

# Fragile Families Research Brief

Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing  
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## DISPELLING MYTHS ABOUT UNMARRIED FATHERS

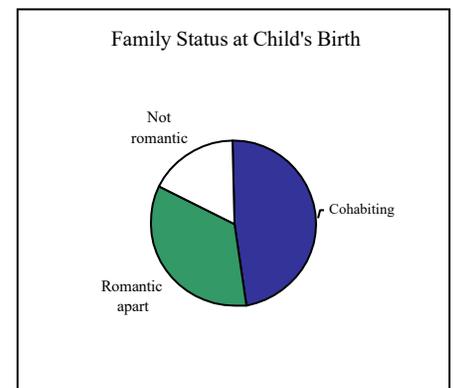
The rise in single parenthood in the U.S. is well known. Today, nearly a third of all children born in the United States are born to unmarried parents; the proportions are even higher among poor and minority populations—40 percent among Hispanics and 70 percent among African Americans.<sup>1</sup> Yet, we know very little about these families, particularly about the fathers. Consequently, much of what we read in the newspapers or hear on television about unwed parents is based on anecdotal rather than scientific evidence. This policy brief is intended to dispel three common myths about unwed fathers and their children. We refer to unmarried parents and their children as “fragile families” to underscore that they are families and that they are at greater risk of breaking up and living in poverty than more traditional families.

### MYTH #1: UNMARRIED BIRTHS ARE THE PRODUCT OF CASUAL RELATIONSHIPS.

Many people believe that unwed births occur to couples who engage in casual sex and who don't know or care about one another. The data from the Fragile Families study do not support this myth. At the time their child is born, 82 percent of unmarried mothers and fathers are romantically involved, 44 percent are living together, and over 70 percent of mothers say their chances of marrying the

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study was developed to provide information about unmarried parents and their children. New mothers are interviewed in the hospital within 48 hours of their child's birth, and fathers are interviewed either in the hospital or elsewhere as soon as possible after the birth. The study will follow these parents and their children for at least four years to study the relationships in these families and to see what factors (including government policy) may push them closer together or pull them apart. Data are being collected in twenty cities with populations over 200,000. The data are representative of nonmarital births in each city, and the full sample will be representative of all nonmarital births in large cities in the U.S. Currently, we have data from the first seven cities in the study—Austin, Baltimore, Detroit, Newark, Oakland, Philadelphia and Richmond.

baby's father are “50-50” or greater. Even among couples who are *not* romantically involved at the time of birth, about half of the mothers say they are friends with the father. Further, most parents favor marriage, as two-thirds of mothers and three-fourths of fathers agreed with the statement, “it is better for children if their parents are married.”<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup>Ventura, S.J., Martin, J.A., Curtin, S.C., Mathews, T.J. *Report of Final Natality Statistics, 1996*. Monthly Vital Statistics Report, Volume 46, No 11, supplement. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 1997.

<sup>2</sup>The 71 percent of fathers who were interviewed in the study are, on average, more invested in their families than their counterparts who were not interviewed. Thus, this figure is likely higher than among all fathers.

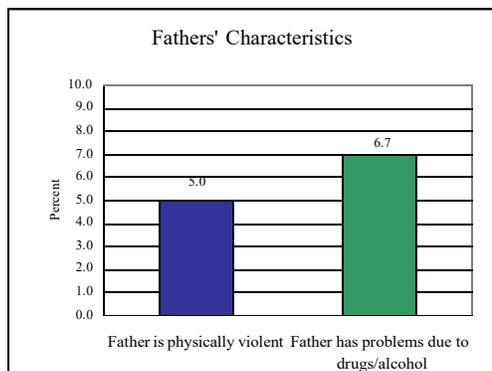
For additional information about the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, please visit our website at <http://opr.princeton.edu/crcw/ff>, email us at [crcw@opr.princeton.edu](mailto:crcw@opr.princeton.edu), or phone us at (609) 258-5894.

## MYTH #2: UNMARRIED FATHERS DON'T CARE ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN.

Some analysts have argued that men who father children outside of marriage do so in order to gain status and impress their peers and that they have minimal attachment to their children. Our findings do not support this view. Eighty-one percent of the mothers in the survey indicated that the father provided financial help during the pregnancy, and all fathers interviewed (99.8 percent) report that they *want* to be involved in raising their children in the coming years. Perhaps the best indicator of a father's intentions toward his child is whether or not he comes to the hospital to see the baby. Three-fourths of mothers reported that the father came to visit her and the baby in the hospital; the proportion was higher for couples who were living together (91 percent) and much lower for couples who were not romantically involved (37 percent).

## MYTH #3: UNMARRIED FATHERS ARE DANGEROUS, AND MOTHERS DON'T WANT THEM AROUND.

Some advocates for single mothers have argued that non-resident fathers, including unmarried fathers, are violent and potentially dangerous to the mother and child. To try and determine what proportion of unwed fathers fall into this group, we asked the mothers whether the father was physically violent and whether he had problems keeping a job or getting along with family and friends because of drug or alcohol use. Five percent of



mothers reported that the father “often” or “sometimes” hit or slapped her when angry, and seven percent said that the father had problems because of alcohol or drug use. While such outcomes are very serious for the minority of mothers who report them (and these negative behaviors are likely underreported in surveys), this group of troubled fathers represents a small fraction of all unmarried fathers. Overall, 93 percent of unmarried mothers report that they want the father to be involved in raising their child. While the proportion is lower among mothers who are not romantically involved with the father (who are also more likely to report problems with physical violence or substance use), still, two-thirds of these mothers indicate that they want their child's father to be involved.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Taken together, these data have important implications for public policy and particularly for the design of fatherhood programs. The results suggest that fatherhood programs can make a difference *if* they are targeted on the right men and *if* they are timed correctly. Practitioners who run fatherhood programs say that fathers' level of motivation has an important effect on whether the program will “work” or not. New fathers who are romantically involved with the mother are likely to be highly motivated and to take advantage of the services that fatherhood programs may provide. Thus, fatherhood programs should start at the hospitals, provide a range of services, and view their clients as members of a family—not only as individuals. The birth of the baby appears to present a “magic moment” for unmarried fathers and their families, and programs should endeavor to take advantage of this important time for new parents.

**For additional information about the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, please visit our website at <http://opr.princeton.edu/crw/ff>, email us at [crw@opr.princeton.edu](mailto:crw@opr.princeton.edu), or phone us at (609) 258-5894.**