

Abstract

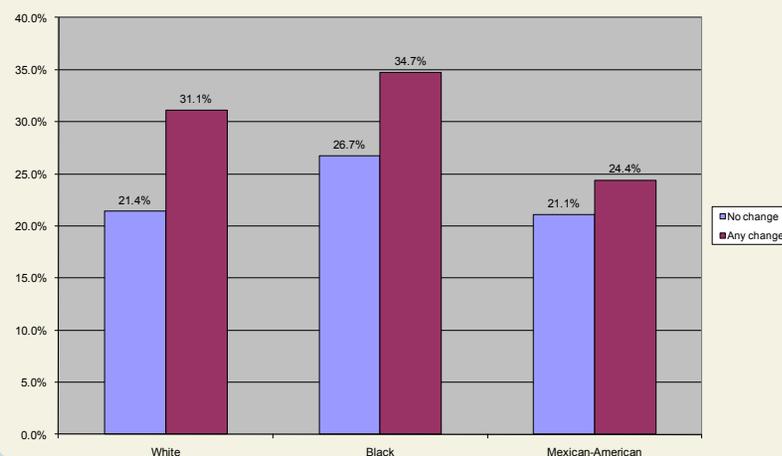
Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (N=7,686) are used to determine whether racial and ethnic differences in socioeconomic stress and social protection explain group differences in the association between family structure instability and three outcomes for white, black, and Mexican-American adolescents: delinquent behavior, age at first sex, and age at first nonmarital birth. Findings indicate that the positive association between mothers' union transitions and each outcome for white adolescents is attenuated by social protection. The association of instability with age at first sex and first nonmarital birth is weaker for black adolescents, but not for Mexican-American adolescents. The weaker association is explained by black adolescents' more frequent exposure to socioeconomic stress in the context of union instability.

Introduction

Family instability is defined as repeated changes in a child's family structure, often measured by the entries and exits of a parent's romantic partners in a child's household. The effect of family instability on children has become a salient issue as the prevalence of instability has increased (Cavanagh, 2008). A growing body of research demonstrates that family instability is associated with elevated problems in children's behavior and school engagement; however, there has been little research to explain the provocative finding: instability appears to have a strong association with some aspects of behavioral development for white children, but not for black children. This study provides the first extensive test of two hypotheses that have been posited to explain racial and ethnic differences in the effects of family structure for adolescents: social protection and socioeconomic stress. These hypotheses may explain why family instability has a stronger association with behavior for white adolescents than for black adolescents (McLoyd et al., 2000) and have not been tested together previously in an attempt to explain racial and ethnic differences in the effects of family structure change.

Figure 1

Percentage of adolescents who had first nonmarital intercourse by age 15, by ethnicity and history of family structure change.



Data Source

National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) waves I and III.

Key findings:

- For white, black, and Mexican-American adolescents, social contact reduces the impact of family change on the likelihood of delinquency.
- For white adolescents, the loss of social protection associated with family change contributes to a higher risk of early sexual initiation on nonmarital childbearing.
- For black adolescents, the effects of socioeconomic stress overwhelm the effects of family instability on the risk of sexual initiation and nonmarital childbearing.

Data and Methods

Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) waves I and III are used in this study. The sample of 80 high schools and 52 middle schools from the U.S. is representative of schools with respect to region of country, urbanicity, school size, school type, and ethnicity (Harris et al., 2003). The analysis is restricted to adolescents who have lived continuously with a white, black, or Mexican-American mother

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Sources

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For a full listing of sources, please visit the NCFMR website: http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/working_papers/file78711.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.

(N=7686) and is stratified by region. Descriptive and multivariate analytic methods are used, including negative binomial regression and Cox proportional hazard models. Results from the weighted sample adjusted for complex sampling design are representative of adolescents who were enrolled in 7th to 12th grade in the 1994-1995 school year (Chantala & Tabor, 1999).

Results

Among white adolescents, social protection factors attenuate the effect of family structure transitions on each of the three outcomes. The same is true for black and Mexican-American adolescents with regard to delinquency, but those groups diverge in regard to the other behaviors considered. In considering the relative risk of sexual initiation, socioeconomic stress factors have a relatively greater, but still very small, attenuating influence on the effect of family structure instability for black adolescents. Mexican-American adolescents are similar to non-Hispanic whites in their response to instability with regard to sexual initiation. Overall, white adolescents who experience family structure instability have less access to social protection compared to co-ethnic adolescents in stable family structures. Among black adolescents, levels of social protection are similar regardless of family structure transition history, but those who have experienced instability tend to reside in economically disadvantaged circumstances, and those circumstances have more impact than does family structure change on adolescents' risk of sexual initiation. In other words, if black adolescents had socioeconomic circumstances comparable to whites', the effect of family instability on the risk of sexual initiation would be somewhat greater.

Strengths and Limitations

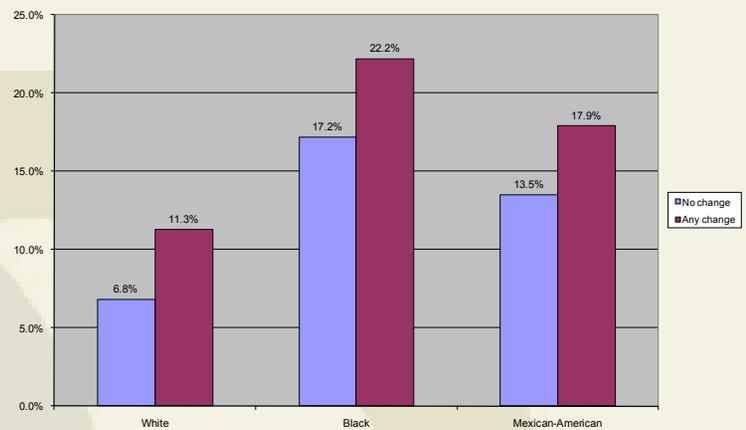
While this study enabled researchers to replicate statistically significant group

differences between blacks and whites in the association of family structure instability with two out of three outcomes, the results pertaining to Mexican-American adolescents are less conclusive. The researchers also conclude that there is some suggestion of meaningful differences between white and Mexican-American adolescents in the relationship between family structure change and nonmarital births, but cannot assert that those differences exist at the population level because of the imprecision in estimates resulting from small group size for Mexican-Americans.

Policy Implications

Racial variation in the influence of family instability on child adjustment provides an opportunity to consider how social context can deflect or exacerbate the stress associated with change. Findings addressing the importance of preserving social protection suggest that social institutions, like schools and churches, can be effective in helping adolescents maintain continuity in their public lives when they are experiencing disruption at home.

Figure 2
Percentage of adolescents experiencing nonmarital birth by wave III, by ethnicity and history of family structure change.



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