



## FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

June 2004 • Number 24

# Religion and Marriage in Urban America

## Background

In the last four decades, marriage rates have declined among all Americans, but especially among minorities and lower-income Americans. Research on the retreat from marriage has focused on a range of factors, from the absence of marriageable males to the impact of changes in welfare policy, but it has largely overlooked the role that religious institutions may be playing in resisting this retreat. Religious institutions may be particularly important in this regard, both because they have traditionally promoted pro-marriage norms and because they have a strong presence in urban communities, especially predominantly African American communities.

One explanation for the retreat from marriage is that societal changes in marriage-related norms and behaviors have been particularly consequential for minorities and low-income Americans. Although Americans from a range of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds continue to support the ideal of marriage, there have been dramatic changes in marriage-related norms and behaviors regarding sexuality, nonmarital childbearing, and gender relations. Because minorities and low-income Americans have typically had less of a socioeconomic stake in marriage, their communities have tended to rely more on these marriage norms to maintain the vitality of marriage as an institution. Accordingly, the erosion of these marriage norms in the 1960s and 1970s, combined with economic shifts in the 1970s that undercut the earning power of minority and lower-class men, fell particularly hard on minority and low-income communities.

Nonetheless, a large minority of minority and low-income adults in urban communities get and stay married. One key institution lending normative and social support to marriage in these distressed communities may be religion. This research brief focuses on whether religious attendance is associated with marital status at the time of birth in urban America, and with transitions into marriage for mothers who bear a child out-of-wedlock. We are interested in the transition to marriage among unwed mothers because a large percentage of urban mothers have children outside of marriage and yet some eventually go on to marry.

We hypothesize that religious attendance is associated with marriage among parents in urban America for three reasons. First, religious institutions lend normative support to marriage itself as the ideal site for sexual activity and childbearing. Second, churches also encourage relationship-related norms and behavior (e.g., sacrifice and sexual fidelity) that can improve relationship quality and lead couples to transition into marriage. Third, they often offer family-oriented social networks that provide social support, social control, and models of successful marriages, all of which may foster matrimony for unwed parents.

This research brief is based on data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study [See Box on Back]. Our first set of analyses, which examines the association between religion, culture, and marriage at birth among all urban mothers in the sample, has a sample size of 4,840. Our second set of analyses, which examines the association between religion, culture, and family formation subsequent to a nonmarital birth and focuses on mothers who had a child outside of marriage, has a sample size of 3,078.

## Data and Methods

Our data come from the Fragile Families baseline and one-year follow-up surveys. We use one variable, frequent attendance at religious services, to measure the extent to which urban mothers and fathers are integrated into a religious institution. Specifically, we coded all mothers and fathers who report attending church "several times a month" or "once a week or more" as frequent attendees.

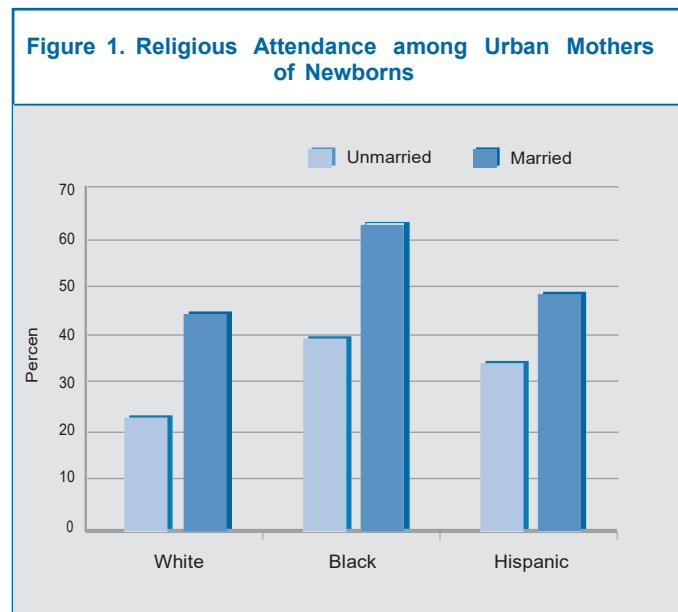
Four variables tap respondents' marriage-related norms and behaviors. First, we constructed a dichotomous measure based on respondents' agreement with two statements: "It is better for a couple to get married than to just live together" and "It is better for children if their parents are married." Respondents who responded "agree" or "strongly agree" to both statements were coded as having a normative commitment to marriage.

Next, we evaluated mothers' responses to three questions about the father of their child: how often is he "fair and willing to compromise when you have a disagreement?", how often does he express "affection or love for you?", and how often does he "encourage or help you to do things that are important to you?". Mothers' scores on these items were combined into a scale measuring the presence of highly supportive fathers with strong relationship skills. Mothers were also asked if they had conflict with the father in the last month over sexual fidelity. Mothers who responded "never" were coded as reporting no conflict over fidelity with the father of their child. These two measures serve as indirect measures of men's marriage-related behaviors regarding sexual activity and an affectionate style of relating to their romantic partner.

Finally, we control for a variety of socioeconomic and demographic factors that might otherwise confound the relationship between religion, culture, and marriage behavior. All independent variables are measured at the baseline interviews.

## Findings

Figure 1 shows that religious attendance is more prevalent among urban mothers of newborns who are African American



and/or married. Among married mothers, 44 percent of white mothers, 62 percent of African American mothers, and 48 percent of Hispanic mothers attend church frequently (that is, several times a month or more). For mothers who are unmarried when their child is born, 23 percent of white mothers, 39 percent of African American mothers, and 34 percent of Hispanic mothers attend church regularly. Overall, in large American cities, 33 percent of new unwed mothers attend church frequently, 47 percent of married new mothers attend

church frequently, and 42 percent of all new mothers attend church frequently. Thus, marriage and race are both strongly associated with religious attendance for mothers of infants who live in urban America.

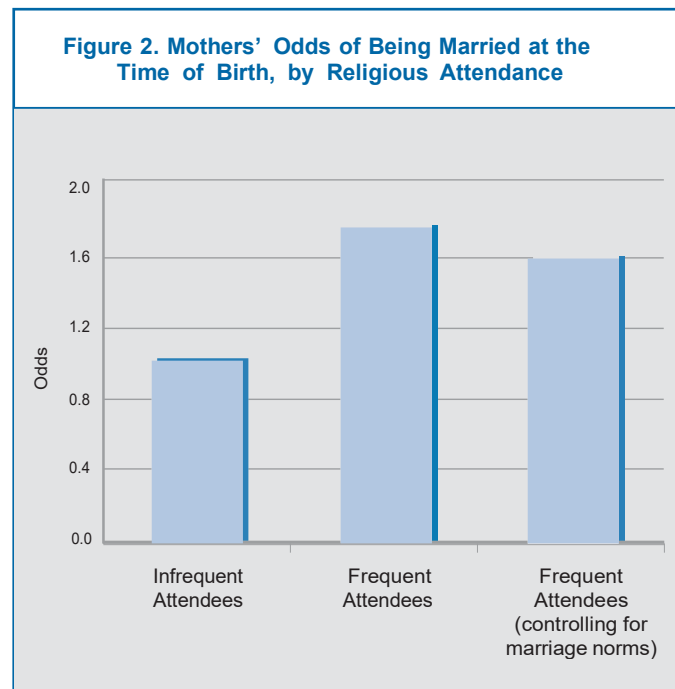
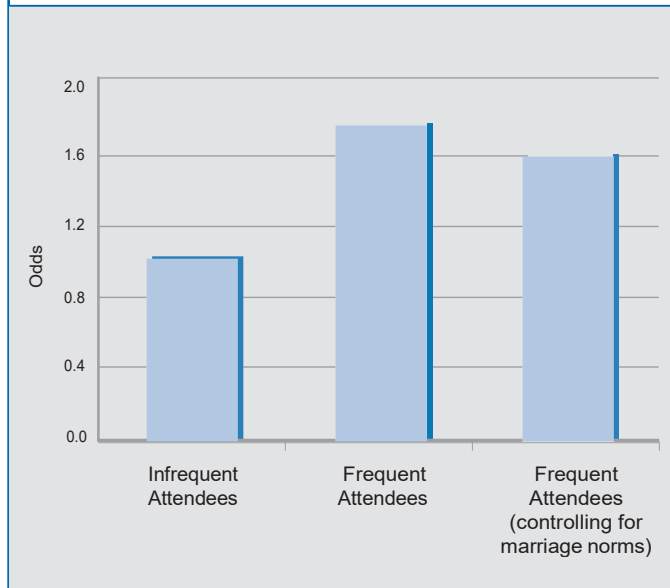


Figure 2 indicates that the association for urban mothers between religious attendance and marital status at birth is strong even after controlling for a range of socioeconomic and demographic factors. Mothers who attend religious services frequently are 73 percent more likely to be married at childbirth than mothers who attend services infrequently or not at all. Figure 2 also indicates that the association between religious attendance and bearing a child in marriage is partly mediated by a strong normative commitment to marriage, having an affectionate supportive partner, and having no conflict over sexual fidelity. Thus, these findings suggest that one reason religious attendance is associated with marriage prior to childbirth is that it fosters a normative commitment to marriage and marriage-friendly behaviors (e.g., father's affection, sexual fidelity).

Likewise, Figure 3 also indicates that unwed mothers are significantly more likely to marry if they attend religious services frequently. Specifically, unwed mothers who attend church frequently are 72 percent more likely to marry within a year of a nonmarital birth, compared to unwed mothers who attend church infrequently or not at all. (Ancillary analyses indicate that the effect of religious attendance on marriage odds is particularly strong for African American mothers.) Once again, the effects of religious attendance are mediated by a mother's normative commitment to marriage, the father's supportiveness, and having no conflict over sexual fidelity with the father. This

**Figure 3. Mothers' Odds of Marriage after a Nonmarital Birth, by Religious Attendance**



provides more evidence that religious attendance fosters marriage in part by promoting a strong normative commitment to marriage, normative and social support for an affectionate, sacrificial approach to relationships, and sexual fidelity.

## Conclusion

This research brief shows that church attendance is strongly associated with marriage at birth and with marriage within one year of a nonmarital birth for urban mothers. Urban mothers who attend church several times a month or more are at least 70 percent more likely to be married or to get married than mothers who do not attend church frequently. Moreover, ancillary analyses indicate that the link between religious attendance and marriage is strongest among African American mothers. Accordingly, this study suggests that urban religious institutions, especially the black church, serve as moral and social bulwarks of marriage in communities where the institution of marriage has grown increasingly fragile. Their presence helps explain the heterogeneity in marital practice in urban America, a heterogeneity that can get lost in public and academic discussions of the urban underclass and the retreat from marriage in poor, minority communities. In other words, one reason that marriage as an institution continues to survive in minority and low-income communities is that churches lend this institution an important measure of moral and social support.

## 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](http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies)

2004-10 Lonnie Berger June 2004 "Children Living Out-of-Home: Effects of Family and Environmental Characteristics"

2004-09-FF Joshua Goldstein, Kristen Harknett Jun 2004 "Parenting Across Racial and Class Lines: Assortative Mating Patterns of New Parents Who Are Married, Cohabiting, Dating, and No Longer Romantically Involved"

2004-08-FF Jean Knab, Sara McLanahan Jun 2004 "Measuring Cohabitation: Does How, When, and Who You Ask Matter?"

2004-07-FF Julien Teitler, Nancy Reichman, Heather Koball May 2004 "Bias in Retrospective Reports of Cohabitation Among New Parents"

2004-06-FF Cynthia Osborne May 2004 "The Relationship Between Family Structure and Mothering Behavior within Racial and Ethnic Groups"

2004-05-FF Jean Knab Apr 2004 "Who's In and for How Much? The Impact of Definitional Changes on the Prevalence and Outcomes of cohabitation"

2004-04-FF I-Fen Lin, Sara McLanahan Apr 2004 "Gender Differences in Perceptions of Paternal Responsibility"

2004-03-FF Lauren Rich, Irwin Garfinkel, Qin Gao Apr 2004 "Child Support Enforcement Policy and Unmarried Fathers' Employment in the Underground and Regular Economies"

2004-02-FF Anna Aizer, Sara McLanahan Apr 2004 "The Impact of Child Support on Fertility, Parental Investments and Child Well-being"

2002-13-FF W. Bradford Wilcox, Nicholas Wolfinger Apr 2004 "Then Comes

Marriage?: Religion, Race, and Marriage in Urban America"

2004-01-FF Rachel Kimbro, Scott Lynch, Sara McLanahan Feb 2004 "The Hispanic Paradox and Breastfeeding: Does Acculturation Matter? Evidence from the Fragile Families Study"

2003-22-FF Julien Teitler, Nancy Reichman, Lenna Nepomnyaschy Dec 2003 "The Effects of State Policies on TANF Participation"

2003-21-FF Nancy Reichman, Hope Corman, Kelly Noonan Dec 2003 "Effects of Child Health on Parents' Relationship Status"

2003-20-FF Hope Corman, Nancy Reichman, Kelly Noonan Dec 2003 "Mothers' Labor Supply in Fragile Families: The Role of Child Health"

2003-19-FF Kelly Noonan, Nancy Reichman, Hope Corman Dec 2003 "New Fathers' Labor Supply: Does Child Health Matter"

# FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

*Center for Research on Child Wellbeing*

Wallace Hall, 2nd Fl. • Princeton University • Princeton, NJ 08544

Presorted  
First-Class Mail  
U.S. Postage  
Paid  
Princeton, NJ  
Permit No. 299

---

## Inside...

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine the association between religion and family formation.

---

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> or email the CRCW at [rcrw@opr.princeton.edu](mailto:rcrw@opr.princeton.edu)

This research brief was adapted from "Then Comes Marriage?: Religion, Race, and Marriage in Urban America" by W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas Wolfinger. 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*.

The Fragile Families Research Brief is funded in part by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We also thank the Joint Center for Poverty Research for helping to disseminate this brief.