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Poor childhood takes lifelong toll, study shows

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Sebastian burped and gurgled on his mother's lap Monday morning, three months into his Philadelphia life.

Because his family is poor, he's unlikely to get the food, housing and living conditions he'll need for his brain to develop properly over the next three years.

The circumstances of his just-begun journey could turn him into a bad student, an ineffective worker, and a poor man for the rest of his days, according to a new study on the cumulative effects of a deprived early childhood.



"Hardship is a constant," said Sebastian's mother, Joanna Cruz, 25, a married, unemployed former Dunkin' Donuts worker from Grays Ferry. "It's not something you can tell someone who never lived it. This is how we struggle."

Researchers from Drexel University, as well as from universities and hospitals in Boston, Baltimore, Minneapolis, and Little Rock have reported that a lack of access to adequate food, housing, and home energy can have devastating effects on the health and development of children from 4 months to 3 years of age.

Known as Children's HealthWatch, the researchers created a so-called hardship index to measure the diminished quality of food, housing, and home energy among the poor. This measure indicates that the recession has played havoc with the health of children and their futures.

In Philadelphia, the hardship index nearly doubled between 2006 and 2009. During the first three years of the index, Philadelphia had the highest hardship rate, though Boston eclipsed it last year.

The study of 7,000 people in the five cities combined was conducted over four years in hospital emergency rooms, where interviewers spoke with parents about issues of food, housing, and energy. The work was published in this month's issue of *Pediatrics*, a journal of children's health.

Hardships "all converge in the body of the baby," said Deborah Frank, a pediatrician and HealthWatch investigator with the Boston University School of Medicine. "America's impoverished families are in a complex humanitarian emergency."

That's not news to Cruz, who lives in a \$725-a-month, three-bedroom house next to an abandoned building.

Her husband was laid off from a bakery job in March. In the winter, the family - including two other children, ages 4 and 8 - shivered in one room at night near the only space heater. This summer, two fans won't be enough to cool them. And welfare and food stamps will be inadequate to stave off hunger.

To conserve, Cruz, her husband, and 4-year-old Silina eat just breakfast and dinner each day, while the 8-year-old gets lunch in school. There's enough formula for Sebastian - for now.

Cruz stocks up on foods her children don't like, such as Oodles of Noodles, so there's something to eat at the end of the month, before new food stamps are issued.

Interviewers at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children in Philadelphia found that 60 percent of families who showed up in the ER had one or more dimensions of hardship, according to Mariana Chilton, Philadelphia's principal investigator for Children's HealthWatch and a professor in Drexel's School of Public Health.

"It's heartbreaking to work on these issues and see the children try to grow and thrive, while parents hustle every day to help their families, and they still can't make it," Chilton said.

"This is a national disaster, but not obvious, like a flood in New Orleans. I'm shocked that people are able to tolerate this in our young."

Defining the dimensions of hardship, Children's HealthWatch reported that food insecurity is a lack of access to enough food for an active and healthy lifestyle. Nutritional deprivation, as doctors know, has severe consequences for cognitive, social, and emotional development.

In many cases, researchers found, children suffer malnutrition, which manifests itself in two ways: Either they fail to thrive, which means they are not getting enough calories to grow; or they get cheap, dense calories and become obese.

Parents who can't afford formula will sometimes thin it with water, which dilutes sodium in the body and can cause seizures from cold-water intoxication. It can also lead to poor weight gain and growth, according to Dan Taylor, a pediatrician at St. Christopher's who was not involved with the study.

Housing insecurity occurs when the family has moved at least twice in the previous year, has difficulty paying the mortgage or rent, or has more than two people sleeping in a bedroom.

Energy insecurity results when a family doesn't have enough money to heat or cool a residence, or to cook. It's also manifest in a family that has received utility shutoff notices, has had the energy turned off, or has used the stove to heat the home.

The stresses of housing and energy insecurity adversely affect a child's health and development, Taylor said.

Babies and young children who move a lot, or live in shelters, or are crowded in a bedroom develop stress hormones that can damage a still-growing brain through age 19, Taylor said.

Similarly, living and sleeping without proper heat or air-conditioning can create the same kind of brain-stifling stress, not to mention respiratory illnesses such as asthma, he added.

Also, he said, he sees more childhood burns from cheap heaters or ovens used to heat homes, more domestic violence in overcrowded apartments, and more child abuse.

"A lot of people talk about post-traumatic stress after a difficult event," Taylor said. "But these babies and young children see continuous traumatic stress. There is no 'post.' "

Such is the case for Samonia Henderson's 2-year-old twins. Henderson, 36, of Mount Airy, is unemployed and searching for work after recently earning an associate's degree to become an administrative assistant. She said that household stress from lack of food, as well as arguments that she and her fiancé have over money, has caused the children's hair to begin falling out.

"I don't want my babies going through this," she said. "But we are barely making it."

The HealthWatch study shows that antipoverty programs are "not working as well as they should," Chilton said.

"We need a new and radical child-centered approach," she added, in which every program meant to help the poor first takes into account the health and development of children.

"If we don't change the way we think," Chilton concluded, "the system is doomed to fail Philadelphia's children."