

For Better or for Worse?

*The Consequences of Marriage and Cohabitation for the Health and Well-Being
of Single Mothers**

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Abstract

Does marriage benefit the health and well-being of single mothers? This question is not purely academic. It is highly relevant for policy makers interested in the potential consequences of government efforts to promote marriage, particularly among disadvantaged single mothers. The present study uses longitudinal data from the National Survey of Families and Households to test the hypothesis that, compared to their childless counterparts, single mothers do not receive the same mental and physical health benefits from entering a marriage. Results generally support this hypothesis although single mothers do appear to benefit psychologically from entering a marriage that endures throughout the study period. But single mothers who enter and exit a marriage between waves report increased psychological distress and declines in self-assessed health compared to the continually unmarried. Differing from childless women who marry, the physical health of single mothers does not improve with marriage even when the analysis is restricted to marriages that endure throughout the study period. Entering cohabitation offers few mental and physical health benefits to either single mothers or to their childless counterparts.