

RSF: Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences
Call for Papers

Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study: 25th Anniversary

**Editors: Lonnie Berger, University of Wisconsin, Kathryn Edin, Princeton University,
Anna Haskins, University of Notre Dame, Lenna Nepomnyaschy, Rutgers University, and
Sarah Pachman, Princeton University**

In celebration of the landmark Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study's 25th anniversary, we are soliciting proposals for an issue of *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, situating the study in the larger literature, engaging with key questions using the most recent wave of survey data, inviting comparisons using other data sources, and identifying areas for future research. The issue will provide a lens into how today's heterogeneous families form, grow, change, and thrive, using data within and across generations.

The Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) was initially designed to provide data on an understudied (at the time) and substantial portion, of American children: those born to unmarried parents. Births to unmarried parents in the United States had increased from 15% in 1975 to 34% in 2000¹ but there was no data source that would allow researchers to understand how these children and their families would fare over time. FFCWS founders, Sara McLanahan, Irv Garfinkel, and Ron Mincy, created FFCWS to fill that gap, meeting families in the hospital when their child was born and capitalizing on the "magic moment" of birth to interview the new mothers and fathers. The study has collected data on a sample of about 5,000 children born in large US cities between 1998 and 2000 at seven time periods: birth and ages 1, 3, 5, 9, 15, and 22. Data have been collected through interviews with parents, the focal child, childcare providers, teachers, in-home interviewer observations, saliva samples, brain scans, and genetic data. Contextual (e.g., census tract characteristics, exposure to gun violence, and school characteristics) and administrative data have been appended to the survey data. Beginning in 2026, an eighth wave of data will be collected on the focal children when they are age 27, and data are currently being collected on children born to original FFCWS focal children. Thus, the breadth of the study allows for intergenerational comparisons between the parents, most of whom were first interviewed in their mid-20s, the young adults, and now the young adults' children, highlighting the diversity of 21st century families.

As the U.S.'s longest-running birth cohort study, and only contemporary birth cohort study of young adults, FFCWS is an unparalleled resource. It offers a unique opportunity to explore intergenerational mobility among today's young adults and to answer key questions about how children have made the transition to adulthood. Further, the cohort has been shaped by a series of significant events (e.g., the Great Recession and COVID-19) and seismic technological and social shifts (e.g., the prevalence of high-speed internet, smartphones, and social media), the impacts of which can be examined to move beyond a groundbreaking study of "fragile families" to encompass how contemporary families fare, function, and thrive within and across generations.

Call for Papers

Celebrating 25 years of FFCWS, we are seeking papers that draw on the FFCWS, other data (surveys, administrative data, qualitative data), and a range of methods to engage with the major themes studied within the FFCWS: how contemporary families are structured and function; how children develop and transition to adulthood; and what family and contextual factors shape their trajectories. We are especially interested in work from emerging scholars and on topics at the cutting edge of family, mobility, and the life course.

This journal issue aims to address key research questions about today's young adults, investigating a host of questions, all with a lens examining heterogeneities along axes such as family context at birth, race, ethnicity, and gender. Researchers can and should draw on FFCWS survey data, data from FFCWS collaborative studies, and quantitative and qualitative data beyond FFCWS (e.g., the PSID, ABCD, ECLS, SIPP, American Voices Project, studies from other nations) that can offer comparative or complementary analyses. Sample research questions may include:

- Are there intergenerational links in family formation patterns?
- How do young adults' educational trajectories compare to those of their parents?
- What are the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on child and young adult wellbeing?
- What are the predictors of economic security for young adults? How do parental investments and systems involvement shape social and economic wellbeing?
- What is the state of young adults' mental and physical health and wellbeing? How are indicators of health shaped by intergenerational determinants of health and family environments?
- How have young adults experienced financial wellbeing and material hardship? How have safety net programs spanning birth to early adulthood impacted young adults' social and economic wellbeing and health?
- What are the predictors, scale, and impact of criminal legal system involvement among this cohort? How has criminal legal system involvement among parents, siblings, other relatives, and peers impacted young adults throughout their lives?
- This cohort is more likely than others to identify as LGBTQ+. What is the relevance of these identities for romantic relationships, family formation, economic security, and broader indicators of wellbeing?
- How have family forms and functions shifted over the last quarter century?

All paper proposals should situate their research questions within the larger body of scholarly research. Papers should provide insights into paths forward for scholars studying families, child development, and the transition to adulthood across a range of critical indicators of wellbeing including employment, economic security, educational attainment, romantic relationships, childbearing, and health. The findings from these analyses are intended to inform researchers and policymakers to identify and develop policies and programs that are most likely to support the transition to adulthood, yield intergenerational upward mobility, and help contemporary families thrive.

Proposals are welcome but not required to draw on research addressing the primary motivations of FFCWS: understanding the conditions and capabilities of parents with nonmarital births and their children's wellbeing, highlighting fathers' roles in these families, and identifying families' interactions with social policies and institutions. Below we outline some of these key findings but also encourage proposals to engage in work that moves beyond them:

- While most unmarried parents expressed the intention marrying each other at the child's birth,² the majority of these relationships had ended by the time the child was 5.³
- Many nonresident fathers continue to see and be involved with their children and provide steady non-cash support throughout childhood. Nonresident fathers' engagement and provision of non-cash support are associated with lower economic precarity in the child's household and better behavioral outcomes for children into adolescence.^{4,5}
- When children are young, about half of nonresident fathers contribute formal and/or informal economic support to their children's households⁶ but this cash support decreases over time, flattening out at approximately \$100/month after about 7 years of living apart.⁷
- As mothers repartner, stepfathers become important figures in children's lives;⁸ stepfathers' high-quality parenting is protective for child cognition and wellbeing.⁹
- Ongoing family instability is associated with more problem behaviors for children (e.g., internalizing, externalizing, and delinquent behaviors).¹⁰⁻¹²
- The criminal legal system plays a pervasive role in these families' lives, with half of fathers having been incarcerated by the age 9 survey, and ¼ of children having been stopped by the police by age 15. Paternal incarceration is associated with a host of negative outcomes including more aggressive child behaviors,¹³ detrimental early schooling outcomes,¹⁴ reduced father-child coresidence and visitation,¹⁵ and material hardship.¹⁶ Further, Black youth are more likely to experience higher levels of, and more aggressive, police contact than males of other races/ethnicities.¹⁷
- Children exposed to concentrated neighborhood poverty are disproportionately likely to experience adverse childhood experiences at age 15.¹⁸ Higher local unemployment rates are associated with greater material hardship,¹⁹ worse maternal mental health and cigarette and drug use,²⁰ and a greater likelihood of experiencing child maltreatment.²¹
- Over 80% of the young adults were working, in school, or both at age 22.²² Still, Black young adults experience lower returns to parental education than white young adults, a relation that is likely mediated by differences in household income.²³

Anticipated Timeline

Prospective contributors should submit a CV and an abstract (up to two pages in length, single or double spaced) of their study along with up to three pages of supporting material (e.g., tables, figures, pictures, etc.) no later than 5 PM EST on January 12, 2026, to:

<https://rsf.fluxx.io>

In other words, your submission may be up to five pages in length. This includes everything, abstract, references, etc. **Note that if you wish to submit an abstract and do not yet have an account with us, it can take up to 48 hours to get credentials, so please start your application at least two days before the deadline.** All submissions must be original work that has not been previously published in part or in full. Only abstracts submitted to <https://rsf.fluxx.io> will be considered. Each paper will receive a \$1,000 honorarium when the issue is published. All questions regarding this issue should be directed to Suzanne Nichols, Director of Publications, at journal@rsage.org. **Do not email the editors of the issue.**

A conference will take place at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City on **October 8-9, 2026** (with a group dinner of the night of the 8th). The selected contributors will gather for a two-day workshop to present draft papers (due a month prior to the conference **on 9/11/26**) and receive feedback from the other contributors and editors. Travel costs, food, and lodging for one author per paper will be covered by the foundation. Papers will be circulated before the conference. After the conference, the authors will submit their revised drafts by 1/12/27. The papers will then be sent out to three additional scholars for formal peer review. Having received feedback from reviewers and the RSF board, authors will revise their papers by 4/5/27. The full and final issue will be published open access on the RSF journal website in spring 2028, as well as in several digital repositories, including JSTOR and UPCC/Muse

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