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A National Longitudinal Study of Marital Disruption

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SYNOPSIS

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OBJECTIVES

The number of children living with divorced mothers more than doubled between 1970 and 1981, rising from 2.3 to 4.9 million. This increase occurred during a time period when the number of U.S. children under age 18 fell by 6 million, from 69 to 63 million. Clearly enormous increases have occurred in the proportion of children experiencing the disruption of their parents' marriage. Since the termination of one marriage is frequently followed by remarriage and remarriages not infrequently end in divorce, many children are exposed to a succession of family types. A snapshot view of American children indicates that in 1982, only 63 percent of U.S. children under age 18 were living with both of their biological parents. Twenty percent lived with their mother only, 2 percent with their father only, an estimated 10 percent lived with one biological parent and one step-parent; 2 percent lived with grandparents or other relatives, and 1 percent lived with foster parents, other non-relatives, or in an institution.

Despite this diversity of living arrangements among children and the rapid pace of change, few studies of this issue and no national data were available to explore the implications of marital disruption for children before the 1976 and 1981 waves of the National Survey of Children were conducted. The 1981 survey was conducted expressly to provide information on the antecedents and consequences of marital disruption among families with children. Specifically, the objectives of the project were:

- 1) To develop a profile of the behavioral and mental health characteristics of children at various stages in the marital disruption process; to examine changes in development and well-being as the disruption process moves through stages of family conflict, dissolution, and reconstitution.
- 2) To examine the influence of characteristics of the child, parents, and family situation that are thought to increase or decrease the risk of problems associated with marital disruption. Specific factors to be studied include: the sex of the child; the age of the child at the time of parental separation; personality characteristics of the child; parents' education and income levels; the emotional stability of the custodial parent; family size and composition; the availability of support from relatives or friends; the level of conflict before, during, and following the separation; custody, visitation, and support arrangements; and parental supervision and parent-child interaction patterns.

- 3) From the foregoing analysis, to develop a prognostic inventory of risk factors that will help to identify those groups of children who are most in need of preventive or ameliorative services.
- 4) Within the limitations of sample size, to develop outcome profiles and norms that will allow practitioners and policy-makers to compare children in specific areas or in particular intervention programs with a nationally-representative sample of children whose parents have undergone marital disruption.

SAMPLE

The data on which the analyses are based are from the National Surveys of Children. These surveys comprise two waves of a longitudinal study of U.S. children. The first wave, conducted in the fall and winter of 1976-77, was based on a national sample of children aged 7-11 at the time. Information was gathered on 2301 children in 1747 families. In cases where three or more children were eligible in one family, two were selected at random. Weights have been developed to take account of oversampling by race, as well as the number of eligible children in the family and minor discrepancies between sample and census distributions on age, sex, race and residence.

The questionnaires covered a wide range of variables describing the children and their environments: family background and mental health; cognitive, behavioral, and social development; and relations with parents and peers.

The second wave of the survey was conducted in the spring and summer of 1981. It was a follow-up of a subsample (N=1423) of the children, by then aged 11-16. The follow-up focused more specifically on marital disruption and its effects on children. For this purpose, the subsample was chosen to include all children in disrupted and high-conflict intact families as of the time of the first wave, and a subsample of those in low or moderate conflict families. Roughly half the children were in each of these broad groups. Additional weights were developed to take account of the subsampling procedures so that national estimates could again be made. Most of the same background and outcome measures were replicated, and new questions were added to describe family functioning and parent-child relations in even more detail.

One important difference in the design of the two surveys, necessitated by budget restrictions, was that most of the follow-up interviews were carried out by telephone. In order to be able to test their reliability, personal interviews were carried out with a random sample. Later statistical analysis revealed no detectable differences between telephone and personal interviews. That the quality of data was not impaired when data were collected by telephone is especially noteworthy since the median length of the parent interview was 70 minutes and the child interview, 35 minutes.

Data from both waves of the survey have been merged into one file making possible the construction of variables which take into account data from both times, as well as the prediction of events or circumstances at the time of the second wave from characteristics present at the time of the first one.

INSTRUMENTS

In order to obtain multiple measures of the children's characteristics and behavior, we obtained data from three sources: the children themselves, their parents, and their school teachers. Data were collected by interview (from the children and parents) and by mailed questionnaire (from the teachers). In addition, the child's questionnaire contained a shortened version of the Peabody Picture Vocabulary test, and interviewers were asked to provide several ratings of the parent and child based on their behavior during the interview. The questionnaires covered a wide range of variables describing the children and their environments: family background and functioning, school and neighborhood characteristics; the child's physical and mental health; cognitive, behavioral, and social development; and relations with parents and peers.

In the second wave of the survey, most of the same background and outcome measures were replicated, and new questions were added to describe family functioning and parent-child relations in even more detail as well as to cover some outcome areas -- such as drug use, delinquency, and sexual activity -- which are more relevant for children in early adolescence. As before, data were obtained from interviews with the children and parents, and through mailed questionnaires to teachers.

In particular, during the second survey extensive information was obtained from the adult respondent on her education, work experience, and marital history; questions were also asked about her health, contact with her family and friends, and support by extended kin. When she was in an intact

marriage or cohabiting with a partner, she was questioned about the quality of the relationship. When she was not part of an ongoing first marriage, a detailed chronology of the dissolution of the previous marriage(s) was collected as well as data on the current relationship between the respondent and her former spouse. Similar data were collected for remarried individuals who were currently living with a spouse.

Extensive information was also gathered on the experiences of the former spouse and his contact with the child. When the former spouse was not the child's biological father, separate questions were asked about the biological father and his relationship to the child. Both the parent and child interviews included numerous measures of current family relations. Parallel questions were asked of each respondent on the child's academic and social development, including several items tapping the child's school performance. Standard scales measuring maladaptive and pro-social behavior were included in the parent and child interviews. Children were also asked to report on the amount and type of social contact they had with each of their parents whether or not both parents were living in the home. When a remarriage had occurred, information was obtained regarding the child's relationship with both the step-parent and the absent parent.

Topical outlines of the questionnaires are given in Tables 1 and 2.

METHODS

Data for both waves of the survey were collected by the Institute for Survey Research at Temple University. The instruments were developed and improved through several pretests preceding each wave of the survey. Several quality control procedures were used to insure the integrity of the data. These steps included verification of the work of each interview, double coding of all questionnaires, double entry of all data onto magnetic tape, and elaborate cleaning procedures to identify and correct inconsistent or out-of-range codes on the tapes.

A variety of analytic methods have been used in our study of the data, depending on the purpose to be served. Factor analysis has been used mainly in the development of scales. Most of the bivariate analyses or simple multivariate analyses have been done with cross tabulations. And we have relied on regression techniques (especially multiple classification analysis) and analysis of variance for our more complicated multivariate analyses.

Where possible we have taken advantage of the longitudinal nature of the data set by using variables measured in Wave 1 to predict variables measured in Wave 2. In addition we have used data from both waves simultaneously to construct variables which categorize children according to the trajectories of their changing family situations.

FINDINGS

Children's Experience of Marital Disruption

Results from the 1981 National Survey of Children (NSC) indicate that by age 16, nearly two of five American children are not living with both of their biological parents.(1) Black youth are almost twice as likely not to be living with both parents. In addition, children from more recent birth cohorts are more likely to have experienced the dissolution of their parents' marriage, reflecting the dramatic upturn in divorce rates during the 1970s. Thus one quarter of the children born between 1965 and 1967 experienced disruption by age 12, compared with a third of those born in 1968 and 1969. In addition, black youth are far more likely not to be living with both parents. Overall, one-quarter of white children but two-fifths of black children have experienced marital disruption by age 12. If the children experiencing out-of-wedlock birth are included as experiencing a form of family disruption, the contrast is even greater. Among youth born in 1965-67, 24 percent of white but 50 percent of black youth did not live with both parents by age 12. Among youth born in 1968-69, 32 percent of white and 70 percent of black youth did not live with both parents at age 12.

For many youth, marital disruption is only the first transition they experience(1). Within five years, four out of seven white children but only one in eight black children have entered stepfamilies. More than a third of these stepfamilies subsequently dissolve. Although black marriages are more likely to dissolve, among those children who do experience marital disruption, whites go through more transitions, as their custodial parents are more likely to enter new marriages, and many of these later dissolve. Thus 72 percent of white youth aged 12-16 experience no marital transitions, compared with 59 percent for black youth. However, of youth experiencing any marital transitions, 54 percent of whites, compared with 29 percent of blacks, experience more than one transition. Overall, the NSC data indicate that one child in ten will face divorce, remarriage of the custodial parent, and subsequent redi-
vorce (1,3).

Only one in ten marital dissolutions experienced by the NSC children resulted from the death of a parent (1). Consequently, negotiating new relationships with the parent who is not in the same household (the "outside" parent), who may well not be on good terms with the custodial parent, is a potential problem. The data suggest, however, that for many families the issue either never arises or is resolved by an absence of contact.

Among children residing with one biological parent and having an outside parent who is alive, nearly one-third have had no contact with the absent parent within the past 5 years and an additional one-sixth have not seen their outside parent during the previous year. The remaining half who had seen their outside parent during the previous 12 months were distributed fairly evenly among those with low (less than 14 days), medium (14-51 days) and high (more than 51 days) levels of contact (2).

The data also show that these low levels of physical contact between children and their absent parents are not compensated for by phone calls or letter writing. For example, only 27 percent of the children report that they talk on the phone with the non-custodial parent once a week or more (3). Absent mothers are more likely to be in contact and to visit frequently than are absent fathers; however the sex of the child has no impact on whether absent parents keep in touch (1, 4), and there is no evidence of a trend toward greater contact among couples married more recently or among younger children (1).

Related results indicate that even those outside parents who maintain contact with their children play only a minor role in childrearing, this role is primarily a social or recreational one, and in most cases does not include a major caretaking or socializing function (4).

Given the high proportion of non-custodial parents who are not in contact with their children, it is possible that substantial numbers of grandparents on the non-custodial side lose contact with their grandchildren, while grandparents on the custodial side seem to be called on for additional financial and emotional assistance. Among divorced or separated parents, 68 percent receive some kind of assistance from their own parents, compared with 59 percent of those in intact first marriages. Also, 21 percent of divorced or separated parents receive financial, emotional and services support, compared with 4 percent for those in intact families. Correspondingly, divorced and never-married parents are more likely to include grandparents as members of their family when asked to list the people whom they "think about as family" (8).

Among children with step-fathers, those very or quite close to the step-father have more positive school outcomes and are much more satisfied with their families. However children

living with both biological parents are still more likely to be very satisfied with their families and more likely to be doing well in school even compared with those children in step-families who are very or quite close to their step-father (10).

From an historical perspective, divorce has only recently been a primary cause of marital disruption. So, norms for handling relationships with former family members have not yet fully developed in our society. Little direct communication or interaction between former spouses seems to occur following the termination of a marriage. In general it appears that most formerly married couples have little to do with each other and engage in parallel rather than cooperative parenting. Only a tiny fraction of the parents in the NSC who had experienced marital disruption had developed co-parenting arrangements. Considering only instances in which the absent parent kept in touch with his child, the data reveal a remarkably low level of joint decision-making and cooperative parenting. Nearly three-quarters of these outside parents were reported by the residential parent to have little or no influence or no involvement in decisions made regarding the child (2).

Consequences of Marital Disruption for Children's Attitudes, Behaviors, and Mental Health

What are the effects of marital disruption on the child's subsequent well-being? Much previous research has searched for simple, long-lasting negative effects under the assumption that divorce was a single uniform event with effects that are inevitably harmful. These early paradigms have been replaced by analyses of how and under what circumstances divorce alters the socialization and developmental process. Results from the current study suggest that divorce does have implications for children's well-being but that the effects are more moderate and more complex than previously assumed.

In general it can be concluded that the most positive outcomes for children are found among children raised by both of their biological parents in the context of a happy marriage. Children raised by one parent, a parent and step-parent or two parents in a conflict-ridden marriage are at a decided if not overwhelming disadvantage (6, 7, 10).

In terms of specific outcomes children who had experienced the disruption of their parents' marriage were more likely to have received psychological help or counseling or to be perceived as being in need of such help (6). Children of disruption were also more depressed or withdrawn, more antisocial, more impulsive or hyperactive and exhibited more serious behavior problems at school (7).

The levels of these mental and behavioral problems varied according to the post-disruption history of the custodial parent. Children, especially girls appeared to have more problems when living with a custodial parent who had remarried, compared with those living with single mothers. This was especially the case if the remarriage was recent. The worst outcome, in terms of needing psychological help, was for children living with a parent who had been divorced or separated after a second or subsequent marriage (6).

Marital disruptions also undermined children's relationships with their parents, especially their fathers, who were also most often the absent parents (4, 7). Given the extent to which physical contact between children and their absent parents is reduced and often terminated by marital disruption, these results are not surprising. Relationships with outside fathers appear to be less close than relationships with fathers who live with their children (7). More than half the children whose fathers are outside the home say they don't get all the affection they need from their fathers and nearly as many say they are only fairly or not at all close to their fathers (4). Those who saw their absent fathers frequently were not more positive than those who saw him infrequently; however those who had not seen their fathers at all during the previous year were considerably less favorable. While the relationship with outside mothers does not appear to be markedly worse than that with custodial mothers, the sample of outside mothers is too small to support clear conclusions.

Outside fathers were considerably less likely to be defined by their children as members of the family; only half of absent fathers were viewed as "family" by their children, compared with virtually all of the fathers residing with their children and even 70 percent of the stepfathers living with the child. In particular, absent fathers seen only 3 days annually or less were very unlikely to be viewed as family members by their children (4).

Factors Associated with Heightened Levels of Risk Among Children Experiencing Marital Disruption

Age

A number of factors have been identified that seem to moderate or exacerbate the effect of marital disruption on children. Children under the age of six at the time of the disruption seem to have more problems in school, and were substantially more likely to have received psychological help -- 31 percent versus 11 percent -- than were older children (6).

Conflict

Children exposed to marital conflict that involved physical violence prior to disruption were found to have more problems; however conflict between the parents after separation doesn't seem to affect child outcomes. In a related finding, conflict in intact families proved to be a powerful predictor of a variety of behavior problems. Among children in intact families the proportion needing or having received psychological help increased as the level of parental marital conflict increased. The need for help was substantially greater in cases of sustained high conflict, that is if a high level of marital conflict was present at both the first and the second interviews.

Sex

Boys generally exhibited higher levels of behavior problems in response to marital disruption than did girls. This was true for school behavior problems, antisocial behavior, impulsive/hyperactive behavior, and the need for psychological help (6, 7). The one major exception was depressed/withdrawn behavior, which was more prevalent in girls. It is unclear however, whether the greater susceptibility of boys had to do with aspects of the disruption itself, or rather to more general sex differences in vulnerabilities to these kinds of behavior problems.

The sex of the child also made a considerable difference depending on the post-disruption living arrangements. Boys living with their fathers appeared to be no worse off than boys living in intact families. But boys living with their mothers were much more likely to exhibit behavioral problems. For girls the situation was reversed -- those living with their mothers were only moderately affected whereas those with their fathers were especially adversely affected (7). Unfortunately, the small number of cases of children of either sex living with their fathers makes these conclusions quite tentative. In particular we do not know whether the differences are due to factors which select certain children to live with their fathers, or to the direct effects of living with a father rather than a mother.

Post-Disruption Stability

If the custodial parent was able to provide a stable post-disruption environment, the prevalence of behavior problems appeared to decline. Children of parents who were divorced, separated, or remarried throughout the period between the two surveys had a lower incidence of need for psychological help.

In contrast, those whose parents became divorced, or whose custodial parent remarried, or redivorced during the interval had higher levels (6).

Parents' Mental Well-Being

The parents emotional well-being also serves to moderate the impact of family structure on children. Not surprisingly, having a parent who reports that her own life is going well, that she is steady in her handling of the child, and that she hardly ever or never loses control of her feelings is related to fewer problems in school, greater satisfaction with family and the child's perception that his or her life is going very well. Even among children whose parents report moderate or high levels of personal well-being, however, those who have been experiencing marital disruption tend to have poorer school outcomes and to be less satisfied than those in intact families. Among parents whose own lives are not going well and who often feel depressed, the effect of family structure is less consistent (10). Thus the advantages associated with being raised by both biological parents again seem most clear among married parents who are happy and satisfied with their own lives.

Parent/Child Relationships

As noted earlier, parent/child relationships were found to deteriorate following disruption. Parent/child relationships were also found to be strongly related to a variety of child outcomes. Consequently, it might be supposed that children who maintain a positive relationship with parents in spite of the disruption might show better mental health and fewer behavior problems than those who did not. The NSC data confirmed this hypothesis, but the effects were not very strong. Controlling for the relationship reduced the effects of conflict and disruption, but large differences remained (7). Effects related to sex, age, and post-disruption living arrangements were all more important in influencing outcomes.

Contact With The Outside Parent and Parent/Child Relationships

Although the direction of the effect is uncertain, more contact is positively associated with a stronger relationship. More frequent contact between the absent parent and the child is related to children feeling that the outside parent's home is like their own home, feeling extremely or quite close to the outside parent, saying they often do things with the outside parent that they enjoy, and saying that they get all the affection from the outside parent that they want. For example,

87 percent of the children classified as having high contact reported feeling extremely or quite close, versus 44 percent classified as having very low or low contact (2).

Considering the effect of remarriage on the child's relationship with the outside parent, no evidence was found suggesting that remarriage affects patterns of communication, assessments of involvement, or problems in relating to the outside parent. In addition, contact with the outside parent was not found to undermine relations with the residential parents (4).

Socio-Economic and Demographic Variables

A number of socio-economic differentials can be found in the analysis of marital disruption and children. For example, black children are more likely to have experienced continued high conflict, to have lived with a continuously separated mother, and to have experienced the divorce of their parents. Children with poorly educated parents were more likely to experience a high conflict marriage, separation and divorce, continued separation, and, in the case of a remarriage, they are more likely to experience redisruption (6). The family income for children living with their mothers after a disruption is especially likely to be low in comparison with those in intact families. In spite of these differentials, however, introducing controls for socio-economic status does not substantially reduce the effects of disruption on children. In some cases it may even strengthen it (7).

Finally, while marital conflict and instability were clearly found related to children's need for psychological help and to a variety of behavior problems, it is important to note that most children who had experienced marital disruption had neither gotten nor needed psychological counseling, nor showed especially high levels of behavior problems. Of those children needing psychological help at the time of the first interview, the majority did not require help at the time of the second interview.

NEXT STEPS

Our results point to at least three areas of importance for future work on marital disruption and children. First, work is needed to confirm and further specify the age effect, that is, that the consequences of disruption appear to be especially harmful to preschool children. Does this finding hold up in all population subgroups and in other cultures? Does it apply to outcomes other than the ones we examined? Is the effect related to stages of social, psychological, and cognitive development in early childhood?

Second, among the factors associated with disruption, conflict appears to be one of the most important. Our data showed that persistent conflict was particularly harmful. In this regard a divorce or separation often brings a good measure of relief from high levels of conflict. How intense and/or how persistent must conflict be to have noticeable effects on children? Can parents successfully encapsulate their conflict so that children are unaware of it and are unaffected? If conflict ceases, will children begin to fare better? If so, how soon?

Finally, and more broadly, we feel that the effects of marital disruption on children can best be understood if disruption is viewed as a process rather than as an event. The process begins well before the separation or divorce and extends far beyond it. It is characterized by the levels and persistence of conflict, by the patterns of contact with the absent parent, by the patterns of parent/child relationships, and by the marital history of the custodial and non-custodial parent after the disruption. And it is affected by the child's own developmental stage. Thus future effects should be directed at identifying more precisely what variables (including these) are involved in the disruption process, how they influence child outcomes, and how they interact with each other.

NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHILDREN
1976 QUESTIONNAIRE
Topical Outline

Parent Questionnaire: Background Information

Marriage & family: marital history; household composition
Residence: residential history; neighborhood quality;
cost of housing
Marital relationship: happiness; conflict
Childrearing practices: self-evaluation; child care arrangements;
religious training; discipline; quality of relationship;
consistency
Health: mental; physical; emotional
Demographics: age, sex, education, income, employment, religion

Parent Questionnaire: Information About Child

Demographics: age; sex; ordinal position
Health: mental; physical; emotional; limiting conditions;
psychological help; doctor visits; characteristics at birth
Parent-child relationship: wantedness of child; quality of
relationship; difficult periods
Schooling: grade; performance; behavior; aspirations &
expectations; need for special resources
Behavior: use of time; delinquency; behavior problems
Socialization: friendships; social adjustment; social skills

Child Questionnaire

Health: mental; physical; emotional; self-esteem
Schooling: performance; behavior; aspirations & expectations;
extracurricular activities
Socialization: friendships; social adjustment
Behavior: usual activities
Parent-child relationship: discipline; conflict; rules &
responsibilities; quality of relationship; family activities
Attitudes: favorite activities; satisfaction with life

School Questionnaire

Classroom characteristics
Behavior: absences; need for discipline; social adjustment
Performance: grade placement; academic performance; need for
special resources; standardized test scores
Limiting conditions
Teacher characteristics

NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHILDREN
1981 QUESTIONNAIRE
Topical Outline

Parent Questionnaire: Background Information

Marriage & family: marital history; household composition
Residence: residential history; neighborhood quality
Patterns of socialization: friendships; kin contact; dating
Marital relationship: happiness; conflict; decision-making;
division of responsibilities; interaction
Childrearing practices: self-evaluation; difficulties
Relationship with former spouse: conflict; nature of disruption;
custody & visitation of children; financial arrangements
Attitudes: stepchildren; marriage & family life; satisfaction
with life
Health: mental; physical; emotional
Demographics: age, sex, education, income, employment, religion

Parent Questionnaire: Information About Child

Schooling: grade; performance; behavior; aspirations &
expectations
Socialization: friendships; social adjustment; social skills
Health: mental; physical; emotional; limiting conditions;
psychological help; doctor visits
Behavior: delinquency; behavior problems
Parent-child relationship: discipline; conflict; rules &
responsibilities; decision-making; quality of relationship;
difficult periods
Relationship between child and parent living outside of home:
communication; quality of relationship; childrearing

Child Questionnaire

Schooling: performance; behavior; aspirations & expectations;
extracurricular activities
Socialization: friendships; social adjustment
Health: mental; physical; emotional
Behavior: delinquency; dating & sexual activity; usual
activities; television viewing; drug use
Parent-child relationship: discipline; conflict; rules &
responsibilities; decision-making; quality of relationship;
family activities
Relationship between child and parent living outside of home:
interaction; quality of relationship; discipline
Attitudes: marriage & family life; favorite activities;
satisfaction with life
Perception of relationship between parents

Topical Outline (1981 Questionnaire) continued

School Questionnaire

Classroom characteristics

Behavior: absences; need for discipline; social adjustment

Performance: grade placement; academic performance; need for
special measures

Limiting conditions

Topical Outline (1981 Questionnaire) continued

School Questionnaire

Classroom characteristics

Behavior: absences; need for discipline; social adjustment

Performance: grade placement; academic performance; need for special measures

Limiting conditions

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