



# The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

## Baseline National Report

Revised - March 2003

By  
Sara McLanahan  
Irwin Garfinkel  
Nancy Reichman  
Julien Teitler  
Marcia Carlson  
Christina Norland Audigier

In twenty cities across the United States, parents are participating in a study of Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing. The study follows a new birth cohort of approximately 5,000 children and their parents in an effort to learn more about an important group of families in the United States: unmarried parents and their children. We use the term *fragile families* to underscore the fact that unmarried parents and their children are families, and to remind the reader that these families have a higher risk of poverty and family dissolution than traditional families.

The proportion of children born to unmarried parents has increased dramatically during the past forty years, with close to one-third of births now occurring outside of marriage. Despite this trend, very little is known about the resources of and relationships within these families, and the ways in which government policies affect the parents' and children's lives. As a consequence, public perceptions are often shaped by unsubstantiated myths about unmarried couples, and policymakers and community leaders often must rely on anecdotal evidence when designing policies and programs. Without adequate information, such programs may not be as effective as intended, and in some cases, may even unintentionally undermine the stability of these families.

---

This report provides nationally-representative estimates from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Data have been weighted to make the mother sample representative of all non-marital births in the seventy-seven U.S. cities with populations over 200,000 in 1999 (from which the Fragile Families cities were sampled). Sample sizes reported reflect the actual number of survey respondents in the study.



Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing

The study addresses four sets of related questions:

- What are the conditions and capabilities of new unmarried parents, especially fathers? How many of these men hold steady jobs? How many want to be involved in raising their children?
- What is the nature of relationships between unmarried parents? How many of these couples are involved in stable relationships? How many expect to get married? How many are exposed to high levels of conflict or domestic violence?
- What factors strengthen the relationships between new unmarried parents? What factors cause conflict between them? In particular, how do public policies affect parents' behaviors and living arrangements?
- What are the long-term consequences for parents, children, and society of new welfare regulations, stronger paternity establishment and stricter child support enforcement, and changes in healthcare and childcare financing and delivery?

To answer these questions, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study follows families from the birth of their child through age five. New, mostly unwed mothers were interviewed in-person at the hospital within forty-eight hours after giving birth.<sup>1</sup> Fathers were interviewed either at the hospital or elsewhere as soon as possible after the birth. Three follow-up interviews are conducted when the children are approximately twelve, thirty-six, and sixty months old, including in-home child assessments at thirty-six and sixty months. The national sample, taken from sixteen of the twenty U.S. cities, is representative of all non-marital births in the U.S. to parents residing in cities with populations over 200,000.<sup>2</sup> The data also are representative of non-marital births within each of the twenty sample cities. A comparison group of married parents is also being followed in each city.

*By gaining a more complete understanding about the lives of unmarried parents, community leaders and policymakers can design programs that more effectively meet the needs of new, unmarried parents and thereby strengthen fragile families.*

The study design has several benefits. First, gathering data at birth and tracking child development throughout infancy and early childhood allows differences that are present at birth (or shortly thereafter) to be distinguished from those that evolve over time. In addition, given that there is little existing research on unmarried fathers, this study provides new information about these fathers and allows us to develop a more complete understanding of unmarried parents' relationships and interactions. Finally, by following children as well as parents, we can relate changes in parental behavior and the family environment to fluctuations in the health and development of children.

Policy developments indicate that the time is right to expand our understanding of fragile families. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) requires welfare clients (the majority of whom are unmarried) to work and limits the total number of years they can receive welfare. The legislation, which is due for reauthorization in 2003, also strengthens child support enforcement and requires states to improve paternity establishment. These policy changes raise many issues, among them the affordability and quality of childcare and non-resident fathers' rights and responsibilities. Furthermore, since many of these reforms are being implemented at the local level, families in various parts of the country are experiencing very different policy environments as well as disparate labor market conditions.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is a major step toward identifying the individual and joint effects of these changes on some of the most vulnerable families in our country. Because families formed outside of marriage are disproportionately African-American and Hispanic, research on unmarried parents is essential to understanding the health and development of children in these populations. With the information provided by the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, policymakers and program directors can design programs that encourage—rather than undermine—the efforts of new parents to raise healthy children, maintain self-sufficiency, and make productive contributions to their communities.

This report summarizes what we have learned from our initial analysis of the baseline data on unmarried parents collected in sixteen cities from April 1998 through August 2000. The national sample consists of 2,659 unmarried couples. Three main findings stand out:

- *Unwed parents are committed to each other and to their children at the time of the birth.* Eighty-two percent of unmarried parents are romantically involved; 51 percent live together. Seventy-four percent of unmarried mothers say the chances that they will marry the baby's father are "fifty-fifty" or better. Four-fifths of unmarried fathers provide financial or other types of support during the pregnancy, and 83 percent of mothers plan to put the father's name on their child's birth certificate. The overwhelming majority of mothers want the father to be involved in raising their child.
- *Although they have high hopes for their families, most unmarried parents are poorly equipped to support themselves and their children.* Among those who reported their employment history, 85 percent of mothers and 98 percent of fathers worked at some time during the past year. However, two of ten fathers were out of work in the week prior to the interview. In addition, the human capital of both parents is low: 43 percent of mothers and 38 percent of fathers lack a high school degree, and only 20 percent of mothers and 22 percent of fathers have more than a high school degree. Human capital and earnings are likely to play critical roles in the success or failure of these parents in maintaining stable families. In fact, a majority of respondents felt that steady employment of both partners is "very important" to a successful marriage.
- *Most unmarried mothers are healthy and bear healthy children.* Sixty-three percent of mothers report they are in very good or excellent health. However, nearly one-quarter of mothers do not receive prenatal care in the first trimester, and 10 percent have babies that are born below normal weight. Ten percent of mothers drank alcohol, 6 percent used drugs and 23 percent smoked cigarettes at some time during the pregnancy, according to their self-reports.

Both parents are re-interviewed twelve, thirty-six, and sixty months after the birth to ask about their child's health and development as well as their parenting styles, childcare arrangements, relationships, access to and use of community resources, personal health, and economic wellbeing. Findings from the follow-up surveys will be described in future reports.

## I. PARENTS' CHARACTERISTICS AND CAPABILITIES

We begin by describing the characteristics of new unmarried parents in large U.S. cities to gain a better sense of their capabilities as well as their needs and constraints. We are particularly interested in their human capital – age, education, work experience, and health status – and their obligations to other children. These indicators can reveal a great deal about parents' ability to support themselves and their new babies.

Table 1 presents profiles of mothers and fathers at baseline.<sup>3</sup> As nearly all the mothers we approached in the hospitals agreed to participate in the study, and because we interviewed mothers in a representative sample of the birthing hospitals, we are confident that our sample is representative of the population of unmarried women who give birth in large U.S. cities.<sup>4</sup> We are less confident that our sample of unmarried fathers is representative, as we were able to interview only 76 percent of these men.<sup>5</sup> Compared to the average unmarried father, the men in our sample are more strongly attached to the mothers of their children than the men we were unable to interview, and they are likely to differ in other ways as well. Anticipating this problem, we asked all mothers some questions about the fathers of their children so that

we could compare fathers who participated in the study with those who did not. The information in Table 1 about fathers' age, education, work status, race/ethnicity, and drug and alcohol problems is based on mothers' reports; thus, it characterizes all unmarried fathers in the national sample. The rest of the information in Table 1 (immigration status, religion, number of children, and health status) is based on the self-reports of the 76 percent of unmarried fathers who were interviewed.

*Lack of education is a serious problem for unmarried parents. Forty-three percent of mothers lack a high school degree, and only twenty percent have even attended college.*

### Parents' Human Capital

The typical unmarried mother is in her early twenties. Twenty-seven percent of mothers are under twenty, and 18 percent are thirty and older. Five percent of mothers are under age eighteen, a figure lower than data from the National Center for Health Statistics, in which 12 percent of all unmarried births in the U.S. are to mothers under eighteen. (Martin, 1999)<sup>6</sup> The typical unmarried father is in his twenties. He is less likely than the mother to be a teenager and more likely to be thirty or older. On average, fathers are three years older than their child's mother. Recent reports in the popular press have raised concerns about the proportion of teenage mothers having children with much older men. To investigate this claim, we examined age differences between teen mothers in our sample (under age twenty) and their partners, and found that 76 percent of teen mothers have partners within four years of their own age, while only 7 percent of teen mothers have partners eight or more years older.

**Table 1. Unmarried Parents' Characteristics and Capabilities <sup>a</sup>**  
**Percentage (%)**

	<u>Mothers</u>	<u>Fathers</u>
<b>Age</b>		
Under 20	27	13
20-24	39	35
25-29	16	24
30 and older	18	28
<b>Average age difference</b>		2.94 years (5.38) <sup>b</sup>
<b>Education<sup>c</sup></b>		
Less than high school	43	38
High school only	36	40
Some college	18	19
College or higher	2	3
<b>Worked in past year<sup>d</sup></b>	85	98
<b>Father worked in last week<sup>e</sup></b>	-	80
<b>Very good or excellent health</b>	63	68
<b>Drugs or alcohol interfere with work or personal relationships</b>	4	6
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
White, non-Hispanic	17	15
Black, non-Hispanic	44	47
Hispanic	35	34
Other	4	4
<b>Immigrant</b>	12	13
<b>Religious affiliation</b>		
Protestant	49	47
Catholic	34	33
Other religion	5	8
No religion	12	12
<b>Have other children</b>	59	53
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	2,659	2,021

<sup>a</sup> The information about fathers' age, education, current work status, race/ethnicity, and drug and alcohol problems is based on mothers' reports. All other father information comes from the self-reports of the 76 percent of fathers who were interviewed.

<sup>b</sup> Standard deviation in parentheses.

<sup>c</sup> Eleven percent of mothers had missing information on the fathers' highest educational attainment.

<sup>d</sup> Approximately 10 percent of mothers had missing information on their own work history and 14 percent had missing information on the fathers' past work history.

<sup>e</sup> Twelve percent of mothers are missing fathers' current work status.

Lack of education is a serious problem for unmarried parents. Forty-three percent of mothers lack a high school degree, and only 20 percent have even attended college. Fathers are slightly more likely than mothers to have only a high school degree and about equally likely to have some college education.

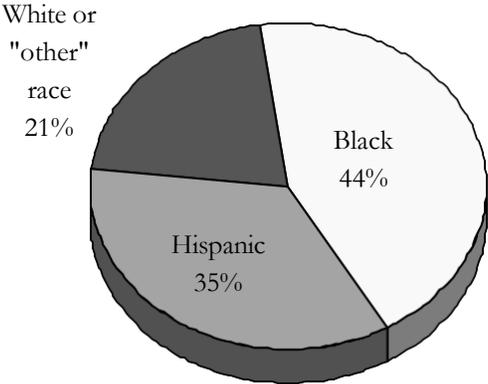
The baseline interviews were conducted in the context of a strong economy across the country — the national unemployment rate was low during the data collection period, dropping from 4.5 percent in 1998 to 4.0 percent in 2000 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001). Of those who reported their employment history, 85 percent of unmarried mothers and 98 percent of unmarried fathers worked at some time during the past year.<sup>7</sup> These figures, however, do not necessarily portray an accurate picture of fathers' employment stability. When looking at the number of fathers that worked in the week prior to the interview, we find that 80 percent of fathers were employed at that time.

**Parents' Individual Characteristics**

Over one-third of new unmarried mothers are Hispanic, 44 percent are non-Hispanic black, and 21 percent are non-Hispanic white or of "other" race/ethnicity.<sup>8</sup> Twelve percent of mothers and 13 percent of fathers are immigrants. Forty-nine percent of new mothers and 47 percent of new fathers are Protestant, 34 percent of mothers and 33 percent of fathers are Catholic, and 5 percent of new mothers and 8 percent of new

fathers belong to other religious groups. Twelve percent of both mothers and fathers have no religious affiliation. Fifty-nine percent of mothers and 53 percent of fathers have other children.

**Figure 1. Race/Ethnicity of Unmarried Mothers**



The majority of unmarried parents are in fairly good health. About two-thirds (63 percent of mothers and 68 percent of fathers) report that their health is "very good" or "excellent." The national averages for persons ages 25 to 44 reporting "very good" or "excellent" health are 68 percent of women and 73 percent of men (Benson and Marano, 1998). Because we interviewed the mothers shortly after the birth of their child, we might expect their self-assessed health status to be lower than otherwise.

On a less positive note, parents do not always engage in healthy behaviors. Four percent of mothers and 6 percent of fathers had a drug or alcohol problem that interfered with their work or personal relationships in the past year. As the data on drug and alcohol problems are based on mothers' self-reports, they are likely to be underestimates of the true proportions.

## II. RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN FRAGILE FAMILIES

The media often present negative stereotypes of unmarried parents, sometimes depicting babies as the products of casual sexual liaisons or portraying mothers as the victims of irresponsible fathers. For policymakers and program directors, getting the facts straight about the nature of parents' relationships is critical for designing effective programs and policies. If, for example, mothers and fathers are truly indifferent to one another, it makes sense to treat them separately. If, on the other hand, they are involved in marriage-like relationships, policies and programs need to treat them as couples. Otherwise, these policies and programs may be ineffective, or may even undermine parents' relationships.

### Mother-Father Relationships

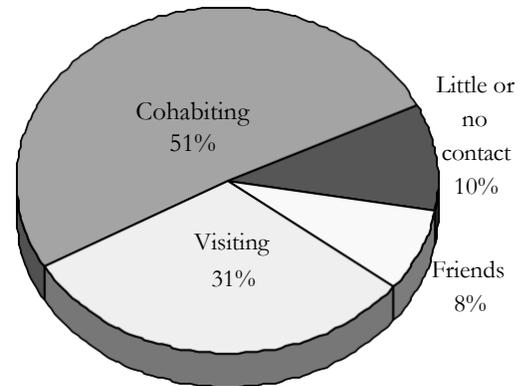
Table 2 presents information on the living arrangements, relationship expectations, attitudes about marriage, and sources of conflict between unmarried parents. We present information on three groups of unmarried mothers – all mothers in the sample, mothers for whom a father interview was not completed, and mothers for whom a father interview was completed — as well as information provided by the fathers we interviewed.

One of the most striking findings is the high rate of cohabitation among unmarried parents. One-half of unmarried mothers are living with the father of their child at the time of the child's birth, and another one-third are romantically involved with the father but living apart. Eight percent are "just friends," and 10 percent have little or no contact with the father or report the father as unknown. Mothers without a father interview (column 2) are much less likely to be cohabiting and much more likely to report little or no contact with the father than mothers with a father interview (column 3). The difference between columns two and three confirms our suspicion that the fathers who agreed to be interviewed are much more involved with the mothers than are the fathers who did not complete interviews.

The majority of unmarried parents have high hopes for the future of their relationships. Seventy-four percent of the unmarried mothers believe that their chances of marrying the father are 50 percent or better. Ninety percent of fathers say their chances of marriage are "50-50" or better. In addition, the majority of mothers and fathers believe marriage is beneficial for children. Two-thirds of mothers and three-quarters of fathers agree or strongly agree with the statement, "it is better for children if their parents are married." For unmarried couples in which both the mother and father were interviewed, the fathers are somewhat more positive than the mothers about marriage and its effects.

There is strong consensus among unmarried parents about what qualities contribute to a successful marriage. When asked to identify the qualities that

**Figure 2. Relationship Status of Unmarried Parents**



*The majority of unmarried parents have high hopes for the future of their relationships.*

**Table 2. Unmarried Parents' Relationships and Attitudes About Marriage  
Percentage (%)**

	<u>All Mothers</u>	<u>Mothers without Father Interview</u>	<u>Mothers with Father Interview</u>	<u>Fathers</u>
<b>Relationship status<sup>a</sup></b>				
Cohabiting	51	19	61	66
Not cohabiting -- romantic	31	29	31	25
Not romantic -- friends	8	19	5	7
Not romantic -- little or no contact	9	31	3	2
Father unknown	1	3	–	–
<b>Chances of marrying baby's father</b>				
"50-50" or greater	74	36	85	90
<b>Marriage is better for kids</b>				
Agree	43	43	44	45
Strongly agree	21	19	22	32
<b>Successful marriage (Percentage who said the following are very important)</b>				
Same friends	13	12	14	15
Husband has steady job	91	92	91	93
Wife has steady job	71	70	71	48
Same race/ethnicity	8	9	8	11
Good sex	28	30	28	39
Same religion	29	36	27	24
Emotional maturity	88	85	89	83
<b>Often a source of conflict (Percentage reporting the following)</b>				
Money	19	18	19	13
Spending time together	19	18	20	18
Sex	10	11	10	10
The pregnancy	9	19	7	7
Drinking or drug use	7	9	6	6
Being faithful	11	18	10	9
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>2,659</b>	<b>638</b>	<b>2,021</b>	<b>2,021</b>

<sup>a</sup> One percent of fathers' reports disagreed with mothers' reports with regard to their marital status.

are important for a successful marriage, over 91 percent of mothers rate *husband having a steady job* as very important. Eighty-eight percent rate *emotional maturity* as key for a successful marriage. In addition, 71 percent rate *wife having a steady job* as very important. The fathers express values similar to those of the mothers, although they rate *husband having a steady job* slightly higher and *emotional maturity* and *wife having a steady job* somewhat lower than mothers do. They also rate *good sex* higher (39 percent of fathers as compared with 28 percent of mothers). In addition, when asked about the level and sources of disagreement in their relationship during the past month, mothers identify *spending time together*, *money*, and *being faithful* as the major points of contention. Comparing columns 3 and 4, unmarried fathers report less conflict than mothers about *money*. With regard to all other areas, fathers' reports of conflict are very similar to those of the mothers. Both mothers and fathers agree that the major source of conflict is *spending time together*.

In summary, unmarried parents have high hopes about their future together. The majority view marriage as a positive institution that benefits their children. Steady employment and emotional maturity are widely regarded by both the new mothers and fathers as essential prerequisites for good marital relations.

## Paternal Involvement

Questions about the paternal role – how and to what extent a father is and should be involved in his child's life – are at the core of many moral, social, and economic debates. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study investigates several indicators of paternal involvement within fragile families, including whether the parents want the father's name on the birth certificate, whether the child will take the father's surname, whether the father helped the mother during her pregnancy, and whether the mother wants the father to be involved in raising the child. For each of these indicators, both mothers and fathers are highly intent on, and interested in, strong paternal involvement.<sup>9</sup>

The figures in Table 3 will surprise those who believe that unmarried fathers are indifferent to their children. Eighty-one percent of mothers and 92 percent of fathers indicate that the father contributed financially during the pregnancy, and 79 percent of mothers and 90 percent of fathers report that he contributed in other ways (such as provide transportation) during the pregnancy. In addition, 83 percent of mothers and 94 percent of fathers indicate that the father's name will be on the birth certificate and 78 percent of mothers and 89 percent of fathers report that their child will take the father's surname. Again, fathers' responses to these questions need to be viewed in light of the fact that the unmarried men who agreed to participate in our study are also more likely to be more committed to the mothers and children than the average unmarried father. Even so, the mothers' responses to these questions, which do not reflect a select group of unmarried mothers, indicate very high levels of intended father involvement.

*Steady employment and emotional maturity are widely regarded by both the new mothers and fathers as essential prerequisites for good marital relations.*

**Table 3. Indicators of Unmarried Father's Involvement with Child**  
**Percentage (%)**

	<u>All Mothers</u>	<u>Mothers without Father Interview</u>	<u>Mothers with Father Interview</u>	<u>Fathers</u>
<b>Father contributed during pregnancy</b>				
Gave money or bought items for baby	81	50	89	92
Helped in other ways	79	47	88	90
<b>Father's name on birth certificate</b>	83	50	92	94
<b>Child will have father's surname</b>	78	48	87	89
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	2,659	638	2,021	2,021

**Table 4. Unmarried Parents' Attitudes About Fatherhood**  
**Percentage (%) reporting the following**

	<u>All Mothers</u>	<u>Mothers without Father Interview</u>	<u>Mothers with Father Interview</u>	<u>Fathers</u>
<b><u>Defining a "Good Father"</u></b>				
<b>Most Important</b>				
Provide financial support	11	13	10	13
Teach child about life	8	7	8	18
Provide direct care	6	6	6	13
Show love and affection	69	68	69	50
Provide protection	2	3	2	3
Serve as authority figure	5	4	5	3
<b>Least Important</b>				
Provide financial support	24	24	24	19
Teach child about life	8	8	8	10
Provide direct care	28	31	28	15
Show love and affection	1	1	1	1
Provide protection	7	7	7	8
Serve as authority figure	32	29	33	47
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	2,659	638	2,021	2,021

The Fragile Families Study seeks to generate a greater understanding of new parents' perceptions of what being a father means, as well as the images of fatherhood that shape their views. The results presented in Table 4 highlight parents' ideas about the characteristics of a good father. When asked to rank the qualities of a good father, the majority of unmarried mothers (69 percent) identify *showing love and affection to the child* as the most important quality. Fifty percent of unmarried fathers rank this quality first as well. *Serving as an authority figure* and *providing direct care* are ranked by mothers as the least important qualities of a good father, whereas fathers chose *serving as authority figure* and *providing financial support* as the least important.

### III. PARENTS' ACCESS TO PUBLIC AND PRIVATE RESOURCES

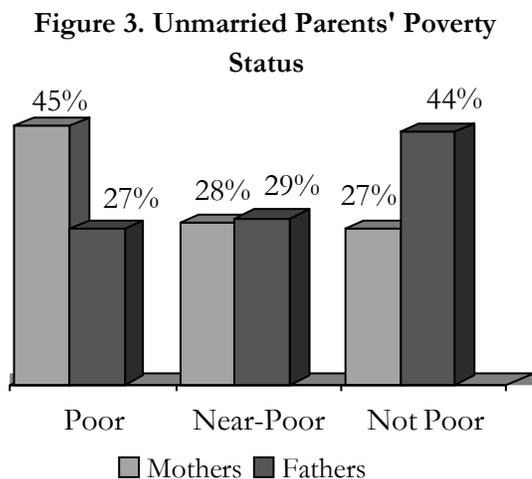
The next section of this report focuses on parents' access to and use of public and private resources. This information is important in determining the needs of unmarried parents, as well as their potential and actual sources of support, and for ensuring that policies and programs complement rather than compromise existing family networks and community networks.

Unmarried parents rely on multiple sources of income and in-kind support to help raise their children. According to Table 1, 15 percent of all new unwed mothers did not work in the twelve months before their babies are born. Furthermore, according to Table 5, among those who report earnings, 62 percent earn less than \$10,000 per year. Fathers are more likely than mothers to have earned at least \$10,000 during the year before their baby's birth.

Household income is substantially higher than earnings. While 21 percent of mothers and 6 percent of fathers report a household income of less than \$5,000 in the past 12 months, 43 percent of mothers and 61 percent of fathers report household income of \$20,000 or higher. The substantial difference between the earnings and household income figures for mothers in part reflects the fact that over one-half of new unmarried mothers are cohabiting or living with another adult. Even so, the majority of new parents live either below or just barely above the poverty line. Forty-five percent of unmarried mothers in large U.S. cities are poor (according to the official poverty line based on total household income) and another 28 percent are "near poor," with incomes below 200 percent of poverty. (It is important to note that the majority of new parents have other children to support, which is taken into account by the poverty threshold.) Not all unmarried parents are in such dire straits, however: 27 percent of mothers and 44 percent of fathers enjoy more comfortable living standards.

The extended family is an important source of support for new, unmarried parents. Nearly all unmar-

*Over four-fifths of unmarried fathers are involved in helping their baby's mother during pregnancy, either financially or in other ways (such as transportation).*



**Table 5. Parents' Access to Resources: Personal, Household and Kin  
Percentage (%)**

	<u>Mothers</u>	<u>Fathers</u>
<b>Total earnings in past 12 months<sup>a</sup></b> <b>(% of those who reported any earnings</b> <b>from regular jobs)</b>		
Under \$5,000	44	14
\$5,000 - \$9,999	18	16
\$10,000 - \$19,999	26	37
\$20,000 and over	12	33
<b>Total household income in past 12 months</b> <b>(% of those who reported income)</b>		
Under \$5,000	21	6
\$5,000 - \$19,999	36	33
\$20,000 - \$49,999	33	42
\$50,000 and over	10	19
<b>Poverty status</b>		
Less than 50% of poverty line	27	10
50 - 99% of line	18	17
100 - 199% of line	28	29
200 - 299% of line	14	18
300% or more	13	26
<b>Kin resources</b> <b>(% receiving during mother's pregnancy)</b>		
Financial assistance	53	26
A place to live	43	29
Childcare assistance	26	—
<b>Consider family a source of</b> <b>potential help</b>	96	93
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	2,659	2,021

<sup>a</sup> There were a substantial number of missing values on both the earnings and household income measures: 29 percent of mothers reported no earnings last year; 8 percent of mothers reported earnings but did not report the amount; 3 percent of fathers reported no earnings last year; only 2 percent of those reporting earnings did not report the amount; 25 percent of mothers and 21 percent of fathers did not report their total household income. The majority of the non-respondents reported that they "do not know" the total income of the household.

ried parents have someone in their family to whom they could turn for help with financial problems, housing, or childcare. Fifty-three percent of mothers received financial support from relatives during the pregnancy, 43 percent received a place to live, and 26 percent received free childcare from kin. Although mothers are more likely than fathers to rely on relatives, a non-trivial proportion of fathers also received financial support (26 percent) or a place to live (29 percent) during the past year.

Community support can also play an important role in the lives of new parents. As shown in Table 6, 58 percent of new mothers and 49 percent of new fathers have lived in their neighborhoods for two years or less. In general, the longer people live in a neighborhood, the more likely it is that they know their neighbors and will have them available as a source of support. Additionally, the quality of the neighborhood can affect the degree of interaction, and thus the support, between neighbors: 85 percent of mothers and 84 percent of fathers characterize their neighborhoods as “safe” or “very safe.”

Another source of community support is organized religion. Recently, attention has been focused on community, faith-based initiatives as potential mechanisms to serve and help low-income families. In order to assess the potential impact of faith-based programs, it is important to examine the ties between unmarried parents and organized religion in their communities. As noted in Table 1, 88 percent of both mothers and fathers have a religious preference. However, only 16 percent of unmarried mothers and 13 percent of unmarried fathers attend religious services at least once a week.

*The majority of parents believe their neighborhoods are “safe” or “very safe.” About one-half of all parents have lived in their neighborhoods for two years or less.*

A substantial proportion of unmarried mothers rely on government support. During the year before their babies were born, 43 percent received welfare or food stamps, 21 percent received some type of housing subsidy, and 9 percent received other government transfers (unemployment insurance, worker’s compensation, disability, or social security). The proportion receiving government assistance is even higher for women who have another child—53 percent of these mothers received welfare or food stamps (figure not shown in table). As expected, unmarried fathers are much less likely than unmarried mothers to receive government support in the form of welfare, food stamps, or housing subsidies. However, unmarried fathers are as likely as unmarried mothers to receive other forms of government transfers.

Recent changes in welfare policy have shifted much of the responsibility for assistance from the federal government to individual states, which differ in terms of their eligibility restrictions and work requirements for welfare recipients. Given these changes, it is important that welfare recipients and potential recipients understand the new policies in their respective states. We find that many unmarried parents are uninformed about the new welfare rules and regulations. Sixty percent of the mothers report that they do not know how many years a woman can receive welfare, and 63 percent do not know how long they can receive benefits before having to work. The majority of fathers lack information about welfare rules regarding eligibility and work requirements. It is diffi-

**Table 6. Parents' Access to Resources: Neighborhood and Government  
Percentage (%)**

	<u>Mothers</u>	<u>Fathers</u>
<b>Neighborhood resources</b>		
Lived in neighborhood two years or less	58	49
Neighborhood safe or very safe	85	84
Weekly religious attendance	16	13
<b>Government transfers and services in last year</b>		
Welfare, food stamps or public assistance	43	8
Housing subsidy or live in public housing	21	12
Other government transfers	9	10
<b>Awareness of welfare rules (% lacking information)</b>		
Years eligible for welfare assistance	60	72
Work requirements for welfare recipients	63	72
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	2,659	2,021

cult to imagine that policies intended to encourage parental responsibility and create disincentives for dependence can be effective if potential recipients are poorly informed. In contrast, unmarried parents are much better informed about establishing paternity (figures not shown). When asked whether a blood test can prove whether a man is the father of a child, 97 percent of mothers answer affirmatively.

#### IV. HOW ARE THE CHILDREN DOING?

Drinking, smoking and drug use during pregnancy can pose substantial health risks for newborns. Ten percent of mothers report drinking alcohol during their pregnancy, and 6 percent report using drugs.<sup>10</sup> Twenty-three percent of mothers report smoking cigarettes during their pregnancy, a behavior strongly associated with low birth weight and other poor birth outcomes.

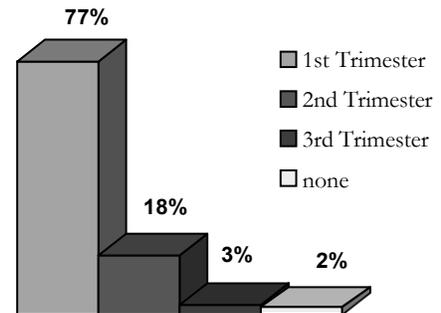
Low birth weight is an important indicator of children's current and future health status. Ten percent of new unmarried mothers have babies weighing less than 2,500 grams at birth. This figure is higher than the 1998 national average of 7.6 percent, most likely because the latter includes both marital and non-marital births (National Center for Health Statistics, 2000a).

Fully 95 percent of unmarried mothers received prenatal care by the end of the second trimester. Seventy-seven percent of mothers initiated prenatal care in the first trimester.<sup>11</sup> The data on medical insurance coverage during pregnancy show that Medicaid is an important resource for unmarried mothers, with 71 percent of unmarried mothers covered by Medicaid. However, mothers covered by Medicaid are less likely to receive prenatal care during the first trimester than mothers with private health insurance (75 percent versus 90 percent, figures not shown).

The length of maternity stay in the hospital is another issue that has attracted much public attention. Hospital stays for women who deliver babies have become longer in recent years after an outcry against the practice of "drive-through deliveries." Over eighty percent of mothers said they were ready to go home and did not want to stay in the hospital any longer at the time they were interviewed. This response may reflect the fact that mothers are benefiting from the federal "Newborns and Mothers Health Protection Act of 1996." Implemented in January 1998, this law prohibits all health insurance providers who cover hospital stays for childbirth from restricting hospital stays for mothers and newborns to less than forty-eight hours.

Finally, as a way of measuring the resources that will be available to the child in the near term, we asked where and with whom the baby was going to live. Going home meant very different things for different babies: 49 percent were expected to live with their mother and father, 30 percent with the mother alone, and 21 percent with the mother and another adult.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 4. Initiation of Prenatal Care**



**Table 7. Children's Health and Wellbeing  
Percentage (%)**

---



---

<u>ALL MOTHERS</u>	
<b>Substance use during pregnancy</b>	
Any alcohol use	10
Any drug use	6
Any cigarette use	23
<b>Low birth weight baby</b>	10
<b>Initiation of prenatal care</b>	
1st trimester	77
2nd trimester	18
3rd trimester	3
No prenatal care	2
<b>Health insurance</b>	
Medicaid	71
Private	23
Other	6
<b>Enough time in hospital</b>	81
<b>Baby's living arrangements</b>	
Mother and father	49
Mother only	30
Mother and others	21
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	2,659

---



---

## CONCLUSION

From a public policy perspective, these baseline findings are of tremendous import, not only because they debunk popular perceptions but also because they provide a foundation for new policy initiatives. It is clear that at the time of their children's birth, the majority of unmarried mothers and fathers have high hopes for the future of their relationships. When looking to strengthen fragile families, policy-makers can target this "magic moment" when the likelihood of family formation is highest. Furthermore, given that mothers *want* the fathers' assistance in raising their children, and given that fathers *want* to be a part of their children's lives, policies and programs should facilitate, build upon, and maintain the commitment that unmarried fathers articulate at the time of their children's births. It is also important to note that a small but substantial portion of mothers do not want their baby's fathers involved.

While these parents do have high hopes for the future of their new families, the majority of parents also face many challenges. A substantial number of unmarried parents live at or below the poverty line and have low educational attainment. In addition, most unmarried parents indicate they believe steady employment is very important for a successful marriage. Through improving parents' human capital, policy-makers would help facilitate family formation. The major challenge for policymakers is to find ways to support new parents as they work to raise their children under a variety of circumstances.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the Institutional Review Boards, doctors and nursing staff at all the hospitals in which we collected data, as well as all others who made this study possible in various cities throughout the country. We are also grateful to Sally Waltman for project management, Jean Knab and Ofira Schwartz for data management, and Jennifer Borkowski and Elizabeth Turley for research assistance.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Births in this sample include those to English- or Spanish-speaking parents only. In addition, mothers were only eligible if they gave birth in a hospital and if the father was living.

<sup>2</sup> The national sample was derived from a stratified random sample of all U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. Sixteen cities were chosen randomly within each of nine strata representing different policy environments and labor markets. These cities are: Austin, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Corpus Christi, Indianapolis, Jacksonville, Nashville, New York, Norfolk, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Richmond, San Antonio, San Jose, and Toledo. Data also were collected in four additional cities that are of special interest to specific foundations and local funders: Detroit, Milwaukee, Newark and Oakland, but are not included in this national report. See Reichman et al. (2001) for a description of the research and sampling design.

<sup>3</sup> Sample size varies by question. In general, few values on individual questions were missing. Variables with substantial numbers of missing values are noted in the tables.

<sup>4</sup> It was necessary to sample hospitals within some cities so as to be representative of non-marital births in that city. In Austin, Richmond, and Corpus new parents were interviewed in all the birthing hospitals located within city boundaries. Most of the remaining cities had one or more small hospitals with few births, and an exclusion criterion was implemented for cost/efficiency reasons. Two exceptions were New York City and Chicago, each of which had dozens of birthing hospitals and, thus, it was necessary to sample from among them. The study was conducted in 61 hospitals in the 16 cities comprising the national sample. For more information on the research design, see Reichman et al. (2001)

<sup>5</sup> The response rates for fathers in the national sample is 76 percent. The response rate for fathers in the full, 20-city sample is 75 percent.

<sup>6</sup> Due to restrictions in many of the hospitals, we were not able to interview all mothers under age eighteen, who were otherwise eligible, without permission from the baby's maternal grandparents. Young teen parents are included in hospitals that requested they be interviewed.

<sup>7</sup> For a similar demographic group, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2000) reports that 67 percent of mothers in female-headed families with children and 89 percent of fathers in male-headed families with children under six years worked in 1999.

<sup>8</sup> 1997 figures from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS, 2000b) indicate that 32 percent of children born to unmarried women in the U.S. (in cities with 100,000 or more people) were born to Hispanic mothers, 43 percent to non-Hispanic black mothers, and 21 percent to non-Hispanic white mothers.

<sup>9</sup> Putting the father's name on the birth certificate is not the same as establishing legal paternity. However, we view this variable as an indicator of parents' intentions to establish paternity.

<sup>10</sup> These numbers probably underestimate the use of drugs and alcohol since mothers may be reluctant to report behaviors that reflect negatively on their mothering skills.

<sup>11</sup> This figure is close to the 77 percent national average for all pregnancies among never-married women (Abma et al., 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Note that very few parents who are not currently cohabiting expect to move in together when their baby comes home. This suggests that most parents who intend to live together have already taken this step by the time their child is born.

## REFERENCES

- Abma, J., Chandra, A., Mosher, W., Peterson, L., and Piccinino, L. (1997). "Fertility, Family Planning, and Women's Health: New Data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth." *Vital and Health Statistics, Series 23* (No. 19) p. 93. National Center for Health Statistics. [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/sr23\\_19.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/sr23_19.pdf). (5/5/2000)
- Benson, V. and Marano, M. (1998) "Current Estimates from the National Health Interview Survey, 1995." *Vital and Health Statistics, Series 10* (No. 199) p. 107. National Center for Health Statistics. [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/10\\_199\\_1.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/10_199_1.pdf). (1/5/2001)
- Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. (2000). "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey." <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.t04.htm>. (1/5/2001)
- Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. (2001). "Employment Status, Table One." *Annual Average Tables from the January 2001 Issue of Employment and Earnings*. <http://www.bls.gov/cpsaatab.htm#empstat>. (8/6/2001)
- Martin, J. (1999). "Births and Deaths: Preliminary Data for 1998." *National Vital Statistics Report Supplements*, Vol. 47, No. 25. National Center for Health Statistics. Table C. [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvs47\\_25.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvs47_25.pdf) (1/5/2001)
- National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2000a). "FASTATS – Birthweight and Gestation." <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/birthwt.htm>. (12/21/2000)
- National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2000b). "Vital Statistics of the United States, 1997, Part I, Natality." First Release of Files. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/t1x2197.pdf>. (7/31/2000)
- Reichman, N., Teitler, J., Garfinkel, I., and McLanahan, S. (2001). "The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study: Sample and Design." *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 23, Nos. 4/5, 303-326.

## RESEARCH TEAM

Sara McLanahan (Princeton University) and Irwin Garfinkel (Columbia University) are the Principal Investigators and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn (Columbia) and Marta Tienda (Princeton) are co-investigators. Other investigators include Nancy Reichman (Columbia), Julien Teitler (Columbia), and a network of (primarily) minority scholars at seven different universities and research institutes. Network scholars include Waldo Johnson (University of Chicago), Yolanda Padilla (University of Texas at Austin), Lauren Rich (University of Pennsylvania), Mark Turner (Johns Hopkins University), Melvin Wilson (University of Virginia), and Maureen Waller (Cornell University). The research team is multi-disciplinary (economics, sociology, psychology, social work) and its members have expertise in both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Advisory Board members include Greg Duncan, Frank Furstenberg, Donald Hernandez, Sandra Hofferth, and William Julius Wilson. The fieldwork was conducted by National Opinion Research Center and Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

## FUNDERS

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is supported by the following grants: 5R01-HD-35301 and 5P30-HD-32030 from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the Office of Population Research, Princeton University. The study is also supported by: California HealthCare Foundation, The Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society at the University of Pennsylvania, Commonwealth Fund, Ford Foundation, Foundation for Child Development, Fund for New Jersey, Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Hogg Foundation, Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, Kronkosky Charitable Foundation, Leon Lowenstein Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, A.L. Mailman Family Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, National Science Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Public Policy Institute of California, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, St. David's Hospital Foundation, St. Vincent Hospital and Health Services, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (ASPE and ACF).

*For more information on the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, please visit the website at:*

*<http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies>*

*The Center for Research on Child Wellbeing  
Wallace Hall  
Princeton University  
Princeton, NJ 08544  
(609) 258-5894  
<http://crcw.princeton.edu>*

*The Social Indicators Survey Center  
Columbia University School of Social Work  
622 West 113 Street  
New York, NY 10025  
(212) 854-9046  
<http://www.siscenter.org>*



# THE FRAGILE FAMILIES AND CHILD WELLBEING STUDY