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'Domino-Dad' Families: Many Women Have Kids With More Than One Man

By BELINDA LUSCOMBE Friday, April 1, 2011

More than a quarter of all U.S. mothers with more than one child had some of those kids with different men, according to a new study.

Among African-American women with several children, that figure rises to more than half; among Hispanics, it's more than a third, and among whites it's 22%.

Multiple partner fertility, as the phenomenon is called in academic circles, is a cause of concern among many sociologists, since **studies have shown** that growing up in a home in which different men cycle in and out is not good for a child's health or well being. Think of these families as having domino dads, with each one's departure putting pressure on the next.

The new figures stem from the first study to look at multiple partners among a nationally representative sample of women. Most previous studies had been done among younger or more urban women. In this case, University of Michigan postdoctoral student Cassandra Dorius analyzed data on nearly 4,000 American women, each of whom was interviewed 20 times over a span of 27 years. The study will be presented at the Population Association of America meeting in Washington, D.C.

"I was surprised at the prevalence [of multiple dads]," said Dorius in a statement. And not in a good way. When mothers find a new partner, or a child from a new man arrives, some fathers become less involved in their children's lives, both financially and emotionally. "Multiple partner fertility is an important part of contemporary American family life, and a key component to the net of disadvantage that many poor and uneducated women face every day," Dorius said.

It's not just an issue among the poor and unmarried. In fact, it struck very close to home: "I was a year into this project before I realized that my mother was one of these women," Dorius said. "We tend to think of women with multiple partner fertility as being only poor single women with little education and money, but in fact at some point, most were married, and working, and going to school, and doing all the things you're supposed to do to live the American Dream."

It's not like anyone sets out to have a domino dad family. Even many of the low-income women who are not married when they have a child intend to get married to their child's father. According to figures from the **Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study**, half of the children born to poor single moms are the offspring of a couple who are already living together. Only 10% of the kids are conceived with a man the mother doesn't really know.

But, as even wealthy and well-educated people have found, introducing a baby into a household has a way of chafing any blisters that are already in a relationship. If it's not infants' disruptive habit of suddenly having extreme periods of neediness then it's the amount of time, money and energy that have to be devoted to their care. In almost every case, the better-off have more leeway to lessen the impact on their lives.

And it's a vicious cycle. "Raising children who have different fathers is a major factor in the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage," Dorius said. "Juggling all the different needs and demands of fathers in at least two households, four or more pairs of grandparents, and two or more children creates a huge set of chronic stressors that families have to deal with for decades."

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