

Source: Costello, E. J., Gordon, P., Keeler, M. S., & Angold, A. (2001). Poverty, race/ethnicity, and psychiatric disorder: A study of rural children. *American Journal of Public Health, 91*(9), 1494-1498.

This study challenges commonly held perceptions about relationships between poverty, race, and the development of mental health problems in children. It is well known that poverty is itself a risk factor in the development of mental health problems, but the extent to which various risk factors associated with poverty contribute to mental illness is unclear. Findings from this study in four rural North Carolina counties suggest that the relationship between income and the prevalence of psychiatric disorders in children may be different for Caucasian children than it is for African-American children.

The study first of all came up with an overall prevalence rate of 19.4% in the sample of children from 9 through 17 years, using the Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Assessment as the psychiatric interview. As the authors point out, this is very consistent with prevalence rates found in other studies (it should be noted that this is the prevalence rate for any diagnosable disorder and not for children with serious emotional disturbances).

Within the sample of 920 youngsters and parents, of whom 541 were African-American and 379 were Caucasian, poverty was much more common in the African-American families than in the Caucasian families. When the relationship between income and presence of a disorder was studied separately for African-American and Caucasian families, it was determined that there was a relatively strong relationship in the Caucasian families (with a higher prevalence rate amongst children from low-income families), and only a mild relationship in the African-American families.

The authors also gathered data on the presence of risk factors in the African-American and Caucasian families (see the table below for a summary of these findings) based on reports by the parents and children. The data show some very high rates of certain risk factors in this rural sample, including about two-thirds of African-American families and one-third of Caucasian families having at least one parent who left school before the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Also, in about 13% of both groups of parents there were reports of physical or extreme verbal violence between the parents, and in about 18% of both groups, at least one parent had been charged with or convicted of a criminal offense. The research showed that Caucasian families were especially vulnerable to the highest level of risk. Poorer Caucasian children with five or more risk factors were significantly more likely to have a psychiatric disorder than equivalently disadvantaged African-American children (56% vs. 34%).

The five risk factors found to contribute significantly to the mental health problems of the children in this study were: 1) familial mental health problems; 2) multiple moves (possibly resulting in different school systems); 3) lack of parental warmth; 4) inadequate parental supervision; and 5) harsh punishment practices. Particularly important were the variables of having to move households many times, and a family history of mental illness.

This study not only supports current estimates of prevalence of psychiatric disorders in children, and shows them to be unacceptably high, but also sheds light on the relationship between income, risk factors, and presence of disorders. It is not clear why the relationship between income and presence of disorders is stronger in the Caucasian sample in this study than in the African-American sample but this is certainly an issue worth further study. The significance of risk and protective factors, both in contributing to the presence of disorders and to possible interventions, also merits further study.

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# Data Trends

*Summaries of research on mental health services for children and adolescents and their families*

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Table 1. Risk factors and prevalence in African-American (N = 541) and Caucasian (N = 379) children

Risk factors	African-American	Caucasian
Child has spent time in a foster home	2.8**	0.4
One or other parent is a stepparent	12.5	17.1
One or both parents younger than 18 at child's birth	14.8*	9.9
Only one parental figure resident in home	33.4***	20.4
Four or more children in the household	8.4	7.8
Child or parent report lack of warmth between one or other parent and child	8.1	12.5*
One or other parent does not exert age-appropriate control on child's activities or friends	6.8*	3.3
Disciplinary style of one or other parent is harsh, restrictive, or physical	4.0	3.1
Physical or extreme verbal violence between parents	13.4	13.7
One or other parent has had treatment for or currently has a drug problem	9.7	9.5
One or other parent has been charged with or convicted of a criminal offense	18.7	18.1
Biological or other resident parent has had treatment for a mental health problem	18.8	36.9
Mother currently has five or more DSM-IV symptoms of depression	8.6	5.6
Parent or child reports that the school or neighborhood is dangerous	5.2	6.3
TANF, or unemployment benefit 1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> source of income	6.6***	0.9
One or other parent unemployed at time of interview	16.8***	9.8
One or other parent left school before the 11 <sup>th</sup> grade	66.4***	34.6
Family has moved four or more times in the past five years	12.8	9.7
One or more recent negative life events reported	40.0	34.9
Child ever exposed to sexual abuse	5.5	7.3

Notes: \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$