Trends in Children's Family Instability, 1995-2010*

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Abstract

Using data from the 1995 and 2006-2010 National Survey of Family Growth, we examine trends in children's family instability from birth to age 12, paying close attention to variation by racial and ethnic group. Period and cohort estimates reveal only a modest uptick in children's experiences of family transitions during the past decade. Family instability levels are comparable for White and Hispanic children and this pattern persists over time. However, there has been a sizeable increase in family instability among Black children that is largely driven by growth in the share of children born to single mothers who eventually form partnerships. Indeed, children born to single mothers in the more recent cohort experience more family transitions, on average, than their counterparts from the earlier cohort. In contrast, the levels of instability characterizing children born into to cohabiting mothers remain unchanged. This study elucidates the various family life course trajectories children experience, revealing how these patterns differ depending on family context at birth and by racial and ethnic group.

The living arrangements of children are increasingly diverse. This variation is evident from birth, as a growing share of children are born outside of marriage. Today, over 40% of births are to unmarried mothers and more than half of these unmarried births occur to cohabiting couples (Manning, Brown, Lamidi, & Payne, 2014). Children born outside of marriage are at greater risk of family instability during childhood relative to children born to married parents (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). In turn, family instability is consequential for children's development and well-being (Brown, 2010; Crosnoe & Cavanagh, 2010). Stable family living arrangements during childhood are associated with more beneficial outcomes for children.

Recent family trends portend growth in family instability during childhood. In addition to the rise in unmarried births, the continued growth in cohabitation and serial cohabitation as well as the decreasing tendency for cohabitation to culminate in marriage point to more family transitions for children (Cohen & Manning, 2010; Guzzo, 2014a, 2014b; Lichter, Turner, & Sassler, 2010). Even children in married families may experience less stability today than in the past given new evidence that divorce has been climbing during the past few decades (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014). And, the growth in multiple partner fertility coincides with the "marriage-go-round" of partnerships identified by Cherlin (2009) that translate into high levels of partnership formation and dissolution by parents. All of these changes in family behaviors suggest that children experience more family instability than they did a generation ago.

Moreover, today's children are more racially and ethnically diverse (Johnson & Lichter, 2010). In 1990, one-third of children were minorities. By 2008, the share had climbed to 43% of all children. The two largest minority groups, African Americans and Hispanics, are characterized by higher shares of unmarried births, single parenthood, and cohabitation relative

to Whites. In short, the changing racial and ethnic composition of children may contribute to rising family instability among U.S. children.

Both contemporary family patterns and the shifting racial and ethnic composition of children indicate that childhood family instability is likely on the rise. The most recent study documenting children's family transitions was conducted by Raley and Wildsmith (2004) using data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). Their research showed the importance of accounting for not only parental marital transitions but also cohabitation transitions, which raised the estimates of children's family instability by 30% for Whites and 100% for Blacks. Their study did not include Hispanic children, who now constitute the largest minority group. Given the numerous changes in family life over the past decade, we update and expand on their work by using data from the 1995 and 2006-2010 NSFG to chart both period and cohort trends in children's family instability for White, Black, and Hispanic children from birth to age 12.

Background

The rapid rise in cohabitation in recent decades has fundamentally altered the childhood family experiences of a growing share of children. Roughly 40% of children will spend some part of their childhood in a cohabiting family. Cohabiting unions are much less stable than marriages, even when children are present. Roughly half of children born to cohabiting parents experience parental union dissolution by their third birthday versus about 11% of children born to married parents (Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007). By age 12, children born to cohabiting parents have experienced roughly twice as many family transitions as children born to married parents (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004).

The linkage between family structure at birth and family instability during childhood is well-established (Graefe & Lichter, 1999; Manning, Smock and Majumdar 2004; Osborne et al., 2007; Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). As growing shares of children are born outside of marriage, more children are poised to experience family trajectories that are marked by instability. In particular, cohabitation plays a larger role now in children's family transitions, reflecting both the rise in births to cohabiting mothers and the increased share of mothers who form cohabiting rather than marital unions. Raley and Wildsmith (2004) illustrate the necessity of examining cohabitation transitions in studies on family instability. More than half of the family transitions experienced by Black children are cohabiting transitions. Among White children, nearly one-quarter of all family transitions are cohabiting rather than marital. Clearly, children's family instability is not driven solely by marital transitions. Increasingly, family instability is the result of parental transitions into or out of cohabitation.

Family instability is often detrimental for child well-being, and the association is linear such that each additional family transition is related to further declines in child well-being (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; Cherlin et al., 1991; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Wu, 1996; Wu & Martinson, 1993). This pattern has been established for a range of child outcomes, including educational, social, and behavioral indicators of well-being. Family living arrangement transitions are stressful for children and adults alike, disrupting family routines and the flow of resources, which can compromise healthy development among children (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). The relationship between family instability and child well-being appears to differ across racial and ethnic groups. For White children, family instability is negatively associated with well-being whereas for Black children, the linkages tend

to be weaker and often do not achieve statistical significance (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). There is little empirical evidence on how Hispanic children fare (Brown, 2010).

Recent family trends suggest that children's family instability could be on the rise. A key factor is the growing share of births that occur to cohabiting mothers. At the time of the Raley and Wildsmith (2004) study, which examined children born during the mid to late 1980s and early 1990s, roughly 11% of all births were to cohabiting mothers (during 1990-1994). This figure has more than doubled to 24% for the 2005-2009 period (Manning et al., 2014). Given that children born to cohabiting mothers experience the highest average number of transitions (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004), we can expect that children's family instability has increased over the past decade.

At the same time, cohabitors' union outcomes are shifting such that they are less likely to eventuate in marriage and more likely to end through separation. During the late 1980s, about 60% of cohabiting unions culminated in marriage. Today, just 40% are expected to be formalized through marriage. The rising instability of cohabiting unions sets the stage for additional family transitions. Specifically, it presents opportunities for repartnering and multiple partner fertility, exposing children to still more family transitions (Cherlin, 2009; Guzzo, 2014a).

Children's family instability differs by race, with Black children experiencing more family living arrangement transitions, on average, than White children (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). This differential is consistent with higher shares of births to unpartnered single and cohabiting mothers among Blacks than Whites. Research on family instability among Hispanic children is scant, although one study indicates that for children born to either married or cohabiting parents, union dissolution is comparable for Whites and Hispanics during the first three years of life whereas for Blacks it is notably higher, on average (Osborne et al., 2007). For

Hispanics, the proportion of births that are to unmarried mothers is higher than Whites and lower than Blacks, suggesting family instability levels for Hispanic children may lie in between those of White and Black children.

The current study is designed to examine whether and how children's family instability has changed over the past decade or so, tracking children according to family context at birth until age 12. Our approach addresses racial and ethnic group variation in children's family instability, expanding on prior research (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004) that documented Black-White differentials by incorporating Hispanic children. Specifically, our study proceeds in three steps. First, we conduct life table estimates of the cumulative number of family transitions children experience by each year of age through age 12 by cohort and racial and ethnic group. Second, we estimate the distribution of family life course trajectories by birth context for children according to cohort and racial and ethnic group. Third, our study provides estimates of the number of transitions children are expected to experience between birth and age 12, emphasizing various trajectories based on birth context. We consider how these estimates have changed over time and how they differ across racial and ethnic groups.

Method

We use the 1995 and 2006/10 cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) to document children's exposure to family transitions and examine if children today experience more transitions than their counterparts roughly one decade ago. The NSFG provides a nationally representative data source of women aged 15 to 44 and includes detailed fertility and relationship histories. Drawing on this information, we documented children's exposure to family transitions and identified trajectories of children's living arrangements through age 12. Inferring children's experiences from mothers' reports allows us to present more recent estimates than would be

possible using a traditional cohort approach. However, it requires two important assumptions. One assumption is that either children live with their mothers for the majority of their lives or mothers' experiences are comparable with whomever the child resides. And the second assumption is that mothers and children report similar experiences with union formation and dissolution. Raley and Wildsmith (2004) concluded both assumptions were reasonable and used mothers' fertility and relationship histories in the 1995 NSFG to indirectly estimate children's family transitions and exposure to instability.

By merging the female pregnancy and respondent files of the NSFG, we constructed a child-level data file in which each case corresponded to a respondent's completed pregnancy. Thus, women who reported more than one completed birth had a separate record for each child. The first set of period estimates documents levels of family instability by counting the number of transitions children experience. Transitions are defined as entering directly into a marital or cohabiting union or dissolving a marital/cohabiting union. The transition from cohabitation to marriage was not treated as a family transition (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). Our measure of instability is downwardly biased because it does not account for other changes in household composition (e.g., living with a grandparent, sibling, other family member, or nonrelative) or changes in a mother's dating relationships with nonresident boyfriends. Multistate period life tables estimated the number of family transitions children were expected to experience, on average, by age 12. Estimates were produced by summing age-specific family transition rates for each month within an established risk period. For the 1995 cycle, the risk period ranged from January 1990 to December of 1994, consistent with the approach used by Raley and Wildsmith (2004). Given the 2006/10 cycle's continuous interviewing strategy, we constructed a variable detailing the number of months prior to interview and censored all person-months occurring

more than 60 months prior to the date of interview. In response to the NSFG's age restrictions, period estimates considered children's exposure to family transitions through age 11 and are limited to children born to mothers under age 30, consistent with Raley and Wildsmith (2004). Considering children's experiences past age 12 would require a more stringent age cut-off for mothers (e.g., limiting births to women under age 29, 27, 25, etc.), a less desirable strategy given recent increases in mothers' median ages at first birth (Arroyo, Payne, Brown, & Manning, 2013). We also conducted cohort analyses documenting trajectories in children's family transitions from birth to age 12 to complement the period estimates. All analyses are stratified according to mother's racial/ethnic status (i.e., White, Black, and Hispanic) and weighted to account for the complex survey design.

The 1995 cycle included 10,847 women and the 2006/10 cycle included 12,279 women. Period estimates for the 1995 analyses were derived from 11,140 children who were aged 0 to 12 and contributed 519,194 person-months between 1990 and 1994. Period estimates for 2006/10 analyses are based on data from 12,462 eligible children who contributed 561,983 person-months in the five years prior to interview. Cohort analyses for the 1995 cycle included 3,359 children who were born between 1980 and 1984, and congruent analyses for the 2006/2010 cycle included 2,389 children who were aged 11-15. Once again, given the continuous design of the 2006/10 panel, rather than identifying a birth cohort per se, we identified children whose age at time of interview corresponded with the ages of eligible children for the 1995 cohort analyses (i.e., children born between 1980 and 1984 who were 11-15 in 1995). The only children excluded from our samples are those who do not have a valid date of birth. Analyses do not count dissolutions or formations for which the mother either refused to provide or did not know the month of occurrence, but instead treat them as "no transition" meaning that our estimates of

family transitions are conservative. Our 1995 period and cohort samples include slightly more children than those in Raley & Wildsmith (2004), but did not substantively alter the results or conclusions about family instability derived from the 1995 NSFG.

Results

Table 1 provides period estimates of children's cumulate number of family transitions by age and time period for all children and separately by racial and ethnic group. The results show there has been a slight increase since 1995 in the number of family transitions children are expected to experience through age 12, rising from 0.89 to 1.01. This increase primarily reflects greater family instability for Black children who are expected to experience 0.4 more family transitions in the 2000s than their counterparts did in the early 1990s. For White and Hispanic children, the rise in family instability over time was negligible at 0.05 and 0.06, respectively. The racial and ethnic gap in family instability has widened over time. In the early 1990s, Black children were expected to experience approximately 0.4 more transitions by age 12 than either White or Hispanic children. A decade later, this gap now stands at 0.7 transitions, which represents a roughly three-quarters increase.

[Table 1 about here]

Supplemental analyses (not shown) indicated that the growth in family instability was due to a rise in the share of children who experience family transitions rather than higher numbers of family transitions. Further, these analyses demonstrated that decreasing shares of children born to married and cohabiting mothers ever experienced a family transition whereas increasing shares of children born to single mothers ever experienced a transition. These patterns suggest that the increase in family instability for Black children might reflect a rise in partnership formation among single mothers. Finally, declining shares of White and Hispanic children born

to cohabiting mothers ever experienced a family transition whereas increasing shares of their Black counterparts ever experienced a transition.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 2 depicts the distributions of children's family life course trajectories through age 12. Overall, the share of children born to marital unions that remain intact through the child's 12th birthday has dropped from 54% to 44%. Still, intact marital unions remained the modal trajectory for children at both time points. The decline in children born to married parents was largely offset by increases in the share of children born to single mothers who went on to form cohabiting unions (which rose from 7% to 12%) and children born to cohabiting parents who either separate (which tripled from 2% to 6%) or transition to marriage (which more than doubled from 5% to 12%). Similarly, the share of children whose mother reported cohabiting at some point before the child's 12th birthday increased from 28% in 1995 to 40% in 2006/10 whereas the share of children whose mother was ever married dropped modestly from 89% to 84% during the time period. There was virtually no change in the share of children whose mother was ever single, but never cohabited, which hovered around 16%.

Turning now to the estimates for each racial and ethnic group, consistent with the pattern for all children we find that at both time points the modal trajectory for White and Hispanic children was "married – intact through age 12." Nonetheless, the share of White and Hispanic children in this group has declined since the 1990s (from 63% to 52% and from 48% to 39%, respectively). This trend was largely offset by increases in the share of children who were born to (a) cohabiting parents who transitioned to marriage, which rose from 4% to 10% and from 5% to 14% for White and Hispanic children, respectively, and (b) single mothers who formed cohabiting unions, which rose from 4% to 10% for White children. In contrast, the modal

trajectory for Black children was being born to a single mother who formed a cohabiting relationship after the birth, and this share has increased slightly over time from 23% to 26% of Black children, providing additional evidence that this trajectory accounts for much of the increase in Black children's family transitions over time. There was also a considerable decline (from 17% to 10%) in the share of Black children born to single mothers who had not partnered by the child's 12th birthday, and at the same time a doubling (from 6% to 12%) in the share of Black children born to cohabiting mothers who transitioned to marriage.

Although all racial/ethnic groups reported an increase in the share of children whose mothers ever cohabited, only Black children experienced a decline in the share of children whose mother was ever single, but never cohabited, which fell from more than one-third to just one-quarter. Fewer White and Hispanic children had a mother who was ever married in the more recent cohort, but for Blacks there was a slight increase in the share of children whose mothers ever married. Still, Black children were least likely to have mothers who were ever married (about 60%) compared with White (over 90%) and Hispanic (over 80%) children.

The third goal of our paper was to examine the average number of family transitions children experience by birth context and racial ethnic group for both cohorts. Table 3 shows the average number of transitions a child can be expected to experience by age 12 differs by family structure at birth, with children born to married mothers experiencing the fewest number of transitions, on average (0.6 in 1995 and 0.5 in 2006/10). Although children born to unpartnered single mothers and cohabiting mothers experienced the same average number of transitions in 1995, the number of transitions experienced by children of single mothers grew to 1.7 for the most recent cohort. The number of family transitions for children born to cohabiting mothers was unchanged at 1.4. Notably, children whose mother ever cohabited are expected to have 1.9

transitions today versus 2.3 in the earlier cohort, suggesting cohabitation is a more stable family context for children nowadays than a decade ago. Overall though, the average number of family transitions children experience has not changed over time. In the 1990s, the average was 0.8 transitions and today it is 0.9 transitions. Of course, this aggregate figure belies variation observed for some subgroups.

[Table 3 about here]

Among children born to married mothers, there has been no change in the number of transitions Black (0.7) and Hispanic (0.6) children experience. However, their White counterparts experienced slightly fewer transitions, on average, in the recent cohort (falling from 0.7 to 0.5). Among children born to single mothers, Whites had more transitions, on average, than did Blacks and Hispanics at both time points. Over time, there was a slight uptick in the number of transitions experienced by Black (from 1.3 to 1.7) and White (from 1.8 to 2.1) children born to single mothers. In contrast, Hispanic children born to single mothers experienced fewer average transitions over time (falling from 1.5 to 1.2). The average number of family transitions rose from 1.1 to 1.6 for White children born to cohabiting mothers, but declined ever so slightly for Black (1.9 to 1.7) and Hispanic (1.2 to 1.1) children.

For Black and Hispanic children, the average number of family transitions was comparable for those children born to unpartnered single mothers and cohabiting mothers. In contrast, birth to a single mother translated into more family transitions compared with birth to a cohabiting mother for White children. Those born to single mothers experienced 2.1 transitions versus just 1.6 transitions for those born to cohabiting mothers in the recent cohort.

There is virtually no change in the number of transitions children whose mother was ever single, but never cohabited across racial/ethnic groups. However, White and Hispanic children

whose mother ever cohabited reported fewer transitions in the more recent sample whereas Black children reported comparable levels of instability at both time points. Black children whose mothers were ever married exhibited slight increases in instability over time (from 1.0 to 1.2) whereas their White and Hispanic counterparts experienced either no change (Whites at 0.7) or slight decreases (Hispanics from 0.8 to 0.7) in instability, respectively. Consistent with period estimates, Black children experienced more transitions, on average, than did White and Hispanic children at both time points. For the recent cohort, Black children averaged 1.3 transitions versus 0.9 for White children and 0.8 for Hispanic children.

Next Steps

This extended abstract is designed to provide a summary of the overarching goals and key findings of our study. The final version of the paper will include a more extensive literature review and a full discussion of the implications and contributions of the study.

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Table 1. Period Estimates of Cumulative Number of Transitions by Age, Race/ethnicity, and Panel

Age of Child	All Children		White Children		Black Children		Hispanic Children	
	1995	2006/10	1995	2006/10	1995	2006/10	1995	2006/10
1	0.07	0.08	0.07	0.07	0.11	0.13	0.07	0.08
2	0.15	0.17	0.14	0.14	0.23	0.27	0.13	0.15
3	0.23	0.24	0.21	0.21	0.35	0.40	0.20	0.21
4	0.32	0.34	0.30	0.30	0.47	0.53	0.28	0.28
5	0.40	0.43	0.38	0.38	0.59	0.69	0.34	0.36
6	0.48	0.52	0.45	0.46	0.70	0.83	0.43	0.44
7	0.55	0.61	0.52	0.54	0.81	0.99	0.50	0.52
8	0.62	0.69	0.58	0.61	0.91	1.12	0.57	0.59
9	0.69	0.77	0.63	0.67	0.99	1.25	0.65	0.68
10	0.75	0.86	0.69	0.75	1.08	1.37	0.73	0.77
11	0.82	0.93	0.75	0.81	1.17	1.48	0.78	0.84
12	0.89	1.01	0.82	0.87	1.23	1.63	0.87	0.93
N (children)	11,140	12,462	5,903	5,246	2,818	2,805	2,067	3,552
N child-months	519,194	561,983	275,087	239,059	132,716	125,126	94,971	159,198

Table 2. Life Course Trajectories through age 12, by Race/ethnicity and Cohort

	All Children				White Children				Black Children				Hispanic Children			
	1995		2006/10		1995		2006/10		1995		2006/10		1995		2006/10	
	Full	%	Full	%	Full	%	Full	%	Full	%	Full	%	Full	%	Full	%
Marital Births																
Intact through age 12	54	70	44	70	63	72	52	71	21	55	20	55	48	71	39	66
Married, split, never repartner	8	10	9	14	7	8	9	12	11	29	11	31	8	12	9	15
Married, split, cohabit	12	16	8	13	13	15	10	14	5	13	3	8	10	14	9	15
Married, split, remarry	3	4	2	3	4	5	2	3	1	3	2	6	2	3	2	4
Total	77	100	63	100	87	100	73	100	38	100	36	100	67	100	59	100
Nonmarital Births																
Single births																
Remain single through age 12	4	27	3	17	1	13	1	8	17	36	10	25	5	29	4	22
Single to cohabit	7	46	12	66	4	50	10	77	23	49	26	65	8	47	10	56
Single to direct marriage	4	27	3	17	3	37	2	15	7	15	4	10	4	24	4	22
Total	15	100	18	100	8	100	13	100	47	100	40	100	17	100	18	100
Cohabiting births																
Cohab through age 12	1	12	1	5	0	--	1	8	1	7	1	4	2	13	3	13
Cohab to split	2	25	6	32	1	20	3	21	8	53	11	46	9	56	6	26
Cohab to marriage	5	63	12	63	4	80	10	71	6	40	12	50	5	31	14	61
Total	8	100	19	100	5	100	14	100	15	100	24	100	16	100	23	100
Ever single, but never cohabited	17		16		14		13		35		24		16		17	
Ever cohabited	28		40		23		35		44		54		36		43	
Ever married	89		84		97		91		60		63		85		81	
Unweighted n	3,359		2,389		1,839		976		852		530		579		737	

Table 3. Average Number of Transitions, by Trajectory, Race/ethnicity, and Cohort

	All Children		White Children		Black Children		Hispanic Children	
	1995	2006/10	1995	2006/10	1995	2006/10	1995	2006/10
Marital Births								
Intact through age 12	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Married, split, never repartner	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
Married, split, cohabit	2.9	2.7	3.0	2.7	2.5	3.0	2.8	2.6
Married, split, remarry	2.4	2.1	2.4	2.0	2.6	2.6	2.0	2.1
Total	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.5	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.6
Nonmarital Births								
Single births								
Remain single through age 12	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Single to cohabit	2.1	2.1	2.3	2.3	2.1	2.3	1.9	1.6
Single to direct marriage	1.8	1.8	1.7	2.0	1.7	2.0	2.3	1.4
Total	1.4	1.7	1.8	2.1	1.3	1.7	1.5	1.2
Cohabiting births								
Cohab through age 12	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Cohab to split	2.2	2.0	2.0	2.3	2.4	2.1	2.0	2.0
Cohab to marriage	1.1	1.3	1.0	1.4	1.7	1.4	1.0	1.0
Total	1.4	1.4	1.1	1.6	1.9	1.7	1.2	1.1
Total	0.8	0.9	0.7	0.9	1.1	1.3	0.8	0.8
Ever single, but never cohabited	0.9	0.9	1.1	1.0	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.8
Ever cohabited	2.3	1.9	2.5	2.1	2.0	2.0	1.9	1.5
Ever married	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.7	1.0	1.2	0.8	0.7
Unweighted n	3,359	2,389	1,839	976	852	530	579	737