

Family Structure and Adolescents' Time Use

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Abstract:

Adolescents living in single-parent and/or impoverished households tend to have worse schooling outcomes than adolescents in other households. Previous research has focused on parental “inputs” into the production of developmental outcomes, such as parental time, the provision of resources, and parenting practices. In this paper, we explore an alternative explanation that focuses on the time use of the adolescents themselves. We hypothesize that disadvantaged parents may rely more heavily on their adolescent children to contribute to household production and market work than other parents, and that these additional time burdens may come at the expense of such beneficial activities as schooling, sleep, and exercise.

Such substitution is a policy concern. If adolescents in disadvantaged households are spending less time in schooling, sleep, and exercise they may be negatively affecting their future health and human capital. This could be a contributing factor to rising obesity and intergenerational welfare receipt. In addition, policy initiatives such as welfare-to-work and food stamp program requirements that increase demands on parental time may be inadvertently encouraging such substitution. Conversely, more stringent state regulations regarding school attendance may limit the degree of substitution between parents’ and adolescents’ time and so improve adolescents’ outcomes.

We examine these hypotheses using time-diary data for over 2,400 15-18 year old adolescents who participated in the 2003-2005 American Time Use Surveys (ATUS). We estimate Tobit models of the time they spend in various activities, controlling for residence in a single-parent household, household income, and other family and demographic variables. Of our

sample of adolescents, almost 30% report living with a single parent and over 11% report living in households with less than \$20,000 in annual income. Preliminary estimates indicate that those living with a single parent spend less time in education-related activities than those living with two parents, while those with lower incomes spend more time sleeping and less time exercising than those from higher-income households. We plan to extend this analysis to include variables that capture cross-state differences in compulsory school attendance laws and in welfare-related schooling requirements for recipients' dependent children to determine how such policies affect adolescents' time use.