

Risk behaviours, victimisation and mental distress among adolescents in different family structures

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Abstract

Background

Previous studies have shown an elevated risk with regard to social and behavioural domains in adolescents of single parents. However, the diversity of single parent families concerning gender of the resident parent has seldom been taken into account when investigating the relation between family structure and children's negative outcomes. Thus, the aim of this study was to investigate risk behaviours, victimisation and mental distress among adolescents in different family structures using more detailed sub-groups of single parents (i.e., single mother, single father and shared physical custody).

Methods

The sample consisted of 15,428 ninth graders from all municipal and private schools in the county of Stockholm (response rate 83.4%). Risk behaviours included use of alcohol, illicit drugs and smoking. Victimization was measured by experiences of exposure to bullying and physical violence. Mental distress was assessed with the anxious/depressed and aggressive behaviour syndrome scales in the Youth Self Report (YSR). Bivariate and multivariate logistic regression analyses were used to investigate the associations between family structure and outcome variables.

Results

Adolescents in single-mother/father families were at higher risk of risk behaviours, victimisation and mental distress than their counterparts in two-parent families. However, after control for possible confounders the associations between victimisation, aggressive behaviour problems and single motherhood were no longer significant, whereas these relations remained for children living with single fathers. Adolescents in shared physical custody run no increased risk of any of the studied outcomes (except drunkenness) after adjustment for covariates. Post hoc analyses revealed that adolescents in single-father families were at higher risk for use of alcohol, illicit drugs, drunkenness, and aggressive behaviour as compared to their peers in single-mother families, whereas no differences were found between adolescents in single-mother families and those in shared physical custody.

Conclusions

Children of single parents should not be treated as a homogenous group when planning prevention and intervention programmes. Researchers and professionals should be aware of and consider the specific problems of single parent children and that their problems may vary depending on their living arrangements.

