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ECONOMICS BLOG

The Benefits of Early Childhood Education and Health Programs May Last Longer Than a Lifetime

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16 COMMENTS

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New research suggests programs aimed at helping low-income U.S. children, such as Head Start early childhood education and Medicaid health coverage, may have benefits not only for participating children but for their children as well.

A [recent working paper](#) found the 1980s expansion of Medicaid programs to cover more low-income pregnant women led, years later, to their children giving birth to healthier babies. [Another working paper](#) found childhood access to Head Start led to better long-term outcomes in the next generation, including higher high-school graduation rates and reduced criminal behavior.

“They both suggest the benefits of these programs are much bigger and longer-lasting than we previously knew,” said University of Colorado, Denver economist [Chloe East](#), one of the researchers who studied Medicaid.

Researchers earlier had found [substantial benefits of early-childhood education](#) for the children who receive it, with positive implications for the broader economy. “When individuals are

denied opportunities to reach their maximum potential, it harms not only those individuals, of course, but also the larger economy, which depends vitally on having a skilled, productive workforce,” then-Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke [said in 2012](#).

The economists said their new research suggests the benefits of programs aimed at helping low-income children may carry over to the next generation.

One of the [papers](#), circulated this month by the National Bureau of Economic Research, examined the effects of 1980s-era expansions of Medicaid, the joint state-federal health-care program for poor Americans, to cover more low-income pregnant women and children. It was written by Ms. East; University of Michigan economist [Sarah Miller](#); University of California, Davis economist [Marianne Page](#); and [Laura Wherry](#), an assistant professor at the University of California, Los Angeles’s David Geffen School of Medicine.

Their analysis found women who were born between 1979 and 1986 in states offering more-generous Medicaid coverage for expectant mothers had babies who weighed more on average and were less likely to have very low birth weight. Those characteristics are “linked to improvements in the individuals’ outcomes much later in life,” such as higher earnings in adulthood, Ms. East said.

“Our results suggest that women whose mothers were more likely to be eligible for Medicaid when they were pregnant are more likely to have healthier children themselves,” she said.

The other [paper](#), by Texas A&M University economist [Andrew Barr](#) and University of Notre Dame economist [Chloe Gibbs](#), examined Head Start, the program for low-income children that [started in the 1960s](#) as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty.

They compared the children of mothers born in the early 1960s who had access to Head Start in their home counties to the children of mothers who didn’t have Head Start available in their areas. They found what they described as significant positive effects of maternal Head Start access on the next generation: reduced teen parenthood and criminal behavior and increased high-school graduation and college enrollment.

That suggests “societal investments in early childhood programs can disrupt intergenerational transmission of the effects of poverty,” Mr. Barr said.

He cautioned the findings don’t necessarily apply to all early childhood education programs. But “it suggests that if we think these programs are having effects on the first generation, then it might have important carryovers to the second generation as well,” he said.