

Using the NLSY79 Child Surveys to Study the Effects of Family Transitions

The NLSY79 Child/Young Adult surveys provide researchers with the opportunity to study the effects of family transitions on child development across the lifespan. The NLSY79 Child/YA data can be used to investigate the connections between economic or employment instability, changes in family structure, or residential mobility on a variety of cognitive, educational, socio-emotional, health, and behavioral outcomes from childhood through adolescence into adulthood.

FAMILY ECONOMIC INSTABILITY:

The NLSY79 cohort is a rich source of family income and asset information. NLSY79 respondents provide detailed information about income from a variety of sources, including sources of public assistance income. Family poverty status and family poverty level are available for NLSY79 respondents. A series of environmental variables describe the extent of family and individual poverty within the respondent's geographical area of residence.

CHANGES IN FAMILY STRUCTURE:

Mother's Marital Status & Transitions. The NLSY79 offers edited Supplemental Fertility File variables that identify the beginning and ending dates of all marriages, as well as a summary variable of the total number of spouses and cohabiting partners ever reported. For each survey round, the respondent's current marital status is reported and 'Change(s) in Marital Status Since Last Interview' are described. A related variable, also located in the "Fertility and Relationship History/Created" area of interest, provides the number of months between the respondent's first marriage and the birth of the respondent's first child. Partner presence is reported starting in 1980 with more detailed cohabitation information available in the 1990 and 1992-current surveys.

Household Structure. An enumeration of the mother's household is conducted each survey year that contains a detailed list of members, their age, education, and relationship to the respondent. Also available is information on the type of dwelling or living situation of the household.

Father Presence & Nonresident Father Contact. Based on information from the mothers' NLSY79 interviews, a series of constructed variables is provided to users that indicate if the child's father is present in the household, and if not, whether he is living and the distance he lives from the child. Children ages 10-14 are asked if they live with their biological father, stepfather, or neither.

RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY/RELOCATION:

Researchers can track family relocation history based on NLSY79 mothers' responses to questions on residence each survey year, so that the type and timing of changes in residence can be traced and linked to child outcomes. For each survey round, a key variable (CRES) is constructed which indicates the child's usual residence at the time of the mother's survey. Geographic residence information for those NLSY79 children who resided with their mother can be inferred from the residence data of their mothers. Data on the mother's region of residence is available on the public use dataset. More detailed geographic location information is available, at the SMSA, county, and state levels, on the restricted-use Geocode File. For information about the Geocode application process, see <http://www.bls.gov/nls/geocodeapp.htm>.

CHILD AND YOUNG ADULT OUTCOMES:

Assessments. Starting in 1986, the children of NLSY79 female respondents have been assessed every two years. The assessments measure cognitive ability, temperament, motor and social development, behavior problems, and self-competence of the children as well as the quality of their home environment. The following assessments have been used:

Cognition:

- PIAT Reading and Math
- Peabody Picture Vocabulary test (PPVT-R)
- Memory for Digit Span
- McCarthy Verbal Memory (1986-1994)
- Kagan's Body Parts (1986-1988)
- Kagan's Memory for Locations (1986-1988)

Socio-Emotional Development/Behavior:

- Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC)
- Temperament
- Motor & Social Development
- Behavior Problems Index

Home Environment: An abbreviated version of Caldwell and Bradley's HOME Environment Inventory

Child Health. The following health information and physical characteristics are collected for each child: birth weight; prenatal history; type of birth; post-birth care including feeding practices and immunizations; hair and eye color; handedness; height and weight; limiting health conditions affecting activities or schooling; use of medicine, medical equipment or medical care, nature and timing of accidents and injuries; hospitalization history; routine health care; dental checkups; psychological treatment or referral; health insurance coverage; and (starting in 2004) asthma history.

Child Schooling and Family Background. Mothers report on Head Start and preschool enrollment, schooling, grade repetition, school behavior, educational expectations, peer relations, and religious attendance and training for their school-age children. Starting in 1996, children answer questions on homework, classroom activities, and parent participation in school decisions and events.

Early Adolescence. Starting in 1988, children 10 and older report on parent-child interaction, family decision-making, school attitudes, work activities, peer relationships, religious attendance, computer use, gender roles, smoking, alcohol and drug use, and sexual activity (the latter for ages 13 and over through 2000).

Young Adulthood. Starting in 1994, children ages 15 and older complete a lengthy interview modeled on the NLSY79 main Youth questionnaire. The topics covered include education, training, employment, physical and mental health, dating, fertility and parenting, marriage and cohabitation, and household composition. A confidential supplement records their self-reports on parent-child conflict, sexual activity, participation in delinquent or criminal activities, substance use, computer use, pro-social behavior, political attitudes, and their expectations for the future. Because the Young Adult survey covers many of the same topics as the main NLSY79 interview, researchers can examine many of the same patterns of instability and changes in family structure in both the lives of the young adults as well as the lives of their mothers.

Beginning in 2016, the Child survey is no longer conducted. However, interviewed NLSY79 mothers completed the Mother Supplement for children in the household at least part-time who were 0 to 13 years of age as of the end of 2016, and children 12 and older were included in the Young Adult data collection.

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NLS data and documentation are publicly available for search and download at: <http://www.nlsinfo.org>

The annotated, searchable NLS bibliography can be accessed at: <http://www.nlsbibliography.org>