

In utero health may affect life's success

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U.S. scientists have determined prenatal health has a significant influence on a person's lifetime economic success.

Columbia University researchers say it's not inherited traits such as skin tone or height that influences economic success, but, rather, a malleable characteristic -- in utero health -- that most strongly indicates how well a child will fare in adulthood.

The scientists said their study has important implications for public policy, suggesting programs targeting early-life health have higher returns for reducing racial disparities in socioeconomic outcomes than do more traditional investments, including schooling.

The study analyzed adult economic outcomes of those exposed in utero to the 1918 influenza pandemic, which lasted only a few months -- meaning those born a few months apart had markedly different in utero conditions.

The Columbia scientists found children of infected mothers were 15 percent less likely to graduate from high school, and sons of infected mothers earned approximately \$2,500 less per year than those who did not have fetal influenza exposure. Additionally, those who were in utero at the height of the epidemic had 20 percent higher disability rates at the age of 61.

The study is detailed in the Journal of Political Economy.

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