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Low Income and Its Impact on Psychosocial Child Development. Comments on Duncan and Magnuson, and Weitzman

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Introduction

On one hand, Greg J. Duncan and Katherine A. Magnuson have provided a brief, very sophisticated presentation of the effects of poverty on prenatal and early postnatal development and its impact on the psychosocial development of children. On the other hand, Michael Weitzman has written a remarkably comprehensive and concise article on low income and its impact on child development. In both cases, the authors show that they are highly knowledgeable about the interactions between poverty and early childhood development.

Research and Conclusions

Duncan and Magnuson’s paper demonstrates that:

- On average, children in low-income families have more psychosocial problems than do children who grow up in high-income families.
- However, research has not established substantial causal linkages between low family income and children's psychosocial outcomes. Correlated characteristics of low-income families (such as family structure) appear to be more important.
- More research is needed to identify which correlates of low income can be most effectively addressed through intervention efforts.

However, in this paper, the impacts of various interventions on children and families living in poverty may have been underrepresented. Duncan and Magnuson have aptly focused on economic policy, indicating that income redistribution may significantly improve outcomes in children. However, the impact of various early intervention programs such as the Head Start and Day Care programs (which have produced both short-term and medium-term results) was not adequately considered — this, despite the vast body of literature now available on Head Start research and David Weikart's studies on early intervention.

Weitzman, who is very familiar with the literature, provides highly appropriate and valuable interpretations of the research. I was amazed by his ability to summarize this complex literature so concisely. Weitzman's foremost argument:

- That there are many confounders and pathways by which poverty negatively influences child psychosocial development.
- That poor children may suffer greater impairment from adverse events than other children under similar circumstances (eg, lead poisoning or failure to thrive).
- That the early years are a period of particular vulnerability during which poverty may be more damaging than later in life.

On a minor note, Weitzman could have paid somewhat more attention to the health consequences of poverty issues and other adverse factors, such as low birthweight. For many years, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation sponsored the Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP), which provided considerable longitudinal data concerning the health and developmental consequences of intervention programs for low birthweight infants. The effects of poverty can be identified in these data.

Implications for Services and Policy Perspectives

Duncan and Magnuson have certainly identified some major issues for policy consideration related to family income and consequent developmental outcomes in children. They have also provided a service by proposing policy options geared towards improving developmental outcomes in children by improving the economic status of low-income families. While Duncan and Magnuson indicate that family income has a preponderant causal effect on both children's cognitive and economic development and on their academic achievements, they also suggest that economic improvement will not, in itself, necessarily resolve psychosocial development and behavioural problems. Indeed, although they are not oblivious to the potential importance of intervention programs, these authors focus much too narrowly on income issues and income redistribution.

Duncan and Magnuson have presented the policy implications associated with family income and the potential significance of moving families out of poverty with salient accuracy. However, despite their familiarity with the relevant literature, they have failed to adequately consider the potential of intervention programs.

In the area of intervention programs, Weitzman has identified entirely appropriate implications for policy. His paper effectively examines a variety of intervention programs that target children growing up in impoverished environments and provides an excellent summary of the health, developmental, and policy issues surrounding the development of these children. Moreover, Weitzman holds that we need not await the day that poverty is (ideally) abolished once and for all to provide positive influences to poor children as they grow.