Long-term Effects of Change in Family Structure
On Achievement During Transition to Adulthood

Focusing on the effect of parental divorce/death on health
condition, depression and educational attainment*

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The family environment children are exposed to growing up greatly influences their future potential and achievements. Previous findings show that changes in family structure during childhood, particularly those resulting from divorce or death, cause lasting negative consequence that affect the child physically, psychologically, economically, and socially. Unfortunately, single-parent households are becoming increasingly common in Korea, nearly doubling to more than a million cases in the last two decades. Existing domestic and international studies of this area tend to focus on the short-term effects of growing up in a single-parent household. In addition, these studies group their samples in ways that result in findings that may be too broad or are not necessarily an accurate representation of the subjects.

This study attempts to address some of these shortcomings by focusing on the long-term effects of how changes in family structure early in children’s lives affect achievement during their transition to adulthood. In addition, it takes into account the development cycle the child is in at the time of family restructuring, and what kind of long-term effects result from that. In this analysis, we find that there are several cases of statistically significantly differences in domain achievement depending on the developmental stage the child was in when the parental divorce or death occurred. The findings indicate that changes in family structure during the infant/toddler period influence health condition and depression, while changes in family structure during middle-childhood and adolescence do not. Meanwhile, changes in family structure during any point in the developmental stages have negative effects on educational

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attainment, with the severity of these negative effects depending on when the family changes occur. The negative effect on educational attainment is most prominent when a change in family structure occurs during the infant/toddler period, followed by adolescence, then middle-childhood.

Key word: change in family structure, transition to adulthood, single parent, educational attainment, health condition, depression

1. Introduction

Family is of critical importance in the development of children physically, emotionally, and socially (Chung, 2003; Gu, 2003; Haveman & Wolfe, 1995; O, 2001). Researchers have studied the relationship between family background and children’s attainment for several decades (Haveman & Wolfe, 1995). Changes in family structure during childhood, particularly those resulting from divorce or death may cause lasting, negative consequence. Children growing up in these single-parent families face many hardships growing up and continue to be affected in later stages of their lives.

Single-parent households are becoming increasingly common in Korea. According to a recent Korean census, the number of single-parent families in Korea has been increasing substantially since the mid 1980s from 564,000 in 1985 to 1,042,000 in 2005 nearly doubling in two decades, This may be attributed to divorce becoming more commonplace during the 1990s. Currently, those children who grew up in single-parent households of the 1990s are maturing and transitioning into adulthood. Existing domestic and international studies of this area focus on the short-term effects of growing up in a single-parent household (Chase-Lansdale et al, 2009), with fewer studies (see Chase-Lansdale et al, 2009; Gu, 2003). Studies of long-term effects are less common, so more research needs to be done exploring how being single-parent families early in children’s lives affect achievement during their transition to adulthood.  

1) The transition to adulthood can take place over a range of ages from the teens through the mid-to late 20s and beyond.