

Diversity and Fluidity in Children's Living Arrangements: Family Transitions in an Urban Afro-American Community

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Hunter, A. G., & Ensminger, M. E. (1992). Diversity and fluidity in children's living arrangements: Family transitions in an urban Afro-American community. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54(2), 418-426.

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Abstract:

The article presents a study exploring the evolution of urban African-American children's living arrangements in a community-defined population. African-American children are more likely than non-black children to spend significant portions of their childhood in households that are not dual parent and are more likely to coreside with extended relatives. In addition, the rates of marital disruption and never-married childbearing among Afro-American parents, and the fluidness of extended family households, suggest that change is a common experience for black. The family as an evolving social context has been a major theme in family research, for several decades. The family developmental perspective in concert with demographic work on the family life cycle has emphasized the dynamic nature of families both in composition and developmental tasks. The prevalence and stability of two-parent nuclear family households has changed for all Americans and the forces of change have been particularly pronounced in African-American communities.

Keywords: African American children | Ethnic groups | Families | Households | Ethnology

Article:

This study explores the evolution of urban Afro-American children's living arrangements in a community-defined population. Household information was gathered from mothers or mother surrogates during the target child's first grade year (1966-679 and during adolescence (1975-76). Children's living arrangements were diverse, including nuclear and extended household family structures. Living arrangements were also fluid, as transitions in household composition and family structure were common. Changes in parents' marital status and the entrances and exits of extended kin were major sources of transition and the course of children's living arrangements was related to family type during first grade.

Afro-American children are more likely than non-black children to spend significant portions of their childhood in households that are not dual-parent and are more likely to coreside with extended relatives (Hofferth, 1985a, 1985b). In addition, the rates of marital disruption and never-married childbearing among Afro-American parents, and the fluidness of extended family households, suggest that change is a common experience for black children (Farley & Allen, 1989; Hofferth, 1985b; Richards, White, & Tsui, 1987). It is in this malleable context of household and family that Afro-American families interact and children develop. Hence, exploring the diversity in family structure and the fluidness of household boundaries in Afro-American communities is an important area of inquiry in family research. The aim of this paper is to explore community-specific patterns of urban Afro-American children's living arrangements and the variations that occur as children develop.

The family as an evolving social context has been a major theme in family research for several decades. The family developmental perspective (Duvall, 1967; Hill & Rodgers, 1964), in concert with demographic work on the family life cycle (e.g., Glick, 1947) has emphasized the dynamic nature of families both in composition and developmental tasks. However, the family developmental perspective was based on the adherence of the majority of American families to the traditional "once married, own children" model, and change was examined within the context of the nuclear family unit. As today's families have become more diverse, researchers have begun to move away from static views of family structure and normative developmental change toward an emphasis on the varied trajectories of individuals, families, and households (e.g., Elder, 1978; Kellam, Adams, Brown, & Ensminger, 1982; Hofferth, 1985a, 1985b; Slesinger, 1980; Watts & Skidmore, 1979).

Revisionist Afro-American family research pointed to the limitations of comparative racial frameworks and the nuclear family model when applied to the black population (e.g., Billingsley, 1968; Hill, 1972; Staples, 1971). These researchers stressed the importance of parents, parent surrogates, intergenerational relationships, and fictive ties in Afro-American families (Billingsley, 1968; Martin & Martin, 1978; McAdoo, 1980; Shimikin, Shimikin, & Frate, 1978; Stack, 1974). Although the major thrust of revisionist work was to dismantle the Frazier thesis of Afro-American family pathology (e.g., Frazier, 1939; Moynihan, 1965), it embodied a less static view of family structure that integrates well with the growing interest in the evolving course of children's living arrangements. Further, this work suggests that an examination of Afro-American children's living arrangements over time requires a focus not only on the marital dyad and nuclear family unit, that is, parent(s) and offspring, but also the extended kinship system in which households and families are embedded.

CHILDREN'S LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

The prevalence and stability of two-parent nuclear family households has changed for all Americans and the forces of change have been particularly pronounced in Afro-American communities (Farley & Allen, 1989; Hofferth, 1985a). It is estimated that for recent birth cohorts

59% (Bumpass, 1984) to 94% (Hofferth, 1985b) of Afro-American children will experience single-parent family status by age 18. However, a significant proportion of their childhoods will also be spent in dual-parent households as well. For recent cohorts, Hofferth (1985b) estimates that 41% of Afro-American childhood years will be spent living with two parents. In sum, most Afro-American children will experience a major change in household family structure, spending part of their lives in both two-parent and single-parent households. Relatively Few will spend their entire childhoods living with both parents (Hofferth, 1985b).

Most research examining transitions in family structure and children's lives tends to focus on changes (i.e., divorce, remarriage) precipitated by the marital dyad without reference to extended kin (Bumpass, 1984; Glick, 1984; Hofferth, 1985a). Afro-American children and adults are more likely than nonblacks to live in extended family households (Farley & Allen, 1989; Hofferth, 1985b) and to make transitions to extended family households; and once formed these households stay intact longer than nonblack extended family households (Richards, White, & Tsui, 1987; White & Tsui, 1986).

Although extended family living arrangements are common in Afro-American communities, studies of children's living arrangements rarely identify the generational structure of extended family households or explore transitions involving extended kin. Descriptions of household family evolution involving nuclear and non-nuclear family members have been reported primarily in ethnographic work (e.g., Martin & Martin, 1978; Stack, 1974) and studies with relatively small samples (e.g., Slesinger, 1980; Smith, 1980). When extended kin have been considered in large panel studies, the relationship of these kin (e.g., grandmothers, uncles) is rarely reported (see for exception, Beck & Beck, 1984, 1989). As a result, we have limited knowledge about the variety of extended family households that children are a part of and about the transitions in living arrangements fueled by non-nuclear kin.

The prevalence of single-parent families among Afro-Americans has been well documented; however, the range of family types (nuclear and extended) that children are likely to live in and the patterns of change across their childhoods need to be explored further. In a community-defined sample, we explore the diversity and patterns of change in urban Afro-American children's living arrangements in two developmental contexts, early childhood (entrance to first grade) and 10 years later during adolescence. The following questions are addressed: (a) What types of households did children live in as they entered first grade, and during adolescence? Were there variations in household family structure as children aged? (b) What were the trajectories of children's living arrangements by family type at first grade? (c) What were the sources, for example, entrances/exits of parent(s) and extended kin, of change in family type between childhood and adolescence? What were the variations in the types of transitions children experienced by first grade family type?

POPULATION AND PROCEDURES

Most research on Afro-American children's living arrangements has relied largely on national probability samples (e.g., Bumpass, 1984; Hofferth, 1985a, 1985b) which provide an excellent aggregate view of patterns of change in Afro-American households. Age-, cohort-, and community-specific studies of family structure and function are necessary complements of studies based on national probability samples, like the Michigan PSID and smaller ethnographic samples (e.g., Burton & Bengtson, 1985; Stack, 1974) because they open a view to variations that may be masked by national patterns and provide a broader context for ethnographic research.

The Woodlawn Longitudinal Study, on which this paper is based, is a community epidemiological study targeting children and their families who share age-graded developmental tasks. The community epidemiological orientation of this work holds constant the macro characteristics of a population (e.g., a neighborhood that is poor, Afro-American, and urban) and allows for the examination of variations in family and child characteristics within the population and for comparisons across defined populations (Kellam, 1990; Kellam, Branch, Agrawal, & Ensminger, 1975).

The target population of children and families resided in Woodlawn, a poor urban community on Chicago's South Side. Between 1955 and 1966 Woodlawn changed from 40% to almost totally Afro-American. In 1966, it ranked among the five most impoverished Chicago neighborhoods, with three times as many residents on public assistance per 1,000 population as Chicago as a whole (de Vise, 1967).

In 1965, about the time target children were in first grade, Woodlawn was highly overcrowded, 90,000 people living in an urban area built to house much fewer. The population declined to about 54,000 by 1970 and to 36,000 by 1980. Given this decline it is not surprising that over the 10 years of the follow-up period, two thirds of the population moved to other community areas within Chicago. Thus, although the study population began in the Woodlawn community, over the course of the study the population dispersed to 46 of the 76 Chicago community areas.

Woodlawn has continued to rank among the most impoverished of Chicago's neighborhoods. In 1970, about 27% of Woodlawn families were below the poverty level and in 1980 about 32% were. The comparable rates for Chicago as a whole were 12% in 1970 and 17% in 1980. However, Woodlawn was not a homogenous community when the study began. There was wide diversity in Woodlawn, with some areas having a high percentage of home ownership and a low percentage of poverty. According to 1980 census data, this diversity remains.

With the support of community leaders, about 1,700 first grade children from 12 elementary schools in the community were assessed. Mothers or primary caregivers of these children were interviewed in the spring of 1967 and followed up 10 years later (1975-76). They reported on the child's functioning, household characteristics, child-rearing patterns and community participation. The final population of children consisted of the complete cohort of first grade

entrants who remained in Woodlawn the entire first grade school year and their families (n = 1,242). In 1975-76, 76% (n= 939) of these mothers and mother surrogates were located in the Chicago area and re-inter-viewed; 12% of the original sample could not be located, 7% moved out of the metropolitan area, and the remaining 6% refused a second interview. Among the respondents re-interviewed, two thirds had moved out of Woodlawn. Mothers and primary caregivers who were not re-interviewed tended to be younger and more mobile. Families with children in parochial schools were also less likely to be followed up because these schools had a less centralized system of record keeping. Importantly, there were no differences in early family income, welfare status, or household composition among mothers who were interviewed and those who were not. The sample reported here includes 912 children and their families for whom complete information on household family members at Time I (1966-67) and Time II (1975-76) was available.

Defining Household Family Structure

In the Woodlawn community there were 86 different combinations of adults living with first graders (Kellam, Ensminger, & Turner, 1977). These patterns indicate the diversity in Afro-American families within urban communities and the variations in living arrangements black children may experience. Previous research on this community defined family type by the combination of adults present, which represented an advance over the prevailing definition of families as either intact (father present) or broken (father absent). In this paper we further focus household family type to include two important dimensions: the number of parents present (one, two, or both absent), and the presence of extended kin and the generational positions held by them.

The six major household family types, based on household members' relationship to the target child, are as follows: (a) one-parent nuclear, which includes a parent (biological, step, or adopted) and siblings (biological, step, or adopted) only; (b) two-parent nuclear, which includes parents and siblings only; (c) one-parent extended, which includes a parent, siblings, and others (kin and friends); (d) two-parent extended, which includes parents, siblings, and others; (e) kin guardian (both parents are absent and the target child's guardian is a relative), and (f) non-kin guardian (both parents are absent and the guardian is a nonrelative).

The generational composition of extended family households is defined as follows: (a) G1 and/or G2 includes members of the target child's generation--the referent point, G 1, (e.g., cousins, sibs-in-law), and the parent generation, G2, (e.g., aunts, nonrelatives); (b) G0 and/or G3 + includes parent's parent generation and beyond, G3+, (e.g., grandparents, great grandparents, great aunts) and/or the offspring of the target child or target child's siblings, G0, (e.g., nieces and nephews); and (c) G1, 2 and G0 or G3 + includes household members in all of the aforementioned generational positions.

RESULTS

Household Family Structure at Entrance to First

Grade (1966-6) and Adolescence (1975-76)

The living arrangements of Woodlawn children were diverse and there were major shifts in the distribution of family types as children aged. Although two-parent nuclear families were not rare, most Woodlawn children lived in households that diverged from this structure. As children aged they were more likely to live in one-parent nuclear and extended family households.

In first grade the modal family type was two-parent nuclear (42.3%). Another 37% resided in one-parent nuclear households while about 20% lived in extended family households (one-parent, two-parent, and kin guardian). Children in extended family households were most likely to be surrounded by kin who were members of the parents' parent generation (G3 +, e.g., grandmothers). This pattern was most pronounced when one or more parents were absent. Children in two-parent extended households were most likely to live with kin who were their parent's siblings (G2, e.g., aunts, uncles) and/or their offspring (G1, e.g., cousins). Only a small percentage of children (4.5%) lived in households where both parents were absent; most of these lived with other relatives. Children in non-kin guardian households were primarily in foster care (see Table 1).

By adolescence fewer than one in three (30.9%) Woodlawn children were members of two-parent nuclear households. Single-parent nuclear households were the modal type (43.9%). There was also an increase in the proportion of extended family households; one in four (24.9%) Woodlawn adolescents lived with extended kin. This was primarily due to the rise in one-parent extended family households.

The variations in the generational composition of extended family households as children aged suggest an intergenerational family life cycle. For children residing with at least one parent, the proportion living with three or more generations (G0 and/or G3 +) increased. Although members of the parent's parent generation (G3+) are still present, the kin who are entering households are likely to be a generation below the target child (G0, i.e., primarily nieces and nephews; few Woodlawn children are parents at Time 2). Children not living with either parent were now more likely to share households with their parent's siblings (G2, e.g., aunts) and/or their children (G1, e.g., cousins) who were perhaps more able to act as parent surrogates as members of the parents' parent generation (G3 +) died or aged.

Trajectories of Children's Living

Arrangements in Woodlawn

Diversity and change in living arrangements was a conventional part of Woodlawn children's lives; about three in four children experienced a change in household composition. They were as likely to spend part of their school years in one-parent nuclear (55%) as in two-parent nuclear

(50%); and more than one in three (34.5%) spent some time in extended family households. Figure 1 illustrates the patterns of stability and change in children's living arrangements. Bars indicate the distribution of family type in adolescence by children's family type at first grade. The types of households children lived in during adolescence were related to household family structure in first grade, $\chi^2 = 1034.5$, $df = 25$, $p = .000$, Cramer's $V = .54$.

The rise in single-parent households reflects two patterns in the evolution of children's living arrangements. First, more than two thirds of the children who began first grade in single-parent nuclear households were in this type of household in adolescence. Second, when children's household family structure changed, one-parent nuclear was the modal destination for children who had begun in two-parent nuclear or one-parent extended households. This pattern parallels national demographic shifts in Afro-American family structure and reflects rates of marital disruption and remarriage and of delays in first marriages of mothers reported elsewhere (Bumpass & Rindfuss, 1979; Farley, 1984; Farley & Allen, 1989; Glick, 1984).

Although 42% of children living with two parents experienced some form of marital dissolution (e.g., death, divorce, or separation) the majority of children (80%) living with two parents in adolescence lived with two parents in first grade. For children who were members of one-parent nuclear households, about 13% became members of two-parent households (nuclear or extended) and 15.8% of children in one-parent extended households made transitions to two-parent households (nuclear or extended).

Extended family living arrangements were more fluid; children in these households were more likely to experience a transition in household family structure and composition than children in nuclear families. The majority of children made transitions to nuclear households; however, 44.2% of the children from one-parent extended families and 30.7% of children from two-parent extended families continued to live in extended family households. About one in five who were in nuclear family households in first grade later lived with extended kin.

Children who entered first grade in parent-absent households (i.e., kin and non-kin guardian) tended to remain in them during adolescence. When transitions occurred they were to parent custody--reunited with parent(s) or adoption. Kin guardian households were the most fluid; most children in these households had relatives move in and out or the children themselves moved across the households of relatives.

Multiple Sources of Transition in Woodlawn

Across first grade family types significant proportions of children were likely to experience a change in the structure of their households. Twenty to 32% of children who were in one-parent nuclear households, kin guardian, and non-kin guardian households experienced a change in household family structure. The remaining household family types had a higher rate of change, with 46% of children in two-parent nuclear, 64% in one-parent extended, and 83.9% in two-parent extended households experiencing a change in household family structure (see Table 2).

Changes in parents' marital status and the entrances and exits of extended kin were both major sources of transition. When family type changed, children often experienced multiple transitions.

Parent married or marriage dissolved. Children in one-parent households, extended and nuclear, were significantly less likely to experience transitions due to the entrance of a parents' marital partner than to the entrance of relatives. When family structure changed, 39% of children in one-parent nuclear and 24.2% in one-parent extended households experienced a transition due to the marriage of a custodial parent. For children in two-parent households in first grade, nuclear and extended, the exit of a parent was a primary source of change; 79.5% of transitions from two-parent nuclear households were due to marital disruption (i.e., divorce, separation) or death of a parent. In two-parent extended family households 44.6% of transitions were due to the exit of a parent.

Exits and entrances of extended kin. Transitions involving extended kin (entrances and exits) were significant sources of change for children in both nuclear and extended family households during first grade. More than one in three (35.9%) children who made a transition out of two-parent nuclear households lived with extended kin in adolescence. Transitions involving the entrances of extended kin were more frequent when children lived in one-parent nuclear households; 61.8% later lived with non-nuclear family members when household family type changed.

The exit of relatives was the primary source of change for children making a transition out of extended family households--86.6% of children who lived in two-parent extended family households and 76.6% of children who lived in one-parent extended households in first grade had a relative leave their household (or the children left the residences of kin).

Parent Present/Parent Absent Households. When transitions from parent-absent households (i.e., kin and non-kin guardian) occurred they were to parent custody--reunited with parent(s) or adoption. Movement into households where both parents were absent was infrequent. Children who lived in one-parent nuclear households in first grade were somewhat more likely to make transitions to nonparent guardian living arrangements.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The view of Afro-American children's lives presented here illustrates the fluidity in living arrangements from childhood to adolescence and the variations that may occur in predominantly poor urban communities. While the patterns of Woodlawn children's living arrangements parallel other findings (e.g., Bane & Ellwood, 1984; Bum-pass, 1984; Hofferth, 1985a, 1985b; Smith, 1980) we did not expect the extent of changes that occurred in the composition and structure of children's households. In the Woodlawn community transitions involving the marital dyad and extended kin are both central sources of change in children's living arrangements. For children living with one parent or none, transitions fueled by extended kin are more likely than those fueled by changes in the marital status of a parent or the re-entry of an absent parent(s). In the

past decade investigators have focused on the impact of divorce and remarriage on children. We know little about the patterning or impact of transitions involving nonparent family members either independent of or in conjunction with changes in the marital status of parents.

Woodlawn children came of age during a period when opportunities for Afro-Americans increased as did the economic marginalization of inner-city black poor (Glasgow, 1981; Wilson, 1987). By first grade Woodlawn children and their families were moving away from two-parent nuclear family living arrangements, a pattern that continued as children aged. The patterns of Woodlawn children's living arrangements parallel demographic shifts in Afro-American family structure since 1960. Wilson (1987) argues that changes in the broader organization of the economy (i.e., changing job markets) from 1960 to 1980, the consequent persistent poverty, and adaptations to these systemic pressures have influenced family structure in inner-city communities, specifically in the proportion of out-of-wedlock births and female-headed households. The results of this study, conducted during the same decades that Wilson observed inner-city neighborhoods in Chicago, suggest the designation of "female-headed households" may not adequately capture the realities of family structure in these neighborhoods.

Many urban Afro-American families were and undoubtedly still are affected by the increasing joblessness in inner-city communities like those described by Wilson (1987). Currently, Afro-American children are more likely to be born into one-parent households of some type and to make a transition to a single-parent status at an earlier age than the Woodlawn birth cohort (Hofferth, 1985b). The variations in families that remain as well as the patterns of change provide important insights into how people are likely to make decisions about families and coresidence in an economic context where challenges to family survival are great and marriage and remarriage less likely. A strategy adopted by many in Woodlawn seems to have included nontraditional extended family living arrangements even though these arrangements are discouraged by many institutions of urban life (e.g., welfare requirements, existing housing stock, and rental contracts).

Exploring how the patterns found here compare with more recent birth cohorts, and other types of communities, is an important area of inquiry as we attempt to understand structural changes in urban Afro-American families in the context of the broader economic and social transformations of inner cities during the last two to three decades. Determining the impact of family structure on urban Afro-American children's development requires a recognition of the potential diversity and fluidness of children's living arrangements as they age.

NOTE

A version of this paper was presented at the Society for Research on Child Development biennial meeting, April 1991, Seattle. The paper was supported by the National Institute of Mental Health Postdoctoral Training Program Grant to the Consortium on Family Process and Psychopathology, by NIMH grant R01-MH/AA 39500-02 and by the Alcoholic Beverage

Medical Research Foundation. The authors thank Jane L. Pearson, Sheppard G. Kellam, and two anonymous reviewers for invaluable comments on an earlier draft. Send correspondence to Andrea G. Hunter.

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TABLE 1. WOODLAWN CHILDREN'S LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AT ENTRANCE TO First GRADE (1966-67) AND ADOLESCENCE (1975-76)

Legend for the Chart:

A - First Grade, %
 B - First Grade, n
 C - Adolescence, %
 D - Adolescence, n

	A	B	C	D
One-parent nuclear	36.6	334	43.9	400[a]
Two-parent nuclear	42.3	386	30.9	282[a]
One-parent extended	10.4	95	13.5	123[a]
Generations present				
G ₁ and/or G ₂	27.4	26	12.2	15
G ₀ and/or G ₃₊	50.0	48	79.6	98[a]
G _{1,2} , and G ₀ or G ₃₊	22.0	21	8.1	10[a]
Two-parent extended	6.1	56	5.4	49
Generations present				
G ₁ and/or G ₂	48.2	27	6.1	3[a]
G ₀ and/or G ₃₊	39.3	22	83.6	41[a]
G _{1,2} , and G ₀ or G ₃₊	12.5	7	10.2	5
Kin guardian	3.4	31	4.9	45
Generations present				
G ₁ and/or G ₂	19.4	6	33.3	15[a]
G ₀ and/or G ₃₊	48.4	15	42.2	19
G _{1,2} , and G ₀ or G ₃₊	32.3	10	24.4	11[a]
Non-kin guardian	1.1	10	1.4	13
Total	100.0	912	100.0	912

Note: G₁ and/or G₂ includes target child's generation (e.g., cousins) and/or parents' generation (e.g., aunts); G₀ and/or G₃₊ includes parents' parent generation and beyond (e.g., grandparents, great aunts) and/or offspring of target child's generation (e.g., offspring, nieces, and nephews); G_{1,2}, and G₀ or G₃₊ includes all aforementioned generations.

a p </= .05.

TABLE 2. SOURCES OF TRANSITION IN WOODLAWN CHILDREN'S HOUSEHOLD FAMILY STRUCTURE

Legend for the Chart:

- A - Household Family Structure at First Grade, One-Parent Nuclear (n = 334)
- B - Household Family Structure at First Grade, Two-Parent Nuclear (n = 386)
- C - Household Family Structure at First Grade, One-Parent Extended (n = 95)
- D - Household Family Structure at First Grade, Two-Parent Extended (n = 56)
- E - Household Family Structure at First Grade, Kin Guardian (n = 31)
- F - Household Family Structure at First Grade, Non-Kin Guardian (n = 10)

	A	B	C	D	E	F
Family type varied in adolescence (%)	32.8	46.9	64.2	83.9	25.8	20.0
Source of transition in family structure (%)						
Parent married or marriage dissolved	39.0(43)	79.5(144)	24.5(15)	44.6(21)	na	na
Entrance or exit of extended kin	61.8(68)	35.9(65)	86.8(36)	76.6(36)	na	na
To parent absent households	13.6(15)	2.2(4)	4.9(3)	6.4(3)	12.5(1)[a]	--
To parent present households	na	na	na	na	87.5(7)	100(2)

Note: Percentages may add to more than 100 because some children experience multiple transitions. Observed cell sizes in parentheses.

a To non-kin guardian household.

GRAPH: FIGURE 1. PATTERNS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN WOODLAWN CHILDREN'S HOUSEHOLD FAMILY STRUCTURE

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