

## **The Influence of Family Disruption on College Attendance and Completion: The Experience of the Wisconsin Longitudinal Cohort**

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A large body of literature examines factors that influence college attendance. Living in a single-parent family has consistently been shown to negatively affect educational attainment. However, studies rarely distinguish among the different types of single-parent households nor do they examine how life-long educational attainment is affected by being raised in a single-parent household. This study focuses on young adults who spent time prior to their high school graduation in a single-parent family and examines the probability and timing of college enrollment and completion. Three types of families are identified in this study- those in which the mother died prior to the student's high school graduation, those in which the father died early and those in which the parents were separated or divorced before students graduated from high school.

College attendance is a complex phenomenon that includes IF one goes, WHEN one goes, and HOW LONG one attends. The 1957-2004 waves of the Wisconsin Longitudinal Survey (WLS), a random sample of individuals who graduated from Wisconsin high schools in 1957, are used to understand the differences between IF and WHEN and among those who attend for HOW LONG. The survey tracks college attendance and completion for nearly fifty years, which makes it possible to investigate individuals' college attendance during their lifetimes as well as time to college completion.

Binomial and multinomial logistic regressions are used to examine the predictors of college attendance. After controlling for gender, parental characteristics, family size and IQ, the empirical results show that family disruption has no effects on the probability of ever attending college (IF). But, compared to the Graduates from two-parent families, the death of mother and marital disruption increase the probability of postponing college entry (WHEN). Moreover, marital disruption through divorce/separation increases the length of time to graduation (HOW LONG). Findings also show that Graduates with more educated and higher SEI parents, and Graduates with higher IQs are more likely to ever attend college. Graduates from larger families are less likely to ever attend college. Furthermore, males are more likely to attend and complete college, but less likely to postpone college attendance. High IQ Graduates are less likely to delay college attendance and Graduates from larger families are more likely to enter college later when they do go to college.

Findings from this study are expected to be useful to researchers, policy makers and administrators in addressing issues faced by students with diverse family experiences as they enroll and attempt to complete college. It suggests that living in a single parent family delays college graduation rather than diminishing the chances of ever attending college. Students "at risk" of attending college eventually do, implying that studies that look only at college attendance after high school graduation overestimate the impact of life events on ever attending college. Mother's absence because of marital disruption or death leads to delayed college entry and being in a single-mother household has negative impacts on college completion. Marital disruption because of divorce/separation increases time to graduation but parental death does not.

These results are for an older cohort. While the college experience may be different for more recent cohorts, we do not yet have complete educational histories for them. By examining an older cohort, this study suggests that researchers, policy makers, educators and administrators in identifying and targeting assistance to those at higher risk of postponing college and extending graduation duration should consider the more complex effects of the causes of family disruption on college attendance.

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