



Research Brief

Family Stress Processes Underlying COVID-19-Related Economic Insecurity for Mothers and Fathers and Children's Internalizing Behavior Problems

Key Findings

1. The current study applied the family stress model to examine the family processes underlying pandemic-related economic insecurity and children's internalizing behaviors. Online survey data from an economically diverse sample of mothers and fathers, who experienced at least one type of pandemic-related economic insecurity in the United States (N=259), were collected across two longitudinal time points in the early weeks of COVID-19 (i.e., 14 April, 2020 and 30 April of 2020).
2. Longitudinal data analysis results showed that pandemic-related economic insecurity was associated with higher levels of parental depressive symptoms, which were then associated with higher levels of negative partner relationship quality. Negative partner relationship quality was subsequently associated with higher levels of harsh parenting, which was then associated with increased child internalizing behaviors. Said differently, the negative effects of pandemic-related economic insecurity on child internalizing behaviors were driven by parental depressive symptoms, negative partner relationship quality, and harsh parenting.
3. No differences in parental gender were found for the examined family stress process. That is, mothers and fathers may not have been that different in how they responded to COVID-19 related economic hardship that eventually contributed to their children's behavioral maladjustments.
4. Practice and policy implications include targeting parents' mental health, relationship quality, and negative parenting behaviors, as well as directly addressing families' financial and material hardship, to mitigate the adverse effects of pandemic-related economic insecurity on children's mental health.

Study Overview

COVID-19 and its economic fallout have resulted in unprecedented financial insecurity and material hardship for many American families, with a disproportionately negative impact on children and families

from socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts. The current study applied the family stress model to examine the family processes underlying pandemic-related economic insecurity and children's internalizing behaviors. Online survey data from an economically diverse sample of mothers and fathers, who experienced at least one type of pandemic-related economic insecurity in the United States (N = 259), were collected across two longitudinal time points in the early weeks of COVID-19: (1) 14 April and (2) 30 April of 2020. Parental depressive symptoms, negative partner relationship quality and harsh parenting were tested as mediators. Results from the path model showed that pandemic-related economic insecurity was associated with higher levels of parental depressive symptoms, which were then associated with higher levels of negative partner relationship quality. Negative partner relationship quality was subsequently associated with more harsh parenting, which was then associated with increased child internalizing behaviors. Indirect effects were found for all hypothesized mediators. The family stress model can be applied and extended to the early COVID-19 period. Social work implications include targeting parents' mental health, relationship quality and parenting behaviours, as well as directly addressing financial and material hardship, to mitigate the adverse effects of pandemic-related economic insecurity on children's mental health.

Conclusion

Our study makes unique contributions to the literature through its application of a family stress model approach to a socioeconomically diverse sample of parents across the United States. Implications for social work practice with children and families include targeting mothers' and fathers' mental health, relationship quality and parenting practices to mitigate the adverse effects of pandemic-related economic insecurity on children's behavioral health. Our results suggest the critical need for ongoing economic and material support for children and families even if the peak periods and darkest hours of the COVID-19 pandemic have passed.

About the researchers

Dr. Joyce Y. Lee is an Assistant Professor at The Ohio State University College of Social Work, where she is the Director of the Child and Family Wellbeing Laboratory and promotes child welfare and family strengthening through preventing child maltreatment, supporting positive parenting, and promoting the health of children in foster care. Dr. Shawna J. Lee, Professor at the University of Michigan School of Social Work. Dr. Sehun Oh, Associate Professor at The Ohio State University College of Social Work. Amy Xu is a PhD student at The Ohio State University College of Social Work, with research experience on artificial intelligence in family services, father-focused texting interventions, and racial disparities in healthcare utilization among youth in foster care. Angelise Radney, PhD Candidate at The Ohio State University College of Social Work. Dr. Christina M. Rodriguez, Professor at Old Dominion University Department of Psychology.

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About the research

This study was a part of a project that aimed to examine mechanisms underlying the links between early COVID-19 economic precarity and family and child functioning.



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