

Poverty hits Vancouver kids hard later in life says UBC study

BY JOHN BERMINGHAM JULY 15, 2009



Children who grow up in poverty face the risk of chronic medical conditions later in life, according to a new UBC study.

Photograph by: AFP file, The Province

Children who grow up poor are more likely to get chronic diseases later in life.

That's the basic conclusion of a new study by a team of researchers at the University of B.C., which has found that early life experience is a key predictor of health challenges, 50 or 60 years down the road.

Co-author Gregory Miller, associate professor of psychology at UBC, said people who grow up with low social status in early childhood have a greater risk of getting heart disease, stroke, diabetes and some cancers.

"What happens to people in their early years of life have longstanding and far-reaching consequences," Miller told The Province.

And even though the poor person may have climbed up the social ladder, the negative health consequences can still show up.

The study of more than 100 Vancouver adults, split evenly between people whose parents had high and low socio-economic status, found that those with a poor childhood are biologically programmed into a more defensive 'fight-or-flight' mode.

Co-author Michael Kobor, assistant professor of medical genetics at UBC, compared the gene profiles of healthy people, and could see clear differences between those who grew up in low and high-status conditions.

"It's clear that there is a different gene activity in people that grew up in low-status," said Kobor.

"It predisposes them to inflammation in their immune systems, which increases the chance of chronic disease down the road."

Kobor said that there might be plenty of things people can do to alter their genetic destiny.

"I don't think people are doomed," he said. "It really has to do with the environmental enrichment. Some people are resilient."

The pair are now doing further study on how loving parents can offset a lot of the negative consequences of a low-status childhood.

B.C. has the highest rate of child poverty in the country, with 13 per cent of kids, or 108,000, living below the poverty-line.

"If you believe the studies out there, then in 30 to 40 years we're going to be seeing the effects of that," said Miller. "It's going to have big implications."

A UBC study last year found that poorer kids from families earning \$27,000 a year have shortened attention spans and other learning problems, compared to kids from homes with family incomes of \$96,000.

Lynda Gray, executive director of the Urban Native Youth Association, said she's not surprised at the study's findings.

More than half of native children in the Lower Mainland are living in poverty, many in single-parent families, and suffer high levels of mental distress.

"Native people are totally over-represented in poverty," said Gray. "It gets passed down from generation to generation."

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