



MARYLAND

FAMILY POLICY IMPACT SEMINAR

Social Support: Key to Psychological Well-being Among Rural, Low-Income Mothers

Marriage is a prominent issue in family policy legislation such as the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and the reauthorization bill has attempted to target and reduce poverty by promoting marriage in the U.S.

This policy brief presents finding from a national study of rural, low-income families, with particular emphasis on factors that might affect a mother's psychological well-being.

Background

For several decades, research on marital status has revealed variant findings regarding marital status and psychological health. Many studies find that marriage is indeed extremely beneficial, however, only for men. Some studies find that married women are able to experience lower levels of psychological distress because of the benefits of marriage.¹ Other studies show that married women possess higher levels of distress and that marriage can be a source of conflict².

Research suggests that marriage contributes to overall healthy well-being³. Married people enjoy the benefits of social support, intimate emotional support, and economic support⁴, as well as having lower morbidity and mortality rates⁵. Married people report higher degrees of intimate emotional support and also tend to report lower levels of depression⁶.

Marriage is assumed to be economically beneficial because it most often results in higher household incomes, which helps to potentially circumvent possible economic stresses and helps to provide for higher quality living, such as better housing, food, and services. The improved standard of living and lower risk of impoverishment contributes to a better overall psychological health⁷.

¹ Brown et al., 2000; Green & Rodgers, 2001; McGrath et al., 1990

² Cotton, 1999; Horwitz & White, 1991

³ Gove & Shin, 1989; Lamb et al., 2003; Ross et al., 1990

Rural Mothers Interviewed

Average age at Wave 1: 29

Married or living with partner:

Wave 1: 60% Wave 2: 63%

Average Depression Scores

Wave 1: 17.67 Wave 2: 14.52

Average Social Support Scores

Wave 1: 27.31 Wave 2: 27.99

Race/Ethnicity White, Non-Hispanic: 64%

Hispanic/Latina: 22% African American: 8%

Other: 6%

Annual Household Income:

Wave 1: \$15,997 Wave 2: \$22,805

Social support is one concept believed to play a protective role in buffering stress for the married and the non-married. Regardless of marital status, if partner emotional support and/or social support from others are lacking, married people will experience higher depression levels. Most research provides evidence that the lower the level of social support, the higher the level of depression².

Rural Families Under Investigation

An ongoing longitudinal study of rural, low-income families in 14 states is yielding information about some of the differences that exist between mothers who are partnered and those who were not. To date, the multi-state study has tracked mothers living in rural areas for three consecutive years, gathering information ranging from family life to health income and job experience. The findings that follow are based on a recent analysis of 307 of those mothers. The analysis explored how marital status and social support impacted psychological outcomes over a 1-year period.

⁴ Waite, 2000

⁵ Coombs, 1991; Ross et al., 1990

⁶ Stack & Eshleman, 1998

⁷ Gove & Shin, 1989; Stack & Eshleman, 1998

⁸ Islam, 2004

Marital Status and Depression

In this study, depression scores changed over time. At Wave 1, no evidence existed that married mothers were psychologically healthier than unmarried mothers. However, consistent with past research, at Wave 2, the married mothers did report the lowest levels of depression.

Social Support and Depression

For these mothers, there were differences in reported levels of social support in both waves. The low-income, rural mothers in this study who had high levels of social support experienced lower levels of depression than the mothers with low levels of social support⁸.

Marital Status, Social Support, and Depressive

Among the mothers in this study, the partnered mothers with high levels of social support possessed the lowest levels of depression followed by the non-partnered mothers with high levels of social support. The partnered mothers with low levels of social support reported higher levels of depression than the first two groups. The group of mothers with the highest levels of depressive symptoms were the non-partnered with low levels of social support.

For this group of mothers, clearly those with partners and high levels of social support were psychologically healthier; those without partners and low levels of social support were the most psychologically distressed.

For these mothers, marital status was not more of a predictor of psychological health than levels of perceived social support⁸.

Key Findings

For this group of rural, low-income mothers:

1. Marital status had no bearing on the experience of depression.
2. Perceived social support, rather than marital status, had greater impact on psychological health.

Implications

These findings provide important information about a group of women often overlooked in the research on marital status, social support, and depression. Findings indicate that marital status had little effect on the experience of psychological distress, while the perception of social support negatively affected psychological distress. Marital status had more of an effect when the status was maintained over time and when levels of social support were high. The more social support mothers' perceived, the less depressive symptomatology reported.

These findings suggest that social support can play an important role in helping rural, low-income mothers to overcome obstacles to psychological well-being associated with rural poverty⁸.

Suggestions for Policy and Programming

1. Marriage promotion programs in rural areas may not be effective in helping mothers to be psychologically healthy unless those programs include the greater arena of social support for mothers.
2. Further research is needed to demonstrate benefits of marriage to mothers' well-being.
3. Policymakers should consider ways of strengthening rural mothers' support networks, and reinforcing those networks that currently exist, through policies that reward informal contacts for in-kind assistance, such as child care.
4. Policymakers and program planners should consider ways to enhance social support in various spheres of rural mothers' lives, including the transportation system, the family, and the community.
5. Policymakers should seek to enhance provisions for available, affordable, and accessible transportation services, childcare services, and medical and psychological services as supports for rural mothers's well-being.

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This policy brief was created by:

Jokena C. S. Islam, M.S.

Reviewed by Bonnie Braun, Ph.D., thesis advisor.

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For more information, please contact:

bbraun@umd.edu.

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