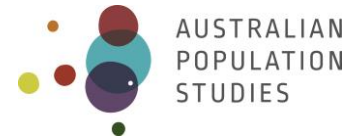


The flow of family transitions of Australian families



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Family structure disruption has been linked to negative child educational and health outcomes (Perales et al. 2016). Australia has relatively stable families, but income disparities between Australians are widening, and single-parent families make up a large proportion of families living in poverty. Cohabitation is also common in Australia with approximately three-quarters of marriages preceded by cohabitation. If substantial family structure churning affects Australian children this may expose a need for special policy interventions aimed at family creation and dissolution to ameliorate the negative effects of such stressful experiences. To highlight family structures and transitions Australian children experience, we use Sankey flow diagrams charting data from 'Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)' (Gilding 2001). We track children from birth to 11 years old using waves 1-6 and population weights to represent 183,521 children born into Australian families.

We used household rosters to construct three baseline family structures in wave 1 (0-1 years old): Biological Married, Biological Cohabit, and Biological Single. In subsequent waves, we placed children into one of five additional categories if they experienced a family transition:

- Disrupted Biological Married – two biological parents who married after the child's birth and live in the same household.
- Disrupted Non-Biological Married – two married parents where one parent is not the biological parent of the child (stepfamilies, adoptions, etc.) and the stepparent lives in the same household.
- Disrupted Biological Cohabit – two biological parents who began cohabiting after the child's birth and live in the same household.
- Disrupted Non-Biological Cohabit – two cohabiting parents where one parent is not the biological parent of the child (social families, etc.) and the social parent lives in the same household.
- Disrupted Single – a single-parent family where a parent exited the family after the child's birth.

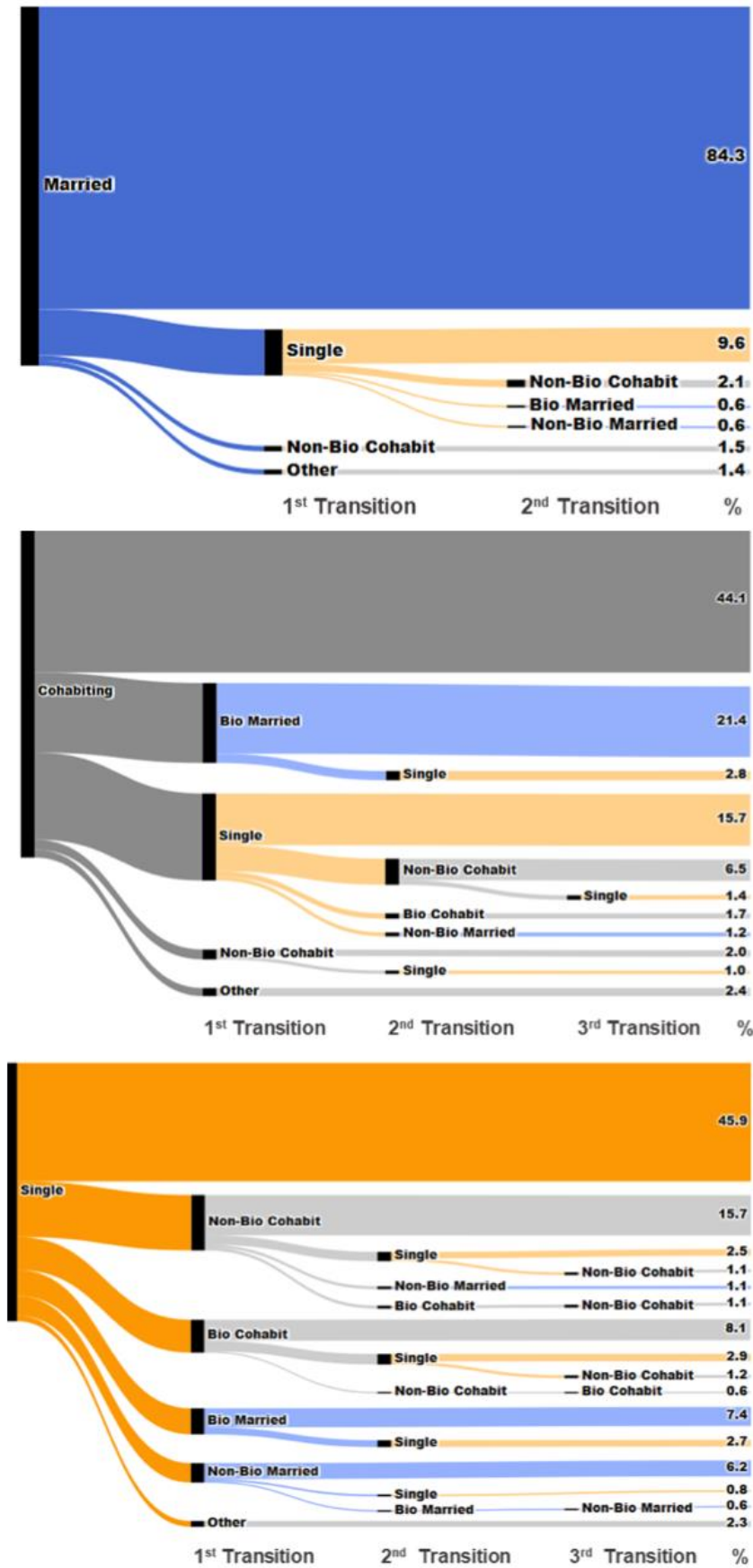


Figure 1: Paths of family transitions for children who were born to married, cohabiting and single parents

Each combination of consecutive family structures defined what we call a family structure path. Children with the same family structure path were grouped. We then created Sankey diagrams to visualize the most common paths overall based on children's family structure at birth (Figure 1). We include only those paths that represent at least 0.6% of the population.

Most common family structures and transitions

Over three-quarters of children were born into a family with biological parents who were married, 16% into a cohabiting parent family, and 7% into a single parent family. While nearly two-thirds of children remained in a family with married biological parents, we discovered 57 distinct family structure paths after birth. But generally, family structures were stable with 75% of children experiencing no transitions and very few children experiencing more than one family transition. Six primary paths represented 90% of children. Still, 1% of children experienced three or more transitions. Among children who experienced at least one transition, 74% were exposed to family instability before age nine.

Born to Married Parents

Children born into families with biological parents who were married experienced the least turbulence with approximately 84% experiencing no family changes. The next most common experience for this group was for the child's parents to transition from married to a single-parent family representing 9.6% of children born to married parents and 7.4% overall. These two-family experiences make up almost 94 % of all children originally born into families with two biological parents who were married.

Born to Cohabiting Parents

Children who were born into a family with cohabiting parents took 11 distinct paths. The largest path (44%) remained in households with two biological parents who were cohabiting. A fifth of children whose biological parents were cohabiting at the child's birth then transitioned into marriage. The third largest path in this group consists of children whose parents cohabited at birth but then split up indicating a transition into a single-parent family that persists--a path that represents 15.7% of cohabiters at birth and 2.5% of the total sample.

Born to a Single Parent

Forty-five percent of children born into a single-parent family remained in that path. Of the 15 additional paths for children born into single-parent families, the most common was for the single parent to enter a cohabiting relationship. Approximately 8% began cohabiting with the biological parent of the child and 15.7% began cohabiting with another person. Marriage was less common among those who had a child while single with 7.4% of single parents marrying the biological parent of the child and 6.2% marrying someone else.

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