

research snapshot

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Rates of Infant Mortality and Low Birth Weight Are High in Canada

What is this research about?

In recent years, research has shown that the social determinants of health have a strong impact on the health of Canadian children. The social determinants are basically the living conditions to which children are exposed. They include: levels of income and wealth; education; degree of employment security; housing and food security; working and community conditions; and the quality of health and social services that are available.

Growing evidence suggests that these living conditions have a stronger impact on the health of children in wealthy developed nations than factors such as genetics, health care, and health-related behaviours. For example, children who are exposed to poverty tend to be less healthy than children who come from families that are better off. But how do children in Canada measure up to those of the rest of the world? What kind of impact do a child's living conditions have on his or her health?

What did the researcher do?

Dennis Raphael, Professor in the School of Health Policy & Management at York University, set out to explore the health of Canada's children in a four-part study. In the first part,

What you need to know:

The living conditions of Canadian children have a strong impact on their health. Social determinants of health associated with poverty have led to increases in the rate of infant mortality and low birth weight in Canada. In terms of the impact that living conditions have on children's health, Canada performs poorly when compared to other countries.

Raphael looked at two key indicators of health in children: infant mortality rate and low birth weight rate. Infant mortality rate refers to the number of newborns who die during their first year of life. Experts consider this to be the single best indicator of the overall health of a population. Low birth weight rate is also an important indicator. It tends to be associated with a wide range of health problems. The researcher provided findings from studies of children's health in Quebec and Toronto.

What did the researcher find?

The rate at which infants die in Canada during their first year of life is 60% higher in the poorest neighbourhoods than in the richest neighbourhoods. The low birth weight rate is

43% higher in the poorest areas than in the richest. As family income increases, children's health improves.

There has been little recent improvement in infant mortality rates in Canada. Infant mortality rates are higher in the Prairie provinces. Nunavut has the highest rate. In general, the infant mortality rate among Canadian Aboriginals is 1.5 times greater than among non-Aboriginals in the rest of the country. In almost all provinces and territories, at least 4 newborns out of every 1000, die. This is noteworthy because at least 10 other wealthy developed nations have lower overall rates than 4.

Low birth weight rates in Canada have been increasing. Nunavut has the highest rate. Interestingly, Albert and Ontario – 2 provinces thought to be the wealthiest in Canada – also have high rates of low birth rate.

In short, Canada has higher infant mortality rates than other wealthy nations. But Canada performs somewhat less poorly in the area of low birth weight. In terms of the impact that living conditions have on children's health, Canada performs poorly when compared to other countries.

How can you use this research?

Policymakers who are interested in the health of children in Canada will find this research useful. Canadian health policy needs to emphasize the strong impact that living conditions have on the health of children. Social determinants of health, such as poverty, have a greater impact on a person's health than genetics or health care.

About the Researcher

Dennis Raphael is Professor in the School of Health Policy & Management at York University.

draphael@yorku.ca

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kmbunit@yorku.ca

www.researchimpact.ca

