

The Effect of Parental Illness on Children's High School GPA

Malika Dhakhwa, University of Georgia ¹
Patryk Babiarz, University of Georgia ²

High school GPA reliably predicts young adults' tertiary educational attainment and earnings (French et al., 2015). Parental illness can lead to psychological distress for children at any age, resulting in significant negative consequences. When experienced during children's high school years, parental illness can have long-lasting effects on their academic performance and achievements. This period is critical in children's lives due to the unique physical, cognitive, and social changes they undergo (Garipey et al., 2017). Parental illness during this sensitive phase places substantial financial and emotional burdens on both children and their families, potentially impacting them into adulthood (De Neve & Oswald, 2012; Keyes, 2006). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (2023) data suggests that approximately 6 out of 10 adults in the US have a chronic disease.

The long-term well-being of children with chronically ill parents is an important research topic, as it can inform the development of interventions to address the needs of this at-risk population. While numerous studies have explored the adverse consequences of children's illness on parents and families, limited literature examines the impact of parental illness on children. Moreover, most recent studies investigating the effect of parental illness on children's educational attainment have used data from Europe (e.g., Aaskoven et al., 2022; Kristiansen, 2021). However, due to variations in healthcare systems and social safety nets, findings from these studies may not be entirely generalizable to other countries. Addressing this research gap, our study aims to examine the link between parental chronic illness and high school performance using U.S. data. We hypothesize that children whose parents have experienced chronic illness before or during high school will have lower GPAs compared to their peers with healthy parents.

The empirical analysis utilized data from the 1999-2019 waves of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) and the 2005-2019 waves of the Transition to Adulthood Supplement (TAS). The analysis sample consisted of matched pairs of young adults and their parents, in which the TAS dataset provided information on the respondents' high school GPA at graduation, and the PSID dataset included parental responses regarding various health conditions experienced, such as cancer, stroke, heart attack, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, asthma, lung disease, arthritis, memory loss, learning disability, psychological conditions, or other conditions.

Our empirical approach involved estimating multiple regression models to examine the relationship between GPA measured on the percentage scale (dependent variable) and binary indicators representing the onset of health conditions experienced by each parent (key independent variables). We included a comprehensive set of socio-demographic and economic control variables to account for confounding factors, as well as the year-of-graduation fixed effects.

The results revealed statistically significant and quantitatively meaningful negative effects of maternal health conditions on the high school GPA of adolescent children. In contrast, the effects of paternal health conditions were inconclusive and weak. Overall, an illness experienced by the mother at any time before the child's high school graduation led to a decrease in the child's GPA by approximately 1 percentage point ($p < .1$). The impact of health conditions with an onset before the child's high school years was stronger than those experienced during high school ($\approx -1.4pp$, $p < .1$ vs. $\approx -.2pp$, $p > .1$). Applying variable coding that categorized health conditions by type and severity, we observed that children of mothers with severe chronic illnesses (e.g., cancer, stroke, heart attack, lung disease) and psychological

¹ Malika Dhakhwa (malika.dhakhwa25@uga.edu), Doctoral Candidate, Department of Financial Planning, Housing and Consumer Economics, University of Georgia.

² Patryk Babiarz (pbabiarz@uga.edu), Associate Professor, Department of Financial Planning, Housing and Consumer Economics, University of Georgia.

illnesses (e.g., memory loss, learning disability, psychological conditions) had GPAs approximately 2.4 ($p < .01$) and 2.2 ($p < .05$) percentage points lower, respectively, compared to children with healthy mothers. Additionally, the estimated magnitude of negative effects of maternal health conditions increased monotonically with the number of co-occurring conditions.

In additional data analyses, we aimed to explore the underlying pathway of the estimated effects. To accomplish this, we augmented the models by introducing additional control variables, such as changes in the family's economic status (income, net worth), marital status of parents, and the student's self-reported closeness of relationship to each parent. While the inclusion of these variables slightly attenuated the aforementioned effects, all estimates remained statistically and quantitatively significant. This suggests that pathways involving increased household and caregiving responsibilities, restricted social activities and isolation, and psychological distress likely contribute to the impact of a mother's chronic illness on the child's high school performance.

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