

# The Effects of Near and Actual Parental Divorce on Student Achievement and Misbehavior<sup>†</sup>

Mark L. Hoekstra\*  
University of Pittsburgh

January 23, 2009

## Abstract

It is well-documented that children whose parents divorced experience worse outcomes than children from two-parent families. However, data and methodological limitations have made it difficult to know whether declines were evident prior to the divorce or whether the declines were due to the unobserved time-varying factors that caused the parents to file for divorce. This paper addresses these questions by linking public records on divorce to child-level data on reading and mathematics composite test scores and school discipline records. Difference-in-difference estimates reveal steady declines in achievement and steady increases in misbehavior after parental divorce relative to children from two-parent families. These declines capture the causal effect of parental divorce under the assumption that the only factor that changed the trajectories of children at the time of divorce was the parental divorce. However, I find similar negative trends in the performance of children whose parents filed for divorce but ultimately chose to remain married. This suggests that post-divorce declines in children's performance are likely due to the factors that caused the parents to divorce rather than to the legal dissolution of marriage itself.

JEL Classifications: I21, J12

Keywords: Education, Children, Divorce

---

\*Department of Economics, 4714 WW Posvar Hall, 230 S. Bouquet Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15260 (email [markhoek@pitt.edu](mailto:markhoek@pitt.edu)). I would like to thank the School Board of Alachua County for providing the school data and the people at the Office of the Clerk of the Circuit Court at the Alachua County Courthouse for help in acquiring the divorce data used in this paper. Special thanks also go to David Figlio, Rich Romano, Larry Kenny, Alexis León, Scott Carrell, and numerous seminar participants for helpful comments. All errors are my own.

<sup>†</sup>A substantially revised version of this paper was circulated under the title, "Just Kidding, Dear: Using Dismissed Divorce Cases to Identify the Effect of Parental Divorce on Student Performance".

## 1. Introduction

Since the rapid increase in divorce rates during the 1970s, much effort has been made toward ascertaining the effect of parental divorce on children's outcomes. Interest is largely driven by the scope of the issue: more than one million children experienced a parental divorce in each year from 1970 to 1990. Consequently, researchers and policy-makers as well as parents and adult children are interested in learning whether parental divorce makes children worse off than they would have been had their parents remained married.

It is well-documented that children of divorced parents experience worse outcomes than children from two-parent families. However, it is difficult to know whether these negative outcomes are consequences of parental divorce per se or of the factors that caused parents to select into divorce (e.g., conflict). Determining the nature of these causal relationships is especially important for public policy since most policies are unable to solve the underlying problems directly. In contrast, the scope of public policy is largely limited to making divorce more costly in order to induce couples to remain married.

One way to address the question of whether parental divorce is worse than the counterfactual is to see if the divorce was preceded by declines in performance. However, most data sets used to examine the effects of divorce utilize outcomes such as educational attainment or earnings that are only observed after the parental divorce (e.g.,; Cherlin, Kiernan, and Chase-Lansdale, 1995; Painter and Levine, 2000; Ermisch and Fracisconi, 2001a and 2001b), while others are unable to observe trends in the

outcomes prior to divorce (e.g., Cherlin, Kiernan, and Chase-Lansdale, 1995; Sanz de Galdeano, Anna, and Daniela Vuri, 2004).<sup>1</sup> In contrast, one advantage of the approach used here is that I observe annual administrative measures of academic performance and misbehavior for students several years before and for up to 7 years after parental divorce. This allows me to examine whether declines in academic performance after parental divorce are predicted by the *trends* in performance prior to filing for divorce.

However, even with an abrupt change in children's performance trajectories at the time of the parental divorce, it is difficult to know if the change was caused by the legal dissolution of marriage itself or by the time-varying factors that caused the parents to file for divorce. To address this possibility, I examine the performance of a previously unstudied group: children whose parents filed for divorce but ultimately decided to remain married. The intuition behind this approach is that this group's performance will be informative regarding whether declines in the performance of children whose parents divorce are due to the factors that caused the parents to file for divorce or the divorce itself.

I am able to do this by combining public records on divorce with an administrative data set covering eight (eleven) years of standardized test scores (disciplinary outcomes) for every student in grades 1 through 10 (12) in the Alachua County school district in Florida. To my knowledge, this is the only data set containing administrative data on annual child outcomes for several years before and after parental divorce. Additionally,

---

<sup>1</sup> Those seeking additional review of the literatures on the effects of parental divorce in psychology and economics should additionally consult Kelly (2000) and Aughinbaugh et al (2005), respectively.

the data make this study the first to examine the outcomes of children whose parents nearly divorced.

Results indicate that children whose parents divorce experience declines in academic performance relative to children from intact two-parent families. Specifically, difference-in-difference estimates indicate that 6 years afterward, children whose parents divorce score a statistically significant 6 percentile points lower on standardized reading and math tests and commit nearly 50 percent more disciplinary infractions than children from intact two-parent families. Accounting for pre-divorce trends does not explain the post-divorce decline in achievement, though it does reduce the magnitude of the increase in disciplinary infractions by 60 percent. Under the assumption that the only factor that changes children's achievement and misbehavior trajectories at the time of the parental divorce is the dissolution of marriage itself, these declines can be interpreted as the causal effect of parental divorce.

However, I find similar declines in the academic achievement of children whose parents filed for divorce but ultimately remained married. Specifically, difference-in-difference estimates indicate that these children's reading and math test scores fall by 13 to 17 percentile points six years afterward, a drop that is unexplained by pre-filing trends. Tests indicate that the steady decline is unexplained by changes in the composition of children in the sample over time. Additional exercises suggest that the decline was not caused by negative family characteristics or by parents maintaining separate households and "acting" divorced.

Consequently, these findings show that pre-divorce levels of achievement may not be helpful in constructing the counterfactual for children whose parents divorce. In contrast, the time-varying factors that caused parents to file appear themselves to cause significant performance declines. This suggests that the deteriorating academic performance observed after parental divorce would have occurred even had the parents remained married.

## **2. Theory and Previous Research**

### **2.1 How Divorce Affects Student Achievement**

There are several mechanisms through which the legal dissolution of marriage may affect the academic achievement and behavior of children. These include potential reductions in both the quality and quantity of parental education inputs, parental guidance or oversight with respect to disciplinary problems, and economic resources that may affect both home and (through moving) school educational inputs. Finally, the overall stress of the change in family structure may also distract a child from school activities and cause an increase in disciplinary problems.

It is important to note, however, that not all of the ways in which divorce can affect children are negative. For example, although the loss of contact with a divorced parent is typically assumed to have negative consequences for the child, divorce may be beneficial if the divorced parent is abusive or alcoholic or if parental conflict itself negatively affected children's achievement and behavior. Indeed, Stevenson and Wolfers (2006) provide evidence that divorce does lower important signals of family

distress such as suicide and spousal homicide, while Morrison and Coiro (1999) and Jekielek (1998) find evidence that divorce improves child behavior and emotional well-being for a subset of high-conflict families. Finally, if the alternative to legally dissolving the divorce is to separate but not divorce, there may well be positive effects associated with legally ending the marriage. Consequently, while parental divorce may affect child outcomes through any of several mechanisms, the net effect is theoretically ambiguous.

## **2.2 Existing Research**

Among the papers that have examined the impact of parental divorce on children's outcomes, several strategies have been used. The most common approach to estimating the effect of parental divorce is to use longitudinal data to examine the extent to which lower outcomes after divorce are predicted by differences in the characteristics of two-parent families and to-be-divorced families. The common concern across this literature is that the researcher may not observe all of the relevant differences between these two groups of families, causing the estimates to overstate the negative effects of divorce. While the majority of studies using this general strategy find negative effects of divorce, some find no effect (e.g., Lang and Zagorsky, 2001; Sanz de Galdeano and Vuri, (2004)). A similar strategy is to identify the effect by comparing siblings (e.g., Sandefur and Wells, 1999). This approach, however, will fail if the family environment pre-divorce is different from what it would have been afterward had the parents remained married.

In a related paper, Gruber (2004) exploited variation in the passage of unilateral divorce laws and found that children raised under such laws were less well educated

and had lower incomes as adults. However, this strategy will capture both the effect of divorce as well as the effect of selection into marriage and childbearing that is caused by the laws, evidence of the latter of which was found by Stevenson (2007). In contrast, this paper examines only whether parental divorce itself causes declines in performance. For that reason, the results are most relevant for understanding the direct effects of making divorce more difficult.

Finally, noting the selection problem associated with parental divorce, some researchers have addressed the more general question of parental absence by examining parental death (e.g., Fronstin, Greenberg, and Robins, 2001; Lang and Zagorsky, 2001, Corak, 2001). The goal of this paper is different in that the aim is to determine the impact of the *legal* dissolution of marriage, not parental absence.

### **3. Data**

#### **3.1 School Data**

To address the effects of near and actual parental divorce, I use a student-level data set provided by the School Board of Alachua County in the state of Florida. One advantage of using these data is that the county is large, covering 874 square miles—an area nearly three times that of New York City. This made it the 194<sup>th</sup> largest school district in the country in the 2000-01 school year among the nation’s more than 16,000 school districts nationwide. Furthermore, there are no large urban areas in the counties adjacent to Alachua County. Collectively, this means that relatively few students move out of the school district even after experiencing a parental divorce.

The dataset containing disciplinary infractions consists of observations on every student in the 1<sup>st</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades for the academic years of 1993-94 through 2002-2003. The test score data consist of norm-referenced reading and mathematics exam scores spanning the 1995-96 school year through 2002-03. Tests were administered to all students in the 1<sup>st</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup> grades, though at the discretion of the principal some schools did not test any 1<sup>st</sup>- and 2<sup>nd</sup>-graders prior to 2000. The test scores reflect the percentile ranking on one of two national tests (Iowa Test of Basic Skills and Stanford 9) relative to all test-takers nationwide. Over ninety percent of students whose grades were tested took the tests. As described later, however, observations on some students from single-parent families not linked to a divorce were dropped to ensure a clean comparison.

In addition, student records also contain the names and addresses of the parents of each student for each year. This information is crucial because it was used to match divorce information to the student records. Finally, I observe information on each student's race, gender, and school lunch status.

In the following analysis, I use two dependent variables from these school data. The primary outcomes are the mathematics and reading scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and Stanford 9 examinations. However, because the sample size of children who experienced dismissed parental divorce is relatively small, to increase precision I use a composite score, calculated as the average of the math and reading scores.<sup>2</sup> This

---

<sup>2</sup> The results are qualitatively and quantitatively similar when reading and math scores are used separately. For example, I find declines of 8.6 and 8.4 points six years after divorce for math and reading, respectively, compared to a reported decline in the composite score of 8.3 points. Similarly, I find statistically

is similar to other studies (e.g., West and Peterson, 2006). In addition, I also look at the number of disciplinary infractions committed by each student in each year.

### **3.2 Divorce Data**

The divorce data used in this study were gathered from public records information at the Alachua County Courthouse. This information includes the names of every husband and wife who filed for a divorce at the Alachua County Courthouse between January 1, 1993 and March 12, 2003. For each filing, I retrieved the filing date, the final judgment date, and the final judgment type. In addition, I also obtained child names and birth dates for certain divorce cases by personally examining the files at the Alachua County Courthouse, as described in Section 3.4.

### **3.3 Divorce in Alachua County, Florida**

To file for a divorce in Florida, at least one of the parties in the marriage must have resided in Florida for at least six months. In order for the court to grant the dissolution of marriage, the court must either rule that the marriage is irretrievably broken or that one of the marriage parties has been judged mentally incapacitated for a minimum of three years.<sup>3</sup> The court may then choose to do any of several things seen as in the best interests of the marriage parties and dependent children, such as ordering that either or both marriage parties consult with a person deemed qualified by the court (e.g., a marriage counselor) and found acceptable by the ordered party or parties, or extending the proceedings no more than three months to enable the parties themselves

---

significant declines of 14 and 7 percentile points after dismissed parental divorce for math and reading, respectively, compared to a reported decline in the composite score of 12 points.

<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, the “irretrievably broken” clause is the path most commonly tread by those seeking divorce in Alachua County, Florida.

to reconcile. During any period of continuance, the court can make orders regarding alimony and support for the parties, child custody and visitation rights, property division, and so on. Although there is no mandated pre-divorce waiting period in Florida, if there are minor children of the marriage, then prior to obtaining a final hearing each parent is required to attend one of seven four-hour parenting education classes approved by the 8th Judicial Circuit Court. Finally, if after the final hearing the court finds that the marriage is irretrievably broken, a final order of dissolution of marriage is made.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, if the petitioning party decides not to pursue the dissolution of marriage any further, the petitioner may submit a formal petition in writing that the case be dismissed. It is these dismissed divorce cases that are used in this analysis.<sup>5</sup>

### **3.4 Linking the Divorce Records to the Administrative School Records**

Divorce records were primarily matched to student records by using parent names. To maximize the size of the sample of children linked to dismissed divorce cases, I retrieved student names and birthdates from the case files of every dismissed divorce case (>1,000) filed over the time period by directly accessing the files in the basement of the Alachua County Courthouse.<sup>6</sup> The full matching process is described in detail in the Appendix. By looking up the case files of 100 children matched to divorce

---

<sup>4</sup> Importantly, there is no legal separation in the state of Florida.

<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, the judge may also notify the petitioner of intent to dismiss if the petitioner has not fulfilled their obligations to the court and may dismiss the case if nothing is done. Those families, however, look very different in terms of income, race, and student outcomes at the time of filing than families in which the parents divorce and were excluded from the analysis.

cases using parent names, I found that 97 of those children were named in their respective divorce filings. Each parent of the child matched to a divorce case is thus, with 97 percent probability, either the biological or adoptive parent of the child.<sup>7</sup>

By linking the public records to the student records, I am able to identify a group of students whose parents divorced as well as a group of students whose parents nearly divorced. In addition, I categorized children who always shared the same last name as both parents listed in the school records and whose parents were never linked to a parental divorce case as being from intact two-parent families.<sup>8</sup>

### **3.5 The Final Data Set Used in the Analysis**

Restricting the sample only to those children linked to a divorce case or to a two-parent family reduces the overall sample size from about 1,700 students/grade/year to approximately 900 students/grade/year. The data containing disciplinary infractions consist of 129,192 observations on 28,354 children from 1993-2003. The test score data consist of 60,933 observations on 17,326 children. In total, 874 (690) children linked to disciplinary records (test scores) experienced one of 625 (512) parental divorces while 156 (111) children experienced one of 93 (69) dismissed parental divorces. The median time observed between the file date and the divorce judgment was 5 months and 10 days; the median time between the file date and the order of dismissal issued at the

---

<sup>6</sup> Since every case that leaves the shelf for viewing by the public needs to be checked out, checked in, and finally reshelfed by case number, this process was possible only with the cooperation of the extremely helpful staff in the public records division.

<sup>7</sup> Since divorce law is only concerned with “children of the marriage”, a divorce between a biological parent and a step-parent who did not become the adoptive legal parent of the child is not included in my data.

<sup>8</sup> While some married parents choose to not share the same last name, 85 percent of those filing for divorce in the county do. Consequently, conditional on two listed parents having different last names and given the demographics of the county, the most likely possibility is that the parents are not married.

request of the petitioner was 6 months. Due to the relatively small sample size of children whose parents nearly divorced, I do not analyze the performance of subgroups after near and actual parental divorce.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of children from intact two-parent households, children whose parents divorced, and children whose parents nearly divorced. For the latter two groups, statistics are presented 0 to 3 years prior to the parents filing for divorce.<sup>9</sup> The table shows that children whose parents divorced and nearly divorced are similar in terms of observable characteristics, with two exceptions. The first is that there are more boys whose parents later filed and dismissed a divorce case (57.9 percent) than whose parents later divorced (47.4 percent). This is consistent with research by Dahl and Moretti (2004) and Lundberg and Rose (2003) that suggests that men are more likely to stay married when there are sons involved. For this reason, I control for child gender in the analysis. The second difference is that children whose parents dismissed a divorce case tend to have more disciplinary problems, though some of this increase is a consequence of the difference in the gender mix of the two groups. I overcome that issue by using a difference-in-difference approach that will yield unbiased results so long as both groups of children are on similar trajectories as children from two-parent families. This assumption is supported by the graphical evidence and formal statistical tests shown later.

---

<sup>9</sup> When a child was observed more than once in this time period, I calculated the average value of each variable from all observations of that child in that category.

### 3.6 Distribution of Observations Over Time for Children Linked to Divorce Filings

Due to the nature of the dataset, relatively few students are observed for extended periods both before and after parental divorce. This is due to three reasons. First, the dataset ends in 2003, so any child in any grade matched to a divorce in, say, 2002, will be observed with at most one post-divorce observation. Second, test scores are first observed in 1996, so students in any grade whose parents filed for divorce in, say, 1997, will be observed with at most one pre-divorce observation. Finally, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders were not tested prior to 2000 and 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders were never tested.

The resulting distribution of observations for children matched to dismissals and divorces is shown in Table 2. Approximately 60 to 70 percent of the children linked to a divorce case are observed one to three years afterward, while 35 percent are observed after three to five years. Five to seven years after the divorce or dismissal, 20 to 30 percent of the total number of children are observed.<sup>10</sup>

Because students observed more than four years after near or actual parental divorce are for the most part (and by necessity) different students than those observed prior to the divorce filing, as with all repeated cross-section datasets one needs to worry about whether results are being driven by changes in the sample composition over time. This is addressed in Section 6.2 in which I show that 1) controlling for observable characteristics such as race, sex, and family income does not affect the difference-in-

---

<sup>10</sup> For the analysis of disciplinary infractions, the time after the divorce is defined as the calendar year of the observation minus the year in which the divorce case was closed. For the analysis of test scores, the time after the divorce is defined as the number of years between the date of the dismissal or divorce judgment and the date of the test.

difference estimates, and 2) there is no evidence of a pattern of composition changes that would explain the results.

#### **4. Methodology**

In examining the outcomes of individuals who nearly received treatment as well as those who did, the strategy employed in this paper is similar in spirit to others. For example, Bound (1989) and Hotz, McElroy, and Sanders (2005) examined the labor market impacts of Social Security Disability Benefits and teenage childbearing, respectively, by examining the outcomes of individuals who were close to receiving the treatment of interest. Both concluded that previous cross-sectional studies had exaggerated the negative effects. The purpose of this paper is to determine whether or not the same is true with respect to the difference-in-difference estimates of the effect of parental divorce.

To do so, I first compare the performance of children before and after parental divorce to children from two-parent families. The identifying assumption of this difference-in-difference estimate is that so long as the children who later experience parental divorce would have followed the same trajectories as children from two-parent families in the absence of treatment, the resulting estimates will yield the causal effect of parental divorce. An important advantage of the data used for this analysis is that they allow this assumption to be tested in two ways. First, I examine whether the trajectories of children before parental divorce really were the same as children from two-parent families. Second, I examine whether difference-in-difference estimates for children whose parents nearly divorce show similar declines in performance after the

event, which would suggest that the decline following parental divorce is not a consequence of the divorce itself.

The effects of near and actual parental divorce are assessed using ordinary least squares estimation of the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} Outcome_{it} = & \vartheta_g + \gamma_t + \alpha X_{it} + b_0 EverFiled_{it} + b_1 PreFilingTimeTrend_{it} \\ & + b_2 DuringDivorceFiling_{it} + b_3 (Within\ 1\ Year\ after\ Case\ Closure)_{it} + b_4 (1\ to\ 3\ Years\ after \\ & Case\ Closure)_{it} + b_5 (3\ to\ 5\ Years\ after\ Case\ Closure)_{it} + b_6 (5\ to\ 7\ Years\ after\ Case \\ & Closure)_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}. \end{aligned}$$

Where  $\vartheta_g$  and  $\gamma_t$  are grade and year fixed effects,  $X$  is a vector of control variables including race, sex, and family income, and *EverFiled* is a dummy variable equal to one if the child's parents ever filed for divorce. The variable *PreFilingTimeTrend* is a time trend estimating the trajectory of children in the three years prior to divorce and provides a test of the identifying assumption of the difference-in-difference analysis. The variable *DuringDivorceFiling* is a dummy variable equal to 1 if the observation occurs after the case is filed but before it is concluded (a period that averages 5 months and 10 days for divorce cases and 6 months for dismissed cases), and the remaining variables (e.g., *(Within 1 Year after Case Closure)*) are dummy variables equal to one if the observation is observed within a given time period after either the divorce judgment or the order of dismissal filed at the request of the petitioner. Consequently, coefficients  $b_3$ ,  $b_4$ ,  $b_5$ , and  $b_6$  capture the cumulative effect of actual (or near) parental divorce relative to children from two-parent families after an average of 6 months, 2 years, 4 years, and 6 years, respectively.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 The Performance of Children Whose Parents Divorce Relative to Children from Intact Two-Parent Families

I first examine whether the performance of children whose parents divorce declines relative to children whose parents remain married. In addition, I test whether this relative decline is predicted by trends that existed prior to the divorce filing.

The underlying data are graphed in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 shows child math and reading scores (demeaned of grade, year, and gender fixed effects) before and after near and actual parental divorce while Figure 2 shows the same for disciplinary infractions.

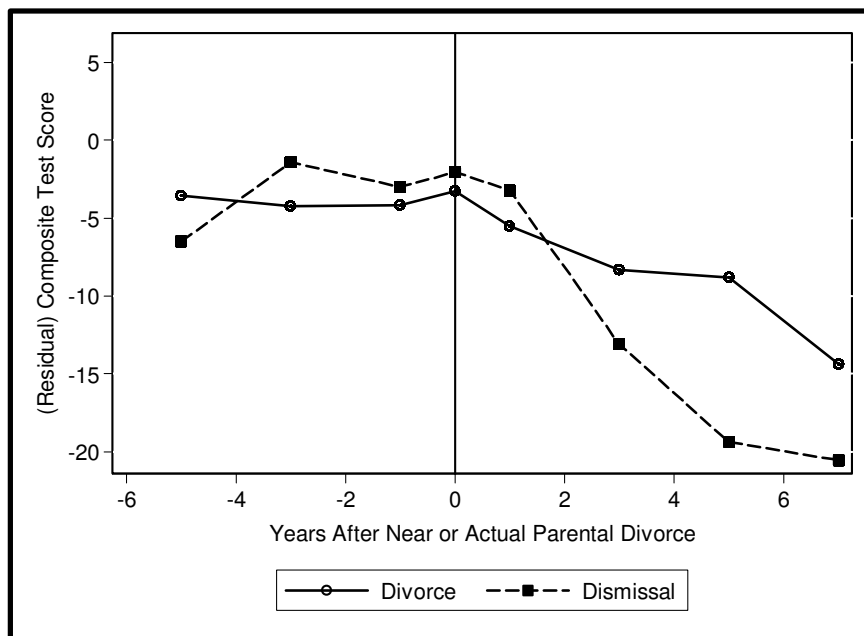


Figure 1: Composite Test Score Performance Before and After Near and Actual Parental Divorce (Demeaned of year, grade, and gender effects)

Figure 1 shows that while test scores are flat prior to parental divorce, they decline gradually afterward. Figure 2 shows that the number of disciplinary infractions

increases in the years after the divorce, though it appears less clear that the parental divorce caused a break in trajectory.

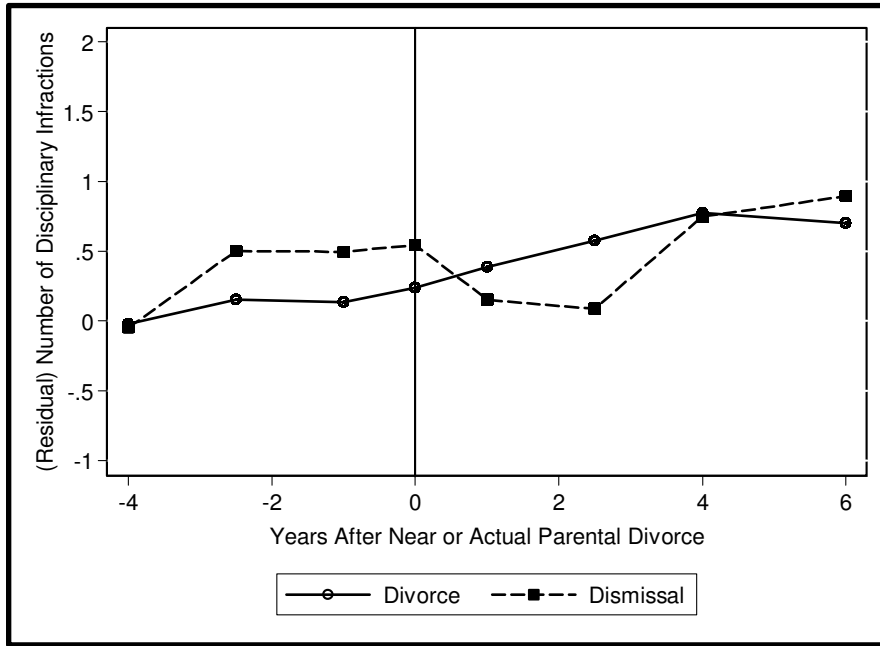


Figure 2: Disciplinary Infractions Before and After Near and Actual Parental Divorce (Demeaned of year, grade, and gender effects)

More formal tests are shown in specifications one through three of panels A and B in Table 3, where difference-in-difference estimates of the cumulative effect of parental divorce after an average of 6 months, 2 years, 4 years, and 6 years are shown. Column 1 shows the estimates without controlling for race, gender, or family income while column 2 does control for race and gender and column 3 additionally controls for subsidized lunch status and median neighborhood income. Standard errors clustered at

the family level are in parentheses.<sup>11</sup> As shown in Panel A, the difference-in-difference estimates indicate that test scores steadily decline after divorce. Estimates in column 1 show that the effect of parental divorce after 3 to 5 years is -4.86 percentile points while the effect after 5 to 7 years is a statistically significant -7.48 percentile points. Similarly, estimates in column 1 of Panel B indicate that children whose parents divorced commit more disciplinary infractions in each year afterward, with the effect increasing from a statistically significant 0.39 more infractions in the year following the divorce to 0.74 more infractions five to seven years after the divorce.

In order to determine if the worsening performance of children whose parents divorce is driven by any changes in sample composition, in Specification 2 I include controls for race and gender and in Specification 3 additionally control for family income. If changes in the sample composition were driving the declines, then controlling for these student and family characteristics should substantially diminish the estimated effects.

The results indicate this is not the case. Specifically, I find that the estimate of the effect of parental divorce five to seven years later changes from -7.48 to -6.69 when controls for race and gender are included and changes only slightly to -5.97 in my preferred result in column 3.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the estimates of the increases in disciplinary

---

<sup>11</sup> The school district does not identify families, so although I identify families for children whose parents filed for divorce, for the children whose parents never filed for divorce I assumed each was in a separate family.

<sup>12</sup> Controlling for family income measures is arguably controlling for too much since parental divorce could itself affect family income, but I do so anyway in an attempt to be conservative given the use of repeated cross-sectional data.

infractions committed after parental divorce are not diminished when the additional controls are added.

Importantly, the test score decline is not predicted by performance trends in the three years before the parents filed for divorce. In contrast, the upward trend in disciplinary problems was at least partially evident prior to the parents filing for divorce. For example, specification 3 in Panel B implies that accounting for the fact that 0.07 more disciplinary infractions were committed each year prior to the parents filing for divorce reduces the increase in disciplinary problems after 4 to 5 years by 60 percent from 0.72 to 0.45 ( $p=0.038$ ) and the increase after 6 or 7 years by 60 percent from 0.68 to 0.26 ( $p=0.335$ ). Under the assumption that the only thing that changes the trajectory of student performance at the time of divorce is the legal divorce itself, these declines in performance capture the causal effect of parental divorce.

As discussed earlier, however, it is possible that the factors that caused a parent to file for divorce may not have been present years earlier when the parent chose not to file for divorce. Consequently, it is still difficult to know if the relative declines are due to the time-varying factors that caused the parents to divorce or to the legal dissolution of marriage itself and all the changes caused by that. For this reason, I now turn to examining the performance of children whose parents went to the brink of divorce but pulled back and decided to remain married.

## **5.2 The Performance of Children Whose Parents Nearly Divorce Relative to Children from Intact Two-Parent Families**

Figures 1 and 2 also show the performance of children before and after their parents nearly divorce. Figure 1 shows that while the trajectory of children's academic

performance was flat prior to the parents filing for divorce, it declined steadily afterwards. Figure 2 shows that consistent with the identifying assumption of difference-in-difference analysis, the trajectory of misbehavior prior to the divorce filing was also flat. After the parents exit the divorce proceedings, an initial reduction in misbehavior is followed by a steady increase in disciplinary problems at school.

These results are shown formally in Table 3 in Specifications 4 through 6. Specification 4 in Panel A reveals that following a near parental divorce, children's performance in math and reading declines quickly, with the estimate indicating that the cumulative effect of near parental divorce 5 to 7 years later is -16.58 percentile points. Panel B shows that after 6 years children whose parents nearly divorced commit 0.69 more infractions—an estimate remarkably close to that for children whose parents did divorce—though the effect is imprecisely estimated. In addition, one cannot reject the null hypothesis that these children's test score and misbehavior trajectories were flat prior to the parents filing for divorce, consistent with the assumption of the difference-in-difference analysis.

In order to determine if the worsening performance of children whose parents nearly divorced is due to changes in the sample composition of those children over time, I include controls for race and gender and for race, gender, and family income in specifications 5 and 6. Results from the preferred specification in column 6 indicate that children whose parents nearly divorced 5 to 7 years earlier score a statistically significant 16.94 percentile points lower and commit 0.58 more infractions than their counterparts whose parents never filed for divorce. More importantly, the results in

columns 5 and 6 show that similar to the results for the children whose parents divorced, there is no evidence that including these controls diminishes the negative estimates. Consequently, if changes in the composition of the sample are driving the results it must be that the sample is changing in a way that is both unobserved and that is uncorrelated with student race, gender, and family income.

In addition, the results of additional tests designed to determine if changes in the sample composition over time are driving the declines in performance are discussed in Section 6.2.

Collectively, these results suggest that whatever causes parents to file for divorce has important longer-term implications for child outcomes such as academic performance and misbehavior in school. Furthermore, given that the magnitude of the declines in performance observed here is at least as large as that observed for children whose parents actually divorced, it suggests that the latter declines are not a consequence of the legal dissolution of marriage itself.<sup>13</sup>

## **6. Alternative Explanations of the Performance Decline of Children Who Experienced a Near Parental Divorce**

### **6.1 Are Dismissed Divorce Cases Really De Facto Divorces?**

The interpretation of the observed decline in the performance of children who experience a dismissed parental divorce depends on why those parents decided not to divorce. While I do not directly observe why the petitioning party requested that the

---

<sup>13</sup> One advantage of having a manageable number of dismissed divorce cases is that I was able to do a county public records search for the parents in each dismissed divorce case to ensure that they did not in fact divorce in Alachua County.

judge dismiss the case, anecdotal evidence suggests that the primary reason was reconciliation.<sup>14</sup> However, there are other possibilities, including that the couples in fact did split up and/or “act” divorced by maintaining separate households even while they remained legally married.<sup>15</sup>

To provide some evidence on whether or not that occurred and caused the observed declines, I estimated the effects again after excluding the dismissed divorce families in which at least one parent’s name was changed or dropped in the school district records after the case was dismissed. The intuition is that if any families in the dismissal group did “act divorced”, it would most likely be these families. The results, which are available upon request from the author, show that excluding these families causes the difference-in-difference estimate to change from -16.9 percentile points to -21.3 points ( $p=0.007$ ). This is consistent with the interpretation that the performance declines are due to the factors that caused the parents to file for divorce rather than to a de facto divorce. More fundamentally, however, in trying to determine how children would do if their parents had instead stayed married—perhaps due to some policy intervention that occurred during the divorce process—it seems hard to think of a more

---

<sup>14</sup> For example, some couples were observed to file for divorce again after requesting that a case be dismissed, though these couples were also excluded from the analysis. In addition, in looking through divorce filings at the courthouse, I noticed that some petitioners whose cases were dismissed by the judge (the type not used in this analysis) wrote letters afterward requesting that the cases be reopened. In those letters, the petitioners typically cited attempted reconciliation as the reason why they decided not to continue the divorce process, which in turn led the judge to dismiss the case.

<sup>15</sup> Although I searched for every dismissed divorce parent in the public records to ensure that they did not subsequently divorce in the county, another possibility is that they did divorce in another county. However, such families are unlikely to drive the result for the simple reason that if they move out of the county, their children are no longer in my sample.

appropriate group of children to examine than those whose parents went to the brink of divorce before turning back.<sup>16</sup>

## **6.2 Are the Performance Declines after Near and Actual Parental Divorce Caused by Changes in Sample Composition?**

This analysis relies on applying difference-in-difference analysis to repeated cross-sectional data due to sample size constraints. Consequently, as with all studies that use repeated cross-sectional data (e.g., Dynarski 2003), one concern is that changes in the sample composition over time could bias the results. However, several tests suggest that this is not a problem. First, one cannot reject the null hypothesis at the 5 percent level that the attrition rates of children in the divorce, dismissal, and two-parent groups are equal.<sup>17</sup> Second, within the divorce and dismissal groups one cannot reject that the children who attrite are the same as those who do not in terms of gender, subsidized lunch status, median neighborhood income, math and reading composite test scores, and the number of disciplinary infractions committed.<sup>18</sup> Third, if changes in sample composition were driving the results, then one would expect that controlling for student and family characteristics would diminish the estimated declines in performance. As shown earlier, however, this is not the case.

As a further test of whether changes in sample composition are driving the results, I estimate the same model using black, male, subsidized lunch status, and

---

<sup>16</sup> However, to the extent that the mere filing of a divorce case causes negative consequences for the children involved, the performance of the group studied in this paper may not be informative regarding the consequences of an intervention or reconciliation that occurs before a parent initiates the divorce process.

<sup>17</sup> The attrition rates of children in the divorce, two-parent, and dismissal groups are 10.9 percent, 15.8 percent, and 17.1 percent. Nineteen of the 111 children in the dismissal group linked to test scores are observed to leave the sample prematurely.

neighborhood family income as the dependent variables. This tests whether, for example, poor children are more likely to be observed three to five or five to seven years after experiencing a near parental divorce in a difference-in-difference framework. One might be especially worried if children from poor families were progressively more likely to be observed in the years following a near or actual parental divorce.

Results are shown in Tables 4 and 5, where Table 4 shows the results using the test score sample while Table 5 uses the larger sample of children linked to disciplinary infractions. Results in Panel A show that there is no evidence of either statistically significant or economically meaningful changes in the sample composition of children who experienced a parental divorce. Results for the children who experienced near parental divorce are in Panel B of Tables 4 and 5. There, the estimates in specifications 3 and 4 suggest that if anything, the children most likely to be observed three to five and five to seven years afterward when the performance declines are the largest are *less likely* to be eligible for subsidized lunch and come from neighborhoods with a *higher* income than during the other time periods. The only potentially worrisome result from Panel B of Tables 4 and 5 is that one is more likely to observe boys in the years after the dismissed cases, even conditional on there being more boys in that sample overall relative to children from two-parent families. However, restricting the sample to only boys yields test score declines after 4 and 6 years of -4.5 ( $p=0.186$ ) and -10.1 ( $p=0.009$ ) percentile points for those who experienced parental divorce and -13.9 ( $p=0.056$ ) and

---

<sup>18</sup> The only statistically significant difference within the two groups is that children from the dismissal group who leave the sample prematurely are less likely to be black than those who do not, a difference which amounts to 5 of 19 attriting students being white instead of black.

-12.8 ( $p=0.109$ ) for those who experienced near parental divorce. This suggests that changes in the gender mix of the sample composition is not driving the results either.

Finally, Figure 3 shows the test score performance of both groups when the sample is restricted to only children observed with at least five test scores. Evidence of similar declines is evidence that the estimates presented earlier are not driven by children who appear in the data for only a short time.

Collectively, the evidence suggests that for attrition to be driving the results, the sample composition must change in ways that are both unobserved and uncorrelated with race and family income and in such a way that it does not cause the attrition rate of the filing group to be different from the non-filing group.

### **6.3 What if the Decision to Dismiss a Divorce Case Is Correlated with Negative Unobserved Family Characteristics?**

Perhaps the most serious concern is the possibility that families that dismissed a divorce case did so because of some time-varying family problem not shared by families that eventually experience a divorce. If this were the case, the performance of children who experience near parental divorce may decline not because of the typical problems shared by children whose parents actually divorced but because of some other issue.

Examples include if families dismiss divorce cases because of coercion (though the current sample excludes all families linked to domestic violence cases),<sup>19</sup> if a parent uses

---

<sup>19</sup> As noted in the appendix, all divorce cases (dismissed and otherwise) that were matched to domestic violence cases using parent name combinations were excluded from the analysis. A total of 31 cases (5.7%) that ended in divorce were excluded as were 7 (7.1%) dismissed divorce cases. While one might worry that the somewhat higher percentage of dropped dismissals may be evidence of negative unobserved characteristics in the dismissal group relative to the divorce group, a more likely explanation is that more matches were made to dismissals because there are more common name combinations in the dismissal group than the divorce group. This arose because of how the public records were matched to student records. See the appendix for the details.

threats (of divorce, in this case) as bargaining tools, if a family decides during the divorce process that it was unable to support a divorce financially, or if certain families simply lack the organization or focus to complete the process.

It seems hard to believe, however, that characteristics correlated with a couple's propensity to dismiss a divorce case would not be evident in either the levels or trajectories of the family characteristics and student outcomes prior to filing for divorce. For example, Figure 1 seems inconsistent with the possibility that some families suddenly become indecisive and frivolous during the divorce process and that it is that newly-discovered indecisiveness (and its correlates) that lowers achievement afterward for the dismissal group, as opposed to the conflict and other problems that also characterized families that experienced divorce. Similarly, it seems difficult to believe that while the \$3,500 difference in neighborhood income does not cause the dismissal group's test scores to decline rapidly prior to filing the divorce case, it would cause the steep decline in test scores observed in Figure 1 after the closure of the case.

In addition, one benefit of looking through more than a thousand dismissed divorce cases was that I was able to identify any peculiar types of dismissed divorce cases that might be responsible for post-filing declines in performance. The only such characteristic that was evident from the filings for requested dismissals was that in 11 cases the petitioner filed a motion for default, which is entered so that the petitioner can proceed with the divorce without the other spouse being present. While the records appeared to indicate that the other spouse eventually responded in all of the

cases,<sup>20</sup> one might still be concerned that such a motion may be correlated with negative unobserved family characteristics and thus may drive the results.

Consequently, it provides some comfort that the post-dismissal decline changes from 16.9 percentile points to 22.8 percentile points when these families are excluded.

A final concern is that children influence the decision to divorce, conditional on filing. This seems unlikely to drive the results for three reasons. First, one must believe that although children affected the decision to divorce conditional on filing, they did not affect the decision to file. Second, the graphical and regression estimates shown earlier provide no evidence that children whose parents nearly divorced experienced worse outcomes in the six months between the filing and conclusion of the divorce case than did children whose parents did divorce. This suggests that these families did not experience a large negative shock that 1) caused the parents to dismiss the divorce case and 2) caused the performance declines afterward. Third, even if one is convinced that in some cases the decision to divorce is endogenous to the children, this is arguably less likely when children are younger. Thus it provides some comfort to note that when the sample is restricted to only those children whose parents divorced when the child was in the 1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> grades, I find declines of -21.2 ( $p=0.016$ ) and -9.2 ( $p=0.006$ ) after five to seven years for children who experienced near and actual parental divorce, respectively.

---

<sup>20</sup> It is also worth noting that there are undoubtedly cases that ended in divorce in my data set in which motions for default were entered that I made no attempt to identify. The potential concern here is that such motions may be more prevalent for cases that end with a request for a dismissal.

## 7. Conclusions

It is well-documented that children whose parents divorce experience worse outcomes than children whose parents do not. However, data and methodological limitations have made it difficult to determine whether these declines were either evident prior to the divorce or were due to time-varying factors that caused the parents to select into divorce. To address these questions, I exploit a unique data set containing annual administrative outcomes on academic achievement and misbehavior in school. Difference-in-difference estimates reveal that six years after parental divorce, children score a statistically significant 6 percentile points lower on standardized math and reading tests than children from intact two-parent families. Similarly, difference-in-difference estimates imply a nearly 50 percent increase in disciplinary infractions committed in school. I find that accounting for pre-divorce trends does not affect the declines in test scores, though it does reduce the magnitude of the misbehavior estimates by 60 percent. Under the assumption that the only factor that changes children's achievement and misbehavior trajectories at the time of the parental divorce is the dissolution of marriage itself, these declines can be interpreted as the causal effect of parental divorce.

However, I also find declines of at least that magnitude in the performance of children whose parents went to the brink of divorce but ultimately decided to remain married. This suggests that the relative decline in the performance of children who experience parental divorce is likely due to the factors that caused the parents to divorce rather than to the legal dissolution of marriage itself. Consequently, any

reconciliation or policy intervention intended to improve the outcomes of children experiencing parental divorce must overcome those underlying problems. Evidence presented here suggests that this is no small task since parents who voluntarily exited the divorce process were apparently unsuccessful at doing so.

## References

- Aughinbaugh, Alison, Charles R. Pierret, and Donna S. Rothstein. 2005. "The Impact of Family Structure Transitions on Youth Achievement: Evidence from the Children of the NLSY79." *Demography* 42 (3): 447-468.
- Bound, John. 1989. "The Health and Earnings of Rejected Disability Insurance Applicants." *American Economic Review* 79 (3): 482-503.
- Cherlin, Andrew J., Frank Furstenberg, P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, Kathleen Kiernan, Philip K. Robins, Donna Ruane Morrison, and J. O. Teitler. 1991. "Longitudinal Studies of the Effect of Divorce on Children in Great Britain and the United States." *Science* 252: 1386-1389.
- Cherlin, Andrew J., Kathleen E. Kiernan, P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale. 1995. "Parental Divorce in Childhood and Demographic Outcomes in Young Adulthood." *Demography* 32 (3): 299-318.
- Corak, Miles. 2001. "Death and Divorce: The Long-Term Consequences of Parental Loss on Adolescents." *Journal of Labor Economics* 19 (3): 682-715.
- Dahl, Gordon B. and Enrico Moretti. 2004. "The Demand for Sons: Evidence from Divorce, Fertility, and Shotgun Marriage." NBER Working Paper 10281. Accessed at <http://www.nber.org/papers/w10281>.
- Dynarski, Susan. 2003. "Does Aid Matter? Measuring the Effect of Student Aid on College Attendance and Completion." *American Economic Review*, 93 (1): 279-288.
- Ermisch, John F. and Marco Francesconi. 2001a. "Family Structure and Children's Achievements." *Journal of Population Economics* 14: 249-270.
- Ermisch, John F. and Marco Francesconi. 2001b. "Family Matters: Impacts of Family Background on Educational Attainments." *Economica* 68: 137-156.
- Fronstin, Paul, David H. Greenberg, and Philip K. Robins. 2001. "Parental Disruption and the Labour Market Performance of Children When They Reach Adulthood." *Journal of Population Economics* 14: 137-172.
- Gruber, Jonathan. 2004. "Is Making Divorce Easier Bad for Children? The Long Run Implications of Unilateral Divorce." *Journal of Labor Economics* 22 (4): 799-833.
- Hotz, V. Joseph, Susan Williams McElroy, and Seth Sanders. 2005. "Teenage Childbearing and Its Lifecycle Implications: Exploiting a Natural Experiment." *Journal of Human Resources* 40 (3): 683-715.
- Jekielek, Susan M. 1998. "Parental Conflict, Marriage Disruption and Children's Emotional Well-Being." *Social Forces* 76 (3): 905-936.

- Kelly, Joan B. 2000. "Children's adjustment in conflicted marriage and divorce: A decade review of research." *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 39 (8): 963-973.
- Lang, Kevin, and Jay L. Zagorsky. 2001. "Does Growing Up With a Parent Absent Really Hurt?" *Journal of Human Resources* 36 (2): 253-273.
- Lundberg, Shelly, and Elaina Rose. 2003. "Child Gender and the Transition to Marriage." *Demography* 40 (2): 333-349.
- McLanahan, Sara S. and Gary D. Sandefur. 1994. *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts? What Helps?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Morrison, Donna Ruane, and Mary Jo Coiro. 1999. "Parental Conflict and Marital Disruption: Do Children Benefit When High-Conflict Marriages Are Dissolved?" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (3): 626-637.
- Orbuch, Terri, Arland Thornton and Jennifer Cancio. 2000. "The Impact of Marital Quality, Divorce and Remarriage on the Relationships Between Parents and Their Children." *Marriage and Family Review* 29 (4): 221-237.
- Painter, Gary, and David I. Levine. 2000. "Family Structure and Youths' Outcomes: Which Correlations Are Causal?" *Journal of Human Resources* 35 (3): 524-549.
- Sandefur, Gary D., and Thomas Wells. 1999. "Does Family Structure Really Influence Educational Attainment?" *Social Science Research* 28: 331-357.
- Sanz de Galdeano, Anna, and Daniela Vuri. 2004. "Does Parental Divorce Affect Adolescents' Cognitive Development? Evidence from Longitudinal Data." Unpublished Paper.
- Stevenson, Betsey. 2007. "The Impact of Divorce Laws on Marriage-Specific Capital." *Journal of Labor Economics*, 25(1): 75-94.
- Stevenson, Betsey, and Justin Wolfers. 2006. "Bargaining in the Shadow of the Law: Divorce Laws and Family Distress." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 121(1): 267-288.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1999. *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, No. 155 and No. 159. Washington, D.C.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1970. *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, No. 75. Washington, D.C.
- West, Martin, and Paul Peterson. 2006. "The Efficacy of Choice Threats within School Accountability Systems: Results from Legislatively Induced Experiments" *Economic Journal* 116 (March): C46 – C62.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(B) - (C)
	Children in 2000 whose parents were likely married but never filed for divorce	Children whose parents later file for and specifically request the dismissal of a divorce case	Children whose parents later file a divorce case that ends in divorce	Difference between Column B and Column C
Age at date of filing	-	11.8 (2.8)	11.9 (2.9)	-0.1
% Black	15.9 (36.6)	17.5 (38.4)	19.7 (39.8)	-2.2
% Male	50.9 (50.0)	57.9 (49.8)	47.4 (50.0)	10.5
% Subsidized lunch	20.1 (40.1)	35.1 (48.1)	31.7 (46.6)	3.4
% Disabled	11.1 (31.4)	21.1 (41.1)	17.0 (37.6)	4.0
% Gifted	13.5 (34.2)	12.3 (33.1)	10.0 (30.1)	2.3
Zip code median family income	\$48,906 (11,630)	\$45,341 (11,971)	\$47,392 (12,808)	-2,051
% Committed disciplinary infraction in a year	18.4 (38.8)	36.8 (48.7)	23.8 (42.6)	13.0**
Number of infractions per year	0.63 (2.23)	1.35 (2.8)	0.74 (2.1)	0.61**
Days suspended per year	0.86 (3.76)	2.18 (5.5)	0.95 (3.6)	1.23**
Composite test score (average of math and reading)	65.1 (26.5)	57.5 (27.7)	59.1 (25.5)	-1.8

If children are observed more than once in each category, the average was used. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Differences reported may not be equal to differences in the numbers in the table due to rounding. Asterisks \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* represent statistical significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1% levels, respectively.

Table 2: Distribution of Observations of Students Matched to Parental Divorce Cases

Data	Group	Total	Students Observed After Near or Actual Parental Divorce		
			1 - 3 Years	3 - 5 Years	5 - 7 Years
All students	Children who Experience Parental Divorce	874 100%	664 76.0%	316 36.2%	186 21.3%
	Children who Experience a Dismissed Parental Divorce	156 100%	103 66.0%	53 34.0%	41 26.3%
Students observed with at least one test score	Children who Experience Parental Divorce	690 100%	399 57.8%	226 32.8%	137 19.9%
	Children who Experience a Dismissed Parental Divorce	111 100%	64 57.7%	41 36.9%	32 28.8%

Notes: Not all children are observed both before and after parental divorce due to the fact that some children experience parental divorce in the early grades, some in the later grades, some in the early part of the time period and some near the end of the time period. For example, children who experienced parental divorce in the 8th grade prior to 2000 or in the 10th grade after 2000 are not observed with test scores after the parental divorce since the tests were not administered in those grades after that. Similarly, children whose parents filed between 1993 and 1996 or who were young at the time of the divorce are not observed with test scores prior to the parental divorce filing.

Table 3: Difference-in-Difference Estimates of the Effect of Actual and Near Parental Divorce Relative to Two-Parent Families

Specification	Actual Parental Divorce			Near Parental Divorce		
	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Panel A. The Effect of Near and Actual Parental Divorce on Composite Score</b>						
Pre-Filing Time Trend	-0.15 (0.93)	-0.67 (0.81)	-0.58 (0.79)	0.62 (3.34)	0.11 (2.51)	-0.90 (2.59)
After filing but before case closure	0.43 (2.75)	-0.61 (2.40)	-0.45 (2.24)	2.21 (10.32)	4.05 (9.09)	1.40 (8.66)
0 - 1 year after case closure	-0.53 (2.40)	-1.22 (2.15)	-0.16 (2.08)	1.43 (8.73)	1.53 (6.99)	-1.10 (7.03)
1 - 3 years after case closure	-3.38 (2.64)	-3.16 (2.36)	-1.71 (2.26)	-4.45 (9.40)	-4.76 (7.31)	-7.77 (7.33)
3 - 5 years after case closure	-4.86 (3.02)	-4.70* (2.71)	-3.42 (2.58)	-11.51 (9.89)	-11.64 (7.58)	-14.60* (7.62)
5 - 7 years after case closure	-7.48** (3.41)	-6.69** (2.99)	5.97** (2.85)	-16.58* (9.74)	-13.18* (7.29)	-16.94** (7.73)
Observations	60,933	60,933	60,933	57,906	57,906	57,906
<b>Panel B. The Effect of Near and Actual Parental Divorce on Disciplinary Infractions</b>						
Pre-Filing Time Trend	0.05 (0.03)	0.06* (0.03)	0.07** (0.03)	0.01 (0.19)	0.00 (0.20)	-0.06 (0.19)
After filing but before case closure	0.24** (0.10)	0.26*** (0.10)	0.26*** (0.10)	0.31 (0.25)	0.30 (0.28)	0.29 (0.28)
0 - 1 year after case closure	0.39*** (0.12)	0.39*** (0.12)	0.35*** (0.12)	-0.10 (0.38)	-0.10 (0.39)	-0.09 (0.37)
1 - 3 years after case closure	0.59*** (0.16)	0.58*** (0.15)	0.54*** (0.15)	-0.13 (0.35)	-0.18 (0.37)	-0.16 (0.36)
3 - 5 years after case closure	0.81*** (0.23)	0.76*** (0.22)	0.72*** (0.21)	0.56 (0.43)	0.45 (0.45)	0.47 (0.44)
5 - 7 years after case closure	0.74*** (0.26)	0.68*** (0.26)	0.68*** (0.25)	0.69 (0.81)	0.51 (0.81)	0.58 (0.79)
Observations	129,192	129,192	129,192	123,324	123,324	123,324
Controls for ever filing and grade and year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls for race and sex	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Controls for subsidized lunch status and neighborhood income	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes

Notes: Each column in each panel represents a separate regression; robust standard errors clustered at the family level are in parentheses. Asterisks \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* represent statistical significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1% levels, respectively.

Table 4: Test-Taking Sample: Tests for Compositional Changes in the Samples of Children Who Experienced Near and Actual Parental Divorce Relative to Children from Two-Parent Families

Specification	1	2	3	4
Panel A. Effect of Actual Parental Divorce on Exogenous Characteristics (Test Score Sample)	Male	Black	Subsidized Lunch	Log Zip Code Income
Pre-Filing Time Trend	-0.010 (0.015)	-0.019 (0.014)	-0.008 (0.18)	-0.004 (0.011)
After filing but before case closure	0.038 (0.048)	-0.044 (0.045)	-0.006 (0.055)	0.019 (0.036)
0 - 1 year after case closure	-0.010 (0.040)	-0.025 (0.039)	0.053 (0.047)	-0.000 (0.028)
1 - 3 years after case closure	-0.009 (0.040)	0.010 (0.044)	0.074 (0.050)	-0.038 (0.031)
3 - 5 years after case closure	0.010 (0.053)	0.003 (0.053)	0.071 (0.057)	-0.024 (0.037)
5 - 7 years after case closure	0.058 (0.061)	0.016 (0.060)	0.048 (0.062)	-0.010 (0.040)
Observations	60,933	60,933	60,933	60,200
Panel B. Effect of Near Parental Divorce on Exogenous Characteristics (Test Score Sample)	Male	Black	Subsidized Lunch	Log Zip Code Income
Pre-Filing Time Trend	0.071* (0.043)	-0.032 (0.054)	-0.061 (0.062)	0.040 (0.031)
After filing but before case closure	0.004 (0.129)	0.059 (0.142)	-0.066 (0.155)	0.075 (0.105)
0 - 1 year after case closure	0.078 (0.115)	-0.012 (0.130)	-0.089 (0.148)	0.119 (0.084)
1 - 3 years after case closure	0.195 (0.134)	-0.052 (0.147)	-0.117 (0.160)	0.146 (0.097)
3 - 5 years after case closure	0.173 (0.144)	-0.040 (0.167)	-0.150 (0.167)	0.099 (0.104)
5 - 7 years after case closure	0.168 (0.156)	0.109 (0.192)	-0.179 (0.183)	0.020 (0.116)
Observations	57,906	57,906	57,906	57,206
Controls for an indicator for "ever filing"	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls for grade and year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Each column in each panel represents a separate regression; robust standard errors clustered at the family level are in parentheses. Asterisks \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* represent statistical significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1%

Table 5: Disciplinary Infraction Sample: Tests for Compositional Changes in the Samples of Children Who Experienced Near and Actual Parental Divorce Relative to Children from Two-Parent Families

Specification	1	2	3	4
Panel A. Effect of Actual Parental Divorce on Exogenous Characteristics (Disciplinary Infraction Sample)	Male	Black	Subsidized Lunch	Log Zip Code Income
Pre-Filing Time Trend	-0.010 (0.012)	-0.006 (0.011)	-0.013 (0.013)	-0.005 (0.008)
After filing but before case closure	0.012 (0.030)	-0.016 (0.033)	0.004 (0.039)	-0.000 (0.024)
0 - 1 year after case closure	-0.013 (0.032)	0.001 (0.035)	0.059 (0.042)	-0.010 (0.026)
1 - 3 years after case closure	0.000 (0.036)	0.008 (0.040)	0.054 (0.045)	-0.028 (0.028)
3 - 5 years after case closure	0.024 (0.044)	0.030 (0.049)	0.059 (0.051)	-0.029 (0.034)
5 - 7 years after case closure	0.029 (0.051)	0.030 (0.054)	0.025 (0.057)	-0.007 (0.037)
Observations	129,192	129,192	129,192	126,761
Panel B. Effect of Near Parental Divorce on Exogenous Characteristics (Disciplinary Infraction Sample)	Male	Black	Subsidized Lunch	Log Zip Code Income
Pre-Filing Time Trend	0.088** (0.038)	-0.045 (0.043)	0.072 (0.055)	0.009 (0.031)
After filing but before case closure	0.113* (0.054)	-0.064 (0.082)	0.008 (0.088)	0.056 (0.054)
0 - 1 year after case closure	0.091 (0.067)	-0.050 (0.084)	0.002 (0.107)	0.081 (0.058)
1 - 3 years after case closure	0.143* (0.080)	-0.037 (0.098)	-0.005 (0.118)	0.073 (0.074)
3 - 5 years after case closure	0.179* (0.092)	-0.014 (0.123)	-0.033 (0.128)	0.036 (0.078)
5 - 7 years after case closure	0.161 (0.111)	0.063 (0.142)	-0.096 (0.135)	0.006 (0.090)
Observations	123,324	123,324	123,324	121,005
Controls for an indicator for "ever filing"	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls for grade and year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Each column in each panel represents a separate regression; robust standard errors clustered at the family level are in parentheses. Asterisks \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* represent statistical significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1% levels, respectively.

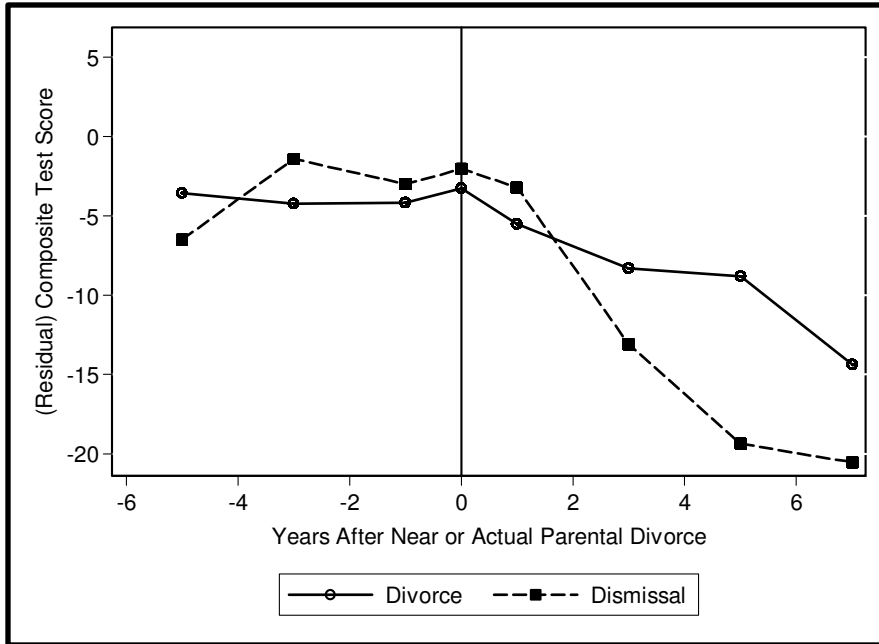


Figure 1: Composite Test Score Performance Before and After Near and Actual Parental Divorce (Demeaned of year, grade, and gender effects)

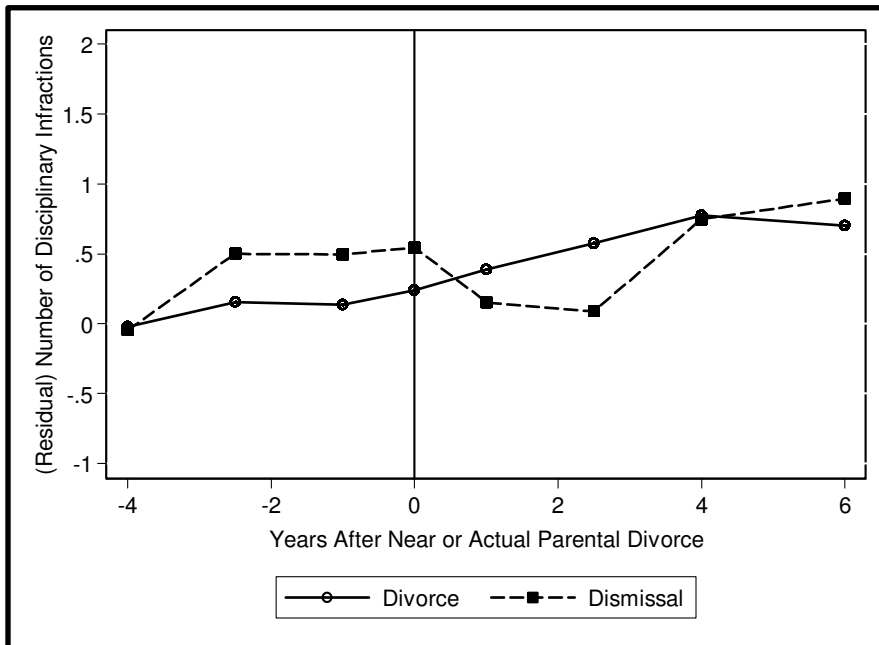


Figure 2: Disciplinary Infractions Before and After Parental Divorce (Demeaned of year, grade, and gender effects)

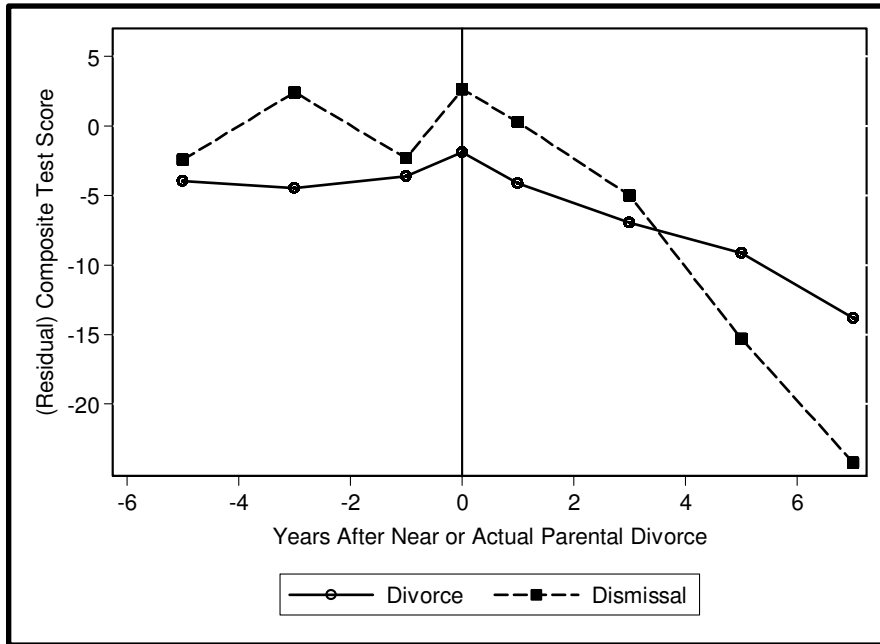


Figure 3: Composite Test Score Performance Before and After Near and Actual Parental Divorce for Students Observed with at Least Five Test Scores (Demeaned of year, grade, and gender effects)

## Appendix (for refereed version of paper only)

Divorce cases were matched to students' parents listed in the school district records using the first and last names of both parents. Only unique couple-name combinations were used. Consequently, if John and Mary Smith were observed to have filed for more than one divorce case from January 1, 1993 through March 12, 2003, those divorce cases were not matched to students.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, if in the school district in any given year from 1993 through 2003 there were two or more children who were not siblings but who had parents with identical names, those children were not matched to any divorce. Siblings were defined as children who shared the same last name and lived at the same residential address.

Divorces were matched to students on a year-by-year basis. Since the parental name information from the school district is from fall registration in August of each year, these parental names were matched to divorces filed from August 1<sup>st</sup> of that year through July 31<sup>st</sup> of the following year. This was done to increase the likelihood that the parent names from the school district used to match to divorces were both present. In contrast, if one were to try to match August names to a divorce filed in January of that same year, the parent names in the school data may not both be present or may have changed since the divorce was filed.

Table A1 shows how many divorces have been filed in Alachua County, Florida, from January 1, 1993, through March 12, 2003. Table A1 also shows how the number of

---

<sup>21</sup> In reality, the uniqueness standard was applied more strictly than this. In the divorce data I observe up to nine names for both the husband and the wife, due to the fact that any address or name changes must be

total divorce cases in the county is different from the number of divorce cases one would expect to be associated with children in the public school system. For example, in the year 2000 there were 1,123 divorce cases filed, of which 974 were General Dissolutions (a necessary but not sufficient condition for the case to have children involved.) Of those, 904 had unique parent name combinations. A random check of 100 General Dissolutions from 1993-2003 indicated that 54 percent of the marriages had minor children of that marriage, implying that one might expect that 488 of those divorce cases may involve minor children of the marriage. Since I match divorces only to children in grades one through twelve and approximately 10 percent of students in the county attend private schools, there were approximately 293 divorces in 2000 that I could reasonably expect to match. Given that about 10 percent of the parent name combinations in the school data were nonunique, there remained approximately 264 divorces filed in the year 2000 that I could expect to match. In all, I could reasonably expect to have matched at most 2,512 divorce cases. While I do not claim that this is the exact number of matchable divorces, it is my best guess as to how many I could expect to match.

As shown in Table 2, I matched 724 divorce cases to names in the school data using the parent name identifier, for a match rate of 28.8 percent.<sup>22</sup> Of those 724 divorce cases, 583 were matched to a student for whom I observed at least one test

---

disclosed to the court. If *any* first-last name couple combination for a given divorce was identical to that in another divorce case, that divorce case was not matched.

<sup>22</sup> While this may seem low, the incidence of typographical errors in the data set is reflected in the fact that my search for a different public record of my own yielded no results due to a misspelling of my last name. In addition, to the extent that any one parent in a couple uses a nickname in the school data set (e.g., Bob) but a formal name in the divorce records (e.g., Robert), the match rate will be low.

score. Of those matches made to children observed with at least one test score, a random check of 100 children matched to divorces suggested that an estimated 97 percent of the matches made were correct.<sup>23</sup>

However, only 66 of those 724 matched divorce cases had been dismissed. In order to increase the sample size of dismissed divorce cases, I went to the Alachua County Courthouse and looked up all dismissed divorce cases with unique parent name combinations that were filed from January 1, 1993 – March 12, 2003. I then matched these dismissed divorce cases to children in the school data for which the first and last name of the child matched along with at least one of the following two identifiers (and none contradicted significantly<sup>24</sup>)

- child's date of birth
- parents' names

Furthermore, only dismissed divorce cases in which one spouse was not found to be deceased were matched. At this point, some adjustments were made to the set of students matched to a dismissed divorce case in order to ensure a proper comparison, the impact of which is shown in Table 3. First, all observations matched to a divorce case that had been dismissed by the judge (as opposed to ones in which the petitioner requested the dismissal directly) were dropped from the data set. Although it may not at first seem intuitive why one would want to eliminate those dismissed cases from the

---

<sup>23</sup> This was done by manually looking up the divorce judgment papers for each of 100 randomly selected matches made and comparing the child's name from my matched data to the names of the children in the divorce papers. All observations matched to the three cases that were incorrectly matched were dropped from the data set.

<sup>24</sup> For example, if the date of birth in one file said 8/16/1985 and the date of birth in the other file said 8/16/1986, I made the match provided that the child name and parent names matched.

data set, it becomes evident by looking at the characteristics of this group prior to filing for divorce. For example, the test scores of children whose parents later filed for a divorce that was dismissed due to something other than a direct request by the petitioner were more than 20 percentile points lower than those of children whose parents explicitly requested the dismissal and those of children whose parents later divorced. Similar differences are evident between these two groups with respect to math scores, subsidized lunch status, and the percent black.

In addition, since I want to ensure that the dismissed divorce cases in the data set were not caused by a threat of violence by one spouse to the other, I acquired data on domestic violence cases filed from 1993-2003. I then matched domestic violence cases to the school data by matching the parent name combinations in the domestic violence cases to parent name combinations in the school data set. The observations of students who were matched to a domestic violence case were then dropped from the data set.

Finally, all observations matched to students for whom only one parent name was listed by the school district in the year prior to that in which the divorce was filed were dropped from the data set, since those children could not have been matched to a case that ended in divorce due to the nature of the matching algorithm described above. This was done to ensure that the dismissed divorces matched were similar to the cases that ended in divorce. The net effect of these adjustments on the data set used is shown in Table A3.

Table A1: Matchable Divorces in Alachua County, Florida

Year	All Divorce Cases Filed	General Divorce Cases Only (excludes Simplified Dissolutions)	Cases with unique husband-wife name combinations	Cases assuming that children are involved in 54% of General Divorces	Cases with children in grades 1-12 (12/18=66.67%)	Cases with children in the public school system (given 10% private enrollment)	Cases after excluding nonunique parent names in school file (10%)
1993	1201	924	886	478	319	287	258
1994	1139	863	802	433	289	260	234
1995	1136	875	816	441	294	264	238
1996	1066	876	820	443	295	266	239
1997	1144	965	900	486	324	292	262
1998	1081	900	840	454	302	272	245
1999	1070	909	843	455	303	273	246
2000	1123	974	904	488	325	293	264
2001	1018	878	816	441	294	264	238
2002	992	868	817	441	294	265	238
2003	187	180	170	92	61	55	50
Total	11,766	9,212	8,614	4,652	3,101	2,791	2,512

Table A2: Families Matched to Unique Divorces

Year	Matchable divorces given nonunique names in school data	Divorce cases matched to school names	Divorce cases linked to at least one test score	Children with test scores linked to a divorce
1993	258	95	51	65
1994	234	68	47	56
1995	238	78	56	76
1996	239	61	45	64
1997	262	70	63	89
1998	245	58	53	74
1999	246	62	58	80
2000	264	83	75	114
2001	238	69	68	93
2002	238	66	65	88
2003	50	14	14	25
Total	2,512	724	595	824

Table A3: Families Matched to Unique Divorces after Adjustments

Sample	Cases Ending in Divorce Matched to Student Records	Cases Ending in Divorce Matched to Student Test Scores	Dismissed Divorce Cases Matched to Student Records	Dismissed Divorce Cases Matched to Student Test Scores
(a) All Cases Matched Using Unique Parent Names	660	543	-	-
(b) All cases matched using student names and birth dates retrieved from all dismissed divorce cases filed from 1993 - 2003	0	0	164	132
(c) Both (a) and (b)	660	543	164	132
(d) Same as (c), but excluding dismissed divorce cases not explicitly known to be dismissed voluntarily	660	543	131	99
(e) Same as (d), but excluding dismissed divorce cases in which one parent name was matched to a domestic violence case	625	512	123	92
(f) Same as (e), but excluding dismissed divorce cases matched to student records in which only one parent name was listed prior to the divorce	625	512	93	69