COUNTING COUPLES, COUNTING FAMILIES

Executive Summary

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COUNTING COUPLES, COUNTING FAMILIES

American families are continuing to change at a rapid pace with consequences for the well-being of children, youth, and adults. Same-sex marriages, multiple partner fertility, delays in marriage, growth in cohabitation, continuing high divorce rates, biological ties between parents and children across households, increasing unmarried childbearing, and other family arrangements have transformed the landscape of family life in America. These shifting contemporary family patterns pose immense challenges to those who seek to understand and respond to changes in family structure and dynamics.

On July 19-21, 2011, more than 150 researchers, data providers, and policymakers gathered at the National Institutes of Health for the third *Counting Couples, Counting Families* conference, which followed previous national conferences in 2001 and 2003. Goals of the conference were to assess the availability and quality of existing family measures in federal data, provide guidance on how these measures might be modified or expanded in future data collection efforts, and discuss strategies to facilitate standardization of family measurement across surveys. Sessions on marriage and remarriage, cohabitation, family structure and instability, family ties across households, and future directions provided rich insights into issues that need to be considered in seeking ways to measure family structure and dynamics. Resources were provided to help assess existing measures across data sources including Question Crosswalks, which present side-by-side comparisons of family indicators available in national data sets.

Measurement of family change is important to ensure accurate assessments of family life and to examine the correlates and implications of family change. These issues are of more than academic interest as they have implications for the effectiveness of policies targeted at improving the health and development of children, youth, and families. As family life in America continues to become more heterogeneous, it is essential that federal data collection efforts capture the full range of experiences that characterize U.S. families.

MARRIAGE AND REMARRIAGE

Marriage is less prevalent today among some subgroups than it has been in the past, but continues to play an important role in individual well-being. However, the effects of marriage are likely to vary because the marriage experience is diverse in terms of age at marriage, duration of marriage, marriage order, and characteristics of spouses. Increasingly Americans are experiencing remarriage, resulting in multiple marital experiences over the course of their lives.

Most data sources provide information about marital status at the time of interview. The legal status of marriage might indicate it is a relatively straightforward family status to measure. Yet there continues to be inconsistent measurement, and the lack of uniformity in

measurement of marital status makes comparisons across time, subgroups, and place difficult. Only the American Community Survey (ACS) and Decennial Census provide adequate sample sizes to generate accurate estimates at the state or local levels.

The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) offers a fairly comprehensive classification for the marital status question: married; not married but living together with a partner of opposite sex; separated because you and your spouse are not getting along; divorced; widowed; and never married. It would be ideal if the NSFG marital status classification was adopted but allow cohabiting couples to be of the same sex; currently only opposite sex cohabiting couples are measured. Of course, the shortcoming with the NSFG is that it is cross-sectional and only includes respondents aged 15-44, which limits the use of these data for the study of remarriage and older Americans.

The growth in the availability of legal marriage to same-sex couples through changing legislation in individual states has outpaced the development of appropriate procedures to count these couples. Data collections should be explicit about whether they are referencing same-sex or opposite-sex couples in part because errors are detected when relying on gender of respondent and household members.

A new opportunity to study marriage rates and age at marriage has been available since 2008 in the ACS. The ACS asks whether respondents married, divorced, or widowed in the past year, how many times the person was married, and in what year the person was last married. The ACS also has large enough sample sizes to generate estimates for racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants and to enable estimates at the state and local levels. These data provide an excellent opportunity to understand local level marriage patterns and context. However, age at first marriage in the ACS is directly available only for individuals married one time.

Longitudinal data collections provide detailed information on marital histories and transitions that are collected at each interview point (e.g., National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) 79, NLSY97, National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health)). These data sources also include up-to-date time-varying information on a variety of important socioeconomic variables, making it possible to assess the causes and consequences of marriage formation, dissolution, and multiple marital transitions. The shortcoming of these data collections are they represent the experiences of specific birth cohorts and do not provide an overall view of the experiences of all Americans. The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) is a panel study (2.5-4 years) that potentially can overcome the limitations of the other longitudinal data collections because of larger sample sizes and extensive coverage of men and women at different ages. In future waves, more marital history questions, especially timing and duration of each marriage, could provide additional ways to examine how marital experiences over the life course influence health and well-being.

Current data collections present challenges in determining whether a marriage is a first marriage for both members of the couple. The lack of detailed marital histories for spouses overlook the role spouses play in marriage, family well-being, child development, health, and other outcomes. Only a few data sources contain this information including the SIPP, NSFG, and both the NLSY79 and NLSY97. Most data collections do not collect this information including the ACS, Census, CPS, ECLS-B, ECLS-K, Add Health, and CE.

Future data on marriage and remarriage will be most effective and useful to policymakers and scholars if they include large sample sizes, can produce estimates at the state and local level, and include information on marital and other key types of relationship histories (i.e., cohabitation) as well as information on the correlates of these relationship transitions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING MARRIAGE AND REMARRIAGE

- Provide consistent measures of marital status across data sources.
- Include same-sex marriages as a marital status.
- Add age at first marriage to the ACS.
- Supplement data collections with marital histories (start and end dates).
- Increase the upper age limit of the NSFG to ensure data are included on remarriage and marriage among older Americans.
- Provide data on the marital history of spouses to determine whether couples are both first-time married.

COHABITATION

Over the last few decades, cohabitation has become a common feature of American life. For example, two-thirds of first marriages are preceded by cohabitation. Cohabitation is often part of the process into marriage and is a family form that commonly includes children.

Although the federal government's national surveys have made significant improvements (e.g., the inclusion of 'unmarried partner' on household rosters and direct questions about cohabitation) in the measurement of cohabitation, a few problems remain. The inconsistent phrasing of cohabitation questions makes it challenging to compare findings across different data sets. Some surveys include questions about "always" or "usually" sharing a residence while others do not. Some surveys base cohabitation on sexual intimacy while others phrase the question in terms of being in a "marriage-like relationship," a term that many couples who have not been married may not understand.

Methods used to identify same-sex cohabiting couples in the Census and ACS also lack conceptual clarity. For example, terms like "husband/wife" and "unmarried" may mean different things to same-sex couples than to different-sex couples. This hetero-normative bias is amplified when surveys restrict responses to explicitly describe different-sex relationships while not providing comparable options to describe same-sex relationships.

Data sources have been expanded to include cohabitation histories, but some data collections do not obtain parallel cohabitation and marital histories. Full union histories are critical for understanding the context of union formation and the family environment in which children are born and raised. For example, the SIPP and ACS do not include cohabitation histories but ask about marriage in the last 12 months (ACS) or marital histories (SIPP).

A larger, related issue is the conceptualization of relationships. The focus has been on residential relationships with a distinction in the legal status of the relationship (married or

cohabiting or domestic partnerships). To better assess relationships, conceptual constructs that describe (1) the nature of the relationship, (2) relationship behaviors and co-residence, and (3) legal status may be necessary. Efforts to include indicators beyond coresidence and legal status would encompass additional important relationships (e.g., living apart together (LAT)) that may be excluded from current data collections.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING COHABITATION

- Include uniform measures of cohabiting relationships across surveys.
- Develop and incorporate measures for the full range of relationships, such as dating, LAT, unmarried partner, civil unions, and registered domestic partnerships.
- Ensure accurate methods of measuring different-sex and same-sex relationships.
- Include measurement of sexual orientation and gender identity as a standard demographic characteristic.
- Refocus measurement toward a broader concept of intimate relationships to allow moving beyond the binary concepts of marriage versus cohabitation.
- Expand the age range covered in social surveys to permit analysis of cohabitation among older Americans.

SEPARATION, DIVORCE, AND UNION DISSOLUTION

Being able to describe trends and differentials in marital and relationship stability is fundamental to understanding family change and the impact of change on the economic, mental, and physical well-being of both adults and children. However, the current statistical system falls short of being able to provide relevant data on trends and differentials in relationship and family instability because it does not do a good job measuring transitions into and out of cohabiting relationships.

During the 1990s, the data collection systems for tracking change in marital stability shifted substantially, and today the primary data sources for tracking trends and differentials in relationship dissolution include the SIPP, NLSY, NSFG, and ACS. Each of these has strengths and weaknesses regarding population coverage, the use of proxy reports, the precision of measurement, and the depth of information on marital histories. For example, the ACS does not collect information on separation, and the tendency of couples to formalize the end of their marriages through divorce varies across population groups. Neither the ACS nor the SIPP provides data to monitor the increase in the instability of cohabiting relationships as opposed to married relationships. The NSFG is limited to respondents under age 45, so the potential to study remarriage or postmarital cohabitation is limited.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING SEPARATION, DIVORCE, AND UNION DISSOLUTION

- Incorporate cohabitation histories.
- Include distinct measurement of separation and divorce.
- Obtain marital and cohabitation histories for same-sex couples.
- Expand the age range of the NSFG to allow assessments of remarriage stability and implications.

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND INSTABILITY

The measurement of children's family structure may appear simple, but represents the intersection of three key pieces of information -- marital/partnership status of parents, living arrangements, and biological relatedness. Today, just less than half of children live in a traditional nuclear family (two biological married parent families with only full siblings). Children are increasingly likely to experience family instability, and indicators of family instability need to reflect change in family structure over time. Though new datasets have become available in recent years to measure how families are changing, more sophisticated data-collecting tools and strategies are needed to determine the full range of changes parents and children undergo.

Current surveys do quite well at capturing the "basic" family structure categories based on marital status of parents at a given point in time (e.g., date of birth, date of interview, age 14). However, in unmarried families, the partnership status of the unmarried parent(s) is often unclear, including whether they are cohabiting, in a dating relationship, or have no partner. Thus refined indicators of relationship histories are necessary to accurately measure family structure and instability.

Many surveys do not capture the full trajectory of family structure over time, which is crucial for measuring instability. Some surveys ask about parental marriage and divorce since the past survey, but few capture finer gradations in partner changes or living arrangements or can measure the duration of relationships. Complete marital, cohabitation, and fertility histories are necessary. For example, the SIPP's fertility history is highly truncated, providing information only on year of first and last birth.

Surveys that draw on household rosters to establish family relationships often do not fully capture sibling's relationships to one another, but rather focus on relationships to the head of household or to the respondent. A household roster will establish whether a child is the biological offspring of the head but cannot determine whether the child shares a residence with a step or half sibling. The CPS has included parental indicators, and the SIPP provides household relationship matrices. Some studies (NSFG) do not provide household rosters for public use but rather summary indicators for confidentiality reasons. Ideally, studies should capture distinctions in the biological relatedness of children – to parents and parent-figures as well as to siblings.

Ultimately, it may be useful to utilize multiple measures of family structure and instability in a single investigation to better understand the nature and implications of family structure and instability from multiple perspectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING FAMILY STRUCTURE AND INSTABILITY

- Incorporate cohabiting, step, and same-sex parents in family structure measures.
- Support surveys focusing on family life that contain complete fertility, marital, and cohabitation histories. Broader based surveys should query about family structure at birth, age 14, and interview or 'ever' experiences.
- Broaden household rosters to establish relationships of family members to one another to ensure accurate assessments of cohabiting, stepparent and sibling relationships.
- Consider multiple reports of family structure recognizing the perspective may depend on the reporter.

FAMILY TIES ACROSS HOUSEHOLDS

Many data collections focus on the household or the family as the unit of analysis, limiting the data opportunities to study family ties across households. Family ties often extend across households and have become more challenging to study as children increasingly experience multiple forms of instability requiring renegotiation of parent-child roles. In addition, the family is the most common and preferred safety net in times of need. Further work on intergenerational support (parents aiding adult children and support for aging parents) will showcase who provides help and the implications for well-being of providers and recipients.

Legal requirements help to ensure that children who experience family instability continue to be linked socially and financially to their biological parents. However, current data collections on parent-child relationships do not always account for family ties across households. Multiple-partner fertility means that parents may have more than one set of children and relationships to describe in surveys, which may reduce the quality of their reports and present analytic challenges. Furthermore, growth in joint legal and physical custody may mean there are more part-time living arrangements with both biological parents.

The increase in co-residence associated with the current economic slowdown increases the difficulty of measuring inter-household arrangements as intergenerational households become more common. Although some information about assistance to children during the transition to adulthood is available from longitudinal studies, this information is limited. Family researchers know little about later life relationships between adult children and absent parents, stepparents, and quasi-parents acquired through cohabitation.

Much attention has been paid to financial support across households. For example, child support payments are the focus of many studies on nonresident fathers, but this strategy omits important sources of informal support provided to children. Similarly, analysis of ties across households focuses on the direction of economic flows without acknowledging the complex web of emotional and instrumental aid. Furthermore, future expectations of support aid may mean some of these sources of support are conditional.

There has been an expansion in the ways that contact may be maintained across households. For example, most surveys include questions about the frequency of contact over a specified period of time, such as the last month or the last year. However, the type of contact is important, especially as new technology alters the way people keep in touch. Texts, IMs, emails, and other new technologies allow for types of contact that many existing surveys do not include when they ask whether or not a parent or child has been in contact.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING FAMILY TIES ACROSS HOUSEHOLDS

- Include measures of part-time family members or family members who share a residence for short periods of time.
- Ensure that resident and non-resident parents are included in assessments of family structure and well-being.
- Describe paternal and maternal ties to children across households.
- Query about multiple sources of support including financial, emotional, instrumental, and informal.
- Extend the dimensions of contact to keep pace with new forms of social interactions.
- Establish geographic indicators to help determine the role of policies in enhancing ties across households.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Social change has rendered many past assumptions about family life outdated. A few have ramifications for measurement of family including: (1) family equals household – family roles and responsibilities extend across households; (2) marriage is the only form of partnership to raise children – we have witnessed wide variation in the family experiences of children and adults; (3) all members of families are heterosexual – legal recognition of same-sex marriages as well as broadening recognition of same-sex couples indicate the importance of considering same-sex couples in assessments of American family life.

Complex family arrangements such as remarriage, cohabitation, same-sex marriage, and nonresident parenthood require new techniques and new technologies. A modest program of methodological research could develop and test some of these new approaches. Given the challenges associated with finding one unambiguous definition of such terms as cohabitation, data collection efforts may need to move toward multiple indicators. Additionally, no one survey can answer all questions. Multiple surveys will continue to be needed with variations in study design, scientific objectives, and questions asked. Efforts should continue to include modules on existing surveys.

Several speakers and attendees called for a new family study, arguing that it is necessary to understand the family lives of today's Americans. Current data are useful but their applicability is limited by restrictions to a singular cohort or specific age range, for instance, or reliance on a narrow set of questions. Our understanding of the causes and consequences of family change requires new data to capture contemporary family patterns.

The federal budget is extremely constrained. In such circumstances, it is critical for researchers, data providers, and policymakers to voice their support for the collection and analysis of information on family status and changes. It is of critical importance to maintain the data infrastructure surrounding American families. Identifying links to specific programs, laws, and governmental needs will be crucial to defend these vital data-gathering efforts.

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