



## RESEARCH BRIEF

# EXAMINING MECHANISMS LINKING ECONOMIC INSECURITY TO INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT AMONG COUPLES WITH LOW INCOME

## KEY FINDINGS

- *Material hardship, but not income poverty, predicted higher levels of both maternal and paternal depressive symptoms in a large and racially diverse sample of couples from low-income backgrounds.*
- *Paternal depressive symptoms, but not maternal depressive symptoms, predicted higher levels of destructive interparental conflict (i.e., moderate verbal aggression couples use that could be harmful to the partner relationship) between mothers and fathers.*
- *Material hardship did not directly predict destructive interparental conflict.*
- *Mediation analysis confirmed that material hardship operated primarily through paternal depressive symptoms in its association with destructive interparental conflict.*

## About this Study

In the US, approximately 7 million families live in poverty. Low household income has been a large focus of poverty research. However, material hardship—defined as everyday challenges related to making ends meet including difficulties paying for housing, utilities, food, or medical care—is common among American families and has not been systematically examined as a complementary indicator of poverty. Relatedly, few poverty-relative studies have included data from both mothers and fathers from low-income backgrounds to understand how poverty, including low household income and material hardship, is associated with key family outcomes. To fill this knowledge gap, the current study used the Family Stress Model to test the mechanisms by which low household income and material hardship contribute to mothers' and fathers' depressive symptoms and destructive interparental conflict (i.e., moderate verbal aggression couples use that could be harmful to the partner relationship). Data were from the Building Strong Families project, a large and racially diverse sample of mothers and fathers from low-income backgrounds ( $N = 2,794$ ). Approximately, 44% of the couples identified as Black, 29% Latinx, 17% White, and 10% Other. Results are highlighted in the Key Findings.

## Conclusion

Fathers in the current study may be more likely than mothers to feel stressed about not being able to alleviate their families' material hardship, which may lead to experiencing higher levels of depressive symptoms that eventually manifest as destructive conflict behaviors in the couple relationship. This may be linked with the fact that the breadwinner role has long been considered a defining feature of

traditional fatherhood. The breadwinner role is a central focus of how many men who live in poverty define their success as fathers. Yet, fulfilling the expectations of the breadwinner role may be particularly challenging for fathers with low income as they often lack access to employment opportunities and resources, all of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Family strengthening programs should consider interventions to address material hardship (e.g., comprehensive needs assessments, connections to community-based resources, parents' employment training) as part of their efforts to address parental mental health and couples' destructive conflict behaviors, as well as deliver services that address fathers' unemployment and economic hardship during the pandemic.

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The current study was part of Dr. Lee's doctoral dissertation, a three-paper dissertation project that examined the links between poverty and children's development by applying the Family Stress Model (FSM) to data from the Building Strong Families project. The current study was the second study of Dr. Lee's dissertation.



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