Redefining Single-Parent Families: Cohabitation and Changing Family Reality*

Larry L. Bumpass
Center for Demography and Ecology
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison, WI 53706-1393

R. Kelly Raley
Carolina Population Center
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, NC 27516-3997

This paper explores the implications, for the measured prevalence and duration of mother-only families, of marked changes in nonmarital fertility, unmarried cohabitation, and homeleaving and re-entry. Throughout, estimates are compared on the basis of marital definitions and definitions including cohabitation. The duration of the first single-parent spell appears to have increased under the marital definition, but declines substantially when cohabitations are taken into account. A substantial proportion of single mothers have spent some time as single parents while in their parents' household. Hence we argue that definitions of single-parent families must be based on living arrangements rather than on the parents' marital status.

Single-parent families have become a major element of our family system; about half of both women and children spend some time in such families. We continue to make progress in understanding the consequences of single-parent experience for economic well-being and children's lifecourse development (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). Nonetheless, our measurement of single-parent families has become progressively less accurate because of marked changes in nonmarital fertility and unmarried cohabitation. In addition, extended-family arrangements require more attention to the distinction between single-parent families and single-parent households (Ghosh, Easterlin, and Macunovich 1993; Winkler 1993). This paper explores the implications of these trends for the estimation of the prevalence and duration of mother-only families as experienced by both women and children.

We begin by documenting the increasing proportion of single-parent families that are

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begun by childbirth, using a marital definition and a union definition that includes cohabitations as well as marriages. Then we examine trends in the duration of single-parent families according to these alternative definitions. Next, to further evaluate the extent to which one-parent families are not one-parent households, we estimate the levels and duration of residence in the mother's parental household. In the final section we summarize the implications of these trends—and incorporate time spent in extended-family households—by disaggregating the time spent by children in the early 1980s into family status components.

Nonmarital birth rates among whites have more than doubled at all ages since the mid-1970s (National Center for Health Statistics 1994)—an increase that could have profound implications for single-parent experience. It is likely that one-third of all children are now born to unmarried mothers. Nonresident fathers of unmarried births are even less likely than separated fathers to be involved with a child or to pay child support (Petersen and Nord 1990), and the potential for long durations in this status is at its greatest. To illustrate this latter point, note that a single-parent family formed by a child's birth has twice as great a potential duration before the child is age 18 as one formed when the child is age 9. The consequences of increasing nonmarital fertility for the duration of single-parent families depend on the relative rate of marriage after nonmarital birth compared with the rate after marital disruption (Teachman, Polonko, and Leigh 1987).

The transformation of cohabitation from a rare and socially disapproved behavior to the majority experience is no longer news. On a steady upward trajectory, almost half of all marriages were preceded by cohabitation when the first National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH1) was conducted over five years ago (Bumpass and Sweet 1989a); the proportion must be higher by now. Even so, we have yet to come fully to terms with the implications of this changed behavior for our definition of families. This paper joins other recent work in pursuing that objective (Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet 1994; Bumpass and Sweet 1989b; Ghosh et al. 1993; Winkler 1993). When cohabitation is ignored, two-parent unmarried families are classified erroneously as single-parent families, an inadvertent consequence of procedures developed before the explosion in cohabitation (Bianchi 1995). Whatever the social and economic consequences of being unmarried, children born to cohabiting couples are in two-parent families, and children of divorce move into a stepfamily when their mother begins to cohabit (Bumpass et al. 1994). Forty percent of cohabiting couples in 1987–1988 had children present (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991). Many of these unions may well be tenuous, but that in itself is not a telling distinction because many new marriages are also likely to be disrupted.

We have noted recently that the likelihood of a woman's returning to live with her parents after marriage has doubled over recent marriage cohorts (Bumpass and Sweet 1992). Because some of these women have had children, this change has clear implications for the nature of single-parent experience. The marked upturn in unmarried childbearing, however, is even more important in this regard because many of these births may occur to young women who have not yet left home. This latter point is obvious because of the young ages of many unmarried mothers, and it is a central point in the debate about whether teen unmarried motherhood is an adaptive strategy among black women (Geronimus 1992; Hoffman, Foster, and Furstenberg 1993). Nonetheless, most treatments of unmarried childbearing implicitly assume that these births create mother-only households.

### DATA AND METHODS

**National Survey of Families and Households**

The NSFH, conducted during 1987 and 1988, is a national sample survey covering a wide variety of issues on American family life. Interviews were conducted with 13,017