

Team studies connection between child, mother mortality

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The death of a child is a tragic event for a family, bringing with it feelings of numbness, anger, guilt and denial. And, unfortunately, for many families, the loss becomes too much to bear.

A new study co-conducted by a researcher at Rochester Institute of Technology uncovers the strong connection between the [death](#) of a child and the mortality of the mother, regardless of cause of death, gender of the child, marital status, family size, income or [education level](#) of the mother.

Javier Espinosa, assistant professor in RIT's College of Liberal Arts and an expert in health and [labor economics](#), compiled results from nine years of research after studying more than 69,000 mothers, ages 20 to 50. According to Espinosa, the impact to mother mortality is strongest in the two years immediately following the child's death. In fact, Espinosa's research suggests that mother mortality increases 133 percent after the death of a child.

"To my knowledge, this is the first study to empirically analyze this issue with a large, nationally represented U.S. data set," Espinosa says. "The evidence of a heightened mortality rate for the mother, particularly in the first two years of the child's passing, is especially relevant to [public health policy](#) and the timing of interventions that aim to improve the adverse [health outcomes mothers experience](#) after the death of a child."

Espinosa's results, "Maternal [bereavement](#): The heightened mortality of

mothers after the death of a child," co-written by William Evans from the University of Notre Dame, were recently published in the journal *Economics and Human Biology*.

Espinosa has also conducted extensive research on spousal mortality in which his studies lead to the conclusion that men who are grieving from a wife's death experience a 30 percent increase in mortality. For women, there is no heightened mortality due to the death of a spouse, but there remains a correlation between the timing of the wife's and husband's deaths. Espinosa believes he understands why this happens, given the data are based on a sample of married people born between 1910 and 1930.

"When a wife dies, men are often unprepared. They have often lost their caregiver—someone who cares for them physically and emotionally, and the loss directly impacts the husband's health," he says. "This same mechanism is likely weaker for most women when a husband dies. Therefore, the connection in mortalities for wives may be a reflection of how similar mates' lives become over time."

Espinosa, who earned his doctorate in economics from University of Maryland at College Park, is an expert in health economics—the sub-discipline of economics that deals with the efficient allocation of health-care resources. He teaches health-care economics and microeconomics at RIT.

Provided by Rochester Institute of Technology

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