



## FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

July 2002 • Number 9

# Is Marriage A Viable Objective for Fragile Families?

## Introduction

A key issue in the reauthorization of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) is how to promote healthy marriages among unmarried couples with children. To better understand the circumstances under which this goal might be achieved, policy makers need answers to the following questions:

- ◆ What is the nature of unmarried parents' relationships?
- ◆ How do these parents view marriage as an institution?
- ◆ What obstacles do they face in trying to achieve stable unions?
- ◆ Would marriage provide the economic security of these families?

This brief uses baseline data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWB) to provide initial answers to these questions. The findings are based on Wendy Sigle-Rushton and Sara McLanahan, "For Richer or Poorer?" (CRCW-FF 2001-17) and "The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Baseline Report (National Report)."

## Unmarried Parents' Relationships

Understanding the nature of unmarried parents' relationships is crucial for determining whether marriage is a viable policy or programmatic objective. If relationships are casual or highly conflicted, then marriage may be detrimental to parents (and their children). In contrast, if relationships are supportive, promoting marriage may make sense. Results from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study show that, at the time of their child's birth, most unmarried parents are committed to each other and to their children. Half of unmarried parents are living together, one-third are romantically involved but living separately, eight percent are "just friends," and only nine percent have little or no contact (Figure 1).

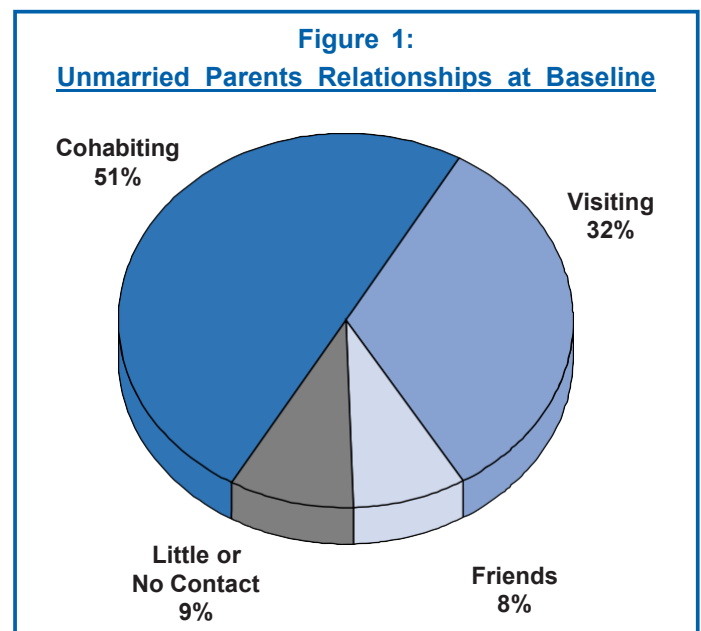
## Parents' Attitudes and Expectations Toward Marriage

Most unmarried parents are quite positive about the benefits of marriage for both themselves and their children. Fifty-one percent of unmarried mothers and 60 percent of the unmarried fathers interviewed agree with the statement that "it is better

for a couple to get married than to just live together." Even higher percentages (66 percent of mothers and 75 percent of fathers) agree that "it is better for children if their parents are married." The authors also found that the majority of unmarried parents are optimistic about the future of their own relationships and see cohabitation as a step toward marriage, whether or not this transition eventually occurs. Seventy-three percent of mothers say their chances of marrying the father are "50/50" or higher, and one-third describe their chances as "almost certain" (Table 1 - See page 2).

## Obstacles to Stable Unions

Despite their high hopes, most unmarried parents are poorly equipped to support themselves and their children (Table 2 - See page 2). Thirty-seven percent of mothers have not finished high school and 32 percent have only a high school degree. The numbers are only slightly better for fathers, 34 and 40 percent respectively. Twenty-eight percent of unmarried fathers were out of work during the week of their baby's birth. The majority of unmarried parents live below or just above the federal poverty line. Forty-one percent of mothers and 26 percent of fathers report household incomes below the poverty line and 28



**Table 1: Unmarried Parents' Views About Marriage**

	Mothers	Fathers
Percent of Parents Who Say:		
Chances of Marriage are 50-50 or Better	73	88
Marriage is Better Than Cohabiting	51	60
Marriage is Better for Kids	66	75
Percent of Parents Who Say _____ is Essential for a Successful Marriage		
Same Friends	13	16
Husband has Steady Job	90	92
Wife has Steady Job	69	50
Same Race/Ethnicity	9	12
Good Sex	32	44
Same Religion	29	26
Emotional Maturity	89	85

**Table 2: Obstacles to Stable Unions**

	Mothers	Fathers
Education		
No High School Degree	37	34
High School Degree Only	32	40
More Than High School	31	26
Employment		
Employed Last Year	84	98
Employed at Time of Birth	N/A	72
Poverty Status		
Poor <100% of Poverty Line	41	26
Near Poor 100-200% of Poverty Line	28	28
Health Limitations		
Drug or Alcohol Problem (Mother's Report)	3	6
Father Has Drug or Alcohol Problem (Reported by Either Parent)	N/A	10

percent of both mothers and fathers have incomes between 100 percent and 200 percent of the poverty line.

In addition to limited economic resources, a substantial proportion of unmarried parents have other limitations. Thirty-five percent of mothers and 31 percent of fathers report that their health is less than 'very good or excellent.' Three percent of unmarried mothers say that drugs or alcohol have interfered with their work or personal relationships, and six percent say that drugs or alcohol are a problem for the father of their child. The number of fathers with drug or alcohol problems is nearly

twice as high when fathers' reports are combined with information from mothers (10 percent rather than 6 percent). The highest rate of drug and alcohol abuse - 27 percent - is reported for fathers who have little or no contact with the mother.

## Is Marriage a Solution for Income Instability?

To determine how marriage might improve the economic security of unwed parents and their children, the authors estimated what unwed parents' household incomes would be if they were married to each other. Rather than using unmarried parents' actual earnings, the authors developed a measure of predicted earnings for each mother and father. To obtain this measure they used a sample of married parents and assumed that unmarried parents would have the same 'returns' to age, education, race, and other characteristics that married parents have. Thus the estimates include a "marriage premium" and should be viewed as a 'best case scenario.'

**Table 3** shows simulations of pre-tax economic status for unmarried mothers, using three different sets of assumptions about their work and marital status. The table also shows the economic status of married mothers under similar scenarios. The first scenario assumes that mothers work full-time and do not live with the father. The second scenario assumes that mothers are married and stay home to care for the children while the fathers work full-time (2,000 hours per year). The third scenario assumes that mothers are married and work half-time (1,000 hours per year) while fathers work full-time. Note that the second and third profiles assume that unmarried fathers can work full-time.

The results suggest that, although marriage to the father would substantially improve the economic status of unmarried mothers, it would not bring them up to the level of mothers who are currently married. Under the first scenario, in which both groups of mothers are single, 37 percent of unmarried mothers would be poor as compared with 17 percent of married mothers. Since both groups of mothers are assumed to be single and working full-time, the difference in their poverty status is due entirely to differences in their earnings capacity or wage rates. As noted above, unmarried mothers are younger and much less educated than married mothers, and their low human capital translates into lower earnings. Under the second scenario, where mothers are married but do not work and where fathers work full-time, the poverty rates of unmarried mothers would drop, from 37 percent to 32 percent. Under the third scenario, where mothers work half-time and fathers work full-time, poverty rates would decline dramatically, from 32 percent to six percent. Note, however, that unmarried mothers would continue to be worse off than currently married

**Table 3: Predicted Poverty Rates for Unmarried Parents: Three Scenarios**

	0-100% Poverty	100-150% Poverty	150-200% Poverty	Over 200% Poverty
<b>Scenario 1: Not Married, Mother Works Full-Time</b>				
Unmarried	37	45	12	6
Married Comparison Group	17	23	19	41
<b>Scenario 2: Married, Husband Works Full-Time, Wife Doesn't Work</b>				
Unmarried	32	40	14	15
Married Comparison Group	16	23	18	43
<b>Scenario 3: Married, Husband Works Full-Time, Wife works Half-Time</b>				
Unmarried	6	31	31	32
Married Comparison Group	3	12	16	68

mothers under the latter two scenarios. If actual earnings (rather than predicted earnings) were used to estimate economic status, poverty rates of both groups of mothers would be much higher (and living standards would be much lower). The relative status of married and unmarried mothers, however, would be much the same.

## Conclusion and Policy Implications

Unmarried parents have high hopes for their future together and positive attitudes toward marriage. The majority of these parents are romantically involved at the time of their child's birth, and most believe that marriage is better than being single, not only for themselves but also for their children. Given this optimistic outlook, programs and policies designed to facilitate marriage may be well received at the time of the child's birth.

What barriers stand in the way of marriage for these couples? A substantial number of unmarried parents have low educational attainment, irregular employment, and income at or below the poverty line, as well as health limitations and problems with

substance abuse. Given that most parents believe that a steady job is very important to a successful marriage, these findings suggest that unmarried parents face significant challenges in maintaining their unions. Programs that prepare parents for good jobs with better earnings capacity may be critical to any effort to stabilize these families.

The authors argue that policy makers must recognize that unmarried parents differ significantly from their married counterparts. Moreover, these differences translate into important disparities in earning capacities, which, in turn, affect household income and poverty. Proponents of marriage will overstate its benefits if they use the median earnings of married, two-parent families as a standard for judging the benefits of marriage. Even if unmarried couples had the same family structure, labor supply, and wage schedule as married couples, they would still be worse off economically. To be successful in the long run - if success is defined as creating stable, healthy families - a marriage promotion strategy will need to do more than just get parents to sign a marriage contract.

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](mailto:crcw@opr.princeton.edu)

This research brief was adapted from "For Richer or Poorer" by Wendy Sigle-Rushton and Sara McLanahan. 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*.

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.