

Childhood traumas strongly impact both mental and physical health, new study shows

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The social environments we grow up in are critical when determining our well-being and health later in life. Most Americans (67%) report experiencing at least one traumatic event in childhood, and a new study shows that these experiences have significant impacts on our health risks as adults. Physical illnesses such as obesity and chronic pain are affected, but mental disorders show the most significant association, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), bipolar disorder, substance abuse, and depression.

Scientists from the Desert Research Institute (DRI) and the University of Nevada, Reno, led the study, published on Oct. 6 in the journal *Frontiers in Psychiatry*. More than 16,000 people from the Reno area volunteered for the research as part of the Healthy Nevada Project, one of the most visible genomic studies in the United States, powered by Renown Health.

Participants answered questions about their [social](#)

[environments](#) before age 18, including experiences with emotional, physical, or sexual mistreatment, neglect, and [substance abuse](#) in the household. The researchers combined this information with anonymized medical records to build on existing research about how childhood traumas affect [health outcomes](#).

"The study provides insight as to how social determinants of health may influence adult health disorders," said Robert Read, M.S., a researcher at the Center for Genomic Medicine at DRI and one of the study's lead authors.

Nearly two-thirds (66%) of participants recalled at least one type of trauma, and almost one-quarter (24%) reported experiencing more than four. Women and people of African-American and Latinx descent reported a higher prevalence of traumatic experiences than men and those with European ancestry, but people in low-income households were the most impacted.

Thirteen [mental illnesses](#) showed the most statistically significant associations, including mood disorders, depression, PTSD, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, schizophrenia, and substance abuse. For every reported type of abuse experienced in childhood, a participant's risk for PTSD increased 47%. Each cumulative trauma also increased one's risk for making a suicide attempt by 33%.

The researchers note that although the study is rooted in Nevada—which has high rates of adults with [mental illness](#) and poor access to care—it provides a window into deeply rooted public health issues across the nation.

"Combatting the prevalence of childhood traumas is a complex problem," said Karen Schlauch, Ph.D., a

bioinformatics researcher at DRI and one of the study's lead authors. "Personal experiences with neglect and abuse are more challenging to address, but many of the underlying issues can be tackled at the community level, like food insecurity and poverty."

Beyond improving our understanding of how early social environments influence our health, Schlauch says that the next target for research is understanding how childhood traumas may be linked with specific traits like impulsivity—a prominent trait in Nevada's gambling communities.

"In order to address the devastating impacts of early-life adversity on local population health and inequities, we must focus on the dominant social and behavioral mechanisms affecting Nevadans," said Stephanie Koning, Ph.D., an assistant professor at the School of Public Health at the University of Nevada, Reno, and study co-author. "Beyond how population needs drive our research, we are partnering with community-based organizations to promote evidence-based interventions across individual, community, and state levels."

As the study team expands their analysis of the health impacts of early-life adversity, they are exploring how to use the Healthy Nevada Project database to inform community-based interventions. They've partnered with community institutional partners—including the Stacie Mathewson Behavioral Health & Addiction Institute and Northern Nevada HOPES—for research and advocacy focused on promoting healthy childhood social environments and well-being throughout an individual's life.

More information: Karen A. Schlauch et al, Using phenome-wide association studies and the SF-12 quality of life metric to identify profound consequences of adverse childhood experiences on adult mental and physical health in a Northern Nevadan population, *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (2022). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsy.2022.984366](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2022.984366)

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