

EVIDENCE REVIEW

Evidence Review on Poverty and Youth Crime and Violence

Summary

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What was this review about?

The link between poverty and children's involvement in crime and violence is well-established, but the details of this relationship are complex and not fully understood. How strong is the relationship? Do different types of poverty – such as low parental income, neighbourhood deprivation, or limited access to affordable housing – have different relationships with offending? Does the timing and duration of poverty matter?

To better understand these complexities, the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) commissioned a systematic review by the Jill Dando Institute Research Laboratory at University College London (UCL). A systematic review uses rigorous methods to find all the research on a topic and create an objective summary of the findings, minimising potential biases. This review specifically examined research on young people aged 5 to 18, which looked at the relationship between poverty and both violent and non-violent crime. It included studies from the UK and very similar countries but didn't include studies from the USA or developing countries.

Finally, the review also suggested poverty-reducing interventions which YEF could evaluate to understand their impact on violence.

What did the review find?

Poverty is a risk factor, but we cannot say whether it causes youth crime and violence

The results suggest that poverty is **associated** with a small increased **risk** of children and young people engaging in crime and violence. But the review could not establish that poverty causes violence as it did not find research which examined this.

The strength of the relationship varies for different types of poverty

The strongest association was for financial problems, such as food insecurity, debt, difficulty paying bills, financial worries, and receiving benefits. This association was still small but nearly crossed the threshold to be considered moderate. This was followed by low income, neighbourhood deprivation and low socioeconomic status, which all demonstrated small relationships with youth crime and violence.

The association varies for different offence types

For non-violent crime (such as theft or property offences), the strongest relationship was with neighbourhood deprivation, although the relationship was still small. For violent crime (such as weapon offences or physical force intended to hurt), the largest relationship (small but bordering moderate) was found for low income.

Boys and girls can experience the association differently

For non-violent crime, boys from higher-income families were less at risk than girls from similar backgrounds, and boys in deprived neighbourhoods were at greater risk than girls. For violent crime, higher socioeconomic status appeared to reduce risk more for girls than for boys.

The association varied across different household types

In single-parent families, higher socioeconomic status reduced risk of crime and violence more than for two-parent families, while lower socioeconomic status posed a greater risk. However, children in single-parent families were less at risk from neighbourhood deprivation. For non-violent crime, higher income was more protective for children in single-parent families.

How a young person perceives their situation can shape the association between poverty and crime and violence.

The perception of being worse off than peers, regardless of one's actual objective deprivation, may also contribute. This finding has lower confidence due to weaker and less generalisable evidence and more research is needed to draw firmer conclusions.

Interpretation and implications

Although the review was unable to conclude whether poverty is a cause, it deepens our understanding of the relationship between poverty and youth crime and violence. It highlights how different aspects of poverty, such as socio-economic status and income, affect the risk of youth crime and violence in different ways.

Crucially, the review identified gaps in the evidence base, particularly around whether there is a causal relationship between poverty and youth crime and violence. To build on this, we are partnering with King's College London and Impact on Urban Health to test whether direct financial support can improve young people's mental health and well-being and reduce the chances they'll become involved in violence.

