Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Michigan Minds Podcast, a quick and informative analysis of today's top issues from University of Michigan faculty.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for joining Michigan Minds. I'm really excited to have the opportunity to talk with you today. So can you start by introducing yourself and sharing a little bit about your role at the University of Michigan?

Speaker 3:

Sure. My name is Catherine Mitchell Moore. I'm an associate professor at the Ford School of Public Policy here at Michigan. I'm also a faculty affiliate with the Education Policy Initiative, as well as a faculty affiliate with the Population Studies Center.

Speaker 2:

And in what areas does your research focus?

Speaker 3:

So most of my work focuses on key issues in social policy as kind of a larger umbrella, so I'm most interested in understanding the experiences of children who grow up in poverty, how those experiences differ by race, and the role that public policy can play in mediating some of those, or mitigating the consequences of growing up poor, particularly in thinking about income mobility, increasing access to higher education, and different education outcomes.

Speaker 2:

Can you tell us a little bit about the Education Policy Initiative?

Speaker 3:

Sure, I'd be happy to. So the Education Policy Initiative is a group of faculty, researchers, staff, where we're really interested in highlighting a lot of the interesting work in education policy, both locally and across the nation. So we do a number of different things. We have researchers who put out policy briefs related to their research, we put on seminars where we invite both internal speakers, so faculty from the University of Michigan to come talk about their work, as well as external policymakers or researchers to come talk about key issues in education policy.

And the other thing that we do is we manage the state's student education administrative data, and what that allows us to do is really to investigate key questions surrounding the experiences of kids going to school in the state of Michigan.

Speaker 2:

Wonderful, thank you. And how can people get involved with this initiative?

Speaker 3:

So there's a number of different ways. We always love it when people come to our seminars. We have seminars throughout the year where we invite researchers to come talk about their work, and so those are open and free to the public. So we're always happy when people want to come hear more about the work that we're doing. Researchers who want to get involved are also welcome to come to us with their research ideas and propose projects if they want to gain access to the data that we maintain, so they're always welcome to do that. You can find that at our website.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much. Your recent research examines how much Black/white educational disparities reflect differences in family, school, and neighborhood context. The study uses 16 years of statewide student administrative data within Michigan with attention to observed racial differences in the duration of exposure to contextual disadvantage. Can you share with us a bit more about this work, and highlight a few key findings?

Speaker 3:

Sure, I'd be happy to. So this project, it's interesting. We weren't set out to actually investigate Black/white differences in education outcomes. So this is built on some earlier work that I've done that maybe sounds very obvious in retrospect, but we were really interested in understanding... when we typically measure income gaps and education outcomes, we want to have a sense of how are poor children performing compared to their higher income peers, we typically think of income measures as a point in time. So we think about, is this child living in poverty right now compared to a child that's not living in poverty.

And so in some earlier work, I've shown that if you take into account a student's history of disadvantage, that it actually really impacts how you measure those income based gaps. So actually if you think about comparing kids who grow up in chronic poverty for instance compared to kids who are never in poverty, you measure a much wider income based gap in test scores for instance than if you just look at a student's kind of point in time whether they're living in poverty or not.

So this work, we're looking into how this impacts Black/white measurements of these gaps, was really taking that question of how would you incorporate a student's chronic disadvantage into measuring Black/white education gaps, and asks how would the gaps look different if we controlled for how long these students are experiencing economic disadvantage? And what we found is actually you can explain or you can kind of reduce the Black/white gap in test scores for instance by about 75% if you kind of condition on or you control for whether or not they experience chronic poverty as children.

And one of the most interest findings I think we saw is that you can actually eliminate and reverse the college going gap between Black and white students if you control for their chronic disadvantage. Compared to if you just were to compare Black and white students and control for whether they're living in poverty at a given point in time. And this is mostly driven by the fact that unfortunately, Black children are just much more likely to grow up in chronic poverty compared to their white peers, so they're about four times more likely to experience chronic poverty compared to their white peers.

Speaker 2:

Thank you. I wanted to talk a bit more about another one of the findings from this study that found that children who grow up in poverty are less likely to go to college regardless of race, but Black children are four times more likely to experience chronic economic hardship than white children. Can you provide a little more insight on this result and its relevance for renewed attention to systemic racism?

Speaker 3:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, so what we found is taking into account the historical economic disadvantage, about 40% of Black children in the state of Michigan were experiencing chronic poverty, so they were in poverty their whole childhood. And this is only the case among about 10% of white children. So if you just compare a white child living in poverty to a Black child living in poverty at a given point in time, you would kind of mis-measure these college going gaps, because you wouldn't be taking into account that the average white student is poor for a much shorter period of time than the average Black student.

So when you take that history into account, what we show is actually that that college going gap reverses. So if you compare a Black child who experiences chronic poverty to a white child who experiences chronic poverty, the Black children are a little bit more likely to go to college compared to their white peers. And this is a question we weren't sure going into it what we would find. There might be some argument that the way that Black and white children experience poverty might be different, that the experience of poverty could be different for Black children than for white children. That might be for a variety of different reasons. But what we show is, no, it's not that the experience of poverty is different for Black and white children. It's the fact that Black children are four times more likely to experience chronic poverty compared to white children that is accounting for some of this gap in college going.

And of course that underlying experience of chronic poverty is stemming from hundreds of years of systemic racism. So think about what leads to why Black children are much more likely to be chronically poor, that's things like access to housing, so historically Black families have not had the same access to housing as white families have, and so that has led to very large gaps in wealth accumulation between white families and Black families. So there's a whole legacy of systemic racism that contributes to those patterns, and that is contributing in part to why on its face we observe these college going gaps between Black and white children. But again, once we account for the differences in the experience of poverty that Black and white children experience throughout childhood, we actually see that that gap is eliminated and is actually even reversed.

Speaker 2:

Thank you. Another recent study you coauthored found that more than 60% of children in lower income families reside in households where multiple adults can potentially claim the same child and create confusion among tax filers. Among lower income families, approximately 80% of Black children had one nonresident parent. Can you share a bit more about this work and discuss how these findings highlight significant racial inequities?

Speaker 3:

So our goal with this work was to really understand how something like the tax system, which you don't necessarily think of as being a racist institution on its face, how it can create these inequitable outcomes for Black and white children. And so kind of getting into the weeds of that, when you file your taxes, taxes are based on marital status. It's been that way for a very long time, and it's in contrast to how a lot of other developed countries run their tax system, but essentially what it means is that if you are married, you file your taxes with your spouse. If you are unmarried, you file your taxes alone.

And so what this does is this system, which again on its face doesn't appear to be racist, creates these kind of different outcomes for Black and white children because there are very large differences in household composition or marital status among Black children compared to white children. So what we show is that, like you said, about 80% of Black children live in a household where one of their parents is not living with them. And so how this creates ambiguity is the tax system essentially preferences the parent that you live with when claiming valuable credits.

Also I think the background of this is, as to the tax system, we also distribute a lot of our social safety net resources that way. So some of our largest tax credits like the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit are credits that go to moderately earning families. And so this is where families go to get a lot of income benefits through our social safety net, and so to the extent that there is inequitable access to those credits, we see this kind of perpetuate in racial differences in take up of those credits, and those could lead to kind of further inequality.

So the tricky thing here is that to claim those credits, the parent that you live with at least half of the year is eligible to claim that credit, but there's also a number of kind of more wonky rules about that, that if say for instance you spend half of your time living with another parent, so if your parents are separated and you spend half your time with one parent and half with the other, there's this open question of who gets to claim the child. And so the fact that Black children are more likely to experience that difference, so they might be more likely to have a nonresident parent, creates more ambiguity for those children.

This is further complicated by more complex family arrangements that are prevalent among different racial and ethnic groups. For instance if you live with a grandparent, a grandparent could potentially claim you of one of these credits, and that's, living with a grandparent or in a multigenerational household is much more common among nonwhite children essentially, so Black children, Asian children, and Latino children are all much more likely to live in a multigenerational household. And so in these types of households, it creates more confusion over who should be claiming the child on the tax credit. And so this can lead to a number of different adverse outcomes. You could imagine first that there's just disagreement within the family of who gets to claim the child, who gets that credit, and that could also lead to higher audit rates. So the IRS might see some kind of strange claiming behavior for certain families and that could lead to families actually becoming ineligible for the credit in the future because the IRS audits them and deems a certain family member not eligible for the credit, not due to some kind of fraudulent behavior on its face, but more due to confusion over who is supposed to be claiming this child.

Speaker 2:

Thank you. And as the podcast comes to a close, what is one thing you hope listeners remember from our conversation today?

Speaker 3:

So I think the thing I'd say to take away from all of this is to kind of take a critical eye to the different institutions we have in this country. So especially the second study that I highlighted there is really about something where on its face, a system doesn't appear to have a racist attitude, but when you peel back the layers, when you think about how do we construct tax filing units, what is our notion of what is a family, those things have implications for children depending on their racial and ethnic background. So because of cultural differences in living arrangements for instance, we see that children who don't identify as white are much more likely to live in more complex family arrangements, and that creates more complexity in filing taxes. And that's a very wonky topic, but in the end what that means is that could lead to disparities in who's eligible to claim these valuable tax credits that could perpetuate income inequality for generations.

Speaker 2:

Fantastic. Thank you so much, it has been an absolutely honor to talk with you today and learn from you. Thank you so much for taking the time to join us.

Speaker 3:

Thank you so much for having me.

Speaker 4:

Thank you for listening to the Michigan Minds Podcast, a production of the University of Michigan. Join the conversation on social media with #UMichImpact.