

Multipartnered Fertility: Can It Be Reduced?

By Lorraine
V. Klerman

Lorraine V. Klerman is professor and director, Institute for Child, Youth and Family Policy, Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA.

During the past five years, multipartnered fertility has gained recognition as a problem whose importance is perhaps equal to that of nonmarital childbearing, unintended childbearing and childbearing among women younger than age 18. Much of the data on multipartnered fertility has come from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.¹ In this issue of *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, Guzzo and Furstenberg add to the relatively sparse literature by examining the characteristics associated with multipartnered fertility among women who participated in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health).² These characteristics include childbearing that begins early, outside of marriage and with a partner who has a weak relationship with the mother.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM

Is multipartnered fertility a matter that should be addressed by federal and state policy? To be considered a problem that merits a policy solution, multipartnered fertility must be reasonably common and must have important consequences. Guzzo and Furstenberg found that the prevalence of multipartnered fertility among female Add Health respondents was quite low: Only 3% of the young women had had births with multiple partners.² This finding may reflect that respondents were still at the beginning of their childbearing years (the sample was aged 19–25) and that those at highest risk, such as school dropouts, were not interviewed. Guzzo and Furstenberg did not analyze data from male respondents, but interviews conducted as part of the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) revealed that nearly 8% of men aged 15–44 had had children with at least two women.³

However, in examining the prevalence of multipartnered fertility, it is important to distinguish between the proportion of all women and men of reproductive age who have children with multiple partners and the proportion of mothers and fathers who do. The figures are much higher, of course, in analyses that focus on mothers and fathers: Fourteen percent of mothers in the Add Health study who were unmarried at first birth² and 17% of fathers in the NSFG had had children with more than one partner.³ In a Wisconsin study that linked welfare (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and other means-tested programs), unemployment insurance and child support records,⁴ 30% of mothers had had children with at least two partners; an additional 20% had had

children by only one father, but that father had had children with more than one woman. Even these findings, however, underestimate the prevalence of multipartnered fertility among mothers in the Wisconsin welfare population, because they exclude mothers with children whose paternity had not been legally established. Almost half (46%) of the fathers in the sample had legally established paternity with more than one mother.⁴ In the Fragile Families study, which used an urban sample, the one-year follow-up survey revealed that one or both parents in 59% of unmarried couples and 21% of married couples had already had at least one other child by another partner.⁵

Not only is multipartnered fertility relatively common, as these findings suggest, but its prevalence is increasing. Data from the NSFG indicate that younger cohorts are having children with new partners more quickly and at a higher rate than older cohorts.³

Although the consequences of multipartnered fertility are not yet well understood, some important findings have emerged. In a one-year follow-up of the Fragile Families sample, Mincy and Huang found that mothers and fathers who had a new child had substantially reduced odds of marriage if they already had a child from a previous relationship.⁶ In an analysis of three-year follow-up data, Carlson and Furstenberg found that mothers perceived their relationship with their child's father to be significantly less supportive if the father had children from a previous relationship; the women also reported less effective co-parenting by the father, including less shared responsibility for child and household tasks. Moreover, the likelihood that the couple's relationship had dissolved by their child's third birthday was elevated if the father had had children with another partner. In contrast, mothers' multipartnered fertility was not associated with deficits in relationship quality and parenting.⁷

Evidence also suggests that there is a relationship between multipartnered fertility and child support. In the Wisconsin data set, the amount of child support that a father was ordered to pay and the amount that he did pay both increased as the number of mothers with whom he had fathered children increased, but payments did not rise as fast as the amount ordered. Thus, fathers with multiple child support orders were more likely than other fathers to be behind in their payments and to face significant consequences, including incarceration.⁴

Overall, these findings suggest that in the short term, multipartnered fertility is associated with reductions in

the likelihood of marriage and in the amount of financial and other support that a mother and her children receive from partners. No studies to date have shown that multipartnered fertility has long-term consequences for mothers or children. However, if we extrapolate from longitudinal studies of teenage parents^{8,9} (who often experience multipartnered fertility) and single mothers who are raising their children alone¹⁰ (a frequent consequence of multipartnered fertility), it seems reasonable to assume that multipartnered fertility often has negative long-term consequences for mothers and children.

POLICIES THAT CAN ADDRESS THIS PROBLEM

What policies might reduce the prevalence of multipartnered fertility or diminish its consequences? Prevention is the preferred approach. Because the risk of multipartnered fertility is reduced for individuals who are married at the time their first child is born,⁵ policies should aim to delay births until marriage or to encourage marriage before a first birth. Promotion of marriage after the birth of the first child is an additional option, provided that the couple is compatible and that resources are available to support a household. However, urging marriage on mothers and fathers who already have children by other partners will be more difficult because of the reluctance of many men to support other men's children, the reluctance of many women to share family financial resources with a partner's earlier children and the uncertain impact that marriage may have on child support payments. Given that many mothers whose lives have been affected by multipartnered fertility will not marry (or remain married if they do), the consequences of multipartnered fertility may be eased by stronger enforcement of child support decrees and by additional efforts to provide fathers with well-paying jobs—employment that will enable them to meet their financial obligations.

Family planning is one approach that may help increase the proportion of births that take place within marriage. The remarkable decline in the birthrate among teenage women during the past decade shows that it is possible to change sexual and contraceptive behavior.¹¹ Continued efforts to reduce rates of childbearing among teenagers—who are usually unmarried and who frequently have a second and third child quickly¹² and with a new partner—are imperative to preventing multipartnered fertility, but older women should also be encouraged to plan their pregnancies so that their births occur within marriage.

Family planning programs alone will not significantly reduce the rate of multipartnered fertility. Men and women, especially those with low incomes, must be convinced that marriage is a beneficial option for them. Edin, Kefalas and Reed have shown that marriage has not lost its importance for poor women and men or for black and Hispanic individuals, despite the high rates of non-marital births in these groups.¹³ In fact, the researchers believe that women in these groups view marriage more

positively than do many middle-class and white women. The problem is that many poor, black and Hispanic individuals have unrealistically high expectations for marriage. Respondents in the study indicated that they wanted to delay marriage until they and their partners had sufficient funds to make a down payment on a home, purchase a car and establish a nest egg to carry them through brief periods of hard times. Moreover, the women wanted to find a husband who would provide for (or at least contribute to) the household financially, be faithful and assist in parenting. Interestingly, many also stated that they wanted a big wedding. In today's America, these conditions for marriage cannot be met by a large proportion of poor individuals.

Most important, being married is not seen as a prerequisite to having children. Although two-thirds of the mothers in the Fragile Families study agreed that it is better for children if their parents are married,¹⁴ they appeared unwilling to wait until they were married to become a mothers; the personal desire to have children may have trumped the feelings about marriage's benefits for children.

If, as Edin and colleagues point out, it is not necessary to convince low-income women and men that marriage is important,¹³ then policies and programs should encourage women to consider whether their expectations for marriage are too high or, better still, make it possible for them to meet some of those expectations. Reasonably, many women will resist marriage unless it increases the resources—both emotional and financial—available to their families. Other than providing appropriate education, there is little that public policy can do to ensure that men will be loving, faithful partners and good fathers to their children.

But women also want husbands who can provide a home, a car and other items, and programs can be developed to increase the pool of men whom women would consider suitable husbands from an economic perspective. For example, programs that encourage more young men to complete high school and obtain the education essential for good jobs would increase the pool, as would juvenile delinquency prevention or diversion programs* that reduce men's risk of incarceration. Job training and employability programs that enable men without higher education to obtain and retain employment that provides sufficient income to support a family are also vital. Increases in the minimum wage, protection against predatory lending and targeted tax relief would also help increase the assets available to low-income families.¹⁵

Although seldom considered in the context of marital formation, another approach to asset development is the

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*Juvenile diversion programs divert youthful offenders from the juvenile justice system to alternative programs, which usually involve counseling and case management, in an attempt to reduce the negative consequences of being processed through the juvenile justice system and the overcrowding in juvenile courts and correctional institutions.

individual development account (IDA). These are special savings accounts, started by low- and moderate-income individuals, contributions to which are matched by federal or state government or other institutions. The match rate—typically 2–3 times the account holder’s deposit—provides an important savings incentive.* These funds can be accessed after a specific period of time, but only to pay for education, job training, home purchases, creation of small businesses or other developmental purposes. Federal support for IDAs is evident in the welfare reform legislation that allows states to exclude these accounts from asset limits for all means-tested programs and permits Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds to be used to match savings in IDAs. Federal funds are also available through Assets for Independence, a federal grant program that enables community-based not-for-profit organizations and state, local and tribal government agencies to implement asset-based approaches for helping low-income families out of poverty. These and other asset development programs, such as the Children’s Savings Account (which has bipartisan support in Congress), can increase women’s and men’s assets, thereby making marriage more attractive and possibly reducing rates of multipartnered fertility.

PROBLEMS IN MARRIAGE PROMOTION

Interestingly, the federal Healthy Marriage Initiative (which seems to assume a unique mother-father relationship, thus ignoring the reality of multipartnered fertility) lists activities that foster economic stability among the fundable approaches to promoting fatherhood. Marriage promotion activities include marriage education, marriage mentoring programs, marriage skills training and programs and public advertising campaigns that educate high school students about the value of marriage.¹⁶ Few would argue against such programs for individuals who are not married or perhaps for couples who are expecting a baby. However, if many young people, particularly those with low incomes, are already convinced of the value of marriage, then educational efforts may need to focus not on promoting marriage, but rather on making marriage expectations more reasonable among such individuals.

Marriage promotion for couples with children is more controversial, particularly if one of the partners has a child from a previous relationship. Under such circumstances, even if a program based on education and counseling could encourage a woman to marry the father of her child (or a man to marry the mother of his child), there are often multiple potential husbands and wives. Who should be urged to marry whom? And is any marriage always preferable to no marriage at all? How will marriage to

a new partner affect the mother’s children by an earlier partner? Will the earlier partner be less likely to visit his children or to provide child support or informal financial assistance? Moreover, if a woman or a man has not found a relationship to be a happy one, it is probably not in the best interests of either the children or their parents to encourage marriage. Studies show that living with a man other than one’s father conveys few benefits for children and is perhaps worse than living with one’s mother only.¹⁰

Even if a father decides to live with his children and marry their mother, he may not want to live with and support her children from another relationship. The problems of assigning child support payments from men who have fathered children with several women bedevil administrators and judges throughout the nation. (These challenges are discussed by Meyer and colleagues.⁴) Most young fathers do not have the resources to make adequate monetary contributions to multiple households. Marriage can improve the economic situation of the mother if it adds a breadwinner to the family, but if it reduces income from child support, the gain may be modest at best.

CONCLUSION

The Guzzo and Furstenberg article furthers our knowledge about which young women are likely to experience multipartnered fertility. Other studies have shed light on the scope of the problem and its consequences. As Guzzo and Furstenberg note, public policy should be focused on preventing the conditions that lead individuals to enter parenthood under unfavorable circumstances. Family life education, easy access to contraceptives, and marriage and relationship education can all play a part. However, economic policies that would increase the assets that women and men bring to marriage and could continue to accrue would probably, in the long run, be most effective in reducing multipartnered fertility and its adverse consequences.

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Author contact: klerman@brandeis.edu