



Article

Patterns of poverty exposure and children's trajectories of externalizing and internalizing behaviors



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ABSTRACT

Using data from the Child Supplement of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, we compare trajectories of externalizing and internalizing behaviors among children exposed to five patterns of poverty from birth to age 14: always or never poor – stable patterns; a single transition into or out of poverty, or repeated fluctuations in and out of poverty – changing patterns. We also examine how low maternal education and single parenthood interact with these poverty exposures to compound their adverse effects. Finally, we compare the magnitude of effects associated with the patterns of poverty exposure, as well as their interactions with low maternal education and single parenthood, on trajectories of externalizing and internalizing behaviors to determine if they are significantly different. Results reveal that initial levels and rates of change in children's trajectories of externalizing and internalizing behaviors are similar across the three changing patterns of poverty exposure, leading us to combine them into a single group representing intermittent poverty. Initial disparities between children who are never poor and their counterparts who are always or intermittently poor are constant over time for internalizing behaviors and grow in magnitude for externalizing behaviors. The cumulative negative effect of poverty exposure over time is stronger for externalizing vs. internalizing behaviors. Low maternal education compounds the adverse effects of persistent poverty, an effect that is similar for externalizing and internalizing behaviors.

1. Introduction

Growing income inequality over the last three decades (Duncan & Murnane, 2011) along with stagnation in wages and employment opportunities have increased the likelihood that children born into poverty will experience persistent exposure over the life course (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, Saez, & Turner, 2014). There is evidence that income volatility has also increased, particularly among lower-income families least able to absorb downward income shocks (Hardy & Ziliak, 2014). Finally, poverty is seldom a unique feature of families; it is often associated with other disadvantages such as low parental education and single parenthood which may serve to compound the adverse effects of poverty on children's mental health (Evans, Li, & Whipple, 2013).

Internalizing behaviors such as emotional problems and externalizing behaviors such as conduct problems are among the most common health concerns experienced by children and youth worldwide (Gore et al., 2011). The environment of poverty exposes children to various adversities that contribute to their externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Evans et al., 2013). Yet, more research is needed to better understand the extent to which stable and changing patterns of

poverty exposure from birth elevate children's risk for externalizing and internalizing behaviors over the early life course, whether other disadvantages such as low maternal education and single parenthood exacerbate the risk associated with specific patterns of poverty exposure, and whether this risk is stronger for externalizing or internalizing behaviors.

We classify children from birth to age 14 into five patterns of poverty exposure: always or never poor – stable patterns; a single transition into or out of poverty, or fluctuations in and out of poverty – changing patterns. We then model children's mental health trajectories as a function of their poverty classifications and two important covariates: low maternal education and single parenthood. The three primary objectives of this study are to: (1) compare the mental health trajectories of children exposed to five patterns of poverty; (2) determine if associations between child mental health trajectories and patterns of poverty exposure vary as a function of low maternal education or single parenthood (statistical interactions); and (3) assess the extent to which the associations between child mental health trajectories and poverty exposures, low maternal education and single parenthood differ for two types of mental health outcomes: externalizing and internalizing behaviors.

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1.1. Stable and changing poverty exposure

Chronic poverty exposes children to an expanding array of disadvantages which can exacerbate their stress response systems over time (Evans et al., 2013). In contrast, children who are never poor are able to use their more favorable socioeconomic circumstances to acquire additional advantages over time. These divergent paths may intensify mental health disparities between persistently poor and non-poor children (Macmillan, McMorris, & Kruttschnitt, 2004; McLeod & Shanahan, 1996).

Whereas some children will move into or out of poverty permanently, many will be subject to fluctuating spells over the early life course. Although income increases have been associated with improvements in child mental health (Costello, Compton, Keeler, & Angold, 2003; Strohschein, 2005), and income decreases, with deteriorations in child mental health (Fitzsimons, Goodman, Kelly, & Smith, 2017; Wickham, Whitehead, Taylor-Robinson, & Barr, 2017; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002), relatively little is known about the extent to which fluctuating poverty experiences are associated with children's mental health trajectories, and how these children compare with their counterparts who experience either stable exposure to poverty or a single transition into or out of poverty.

We approach the first objective of this study in three steps. In step one, we model the mental health trajectories of children who experience stable patterns of poverty exposure to estimate differences in their initial levels and course. In step two, focusing on children experiencing change in poverty exposure, we determine if there are sufficient differences in the initial levels and course of their mental health trajectories to retain the three groups of change or to combine them into a single category representing intermittent poverty exposure. It is conceivable that these different patterns of change represent a similar phenomenon: lower-income families experiencing income instability in proximity to the poverty line. In step three, we compare children experiencing stable exposures to their counterparts experiencing change to assess whether there are differences in the initial levels and course of their mental health trajectories.

Whereas most studies have examined the influence of different patterns of poverty exposure on children's mental health in comparison to a reference category that represents never poor children (e.g. Macmillan et al., 2004; McLeod & Shanahan, 1996), we use multiple group latent growth models to make multiple comparisons with respect to the mental health trajectories of children exposed to stable patterns, changing patterns, and stable vs. changing patterns. To our knowledge, only one other study makes multiple comparisons among children who experience different patterns of poverty exposure (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). Using a sample of children aged 6 months to 9 years, these authors report that persistent poverty and moving into poverty were associated with increasing behavioral problems, but only in school-aged children. Restricted to an examination of young children, their results raise questions about the effects of different patterns of poverty on adolescent mental health.

1.2. Poverty, maternal education, and single parenthood

Most studies documenting the link between poverty and child mental health consider maternal education and single parenthood as control variables and assume that they have similar effects across the income distribution. Thus, they miss the opportunity to examine how they intersect with poverty to create conditions in which children's mental health is affected by exposure to multiple risks.

Indeed, a defining feature of family poverty is the co-occurrence of risk variables inimical to children's mental health (Evans et al., 2013). For example, better-educated parents often have traits such as more knowledge about parenting practices and better communication skills, and the absence of these traits among less educated parents could exacerbate the adverse effects of poverty on child development (Evans

et al., 2013). In addition, single parents generally experience more stressors than married or cohabiting parents, including financial strain, work-family conflict, and higher caregiving demands (Avison, Ali, & Walters, 2007), all of which may compromise their parenting abilities and potentially increase the risk for mental health problems among poor children.

The effect of different patterns of poverty exposure in the context of low maternal education and single parenthood is not well understood. In the second objective of this study, we examine the extent to which the associations between children's mental health trajectories and their pattern of poverty exposure varies as a function of low maternal education or single parenthood.

1.3. Child mental health outcomes

Internalizing behaviors associated with symptoms of depression and anxiety begin in childhood, gradually increase through the middle years, accelerate after puberty, and peak in late adolescence (Bongers, Koot, Van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2003). In contrast, externalizing behaviors linked with aggression tend to peak between 2 and 3 years of age and then decline through to early adolescence (Coie & Dodge, 1998). Externalizing behaviors linked with other forms of conduct problems (e.g., violation of social norms) emerge in early adolescence and peak during the early 20's (Bongers et al., 2003). Thus, trajectories of externalizing behaviors among 5–14 year olds can be expected to decline gradually from age 5 to 11 and begin to increase at age 12. Although previous studies have reported stronger poverty effects for externalizing compared to internalizing behaviors (McLeod & Shanahan, 1996; Costello et al., 2003), to our knowledge, none have empirically tested whether the associations between child mental health and different patterns of poverty exposure as well as their interactions with low maternal education and single parenthood are different for these two outcomes, which is the third objective of this study.

1.4. Research questions and hypotheses

The first three research questions address objective one, and questions four and five address objectives two and three, respectively. 1) Do always poor children and never poor children have different initial levels and rates of change in their externalizing and internalizing behaviors? 2) Do children who move onto, off of, or fluctuate on and off of poverty exhibit sufficient differences in initial levels and rates of change of their externalizing and internalizing behaviors to merit separate classifications or should they be combined into a single category of intermittent poverty exposure? 3) Are initial levels and rates of change in externalizing and internalizing behaviors different for children who experience stable vs. changing exposures to poverty? 4) To what extent do children's experiences of poverty interact with low maternal education and single parenthood to influence initial levels and rates of change in their externalizing and internalizing behaviors? 5) Is the association between patterns of poverty exposure, low maternal education, or single parenthood and child mental health trajectories different for externalizing and internalizing behaviors?

Hypotheses: 1) Children who are always poor will have higher initial levels of externalizing and internalizing behaviors compared to those who are never poor, and the magnitude of this difference will grow over time; 2) Children exposed to different patterns of change in poverty exposure will experience initial levels and rates of change in their externalizing and internalizing behaviors that are roughly aligned with each other and fall midway between those who are never or always poor; 3) Always poor children and never poor children will have initial levels of externalizing and internalizing behaviors that differ from those who experience change, and this difference will also grow in magnitude over time; 4) Low maternal education and single parenthood will exacerbate externalizing and internalizing behaviors among poor (always, move in, move out, or fluctuating) vs. non-poor children; 5)

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