

The Effect of Parental Divorce on the Offspring's Adult Health

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Introduction

The effects of parental divorce on offspring have been shown to stretch from early childhood, through adolescence, and into the adult years (Amato and Keith, 1991a; Amato, 2001). Moreover, the list of outcomes for children that are negatively effected by the divorce of their parents ranges widely from academic and socioeconomic attainment (Amato and Keith, 1991b; Wolfinger et al., 2003) to psychological well-being (Cherlin et al., 1998; Amato and Sobolewski, 2001) to the stability of their own romantic relationships and childbearing experiences (McLanahan and Bumpass, 1998; Teachman, 2002; Wu and Martinson, 1993). Given the numerous outcomes involved and the associated implications for life course trajectories, it is plausible that the long arm of parental divorce reaches into the adult years of the offspring to affect their health. We test this hypothesis using longitudinal data collected from a British cohort observed several times during their lives starting from birth, and ending with the most recent round when they reached age 50. A structure equation model is used to map the various pathways through which parental divorce can affect the health of the adult offspring. This analysis will show which indirect effects are most salient, and thus emphasize the particular consequences of family instability for the long-term well-being of children.

Data & Methods

We use data from the National Health and Child Development Study (NCDS) to assess the impact of parental divorce on the adult health of the offspring. The NCDS is a longitudinal study that targeted every birth in the United Kingdom that occurred during a single week in 1958. Subsequent waves of the survey were conducted at ages 7, 11, 16, 23, 33, 42, 46, and 50. These data contain measures of childhood family structure, childhood health, cognitive test scores, behavioral measures in adolescence, education, social class (i.e. major occupation categories), health behaviors (e.g. smoking and exercise), marital histories, and adult self-reported health. We use multiple imputation techniques to deal with item and wave missingness, and we estimate inverse probability weights to correct for sample attrition.

The NCDS data are used to estimate a structural equation model of paths that stem from childhood family structure and stretch through adolescence and into the adult years of the

cohort members. This approach allows us to assess the magnitude of the indirect effects of parental divorce on the adult health of offspring. Our analysis will decompose the gross effect of parental divorce into the components attributable to our mediating variables (such as behavioral measures, educational attainment, smoking behavior, and others). While we do not expect to find any direct effects of parental divorce, any effect that remains (net of the socioeconomic and behavioral covariates included in our model) will provide the foundation for future research to find the unobserved or omitted factors that connect parental divorce to our outcome of interest. We will also explore differences by gender, socioeconomic status of the family of origin, and subsequent relationship transitions of the parents.

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