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Heavy Smoking During Pregnancy Linked to Kids Becoming Repeat Offenders as Adults

Mums who smoke heavily while pregnant run the risk of having kids who grow up to become repeat criminal offenders, suggests research published online in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health.

The findings held true, even after taking account of a comprehensive range of family and social factors, such as mental ill health and deprivation, which are likely to influence behaviours, the research showed.

The authors base their findings on just under 4000 adults aged between 33 and 40, who were part of the Rhode Island cohort of the Collaborative Perinatal Project. This is tracking the long term effects on children of prevailing factors during pregnancy and around birth.

Their mums were enrolled in the study between 1959 and 1966, and information collected on their smoking habits during pregnancy. Heavy smokers were classified as those smoking 20 or more cigarettes a day.

In 1999/2000, when all the children from these pregnancies had reached at least 33 years of age, criminal record checks were conducted.

The findings showed that children whose mothers had smoked heavily during the pregnancy were the most likely

to have a criminal record as an adult. They had a 30% increased chance of having been arrested, and this applied to women just as much as it did to men.

The children of women who smoked heavily during the pregnancy were also more likely to be repeat criminal offenders as adults.

“While we cannot definitively conclude that maternal smoking during pregnancy (particularly heavy smoking) is a causal risk factor for adult criminal offending, the current findings do support a modest causal relationship,” conclude the authors.

There is some plausible biological evidence for the biological impact of nicotine on the neurobehavioural pathways of the developing brain, say the authors.

And previous research has indicated a link between exposure to cigarette smoke while in the womb and a higher risk of poor attention span, impulsivity, and hyperactivity, they add.