Family Structure and Instability

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Availability and Quality of Measures of Family Structure and Instability

• Vary by key criteria of the data collection efforts:
  – Study design
  – Scientific objective of the study
  – Data reporters in family/HH of interest
  – Survey content
Federal Data Collection Efforts

- ACS, CPS, U.S. Census, NSFG
- CE, SIPP
- ECLS-B, ECLS-K, Fragile Families, Add Health, NLSY79, NLSY97
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Measures

• Family structure status
  – Static measure of family structure at point in time;
  – Requires data on sex, number, and type of parent(s) with whom the child lives.

• Family instability
  – Indicator of change in family structure over specified period of time (child’s life);
  – Requires data on changes in number and type of parent(s) with whom the child lives.
Family Structure Status

• Type of parent determined by relationship of each parent figure to the child in the home
  – Biological
  – Adoptive
  – Step
  – Foster
  – Surrogate
    • Biologically related
    • Non-biologically related
Detailed Family Structure Status

- Two bio parents
- Two adoptive parents
- Two foster parents
- Bio mom, step dad
- Bio dad, step mom
- Two bio-related surrogates
- Two non-bio surrogate parents

- Single bio mom
- Single bio dad
- Single bio surrogate
- Single non-bio surrogate
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Structure of Adolescents</th>
<th>Add Health 1995</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 biological parents</td>
<td>10,339</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 adoptive parents</td>
<td>403</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bio Mom/ Step Dad</td>
<td>2,756</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bio Dad/ Step Mom</td>
<td>591</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single Bio Mom</td>
<td>4,520</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single Bio Dad</td>
<td>637</td>
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<tr>
<td>Surrogate parent(s)</td>
<td>1,499</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20,745</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Required data for Ideal Measure of Family Structure Status

- Number and sex of parent figures in the home
- Marital and cohabiting status of parent
- Relationship of each parent in HH to child.
Availability of Family Structure Status Measures

- All cross-sectional datasets (ACS, CPS, NSFG, U.S. Census) and CE and SIPP have a main Household Respondent (HHR) fill out HH roster and indicate
  - Sex and marital status of HH member
  - Relationship of HH member to HHR

- These data identify other parent figures in the home (spouse or married partner of HHR), but only the relationship between the HHR any child on HH roster.

- Only one type of parent figure can be identified for two-parent families.
Availability of Family Structure Status Measures

- Longitudinal studies do a better job of sorting out 2-bio parent families from 2-parent step or blended families.
- Fragile Families and Add Health gather a HH roster and obtain the social and biological relationships with all parent figures from the perspective of the child.
  - Marital and cohabiting status of parents data available
- NLSY and ECLS surveys gather HH roster but only obtain relationship between parent respondent and child
  - Additional questions to determine presence and type of other parent figure in home, and marital status of parent
Summary: Family Structure Status

• Most detail come from social and biological relationships between parents and children
  – From child’s perspective: Add Health and Fragile Families
  – From parent (HHR)’s perspective get half the structure, need additional data on presence and bio relationship of spouse/partner to child: NLSY97, ECLS-B, ECLS-K

• Cross-sectional and census-based surveys only provide number of parent figures and define 1 type of parent.
  – Exceptions are SIPP and NSFG
  – Main limitation is not being able to determine types of parents in two-parent families
What is a two parent family?
Family composition from adolescent reports

![Bar chart showing family composition](chart.png)
Family Instability

• Change: when, what, and how often
  – Number of changes
  – Type of change
  – Developmental stage for any, number, and type of change

• Duration: stability of family structure experiences.
  – length of time since last family structure change
  – Length (proportion) of child’s life spent in different family structure types
Family Instability Data

- All instability measures require longitudinal data to capture change over time with two general approaches:
  1) Retrospective data on family disruptions with either a set of questions or marriage and cohabitation history of the parent with whom the child lives.
     - Both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs
  2) Household roster with all social and biological relationships between parents and the child collected in waves of data collection on a prospective cohort.
     - Only longitudinal designs provide these data
Availability of Family Instability Measures

- Census-based cross-sectional studies do not have a marital or cohabitation history of parents
  - Instability measures come from current HH roster and marital status of HHR.
- NSFG has a marital and cohabitation history, so instability for the resident parent resp is available, but changes in parent types over time are not.
  - though can overlap dates of birth with marital history to determine biological vs non-biological parents’ presence.
Availability of Family Instability Measures

- Longitudinal studies provide repeated measures of relationships between parent(s) and children to determine change in types of parents.
- Quality of instability measures with this approach is conditional on the quality of family structure status measure and periodicity of survey.
- With repeated HH roster approach, highest quality measures come from Fragile Families, ECLS-B, ECLS-K, and NLSY97.
- Measures are complex and time-intensive and potentially left-censored
Availability of Family Instability Measures

• Approach of using marital and cohabitation history of resident parent, supplemented with data on relationships between the parent’s partners and the child is ideal.

• For example, Add Health collects
  – resident parent’s marital and cohabitation history
  – HH roster data on the social and biological relationships of the child with every HH member
  – when the child ever lived with the non-resident bio parent

• All instability measures possible: number and type of transitions, the timing of transitions, and the duration of the life course that the child lived in different family structures.
Summary: Family Instability

- Highest quality instability measures come from longitudinal studies
  - With richest measures of family structure status that define social and biological relationships with HH members from child’s perspective
  - With short periodicity
  - Parent’s marriage and cohabitation histories that cover the life of the child (up to the interview date).
- Always data issues with complex change measures
Other Family Structure Measures

• Non-residential biological parents and siblings
• Living arrangements of children (e.g., multiple households, joint custody)
• Co-residential intergenerational family structures
• Biological relationships among residential siblings
• Contextual measures of family structure at neighborhood, school, peer levels.
Recommendations

• Data needs for high quality measures
  – HH relationships from perspective of the child to determine the social and biological relationships of the child to each parent
  – Marr/cohab histories of parent with whom the child lives
  – Information on when biological parents ever-lived with child if one or both ever non-residential

• Not that time-consuming in a survey context, but depends on survey purpose
Recommendations

• Measure of family structure status and instability depends on the research question at hand:
  – Biology may be more important than number of parents
  – Stability of any family structure may be more important than the type of family structure.

• From a data producer perspective, best to provide the most detailed data on family structure and instability possible so data user can create the most meaningful measure for their research questions.

• Data user strive for parsimony and test for differences in refined categories of family structure and instability.