

Single Parenthood and Adolescent Well-being: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Background: Single parenthood represents nearly one-fifth of households with children worldwide and is frequently linked to poorer adolescent outcomes. **Objective:** This systematic review synthesises evidence on the psychological, academic, and social consequences of single parenthood for adolescents. **Methods:** We searched Scopus and Web of Science (January 2010–March 2024) using predefined family-structure, population, and mental-health terms, screening 1,135 records in accordance with PRISMA 2020. Nine studies met all criteria. **Results:** Seven of nine studies reported significantly higher depressive or anxiety symptoms among adolescents in single-parent households; two longitudinal studies indicated these effects persist over time. Lower self-esteem, poorer academic performance, and increased behavioural problems were also observed, with financial strain and reduced parental monitoring acting as key mediators. Maternal warmth, resilience, and social-support networks emerged as protective factors. **Conclusions:** Adolescents in single-parent families face elevated mental-health and academic risks, but supportive parenting and community resources can mitigate harm. Policy should integrate financial assistance, parenting programmes, and school-based counselling to address multifaceted needs.

Keywords: *Single Parenthood, Adolescent Well-Being, Systematic Review, Psychological Effects*

Single parenthood now accounts for nearly one in five households with children worldwide, a trend that carries wide-ranging implications for adolescent development. Although a substantial body of international research links single parenthood to outcomes such as psychological distress, academic underachievement and social adjustment difficulties, most evidence comes from high-income Western settings. Comparative, region-specific syntheses are sparse, making it difficult for policymakers in diverse cultural contexts to craft targeted interventions. This systematic review therefore aggregates and appraises the global literature to clarify the challenges faced by adolescents living in single-parent households and to highlight geographic and methodological gaps that future studies should address.

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METHODS

Objectives

1. Synthesize the psychological, academic, and social outcomes reported for adolescents in single-parent households.
2. Assess the methodological quality of these studies and outline key research gaps.

Search strategy

We searched Scopus and Web of Science on 31 March 2024 for peer-reviewed articles published between 1 January 2010 and 31 March 2024. The asterisk (*) acts as a truncation symbol to detect various results composed of a single string of text. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine searches and ensure a broad yet precise retrieval of relevant literature. Only peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2024 were included in the final selection.

Screening process

The study-selection workflow followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. After automatic duplicate removal in EndNote X9, two reviewers (Initials A & B) independently screened titles and abstracts in Covidence. Records judged potentially relevant were retrieved in full text and screened against the inclusion criteria; disagreements were resolved by consensus or, if needed, a third reviewer (Initial C). Inter-rater agreement for full-text decisions was $\kappa = 0.82$, indicating substantial concordance. All articles that passed full-text eligibility were then forwarded to the data-extraction

Study selection (PRISMA flow)

A total of 1,135 records were identified (Scopus = 571; WoS = 564). After removing 259 duplicates, 876 unique records were screened. 777 were excluded by title/abstract. Of 99 full-text reports sought, 55 were not retrievable and 35 were excluded for methodological reasons, leaving 9 studies for analysis (see Figure 1, PRISMA diagram).

Data extraction

A standardised form captured: author/year, country, sample size and demographics, study design, psychological measures, key findings (shown in table 1). Extraction was performed independently by two reviewers.

Data synthesis

- **Psychological distress** Adolescents from single-parent families consistently reported higher depressive and anxiety symptoms (Björkenstam et al., 2017; Daryanani et al., 2016; Perales et al., 2016). Longitudinal evidence (Björkenstam et al., 2017; Lu, 2019) suggests these differences persist over time.
- **Self-esteem and resilience** Lower self-esteem was linked to greater maternal psychological control (Sterrett-Hong et al., 2019), whereas high parental responsiveness buffered distress (Leung & Shek, 2016). Resilience moderated the association between family structure and mental health in two studies.
- **Academic and behavioural outcomes** O'Malley et al. (2015) reported lower Grade Point Averages among single-parent adolescents; Ilabaca Baeza & Gaete Fiscella (2018) highlighted elevated aggression and parent-child conflict.
- **Socio-economic context** Five studies identified financial hardship as a mediating factor between single parenthood and adolescent mental-health outcomes (Kachi et al., 2016; Lu, 2019).

DISCUSSION

This review synthesised nine recent studies spanning five countries and confirms a robust association between single parenthood and poorer adolescent mental-health indicators, particularly depression and anxiety. The pattern aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory: economic strain and reduced parental resources in the microsystem cascade into elevated psychological risk at the individual level.

Yet the evidence is nuanced. Protective factors maternal warmth, parental monitoring, social-support networks consistently attenuated adverse outcomes (Leung & Shek, 2016; Sterrett-Hong et al., 2019). These findings echo resilience frameworks that emphasise relational buffers in stressful contexts.

Methodologically, the dominance of cross-sectional designs limits causal inference; nevertheless, the three longitudinal studies strengthen confidence that psychological gaps do not simply reflect transient adjustment periods after family change.

Culturally, the evidence base is heavily Western or East-Asian. No eligible studies originated from South Asia, Africa, or the Middle East settings where kinship structures and social safety nets differ markedly. Addressing this gap is critical for tailoring interventions in low- and middle-income countries, including India.

CONCLUSION

Adolescents growing up in single-parent households are at heightened risk of psychological distress, with depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem most frequently reported. Economic hardship and reduced parental involvement amplify these risks, whereas responsive parenting and strong social support confer resilience. Policymakers should target multi-layered supports financial relief, parenting programmes, school-based counselling to offset structural disadvantages faced by single-parent families.

Limitations And Future Directions

1. Heterogeneity in study designs, measures, and cultural contexts restricted quantitative synthesis.
2. Cross-sectional dominance (six of nine studies) limits causal claims.
3. Geographic bias towards Western settings reduces global generalisability.
4. Publication bias could not be assessed due to the small study pool.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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TABLE & FIGURE

Table 1. Characteristics of the nine studies included in the systematic review

Study	Time Frame	Study Population	Psychosocial Variables	Comparison Group	Study Design	Measures of Mental Health
Björkenstam et al. (2017)	2017	Adolescents (2,223, U.S.)	Depression, Psychological Distress	Single-parent vs. two-parent households	Longitudinal	Depressive symptoms
Perales et al. (2016)	2016	Children & adolescents (Australia)	Depression, Anxiety, ADHD, Conduct Disorders	Single-parent vs. blended, step, and two-parent families	Cross-sectional (survey)	Mental disorders
Daryanani et al. (2016)	2016	Adolescents (368, U.S.)	Depression, Stress, Rumination	Single-mother vs. two-parent families	Longitudinal	Depressive symptoms, rumination scale

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Sterrett-Hong et al. (2019)	2019	African American adolescents (193, U.S.)	Depression, Self-esteem, Hopelessness	Single-mother families	Cross-sectional	Self-esteem, depressive symptoms
Leung & Shek (2016)	2016	Adolescents from single-mother families (372, Hong Kong)	Resilience, Self-esteem	Single-mother families only	Cross-sectional	Psychological well-being, resilience scale
Lu (2019)	2019	Adolescents (U.S.)	Depression, Mental Health Disparities	Single-mother vs. two-parent families	National survey data	Depression prevalence
Kachi et al. (2016)	2016	Adolescents (9,491, Japan)	Psychological Distress	Single-parent vs. two-parent families	National survey	Psychological distress scale
Ilabaca Baeza & Gaete Fiscella (2018)	2018	Adolescents (1,861, Chile)	Aggression (psychological & financial)	Single-parent vs. two-parent families	Cross-sectional	Aggression self-report
O'Malley et al. (2015)	2015	High school students (490,000, U.S.)	Academic Achievement, Mental Well-being	Single-parent, homeless, and foster-care vs. two-parent families	Cross-sectional	GPA, school bonding

Figure 1, PRISMA diagram

