



Residential Mobility After Divorce: Implications for Divorce Education



Tyler Jamison, PhD, University of New Hampshire
David Schramm, PhD, University of Missouri
Adam Galovan, MS, University of Missouri

Abstract

Forty-six states now have voluntary or mandated courses that are designed to reduce conflict and improve communication between coparents following separation or divorce (Schramm & Calix, 2011). Although most coparents must negotiate these tasks across separate households, little research has addressed the issue of residential mobility (i.e., moving from one residence to another) as it relates to post-divorce family processes. Consequently, programs aimed at supporting post-divorce families may not account for the ways in which residence shapes post-divorce family relationships. The purpose of this study was to explore data related to residential mobility from recently divorced parents and explain how the findings might influence divorce education curriculum and implementation.

Background

Data from several studies in Western Europe suggest that individuals tend to make quick decisions about moving out after separation. Individuals are more likely to move out of their homes following divorce if: they initiate the divorce, they immediately enter into a new relationship, they have fewer resources, and/or they do not have custody of their children (Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen, 2008; Mulder & Malberg, 2011; Mulder & Wagner, 2010). Moving quickly or impulsively out of the marital home often results in temporary housing situations (e.g., living with parents). Nearly half of individuals who moved after divorce moved again within a year (Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen).

Which partner moves and how far have important implications for family processes following divorce. For example, coparenting may be more or less challenging when parents live far apart, depending on the level of conflict and the desired level of coparental interaction (Jamison, Coleman, Ganong, & Feistman, 2014). Research has shown that children tend to suffer poorer outcomes when they move frequently (see Jelleyman & Spencer, 2008), and divorce often precipitates moves to poorer neighborhoods (South, Crowder, & Trent, 1998), limiting access to good schools and other opportunities. The dearth of data from the United States about residential mobility following divorce is problematic, given that many American families are affected by separation and divorce.

Methods and Analysis

The data for this study come from a mixed-method investigation of the costs of divorce. Participants were recruited from a mandated parenting education class for divorcing couples in a Midwestern state. The sample for the quantitative portion of the study included 530 parents who had divorced in the last 12 months. Participants were predominantly White (93%) and female (68%), but were diverse in terms of educational attainment and age (21-60). Surveys were composed mainly of questions that were created by the research team to assess the financial costs associated with divorce (e.g., legal fees, income changes), participants' level of distress about the divorce, and the reasons for the divorce. Data were collected using paper and online surveys.

We also conducted qualitative interviews with 10 women and 10 men from the larger sample. We used purposive sampling to achieve a range of ages and levels of household income before and after divorce. Using their surveys as a guide, interviewees were asked to clarify and elaborate on their answers in addition to providing insight about how the financial aspects of divorce impacted them emotionally and interpersonally. The quantitative analysis consisted of assessing means and frequencies for key variables related to moving following divorce. Qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo software to facilitate open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Results

More than half of participants (64%) moved as a direct result of the divorce, including 69% of women and 52% of men. Home ownership dropped by one third as a result of divorce (from 73% to 40%). Among those who no longer owned their homes, 20% rented and 13% lived with family or friends. A majority of participants (52%) relocated a short distance away (< 10 miles), but 22% moved 11-25 miles and 26% moved 26 miles or more. Consequently, 47% of participants lived outside their child's school district after they divorced.

The qualitative interviews revealed several additional themes, including housing as a factor in determining custody, concerns about moving children from their childhood homes, and problems with coparenting that arise from greater distances between homes (see handout for quotations). Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that residential mobility is part of the context of post-divorce family life and, perhaps, deserves greater attention in education and intervention geared toward this population.

Participants experienced a 33% drop in home ownership after they divorced.

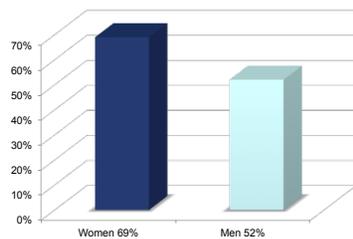
13% of participants moved in with friends or family after they divorced.

47% of parents lived outside their child's school district after they divorced.

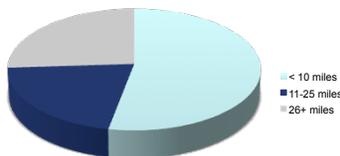
How many people moved as a direct result of the divorce?



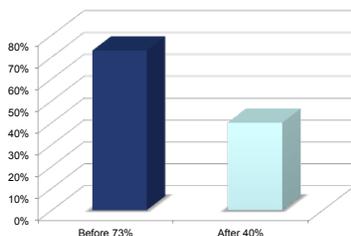
Who moved as a consequence of the divorce?



How far did participants move?



Home Ownership Before and After Divorce



Suggestions for Practitioners

1 Flexible Parenting Plans

As educators, we often encourage parents to make detailed parenting plans; we stress that good parenting plans facilitate smoother coparenting by setting clear expectations. However, our findings suggest that changes in residence are common and varied. Where parents live may alter visitation schedules and logistics as well as communication and contact between coparents. Thus, flexibility may be key to helping parents accommodate the changing realities that accompany housing transitions.

2 Online Delivery

The post-divorce parenting class in Missouri has five goals: (a) improve conflict resolution between coparents, (b) encourage parents to remain involved with their children, (c) highlight healthy coparenting behaviors and discourage unhealthy ones, (d) explain how divorce impacts children, (e) provide community resources. By providing online delivery of the course and ongoing access to handouts and resources through a website, participants can work toward these goals wherever they are.

3 Housing is a Context for Coparenting

Parents' housing situation shapes how they are involved with their children and the nature of the coparenting relationship they can create. Parents who live far away may struggle to remain involved with their children, regardless of good intentions to do so. Coparents that live close together may face challenges with boundaries between households (i.e., maintaining separation between each parents' time). Similarly, living with family or friends may contribute to ambiguity about what roles these individuals should play in childcare or communication between coparents. Accounting for residential context is key for divorce educators whose goal is to provide guidance about coparenting.

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