

Family structure and children's behavior

Rebecca Ryan, Amy Claessens, and Anna J. Markowitz

Rebecca Ryan is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Georgetown University; Amy Claessens is Assistant Professor of Public Policy at the University of Chicago; Anna J. Markowitz is a graduate student in Psychology at Georgetown University.

Over the last 40 years, rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing in the United States have risen dramatically.¹ Most children in the United States will experience one or more changes in family structure during their childhood, for example, from a two-biological-parent family into a single-parent or stepparent family.² Children who have experienced family change tend to have poorer cognitive and behavioral outcomes than those from intact families.³ Public policy attempts to reduce family change or ameliorate its expected effects take three broad approaches: (1) promoting marriage; (2) promoting father involvement; and (3) reducing economic strain among single-parent families. These policies assume that the relationship between family change and child development is as strong—or stronger—in poor or near-poor families as in families with higher incomes. With their substantially higher rates of family instability, low-income families are the targets of many of these policies. The study discussed in this article tests this assumption by estimating how changes in family structure are related to changes in children's behavior, for low-, moderate-, and high-income households.

Family instability and family income

Family instability has been linked to poorer child outcomes, particularly with regard to behavior. Children whose parents have divorced have more behavior problems than those in intact families; children living in stepparent and blended families also tend to have more behavior problems, though the effect sizes are smaller and the relationship is less consistent.⁴ Overall, prior research has shown that children who have experienced any kind of family change have poorer behavioral outcomes than children in stable, two-biological-parent families. Policy efforts intended to promote marriage and encourage fathers' involvement primarily target low-income families, since rates of nonmarital childbearing and family instability are disproportionately high for this population.⁵ This targeting assumes that the links between family change and child behavior described above apply to low-income families. Prior research and theory differ on whether this connection actually exists.

Evidence that family instability matters as much (or more) for low-income families

Research on the relationship between income and child development, and between poverty and family stress, suggests that family instability may actually matter *more* for children in low-income families than for those in higher-income families. Associations between changes in income and child outcomes have been found to be much larger for—and in some cases found only among—those at the lowest end of the income distribution.⁶ Findings suggest that declines in economic resources account for as much as half of the correlation between family change and child outcomes.⁷ If changes in economic resources partly explain links between family change and child development, and those changes matter more to those with fewer resources, then family change could affect children in low-income families to a greater degree.

This theory is also supported by studies examining the effects of poverty on family functioning. For example, economic hardship has been found to cause emotional distress in parents, which can in turn impede parents' ability to be supportive, sensitive, and consistent with their children.⁸ If low-income parents have fewer emotional resources on average than those with higher incomes, then parent-child interactions as well as child well-being could suffer more as a result of family change in poorer families.

Evidence that family instability matters less for low-income families

An alternate set of theories suggests that family instability may matter *less* for children in low-income families compared to those with higher incomes. Because single and blended families are more common among low-income families, parents and children may perceive transitions into these family structures as less unusual and thus less stressful.⁹ A less stressful change should in turn have less effect on parenting behavior and child well-being. Another reason that family instability may matter less for low-income families is that fathers in those families may contribute a smaller proportion of the household economic resources than do higher-income fathers, so divorce or separation could have less of a negative economic effect on these families.¹⁰ Fathers in low-income families may also spend less time on average with their children, and have more emotionally strained relationships with their partners, so their departure from the home may not decrease the parenting and emotional resources in the home as much as the departure of a higher-income father.

In turn, moving into a stepparent family may provide a greater benefit to children in higher-income families than those in lower-income families, because mothers in higher-income families are more likely to repartner with men whose eco-

conomic resources resemble their own.¹¹ These new partners may thus elevate the economic and emotional stability of the family more than stepfathers in lower-income families, perhaps leading to a greater improvement in child behavior. This set of theories thus suggests that family structure changes would affect children in higher-income families more than those in lower-income families both for worse and for better, depending on the type of family transition.

Types of family change

It is possible that the relationship between family change and child behavior, and thus the effect of family income on that relationship, will vary by what type of change the family experiences. If stress is the driving force that affects child well-being, and all family change strains family roles and relationships, then the effect of family change on child well-being could be uniform and negative. However, different types of change reduce—or increase—family resources in different ways. A transition into a single-parent family from a two-biological-parent family may be expected to be detrimental to children's well-being because they would lose important economic and emotional resources. However, a transition into a blended family could either impair child well-being (because having a new adult in the family means that family roles and relationships are reorganized in ways that are stressful to children), or increase economic and emotional resources at a crucial time in development. The latter possibility is supported by our earlier study, in which we found that with the negative effect of divorce or separation held constant, movement into a stepparent family during middle childhood predicted reductions in children's behavior problems relative to staying in a single-parent family.

The question of causality

Supporters of marriage or fatherhood initiatives often emphasize the benefits of an intact family for children, citing the well-documented relationship between changes in family structure and children's outcomes. However, before effective policies can be designed to address these links, it is necessary to determine causality. It is possible that the parental characteristics that contribute to family instability, including poor emotional or behavioral health, low human capital, and interpersonal issues, also affect parenting and children's home environments more generally. If this is the case, then policies designed to encourage the formation of stable families would not necessarily increase child well-being, even if they did successfully decrease family instability.

In order to control for child and family characteristics that do not change over time, studies have used models in which changes in family structure predict changes in child outcomes.¹² These change models typically look at concurrent associations between family change and child outcomes, however, and do not allow for the possibility that relationships vary by children's age or change over time. If relationships do vary by children's age, these models would underestimate effects by averaging across ages. Similarly,

if associations decrease or increase over time, these models would either overestimate or underestimate effects. Some scholars have suggested that a family change during children's first five years should alter their developmental paths by a greater degree than a change experienced later, because at this stage children are more dependent on the family context and thus most sensitive to its influence.¹³

Results

In order to assess children's behavioral outcomes, we used scores on the Behavior Problems Index, a measure of the frequency, range, and type of childhood behavior problems.¹⁴ We estimated how changes in family structure relate to measures on this index for low-, moderate-, and high-income households.

Children of low-income parents

We found that children in low-income families had significantly higher initial levels of behavior problems than those in moderate- or high-income families. Children in low-income families who experienced early change from a two-biological-parent to a single-parent family had higher initial behavior problems at age 3 or 4 than those who experienced no early change.

Here, our primary interest is in how family-structure changes predict the pattern of increase in behavior problems during four age ranges: infancy and toddlerhood (birth and age 1 or 2); preschool years (age 3 or 4 and age 5 or 6); middle childhood (age 7 or 8 and age 9 or 10); and preadolescence (age 11 or 12). We found that for low-income families, no family change of any type affected children's long-term behavioral trajectories. We examined children's behavioral trajectories after (1) preschool-age changes from two-biological-parent families to single-parent families; (2) preschool-age changes into stepparent families; and (3) no preschool-age change in family structure. The only significant effect was a recovery during preadolescence from initially higher levels of behavior problems for children who experienced an early move into a single-parent family.

Children of moderate-income parents

For children in moderate-income families, we again looked at trajectories for children who experienced changes during the preschool period, compared to those who experienced no changes. We found no significant initial differences in behavior problems between those who experienced early changes in family structure and those who did not.¹⁵ We did find that an early change from a two-biological-parent to a single-parent family is associated with a significant increase in behavior problems in middle childhood.

Children of high-income parents

For children in high-income families, there were no initial differences in behavior problems between those who experienced early changes and those who did not. There were,

however, two significant effects for changes experienced later in childhood. Children of preschool age who experience a change from a two-biological-parent family to a single-parent family have a significant increase in behavior problems by age 11 or 12 relative to those who did not experience a preschool-age change. Children who experienced movement into a stepparent family during middle childhood had fewer behavior problems than those who did not experience a family change during middle childhood. These children likely experienced an earlier move into a single-parent family, and had the associated increase in behavior problems; the subsequent move into a stepparent family was then followed by a recovery in terms of behavior. The net effect is that children in high-income families who experience a preschool-age move into a single-parent family followed by a middle-childhood move into a stepparent family have behavior problem scores nearly identical to those of children who experienced no changes during the preschool period.

Discussion

Our study tested a central assumption underlying policies that are aimed at reducing the occurrence of family change, or ameliorating its expected effects on children: that the relationship between family change and child behavior is as strong or stronger in poor families as it is in higher-income families. We found little support for this assumption; significant effects of family structure changes were found only for children with moderate- and high-income parents, and not for those with low-income parents. Our results instead suggest that family structure changes affect children in high-income families more than those from low-income families, and that they do so for better and for worse, depending on the type of family transition. Overall, while these results confirm that union dissolutions do affect children's behavior, they also highlight the importance of family context to understanding the implications of family instability.

We used an analytic approach that looked at how changes in family structure predict changes in child outcomes, thus reducing the possibility that permanent family characteristics could obscure the relationship between family change and child behavior. Using this conservative approach, we found few significant effects of family structure changes in moderate- and high-income families, and no effects in low-income families. These results suggest that many factors other than family instability are responsible for determining children's behavior, particularly for children in low-income families. We did find some significant effects among children in moderate- and high-income families, indicating that the effect of family change varies by families' economic status. These findings suggest that although low-income families have a higher prevalence of family instability, public and policy concern over family disruption might more effectively focus on the broader population.

Our findings also show that the type of family change experienced by children matters. Moving from a two-parent

or single-parent family into a stepparent family results in a positive effect on child behavior compared to those who experience no family change during middle childhood. Because movement into stepparent families typically follows divorce or separation, which are associated with increases in children's behavior problems, this positive effect is more accurately described as a recovery rather than a benefit. Children's behavior might improve when their mothers form beneficial relationships after a period of marital discord or single parenthood, or when stepfathers bring additional economic resources into the home and alleviate financial stress. This kind of transition may indeed benefit (or at least not harm) children's behavioral development if it improves maternal parenting quality, or provides a higher-quality father figure for children.

The question remains, however, why this advantage appears only for children in high-income families. Existing research suggests that low-income mothers tend to repartner with men who have greater economic resources than their child's father, while married stepfathers partnered with divorced mothers tend to have lower incomes than married biological fathers.¹⁶ To the extent that low-income mothers are more likely than high-income mothers to have a nonmarital birth, one might expect repartnering to benefit children in low-income families as much as, if not more than, those in high-income families. However, even if low-income mothers are more likely to "trade up" upon repartnering, high-income mothers still tend to repartner with men who contribute more economic resources, and possibly more parenting resources, to the household, compared to low-income mothers.

We found significant relationships between family changes and child behavior problems only for changes experienced during early childhood and preschool; for changes during subsequent periods, the relationship was weak or nonexistent. These findings are consistent with earlier work indicating that family structure changes during the first five years of children's lives are important for behavior throughout childhood. These patterns suggest that public policies related to family instability should focus on the years immediately following childbirth rather than on all stages of childhood.

Overall, our results suggest that early family changes, particularly those from two-biological-parent families to single-parent families, may indeed increase children's behavior problems both concurrently and in the long term. Most significantly, our findings reveal the importance of considering family context when generalizing about the negative effects of family instability. It is possible that children in disadvantaged families, although they experience more family instability on average, are not as affected by instability—for better or for worse—as their more advantaged counterparts. ■

¹⁶U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States (126th Edition)*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006.

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³W. Sigle-Rushton and S. McLanahan, "Father Absence and Child Well-Being: A Critical Review," *The Future of the Family* 116 (2004): 120–22.

⁴For a review of studies of divorced families, see P. Amato, "Children of Divorce in the 1990s: An Update of the Amato and Keith (1991) Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Family Psychology* 15 (2001): 355–370. For an example of research on stepparent and blended families, see B. Ram and F. Hou, "Changes in Family Structure and Child Outcomes: Roles of Economic and Familial Resources," *The Policy Studies Journal* 31 (2003): 309–330.

⁵A. J. Cherlin, "American Marriage in the Early Twenty-First Century," *The Future of Children* 15, No. 2 (2005): 33–55.

⁶See, for example, G. J. Duncan, K. M. Ziol-Guest, and A. Kalil, "Early-Childhood Poverty and Adult Attainment, Behavior, and Health," *Child Development* 81, No. 1 (2010): 306–325.

⁷See, for example, Ram and Hou, "Changes in Family Structure and Child Outcomes."

⁸E. Dearing, K. McCartney, and B. A. Taylor, "Within-Child Associations between Family Income and Externalizing and Internalizing Problems," *Developmental Psychology* 42, No. 2 (2006): 237–252; and V. C. McLoyd, "The Impact of Economic Hardship on Black Families and Children: Psychological Distress, Parenting, and Socioemotional Development," *Child Development* 61, No. 2 (1990): 311–346.

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¹⁰J. Guryan, E. Hurst, and M. Kearney, "Parental Education and Parental Time with Children," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 22, No. 3 (2008): 23–46; and Elder and Shanahan, "The Life Course and Human Development."

¹¹J. A. Jacobs and F. F. Furstenberg, "Changing Places: Conjugal Careers and Women's Marital Mobility," *Social Forces* 64, No. 3 (1986): 714–732.

¹²See, for example, K. Magnuson and L. M. Berger, "Family Structure States and Transitions: Associations with Children's Well-Being During Middle Childhood," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71 (2009): 575–591.

¹³See, for example, Elder and Shanahan, "The Life Course and Human Development."

¹⁴N. Zill and J. L. Peterson, *Behavior Problems Index*, Child Trends, Washington, DC, 1986.

¹⁵The magnitude of the difference in initial behavior problems for those who experienced early change from a two-biological-parent to a single-parent family, compared to those who experienced no early change, is about the same for moderate-income families as for low-income families, but because of a higher standard error the effect for moderate-income families is not statistically significant.

¹⁶For research on low-income mothers, see S. Bzostek, S. McLanahan, and M. Carlson, "Mothers' Repartnering after a Nonmarital Birth," *Social Forces* 90, No. 3 (2012): 817–841; for research on married fathers' income, see S. L. Hofferth, "Residential Father Family Type and Child Well-Being: Investment Versus Selection," *Demography* 43, No. 1 (2006): 53–77.