

# Tracing the connections between family poverty and problem behaviour in early childhood and adolescence

## Some research evidence

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*This article reviews some recent US research into the impact of family poverty on child development. These studies report on the link between family poverty and children's early cognitive development. They also report on the impact of family and neighbourhood poverty on family structure, family process and problem behaviour in adolescence. This is important research as it goes some way toward unraveling the connection between individual behaviour and social conditions. Knowledge of this research is important for those advocating for measures to combat family poverty in Australia as it quantifies the issue and offers new ways to cast the argument for intervention.*

The question as to whether there is a connection between family impoverishment and children's behavioural and emotional problems from early childhood through to adolescence is long standing. The debate regularly surfaces in the form of arguments between the proponents of two different theoretical explanations (Morgan & Allegritti 1992). The first explanation locates the responsibility for these behaviours entirely within the individual – the individual maladjustment theory. The other explanation locates responsibility for these behaviours in the broader society and the conditions that generated family poverty of which these behaviours are a product – the structural theory. Three recent US studies have attempted to unravel the complex equation between individual behaviour and social conditions. It is this research that utilises inferential statistical and model building techniques (Pedhazur & Pedhazur Schmelkin 1991) that is reviewed in this article. Readers who are interested in the statistical data may view this by obtaining copies of the original publications noted in the reference list.

### WHAT DO THE STUDIES SAY?

#### Study one

The first study that explores these issues asks three critical questions:

- how are developmental outcomes affected by poverty;
- what are the developmental consequences of the duration and timing of poverty; and
- what is the comparative influence of poverty at the family and neighbourhood level? (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov 1994).

For this purpose longitudinal data was drawn from two sources: the Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP) (The Infant Health and Development Program Staff 1990) and the University of Michigan's Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) (Hill 1992). From the IHDP data set a matched analysis sample of 895 children (489 (54.7%) black, 101 (11.3%) Hispanic, 304 (34.0%) non-Hispanic white), identified by neighbourhood, was drawn. This sample from the IHDP was used to examine the relative influence of family poverty and other family characteristics, of timing and duration of poverty on developmental outcomes at age 5. The sample drawn from the PSID consisted of 568 black and 796 white children aged 0-3 in 1980. This data was used to analyse the incidence of family and neighbourhood level poverty among this group.

#### Results

The research indicates that the data obtained:

...are consistent with the hypothesis that family income and poverty status are powerful determinants of the cognitive

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development and behavior of children, even after we account for other differences – in particular family structure and maternal schooling – between low- and high-income families (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov 1994, p. 315).

However, the association between income and developmental outcome:

...appears to be mediated by maternal characteristics and behaviors. The learning environment of the home mediates the relation between income and IQ, whereas maternal depression and coping mediate children's behavior problems. Thus, economic disadvantage not only has a tangible effect on children through the provision of educational resources available to them, but through the detrimental psychological effect it exerts on their parents (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov 1994, p. 315).

Moreover, the results:

...suggest that having more affluent neighbors is associated with higher [children's] IQs while having more low-income neighbors is associated with more externalizing problem behavior (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov 1994, p. 309).

However, it is noted that the:

...explanatory power of ... neighbourhood-based measures of economic resources was considerably smaller than the family-based measures ... the benefits of affluent neighbors for IQ were not significantly different for children in poor and nonpoor families (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov, 1994, p. 309).

The timing of family poverty, regardless of whether it occurred early or late in the child's life, was not statistically significant in these results.

### Limitations

One concern about this study is about the representativeness of the IHDP data. Children in this sample were low birth weight, premature infants aged 0-3 years from eight sites. Low birth weight might predispose children to the poor developmental outcomes reported although we cannot be sure if this is the case. Whether similar results would be found for normal birth weight children is unknown. The other concern about

the IHDP data is that the behaviour-problem measure is reported by the child's mother. As is known self report measures are not the most reliable way of collecting data. In addition, problem behaviours are only one aspect of socioemotional functioning.

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### Study two

The second study focuses on urban poverty and the family context of delinquency (Sampson & Laub 1994). This study draws on empirical studies that have identified early childhood problem behaviours as a prelude to later delinquency (Patterson 1982; Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990; Braithwaite 1989). For example, from a psychological perspective 'coercion theory' emphasizes ineffective parenting practices as the determinants for these behaviours (Patterson 1982). This perspective is compatible with 'control theory', a sociological/criminological formulation of the causes of delinquency (Hirschi 1969; Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990). Control theory draws heavily on Patterson's (1982) work and cites monitoring of the behaviour of children and the recognition and correction of misdeeds in a loving and consistent manner as key aspects of effective parenting (Hirschi 1969; Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990). These views are compatible with Braithwaite's (1989) formulation of 'integrative shaming' that is a process by which parents discipline in a consistent manner within the context of respect and acceptance of the child.

Overall, all these works indicate that families of children who evidence

antisocial behaviours are likely to be characterized by 'harsh and inconsistent discipline, little positive parental involvement and poor monitoring and supervision of a child's activities (Patterson, DeBaryshe & Ramsey 1989). Furthermore, in these theoretical models parental behaviours are seen as contributing to:

...disrupted child bonding with the resultant failure by the child to identify with parental and societal values regarding conformity and work. These omissions leave the child lacking in internal control (Patterson, DeBaryshe & Ramsey 1989).

By contrast the Sampson and Laub (1994) study on 'informal social control' theory, while emphasizing the importance of these factors, also pays attention to other important variables. One set of variables relates to the way the temperament of the child influences parental behaviour (child-effects) and another to structural factors, eg, family poverty, as influences on the development of antisocial behaviour and later delinquency (Sampson & Laub 1994). To test this model Sampson and Laub (1994) re-analyzed the original data used by Glueck and Glueck (1950) for their classic Boston based study of male juvenile delinquents. The study was of 1000 males born between 1924 and 1935 who grew up in impoverished inner city neighbourhoods during the great depression. The sample consists of 500 officially defined delinquents and 500 nondelinquents matched case-by-case on age, race/ethnicity, measured intelligence and neighbourhood deprivation. The average age of the delinquents was 14 years and 8 months, and the nondelinquents 14 years and 6 months when the study began. The informal social control model takes account of the structural context, parent/child disposition and family processes using multiple indicators of these constructs to predict delinquency in adolescence as the outcome (Sampson & Laub 1994).

### Results

The results from this re-analysis suggest three substantive conclusions: firstly, that family poverty and most other structural background factors influence delinquency largely through the mediating dimension of family process;

secondly, that child-effects have a significant direct effect on delinquency that is unaccounted for by family process and structural context; and thirdly, that even after controlling for child and parental disposition, the dimensions of parental attachment and supervision all continue to influence delinquent conduct in a manner predicted by the 'informal social control' model (Sampson & Laub 1994). Thus, the major finding of this study is that:

...family process mediated approximately two-thirds of the effects of poverty and other structural background factors on delinquency. However, poverty appears to inhibit the capacity of a family to achieve informal social control, which in turn increases the likelihood of adolescent delinquency (Sampson & Laub 1994, p. 538).

Conversely, while:

these results point to the indirect effects of poverty on adolescent delinquency, they simultaneously suggest that strong family social controls may serve as an important buffer against structural disadvantage in the broader community (Sampson & Laub 1994, p. 528).

These findings add to our understanding of the link between family poverty and child and adolescent development and are in keeping with the results from the first study that was reviewed (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov 1994).

#### Limitations

A limitation of the coercion, social control, reintegrative shaming and informal social control theories is that most of the studies have been of males (Braithwaite 1989; Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990; Patterson 1982, 1989; Sampson & Laub 1994). For example, this study relies on the Glueck and Glueck

(1950) data set of male delinquents. As a consequence we cannot be certain, given the difference in moral development (Gilligan 1982; Gilligan, Ward & Taylor 1988), that the results hold good for females.

#### Study three

The next study was conducted to test a model that links family conflict and coercion with economic stress in family life and developmental problems of adolescence (Conger, Xiaoqia Ge, Elder, Lorenz & Simons 1994). This study, which was conducted over a three year period, involved interviewing 180 boys and 198 girls in seventh, eighth and ninth grade and their parents. All were white and from intact urban families. This model holds that adverse conditions that place economic pressure on families lead to parents depressed mood, increased marital conflict and parent-adolescent financial conflict, and parental hostility to the adolescent, which then produce adolescent problem behaviours.

#### Results

Overall the results obtained in this study were consistent with the proposed model. Moreover, the results confirm

that this process applied equally well to the behaviours of mother and father, as well as sons and daughters. These results add further support to the explanation as to how poverty negatively influences family processes as shown by Sampson and Laub (1994).

#### Limitations

This study was conducted with white, intact, urban families. The extent to which these results would apply to families in rural areas, of a different composition (eg, single-parent or stepfamilies), or families from a different cultural background as well as to families of colour, is an unresolved issue. Further studies are needed to explore these important questions.

#### DISCUSSION

While it may be desirable to attempt replication of these types of studies using Australian data, this is unlikely to occur in the near future. Unfortunately, the large scale computerized databases that permit such studies are not available in Australia. In spite of this situation there are some lessons to be learnt from these studies.

These studies move some way toward an integration of the individual maladjustment and structural theory explanations of how behavioural and emotional problems emerge in children and adolescents. They show that neither a structural explanation nor an individual maladjustment explanation of behavioural and emotional problems alone is appropriate. Strong family controls can ameliorate some of the impact of poverty and adverse social conditions. Likewise, poverty and adverse social conditions can negatively affect family processes.

For child welfare practice this suggests



that reducing family poverty alone will not be enough to reduce the incidence of behavioural and emotional problems in children and adolescents. While the reduction of family poverty is a social imperative it is equally vital that services designed to strengthen family processes are readily available. These services need to focus on parent education and training that help parents to achieve informal social control through improved parental discipline and monitoring practices (Ainsworth 1996).

## CONCLUSION

In Australia there are frequent calls for governments to eradicate family poverty because of its corrosive impact on family life and on the lives of young children (Hollingsworth 1996; Owen 1996). When these calls are made, those advocating this action rarely cite the research evidence to support this position. This is in some measure due to the absence of Australian studies of the type reviewed in this article. Instead they appear to want to win the argument on moral ground – that it is immoral for governments not to act to relieve family poverty. This moral imperative may be philosophically justified but it needs to be accompanied by sophisticated data of the type presented in these studies. This will strengthen the claim for government intervention. Hopefully, by drawing attention to recent evidence that clarifies and quantifies the impact of family poverty on the lives of children and adolescents, this article may encourage child welfare personnel, social workers and others to face governments with this compelling data. □

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