

## **The Effects of Household Disruption on the Risk-Taking Behaviors of South African Young People**

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Recent research estimates that one-third of South African young people are infected with HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS 2000). In such a context, anything that reduces condom use or control over sexual relationships can have life-threatening consequences. Household economic and contextual shocks—such as parental job loss and divorce—may be one important influence on adolescent risk-taking behaviors. Drawing upon theory and research from a number of disciplines, including sociology, economics, psychology, and public health, this paper examines the influence of household shocks on risky behaviors, including the use of condoms and contraception with recent sexual partners, non-monogamy, decision-making dynamics concerning condom usage, and substance use.

I use data from two large, regionally-representative surveys of South African young people to conduct the analysis. These data contain responses from a large number of adolescents and their parents/guardians to a broad range of questions concerning sexual and reproductive health and demographic and household characteristics, and allow me to address some of the shortcomings of previous research (described below).

There are several reasons to expect that household shocks may influence risk-taking behavior. First, because adolescents generally look to their families for emotional and economic security, they may take risks to cope with the added stress that such shocks may bring (Kaufman et al 2004). Similarly, parents may increase their own substance use or other risk-taking in response to such stressors; their behaviors then provide adolescents with negative examples and may reduce parents' ability to monitor adolescent behavior. Moreover, parents may increase their working hours to cope with economic shocks, reducing their availability to supervise their children and creating more opportunities for adolescents to take risks (McLloyd 1998; Wu & Thomson 2001). Furthermore, household economic shocks may encourage adolescents—especially girls—to exchange sex for school fees or material goods they can no longer afford. Previous research suggests that transactional sexual relationships reduce condom use and increase the risk of coercion and sexually transmitted infections (Dunkle et al. 2004; Stavrou and Kaufman 2000).

Theories of adolescent development suggest that change—and especially multiple sources of change—reduces adolescents' resilience to adversity and increases the risk of negative behavioral outcomes (Gerard & Buehler 2004). While researchers from a number of social science disciplines have investigated the effects of household and contextual change on adolescent behavior, their studies have often been constrained by disciplinary boundaries. Scholars of public health and sociology have examined adolescent risk-taking behaviors extensively, but to the extent that they have examined the effects of family or household change, they have mainly used static measures of household characteristics. [However, see Wu 1996 for a notable exception.]. The possible additional effects of changes in these characteristics, or the cumulative effects of such changes, are often overlooked. Economists have often collected detailed information on household economic shocks, but have mainly used these data to examine their effects on adolescents' schooling and employment rather than on risky sexual or substance use behavior (Duryea et al 2003). Alternatively, psychologists have focused on measuring changes in family or household processes, such as conflict or parental monitoring, rather than in structural characteristics like income or household membership, and have mainly examined psychosocial outcomes rather than risky behavior. Even studies on the effects of parental divorce, which explicitly examine family change, have usually considered the

consequences of family disruption—sometimes along with the effects of subsequent economic decline—in isolation from other potential sources of change. Given that household shocks are a common part of life for South African young people, and since risk-taking can have long-term and sometimes life-threatening consequences, a closer empirical examination of the effects of multiple household shocks is warranted. A more dynamic approach to households may provide additional insight into adolescent behavior and provide direction for policies, prevention efforts, and future research.

### ***Data and Methods***

In this study, I cross disciplinary boundaries by examining the effects of economic changes at the household-level—traditionally the purview of economists—along with other household contextual changes on risky sexual and substance use behavior—traditionally the purview of public health researchers and sociologists—and conduct my analysis guided by theories of adolescent development based in psychological research.

I use panel data from two large, regionally-representative surveys of young people in South African, the Durban Transitions to Adulthood survey and the Cape Area Panel Study (CAPS). The Transitions to Adulthood in the Context of HIV/AIDS study (the Transitions study) was conducted on approximately 3,100 young people ages 14-24 in two districts within KwaZulu-Natal Province, Durban Metro and Mtunzini Magisterial District. A modified stratified, multi-stage cluster sampling method was used with census enumeration areas from the 1996 Census serving as the primary sampling unit. Interviews were conducted with all willing young people aged 14–24 years within each census enumeration area. In addition, the household head or other responsible adult in the household was interviewed about the household’s residents, sociodemographic characteristics, household amenities, and recent household shocks. Two waves of interviews were conducted, in 1999 and 2001.

The CAPS study was conducted in 2002 on a regionally representative sample of about 4,800 young people ages 14-22 in the Western Cape area of South Africa (Lam et al. 2005). This survey used a modified, stratified, two-stage cluster sampling strategy, with enumeration areas from the 1996 Census serving as the primary sampling units. Interviews were conducted with randomly selected young people in each sampled household; up to three young adults were interviewed in each household. Data were also collected on the households in which they live from the household head or other responsible adult; information was obtained on the household residents, sociodemographic characteristics, amenities, and recent economic shocks.

The analysis will investigate a number of risky behaviors as dependent variables. These include indicators of recent sexual risk-taking behaviors, including the number of recent partners, the type of relationship the respondent had with these partners (e.g., boyfriend/girlfriend, sex worker, acquaintance), non-monogamy, the use of condoms and contraception with these sex partners, and decision-making dynamics concerning condom usage. Other outcomes include the frequency and intensity of recent alcohol, drug, and cigarette consumption.

The household shocks under examination include: Death of a household member or other family member, a serious injury or illness that kept a household member from doing normal activities, the loss of a regular job of a household member, a reduction or cut-off of a remittance to the household, a reduction or cut-off of a government grant (not due to death), abandonment or divorce, theft, fire, or destruction of household property, loss of crops or livestock, or failure of a business or bankruptcy of business. Each survey asked respondents about these shocks during the 24 months prior to the survey.

The analyses will also include a wide range of control variables, such as age, sex, family structure, population group, current school enrollment, employment in the past 12 months, type of residence in which respondent lived before age 12, and household socioeconomic status, which will allow me to control for potentially confounding variables.

I will conduct separate fixed effects models for boys and girls to examine the relationships between household shocks and these risk-taking behaviors. Drawing on adolescent resilience theory, I investigate the effects of any household shock, multiple shocks (additive effects), and whether there are threshold or non-linear (multiplicative) effects.

## **Results**

Initial exploratory results suggest that household economic shocks are significantly associated with all of the risk behaviors described above even after controlling for respondents' socioeconomic status and other individual and household variables. Moreover, the household economic shocks help to explain a considerable portion of additional variance in the preliminary models. I expect that the full findings will demonstrate the added value of understanding the dynamics of the household economic situation in explaining adolescent risk-taking behaviors.

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