Poverty Dynamics, Immigration and Children’s Socioemotional Trajectories

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Using Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K) in the United States, this paper examines the relationship between poverty and children’s socioemotional development in immigrant families. Existing research has attested the importance of poverty and income on children’s short- and long-term well-being. However, much of this research has yet differentiated the various dimensions of poverty and how that may shape children’s well-being differently. In this paper, we pay particular attention to different dimensions of poverty and how that might shape children’s socioemotional trajectory from kindergarten to eighth grade among immigrant families. We used family socioeconomic status (SES) to define poverty based on the U.S. federal poverty threshold. Three dimensions of poverty dynamics were examined including depth (i.e., nonpoor, near-poor, poor or extremely poor), stability (i.e., the direction of changes in income and poverty status), and duration (i.e., for how many times in poverty since kindergarten). Results show that children who were financially disadvantaged (exposed to deep poverty, chronic poverty, and unstable household income) had more internalizing and externalizing problems at the entry of kindergarten. The socioemotional gaps became larger over time between the financially advantaged and disadvantaged children. However, among those of financially disadvantaged, children of immigrants had better socioemotional development as reported by their teachers than their peers with native-born parents. In contrast, children of immigrants themselves reported worse socioemotional development compare to their peers with native-born parents. Our results shed new lights on the complexities of different patterns of poverty in shaping children’s socioemotional well-being throughout their first nine years of schooling. This investigation speaks to the importance of poverty in an era when children’s life opportunities are increasingly connected to their families’ socioeconomic status.

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