

The penalty of poor housing

January 15 2014, by Marjorie Howard

It's tough enough growing up in a house with rodents, a leaky roof and heat that doesn't work. Now a Tufts researcher has found that children and teens who live in substandard housing are more likely to experience emotional problems and do poorly in school.

Tama Leventhal, an associate professor in the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development in the School of Arts and Sciences, is co-author of a recent paper that found living in run-down [housing](#) causes stress for parents, who then struggle with symptoms of depression or anxiety and are thus less able to provide stable family routines. The study, "Relations Between Housing Characteristics and the Well-Being of Low-Income Children and Adolescents," was published in the journal *Developmental Psychology*.

Leventhal used data collected by the Three-City Study, a project that began at Johns Hopkins University in 1999, to assess the well-being of low-income [children](#) and families in Boston, Chicago and San Antonio following welfare reform, which changed eligibility requirements. The project, which has provided a wealth of data for many researchers, followed 2,400 low-income young children and teens and their families for six years to assess how families have responded to welfare reform measures.

Leventhal and her co-authors, including Rebekah L. Coley of Boston College, used the data to look at five housing characteristics: quality, stability, affordability, ownership and whether a family received a housing subsidy. Housing quality, says Leventhal, was the strongest

predictor of emotional and behavioral problems in low-income children and youth.

An estimated two million poor American children lived in physically inadequate dwellings in 2005, according to national data.

"What our study suggests is that when you look at whether families moved or owned their homes or lived in subsidized housing or had poor housing, quality stood out as being the most important for children's social and emotional development," she says.

Mothers in the Three-City Study were asked about housing maintenance, leaking roofs, broken windows, rodents, whether the heat and stove worked and whether there was exposed wiring. Interviewers made their own observations about the condition of the housing as well. The mothers also were asked about their children's behavior, including whether kids showed signs of depression or anxiety or had behavioral problems such as aggression. In addition, the study looked at how well children did on standardized tests like those given in school.

They found that both younger children and adolescents struggled with emotional and behavioral problems, but adolescents had problems in school, too. "Our study also found that the difficulties of living in poor-quality housing can take their toll on parents, whose own stress can result in a less stable household," says Leventhal. "We did additional analyses that found that parental stress and parenting behaviors explained the link between housing problems and children's emotional and [behavioral problems](#)."

What can be done? Leventhal says she is cautious about using a single study as the basis for policymaking. While housing for low-income people is often federally funded, housing codes and their enforcement are implemented at the local level.

Several follow-up studies are being done by Leventhal and her colleagues, including one that looks at how both housing and neighborhood quality are related to adolescent adjustment, and another that looks at how the various housing characteristics are related to each other, she says.

More information: "Relations between housing characteristics and the well-being of low-income children and adolescents." Coley RL, Leventhal T, Lynch AD, Kull M. Dev Psychol. 2013 Sep;49(9):1775-89. DOI: [10.1037/a0031033](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031033). Epub 2012 Dec 17.

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