

Stepfamilies in the United States: A Fact Sheet

Stepfamilies differ from families in which both parents are the biological parents of the children.

Background

Stepfamily dynamics

This fact sheet is based on the latest nationally available information regarding stepfamilies.

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Stepfamilies face unique dynamics that can contribute to an increased risk of divorce (Adler-Baeder, Erickson & Higginbotham, 2007). Factors such as negotiating parenting roles between biological parents and stepparents and relationships between stepparents and stepchildren can strain the marital quality of stepfamily couples. The dynamics of the cohabiting stepfamily may mimic married stepfamilies in the way in which family roles are assumed and in the financial and emotional contributions that are made to the other partner's children. Thus cohabiting families may face some of the same challenges faced by married stepfamilies (Stewart, 2001). Practical considerations to remarriage include help with raising children and help with legal threats regarding children's custody.

Stepfamilies differ from families in which both parents are the biological parents of the children because:

- Children often are members of two households.
- Stepfamily members have different family histories.
- Parent-child bonds are older than adult-partner (spousal) bonds.
- Stepfamilies begin after many losses and changes.
- Legal relationships between stepparent and stepchild are ambiguous or nonexistent.

Headlines/Trends

Because the divorce rates in the U.S. have remained stable over the past two decades at about 1 divorce for every two marriages, it is important to assess the stepfamily demographics in the U.S. and see how stepfamilies relate to marriage education, policy



and child well-being. Nearly 50% of marriages are a remarriage for at least one partner. About 75% of divorced women remarry within ten years. However, the likelihood of remarrying is reduced for those caring for children from a previous marriage, especially for women. In 1980, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that about 16.1% of married-couple households with children contained at least one stepchild under age 18. By 1990, this estimate had risen to 20%. Data on younger parents taken from the 1987-1988 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) shows that in married couples with a wife under age 35, about 11% were residential families with at least one stepchild under age. Clearly, the amount of stepfamilies in the United States is on the rise.

Existing information regarding stepfamilies comes from somewhat outdated data sets (Robertson, Adler-Baeder, Collins, DeMarco, Fein & Schramm, 2006), some of which are unable to capture a full count of stepfamilies. More national-level, contemporary research on stepfamilies is needed to provide:

- Better estimates of stepfamily prevalence today;
- Additional information on marital dissolution rates for stepfamilies and child outcomes for children in stepfamilies; and
- Details on similarities and differences between dynamics and challenges faced by stepfamilies of varying racial and ethnic groups.

Expanding on what is currently known about stepfamilies will allow for the identification of additional demographic and descriptive data to drive the development of intervention strategies and best practices to support sustainability and better outcomes for stepfamilies.

Difference by Subgroup

Stepparents

There are three types of stepfamilies: stepfather families, stepmother families, and families in which both parents are stepparents.

- Stepfather families comprise about 8.4% of U.S. married couples of childbearing age (Robertson et al, 2006-2008 ACF Data).
- Stepmother families encompass 1.4% of all U.S. married couples of childbearing age (Robertson et al, 2006-2008 ACF Data)
- Families in which both parents are stepparents comprise 0.8% of all married couples of childbearing age (Robertson et al, 2006-2008 ACF Data).

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Nonresidential and Cohabiting Stepfamilies

Certain analyses expand the definition of stepfamilies from married-couple families to include *nonresidential stepfamilies* and/or *cohabiting couples* with children. A typical example of this arrangement is when a biological father divorces, remarries, and his children do not live with him and his new wife. Approximately 59% of stepparents were cohabiting stepparents or stepparents with biological children living outside of the home (Stewart, 2001).

- Data show that approximately 9% of U.S. married couples of childbearing age headed stepfamily households with nonresidential stepchildren (Robertson et al, 2006).

- Data also show that of all stepparents, half lived with their stepchildren and half did not.
- About 2% of stepparents lived with some of their stepchildren, and had other stepchildren who lived elsewhere (Stewart, 2001).
- At least one of the husbands' biological children did not live in the household (6.6%).
- 1.4% of nonresidential stepfamilies were those in which at least one of the mothers' children did not live in the household (Robertson et al, 2006).
- Both the mother and father had at least one child that did not live in the household accounted for 1.2% of U.S. married couple households (Robertson et al, 2006).

2002, the percentage of stepfamilies did not increase significantly for any racial group except for Hispanics. Conversely, the percentage of cohabiting parents did increase significantly across all racial groups (Wherry and Finegold, 2004).

- In 2002, 8.9% of white children, 7.5% of African-American children, and 7.4% of Hispanic children lived in a stepfamily household comprised of a biological (or adoptive parent) and the parent's spouse (Wherry and Finegold, 2004).
- In 2006, 5% of Hispanic children, 6% of African American children, and 8% of non-Hispanic white children were living with stepparents which included both married and cohabiting couples (Robertson et al, 2006).

Children

It is estimated that between 10 and 20% of U.S. children reside in stepfamilies.

Compared to children living with both biological parents, children in stepfamilies tend to have more struggles with behavior problems, emotional well-being, and academic achievement.

- In 2004, it was estimated that 10% of children under age 18 residing in two-parent families are living with a biological parent and a stepparent (Kreider, 2007).
- In 1990, it was estimated that approximately 20% of U.S. children under age 18 lived in stepfamily households (1990 U.S. Census).
- The 1980 U.S. Census showed that approximately 19% of children under age 18 lived in stepfamilies.

The percentage of children living in stepfamilies does not vary greatly across racial groups, although African Americans and Hispanics are less likely to remarry after a divorce. The National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) data show that between 1997 and

Compared to children living with both biological parents, children in stepfamilies tend to have more struggles with behavior problems, emotional well-being, and academic achievement. However, overall these differences are small, and may disappear when factors such as family income and length of time since the remarriage occurred are considered. The increased financial resources resulting from remarriage help children overcome some struggles. Parental monitoring, support, and attention can also help children adjust. Changes accompanying remarriage, such as moving to a new home and attending a new school, tend to make it harder for children to adjust to remarriage. Teens tend to have a harder time adjusting to their parents' remarriages than do younger children.

- **Emotional and Mental Wellness:** Compared to children in first-marriage families, stepchildren show more signs of depression and are at greater risk for developing emotional problems (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000).
- **Risky Behaviors:** Adolescent stepchildren are more frequently engaged in drug and alcohol use and sexual activity as compared to children living with both biological parents (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000).

Stepchildren have lower school performance, on average, than children living with both parents (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000). Stepchildren also have higher dropout rates, lower school attendance and lower graduation or GED rates (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000).

Definitions

Stepfamilies are created through many different circumstances. They can result from the remarriage of one or both parent or through a first marriage with children from a non-marital relationship. Additionally, some children live with their parents and their parents' partners; this family situation can be categorized as a stepfamily without a legal marriage. While most resident stepfamilies consist of a mother and stepfather, some stepfamilies encompass a father and stepmother. Other stepfamilies include biological children from both partners. Finally, a child may be a part of a nonresidential stepfamily, in which case the child resides primarily with one biological parent but spends some time with the other biological parent and that parent's partner.

Due to the variations in how stepfamilies are defined and how stepfamily data is collected, stepfamily estimates differ across research studies. Most stepfamily research was conducted in the 1980s, which makes it a challenge to determine how many stepfamilies exist today. Finally, researchers have faced challenges in collecting data on stepfamilies since some parents do not identify themselves as stepparents; researchers have found that some families view being a stepfamily as a stigma and do not identify themselves as such.

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It is important to note that this area of research includes many inconsistencies due to the various definitions of stepfamilies used in data collection. For instance, the U.S. Census Bureau defines a stepfamily as "a married-couple family household with at least one child under age 18 who is a stepchild¹ of the householder." Other researchers classify unmarried, cohabiting couples with children as stepfamilies² while some consider homes where children only spend part of their time with a parent and their partner (nonresidential stepparents) as stepfamilies.

¹ The U.S. Census defines a stepchild as "a son or daughter through marriage, but not by birth) of the householder (U.S. Census, 2008)."

² Cohabiting stepparents are unmarried couples that share a residence where one partner has at least one biological child that is not the child of their partner.

Few datasets can capture all stepfamilies, regardless of the definition used. For example, the U.S. Census identifies children in relation to the householder (usually the person filling out the survey). Thus, a biological parent will identify her biological children as her own, and her spouse as her husband, but can not indicate which parent is the biological parent or stepparent of any or all of the children. The Census' American Community Survey, a major dataset used to provide the population estimates of states, counties and communities, has this limitation.

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