

Transitions in Parental Presence Among Children: 2017

Current Population Reports

Zachary Scherer and Yeris Mayol-García

P70BR-169

November 2020

INTRODUCTION

Prior research has indicated that children who experience family structure transitions are more likely to experience behavior problems and decreased achievement.^{1,2} Changes in household membership lead to changes in resources, stress levels, roles, parenting behaviors, and relationships between parents and children, all of which impact children.^{3,4} Among U.S. Census Bureau surveys, the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) is the only data source that captures these changes in children's living arrangements at a monthly level. Given the SIPP's panel structure, up to 4 years of monthly data will be available for these children with future data releases.⁵ This SIPP brief offers estimates of the timing and nature of transitions in the presence of parents or a parent's partner during calendar year 2017 for children under the age of 18 at the time of the interview.

¹ See Katherine Magnuson and Lawrence M. Berger, "Family Structure States and Transitions: Associations with Children's Wellbeing During Middle Childhood," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 71:3, pp. 575-591, 2009.

² See Dohun Lee and Sara McLanahan, "Family Structure Transitions and Child Development: Instability, Selection, and Population Heterogeneity," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 80:4, pp. 738-763, 2015.

³ See Audrey N. Beck, Carey E. Cooper, Sara McLanahan, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, "Partnership Transitions and Maternal Parenting," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 72:2, pp. 219-233, 2010.

⁴ See Judy Dunn, "Understanding Children's Family Worlds: Family Transitions and Children's Outcome," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, Vol. 50:3, pp. 224-235, 2004.

⁵ The U.S. Census Bureau reviewed this data product for unauthorized disclosure of confidential information and has approved the disclosure avoidance practices applied to this release. CBDRB-FY20-POP001-0146.

KEY CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

What counts as a transition in living arrangements?

Children may experience a variety of types of transitions in their living arrangements.* In this brief, a transition is defined as a:

1. Change in the number of coresident parent(s) between consecutive months. For example, children live with their biological mother in September, and then with their biological mother and stepfather in October.**
2. Change in the identity of the parent(s) between consecutive months. For example, children live with their biological mother in May, and then with their biological father in June.
3. Change in the presence of a parent's cohabiting partner who is not directly identified as the child's parent between consecutive months. For example, children live with their biological mother in November, and then with their biological mother and her boyfriend in December.

*Since transitions are defined based on parental presence, if a child moved to a new address, but remained living with the same parent(s), that is not considered to be a transition. Additionally, incomplete reporting of household membership or residence history may affect estimates of the frequency of transitions.

**In this case, the two coresident parents may be married or cohabiting, but are both directly identified as the children's parents.

The brief first looks at the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of children based on whether they experienced at least one transition. It then considers the most common types of transitions that children experienced. Finally, it presents changes in the frequency of transitions over the course of the year.

WHO EXPERIENCED TRANSITIONS?

In 2018, there were 72.0 million children under the age of 18 living in the United States.⁶ Among all children under 18 years old, 2.1 million (2.9 percent of all children) experienced a transition in parental presence or the presence of a parent’s partner in the household during calendar year 2017. Among those children who experienced a transition during 2017, roughly two-thirds experienced just one transition, while the remaining third experienced two or more transitions (Figure 1).⁷

Table 1 presents various demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of children, distinguishing between those children who experienced at least one transition during 2017 and those who did not. For many characteristics, such as age and nativity, there were not statistically significant differences between children who experienced at least one transition and children who did not. See the Appendix Table for Table 1 standard errors.

Notably, a higher percentage of children experiencing a transition

⁶ The SIPP universe includes the civilian, noninstitutionalized population in the United States living in households.

⁷ For infants born in 2017, information is not available for all 12 months of the reference period. For these children, the available months are used to determine whether a transition took place.

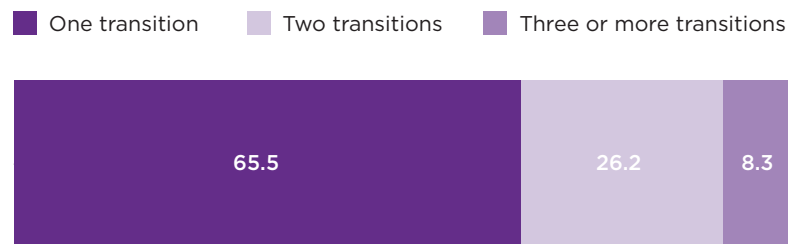
WHAT IS SIPP?

The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) is a nationally representative panel survey administered by the U.S. Census Bureau. It collects information on the short-term dynamics of employment, income, household composition, and eligibility and participation in government assistance programs. It is a leading source of information on topics related to economic well-being, family dynamics, education, wealth and assets, health insurance, child care, and food security. Each SIPP panel follows individuals for several years, providing monthly data that measure changes in household and family composition and economic circumstances over time. For more information, visit the SIPP Web site at <www.census.gov/sipp>.

WHAT INFORMATION DOES THE SIPP COLLECT ABOUT LIVING ARRANGEMENTS?

The SIPP collects the relationship of each household member to a reference person (typically the first person listed as the owner or renter of the housing unit) at the time of interview. In addition, it asks for direct identification of parents living in the household at interview month, as well as the type of relationship between each child and any parent(s), whether biological, step, or adoptive. These responses can be combined with other information, such as residence and fertility history, to develop indicators for how each household member is related to every other person during each month of the reference period (the calendar year preceding the interview). These indicators include the presence and type of coresident parents at each month, as well as the presence or absence of a parent’s cohabiting partner.

Figure 1.
Number of Transitions Experienced During 2017, Among Children Experiencing at Least One Transition
(In percent)



Note: Multiple transitions between the same consecutive months are counted as separate transitions in this figure.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics of Children by Transitions in Presence of Parent(s) or a Parent's Partner During 2017

Characteristics	All children	Children with no transition	Children with any transitions		
			Children with one or more transitions ¹	Children with one transition	Children with two or more transitions ²
Number of children (in thousands)	71,962	69,843	*2,119	1,387	*732
Percent of children	100.0	97.1	*2.9	1.9	*1.0
Child's Sex					
Male	51.1	51.2	49.2	46.1	*55.1
Female	48.9	48.8	50.8	53.9	*44.9
Child's Age					
0-5	31.6	31.6	32.2	33.5	29.8
6-11	33.7	33.6	35.9	33.8	39.8
12-17	34.7	34.8	31.9	32.7	30.4
Child's Race and Hispanic Origin					
White alone, non-Hispanic	50.3	50.4	47.2	52.2	*37.8
Black alone, non-Hispanic	13.4	13.3	16.7	13.0	*23.8
Asian alone, non-Hispanic	5.4	5.4	3.8	4.0	3.4
All other single races and all race combinations, non-Hispanic	5.4	5.3	*9.9	8.5	12.6
Hispanic	25.6	25.7	22.4	22.4	22.4
Child's Nativity					
Native-born	95.9	95.8	96.8	96.4	97.7
Foreign-born	4.1	4.2	3.2	3.6	2.3
Education of the Householder at Interview Month					
Less than high school	12.7	12.8	*8.6	7.4	11.1
High school graduate	23.3	23.2	27.4	24.6	32.7
More than high school	64.0	64.1	64.0	68.0	*56.2
Household Income-to-Poverty Ratio					
Below poverty threshold	17.1	16.8	*25.6	21.5	*33.4
At or above poverty threshold	82.9	83.2	*74.4	78.5	*66.6

* Indicates statistical significance at the 90 percent level ($p < 0.1$).

¹ Statistical testing compared children with one or more transitions to children with no transitions.

² Statistical testing compared children with two or more transitions to children with one transition.

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

were living in poverty compared to those children not experiencing a transition.⁸ In 2017, while 26 percent of children who experienced a transition were in poverty, just 17 percent of children with no transition were in poverty. Poverty is closely associated with instability. Poor families may experience more changes in residence and household membership, as well as higher levels of participation

⁸ "In poverty" is defined as living in a household whose income in December of 2017 fell below the poverty threshold.

in aid programs.⁹ Furthermore, living in poverty during childhood has been linked to many negative outcomes, including emotional and behavioral problems, lower educational outcomes and poorer health.¹⁰

⁹ Kathleen M. Ziol-Guest and Claire C. McKenna, "Early Childhood Housing Instability and School Readiness," *Child Development*, Vol. 85:1, pp. 103-113, 2014.

¹⁰ Guang Guo & Mullan Harris, Kathleen, "The Mechanisms Mediating the Effects of Poverty on Children's Intellectual Development," *Demography*, Vol. 37:4, pp. 431-447, 2000.

Additionally, the characteristics of those children who experienced two or more transitions differed from children who experienced one transition. Children who experienced two or more transitions during 2017 were more likely to be male; Black-alone, non-Hispanic; and living in poverty than those children who experienced one transition. Meanwhile, they were less likely to be living with a householder with greater than a high school education.

These children experiencing two or more transitions are likely to be especially vulnerable to some of the negative consequences of household instability highlighted above.

WHAT TYPES OF TRANSITIONS WERE MOST COMMON?

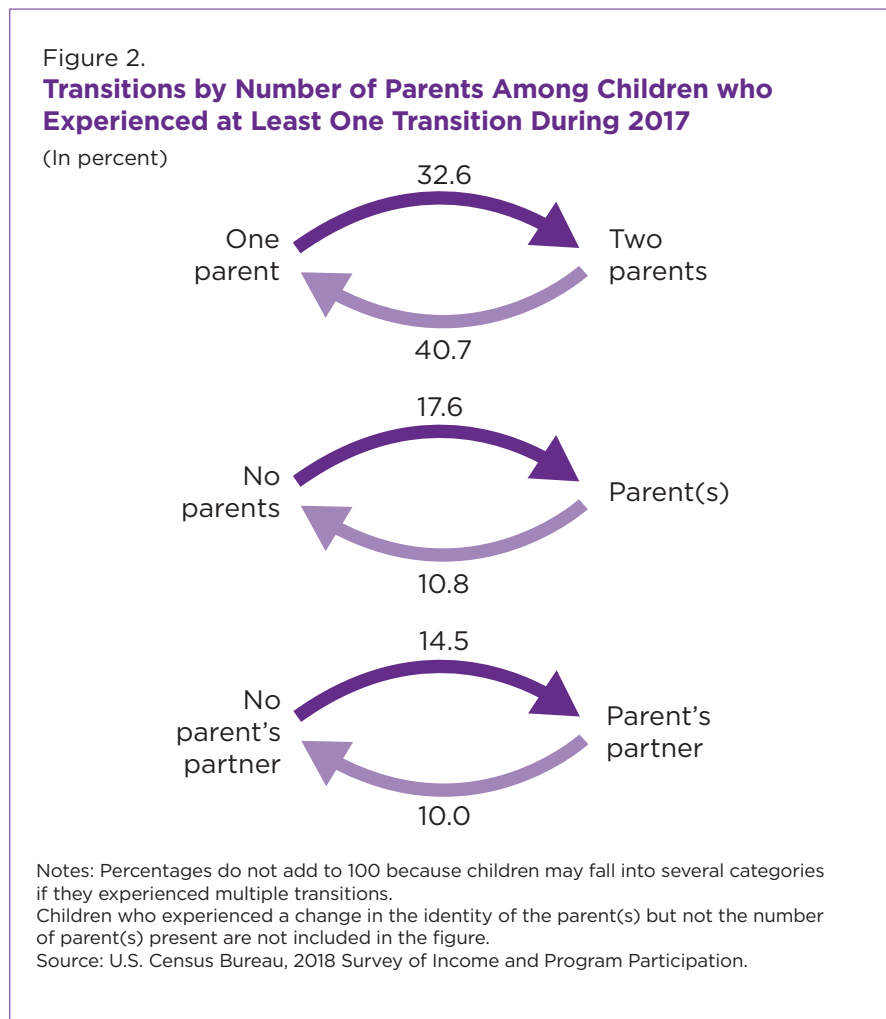
Among all children experiencing a transition during 2017, the most common changes in number of coresident parents (Figure 2) were the transition from two parents to one parent (41 percent) and the transition from one parent to two parents (33 percent).¹¹ Changes in parental presence are driven by the formation or dissolution of parental unions, and among developed countries, the United States has one of the highest turnover rates in marriage and partnership.¹²

The most common transitions by parent type (Figure 3) involved biological or adoptive parents—likely because the majority of children at any given time are living with biological or adoptive parents. About 64 percent of those shifting from living with two parents to living with one parent experienced the departure of a second biological or adoptive parent, while 69 percent of those shifting from living with one parent to living with two parents experienced the arrival of a second biological or adoptive parent.¹³ There is a large overlap between these two groups—many children who had a second bio-

¹¹ The two percentages did not differ significantly.

¹² See Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

¹³ The two percentages did not differ significantly.



logical or adoptive parent arrive also transitioned from having two biological or adoptive parents to only one at some point during the reference period. Transitions involving stepparents were less frequent. Roughly 35 percent of children transitioning from living with two parents to living with one parent shifted from living with one biological or adoptive parent and one stepparent to living with one biological or adoptive parent. Meanwhile, 30 percent of those shifting from living with one parent to living with two parents transitioned from living with one biological or adoptive parent to

living with one biological or adoptive parent and one stepparent.¹⁴

Children also experienced other transitions in the number and type of parents with whom they lived. About 18 percent of those children experiencing a transition shifted from living with no parents to living with at least one parent at some point during 2017, while 11 percent shifted from living with at least one parent to living with no parents.¹⁵ A small proportion of children (roughly 5 percent of those experiencing a transition)

¹⁴ The two percentages did not differ significantly.

¹⁵ Children living with no parents may be living with grandparents, foster parents, other relatives, or nonrelatives.

did not have a change in the overall number of parents present across months, but experienced a transition in the parent(s) with whom they lived.

Roughly 15 percent of children experiencing a transition gained a parent's cohabiting partner at some point during 2017, while 10 percent lost a parent's cohabiting partner.^{16,17} Although a parent's cohabiting boyfriend or girlfriend could be considered an additional parental figure, their entry or departure as household members has been linked to increased family instability and poorer outcomes for children.^{18,19}

WHEN DID TRANSITIONS OCCUR?

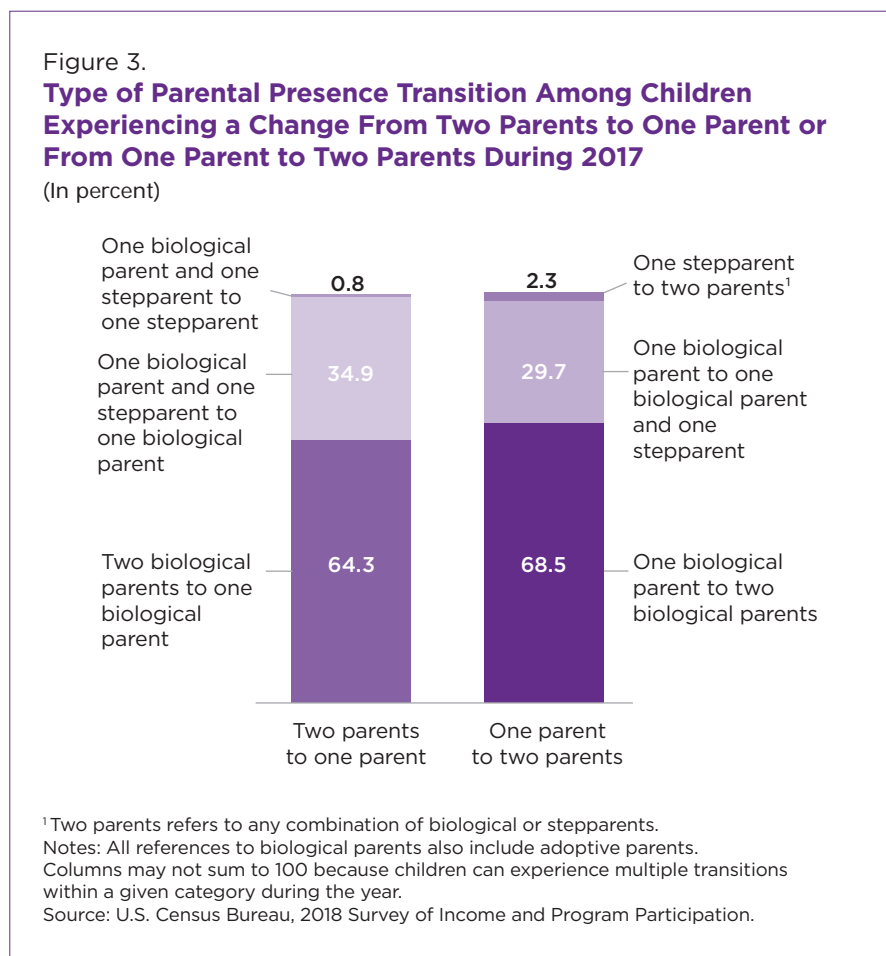
Transitions were not spread evenly throughout the year. Figure 4 shows the proportion of children experiencing a transition between two consecutive months, as a proportion of all children who experienced at least one transition during the year. In 2017, children experienced transitions in their

¹⁶ In this context, a parent's cohabiting partner refers to a person who is identified as the cohabiting partner of the child's parent at a given month, but is not identified as the parent of the child.

¹⁷ The two percentages did not differ significantly.

¹⁸ See Susan L. Brown, "Family Structure Transitions and Adolescent Well-Being," *Demography*, Vol. 43:3, pp. 447-461, 2006.

¹⁹ See Kelly Raley and Elizabeth Wildsmith, "Cohabitation and Children's Family Instability," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 66:1, pp. 210-219, 2004.



living arrangements with parents most frequently during the summer and early fall.²⁰ For example, roughly 18 percent of all children experiencing a transition did so between August and September, while about 10 percent experienced a transition between March and April. This pattern broadly follows trends in the timing of

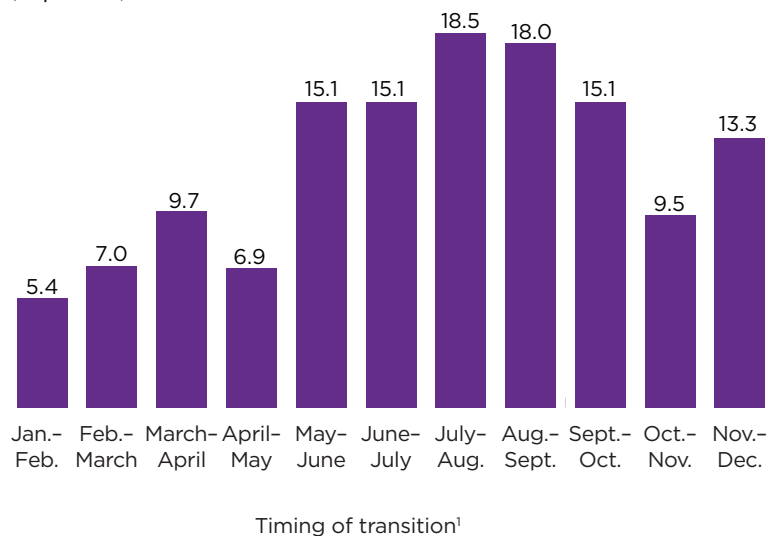
²⁰ The percentage of children with a transition between July and August did not differ significantly from those with transitions between November and December.

residential moves identified in past research.^{21,22}

²¹ See: Matthew C. Marlay and Alison K. Fields, "Seasonality of Moves and the Duration and Tenure of Residence: 2004," *Current Population Reports*, P70-122, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2010.

²² Reduced recall for earlier months of the reference period may also contribute to this pattern. For more information regarding recall bias in SIPP, see Moore et al., "The 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation Event History Calendar Field Test: Study Design and Initial Results," *Survey Methodology Report Series*, 2009-09, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2009.

Figure 4.
Timing of Transitions in Presence of Parents or a Parent's Partner Across 2017 Among Children who Experienced at Least One Transition
(In percent)



¹ Since data are only available for the months of calendar year 2017, only 11 transitions can be captured.
Notes: Percentages do not add to 100 because children who experienced multiple transitions may fall into multiple categories.
The presence of a transition between consecutive months is treated as binary, meaning that a child who experienced two transitions between June and July is not counted differently than a child who experienced just one transition between those months.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

SUMMARY

To summarize, the most common transitions in parental presence or the presence of a parent's partner experienced by children in 2017 were the arrival or departure of a second parent, particularly a biological or adoptive parent, and transitions were most frequent during the summer and early fall months. Children experiencing a transition were more often living in poverty, indicating the intersection of two experiences that have been identified as predictors of negative outcomes in later life. The ability to study this linkage between monthly transitions in living arrangements and poverty status reflects the unique

strengths of the SIPP among Census Bureau data sources.

SOURCE AND ACCURACY

Statistics from surveys are subject to sampling and nonsampling error. All comparisons presented in this report have taken sampling error into account and are significant at the 90 percent confidence level unless otherwise noted. This means the 90 percent confidence interval for the difference between the estimates being compared does not include zero. Nonsampling errors in surveys may be attributed to a variety of sources, such as how the survey was designed, how respondents interpret questions, how able

and willing respondents are to provide correct answers, and how accurately the answers are coded and classified. To minimize these errors, the Census Bureau employs quality control procedures throughout the production process, including the overall design of surveys, wording of questions, review of the work of interviewers and coders, and the statistical review of reports.

Additional information on the SIPP can be found at: <www.census.gov/sipp/> (main SIPP Web site), <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sipp/guidance/users-guide.html> (SIPP Users' Guides), and <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sipp/tech-documentation/source-accuracy-statements.html> (SIPP Source and Accuracy Statements).

CONTACTS

Additional information on family statistics can be found by contacting the SIPP Coordination and Outreach Staff at <census.sipp@census.gov> or 1-888-245-3076. For further information on the content of this report, contact:

Zachary Scherer
<Zachary.Scherer@census.gov>
Yerís Mayol-García
<Yeris.H.Mayol.Garcia@census.gov>
Fertility and Family Statistics Branch
301-763-2416

SUGGESTED CITATION

Scherer, Zachary, and Yerís H. Mayol-García, "Transitions in Parental Presence Among Children: 2017," Current Population Reports, P70BR-169, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2020.

Appendix Table.

Standard Errors for Table 1

Characteristic	All children	Children with no transition	Children with any transitions		
			Children with one or more transitions	Children with one transition	Children with two or more transitions
Standard error of number of children (in thousands)	X	202	151	124	83
Standard error of percent of children	X	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1
Child's Sex					
Male	0.1	0.1	2.4	3.1	3.9
Female.....	0.1	0.1	2.4	3.1	3.9
Child's Age					
0-5	0.1	0.1	2.7	3.5	4.5
6-11	0.2	0.2	2.5	3.3	4.2
12-17	0.2	0.2	2.6	3.3	3.9
Child's Race and Hispanic Origin					
White alone, non-Hispanic	0.2	0.3	3.5	4.4	5.9
Black alone, non-Hispanic.....	0.2	0.2	2.6	3.3	5.0
Asian alone, non-Hispanic.....	0.2	0.2	1.3	1.5	2.2
All other single races and all race combinations, non-Hispanic.....	0.2	0.2	2.1	2.6	3.5
Hispanic.....	0.1	0.2	3.0	3.7	4.4
Child's Nativity					
Native-born	0.2	0.2	1.1	1.3	1.8
Foreign-born	0.2	0.2	1.1	1.3	1.8
Education of the Householder at Interview Month					
Less than high school.....	0.4	0.4	1.9	2.2	3.8
High school graduate.....	0.5	0.6	3.5	4.1	5.2
More than high school.....	0.6	0.6	3.7	4.3	5.4
Household Income-to-Poverty Ratio					
Below poverty threshold.....	0.6	0.6	3.1	3.9	5.1
At or above poverty threshold.....	0.6	0.6	3.1	3.9	5.1

X Not applicable.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.