Family Structure, Stability, and Child Wellbeing

*Terry-Ann Craigie, Ph.D.*

SSRC Emerging Scholar Webinar #5

Wednesday, December 11, 2013

2:00PM EST
Overview of the SSRC

• Virtual library with over 2500 items
• Designed for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers
• Includes interactive features
  – Events and Conferences
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Substantive Focus: 12 Topic Areas

- Asset-Building, Tax Policies, and Subsidies
- Child Care
- Child Support
- Community Development and Housing
- Education and Training
- Employment
- Family Structure and Family Formation
- Food Assistance
- General Research on Income and Poverty
- Health
- TANF Policy, Services, and Benefits
- Transportation

Resources must be relevant to self-sufficiency
Emerging Scholar
Emerging Scholar Selection Criteria

• In graduate school or holds a graduate degree. Early career - usually 1-5 years experience, no more than 10
• Currently doing research on self-sufficiency issues related to one of the 12 topic areas
• Conducting high quality research that fills a knowledge gap or addresses a self-sufficiency issue that warrants greater visibility
• Currently working in academic, program, think-tank, or agency setting
Lenore Tingle Howard Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Connecticut College

Education
- Ph.D., Michigan State University, Economics, 2009
- M.A., Michigan State University, Economics, 2006

Research interests and current research:
- Labor economics
- Economics of the family
- Applied microeconomics
- Urban economics
- Child support
- Complex family structures

Recent Work
Ask a Question!

- Participants can submit questions throughout the Webinar through the Question and Answer feature on the bottom right side of your screen.

- Questions will be collected and answered after Dr. Craigie’s presentation.

- If we run out of time, questions will be answered and the answers will be posted on the SSRC with other Webinar materials after the event.
Family Structure, Stability, and Child Wellbeing

Terry-Ann L. Craigie
Self-Sufficiency Research Clearinghouse Emerging Scholar Webinar
December 11, 2013
Introduction

- American families are changing.
- More births to unwed mothers.
- Lower marriage rates and higher incidence of divorce.
- Low-income families are more at-risk.
Effects on Children

- Children born to married parents fare better than children born to unmarried parents.

- This has been shown for cognitive development, health, socio-emotional development.
The Role of Instability

Are children affected more by the family structure into which they were born?

OR

Is it the stability of the family structure that really matters?
Presentation Outline

- Identify the effect of *family structure* on child developmental outcomes

- Identify the effect of *family instability* on child developmental outcomes

- Pathways through which child wellbeing is influenced

- Child support as a policy response
Presentation Outline

- Identify the effect of family structure on child developmental outcomes
- Identify the effect of family instability on child developmental outcomes
- Pathways through which child wellbeing is influenced
- Child support as a policy response
In general, marriage yields positive consequences for child wellbeing…
Data

- Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS):
  - Follows a cohort of 4,897 children born from 1998 to 2000. (3,700 born to unwed parents)
  - Covers an urban sample of parents and their children.
  - Provides data on family structure and transitions throughout the child’s life course
  - Provides data on various child outcomes at age five
Married at Birth:
• Parents are married at the time of the child’s birth

Unmarried at Birth:
• Cohabiting – parents are living together at the time of the child’s birth
• Single – mother is neither married nor cohabiting at the time of the child’s birth
Measures of Child Wellbeing

- **Cognitive Development**
  - Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-R)- Revised  
    \((\text{Range: 40-139})\)

- **Health**
  - Obesity \((\text{obese} = 1 \text{ if yes, } = 0 \text{ if no})\)

- **Socio-Emotional Development**
  - Aggressive Behaviors \((\text{Range: 0 – 36})\)

*These child outcomes are assessed at age five.*
PPVT-R (By Family Structure at Birth)

Mean: 93.36

Married
Cohabiting
Single

(Craigie, Brooks-Gunn, and Waldfogel, 2012)
Obesity (By Family Structure at Birth)

Mean: 0.17

(Craigie, Brooks-Gunn, and Waldfogel, 2012)
Aggressiveness (By Family Structure ...)

Mean: 11.16

(Craigie, Brooks-Gunn, and Waldfogel, 2012)
Summary

- Marriage confers significant benefits for child cognitive, health, and socio-emotional outcomes
  - Highest test scores
  - Lowest incidence of obesity
  - Fewest aggressive tendencies
Presentation Outline

- Identify the effect of family structure on child developmental outcomes

- Identify the effect of family instability on child developmental outcomes

- Pathways through which child wellbeing is influenced

- Child support as a policy response
Previous Findings on Family Instability Effects

Mostly negative consequences for children…
Types of Family Instability

Stable:
- Single (never-married mother who has not partnered with anyone since child’s birth)
- Cohabiting (unmarried couple who lived together since child’s birth)
- Married (couple married since child’s birth)

Unstable:
- Single (single mother who lived with or married someone after the child’s birth)
- Cohabiting (unmarried couple who lived together but “broke-up” after the child’s birth)
- Married (married couple who got divorced after the child’s birth)
Measures of Child Wellbeing

- **Cognitive Development**
  - Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-R)-Revised
    (Range: 40-139)

- **Health**
  - Obesity (obese = 1 if yes, = 0 if no)

- **Socio-Emotional Development**
  - Aggressive Behaviors (Range: 0 – 36)

*These child outcomes are assessed at age five.*
PPVT-R (By Stability of the Family Structure)

Mean: 93.36

(Craigie, Brooks-Gunn, and Waldfogel, 2012)
Obesity (By Stability of the Family Structure)

Mean: 0.17

(Craigie, Brooks-Gunn, and Waldfogel, 2012)
Aggressiveness (By Stability of the Family Structure)

Mean: 11.16

(Craigie, Brooks-Gunn, and Waldfogel, 2012)
Summary

- Marriage significantly improves cognitive, health, and socio-emotional outcomes.

- However, it is stability than seems to drive this benefit.

- For aggressive behaviors, the adverse effects of instability tends to be much smaller for all family structure types.
There are unfavorable circumstances, *oftentimes unobserved*, that influence family type/instability as well as child wellbeing.

This problem, known as *selection bias*, may cause the family structure and instability effects to be over-estimated.
Adjusting for Selection

Accounting for demographic and individual characteristics…

- Children born to *married* parents…
  - Stability matters – for obesity only

- Children born to *cohabiting* parents…
  - Lower test scores
  - Display more aggressive behaviors
  - Stability matters – aggressive behaviors only
Adjusting for Selection (cont’d)

- Children born to *single* mothers...
  - More likely to be obese
  - Display more aggressive behaviors
  - Stability – not as important
Presentation Outline

- Identify the effect of family structure on child developmental outcomes

- Identify the effect of family instability on child developmental outcomes

- **Pathways through which child wellbeing is influenced**

- Child support as a policy response
Main Mechanisms at Work

- Parental Income
- Parental Emotional Wellbeing
- Parenting Quality
- Father Involvement

(Waldfogel, Craigie, and Brooks-Gunn, 2010)
FAMILY STRUCTURE
FAMILY STABILITY

INCOME

COGNITION
HEALTH
SOCIO-EMOTIONAL
DEVELOPMENT
FAMILY STRUCTURE
FAMILY STABILITY

INCOME
EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

COGNITION
HEALTH
SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT
FAMILY STRUCTURE
FAMILY STABILITY

INCOME
EMOTIONAL WELLBEING
PARENTING QUALITY

COGNITION
HEALTH
SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT
These mechanisms are inextricably linked.

Income is most commonly cited.

Must preserve income allocated to children when parents “split-up”.
Presentation Outline

- Identify the effect of *family structure* on child developmental outcomes

- Identify the effect of *family instability* on child developmental outcomes

- Pathways through which child wellbeing is influenced

- Child support as a policy response
Significance of Child Support

- Integral for reducing child poverty and improving child wellbeing outcomes.
- Child support contributions and father involvement are positively correlated.
- Child support delinquency is prevalent among low-income non-marital families.
- The burden of unpaid child support falls on the tax-payer.
Role of Child Support Enforcement

- Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 helped to improve the overall collection rates of child support payments.

- PRWORA has been effective at reducing child poverty for those families with child support awards.

- Nonetheless, not all families eligible for child support awards petition for them.
Advantages of a Child Support Award

- Stringent enforcement policies
  - Driver’s license revoked
  - Wages and tax refunds withheld
  - Incarceration

- Easier Access to payments
  - Automated withdrawal of child support payments
  - State case registry
Disadvantages of the Child Support Award

- Court-mandated awards are often too high for low-income fathers
- May interfere with family cohesion
In lieu of the formal court-mandated child support award, some families have private or informal child support arrangements.

Non-marital parents may choose to have child support payments made without court involvement.
Advantages of Informal Child Support Arrangement

- Allows parents the autonomy to make their own child support arrangements independent of the courts
- Suitable for fathers with sporadic employment patterns and those with under-the-table earnings
- Helps enhance family cohesion
Disadvantages of Informal Child Support

- Agreed upon payments may be lower than under the formal child support agreement
- Not as easy to police the informal agreement
Which child support arrangement will the non-marital couple choose?

- Parents will weigh the benefits and costs of each type of child support arrangement.
- Some families may be constrained if they are welfare recipients.
- Some families may be constrained if legal paternity cannot be established.
The Main Story

1. The marriage-advantage exists but is most striking for stable marriages.

2. Family instability lowers child wellbeing.

3. Pathways include income, emotional wellbeing, parenting quality, and father involvement.

4. Child support arrangements are also changing among non-marital families.
Final Thoughts

- Can we keep families stable?

- Programs to assist children from non-marital and unstable family backgrounds

- Do we need other reforms to child support guidelines?