



FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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Looking for Murphy Brown: Are College-Educated, Single Mothers Unique?

Background

College-educated single mothers gained notoriety in the early 1990s when then-Vice President Dan Quayle criticized Murphy Brown, the title character in a TV sit-com, for bearing a child outside wedlock. According to Quayle, Murphy Brown, a cynical, highly paid, professional woman, was “mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another ‘lifestyle choice.’”

Though the vast majority of single mothers have only a high school degree (or less), single women with at least some college education now represent 20 percent of new single mothers in the U.S. or one of five new non-marital births. Because college attendance and non-marital childbearing has been increasing, the proportion of college-educated single mothers has grown. Moreover, between 1985 and 1994, the rate of non-marital childbearing among women with one to three years of college rose from 18.9 to 23.4 births (per 1,000). Among women with at least four years of college, it rose from 6.1 to 12.9 (per 1,000).

Despite the increase in numbers and despite the attention stimulated by Vice President Quayle’s remarks, very little research has been done on college-educated single mothers. This oversight is potentially serious since the causes for out-of-wedlock childbearing may be different for this group. Unlike less-educated women, factors such as a lack of marriageable males, lack of opportunities for women, and high welfare benefits are probably less likely to be important for college-educated mothers.

The analysis described in this brief looks at three possible explanations for why college-educated women might have children outside marriage. First, we consider the possibility that a high proportion of these women have reached their mid-thirties without having a child and thus opt to become single mothers rather than miss the opportunity to experience motherhood. Second, we consider the possibility that college-educated single mothers hold particularly negative views toward marriage and/or men perhaps because of their exposure to feminist ideas. Third and finally, we explore the idea that these mothers bear children outside of marriage because they have trouble finding suitable partners. In all three cases, we are interested in whether

college-educated, single mothers are unique - that is, whether they are more likely than other mothers to be facing the biological clock, to hold negative views of marriage and men, or to have less desirable partners.

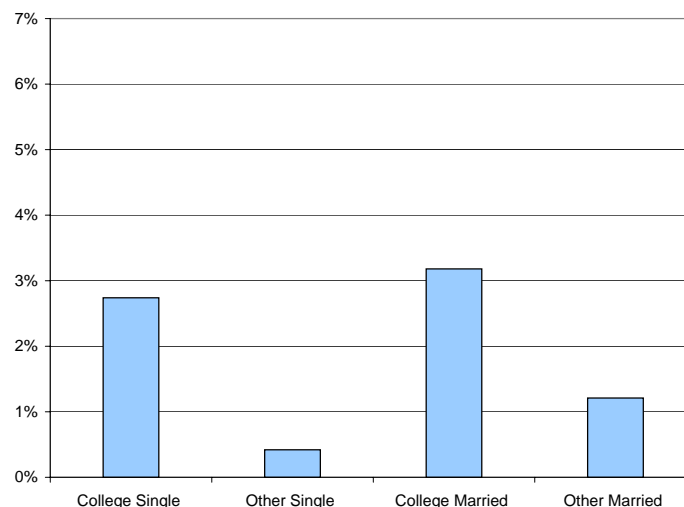
Data and Methods

Our data come from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study [see box on back], which includes 946 college-educated single mothers along with 2,634 less-educated single mothers, 748 college-educated married mothers, and 433 less-educated married mothers. We use data from the baseline interviews.

To assess whether a mother is likely to be worried about her biological clock running out, we use an indicator of whether or not she was over 35 and childless at the time she gave birth.

To answer whether a mother has ‘unconventional’ attitudes toward men and marriage, we use five questions about the value of marriage, two questions about gender roles, and two questions about trust in men. We consider valuing marriage, supporting traditional gender roles, and expressing trust in men to be conventional (pro-marriage) attitudes.

Figure 1: Biological Clock: Mother Age 35 or Above and Does Not Have Other Children



Note: Percentages adjusted for race, immigration status, duration of relationships, age and number of children.

Figure 2: Attitudes Toward Marriage and Men
(Scale of 1 to 4; Higher scores mean more pro-marriage or traditional values)

	College Single	Other Single	College Married
Marriage More Advantageous	2.79	2.60	3.14
Parents Should Stay Together	1.69	1.90	1.87
Marriage Better for Couples	2.68	2.64	3.09
Marriage Better for Children	2.81	2.87	3.22
Two Parents Better for Children	1.91	1.90	2.38
Better if Man Makes Important Decisions	1.84	1.96	1.87
Better if Man Earns Main Living	2.01	2.27	2.08
Men Can Be Trusted in Dating Relationships	3.04	2.89	3.21
Men Can Be Trusted to be Faithful	2.99	2.80	3.24

Note: Scores adjusted for race, immigration status, duration of relationships, age and number of children. Scales: 1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=agree; 4=strongly agree.

Finally, we use three indicators to measure father ‘quality’ or ‘marriageability.’ The first indicator measures whether the baby’s father has completed less schooling than the mother. The second indicator measures whether the father has one or more of the following problems (not working or attending school; a physical or mental health condition that limit the kind or amount of work he could do; drug or alcohol use that interfere with work or relationships; or a history of violence toward the mother.) The third indicator measures how well the father treats her.

Results

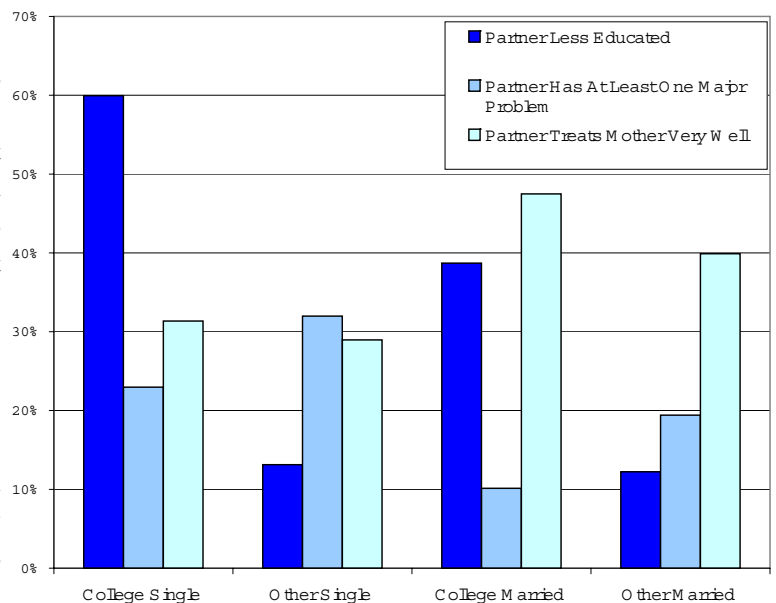
Figure 1 addresses the question of whether college-educated single mothers are having children outside marriage because they are afraid of running out of time to bear children. The percentages in Figure 1, which are adjusted for race, immigration status, and the length of the couple’s relationship, provide very little support for this argument. Only about 2.7 percent of college-educated single mothers are over 35 at the time of their first birth, similar to the 3.2 percent of college-educated married mothers. In short, the biological clock phenomenon appears to be equally true of married and single mothers. Note however that the percentage of mothers who fit this description is significantly larger among college-educated mothers than it is among less educated mothers.

Figure 2 addresses the question of whether college-educated, single mothers hold more negative views toward marriage than other mothers. This is what the Vice President was implying when he criticized Murphy Brown for ‘mocking the importance of fathers.’ Again, the data do not provide much support for this argument. College-educated single mothers value marriage somewhat less than college-educated, married mothers, but the

differences are fairly small. And college-educated, single mothers generally value marriage as highly as other single mothers, although they are slightly less likely to believe parents should stay together for their children’s sake.

Compared with other single mothers, college-educated single mothers are slightly more independent-minded about gender roles, but no more so than college-educated married mothers. When it comes to trust in men, college-educated single mothers fall in between the other groups of mothers - slightly more trusting than other single mothers and slightly less trusting than college-educated married mothers.

Figure 3: Partner Quality



Note: Percentages adjusted for race, immigration status, duration of relationships, age and number of children.

Figure 3 provides information on the partner quality of each group of single mothers. According to the figure, about 60 percent of single college-educated mothers have partners who are less-educated than themselves, compared to about 40 percent of college-educated married mothers and only 13 percent of less-educated single mothers. Thus, compared with other mothers, college-educated single mothers are indeed unique in terms of their odds of having a less-educated partner. But they are not unique in terms of the other measures of partner quality. With regard to the risk of having a partner with a major problem, college-educated single mothers fall in between college-educated married mothers (fewest partners with problems) and other single mothers (more partners with problems). And, like other single mothers, college-educated single mothers are less likely than married mothers to say their partner treats them 'very well.'

Further analyses (not shown here) looked at how these patterns might change should the definition of college-educated be confined to those who have graduated college. Results indicated that there was not a very big difference between those with a degree and those who did not finish their college education.

Conclusions

The legendary Murphy Brown character who wants motherhood without marriage appears to be the exception rather than the rule among college-educated single mothers. Although these mothers appear to value marriage somewhat less than college-educated married mothers, their views are no more negative than those of less-educated single mothers. Similarly, college-educated single mothers hold more independent views about gender roles than less-educated mothers, but no more so than college-educated married mothers. And college-educated single mothers trust men more than less-educated single mothers, but less than college-educated married mothers.

There is little evidence that college-educated single mothers are choosing to bear children outside marriage because they are coming to the end of their childbearing years. Only about one in 37 college-educated single mothers are in their mid-30s and having their first child.

Where college-educated single mothers differ most from other mothers is in their chances of being with a man who is less educated than themselves. While we cannot be sure why these mothers are partnered with such men, this educational disparity may contribute to their decision - or their partners' decision - to forgo marriage.

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