

Family Complexity and Poverty



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The Morgridge Center for Public Service and the Institute for Research on Poverty are putting the Wisconsin Idea into action by collaborating on a project to raise awareness of social issues through sharing research findings in a series of fact sheets and by encouraging community involvement among UW-Madison undergraduate students. This fact sheet provides information about the changing nature of the American family and the implications of the changes. To learn more, visit www.irp.wisc.edu. To get involved, visit www.morgridge.wisc.edu.



**Morgridge Center
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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

By Rebekah Ludwig*

The American family has changed.

The American family has changed dramatically over the past half century, increasing in instability, diversity, and complexity. More people are having children outside of marriage (Fig. 1), some with partners and others as single parents; more unmarried couples are living together; up to half of couples that do marry, divorce; and many couples with children that break up go on to have more children with new partners.¹

From 1960 to 2010, the proportion of births that occur outside of marriage rose from 5% to 41% in the U.S. and from 3% to 37% in Wisconsin. Most nonmarital births are to women in their 20s; nonmarital birth rates for teenagers (ages 15 to 19) declined to a historic low in 2011.²

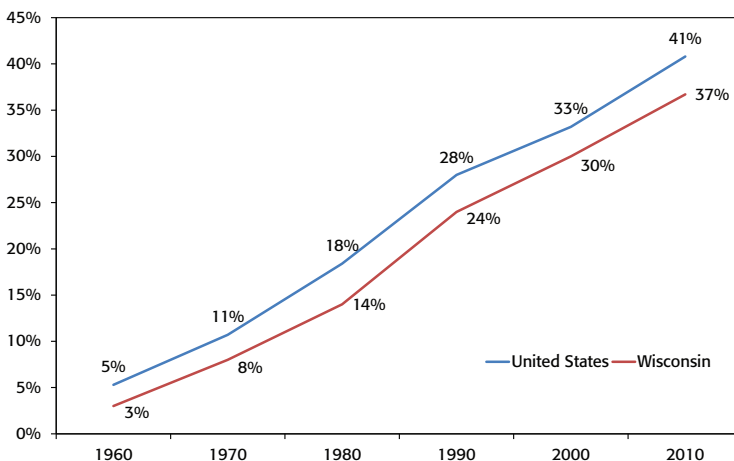


Figure 1. Trends in Percentage of Nonmarital Births in the United States and Wisconsin, 1960 to 2010.

Sources: Data from National Vital Statistics Reports, Vol. 48(16), National Center for Health Statistics; and Wisconsin Births and Infant Deaths, Wisconsin Department of Health Services.

are well off, and some intact two-working-parent families are poor—but single-mother families are about 5 times more likely to be poor than married-couple families with children, so an increase in single-mother families increases poverty. However, changes in marriage, childbearing, and work have mixed effects that, when combined, have a modest effect on poverty: less marriage increases poverty, more mothers working (a trend that has coincided with increasing family complexity) reduces poverty, and fewer children per mother reduces poverty.⁶

We know that about 70% of children living with a single mother are poor or low income; that poor children are more likely to have parents with low education (Fig. 2); that African American, American Indian, and Hispanic children are much more likely to be poor than white children (Fig. 3); and that complex families are more prevalent among these racial/ethnic groups (see p. 2).

We also know that growing up in poverty is linked to many undesirable outcomes, including reduced academic achievement, higher rates of family complexity such as nonmarital childbearing, and a greater likelihood of health problems. In addition, research shows that when poverty persists in a child's life, it increases the chances that the child will grow up to be poor as an adult.⁷

What do we know about parents in complex families?

A longitudinal study called the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is providing insight into nonmarital childbearing and its implications for children and families. “Fragile families” are defined as unmarried parents and their children, and the term emphasizes that they are at greater risk of breaking up and of living in poverty than more-traditional families. The study follows a birth cohort of almost 3,700 children born to unmarried parents and a comparison group of 1,200 children born to married parents.⁸

These changes in couples' relationships and childbearing, which have led to unprecedented family complexity, have been accompanied by a steep increase in U.S. economic inequality over the last quarter of the 20th century.³

Researchers have found growing gaps in children's experiences by their parents' socioeconomic status.⁴ The differences in family structure are thought to also affect increasing inequality, and vice versa.⁵

What do we know about family complexity and poverty?

We know that economic disadvantage and family complexity often go together, so understanding the interrelationships of changes in family structure and functioning to socioeconomic status is important for understanding the causes and consequences of poverty and for the design of effective antipoverty policies.

We know that family change doesn't necessarily cause poverty—for example, many divorced and remarried families

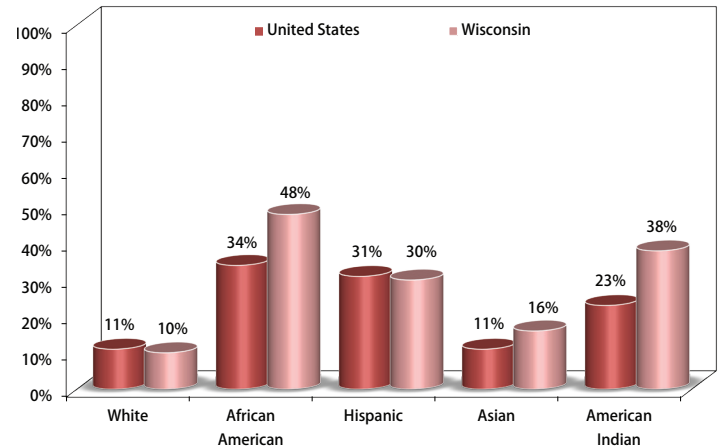
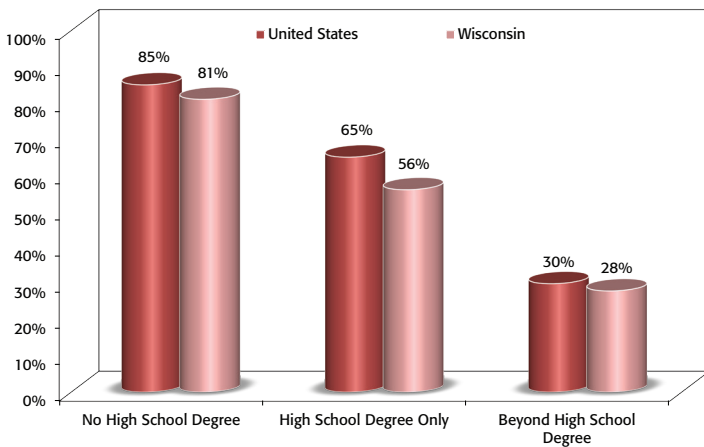


Figure 2. Percent of Children Who Are Low Income by Parental Education, 2010.

Figure 3. Child Poverty Rates by Race/Ethnicity, 2010.

Notes: Low income in 2010 was annual income under 200% of the federal poverty line (FPL) of \$22,314 for a family of 4; poor in 2010 was defined as annual income under 100% of the federal poverty line (FPL).

Sources: Fig. 2: National data were calculated from the 2010 American Community Survey, representing information from 2010, and state data were calculated from the 2008–2010 American Community Survey, representing information from the years 2008 to 2010; Fig. 3: American Community Survey, 2010.

The Fragile Families data show that unmarried parents are disproportionately African American and Hispanic, younger, and more likely to be teen parents than their married counterparts.⁹ Unmarried parents are more likely to suffer from depression than married parents and somewhat more likely to report problems with alcohol. Having children with more than one partner is increasingly common among all couples, but significantly more so among unmarried parents. Whereas about 21% of married parents report having a child with another partner (8% father only, 8% mother only, and 5% both), the majority of unmarried couples—59%—have at least one child with another partner (22% father only, 17% mother only, and 20% both).¹⁰

Analyses of birth patterns for women born in the early 1960s show that fertility patterns vary notably by education. Less-educated women start having children much earlier and end up having more children by age 40 than more-educated women. The majority of mothers with a high school education or less have had a child by age 25, whereas only one-fifth of college graduates have done so. By age 40, high school dropouts have had 2.6 children, on average, compared to 1.6 children for college graduates.¹¹

What challenges do children in complex families face?

Children in complex families face a range of challenges, especially parents/caregivers who are under stress, changes in their living situations, and shifting family dynamics.¹² Economic disadvantage, as discussed above, makes these difficult circumstances harder.

In a study of children in complex families in Wisconsin, researchers found that 60 percent of firstborn children of unmarried mothers have at least one half-sibling by age 10.¹³ Looking at nonmarital childbearing generally from a child’s perspective, researchers note: “Children born to unmarried parents are disadvantaged relative to children born to married parents in terms of parental capabilities and family stability. Additionally, parents’ marital status at the time of a child’s birth is a good predictor of longer-term family stability and complexity, both of which influence children’s longer-term well-being.”¹⁴

But having married parents gives children no guarantee of stability. Divorce among married couples with children, which is increasing along with nonmarital fertility, is often the first in a series of family changes. One parent (typically the father) moves out, resulting in less interaction between the father and child, and, in time, one or both parents will likely remarry or cohabit—and sometimes have children—with a new partner. This leaves children to negotiate new relationships with stepparents and often stepsiblings.¹⁵ These challenges often coincide with a drop in the quantity or quality of parental investment they receive.¹⁶

Of all the demographic shifts since 1960, the increase in instability in parents’ relationships and parents having biological children with more than one partner, or “multipartnered fertility,” seem to have the most important implications for children’s well-being.

To keep in mind:

The “new” American family, with its instability, diversity, and complexity—cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, divorce, and repartnering—especially when coupled with lower socioeconomic status, challenges parents’ ability to provide for their children, makes family life less stable, and complicates the design of public policies to effectively serve families. For a college student volunteering in a classroom or after-school program, sensitivity to the range of experiences children take with them to school is paramount.

Note: Endnotes with links to publications when available can be found at <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/factsheets/pdfs/FactSheet2.pdf>.

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“Children born to unmarried parents are disadvantaged relative to children born to married parents in terms of parental capabilities and family stability.”
—Sara McLanahan

Notes for Family Complexity and Poverty Fact Sheet

¹See M. Cancian and D. Reed, “Family Structure, Childbearing, and Parental Employment: Implications for the Level and Trend in Poverty,” *Focus* 26, No. 2(2009): 21–26, available at <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc262d.pdf>; and S. McLanahan, “Fragile Families and the Reproduction of Poverty,” *Annals, AAPSS*, 621 (January 2009): 111–131.

²B. E. Hamilton, D. L. Hoyert, J. A. Martin, D. M. Strobino, and B. Guyer, “Annual Summary of Vital Statistics: 2010–2011,” *Pediatrics* 131 No. 3 (2013): 548–558.

³P. Gottschalk and S. Danziger, “Inequality of Wage Rates, Earnings and Family Incomes in the United States: 1972–2002,” *Review of Income and Wealth* 51 (2005): 231–254. See also M. J. Carlson and P. England, “Introduction: Social Class and Family Patterns in the U.S.,” in *Social Class and Changing Families in an Unequal America*, eds. M. J. Carlson and P. England (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁴Sara McLanahan, “Diverging Destinies: How Children Are Faring Under the Second Demographic Transition.” *Demography* 41 (2004): 607–627.

⁵M. A. Martin, “Family Structure and Income Inequality in Families with Children, 1976 to 2000,” *Demography* 43 (2006): 421–445.

⁶M. Cancian, “Innovations in Family Policy: Designing Policies for the New Reality,” slide presentation, April 2012. See also M. Cancian, D. R. Meyer, and D. Reed, “Promising Antipoverty Strategies for Families,” *Fast Focus* No. 6 (August 2010). Available at <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/fastfocus/pdfs/FF6-2010.pdf>.

⁷K. Magnuson and E. Votruba-Drzal, “Enduring Influences of Childhood Poverty,” *Focus* 26, No. 2 (2009): 32–37. Available at <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc262f.pdf>.

⁸To learn more about the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, see <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/about.asp>.

⁹M. J. Carlson and F. F. Furstenberg, “The Prevalence and Correlates of Multipartnered Fertility among Urban U.S. Parents,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68, No. 3 (2006): 718–732; M. J. Carlson and F. F. Furstenberg, “The Consequences of Multi-Partnered Fertility for Parental Involvement and Relationships,” Working Paper #2006-28-FF, Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton, NJ, 2012. Available at <http://crcw.princeton.edu/workingpapers/WP06-28-FF.pdf>.

¹⁰Furstenberg and Carlson, “The Prevalence and Correlates of Multipartnered Fertility.”

¹¹T. M. Smeeding, I. Garfinkel, and R. B. Mincy, “Introduction: Young Disadvantaged Men: Fathers, Families, Poverty, and Policy,” *Annals* 635 (May 2011).

¹²L. Tach, “Family Complexity, Childbearing, and Parenting Stress: A Comparison of Mothers’ and Fathers’ Experiences,” Working Paper, Cornell University, 2012. Available at <http://crcw.princeton.edu/workingpapers/WP12-15-FF.pdf>; Carlson and Furstenberg, “The Consequences of Multi-Partnered Fertility.”

¹³M. Cancian, D. R. Meyer, and S. T. Cook, “Stepparents and Half-Siblings: Family Complexity from a Child’s Perspective,” *Fast Focus* No. 11-2011 (September 2011). Available at <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/fastfocus/pdfs/FF11-2011.pdf>. See also, Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study Fact Sheet, based on a chapter entitled “Children in Fragile Families,” by S. McLanahan and published in *Changing Families in an Unequal Society*. Fact sheet available at <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/documents/FragileFamiliesandChildWellbeingStudyFactSheet.pdf>.

¹⁴Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study Fact Sheet, available at <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/documents/FragileFamiliesandChildWellbeingStudyFactSheet.pdf>.

¹⁵Carlson and Furstenberg, “The Consequences of Multi-Partnered Fertility.”

¹⁶Carlson and Furstenberg, “The Prevalence and Correlates of Multipartnered Fertility.”