

Windows on Divorce: Before and after

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This paper uses data from the National Survey of Families and Households to examine how parental divorce is related to three important types of family resources: economic resources, parental resources (socialization practices), and community resources. We pay special attention to the dynamic character of family resources, examining how resources change as parents move closer to divorce and whether the consequences of divorce for family resources are short term or long term. Consistent with other work in this area, we find that parental divorce has severe negative consequences for the economic well-being of mothers and children. Most of our results for parental resources suggest that marital disruption results in declines in effective parental practices, at least in the short term. Our results for community resources provide some evidence that parental divorce results in gains in extra-household sources of support—although in some areas, community resources decline after divorce as well. © 1998 Academic Press

INTRODUCTION

Divorce is both an event and a process. Many of the changes we associate with divorce can be observed well before and long after a couple lives apart or formally

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terminates their marriage. Identifying the timing of changes associated with divorce is particularly important for understanding how divorce influences the resources available to children and subsequently influences child welfare.

We know that children whose parents divorce¹ are disadvantaged in a variety of ways as compared to children who grow up with both parents (see Amato and Keith, 1991; Furstenberg and Cherlin, 1991; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). These findings have been replicated with different data sets, for children of different ages, and for children from different social class backgrounds and different race and ethnic groups (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). We also know that divorce is associated with reduced family resources—economic, parental, and community—and that differences in resources can account for some of the associations between divorce and child welfare (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994).

What is less clear is when and how differences in family resources emerge in the process of divorce. Are some differences clearly evident well before a marriage is in trouble? That is, are the resource differences between divorcing and intact families due in part to selection into divorce of families with fewer resources? Or do resource differences appear as the result of marital or family problems that eventually result in divorce? That is, do the true “effects” of divorce emerge during the *process* of marital separation rather than after the final event? Or is it the *event* of divorce itself that creates losses in economic, parental, or community resources for children? Finally, are resource losses associated with divorce recouped over time, particularly if a mother remarries or cohabits? The answers to these questions are necessary to understand how children are likely to fare in the process of their parents’ divorce.

In this article, we use data from the 1987–1988 and 1992–1994 waves of the National Survey of Families and Households to examine how divorce and family resources are related over time. We examine whether children experience significant reductions in family resources subsequent to divorce; whether resource losses, when they exist, precede the actual event of marital disruption; and whether divorce is associated with short-term or long-term losses of family resources, contingent on the mother’s remarriage or repartnering.

DIVORCE AND FAMILY RESOURCES

Three types of resources have been identified as especially important in the divorce process: economic resources, parental resources, and community resources. Economic resources are the material resources available to the household, including income and assets. A good deal of research has demonstrated that economic resources are positively related to child well-being (Elder, Van Nguyen, and Caspi, 1985; McLoyd, 1990; Huston, 1991; Miller and Korenman, 1993; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn, 1997). Families with more income can purchase more goods and materials that enhance healthy child development. Economic resources

¹ Throughout the paper, we use the terms “divorce,” “marital dissolution,” and “marital separation” synonymously.

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