

Growing up poor affects adults' sense of control, impulsiveness when faced with economic uncertainty

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Growing up poor can influence people's sense of control and in turn may lead them to more impulsive decision-making and quickly give up on challenging tasks in uncertain situations, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Two people with different childhood backgrounds are likely to respond to uncertainty in different ways, even if as adults they have a similar socioeconomic status (SES). We found that adults who grew up poor were more inclined to consider difficult and uncertain living conditions as beyond their control, while those from affluent backgrounds found them to be within their control. This leads to different reactions to the same situation," said lead author Chiraag Mittal, MS, a doctoral student at the University of Minnesota.

Differing perceptions of control affected whether people were able to postpone a reward, with people from poorer backgrounds behaving more impulsively in uncertain situations than those from wealthy families, the research found. In addition, after recalling personal [financial hardship](#) and then asked to solve a difficult puzzle, those who grew up poor gave up much sooner than those who grew up wealthy, even if they had similar incomes as adults.

One experiment with 95 people (36 men, average age 33) found those with poor compared to wealthier childhoods had a lower sense of control

after looking at photos depicting economic hardship, such as unemployment lines, home foreclosure signs and empty office buildings. To determine the [participants'](#) sense of control, researchers asked how much they agreed with statements such as "I can do just about anything that I really set my mind to" or "Whether or not I am able to get what I want is in my own hands." Participants described their childhood household incomes by indicating agreement with statements such as "My family usually had enough money for things when I was growing up," or "I felt relatively wealthy compared to the other kids in my school." To determine their current SES, they rated their agreement with statements including, "I don't need to worry too much about paying my bills," or "I feel relatively wealthy these days."

Having a low sense of control along with [economic uncertainty](#) prompted people from poorer backgrounds to be more impulsive than those from wealthier families in a trial that involved 150 people (56 men, average age 33). Participants selected from eight ranges of household annual incomes while they were growing up, from less than \$15,000 to \$150,000 or more. One group saw photos depicting financial hardship and the other saw photos of office furniture and supplies. Sense of control for participants from both groups was assessed with the same set of questions used in the previous experiment. To measure impulsivity, the researchers asked participants if they wanted to receive \$28 to \$58 tomorrow or wait 33 days and receive \$62 to \$87. Adults from poorer backgrounds who saw the economic uncertainty photos felt significantly lower sense of control and were more impulsive than those from wealthier backgrounds. When they were not shown the photos depicting financial hardships, participants from poor and wealthy backgrounds didn't differ in impulsivity.

When the participants read a news article about economic uncertainty and the researchers asked them to recall a time when they were in complete control of a situation, they were less impulsive and more

capable of delaying gratification even if they grew up poor, found another trial with 99 people (45 men, average age 36).

In an experiment with 73 university students (47 men, average age 20), one group was asked to recall feeling uncertain about their finances and then asked to solve an unsolvable puzzle. Those who came from poorer backgrounds gave up trying to solve the puzzle 25 percent sooner than those from wealthier backgrounds. However, students from low and high-income backgrounds who were asked to describe a recent ordinary purchase spent the same amount of time on average trying to solve the puzzle.

"Persistence is directly tied to myriad important outcomes, including self-control, academic achievement, substance abuse, criminal behavior, healthy eating and overspending," said study co-author Vladas Griskevicius, PhD, also of the University of Minnesota. "Future research should investigate strategies to prevent individuals from poor childhoods from potentially quitting challenging tasks in the face of adversity."

While economic uncertainty can alter people's perceptions of their own sense of control depending on their childhood SES, it does not alter their perceptions of other people's control of their lives, according to another trial with 84 people (27 men, average age 34). One group read a news article about increasing national economic uncertainty while another group read about doing laundry. The participants' sense of self control was based on their ratings of statements such as "To what extent are you able to control how much debt you have?" and "How capable are you of staying within your spending budget?" They were asked similar questions about other people's behavior to assess their views of other people's control of their lives.

More information: "Sense of Control Under Uncertainty Depends on People's Childhood Environment: A Life History Theory Approach,"

Chiraag Mittal, MS, and Vldas Griskevicius, PhD, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota, online Aug. 18, 2014, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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