EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Effects of Support from Kin and Nonkin on the Well-being of Children in Single-Parent Households

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Continued high rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing expose about half of U.S. children to potential adverse consequences of living apart from a parent, usually their father (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Studies spanning the disciplines have long suggested that intact marriage improves outcomes of health and well-being in adults (Waite, 1995; Coombs, 1991; Ross, et. al., 1990), while divorce typically worsens outcomes in both adults and children (Amato, 2000; Wallerstein, 1991) and these negative effects are sometimes lasting (Aquilino, 1996; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994).

Most of the research analyzing the effects of compensatory support in single-parent families from family members other than the resident parent has focused primarily on the child's grandparents (e.g., Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986), the stepfather or mother's cohabiting partner (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Manning and Lamb, 2003), or on the nonresident father (Seltzer, 1994). One such study indicates that living with grandparents may even improve children's outcomes beyond those of a more traditional two-parent family structure (Deleire and Kalil, 2002). Similarly, studies focusing on the effect of the nonresident parent on the child, have found that higher quality social involvement between the child and parent improves a child's well-being, (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999). Research on the effects of stepfathers provides mixed evidence on their effects on children's well-being, although under some circumstances relationships with stepparents and the resources they provide benefit children (Coleman et al., 2000; Hawkins and Eggebeen, 1991). Theory suggests that involvement with family members even beyond grandparents, stepparents, and nonresident parents may enhance children's well-being. However, insufficient research exists as to which specific relationships produce such outcomes, how they compare with one another, whether and which resident family members have a greater impact on children than nonresident members, and whether kinship—having a biological or legal tie to the child—matters.

We use detailed information about children's family and social networks to describe the kin and nonkin who are potentially available to share social and economic resources with children. We ask: How do various kin and nonkin and coresidential and non-coresidential relationships influence children's well-being? For example, is blood truly thicker than water regardless of location or do children need two parent figures in their home? We investigate whether some types of relationships (kin and nonkin of different types) are more beneficial to children than others, and whether more ties are always better than fewer ties. Moreover, we pay particular attention to whether or not the effects of kin and nonkin ties vary for Mexican immigrants and the general population of non-immigrants because of potential differences in the meaning of cohabitation and extended family ties among Mexican Americans compared to native-born Whites. We also examine differences in the experiences of children who live with a single parent because of divorce

and those who do so as a result of nonmarital childbearing. Finally, we compare outcomes for single-parent families to those of two-parent families to determine the degree of difference between the two groups and whether additional social support mitigates any of this difference. We consider a range of child outcomes including health, behavioral problems, and education-related outcomes.

Data

This analysis uses data from the first wave of the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (L.A. FANS), a study of families in Los Angeles County designed to address the sources of children's well-being and the experiences of economically vulnerable families (http://www.lasurvey.rand.org/index.htm). The study uses a clustered sample design by census tract and includes over-samples of both households with children and households in high-poverty tracts (Sastry et al., 2003). The data include weights to adjust for unequal probabilities of sample selection and to adjust for non-response at the household level. The first wave was fielded from April 2000 until the end of 2001 and samples 65 census tracts throughout Los Angeles County. Wave 2 of the survey will be in the field this year, but data from the followup interview will not be available by the time of the 2006 PAA meeting. Although longitudinal data are more useful than a cross-sectional design for determining cause and effect, the L.A. FANS cross-sectional data provide exceptionally rich information about children's family and social ties both within the household and in the broader community.

L.A. FANS interviews were conducted in English and Spanish, a design decision that reflects the composition of the immigrant population in Los Angeles. More than half of the L.A.FANS sample is Latino, principally of Mexican origin, and the sample includes sizeable numbers of first- and second-generation immigrants as well as non-immigrants.

For each household in which at least one child under the age of 18 resides half-time or more, a focal child was selected at random. The household member completing the household roster was then asked to name an adult who served as the primary caregiver for the randomly selected child. We restrict our analysis to households with at least one child for whom the primary caregiver respondent is the child's biological or adoptive mother. The survey obtained information about children's relationships to household members, including the mother's cohabiting partner, is available to determine if the cohabiting partner is the child's biological father or a "step" father.

The L.A. FANS includes measures on a wide range of health and behavioral outcomes for children, many of them drawn from large national surveys used to study children's well-being, including the National Survey of Families and Households, the National Longitudinal Surveys, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and the National Health Interview Survey. Reports from the primary caregiver about children's behavior and health are complemented by children's own reports (for children age 9 and older) and by standardized cognitive test scores administered by trained survey staff for children age 3 and older. The combination of the excellent measures of child outcomes and detailed information on children's relationships with kin and nonkin as well as the geographic proximity of children's kin provide a valuable opportunity to learn more about the sources of children's well-being.

The analysis builds on work already underway using the L.A. FANS data. We anticipate no difficulty in completing the paper well before the March deadline for the PAA meetings.

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