The Increasing Diversity and Complexity of Family Structures for Adolescents

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DRAFT
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ABSTRACT

The structure of adolescents’ families, and thus parental forms, in the United States, have become more heterogeneous and fluid over the past several decades. These changes are due to increases in never-married, single parents, divorce, cohabitation, same-sex parenting, multi-partnered fertility, and co-residence with grandparents. We document current diversity and complexity in adolescents’ families as context for emerging developments in parenting theory and research. However, understandings of adolescents’ families can be limited by the methods used to describe them, so we also review strengths and weaknesses in current studies and suggest future directions for measuring adolescents’ families and their implications.
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Even though a universal feature of adolescence is the growing autonomy that youth gain from parental oversight, parents, and the family context in general, continue to play a vital role in adolescents' lives. The ways that adolescents are “parented,” including the provision of material and psychosocial resources, the quality of parent-child interactions and relationships, and levels of parental monitoring and scaffolding of youth have been consistently shown to matter for adolescents’ academic outcomes (Simons and Conger 2007; Tillman 2007), subjective well-being (Han and Grogan-Kaylor 2013; Simons and Conger 2007), sexual behavior (DiClemente et al. 2001; Huang, Murphy, and Hser 2012; Zimmer-Gembeck and Helfand 2008), substance use (DiClemente et al. 2001; Dornbusch et al. 2001; Simons and Conger 2007), delinquency (DiClemente et al. 2001; Dornbusch et al. 2001; Petts 2009; Simons and Conger 2007), and other outcomes (see Steinberg 2001 for a general discussion on parent-adolescent relationships and outcomes). Thus, social scientists, policy-makers, and practitioners continue to investigate and attempt to promote successful models for parenting adolescents.

For better or worse, many current investigations of the features and types of parenting that seem most beneficial for adolescents are based in theories of parenting and adolescence developed decades ago when family structures and their distribution in the population looked very different than they do today. Theories, consciously or not, were designed to reflect processes in white, middle-class households with two married, biological parents, usually including a stay-at-home mother. Studies of parenting have been increasingly recognizing how styles of parenting and their impact vary across cultures, socioeconomic strata, and family structures (e.g., Lareau 2003; Newman 2012). Thus, to more accurately theorize, measure, and interpret findings regarding the parenting of adolescents, we must be clear about the types of families and households in which they live—especially dynamics and complexity in family forms throughout their childhood and adolescence.
In this article, we review and summarize a wide body of literature showing how family forms and their prevalence have changed over the last several decades. After defining what we mean by “family” and “adolescence,” we describe the family households of adolescents, or the family members with whom they tend to live. We then discuss how family members might also be spread across other households, near and far. We then examine current practices in measuring the family contexts of adolescents and recommend innovations such as family network or profile methods. It is our goal to provide as detailed a picture as we can as to the range and distribution of adolescents’ family contexts in addition to suggesting future methods for further enhancing our understanding of contexts for the parenting of adolescents.

**Definitions**

Family has always been a relatively elusive concept – definitions of family have changed over time, families themselves change over time, and members of families change (i.e., development and aging) (Harris 2008; Powell et al. 2010). For our purposes, we focus on all parents, siblings, and extended family members who play a role in adolescents’ lives. Family members may be related by blood, marriage, or other lasting bonds (e.g., cohabitation, guardianships, or adoption). Some family members reside in the same household as a given adolescent, and some do not. Sometimes adolescents move between households following custody arrangements or other special circumstances. Thus, we start by describing change in the family households of adolescents and then broaden our focus to consider non-residential family members and their connections to adolescents over time.

Adolescence is a phase of life whose exact age bounds vary by expert or study, but are generally considered to encompass the second decade of life. This is roughly the time period from the onset of puberty to the beginning of adult roles (Steinberg 2016). We cite studies using a variety of age or grade ranges, including 12-17, 18-24, or grades 7-12, primarily due to the ages of participants. Further, many studies of family structure or stability aggregate data for all minors.
(ages 0-18). Thus, some of the data that we present apply to all youth, not just adolescents. Where we are able, we comment on the extent to which adolescents’ family forms are different than those of younger children.

The Households in Which Adolescents Live

As of 2016, 15 percent of all American households, and 23 percent of family households, contained at least one 12-17 year old (U.S. Census Bureau 2017a). Below we describe the changing prevalence of other family members in the households of adolescents. We discuss the parents, siblings, and grandparents with whom adolescents often live as well as when adolescents head their own households or are homeless.

Parental Structure. The nuclear family (a mother and father—usually married—and their biological child/ren) has long been assumed to be the Standard North American Family (SNAF) (Smith 1993) and continues to generally be the standard form to which all others are compared (Powell et al. 2010). As seen in Figure 1, as recently as 1960, just under 90 percent of children (ages 0-18) lived with two parents (biological/adoptive, step, or cohabiting parents), eight percent lived with their mothers only, one percent lived with their fathers only, and four percent lived with other relatives or non-relatives. As of 2016, the percentage of children living with two parents is 69 percent -- a 22 percent decrease from 1960. The shift was mostly to single mother and single father families: now, 23 percent of children live with their mother only and four percent live with their fathers only. These numbers represent about a 192 percent increase in mother-only families and 259 percent increase in father-only families (U.S. Census Bureau 2017e). Although father-only families have increased in number faster than mother-only families, mother-only families are still nearly six times more common.

Figure 1 about here

The increase in single parent households over time is primarily the result of two trends. First, there has been a rise in the percentage of births to unmarried women from 4 percent in 1940
to 41 percent in 2013 (Curtin, Ventura, and Martinez 2014). However, it is important to note that about half of the births to single mothers are actually to mothers in cohabiting unions, and this has been increasing over time (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Mincieli et al. 2007). Indeed, about 55 percent of nonmarital births between 2015 and 2016 were to cohabiting women (U.S. Census Bureau 2017d). Second, divorce has been on the rise in the United States since the end of the Civil War, with a brief plateauing during the early 1980s (Kennedy and Ruggles 2014). Both of these changes mean, increasingly, one biological parent is not residing in the household, and if there are two parents, they may be cohabiting partners rather than marital ones. Because of racial and ethnic variation in rates of nonmarital births, cohabitation, and divorce (Barber, Yarger, and Gatny 2015; Curtin et al. 2014; Ruggles 1997; Smith, Morgan, and Koropeckyj-Cox 1996; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1995), the increase in mother-only households and children living with other relatives has been particularly dramatic for Black and Hispanic youth, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 about here

The way data were collected for many years, one can identify whether there are two adults living in a household and whether at least one of the adults is biologically or adoptively related to children in the household. However, further specification of the marital or even romantic status of the two adults or how both adults are related to each child is often impossible in data collected from before mid-1990s back in time. More contemporary data has the specificity that allows us to further distinguish households by the complexity of family relationships. For example, we create Table 1 below by adapting data from U.S. Census Bureau tables based the Current Population Survey in 2016 (U.S. Census Bureau 2017b). This table builds upon Figure 1 and allows us to hone in on three groups of adolescents: 9-11 year-olds, 12-14 year-olds and 15-17 year-olds. We are able to detail different kinds of living arrangements of contemporary adolescents and detect whether
and how the distribution of household types differs for adolescents as compared to all children under age 18.

Table 1 about here

Overall, 9-17 year-olds have very similar living arrangements to 0-18 year-olds. About 68 percent of 9-14 year-olds and 64 percent of 15-17 year-olds live with two parents as compared to 69 percent of all 0-18 year-olds. Twenty-eight percent of 9-14 year-olds and 30 percent of 15-17 year-olds live with one parent, compared to 27 percent of 0-18 year-olds. And, four and five percent, respectively, do not reside with a parent compared to four percent of those aged 0-18. Not surprisingly, the older adolescents (whose parents have had more time to change living situations or family structure) are slightly more likely than the younger children to live in single parent, other relative, or nonrelative homes.

For the 64-68 percent of adolescents living with two parents, the vast majority of them (about 96-98 percent) live with married biological or adoptive parents. For the 28-30 percent of adolescents who live with one parent, the vast majority of them live with their mothers; specifically, 85 percent of 9-11 year-olds, 84 percent of 12-14 year-olds, and 82 percent of 15-17 year-olds who live with a single parent live with their mother. Conversely, between 15 and 18 percent of adolescents live with their single father. For all single parent categories, the largest groups, by far, are never married mothers and divorced mothers (never married mothers are slightly more common for 9-11 year-olds, but this switches for 12-17 year-olds). Living with a separated mother is the third most common single parent living arrangement, which describes 11-13 percent of adolescents. Lastly, for the 4 to 5 percent of adolescents who do not live with either parent, the most common arrangement for each age group is to live with a grandparent. However, there is some noteworthy reduction by age among this group: 65 percent of 9-11 year-olds, 58 percent of 12-14 year-olds, and 46 percent of 15-17 year-olds live with a grandparent. The next most common arrangement for those living without either parent is to live with another relative (e.g., an aunt or
uncle), which varies between 25-33 percent of adolescents and increases with age. Living with a nonrelative is the next most likely scenario, which describes between 7-18 percent of adolescents, and also increasing with age. Finally, between four and six percent of these adolescents living without parents are living in foster care.

The dramatic decrease over time in the proportions of adolescents living with two biological parents, the lengths of time adolescents are likely to live with one parent, and the growing likelihood an adolescent lives for some time with a parent’s cohabiting partner or a step-parent all suggest our theories about the parenting of adolescents must be flexible to the number and type of parents involved. Further, it is clear that parents are increasingly spread across different households which raises issues of how parenting is shared (or not) inside and outside an adolescent’s primary residence.

Same-Sex Parents. There have also been changes over time in the percentage of children living with two parents of the same sex. Vespa, Lewis, and Kreider (2013) find that about 16 percent of same-sex cohabiting or married couples in the United States have biological, adoptive, or stepchildren under age 18 living with them as of 2012 (11 percent of male couples and 22 percent of female couples). This is higher than the 1990 rate of 13 percent, but is lower than estimates between 2000 and 2008, which fluctuated between 17 and 19 percent (Gates 2012). With current estimates of same-sex couples from the American Community Survey at about 860,000 for 2015 (U.S. Census Bureau 2017c), if 15-20 percent of them have one child, then between 129,000-172,000 youth are currently living with co-resident same-sex parents. One noteworthy trend among same-sex couples is the proportional increases in adoptive children compared to biological children, which may be due to LGBT individuals coming out earlier in life and thus becoming less likely to have children while in relationships with opposite sex partners (Gates 2012). With the number of same-sex couples growing each year between 2008-2015 (U.S. Census Bureau 2017c), adolescents may be increasingly likely to spend some time in one of these households. There is
interesting racial and ethnic variation in same-sex parenting and adoption. Same-sex couples in which at least one member is Black, Latino, or Native American are more likely to be raising children. Among those who are raising children, White couples and more highly educated couples are more likely to have adopted children (Gates 2012). Theories of parenting often taken into account gendered models of parenting and the gendered division of parenting, assuming adolescents have heterosexual parents, so there is a need to reconsider models of parenting with same-sex parents in mind.

Foster and Adoptive Parents. In September of 2015, about 172,000 adolescents ages 10-20 were living in foster care; during the same year (Federal Fiscal Year 2015), 92,000 adolescents entered foster care and 99,000 exited foster care (Children’s Bureau 2016). Among youth ages 0-20 who exited, 51 percent were reunified with their parents or primary caretakers and 22 percent were adopted (ibid.). In published statistics, adopted children are typically included with those who are biologically related to parents. However, Child Trends (2012) uses more detailed survey data on adoption from 2007 to show that two percent of all children (ages 0-17) live with at least one adoptive parent and no biological parents. Of those, 37 percent were in foster care at some point, 38 percent were adopted through private domestic adoption, and 25 percent were adopted internationally. One more recent estimate suggests that approximately seven percent of children ages 0-17 in the United States live with at least one adoptive parent, but this includes those adopted by a step-parent, unlike the prior estimate (Kreider and Lofquist 2014). Fostering and adopting children raises all kinds of unique parenting issues, and a full consideration of these could be instructive both to these kinds of parents, but to parenting theory in general. Knowing what propositions hold across these types of parenting arrangements in addition to others helps bolster the literature as a whole.

Parental Incarceration. In 2012, around 2.6 million children, or about one in twenty-five minors, had a parent who was incarcerated, and this was a five-fold increase from 1980 when
around 500,000 children had a parent incarcerated. Many more children, about 5 million (7 percent), have ever had a residential parent go to jail or prison, though this is likely an underestimate (Murphey and Cooper 2015). The likelihood of having a parent incarcerated is not evenly distributed across households, though, as black, poor, and rural children are all more likely than their counterparts to have a parent in jail – almost always the father (ibid.). With families increasingly facing the challenges that come with incarceration, our theories of parenting adolescents must go beyond accounting for absent parents, but specific types of absences which may bring with them particular financial or stigmatic challenges.

**Siblings.** Another important feature of family or household context, when it comes to parenting, is how many and what types of siblings live with adolescents on average. Using data from 2009, Kreider and Ellis (2011) find that about 58 million children live with siblings (78 percent). Of these children, the majority (82 percent) live with only full siblings, 14 percent live with a halfsibling, 2 percent live with a stepsibling, and 2 percent live with an adopted sibling. About 22 percent of all youth have no siblings, 38 percent have one sibling, 24 percent have two siblings, 11 percent have three siblings, and 5 percent have four or more siblings. Siblings function as both sources of intimacy and conflict for adolescents (Lempers and Clark-Lempers 1992), which is largely a continuation of their sibling relationships from childhood (Dunn, Slomkowski, and Beardsall 1994). Intimacy remains stable among same-sex sibling dyads throughout adolescence, but increases for mixed-sex dyads, while conflict appears to taper off during middle-late adolescence (Kim et al. 2006). The theorizing of parent-adolescent interactions often assumes a focal child, and could increasingly consider number of siblings as a context that has implications for how resources (material and emotional) are shared. This takes on even more complexity in blended families.

**Grandparents.** Table 1, discussed earlier, shows that about 2 percent of all children live without parents but with a grandparent. Living with grandparents is also the most common
arrangement for adolescents who live without parents. Vespa, Lewis, and Kreider (2013) show that 4.6 percent of all family households were multigenerational in 2012. Figure 3 shows trends over time in children living with grandparents together with which other parents are in the household (U.S. Census Bureau 2017f). The figure shows a doubling in the percent of children who live with a grandparent between 1980 and 2014. Theories of parenting adolescents could be improved for greater recognition of the role of grandparents and how their parenting might vary as compared to biological parents.

**Homeless adolescents.** Although rare, another important family form to address for adolescents is homelessness. About seven percent of the homeless population are unaccompanied children (under 18 years old) and youth (18-24), and about 37,000 children and youth were experiencing homelessness during a point-in-time estimate in 2015 (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2016). However, this is likely an underestimate, since enumeration techniques are not as effective for youth, and youth often do not congregate in the same areas as those in older age groups. Indeed, survey estimates of youth who experience at least one night of homelessness in a given year range from about 1 million to 1.7 million (Child Trends 2015; Fernandes-Alcantara 2013; Ringwalt et al. 1998).

**Adolescents as parents.** Births to adolescents are declining and reached an all-time low in 2015 (Martin et al. 2017), predominately due to improved contraceptive usage (Lindberg, Santelli, and Desai 2016), though many adolescents do become parents – usually unintentionally. Finer and Zolna (2014) show that, as of 2008, 91 percent of pregnancies among 15-17 year-olds and 77 percent of pregnancies among 18-19 year-olds are unintended. Nevertheless, in 2015, adolescent females ages 15-19 had about 230,000 births, with about one percent of 15-17 year-old girls giving birth and four percent of 18-19 year-old girls (Martin et al. 2017). Adolescent parents and their children face a number of obstacles and are at an increased risk for a host of negative outcomes, yet
intervention programs have the potential to mitigate these (see Pinzon et al. (2012) for a comprehensive review on both outcomes of adolescent parenting and interventions).

**Household Transitions Experience by Adolescents**

What we have presented to this point are snapshots of what the households of children or adolescents look like across the population in certain years. Another way of understanding variance in the family contexts of youth is to consider how stable these contexts are over time. Several studies have conceptualized family instability as the number of transitions households experience (Cavanagh 2008; Fomby, Mollborn, and Sennott 2010), and increasingly studies are comparing particular types of transitions or the timing of those transitions and their associations with child well-being (Lee and McLanahan 2015). When households lose or gain parents or siblings, it is likely to affect parenting resources and styles, so it is important to understand the extent to which this is happening for adolescents.

**Parental Transitions.** Brown (2006) uses data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), a nationally representative sample of youth in grades 7-11 during the 1994-95 school year (so born in the late 1970s or early 1980s) to report the frequency of family transitions within one year of adolescence. She finds that 93 percent of them experienced no household transitions in the year between Waves 1 and 2 of the study. Drilling down further, 62 percent of adolescents in this sample lived with two-biological parents throughout the year (married or cohabiting), 12 percent lived in the same stepfamily that had been previously formed through remarriage or cohabitation, and 19 percent lived with a single-mother for the year. A total of 7 percent of this sample of adolescents did experience a household or family transition of some sort during that year: 4 percent of youth experienced a transition from a two-parent family to a single-mother family, 3 percent went from a single-mother household to a two-parent household (either cohabiting or married), and 1 percent experienced a transition from one two-parent household type to another (usually from a cohabiting stepfamily to a married stepfamily). Laughlin
(2014) shows that 12 percent of children ages 12 to 17 years old in 2011 had experienced a change in the number of residential parents or parent’s partners in the home in the past four years.

Taking a longer view, and considering the trajectories of household structure throughout all of childhood and adolescence, Mitchell (2013) uses data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 Mother's and Children sample to estimate latent classes of children’s long-term living arrangements for youth who were 14-19 years old in 2006. She finds five general pathways. The most common pathway, experienced by 55 percent of adolescents, was having been born to married, biological parents and always living with them. The second most common pathway, representing 18 percent of adolescents, is having lived long-term with a single mother. Twelve percent of youth have married biological parents who divorce, and the odds of parental divorce are highest during adolescence. Then, eleven percent of youth gained a stepfather, usually through marriage, at some point during childhood, and the odds were highest during adolescence. Finally, four percent of adolescents were born to cohabiting biological parents who typically either married or broke up, but there was about a 30-40 percent chance they were still living with two cohabiting biological parents in late adolescence. Although these five pathways do not encompass the experiences of all adolescents, they give a good sense of the most common experiences over time.

**Custody and Living Arrangements.** Using data from the 2009 American Community Survey, Elliot and Simmons (2011) show that about 18 percent of men and 44 percent of women with a divorce in the past year were living with children under 18. This totals to about 1.1 million children experiencing a divorce in the past year, with the median age of these children around 9.8 – about the onset of adolescence. Following many of these divorces will be custody arrangements that inevitably change the living situation of the adolescents involved. Custody arrangements have changed tremendously over the past few centuries (see DiFonzo (2014) for a review), but the most recent trend (from the mid-1980s to present) has been a substantial decline in sole custody awards to mothers coupled with a dramatic increase in shared custody awards (Cancian et al. 2014).
Estimates of custody awards from 2008, based on a very large sample of court records in Wisconsin, suggest that about 42 percent of awards are now for sole mother custody, 45 percent are for shared custody (which can be subdivided further into equal or unequal with either mother or father as primary), nine percent are sole father custody, and the rest are split custody (Cancian et al. 2014).

**Other Residential Transitions.** The period between late adolescence and early adulthood, generally known as “emerging adulthood” (Arnett 2000, 2004), is marked by both numerous transitions and identity explorations. Each year, millions of older adolescents begin a college degree; estimates from 2015 suggest that about 69 percent of high school graduates begin college immediately following their high school completion (McFarland et al. 2017). A recent report by Sallie Mae (2017) shows that about 50 percent of 18-24 year-old college students live at home, with half of the remaining students living with a roommate. Thus, late adolescence is a period of home-leaving for many but not necessarily independent living for most. For adolescents who do not go on to college, many of them begin some sort of paid work, establish their own household, or start families (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016; Mitchell and Syed 2015), often with difficulties in the labor market due to having no more than a high school degree (American Youth Policy Forum 1998; Rosenbaum 2001). Especially among disadvantaged youth, the typical explorations of emerging adulthood may not be possible (Côté 2014); these youth often face an expedited path to adulthood that involves forgoing postsecondary education and becoming independent as quickly as possible (DeLuca et al. 2016). Common predictors of leaving the parental home include emotional distress, poverty, having less than a high school education, giving birth, and experiencing a nonmarital pregnancy (Sandberg-Thoma, Snyder, and Jang 2015). In 2016, about 753,000 households were headed by someone 19 years old or younger, which represents about .6 percent of all households nationwide (U.S. Census Bureau 2017a).
Interestingly, the percentage of older adolescents and young adults who return to their parents’ home after leaving, who are sometimes referred to as “boomerang kids,” has been increasing over time in the United States (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999). In fact, recent estimates show that living with parents is the most common living situation for 18 to 34 year-olds, at 32 percent (Fry 2016). The reaction of parents to this phenomenon varies, but there is an expectation among parents in the United States that their live-in adult children are working toward independence (Newman 2012). Common predictors of returning to the parental home include emotional distress, alcohol problems, full time employment, having less than a high school education, and experiencing a nonmarital pregnancy (Sandberg-Thoma et al. 2015).

In general, the increasing fluidity and change in the households and family structures of adolescents signals a growing need for theories of parenting adolescents to not just expand to consider different family forms, but to also recognize family instability as its own context for parenting. As the life course perspective recognizes, young people (and their parents) carry forward their early life experiences, and so a divorced and single mother might not just be parenting with reduced time and resources in the present, but she and her child/ren are also living with the experiences of the past, such as how well was the divorce handled by all.

Nonresidential Family Members in the Lives of Adolescents

Nonresident Fathers. Due to the rising rates of births to single mothers and divorce, as well as the fragility of cohabiting unions, many children have nonresident fathers for some or all of adolescence. In Figure 1, we show that about 27 percent of youth live away from their father, with the majority of them (23 percent of youth) living with a single mother. Rates of single motherhood also vary substantially by race, with 18 percent of white children, 52 percent of black children, and 25 percent of Hispanic children living with a single mother as of 2016 (U.S. Census Bureau 2017g). Nonresident fathers, as a group, substantially increased involvement in their children’s lives between 1976 and 2002, with more fathers seeing their children weekly and less reporting no
contact at all (Amato, Meyers, and Emery 2009). Cheadle, Amato, and King (2010) add nuance to this finding and identify four latent classes of nonresident father involvement: 38 percent of fathers have high and stable involvement over time, 32 percent have low and stable involvement, 23 percent have high involvement initially but decrease it over time, and 8 percent have low involvement initially but increase it over time.

**Nonresident Mothers.** Although uncommon, some children spend years not living with their biological or adoptive mothers. In Figure 1 we show that about 8 percent of youth live away from their mother, with about half of these youth (4 percent) residing with single fathers. Table 1 further shows that this percentage is about the same (i.e., 4-5 percent) for 9-11 year-olds, 12-14 year-olds, and 15-17 year-olds. The economic situation of single fathers tends to be better than that of single mothers (Sousa and Sorensen 2006).

**Multi-Partner Fertility.** Due to increases in nonmarital births, divorce, cohabitation, and marriage, adults have become increasingly like to have children with more than one partner, often called multi-partner fertility (MPF). Recent estimates suggest about 10 percent of adults have MPF (Monte 2017). This means many adolescents have siblings (full, half, or stepsiblings) who do not live with them but with whom they maintain relationships. Once again, because surveys usually only collect information on household members, we know little about how many adolescents have siblings or any kind residing in other households, nor the quality, benefits, or consequences of those relationships. It is likely that the presence of siblings across other households stretches resources such that adolescents in these situations may get, on average, less time and support from their parents.

**Extended Family.** Adolescents are often close to and exchange support with extended family members, including grandparents, aunts and uncles, or cousins (Colarossi 2001; Lamborn and Nguyen 2004; Sterrett et al. 2011). Increasing gains in longevity translate to a higher likelihood that adolescents know their grandparents longer than in previous generations (Bernal and de la
Studies have shown grandparents to play an important role in the lives of their adolescent grandchildren, even if they live far apart (Attar-Schwartz et al. 2009). The closer grandparents live to their grandchildren, the more emotionally close they are, but grandparents who live far away often use electronic forms of communication, and studies show that frequent phone or email conversations build closeness (Harwood 2000). Kinds of support that grandparents provide include emotional support, peace-keeping, “straight talking,” and sharing family history (Soliz 2008).

Although research is doing a great job of tracking the role of nonresidential family members, and especially parental figures, in the lives of adolescents (Jones et al. 2007), it is time to reflect on what we have learned more generally for revision to parenting theories. Past theories have relied heavily on the household context and the presence of two biological parents, but now the socialization and raising of adolescents falls to a larger network of adults, and the better we understand the forms those networks take, but more successfully we can identify how many adolescents can be more successfully parented.

**Measuring Family Contexts for the Parenting of Adolescents**

In addition to data on families collected through the U.S. Census, there are a number of high quality, nationally representative sample surveys, many of which are used in the research reported above, that make the description of adolescent family contexts possible. What we know about the family contexts in which adolescents live depends on how we collect data and “measure” family life. Although we learn a great deal from these data, there are few key ways in which the design of these studies limit our ability to fully understand some aspects of families.

Most existing surveys rely, for understandable reasons, on collecting information about family members who reside together in households. For some surveys, like the Current Population Survey (CPS) or the American Community Survey (ACS), households are a sampling unit, and one member of the household reports on all other members of the household. The quality of those data
for understanding family structures within households depends heavily on a well-designed household roster or matrix that lists all members of a household and carefully notes the relationships between all members. When data do not include complete information about the relations between each household member and all other household members, we are often restricted from knowing important family characteristics, like whether a married or cohabiting couple in a household are biological, adoptive, or step-parents to the child/ren in the household (Manning, Brown, and Stykes 2014; O’Hara, Shattuck, and Goerge 2017). Further, data often lack the detail necessary to determine whether co-resident children are full or half siblings, or unrelated biologically (McHale, Updegraff, and Whiteman 2012). Researchers interested in the structure and functioning of the households in which adolescents reside should continue to pursue methods like detailed household rosters and survey questions designed to collect comparable information across household members, permitting a deeper understanding of who is in the household and how types of relations affect family relationships and well-being.

For many years, household surveys such as the U.S. Census (up until 1980) required the “household head” to be the household respondent. This was typically a man. In 1980, the Census changed procedure, allowing any “householder” to be the respondent, and this would include men or women who jointly own or rent the home. The proportion of reporting householders who are women has increased over time (Ruggles and Brower 2003). On the other hand, in many more recently established survey studies, such as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, or Add Health (Harris 2013), the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) 1979 Children and Young Adults, or the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), mothers are the primary reporting parent and source of information on other members of the household (including fathers when relevant). Household- or child-focused studies are often designed to have mothers (whenever possible) as reporters because of long-standing assumptions about their chief importance in and knowledge of children’s development and family processes (Coley and Morris
2002; Mikelson 2008; Schaefer, Seltzer, and Dykema 1998). It has also proved easier and less costly, historically, to locate and recruit women or mothers for survey research (Braver and Bay 1992; Schaefer et al., 1998). Despite the benefits of relying on mothers for family information, only having reports of parent or child characteristics or dyadic relationship features from one parent limits the information we have about adolescents and their families.

Regardless of how residential family members and their relationships to each other are documented, household-based surveys have another well documented limitation and that is the extent to which they can shed light on family members who reside outside the focal household (Manning, Brown, and Stykes 2014). This includes nonresidential parents, siblings (full, half, or otherwise), grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, or even adults who are not blood relatives but play a central role in parenting adolescents (e.g., mentors, neighbors, former foster parents, etc.). Some studies, like the National Study of Families and Households, involve interviews with multiple parents, including follow ups with parents who leave the household. Very few nationally representative studies of youth or families collect data from nonresidential parents from the start. One exception is the Fragile Families Study for which a set of weights can be used to make the data from 16 of the 20 focal cities representative of births in the 77 U.S. cities with populations over 200,000 (Reichman et al. 2001). In the Fragile Families, fathers are interviewed at all the same timepoints as mothers (regardless of whether they reside with their child and/or their child’s mother). It is undoubtedly expensive to fully delineate and measure adolescents’ families, especially from the perspective of multiple family members, but the value in doing so justifies consideration of how we might more creatively approach the collection of data on adolescents’ family contexts.

A handful of other previously identified reasons may also bias our understandings of adolescents or young adults’ living arrangements when young people themselves are the sampling units. For example, when youth are sampled from schools, youth who are not in school either because of dropping out or being homeschooled maybe be missing from the sampling frame.
(Johnston and O’Malley 1985). Thus, the types of families or households those youth tend to have could be underrepresented in the data. Further, some studies restrict residents of institutions from being in the sampling frame, meaning that when focusing on youth, those who live on a college campus or are incarcerated (and their family situations) are underrepresented. And, some studies restrict their samples to college students, making findings less generalizable to the whole population of late adolescents or young adults. (Côté 2014; Mitchell and Syed 2015).

Future Directions

**Family Networks.** Given the limitations inherent in the household-centric design of surveys that provide information on adolescents’ families and experiences, it is useful to consider alternatives that would better capture family structure and processes. One promising avenue is the application of social network approaches and methods to the collection of data on family members (Widmer 2010). These methods have been primarily used for adults’ social networks to date, and to collect information on the most influential people in their lives. Widmer (2010) argues families are best defined as configurations created out of the interdependencies between family members, and that studies of these configurations as they are and what they provide (e.g., emotional support or social capital). Bernardi (2011) focuses particularly on transnational families and understanding characteristics of relationships and exchanges between family members who reside in different countries. Because of the increasing degree to which adolescents’ families spread across multiple households with the same country, city, town, or even neighborhood, the network approach appeals for measuring family networks regardless of the geographic distance involved.

The general definition of a social network is a network of social relations in which a person is embedded (Granovetter 1973). Using a social network approach to conceptualize families allows researchers to put adolescents at the center of a network of family members, considering the social, psychological, biological, and geographic distances of those in the web of family. It also makes it possible to assess the type and quality of ties between members of an adolescent’s family network,
including the social capital available (Widmer 2010). Further, one could consider the support networks (family or wider) of multiple family members and the extent to which they overlap or leave certain family members isolated (Bernardi 2011).

The conceptualization of adolescents’ families as social networks suggests new forms of data collection as well (Bernardi 2011; Widmer 2010). In survey studies designed to understand the role of family and family members in the lives of adolescents, rather than a standard household roster and perhaps a set of questions about nonresident family members, adolescents might be asked to complete a sociogram or network diagram that systematically elicits reports of the important individuals in an adolescent’s life (Widmer, Aeby, and Sapin 2013). “Important” could be defined according to key theories or research questions. For example, studies might focus on listing and describing family ties based on levels of closeness, social support, financial support, or time spent together. Further, the adolescents could report perceptions of how close each of these family members is to every other family member, so that standard network measures, such as density or centrality, could be applied to understanding family characteristics. Additionally, other family members could become participants in the study and provide their own assessment of adolescents’ family networks and the ties involved. These other family members could also provide information on their own family or social support networks to see how their networks overlap or add to the networks of other family members. This could indicate strengths of weaknesses in the larger family context and beyond.

In longitudinal studies, the repeated use of methods to map adolescents’ family networks could provide rich data for shifts over time in influential family members, family relationships, and family living arrangements. This dynamic approach allows for assessing levels of stability or instability in family networks as well as various trajectories in network change. Widmer (2010) demonstrates how change in family configurations in the short and long term are related to psychological well-being.
Using a social network approach in measuring the family structures, ties, and interactions of adolescents could address several issues raised earlier in the paper. For one, this measurement strategy could do a better job of documenting family relations across households, not limiting researchers to the context of one household. Second, depending on how data about family networks are collected, this approach could do a better job of characterizing types and features of family relationships (Widmer 2010).

**Family Profiles.** Another way in which our methods could better reflect the family contexts in which adolescents live is to think of family structure as different combinations of various dimensions of family structure and measure it as such. Research on the implications of family structure for children and adolescents often focuses on one aspect of family structure, like whether there are one or two parents in the home, or the impact of a remarriage on adolescents. However, the relationship status or transitions experienced by parents might be different based on whether an adolescent has siblings or not. Manning et al. (2014) and others describe the multifaceted nature of families as “complexity,” and they recommend an approach that documents types of parent figures as well as siblings. Their analysis, like many are, is limited to members of households, but their consideration of different types of parent structures and sibling structures and the intersection between the two is an important advance. This approach could be extended to a variety of indicators beyond number and type of parents or siblings in the household, to those outside the household, and connections to other relatives or even non-related co-parents.

Methods that could be used to model common, multidimensional forms of family complexity could include cluster analysis or latent class analysis. These methods that capture “types” or “profiles” of families based on a set of indicators that could relate to parental family structure, sibling types and living arrangements, different residential custody arrangements, multigenerational living, and more. Family configurations could represent families at one moment in time or a set of experiences across time. For example, one might use configurational measures of
household structure at one point in time that uses indicators for all the different types of family members present in a home, including parents, siblings, and other family or non-family members (e.g., grandparent, parent’s friend, etc.) and suggests what the most common types of households are and estimate the distribution across the population. An indicator of dynamic living arrangements such as shared residential custody could be included. One could also design a set of latent class indicators that represent family transitions over time to measure the family experiences of adolescents to that point. Indicators might include having lived with a single parent, a step-parent (married or cohabiting), having had a biological-, half-, or step-sibling, having ever lived with a grandparent, having experienced a parental dissolution, having moved from home, or ever having returned to home.

Being able to use either relational networks or multidimensional family configurations has the potential to more richly measure and describe the family contexts of adolescents. Further, there could be more nuance in understanding how families affect adolescents and vice versa. Rather than having to rely on certain segments of what adolescents might defines as their family, or only consider one aspect of family structure (e.g., parental structure) at a time, these methods broaden the complexity of families researchers are able to capture.

Conclusions

Understanding forms of family in which adolescents come of age and their impact is challenging on a number of fronts. There are many dynamics in play. The definition of what a family is has been changing over time, any given family is likely to experience the loss and/or gain of members across time, and adolescents themselves are developing through time. Further, there are key measurement challenges, including the extent to which we focus on household members as family members, missing a variety of non-residential parents, siblings, and other relatives, who we ask to report on family structure and dynamics, and how to best capture changes in these very complex processes over time.
Despite these challenges, we do have a sense of the range and prevalence of family forms and how these have changed over time. Adolescents increasingly live in single-parent, step-parent, and no-biological-parent homes. Having step-siblings or half-siblings in the home or in other homes is more common. Grandparents are increasingly present in adolescents’ homes and lives. Older adolescents or young adults are more likely to return to their parents’ homes for a period of time. These changes call for consideration of our current theories about the roles of parents and other family members in the lives of children.

Implications for Parenting. These changes over time in family forms have several potential implications for parenting of adolescents, which are important questions for future research. For example, complex families with multiple parent figures, such as multigenerational families or non-residential parents, may have increased potential for conflicts about parenting and greater challenges negotiating parenting practices. For example, the percentage of children living with grandparents has been increasing over time, as we described earlier. How will parents in the future go about deciding if and when to have grandparents serve as co-parents or primary caretakers? How might this affect the grandparents’ own life course, development, and relationships with their children and grandchildren (Burton, Dilworth-Anderson, and Merriwether-deVries 1995)? Given the long-term increase in single mother families and multi-partner fertility also described earlier, parenting behaviors (particularly for fathers) now need to be responsive to the desires of the other parent, new romantic partners (of their own and of former partners), new children (of their own and of former partners), and how these interwoven relationships may affect access to, and relationships with, all of their adolescent children (Craigie 2015; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin and Nelson 2013; Meyer and Cancian 2012; Tach, Mincy, and Edin 2010).

There are numerous other examples of how parenting could be affected by complex family changes. Families with boomerang adolescents may have challenges negotiating appropriate autonomy-granting and independence-building (Newman 2012). Families with socially stigmatized
parents (e.g., incarcerated parents) may have challenges maintaining parent-adolescent relationships and handling stigma (Bryan 2017). Similarly, families with LBGT parents are navigating both the social and legal changes associated with same-sex marriage, the division of labor, and how to discuss these issues with their children (Goldberg and Kuvalanka 2012; Goldberg, Smith, and Perry-Jenkins 2012; Kimport 2014). Adolescents who experience a functional absence of parent figures (e.g., homeless adolescents) require parenting from other individuals or institutions that can provide support and guidance.

Partnership transitions have also been associated with more parental stress and harsher parenting in mothers, though the effects on stress seem to be moderated by education, with more education attenuating the relationship (Beck et al. 2010; Cooper et al. 2009). Amato (2004:32) contends that while there are many risk factors associated with divorce, “disruptions in parent-child relationships have the greatest potential to affect children negatively.” Thus, not only do new family forms present potential challenges to parenting, the transitions themselves to these new forms are also potential risk factors. These considerations all points to an increased need for cooperation, negotiation, and understanding among parents, partners, and children (Amato 2004).

These complex and dynamic family situations also underscore the importance of authoritative parenting, which has been repeatedly shown to produce better parent-adolescent relationships and outcomes for adolescents (Steinberg 2001). Authoritative parents are warm, involved, and supportive of their adolescent’s autonomy and decision-making, yet are clear and firm about their boundaries and expectations (Baumrind 1971; Steinberg 2001). Even just having one authoritative parent is better than none (Steinberg 2001), which suggests that the difficulties of family changes and transitions can be buttressed, to some extent, by parents who are willing to exhibit this parenting style before, during, and after the transitions.

As described earlier, more nuanced measurement of family forms is a prerequisite to pursuing these research directions. Because of the challenges in grasping all complexities of
adolescents’ families, research should continue to pursue and implement new ways to conceptualize and measure family structures, ties, and processes. Knowing the great importance of family emotional and material support in the lives of adolescents should motivate improvements in how we capture all exchanges and interactions, within households and beyond.
References


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<tr>
<th>Table 1. Living Arrangements of Children and Adolescents in the United States in 2016 (Numbers in Thousands)</th>
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<td>Within Category %</td>
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<td>Global Category %</td>
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Source. U.S. Census Bureau (2017b)

<sup>1</sup>Spouse absent
Figure 1. Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years Old, 1960-2016

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2017)

Notes. The Census report does not have statistics for 1961-1967; for graphical purposes, a linear trend in each category is used between the data points for 1960 and 1968.
Figure 2. Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years Old, by Race/Ethnicity, 1960-2016

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2017b

Notes. The Census report does not have statistics for 1961-1967; for graphical purposes, a linear trend in each category is used between the data points for 1960 and 1968. Data for Hispanics begin in 1980 since they were not available before then for the subcategories shown here.
Figure 3. Children Under 18 Living with Grandparents as Percentage of All Children Under 18

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2017f)