Recent Patterns and Implications of Nonmarital Childbearing

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Key Points about U.S. Nonmarital Births

1) Linked to economic disadvantage (more so than other Western countries)

2) High levels of instability/complexity

3) Many biological fathers not highly involved, and many new ‘social fathers’

4) Lower child wellbeing because fewer parental resources (time & money)—not marriage per se
Nonmarital Childbearing

Sources: CDC/NCHIS Vital Statistics; Stat Canada; Eurostat, European Commission; figure by Laura Tach.

a. Earliest year available is 1974.
1) Linked to economic disadvantage (more so than other Western countries)
Figure 1: Percent of All Births that are Non-marital by Education, 1990-2010
Source: National Vital Statistics Birth Data Files

Graph showing the percent of all births that are non-marital by education level from 1990 to 2010.
Smaller Educational Gradient in Nonmarital Births in European Countries (except the UK)

2) High levels of instability/complexity
Percent of Parents who Broke up by Child Age 15

% Parents Separated by Child Age 15
1990s & 2000s

Sources: Andersson & Philipov 2002; Andersson, Duntava & Thomson forthcoming; slide from Betty Thomson
Percent of All Separated Parents Who Enter a New Union within 3 Years

To Age 15: Years with Two-Biological Parent Families, by Education

Source: Generations & Gender Survey.
To Age 15: Years with Two-Biological Parent Families, by Education

Children in the US with highly educated mothers spend 4.2 more years with both biological parents than those with less educated mothers.

The average gap in all other countries is just over 2 years.
U.S. Urban Nonmarital Births: Percent of Parents Who Separate by Child Age

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study
New Partners

• By 5 years after a nonmarital birth, 22% of urban mothers have a new partner (Bzostek et al. 2012)

• Biological fathers *intend* to stay involved with their children, but fathers’—and especially mothers’—new relationships diminish fathers’ involvement with children (Edin & Nelson 2013; Tach et al. 2010)

• Social fathers are often highly involved, but will the relationships last?
Complex Family Situations

Non-complex Nuclear Family

Father has Child by New Partner

Mother has Child by New Partner
Urban U.S. Births: Children with at Least One Half-Sibling over 9 Years, by Marital Status at Birth

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study
Most Children Born to Unmarried Parents Will Be in a Complex Family by Age 10 (WI state data)

Most Children Born to Unmarried Parents Will Be in a Complex Family by Age 10 (WI state data)

Percent of Mothers Who Have Children with Two or More Fathers

3) Many biological fathers not highly involved, and many new ‘social fathers’
Urban Parents: Biological-Father Contact at 9 Years by Parents’ Marital Status at Birth

Source: Fragile Families Study
4) Lower child wellbeing because fewer parental resources (time & money)—not marriage per se
Parenting Resources by Family Type at Child Age 5
(Fragile Families Study)

Implications

• At least in the U.S., children born to unmarried parents are ‘triply disadvantaged’
  1) Low economic resources
  2) Unstable/complex families
  3) Limited policy supports

• Policy?
  ▫ Hard to change family behaviors, so either:
    1) Decrease unintended fertility (Sawhill 2014) or
    2) Better support children/families