

Complex Families and Implications for Parents' Support of their Children

Abstract: Recent research suggests the importance for both demographers and policy analysts of considering patterns of multiple partner fertility. Many of the early insights have come from ethnographic research. Quantitative research on complex families is difficult given data limitations (including inherent problems with sample definitions given complex family structures). We use data derived from statewide administrative records of welfare recipients to map the multiple obligations and sources of support available to mothers and fathers of low income families in Wisconsin. Using these data, as well as survey reports of family structure and informal support, we gain a better understanding of the implications for parents who have children with multiple partners and who are simultaneously custodial and noncustodial parents and/or step-parents. We discuss implications for theories of the family that emphasize social or biological ties, as well as implications for current policy initiatives related to marriage promotion and child support.

Recent research suggests the importance for both demographers and policy analysts of considering patterns of multiple partner fertility. The focus of research on marriage and the family has for some time included substantial research on, for example, cohabitation and remarriage. However, analysis of complex patterns of multiple partner (mostly nonmarital) fertility is at an earlier stage.

Ethnographic research has played an important role in calling attention to the frequency and implications of multiple partner fertility. Quantitative research on complex families is difficult given data limitations. A key difficulty derives from inherent problems with sample definitions given complex family structures. Asking respondents to report on the subsequent marriage, cohabitation, and fertility history of former partners is difficult, both because of the sensitivity of some topics, and because respondents may have limited information on their former partner's relationships occurring after (or before) their own. Surveys designed to include multiple partners as respondents are also difficult and expensive to field. To our knowledge, no survey uses such a design and includes a large enough sample to support estimation based on detailed categories of complex families.

To address these issues we use a unique data set constructed from merged administrative data which includes information on virtually all legal paternities established in the State of Wisconsin. Beginning from a sample of women with children who received TANF cash benefits or other work supports, we use statewide administrative records to map the multiple obligations and sources of support available to mothers and fathers of low income families in Wisconsin. We start with a sample of mothers who received public benefits, and the legal fathers of their children. One of the contributions of our analysis is that we are then able to examine the families of all legally established children of these fathers, including those whose mothers do and do not receive welfare.

Administrative records are limited, because not all paternities are legally established (though establishment rates in Wisconsin are over 90 percent) and some subsequent births will not be recorded in administrative data (for example births within intact marriages; though note that over 85 percent of births to women receiving TANF benefits in Wisconsin are nonmarital). Thus, our estimates of family complexity are conservative. Nonetheless, given the paucity of alternative data, these estimates provide an important contribution to the picture of complex families that is emerging from ethnographic and smaller-scale survey research. For example, we find that in our sample of nonresident fathers, less than 30 percent are involved in a single

“simple” family (where both mother and father only have children with one another). Almost 40 percent of fathers have very “complex” families – that is, they have had paternity established for children with multiple mothers, and at least one of the mothers of their children has other children with another legally established father. The remaining fathers either have children with one mother, where that mother has children with more than one father, or they have children with multiple mothers, each of whom only have children with that father.

Using merged administrative data on formal child support payments we estimate the relationship between family complexity and fathers’ economic contribution to their children. Because of the high rates of family complexity, and the size of our sample (over 20,000 fathers), the data support an analysis distinguishing families by detailed measures of complexity. For example, we are able to estimate the extent to which a father’s child support payments vary with the number and gender of his children living in a given household, the proportion of children in the household who are not his biological children (and the number of associated fathers), as well as the number and family structure of other children he has fathered with other mothers.

Because our administrative data were also used as the sampling frame for a survey of 3000 mothers receiving welfare and the father of a randomly selected child, we are able to use mothers’ and fathers’ survey reports to verify the administrative data. While the survey only includes information on a single couple (i.e. one father per mother), it provides information on living arrangements, informal support, and other information not available from administrative sources. Finally, ethnographic research based on a small (n=40) sample of fathers also drawn from these data (Pate, 2003) also provides context for interpreting our results.

Using these data, we gain a better understanding of some of the implications of the complex family structures that result when parents have children with multiple partners, and when they are simultaneously custodial and noncustodial parents and/or step-parents. We discuss implications for theories of the family that emphasize social or biological ties, as well as implications for current policy initiatives related to marriage promotion and child support.