

Center for Demography and Ecology

University of Wisconsin-Madison

**The Changing Character of Stepfamilies:
Implications of Cohabitation and Nonmarital Childbearing**

Larry L. Bumpass

R. Kelly Raley

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Abstract

Divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation are reshaping family experience in the U.S. Because of these changes, our traditional definitions of "families" decreasingly capture the social units of interest. We have noted how a significant proportion of officially defined single-parent families are, in actuality, two-parent though unmarried families. We make a similar argument in the present paper that the definition of stepfamilies must be expanded to include cohabitations which involve a child of only one partner, and explicitly recognize that stepfamilies include those formed after nonmarital childbearing as well as after separation or divorce. We find that cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing have been important aspects of stepfamily experience for at least two decades, and that this is increasingly so. To define stepfamilies only in terms of marriage clearly underestimates both the levels and the trend in stepfamily experience: when cohabitation is taken into account, about two-fifths of all women and 30 percent of all children are likely to spend some time in a stepfamily.

This article continues our efforts to understand how divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation are reshaping family experience in the United States. Because of these changes, our traditional definitions of "families" decreasingly capture the social units of interest. We have recently noted how a significant proportion of officially defined single-parent families are two-parent cohabiting families (Bumpass and Raley, 1993). In these instances, a family with children is formed at the birth of the child, not when the unmarried parents marry - as the majority of such couples ultimately do. Similarly, we will argue, we have to expand our definition of stepfamilies to include cohabitation with a child of only one partner, and explicitly recognize that stepfamilies include those formed after nonmarital childbearing as well as after separation or divorce. We find that cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing have been important aspects of stepfamily experience for at least two decades, and that this is increasingly so.

Trends in the relevant factors are well known by now. While marital dissolution rates have been constant for more than a decade, the level remains high and involves over half of all marriages and over a million children each year (Castro Martin and Bumpass, 1989). Over the last two decades, cohabitation has grown from a rare and deviant behavior to the majority experience among cohorts of marriageable age (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989b). Marriage and remarriage rates have declined markedly, though these declines have been largely offset by increasing cohabitation (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin, 1991). Nonmarital childbearing has increased dramatically, both as a consequence of the greater number of years spent unmarried and of increased rates among the unmarried (Manning and Bumpass, 1993; National Center for Health Statistics, 1993).

These trends have had a major impact on the prevalence and character of stepfamilies. The high level of marital disruption creates a large pool of mothers and children "at risk" of forming stepfamilies, and this is the traditional conception of the population from which stepfamilies are formed. Less well recognized is how large a role nonmarital fertility plays in creating stepfamilies (Bumpass, 1984b). While the most recent vital

statistics report indicates that 28 percent of births in 1991 were to unmarried mothers (National Center for Health Statistics, 1993), the proportion is now likely one-third if the trend has continued since that report. However, we know that these are not all single-parent families because one-quarter of unmarried mothers are cohabiting with the child's father at the time of the birth (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989a; Bumpass and Raley, 1993). Taking that into account, we estimate that about a quarter ($.33 * .75$) of all children now enter life with entry into a stepfamily being their next potential family transition.

The marked substitution of cohabitation for marriage and remarriage, even among women with children, means that many children gain a stepfather by their mother's cohabitation rather than by her marriage. We will return in the conclusion section to the conceptual issues that this raises, but for now we note that - for the substantial proportion of such couples who marry after a period of cohabitation - stepfamily life begins with the cohabitation. If we limit our definition of stepfamilies to **married** couples with a child of only one partner, we will seriously misclassify a significant proportion of families and underestimate the duration of stepfamily experience.

Hence, this paper examines the implications of differing reasons for single-parenthood preceding stepfamily formation (birth outside a union, or the dissolution of a union) and differing modes of entry into stepfamilies (cohabitation or marriage) for estimates of the prevalence, character, and stability of stepfamilies in the U.S. Separate estimates are presented for women and children, though we consider children's experience in somewhat more detail.

DATA AND METHODS

National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH):

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 respondents, including a main cross-section sample of 9,643 persons aged 19 and older, plus an overs ample of minorities and households containing single-parent families, stepfamilies, recently married couples, and cohabiting couples. (Results are weighted to properly represent the U.S. population.) In each household, a randomly selected adult was interviewed. In addition, a shorter, self-administered questionnaire was administered to the spouse or cohabiting partner of the primary respondent. Interviews averaged about 100 minutes, although interview length varied considerably with the complexity of the respondent's family history. Topics covered included detailed household composition, family background, adult family transitions, couple interactions, parent-child interactions, education and work, economic and psychological well-being, and family attitudes (Sweet, Bumpass and Call, 1988).

Methods:

Women's histories of cohabitation, marriage, and birth are compared to estimate levels and trends in stepfamily living arrangements from both mothers' and children's perspectives. For children this means creating a file in which each birth is a unit of analysis that is then compared with the mother's history of marriage and cohabitation (Bumpass and Rindfuss, 1979). The estimation proceeds as if all children lived with their mothers after separation, and hence misrepresents the universe of all children to the extent that the small proportion of children living with their fathers have markedly different rates of subsequent transitions. Checks against external estimates have repeatedly demonstrated the robustness of this estimation procedure (Bumpass, 1985; Bumpass and Sweet, 1989b), and we are able in the present paper to compare estimates from this procedure to the histories of children currently in stepfamilies.

The importance of including cohabitation in classifying family types is further illustrated in the attention that has recently been given to increases in father-only families (Meyer and Garasky, 1993; Rawlings, 1993). It is likely that these increases have been overstated, given the marked increase in cohabitation and in births to

cohabiting couples. Two-parent, but unmarried, families will be classified as "father-only" by usual census-type definitions: i.e., if the male is the "reference person" these are classified as a father, his child, and another unrelated adult.

Alternative estimates are presented using marriage or any union (whether marriage or cohabitation) as defining the formation of a stepfamily. Until data are available from the reinterview of the NSFH sample (NSFH2), we do not know what proportion of women who marry after a nonmarital birth actually marry the child's father. Obviously, such cases do not create stepfamilies. To reduce the incorrect inclusion of this category, we have excluded unions within a year of nonmarital birth from our stepfamily definition. Our resulting stepfamily classification undoubtedly still includes some unions that were later formed with the child's father, and excludes some stepfamilies that were formed when the child was under age 1, but the errors introduced are not likely to be large. The sample of stepfamilies is reduced about 9 percent by this exclusion, and a comparison of estimates before and after the exclusion indicates that it does not affect our substantive conclusions.

Life-tables are used to estimate cumulative transitions into and out of stepfamilies. As is customary in definitions of families with children, we focus on family experience with children under age 18, and use alternative strategies to exclude transitions occurring after a child reaches 18. We censor observations at 18 in the life-tables. In some instances, we also consider estimates for samples of children's experiences at younger ages and to durations of exposure that would have occurred before age 18. The results from these two procedures are consistent with one another. Of course some children are still at home and gain a stepfather at age 19, but the fact that increasing proportions will have left home after age 18 precludes our producing estimates for older ages. We will slightly overestimate stepfamily experience before age 18 to the extent that children had already left home to be on their own when their mother remarried (Mitchell, Wister, and Burch,

1989).

Both cohort and period life tables are created to describe mothers' and children's experience in stepfamilies. The former represent the experience of actual cohorts of stepfamilies, whereas the latter represent the life-course experience that would result if age-specific transitions observed in a period were to be experienced over the life time of a cohort.

RESULTS

Life-Course Experience

We begin with a life-course perspective on experience in stepfamilies. Our objective is to estimate the proportion of women who will spend part of their adult life, and the proportion of children who will spend part of their childhood, in a stepfamily.¹ Further, we evaluate how estimates of levels and trends differ when stepfamilies are defined only by marriage compared to when they are defined by any union including cohabitations.

Table 1 presents synthetic estimates of the proportions of women and of children who would be expected to have lived in a stepfamily by successive ages, based on the age-specific rates of entry observed 1970-74 and 1980-84. Limiting our definition to **married** stepfamilies, we see in the first two columns of Table 1 that the proportion of women likely to live in a stepfamily increased from about one-fifth to one-third. For children, the increase was from about one-seventh to almost one-quarter.² Thus, increasing marital disruption and nonmarital

¹There is an additional life-course perspective which we are not addressing in this paper, and this is the proportion of the population who will have lived in a stepfamily as either a child or an adult. If childhood and adult experiences were independent, the results of the present paper would imply that about 60 percent of all women would at some time live in a stepfamily.

²This estimate for children is substantially below the one-third estimated by Glick (1989). Glick's paper does not present the basis for his estimate, but it is likely inflated by not recognizing that some unmarried fathers eventually marry their child's mother. Further, to the extent it results from the application of annual rates of entry experienced by children in the aggregate, it "double counts" from a life-course perspective those entries that are second or later stepfamilies.

fertility have more than compensated for declining rates of marriage and remarriage, with a consequent increase in married stepfamily experience.

A substantial proportion of women and children spend part of their lives in married stepfamilies. Nonetheless, to define stepfamilies only in terms of marriage clearly underestimates both the levels and the trend in stepfamily experience. The last column of Table 1 indicates, that when cohabitation is taken into account, about two-fifths of all women and 30 percent of all children are likely to spend some time in a stepfamily. As high as they are, these estimates are quite credible when we recognize that, in addition to the disruption of about half of all marriages with children, about a quarter of all women are likely to have a nonmarital birth at some point in their lives (Bumpass and Sweet, 1992).

Despite lower rates of marriage and remarriage for blacks than whites, a higher proportion of black mothers and children will spend some time in a married stepfamily. This is even more the case when we include stepfamilies created by nonmarital cohabitation. Under the union definition, about a quarter of white children and two-fifths of black children will live in a stepfamily. A third of white mothers and over half of black mothers will share a household with their children and a spouse or partner who is not the children's father.

Preceding Family Type and Mode of Entry

Table 2 turns our attention to trends in the circumstances preceding stepfamilies (nonmarital birth or marital dissolution) and the type of union that establishes a stepfamily (marriage or cohabitation). Columns 1-4 present the joint classification of these variables, and the last two columns are summary estimates for the two dimensions: i.e., the column for nonmarital birth is the sum of columns 1 and 2, and that for cohabitation is the sum of columns 2 and 4. Looking at the first two panels of this table there are three major observations.

1) Our traditional conception of stepfamilies is seriously challenged by these results. A third of children entering stepfamilies did so after birth to an unmarried mother rather than after parental marital disruption, and

almost two-thirds are entered by cohabitation rather than marriage. In thinking about the role of nonmarital fertility in creating stepfamilies we must recognize that about a fifth of nonmarital births occur after marital separation.³ Thus many children of even separated or divorced mothers enter a stepfamily without having experienced the dissolution of the previous marriage.

2) Furthermore, the roles of nonmarital fertility and cohabitation have been very significant throughout the last two decades and are not simply more recent phenomena. This finding was implicit in our earlier results that a third of remarriages around 1970 were preceded by cohabitation (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989b), but at that time we did not recognize the implications for the definition of stepfamilies.

3) There has been a substantial increase in the role of cohabitation in initiating stepfamilies, but this has occurred primarily through an approximate doubling in the proportion formed through cohabitation after unmarried childbirth.

In the third panel of Table 2 we see the very large role that nonmarital childbearing plays in stepfamily experience among blacks (Bumpass, 1984b). This is an expected consequence of the high proportion of black children born to unmarried mothers. Two-fifths of the first marriages to black women in the 1970s involved women who already had children (Sweet and Bumpass, 1987). Including cohabitation, we find that about two-thirds of the black stepfamilies formed 1975-84 were preceded by nonmarital birth, as were one-sixth of white stepfamilies.

Though entry by cohabitation rather than marriage is higher among blacks than among whites, the similarity is more important than the difference: 67 compared to 55 percent. Turning to the last panel of this table, there are dramatic differences in the preceding circumstances and mode of entry to stepfamilies, depending upon the age of child at entry. This is not at all surprising, but it is important information about the

³Tabulations from the 1988 National Survey of Family Growth.

circumstances of stepfamilies associated with different ages of children when they are formed.

A majority of preschoolers entering stepfamilies do so after nonmarital birth and through their parent's cohabitation with a partner. The **least** frequent mode of entry for these young children (16%) fits the traditional conception of a stepfamily as formed by parental remarriage following a marital disruption which involved the child. Only among children entering stepfamilies over age 10 does this traditional conception of stepfamily formation approach one-half.

Indeed, the ages of children when stepfamilies are formed is a topic that has received far too little attention in concerns with life in stepfamilies. When the literature pays any attention to ages of children it is usually to current age rather than age at which the family was formed. Yet many of the concerns with stepfamily roles (Cherlin, 1978; Jacobson, 1979) turn on the problems faced by families with children who are older when the stepparent enters the picture. For example, questions of acceptance of the stepparent as a parent, or of the divergence of parenting styles between the former parents and stepparent, become progressively less an issue the younger the child when the stepparent enters the household.⁴ While contact with an absent parent is an issue for many young children, this is much less likely to be so in stepfamilies of children of unmarried mothers.

We see in Table 3 that there has been little consistent trend in the ages of children entering stepfamilies. Children are somewhat younger when entering cohabiting than married stepfamilies; the proportion under age 5 was 41 percent compared to 32 percent for the most recent cohort. The main story from Table 3 is that about two-fifths of all children entering stepfamilies do so at ages in which the parenting issues noted above may be less relevant.

Family Stability

⁴It is instructive that it must be largely for this reason that we tend to classify adoptive parents together with biological parents, and the NSFH family history asks jointly about living with "natural or adoptive" parents.

A major concern raised by the increasing prevalence of cohabiting stepfamilies is the extent to which these family units are likely to provide a stable home environment for the children involved. Table 4 reports the cumulative percent of cohabiting mothers who have married their partner by successive years since the stepfamily began, and the cumulative percent which has separated from this partner (whether or not marriage occurred).

Rates of marriage for cohabiting stepfamilies appear to have increased over the 1970s and then declined. This most recent decline is consistent with a decline in marriage rates for cohabitations generally (Blanc, 1987; Schoen, 1992).⁵ For the most recent cohort of children entering cohabiting stepfamilies, parental marriage followed within the year for about a quarter, and within 5 years for about half.

The stability of stepfamilies begun by cohabitation seems to have followed the trend in marital stability over this period. There was a substantial increase in disruption over the 1970s, but only a slight increase since then. About two-fifths of the children in stepfamilies begun by cohabitation in the early 1980s experienced the disruption of that family within 5 years. Hence many of these children experienced fluctuating family arrangements - and yet the majority of children who entered cohabiting stepfamilies were still in intact families 5 years later. Further, of course, many **married** stepfamilies are unstable, and it is to this comparison that we turn in Table 5.

It is well known by now that first unions begun by cohabiting couples are less stable than those begun by marriage (Bennett et al., 1988; Booth and Johnson, 1988; Bumpass and Sweet, 1989a; Axinn and Thornton, 1992). Hence, we might expect cohabiting stepfamilies to be less stable. On the contrary, we find little difference in the cumulative proportion disrupted between stepfamilies begun by marriage and those begun by

⁵Schoen reports that successive birth cohorts of women are less likely to have married after cohabitation by a given age. We find that successive cohabitation cohorts are less likely to have married by the same duration since formation.

cohabitation (Table 5). Disruption levels may be slightly higher for those begun by cohabitation after 5 years duration but we see no difference by 10 years.⁶ Slightly over half of each type have disrupted after 10 years.

Apparently, whatever the selection and causal processes associated with the differences between cohabitation and marriage in first unions, these are not operative for unions of women who have already experienced marital disruption or nonmarital childbearing.⁷ We think cohabitations should be considered as stepfamilies even if we were to find they were less stable than married units. Nonetheless, this lack of a difference in stability further bolsters that argument.

The most important observation from Table 5 is that many children entering stepfamilies go through the disruption of that unit as well (Bumpass, 1984a), increasing the number of stressful transitions they experience (Wu and Martinson, 1993).

Table 6 illustrates such multiple transitions. To maximize the number of cases and the length of time that can be examined, this table is based on children who entered stepfamilies under age 11 between 1970 and 1979, and reports their family status 7 years after entry. Consistent with the preceding table (even though older children are excluded), about three-fifths of these family units are intact after 7 years, irrespective of whether they were begun by cohabitation or marriage.

Of families no longer intact, those begun by cohabitation are more likely to have gone through further transitions subsequently: 17 percent have entered a subsequent stepfamily compared to 11 percent of those

⁶When this table is broken down into the four categories of entry type described in Table 2, stepfamilies begun by marriage after nonmarital birth appear to have the highest rate.

⁷Examining life tables with the NSFH for second-marriage cohorts, 1975-84, we find no difference by prior cohabitation status in marital stability at either 5 or 10 years after marriage.

whose first stepfamily began with marriage. Thus the unstable component of stepfamilies appears more volatile among cohabiting than among married step families. Nonetheless, the most important point is that a significant minority of children entering stepfamilies (whether through parental marriage or cohabitation) undergo multiple subsequent family transitions before reaching age 18.

Current Stepfamilies

The estimates examined so far have been based on our comparisons of women's marital and birth histories to describe cohorts of entry into stepfamilies. Table 7 turns our attention to stepfamilies at the time of the survey. Here, we have combined our retrospective procedures with a match for whether there is a child of the appropriate age in the household. Consequently, children who live with their fathers after their parents separation are excluded.⁸ These estimates of prior marital circumstances for current stepfamilies are very similar to those estimated for earlier cohorts at their formation, despite the fact that some unions have dissolved since they began. About one-third began after a mother-only family resulting from nonmarital birth and two-thirds entered their stepfamily through cohabitation. (The age of child at entry panel is included to document for current stepfamilies the patterns we have already observed from our estimations for stepfamily cohorts.)

A quarter of current stepfamilies involve cohabiting couples (not shown in table) and this is significant in its own right. Discussions of current stepfamilies are missing a large component of such families if cohabiting couples are ignored. Nonetheless, this one-quarter figure contrasts sharply with the two-thirds that began as cohabitations. This difference makes it clear that duration of **married** stepfamilies will be understated if cohabitation is ignored. We believe that cohabitations with children ought to be considered as stepfamilies even

⁸Our procedures identify a larger number of stepfamilies than does the appropriate question used for this purpose in NSFH1. Details are in the Appendix, but we conclude that the sample on which Tables 7 and 8 are based is more complete than one which we would have identified from the question on whether any of the respondent's biological children were not the biological children of their spouse/partner.

when they do not result in marriage, but we recognize that some might argue otherwise because of issues concerning relative commitment and parenting. It would be harder, however, to argue that cohabitations with children only become stepfamilies when the parents marry. Further, the difference between cohabitations which will ultimately marry and those which will not is hard to tell in the cross-section. Many of the parents still cohabiting will eventually marry each other. In light of the fact that half of currently married stepfamilies were begun by cohabitation, we argue that our stepfamily definition must routinely include cohabiting couples with children.

Finally, we turn to some of the characteristics of children's current stepfamilies. We have noted in earlier work on remarriage (Bumpass, Sweet, and Castro Martin, 1990) how the succession of life-course processes, from earlier marriage through higher rates of marital disruption among young marriages, and selective remarriage among younger women, tend to generate a lower educational distribution for remarriages. Hence, lower parental education is an important aspect of the family contexts of children in stepfamilies (Moorman and Hernandez, 1989). In Table 8, we consider how stepfamilies vary on parental education, income, and perceived stability depending upon type of entry and current marital status.

As we might expect, the least disadvantaged children in stepfamilies - in terms of maternal education and total household income - are in the most traditional category, those begun by remarriage following a marital dissolution: 9 percent of their mothers did not complete high school compared to over a quarter for other children in stepfamilies, and 26 percent were in the lowest quartile of income for families with children compared to almost half among children born to unmarried mothers who later married. It is surprising that among children born to unmarried mothers, those whose mother married are in lower income households than those whose mother formed a cohabiting union.

Stepchildren with a cohabiting parent live in households with much lower income than children in

married stepfamilies (37 vs 19 percent in the lowest quartile), but the difference in maternal education is small.

The final two columns of this table turn our attention to current measures of perceived stability that may index the future stability (Booth, 1985) of these different types of stepfamilies. It is puzzling that, contrary to our findings about actual stability for earlier stepfamily cohorts, cohabitation appears to be associated with higher proportions of mothers who have thought the marriage was "in trouble" in the last year (though Thomson and Colella (1992) found this for first unions), and with higher proportions rating the chance of future stability as "about even" or less. The lower anticipated stability among current cohabitations is consistent with the fact that only about two-thirds of the mothers of these children say that they expect (45%) or think (21%) that they will eventually marry their partner. We would expect that continuing cohabitations among stepfamilies would be selective of parents least certain about the stability of their relationship with their partner, but we are hard put to understand the differences by entry type in light of our finding of no difference in actual stability.

Conclusions

We have documented the major role that both nonmarital childbearing and cohabitation play in defining stepfamily experience in the contemporary United States. We recognize that many will find our definition of cohabitations as stepfamilies problematic, so it is to that issue that we turn in this concluding section.

Most work to date considering the place of cohabitation in American family life has focused on the similarities and differences between cohabitation and marriage in **couple** relationships (Rindfuss and Van den Heuvel, 1990). We have argued in that context that the profession has long used a coresidential definition of the end of marriage (Sweet and Bumpass, 1974; Bumpass and Raley, 1993), and that, similarly for the beginning of unions, most of the significant transitions traditionally signaled by marriage are already in place at cohabitation.

From a couple perspective, it is primarily intended fertility that may distinguish between cohabiting and married states, since marriage is the preferred (and intended) context for childbearing for most (Bachrach, 1987; Manning, 1992). On the other hand, when children are already present, as they are for over 40 percent of cohabiting couples, our attention is redirected from a focus on couple relationships to the definition of families (Popenoe, 1993).

It is obvious that marriage engages the legal system and employee benefits in a way that cohabitation does not. (At the same time, we must recognize that the consequences of legal obligations of marriage are often weak after residential separation.) Further, it is credible that married parents may be more committed to each other and even to parenting than are unmarried parents (though the commitment to the parenting of stepchildren by married stepparents should not be assumed as universal). It is extremely important that we understand more about variations in parenting behaviors within and between family types of the sort that Thomson, McLanahan, and Curtin are pursuing (1992), as well as in broader kin support systems (Marks and McLanahan, 1993). Clearly, marriage is not irrelevant, as argued by Scanzoni and colleagues (1989); it is a variable both affecting and reflecting conditions of family life.

Legal issues aside, we doubt that many would insist that a cohabiting couple and their own child is a "single-parent" rather than a "two-parent" family. Something is added (and indexed) by the couple's subsequent marriage, but surely, they do not become a family only at the ceremony. This paper extends that perspective to couples cohabiting with children of one of the partners. Do these units become families only when they marry? Did the half of currently married stepfamilies who cohabited with children become families only at marriage?

We may need to add new categories to our family classification scheme - recognizing "unmarried families" or "unmarried stepfamilies" if that is helpful analytically - but it does considerable violence to our

representation of social life not to recognize cohabiting units with children as families. This signals the critical importance of our understanding better how parent-child relationships develop over the course of family life in differing types of families. However, we argue that marriage must be treated as an important variable, rather than as the defining characteristic of families: the social interactions which constitute coresidential family life are not created by civil registration.

Appendix

We use our estimation procedure to define current stepfamilies by comparing the ages of the "child " records created from the birth history to the household roster. We include as a match any child with an age plus or minus one year of the birth record age. Nineteen percent of the cases defined by our method do not match a household child. Most of these are probably living with their fathers and some are living on their own , especially since homeleaving is earlier among children in step-parent families (Mitchell, Wister, and Burch , 1989) - one-quarter of these nonmatching cases are age 16 or 17. Seltzer and Bianchi's (1985) estimates suggest that in 1980 about 18 percent of the children in married stepfamilies were living with their fathers, whereas those of Moorman and Hernandez (1989) imply that about 12 percent do so. Hence the level of our nonmatches is quite plausible.

Early in the NSFH1 interview, shortly after the household roster was collected, respondents were asked the following question (M23): "I've recorded (names) as your biological children. Is (each of these children/he/she) the biological child of your current (husband/wife/partner)?" And, if no, (M24) "Which ones are not the biological children of your (husband/wife/partner)?" These questions were used to define households with children with an absent parent for the selection of a "focal child" for subsequent questions, and hence also define stepfamilies.

Children identified by M23 and M24 as stepchildren living with their mother and stepfather are 7.7% of all children under age 18 in married families. This contrasts to the 9.5% identified by our retrospective procedures, and the estimates for 1980 of 9% estimated by Bianchi and Seltzer (1985), and the 12% estimated by Moorman and Hernandez (1989). Hence we conclude that the procedures used in this paper are preferable to the use of only M23 and M24 to identify stepfamilies in NSFH1. This may be a result of the fact that this question occurred so early in the interview--in particular, before marital and fertility histories had been asked.

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Table 1

Period Life Table Estimates of Cumulative Proportion Ever in Stepfamily, Using Alternative Definitions Based on Marital Status and Union Status: For Mothers and for Children, 1970-74 and 1980-84, 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households

Cumulative Percent by Age	Begun by Marriage		Begun by Mar or Cohab	
	70-74	80-84	70-74	80-84
TOTAL				
Mothers				
25	7%	16%	10%	20%
35	16	32	22	33
45	19	32	26	39
Children				
5	5	6	7	10
10	9	14	14	20
15	13	20	18	27
18	14	23	19	30
NONHISPANIC WHITE				
Mothers				
25	5	13	8	17
35	14	24	19	29
45	16	30	23	34
Children				
5	4	6	6	9
10	9	14	12	19
15	12	20	16	25
18	14	21	18	27
BLACK				
Mothers				
25	23	22	23	31
35	36	37	39	51
45	39	44	41	55
Children				
5	10	11	15	17
10	17	18	21	27
15	20	24	25	36
18	21	27	27	40

Table 2

Whether Stepfamilies Begun by Cohabitation or Marriage, and Whether Preceding Single-Parent Family Resulted from Nonmarital Birth or Union Disruption: For Mothers and for Children, Stepfamilies Formed 1970-84, 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households

	Preceding State and Union Status					Preceded by Nonm Birth	Begun by Coh	(N)
	Nomar Birth		Dissolution		Tot			
	Mar	Coh	Mar	Coh				
MOTHERS								
70-74	13%	8%	35%	43%	100%	21%	51%	226
75-79	8	14	39	39	100	22	53	349
80-84	10	17	25	48	100	27	65	404
CHILDREN								
70-74	13	14	36	38	100	27	52	445
75-79	11	14	42	33	100	25	47	609
80-84	11	21	25	43	100	32	64	766
CHILDREN ENTERING STEPFAMILIES 1975-84								
Race/Ethnicity								
Black	19	45	14	22	100	64	67	320
Non-Hisp White	7	10	38	45	100	17	55	890
Age at Entry								
0-4	18	32	16	34	100	50	66	529
5-9	10	13	36	42	100	23	55	482
10+	5	7	48	40	100	12	47	363

Table 3

Age of Children at Entry to Stepfamily by Year and by Entry Type,
1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households

	Child's Age at Entry				Total	(N)
	0-4	5-9	10-14	15-17		
BEGUN BY MARRIAGE OR COHABITATION						
70-74	37	30	23	10	100	441
75-79	34	35	22	9	100	609
80-84	38	31	21	10	100	765
BEGUN BY MARRIAGE						
70-74	34	28	25	14	100	216
75-79	35	36	27	12	100	279
80-84	32	31	23	14	100	255
BEGUN BY COHABITATION						
70-74	39	32	22	8	100	225
75-79	44	33	17	6	100	330
80-84	41	31	20	8	100	510

Table 4

For Children in Stepfamilies Begun by Cohabitation, Cumulative Proportion Whose Parent Married and Cumulative Proportion Whose Parent Separated from Partner, by Duration : Children Entering Stepfamilies 1970-84 Under Age 15, 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households

	Parent Married			Parent Separated		
	70-74	75-79	80-84	70-74	75-79	80-84
Duration in Years						
1	25	34	25	8	9	11
2	41	52	36	14	18	20
3	45	56	41	17	28	29
4	49	62	43	18	32	35
5	54	63	49	29	38	42

Table 5

Life Table Estimates of Cumulative Proportion of Children Whose Parent Separated from Partner; by Stepfamily Duration and whether begun by Marriage or Cohabitation: Children Entering Stepfamilies 1975-84, 1987-88
National Survey of Families and Households

Duration	Stepfamily Type		
	Total	Marriage	Coh
2	19	20	18
4	30	31	30
6	41	39	42
8	47	45	49
10	54	54	54

Table 6

Family Status 7 Years After Entry to Stepfamily, Children Entering
Stepfamilies 1970-79 Under Age 11, 1987-88 National Survey of Families
and Households

How Begun	Intact	Single Par.	2nd Step	Single Par.	Total	Number of cases
Cohabitation or Marriage	58%	28%	11%	3%	100%	538
Marriage	58	31	9	2	100	196
Cohabitation	57	25	13	4	100	210

Table 7

For Children in Current Stepfamilies Whether Stepfamilies Begun by Cohabitation or Marriage, and Whether Preceding Single-Parent Family Resulted from Nonmarital Birth or Union Disruption, by Age of Child at Entry and by Whether Stepfamily Married or Cohabiting: 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households

Child's Age at Entry	Preceding State and Union Status					Tot	Preceded by Nonm Birth	Begun by Coh	(N)
	Nonm Birth		Dissolution						
	Mar	Coh	Mar	Coh					
0-4	21	25	15	39	100	46%	64%	348	
5-9	11	11	29	49	100	22	60	341	
10+	4	9	32	55	100	13	64	185	
Parent's Current Mar/Coh Status									
Married	21	14	29	36	100	35	50	631	
Cohab	0	32	0	68	100	32	100	243	
Total	16	19	21	44	100	35	65	874	

Table 8

Characteristics of Current Stepfamilies by Type of Entry and Current Marital Status,
Children with Stepfathers, 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households

	Mother Not HS Graduate	Lowest Household Income Quartile	Thought Relationship in "Trouble" During Last Year	Perceived Instability ^a
Entry Type				
Nonmar birth				
Marriage	31%	47%	20%	12%
Cohab	29	40	38	28
Marital dissolution				
Marriage	9	26	30	10
Cohab	25	26	46	20
Current Marital Status				
Mother Married	19	31	32	13
Mother Cohabiting	37	34	53	35

^a Reported that chances "will eventually separate" from spouse partner were "about even" or worse

Center for Demography and Ecology
University of Wisconsin
1180 Observatory Drive, Rm. 4412
Madison, WI 53706-1393
U.S.A.
608/262-2182
FAX 608/262-8400