

research snapshot

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Canadian children worse off, health-wise, than those in other nations



What is this research about?

Living conditions have a strong impact on the health of children. Family income, in particular, is a key indicator of health. As family income increases, children's health improves. But income, by itself, isn't the cause of health inequalities. Rather, a family's income is a good indicator of its socioeconomic position. Families that are disadvantaged – for example, families that live in poverty – are more likely to have children who experience health problems. But what are the specific mechanisms by which poor living conditions translate into poor health for children? And what are the larger forces that create these conditions in the first place?

What did the researcher do?

Dennis Raphael, Professor in the School of Health Policy & Management at York University, set out to explore the health of Canada's children in a four-part study. In the second part, Raphael looked at the ways in which different living conditions create health inequalities among children. He also looked at the political and economic factors that shape these living conditions.

What you need to know:

The living conditions that lead to large health disparities among Canadian children are themselves shaped by a larger, Neoliberal agenda.

What did the researcher find?

A number of explanations have been developed to explain the disparities in the health of children. Materialist and life-course explanations, in particular, focus on how living conditions can have latent, pathway, and cumulative effects on children's health.

Latent effects show themselves over the long-term. They are the result of the conditions to which a person is exposed in childhood, even pregnancy. For example, pregnant women who are disadvantaged – who have poor diets or are exposed to risky behaviours – are more likely to give birth to underweight babies. These babies, in turn, tend to have more health problems later on. In adulthood, they are more likely to have cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. But children who have low birth weight are less likely to have these health problems if they come from a more advantaged background.

Pathway effects draw attention to how living

conditions shape the trajectories of the lives of children and whether or not social institutions (like child care and schools) can alter these trajectories. For example, children who come from poverty tend to lack a readiness to learn when they enter school. This has an impact on their ability to find a good job later in life and, therefore, has consequences for their health.

Cumulative effects are the result of a child's having lived for many years in poverty. The accumulation of adverse experiences can have an impact on a child's readiness to learn. It can leave a child feeling helpless and unable to change her situation.

While it's possible to intervene in the lives of children who experience poor living conditions and their resulting effects, Raphael argues that we need to focus on the broader political and economic forces that produce such conditions in the first place. Health inequalities, after all, are health *inequities*; in other words, they are both 'unfair' and 'avoidable.' Nations differ in how they distribute wealth among their populations and the extent to which they allocate resources to health care, social services, schools, and other forms of social infrastructure. Some nations take a more Neoliberal approach, letting the market determine how resources are distributed. These nations emphasize individualism at the expense of government interventions. In other words, they provide the least support and security for their citizens. Although Canada spends more than the United States on social infrastructure, Canada has greater inequality in children's living conditions than many other wealthy developed nations. This shows itself in the poor health of many Canadian children.

How can you use this research?

Policymakers need to understand the extent to which market-based, Neoliberal policies leave many Canadian children and their families disadvantaged. They need to invest more in the health of Canadian children by working to close the socioeconomic gaps between these children. While interventions on behalf of the most disadvantaged families are vital, decision-makers need to address the root causes of poverty. They need to focus on the health of *all* Canadian children.

About the Researcher

Dennis Raphael is Professor in the School of Health Policy & Management at York University. This ResearchSnapshot is from his study, "The health of Canada's children. Part II: Health mechanisms and pathways." draphael@yorku.ca

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