

**IRP Conference on ‘Family Complexity, Poverty and Public Policy’
University of Wisconsin-Madison, Memorial Union, Main Lounge (800 Langdon Street)
July 11 & 12, 2013**

With funding from the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison convened a research and policy conference on July 11 and 12, 2013, at UW–Madison in cooperation with the National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University. Marcy Carlson (Professor of Sociology) and Dan Meyer (Professor of Social Work) from UW–Madison co-led this effort. The multidisciplinary conference considered the nature and dynamics of family complexity, the extent to which family complexity is a particular challenge for low-income families and individuals, and the extent to which public policy is (or should be) responsive to these contemporary family circumstances. Twelve new research papers from some of the top scholars in the field were commissioned (see paper titles and authors listed below), and *The ANNALS* of the American Academy of Political and Social Science has agreed to publish a guest-edited volume with these papers in July 2014; we also plan publications targeted at policymakers and practitioners.

This conference is motivated by the dramatic changes in family life that have occurred in the United States over the past 50 years. One of the most important changes has been an increase in family complexity, owing to high rates of cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, divorce, and repartnering in the context of ongoing fertility. Particularly notable is an increase in multiple-partner fertility, or the proportion of adults who have biological children by more than one partner (with a corresponding increase in the number of children that have at least one half-sibling). These changes and trends in family life are important for understanding both the causes and consequences of poverty. As the reach and effects of many antipoverty policies vary with family structure, changes in family life pose challenges to the effective design of a host of social programs and policies.

It is often difficult to define family complexity in a way that scholars and policymakers will find useful. We observe that simple nuclear families are easier to describe: a woman and man marry, begin living together at the time they marry, have children together following marriage, and do not dissolve the marriage or have children with others. This means that marriage is lifelong, that co-residence and marriage always go together, and that fertility occurs only within marriage. In contrast, complexity occurs when marriage and legal ties, living arrangements, fertility and parenting are not coterminous, i.e., when roles and relationships diverge from the simple scheme. Members of a family (however defined by a given individual) may have differences among them in biological ties, legal relationships, and where they live and how long they live there. Sometimes complexity results from differential attachment across a category that is and only can be discrete (i.e., biological status), and other times it emerges due to the variability in categories that were previously thought to be—but are not necessarily—discrete (i.e., parental cohabitation that may occur a few nights/week, or children may regularly live in more than one home due to shared custody arrangements). This does not even begin to include individuals who are considered to be family members by those with whom they do not share a relationship resulting from biology, legality and/or co-residence.

For purposes of this conference, we limited our focus to families with minor children (under age 18); hence, we did not focus on other important topics, such as serial cohabitation among adults without children, or complexity that may arise when elders move in with their adult children (or vice versa), or adults who “live apart together.” Examples of complex families we consider thus include: (a) stepfamilies, where one parent is biologically related to their child(ren) and the other adult has a step or social relationship to the child(ren) of

the first parent; (b) single-parent families where the mother has children with two or more partners (who may or may not have lived with her); and (c) children with the same biological parents who spend half-time living with their mother and half-time with their father.

Conference Day 1, entitled “Family Complexity, Poverty and Inequality,” included papers that provide up-to-date summaries and new analyses about what is known, incorporating information on the ways complexity is linked to poverty and inequality. Papers were presented by experts in demography, economics, sociology, psychology, family studies, and social work. The intended audience was researchers from multiple disciplines as well as individuals involved in planning or carrying out programs designed to prevent/ameliorate poverty or inequality. The first set of papers provides broad overviews about family complexity—describing the nature of family patterns and roles that have increased complexity over the past half-century, examining the link between poverty/inequality and family change, and exploring the prevalence of children’s experiences with various aspects of family complexity. The second set of papers considers domains of complexity that are central to contemporary family life, including fertility (especially with multiple partners); union formation/dissolution (both marriage and cohabitation) and parental roles; grandparents’ roles in childrearing; and incarceration as linked to family roles and relationships. The third set of papers focuses on how complexity plays out within families and affects family functioning/processes from the perspective of children, fathers and mothers. The day concluded with a final session reflecting on the material presented, with a focus on whether and how family complexity contributes to growing inequality and poverty and/or creates particular challenges for public policy.

Conference Day 2, entitled “Family Complexity and Public Policy,” began where Day 1 left off and focused on the relationship between family complexity and social policies affecting families with children. The audience was intended to include those attending Conference Day 1 and additional policymakers, program administrators, and front-line staff. To keep the policy discussion concrete and focused, we zeroed in on four primary types of complexity: (a) children who live with each parent about half of the time (shared custody); (b) children who live with half-siblings or have half-siblings who do not live with them (or, focusing on the parents, adults who have had multiple-partner fertility); (c) children who live with one parent and that parent’s partner (who may or may not be the child’s parent) who lives in the home several nights/week (part-time cohabitation); and (d) children who live with their grandparents (but not their parents). We also consider other types of complexities that create issues for social policies and programs as they come up in the papers and discussion and as summarized by the papers on the previous day.

There were two commissioned policy-related papers—one that summarizes the extent to which policies and programs are shown to *affect* family complexity (and its component parts, such as family structure and instability, fertility, etc.), and the second that evaluates the extent to which policies currently *take account of* family complexity in their eligibility rules, benefit determination, and implementation. While the papers provide important new information about public policies as linked to changing family life, the heart of conference Day 2 was the interactions among program administrators, policymakers, and researchers. Primary goals for this day were to identify areas in which complexity is creating difficulties or opportunities for policies and programs, to brainstorm about and discuss potential policy changes that might be considered, and to identify areas in which additional research would be useful. The day concluded with a facilitated discussion of these issues.

Thursday, July 11 – Family Complexity, Poverty and Inequality

(Breakfast on your own)

8:30a.m. Registration and Coffee

9:00-9:15 Welcome, Introductions and Goals

Marcy Carlson, Dan Meyer and Tim Smeeding, University of Wisconsin-Madison

9:15-10:30 Session 1: Patterns of Family Change, Poverty and Inequality: The Big Picture

“Fifty Years of Family Change: From Consensus to Complexity”

Frank F. Furstenberg, University of Pennsylvania

“The Impact of Changes in Family Composition on Income, Poverty, and Inequality”

Maria Cancian, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Ron Haskins, Brookings Institution

“Family Complexity among Children in the U.S.”

Wendy D. Manning, Susan L. Brown, and J. Bart Stykes, Bowling Green State University

10:30-10:45 Break

10:45-12:30 Session 2: Domains of Family Complexity

“Complexity and Fertility”

Karen Benjamin Guzzo, Bowling Green State University

“Adults’ Roles as Partners and Parents in a Context of Family Complexity”

Lawrence M. Berger, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Sharon Bzostek, Rutgers University

“Grandparental Co-Residence and Family Well-Being: Implications for Research and Policy”

Rachel Dunifon, Kathleen Ziol-Guest, and Kimberly Kopko, Cornell University

“Mass Incarceration, Family Complexity, and the Reproduction of Childhood Disadvantage”

Bryan L. Sykes, DePaul University, and Becky Pettit, University of Washington

12:30-1:30 Lunch – Tripp Commons, 2nd floor

1:30-3:00 Session 3: How Families Operate Amidst Complexity

“Time Investments in Children across Family Structures”

Ariel Kalil, University of Chicago, Rebecca Ryan, Georgetown University, and Elise Chor, University of Chicago

“The Family-Go-Round: Family Complexity and Father Involvement from a Father’s Perspective”

Laura Tach, Cornell University, Kathryn Edin, Hope Harvey and Brielle Bryan, Harvard University

“Authoring Mothering in Low-Income Multiple Partner Fertility Relationships: Paradoxes in Romance, Parenting, and Intimate Partner Hierarchies”

Linda Burton, Duke University

Research | Training | Policy | Practice

3:00-3:15 *Break*

3:15-4:30 **Session 4: Family Complexity, Inequality and Poverty: Looking Forward**
(Rapporteur comments and discussion)

Rapporteurs

Andrew Cherlin, Johns Hopkins University

Judith Seltzer, University of California-Los Angeles

4:30pm Adjourn

(Informal happy hour on the Memorial Union Terrace)

7:00pm Dinner – *Fluno Center, Skyview Room (8th floor)*
601 University Avenue

Keynote Speaker

Elizabeth Thomson, Stockholm University and University of Wisconsin-Madison

“Family Complexity in Europe”

Friday, July 12 – Family Complexity and Public Policy

(Breakfast on your own)

8:30 a.m. **Registration and Coffee**

8:45-9:30 **Session 1: Key Aspects of Family Complexity for Public Policy**
Dan Meyer and Marcy Carlson, University of Wisconsin-Madison

9:30-10:45 **Session 2: What Do We Know about How Public Policies Consider and Affect Family Complexity?**

“How Do Policies/Programs Take Family Complexity Into Account?”
Jennifer L. Noyes, University of Wisconsin-Madison

“U.S. Social Policy and Family Complexity”
Leonard M. Lopoo and Kerri M. Raissian, Syracuse University

Discussant: *Isabel Sawhill, Brookings Institution*

10:45-11:00 *Break*

11:00-2:30 p.m. **Session 3: What Particular Issues Does Family Complexity Create in Different Program Areas, and How Could Policy Be More Responsive? (Working lunch)**
(30 minutes per topic)

A) **Child support enforcement** – *Maria Cancian, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Linda Mellgren, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*

B) **EITC** – *Karl Scholz, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and William Padley, Madison College*

- C) **SNAP** – *Judi Bartfeld, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Shawn Smith, Wisconsin Department of Health Services*

12:30-12:45 **Break to get box lunches**

- D) **TANF/employment** – *Kristin Seefeldt, University of Michigan, and Julie Kerksick, Colorado Department of Human Services*
E) **Health insurance** – *Bobbi Wolfe, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Jon Peacock, Wisconsin Council on Children and Families*

Rapporteurs

Eloise Anderson, Director, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families
Mark Greenberg, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

2:30 **Adjourn**