The Dynamics of Childcare Instability

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Disrupting the settings of children’s daily lives, childhood instability can manifest in many overlapping ways. Moving beyond conventional studies focused on single dimensions of instability, this paper aims to unpack instability in childcare by closely examining the implications of three domains of childcare instability—childcare transitions between birth and age three, childcare type, and childcare quantity—for child cognitive and behavioral outcomes at age five. Data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study are used to assess the cumulative and multiplicative consequences of changes in childcare arrangements in combination with childcare type and quantity. Given overall increasing rates of instability in the family at birth and over time, and the higher prevalence of such unstable arrangements among some of the more disadvantaged groups in society, patterns and mechanisms of childcare instability highlight mediating and moderating pathways through which inequality may be perpetuated in the United States.