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Adolescents and the native-immigrant mental health gap in Spain. The same story as in the US?

This paper explores and explains migrant-native differentials in psychological health of adolescents in Spain. As a recent immigration country, research on integration outcomes in Spain is attracting growing attention. Spain was the second largest destination of international migration only after the US from 2000 to 2007, and the impact that the Great Recession is being particularly strong among migrant families and other disadvantaged groups.

Our paper is inspired by a growing body of research from United States showing that Latin American origin adolescents tend to show highest risks for mental health even after controlling for age, gender and socioeconomic status. Despite of the growing size of this population in Spain, research on their mental health and psychological wellbeing remains very limited due to a serious dearth of adequate data. We take advantage of a recently released dataset, the Chances (2011) survey, which sampled students enrolled in the 3rd and 4th grades of secondary education in the municipality of Madrid (n=2,734). The survey oversampled adolescents of immigrant origin, which allows for separated analyses of this population. In addition, it contains very rich information on the life of adolescents, including indicators of mental health and psychological wellbeing, quality of the relationship within the family, relationships with friends and schoolmates, etc. A parallel survey was taken with the parents of half of the adolescents sample (n=1,239), which includes additional information about family characteristics and intergenerational relationships. Finally, the data also permit to examine the impact of contextual factors such as schools and neighborhoods.

Our findings suggest worse mental health outcomes of children of migrant families compared to native families in Spain. Using several indicators of mental health outcomes (e.g. difficulties to concentrate, sleep, self-esteem), the paper examines the effect of parent characteristics, family conflict, and school and neighbourhood context on adolescent mental health.