

***COUNTING COUPLES, COUNTING FAMILIES***  
**Full Report**

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We are grateful for the excellent speakers who provided the intellectual basis to the conference. Their summaries of the prior work and insightful presentations pushed our understanding of contemporary families forward. We also appreciate the participants who attended and actively engaged in the conference dialogue.

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## II

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*****COUNTING COUPLES, COUNTING FAMILIES***

American families are continuing to change at a rapid pace with consequences for the well-being of children, youth, and adults. Same-sex marriages, multiple partner fertility, delays in marriage, growth in cohabitation, continuing high divorce rates, biological ties between parents and children across households, increasing unmarried childbearing, and other family arrangements have transformed the landscape of family life in America. These shifting contemporary family patterns pose immense challenges to those who seek to understand and respond to changes in family structure and dynamics.

On July 19-21, 2011, more than 150 researchers, data providers, and policymakers gathered at the National Institutes of Health for the third *Counting Couples, Counting Families* conference, which followed previous national conferences in 2001 and 2003. Goals of the conference were to assess the availability and quality of existing family measures in federal data, provide guidance on how these measures might be modified or expanded in future data collection efforts, and discuss strategies to facilitate standardization of family measurement across surveys. Sessions on marriage and remarriage, cohabitation, family structure and instability, family ties across households, and future directions provided rich insights into issues that need to be considered in seeking ways to measure family structure and dynamics. Resources were provided to help assess existing measures across data sources including *Question Crosswalks*, which present side-by-side comparisons of family indicators available in national data sets.

Measurement of family change is important to ensure accurate assessments of family life and to examine the correlates and implications of family change. These issues are of more than academic interest as they have implications for the effectiveness of policies targeted at improving the health and development of children, youth, and families. As family life in America continues to become more heterogeneous, it is essential that federal data collection efforts capture the full range of experiences that characterize U.S. families.

**MARRIAGE AND REMARRIAGE**

Marriage is less prevalent today among some subgroups than it has been in the past, but continues to play an important role in individual well-being. However, the effects of marriage are likely to vary because the marriage experience is diverse in terms of age at marriage, duration of marriage, marriage order, and characteristics of spouses. Increasingly, Americans are experiencing remarriage, resulting in multiple marital experiences over the course of their lives.

Most data sources provide information about marital status at the time of interview. The legal status of marriage might indicate it is a relatively straightforward family status to measure. Yet there continues to be inconsistent measurement, and the lack of uniformity in [measurement of marital status](#) makes comparisons across time, subgroups, and place difficult. Only the American Community Survey (ACS) and Decennial Census provide adequate sample sizes to generate accurate estimates at the state or local levels.

The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) offers a fairly comprehensive classification for the marital status question: married; not married but living together with a partner of opposite sex; separated because you and your spouse are not getting along; divorced; widowed; and never married. It would be ideal if the NSFG marital status classification was adopted but allow cohabiting couples to be of the same sex; currently, only opposite sex cohabiting couples are measured. Of course, the shortcoming with the NSFG is that it is cross-sectional and only includes respondents aged 15-44, which limits the use of these data for the study of remarriage and older Americans.

The growth in the availability of legal marriage to same-sex couples through changing legislation in individual states has outpaced the development of appropriate procedures to count these couples. Data collections should be explicit about whether they are referencing same-sex or opposite-sex couples in part because errors are detected when relying on gender of respondent and household members.

A new opportunity to study marriage rates and age at marriage has been available since 2008 in the ACS. The ACS asks whether respondents married, divorced, or widowed in the past year, how many times the person was married, and in what year the person was last married. The ACS also has large enough sample sizes to generate estimates for racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants and to enable estimates at the state and local levels. These data provide an excellent opportunity to understand local level marriage patterns and context. However, age at first marriage in the ACS is directly available only for individuals married one time.

Longitudinal data collections provide detailed information on marital histories and transitions that are collected at each interview point (e.g., National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) 79, NLSY97, National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health)). These data sources also include up-to-date time-varying information on a variety of important socioeconomic variables, making it possible to assess the causes and consequences of marriage formation, dissolution, and multiple marital transitions. The shortcoming of these data collections are they represent the experiences of specific birth cohorts and do not provide an overall view of the experiences of all Americans. The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) is a panel study (2.5-4 years) that potentially can overcome the limitations of the other longitudinal data collections because of larger sample sizes and extensive coverage of men and women at different ages. In future waves, more marital history questions, especially timing and duration of each marriage, could provide additional ways to examine how marital experiences over the life course influence health and well-being.

Current data collections present challenges in determining whether a marriage is a first marriage for both members of the couple. The lack of detailed marital histories for spouses overlook the role spouses play in marriage, family well-being, child

development, health, and other outcomes. Only a few data sources contain this information including the SIPP, NSFG, and both the NLSY79 and NLSY97. Most data collections do not collect this information including the ACS, Census, CPS, ECLS-B, ECLS-K, Add Health, and CE.

Future data on marriage and remarriage will be most effective and useful to policymakers and scholars if they include large sample sizes, can produce estimates at the state and local level, and include information on marital and other key types of relationship histories (i.e., cohabitation) as well as information on the correlates of these relationship transitions.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING MARRIAGE AND REMARRIAGE**

- Provide consistent measures of marital status across data sources.
- Include same-sex marriages as a marital status.
- Add age at first marriage to the ACS.
- Supplement data collections with marital histories (start and end dates).
- Increase the upper age limit of the NSFG to ensure data are included on remarriage and marriage among older Americans.
- Provide data on the marital history of spouses to determine whether couples are both first-time married.

### **COHABITATION**

Over the last few decades, cohabitation has become a common feature of American life. For example, two-thirds of first marriages are preceded by cohabitation. Cohabitation is often part of the process into marriage and is a family form that commonly includes children.

Although the federal government's national surveys have made significant improvements (e.g., the inclusion of 'unmarried partner' on household rosters and direct questions about cohabitation) in the [measurement of cohabitation](#), a few problems remain. The inconsistent phrasing of cohabitation questions makes it challenging to compare findings across different data sets. Some surveys include questions about "always" or "usually" sharing a residence while others do not. Some surveys base cohabitation on sexual intimacy while others phrase the question in terms of being in a "marriage-like relationship," a term that many couples who have not been married may not understand.

Methods used to identify same-sex cohabiting couples in the Census and ACS also lack conceptual clarity. For example, terms like "husband/wife" and "unmarried" may mean different things to same-sex couples than to different-sex couples. This hetero-normative bias is amplified when surveys restrict responses to explicitly describe different-sex relationships while not providing comparable options to describe same-sex relationships.

Data sources have been expanded to include cohabitation histories, but some data collections do not obtain parallel cohabitation and marital histories. Full union

histories are critical for understanding the context of union formation and the family environment in which children are born and raised. For example, the SIPP and ACS do not include cohabitation histories but ask about marriage in the last 12 months (ACS) or marital histories (SIPP).

A larger, related issue is the conceptualization of relationships. The focus has been on residential relationships with a distinction in the legal status of the relationship (married or cohabiting or domestic partnerships). To better assess relationships, conceptual constructs that describe (1) the nature of the relationship, (2) relationship behaviors and co-residence, and (3) legal status may be necessary. Efforts to include indicators beyond coresidence and legal status would encompass additional important relationships (e.g., living apart together (LAT)) that may be excluded from current data collections.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING COHABITATION**

- Include uniform measures of cohabiting relationships across surveys.
- Develop and incorporate measures for the full range of relationships, such as dating, LAT, unmarried partner, civil unions, and registered domestic partnerships.
- Ensure accurate methods of measuring different-sex and same-sex relationships.
- Include measurement of sexual orientation and gender identity as a standard demographic characteristic.
- Refocus measurement toward a broader concept of intimate relationships to allow moving beyond the binary concepts of marriage versus cohabitation.
- Expand the age range covered in social surveys to permit analysis of cohabitation among older Americans.

### **SEPARATION, DIVORCE, AND UNION DISSOLUTION**

Being able to describe trends and differentials in marital and relationship stability is fundamental to understanding family change and the impact of change on the economic, mental, and physical well-being of both adults and children. However, the current statistical system falls short of being able to provide relevant data on trends and differentials in relationship and family instability because it does not do a good job measuring transitions into and out of cohabiting relationships.

During the 1990s, the data collection systems for tracking change in marital stability shifted substantially, and today the primary data sources for tracking trends and differentials in [relationship dissolution](#) include the SIPP, NLSY, NSFG, and ACS. Each of these has strengths and weaknesses regarding population coverage, the use of proxy reports, the precision of measurement, and the depth of information on marital histories. For example, the ACS does not collect information on separation, and the tendency of couples to formalize the end of their marriages through divorce varies across population groups. Neither the ACS nor the SIPP provides data to monitor the increase in the instability of cohabiting relationships as opposed to married



relationships. The NSFG is limited to respondents under age 45, so the potential to study remarriage or postmarital cohabitation is limited.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING SEPARATION, DIVORCE, AND UNION DISSOLUTION**

- Incorporate cohabitation histories.
- Include distinct measurement of separation and divorce.
- Obtain marital and cohabitation histories for same-sex couples.
- Expand the age range of the NSFG to allow assessments of remarriage stability and implications.

### **FAMILY STRUCTURE AND INSTABILITY**

The measurement of children’s family structure may appear simple, but represents the intersection of three key pieces of information -- marital/partnership status of parents, living arrangements, and biological relatedness. Today, just less than half of children live in a traditional nuclear family (two biological married parent families with only full siblings). Children are increasingly likely to experience family instability, and indicators of family instability need to reflect change in family structure over time. Though new datasets have become available in recent years to measure how families are changing, more sophisticated data-collecting tools and strategies are needed to determine the full range of changes parents and children undergo.

Current surveys do quite well at capturing the “basic” family structure categories based on marital status of parents at a given point in time (e.g., date of birth, date of interview, age 14). However, in unmarried families, the partnership status of the unmarried parent(s) is often unclear, including whether they are cohabiting, in a dating relationship, or have no partner. Thus refined indicators of relationship histories are necessary to accurately measure [family structure and instability](#).

Many surveys do not capture the full trajectory of family structure over time, which is crucial for measuring instability. Some surveys ask about parental marriage and divorce since the past survey, but few capture finer gradations in partner changes or living arrangements or can measure the duration of relationships. Complete marital, cohabitation, and fertility histories are necessary. For example, the SIPP’s fertility history is highly truncated, providing information only on year of first and last birth.

Surveys that draw on household rosters to establish family relationships often do not fully capture sibling’s relationships to one another, but rather focus on relationships to the head of household or to the respondent. A household roster will establish whether a child is the biological offspring of the head but cannot determine whether the child shares a residence with a step or half sibling. The CPS has included parental indicators, and the SIPP provides household relationship matrices. Some studies (NSFG) do not provide household rosters for public use but rather summary indicators for confidentiality reasons. Ideally, studies should capture distinctions in the biological relatedness of children – to parents and parent-figures as well as to siblings.

Ultimately, it may be useful to utilize multiple measures of family structure and instability in a single investigation to better understand the nature and implications of family structure and instability from multiple perspectives.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING FAMILY STRUCTURE AND INSTABILITY**

- Incorporate cohabiting, step, and same-sex parents in family structure measures.
- Support surveys focusing on family life that contain complete fertility, marital, and cohabitation histories. Broader based surveys should query about family structure at birth, age 14, and interview or 'ever' experiences.
- Broaden household rosters to establish relationships of family members to one another to ensure accurate assessments of cohabiting, stepparent and sibling relationships.
- Consider multiple reports of family structure recognizing the perspective may depend on the reporter.

### **FAMILY TIES ACROSS HOUSEHOLDS**

Many data collections focus on the household or the family as the unit of analysis, limiting the data opportunities to study family ties across households. Family ties often extend across households and have become more challenging to study as children increasingly experience multiple forms of instability requiring renegotiation of parent-child roles. In addition, the family is the most common and preferred safety net in times of need. Further work on intergenerational support (parents aiding adult children and support for aging parents) will showcase who provides help and the implications for well-being of providers and recipients.

Legal requirements help to ensure that children who experience family instability continue to be linked socially and financially to their biological parents. However, current data collections on parent-child relationships do not always account for **family ties across households**. Multiple-partner fertility means that parents may have more than one set of children and relationships to describe in surveys, which may reduce the quality of their reports and present analytic challenges. Furthermore, growth in joint legal and physical custody may mean there are more part-time living arrangements with both biological parents.

The increase in co-residence associated with the current economic slowdown increases the difficulty of measuring inter-household arrangements as intergenerational households become more common. Although some information about assistance to children during the transition to adulthood is available from longitudinal studies, this information is limited. Family researchers know little about later life relationships between adult children and absent parents, stepparents, and quasi-parents acquired through cohabitation.

Much attention has been paid to financial support across households. For example, child support payments are the focus of many studies on nonresident fathers, but this strategy omits important sources of informal support provided to children.

Similarly, analysis of ties across households focuses on the direction of economic flows without acknowledging the complex web of emotional and instrumental aid. Furthermore, future expectations of support aid may mean some of these sources of support are conditional.

There has been an expansion in the ways that contact may be maintained across households. For example, most surveys include questions about the frequency of contact over a specified period of time, such as the last month or the last year. However, the type of contact is important, especially as new technology alters the way people keep in touch. Texts, IMs, emails, and other new technologies allow for types of contact that many existing surveys do not include when they ask whether or not a parent or child has been in contact.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING FAMILY TIES ACROSS HOUSEHOLDS**

- Include measures of part-time family members or family members who share a residence for short periods of time.
- Ensure that resident and non-resident parents are included in assessments of family structure and well-being.
- Describe paternal and maternal ties to children across households.
- Query about multiple sources of support including financial, emotional, instrumental, and informal.
- Extend the dimensions of contact to keep pace with new forms of social interactions.
- Establish geographic indicators to help determine the role of policies in enhancing ties across households.

### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Social change has rendered many past assumptions about family life outdated. A few have ramifications for measurement of family including: (1) family equals household – family roles and responsibilities extend across households; (2) marriage is the only form of partnership to raise children – we have witnessed wide variation in the family experiences of children and adults; (3) all members of families are heterosexual – legal recognition of same-sex marriages as well as broadening recognition of same-sex couples indicate the importance of considering same-sex couples in assessments of American family life.

Complex family arrangements such as remarriage, cohabitation, same-sex marriage, and nonresident parenthood require new techniques and new technologies. A modest program of methodological research could develop and test some of these new approaches. Given the challenges associated with finding one unambiguous definition of such terms as cohabitation, data collection efforts may need to move toward multiple indicators. Additionally, no one survey can answer all questions. Multiple surveys will continue to be needed with variations in study design, scientific objectives, and questions asked. Efforts should continue to include modules on existing surveys.

Several speakers and attendees called for a new family study, arguing that it is necessary to understand the family lives of today's Americans. Current data are useful but their applicability is limited by restrictions to a singular cohort or specific age range, for instance, or reliance on a narrow set of questions. Our understanding of the causes and consequences of family change requires new data to capture contemporary family patterns.

The federal budget is extremely constrained. In such circumstances, it is critical for researchers, data providers, and policymakers to voice their support for the collection and analysis of information on family status and changes. It is of critical importance to maintain the data infrastructure surrounding American families. Identifying links to specific programs, laws, and governmental needs will be crucial to defend these vital data-gathering efforts.

## III

**INTRODUCTION**

Family structures and living arrangements in the United States have become increasingly complex as marriage has been delayed, divorce rates have remained high, and cohabitation and unmarried childbearing have increased. The family experiences of today's children and adults are more varied and less stable than in the past. These changes in family life raise important new questions for social science research and policy analysis. They also present significant measurement challenges for the researchers, data providers, and policymakers who seek to understand and respond to the changes in family structure and dynamics that have occurred in recent years.

In 2001, representatives of federal and state statistical agencies, policy organizations, and research institutions came together for the first Counting Couples conference to discuss the ramifications of family changes for federal data collection efforts and to propose priorities for future data collections. This work continued at the second Counting Couples conference, which was held in 2003. (The key goals and recommendations from the first two Counting Couples conferences are briefly summarized in the box at the end of this chapter.) Since then, the family experiences of U.S. children and adults have only become more diverse and complex.

The third Counting Couples conference, held at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, on July 19-20, 2011, brought together researchers, federal data providers, and policymakers to examine new and enduring issues in family measurement. The third conference sought to assess the availability and quality of existing family measures in federal data, provide guidance on how these measures might be modified or expanded in future data collection efforts, and discuss strategies to facilitate standardization of family measurement across surveys.

**The Ongoing Challenge**

In the decade since the first Counting Couples conference, American families have continued to change. Same-sex marriage is legal in several states and the District of Columbia. Cohabitation is now a normative stage in the life course of families, and half of all unmarried births occur in the context of cohabitation. High levels of parental relationship instability make children more likely to experience multiple family transitions and have family ties that extend across multiple households.

Measuring and understanding these changes are essential to developing effective policies. Linda Mellgren, Office of Human Services Policy, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Department of Health and Human Services, made this point in her welcoming remarks at the conference stating, "Unless there is good measurement, there can't be good policy." Furthermore, during a period of great economic uncertainty and rapid social change, policies have a direct effect on the lives of millions of adults and children. Yvonne Maddox, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, observed in her opening remarks, "We can't have

healthy, productive children and healthy productive families unless we look at households and at family structure, because these are life-preserving institutions and environments.”

As the family life course becomes more heterogeneous, it is essential that federal data collection efforts capture the full range of experiences characterizing U.S. families. The third Counting Couples conference was an important step toward achieving this vital objective.

### **Summary of the First Two Counting Couples Conferences**

The first Counting Couples conference, “Improving Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Cohabitation Data in the Federal Statistical System,” occurred on December 13-14, 2001. The goals of the conference were to identify critical shortfalls in data systems, develop consensus about the most critical points of need, and discuss strategies for possible short- and long-term improvements.

Day 1 featured a review of policy and academic research to discuss the adequacy of current data and challenges in thinking about measuring marriage, remarriage, divorce, and cohabitation. Day 2 consisted largely of seven small-group discussions of critical needs and challenges. At the end of the meeting, breakout groups formulated recommendations and priorities.

The conference identified 14 targets of opportunity divided into two categories: measuring union status and measuring the causes/consequences associated with union statuses. (Highlights from the conference are available at [http://www.childstats.gov/pdf/other\\_pubs/ccr.pdf](http://www.childstats.gov/pdf/other_pubs/ccr.pdf)).

Seven targets of opportunity address measuring marriage, divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation:

1. Develop cost-effective systems using vital registration and/or survey methods for providing marriage and divorce data at the national, state, and local levels.
2. Standardize marital status information across surveys.
3. Collect summary measures of marriage and cohabitation history.
4. Collect full marital and cohabitation histories.
5. Include special populations such as institutionalized populations, racial and ethnic subgroups, immigrant groups, LGBT groups, and children.
6. Share existing questionnaires and knowledge.
7. Improve tabulation and publication of marriage and family formation data.

Another seven targets focus on measuring the causes and consequences of marriage, divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation:

1. Increase the detail of household relationship information.
2. Develop and test key concepts to improve understanding of family relationships.
3. Include measures of family-related values and attitudes.

4. Obtain information for all fathers and mothers in studies of children, not just resident parents.
5. Develop standard sets of variables to track indicators of the causes and consequences of family change.
6. Develop a plan for a new family study to examine the causes and consequences of family change.
7. Field a couples' study.

The second Counting Couples conference was held November 13-14, 2003. Its goals were to explore issues in measurement, describe why accurate measurement is important, summarize how demographic phenomena are measured in private and public survey data collections, discuss limitations in measurement, and provide concrete recommendations for improving measures. This conference resulted in the book *Handbook of Measurement Issues in Family Research* (Hofferth & Casper 2007).

Conference participants established five goals:

1. Generate better and more inclusive data on marriage and cohabitation from the Census.
2. Identify all biological parents and any social parents in the household.
3. Obtain marital and cohabitation histories for adults.
4. Improve family formation data, especially from minority men, with parallel data from mothers and fathers.
5. Define relationship quality, and ensure that questions are asked in a meaningful way across populations.

Three prominent themes emerged from the two conferences, which influenced planning for the third conference. They include:

- The need for improved measurement.
- Explanations for why high-quality measurement matters.
- Continued shortcomings and challenges in the data infrastructure.

Progress in measuring family structure and dynamics has been made on many fronts over the past decade. However, families are constantly changing in new ways. Anyone with an interest in the American family needs to be flexible in responding to new challenges and opportunities.

## IV

### **MARRIAGE AND REMARRIAGE\***

This session included two speakers who discussed major issues in the measurement of marriage and remarriage followed by two respondents who elaborated on particular issues. Each speaker emphasized the dizzying pace of changes in marriage and its implications for family life. These changes have continued to occur over the past decade, and there is no reason to assume that they will not continue to occur in the future.

At the same time, the tools used to collect data about marriage and remarriage have been changing, some for the better and others for the worse. All of the speakers noted the policy implications of these tools while highlighting changes that would make them more useful.

#### **MARRIAGE: AN OVERVIEW**

Zhenchao Qian, The Ohio State University, stated that marriage is one of the basic demographic processes shaping society. Marriage is associated with childbearing. Traditionally, marriage has provided a shelter for the lives of the majority of infants and children. Most people will eventually marry.

Marriage is less prevalent today than it has been in the past, but it continues to play an important role in an individual's well-being, Qian said. However, the effects of marriage on well-being are likely to be diverse because of variation in both the duration and order of marriages. Many individuals experience singlehood, cohabitation, marriage, and divorce at different points over the course of their lives. Unions, whether marital or cohabiting, are transitory in the United States, a situation Cherlin (2009) described as the “American marriage-go-round.”

At the same time, marriage involves two individuals. Both who are available in a marriage market and who marries whom have implications for the distribution of incomes and for consumption patterns. In addition, marriage plays a major role in determining future labor market supply and composition. Who marries whom is also an important factor in understanding social structure and social life.

#### **Sources of Data**

Various sources of data help us to understand changes in marriage and family, including the U.S. Census, the American Community Survey (ACS), the Current Population Survey (CPS), and longitudinal surveys such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). However, marriage-related measures are not uniform across these data sources, making

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\* This chapter is based on the presentations by Zhenchao Qian, The Ohio State University; Megan Sweeney, University of California, Los Angeles; Martin O’Connell, U.S. Census Bureau, Department of Commerce; and Sherry Steisel, National Conference of State Legislatures.



comparisons across time and place difficult. In addition, survey data often do not provide adequate sample sizes at state or local levels. Finally, more marriage-related measures are needed to better understand the causes and consequences of marriage, marital formation, and assortative mating.

The most commonly available measure of marriage is marital status. The Census, ACS, CPS, NLSY, the Early Child Longitudinal Study (ECLS), the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), the Consumer Expenditure Survey (CES), the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) all include a question on a respondent's marital status. This variable typically includes the following response categories: married, widowed, divorced, separated, and never married.

The CPS makes a further distinction between whether the spouse is present for a married respondent. However, Qian observed that it is unclear what "married, spouse absent" means. The NSFG offers the best classification for the marital status question: married; not married but living together with a partner of opposite sex; separated because you and your spouse are not getting along; divorced; widowed; and never married. This classification allows researchers to accurately identify cohabiting relationships. Data from the Census, CPS, and ACS make it possible to link the "householder" with an unmarried partner to establish whether the householder is in a cohabiting relationship. Unfortunately, these data do not provide information on whether other family members are in such relationships. Thus prevalence of cohabitation is often underestimated. Qian stated that it would be ideal if the Census, ACS, and other surveys adopted the NSFG's marital status classification while allowing for cohabiting couples to be of the same sex.

Marital status measures provide a snapshot at the time of a census or survey. However, such measures fail to capture the duration and order of marriages that can have a major effect on couples and on children. For example, if an individual classifies himself or herself as married, the data do not indicate whether it is a first marriage or how long the respondent has been married. This issue becomes more serious as marital and cohabiting unions become more transitory. Many men and women have experienced multiple unions over the life course, and such experiences are likely to differ from a single union experience.

Qian noted that the ACS has addressed this issue by adding some key questions to the 2008 questionnaire. In addition to the current marital status, the ACS asks all ever-married persons if they have been married, divorced, or widowed in the past year, how many times they have been married, and in what year they were last married. By identifying the order and duration of marriages and other recent changes in marital status, researchers can compare differences in well-being and other outcomes.

The ACS is advantageous for generating reliable data for special populations at the national, state, and local levels. For example, sample sizes are large enough to generate estimates for racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants, including smaller groups. In addition, it is easier to generate estimates at the state and local levels when pooling several ACS samples. These data make it easier to compare states and cities. Finally, couple records can be linked to marriage market conditions, allowing researchers to examine the kinds of marriages that are formed. "There's a lot of potential in this survey for researchers," said Qian.

ACS data and the 2000 Census also make it possible to generate estimates for LGBT couples using indicators of “gender” and “relationship to householder.” However, all same-sex relationships are classified as unmarried or cohabiting. At the time of the conference, LGBT couples could legally marry in Connecticut, the District of Columbia, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont, with New York joining the list in July 2011. Some other states, including California and New York, recognized same-sex marriages legally formed elsewhere. Qian acknowledges that it is important for LGBT marriages to be recognized in future Census and ACS surveys.

### **Longitudinal Surveys**

Cross-sectional surveys are not designed to provide a comprehensive picture of marriage and cohabitation histories. The NLSY, a nationally representative sample of young men and women aged 14-22 in 1979, was conducted annually from 1979 to 1994 and has been conducted biannually since 1996. This is one of the best longitudinal data sources with detailed information on marital histories.

At every interview, each respondent is asked to report whether he/she still lives with the spouse reported previously or whether a new marriage has occurred. The NLSY captures key dates (formation and dissolution) for each marital event, making it possible to derive both marriage order and duration. The NLSY also includes up-to-date time-varying information on a variety of important socioeconomic variables, the causes and consequences of marriage formation, dissolution, and multiple marital transitions.

While the NLSY provides rich information on marital history, the sample size is relatively small, Qian observed. Marital history varies by race, socioeconomic status, and other factors. Unfortunately, the NLSY does not have enough cases for some populations (e.g., Latino and Asian ethnic groups, racially heterogeneous married couples, and LGBT couples) to conduct reliable statistical analyses. In addition, the NLSY is a cohort-based study so it does not capture marriage history for men and women of different age ranges in a given year.

The SIPP can potentially overcome many of the limitations of the NLSY because of its larger sample size and extensive coverage of men and women at different ages. Currently, the SIPP asks respondents’ marital status during the first interview and then verifies marital status in subsequent interviews. The SIPP also includes questions on household relationships. Qian suggested that in future waves, more marital history questions on timing and duration of each marriage be included to examine how marital experiences over the life course influence health and well-being.

The existing surveys do not collect detailed marital histories for spouses, overlooking the role spouses play in marriage, family well-being, child outcomes, health, and other behaviors. According to Qian, an important research question needs to assess how prospective spouses view the attractiveness of marrying another person. Answering this question requires examining which women find men “marriageable” and which women men find marriageable. Similarly, studies examining marital influences on a child’s mental health, for example, should include both the mother’s and father’s characteristics.

## Uncharted Territory

Some aspects of American family life differ from experiences in the past and in other countries (Cherlin 2009). Contemporary Americans start relationships at younger ages, experience short-term cohabitations more often, divorce more quickly after marriage, and then move into other cohabiting or marital relationships. Men and women are able to exercise their individual freedom, going through transitory marital and cohabiting unions one after another.

Marriage and childbearing no longer go hand in hand. Social norms against nonmarital childbearing are weak with nonmarital childbearing increasing, and “shotgun weddings” decreasing. The recent increase in nonmarital childbearing is largely due to the growing proportion of births among cohabiting couples. Unfortunately, cohabiting relationships tend to be unstable. Children born to cohabiting parents are far more likely to experience single parenthood or frequent changes of a parent’s live-in boyfriends or girlfriends than those born to married parents. Even if their mothers or fathers later marry, their overall academic and economic well-being in stepparent families pales compared to children born in married two-biological parent families.

Qian highlighted policymakers’ vital interest in developing appropriate programs to address the well-being of children. Unfortunately, most surveys and censuses do not have detailed information about the relationships between the children and adults in a family. Currently, it is relatively easy to identify the biological mothers of children, but it is often difficult to link children to the father. It becomes increasingly difficult to gather any information on the role the biological versus resident father plays in children’s lives. Survey questions should include whether a child’s parents are present and whether the relationship of the child to each of those parents is biological, step, adopted, or foster. In addition, it would be helpful to include variables about parental relationship quality and how couples’ relationships affect children’s well-being.

## Dramatic Changes

Qian concluded that American families are undergoing dramatic changes. In response, a fuller understanding of marriage, marital history, and its impact on children has important policy implications.

### **MARRIAGE, REMARRIAGE, AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BASIC QUESTIONS**

Megan Sweeney, University of California, Los Angeles, began her presentation by observing Bachrach’s (2007) emphasis on two basic questions regarding marriage and remarriage: “What are family demographers trying to measure, and why?”

Sweeney acknowledged two aspects of family life in the early 21st century have increased the importance of these questions. First, the majority of marriages begin as cohabiting unions. Second, a substantial share of marriages do not last a lifetime. In this context, two basic questions arise. First, is it still important to study legal marriage in a manner that distinguishes marriage from other forms of intimate partnership and to distinguish first marriages from higher-order marriages? Second, given the increasing availability of marriage to same-sex couples, how is marital status best measured?

## Why Study Marriage and Remarriage?

Sweeney maintained that although intimate partnerships increasingly exist outside of legal marriage, marriage still warrants study as a distinct relationship type. Marriage is associated with better health and economic well-being compared to nonmarital cohabitation, both for adults and children (Morrison & Ritualo 2000; Rendall, Weden, Favreault, & Waldron 2011), although mechanisms underlying these associations remain unclear. Marriage is associated with widely shared expectations about formal and informal social interactions, roles and obligations, and long-run commitment more so than other relationship forms (Raley & Sweeney 2009). Although rates of marital instability are high, marital unions are characterized by longer duration, on average, than other relationship types (Bumpass & Raley 2007). Finally, apart from the social and emotional significance of marriage, marriage confers a specific set of legal and economic rights and responsibilities (American Bar Association Section of Family Law 2004).

Considerably less is known about remarriage than first marriage, yet remarriage is an important area of study for a number of reasons. For example, remarriage is associated with weaker economic, social, and health benefits than first marriage (Carr & Springer 2010; Sweeney 2010), although the reasons for these differences are not fully understood. In addition, the wisdom of encouraging marriage among single mothers has been a topic of considerable debate in both scholarly and policy circles (Brown 2010). These unions often involve a remarriage rather than a first marriage. Remarriages require consideration of a separate set of processes concerning formation and stability compared to first marriages. Unlike first marriage transitions, which tend to be concentrated in early adulthood, remarriage transitions are distributed more evenly throughout the life course. This provides opportunities to understand how the context of marriage varies with age. Remarriage also offers strategic opportunities to study how marital transitions are affected by the broader contexts of social and kin relationships, economic resources, and labor market trajectories (for further discussion, see Sweeney 2010).

## The Changing Data Landscape

There have been considerable changes in the landscape of federal data available to monitor trends in patterns of marriage and remarriage in recent decades. In December 1995, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that they would no longer collect and publish detailed data on marriage and divorce from vital statistics. The agency acknowledged that this would represent a loss of data to researchers interested in trends and differentials in marriage, divorce, and remarriage, but they noted that much of this information was available from the June Marital History Supplement of the CPS. Unfortunately, the CPS Marital History Supplement was discontinued after 1995. Further, these losses followed the discontinuation of the age-at-first-marriage question in the U.S. Census in 1990.

Large sample sizes are required for monitoring marriage and remarriage trends reliably. This becomes a challenge for relatively small subpopulations, such as specific racial or ethnic groups, immigrant populations, and individuals in same-sex partnerships. In addition, reliable estimates of how marriage and remarriage trends vary across states

or other local contexts are needed to understand how family policy influences marriage behavior. This is particularly important considering state law predominately governs conditions of marriage formation and dissolution, determining the rights and obligations of spouses (Ooms, Bouchet, & Parke 2004). Both information on current marital status and marital histories are needed to appropriately monitor trends and differentials in marriage, to identify marriage order, and to estimate rates of marriage and remarriage. A growing body of research highlights the importance of considering full relationship careers as well as evidence suggesting cumulative family structure instability is associated with poor youth well-being (e.g., Bulanda & Manning 2008; Fomby & Cherlin 2007). While it is important to study transitions involving the formation and dissolution of legal marriages, most family scholars agree that this information is most useful in examining more complete relationship histories (i.e., marriage and nonmarital cohabitation).

The ACS and SIPP are two important data sources representative of the U.S. population and well designed to study marriage and remarriage. The utility of the ACS for studying marriage improved significantly in 2008 (as described earlier in this chapter). The sampling design of the ACS also includes coverage of institutionalized populations, which is essential in documenting and explaining patterns of marriage and remarriage among subgroups with relatively high rates of incarceration or military service. These features make the ACS an extremely valuable data resource for policymakers and family scholars. Sweeney said, “The people who were integral in designing the ACS, and particularly the editions since 2008, clearly attended the first two Counting Couples conferences. They really listened, and it's a great resource.”

However, she added that the ACS remains limited in a number of respects for the study of marriage and remarriage. These data only provide limited information about marital careers or potential determinants of marital transitions for individuals. For example, age at first marriage – a key demographic variable – is directly available only for individuals married one time in the ACS. An array of other important information needed to develop a theoretical understanding of the determinants of marital transitions remains limited in these data. In addition, no information is gathered on nonmarital cohabitation histories.

The SIPP is not designed to produce annual state-level estimates of marriage and remarriage like the ACS. However, its sample size is relatively large, and the SIPP contains more detailed information on marital histories compared to the ACS. Like the ACS, however, the SIPP does not allow for the study of marital transitions in the context of broader relationship careers such as nonmarital cohabitation. Sweeney mentions that it also is important to note the SIPP has come under threat of discontinuation several times in the last five years.

The NSFG contains smaller sample sizes than either the ACS or SIPP but includes detailed marital and cohabitation histories. Pooling multiple rounds of the survey can potentially increase small sample sizes. In addition, the NSFG includes a reasonably large number of potential correlates of marital transitions coupled with more extensive information on the characteristics of spouses. The NSFG began collecting data on men as well in 2002.

A major limitation of these data is the age-based sampling design, which is restricted to respondents aged 15-44. This limits the usefulness of these data for

studying remarriage (see also Bumpass & Raley 2007). Datasets specifically focusing on older age groups, such as the Health and Retirement Survey (HRS), can help fill this gap, but piecing together data from multiple studies to examine how marriage and remarriage vary over the life course becomes complicated by different sampling designs and question wording.

Sweeney stated, “We have definitely gained some things over the last 15 years with respect to data. But I would have to argue that we've lost more than we've gained.”

### **The Measurement of Same-Sex Marriages**

The increasing availability of legal marriage to same-sex couples through state-specific legislation has outpaced the development of measurement of same-sex couples. In addition, Sweeney noted that the relatively small population of same-sex married couples makes large sample sizes extremely important in datasets used to study this group.

Federal agencies have routinely edited raw data affecting counts of same-sex partners and spouses. These editing procedures are complicated and have changed substantially over a short time span. In some instances, “corrections” inflated counts of same-sex couples. For example, pre-2007 ACS procedures routinely recoded cases where respondents marked both male and female in response to the gender item, or marked multiple responses to the relationship items, to the first category marked (e.g., “male” or “husband/wife”) (O’Connell et al. 2010). Recent studies indicate the misclassification of different-sex couples seriously distorted estimates of the total numbers of same-sex couples in the 2000 Census, but estimates of the magnitude of this bias vary considerably across studies (e.g., Black, Gates, Sanders, & Taylor 2007; O’Connell & Gooding 2007; Gates & Steinberger 2011).

ACS procedures were refined in 2007 -- for example, cases of multiple responses were inspected for likely error (such as evidence of intended erasures or cross-outs) and remaining cases of multiple marks were treated as blank responses (O’Connell et al. 2010). Similar procedures were planned for the 2010 Census. In both the 2000 Census and the ACS, the “husband/wife” relationship designation was changed to “unmarried partner” in publicly released data when respondents reported having a same-sex spouse (O’Connell & Gooding 2006; O’Connell, Lofquist, Simmons, & Lugaila 2010). Although the Census Bureau plans to release aggregate tabulations of same-sex spouses from the 2010 Census, specific plans for releasing individual-level microdata on same-sex spouses remain unclear (Gary Gates, personal communication, July 2011).

Counts of same-sex spouses may be inaccurate in federal data for other reasons. For example, fears of stigma or discrimination may make some same-sex couples (married or unmarried) hesitant to identify themselves as such on federal surveys. In one recent study, Gates (2010) found that 10% of individuals cohabiting with a same-sex partner recalled having described their relationship as roommates or other non-relatives on the Census 2010 form. Some of the most commonly cited reasons for this include thinking of their relationship in some other way, confidentiality concerns, or dissatisfaction with the relationship choice options presented to them. These findings suggest that additional outreach specifically targeting privacy may improve



measurement of same-sex partners and spouses. Findings also indicate that additional exploratory work is needed to determine the best measure of legal relationship status response categories, including how gay and lesbian individuals label their relationships. Further, married same-sex spouses may be unclear as to whether “husband/wife” is an appropriate response category for a federal survey, since these marriages are not recognized by the federal government and may not be recognized by their state of residence (Gates 2010). In Gates’s (2010) study, sample members who were legally married but had reported living with an unmarried partner on the Census 2010 form almost universally (94%) did so because the federal or state government did not recognize their marriage. Legally married respondents were also more likely to report themselves as such on the Census 2010 form if they lived in a state that legally recognized same-sex marriage compared to those whose state did not (89% versus 62%, respectively).

Researchers are not the only ones grappling with the question of what marital status should measure. Indeed, the 2010 Census explicitly put this task of conceptualization on the shoulders of individual respondents when advising LGBT community leaders: “Census data are based on how individuals self-identify and how couples think of themselves. Same-sex couples who are married, *or consider themselves to be spouses* [emphasis added], can identify one other adult as ‘husband or wife.’” Sweeney observed that this approach likely produced variability in the definition of “husband or wife” applied by individual respondents and does not capture the fact that marriage is a privileged legal relationship conveying specific rights and responsibilities. What to measure requires more thought and discussion among scholars and policymakers and should take into account motivations for counting same-sex spouses in the first place.

## Recommendations

Sweeney concluded that it remains important to monitor and explain trends and differentials in patterns of marriage and remarriage. This work will be most effective and useful for policymakers and scholars when data are available that include large sample sizes, can produce estimates at the state and local level, and include information on marital and other key types of relationship histories (such as nonmarital cohabitation) coupled with information on the likely correlates of these relationship transitions.

Constrained resources may reasonably require trade-offs between breadth and depth of coverage of these topics. It may not be feasible to fulfill all of these needs in a single data source (such as the ACS). However, Sweeney observed some changes to the existing menu of federal data options warrant serious consideration. For example, the needs of researchers and policymakers may justify the addition of cohabitation histories in the SIPP. It might make sense to consider modifying the upper age limit of the NSFG. The National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) was analyzed extensively by family demographers and provided tremendous insights into patterns of marriage and remarriage throughout the life course, but the full NSFH sample was last interviewed more than 15 years ago, and marriage patterns are known to have changed in more recent years. Dedicating resources to another study of marriage and family patterns that

are broadly representative of the U.S. population and spans the full life course should be considered.

Sweeney asked, “What are the motivations for monitoring trends in same-sex marriage?” Should researchers measure legally defined marriages, legally recognized relationships of any type, or whether people “feel” married? If legal status is of particular interest, it seems important to locate individuals within states or other local contexts. This strategy allows researchers to determine the extent to which a marriage between same-sex spouses practically confers the set of legal rights and responsibilities afforded different-sex spouses. Once researchers and policymakers have agreed on what to measure in the case of same-sex marriage, this meaning should be conveyed more clearly to survey respondents.

Finally, more consideration is needed for the best ways to gather and process data on marital status to accurately count same-sex spouses and partners, including empirical evaluations of how question wording and data processing procedures influence the validity of final counts. Recent analyses offer examples of this type of work (such as Gates 2010 and O’Connell et al. 2010). Greater transparency is also needed concerning the editing procedures employed before making raw data available for public release. Finally, Sweeney said that researchers should be given access to microdata in its original unedited form whenever feasible.

### **MARRIAGE AND REMARRIAGE: A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE CENSUS BUREAU**

In a response to Qian’s and Sweeney’s presentations, Martin O’Connell, U.S. Census Bureau, Department of Commerce, observed that Census Bureau data on marital status capture the current marital condition of individuals at the time of the survey, not their living arrangements. Living arrangements are collected through the relationship item. However, the Census Bureau does use the dual concept of “married, spouse present” and “married, spouse absent” to delineate married people who are either living or not living with their spouses.

There are two reasons why individuals might not live with their spouses. Couples can be (1) separated for reasons of marital discord--which is how the NSFG defines this status -- or (2) not living with their spouses for other reasons, such as being in the military or away in school. Many economists use this dichotomy to examine labor force participation and different types of child care arrangements, since both behaviors are heavily influenced by the presence or absence of a spouse in the household. Federal agencies use the more traditional marital status categories rather than cohabitation in the computation of basic indicators such as nonmarital birth rates, mortality rates by marital status, and projections of widows and divorced people for Social Security programs. Currently, birth and death certificates and Social Security forms do not include the category “cohabiting.”

O’Connell stated that removing up to 15 million people from these statuses (or more than 7 million unmarried partners) and placing them into a “cohabiting” category could “create havoc” for the programmatic uses of the data. The current Census Bureau nomenclature that retains the two concepts increases the flexibility of the data for public and private researchers.



All Census Bureau surveys collect the two items separately. However, the Census Bureau also collects information on cohabitation status in the CPS. In 2007, a question was added -- based on a recommendation made in a previous Counting Couples conference -- asking all people who are not married if they are living together with someone in the household as a boyfriend/girlfriend/partner. This probe increased by 1 million the number of cohabiting couples over the previous CPS estimate. This approach, can be feasibly executed on a laptop computer (as in the CPS), but has not been incorporated into current ACS forms, which rely heavily on a paper instrument mailed to respondents.

### **Marital Histories**

O'Connell sought to correct the misimpression that the SIPP and ACS do not collect marital history data for spouses. The SIPP always has, and the ACS currently does, although some changes will occur in the collection of marital history data in the new SIPP. The old SIPP collected up to three dates for marriage, separation, widowed, and divorce. The current plans for the SIPP will obtain information on the first marriage and detailed marital and cohabiting transitions that occurred in the 12-month period prior to the interview.

With regard to the loss of marital history data on the SIPP and CPS, O'Connell reminded the conference participants that questionnaire space on the Census and ACS has always been highly competitive among federal agencies. The majority of households on the Census and ACS still receive paper forms in the mail, imposing constraints on form design and postal regulations. Even the simple marital status item was deleted from the 2010 Census.

### **Same-Sex Marriages**

A major reason researchers want questions on same-sex marriages in surveys is because reasonable estimates are unavailable from traditional administrative sources. California never published counts of same sex-marriages when it performed them in 2008, and the National Center for Health Statistics publishes only total counts of marriages performed, as provided by the states.

Estimates from surveys such as the CPS and ACS produce similar national estimates -- about 550,000 same-sex households -- and comparable distributional patterns on key demographic characteristics (Lofquist & Ellis 2011). Although the CPS is not large enough to produce state estimates, the main problem researchers face is not whether the numbers are good enough to be shown for individual states or counties but the accuracy even at the national level.

The 2010 Census will release a supplemental table with the numbers of same-sex households that identified themselves as same-sex spouses. By the time of the 2010 Census, administrative records suggested that there were about 50,000 same-sex couples who were married in the United States. Yet a 1 in 1,000 error in the marking of the gender item by opposite sex spouses can produce over 55,000 same sex spouses, which reveals the potential magnitude of the problem. O'Connell said, "I'm sure anyone would love to have a survey where someone guaranteed you that only 1 in 1,000

answers would be incorrect. You're never going to get that survey, and human beings are never going to be that perfect." Error rates can be sensitive to form design changes even when the questions remain the same. This happened in 2008 when the ACS changed the layout of the paper mail form and the estimate of same-sex spouses dropped from 340,000 to 150,000.

### **Future Work Plans**

Over the past two years, the Census Bureau has conducted hundreds of interviews all over the country in a series of focus groups and cognitive interviews to get a better idea of how people respond to the marital status and relationship items. It is currently engaged in a long-term project to incorporate these findings into the ACS and other Census Bureau surveys, but changes require large-scale testing to measure differences in the old and new approaches and potential pushback or confusion from respondents over wording. Simple changes often produce unexpected results, which require the creation of rather complex editing.

The Census Bureau is also a key participant in a group formed by the Office of Management and Budget named "The Federal Interagency Working Group on Measuring Relationships in Federal Household Surveys." This group addresses the following four topics:

1. The uses of relationship and marital status information by federal agencies, policy users, and the research community in general
2. The collection of data -- items and wordings on surveys and forms
3. Editing of data -- how data are edited if missing and how they are edited for consistency
4. Tabulation, presentation, and dissemination of information -- how are the data presented, and what is available on publicly released micro-data files

O'Connell concluded that the Census Bureau and OMB group are addressing many of the issues raised by Qian and Sweeney to both increase the knowledge base of the research community and improve the quality of the data on marriage and living arrangements. It's a long process, said O'Connell, "It's not an easy and simple fix. [But] we've done a lot of work."

### **MARRIAGE AND REMARRIAGE: A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE STATES**

Sherry Steisel, National Conference of State Legislatures, observed that many policy decisions involving marriage and remarriage are made at the state level. Therefore, as issues surrounding marriage become more complicated, so do the decisions confronting the 7,500 state legislators and 30,000 legislative staff in the United States.

Many state policymakers have specific interests. They are interested in family formation particularly among low-income families. They also are interested in dissolution because they are responsible for creating divorce laws, child support enforcement, and other issues accompanying the dissolution partnerships. And they are

interested in fathers both residential and non-residential. Steisel stated that, most importantly, child well-being “is where the rubber hits the road.”

Many state legislators are looking for information but do not know where to get it. When presented with data, they are unsure if the data answer their questions. Original research results and raw data are usually too dense for most legislators generating the need for intermediaries. These intermediaries can either translate the results or direct legislators to resources where data are available and easier to understand. Steisel encouraged researchers to reach broader audiences by writing a paragraph or two, allowing non-researchers to better understand and apply empirical findings.

### **Changes at the State Level**

Steisel stated that the recession in 2008 has led to major budget cuts and other problems in states, increasing the importance of research. When states need to make choices about financing programs or funding pilot initiatives, they need empirical evidence to help them spend money effectively. Steisel said, “They’re looking at your research to try to determine where they are going to make those policy choices.”

State lawmakers are also dealing with the rapidly changing issues surrounding same-sex marriage. Some same-sex individuals marry in states where it is legal and move to states that do not recognize their marriages. Other states may recognize these marriages, but do not perform them. In addition, laws are constantly changing. Some unanswered questions include whether changing laws will influence where people move and what effects changing such laws will have on children.

For many state legislators, national information and information from other states do not address their own public policy needs. Steisel urges her members (state legislators and legislative staff) to consider legislative changes in other states as potential county pilot projects. In some instances, county-level comparisons may be more effective.

### **Other Issues**

Legislators are interested in public policies that encourage marriage, which is one reason why they also are interested in remarriage and cohabitation. Steisel indicated that research seems to suggest cohabitation is first step toward marriage. But what does that mean for policymaking? She added, “We’re getting a lot of questions about that.”

Another question legislators ask is how public policy can strengthen the relationships of fathers to their families. Instability can be a problem for child well-being, which places this issue squarely on the agenda of state legislators.

In addition, the public is also very interested in issues surrounding marriage and family. For example, the NCSL compiles information on family issues, and the pages containing that information are among the most widely read on the organization’s website.

Steisel stated that concerns about families will continue to evolve along with public perceptions and attitudes. Thus it is important to have a long-term view and not

rely solely on snapshots of the current situation. As families change and opinions about family life shift, researchers can make valuable contributions to public policies.

## DISCUSSION

### Additional Sources of Information

Nicholas Zill, consulting psychologist, mentioned several additional sources of data that bear on family relationships. Two longitudinal surveys from the National Center for Education Statistics -- the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), which is now in its second cohort, and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) -- both contain longitudinal information about relationships, but the data are limited to adults who have children of a particular age. In addition, two surveys from the National Center for Health Statistics -- the National Health Interview Survey and the National Survey of Children's Health -- provide information on relationships, health status, marriage status, and other useful indicators, but the public use file of the latter survey is heavily restricted.

Zill also noted the need to defend surveys in the current political climate such as the ACS. The information in these surveys is useful no matter what a policymaker's political party. He concluded, "We may have to work very hard just to preserve what we have right now."

### Same-Sex Marriage

Gary Gates, UCLA, asked about nonmarital partnerships such as civil unions and domestic partnerships. He noted that about the same number of people live in states that allow such arrangements as those living in states that allow same-sex marriages. O'Connell responded that perceptions of these arrangements are among the issues currently being tested. People in such an arrangement may not consider themselves to be spouses because they are not married, but they may consider themselves more than friends or partners. O'Connell stated, "That's one of the issues that we're trying to look at now." Additionally, the interagency group under the Office of Management and Budget is investigating how the questions pertaining to families on federal surveys and forms correspond with the programmatic needs of specific agencies as well as how questions can be made consistent and useable for all federal needs. However, O'Connell observed that making changes in these questions usually is not easy partly because one question is often related to many others.

Sweeney also observed that comparisons of marriages in one location with other kinds of arrangements in other locations are a valuable source of information. The decisions people make are in some part related to the rights and benefits that they get from being married. She suggested this provides "one opportunity to parse out why marriage has the effects that it does." This opportunity also argues for samples that provide state-level detail.

Robert Kominski, Census Bureau, observed that ongoing research demonstrates the difference between legal status and social status. Terms such as marriage, civil union, domestic partnerships, and common law marriage have different meanings to

people. A couple may report being married, but further investigation might show that no legal marriage exists. He said that the definitions people use do not necessarily coincide, creating noise in measurements.

### **Marital Satisfaction**

In response to a question about measuring marital satisfaction, Qian pointed to several surveys that provide related information, though the data may be limited. Steisel added that the impact of the recession on marital satisfaction is an important research question. For example, have there been increases in divorce or child neglect? Answers to such questions may influence the support from legislators.

### **Tax and Transfer Programs**

Robert Lerman, Urban Institute, asked if the provisions of tax and transfer programs influence responses to questions on surveys, since eligibility for programs may depend on marital or residency status. O’Connell replied that people may answer questions differently depending on who is asking the question. For example, when the Census Bureau asks about marriage, respondents know that the federal government does not recognize same-sex marriage, so they may respond differently than they would to a similar question from a state agency. He concluded, “That’s part of the problem -- the context of the form or the agency asking the question does have a bearing on the answer. . . I don’t know how to solve that problem, and I’m not quite sure that we should, because if the people really feel that way, and they’re answering for that specific gain that they’re expecting from that answer, should we tell them to answer another way? I don’t know -- probably not, and they probably wouldn’t do it anyway.”

### **Changes in the NSFG**

Bill Mosher, National Center for Health Statistics, said that efforts have been made to lift the age restriction on the NSFG, but so far the change has not been affordable. He also pointed out that state-level information often cannot be included in public use files because of disclosure risks. Nevertheless, there are ways for researchers to access more detailed data through restricted data enclaves.

### **The Relationship to Health Care and Employment**

Jeff Evans, recently of NICHD, noted the relevance of health care costs and insurance coverage to marriage. Evans stated, “For the next decade or more, these issues are likely to be the most dominant public policy issues of the day.” As a result, datasets need to be harmonized as a part of health care reform and for all generations, from grandparents to children.

John Jolley, Administration for Children and Families, asked about combining data on marriage and unemployment so resources can be directed to enhance family stability and the well-being of children. For example, he asked if data from the

Department of Labor identify areas where unemployment is high or employment is recovering to help states spend limited resources most effectively.

### **Vital Records Systems**

O’Connell pointed out in response to a comment about gathering data from administrative records that even though guidelines exist, each state can organize its administrative records systems differently. He continued, “Each state has the opportunity of doing whatever they want, because that’s how the Constitution was laid out.” Steisel added that many decisions are made at the county level because some states give counties flexibility regarding vital statistics. In addition, local funding for these offices varies widely influencing both data availability and quality.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING MARRIAGE AND REMARRIAGE**

- Provide consistent measures of marital status across data sources.
- Include same-sex marriages as a marital status.
- Add age at first marriage to the ACS.
- Supplement data collections with marital histories (start and end dates).
- Increase the upper age limit of the NSFG to ensure data are included on remarriage and marriage among older Americans.
- Provide data on the marital history of spouses to determine whether couples are both first-time married.

## V

**COHABITATION\***

One of the areas in which change in family structure has been most rapid is cohabitation. Cohabitation has changed in recent decades from an unusual and socially disapproved practice to a common feature of American life. Yet the various forms of cohabiting relationships pose immense challenges for those studying families. The speakers in this session discussed the steps that have been taken to deal with this complexity and further changes that are needed.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING MEASUREMENTS OF INTIMATE  
PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS**

Gary Gates, University of California, Los Angeles, stated that the methods for measuring intimate partner relationships occurring outside of marriage are still influenced heavily by the decades-old concept of POSSLQs (People of the Opposite-Sex Sharing Living Quarters). The POSSLQ framework only considers different-sex couples and those residing together in the same household. Despite these limitations, this construct still forms the basis for how most surveys measure nonmarital intimate relationships. As a result, assessments of nonmarital relationships are largely limited to coresidential couples. In addition, few surveys address important conceptual and methodological issues that should be considered in measuring same-sex couples.

Gates argued that the approaches the field currently uses in counting intimate relationships and measuring the legal status of those relationships are largely fixed in two paradigms, neither of which is grounded in an inclusive concept of intimate partner relationships. The first paradigm constructs a framework dividing relationships into two types: marriage and everything else. The second paradigm assumes that for the “everything else” relationships, a key component is coresidential status. The reality of intimate relationships is much more complex than these paradigms.

Using the first paradigm of marriage versus all other relationships forces a false dichotomy, said Gates. In making this point, he cited Manning and Smock (2005) who show that couples do not frame their decision about union formation as marriage versus cohabitation but rather as cohabitation versus singlehood. Manning and Smock (2005) also observed that cohabitation is not a binary condition given that unmarried cohabiting couples show substantial variation in the degree to which they coreside. There is variation in coresidence among married individuals, as an estimated 5% of married individuals in the 2009 American Community Survey (ACS) report that they are not separated nor residing with their spouse.

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\* This chapter is based on the presentations by Gary Gates, University of California, Los Angeles; Pamela Smock, University of Michigan; Casey Copen, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; and Katherine K. Wallman, Statistical and Science Policy Branch, Office of Management and Budget.



The current, most frequently used methods for measuring relationships are restrictive and rarely allow researchers to consider the totality of relationships outside of the structure of the household. Additionally, these measures often lack conceptual clarity and conflate varied constructs for measuring relationships. Gates posited at least three distinctive conceptual constructs important in measuring relationships:

*Nature of the relationship:* What terms do individuals use to describe their relationships? This construct is potentially distinct from a household roster where respondents are asked if a husband, wife, fiancé, partner, boyfriend, or girlfriend is living in a household. A more inclusive construct designed to assess if respondents are in a relationship and what specific terms they use to describe that relationship would not depend on coresidence. Decoupling coresidence from measuring intimate relationships could provide more accurate assessments of both the presence and nature of such relationships.

*Relationship behaviors and coresidence:* How do individuals interact with their relationship partners? These might include questions about resource allocation, similar to those used in the Consumer Expenditure Survey or coresidence behaviors included in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). This would also include coresidence constructs captured in household rosters like those used in the Census, ACS, or Current Population Survey (CPS).

*Legal status:* How have individuals formalized their relationships legally? This would resemble typical marital status questions while including a wider range of legal statuses like civil unions and registered domestic partnerships.

Questions that measure these constructs exist in a wide array of surveys, but surveys rarely keep these concepts conceptually distinct. For example, Gates considered the marital status question used in the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), which includes typical options of married, widowed, separated, divorced, or never married, while adding an option “not married but living with a partner of the opposite sex.” Gates stated that setting aside the obvious heterosexual bias of this question is problematic because these categories are not mutually exclusive. The question reads, “What is your current marital status?” It is entirely possible that a respondent can simultaneously be living with a partner, currently married, divorced, and widowed. But perhaps even more importantly, the partner option included in this question conceptually strays from assessing the current legal marital status of a person and instead assesses some type of nonmarital relationship.

In most surveys, marriage is the only relationship form measured without regard to coresidence. However, in the case of the ACS and the Census, occupants of a household can determine how marital status is actually coded. If the householder designates one person as an “unmarried partner,” Census coding procedures do not allow either the householder or the unmarried partner to be designated as “currently married” in the marital status question. If either indicates that they are married, the response is subject to being coded to another marital status. Again, this procedure mixes two different conceptual constructs: the legal relationship status of an individual



and how respondents describe their relationships to other individuals in a household. Census procedures also do not allow for the presence of multiple unmarried partners or spouses and do not permit households to include both a spouse and an unmarried partner. These procedures confine relationship measures to very specific parameters that narrow and potentially distort understanding of intimate relationships.

To understand the totality of relationships, Gates argued, surveys must move beyond coresidence as a condition for the identifying relationships. In addition, surveys must include questions with more conceptual clarity allowing researchers to compare and contrast how individuals describe their relationships, how relationships manifest themselves in behaviors such as coresidence, and the legal status of relationships.

### **Measuring Same-Sex Relationships**

Gates explained that the treatment of same-sex relationships in surveys marks a problematic aspect of relationship measurement. Some of these concerns relate to conceptual issues as well as issues associated with measuring small populations. Increasingly problematic, he stated, is a hetero-normative perspective pervading relationship measurement constructs coupled with the lack of questions designed to measure the increasing number of nonmarital relationship recognition forms.

Methods used to identify same-sex couples in the decennial Census and ACS highlight both a general lack of conceptual clarity about same-sex relationships as well as serious measurement problems. Gates indicated that identifying cohabiting same-sex couples relies on both the household roster and the sex of respondents. A same-sex couple is identified when a householder designates another person of the same sex as a “husband/wife” or “unmarried partner,” but the options of husband/wife and unmarried partner are conceptually more limiting to same-sex couples than they are to different-sex couples. This is a result, at least in part, of the complicated legal and social status of same-sex couples in the United States.

As of June 2011, an estimated 15% of same-sex couples live in the six states and the District of Columbia that have legalized same-sex marriage. Approximately 25% of same-sex couples live in the 14 states that offer various forms of nonmarital recognition, such as civil unions, registered domestic partnerships, and designated beneficiaries. Many municipalities maintain domestic partnership registries for same-sex couples. Regardless of state and local law, some religious communities will marry same-sex couples. In addition, the LGBT community has a long history of conducting commitment ceremonies.

Gates stated that at the same time there is no federal recognition of any same-sex relationships. Given this history and legal complexity, terms like “husband/wife” and “unmarried” mean different things to same-sex couples than to different-sex couples. As an example, he considered someone married and living in Iowa. Does this person have a husband or wife if he or she files federal taxes as single? If a couple has had a civil union and receives the equivalent of spousal benefits from an employer, are they really “unmarried?” These terms are ill-suited to the realities of same-sex relationships.

Increasing this conceptual ambiguity, all same-sex couples are coded as “unmarried partners” in public use microdata files, and flags indicating any alteration of “husband/wife” couples to “unmarried partner” are not included in these files. Further,

Census Bureau procedures do not allow “unmarried partners” to be “currently married” in the marital status question meaning that any individual within a same-sex couple who indicates a status of “currently married” is recoded and allocated to another status. An additional complication with this measurement concerns the possibility that different-sex couples, who outnumber same-sex couples by roughly 100 to 1, occasionally miscode the sex of a spouse or partner and are mistakenly coded as same-sex couples. To elaborate, Gates cited some of his own work (Gates & Steinberger 2011) showing that as many as 30% of same-sex couples in the 2007 ACS and approximately 15% of same-sex couples in the 2008 and 2009 ACS may be miscoded as different-sex couples. In 2009, the ACS made improvements to reduce this form of miscoding. However, as long as survey options do not explicitly distinguish between same-sex and different-sex spouses or partners, analyses of the Census and ACS same-sex couples’ data are challenging and come with a variety of caveats.

Hetero-normative biases are prevalent in measurement as most surveys require individuals in same-sex relationships to describe their relationships using terms designed primarily for different-sex couples. This bias is amplified when surveys restrict responses to explicitly describe different-sex relationships while not providing comparable options to describe same-sex relationships (e.g., the NSFG marital status question). The NSFG marital status question includes a response option of “not married but living together with a partner of opposite sex” while offering no mechanism to indicate that the respondent is not married but living with a same-sex partner.

The bias toward heterosexual relationships in population-based surveys raises serious human subjects’ concerns as well, said Gates. LGBT people and same-sex couples routinely experience social stigma in their daily lives. Their families do not treat same-sex relationships as comparable to the different-sex relationships of siblings or other family members. Employers routinely provide benefits to different-sex married couples that are unavailable to same-sex couples. When surveys fail to provide options allowing same-sex couples to appropriately designate their relationships or, even worse, when they explicitly only inquire about different-sex relationships, this reinforces social stigma. It signals to LGBT respondents that same-sex relationships are not valued and are not comparable to different-sex relationships. Gates argued that this is a concern Institutional Review Boards should take more seriously.

Ten years ago, after California passed its first domestic partnership law, only 13% of Americans lived in a state that offered any legal recognition for same-sex couples. Today, more than 40% of the U.S. population lives in a state with some form of legal recognition for same-sex couples, and more than one in ten Americans lives in a state that allows same-sex couples to marry. Gates argued that surveys designed to measure intimate relationships must begin to adapt to these changes. The Census Bureau has recently conducted testing on alterations to both the household roster and marital status questions improving measurement of same-sex couple relationships. While this is a clear step forward, the process still focuses on couples and maintains a paradigm of using the household roster and legal relationship status to measure relationships.

It seems self-evident that knowledge of a person’s sexual orientation and gender identity would be a crucial component to understanding the nature of their intimate relationships. Yet of the surveys Gates reviewed, only Add Health and the NSFG include questions designed to measure sexual orientation, and none assess gender identity. The

recent Institute of Medicine (2011) review of LGBT health disparities observed that a detailed identification of specific gaps in LGBT health research was not possible given the lack of population-based data allowing for the identification of LGBT respondents. The review called for broad-based inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity measures in population-based surveys.

## Recommendations

Gates concluded his talk with six recommendations for improving the measurement of intimate partner relationships:

- Refocus measurement toward a broader concept of intimate relationships.
- Develop methods of measuring relationships that offer greater conceptual clarity.
- Develop methods to measure nonmarital relationship recognition forms.
- Develop accurate methods of measuring different-sex and same-sex relationships.
- Develop IRBs to consider hetero-normative relationship measurements as stigmatizing to LGBT respondents.
- Include measurement of sexual orientation and gender identity as a standard demographic characteristic.

## MEASURING COHABITATION

Pamela Smock, University of Michigan, stated that over the course of three decades, cohabitation in the U.S. has grown from a relatively uncommon and socially deviant behavior to an acceptable and normative experience among couples today. As the rates of cohabitation have increased, so has the amount of research addressing the topic. Smock and colleague, Cassandra Dorius, conducted an extensive search of cohabitation literature and found that the number of peer-reviewed papers on the subject has grown exponentially over the past 15 years. Smock and Dorius focused on 438 peer-reviewed papers on cohabitation in the United States published since 2000 (the search terms cohabitation, cohabit, cohabitor, cohabiter, and cohabiting appeared in either the title or abstract.) The papers spanned economics, population studies, sociology, policy, and psychology.

Over half of these papers used data from 12 large surveys, with the majority of articles using data from the CPS, Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCWB) study, National Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), and the Census. Smock and Dorius noted that about 40% of the papers appeared in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Journal of Family Issues*, and *Demography*. Together, these papers have produced many influential findings that have advanced understanding of cohabitation, including:

- Providing information about the prevalence and correlates of cohabitation and identifying disparities in cohabitation by race, age, education, employment, immigrant status, and social class.
- Demonstrating that cohabitation is less often a pathway to marriage and more often a long-term alternative to marriage.
- Challenging previously accepted notions that cohabitation before marriage increases the likelihood of divorce and is related to poorer relationship quality for all couples; instead finding the demographic characteristics of the couple and the type of union are primarily driving these effects.
- Starting to identify differences in cohabitation experiences and systematically examining the relationship between these forms and individual (child and adult), family, and couple-level outcomes.

### **How, When, and Who?**

Given this body of literature, Smock and Dorius examined three questions: How is cohabitation measured? When does cohabitation take place? Who is involved in cohabitation?

The majority of these studies measure cohabitation indirectly via household roster questions. However, a small number of studies use direct assessment of cohabitation histories or longitudinal follow-up questions of relationship status. Smock also noted that the 2007 CPS included two innovations -- the addition of a direct question about a boyfriend or girlfriend, which increased the rate of cohabitation by 15%, and a question about the cohabitation status of all family members, not just the head of household.

Inconsistent phrasing of cohabitation questions makes it challenging to perform comparisons across different data sets. Some surveys include questions about "always" or "usually" sharing a residence, while others do not. Smock stated that some surveys base cohabitation on sexual intimacy, which can be problematic since we do not define marriage as based on sexual intimacy. Other surveys phrase the question in terms of being in a "marriage-like relationship." She considers "marriage-like relationship" as ambiguous at best and suggests that many couples who have not been married might not understand the term.

There also is inconsistency in national surveys about when cohabitation takes place. Smock stated that some couples have a hard time determining whether they are currently in a cohabiting relationship. For example, how many nights do couples have to spend together to qualify as cohabiting, or does cohabitation require having a single, shared residence? In addition, start and stop dates are also difficult to pinpoint because many couples gradually slide into cohabitation, and men and women do not necessarily give the same dates (Knab 2005; Knab & McLanahan 2006; Manning & Smock 2005).

Retrospective reporting for cohabitation histories is also problematic, confounding data on when cohabitation begins and ends. Smock said that several studies (Hayford & Morgan 2008; Manning & Smock 2005; Nepomnyaschy 2004) find systematic bias in retrospective reports of unmarried parents' cohabiting status based on relationship quality, relationship trajectory, and other couple attributes. Smock

explained that misreporting at the time of an initial interview could result from either post-birth optimism, leading to over-reporting of cohabitation, or fear of welfare/immigration authorities, leading to under-reporting.

Looking at the "who" question raises the issues of ambiguity in family composition -- that is, who is in the family and what exactly is the relationship status. Increasing complexity of family forms and the family landscape blurs the meaning of cohabitation for both individual members of the couple and parents and children.

### **Improving Data on Cohabitation**

There have been some major improvements in cohabitation data collection, particularly in identifying biological and social parents and establishing histories of the adults of all ages in a family, Smock said. Nevertheless, Smock and Dorius noted that the field could benefit by making the following changes to survey measurement of cohabitation:

- Move beyond the binary comparison of marriage versus cohabitation.
- Create new labels for comparison groups, such as dating, unmarried partner, civil unions, and registered domestic partnerships.
- Ask for relationship details from both members of a couple.
- Include more information about same-sex couples.

In closing, Smock encouraged the field to harmonize and pool data within and across surveys when reasonable to address changes in cohabitation across groups, changes in the meanings and levels of cohabitation over time, and to capitalize on the strengths of several nationally representative data collection efforts. Smock noted that the field's research on cohabitation has produced a number of path-breaking, important studies over the past ten years. By making a few direct and targeted changes to the current research agenda, the field will be able to continue to produce high quality, meaningful research on this topic well into the next decade.

### **MARRIAGE AND COHABITATION IN THE UNITED STATES: USING DATA FROM THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF FAMILY GROWTH**

Casey Copen, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, stated that the federal government's national surveys have made significant changes in measuring cohabitation since the Census Bureau developed its first POSSLQ measurements in the 1970s. Copen noted that the 1990 Census shifted from indirect measures, such as the POSSLQ, to more direct measures. In addition, the 1995 CPS included the category of unmarried partner for the first time, but that category failed to capture unions that did not involve the householder.

The 2007 CPS asked the direct question of whether unmarried adults were living with a boyfriend, girlfriend, or partner. Copen said that this question improved the identification of cohabitators, particularly those living within subfamilies or those who selected some relationship other than unmarried partner. She also noted that

cohabiting couples identified by the direct question were different, demographically and socio-economically, than cohabitators who identified as unmarried partners. In other words, the addition of this new question on the CPS identified a group of cohabitators missed entirely by the household roster question included in previous surveys. The transition from inferred to direct measures of cohabitation is just one example of how the collection of data has improved in federal surveys in recent years.

Further improvements in the data from such surveys will come from expanding both the breadth of information on people in romantic relationships and the depth or context of these relationships. Copen noted that the first two speakers focused on the first of these areas and that she was going to focus on the second, particularly concerning revisions made in the NSFG intended to improve data on the context of cohabiting relationships. She explained that the NSFG provides data on both the individual and contextual factors affecting pregnancy rates and maternal/child health. Over the past several decades, cohabitation has increased as an alternative social institution for bearing and raising children.

Preliminary data on vital statistics show that the proportion of births to unmarried women increased to 41% in 2009. This increase makes it important to provide questions highlighting the proportion of these nonmarital births occurring in cohabiting unions. To better answer these questions, the NSFG now gathers information on cohabitation in three sections of the interview: the household roster, where all household members are enumerated and their relationship to the survey respondent is defined; direct questions about current marital and cohabiting status; and marriage and cohabitation event histories.

The NSFG has collected data on opposite-sex marital and cohabiting histories for women since 1995 and for men since 2002. Several revisions have been made to these questions in the NSFG improving the collection of data, particularly in measuring multiple-partner fertility. Copen explained that for females, measuring multiple-partner fertility in previous NSFG cycles was done by comparing birthdates of children with marriage and cohabitation dates, which was quite difficult. In 2007, questions were added to the female questionnaire asking directly about biological children with each husband or cohabiting partner reported by the respondent. These data on multiple-partner fertility can be used in conjunction with existing pregnancy, marriage and cohabitation histories to more accurately define marriage and cohabiting status at both conception and birth. Today, the questionnaire is designed to capture births within marriage, births within cohabitation, and births outside of coresidential relationships.

Another improvement to relationship data in the NSFG has been the expansion of information about men's non-biological children. This addition allows for a more complete picture of men's potential fathering roles in the context of marital and cohabiting relationships. In 2002, men were only asked questions on basic demographic data and current living arrangements for the non-biological children they had legally adopted. In 2007, questions were modified to collect demographic and other key information for all non-biological children with whom a respondent had ever lived. The increase in the proportion of children living in households with non-biological fathers (i.e., step or social fathers) coupled with the need to collect data on aspects of social father involvement motivated this change.



The final improvement Copen mentioned concerned the redesign of the father involvement section in the male questionnaire. In the next round of data collection (2011 to 2015), this section will include child-specific parenting information on two focal children -- the youngest residential child and the youngest non-residential child. The most recent NSFG does not ask about involvement with specific children but rather all children together. In addition to expanding information on parenting of non-biological children, the inclusion of child-specific measures on the NSFG is an important step in linking the circumstances of a birth, such as the marital and cohabiting status of the child's mother to level of father involvement.

### THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND COHABITATION DATA

Katherine Wallman, Statistical and Science Policy Branch, Office of Management and Budget, stated the field needs to ask one critical question: To what extent is the household an appropriate framework in which to consider cohabitation? She also took a moment to distinguish between a federally sponsored survey, where the government exerts explicit control over the questions asked, and a federally funded survey, where the government gives explicit control to the researchers designing the survey content. She stated that yes, the government can try to persuade investigators to make their surveys consistent with federally sponsored surveys, but ultimately those decisions are up to the researchers. She also commented that surveys are designed to produce general-purpose statistical data or to answer research questions making it important to distinguish between federally funded and federally sponsored when comparing or aggregating data from different surveys.

Wallman mentioned that the Office of Management and Budget, at the request of the Commerce Secretary, has formed an interagency task force that is looking at the various federally sponsored surveys hoping to improve the tabulation and collection of data on relationships. This task force includes representatives from the following organizations:

- Census Bureau
- Bureau of Labor Statistics
- Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation at the Department of Health and Human Services
- Administration on Children and Families
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
- National Center for Health Statistics
- Office of Research Evaluating Statistics at Social Security
- National Center for Education Statistics
- Department of Housing and Human Development
- Department of Labor
- Economic Research Service
- Maternal and Child Health Bureau
- National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics
- Office of Personnel Management

- Equal Opportunity Commission

The Census Bureau has conducted a series of 18 focus groups across the country to help inform this interagency review. These focus groups include urban and rural areas and states that legally recognize same-sex marriages or domestic partnerships. A total of 186 participants were engaged in these focus groups, including those with legal marriages, registered domestic partnerships, and no legally recognized status. The participants have considerable diversity in terms of age, relationship, longevity, and educational background. These discussions centered on the current Census Bureau questions of relationship and marital status and have addressed how people answered the question and why, the terminology used, and potential alternatives.

Several alternative questions used in other countries were shown to participants to get their reactions. The Census Bureau then tested new questions in a series of in-depth cognitive interviews with 40 individuals to see how well the questions were understood. The results of this research have led to a set of specific questions proposed for quantitative testing in a larger scale field test.

## DISCUSSION

### Same-Sex Relationships

Gates noted that the issue of having pointers for the children to different parents in same-sex relationships is important because of the complicated legal status of these relationships. He also remarked that the use of the terms boyfriend and girlfriend (rather than partner or cohabitant) in the CPS was important because the former, not the latter, are the terms that most people use in describing same-sex relationships.

Nancy Bates, Census Bureau, in response to a question about the results of the cognitive tests done on relationship and marriage status questions said that those responses suggest the recommended questions could solve many of the problems associated with false positives. She added that it is logical to keep the two-part marital status question separate because it reflects the manner most people view these relationships. Terry DeMaio, Census Bureau, added that including a question on boyfriend or girlfriend helped those in same-sex couples who were not married or in a domestic partnership or civil union find a place for themselves.

In response to a question about the necessity of distinguishing between civil unions and civil marriages given minimal legal differences in the two, Gates said that there is a huge social difference. Being married versus being in a civil union carries a very different meaning to people's families and how couples are treated. The difference is more a matter of social status rather than legal rights.

### The Complexity of Cohabitation

In response to a question about the need to identify roommates who later become a cohabiting couple, Smock explained that this level of detail is necessary to truly understand the phenomenon of cohabitation in terms of roles, responsibilities, and legal obligations. Another participant added that this type of detail is important in



understanding how the economic resources available to adults or children in a household evolve with the relationship. A participant also remarked that the concept of cohabitation is so complex that there is a need to tease out such details to obtain meaningful insights. An additional comment was made that the field may need to assign different statistical weights to the various indicators if the level of detail becomes too great.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING COHABITATION**

- Include uniform measures of cohabiting relationships across surveys.
- Develop and incorporate measures for the full range of relationships, such as dating, LAT, unmarried partner, civil unions, and registered domestic partnerships.
- Ensure accurate methods of measuring different-sex and same-sex relationships.
- Include measurement of sexual orientation and gender identity as a standard demographic characteristic.
- Refocus measurement toward a broader concept of intimate relationships to allow moving beyond the binary concepts of marriage versus cohabitation.
- Expand the age range to permit analysis of cohabitation among older Americans.

## VI

### **SEPARATION, DIVORCE, AND UNION DISSOLUTION\***

In the 1970s, the number of divorces in the United States grew rapidly followed by a dramatic increase in nonmarital cohabitation in the 1980s. These changes in family structure and stability pose great challenges to both data collection efforts and family researchers. New living arrangements need to be defined and understood. Therefore, surveys and longitudinal studies need to be modified or revamped to reflect the new realities of American family life.

Four conference speakers looked specifically at separation, divorce, and union dissolution. These speakers described both how data collection systems have changed and the issues that have yet to be resolved. Large-scale economic or social events, such as recessions or military mobilizations, offer an opportunity to probe and refine theories of family stability. In addition, data instruments need continual scrutiny to reflect ongoing changes in family dynamics.

#### **MEASURING MARITAL AND UNION DISSOLUTION**

Accurately describing trends and differentials in marital and relationship stability is fundamental to understanding family change and the impact of this change on the economic, mental, and physical well-being of both adults and children. Kelly Raley, the University of Texas at Austin, said that the good news is the evidence suggests data collections systems in place for measuring marital dissolution are solid. A review she conducted with Larry Bumpass (Bumpass & Raley 2007) finds high levels of agreement across data sources regarding levels and trends in divorce. The bad news is that the current statistical system falls short in providing relevant data on trends and differentials in relationship and family instability because it does not do as good a job measuring the transitions into and out of cohabitating relationships as marital dissolution. The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) is the only nationally representative source of data on cohabitation covering all men and women age 15-44, but the upper age cutoff is a problem. Raley noted that other data sources describe the experiences of specific birth cohorts, such as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), but none of these sources provide data for tracking relationship instability across the life course over time.

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\* This chapter is based on the presentations by Kelly Raley, the University of Texas at Austin; Philip Cohen, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Martha Moorehouse, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Department of Health and Human Services; and Rose Kreider, Census Bureau.

## Measuring Marital Dissolution

Raley observed that there are many approaches to describing levels, trends, and differentials in marital dissolution. The simplest measure, the crude divorce rate -- the number of divorces divided by the population -- is a period of measure that can fluctuate substantially from year to year. Raley indicated that this fluctuation is useful because it provides information on how current social circumstances are shaping marriage. She noted that if most couples formally divorce quickly after separating, this measure can provide information about whether and how historical events, such as wars or recessions, impact family life. However, she suggests it would be more useful to gather information about separation rather than divorce.

Another issue with the crude divorce rate is that it describes populations, not marriages. The crude divorce rate does not provide the percentage of marriages that will end in divorce. To describe the experience of married couples, demographers calculate cohort estimates of marital dissolution that can describe trends in divorce by describing changes in the percentage of marriages dissolved within five or ten years across successive marriage cohorts. Raley stated that this approach provides more intuitive descriptions of marriages and their risk of dissolution. This method also considers the fact that the risk of divorce varies substantially by marriage duration and includes both separation and formal divorce. A disadvantage of this approach is that it requires detailed survey data on marital histories.

In the 1990s -- prior to the first Counting Couples conference -- the primary data sources on marital dissolution and divorce were the Current Population Survey (CPS), the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), the NSFG, and vital statistics. In the late 1990s, the data collection systems for tracking change in marital stability shifted substantially. Today, the primary data sources for tracking trends and differentials in marital dissolution include the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), the NSFG, and the American Community Survey (ACS). Each of these has strengths and weaknesses regarding population coverage, the use of proxy reports, the precision of measurement, and the depth of information on marital histories. Raley noted that correspondence among the data sources is good and that each successive survey has yielded a slightly lower estimate of the percentage of marriages ending in divorce (Figure 4-1). However, she questioned if interpreting the 1- to 2-point changes in the percentage of marriages ending in divorce in five years as substantive declines is appropriate.

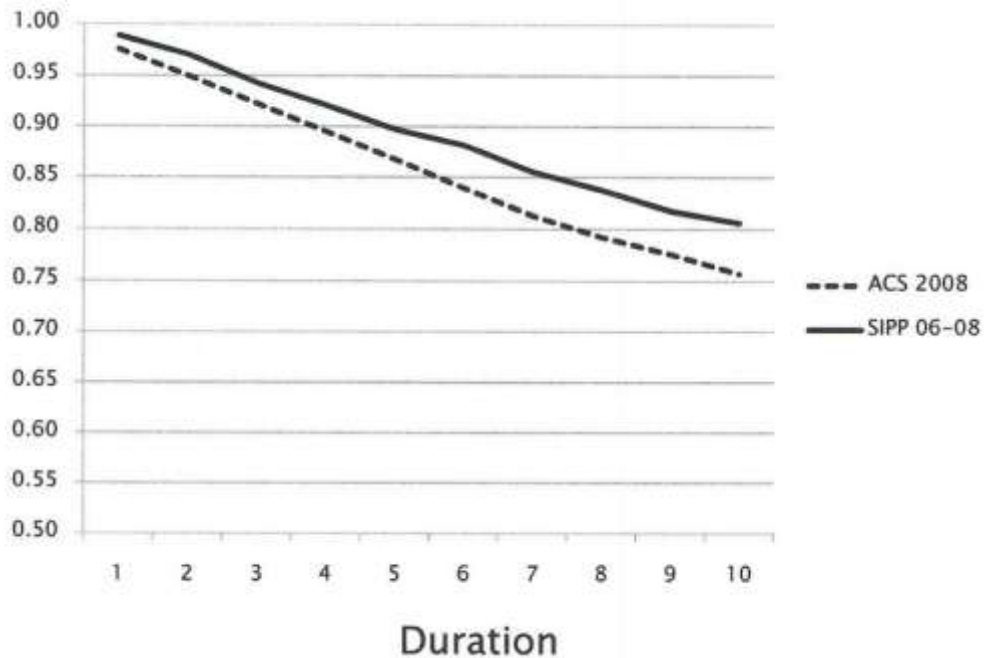


FIGURE 4-1 Period estimates of the percentage of marriages intact by duration from the ACS and SIPP

### New Data Sources

Data from the SIPP provide consistent estimates of marital dissolution over time, but Raley noted that there are some areas in which the SIPP falls short. First, the SIPP's fertility history is highly truncated, providing information only on year of first and last birth. Consequently, this data source does not provide insights into children's experience of parental marital instability. Additionally, the SIPP only provides public-use data on the year of marriage and divorce, not on the respective months, which can lead to downwardly biased estimates of marital dissolution. Another problem with the SIPP is that marital histories of all household members are reported by a single respondent. Men's marital histories are poorer than women's, in part, because women are more often the respondent.

The ACS is the most recent new source of data. Starting in 2008, the ACS began collecting information on marital events over the past 12 months as well as the year of the respondent's most recent marriage. This information provides period estimates of divorce that have a number of advantages over vital statistics. First, both the numerator and the denominator come from the same source, and the denominator includes only ever-married people. Second, these data can be used to calculate the duration-specific probability of divorce. As the population ages, the percentage of marriages that are in their first 10 years -- when divorce rates are highest -- is declining. Calculating duration-specific divorce rates adjusts for this population's age structure. In addition, the ACS collects information on many factors associated with divorce such as race and educational attainment. In effect, the ACS can serve as a good source of data for

describing differentials in divorce. However, Raley noted, the ACS does not collect information on separation, and the formal dissolution of marriages varies across subpopulations. Neither the ACS nor the SIPP provide data to monitor the increase in the instability of cohabiting relationships.

The NSFG serves as a good data source for monitoring this trend as it collects both marital and cohabitation histories. However, the upper age limit on the NSFG is 45, so this means that the experiences of children living with mothers over the age of 45 are not captured via this mechanism. Raley recommended that the age limit for the NSFG be extended to 55 or 60. She also noted that the newly revamped SIPP will, during a four-year period, measure cohabitation over the past 12 months, which will provide data needed to understand children's experience of cohabitation as they age.

Raley listed a number of important questions that cannot be answered with current data sources. These included:

- What percentage of children will experience their parents' separation or divorce before reaching adulthood?
- What percentage of children will live in an unmarried mother household while growing up?
- What percentage of children will experience a stepparent family?
- How much household instability will children experience while growing up?
- How different are these experiences by maternal education?

To answer these questions, she recommended adding fertility histories to the SIPP and providing access to the month and year of three key family events: birth, marriage, and marital dissolution.

### **MEASURING THE EFFECT OF RECESSION ON DIVORCE**

After rising during the 1960s and 1970s, divorce rates have fallen in the United States since the early 1980s more or less steadily. Philip Cohen, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, remarked that recessions seem to have had little effect on the divorce rate (Figure 4-2). Nevertheless, the severity of the Great Recession of 2007 has prompted speculation over its effects on U.S. families. Early effects already have been found, for example, on fertility (Sutton, Hamilton, & Mathews 2011) and cohabitation (Kreider 2010).

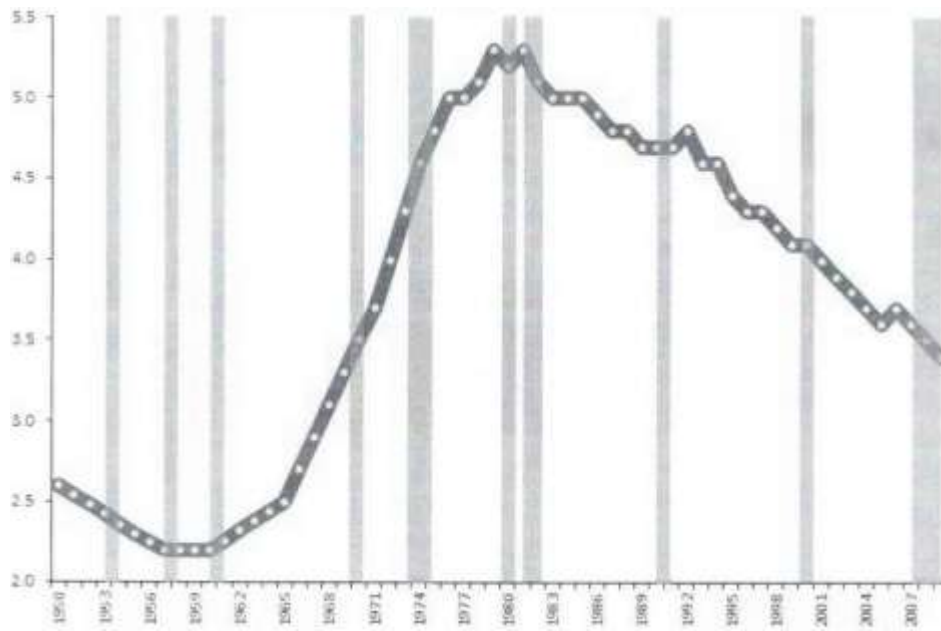


FIGURE 4-2 Crude divorce rate (divorces per 1,000 population) and recessions, 1950-2009

Couple-level theories suggest that economic recessions might affect divorce rates, even if these effects are limited to the short term (Amato & Beattie 2011). On the one hand, economic hardship, resulting from job loss or fear of job loss, low earnings, home foreclosure, and other factors, can add stress to marriages that *increases* the risk of marital conflict and dissolution. On the other hand, there are two mechanisms by which economic hardship might *reduce* the occurrence of divorce, at least temporarily. First, loss of a job or a decline in the value of a home may make divorce more costly relative to available resources, and the recession may have increased the economic shocks that make these costs insurmountable for some individuals or couples considering a divorce. Second, hard economic times within families may draw some couples closer together in resilience so that even those considering divorce might set aside their conflicts and pull together (Wilcox 2011).

To begin to explore these different possibilities, Cohen first used Google's advanced search capabilities to spot early trends in divorce rates in the same manner that Google Flu Trends uses aggregated Google search data to estimate current flu activity around the world in near real time. In this case, Cohen searched the term "divorce" plus the 100 terms most correlated with searches on divorce. Plotting this data from 2003 to the present shows an increase in interest in divorce during this recession. A striking finding from the data was that every year from 2003 through 2008, there was a big dip in interest in divorce between December 1 and December 25, which Cohen called the Christmas dip. However, the Christmas dip has been absent the past two years. He acknowledged that this approach simply represents a new way to spot trends that might not show up in survey data for another few years.

Cohen turned to data from the ACS for a more demographic approach. The ACS began including a divorce question in 2008 and affords the opportunity for calculating the odds of divorce for all states in 2008 and 2009. If recession indicators across states are associated with increasing divorce rates, this would be consistent with the stress perspective at the couple-level suggesting economic shock and hardship fray marital relationships. If, on the other hand, states with more severe recession symptoms have lower divorce rates, this would be consistent either with the costs-of-divorce or the family resilience perspective.

Distinguishing between the two negative effects (cost versus resilience) on divorce is difficult. However, Cohen explained, there are ways to look at different indicators that might distinguish the two. While unemployment and foreclosure might trigger resilience as well as make divorce more expensive, low home prices represent a potential barrier to home resale, not a hardship -- they are mostly experienced as hardship if a family needs to sell their home. Therefore, if falling home sale prices are associated with lower divorce rates, then evidence would be more consistent with the divorce-cost hypothesis rather than the resilience perspective.

### **Empirical Results**

Cohen limited his analyses to ACS data from women included in the survey and used state-level unemployment data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the House Price Index published by the Federal Housing Finance Agency and real estate foreclosure data from Realtytrac to test the three hypotheses. In conducting the regression analysis, he excluded data from four states (California, Nevada, Arizona, and Florida) that were outliers in both the home price and foreclosure and examined them separately.

The results of this analysis of divorce rates in 2008 and 2009 provide little evidence supporting an effect of the current economic crisis on divorce at the state level. Change in housing price was the only statistically significant correlation showing that divorce rates were lower in states where house prices fell the most in the previous year. Cohen said that except in the four states where the housing crisis was extreme there was no support for the hypothesis that recession-related stress increases divorce. In contrast, the data did support the conclusion that the recession reduced divorce rates. Further this reduction is more likely to be associated with the cost-of-divorce perspective rather than with the resilience perspective.

Cohen suggested it might be worthwhile to seek opportunities to take a more detailed look at the ability of Google's search capabilities to provide a rapid response tool for Counting Couples. He also recommended that the field needs to focus data collection and analyses to include individual and contextual covariates for analysis over large pooled areas.

## **SEPARATION, DIVORCE, AND UNION DISSOLUTION**

Rose Kreider, Census Bureau, represented the federal data community's perspective and listed some of the current issues in dissolution measurement:

- Retaining items in surveys as budgets tighten.

- Measuring dissolution of cohabitation.
- Measuring the number of transitions children experience.
- Responding to the lack of monthly dissolution data.

Kreider stated that in the face of federal budget uncertainties, it is critical for the user community to voice its support for the items in these surveys. The community needs to be prepared to identify the bare minimum needed in terms of data collection and defend the need for those items. Identifying links to specific programs, laws, and governmental needs will be crucial. Kreider noted that the field also needs to look for any links to administrative data that are available from sources other than surveys.

In terms of measuring dissolution of cohabitation, the field should conduct further work to better understand the murky edges of cohabitation -- when does it start and end -- and also better define cohabitation. It is important to identify the salient features for which data are needed, particularly as they relate to outcomes such as children's well-being and cohabiting partners and the transition to marriage. The field also should look for other sources of federal data that can be useful.

Kreider raised a number of questions about cohabitation that need to be answered, including: Is it coresidence that matters for outcomes? Is it how long people have lived together? Is it whether they have definite plans to marry or not? Is it whether they have joint children? From the children's perspective, are these partners their parents? Data from the SIPP may provide some answers to these questions. She said that in the end, the key issue is how these transitions affect children. Measuring the number of transitions children experience is important; however, it is also important to quantify the parents' fertility and relationship histories and the child's residential history.

The lack of monthly dissolution data is not likely to be resolved soon due to disclosure issues. However, a study published last year (Mitchell 2010) finds a significant amount of noise in recording divorce dates. The level of noise may be significant enough to conclude that disclosure issues are not an insurmountable issue.

To move forward, Kreider presented a list of items for the field to consider:

- Exploit the new ACS marital events data.
- Further examine the difference between permanent separation and divorce.
- Reduce the fuzziness in the concept of cohabitation by zeroing in on what information is crucial.
- Better understand the dissolution issues involved for same-sex couples.

### **CHALLENGES IN FEDERAL EVALUATION WORK**

Martha Moorehouse, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Department of Health and Human Services, presented a federal policy perspective and suggested a number of issues need to be resolved in thinking about children and family structure. For example, teen pregnancy prevention work suggests it is important to talk with children, not parents. It also is important to understand how children define



families and family structure in the surveys as opposed to how adults define these concepts. A multiagency task force is currently examining questions such as: How has this been assessed in household surveys? What measures best capture family status? How can family context be tracked over time? Moorehouse also noted that the task force is considering questions that explore whether children live in one home (household) or if they shuttle back and forth between two or more different households.

A major understudied policy issue is assessing how well parenting interventions work. The majority of work on this subject is being conducted as part of the State of the Science and Practice in Parenting Interventions Across Childhood project run by the Department of Health and Human Services. This effort aims to understand both parenting relationships and the contexts in which parental intervention is helpful. This work is also attempting to measure change in family context and identify targets for parenting interventions based on constantly changing living situations.

Touching on the issue of complexity in families, Moorehouse said that there are good data on some of the most complex family arrangements, such as adoption and children not living with their parents. These families do not represent large populations, but the success of getting data on these types of families is a positive development in creating data strategies for answering specific policy questions.

Moorehouse said that the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Department of Health and Human Services is the last place where policy recommendations originate. However, this office is the first place that attempts to ensure policies are informed by data, are on track and not misusing data, and are not based on misunderstandings of what data represent. She added the data on family arrangements in the larger population of the United States are important in understanding complexities of vulnerable families. There may be a misunderstanding of the unique stresses in the populations being examined if we don't know what patterns are happening overall.

Moorehouse laid out a number of dos and don'ts in using data to inform policy. For policy, first and foremost, data are needed on income. For example, when thinking about divorce and recession, do the data look the same at different income thresholds or for people who are married with children compared to those who are not married and have children? The richer the data, the stronger the foundation for thinking about the policy issues.

The strength of the data, especially in relation to the strength of the claims being made, must be considered carefully; data are not generated in a vacuum. Data come from specific research, which might bear directly on policy, but some of the research is far removed from the policy arena. Moorehouse explained that it is important for researchers to lay out constraints when using their data in the policy arena. Failure to do so damages the reputation of science as a tool for informing policy.

## DISCUSSION

### Separation Versus Divorce

In response to a question about distinguishing between separation and divorce, Raley noted that ACS data suggest people were reporting on dissolution, not formal divorce, meaning that the most important transition may be moving out rather than formal legal divorce. Cohen also noted that Census focus groups found people in same-sex couples who had been divorced earlier still categorized themselves as divorced even though they were currently in a long-term, committed relationship. Krista Payne, National Center for Family & Marriage Research, also responded to this question adding that the definition of separated needs further clarification by differentiating whether it is a legal separation involving lawyers, an agreed-upon but informal separation, or one in which a partner simply moved out. Gates noted that there are likely to be differences in the way men and women define these terms. Raley agreed, particularly over longer periods of time.

In response to a concern about considering divorce as a static event with a fixed end date, Cohen and Kreider both agreed that survey respondents can think about this date in many ways (considering either the date the divorce is final or the date that separation occurred). As time passes, respondents are more likely to remember the move-out date rather than the formal date of legal dissolution. Raley added that in an ideal world, data on divorce would include both the separation date and date of divorce. She also mentioned how important it is to have both of these dates. However, she acknowledged that adding this level of detail to surveys such as the ACS might be too much. Raley's last comment drew widespread support from a number of participants, with the general summary of the remarks being that all surveys cannot -- and should not -- be all things for all research questions. Robert Kominski, Census Bureau, cautioned that the Census Bureau considered adding separation date to the Census but found that the data were not meaningful because of the fluidity of separation.

In response to a question about military families, Kreider noted that a military spouse can respond "married, spouse absent" when their partner is overseas. However, some non-military people report their status as married spouse absent when there is just no spouse in the household, so this is not a clean designation.

### The Recession and Marriage Rates

In response to a question about the impact of recession on marriage rates, Gates said that he had not yet looked at whether recessions were delaying marriage. He agreed that this question should be examined in terms of who is deciding to get married and who is not.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING SEPARATION, DIVORCE, AND UNION DISSOLUTION

- Incorporate cohabitation histories.

- Include distinct measurement of separation and divorce.
- Obtain marital and cohabitation histories for same-sex couples.
- Expand the age range of the NSFG to allow assessments of remarriage stability and implications.

## VII

### **FAMILY STRUCTURE AND INSTABILITY\***

Family instability can have major effects on all family members, especially children. With the increases in divorce and cohabitation in the 1970s and 1980s, more children today experience changes in family structure than in the past. Measuring both the kinds of families and family changes children and parents experience requires sophisticated data-collecting tools and strategies.

Four conference speakers discussed these issues, focusing on the availability and quality of existing measures of family structure and family instability in federal data collection efforts. New datasets have become available in recent years, and existing tools have changed, providing new opportunities to measure and understand how families are changing.

#### **MEASURING FAMILY STRUCTURE AND INSTABILITY AMIDST RAPID DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE**

Marcia Carlson, University of Wisconsin-Madison, observed that family structure -- particularly how it affects child well-being -- has been a major topic in family research over the past several decades. An extensive body of literature has documented that, on average, children's spending time in a family structure other than the traditional two married biological parent household is associated with a greater risk of a number of adverse outcomes such as behavioral problems and delinquency, lower educational attainment, dropping out of high school, and having a teen birth (Astone & McLanahan 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur 1994; Painter & Levine 2000; Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan 2004). It is important to note these studies are based on observational data, so some -- but likely not all -- of the association may be due to unobserved heterogeneity (Cherlin 1999; Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan 2004).

The early family structure literature developed in the context of the rising divorce rates of the 1970s and 1980s, as researchers recognized a large proportion of children would experience their parents' divorce. More recent research has focused on other family types, especially cohabiting families with children (either before or after marriage) and families begun by a nonmarital birth. High rates of dissolution and repartnering among such families coupled with the presence of social parents (typically fathers) in children's lives and high levels of multiple-partnered fertility (parents having children by more than one partner) have increased the focus on instability and complexity in family life in the last decade. Building on Wu's work in the 1990s (e.g., Wu 1996), recent studies suggest that high levels of family instability may be detrimental to children's wellbeing (Fomby & Cherlin 2007; Osborne & McLanahan 2007). In addition, new research has challenged the view that two-parent families most beneficial for

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\* This chapter is based on the presentations by Marcia Carlson, University of Wisconsin-Madison; Kathleen Harris, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Jennifer Park, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; and Gerri Fiala, Employment and Training Administration, U.S. Department of Labor.

children must include a biological father and mother. Some studies have shown outcomes for children living with same-sex parents do not differ from those living with opposite-sex parents (Wainright, Russell, & Patterson 2004) and that those living with adoptive parents do not differ from those with biological parents (Hamilton, Cheng, & Powell 2007).

Given increasing diversity in families, both the challenge of and need for researchers to accurately describe contemporary families and understand how their structure affects the next generation have only increased.

## Family Structure

Even amidst rapid change in family demography, the family remains the institution responsible for the care and socialization of children, charged with rearing the next generation of healthy and productive citizens, workers, partners, and parents. While units without children are certainly considered families, the concept of family structure implicitly directs attention to families with children. Family structure represents the intersection of three key pieces of information -- marital/partnership status (of parents), living arrangements, and biological ties. Instability reflects change in family structures over time.

*Marital/partnership status.* Among family ties, the marital relationship has often been viewed as central to nuclear family dynamics (Cummings & O'Reilly 1997). Marriage signals the history and character of a dyadic relationship and may prospectively affect social and economic wellbeing via the “enforceable trust” of a public commitment (Cherlin 2004) and by increasing men’s earnings (Waite & Gallagher 2000).

Whereas childbearing historically occurred within marriage, today’s marriages (particularly those to parents of lower socioeconomic status) have a high likelihood of dissolving (Martin 2006). Many births occur to cohabiting couples (Raley 2001), including post-marital cohabiting unions (Brown 2000). Additionally, 41% of births now occur outside of marriage (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura 2010), and the majority of unmarried couples are in a romantic relationship (with about 50% cohabiting) at the time of a child’s birth (McLanahan forthcoming). Therefore, children have a high likelihood of experiencing a family type other than the traditional two married biological parent household.

To measure family structure today, it is important to understand the nature of the union between the parents of a focal child (or one parent and another partner who may serve as a parent figure). Are they legally married, living together, dating, or have no romantic relationship? At the same time, with respect to new partners, it is important to recognize that not all new relationships reach the threshold of “family” -- that is, not all dating partners of mothers or fathers will be involved with children or have a long-term relationship. Therefore, understanding when (and by what criteria) to include new partners is an important topic for future research.

*Living arrangements.* Second, it is important to understand who is living in the household. Living with others affects the distribution of household resources, economies of scale, and the filing unit for tax and transfer policy. Recent research has

suggested that “living together” may not be a discrete status (Manning & Smock 2005). In addition, reports about whether a couple is living together might depend on how or to whom the question is asked (Knab & McLanahan 2006) and when the question is asked (Teitler, Reichman, & Koball 2006). Differing custody arrangements may imply that children divide their time across households and do not have a “primary” residence. It is important to gather information about all household members, including individuals who may come and go from a given household -- for example, half-siblings of a focal child or the partner of a biological parent.

*Biological ties.* Evolutionary psychologists cite the importance of biological (or genetic) ties for determining the level and nature of investment in offspring and relationships (Daly & Wilson 2000). With greater instability and high levels of re-partnering, children are likely to spend time living with the partner of one of their biological parents: two-fifths of children will live in a cohabiting family by age 12 (Kennedy & Bumpass 2008), and nearly one-third will experience a married or cohabiting stepfamily (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet 1995). Therefore, many children will be living with a social parent (typically father). High levels of multiple-partnered fertility imply that many children will also have half- or stepsiblings who may or may not reside in the same household. Understanding both biological and nonbiological family ties is important for fully capturing family structure today.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of Surveys**

Carlson asked, “Given these demographic changes, how well are contemporary surveys doing in measuring family structure and family instability?” She acknowledged that current surveys do quite well in capturing the “basic” family structure categories by marital status at a given point in time. For instance, they typically reveal if a child is living with two married biological parents, a married stepfamily, or a divorced single mother. However, among unmarried families, partnership status of parent(s) is often unclear. It is difficult to determine whether unmarried parents are cohabiting, in a dating relationship, or have no partner. Some studies ask about cohabitation at each survey, but it is not always clear whether the cohabiting partner is the same person across waves. Many surveys do not collect information on the less “discrete” categories of couple relationships, such as dating relationships of couples that live together “some of the time.” Excluding such relationships significantly underestimates the degree of family instability, particularly for families begun by a nonmarital birth (Osborne & McLanahan 2007). Additionally, many surveys do not capture the full trajectory of family structure over time, which is crucial for measuring instability. Some surveys ask about marriage and divorce since the past survey, but few capture finer gradations in partner changes or living arrangements or measure the duration of all relationships. In addition, measures (and studies) of family structure rarely capture distinctions in the biological relatedness of children -- to parents and parent-figures as well as to siblings. Exceptions include studies of blended families that focus on biological and non-biological children of the same resident father (e.g., Hofferth 2006).

With growing family complexity, individuals in the same household may not have the same definition of their family because they have different biological or affective

ties to particular members inside or outside the household. Therefore, it is important to consider who the respondent is in a given survey and whether full information is collected to evaluate the complete array of family relationships for all members. It is also important to recognize that adults and children may have different knowledge about the family situation, and surveys need to be sensitive to this situation. For example, the NLSY97 asks the adult respondent whether the youth knows that a father- or mother-figure is not their biological father or mother.

Overall, it is crucial to recognize that families today often span households, particularly if children live away from one biological parent (typically the father) and if parents live away from some or all of their biological children. Many current surveys are household based, so they focus on collecting information about who is in the household (i.e., with detailed household rosters), but often miss any “outside” family ties. Similarly, most studies in the family structure literature use household measures of family structure. Hence, a married couple with two biological children in the same household would look identical to a married couple with two biological children together where the father has a child by a prior partner living elsewhere. This nonresident child may come to visit and affect family dynamics.

### **Future Measurement and Research**

Carlson noted two fundamental strategies for better understanding the variability in contemporary families, each with strengths and weaknesses. The first strategy is to develop more detailed survey questions and categories to try to capture all possible family configurations in which a respondent may live. Good examples of this approach are in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of a Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) (respondents are asked about their relationship to a given child) and in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) (respondents are given extensive choices about how they might be related to another household member). The advantage of this approach is that, with detailed and extensive questions, researchers can be certain that all the key pieces of information have been reported – who is in the household and what are the biological and legal relationships between them. The disadvantage is that it requires extensive questionnaire time. In addition, many of the categories will not be relevant for a given respondent leading to significant respondent burden in getting complete information.

The second strategy is to allow the respondent to proactively describe the structure of his or her family in the form of a family map or diagram prompting respondents for key pieces of information. Respondents would be asked “who is in your family” and to identify particular family members, where they live, and how they are related. For example, adults would be asked about all their children, including any biological children living elsewhere, as well as unrelated children in the household. Children would be asked about their biological mother and father, any other parent-figures, full siblings, half siblings, and step siblings. The NLSY79 currently has this type of question for siblings. It asks how many brothers and sisters the respondent has, and then prompts respondents with “please think of whomever you consider as your brothers and sisters.” The advantage of this method is that it allows individuals to determine who *they* consider to be family members. The disadvantage is that some



family or household members could be missed if the respondent does not remember or intend to identify them as family.

Regardless of how data are gathered, one important issue will be for researchers to develop and use efficient categories of family structure that are detailed enough to provide meaningful information in the context of current family diversity, but large enough to allow for both substantive and empirical comparisons across groups. Family theory may guide this inquiry by suggesting the aspects of family structure that are most important for measurement and why. Ultimately, it might be useful to incorporate multiple measures of family structure and instability in a single investigation (e.g., Hill, Yeung, & Duncan 2001) to better understand the nature and implications of family structure and instability from multiple perspectives.

### **FAMILY STRUCTURE AND INSTABILITY MEASURES IN FEDERAL DATA COLLECTION EFFORTS**

Kathleen Harris, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, assessed the availability and quality of existing measures of family structure and family instability in federal data collection efforts in the United States. A large body of research has documented the profound changes in contemporary family forms beginning in the 1960s when divorce rates began to rise and into the 1970s when nonmarital fertility rates increased, fueling the growth in single-parent families in the latter half of the 20th century. Soon after, research brought attention to the rise in cohabiting-parent families in the 1980s and 1990s. These profound changes in the contexts in which children are raised and the salience of these family contexts for their social, behavioral, and physical well-being make it a priority for federal data collections to measure family structure and changes.

Almost all current nationally representative studies that sample households or interview individuals include some measures of the family structures in which individuals in households live. The amount and quality of measures on family structure depend on several key criteria of the data collection effort: (1) study design; (2) scientific objective of the study; and (3) data reporters in the family of interest. First, the design of the study contains several elements. Longitudinal cohort designs have the advantage over cross-sectional studies in capturing change in family structure as it occurs through time. They can provide data to measure family instability as an individual experiences it and relate family instability to changes in outcomes. Second, the scientific objective of a study reflects what amount of survey time can be devoted to collecting information on family structure and family structure change. For example, the scientific goal of the Fragile Families longitudinal study and the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) is to study the causes and consequences of family formation and family behavior. Add Health is an omnibus study of the health status and health behavior of young people over their life course, while the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) is focused primarily on the development of labor market skills and experiences over the life course. Third, the data reporters about family structure are conditional on the design and purpose of the study. When children are young, as in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) or Fragile Families, parents report on family structure. When children are adolescents or young adults, they report on their own family structures growing up, as in Add Health or NLSY. Having two reporters of family structure is advantageous for validity checks and

more complete measurement, such as mothers and fathers (a small subset in Fragile Families) or parents and children (in Add Health).

### Measures of Interest

Harris discussed two key concepts: family structure and family instability. Both concepts may be measured by the same data, but family instability often requires additional data for more refined measurement. *Family structure status* is a static measure of family structure at a point in time (or point in a child's life course). *Family instability* is an indicator of change in family structure over time (or over the developmental stages of a child's life preferably when children live at home). Measures of family structure status and family instability range from static, crude measures of resident parents' marital status to elaborate measures of the social and biological configuration of all family members inside and outside a household as well as the changes in these configurations over time. Each family structure measure requires specific sources of data.

### Family Structure Status Measures

Family structure status measures require data on the number and type of parent(s) with whom the child lives. Type refers to the relationship of each parent figure in the household to the child (including biological, step, adoptive, foster, or (non)biological surrogate parents). If two parents are in the household, crossing parent types results in the most detailed measure of family structure with two parents yielding 25 family structure types. Those 25 family structure types can then be added to single parent types in each category providing 30 family structure types. However, some combinations of parent types are rare or not substantively distinct from other types, such as stepdad and foster mom or foster mom and surrogate dad. Based on this detailed information, a meaningful measure of family structure status might include the following structure types: (1) two biological parents; (2) two adoptive parents; (3) two foster parents; (4) biological mother, stepfather; (5) bio father, stepmother; (6) two biologically related surrogate parents (e.g., grandparents, aunts, and uncles); (7) two non-biological surrogate parents (e.g., two stepparents, neighbors); (8) single biological mother; (9) single biological father; (10) single biological surrogate (e.g., sibling); and (11) single non-biological surrogate.

This level of detail is informative for descriptive cohort and period trends in family structure, but it may not be necessary for more specific research questions and analyses. For example, if the research focus is on variations in social and economic resources by family structure, the types of social parent figures may be less important than the number and biology of parents. In this case, collapsing family structure categories into five categories with three types of two-parent families (two biological, step, and surrogate) and two types of one-parent families (single biological parent, single non-biological) might be sufficient.

Research has also indicated the marital status of two-parent families is salient for family relationships and adolescent outcomes. Thus categorizing family structure types by marital versus cohabiting status to create subcategories of two biological, step, and

surrogate parents may be beneficial. In addition, there is increasing interest in same-sex couples with children, another potential subcategory of two-parent families.

Harris emphasized that sound, influential research involves a balance between detail and parsimony in measurement coupled with modeling decisions. She suggested beginning with the most detail possible then using theory and prior evidence to refine the measure to address specific questions is a good strategy.

In many cross-sectional data surveys, a main survey household respondent (HHR) lists all members of the household on a roster, indicates each household member's current marital status and notes their relationship to the HHR. Typically, the HHR is a parent figure. These data therefore allow the researcher to identify parent figures in the home (spouse or unmarried partner of HHR), but only the relationship between the HHR and any child listed on the household roster, meaning only one type of parent figure can be identified for two-parent families. The spouse or unmarried partner's relationship with each child is unknown. For example, a male HHR who fills out the household roster may indicate that he is separated and has an unmarried partner in the household and a biological child and adopted child. It is unclear whether the biological child to the HHR is also the biological child of the unmarried partner or whether the adopted child is the adopted child of the HHR, the unmarried partner, or both parent figures. Moreover, a married HHR who has a biological child in the household and lives with his wife could represent a two-biological parent family or a two-parent stepfamily. Therefore, from the child's perspective, complete family structure status cannot be determined. Biological relationships between all parents and children in a household cannot be determined, and complex blended family structures cannot be specified.

The level of detail available in cross-sectional surveys varies. For example, in the ACS, an HHR's relationship to a child can be biological, adopted, step, or foster. The U.S. Census identifies biological, adopted, or stepchildren of the HHR. The major limitation of these data is that the biological and social relationships between parents and children can only be determined for one parent in the household limiting refinement in family structure types. This limitation primarily occurs because relationship data are collected from the perspective of the household head completing the survey, a design primarily driven by the survey's purpose. To obtain complete information on the types of all parents in the household, the survey needs to collect relationship data from the child's perspective. Family structure types are even more difficult to measure if the HHR is not a parent figure in the household. For instance, if a grandparent in a three-generation household completes the household information, parents will be listed in the household as sons or daughters to HHR, and their children as a grandchild of HHR, but the relationship between the parent(s) and children cannot be discerned.

Longitudinal studies enable the researcher to distinguish two-biological parent families from other types of two-parent families or blended families using different strategies. Fragile Families and Add Health gather a household roster and obtain the social and biological relationships between all parent figures and children in the household. In the Fragile Families, the relationships between the child and both parent figures in the home are reported. In the Add Health, the adolescent respondent (and young adult in subsequent waves) reports his or her relationship with every household member. Thus complete family structure status measures are available in these two data sources over time. In addition, multiple reporters (fathers in the Fragile Families for

a subset of families, and parents in the Add Health) allow for validity checks or missing data imputation, making these very high quality data. The marital and cohabiting status of parents and the mother's relationship to the biological father are available from other questions in Fragile Families and from the parent interview in Add Health. In addition, this can be determined by the type of parent partner listed (spouse, partner/boyfriend/girlfriend) in the household roster.

The NLSY79 and NLSY97 also gather a household roster, but they only obtain the relationship of HHR (in the NLSY79) or parent (in the NLSY97) to household members. To address this limitation, the NLSY97 contains a series of follow-up questions asking the parent respondent to identify the mother and father figure of the children who live in the household, specify the type of mother and father figure (bio, step, adopted, foster, or guardian), and indicate whether the parent respondent has a spouse or partner in the household. This information enables the researcher to measure more refined family structure statuses such as two bio parents, step families (one bio, one step), single bio-parent families, as well as single and two-surrogate parent families, getting closer to the ideal measure described above.

The ECLS-B and ECLS-K collect data on family structure by asking the parent respondent what their relationship is to the child (bio, step, adopted, foster, and other) along with other questions about the marital/cohabiting status of the parent respondent, and whether the spouse or partner is the other biological parent. As with the NLSY97, one- and two-parent families can be delineated according to biological ties in the ECLS surveys.

In sum, the most detailed information for measuring family structure status comes from data on the social and biological relationships between parents and children and the marital/cohabiting status of parent figures in the household. Ideally, this information can be obtained from the child's reports of relationships with members in a household roster, as in Add Health, but it can also be obtained from one parent reporter in Fragile Families. Alternatively, parent reports of their relationships with children provide part of the structure, and when coupled with data on the presence of a spouse or partner in a household and on the biological relationship of a spouse or partner to the child, we can obtain as close to the ideal measure of family structure status as possible. These data are available in the NLSY97, ECLS-B, and ECLS-K, but is harder to work with from a researcher's perspective, does not provide as much detail, and is of somewhat lower quality.

Family structure measures used in the cross-sectional and Census-based surveys are of lower quality because the social and biological relationships between both parents in two-parent families are unknown, leading to less detailed measures of family structure status along dimensions that previous research has indicated are critical to outcomes. Exceptions include the SIPP and NSFG, which contain supplemental questions about children's living arrangements and the relationship of the HHR's spouse or unmarried partner to the child.

### **Family Instability Measures**

In the most general sense, family instability is measured by family disruption or transitions and change in family structure over time, where time refers to the child's life

course. A crude indicator of family instability is parents' marital status, where divorced, separated, or widowed indicates some prior disruption. But general disruption is not a satisfying measure. Research indicates that the number of transitions, the life stage in which disruptions occur, and the length of time since disruption have implications for children's adjustment and well-being. Thus there are several concepts related to family instability that require more refined measures and detailed data.

There are two relevant dimensions: (1) change -- when, what, and how often; and (2) duration -- length of time since last family structure change and length of the childhood life course in different family structure types. The number of family structure changes is an overall measure of family instability and can be measured across the life course, within different life stages (such as childhood and middle and late adolescence), or up to the date of survey collection. Type of change might be relevant for the theoretical research question being addressed. That is, change from a two-parent family to a one-parent family may be detrimental, whereas change from a one-parent to a two-parent family may be beneficial for children and parents; or change from a two bio-parent family may be more detrimental than change from a two-parent step family.

Finally, family structure change, as well as the number and type of changes, may have differential impacts on children and parents depending on the developmental stage of the child's life course in which change occurs. The duration dimension captures the stability of family structure experiences. Some evidence suggests that children's adjustment to family structure changes improve with longer time in the new family structure, making the duration since family structure change a salient measure. To test theoretical hypotheses about the impacts of different family structure statuses, the length of the child's life spent in each family structure type becomes a high-quality, data-demanding measure.

Family instability can be measured using two approaches, but the best instability measures require longitudinal data and capture change over time. One approach gathers retrospective data on family disruptions, either with a set of questions (how many times have you been married or living with a partner?) or with a marriage and cohabitation history of the parent living with the child. Cross-sectional and longitudinal study designs can provide these types of data. The second approach collects a household roster indicating the relationships between children and household members across waves of data collection on a prospective cohort and measures change in parent figures over time. These types of data are not available in cross-sectional study designs.

The available measures of family instability for the Census-based cross-sectional studies (ACS, CE, CPS, SIPP, and U.S. Census) come from current marital and cohabitation status, where any disruption can be crudely measured. The SIPP includes additional questions asking why new household members "joined" the household (with response categories including marriage, separation or divorce, or birth). The SIPP allows for a dynamic measure of family structure change.

In longitudinal studies, repeated measures of relationships between parents and children based on the household roster and the marital/cohabiting status of the HHR across the waves of data collection allow researchers to identify change in types of parent figures over time when constructing measures of family instability. Data on change in family structure types are of higher quality if the periodicity of the survey is more often capturing changes that might be missed with longer intervals between

survey waves (three or more years). Data quality on instability measured using this approach is dependent on the data quality of the family structure status measure because this repeated measure is the basis of the instability measure. Thus the highest quality data on instability using the household relationships approach are found in the Fragile Families, ECLS-B, ECLS-K, and NLSY97 because they collect data from the same cohort every one to three years (the last wave of the Fragile Families had a four-year interval).

Creating these instability measures is time-intensive and complex because the household relationship data are only available for one parent (except in the Fragile Families). Therefore, they must be supplemented with additional questions using complex skip patterns to address the array of social and biological relationships with children in two-parent families. These are then compared across time. Another limitation to this approach concerns failure to collect data on both parents' relationship histories. This limitation can result in left-censoring the child's experience of family structure change depending on the date the survey begins. This is not problematic for the ECLS-B and Fragile Families because these surveys began with the birth of the index child. However, in the NLSY97 and ECLS-K, family structure history of the child is only known from the age of the child at the first interview wave. Thus measures of the number of family structure changes, the types of changes, and the life stages in which changes occur may be incomplete or underestimated. Similarly, duration measures will be truncated if the entire child's life cannot be captured in measurement.

Another approach uses the marital and cohabitation history of the mother or custodial parent supplemented with data on the relationship between the parent's partners and the child. At bare minimum, asking which partner is the biological parent of the child. Supplementing the relationship histories with these questions can overcome these limitations. The Add Health includes both a marriage and cohabitation history of the resident parent. The parent's marriage and cohabitation history covers the adolescent respondent's life from birth to time of first interview for more than 90% of the adolescent respondents. In conjunction with data from the household roster considering the social and biological relationships to every household member and data asking if the adolescent ever lived with the non-resident, biological parent, all instability measures are available, including the number and type of transitions, the timing of transitions, and the duration of the life course that the child lived in different family structures.

The ECLS-K does not collect marital or cohabitation histories of parents, and NLSY97 only asks the youth respondent the number and duration of the parents' previous marriages. However, there are data issues with complex change measures including missing data, inconsistencies, and highly variable and unstable living arrangements of children. Further, these problems are greater for children and parents experiencing the most instability. However, the datasets with the richest measures of family structure status (Add Health, Fragile Families, NLSY97, and ECLS), with short periodicity (Fragile Families, ECLS, NLSY97), or with high-quality retrospective data on parents' marital and cohabitation histories (Add Health) provide immense opportunities for research on the dynamics of family structure and instability and their consequences for children and parents.



## Other Family Structure Measures

Federally funded national data collection projects provide other types of data allowing extensions of family structure measures. All of the longitudinal studies and the NSFG and SIPP provide information on non-resident biological parents, their living arrangements, and the history of when they lived with their biological child. These data allow for more nuanced measures of family structure representing the complete configuration of social and biological parents with whom the child has access. For example, a child may live with a bio mother and stepfather but also be in contact with (or sometimes live) with his or her non-resident bio father and stepmother. Therefore, this child may have access to four parent figures compared to a child living with a single parent and having no contact with the non-resident biological parent. In particular, the Fragile Families, NSFG, and SIPP collect additional information on the living arrangements of children, especially if children live in multiple households during the year.

Coresidential intergenerational family structures also can be identified for all surveys collecting a household roster (the ECLS collects a household roster in the first interview and then updates it in subsequent waves). The presence of grandparent(s) in the household represents greater access to biologically related adults. Some surveys specifically ask about grandparent relationships (ACS, CE).

Most longitudinal studies provide information on biological children who are not living with the parent. This is important in calculating the total number of children and the number of siblings. The Fragile Families and NLSY surveys provide the most information on nonresident or other biological children of parents. Add Health provides information about the biological relationships among siblings because the relationship information based on the household roster is gathered from the child rather than the parent. Siblings can be classified as twin full, non-twin full, half, and stepsibs, and identical twins are differentiated from fraternal twins. Other surveys allow for the identification of siblings in the household even though their biological relationship is not always known. These data provide even more refined measures of family structure according to sibship relations, which are found to vary with outcomes for children.

Finally, many of these surveys provide contextual information measured at multiple spatial units that are attached to individual records. Various measures of family structure and instability can be defined at the neighborhood, school, and peer levels. Many studies have attached Census measures on the proportion of married couples with children and the proportion of female-headed families with children measured at the block group or Census tract, for example. Add Health provides unique contextual data that measure the family structure in the school and the peer groups in which adolescents are embedded in addition to the neighborhood measures. The proportion of the adolescent's friends who live in a single-parent family (based on actual peer reports of their family structure) and the proportion of students in the school who live in single-parent families represent family structure norms and models in the social environments in which children live.



## The National Children's Study and Family Stability

In response to this session's presentations, Jennifer Park, *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, asked, "What is it about family structure and instability that affects child outcomes?" She replied that the determinants of outcomes should guide how structure or instability is measured. In particular, if time or funds are limited, the purpose of the study should guide the decisions made.

Park briefly described some of the decisions that have gone into the National Children's Study (NCS), which has the goal to collect information to better understand how the environment and children's genetic background affect their health and development over time. The current target for the study is a nationally representative sample of about 100,000 children born in the United States over a given period of time. Park explained that the large sample size will make it possible to study rare outcomes or conditions while probing the full experiences of child development.

The NCS has been in a design phase for about ten years. It has two field tests, the first in 2009 in seven study centers across the United States, the second in 2010 in an additional 30 study centers. The protocol calls for recruiting pregnant women or women who intend to become pregnant and then enroll them and their children as their children are born. Experiments with recruitment have been conducted to gauge the potential biases in measuring children's outcomes. For example, how might recruitment through health care providers affect coverage? In some cases, a lower intensity protocol is administered, and the individual is invited to participate in a higher intensity data collection effort once trust has been established.

For the main study, organizers are planning to front load the information collection process. Intense data collection will occur during pregnancy, immediately after birth, and during the first few years of life. Periodicity will then broaden as the child ages. The study will collect environmental samples, biological samples, cognitive and socio-emotional development measures, achievement measures for children and air, dust, water, blood, urine, saliva, and toenails. Park said, "Of all the biological samples, people seem to be the most reluctant about offering us their toenails."

### Measuring Family Change

Park observed that family structure is a snapshot at a particular point in time. In that respect, the National Children's Survey, with its long duration and repeated measures, provides an opportunity to measure change in families by comparing these snapshots.

She asked, "What are the things that occur in a family that benefit a child's well-being? Is it the family living arrangement? Is it a change in residence? Is it mobility? Is it people coming to the household? Is it companionship? Is it income? Is it parenting practices?" All of these things can be measured through the National Children's Study. With these data, it may be possible to identify the factors in family structure and instability that influence children's outcomes over time.

Finally, the National Children's Study makes substantial demands on participants in terms of privacy, time, and commitment, which is also a factor with other studies. Respondents can refuse to answer any questions they like, and participation is strictly

voluntary. Park mentioned that to encourage participation, questions need to be simple and straightforward and focus on activities that are important to families.

### THE CONNECTION WITH EMPLOYMENT

Gerri Fiala, Employment and Training Administration, U.S. Department of Labor, brought a different perspective to the discussion noting that when she thinks of instability, she considers whether an individual may have lost a job or may be engaged in an occupation that requires prolonged periods of absence from a family rather than a change in parental legal guardianship. She also thinks about individuals whose unemployment benefits are running out and have yet to find a job. She said, “There is an instability in the family in terms of being able to provide. That’s something that one would want to consider.”

Fiala noted that another form of instability is when a parent is incarcerated for some period of time. These transitions can have a major impact on children and adolescents, which could be a research focus, along with other forms of instability that affect the lives of children and adolescents.

The Department of Labor has partnered with sister agencies, states, localities, and the public and private sectors to study the effects of interventions on families and children. The Labor Department is interested in testing programs and policies that address the employment challenges of individuals, including low-income, noncustodial parents. She said that nearly one-fourth of noncustodial parents have a difficult time contributing to their children’s income and well-being on a regular basis. Further, “These individuals may have low levels of educational attainment, they may have few employment skills, they may have additional barriers to employment, they may have a hard time finding and keeping jobs that allow them to meet their financial obligations for their children.” When they fail to meet their obligations to their children, they lose an opportunity to play a positive role in their children’s lives.

A Labor Department study in partnership with the Administration on Children and Families revealed that 63% of the custodial families in the child support program were poor or near poor. However, only 35% of poor custodial families and 43% of near-poor custodial families receive child support. She said, “One of the things we’re very concerned about is how do we help noncustodial parents acquire the skills and employment history to support their children? . . . That clearly is a focus of ours because child support makes up about 40% of family income for poor families that receive it.”

A number of states have employment-oriented child support programs. But very little is known about the employment and earnings outcomes of these programs or about their ability to help workers develop skills. The Labor Department is interested in learning more about how these programs could strengthen family stability. For example, as a program strengthens noncustodial parents’ ability to contribute to their child support obligations, is a child’s development affected? Fiala said, “The public workforce system should work closely with the child support agencies and other support providers to help noncustodial parents as part of their employment strategy.”

Fiala mentioned several Labor Department investments related specifically to family stability. One program in a demonstration phase, provides four-year grants that

provide intensive mentoring services to help young parents, ages 16 through 24, reach their education, training, and employment goals leading to family self-sufficiency.

Another program focuses on transitional jobs to help ex-offenders and low-income, noncustodial fathers, encouraging and promoting stronger families. In that program, grantees are part of a random assignment evaluation to test the effectiveness of efforts to help these low-income, noncustodial parents transition into long-term employment, increase their earnings, help pay child support obligations, and become part of their children's lives.

Fiala said, "selfishly, we would love to have people do research on our projects." These projects provide context for thinking about stable families and provide fertile questions for future research.

## DISCUSSION

### The Attributes of Parenting

Philip Cohen, University of North Carolina, noted that biological parents, step-parents, or partners may or may not play a parenting role. So the question becomes, what is parenting, even though the term is often used as a stable category in research. Cohen stated that as with the category of race, it is more important to measure the behaviors a researcher is interested in rather than using a label as a proxy for behaviors.

Harris responded that abundant data exist on the quality and quantity of parenting relationships, such as how much time is spent with a child, what the affect is, and what parents actually do. Furthermore, these characteristics of parenting are strongly associated with family structure. For example, adolescents tend to have different outcomes depending on whether they refer to a biological mother's partner as a spouse or as a stepparent.

Carlson responded that the term social parent is somewhat unfortunate, because it refers to behavior, whereas biological parent refers to genetic relatedness. Additionally, structure refers to family composition, whereas different processes are involved in the interactions within a family; however, measures of these processes, which are being planned in the National Children's Study, can provide perspective on what the structures mean.

Judy Seltzer, University of California, Los Angeles, noted that there is a range of biological and social relationships, some of which overlap and some of which do not. Data can be gathered about the input that a biological parent makes to a family, or data can be gathered about all of the inputs a child receives regardless of source. Those two approaches can conflict, which requires that compromises be made.

### The Role of Extended Kin and Siblings in Families

In response to a question about the role of extended kin in families, Park noted that the ECLS program is following children over time, making it possible to explore the role of kin in a child's living arrangements. Laurie Schwede, Census Bureau, observed that the role of kin can vary by racial or ethnic group, with extended families being more common in some groups than others.

Another questioner asked about sibling relationships within families, noting that children are often confused by the various terms demographers use to define sibling relationships. Harris noted that Add Health can determine these relationships because questions are administered by an interviewer who could help an adolescent figure out the relationships. Carlson added that diagrams can help a respondent map out a relationship.

### **The Role of Stress in Families**

Nicholas Zill, consulting psychologist, asked how to distinguish high-stress but intact families from disrupted families. Park noted that the ECLS and National Children's Study are currently field testing a number of parental stress measures. She observed that there are different kinds of stress related to factors such as money, sex, family roles, and child care. This variety has made it difficult to capture the concept.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING FAMILY STRUCTURE AND INSTABILITY**

- Incorporate cohabiting, step, and same-sex parents in family structure measures.
- Support studies focusing on family life that contain complete fertility, marital, and cohabitation histories. Broader based surveys should query about family structure at birth, age 14, and interview or 'ever' experiences.
- Broaden household rosters to establish relationships of family members to one another to ensure accurate assessments of cohabiting, stepparent and sibling relationships.
- Consider multiple reports of family structure recognizing the perspective may depend on the reporter.

## VIII

### **FAMILY TIES ACROSS HOUSEHOLDS\***

Support across households is substantial, but with the exception of child support payments, little understood. However, there have been increasing amounts of data available in recent years to study ties among households. These data cover children living elsewhere as well as children establishing their own households and supporting aging parents.

Four speakers discussed these issues -- two who covered the broad issues involved in family ties across households and two who examined particular topics. The speakers emphasized that these inter-household exchanges are tremendously complicated, but they can be critical factors in the dynamics of modern families.

#### **THE VARIETY OF INTER-HOUSEHOLD EXCHANGES**

In 2002, 23% of all children were only living with their mothers (Fields 2003), and child support collections amounted to \$25 billion (Grall 2007; Hofferth, Pleck, Stueve, Bianchi, & Sayer 2002). Financial support from nonresidential fathers is important to the future success of children in school. Studies demonstrate that child support has been shown to increase GPA and scholastic achievement and to reduce behavioral problems (Argys, Peters, Cook, Garasky, Nepomnyaschy, Sorensen et al. 1998; Baydar & Brooks-Gunn 1994; King 1994; King 1994; McLanahan, Seltzer, Hanson, & Thomson 1994). However, other than child support, little is known about sharing of resources across households. With some exceptions, research assumes sharing of resources with children and spouses, though research has shown that the men allocate resources differently from women.

Sandra Hofferth, University of Maryland, described what is known and what is important to know about these exchanges, what data are currently collected, and what types of information are needed. She focused on three types of intergenerational exchange: (1) support by nonresident parents to their minor children (financial support, contact, and involvement); (2) support parents provide as children transition out of the home (including financial support while completing schooling, coresidence, and subsidies for the transition to self-sufficiency as they leave home to form their own families); and (3) support by children to aging parents.

#### **Why Linkages Matter**

In determining family behavior and decisions, a critical factor is potential contributions of non-household family members. The potential availability of support from family permits individuals to select options that might otherwise be unaffordable. Hofferth

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\* This chapter is based on the presentations by Sandra Hofferth, University of Maryland; Judith Seltzer, University of California, Los Angeles; Charles Pierret, National Longitudinal Surveys Program, Bureau of Labor Statistics; and Wade Horn, Deloitte Consulting.

said, “The potential of having these transfers is like having a bank, but an informal banking system.”

Although family exchanges cross household boundaries, obtaining information on these exchanges has been rare. It is, however, available in some of the newer surveys.” (such as the NLSY97). Information is also missing on the household of the nonresidential family members with whom exchanges occur. For example, in studying the provision of child support, it would be helpful to know whether the nonresidential parent started a new family and the financial stability of the household.

Another category of data not currently obtained is information about support from nonhousehold individuals other than nonresidential parents. Intra-household exchanges also are missed. In general, except for child care expenses (which are well covered), little is known about how much time and money fathers and mothers provide their children. This lack of data is beginning to be addressed through the Consumer Expenditure Survey, the American Time Use Survey, and other data projects that collect information about parental expenditures of time and money on children.

### **Nonresident Parents and Support for Children**

Nonresident parents could be mothers or fathers but are disproportionately fathers because young children tend to live with their mothers. There are three types of exchange under this domain: financial support, contact, and involvement. Child support increases the resources of the receiving household (and diminishes the resources of the contributing household). Fathers’ time contributions may be compromised by obligations to children in different households.

A critical research issue is how important nonresident paternal contact and involvement are to children’s cognitive achievement and adjustment compared with financial support. Research suggests that it depends on both the outcome (achievement, behavior, relationships) and subgroup. For example, Hofferth’s research demonstrates that financial support matters more for the relationship between parents of White children than for those of Hispanics and Black children (Hofferth, Forry, & Peters 2010). This might be due to the greater amount of informal noncash and in-kind support from Hispanic and Black fathers.

### **Child Support Received and Provided**

In 2002, 63% of all custodial mothers had a support agreement or award; three-quarters received some support, but only half received the full amount (Garasky et al. 2007). Six in ten received noncash support.

Most question sequences establish the legal basis for support. The first questions determine whether a child is eligible -- that is, is there a living nonresident parent? Some sequences then focus on whether there is a child support award agreement, formal or informal. Other question sequences ask whether the custodial parent is supposed to receive child support, whether she receives it regularly, and whether she receives the entire amount. Some ask what the amount is.

In previous research, Hofferth has used an item on the regularity of support. She also has used the trend in total amount of support from the time of the departure of the father (Hofferth et al. 2010).

The most important and most often missing piece of information concerns informal support. The ECLS-K asks about formal support but does not begin to ask about informal cash and in-kind support until the third grade interview. This makes the question useless for analysts examining change over time.

One suggestion from the last Counting Couples conference was to include information on modifications of child support orders. Child support provided to other households is not always asked but should be parallel to questions about receipt.

## **Contact**

Most surveys include questions about the frequency of contact over a specified period of time, such as the last month or last year (Argys et al. 2007). Questions include the number of visits and the number of days or nights spent with the other parent. The type of contact is important – in-person visits, phone calls, cards and letters, and email or other messages.

Hofferth said that she has created and used a variable for trends in contact to examine whether contact is becoming more or less frequent. The usefulness of cross-sectional contact information is unclear because contact has no consistent relationship with child outcomes -- it could be either a cause or effect. For the relationship between father and child, the amount of contact is less important than the quality of the parent-parent relationship (Hofferth et al. 2010).

## **Involvement**

Hofferth observed that involvement is now preferred to the word “contact” Surveys have begun asking about the quality of relationship between parents and the relationship or involvement of the father with the child. Hofferth’s research on child support, contact, father involvement, and parent-parent relationships defined by how parents got along and whether parents agreed on how to raise the child. The NLSY also obtained information on whether father and child were close, whether they shared ideas, and whether the father did not miss events, which were used to measure father involvement with his child.

A last dimension is distance between parents. However, this variable may not be useful (unless one can get a trend in distance) because it is selective -- fathers may move closer to the child’s household if the relationship is good. Furthermore, contact today is less dependent upon distance.

## **Assistance to Children in the Transition to Adulthood**

Cross-household data limitations become sharper when moving from child support to less charted territory, such as the provision of assistance to children during the transition to adulthood. This transition begins in the parental household and ends in the separate household of the young adult. One approach documents the support provided



by parents and received by children prior to the transition. Earlier support for school expenses (including private schooling), financial training, and support for minor purchases could set expectations for support for college and for the purchase of a home. Appropriately (because of the ages of the youth in the survey), the NLSY young adult survey and the NLSY97 asked questions about sources of financial support. The Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) Transition to Adulthood supplement also has a substantial module on financial support for young adults (Panel Study of Income Dynamics 2011). These examine actual exchanges of goods and services. It might also be helpful to get the youth's expectations about support from a parent (Goldscheider, Turcotte, & Kopp 2001). Documenting which parent is providing support is increasingly important now that many parents are living apart from their children.

An alternative approach is to question household members about *potential* access to financial and other supports even if they are not currently using these supports. One of the problems with using actual exchanges is that they are both rare and selective of people who need support (Hofferth, Boisjoly, & Duncan 1999). A standard sequence is: "In the past five years, has anyone in your household spent a lot of time helping a friend or relative in an emergency? In the last five years, have you helped a friend or relative in an emergency by giving or loaning them several hundred dollars or more?" Many other families have access to supports but are not using these resources at the moment. Hofferth also noted, "potential support has a more powerful effect on decisions than actual support."

In addition, the PSID asked the following series of questions: "Suppose there were a serious emergency in your household. Is there a friend or relative living nearby that you could call upon to spend a lot of time helping out? Suppose in an emergency you needed several hundred dollars more than you had available or could borrow from an institution. Would you ask either a friend or relative for it?"

### **Support for Aging Parents**

The major national survey of aging, the Health and Retirement Study (funded by the National Institute on Aging) documents support received by the aging parent. The surveys covered in the Counting Couples conference primarily focus on young men, women, and their families, but many have aging parents, and most ask about support given, though rarely are contributions to mothers and fathers reported separately. This is an important issue for the support of baby boom generations considering their high levels of marital dissolution. Hofferth said that this is a topic of significant importance for the coming decade and should receive more attention.

### **Potential Research Designs**

Selection is a potentially important issue (Hofferth 2005). Exchanges that have occurred provide a select and partial picture of families as a potential source of support. Some individuals may have access but not need these exchanges. One example would be loans for college. Some students may not need family loans because they can get a scholarship, whereas others may need family assistance. Some families may have an emergency while others do not. It may be the potential availability of assistance rather

than the assistance itself that influences decision-making behavior (Hofferth et al. 1999).

The only data set that routinely collects cross-household information is the PSID. This is because the PSID follows sample members as they leave home, making it possible to link parent households with child households. Further, it is possible to link former spouses at least until the child is age 18. If the parent has a sample child living with him or her, that parent is followed even if the parent is not a member of the original sample. From 1994 to 2005, both parents of sample children were followed-up even after the child turned age 18. The PSID provides the necessary information (ID numbers) to identify parents and their households.

The alternative approach is to obtain information from one household member and contact nonresident household members directly. The ECLS-B obtained information directly from the nonresident father, but response rates were low (about 50%). The Fragile Families survey also obtained information on the nonresident father. The PSID experience suggests that following fathers as they split off from the original family is more efficient and effective. However, most surveys are household based (e.g., the CPS) and not family based or they follow individuals (e.g., the ECLS and NLS). Most studies inconsistently collect information on more than one person, and most follow only the original respondent. The PSID is the only pure family study and should serve as a model for other studies. The value of the PSID is that it provides the universe of potential non-household family members with whom exchange can occur. Without this, documented exchanges are highly selective.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Families are dynamic entities. Constantly forming and reforming households continue to be linked socially and financially, but current data may not take this into account. Hofferth concluded that much remains to be learned about the key scientific questions, priorities, and appropriate data collection methods to obtain information about family ties across households.

### Data on Family Ties Across Households

Judith Seltzer, University of California, Los Angeles, stated that family relationships are complicated in real life. Further, they are complicated for researchers and policymakers trying to understand the experiences of family members by asking questions that make sense to them. Some parents (usually fathers) and young children live apart, some mothers have children with different fathers, and some fathers have children with different mothers. Children also have ties to adults who may be social parents, for instance, when a biological parent cohabits, remarries, or has a serious relationship with someone with whom they are not living. The potential proliferation of family relationships occurs for all generations, affecting grandparents who separate and repartner as well as parents and children.

Despite the growing complexity of U.S. families, data on ties between family members living apart have improved greatly in the past couple of decades. These improvements have occurred in federal surveys (such as the Current Population Survey

and the National Survey of Family Growth) as well as selected researcher-initiated surveys supported by federal funds (such as the Fragile Families and Add Health). Multiple dimensions of relationships can be studied using federal or federally supported data sources.

Specifically, data from these and other sources can address three broad questions: (1) Who helps a family member who is living elsewhere? (2) How is this help associated with the well-being of those who give help and those who receive it? This question is important for children who receive help from parents and grandparents outside the household. (3) How do legal arrangements, such as custody and paternity establishment, child support orders, and visitation agreements, affect relationships between parents and children who live apart?

Seltzer used these questions to evaluate the data, focusing on populations at risk, the populations to which findings about the effects of inter-household family ties can be generalized, and the importance of geographic location for family members. She also considered four issues that related to improved data on inter-household family ties: (1) technological change in how family members can maintain ties when they do not live together; (2) how multiple-partner fertility presents challenges in collecting data on inter-household ties; (3) increases in “doubling up” or parents and adult children living together; and (4) the aging of cohorts who experienced high rates of divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation.

### **What Is the Population?**

*Kin Availability.* Researchers must observe both those who help nonresident kin and those who do not in order to determine what social or policy variables cause family members to help each other. In answering this question, it is not enough to only know who helps because knowing which fathers pay child support does not answer the following question: What causes fathers to pay child support? To predict who helps, the first question is, Is the man a father? Second, Does he have a minor child who does not live with him? Finally, does he pay child support? For example, the Consumer Expenditure Survey asks if anyone paid child support. However, these data cannot be used to investigate why some fathers pay and others do not because the data cannot identify nonresident fathers. It is impossible to distinguish those who have no children from those who do not pay support without being able to identify who is a nonresident father.

Similarly, to answer why some adult children help their older parents after they become infirm, the first thing we need to know is whose parents are still alive. We can then determine whether or not children provide care. The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) asks about unpaid help provided to parents (among others), but without knowing who has an older parent, researchers cannot distinguish between those who choose not to help a parent and those who are not at risk. “Not at risk” refers to those who do not help anyone because they have no one to help. The NLSY97 Nonresident Roster lists family members who do not live in a youth’s household and provides a way to keep track of what kin are available in a child’s family. The NLSY97 staff assign unique IDs allowing researchers to determine if youths share a household with any of these family members at a later time.

*Children, Fathers, or Mothers?* A wide variety of data sources exist to study families: birth cohort studies, cross-sectional surveys of parents reporting on one or more children, and cross-sectional studies of children. However, these designs yield different findings. Birth cohort studies (such as the Fragile Families, Early Childhood Longitudinal Surveys, NLSYs, and Add Health) provide in-depth information about how family relationships change over time as children age and parents (and the children themselves) move in and out of shared households. These children all share similar initial conditions as others in the sample because they start school at approximately the same time. Therefore, they are subject to the same broad economic, social, and political environments, however, can live in different U.S. states and be exposed to different family policies. Policy analyses can model variation in responses to policies directed at topics such as child support and custody laws.

Birth cohort studies cannot provide a snapshot of the welfare of U.S. children, the percentage of children with ties to nonresident parents, or how much child support nonresident parents pay or resident parents receive; however, the CPS Child Support Supplement (CPS-CSS) provides this information. There is, although, a trade-off between following cohorts over time and cross-sectional data (such as the CPS-CSS) that provide broad coverage without knowing the effects of child support payments or custody.

Birth cohort studies are by definition samples of children born in a particular time period. Parents can be interviewed to describe themselves and to give information about their children, however, these parents are themselves characteristics of the sample child in the study design. The parents are not a sample of all parents or even of all parents of a child-support eligible child. Studies like the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) sample adults in their reproductive years and can be used as samples of parents, some of whom live with their children. The NSFG's extension to include men as well as women makes this a valuable new source of information about ties between parents and children living apart. Again, the restriction on the population of parents, aged 15 to 44 years old, must be considered. An upper age limit of 44 results in either truncating or excluding the experiences of older parents entirely. In effect, the NSFG data under-represent remarriages and later cohabitations, which is more than an accounting problem. It becomes a problem in studying the association between repartnering and nonresident parent-child relationships, which matter in considering children's well-being. Extending the age range of the NSFG sample would make it an even more valuable data source for studies of inter-household ties from parents' perspectives.

The parallel samples of the NSFG are also useful in describing differences between inter-household family ties from both mothers' and fathers' perspectives. However, it is important to remember that the fathers of children who are reported by the women in the NSFG sample are not necessarily represented in the male NSFG sample of fathers. Women typically partner with men who are slightly older than they are, while the NSFG sample ages are comparable for the parallel samples of women and men. This is not a design flaw, but it is something to consider when comparing mothers' and fathers' experiences.

*Biological Parents or Parent Figures?* Information about children's parents and other aspects of children's environments is required to address questions about what makes

some children successful. Biological parents' health and resources give children a start in life as they are also genetically linked. Further, the combination of genetic and social ties may have lasting consequences for children's health and well-being.

In some families, learning about the characteristics of children's biological parents' is more simplistic because both parents live in the same household as the child. When the child grows up and leaves home, that child is still a reasonably good source of information about both biological parents. In other families, it becomes more difficult because one or both biological parents are not in the household. Other adults (such as stepparents, a parent's cohabiting partner, and grandparents) may act as parents, spending time with children, sharing resources with them, and influencing their development.

The diversity of parents makes it challenging for surveys to obtain information about each of a child's parents if the child is still young or is an adult living independently. However, information about both biological parents and stepparents is necessary to understand the potential resources available to children and the potential need to provide care to parents late in life. Nonresident fathers and stepparents may be particularly disadvantaged in later life if they need care from adult children (Lin 2008; Pezzin, Pollak, & Schone 2008). Many increasingly important research questions about the intergenerational transmission of health and transfers require basic information about biological parents, whether they are living and where and about their health and economic circumstances. This information is important even when the child feels closer to a stepparent or other parent figure than to a biological parent.

### **Where Is Everyone?**

*Geography and Policy.* Many of the laws and policies governing relationships between parents and minor children are made at the state level. Therefore, knowing where parents and minor children live is important for determining what policies might affect their relationships. This becomes most critical for studies of nonresident parent-child relationships, child support, visitation, custody, and some aspects of health coverage. It is also important for studies of adoption. The CPS-CSS question about whether the nonresident parent lives in the same state as the resident parent is helpful on this point.

*Proximity and Caregiving.* Geographic proximity also affects the ability to provide child care or help an older parent with errands and housekeeping. However, there is considerable variation in how proximity is measured in large surveys. Some ask respondents to report distance in miles while others ask about travel time. Response categories vary across surveys making it difficult to compare measures of proximity even where questions use the same metric.

Geographic coordinates provide the most information by linking a family member to a legal, economic, and physical environment. However, these data can make respondents identifiable and should only be available with appropriate data security. Most surveys do not include the specific geographic location of multiple (non-coresiding) family members; the PSID is a rare exception. For the few studies, like the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), that have geographic locations of both parents and children as well as proxy reports from parents about how far away each child lives, it

would be helpful to know the accuracy of respondents' reports about geographic proximity by comparing specific geographic locations to survey responses about proximity. Better data on geographic location and proximity would enhance researchers' ability to investigate how policies affect family ties and how decisions about where to live affect caregiving.

### **Coresidence and Household Rosters**

Household-based sampling is a basic tool of family demography. Demographers, for the most part, do a good job of describing relationships between parents and children living together. However, this characterization remains somewhat simplistic. It ignores variation across surveys in the rules determining who is a household resident and who is not. Data collectors and respondents may have different definitions of those who live in a particular household. In fact, the 2000 Census has an over-count of children around age 10. Analysts attribute this error to joint custody situations where both parents report that the child lived with them (Cork & Voss 2006).

Getting residence right is important for two practical aspects of data on inter-household ties. First, it links individuals to geography, which is essential for policy-related analyses. Second, it guides respondents through question sequences that treat family members who live together differently than family members who live apart. The clearest example of this is that a single parent who lives with a minor child is asked about *receiving* child support and in-kind transfers from the child's nonresident parent, whereas a parent who reports that a minor child lives elsewhere is asked about *giving* child support and transfers. These questions make sense to many families, but in cases where children spend substantial time in each parents' homes, the questions become difficult to answer (Lin, Schaeffer, Seltzer, & Tuschen 2004). Questions asking whether youths at the transition to adulthood are living in their parents' household or have "left home" also ask respondents to describe a situation that can be ambiguous because youths may spend most of their time away but still be economically dependent on parents. Surveys should have clear rules for interviewers and respondents about what "living here" means and communicate the rules in a way that makes sense to respondents.

### **Potential Family Ties Versus Actual Family Ties**

Most surveys ask questions about actual ties between family members who live apart: Do they spend time together? Do they talk about important things? Do they help each other with practical aspects of life? Do they give each other money? These are all considered to be part of being a family.

Another part of being a family is knowing there is a safety net of family members who will help in an emergency or could bail you out if you take a risk and things turn out badly. Few datasets ask questions about this kind of potential help, but it is a concept that is important in both economic and sociological theories about intergenerational relationships (Wong 2008). Knowing whether a person can count on nonresident family members and knowing whether these family members think they are responsible for that person would provide new insight on why individuals make the family and



employment choices they do and what difference these choices make for their well-being. Questions of this type could be added as a topical module in an ongoing survey such as the Add Health or NLSY97 to enhance the rich behavioral data these studies already collect.

### Looking to the Future

Four changes pose challenges for data collection on inter-household family ties. First, new technology has altered the way people keep in touch. Texting, IMs, email, and other new technologies are types of contact that many existing surveys do not include when they ask about whether a parent or child has been in contact. The coverage of examples in questions about contact needs to be broadened.

A related question is whether these new modes change the content or effect of keeping in touch -- for instance, keeping in close touch (perhaps too close, as in helicopter parenting) with young adult children who are in college or providing emotional support to an older parent who has been widowed recently.

A second challenge is that multiple-partner fertility means parents may have more than one set of children to report about in surveys. Dykema and Schaeffer (2000) find that the quality of reports about child support diminishes the more children parents have. Although the parents studied were reporting about children in one family (i.e., one mother, one father), their results suggest that the quality of reports about financial transfers may be worse when there are multiple sets of children. There is a need for offline studies of data quality provided by members of more complicated families compared to the data provided by members of less complicated families. If improvements in measurement are needed, they would enhance knowledge about how families with multiple sets of children function.

The third change that might increase the difficulty of measuring inter-household family ties is an effect of increasing coresidence associated with the current economic crisis (Mykyta & Macartney 2011). As intergenerational households become more common, potential respondents may experience living arrangements that are more difficult to describe using standard household enumeration methods. Young adults who take longer to leave the parental home or are more likely to return due to economic hardship may make it more difficult for parents and adult children to describe who lives in the household. This response difficulty has downstream implications for the data quality of question sequences about transfers that condition on whether or not a person is in the household.

Finally, data collectors interested in family ties across households should attend to a fourth change -- the aging of cohorts whose lives have been affected by high rates of divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation. Family researchers know little about later life relationships between adult children and “absent” parents, stepparents, and quasi-parents acquired through cohabitation. Even the terminology for some of these relationships is difficult. For example, HRS respondents sometimes describe children as “former stepchildren” but this relationship is not a standard concept in “real life” or a relationship code in most surveys.

The challenge of describing available kin is only a first step. Because family members are the primary source of informal care for the elderly population, most who



live independently, data on the need for care and on who has the resources to provide it will shed light on an important, policy-relevant problem. It is also important for surveys to include questions that better identify both partners' own children as well as their shared children, because retirement-age spouses and cohabiting partners are increasingly likely to have children from previous relationships. Biological parents are more likely to accurately report their children's characteristics than are stepparents who may not have lived with the children. This points to the need to develop creative ways to obtain information from both members of a couple without unduly burdening respondents.

Another reason to ask both spouses and partners about family relationships outside the household is that gender differences in family ties may diverge in later life due to differences in mothers' and fathers' time with young children after divorce or a nonunion birth and differences in whether or not the parent becomes a residential stepparent. The aging of individuals with complicated family ties will create new challenges for demographic researchers and the policymakers who rely on the data they collect.

### **LONGITUDINAL STUDIES AT THE DEPARTMENT OF LABOR**

Charles Pierret, National Longitudinal Surveys Program, Bureau of Labor Statistics, began his response to the two presentations on family ties across households by noting that the types of families being discussed have expanded dramatically since the first Counting Couples conference. He also focused on the policy implications of the data on inter-household ties. These policies have a distinct effect on the well-being of families and children.

As families have gotten more complicated, datasets are also going to get more complicated. In this regard, Pierret made a distinction between tracking surveys and research-oriented surveys. In modern circumstances, many research questions are going to be difficult to answer using tracking surveys. Instead, research-oriented surveys will become increasingly useful. For example, comparisons of state policies or comparisons of rural versus urban areas have implications for both research and policymaking.

The National Longitudinal Surveys Program at the Bureau of Labor Statistics has been investigating the transition out of the parental household, focusing on how parents can act as backstops in an era of increasing economic inequality. For instance, NLS research shows that children in high-income households with low math achievement scores (the bottom quartile) are graduating from college at the same rate as children with high achievement scores and low income. Pierret said that income is an important factor in such findings that can be studied through these surveys.

Studies of child support are more difficult, because they require information from two households. Research results often have been based on reports from the mother of one household (the Fragile Families and PSID are two exceptions). It is possible that mothers may know very little about a father's household or may have a strong bias, which could influence data quality.

Support for elderly parents is even more complicated than child support. The NLS program has studied transfers to elderly adults by looking at both transfers to parents and to children. Data gathered for transfers in one direction occurred in 1997

and 2001, while transfers in the opposite direction occurred in 1999 and 2003. Discussing the results, Pierret said, “[this is] one of the few instances in which there’s longitudinal data on transfers.” However, these transfers can be exceedingly complicated and have complicated effects, especially when considering the full variety of families.

Finally, Pierret emphasized the impact of resource constraints on data collection. Measuring large and complicated constructs requires asking many questions, therefore, other questions must be limited given the constraints on government resources, researchers, and respondents. He noted, “If we ask more in this area, we’re taking more out of that area.”

Pierret also observed that research-oriented databases are the ones most threatened by budget cuts concluding, “We may have to fight for those kinds of data.”

### **Family Interactions in an Age of New Technologies**

Wade Horn, Deloitte Consulting, who was previously Secretary for Children, Youth, and Families at the Department of Health and Human Services, agreed that the two main talks in the session demonstrated that progress has been made in measuring family ties across households. However, both talks also suggested that much remains to be done, especially in measuring the transition of children out of the home and support of elderly parents.

He focused most of his remarks on the new ways families have to maintain contact through such means as social networking sites, texting, e-mail, and Twitter. Children and an increasing percentage of adults use these forums to keep in touch, although their use poses difficulties for researchers. Horn said that knowing what to measure is the first topic that needs to be addressed. Counting personal contacts or phone calls is straightforward compared with the use of Facebook or texts. Similar to parental contacts, quality is generally more important than quantity, but how can the quality of an e-mail or posting be measured? For that matter, to what extent is an electronic interaction a meaningful interaction as opposed to a way of simply informing someone else of an activity?

Horn asked, “Do non-custodial parents -- who often complain about not feeling in touch with their kids -- feel more in touch with these new social networking sites and virtual ways of communicating? And do their children feel the same way? And to what extent do these virtual interactions either substitute for or augment physical interactions or phone calls?” In some circumstances, virtual contact might be preferable to an in-person contact, since a child may not feel as pressured to perform. Horn noted, “I’m not arguing that there ought to be a full-scale substitution of the two, but how do we measure that?”

Generational factors also are involved in virtual contacts. For example, aging parents may be less comfortable with new technologies than younger generations. New technologies may be adopted first by young people and gradually work their way into parents’ generations.

Horn said, “As I think about all of this, I don’t have many answers. But it seems to me that when we start to construct our strategy in assessing these datasets, we’re going

to have to incorporate this.” Furthermore, technologies will continue to change, posing new demands on the measurement of family interactions.

## DISCUSSION

### Unwed Fathers

Robert Lerman, Urban Institute, asked about the problem of men who have children living elsewhere but do not report it in general surveys. He also called attention to two possible sources of additional data -- administrative records and experimental and demonstration projects. Hofferth replied that the NLSY has actually been very helpful because it has established relationships with men before they become fathers noting, “If you can hang onto them, that would be my strategy.” Also, some surveys have extensive supplements that gather good data on such issues as child support. She said administrative data may raise issues of confidentiality, but experiments could offer valuable information to demographers if these groups could work together more closely.

Seltzer agreed that following young men over time is a good way of tracking unwed fathers. However, it is not a good way to generate a sample of unwed fathers because it only includes members of a cohort who have stayed in a survey long enough to cover multiple generations. She advocated pursuing a number of different approaches, such as better question wording, additional sections of surveys, and direct questions about issues of interest. She also advocated trying to match survey data with vital statistics records for cohorts and creating forums for experiment developers and demographers to talk.

## Family Structure Versus Processes

Marcia Carlson, University of Wisconsin-Madison, raised an issue that arose in the discussion period from the previous session about the distinction between what a family is and what it does. For example, a former stepparent might be considered a family member if that person is still involved in a respondent's life.

Seltzer responded that processes are the crux of the theoretical questions. For example, someone may not be considered part of a family at one point, but an emergency may cause that person to reenter the family in the future. Seltzer said, "I would privilege a set of relationships, some biological, some tied, into the family through marriage or prior cohabitation. Then I would ask about ties, behaviors, and emotional attachment. And then I would ask respondents whether there is anybody I've missed that you think of as part of your family." Such questions cannot be asked in something like the CPS, but they could be done in an investigator-initiated study.

Hofferth added that area surveys as well as national surveys can be useful. Area surveys can focus on particular groups or policies, however, she noted they have not been discussed much at the conference.

## New Data for New Questions

Susan Jekielek, Administration for Children and Families, observed that defining extended families and measuring how those families support children are important issues, especially as the number of Hispanic families in the United States increases. Her colleague John Jolley noted that a variety of other instruments should be investigated that could potentially provide information on this and other issues.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING FAMILY TIES ACROSS HOUSEHOLDS

- Include measures of part-time family members or family members who share a residence for short periods of time.
- Ensure that all fathers and mothers are included in assessments of family structure and well-being
- Determine paternal and maternal ties to children across households.
- Query about multiple sources of support including financial, emotional, instrumental, and informal.
- Extend the dimensions of contact to keep pace with new forms of social interactions.
- Establish geographic indicators to help determine the role of policies in enhancing ties across households.

## IX

### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS\***

In the final session of the workshop, three speakers provided an overview of the proceedings and of future directions, followed by a final discussion session that closed the third Counting Couples Conference.

#### **ACCOUNTING FOR NEW REALITIES**

Andrew Cherlin, Johns Hopkins University, reiterated an observation made earlier about “how far we’ve come” since the first Counting Couples conference. Individual studies and longitudinal surveys have made “enormous progress” in adding new information and exploring new issues. He said, “I want to thank the staff of the federal agencies and the survey firms and academics who have been doing most of this work -- it’s really terrific.”

#### **Prudent Caution**

Cherlin said the history of family demography has been marked by “prudent caution.” Demographers respond to social change by considering questions that seem potentially troublesome. They weigh the pros and cons, try questions that seem appropriate, “and usually they work just fine.”

Government statistical agencies have to move with caution because they have central missions such as a constitutionally mandated job to count the population. They also have cost constraints, time constraints, and even page constraints, when particular questions must fit within a page. Congressional oversight committees have budgetary power over federal agencies and may have substantive power over research. Further, agencies want to ensure comparability of the data. Cherlin said, “We do want to move with prudent caution. Nevertheless, we do want to keep moving.”

Concerns about privacy have been a growing issue. For example, a major reason for the loss of marriage and divorce statistics from the vital statistics is privacy concerns. In the mid-1990s, many states responded to lobbyists who suggested that asking people to provide demographic characteristics (such as education) on divorce forms was an invasion of privacy. As a result, many states quit gathering this information and now only provide counts of marriages and divorces.

Cherlin provided an anecdote about a Census Bureau employee named Paul Glick, whom he described as the “the father of family statistics.” At one point, Glick asked his superiors if they would insert a question into the Census asking if a marriage ended in divorce. They responded that such a question would be far too sensitive and it

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\* This chapter is based on the presentations by Andrew Cherlin, Johns Hopkins University; David Harris, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Department of Health and Human Services; and Regina Bures, Demographic and Behavioral Sciences Branch, *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute for Child Health and Human Development.

could not possibly be added to the Census. Glick went to his office, thought for a few minutes, and came back to ask, “Would you add a question about whether your previous marriage ended in the death of your spouse?” They readily agreed. Cherlin concluded the anecdote saying, “And that backhanded way was how divorce first became part of the statistical system.”

Cherlin also recalled an article by Glick called “Types of Families: An Analysis of Census Data” based on the 1940 Census, which provided tables of three types of families: normal families; other male-headed families; and other female-headed families. He stated, “In other words, the assumption was a two-parent family is not only numerically dominant, it’s normal and everything else is abnormal. Nobody thought there was anything wrong with that way of talking about things in 1940.”

### **Outdated Assumptions**

Social change has rendered many past assumptions outdated, Cherlin said. One such assumption is that family equals household. That assumption “allowed us to knock on the door of a household, ask questions, and capture all of the information for a family because it was assumed that families were bounded by the same laws as a household was. It was great while it lasted. It’s gone now.”

A second assumption was that marriage equals intimate partnership. According to this view, there was only one kind of serious sexual partnership, marriage, which involved having children and long-term relations. Cherlin noted that this may have been true in the 1940s and early 1950s, but it rapidly became less true.

A third assumption was that all members of families are heterosexual. Cherlin said, “that wasn’t true even in 1950,” however, demographers have more or less ignored this fact until the last decade.

The conversation at this Counting Couples conference has shown the assumption that family equals household is mistaken. However, measuring intimate partnerships in forms other than marriage remains a challenge. For example, demographers may want to learn more about living apart together families who choose to be in two households even though they are married.

Similarly, cohabitation remains a problematic term. Cohabitation is an ambiguous boundary with multiple forms instead of clear legal definitions. Cherlin estimated that between 20 and 25% of all children in the United States are born to cohabiting couples. Nearly all the rise in out-of-wedlock childbearing over the last decade or two has occurred among cohabiting couples, most of them without college degrees, a majority of them probably White, and many of them in their twenties and early thirties. Young teenagers living alone or with their mothers have not been the cause of the rise in the total number of children being born outside of marriage.

Why are people choosing to live together and not to marry but to have children, who is doing that, and what are the implications of these decisions are all important questions, said Cherlin. Answering these questions means figuring out what cohabitation means and how it can be measured. For some couples, cohabitation is clearly premarital. They believe that they are likely to marry someday but they are postponing marriage until one of the partners gets out of graduate school or some other constraint is lifted. For others, cohabitation has little to do with marriage, at least

immediately. Others enter into cohabitation because they do not feel, as a couple, that they are ready to marry. For example, during the economic downturn, they might not think they have the economic foundations to support a marriage. In these cases, couples may go ahead and have children. The births may not necessarily be planned, “but they may not be totally unplanned either. And if they happen, we’ll go with them.” For a couple that is not living together and has a child, a man may move in with a partner to be with the child for a few years. “Not for a lifetime, but it would be a good start [for the child] if we live together for a few years.”

Cohabitation has been defined from a frame of marriage, which makes sense given the American family of a few decades ago. But, Cherlin said that today it is necessary to get beyond that frame.

A more general problem is that many questions about classification today do not have one correct answer. The question “is this person cohabiting?” may have multiple answers depending on what a person means by cohabiting, which in turn may depend on why a person is asking the question.

Given the impossibility of finding one unambiguous definition of cohabitation for every federal-sponsored or funded survey, Cherlin argued, data collection effort needs to move cautiously toward multiple indicators. Different weights could then be assigned to the answers to a series of questions yielding a probability. As an example, Cherlin listed some of the questions that could be asked about cohabitation:

- Are you in an intimate or sexual relationship?
- How many nights per week do you share the same household?
- Do either you or your partner have another residence that one of you shares?
- Do you combine most of your finances into one budget?
- Do you consider this a marriage-like relationship?
- Are you raising children together?

The weights accorded various answers could depend on the application of the responses. For population counts, the emphasis would be on whether a couple is living together. For questions about the rise of childbearing within cohabiting unions, other questions would be asked. “We need some working out and testing of these kinds of multiple indicators of cohabiting unions,” Cherlin said. Family theory then needs to be applied to the answers to figure out which properties of a cohabiting couple are of interest. Cherlin noted, “This is hard work that would require careful testing. It makes life more difficult for us and is not fun to consider. Nevertheless, I don’t see the alternative.”

### **Additional Complexities**

As families become more complex, the questions demographers ask become more difficult. For example, the first child in a family is often considered to be the most advantaged because he or she is an only child for a period and gets most of the resources. But in multiple-partner fertility families, the last child may be the most



advantaged because the fathers of the first children are probably no longer there, the mother is older by the time she has the last child, and she may more established and have a better income. Cherlin said, "That's just one example of the kinds of ways in which we have to begin thinking differently about these complex households that are generated by people having children with more than one partner."

New techniques will be needed to answer complex problems. For example, Patrick Heady, an anthropologist at the Max Planck Institute for Demography in Germany, has developed what is essentially a tablet computer program allowing respondents and interviewers to draw anthropological diagrams with fields for relationships and other appropriate questions that arise. Cherlin observed that the family roster approach may be outdated in measuring family complexity, given the number of kinds of relationships that are possible. New approaches would need to be tested, but they may provide more complete answers.

Same-sex relationships are another new frontier. Cherlin said that this topic may be at the same point where Paul Glick was with divorce 75 years ago. Policymakers may think that a question about sexual orientation on a national survey would be too sensitive, but experience has indicated that people generally do not object when such questions are tried, according to Cherlin. "I was very impressed with the work that the Census is doing on a household roster that contains the categories, is this person in a same-sex marriage, an opposite sex marriage, a same-sex cohabiting union, an opposite sex cohabiting union? That's certainly a great start."

Cherlin predicted that some surveys will need to ask directly about sexual orientation. "My guess is that by the time we test how well we're doing and get it on there, it's going to be less sensitive than we think, just as that has been the case in almost all innovations that we've done. But it's certainly something we're just beginning to think of and clearly need to do better."

Assistance across households is another difficult issue. Data on child support and visitation remain essential and can be collected in better ways. Similarly, the assistance that adult children give to their older parents is an increasingly important process.

As an aside, Cherlin speculated on what will happen 20 years from now to middle-aged men who divorced their first wives, did not have much contact with their kids, got married, had a stepfamily that ended after five years, and now are retired and need assistance. "Who will help them? What kinds of obligations do those various people feel to a man like that? And who does he feel he has the obligation to support?"

Cherlin suggested supporting a modest program of methodological research, perhaps jointly with academics and with agency staff, to develop and test some of these new approaches. He admitted that methodological research does not generate many headlines and is difficult to fund, but it needs to be done to answer some of the difficult questions facing family researchers today.

Cherlin concluded that family demographers "will keep pushing the boundaries because that's what our discipline has done. I know that the family and child statistics community, the agency staff, academics, and the people in research firms will continue to improve our statistics over time and make them relevant -- actually, essential -- to many of the great social issues of our time."

## Constraints and Needs

David Harris, who spoke on his last day as Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Department of Health and Human Services, discussed two broad issues in his closing remarks at the conference: constraints on what can be done and needs for data related to family policy.

### Constraints

Harris said that the federal budget is extremely constrained. Funding for new projects will be extremely difficult to acquire, as will support for methodological research to develop new questions, change surveys, and so on.

However, Harris noted that inertia was an even more important factor than funding. Once something has been done a particular way for many years, it is very difficult to do it in a new way. The pressure not to change comes from several communities. One community is the policy advocates. Harris said, "Advocates are much more influential than I had ever imagined. I spent a lot more time interacting in Washington with advocates than with academics." Advocates are prominent, engaged, and often quite invested in certain questions and procedures.

Legislation is also a reason for inertia. Changes that would obviously be for the better, such as common grant applications across agencies, cannot be done because different agencies are overseen by different authorizing committees, and each committee wants something a bit different.

Finally, academics are a source of considerable resistance to change. Once someone develops a scale and uses it for research, that person's career is linked with that scale. Academics may emphasize the need for consistency across time, but consistency means little if the concepts themselves change. Harris asked, "Do you really think you're getting the same thing if you ask the marriage question in 1950 and ask it exactly the same way in 2010? If you want to measure change, change the question if the concept changes."

### Data Needs

One data need Harris did not fully recognize until coming to Washington, DC, involves child-only cases. Since welfare reform, there has been a boom in the percentage of welfare cases that are child-only, where the only recipient of assistance is not the mother or the father but the child. Such cases raise many issues such as how to define a family unit and what happens to the resources.

Another issue involves adoption and adoptive families. Harris asked if adoptive families need to be disaggregated in the same way as other families. What is known about adoptive families, and what needs to be known? He stated, "There's a lot of work that could be done in that area."

The last issue he mentioned involves what is being measured. Harris has specialized in race and racial classifications and has spent considerable time thinking about the question, what's my race. Harris noted, "The problem is that a whole bunch of concepts are hiding under a single term. There's your biological race, there's your social

race, there's your perceived race, which could vary across observers." Furthermore, different concepts of race can be described by the same term.

Harris continued that the same can be said of marriage or family type. A small number of terms are used to cover a very large set of arrangements. People answer questions about their relationships based on what they think, and researchers analyze people's answers as if they knew what those respondents were thinking. Harris said, "There's an obvious problem here."

As with race, researchers need to be more explicit about what they actually want to know. Are they interested in sexual, emotional, financial, residential, or parenting relationships? He said, "There's a whole bunch of things you might care about in policy . . . and we're not being explicit about it."

A related problem is that terms tend to be used inconsistently by different populations. Policy people need to be clear about what they want to know and for what purpose. Additionally, researchers need to do the hard theoretical work to understand and operationalize different dimensions and to ask how you would operationalize those concepts. For example, if 30 categories exist, can they be collapsed to three so policymakers are not overwhelmed by detail?

### Three Cautionary Tales

Harris closed with three examples where loosely defined concepts can cause problems for family policy. The first involves homelessness. In 2010, the Federal government released the first-ever Federal Strategic Plan to End Homelessness. Harris was the HHS lead with a HUD partner on the key demonstration project attempting to end family homelessness. Money for the vouchers used in the program was never appropriated, but an issue that arose in the process of seeking appropriations was the issue of what family homelessness means. Harris said, "It's one of those moments you have when diverse groups . . . that all think they know what they're talking about -- until somebody asks the key question, and you realize they've been talking about different things the whole time." In the case of homelessness, HUD defined it one way and the Department of Education defined it a different way. For HUD, homelessness means living on the street, whereas for education it can mean doubling up with another household. So a parent and child living in the same place can fall into two different categories because of different definitions among agencies. In fact, Harris said that a family could decide to live in a shelter or on a street rather than with a relative to make a child eligible for a particular federal program.

The second example involved a family where one parent is gone for an extended period (because of military commitments or incarceration), during which time both the person and the family undergo substantial changes. To what extent should the absent parent be consulted or given sign-off authority by federal programs as a member of that family? How much effort should a federal program devote to keeping that family together? And do the answers to those questions depend on why the parent is away, even though the difference may not be significant to a child?

The final example involves the Building Strong Families program funded through the Administration for Children and Families, which was designed to increase the quality of relationships. In most sites, the program had beneficial results, but in one site, it

appeared to increase the incidence of serious domestic violence substantially evidently because of differences in the relationships of the couples enrolled at that site. Harris concluded, “That’s a cautionary tale to close with, which tells us we’ve got to think very deeply as policymakers and as researchers about what we mean by these terms.”

### REPEATED THEMES

In her closing remarks, Regina Bures, Demographic and Behavioral Sciences Branch, *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, said that understanding the constant flux of American families is a key scientific program area for NICHD. The Demographic and Behavioral Sciences Branch of NICHD supports a number of longitudinal data collection efforts, including the Add Health, NLSY Young Adults (a complement to the NLS), Fragile Families, PSID, and PSID Child Development Supplement, along with research in family demography and nuptiality.

Bures mentioned several themes that emerged repeatedly during the conference. First, a distinction should be drawn between federally-sponsored surveys, such as the ACS, SIPP, and NSFG and federally funded surveys, such as the Add Health, Fragile Families, PSID, and NLSY. The two categories of studies have different expectations and different user input.

Second, a distinction should be drawn among data on families, households, and relationships within or across households. She stated, “We’re talking about a number of different things and not just defining families.”

Finally, she suggested that a distinction should be drawn between data that allow researchers to study trends versus data focused on processes. The subject being studied overlaps with the type of survey used and reflects the diverse interests of researchers involved in the study of families. Bures said, “No one survey can answer all questions. We clearly need multiple surveys [with] variations in study design, scientific objectives, and questions asked.”

Bures encouraged the researchers at the conference to publicize their findings, saying, “Work with your universities or organizations to engage press releases of your findings and acknowledge their data and funding sources. Get the word out.” She also encouraged researchers to work with their scientific organizations to ensure that funding for agencies that both produce and use data is preserved, because resources are very tight.

At the same time, researchers should initiate partnerships to work with the data that is already available and talk with program officers about developing supplements for existing resources. She suggested that doing more with the resources that are already available will move the field forward.

Finally, she encouraged researchers to make concrete suggestions about ways that federal data collection strategies might be refined. She said, “Suggestions resulting from the previous two Counting Couples conferences have made a difference.” For example, researchers should continue to press for extending the ages covered by the NSFG. She acknowledged that other valuable changes would include adding much more detailed relationship questions to federal surveys and finding ways to merge administrative data with household surveys.

She asked, “What would you add?” Concrete suggestions coming out of this final conversation for the federal agencies would be really appreciated, especially if they’re realistic.”

## DISCUSSION

### Needed Data

Nicholas Zill, consulting psychologist, said that more information is needed about children without families, such as children in juvenile justice institutions or foster homes. These children are at high risk and impose sizable costs on society when they end up homeless, in prison, or addicted to drugs.

He also added that the ACS should add questions about the relationship of the child to the second parent in the household, which would produce information very relevant to policy. He said, “To me, that’s a higher priority than changing the current relationship question.”

### Diversity in the African American Community

Dr. Hudgins pointed out that cohabitation has long been a topic of discussion in the Black community, which has been referred to it as “shacking.” He noted many African American families do not perceive marriage as an option, even if they have been together for years. With this and other communities, it is important to consider what terms mean in the community rather than distinguishing communities from each other. When family can mean 20 or 30 different things, with different implications for policy, distinctions must be made. He said, “We need to spend more time understanding that we live in a very and increasingly diverse culture. This is an opportunity to refine our thinking in that area, and not only with African Americans.”

Cherlin agreed that “we need to figure out what cohabitation means for a particular community, and then figure out what questions to include rather than putting on a question that we think is one size fits all.” He also pointed out that issues dealt with by the African American community are now issues for many other communities. “They’re still issues in the African American community, but they’re not just African American community issues.”

Harris observed that the term African American community meant one thing in 1960 or 1970 and means something different today. “As a family researcher, I think it’s just as important to think about those groups and their diversity the way we think about cohabitation and marriage, or else we’re going to find that we’re still not getting the right answers, and we’re still not asking the questions that get the answers that we want to get.”

Steve Henderson, Bureau of Labor Statistics, pointed out that a single-parent household with children on average earns less than a third of what a two-parent household with children earns. Family research is critically important when it influences policy affecting such statistics.

## Questions about Sexual Orientation

Several conference participants pointed out that the Add Health and several other federal surveys have asked questions related to same-sex relationships in the past, but the discussion at the conference clearly pointed to a need for more of such questions. As a result, the respondents in the Add Health study, for example, are now accustomed to such questions.

Cherlin did not think that a question on sexual orientation would be inserted into the Census immediately. Rather he said, “I’m suggesting that we build on what’s in Add Health and other surveys and carefully test things.” He said that in the future, however, and in a different social climate, such a question could go on the Census.

Harris observed that many people have friends or relatives who are gay, and federal surveys are becoming more open to such questions. He suggested, “We’re closer to this than I would otherwise think.”

Virginia Cain, National Center for Health Statistics, observed that sexual orientation is as complex as other attributes in family research. She said, “It means many different things to many people.” For some people it connotes a political issue, for others it connotes affiliation with a group, and for others it connotes attraction. “It’s not a simple question to ask, ‘What’s your sexual orientation?’”

Cherlin and Harris agreed that the answer is complex, but Gates also said that concerns about getting the question right have been used in the past as a mechanism to not ask the question. He suggested, “We need to be careful that we don’t hold sexual orientation to a higher standard, because the reality of this group is that it is a politically charged environment, and it is a highly stigmatized group. And part of that stigma comes from the fact that the group isn’t recognized within federal data sources. That’s not entirely where the stigma comes. But, it contributes to it because when legal cases are filed, people can’t provide statistics that help to make their case because they don’t exist.”

## The Influence of Research in Government

In response to a question about the level of attention paid to academic results within government, Harris said that “the research we do plays less of a role than we would like but more of a role than you might expect.” People within government listen to the results of research, even if those results do not always determine the final decision.

Hofferth briefly described the Child and Family Well-Being Research Network, which brought the academic and policy communities together about a decade ago, and asked whether establishing something that would serve a similar purpose is advisable today. Harris mentioned a working group in the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation with ACF that is quite interested in hearing from the research community about important topics in family science.

Finally, Jason Fields, Census Bureau, added that researchers have had great success in shaping various federal surveys, which in turn has been important in answering questions from policymakers. He said, “We have to defend and support the way we spend money.”

## X

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## XI

### APPENDIX A WORKSHOP AGENDA

#### July 19, 2011

- 8:00 am-8:30 am      **Registration** (continental breakfast)
- 8:30 am-8:40 am      **Welcome**
- Susan Brown, National Center for Family & Marriage Research/Bowling Green State University
  - Linda Mellgren, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation/HHS
  - Yvonne Maddox, National Institute of Child Health & Human Development/NIH/HHS
- 8:40 am-9:00 am      **Counting Couples I and II**
- Wendy Manning, National Center for Family & Marriage Research/Bowling Green State University
- 9:00 am-10:30 am      **Marriage and Remarriage** (Wendy Manning)
- Presenters:*
- Zhenchao Qian, The Ohio State University
  - Megan Sweeney, University of California, Los Angeles
- Discussants:*
- Martin O'Connell, *Fertility and Family Statistics Branch*/U. S. Census Bureau/Commerce
  - Sheri Steisel, Federal Affairs Counsel & Human Services Policy/National Conference of State Legislatures
- 10:30 am-11:00 am      **Break** (coffee, tea, and pastries)
- 11:00 am-12:30 pm      **Cohabitation** (Susan Brown)
- Presenters:*
- Gary Gates, University of California, Los Angeles
  - Pamela Smock, University of Michigan
- Discussants:*
- Casey Copen, National Center for Health Statistics/CDC/HHS
  - Katherine K. Wallman, Statistical and Science Policy Branch/OMB
- 12:30 pm-2:00 pm      **Lunch (pay your own) with small groups on the day's topics**

- 2:00 pm-3:30 pm **Separation, Divorce, and Union Dissolution** (Wendy Manning)  
*Presenters:*
- Philip Cohen, University of North Carolina
  - R. Kelly Raley, The University of Texas at Austin
- Discussants:*
- Rose Kreider, *Fertility and Family Statistics Branch/U.S. Census Bureau/Commerce*
  - Martha Moorehouse, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation/HHS
- July 20, 2011**
- 8:00 am-8:30 am **Registration** (continental breakfast)
- 8:30 am-10:00 am **Family Structure and Instability** (Susan Brown)  
*Presenters:*
- Marcia Carlson, University of Wisconsin-Madison
  - Kathleen M. Harris, University of North Carolina
- Discussants:*
- Jennifer Park, National Children’s Study/NICHD/NIH/HHS
  - Gerri Fiala, Employment and Training Administration/DOL
- 10:00 am-11:00 am **Poster Session and Break** (coffee, tea, and pastries)—Atrium
- 11:00 am-12:30 pm **Family Ties across Households** (Wendy Manning)  
*Presenters:*
- Sandra Hofferth, University of Maryland
  - Judith Seltzer, University of California, Los Angeles
- Discussants:*
- Charles Pierret, Bureau of Labor Statistics/DOL
  - Wade Horn, Deloitte Consulting LLP
- 12:30 pm-2:00 pm **Lunch (pay your own) with small groups on the day’s topics**
- 2:00 pm-3:30 pm **Closing Discussion and Future Directions** (Linda Mellgren)
- Andrew Cherlin, Johns Hopkins University
  - David Harris, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation/HHS
  - Regina Bures, National Institute of Child Health & Human Development /NIH/HHS



## XII

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