

## Paying a Steep Price for Substandard Housing

Study co-published by Coley shows housing's impact on children

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Sifting through a massive study of low-income children and their families, Lynch School of Education Professor Rebekah Levine Coley and colleagues have gleaned new insights into the harmful effects of substandard housing on families and children.

Coley, whose research into the housing choices of low-income families is supported by a grant from the MacArthur Foundation, says her new report shows the distinct emotional and educational prices children pay when their families live in run-down apartments and homes.

Data culled from the six-year Three City Study of 2,400 children, teens and young adults found emotional and behavioral symptoms such as anxiety, depression, lying and aggressive behavior are closely connected to poor housing quality and the related stress placed on parents, children and families, according to the report in the current edition of the journal *Developmental Psychology*.

The study, which focused on families living in low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago and San Antonio, may serve to focus policymakers on making the link between quality and affordability in new housing legislation and regulations.



Rebekah Levine Coley (Photo by Lee Pellegrini)

“There’s a tremendous amount of attention paid to affordability and that’s a critical issue for low-income families,” said Coley. “What our findings suggest is that housing quality may be more important when we are concerned with the growth and development of children. The data suggest policymakers make housing quality a priority as they work to resolve the housing crisis facing low-income families.”

Children growing up in poor-quality housing plagued by leaky roofs, broken windows, peeling paint, debris and vermin experience greater emotional and behavioral problems at young ages and later see their school performance suffer, researchers report in one of the most comprehensive assessments ever conducted into the impact of housing on children in the US.

“Through no fault of their own, children and teens whose families live in substandard housing are paying a steep price in terms of their emotional and behavioral well-being,” said Coley, who teaches in the Lynch School Counseling, Developmental and Educational Psychology Department. “That carries on into school and creates deficits that are extremely difficult to overcome.”

Extremely telling was the finding that poor housing quality was the most consistent and strongest predictor of emotional and behavioral problems in low-income children and youth who were studied when compared to factors such as affordability, ownership, residential stability or housing subsidy receipt, according to the researchers, whose analysis was also funded by the W.T. Grant Foundation.

Furthermore, residential instability – the moving from place to place, even if only a few blocks away or the town next door – disrupts the functioning of low-income children over the long term, according to Coley, who conducted the study with Tufts University Professor Tama Leventhal and was assisted by graduate students Alicia Doyle Lynch and Melissa Kull.

Although single moves may provide a boost to poor children and teens in the short-term, perhaps allowing them to access safer housing or better schools, over time the cumulative effect of residential instability took a toll on children, increasing children’s emotional and behavioral problems.

The effect was not only felt by children: For parents, the strain of living in substandard housing produced symptoms of anxiety and depression, said Coley. Researchers found a strong link between the stress poor housing quality placed on parents and the problems experienced by children, according to the report.

“A big takeaway is that many of these links function in part through parenting and parental stress,” said Coley, whose research examines the intersection of families, neighborhoods and public policy. “We know that environmental stress can come not just from outside the home, but from the home itself when we consider the impact of living day-to-day with exposed wiring, peeling paint, rodents, poor sanitation and a lack of natural light, or with frequent moves from home to home.”

An estimated two million poor children lived in run-down and unsafe housing in 2005, and double blows dealt to low-income neighborhoods by the recent housing crisis and the recession have likely only worsened the situation.

Among the many interrelated issues the researchers untangled was the impact of affordability. While many of the families struggled with housing costs – with most paying more than 30 percent of household income toward housing – whether or not housing was affordable was not predictive of children’s well-being. Similarly, living in owned homes or government-assisted housing rather than private rental stock did not outweigh the issues of quality and stability.

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