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Household Poverty and Adolescent Social Competence: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Poverty remains a pervasive global challenge and a critical public health concern due to its far-reaching effects on health outcomes and human development. This study presents a systematic review of 13 peer-reviewed articles to examine the multidimensional nature of household poverty and its implications for population health. Guided by established systematic review protocols, relevant studies were identified, screened, and synthesized to explore how material and financial deprivation influence access to essential resources such as healthcare, nutrition, housing, and education. The findings reveal that poverty operates through interconnected pathways, including limited access to health services, increased exposure to environmental and social risks, and heightened psychosocial stress, all of which contribute to adverse physical and mental health outcomes. Additionally, the review highlights how poverty reinforces health inequities and perpetuates cycles of vulnerability across generations. The study underscores the importance of addressing poverty within a public health framework and aligns its findings with global development priorities, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It concludes that reducing household poverty requires integrated, multisectoral interventions that target both economic and social determinants of health to achieve sustainable improvements in well-being.

Keywords: Household poverty, Public health, Health inequalities, Social competence, Systematic review, Human development.

1. Introduction

Household poverty, as a multidimensional deprivation affecting access to food, housing, healthcare, and education, is a central public health concern that directly aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Most notably, it is linked to SDG 1: No Poverty,

which seeks to eradicate extreme poverty and reduce vulnerability, and SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being, which aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all. Poverty limits access to essential health services and increases exposure to risk factors such as malnutrition, poor living conditions, and psychosocial stress, thereby driving disease

burden and health inequities. It is also closely connected to SDG 2: Zero Hunger, SDG 4: Quality Education, and SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities, as these goals collectively address the structural determinants that sustain poverty and poor health outcomes.

Addressing household poverty through the SDG framework, therefore, represents a holistic public health strategy aimed at breaking cycles of deprivation, improving population health, and promoting equitable development. Poverty is a major impediment to achieving good health; it is a critical public health concern because it operates as a fundamental driver of health inequities across populations. Beyond mere income deprivation, poverty reflects a multidimensional condition that limits access to essential determinants of health, including adequate nutrition, safe housing, quality healthcare, education, and social protection. These deprivations create conditions that increase disease susceptibility, worsen health outcomes, and reduce life expectancy. Moreover, the persistent exposure to economic hardship contributes to chronic stress, diminished agency, and constrained life choices, all of which negatively affect both physical and mental well-being. As a result, poverty perpetuates cycles of vulnerability and ill-health, making it not only a social and economic issue but a central public health challenge requiring comprehensive, multisectoral interventions.

Since poverty influences the lives of billions of people globally, it is generally accepted that it is

one of the most prevalent socioeconomic factors influencing human development. Household poverty is essentially defined as a state of material and financial deprivation in which a family is unable to meet its most basic needs, such as inadequate access to food, clothing, housing, healthcare, and even education. The loss involved in this deprivation goes beyond just the lack of income, but it can be the intricate network of deprivation that restricts opportunity, reduces agency, and exposes individuals to constant vulnerability (Alkire et al., 2011). A multidimensional approach to the definition of poverty has been embraced by scholars, who now consider that poverty is not simply about a shortage of money but also about societal marginalization, inaccessibility to good education, deplorable housing, and low engagement in political activities (UNDP/OPHI, 2022). The pressure of household poverty is placed on children and adolescents the most. The findings of the 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Survey, the first-ever national census of Nigeria, indicate that about 63 percent (roughly 3/5) of the population in the country (133 million people) are multidimensionally poor, with children adversely affected by this poverty (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Indicatively, out of the total number of Nigerian children (0–17 years old), two-thirds (67.5%) are multidimensionally poor, and half of all poor persons in the country are children. These results emphasize the size and the urgency of the issue, especially in the developmental setting in Nigeria.

Adolescence is one of the most vulnerable stages in development to the impact of poverty; the definition provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) is quite broad, namely between ages 10 and 19. The stage is characterized by dramatic biological, cognitive, emotional, and social change. Adolescents create a rather mobile social environment: relations with peers become increasingly central, identities are actively formed, and the premises to adult social operation are laid down. The ability to develop effective and appropriate interactions in interpersonal situations, so-called social competence, is one of the pillars of healthy development at this critical period. Social competence is a complex phenomenon that includes skills, knowledge, and dispositions that could help one be socially successful. Scholars define it as the ability to engage in meaningful interactions with others as a competence of seeking beneficial communication, empathy, perspective-taking, conflict resolution, as well as forming and preserving healthy peer relationships (Slot et al., 2020). Social competence expression is further advanced during the teens: at the early adolescence stage, there is mutual and third-person perspective-taking, and at the late adolescence stage, there is adjusting behavior in accordance with a larger social norm. It has been shown that adolescents of high social competence perform better, have lower levels of behavioral issues, are emotionally more well-adjusted, and have more favorable long-term life outcomes such as career success and the ability to build

healthy adult relationships (Chernyshenko et al., 2018). Previous studies have identified a number of factors that could lead to household poverty among young people, including Adverse Childhood Experiences, Juvenile Delinquency, School Dropout, Unemployment, gambling, and drug use, among others (Akinwale & Ojakorotu, 2026; Akinwale & Aroyewun, 2023).

Poverty, however, restricts access to some of the very basics of this environment, the resources and even the social opportunities that help one develop social competence and future career prospects (Akinwale & Ojakorotu, 2026; Atiri et al., 2025). Poor households are less able to instil enriching social experiences, afterschool enrichment, and constant emotionally consistent care-giving, all of which are important ingredients in the development of social skills during adolescence. In addition, stress factors associated with poverty, including parental finances, family uncertainty, and the socio-economic deprivation of the neighbourhood, may impair parent-child relations and peer social networks and influence the process of social learning, upon which competence development depends (Masarik & Conger, 2017; Akinwale & Adejinle, 2024).

Current Study

Household poverty and social development in adolescence is a critical public health and social policy issue, especially in developing or low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like Nigeria. On a global scale, poverty remains a limiting

factor to developmental outcomes for millions of youths, yet the issue is particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa, which poses an accumulated disadvantage to children and adolescents affected by poverty and a lack of financial resources (UNICEF, 2023). In the Nigerian context, the level of poverty among children and adolescents in the household setting is devastating. According to the 2022 MPI Survey, child poverty is worse in rural regions, as almost 90% of rural children are living in multidimensional poverty (NBS, 2022). When the level of poverty is directly compared with the lower-middle-income poverty threshold of \$3.65 per day for children aged 0 to 14, the rate is 72.5% (World Bank, 2023). Among adolescents raised in such circumstances, social development takes place under conditions of chronic shortage, low institutional support, and psychosocial risk. The effects of affected social competence in adolescence are broad. Research has demonstrated strong correlations between ineffective social skills during adolescence and numerous adverse effects, such as poor peer relations, lack of social role, low self-esteem, greater susceptibility to anxiety and depression, and a greater propensity toward risky or antisocial behavior (NBS, 2022).

From a developmental cascade viewpoint, the lack of social competence in adolescence may be transmitted into social, occupational, and relationship problems in adult life, and lifelong disadvantage loops can be maintained. These risks are increased by poverty. Teenagers in poverty-stricken families face an increased risk of

inhabiting cramped and resource-lacking neighborhoods with low social infrastructure, including parks, extra-curricular activities, and secure meeting areas (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The result of these environmental deficits is a decreased likelihood of positive peer interaction and community involvement, both of which are crucial to the establishment of social competence. Moreover, parents with low socioeconomic status, commonly facing significant financial and psychic stress, might have fewer cognitive and emotional resources to provide the warm and responsive parenting that strengthens healthy social conduct. Although the topic is well established as relevant, the existing empirical evidence remains disjointed. Different studies use variable methods to operationalize both poverty and social competence and have also been mostly drawn from high-income Western contexts, limiting their generalizability to Nigerian and other sub-Saharan African adolescent populations. A systematic review is thus required to summarize existing knowledge and reveal important mediating and moderating factors, as well as gaps to be filled by future research.

Aim of the Review

The aim of this systematic review is to evaluate the relationship between adolescent social competence and household poverty and to identify the major connecting avenues, variables, and situational frameworks that shape this relationship. In particular, the review assimilates the current body of empirical research on the

effect of household-level economic hardship on the acquisition, expression, and sustenance of social skills, such as communication, empathy, the quality of peer relationships, and conflict resolution, among adolescents between 10 and 19 years old. This review also attempts to determine the level of consistency in the poverty-social competence relationship across varying cultural and socioeconomic environments, with specific focus on how the results would apply in the context of adolescents in Nigeria and other LMIC environments. Ultimately, this review is intended to be rigorous and evidence-based, offering a foundation for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers who may wish to understand and respond to the social developmental implications of economic deprivation during adolescence.

Research Questions

1. How does household poverty affect and influence the social competence of adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19?
2. How is adolescent social competence affected by household poverty, whether through parenting style, the home environment, or emotional state?
3. Which aspects of the relationship between household poverty and adolescent social competence are moderated by individual, family, or community-based factors?

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study used a systematic review design to investigate the relationship between household poverty and adolescent social competence. This approach was selected to provide a comprehensive and structured understanding of the research area. The review followed the procedure of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to ensure transparency and rigor in the reporting of studies.

Search Strategy

A systematic search for relevant literature was conducted using the following databases: Google Scholar, JSTOR, and PubMed. These databases were selected due to their clear coverage of peer-reviewed academic research on the focused topic. The search process involved the use of relevant keywords, including household poverty, socioeconomic status, adolescents, social competence, peer relationships, and emotional development. The articles were limited to studies conducted between 2010 and 2025 to ensure the use of relevant, current literature.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included in the review based on the following criteria:

4. Published between 2010 and 2025
5. Written in the English language
6. Focused on adolescents aged 10–19 years
7. Examined the relationship between household poverty and social competence or closely related outcomes

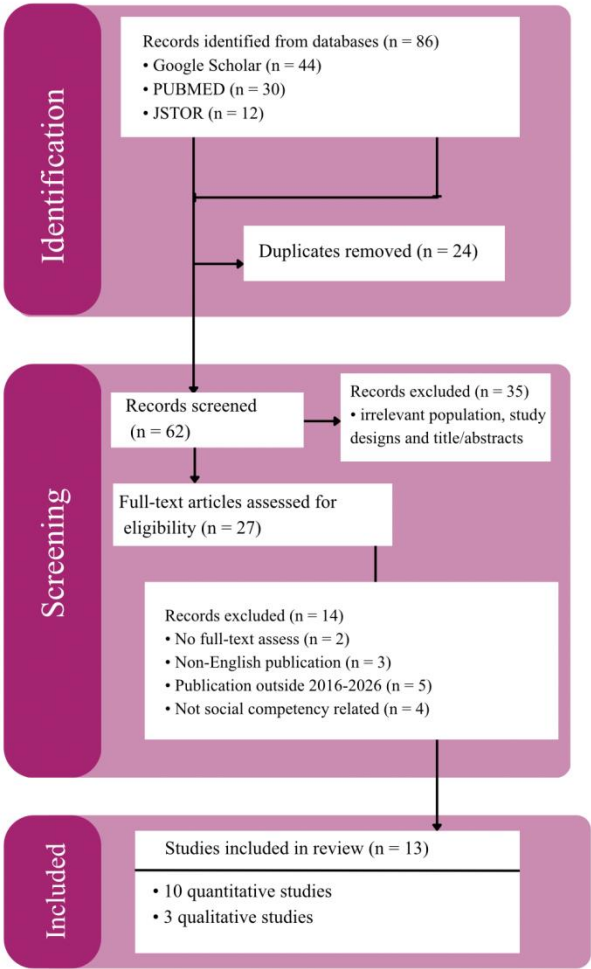
8. Peer-reviewed journal articles

Studies were excluded if they met any of the following conditions:

- 9. No free access to full-text articles
- 10. Population outside the specified age range
- 11. Non-English publications
- 12. Research centred on adverse childhood experiences unrelated to social competence
- 13. Duplicate records

Study Selection Process

Database searches generated an initial pool of 86 records: PubMed (n = 30), Google Scholar (n = 44), and JSTOR (n = 12). Following the removal of duplicates (n = 24), 62 records underwent title and abstract screening against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Of these, 35 records were excluded at the screening stage due to irrelevant populations, outcomes, or study designs. The remaining 27 articles were retrieved for full-text review. Fourteen articles were subsequently excluded for the following reasons: lack of access to full-text articles (n = 2); non-English publications (n = 3); studies on adverse childhood experiences with no mention of social competence (n = 4); and publication outside the 2016–2026 window (n = 5). Thirteen studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final review, comprising 10 quantitative studies and 3 qualitative studies. The selection process is summarised in the PRISMA flow diagram below:



Data Extraction and Analysis

The extracted information included author(s), year of publication, country, sample size, research design, instruments used, and key findings. The review's studies were mainly cross-sectional and longitudinal, which made it possible to evaluate outcomes for adolescents both qualitatively and progressively. A thematic analysis approach was used to synthesize the findings. The results were organized into four major themes:

- 14. Household poverty and peer relationships

- 15. Household poverty and social skills development
- 16. Household poverty and behavioral and emotional adjustment
- 17. Role of parenting style and home environment

Ethical Considerations

This study involved the review of previously published research and did not require direct interaction with human participants. Ethical standards were maintained by (i) properly citing all sources, (ii) ensuring academic integrity, and (iii) accurately representing the findings of the original studies.

Reliability and Validity

To ensure the reliability and validity of the review, multiple databases were used during the literature search, and clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied consistently. The PRISMA framework was utilised to increase the repeatability and accountability of the study selection process.

3. Results

Study Characteristics

Using a systematic process and the PRISMA method of selection as stated in the methodology, a total of 13 studies were included in the final review of this analysis. The studies were conducted between 2010 and 2026. The sample comprised adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19. The studies used in the final review were mainly cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys.

Geographically, the studies span different countries and continents, but the majority are based in the United States. Various research instruments were used, the majority focused on adolescents, poverty, and the home environment. Household poverty was measured through parental occupation level, adolescents' ability to be involved in extracurricular activities, and access to their own space in the household. Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the included studies:

Table 1: Summary of Study Characteristics

Author & Year	Country	N	Design	Instrument	Theme
Hjalmarsson, 2018	Sweden	N=4,725	Cross-sectional	CILS4EU	Theme 1
Cavicchiolo et al., 2022	Europe (multi)	N=406,783	Cross-sectional	CSIQ, INVALSI	Theme 1
Jing et al., 2020	East China	N=6,902	Cross-sectional	ISCED, ISCO-08, FES	Theme 1
Manoj et al., 2023	India	Global	Descriptive	Questionnaire	Theme 2
Meilstrup et al., 2020	Denmark	N=3,652	Cross-sectional	HBSC, OSCIV	Theme 2
DeAngelo, 2017	United States	N=877	Correlational	FACES IV	Theme 2
Bin & Shuang, 2022	China	N=1,044	Cross-sectional	SES, SWLS	Theme 2
Kotchick et al., 2020	United States	N=2,402	Longitudinal	Questionnaire	Theme 3
Herd et al., 2021	United States	N=167	Longitudinal	Questionnaire	Theme 3
Wang & McLeroy, 2023	United States	N=3,580	Longitudinal	FFCWS	Theme 4
Gautam et al., 2024	Australia	N=3,014	Longitudinal	LSAC	Theme 4
Sarah et al., 2017	Australia	N=166	Longitudinal	CGAS	Theme 4

Theme 1: Household Poverty and Peer Relationships

Several studies examined the relationship between household poverty and adolescent peer relationships. A study on household income and peer rejection by Hjalmarsson (2018) showed that

adolescents from low-income homes experienced higher rates of peer rejection than those from middle or high-income homes. This study also reported that adolescents who were unable to participate in peer or school extracurricular activities because of financial limitations were segregated by peers, but this segregation never resulted in bullying, though it affected peer relationships. Similarly, Cavicchiolo et al. (2022), in a CSIQ study highlighting the importance of classmates as a key part of an adolescent's social group, found that boys showed a higher level of peer acceptance, which led to peer friendship. The study reported that adolescents from lower socioeconomic status reported being accepted less and having fewer friendships compared to adolescents of middle or higher socioeconomic status. It was noted that adolescents who performed better academically were also accepted better irrespective of socioeconomic status, so academic success was a key influence on peer acceptance. Another study by Jing et al. (2020) found that subjective socioeconomic status had a stronger influence on peer relationships than objective socioeconomic status. Additionally, how an adolescent perceived their parents' social interactions influenced the adolescent's own ability to relate socially. Overall, the studies included in this section indicated that a household's economic status plays a significant role in an adolescent's peer relationships, affecting areas like friendship quality, social acceptance, and the ability to interact socially.

Theme 2: Household Poverty and Social Skills Development

Considering poverty affects a child's entire development, it has a major effect on a child's social development. Some key elements related to poverty that influence social changes in a child's development include identity, independence, responsibility, values, love, and caring (Saitadze & Lalayants, 2021). A number of studies investigated the relationship between household poverty and adolescents' social skill development. A study by Manoj et al. (2023) found that individuals from households of poverty experienced confusion regarding their social identity. The study noted that children at a growing age have to explore to discover where their interests lie, but children from households with poverty have no option to explore or access certain activities because of financial constraints. Another study by Meilstrup et al. (2020) found that as socioeconomic status declines, emotional issues increase and, as a result, social competence, self-efficacy, and confidence reduce. The study also pointed out that if an adolescent has high self-efficacy and social competence, they are less likely to experience emotional distress irrespective of socioeconomic status. Related to this is a study by Bin & Shuang (2022), which found that though perceived poverty affects life satisfaction through self-esteem, high self-esteem has the ability to reduce the negative effects of poverty and improve social competence. The study stated that students with

low self-esteem felt inferior, withdrew from peers, and experienced negative emotions, while impoverished pupils with high self-esteem had greater life satisfaction and were more socially active. The study noted that since the effects of poverty can be psychological, positive self-esteem can serve as a protective measure against its negative effects on an individual. Another key study by Gatlin (2017) found that even in a household with poverty, the presence of family cohesion significantly improves social skills. Overall, the studies showed that household poverty has a significant impact on social skill development, but factors like self-esteem, self-efficacy, and family support can reduce its negative impact on social competence.

Theme 3: Household Poverty and Behavioral and Emotional Adjustment

Several studies examined the link between adolescents from low-income households' mental behaviours, emotional and behavioural issues, and household poverty. Adolescent emotional and behavioural problems are associated with home food scarcity, a sign of poverty, according to a study by Kotchick et al. (2020). The study explained that this finding aligns with the family stress model, which proposes that poverty in a household creates stress for parents, which in turn results in poor parenting abilities and then behavioral problems in children. In the same way, Herd et al. (2021) discovered that experiencing household poverty during childhood has an impact on appropriate emotional development

because unbalanced consumption brought on by poverty can have a negative effect on brain development. The study also mentioned that during adolescence, socioeconomic status is linked to emotional difficulty. Overall, the studies suggest that household poverty negatively affects an adolescent's behavioral and emotional development. The findings show the importance of parental support and involvement in reducing the psychological burden that can be associated with household poverty.

Theme 4: The Home Environment and the Role of Parents

Numerous studies have examined the way parenting and the home environment affect the relationship between adolescent development and household poverty. According to research, parenting stress, parenting style, and the standard of the family environment are some indirect means through which poverty affects teenagers. A study by Wang & McLeroy (2023) found that household poverty played a major role in the presence of parental stress, and subsequently in adolescents' mental health struggles as they have to cope with their parents' distress. According to the study, teenagers from low-income families had more symptoms of anxiety and sadness. Another study by Gautam et al. (2024) found that the type of parenting style strongly influences an adolescent; a positive parenting style, irrespective of socioeconomic status, had a positive impact on the mental state of children and adolescents. It was also noted in this study that the home

environment and parents' relationship with one another affects adolescents' wellbeing, and that low socioeconomic status households had a higher tendency of using poor parenting styles. Similarly, a study by Sarah et al. (2017) found that positive parenting can reduce the effect of poverty on an adolescent. It was also noted that parenting styles affect brain development, and so good parenting styles result in good academic performance. Overall, these results suggest that parenting styles and the standard of the home environment have a significant impact on the negative effects of family poverty on teenagers.

4. Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this systematic review have yielded extensive evidence surrounding the detrimental contribution of household poverty to the social competence of adolescents in a pervasive and multidimensional manner. Instead of acting via one direct route, poverty influences social development indirectly, via psychological stress, limited social exposure, impaired parenting, and reduced self-perceptions. Taken together, the four thematic areas found in this review form a consistent piece of evidence: household economic deprivation does not simply hold material resources hostage; it fundamentally changes the social ecology in which adolescents develop.

Poverty, Peer Relationships, and Social Exclusion

According to the evidence associated with Theme 1, adolescents in low-income households have a higher risk of peer rejection and social marginalization. Hjalmarsson (2018) demonstrated that the financial obstacles to extracurricular participation served as an element of social marginalization that effectively deprived low-income adolescents of important venues of interaction with peers. Cavicchiolo et al. (2022) also found that lower socioeconomic status was linked to lower peer acceptance and fewer friendships, but academic performance was a protective factor that cut across the board and helped to partially compensate for socioeconomic disadvantage. It is important to note the significant distinction between subjective and objective socioeconomic status: adolescents' perceptions regarding their families' social status can prove more relevant to peer relationships than actual income levels (Jing et al., 2020). This implies that the psychological aspect of poverty – the feeling of inferiority or of being different – is itself an influencer of social hardship, regardless of material conditions. Furthermore, the social modelling aspect noted by Jing et al. (2020) reflects a social capacity transmission process between generations, indicating that children's social capacity develops partly as a result of their parents' own social behaviours.

Poverty, Identity, and Social Skill Development

Research papers considered within Theme 2 converge on the conclusion that the psychological resources that are the cornerstone of social

competence – self-esteem, self-efficacy, and identity – are compromised by poverty. Manoj et al. (2023) emphasized that poverty limits identity exploration among adolescents, which is central to healthy psychosocial development in the Eriksonian tradition. Denied access to a variety of activities and experiences, teens living in poor families may find it difficult to form an integrated and assertive sense of identity, which eventually curbs their social interactions. Meilstrup et al. (2020) presented complementary evidence indicating that low socioeconomic status correlates with greater emotional issues and lesser social competence, while high self-efficacy is capable of offsetting these impacts independent of income level. Similarly, Bin & Shuang (2022) established that self-esteem mediates the relationship between students' perceived poverty and life satisfaction, and that high levels of self-esteem are a protective mechanism leading to greater social activity and minimal withdrawal. All of these findings indicate that poverty does not necessarily have a negative influence on the development of social skills; it depends on whether the key psychological resources are available. This implies that self-esteem and self-efficacy interventions can be just as important as those that target material poverty directly.

Poverty, Behavioral Problems, and Emotional Maladjustment

The articles addressing Theme 3 consistently show that household poverty is a strong predictor of emotional and behavioral problems in

adolescence. The results of Kotchick et al. (2020) fit the family stress model (Conger & Elder, 1994), according to which economic hardship creates parental stress that in turn interferes with parenting quality, causing behavioral issues among children. This chain of influence shows how poverty operates through continual relational and emotional channels rather than purely through material deprivation. Herd et al. (2021) extended this point by tracing a neurobiological pathway, suggesting that nutritional imbalances brought about by poverty can impair brain development and deteriorate emotional regulation during vital developmental phases. Together, these findings, connected to those of Themes 1 and 2, suggest that a subsequent breakdown in peer relations and social skills development is likely to occur as a result of emotional dysregulation and behavioral maladaptation, generating a vicious cycle of social disadvantage.

The Mediating Role of Parenting and the Home Environment

Perhaps the most practically significant findings of this review are presented in Theme 4, which shows that the quality of parenting and the home environment are key moderators of the relationship between poverty and adolescent outcomes. The results of Wang & McLeroy (2023) indicate that parental stress caused by poverty is one of the main routes through which poverty translates into mental health challenges among adolescents, underscoring that the home environment is itself a highly vulnerable context.

Nevertheless, both Gautam et al. (2024) and Sarah et al. (2017) found that improved mental health, brain development, and academic success in adolescents are linked to positive and responsive parenting styles regardless of socioeconomic background. The findings of Gatlin (2017) discussed under Theme 2 similarly demonstrated that family cohesion is a strong protective factor, reinforcing the argument that the quality of family relationships can buffer adolescents even under material hardship. Combining the results of all four themes, this review indicates that household poverty has an indirect, cascading impact on adolescent social competence, operating through reduced social exposure and greater peer exclusion, lower self-esteem and self-efficacy, heightened emotional and behavioral dysregulation, and disrupted parenting. These pathways are not mutually exclusive; they interact and reinforce one another in ways that can compound social disadvantage as adolescence progresses. Importantly, the review also identifies protective factors – academic engagement, high self-efficacy, positive parenting, and family cohesion – that can reduce the adverse impact of poverty, pointing to meaningful targets for intervention.

5. Conclusions

Policy Implications

The findings of this review carry significant social policy implications. On a macro level, the consistent relationship between household poverty and unfavorable adolescent outcomes

highlights the need for comprehensive poverty alleviation measures. Government initiatives that enhance household income security, such as conditional cash transfer programmes, housing subsidies, and social protection systems, are likely to have downstream effects on adolescent social and psychological identity development. This review indicates that alleviating financial pressure on families is not only an economic concern but also a developmental one, since parental stress is one of the main channels through which poverty negatively affects adolescents. Educational policy also plays a major role: since the effects of poverty can be partly offset by academic performance (Cavicchiolo et al., 2022), it is crucial to ensure children in low-income families receive equal access to high-quality education and academic support. Funding for extracurricular activities and school-based participation programmes for economically disadvantaged students is specifically justified, given that a lack of access to such activities is a direct route to social marginalization (Hjalmarsson, 2018). In lower-resource settings such as Nigeria and other African countries, where this research gap is most prominent, government intervention focused on inclusive school settings may be an affordable way to foster social competence among poor adolescents.

Practice Implications

At the professional practice level, the findings point to several intervention strategies. In low-

income communities, social skills training programmes should be prioritised by school counsellors and psychologists, addressing the gaps identified in this review, such as peer interaction skills, emotional regulation, and self-advocacy. Since low self-esteem and weakened self-efficacy are primary mediators between poverty and social competence (Bin & Shuangle, 2022; Meilstrup et al., 2020), therapies and psychoeducation targeting these two psychological factors are likely to have a significant positive effect on adolescents' social functioning. Parental interventions are also important: since positive parenting can offset the impact of poverty on adolescent outcomes (Gautam et al., 2024; Sarah et al., 2017), parenting support programmes should form part of community mental health and social welfare services in low-income communities, addressing parental warmth, reduction of parenting stress, coping skills training, and family cohesion. School counselling services should also be equipped to detect early signs of emotional and behavioral difficulty among adolescents from low-income families and to respond with timely, culturally sensitive services.

Research Implications

This review also highlights gaps in the existing literature that future research should address. Most notably, the geographical clustering of studies in Western settings, particularly the United States and Europe, limits the generalizability of results to adolescents in the

Global South, such as sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, where poverty is more widespread and the social-contextual conditions shaping adolescent development may differ significantly. There is a pressing need for empirical research exploring the relationship between household poverty and adolescent social competence within African settings, where the extended family system, communal living, and cultural valuing of social hierarchy and peer relations might produce distinct developmental trajectories. Methodologically, future research should move beyond the cross-sectional designs common in Themes 1 and 2 and shift toward longitudinal and experimental designs capable of establishing causal direction. Qualitative and mixed-methods approaches would also contribute to understanding the lived experiences of adolescents affected by poverty, their peer relationships, and the development of their social identities. Further research should also focus on intersectional factors, such as gender, ethnicity, and disability, which may moderate the relationship between poverty and social competence. Finally, the role of digital and social media spaces as a novel context for how adolescents relate to peers under conditions of poverty remains largely unexplored and represents an interesting avenue for future research.

Limitations

Geographic Bias: The vast majority of the studies reviewed were conducted in high-income

Western countries, such as Australia, countries in Europe, and the United States. This limits the generalizability of the results to other regions, particularly the Global South, where social institutions and cultural values may affect how poverty influences social competence differently.

Methodological Restrictions: Establishing cause-and-effect relationships is difficult, as many of the included studies used cross-sectional designs. For instance, it remains uncertain whether poverty causes social disengagement or whether social challenges might likewise contribute to financial hardship.

Conclusion

This systematic review shows that household poverty is a major factor affecting adolescents' social competence development. The results across the four themes point to a series of consequences: poverty restricts social opportunities, raises the likelihood of peer rejection, undermines important psychological resources such as identity and self-worth, and worsens emotional problems through constant stress. The home environment plays an important role in this process; financial hardship can increase parental stress, which can in turn lower parents' engagement and care for their teenagers, ultimately affecting adolescents' social development. However, the review emphasises that these results are not deterministic. The negative effects of poverty can be reduced by factors such as strong academic engagement, high self-esteem, and supportive family relationships.

This implies that adolescents from low-income households can still develop strong social skills and relationships, given appropriate interventions that combine material support with psychological resources.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed jointly to the conceptualization, literature search, screening, data extraction, and thematic synthesis reported in this review. All authors contributed to drafting and revising the manuscript and have read and approved the final version submitted for publication.

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Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable. This study is a systematic review of previously published literature and did not involve the collection of new data from human or animal subjects (see Ethical Considerations above).

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

SDG: Sustainable Development Goal; MPI: Multidimensional Poverty Index; LMIC: Low- and Middle-Income Country; PRISMA: Preferred

Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses; NBS: National Bureau of Statistics.

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