

Research Snapshot

Mental Health and Poverty in Justice Involved Youth

What you need to know

This study examined how living in poverty relates to youth mental health problems and youth criminal activity. Findings suggest that youth who live in moderate to higher levels of poverty are more likely to have mental health problems, as well as early criminal involvements.

What is this study about?

Young people who experience poverty appear in court ten times more often than other youth. Additionally, young people involved in the criminal justice system are at a higher risk for mental health disorders compared to other young people. Research shows that between 50% and 100% of court-involved young people have a mental health disorder. While experiencing poverty and a mental health disorder does not cause crime, it can influence behaviour patterns – resulting in court involvement. An important question addressed in this study is how living in poverty relates to youth mental health problems and youth criminal activity.

What did the researchers do?

As part of this study, 281 youth files from London Family Court Clinic (LFCC) were reviewed. Youth were originally referred by a judge to LFCC to complete a psychological assessment between the years 2010 and 2015. At the time of their involvement with LFCC, youth were between 12-23 years old, with all criminal activity having taken

place when they were under 18. Eighty-two percent of the sample were male.

Information collected related to young people's mental health problems, criminal involvement, and their level of poverty.

Mental health problems were recorded according to both the number of psychological symptoms/diagnoses, as well as, by the type of mental health problem experienced by the youth (e.g., trauma, depression). As well, the age at which mental health problems began was considered (e.g., prior to age 12 or after 12).

Criminal involvement was recorded based on a youth's number of past and current charges, as well as, when criminal activity began (e.g., prior to age 12 or after 12).

Poverty was understood by considering information about young people's socioeconomic status (e.g., parent's marital status and education, refugee status, teen pregnancy etc.). Based on this information, youth were seen as falling into one of three levels of poverty: low, moderate, or high.

Research Snapshot | Mental Health and Poverty in Justice Involved Youth

What did we find?

More severe poverty is associated with persistent mental health challenges:

- Young offenders who lived in moderate to high levels of poverty were more likely to have mental health problems identified prior to age twelve.

Mental health problems are pervasive for court-involved youth:

- Overall, more than 75% of these court involved youth had at least one mental health diagnosis, with over 50% having two or more diagnoses.

Offending is sometimes directly linked to mental health:

- One in five of the offences committed were viewed as being directly related to the youth's mental health problems.

Persistent mental health concerns increase the chance of persistent offending behaviour:

- Mental health problems before age 12 tended to increase the likelihood of youth being involved in criminal behaviour prior to age twelve and into adolescence.

How can we use this research?

While having a mental health problem or living in poverty does not in itself cause crime, these findings suggest that experiencing both higher levels of poverty and persistent mental health challenges, relates to longer term involvement in the youth justice system.

Future interventions for court-involved youth should address both the effects of poverty on youth

(e.g., addressing barriers to accessing services, safe housing) as well as their mental health service needs, in an effort to reduce their future offending and improve their lives.

Ideally, services aimed at redirecting youth from becoming involved in the justice system would begin prior to age twelve.

Original Research Article: For a complete description of the research and findings, please see the full research article [by clicking here](#)

About the Authors: Alan Leschied, PhD, Professor, Faculty of Education, Western University and Angelina MacLellan, MA, Hubley and Carruthers, Psychologists, Halifax, NS. This research was conducted at LFCC with contributions by Dr. Joyce Radford and Dr. Dan Ashbourne.

Keywords: Youth, mental health, criminal activity, poverty

About this Summary: This summary was prepared by Rebecca West, MA Candidate at Western University. For further information about London Family Court Clinic, visit www.lfcc.on.ca

This project is funded by the Government of Ontario and administered by the Ontario Trillium Foundation through the Local Poverty Reduction Fund.

