

*In this issue of Fast Focus, Maria Cancian, Daniel R. Meyer, and Steven T. Cook summarize findings published in the journal Demography, which document the incidence and evolution of family complexity from the perspective of children.<sup>1</sup> Following a cohort of firstborn children whose mothers were not married at the time of their birth, the authors consider family structure changes over the first 10 years of the child's life—considering both full and half-siblings who are coresidential or who live in another household. They find that 60 percent of firstborn children of unmarried mothers have at least one half-sibling by age 10. Complex family structures are more likely for children of parents who are younger or who have low earnings and for those in larger urban areas. Children who have half-siblings on their mother's side are also more likely to have half-siblings on their father's side, and vice versa, contributing to very complex family structures—and potential child support arrangements—for some children.*

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## Stepparents and half-siblings: Family complexity from a child's perspective

Maria Cancian, Daniel R. Meyer, and Steven T. Cook

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The coauthors of this brief are scholars at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and affiliates of the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP). Maria Cancian is associate dean of social sciences, professor of public affairs and social work, and former IRP director; Daniel R. Meyer is Mary C. Jacoby Distinguished Professor of Social Work; and Steven T. Cook is an IRP researcher.

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### Introduction

Increases in nonmarital fertility, as well as increases in divorce and remarriage, have contributed to higher proportions of mothers and fathers who have had children with more than one partner. Multiple parenting relationships result in growing family complexity with many children over the course of their childhood coming to share a household and parent with half-siblings and to share a nonresident parent with other half-siblings who live elsewhere. Multiple-partner fertility has also been of concern to policymakers, particularly those

dealing with child support. Determining how much formal child support nonresident parents should provide for their children when these children are spread across multiple families is a thorny but important policy problem.<sup>2</sup>

In this research brief, we document the incidence and evolution of family complexity from the perspective of nonmarital children. Following a cohort of firstborn children whose mothers were not married at the time of their birth, we document changes in family structure, considering both full and half-siblings who are coresidential or who live in another household. We rely on detailed longitudinal administrative data that capture almost 90 percent of all nonmarital births in the state of Wisconsin. These data allow us to consider the timing of subsequent births to the mother and father, together or with new partners, and to account for siblings and half-siblings, even if they are not coresidential.

### What we know about complex families

In 2009, 41 percent of U.S. children were born to unmarried mothers.<sup>3</sup> This percentage has risen steadily in the last two decades, from 23 percent in 1986 to 32 percent in 1996 and 41 percent in 2009.<sup>4</sup> Some of the increase is related to

increases in cohabitation.<sup>5</sup> Nonmarital fertility has also been linked to the declining economic prospects of men and other economic variables, to changes in norms, and to the extent to which children are seen as social capital.<sup>6</sup> While the increasing prevalence of nonmarital births and some of their covariates is clear, there is substantial debate regarding the consequences of nonmarital fertility for child well-being.<sup>7</sup>

An emerging body of research shows that multiple-partner fertility is fairly common. Karen Guzzo and Frank Furstenberg, Jr., using the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), found that 17 percent of all fathers between the ages of 15 and 44 have had children with more than one partner.<sup>8</sup> Estimates using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which is representative of a recent birth cohort in large cities, suggest that for most couples having a child outside of marriage, at least one of the parents already has, or will have, a child by another partner.<sup>9</sup> Other recent research drawing on the NSFG has documented the increasing prevalence of nonmarital multiple-partner fertility in more recent cohorts.<sup>10</sup> Even studies that considered married or formerly married partners have found that multiple-partner fertility is not rare.

Studies have found that the rates of multiple-partner fertility tend to be higher among the following groups:<sup>11</sup>

- economically disadvantaged parents;
- parents with less education;
- parents who had a first child at a younger age;
- African Americans and, less so, Hispanics;
- men with a history of incarceration;
- women (but not men) whose previous partner was of a different race or ethnicity;
- persons raised in a single-parent family; and
- unmarried parents.

Finally, multiple-partner fertility is lower among those having more than one child with an initial partner.<sup>12</sup>

Researchers have also considered the implications of multiple-partner fertility and resulting family complexity for many areas of child development and family life.<sup>13</sup> As a whole, the literature identifies the risks and complications associated with mothers and fathers having multiple partners. These risks include fewer investments in children, greater conflict, and lower probability of marriage or continued cohabitation. However, there is also some evidence that multiple partners may provide a type of insurance whereby one partner may compensate for another.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, while much of the literature on children in blended families suggests that they have worse outcomes than those in traditional two-parent families, recent research suggests that for many outcomes, some or all of the difference may be explained by selection—that is, by differences in the characteristics of parents involved in different family forms, rather than being the consequence of the family structure per se.<sup>15</sup>

## Data and sample

We use a unique set of data derived from State of Wisconsin administrative systems, primarily from the child support enforcement data system (named KIDS). KIDS contains a record for every child for whom a referral to the child support agency was required (welfare cases) as well as for any child whose parent initiated contact with the child support agency for help with paternity establishment, locating a nonresident parent, establishing or changing a child support order, or collecting a child support order. It also includes divorce cases in which child support orders are issued, whether the parents initiated contact with the agency or not. Nearly all nonmarital children are in KIDS; a comparison of nonmarital cases in KIDS with birth records found that 86 percent of all nonmarital children born in Wisconsin had records in KIDS.<sup>16</sup>

From KIDS, we extracted records for all children born in 1997 and identified whether they were nonmarital or marital. We then identified the parents of the nonmarital children and merged the records for all siblings and half-siblings of the initial 1997 birth cohort found in the KIDS system as of June 2008. There are 16,039 children of unmarried mothers born in 1997 in KIDS for whom both parents are known. Our focus is on 8,019 nonmarital children who were their mother's first child (81.5 percent of the nonmarital children who were their mother's first birth have an identified father). We do not restrict our sample to births that are both parents' first because these births represent a more select sample: every child's mother has had a first birth, but not every child's mother has had a first birth with a father who was also becoming a father for the first time.

## Results: Incidence and timing of half-siblings

Figure 1 shows the evolution of family complexity from the perspective of these firstborn children. At birth, 78 percent are only-children; the other 22 percent have half-siblings with whom they share a father (as previously noted, these firstborn-to-mother children by definition have no siblings or half-siblings with the same mother). Family complexity increases over the child's first 10 years, especially during the four years from age 2 through age 5, when the proportion who are only-children or who have only full siblings falls by at least 5 percentage points in each year.

By age 10, 60 percent of firstborn children of unmarried mothers have a half-sibling. Twenty-three percent have half-siblings only on their father's side, 18 percent have half-siblings only on their mother's side, and 19 percent have half-siblings from each of their parents—that is, they share their mother (and usually their household) with children who have different fathers, and they share their father with children who have different mothers. Figure 1 also highlights the importance of including data on both parents in order to understand children's exposure to family complexity. Relying on information about only the mother's fertility would result in substantially lower estimates of family complexity.

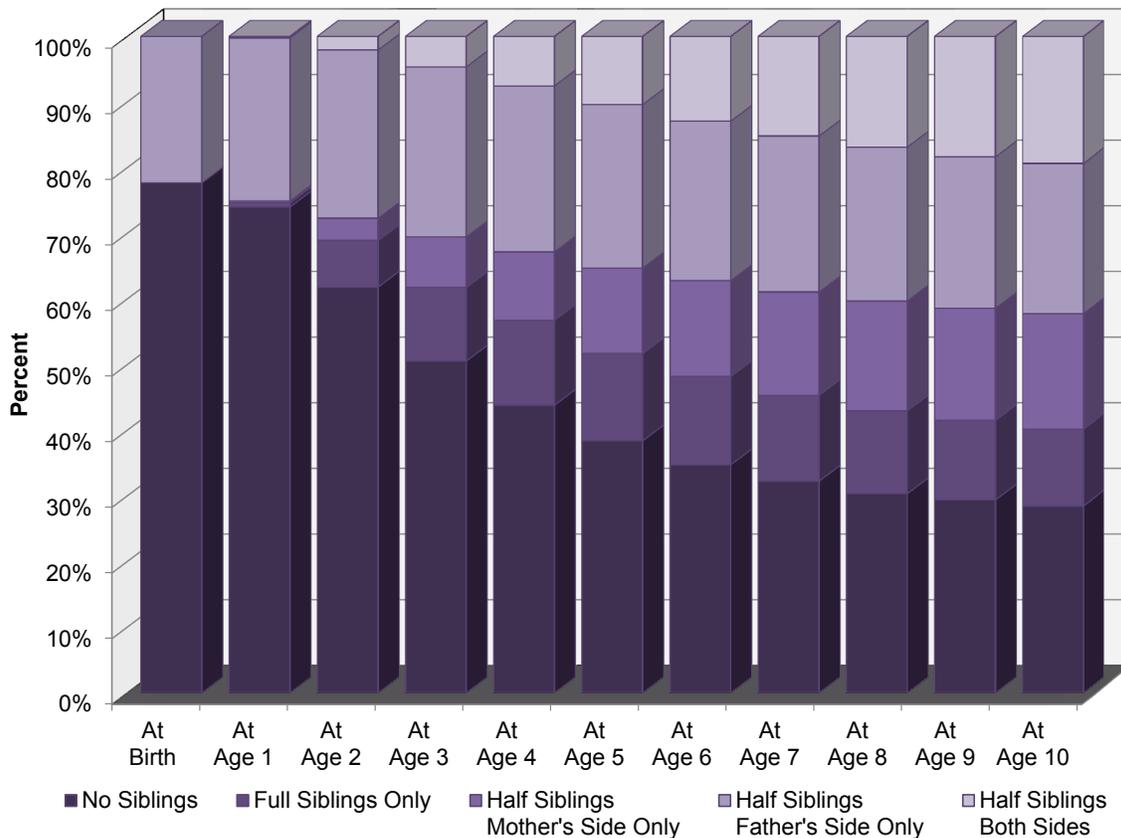


Figure 1. Family complexity from birth (in 1997) through age 10, for nonmarital firstborn-to-mother children.

Source: Wisconsin KIDS, 1997 birth cohort, unmarried mothers' first children ( $N = 8,019$ ).

While Figure 1 shows the proportion of children with half-siblings from their mother, father, or both, it does not distinguish the number of half-siblings. The distribution of half-siblings and parents' other partners is shown in Table 1. The first panel shows the number of half-siblings on the father's and mother's side. By construction, at first birth, there are no half-siblings on the mother's side. We find that 22 percent of children have at least one half-sibling on their father's side, and a total of about 10 percent have two or more half-siblings at birth. By the time the child is 10 years old, a majority of children still have only one (22 percent) or no (40 percent) half-siblings, almost evenly split between the father's side and mother's side. In contrast, 38 percent have two or more half-siblings. Higher numbers of half-siblings are not uncommon: almost 1 in 4 children have three or more half-siblings, and more than 1 in 10 have four or more half-siblings.

The second panel of Table 1 shows the distribution of other partners for the focal child's mother and father at birth and age 10. We find that, at birth, 16 percent of fathers have had children with one other mother, 4 percent with two other mothers, and 2 percent with three or more other mothers. Thus, about a quarter of the children with half-siblings from their father share their father with children of at least two other mothers at birth. After 10 years, 26 percent of fathers have children with one other partner, 10 percent have chil-

dren with two other partners, and 7 percent have children with three or more additional partners.

Although by construction mothers have no children with other partners at the focal child's birth, by the time the child reaches age 10, 28 percent of mothers have had children with one other partner, 8 percent with two other partners, and 1.5 percent with three or more other partners. Because most children born to unmarried parents live with their mothers, half-siblings from a mother are likely to have a greater impact on a child's living situation and daily family interactions. At the age of 10, many firstborn children of unmarried mothers could be connected to several adults through their parents' partnering: about 15 percent have half-siblings from three or more adults, in addition to their own parents.

Finally, it is noteworthy that those who have half-siblings by one parent are more likely to have them by the other. Examining the distributions at age 10, we see that among those who have no half-siblings on their mother's side, less than 10 percent have three or more half-siblings on the father's side (5.6 percent/63.1 percent). In contrast, in the bottom row, one-quarter of those who have three or more half-siblings on their mother's side also have three or more half-siblings on their father's side (1.3 percent/5.2 percent). Similarly, those who have one parent with three or more additional partners are more likely to have another parent with three or more additional partners.

**Table 1. Distribution of Half-Siblings and Parents' Other Partners for Focal Child, by Focal Child's Age and Number of Half-Siblings (percentages)**

	Number of Child's Half-Siblings									
	At Birth Father's Side					At Age 10 Father's Side				
	None	One	Two	Three or More	Total	None	One	Two	Three or More	Total
Mother's Side										
None	77.7%	12.5%	5.4%	4.5%	100.0%	40.2%	11.3%	6.0%	5.6%	63.1%
One						11.2	4.4	2.8	3.4	21.8
Two						4.3	2.6	1.3	1.8	10.0
Three or more						2.1	1.0	0.8	1.3	5.2
Total	77.7	12.5	5.4	4.5	100.0	57.8	19.4	10.8	12.0	100.0
	Number of Parents' Other Partners									
	At Birth, Father's Side					At Age 10, Father's Side				
	None	One	Two	Three or More	Total	None	One	Two	Three or More	Total
Mother's Side										
None	77.7%	16.1%	4.4%	1.9%	100.0%	40.2%	15.0%	5.0%	2.9%	63.1%
One						13.9	7.9	3.6	2.5	27.9
Two						3.2	2.3	1.1	1.0	7.6
Three or more						0.6	0.4	0.3	0.2	1.5
Total	77.7	16.1	4.4	1.9	100.0	57.8	25.7	9.9	6.6	100.0

Source: State of Wisconsin administrative data.

## Family complexity by demographic and socioeconomic characteristics

Children's likelihood of experiencing family complexity varies by the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of their parents. As shown in Table 2, focusing first on characteristics at the child's birth, the mother's first nonmarital birth generally occurs when she is young. More than half (53.3 percent) of all these unmarried mothers are teens at first birth, with most of the others between the ages of 20 and 25. Fathers are only slightly older: 30 percent are teens, and 43 percent are 20 to 25 years old.

We also examine the association between parents' ages and new half-siblings, finding that the younger the mother at first birth, the more likely the focal child is to have a half-sibling. For example, 63 percent of focal children born to teen mothers had a new half-sibling by the age of 10, compared with only 40 percent of those born to mothers aged 20 to 25 and 20 percent of those born to mothers aged 26 to 30. The patterns are similar between fathers and mothers: focal children with younger fathers are more likely to have new half-siblings than are focal children with older fathers.

Sixty percent of mothers are identified as white; 21 percent as black; and 6 percent as Hispanic. We are missing information on race and ethnicity for 11 percent of the mothers. Among those with information on race/ethnicity, fathers are less likely than mothers to be white and more likely to be black or Hispanic. However, information on father's race is missing in 19 percent of the cases. Patterns of family complexity vary substantially with the race and ethnicity of the child's parents. Children with two white or two Hispanic parents are less likely to have half-siblings over time—especially from their fathers. At age 10, almost half of these children have no new half-siblings. Most likely to have half-

siblings are children born to two black parents or to a white mother and a black father.

Looking at differences between urban and rural areas, based on the county in the KIDS case record, we categorize cases into Milwaukee County (the only large urban area in the state); "other urban," which includes 24 counties that are part of Metropolitan Statistical Areas; "rural" (all other counties); and "multiple" (children whose cases appear in more than one county in our time frame). Nearly half the children lived in urban counties outside Milwaukee County, with more than one-fourth of children in Milwaukee County (16.7 percent of Wisconsin's overall population lived in Milwaukee County in 2007). Milwaukee County cases are about twice as likely to have new half-siblings on both sides (22 percent, compared with 11 percent to 14 percent for the other areas) and correspondingly less likely to have no half-siblings at age 10 (29 percent, compared with 42 percent to 46 percent for the other areas).

We present information on parents' employment and earnings and mothers' program participation in Table 3. Nearly two-thirds of the mothers were not fully employed in the year prior to pregnancy, and those who did work generally had low earnings—only 12 percent earned more than \$10,000 (in 2007 dollars). Earnings rose over time, so that when the first child was age 10, 28 percent of mothers had earnings of \$10,001 to \$25,000 and 16 percent had earnings over \$25,000 (not shown in table). Fathers' employment and earnings are also quite low, though again there is some earnings growth over time. Only about a third of fathers were working all four quarters of the year prior to the pregnancy, and only 19 percent earned more than \$10,000. By the time the focal child was age 10, 16 percent of fathers had earnings of \$10,001 to \$25,000 and 24 percent had earnings over \$25,000. Children of higher-earning mothers are less likely to have new half-siblings from either the mother or the father.

**Table 2. Family Complexity by Demographic Characteristics, Focal Child's Perspective (percentages)**

Characteristic	At Age 10					
	At Birth, Total	No New Half- Siblings		New Half-Siblings		
		No Half-Siblings at Birth	Half-Siblings at Birth	On Mother's Side but Not Father's	On Father's Side but Not Mother's	On Both Father's and Mother's Side
<b>Mother's Age at Birth</b>						
Under 20	53.3%	32.3%	4.8%	27.2%	13.9%	21.8%
20–25	35.7	47.0	13.1	19.1	13.0	7.8
26–30	6.7	56.7	23.4	8.8	7.7	3.4
31–35	2.9	52.2	27.2	10.3	9.1	1.3
36+	1.5	63.3	29.1	3.4	2.6	1.7
<b>Father's Age at Birth</b>						
Under 20	29.8	33.6	2.2	24.9	15.4	23.9
20–25	43.1	43.5	8.1	21.6	13.5	13.4
26–30	15.3	41.7	17.4	21.8	11.8	7.4
31–35	6.8	43.5	24.6	19.5	6.2	6.2
36+	5.1	41.7	30.5	17.6	5.1	5.1
<b>Father's Age Relative to Mother's</b>						
10 or more years younger	0.5	59.0	20.5	5.1	2.6	12.8
5–9 years younger	1.8	55.5	10.3	11.6	18.5	4.1
2–4 years younger	6.8	49.3	9.2	14.6	14.6	12.4
Same age (< ±1)	34.6	43.8	5.5	20.8	14.2	15.7
2–4 years older	30.4	37.6	8.8	22.5	14.1	17.0
5–9 years older	17.6	36.4	16.2	25.9	9.4	12.2
10 or more years older	8.3	31.0	20.2	29.2	8.1	11.4
<b>Mother's Race</b>						
White	59.8	44.4	10.8	21.4	12.1	11.4
Black	20.5	19.0	9.1	24.9	18.0	29.1
Hispanic	5.6	43.3	6.3	26.5	9.6	14.4
Other	2.9	38.7	8.9	23.8	8.9	19.6
Unknown/missing	11.3	55.3	9.8	19.6	10.4	5.0
<b>Father's Race</b>						
White	45.7	47.2	11.2	20.0	11.5	10.2
Black	24.3	20.5	11.6	22.7	19.2	26.0
Hispanic	7.5	38.8	7.4	23.9	13.7	16.2
Other	3.4	33.8	10.4	22.7	14.9	18.2
Unknown/missing	19.2	50.0	6.2	26.5	7.5	9.8
<b>Parents' Race, Combined</b>						
Both white	41.1	47.3	10.8	20.4	11.4	10.2
Both black	16.9	18.9	9.6	23.6	19.0	29.0
Both Hispanic	3.5	43.0	6.9	26.7	10.1	13.4
Mother white/father black	5.2	23.8	15.5	20.7	20.2	19.8
Mother white/father Hispanic	3.3	36.0	8.7	21.6	15.5	18.2
All other combinations	5.9	32.8	9.0	25.0	13.2	20.0
Either unknown	24.2	48.5	8.6	23.6	9.6	9.7
<b>County Type</b>						
Milwaukee County	28.8	28.4	10.5	24.4	15.0	21.9
Other urban county	45.5	44.8	9.8	21.1	12.4	12.0
Rural county	21.8	45.9	10.1	21.4	11.6	11.0
Multiple counties	4.0	42.3	8.8	24.5	10.0	14.4
Either unknown	24.2	48.5	8.6	23.6	9.6	9.7

Source: Wisconsin KIDS, 1997 birth cohort, unmarried mothers' first children (N = 8,019).

In the year prior to first birth, mothers generally did not participate in public programs, and they did not receive financial support from the child's father. But five years after the child's birth, almost a quarter received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, almost half had children

enrolled in public health insurance, and more than 40 percent had child support paid by the father. Children whose mothers either participated in a public program or received child support from that father in the year before the children were 5 years old were more likely to have new half-siblings from

**Table 3. Family Complexity by Socioeconomic Characteristics, Focal Child's Perspective (percentages)**

Characteristic	Full Sample	At Age 10				
		No New Half-Siblings		New Half-Siblings		
		No Half-Siblings at Birth	Half-Siblings at Birth	On Mother's Side but Not Father's	On Father's Side but Not Mother's	On Both Father's and Mother's Side
<b>Employment and Earnings in Year Prior to Pregnancy</b>						
Mother Fully Employed						
No	63.1%	37.1%	6.9%	26.1%	12.4%	17.6%
Yes	36.9	45.5	15.3	15.7	13.8	9.8
Mother's earnings						
None reported	36.2	37.5	6.1	26.8	11.4	18.3
\$1–10,000	51.6	40.0	9.6	21.6	14.1	14.7
\$10,001–25,000	11.1	49.1	22.1	12.2	12.3	4.3
\$25,001+	1.1	47.7	34.9	8.1	7.0	2.3
Father fully employed						
No	66.4	37.9	7.8	23.7	12.9	17.6
Yes	33.5	44.6	14.4	19.3	12.8	9.0
Father's earnings						
None reported	37.8	40.6	6.0	25.9	11.1	16.5
\$1–\$10,000	42.9	36.3	9.5	21.2	16.0	17.1
\$10,001–\$25,000	15.8	47.0	17.5	18.4	10.5	6.6
\$25,001+	3.4	53.3	27.0	13.5	5.1	1.1
<b>Program Participation and Child Support in 10 Months Before Child Is Age 5</b>						
Mother on SNAP (formerly food stamps)						
No	76.9	45.8	10.5	20.0	12.9	10.9
Yes	23.2	21.7	8.5	29.9	12.8	27.2
Mother on public health insurance						
No	51.7	51.6	10.9	17.4	12.7	7.4
Yes	48.3	27.9	9.0	27.5	13.1	22.5
Father's child support payments to this mother (year before age 5)						
None	57.4	45.1	10.0	21.5	10.6	12.8
\$1–\$999	12.0	21.1	10.9	23.3	19.8	24.9
\$1,000+	30.6	38.4	9.7	23.2	14.5	14.2

**Notes:** All dollar amounts adjusted to 2007 dollars using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U). The employment and earnings panels do not include those without known Social Security numbers (three mothers and eight fathers).

**Source:** Wisconsin KIDS, 1997 birth cohort, unmarried mothers' first children ( $N = 8,019$ ).

the mother and from the father by the time they were 10 years old.

In addition to these descriptive results, we estimate separate multivariate hazard models predicting the likelihood of each parent having children with another partner. The results confirm that most of the relationships between demographic/socioeconomic characteristics and family complexity remain significant in a multivariate framework. We find that mother's public assistance program participation and receipt of child support are both still associated with higher likelihood of mother's-side half-siblings even after controlling for income. We also find that when one parent has a child with another partner the probability of the other parent also then having a child with a different partner increases.

## Discussion and policy implications

Following a birth cohort of firstborn children of unmarried mothers, we document the evolution of family complexity from the perspective of the child, accounting for new partnerships that result in half-siblings on the mother's side or the father's side. Our results show very high levels of half-siblings that result from multiple-partner fertility. The proportion with half-siblings increases steadily over a child's first 10 years, but especially when the child is aged 2 to 5. By the time firstborn-to-mother nonmarital children are 10 years old, 60 percent have at least one half-sibling. Moreover, some children's lives are quite complicated: more than 15 percent are potentially connected to at least five adults who are either their parents or the parents of half-siblings.

The extent to which multiple-partner fertility is a problem for the child support system depends partly on its frequency.<sup>17</sup> These results demonstrate that half-siblings are quite common and illustrate the dynamic nature of children's siblingships and, therefore, of resident and nonresident parents' obligations and sources of support. The timing of these changes raises serious issues for child support policy.

There is no consensus regarding the optimal approach to setting child support orders for complex families.<sup>18</sup> Current policy in most states (and some developed countries) treats each couple individually, taking into account the obligor's previous obligations in setting new orders, but leaving the previous order unchanged. Some policy alternatives call for a child support order to be adjusted downward whenever a noncustodial parent has a new obligation, in order to treat all children equally and keep the total support owed manageable. Other approaches call for reductions in orders whenever a custodial parent has a new child, so that mothers receive the same support for a given number of children, whether they all have the same father or have different fathers. If the child support order system included provisions like these that allow for an adjustment every time one of the parents had another child, adjustments for this reason would be fairly common.

Our results highlight the frequency and evolution of family complexity. The implications for policy and research are potentially profound. Policies that were designed for simple families, with parents who had children only with one another, often are not well adapted to complex families. This raises issues not only for child support policy and marriage promotion policy but also for tax and income support policies for which family structure is important in determining eligibility.

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<sup>17</sup>M. Cancian, D. R. Meyer, and S. T. Cook, "The Evolution of Family Complexity from the Perspective of Nonmarital Children," *Demography* 48 (2011): 957–982. Adapted with permission. doi:10.1007/s13524-011-0041-4

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