Parental Depression

According to a recent report from the National Academy of Sciences, at least 15 million children (about one in five) in the U.S. live in households with parents who have major or severe depression.

Importance

Parental depression negatively affects fathers' and mothers' caregiving, material support, and nurturance, and is associated with poor health and developmental outcomes for children of all ages, including prenatally.[1][2] Depressed mothers are more likely than non-depressed mothers to have poor parenting skills and to have negative interactions with their children.[3] Mothers who are depressed are less likely to use appropriate practices (such as using car seats, smoke alarms and covering electrical outlets) to prevent injury and harm among their children, and more likely to use corporal punishment.[4][5] Maternal depression is a significant risk factor for child abuse and neglect.[6] Low-income depressed mothers may also be less likely than their non-depressed peers to access public assistance.[7] The two factors most strongly associated with maternal depression, in turn, are intimate-partner violence, and mothers' health.[8]

Children of depressed mothers are more likely than other children to have behavior problems, academic difficulties, and health problems (including psychiatric illness).[9][10][11] Maternal depression has also been linked to delays in cognitive and motor development among children 28 to 50 months old.[12] Long-term, severe maternal depression has been found to have especially adverse consequences for child development and behavior.[13][14] Five-year-old children whose mothers experienced frequent and/or severe depression were more likely to have behavioral problems and lower vocabulary scores than those whose mothers had less chronic and/or severe depression.[15] Among families receiving welfare, children of depressed mothers have lower average scores on math achievement tests than do other children.[16]

One study found that when mothers are successfully treated for depression, their children also are less likely to be diagnosed with or show symptoms of depression.[17] The effects of maternal depression on child outcomes may also be moderated by higher levels of maternal sensitivity,[18] suggesting that policies aimed at increasing parental sensitivity, in addition to those reducing parental depression, may be effective in improving child outcomes. Another factor moderating the negative effects of maternal depression on child behavior may be enrollment in formal child care. A recent study found that as little as a half-day per week in formal child care at age two buffered the effects of recurrent maternal depression on children's behavior problems at age five.[19]

Depression among fathers has been less well-researched, but one study found that
depressed fathers were more likely than nondepressed fathers to report spanking their one-year-old children, and less likely to report reading to them.[20]

According to another study, depressed fathers were less likely to engage their child in activities, and more likely to exhibit stress/aggravation in parenting.[21] Research on the children of depressed mothers indicates that having a father who is also depressed is associated with worse outcomes for children and adolescents than those accompanying maternal depression alone.[22] On the other hand, a non-depressed father who is positively involved in parenting may compensate for a depressed mother's functioning, moderating the risk of the child's developing problem behaviors.[23]

Trends

According to a recent report from the National Academy of Sciences, at least 15 million children (about one in five) in the U.S. live in households with parents who have major or severe depression.[24] In 2011, four percent of all parents living in two-parent families with their children, and eight percent of single parents, reported two or more symptoms related to depression. While there has been no significant change in this proportion for parents living in two-parent families, among single parents, the rate of depressive symptoms fell between 2004 and 2007, then rose between 2007 and 2009. Due to the sampling procedure used to obtain our source data, comparisons with the overall population of parents are not available. (Figure 1) According to another data source, by the time children reach age 12, 39 percent of mothers, and 21 percent of fathers are likely to have experienced depression as parents.[25]

Differences by Family Type

Single parents are twice as likely to be depressed as parents living in two-parent families. In 2011, eight percent of single parents reported two or more symptoms related to depression, compared with four percent of parents living in two-parent households. (Figure 1)

Differences by Gender

When looking at single parents and parents in two-parent households separately, there is no significant difference in rates of depressive symptoms by gender. (Appendix 1)

Differences by Educational Attainment

Parents with at least a bachelor's degree are less likely than others to show two or more
symptoms of depression. In 2011, two percent of single parents with a bachelor's degree or higher reported such symptoms, compared with more than eight percent of single parents without a bachelor's degree. Among parents living in two-parent households, one percent with at least a bachelor's degree reported symptoms, compared with five percent or more among those without a bachelor's degree. (Figure 2)

Differences by Poverty and Receipt of Public Assistance

Parents living in households that are poor or receiving public assistance are much more likely than others to report symptoms of depression. Among single parents in 2011, 13 percent living in households with incomes below the federal poverty line reported symptoms of depression, compared with five percent of single parents at or above the poverty line. Eighteen percent of single parents living in households receiving TANF benefits (welfare) reported symptoms of depression, compared with seven percent of single parents in families that did not. In the same year, 13 percent of single parents who had at least one family member eligible to receive SNAP benefits (food stamps) reported symptoms of depression, compared with five percent of other single parents. A similar pattern is found among parents living in two-parent families. (Figure 3, Appendix 1)

State and Local Estimates

None available.

International Estimates

None available.

National Goals

Through its Healthy People 2020 initiative, the federal government has outlined a goal to decrease the percentage of adults who experience a major depressive episode, from 6.8
percent in 2008 to 6.1 percent in 2020. Additionally, they seek to increase the percentage of adults with depression who receive treatment, from 68.3 percent in 2008 to 75.1 percent in 2020, and increase depression screening by primary care providers.

More information is available at:


What Works to Make Progress on This Indicator

See Child Trends' LINKS database (“Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully”), for reviews of many rigorously evaluated programs, including the following which have been shown to be effective at reducing the risks to children from parental depression:

- Parent Education Group for Families Affected by Depression: http://www.childtrends.org/?programs=parent-education-group-for-families-affected-by-depression
- STOP Technique and Insight Program for Depression: http://www.childtrends.org/?programs=stop-technique-and-the-insight-program

Related Indicators

- Adolescents Who Felt Sad or Hopeless: http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=adolescents-who-felt-sad-or-hopeless
- Young Adult Depression: http://www.childtrends.org/?indicato

Definition

Parents are considered to exhibit symptoms of depression if they responded "all of the time" or "most of the time" to at least two of the following questions:

During the past 30 DAYS, how often did you feel...

1. So sad that nothing could cheer you up;
2. Nervous;
3. Restless or fidgety;
4. Hopeless;
5. That everything was an effort;
6. Worthless

Note: The National Center for Health Statistics, in partnership with Harvard Medical School, conducted a validity study to determine appropriate cut-points for these measures. The results from this study are available at:
http://www.hcp.med.harvard.edu/ncs/k6_scales.php

Note that this is not a definition of clinical depression, and these self-report data should not be taken to indicate levels of clinical depression in the population. Nevertheless, the relative incidence across subgroups is consistent with the research cited above.

Data Sources

Data for 1998-2011: Original analyses by Child Trends of the National Health Interview Survey.

Raw Data Source

National Health Interview Survey
http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm

Appendix 1 - Of Parents¹ Who Live With Their Children, Percentage Who Reported Two or More Depressive Symptoms² During the Past 30 Days, by Family Type³ and Selected Characteristics, 1998-2011

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Non-Hispanic black | 8.3 | 8.2 | 6.2 | 8.5 | 7.8 | 7.7 | 9.9 | 7.1 | 6.2 | 7.8 | 10.0 | 7.9 | 8.5 | 6.6
Hispanic | 9.1 | 7.2 | 8.5 | 11.3 | 9.0 | 10.2 | 10.6 | 10.0 | 9.0 | 8.5 | 7.2 | 10.5 | 7.3 | 9.1
Poverty Status
At or above poverty level | 6.5 | 6.1 | 5.8 | 7.8 | 5.2 | 6.7 | 7.2 | 6.2 | 6.2 | 4.5 | 5.4 | 7.2 | 4.6 | 5.3
Below poverty level (Single Parents) | 14.5 | 13.7 | 14.3 | 17.3 | 13.5 | 15.1 | 15.3 | 16.1 | 11.3 | 12.3 | 14.8 | 16.1 | 14.9 | 13.2
Education
Some high school or less | 13.9 | 10.8 | 10.3 | 15.1 | 12.6 | 14.7 | 12.5 | 12.6 | 12.2 | 10.1 | 14.3 | 13.1 | 11.1 | 11.0
High school graduate/ GED or equivalent recipient | 9.5 | 8.8 | 8.8 | 8.7 | 7.8 | 9.7 | 12.3 | 11.9 | 10.2 | 7.0 | 7.6 | 9.4 | 9.9 | 9.9
Some college, no degree/AA degree | 8.3 | 6.3 | 7.4 | 10.4 | 6.9 | 8.0 | 8.2 | 8.3 | 6.5 | 7.2 | 7.1 | 10.5 | 7.5 | 8.4
Bachelor's degree or higher | 3.8 | 3.5 | 2.3 | - | 3.0 | 3.9 | 5.0 | 3.6 | - | - | 3.3 | 5.0 | 3.3 | 2.3
TANF (welfare) receipt
At least one family member received income from TANF (welfare) | 15.9 | 14.5 | 15.9 | 18.6 | 18.1 | 19.9 | 18.9 | 23.4 | 17.9 | 14.0 | 21.5 | 19.2 | 16.2 | 17.5
No one in family received income from TANF (welfare) | 7.8 | 6.3 | 6.7 | 8.8 | 6.6 | 8.2 | 8.8 | 8.2 | 7.1 | 6.1 | 6.5 | 8.7 | 7.1 | 7.2
Food Stamps/SNAP
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Region:

Northeast: 12.4 6.4 7.4 10.8 6.7 9.3 6.7 12.7 9.9 6.5 6.5 8.6 7.8 6.7
Midwest: 9.3 7.2 8.9 8.0 9.4 8.9 9.7 8.3 9.0 6.7 6.2 12.2 6.4 8.4
South: 8.2 8.8 8.2 10.3 7.3 10.4 11.5 9.5 8.1 6.6 9.0 8.0 9.2 9.4
West: 9.0 7.8 6.4 11.0 8.7 8.1 9.1 8.7 5.6 8.3 9.3 11.1 8.2 7.4

Parents in two-parent households:

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Gender:

Male: 3.3 2.2 3.0 2.7 2.8 3.0 2.9 2.8 2.9 3.0 2.8 3.7 3.4 3.4
Female: 4.0 3.8 3.6 4.0 3.6 4.0 4.1 3.4 3.5 3.5 3.7 3.4 3.5 3.9

Age group:

18-24: 6.3 3.2 6.5 6.1 4.6 3.5 5.9 5.9 5.1 5.4 - - 9.1 6.0
25-34: 3.9 2.9 3.1 3.6 2.6 4.3 3.5 3.5 3.3 3.8 3.6 4.1 3.9 4.0
35-44: 3.1 2.9 2.5 2.9 3.2 2.7 3.3 2.7 2.6 2.9 3.3 3.6 2.5 3.4
45+: 3.9 3.2 4.5 3.3 3.6 3.7 3.3 2.7 3.8 2.7 3.0 3.2 3.3 3.1

Race/Hispanic origin:

Non-Hispanic white: 3.2 2.8 3.5 3.3 3.1 3.4 3.5 2.9 3.3 2.8 3.5 4.5 3.8 4.1
Non-Hispanic black: 5.5 4.6 2.5 3.4 4.1 3.6 4.2 4.6 2.9 3.3 3.5 3.5 4.1 3.5
Hispanic: 5.1 3.8 3.0 4.3 3.3 4.0 3.8 3.7 3.3 3.3 3.3 3.5 3.4 3.8

Poverty Status:

At or above poverty level: 3.3 2.8 3.1 3.1 2.9 3.1 2.9 2.7 2.7 2.5 2.6 3.0 2.8 2.8
Below poverty: 11.5 5.8 0.4 0.8 5.6 0.4 0.8 10.1 10.7 11.5 10.8 3.0 2.1 2.0
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No one in family authorized to receive food stamps/SNAP

Region

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¹Parents are defined as parents of children under age 18, residing with one or more of their children.

²Depressive symptoms include the following: felt sad, hopeless, worthless, restless, or that everything was an effort all of the time or most of the time during the past 30 days.

³Because depressive symptom data were obtained from a randomly chosen adult within a household, data for single parents and parents in two-parent households cannot be combined.

⁴Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race.


Endnotes


[13] Ibid.


[15] Ibid.


depressive symptoms and child care during toddlerhood related to child behavior at age 5 years. *Pediatrics*. Published online, June 13, 2011.


[25] Dav