

## The Impact of Supportive and Stressful Relationships on Disadvantaged Youth



### What this research is about

Supportive social relationships are often thought of as foundational to having a fulfilling life, while stressful relationships are seen as sources of burden and frustration. Much research has examined the benefits of positive social relationships, and a few studies have looked at the downsides of negative social relationships. However, supportive and stressful relationships are often researched separately. Many relationships contain elements of both support and stress, but a holistic view is rarely represented within existing research.

Youth from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are especially likely to experience relationships that are both supportive and stressful. As they become adults, youth shift from receiving support to providing support in many of their interpersonal relationships. They also face challenges in education, employment, and wellbeing. This study examined both stress and support in the social relationships of youth from less-resourced backgrounds and the effects on their wellbeing.

### What the researchers did

This research was part of the broader *Parcours* study. Participants were recruited from 10 different public high schools, eight of which were located in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Greater Montreal, Quebec. However, the data used for this study was from the four- and eight-year follow-up interviews (i.e., when participants were in their early and mid-20s). A total of 384 young adults participated in the four-year follow-up; 50% were male, 32% had immigrant parents, 63% still lived with their parents, and 49% were in an intimate relationship. Among them, 304 also participated in the eight-year follow-up; at that time, 87% were working, and 19% had not received an educational credential.

### What you need to know

This study examined how the social relationships of socioeconomically disadvantaged youth can both support and strain their wellbeing. The researchers asked young adults in their 20s about their relationships with families, friends, and intimate partners. They found four profiles: Wrap-Around Support, Supported Singles, Double-Edged, and Isolated. Young adults with more social support had higher wellbeing, though severe life stressors such as housing issues could weaken the benefits of social support. The researchers conclude that it is as important to help youth with the burdens of social and other life stressors as well as strengthening their social relationships to promote wellbeing.

The researchers used a combination of self-report scales and semi-structured interviews. At the eight-year follow-up, participants rated how they were thriving (on a 7-point scale) and their experiences of negative states like hopeless and low self-esteem (on a 4-point scale). During the interview, participants were asked questions about supports and stressors in their lives and relationships with families, friends, and intimate partners based on the Life Events and Difficulties Schedule (LEDS). The interviewer prepared a written report of each interview. Based on this summary, two research assistants independently rated the strain and support within each participant's relationships.

### What the researchers found

The researchers identified four relationship profiles, splitting participants into roughly two halves. Strengthening, strain-free relationships characterized the first two profiles. Supported singles (30% of

participants) were well supported by their family and friends. Participants who had Wrap-Around Support (16%) also received support from a romantic relationship. These profiles were associated with high levels of wellbeing, especially the Wrap-Around Support profile. However, for youth with Wrap-Around Support, severe life stressors (e.g., housing) could undermine this high wellbeing.

The other two profiles experienced straining relationships, particularly regarding family. Those who were Isolated with straining family (30%) had few supports of any kind. Double-Edged (26%) participants grappled with both strain and support from their family and intimate partner. In these profiles, participants had lower levels of wellbeing, with no significant difference between the two. Additional life stressors beyond social relationships were not found to influence their wellbeing.

Youth with immigrant parents were more likely to be single and were overrepresented in both the Supported Singles and Isolated profiles. Youth with separated parents were overrepresented in the Isolated and Double-Edged profiles. Youth with less education were more likely to be Isolated.

### How you can use this research

This research can inform researchers, policymakers, and youth-oriented public services and support networks. The findings suggest a reverse stress-buffering effect, whereby stressors can undermine the benefits of social support (as seen in the Wrap-Around Support profile). The researchers recommend deeper investigation into how specific types of relationships may uniquely impact wellbeing across life stages.

### About the researchers

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*Research Snapshot by Dawn Abraham*

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