

Kids of single moms who later marry reap few benefits

October 11 2013, by Ted Boscia

(Medical Xpress)—With roughly four in 10 of all U.S. births now to unwed mothers, a new longitudinal study by Cornell demographers is the first to show that being raised in a single-parent home poses significant risks to adolescent physical health years later.

The researchers discovered that as teens, the offspring of never-married mothers – regardless of whether mom one day weds – report worse self-assessed [physical health](#) but similar levels of depressive symptoms as children born in traditional, two-parent biological families.

They also discovered that among never-married mothers, getting married does not lead to improved mental and physical health for their children as teens when compared with children of never-married moms who remain single. The lone exception, however, is when a never-married mom later marries and remains with the biological dad – then the kids reap some small benefits.

The study, published in the September issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, casts doubt on the effectiveness of policies intended to induce never-married mothers to marry since such unions rarely last or lead to long-term gains for children born out of wedlock. That is, the lasting benefits to children that come from marriage appear to occur only when their parents wed prior to birth, not in marriages formed later.

"We find that marriage is no panacea for single mothers," said co-author Sharon Sassler, professor of policy analysis and management in the

College of Human Ecology. "When mothers marry the biological father of their child and stay married to him, children have better health, but the association is modest. But relatively few mothers fit in this category."

The authors analyzed data on women and their children included in the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a nationally representative sample of individuals who were 14-22 years old at the start of the study in 1979 and continue to be regularly surveyed.

Of the survey's women, the researchers compared a sample of 704 adolescents born to never-married mothers with 1,299 of married mothers for health differentials; within the unwed sample, they also studied the health of children whose mothers later married or cohabited to those whose mothers remained single.

They found that teens whose mothers never married after their birth have no worse health than those whose mothers marry and divorce their biological fathers, marry new partners or cohabit without marrying. Only in rare cases where mothers marry and stick with the child's [biological father](#) is [adolescent health](#) improved.

The paper notes that the barriers to [single mothers](#) entering and remaining in such unions are steep – in part because such women are not always viewed as ideal spouses by men.

As a result, improving the long-term health of children born to single [mothers](#) relies on "policy interventions beyond encouraging women to marry," Sassler argued.

"We are seeing health disadvantages in adolescents 14 or more years after their birth to a never-married mother," said Sassler. "These appear to be associated with cumulative stressors on the mother from having a

nonmarital birth, stressors that apparently also take a toll on children themselves over a long period. That suggests that interventions earlier in childhood and focused on ensuring health coverage and regular [health](#) visits for [children](#) born in less advantaged circumstances are important."

The paper is titled "Does Nonmarital Childbearing and Mother's Later Marriage Influence Child Health in Adolescence?"

Provided by Cornell University

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