

Beyond Provisions:

The Relationship between Poverty and Parenting among Single Mothers

Background

The economic plight of single mothers is well documented. We know that single mothers may be poor for several reasons: their progress in education or work was delayed to have children, they lost a source of income but gained child custody following divorce, they do not receive child support, or they receive discriminatory wages (Bartfield and Meyer, 1994; Cherlin, 1992; Rind, 1991; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Establishing that single mothers are generally worse off economically than married mothers has prompted further research comparing the outcomes of children from these family types (Astone and McLanahan, 1991; Crosnoe et al., 2002; Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan, 1994). It is believed that the economic circumstances of single parents are largely responsible for the differences in child outcomes. However, research has yet to answer an important question: Is the poverty among single parents consequential for the parenting behaviors and parenting relations that exist within their homes/family type?

This question remains unanswered for two primary reasons. First, an abundance of literature assessing the parenting of single mothers does it only in comparison with married mothers (Astone and McLanahan, 1991; Crosnoe et al., 2002; Cui et al., 2002; Thomson et al., 1994). These studies demonstrate how the parenting of single mothers relates to mothering in married families. However, they do not contribute to our understanding of the role poverty (or income) has in influencing the parenting of single mothers. This is an important limitation given evidence that single mothers may be

especially vulnerable to parenting stress (Morgan et al., 2002). Yet it has not been explored how poor single mothers may parent differently than *non-poor* single mothers.

The second reason this question remains unanswered is that studies that *do* focus on only single parent families have restricted their samples to *only* low income single mothers (Brody and Flor, 1998; Kelley et al. 1992; McGroder, 2000; Medora et al. 2001). They do not account for the variation in income status among the single mother population. Due to these limitations in the literature, there is no clear understanding of whether or how poverty (income) matters for the parenting of single mothers.

An examination of current literature demonstrates that no clear picture exists as to how economic status influences the parenting of single parents. Based on the results of their study, Cui and colleagues (2002) conclude that economic advantage, in terms of income, promotes parental support and inhibits hostile parental behavior. However, the results of the same study reveal that single parents, who are disproportionately poor compared to two parents, show *more* support and more hostile behaviors. These seemingly contradictory results in terms of support breed uncertainty as to the true nature of economic influence on the parenting of single parents. I will attempt to remedy this uncertainty by assessing how poverty status affects parenting behaviors and parent-child relations of single parents.

In doing so, this work will fill another important gap in the literature. The emphasis on the parenting of low-income single mothers has left a void in our understanding of how single mothers parent when they do not experience poverty conditions. Recent statistics indicate that *less than half* of single mothers fall below the poverty line, leaving a large portion of the single mother population unexplored (U.S.

Bureau of the Census, 2000). The results of this research will help illustrate the home environment of children raised in single parent homes, as it relates to poverty.

Sample

The data used in this analysis are from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), designed to be representative of U.S. residents in 1997 who were born during the years 1980 through 1984 (Center for Human Resource Research, 2002). The NLSY97 cohort of 8,984 respondents includes this representative sample, in addition to a supplemental sample of black and Hispanic youths. There are 2140 single-mother families that meet the necessary restrictions for parenting interviews, dependent children, and defined race. Of these families, 2102 have valid data for the dependent measure “parenting style.” Reports of parental support and monitoring are limited to mothers of children ages 14 or younger at the time of sampling. Of the 1308 cases subject to this restriction, 1287 have valid data on both measures. The sample for parental limit-setting is restricted to 855 families with children 13 or younger at the sampling date, of which 818 have valid data on the measure.

Preliminary Discussion

One of the salient points of the initial analyses is the evidence suggesting poor single mother families manage quite well despite their economic burden. Since many prior studies limited their focus to only poor single mothers (Brody and Flor, 1998; McGroder, 2000; Medora et al., 2001), it remained uncertain if the poverty of single mothers exacerbated the already difficult task of parenting, or if the burden of being the sole parent attenuated this potential influence. A bulk of the evidence produced thus far in this work supports the latter proposition. In many instances, the poverty status of

single mothers is unrelated to their parenting. Specifically, the support and monitoring of single mothers is not associated with the poverty status of single mothers. In contrast, the parenting measure related to the poverty status of poor single mothers may be indicative of a positive parenting approach. Poor single mothers are more involved in establishing limits for their adolescent children. It may be that the neighborhood contexts emphasized in prior works contribute to this trend. Poor single mothers may feel more compelled to establish rules for their adolescent's safety and well-being because of more perceived risks to the child. This is consistent with prior speculation, at least in terms of limit-setting, that low-income parents become more involved with children because of the associated high-risk environment of the child (Harris and Marmer, 1996).

In terms of the other parenting measures, the lack of influence of poverty status on support and monitoring may be interpreted as signs poor single mothers manage parenting as effectively as non-poor single mothers. This is inconsistent with the speculation of prior research that the combined effect of economic difficulties with the demands and stresses of single parenthood may lead to ineffective parenting (Bank et al., 1993; McLoyd, 1990). Ultimately, the lack of association between poverty and the monitoring, support, and style of single mothers signifies an important idea: family structure appears to have a leveling effect on the obstacles poverty presents for parenting. For the parenting measures included in this study, the experience in poverty did not implicate an additive negative effect on the parenting of single mothers beyond those that existed as a function of either the family structure or the covariates.