

Health problems, lack of access to care increase risk of delinquency

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Credit: Craig Chandler/University Communications

Juvenile delinquency isn't just a drain on the criminal justice system. It can affect the economy through damaged or stolen property, as well as strain the health care system because delinquency and other risky

behaviors have been linked to poor health outcomes as adults.

UNL sociologist Lisa Kort-Butler recently examined what may cause youths to participate in delinquent behaviors and marijuana use. In a recent study, she found it leads back to [health](#) issues and lack of access to [health care](#).

In the new study, which appears this month in the journal *Youth and Society*, Kort-Butler used surveys and interviews collected from more than 12,000 U.S. youths to examine why some kids are more likely than others to be involved in crime.

"This relationship has been established that shows people with poor health were more likely to get involved in delinquency," the associate professor of sociology said. "My expansion on that is to try to figure out why. What is linking these [poor health](#) symptoms and delinquency?"

As symptoms increased, so did the likelihood of delinquency and marijuana use, Kort-Butler found. Youths who reported lack of health care were also at increased risk for delinquency and marijuana use. In the sample, 68 percent had engaged in some form of [delinquency](#) in the past year; 25 percent had used marijuana at least once.

Kort-Butler said she suspected mental [health issues](#) were the cause, but found health problems and lack of care contributed to absences from school and academic problems, which significantly increased the likelihood of [risky behaviors](#).

She pointed to lack of access to health care as a main predictor of future delinquent behavior; 18 percent of respondents said they did not get medical care when they needed it in the previous year.

Poor health and lack of access to care compounded with school absences

because of illness, which became a vicious cycle for youths in the study.

"Kids who had these health problems and lacked access to care were more likely to experience problems at school and be absent," Kort-Butler said. "We call it 'proliferated stress.' They have these stressful problems related to their health, which then created problems at school for them and consequently, it led to getting involved in some of these other sorts of behaviors."

School absences can affect an adolescent's social and academic standing, Kort-Butler said.

"You can think of (absences) in terms of the youths aren't doing the normative kinds of things that they're supposed to be doing," she said. "So, if they're not in school and participating because they're sick, then they may look for a way to fit in with the crowd."

"We can also look at those absences as another cause of stress. Not only are these kids missing out on things, they're probably feeling bad about it, too. They want to be involved."

Kort-Butler said the findings hint at possible preventative measures for at-risk youths. Ending the cycle of illness and school absences by providing [health care access](#) and academic support could curtail risky behaviors that lead to more negative health consequences.

"There may be a role here for schools to identify those students who are sick a lot and missing school because of illness and make sure they're getting the academic support they need, as well as keeping them integrated into the school environment," she said. "If we can identify who those kids are and provide the kind of support they need for their health or their academics, then potentially what this suggests is we can prevent negative behaviors."

More information: "Health-Related Strains and Subsequent Delinquency and Marijuana Use." *Youth & Society* 0044118X15578436, first published on April 6, 2015 [DOI: 10.1177/0044118X15578436](https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X15578436)

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