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# Family Complexity and Public Policy

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# Families Are Increasingly Complex and Fluid

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Family formation and parental role norms have changed over time

- Most children will not live with both biological parents their entire childhood
- 1/3 children will live with a parent to whom they are not biologically related
- Most children born to unmarried parents will experience
  - Changes in who is considered “family” and who lives in the household
  - Half-siblings when parents have children with other partners

Increased diversity and fluidity leads to

- Exposure to multiple parental figures
- Multiple family roles for children and adults within and across family units and households, and over time

# Family Complexity and Fluidity Have Important Implications

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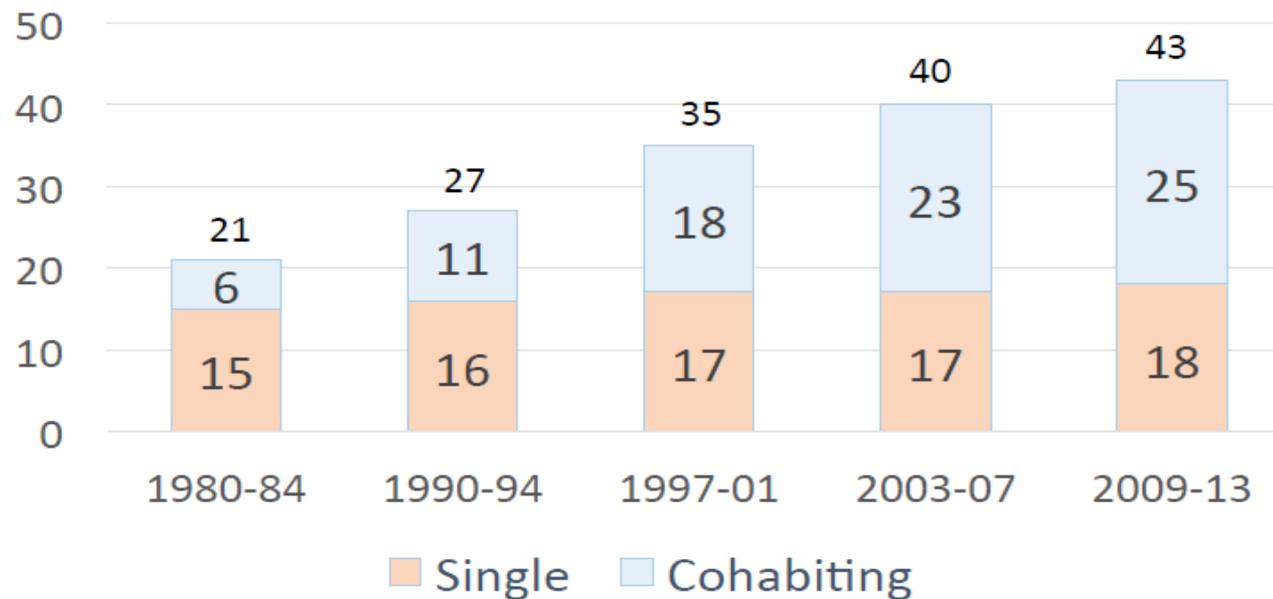
- Complexity and fluidity are especially common for disadvantaged (less educated) families, who are more likely to experience nonmarital births, father absence, and births with multiple partners
- They may impact resources available to children
  - Formal and informal support by noncustodial parents
- They are associated with adverse outcomes for children
- These consequences may be intergenerational
- Most policies have not been designed to account for family complexity
  - E.g., eligibility for and distribution of food assistance, tax credits, child support, health care coverage, income support/welfare

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

# Births to unmarried (cohabiting) mothers have increased dramatically over time

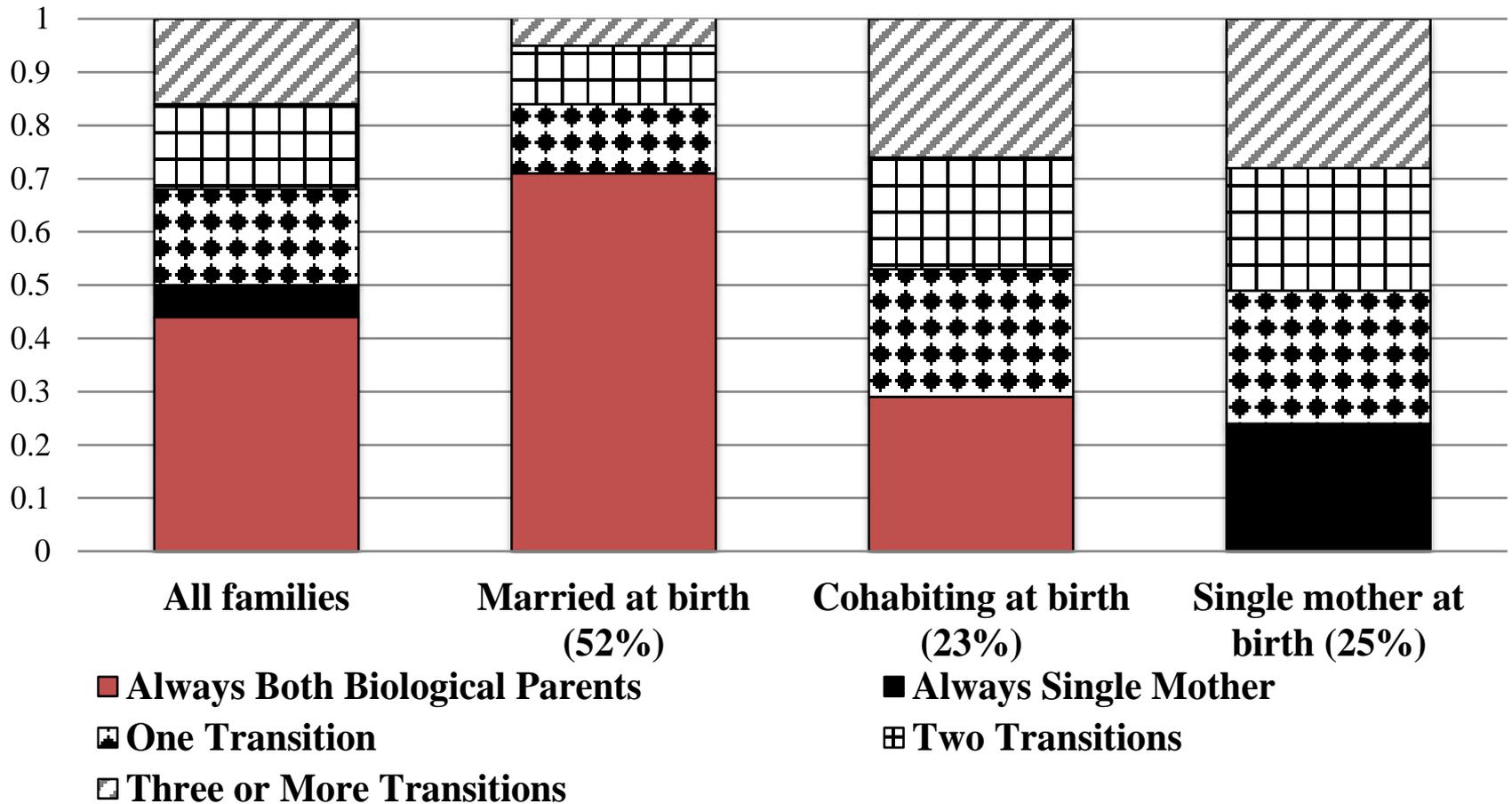
The Total: Percentage Of Births To All *Unmarried Mothers.*



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

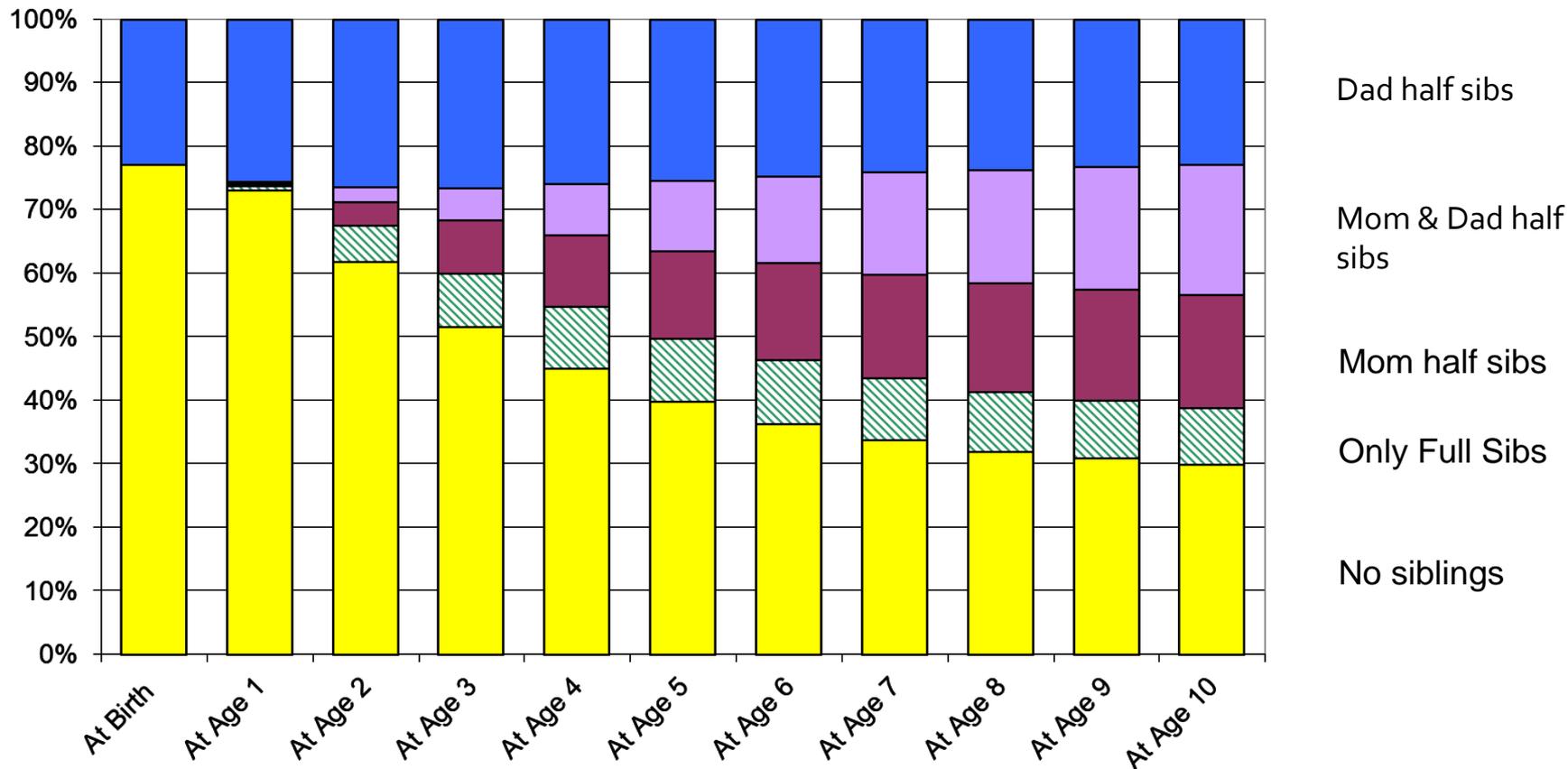
# Family Structure Transitions Are Common

(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.

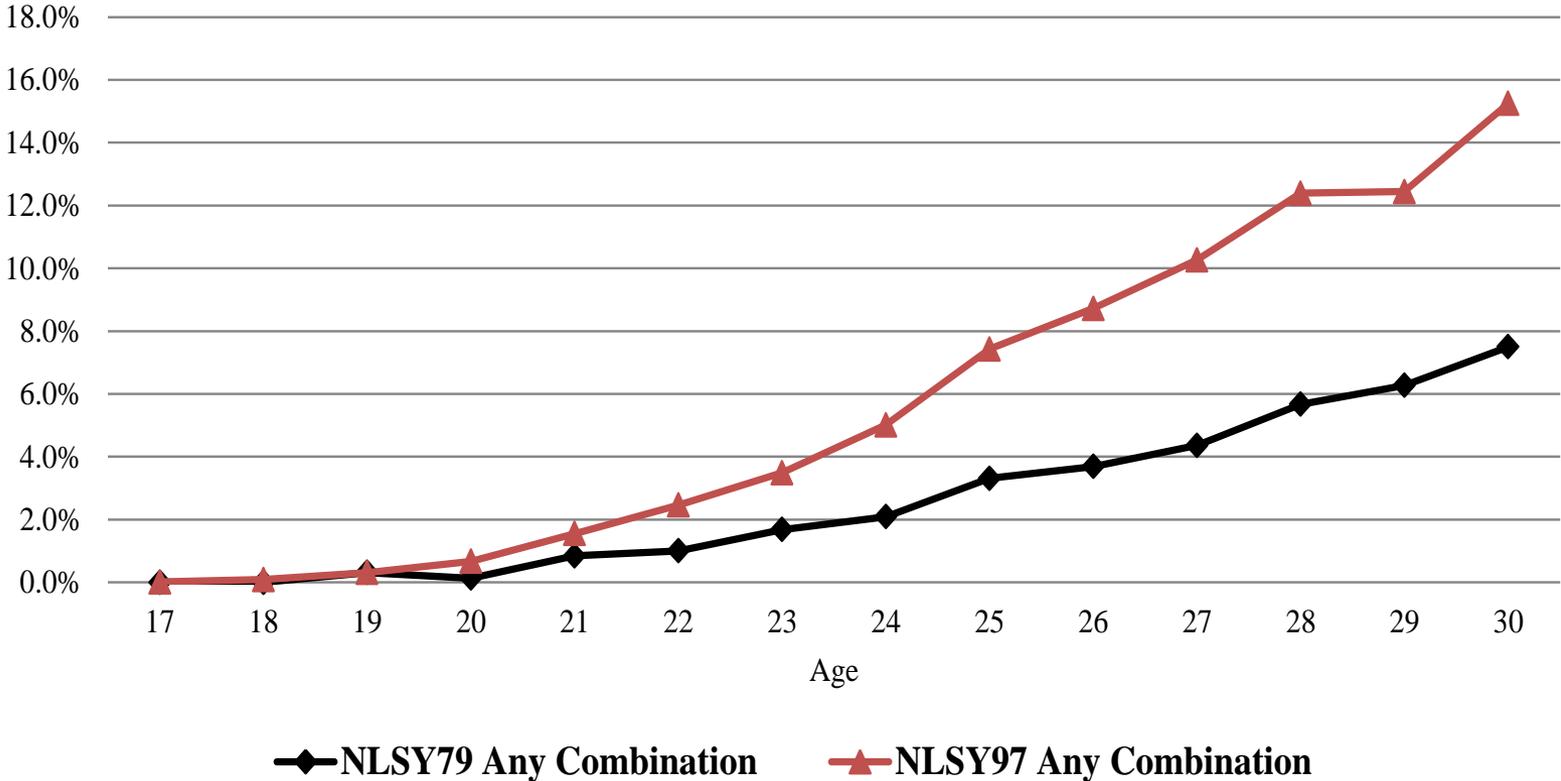
# Most children born to unmarried parents will be part of complex families



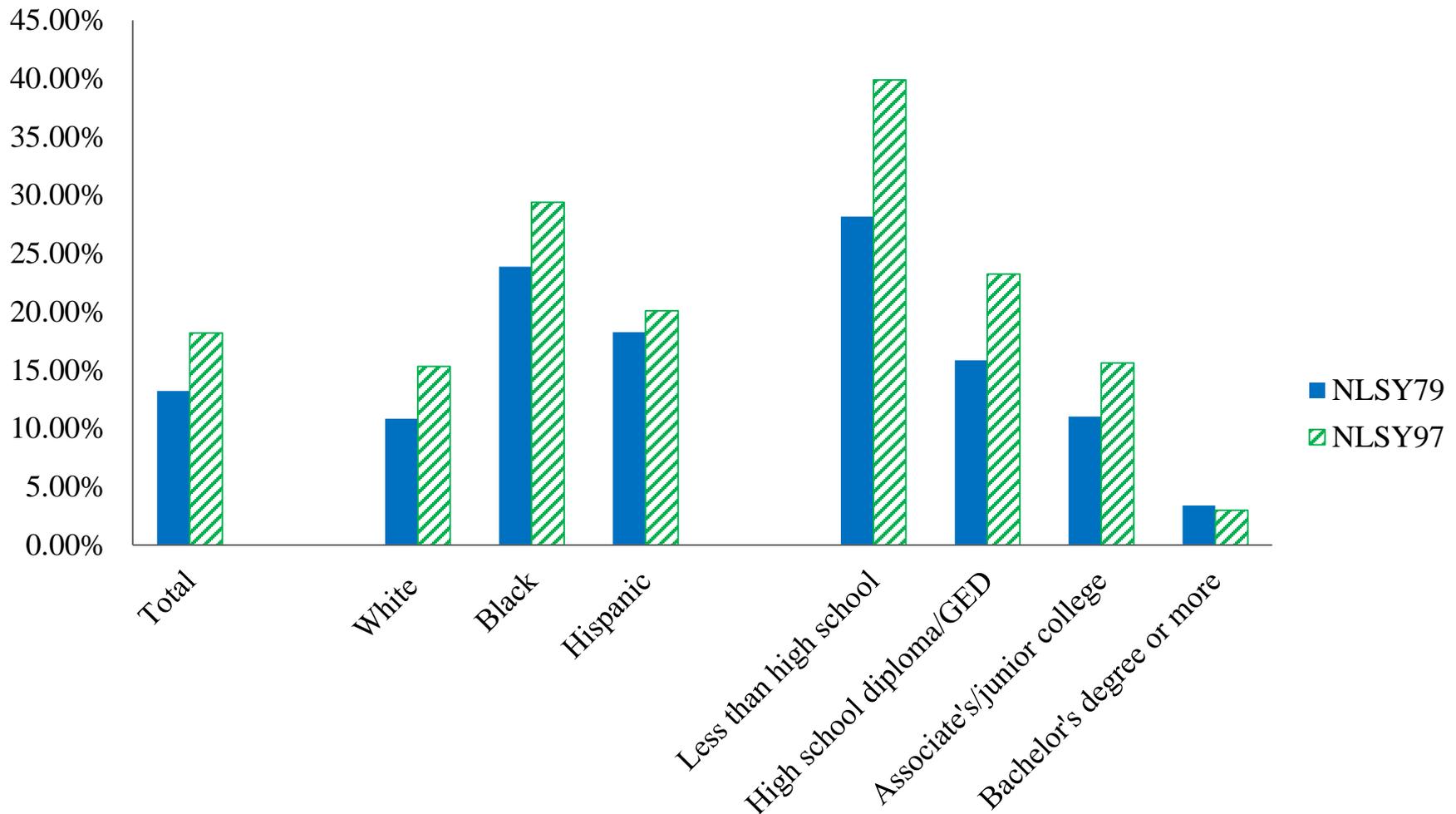
Source: Cancian, M., Meyer, D. R., & Cook, S. T. (2011). The evolution of family complexity from the perspective of nonmarital children. *Demography*, 48(3), 957-982.

# Parenting in multiple family units and with diverse relationships is now common

**The Probability of Simultaneously Occupying More than One Parental Role Has Roughly Doubled Over The Last 20 Years**  
(NLSY79&97; Men)



# Having multiple parental roles has increased substantially for all but the most educated



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.

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## II. Considerations and Implications for Public Policy

# Policies Must Now Balance Many Factors

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- Economic and 'behavioral' goals
  - Fertility and family formation decisions
  - Public and private income support/transfers: adequacy, affordability, equity
  - Healthy parenting practices/Father involvement
- Multiple actors, roles, and relationships within and across family 'units' now matter
  - Biological, marital, and co-residential ties (which to privilege?)
  - Needs, capabilities, and well-being of mothers and fathers as well as children, particularly in a context of multiple-partner fertility
  - Fluidity in these factors over time

# Policies for Preventing Family Complexity

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- Most nonmarital births—73% of those to women under 30—are unintended; most of these parents will break up
- Returns to delaying child birth are substantial and 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)
- Three approaches to preventing family complexity:
  1. Abstinence Education
  2. Marriage Promotion
  3. Easy access to long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs) for women *seeking family planning services*

# To Support Contemporary Families Policies and Programs Should Now

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Promote healthy relationships and involvement among all actors:

- Hold children harmless for their family contexts
  - Birth order
  - Parentage
  - Living arrangements
- Recognize that families are not just biological parents and their joint child(ren)
- Recognize that families will change over time
- Approach noncustodial parents as parents rather than non-parents

# Current Approaches to Custodial and Noncustodial Parents

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- Custodial parents have access to multiple supports:
  - CTC, EITC, WIC, TANF, Child Support Enforcement, SNAP, MA, (sometimes) housing assistance
- Noncustodial parents generally do not:
  - typically treated as non-parents rather than parents
- Noncustodial parents' primary interactions with government:
  - courts (family, criminal); child support enforcement; unemployment insurance (?); employment services (?)
  - limited direct economic supports or services; heavily oriented around mandated behaviors
- Noncustodial parents are expected (and want) to contribute to childrearing: equitable and parallel policies for custodial and noncustodial parents may help

# Supporting Noncustodial Parents (Fathers) to Support Children

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- Parallel supports, benefits, and tax credits to custodial parents
- Partial credit for nonresident children in eligibility and benefits
  - Work supports, social welfare benefits, and subsidies
  - Tax credits (EITC), deductions, and incentives (child support deductions?)
- Better child support services
  - Employment, child support, and parent involvement are interrelated
  - Support work: training, mentoring, placement, apprenticeship, and subsidy programs
  - Set realistic child support orders and provide arrears reduction credits for compliance
  - Withhold child support from earnings, benefits, and tax credits
  - Promote access to children in most circumstances
- Coordinate efforts with criminal justice system

# Contact Information

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# THANK YOU!

# Child Maintenance/Child Support

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- Extremely complicated in a context of MPF (particularly in U.S.)
  - Mothers and fathers with MPF tend to partner with each other
- Explicit balancing of biological vs. residential responsibility for children (continuum); values and incentives vis-à-vis obligations
- Have direct consequences for economic wellbeing of children and resident and nonresident parents
  - Adequate support for children by parents/continuity of expenditures; horizontal equity between families; reduce uncertainty and litigation
  - Generally designed (in simpler times) with manageable burdens and economies of scale in mind
  - Currently need to consider whether children should be affected by parents' later fertility choices, as well as feasible implementation
  - Major policy dilemmas: (1) should children in different households receive different amounts? (2) should first child's order be altered with the arrival of a second child?

# Child Maintenance/Child Support Schemes

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## No. of Countries Following Various Child Support Strategies

Strategy	Number of countries
Equal - No reduction	2.5 (ON/CA, NL, NO)
Equal - Reduction	4.5 (AU, ON/CA, DK, NZ, UK)
Unequal - No Reduction	5 (AT, FI, DE, SE, WI/US)
Unequal - Reduction	0

Ontario (Canada) 2 strategies for low-income and moderate/high-income  
Belgium and France excluded – based on full judicial discretion

Source: Meyer 2012

# Physical and Legal Custody and Visitation

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- Increasing move toward joint physical custody after parental breakup across the industrialized countries
- Policy must grapple with how to balance and allocate child maintenance given differences in parents' incomes and child time in each parent's custody; also has implications for tax policy
- Child support/maintenance and visitation/father involvement tend to be complements, not substitutes; focusing on nonresident parents' ability to pay (via employment and income) may be an important component of encouraging both (U.S.)
- Policies need to explicitly address rights, responsibilities, and decision making power of social parents (and, in some cases, same sex parents in which only one parent is biological/adoptive)
- Relationship programs should address multiple roles

# Means/Income-Tested Programs

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- Direct cash transfers to low-income families/households; tax credits or deductions; in-kind benefits/vouchers; housing subsidies
- In the U.S.: Earned Income Tax Credit; child deduction, employment assistance/cash welfare (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), Food Stamps/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, housing subsidies, etc.; In other countries: may include similar types of programs as well as child allowances
- Children can often only be “claimed” in one household regardless of time spent with each parent
- Child support ignored by the tax system; nonresident parent generally gets no child associated tax benefits
- Benefits cannot be split between households
- Eligible “family” inconsistently defined by marriage vs. coresidence

# Other Programs and Benefits

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- Role of domestic partner benefits and 'common law marriage' for same and different sex couples may be increasingly important
- Pension benefits often only provided to married spouses
- Survivors benefits often only available to married widows/widowers and surviving children with paternity/adoption legally established
- Often no spousal support for cohabiting partner after break-up
- Parental leave and (U.S.) health care coverage often do not apply to cohabiting partner's children
- Child protection/parenting/child wellbeing programs: generally focus explicitly on resident parent (mother) and sometimes spouse; should pay more attention to potential roles of other actors (biological and social fathers); could offer similar interventions to men