



Pre-school enrollment: An analysis by immigrant generation

Barry R. Chiswick*, Noyna DebBurman

Department of Economics, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL 60607 7121, USA

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Abstract

There has been minimal research on the pre-school enrollment of immigrant children. Using 1990 US Census data, this paper investigates pre-school enrollment of child immigrants, those who immigrated as children and the US-born children of immigrants. The analysis is conducted using probit analysis. Pre-school enrollment is found to vary systematically with parental characteristics (income and education), immigrant generation, number of siblings, mother's labor supply, and country of origin. Among the foreign-born, differences in pre-school enrollment are analyzed by country of origin. Among the US-born children of immigrants pre-school enrollment is greatest among those with both parents foreign born.

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1. Introduction

Immigration to the United States has increased sharply in recent decades and as a result the proportion of the US population that is foreign born increased from less than 5% in 1970 to about 12% in 2004. This has been accompanied by an increase in

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 312 996 3344.

E-mail address: brchis@uic.edu (B.R. Chiswick).

“immigrant children,” that is, both those who immigrate as children and the US-born children of immigrants.

There is a clear public policy interest in the successful adjustment to the United States labor market of the immigrant parents, and there is also an important policy interest in the skill formation and, when they become adults, the labor market success of the immigrant children. Initial conditions matter for subsequent success in school and in the workforce, as is emphasized in the path dependence literature. These initial conditions include the early home environment. They also include whether children have access to opportunities during their pre-school years to prepare them socially, psychologically, and intellectually for formal primary schooling. Perhaps more so than for the children of parents born and raised in the United States, pre-school in the US in a formal institutional setting may be crucial for the adjustment to primary schooling of immigrant children. Yet, there is virtually no research on the pre-school enrollment of immigrant children.

This paper examines pre-school human capital accumulation, which is considered an important component of a child’s educational attainment. Research on skill formation among youths has typically concentrated on issues such as investment in child quality versus child quantity, school performance, teenage dropout rates, and college enrollment. These studies have examined differences by race, but rarely make comparisons between different immigrant groups, or study immigrant generational effects.¹ In particular, research on the lower or starting end of the educational spectrum, pre-school enrollment, among different immigrant groups is lacking. The present paper seeks to fill this void in the literature by developing and testing a model of pre-school enrollment among immigrant children and the US-born children of immigrants.

Section 2 reviews the literature on pre-school human capital accumulation. Section 3 discusses the theory of human capital investment and the theory of demand for schooling, and uses them as a basis to formulate a theoretical model for studying pre-school enrollment. Section 4 describes the 1990 Census of Population and Housing, the dataset used for this study, as well as the estimating equations. The estimation results are described in Section 5. Finally, conclusions and policy implications are summarized in the last section.

2. Review of literature

A diverse body of research that has relevance to pre-school enrollment was explored to formulate a theoretical model for this study. This section first reviews earlier studies that focus on child educational attainment and investment in child quality versus child quantity, followed by an overview of recent studies on non-maternal care for pre-school children.

¹ Notable exceptions for the US include White and Glick (2000), Glick and White (2003, 2004), and Chiswick and DebBurman (2004).

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