



## FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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### Effects of Welfare Participation on Marriage

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#### Background

Policymakers designed the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) to reduce reliance on welfare, make fathers more accountable, and encourage marriage and marital stability. The goals of encouraging marriage and marital stability have been prominently featured in debates over welfare reauthorization. While the link between marriage and better child outcomes certainly motivated marriage provisions in the PRWORA, a suspected causal link between welfare and family structure has also played a role.

There is widespread speculation about the links between the welfare system and marriage behaviors of low-income women. Most of the research in this area has focused on the effects of welfare policies, such as the effects of generous cash benefits, on marriage. Findings from the best available studies suggest that while there is some evidence that more generous welfare benefits discourage marriage and encourage fertility, these effects tend to be small and are often only present among whites. However, these studies give little attention to the effects of actually receiving welfare on the timing of marriage, either in the short or long term.

For instance, current welfare participation might delay marriage (due to actual or perceived eligibility criteria relating to a spouse's earnings), resulting in a short-term effect of welfare that dissipates after a woman's time on welfare ends. Or, being on welfare might alter a woman's view of marriage, resulting in welfare effects that persist over time. Understanding whether welfare causes women to delay marriage in the short term or ultimately forego marriage over the long term has important implications for how policy makers design policies.

This brief is based on analyses of data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study that examined how current and past participation in the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program affect the likelihood and timing of marriage among mothers who had a non-marital birth in urban areas during the late 1990s—a group at high risk for welfare dependence. By focusing on the effects of welfare participation on these mothers' marital behavior, it sheds light on important welfare effects overlooked in previous research.

#### Data and Measures

The sample includes 3,219 mothers who were interviewed at baseline (the birth of the child) and when the child was approximately one year old. Additional information was drawn from interviews that occurred when the child was approximately 3 and 5 years old. All mothers were unmarried at the birth of the child. The outcome of interest was the timing of marriage to any man during the 5 years after the child's birth.

Monthly welfare histories were constructed from mothers' reports of whether or not they had participated in TANF from 1997 until the child was five years old (during 2003 to 2005). Fifty-nine percent of the sample (1,899 out of 3,219 mothers) relied on TANF at some time between 1997 and the child's fifth year. For this group, the average length of a first spell on TANF between the birth and the mother's final interview was 11 months.

The multivariate analyses controlled for the following measures that past research indicates are associated with TANF participation, marriage, or both: mother's race/ethnicity, mother's nativity, mother's age, mother's educational

attainment, whether the mother was cohabiting with the baby's father, whether the mother lived with both her biological parents at age 15, the quality of the mother's health, whether the child was the mother's first, whether the birth was covered by Medicaid, whether the mother attended religious services regularly, and characteristics of the mother's city and state.

## Findings

Twenty four percent of all mothers in this sample married the focal child's father or a new partner by the child's fifth birthday. Among those who had ever been on TANF (1,899), one-fifth married. Among those who had never been on TANF (1,320), approximately one-third married (see Table 1). These figures indicate that welfare participation is associated with marriage. However, mothers who have never received TANF may differ systematically from mothers who have received TANF.

Multivariate proportional hazard models included sociodemographic controls and measures of whether the mother was receiving TANF each month and whether she had received TANF in any past month. The comparison group was mothers who never received TANF. Results indicate that current TANF participation reduces the likelihood of marriage by about one-third. However,

past TANF participation does not have a significant effect on the likelihood of marrying. In other words, while a mother is on welfare, she is less likely to get married than a mother not on welfare. Once she leaves, however, her propensity to marry reverts to that of a mother who has never been on TANF.

Projections that assume that TANF participation effects are constant over time (that is, mothers currently on TANF are one third less likely to marry than those not on TANF) indicate that the cumulative gap in marriage rate after 18 years, adjusted for sociodemographic characteristics, would be 3.7 to 4.9 percentage points. About 62 percent of mothers spending any time on TANF will marry within 18 years of the birth compared to 66 percent of those never participating in TANF. The average delay in marriage for mothers participating in TANF would be 12 to 16 months over the same period.

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

This study examined the extent to which TANF participation is associated with the likelihood and timing of marriage among mothers with young children who were born out of wedlock—a population of substantial policy interest. The findings suggest that TANF participation has a negative effect on the likelihood of marriage, but

**Table 1. Cumulative Percentage of Mothers Who Married Over Five Years, by TANF Participation Status**

| <i>Months Since Child's Birth</i> | <i>All Mothers</i> | <i>Ever on TANF</i> | <i>Never on TANF</i> |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| 5                                 | 4%                 | 2%                  | 5%                   |
| 10                                | 8                  | 5                   | 12                   |
| 15                                | 11                 | 7                   | 16                   |
| 20                                | 12                 | 8                   | 18                   |
| 25                                | 14                 | 10                  | 20                   |
| 30                                | 16                 | 11                  | 23                   |
| 35                                | 18                 | 13                  | 25                   |
| 40                                | 20                 | 14                  | 28                   |
| 45                                | 21                 | 15                  | 29                   |
| 50                                | 22                 | 16                  | 31                   |
| 60                                | 25                 | 19                  | 35                   |

<sup>1</sup> For more detail on the methodology, see the "Effects of Welfare Participation on Marriage" written by Julien O. Teitler, Nancy E. Reichman, Lenna Nepomnyaschy, and Irwin Garfinkel at <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/ffpubs.asp>.

that the effect is confined to the period when a woman is receiving welfare. Consequently, by the time their children are 18 years old, the proportion of mothers who would marry would differ little by whether they have ever received TANF.

Whether delays in marriage are harmful, on balance, to mothers and their children is not clear. On the one hand,

marriage is an important route out of poverty for many unwed mothers. Thus, delays in marriage may have detrimental effects on mothers' and children's economic well-being. On the other hand, marriage delays could have favorable effects on family stability by leading to more selective searches for husbands, which could result in higher quality or longer-term relationships.

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*Center for Research on Child Wellbeing*

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## Inside...

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine the relationship between welfare receipt and marriage.

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**For more information about the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, go to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu> and go to "About Fragile Families" and "Collaborative Studies." To review public and working papers from the Fragile Families Study, go to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/ffpubs.asp>.**

**This research brief was adapted from "Effects of Welfare Participation on Marriage", Center for Research on Child Wellbeing Working Paper # 2005-24 by Julien O. Teitler, Nancy E. Reichman, Lenna Nepomnyaschy, and Irwin Garfinkel. The Fragile Families Research Brief series is funded by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.**