

Socioemotional Skills and Psychological Trauma: Evidence from a Labor Training Program for Young Victims of Violence in Colombia

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Abstract

This paper examines how the socioemotional skills of adolescents are influenced by the experience of violence and psychological trauma. We explore this relation among beneficiaries of a labor training program for young victims of violence in Colombia, which combined traditional technical skill training with an initial module to foster socioemotional skills. Using a socioeconomic survey and a computerized test battery, we collected a rich set of data from a sample of 807 participants between 16-25 years of age including measures on risk-taking behavior, delay discounting, inhibitory responses, cognitive skills, psychological traits, symptoms of psychological trauma, and a characterization of the victimization profile. Using arguably exogenous variation in the timing of the victimization episodes to instrument for the extent of psychological trauma, we find that higher levels of trauma are associated with higher levels of risk aversion, lower levels of self-esteem, perseverance, and impulse control, and an external locus of control. These results suggest that psychological trauma can hinder participants' performance in the labor training programs and in the labor market, and thus have important implication for the design of programs for adolescents exposed to violence or in contexts of extreme adversity.

JEL classifications: J13 Children, Youth; J24 Human Capital, Skills, Labor Productivity; I12 Health Behavior

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