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Does the Psychological Well-Being in Childhood Last to Adolescence? A Longitudinal Data Analysis in the Context Where Parental Migration Is Common

สุขภาพจิตวัยเด็กคงอยู่ถึงวัยรุ่นหรือไม่:
การวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลระยะยาวในบริบทที่การย้ายถิ่นของพ่อแม่เป็นเรื่องปกติ

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เป็นเรื่องปกติ

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Key messages

Early life experiences and well-being can predict well-being in adolescence. Analyzing a longitudinal data set that followed 3–5 years old children up to their adolescence (16–18 years old), we show that childhood mental well-being is a significant predictor of adolescent mental well-being. We also offer that the experience at the early age of living separately from parents due to international migration has a negative impact on children's mental well-being when they become adolescents.



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Background

Psychological well-being is paramount for children and young people (McDougall, 2011). Early recognition, prevention, and timely intervention are essential. This research takes the life-course approach to examine whether psychological well-being at an early stage stays to adolescence amidst the changing environment around which children live.



Life-course approach and research on the health and well-being of adolescent

The life-course approach recognizes the complex interweaving of a person's all life stages with each other, with the lives of others in the same cohort, and with the lives of previous and generations to come. It views the health and well-being of individuals and communities as the outcome of interactions between multiple risks and protective factors throughout life, addressing the importance of early life events during life's transitions (Elder, 1998; World Health Organization,

2018). The connections between adolescence and the two life stages before and after adolescence (i.e., childhood and young adulthood) are highlighted (Johnson et al., 2011). The approach considers the stability or change of adolescents' mental health from early childhood, their parent's or carer's mental health, and the environment in which they are raised as risk or protective factors for their mental health later in life.

The psychological health of adolescent and parental migration in the Thai context

In the developing country context, one of the childhood experiences that could have a lasting impact on the well-being of adolescence and young adult is living apart from their parents due to their parent's labor migration. Several Thais move to work in other countries each year, particularly in Taiwan and South Korea. Past

literature shows diverse and inconclusive findings on the impact of parental migration on the well-being of children and adolescents left behind. However, worse psychological well-being among the children of migrant parents has often been pointed out.

Data and Methods

Data set

We used the longitudinal data set of CHAMPSEA-Thailand, conducted in 2008 and 2021. It was part of the study on Child Health and Migrant Parents in South-East Asia (CHAMPSEA), collected from approximately 1,000 households in four Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand. The baseline survey in Thailand interviewed 1,030 eligible households with at least a child in one of two age groups (aged 3 to 5 or 9 to 11). The inclusion criteria for the CHAMPSEA were either one or both parents were international migrants for at least six months

before the survey or households whose parents were not migrants in the last six months, including as the comparison group. The households initially recruited at the baseline were re-interviewed in the follow-up study in 2019. Our analysis took only children aged 3–5 years in the baseline survey (2008) who became 16–18 years old in the follow-up survey (2021). In total, 407 children from both surveys were matched, but only 404 with all available variables in our analytical framework were included in the final analytical sample.

The outcome, the main independent, and control variables

The outcome variable was the psychological well-being of adolescents (16–18 years), measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), the world's most used instrument (<https://sdqscore.org/>) for assessing mental health status for people aged 2 to 18. A higher score of SDQ implies a higher risk of mental problems. Our analysis uses SDQ scores reported by carers. Results suggested that at Wave 2, the proportion of being risky to

problematic or problematic psychologically was about 3%. The main independent variable was the SDQ score at Wave 1 (when they were 3–5 years old), of which results showed that 36% were assessed as risky to problematic or problematic psychologically. In our multivariate analysis, we used SDQ scores as an interval scale. We regressed SDQ scores at Wave 2 (the outcome variable) on SDQ scores at Wave 1 (the independent variable) using linear

multiple regression analysis. We also considered a potentially impactful life event as another independent variable, whether the adolescent experienced living separately from their parent(s) due to international migration when they were young and how the experience might affect their well-being psychologically later in life – at adolescence. Our analysis controls for the adolescents' individual characteristics, including

gender, age, whether they were enrolled in school at Wave 2, number of siblings, and the carer's psychological health at Wave 1, using SRQ-20 (Self-Reporting Questionnaire) (Beusenbergh & Orley, 1994), mother carer at an early age (Wave 1), family function using APGAR score (Smilkstein, 1978) at Wave 1, and household's economic status, using a dichotomous variable whether the household had savings, at both waves.

Results

We used multiple regression analysis to examine whether psychological health at a young age can predict psychological health when people become adolescents. Results indicated that net of individual, family, and household characteristics, psychological health at a young age was a significant predictor of adolescents' psychological well-being ($b = 0.1$, sig at .05 level). Having an international migrant parent at a young age predicted a higher score

of adolescents' SDQ ($b = 0.87$, sig at .05 level), implying the negative impact of living separately from parents early on. Our findings also showed that adolescents with carers with a risk of mental problems when they were young had a higher score of SDQ ($b = 1.12$, sig at .05 level) than their counterparts. Further, being in a better-off household helped protect adolescents from the risk of psychological problems.

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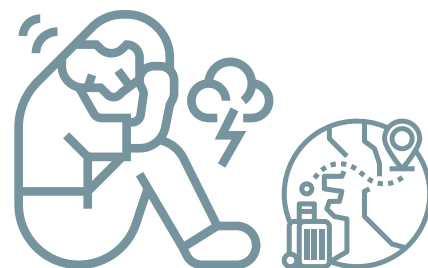
Summary and discussion

Our analysis highlights two main independent variables reflecting early life events and experience: the psychological well-being measured by the SDQ difficulty scores and whether their parents were international migrants. While our evidence suggests that mental health problem lessens over time (from 36% to about 3%), the continuity of mental well-being from a young age to adolescence should also be noted, as the two are significantly associated in our analysis. Psychological health at a young age remains a significant predictor of adolescents' psychological well-being. Our findings emphasize the importance of early recognition and detection of mental health problems among young children, so comprehensive prevention and timely intervention services can be developed and implemented. As scholars in early childhood mental health suggest, improving children's environments of

relationships and experiences early in life can address many costly problems in society, and **“Most potential mental health problems will not become mental health problems if we respond to them early”** (Center on the Developing Child, 2013).

Our findings show the negative impact of experiencing parental international migration at an early age on the mental well-being of adolescents, consistent with previous literature that left-behind children had a higher risk of depression and higher depression scores, anxiety, suicidal ideation, conduct disorder than children of non-migrant parents (Fellmeth et al., 2018). Our analysis shows the lasting impact of early life experience on children's outcomes in later life, as addressed by the life-course approach.

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Our findings of the positive relationship between the carer's mental health problem and the higher score of total difficulty show that children's and adolescents' mental well-being is also shaped by the well-being of people around them (e.g., Wolicki et al., 2021). This finding implies two principles of the life-course approach, the importance of early life events and the complex interweaving of an individual's life with the lives of others (linked/interdependent lives). Therefore, caregivers' mental health needs to be enhanced to further promote child health and well-being.

Our study offers a significant contribution to child psychological health and well-being research. We provide evidence from a longitudinal study showing the significant association between mental health and experience in early childhood and mental health in adolescence. We acknowledge the limitation of using SDQ total difficulty scores as an interval scale due to slight variation when using the cut-off points to detect mentally problematic children, as suggested in the existing literature.



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