

Does the Experience of Parental Separation Matter? Differentials by Separation and Parent Absence in Norway.

Authors: Pauline Kleinschlömer^{1*}, Lara Bister^{2,3}

¹ Federal Institute for Population Research, Wiesbaden, Germany

² ECPD Einstein Center Population Diversity, Berlin, Germany

³ WZB Social Science Center Berlin, Research Group Health and Social Inequality, Berlin, Germany

* Corresponding author: Pauline Kleinschlömer, pauline.kleinschloemer@bib.bund.de

Research consistently shows that children growing up in single-parent households have poorer outcomes across a range of well-being dimensions than children growing up with both parents. The literature identifies two key drivers of reduced well-being among children residing in single-parent families. (1) A reduction in emotional and financial resources available for the children; (2) An increase in stress during the period of parental separation, which may be caused by factors such as parental conflict or a lack of contact with the non-resident parent. We aim to contribute to the existing literature by comparing the school outcomes of children living in a single-parent family who have experienced parental separation by the age of 10 with those born into a single-parent family. We draw on Norwegian register data and use sequence analysis to identify different clusters of family structure transitions up to the age of 10. This encompasses children who have resided in a single-parent family continuously up to the age of 10, children who have transitioned to a single-parent family, and children who have transitioned to a stepfamily. Next, we compare the math and reading scores of children who have lived in a single-parent family continuously from birth to age 10 with the school performance of children who have experienced parental separation up to age 10. This will enhance our understanding of whether the lack of resources is a contributing factor to children's diminished well-being or whether the experience of parental separation itself is a factor influencing children's well-being.

Extended abstract

Does the Experience of Parental Separation Matter? Differentials by Separation and Parent Absence in Norway.

Background

Introduction / Problem statement

Family structures in the global north have changed drastically in recent decades, shifting from “traditional” two-parent families following male breadwinner and female caretaker norms towards a greater diversity of family structures. Although contemporary family arrangements increasingly include post-separation families such as single-parent or stepfamilies (Thomson, 2014), family policies continue to prioritize the two-parent family as the norm, thereby neglecting the needs of families, and particularly children, experiencing diverging realities. At the same time, research consistently shows worse outcomes in various areas of well-being in children growing up in single-parent households compared to those growing up with both of their parents (Amato, 2014; McLanahan et al., 2013; Raley & Sweeney, 2020). This contradictory research-policy framework highlights the societal relevance of research on child well-being in the context of family instability, in order to identify the drivers of social stratification in relation to the diversity of family structures and thus to reduce social inequality.

In the context of family instability, the literature identifies two key drivers of child wellbeing: resource theory and stress theory. According to the resource theory, the children may lose the benefits of the additional income and social support that a second parental figure can provide, if a parent leaves the family home following a separation (Manning & Lamb, 2003; Sweeney, 2010). As research has shown a negative association between family income and children’s well-being (Cooper & Stewart, 2021), it can be argued that financial strain may result in a decline in children’s well-being for children living in single-parent families. In addition, parents under economic stress may struggle to provide adequate levels of support and control (Conger et al., 2010; Wadsworth & Berger, 2006), which may lead to reduced emotional resources in children. Single parents often face the dual demands of fulfilling both caregiving and breadwinning roles, which may limit the amount of time they can spend with their children (Magnuson & Berger, 2009). This may result in less time for playing together and less time for assistance with homework or shared bedtime routines, which may in turn lead to reduced well-being. A second approach that tries to explain the differences in children’s well-being before and after parental separation is stress. Family transitions are often considered a stressful event for children, which can lead to worse well-being. In his divorce-stress-adjustment model Amato (2010) identified five groups of potential stressors that may lead to lower well-being in children

living in a single-parent family: (1) financial strain; (2) parental conflicts; (3) decline in parenting skills due to excessive demands on the parent; (4) lack of contact with the non-resident parent; (5) possible further changes due to moving, changing schools, or loss of friends.

However, these mechanisms have rarely been explicitly tested and the answer to the question of what drives child well-being in post-separation families remains unclear. Since so far empirical support for emotional and financial resources as potential drivers remains surprisingly modest, there is a need to further investigate the role of these mechanisms (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2019).

Objective

We aim to contribute to this discussion by analyzing the well-being of children living in two different single-parent family households: (1) children who were born into a single-parent household or (2) children who experience a transition from a two-parent household to a single-parent household between the ages of 0 and 10, leading to our research question: Does child's well-being in single-parent families differ depending on whether the child has experience parental separation or not? This comparison between children living in a single-parent family who have experienced parental separation by age 10 and children born into a single-parent family improves our understanding of whether the lack of resources contributes to children's diminished well-being or whether the experience of parental separation itself influences children's well-being.

Methods

Data and study population

We used full population data from the Norwegian population registers, provided by Statistics Norway. Due to the availability of our outcome variable, the data in our sample covers the period from 2012–2017.

Variables

Our **main dependent variables** were children's ability tests, more specifically national test scores in math and reading in grade 5, when most children are aged 10. Since 2007, this mandatory test is conducted by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training and aims to monitor the learning outcomes of students in the Norwegian school system. In order to ensure comparability across years, a variable indicating percentile ranks for maths and reading scores, respectively, was generated for each school year, ranging from 0 to 100. A percentile rank of 50 represents the median grade of the respective school year. Values below 50 indicate a grade that is worse than the median, while values above 50 indicate a grade that is better than the median.

Our **main independent variable** was children's family transition history, specifically whether the child has experienced parental separation or not. Thereby, we differentiated between children born into a single-parent family and children who transitioned from a two-parent family to a single-parent family up to age 9.

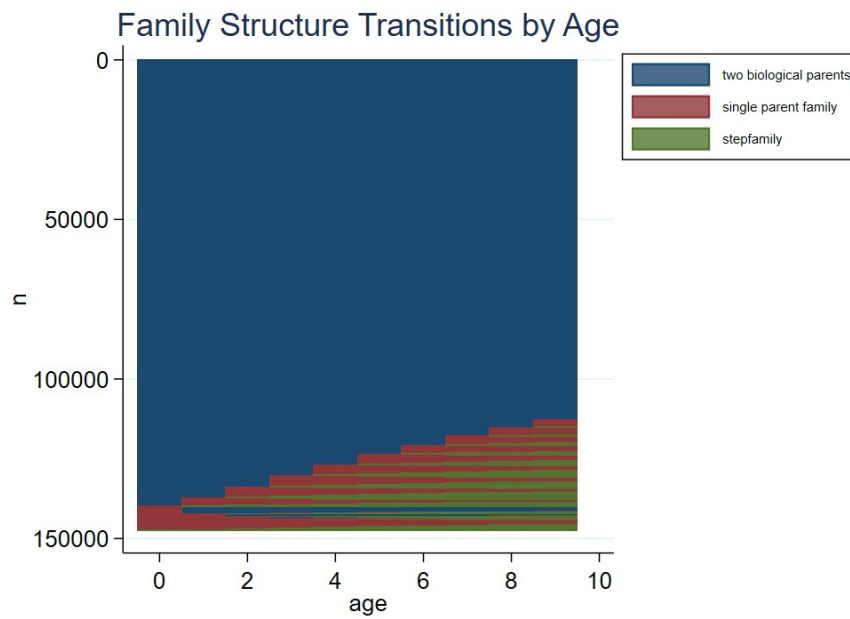
Analytical strategy

In the preliminary analysis, conducted a sequence analysis to identify clusters of family structure transition histories. In the next step, we will analyse the effect of the predefined cluster of family structure transition history on children's maths and reading scores. Our comparison group consists of children who were born in a single-parent family and remained in a single-parent family until the age of 10 (n = 1,354). Their school performance is compared with that of children with different family transition histories identified by sequence analysis.

Preliminary results

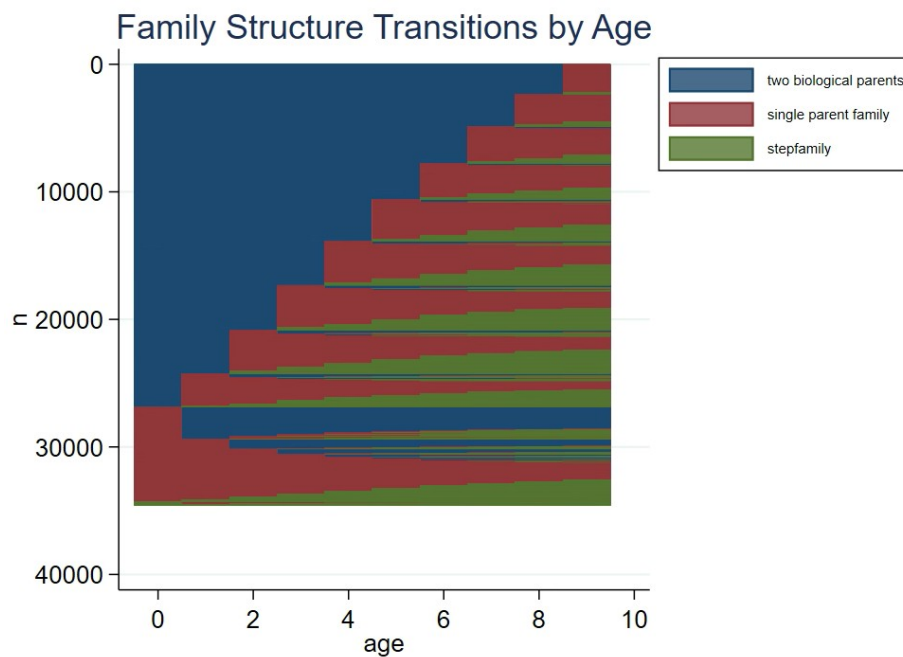
As a first step, the sequence analysis of the total sample shows that the majority of children (76.57%) grow up with their two biological parents until the age of 10 (see Figure 1). Figure 2 shows the family structure transition history of children living in a single-parent family up to the age of 10. Of these children, 59.39% experience parental separation and continue to live in a single-parent family up to the age of 10. 29.20% transition to a stepfamily after living in a single-parent family. 2.36% transition directly to a stepfamily without any episode of living in a single-parent family. 3.92% are born into a single-parent family and continue to live in a single-parent family up to age 10. These are our comparison group. In the next step, we compare their school performance with the math and reading scores of children with different transition patterns to see if the experience of parental separation matters.

Figure 1: Children's Family Structure Transition Histories up to Age 10 in Norway



Data source: Norwegian Population Register Data (Authors' own estimations.)

Figure 2: Children's Family Transition Histories of Children who Experience Family Structure Transitions up to Age 10 in Norway.



Data source: Norwegian Population Register Data (Authors' own estimations.)

References

- Amato, P. R. (2010). Research on Divorce: Continuing Trends and New Developments. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), 650–666. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00723.x>
- Amato, P. R. (2014). The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children: An Update. *Drustvena Istrazivanja*, 23(1), 5–24. <https://doi.org/10.5559/di.23.1.01>
- Cavanagh, S., & Fomby, P. (2019). Family Instability in the Lives of American Children. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 45(1), 493–513. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073018-022633>
- Conger, R. D., Conger, K. J., & Martin, M. J. (2010). Socioeconomic Status, Family Processes, and Individual Development. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), 685–704. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00725.x>
- Cooper, K., & Stewart, K. (2021). Does Household Income Affect children's Outcomes? A Systematic Review of the Evidence. *Child Indicators Research*, 14, 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-020-09782-0>
- Magnuson, K., & Berger, L. M. (2009). Family Structure States and Transitions: Associations With Children's Wellbeing During Middle Childhood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 71(3), 575–591. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2009.00620.x>
- Manning, W. D., & Lamb, K. A. (2003). Adolescent Well-Being in Cohabiting, Married, and Single-Parent Families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65(4), 876–893. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2003.00876.x>
- McLanahan, S., Tach, L., & Schneider, D. (2013). The Causal Effects of Father Absence. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 39(1), 399–427. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-071312-145704>
- Raley, R. K., & Sweeney, M. M. (2020). Divorce, Repartnering, and Stepfamilies: A Decade in Review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82(1), 81–99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12651>
- Sweeney, M. M. (2010). Remarriage and Stepfamilies: Strategic Sites for Family Scholarship in the 21st Century. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), 667–684. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00724.x>
- Thomson, E. (2014). Family Complexity in Europe. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 654(1), 245–258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716214531384>

Wadsworth, M. E., & Berger, L. E. (2006). Adolescents Coping with Poverty-Related Family Stress: Prospective Predictors of Coping and Psychological Symptoms. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 35(1), 54–67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-005-9022-5>