



# FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

August 2002 • Number 10

## Diversity Among Unmarried Parents

### Background

Policy makers are seeking to devise programs to promote healthy marriages among unmarried parents as part of the reauthorization of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). While a majority of unmarried parents hold positive views of marriage and express a desire to marry, they also face many obstacles to forming stable unions. To be effective, the new 'marriage programs' must be sensitive to the differences between unmarried and married parents as well as to the differences among unmarried parents themselves.

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey [See **Box, Back Cover**] to answer the following questions:

- How different are unmarried parents from married parents in terms of their demographic characteristics, human capital, economic resources, attitudes about marriage and gender roles, and relationship quality?
- How different are unmarried parents among themselves?
- How important are marriage expectations in differentiating among unmarried parents?

Table 1: Demographic and Human Capital Variables by Relationship Status and Expectations of Marriage

	Married N=1186	All Unmarried N=3035	Cohabiting/ High Chance of Marriage N=1390	Cohabiting/ Low Chance of Marriage N=384	Visiting/ High Chance of Marriage N=619	Visiting/ Low Chance of Marriage N=642
<b>Mothers Race*</b>						
White	41.9	13.8	20.4	9.9	8.7	7.0
Black	24.8	54.7	41.9	53.4	68.0	70.3
Hispanic	25.4	28.3	34.4	33.6	20.0	19.8
Other	7.9	3.2	3.4	3.1	3.2	2.9
Mother Foreign Born	24.5	13.7	17.1	18.5	9.1	10.9
<b>Age</b>						
Mother's Age	29.3	23.9	24.2	24.4	23.1	23.9
Father's Age	31.7	26.8	26.9	27.7	25.7	27.0
Mother Attends Weekly Religious Service	33.5	18.2	16.4	10.9	21.7	18.7
<b>Employment</b>						
Mother	71.4	66.0	69.9	65.6	65.1	58.9
Father**	91.4	74.9	81.9	75.8	70.3	63.2
<b>Mother's Education*</b>						
Less than High School	16.6	40.5	38.1	47.7	36.2	45.5
High School	19.9	33.7	34.3	29.9	36.7	31.8
Some College	28.8	22.8	24.0	20.6	24.2	19.9
College	34.6	3.1	3.6	1.8	2.9	2.8
<b>Health</b>						
Mother's						
Excellent	73.4	63.3	64.0	55.2	66.4	63.4
Good	22.2	28.2	27.8	33.6	27.1	26.8
Poor	4.4	8.5	8.1	11.2	6.5	9.8
Father's Health Limits Work	3.2	6.3	6.3	8.6	4.0	7.3

\*Mother and Father's race and education are highly correlated.

\*\*Father's employment is based on father's report where available, and supplemented with mother's report.

Table 2: Predicted Probabilities of Attitudes About Marriage, Gender Roles, and Relationship Quality by Relationship Status and Expectations of Marriage

	Married N=1186	All Unmarried N=3035	Cohabiting/ High Chance of Marriage N=1390	Cohabiting/ Low Chance of Marriage N=384	Visiting/ High Chance of Marriage N=619	Visiting/ Low Chance of Marriage N=642
<b>Attitudes About Marriage</b>						
Pro Marriage for Couple	65.5	37.8	38.9	27.7	46.9	32.4
Pro Marriage for Child's Well-Being	44.1	24.3	28.7	18.7	25.2	16.4
<b>Attitudes About Gender Roles</b>						
Traditional Gender Roles	15.1	9.5	9.9	10.1	9.4	7.8
Gender Distrust	6.3	8.6	6.7	13.0	6.0	12.9
<b>Relationship Quality</b>						
Often Disagree	0.7	1.4	0.9	1.8	1.3	2.7
Physically Abusive	1.9	2.3	1.4	5.6	0.9	3.8
Often Supportive	43.2	42.5	53.6	26.2	47.8	19.9

Predicted probabilities of those who agree or strongly agree are listed, except for relationship quality, which is noted. Mother's race, nativity, age, religiosity, employment, education, Medicaid use and health, and father's employment are controlled at their means.

## Differences Between Married And Unmarried Parents

Results from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey indicate that married and unmarried parents differ markedly in terms of their demographic characteristics and capacities (See **Table 1 - Previous Page**). [This analysis is based on parents who were romantically involved at the time of their child's birth; 86 percent of the sample.] As compared with married parents, unmarried parents are younger on average (by five years) and less likely to be white or foreign born. Unmarried mothers report less frequent attendance at religious services than married mothers. Unmarried parents, especially fathers, are also less likely to be employed and more likely than married fathers to have a health problem that limits the ability to work. One of the most important differences between married and unmarried parents is educational attainment. While nearly two-thirds of married parents have received some post-secondary education and almost one-third have graduated from college, three-quarters of unmarried parents have a high school degree or less, and only three percent have completed college.

The attitudes of married parents are more pro-marriage than the attitudes of unmarried parents, even after taking account of differences in demographic characteristics and capacities (See **Table 2 - Above**). Married mothers also hold more traditional views of male/female roles and are generally more trusting of men than unmarried mothers. Married and unmarried mothers are similar, however, in their reports of relationship quality. Few

mothers, married or unmarried, report high levels of disagreement and violence or low levels of emotional support.

## Differences between Cohabiting and Visiting Parents

Many analysts assume that unmarried but cohabiting couples are more committed to one another and perhaps more "marriage ready" than "visiting couples." The latter are defined as unmarried parents who are in a romantic relationship but not living together. These two groups of unmarried parents are actually quite similar in terms of their education and self-reported health status (See **Table 1**<sup>1</sup>). They also have similar attitudes about marriage and gender roles. However, a major difference between the two groups of unmarried parents is employment status. Cohabiting parents are more likely to work than visiting parents. Cohabitors also report higher relationship quality than visitors, particularly in terms of the emotional support the mother receives from the baby's father. Indeed, cohabiting mothers report higher levels of support than do married mothers. The two groups of unmarried mothers also differ in terms of their future plans. Over three-quarters of cohabiting mothers report that their chances of marrying the father are better than fifty-fifty as compared to about one-half of visiting mothers (not shown). This difference is large, given the similarities of mothers in other domains related to marriage readiness.

## Marriage Expectations

Marriage expectations have been shown to distinguish different groups of cohabiting parents in terms of their commitment and

<sup>1</sup>In Tables 1 and 2, cohabiting and visiting mothers are each divided into two groups based on the mother's reported marriage expectations. Overall results for each group are derived from a weighted mean of the high and low expectations groups for Table 1, and a separate logistic regression model for Table 2.

**Table 3: Union Transitions from Child's Birth to One Year Later, Unadjusted**

Relationship at Child's Birth	Relationship One Year Later			
	Improved Married	Cohabit	Remained Stable	Separated
Married N=1071	na	na	94.2	5.8
Cohabiting N=1576	14.7	na	55.5	29.9
Cohabiting/High N=1246	16.9	na	56.0	27.1
Cohabiting/Low N=330	6.4	na	53.5	40.1
Visiting N=1131	5.3	23.8	22.3	48.5
Visiting/High N=567	8.3	29.5	25.9	36.2
Visiting/Low N=564	2.3	18.1	18.7	60.9

similarities to married couples. The same is true of parents in the Fragile Families Study. Cohabiting and visiting parents with high marriage expectations (defined as chances better than 50/50 according to the mother) are more similar to each other, and to married parents, on most measures, than they are to other unmarried parents. Parents with high expectations have more education and are in better health. Mothers with high expectations also report more positive views toward marriage, more trust in men, less physical abuse, and more emotional support from their partners than mothers with low expectations.

## Union Transitions

Despite high marriage expectations at the time of their child's birth, few unmarried parents actually marry by the time their child is 12 to 18 months old (See **Table 3 - Above**). Only 17 percent of cohabitators and 8 percent of visitors with high marriage expectations are married

by the time of the follow-up interview. These rates are, however, two to three times higher than those of parents with low marriage expectations. Although marriage rates are low among unmarried parents at follow-up, the majority of parents who had high marriage expectations at baseline are still together one year later. In contrast, many parents with low marriage expectations have separated; 40 percent of cohabitators and 62 percent of visitors.

## Conclusion and Policy Implications

Low rates of marriage and high rates of union instability among unmarried parents imply that a substantial investment is necessary to foster stable healthy unions. Moreover, significant differences between married and unmarried parents and among unmarried parents themselves suggest that a one-size-fits-all policy is not likely to be very effective. Regardless of whether marriage or union stability is the goal, policy makers need to take account of the differences among unmarried parents in both living arrangements and marriage plans.

Some couples who expect to marry have relationship problems and may benefit from programs that seek to improve their relationship/communication skills. Other couples who hope to marry have relationships that are very similar in quality to those of married couples and may be less likely to require such services. However, based on these data, a high proportion of these couples would benefit from programs that provide economic support, employment services, and mental health services.

Some couples who do not plan to marry would also benefit from programs designed to improve relationship skills. Even if marriage is not their goal, most of these parents plan to raise their child together, and their ability to cooperate with one another is likely to affect their child's future. These parents would also benefit from economic and health services. Indeed, they may need more help in these areas than couples who plan to marry. Finally, a portion of unmarried parents may not be good candidates for marriage programs, particularly parents who are no longer romantically involved at the time their child is born, and especially parents who are in violent relationships.

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

2002-11 The Role of Welfare in New Parents' Lives, N. Reichman, J. Teitler, I. Garfinkel, S. McLanahan

2002-10 The Effects of Welfare and Child Support Policies on Union Formation, M. Carlson, I. Garfinkel, S. McLanahan, R. Mincy, W. Primus

2002-09 Characteristics and Antecedents of Involvement By Young, Unmarried Fathers, M. Carlson, S. McLanahan

2002-08 Racial Differences in Marriage Among New, Unmarried Parents: Evidence from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, K. Harknett, S. McLanahan

2002-07 The 'M' Word: The Rise and Fall of Interracial Coalitions on Fathers and Welfare Reform, R. Mincy, C. Huang

2002-06 A Balancing Act: Sources of Support, Child Care, and Hardship Among Unwed Mothers, J. Teitler, N. Reichman, L. Nepomnyaschy

2002-05 Can Demographic and Economic Factors Explain the Trend in Teenage Birth Rates from 1985-1996? L. Lopoo, S. McLanahan, I. Garfinkel

2002-04 The Effect of Family Structure on Intergenerational Earnings Mobility, A. Fertig

2002-03 Who Should Marry Whom?: Multiple Partner Fertility Among New Parents, R. Mincy

2002-02 Just Get Me to the Church: Assessing Policies to Promote Marriage Among Fragile Families, R. Mincy, C. Huang