

# **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

# Family Structure of Adolescents Add Health 1995

	N	%
2 biological parents	10,339	53.3
2 adoptive parents	403	0.7
Bio Mom/ Step Dad	2,756	13.6
Bio Dad/ Step Mom	591	2.6
Single Bio Mom	4,520	20.4
Single Bio Dad	637	3.1
Surrogate parent(s)	1,499	6.3
Total	20,745	100.0





# 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

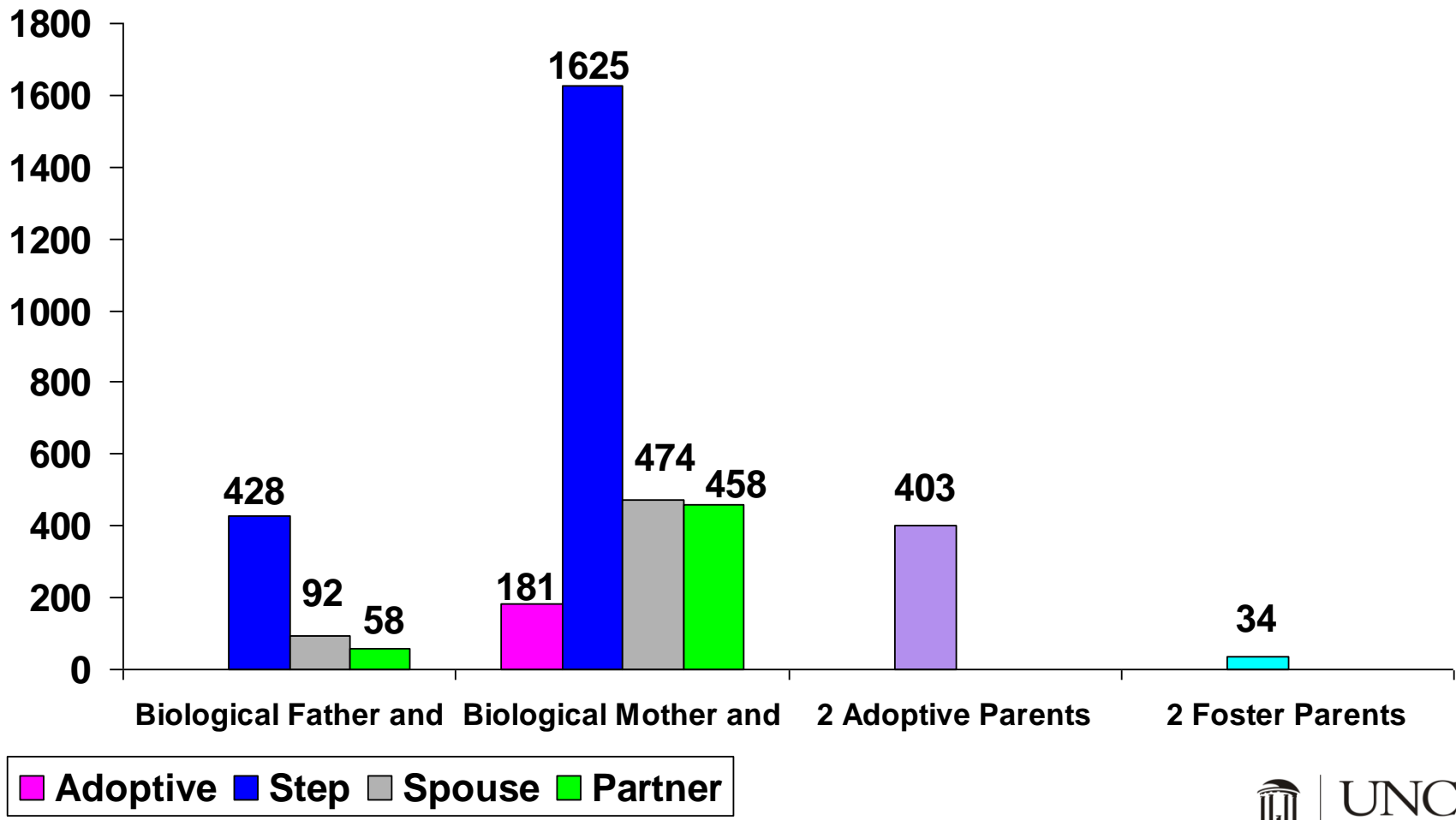
- Longitudinal studies do a better job of sorting out 2-bio parent families from 2-parent step or blended families.
- Fragile Families and Add Health gather a HH roster and obtain the social and biological relationships with all parent figures from the perspective of the child.
  - Marital and cohabiting 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



Adoptive Step Spouse Partner

# 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.