Study: Adolescents from unstable families lose ground in rigorous high schools

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Research continues to support a connection between instability in the home and school performance in adolescents, but a new study in the January issue of *Sociology of Education* takes the research a step further by exploring how the relationship between family structure change and adolescent academic careers is also affected by the kinds of schools they attend.

According to study co-author Shannon Cavanagh, a professor in The University of Texas at Austin's Department of Sociology, schools vary considerably in terms of socio-demographic composition and "academic press," measured by whether the school is defined by academic, achievement-oriented values, goals, and norms and by specific standards of achievement.

"For these reasons, we were curious about whether the family instability effect on course-taking behaviors might be different (stronger or weaker) in different kinds of schools," she said.

What Cavanagh and study co-author Paula Fomby, an assistant professor in the University of Colorado Denver's Department of Sociology, found supports what is called the "mismatch hypothesis"—a theory that suggests that students who have experienced repeated changes in their family structure status will be less successful academically when attending schools with higher levels of academic press.

Cavanagh and Fomby used data from a nationally representative,

longitudinal study of students who were in high school in the mid-1990s. They chose to focus on math course-taking patterns, since math is among the strongest predictors of college matriculation. Academic status in mathematics at the end of high school not only represents interest and ability in the subject, but, more generally, it captures a clearer picture of a student's cumulative high school career.

Because the data from the chosen study included information on students' school records and their families as well as multiple reporter accounts of the characteristics of their schools, Cavanagh and Fomby were able to relate a specific characteristic of each student—their family structure history—with school characteristics such as the level of academic press and the percentage of students who were from single-parent homes.

"This interaction allowed us to determine the context in which a student's own family history had the greatest impact on their course-taking patterns," Cavanagh said.

"While students in a high-academic press school, regardless of family instability histories, are higher achieving in terms of course-taking compared to their peers overall, students who have experienced repeated family structure changes lose some part of their advantage," Cavanagh said. As such, Cavanagh and Fomby frame their results in terms of "lost gains."

Unfortunately, the results of the study complicate the work of policymakers and educators who have historically sought to mitigate social disadvantages through access to opportunities and resources found in higher-performing schools. While acknowledging that there are people specifically trained to convert academic findings into policy, Cavanagh does highlight the need for teachers and school leaders to clarify what she calls the "opaque process of college preparation" and to

help parents ask the right questions about their student's college preparation.

"[School administrations] can remove some of this opacity with broad information campaigns about the expectations that colleges and employers have for student learning," Cavanagh suggested. "Local business and community leaders who join schools in an effort to prepare college-ready high school graduates may also be effective in reaching parents and adolescents."

Provided by American Sociological Association

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