A Closer Look at Unmarried Families:
Children’s Experiences of Relationship Instability
and Family Complexity

Family Taskforce Meeting
Brookings Institution
Feb 10th, 2011
Part 1:
Relationship Instability
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New Partner

Focal Child

New Partner
Total New Parental Romantic Relationships in Fragile Families, by Child’s 5th Birthday

- **45%** No New Relationship
- **55%** At Least 1 New Relationship

By the number of new relationships:
- **12%** 1 new relationship
- **14%** 2 new relationships
- **13%** 3 new relationships
- **16%** 4+ new relationships

Source: Tabulated by Dr. Laura Tach from Waves 1-4 of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Survey, a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Counts total number of mothers’ and fathers’ new romantic relationships that lasted at least three months. Fragile Families are defined as biological parents who were unmarried at time of birth.
Mother’s New Romantic Relationships in Fragile Families by Child’s 5th Birthday

- **49%** No New Relationship
- **51%** At Least 1 New Relationship
  - **23%** 1 Relationship
  - **18%** 2 Relationships
  - **7%** 3 Relationships
  - **3%** 4+ Relationships

Source: Tabulated by Dr. Laura Tach from Waves 1-4 of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Survey, a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Counts total number of mothers’ new romantic relationships that lasted at least three months. Fragile Families are defined as biological parents who were unmarried at time of birth.
Father’s New Romantic Relationships in Fragile Families by Child’s 5th Birthday

- **No New Relationship**: 51%
- **At Least 1 New Relationship**: 49%

- **1 New Relationship**: 32%
- **2 New Relationships**: 10%
- **3 New Relationships**: 4%
- **4+ New Relationships**: 3%

Source: Tabulated by Dr. Laura Tach from Waves 1-4 of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Survey, a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Counts total number of fathers’ new romantic relationships that lasted at least three months. Fragile Families are defined as biological parents who were unmarried at time of birth.
Part 2: Family Complexity

Focal Child

Half-Sib

Half-Sib
Part 2:
Family Complexity

Half-Sib

Focal Child

Half-Sib

Half-Sib

Half-Sib
Part 2: Family Complexity

- Step-Sib
- Half-Sib
- Focal Child
- Half-Sib
- Step-Sib
Amount of Multi-Partner Fertility (Half-Sibs) in Fragile Families by Child’s 5th Birthday

No Half-Sibs in Family: 40%
Half-Sibs in Family: 60%

- 18% with 1 half-sib
- 19% with 2 half-sibs
- 23% with 3+ half-sibs

Source: Tabulated by Dr. Laura Tach from Waves 1-4 of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Survey, a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Counts total number of half-siblings (biological children of either mother or father, but not both). Fragile Families are defined as biological parents who were unmarried at time of birth.
Type of Multi-Partner Fertility (Half-Sibs) in Fragile Families by Child’s 5th Birthday

- **No Half-Sibs in Family**: 40%
- **Any Half-Sibs in Family**: 60%
  - **Dad Only**: 18%
  - **Mom Only**: 19%
  - **Both Mom & Dad**: 23%

Source: Tabulated by Dr. Laura Tach from Waves 1-4 of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Survey, a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more.

Half-siblings are biological children of either mother or father, but not both. Fragile Families are defined as biological parents who were unmarried at time of birth.
Unstable: relationship between biological parents ends and/or relationship with new partner begins
Complex: one or more parents has children by a different partner

Source: Tabulated by Dr. Laura Tach from Waves 1-4 of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Survey, a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Fragile Families are defined as biological parents who were unmarried at time of birth.
Children’s Combined Experiences of Instability and Complexity in Fragile Families by 5th Birthday

- **Stable** Two-Parent (18%)
- **Stable** Single Mother (4%)
- **Unstable/Complex** (78%)
  - **Unstable, No Half-Sibs** (10%)
  - **Stable, Half-Sibs** (23%)
  - **Unstable and Half-Sibs** (45%)

**Unstable:** relationship between biological parents ends and/or relationship with new partner begins

**Complex:** one or more parents has children by a different partner

Source: Tabulated by Dr. Laura Tach from Waves 1-4 of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Survey, a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Fragile Families are defined as biological parents who were unmarried at time of birth.
Children’s Combined Experiences of Instability and Complexity in Fragile Families by 5th Birthday

- **78%** Unstable/Complex
- **18%** Stable, Two-Parent
- **4%** Stable, Single Mother
- **10%** Unstable, No Half-Sibs
- **23%** Stable, Half-Sibs
- **45%** Unstable and Half-Sibs

- **18% of kids have step-siblings from either mom’s or dad’s current new partner.**

Source: Tabulated by Dr. Laura Tach from Waves 1-4 of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Survey, a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Fragile Families are defined as biological parents who were unmarried at time of birth.