

PAA Submission – Sept 2007

Title: The Impact of Parental Marital Disruption on Children's Performance in School

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Short abstract (150 words)

Although it is well-documented that children from divorced or single-parent families perform more poorly in school than children from stable, two-parent families, less is known about how the timing of divorce is linked to declines in school performance. In this paper, we examine the temporal link between parents' marital dissolution and the odds that a child is retained a grade in school using the Baltimore Parenthood Study, a thirty-year longitudinal study that has tracked the lives of inner-city families. Using logistic regression and hazard analysis, we show that the odds that a child is held back in school increase dramatically around the time of marital termination, including the pre-separation turmoil period and the post-separation crisis period.

Long abstract

Title: The Impact of Parental Marital Disruption on Children's Performance in School

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Given the rising significance of education in today's labor market, researchers and policymakers alike have become increasingly interested in the ways in which families shape students' performance in school. Numerous studies have documented that both those children who have never lived in a two-parent household and those children who have experienced the disruption of their parents' marriage have significantly worse outcomes in school than children from stable two-parent homes. For example, researchers have found that children living in alternative family structures or transitioning between family structures via separation or divorce have, on average, significantly lower test scores and grades, increased likelihood of being held back, lower attendance while enrolled, decreased likelihood of graduating high school, and lower educational attainment than their peers in stable, two-parent homes (Pribesh and Downey 1999, Axinn, Duncan, and Thornton 1997, Entwisle, Alexander, and Horsey 1997, McLanahan and Sandefur 1994, Sandefur, McLanahan, and Wojtkiewicz 1992; Kiernan 1992; Astone and McLanahan 1991, Cherlin et al 1991).

However, in the case of divorce, we know little about how the timing of such an event shapes schooling trajectories. Does divorce or separation have an immediate impact on children's grades or do the effects appear later in schooling, if at all? Does the conflict that precedes divorce affect students' performance or is the actual separation or divorce the primary influence? Is the turmoil of marital dissolution reflected in a concurrent decline in academic performance?

In this analysis, we examine the question of whether and how marital dissolution influences children's performance in school using a unique, longitudinal dataset: the Baltimore Parenthood Study, started by Frank Furstenberg in the late 1960s. Spanning more than three decades of the lives of a cohort of teenage mothers and their first-born children, The Baltimore Study is ideal for examining the relationship between the disruptive events in mothers' lives and the life course of children. Moreover, the Baltimore Study contains data on one of the more detrimental events that can occur in a student's educational career: grade retention. Not only is retention an important marker of current difficulties and an excellent predictor of future ones, but the study of grade retention allows us to focus on a more immediate relationship between divorce and school problems than measures of educational attainment.

Theoretical background

There is a substantial body of research linking both family structure and changes in family structure, particularly through marital dissolution, with poor educational outcomes. Several studies show that children who grow up in a single-parent household have worse outcomes at many points in their educational trajectories than children from two-parent homes. Likewise, changes in family structure via divorce or separation have been shown to negatively impact children's educational achievements across various points in their educational careers. In general, children who experience a divorce have lower eventual educational attainment than their

peers who experienced no divorce (Sandefur and Wells 1999; Axinn, Duncan, and Thornton 1997).

However, there has been little study of temporal aspects of this relationship. We know that divorce matters for children's and adolescents' performance in school, yet we do not know much about how the *timing* of separation and divorce influences school outcomes. The handful of studies that have examined temporal aspects have tended to focus on a small window of time, such as the high school years. For example, Sandefur, McLanahan, and Wojtkiewicz (1992) found that adolescents whose parents divorced in the high school years were less likely to graduate from high school than those whose family structure was stable throughout. Similarly, in examining a cohort of eighth grade children of intact families, Pong and Ju (2000) found that students who experience a divorce in high school are two to three times more likely to drop out before completing their degree, although they conclude that these effects are highly accounted for by income, demographic, and prior schooling factors.

Understanding the temporal link between household dissolution and student performance is essential to untangling the mechanisms through which such disruptions influence children's and adolescents' lives. As Hanson et al. write, "Identifying the timing of changes associated with divorce is particularly important for understanding how divorce influences the resources available to children and subsequently influence child welfare" (1998: 330). In the analyses that follow, we not only ask whether separations affect grade retention, but also whether the timing of these events matters. Drawing on the literature cited above, we hypothesize that children's difficulties in school will be concentrated around the time that parental divorce occurs.

Data

The Baltimore Study is a thirty-year longitudinal study (1966-1996) that has tracked the lives of inner-city families in which children were born to teenage mothers. At several points over the past three decades, extensive demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal data in the areas of work, education, family, social service utilization, and community factors have been collected from three generations (for more detail, see Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, and Morgan 1987). Most importantly for this analysis, complete life histories have been collected for both mother and child from the child's birth through the mid-1990s, when the children were in their late 20s.

Measures and Methods

We have chosen to examine grade retention as our outcome in this analysis, as grade retention is a critical event in the educational life course, with influence on a number of other realms of life. Numerous studies in education have shown that grade retention is both an important marker of current educational difficulties and an excellent predictor of future outcomes and eventual educational attainment (Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabani 2001; Brooks-Gunn, Guo, and Furstenberg 1993). We examine whether or not the child was ever held back a grade in his/her schooling career. The measure we use in these analyses is drawn from mothers' reports about their children's grade retention. In the 1983-4 interview, mothers were asked what grades, if any, their children had repeated for any reason. We examine only the first occurrence of grade retention in these data. We restrict to the first retention because many schools maintained policies that limited students to one failure before high school.

Our primary predictor, in both our logistic regressions and hazard analysis, is whether a child's parents separate. We use the date of divorce only in those cases where the date of separation is unavailable, as the separation represents the point at which the household structure changes and at which the marital change would influence family stress, decline in economic resources and a decrease in parental attention.

Preliminary Results and Expected findings

Our analysis begins with an examination of the adolescents' educational paths, describing how many students repeated a grade and which grades were repeated. Grade failure was hardly a rare event in this population, as almost as many students failed at least one grade as passed all. Overall, 115 of the 245 cases (47% of the sample) were held back at least once.

We next explore the relationship between divorce and students' odds of grade retention through multivariate analysis. We anticipate that we will find a relationship between parental divorce and the odds of being held back in school. Preliminary results from our multivariate regression models confirm our hypotheses and indicate a significant negative impact of divorce on the likelihood of being retained. These effects are robust with respect to model specification and whether we use controls for ability before entering school, as measured by scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), or in eighth grade, based on grade point average for academic courses in that year. Notably, the effect of divorce on children's schooling trajectories varies significantly by gender, with boys and girls reacting differently to the marital disruption.

In our initial examinations of the relationship of the timing of divorce or separation and grade retention, we find that the great majority of retentions occur in a five-year period that begins two years before divorce. Our preliminary hazard analyses include a set of child- and mother-level controls, with a measure of separation or divorce as a time-varying predictor. Results from these models show that separation or divorce has a profound and near-immediate impact on children's performance in school.

We expect that these analyses will show that events in parents' lives may have a sharp and significant impact on the lives of children. Although researchers have long known that children from divorced or single-parent families do worse in school than those from two-parent families, this paper advances our understanding of how timing matters. The results presented here show a substantial increase in the likelihood of grade retention starting two years before separation or divorce, lasting three years following the event.

The findings from this study will enrich our understanding of how parental life events influence children's educational outcomes, and particularly whether some of these events have lagged and lasting effects on children. They should contribute to our knowledge of the pathways of intergenerational transmission of advantage and disadvantage, and help policy makers and educators in their efforts to improve the academic performance of adolescents at risk for educational failure by identifying the times in which extra support may be crucial due to family circumstances that seep into the classroom.

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