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“They lock us up for trying to survive”: The socioecological context of police contact among adolescents experiencing homelessness

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Abstract

Background: Dual experiences of homelessness and criminal justice system contact in early life can have profoundly negative and synergistic impacts on health and wellbeing, social functioning, and healthy development at a critical juncture in the life course. There is limited exploration of the socioecological context of police contact among adolescents experiencing homelessness with which to inform effective prevention and intervention. We aimed to describe how and why homeless adolescents encounter police, with the objective of understanding how their socioecological context shapes these engagements

Methods: We conducted semi-structured interviews with 53 adolescents (aged 15-27 years) who accessed homelessness support services between 2014 and 2019 in Melbourne, Australia. We described participant experiences using a socioecological framework.

Findings: Participants described complex circumstances in which engaging in behaviours that increased risk of police contact (e.g., theft, violence, aggression, carrying weapons, using or selling drugs, squatting) were normalised as necessary for survival, self-protection, and safety. We identified factors that impacted participants' risk of police contact across multiple socioecological levels. Some of these increased the risk of police contact, such as untreated health issues, engagement in illegal activities, violence, seeking protection in gangs, and being stereotyped by police as criminals. Others supported trajectories away from police contact, such as having future ambitions, intentionally associating with peers who stayed out of trouble, responsibility for children or other dependents, and positive police interactions.

Discussion: Factors contributing to risk of police contact among homeless adolescents extend well beyond the individual level. Strategies to prevent police and criminal justice system contact must also consider interpersonal, community, and systems-level influences and span multiple sectors including law enforcement, justice, homelessness, health, welfare, and child protection.

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