

The Impact of Family Structure on Depression Outcomes Among Adolescents

Claire Yu
Department of Social Work



Abstract

The primary purpose of the present research was to examine the relationship between family structure and depression outcomes among adolescents. This study was a secondary data analysis of survey data gathered from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. The sample population consisted of adolescents and their parents who were administered questionnaires. The data was examined to determine whether different family structure permutations contribute to the severity of depression scores. This study confirmed the hypothesis that adolescents from two biological parent households are at lower risk of experiencing depressive symptoms than adolescents from single-parent and two-parent households with one biological and one stepparent. These findings, in addition to those of previous studies, demonstrate the need for mental health professionals to be aware of factors that have long-lasting emotional and social impacts on at-risk students.

Introduction

Significance of Study

- The WHO states around 10 to 15% of adolescents are depressed at any given time.
- Parental divorce and exposure to family structure transitions predispose adolescent to increased risk of developing depression (Langton & Berger, 2011).
- More than 40% of American teens will have spent part of lives in households that experienced family structure changes, by the age of 12 years old (Manning, 2015).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to expand knowledge related to the mental health of adolescents, so that licensed professionals will become better informed of practices most effective in identifying at-risk adolescents and be able to provide supportive services to prevent more teens from becoming another statistic.

Research Question

What is the relationship between family structure and depression among adolescents?

Hypothesis

The hypothesis for this study is that adolescents from two biological parent households are at lower risk of experiencing depressive symptoms, in comparison to adolescents from single-parent households and two-parent households with one stepparent and one biological parent.

Literature Review

Normative experiences such as the transition from elementary to middle school may coincide with nonnormative transitions such as parental divorce, which can cause destructive outcomes during an already stressful time of being in a new environment and making new friends, which exacerbate negative outcomes experienced.

Family Dynamics and Adolescent Depression

- During adolescence, consequences of parental divorce impact emotional wellbeing, academic achievement, conduct related difficulties, and even teenage childbearing (Oldehinkel et al., 2008; Videon, 2002).
- Adolescents who grow up in intact families report lower levels of psychological distress and minimized risk of depression (Falci, 2006).

Single-Parent Families and Adolescent Depression

- Adolescents from single-parent families have highest prevalence of depression and overall lower levels of wellbeing compared to peers who spent childhood living with biological parents (Langton & Berger, 2011; Laukkanen et al., 2016; Manning, 2015).

Gaps in Research

- Lack of studies that examine different family structure permutations.
- More research on different parent types (i.e. stepparent, biological parent) need to be conducted.

Methods

Research Design

This study is a secondary analysis of Wave I data from the Add Health study. The purpose is to identify relationships between family structure and depression outcomes.

Sampling Method

The study sample was selected from respondents who indicated living with either a biological mother/father, two biological parents, stepparent + biological mother, or stepparent + biological father. There were originally 12 categories of parental relationship (i.e., family structure), which were collapsed into six to allow for better comparison between single- and two-parent households. The final sample size is 6,386 adolescents.

Measures

In-school and in-home questionnaires were administered in Wave I and Wave II.

Depression: A feelings scale was used to identify participants' general mood and emotional feelings, and the extent to which respondents experienced typical depressive symptoms.

Family Structure: Respondents self-identified the parental relationship that best describes their household on the questionnaires. Family structure variables were categorized as: no parents at home, single-parent male, single-parent female, two biological parents, two parents (bio mom + stepdad), two parents (bio dad + stepmom).

Results

- Respondents with no parents at home had significantly higher depression scores ($M = 13.13$, $SD = 8.32$) than those from two biological parent households ($M = 9.93$, $SD = 6.92$).
- Respondents from single male parent households had significantly higher depression scores ($M = 12.98$, $SD = 8.00$) than those from biological parent ($M = 9.93$, $SD = 6.92$) and two parent households with a biological dad and step mom ($M = 10.44$, $SD = 6.49$).
- Respondents of single female parent households ($M = 12.03$, $SD = 8.05$) and two parent households with a biological mom and step dad ($M = 11.43$, $SD = 7.95$) had significantly higher depression scores, compared to respondents from two biological parent households.

Comparisons Between Family Structure Permutations

	Post Hoc Comparisons: Mean Difference (SE)					
	No parents at home	Single-parent male	Single-parent female	Two parents (bio)	Two parents (bio mom + stepdad)	Two parents (bio dad + stepmom)
No parents at home	-----	.150 (.625)	1.104 (.428)	3.207 (.409)***	1.699 (.498)**	2.696 (.764)**
Single-parent male	-.150 (.625)	-----	.954 (.522)	3.056 (.506)***	1.548 (.581)	2.545 (.820)*
Single-parent female	-1.104 (.428)	-.954 (.522)	-----	2.103 (.221)***	-.594 (.361)	1.591 (.670)
Two parents (bio)	-3.207 (.409)***	-3.056 (.506)***	-2.103 (.221)***	-----	-1.508 (.338)***	-.511 (.670)
Two parents (bio mom + stepdad)	-1.699 (.498)**	-1.548 (.581)	-.594 (.361)	1.508 (.338)***	-----	.997 (.729)
Two parents (bio dad + stepmom)	-2.696 (.764)**	-2.545 (.820)*	-1.591 (.670)	.511 (.670)	-.997 (.729)	-----

*** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05

Conclusion

- Adolescents belonging to no parent and single male and female parent households reported significantly higher depression scores than those from two biological parent households.
- Barriers faced by single-parent households such as limited access to financial and emotional resources may impact adolescents academically and socially, which worsens outcomes and increases depression scores.
- Though all forms of two-parent families benefit from lessened exposure to burdens, there is no guarantee of positive parental involvement due to possibilities of marital conflicts.

Implications for Future Research: Given the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic on families and individuals, future research may be flooded with new findings in the area of marital conflict and depression outcomes, which opens up the possibility of a more profound understanding of the field of adolescent mental health. Another implication is that future research could extend the longitudinal study into respondents' young adulthood or beyond, to see if long-term effects of family dynamic and history of depression are observed.



References

- Falci, C. (2006). Family structure, closeness to residential and nonresidential parents, and psychological distress in early and middle adolescence. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 47(1), 123-146. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4121003>
- Langton, C. E., & Berger, L. M. (2011). Family structure and adolescent physical health, behavior, and emotional wellbeing. *Social Service Review*, 85(3), 323-357. <https://doi.org/10.1086/661922>
- Laukkanen, M, Hakko, H., Riipinen, P., & Riala, K. (2016). Does family structure play a role in depression in adolescents admitted to psychiatric inpatient care? *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 47, 918-924. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-015-0622-3>
- Manning, W. D. (2015). Cohabitation and child wellbeing. *The Future of Children*, 25(2), 51-66. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43581972>
- Mayo Clinic. (n.d.). *Teen depression*. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/teen-depression/symptoms-causes/syc-20350985>
- Oldehinkel, A. J., Ormel, J., Veenstra, R., de Winter, A. F., & Verhulst, F. C. (2008). Parental divorce and offspring depressive symptoms: Dutch developmental trends during early adolescence. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70(2), 284-293. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2008.00481.x>