

Upfront

Poor in Body: Toxic environments knock impoverished kids' systems out of kilter

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Poor in Body

Toxic environments knock impoverished kids' systems out of kilter

Some 17 percent of children in America live in families with incomes below the federal poverty line, according to a 2005 U.S. Census Bureau report. A minority of these children will escape poverty by the time they grow up. Even so, their bodies will still bear the marks of their early deprivations as they succumb to higher rates of cancer, infectious diseases, arthritis, and other ailments. Adults who never leave poverty suffer even worse fates, studies show.

Yet no one quite understands how poverty gets – and stays – under children's skin. In the November 2007 issue of *Psychological Science*, researchers plot one possible path: Poor kids are exposed to so many social and physical risks that their bodies no longer react properly to stress. Indeed, the longer they live in poverty, the worse they handle stress, says Gary W. Evans, a psychologist at Cornell University and the study's lead author.

"Poverty is not just economics and misery," says Evans. "It has lasting, serious health effects."

To examine the links between time spent in poverty, exposure to environmental risks, and the body's stress responses, Evans' team of researchers tested more than 200 Caucasian children at ages 9 and 13. Half of the children's families were living in poverty.

The researchers interviewed the children and their parents to find out what physical risks – including noise and substandard housing – and social risks – including separation from parents and exposure to violence – the children had endured. Then the children performed a stressful task – solving math problems out loud, without paper and pencil – while the researchers measured their blood pressure.

With co-author Pilyoung Kim, Evans found that the longer children had lived in poverty, the more environmental risks they experienced. In turn, the greater the children's environmental risk exposure, the less their blood pressures rose in response to the math test. Their blunted responses, explains Evans, are an early sign that stress has damaged their cardiovascular systems.

The researchers also found that the longer the children had lived in poverty, the higher their levels of the stress hormone cortisol upon waking. Chronically elevated cortisol portends illness, studies show.

Just as Evans and Kim show that toxic environments damage children's health, other research reveals that changing children's surroundings can improve their long-term health. Combined, these studies show not only that poverty is the problem, but also that social interventions can be the answer. –A.C.

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