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Multiple Partner Fertility Among White Married Couples in the U.S., 1955

Sara R. Zobl & Pamela J. Smock

One signal of American complex family relationships is that a substantial share of today's adults have biological children with more than one partner – up to 13% of men and 19% of women in their forties (Guzzo 2014). Multiple partner fertility (MPF or having children with more than partner) is often discussed in the context of contemporary families, but it is not a new phenomenon. While 1955 is considered the heyday of the traditional two-parent married family, there were complex family circumstances such as MPF. Drawing on data from the 1955 Growth of American Families (GAF 1955), a component survey of the [Integrated Fertility Survey Series](#), this profile examines MPF among White married couples ages 18-39 in the U.S.

The MPF measure indicates whether the respondent or her husband (or both) had biological children from more than one union and includes cases in which husband's child(ren) by another partner live(s) outside the respondent's household.

The Growth of American Families

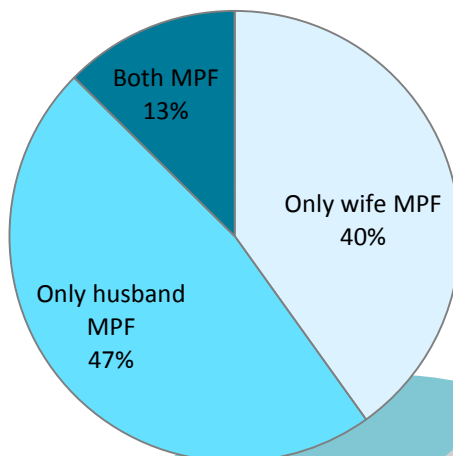
The 1955 GAF was the first survey designed to measure demographic characteristics, household configurations, and fertility histories and intentions at a nationally-representative level. In-home, face-to-face interviews were conducted with White women aged 18-39 who lived in private households with their husbands or were temporarily separated due to military obligations. Interviewees answered questions about themselves, their husbands, and any other household members. Husbands' histories were constructed based on wives' answers to interviewers' questions.

Family Profiles examine topics related to NCFMR's core research themes. Data are presented at both the national and state levels using new data sources. Written for both researchers and broad communities, these profiles summarize the latest statistics on U.S. families.

Prevalence and Sources of MPF

- In 1955, 6.1% of White married couples experienced MPF. At least thirty years later, these levels have doubled among married couples (Clarkwest 2007).
- It was uncommon (13%) for both husbands and wives to have children with other partners. Husbands were slightly more likely to be the source of MPF than wives (47% versus 40%).
- The majority (70%) of married couples with MPF included a wife in her second or third marriage (84% of which were due to divorce). Similarly, 64% of married couples with MPF included a husband in a second - or higher-order marriage.

Figure 1. Sources of Multiple Partner Fertility, 1955

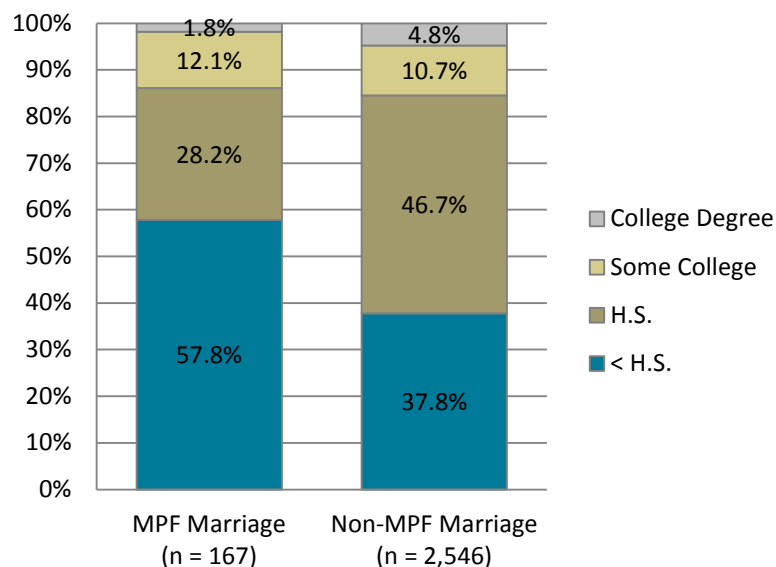


Source: Integrated Fertility Survey Series, Release 7, 1955-2002

MPF and Educational Attainment

- Education levels were lower in marriages with MPF than marriages without MPF.
- The majority of wives in marriages with MPF had not completed high school (57.8%) in contrast to 37.8% of wives in marriages with no MPF. The modal education category among women in marriages without MPF was high school graduate.

Figure 2. Multiple Partner Fertility and Educational Attainment, 1955



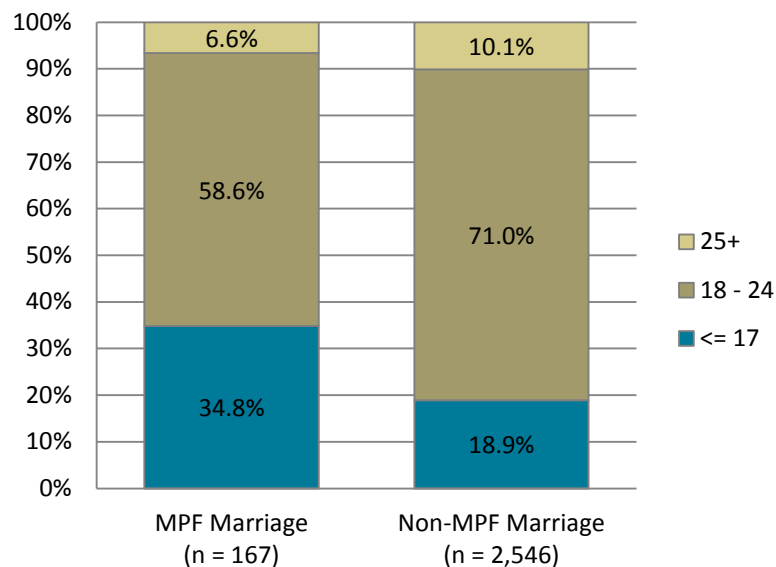
Source: Integrated Fertility Survey Series, Release 7, 1955-2002

MPF and Age at First Marriage

These data are drawn from an era of early marriage; in 1955, the median age at first marriage for women was 20.2 compared to 26.6 in 2013 (U.S. Bureau of the Census).

- Women in MPF marriages got married at younger ages than wives in marriages without MPF. The share of women married prior to age 18 was nearly twice as high in MPF marriages (34.8%) than in marriages without MPF (18.9%).

Figure 3. Multiple Partner Fertility and Age at First Marriage, 1955



Source: Integrated Fertility Survey Series, Release 7, 1955-2002

References:

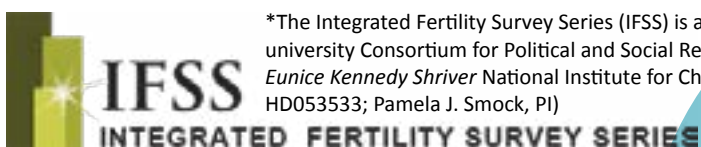
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