Variation in the link between parental divorce and children’s health disadvantage in low and high divorce settings

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Variation in the Link between Parental Divorce and Children’s Health Disadvantage in Low and High Divorce Settings

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Abstract
Like in other world regions, children with divorced parents in sub-Saharan Africa experience significant health disadvantages relative to their peers with married parents. Preliminary evidence suggests this disadvantage may not be uniform across the subcontinent’s diverse settings. Research from other world regions shows that the childhood health consequences of divorce vary across different contexts. Specifically, we hypothesize that the childhood disadvantages associated with divorce are more severe in regions of sub-Saharan Africa where divorce is rare, and less so where divorce is a more common family experience. Using Demographic and Health Survey data from 290 subnational regions within 31 sub-Saharan African countries, multilevel models document the previously shown link between having a divorced mother and child morbidity and mortality. The study results further demonstrate that the childhood health disadvantage is accentuated in subnational African regions where fewer women are divorced and muted in areas where more women are divorced. The findings demonstrate that the broader context can powerfully moderate childhood health inequalities traditionally thought of as operating at the family or individual level.

Keywords
Child health; Divorce; Context; sub-Saharan Africa

Across diverse regions of the world, divorce is associated with health disadvantages for the adults and children who experience it (Amato 2010, Bhuiya and Chowdhury 1997, Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale and McRae 1998, Schmeer 2013). Only recently, however, has research explored the health implications of divorce in sub-Saharan Africa, where the public health environment suggests the potential for severe health effects is profound. Studies on the link between parental divorce and children’s health have developed a clear consensus: African children with divorced mothers have worse health, worse developmental profiles, and lower survival rates, relative to their peers with married
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