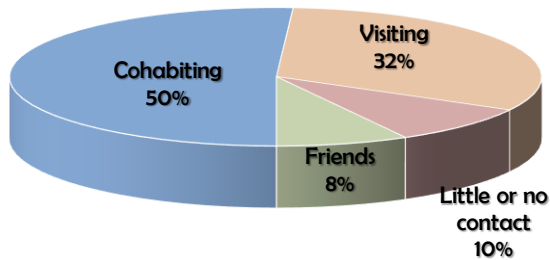




Non-marital childbearing has increased dramatically since the 1970s. At that time, about 10% of all births were to unmarried parents. In 2006, the number was nearly 40%. To gain a better understanding of what these trends imply for parents, children and society, the *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study* has been following approximately 5,000 children born in large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000, including a large oversample of children born to unmarried parents. The study has yielded a number of important findings.

**A large proportion of unmarried parents are in “marriage-like” relationships at the time of their child’s birth.** One-half of unmarried parents are living together at the time of their child’s birth, and another 32% are in ‘visiting unions,’ defined as romantically involved but living apart. Less than 20% are not romantically involved at the time of the child’s birth.

Figure 1. Unmarried Parents' Relationship Status at Birth



Most unmarried fathers are very involved during pregnancy and immediately after the birth, especially fathers in cohabiting and visiting unions. Over 80% provide support to the mother during the pregnancy and over 70% visit the mother and baby at the hospital. In addition, the vast majority of unmarried fathers say they want to help raise their child.

Table 1. Unmarried Fathers' Involvement, By Parents' Relationship Status at Birth

	Cohabiting (%)	Visiting (%)	Non-romantic (%)
Gave money, bought things	97	84	28
Visited hospital	97	71	29
Name on birth certificate	96	80	52
Mother wants father involved	99	99	74

**Unmarried parents are much more disadvantaged than married parents.**

Compared to married parents, unmarried parents are:

- ✓ more likely to have started parenting in their teens,
- ✓ less likely to have lived with both biological parents growing up,
- ✓ more likely to have had children with other partners,
- ✓ more likely to be poor,
- ✓ more likely to suffer from depression,
- ✓ more likely to report substance abuse,
- ✓ more likely to have spent time in jail, and
- ✓ disproportionately African American and Hispanic.

**Despite their high hopes, most parental relationships do not last, and as a result many children experience high levels of instability.**

Only 35% of unmarried couples are still living together five years after the birth of their child, and less than half of the 35% are married. Couples that were cohabiting at birth are more likely to be together than couples in ‘visiting unions.’ Just over 50% of cohabiting couples are married or cohabiting five years after the birth.

Once their relationship with baby’s father ends, many unmarried mothers form new partnerships and many have children with new partners. Nearly 40% of all unmarried mothers



experience at least one new partnership, and about 14% have a child with a new partner, adding to the instability and complexity of these families.

**Relationship changes influence parental resources and contributions.** During the five years following the birth, unmarried mothers experience lower income growth and worse health trajectories than married mothers. Unmarried mothers who end their unions with the biological father also experience more mental health problems. That said, married mothers who subsequently divorce experience the steepest income declines and the sharpest increases in mental health problems.

Father involvement declines over time. By age five, only 50% of non-resident fathers have seen their child in the past month. While formal child support from non-resident fathers increases over time, informal cash support and in-kind support (such as buying toys or clothes) declines.

Table 2. Non-Resident Fathers' Involvement, By Follow-Up Wave

	Year 1 (%)	Year 3 (%)	Year 5 (%)
Saw Child Past Year	88	78	72
Saw Child Past Month	63	55	51
Formal Child Support	11	41	57
Informal Support	72	42	37
In-Kind Support	56	47	43

**Children born to unmarried parents do not fare as well as children born to married parents.** Single mothers and mothers in unstable partnerships engage in harsher parenting practices and fewer literacy activities with their child than stably married mothers. Family instability also reduces children's cognitive test scores and increases aggressive behavior. The increase in aggression is especially pronounced among boys.

**Welfare programs loom large in the lives of unmarried parents and their children.**

As compared with stably married parents (denoted as Married/Married in the table below), unmarried parents are much more likely to rely on public assistance and income-tested programs, including TANF, Food Stamps, Medicaid and the EITC. Those mothers who are not cohabiting with or married to their child's father at either the birth or the five year follow-up (denoted as Single/Single below) are the most likely to receive benefits.

Table 3. Public Assistance Receipt at Five Year Follow-Up, By Relationship Status (At Birth/At Five Year Follow-Up)

	TANF (%)	Food Stamps (%)	Medicaid (%)	SSI (%)	EITC (%)
Married/Married	2	7	24	1	25
Married/Single	12	35	62	6	59
Cohabiting/Cohabiting or Married	10	32	54	7	50
Cohabiting/Single	31	61	71	7	45
Single/Single	33	63	74	12	40

In conclusion, children born to unmarried parents are disadvantaged relative to children born to married parents in terms of parental capabilities and family stability. Additionally, parents' marital status at the time of a child's birth is a good predictor of longer-term family stability and complexity, both of which influence children's longer-term wellbeing.



This brief is based on a paper entitled “Family Instability and Complexity after a Nonmarital Birth: Outcomes for Children in Fragile Families,” written by Sara McLanahan and published in *Social Class and Changing Families in an Unequal America*, edited by Marcia Carlson and Paula England, Stanford University Press. The data come from the first five years of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Data through the nine-year wave are publicly available.

### **THE FRAGILE FAMILIES AND CHILD WELLBEING STUDY**

The Study interviews both mothers and fathers soon after the birth of their child and again when the child is one, three, five, and nine years old. In-home assessments of the child and the home environment are conducted at three, five and nine year interviews. The parent interviews collect information on attitudes, relationships, parenting behavior, demographic characteristics, physical and mental health, economic and employment status, neighborhood characteristics, and program participation. The in-home interview collects information on children’s cognitive and socio-emotional development, health, and home environment. The nine year interview collects saliva samples from mothers and children for genetic analysis. The fifteen year data collection is projected to be complete in 2017 and includes primary caregiver and teen interviews, and home visits.

### **ADDITIONAL STUDY INFORMATION**

Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Website: [fragilefamilies.princeton.edu](http://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu)  
Download Baseline through Year Nine Follow-up Data: [opr.princeton.edu/archive/ff/](http://opr.princeton.edu/archive/ff/)  
Sign up for the Study E-newsletter: <https://lists.princeton.edu/cgi-bin/wa?SUBED1=FFnews&A=1>  
View the Fragile Families Publications Archive: <http://crcw.princeton.edu/publications/publications.asp>

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is a joint effort of Princeton University’s [Center for Research on Child Wellbeing](#) and [Center for Health and Wellbeing](#) and Columbia University’s [Columbia Population Research Center](#) and the [National Center for Children and Families](#). The Principal Investigators are Sara McLanahan and Christina Paxson at Princeton University and Irwin Garfinkel and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn at Columbia University.

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