

Differences in childcare use between Irish-born and immigrant households in Ireland^{1 2}

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INTRODUCTION

Increased immigration flows have made Ireland considerably more diverse. However, understanding how one can ensure that children of migrant origin have equal chances to do well in school remains a challenge. Evidence suggests that interventions early in the life course are a powerful and cost-effective way of mitigating educational inequalities, making childcare an interesting policy tool. However, childcare can only contribute to reducing educational disparities by migration background if it can reach a large enough group of children of migrant origin. This research article presents new evidence on how and why childcare utilisation patterns differ by migration background in Ireland.

DATA AND METHODS

This study uses data from the infant cohort (Cohort '08) of *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI), a national longitudinal study of children in Ireland. The GUI data include a wide range of measures on children's circumstances and development as well as detailed information from their caregivers. Importantly, GUI recorded the main childcare type at age three, as well as a variety of factors that may be related to childcare choices.

A child was considered to have a migration background if they had at least one foreign-born parent living in the household (compared to those living in Irish-born households). Because language plays an important role in immigrant integration, a further distinction was made between children living in English and non-English speaking households. Furthermore, three childcare types were distinguished: Sole

¹ This Bulletin summaries the findings from: Sprong, S., and Skopek, J., "Childcare utilisation by migration background: Evidence from a nationally representative Irish cohort study", *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2023.100773>

² This research was supported the Irish Research Council (IRC) and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) under the Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship Programme [Project ID: GOIPG/2019/4418].

parental care, informal care (paid or unpaid in the child's or the carer's home) and formal care (provided by qualified staff within an institutional setting).

Statistical methods were used to explore I) to what extent differential childcare utilisation patterns by migration background existed; and II) what factors may underlie these differences.

RESULTS

Statistical modelling showed that, compared to children from Irish-born households, children of migrant descent were more likely to be in formal care relative to informal care. However, children from non-English speaking immigrant households were less likely to be in both informal and formal care than parental care. Children from English speaking immigrant households were also slightly less likely to be in informal care than parental care, although there was no difference in how often they were in formal care relative to parental care.

These differences in childcare usage by migration background partly reflected differences in socio-demographic and other relevant characteristics. Children with a migration background, for example, tended to live in households with a lower income, less grandparental contact, and less available support from friends and family than children living in Irish-born households. These factors played an important role in explaining the differences in childcare usage (as described above).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that differences in childcare usage by migration background exist and that they partly reflect other related dimensions of disadvantage, such as a lower income and less social support. This suggests that children of migrant origin are less likely to be exposed to the beneficial effects of formal childcare, which may also have negative consequences for their mothers' labour force participation. For formal childcare to reduce educational disparities, it is thus crucial to provide additional support to immigrant households. This can ensure that children with a migration background are able to benefit from formal care not only in theory but also in practice.
