BACKGROUNDERS FROM THE UNNATURAL CAUSES HEALTH EQUITY DATABASE

Childhood / Early Life

**Background:** The conditions of our early life not only affect how sick or well we are as children, they have an impact on our life-long health and even that of future generations. Just as our income, education and neighborhood environment shape our health as adults, they have even greater consequences for children. Because children are still developing, they are especially vulnerable to deprivation and stressful environments. Children are also the least empowered to protect themselves or change their environments. Circumstances set in motion during the early stages of child development are difficult to overcome later on.

**Key Factors:**

**Socioeconomic Status.** Lower socioeconomic status in childhood has been linked repeatedly with lower educational and income levels in adulthood, which in turn predict health status. Children in poor families are about seven times as likely to be in poor or fair health as children in the highest-income families. Those whose parents have not finished high school are over six times as likely to be in poor or fair health as those whose parents are college graduates. Although children in middle-income families are better off than those in poor families, they still fare worse than those at the top.

Among other things, diet, housing conditions, educational quality, and neighborhood environment are a function of class. Nutrition in childhood, for example, affects learning, growth and development, which in turn affect educational success, job prospects and future behavioral patterns. Obese children are more likely to be obese as adults, increasing their risk for serious chronic diseases including diabetes, heart disease, and stroke. Children in disadvantaged situations are also more likely to develop health problems when they are young, further limiting their long-term prospects.

Class differences also affect the quality of care and attention that children receive, in both positive and negative ways. Children whose parents have access to the knowledge, skills, time, money or other resources to create healthy and stimulating home environments benefit in terms of cognitive, brain, physical, emotional and behavioral development. Wealth also conveys other health advantages that last well beyond childhood. For example, people who grew up in a house owned by their parents were less likely as adults to become sick when exposed to a cold virus.

From one generation to the next, healthy children are more likely to grow up to become healthy adults who have healthy children.

**Maternal Health.** The influence of "social determinants" on health begins even before we are born. Study after study has outlined the ways in which a woman's health, diet and stress level during pregnancy affects her newborn's life chances: everything from
neurological and emotional development to the likelihood of adult obesity. Proper nutrition, prenatal care, and exercise are important, but class, racism, loving relationships and place can also affect pregnant women.

Women who have not finished high school are one and a half times as likely to give birth to a premature or low birthweight baby compared to those who have college degrees. Babies born to a college graduate are twice as likely to survive past their first birthday. Income level and neighborhood conditions also constrain access to healthy foods, quality medical care and opportunities for exercise, while having unpaid bills, job worries, dealing with lousy transportation, and worrying about crime and violence can affect stress levels during pregnancy.

Increasingly, research has shown that life-long exposure to stressful experiences even BEFORE pregnancy can increase a woman's risk of delivering a premature or low birth weight baby, which in turn elevates the child's lifelong risk of chronic health problems. In fact, many researchers hypothesize that the added stress burden of racism through the life course helps explain the persistent African-American/white mortality gap.

**Neighborhood Conditions**

Children who live in low-income communities are more likely to be exposed to environmental pollutants such as lead, dirty air, toxic mold and vermin - all of which can contribute to chronic ailments and poorer health, especially asthma. At the same time, these neighborhoods are less likely to have access to healthy food options, to parks and public spaces where families can exercise, gather or play, and to jobs and educational opportunities that might provide a path out of poverty.

Violence in school and on the street also exposes children to injury and accidents and triggers conflict and anxiety. Not only does growing up with crime and brutality increase a child's own propensity for destructive behavior, researchers have shown that elevated stress levels chemically interfere with the development of neural pathways - affecting not only normal developmental processes but a child's actual capacity to learn.

Policies that can help young children gain a healthy start include: (1) support for working families: earned income tax credit, paid family leave, flexible work arrangements, guaranteed quality childcare, and universal health care; (2) programs that benefit young children: universal preschool, early reading, parent education, new mother support, more equitable education spending; (3) improvement of neighborhood conditions: revitalization of neglected communities, removal and monitoring of toxic hazards, creation of more quality, affordable housing, better land use and development that limits fast food outlets, encourages grocery stores and other health-promoting local businesses, and builds wealth for poor families.