Marriage Selectivity and Stepfamily Formation: Do Single Mothers Settle?

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UTSA.
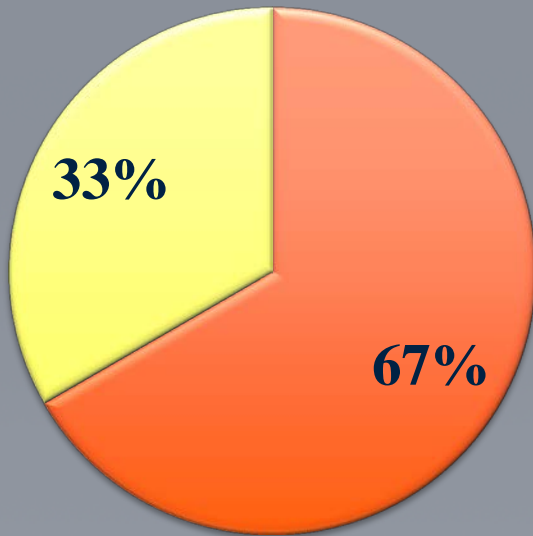
The University of Texas at San Antonio™

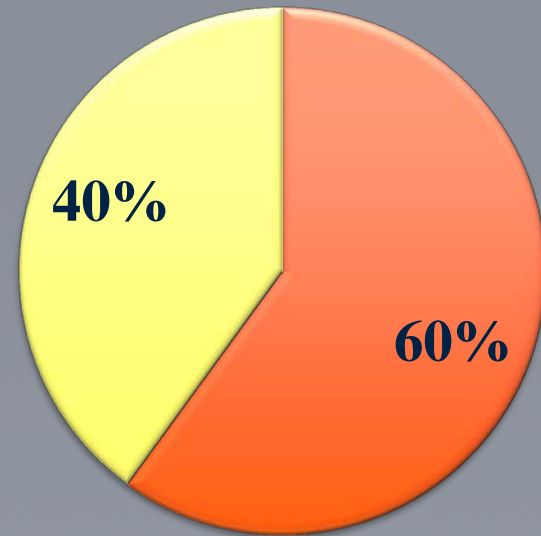**Department of Demography**

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How prevalent are American stepfamilies?

One-third of American children will reside in stepfamilies

40% of Americans have at least one step-relative

33%

67%

40%

60%

Source: Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet (1995)

Source: Pew Research Center (2011)

The process and impact of stepfamily formation

Narrative: Stepfathers are negatively selected

- Single mothers are disadvantaged in the marriage market
- Stepchildren are vulnerable to:
  - Teenage pregnancy & early sexual debut
  - Poor academic performance
  - Behavior/emotional difficulties

Marriage selectivity perspective

- Union formation is a numbers game
- Marriage market conditions = sex ratio
- Sex ratio < 1 = unfavorable marriage market conditions for women
  - More competition + fewer choices

An alternative hypothesis…

Oppenheimer's Marital search perspective
- Women with sufficient financial resources will not "settle"
- Rather, the marital search will be extended until a preferable mate is available

Consistent with some stepfamily literature
- Mothers return to the marriage market with:
  - Higher expectations for subsequent unions
  - Emphasis on "good providers"
  - Mothers with desirable traits "trade up" in terms of new partners' economic potential (Bzostek et al., 2012)
  - The most disadvantaged mothers are the least likely to remarry (Edin & Kefalas, 2005)

Competing Hypotheses

Support for Marriage Selectivity

- H1: When marriage markets favor women (SR >1), more desirable male partners (e.g., employed) will enter unions with single mothers

- H2: When marriage markets favor men (SR<1), the least desirable male partners will form stepfamilies

Support for Marital Search

- H3: The sex ratio has no significant impact on stepfamily formation.

Data and Analytic Samples

National Survey of Families and Households

Selection criteria:

1. Not cohabiting or married at NSFH1
2. Dissolved union between NSFH1 & NSFH2
3. Reinterviewed at NSFH2

Men (*n*=1,260)

- 29 years old
- Earned $16,179/year
- 79% white non-Hispanic
- 48% ≤ high school diploma

Data and Analytic Samples

1990 Census

Labor Market Areas
- Based on journey-to-work patterns
- Not confined to state or county boundaries

LMA Sex Ratio
- Men (16-49) : Women (18-44)
- =1 indicates equilibrium
- <1 indicates unfavorable marriage market conditions for women
- Range 0.77-10.3; *M* 1.41

1990 Labor Market Areas (*n*=394)

1.0

0.5

1.8

Source: United States Department of Agriculture

Research Design

Analytical Strategy
- Weighted multinomial logistic regression

Dependent variable (NSFH2)
1. Remaining single (reference)
2. Cohabit with stepchildren
3. Cohabit without stepchildren
4. Married with stepchildren
5. Married without stepchildren

LMA Sex Ratio
- Men (18-49) : Women (18:44)

Controls (NSFH1)
- Age
- Race/ethnicity
- Education
- Employment
- Earnings
- Childhood family structure
- Coresidential biological children

Relative Risks of Union Type at NSFH2

	Cohabit With a Woman		Marry a Woman	
	With Children	**With No Children**	**With Children**	**With No Children**
	Each Versus Remain Single			
Age	**0.98** ***	**0.95** ***	**1.01** ***	**0.93** ***
White non-Hispanic (ref)				
Black non-Hispanic	**2.30** *	**0.40** *	0.76	0.51
Hispanic	0.81	1.31	1.16	**0.14** ***
College graduate	1.39	1.03	3.35	**2.78** ***
Employed	1.58	1.89	**42.48** ***	**2.55** **
Coresidential biological child	**3.70** **	**3.21** ***	**11.02** ***	**9.22** ***
LMA Sex Ratio	**5.71** ***	0.35	3.00	**4.05** **

Source: National Survey of Families and Households, Waves 1 and 2

Note: Only significant results are displayed. Model also controls for earnings (logged) and childhood family structure ('1' nuclear family; '0' other family structure).

Conclusions

- Very little support for marriage selectivity perspective
  - It is not the least desirable men who form marital stepfamilies
  - Marital stepfathers seem to be "positively selected"
- Favorable marriage market conditions are associated with increased odds of men forming two very different unions:
  1. Cohabiting stepfamilies
  2. Marital unions with childless women
  3. NOT marital stepfamilies
- Custodial fathers are 11 times more likely to marry a woman with children as opposed to remaining single
  - Consistent with literature that suggests single fathers are extremely eager to recreate a familiar family environment
  - Further evidence that single mothers do not necessarily marry the least desirable men

Future research

- Telling half of the story
  - Future research will incorporate female partner characteristics
- Data limitations
  - NSFH offers the largest sample of stepfathers
  - BUT the latest wave does not include geocode information
  - Next steps: 2010-2006 National Survey of Family Growth
- Research design
  - These processes may be further clarified by stratifying the model according to marriage market conditions
  - Additional contextual variables:
    - Proportion unemployed
    - Average AFDC payment

Thank you!