

Research suggests cognitive ability may 'buffer' the impact of social disadvantage on mental health

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Higher levels of cognitive ability could help protect people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds from increased risk of mental health

issues—but health inequality remains a major issue, new research has found.

A study from researchers at Birmingham City University and University College Dublin, Ireland has identified a consistent 'buffer effect' showing that increased cognitive ability reduced the likelihood of those from disadvantaged backgrounds encountering mental health difficulties later in life.

The study looked at data from nearly 28,000 people in Understanding Society, a rich UK-wide study representative of modern Britain, and examined how verbal and non-verbal skills as well as [social disadvantage](#) related to the likelihood of developing mental health complaints.

Like previous work, the paper showed that those who grew up relatively disadvantaged were more likely to report [mental health problems](#) in adulthood.

However, the new research revealed this was not the case for those individuals who performed higher on word recall, verbal fluency and numerical ability tasks. For these individuals, the negative implications of coming from a disadvantaged background for mental health were absent.

The research indicates that we are not all impacted equally by the health consequences of social disadvantage, and that some groups may require specific additional support and interventions to offset the damaging consequences their environments.

But the researchers have also warned that more investment is needed to tackle the causes of [health inequality](#), and for specialist support to be provided for those who are particularly vulnerable to growing up in less privileged surroundings.

The study calculates social disadvantage using a number of factors including parents' occupation and education level.

The research was carried out by Dr. Emma Bridger, Senior Research Fellow at Birmingham City University, and Dr. Michael Daly, University College Dublin, Ireland.

Dr. Emma Bridger said: "These findings show what psychologists have long suspected, which is that psychological factors which relate to how well we can adapt to our environment – such as cognitive ability – may help protect against the impact our early socioeconomic environment has on our mental wellbeing.

"However there really is a wider issue at play here, and the fact that people from less privileged backgrounds remain more likely to encounter mental health difficulties than their more affluent counterparts is something we need to tackle.

"We know health inequality exists but this is less often discussed in terms of [mental health](#). Whilst this work highlights that some people are less affected by these trends they remain a minority. The relationship between background disadvantage and how psychologically well we are can only really be addressed by ensuring proper government investment in reducing socioeconomic disadvantage and its psychological toll."

The paper titled 'Cognitive ability as a moderator of the association between social disadvantage and psychological distress: evidence from a population-based sample' has been published in the journal *Psychological Medicine*.

Dr. Michael Daly said "The research builds on our previous study which analysed data from UK cohorts of those born in 1958 and 1970, and suggested a similar 'buffer effect' may exist for a number of aspects of

health, including psychological distress, general health and potentially mortality."

The latest study is an expansion of that work and looks at tens of thousands of people in modern Britain and found that despite changing demographics the same pattern emerged.

It suggests that early interventions, such as targeted prevention and treatment programmes, should be put in place to support those from [disadvantaged backgrounds](#).

The paper also calls for increased investment to tackle the overall causes of health inequality which leave these communities exposed to [health](#) problems.

More information: Emma Bridger et al. Cognitive ability as a moderator of the association between social disadvantage and psychological distress: evidence from a population-based sample, *Psychological Medicine* (2018). [DOI: 10.1017/S0033291718002118](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291718002118)

Provided by Birmingham City University

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