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Patterns of Family Economic Wellbeing Among American Indian and Alaska Native Families with Young Children

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Background

- Research on family economic wellbeing (FEW) among American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) families with young children is sparse.[1,2] AIAN children experience high rates of poverty, food insecurity, adverse childhood experiences, and physical and mental health disparities, which are rooted in centuries of colonialism, structural racism, and historical, intergenerational trauma.[3,4]

- At the same time, many AIAN families with young children experience high levels of social and community support, engagement in cultural activities, availability of material support if needed, and low levels of economic strain.[5] These important protective factors within AIAN communities and families may promote FEW and buffer some of the effects of poverty on child development.

Objectives

- The goals of this study were to use a latent class analysis (LCA) approach to 1) identify latent classes of preschool-aged AIAN children and their families based on patterns of economic characteristics related to FEW, and 2) examine correlates of class membership.

Methods

- We selected a subsample (n=374) of AIAN children and their families from the 2019 Region XI AIAN Family and Child Experiences Survey (AIAN FACES), which includes both AIAN and non-AIAN children and families.[6]

- LCA indicators (n=12) and covariates (n=7) were derived from previous AIAN FACES analyses, existing literature, and feedback from practice and research partners.[5] LCA indicators included highest level of employment among primary caregivers; receipt of public assistance in the past six months, including welfare, SNAP, and WIC; ratio of income to poverty threshold; household financial strain (based on perception of not having enough money to afford basic needs related to housing, clothing, food, and medical care; unmet transportation needs); whether housing is right size; a composite variable of total food security status; and family safety net (i.e., composite variable indicating the number of types of help parents can always get and the average of family involvement with caregiving for the child in past month). Covariates included variables listed in Table 1, as well as child age, sex, and whether they were new to Head Start.

- LCA was used to identify classes of individuals who share economic characteristics, followed by multinomial logistic regression to examine correlates of each class.

Figure 1. Latent classes of family economic wellbeing

Latent Class 1
(High Resource/ Low Economic Strain)
N=121 (32.4%)

Latent Class 2
(Low Resource/ High Economic Strain)
N=121 (32.3%)

Latent Class 3
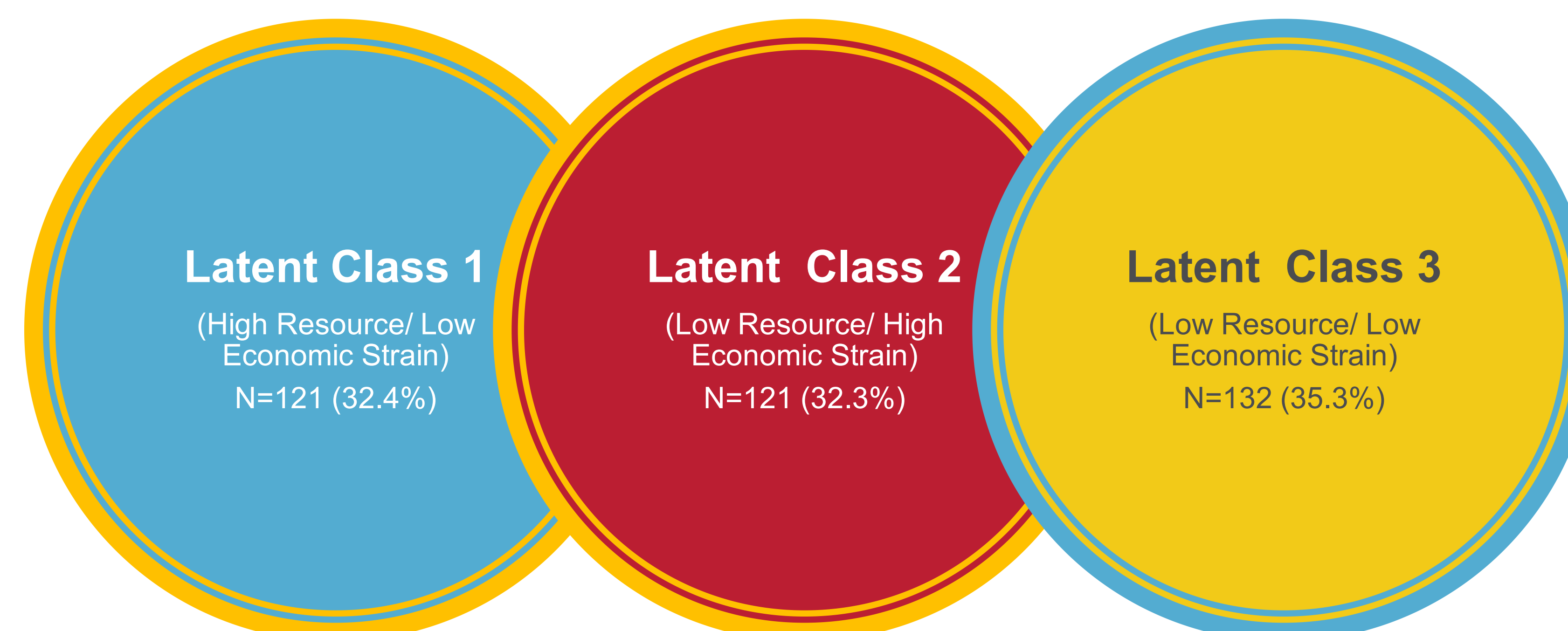(Low Resource/ Low Economic Strain)
N=132 (35.3%)

Table 1. Association of latent classes with caregiver education, intergenerational household, family structure, parent mental health – AIAN FACES 2019-20

	Class 2 compared to Class 1	Class 3 compared to Class 1
	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)
Highest education of caregiver in household		
>12 years	**.68 (.01, .32)***	**.05 (.01, .25)***
12 years	**.18 (.04, .89)***	.22 (.45, 1.10)
<12 years (reference)	1.00	1.00
Family structure (with whom child lives)		
Bio/adoptive mother and father	.55 (.17, 1.79)	.47 (.15, 1.45)
Bio/adoptive mother only (including non-bio father)	.64 (.20, 2.06)	.64 (.21, 1.98)
Bio/adoptive father only (including non-bio mother)	.16 (.01, 2.23)	.25 (.03, 1.90)
Grandparents	.23 (.4, 1.46)	**.15 (.03, .83)***
Other (reference)	1.00	1.00
Intergenerational household		
No	1.70 (.72, 3.96)	**3.65 (1.65, 8.08)***
Yes (reference)	1.00	1.00
Parent Mental Health		
No depressive symptoms	**.08 (.21, .29)***	0.45 (.11, 1.82)
Mildly or moderately depressed	**.23 (.06, .83)***	0.49 (.12, 2.03)
Severely depressed (reference)	1.00	1.00

Note. N=374; model adjusts for child age, sex, and whether they are new to Head Start; OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval; Class 1 (high resource/low economic strain) was reference group; *p < .05; ***p < .001

Key Findings

- A three-class model was selected based on model fit and substantive knowledge of FEW within AIAN communities: High resource/ low economic strain (class 1), low resource/ high economic strain (class 2), and low resource/ low economic strain (class 3).

- Compared to the high resource/low economic strain class (1): Caregivers in the low resource/high economic strain class (2) were significantly less likely to have more than 12 years education and less likely to report no or mild/moderate depressive symptoms.

- Caregivers in the low resource/low economic strain class (3) were significantly less likely to have more than 12 years education and less likely to have children whose grandparents were primary caregivers. This class was also more likely to report that their child was not living in an intergenerational household.

- Caregivers in the high resource/low economic strain class (1) were more likely to have higher levels of education, better mental health, and live in an intergenerational household.

Conclusion

- This is the first study to explore FEW in AIAN families with young children by combining objective and subjective indicators of economic context.

- Our findings underscore protective factors (e.g., social and family support) that influence subjective economic strain and highlight ways to support AIAN families through tailored and culturally informed interventions that align with economic and community contexts.

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