



FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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Union Formation and Dissolution in Fragile Families

Background

Dramatic declines in marriage, increases in divorce, and increases in nonmarital fertility have occurred over the past four decades such that today only about half of all children grow up with both of their biological parents. These changes in family formation are of concern, given that stable marriages have been linked to a range of positive outcomes for both adults and children. Accordingly, policy makers have endeavored to reduce family instability and/or ameliorate its negative consequences for children. The 1996 welfare reform legislation contained provisions designed to increase two-parent families, and the Bush administration's 2002 proposal for welfare reauthorization included more than one billion dollars over five years (\$300 million per year) for programs to promote "healthy marriages."

In order to understand the possible role for marriage among low-income couples, it is critical to understand the relationships between unmarried parents and the factors that affect relationship stability over time. This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study [see box, back cover] to examine union formation and dissolution among unmarried parents subsequent to a nonmarital birth, with an emphasis on the factors that increase marriage. The following questions are addressed:

- What happens to unmarried parents' relationships after the birth of their child? What fraction of parents gets married? What fraction breaks up?
- What factors are associated with moving 'up' the relationship spectrum?

Table 1: Relationship Status of Unmarried Parents

Time of Birth	12 Months after Birth of Child					Number of Cases (n)
	Married	Cohabiting	Visiting	Friends	Not in Relationship	
Cohabiting	14.6	59.6	4.6	10.9	10.4	1,580
Visiting	5.3	32.2	14.0	25.6	23.0	1,137
Friends	1.2	9.2	3.5	44.1	42.2	261
Not in Relationship	1.7	6.3	4.3	22.9	64.8	301
Number of Cases (n)	298	1,351	253	647	730	3,279

Note: Cohabitation at 12 months is defined as living together "all or most of the time" or "some of the time;" time of birth is a dichotomy (yes/no) for whether parents are living together.

- How important are economic capabilities? How important is relationship quality?
- Are changes in policies likely to affect the overall marriage rate among unmarried parents?

Relationship Stability and Change

Although most unmarried parents say shortly after their baby's birth that they plan to marry the other biological parent, only nine percent actually do so by the time their child is one year old. Another 49 percent of parents continue to be romantically involved though not married, and fully 42 percent of parents are no longer in any type of romantic relationship, up from 20 percent at birth. Table 1 shows parents' relationship status approximately one year after their baby's birth by relationship status at the time of the child's birth (i.e. the percentages shown are of the row totals). Cohabiting unions are much more stable over time than other types of unions, including those in which the parents are romantically involved but living apart (we refer to these as 'visiting' couples).

Table 2: Simulated Proportions of Couples Married One Year after a Nonmarital Birth

Baseline Prediction	10%
<u>Percentage-Point Change</u>	
Improve Relationship Quality	+3
Increase Wages 25%	+1
Increase Fathers' Employment	+1
Increase all 3 Above	+5

Apparently, the decision to cohabit by the time the child is born is indicative of a certain level of commitment among parents -- to each other and/or to raising their child together. Overall, three-fourths of parents who were cohabiting at the time their child was born are still in a co-residential union one-year later; 15 percent have gotten married; and 60 percent are still cohabiting. In contrast, living separately and being romantically involved appears to be a very unstable status: only 14 percent of 'visiting' parents are still in this status one year after their child's birth. Forty percent of visitors have moved closer together ; 32 percent are cohabiting; and 5 percent have gotten married-while nearly half have broken up. The vast majority of couples who were not romantically involved at the time of their child's birth remain uninvolved one year after the birth. Somewhat surprisingly, however, 14 percent of mothers who said they were "just friends" with the father at the time of the birth, and about one third of mothers who said they "hardly ever" or "never" talked to the father, report being closer at the follow-up interview.

What Matters for Marriage?

What can we learn from the Fragile Families data about the individual and couple characteristics that seem to promote marriage? With respect to public policy, we are most interested in variables that can potentially be altered by some type of intervention program. Economic theory and evidence from past interventions suggest that improving parents' human capital may increase the stability of their relationships, and current policy efforts to encourage marriage are largely focused on strengthening couple relationships (through education or skills development). Therefore, we focus on the extent to which these two factors (parents' earnings capacity and relationship quality) affect their relationships following a nonmarital birth.

Multivariate regression analyses reveal that, with respect to parents' earnings-related variables, neither mothers' employment nor their predicted wages have any effect on union formation or stability.¹ By contrast, men's employment is positively associated with both cohabitation and marriage. Also, men's wages are important for marriage: an increase of one dollar per hour in wages increases the odds of moving into marriage by five percent.² Women's education encourages union formation and

stability. Men's education also has a positive effect on marriage, but the effect is no longer statistically significant once earnings and employment status are taken into account.

With respect to parents' relationship quality, fathers' physical violence is a significant deterrent to couples' romantic involvement; if the mother reports that the father "sometimes" or "often" hits her, the odds of the couple staying together are much lower. Men's violence has no significant effect on marriage, however. Fathers' reports of high conflict are negatively associated with staying together and moving in together. Mothers' reports of conflict, however, are not significantly related to any of the relationship outcomes. Both mothers' and fathers' reports of whether or not the other parent provides emotional support are positively (and significantly) associated with relationship stability and marriage. These effects are net of the couple's initial relationship status, indicating that living arrangements are not a direct proxy for the quality of interaction between the couple. Finally, mothers appear to be particularly reticent to move in (or stay) with a man who has a substance abuse problem. Overall, the evidence indicates that 'better' relationships promote union stability or moving 'up' the relationship spectrum, while negative attributes increase the chance that couples will break up after their baby's birth.

Could Policy Make a Difference in Marriage?

Beyond knowing the individual-level effects of parents' economic and relationship characteristics on the likelihood that they will marry, it is also important to know whether marriage would be notably altered at the population level if a policy intervention could in fact change parents' attributes (a non-trivial assumption). To evaluate this question, we conducted simulations to predict the proportion of unmarried parents that would be married under various conditions.

As shown in Table 2, if parents' relationships could be improved such that both parents reported the highest level of supportiveness from the other parent, the estimated proportion of couples who married within one year of a nonmarital birth would increase from 10 percent to 13 percent. Raising both parents' average hourly wage rate by 25 percent would yield a one percentage-point increase in marriage. The same one-point increase would be observed if all fathers were employed at the time of their baby's birth. If all three factors (relationship quality, wage rates, and fathers' employment) were changed simultaneously, the proportion of parents who got married by the time their child was a year old would rise by five percentage points, from 10 percent to 15 percent.

This simulation exercise demonstrates that the magnitude of the effects described above is actually quite small when considered at the macro level. Even large-scale changes in couples'

¹Alternative models using actual instead of predicted wages showed that women's actual wages promote parents relationships, while men's actual wages have no such effect.

²There is some evidence that men's earnings potential may also affect union formation indirectly, via better-quality relationships

earnings and quality of relationship by policy standards are likely to yield relatively small changes in the proportion of unmarried parents who get married. Further, this simulation assumes that the effects of parents' characteristics on marriage would be the same for parents who didn't marry as we have observed for those who did; this 'unobserved heterogeneity' may upwardly bias the estimates we present here.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

These results provide information relevant to recent policy proposals that seek to promote healthy marriages by increasing parents' human capital and/or stressing the value of marriage and improving parents' communication and relationship skills. Descriptive data from the Fragile Families baseline survey make clear that most unmarried parents need no convincing that marriage is desirable; they want to and plan to marry. Programs aimed at convincing them that marriage is desirable are unlikely to be effective since they appear already convinced. Yet, few couples

are married within a year of a nonmarital birth. The issue seems to be whether the conditions they set for marriage are met.

Parents' earnings capacity and their relationship quality have notable but small-effects on parents' relationship trajectories following a nonmarital birth. This finding suggests that policies that either improve the economic situation and/or the emotional quality of unmarried parents' relationships could encourage the maintenance of romantic or cohabitational unions and the movement to marriage, at least to a modest degree. Yet, we cannot be sure that these observed effects are causal. Experiments with random assignment to services intended to increase earnings or relationship quality would provide the best test of whether programs offering such services could help unmarried parents stay together. Absent such 'gold standard' evidence, these results are suggestive that both economic resources and the emotional skills that facilitate relationship quality may promote marriage among fragile families.

Recent Working Papers

The following comprises a list of the most recent Working Papers authored by the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) faculty and research associates. A complete list of Working Papers is also available for viewing and downloading on the CRCW Web site:

crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.htm

2002-23-FF Pinka Chatterji, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn Dec 2002 "Does WIC Participation Improve Maternal Investments in Infant Health?"

2002-17-FF Angela Fertig, Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel Dec 2002 "Child Support Enforcement and Domestic Violence Among Non-Cohabiting Couples"

2002-22-FF Bruce Western, Leonard Lopoo, Sara McLanahan Dec 2002 "Incarceration and the Bonds Among Parents in Fragile Families"

2002-21 Leonard Lopoo Dec 2002 "Maternal Employment and Teenage Childbearing: Evidence from the PSID"

2002-20 Wendy Sigle-Rushton, Sara McLanahan Nov 2002 "Father Absence and Child Well-being: A Critical Review"

2002-19-FF Christina Gibson Nov 2002 "Understanding the Stick (or Is It the Carrot?): The Effect of Welfare Beliefs on Family Formation Decisions"

2001-08-FF Marcia Carlson, Sara McLanahan Nov 2002 "Early Father Involvement in Fragile Families"

Conceptualizing and Measuring Father Involvement. Randal Day and Michael Lamb, editors. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

2001-06-FF Marcia Carlson, Sara McLanahan, Paula England Nov 2002 "Union Formation and Dissolution in Fragile Families"

2002-14-FF Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel Oct 2002 "Strengthening Fragile Families"

2002-01-FF Cynthia Osborne Oct 2002 "Diversity Among Unmarried Parents: Human Capital, Attitudes, and Relationship Quality"

2002-18-FF Maureen Waller, Amanda Bailey Sept 2002 "How Do Fathers' Negative Behaviors Shape Relationships with Their Children?"

2002-16-FF Marcia Carlson, Sara McLanahan Aug 2002 "Do Good Partners Make Good Parents?"

2002-15-FF Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel Jul 2002 "Unwed Parents: Myths, Realities, and Policymaking"

2002-13-FF W. Bradford Wilcox Jul 2002 "Then Comes Marriage? Religion, Race, and Marriage in Urban America"

2002-12 W. Bradford Wilcox Jul 2002 "Focused on Their Families: Religion, Parenting, and Child Well-being"

2002-11-FF Nancy Reichman, Julien Teitler, Irwin Garfinkel, Sara McLanahan Jun 2002 "The Role of Welfare in New Parents' Lives"

2002-10-FF Marcia Carlson, Irwin Garfinkel, Sara McLanahan, Ronald Mincy, Wendell Primus Jun 2002 "The Effects of Welfare and Child Support Policies on Union Formation"

2002-09-FF Marcia Carlson, Sara McLanahan Jun 2002 "Characteristics and Antecedents of Involvement By Young, Unmarried Fathers"

2002-08-FF Kristen Harknett, Sara McLanahan Jun 2002 "Racial Differences in Marriage Among New, Unmarried Parents: Evidence from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study" Unwed Mothers"