



## FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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# THE RETREAT FROM MARRIAGE AMONG LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

### Background

The Bush administration is proposing to spend 1.5 billion dollars over the next five years on programs to promote "healthy marriages." The administration hopes to reduce family instability and encourage unwed couples to marry in order to enable children to grow up with two biological parents who are married.

Data from the Fragile Families Study would indicate such a plan is consonant with the wishes of unmarried parents. According to the survey, 86 percent of unmarried mothers and 91 percent of unmarried fathers who were living together when their child was born had plans to marry. Among 'visiting' parents (those who were romantic but not living together), about 82 percent of the mothers and 84 percent of the fathers had plans to either marry or move in together.

Despite their 'high hopes,' only a handful of these parents actually married within a year after their child's birth. Of those who were in a romantic relationship, only 11 percent married by the end of the first year, while 32 percent broke up. Cohabiting parents were slightly more likely to get married and less likely to break up - 15 percent had married while only 21 percent had broken up.

What explains the gap between what unmarried parents say about marriage and what they do? One explanation for low marriage rates in this population is the lack of marriageable males - men who are financially stable and non-incarcerated. Another explanation is that a large number of women have entered the workforce, making them less dependent on men and undermining their incentives to marry. Other arguments emphasize the increase in government transfer programs or to cultural shifts that have reduced the stigma associated with single motherhood. While each of these arguments has merit, none can fully account for why parents who say they plan to marry fail to follow through on their plans.

This brief uses data from the Time, Love, Cash, Care, and Children Study (TLC3) to examine what unmarried parents say about marriage. The TLC3 Study conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with a subset of parents who participated in the larger Fragile Families Study (SEE PAGE 2, SHADED BOX). Twenty-five couples were selected from each of three cities - Milwaukee, New York, and Chicago - for a total of 75 families.

The TLC3 study was restricted to parents who were romantically involved at the time of their child's birth. Roughly two months after the birth, each parent was interviewed twice - once together and once alone. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews covered such topics as parents' relationships with their partners, the division of labor in the household and ideals and norms about parenting and fatherhood.

The TLC3 Study sheds light upon the reasons behind the apparent contradiction of parents saying they want to get married but not actually doing so. The interviews confirm the findings from the Fragile Families survey that parents hold positive views towards marriage. At the same time, they suggest that these positive views may actually be preventing marriage, or at least postponing it. To these young couples, marriage symbolizes that a couple has 'arrived,' both financially and emotionally. And because they value marriage so highly, many believe they must achieve certain (often lofty) goals before they can get married.

### Findings

The qualitative TLC3 interviews reveal that the most common obstacles to marriage are financial concerns, relationship problems and timing issues.

With regard to financial concerns, unmarried parents insist they must 'get it together financially' or 'get their money together,' in three different areas - financial responsibility, accumulating some assets, and having enough savings to host a proper wedding - before getting married. Most couples first want to ensure that both partners are economically stable. Here is what one young couple says when we ask them what stands in the way of their plans to marry:

*She: Once we get a job. Once we both have jobs. And, like, I'm waiting on his insurance to get free daycare, and then if I decided to put him in daycare, then I can get a job and work. And I still have to finish school. So once I finish school and get a job and everything, and he's working...*

Another 24-year-old woman said her 22-year-old partner would have to get a second job and demonstrate more responsibility than he's thus far exhibited before she would respect him enough to marry him.

Parents also believe they must accumulate substantial assets before marriage, assets that represent their ability to work together toward long-term economic goals. Some parents also insist upon the necessity of having shared savings before they marry. One new father said that “(marriage means) not living from check to check.” One couple, both in their late teens, insisted that before they could marry, they must own their own home, “a single house, not a double, with a BIG YARD and a garage, so we can put both our cars in.” Another couple said “if we get married, we’re not going to want to live here, we’ll want a house, and we don’t want this [apartment living]...Cuz we’re going to want the two-car garage, the white picket fence.”

Other couples want to demonstrate their respectability by hosting a proper wedding and reception instead of getting married on the cheap at City Hall. One 20-year-old mother shunned her baby’s father’s suggestion that they get married at the city hall, saying she wanted a “big fantasy” wedding. A father from another couple who had been married and divorced before said: “when I do it again, I want to have a very nice wedding and a big wedding, and that takes a lot of planning. And a lot of money.”

Since most of the parents in the TLC3 study were cohabiting at the time of the interview (77%) and had enough money to establish an independent household together, we were surprised to learn how strongly they were influenced by financial barriers. Yet clearly these couples believe that getting married means more than simply living together. Most importantly, it signals that a couple has ‘arrived’ in a financial sense.

But money is not the only thing standing in unmarried couples’ way. Most mothers seem to have a clear set of standards for the men they marry, often claiming that their male partners are not yet emotionally mature enough for marriage. Fathers, too, believe relational maturity is

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important, and often doubt they are ready. Mothers sometimes worry that the father would be unable to ‘settle down,’ or remain sexually faithful to them. In this regard, the level of trust between the mothers and the fathers is often very low. Other parents thought the relationship itself is not yet strong enough to withstand a marriage commitment. In general, all of these parents are extremely fearful of divorce. Getting married ‘just to get divorced’ is often deemed worse than having a child out of wedlock. Below, one woman says she believes her baby’s father needs to ‘sow his wild oats’ first.

*Interviewer: Do you have a sense of what it’s going to take (to want to get married)?*

*She: It’s going to take him [wanting] to do it...Yeah. If he’s not ready to commit, then it’ll never happen. I’m younger; he’s older. He probably feels like he got a lot of oats to still sow.*

Another woman says she cannot yet trust her child’s father enough, as he abandoned her once before, while the couple was living in Puerto Rico.

*She: We have to get our trust back ... I need to start trusting him again ... In some ways, sometimes, I’m mad at him, cause I’ll NEVER forget what happened to me in this life. And, it’s like, sometimes, I’ll think about what he did to me over there in Puerto Rico, and I will be mean...Cause he really did hurt me.*

A final obstacle to marriage identified in the interviews is that of timing. Many couples said they just did not have enough time to get married right now. According to them, marriage requires an uninterrupted stretch of time to plan the wedding and carry out other tasks. In fact, couples felt it was improper to rush into marriage simply to legitimate a birth. Shotgun marriages are clearly a thing of the past for these parents.

**The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is following a birth cohort of nearly 5,000 children, including 3,712 children born to unmarried parents and 1,186 children born to married parents. The data are nationally representative of births in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. For more information about the study, visit the Website of The Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.htm> or email the CRCW at [crcw@opr.princeton.edu](mailto:crcw@opr.princeton.edu)**

**The Time, Love, Cash, Care and Children Study (TLC3 Study) is following a total of 75 couples, 25 each from the cities of Chicago, Milwaukee New York. Each of the 75 couples participated in two in-depth interviews, once together and once alone. Baseline interviews are conducted at birth and follow-up interviews are conducted at 12, 24 and 36 months.**

**This research brief was adapted from “High Hopes But Even Higher Expectations: The Retreat from Marriage Among Low-Income Couples” by Christina Gibson, Kathryn Edin and Sara McLanahan. To download a copy of the paper on which this brief was based, visit <http://crcw.princeton.edu>, go to the *Fragile Families* link, click on *Publications*, then click on *Working Papers Series*.**

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Also interesting is what couples did not discuss as obstacles to marriage. Children's needs, public assistance and ideological objections to the institution of marriage rarely, if ever, were mentioned. And not a single mother or father mentioned the most prevalent concern on policy maker's minds - that marriage might enhance the life chances of their child.

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

The findings from the TLC3 in-depth qualitative interviews suggest that to be successful, marriage promotion programs will need to address at least two issues among unmarried couples. First, they will need to work on strengthening relationships and

trust, including emphasizing the importance of sexual fidelity. The marriage programs currently being put forth as models for the new initiative appear to be well-suited for dealing with issues of relationship quality and trust, though none that we know of explicitly take on the issue of male infidelity. Less obvious is the extent to which existing programs are prepared to deal with parents' relatively high expectations for financial security. Many unmarried parents view a stable, working-class lifestyle as a prerequisite for marriage. These standards are driven, at least in part, by the strong fear of, and opposition to, divorce. Given the relatively low human capital of most unmarried parents, marriage programs will need to think about ways to increase the financial stability and asset accumulation of these couples if their 'high hopes' for a future together are to become a reality.

## 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](http://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"

2001-07-FF Julien Teitler, Nancy Reichman Jun 2002 "Cohabitation: An Elusive Concept"

2001-15-FF Wendy Sigle-Rushton, Sara McLanahan Jun 2002 "The Living Arrangements of New Unmarried Mothers"

2002-07-FF Ronald Mincy, Chien-Chung Huang May 2002 "The 'M' Word: The Rise and Fall of Interracial Coalitions on Fathers and Welfare Reform"

2002-06-FF Julien Teitler, Nancy Reichman, Lenna Nepomnyaschy May 2002 "A Balancing Act: Sources of Support, Child Care, and Hardship Among Unwed Mothers"

2002-05 Leonard Lopoo, Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel May 2002 "Can Demographic and Economic Factors Explain the Trend in Teenage Birth Rates from 1985-1996?"

2002-04 The Effect of Family Structure on Intergenerational Earnings Mobility, A. Fertig

2002-03 Who Should Marry Whom?: Multiple Partner Fertility Among New Parents, R. Mincy

2002-02 Just Get Me to the Church: Assessing Policies to Promote Marriage Among Fragile Families, R. Mincy and C. Huang

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## Inside...

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study and also the Time, Love, Cash, Care and Children study to examine what unmarried couples think about marriage and, specifically, the reasons they give for not getting married

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