

Princeton University

HONORS FACULTY MEMBERS
RECEIVING EMERITUS STATUS



May 2021

The biographical sketches were written by staff and
colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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In the Nation's Service and the Service of Humanity

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SARA MCLANAHAN



Sara McLanahan, the William S. Tod Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs, is retiring this spring following nearly thirty-one years at Princeton.

Sara Francis Smith was born in Tyler, Texas, on December 27, 1940, where she lived with her parents and two siblings until moving to Irvington, New York, to attend Bennet Junior College in 1959. Graduating with highest honors, she moved to Northampton, Massachusetts, to attend Smith College in 1961, but dropped out to marry Ellery McLanahan in 1962. By the early 1970s, Sara, her husband, and the couple's three children had settled in Houston, where, in 1972, the couple divorced. Shortly thereafter, Sara completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Houston. While raising her children on her own, she earned her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Texas in 1979. Later, she would come to be known for her pathbreaking work on single motherhood, an interest sparked by becoming a single mother herself.

As a graduate student, Sara's research was not focused on single parenthood—she didn't believe she should pursue that interest because she was so close to the subject matter. Instead, she examined healthcare delivery systems such as HMOs. Yet those years offered a glimpse of the scholarly interests that would drive her career. While at the University of Texas, she became friends with several demography trainees and was attracted to their collaborative approach. To learn more, Sara enrolled in a course taught by Teresa A. Sullivan, a well-known demographer. Sullivan assigned the 1975 book, *The Time of Transition: The Growth of Families Headed by Women*, by Heather Ross and Isabel Sawhill. "It was all about increases in divorce and interpreting those trends. I loved the stuff, and I wanted to be Isabel Sawhill!" Sara said in an interview with the Population Association of America. This is how she discovered the field that she would engage with, and help shape, for the next forty years.

After completing her degree, Sara completed a postdoctoral fellowship in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin, funded by the National Institutes of Mental Health. These years at Wisconsin, with its rich traditions in poverty studies, demography, and sociology of the family, would prove pivotal to her career. There, she met two of the leading family demographers in the country, Larry Bumpass and James Sweet. Bumpass taught Sara demographic techniques.

Sara also began to attend a brown bag seminar at Wisconsin's Institute for Research on Poverty, the first federally supported poverty research center in the United States, established in 1966 and funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity. One week, the discussion centered around a series of articles titled "The Underclass" by Ken Auletta, published in the *New Yorker* in November 1981. Among his claims was the statement that "one cannot talk about poverty in America, or about the underclass, without talking about the weakened family structure of the poor." Auletta went on to quote experts who claimed that racial differences in family structure explained a significant portion of the black-white income gap (about one-third, according to one scholar). The implication was that growing up with a single parent was harmful to children.

Sara was stunned by Auletta's claims. She had just read a lengthy scholarly review concluding that studies showing negative associations between single motherhood and child outcomes were seriously flawed due to highly selective samples. Surely, with better data, she could prove those experts wrong, she believed. When Aage Sorensen, chair of the sociology department at Wisconsin, heard that Sara was interested in studying single parents, he delivered the codebook for the first representative longitudinal panel study in the U.S., the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), which had enrolled its first cohort in 1968. Sorensen told Sara that if she wanted to study single mothers, this is where she could find a lot of them. She dug in.

Sorensen went on to hire Sara as an assistant professor of sociology in 1981. By 1986, she had well over a dozen peer-reviewed publications, most of them on the topic of single mothers. The first was based on an innovative qualitative study of divorced mothers she conducted as a postdoc, while others deployed panel surveys like the PSID. Sara was granted early tenure in 1986; she was promoted to full professor in 1989.

Sara's initial publications focused on single mothers' psychological stress. Yet, she was intent on testing Auletta's claims. To her surprise (and consternation), she found that no matter how careful the analysis, results showed that children living with single parents did not fare as well as those raised by two married parents across a wide variety of domains, in part due to economic factors. Sara emphasized the "low earnings capacity of single mothers, the lack of child support from non-residential parents, and meager public benefits." Nonetheless, the findings raised feminist hackles.

Sara's book with Wisconsin colleague Irwin Garfinkel, *Single Mothers and Their Children: A New American Dilemma*, was published in 1986, part of a larger project commissioned by the Urban Institute to investigate the effects of changes in welfare policies during the Reagan

administration. The agenda-setting book pointed to the sharp growth in single parenthood and the growing public concern (with some evidence) that children of single parents were less likely to be successful adults.

Eight years later, with Wisconsin colleague Gary Sandefur, she published *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Helps, What Hurts*. Based on an exhaustive examination of four nationally representative surveys and more than a decade of research, the findings reinforced the significance of the relationship between family structure and a child's prospects for success. Children whose parents lived apart, the authors found, were twice as likely to drop out of high school as those in two-parent families, one and a half times as likely to be idle in young adulthood, and twice as likely to become single parents themselves. The book won both the Otis Dudley Duncan Award and the Goode Distinguished Publication Award from the American Sociological Association.

In the late 1980s, Marvin Bressler, the chair of Princeton's Department of Sociology, invited Sara to apply for a joint position in sociology and the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs, then known as the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. She moved to Princeton in 1990. At the same time, her longtime collaborator and spouse, Irwin Garfinkel, was hired by Columbia University's School of Social Work. Purchasing homes near both campuses, they were able to arrange their schedules so that they saw each other every day of the week, each spending some time in both homes.

At Princeton, Sara continued to produce pathbreaking research on single parents and their children. She became evermore committed to working across disciplinary lines, as evidenced by the decade she spent in the MacArthur Network on the Family and the Economy. Garfinkel, Ron Mincy, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and Kathryn Edin were also in the network. Each would come to play a key role in the landmark study that would shape the rest of her career.

Just a few years after arriving at Princeton, Sara founded the Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW), an interdisciplinary center of the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs, whose mission is to stimulate basic research, educate faculty and students, and influence policymakers and practitioners on issues affecting children, youth, and families. In 1998, CRCW became home to the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal birth cohort survey based on a stratified sample of about 5,000 children (and their parents) born in large U.S. cities, which Sara and Garfinkel launched in partnership with Mincy

(then at the Ford Foundation). The study oversampled nonmarital births by a ratio of 3 to 1, a strategy which resulted in the inclusion of many Black, Hispanic, and low-income children. Mothers were first interviewed in the hospital shortly after giving birth, while fathers—underrepresented in other studies—were also first interviewed at the hospital when they came to visit the child, an innovation leading to the participation of many fathers. Follow-up interviews were conducted when the children were one, three, five, nine, fifteen, and twenty-two. With this data, Sara has continued to study the capabilities of unmarried parents, including fathers, the nature of parental relationships, from casual to committed, and the fortunes of children in these households, showing how labor market conditions and government policies shape family dynamics, and child and adolescent wellbeing.

In 2004, Sara became president of the Population Association of America. Her presidential address, “Diverging Destinies: How Children Are Faring in the Second Demographic Transition,” demonstrated that recent trends were increasing disparities in children’s resources, with those born to the most-educated gaining resources while those who were born to the least-educated were losing them. Sara contended that Americans should be concerned about the deepening divide of parental resources and that the government should do more to close the gap between rich and poor children.

To further the public’s interest in the best social science research about children, and to make the research accessible to policymakers and practitioners, Sara assumed the role of editor in chief of the *Future of Children* in 2004, a collaboration between the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs and the Brookings Institution. The topics range widely—from education to health to families—with a concern for children as the unifying theme.

Throughout her career, two features of Sara’s approach have been readily apparent. First, she has been committed to conducting research that informs policy debates. For example, early in her career, she analyzed the relationship between changes in family structure and the rise of the so-called underclass. She also examined the reverse claim, made in Charles Murray’s book *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980*—that welfare had led to the spread of single parenthood. She also assessed the impact of child support on children’s wellbeing.

Second, she has been committed to bringing the best data and methods to bear. For example, she became interested in bio-demography, including the effect of genes and epigenetic markers on child and adolescent outcomes as well as the effects of family environments on brain development, guided by her collaboration with Princeton molecular

biologist Daniel Notterman. Another example is her recent collaboration with Matthew Salganik, also of Princeton—a mass collaboration involving social scientists and data scientists from across the globe who apply machine-learning techniques to analysis of the Fragile Families data.

Over her career, Sara has published over 125 research articles, seven books and edited volumes, fifty-nine book chapters, and has given fifty-seven invited lectures. She is an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2019), the American Philosophical Society (2016), the National Academy of Sciences (2011), and the American Academy of Political and Social Science (2005). She has held positions on twelve external advisory boards and committees including the Population Association of America, the Russell Sage Foundation (RSF), and the National Poverty Center. From 2014 to 2017, she was chair of the RSF Board.

To date, more than 915 published articles across a range of social science disciplines and applied fields have used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which she co-founded. Due to Sara’s career-long emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration, the study now includes several ancillary studies, including those focused on DNA, brain development, cardiovascular health, and the children of the focal youth. Her research has been frequently featured in a wide array of media outlets. In a 2021 interview, she noted that “In addition to my scholarly audience, my research has been used (and misused!) by political groups to promote their views about family structure and poverty.”