

Great Recession could reduce school achievement for children of unemployed

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Lingering impacts of the Great Recession could include long-term stress, behavioral problems and economic hardship among children of the unemployed, according to researchers at the University of Chicago.

“There is growing evidence that parental [job loss](#) has adverse consequences on [children](#)’s behavior, academic achievement and later employment outcomes, particularly in economically disadvantaged families,” said Heather Hill, assistant professor in the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration. The material hardship and stress associated with unemployment appears to reduce the quality of the home environment and adversely affect children, Hill and other UChicago researchers have found.

The families that Hill studied were largely low-income. She found that, among young children, a maternal job loss is associated with increasing children’s problem behavior in the classroom by more than 40 percent.

She based her work on data collected from single mothers encouraged to go back to work during the welfare reforms of the 1990s. Many of the mothers in the study found work relatively quickly, but subsequently experienced one or more job losses followed by extended periods of unemployment.

Psychological and sociological theories suggest that besides reducing money available to provide for the needs of children, frequent and

sustained joblessness could disrupt children's lives by leading to volatile child care arrangements and additional stress at home.

Prior studies suggest that disruptions in child care lead to lower cognitive development and increased behavior problems. Parental stress and depression "can lead to less nurturing and harsher parenting," Hill said.

Parental unemployment can lead to problems for children regardless of the family's income status, however, said Ariel Kalil, professor in the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy Studies.

Kalil studies the impact of parental job loss and unemployment on children and is undertaking new studies focused on the current [recession](#). She found in previous studies of two-parent families that a paternal job loss impacted the welfare of children more significantly than a maternal loss.

Children were 1.6 times more likely to repeat a grade if their father lost a job. Among older children, a father's job loss was associated with more suspensions and disruptions.

"It was not a matter of income only," she said. "Even in families in which the mother earned more money than the father, children were not affected as greatly when she lost a job than were the children in families in which the father lost a job," Kalil said.

The impact of job loss is different for men: "Men's identity is more closely linked to their jobs, and they are less accustomed to performing the household and child care tasks that women are," Kalil explained. Women may be more effective being at home with their children during a period of unemployment.

Hill is co-principal investigator in the Network on Employment

Instability, Family Well-being and Social Policy—an interdisciplinary, multi-university research effort based at the School of Social Service Administration to better understand the causes and consequences of employment instability.

Kalil is a member of the advisory board for the project, to be launched this fall, which will study between- and within-job sources of instability at the lower end of the labor market. It also will develop and evaluate interventions aimed at reducing employment instability and its effects on children and families.

Kalil is the author of a number of articles on this topic, including “Job Loss at Mid-Life: Managers and Executives Face the ‘New Risk Economy,’” published in *Social Forces*; “Parental Job Loss and Children’s Academic Progress in Two-Parent Families,” published in *Social Science Research*; and “Parental Job Loss and Children’s Educational Attainment in Black and White Middle Class Families,” published in *Social Science Quarterly*.

Hill has written extensively on the connection between employment and family life and was a co-author of the recent article “Getting a Job is Only Half the Battle: Maternal Job Loss and Child Classroom Behavior in Low-Income Families,” published in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.

Provided by University of Chicago

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