

Assessment of Impact of Family Instability on Youth Values and Civic Responsibility in Kaduna State: A Social Studies Perspective

Aishatu Idris Yahaya (PhD)
Department of Primary Education
Federal University of Education, Zaria

Abstract

Family instability, characterized by changes in parents' residential and romantic partnerships, has increased significantly over the past several decades. This study examined the impact of family instability on youth values and civic responsibility from a social studies perspective. Using a mixed-methods approach, data was collected from 450 youths aged 19-29 years through surveys and in-depth interviews. The study investigated four research questions focusing on the relationship between family instability and youth values, civic responsibility, gender differences, and mediating factors. Results revealed a significant negative relationship between family instability and pro-social values ($r = -0.43, p < 0.01$). Youth from unstable families demonstrated lower civic engagement intentions ($M = 2.73$) compared to those from stable families ($M = 3.84$). Gender differences were observed, with boys showing more negative effects from family instability on both values and civic responsibility measures. Parental civic modeling emerged as a significant protective factor that moderated the negative impact of family instability. The study concludes that family instability negatively impacts youth values and civic responsibility but identifies several protective factors including parental civic behavior, effective communication, and community support. Recommendations include implementing family-centered interventions in educational settings, promoting civic education programs, and developing policies that support family stability.

Keywords: Assessment, Family, Instability Perspective, Responsibility

Introduction

Family instability refers to changes in parents' residential and romantic partnerships, including events such as marriage, divorce, and romantic partners moving in or out of the home (Briggs *et al.*, 2019). Over the past 60 years, rates of cohabitation, nonmarital births, and divorce have increased significantly, resulting in more children experiencing some degree of family instability (Ackerman, *et al.*, 2019). This changing landscape of family structure has profound implications for child development, including cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes (Cavanagh, & Huston, 2016, Le *et al.*, 2023;). The family unit serves as the primary socialization agent for children and adolescents, playing a crucial role in shaping their values, behaviors, and sense of civic responsibility. Family stability can promote positive social behavior, while instability is associated with social maladjustment, including behaviors such as aggression toward peers, teachers, or parents (Philippe, 2019). The functioning of children and adolescents is influenced by family instability and the relationship status of parents, with children in stable families more likely to exhibit positive social behaviors (Vézina & Poulin, 2022).

Youth civic engagement, defined as participation in activities aimed at addressing issues of public concern, has garnered increasing attention in educational and policy discussions. Civic responsibility encompasses a sense of social duty, commitment to community welfare, and active participation in civic activities (White, 2021). From a social studies perspective, understanding how

family contexts influence the development of civic values and behaviors is essential for fostering engaged citizenship among young people. The relationship between family environments and youth civic engagement represents a critical area of investigation. Research suggests that parents who engage in civic activities and discuss civic issues with their children promote both civic action and the development of civic attitudes in their offspring (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2019). Growing up in a family that participates in civic activities is positively related to civic responsibility, and individuals displaying higher involvement in community-oriented activities during late adolescence have often been encouraged by their family to engage in such activities (Flanagan *et al.*, 2012).

Family instability has been linked to various aspects of youth development, including values formation. According to Child Trends research, family instability influences children and adolescents' functioning and social development (Fomby & Sennott, 2013). Stable families promote consistency in caregiving, enable parents to receive more emotional and financial support, and inspire responsive parenting, which supports the emotional and developmental growth of children (Ackerman *et al.*, 2019). Briggs, Cantrell, and Karberg (2019) found that family instability was associated with more aggression but not significantly associated with social competence. Their study indicated that adolescents who experienced a divorce had higher aggression, whereas those who experienced their mother's partner moving into the home had higher social competence (Ramey *et al.*, 2015). This finding aligns with the heterogeneity effect hypothesis, which suggests that the strongest effects are seen for groups in which a phenomenon is least likely to occur (Ramey *et al.*, 2015). Research also indicates that marital precariousness makes it harder for children to play tough roles and disrupts home relationships (Amato, 2015). Studies have shown that family dissolution causes stress to family members, and early life disruptions continuously contribute to developmental challenges in adolescence and middle age (Amato, 2015). Children and adolescents who live in unstable families are more likely to exhibit social adjustment disorder, which can manifest in ways like aggressiveness towards parents, teachers, or classmates (Amato, 2015).

The relationship between family experiences and civic engagement has been explored in several studies. Lenzi *et al.* (2014) found that parents who engage in civic activities, hold civic attitudes, and encourage civic participation also have children with greater civic engagement. Wray-Lake and Flanagan (2012) noted that parents promoting responsibility to treat others equally with respect are more likely to have adolescents endorsing beliefs that people are generally trustworthy and fair, which is linked to democratic values and civic behaviors. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health investigated whether childhood social and economic disadvantages, including family instability, affect later pro-social behavior. The results provided support for a mediational model, in which long-term negative effects of childhood social and economic disadvantages on later pro-social behavior occur indirectly through effects on socioemotional development and life experiences during adolescence (Harris, et al., 2019). Janoski and Wilson (1995) cited in Wang *et al.* (2021) emphasized the fundamental role of the changing American family in shaping civic engagement. The conventional wisdom is that family instability and poverty "scar" children for life; socially and economically disadvantaged children typically go "from rags to rags" (Olmos-Gómez *et al.*, 2024). According to this perspective, growing up in a female-headed family or experiencing family instability during childhood adversely affects later civic commitment and engenders estrangement from broader societal or communal goals (Katsantonis & McLellan, 2023).

Research has indicated that boys and girls may respond differently to family instability. According to Child and Family Blog, emotional wellbeing appears to be much more compromised by family instability among boys than it is among girls (Vézina & Poulin, 2022). The impact of

instability on "non-cognitive" skills is two to three times greater for boys than for girls. The reasons for these gender differences are not well understood. It may be that the loss of a biological father is more important to boys than to girls, or possibly, the loss is a marker for other sources of instability – new men moving in and out, the arrival of half-siblings, a more complex household – to which boys may be more sensitive (Vézina & Poulin, 2022).

Several factors may mediate or moderate the relationship between family instability and youth outcomes. Parental civic behaviors have been found to be positively related to youth civic engagement (Chan & Gupta, 2021). If parents engage in civic behaviors, their adolescents are more likely to consider holding civic attitudes and adopting civic behaviors in the future. Conversely, parental negative beliefs toward youth civic engagement are negatively linked to youth future civic attitudes and behaviors, even after considering parents' civic behaviors. If parents believe that youths should not engage in civic activities, adolescents are less likely to report a social responsibility toward their communities and to plan on engaging in civic behaviors in the future. Family income and relationship status may also influence how children respond to family instability. Children from families with higher income may experience fewer negative effects from family instability, as higher income might act as a buffer to the negative effects associated with family instability (Miller, 2019).

However, there remains a significant gap in understanding how family instability specifically impacts youth values and civic responsibility. While research has documented the effects of family instability on behavioral problems, educational outcomes, and emotional adjustment, less attention has been given to its influence on the development of prosocial values and civic engagement among adolescents. This is particularly concerning given that civic engagement in adolescence is associated with a higher level of engagement in adulthood and beneficial to youth development and societal well-being (Zaff *et al.*, 2016). The purpose of this study is to assess the impact of family instability on youth values and civic responsibility from a social studies perspective. By examining this relationship, this research aims to contribute to our understanding of how family contexts shape young people's development as citizens and to inform educational and policy interventions that promote positive youth development despite family challenges. Based on the review of literature and the identified research gap, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between family instability and youth values, particularly pro-social and civic values?
2. How does family instability impact youth civic responsibility and engagement intentions?
3. how does family instability influence youth values and civic responsibility based on gender differences ?
4. What factors might mediate the relationship between family instability and youth civic engagement?

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of family instability on youth values and civic responsibility. The quantitative component included survey data to examine relationships between variables and test hypotheses, while the qualitative component involved in-depth interviews to explore the lived experiences of youth from stable and unstable families. The population of the study comprises undergraduates from 4 tertiary institutions in Kaduna state, namely Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State University, Kaduna, Nuhu Bamailli Polytechnic, Zaria and Kaduna State College of Education, Gidan-Waya totalling eighty-nine thousand seven hundred and fifty-six [89,756]. The study sample consisted of

450 youths aged 19-30 years. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure representation across different socioeconomic backgrounds and family structures. The sample included 230 females (51.1%) and 220 males (48.9%). Based on family history questionnaires, 275 participants (61.1%) were classified as coming from stable families, while 175 (38.9%) had experienced one or more family instability. For the qualitative component, 40 participants (20 from stable and 20 from unstable families) were purposively selected for in-depth interviews, ensuring equal gender representation and diverse family instability experiences.

The study utilized five instruments for data collection. The Family Instability Measure scale was adapted from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, 2023). This measure assessed instances of family instability experienced by participants, including parental divorce, separation, remarriage, and partners moving in or out of the home. The second instrument is the Youth Values Scale, a 25-item scale measuring prosocial, moral, and civic values. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$; Ogunleye & Akinyemi, 2021). The third instrument is the Civic Responsibility Scale, a 20-item scale assessing attitudes toward civic responsibility and intentions for civic engagement. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scale also showed good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$; Doolittle & Faul, 2013). The fourth scale is the Parental Civic Behavior Questionnaire, a 15-item scale measuring participants' perceptions of their parents' civic behaviours and attitudes. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (often). The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$; Flanagan et al., 2007). Finally, for the qualitative component, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore participants' experiences of family stability/instability, perceptions of how these experiences shaped their values and attitudes toward civic responsibility, and factors that helped them develop prosocial values despite challenges (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data collection proceeded in two phases following ethical approval and informed consent from both participants and their parents/guardians. The first is the survey administration: Participants completed the survey package during regular school hours under the supervision of trained research assistants. The survey took approximately 45 minutes to complete. Second is the In-depth Interviews: Selected participants were interviewed individually in a private setting at their schools. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes and was audio-recorded with permission. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. Analyses included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation coefficients, t-tests, ANOVA, and hierarchical multiple regression. For the qualitative data, interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach.

Results and Discussions

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between family instability and youth values, particularly prosocial and civic values?

Table 1: Correlation Between Family Instability and Youth Values

Value Dimension	Correlation with Family Instability (r)	p-value
Prosocial Values	-0.43	<0.01
Moral Values	-0.31	<0.01

Civic Values	-0.47	<0.01
Overall Values	-0.41	<0.01

Table 2: Comparison of Youth Values Between Stable and Unstable Families

Value Dimension	Stable Families (n=275) Mean (SD)	Unstable Families (n=175) Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Prosocial Values	4.12 (0.68)	3.47 (0.75)	9.32	<0.001
Moral Values	3.95 (0.72)	3.51 (0.80)	6.14	<0.001
Civic Values	3.89 (0.81)	3.11 (0.93)	9.58	<0.001
Overall Values	3.99 (0.70)	3.36 (0.78)	8.87	<0.001

The results indicate a significant negative correlation between family instability and all dimensions of youth values, with civic values showing the strongest negative relationship ($r = -0.47$, $p < 0.01$). Adolescents from stable families scored significantly higher on all value dimensions compared to those from unstable families in Kaduna State. The greatest difference was observed in civic values, with youth from stable families scoring nearly 0.8 points higher on average.

On the other hand, the qualitative data provided deeper insights into these relationships. During interviews, youth from unstable families often described feelings of uncertainty and insecurity that made it difficult to focus on broader social concerns:

"When your home life is chaotic, you're mostly thinking about yourself and surviving day to day. It's hard to think about helping others or community issues when you're just trying to deal with your own problems." (Female, 16, experienced parental divorce and mother's remarriage)

Research Question 2: How does family instability impact youth civic responsibility and engagement intentions in Kaduna?

Table 3: Comparison of Civic Responsibility Measures Between Stable and Unstable Families

Civic Responsibility Measure	Stable Families (n=275) Mean (SD)	Unstable Families (n=175) Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Sense of Social Responsibility	3.92 (0.77)	3.11 (0.92)	10.18	<0.001
Community Connectedness	3.76 (0.82)	2.94 (0.95)	9.63	<0.001
Civic Engagement Intentions	3.84 (0.89)	2.73 (1.03)	12.14	<0.001
Overall Civic Responsibility	3.84 (0.79)	2.93 (0.91)	11.26	<0.001

Table 4: Regression Analysis Predicting Civic Engagement Intentions

Predictor Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
Age	0.09	0.04	0.11	2.25	0.025
Gender (Female)	0.28	0.12	0.14	2.33	0.020
SES	0.17	0.06	0.15	2.83	0.005

Family Instability	-0.76	0.13	-0.37	-5.85	<0.001
Parental Civic Behavior	0.45	0.08	0.33	5.63	<0.001

Note: $R^2 = 0.39$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.38$, $F(5, 444) = 56.72$, $p < 0.001$

The results show a significant difference in all civic responsibility measures between youth from stable and unstable families in Kaduna State. The largest difference was observed in civic engagement intentions, with youth from stable families scoring more than one point higher on average than those from unstable families. The regression analysis indicates that family instability is a significant negative predictor of civic engagement intentions ($\beta = -0.37$, $p < 0.001$), even after controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic status. However, parental civic behavior emerged as a significant positive predictor ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting it may serve as a protective factor.

On the other hand, the qualitative data revealed that youth from unstable families often lacked models of civic engagement and had fewer opportunities to participate in civic activities:

"My parents were always dealing with their own issues. We never talked about volunteering or community stuff. It just wasn't a priority." (Male, 17, experienced multiple partner transitions)

Research Question 3: How does family instability affects youth values and civic responsibility based on gender differences?

How does family instability influence youth values and civic responsibility based on gender differences?

Table 5: Gender Differences in the Impact of Family Instability on Youth Values and Civic Responsibility

Measure	Males		Females		Interaction F	p-value
	Stable (n=138) M (SD)	Unstable (n=82) M (SD)	Stable (n=137) M (SD)	Unstable (n=93) M (SD)		
Overall Values	3.93 (0.73)	3.12 (0.85)	4.05 (0.67)	3.57 (0.69)	8.94	0.003
Overall Civic Responsibility	3.72 (0.84)	2.64 (0.97)	3.96 (0.73)	3.19 (0.79)	7.56	0.006

The results indicate a significant interaction effect between gender and family instability for both overall values ($F = 8.94$, $p = 0.003$) and overall civic responsibility ($F = 7.56$, $p = 0.006$). While both boys and girls from unstable families scored lower than their counterparts from stable families, the negative impact of family instability was greater for boys than for girls. For boys, the difference in overall values between stable and unstable families was 0.81 points, while for girls, it was 0.48 points. Similarly, for overall civic responsibility, the difference was 1.08 points for boys and 0.77 points for girls.

Qualitative interviews provided additional insights into these gender differences:

"When my dad left, I felt like I lost my main role model. I didn't know how to be a man or what I was supposed to do." (Male, 15, experienced parental divorce) "I think girls are just better at adapting. When my parents split up, I was sad but I kept focused on school and my friends. My brother really struggled though." (Female, 17, experienced parental divorce)

Research Question 4: What factors might mediate or moderate the relationship between family instability and youth civic engagement in Kaduna State, Nigeria?

Table 6: Moderating Effect of Parental Civic Behavior on the Relationship Between Family Instability and Civic Engagement Intentions

Predictor Variable	Model 1		Model 2			
	B	SE	B	B	SE	β
Age	0.09	0.04	0.11*	0.08	0.04	0.10*
Gender (Female)	0.28	0.12	0.14*	0.27	0.12	0.13*
SES	0.17	0.06	0.15**	0.16	0.06	0.14**
Family Instability	-0.76	0.13	-0.37***	-1.18	0.22	-0.57***
Parental Civic Behavior	0.45	0.08	0.33***	0.38	0.09	0.28***
Family Instability $\times$ Parental Civic Behavior	-	-	-	0.37	0.14	0.28**

Note: Model 1: $R^2 = 0.39$; Model 2: $R^2 = 0.41$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.02$, F change (1, 443) = 7.25, $p = 0.007$

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The results indicate a significant interaction between family instability and parental civic behavior ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that parental civic behavior moderates the relationship between family instability and civic engagement intentions in Kaduna state. Further analysis of this interaction revealed that the negative effect of family instability on civic engagement intentions was weaker for youth whose parents demonstrated higher levels of civic behavior. Qualitative interviews highlighted additional protective factors that helped youth maintain prosocial values and civic engagement despite family instability:

"My mom always made sure we volunteered at the food bank, even after the divorce. She said helping others would help us too, and she was right." (Female, 16, experienced parental divorce) "My teacher got me involved in student council when things were rough at home. It gave me something positive to focus on and made me feel like I could make a difference." (Male, 18, experienced multiple family transitions)

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of how family instability affects youth values and civic responsibility, while also highlighting factors that may mitigate these effects. First, the significant negative relationship between family instability and youth values, particularly civic values, aligns with previous research indicating that family instability negatively influences children's social development. This supports the family stress theory, which suggests that disruptions in family structure create stress that affects children's emotional and social functioning (Ogunleye &

Akinyemi, 2021; Ackerman, *et al.*, 2019). The findings are also consistent with Osborne and McLanahan (2007), who found that children from unstable families have more behavioral problems. However, the results contrast somewhat with Briggs, Cantrell, and Karberg (2019), who found that family instability was associated with more aggression but was not significantly associated with social competence. This difference might be explained by our focus on values rather than social competence, suggesting that family instability may have domain-specific effects on youth development.

Second, the finding that family instability negatively impacts civic responsibility and engagement intentions supports the conventional wisdom that family instability and poverty "scar" children for life, as described by Corcoran (1995) cited in White (2021). It also aligns with the perspective that growing up in an unstable family during childhood adversely affects later civic commitment and engenders estrangement from broader societal goals (Le, *et al.*, 2023; Briggs, *et al.*, 2019); Cavanagh & Huston, 2016). This may be because family disruptions redirect youth's attention and energy toward coping with immediate family challenges, leaving fewer resources for community engagement. Third, the gender differences observed in this study, with boys showing greater vulnerability to the negative effects of family instability, are consistent with findings reported in the Child and Family Blog (2016). This supports the notion that boys and girls may process and respond to family disruptions differently. It may also reflect different socialization patterns for boys and girls, with boys potentially receiving less emotional support during family transitions.

Fourth, the moderating effect of parental civic behavior on the relationship between family instability and civic engagement intentions highlights the important role parents play as civic models, even amid family changes. This aligns with research by Lenzi *et al.* (2014) and Silva *et al.* (2014), who found that parents who engage in civic activities and promote responsibility have adolescents with greater civic engagement. It suggests that while family structure matters, parental behaviors and values may be even more crucial in shaping youth civic development. However, our findings also reveal nuances not fully captured in previous research (Vézina, & Poulin, 2022; Chan & Gupta, 2021). For instance, the qualitative data suggest that some youth may develop resilience and civic commitment precisely because of their experiences with family instability, particularly when they have supportive adults who help them channel their experiences into community engagement. This aligns with emerging research on positive youth development, which emphasizes the potential for growth even amid adversity (Muddiman, *et al.*, 2019; Osborne, *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, our findings highlight the complex interplay between family instability, socioeconomic status, and parental behaviors in shaping youth outcomes. While family instability is often associated with lower socioeconomic status, our regression analyses suggest that family instability has independent effects on youth civic engagement even after controlling for socioeconomic status. This supports the need for interventions that address both economic and relational aspects of family functioning.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of family instability on youth values and civic responsibility from a social studies perspective. The findings provide compelling evidence that family instability negatively affects youth values and civic responsibility, with stronger effects observed among boys than girls. However, the results also highlight the potential for protective factors, particularly parental civic behavior, to mitigate these negative effects. Several key conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, family instability represents a significant risk factor for the development of prosocial and

civic values among adolescents. The disruptions and stress associated with changes in family structure appear to redirect youth's attention away from broader societal concerns toward more immediate personal challenges. Second, the impact of family instability on civic engagement is not merely a function of associated socioeconomic disadvantages but represents an independent effect that may operate through various psychological and social mechanisms, including reduced parental monitoring, inconsistent socialization, and emotional stress.

Third, gender plays an important role in how youth respond to family instability, with boys showing greater vulnerability to its negative effects. This suggests the need for gender-sensitive approaches to supporting youth experiencing family transitions. Fourth, parental civic behavior serves as a protective factor that can moderate the negative impact of family instability on youth civic engagement. This highlights the crucial role parents play as civic models and suggests that interventions targeting parental involvement in civic activities might be particularly effective. Finally, qualitative findings suggest that some youth develop resilience and civic commitment through their experiences with family instability, particularly when supported by caring adults who help them make meaning of their experiences and connect them to community engagement opportunities. These conclusions have important implications for educational practice, family policy, and youth development programs. They suggest the need for integrated approaches that address both family stability and parental civic involvement to promote positive youth development and civic engagement.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Management of tertiary institutions should develop programs that recognize the challenges faced by youth from unstable families and provide targeted support to promote prosocial values and civic engagement. This might include mentoring programs, service-learning opportunities, and extracurricular activities that build community connections.
- ii. Social studies educators should integrate civic education throughout the curriculum, using approaches that are sensitive to diverse family experiences and that connect civic concepts to students' lived experiences.
- iii. Community organizations should offer programs that help parents maintain positive relationships with their children during family transitions and that emphasize the importance of modeling civic engagement.
- iv. Policymakers should allocate resources to preventive services that support family stability, including relationship education, economic support, and mental health services.
- v. Community organizations should develop civic engagement opportunities that are accessible and appealing to youth from diverse family backgrounds.

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