

Exploring factors and environments that shape health inequities for Black children

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Children's health is paramount to the future of any society. With children having to rely on their parents, guardians and settings for their health and wellbeing, any suffering they endure is troubling. Since a child's environment strongly influences their mental, emotional and physical developments, understanding these environments and the factors linked to them is imperative for helping prevent and/or improve these conditions to give children the best chances of living healthy, high-quality lives. This article will explore some of these environmental factors and the health outcomes resulting from them, specifically for Black children in Kent County, Michigan.

In 2021, the Grand Rapids African American Health Institute (GRAAHI) via its Research Department performed a literature review on [how environments impact children's health and success during life](#). This review assessed and summarized many studies that examined the environmental and social effects of a child's upbringing. With Black children experiencing higher rates of poverty and infant mortality than other races of children in most cases, it was important for GRAAHI to explore these factors, even though the findings can apply to any child of any race or ethnicity. Below are some of the findings from that literature review:

- A child who grew up poor (or in a low socioeconomic background) was more likely to have cognitive or working memory problems in adulthood.[\(cite\)](#)
- A child with a low socioeconomic status (SES) was less likely to have access to books, computers and a mother who read to them.[\(cite\)](#)
- Learning math early in life improved a child's math proficiency skills in adulthood.[\(cite\)](#)
- People who were sexually abused as children had a higher risk of being obese.[\(cite\)](#)
- Childhood abuse was linked with depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, chronic fatigue syndrome, chronic pain syndrome and many other problems.[\(cite\)](#)
- Black children (who grow up poor) were at higher risk of disrupted physiological functioning and regressed academic achievement.[\(cite\)](#)
- Blacks (who are born into poverty) were less likely than whites to earn high income later in life due to neighborhood effects, educational inequalities, workplace discrimination, racism, incarceration rates and several other factors.[\(cite\)](#)
- Children who were exposed to higher levels of atmospheric lead than other children were more likely to have less adaptive personality profiles into adulthood, which included lower conscientiousness, lower agreeableness, and higher neuroticism.[\(cite\)](#)

These findings clearly demonstrate the complex and weighted factors influencing children's health. While these factors may be known or obvious to some, health care institutions may not be keeping these factors in mind when addressing children's issues. For example, encouraging children and/or people to lose weight via diets and exercise may not be sufficient, when some people are battling psychological or emotional problems from past or current stress, abuse or trauma. Maybe obesity prevention programs should consider these factors and take a more holistic approach to these health problems. This is just one example of many that could be explored.

Unfortunately, Black children in Kent County, Michigan are too familiar with these health challenges. In 2020, Black children in Kent County were more than six times more likely to live in poverty compared to white children, with the rate being 37% for Black children and 6% for white children. In addition from 2017-2020, Black children in Kent County were nearly three times more likely to experience child mortality than white children, with the rate being 110 Black deaths compared to 40 white deaths per

100,000 children. Regrettably, the same theme occurred with Black infants in 2020 who were nearly three times more likely to die “before turning one year old” compared to white infants in Kent County. Moreover in 2021, Black children in Kent County were 3.7 times more likely to experience child abuse or neglect compared to white children. (All data points derive from [GRAAHI’s Health Equity Index](#).) Even though these findings clearly showcase the perplex issues of Black children, these data are just small windows into the challenging worlds of Black children who must overcome these obstacles to have a chance of living healthy, productive lives.

Moving forward, the impact of health inequities on Black children should be studied more closely to better understand the short and long term effects of this reality. With the world changing so quickly with new technologies, family structures, educational frameworks and societal troubles (such as pandemics and political clashes), children in general and Black children specifically will need sufficient access to high-quality resources and education to conquer these challenges. Thus, community leaders and policymakers should establish policies and programs to ensure that every child has equitable opportunities and environments to be productive, healthy and happy. Giving them that chance is something that every child deserves.