

Marital Dissolution, Family Life Course Stage, and Adult Psychological Well-Being

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Abstract

Substantial evidence indicates that divorce has negative consequences for adult health and well-being. Because most research focuses on the average consequences of divorce, we know very little about factors that might moderate this association. The present study tests the following central hypothesis: The effects of the transition to divorce or separation on adult well-being are greatest for those with young children in the home at the time of marital dissolution.

Analysis of two waves of data from the National Survey of Families and Households supports this hypothesis among women. The negative effects of divorce on three indicators of psychological well-being are substantially greater among mothers of preschool aged children compared to those with no minor children in the home prior to divorce. Among men, although the age of children moderates the effects of marital dissolution on depression, its consequences for other outcomes are not dependent on the age of children. Differential exposure to several secondary stressors that accompany marital dissolution partly explains these patterns.