Growing Up Poor: Examining the Link between Persistent Childhood Poverty and Delinquency

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Findings from aggregate-level and ethnographic research suggest that poverty and delinquency are related. The inability of individual-level quantitative research to demonstrate consistent evidence of this relationship, however, has been used to call into question whether poverty is indeed related to an increased propensity for delinquent involvement. This may be due to the difficulty individual-level analyses have in identifying the group most important in uncovering the relationship of poverty to delinquency—those individuals that experience persistent childhood poverty. This paper provides an assessment of the effects of both the level of exposure to poverty and its timing on delinquent involvement using fourteen years of longitudinal data for a national sample of younger adolescents. Findings indicate that exposure to poverty and the timing of such exposure are indeed related to an increased likelihood of involvement in delinquency.

KEY WORDS: delinquency; poverty; persistent poor; tobit; longitudinal data.

1. INTRODUCTION

We are currently realizing a deepening of poverty for American children, both in terms of the number of children in poverty and in the intensity of the poverty they are experiencing. In terms of the numbers of children in poverty, data shows that nearly 21% of the nation’s children are from families living in poverty—about twice that of most other industrialized countries (Huston et al., 1994). For 1995, that means that there are approximately 15.3 million U.S. children living in households defined as falling below the poverty line (Duncan et al., 1998). The percentage of children living in poverty has remained constant during the 1990s, but the number of children has increased. The increasing depth of poverty for American children is shown not only in this change but also in dramatic changes in the nature of

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poverty. Children in poverty are increasingly concentrated in impoverished and underclass neighborhoods (Greenwood, 1995).

Concern about the number of children living in poverty arises from our knowledge of the problems children face because of poverty. Since the 1960s, developmental research has examined the effects of poverty on IQ, social adjustment, self-esteem, depression, and other types of maladaptive behaviors as mediated by such factors as parenting, home environment, family structure, immediate resources and more recently, school, child care, and neighborhood (Huston et al., 1994). In each case, poverty has been shown to have detrimental effects.

Whether we find evidence that poverty is related to delinquency, however, depends on the type of research employed. Ethnographic studies link poverty to delinquency and crime, along with such factors as persistent unemployment, marital disruption, female-headed households, and teenage pregnancy (Anderson, 1993; Hannerz, 1969; Liebow, 1967; Rainwater, 1970; Sullivan, 1993; Suttles, 1968). Ethnographic research tends to focus on a relatively small group within a relatively limited context, however, and so is unable to convincingly rule out rival hypotheses for a poverty–delinquency relationship. Empirical research at the aggregate-level has also amassed evidence that chronic and persistent poverty leads to crime (Currie, 1985; Hagan and Peterson, 1995; Jencks, 1992; Krivo and Peterson, 1996; Sampson and Wilson, 1995; Wilson, 1987). The results of aggregate-level studies, however, are not often taken by many as convincing evidence of a causal relationship (Jencks, 1992) or as useful in explaining the nature of the relationship: “when a relationship is found using aggregated data, the etiology, characteristics, and behavior associated with that relationship cannot be specifically detailed or easily understood (Sánchez Jankowski, 1995:93).”

The most convincing evidence that poverty causes delinquency would, therefore, necessarily be based on individual-level quantitative analyses. Yet, such investigations provide the least support for a relationship between poverty and crime (Sánchez Jankowski, 1995; Tittle and Meier, 1990). In general, such research efforts have led to the conclusion that poverty accounts for little of the variation in delinquent involvement. Yet, individual-level quantitative analyses have been the least effective of these three approaches at identifying the group which criminological theory suggests is the most important—individuals who grew up in conditions of persistent poverty (see Farnworth et al., 1994).

This paper provides an individual-level analysis of the effect of poverty on delinquent involvement using a national sample of adolescents. The analysis is specifically designed to go beyond past analyses by identifying those youths growing up in persistent poverty, indicating the stage of life