

The legacy of parental divorce: social, economic and family experiences in adulthood

Parental divorce during childhood can have a negative effect on adult lives, but some difficulties also relate to personal and family circumstances that precede the break-up. Kathleen Kiernan of the London School of Economics used longitudinal data on 33-year-old adults from the National Child Development Study to compare the economic and family situations of those from divorced backgrounds with those for their contemporaries raised by both parents. The study showed that:

- f** Pre-divorce factors, especially financial hardship, played an important part in explaining the increased likelihood that children whose parents divorced would lack qualifications, be unemployed or be living in social housing as adults. Pre-divorce circumstances were less influential in accounting for why children of divorce differed in their personal relationships and parenthood behaviour in adulthood.
- f** Children who grew up with both their parents became better qualified and were in better jobs as adults largely due to their families being socially and economically advantaged to begin with and not necessarily because their parents had stayed together.
- f** Women from divorced families were almost twice as likely to become teenage mothers as their contemporaries, while men were more likely to become fathers before they were 22. These differences may be explained both by the family's situation before the separation and the children's experiences after this.
- f** Women whose parents had divorced were more likely to give birth as single or cohabiting mothers, even allowing for family background and the greater tendency for teenage mothers to give birth outside marriage. A similar pattern emerged for men becoming fathers outside marriage.
- f** Women and men who experienced parental divorce during childhood were more likely to have experienced the break-up of their own first cohabitation or marriage than those from families where the parents stay together. Controls for childhood and adolescent background factors produced only a modest reduction in the chances of partnership breakdown.
- f** Women who were aged over 20 when their parents divorced were little different in terms of educational attainment, housing, and income and becoming a young mother, to those whose families had remained together. By contrast, men who were young adults when their parents separated were economically disadvantaged compared with contemporaries from families where the parents stay together.
- f** Men and women who were over 20 when their parents divorced were more likely to have cohabited and to have experienced the break-up of their own partnerships by the time they were 33 compared with those whose parents remained together.

Introduction

Parental separation has been shown to be associated with both short- and long-term impacts on the lives of children. Part of the challenge for recent research has been to distinguish the long-term effects of conflict, low income and other family problems that may exist before divorce from the consequences of parental separation itself. Using the longitudinal National Child Development Study (NCDS) of children born in March 1958, the study pursued three questions:

- to what extent does parental divorce during childhood have long-term consequences for educational attainment, economic circumstances, partnership and parenthood behaviour in adulthood?
- when child and family characteristics before divorce are taken into account, does the link between the divorce and adult experiences become weaker?
- if parents stay together until their children are grown up before separating, does this reduce the impact of divorce on their adult children's lives?

The series of NCDS interviews - most recently when the subjects were aged 33 - made it possible to compare the adult lives of children whose parents stayed together with those of children whose parents had divorced when they were 7 or under and with those who were aged between 9 and 16 when their parents separated. Data for a third group who were aged over 20 before their parents separated were also examined.

Educational attainment

By the time they were 33, those who had experienced parental divorce as children (16 and under) were almost twice as likely to lack formal qualifications as others: 20 per cent compared with 11 per cent. Moreover, some 28 per cent of those whose parents had stayed together had higher level qualifications, compared with 18 per cent whose parents had separated. Women whose parents had divorced were more likely to lack qualifications than men.

However, the analysis of family background factors showed that pre-existing financial hardship and behavioural problems at the time of the age 7 interview were important contributors to the increased odds that children whose parents subsequently divorced, would have no qualifications as adults. The difference in risk between women from divorce and non-divorce backgrounds obtaining high level qualifications was also reduced by controlling for financial hardship and behavioural problems prior to the divorce, whereas the odds against boys obtaining high level qualifications whose parents had separated remained significant and almost unchanged.

Adult income and employment

Adult men who had experienced divorce during childhood had broadly similar earnings and family incomes to contemporaries whose families had remained intact. However, men with a background of parental divorce were at greater risk of unemployment at age 33 and of having been unemployed at some point since they left school. The odds of unemployment as an adult were greatest for boys whose parents had separated before they were 7 years old. Controlling for financial hardship at age 7 resulted in a level of added risk that was no longer statistically significant among men whose parents divorced during their later childhood. In other words, family circumstances that pre-dated parental separation were implicated in an adverse employment history, but divorce may also have served to amplify the risks that already existed.

The income and employment histories of women are complicated by the timing of motherhood. Women who had experienced divorce as children were more likely to have begun child-bearing at an early age (see below) and this, in turn, affected their ability to earn. In general, women whose parents had divorced had lower earnings than others and were more likely to be receiving Income Support than women whose parents had stayed together - although the latter link was relatively weak.

Housing and homelessness

Adults who experienced parental divorce in childhood were more likely than others to be living in property rented from a local authority or housing association and less likely to be home-owners. Women from divorced families were especially likely to be living in social housing at age 33 (27 per cent) compared with men whose parents had separated (19 per cent). Once again, the links between a divorce background and living in social housing as an adult appeared to be largely indirect. Taking financial hardship, behavioural problems and other factors present at age 7 into account reduced the odds for both men and women.

One in 16 men and women whose parents separated during their childhood went on to experience homelessness as young adults compared with one in 28 whose parents had stayed together. The excess risks of later homelessness among women were partly captured by taking early financial hardship into account, but were little changed by such controls in the case of men.

First partnerships

Early marriage and early parenthood have been shown to be associated with reduced employment prospects and an increased risk of divorce in previous research. The study found that men and women who experienced parental separation during childhood

were more likely to cohabit or marry before the age of 20 than those whose parents stayed together. As many as 48 per cent of women and 19 per cent of men from disrupted families had begun their first live-in partnership during their teens compared with 29 per cent of women and 10 per cent of men brought up by both parents. Controlling for children's experiences of financial hardship, social group and behavioural and cognitive scores at age 7 and at age 16, left the odds of young men from divorce backgrounds forming early partnerships almost unchanged. The odds in the case of young women were reduced, but still remained highly significant.

Young people in the NCDS cohort were not asked about the timing of first sexual intercourse. However, a parallel analysis of data from the 1990-91 National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles found that young people from families where parents had separated were more likely to become sexually active before 16, which accounted for much of their early entry into first partnership. Teenagers from disrupted backgrounds who delayed becoming sexually active were no more likely to have formed early partnerships than those from families whose parents had stayed together.

By the age of 33, nine out of ten members of the NCDS cohort had entered a first partnership, 60 per cent of which began as marriages. However, men and women whose parents had separated during their childhood were more likely to have cohabited before marriage or to be cohabiting at the time of interview. These differences remained highly significant even after statistical controls to take account of family background factors at ages 7 and 16.

Parenthood

Women with divorced parents were almost twice as likely to become teenage mothers (25 per cent) as their contemporaries from intact families (14 per cent). Similarly, men from divorced families were more likely to become fathers before the age of 22 (23 per cent) than those from intact families (13 per cent). The odds of early parenthood among young people of both sexes from divorce backgrounds were reduced - but remained statistically significant - after controlling for other factors in early childhood and adolescence.

Overall, 15 per cent of women and 13 per cent of men in the NCDS cohort had their first child outside marriage. However, women whose parents had divorced were around twice as likely as others to give birth while single or cohabiting. Having a child outside marriage was most common among those who became parents at an early age. Controlling for age at becoming a mother for the first time barely affected the greater likelihood that women from divorced families would become mothers while cohabiting. But it did substantially reduce the chances of giving birth

as a single parent. The odds were further reduced by controls for family background at ages 7 and 16. Even so, the odds that women who experienced parental divorce in childhood would become mothers while cohabiting remained significantly greater than for their contemporaries.

Partnership break-up

Three out of ten first partnerships formed by members of the NCDS cohort had been dissolved by the time they were 33, including 23 per cent of first marriages. Moreover, 43 per cent of women and men who had experienced parental divorce in their own childhood had already seen the break-up of their own first partnership or marriage, compared with 29 per cent of those from families whose parents had stayed together. This in part reflected the greater tendency for young people from divorced families to form live-in relationships at an early age. There was no difference in the risks of marital dissolution between those whose live-in relationship had begun with marriage and those who had cohabited before marrying. The highest disruption rates were among men and women who had cohabited without marrying. Controlling for the influence of childhood and adolescent background factors produced only a modest reduction in the odds of partnership breakdown among men and women whose parents had divorced.

Post-childhood divorce

Little is known about the impact of parental divorce that occurs after childhood, although this is an increasingly common experience. This study compared outcomes for 33-year-old adults who were aged over 20 when their parents divorced with those who parents separated during childhood and with those whose parents stayed together. Women from later-divorcing families were similar to their peers from 'intact' families in terms of their educational attainment and economic situation in adulthood whereas men from these families tended to experience social and economic disadvantage. Both men and women from later-divorcing families were similar to those brought up with both parents in their odds of forming partnerships or becoming parents at a young age. However, both men and women whose parents divorced when they were adults were more likely than those whose parents had not divorced, to cohabit and to experience the break-up of their own partnerships or marriages.

Conclusions

There are no simple conclusions to be drawn about the way that parental divorce during childhood is linked to behaviour in adulthood. The connection - when it exists - depends on which aspects of adult life are examined. It also depends on whether the children in

question are boys or girls and, to some extent, on their age at the time of separation.

In general, children from divorced families had more negative experiences than children reared by both parents. Nevertheless, for many of the educational and economic outcomes studied there was evidence of powerful influences - notably family hardship - at work before the break-up occurred. Thus, the reason that children who grew up with both parents found themselves better qualified and in better jobs as adults was largely that they were advantaged to begin with - and not necessarily because their parents stayed together.

In the case of personal relationships and parenting, the influence of family circumstances before divorce was much less evident. The greater likelihood of starting a live-in relationship as a teenager or becoming a parent before the age of 21 may well be directly linked to parental separation during childhood. Moreover, the wide range of background factors available to this study failed to explain why men and women who experienced parental divorce in childhood or in adulthood tend to form cohabiting relationships more readily, and experience the break-up of their cohabitations and marriages sooner than others. Parental divorce may be directly implicated in that children of these unions carry a legacy of doubt and vulnerability about forming and maintaining long-term relationships.

Undoubtedly children benefit from being raised in an emotionally and economically secure two-parent family. But if that is not possible, the evidence from this study suggests that those concerned with children's long-term welfare should attend as much to the conditions that precede, and may lead to, parental separation as with its consequences.

About the study

The study was based on longitudinal records for 11,400 members of the National Child Development Study cohort born in March 1958 who were most recently interviewed at age 33. A simple, bivariate comparison of adult outcomes between children from divorce and non-divorce backgrounds was followed by a multivariate analyses to assess the influence of a range of background factors, including those existing before parental divorce. The analysis of differences in

the timing of first sexual intercourse used data from the 1990-91 National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles based on interviews with a nationally representative sample of over 18,800 individuals aged 16 to 59.

Further information

The detailed report **The Legacy of Parental Divorce: social economic and demographic experiences in adulthood**, CASE Paper No 1, by Kathleen Kiernan, is published by STICERD, and is available from Jane Dickson, ESRC Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2 2AE. Other outputs from this project include **Parental Divorce during Childhood: Age at first intercourse, partnership and parenthood** Kathleen Kiernan and John Hobcraft published in *Population Studies*, 51 (1997) pp. 41-55 and **Lone Motherhood, Employment and Outcomes for Children** Kathleen Kiernan published in *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 10 (1996) pp 233-249.

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