

Family complexity in America

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Dramatic changes in family life have occurred in the United States over the past half century. Marriage has become less central to the life course, as individuals marry at older ages (or not at all) and face a high likelihood of divorce. Cohabitation typically precedes marriage today, and more than two-fifths of all births now occur outside of marriage. Taken together, these changes have led to an increase in family complexity and instability, as the majority of U.S. children do not spend their entire childhood living with their two biological parents. Particularly notable is an increase in multiple-partner fertility, or the number of adults who (will) have biological children by more than one partner (with a corresponding increase in the number of children that have at least one half-sibling). These changes and trends in family life are important for understanding both the causes and consequences of poverty and likely have implications for broader trends in inequality. As the reach and effects of many antipoverty policies vary with family structure, changes in family life pose challenges to the effective design and operation of a host of social programs and policies.

In order to learn more about growing family complexity and its implications for families, poverty, and public policy, the Institute for Research on Poverty commissioned a small grant competition for emerging scholars in 2012, with final papers submitted by the fall of 2013. Awards were made to outstanding young scholars studying family change across several social science disciplines. The following four articles explore an important set of forward-looking issues related to the nature and implications of family complexity and instability. Taken together, these articles examine both the antecedents and consequences of family complexity and instability. In particular, they evaluate how family structure changes affect children's outcomes, how union dissolution is linked to income changes for married and cohabiting couples, how paternal incarceration is associated with family instability, and how the Great Recession may have influenced fertility behavior both within and outside of marriage.

In the first article, Rebecca Ryan, Amy Claessens, and Anna Markowitz explore how changes in family structure are linked to changes in children's behavioral problems. Mindful of the fact that the effects of family change may differ

as children grow and develop, they evaluate four child age groupings from infancy/toddlerhood through pre-adolescence. They also explore differences across various types of family changes (e.g., union dissolution versus re-partnering), and they consider variation by parental income, comparing low-, moderate-, and high-income parents. The latter is especially informative for public policy, since most social welfare programs and policies are particularly targeted on disadvantaged families.

The second article, by Laura Tach and Alicia Eads, examines the extent to which increasing family instability may have contributed to growing household income volatility in the United States since the 1980s. In particular, they evaluate how the economic consequences of union dissolution for married and cohabiting couples have changed over a 26-year period, and the extent to which changes in mothers' employment and public and private support systems may have affected this. This research has important implications for understanding how the dramatic changes in family life may have affected the economic well-being of the next generation.

The third article, by Kristin Turney, turns our attention to the possible link between the dramatic rise in incarceration, particularly among low-educated and minority men, and family instability. She uses data from a recent cohort of urban births to analyze how paternal incarceration is associated with the dissolution of married, cohabiting, and nonresident romantic relationships, as well as to consider whether post-incarceration changes in family experiences can help account for the link between incarceration and union dissolution. This article provides important new information about how the rise of one social institution (prison) in the lives of disadvantaged men is linked to challenges in another fundamental social institution (family) designed to rear the next generation.

Fourth and finally, Christine Percheski and Rachel Kimbro focus on how economic conditions are linked to fertility patterns by considering how the Great Recession affected pregnancy for four groups of women – married adults, cohabiting adults, unpartnered adults, and teenagers. Their research sheds light on how economic circumstances and social factors interact to affect family outcomes, highlighting the fact that different economic indicators (unemployment and mortgage foreclosure inventories) are not uniformly related to childbearing across different contexts (or by race and education).

The articles are summaries of four of the small grants to emerging scholars awarded under of the “Family Complexity, Poverty, and Public Policy” initiative of the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Funded by the Assistant Secretary for Planning and

Evaluation under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, this initiative aims to understand the nature and consequences of growing family complexity, including implications for public policy. In addition to the small grant awards, a major IRP conference was held on this topic in July 2013, and the papers and commentaries will be published July 2014 in *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (vol. 654).■