

Do joint custody laws improve family well-being?

Joint child custody laws affect not only divorced families but intact families as well

Keywords: joint custody, marriage, divorce, fertility, suicide, child outcomes

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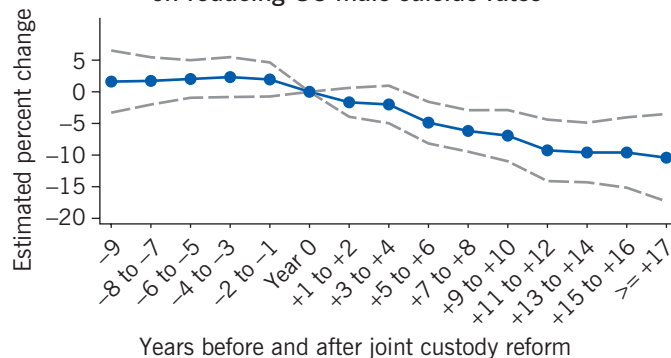
Custody laws governing living arrangements for children following their parents' divorce have changed dramatically since the 1970s. Traditionally, one parent—usually the mother—was assigned sole custody of the child. Today, many divorced parents continue to share parental rights and responsibilities through joint custody arrangements. While joint custody laws have improved the situation of divorced fathers, recent empirical research has documented intended and unintended consequences of joint custody laws for families in such areas as family formation, labor force participation, suicide, domestic violence, and child outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS

Pros

- ⊕ The introduction of joint custody reforms boosts marriage rates, particularly among people with previous divorce experience and those aged 35 or older.
- ⊕ Joint custody reforms have increased overall fertility rates and shifted fertility from outside marriage to inside marriage.
- ⊕ Joint custody reforms have lowered male suicide rates by about 9% over the long term.
- ⊕ Joint custody reforms have reduced the incidence of domestic violence.
- ⊕ Children of divorced parents growing up under joint custody reforms may have higher educational attainment.

Joint custody reforms have a large estimated effect on reducing US male suicide rates



Note: Dotted lines indicate confidence intervals.

Source: Based on regressions analysis presented in Table 6 of [1].

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World of Labor

Cons

- ⊖ The introduction of joint custody reforms reinforces the traditional division of labor within the family and gives men greater bargaining power over the intra-household allocation of resources.
- ⊖ There is some evidence that joint custody reforms increase divorce rates.
- ⊖ Joint custody reforms reduce female labor market participation.
- ⊖ Joint custody reforms have had no robust, long-term effect on female suicide rates.
- ⊖ Children overall and those in intact families growing up in jurisdictions with joint custody laws have lower educational attainment and worse labor market outcomes.

AUTHOR'S MAIN MESSAGE

Joint custody reforms increase the bargaining power of men within marriage and alter the allocation of resources within the household. The empirical evidence suggests that these shifts reinforce the traditional division of household labor, with both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, marriage and fertility rates rise, and male suicides and domestic violence decline. On the negative side, female labor supply drops, and average education and labor market outcomes for children worsen. Policymakers should acknowledge that regulating families' post-divorce life may affect intact families and try to minimize any unintended negative consequences.