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Statistical Brief

When Families Break Up

Economic stress can be a factor in the breakup of families. When families fall apart, low income and unemployment are often part of the picture. This brief examines family breakup and tries to answer the following questions:

- How many families discontinue over a two-year period?
How much do assorted economic and demographic factors affect the chances of a two-parent family breaking up?
Do many poor single mothers who recently formed their own households come from households where they were already poor?
Of all the families (with children) that became poor during a year, how many of them were formed recently?

This brief concentrates on two types of families: two-parent families (married-couple households with children), and mother-child families (households maintained by a single mother living with her children). Data come from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), which gathers information from a sample of

families over a period of time (a panel).

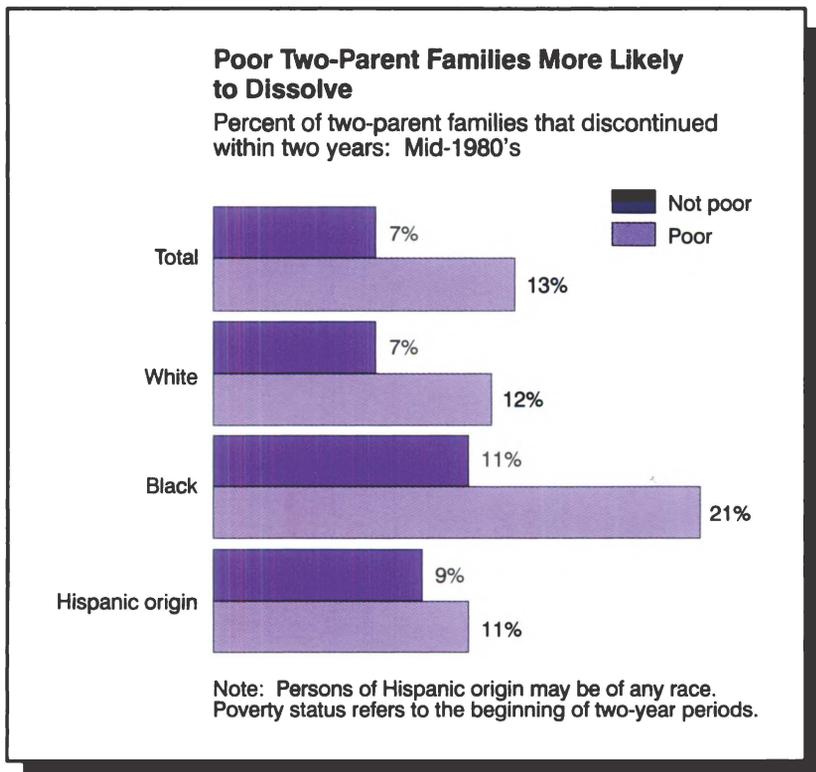
Two-year family changes are estimated by combining results from the 1984 and 1985 SIPP panels, which cover two different biennial periods between December 1983 and April 1987. One-year changes are estimated by combining results from the 1984-1987 SIPP panels, which cover four different annual periods between December 1983 and April 1988.

Families are constantly discontinuing and being replaced by new ones.

About 1 in every 12 two-parent families that existed at the beginning of a typical two-year

period in the mid-1980's no longer existed two years later: the spouses separated or one died. Usually, the result was that a new single-parent family came into being. Discontinuation was more likely for Black than for White families (12 compared with 7 percent). The discontinuation rate for White families, incidentally, wasn't statistically different from the rate for all families.

On the other hand, mother-child families are even more transitory. Of every four of these families, one did not exist 2 years later. They usually disbanded in one of two ways: marriage (as a new two-parent family formed), or when the



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mother and her children joined a household that already existed, such as one maintained by the mother's parents. White single mothers were more likely than their Black counterparts to see their family discontinued (27 compared with 13 percent). Not significantly different from Blacks, 16 percent of Hispanic mother-child families discontinued.

Several factors play roles in the breakup of two-parent families.

■ **Nonemployment:** If the husband is not employed, the likelihood of a two-parent family's breakup increases. Among two-parent families where neither spouse worked at the start of the period, 16 percent discontinued within two years. Not statistically different, among those where only the wife worked, 13 percent dissolved. Among those where the husband worked (regardless of whether or not the wife did), 7 percent broke up.

■ **Hours Worked:** If both spouses have to balance large amounts of time at work with the care of their children, additional stresses may be placed on their marriage. Among two-parent families where both parents worked full-time, two-year discontinuation rates were higher than among those where the father worked full-time and mother part-time (8 compared with 5 percent). It's also possible, of course, that spouses who both work full-time may find separating and living on their own easier than those who don't each work full time, since each has more available income.

■ **Poverty Status:** As the graph on the front shows, two-parent families who were below the poverty line were nearly twice as likely as those above the line to dissolve within two years (13 compared with 7 percent).

■ **Husband's Age:** The younger the husband in a two-parent family, the likelier it was for the family to dissolve. Fourteen percent with a husband under age 30 dissolved within two years, compared with 7 percent of those in which the husband was age 30-39; the figure was 5 percent for families with a husband between 40 and 64 years old.

Most families who become poor during a year are continuing families.

Of all the families with children who became poor during an average year in the mid-1980's, most were *continuing* families — in other words, the type of family was unchanged from a year earlier. These continuing families comprised 73 percent of families with children who fell into poverty during a year. The remaining families who became poor were those that hadn't existed a year earlier.

Why did continuing families account for such a large share of families who became poor? Usually because one of the parents or someone else living in the household experienced a drop in the number of hours

they worked. Or, in some cases, the amount of money they made per hour failed to keep pace with inflation.

More information:

When Households Continue, Discontinue, and Form. Current Population Reports, Series P-23, No. 179. Contact Customer Services for ordering information (301-763-4100).

Contacts:

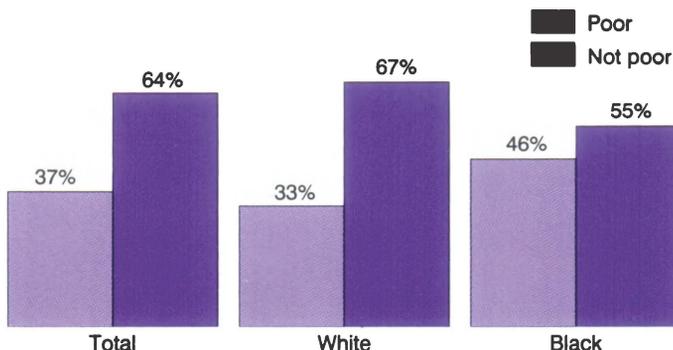
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Many Poor Single Mothers Were Poor in Their Previous Households As Well

Of poor mother-child families formed less than a year earlier, percent of the mothers who were poor one year earlier in their previous household: Mid-1980's



Note: Figures don't add to 100 due to rounding. Also, newly formed, poor Hispanic mother-child families aren't broken out separately because there are fewer than 200,000 of them in the reported data.