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The Complex Living Arrangements of Children and Their Unmarried Parents
Rose M. Kreider and Diana B. Elliott

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Introduction

For more than 30 years, the percentage of children in the United States who live with two married parents has declined. In 1971, 83 percent of children under 18 lived with two married parents, while in 2006, this figure had declined to 67 percent. Correspondingly, the percentage of children living with one parent has risen from 13 percent in 1971 to 28 percent in 2006.¹ But is this the whole story?

Family demographers have noted that over time, more unmarried partner households have formed, many of which have children. Before surveys had a direct measure of cohabitation, it was estimated using the POSSLQ—persons of opposite sex sharing living quarters—which included households in which the householder lived with another unmarried adult of the opposite sex. Using this indirect estimation method, about 28 percent of the 1.8 million POSSLQ households in 1981 had a child under 15 present, while 34 percent of the 5.4 million POSSLQ households in 2006 had children under 15 present.

So, many children previously counted as living with single parents may have actually lived with

¹ All comparative statements have undergone statistical testing and are significant at the 90-percent confidence level unless otherwise noted. Further information about the source and accuracy of the estimates is available at: <http://www.census.gov/aprd/techdoc/cps/cpsmar08.pdf>.

another parent or adult. However, most large nationally representative data sets have not had direct and detailed measures documenting this trend. Consequently, there is a need to better understand whether children live with 1) Two parents; 2) One parent and their parents' cohabiting partner or another adult; or 3) Alone with one parent. Studies suggest that children may benefit from the resources that other adults contribute to a household.

This poster looks at detailed living arrangements of children living with unmarried parents to understand who they are and how their well-being compares with children living with married parents.

Data

We use the Current Population Survey's (CPS) Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), collected in February, March and April of 2008. Before 2007, the Current Population Survey could only show children living with married parents as living with two parents. So children who lived with two unmarried parents were listed as living with a single mother or single father. Beginning in 2007, collection of the data changed so that two coresident parents can now be identified. Also in 2007, a direct question was added that asks whether adults who live with nonrelative adults have a boyfriend, girlfriend or partner living in the household. Using data from these new questions, we can show more detail about the living arrangements of children and their unmarried parents. For more information about the changes in data collection, see the working paper on the Census Bureau's website at:

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps08/twps08.pdf>

Sample

The poster includes children who are under 18, never married, who are not themselves a family reference person, householder or spouse, and who are living with at least one parent. We divide the sample into age groups in order to proxy changes in children's living arrangements through the course of their childhood.

Types of Children's Living Arrangements

The detailed living arrangements for children that we show include the following: married parents, two unmarried parents, mom with a cohabiting partner, dad with a cohabiting partner, mom only with another adult, dad only with another adult, mom sole adult and dad sole adult. The other adults living with the parents may be relatives or nonrelatives.

About 70 (+/- 1.9 %) percent of children, across all age groups, lived with married parents, however the percentage of children age 12-17 who lived with two married parents, at 68.7, is statistically lower than 70 percent, and only differs statistically from the percentage for children age 6-11, which is 70.2 percent. A higher percentage of younger children lived with two unmarried parents than did older children. It is this category of children (2.4 million in 2008) that in prior CPS surveys, were classified as living with only one unmarried parent.

Focusing on children living with unmarried parents, we see that one third (36 percent +/- 3.6 %)

of infants under age 1 lived with two parents, while among 12 to 17 year olds, 4 (+/- .6 %) percent lived with two unmarried parents. A majority of children living with unmarried parents were living only with their mothers and not their fathers (61 percent +/- 3.7 % before age 1 and 80 percent +/- 1.2 % among 12 to 17 year olds). The comparable percentages for children living only with their fathers are 3 percent (+/- 1.3 %) before age 1 and 16 percent (+/- 1.1 %) for children 12 to 17.

The living arrangements of children vary across race and origin groups. Among all children under age 18, more than eight in ten Asian² children, more than three-quarters of white children, two-thirds of Hispanic children, and more than one-third of black children lived with two married parents. A higher percentage of Hispanic children age 0 to 2 were living with two unmarried parents than other children. One quarter (23 percent +/- 3.3 %) of black children age 0 to 2 were living with one parent and another adult, who may be the parent's cohabiting partner, or a relative, or nonrelative. Within each age group shown, a higher percentage of black children were living with a sole parent than other children.

The Well-Being of Children Living With Unmarried Parents

By examining several characteristics of the parents and households in which the children live, we can gain some sense of the relative well being, on average, of children by type of parental living arrangement. About 92 percent (+/- .4 %) of children living with married parents and 90 percent (+/- .8 %) of those living with a sole adult parent had health insurance, compared with 83 percent

² The race groups include children reported as single race, non-Hispanic.

(+/- 2.1 %) of children living with two unmarried parents, and 82 percent (+/- 1.4 %) of those living with a parent who lived with another adult.³ Thirty-five percent (+/- 1.1 %) of children living with a sole parent were receiving food stamps, compared with 6 percent (+/- .3 %) of children living with married parents.⁴ Seventy-eight percent (+/- .5 %) of children with married parents and 56 percent (+/- 1.7 %) of children living with one parent and another adult lived in homes that were owned. About 6 in 10 children living with two unmarried parents or living with a sole parent lived in rented housing.⁵ Children living with married parents had parents with the highest levels of education: 46 percent (+/- .6 %) of children with married parents had a parent with at least a bachelor's degree and 73 percent (+/- .5 %) had a parent with at least some college.

Conclusions

Improved data collection beginning in the 2007 CPS allows us to look at the living arrangements of children and their unmarried parents in greater detail. Most children lived with two married parents, and this proportion was about 70 percent for all age groups. While most children with unmarried parents were living only with their mother, 11 percent (+/- 1.3 %) of all children under the age of 1 lived with two unmarried parents. A higher percentage of children age 12 to 17 lived

³ The percentage of children with health insurance coverage does not differ statistically for those living with two unmarried parents and those living with a parent who lives with another adult.

⁴ Estimates of the percentages of children living in a household receiving food stamps do not differ statistically for children living with two unmarried parents and children living with a parent who lives with another adult.

⁵ The percentage of children living with a parent who lives with another adult, 64 percent, was statistically different from 60 percent.

with a sole parent than children under the age of 1. Living arrangements varied across race and ethnicity. Twelve percent (+/- 1.9 %) of Hispanic children age 0 to 2 lived with two unmarried parents. At all ages, a higher percentage of black children lived with a sole parent than children in other arrangements. On average, the children of married parents fared better than children in other living arrangements on a number of indicators of well-being such as parents' educational attainment and home ownership.