



# Family policy, family structure, and children's educational achievement

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the interface between policy, the family, and educational outcomes. More specifically, this research examined how the association between single motherhood and children's literacy achievement is affected by a country's family policy environment. Using data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and national level comparative policy data, the results from the 2-level hierarchical linear models indicate that in those countries that have policies that favor low-income single-parent families, the literacy gap decreases in size between students who reside in single-mother households and their counterparts who reside in two-parent families.

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## 1. Introduction

Many have argued that a child's life outcomes are impacted by their family's economic, social, behavioral, and compositional characteristics (Duncan et al., 1998; Lareau, 1989; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). In terms of family composition, research has indicated that while some scholars have found a number of strengths associated with single-parent families (Amato, 1987; Olsen and Haynes, 1993; Richards and Schmiede, 1993; Shaw, 1991), the vast majority of researchers have highlighted the negative consequences for children living with one parent.<sup>1</sup> Findings indicate that as a result of divorce, children suffer from depression and emotional distress (Hetherington et al., 1985; McGrab, 1978; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980), may be required at an early age to take on adult responsibilities (Wallerstein, 1985), and show signs of learning difficulties and behavioral problems in school (Astone and McLanahan, 1991; Hetherington et al., 1985). The long-term consequences of children's residing in a single-parent family include an increased likelihood to become single parents themselves (McLanahan, 1988; Mueller and Cooper, 1986) and to have difficulties forming lasting relationships with their partners (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989). In addition, Uhlenberg and Eggebeen (1986) used American data to show that an increase in divorce (marital instability) had resulted in worsening in child delinquency, alcohol and drug use, suicide, sexual conduct, and academic test scores.

More specifically, family structure has been linked to differences in educational outcomes (Amato and Keith, 1991a, 1991b; Beller and Chung, 1992; Biblarz and Gottainer, 2000; Downey, 1994; Furstenberg and Teitler, 1994; Hampden-Thompson, 2009; McLanahan, 1985; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Pong and Ju, 2000; Sandefur et al., 1992; Shriner

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<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses exclusively on the educational consequences of residing in a single-mother home versus a two-parent household. Some research fails to distinguish between single-mother and single-father families. However, given that mother-only families are the overwhelming majority of single-parent households, it is assumed that the results of many of these studies that focus on single-parent families would probably differ little if they had focused exclusively on single-mother families only. Therefore, I review literatures that are concerned with both single-parent and mother-only family structures.

et al., 2010; Zill et al., 1993; Zimiles and Lee, 1991). Significant differences have been noted between children from single-parent families and those from two-parent homes across a variety of educational outcomes, including high school drop-out rates, the attainment of a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED), college attendance, years of schooling, performance on standardized achievement tests, reading literacy, and grade-point average.

These findings are not restricted to the United States, however. A study in Switzerland in the 1980s compared the educational and occupational life courses of children from single-parent and two-parent homes and found lower educational attainment and earlier transition to work for children from single-parent families (Oggenfuss, 1984). In another European study Kiernan (1992) found that single-parenthood increased English children's likelihood of dropping out of school. Furthermore, Murray and Sandqvist (1990) found that early residence with a single mother at age 13 had adverse consequences in later life for Swedish children, resulting in lower educational attainment by age 21. Jonsson and Gahler (1997) studied the relationship between family structure and educational outcomes of transition to upper secondary school and early school-leaving also in Sweden. The researchers found that children who lived in divorced-mother families were less likely to stay in school. However, they found no differences between intact families, cohabiting parents, and widowed parents.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Björklund et al. (2007) examined the association between family structure and educational attainment (years of schooling) and earnings for adults in both Sweden and the United States. The authors found a negative association between educational attainment and earnings were less for those adults who had resided in non-intact families when compared to those who had resided in intact families. Interestingly, they found few differences in the patterns of their results between the two countries.

While relatively rare, cross-national studies have found differences in achievement between children who reside with two parents versus those who reside with one (Hampden-Thompson, 2009; Hampden-Thompson and Pong, 2005; Heuveline et al., 2010; Marks, 2006; Pong et al., 2003). Hampden-Thompson (2009), for example, found significant reading literacy gaps between children who reside in two-parent families compared with those who reside in single-mother families in 10 out of 18 countries. Economic resources (parents' occupation, parent's education, number of books in the home) were found to account for much of the achievement differences between the two family structures. However, while economic resources significantly influenced the literacy gap between single-mother and two-parent families in countries such as Great Britain and the United States, the influence was to a lesser extent in the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Similarly, Marks (2006) found that the effect of single parenthood on both reading and mathematics literacy could be explained by socioeconomic background of the student.

Until recently, cross-national variations in the extent of the educational disadvantage of residing in various family structures have received less attention from researchers. In addition, much of the research has focused on what could be termed as micro-level mechanisms in which families economic, social, and cultural resources explain the educational outcomes disparities between different family structures. One less researched area is the role of macro-level factors in explaining the differences in educational outcomes among differing family types (for exceptions see Garib et al., 2007; Hampden-Thompson and Pong, 2005; Heuveline et al., 2010; Marks, 2006; Pong et al., 2003; Xu, 2008). The policy context of a country may exacerbate or reduce the educational disparities found between children who reside in different family types. For example, family policies such as child and family allowances, and other benefit entitlements, are expected to increase a low-income family's disposable income relative to the disposable income of high-income families. As many single-parents are female (OECD, n.d.-a) and are more likely to live in poverty (OECD, n.d.-b), a generous policy environment that supports low income single-mother households may go some way to reducing stratification by family structure by lessen the effect of economic deprivation on educational achievement. An increase in disposable income, for example, can lead to more educational resources in the home (e.g., books and computers) and money for participation in extracurricular activities (e.g., summer camp programs, tutoring), both of which are associated with higher educational achievement.

Unlike previous work in this area, this research focuses specifically on family policies and their actual financial worth. Specifically, the disposable income "gap" between single- and two-parent families after taxes, benefits, housing costs, and services have been adjusted for is used in this analysis. This research extends this previous project by utilizing the PISA dataset instead of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) dataset used in the Pong et al. (2003) and Heuveline et al. (2010) studies. PISA 2000 has better measures of family background variables, including socio-economic and parental involvement measures. Furthermore, this research uses a larger and broader range of countries than the previous research and I include in my analysis 18 countries that are diverse in their approach to family policymaking and in the role of the welfare state. In addition, I examine a different age group. The students in the PISA study are 15 years of age, as opposed to 9 years as in the Pong et al. study and 13 years in the Heuveline et al. study. Therefore, this study has the potential to capture the longer term cumulative effect of family policies on educational outcomes.

Significantly, in this study I focus specifically on children who reside in mother-only households. As previously discussed, this living arrangement constitutes the overwhelming majority of all single-parent households. Due to the female's position in the labor market and also the children in single-mother homes are more likely to live in poverty than those headed by males, the focus of this analyses is on children who reside in single-mother households. This is in contrast to previous studies by Pong et al. and Heuveline et al. who did not make this distinction.

<sup>2</sup> For a more substantial review of the literature that examines multiple aspects of single parenthood and child wellbeing see the meta-analysis and literature review by Chapple (2009).

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