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Transitions in secondary education: Exploring effects of social problems

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to investigate educational choices and attainment of children who experience social problems during their upbringing. The study explores the extent to which social problems can help explain the gaps in entry and dropout rates in upper secondary education in Denmark between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Population-based registers are used to include information on family upbringing, e.g. alcohol abuse, criminality, use of psychopharmaca and out-of-home placement. We estimate a parsimonious version of [Cameron and Heckman's \(2001\)](#) dynamic statistical model of educational progression. By using this method, we parcel educational attainment into a series of transitions and the model is able to control for educational selection and unobserved heterogeneity. We apply counterfactual analyses to allow a formal decomposition of the effects of social problems. The results show that social problems during upbringing have a large and significant effect on children's educational outcome and that the indicators of social problems explain about 20–30 per cent of the class differences in the students' educational outcomes.

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1. Introduction

An extensive literature exists documenting the effect of family background on educational attainment (e.g. [Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997](#); [Breen & Jonsson, 2000](#); [Cameron & Heckman, 2001](#); [Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986](#); [Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999](#); [Rumberger, 1983](#)). Several characteristics of the family have significant influence on children's schooling success, with the most important ones being socioeconomic factors like parental education, occupational status and family income as well as family structure. This paper contributes to the literature with a

focus on a variety of additional family-related factors associated with dropping out of school. The purpose of this research is to investigate whether social problems in the family (such as criminality, alcoholism and psychiatric illness) can help explain why only 77 per cent of students of low socioeconomic status (SES) born in 1983 or 1984 enter upper secondary education, and 96 per cent of students of high SES enrol in either vocational or general education in Denmark.

Prior empirical studies link social problems in the family during upbringing to adverse contingencies for the children, including low educational outcome. [Farahati, Marcotte, and Wilcox-Gök \(2003\)](#) investigate longer-term consequences of parental mental illnesses on children's outcome and find that parents' psychiatric disorders increase the probability of high school drop out for their

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children. The presence of parental substance abuse during children's upbringing is also associated with a higher dropout rate (Rosenthal, 1998), and children from families with alcoholic parents have more disrupted school careers and higher failure rates (Christoffersen & Sothill, 2003). Adverse environmental factors like parental alcohol abuse, substance abuse, criminality and mental illness can ultimately result in the out-of-home placement of the children. Empirical research suggests a higher probability of poor educational outcomes and attainments among children who experienced in-home interventions or were placed in out-of-home care (Vinnerljung, Öman, & Gunnarson, 2005; Viner & Taylor, 2005). This study builds on extensive register data and complements previous research by investigating a range of different aspects of social problems in the family such as alcohol abuse, criminality and mental illness, and uses micro-econometric methods to evaluate the effects on children's educational decisions and outcomes. In this type of study Denmark is an interesting case as the use of Danish administrative registers enables us to include information on for example hospital admissions, purchase of prescription drugs and criminal records in order to identify indicators of social problems.

Within the field of stratification research, a growing number of empirical studies investigate the distinction between primary and secondary effects (e.g. Erikson, Goldthorpe, Jackson, Yaish, & Cox, 2005; Jackson, Erikson, Goldthorpe, & Yaish, 2007; Karlson & Holm, 2011; Schindler & Lörz, 2012). They decompose the effects of social background on educational decisions and attainments into primary and secondary effects, in order to explain the mechanism of the observed educational inequality (Boudon, 1974; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). In this literature, the primary effects refer to the indirect effects of social origin expressed through the uneven distribution of scholastic abilities across students from different social backgrounds. The secondary effects refer to the direct effects of social background, as the social demotion motive influences students' educational decisions through the desire to avoid downward social class mobility. While the primary effects are a result of genetic influences and conditions in the early years affecting academic abilities and performances, the secondary effects are a result of a rational choice (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Erikson & Rudolphi, 2010). Recent research focuses on empirically separating these two mechanisms and evaluating their relative effects by applying different decomposing methods (Karlson, 2013).

This research focuses on the mediating effect of academic performance, whereas the present study contributes by examining potential mediating effects of social problems, in order to help explain the gap in educational outcomes between students of different SES.¹ The prevalence of social problems is correlated with socioeconomic background factors and we anticipate that social problems

in the family during the children's upbringing can be linked to adverse contingencies for the children, including educational outcome. The parental educational support (e.g. the learning within the home, the parents' attitudes towards education and their support and monitoring of the children's school progress) affects the children's educational engagement and performance (e.g. Ekstrom et al., 1986; Rumberger, 2011). There is a long-term and cumulative effect of parental involvement and early school experience, as children's early school performance and engagement affect their subsequent educational attitude and success (e.g. Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborg, 1992; Rumberger, 2011). Hence, social problems during the upbringing can have a long-term effect on a child's subsequent attainments, as parents who experience social problems will have fewer resources to be involved in their children's schooling during the upbringing. This understanding of the potential influence of social problems stresses them as important aspects of the conditions in the early years affecting children's academic abilities and performances.

When focusing on family-related factors in the upbringing and their effect on educational attainment, it is important to take account of educational selectivity. Educational attainment consists of a series of transitions where students not only face the decision to continue to the next higher grade level, but also which branch to choose. These educational choices are correlated with socioeconomic and social factors; for example, students with poor academic abilities and aspirations from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to commence vocational than general upper secondary education. At the same time there is a dynamic selection bias because those who advance to higher grades from poor backgrounds tend to be the most talented and ambitious. This means that students of low SES who experienced social problems during their upbringing and completed general upper secondary education, for example, are selected members of the source population. These considerations motivate the use of a parsimonious version of Cameron and Heckman's (2001) dynamic statistical model of educational progression. Educational attainment is parcelled into a series of transitions, and the use of this model enables us to control for educational selection and unobserved heterogeneity. The ambition with this paper is to explore the longer-term effects of social problems during upbringing on educational outcomes using a statistical model that takes account of dynamic selection bias. In this way we can investigate the net effects of social problems (like criminality, alcoholism and psychiatric illness) on educational outcomes and make a formal decomposition to assess how much of the difference between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds can be explained by the indicators of social problems.

2. Data

The empirical analyses use a large longitudinal dataset originating from the population-based administrative registers provided by Statistics Denmark, matched by a unique personal identifier. The dataset covers the period 1983–2008 and enables us to follow 105,500 Danish

¹ The Danish administrative register data does not hold information on GPA or other academic performance measures for the 1983 and 1984 cohorts, which implies that this study cannot identify primary effects (for further discussion see Section 5).

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