School discrimination to nontraditional households: Evidence from an experimental study in Colombia

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1. **Introduction**

Nontraditional household structures, including divorced and single parenthood have been on the rise in most of the western world over the last decades (United Nations, 2022). In particular, Colombia is now one of the countries with the largest share of single-parent households around the world.

Single- and divorced-parent households face several challenges such as a higher likelihood of poverty (Lu et al., 2020; Nieuwenhuis, 2020), more difficulty finding housing (Lauster & Easterbrook, 2011; Murchie & Pang, 2018). These factors can in turn affect parents’ mental health (Bentley et al., 2019) and children’s education (Woessmann, 2015; Nonoyama-Tarumi 2017).

While the household structure can already affect a child’s education, these effects could be amplified if single- and divorced- parents have also face restrictions on which schools they can send their children to. While there is anecdotal evidence that schools restrict admissions to nontraditional households, there is very little rigorous evidence of this practice.

We aim to determine the existence and quantify the extent of discrimination against children of divorced and single parents through an audit study. We will send fictitious requests for information to schools across the country to register a child, randomly varying the marital status of the parents and the number of caretakers of the child (one or two). We will track these requests and compare the response rates and the type of responses that parents receive from school officials. The differences in either the type or the timing of responses (if any) will allow us to determine whether there is discrimination against divorced and parents and its extent.

We plan on sending requests to a representative sample of primary private schools of the country. This will allow us to estimate heterogeneity in the extent of discrimination against same-sex couples by geographical region, school type (i.e., religious vs. non-religious) and school quality (proxied by test scores from standardized tests).

Studies to assess the extent of discrimination against nontraditional households have been exclusively focused on developed countries, and for the most part they focus on single parents only. Hence, the results of this study would be of great interest for both academics and policymakers. It would provide a first step to determine whether, how, and where the government should devote efforts to reduce the extent of discrimination against nontraditional households in schools in developing countries. For example, if schools are less inclined to respond to requests from single parents, governments and educational authorities might want to encourage the use of standardized request forms that do not require the inclusion of parents’ names, or require only one of the parents to fill out their information. On the other hand, governments may try to incentivize schools to admit students of single parents through tax incentives or public recognition, among others.

1. **Literature Review**

Single parents and their children already face challenges compared to traditional households along several dimensions. Nonoyama-Tarumi (2017) finds that children of single parents in Japan perform worse than children of two-parent families. Woessmann (2015) finds similar evidence looking at the results of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) for 28 OECD countries.

Empirical evidence of discrimination against people based on their marital status and household structure is still scarce and it is mostly focused on developed countries. For example, Lauster and Easterbrook (2011) and Murchie and Pang (2018) conducted correspondence studies in the housing market to analyze whether landlords discriminate against single fathers and single mothers. Their findings are consistent with substantial discrimination against these groups in the housing market.

Regarding schooling, the only study we are aware of is the one by Diaz Serrano & Flamand (2020) in Spain. The authors implemented a correspondence study to analyze if there is discrimination by schools against single parents using a sample of schools in Catalonia. The authors find that, if anything, single parents are more likely to receive positive responses from schools than married couples. However, this study differs from our proposal in several ways. In addition to the different context (Colombia being a more conservative country than Spain and Catalonia in particular), the authors focus only on single parents (instead of both single and divorced parents), and their design does not allow to control for unobserved school characteristics that may affect the observed behavior.

1. **Experimental design**
2. Sample

The proposed experiment will be conducted among calendar B schools in Colombia during the 2023 school year. From a similar study conducted last year, we have information about each school such as its location (at the Municipality level), type (religious or secular), name of the principal, and average score in standardized tests, among others.[[1]](#footnote-1) We will only use this information as control variables in our study and to conduct heterogeneity analysis. In addition, we know what the best method is to contact each school (i.e., whether it is by email or using a contact form in their website) to send the fictitious requests.

1. Protocol

We will create several sets of e-mails in which fictitious parents request information about vacancy availability and requirements to enroll their child. An example of this e-mail can be found as an annex at the bottom of this document. We will use fictitious names, and e-mails to prevent officials from identifying any person. For each school, we will send two e-mails: one in which the parents are married, and another one in which either the parents are divorced or the child has only one parent. Only the researchers will have access to the e-mail accounts to prevent anyone from identifying the responses from any particular school.

We will track whether schools reply to our e-mail and the time schools take to reply to each kind of household. Therefore, in our analysis, whether there was a response, and the time (in days) from the request to the response will be our main dependent variables. On the other hand, our main independent variable of interest will be whether the parent who sent the request for information is married or either divorced or single.

1. Econometric Approach

To analyze the data collected from the callbacks, we will run the following regression:

Where the dependent variable, , is an indicator variable for whether the e-mail from couple *i* led to a callback from the school s (either by phone, WhatsApp or e-mail). Next, and are indicators that take the value of one if the request writer is a divorced or a single parent. We also include school fixed effects, . Finally, is the error term.

**4. Discussion**

In this study, we aim to test whether divorced and single parents encounter discrimination in the process of applying to private schools for their children. School application processes consist of several stages. We would identify if such discrimination occurs in the first stage of these processes, when families first contact schools inquiring about admissions. We will use a correspondence experiment with schools during the children’s pre-registration period to achieve this goal. The results provided here will be the first to determine whether there is discrimination towards parents during school application processes, based to their sexual orientation in developing countries.

While there is evidence of discrimination against individuals based on their marital status in developed countries, there is little evidence about the instances in which this population is discriminated against in low and middle countries. This study would advance our understanding of the instances where divorced and single parents are marginalized in Colombia, and the characteristics of education institutions where this is more likely to happen. Thus, we believe that our study will provide enormous insights for policy makers as well as parents seeking schooling options for their children.

**References**

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**ANNEX – Example of emails to request information about enrolling a student**

**Married couple**

Buenos días,

Somos XXX y YYY. Nuestra hija ZZZ comenzará grado 1ro el próximo semestre y estamos buscando un colegio para ella.

Hemos recibido buenas referencias del colegio CCC y queremos conocerlo un poco más ¿Sería posible visitar el colegio? De ser así, le pido que nos indique por correo o al teléfono ### el mejor momento para realizar la visita.

Mil gracias por su atención y quedamos pendientes de su respuesta,

XXX y YYY

**Divorced couple**

Buenos días,

Mi nombre es XXX y con mi ex-esposa YYY estamos buscando un colegio para nuestra hija ZZZ, que debe comenzar primero en septiembre.

Nos han dado buenas referencias del colegio, pero queremos conocerlo en persona ¿Podríamos hacer una visita? De ser así, le pido que nos indique en qué momento sería posible hacerlo. Puede escribirnos a este correo o por teléfono al ###.

Desde ya le agradecemos mucho por su atención y quedamos a la espera de su respuesta,

XXX y YYY

**Single parent**

Buenos días,

Mi nombre es XXX y soy el único acudiente de mi hija ZZZ. Estoy buscando un colegio para ella porque en septiembre debe comenzar grado primero.

Me han dado buenas referencias del colegio CCC, pero quiero conocerlo mejor ¿Puedo hacer una visita? Si es así, por favor dígame cuándo sería posible hacerlo. Puede escribirme a este correo o por teléfono al ###.

Le agradezco mucho y quedo a la espera de su respuesta,

XXX

1. In Colombia, students take standardized tests (called “Pruebas Saber”) in 3rd and 5th grade in primary school, in 9th grade at the end of basic secondary school, and in 11th grade at the end of secondary school. Average scores at the school level are publicly available. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)