

Abstract

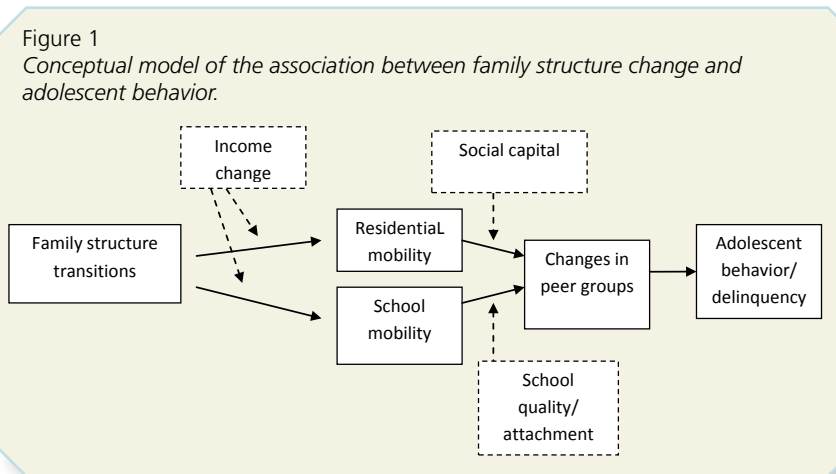
Adolescents who experience repeated change in family structure as parents begin and end romantic unions are more likely than adolescents in stable family structures to engage in aggressive, antisocial, or delinquent behavior. This paper examines whether the link between family structure instability and behavior in adolescence may be explained, in part, by the residential and school mobility that are often associated with family structure change. Nationally-representative data from a two-generation study are used to assess the relative effects of instability and mobility on the mother-reported externalizing behavior and self-reported delinquent behavior of adolescents who were 12 to 17 years old in 2006. Results reveal residential and school mobility explain the association of family structure instability with each outcome, and these factors, in turn, are explained by children's exposure to poor peer networks.

Introduction

The experience of family structure instability is associated with behaviors in adolescence that potentially lead to disadvantaged entry into adulthood. Existing conceptual models of why family structure instability is consequential for children and adolescents drawn from theories of family stress, family conflict, and family systems. While family is an essential component of the social context that shapes children's and adolescents' behavior, extrafamilial relationships that youth establish with other adults and with peers also have a significant influence on the likelihood of engaging in behaviors that are prosocial or carry some risk to overall well-being (Bearman & Brueckner, 2001; Ryan, 2000). In addition, evidence indicates that residential mobility can be detrimental for adolescents outside of two-parent families. More broadly, the experience of simultaneous or closely-spaced transitions in school, family, and developmental domains is associated with lower self-esteem and poorer school engagement among young adolescents compared to the experience of sequenced, more widely-spaced transitions (Simmons et al., 1987).

Data and Methods

This study includes two-generation data from NLSY79 and CNLSY, 1986-2006. Together, data include



information on mother's union transitions; children's history of residential and school mobility; children's peer relationships; and children's externalizing behavior and delinquent behavior. Descriptive, multivariate research methods are used, including ordinary least squares regression and negative binomial regression. Outcome measures at each wave of the CNLSY include child externalizing behavior for adolescents aged 12-14 and delinquent behavior for adolescents aged 12-17 in 2006. The analysis is constrained to consider the effects of family structure change and mobility since 1998. Different interview protocols are used for respondents classified as young adolescents (<15) or as older adolescents (15+). The analytic sample includes 527 young adolescents and 800 older adolescents.

Data Source

1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and Children of NLSY79 (N=1327).

Key findings:

- Among teens, the effect of family instability on externalizing and delinquent behavior is explained by co-occurring residential and school changes.
- The negative effect of residential and school change is explained by mobile adolescents' entry into high pressure peer groups.

“Environmental changes that co-occur with family instability may have distinct and far-reaching consequences for adolescents.”

This project was supported with a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, grant number 5 U01 AE000001-03. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the author(s) and should not be construed as representing the opinions or policy of any agency of the Federal government.

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For a full listing of sources, please visit the NCFMR website: http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/working_papers/file78714.pdf

Fomby's brief is based on a paper that is part of NCFMR's Working Paper Series: <http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/page78702.html>

The National Center for Family & Marriage Research, established in 2007 by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, aims to improve our understanding of how marriage and family structure affect the health and wellbeing of families, adults, children and communities and to inform policy development and programmatic responses.

Two indicators of behavioral adjustment are used, including mother- and self-reports. Key independent variables include family structure instability, residential mobility, school mobility, and peer network quality. Explanatory variables include income, social capital, school quality, and behavior problems.

Results

Adolescents who have experienced a family structure change since 1998 have also made more residential and school transitions and are relatively disadvantaged compared to those children in stable family structures. Adolescents facing family instability have moved more than twice as often and have attended 3.69 schools on average, compared to 3.25 schools for other adolescents. Almost twice as many young adolescents report experiencing peer pressure from friends when they have experienced family structure instability (15 percent vs. 8 percent for young adolescents in stable families).

While the groups are similar in their household income in 1998, those who have experienced family structure instability have experienced income gains about one-third the size of those in stable arrangements (an 11-percentage point increase for the any transitions group compared to a 30.5 percentage point increase for the stable group). Those who have experienced parental union transitions have less frequent social contact with friends and family (p<.10), and adolescents who have experienced family structure change have dropped out of high school at twice the rate of other adolescents.

Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of the data is the completeness of available data for family structure transition history and school mobility, whereas an important

data limitation is the lack of information on the timing of local residential moves. Family structure instability and mobility may coexist as expressions of a parent's underlying behavioral traits.

Policy Implications

Adolescents fare better if they can maintain their social environment following a change in family structure, that is, stay in the same school and neighborhood. For those adolescents who do experience social and family structure change, schools can help students foster friendships by creating peer-to-peer programs (e.g., matching a new student to someone with similar interests who can show the student around) and keeping track of new students' participation in organized school activities.

Table 1
Unweighted descriptive statistics, overall and by whether adolescent has experienced any family structure change.

Source: 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and Children of NLSY, 1979-2006

Variable	Overall		No Change		Any Change	
	Mean/ Prop.	SD	Mean/ Prop.	SD	Mean/ Prop.	SD
Outcome measures						
2006 Externalizing BPI score (age<=14)	100.58	14.69	99.74	13.82	103.37	17.06 *
2006 self-reported delinquency, average (range=0-2, age<=14)	0.38	0.41	0.36	0.40	0.46	0.43 *
2006 self-reported delinquency, average (range=0-2, age=15-17)	0.47	0.48	0.44	0.47	0.53	0.51 *
Change in adolescent's lives, 1998-2006						
Family structure transitions, 1998-2006	0.45	0.92				
Number of residences, 1998-2006	1.06	1.61	0.79	1.37	1.84	1.96 *
Number of schools, lifetime	3.34	1.50	3.23	1.44	3.69	1.61 *
Any peer pressure from friends (age<=14)	0.10		0.08		0.15	*
Any peer pressure from friends (age15-17)	0.24		0.23		0.26	
Control variables						
Adolescent is black	0.31		0.26		0.46	*
Young adolescent's age (12-14)	12.75	0.72	12.72	0.71	12.78	0.75
Older adolescent's age (15-17)	15.99	0.81	15.96	0.81	16.07	0.80
Adolescent is male	0.52		0.53		0.51	
Mother is single in 2006	0.29		0.19		0.59	*
Mother is cohabiting in 2006	0.03		0.00		0.13	*
Young adolescent's closeness to mother (1-4, 4=extremely close)	3.77	0.57	3.76	0.58	3.81	0.54
Older adolescent's closeness to mother	3.55	0.74	3.57	0.71	3.49	0.83
Mother has < HS diploma	0.12		0.09		0.20	*
Mother has HS diploma	0.42		0.40		0.46	
Mother has > HS education	0.46		0.51		0.34	*
Mother is unemployed in 2006	0.23		0.22		0.23	
Explanatory factors						
1998 income as % of FPL	169.86	33.26	170.50	32.46	167.97	35.50
Difference in HH income as % of FPL, 1998-2006	25.73	36.53	30.51	31.28	11.55	46.15 *
Mother's eval of child's school quality, average score (1-4) (age<=14)	3.28	0.69	3.32	0.67	3.15	0.75 *
# of adolescent's friends mother knows (age<=14)	1.97	1.08	1.85	1.00	2.36	1.25 *
Mom's frequency of family/friend visits (range=1-7, age<=14)	3.34	1.22	3.39	1.18	3.16	1.34 ^
Adolescent has positive view of school (age=15-17)	0.12		0.13		0.09	
Adolescent dropped out of HS	0.03		0.03		0.06	*
1998 externalizing BPI score	98.01	8.11	97.49	7.67	99.55	9.12 *
Mother's 1980 illegal activities score (0-27)	2.68	3.85	2.54	3.61	3.08	4.47 *
Mother unmarried at adolescent's birth	0.20		0.15		0.35	*
Number of family structure transitions before 1998	0.31	0.69	0.21	0.56	0.61	0.92 *
N	1327		993		334	

Between-group differences significant at *p<.05, ^p<.10