

Life-course Perspectives on Childhood Inequality: Understanding Its Contemporary and Long-term Impacts

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Abstract. Socioeconomic inequality in childhood has become a core challenge for global public health and social equity. This article reviews the socio-economic inequality experienced in childhood, which is reflected not only in physical and mental health and education, but also in social performance. These early disadvantages continue to accumulate and develop in the long term, affecting career development and individuals' capacity for economic accumulation in adulthood, and eventually widen the physical and mental health gap in middle and old ages. The persistence of this predicament highlights the necessity of multi-faceted interventions during the critical period of children's growth and development. This study emphasizes the need for a comprehensive policy approach and early interventions that integrates educational investment, health system reform and social security enhancement. Understanding the impacts of and interventions for socioeconomic inequality in childhood is of great significance for achieving sustainable social equity and breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Keywords: Childhood; socioeconomic inequality; health; education.

1. Introduction

Childhood is a crucial stage in human development. However, social and economic inequality begins to quietly alter people's life trajectories from childhood. The impact of childhood inequality goes far beyond temporary hardship; it will continue to affect an individual's health status, cognitive development, and ability to integrate well into society.

Childhood inequality is manifested in multiple dimensions. Economically, over half of the 1.2 billion people living in multidimensional poverty worldwide are children under the age of 18, highlighting the severity of early deprivation [1]. These economic constraints directly harm health: children from low-income families face a higher risk of chronic diseases due to difficulty in accessing nutritious food and medical services. Psychologically, family stress and adverse environments can alter neurodevelopmental processes, making children more prone to mental health problems. Educational disparities further complicate the issue, as differences in academic performance due to unequal access to resources become apparent in early development and continue to widen in adolescence and adulthood.

Socioeconomic inequality in childhood contributes to a range of health, economic and developmental issues across one's life course. Research based on the China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS) indicates that the negative impact of childhood poverty on health persists into middle and old ages and intensifies with age. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have a significant impact on whether adults are healthy and financially stable [2]. The relationship between people in society is also crucial for children's equal development. For instance, parenting styles are influenced by socioeconomic status, which further leads the next generation to continue growing up in an unequal environment. Lareau's theory of "concerted cultivation" and "natural growth" vividly explains how parenting styles in society are passed on through cultural capital, thereby affecting their children's adaptability and development paths in society [3].

This paper reviews the short-term and long-term implications of childhood socioeconomic inequality across health, education, and social domains. It begins by examining immediate impacts, traces their extension into adulthood, and concludes with evidence-based policy recommendations to interrupt cycles of disadvantages.

2. Short-term Impacts

2.1. Impacts on Physical Health

Socioeconomic inequality in childhood increases the risk of mortality, malnutrition, chronic diseases, as well as cognitive and emotional problems. For example, infants of mothers from low-income backgrounds have a higher risk of dying within their first year. Existing research indicates that infant mortality is associated with maternal health issues such as preeclampsia and diabetes. At the same time, socioeconomic factors lead to differences in prenatal care, prenatal nutrition, and substance use (smoking, alcohol, and illegal drugs), which directly increase the infant mortality rate among the poor [4]. In America, children from low-income families are more likely to rely on processed foods that are high in sugar and salt, so children in poverty-stricken areas are at a higher risk of malnutrition and chronic diseases. This health disparity is often due to the fact that their parents usually work long hours, leaving home early and returning late, and lack sufficient knowledge and time to prepare balanced three meals a day for their children. Processed foods rich in sugar and fat are far cheaper than healthy foods such as fresh vegetables, fruits and lean meat, which leads children to rely heavily on cheap and convenient high-oil and high-sugar foods. After consuming too much high-oil and high-sugar food, the rate of tooth decay among children will increase. This is because high-sugar snacks produce acid that erodes the enamel of teeth, and new cavities can occur in a short period of time. After consuming high-sugar snacks, blood sugar levels soar rapidly, bringing a brief period of abundant energy. Subsequently, excessive insulin secretion leads to a sharp drop in blood sugar, causing insufficient energy supply to the brain and resulting in fatigue, inattention and mood swings. Health issues like these can harm children's bodies in the short term.

2.2. Impacts on Mental Health

Socioeconomic inequalities during childhood significantly elevate the risk of a range of mental health problems, with impacts mediated through family stress and neurobiological pathways. Research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States shows that teenagers from low-income families are 1.5 times more likely to suffer from depression than those from high-income families [5]. It is evident that mental health problems among impoverished children are more widespread. In poor families, parents often work long hours and are under great pressure, which can harm their mental health. They are more prone to anxiety and depression. Parents who are constantly under pressure are more likely to adopt strict, autocratic or inconsistent disciplinary methods, and even neglect or abuse. They may not have the patience to offer gentle guidance but instead resort to commands and punishments. This kind of parent-child relationship lacking warmth and response leads to the child's emotional needs not being met. When children are under long-term pressure from their parents, factors related to poverty such as long-term insecurity, family conflicts and community violence will keep them in a "fight or flight" stress state for a long time, affecting the secretion of substances such as cortisol, damaging brain development, and subsequently leading to inattention, learning difficulties, impulsive behavior and inability to properly adjust emotions [6].

2.3. Impacts on Education

Educational opportunities and outcomes are profoundly shaped by socioeconomic inequalities, mediated through resource distribution disparities and home environment factors. In low-income countries, only two-thirds of children can complete primary education, while in high-income economies, the completion rate of primary education is almost 100% [7]. The above situation indicates that the academic performance of children from poor families is generally poor, which in turn leads to a lower proportion of their further education, and there is a significant gap in academic performance compared with children from non-poor families. The main reasons for this phenomenon are twofold: on the one hand, the distribution of educational resources in schools is uneven. In poverty-stricken areas, the teaching staff is weak, and the teaching facilities are backward. Graduates from poverty-stricken areas are more inclined to seek career development opportunities in cities and

are seldom willing to return to their hometowns to teach. Furthermore, for teachers sent abroad for teaching or short-term teaching support, the harsh environmental conditions and limited career development space in poverty-stricken areas make it rare for them to stay and engage in teaching work for a long time. On the other hand, economic pressure and factors such as some parents' own low educational level and early entry into work prevent them from providing after-school tutoring or academic support for their children. Poor families often find it hard to afford the cost of quality education, which leads to children in poor families having difficulty accessing quality educational resources - such as abundant extracurricular books and electronic devices to assist learning. And for extremely poor families, even basic learning supplies like paper and pens are beyond their reach. For these families, meeting basic living needs is already a difficult problem, let alone providing good educational conditions for their children [8].

Educational inequality can also limit children's cognitive development. Research shows that by the age of three, children from high-income families can hear an average of about 45 million words, while those from low-income families can only hear about 13 million words during the same period [9]. In addition, there are also differences in the quality of vocabulary that children from the two types of families are exposed to: children from high-income families can hear more positive and encouraging language in their daily lives, which contains a large number of complex sentence structures and abstract concepts; in low-income families, there are more simple instructions and one-way demands between parents and children, lacking equal communication [10]. If this continues for a long time, the language gap between the two types of children will keep widening and have an impact on their future reading ability and social cognitive ability.

2.4. Impacts on Society

Childhood inequality fosters social division by perpetuating exclusion, hindering healthy peer relationships, and impeding the development of social skills and capital. The impact of inequality on children is also reflected in society. The differences in economic status in society translate into exclusion, isolation and a lack of social capital among people. First of all, children from families with lower socioeconomic status are often systematically excluded from the mainstream social circle of their peers because they cannot afford paid extracurricular activities or school trips. This kind of activity not only deprives them of a common collective experience but also weakens their sense of belonging and may lead to children being isolated. Secondly, such a rejecting environment makes it difficult for children to establish healthy peer relationships. According to the social identity theory, children are divided into different groups within a group, and disadvantaged children are prone to be labeled. Empirical studies consistently show that a low socioeconomic status is an important risk factor for school bullying. In order to seek a sense of identity, some children may be forced to join peer groups with unhealthy factors. And in order to seek a sense of identity and belonging, children may be influenced by bad peers and continue to engage in bad behaviors. At the same time, due to the reduction of social opportunities and the interference of chronic stress, the development of their social skills such as communication, cooperation and conflict resolution abilities often lags behind. In conclusion, inequality has already shown a tendency to create social differentiation during childhood, hindering children's normal social integration, healthy friendship development and accumulation of social capital, and laying the groundwork for their long-term disadvantage in social and economic status [11].

3. Long-term Impacts

3.1. Impacts on Physical Health

Early experiences of socioeconomic inequality increase the likelihood of developing chronic non-communicable diseases, mental health disorders and engaging in health-damaging behaviors in adulthood. During childhood, excessive intake of high-oil, high-sugar and high-calorie foods can gradually lead to cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, as well as psychological disorders caused

by the inability to properly adjust emotions due to high stress. Additionally, to relieve stress, addictive bad habits such as heavy drinking and long-term smoking may develop [12]. These health problems will lead to an increased medical burden in adulthood in the long term and to some extent shorten life expectancy.

3.2. Impacts on Society

Childhood poverty often triggers a continuous cycle of economic disadvantages, characterized by restricted careers and difficulty in accumulating wealth. From an economic perspective, the "Social Mobility Report" released by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2018 pointed out that in most developed countries, the income level of children from poor families when they grow up is usually 20% to 30% lower than that of children from wealthy families [13].

The reasons for this phenomenon are not only due to the unequal educational opportunities for children, but also because children from poor families generally lack professional guidance, which limits their career development opportunities and makes it difficult for them to obtain stable and high-paying jobs. Influenced by various factors such as economic conditions, these children have to enter the labor market too early when they grow into teenagers, which limits their career development paths. Furthermore, early employment makes it difficult for them to acquire advanced technologies and multiple problem-solving approaches. Compared with highly educated and broad-minded competitors, these people are not the most suitable candidates in the workplace.

Children who grow up in low-income families often have difficulty accumulating wealth. People who grow up in families where their parents have low incomes and rely on social welfare often need to depend on social welfare or housing subsidies to make a living when they become adults. Meanwhile, the demand for low-skilled jobs is gradually declining, and 47% of occupations in the United States are at risk of being replaced by automation technology [14]. This indicates that children facing the challenge of childhood inequality have a higher risk of unemployment. Furthermore, the regions where they are located have exacerbated these challenges: for instance, the infrastructure in economically backward areas is often insufficient, and these areas can only barely maintain the basic living standards of local residents. This defect not only slows down economic development but also deepens the number of poor people and exacerbates the problem of economic development inequality. This vicious cycle makes it increasingly difficult for family wealth accumulation, and through intergenerational transmission, the problem evolves from a temporary economic hardship to a long-term poverty that is difficult to escape.

4. Recommendations for Policy and Implementation

In the future, the living space and employment opportunities of groups with insufficient educational attainment will be further compressed. Therefore, to narrow the educational gap, the government can improve the basic educational facilities in poverty-stricken areas, solve the enrollment problems in these areas, and increase the treatment of volunteer teachers, so that those who are interested in volunteer teaching can stay in poverty-stricken areas for a long time to carry out educational work. The government can enhance basic education and vocational training for minors in poverty-stricken areas. Popularizing basic education is crucial for breaking the vicious cycle of poverty. It is not only necessary to enhance children's cognitive level but also that of parents. To improve children's health issues, it is suggested to strengthen the construction of the social security system, understand and promote the improvement of children's nutritional status, ensure the balanced nutrition of children's three meals as much as possible, and implement subsidies for children in poverty-stricken areas [15]. At the same time, people should pay attention to the mental health of teenagers, discover and stop teenagers from relieving stress through bad habits, and carry out psychological counseling to help them learn to integrate into society and relieve stress in the right way. It is also necessary to start with parents and provide them with skills training to enhance their working ability while reducing the pressure that parents project on children. People at a lower

economic level can break the vicious cycle of the continuous accumulation of inequality within their families from various different directions.

5. Conclusion

Existing evidence clearly shows that socio-economic inequality in childhood can trigger a series of negative consequences throughout a person's life. In a short period of time, it can cause physical and mental illnesses in children. Moreover, children living in poverty cannot obtain the same educational resources as those growing up in economically developed areas. The accumulation of these early experiences amplifies the inequality experienced in childhood over time, which leads to worsening health in adulthood, lack of opportunities to accumulate wealth, and more problems such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and difficulty in establishing good relationships with others in social life.

Comprehensive policies and recommendations in education, health and social security are essential to mitigate the effects of childhood socioeconomic inequality. The local government should gradually improve local educational facilities and enhance teachers' remuneration to improve the educational attainment of local students. Meanwhile, the government should provide students with meal subsidies and mental health services to ensure their physical and mental development. Furthermore, the government's provision of employment training for adults from poor families can help fundamentally alleviate social and economic inequality.

This study highlights the importance of early intervention in addressing inequality during childhood. It provides a practical framework for fields such as education, health and social protection, and offers a feasible model for society to break the cycle of economic inequality.

In conclusion, addressing inequality among children is not only a moral obligation but also a crucial link in whether society can achieve economic prosperity. The costs of inaction include the loss of some talents, increased medical expenses and reduced economic efficiency, which will far exceed the investment required for implementing early intervention. Society needs to recognize the current multi-faceted inequalities in order to break this cycle of social and economic inequality and build a society where everyone can fully realize their potential.

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