

Changing American Family

Remarkable changes in family demography occurred in the United States during the last half of the 20th Century. These changes transformed many family behaviors and practices, especially in the areas of marriage and fertility (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2003; Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2003). Two dramatic changes occurred that affect children and families, especially low-income families. Cohabitation became a common living arrangement for adults and continues to increase in prevalence (Osborne, McLanahan & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Today, about 40 percent of all non-marital births are to mothers living with the baby's father, an increase from 25 percent in the 1980s (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Even though cohabitation is a more tenuous relationship than marriage, lasting on average only 1.3 years, about 53 percent of cohabiting unions "end" in marriage (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). However, even for the total population, cohabitation is now the modal path of entry into marriage (Brown, 2000). Today, in the United States there are more than four million cohabitating couples, which is eight times the number in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1999).

Changes in behaviors related to fertility have simultaneously been observed, alongside declines in marriage rates. Larger numbers of children are being born to unmarried women ages 15-44 (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2003). Most children born outside of marriage will live below or just above the poverty line and many will spend time on welfare (Carlson, Garfinkel, McLanahan, Mincy & Primus, 2003). Parents living a lifetime in cohabiting households will rear many of these children (Osborne, McLanahan & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Children's lives are less stable when their parent, most typically their mother, moves from one relationship to another. For a substantial number of children, the model of cohabitation leads to the development of gender attitudes and marriage beliefs that influence behaviors and decision-making in adolescents and adulthood (McGinnis, 2003; Manning & Lamb, 2003).

Those parents choosing cohabitation are most frequently younger, less educated and minority women (Osborne, 2003). These factors alone often create obstacles for single-parent families that predispose them to experience poverty (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Economic uncertainty and scarcity of economic resources increases the likelihood of cohabitation (Seltzer, 2000). These patterns of family unions that occur more frequently in low-income, high-stress households increase the likelihood that children will experience living with a cohabiting parent at sometime in their formative years. In the 1970s, about 60% of cohabiters were married at the age of 25 or older; in the early 1990s only 35% married (Bumpass, Sweet & Cherlin, 1991), increasing the trend of fewer cohabitations ending in marriage. As the pattern of cohabitation becomes more socially accepted, so does the number of children born within these relationships. Recognizing that this form of adult union is not going to disappear, but most likely will increase; it becomes critical to develop a greater understanding of these unions.

The social and economic cost of families living in poverty is staggering. The increase of cohabitating poor families is influenced by complex factors, which is especially true of rural poor families. These families have fewer employment opportunities available and

limited access to human service agencies (Logan, Walker, Cole, Ratliff & Leukefeld, 2003). For some the social isolation may prevent them from engaging in activities to increase their skills that ultimately limit them to the context in which they have “grown up.” Efforts to strengthen the skills and change the perceptions of this population will require the development of programs and services that are tailored to the circumstances of poor families (Ooms, 2002). The decision to marry or cohabitate is likely influenced by many factors that interact within the life situation of low-income individuals. Given that these factors will not radically change for them, it is imperative to determine which factors can be influenced by intervention.

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