



The SAGE Encyclopedia of World Poverty

Family Size and Structure

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Historically, the role of family size and structure in the analysis of poverty was neglected. However, later analysis found that a large family is a contributing factor to the circle of poverty. The place of family size and structure as a core fundamental determinant of one's chances of becoming poor cannot be overemphasized. Studies have demonstrated the association between family size and structure and overall well-being of individuals within the family. It is assumed that poor people have large families, and that the larger the family, the lower the standard of living. Large families operate primarily to reduce the share of family income available to meet each individual member's needs. This happens when large families have a high proportion of child dependents resulting from high fertility. Fertility rate, inheritance, emigration, religion, and cultural and psychological factors are implicated as determinants of family size. Negative relationships between a large family and family structure, poor health, poor housing, mortality, malnutrition, and morbidity have been documented and are all indicators of poverty.

One explanation for the effect of family size on poverty is the wealth flows theory, which proposes that fertility decisions in all societies are economically rational responses to familial wealth flows. In some societies with net upward wealth flows, family members decide to have as many surviving children as possible, as these children are seen as a form of wealth and as security in old age. This belief can lead to a large family with its attendant consequences. However, in societies with net downward wealth flows, the decision is to have no children or the minimum number that gives the satisfaction of being a parent.

Family structure represents a dynamic set of parental relationships, including marriage, cohabitation, singleness, divorce, or some combination. It is dynamic and not static over an individual's life course, as individuals may likely experience one form of vacuum at a certain time during his or her life. The circumstance of each phase of transition is very important in determining one's life chances of escaping poverty or not.

But at what phase could an individual fall into the poverty trap? This may not have a ready-made answer, but drawing an analogy using adolescent behavior, research suggests that family structure effects may be due, in part, to frequent transitions that lead to risky adolescent behavior, as outlined by Paula Fomby and colleagues. Hence, it can be argued that frequent changes in family structure can lead to poverty, as instability occasioned by family size and structure could bring about emotional instability, which is detrimental to well-being.

It is generally thought that large families tend to concentrate at the lower income levels. This could be explained by the fact that having a large family causes both occupational and geographical immobility, and consequently the earning member of the family is susceptible to unemployment. Women could be weighed down with a lot of domestic duties, consequently limiting their earning capabilities. In a large family children are seen as assets rather than liabilities as they are made to start contributing to the family income when they are young. Also, extreme poverty or material deprivation seems to cause indifference and irresponsibility, hence having additional children is of no consequence. For these reasons, large families, in which the majority of members are not engaged in income-generating activities, result in more hard work for the individual(s) earning money to satisfy the consumptive needs of dependent members.

However, there is a hypothesis that married family structure affects well-being because economic benefits to both partners increase emotional support and social integration. The economic benefits from dual-earning married individuals potentially increase access to basic

necessities of daily living. Per capita income is highest among married individuals without children; hence, they experience less material deprivation. Beyond family structure, which gives rise to either a large or small family, the question remains about the relationship of family size and poverty. Again, what is generally known is that the presence of extended family members within the home can mitigate the effects of stress on well-being, while the presence of more adults in the family could help increase the amount of social support individuals believe is necessary to support their needs.

Types of Family Structure and Impact on Poverty

A literature search shows three main types of family structure—intact families, reconstituted or stepparent families, and single-parent families. However, would any type of family size and structure breed poverty? There is an assumption that an intact family with dual-earning couples would have access to basic items of daily living. But how about the effect of chronic parental conflict in intact families, and how it affects the members of the family? Disruptions arising from family conflict could be detrimental to the well-being of every member of the family, as resources might be diverted to uses other than family needs. In addition, the earning power of either parent in an intact family could impact positively or negatively on dependent family members.

The relationship between family structure and poverty can be discussed by examining some specific instances. For example, the prevalence of single-parent families and stepfamily structures has been implicated as more likely to create unfavorable environments for children than two-parent families. Adolescents from single-parent families are more likely than their peers from two-parent families to engage in risky behaviors and subsequently suffer health problems, as noted by Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew and Gordon De Jong. This could lead to poverty, because being in a state of poor health means being dependent on others for subsistence living. Single-parent families have less access to financial resources than two-parent families, as data have shown that roughly half of all mother-only families live below the poverty line when compared to two-parent families. In addition, mother-only families experience more severe poverty, as children in such families remain in poverty longer than children in two-parent families. Economic resources in a two-parent family structure are better than a single-parent structure, while the poverty rate in female-headed, single-parent families is higher than that of two-parent families.

Furthermore, single parents raising children alone are often stressed by economic strain and social pressure, as discussed by Anne E. Barrett and R. Jay Turner. This may lead to impairments in both mental well-being and physical health, and consequently result in poverty. This is further illustrated by the fact that children from single-parent and stepparent households, on average, are more likely to use alcohol and drugs, to drop out of school, to leave home at a young age, and to have early experiences with sexual activity, as reported by Marcia Carlson and Mary Corcoran.

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See Also: [Children](#); [Family Budgets](#); [Household Consumption](#); [Household Employment](#); [Household Income](#).

Further Readings

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