

Do children affect health outcomes around divorce?

A causal analysis for maternal health depending on children's age

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ABSTRACT (300 words)

Although there is a growing body of research on the impact of divorce on health in general, our study is the first that aims at estimating the intra-individual causal effect of divorce on maternal health depending on the age of the youngest biological child. In terms of substantive theory, we rely on the set point model that predicts a nonlinear, homeostatic self-regulation process with an anticipatory divorce effect and a subsequent recovery phase. Taking on the notion of buffering effects, we expect the age of the youngest biological child (five distinct groups: childless, pre-school child, primary school child, secondary school child and adult child) to moderate the strength of the divorce-health nexus. We use SOEP data and restrict our sample to females who were married when entering the panel and count for them 1,713 transitions to divorce between 1992 and 2014. Our dependent variables are self-rated health and the SF-12v2 health survey instrument. We conduct fixed-effects panel regressions using a parametric impact function with years after the divorce as process time. This allows us to model effect heterogeneity on the group level using the nested effects parametrization in an interaction term multiplying treatment (divorce) by group. We observe a significant increase in physical health immediately after divorce for mothers of pre-school and school children what might indicate physical relief from stress, possibly due to conflicts prior to divorce and the divorce process itself. Further, mothers decrease first in mental health and start to recover in the second year after divorce, what may be a sign of anxiety and worry about everyday life when starting over as a single mother. In contrast, childless divorced women first show an increase and then a decrease in mental health, suggesting an initial adjustment to being single, followed by loneliness and a delayed grief reaction.