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

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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 noted how a significant proportion of officially defined single-parent families actually are two-parent unmarried families. The present paper expands on this perspective with respect to stepfamilies. We must broaden our definition of stepfamilies to include cohabitations involving a child of only one partner, and must recognize the large role of nonmarital childbearing in the creation of stepfamilies. 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 level and the trend in stepfamily experience: when cohabitation is taken into account, about two-fifths of all women and 30% of all children are likely to spend some time in a stepfamily.

In this article we continue 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 capture the social units of interest to a decreasing extent. Recently we noted how a significant proportion of officially defined single-parent families are two-parent cohabiting families (Bumpass and Raley

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1995). In these instances, a family with a child is formed at the birth, not when the parents marry—as the majority of such couples ultimately do. Similarly, the definition of stepfamilies should be expanded to include cohabitation with a child of only one partner, and should recognize that stepfamilies include those formed after nonmarital childbearing as well as after marital disruption. 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. Although marital dissolution rates have been constant for more than a decade, the level remains high and involves more than half of all marriages and more than 1 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 in cohorts of marriageable age (Bumpass and Sweet 1989b; Thornton 1988). Marriage and remarriage rates have declined markedly, though these declines have been largely offset by increases in cohabitation (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991). Nonmarital childbearing has increased dramatically, both as a consequence of the greater number of years spent unmarried and because of increased birth rates among the unmarried (Manning and Bumpass 1993; National Center for Health Statistics 1994).

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; this is the traditional conception of the population from which stepfamilies are formed. Less well recognized is the importance of nonmarital fertility in creating stepfamilies (Bumpass 1984b). The most recent vital statistics report shows that 30% of births in 1992 were to unmarried mothers (National Center for Health Statistics 1994); the proportion is now likely to be one-third if the trend has continued since that report. We know, however, 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 Raley 1995; Bumpass and Sweet 1989a). Taking that into account, we estimate that for about one-quarter ($.33 \times .75$) of all children now born, entry into a stepfamily is their next potential family transition.

Because of the marked substitution of cohabitation for marriage and remarriage, even among women with children, many children gain a stepfather by their mother's cohabitation rather than by her marriage. In the concluding section we will return to the conceptual issues raised by this fact, but for now we note that for the substantial proportion of such couples who marry after a period of cohabitation, life in a stepfamily begins with the cohabitation. Analyses that limit the definition of stepfamilies to *married* couples misclassify a significant proportion of families, and underestimate both the prevalence and the duration of stepfamily experience.

Hence this paper examines the implications of 1) differing routes to single parenthood preceding stepfamily formation (birth outside a union or the dissolution of a union) and 2) differing modes of entry into stepfamilies (cohabitation or marriage) for estimates of the prevalence, character, and stability of stepfamilies in the United States. We present separate estimates for women and for children, though we consider children's experience in greater detail.

Obviously family ties and stepfamily issues extend across households because children have parents and stepparents who do not live with them. These family ties are important, but the present analysis follows customary procedure in addressing *coresidential* families—that is, stepfamily households.

DATA AND METHODS

The 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 in American family life. Interviews were conducted with 13,017 respondents including a main cross-section sample of 9,643 persons age 19 and older plus an oversample 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 primary respondent's spouse or cohabiting partner. Interviews averaged about 100 minutes, although interview length varied considerably with the complexity of the respondent's family history. The topics 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:

We compare women's histories of cohabitation, marriage, and birth to estimate levels and trends in stepfamily living arrangements from both mothers' and children's perspectives. For children this entails creating a file in which each birth is a unit of analysis, which then is 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; hence it misrepresents the universe of all children insofar as 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 here to compare estimates from this procedure with the histories of children currently in stepfamilies.

We present alternative estimates using marriage or any union (whether marriage or cohabitation) as defining the formation of a stepfamily. Unfortunately we do not know what proportion of women eventually marry the child's father after a nonmarital birth; obviously such cases do not create stepfamilies. To reduce the incorrect inclusion of this category, we excluded from our stepfamily definition all unions formed within a year of nonmarital birth. Certainly our resulting stepfamily classification still includes some unions that were formed later 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% by this exclusion; a comparison of estimates before and after the exclusion reveals that it does not affect our substantive conclusions.

We use life tables 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 for 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 we are precluded from producing estimates for older ages by the fact that increasing proportions will have left home after age 18. We slightly overestimate

stepfamily experience before age 18 insofar as children had left home to be on their own before their mother remarried (Mitchell, Wister, and Burch 1989).

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

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 in comparison with definitions of stepfamilies 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 in 1970-1974 and 1980-1984. 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 proportion increased from about one-seventh to almost one-quarter.[2] Thus the increases in marital disruption and nonmarital 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 shows that when cohabitation is taken into account, about two-fifths of all women and 30% of all children are likely to spend some time in a stepfamily. High as these estimates are, they are quite credible when we recognize that about half of all marriages

Table 1. Cumulative Proportion of Mothers and Children Ever in a Stepfamily, by Alternative Definitions of Beginning Union Type

	Marriage		Marriage or Cohabitation	
	70–74	80–84	70–74	80–84
Mothers[a]				
Total	19	32	26	39
Non-Hispanic white	16	30	23	34
Black	39	44	41	55
Children[a]				
Total	14	23	19	30
Non-Hispanic white	14	21	18	27
Black	21	27	27	40

[a] Life table estimates by age 45 for mothers and by age 18 for children.

with children will be disrupted and that about one-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 for 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 this latter definition, about one-quarter of white children and two-fifths of black children will live in a stepfamily. One-third of white mothers and more than 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: that is, 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. The first two panels of this table produce three major observations. First, our traditional conception of stepfamilies is challenged seriously by these results. One-third of children entering stepfamilies did so after birth to an unmarried mother rather than after parental marital disruption, and almost two-thirds entered by cohabitation rather than marriage. In considering the role of nonmarital fertility in creating stepfamilies we must recognize that almost one-quarter of nonmarital births occur after marital disruption.[3] Thus many children of even separated or divorced mothers enter a stepfamily without having experienced the dissolution of the previous marriage.

Furthermore, the roles of nonmarital fertility and cohabitation have been very significant throughout the last two decades and are not simply recent phenomena. We failed

Table 2. Preceding State and Beginning Union Type of Stepfamilies Formed, 1970-1984

	Preceding State and Beginning Union Status							
	Nonmarital Birth		Dissolution					
	Marr.	Cohab.	Marr.	Cohab.	Total	Preceded by Nonmarital Birth	Begun by Cohabitation	(N)
Mothers								
1970–1974	13%	8%	35%	43%	100%	21%	51%	226
1975–1979	8	14	39	39	100	22	53	349
1980–1984	10	17	25	48	100	27	65	404
Children								
1970–1974	13	14	36	38	100	27	52	445
1975–1979	11	14	42	33	100	25	47	609
1980–1984	11	21	25	43	100	32	64	766
Children Entering Stepfamilies 1975–1984								
Race/ethnicity								
Black	19	45	14	22	100	64	67	320
Non-Hispanic 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

to recognize this implication for stepfamilies in our earlier report that one-third of remarriages around 1970 were preceded by cohabitation (Bumpass and Sweet 1989b).

Finally, the role of cohabitation in initiating stepfamilies has increased substantially, but this has occurred primarily through an approximate doubling in the proportion formed through cohabitation after unmarried childbirth.

The third panel of Table 2 shows the very large role of nonmarital childbearing 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). When we include cohabitation, we find that about two-thirds of the black stepfamilies formed in 1975-1984 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%. The last panel of this table displays dramatic differences in the preceding circumstances and mode of entry into stepfamilies, depending on the child's age at entry. This finding is not at all surprising, but it is important information about the circumstances of stepfamilies associated with differences in the children's ages 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: parental remarriage following a marital disruption that involved the child. This traditional conception of stepfamily formation approaches one-half only among children entering stepfamilies over age 10.

Indeed, the age of children when stepfamilies are formed has received far too little attention in literature on stepfamilies. When children's ages are included, current age rather than age at which the family was formed is the usual age variable. Yet many of the concerns with stepfamily roles (Cherlin 1978; Jacobson 1979) may 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 in parenting styles between the former parents and the stepparent, may become progressively less an issue, the younger the child when the stepparent enters the household.[4] Although contact with an nonresident parent is an issue for many young children, this is much less likely to be the case in stepfamilies of children of unmarried mothers because of the lower frequency of contact between absent fathers and their nonmarital children (Seltzer 1991). About two-fifths of all children entering stepfamilies do so under age 5; about one-third do so after age 10 (data not shown).

Family Stability

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 3 reports the cumulative percentages of cohabiting mothers who have married their partner, by successive years, since the stepfamily began, and the cumulative percentages who have separated from this partner (whether or not marriage occurred).

Rates of marriage for cohabiting stepfamilies apparently 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

Table 3. Cumulative Percentages of Children Experiencing Parental Marriage or Separation, by Duration Since Cohabiting Stepfamily Began[a]

Duration in Years	Parent Married			Parent Separated		
	1970–1974	1975–1979	1980–1984	1970–1974	1975–1979	1980–1984
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

[a] Life table estimates for children under age 15 at beginning of stepfamily.

entering cohabiting stepfamilies, parental marriage followed within the year for about one-quarter, and within five years for about half.

The stability of stepfamilies begun by cohabitation seems to have followed the trend in marital stability over this period. Disruption increased substantially over the 1970s, but only slightly after that time. About two-fifths of the children in stepfamilies begun by cohabitation in the early 1980s experienced the disruption of that family within five 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 five years later. Further, of course, many *married* stepfamilies are unstable; we turn to this comparison in Table 4.

It is well known by now that first unions begun by cohabiting couples are less stable than those begun by marriage (Axinn and Thornton 1992; Bennett, Blanc, and Bloom 1988; Booth and Johnson 1988; Bumpass and Sweet 1989a; Teachman, Thomas, and Paasch 1991; Thomson and Colella 1992). Hence we might expect cohabiting stepfamilies to be less stable. On the contrary, however, we find little difference in the cumulative proportion disrupted between stepfamilies begun by marriage and those begun by cohabitation (Table 4). Slightly more than half of each type have been disrupted after 10 years.

Apparently, whatever the selection and causal processes associated with the differences between cohabitation and marriage in first unions, these do not operate for unions of women who have already experienced marital disruption or nonmarital childbearing.[6] We think cohabitations should be considered as stepfamilies even if we were to find that they were less stable than married units. This lack of difference in stability further supports our position.

Table 4. Cumulative Percentages of Children Experiencing Parental Separation by Beginning Union Type, by Duration Since Stepfamily Began[a]

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

[a] Life table estimates for children under age 15 at beginning of stepfamily.

The most important observation to be drawn from Table 4 is that many children entering stepfamilies experience the disruption of that unit as well (Bumpass 1984a), thus increasing the number of stressful transitions in their lives (Wu and Martinson 1993). Table 5 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 seven years after entry. In agreement with the preceding table (even though older children are excluded), about three-fifths of these family units are intact after seven years, whether they were begun by cohabitation or by marriage.

Among families no longer intact, those begun by cohabitation are more likely to have gone subsequently through further transitions: 17% have entered a subsequent stepfamily, compared with 11% of those whose first stepfamily began with marriage. Thus the unstable component of stepfamilies appears to be more volatile among cohabiting than among married stepfamilies. 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. This has been the only approach available because of our concern with the formation of stepfamilies. Nonetheless, we can evaluate our estimation procedures by comparing the estimates derived from these procedures with the experience reported by current stepfamilies. The universe of experience is not necessarily the same, of course, because of the possibility of differential attrition in current stepfamilies associated with different modes of stepfamily formation.

As discussed in the methods section, the use of women's fertility and union histories in our estimation procedure disregards the experience of children who live with their father and a stepmother. We examined two separate samples of current stepfamilies[7] to examine possible biases due to this aspect of our procedure: those living with their mother (reflecting the actual household experience of children with their mother) and all children in stepfamilies, whether with their mother or their father. Our estimates of the proportion of current stepfamilies begun after nonmarital birth and of those begun by cohabitation differ by only a few percentage points from the estimates presented here for the most recent stepfamily cohort. Hence we are quite confident about the robustness of our comparison procedure.

One-quarter of current stepfamilies involve cohabiting couples (not shown); this finding is significant in its own right. Discussions of current stepfamilies miss many such

Table 5. Family Status Seven Years after Entry into Stepfamily, by Beginning Union Type[a]

How Begun	Intact	Single Parent	2nd Step.	Single Parent Again	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

[a] For children under age 11 at entry into stepfamilies begun 1970–1979.

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

CONCLUSIONS

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

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; Wiersma 1983). In that context, the profession has long used a coresidential definition for the end of marriage. Similarly, most of the significant transitions traditionally signaled by marriage have already occurred with cohabitation (Bumpass and Raley 1995; Sweet and Bumpass 1974).

From a couple perspective, fertility intentions may be a major force distinguishing between cohabiting and married states because marriage is the preferred (and intended) context for childbearing for most people (Bachrach 1987; Manning 1992). On the other hand, when children are already present, as they are for more than 40% 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 as cohabitation does not. (At the same time, we must recognize that the consequences of legal obligations of marriage are often weak after separation.) Further, it is credible that married parents may be more strongly committed to each other, and even to parenting, than are unmarried parents (though the married stepparents' commitment to the parenting of stepchildren 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 (1992) are exploring as well as in broader kin support systems (Marks and McLanahan 1993). Marriage is not irrelevant, as argued by Scanzoni and colleagues (1989), but it is a *variable* that both affects and reflects conditions of family life.

Legal issues aside, we doubt that many observers would insist that a cohabiting couple and their own child are a "single-parent" rather than a "two-parent" family. Something is added (and indexed) by the couple's subsequent marriage, but surely such households 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 to disregard cohabiting units with children as families introduces too much error into our representation of social life. This situation signals the critical importance of understanding more clearly how parent-child relationships develop over the course of family life in differing types of families. We conclude, however, that marriage must be treated as an important *variable* rather than as the *defining* characteristic of families: the social interactions that constitute coresidential family life are not created by civil registration.

NOTES

[1] There is an additional life-course perspective that we are not addressing here, namely 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% of all women would live in a stepfamily at some time.

[2] This 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 probably it is inflated by not recognizing that some unmarried fathers eventually marry their child's mother—that is, by treating all nonmarital births as stepchildren. Further, insofar as Glick's estimate results from the application of annual rates of entry experienced by children in the aggregate, it would "double count" from a life course perspective those entries which are second or later stepfamilies.

[3] This figure is based on tabulations for births 1986–1988 from the 1988 National Survey of Family Growth.

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

[5] Schoen and Owens (1992) report that successive birth cohorts of women are less likely to have married by a given age after cohabitation. We find that successive cohabitation cohorts are less likely to have married by the same duration since formation.

[6] Examining life tables with the NSFH for second-marriage cohorts, 1975–1984, we find no difference by prior cohabitation status in marital stability at either 5 or 10 years after marriage.

[7] Our procedures identify a larger number of stepfamilies than does the appropriate question used for this purpose in NSFH1. (Details are in the appendix). We conclude, however, that the sample based on marital and birth histories 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 the respondent's spouse/partner.

APPENDIX. DEFINITION OF CURRENT STEPFAMILIES

We use our estimation procedure to define current stepfamilies by comparing the ages of the "child" records created from the birth history with 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 because homeleaving is earlier among children in stepparent families (Mitchell et al. 1989): one-quarter of these nonmatching cases are age 16 or 17. Bianchi and Seltzer's (1985) estimates suggest that in 1980 about 18% of the children in married stepfamilies were living with their fathers, whereas those of Moorman and Hernandez (1989) imply that about 12% did 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)?" 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 to 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 figure contrasts with the 9.5% identified by our retrospective procedures, with the 9% estimates for 1980 made by Bianchi and Seltzer (1985), and with the 12% estimated by Moorman and Hernandez (1989). Hence we conclude that the procedures used here are preferable to the use of only M23 and M24 to identify stepfamilies in NSFH1. This may be the case because this question occurred so early in the interview—in particular, before marital and fertility histories had been taken.

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