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Family Structure and the Reproduction of Inequalities

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Abstract

Over the past four decades, income inequality has increased and family structures have diversified. We argue that family structure has become an important mechanism for the reproduction of class, race, and gender inequalities. We review studies of income inequality and family structure changes and find a wide range of estimates of the correlation. We discuss how increases in income inequality may lead to increases in single motherhood, particularly among less educated women. Single motherhood in turn decreases intergenerational economic mobility by affecting children's material resources and the parenting they experience. Because of the unequal distribution of family structure by race and the negative effects of single motherhood, family structure changes exacerbate racial inequalities. Gender inequalities also increase as mothers incur more child-related costs and fewer fathers experience family life with children.

INTRODUCTION

The increase in income inequality during the latter part of the twentieth century has stimulated interest in the extent to which other types of social inequalities may have increased and the possible future implications. Changes in family formation are of particular interest. In 1960, only 6% of children in the United States lived with a single parent. Today over half of all children are expected to spend some time in a single-parent family before reaching age 18. Furthermore, the composition of single-parent families, usually single-mother families, has shifted dramatically since 1960, from widowed mothers to divorced mothers and, most recently, never-married mothers (Uhlenberg 1983).¹ Families are the primary institution for raising children, and family experiences play an important role in shaping children's life chances (Parsons 1949). Thus, major changes in family formation greatly interest sociologists studying inequality and intergenerational mobility. Indeed several recent books have argued that family structure is an important mechanism in the reproduction of poverty and inequality (Western 2006, Massey 2007).

This article reviews the evidence for this claim. We begin by looking at trends in single parenthood and income inequality over the past 50 years and the associations between these trends. We also look at race and class differences in family structure trends to measure the concentration of single parenthood in particular groups. We then review several arguments for the reasons that income inequality may affect family structure, with attention given to evidence of a causal link. Finally, we look at how family structure contributes to the reproduction of inequalities by creating barriers to upward mobility and by exacerbating pre-existing gender and racial disparities.

Although we focus on trends and evidence from the United States, the argument for family structure as a mechanism for the reproduction

of inequalities is germane to other countries as well. The extent to which family structure contributes to the reproduction of inequalities may differ across countries, but the pathways through which it operates are likely to be the same.

THE TRENDS

Since 1960, single motherhood and income inequality among families have increased (**Figure 1**, see color insert). (For a recent review of the causes and levels of economic inequality, see Neckerman & Torche 2007.) These trends follow similar but not identical patterns. Throughout the 1960s, income inequality declined, reaching historically low levels in 1969. After 1970, income inequality increased steadily through the 1970s, leveled off in the late 1980s, increased rapidly again in the early 1990s, and leveled off at the end of the 1990s.² In contrast, single motherhood advanced continuously after 1960.

The extent of family structure change goes well beyond the increase in single motherhood, with diversification within as well as between the categories of single mothers and married parents. Single-mother families, as measured by Census data, include both lone mothers and cohabiting couples. By 2000, almost 50% of all nonmarital births were to a cohabiting mother (McLanahan et al. 2001, Kennedy & Bumpass 2007), and between one-quarter and two-fifths of children were expected to experience parental cohabitation during childhood (Graefe & Lichter 1999, Hueveline & Timberlake 2004, Kennedy & Bumpass 2007). Two-parent married couple families have also become more diverse. Between 11% and 18% of children now live with a stepparent at some point during childhood (Bjorklund et al. 2007).

¹Uhlenberg (1983) discusses changes in the probability of marital disruption owing to divorce or death.

²The Gini coefficients we report are from the Historical Income Tables of the U.S. Census Bureau and are slightly different than those reported by other researchers who show a slight decline in income inequality in the late 1990s.

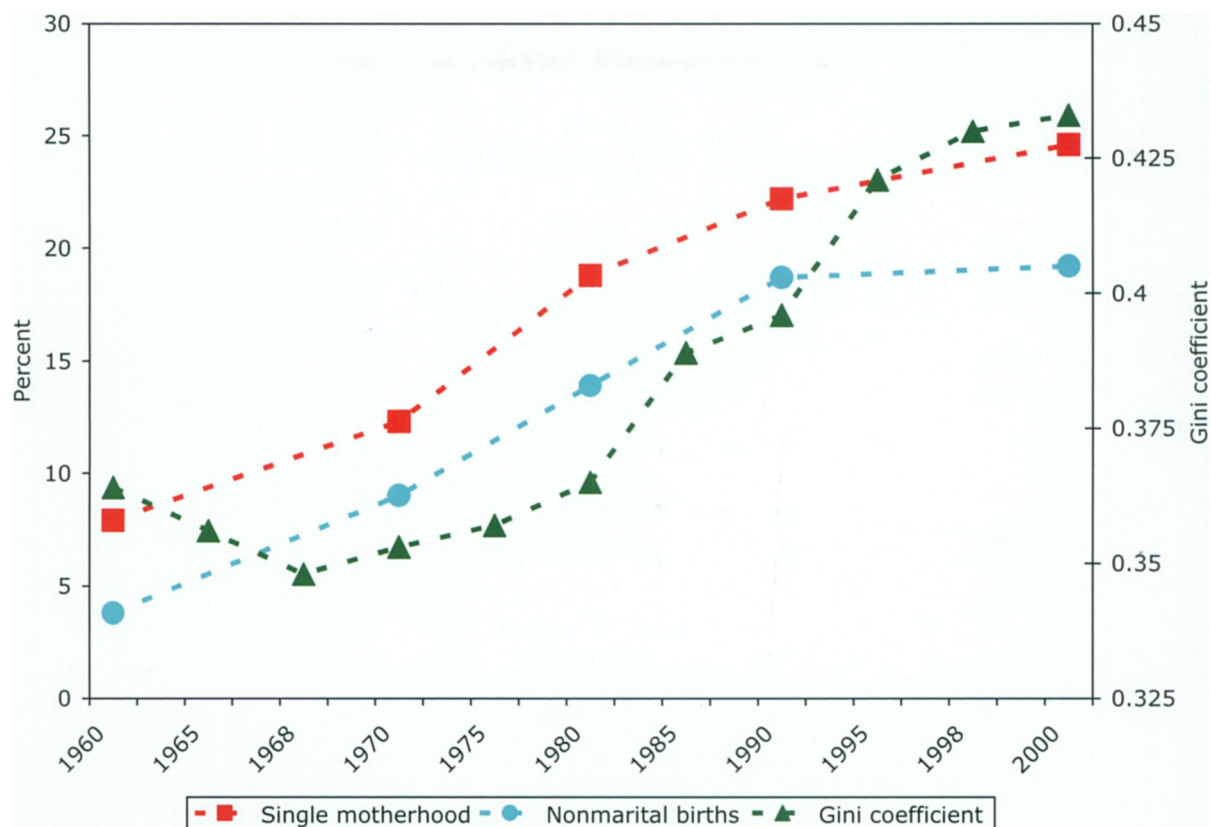


Figure 1

Trends in single motherhood and income inequality in the United States, 1960–2000. The single-motherhood trend is calculated as the percentage of mothers who are not married and who are living with their children. The nonmarital birth trend is calculated as the percentage of mothers who are not married and who have a child less than 1 year old. The Gini coefficient is for all families, including those without children. Single motherhood and nonmarital births are based on authors' tabulation of 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 IPUMS (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series) Census data. Gini coefficients are from Historical Income Tables, U.S. Bureau of the Census (<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/f04.html>).

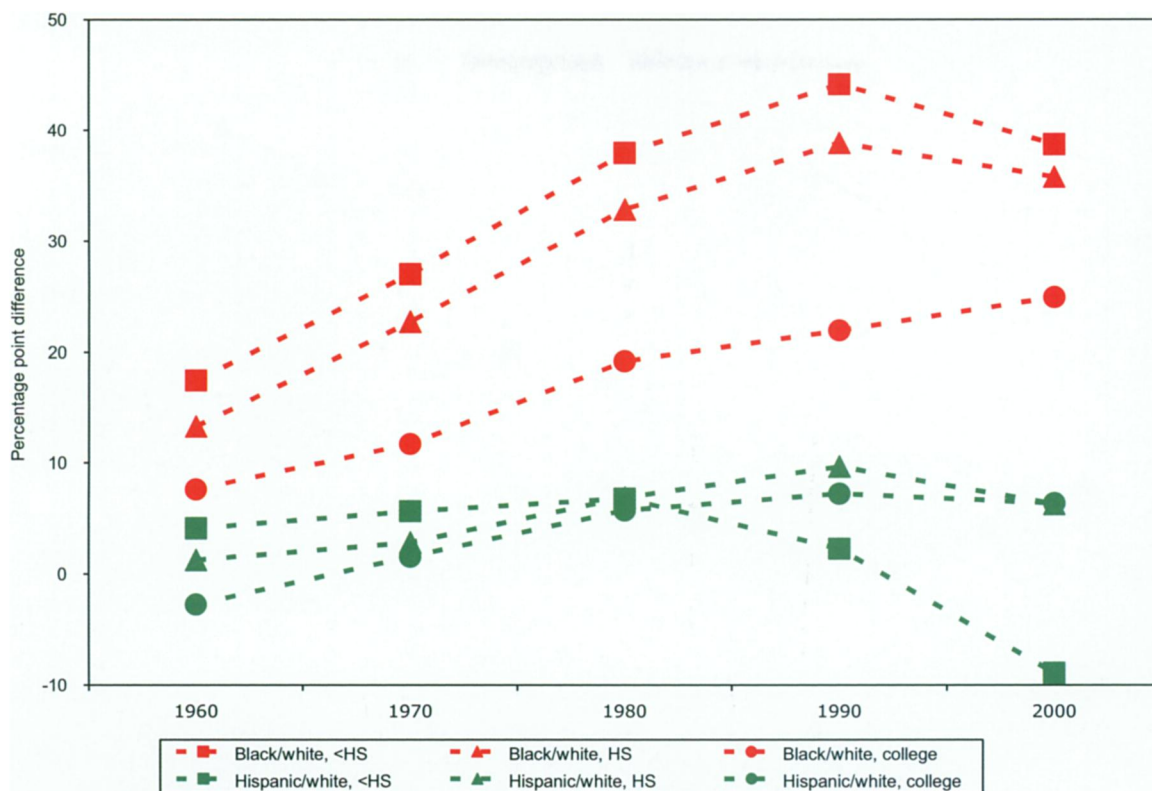


Figure 2

Differences in single motherhood by race and education based on tabulations of 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 IPUMS Census data.

Changes in family structure have not occurred uniformly across population subgroups; instead there are notable differences by race and education, with increases in single motherhood most pronounced among the most disadvantaged groups (Ellwood & Jencks 2004). Unmarried mothers account for nearly two in three births to mothers without a high school education but only 9% of births to mothers with a college education (Kennedy & Bumpass 2007). These educational differences in non-marital birth rates combined with differences in divorce and remarriage rates produce a scenario in which children with mothers in the bottom educational quartile are almost twice as likely to live with a single mother at some point during childhood as children with a mother in the top quartile (McLanahan 2004). Racial differences in single motherhood are also striking. More than two-thirds of black children are born to unmarried mothers compared with less than one-quarter of white children and between two-fifths and one-half of Hispanic children (Ventura & Bachrach 2000, Kennedy & Bumpass 2007).

Racial differences in family structure cannot be accounted for solely by differences in mothers' educational attainment. **Figure 2** (see color insert) shows the gap in single motherhood between white and black mothers and between white and Hispanic mothers by education. At each educational level, black mothers have a higher rate of single motherhood than white or Hispanic mothers. The racial differences among less educated women are particularly striking: Between 1980 and 2000, the single-motherhood rate among women with a high school education or less was over 30 percentage points higher among black women than among white women. In contrast, Hispanic women without a high school education had lower rates of single motherhood than white women in 2000. Although the pattern of family structure by race and education is complex, the overall trend is clear: Advantaged women continue to raise their children in the context of marriage, whereas less advantaged women are

increasingly likely to spend some time as single mothers.

An extensive literature has examined the amount of the rise in income inequality that can be accounted for by the growth in female-headed families. The results have been far from conclusive, with estimates ranging from 11% to 41%. **Table 1** describes recent studies, along with some of their important characteristics. All these studies use either Current Population Survey (CPS) data from the March Supplement or decennial Census data, and most conceptualize family structure as families with an unmarried female householder versus families with two married parents.

Two factors may account for the large variance in the estimates: the time periods examined and the extent to which researchers take other factors into account in their analyses. The choice of time period influences estimates because macroeconomic trends such as recessions and unemployment affect income inequality. Martin (2006) argues that family structure explains more of the variance in family income in periods of low inequality growth and less of the variance in periods of high growth. Indeed, several studies find much larger family structure effects during the 1970s (Karoly & Burtless 1995, Lee 2005, Martin 2006) and 1990s (Lee 2005, Daly & Valletta 2006, Martin 2006) as compared with the 1980s (for an exception, see Chevan & Stokes 2000).

The choice of time period may also matter if the relationship between family structure and income inequality has changed over time as the result of changing patterns of selection into single motherhood. In addition, a mechanical effect arises whereby studies using two endpoints display more variability compared with studies averaging estimates over many years (Martin 2006).

The second major source of variability in estimates is related to modeling strategy. As shown above, family structure is correlated with other factors—particularly race/ethnicity and education—which are known to affect family income. Estimates of family structure's

Table 1 Studies of single-parenthood effects on family income inequality

Author(s)	Data	Measure of inequality	Method	Increase in income inequality attributed to family structure changes
Bishop et al. (1997)	CPS 1977–1990	Gini coefficient	Regression	39%–56%
Burtless (1999)	CPS 1980, 1997	Gini coefficient	Decomposition	21%–25%
Chevan & Stokes (2000)	Census 1970, 1980, 1990	Gini coefficient	Regression	NA
Daly & Valletta (2006)	CPS 1969, 1979, 1989, 1998	Gini coefficient	Decomposition	34% for 1969–1989; 62% for 1989–1998
Gottschalk & Danziger (1993)	CPS 1969–1987	Log variance of incomes	Regression	17% for blacks; 13% for whites
Karoly & Burtless (1995)	CPS 1970, 1980, 1990	Gini coefficient	Decomposition	47% for 1969–1979; 16% for 1979–1989
Lee (2005)	CPS 1969–2001	90–10 ratio	Decomposition	11%
Lerman (1996)	CPS 1972–1990	Gini coefficient	Decomposition	36%
Martin (2006)	CPS 1977–2001	Mean logarithmic deviation	Decomposition	41%
Western et al. (2008)	CPS 1976–2006	Log variance of income	Regression	20%

effect on income inequality differ depending on whether (and how) the modeling strategy accounts for these factors (Western et al. 2008). We can divide most of the analyses described in **Table 1** into two general types: models that use a regression framework and those that use decomposition, standardization, or shift-share analyses. Regression analyses (which typically control for a wide range of demographic and labor market factors, such as increasing returns to education, immigration, and women’s employment rates) tend to report smaller estimated effects of family structure than decomposition analyses (Gottschalk & Danziger 1993, Chevan & Stokes 2000, Western et al. 2008; see Bishop et al. 1997 for an exception). Still other factors, in addition to time periods and modeling strategies, differ across studies but probably have a smaller effect on the range of results. These include the populations considered, definitions of income (including whether it is before or after taxes and income transfers), the measure of inequality, and the adjustment method for family size.

Given the wide range of estimates, it is debatable whether the association between family structure and income inequality is sizeable

or moderate. More importantly, these analyses rely on correlations and do not tell us about the direction of causality. Changes in family structure could be causing changes in income inequality or vice versa, or a separate factor could be causing changes in both outcomes.

DOES INCOME INEQUALITY HAVE A CAUSAL EFFECT ON FAMILY STRUCTURE?

In the previous section we document an association between the trends in single motherhood and income inequality. Here we examine the theoretical and empirical evidence for income inequality’s causal effect on family-formation behavior and how this may vary among women from different socioeconomic backgrounds. We argue that income inequality has led to delays in marriage among both advantaged and disadvantaged women, which should increase nonmarital childbearing, all else being equal. We also argue that income inequality has led to delays in childbearing among advantaged women but not among disadvantaged women,

contributing to a separation of marriage and childbearing among the latter.

Income Inequality and Marriage

Income inequality may affect marriage in many ways. First, the inequality in men's wages increases the gains to women of searching for the best possible husband. As a result, women marry later when wage inequality is high (Becker 1981, Oppenheimer 1997). In empirical tests of this hypothesis, Loughran (2002) finds that increases in male wage inequality over time in geographically, educationally, and racially defined marriage markets can account for between 7% and 18% of the decline in marriage between 1970 and 1990 for white women, but for considerably less of the decline for black women. Similarly, Gould & Paserman (2003) estimate that differences in male wage inequality can account for approximately 25% of the decline in marriage over the past few decades.

Earnings inequality not only increases the benefits of searching, it also makes it harder for low-income couples to reach the marriage bar, defined as the standard of living a couple is expected to obtain before they marry. Dixon (1978) and Oppenheimer (1994) both argue that the marriage bar has often been higher than the minimum necessary to establish an independent household. If we assume that the marriage bar is some function of the population's median income (as opposed to an absolute standard), then increases in income inequality make it harder for couples at the bottom of the income distribution to reach the bar. Moreover, if we assume that the bar is a function of the median income of married couples, the distance becomes even greater as marriage becomes increasingly concentrated among high-income couples. Thus, the decline in marriage among low-income populations likely has a negative feedback effect by raising the bar even further.

Empirical evidence for the importance of the marriage bar comes from both qualitative and quantitative studies. Edin and colleagues (Edin & Kefalas 2005, Gibson-Davis et al. 2005) interviewed a large number of low-income sin-

gle mothers and unmarried parents. These low-income parents placed a high value on marriage but also believed that a married couple must maintain a certain standard of living, which includes a house, a car, and stable employment. In interviews with cohabiting couples from working-class backgrounds, Smock and colleagues (2005) also find that couples believe they should wait to marry until they obtain financial stability. In a quantitative analysis of union formation, Clarkberg (1999) finds that men and women who have relatively high levels of economic well-being compared with peers of similar educational and family backgrounds have twice the probability of marriage, even after controlling for absolute levels of earnings. Similarly, Watson & McLanahan (2004) find that the distance between a man's own income and the median male income in his city affects his likelihood of getting married if his income is below (but not above) the estimated marriage bar, even after adjusting for his own income.

Wage inequality may also make men in the bottom half of the income distribution less attractive as marriage partners. Despite the increase in women's employment, the male breadwinner role continues to be an important norm (Sweeney 2002), and men who cannot meet the expectations associated with this role are likely to be deemed as failures by society, themselves, and their partners. The most common version of this argument focuses on the negative consequences of job loss for marriage and the absolute decline in men's earnings (Wilson 1996, 1987). But one can make a similar argument for the relative decline in men's earnings, if women use a relative yardstick to judge the suitability of potential partners.

Several well-known ethnographies have documented the corrosive effects of men's inability to support their families, including Bakke's (1940) study of families in the Great Depression and Liebow's (1967) study of street-corner life in the 1960s. Furstenberg's (2007) review of the ethnographic literature finds a common pattern in these ethnographies, with male unemployment followed by marital strain or dissolution and men retreating from

involvement in family life. Recent ethnographies of family life such as those by Anderson (1990), Edin & Kefalas (2005), and Waller (2002) also find male unemployment and underemployment to be major obstacles to marriage and stable families.

In addition to the ethnographic studies, a large body of quantitative research has examined the effects of male unemployment and low earnings on marriage, divorce, and single motherhood (see Ellwood & Jencks 2004 and Burstein 2007 for comprehensive reviews of this literature). Included here are studies using area-level data to examine differences in the prevalence of marriage (or single motherhood) among women, studies using individual-level data to examine the incidence of marriage and divorce among women, and studies using individual-level data to examine the incidence of marriage and divorce among men. Each study faces limitations with respect to its ability to identify causality. For example, studies that use aggregate-level data cannot determine whether the association between male employment and marriage results from marriage affecting employment or vice versa. Similarly, studies that use prospective data on single women's likelihood of marriage cannot directly measure the employment characteristics of their potential partners. Even studies that follow men over time are limited insofar as men's employment may be an indicator of their intention to marry rather than an employment effect per se. What is most striking about this literature is the consistency of the empirical findings; all the studies show that male unemployment or underemployment has a large negative effect on union formation and stability. Given the consistency of the empirical evidence and the strong theoretical arguments for a causal effect, we find this argument convincing.

Income Inequality and Single Motherhood

Above we focus on the reasons why wage inequality might lead to delays in marriage. Delays in marriage, however, do not fully ex-

plain why women from disadvantaged backgrounds have children in the absence of marriage whereas more advantaged women delay both marriage and children.

To understand why some women would be willing to have children in the absence of marriage, we must first acknowledge the importance of motherhood for women's identity. Edin & Kefalas (2005) argue that although poor women view marriage as a luxury, they view motherhood as essential. Moreover, they believe in their ability to perform the role of mother and receive psychological benefits from taking care of children. Whereas most women in the United States place a high value on children, women with high skills and a college education have other possible sources of identity from which they can derive meaning and fulfillment. Not surprisingly, childlessness is much more common among highly educated women and women in professional occupations than among less educated women (Abma & Martinez 2006).

Growing inequality in women's earnings potential may also have contributed to nonmarital childbearing among low-skilled women by reducing the perceived benefits of delaying motherhood. Wage inequality among women (Gottschalk & Danziger 2005) and the returns to education for highly skilled women (Hamil-Luker 2005, DiPrete & Buchmann 2006) have increased across time and birth cohorts. Because women's employment and earnings tend to fall sharply when they become mothers (Waldfogel 1997, Budig & England 2001), those in a position to take advantage of new educational and employment opportunities have a strong incentive to invest in education and careers before having children. In contrast, wage inequality reduces incentives to invest in education among women who are not in a position to pursue higher education [i.e., women who have attended low-quality schools, lack financial means to pursue higher education, and lack role models (and information more generally)].

A number of researchers have examined how opportunity costs affect the timing of women's childbearing. This literature is plagued by

questions of how to account for unobserved heterogeneity because women who have children at younger ages are different from women who delay childbearing to older ages. Some recent studies have compared women who become pregnant at the same age but have different birth outcomes—involuntary miscarriage versus live births—to try to measure the earnings and employment effects of delaying childbearing. One strain of this research focused on births to teen mothers. Although teenage mothers have much lower educational attainments, earnings, and household incomes than mothers who delay childbearing, Hoffman (2008) finds that once selection into teenage motherhood is taken into account, early childbearing does not adversely affect a woman's own earnings, her spouse's earnings, or her income from public assistance. However, a teenage birth does reduce educational attainment (Hoffman 2008). Hoffman's findings suggest that women who become teenage mothers may have had low opportunity costs in terms of lost earnings or wages. Looking at an older age group, Miller (2006) finds that even short delays in motherhood increase women's cumulative early career earnings (from age 21 to 34) by approximately 10% per year of delay and that the effect is much stronger for women with college educations or in professional and managerial occupations.

Most research on the opportunity costs of early or nonmarital childbearing focuses on the ways motherhood affects women's wages or earnings, but fertility behavior may also affect a woman's economic status by influencing her chances of marriage and the quality of her spouse. For women, husbands' earnings are an important component of total family income. Several researchers have shown that women who have had a nonmarital birth are much less likely than other women to ever marry (Bennett et al. 1995, Upchurch et al. 2001, Graefe & Lichter 2002). Assuming that women take this information into account in making decisions about childbearing, declines in marriage (owing to increases in men's earnings inequality) reduce the opportunity costs of non-

marital childbearing for women who have low expectations of marriage.

Finally, while the opportunity cost of early childbearing was increasing for highly skilled women relative to low-skilled women, other forces were reducing the direct costs of early childbearing and single motherhood for women from disadvantaged backgrounds. The first factor was a decline in the stigma associated with single motherhood and sex outside marriage. In a review of attitude trends from the 1960s to the end of the 1990s, Thornton & Young-DeMarco (2001) show that acceptance of premarital sex and cohabitation increased substantially. Additionally, although most people continue to believe that marriage is the best context for child-rearing, fewer say that nonmarital childbearing is immoral.

A second factor was the expansion of welfare rights and benefits that make it easier for a woman to raise a child alone. Welfare benefits increased dramatically during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although cash benefits declined after 1975, the value of in-kind benefits (e.g., food stamps, housing, medical care) continued to rise.

A large number of researchers have attempted to estimate the size of the welfare effect on family formation. These studies typically use information on changes between (and within) state differences in welfare benefits to identify the causal effect of welfare. In a widely respected review of this literature, Moffitt (1998) reports that, on average, these cross-sectional analyses show that welfare decreases marriage and increases nonmarital fertility. However, he points out that the estimates vary widely across studies and that the true magnitude of the welfare effect is likely to be small. Moreover, he notes that most analyses using time-series data do not find a significant effect, although this omission can be explained by the failure of analyses to account for changes in wage rates (Moffitt 2000). More recent time-series analyses also find that changes in welfare benefits do not explain much of the increase in single motherhood (Blau et al. 2004). However, recent research focusing explicitly on the likelihood of

future marriage among unwed mothers, a group for whom welfare is especially salient, finds large negative effects of welfare (Knab et al. 2007).

DOES FAMILY STRUCTURE CAUSE INEQUALITY?

If family structure is a mechanism in the reproduction of inequalities, as opposed to a marker of disadvantage, it must have a causal impact on the outcomes we care about. This section examines the ways in which family structure differences affect class, gender, and racial inequalities. We first review the evidence that family structure affects children's life chances and intergenerational class mobility. We then consider how family structure changes may exacerbate gender and racial inequality. Because the issue of causality is central to our argument, we devote considerable space to it.

Children's Life Chances

A large body of research indicates that living apart from a biological parent (typically the father) is associated with a host of negative outcomes that are expected to affect children's future life chances or ability to move up the income ladder (McLanahan & Sandefur 1994, Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan 2004, Amato 2005).³ Children who grow up apart from their biological fathers score lower on standardized tests, report poorer grades, and view themselves as having less academic potential than children who grow up with both biological parents. Most importantly, they are also more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to attend college, and less likely to graduate from college. Most of these effects are similar for boys and girls; for children from different socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups; and for children living with stepfathers as well as single mothers.

³The following discussion of research on family structure and child well-being draws heavily from Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan (2004).

Children who grow up apart from their biological father also experience a higher prevalence of behavioral and psychological problems, such as shyness and aggression, than other children. Some studies report that father absence has a more negative effect on boys' psychological well-being than on girls'. However, this finding may result from an emphasis on aggressive behavior, which is more common among boys. Studies that examine anxiety and depression (or withdrawal) find no gender differences. Although some of the psychological and behavior problems associated with divorce and single motherhood may be short-lived, if they occur at times of crucial transitions (such as finishing high school and becoming sexually active), they may create disorder in the life course that carries lasting penalties.

Finally, the absence of a father is associated with children's transition to adulthood, family formation, and economic status as young adults. Compared with children in two-parent families, children who spend time in a single-mother family are more likely to have sex at an early age, and daughters from single-mother families are more likely to form romantic partnerships and begin childbearing at a younger age. Children from stepparent families appear to be especially disadvantaged when it comes to early home leaving. Because early home leaving and early childbearing may interfere with educational attainment, these transitions are of particular concern. Similarly, early sexual experience is a concern if it leads to early childbearing or home leaving. Early partnerships tend to be less stable and more likely to dissolve than relationships formed later in life. Compared with children raised by single parents, children raised by both biological parents have higher earnings, are less likely to be live in poverty, and are in a better position to insure themselves against economic uncertainties.

The above review concentrates on the effects of biological father absence, a characteristic of most new family structures. However, unmarried, cohabiting biological parent families are also becoming more common. Do children from families with two stably cohabiting,

unmarried parents fare as well as children from married parent families? The evidence so far suggests they do not (Brown 2004, Artis 2007), although the research on this topic is limited. One reason for the difference between these children is that cohabiting parent families have much higher dissolution rates than married parent families, so most children born to cohabiting parents experience father absence at some point in their lives (Kennedy & Bumpass 2007, Osborne & McLanahan 2007).

Selection Bias

The effects described above are mainly from observational studies, which provide limited information because the children in these studies are not randomly distributed across family structures, unlike in an experimental study that randomly assigns people to one group or another. Thus, we cannot be sure that the outcomes associated with divorce and single motherhood actually result from family structure per se as opposed to another factor that is more common among people who divorce or become single mothers. For example, parents' interpersonal skills likely affect both their family structure and their parenting skills. Children of parents with poor interpersonal skills who experience a lower quality of parenting likely have worse outcomes than other children, regardless of whether they live with both parents. Thus, if we do not account for selection into family structure, we may overestimate the causal effects.

To deal with possible selection bias, researchers have used various statistical techniques and natural experiments. One such approach compares children who share parents (or one parent) but experience different family structures or different lengths of exposure to a particular family structure (Ermisch & Francesconi 2001, Wolfinger et al. 2003, Bjorklund et al. 2007). For example, if parents separate when one child is 10 and the other child is 5, the older sibling experienced 8 years of father absence before his eighteenth birthday, whereas the other sibling experienced 13

years of father absence. This approach assumes that the longer a child lives in a father-absent family, the greater is the negative effect. If this assumption is true, the sibling with the longer exposure should have worse outcomes than the sibling with the shorter exposure to father absence. Other researchers have used a similar strategy to examine the effects of living in a stepparent family (Case et al. 2001, Hofferth & Anderson 2003, Evenhouse & Reilly 2004, Ginther & Pollak 2004, Gennetian 2005). In these studies, one child has typically experienced a divorce, and the second child (half-sibling) has lived with both biological parents since birth. Few sibling studies compare unmarried two-parent families with married two-parent families, making it difficult to determine whether parental cohabitation is equivalent to marriage in its effects on child outcomes.

In general, the findings from the sibling studies are quite mixed. In some cases, the differences between children across the various family structures become smaller and insignificant when siblings are compared (Hofferth & Anderson 2003, Ginther & Pollak 2004, Gennetian 2005, Bjorklund et al. 2007). In other cases, the differences become larger or remain significant (Case et al. 2001, Ermisch & Francesconi 2001, Evenhouse & Reilly 2004). It is important to keep in mind that estimating family structure effects from sibling models changes the interpretation of the findings enormously. Blended families are a select group, and what happens in these families may not be reflective of the whole population. Moreover, sibling models assume that parents treat their children exactly the same and that children respond similarly to family structure changes, which is unlikely.⁴ For example, parents may wait to divorce until the oldest child leaves home (or is older) precisely because they believe this child would be harmed more than the younger child by the divorce. Thus,

⁴However, Wolfinger and colleagues (2003) test differences in the effects of divorce within sibling pairs and find that divorce affects child outcomes similarly for children in the same family.

finding no difference between siblings in such a family does not necessarily mean that the older sibling would not have been harmed by an earlier divorce.

A second strategy for determining the effect of parental absence on children is to use a so-called natural experiment to determine whether children exposed to father absence by a force clearly beyond their parents' control have worse outcomes than children who are not exposed. For example, Gruber (2004) and Johnson & Mazingo (2000) have examined the association between years of exposure to unilateral or no-fault divorce laws in childhood and a range of adult outcomes, including marital status, fertility, educational attainment, and earnings. Gruber finds that living in a state with unilateral laws is associated with less education, more dropping out of high school, more early marriage, and more divorce. In some instances, the effects differ for women and men, but in all cases at least one group experiences a negative outcome. Although unilateral divorce is significantly associated with poorer outcomes in children, this strategy is limited in its capability to provide an estimate of the causal effect of divorce. The authors of both papers argue that changes in divorce law may have altered the bargaining power of husbands and wives in ways that disadvantage their children. If this were true, the negative outcomes associated with these changes may not result from increases in divorce but rather from changes affecting parental obligations toward children more generally. In sum, state-level variation in divorce laws does not provide an acceptable instrumental variable for child outcomes and likely overestimates the relationship between family structure and child outcomes.

Another natural experiment involves parental death. Because death is more likely than divorce or nonmarital parenthood to be a random event, the effect of parental death should provide a less biased estimate of the effect of father absence. In several reviews of the literature, Amato and his colleagues (1991a,b) report that, compared with children in intact families, adolescents in bereaved

families score significantly lower on academic achievement tests, and males are less likely to finish high school. Biblarz & Gottainer's (2000) findings also show that children who experience parental death are less likely to finish high school than children with two married parents. Children exposed to a parent's death also have more behavioral problems and lower psychological adjustment than children in two-parent families. Parental death typically has a smaller (less negative) effect on children than parental divorce, consistent with the argument that at least some of the effect of growing up with a single parent results from selection. However, there are other reasons why parental absence resulting from death may affect children differently than absence resulting from divorce or nonmarital childbearing. Children from divorced and unmarried families often have less access to the absent parent's social capital and less interaction with the parent's family and friends, whereas death may have the opposite effect, actually increasing support from friends and kin. Divorce and nonmarital parenthood are also often accompanied by residential instability, whereas parental death less frequently necessitates a move. Moreover, most children who do not live with both parents still have some contact with the absent parent, but children who experience parental death obviously do not. Thus, using parental death is far from a perfect way of measuring selection effects.

In sum, selection appears to account for some but not all of the difference in child outcomes associated with divorce and father absence. Parents that divorce or never marry are different from parents that remain continuously married, and studies that do not account for pre-existing differences are bound to overstate the negative effect of family structure. Moreover, although longitudinal data allow researchers to account for observed differences prior to family formation and disruption, such a strategy is limited in that it cannot adjust for differences that are not observed by the researcher or are not easily measured in large-scale data collection. Attempts to control for unobserved

differences, either by exploiting new measures or employing new statistical techniques, frequently reduce the association between father absence and poor child outcomes. However, all these methods have their own limitations and, in general, do not account for all the differences in children, families, and subsequent outcomes. The negative impact of parental death on children's outcomes is probably the strongest evidence we have to date that father absence reduces child well-being, although this conclusion is tempered by the fact that children with coresident cohabiting fathers are often as disadvantaged as children in single-mother families.

Pathways

Another way to address the selection issue is to develop and test hypotheses about the specific pathways that are expected to link family structure to child outcomes. Although such an approach does not rule out the possibility that selection is operating at each turn in the pathway, it is more conservative than just looking at the correlation between family structure and child outcomes inasmuch as each pathway can be subjected to its own empirical test. **Figure 3** illustrates the major pathways through which family structure is expected to affect children's well-being.

According to **Figure 3**, some family structures undermine children's future success by reducing family resources, such as income and mothers' mental health, which in turn reduce the quality of parenting and resources available to them, ultimately decreasing their well-being. **Figure 3** is a simplified model illustrating how family structure may affect child outcomes and is not meant to be exhaustive; rather, it re-

flects the most studied and important pathways through which family structure may be causally influencing child outcomes.

Family structure and parental resources.

Women who divorce or have children outside marriage are likely to be economically disadvantaged even before they become single mothers. At the same time, single motherhood is expected to reduce family income because there is one less potential earner in the household and because women's hourly earnings are less than those of men. In their lengthy review of the literature on the economic consequences of divorce, Holden & Smock (1991) report that divorce is associated with a 30% reduction in the income of mothers and children. More recent estimates show that the loss in women's income following a divorce may have lessened over time because of increases in women's employment and earnings but that there is still a substantial loss (Smock et al. 1999, McKeever & Wolfinger 2001), although Bedard & Deschenes (2005) argue there is no effect once selection is taken into account. Women in cohabiting relationships experience a 33%–53% decrease in household income following their union dissolution (Avellar & Smock 2005). More recently, researchers have looked at the economic consequences of nonmarriage for women who give birth outside marriage. These studies show that unmarried mothers' poverty rates would be lower if they were married to the fathers of their children, although not nearly as low as mothers whose children were born within marriage (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan 2002, Thomas & Sawhill 2005).

Divorce and single parenthood may affect mental health by causing short-term stress and

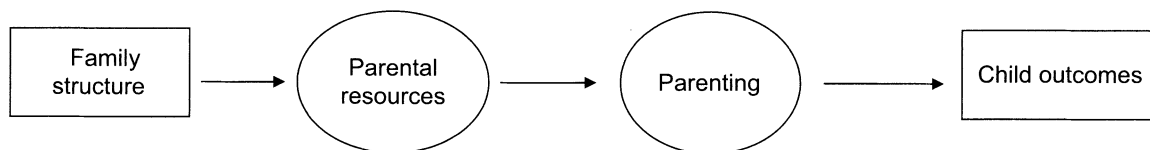


Figure 3

Simplified pathway between family structure and child outcomes.

creating conditions that foster ongoing stress and strain. Using fixed-effects models, Musick & Bumpass (2007) find that union formation—beginning a marriage or cohabitation—is associated with a short-term increase in happiness and decrease in depression. Simon (2002) also finds that marriage decreases never-married women's depression, whereas divorce increases women's depression. Meadows and her colleagues (2008) also find evidence of short-term negative effects associated with divorce and relationship instability, which is inconsistent with a selection argument. Although some researchers argue that the effects of divorce are likely to fade over time (Hetherington et al. 1985), many divorced and never-married mothers experience multiple transitions, which expose mothers and children to multiple short-term stressors (Fomby & Cherlin 2007, Osborne & McLanahan 2007).

Parenting and child well-being. A large body of theory and empirical research indicates that parents play a critical role in their children's cognitive and emotional development. Parents provide nurturance, and discipline; they promote language development and act as teachers; and they are responsible for monitoring and managing the care the child receives from other adults (Maccoby & Martin 1983, Bornstein 2002). The most widely used assessment of parenting quality is the HOME inventory (Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment), which measures multiple parenting domains and is based on a combination of parental reports and direct observation of parent-child interactions (Bradley & Caldwell 1984). Much of the literature on parenting, similar to the literature on divorce and single parenthood, is based on observational data rather than experiments and therefore is subject to criticisms of selection bias. Fortunately, researchers can randomly assign parents to programs that teach parenting skills and observe whether increases in skills are associated with improvements in child behavior. The literature on these interventions indicates that improvements in parenting do lead to im-

provements in child outcomes (Brooks-Gunn & Markman 2005). There is also evidence that interventions designed to improve parenting following a divorce can reduce behavior problems among adolescents (Wolchik et al. 2002).

Resources, parenting, and child well-being.

Good parenting, which results in positive child outcomes, depends on parental resources such as family income and parents' mental health. Low income and financial insecurity reduce the quality of the child's physical surroundings and the services that can be purchased outside the home, such as child care and medical care. It also affects parent-child relationships by increasing parental stress. A large number of studies have documented the correlation between family income and children's well-being, although again there is debate over whether the effect of income is causal (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn 1997, Mayer 1997). The most convincing evidence that income has a causal effect comes from evaluations of several large social experiments, including welfare experiments carried out in Canada and the United States in the 1990s. These studies found that increases in mothers' earnings and family income were associated with gains in children's achievement and health (Huston et al. 2001, Morris et al. 2005). Although these evaluations show that family income led to improvements in child outcomes, they cannot distinguish between pure income effects and employment effects because most of the mothers in these studies were required or encouraged to increase their employment levels.

Mothers' mental health is another critical factor in determining the quality of parental care insofar as mothers' health affects the quality of her parenting. Meta-analyses indicate that maternal depression is associated with lower levels of nurturance and parental engagement and with higher levels of harsh parenting (Downey & Coyne 1990, Lovejoy et al. 2000). Differences in parenting appear to be more pronounced among mothers of infants than among mothers with older children, suggesting that the differences are not driven by

differences in children's personalities or behaviors. Differences are also more pronounced among low-income mothers as compared with affluent mothers. As was the case with the research on income, this evidence is based primarily on observational data. However, some researchers have examined the effectiveness of interventions designed to improve parenting among mothers with mood disorders using experimental design and random assignment. These studies indicate that improvements in mothers' mental health lead to better parent-child interaction (Beardslee et al. 2003).

Above we argue that family structure affects children's educational attainment, earnings and employment, and family formation. These outcomes affect children's class status and economic well-being as adults. Because the family structures that negatively affect child development are most common among low-income and less educated Americans, we can think of family structure as a mechanism by which class inequality is reproduced. Below we discuss how family structure may affect racial and gender inequalities as well.

Reproducing Racial Inequalities

Family structure changes may affect racial inequality if the distribution of children across family structures varies by race or if family structure effects vary across racial groups. In this section, we discuss the evidence for each of these mechanisms.

As argued above, family structure causally affects children's outcomes such that children raised in an intact two-parent family are more likely to be economically successful and achieve upward mobility than children raised by single parents or stepparents. If more children in some racial groups have the benefits of growing up with both parents than in other groups, a gap should emerge (or widen) in social-mobility rates. As discussed above, racial differences in family structure are large. A much higher percentage of black and Hispanic children than white children live apart from their fathers during their childhood: 44% of black children and

20% of Hispanic children start life living apart from their fathers compared with 10% of non-Hispanic white children. Of children born to married or cohabiting parents, black and Hispanic children are also much more likely to experience parental separation during childhood (Kennedy & Bumpass 2007). Even if the causal effects of family structure are small, the sizable difference in family structure distribution suggests that family structure may become an important mechanism in maintaining and exacerbating racial economic inequality.

Some scholars have suggested that the effects of family structure may vary by race. They argue that racial and ethnic groups in which two-parent families are less common may have developed different models of childrearing and social support, which rely less on the nuclear family and more on extended-kin networks. If family structure has a different effect on well-being for children of different racial groups, then differences in the distribution of family structures across racial groups may not lead to increased racial inequalities. The evidence to date is far from conclusive. On the one hand, there is some evidence of weaker effects for black children (see Fomby & Cherlin 2007). On the other hand, there is evidence of stronger effects for children of less educated mothers (Cooper et al. 2007). Moreover, even if different childrearing practices alleviate some of the negative effects of father absence, differences in material resources by family structure would remain. Indeed, studies of the correlation between family structure and poverty rates show that changes in family structure account for a larger share of the change in child poverty among non-Hispanic blacks than among Hispanics or non-Hispanic whites (Iceland 2003) and that the poverty rates of black and Puerto Rican children would be 35% lower if their distribution across family structures were the same as in the total population of children (Lichter et al. 2005).⁵ Thus, it is unlikely that the effects

⁵However, Manning & Brown (2006) find that living with married parents versus cohabiting parents is associated with

of family disruption on disadvantaged populations are small enough to make them inconsequential.

Reproducing Gender Inequalities

Despite considerable changes in family structure since 1960, the share of single parents who are men has remained virtually unchanged. Changes in family structure may contribute to the reproduction of gender inequalities in two ways. First, parenthood affects the employment and earnings of women much more strongly than it does men because women bear the primary responsibility for raising children. Second, when parents live apart, women bear a disproportionate share of the costs of children. Therefore, single mothers shoulder more caretaking responsibilities, and nonresident fathers lose out on the joys of family life and other benefits that accompany fatherhood. Below we discuss these mechanisms in more detail.

Before becoming parents, most women earn less money than their male partners, and after the transition to parenthood, the difference in earnings increases. Recent research shows that men experience gains in wage rates after the birth of a first child, whereas women, on average, experience losses (Lundberg & Rose 2000). Women experience earnings losses because they take time off work to care for children and are penalized for this in the labor market (Waldfogel 1997, Lundberg & Rose 2000). Correll and colleagues (Ridgeway & Correll 2004, Correll et al. 2007) cite employment discrimination against mothers as a possible additional source of disadvantage. In contrast, the evidence suggests that men either benefit or experience no change in employer treatment based on their parental status (Correll et al. 2007). When parents live in the same household, these changes in earnings and employment may offset each other. However, when

they live in different households, women lose any potential benefits from this type of specialization. Single mothers who are not married tend to work more than married mothers (Cohen & Bianchi 1999), but this increased level of maternal employment does not fully compensate for the loss of a male partner's income. A long line of research shows that one reason why women's poverty rates are much higher than men's rates is because many women face the high costs of raising children without adequate financial support from the child's father (Garfinkel & McLanahan 1986). Additionally, recent research shows that women and men who grow up in middle-income or affluent families have similar chances of intergenerational mobility, whereas women who grow up in the bottom fifth of the income distribution are much less likely to escape a similar economic status as adults than their male counterparts (Isaacs 2007). This suggests that the economic status and chances for mobility for women are lower than for men in part because of women's greater responsibility for children.

Caretaking responsibilities for children also differ by family structure. Fathers spend less time with their children if they do not live with them, leaving mothers in single-mother families with more responsibility. This uneven distribution has two effects. First, single mothers have less time available for work or leisure and more stress in coordinating and providing care for their children. Second, nonresident fathers miss out on the benefits of living with children. Akerlof (1998) argues that men without children are more likely to engage in risky behavior, work less, and have lower incomes.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This article addresses whether family structure can be viewed as a mechanism in the reproduction of inequality. For this statement to be correct, family structure must be a consequence of income inequality, and it also must be a cause of future inequality. We argue that both theory and empirical evidence suggest that both

greater economic resources for white children than for black or Hispanic children.

conditions hold. With respect to the first condition, income inequality undermines marriage and union stability by reducing the proportion of men in the population who are deemed suitable for marriage, by making it harder for couples to achieve the standard of living they associate with marriage, and by reducing low-skilled women's motivation to delay having children until after they marry. With respect to the second condition, single motherhood lowers children's future life chances by reducing parental resources (income and mental health) and undermining the quality of parenting. Be-

cause children from the lower end of the income distribution are much more likely to experience father absence than other children, and because the negative effects of father absence appear to be just as detrimental for these children as they are for children from advantaged backgrounds, the evidence suggests that recent changes in the family are contributing to the intergenerational persistence of inequality. Finally, we argue that changes in family structure are also contributing to increases in disparities between whites and minorities and between women and men.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any biases that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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