ASTRACT
In the U.S., most research on unintended fertility tends to address differences by family background and the sociodemographic contexts in which unintended births occur. However, little is known about the mechanisms by which family background is associated with unintended childbearing. In this study, we propose childhood disadvantage as a key mediating factor that explains the family background gradient on unintended fertility. Drawing upon the life course and human capital formation literature, we identify four dimensions of childhood disadvantage: economic resources, family structure, parenting quality, and self-regulation. Using data from the Children of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and event history models, this study examines the relative role that each dimension of childhood disadvantage plays in linking family background to unintended fertility.

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Family Background, Childhood Disadvantage, and Unintended Fertility

INTRODUCTION

In the U.S., one of the most profound family changes over the last five decades is the decoupling of fertility and marriage. While the majority of women have postponed marriage, their fertility behavior has increasingly diverged in terms of its timing and union status. Numerous studies have documented that, by the 2000s, about 40 percent of all children were born to unmarried mothers who were relatively young (Ventura and Bachrach 2000). Coupled with this trend, a growing body of research has reported that, despite the wide availability of contraceptive methods, about 50 percent of recent pregnancies and about 40 percent of live births were unintended (Chandra et al. 2005; Finer and Henshaw 2006). Taken together, unintended fertility is at the core of making sense of the causes and consequences of the dramatic increase in nonmarital childbearing.

Research to date has addressed differences in the risk of unintended fertility by family background and the sociodemographic contexts in which unintended births occur (Guzzo and Hayford 2011; Musick 2002). There has been a long-standing literature that shows differences in the ability to postpone or avoid pregnancy by socioeconomic status (SES) (Rainwater 1960). On average, women from low SES background and black and Hispanic women are less regular and effective in contraception; less educated women have more unintended pregnancies than more educated women; and single mothers, and followed by cohabiting mothers, are more likely than married mothers to characterize their conceptions as unintentional (Brown and Eisenberg 1995; Musick et al. 2009). Given the negative association between unintended fertility and the wellbeing of women and children, the difference in birth intention status by SES can be an
important dimension of the reproduction of social inequality (Barber and East 2009; Kissin et al. 2008).

Although previous studies advance our understanding of the determinants of unintended fertility, they have yet to address the fundamental question as to why nonmarital, especially unintended childbearing occurs most likely among women who are least able to cope with socioeconomic disadvantages. We still know very little about the mechanisms by which family background is associated with the occurrence of unintended childbearing. In addition, family and individual attributes measured around the time of childbearing, such as educational attainment, earnings, and union status, are likely to affect as well as be affected by birth intention status. This endogeneity problem may make it difficult to ascertain the causal relationship between those family and individual attributes and unintended childbearing. More importantly, to the extent that unintended childbearing reflects a lack of perceived and actual opportunity costs of having a child while young (e.g., less education, lower earnings, and less marriageability), women having an unintended birth are more likely to experience contraception failures and unstable partner relationships (Raffaelli and Crockett 2003). This suggests that levels of self-regulation can be a critical determinant of unintended fertility, but its role is strikingly understudied in the literature.

In this study, we extend prior research by focusing attention on childhood disadvantage. Taking a life course perspective, this study tests the hypothesis that advantages and disadvantages women experience in their childhood are a major intervening factor that explains the family background gradient on intended and unintended fertility. The life course perspective stresses childhood as a critical and sensitive period of development, which indicates the negative consequences of developmental deficits in childhood over the life course (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003). The literature on child development and human capital formation has provided
ample evidence that children’s cognitive and socioemotional development during childhood has lasting impacts on a variety of life outcomes including educational attainment, labor market performance, and union formation (Heckman 2007; Mortimer and Shanahan 2003). Drawing upon this line of research, we identify economic resources, family structure, parenting quality, and self-regulation as key components of childhood disadvantage that link family background to unintended childbearing.

First, economic resources during childhood have been documented to affect a host of child wellbeing outcomes (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 1997). Economic deprivation is a primary cause of less investment in child development, exposing children raised in poor families to having nonmarital and unintended births. Alongside levels of economic resources, changes in economic circumstances also impact women’s fertility behavior. Unstable or downward trajectories of childhood economic conditions may lower opportunity costs associated with nonmarital and unintended births, as they increase uncertainty and make young women readjust their socioeconomic prospects.

Second, differences in family structure are another component of childhood disadvantage. Women raised in single-mother families may view early sexual activity and nonmarital childbearing as feasible or even desirable as they model their mother’s behaviors in the absence of a father. In addition, single-parent families may be less likely than two-parent families to prevent their adolescent children from early entry into sexual activity, because of a lack of resources and a difficulty in sharing parental control. Furthermore, the stresses induced by changes in family structure may exacerbate young women’s relationship with parent(s) and make them pursue emotional support outside the family, thereby increasing the risk of nonmarital and unintended childbearing (Wu 1996).
Third, compared to economic resources and family structure, parenting quality is potentially a more proximate indicator of childhood disadvantage. Much research indicates that parenting quality not only mediates the association between family SES and child development but also affects child outcomes net of other socioeconomic disadvantages in childhood. Low quality parenting may hamper children’s optimal development because it represents an intellectually less stimulating home environment and less parental supervision (Guo and Harris 2000). As a result, young women exposed to low quality parenting are less likely to regulate their fertility behavior.

Finally, we propose self-regulation as one of the most significant, but largely overlooked, components of childhood disadvantage that can explain the relationship between family background and unintended childbearing (Brown and Eisenberg 1995; Edin et al. 2007). Children who lag behind in terms of cognitive and socioemotional development tend to have more limited skill sets as indicated by academic performance, problem behaviors, perseverance, self-organization, and time horizon. All these aspects of self-regulation are likely to play a key intervening role in disentangling the family background gradient on intended and unintended fertility, as individuals’ level of self-regulation differs by family background and self-regulation has direct relevance to controlling one’s sexual and childbearing behavior.

**DATA AND METHODS**

To investigate the ways in which childhood disadvantage mediates the linkage between family background and unintended childbearing, we use data from the Children of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (CNLSY). The CNLSY is the mother-child supplement to the NLSY79, which is a longitudinal study of 12,686 men and women aged 14 to 21 in 1979. The NLSY79 has collected information on respondents’ family background, cognitive and
socioemotional characteristics, educational attainment, fertility, family formation, and labor market experiences. In 1986, it expanded to include the CNLSY, a biennial assessment of the children of NLSY79 mothers. All of a mother’s children are eligible for the CNLSY. Starting in 1994, the CNLSY has interviewed children aged 15 and older using questionnaires similar to those of the NLSY79.

The analytic sample for this study is based on approximately 3,000 young women born between 1981 and 1996 who were aged 14 to 29 in 2010. We exclude from the analytic sample the daughters born prior to 1981 because their birth could affect mothers’ characteristics and the daughters born after 1996 because they were still in childhood in 2010, the latest survey year that we gather information on young women’s fertility history. As a sensitivity analysis, we construct another analytic sample that is restricted to young women born between 1986 and 1996, given that the full assessments of children’s cognitive and behavioral development are available from 1986 onward.

The outcome variable of this study is age at first birth by intendedness. We use the 2010 wave of the CNLSY to obtain information on young women’s age at first birth and annual data files to establish their birth intention status. Births are intended if a woman reported not using contraception because she wanted to get pregnant or said that, regardless of contraceptive use, she wanted to get pregnant or felt indifferent about getting pregnant at that time. Births are mistimed if a woman reported she did not want a baby at the time of pregnancy but did want a baby at some time in the future. Births are unwanted if a woman reported she did not want a baby at any time in the future. Following prior research, we classify mistimed and unwanted births as unintended (Guzzo and Hayford 2011; Musick et al. 2009; Williams, Abma and Piccinino 1999).
The CNLSY provides rich information on family background and childhood experience. For family background, this study measures mother’s race/ethnicity, educational attainment at birth, Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) score, locus of control, self-esteem, age at first birth, birth intention status, and religious affiliation. We also include daughter’s low birthweight status and birth year. As described above, this study measures four sets of measures of childhood disadvantage. For economic resources, we include family poverty status, mother’s employment status, and number of siblings. Measures of family structure consist of family type and number of family transitions. For parenting quality, we measure mother’s involvement with child and cognitive stimulation at home, both of which are derived from the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) scale (Caldwell and Bradley 1984). Finally, we measure daughter’s self-regulation by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised (PPVT-R), the Peabody Individual Achievement Test (PIAT), and the Behavioral Problem Index (BPI).

To link family background to unintended childbearing via childhood disadvantage, this study employs discrete-time event history models for competing risks. We rearrange our data to a person-year data file and take age 14 to be start of follow-up time for our analysis. Women who married before or without giving birth are censored at the time of marriage. And women who remained single and childless are censored at the time of the 2010 interview. Our models are given by:

$$\ln \left[ \frac{P_{ijt}}{1 - P_{ijt}} \right] = \alpha_{tj} + F_{ijt} \beta + C_{ijt} \gamma,$$

where $P_{ijt}$ denotes the conditional probability that woman $i$ gives either an intended ($j = 1$) or an unintended ($j = 2$) first birth ($j = 0$ for censored cases) at age $t$, $\alpha_{tj}$ is a series of age dummy variables, $F$ is a vector of family background characteristics, and $C$ is a vector of childhood
disadvantage measures. In the analysis, we introduce each set of explanatory variables in a successive manner:

Model 1: family background only

Model 2: Model 1 + economic resources

Model 3: Model 1 + family structure

Model 4: Model 1 + parenting quality

Model 5: Model 1 + self-regulation

Model 6: Full model

REFERENCES


