Mental Health and Poverty in Young Lives:
Intersections and Directions

Key Details

KEY WORDS
Youth, mental health, poverty, social inequality, young lives, education, school

POPULATION GROUP
Low-income youth

STEPPING UP THEMES
Health & Wellness; Coordinated & Youth Friendly Communities

RESEARCH ORIGIN
Canada

SOURCE
Academic Article (peer-reviewed)

"Human relationships are the cornerstone to school success, but it is often in high school that student–teacher relations can become less personal, less positive, less supportive, less caring, and teachers were found to trust students less."

1. What is the research about?

This article provides a review and synthesis of the research on the lives and experiences of young people dealing with poverty and/or mental health challenges as they make their way through school. The research demonstrates how these young people encounter social stigma, classism, and other forms of social marginalization, which then has an impact on their level of engagement in education. It shows the ways in which relationships and structures embedded in schools and other agencies can worsen and reproduce problems that are already faced by youth dealing with poverty and mental health issues.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research is based on a meta-synthesis of academic and community-based literature that examined the intersection of youth from Canada, England, New Zealand, France, Denmark and the United States who live in poverty and who experience mental health issues.

3. Who is this research about?

This research focuses on the experiences of children and youth affected by poverty and mental health issues in hopes of improving the lives of Canadian youth.

4. How was the research done?

This study reviewed literature on the intersections and connections between poverty and mental health, as well as their lived experiences in schools. Academic and grey literature, which includes research summaries, special publications, statistics and other materials from the Internet, were used for the review.

5. What are the key findings?

While transitions to adulthood are lengthening, youth living in poverty often experience early entry to adulthood. Income inequality leads to economic and social marginalization, which has detrimental health and social outcomes. Children and youth who grow up experiencing income insecurity and poverty are less likely to access mental health supports. Youth policy-makers and practitioners need to take the intersections of poverty and mental health into consideration and design interventions that can address the complexity.

The World Health Organization refers to the intersection of mental health, physical health and poverty as "the millennial morbidity". These challenges become greater in late middle childhood and adolescence, and have negative impacts on academic outcomes.

The research details the following experiences of youth dealing with poverty and mental health issues in relation to schooling:

- Many young people experience social or academic challenges when transitioning to high school;
- Self-esteem and access to a confidant decline as youth enter secondary school, with an overall decrease in school engagement;
- Many students report high levels of anxiety and depression;
- Student-teacher relations tend to deteriorate in high school; and
- Those suffering from mental illness are often stigmatized and isolated from peers.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

This study shows that there is a long way to go in ensuring that young people living in poverty have access to adequate mental health supports, both in and out of the school environment. The gaps identified by this research indicate that community agencies have a strong role to play in helping young people and their families. The researchers recommend that community-based organizations:

1. Take the growing income inequality and youth poverty in Canada seriously;
2. Pay better attention to the experiences and life stories of young people and their communities, and the roles played by their friends, families, teachers, and themselves in their stories;
3. "Take mental health to school" by advocating for school-based mental health services and improving the mental health literacy of school administrators and teachers;
4. Address youth concerns of social fit and belonging to ensure that their needs are met in a timely manner;
5. Consider social context and environmental factors when deciding whether one is eligible to receive youth supports, rather than relying on biological categories such as age.

All said, greater collaboration between community-based and institutional systems is needed in order to meet the unique needs of young people struggling with mental health challenges, and experiencing income insecurity and poverty.

Tilleczek, K., Ferguson, M., Campbell, V., & Lezeu, K. E. (2014). Mental health and poverty in young lives: Intersections and directions. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health, 33*(1), 63-76.

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