

For low-income families, substandard housing takes toll on children

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A new report from researchers at Boston College and Tufts University shows the distinct emotional and educational price children pay when their families live in run down apartments and homes.

Data culled from a six-year study of 2,400 children, teens and young adults found emotional and behavioral symptoms such as anxiety, depression, lying and aggressive behavior are closely connected to poor [housing](#) quality and the related stress placed on parents, children and families, according to the report, which was published in the journal *Developmental Psychology*.

Children growing up in poor quality housing plagued by leaky roofs, broken windows, peeling paint, debris and vermin experience greater emotional and [behavioral problems](#) at young ages and later see their school performance suffer, researchers report in one of the most comprehensive assessments ever conducted into the impact of housing on children in the U.S.

"Through no fault of their own, children and teens whose families live in substandard housing are paying a steep price in terms of their emotional and behavioral well-being," said a lead author of the study, Boston College Professor of Education Rebekah Levine Coley. "That carries on into school and creates deficits that are extremely difficult to overcome."

Most telling was the finding that poor housing quality was the most consistent and strongest predictor of emotional and behavioral problems

in low-income children and youth who were studied when compared to factors such as affordability, ownership, residential stability or housing subsidy receipt, according to the researchers, whose analysis was funded by grants from the MacArthur Foundation and the W. T. Grant Foundation.

Furthermore, residential instability – the moving from place to place, even if only a few blocks away or the town next door – disrupts the functioning of low-income children over the long term, , according to Coley, who conducted the study with Tufts University Professor Tama Leventhal. Although single moves may provide a boost to poor children and teens in the short-term, perhaps allowing them to access safer housing or better schools, over time the cumulative effect of residential instability took a toll on children, increasing emotional and behavioral problems.

A toll was taken not only on children, but their parents, generating stressful conditions within families, said Coley, a professor of Counseling, Developmental and Educational Psychology at the Lynch School of Education.

"A big takeaway is that many of these links function in part through parenting and parental stress," said Coley, whose research examines the intersection of families, neighborhoods and public policy. "We know that environmental stress can come not just from outside the home, but from the home itself when we consider the impact of living day-to-day with exposed wiring, peeling paint, rodents, poor sanitation and a lack of natural light, or with frequent moves from home to home."

An estimated two million poor children lived in run-down and unsafe housing in 2005, and double blows dealt to low-income neighborhoods by the housing crisis and the recession have likely worsened the situation.

Among the many interrelated issues the researchers untangled was the impact of affordability. While many of the families struggled with housing costs – with most paying more than 30 percent of household income toward housing – whether or not housing was affordable was not predictive of children's well-being. Similarly, living in owned homes or government-assisted housing rather than private rental stock did not outweigh the issues of quality and stability.

Researchers found a strong link between the stress poor housing quality placed on parents and the problems experienced by children, according to the report. For parents, the strain of living in substandard housing produced symptoms of anxiety and depression.

The study, which focused on families living in low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago and San Antonio, may serve to focus policymakers on making the link between quality and affordability in new housing legislation and regulations.

"There's a tremendous amount of attention paid to [affordability](#) and that's a critical issue for low-income families," said Coley. "What our findings suggest is that housing quality may be more important when we are concerned with the growth and development of [children](#). The data suggest policymakers make housing quality a priority as they work to resolve the housing crisis facing low-income families."

Provided by Boston College

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