

Research Snapshot

Gender and Poverty in Justice-Involved Youth

What you need to know

Pathways to crime differ for male and female youth. Females showed significantly higher levels of poverty, risky family circumstances and sexual behaviour, whereas males showed high levels of both unsafe family circumstances and poorer school performance. These male and female youth all experienced mental health issues and child welfare involvement.

What is this study about?

Research on gender and youth offending tends to focus on males and then uses this information to try to understand female youth criminality. Research shows, however, that behavioural patterns or pathways that lead female youth to criminal involvement are different than for males. Females and males have unique experiences that should be part of service response and such information can promote better understanding related to gaps in service delivery. Research shows that crime rates for males are higher than for females, whereas female youth are more likely to have family and parenting issues that contribute to their difficulties. An important question addressed in this study is whether poverty affects pathways and risks to criminal activity differently for male and female youth.

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-

three percent of the sample were male.

Information collected related to youth's criminal involvement, poverty level, family dynamics, education, mental health problems, sexual behaviour and child welfare involvement.

Criminal involvement was recorded based on a youth's number of past and current charges, as well as, the type of offence.

Poverty was understood by considering information about young people's socioeconomic status (e.g., parent's marital status, refugee status, teen pregnancy, etc.). Youth were seen as falling into one of three levels of poverty: little to none, moderate, or high.

Family dynamics was understood by considering information about a young person's risk of family instability (e.g., lack of housing and supervision, victim of abuse, etc.). Youth were seen as falling into one of three levels of family risk level: low, moderate, or high.

School performance was understood by considering information about a young person's educational outcomes (e.g., learning disability, grade failure, etc.). Youth were categorized as falling into one of three levels of education risk: low, moderate, or high.

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Mental health problems were recorded based on the number of psychological diagnoses (e.g., anxiety, depression).

Sexual behaviours were recorded based on parental reports of youth's risky sexual actions (e.g., promiscuity, prostitution, etc.).

What did we find?

Child welfare system involvement is common for both male and female youth:

- 78% of court involved males, and 92% of the females, have also had involvement with the child welfare system.
- Female court-involved youth with risky family situations were more likely to have higher rates of poverty, higher levels of family distress and instability, were more likely to reside in a shelter and come from a single-parent household.

Female court-involved youth were more likely to be victimized and engage in risky sexual behaviour:

- 47% of female youth had a history of sexual victimization, compared to 12% of males.
- Female more than male youth were more likely

How can we use this research?

Future interventions should address the unique concerns that place males and females at an even greater risk for further criminal involvement in order to support better educational and occupational outcomes for these young people. Ideally, future intervention strategies for female court-involved youth should address risky and unstable family circumstances and dynamics, abuse and victimization,

Child welfare involvement was recorded based on whether youth currently or had previously been involved in any way with child welfare (e.g., Children's Aid Society, crown ward, etc.).

to be neglected (Female 40%; Male 23%) and physically abused (Female 70%; Male 50%).

- Female youth were more likely than males to demonstrate risky sexual behaviour.

Male court involved youth can benefit from structure and activities:

- As risky family dynamics increase for male youth, so does their number of criminal charges.
- More involvement in organized activities was associated with a lower risk for poor school performance for males.
- A lower risk for poor school performance was associated with less criminal charges in these male youth.

sexual education, and poverty barriers. For male court-involved youth, future services should address both unstable and unsafe family circumstances, as well as, poor performance at school. For both male and female youth involved in the criminal justice system, future services should focus on the effects of mental health problems and achieving financial independence.

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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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