

Myth: Poverty isn't related to crime—everyone has the same choices and opportunities

Reality Check: Poverty and the criminal justice system go hand-in-hand

Did You Know?



There are certain groups at greater risk of living in poverty in Canada. They include:

1. Children
2. Single-parent families
3. Women
4. Unmarried individuals
5. Seniors
6. Aboriginal people
7. People with disabilities
8. Recent immigrants and visible minorities
9. Low-wage workers

We often hear people say that in a country like Canada, everyone has the same chances to succeed in life: "if you work hard, you can overcome any obstacle."

But the reality is that being born into a low-income family in a disadvantaged neighbourhood significantly increases one's odds of facing numerous health, financial and social challenges. One of these social challenges is becoming involved in criminal behaviour. Children who are born into disadvantaged communities are often described as being "at-risk."



In Canada, poverty is often measured by the "low-income cut-off measure" (LICO). Families who are living at or below the LICO have to spend most of their money on the basics of living, like food and shelter. Often this means that spending money on education, sports and other activities for children is very limited. Children cannot choose where they are born. A child who is born into poverty, through no fault of his or her own, can face all kinds of difficulties growing up.

Some of the difficulties that "at-risk" children and youth face are:

- Difficulties at school and dropping out
- Going to school hungry
- Homelessness, or living in foster homes
- Developmental delays or disabilities
- Living with only one parent
- Exposure to, and experience of verbal, physical, and/or sexual abuse, which can lead to serious psychological and developmental harm
- Lower levels of parental involvement and/or supervision
- Risk of becoming a victim of violence in their homes or communities
- Mental health problems and suicide
- Greater exposure to sexually transmitted infections
- Difficulty finding quality employment, or being under-employed (e.g. Only being able to find temporary work)

All of the difficulties at-risk children face limit their opportunities and also increase the likelihood they will have peers who share similar challenges. If a young person becomes involved in the youth justice system, it can create a negative domino effect; if efforts are not made to provide support for these youth, it is more likely that such behaviour will continue into adulthood.

Poverty and the Criminal Justice System

Low-income Canadians greatly outnumber wealthier Canadians in the criminal justice system. They are more “at risk” of participating in crime because of the social and economic challenges they face. They are also more likely to face significant barriers once they are involved in criminal justice processes.

Low-income people are more likely to...

...Be detained when they are arrested

Detention: The act of imprisoning a crime suspect in jail until his/her bail hearing

Low-income people—especially the homeless—are more likely to be held in detention once they are arrested and charged by the police.

...Be denied bail

Bail: The act of releasing a person suspected of committing a crime before his/her trial

To imprison a person before his or her trial is one of the greatest restrictions on a Canadian’s freedom. Bail should only be denied if: 1) the suspect is at risk of not showing up to the trial; or, 2) if the person is considered dangerous; or, 3) if releasing the individual would threaten the public’s opinion of the criminal justice system. Low-income people are more likely to be denied bail; for example, because they do not have a job or a home. Being denied bail has serious consequences for the later stages in a person’s case.

...Plead guilty or be convicted

People who are denied bail are more likely to be convicted of their charge(s) or to plead guilty. It takes most court cases between 3 months and a year to get to trial in Canada. Many people will plead guilty to get out of prisons or to avoid losing their jobs or homes. Since low-income people are more likely to be denied bail, they will also be more likely to plead guilty or be convicted of the crimes they are charged with.

...Have more difficulties during reintegration

Low-income people have numerous challenges to overcome when they are finally released from prison. They can face unemployment, mental health issues, addictions, lack of education, poverty, and homelessness. All of these challenges increase a person’s chances of re-offending after they are released. If these individuals cannot access proper housing, employment, and other supports, their ability to become law-abiding citizens is reduced.

JHSO Says: Poverty prevention is crime prevention. If nothing is done to help people living in poverty, families suffer and so does the community. We all pay the price in higher crime, poor education and lost potential.



Who are we?

“Effective, just, and humane responses to crime and its causes”

The John Howard Society of Ontario supports our 19 Affiliates through research, policy and program development. We strive to offer the most effective service possible to our clients and their families and contribute to the health, well-being and safety of communities.

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