

Wide income gaps affect health of rich and poor alike, says researcher

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Sharp income disparity in neighborhoods linked with physical and mental health problems, says U of A social epidemiologist who found similar results in Boston and Calgary.

Newborns in U.S. counties where the gap between rich and poor is wider than average die at a higher rate than babies born in counties where the gap is more equitable, according to research by University of Alberta social epidemiologist Roman Pabayo, who adds that same inequality also exists in Canada.

"I think there are a lot of people that think of Canada as an egalitarian country, but inequalities exist. Some inequality can be seen as natural,

but when there is too much, it can be harmful," said Pabayo, newly named Canada Research Chair in Social and Health Inequities Throughout the Lifespan.

Pabayo's research team used [census data](#) on income within a particular area to calculate the Gini coefficient, the most commonly used measurement of income inequality. For the Canadian portion, he chose neighbourhoods in Calgary.

He found that even an economically robust city like Calgary can have income inequality, which in this case led to higher rates of depression in new moms.

Pabayo said similar results by other epidemiologists showed the same effect in desirable locales such as San Francisco, where many people work in the high-paying tech sector while others are left to work in industries that don't pay as well.

"It's not natural inequality because people are choosing to live in an area for a particular reason, whether it's jobs or family or something else, but the results are the same," he said.

In a similar study, Pabayo found that girls living in Boston neighbourhoods where there was a large income gap had higher rates of depression than girls living in neighbourhoods where [income](#) inequality wasn't as sharp.

Pabayo explained both the Calgary and Boston studies illustrate how social cohesion and trust in a society begin to erode when people compare themselves to each other. The deterioration ultimately leads to fear and insecurity, which is associated with spikes in depression or aggression—and is not necessarily the sole domain of those left wanting.

"Income [inequality](#) doesn't just affect people on the lower end but the higher end as well. We all live together, we have to interact with each other," he said.

"Government redistribution of wealth over the long term would improve health for all members of a society—the most privileged and the most disadvantaged."

Things like basic health coverage, funding for education, and community and recreational programming level the playing field for members of a society, as do minimum wage increases, said Pabayo, who added he has seen the [health](#) benefits show up in his research.

"There is always going to be [income inequality](#). The question is, what is the threshold before it is bad for everyone?"

Provided by University of Alberta

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