

The Impact of Poverty on Children's Mental Health and its Role in Risky and Negative Behaviors

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PSY 310

How does poverty affect children's mental health, and how does this contribute to engagement in negative behaviors such as crime? Children in low-income households are disproportionately exposed to stressors that can impair mental health, increasing the likelihood of going out and engaging in risky behaviors. Addressing this issue can help policy makers create interventions to break this cycle. This paper will explore how Poverty influences children's mental health through chronic stress and limited resources. All of this increases the likelihood of behavioral issues like aggression, crime, and substance abuse. There may be other issues that have not been well researched yet and certain metrics that may be overlooked in the terms. Looking from the outside does not give a good perspective on what really happens in a child's development so these studies will help reflect my research from going to John W. Cook Elementary school and reading through studies.

To address the question of how living in low-income households affects youth, this paper will examine three key aspects. First, it will explore the mental health challenges faced by children living in poverty. The first section will be from *The Effects of Poverty on Children*, which highlights the psychological toll of financial instability, and *Impact of Poverty on Adolescent Drug Use*, which examines the relationship between economic hardship and substance use. This section will also go over personal experience from visiting the Auburn Gresham area. The second aspect will analyze the environmental and psychological mechanisms

driving negative behaviors, as well as provide a brief historical overview of the Auburn Gresham neighborhood. For this, *Reinvesting the Greater Chatham Neighborhoods* will be used to describe systemic economic disparities and their impact on families, while *Always Growing, Auburn Gresham* will emphasize community-based stressors such as safety and access to resources. Additionally, *Psychological and Neurobiological Mechanisms Underlying the Decline of Maternal Behavior* will explain how stress can affect caregiving, and *The Role of Urgency and Its Underlying Psychological Mechanisms in Problematic Behaviours* will explain how impulsivity and emotional distress contribute to risky actions. Finally, the paper will review proven interventions to mitigate these effects. For this, *After-School Programs for Low-Income Children* will focus on the role of structured extracurricular activities in promoting resilience, and *Interventions to Mitigate the Effects of Poverty and Inequality on Mental Health* will outline strategies for addressing poverty-induced mental health issues. Additional sources will be used to discuss the mentoring component of the Cities Project. This will specifically focus on how mentoring helps children emotionally grow.

There will be five terms discussed in this research paper. The first one is poverty / low-income. They are expressed throughout all the research papers as the state of not having sufficient resources or needs, including food, shelter, and healthcare. For this research, poverty will be reviewed under two terms. The first term is what the federal government describes as poverty and how poverty is felt relative to the person experiencing it. This will mainly focus on socioeconomic disparities within communities. The measurement of poverty often includes income level, violent crime rates, and education rates (Toussaint-Comeau & Newberger, 2017). Poverty can lead to Mental Health Challenges. Mental Health challenges refer to psychological difficulties that impair emotional, social, or cognitive functioning. In the context of children living in poverty, this may include anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders (Brooks-Gunn,

& Duncan, J. 1997). Although this study is from twenty years ago, it still has relevant information about humans today. This study about contemporary issues back then may not be relevant to today's research but it can be used to compare data from the 90's to the early 2020's. The mental challenges that young people face can be measured by using tools such as the Child Behavior Checklist found on the American Psychological Association's website (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). This resource can help a child, and their parents determine what they might struggle with and what they may be good at to help focus on those areas. Leading from the mental health challenges. There is also the Environmental and Psychological Mechanisms that play a big factor. Environmental mechanisms include external factors like housing instability, exposure to violence, and lack of access to quality education. All these factors contribute to stress for children in low-income households (Brooks-Gunn, & Duncan, J. 1997). Psychological mechanisms, such as chronic stress can lead from internal processes to external reactions. This is also related to when the internal processes mediate how external stressors influences behavior. These methods can be measured using stress scales such as the Perceived Stress scale (Cohen et al., 1983). The next term that is relevant in this study is Interventions. Interventions are strategies or programs designed to address specific challenges. In this paper, interventions refer to evidence-based approaches aimed at mitigating the mental health effects of poverty. This can include after-school programs, mentorship initiatives, and community support services. Effectiveness is measured through tracking improvements in children's behaviors and their health outcomes (Lee & Clancy, 2020), which is what the Cities project does. The last term follows closely with interventions. The Cities Project is a mentorship program focused on mentoring at-risk youth by providing guidance, emotional support, and academic encouragement. This program addresses both environmental and psychological mechanisms by creating a stable support network for

children in low-income neighborhoods. The program, from my experience, will be discussed more later in the paper.

The studies reviewed provide valuable insights into the effects of living in low-income households on children's mental health. The review is organized in the three themes mentioned previously. These are the mental health challenges faced by children living in low-income households, the psychological and environmental mechanism, and interventions to mitigate these effects. Each of these studies have their own methodology to finding their answers but it is important to notice bias, subconscious and conscious (Lindwall, 2017). These are important considerations that may influence the interpretations of the results from the other studies and this study. Since I did not grow up in the same environment that the children grew up in, I have different experiences and struggles. Even then, there is still common ground that can be found. A quote from *Will I Be Able to Understand My Mentee* by Lindwall (2020) elaborates on this a bit more:

Community perception of outside support combined with an outsider's limited ability to understand the community's unique culture and experiences creates a barrier we must further examine. (p. 74)

She goes into more detail about how usually the dominant culture is the one that mentors groups from minority areas. Although it does not seem the case for Cook Elementary school but generally that is where mentors are from ethnically. It can create a barrier as Lindwall states because the dominant culture may not have experienced what other minority groups have experienced. She later mentions how the removal of Native Americans and how Jim Crow laws were not enacted on the dominant culture. Again, it is important to point out the conscious and subconscious biases that we may experience in everyday life. Although there has been great

progress since the Jim Crow era, there is still more to go. One of the central findings of the study is the significant impact of poverty on children's mental health (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). They go over that children in low-income households are more likely to experience anxiety, depression and behavioral disorders compared to children who come from upper-middle-class households (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Another fact from the same study promotes family characteristics that can help influence a child into adulthood. Some examples of these are promoting school completion for the mother, father, and the child, and reducing out-of-wedlock childbearing (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, p407). All these factors tend to help children do better in life and see strong role models in their lives. Although these are ideal conditions, they did not always happen. These mental health challenges are often linked to the stressors associated with poverty. These include food insecurities, housing instability, and limited access to healthcare and education. The people who made the Perceived Stress Scale provide evidence that perceived stress plays a critical role in shaping mental health outcomes (Cohen, 1983). This measure has been widely used and studies to assess how children perceive the stress associated with poverty.

However, the research done by Books-Gunn and Duncan (1997) in *The effects of poverty on children* may be limited by their credibility because the study was not for long term. There was limited cross-sectional data and not many studies done. Another problem with the Perceive Stress Scale is that it may not account for the child's entire stress and responses would be limited based on different social and environmental factors. Future research could benefit from these nuances or by using more specific stress measurements. Another part that I do not want to overlook is the Cities Project and the Auburn Gresham neighborhood. The cities project has benefited many children, and it continues to benefit them into the future. The mentees practice mindfulness and other practices to help reduce stress and focus on academic goals. According to *Always Growing, Auburn Gresham*, the neighborhood is ninety-six percent black and around

twenty-six percent of the population lives below the federal poverty line. The median income has come down from \$40,794 in 2006-2010 to \$34,396 (Theodos Marx, & Nunna, 2021). All of these changes have an effect on the children that grow up in that neighborhood. There will be more about the history of the area in a later paragraph.

The second aspect of the research goes through the psychological and environmental mechanism that contribute to negative behaviors in children from low-income households. A study by Lee and Clancy (2020) investigates how poverty impacts adolescent drug use. This shows that the effects of poverty are exacerbated in the absence of family-support and positive self-esteem or higher levels of self-esteem. Family can police a child in a good way; It highlights the moderating role of family and a strong social support in mitigating negative behavior. These factors are important in how poverty influences behavior. In *The role of urgency and its underlying psychological mechanisms in problematic behaviours*, they examine psychological mechanisms behind urgency. That refers to the tendency to act impulsively under excessive stress. Their research suggests the children living in poverty may be more prone to engaging in problematic behaviors, such as substance abuse to aggression. This may be due to a heightened sense of urgency under stress (Billieux, Gay, Rochat, & Van der Linden, 2010). The study provides valuable ideas and experiences into the psychology of these behaviors, but the study relies heavily on self-reported data that may or may not be accurate. Even if the participants were being completely honest, since it was self-reported they may be subject to social desirability bias or they may perceive themselves differently than they actually are. Further research with a better control group could be conducted to possibly achieve more accurate results. The results may be accurate but there is still room for doubt since people do not sometimes realize what is wrong or what is right about them. Now for a brief history of the Auburn Gresham area since that is where I am doing my mentoring for the year. Auburn Gresham was a middle-market community in

Chicago's South side. It boomed in the 1920 when their industry but because of white flight, racisms, and the exiting of industry, there has been little done to reinvest in Auburn Gresham since then. There has been a lack of resources and opportunities in that area since the 1960s. The declining housing values and high unemployment lead to many problems that are still relevant today (Theodos Marx, & Nunna, 2021). Since at least 2000, Auburn Gresham has had the highest population out of the Chatham area and least change in population since then (Toussaint-Comeau, & Newberger, 2017). This means that the majority of the people who live there still currently live there. Also, the area has seen the least amount of people with bachelor's degrees, and it has stayed stable since 2010. Lastly, Auburn Gresham has one of the highest rates of minority owned business in all of South Side Chicago (Toussaint-Comeau, & Newberger, 2017). This data shows that the situation is dire but with new interventions, such as the Cities Project. More has been done by the community to make it a safer and a better place. New sporting centers and recreational facilities have been built by local and private businesses to help build up the area. All these investments help bring in more business and foster a sense of community that can bring in even more people. Throughout both articles, they both mention the community that is in South Side Chicago and specifically in Auburn Gresham.

The final area of focus is on intervention aimed at mitigating the effects of poverty on children's mental health. Halpern (1999) discusses the potential of after-school programs to provide a safe and supportive environment for children in low-income communities. These programs have been shown to improve academic performance, reduce behaviors problems, and provide emotional support for the students (Halpern, 1999). This helps keep them off the streets and allows them to grow emotionally and academically. In a similar article, Wahlbeck (2017) emphasizes the importance of community and the intervention the community can take to prevent a child from turning to crime. The community can help address the socioeconomic

inequalities and the mental health challenges. The study advocated for a holistic approach that considers different aspects of living in low-income neighborhoods. Looking into education, healthcare, and social support is what the study advocates for intervention. A common issue among these studies was the lack of long-term research. Although there may have been some studies done to research the benefits of afterschool programs long term, none have shown up when looking for them. The method that these studies rely on evaluating the programs that they looked at and the outcomes which were present after the school programs finished. The studies have a critical understanding for the effectiveness of the interventions. However, such evaluations can lack rigorous control groups or fail to account for external facets that may influence results. It is hard to study children in a not one hundred percent-controlled environment because the researchers could not possibly know every facet of a child's life and what lead them into an after-school program like the one they were researching. Halpern (1999) provides valuable ideas and research into the challenges and promises of after-school programs but does not fully examine the long-term sustainability and effects of these interventions.

Overall, the research highlights the multifaced nature of the impact of poverty on children's mental health. Mental health challenges are constant, and stress plays a significant role in shaping a child's outcome. Psychological mechanisms such as urgency, and environmental factors, such as family support, are critical in understanding the development of negative behaviors. Intentions like after-school programs and community-based support services show promise in mitigating the effects that poverty and stress have on children. Although these studies were effective in measuring the effects of intervention and stress have on children, there may be more rigorous evaluation methods that are needed to assess the long-term efficacy. The Cities Project is a great research-based project that helps children in low-income neighborhoods connect with adults and other students who want to do better academically and emotionally. It

seems like one of the best research projects out there although there could still be more research done.

Finally, addressing the effects of poverty on children's mental health requires targeted interventions, informed policy changes, and further research to bridge existing gaps in knowledge. Based on the review studies, three primary approaches suggest that implementing evidence-based community programs, enhancing policy frameworks to address socioeconomic disparities, and conducting longitudinal research to explore long term outcomes. Programs like after-school activities and mentoring projects are helpful in providing support to children in low-income communities. Halpern (1999) discusses the benefits of after-school programs in creating safe spaces for children, fostering connections, and offering emotional support. These programs help mitigate some of the stressors associated with poverty and reduce the likelihood of behavior problems in the future and currently. For example, structured programs that integrate academic support and mental health resources can address both educational and emotional needs at the same time. Expanding access to such programs in underserved area, particularly neighborhoods like Auburn Gresham. This will help in reducing the negative mental challenges and it is a key step in intervention efforts. Another intervention that shows promise is mentoring programs tailored to address the unique challenges faced by marginalized youth. Weiston-Serdan (2017) mentions how critical mentoring provides guidance but also considers the system barrier these children face. Programs like the Cities Project, which incorporates mentoring into its structure, demonstrates how personalized guidance can counteract the effect of living in a low-income neighborhood. It helps by fostering self-esteem and resilience in the mentees. Scaling such programs across similar communities could amplify the positive impact.

For some policy recommendations that can address the systemic causes of poverty and its impact on children. Wahlbeck (2017) emphasizes the need for holistic approaches that tackled

multiple facets of poverty, such as healthcare access, housing stability, and educational equity. Policymakers should prioritize funding for integrated services that provide not only financial support to families but also access to mental health care and community resources. Tax incentives for organizations running after-school programs, like the Cities Project, and community initiative could ensure sustainability and broader reach. Another resource that could benefit children from low-income neighborhoods is access to counselors and other resources without additional behavior.

While existing research has provided valuable ideas into the effects of poverty on children's mental health. Future exploration is necessary to address unanswered questions. A significant limitation in the reviewed studies is the reliance on cross-sectional data, which provides a snapshot into that study rather than a comprehensive view of long-term impacts. Future research should focus on studies that are more extensive that track children over time to better understand how poverty affects their mental health and behavior across different stages of life.

Interventions coupled with informed policy changes can significantly mitigate the effects of poverty on children's mental health. However, sustained progress requires ongoing research to deepen our understanding of these effects and to refine our approaches to intervention. By addressing system roots of poverty and ensuring that children have access to supportive resources which can help empower them and future generations.

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