

# Study finds evidence of intergenerational transmission of trauma among ex-POWs from the Civil War

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A trio of researchers affiliated with the National Bureau of Economic Research has found evidence that suggests men who were traumatized

while POWs during the U.S. Civil War transmitted that trauma to their offspring—many of them were found to die earlier. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Dora Costa, Noelle Yetter and Heather DeSomer describe their study of Union POWs during the Civil War and the longevity of their offspring.

During the U.S. Civil War, there were periods when prisoners were frequently exchanged between sides, and periods when such exchanges were halted. During periods when exchanges were halted, prison populations rose and prisoners suffered as a result. Not only were they treated more harshly, they were also given very little to eat. In this new effort, the researchers compared [survival rates](#) of [children](#) born to Union Civil War soldiers detained in the south during the war.

The researchers were able to obtain data on approximately 700 Union POWs and 2,500 of their children. For comparison purposes, they used data from 5,000 non-POW Union soldiers and 15,000 of their children. The researchers found that the longevity of sons born to soldiers who underwent more severe conditions as POWs during the war was shorter than for sons of fathers who were not POWs or who were part of exchange programs. For daughters, there was no measurable difference. More specifically, by age 45, sons of POWs who experienced harsh conditions were found to be 11 percent more likely to die than sons of non-POWs.

The researchers found that the main factor responsible for the increased death rate was cerebral hemorrhage, and to a small degree, various types of cancer. They were also able to eliminate other factors as possible causes of the reduced survival rates. They conclude that trauma experienced by the fathers was an example of gender-specific epigenetic effects. To bolster their assessment, they cite a Swedish study that found gender-specific epigenetic effects in sons of men who had undergone serious food shortages for a period of time before conceiving their

children.

**More information:** Dora L. Costa et al. Intergenerational transmission of paternal trauma among US Civil War ex-POWs, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2018). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1803630115](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1803630115)

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