

## **AIM**

The aim of this research project is to illustrate the potential benefits and shortcomings of expanding upon traditional measurements and conceptualizations of family trajectories. Family trajectory refers to an individual's entire childhood experience in terms of family structure (i.e., ever having lived in a single mother home, married parent family, stepfamily, or cohabiting unmarried parents). Thus far, research has employed simplified measures of family trajectories in order to assess how family instability affects child outcomes. For example, studies of future child well-being often use parental divorce or separation as a sign of family instability, and assess its relationship with future child outcomes. This research project attempts to supplement and advance prior work by utilizing data from the 1995 round of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). These data offer significant details about respondents' cumulative family structure experiences, from the time they were born until the time they reach the age of 18. The data allow respondents to report up to twelve different changes in their living arrangements during their childhood, as well as offering respondents dozens of choices in identifying the nature of each of these living arrangements (the parental figure combinations). The details of this data offer a variety of ways to measure and conceptualize family instability that go beyond the attempts of prior research.

Ultimately, this project will assess the influence of various family trajectories on important child outcomes, including high school graduation and teen pregnancy. This study will make comparisons in the odds of high school graduation and teen pregnancy among those respondents who follow distinct family trajectories from the time of their birth. This study will compare the influence of cohabiting parent unions that dissolve (separate) with married parent families that dissolve (separate or divorce) to identify potential differences in the nature of the instability. Furthermore, this study will compare outcomes of respondents with single mothers who marry with outcomes of respondents with single mothers who cohabit (but do not marry). Results will indicate whether these specific types of changes experienced in family structure yield different outcomes among the children within the households.

## **Background**

The assessment of family structure on child outcomes is not a novel endeavor in sociology. However, detailed accounts of family structure have been notably absent in the available datasets. Hence, many studies have been limited by their ability to only account for family structure at one point in time. For example, research has assessed the influence of living in a particular family structure at age 14 because surveys have been limited in their number of questions on this matter (including the most recent round of the NSFG in 2002). In turn, the use of these static measures of family structure do not fully capture the role of union formation or union dissolution in children's lives (Manning and Bulanda, 2006). Incorporating more detailed measures of children's family structure experiences is a necessary goal for future research.

Currently, the family sociology literature has placed a great deal of emphasis on the role of family structure on children's lives (Brown, 2004; Lansford et al., 2001; Raley and Wildsmith, 2004). Lansford and colleagues (2001) focus on comparisons of family processes within two-parent families, single mother families, and stepfamilies. However, they did not address movement from one structure to another and how that may influence the children. Brown (2004) addresses the relationship between current family structure

and adolescent behavior problems, but fails to account for the adolescent's prior family structure experiences. Raley and Wildsmith (2004) assesses the methodological importance of accounting for transitions adolescents experience when their parents enter and leave cohabiting relationships. They find research has largely failed to account for parents who cohabit and separate as a form of family instability. This is of tremendous importance to family instability research, as it is well documented cohabitating unions are much less stable than marriages (Manning, 2004). Hence, research has overlooked a significant source of family instability when assessing only divorce.

It is also important research begins to look at how single parents who later choose to cohabit constitutes a family change which may influence the children involved. However, research focusing on families that enter cohabiting unions is rare (Sassler, 2004). The abundance of literature on cohabiting families has focused either on the current union (Brown, 2004) or on the instability associated with the dissolution of the union. No known studies assess how a single mother household transitioning to a cohabiting union may be seen as a stabilizing factor (in that it adds a parent to the household, much in the same way marriage would). This study hopes to remedy this shortcoming and would emphasize this particular family transition.

The outcomes of high school graduation and teen pregnancy are important to include as dependent variables because they are strong indicators of future success and well-being. Failing to graduate high school or having a teenage pregnancy (impregnating someone as a teen) are two obstacles for future employment and upward social mobility (moving up the social class ladder). Family instability is commonly associated with poor developmental child outcomes due in part to greater emotional stress, inconsistent and poor socialization, and weaker parental control (see Rodgers and Rose, 2002). Hence, it is anticipated family instability will also be important correlates of these two outcomes.

The purpose of the project is to address the following research questions:

1. Among respondents born to single mothers, how do the following three trajectories compare in their association with odds of high school graduation and odds of having a teen birth:
  - a. remaining in a single mother family
  - b. transitioning from a single mother family to a cohabiting parent family
  - c. transitioning from a single mother family to a married stepparent family
2. Among respondents born to married mothers, how do the following three trajectories compare in their associations with odds of high school graduation and odds of having a teen birth:
  - a. remaining in a married parent family
  - b. transitioning from a married parent family to a single parent family via separation
  - c. transitioning from a married parent family to a single parent family via divorce

## REFERENCES

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