



Do poorer youth have fewer friends? The role of household and child economic resources in adolescent school-class friendships☆



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ABSTRACT

Poverty among children and adolescents attracts considerable research interest, and many are concerned with the potential consequences of poverty for children's well-being and development. Research is however lacking on the consequences of economic hardship for children's social relations. This article asks whether adolescents with a lack of economic resources have fewer school-class friends than others, something we would expect given the modern view of poverty as a lack of economic resources that has negative social consequences. We take a child-centred perspective in explicitly acknowledging the role of the child's own economic and material resources alongside the more traditional measurement of parental incomes, and we use sociometric (network) data to assess children's school-class friendships. We find that adolescents with the lowest family incomes and those who often miss out on activities due to a lack of economic resources receive on average fewer friendship nominations and are more likely to experience social isolation in the school class. Access to an own room is also of some importance for the number of friends. These results point towards the importance for adolescents' social relations of having the economic and material possibilities to participate in the social life and in activities undertaken by peers. The estimated effects of household income and of students' own economic situation are largely independent of each other, suggesting that the common practice of assessing child economic conditions through parental income gives an incomplete picture. We suggest that policies directly targeting children's activities and social participation may be a relatively direct and cost-effective way of reducing the impact of economic resources and greatly improve the everyday lives of many adolescents and promote their social inclusion.

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1. Introduction

Poverty among children and adolescents attracts considerable research interest. Research into trends in child poverty and differences in child poverty across countries and across groups within countries has become a mainstay of sociological analysis (e.g., Bradbury & Jäntti, 2001; Bradbury, Jenkins, & Micklewright, 2001; Mayer, 1997; Rainwater & Smeeding, 2003). This attention is often motivated by the potentially negative consequences of child poverty for children's wellbeing and development (e.g., Berger, Paxson, & Waldfogel, 2009; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Case, Lubotsky, & Paxson, 2002; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Duncan, Morris, & Rodrigues, 2011; Duncan, Ziol-Guest, & Kalil, 2010; Mayer, 1997), but one dimension of these consequences that we know surprisingly little about is the social one. The social consequences of economic hardship are of particular theoretical

interest as they are integral to most modern definitions of poverty. Poverty is generally seen as a lack of economic resources that has negative social consequences (Sen, 1983; Townsend, 1979; United Nations, 1995), the presumed mechanisms being, for example, costs of social participation, status mechanisms, shame, and stigma, leading to exclusion by others or self-withdrawal. This social nature of poverty is also reflected in the increasing use of the term *social exclusion* (e.g., Hills, LeGrand, & Piachaud, 2002). Despite their central position in the modern view of poverty, social consequences are seldom studied, and we have yet to build a knowledge base concerning how various aspects of economic conditions affect various aspects of social life.

This article takes a step in this direction, focusing on the social relations of adolescents and asking whether those lacking economic resources have fewer school-class friends than do others. We take a child-centred perspective in explicitly acknowledging the role of the child's own economic and material resources alongside the more traditional measurement of parental incomes. The data are representative of Swedish grade 8 students (approximately 14 years old) and uniquely suited to the research question as they contain multiple-informant data, making it possible to measure the relevant variables with high reliability. Parental income data and other parental variables come

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from official registers, and are thus free from reporting errors and non-response; the children's own economic conditions are self-reported, and their friendships are assessed using sociometric (network) data, based on reports not by the respondent (ego) but by classmates (alter).

2. Economic resources and friendships

Being socially accepted and having social relations is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and it has been suggested that friend relations are particularly significant during late childhood and early adolescence, as this is a transitional period when children move towards autonomy from their parents (Giordano, 2003; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). It is therefore unsurprising that research into the determinants of child and adolescent social relations is voluminous. What is surprising is that this research is almost exclusively psychological in character, leaving several blind spots to be illuminated by a sociological perspective. We here focus on the role of economic resources, as their association with social relations speaks to the heart of modern poverty theories.

There are many ways in which money can affect social relations. Money enables consumption, which is a means of gaining social status and hence attractiveness to potential friends. In line with the modern view of poverty as an essentially social phenomenon, especially in richer countries, we can conceive of a lack of money as intrinsically linked to social stigma and feelings of shame (Walker, 2014). This, in turn, can lead to exclusion by others or self-exclusion from social situations in order to hide one's economic situation or avoid potentially shameful situations. In addition, participation in social life quite often depends directly on material resources (e.g., owning a smartphone supporting social functions) and on the economic ability to participate in organized (e.g., sports) and unorganized (e.g., going to the cinema) social activities outside school. Economic strain may also have more indirect effects on social relations by increasing the conflicts and stress level within the family (Conger et al., 1992); this may affect children's behaviour and wellbeing, which may in turn affect friendship relations.

Research into the relationship between economic resources and social relations is surprisingly scarce. For adults, the few larger-scale studies addressing the association between economic resources and social outcomes tend to verify that a lack of economic resources is related to worse social relations (Böhnke, 2008; Levitas, 2006; Mood & Jonsson, 2015), though Barnes et al. (2002) found no noteworthy association between poverty and social relations or social isolation. Dahl, Fløtten, and Lorentzen (2008) found no relationship between poverty and friendships but reported less participation in civic organizations among the poor. For adolescents and children, most research on the topic is based on qualitative interviews with a small number of children (for reviews, see Attree, 2006; Ridge, 2011). The few large-scale studies that exist tend to find associations between economic resources and social relations – Mood and Jonsson (2014), Olsson (2007), and Sletten (2010) in recent Nordic contexts and Bolger, Patterson, Thompson, and Kupersmidt (1995) using US data from the 1980s.

In sum, it is theoretically plausible that a lack of economic resources may negatively affect the social relations of adolescents, and previous research suggests a relationship in line with this expectation. However, there are two main threats to causal interpretations of empirical findings in the area. First, poverty and low income are not randomly distributed across families, but are often associated with other household characteristics that may affect adolescents' friendship relations, and failure to take these characteristics into account could lead us to overestimate the importance of economic resources. Previous studies normally control for important factors such as family structure and immigration background, mitigating but not eliminating the risk of bias. A second threat to causal conclusions results from the common use of self-perceived peer relations. It is quite possible to self-identify as a person with many friends while the supposed friends reject the friendship, and if the subjective assessments vary with factors related to economic

conditions (e.g., negative mood or anxiousness), the estimated effects are susceptible to endogeneity bias.

3. What economic resources matter?

When examining the effects of a lack of economic resources among adolescents, common practice is to define economic resources in terms of household income. This practice is not unreasonable, as household income sets important limits on, for example, housing and material standards, but it assumes the equal distribution of income within households. This assumption has been criticized from a gender perspective for ignoring within-household inequality (Millar, 2003; Pahl, 1990), but it is equally questionable from a child perspective. Children's own economic standards are far from determined by the parental economy (cf. Mood & Jonsson, 2014), and households vary in their internal distribution of economic resources. For instance, parents from lower-income households may prioritize their children's consumption over their own, and adolescents can also receive additional resources from outside the family (e.g., relatives or work). Children's own economic and material resources can have important repercussions for their everyday social life, meaning that this is a research field in which the use of child-reported poverty indicators is particularly relevant. Olsson (2007) used such indicators in conjunction with traditional household income measures, finding that children's own economic and material resources mattered for self-reported friend relations and leisure activity participation, and that the family economy and children's own economy exerted independent effects on children's social relations and participation.

Another question is whether economic resources should be measured in absolute terms or relative to some reference group. As the relevant theories concern consumption and status relative to that of others, a relative measure appears most relevant, though it is not as obvious what reference group to use. It is common to measure relative poverty relative to the national income level (e.g., having a disposable income below 60% or 50% of the national median income), but it is highly likely that the more relevant comparisons are with more local reference groups, and for adolescents we can expect the economic situation and consumption level of peers in the same school or school class to be particularly relevant (cf. Bernburg, Thorlindsson, & Sigfusdottir, 2009).

4. The present study

This article seeks to improve our understanding of the association between adolescents' economic resources and their social relations, building on Olsson (2007) by taking both household economy and adolescents' own economic situation into account, but using an objective (sociometric) friendship measure instead of a subjective (self-reported) one. These measures capture different things: Self-reported measures assess one's perception of having friends, while sociometric measures assess whether one is nominated as a friend by others in a group. When using subjective measures, there is a risk that the estimated effects may reflect not only the impact on the number of friends but also on, for example, self-confidence or optimism, possibly leading to biased estimates. The correlation between objective and subjective measures of peer relations has been found to be low or modest (e.g., Bouman et al., 2012; Scholte, Burk, & Overbeek, 2013; Tucker et al., 2011), meaning that one is unlikely to be a good proxy for the other.

Our measure is based on sociometric (network) data from entire school classes, giving uniquely reliable estimates of friendships in a group of central importance in adolescents' lives. Of course, a student may not perceive all the nominating students as friends, so the variable is best regarded as a measure of attractiveness for friendship or of the number of friendship choices available to the student within the group.¹

¹ We do not use reciprocal nominations, as these would involve elements of self-perception, which we seek to avoid as self-perception can vary with economic conditions and hence lead to biased estimates.

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