Session IV

What are the timing and family contexts of fertility in young adulthood?

Session IV focused on young adults’ parenting related decisions and behaviors. The session examined the characteristics of young adults who have children and how these characteristics may be related to fertility timing. Family context, including fertility and parenting outside of unions, in cohabiting unions, or with multiple partners, quality of young adults’ relationships with their offspring and their partners, and the role of the family of origin in adjustment to parental roles were considered. Additionally, the session included attention to the consequences of parenthood for young adults’ adjustment and development, including their work and education trajectories.

Lead Speaker

Kathryn Edin, Professor of Public Policy and Management, Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government

Abstract

This chapter uses quantitative data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study and qualitative data from an in-depth study of low-income fathers in Philadelphia to describe the characteristics of young adults who transition to parenthood before 25 and the family contexts into which their children are born. Most births to young adults occur outside of marriage, but unmarried parents typically rally around the birth of their child, claiming a commitment to making their relationships work. Yet the responsibility of providing for a family of their own before they have achieved financial stability proves to be an enormous strain for most. Perhaps because the children of young adults are seldom explicitly planned, and because economic hardship and parenthood strain even the most committed relationships, young parents break up at higher rates than couples who delay childbearing. Young parents who break up with their partners do not remain single for very long, however, and quickly enter into new romantic relationships, many of which produce additional children. The churning of romantic partners, and the additional children that result, create a complex web of economic obligations and negotiations that complicate paternal access to nonresident children, compromise maternal parenting, and create unstable family environments for young children.