

Transcript

Institute for Research on Poverty Podcast featuring Marcy Carlson

Hosted by David Chancellor

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[Chancellor] High rates of divorce and increases in the number of children being born outside of marriage have led to greater numbers of parents having biological children with more than one other person. Researchers call this multi-partner fertility. For today's podcast, I talked to UW-Madison sociologist Marcy Carlson about this trend and why it matters for disadvantaged families. To start, I asked Professor Carlson just what multi-partner fertility is.

[Carlson] Multipartner Fertility is a pretty cumbersome term that basically tries to get at this phenomenon of parents today being likely to have kids by more than one partner. So we have families where a mother might have a child by two or more fathers and a father that might have a child by two or more mothers. And then you have families where that's true in both of the cases so it makes family life more complicated and it causes parents to have to divide their parental investments across their children.

[Chancellor] It's the way that these investments are spread, or not, that's really the motivating question behind a lot of this research. Most people intuitively figure—and Carlson says the evidence shows—that having two committed parents is, on average, better for children—though there are lots of caveats around this.

[Carlson] If you're the resident mother with two kids by different men living in your household, it's probably harder to coordinate with two dads, rather than one dad who would live outside the household. And if you're the father, it's very common that you might be living away from both of your children. Essentially, when you have kids by more than one person, it diffuses your ability to invest in the child or children you have because they're either living in different places from each other—in dad's case, different places from them—or they're living in a family where the partner that you live with is not also the parent of all of those children.

[Chancellor] You might think about parental investments as time, money, and emotional energy. As you would expect, when you have kids in different households by different partners, it's a lot harder to focus your attention and your dollars on them in the same way that you would be able to if those kids were in the same household and by the same partner.

[Carlson] Economists would talk about the greater transaction costs of trying to make the visits happen or get the money to the parents who need it or the custodial parents—so it just makes the nature and levels of investment spread out across a wider array of locations or complex biological relationships.

[Chancellor] According to Carlson, multi-partner fertility isn't a random event. In data for urban areas that she has looked at, there's more of a concentration among people that have had kids outside of marriage. And, there are individual characteristics that show up. . .

[Carlson] It's education, men who have some history of incarceration are more likely to have kids with more than one partner, African-Americans are more likely to be in this situation and those who didn't live with their own biological parents when they were adolescents. So it tends to be characteristics that are either indicative of or associated with disadvantage.

[Chancellor] From a social science perspective, when you're trying to understand family trends like this, you need good data to get a sense of how things are changing and how different types of families fare. Carlson says that questions about Multi-Partner Fertility really draw attention to the importance of how families are actually measured. In the U.S., at least, most surveys try to look at families, and families are usually thought of in terms of a household. But, in this case, people with family ties are not all going to be in the same household and it's likely that even within the same household, not everyone will have the same definition of who is in their family.

[Carlson] So say you have a child who is living with their biological mother and their mother's partner who may or may not be married. Does that child consider that partner to be part of his or her family? It's not clear. Does that partner consider the child to be a member of his or her family? It's not clear. It might change if and when the parents get married. Potentially, that partner has other children that live in another household so, in effect, the child, the first child that I was talking about is a half-sibling—a half sibling of that other child. Whether they consider that to be a family relationship I think is not clear so I think we need a better way of defining who is in families and then, I think, it won't be one definition but it might be along different domains. Of thinking, are you biologically related? Do you have regular interactions? Do you have the kind of investments or responsibilities and obligations that we typically expect of kin relatives today? So, I think it reflects a bigger complexity in how we think about families and how we measure families than used to be the case when a higher proportion of kids were living with their two biological parents throughout childhood.

[Chancellor] These measurement issues affect the government programs some of these families interact with. And, according to Carlson, many of the programs don't do a good job of understanding this complexity and factoring it into the supports that families might need.

As an example, you might look at the efforts during the presidential administration of George W. Bush to try to encourage unmarried parents to get married. Carlson says that this sounds like a good idea because, in general, married parents are more stable and have better socioeconomic standing than unmarried parents. But, she says that if you look at the data, it's not that easy. For one thing, these two groups have different levels of resources and different backgrounds.

[Carlson] Unmarried couples tend to be much younger, much less educated, less mature, kind of, ready for a relationship and oftentimes the birth is unintended. So I think when we're thinking about what's going on in some of these more disadvantaged type situations, it's probably not a great idea to just encourage that couple to get married because if one or the other already has a child by someone else, in effect you're creating a step family or you're certainly creating something that's not a typical nuclear family that I think some of the policymakers had in mind when designing these policies.

[Chancellor] Meanwhile, child support is another area where family complexity and multi-partner fertility have big implications. IRP researchers including Dan Meyer, Maria Cancian, and Steve Cook have done a lot of work in trying to understand how changing family demographics affect the child support system.

[Carlson] How does that play out when we recognize in assigning child support orders that a father may have children with two different women and if we determine the order based on what the father should pay, we're going to get one thing vs. what the mother should receive and so there's a lot of complexity in that. Then I think that if you just think about trying to support—cash transfer programs are trying to support families—we have to worry about their diffusion of resources, and again, it's not just one household that might need resources.

[Chancellor] Professor Carlson says that a lot of what we're seeing in family change has been well-documented over the last half century— more children born outside of marriage, more unstable relationships, more single parent households, and so on. But, there's a lot that we're still trying to get a handle on.

[Carlson] I think what we haven't fully processed is 'what does this all mean for families trying to do the job that families are expected to do?' And so, if we think of this important, fundamental aspect of family life, which is rearing and socialization of children, to grow and to hopefully be productive, independent citizens over time, I think it makes the job of being a family and doing family much more complicated and I think there are challenges that we need to recognize and, potentially, opportunities for intervention that I think we have yet to understand.

[Chancellor] As we continue to talk about multi-partner fertility, the bottom line concern is what are children going to be getting from their parents in this kind of a family life? This is hard and often expensive to measure, and, as a trend, there aren't a lot of easy answers in terms of how the government, schools, churches, and other social organizations might respond. Yet, interest is widespread and there is a patchwork of research, programs, and policy that will hopefully continue to grapple with this important issue.

Thanks to Marcy Carlson for taking the time to talk about this. You've been listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.