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FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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Multiple Partner Fertility

Background

Recent estimates suggest that 25 percent of single-parent families in the U.S. are in poverty and nearly two-thirds of poor children in the child support caseload are born to unwed parents. As the outcomes for children born to single-parent households are significantly worse than children born to two-parent families, recent policy efforts have been aimed at promoting marriage among the low-income population. Most recently, President Bush proposed that $300 million from the reauthorized Welfare Reform Act be devoted to marriage promotion programs. Skeptics question the effectiveness of these programs, arguing that a one-size fits all marriage solution may oversimplify the complex situations and realities of low-income parents.

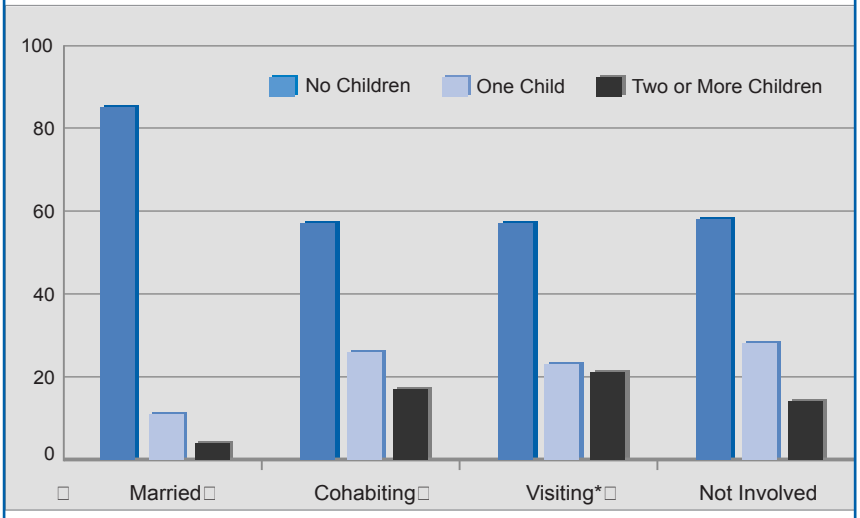
One complexity that policy makers should consider is multiple partner fertility - defined as having children with more than one partner. Multiple partner fertility may reduce the marriage chances of both mothers and fathers. Because of financial and other obligations, a woman with children from a previous union may be considered less attractive as a potential marriage partner than a woman with no other children. Prior commitments to children (and child support obligations) may also make a man less attractive on the marriage market.

This research brief examines the extent and correlates of multiple partner fertility. Data comes from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Findings in this brief are based on a working paper entitled "Who Should Marry Whom: Multiple Partner Fertility Among New Parents," by Ronald B. Mincy [SEE BOX, page 2]. After discussing the characteristics of parents in the Fragile Families sample who have had children by more than one partner, the paper concludes with policy recommendations to address the consequences of multiple partner fertility.

Premarital Births and Marriage Prospects

Total fertility does not vary greatly by marital status. Married mothers have, on average, 2.02 children whereas unmarried mothers have 2.08 children. In contrast, the prevalence of multiple partner fertility is very different for these two groups. While only 15 percent of married mothers have children with different fathers, 43 percent of unmarried women have children with at least two men. Among unmarried mothers, the incidence of multiple partner fertility does not vary much by relationship status (as shown in Figure 1). Mothers in cohabiting and visiting relationships and those not involved with the father of the focal child are equally likely to have children with more than one father. Of all unmarried mothers with more than one child, almost 70 percent exhibit multiple partner fertility.

Figure 1: Number of Children with Other Fathers by Relationship Status



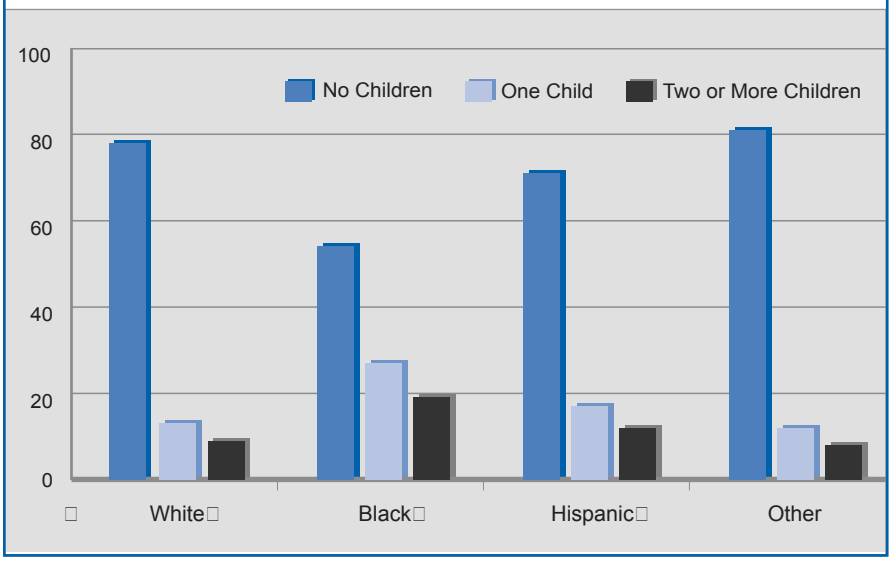
*Visiting parents are defined as romantically involved but not living together

Not surprisingly, as a woman ages, she is more likely to have had children with more than one man. While only 12 percent of teenage mothers indicate children with two different fathers, 32 percent of mothers age 20-24, 45 percent of mothers aged 25-29 and 40 percent of mothers thirty years or older have children with another man.

Black women are much more likely to exhibit multiple partner fertility than other women (46 percent versus less than 29 percent for non-blacks; see Figure 2). Hispanic women exhibit levels of multiple partner fertility between that of blacks and whites. Given the research on the reluctance of men to take responsibility for non-biological children, this may help to explain the low marriage rates among black families.

Because of data limitations, the authors must rely on the mothers' reports of the fathers' prior fertility. Interestingly, mothers' reports of fathers' multiple partner fertility are generally similar to their

Figure 2: Number of Children with Other Fathers by Race/Ethnicity



reports of their own fertility. For example, black women are more likely than other women to exhibit multiple partner fertility; they also report that their partners (also almost entirely black) are more likely than other men to exhibit the same behavior (not shown in Figures). This further suggests that multiple partner fertility may be a factor in the lower probability for black mothers to marry the father of their children.

In contrast to mothers, fathers exhibit more multiple partner fertility across the entire relationship spectrum. About one-fifth of married men have children with more than one woman. One-third of cohabiting fathers, more than two-fifths of visiting fathers, and more than three-fifths of non-involved fathers exhibit multiple partner fertility.

Discussion and Policy Implications

There is growing evidence that the ideal context to promote child wellbeing is a healthy, conflict-free marriage involving a couple living only with their common, biological children. Previous findings from the Fragile Families Study have shown that after the birth of their child, many unwed couples are still romantically involved and intend to marry. This has encouraged some policymakers and analysts to recommend using TANF funds to pay for marriage promotion efforts among fragile families. Such optimism must be tempered by the findings presented here that the majority of mothers and fathers have had children with more than one partner. As multiple partner fertility is inversely correlated with getting married, these results indicate that couples may be less likely to marry than would be expected.

Note also that family formation patterns vary substantially by race and ethnicity. Total fertility for black mothers is approximately 10 percent greater than for white and Hispanic mothers, but black mothers (and fathers) are about twice as likely as white mothers (and fathers) to exhibit multiple partner fertility, with Hispanic parents falling between the two. Thus, the authors expect marriage promotion efforts to be less successful among blacks than among other racial and ethnic groups.

Policymakers could use the differences in rates of multiple partner fertility to target marriage promotion policies to specific groups. For example, mothers in their early twenties - only one-third of whom have had children with more than one man - or mothers giving birth for the first time, may be the most appropriate targets for marriage promotion policies. And there are other policies that could encourage marriage, regardless of the age of the partner. For example, the authors recommend providing team-parenting services to both parents, near the birth of their children. These programs would help couples work together to parent their children, and, as a by-product, could reduce conflict and improve relationship skills, which might ultimately promote marriage. The authors also recommend enhancing fathers' financial status through job training, so that he is better able to meet his child support obligations.

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 Web site of The Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.htm or email the CRCW at crcw@opr.princeton.edu

This research brief was adapted from "Who Should Marry Whom? Multiple Partner Fertility Among New Parents," by Ronald B. Mincy. This paper uses an early release data file that contains responses from the first two waves of the study for approximately two-thirds of the Fragile Families sample. 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*, and then click on *Working Papers Series*.

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