

The Educational Cost of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Minority Students

Amanda Wolf

Abstract

ACEs, or Adverse Childhood Experiences, are various events that, if they occur during an individual's formative years, can negatively influence their future and create cycles of trauma. The following study examines the extent to which young adults are affected by ACEs and if certain subgroups suffer from a compounded effect because of external factors. Specifically, the research questioned if there is a relationship between higher Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) scores and poor academic performance (H1); it also questioned if being self-described as non-White is positively correlated with one's ACE score, due to structural discrimination (H2). Using data from Wave 7 of the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Survey (FFCWS) by McLanahan et al. (2024, July 31), the only group of ACEs that was found to have any significant influence on academic performance was that which is related to neglect. Also, there was no difference among any of the variables that proved the idea that minority students would be more affected by ACEs. In contrast to previous literature and studies on the impact of ACEs, this reevaluation of the FFCWS data showed that not all ACEs hold the same weight on how they affect young adults and that no one "type" of individual is more affected than another.

Introduction

In the United States, Spanish is the second most spoken language, just behind English. Despite this, the U.S. Census only evaluates the population every 10 years, which ignores the growing number of individuals who speak Spanish as their primary language. Furthermore, schools throughout the United States divide students based on their acquisition of various skills, like comprehension and literacy, with some students being placed in honors-level

courses while others are left to remedial ones. The disparity between these students does not seem to end just with their perceived performance, however, but other "invisible" barriers as well. ACEs, or Adverse Childhood Experiences, first coined by Felitti et al. (1998), are events that occur in one's childhood that can cause future mental, physical, or emotional harm, as well as lasting trauma. These experiences are separated into three categories based on type— neglect, abuse, and other

challenges—which then can be further divided into specific experiences (CDC-Kaiser, 2021). I intended to examine the extent to which young adults are affected by ACEs and if certain subgroups suffer from a compounded effect (because of race, gender, and more). Then, to assess if these experiences have a negative impact on learning, students' average grades from high school were factored in.

Methods

Within this study, there were a few key relationships of interest, the most important being that between ACEs and student performance. The following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). Higher ACE scores will have a negative relationship with academic performance.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). Being self-described as non-White will have a positive relationship with one's ACE score due to structural discrimination.

Various types of ACEs were studied, and minimal demographic information was collected from students, so that the confounding variable of race could be examined for disproportionate relationships to ACEs and stunted academic performance.

As it is difficult to survey students on such a sensitive topic as ACEs, the decision was made to rely on former research to analyze them in consideration of a larger data set. Multiple variables were chosen from Wave 7 of the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) by McLanahan et al. (2024, July 31). The study itself was created to analyze the effects of parenting styles and dynamics on children and originally had chosen about 5,000 children from 16 U.S. cities, which were selected via stratified random

sampling. For this study, specific questions were chosen from the following categories: Education (B), Relationships (E), Systems Involvement (G), Identity (H), and Substance Use (J).

Findings

Out of the categories of ACEs that were examined by grouping existing variables based on type (Neglect, Abuse, and Other challenges), the only category to have *every variable* reject the null of H1 was 'Neglect.' It was shown that biological parent involvement of a mother or father (E1 and E7) does have a significant effect on a student's performance in school, with those reporting more involvement showing greater rates of success. The same dynamic was observed in the relationships between CPS involvement and removal (G1 and G2), where individuals who reported that either of these events occurred during their youth were more likely to report lower grades.

Regarding H2, or the relationship between race and the impact of ACEs, the prediction did not correspond with the results, and thus, this hypothesis could be refuted due to there being no variables in which non-White participants reported a more significant effect of ACEs than their White counterparts. In contrast, for the variable detailing CPS involvement (G1), the results were only significant for *White* respondents ($p < 0.001$). Thus, H2 was disproven for a surprising alternative: All students, regardless of race, are equally affected by ACEs. In rare cases, White students may see more of an impact, although there would need to be more extensive research to determine the extent to which this small finding holds true.

Future Implications

Although only one hypothesis was in favor of the researcher's expectations and supported the idea that ACEs have a negative impact on academic performance, more comprehensive research should be

done to examine if, as was found in this study, there is no difference in the extent to which ACEs affect youth from different social categories (like race). This study was limited by external factors that could influence its generalizability or validity, such as time constraints and the use of a pre-recorded data set. Future research on this study's questions of interest may include youth from a wider variety of regions (more rural data) and more measures

to assess the impact of the ACEs themselves, such as the consequences on mental health. While the FFCWS does contain valuable information for such research, it was difficult to determine the total number of lifelong ACEs for participants. If neglect is truly the most influential ACE type, then service providers can refocus their efforts to fill the perceivable gaps from this type of adverse experience.

References

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