Family Structure, Stability, and Child Well-being: The Significance of Cohabitation*

Susan L. Brown

Department of Sociology

Center for Family and Demographic Research

Bowling Green State University

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Background

- Children are spending less time in married families and more time in families formed outside of marriage (e.g., cohabitation)
- Cohabitation is an important part of many children's family experiences
  - 20% of births are to cohabiting parents
  - 40% of children will spend time in a cohabiting family by age 16

Types of Cohabiting Families

- Two biological cohabiting parent families
  - Children born to cohabiting parents
  - Nearly 50% of births to single mothers are actually to unmarried cohabiting parents
- Cohabiting stepfamilies
  - Children enter a cohabiting family after being born to a single mother or following parental divorce
- Roughly equal numbers of children reside in these two types of cohabiting families

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Child Well-being in Cohabiting Families

- Research on child well-being in cohabiting families primarily has focused on cohabiting stepfamilies
- Nationally representative data sets often examine school-age children and adolescents
- The high levels of instability characterizing cohabitation mean most of these children reside in cohabiting stepfamilies
- 85% of children in two biological cohabiting parent families are under age 6

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Rationale

- Little is known about cohabitation as a setting for child development, especially among very young children
- Do two biological parent families provide similar benefits for children regardless of whether the parents are cohabiting or married?
- I use ECLS-B 9 and 24 month data to examine the linkages between family structure, family stability, and child outcomes
  - Emphasize comparison of two biological cohabiting vs. two biological married parent families

Family Structure and Child Well-being

- Children residing outside of a two biological married parent family tend to exhibit lower levels of well-being
- Children in married stepfamilies fare similarly to children in single-mother families
- How children in cohabiting families compare to those in single-mother or married stepfamilies is less clear
  - Similar or worse

Mechanisms

- Much of these observed differences are accounted for by variation in economic and parenting resources
- Poverty levels
  - Stepfamilies: 20% cohabiting vs. 10% married
  - Two Biological: 23% cohabiting vs. 7% married
- Cohabiting mothers report the most difficulty rearing their children and the most depressive symptoms
- Mother-infant relationship of highest quality for marrieds; cohabitors and singles do not differ

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Family Stability and Child Well-being

- Family transitions have a cumulative, negative effect on child outcomes
- Cohabitation is the most unstable family form
  - Children born to cohabiting (vs. married) parents are 2x as likely to experience parental break up
  - Cohabiting less stable than single-mother families
- Adolescents do not benefit from remaining in stable cohabiting stepfamilies
  - Some gains for transitioning into a single-mother family

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Research Goals

- Describe children's living arrangements at 9 months and document the level and patterns of family transitions between the interviews
- Establish the association between family structure and child well-being at 9 months, net of economic and parenting resources
- Examine how various types of family transitions (versus stable family forms) are related to changes in child well-being between 9 and 24 months, net of changes in economic and parenting factors

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The Present Study

- This study fills significant gaps in research on cohabitation and child outcomes by:
  - Examining very young children (9-24 mos.)
  - Focusing on two biological cohabiting parents
  - Considering transitions into and out of cohabitation
- ECLS-B is advantageous because it permits a prospective examination of the consequences of family structure and stability for a large, nationally representative sample of very young children
  - Possibility that these children experienced prior, unmeasured transitions is minimal

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Data

- ECLS-B, 9 month and 24 month interviews
- Analytic sample size is 8,700 children
  - Main parent R is biological or adoptive mother
  - Valid data on parent marital status and the child weight at both waves
  - Classified as in a two biological cohabiting, two biological married, or single-mother family at 9 month interview
- Analyses conducted using the wave two child replicate weights in AM to correct for the complex sampling design

Child Well-being

- Bayley Short Form-Research Edition (BSF-R), 9 mos
  - Mental Development (X1RMTLS)
  - Motor Development (X1RMTRS)
- Nursing Child Assessment Teaching Scale (NCATS), 9 mos
  - Total Score (X1NCATTS)
- Changes between interviews in:
  - Mental Development (X2MTLSCL-X1RMTLS)
  - Motor Development (X2MTRSCL-X1RMTRS)

Family Structure

- The family structure measure (X1MARSTA, P1PARTNR, P1NFTHHH) distinguishes among:
  - Two biological cohabiting parents
  - Two biological married parents (ref)
  - Single mother
  - Cohabiting step
  - Married step
- Cohabiting and married stepfamilies are excluded from multivariate analyses due to small sample size

Family Stability

- Measures of family (in)stability are used in the longitudinal analyses:
  - Two bio cohabiting – Two bio married
  - Two bio cohabiting – Single mother
  - Two bio married – Single mother
  - Single mother – Two parents
  - Stable two bio cohabiting
  - Stable single-mother
  - Stable two bio married (ref)

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Child and Maternal Characteristics

- Child's age in months
- Child's gender
- Child's race-ethnicity (NH Black, Hispanic, NH Other, NH White [ref])
- Maternal age at child's birth (<20, 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, >34 [ref])
- Smoked (1=during last 3 months of pregnancy)
- Drank (1=during last 3 months of pregnancy)
- Breastfeeding (never, previously, currently [ref])
- Normal birth weight (1=yes)

Economic Resources

- Maternal labor force participation (full-time, part-time [ref], not working)
- Maternal education (< high school, high school [ref], some college, college degree or more)
- Family income (X1INCOME)
- Changes in economic resources
  - Maternal labor force participation (increased, decreased, same [ref])
  - Family income (X2INCOME-X1INCOME)

Parenting Resources

- Maternal responsiveness (assessed by interviewer)
  - 5 items consistent with Bradley et al. (2001)
- Child is difficult to raise (item ranges from 1 to 5)
- Literary activities scale (3 items)
- Maternal depressive symptoms (12 items, CES-D)
- Changes in parenting resources
  - Responsiveness (T2-T1)
  - Child difficult to raise (more, less, same [ref])
  - Literary activities (T2-T1)

The Distribution of Children by Family Structure at 9-mo interview

Family Structure	Weighted %
Two Biological Parent Family	
Two Biological Cohabiting Parents	13.79
Two Biological Married Parents	64.94
Single-Mother Family	19.68
Stepfamily	
Cohabiting Stepfamily	0.73
Married Stepfamily	0.87
Total	100.00

Note: Weight W1C0 is used. Weighted N=10,100.

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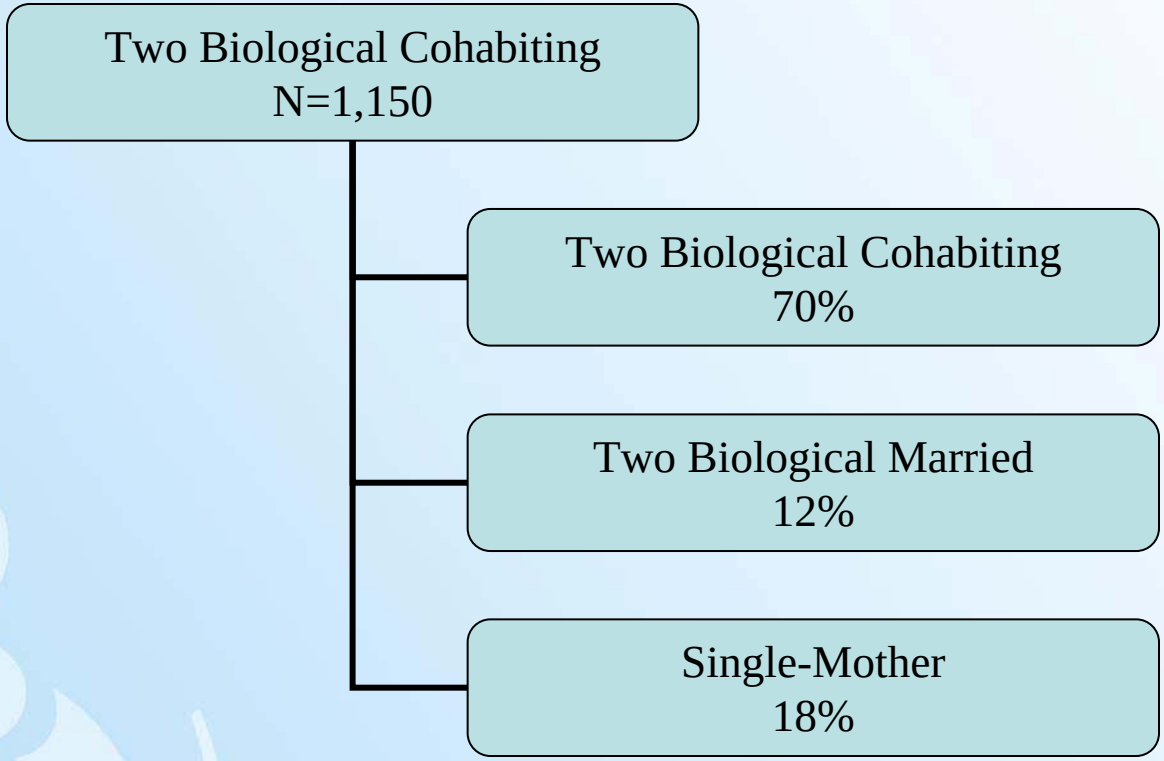
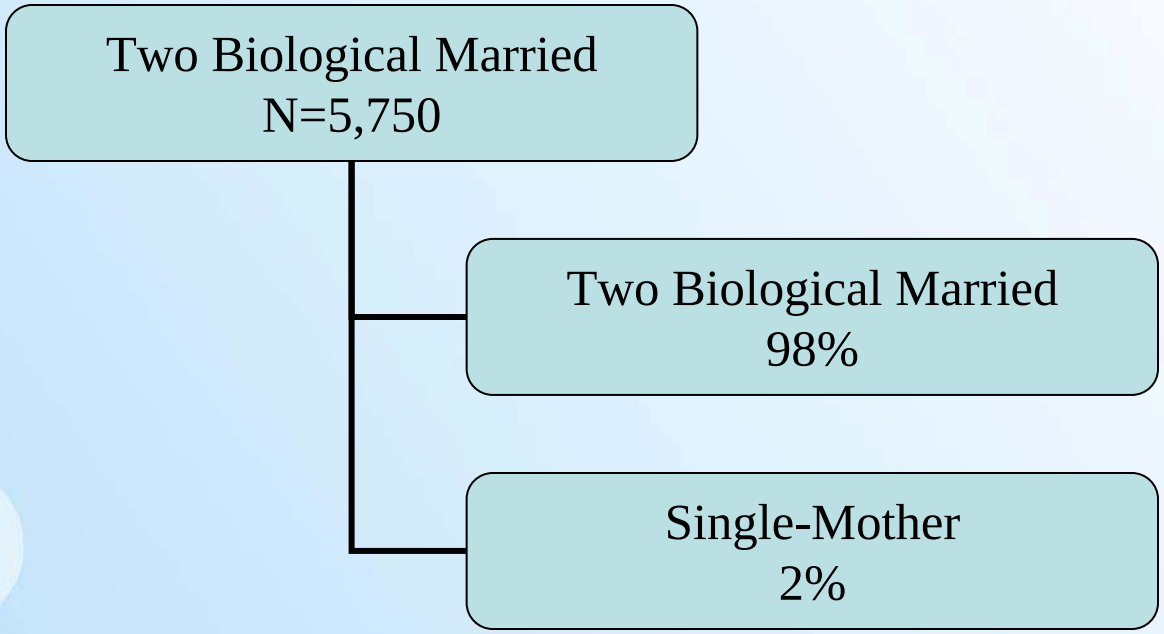
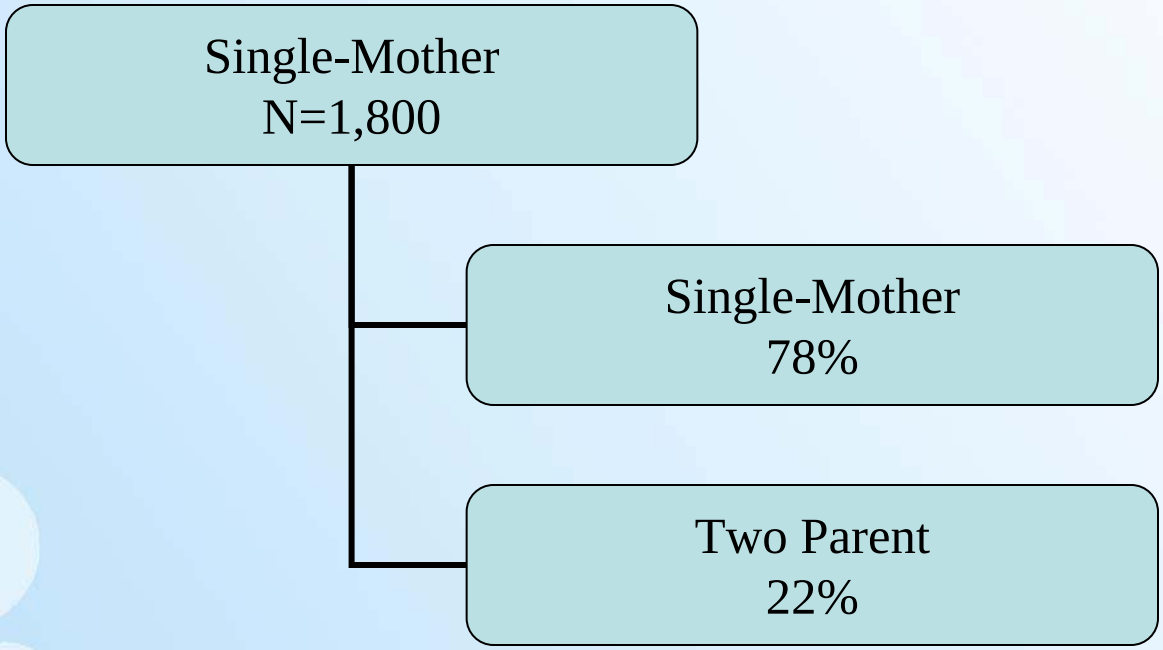

Two Biological Cohabiting
N=1,150
Two Biological Cohabiting
70%
Two Biological Married
12%
Single-Mother
18%


Two Biological Married
N=5,750
Two Biological Married
98%
Single-Mother
2%


Single-Mother
N=1,800
Single-Mother
78%
Two Parent
22%

OLS Models Predicting Well-being

- Model 1: Family Structure
- Model 2: Model 1 + Child and Family Characteristics
- Model 3: Model 2 + Economic Resources
- Model 4: Model 2 + Parenting Resources
- Model 5: All variables

Summary of Findings

- Mental Development at 9 mos
  - No variation by family structure
- Motor Development at 9 mos
  - No variation by family structure
- NCATS total score at 9 mos
  - Model 1: Two bio cohab and single-mother families score lower than two bio married
  - Model 5: Two bio cohab score lower than both two bio married and single-mother families
  - Difference between single-mother and two bio married families accounted for by economic resources

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Mental Development, 24 mos

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Family Structure					
TwoBioCoh - TwoBioMar	-2.81**#	-1.49†	-0.89	-1.50†	-0.91
TwoBioCoh - SingleMom	-1.85†$	0.18$	0.51$	0.34$	0.65$
TwoBioMar - SingleMom	-1.30	-1.30	-0.78	-0.93	-0.45
SingleMom -TwoParent	-2.03**	-0.36	0.12	-0.25	0.18
Stable Single Mother	-4.04***	-1.16*	-0.68	-1.01*	-0.57
Stable Two Bio Coh	-4.75***#$	-2.00***$	-1.38*$	-1.86***$	-1.28*$
Stable Two Bio Mar (ref)					

and $ superscripts indicate coefficients are significantly different, p < .10

†p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. N=8,500

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Motor Development, 24 mos

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Family Structure					
TwoBioCoh - TwoBioMar	-0.48	-0.35	-0.26	-0.34	-0.25
TwoBioCoh - SingleMom	-0.09	-0.33	-0.29	-0.27	-0.24
TwoBioMar - SingleMom	-0.07	-0.63	-0.58	-0.50	-0.46
SingleMom -TwoParent	0.43	0.20	0.26	0.24	0.30
Stable Single Mother	-0.38	-0.58*	-0.53*	-0.53†	-0.48†
Stable Two Bio Coh	-0.71**	-0.55*	-0.47†	-0.50†	-0.43
Stable Two Bio Mar (ref)					

†p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. N=8,500

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Discussion

- 14% of 9 month olds live in two biological cohabiting parent families
- There are few differences by family structure in child development at 9 months
  - No differences in mental or motor development
  - Children in two biological cohabiting families perform worse on the NCATS than those in either two biological married or single-mother families

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Discussion (cont)

- All types of family stability are not equally beneficial
  - Stable cohabiting families are associated with smaller gains in mental development than stable married families
- Some family transitions can be beneficial
  - Children who move from cohabitation to a single-mother family experience larger gains in mental development than those in stable cohabiting families
- The impact of most family transitions is neutral
  - E.g., formalizing a cohabiting family through marriage offers no appreciable benefit relative to remaining in a stable cohabiting family

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Limitations

- A few children may have experienced family transitions prior to the 9 month interview or between interviews
- Absence of significant differences between types of transitions on changes in development may reflect low statistical power
- These analyses document associations; causal conclusions are not warranted

Future Directions

- Subsequent waves of data will yield additional transitions and allow more statistically rigorous analyses of family instability and child development
- Other domains of child well-being should be considered
- The role of fathers and the quality of the parental relationship may be important

Take Home Message

- A growing share of young children is born to cohabiting parents and these families are unstable
- Extended time in this family form at an early age is linked to slowed cognitive growth and language acquisition
- Researchers should distinguish two biological cohabiting from two biological married parent families