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Justice system failing people from poorer backgrounds, study finds

Scotland's criminal justice system punishes poorer people and makes it difficult for them to escape poverty, new research suggests.

People who live in extreme poverty are more likely to be both the victims – and perpetrators – of crime, experts say.

Household poverty is identified as an exacerbating factor that increases the likelihood of young people offending. This is the case even when a range of other risk factors have been taken into account, the University of Edinburgh study found.

Poorer young people who commit an offence are twice as likely to get in trouble with the police compared with better off children who carry out the same crime. They are also around five times more likely to be placed on statutory supervision than their better-off counterparts

The study also identified gender as one of the most powerful predictors of violence, with boys being three times more likely than girls on average to engage in violent acts.

Living in poverty increases the likelihood of violence amongst both boys and girls, but the effect is far more powerful for girls.

Girls from poorer backgrounds are twice as likely as girls from more affluent households to be involved in violent crime, the authors say. This is the case even after other factors – such as truancy, substance abuse and poor parental supervision – are taken into account.

Researchers also found that a history of being in trouble with the police is the strongest predictor of whether a young person was not in education, employment or training by age 18.

The findings from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime, by the University of Edinburgh's School of Law, are published in the latest edition of the *Scottish Justice Matters* journal.

The study has tracked 4300 young people in Edinburgh since 1998 to better understand changes in their behaviour and lifestyles. It has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the Nuffield Foundation and the Scottish Government.

Ranked among the top universities in the world

Report author Professor Lesley McAra said: “Our findings highlight a very destructive dynamic – poverty increases the risks of violence. Contact with juvenile justice system increases the risks associated with poverty. As a result, contact with the very agencies meant to stop offending is inadvertently reproducing the conditions in which violence can flourish.”

Scottish Justice Matters also published a report that show the recent fall in crime rates in Scotland has not benefitted areas with the most chronic rates of crime.

A study by Applied Quantitative Methods Network (AQMeN) Research Centre – also based at the University of Edinburgh’s Law School – suggests that victims experiencing the most crime continue to be within the most deprived communities.

Half of the communities with the highest crime rates are found in the top 20 per cent of areas with the highest levels of chronic health problems, the report shows.

A third of the communities with the highest rates of crime are in the top 20 per cent of areas with the highest levels of unemployment.

Lead researcher Professor Susan McVie said: “The findings are important as they suggest that crime tends to be highly concentrated amongst poor people and within poor neighbourhoods, and this has not changed despite crime being at its lowest level for decades. This raises important questions about whether inequality is being adequately tackled by the Scottish Government.”

For further information please contact:

Edd McCracken, Press and PR Office, tel 0131 651 4400; email edd.mccracken@ed.ac.uk