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Occupational stratification, job-mismatches, and child poverty: Understanding the disadvantage of Black immigrants in the US [☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the implications of occupational stratification and job mismatches for the welfare of children, using data from the 2005–2009 American Community Survey. The results show that Black children of immigrants have household heads that are more likely to have occupations with low SEI scores than children in US-born households. More importantly, they demonstrate that intersections between parental job-mismatches and employment in the bottom rather than upper levels of the occupational distribution have important implications for understanding poverty differences among children. Job mismatches within occupations with low SEI scores are associated with greater poverty risks among Black than White, Asian, or Hispanic children of immigrants. However, racial poverty disparities are considerably lower among children with household heads in the highest occupational strata.

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1. Introduction

Successful incorporation into the labor force is a central determinant of immigrants' welfare and that of their families. However, as we learn from previous research, occupational outcomes are differentiated by a number of social and demographic factors. Race and human-capital characteristics are among the most important of these (Miech et al., 2003). Among immigrants, therefore, variations in race and human-capital endowments can result in associated occupational inequalities. These inequalities could in turn generate significant disparities in the social and economic welfare of their children. Notwithstanding their significance, these intricate relationships have not garnered significant attention in previous studies. However, they are of critical importance to our understanding of the socioeconomic circumstances of children in the US. One reason for this is that the children of immigrants represent a growing segment of the US child population (Landale et al., 2011). Similarly, immigration flows are now increasingly diverse, with Black immigrants making an important contribution to these trends (Rumbaut, 1994; Capps et al., 2012). Estimates indicate, for example, that the number of Black immigrants increased by more than 300 percent in the last three decades (Kent, 2007). Recent studies further suggest that their children account for an increasing proportion of the number of children living in immigrant families (Landale et al., 2011). These changes in the racial composition of immigrant families are important. Moreover, they have created new opportunities for expanding

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research on how differential occupational dynamics can result in disparities in the life circumstances of the children of immigrants.

Previous studies limit our ability to understand these issues by their tendency to separately analyze the outcomes of immigrants and the welfare of their children. However, there is scattered evidence among non-immigrants suggesting that parent's occupational outcomes do influence the well-being of their children (Hauser et al., 2000; Eggebeen and Lichter, 1991; Waite, 1995; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Limited incorporation of parental occupations into research on the children of immigrants has three important implications. First, it understates the significance of occupational incorporation processes as independent determinants of child poverty. Second, it over-emphasizes the significance of immigrants' human-capital as a positive influence on the economic welfare of their children. Third, it underplays the significance of race and its simultaneous influences on parental occupational dynamics and child poverty disparities.

In order to address these implications, this study examines the relationship between parental occupational stratification and child poverty among Black immigrants. Its objectives are both substantive and theoretical. Substantively, it investigates whether highly-skilled Black immigrants are disproportionately concentrated within bottom tier occupations and whether this results in more negative consequences for their children compared to other children in the US. Part of this process involves examining the extent to which job mismatches within bottom and top tier occupations differentially contribute to their children's poverty outcomes. Theoretically, the study expands our understanding of the general determinants of child poverty. It does so by highlighting the understated implications of occupational stratification and demonstrating their racial implications for children. In doing so, the study argues that beyond their influence on children's educational outcomes (Hauser et al., 2000), parental occupations also have independent implications for the economic circumstances of immigrants' children, especially for those who are Black.

2. Background

The recent increase in Black immigration to the US is now well-documented in the literature with a number of studies examining its general implications for US society (Arthur, 2000; Kent, 2007; Konadu-Agyemang et al., 2006; Logan and Deane, 2003). Estimates indicate that the Black immigrant population increased from 125,000 in 1960 to about 2.5 million in 2005 (Kent, 2007; Rong and Brown, 2001). Much of this increase is however relatively recent. In the 1990s alone, the Black foreign-born population of the US increased almost threefold (Logan and Deane, 2003). For the most part, the increases in Black immigration trends reflect the consequences of critical changes that have occurred in US immigration policy and in economic conditions in migrant origin countries. In the US, the major policy changes include the 1965 immigration reform, which increased opportunities for racial minorities to immigrate to the US, and more recently, the Diversity Visa program created under the Immigration Act of 1990. In origin countries in Africa and the Caribbean, the most significant changes were associated with the expansion of unemployment, increases in poverty, and general socioeconomic decline. As a consequence of these transformations, there is now an increased desire among nationals from these countries to migrate to countries in North America and Europe.

A broader implication of these structural changes is found in their contribution to changes in the educational composition of the Black immigrant population. Lobo (2001), for example, argues that the Diversity Visa Program, with its emphasis on skills and education as requirements for immigration, has resulted in significant increases in the number of highly-skilled Africans in the US. Furthermore, in many Black immigrant origin countries highly-educated individuals have increasingly left for other countries in response to increasing poverty, declining incomes, and political instability (Adepoju, 2000; Dovlo, 2003). Many of them expect the rewards to employment abroad to be much greater than those found in their countries of origin. Not surprisingly, research indicates that Black immigrants in the US have high levels of labor force participation and are more likely to be employed than US natives (Kent, 2007).

After arriving on US shores, however, the skills of highly-educated immigrants are not always appropriately utilized in the labor market. Indeed, many of them tend to end up in jobs for which they either lack or exceed the typical schooling requirements (Chiswick and Miller, 2009). This problem appears to be more prevalent among immigrant racial minorities (Batalova et al., 2008). Thus, although many Black immigrants do not always identify themselves using US racial constructs (Chacko, 2003), they can still experience the negative effects of racial minority status in the US labor market. Job mismatches among the highly-skilled usually have many negative consequences. They have been shown to adversely affect wages, job turnovers, and worker motivation (Battu et al., 2000; Burris, 1983; Nielsen, 2011). Racial mismatch differences, therefore, suggest that these negative consequences are more likely to be concentrated among highly-skilled Black immigrants than among their non-Black immigrant counterparts. These differences are therefore important. Yet, few studies have examined how they can affect the broader incorporation processes among Black immigrants. In fact, previous studies largely fail to examine the implications of immigrants' occupational constraints for the economic welfare of their children.

3. Race and the socioeconomic disadvantage of the children of immigrants

The study's objectives are also situated within a larger body of work on the socioeconomic wellbeing of the children of immigrants. A consistent finding emerging from these studies is the fact that living in immigrant families exposes children to a wide range of socioeconomic risks compared to living in US-born families. For example, the children of immigrants are

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