

Research Snapshot

Friendships, Mental Health and Poverty in Court-Involved Youth

What you need to know

This study examined how friendships of young offenders relate to living in poverty, criminal behaviour, and having mental health difficulties. This study found that living in conditions related to poverty is prevalent among court-involved youth. As well, these youth were likely to live among peers who held antisocial values, beliefs and behaviours. A more negative peer environment was linked to a greater likelihood criminal involvement and mental health difficulties.

What is this study about?

Young people are strongly influenced by the emotions, opinions, and behaviours of their friends. Research shows that young people are more likely to be involved in a crime with their friends, compared to adults who are involved in crime. Young people involved with friends who are a bad influence are at high risk for: violent behaviour, poor school achievement, drug and alcohol use, and criminal involvement. This risk increases further for those young people who also experience poverty. While poverty does not cause crime, research shows that youth living in marginalized economic conditions tend to have friends with a more negative influence. A question addressed by this study is how living in poverty relates to the friendships and the mental health of young people who are involved in criminal behaviour.

What did the researchers do?

As part of this study, 281 youth files from London Family Court Clinic (LFCC) were reviewed. These youth were originally referred by a judge to complete a psychological assessment for court purposes, 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 years of age. Eighty-two percent of the sample were male.

Information that was collected related to young people's mental health problems, friendships, criminal involvements, 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).

Criminal involvement was recorded based on a youth's number of past and current charges, as well as, whether the crime happened when the youth was alone or with a friend.

Poverty was understood by considering information about a young person's socioeconomic status. (e.g., parent's marital status and education, refugee status, teen pregnancy, etc.). Youth were rated as falling into one of three levels of poverty: low, medium, or high.

The friendships of the young people were understood according to a youth's report of having friends or no friends. As well, based on a friend's criminal behaviour involvement, young people were rated as having poor, good, or mixed-influenced friendships.

A negative peer environment was understood by considering a youth's involvement in settings with antisocial peers (e.g., living conditions, school, etc.). Young people's negative peer environments were rated as: low, medium, or high.

What did we find?

Poverty, negative peer environments, and antisocial friendships are evident in the lives of court-involved youth:

- While almost 20% of the youth lived in moderate to high poverty, nearly 97% had at least one negative peer environment and 78% had friendships that were a negative influence.

Poverty was associated with young people's involvement in a negative peer environment:

- For every additional contributor to poverty, a young person's involvement in a negative peer environment increased by almost 30%.

Antisocial friendships were associated with more behavioural difficulties:

- Court-involved youth with poor-influence friendships were more likely to have behavioural difficulties.

How can we use this research?

The findings suggest that poverty, a negative peer environment, and negative-influence peers are often present in the lives of court-involved youth.

Knowing that young offenders are negatively influenced through their friendships, future rehabilitative efforts should address the function of these friendships. For example, if a youth has negative-influence friends due to peer rejection, rehabilitative efforts should in part be focused on building a youth's social skills.

Having negative-influence friendships or having no friends at all are both related to mental health

Peer isolation amongst these youth was linked to increased mental health problems:

- One out of ten of the youth were identified as having no friends at all
- Youth without friends had the highest number of mental health difficulties.

More severe negative peer environments increased the chance of psychological difficulties and offending behaviour:

- Higher negative peer environments tended to increase the likelihood of mental health symptoms and diagnoses, as well as criminal involvements.
- Over 32% of the youth who had committed a crime had done so with at least one other person.

difficulties for young people. Efforts should focus on treating mental health challenges as well as addressing the negative effects of social isolation. Efforts to assist youth should also address the effects of poverty and target key needs of young people including their daily care and their access to support and supervision.

For youth involved in the criminal justice system, interventions that focus on the effects of negative peers and social environments, may offer better educational and occupational outcomes for these young people.

Research Snapshot | Friendships, Mental Health and Poverty in Court Involved Youth

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 Victoria Sabo, MA, CCC. This research was conducted at the LFCC with contributions by Dr. Joyce Radford and Dr. Dan Ashbourne.

Keywords: Youth, mental health, criminal involvement, poverty, friendships, negative peer environment

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.

