



# THE GREAT RECESSION AND FATHERS' HEALTH

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This brief is part of a series of research briefs by Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) and Center for Health and Wellbeing and the Columbia Population Research Center (CPRC) and The National Center for Children and Families (NCCF) at Columbia University. The briefs look at the impacts of the recent "Great Recession" on low-income families' and children's wellbeing. These briefs distill findings from analyses of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Please direct questions or comments to Christopher Wimer at [cw2727@columbia.edu](mailto:cw2727@columbia.edu).

## Introduction

Economic recessions can have detrimental impacts on individual and family wellbeing. Previous research indicates that recessions increase stress due to unemployment and reductions in income. The uncertainty or anticipation of losing a job also causes stress. Stress tends to have negative effects on physical health, and increase risky or health-compromising behavior, like smoking or binge drinking. In contrast, other data has found positive relationships between unemployment and health, because individuals engage in more healthful behaviors when they have more free time at their disposal or because they have less money to purchase unhealthy substances like cigarettes or alcohol.

New research by Janet Currie of Princeton University and Valentina Duque of Columbia University uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS, see text box) to assess how the Great Recession affects the health of fathers with young children. They examine physical health (i.e. general health status and work-limiting health conditions) and health behaviors (i.e., binge drinking, smoking, and drug use). The analysis on fathers yields two main findings: 1) High unemployment was associated with declines in physical health but little change in health-compromising behaviors; 2) Changes in physical health were concentrated among fathers in the lower end and middle of the education distribution. In a related set of findings using FFCWS data, Currie, Duque, and Irwin Garfinkel of Columbia University study whether the Great Recession led to changes in mothers' physical health and substance use, and they found that the increase in the unemployment rate was associated with substantial declines in mother's physical health and an increase in substance use among the most disadvantaged. The results indicate that economic recessions and related unemployment rates have differing effects on mothers and fathers, at least in terms of binge drinking and drug use.

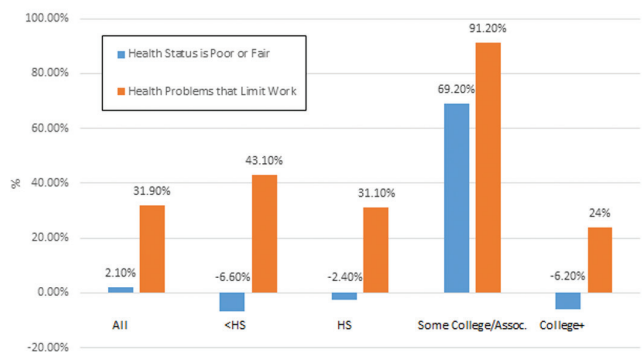
**Increased unemployment is associated with declines in physical health, but little change in health-compromising behaviors.** The Great Recession was associated with a worsening in fathers' physical health. The likelihood that fathers reported a work-limiting condition increased by 32% (see Figure 1). However, they did not report significant changes in binge drinking or drug use as the unemployment rate increased. This latter finding differs from Currie, Duque, and Garfinkel's findings that mothers were significantly more likely to engage in negative health behaviors in response to the recession.

## Fathers in the lower end and in the middle of the education distribution generally experienced worse impacts on health outcomes.

High unemployment resulted in worse health outcomes for fathers with less than a college degree. White fathers were also more likely to report "fair" or "poor" health, and married fathers often saw increases in the likelihood of having work-limiting health problems when unemployment was high. Fathers with some college education were 70% more likely to report "poor" health during periods of increased unemployment (Figure 1). Furthermore, although statistically insignificant, the results suggest an increase (18%) in drug use predominantly among fathers with some college education. In contrast, Currie, Duque, and Garfinkel found the health status of college-educated mothers improved during the recession. Moreover, and in contrast to fathers, the economic downturn had a disproportionate impact on the health and health behaviors of more disadvantaged (i.e. racial/ethnic minorities and unmarried) mothers.

In summary, the Great Recession caused declines in health among fathers, however the effects varied by socioeconomic and demographic groups. The probability of work-limiting health problems associated with higher unemployment increased among all fathers, while fathers with some college education were more likely to report "fair" or "poor" health. Suggestive evidence also indicates that fathers with some college education had increases in drug use associated with increasing unemployment rates. This study underscores the importance of utilizing longitudinal and individual level data to examine potential disparities among socioeconomic groups. Furthermore, there is value in analyzing how and why economic instability and unemployment affects parents' health, because it impacts the wellbeing of children and the families in the short and long-term.

Figure 1. Effects of a Recession on Fathers' Health by Level of Education



## Sources

Currie, J. and Duque, V. (forthcoming). Mothers' and Fathers' Health. In *Children of the Great Recession*.

Currie, J., Duque, V., & Garfinkel, I. (forthcoming). The Great Recession and Mothers' Health. *The Economic Journal*.

See reverse for background on The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

# THE GREAT RECESSION AND FATHERS' HEALTH RESEARCH SUMMARY

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study follows a cohort of nearly 5,000 children born in large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000 (roughly three-quarters of whom were born to unmarried parents).

The Study consists of interviews with both mothers and fathers at birth and again when children are ages one, three, five, and nine, plus in-home assessments of children and their home environments at ages three, five, and nine. The interviews collect rich information on attitudes, relationships, parenting behavior, demographic characteristics, health (mental and physical), economic and employment status, neighborhood characteristics, and program participation. The in-home assessment collects information on children's cognitive and emotional development, health, and home environment. Several collaborative studies provide additional information on parents' medical, employment and incarceration histories, religion, child care and early childhood education.

The Fragile Families study provides a unique window into the impacts of the Great Recession, as data were collected from these families when their children turned 9 years old, which happened between 2007 and 2009 – precisely the years over which the Great Recession fell.