

'Neglected infections of poverty' in US disable hundreds of thousands of Americans annually

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An analysis published June 25th in the open-access journal *PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases* highlights that diseases very similar to those plaguing Africa, Asia, and Latin America are also occurring frequently among the poorest people in the United States, especially women and children. These diseases — the "neglected infections of poverty" — are caused by chronic and debilitating parasitic, bacterial, and congenital infections.

While most Americans have never heard of neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), the analysis estimates that these infections occur in hundreds of thousands of poor Americans concentrated primarily in the Mississippi Delta (including post-Katrina Louisiana), Appalachia, the Mexican borderlands, and inner cities. These diseases represent a major cause of chronic disability, impaired child development, and adverse pregnancy outcomes, yet many of them are preventable.

"The fact that these neglected infections of poverty represent some of the greatest health disparities in the United States, but they remain at the bottom of the public health agenda, is a national disgrace," says Peter J. Hotez, MD, PhD, author of the analysis and President of the Sabin Vaccine Institute, Executive Director of Global Network for Neglected Tropical Diseases, and Walter G. Ross Professor and Chair of the Microbiology, Immunology, and Tropical Medicine department at George Washington University.

Hotez notes that the common features of these neglected infections include their highly disproportionate health impact on minorities and people living in poverty; their chronic, largely insidious, and disabling features; and their ability to promote poverty because of their impact on child development, pregnancy outcome, and productive capacity. He calls upon policy makers to make these infections a priority on the public health agenda.

"Control of these neglected infections is both a highly cost-effective mechanism for lifting disadvantaged populations out of poverty and consistent with our shared American values of equity and equality," Hotez says. "We need a national dialogue about these very important, but neglected conditions that afflict the poorest people in the United States. Neglected infections of poverty are understudied and not well known even by physicians and public-health experts. This lack of understanding and knowledge points to the urgent need to increase surveillance for these infections; use cost-effective existing drug control and treatment efforts; implement newborn screenings; and develop new drugs, diagnostics, and vaccines for these infections."

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