

**Parental separation and adult psychological distress: the role of material and relational pathways. Evidence from two British birth cohorts.**

**Background:** The relationship between parental separation and adult psychological distress is well established, however relatively little is known about the mechanisms involved. The aim of this study was to investigate the role of material (adolescent material disadvantage, educational attainment and adult material disadvantage) and relational (parent-child relationship quality, peer relationships and adult partnerships) pathways and how these may have changed over time.

**Method:** This study used data from the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) and 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS). Parental separation was measured from 0-16 years. Psychological distress was measured by Malaise Inventory at age 33 years (NCDS) and 30 years (BCS). Information on material and relational factors was taken from intermediate sweeps across the life course. Data are multiply-imputed resulting in a sample of 10,923 NCDS participants and 10,714 BCS participants with complete data on psychological distress. Path analysis was used to calculate probit estimates and to investigate direct and indirect effects via material and relational pathways and the way in which these interlink across the life course.

**Results:** Parental separation was associated with increased reporting of psychological distress in adulthood in both cohorts. The direct effect was more important than the indirect effect in the BCS, but the indirect effect through relational and material mechanisms was more important in the NCDS. Material pathways were more important than relational. The picture for women appears to be particularly complex in both cohorts, with greater linkage between material and relational pathways across the life course.

**Conclusions:** Parental separation was related to increased psychological distress in adulthood. There is evidence that the pathways between parental separation and psychological distress have changed over time. The mechanisms involved are complex and involve both material and relational factors.