

Childhood poverty, parental abuse cost adults their health for years to come

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Growing up in poverty or being abused by parents can lead to accumulated health problems later in life, according to research from Purdue University.

"Childhood disadvantage has long-term health consequences - much longer than most of us realize," said Kenneth F. Ferraro, distinguished professor of sociology. "A novel aspect of this study is that childhood disadvantage was linked to the onset of new health problems decades later."

The findings are published in the *American Sociological Review*, and the National Institute on Aging funded the study. The findings were based on the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States data from 1,748 adults. The data were collected in two waves, the second a decade later, to measure health changes in the adult population. Wave 1 occurred in 1996 when respondents were 25-74 and Wave 2 took place in 2006 when participants were 35-84.

"Health problems and quality of life issues were a concern during the first wave of the study. However, when we revisited the study's adult participants 10 years later, childhood poverty and frequent abuse were related to the onset of new health problems, such as cancer and heart disease, even after we adjusted for risk factors including health lifestyle and socioeconomic status," said Ferraro, who also is interim head of sociology and director of Purdue's Center on Aging and the Life Course.

In addition to childhood poverty and abuse, family composition, including if both parents were present, was measured. The link between each of these [childhood experiences](#) and 14 adult outcomes also was examined for potential mediating effects. Family composition affected four of the 14 outcomes, including the likelihood of smoking and financial strain during adulthood. In comparison, childhood poverty affected nine outcomes and parental abuse affected 11 outcomes, such as smoking and heavy alcohol consumption. The authors found that [childhood poverty](#) and abuse led to adult behavioral problems as well as directly influenced disease development in later life.

In this study, abuse was considered to be physical or verbal. And, if both parents were abusive, it escalated the risk for health problems.

"It's also possible we have underrepresented the relationship between childhood disadvantage and later-life [health problems](#) because those most severely affected were not able to participate in a social survey," Ferraro said. "But, now that we have identified some of the early origins of adult disease, we should focus on greater resources, even during midlife, to break the chain of risks."

Also contributing to this research is Markus H. Schafer, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Toronto, and Lindsay R. Wilkinson, an assistant professor of sociology at Baylor University.

More information: K. F. Ferraro et al. Childhood Disadvantage and Health Problems in Middle and Later Life: Early Imprints on Physical Health?, *American Sociological Review* (2015). [DOI: 10.1177/0003122415619617](#)

Provided by Purdue University

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