

Out of Poverty: Investigation of Young Offenders and Their Families (A Question of Access: Examining Poverty and its Impact on Service Acquisition in Youth Justice)

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Summary

The focus of Ontario's Poverty Reduction strategy is framed by the following:

"Fighting poverty is part of the government's economic plan to build Ontario up and deliver on its number-one priority to grow the economy and create jobs.... [its] aim is to find out what makes a difference for those living in poverty, share knowledge and use the evidence gathered from projects to expand successful solutions across the province". (Ontario Treasury Board Secretariat, 2014).

The impact of poverty is very individualized, ranging from homelessness, malnutrition, challenges to physical and mental health, an absence of educational and vocational opportunities, social unrest, life expectancy, and child and adult mortality. Poverty also cycles through families, with subsequent generations experiencing the legacy of the previous generation's challenges to escape its impact. Bird (2007) acknowledged that being a poor child increases the chances of being a poor adult. However, this is not always the case, and other factors operate independently to affect the well-being over the life-course for each child in unique ways. Bird's influential review, while in the context of the United Kingdom, pertains equally to our concerns in Ontario. That is, differentiated access to and control of certain resources, unequal investment in human capital, systematic inequalities within and between households, higher rates of adolescent pregnancy, poorer early child care and development practices, domestic violence, household decision-making, livelihood and survival strategies, service uptake, exposure to specific vulnerability to risk and resilience and an ability to cope, combine to conspire against certain individuals to escape the impact of poverty.

What is Poverty?

Relative poverty. Poverty is a continuum best understood not in its absolute sense through an income cut off but rather in its relative impact. Hence the term *relative poverty* is

more fitting as a functional reflection of the impact of poverty; in other words, the severity of poverty matters where the effects of poverty are the strongest at the lowest levels of income (De Boer, Rothwell, & Lee, 2013). For example, relative poverty is considered in relation to how income levels relate to an individual's ability to meet *basic needs* (The Fraser Institute), or in the *market basket* of purchasing a "basket" of goods and services considered to represent the "standard of consumption for a reference family of two adults and two children [that] includes the costs of food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and other goods and services that are determined for different regions across Canada (Human Resources Development Canada) (Collin and Campbell, 2015).

Rate of poverty in Canada. Canadians will be familiar with *Campaign 2000*, the goal of then Prime Minister Jean Chretien who committed our country in 1980 to end poverty by the year 2000. This was in part a response to data that continues to appear reflected in the publication by The United Nations (2007) that ranked Canada 17th out of 23 industrialized countries – seventh from the bottom – when it comes to addressing child poverty in the more advanced economies. This data recognized that on average:

"One in every ten children in Canada struggles to have their basic needs met. In First Nations and Inuit communities, one in every four children grows up in poverty. Canada's child poverty rate of 15 percent is three times as high as the rates of Sweden, Norway or Finland. Every month, 770,000 people in Canada use food banks. Forty percent of those relying on food banks are children." (Canadian Make Poverty History Campaign, 2015)

Canadian Children's Rights Council

What Does Poverty Relate To?

What poverty relates to, and these findings have been replicated across numerous studies includes the following¹:

1. **Negative Health Effects.** Poverty increases the chances of poor health. Poor health in turn traps communities in poverty.
2. **Malnutrition.** A family on a very small budget is much more likely to purchase food that is less nutritious.
3. **Literacy and Education.** Literacy rates in countries with high poverty levels indicate that these two are inextricably linked.
4. **Employment.** Without an education, people are unlikely to find a paying job.
5. **Inadequate Housing and Homelessness.**

¹ This listing is largely drawn from the following: *The Brogen Project*, An innovative, national campaign that works with U.S. leaders to improve their response to the global poverty crisis; The World Health Organization [WHO]; The Association for School and Curriculum Development;

6. **Family Violence and Childhood Abuse.** When child abuse does happen anywhere, in any social class, it is overwhelmingly more frequent in poorer families.

Of specific interest in the current study is the relevance of poverty to crime.

Relevance of Poverty to Youth Justice and Child and Family Service Delivery

The goal of human service research as reflected in the current study is to further articulate: 1. The conditions under which specific groups experience distress; 2. Assess the degree to which those conditions are amenable to change; 3. Account for the context in which certain conditions are experienced; and 4. Ensure that current systems are supported to deliver the most effective services targeting the most relevant risks and needs at the required time.

What is also relevant in this context is research showing that if the conditions of effective service are followed, the best predictor of a successful outcome is *completion of the treatment process*. The best evidence of this statement is reflected in the *Multi Systemic Therapy* literature that indicated even when the most effective treatments are provided, if the course of therapy or the *dosage of treatment* is inadequate, positive results will not occur (Henggeler, Pickrel, Brondino, & Crouch, 1996). In other words, even within the most effective service delivery system, if clients are not connected, engaged and supported to completion of the treatment or intervention process, a positive outcome will not occur.

Relevance to Enhancing Service Delivery

The goal of this study was to identify the nature of the youth and their families in relevant ways in order to inform the nature of what services can provide to assist in maximizing positive outcomes.

The LFCC has identified the need of a system navigator to support the assessment process in ensuring those young persons and their families who are recommended certain services are connected, supported and engaged in the process of intervention. This intervention focus draws on the broad based research findings underscoring that a risk and needs based intervention decision matched with certain service allocations is the most effective framework within which services can be articulated.

Service targets related to poverty. This study focused concern on the connection to poverty of the youth and their families who are referred to the LFCC. However, before commenting on the specific nature of these poverty related concerns, it must be stated that this sample of justice involved youth are challenged in multiple ways *regardless of their socio*

economic status. These concerns relate to educational attainment, mental health status, addiction, and victimization, all of which have shown relevance to youth and adult outcomes in predicting future offending and a decreased likelihood of positive life outcomes including educational and vocational success (Leschied, Chiodo, Nowicki and Rodger, 2008).

The vast majority of these youth experience one if not multiple mental health concerns, and a significant number of youth who experience some mental health disorder commit offenses that are directly related to their disorder, such as thefts supporting a drug addiction. Similarly, in regards to social relationships and the social determinants of health, certain challenges appear recurrently in the lives of these youth and their families. Specific to poverty, system navigators will want to be aware of the following:

1. Over half of these youth experience two or more mental health diagnoses, and as the number of diagnoses increases so too does the rate of offending.
2. A higher level of poverty is related to an increased likelihood of a youth experiencing a persistent mental health concern, the onset of which occurs prior to their 12th birthday.
3. A higher level of poverty is associated with higher levels of involvement in a negative peer environment.
4. The likelihood of gang affiliation increases with a youth and family's poverty level.
5. Significant differences emerge in the condition and quality of a youth's family experience dependent on the level of poverty including the lack of parental involvement, witnessing domestic violence, and child welfare involvement.
6. Youth living in moderate levels of poverty are characterized by the lowest rate of school attendance and a higher rate of grade failure *even within a general youth justice sample whose school success rate is severely compromised*.
7. A high prevalence of no social ties to the community are noted for all offenders regardless of their poverty level.
8. Females who are experiencing poverty are more likely to have been homeless, or birthed to a teen mom, and have a primary caregiver receiving financial assistance.
9. Almost half of the females have been sexually victimized and are more likely to have been neglected and physically abused relative to their male counterparts.
10. Over 90 per cent of these young women have been or are currently involved in the child welfare system.

11. Almost half of these females have been formally diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
12. One third of these females are involved in some form of risky sexual behaviour.

A Final Comment

It is critical that as a follow-up to the court process, system navigators form supportive relationships with the youth and their families in helping facilitate the engagement process to make the connections with appropriate treatment services and offer advocacy within a system that too often is overly complicated and burdensome to individuals who are already struggling to cope with the challenges of living in economically compromising conditions. In this context the role of the system navigator could be critical to ensuring that the aforementioned barriers to services are overcome.

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