

Research Snapshot

Family, Education, Community and Poverty in the Lives of Court-Involved Youth

What you need to know

This study examined how living in poverty relates to a youth's family, school, and community contexts that shape their health and behaviour. Findings suggest that court-involved youth who live in poverty are more likely to have poor educational outcomes, high family instability, and are lacking prosocial ties to the community.

What is this study about?

Over the last 10 years, 80% of household incomes have remained unchanged for families in Canada. As a result, 1 out of every 10 children in Ontario is growing up with challenges related to poverty. Research shows that youth who experience poverty are twice as likely to engage in risky behaviour compared to youth who have never experienced poverty. While experiencing poverty does not cause crime, it can influence living and working conditions that affect a young person's health and behaviour. Research shows that youth who experience poverty have lower grades and educational achievement, less structured family routines, and poor social supports. This study addressed how living in poverty relates to a youth's family, school, and community experience, (what are generally referred to as the social determinants of health), and how these areas contribute to shaping a youth's well-being.

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 between the years 2010 and 2015 to the LFCC for a psychological assessment. 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, education, family environment, community engagement, and their level of poverty.

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

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).

Education was understood by considering information about a young person's educational outcomes (e.g., learning disability, grade failure, history of suspension, etc.). Based on this information, youth were seen as falling into one of three levels of education risk: low, moderate, or high.

Family structure was understood by considering information about a young person's risk of family instability (e.g., housing instability, lack of supervision,

victim of abuse, etc.). Based on this information, youth were seen as falling into one of three levels of family structure instability: low, moderate, or high.

Community engagement was understood by considering information about a young person's social ties outside of the family home (e.g., activities, hobbies, gang activity, etc.). Based on this information, youth were seen as falling into one of three levels of community risk: low, moderate, or high.

What did we find?

Young people's family experience was often a source of difficulty:

- One in 5 court-involved youth did not have a birth parent as their legal guardian.
- Regardless of their level of poverty, more than 1 in 4 court-involved youth were not living with their family.
- A lack of parental involvement, rates of Children's Aid Society (CAS) involvement, family violence, and witnessing domestic violence was pervasive for all these court-involved youth.
- CAS involvement was highest for those who were more likely to live in higher poverty.
- The quality of a youth's family experience was poorest for those experiencing a high level of poverty

Poor school progress was common for youth:

- More than half of these court-involved youth had

How can we use this research?

There is a need to consider the health burden associated with the living and working conditions related to poverty. For court-involved youth, important living and working conditions to consider are school, family, and community environments. While all the youth in this study demonstrated challenges in these areas of life, those youth who experience higher levels of poverty more frequently demonstrate family structure instability, a lack of parental involvement, grade failure more readily, and poor school progress as well as a lack

The social determinants of health were reflected in the youth's family, school and community experiences, which influence health outcomes for people.

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.

completed an educational assessment due to peer achievement concerns.

- School was consistently viewed as being difficult by all of these youth.
- Youth living in moderate poverty had the lowest rate of school attendance and a higher rate of grade failure.
- Youth living in high poverty, had the lowest rate of educational attainment, and poorest motivation or interest in school, compared to the other youth.

No or few social ties to their community:

- An absence of recreational activities and hobbies were reported by youth across all levels of poverty.
- Youth living in high poverty were more likely than other youth to have negative relationships in their community, as well as, involvement in gang behaviour.

of positive community and recreational involvement. Also, increased poverty appears to impact young people's re-involvement with the court system and increase their difficulty in accessing services. Future services for court-involved youth should prioritize a youth's needs related to poverty (e.g., addressing barriers to accessing services, safe housing) and specific needs related to their challenges in family, school, and community environments, in order to improve their rehabilitation efforts and reduce future reoffending risks.

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

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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

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