Nonmarital Births: Implications for Families and Children

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Key Points about U.S. Nonmarital Births

1) Linked to disadvantage (more so than other Western countries)

2) High levels of instability/complexity

3) Many biological fathers not highly involved, and many new ‘social fathers’

4) Lower child wellbeing because fewer parental resources (time & money)—not marriage per se

Nonmarital Childbearing

![Graph showing percentage of births to unmarried women, 1960 to 2010](source)

Percent of births to unmarried women, 1960 to 2010

Source: CDC/NCHS Vital Statistics; Stat Canada; Eurostat, European Commission; figure by Laura Tach.

1) Linked to disadvantage (more than other Western countries)

Smaller Educational Gradient in Nonmarital Births in European Countries (except the UK)

![Graphs showing educational gradient in nonmarital births in European countries](source)

2) High levels of instability/complexity

Percent of Parents who Broke up by Child Age 15

To Age 15: Years with Two-Biological Parent Families, by Education

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U.S. Urban Nonmarital Births: Percent of Parents Who Separate by Child Age

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Children in the US with highly educated mothers spend 4.2 more years with both biological parents than those with less educated mothers. The average gap in all other countries is just over 2 years.
New Partners

- By 5 years after a nonmarital birth, 22% of urban mothers have a new partner (Bzostek et al. 2012)
- Biological fathers intend to stay involved with their children, but fathers’—and especially mothers’—new relationships diminish fathers’ involvement with children (Edin & Nelson 2013; Tach et al. 2010)
- Social fathers are often highly involved, but will the relationships last?

Urban U.S. Births: Children with at Least One Half-Sibling over 9 Years, by Marital Status at Birth

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

Most Children Born to Unmarried Parents Will Be in a Complex Family by Age 10 (WI state data)


Percent of Mothers Who Have Children with Two or More Fathers

3) Many biological fathers not highly involved, and many new ‘social fathers’

4) Lower child wellbeing because fewer parental resources (time & money)—not marriage per se

Implications

- At least in the U.S., children born to unmarried parents are ‘triply disadvantaged’
  1) Low economic resources
  2) Unstable/complex families
  3) Limited policy supports

- Policy?
  - Hard to change family behaviors, so either:
    1) Decrease unintended fertility (Sawhill 2014) or
    2) Better support children/families