

# Young people less likely to study at university if mother has maternal depression, finds study

November 16 2023

---



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Young people whose mothers experienced periods of depression during their lifetime were less likely to study at university, new research led by

the University of Bristol has found. [The study](#) is published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*.

It was already known that [maternal depression](#) can impact [young people's](#) educational attainment in [secondary school](#), [mental health](#), and socio-emotional development. However, it was not known how maternal depression impacts young people going to university, which can effect a person's earnings and socioeconomic circumstances over their lifetime.

The study investigated whether maternal depression was related to whether a young person studied at university, how far they moved for university, and the reasons for choosing a particular university.

The research team also explored how the young person's own mental health, sense of control over events in their life (known as locus of control), and [exam results](#) in their [teenage years](#) related to their decision to study at university.

The study analyzed data collected from 8,952 participants of Bristol's Children of the 90s study (also known as the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, ALSPAC), a world-leading [longitudinal study](#) which has followed pregnant women and their offspring since 1991.

The team used data from questionnaires completed by mothers during pregnancy and when the young person was 1, 5, 8, 11 and 18 years old. Data collected from young people via questionnaires when they were 16, 18 and 26 years old was also used, together with records from exams taken at 14 and 16 years old.

The research team found that for each questionnaire the mother reported experiencing elevated symptoms of depression in the young person's lifetime, the young person was 12% less likely to have studied at university, even after considering socioeconomic factors. The

researchers also found that this effect was explained by differences in the young people's exam results in secondary school at 16, and to a lesser extent their locus of control at 16, suggesting targets for intervention.

These findings suggest that to reduce long-term inequalities related to maternal depression, interventions could focus on improving educational outcomes in secondary school for young people affected by maternal depression.

Dr. Amanda Hughes, research fellow in the Bristol Medical School: Population Health Sciences (PHS) and a lead author, said, "Maternal depression is estimated to impact around one in five mothers with children under 16. Our study found that young people, whose mothers had experienced more symptoms of depression during their lifetime, were less likely to study at university, and that differences in important education outcomes were already seen by the time a young person has reached 16 years old."

Sally Bowman from the Avon & Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust, and a lead author on the paper, added, "For young people who do not go to university, maternal depression may be a reason together with other family priorities. To reduce the long-term impact and increase life chances, interventions should focus on improving young people's educational outcomes before or during secondary school."

The research team now plan to investigate how maternal [depression](#) might impact educational outcomes during secondary schooling, which their findings indicate is crucial for later educational outcomes.

Follow-up research using data from other surveys could also explore the role of fathers' as well as mothers' mental health, parenting behaviors, and changes in [household income](#), which the research team were not able to consider.

**More information:** Sally Bowman et al, Maternal depressive symptoms and young people's higher education participation and choice of university: Evidence from a longitudinal cohort study, *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2023.10.061](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2023.10.061)

Provided by University of Bristol

Citation: Young people less likely to study at university if mother has maternal depression, finds study (2023, November 16) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-11-young-people-university-mother-maternal.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.