



FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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The Prevalence And Correlates Of Multipartnered Fertility Among Urban U.S. Parents

Background

The final decades of the 20th century were marked by substantial changes in patterns of union formation and fertility in Western industrialized countries. Individuals are now marrying later, divorcing more frequently, and cohabiting more often than in the past. Whereas only four percent of all births occurred outside of marriage in 1940, today more than one-third of all births occur to unmarried women. Because of these changing patterns, fewer families fit the "traditional" image of two married parents living with only their own biological children. In fact, a substantial number of parents now have children from more than one relationship. This experience, referred to here as "multipartnered fertility," is the focus of this brief.

In addition to indicating a significant break with previous patterns of family formation, multipartnered fertility may have important consequences for children. Parents rearing children across multiple households must make difficult choices about how to allocate their time, financial resources, and emotion. This increased tension may lead to reductions in parental investments that are known to be important for child wellbeing. As the prevalence of multipartnered fertility likely continues to rise in the future, this issue will become relevant to many more children and their families and will likely demand increased consideration by policy makers.

This brief examines the prevalence of multipartnered fertility at the beginning of the 21st century and identifies

factors that are associated with this increasingly-common family situation. Specifically, we assess the prevalence of multipartnered fertility among unmarried and married parents, and we describe the individual and couple characteristics that are associated with multipartnered fertility for mothers and fathers.

Data and Measures

We utilize data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study [see box on back]. Our sample includes the 4,300 married and unmarried couples who responded to the baseline and one-year follow-up surveys. The data are weighted to adjust for the oversampling of nonmarital births in the survey.

Multipartnered fertility among mothers and fathers is measured from mothers' reports in the one-year follow-up survey. Each mother is asked if she has any children by someone other than the baby's father and whether the father has children by someone else. Data about fathers' multipartnered fertility were drawn from mothers' reports because the study obtained a higher response rate among mothers than among fathers. This

procedure is unlikely to affect the outcomes of the analyses because in cases where reports were available from both parents, they agreed about whether or not the father had children from other women approximately 90 percent of the time.

We estimated logistic regression models to identify the characteristics that are associated with multipartnered

Figure 1: Prevalence of Multipartnered Fertility Among Unmarried Couples

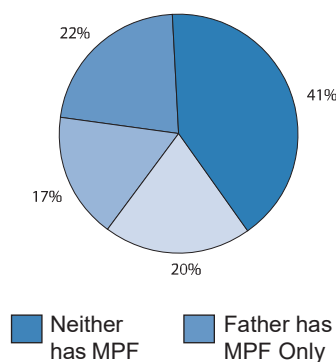
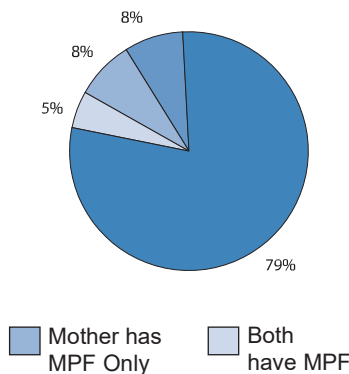


Figure 2: Prevalence of Multipartnered Fertility Among Married Couples



fertility for mothers and fathers. Demographic characteristics considered include parents' race/ethnicity, mothers' age at first birth, current age, total number of births, family background, and whether foreign born. The study also evaluated the role of other characteristics such as parents' human capital, parents' attitudes and religiosity, parents' relationship status, and fathers' incarceration history. Since the latter variables occurred in time subsequent to the multipartnered fertility we are measuring, we cannot determine if they are causal factors or consequences of having children by more than one partner.

Results

Prevalence of Multipartnered Fertility

Multipartnered fertility is common among unmarried parents (see Figure 1). In fully 59 percent of couples who were unmarried at the time of their baby's birth, at least one parent has a child from another relationship: in twenty percent, both partners have a child by a previous partner; in seventeen percent, only the mother has experienced multipartnered fertility; and in twenty-two percent, only the father has experienced such. In the remaining 41 percent of unmarried couples, neither parent has a child by another partner.

The results for married couples are quite different (see Figure 2). In three-quarters (79 percent) of married relationships, neither parent has a child by another partner. In five percent of married couples, both parents have a child from another partner; in approximately eight percent, the father but not the mother has experienced multipartnered fertility, while in the remaining eight percent, the mother but not the father has children from a previous partner.

As one might expect, the more children a mother has, the more likely she is to have children by more than one partner. Among all mothers with two births, 24 percent have children from multiple fathers. This proportion rises

to 48 percent among mothers with three births, 47 percent among mothers with four births, and fully 72 percent among mothers who have had five or more births. Thus, high fertility is strongly associated with multipartnered fertility, a fact that has received little attention in the general demographic literature on fertility.

Correlates of Multipartnered Fertility

A number of parental characteristics are significantly correlated with multipartnered fertility. This section highlights some of the most important of these characteristics, including parents' race/ethnicity, mother's age at first birth, total number of births, parental relationship status, and fathers' incarceration history (See Table 1).

Multipartnered fertility is highly correlated with race/ethnicity. Black non-Hispanic mothers and fathers are much more likely than are parents of other racial and ethnic groups to have children from more than one partner. This association remains significant even after controlling for many other parental characteristics.

Mothers who had their first child at a young age are much more likely than others to experience multipartnered fertility. For example, mothers who had their first child as a young teen (ages 14-16) are six times more likely than those who had their first child

in their 30s to have children by more than one partner. While corresponding data about age at first birth are not available for fathers, the results would presumably be similar. Thus, early childbearing appears to increase subsequent family instability, even once we control for the higher total number of births and other maternal characteristics typically associated with teenage fertility. There is, however, a strong link between total number of births and multipartnered fertility.

As we saw in the simple descriptive statistics, unmarried

Table 1. Characteristics Associated with Multipartnered Fertility Among Mothers and Fathers

	Mothers	Fathers
Age at first birth, 14-16	+	n/a
Age at first birth, 17-18	+	n/a
Age 21 and older (at 1-year survey)	+	n/a
Age at baby's birth, 30 and older	n/a	+
Total number of births to mother (parity)	+	n/a
Lived with both parents at age 15	-	-
Black, non-Hispanic	+	+
Parents of different race/ethnicity	+	(ns)
Immigrant	(ns)	-
Obtained bachelor's degree or higher	(ns)	-
Mother worked last year	+	n/a
Health is fair/poor	(ns)	+
Frequency of religious attendance	-	(ns)
Father ever incarcerated	n/a	+
Thought about abortion	+	+
Parents married at time of birth	-	-

+/- denotes statistical significance at .05 level and direction of relationship; (ns) indicates variable is not statistically significant; n/a indicates variable not applicable.

Model also includes other demographic, economic, and social-psychological characteristics. Please refer to the working paper for the full models.

mothers and fathers are much more likely than married mothers and fathers to have children by more than one partner. This is the case regardless of whether the unmarried parents were involved in a cohabiting, visiting (romantically involved but not cohabiting), or non-romantic relationship at the time of their child's birth.

Finally, fathers who have a history of incarceration are twice as likely as fathers who have not been incarcerated to have children by more than one partner. This finding merits further investigation in order to explore whether men with histories of partner instability are more likely to go to prison and/or whether being incarcerated influences men's subsequent fertility and partnering behaviors.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Both the prevalence of multipartnered fertility and the parental characteristics that are associated with it have

important implications for public policy. Multipartnered fertility may complicate marriage promotion programs by creating ambiguity about which parents the programs should be encouraging to marry and about how to encourage effective co-parenting with the 'outside' parent(s) while strengthening the focal couple's union. Additionally, multipartnered fertility makes enforcement of child support more complicated, as paternal obligations from multiple partnerships are often not considered when estimating fathers' ability to provide child support.

Given recent trends in union formation and fertility, rates of multipartnered fertility are likely to continue to increase in the future. It is important that policymakers give due consideration to this demographic reality and its possible consequences for children and families.

Recent Working Papers

The following comprises a list of the most recent Working Papers authored by the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) faculty and research associates. A complete list of Working Papers is also available for viewing and downloading on the CRCW web site: crcw.princeton.edu/papers.html

2006-09-FF Lenna Nepomnyaschy, Irwin Garfinkel March 2006 "Child Support Enforcement and Fathers' Contributions to Their Nonmarital Children"

2006-08-FF Cynthia Osborne, Jean Knab March 2006 "Young Children's Health and Behavior Following Welfare Reform"

2006-07-FF Suzanne Leaman, Christina Gee February 2006 "Abusive Romantic Relationships among Adolescent and Young Adult Mothers"

2006-06-FF Kristen Harknett, Jean Knab January 2006 "More Kin, Less Support: Multipartnered Fertility and Perceived Support among Mothers"

2006-05-FF Nancy Reichman, Hope Corman, Kelly Noonan, Dhaval Dave January 2006 "Typically Unobserved Variables (TUVs) and Selection into Prenatal Inputs: Implications for Estimating Infant Health Production Functions"

2006-04-FF Jean Knab, Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel January 2006 "The Effects of Welfare and Child Support Policies on Maternal Health"

2006-03-FF Lenna Nepomnyaschy, Nancy Reichman January 2006 "Low Birth Weight and Asthma Among Young Urban Children"

2006-02-FF Nancy Reichman, Julien Teitler January 2006 "Paternal Age as a Risk Factor for Low Birth Weight"

2006-01-FF Amanda Geller, Irwin Garfinkel, Bruce Western January 2006 "The Labor Market Effects of Incarceration: A Propensity Score Analysis"

2005-28-FF Robert Whitaker, Sean Orzol 2005 "Preschooler Obesity and Socioeconomic Status in U.S. Cities"

2005-27-FF Rachel Kimbro, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Sara McLanahan October 2005 "Children's Overweight and Obesity at Age Three: Explaining the Racial and Ethnic Differentials"

2005-26-FF Marcy Carlson, Sara McLanahan September 2005 "Strengthening Unmarried Families: Could Enhancing Couple Relationships Also Improve Parenting?"

2005-25-FF Hillary Burdette, Robert Whitaker 2005 "A National Study of Neighborhood Safety, Outdoor Play, Television Viewing, and Obesity in Preschool Children"

2005-24-FF Julien Teitler, Nancy Reichman, Lenna Nepomnyaschy, Irwin Garfinkel August 2005 "Welfare Participation and Marriage"

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Inside...

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to document the prevalence and correlates of multipartnered fertility among urban U.S. parents.

For more information about the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, go to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu> and go to "About Fragile Families" and "Collaborative Studies." To review public and working papers from the Fragile Families Study, go to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/ffpubs.asp>.

This research brief was adapted from "The Prevalence and Correlates of Multipartnered Fertility among Urban U.S. Parents" by Marcia J. Carlson and Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr. The Fragile Families Research Brief series is funded in part by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.