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## Childhood Poverty and its Effects on Adulthood

Childhood poverty is an unfortunate pandemic that is difficult to get a handle on. Impoverished communities are evident in every city or town, even the seemingly wealthy ones. While poverty certainly takes a toll on adults, it can hit children harder as they are more vulnerable. Childhood poverty is an unfortunate pandemic that is difficult to get a handle on. Poverty affects children's physical health, mental health, and keeps them trapped in a cycle that leads into adulthood.

Before assessing what happens to children in poverty, the types of poverty must first be assessed. First, there is situational poverty, which is lack of resources due to a life-altering event, such as the death or disease of a family member. Secondly, there is generational poverty, which is from at least two generations (Payne 61). Generational poverty has its own culture, belief systems, and hidden rules (Payne 61). Generational poverty is typically the case when it comes to the poverty cycle.

At first glance and examination, it can be said that an individual's physical health is heavily affected by poverty. According to the University of California San Francisco, "poor neighborhoods are more likely to have higher crime rates, lower performing schools, and little access to healthy foods" (Conway). Nutrition is the first piece to this puzzle. Children in poverty often lack the nutrition they need. This is due to healthy foods, such as fruits and vegetables, being more expensive than foods that are high in sodium, preservatives, and fats, like Ramen Noodles, chips, and sodas (Conway). Sometimes, households lack enough food altogether. When children do not have enough food, this can affect their growth and hinder their ability to learn in school.

Exercise is the second piece to the physical health puzzle. Since poor neighborhoods often have high crime rates, parents do not want their children going outside. This means the kids are not getting the exercise they need. This combined with poor nutrition makes for a dangerous combination. When your diet is mainly high fat, high cholesterol, and high sugar foods, and you don't get the exercise you need, obesity becomes common, along with pre-diabetes, and risk of heart disease.

The third piece to the physical health puzzle is chronic disease, which accounts for 70 percent of U.S. deaths, and is linked to poverty (Conway). Chronic health conditions are striking communities earlier and more often (Conway). For example, CVP researchers found that ten years ago, 1 in 11 kids had pre-diabetes; now, 1 in 4 kids has it (Conway). According to Dr. Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo, these are diseases that typically happen with older age, but now they are starting to become more common in teenagers and those in their twenties (Conway). Though they are not the ones at fault, if these problems are not stopped at the roots, these kids are going to face severe ramifications as adults.

While physical health is certainly swayed by a person's socioeconomic status, mental health correlates with that as well. Psychological issues are predominant in impoverished children. Those at risk would include children of single-parent families, children of teen mothers, children of social assistance, and children with disabilities (Boyle and Lipman). As stated by Dr. Boyle and Dr. Lipman in their research, "socio-economic disadvantage, measured by low social class

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based on parental occupation measured at ages seven, 11 and 16 years, was associated with self-rated ill health, malaise (indicative of low mood), psychological morbidity, and short stature assessed at age 23 in men and women” (Boyle and Lipman). This evidence shows the correlation between physical and mental health, and how you cannot have one stay healthy without the other.

Familial characteristics can sway how mental health impacts a poor family’s situation. Among children in low-income households from a study done in 1983, there was at least one psychiatric disorder present (Boyle and Lipman). In a separate study using the same data, it was predicted that academic and psychiatric difficulties would ensue for children aged eight to eleven years (Boyle and Lipman). Lipman and Boyle concluded from this study that “as the length of time that families live in poverty increases, the mental health disadvantages of children increase” (Boyle and Lipman). The timing of exposure is important as well. Negative effects of low income are more severe when children are young as opposed to teenage years or early adulthood (Boyle and Lipman).

The area where a child grows up has a tremendous impact on mental health, too. Neighborhood characteristics have been found to be highly associated with mental health problems in youth (Boyle and Lipman). Neighborhood influences can impact educational achievement, as seen in a study done by Professor Michael Boyle. The study was done in 2001 and uses the same numbers from the 1983 study in which the children studied were four to sixteen. The “children” are now between the ages of 22 and 34. Boyle says the “results of this study demonstrated a significant effect of neighborhood on outcome, with neighborhood affluence [education, jobs, etc.] significantly associated with outcome even after controlling for other child and family characteristics” (Boyle and Lipman). Neighborhood disadvantage was not connected with the development (Boyle and Lipman).

Something as simple as being born into an impoverished family can influence a child at birth. This would be brain development. A study done by Dr. Tom Boyce, chief of UCSF’s Department of Pediatrics, found that kids from poor families tend to have lower IQs, along with less executive functioning in the prefrontal part of the brain. This controls cognitive flexibility, working memory, and semantic fluency (Conway). Boyce says, “the further you go up the scale in parental education, the more folding – or cortical surface area – is evident in a child’s brain” (Conway). The brain folds inward to allow more surface area into the skull. This brain folding is what sets apart humans from other species, as we literally have more brain space (Conway). How much this has to do with a child’s ability to learn is uncertain, as it has been proven that a low IQ score does not predestine people to failure. This includes several famous presidents, such as Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan.

Education could be the driving force to lifting people out of poverty, but that field does not come without its share of struggles either. The poor, whether unemployed or socially isolated, do not often have the finances necessary for supplies their kids will need for school (Cizon). Children in poverty come to school less prepared than other children, for example without necessary notebooks, or other supplies due to poverty, causing them to fall behind each year. They have limited and slow learning process due to limited vocabulary, pride, and motivation (Cizon). When kids fall behind in school, it is difficult to close the gap. These kids are now more susceptible to violent behaviors, failing classes, or even dropping out of high school altogether (Black and Engle). Children in developing countries are at great risk of never attending school compared to children from wealthier families. The differences are vast. For example, according

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to a study done by Patrice Engle and Maureen Black, “in a sample of 80 countries, 12% of children in the top quintile of households never attended school, whereas 38% of children in the poorest quintile never attended school” (Black and Engle). With a chunk of the poor never attending school in developing countries, this leads to a portion of them not finding good enough jobs for their family, so they will not have enough money to send their future children to school.

This leads into perhaps the greatest barrier of all for the poor: the poverty cycle. There certainly seems to be a catch 22 when it comes to escaping poverty. After all, if it was so simple to get out, no one would be in that position. While an impoverished person may want to make their situation better, they usually cannot afford the resources to do so. The poverty cycle is an unfortunate pattern, and keeps entire families entangled for months, years, or even generations until they manage to break free. “The poverty cycle implies poverty that generates poverty”, says Francis A. Cizon, Director of Social Work Research at Loyola University. As mentioned previously, when parents cannot provide for their children, they tend to fall behind in school. When those kids fail in school, they are offered less job opportunities, and their kids will not have the supplies or resources to go to school, and the cycle continues.

Those in poverty have less choices as opposed to the middle and upper classes. They are required to live in specific areas of a city, with limited options for jobs and careers, and limited marriage partners (Cizon). Cizon explains that “life [for the impoverished] is not a series of alternatives but a sequence of either this or nothing, a sequence of preselected conditions upon which life depends for survival” (Cizon). Most in poverty often find they can survive best in groups.

When groups develop due to poverty, they adopt what is known as learned helplessness. The poor become unheard and without power and life becomes unpredictable, a place where they have no control (Cizon). They are unable to make their dreams a reality, generation after generation. Their voices are unheard, so they go unheeded. In order to break this cycle, those who want to help must have a willingness to extend themselves and deploy existing resources (Cizon).

Poverty is a horrible situation to be in, especially for children. It has tremendous effects on their physical and psychological well being. If they are unlucky and do not find a way to pull themselves from the muck of deprivation, they will face it for the rest of their lives, along with their children and their grandchildren.