THE GREAT RECESSION AND PARENTS' RELATIONSHIPS

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June 2015

This brief is part of a new 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 cw2727@columbia.edu.

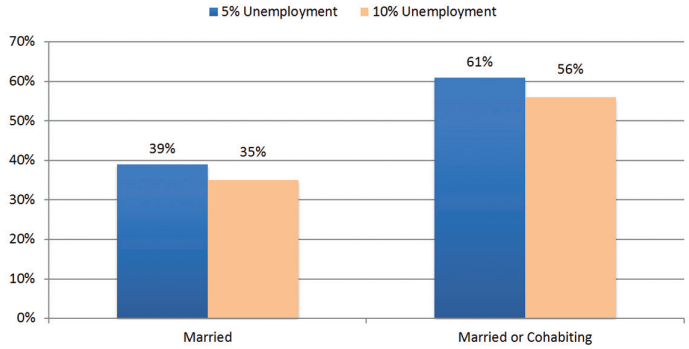
Introduction

Economic downturns are stressful experiences for those affected by them, as well as those connected to affected family members and loved ones. Even those not directly affected may feel the effects of a downturn as they worry about the changing economic climate and opportunity. It stands to reason, then, that recessions may not be great for couples' marital or non-marital relationships with one another. Marriages and romantic relationships could become strained, leading to breakups of existing unions. Marriage may also seem more expensive, leading to delays in new marriages forming. On the flip side, couples may move in together to reduce costs or delay an impending breakup because of anticipated costs. Regardless of whether relationships dissolve, stay intact, or form, economic downturns can strain couples' relationships, leading to more conflict and an erosion of supportiveness. Such processes are particularly worrisome when couples have young children in the home. This begs the question: Did the recent Great Recession lead to significant changes in the relationships between parents of young children?

In a recent study, Sara McLanahan of Princeton University, Daniel Schneider of the University of California at Berkeley, and Kristin Harknett of the University of Pennsylvania looked at mothers' and fathers' relationships in the context of the Great Recession. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) [See text box], the authors ask whether the Great Recession was associated with changes in mothers' likelihood of being married or partnered as well as the quality of their relationships, both with their children's fathers and subsequent romantic partners. They also examined whether the effects of the recession seemed to vary by parents' educational background. Two key findings emerged: 1) The Great Recession led to modest declines in the prevalence of two-parent families, as well as decreases in couples' supportiveness; 2) The least educated couples suffered the largest impacts, thus widening inequalities between more and less-educated families on these outcomes.

Higher unemployment is associated with declines in two-parent families with young children. Increased unemployment was associated with a decline in the prevalence of two-parent families. At 5 percent unemployment, 39 percent of mothers were found to be married, as opposed to 35 percent when unemployment reached 10 percent, about the size of the magnitude of the Great Recession. When including marriage or cohabitation jointly, these figures stand at 61% and 56%, respectively (see Figure 1). The authors found no effects of the recession for college-educated mothers, such that the effects were concentrated among less-educated mothers. In addition, there was some evidence that these effects were the result both of some couples breaking up and some couples not forming in the first place.

Figure 1: Marriage and Cohabitation among Fragile Families in the Great Recession



The recession also may have eroded relationship quality for some couples. The authors also found some evidence that the Great Recession led to declines in relationship quality, especially among some select groups defined by parents' education. For instance, mothers and fathers with a high school education or some college reported lower-quality relationships when unemployment was at 10 percent. In addition, biological fathers reported less supportiveness from mothers when unemployment was high, at least for fathers partnered with mothers without a college degree. Interestingly, the authors also found that rapidly deteriorating unemployment rates were also associated with declines in relationship quality.

In sum, then, the Great Recession seems to have led to declines in both two-parent families and couples' relationship quality. These declines were felt most acutely by couples without a college degree, though effects were often modest in size. This research suggests that severe economic downturns like the Great Recession may have downstream effects on the stability of parental relationships among families with young children, a fact that may be worrisome for those concerned about the well-being of vulnerable children.

Source

Schneider, D., McLanahan, S., & Harknett, K. (mimeo). The Great Recession and Parents' Relationships. Chapter submitted to the Russell Sage Foundation.

See reverse for background on The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

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.