This brief is part of a series of research briefs by Princeton University’s Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) and Center for Health and Wellbeing and the Columbia Population Research Center (CPRC) and The National Center for Children and Families (NCCF) at Columbia University. The briefs look at the impacts of the recent “Great Recession” on low-income families’ and children’s wellbeing. These briefs distill findings from analyses of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Please direct questions or comments to Christopher Wimer at cwi7272@cumc.columbia.edu.

Introduction

Much sociological and economic research has demonstrated the connection between economic crises and family upheaval. Seminal studies of the Great Depression and of the Iowa Farm Crisis gave rise to the “Family Stress Model,” underscoring the pathways through which economic hardship affects family functioning. The model predicts that economic instability leads to feelings of economic stress and strain, which, in turn, lead to marital conflict. Building on this framework, Daniel Schneider (Berkeley), Kristen Harknett (University of Pennsylvania) and Sara McLanahan (Princeton University), examined the effects of our most recent economic crisis—the Great Recession—on an extreme measure of marital conflict—intimate partner violence.

Drawing on five waves of individual-level, longitudinal data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (see text box), combined with Bureau of Labor Statistics data on local area unemployment rates, the authors assessed how macro-economic conditions, including the dramatic shock of the Great Recession, affected violent and controlling behavior in romantic co-residential unions.

The analysis significantly advanced prior work in three key ways. First, the authors utilized a more rigorous approach to causal inference, using exogenous measures of macro-economic conditions to identify the effects of the recession on the quality of romantic unions. Second, they examined how the pace of change in unemployment rates affected abusive behavior. Third, the study was based on a representative sample of urban couples who lived through the Great Recession, including different racial groups, education levels and both married and unmarried couples.

The study revealed that rapid increases in unemployment rates during the Great Recession were associated with increases in men’s abusive behavior. This association persisted even after individual and household-level experiences with unemployment and material hardship were controlled for. The authors argue that these results indicate that economic uncertainty plays an important role in relationship dynamics, above and beyond its direct effects on job loss and material hardship.

Household Hardship and Unemployment Increase the Risk of Violent/Controlling Behavior in Romantic Unions

On average, across all survey waves, 10.4% of mothers reported being in a violent or controlling relationship. Economic hardship was associated with men’s violent and controlling behavior towards their wives and partners. As shown in Figure 1, mothers who experienced economic hardship were approximately twice as likely to be victims of violent or controlling behavior (15% vs. 7%) or controlling behavior (13% vs. 7%), and were much more likely to experience violent behavior (2% vs. 0.05%) than mothers who did not experience hardship.

Mothers exposed to unemployment (either their own or their partner’s) were more likely to experience violent or controlling behavior (13% vs. 10%) or controlling behavior (12% vs. 9%), however, no significant relationship was found between couple unemployment and violent behavior on its own (Figure 1).

Worsening Macro-Economic Conditions raise the Risk of Controlling Behavior in Romantic Unions

More broadly, the authors also examined how macro-economic conditions affected mothers’ risk of intimate partner violence. While change in unemployment rate had a significant effect on relationship quality, the level of unemployment did not. These results are consistent with the idea that individuals adapt to relatively higher or lower levels of local unemployment but that large changes in economic conditions have more of an impact on relationship behavior.

Notably, the relationship between worsening city-level unemployment rates and controlling behavior persisted after adjusting for women’s household economic hardship and unemployment (see Figure 2). This pattern aligns with a dynamic in which loss of control in one domain (the economy) leads men to assert greater control in another domain (their intimate relationships).

While recessions are generally assumed to affect family functioning only among those who lose their jobs, the authors argue that the results of this study demonstrate that uncertainty and anticipatory anxiety of sudden macroeconomic downturns can have a strong impact on relationship dynamics.
INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN THE GREAT RECESSION
RESEARCH SUMMARY

Fig. 1. Predicted share of married mothers in violent or controlling unions, controlling unions, and violent unions by economic hardship and unemployment.

Fig. 2. Predicted share of married mothers in violent or controlling unions, controlling unions, and violent unions by percentage change in unemployment.

The Great Recession led to a great deal of economic hardship for families across the United States. As this study documents, it also led to another type of hardship: an increase in women’s exposure to abusive behavior. The increase in controlling behavior is of concern because of its harmful effects on both women’s health and employment and child development.

The study provides evidence that the shock of the Great Recession had reverberations for family functioning that went beyond job loss and hardship at the household level. The authors argue that these ripple effects of the economic downturn are most accurately captured by the pace of change in macroeconomic conditions: in particular, a measure of how unemployment in a locality today compares with unemployment in that locality last year. The Recession created feelings of fear and insecurity, and this uneasy mindset impacted relationship dynamics, a pattern illustrated by the robust evidence that the pace of change in unemployment increased men’s controlling behavior towards their partners.

References

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study follows a cohort of nearly 5,000 children born in large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000 (roughly three-quarters of whom were born to unmarried parents).

The Study consists of interviews with both mothers and fathers at birth and again when children are ages one, three, five, and nine, plus in-home assessments of children and their home environments at ages three, five, and nine. The interviews collect rich information on attitudes, relationships, parenting behavior, demographic characteristics, health (mental and physical), economic and employment status, neighborhood characteristics, and program participation. The in-home assessment collects information on children’s cognitive and emotional development, health, and home environment. Several collaborative studies provide additional information on parents’ medical, employment and incarceration histories, religion, child care and early childhood education.

The Fragile Families study provides a unique window into the impacts of the Great Recession, as data were collected from these families when their children turned 9 years old, which happened between 2007 and 2009 – precisely the years over which the Great Recession fell.