

**IRP Conference on ‘Family Complexity, Poverty and Public Policy’  
July 11-12, 2013**

With funding from the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison is organizing a research and policy conference to be held July 2013 in cooperation with the National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University. Marcy Carlson (Professor of Sociology) and Dan Meyer (Professor of Social Work) from UW-Madison are co-leading this effort. The multidisciplinary conference will consider the nature and dynamics of family complexity, the extent to which family complexity is a particular challenge for low-income families and individuals, and the extent to which public policy is (or should be) responsive to these contemporary family circumstances. Twelve new research papers from some of the top scholars in the field have been commissioned (see paper titles and confirmed authors listed below), and the *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* has agreed to publish a guest-edited volume with these papers in July 2014; we also plan publications targeted at policymakers and practitioners.

This conference is motivated by the dramatic changes in family life that have occurred in the United States over the past 50 years. One of the most important changes has been an increase in family complexity, owing to high rates of cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, divorce, and repartnering in the context of ongoing fertility. Particularly notable is an increase in multiple-partner fertility, or the proportion of adults who have biological children by more than one partner (with a corresponding increase in the number of children that have at least one half-sibling). These changes and trends in family life are important for understanding both the causes and consequences of poverty. As the reach and effects of many anti-poverty policies vary with family structure, changes in family life pose challenges to the effective design of a host of social programs and policies.

It is often difficult to define family complexity in a way that scholars and policymakers will find useful. We observe that simple nuclear families are easier to describe: a woman and man marry, begin living together at the time they marry, have children together following marriage, and do not dissolve the marriage or have children with others. This means that marriage is life-long, that co-residence and marriage always go together, and that fertility occurs only within marriage. In contrast, complexity occurs when marriage and legal ties, living arrangements, fertility and parenting are not coterminous, i.e., when roles and relationships diverge from the simple scheme. Members of a family (however defined by a given individual) may have differences among them in biological ties, legal relationships, and where they live and how long they live there. Sometimes complexity results from differential attachment across a category that is and only can be discrete (i.e., biological status), and other times it emerges due to the variability in categories that were previously thought to be—but are not necessarily—discrete (i.e., parental cohabitation that may occur a few nights/week, or children may regularly live in more than one home due to shared custody arrangements). This does not even begin to include individuals who are considered to be family members by those with whom they do not share a relationship resulting from biology, legality and/or co-residence.

For purposes of this conference, we limit our focus to families with minor children (under age 18); hence, we are not focusing on other important topics, such as serial cohabitation among adults without children, or complexity that may arise when elders move in with their adult children (or vice versa), or adults who “live apart together.” Examples of complex families we will consider thus include: a) stepfamilies, where one parent is biologically related to their child(ren) and the other adult has a step or social relationship to the child(ren) of the first parent; b) single-parent families where the mother has children with two or more partners (who may or may not have lived with her); and c) children with the same biological parents who spend half-time living with their mother and half-time with their father.

Conference Day 1, entitled “Family Complexity, Poverty and Inequality,” will include papers that provide up-to-date summaries and new analyses about what is known, incorporating information on the ways complexity is linked to poverty and inequality. Papers will be presented by experts in demography, economics, sociology, psychology, family studies, and social work. The intended audience is researchers from multiple disciplines as well as individuals involved in planning or carrying out programs designed to prevent/ameliorate poverty or inequality. The first set of papers will provide broad overviews about family complexity—describing the nature of family patterns and roles that have increased complexity over the past half-century, examining the link between poverty/inequality and family change, and exploring the prevalence of children’s experiences with various aspects of family complexity. The second set of papers will consider domains of complexity that are central to contemporary family life, including fertility (especially with multiple partners); union formation/dissolution (both marriage and cohabitation) and parental roles; grandparents’ roles in childrearing; and incarceration as linked to family roles and relationships. The third set of papers will focus on how complexity plays out within families and affects family functioning/processes from the perspective of children, fathers and mothers. The day will conclude with a final session reflecting on the material presented, with a focus on whether and how family complexity contributes to growing inequality and poverty and/or creates particular challenges for public policy.

Conference Day 2, entitled “Family Complexity and Public Policy,” begins where day 1 leaves off and has a focus on the relationship between family complexity and social policies affecting families with children. The audience is intended to include those attending Conference Day 1 and additional policymakers, program administrators, and front line staff. To keep the policy discussion concrete and focused, we intend to zero in on four primary types of complexity: (a) children who live with each parent about half of the time (shared custody); (b) children who live with half-siblings or have half-siblings who do not live with them (or, focusing on the parents, adults who have had multiple-partner fertility); (c) children who live with one parent and that parent’s partner (who may or may not be the child’s parent) who lives in the home several nights/week (part-time cohabitation); and (d) children who live with their grandparents (but not their parents). We will also consider other types of complexities that create issues for social policies and programs as they come up in the papers and discussion and as summarized by the papers on the previous day.

There will be two commissioned policy-related papers—one that evaluates the extent to which policies currently *take account of* family complexity in their eligibility rules, benefit determination, and implementation, and the second that summarizes the extent to which policies and programs are shown to (or could potentially) *affect* family complexity (and its component parts, such as family structure and instability, fertility, etc.). While the papers will provide important new information about public policies as linked to changing family life, the heart of conference Day 2 will be the interactions among program administrators, policymakers, and researchers. Primary goals for this day are to identify areas in which complexity is creating difficulties or opportunities for policies and programs, to brainstorm about and discuss potential policy changes that might be considered, and to identify areas in which additional research would be useful. The day will conclude with a facilitated discussion of these issues.

## **Day 1 – Family Complexity, Poverty and Inequality (Thursday, July 11)**

**8:15am Continental Breakfast, Registration**

**9:00-9:15 Welcome, introductions and goals – Marcy Carlson, Dan Meyer & Tim Smeeding**

We will describe what we mean by family complexity and lay out the goals for conference Day 1.

**9:15-10:30 Session 1: Patterns of Family Change, Poverty and Inequality: The Big Picture**

This session is intended to set the stage, and the papers are intended to provide big-picture views.

1. “Fifty Years of Family Change: From Consensus to Complexity”  
*Frank F. Furstenberg, University of Pennsylvania*

This paper will provide a broad overview of family change from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. In particular, the paper will discuss how and why the U.S. went from having a relatively undifferentiated family system to the current system of notable family diversity. The paper will also describe how stratification works to produce complexity over time and will consider complexity in a changing global context (this is the only paper that will have a small international component). The paper will conclude with a discussion of relevant implications for public policy.

2. “The Impact of Changes in Family Composition on Income, Poverty, and Inequality”  
*Maria Cancian, University of Wisconsin-Madison and Ron Haskins, Brookings Institution*

This paper will review key changes in family formation and composition and key changes in employment and earnings, overall and for important sub-groups using Census data (decennial censuses and the American Communities Survey). Then, the authors will summarize changes in poverty and inequality and will evaluate the extent to which these can be attributed to changing family patterns and/or changing employment patterns. The paper will conclude with relevant implications for public policy.

3. “Complexity in American Families: Children’s Perspective”  
*Wendy D. Manning, Susan L. Brown, and J. Bart Stykes, Bowling Green State University*

This paper will provide a critical review of the recent literature on family complexity in children’s lives and a long-term view on the trends in children’s living arrangements. The paper will present new estimates of children’s experiences of complex families using data from the Current Population Survey and the Survey of Income and Program Participation and include a discussion of directions for future research on this topic.

**10:30-10:45 Break**

## 10:45-12:30 Session 2: Domains of Family Complexity

These papers will provide overviews of different types of family complexity. Each paper will include information on prevalence, trends, and characteristics of families and individuals that experience the type of complexity, including differences by socioeconomic status. We anticipate that these papers will include new analyses as well as substantial literature reviews. To the extent possible, these papers will also address what is known about the *effects* of the type of complexity on individuals and families and implications for poverty and inequality.

### 4. “Complexity and Fertility”

*Karen Benjamin Guzzo, Bowling Green State University*

This paper will briefly review theories of fertility and identify their applicability to today’s fertility, will summarize the key determinants of fertility, and will identify the key types of complex fertility. Then, the paper will summarize prevalence and trends, drawing on published estimates, as well as conducting new analyses using the National Survey of Family Growth, Add Health, and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). The paper will conclude by discussing implications for family life and inequality and identifying topics for future research.

### 5. “Instability and Complexity in Unions and Parental Roles”

*Lawrence M. Berger, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Sharon Bzostek, Rutgers University*

This paper will examine how union transitions affect family complexity. It will explore the extent to which family members inhabit multiple—and potentially unclear and/or conflicting—roles, both at one point in time and over the life course, and what this may mean for intra- and inter-familial relationships. In addition to reviewing the literature, the authors will provide new descriptive estimates using data from the 1979 and 1997 NLSY cohorts (and possibly the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study) and will conclude with a discussion of the implications for both poverty and family policy.

### 6. “Complexity and Grandparents”

*Rachel Dunifon and Kathleen Ziol-Guest, Cornell University*

This paper will consider both three-generation families and custodial-grandparent families. For each family type, the author will summarize the prevalence and trends and identify associated characteristics, as well as discuss the implications of such families for children (in comparison to other family types). This paper will mostly draw on existing literature but will also include information from the author’s own study of grandparents.

### 7. “Complexity and Incarceration”

*Becky Pettit, University of Washington*

This paper will draw primarily on published work (including the author’s) to examine the size and reach of the penal system, the connection to family instability and complexity, and the consequences for children. The paper will conclude by discussing the limitations of existing data resources and the need for future research.

**12:30-1:30 Lunch**

### **1:30- 3:00     Session 3: How Families Operate Amidst Complexity**

These papers will shift the focus from describing family complexity to more explicitly examining its effects on families and family processes. We anticipate that these papers will include new analyses as well as substantial literature reviews.

8. “Time Investments in Children across Family Structures”  
*Ariel Kalil, University of Chicago, Rebecca Ryan, Georgetown University, and Elise Chor, University of Chicago*

This paper will provide an up-to-date review of the literature on children’s developmental outcomes across family structures (and the mechanisms by which such come about), drawing on studies that use large-scale, nationally-representative data. The second part of the paper will include new analyses of the cross-sectional time diary data in the Panel Study of Income Dynamics’ Child Development Supplement, evaluating the total amount of time that all parents (and parent-figures) invest in children across family types.

9. “The Family-Go-Round: Family Complexity from a Father’s Perspective”  
*Laura Tach, Cornell University, Kathryn Edin, Timothy Nelson and Brielle Bryan, Harvard University*

This paper will draw on qualitative evidence from Philadelphia/Camden to investigate why men have children by more than one partner and how this so-called ‘multi-partnered fertility’ influences them and their children. Then, the paper will include new analyses of the NLSY 1997 cohort about fathers’ involvement in the context of having multiple children.

10. “Journeys in Mothering in Low-Income Urban and Rural Complex Families”  
*Linda Burton, Duke University*

This paper will use longitudinal ethnographic data on mostly never-married mothers who participated in the Three Cities Study (urban) and the Family Life Project (rural) studies to profile emergent dimensions of these women’s experiences as mothers in multi-partnered fertility family configurations.

**3:00-3:15     Break**

**3:15-4:30     Session 4: Family Complexity, Inequality and Poverty: Looking Forward**  
 (Rapporteur comments and discussion)

Two rapporteurs (*Andy Cherlin, Johns Hopkins University* and *Judith Seltzer, University of California-Los Angeles*) will provide reflections on: What are the implications for families and society and public policy? How does all this contribute to growing inequality and poverty? What else do we need to know?

**4:30pm     Adjourn**

**6:30pm     Dinner with Keynote Speaker: “Family Complexity in International Perspective”**  
*Elizabeth Thomson, Stockholm University and University of Wisconsin-Madison*

## Day 2 – Family Complexity and Public Policy (Friday, July 12)

**8:30am Continental Breakfast, Registration**

**9:00-9:45 Session 1: Welcome, Introductions and Review of State of Knowledge about Family Complexity – Dan Meyer and Marcy Carlson**

Welcome participants and do introductions. Review key issues emerging from day 1 and present other relevant material.

**9:45-11:00 Session 2: What Do We Know about how Policies Consider Complexity? What Do We Know about the Effects of Policies on Family Constellations?**

Two commissioned papers, with two policy-related discussants.

11. “How Do Policies/Programs Take Family Complexity Into Account?”  
*Jennifer L. Noyes, University of Wisconsin-Madison*

This paper will summarize the policies/programs where family complexity might matter most in terms of eligibility, the level or distribution of benefits, and other programmatic dimensions. To the extent possible, issues associated with the administration of the programs will also be addressed.

12. “The Effects of Public Policy on Family Complexity”  
*Leonard L. Lopoo and Kerri M. Raissian, Syracuse University*

This paper will review the literature on the impact of public policy on complex or non-traditional families in the United States. In specific, the paper will summarize studies that evaluate how aspects of public policy are related to family structure, children living apart from their parents, and fertility.

**Respondent:** Will address the implications of the findings from the two papers for current public policy and programs.

*Isabel Sawhill, Brookings Institution*

**11:00-11:15 Break**

**11:15-2:30 Session 3: What Particular Issues Does Family Complexity Create in Different Program Areas, and How Does/Could Policy Be More Responsive? (Working Lunch)**

This panel will provide more detail on particular program areas. Within each area, we will ask two people to present/coordinate a 10-minute presentation, one person who is a researcher and one person who is an on-the-ground caseworker or program administrator. We will ask presentation teams to provide more detail on what complexity means within their policy/program area and, if possible, to identify administratively-feasible changes in policy or practice that would better respond to family complexity.

- A) **Child support enforcement** – *Maria Cancian, University of Wisconsin-Madison and Jacquelyn Boggess, Center for Family Policy and Practice (invited)*

- B) **EITC** – *Karl Scholz, University of Wisconsin-Madison and William Padley, Madison College (invited)*
- C) **SNAP** – *Judi Bartfeld, University of Wisconsin-Madison and Shawn Smith, Wisconsin Department of Health Services*
- D) **TANF/employment** – *Kristin Seefeldt, University of Michigan and Julie Kerksick, Colorado Department of Human Services*
- E) **Health insurance** – *Bobbi Wolfe, University of Wisconsin-Madison and Jon Peacock, Wisconsin Council on Children and Families*

**Rapporteurs and Discussion – What Changes in Policy and Practice Are Needed? Is There Anything We Still Need to Know before We Can Make More Effective Policy in Light of Family Change and Complexity?**

*Eloise Anderson, Director, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families*

*Mark Greenberg, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Administration for Children and Families*

**2:30pm      Adjourn**