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Social determinants of mortality after leaving the parental home—Childhood and current factors

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ABSTRACT

Most research on life course effects on health has concerned adult and older populations. Given that the adulthood social position appears to affect health differentials over the effects of parental factors and childhood living conditions, the transition to adulthood is, however, a life period of particular interest. This study examines mortality differentials in late adolescence and early adulthood by both parental social background (family structure in childhood, parental education, occupational class and income) and young people's own social position (level of education, current main economic activity) and living arrangements. In order to compare the effects of the childhood and current factors, we focus on mortality after leaving the parental home, which is an important step in the transition to adulthood. The study is based on longitudinal register data that include a representative 11% sample of the Finnish population with an over-sample of 80% of all deaths. Cox proportional hazards models were used to study deaths from different causes between ages 17 and 29 in 1990–2007. Strong excess mortalities were found among young men and women with lower education, the non-employed, and those living without a partner. The effects of parental social background on mortality in early adulthood were smaller and largely, but not entirely, mediated by the current factors, level of education in particular. Adjusting for both childhood and current factors, leaving the parental home at a young age remained independently associated with premature death. Among men, the patterning of social differentials was highly consistent across different causes of death, whereas among women even contradictory findings were observed for parental socioeconomic position in suicides and alcohol-related deaths. Social differentials in health develop across generations, and the clear life course effects on mortality inequalities at a relatively young age demonstrate the importance of the transition to adulthood in this process.

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1. Introduction

Parental background and differential exposures to risk and protective factors across the life course have profound effects on our health (Galobardes, Lynch, & Davey Smith, 2004; Kuh, Ben-Shlomo, Lynch, Hallqvist, & Power, 2003; Power & Matthews, 1997). In the existing body of

literature, the association between early social position and adult health has been found to be strongly mediated by adulthood social position, particularly education (Galobardes, Lynch, & Davey Smith, 2008). With regard to later educational and employment careers and family formation, important steps are taken already in adolescence. Earlier studies on life course effects on health have, however, rarely focused on health outcomes at young ages when the adulthood social position is not yet firmly established (Viner et al., 2012). Parental social background is known to associate with health and mortality in adolescence and early adulthood (Pensola & Valkonen,

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2000; Saarela & Finnäs, 2008; Weitoft, Hjern, Haglund, & Rosén, 2003), but there is a lack of evidence on health and mortality differentials by factors that refer to young people's own social position, or on the combined effects of parental social background and the current factors during this transitional period.

Compared to the mid-twentieth century, the transition to adulthood in advanced economies has become more protracted and complex (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Corijn & Klijsing, 2001), which has raised concerns on the increasing burden on families needing to support their children well into adulthood (Furstenberg, 2010; Settersten, 2007). Evidence from several countries shows in fact significant declines in economic self-sufficiency among young people (Bell, Burtless, Gornick, & Smeeding, 2007). With regard to intergenerational transmission of social position, increasing reliance on family resources, whether emotional or instrumental, in a successful transition to adulthood may deepen the divide between the life chances of those from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds (Swartz & Bengtson O'Brien, 2009). Although the pressure on families is likely to be lesser in welfare states with free education and extensive social protection systems, parental background nonetheless plays an important role in the transition to adulthood that is manifested in the similarities between the social position and family behaviour of parents and their offspring (Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008; Erola, 2009; Murphy & Knudsen, 2002; Rijken & Liefbroer, 2009; Sørensen, 2006).

Using longitudinal data, this study examines social differentials in mortality during the transition to adulthood with detailed measures of parental social background and annually updated data on the current level of education, main activity and living arrangements. The empirical framework of the study is depicted in Fig. 1. Guided by previous studies among adult populations, we expect to find both childhood and current factors to be associated with mortality in late adolescence and early adulthood. To an extent, the associations between the childhood factors and mortality are likely to be mediated by the current factors, through processes of intergenerational transmission of social position and family behaviour. In order to compare the effects of parental social background and young people's own social position, our main focus lies on mortality inequalities among those men and women who have already left their parental home and thus gained a degree of independence. Due to the increased

complexity of the transition to adulthood, the point at which young people are to be considered as independent adults is difficult to determine. Establishing your own household is, however, a highly concrete step in the transition to adulthood: the material and social resources of the parental home are no longer available, at least not to the same extent as for those still living at the parental home. On the other hand, a lack of parental resources among those from disadvantaged backgrounds or family conflicts may encourage early leaving (Bernhardt, Gähler, & Goldscheider, 2005). In previous research, leaving the parental home at a young age has been associated with increasing risk of health problems, as well as financial difficulties, lower educational attainment, and early family formation (Aassve, Iacovou, & Mencarini, 2006; Bernhardt et al., 2005; Wickrama, Wickrama, & Baltimore, 2010). Consequently, associations with mortality that relate to the timing of leaving the parental home are likely to involve both selective and causal mechanisms.

Specifically, a first aim of this study is to find out how parental social background and the timing of leaving the parental home are associated with mortality in late adolescence and early adulthood. A further aim is to compare the strength of the effects of parental social background and young people's own social position on mortality and to determine to what extent the associations between parental social background and mortality are mediated through the timing of leaving the parental home and young people's own social position and current living arrangements among those who have already left their parental home.

2. Data and methods

2.1. Study population

The study is based on individual-level register data produced by Statistics Finland. Using personal identification numbers, longitudinal population census and employment data were combined with data on mortality and causes of death. The study data include a representative 11% sample of the Finnish population during 1987–2007 with an 80% over-sample of the population that died during the period. Sampling weights were used in the analyses to account for the unequal sampling probability.

The participants were restricted to the native-born cohorts between 1972 and 1989 who were 17–29 years of

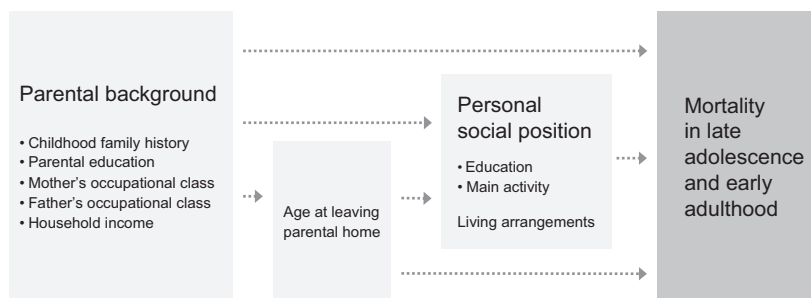


Fig. 1. Social determinants of mortality after leaving parental home – the measures and associations examined in this study.

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