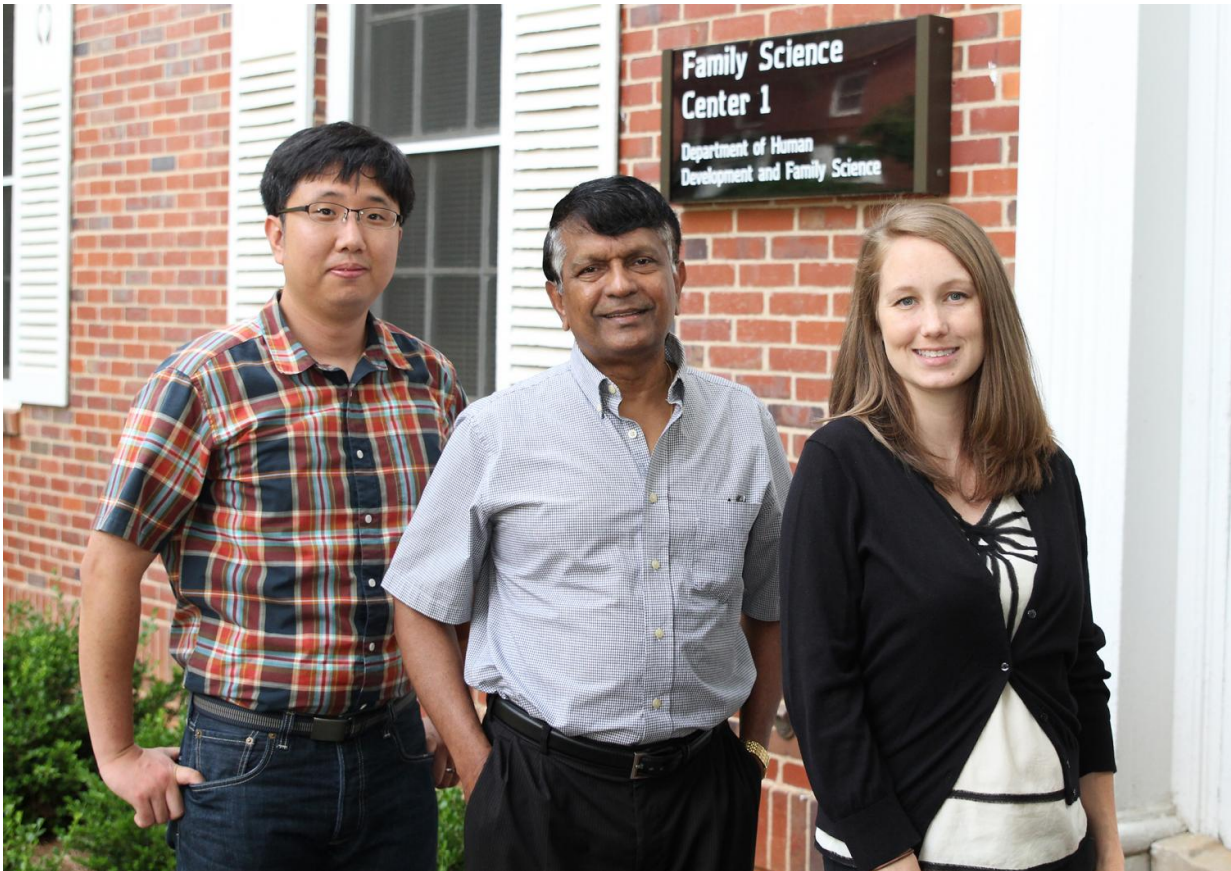


# Research finds health cost for motivated, disadvantaged youth

April 8 2016, by Erica Hensley

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Tae Kyoung, K.A.S. Wickrama and Catherine Walker O'Neal in the College of Family and Consumer Sciences study the longterm effects of early life adversity. Credit: Cal Powell/UGA

There may be a hidden cost to the old adage of pulling oneself up by the

bootstraps: Research out of the University of Georgia suggests the unintended stress spurred by upward mobility can pose an unintended health risk later down the road.

Previous studies have shown the negative [health](#) effect that stress can cause, particularly on people coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. But this study specified the approach and narrowed it down to just look at the effect on "future oriented" adolescents who strive to break the cycle and earn higher levels of education and income.

Researchers in the UGA College of Family and Consumer Sciences, including professor

K.A.S. Wickrama, assistant research scientist Catherine O'Neal and graduate student Tae Kyoung Lee, combed through a 13-year national study that contained clinical health data from over 11,000 participants as they aged into adulthood.

They found that young adults who come from adverse backgrounds—but also show resilience to break that pattern and achieve a higher social status—are more likely to be unhealthy later in life than those not motivated to change their circumstances.

Specifically, the researchers found that stress increased participants' risk of developing cardio-metabolic diseases, like diabetes, heart disease and stroke.

The study relied on self-reported stress from participants to determine the cause and clinical markers including blood pressure, body mass index, glucose levels and others to determine subsequent health effects.

As [young adults](#) work to break the cycle of poverty or strive toward being the first in their family to go to college, they experience a

disproportionate burden of stress-and were not resilient in terms of their future health due to the combined burden of lived adversity and striving to change it. This stress is then likely to cause irreversible weathering in their body systems.

"The act of striving for socioeconomic attainment is itself stressful for youth already experiencing [stressful life events](#)," said Wickrama, the Athletic Association Professor in Human Development and Family Science.

The findings suggest that although there may be long-term health benefits associated with increased socioeconomic status, there may also be consequences due to the subsequent mental and physical strain.

The notion seems counterintuitive at first, but the relationship between [stress](#) and health risks has been shown before. This study shows the intensification of health effects for future-oriented youth with a stressful family background.

Researchers said that the study shows the need for institutional policy that supports young people who show signs of future upward orientation and come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"In order to reduce health vulnerability and the burden that comes as a cost of succeeding," said O'Neal, at-risk youth "need support through preventative measures."

**More information:** Kandauda A. S. Wickrama et al. The Health Impact of Upward Mobility: Does Socioeconomic Attainment Make Youth More Vulnerable to Stressful Circumstances?, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* (2015). [DOI: 10.1007/s10964-015-0397-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-015-0397-7)

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