

scottish justice matters

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POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND JUSTICE





THE REPRODUCTION OF POVERTY

Lesley McAra and Susan McVie on the impacts of system contact on the life chances of young people.

UK DATA SHOWS that poverty has increased in recent years, especially in the wake of the financial crisis, and that young people have suffered the most. In Scotland, around half a million people, including 100,000 children, are living in 'severe' poverty according to a Government report published earlier this year (Scottish Government 2015a). And the latest Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) report indicates that children in the lowest income quintiles have poorer health, greater emotional and behavioural difficulties and lower life satisfaction than those in higher income groups (Scottish Government 2015b). While the GUS cohort is not yet old enough to explore the causes and correlates of offending, its findings raise important questions. What role would we expect poverty to play in offending by young people? And how might we expect the response of our justice system to impact on the poorest young people's well-being and life chances? Using data from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime, we have found that poverty is a strong driver of violent offending amongst young people. However, systems of youth and adult justice, far from tackling violence and lifting young people out of poverty, serve instead to entrench poverty, thereby reproducing the very conditions in which violence can flourish.

The Edinburgh Study

The Edinburgh Study has followed the lives of around 4,300 young people as they made the transition from childhood to adulthood. Using both self-reported data from the cohort members and linked data from a range of official administrative datasets, we have studied the effect of childhood poverty on violence in the teenage years (McAra and McVie, 2016) and

examined its impact beyond into early adulthood. In this article, we examine four measures of poverty: low socio-economic status of the child's head of household; whether the young person was not in education, training or employment at age 18 (NEET); whether the young person had been unemployed for more than a year at age 22; and neighbourhood deprivation based on census measures of poverty in the young person's area of residence.

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Links between poverty and violence

We found that poverty had a significant and direct effect on young people's likelihood to engage in violence at age 15, even after controlling for the effects of a range of other factors known to influence violent behaviour. In other words, even when taking account of a raft of risk indicators that would be expected to increase the propensity to engage in violence (including poor family functioning, lack of attachment to school, substance misuse, and impulsivity), and a range of protective factors that are known to act as preventative (such as strong and positive relationships with parents), young people who were living in a family where the head of household was unemployed or in low status manual employment and those who were growing up in communities scarred by high levels of deprivation were significantly more likely to engage in violence.

Interestingly, we found two significant interaction effects in our analysis of poverty and violence. Compared to all other young people, girls from low socio-economic status backgrounds were at significantly greater risk of engaging in violence. In addition, compared to all others, those who were identified as having a 'low risk' background but were from low socio-economic status backgrounds had a greater likelihood of engaging in violence. What this suggests is that for certain types of young people, living in a poor household increases their risk of engaging in violence beyond what we would expect it to be, all other things being equal. So, we know that girls are less likely to offend than boys and we know that people who have a low risk profile are less likely to offend than those with a higher risk profile; however, household poverty appears to act as an exacerbating factor and increases the chance of such young people offending.

How then might this relationship between poverty and crime be explained? Our findings are supportive of a theory of offending based on the concept of negotiated order (McAra and McVie 2016). For young people from the most impoverished backgrounds, violence provides a touchstone against which identities are honed; more particularly, violence empowers and is a means of attaining and sustaining status amongst peers. Willingness to use violence, therefore, becomes a resource for the most dispossessed and, as will be demonstrated below, this becomes a persistent feature across the teenage years.

Institutional responses exacerbate poverty and violence

The Scottish children's hearing system is predicated on a needs-based educational model of care. One might expect that where poverty is identified as a specific need and linked to offending, then the children's hearings system would be able to access services and support for young people, which would help lift them out of poverty. However, the Edinburgh Study findings indicate that this is manifestly not the case. We found that throughout the teenage years and into adulthood the decision-making practices of institutions (including the police, the hearings system and the criminal courts) disproportionately focus on young people from impoverished backgrounds.

Looking the characteristics of young people who were charged by the police at age 15, for example, it is not surprising that involvement in serious offending and hanging about the streets were strong predictors of police engagement. In addition, the police were most likely to charge those who had come to their attention during the previous year, which indicates some prior labelling. However, even taking account of these factors, young people from low socio-economic status households were significantly more likely to be charged by the police than those who were not. Such young people were also more likely to be referred to the hearings system and placed on statutory supervision, even after controlling for a range of other determining factors.

A similar dynamic can be found in early adulthood. At age 22, those with prior labelling and involvement in serious offending were more likely to be charged by the police. But even taking these factors into account, young men who had been unemployed for more than a year were significantly more likely to be charged than others in the cohort. Furthermore, those who were both unemployed for more than a year and

known to the police by 15 were significantly more likely to be convicted than those in employment and those with no such policing history, even after their involvement in serious offending had been taken into consideration.

The story does not end there. The longitudinal nature of our study allowed us to track the outcome of early contacts with youth justice on the behaviour, social status and well-being of young people in later years. Using data about whether young people went on to be NEET by age 18, we found that by far the strongest predictors of NEET status were whether the young person had ever been charged by the police for an offence and whether they had ever been placed on supervision within the hearing system. This held true when other factors linked to the risk of NEET status were taken into account (including low socio-economic status in early childhood and a range of school and family factors). Moreover, both low socio-economic status in early childhood and being placed on supervision by the hearings system were significantly associated with continued involvement in violence at age 18 (even when controlling for a range of risk and protective factors).

Conclusions

The Edinburgh Study is a valuable resource that holds both self-report and official data on a large cohort of young people. It provides strong evidence that children living in poverty are over-represented amongst violent offenders. Even taking account of this increased risk of offending, however, children from poor backgrounds are disproportionately selected into the juvenile justice system and retained there by decision making that is predicated on, amongst other things, their impoverished status. Previous work has shown that this type of systemic processing labels and marginalises the most vulnerable young people in society, making it difficult for them to escape from their offending persona (McAra and McVie 2007). The system causes structural failures that prevent those in poverty from moving out of this condition and, in the longer term, this constrains opportunities and reduce life-chances, such that these young people are at increased risk of criminal justice system intervention and NEET status in early adulthood. In other words, the youth and adult criminal justice systems appear to punish the poor and reproduce the very conditions that entrench people in poverty and make violence more likely.

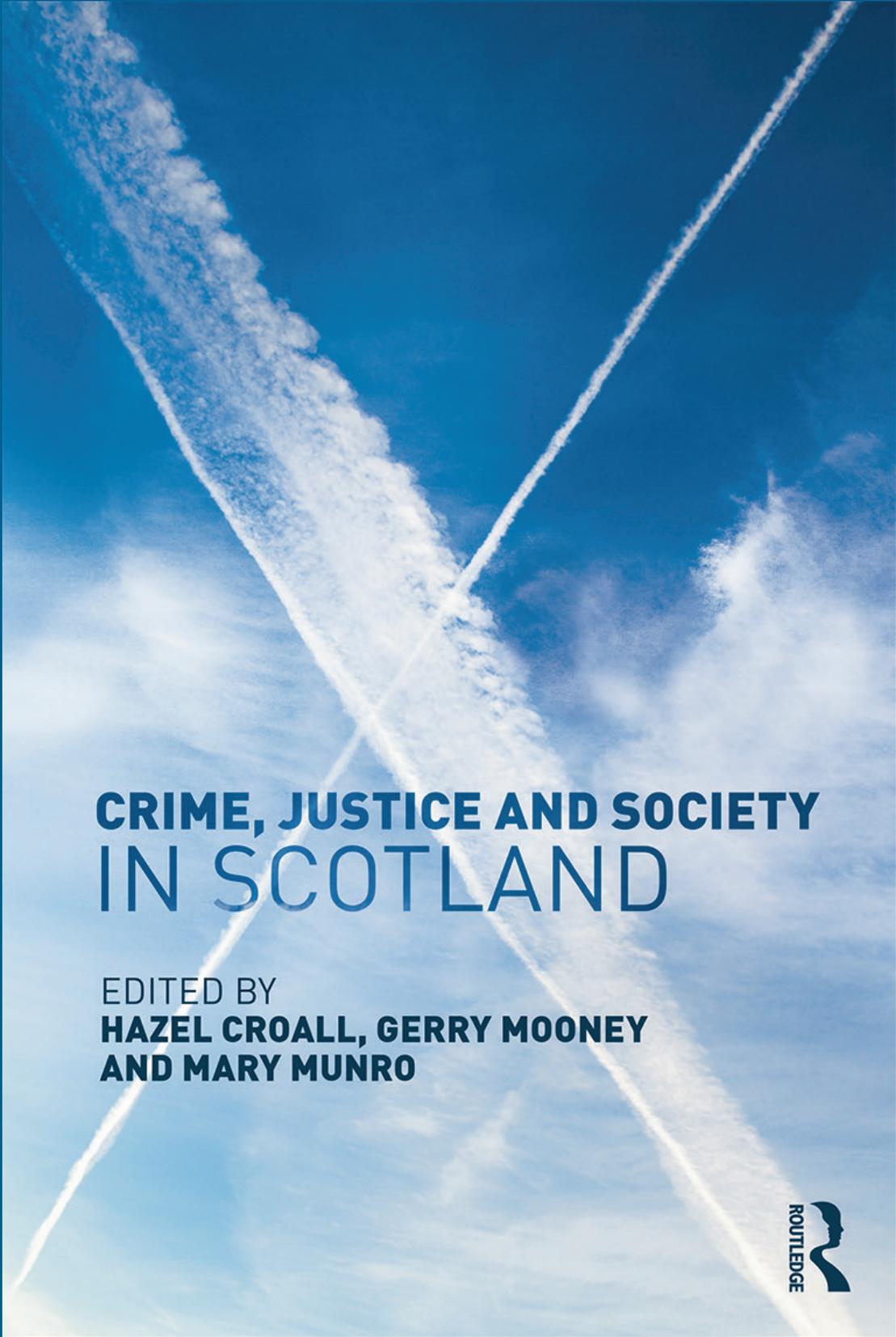
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