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POVERTY

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Family Complexity and Fluidity, Child and Family Wellbeing, and Public Policy

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Wisconsin Future of the Family Commission

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Families Are Increasingly Complex and Fluid

- Both the family forms that individuals commonly experience and norms re: parental roles have changed over time: resident (married or cohabiting), nonresident, semi-resident, biological, social, and same sex parents; resident and nonresident full-, half-, and step-/social-siblings; living apart/together, together/apart; adult children living with parents, etc.
- 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; the majority of children born to unmarried parents will live in complex families and experience family fluidity (family structure transitions) and parental multi-partnered fertility
- Increased diversity and fluidity in family forms means many children are exposed to multiple types of parents/parental figures and that both children and adults are increasingly likely to take on multiple family roles, within and across family units/households, simultaneously and over time (particularly since shared physical custody has also increased substantially over time)
- Parental repartnering is increasingly common: Approximately 1/3 of children in the U.S. will spend time living with a parent to whom they are not biologically related

Family Complexity and Fluidity Have Important Implications

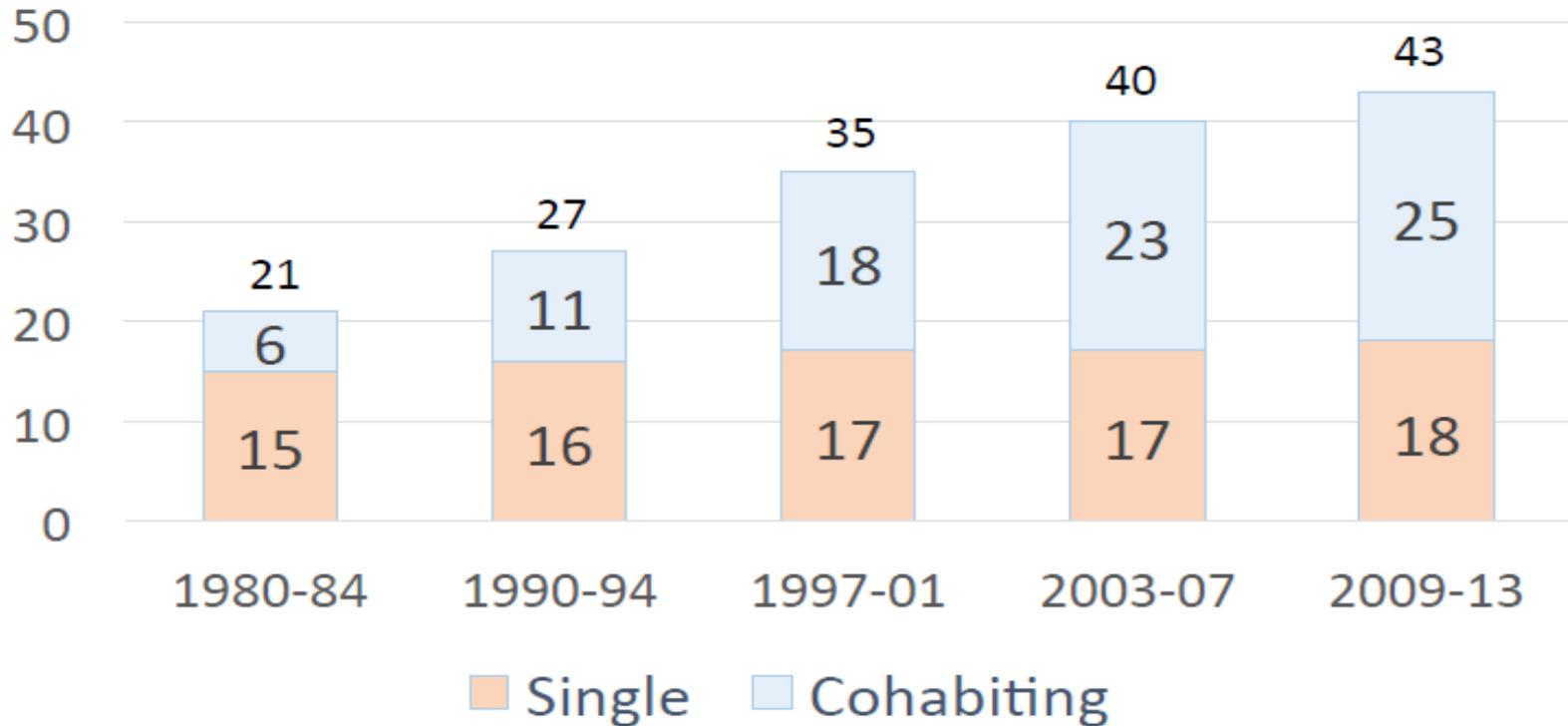
- Disadvantaged groups are especially likely to experience nonmarital births, father absence, and subsequent family complexity and fluidity
- Differential selection into family types/experiences has implications for intergenerational transfer of human capital and inequality in the United States
- Levels of formal and informal support by non-custodial parents (generally fathers) are related to whether parents have other partners and children
- Family structure transitions and complexity are associated with adverse developmental outcomes for children and have important implications for intergenerational transmission of inequality
 - 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

Outline

- 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. How does the current policy landscape address family fluidity and complexity?
- IV. Putting it all together: Considerations and implications for public policy

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

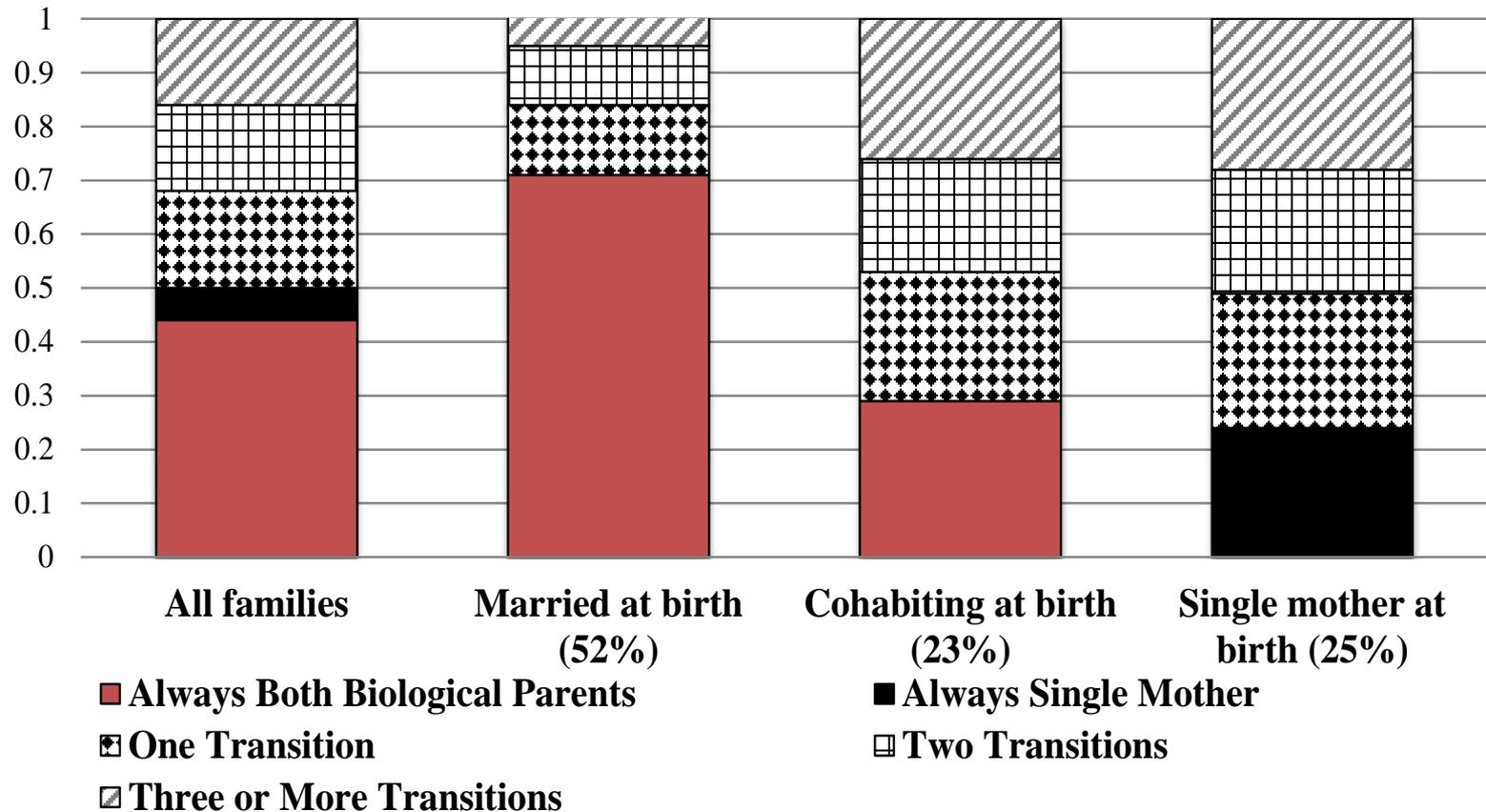
The Total: Percentage Of Births To All *Unmarried Mothers.*



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

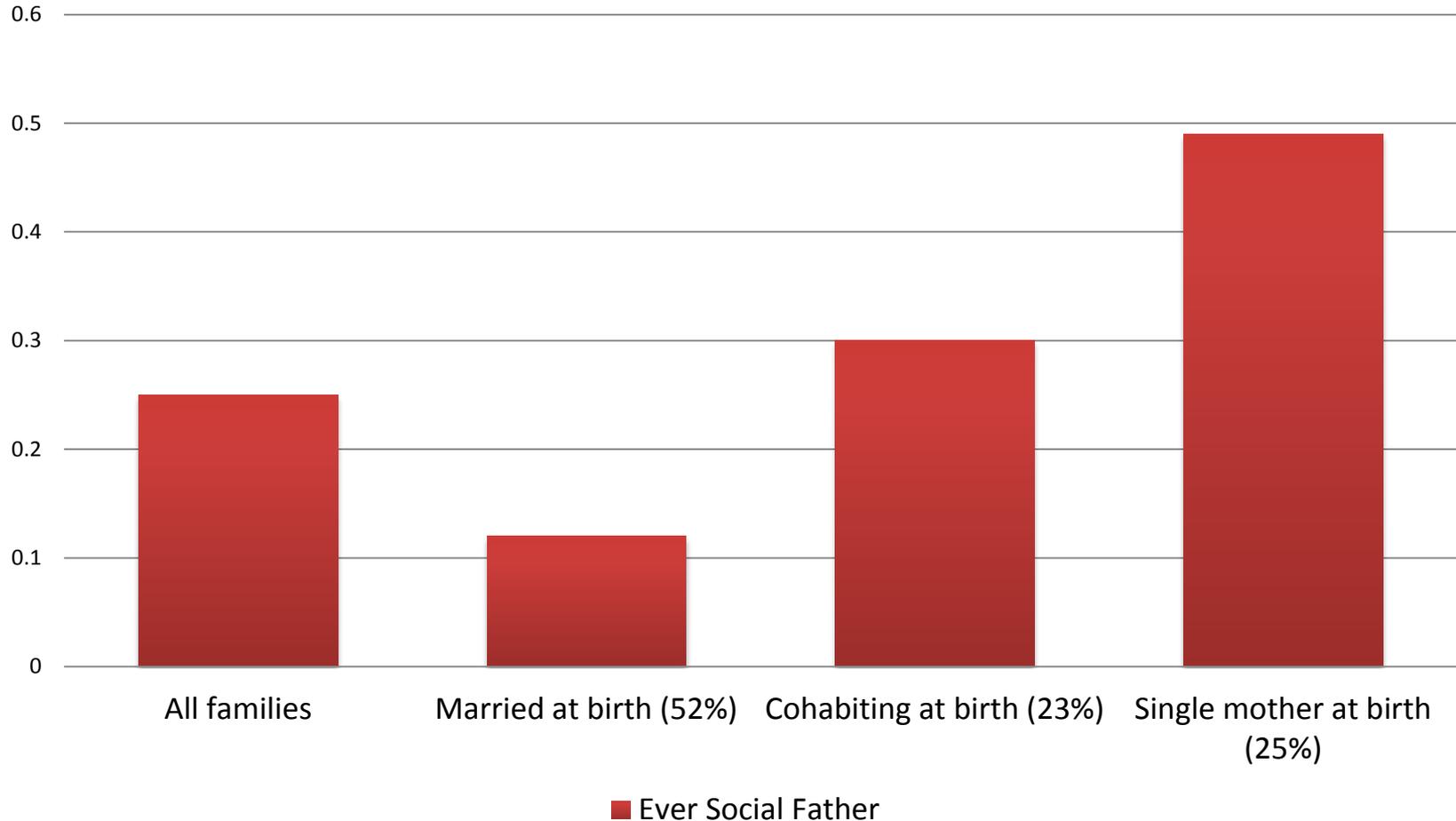
Family Structure Transitions Are Common

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



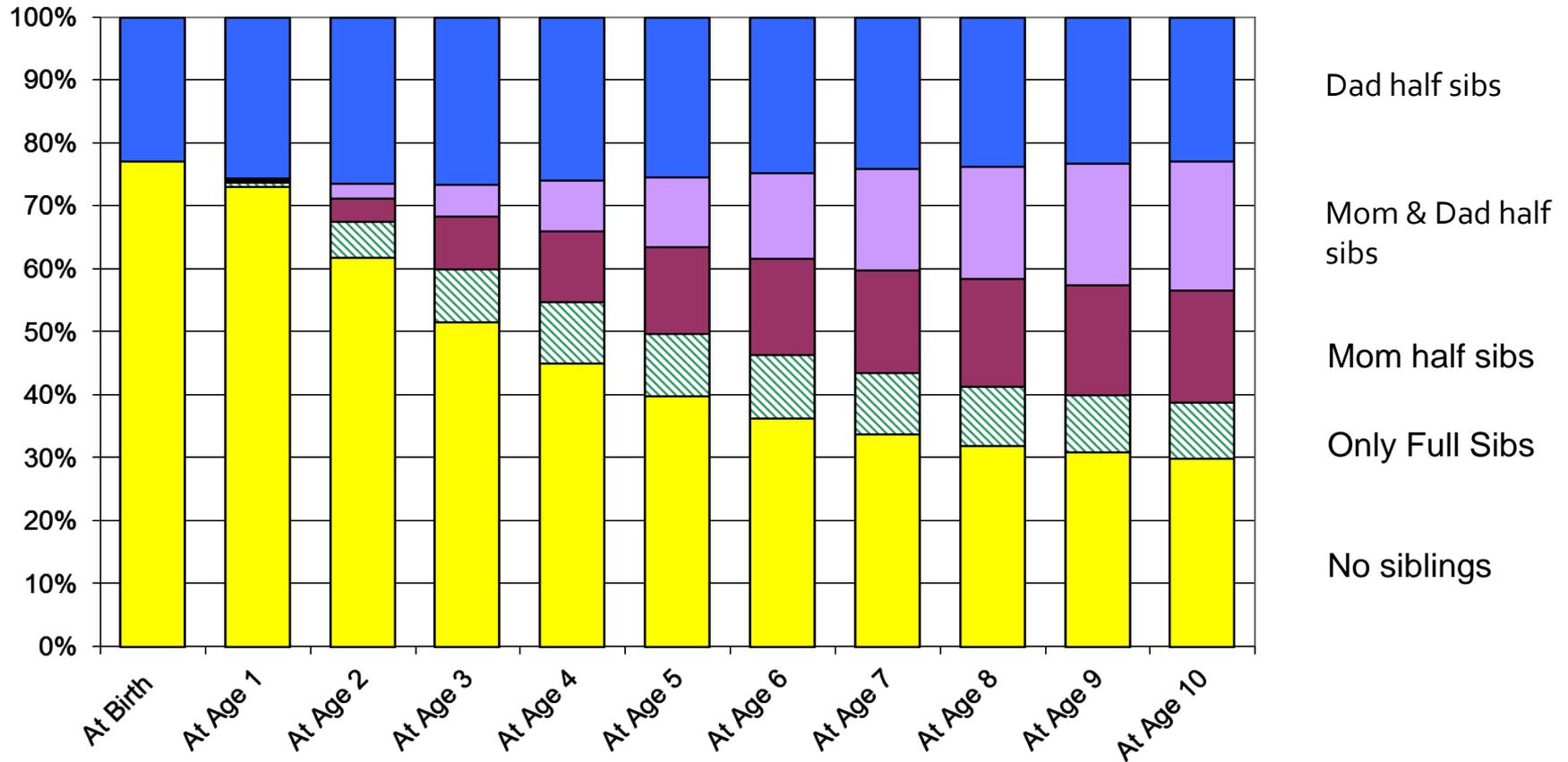
Source: Bzostek, S. H., & Berger, L. M (2016). Family structure experiences and child socioemotional development during the first nine years of life: Examining heterogeneity by family structure at birth. Manuscript, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Proportion Ever Living with a Social Father by Family Structure at Birth, weighted FFCW data birth to age 9



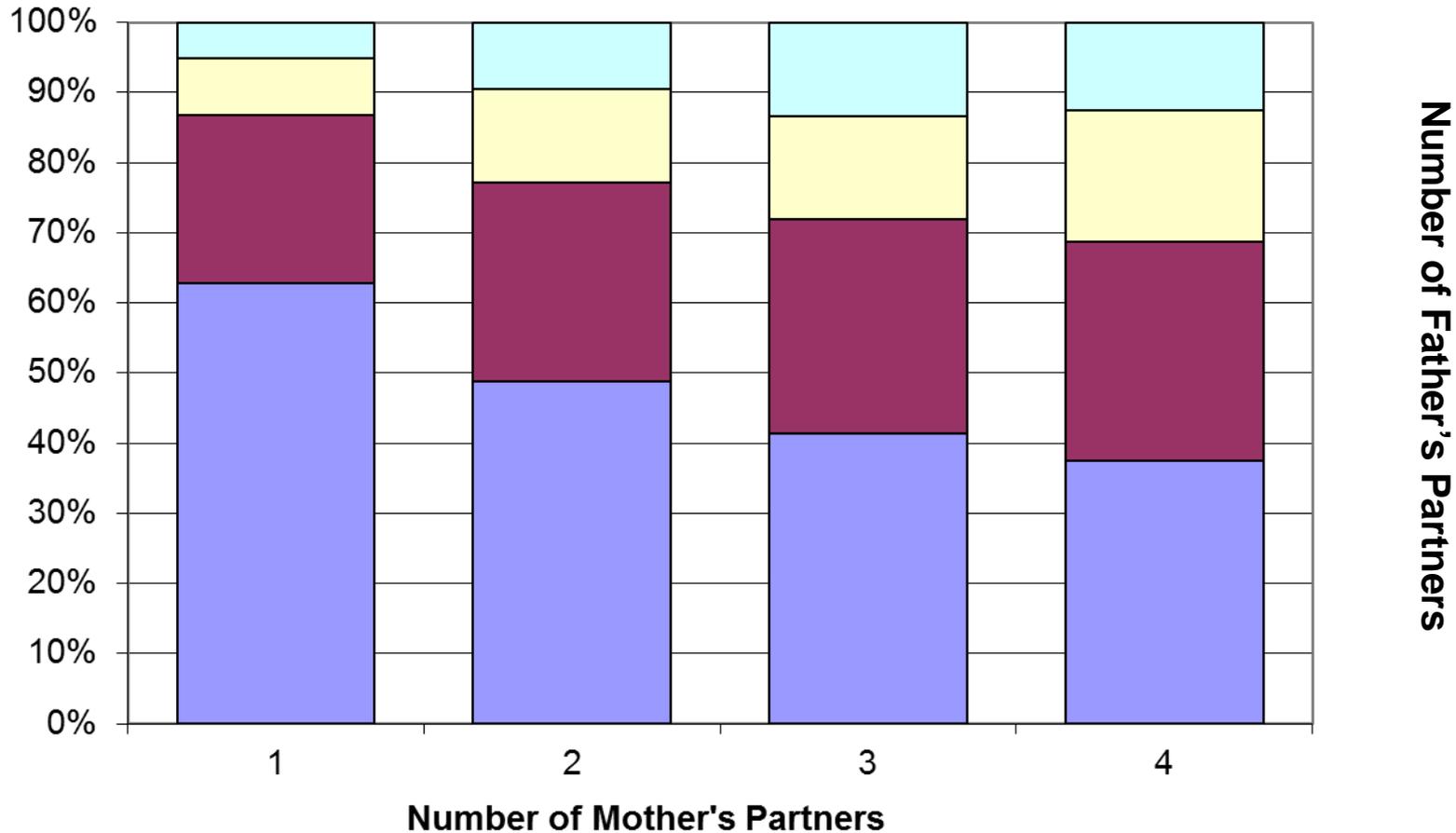
Source: Bzostek, S. H., & Berger, L. M (2016). Family structure experiences and child socioemotional development during the first nine years of life: Examining heterogeneity by family structure at birth. Manuscript, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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.

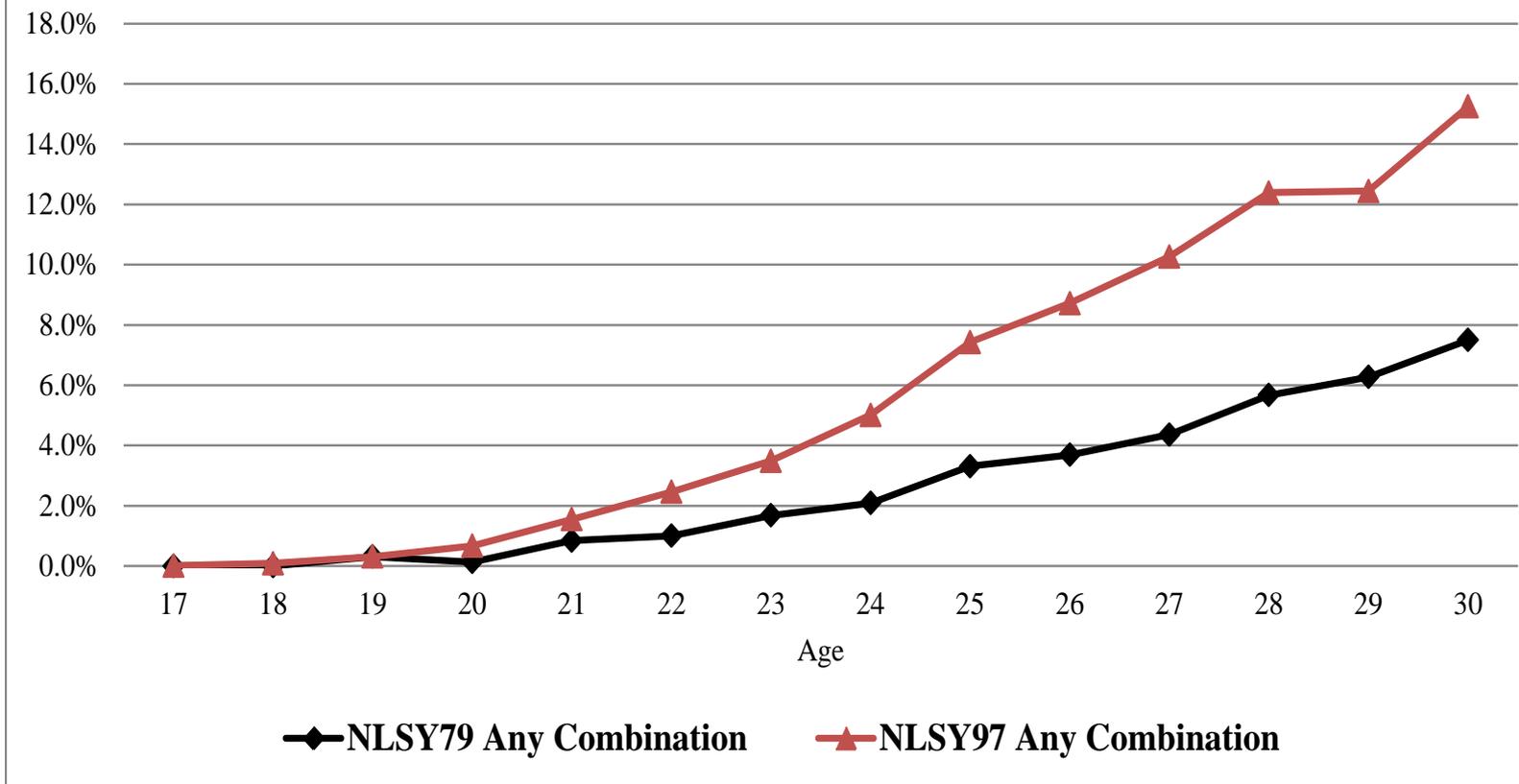
Number of Father's Birth Partners by Number of Mother's Birth Partners



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.

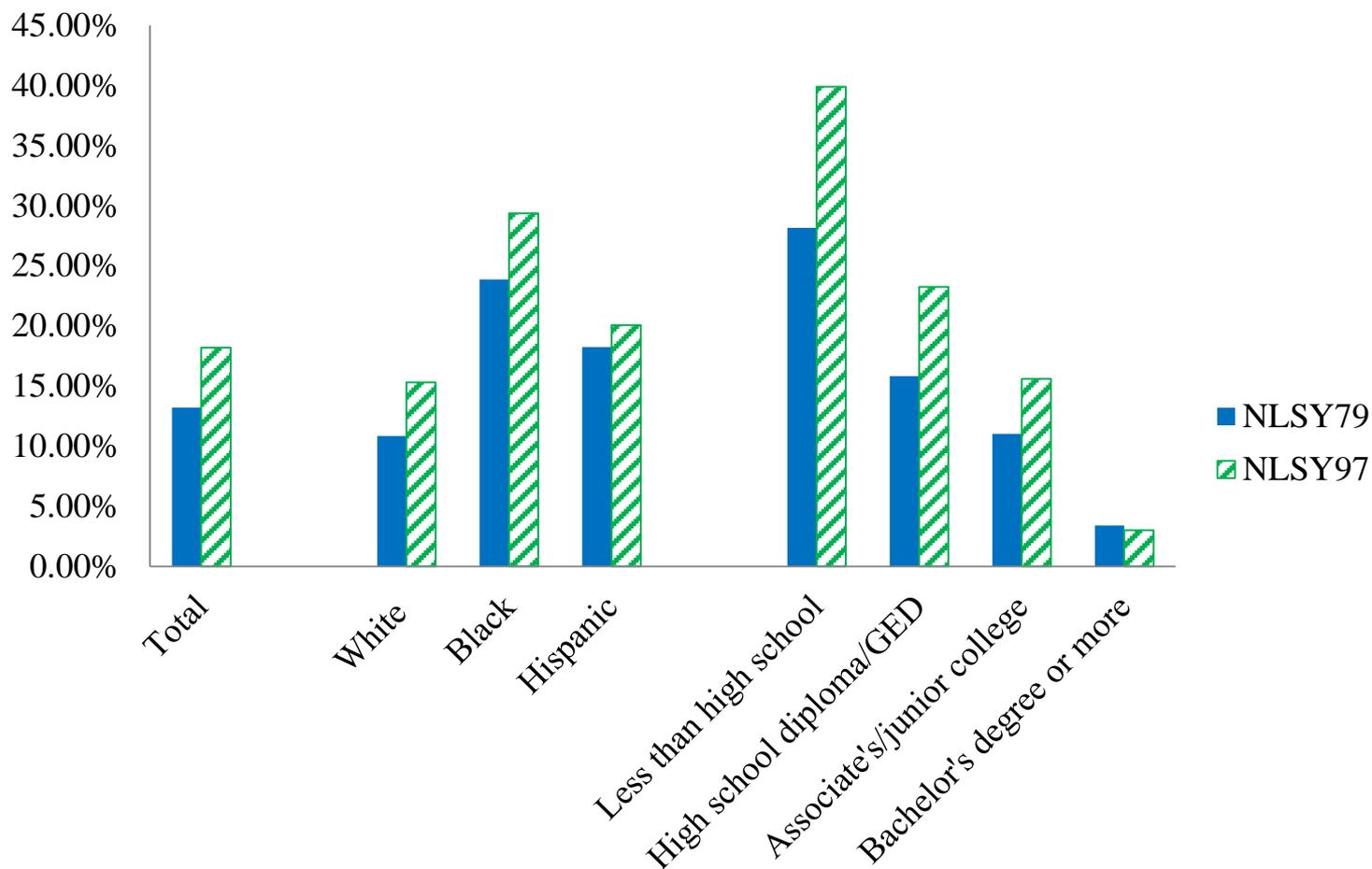
Prevalence of Multiple Parenting Roles in Two-Cohorts of Young Men

**The Probability of Simultaneously Occupying More than One Parental Role Has Roughly Doubled Over The Last 20 Years
(NLYS79&97; Men)**



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.

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

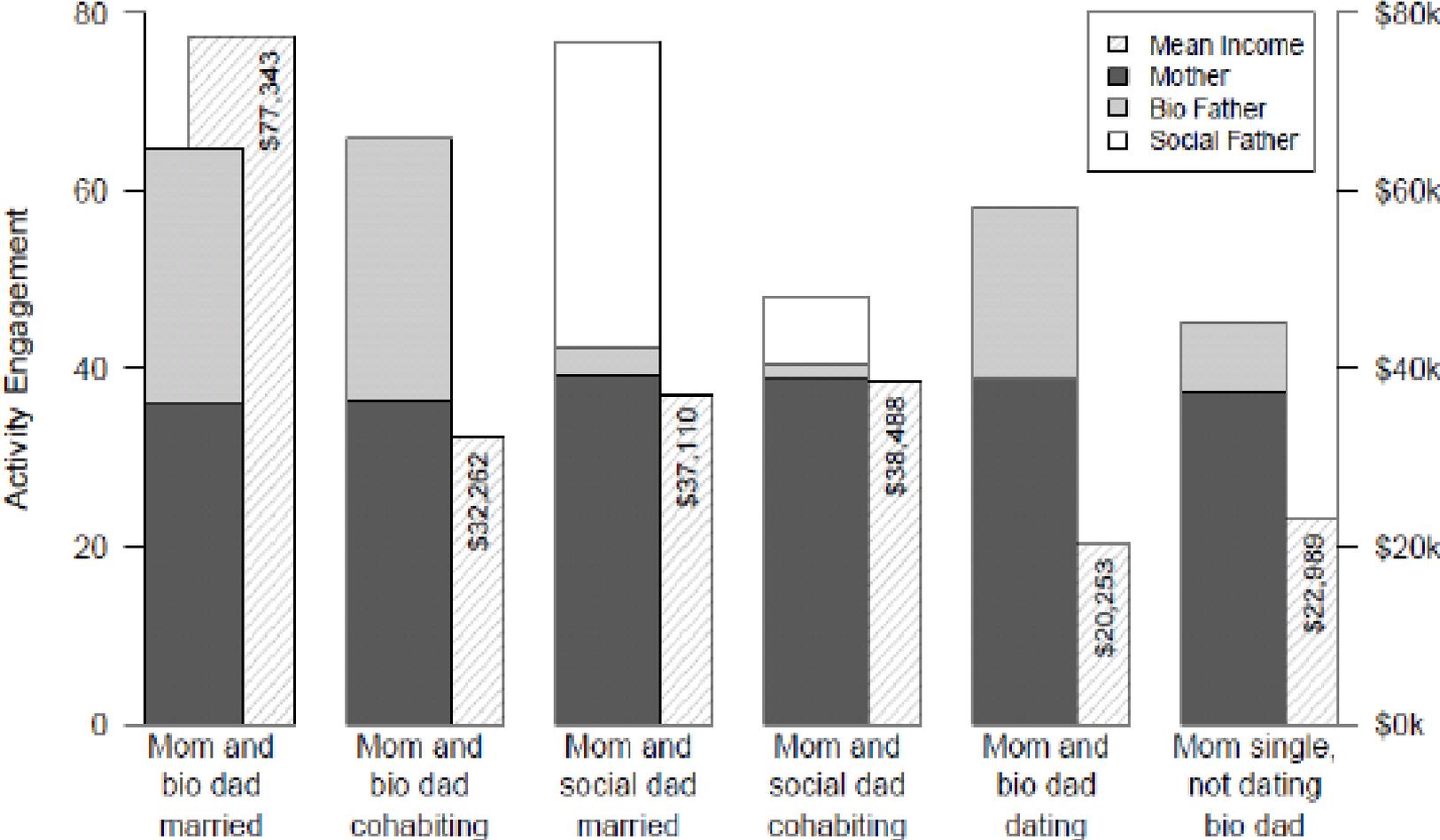


Source: Berger, L. M., & Bzostek, S. H. (2014). Young adults' roles as partners and parents in the context of family complexity. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 654(1), 87-109.

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

Resources and Investments Available to Children Differ by Family Type

Figure 1. Activity Engagement and Income by Family Type (unadjusted)



Source: Carlson, M. J., & Berger, L. M. (2013). What kids get from parents: Packages of parental involvement across complex family forms. *The Social service review*, 87(2), 213.

Incongruent identity/role expectations suggest poorer family functioning in the context of family complexity and fluidity

- We arrange our identities (the meanings that define us in our various social roles) hierarchically by level of importance (salience) within a given context and point in time
- We evaluate our actions and interactions relative to our own expectations and expectations of others; identity verification is psychologically beneficial to the individual and also strengthens group bonds
- Identity conflicts, incongruities, or discrepancies—within or between individuals—are associated with psychological discomfort, ongoing (dis)tress, anxiety, and internal conflict, and decreased self-esteem
- There is likely to be greater congruity of identity meanings and less identity conflict in non-complex families and for individuals occupying only one family role than in complex families and for individuals occupying multiple family roles
- Transitions in family configuration necessitate changes in identities and associated adjustments in identity roles and hierarchies
- Difficulty achieving identity verification implies that complex families will exhibit greater psychological discomfort and poorer family functioning than non-complex families
- Empirical evidence suggests more stress and conflict in complex families

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 adverse child outcomes:

- 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. How does the current policy landscape address family fluidity and complexity?

Family Complexity: Implications for Policy

- Trends in family complexity and fluidity: (1) make it difficult to categorize families and develop policies, and (2) necessitate a substantial shift in how we approach families, as well as familial roles and responsibilities
- Multiple actors, roles, and relationships within and across family ‘units’ now require a substantial shift in how we approach families and family functioning, as well as familial roles and responsibilities
 - Biological, marital, and co-residential ties (which to privilege? when?)
 - 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
 - Relevant to any policy that links eligibility or benefit level to family membership
- Relevant policies span economic and behavioral goals
 - Public and private income support/transfers: adequacy, affordability, equity
 - Fertility and family formation decisions
 - Healthy parenting practices/noncustodial parent (father) involvement
- Policies were designed in an era of less complexity and when disadvantaged men had better earnings potential
- Child rather than ‘family unit’ as base for some benefits may help (but could adversely affect adults)

Approaches to Custodial and Noncustodial Parents

- Custodial parents have access to multiple supports and services in the tax code and social welfare arena: CTC, EITC, WIC, TANF, Child Support Enforcement, SNAP, MA, (sometimes) housing assistance
- Noncustodial parents generally do not; they are typically served and categorized as non-parents rather than as parents
- Noncustodial parents' primary interactions with government consist of: courts (family, criminal); child support enforcement; unemployment insurance (?); employment services (?)
 - These programs and policies offer limited direct economic supports or services and are more heavily oriented around mandated behaviors
- Equitable and parallel policies for custodial and noncustodial parents may be more appropriate given that noncustodial parents are also expected to contribute to childrearing

IV. Putting it all together: Considerations and implications for public policy

Some Guiding Principles

- 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

Promising Direction #1: Prevent Family Complexity

- The vast majority of nonmarital births—73% of those to women under 30—are unintended; the majority of these parents will break up
- Marriage promotion has not been particularly effective
- Recent research suggests that making long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs) widely easily accessible to all women *seeking family planning services* may be a game changer
 - 75% of women in the St. Louis Contraceptive CHOICE project selected LARCs when they were explained and offered for free
 - Those who chose LARCs were 22 times less likely to experience an unintended pregnancy over the next three years
 - The Colorado Family Planning Initiative found that increased access to LARCs was associated with a 27% decrease in births to disadvantaged young women (unmarried, younger than 25, less than a high school education) over a two-year period
- 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)

Promising Direction #2: Support 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)

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THANK YOU!