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Family Complexity, Public Policy, and Child Wellbeing in the United States

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Families Are Increasingly Complex

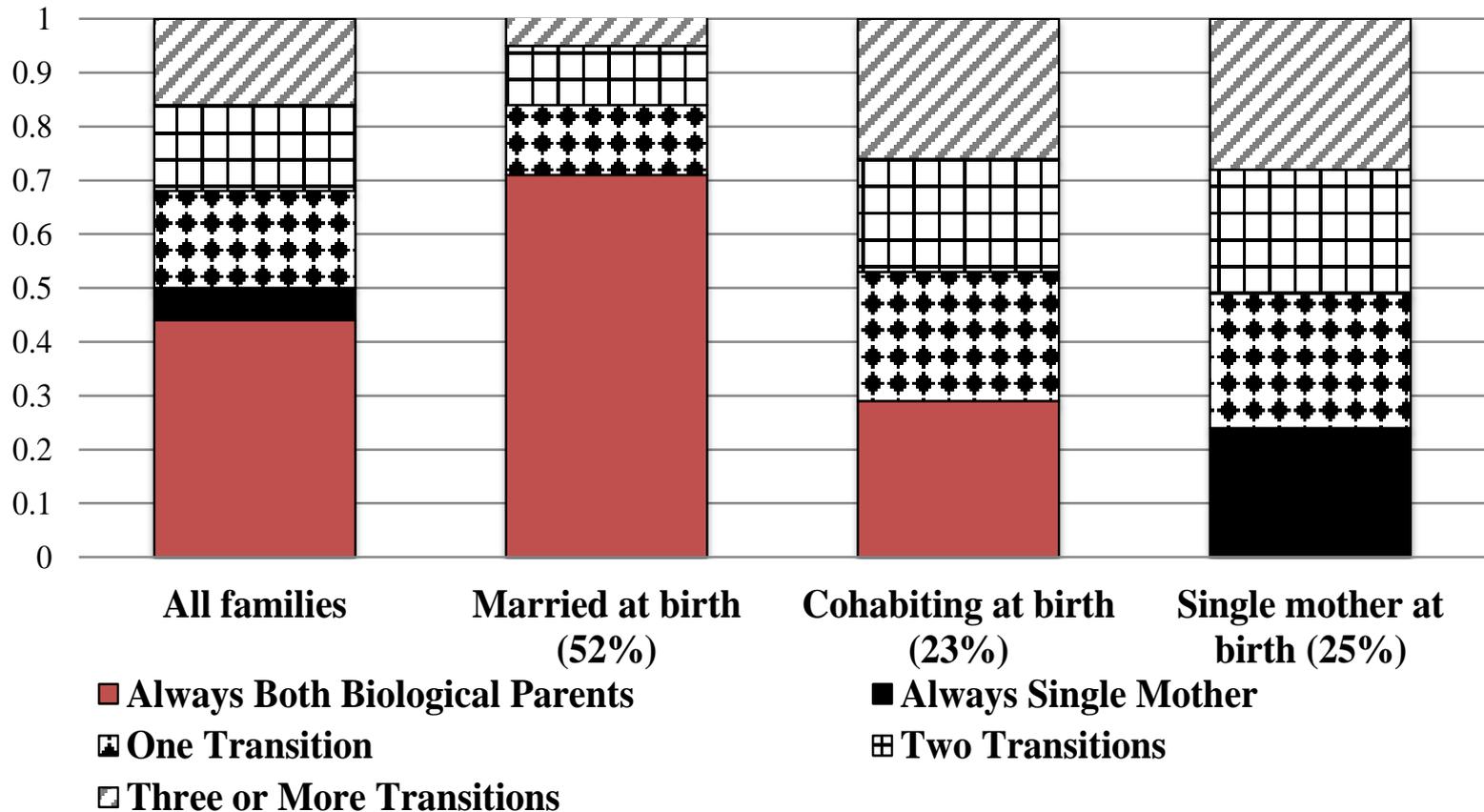
- Both the family forms that individuals commonly experience and norms re: parental roles have changed over time
 - Resident (married or cohabiting), nonresident, semi-resident, biological, social, and same sex parents; resident and nonresident full-, half-, and step-/social-siblings; living apart/together, together/apart; also adult children living with parents; elders living with children, etc.
- Increased diversity and fluidity in family forms means many children are exposed to multiple types of parents/parental figures and that both children and adults are increasingly likely to take on multiple family roles, within and across family units/households, simultaneously and over time (particularly since shared physical custody has also increased substantially over time)
- Most U.S. children will not spend their whole childhood living with both biological parents and many will transition into and out of multiple family configurations; the majority of children born to unmarried parents will live in complex families and experience family fluidity (family structure transitions) and parental multi-partnered fertility
- Parental repartnering is increasingly common: Approximately 1/3 of children in the U.S. will spend time living with a parent to whom they are not biologically related

Family Complexity and Fluidity Have Important Implications

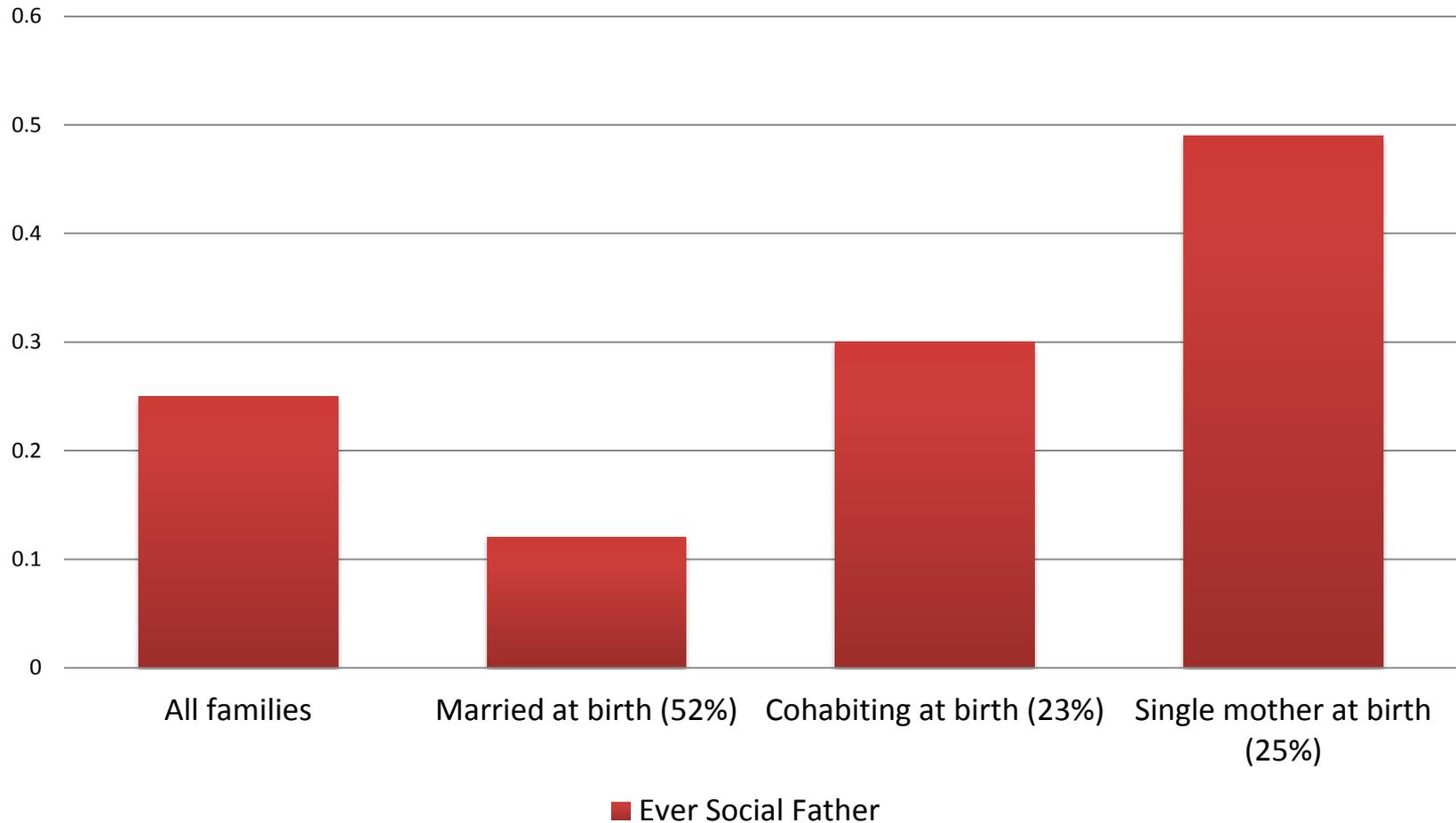
- Disadvantaged groups are especially likely to experience family complexity and fluidity
- Differential selection into family types/experiences which has implications for intergenerational transfer of human capital and inequality in the United States
- Levels of formal and informal support by non-custodial parents (generally fathers) are related to whether parents have other partners and children
- Family structure transitions and complexity are associated with adverse developmental outcomes for children and have important implications for intergenerational transmission of inequality
- Policies in a host of domains, including food assistance, tax credits, child support, health care coverage, and income support/welfare, have not been designed to account for family complexity

Family Structure Transitions Are Common

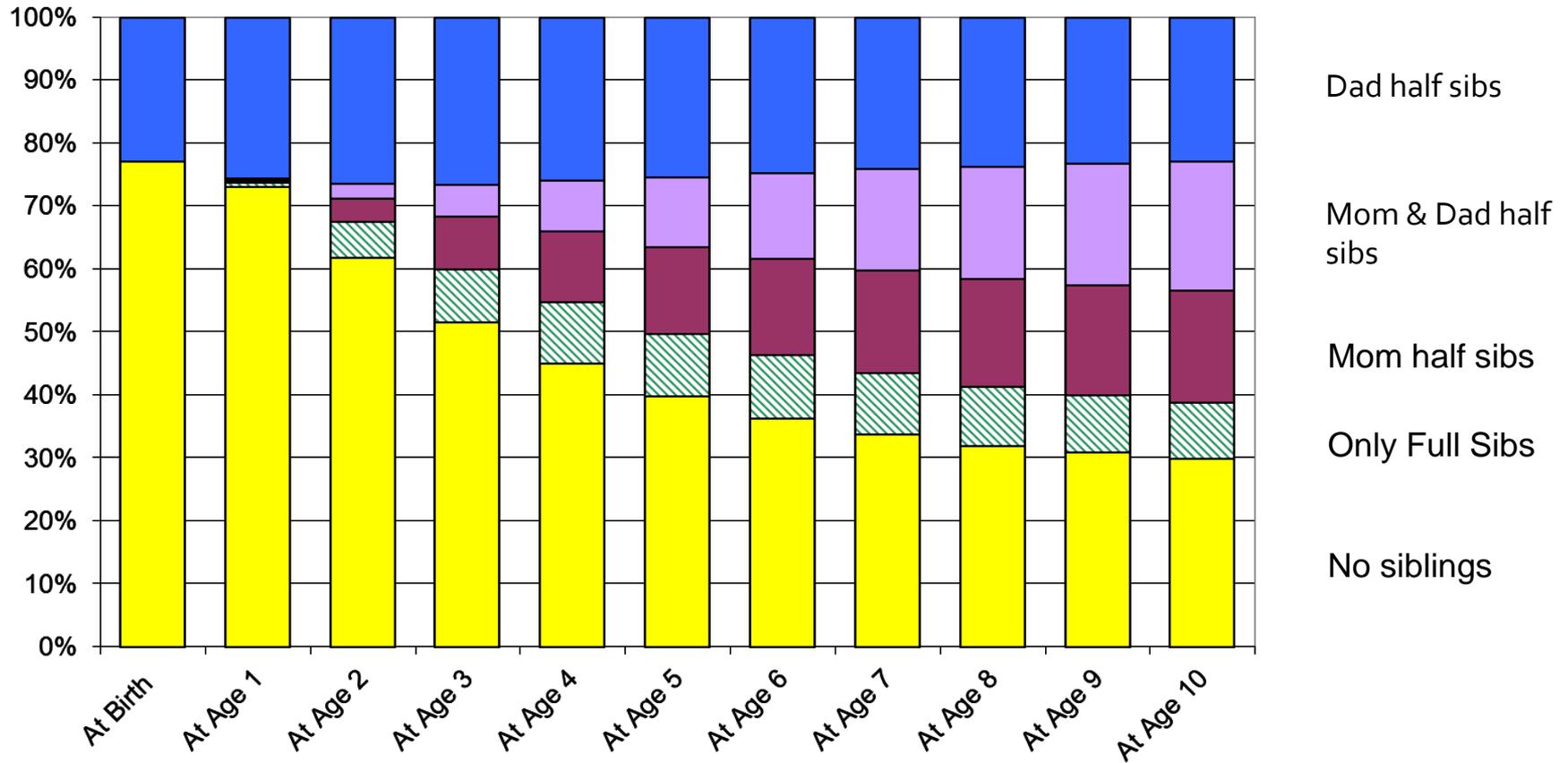
(Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, birth to age 9)



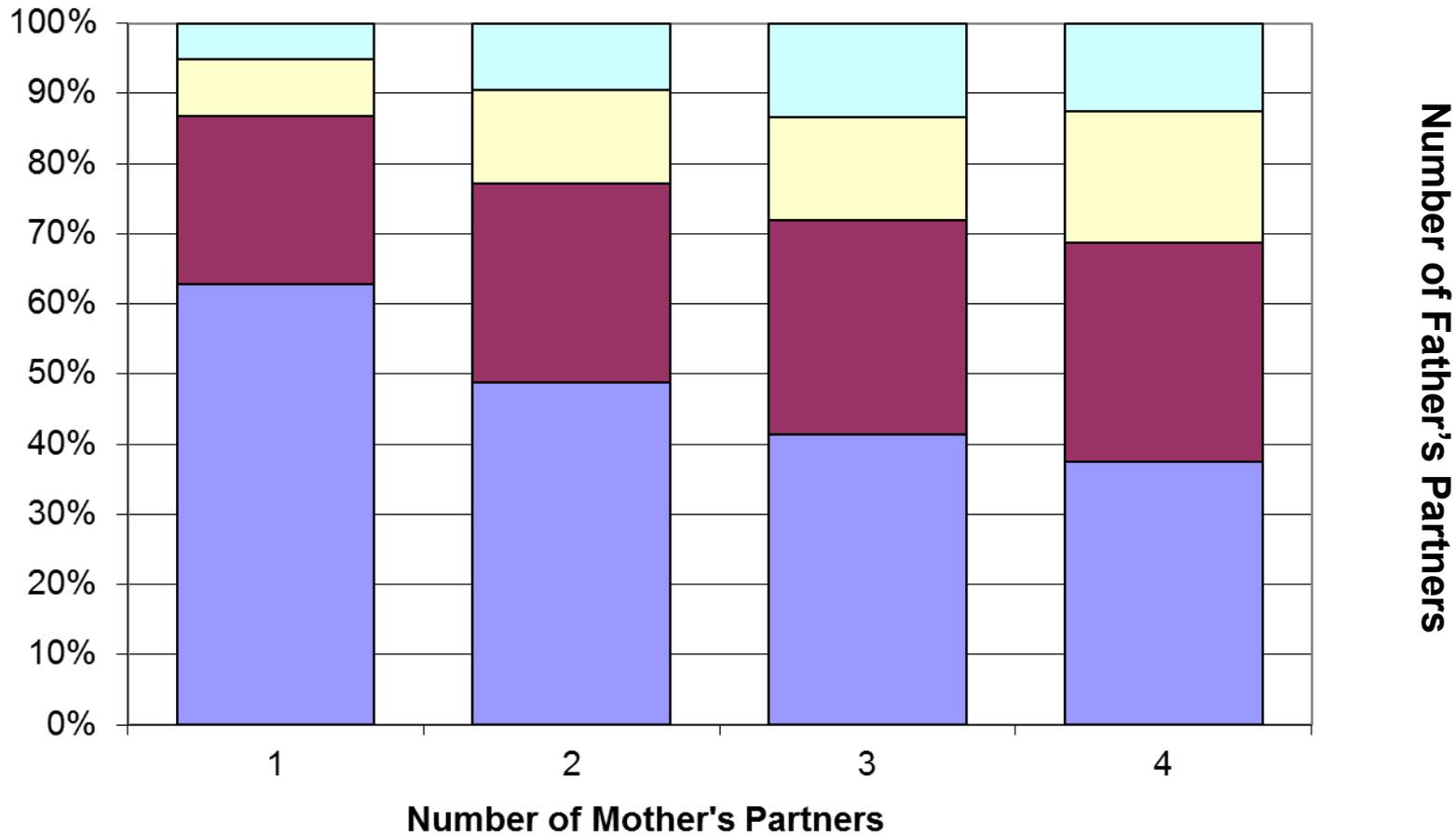
Proportion Ever Living with a Social Father by Family Structure at Birth, weighted FFCW data birth to age 9



Most children born to unmarried parents will be part of complex families



Number of Father's Birth Partners by Number of Mother's Birth Partners



Prevalence of Multiple Parenting Roles in Two-Cohorts of Young Men

The Probability of Simultaneously Occupying More than One Parental Role Has Roughly Doubled Over The Last 20 Years
(NLYS79&97; Men)

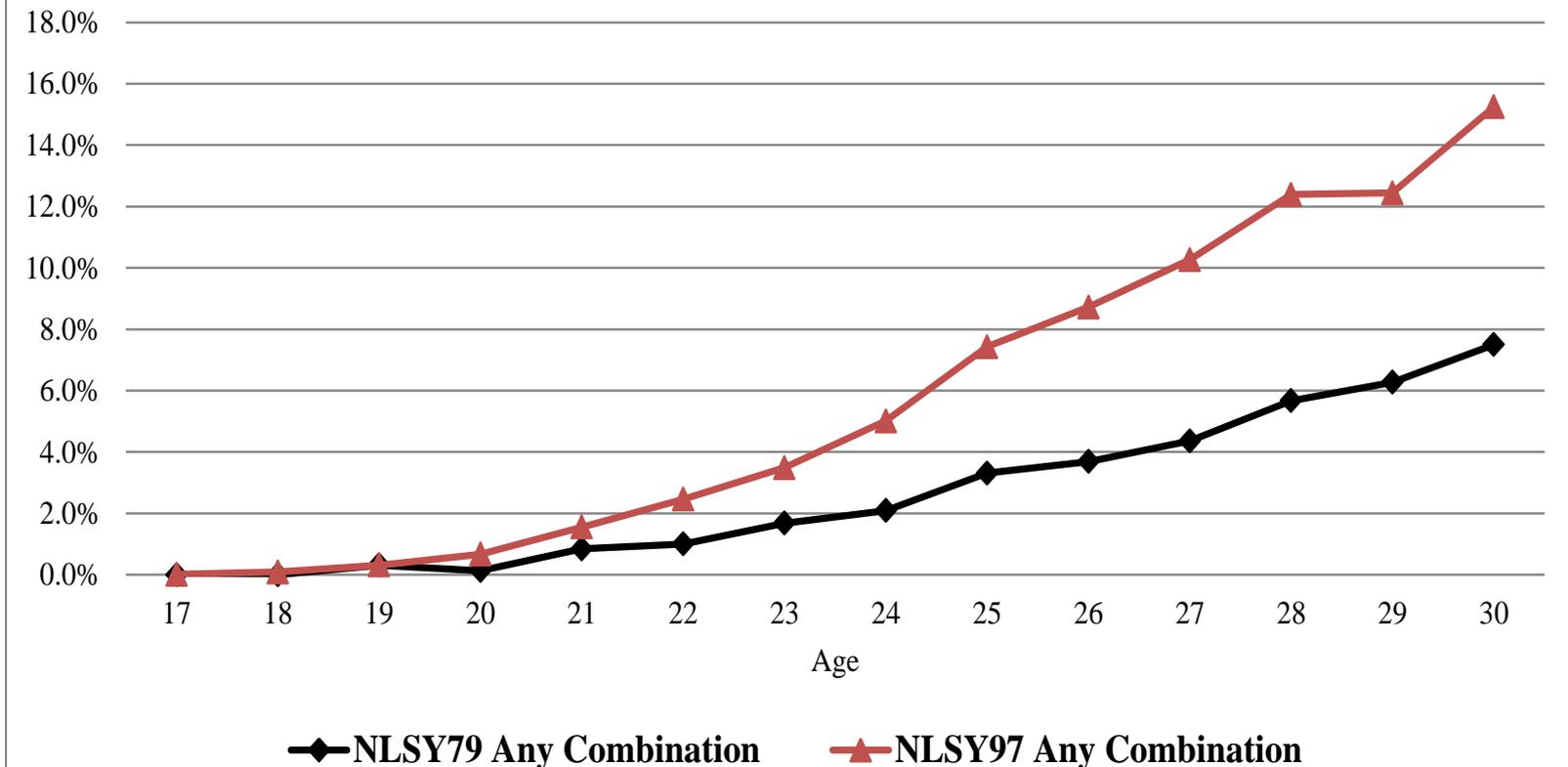
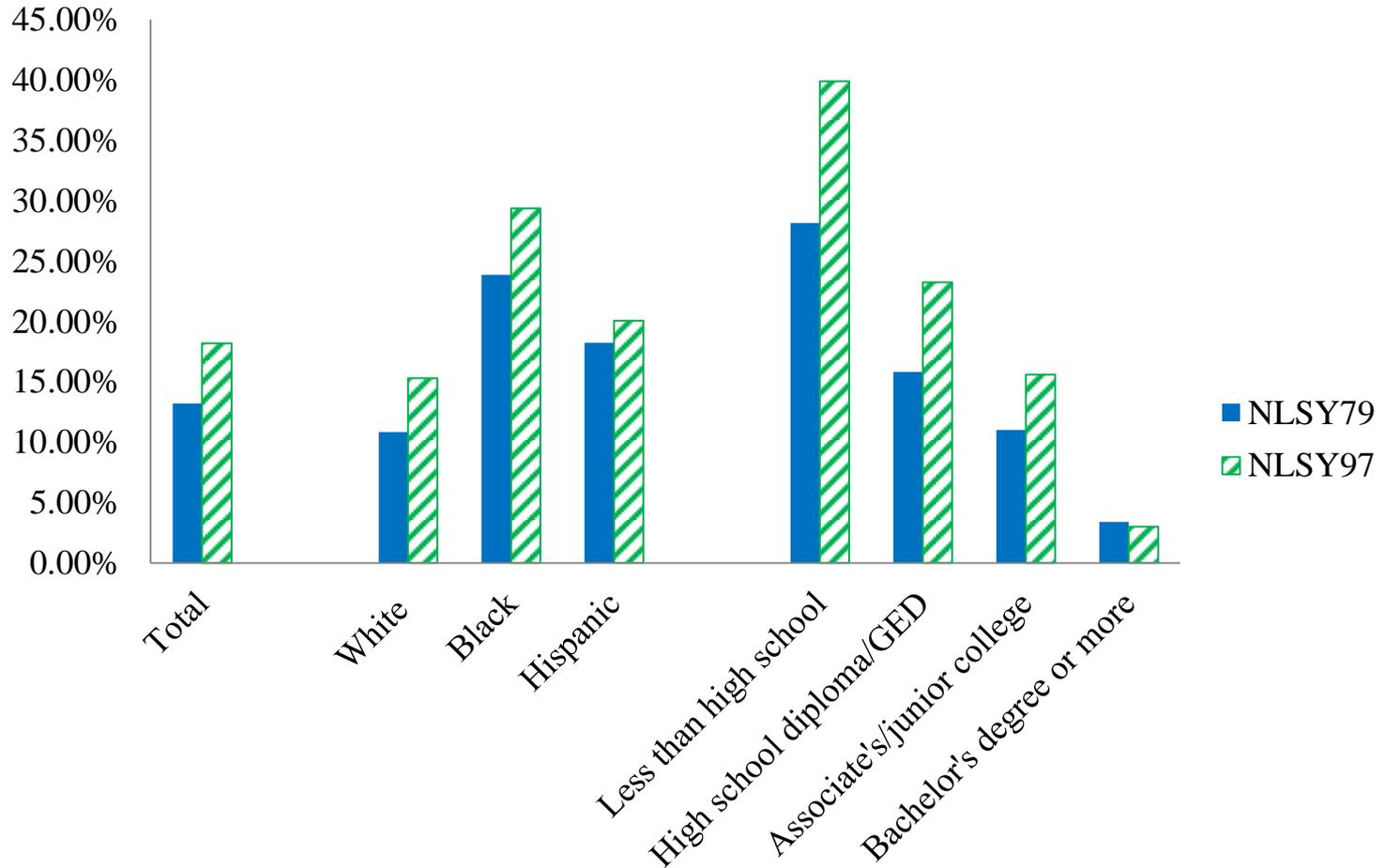
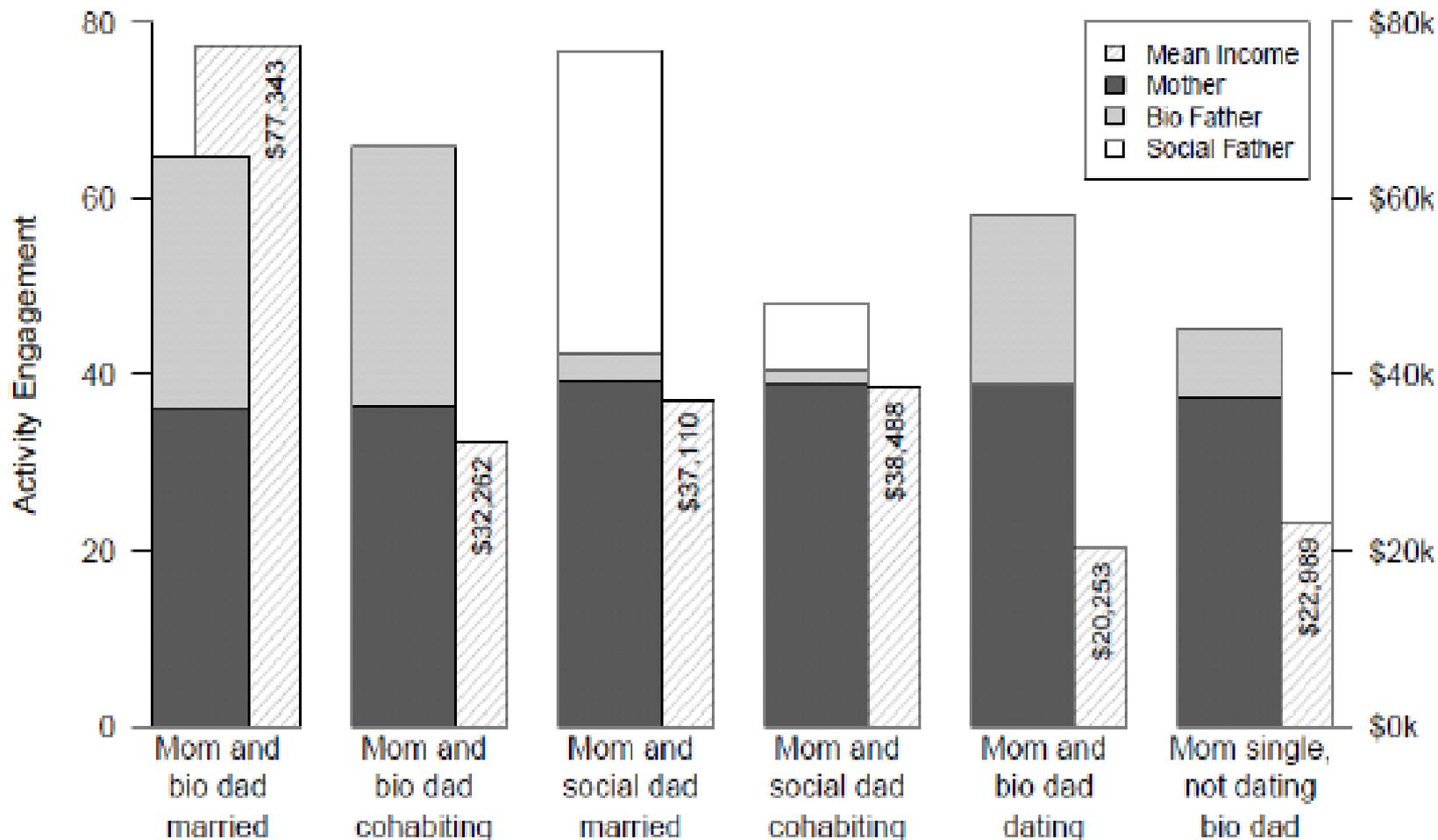


Figure 4. Cumulative Proportion Ever Simultaneously or Sequentially Experiencing More Than One Parental Role



Resources Available to Children Differ by Family Type

Figure 1. Activity Engagement and Income by Family Type (unadjusted)



Implications for Policy

- Trends in family complexity and fluidity: (1) make it difficult to categorize families and develop policies, and (2) necessitate a substantial shift in how we approach families and family functioning, as well as familial roles and responsibilities
- Multiple actors, roles, and relationships within and across family ‘units’ now require a substantial shift in how we approach families and family functioning, as well as familial roles and responsibilities
 - Biological, marital, and co-residential ties (which to privilege? when?)
 - Needs, capabilities, and well-being of mothers and fathers as well as children, particularly in a context of multiple-partner fertility (MPF)
 - Fluidity in these factors over time
 - Relevant to any policy that links eligibility or benefit level to family membership
- Economic and ‘behavioral’ goals
 - Public and private income support/transfers: adequacy, affordability, equity
 - Fertility and family formation decisions
 - Healthy parenting practices/noncustodial parent (father) involvement
- Child rather than family base for some benefits may help (but could adversely affect adults)

US Policies Approaches to Custodial and Noncustodial Parents

- Custodial parents have access to multiple supports and services in the tax code and social welfare arena: CTC, EITC, WIC, TANF, Child Support Enforcement, SNAP, MA, (sometimes) housing assistance
- Noncustodial parents generally do not; they are typically served and categorized as non-parents rather than as parents
- Noncustodial parents' primary interactions with government consist of: courts (family, criminal); child support enforcement; UI (?); employment services (?)
 - These programs and policies offer limited direct economic supports or services and are more heavily oriented around mandated behaviors
- Equitable and parallel policies for custodial and noncustodial parents may be more appropriate given that noncustodial parents are also expected to contribute to childrearing

Some Guiding Principles

- Policy/programs should address family complexity and promote healthy relationships/involvement among all actors
 - Unrealistic to focus on current or former couple and joint child(ren)
 - Most children born to unmarried parents will live in complex families (MPF) and experience family fluidity (family structure transitions)
 - Multiple parental roles at a given time and over time (particularly relevant for fathers)
- For noncustodial parents, policy should:
 - Promote access to children (in most cases) but consider particular circumstances under which involvement should (should not?) be encouraged
 - Recognize that employment, child support, and noncustodial parent involvement are interrelated; assist with education/training/job placement
 - Collect support from noncustodial parents (fathers) who can afford to pay and improve the labor market prospects of low-income men so that more men are able to pay

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THANK YOU!

Child Maintenance/Child Support

- Extremely complicated in a context of MPF (particularly in U.S.)
 - Mothers and fathers with MPF tend to partner with each other
- Explicit balancing of biological vs. residential responsibility for children (continuum); values and incentives vis-à-vis obligations
- Have direct consequences for economic wellbeing of children and resident and nonresident parents
 - Adequate support for children by parents/continuity of expenditures; horizontal equity between families; reduce uncertainty and litigation
 - Generally designed (in simpler times) with manageable burdens and economies of scale in mind
 - Currently need to consider whether children should be affected by parents' later fertility choices, as well as feasible implementation
 - Major policy dilemmas: (1) should children in different households receive different amounts? (2) should first child's order be altered with the arrival of a second child?

Child Maintenance/Child Support Schemes

No. of Countries Following Various Child Support Strategies

Strategy	Number of countries
Equal - No reduction	2.5 (ON/CA, NL, NO)
Equal - Reduction	4.5 (AU, ON/CA, DK, NZ, UK)
Unequal - No Reduction	5 (AT, FI, DE, SE, WI/US)
Unequal - Reduction	0

Ontario (Canada) 2 strategies for low-income and moderate/high-income
Belgium and France excluded – based on full judicial discretion

Source: Meyer 2012

Physical and Legal Custody and Visitation

- Increasing move toward joint physical custody after parental breakup across the industrialized countries
- Policy must grapple with how to balance and allocate child maintenance given differences in parents' incomes and child time in each parent's custody; also has implications for tax policy
- Child support/maintenance and visitation/father involvement tend to be complements, not substitutes; focusing on nonresident parents' ability to pay (via employment and income) may be an important component of encouraging both (U.S.)
- Policies need to explicitly address rights, responsibilities, and decision making power of social parents (and, in some cases, same sex parents in which only one parent is biological/adoptive)
- Relationship programs should address multiple roles

Means/Income-Tested Programs

- Direct cash transfers to low-income families/households; tax credits or deductions; in-kind benefits/vouchers; housing subsidies
- In the U.S.: Earned Income Tax Credit; child deduction, employment assistance/cash welfare (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), Food Stamps/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, housing subsidies, etc.; In other countries: may include similar types of programs as well as child allowances
- Children can often only be “claimed” in one household regardless of time spent with each parent
- Child support ignored by the tax system; nonresident parent generally gets no child associated tax benefits
- Benefits cannot be split between households
- Eligible “family” inconsistently defined by marriage vs. coresidence

Other Programs and Benefits

- Role of domestic partner benefits and ‘common law marriage’ for same and different sex couples may be increasingly important
- Pension benefits often only provided to married spouses
- Survivors benefits often only available to married widows/widowers and surviving children with paternity/adoption legally established
- Often no spousal support for cohabiting partner after break-up
- Parental leave and (U.S.) health care coverage often do not apply to cohabiting partner’s children
- Child protection/parenting/child wellbeing programs: generally focus explicitly on resident parent (mother) and sometimes spouse; should pay more attention to potential roles of other actors (biological and social fathers); could offer similar interventions to men

Conclusions/Moving Forward

- Greater numbers of actors and more complex sets of relationships within and across family 'units' now matter
 - Unrealistic to focus on a 'current' couple and their joint child(ren)
- Implies a substantial shift in how we approach families and family functioning, as well as familial roles and responsibilities
- Relevant to any policy that links eligibility or benefit level to family membership ; child rather than family base for some benefits may help (but could adversely affect adults)
- Policy choices must balance:
 - Conflicting principles and inevitable trade-offs
 - Issues of equity, adequacy/affordability, and outcomes from multiple perspectives
 - Administrative capacity/feasibility vis-à-vis implementation and ongoing program operation; simplicity vs. tailoring
 - High incidence of parental incarceration (U.S.)