

Health of future generations determined by childhood conditions

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A growing body of economic research, published in the latest issue of *Research in Public Policy*, finds compelling evidence that the conditions to which children are exposed in their early and even foetal years can dramatically affect their future.

Researchers for the University of Bristol's Centre for Market and Public Organisation (CMPO) looked at the health and cognitive development of [children](#) from across the world and concluded that investments made during critical periods in a child's lifespan can lead to significant returns, while failure to invest can lead to irreversible damage.

The nutritional disruption caused to unborn children by Muslim women who fast during the month of Ramadan was found to result in lower [birth weight](#), reduced gestation health, increased likelihood of learning disabilities in adulthood and adverse effects on schooling, earnings and measures of wealth.

A further study into health shocks during pregnancy found that the consequences of the Asian [influenza pandemic](#), which struck Britain in 1957-58, were still being felt among the people who were exposed to it in utero.

The epidemic had significant detrimental effects on intrauterine growth and, conditional on birthweight, on test scores at seven and 11. These negative effects were either restricted to or more pronounced among women who were relatively short or who smoked during pregnancy.

Analysis of three decades' worth of data on over two million children across 38 developing countries revealed how health is transmitted across generations - and how public policy can respond.

Improvements in the socio-economic environment at birth were found to generate greater dividends in less healthy families, while investments in the nutrition and health of women had an intergenerational payoff, improving the survival and [health](#) of future generations.

A study into the impact of lead exposure in early life found significant effects on future educational attainments and labour market outcomes, based on analysis of the later life outcomes of people born in Sweden in the 1970s, when regulations on leaded gasoline gradually reduced the lead content in the air and in children's blood.

Reduced exposure early in life was found to improve cognitive performance and [labour market](#) outcomes among young adults. Children from poorer families benefited relatively more from gasoline lead reductions, suggesting that environmental policies may act as an instrument of redistribution by improving long-term outcomes for disadvantaged children.

Provided by University of Bristol

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