Adolescent Wellbeing amidst Family Instability: Demographic Trends and Family Processes

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Parenting In-Service
9/17/15
Trends in Nonmarital Childbearing by Race and Ethnicity

Percentage of All Births that were to Unmarried Women, by Race and Hispanic Origin, Selected Years, 1960-2009*

Source: National Vital Statistics Reports
The Growth in Single Motherhood

Source: IPUMS Census/ACS 1960-2010
• **Quantitative Data**
  – Longitudinal survey of 5,000 children born in late 1990s
    • Follows focal child, mother, and father from birth to child’s 9th birthday, regardless of relationship status
      (15-year follow-up survey currently in the field)
    • Urban sample: representative of cities with populations 200,000+
    • Oversample of nonmarital births

• **Qualitative Data**
  – In-depth interviews with 75 families from the survey
    • Selected to have racial-ethnic variation in sample
“Honey, I’m Pregnant!”
Relationship Contexts at Conception
“Honey, I’m Pregnant!”
Relationship Contexts at Conception

- **Precocious:** Childbearing starts young. A majority of disadvantaged mothers begin childbearing during their teens or early 20s (Edin & Tach, 2014).

- **Employment Challenges:** Many disadvantaged men and women face challenges to finding well-paying and secure employment (Sum et al. 2011).

- **Haphazard:** Median length of relationship prior to conception is 6-7 months for unmarried couples and 1 year for married couples (Tach & Edin 2011).

- **Casual:** Half of unmarried parents describe their relationship prior to conception as “casual” (Edin et al. 2007).

- **Unplanned:** Unmarried parents are much more likely to report that their child’s birth was “unplanned” than are married parents (74% vs. 27%) (Finer & Henshaw 2006).
Unpacking the “Unplanned” Pregnancy

• In qualitative accounts, the modal pregnancy is neither actively planned nor avoided—according to men’s and women’s accounts they were “just not thinking” or “weren’t trying, but weren’t against it either” (Augustine et al. 2009; Tach & Edin 2011).

Survey data reveal:

• Inconsistent Contraception
  – Couples report knowledge of forms of contraception and access to them.
  – They report using contraception... but they use it inconsistently.
  – Some stop using condoms as a signal of commitment to the relationship.
  – They know what could happen when they do this.

• Ambivalent desires for children
  – True for both men and women.
  – They see little cost for their futures.
  – Many live in communities with few social sanctions for nonmarital childbearing.
Unmarried Men Do Not Flee at News of Pregnancy

During pregnancy, % of men who...

- Gave money/bought things for child
- Helped out in another way
- Visited baby’s mother in hospital
- Child will take father’s surname
- Father’s name is on birth certificate
- Mother wants father to be involved

Source: Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Baseline Survey, Mother’s Report
Relationship Contexts at Child’s Birth

- Cohabiting: 51%
- Friends: 8%
- Little or No Contact: 9%
- Romantic Nonresident: 32%

Only 1 in 5 nonmarital children born to a “single” mother. The rest are born to “fragile families.”

Birth: The “Magic Moment” for Unmarried Couples

% of Unmarried Mothers and Fathers who Agree or Strongly Agree that:

- Chances of marriage (50/50 or better)
- Marriage is better for kids

Source: Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Baseline Survey, Mother and Father Reports. McLanahan 2009
## Risk Factors At Time of Birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mothers</th>
<th>Fathers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teen Parent</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor/Fair Health</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy Drinking</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal Drugs</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Ever Incarcerated</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Violence</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men/Women Cannot Be Trusted to be Faithful</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample is mothers with a high school degree or less.

Source: Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Baseline Survey and 1 Year Surveys, Mother and Father Reports; McLanahan 2009
## Economic Risk Factors At Time of Birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Unmarried</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother Received Welfare</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Employed</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s Earnings</td>
<td>$28,342</td>
<td>$16,010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s Earnings</td>
<td>$11,775</td>
<td>$8,376</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample is mothers with a high school degree or less.

Source: Baseline survey of Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study
After the “Magic Moment”
Relationships Are Unstable Following a Birth

% of couples who broke up by child’s...  

Sample restricted to couples who were in a relationship at the child’s birth.
Parents Quickly Repartner

New Partner  ➔  New Partner

New Partner  ➔  Focal Child  ➔  New Partner

Focal Child
Total New Parental Romantic Relationships in Disadvantaged Families, by Child’s 5th Birthday

- **No New Relationship**: 30%
- **At Least 1 New Relationship**: 70%
  - 1 new relationship: 38%
  - 2 new relationships: 23%
  - 3+ new relationships: 9%

Source: Tabulated by Dr. Laura Tach from Waves 1-4 of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Survey, a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Counts total number of mothers’ and fathers’ new romantic relationships that lasted at least three months.
New Partnerships Often Produce New Children...
... and Bring With Them Children From Past Relationships

[Diagram showing relationships between step-siblings and focal child]
Amount of Multi-Partner Fertility (Half-Sibs) in Disadvantaged Families by Child’s 5th Birthday

Source: Tabulated by from Waves 1-4 of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Survey, a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Counts total number of half-siblings (biological children of either mother or father, but not both).
Parenting in Complex Households
Fathering in Fragile Families

- **Salience of the father role:** most embrace fatherhood from the beginning and want to be there for their partners and children.

- **Rejecting the “package deal”:** most believe that they should stay in contact with their children even when romantic relationships with mothers end.

- **Declining paternal involvement:** is often an unintended consequence of transitions to new partners and economic hardships associated with poverty and low education.

- **Uncertainty about fathering in complex households:** many readily care for non-biological children and want to stay involved with non-resident children, but struggle with how they should parent them.

- **A portrait of continuous fathering:** many intensively father for long periods of time, but struggle to father all of their resident and non-resident children simultaneously.
Parental Relationships & Parenting Behaviors

• Good partners make good parents.
  The quality of the parents’ relationship is a strong predictor of positive engagement with children: declines in one lead to declines in the other

• Key predictors of declining parental relationship quality after parents break up:
  – Economic disadvantage and paternal unemployment
  – Repartnering (both moms and dads)
  – Mental health and substance abuse
  – Incarceration

Carlson et al. 2007; Turney 2012, 2014; Tach & Edin 2010
From the Child’s Point of View
Children’s Combined Experiences of Instability and Complexity by 5th Birthday

Unstable: relationship between biological parents ends and/or relationship with new partner begins
Complex: one or more parents has children by a different partner

Unstable/Complex Family: 78%
Stable Two-Parent Family: 18%
Stable Single Mother Family: 4%

Source: Tabulated from Waves 1-4 of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Survey, a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Fragile Families are defined as biological parents who were unmarried at time of birth.
Blended Family System from a Child’s Point of View
How Complexity Matters for Children:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resource Dilution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role Ambiguity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stigma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Implications for Child Wellbeing**

- **Implications for support and caregiving**
  - Many men involved in care of infants and young children, but not the same men over time
  - Relationship instability lowers parents’ social support, increases parenting stress, and worsens mental health (Beck et al. 2011; Meadows 2009; Harknett & Knab 2007)

- **Implications for child well-being**
  - Family instability is associated with more externalizing problem behaviors, fewer regular doctor’s visits, and more injuries (Cooper et al. 2008; Waldfogel et al. 2010; McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider 2014)
Considerations for Policy & Programming

• Design for *fragile families*, rather than single mothers.
  – Capitalize on “magic moment” around time of birth for promoting paternal involvement and parenting and relationship skills.
  – Foster father involvement even after parents break up.
    • Parental relationship quality is very important.
    • Interventions that also offer employment or job training may be more effective at engaging disadvantaged fathers.

– Supports not limited to custodial parents.
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