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Poorer kids often depressed as teenagers

Study suggests why it's so hard to break the generational poverty cycle Reuters updated 12 34 p.m ET, Wed, Jan 7, 2009

Children from poor families are more likely than their peers to be depressed as teenagers, with effects that can ultimately make it harder to climb out from poverty, a new study suggests.

The study, which followed nearly 500 Iowa families for a decade, found that children in poorer families were at greater risk of depression symptoms by adolescence. These teenagers, in turn, were more likely to "grow up" faster including having sex, leaving home or getting married at an earlier-than-average age.

This cycle, the study found, eventually put kids at risk of substantial obstacles in young adulthood, such as low education levels, unemployment and a lack of stable relationships in their lives.

"The main finding shows the continuity of family adversity over generations -- from family-of-origin to a young adult's family," lead researcher K.A.S. Wickrama, a professor of human development and family studies at Iowa State University in Ames, said in a written statement.

"In other words," he said, "it's the transmission of poverty."

The findings, which appear in the Journal of Health and Social Behavior, suggest that early-life stress and depression symptoms feed each other, ultimately making the transition to adulthood a tough one, according to Wickrama's team.

Children from poor families, the researchers say, are particularly vulnerable to becoming "trapped in the self-perpetuating cycle of adverse life circumstances and poor health."

*These findings emphasize the need for federal, state, and local level policies and programs designed to reduce childhood adversity," Wickrama and his colleagues write.

Such policies, according to Wickrama, should focus on boosting at-risk children's "resiliency" — by investing in education, for example, or in programs aimed at improving kids' psychological well-being.

"The policies and intervention programs need to focus on early intervention," Wickrama said. "That is the real lesson, because early levels of depression have a persistent influence. So you need to intervene early in childhood and adolescence - not when they become young adults."

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