

The impact of separation

Study says children of divorce have reduced earnings and increased chances of teen births and jail.

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IN the United States, children whose parents divorce when they are age five or younger have reduced earnings as adults and increased chances by young adulthood of teen pregnancy, incarceration and death, according to a study released recently.



After a divorce, a household's income typically is halved as a family splits into two households, and it struggles to recover that lost income over the ensuing decade.

Families after divorce also tend to move to neighbourhoods with lower incomes that offer reduced economic opportunities, and children are farther away from their non-custodial parent, according to the working paper by economists at the University of California in Merced, the US Census Bureau and the University of Maryland.

The three events – loss of financial resources, a decline in neighbourhood quality and missing parental involvement because of distance or an increased workload required to make up for lost income – accounted for 25% to 60% of the impact divorce has on children's outcomes, the study said.

“These changes in family life reveal that, rather than an isolated legal shock, divorce represents a bundle of treatments – including income loss, neighbourhood changes and family restructuring – each of which might affect children's outcomes,” the economists wrote.

Almost a third of American children live through their parents' divorcing before reaching adulthood, according to the study.

Many children of divorce have reached the heights of professional success, including former President Barack Obama and vice-president JD Vance, who lamented that divorce was too easily accessible during a 2021 speech at a Christian high school in California.

Declining trend

The US divorce rate has been on a decline for the past decade and a half, going from over 10% in 2008 to about 7% in 2022, according to the Census Bureau.

The economists' study can't show the emotional impact of divorce, but some children of divorce said it resonated through adulthood, no matter what age they were when it happened.

Brandon Hellan, 54, said it took him until his mid-30s before he felt like he could commit to getting married and having children.

He thinks his parents' divorce when he was in his early 20s played a role since it felt at the time like an immense betrayal.

"I really think my parents' divorce made me put up these walls and treat relationships like they were rentals, temporary," said Hellan, who lives in the St. Louis area and wasn't connected to the study.

While the study shows the negative impacts of divorce, it can't show what families' lives would have been like if parents

and had stayed together, said Philip Cohen, a University of Maryland sociologist with no ties to the study.

"Probably nobody can tell better than the parents facing the conditions of the marriage and the opportunity for divorce," Cohen said.

"I believe parents are aware divorce may have harmful consequences for their children, and make difficult judgements about what is in their own best interest, as well as the interest of their children."

Different conclusions

Previous academic studies reached different conclusions about the impact of divorce on children.

Some argued that unhappy marriages harm children by exposing them to conflict between their parents and that, generally, divorce is a better option for both parents and children.

Other studies said divorce leads to reductions in financial resources, the time parents have to spend with their children and the emotional stability of their offspring.

Yet other studies concluded that divorce has a minimal impact one way or another.

A big shortfall in reaching any conclusions has been a lack of data.

But the authors of the new study said they overcame that limitation by linking data from federal tax records, the Social Security Administration and the Census Bureau for all children born in the US between 1988 and 1993.

The tax data traced marital histories and income of the parents and the census data provided information about households and outcomes from childhood to adulthood.

The study compared outcomes among siblings by the amount of time a childhood was spent with divorced parents.

It found that children whose parents divorced when they were age five or younger had a 13% smaller income by age 27, but there was little or no impact if the child was older than 18 when their parents divorced.

A parental divorce increased the chances of teen pregnancy if it took place before the child turned 15. But that effect disappeared by age 20, as did the impact of any divorce on the chances of incarceration. There also was no noticeable effect on a child of divorce getting married by age 25, according to the study.

The impact from divorce was similar across demographic groups, the study found.