

Family Instability, Multipartner Fertility, and Behavior in Middle Childhood

Paula Fomby
University of Colorado Denver

Cynthia Osborne
University of Texas at Austin

Abstract

Two concepts in family demography capture the dynamic and complex nature of family structure: family instability (repeated changes in children's family structure when parents form and dissolve unions) and multipartner fertility (a parent's experience of having children with more than one partner). Each phenomenon is associated with children's compromised well-being. We investigate the extent to which instability and multipartner fertility co-occur and consider whether the two processes have distinct consequences for children's behavior. We use longitudinal data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (N=3,377) to document and explain the association of family instability and multipartner fertility with three measures of child behavior at age 9: mother-reported and teacher-reported externalizing behavior and child-reported delinquency. Preliminary results indicate that children who experienced either event had higher behavior problem scores than children in stable, single-partner families, and children who had experienced both events had the highest average levels of behavior problems.

Introduction

Two emerging trends have captured the attention of demographers studying the association between family structure and child well-being during the last decade: *family instability* and *multipartner fertility*. Family instability is defined as repeated change in a child's family structure, and is usually measured as a count of the entrances and exits by a biological parent's romantic partner(s) or spouse(s) into or out of a child's household. Multipartner fertility is defined as a parent's experience of having biological children with more than one partner during his or her lifetime. From the perspective of children, a parent's multipartner fertility introduces half-siblings into the child's family, regardless of whether those half-siblings share the child's household.

It is likely that family instability and multipartner fertility co-occur. For example, when a child's parent dissolves one union and begins another, the parent may have an additional child with his or her new partner. Under those circumstances, a child experiences both family instability (the dissolution of one union and the formation of another) and multipartner fertility (the addition of a half-sibling to his or

her family tree). However, little scholarship has sought to disentangle the independent effects of these two phenomena on child well-being. In this paper, we assess the relative and joint influence of family instability and multipartner fertility on children's externalizing and delinquent behavior in middle childhood, at age 9. These outcomes are of particular interest because of their robust association with family instability, a finding that has been documented but largely unexplained across a variety of age groups and contexts.

Background

Both family instability and multipartner fertility have become more frequent in the last half century in response to rising and then plateauing rates of divorce and remarriage and a steady increase in the prevalence of nonmarital childbearing among unpartnered or cohabiting parents. Approximately 18 percent of adolescents interviewed in the mid-1990s had experienced two or more changes in family structure (Cavanagh, 2008), and estimates from a nationally-representative sample of children born in 2001 indicate that the prevalence of family instability has held steady or increased since then: about 10 percent of children had experienced two or more changes in family structure by school entry (author's own estimates from ECLS-B data). Family instability is more common among children born to unmarried parents. Using data from the Fragile Families Study, Osborne and McLanahan (2007) found that over one-third of children born to unmarried mothers had experienced two or more changes in union status by age 3.

Drawing on a variety of data sources and methodologies, scholars have established a robust association between the experience of family instability and externalizing behavior, aggressive behavior, and delinquency across childhood and adolescence (Cavanagh, 2008; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006, 2008; Cooper, Osborne, Beck, & McLanahan, 2011; Fomby, 2011; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Fomby, Mollborn, & Sennott, 2010; Fomby & Osborne, 2010; Magnuson & Berger, 2009; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Ryan & Claessens, 2012). Hypotheses concerning income volatility, relationship quality between parents and

children, parental selection into unstable unions, and maternal stress have largely failed to explain this association. The timing of union instability appears to be consequential to children, with early union transitions having a larger and more lasting impact on behavior and delinquency compared to later instability (Cavanagh, 2008; Ryan & Claessens, 2012), and some research indicates that family instability is more consequential for boys' conduct than for girls' in early and middle childhood (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; Cooper et al., 2011), but this pattern reverses in adolescence (Fomby & Sennott, forthcoming).

A smaller but growing literature has documented the increase in multipartner fertility in the United States. In one study of children born in large U.S. cities, more than one-third of births occurred to parents where the mother or father had at least one child with a previous partner (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006). Administrative data from Wisconsin show that 60 percent of firstborn children with unmarried parents had at least one half-sibling through their mother or father by age 10 (Cancian, Meyer, & Cook, 2011). Much of the literature on multipartner fertility has investigated its effects on parents in terms of kin support, child support arrangements, co-parenting behavior, and maternal mental health (Fomby, forthcoming; Guzzo, 2009; Harknett & Knab, 2007; Smock & Greenland, 2010; L. Tach & Edin, 2011; Laura Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010; Turney & Carlson, 2011).

The literatures that inform hypothesis building in these two areas are also distinct, although the mechanisms that are hypothesized to influence child behavior in the context of family instability and multipartner fertility are likely to overlap, and much of the research in both areas shares a foundation in family stress theory. In seeking to identify causal mechanisms, the family instability literature has emphasized maternal stress, changes in parenting quality, partners' relationship quality prior to union dissolution, income fluctuation, and changes in children's broader environments. Overall, family instability literature has generally focused on how established relationships change in the context of family structure transitions, without direct attention to the potential impact of new individuals

moving in or out of a child's household. Also absent from much of the literature is a consideration of how a child's relationship with a non-coresident biological parent changes as the resident parent's union status changes.

In contrast, the multipartner fertility literature to date has identified mechanisms that highlight father involvement, uncertainty in social roles, and the porousness of household boundaries in complex families. These mechanisms include the loss of a non-coresident parent's payment of informal child support or visitation with biological children after either parent's new union formation; the loss of social support from kin as family-based networks become more diffuse; and role ambiguity within and across households as family members' shifting affinities and obligations pose evolving challenges to family process. However, the multipartner fertility literature has been less attentive to whether these mechanisms influence child outcomes.

We bring together these two strands of research to consider simultaneously how family instability and multipartner fertility influence children's externalizing behavior and early delinquency when they are nine years old. Using data from five waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, we put the focal child from the study at the center of his or her mother's union formation and childbearing trajectories. Conceptually, we imagine four statuses focal children may occupy: (a) stable single-partner fertility, where a child remains in the same family structure into which s/he is born and all siblings share the same biological father; (b) stable multipartner fertility, where a child always resides in the same family structure but has older half-siblings with at least one different biological father; (c) unstable single-partner fertility, where a child experiences union status change(s) after birth but no multipartner fertility (that is, the focal child and older siblings share a biological father and the mother has no subsequent fertility with a new partner); and (d) unstable multipartner fertility, where children experience both union status change and multipartner fertility (either in the mother's history or after the child's birth).

We consider the association between family instability and multipartner fertility and externalizing behavior outcomes for children born to married and unmarried mothers separately. We focus on children who have lived continuously with their biological mother, and we measure the mother's union status changes and fertility history to capture union instability and multipartner fertility. We acknowledge that a focus on one parent's relationship and fertility history underestimates the total family complexity that children may experience if the other parent also experiences union status changes and new childbearing or if the addition of a stepparent to a child's household brings stepsiblings as well.

Data and Methods

We use longitudinal data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal birth cohort study including nearly 5,000 children born between 1998 and 2000 in hospitals in 20 U.S. cities with populations of 200,000 or more. The study includes an oversample of children born to unmarried mothers, which enables an assessment of variation within a heterogeneous population. The population represented by the Fragile Families Study is relatively more disadvantaged than the U.S. population as a whole in terms of educational attainment and socioeconomic status, and is of interest to family policy advocates and scholars studying social inequality. Prior research has established the relatively high prevalence of family instability and multipartner fertility in the Fragile Families Study, making it an attractive sample for considering the consequences of the dynamic nature of family structure for child well-being.

Mothers of the children in the Fragile Families sample were interviewed in person within 48 hours of the child's birth and by telephone when the children were 1, 3 and 5 years old (a subset of households also participated in home visits at the 3 and 5-year follow-ups). The 9-year follow-up included a telephone interview with the primary caregiver and biological parents and an in-home interview with and observations of the focal child (N=3,392 for observations and 3,377 for the

interview). In addition, teachers of focal children were recruited to participate in a mail survey (N=2,254). The response rate at baseline was 82 percent for unmarried mothers and 87 percent for married mothers. Seventy-two percent of families who participated in the first wave completed the in-home observation and interview at the 9-year follow-up (Bendheim-Thomas Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2011). The analysis we present here uses a more restrictive sample that includes only those household who participated at each wave in order to construct the most straightforward measure of exposure to family instability. We also limit the analysis to include only children who have lived continuously with their biological mother in order to be exposed to her union instability and multipartner fertility (N=2,829). Because the nine-year parent interviews obtain complete union histories, we will be able to recover those families who missed one of the intervening waves as we proceed. We will also use multiple imputation to recover cases lost to missing data on independent variables.

Measures. Family instability is measured as the number of changes a child has experienced in co-resident family structure since birth that resulted from a mother's union dissolution or new union formation. The variable ranges from 0 to 8 (mean=1.34, SD=1.65), with family instability more frequent among children born to unmarried mothers (mean=1.62, SD=1.71, N=2099) than married mothers (mean=.51, SD=1.62, N=730). For purposes of our descriptive analysis below, we dichotomize the measure into an indicator of whether a child experienced no family instability or any instability.

Multipartner fertility is based on the mother's reported fertility during the year 9 interview. The mother was asked to identify all of her biological children living in or out of the household and to indicate the biological father of each child. Where all children share the same biological father, the measure takes a value of 1. The variable ranges from 1 to 7 (mean=1.67, SD=.88), with multipartner fertility more frequent among children born to unmarried mothers (mean=1.82, SD=.93) than to married mothers (1.21, SD=.50). We dichotomize this measure as well for our descriptive statistics below.

We consider three measures of children's externalizing behavior and delinquency, each from a different source. Using data from a variety of sources allows us to overcome potential respondent bias and to get a sense of how children behave in different contexts. First, *mothers* responded to 111 items from the Child Behavior Checklist, indicating whether each behavior described is never, sometimes, or always true of the focal child. Twenty-seven items measure the underlying construct of externalizing behavior. Externalizing behavior is described as aggressive or rule-breaking behavior that is typically directed outward and in opposition to other individuals or material goods (e.g., vandalism, breaking things), and is distinct from internalizing behavior, which is characterized by symptomatology that reflects depression and anxiety. Examples of externalizing behavior include fighting, arguing, stealing, or breaking items belonging to others. Items in the externalizing behavior scale are recoded to range from 0 (never) to 2 (always) and summed. Values range from 0 to 54 with high positive skew ($\alpha=.89$).

Children self-reported their early delinquent behavior during the child interview. The scale includes 17 items, and children are asked whether they have ever engaged in each behavior listed. These range from sneaking a sip of wine or beer to trespassing to stealing, vandalizing property, or setting fires. The items are recoded and summed to create a scale ranging from 0 to 17 with high positive skew. (Sensitivity analyses will determine whether a "serious delinquency" scale may be broken out from the items included in the battery.)

Finally, *teachers* reported on children's classroom behavior in the mail-in survey they submitted. S/he indicated whether a child engaged in each of 12 behaviors never, sometimes, often, or very often in the last month. We selected 6 behaviors from the scale that are characteristic of externalizing behavior – fighting, arguing, threatening/bullying, talking back to adults, getting angry easily, and having temper tantrums ($\alpha=.92$). The variables were recoded to range from 0 to 3 and summed into a measure ranging from 0 to 18.

Methods. Below we describe the distribution of family instability/multipartner fertility status in the Fragile Families sample and present bivariate associations between family status and child behavior on each of our three indicators. Our descriptive statistics use dichotomous indicators of family history, but we will use continuous measures in our multivariate analyses. Our analysis plan will proceed as follows: predict child outcomes as a function of (1) family instability and multipartner fertility in separate models, controlling for sociodemographic characteristics; (2) family instability and multipartner fertility as main effects in the same model; and (3) interactions between instability and multipartner fertility. We will then add in covariates that are hypothesized to mediate family instability and multipartner fertility in order to assess the extent to which the two phenomena are empirically similar or distinct in the processes through which they influence child behavior. We will conduct separate analyses for children born to unmarried vs. married parents to account for the different starting points children may have before they experience family instability or multipartner fertility. We will use appropriate statistical methods to account for the skewed nature of the dependent variables and to account for complex sampling design.

Preliminary Findings

Table 1 shows the (unweighted) distribution of children in the longitudinal Fragile Families sample by family history, overall and by mother's marital status at birth. Just over one-quarter of children have remained in the same family structure from birth to age 9 (whether with a single parent or with two parents) and the focal child has the same biological father as his/her siblings (if any). This arrangement is about four times more common among children born to married than to unmarried parents (64.25 percent vs 14.48 percent of all children, respectively).

About 15 percent of children experienced multipartner fertility in the context of their parents' stable union. This means that the focal child is the source (or a source) of multipartner fertility in the household – at least one parent had children with another partner prior to the union into which the

child was born, so the focal child became a new half-sibling to his/her older sister at birth. While the family structure has remained stable since the child's birth, the family must negotiate the complexity and role ambiguity associated with multipartner fertility, as the older children's biological father is no longer in the household. Another 22 percent of children experience some union status change (at a minimum, either the end of a union or the formation of a new union) without the addition of half-siblings to the household. This experience occurs about twice as often among children born to unmarried vs. married mothers (24.73 percent vs. 12.88 percent). Finally, a little more than one-third of children have experienced both family instability and multipartner fertility – that is, their mothers have changed union status at least once during the child's lifetime and the mother has experienced multipartner fertility, either prior to or at the child's birth or after the child was born.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for each of the dependent variables we consider by family history, overall and separately by mother's union status at birth. We note statistically significant differences between family history groups on the overall means. Across the board, children who experience both union instability and multipartner fertility exhibit higher levels of behavior problems compared to children in stable, single-partner families, whether born to a married or unmarried mother. Those who experience both types of family change also have higher levels of mother-reported and teacher-reported externalizing behavior compared to children who experienced only one type of family change. Children who experienced multipartner fertility without union instability have higher self-reported delinquency, but those who experienced union instability had higher externalizing behavior reports from mothers and teachers compared to those who experienced only multipartner fertility.

References

- Bendheim-Thomas Center for Research on Child Wellbeing. (2011). *Data User's Guide for the Nine-Year Follow-Up Wave of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
- Cancian, M., Meyer, D. R., & Cook, S. (2011). The Evolution of Family Complexity from the Perspective of Nonmarital Children. *Demography*, 48(3), 957-982.
- Carlson, M. J., & Furstenberg, F. F. (2006). The Prevalence and Correlates of Multipartnered Fertility Among Urban U.S. Parents. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68(August), 718-732.
- Cavanagh, S. E. (2008). Family structure history and adolescent adjustment. *Journal of Family Issues*, 29(7), 944-980.
- Cavanagh, S. E., & Huston, A. C. (2006). Family Instability and Children's Early Problem Behavior. *Social Forces*, 85(1), 551-581.
- Cavanagh, S. E., & Huston, A. C. (2008). The Timing of Family Instability and Children's Social Development. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70(5), 1258-1270.
- Cooper, C. E., Osborne, C. A., Beck, A. N., & McLanahan, S. S. (2011). Partnership Instability, School Readiness, and Gender Disparities. *Sociology of Education*, 84(3), 246-259.
- Fomby, P. (2011). Family Instability and School Readiness in the United Kingdom. *Family Science*, 2(3), 171-185.
- Fomby, P. (forthcoming). Motherhood in Complex Families. *Journal of Family Issues*.
- Fomby, P., & Cherlin, A. J. (2007). Family Instability and Child Well-Being. *American Sociological Review*, 72, 181-204.
- Fomby, P., Mollborn, S., & Sennott, C. A. (2010). Race/Ethnic Differences in Effects of Family Instability on Adolescents' Risk Behavior. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(2), 234-253.
- Fomby, P., & Osborne, C. (2010). The influence of union instability and union quality on children's aggressive behavior. *Social Science Research*, 39(6), 912-924.
- Fomby, P., & Sennott, C. (forthcoming). Family Structure Instability and Mobility: The Consequences for Adolescents' Problem Behavior. *Social Science Research*.
- Guzzo, K. B. (2009). Maternal Relationships and Nonresidential Father Visitation of Children Born Outside of Marriage. *Journal Of Marriage And Family*, 71(3), 632-649.
- Harknett, K., & Knab, J. (2007). More Kin, Less Support: Multipartnered Fertility and Perceived Support Among Mothers. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69(1), 237-253.
- Magnuson, K. A., & Berger, L. M. (2009). Family Structure States and Transitions: Associations With Children's Well-Being During Middle Childhood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71(3), 575-591.
- Osborne, C., & McLanahan, S. (2007). Partnership Instability and Child Well-Being. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69(4), 1065-1083.
- Ryan, R. M., & Claessens, A. (2012). Associations Between Family Structure Changes and Children's Behavior Problems: The Moderating Effects of Timing and Marital Birth. *Developmental Psychology*, No Pagination Specified.
- Smock, P. J., & Greenland, F. R. (2010). Diversity in Pathways to Parenthood: Patterns, Implications, and Emerging Research Directions. *Journal Of Marriage And The Family*, 72(3), 576-593.
- Tach, L., & Edin, K. (2011). The Relationship Contexts of Young Disadvantaged Men. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 635, 76-94.
- Tach, L., Mincy, R., & Edin, K. (2010). Parenting as a "Package Deal": Relationships, Fertility, and Nonresident Father Involvement Among Unmarried Parents. *Demography*, 47(1), 181-204.

Turney, K., & Carlson, M. J. (2011). Multipartnered Fertility and Depression Among Fragile Families.
Journal of Marriage and Family, 73(3), 570-587.

Table 1. Percentage of children in each family history category, overall and by union status at birth (unweighted, N=2,829)

	Overall	Unmarried at birth	Married at birth
Stable single-partner fertility	27.32	14.48	64.25
Stable multipartner fertility	14.56	16.34	9.45
Unstable single-partner fertility	21.67	24.73	12.88
Instability and MPF	36.44	44.45	13.42
Total	100	100	100
N		2099	730

Table 2. Group mean comparisons of dependent variables by family history, overall and by mother's union status at birth

	Overall			Unmarried at birth		Married at birth	
	Mean	SD		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<i>Child-reported delinquency (N=2,593)</i>							
Stable single-partner fertility	0.91	1.55		1.19	1.74	0.72	1.36
Stable multipartner fertility	1.38	1.90	*	1.43	1.94	1.10	1.61
Unstable single-partner fertility	1.22	1.76	*	1.24	1.79	1.11	1.62
Instability and MPF	1.46	1.84	*†	1.44	1.85	1.60	1.76
<i>Mother-reported externalizing behavior (CBCL, N=2,486)</i>							
Stable single-partner fertility	4.67	4.89		5.49	5.36	4.10	4.46
Stable multipartner fertility	5.18	5.63	*	5.44	5.92	3.88	3.63
Unstable single-partner fertility	5.98	5.91	*	5.87	5.80	6.63	6.52
Instability and MPF	6.42	6.57	*^	6.42	6.68	6.34	5.48
<i>Teacher reported externalizing behavior (N=1,768)</i>							
Stable single-partner fertility	2.18	3.13		2.97	3.69	1.68	2.60
Stable multipartner fertility	3.18	4.02	*	3.46	4.17	1.93	2.98
Unstable single-partner fertility	3.36	4.06	*	3.44	4.19	2.98	3.23
Instability and MPF	4.23	4.53	*†^	4.24	4.56	4.17	4.29

* p<.05 compared to stable, single-partner fertility

† p<.05 compared to stable multipartner fertility

^ p<.05 compared to unstable single-partner fertility