

Is upward mobility bad for your health?

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Youth from low-income families who succeed academically and socially may actually pay a price—with their health—according to a new Northwestern University study.

It has been well documented that children from low-income families typically complete less education, have worse [health](#) and are convicted of more crimes relative to their affluent peers.

To ameliorate these disparities, policy-makers are increasingly advocating for programs that provide low-income youth with character skills training, which along with self-control, includes traits like optimism and persistence. The hope is that such traits will allow these youth to resist temptations that interfere with long-term aspirations.

However, overcoming such odds may take a physical toll. According to the researchers, relentlessly pursuing goals can undermine health, particularly when structural forces like discrimination impede progress toward those goals.

"Emerging data suggest that for low-income youth, self-control may act as a double-edged sword, facilitating academic success and psychosocial adjustment, while at the same time undermining physical health," said lead author Gregory E. Miller, professor of psychology in Northwestern's Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences.

Miller also is a faculty fellow with Northwestern's Institute for Policy Research and a member of its Cells to Society: The Center on Social

Disparities and Health.

The researchers focused on a group of approximately 300 rural African-American teenagers making the transition from adolescence to adulthood. They found that those adolescents who have high levels of self-control, or the ability to focus on long-term goals over more immediate ones, fare better on a variety of psychological outcomes as young adults.

"They are less depressed, use substances less frequently and are less aggressive," Miller said. "That's true across the board, regardless of gender, family income and education."

The researchers also looked at a metric of cellular aging in adulthood. It tells them how "old" people's cells look relative to their [chronological age](#). Older cells are related to more health problems.

"We find that the psychologically successful adolescents—those with high self-control—have cells that are biologically old, relative to their chronological age," Miller said. "In other words, there seems to be an underlying biological cost to the self-control and the success it enables. This is most evident in the youth from the lowest-income families."

"As disadvantaged youth strive for favorable life outcomes, they have substantial barriers to overcome and competing demands to balance, including resource-deprived schools, family obligations and managing social identity threats. These challenges are particularly salient for African-Americans," the authors write.

The researchers looked at such factors as stress and obesity as possible causes for their health status. They write that navigating challenges requires intense and persistent self-control, which is metabolically and behaviorally demanding to sustain. Exerting [self-control](#) also triggers the

release of stress hormones.

"Our findings have conceptual implications for models of resilience and practical implications for interventions aimed at ameliorating social and racial disparities," Miller said.

"Skin-deep resilience: Self-control forecasts better psychosocial outcomes but faster epigenetic aging in low-SES [youth](#)" will be published July 13 in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS). In addition to Miller, co-authors include Tianyi Yu and Gene H. Brody of the Center for Family Research, University of Georgia, Athens, and Edith Chen of Northwestern.

More information: Self-control forecasts better psychosocial outcomes but faster epigenetic aging in low-SES youth, *PNAS*, www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1505063112

Provided by Northwestern University

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