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Family Complexity, Family Wellbeing, and Public Policy

Lawrence M. Berger
University of Wisconsin–Madison
Institute for Research on Poverty and
School of Social Work

Evidence-Based Health Policy Project
The Other Half of Health: An Introduction to Social Determinants
Capitol Briefing
November 14, 2017

Research / Training / Policy / Practice

Families Are Increasingly Complex and Fluid

- Both the family forms individuals experience and prevailing norms re: parental roles have changed over time
- Most U.S. children will not spend their whole childhood living with both biological parents and many will transition into and out of multiple family configurations
- Most children born to unmarried parents will live in complex families and experience family fluidity and parental multi-partnered fertility
- Parental repartnering is increasingly common: ~1/3 of children will live with a parent to whom they are not biologically related
- Increased diversity and fluidity in family forms means many children are exposed to multiple types of parental figures and that children and adults will take on multiple family roles, within and across family units/households, simultaneously and over time

Family Complexity and Fluidity Have Important Implications

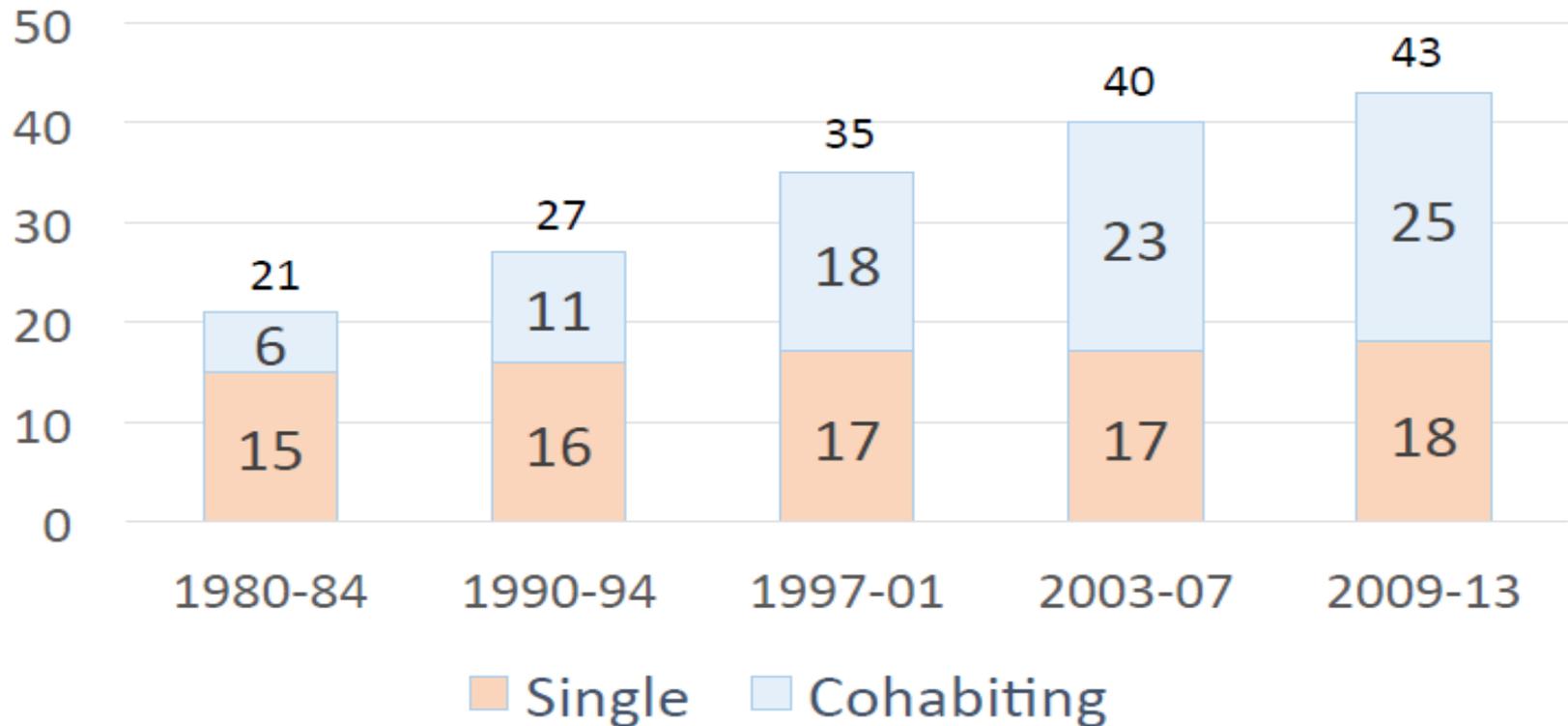
- Disadvantaged groups are especially likely to experience nonmarital births, father absence, and subsequent family complexity/fluidity
- Differential selection into family experiences has implications for intergenerational transfer of human capital
- Formal and informal support by non-custodial parents (generally fathers) is related to whether parents have other partners and children
- Family complexity and fluidity are associated with adverse outcomes for children (additional intergenerational implications)
 - greater parental stress, lower parental investments, greater poverty and income inequality, and poorer child outcomes in a wide range of domains
- Policies in a host of domains, including food assistance, tax credits, child support, health care coverage, and income support/welfare, have not been designed to account for family complexity

Today

- I. How complex and fluid are today's families?
- II. What do family complexity and fluidity mean for family functioning and child and family wellbeing?
- III. Considerations and implications for public policy

I. How complex and fluid are today's families?

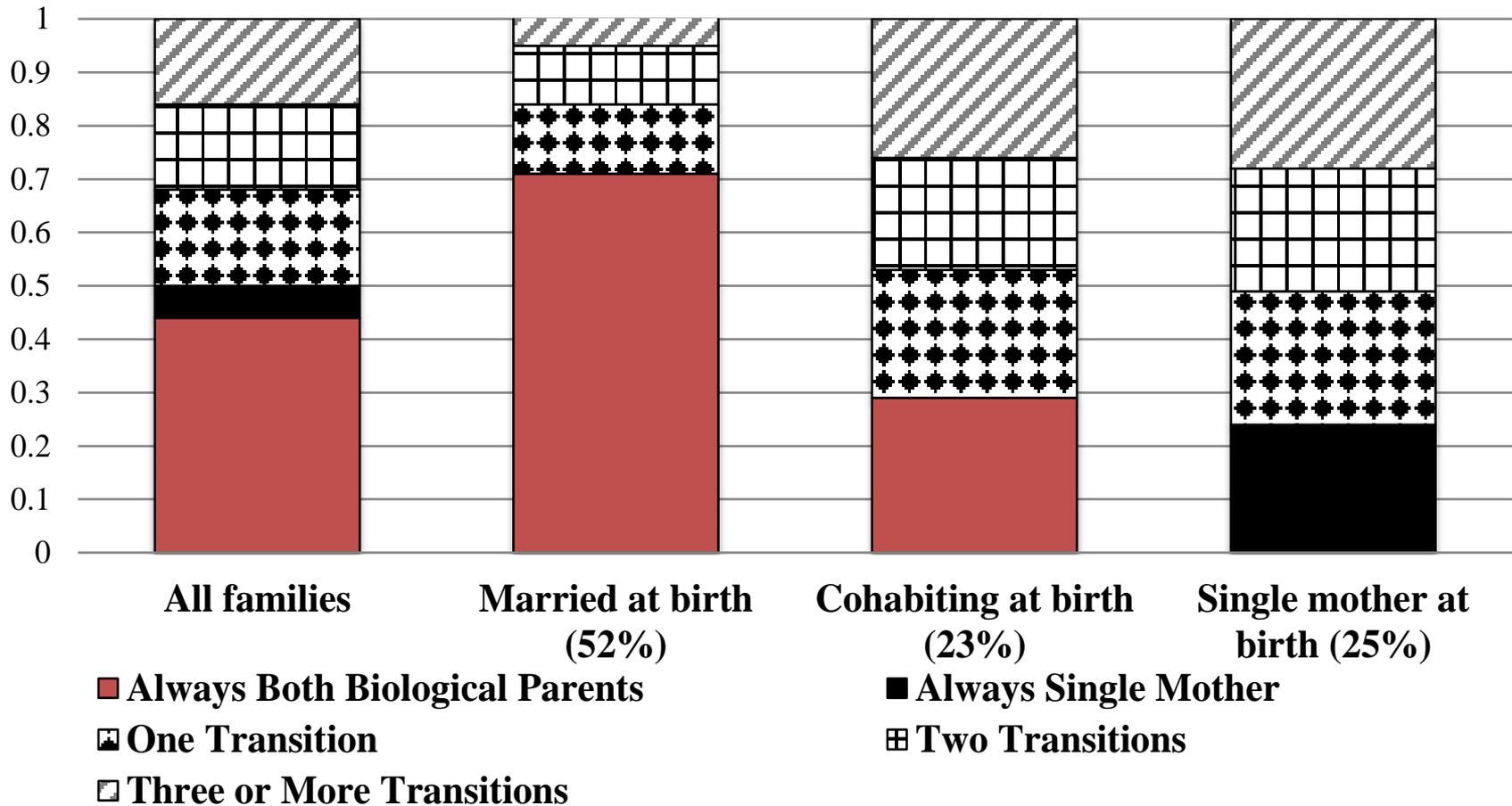
The Total: Percentage Of Births To All *Unmarried Mothers.*



Source: Manning, Brown, and Stykes. 2015. FP-15—03. National Center for Family and Marriage Research.

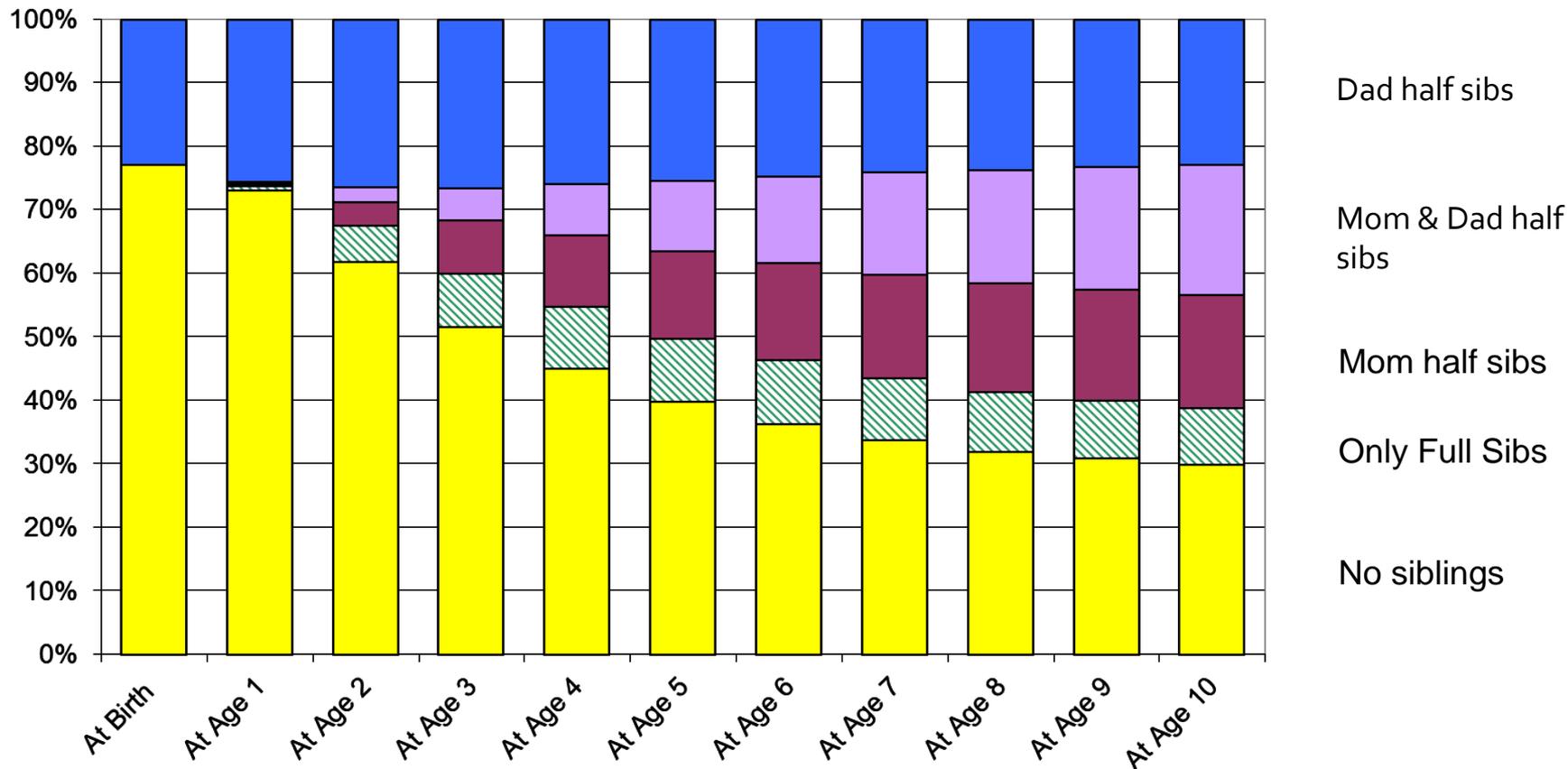
Family Structure Transitions Are Common

(Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, birth to age 9)



Source: Bzostek, S. H., & Berger, L. M (2016). Family structure experiences and child socioemotional development during the first nine years of life: Examining heterogeneity by family structure at birth. Manuscript, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Most children born to unmarried parents will be part of complex families



Source: Cancian, M., Meyer, D. R., & Cook, S. T. (2011). The evolution of family complexity from the perspective of nonmarital children. *Demography*, 48(3), 957-982.

The Probability of Simultaneously Occupying More than One Parental Role Has Roughly Doubled Over The Last 20 Years (NLSY79&97; Men)

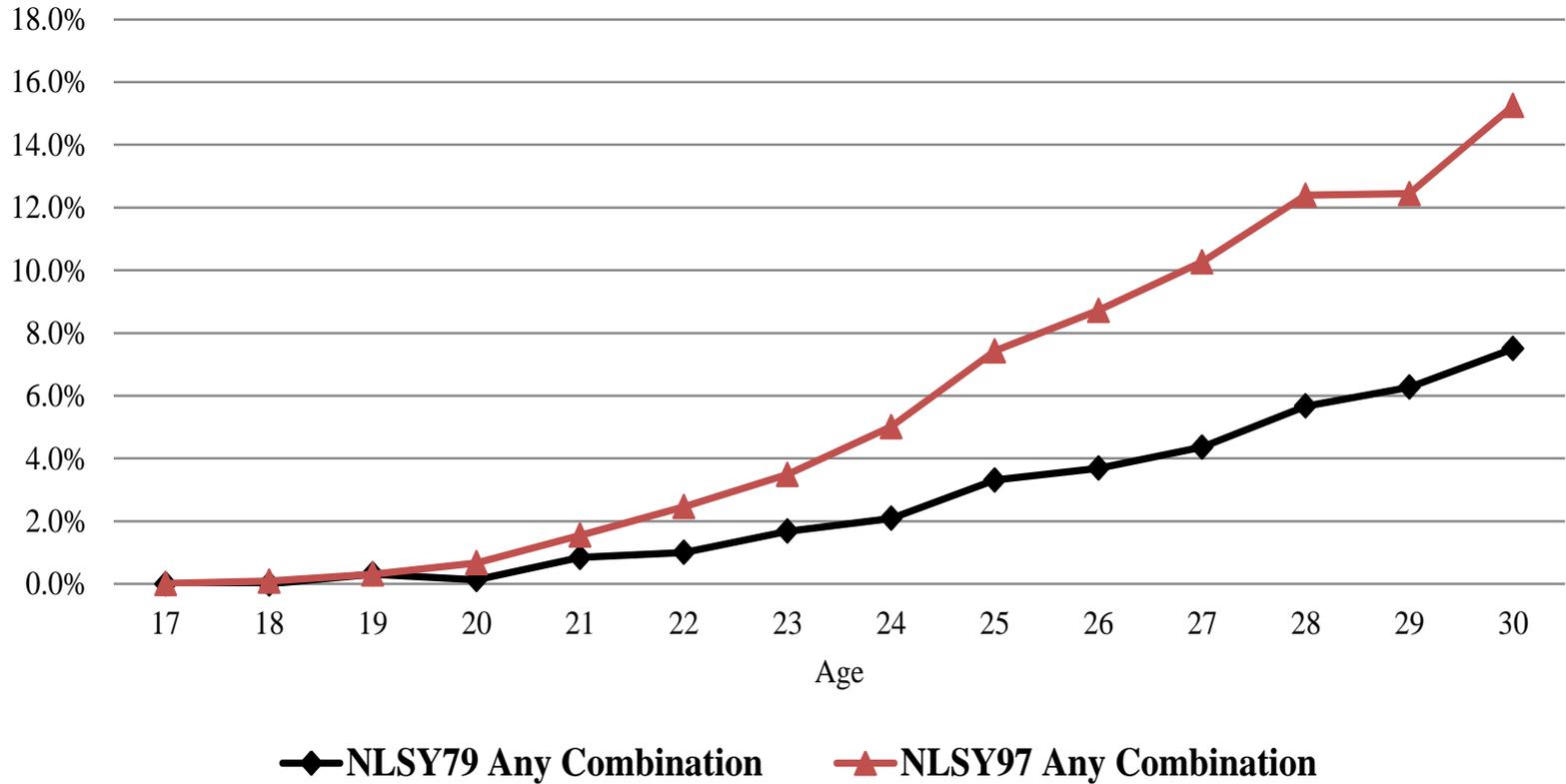
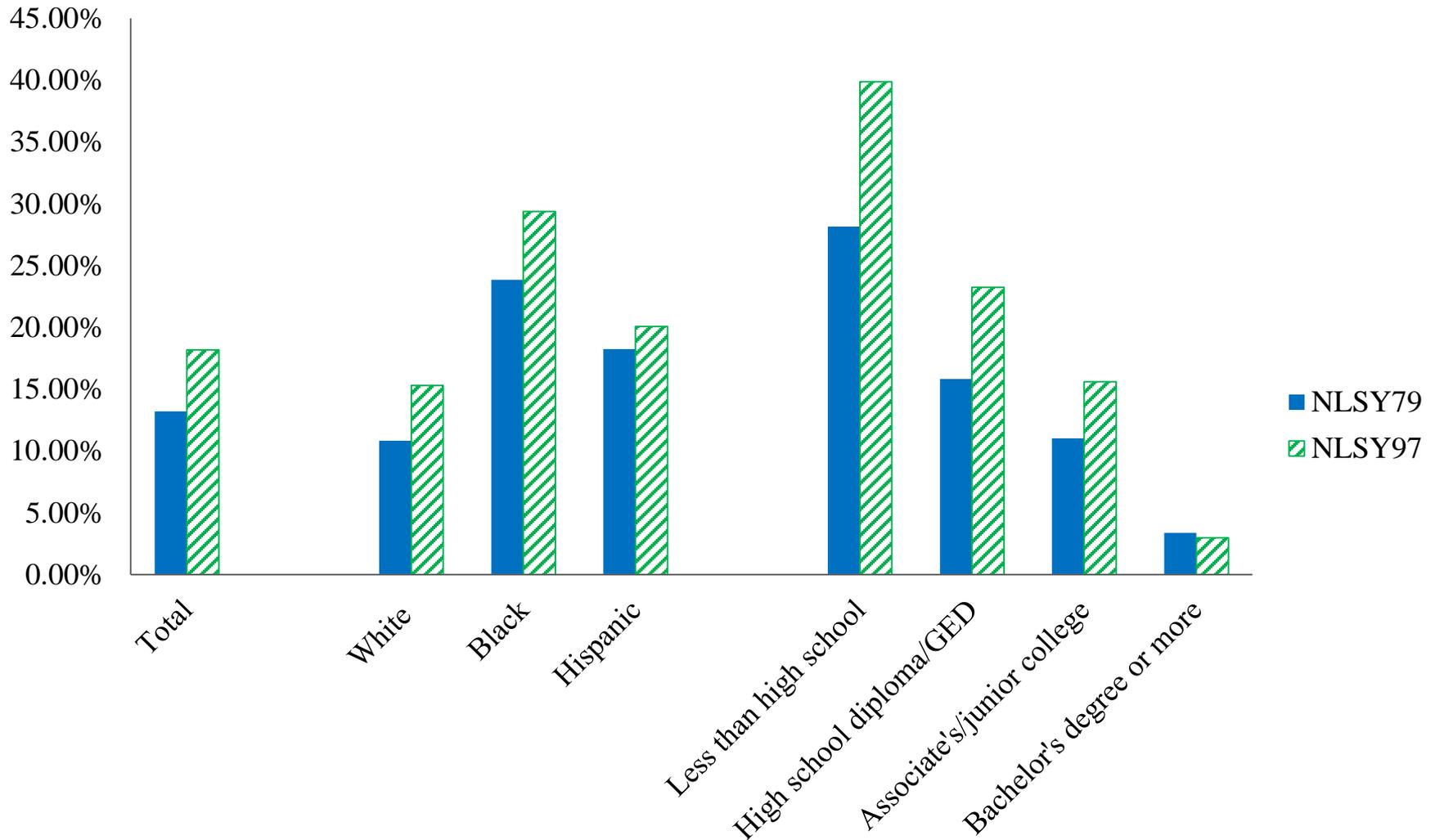


Figure 4. Cumulative Proportion Ever Simultaneously or Sequentially Experiencing More Than One Parental Role



Source: Berger, L. M., & Bzostek, S. H. (2014). Young adults' roles as partners and parents in the context of family complexity. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 654(1), 87-109.

II. What do family complexity and fluidity mean for child and family wellbeing?

Differences in parental investments and family functioning are associated with poorer child outcomes in the context of family complexity and fluidity

Even after accounting for differences in resources at birth, father absence and family complexity and fluidity are associated with poorer wellbeing for families and children:

- Greater stress and conflict
- Lesser parental caregiving (in some cases) and economic investments
- Poorer cognitive test scores
- Poorer social-emotional functioning
- Greater mental health problems
- Greater physical health problems
- Greater child protective services involvement
- Lower educational attainment
- Poorer labor market outcomes
- Greater likelihood of unintended pregnancy and nonmarital births

III. Considerations and Implications for Public Policy

Policies Must Now Balance Many Factors

- Multiple actors, roles, and relationships within and across family 'units' now matter
 - Biological, marital, and co-residential ties (which to privilege?)
 - Needs, capabilities, and well-being of mothers and fathers as well as children, particularly in a context of multiple-partner fertility (MPF)
 - Fluidity in these factors over time
- Economic and 'behavioral' goals
 - Public and private income support/transfers: adequacy, affordability, equity
 - Healthy parenting practices
 - Father involvement
 - Fertility and family formation decisions (?)

Preventing Family Complexity

- Returns to delaying child birth are substantial
- The vast majority of nonmarital births—73% of those to women under 30—are unintended; the majority of these parents will break up
- Reducing unplanned pregnancy has the potential to: reduce poverty; reduce abortion; increase time between births; increase prenatal care; lower postpartum depression; reduce parental breakup; encourage great maternal education; reduce government expenditures (Haskins, 2016)
- To date, three approaches to preventing family complexity have been tested:
 1. Abstinence Education – evidence is universally disappointing
 2. Marriage Promotion – evidence has been discouraging
 3. Making long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs) widely easily accessible to women *seeking family planning services* – evidence is quite promising and suggests that this could be a game changer (but we need additional rigorous studies)

Some Guiding Principles for Serving Complex Families

- Policy/programs should address family complexity and promote healthy relationships/involvement among all actors
 - Unrealistic to focus on current or former couple and joint child(ren)
 - Most children born to unmarried parents will live in complex families (MPF) and experience family fluidity (family structure transitions)
 - Multiple parental roles at a given time and over time
 - Approach noncustodial parents as parents rather than as non-parents
- For noncustodial parents, policy should:
 - Recognize that employment, child support, and noncustodial parent involvement are interrelated; assist with education/training/job placement
 - Collect support from noncustodial parents (fathers) who can afford to pay and improve the labor market prospects of low-income men so that more men are able to pay
 - Promote access to children (in most cases) but consider particular circumstances under which involvement should (should not?) be encouraged

Supporting Noncustodial Parents (Fathers) to Support Children

- Provide parallel package of supports, benefits, and tax credits to that available to custodial parents
- Provide partial credit for nonresident children in eligibility and benefit calculations
 - Work supports and subsidies: work-readiness/training, mentoring, and apprenticeship programs; job placement programs; subsidized jobs
 - Tax credits, deductions, and incentives (possibly including child support deductions)
- Withhold child support from earnings, benefits, and tax credits, but:
 - Set realistic child support orders
 - Provide arrears reduction credits for compliance
- Coordinate efforts with criminal justice system and reforms therein (reduced incarceration; re-entry)

Contact Information

Lonnie Berger

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Institute for Research on Poverty and

School of Social Work

Imberger@wisc.edu

(608)262-6379

THANK YOU!