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The Long-Arm of Conflict:  
How Timing Shapes the Impact of Childhood Exposure to War

Webinar

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Growing up amid conflict is associated with an increased likelihood of developing a wide array of health conditions including cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, mental health problems, and low self-rated health. Additionally, there is substantial evidence showing childhood exposure to war can lead to stunted socioeconomic attainment. Yet, this evidence has largely not been formulated within a life course theoretic framework of early life adversity. Literature on early life exposure to war often portrays childhood as a single critical period, obviating the notion that childhood is a period of life characterized by multiple critically developmental changes. As a result, research has underexplored two crucial and interrelated aspects of conflict's long-term impact on health. The first is whether war has heterogenous effects depending on the timing of exposure within the childhood periods. The second is a lack of clarity in the processes and mechanisms through which exposure to armed conflict adversely impacts adult health. This study examines how the timing of childhood exposure to armed conflict influences both the magnitude of the impact it has on later life health and the pathways through which those impacts manifest. Utilizing the Survey of Health and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), we examine cohorts of children born and raised during World War II. We find that cohorts born during the war show the largest negative effects of exposure on health in later life. The pathways also vary by the timing of exposure. Consistent with a latent critical periods, children born during the war experience increased risk of poor health and illness in childhood, as well as adult cardiometabolic conditions and poor functional health. Conversely, cohorts born before the war experience more indirect pathways consistent with cumulative disadvantage processes and institutional breakdown. These include stunted socioeconomic attainment, increased risk behaviors, and poorer mental health. Overall, this study emphasizes that the timing of exposure is critical to understanding the long-term health effects of war. Future follow-up studies involving relating childhood exposure to war to the onset of disease in later life and disability-free life expectancy. Additionally, we are currently expanding a similar research setting to the Spanish Civil War which, due to its complexity, warrants a study of its own.



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