

Income Inequality and Children's Pressures

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Abstract: Children's academic backgrounds can vary widely because of the different resources that come with income inequality. Thus, children can become increasingly stressed academically. Under pressure that is difficult to regulate, young people's mental health can easily be affected. Therefore, we need to understand such a situation and take countermeasures. This article explores the relationship between income inequality, sources of competitive stress, anxiety, and suicidal behavior, and potential psychological treatments for these problems. Finally, this work concludes that income inequality is associated with significant social class differences that can increase children's academic competitive stress and affect their mental health.

Keywords: income inequality, mental illness, SES, competitive pressure

1. Introduction

The income inequality hypothesis (IIH) assumes that people's psychosocial health is affected by income inequality [1]. This is not limited to one's own SES level but is also influenced by the SES levels of others in the community in which one lives. In addition, Wilkinson and Pickett also mentioned that income inequality strongly predicts problems with crime rates, social security, and health issues worldwide [2]. On the other hand, many top universities are gradually receiving record numbers of applications, and admissions rates are becoming more restricted [3]. This has increased the anxiety of students in recent years. More and more students are looking for ways to improve themselves to be admitted to college [4]. The behavior of cramming their schedule with many classes makes them increasingly stressed, with most tending towards anxiety and depression [5]. And severe symptoms may even lead them to commit suicide. Therefore, this study predicts that income inequality relates to significant social class differences, increasing children's pressures to compete. The following article will explore income inequality, sources of competitive stress, the relationship between anxiety and suicidal behavior, and potential psychological treatments for these issues.

2. Income Inequality

The past experiences of inequality did not lead society to pay enough attention to this issue. Data from the United States show that the income shares of the wealthiest 10% have increased over the past four decades from 33% of total income in 1978 to 50% in 2014 [6]. This income share continues to grow, while the payment of the middle- and lower-income groups has not changed much. As a result of the continuous development, the problem of wealth disparity has become

increasingly apparent. This inequality isn't something that affects only the individual but also occurs in the family. If the issue of income inequality persists, the social status of poor children will only continue to decline. Then, children's mental health may easily be affected by income inequality.

Furthermore, new evidence shows that low-income children who grow up with children from wealthy families will face a "double disadvantage" [7]. Poor children who see rich children around them with many resources that are not available to them can make them feel jealous and stressed. The pressure to compete academically will also continue to grow.

3. Sources of Competitive Pressure

In recent years, the admission rates of universities have been continuously decreasing. More and more high school students apply to more colleges than before. College applications seem to be gradually turning into lottery activity [3]. The more applications students submit, the greater their chances of acceptance by a good school because they fear rejection. As a result, this makes even more applications to schools, making the acceptance rate even lower because applications rise while enrollment does not.

What's more, income inequality brings varied opportunities for children's development. In recent years, parents have been paying more attention to their children's education [8]. Wealthy families may give their children more opportunities to interact with successful people or enroll in tutoring classes and scientific research. Like in college admissions preparation, wealthy parents provide their children with more resources to help them, such as SAT tutoring classes, opportunities to conduct research with university professors, and access to professional college counseling agencies, etc. Undoubtedly, children from wealthy families can receive the latest information on college admissions and professional guidance. If they also work hard in their studies, they will naturally be ahead of children without resources. However, low-income families find it challenging to do so. Parents with lower incomes are more likely than parents with higher incomes to be unable to help their children with school problems [8]. It is challenging for children to study hard and create opportunities for themselves with limited resources. Even more, they may be less likely to apply to college and may quickly spread to schools that do not match their academic level [9].

Why do children from high-income families tend to be anxious and depressed despite having better resources? Because they are subject to the academic pressure of many classes and the high expectations of their parents [10]. If there are more scheduled activities, this can lead to stress and anxiety for children [11]. One interpretation of these findings is that parents of high-income families have high expectations for their children and hope they will develop according to the "perfect" path they have planned. They may do this for their children's future or believe their children need to work hard to repay themselves for raising them. But I think that parents in low-income families also have high expectations for their children's future.

So, the stress that comes with it may affect a child's mental health, whether it's high parental expectations or income inequality. If a child cannot cope with the pressure brought on by academic work and expectations, they may experience anxiety and depression [12].

4. Production of NSSI and Suicide

There was a strong association between the level of depressive or anxiety symptoms and suicidal behavior among students [13]. The prevalence of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) and suicidal ideation was higher among students with anxiety and depression. However, the main difference between NSSI and suicidal behavior is their purpose. NSSI is mainly caused by unmet core daily needs [14]. They need to self-harm to satisfy their desire for control and to feel that external

motives are not controlling them. Such behavior generally does not lead to death.

On the other hand, depression is usually costly and may lead to death through purposeful suicide. Depression-induced suicide is likely a social signal intended to attract attention. Why does this happen? Because people may often find it challenging to empathize unless there is news of suicide due to pressure resulting in death, which can attract more attention and concern. It's hard for people to feel complete empathy for what's going on with others because everyone has a lot to do on their own. Not everyone is willing to listen to someone else's painful encounter or to help them. Most people do not think having pressure is a reason to harm oneself, and it is only when death is possible that it becomes a significant problem.

Meanwhile, anxiety is a precursor to depression, and the average age of individuals suffering from anxiety is becoming increasingly younger [15]. So, we need to provide psychological guidance and counseling for children at a young age.

5. Psychological Therapy and Intervention

Depression and anxiety caused by long-term stress are inevitably detrimental to children. Data show that anxiety and depression were common among American children and adolescents before the pandemic [16]. There was a 29% increase in the number of American children aged 3 to 17 diagnosed with anxiety disorders and a 27% increase in the number of children diagnosed with depression from 2016 to 2020 following the outbreak of Covid-19 [12]. With such increases in these indicators, more and more people realize the importance of children's mental health. However, without proper guidance, many children may relieve stress on their own and may be reluctant to seek external help. This can easily lead to internalizing disorders characterized by anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms [17]. Internalizing disorders in children refer to behaviors directed inwardly toward oneself, such as social withdrawal, suicidal thoughts or behaviors, and unexplained physical symptoms [18]. These behaviors are often subtle and unnoticed by parents and others. However, if these anxiety tendencies are resolved early, it is unlikely that they will develop into depression, suicidal tendencies, or suicidal behavior. Weisz et al.'s study suggest that adolescent-centered behavioral therapies, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), have the most beneficial effects [19]. CBT is a form of psychotherapy that is highly effective in treating depression and anxiety. It typically aims to change the problems caused by a patient's distorted thinking and pathological behavior patterns [20]. Children's distorted thinking and pathological suicidal and self-harming behavior caused by competitive pressures can be alleviated through this psychological treatment approach.

6. Conclusion

This article argues that income inequality is related to significant social class differences, which increase the pressure on children to compete. I explored the sources of competitive stress, the relationship between anxiety and suicidal behavior, and potential psychological treatments. The persistent existence of income inequality creates immense pressure on children to compete for educational opportunities. Children from low-income families do not have access to the same resources and information as children from high-income families. Yet, they are expected to compete for college admission alongside them. This can lead to significant stress for children from low-income families, as it is difficult to adjust to the societal imbalance as a child. Even children from high-income families can struggle with the pressure due to the high expectations placed on them by their parents. Children are at risk of developing anxiety and depression because of this pressure. In severe cases, this can lead to suicidal or self-harming behaviors, which is why there has been an increase in reports of student suicide and self-harm in recent years. I hope parents understand their

children's pressures and guide them or seek help from a mental health professional. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a suitable method to help with treatment.

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