Stabilizing Children’s Lives
Insights for Research and Action

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Based on work by Gina Adams, with Mary Bogle, Julia Isaacs, Heather Sandstrom, Lisa Dubay, Julia Gelatt, and Michael Katz
Overview

• Background

• Our Approach

• Our Findings:
  • Exploring the Basics
  • Insights for Future Research
Background

• Emerging concern about impact of instability on healthy child development and family success, but uneven and often within siloes

• Highly complex and interconnected, yet little attention paid to the pervasive and interconnected nature of the problem

• Builds upon earlier Urban work:
  • Synthesis of research on child care instability (Adams and Rohacek, 2010)
  • Synthesis of research from different domains on instability and child well-being (Sandstrom and Huerta, 2013)
  • 2014 conference proceedings (Adams and Dubay, 2014), and essay volume (Adams editor, 2014)
Background (continued)

- RWJF funded Urban in Fall 2015 to assess what information/research is needed to support changes in policy and practice to stabilize families.

- Conducted high-level scan through 60 expert interviews and targeted literature review in the following areas:
  - How instability functions
  - What we need to know within and across key domains to inform action:
    - Parenting/primary caregivers
    - Social and community networks
    - Caring institutions (child care/early education and K-12)
    - Employment
    - Income/assets
    - Key resources (health, housing, food)
    - Safety net programs
  - Community practitioner perspective

Provides important insights at very high level – much more work to be done.
Background (continued)

- Products from RWJF funding:
  - Six internal working papers submitted to RWJF summer 2016
  - Blog series of 11 related blogs posted 12/5/16 to 12/16/16 at http://www.urban.org/urban-wire/stabilizing-childrens-lives-insights-research-and-action
Exploring the Basics
What Is Instability? How Common Is It?

• Working definition:

  The experience of abrupt and/or involuntary change in individual, family, or community circumstances, which can have adverse implications for child development

• More work needed on terminology

• How does instability differ from related concepts of poverty and mobility?
How Common Is Instability?

• Little information on how much instability children experience across domains
  • One study (2000) found 13% poor children 6-13 experienced 2 or more changes across 4 domains in 12 month period

• Data on instability within particular domains finds instability relatively common
  • Income: Almost 40% adults living with children lose ¼ of their income or more at least once in the space of a year
  • Family composition: >1/3 of all children see parents marry, remarry, separate, or start/stop cohabiting by the time they reach 4th grade
  • Employment: 1 in 6 children live with at least one un- or under-employed parent; recent research finds significant instability in schedules for employed parents
  • Food insecurity: 1 in 6 children live in food insecure households, across rural/urban, above/below poverty
  • Residential mobility: 1 in 10 low-income children have lived in their current home for less than 6 months
Why Does Instability Matter?

- Associated with poor short- and long-term child outcomes, toxic stress
- Threatens upward mobility and greater equity
- Undercuts public and private efforts to support the development of children and family well-being
- Widely shared experience and concern
How Does It Affect Children’s Outcomes – Key Mechanisms?

Instability affects children’s outcomes by affecting:

• Stress for child -- impact on well-being if not buffered

• Critical relationships between child and parent/other nurturing adults

• Stability of place and routine

• Access to basic resources (i.e. food, housing, education, health care)

• Ability of social networks and public systems to support the child/family
Other Factors Likely to Shape How Instability Affects Children’s Outcomes

Though relatively little is known (or is known only in some areas), other factors appear likely to be important:

• Characteristics of instability likely to matter

• Child and family characteristics, and history of instability/trauma

• Characteristics of community or place
  • Community resources, stability, and resilience (or lack thereof)
  • “Collective instability” where children experience the fear/stress of instability even if not experiencing it directly – can be associated with a geographic area (i.e. chronic violence) or membership in a group that is under threat or discrimination (e.g. due to race/ethnicity, immigration status, religious affiliation, or sexual orientation)

• Systemic factors or policy context
What Causes It? Where Should We Focus?

• Looked across many domains

• Knowledge base is uneven, but every domain plays a role in stabilizing or destabilizing children and families – no single trigger

• Some children and families are particularly vulnerable, including:
  - Children during periods of intense brain development – first three years of life (especially first year), and ages 15-19
  - Families with mental health challenges
  - Families facing challenges of disability and chronic illness
  - Other groups as well
Insights for Future Research
Key Insights and Selected Ideas

• Recognize the complexity and intersecting nature of the problem
  - Every sector has a role to play, but requires cross-sector awareness
  - Cross-sector work essential

• Fill gaps in our understanding of how it affects children’s development
  - Articulate conceptual model for a variety of audiences
  - Re-envision the concept of safety net -- explore whether these domains function together to create a “web of stabilizing supports”
  - Explore what is known about key characteristics of instability in shaping the impact
Key Insights and Selected Ideas (continued)

• Explore what is known about risks and protective factors for different populations
  - Prevalence of multiple instability experiences overall, and for particular populations of concern (i.e. critical developmental periods)
  - Which families/communities have access to the web of stabilizing supports? What are the gaps? How has it changed over time, and for whom?
  - Explore experiences of collective instability

• Improve our ability to measure and interpret instability
  - Improve measures (for surveys, practitioners, etc.)
  - Improve ability to detect whether instability in one area is triggered by (or triggers) instability in another area
Key Insights and Selected Ideas (continued)

- Identify and assess strategies within each domain, and across domains, to prevent, detect, and/or ameliorate instability*

- Bring together expertise across sectors

- Explore value of “stabilizing families” as a message to enlist support and public will to support families

*See report for more details