

From the Archive: The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study



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Gene Fowler, the famous American journalist, author, and dramatist, once said, “Don’t be dismayed by the opinions of editors, or critics. They are only the traffic cops of the arts.” That may be so, because like traffic cops we direct and we enforce but, if we are lucky, we also occasionally usher through the editorial process a paper that comes to be recognized as a groundbreaking contribution to the field. In 1998, the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* published such an article, titled “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study,” by Vincent J. Felitti, MD, et al.,¹ which represented the first of what is now a voluminous, and still rapidly expanding, research literature on adverse childhood experiences, or ACE. The paper presented the initial conceptualization of ACE through an exploration of the long-term effects of childhood trauma, in its many forms, to adult health. Dr. Felitti and his colleagues found a strong graded relationship between the breadth and intensity of exposure to childhood abuse and household dysfunction and risk factors for the leading causes of death among adults. Their initial study has generated an over 20-year history of ACE-related research, advancing our fundamental understanding of the implications of childhood trauma and stress for adult well-being while also attracting interest from the public, the media, and scholars worldwide.

The AJPM Editorial Office is highlighting Dr. Felitti’s article as the first in our new *From the Archive* series, which will appear periodically throughout the year and will feature Editor-selected articles that have been especially influential in the development and practice of preventive medicine and population health. Our choice of the initial paper to showcase was surprisingly easy, as it continues, even after 20 years, to be the most frequently read AJPM paper year over year while also garnering almost 5,000 citations in the peer-reviewed literature. The launch of *From the Archive* also coincides with completion of a long-term project carried out in partnership with our publisher, Elsevier: the digitization of every article ever published in AJPM, all of which are now available to our readers on our homepage (ajpmonline.org) for the first time in the journal’s 34-year history.

The re-publication of the original 1998 ACE article in the pages that follow is accompanied by a fascinating commentary by Dr. Felitti that reflects on the genesis of the study, which had its roots in an obesity management program and his gradual realization that many of the patients’ difficulties with weight control and other health issues traced their origins to experiences of childhood mistreatment, especially sexual abuse. His commentary is followed by a Current Issues article from Craig McEwen and Scout Gregerson at Bowdoin College, titled “A Critical Assessment of the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study at 20 Years,” which celebrates the original ACE study with regard to its far-reaching impact while also recognizing its important limitations, including a relatively homogeneous study population and a narrow operationalization of adversity. The authors consider the study in the broader context provided by the social determinants of health framework and our greater understanding of the biology/neuroscience of early childhood adversity. They make the case that such an approach can deepen ACE research and extend its impact in formulating primary prevention policies that have the potential to ameliorate the social and economic conditions contributing to adversity.

We hope AJPM readers find our *From the Archive* series informative and invite your thoughts and suggestions on past articles we should consider featuring. We also strongly encourage our readers to take advantage of the newly available digital article archive to read seminal studies, like Dr. Felitti’s article, or simply to revisit papers that have been particularly important to you, your own research, or your career.

REFERENCE

1. Felitti VJ, Anda RF, Nordenberg D, et al. The relationship of adult health status to childhood abuse and household dysfunction. *Am J Prev Med.* 1998;14(4):245–258. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8).

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