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Measuring parental separations using register data

Background

Since 1998, Statistics Sweden publishes annual statistics on parental separations based on register data. Parental separations are measured by comparing the dwelling-unit at which the parents are registered in for two consecutive years. If the parents are registered in the same dwelling the first but not second year, a separation is assumed to have occurred. Previous studies have indicated that this method might lead to an overestimation of the number of parental separations.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are to estimate the quality of the current method used to measure separations between parents, to determine if overestimation of separations is more common in certain groups and to investigate whether another method would result in an improvement of the quality of the statistics.

Data and methods

In the study, register data on 78 000 children born in 1998 are used to follow children and their biological parents from age 0 to age 18. The 1.6 million children registered with two parents in 2015 are followed during a shorter period. Cases where parents are registered at the same dwelling again after moving apart are studied using parents' marriage histories and moving patterns to determine if they are likely to be actual separations.

Results

In almost 10 percent of cases where parents move apart, the parents are registered at the same dwelling again within a year. Parents' moving patterns indicate that many of these cases still might be actual separations. Overestimation of separations seems to be more likely if the child is younger, has foreign background or has parents with low income.

Main conclusions

The results indicate a certain overestimation of the number of parental separations, but there is no clear evidence that a method using parents' marriage histories and/or moving patterns would result in a measure of better quality.

