

Mothers' poor health impairs children's well-being, not only due to genetics

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Disadvantaged, unhealthy mothers are much more likely to have sickly children than are disadvantaged moms who are relatively healthy—and this is not only due to genetics, suggests new research to be presented at the 106th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association.

Relying on nationally representative data from the 2007 and 2008 National Health Interview Surveys, the study finds that [children](#) whose [mothers](#) are both in [poor health](#) and disadvantaged (determined by a combination of family income, race/ethnicity, family structure, and mother's level of education) experience a significantly greater number of health issues—such as having fair or poor overall health and suffering from asthma—than children whose mothers are disadvantaged but relatively healthy.

"Mothers who experience frequent or serious health problems may have a harder time monitoring their children or performing day-to-day caretaking tasks, including taking their children to regular medical checkups," said study co-author Jessica Halliday Hardie. "Maternal health problems can also place emotional and material burdens on children and heighten their stress and anxiety. Finally, to care for herself, an unhealthy mother may have to use financial resources that could otherwise benefit her children."

The most striking aspect of the study is the stark contrast between the two groups of disadvantaged children—those with mothers in good health and those with mothers in poor health, said Nancy S. Landale,

who co-authored the study with Hardie, her colleague at Pennsylvania State University's Population Research Institute.

Compared to children whose mothers are disadvantaged but relatively healthy, children whose mothers are both disadvantaged and unhealthy are more than five times more likely to have fair or poor overall health (as reported by the mothers).

Children of disadvantaged, unhealthy mothers also fare worse than children of disadvantaged, healthy mothers on other indicators of well-being. They have significantly higher odds of having asthma and a learning disability, and are more likely to go to the emergency room.

"Skeptics may jump to the conclusion that genetics alone are responsible for the health disparities among these groups," Hardie said. "But, we assess indicators of well-being that are at least partly environmentally conditioned, which suggests that group differences are not completely due to genetics."

Using a modeling program that identifies subsets of people with similar profiles, Hardie and Landale classified mothers as members of one of three groups: those who are disadvantaged and report health problems (about 15 percent of the sample); those who are disadvantaged but do not report health problems (about 34 percent of the sample); and those who are not disadvantaged and do not report [health problems](#) (about 51 percent of the sample). A small number of mothers (less than 2 percent) did not fall primarily within any of the three groups, but they were still assigned to the group of moms with whom they had the most similarities.

Consistent with previous research, Hardie and Landale find that children whose mothers are neither disadvantaged nor unhealthy generally have the best health outcomes. These children have the lowest odds among all three groups of having fair or poor overall health, suffering from

asthma, being overweight, and not having regular doctors' checkups. They also go to the emergency room significantly less often than the other groups.

Hardie and Landale said their study is important because children's well-being has long-term consequences for health and achievement in later life.

"Knowing that maternal health strongly predicts child well-being could put additional pressure on policy-makers to help unhealthy mothers, particularly those who are disadvantaged," said Landale. "This undertaking would also benefit the children of these mothers."

More information: The paper, "Cumulative Disadvantage, Maternal Health, and Children's Well-Being," will be presented on Sunday, Aug. 21, in Caesars Palace Las Vegas, at the American Sociological Association's 106th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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