

How much does
childhood poverty
affect the life chances
of children



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Poverty has a strong effect on the success and development of children from infant to early childhood. In the article, “ How much does childhood poverty affect the life chances of children? ” Greg J. Duncan and colleagues attempt to examine the influence of poverty upon children through their developmental stages of early childhood. The basic premise of their position is that while research has been conducted on the overall impact of poverty on youth, little of this research has centered on three key factors.

First, there has been almost no research on the “ importance of the timing of economic deprivation during childhood”. Duncan contends that in poverty during the infant stages is much more crucial to childhood development than poverty after age five. Secondly, they argue that current studies of causation between poverty and childhood development do not omit such biasing factors as “ parental ability, mental health, or altruism in putting the needs of their children’s development before their own needs”.

In essence, Duncan is arguing that there are many immeasurable qualities of parent-child relationships that are not accounted for in present research. Finally, research into the magnitude of the income effect has not been carefully performed. Therefore, no real understanding of how income impacts the learning process has been cohesively studied. The purpose of this particular article then is to study how the three key issues stated above effect child development and their chances for success later in life.

The strength of this article is that it attempts to examine the strength of correlation between poverty and childhood development rather than merely stating that such a relationship exists. Their findings state that overall, family

income has a much stronger association with achievement and “ability-related outcomes for children” than other measures such as health and behavior. This discovery profoundly changes the frame of childhood development understanding. Poverty at the infant to age five level then can be noted as one of the most fundamental agents of causation for future learning barriers.

The conclusion that “early childhood appears to be the stage in which family economic conditions matter the most” profoundly impacts the landscape of educational development. Their conclusion comes as a result of statistical analysis of children’s performance from low-income areas. Their research reveals that socio-economic status is an intuitive indicator for future success. The final conclusion of their study is that “estimated impact of family income on completed schooling appears to be larger for children in low-income families than those in high income families”.

All three of these conclusions have a strong implicit impact on the overall understanding of how poverty correlates to childhood development. This research validates the fact that socio-economic status is the most important predictor for later success. This has important implications for future local and national efforts to improve education and learning. Despite the strength and explosiveness of their conclusions, there are several reasons to doubt the true definitiveness of their research. Since this analysis was based primarily on PSID data, there are many implicit conditionals upon their research.

Although one of their stated purposes was to eliminate the omission bias of such factors as parent-child relationships, mental health and other factors that could severely skew the data, they were unable to devise a strong system to do so. Duncan attempted to use sibling differences as a measure to eliminate the influence of unmeasured persistent family characteristics; however the use of this sibling model yielded strong inconsistencies within the data. Another fundamental problem is in their understanding and explanation for why causality exists within their data.

Although statistical modeling shows that overall income poverty during the infant to age five development cycle impacts schooling completion, college enrollment, low test scores later in childhood as well as grade failure, no structural explanation for why such that period is so crucial to development is articulated. The theory that they put forward explains that “ preschool ability sets the stage for children’s transition into the formal school system”, therefore poverty before this level ill-prepares children for a lifetime of schooling.

This line of logic appears to have many faulty assumptions, primarily that children past the age of five will not have the opportunity to adapt to their current circumstances and improve learning given the opportunity to do so. The strength of this article is that it provides statistical proof that there is a strong relationship between early childhood poverty with low childhood performance later in life. The order magnitude of this problem far eclipses other explanations for childhood learning deficiencies.

The implications of this study are numerous, it is now necessary for the government to contextualize progressive educational programs geared towards helping impoverished families during the crucial infantile stage. Schools need to develop a mechanism that does not classify children at a very early age, thus giving children from impoverished backgrounds the time to adjust and re-invent themselves within the school environment.

The American educational system is extremely rigid in structure, with both implicit and explicit methods of segregating high performance and low performance students at an early age. This study reveals error in such practices because it gives children from poverty backgrounds an unfair opportunity to succeed within the American framework. This article provides a powerful examination of how socio-economic factors play a significant role in the development of children geared for future success.