Have American Families Become Less Stable? Trends in Household Changes from 1996-2010

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Abstract: An established literature seeks to identify the effects of family complexity and instability on child and adolescent outcomes. The literature considering trends in family instability over time, however, is much more limited. This paper considers trends in children's exposure to changes in household composition from 1996 through 2010 using the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). First, do the traditional measures of changes in parents' romantic partners adequately capture children's exposure to changes in household environments? Second, have certain types of household changes become more or less common? I find that the cumulative proportion of children exposed to gaining or losing a household member is much higher than the cumulative proportion of children whose father or mother leaves the household. In addition, the proportion of young children who experience a parent leaving the household is higher in the late 2000s and 2010s than in the 1990s and early 2000s.

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There is an established literature that seeks to identify the effects of family complexity and instability on child and adolescent outcomes. The literature considering trends in family instability over time, however, is much more limited. This paper considers trends in children's exposure to changes in household composition from 1996 to 2010 using the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), focusing on two primary research questions. First, do the traditional measures of changes in parents' romantic partners adequately capture children's exposure to changes in household environments? Second, have certain types of household changes become more or less common in recent years?

Background

As complex family structures have become more prevalent in the United States, scholars have investigated the implications of non-nuclear family structures for the children growing up in them. This research tends to find that children living with two married biological parents fare better than children growing up with any other household configuration, such as single mother, married stepfamily, or cohabitating union households. Though much of this research treats family structure as a static characteristic, it is better characterized as a dynamic process; for example, children growing up with single mothers tend to experience many different living arrangements and family structure transitions during childhood (Aquilino 1996; Beck at al. 2010; McLanahan 2011). Family structure transitions are not limited to single parent households, as Cavanagh (2008) shows that while 80 percent of children born in the late 1970s and early 1980s in a national sample were born into a two-parent family, by adolescence only 58 percent were living with both biological parents, and that one-third of all children had experienced some type of family structure transition. One theory connecting family structure to child outcomes argues that the stress of family disruption contributes to worse outcomes for children living in non-nuclear family structures.

Divorce is a common family disruption studied in this line of research. Cherlin, Kiernan and Chase-Lansdale (1995) find that experiencing parental marital disruption in childhood is associated with adolescent and young adult outcomes including leaving home because of conflict, cohabiting, and premarital childbearing, controlling for pre-disruption characteristics of the child and family. Divorce in one generation has consequences for children and grandchildren, with divorce among grandparents associated with lower educational attainment and higher marital discord among grandchildren (Amato and Cheadle 2005). Kim (2011) finds that the negative effects of divorce for children are stage (during divorce rather than pre- or post-divorce) and outcome specific, negatively affecting math test scores, interpersonal skills and internalizing behavior, but not reading or externalizing behavior.

Multiple transitions among family structures are associated with lower school engagement, externalizing behavior, and negative relationships with teachers and peers in young children (Cavanagh and Huston 2006; Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Fomby and Osborne 2010; McLanahan 2011), and lower educational attainment, early home leaving, premarital childbearing, depression, delinquency and drug use among adolescents (Aquilino 1996; Brown 2006; Cavanagh 2008; Wu 1996). Parental relationship transitions (e.g., divorce) are also associated with parenting behavior and parent mental health (Beck et al. 2010; McLanahan 2011). Cavanagh and Huston (2006) find evidence that children in the most disadvantaged contexts, those characterized by maternal depression, poverty and a poor home environment, are most affected by instability.

Nearly all research on family instability has focused on parental relationship changes as the source of instability, but a growing number of scholars are undertaking research on family instability that takes a more comprehensive view of instability, capturing other types of changes

occurring in a household that are potentially consequential for children (Condliffe, Warkentien and DeLuca 2013; Mollborn, Fomby and Dennis 2011; Warkentien, Condliffe and DeLuca 2013). Mollborn, Fomby and Dennis (2012) find that having grandparents or other adults join or leave a child's household is associated with child cognitive outcomes independent of parent relationship transitions. This paper builds on these more recent conceptualizations of family processes that account for the dynamic nature of family structure and the potential importance of changes in household composition beyond parental romantic partners. The entry or exit of household members other than parental figures could affect children through the amount of household resources available to them. In particular, parenting quality may suffer as individuals join or leave the household if these changes place additional burdens on children's parents. Conversely, children may have better outcomes as a result of changing household composition if these changes bring additional resources or supervision to the household.

There is very limited research that looks at trends in how many households have experienced changes in household composition over the last several decades. Bumpass and Lu (2000) show increases in non-marital cohabitation in the 1980s and 1990s and note that since cohabiting unions are more likely to dissolve than are marital unions, any shift from marital to cohabiting unions also increases the overall rate of dissolution. Bumpass and Lu report that 40 percent of children spend some time living with a parent and his or her cohabiting partner. While Bumpass and Lu's analysis suggests that an increase in cohabitation among households that include children leads to an increase in the number of children exposed to changes in household composition, their data are from 1988 and 1995, and their focus is limited to cohabiting romantic partners. Mollborn et al. (2012) widen the scope of changes in household composition to include extended household members (grandparents or other adults), but also examine only one cohort of children born in 2001. This paper includes data from children born in the early-1990s through

those born in the late-2000s and considers all changes in household composition, moving beyond analyses that are limited to parent romantic relationships or adult coresidents.

Data and Measures

I use the U.S. Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) to analyze trends in children's exposure to household changes. The SIPP data include panels of nationally representative households that are followed for a period of 2 ½ to 4 years. The first panel began in 1984 and there have been 14 panels of data collected, the most recent beginning in 2008. This design allows me to prospectively track changes in households within panels, because the SIPP collects household roster data every four months over a period of 2 ½ to 4 years, and compare the prevalence of household changes across different panels to determine whether exposure to household changes has increased or decreased over time. The SIPP is an especially useful data source for this research question because it includes longitudinal data for large, nationally representative samples, between 35,000 and 45,000 households per panel for the 1996-2008 panels.

The findings presented in this paper are based on the 1996, 2001, 2004 and 2008 SIPP panels.[1] The number of waves of data varies by panel, with 12 waves in the 1996 panel, 9 in 2001, 12 in 2004 and 15 in 2008. For these analyses I employ the SIPP's longitudinal panel weights that adjust for non-response thus I am limited to the waves in each panel covered by these weights. The SIPP collects data on each person living in a sampled household at all waves of the panel. If a member of a sampled household moves to a new address, the SIPP follows that person and collects data on each person in his or her new household. This data

[1] The Census Bureau substantially changed the SIPP's study design between the 1993 and 1996 panels so this paper is currently limited to the SIPP panels beginning in 1996.

collection strategy allows for a dynamic and comprehensive accounting of each original sample member's household at every wave of the survey.

This paper takes a child-focused approach to examining changes in household composition, which I conceptualize as an indicator of family instability. Thus I limit my sample to households with children and I use the detailed SIPP data to create a complete household roster at each wave. The findings I present here are based on an analytic sample including all children less than 5 years of age living in SIPP households at the wave 1 interview of each panel and who were followed through at least 6 waves of each panel. The sample includes 13,004 children across four panels.

There are four main measures that I explore in this analysis. The first two are whether the child's father or mother leaves the child's household between waves. For simplicity I refer to this as the parent leaving, though this type of transition can occur in either of two ways: the parent could leave the household or the child could move to a different address without the parent. The third and fourth measures are indicators for whether someone joined or left the child's household. These two general indicators of household change do not identify how the person joining or leaving the household is related to the focal child, but they do represent a change that the child experiences in his or her household environment. After presenting the main results, I include a brief discussion of the more specific types of household changes captured by the overarching indicators for gaining or losing a household member.

Results

Table 1 presents weighted sample statistics across the 1996, 2001, 2004 and 2008 SIPP panels. The focal children are between 4 and 6 years old, on average, when the observation period ends, thus my analysis captures changes occurring very early in children's lives.

In the 1996 panel, close to two-thirds of the children are white, with blacks and Hispanics both making up 16 percent of the sample. Across the panels, the proportion of children who are white declines, to 54 percent white by 2008, and the proportion Hispanic increases to 24 percent. Table 1 also provides some description of the sample children's households at the start of each panel. Household size, averaging about 4.5, stayed fairly constant across panels. A very high proportion of these young children live with their mothers at the start of observation, between 96 and 97 percent, while the proportion who live with their fathers is lower, at 78 to 79 percent, but fairly constant across panels. Approximately 10 percent of children live with at least one grandparent at wave 1. Finally, the children's coresident mothers are about 30 years old and their coresident fathers are about 34 years old at the start of each panel.

Figures 1 and 2 address the paper's two primary research questions:

1. What is missed by measures of family instability that traditionally capture only changes in parents' (typically mothers') romantic partners?
2. Are different types of household changes occurring more or less frequently in the 2008 panel than in the 1996 panel?

Figure 1 includes four charts, one for each of the four panels of SIPP data I use for this analysis. These charts show the weighted cumulative proportion, over 6 to 12 waves of data collection, of children who experience four types of household changes: gaining a household member, losing

a household member, no longer living with their father, and no longer living with their mother.[2] Across all four panels, the proportion of children whose father leaves the household (solid line) is always higher than the proportion of children whose mother leaves the household (triangle markers). By the end of observation, after 2 to 3 years, up to 7 percent of children experienced their father leaving while no more than 3.5 percent of children experienced their mother leaving. What these charts of cumulative proportions make clear is that experiencing the departure of a parent is only one type of change in household composition to which children are exposed. By the end of data collection in the 1996 panel, less than 2 percent of children's mothers had left the child's household and 7 percent of children's fathers had left, but 26 percent of children had lost at least one household member and 42 percent had gained at least one household member. The same pattern generally holds true for 2001, 2004 and 2008: more children lose a father in the household than lose a mother, between 16 percent and 26 percent of children lose a household member, and between 29 percent and 42 percent of children gain a household member by the time they are 4 to 6 years old.

These charts provide preliminary evidence that there are many transitions occurring in children's households other than parents leaving the household and that measures of family instability that are limited to mothers and fathers are missing other changes in household environment that could be meaningful to young children's growth and development. These gained and lost measures are coarse and do not identify how the individuals who join and leave the household are related to the focal children. Selected waves of the SIPP data include relationship matrices that do indicate how each member of the household is related and I discuss below preliminary

[2] The number of waves varies across panels because the longitudinal panel weight is available for different lengths of time across panels. All panels have at least 6 waves of data represented. For the within-panel comparisons, I include as many waves as possible. For the between-panel comparisons I show only the first 6 or 7 waves of data.

analyses of the relationship data used to categorize the type of household change each child experiences.

The charts in Figure 2 show the same data as presented in Figure 1, but from a different perspective, allowing for an assessment of how children's exposure to different changes in household composition has changed in the time period covered by the 1996 to 2008 panels of the SIPP, addressing the second research question posed in this paper. These charts again show cumulative proportions of children experiencing specific types of household changes over the first 7 (or 6 in 2004) waves of data collection in each panel. Beginning with the chart that shows the cumulative proportion of children whose father left the household, we see that the cumulative proportion is lower in 1996 (solid line) than in the later years (dotted and dashed lines). By the end of the 2001 and 2008 panel observations, 5 to 6 percent of children had a father leave the household, but this happened to only 4 percent of children in the 1996 panel. A similar pattern is evident in the chart showing the proportion of mothers who left the child's household. Although this proportion is quite low overall, three times as many mothers left the focal children's households in the 2004 and 2008 panels than in the 1996 and 2001 panels. The two charts for the more general measures of household change, losing and gaining household members, show fewer differences by year. In both cases the cumulative proportions track pretty closely across the 1996, 2001, 2004 and 2008 panels, with the 2004 panel having a slightly higher cumulative proportion for gaining a household member over the second portion of the panel, and the 2008 panel having a slightly lower cumulative proportion for losing a household member over the second half of the panel.

Figure 2 suggests that having a mother or father leave the household is a more common experience among young children in the later 2000s and 2010s than it was in the 1990s and early 2000s. It will be especially useful to disaggregate the broad categories of gaining and

losing a housing member to assess whether there are discernable time trends in other types of household change. It is possible that the similarity in cumulative proportion of children who gained and lost household members across panels masks considerable heterogeneity in more specific types of household member transitions. The relationship matrices included in selected waves of the SIPP panels will be key to uncovering any underlying patterns.

Table 2 presents a snapshot of the detailed types of household changes experienced by children under age 5 in the 2008 panel of the SIPP. The table lists the relationship categories from the child's perspective and the corresponding share of the sample that experiences the gain or loss of at least one person in each relationship category between the first and second waves of the 2008 panel. This snapshot complements Figure 1 in demonstrating the variety of household changes that children experience beyond parental exit and entry. For example, movement in and out of the household of extended family members and non-relatives accounts for a substantial share of the change in household composition that children experience. While not shown in the table, these categories could be further disaggregated by the age of the individual joining or leaving the household and their employment status to assess how the addition or subtraction of this household member may affect household resources.

Discussion

The first goal of this paper is to provide evidence supporting the argument that research on family complexity and instability should take a more holistic view of family instability by incorporating measures of household transitions beyond parents and their romantic partners. The second goal is to determine whether children's exposure to changes in household composition has increased or decreased in the years covered by the 1996 to 2008 SIPP panels. My results suggest that the cumulative proportion of children exposed to gaining or losing a

household member is much higher than the cumulative proportion of children whose father or mother leaves the household. They further suggest that the proportion of young children who experience a parent leaving the household, a mother in particular, is higher in the late 2000s and 2010s than in the 1990s and early 2000s.

This paper also presents a static account of the more detailed types of household changes children experience, and the next step for this analysis is to use these relationship categories to disaggregate the experience of losing and gaining household members into more specific types of household change. This step will be especially important for the first research question focused on the types of changes that children experience in addition to parent and parent romantic partner transitions into and out of the household. Additionally, future analyses will include earlier SIPP data, from the 1984-1993 panels. This expansion will be particularly useful for the second research question examining trends over time by adding 12 years to the beginning of the period under examination.

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Table 1. Weighted Sample Statistics across 1996, 2001, 2004 and 2008 SIPP Panels.

	1996		2001		2004		2008	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age at end of period	5.81	1.43	4.07	1.37	3.75	1.43	3.96	1.42
Race/Ethnicity								
White	0.64		0.60		0.57		0.54	
Black	0.16		0.15		0.15		0.13	
Hispanic	0.16		0.19		0.21		0.24	
Other Race	0.04		0.06		0.07		0.09	
Wave 1								
Household Size	4.41	1.44	4.46	1.65	4.45	1.56	4.45	1.52
Live with Mother	0.97		0.96		0.97		0.96	
Live with Father	0.78		0.79		0.79		0.78	
Live with Grandparent	0.10		0.10		0.09		0.10	
Mother's Age	30.4	6.04	30.5	6.36	30.6	6.38	31.10	6.40
Father's age	33.6	6.47	33.8	6.70	33.8	6.94	34.1	7.00
N	4,152		3,973		5,008		4,019	

Table 2. Detailed Snapshot of Changes in Household Composition for Children under Age 5, Wave 1 to 2, 2008 SIPP Panel

Type of Change	Join Wave 2 (%)	Leave Wave 2 (%)
Biological Parent	0.04	0.86
Stepparent	0.05	0
Step/Adoptive Parent	0	0
Adoptive parent	0	0.02
Foster Parent	0	0.06
Other parent	0	0.06
Biological brother/sister	0.5	0.41
Half brother/sister	0.08	0
Step brother/sister	0.02	0.13
Adopted brother/sister	0	0.05
Other brother/sister	0	0.04
Grandparent	0.15	0.87
Uncle/aunt	0.26	0.88
Nephew/niece	0	0.02
Other relative	0.19	0.65
Roommate/housemate	0.02	0.16
Other non-relative	0.18	0.5

Figure 1. Cumulative Proportion of Children Exposed to Changes in Household Composition: 1996, 2001, 2004 and 2008 Panels

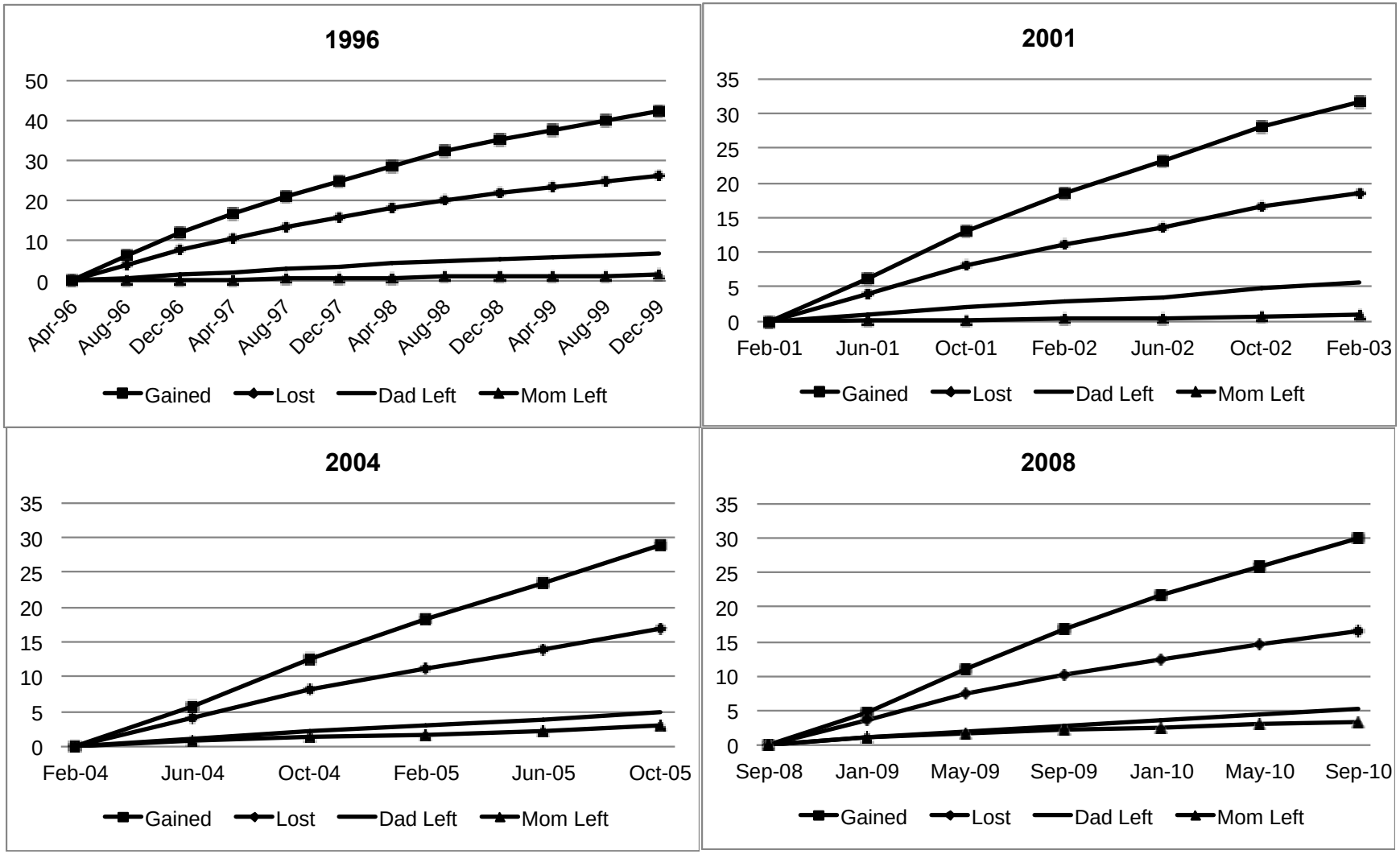

Figure 2. Cumulative Proportion of Children Exposed to Different Types of Household Change