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POLICY BRIEF

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Are Married Parents Really Better for Children?

What Research Says About the Effects of Family Structure on Child Well-Being

By Mary Parke

Introduction

Over the past four decades, the patterns of family structure have changed dramatically in the United States. An increase in the numbers and proportion of children born outside of marriage and a rise in divorce rates have contributed to a three-fold increase in the proportion of children growing up in single-parent families since 1960. These changes have generated considerable public concern and controversy, particularly about the effects of these changes on the well-being of children. Over the past 20 years, a body of research has developed on how changes in patterns of family structure affect children. Most researchers now agree that together these studies support the notion that, on average, children do best when raised by their two married, biological[1] parents who have low-conflict relationships.

This research has been cited as justification for recent public policy initiatives to promote and strengthen marriages. However, findings from the research are often oversimplified, leading to exaggeration by proponents of marriage initiatives and to skepticism from critics. While the increased risks faced by children raised without both parents are certainly reason for concern, the majority of children in single-parent families grow up without serious problems. In addition, there continues to be debate about how much of the disadvantages to children are attributable to poverty versus family structure, as well as about whether it is marriage itself that makes a difference or the type of people who get married.

This policy brief summarizes the principal findings of this large and evolving body of research, discusses some of its complexities, and identifies issues that remain to be explored. It seeks to answer the following questions:

- How has family structure changed in the past several decades?
- Are children better off if they're raised by their married, biological parents?
- How do child outcomes vary among different family types?
- What really makes the difference for children—income or family structure?
- Does marriage itself make a difference, or is it the kind of people who marry and stay married?
- Does the quality of the relationship matter more than marital status?
- What is the relationship between marriage and poverty?

About the Author

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

The third in a series on Couples and Marriage Research and Policy, this brief summarizes the research on the effects of family structure on child well-being, discusses some of the complexities of the research, and identifies issues that remain to be explored.

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This policy brief series is informed by a "Marriage-Plus" perspective, which has two main goals centered on the well-being of children: (1) to help more children grow up in healthy, married families and (2) when this isn't possible, to help parents—whether unmarried, separated, divorced, or remarried—cooperate better in raising their children.

How Has Family Structure Changed?

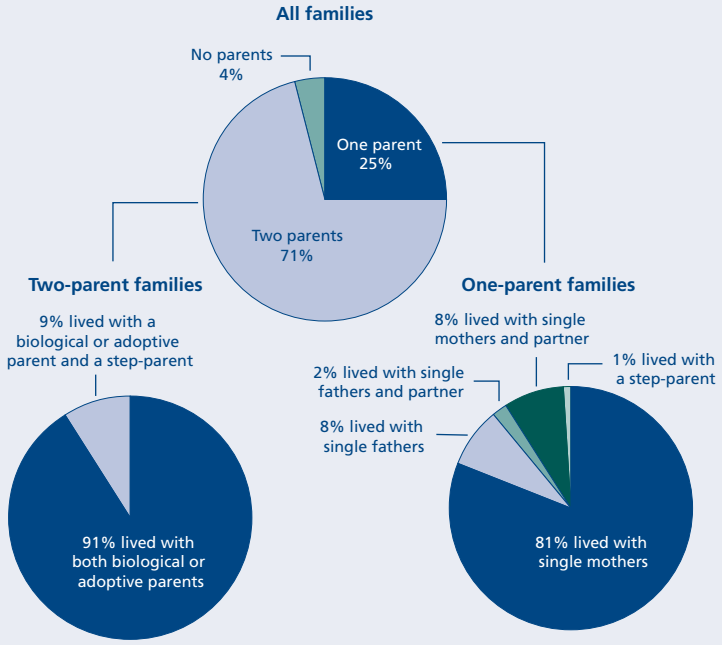
Single-parent families are much more common today than they were 40 years ago.[2] Rates have increased across race and income groups, but single parenthood is more prevalent among African Americans and Hispanics. Twenty-two percent of African American children were living in a single-parent home in 1960; by 2001, the percentage had more than doubled to 53 percent. For whites, the percentage nearly tripled, from 7 percent to 19 percent, over the same time period. Three out of 10 Hispanic children lived in single-parent families in 2001.

In 1996, 71.5 million children under the age of 18 lived in the U.S. The large majority of these children were living with two parents, one-quarter lived with a single parent, and less than 4 percent lived with another relative or in foster care (see Figure 1). Two-thirds of children were living with two married, biological parents, and less than 2 percent with two cohabiting, biological parents. Less than 7 percent lived within a step-family. Twenty percent of children lived with a single mother, 2 percent with a single father, and almost 3 percent lived in an informal step-family—that is, with a single parent and his or her partner.[3]

Family situations often change, which makes understanding the effects of family structure on children complicated. Many children live in more than one type of family during the course of their childhoods. For instance, the majority of children in step-families have also lived in a single-parent family at some point.

FIGURE 1

Family Living Arrangements for Children Under Age 18 (1996)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Are Children Better Off If They Grow Up With Their Married, Biological Parents?

In 1994, Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, using evidence from four nationally representative data sets, compared the outcomes of children growing up with both biological parents, with single parents, and with step-parents. McLanahan and Sandefur found that children who did not live with both biological parents were roughly twice as likely to be poor, to have a birth outside of marriage, to have behavioral and psychological problems, and to not graduate from high school. Other studies have reported associations between family structure and child health outcomes. For example, one study found children living in single-parent homes were more likely to experience health problems, such as accidents, injuries, and poisonings.

Of course, most children in single-parent families will not experience these negative outcomes. But what is the level and degree of risk for the average child? The answer depends on the outcome being assessed as well as other factors. For example, McLanahan and Sandefur reported that single-parent families had a much higher poverty rate (26 percent) than either two-parent biological families (5 percent) or step-families (9 percent). They also found that the risk of dropping out of high school for the average white child was substantially lower in a

two-parent biological family (11 percent) than in a single-parent family or step-family (28 percent).[4] For the average African American child, the risk of dropping out of high school was 17 percent in a two-parent family versus 30 percent in a single- or step-parent family. And for the average Hispanic child, the risk of dropping out of school was 25 percent in a two-parent family and 49 percent in a single- or step-parent family.

Up to half of the higher risk for negative educational outcomes for children in single-parent families is due to living with a significantly reduced household income. Other major factors are related to disruptions in family structure, including turmoil a child experiences when parents separate and/or re-couple with a step-parent (including residential instability), weaker connections between the child and his or her non-custodial parent (usually the father), and weakened connections to resources outside of the immediate family—that is, other adults and institutions in the community that the non-custodial parent may have provided access to.

When controlling for other differences in family characteristics, such as race, level of parents' education, family size, and residential location, McLanahan and Sandefur found little difference in outcomes for children according to whether the single-parent families were a result of non-marital births or divorce. However, children of widowed parents do better than children of other types of single-parent families with similar characteristics.

How Do Child Outcomes Vary Among Types of Families?

Comparing two-parent families with all single-parent families often masks important subtleties. Subsequent research has added to our understanding of the range of family structures by examining separately the data for divorced, widowed, never-married, and cohabiting parents, married step-parents, and same-sex couples. While this research has revealed important nuances about the effects of these different family types on children, many questions remain unanswered. In addition, understanding the findings is complicated by the fact that studies do not use consistent definitions of family types or consistent comparison measures across data sets. And, as noted previously, children may experience more than one type of living arrangement over their childhoods. This section provides demographics on different types of families and discusses some research findings on various childhood outcomes.

Divorced families

Before they reach adulthood, nearly four out of 10 children will experience the divorce of their parents, and roughly one million children experience their parents' divorce every year. Research shows that, on average, children of divorced parents are disadvantaged compared to children of married parents in the area of educational achievement. Children of divorce are more than twice as likely to have serious social, emotional, or psychological problems as children of intact families—25 percent versus 10 percent.

Most divorced families with children experience enormous drops in income, which lessen somewhat over time but remain significant for years—unless there is a subsequent parental cohabitation or remarriage.[5] Declines in income following divorce account for up to half the risk for children dropping out of high school, regardless of income prior to the divorce. The effects of divorce on children often last through adulthood. For instance, adult children of divorce are more likely to experience depression and their own divorces —as well as earn less income and achieve lower levels of education—compared with adults whose parents remained married.

Widowed parents

Death of a spouse is a relatively uncommon cause for single parenthood today. More than 90 percent of children reach adulthood with both parents living. In 1998, only 3 percent of white children and 5 percent of black children were living with a widowed mother. Although death of a parent does put children at a disadvantage, children of widowed parents do the best of all categories of children of single parents. Children of widowed mothers are about half as likely to drop out of high school or have a teen birth as children of divorce or children born outside of marriage.

Never-married mothers

Childbirth and childrearing outside of marriage have become increasingly prevalent in the U.S. Among children living with single mothers, the proportion living with never-married mothers increased from 7 percent to 36 percent between 1970 and 1996. In 1996, 7.1 million children lived with a never-married

parent. Children of never-married mothers are at risk of experiencing negative outcomes and are among those most likely to live in poverty. Roughly 69 percent of children of never-married mothers are poor, compared to 45 percent of children brought up by divorced single mothers. Never-married mothers are significantly younger, have lower incomes, have fewer years of education, and are twice as likely to be unemployed as divorced mothers.[6] While age of the mother has some effect, most of the differences between the two groups remain even when age is taken into account. Regardless of the mother's age at birth, a child born to an unmarried mother is less likely to complete high school than a child whose mother is married.

While we know the number of children born to never-married mothers, we don't really know how many spend their entire childhoods living with a mother who never marries or cohabits. Part of the increase in children living with never-married mothers is attributable to the increase in children born to cohabiting couples, which are often reported as single-mother families. Therefore, although these children are living with unmarried mothers, many may also have their fathers or other males in their households.

Cohabiting-parent families

The phenomenon of cohabitation —homes in which two adult partners of the opposite sex live together but are not married—has become much more common over the last 40 years. In 1970, there were 523,000 unmarried-couple households, while in 2000 4.9 million opposite-sex couples cohabited. About 40 percent of cohabiting households in 2000 included children. While this equates to a small proportion of the total children in the U.S., the proportion of children who will live in a cohabiting household at some point during their childhoods is estimated to be four in 10. Cohabitation is more common among couples with low levels of education. Also, African American and Hispanic cohabiting households are roughly twice as likely as white cohabiting households to include children.[7] However, while births within cohabiting unions have sharply increased for whites—accounting for almost all of the increase in non-marital births among white women—among black women, births to cohabiting couples account for less than one in five of non-marital births.[8]

Cohabitation takes place between a parent and his or her partner (creating an informal step-family) or the two biological parents of a child. Six out of 10 children in cohabiting-parent families live with an informal step-parent, while four out of 10 live with both biological parents. (In comparison, nine out of 10 children in married-couple households live with both biological parents.)

Research suggests that children in cohabiting families are at higher risk of poor outcomes compared to children of married parents partly because cohabiting families have fewer socioeconomic resources and partly because of unstable living situations. The average cohabiting union lasts about two years, with roughly half ending in marriage. Once married, formerly cohabiting parents have a much higher dissolution rate than couples who did not live together prior to marriage. One study found that of children born to cohabitating parents who later marry, 15 percent will have their parents separate by the time they are one year old, half will not be living with both parents by age five, and two-thirds will not live with both parents by age 10. In comparison, 4 percent of children born into marital unions experience the break-up of their parents by age one, 15 percent by age five, and about one-third by age 10. Children living with cohabiting parents—even if the parents later marry—are thus likely to experience considerable instability in their living situations. However, there is some evidence that cohabiting African American parents who marry may achieve the same level of stability for their children as African American couples who marry prior to having children.

Research suggests the importance of distinguishing between cohabiting families with two biological parents and those with a biological parent and another partner. Some evidence indicates that school achievement and behavioral problems are similar among children living with both biological parents —regardless of marital status— and that children in both formal and informal step-families also fare similarly in these areas.

Step-families

Roughly half of marriages are projected to end in divorce— 60 percent of which have children —and many of these couples remarry. In 1996, about 7 percent of children, or five million children, lived with a step-parent, and estimates indicate that about one-third of all children today may live with step-parents before reaching adult-

hood. More than 90 percent of step-children live with their mother and a step-father. Step-families are at greater risk of dissolution than other marriages; about 60 percent of step-families are disrupted by divorce.

In spite of their better economic circumstances on average, children in step-families face many of the same risks as children of never-married or divorced parents. They are more likely to have negative behavioral, health, and educational outcomes, and they tend to leave home earlier than children who live with both married biological parents. However, the effect sizes are small for many of these differences, and risk levels may vary according to race and level of socio-economic disadvantage. One study found that African American daughters in step-families were 92 percent less likely to have engaged in sex than African American daughters of single mothers. They were also less likely to become pregnant. Finally, children in step-families are at increased risk for experiencing physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.

Same-sex couple families

The 2000 Census revealed that out of 5.5 million cohabiting couples, about 11 percent were same-sex couples—with slightly more male couples than female. One-third of female same-sex households and 22 percent of male households, or about 163,000 same-sex households in total, lived with children under 18 years old.[9] (This compares with about 25 million married-couple households with children under 18.)

Although the research on these families has limitations, the findings are consistent: children raised by same-sex parents are no more likely to exhibit poor outcomes than children raised by divorced heterosexual parents.[10] Since many children raised by gay or lesbian parents have undergone the divorce of their parents, researchers have considered the most appropriate comparison group to be children of heterosexual divorced parents. Children of gay or lesbian parents do not look different from their counterparts raised in heterosexual divorced families regarding school performance, behavior problems, emotional problems, early pregnancy, or difficulties finding employment. However, as previously indicated, children of divorce are at higher risk for many of these problems than children of married parents.

Does Family Structure or Reduced Income Make the Difference?

If the negative effects of single parenthood on child well-being were primarily due to a lack or loss of income, one would expect children living with two adults to do as well as those living with their married, biological parents. But this is not the case. The research shows that children living with two adults (i.e., with cohabiting parents or in a step-family) do not do as well as children living with married, biological parents on a number of variables.

Also, if income was the major factor behind the negative association between single parenthood and child outcomes, one would expect children of single-parent families who are not poor to have better outcomes than children of poor single-parent families. However, a recent study in Sweden—where the safety net is stronger than in the U.S. and where the poverty rate among single mothers is very low—found problems for children of Swedish single-parent families similar to those found for children of American single-parent families.

Is It Marriage Itself or the Kind of People Who Marry (and Stay Married) That Makes the Difference?

It is often suggested that the positive effects of marriage on child well-being are likely derived not from marriage itself but from the distinctive characteristics of the individuals who marry and stay married (known as the "selection effect"). In many of the more recent studies, researchers have attempted to control for most of these selection effects through various statistical methods. For example, research on women with a first premarital pregnancy leading to a birth found those who had "shotgun" weddings (i.e., who married while they were pregnant) experienced a poverty rate of less than half of those who did not marry.[11]

There may be certain benefits to marriage, such as access to health insurance and tax advantages, that contribute to the increased likelihood of child well-being. In addition, it remains possible that those who marry also have attributes unmeasured in existing surveys—such as commitment, loyalty, and future orientation—that distinguish them from those who don't marry and stay married. It is also possible that marriage itself—the actual act of getting married—changes the attitudes and behaviors of couples in positive ways, as well as those of others towards them.

Doesn't the Quality of the Relationship Matter More Than the Piece of Paper?

The quality of the relationship between parents matters to child well-being. Children who grow up in married families with high conflict experience lower emotional well-being than children who live in low-conflict families, and they may experience as many problems as children of divorced or never-married parents. Research indicates that marital conflict interferes with the quality of parenting. Furthermore, experiencing chronic conflict between married parents is inherently stressful for children, and children learn poor relationship skills from parents who aren't able to solve problems amicably. When parents have a highly discordant relationship, children are often better off in the long run if their parents divorce. Between 30 to 40 percent of divorces of couples with children are preceded by a period of chronic discord between the parents. In these situations, children do better when their parents divorce than if they stay married.

What Is the Relationship Between Marriage and Poverty?

Children living with single mothers are five times as likely to be poor as those in two-parent families. Some economists have attributed virtually all of the 25 percent increase in child poverty between 1970 and 1997 to the growth of single-parent families. But are single parents poor because they are not married, or would they have remained poor even if they married available partners? While it is difficult to disentangle the effects of income and family structure, clearly the relationship operates in both directions: poverty is both cause and effect of single parenthood.

For example, research evidence indicates that in low-income, African American communities, the high rate of male unemployment is one of the factors that explains why low-income mothers do not marry. Serious and long-term financial stress can also wreak havoc on a marriage, and this may lead to marital breakup. Moreover, poverty and single parenthood reinforce each other. Growing up in an environment of poverty places a child at risk for not completing school, for becoming a teen parent, and for being unemployed, which are all characteristics that make it less likely that the child will eventually marry or that she or he will stay married.

But do low-income parents gain similar economic advantages from getting married as does the population as a whole? Recent economic simulation studies have found that if two poor unmarried parents marry they are less likely to be poor. Economist Robert Lerman found that married parents suffered less economic hardship than cohabiting parents with the same low income and education. Among the apparent explanations were that married parents are more likely to pool their earnings, husbands work longer hours and earn more, and married families receive more assistance from family, friends, and the community. While marriage itself will not lift a family out of poverty, it may reduce material hardship. However, marriage appears to be less of a protector against poverty for Hispanic families than for others.

What More Do We Need to Know?

Much remains to be learned about how living in different family structures affects child well-being, including:

- How does moving into and out of different family situations affect children? At what ages are children most vulnerable to these changes? How much of the risk to children is caused by living arrangement instability itself?
- What are the long-term effects of some of these family structure patterns—for example, for children who live in long-term cohabiting families or in long-term, single-parent, never-married families?
- How are children in families from different minority and cultural backgrounds affected by family structure?
- From a child well-being perspective, what are the relevant measures of a "healthy" or "good enough" marriage?

Conclusion

Research indicates that, on average, children who grow up in families with both their biological parents in a low-conflict marriage are better off in a number of ways than children who grow up in single-, step- or cohabiting-parent households. Compared to children who are raised by their married parents, children in other family types are more likely to achieve lower levels of education, to become teen parents, and to experience health, behavior, and mental health problems. And children in single- and cohabiting-parent families are more

likely to be poor. This being said, most children not living with married, biological parents grow up without serious problems.

In individual situations, marriage may or may not make children better off, depending on whether the marriage is "healthy" and stable. Marriage may also be a proxy for other parental characteristics that are associated with relationship stability and positive child outcomes. The legal basis and public support involved in the institution of marriage help to create the most likely conditions for the development of factors that children need most to thrive—consistent, stable, loving attention from two parents who cooperate and who have sufficient resources and support from two extended families, two sets of friends, and society. Marriage is not a guarantee of these conditions, however, and these conditions exist in other family circumstances, but they are less likely to.

Endnotes

For an annotated version, with complete reference citations, visit www.clasp.org.

1 The reference to biological parents is to distinguish between biological/adoptive parents and step-parents. Most studies that include data on adoptive parents include them in the biological-parent category. Adopted children have very similar outcomes to children raised by both biological parents.

2 The number of U.S. children living with a single parent increased from 9 percent in 1960 to 27 percent in 2000.

3 While a number of children live in households with neither parent, this brief does not address children living with another relative or in foster care. For more information on the well-being of children living without either parent, visit www.urban.org and www.clasp.org, under child welfare.

4 Step- and single-parent families were grouped together.

5 Estimates suggest that children of divorce experience a 70 percent drop in their household income right after a divorce, and, unless there is a remarriage, the income is still 40 to 45 percent lower six years later than for children living in intact-family households.

6 59 percent versus 29 percent.

7 67 percent of African American, 70 percent of Hispanic, and 35 percent of white cohabiting households.

8 In Europe, a very high proportion of out-of-wedlock child births are to cohabiting parents; in the U.S., less than half of non-marital births are to cohabitors.

9 There may be under-reporting by same-sex couples.

10 There is little information available about differences relating to socio-economic status, race, or other variables in same-sex couple families. Many of these studies have methodological limitations that apply to recruitment methods and small samples sizes. In addition, many samples of same-sex couple families have been largely of white, middle-class, well-educated families. Little research has been done on children born to or adopted and raised by lesbian or gay parents.

11 20 percent versus 47 percent.

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ABOUT CLASP

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1968, conducts research, legal and policy analysis, technical assistance, and advocacy on issues related to economic security for low-income families with children.

The Couples and Marriage Policy Brief series seeks to inform the debate about public policies to strengthen and stabilize two-parent families and marriage. The series will focus on the effects on child well-being, with a special interest in couple relationships and marriage in low-income communities.

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