**Children's Living Arrangements and Experiences of Family Disruption in Sweden, 1975-2000**

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This paper examines changes in children's family structure in Sweden between 1975-2000 and focuses on socioeconomic differences in children's family lives. We will address two main questions: 1) Have rising rates of cohabitation and childbearing in consensual unions increased children's experience of family instability and time in a single-parent household? 2) Have these changes in children's living arrangements disproportionately affected children from disadvantaged backgrounds? Sweden, a country with high rates of cohabiting births and high rates of union dissolution, combined with generous social policies, is an important context for studying SES differences in children's family instability.

## Theoretical Focus

In the last half of the 20th century rising rates of cohabitation, divorce, and nonmarital childbearing, combined with declining rates of marriage and marital childbearing have changed the family structures into which children are born and raised. McLanahan (2004) argues that these changes, referred to collectively as the Second Demographic Transition, have resulted in "diverging destinies", growing disparities in children's access to parental resources of time and money. Children born into advantaged households, she argued, are gaining resources as a result of their parents' delayed family formation and increases in mothers' employment—experiencing, as a result, higher standards of living, low parental divorce rates, and significant increases in father involvement. Children born into disadvantaged families, on the other hand, have experienced the more detrimental aspects of the Second Demographic Transition—nonmarital childbearing and increasing divorce rates resulting in greater time spent in single parent families and concomitant lower standards of living and father involvement.

The evidence of a divergence in children's access to a stable family life is strongest for the United States, although suggestive evidence is available for other wealthy countries. In the U.S., Bumpass and Lu (2000) demonstrate that the growth in nonmarital childbearing and cohabiting births, in particular, was limited to women without college degrees, while the likelihood a child will experience mother's cohabitation decreases with mother's education. Educational differences in divorce rates have increased in the U.S. and in Sweden (Hoem 1997; Raley and Bumpass 2003). Moreover, separation risks are higher in cohabiting unions than marital unions in the U.S. and Sweden (Heuveline, Timberlake, and Furstenberg 2003; Hoem and Hoem 1992; Manning, Smock, and Majumdar 2004). In the 1990s in wealthy countries, children of highly educated mothers are the least likely to be exposed to singe motherhood (McLanahan 2004).

Sweden is an important context for studying recent family change for both practical and theoretical reasons and presents an important comparison case to the more frequently studied United States. Demographically and theoretically, Sweden is important because cohabitation has become so common that cohabiting and marital unions are virtually indistinguishable in public perception, and over half of all births now occur outside of marriage (Heuveline et al. 2003;

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Kiernan 2002; Thomson 2005) Dissolution rates for Swedish unions (even with children present) are relatively high, although still less than the levels found in the U.S—Andersson (2002) estimated that during the period 1987-93 about 30 percent of Swedish children experience life in a single parent family by age 15, compared to 40 percent in the U.S. Among parental unions, dissolution rates are higher for cohabiting than for married unions in all wealthy countries but the ratio is estimated to be lowest in Sweden (Heuveline et al. 2003). Family policies and the more generous welfare state in Sweden buffer the economic impact of single-parenthood, with relatively few children experiencing poverty as a result of parents union status (McLanahan 2004; Rainwater and Smeeding 2003). These policies may also minimize the importance of parents' marital status for children's living arrangements and perhaps minimize socioeconomic differences in union formation and dissolution patterns. In addition, recent data are available in Sweden that will enable us to produce up-to-date estimates and to study historical changes in children's family lives (and in a later project) to link these changes with detailed measure of child well-being.

**Data and Research Methods**

*Data:* This paper will use data from the 1991 and 2000 surveys of the Swedish Level of Living Survey (LNU). The LNU is long-running survey of adults conducted first in 1968, and repeated in 1974, 1981, 1991, and 2000. The original sample was a 1/1000 sample of the Swedish population ages 15-75. Each subsequent wave aimed to create a new cross-section representative of the population at the time of the survey, while maintaining a longitudinal component. Thus, each survey retained respondents within the age-range (adjusted to 18-75 in 1991), while adding random samples of younger cohorts and of immigrants within the age-range who arrived in Sweden between surveys. The 1991 and 2000 surveys incorporated life histories (education, employment, partnerships, and household composition). The 2000 survey collected particularly detailed indicators of wellbeing from children themselves and from parents.

An important aspect of the LNU is the link between the survey data and annual civil registration data. These linked data allow us to observe respondents and children before and after each survey, and to have access detailed data not included in the survey questionnaire. The data are currently linked with the tax register, providing detailed income, taxes, and benefits data, along with an annual indicator of marital status since 1973.

The detailed birth and union histories collected by the LNU enable us to construct children's family histories. From each child's perspective, we observe parental marital and cohabitation status at birth, as well as the type and timing of family changes the child experiences (although only the responding parent's partnership histories can be tracked.)

*Methods:* We will use life table methods to estimate a number of markers of children's family lives and experiences of family stability or instability. This is a common approach for describing children's family lives (see for example:Andersson 2002; Bumpass and Lu 2000; Heuveline et al. 2003) and will enable us to produce estimates comparable to those for other times and places..

We plan to produce the following life table estimates: union status at birth; experience of union disruption (by parent's union type) for children born into unions; experience of repartnering of

parent for children experiencing disruption of parents unions; experience of time in a single-parent family; and duration of time spent living with both biological parents**.**
These estimates will be stratified by parent's educational attainment and by period. This will enable us to see whether children are experiencing greater disruption in family situation over time and whether family socioeconomic status (measured by SES) is becoming increasingly important predictor of family instability in Sweden as it is the in United States (Bumpass and Lu 2000). We also plan to present observed changes by birth cohort for parental union dissolutions by child age (up to age 15 for the earlier cohorts of children).

We also plan to use multivariate event history techniques to test for the significance of differentials identified from the life table estimates, and to control for factors that may influence children's experience of family instability. Independent variables in these models will include: type of union type at birth, experience of parental separation for children born into unions, and subsequent repartnering.

## Preliminary Findings

Below we present preliminary estimates of family dissolution and reconstitution for children of LNU respondents. This analysis includes children born 1970-2000 (n=4956). The estimates are based on child birth cohort—future analyses will examine period changes as well, enabling us to estimate living arrangements for children as recently as the period 1995-2000. Subsequent analysis will also differentiate between legal marriage and cohabitation and will be stratified by education.

Table 1 presents estimates of parental union status at the time of the child's birth. Despite Sweden's high nonmarital fertility rates, very few children are born to single parent families. About 4 percent of mothers in both the earlier and later cohorts report having a child without being in a union. Father reports of nonunion births are somewhat lower, about 3 percent of births, likely indicating under-reporting of nonresident children. There is little evidence of an increase in nonunion childbearing over time. We expect to find strong educational differences in nonunion childbearing.

**Table 1. Proportion of children born into single parent household, by child birth cohort and responding parent gender**

| | |
|---|---|
| Female R | |
| 1970-1984 | 0.040 |
| 1985-2000 | 0.043 |
| Male R | |
| 1970-1984 | 0.026 |
| 1985-2000 | 0.036 |

The proportion of children experiencing parental separation appears to have increased over time (see Table 2). The likelihood of dissolution by child age 15 reached nearly 30 percent by the later cohort (regardless of the responding parent's gender)—an estimate quite similar to Andersson's (2002) estimate for the period 1987-93. The cohort increase was smaller for mothers than for fathers (about 5 percentage points compared to 11 percent among fathers),

suggesting that some of the increase from father reports is due to improved male reports of union histories. Because divorce rates in Sweden have increased more among less well-educated adults (see Hoem 1997), we expect to find the increase in union dissolution rates overall to be lower for the children of more-educated parents. We will also examine whether trends in dissolution rates differ by the type of union (marital or nonmarital), and whether increases in union disruption are attributable to overall shift from marriage to less stable cohabiting unions as the context for childbearing.

**Table 2. Cumulative percent of children out of union, by exact age of child, for child born into a union**

| | age 1 | age 3 | age 9 | age 15 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female R. | | | | |
| 1970-84 | 0.02 | 0.05 | 0.16 | 0.22 |
| 1985-2000 | 0.02 | 0.07 | 0.18 | 0.28 |
| Male R. | | | | |
| 1970-84 | 0.01 | 0.04 | 0.10 | 0.16 |
| 1985-2000 | 0.01 | 0.05 | 0.18 | 0.27 |

The final table examines children's experience of stepfamily formation (the repartnering of parents), by time since parental separation. The estimates indicate little change over time, and the estimates of repartnering for female respondents are quite similar to Andersson's (2002) female-based estimates for during the period 1987-93. Fathers report repartnering at higher rates than mothers, suggesting that mother-based estimates may understate the degree of instability in children's family lives.

**Table 3. Cumulative percent in new union, by time since union disruption**

| | **Duration since separation** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Birth cohort** | 1 year | 3 years | 6 years | 10 years |
| Male R. | | | | |
| 1970-84 | 0.12 | 0.45 | 0.63 | 0.80 |
| 1985-2000 | 0.12 | 0.45 | 0.63 | |
| Female R. | | | | |
| 1970-84 | 0.13 | 0.31 | 0.48 | 0.62 |
| 1985-2000 | 0.04 | 0.27 | 0.53 | |

Our planned analysis will flesh out these preliminary findings, and will focus on educational differences and trends in family instability.

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