Linking Economic Hardship to Adolescent Aggression

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The relationship between economic hardship and adolescent aggression has been explored from various perspectives. Using survey and observational data on two-parent families in a midwestern rural county, the study identifies four important mechanisms that link economic hardship to the aggressive behavior of adolescents. Economic pressure stemming from low income, financial loss, and unstable work, adversely affects the marital relationship through the negativity of fathers. Negative marital interactions increase irritable parenting, making adolescent aggression more likely.

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INTRODUCTION

Many studies report an association between economic hardship and children’s problem behavior, such as aggression (Bronfenbrenner and Crouter, 1983). What happens to families experiencing economic pressure that could explain an increase in children’s aggression? Research on “children of the Great Depression” suggests that the experience of intense economic stress produces negative exchanges within the marital relationship (Elder, 1974; Liker and Elder, 1983; Elder et al., 1984; McLoyd, 1989). As negativity between husband and wife increases, short-tempered responses to children’s needs and requests rise as well.

These irritable exchanges within the family promote adolescent aggression in at least three ways. First, marital conflict may distract parents from child-rearing responsibilities, thereby limiting their effectiveness in monitoring and controlling an adolescent’s expressions of aggression. Second, children may emulate parent hostility with potentially disastrous consequences for the family, peer group, and school. Third, adolescents may simply become annoyed with parents who are irritable and difficult to deal with, and respond aggressively.

This study addresses the process by which hardship is transmitted through the family. We test a serious of models that depict family economic pressure due to low income, financial loss, and unstable employment. Using survey and observational data on two-parent families in a midwestern rural county, the study examines four important mechanisms that link economic hardship to the aggressive behavior of adolescents. The first involves the economic pressures deprived families face when financial resources decline. These include a recognition of financial constraints, and a reduction of expenditures through delays in purchases and actual cutbacks. The second mechanism links the broader economy to family relationships through the father/husband. Adverse economic change most directly threatens the status and well-being of men. Therefore, hardship is more likely to undermine the stability of marriage through his emotional distress and irritable behavior. The third mechanism centers on the marital relationship as a potential bridge between economic pressure and irritable parent behavior (Elder, 1979). As financial difficulties mount, the martial relationship becomes conflicted. The more fractured and discordant the marriage, the greater the likelihood of erratic, punitive parenting. The fourth mechanism, irritable parenting, has a direct impact on adolescent aggression.

Each of these mechanisms have been explored in a series of studies of children who grew up in the Great Depression of the 1930s, but no study has focused on them among contemporary youth in rural America. Our sample consists of 74 families from an agriculturally dependent county.