Effects of Cohabitation on Children

As the rate of cohabiting adults in the United States rapidly increases, the dynamic of cohabiting unions has simultaneously shifted. Cohabiters are more likely to have children together, less likely to eventually marry, and more likely to serial cohabitate. Therefore, children born to cohabiting parents face a significant risk of instability throughout their life as they cope with their parents’ relationship transitions.

1. Instability of Cohabiting Unions

Cohabiting unions are already less stable than marriage, and the presence of children further destabilizes cohabiting relationships. More stable cohabiting couples tend to marry around the time of their child’s birth, whereas less stable unions remain as unmarried cohabiting partners. A recent analysis of data from seventeen countries found that, despite cohabitation becoming normative, cohabiting unions still provide less stability for children than marriage.

2. Children’s Health

Children living in cohabiting households are more likely to suffer from a variety of emotional and social problems, including drug use, depression, and dropping out of high school, as compared to those in married homes. According to the Center for Disease Control, children in cohabiting families (whether both biological parents or only one biological parent in the union) are more likely to be without health insurance than children in single parent families, stepfamilies, and married families. Children whose biological parents are cohabiting rather than married are also more likely than single-parent families, stepfamilies, and married families to report “good”, “fair”, or “poor” health rather than “very good” or “excellent” health.
2.1 Related American Demographics

According to the 2001 cycle of the National Health Interview Survey, 4.7 percent of children in intact married families, 8.0 percent of children raised in remarried stepfamilies, and 8.6 percent of children living with a cohabiting parent had been diagnosed with ADHD, though children living in single-parent families were most likely to have been diagnosed with ADHD (9.1 percent).  

3. Education

Family instability, a trait of cohabiting families, was linked with lower task orientation and lower academic grades for adolescents. 

3.1 Related American Demographics

National Longitudinal Survey of Youth shows that students from married, always-intact families had an average GPA of 3.0. Students from intact cohabiting families (2.8), married stepfamilies and divorced single-parent families (2.7), cohabiting stepfamilies (2.6), and always-single parent families (2.5) had lower average GPAs than students from always-intact families.
According to the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 28 percent of students who grew up in an intact married family received mostly A’s, followed by students from intact cohabiting families (21 percent), single divorced parent families (18 percent), married stepfamilies (15 percent), cohabiting stepfamilies (11 percent), and always single parent families (9 percent).\textsuperscript{17}

Ninety one percent of individuals who grew up with married biological parents received a high school degree, according to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. They were followed by those who grew up in a married stepfamily (80 percent), those who grew up with a single, divorced parent (76 percent), those who grew up in a cohabiting stepfamily (68 percent), those who grew up with an always-single parent (63 percent), and those who grew up in an intact cohabiting family (60 percent).\textsuperscript{18}
According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, thirty six percent of individuals who came from intact, married families received a Bachelor’s degree, followed by those from intact, cohabiting families (20 percent), single divorced-parent families (17 percent), married stepfamilies (16 percent), always-single parent families (8 percent), and cohabiting stepfamilies (7 percent). \(^{19}\)

4. Child Abuse

Children raised in cohabiting families are particularly vulnerable to abuse. According to the Fourth Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect, children raised by their cohabiting biological parents are 4.3 times more likely to suffer from physical abuse and 5 times more likely to experience sexual abuse as compared to children raised by their married, biological parents. \(^{20}\)
The most dangerous family structure for a child is a cohabiting family in which one of the partners is not a biological parent. The same survey stated that children raised with one biological parent and their non-biological cohabiting partner are 10.3 times more likely to suffer from physical abuse and 19.8 times more likely to experience sexual abuse, as compared to children raised by their married, biological parents.\(^{21}\)

5. Poverty Risk

Children raised in cohabiting families face an increased risk of falling into poverty. According to the 2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 47.5 percent of children who live with their cohabiting
parents are in poverty. This is partially because cohabiting couples lack the relationship stability and material pooling that married couples experience.


17) Patrick F. Fagan and Scott Talkington, “Received a Bachelor’s Degree by Family Structure and

