

Coresidence with parents and the well-being of single mothers in Japan

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to evaluate the extent to which the well-being of single-mothers in Japan is related to intergenerational coresidence and the receipt of economic and instrumental support from non-coresident parents. We use data from a recent survey of single mothers to examine three measures of well-being: self-rated health, subjective economic well-being, and educational expenditures on children. One-fourth of the single mothers surveyed were coresiding with parents and initial tabulations indicate that these women fare significantly better than their independent-living counterparts on all three measures of well-being. Tabulations by whether mothers were receiving support from non-coresidential parents suggest that single mothers living apart from parents are a heterogeneous group. Those who are not receiving support from parents appear to be similar to coresident women whereas non-coresident single mothers receiving support from parents have significantly lower levels of well-being.

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Trends in divorce and nonmarital childbearing have resulted in substantial increases in single-parent, especially single-mother, families in most industrialized countries. A large body of research demonstrates that single-mothers fare less well, on a range of outcomes, relative to their married counterparts. The lower level of financial well-being among single mothers is particularly well-documented (e.g., Smock, Manning, and Gupta 1999). It is also clear that divorce is related to lower levels of physical and psychological well-being (Amato 2000). Relative to married individuals, those who are divorced appear to be less happy with life, have lower self-esteem, and higher levels of depression. These differences are thought to reflect the lower earnings capacity of single mothers and the strains associated with balancing work and family demands without a spouse.

Research on the well-being of single mothers suggests that financial and instrumental support from kin, especially parents, plays an important role in mitigating the difficulties associated with single parenthood (e.g., Hogan, Hao, and Parish 1989). Our goal in this paper is to extend this focus on single-motherhood, well-being, and parental support to Japan, a setting that is particularly interesting for several reasons. It is a country where single-mother families have increased rapidly in recent years and where women's ability to balance work and family is particularly difficult. Japan differs from the U.S. in that the vast majority of single-parent families are formed via divorce (nonmarital childbearing remains rare) and a much higher proportion of divorced women coreside with their parents. One recent study estimates that the proportion of divorced women coresiding with parents is roughly one-quarter in Japan, compared to only 2% in the U.S. (Raymo, Iwasawa, and Bumpass 2004). Evidence that the high prevalence of intergenerational coresidence and intrafamilial support exchange offsets some of the negative implications of single parenthood may have important implications for linkages between growth

in single parenthood and socioeconomic inequality (e.g., Martin 2006) in “strong-family” countries such as Japan. Existing research on the single mothers in Japan is extremely limited but recent reports demonstrate that approximately 90% of single mothers are employed, that single mothers’ income is very low, and that few receive any child-support from the fathers of their children (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare 2005).

Data

We use data from the Survey on Work Assistance for Single Mothers, a survey of single mothers conducted in 2001 by the Japan Institute of Labour. One of the only large-scale random samples of single mothers in Japan, this survey provides rich information on a far larger number of single mothers than is available from other nationally representative sample surveys. Sampling from the *Basic Resident Registry*, this survey collected information on the work and family circumstances of 1,721 unmarried women with a coresident child(ren) under the age of 20. The characteristics of single mothers in this survey, including the proportion divorced (.71), the proportion working for pay (.87), and the proportion coresiding with parents (.24) are similar to estimates based on other sources of data including the census.

We consider three measures of well-being: poor self-rated health, subjective economic well-being, and monthly per-capita expenditures on children’s education. Poor self-rated health is a dichotomous measure distinguishing those who reported being in fair or poor health from those who reported being in good, very good, or excellent health. Subjective economic well-being is also measured on five-point scale ranging from difficult to comfortable, and expenditures on children’s education is calculated as the reported monthly household expenditures on children’s education divided by the number of coresident children. In the

preliminary tabulations summarized here, we compare values of these outcomes across categories of living arrangements and parental support.

Preliminary descriptive results

Preliminary tabulations presented in the upper panel of Table 1 indicate that coresidence with parents is positively associated with all three measures of well-being. Single mothers coresiding with parents are less likely to report being in fair/poor health, report significantly higher levels of subjective economic well-being, and have higher per capita expenditures on children's education. All of these differences are statistically significant.

In the lower panel of Table 1, we split single mothers who are not coresiding with parents into two groups – those who do and do not report receiving financial and/or instrumental support from parents. Interestingly, these tabulations suggest that those who are receiving support from parents appear to have the lowest levels of well-being. There is no difference in the proportion with fair/poor self-rated health but for those receiving parental support subjective financial well-being of is significantly lower than that of coresident single mothers and expenditures on their children's education are significantly lower than both coresident women and non-coresident women who are not receiving parental support. These results suggest that there is a group of single mothers who are particularly disadvantaged, despite receiving support from parents. In subsequent multivariate analyses, we will reevaluate these initial tabulations by controlling for differences across the groups in age, parity, age of children, duration of single motherhood, educational attainment, and employment circumstances.

Table 1: Well-being among single-mothers, by living arrangements and receipt of parental support

Outcome	Not coresiding with parents	Coresiding with parents
Fair/poor self-rated health (0-1)	0.26	0.21 *
Perceived financial difficulty (1-5)	2.07	2.18 *
Per-capita monthly expenditures on	2.24	2.86 **
N	1,286	417

*p < .05, **p < .01 for comparisons with women not coresiding with parents

Outcome	Not coresiding with parents, not receiving support	Not coresiding with parents, receiving support	Coresiding with parents
Fair/poor self-rated health (0-1)	0.26	0.27	0.21
Perceived financial difficulty (1-5)	2.09	2.02	2.18 †
children's education (10,000 yen)	2.44	1.79 *	2.86 ††
N	892	394	417

*p < .05, **p < .01 for comparisons with women not coresiding with parents and not receiving support from parents

†p < .05, ††p < .01 for comparisons with women not coresiding with parents and receiving support from parents

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