The Legacy of Disadvantage: Multigenerational Neighborhood Effects of Cognitive Ability

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Abstract

This study examines how the neighborhood environments experienced over multiple generations of a family influence children’s cognitive ability. Building on recent research showing strong continuity in neighborhood environments across generations of family members, we argue for a revised perspective on “neighborhood effects” that considers the ways in which the neighborhood environment in one generation may have a lingering impact on the next generation. To specify such multigenerational effects is not simply a theoretical problem, but poses considerable methodological challenges. Instead of traditional regression techniques that may obscure multigenerational effects of neighborhood disadvantage, we utilize newly developed methods designed to generate unbiased treatment effects when treatments and confounders vary over time. The results confirm a powerful link between neighborhoods and cognitive ability that extends across generations. Being raised in a high-poverty neighborhood in one generation has a substantial negative effect on child cognitive ability in the next generation. A family’s exposure to neighborhood poverty across two consecutive generations reduces child cognitive ability by roughly half a standard deviation.