

Family Structure Differences in Maternal Time with Children: Disparate Social Structural Locations or Different Propensities Towards Mothering

Married-couple households have been long-considered the standard and most beneficial family structure in which to raise children. With the rise in divorce and nonmarital childbearing over the past several decades, children are increasingly likely to reside in nontraditional households often headed by single mothers. Single mothers must provide the necessary financial and time inputs for their children without the resources and presence of a spouse. Researchers and policymakers have focused on the economic constraints that single mothers experience in rearing their children but relatively little attention has been given to the time constraints they may also face (Vickery 1977).

There are reasons to believe that single mothers may spend less time with their children than married mothers. Single and married mothers differ in characteristics that are associated with maternal time investments in children. For example, prior research suggests that more highly educated mothers spend more time with children (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie, 2006). On average, single mothers are less educated and are more economically disadvantaged than married mothers. However, these characteristics may vary greatly within the single mother population by detailed marital status and living arrangements. For example, never-married mothers are more disadvantaged than divorced mothers. Additionally, single mothers may cohabit with an unmarried partner, live alone, or live with other adults and their living arrangements may enhance or restrict their ability to spend time with their children.

Utilizing the 2003 and 2004 American Time Use Survey (ATUS), this analysis examines variation in maternal time with children of single mothers by marital status and living arrangements and in comparison to married mothers. The large sample of 4,309 married mothers and 1,821 single mothers with children less than 13 years of age allows for a detail-rich description of single mothers' time with their children that has not been possible before the ATUS. This analysis investigates the household complexity of the single mother population and sheds light on whether single mothers provide less time to their children than married mothers. Employing regression analysis as a tool for standardization, we assess the role of differences in observed characteristics – e.g., employment,

educational attainment, age of mother and children – in “explaining” variation among single mothers and between single and married mothers.

Variation in two measures of involvement with children is assessed: time in primary child care activities and total time with children. Further, time in primary child care activities is divided into routine care activities and interactive activities, such as time engaged in teaching and playing, in order to assess whether mothers of differing marital statuses and living arrangements are able to provide not only similar “quantities” of time to their children but a similar “quality” of time with children.

As shown in Table 1, preliminary analyses indicate that single mothers overall and non-cohabiting single mothers, both living alone and living with other adults, do spend less time with their children than married mothers (except for interactive activities for those living with other adults), prior to accounting for other characteristics. However, the more intriguing question may be: what is it about single mothers that make them less likely to spend time with their children? Regression analyses in Table 2 indicate that two differences are the most highly associated with time with children: single mothers have higher rates of employment and tend to be less educated, both of which are associated with reduced child care time. Controlling for these two factors, marital status differences in child care time are reduced substantially to nonsignificance. However, although the inclusion of education and employment reduces the difference in total time with children by one-half, controls for age of children and maternal age are also needed to reduce the coefficient for single motherhood to nonsignificance. Interestingly, once maternal age and race/ethnicity are introduced, single mothers spend significantly more time in child care activities than married mothers.

Another key finding is that cohabiting mothers do not differ from married mothers in the amount or type of time that they spend with their children, both before and after controls are added. Thus, it appears that *partnered* mothers emerge as the standard comparison rather than married mothers per se and that the absence of a partner is consequential for the flexibility mothers have in

meeting their children's needs. At least in regard to mothers' time investments, children benefit equally from living in cohabiting households as they do in married-couple households.

In sum, we can "explain" single mothers' lower time investments in children by observed differences in their social structural location compared to married mothers. That is, we do not have to resort to explanations based on unobserved differences in proclivities towards mothering between married and single mothers. If all else were equal on employment, education, maternal age, and age of children, single mothers would spend at least as much or more time with their children than married mothers. Further work for the full paper will include analyses of variations in maternal time with children by detailed marital status and characteristics of other adult household members within single mothers' households and in comparison to married mothers.

References:

- Bianchi, S.M., J.P. Robinson, and M.A. Milkie (2006). *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*. Russell Sage.
- Vickery, C. (1977). The time-poor: A new look at poverty. *The Journal of Human Resources*, 12(1), 27-48.

Table 1. Mean Daily Hours of Maternal Time with Children by Marital Status and Living Arrangement of Mothers with Children under 13 years of age, 2003-2004

| Marital Status and Living Arrangement | Time in Child Care Activities | | | | |
|--|-------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| | Sample Size | Total | Routine | Interactive | Total Time with Children |
| Married - Spouse Present | 4,309 | 2.4 (2.0) | 1.7 (1.6) | 0.7 (1.0) | 7.2 (3.6) |
| All Single Mothers | 1,827 | 2.0 (1.7) *** | 1.5 (1.4) *** | 0.6 (0.8) *** | 6.5 (3.4) *** |
| Cohabiting | 208 | 2.2 (2.0) | 1.6 (1.8) | 0.6 (1.1) | 6.9 (4.1) |
| Non-cohabiting, Living Alone | 1,262 | 2.0 (1.4) *** | 1.5 (1.2) ** | 0.5 (0.7) *** | 6.4 (3.0) *** |
| Non-cohabiting, Living with Other Adult(s) | 357 | 2.0 (2.2) *** | 1.4 (1.9) *** | 0.6 (1.2) | 6.5 (4.2) *** |

Note: All bivariate tests are compared to married-spouse present mothers. Time measured in hours per day.

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Standard deviations provided in parentheses.

Sample sizes are unweighted; percentages and means are weighted.

Table 2. Summary of OLS Regressions of Maternal Time with Children by Marital Status and Living Arrangements of Mothers with Children under 13 years of age, 2003-2004 (N=6,136)

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Total Time in Primary Child Care Activities | | | | | | | | |
| <u>Marital Status (Married omitted)</u> | | | | | | | | |
| Single (Single = 1) | -0.42 *** (.06) | -0.33 *** (.06) | -0.11 (.06) | -0.06 (.07) | 0.04 (.06) | 0.07 (.06) | 0.17 ** (.06) | 0.26 *** (.07) |
| <u>Living Arrangement (Married omitted)</u> | | | | | | | | |
| Cohabiting Single | -0.24 (.14) | -0.21 (.14) | 0.05 (.14) | 0.10 (.14) | -0.09 (.13) | -0.04 (.13) | 0.05 (.13) | 0.05 (.13) |
| Non-Cohabiting Single, Living Alone | -0.46 *** (.08) | -0.32 *** (.08) | -0.13 (.08) | -0.05 (.08) | 0.17 * (.08) | 0.17 * (.08) | 0.22 ** (.08) | 0.32 *** (.08) |
| Non-Cohabiting Single, Living with Other Adults | -0.43 *** (.10) | -0.39 *** (.10) | -0.16 (.10) | -0.13 (.10) | -0.10 (.09) | -0.05 (.09) | 0.14 (.10) | 0.26 ** (.10) |
| Time in Routine Child Care Activities | | | | | | | | |
| <u>Marital Status (Married omitted)</u> | | | | | | | | |
| Single (Single = 1) | -0.24 *** (.05) | -0.18 *** (.05) | -0.06 (.05) | -0.02 (.05) | 0.06 (.05) | 0.10 (.05) | 0.15 ** (.05) | 0.18 ** (.05) |
| <u>Living Arrangement (Married omitted)</u> | | | | | | | | |
| Cohabiting Single | -0.11 (.11) | -0.09 (.11) | 0.05 (.11) | 0.09 (.11) | -0.08 (.11) | -0.03 (.10) | 0.03 (.11) | 0.02 (.11) |
| Non-Cohabiting Single, Living Alone | -0.21 ** (.07) | -0.13 * (.07) | -0.02 (.07) | 0.05 (.07) | 0.23 *** (.06) | 0.23 *** (.06) | 0.26 *** (.07) | 0.29 *** (.07) |
| Non-Cohabiting Single, Living with Other Adults | -0.32 *** (.08) | -0.30 *** (.08) | -0.17 * (.08) | -0.15 (.08) | -0.12 (.08) | -0.06 (.08) | 0.04 (.08) | 0.08 (.08) |
| Time in Interactive Child Care Activities | | | | | | | | |
| <u>Marital Status (Married omitted)</u> | | | | | | | | |
| Single (Single = 1) | -0.18 *** (.03) | -0.14 *** (.03) | -0.05 (.03) | -0.04 (.03) | -0.02 (.03) | -0.02 (.03) | 0.02 (.04) | 0.08 * (.04) |
| <u>Living Arrangement (Married omitted)</u> | | | | | | | | |
| Cohabiting Single | -0.13 (.07) | -0.11 (.07) | 0.00 (.07) | 0.01 (.07) | -0.01 (.07) | -0.02 (.07) | 0.03 (.07) | 0.03 (.07) |
| Non-Cohabiting Single, Living Alone | -0.25 *** (.04) | -0.19 *** (.04) | -0.11 * (.04) | -0.10 * (.04) | -0.06 (.04) | -0.06 (.04) | -0.04 (.04) | 0.03 (.05) |
| Non-Cohabiting Single, Living with Other Adults | -0.10 (.05) | -0.09 (.05) | 0.01 (.05) | 0.02 (.05) | 0.02 (.05) | 0.02 (.05) | 0.10 (.05) | 0.18 ** (.05) |
| Total Time with Children | | | | | | | | |
| <u>Marital Status (Married omitted)</u> | | | | | | | | |
| Single (Single = 1) | -0.70 *** (.12) | -0.48 *** (.11) | -0.38 *** (.12) | -0.46 *** (.12) | -0.29 * (.11) | -0.25 * (.11) | -0.20 (.12) | 0.05 (.12) |
| <u>Living Arrangement (Married omitted)</u> | | | | | | | | |
| Cohabiting Single | -0.33 (.26) | -0.27 (.24) | -0.15 (.25) | -0.22 (.25) | -0.44 (.24) | -0.37 (.24) | -0.34 (.24) | -0.29 (.24) |
| Non-Cohabiting Single, Living Alone | -0.80 *** (.15) | -0.42 ** (.14) | -0.33 * (.15) | -0.44 ** (.15) | -0.11 (.15) | -0.11 (.15) | -0.09 (.15) | 0.22 (.15) |
| Non-Cohabiting Single, Living with Other Adults | -0.73 *** (.19) | -0.69 *** (.18) | -0.59 ** (.18) | -0.63 *** (.18) | -0.51 ** (.17) | -0.43 * (.17) | -0.36 * (.18) | -0.09 (.18) |

None Employment Addition of Education Addition of Household Income Addition of Age of Children Addition of No. & Gender of Children Addition of Maternal Age Addition of Race/ Ethnicity

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001. Standard deviations provided in parentheses.

Note: Controls are accumulated across models (e.g., Model 8 controls for employment, education, household income, age, no., & gender of children, maternal age and race/ethnicity)