



Family structure, victimization, and child mental health in a nationally representative sample[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing the 2008 National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV), the current study compares past year rates of 7 forms of child victimization (maltreatment, assault, peer victimization, property crime, witnessing family violence and exposure to community violence) across 3 different family structure types (two biological/adoptive parents, single parent, step/cohabiting family) among a representative sample of 4046 U.S. children ages 2–17. The study also considers whether certain social-contextual risk factors help to explain family structure variations in victimization, and the extent to which victimization exposure accounts for family structure differences in distress symptom levels. Findings showed significantly elevated rates of almost all types of victimization among children in both nontraditional family types, relative to those living with two biological/adoptive parents. Factors associated with increased victimization risk in these families include high parental conflict, drug or alcohol problems, family adversity, and community disorder. A summary measure of children's exposure to multiple forms of victimization was the strongest predictor of distress symptoms.

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Introduction

Considerable research and policy attention has been focused on how different family structures affect children's development and well-being. Given high rates of divorce and increases in children born to unmarried mothers, 26% of all U.S. children (under 18 years) currently live with a single, unmarried parent (Kreider, 2008, pp. 70–114). Moreover, given high rates of remarriage and unmarried cohabitation, it has been estimated that about a third of children will also spend some time in a cohabiting or stepfamily arrangement (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995). At any one time, about 11% of children are living in stepfamilies and another 3% are living in

households with one biological parent and an unrelated cohabiting partner (Kreider, 2008).

Past research suggests that residing with a single parent, stepfamily, or in a household with a parent and cohabiting partner can represent a risk factor for psychopathology and adjustment problems in children and adolescents (Hetherington, Bridges, & Isabella, 1998). Although there are a variety of intervening and moderating conditions that influence whether these family structures are associated with negative child outcomes (Amato, 2010; Hetherington, 2006), research has found that, on average, children from divorced, never married, and remarried or cohabiting families are more likely than children living with both biological parents to have academic problems, externalizing and internalizing disorders, and lower social competency (Amato & Keith, 1991; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Hetherington et al., 1998). Among the potential sources of risk for children in these nontraditional family structures may be greater exposure to violence, crime and victimization.

Family structure variations in victimization exposure

Earlier studies on family structure and child victimization have typically focused on specific forms of victimization, such as physical maltreatment or sexual abuse rather than address family structure patterns across a full range of victimization types. Nevertheless, there is evidence that exposure to child victimization differs

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significantly across family type. Based on a large national survey of 12–17 year-olds, Lauritsen (2003) found that youth in single parent families experienced more stranger and nonstranger victimizations than those in two-parent families, independent of race and socio-economic status. A more recent study by Turner, Finkelhor, and Ormrod (2007) found that, relative to children living with two biological or adoptive parents, children living in single parent and stepfamilies had greater lifetime exposure to several forms of victimization, including sexual assault, child maltreatment, and witnessing family violence. Similarly, a large Dutch study using child protective service data found higher rates of maltreatment in single parent and stepfamilies than in biological two-parent and adoptive families (van IJzendoorn, Euser, Prinzie, Juffer, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2009). Research also suggests that the likelihood of multiple child maltreatment recurrence is greater in both single parent and stepparent households (Bae, Solomon, & Gelles, 2007), but particularly when youth are residing with nonrelated adults (Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996; McRee, 2008; Turner et al., 2007).

In addition to identifying risk factors for specific types of child victimization, such as maltreatment or sexual victimization, it is crucial to specify contexts associated with exposure to multiple forms of victimization. As discussed below, recent research has pointed to the particular significance of multiple victimization exposure in producing negative outcomes in children and adolescents (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007b; Ford, Elhai, Connor, & Frueh, 2010; Menard & Huizinga, 2001). To the extent that children in single parent and/or stepfamily arrangements are at increased risk for experiencing multiple forms of victimization, the importance of family structure as a risk factor becomes even greater.

Given the large body of literature pointing to the significance of child victimization for the development of psychiatric disorders, physical health problems, and poor social and economic outcomes (Molnar, Buka, & Kessler, 2001; Terr, 1991), specifying family arrangements and related social contexts that may contribute to child victimization remains an important objective.

Family structure, social and contextual risk factors, and victimization

Although past research suggests that youth in single parent and stepfamilies may be at elevated risk for victimization, the extent of risk, the types of victimizations they experience, and the mechanisms that lead to or help to explain increased exposure have not been clearly specified. A variety of social and structural factors has been linked to problematic outcomes for children in single parent and stepfamily households and, as discussed below, may also be associated with increased risk for specific types of victimization and/or cumulative exposure to multiple forms of victimization. We focus on three general conditions or qualities that may be both more common in nontraditional family arrangements and associated with greater exposure to child victimization: 1) adverse neighborhood conditions as indexed by level of community disorder, 2) factors that reflect family stress and instability, including residential moves, living in multiple households, and family adversity, and 3) problems that represent likely markers of family dysfunction, including parental verbal conflict, parent psychological disorder and family drug or alcohol problems.

Community disorder

Youth in nontraditional family structures, especially those in single parent families, may be at elevated risk for victimization that arises from economic-deprivation-related factors, such as living in neighborhoods with high levels of community disorder (Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Thomas & Sawhill, 2005). Children in high

community violence contexts (typically inner cities) are more likely both to witness violence and to experience personal victimization outside of the household (Margolin & Gordis, 2000). Because financial difficulties often force single parents to move into more dangerous neighborhoods (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; South & Crowder, 1998), this may represent a particularly important risk factor for children in single parent structures.

Residential instability

Frequent changes in residence may also represent an important connection between family structure and victimization risk (Sampson, 1985). Moving households is often accompanied by changing schools, leaving friendship networks, having new peer contacts, and exposure to different neighborhood conditions, which can undermine some factors protective against victimization. Residential mobility is typically higher for single parent families than for two-parent families (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), but is also likely to be elevated in step and cohabiting families as residential changes often accompany blending and reconfiguring household composition. Children living in these family types often also reside in more than one household, as they adhere to shared custody arrangements or visit non-resident biological parents. Since such arrangements typically mean greater contact with multiple adults (and often children) across households, and possibly across neighborhoods, they have the potential to increase victimization risk (Turner et al., 2007).

Family adversity

Exposure to stress and adversity is higher in nontraditional family structures. Barrett and Turner (2005), for example, found significantly greater exposure to recent negative life events in both single parent and stepfamily households, relative to families with two biological parents. Youth in single parent households also experienced higher levels of chronic stress; that is, ongoing hardships associated with things like finances, job and relationship instability, and everyday discrimination. Parents who experience considerable stress are more likely to engage in harsh and inconsistent parenting (McLoyd, 1990; Turner, 2005) and ultimately are at greater risk for child maltreatment (Rodriguez, 2010; Stith et al., 2009). High levels of adversity likely also index stressful neighborhood contexts associated with elevated community violence (Latkin & Curry, 2003). Because many types of adversity arise directly from economic hardship, family adversity may be a particularly salient victimization risk factor in single parent households.

Parental conflict

Nontraditional family structures may be more likely to experience interpersonal problems. Both single parents and parents in cohabiting relationships tend to have lower relationship quality and more conflict with partners (McLanahan & Beck, 2010). Parents in stepfamilies are also more likely than those in traditional family structure to exhibit interpersonal difficulties, including high parental conflict (Amato, 1993; Booth & Edwards, 1992; Dunn, 2002; O'Connor, Thorpe, Dunn, & Golding, 1999; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Because parental verbal conflict is a risk factor and/or corollary of domestic violence (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 2006) and problematic parenting practices (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006), children in households with high parental conflict may be especially likely to witness family violence and be exposed to child maltreatment.

Parental psychopathology and drug/alcohol use

Single parents, cohabiting parents, and parents in stepfamilies are all more likely to report depression, engage in heavy drinking, and use illicit drugs than are married parents (Kalil & Ryan, 2010;

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