

Experience of poverty and other risk factors among young people who offend in Scotland

Author: Dr Allison Kurpiel and Professor Susan McVie

Date: 15 May 2025

DOI: 10.7488/era/6007

This Data Insights presents findings from ADR Scotland research, which suggest that reducing child poverty might prevent early offending. However, a range of other factors would need to be addressed too.

Summary

Researchers were interested in the relationship between child poverty and youth offending. Using data from a large study of children in Scotland, they found those who offended by age 12 were most likely to have experienced persistent child poverty. They were also more likely to have experienced neighbourhood deprivation, low parental monitoring, living with a single parent, and adverse childhood experiences.

What we did

We analysed data from the Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) study to explore whether offending amongst young people was associated with household poverty, neighbourhood deprivation, and various other aspects of family disadvantage during childhood. We used GUS data collected from age 6 to age 14 to look at both persistent and intermittent poverty and deprivation. Self-reported data on offending was collected at age 12 and 14.

We looked at three groups: 'early onset' offenders (started by age 12); 'adolescent onset' offenders (started at age 14); and non-offenders. For each group, we looked at five factors:

- Household poverty (based on relative low income)
- Neighbourhood deprivation (based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation)
- Low parental monitoring
- Living in a single-parent household
- Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

What we found

We found that **early onset offenders were more likely than the other two groups to have been exposed to persistent household poverty during childhood**. Figure 1 shows that 31% of early onset offenders experienced persistent poverty, compared to 25% of non-offenders and 22% of adolescent onset offenders. There was less difference between groups in the percentage who had experienced intermittent poverty, but early onset offenders were the highest.

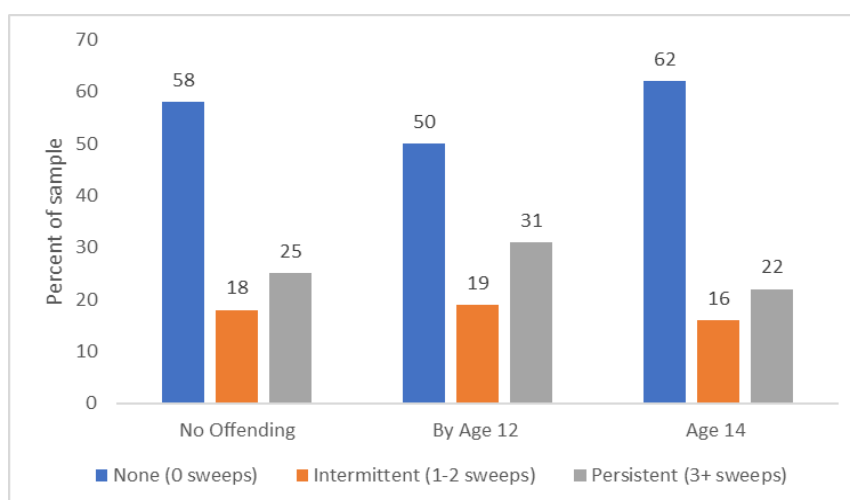


Figure 1. Duration of Exposure to Relative Low Income by Offending Onset Prevalence, GUS (sweeps 6-10, N=2,021).
Notes: Estimates weighted and rounded. Estimates based on imputed data.

Early-onset offenders were more likely to have experienced persistent neighbourhood deprivation compared to the other two groups: this applied to 23% of early onset offenders compared to 20% of adolescent onset offenders and 18% of non-offenders.

Looking at the other types of social adversity, early onset offenders were most likely to have experienced all three. Figure 2 shows that **those who engaged in offending by age 12 were far more likely to have experienced low parental monitoring, and somewhat more likely to have lived in a single-parent household or been exposed to 3+ ACEs**, than the two other groups.

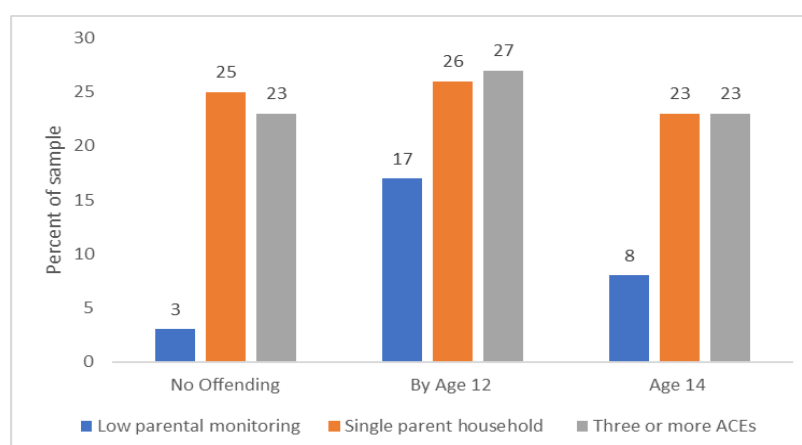


Figure 2. Select Household Characteristics by Offending Onset Prevalence, GUS (sweeps 6-10, N=2,021)
Notes: Estimates weighted and rounded. Estimates based on imputed data. ACEs= adverse childhood experiences.

Why it matters

Reducing child poverty is a key policy priority in Scotland, as it is widely recognised that this could improve children's longer-term outcomes into adulthood. Our study suggests that reducing child poverty might help to reduce the risk of early onset offending in Scotland. However, early offending is also associated with adverse environmental circumstances, including exposure to persistent neighbourhood deprivation, and a range of other household or family factors, such as poor parental monitoring, living in a single parent household and exposure to adverse childhood experiences. Therefore, wider policies aimed at improving housing policies, reducing trauma, and supporting parents may be needed to help children thrive and reduce the risk of early offending.

The associations found in this study between early onset offending and household poverty and other risk factors in childhood are consistent with prior criminological theory (e.g. Moffit, 1993). This theory suggests that early onset offending may lead to persistent offending over the longer term, so it is important to focus on tackling the factors that increase risk of early onset offending. Reducing exposure to child poverty and neighbourhood deprivation - as well as the other factors studied here - could help to reduce early onset, and later persistent, offending.

Early intervention for those who experience multiple aspects of poverty may be most beneficial to children living in Scotland. Other research (not presented here) suggests that reducing the cost-of-living crisis, supporting families on low incomes, and reducing 'financial strain' within households may play a key role in reducing early onset offending. Given the strong association between parental supervision and early offending, assisting parents with childcare needs or afterschool provision may also be warranted.

Child poverty in Scotland is affected by a combination of devolved and reserved policy measures – such as personal taxation and benefits - so reducing child poverty may well require both UK and Scottish strategies.

What next?

The team is conducting a wider piece of research to compare relative low income with other indicators of financial hardship—such as material deprivation and financial strain—to determine which measures of household poverty are most strongly associated with onset of offending in childhood.

Future research will explore how low income may affect parenting processes, such as parental mental health, disciplinary practices, monitoring, and parent-child relationships, to assess whether these factors mediate the link between poverty and early offending. We hope that these findings can inform more precise, data-driven prevention and intervention strategies to reduce early offending and prevent long-term involvement in the justice system.

References

Moffitt T. E. (1993), 'Adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behaviour: A developmental taxonomy', *Psychological Review*, 100: 674–701

Scottish Centre for Social Research. (2022). Growing Up in Scotland: Cohort 1, Sweep 3, Geography Data, Intermediate Geography and Local Authority, 2007-2008: Secure Access. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 8523, DOI: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-8523- 1

Scottish Government. (2024), *Child Poverty Delivery Plan progress 2023-2024*. Scrutiny by the Poverty and Inequality Commission Executive Summary prepared for the Scottish Government, available online at https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Executive_Summary_Child_Poverty_Delivery_Plan_progress_2023-2024_Scrutiny_by_the_Poverty_and_Inequality_Commission.pdf

Acknowledgements

- ADR UK
- Scottish Centre for Administrative Data Research (SCADR)
- Scottish Centre for Social research
- UK Data Archive

About ADR Scotland

Our mission is for ADR Scotland to enable vital research, by utilising Scotland's wealth of public sector data to better inform policy and public services.

[ADR Scotland](#) works with four delivery partners:

- [Research Data Scotland](#) (RDS) - a charitable organisation working to improve access to secure datasets and enable research in the public good that will inform policymakers and government.
- [Public Health Scotland](#) (PHS) - bringing together and sharing data and intelligence to shape decisions affecting health. The Electronic Data Research and Innovation Service (eDRIS) is part of PHS.
- [National Records of Scotland](#) (NRS) - enables data to be de-identified for data linkage in Scotland in collaboration with our delivery partners PHS (eDRIS) and EPCC.
- [EPCC](#) - a centre for high performance computing at University of Edinburgh which provides the IT infrastructure for [Scotland's National Safe Haven](#) (a trusted research environment).

About ADR UK

ADR UK is a partnership transforming the way researchers access the UK's wealth of public sector data, to enable better informed policy decisions that improve people's lives. By linking together data held by different parts of government and facilitation safe and secure access for accredited researchers to these newly joined-up and de-identified data sets, ADR UK is creating a sustainable body of knowledge about how our society and economy function – tailored to give decision makers the answers they need to solve important policy questions.

Contact

Name: Dr Allison Kurpiel and Professor Susan McVie

Email: akurpiel@ed.ac.uk