

National Poverty Center

Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan

[www.npc.umich.edu](http://www.npc.umich.edu)



Mixed Methods Research on Economic Conditions, Public Policy,  
and Family and Child Well-Being

This paper was delivered at a National Poverty Center conference. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the National Poverty Center or any sponsoring agency.

**DRAFT, NOT FOR CITATION OR QUOTATION**

**FAMILIES ACROSS HOUSEHOLDS: WHO GETS COUNTED  
AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY FUNCTIONING**

Rukmalie Jayakody  
Pennsylvania State University  
[jayakody@pop.psu.edu](mailto:jayakody@pop.psu.edu)

Kristin S. Seefeldt  
University of Michigan  
[kseef@umich.edu](mailto:kseef@umich.edu)

Paper prepared for the National Poverty Center conference on Mixed Methods  
Research on Economic Conditions, Public Policy, and Family and Child Well-Being,  
June 27-28, 2005, Ann Arbor, MI.

## **FAMILIES ACROSS HOUSEHOLDS: WHO GETS COUNTED AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY FUNCTIONING**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Concern over poor child outcomes, high poverty rates and welfare dependence in single parent households has resulted in an increased focus on marriage and its potential benefits among both social scientists (Poponoe & Whitehead, 2003; Waite & Gallagher, 2000) and policy makers (Horn, 2002). Marriage promotion was a stated policy goal in the 1996 welfare reform bill, and efforts to promote marriage have come to the fore during welfare re-authorization discussions. Although not viewed directly as an anti-poverty program (although stable marriages are associated with more stable employment and higher wages), marriage promotion is increasingly viewed as part of an overall strategy to help low-income couples achieve economic self-sufficiency. The Bush administration has proposed spending over \$1.5 billion over the next five years on marriage promotion efforts.

There is an emerging literature on the marriage patterns of low-income families. Although a perception exists that low-income individuals rarely marry, overall, economically disadvantaged adults are just as likely to marry as their advantaged counterparts (Fein, 2004). However, these marriages tend to be less stable and are more likely to be preceded by a non-marital birth. Further, low-income couples who have a child together may not always marry each other. Among unwed new parents in the Fragile Families study, most of whom are economically disadvantaged, only nine percent marry within a year after the birth, and more than two-fifths are no longer romantically involved together (Fragile Families, 2003).

For women who have recently left welfare, marriage may be relatively rare. Nationally representative data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) indicate that among unmarried women receiving welfare in 1996, only 13 percent had transitioned into marriage four years later. Regional data on an urban Michigan sample from the Women's Employment Study (WES) show higher rates, with about 20 percent of former recipients transitioning into marriage within four years (Jayakody, Seefeldt, Danziger, & Avellar, 2004).

Much less is known about the situation and circumstances of low-income families after a couple marries. Discussions of post marriage well-being are largely limited to economic conditions, with assertions that marriage will improve economic well-being, in part by bringing an additional earner into the household.

Furthermore, proponents of marriage promotion, while recognizing that one or more members of a couple may have children from other relationships, often fail to take into account that the new "families" created may be quite complex. Indeed, much of the prior research on the economic well-being of married versus single parent families, or on families more generally, takes a household based approach. That is, when examining families, studies consider members residing in the household at a certain point in time and do not consider the wider network of family members residing across multiple households.

We argue, though, that a household-based definition of "family" does not capture the true situation of many low-income married couples and their children—either before or after the marriage. We compare data gathered from the Women's Employment

Study (WES), which followed a panel of women, all of whom were on welfare in early 1997, with results obtained from a recently-completed qualitative supplement conducted with WES respondents who married during the study period. We find that the household composition data gathered in the surveys leaves out numerous other individuals, sometimes cohabiting adults but particularly children who periodically visit or occasionally reside with the family. Connections and obligations also exist between children in the household and their biological parents and the other children of their biological parents. Failure to account for these complex relationships could overstate potential marriage benefits marriage (both economic and otherwise) and overlook important issues that may have an impact on the stability of new marriages and the functioning of families.

## **BACKGROUND**

As numerous studies have documented, the American family has undergone massive changes in the past several decades, including delayed entry into marriage, increased divorce rates, increased non-marital childbearing, and increasingly common “alternative” family forms that include single parent families and cohabiting couples, both with and without children. Currently in the general population, about 56% of first marriages are preceded by cohabitation (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Casper & Cohen, 2000). Cohabitation is negatively correlated with education (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Thornton, Axinn & Teachman, 1995; Manning & Lichter, 1996) and income (Casper & Bianchi, in press) and thus more prevalent among low-income individuals.

With increases in the rate of childbearing outside of marriage, when a couple does marry, the family may be ready-made with existing children. In some cases, the

prospective bride and groom are the biological parents of the existing child. These “fragile families,” in which young couples are unmarried, but have children together (Mincy, 1994), are a key target of marriage promotion efforts. We know much about marriage and the intentions of marriage among this group from the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study, a birth cohort study that follows 4,898 children who were born between 1998-2000 and interviews the parents, many of whom were unmarried at the time of the birth and many of whom are low-income. At the time of their child’s birth, 86 percent of cohabiting mothers and 91 percent of cohabiting fathers said they had plans to marry; among romantically involved couples not living together, 82 percent of mothers and 86 percent of fathers planned to marry. Despite their strong intentions, however, few had married by their child’s first birthday (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2004).

In addition to fragile families, many low-income women consider unions with men who do not have a biological connection to all or any of her children. The presence or absence of biological ties between male partners and existing children has important implications for union formation decisions, issues surrounding the new partner’s integration into the household, and for the nature of his relationship and interactions with children. While the Fragile Families study has provided important information on young couples who have a child together, little is known about the integration of male partners without a biological connection to existing children and the implications for life after marriage.

Further complicating family dynamics after marriage are issues of multiple partner fertility—the growing number of adults who have children with more than one

partner (Furstenberg & King, 1999; Mincy, 2002). Demographic changes over the past few decades imply that a decreasing proportion of families contain married parents living only with their biological children and suggest an increase in multiple partner fertility. Although there are no national estimates of multiple partner fertility, several studies provide evidence of its growing importance. For example, a sample of low-income mothers in Baltimore found that about 50 percent had births by at least two men (Furstenberg & King, 1999). Data from Fragile Families indicate that among couples that recently had a child together, almost two-fifths of one or both of the partners had a previous child by another partner. Among these 40 percent of couples with multiple partner fertility, only the father had a child by another parent for 14 percent of the couples, for 13 percent of the couples only the mother had a child by another partner, and for the remaining 13 percent both the mother and the father had a child with another partner (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2005).

While these estimates indicate the importance of multiple partner fertility, they likely under-estimate its prevalence among a low-income sample. Multiple partner fertility appears positively correlated with parent's age, number of children, and with being African American (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2005). Because the Baltimore study involved young mothers, and Fragile Families over-represents young mothers, it is likely that the wider age range of a low-income sample would yield even higher rates of multiple partner fertility. In fact, a Wisconsin-based sample of mothers receiving cash assistance found that three-fourths had children by more than one father (Meyer, Cancian, & Cook, 2004).

Whether new marriages among former welfare recipients involve a biological child of both the partners, the mother's children who are unrelated to the new male partner, children from previous relationships, or all three situations, it is clear that the new families that result will look nothing like the 'traditional' American family. The complex biological and non-biological ties to children within the household, as well as to children across households, has important implications for both economic and non-economic outcomes of marriage. Economically, having children from prior relationships living elsewhere may dilute the resources that male partners can contribute to the new family. Formal child support payments to children residing elsewhere, along with informal assistance, will mean less of his income is available to his wife and the children he is currently living with. Non-economically, his time and attention may also be diluted. Given these diverse relationships with children within and across households, important questions remain about what families will look like after marriage and the consequences of this composition for family dynamics. This information is needed to better understand the potential consequences of marriage promotion efforts and to better design services to meet this policy goal.

Non-marital childbearing, divorce, multiple partner fertility, and marriage and remarriage are further complicating the distinction between the concepts of 'family' and 'household' as the composition of families increasingly span multiple households. Information on these linkages across households and their implications for family processes is an important component of understanding post-marital well-being. Survey data and its often-used household-based sampling approach, however, may mask this complexity by largely focusing on individuals living within the same household. Unless

specifically focused on kinship or networks, detailed information is rarely available on family members residing elsewhere. Further, nebulous living arrangements or part-time residents may confound counts of who really is living in a household, underestimating cohabitators as well as other children and relatives.

Although this detailed type of data can be gathered through survey research, much more information is needed about these families and who they may include in order to develop effective survey measures. Qualitative data is better suited for uncovering these new relationships and highlighting their potential impact on family dynamics after marriage.

We use both survey and qualitative data to examine life after marriage and post-marriage well-being. Our qualitative data is comprised of a sub-sample of the panel survey data and this nesting feature allows us to examine the types of information gathered from each methodological approach. For example, do the survey data and qualitative data provide the same information on household composition? Additionally, we use qualitative data to examine family structure and family dynamics after marriage. Specific questions we address include: 1) what do families look like after marriage? 2) what types of relationships exist within and across households? 3) how do these relationships affect family dynamics? Answering these questions can lead not only to better methods for collecting data on families but may also help identify issues that are likely to emerge as a result of marriage promotion efforts, thereby assisting marriage promotion programs as they design the content and approach of their services.

## **METHODS**

We use data from the Women's Employment Study (WES), a panel study begun in 1997 that follows a random sample of 753 welfare recipients who were living in one urban Michigan county. Five waves of survey data have been collected (1997, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2003) with response rates between 86 and 93 percent (Danziger et al., 2000). Although the WES began as a sample of welfare recipients, seven years later this sample is more accurately described as low-income (only 20% of respondents were receiving welfare in 2003, the last year of the survey). WES is unique in the extent and quality of information it gathers, including labor market experiences, income, mental health problems (based on questions from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual), maternal and child health problems, experiences of domestic violence, and household and family composition.

A qualitative component of WES was completed in July, 2004, after the final 2003 panel surveys were completed. The qualitative interviews provide further depth and detail on union entrance and the resulting family dynamics and issues to an already rich data source. The qualitative sub-sample selected respondents with particular work and family characteristics. To be eligible for the qualitative sub-sample, Wave 5 (2003) WES survey respondents had to have either 1) worked in at least 75% of the study months since the Wave 1 interview, or 2) had entered marriage or a long-term cohabiting relationship during the study period. Additionally, because we were interested in the work-family balance and in family dynamics after union entrance, we also restricted the sample to women who had at least one co-resident child age 14 or younger. Among the completed Wave 5 WES interviews, 34% met the eligibility criteria for inclusion in the qualitative component. Semi-structured interviews were conducted

with 65 respondents who met our qualitative sample eligibility criteria. The overall response rate for the qualitative supplement was 93%.

While all interviews touched on the theme of the work-family balance in the context of lower-income working families, about half of the women in the sample were married or long-term cohabitators (and five single women were included for comparison purposes). The topics covered during these semi-structured interviews included: benefits and disadvantages to cohabitation, marriage, and remaining single; reasons for entering into a union; issues around integrating the male partner into the household (with a particular focus on the relationship between the partner and children in the household); issues with past partners and children (e.g., step- and half-siblings of the respondents' children) living outside of the household; and work-family balance challenges. Interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes and most took place in the respondents' home.

For this paper, we focus our analyses on married women in the WES sample, both those who participated in the qualitative component and those who got married by the fifth and final wave (2003) of the survey. Among the 536 wave 5 respondents, 108, or 20 percent were married by 2003. Among our qualitative sample, 21 women were married.

Table 1 below highlights some relevant descriptive characteristics of married women in WES with comparisons to the rest of the WES sample. Married women are much less likely to be African American than the rest of the sample (37 percent vs 59.1 percent). Married women are also more likely to have more children in the household than do other WES respondents. For some married women, this is due to the birth of a

child after marriage. Fewer married women lack a high school education or a GED (21 percent compared to 32 percent). There is no statistical or substantive difference in the amount of work effort by respondents over the 79 month study period (1997 – mid-2003).

**Table 1**  
**Sample Characteristics of WES Survey Sample**

	Married WES Respondents (n=108)	Remainder of WES Sample (n= 428)
African American***	37.0	59.1
White***	63.0	41.0
Age (2003)	35.9	36.4
Number of own children (2003)*	2.3	1.9
No HS/GED (1997)*	21.3	32.0
Percent of Months Employed, 79 month period (2003)	68.5	67.4

+ p < .1 \*p < .05 \*\*p < .01 \*\*\*p < .001

Married women who participated in the qualitative component look fairly similar to all married women in WES on some measures, but differ on others, as shown in Table 2. Foremost, the racial distribution within the qualitative sample is more evenly split between African Americans and Whites. Whereas 37 percent of all married women in WES are African American (see Table 1 above), 51 percent of qualitative sample members are this race. We purposefully over-sampled African American married women, so that we could attempt to gain some insights on potential racial differences in decisions regarding marriage and family. Married women in the qualitative sample are also slightly younger than all married women, which was not part of the sampling strategy.

**Table 2**  
**Characteristics of the WES Qualitative Sub-sample**

	Married Qualitative Respondents (n=21)	Remainder of WES Married Women (n=87)
African American*	51.5	32.2
White*	48.5	67.8
Age (2003) <sup>+</sup>	33.8	36.6
Number of own children (2003)	2.5	2.2
No HS/GED (1997)	21.2	24.1
Percent of Months Employed, 79 month period (2003)	63.3	69.9

+ p < .1 \*p < .05 \*\*p < .01 \*\*\*p < .001

## COUNTING COHABITORS

One trend that accounts for complexity of families and family arrangements is the increase in cohabitation, both as an alternative family form and as a pre-cursor to marriage. Despite the substantial research interest in and literature on cohabitation, our ability to measure cohabitation is lagging (Knab, 2005). We first use our nested structure to examine the relationship between cohabitation and marriage.

Although to researchers cohabitation is frequently used as a dichotomous variable in analyses (e.g., cohabiting or not), to many individuals it may be an ambiguous state that came about as a process rather than a discrete event (Knab, 2005; Seefeldt & Jayakody, 2004). Part-time cohabitators, those who live together some of the time but not all of the time, further complicates survey respondents' understanding of survey questions. Individuals in the same situation may answer survey questions about their cohabiting status differently. Indeed, cohabitation rates differ both by question wording and by who is providing the answer (Brown & Manning, 2004; Casper & Cohen, 2000). Most research has examined the ambiguity of

cohabitation by examining rates across surveys, or across waves in the same survey. More recent work has compared subjective measures (are you cohabiting) to behavioral ones (how many nights the couple spends together) (Knab, 2005). We contribute to this growing measurement discussion by comparing responses on cohabitation status given in the WES survey to information gathered from the qualitative interviews.

Among our 21 married qualitative respondents, 15 reported that they had lived with their spouse prior to marriage. In eight of these 15 cases, the survey data indicates that the male partner was present, confirming the qualitative interview responses. However, in the remaining seven cases, there was a discrepancy between the quantitative and qualitative responses.

For several of these seven cases, the discrepancy is likely due to timing issues with the survey. For three of the women, the period of cohabitation preceded any data collection and thus is not observed. In another case, the respondent reported in the qualitative interview that she and her husband lived together for just four months before they got married, a time period which fell between waves of survey data collection. It is possible that data collection timeframes for the survey also account for reporting inconsistencies for one more woman. In the qualitative interview, she reported that she and her husband lived together “about one year.” It is possible that more than 12 months elapsed between survey waves and thus he only shows up in the household roster as a spouse (and never as a cohabitor). However, there is also reason to believe that he might have been residing in the house, and our respondent either felt uncomfortable telling this to the survey interviewer or, at the time, did not characterize the living arrangement as one of cohabitation. Other studies have documented

discrepancies in retrospective and contemporaneous measures of cohabitation (Brown & Manning, 2004; Teitler, Reichman, & Koball, 2004), in part because the decision to move in together may not have been a conscious one and in part because of differing definitions between researchers and those they study as to the meaning of “living together.”

For the other two cases, the reason for the discrepancy is less clear. Both of these women, in the qualitative interview, reported that they had lived with their now-husbands for many years prior to getting married. One of these women told us in the qualitative interview that she and her husband had lived together for four years before being married in 1998. Yet, her partner was not listed by her in the household roster when the first survey was conducted in 1997. It could be that this woman did not report her male partner due to fears of repercussions from the welfare office or other official entities (recall that the majority of respondents received welfare at the 1997 interview) and a lack of trust with the interviewer, whom she had never met before. The other woman, who got married in 2001, reported living with her husband for eight years before that; her partner was never listed as a household member in the three prior surveys. Again, distrust of the survey interviewer may have contributed to the non-reporting of her partner as a cohabitor. Alternatively, some research indicates that cohabitation is fairly unstable. That is, partners may break up or otherwise spend time apart and then move back in together (Binstock & Thornton, 2003). Another possibility is that these women were waiting for a “legitimizing” event (Knab & McLanahan, 2004), such as marriage, before reporting that they had been cohabiting.

While for most women, reports of cohabitators in the survey line up with responses in the qualitative interviews, several cases remain a puzzle. However potential “missing” children seem to be a larger problem, as the following sections illustrate.

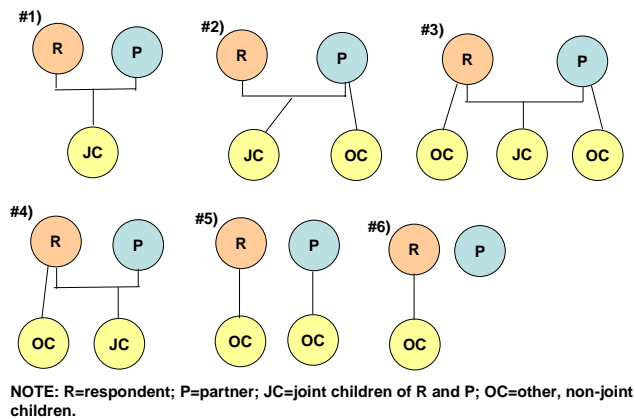
### **WHAT DO FAMILIES LOOK LIKE?**

As discussed in the background section, marriages among low-income couples are increasingly likely to include children. While most marriage-promotion discussions have focused on children that the couple has together, children from prior relationships, either the women’s, the man’s, or both, may also be involved. Therefore, a basic question with examining this post-marital well-being, is the structure of these new families. What do new families look like after marriage?

We developed “family profiles” to describe the new families resulting from union entrance. The profiles, illustrated in Figure 1, describe the family structure of our sample by focusing on children who are involved in the newly formed relationship and highlighting their biological and non-biological ties to the respondent woman (represented by the circle labeled R, for respondent) and her new partner (the P circle). JC designates joint children of the respondent and her new partner, situations in which the respondent is the biological mother and the partner is the biological father. OC designates other children that are not biologically related to both the respondent and partner. These may be the respondent’s children from prior relationships, or the partner’s children from prior relationships. For example, Profile #1 depicts a family in which the respondent and partner have a biological child or children, and neither have children with anyone else. Alternatively, Profile #3 depicts a family in which the respondent and spouse have a child(ren) together (JC), the respondent has a child(ren)

with someone else (OC), and the partner also has a child(ren) with someone else (OC). As Figure 1 illustrates, some new unions do involve cases where both partners have a child together (Profiles 1 through 4). However, even when a joint child is involved, it is often the case that the household also contains children from previous relationships (Profiles 2 through 4). Additionally, some new unions contain no joint children (Profiles 5 and 6).

**Figure 1: Family Profiles**



Among the married women in the qualitative sample (n=21), two only have children with their current husband, and the husband has no other children (Profile 1), two have children with their husband and their husband has other children (Profile 2), three women have children with their husband and each has children from other relationships (Profile 3), while six women have children with their current husband and with other partners, but the husband has no other children (Profile 4). In the family profiles with no joint children, six women have children from other relationships and are married to men with other children (Profile 5), while two women have other children, but their spouses have no children.

Given these breakdowns, it is clear that multiple partner fertility is fairly common among these married women and their husbands. Four of the 21 women have had children only with their husbands, and four of the 21 husbands have had children only with our respondents. In cases where the husband had children from other relationships (Profiles 2,3,5), respondents reported that, on average, he has 2.2 children. However, a few women added a disclaimer when counting the number of other children by other partners by adding “that I know of.”

### **CHANGES IN HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION**

At each panel survey wave, women were asked about the number of their own biological children living with them in the house (or “who usually stays here”). They were also asked to enumerate the number of non-biological children for whom they had primary caregiving responsibilities (“caregiven children”) and the number of “other” children living in the house, with additional information provided on the relationship between those children and the respondent (e.g., niece, nephew, granddaughter, etc). Among the 475 respondents who completed the 2003 interview and who had children in the house, 89 percent reported only their own biological children in residence, 5.5 percent reported biological and other children, and 5 reported some other combination (11 percent of the sample had no children in the house in 2003, most typically because their children were now adults living on their own). Respondents were also asked about the number of other adults living in the house and their relationship to the respondent.

Because this information was asked at each survey wave, we can examine changes in household composition over time. Coupled with questions on marital status, also asked at each wave, we can determine changes in household structure and

composition after a marriage. In the survey year immediately following a new marriage, household roster questions indicate that the major change is the addition of another adult, namely, the new husband. In 14 percent of cases, one or more additional children are reported living in the house. This suggests, perhaps, that some women had a baby after getting married (for women who married prior to the final 2003 survey, we do not have information on changes post-marriage, and it likely we have not observed them long enough to note an additional birth). However, the vast majority of married women, 72 percent, report no change in the number of children living in the house, while another 14 percent had children leave the house.

Because the timing of the marriages vary in relationship to the administration of the survey (e.g., some women may have gotten married 12 months prior to their interview while others could have married 1 month prior), we might not expect that new children would move into a house immediately or that a couple would have another child together right away. When we examine change in the number of children in a household two to three years later, we find that more, 30 percent, report one or more additional children in the household. Most women, though, report no change in the number of children (56 percent), and six percent report a reduction in the number of children.

In sum, according to survey data, household size does not typically change much in the months or years following a marriage. Although the suspected incidence of multiple partner fertility is high among this group of men, our finding is not unsurprising given that women typically have custody of children, particularly in relationships never formalized by marriage. That the number of children in the household remains quite

stable does not necessarily mean that the new husbands do not have other children. Further, the respondents' own children may have ties with their biological fathers, who may also have other children.

We thus asked our qualitative respondents detailed questions about the number of children both inside and outside the house who had ties to children and to their spouse. Primarily, these are step- and half-siblings of the respondents' children, although in some cases, grandchildren and other children (e.g., foster children) were named. Table 3 then shows, for each married woman in the qualitative supplement, the number of children in the household, as reported in the survey wave prior to getting married (column 1), the number of children in the household in the survey wave post-marriage (column 2), and the number of children with attachments to the household, as reported in the qualitative interview (column 3). Attachments range from actual residence in the house and biological ties to one or both adults to biological ties to one of the adults without residence, to biological ties to one or more of the resident children. On average, the series of survey questions asked to obtain the household roster misses 6.7 children. This ranges from 0 to 28 "outside" children. While some of these children are adult children of the respondents who now live elsewhere, others are children of the new husband (thus step siblings to the respondents' children) and others are half-siblings of the respondents' children, i.e., offspring of her children's biological fathers.

While some of the discrepancies between the survey data and the qualitative data are due the purpose of the survey question—namely to capture household size, these differences strongly suggest that household size is not equal to family size. In addition to not counting men's (mostly) non-resident children, also missing from

**Table 3**  
**Children Inside and Outside of the Household**

Number of Children in Household Before Marriage, Survey Data	Number of Children in Household After Marriage, Survey Data	Number of Children with Attachments to Household, Qualitative Interview	Number of “Uncounted” Children (Qualitative Data – Survey Data)
1	1	7	6
1	1	2	1
1	1	3	2
1	1	3	2
1	1	18	17
1	1	2	1
1	2	3	1
2	2	9	7
2	2	6	4
2	2	2	0
2	2	4	2
2	2	15	13
2	2	2	0
2	2	5	3
3	3	9	6
3	5	10	5
3	3	18	15
3	3	15	12
3	3	12	9
4	4	16	12
5	5	33	28
5	5	7	2
Average number of children “missed”			6.7

the family portrait are half-siblings. Nearly all women who have had children with other partners report that those men have other children with other women. In other words, a respondent’s children might not just have step-siblings, they might also have half-siblings. In families in which the respondent has children with other partners (Profiles 3, 4, 5, and 6), those children have, on average 6.45 other siblings.

**TIES ACROSS HOUSEHOLDS**

Although the family profiles illustrate the diversity of new families after marriage, they mask many additional relationships and complexities. Our qualitative interviews

emphasize the fluidity of living arrangements and the extensive ties that exist across households. Although research highlighting men's lack of participation with their children when they end a relationship with the mother produces an impression that men are often uninvolved in their children's lives, many of our respondents describe active biological father ties. While these men often participate in their children's lives, many do not make formal child support payments.

For example, the situation of one of our respondent's well-illustrates the ties to children across households. "Stacy" recently married, and while she has no biological children with her new husband, Stacy's three children from former relationships live with the couple. Each of Stacy's three children, two sons and a daughter, have different biological fathers. While Stacy's daughter, Rebecca, has no contact with her biological father, each of Stacy's sons' fathers are actively involved in their lives. Her older son spends every other weekend with his biological father, his new wife, and his half-siblings. Her younger son spends every Saturday night with his father, step-mother and his half-sibling.

Stacy's situation is shared by many others. In fact, among families in which the new husband has children from other relationships, the norm is that at least some of the man's other children are frequent visitors, if not sometimes-residents, of the new household. Coming back to the example of Stacy and John, Stacy's new husband, John, has four children from a prior relationship, and these children come over and spend every other weekend with the two of them and Stacy's children. This is not a formal custody agreement, but one that has been worked out informally.

The financial implications of these new arrangements are unclear, in large part because we did not ask about them. However, we obtained detailed information about the other aspects of well-being, namely the complications that arise around parenting issues and rules and expectations for children, particularly for those circulating between several households. Many women mentioned numerous tensions around bringing their husbands into the lives of their children. For the most part, women reported resolutions of these tensions; however, ongoing problems were reported around the children visiting the household, but not permanently living there (usually the new male partner's children from prior relationships). For example, one of our respondents described frustration at her perception that rules were enforced differently for her children compared to her husband's children.

At the beginning I thought it was working out really good until I realized that one thing about Tim is I guess he's like me, very protective. So I couldn't say - I mean, he could get on to my kids, but that was just something I couldn't do. Not that I wanted to, because I felt from the very beginning - this is something that we didn't work out very well at the beginning - I felt that you should get to know the kids and I just didn't feel that discipline right away was right, you know, the getting on to them all the time instead of maybe just talking to them and saying, hey, you know, this is how I'd like things and blah blah blah. I had to be the one when he wasn't around saying this is how he likes things so we've got to try to, you know... I just wish he would have tried to be softer, you know? Now with his kids I couldn't do that, and he would get upset. Like my son came home and threw his bike on the ground instead of putting it on the kickstand. He's a little anal, but little things like that, you know, he couldn't ride his bike for two days. His son would do it - well, I don't see him very often since he doesn't live here so I'm not going to discipline him. That's how he felt, so that was really hard on me.

Just as marriage entry required coordination between the new spouses, and between their ex-spouses, children frequently have to deal with new step- and half-sibling relationships. At the same time that they are adjusting to the entrance of a new step-parent, they are also adjusting to the entrance of his children. As one mother

describes, she must worry about the reaction of her children, as well as the reaction of his children who visit on weekends:

You don't want the kids who are coming over on the weekends being totally miserable because they don't get along with the other children in the house and the other children in the house are just down right mean to them, you know? Then on the flip side, you don't want your own kids that are here feeling the same way when the other kids come over. They've got to be able to intertwine and get along on some level. Like I said, you're going to have the constant bickering and arguing and fighting.

Differing rules and expectations between households can often lead to conflict, as is the case in other types of blended families. One woman, Joan, describes the shuttling back and forth of her oldest step-daughter, who moved repeatedly from her biological mother's house to her biological father's, Joan's current husband:

the only problem we had with Kelly was she didn't like Daddy's rules, was, why she wanted to go back to Florida was because Dad wouldn't let her date boys, and we had a big problem with that at sixteen years old. You know it's about school, it's about getting your life on track, boys will come later. You know, and mom would let her drop out of school and do whatever she wanted to.

Joan goes on to describe her frustration at her husband's ex-partner for acting more like Kelly's friend and less like Kelly's parent, a role she, Joan tries to take on.

Similarly, Tosha, who recently married Andre, finds fault with the parenting of Andre's ex-partner. She notes that his children:

...would sleep in the same clothes they played in for three days straight. They wouldn't bathe but maybe once a week, so when his kids stink he doesn't expect them not to. But when my kids stink, it's like, "You stink! What is wrong with you? Go take a shower! You weren't brought up like that!" But his kids come in here reeking, and it's like, well, ok, it's still you.

Not only do the hygiene habits of the ex-partner irritate Tosha, but so does her husband's tolerance for it.

While nearly all (but not all) of the married women we interviewed reported happiness with their new families, all acknowledged ways in which their situations were challenging and required on-going negotiations with numerous partners—their own children, their current and former partners, and the children and ex-partners of their new husbands. While one woman said “we’re the Brady Bunch,” the number of family members involved would not fit neatly onto a television screen.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

From a methodological perspective, similar to other studies, we find that cohabitators are not always enumerated in surveys. However, the magnitude of this undercount in our small qualitative sample is not overwhelming. On the other hand, our results highlight the shortcomings of household rosters in surveys, both in measuring living arrangements and in measuring family size, for low-income families that experience multiple partner fertility. While the household roster in WES may have correctly stated the number of children with more or less permanent residence in the house at that moment the survey was administered, this data is not a true reflection of family size, particularly if one is considering family from the point of view of the new male partner or of children. Children have numerous step- and half-siblings residing elsewhere, with many having strong and ongoing connections to these “outside” children. Formal visitation and custody may not be established through the legal system, but we find that at least some “outside” children spend significant time “inside” the household of interest.

This suggests that surveys wishing to understand family structure and relationships, particularly within low-income households, need to look beyond the

household as the unit analysis and ask questions about the presence of children residing elsewhere and their ties to members of the household. Even asking who “usually stays” here did not elicit the every-other-weekend visits of step-children or half-siblings.

We believe that getting the count right is not just important for reasons of enumeration, but primarily because the uncounted children and adults are enmeshed in the lives of these mothers and their new partners. Introducing a male into an already established household raises significant challenges for some women (Seefeldt & Jayakody, 2004). The variety of relationships between children and adults further complicates an already complex situation. Current discussions of marriage promotion policies and programs often overlook this complexity. Too often, the policy focus is only on the new couple. While existing relationship programs stress improvement of communication skills between partners, our results highlight the need for effective communication between ex-partners, and with the current partners of the ex, particularly around issues of discipline and parenting styles. Effective parenting occurs across multiple households, requiring coordination with a wide network of people.

Encouraging marriage must be accompanied by an acknowledgement of the large numbers of individuals involved when new marriages are formed. Family relationships and dynamics are affected by many individuals, and effective coordination between adults and children is a vital component of post-marriage well-being.

## REFERENCES

- Binstock, G., & Thornton, A. (2003). Separations, reconciliations, and living apart in cohabiting and married unions. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 65(2), 432-443.
- Brown, S. L., & Manning, W. D. (2004). *Family structure measurement: Reconciling adolescent and mother reports of cohabiting stepfamilies*. Bowling Green, OH.
- Carlson, M., & Furstenberg, F. F. (2005). *The levels and correlates of multi-partnered fertility in the U.S.*: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Working Paper #03-14-FF, Princeton University.
- Casper, L. M., & Cohen, P. N. (2000). How does POSSLQ measure up? Historical estimates of cohabitation. *Demography*, 37(2), 237-245.
- Danziger, S. K., Corcoran, M., Danziger, S., Heflin, C., Kalil, A., Levine, J., et al. (2000). Barrier to employment of welfare recipients. In R. Cherry & W. M. Rodgers (Eds.), *Prosperity for all?* New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Fein, D. J. (2004). *Married and poor: Basic characteristics of economically disadvantaged married couples in the U.S.* New York: MDRC.
- Furstenberg, F. F., & King, R. B. (1999). *Multi-partnered fertility sequences: Documenting an alternative family form*. Paper presented at the Population Association of America, Chicago, IL.
- Gibson-Davis, C., Edin, K., & McLanahan, S. (2004). *High hopes but even higher expectations: The retreat from marriage among low-income couples*. Princeton, NJ: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Working Paper #03-06-FF, Princeton University.
- Horn, W. (2002). Welfare reform reauthorization: Promoting self-sufficiency, protecting children, and strengthening marriage. *Poverty Research News*, 6(3), 3-5.
- Jayakody, R., Seefeldt, K., Danziger, S., & Avellar, S. (2004, April 1-3). *Entry into marriage among former welfare recipients*. Paper presented at the Population Association of America, Boston, MA.
- Knab, J. T. (2005). *Cohabitation: Sharpening a fuzzy concept*. Unpublished manuscript, Princeton, NJ.
- Knab, J. T., & McLanahan, S. (2004). *Measuring cohabitation: Does how, when, and who you ask matter?* Princeton, NJ.
- Meyer, D. R., Cancian, M., & Cook, S. (2004). *Multiple-partner fertility: Incidence and implications for child support policy.*: Institute for Research on Poverty, Working Paper, University of Wisconsin.
- Mincy, R. (1994). *Nurturing young black males: Challenges to agencies, programs, and social policy*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press.
- Mincy, R. (2002). *Who should marry whom? Multiple partner fertility among new parents*. Princeton, NJ: Center for Research on Child Well-being.
- Poponoe, D., & Whitehead, B. D. (2003). *The state of our unions, 2003*. Rutgers University: National Marriage Project.
- Seefeldt, K., & Jayakody, R. (2004). *Why do low-income women marry? Evidence from qualitative interviews*. Paper presented at the Association of Public Policy Analysis and Management, Atlanta, GA.

**DRAFT, NOT FOR CITATION OR QUOTATION**

Teitler, J., Reichman, N. E., & Koball, H. (2004). *Bias in retrospective reports of cohabitation among new parents*. Princeton, NJ.

Waite, L., & Gallagher, M. (2000). *The case for marriage: Why married people are happier, healthier, and better off financially*. New York: Doubleday.