

Who Are “Fragile Families” and What Do We Know About Them?

By Mary Parke

Introduction

Family structure and relationships have changed dramatically over the past four decades. Nearly one-third of all births now occur outside of marriage. The proportions are even higher among poor and minority populations: 40 percent of Hispanic and 70 percent of African American births are out-of-wedlock.¹ In some instances, the parents of these children are living together. Others have a close relationship, but the father lives in a separate household. In still other cases, the father has virtually no contact with either the mother or child. Unmarried parents and their children have been called “fragile families.” The term “fragile families” emphasizes both that these unmarried couples and their children are, in fact, families—and that they are at greater risk of poverty and of family dissolution than married families.

Cohabiting couples with children are increasingly common, and

About the Author

Mary Parke is a Policy Analyst at the Center for Law and Social Policy.

roughly 40 percent of cohabiting households now include children.² It is estimated that two out of five children will live in a cohabiting household at some point during their childhood.³ However, these households are still often reported as single-parent households.

There have been numerous studies of the causes and consequences of non-marital fertility. However, nearly all of these studies have collected information solely on unwed mothers and their children. In the 1980s, scholars and policymakers began to focus on unwed fathers and, more recently, on learning about the relationships between unwed mothers and fathers. For example, the state of Louisiana has just conducted a survey of poor, never-married mothers and fathers in the state.⁴ Understanding the nature of the relationships between unmarried parents is crucial to crafting effective policy and programs for this population. If, for example, substantial numbers of these families are functioning in stable, cohabiting relationships, it might make more sense to develop policies and programs that address them as families and couples, rather than individuals.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This policy brief summarizes selected findings from two studies: the *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWB)*, the first national study of unmarried parents, their relationships to each other, and the well-being of their children; and the *Time, Love, Cash, Caring and Children Study (TLC3)*, a related ethnographic study of a sub-sample of romantically involved couples from FFCWB. The author thanks the following advisors who reviewed drafts of the brief: Kathryn Edin, Professor at Northwestern University; Christina Gibson, Assistant Professor at Duke University; Sara McLanahan, Professor at Princeton University; and Ronald Mincy, Professor at Columbia University.

This brief summarizes the findings to date of the first national study of unmarried parents, which has become one of the principal sources of information about how unmarried parents relate to one another, as well as about their conditions, capabilities, and expectations for themselves and for their families.

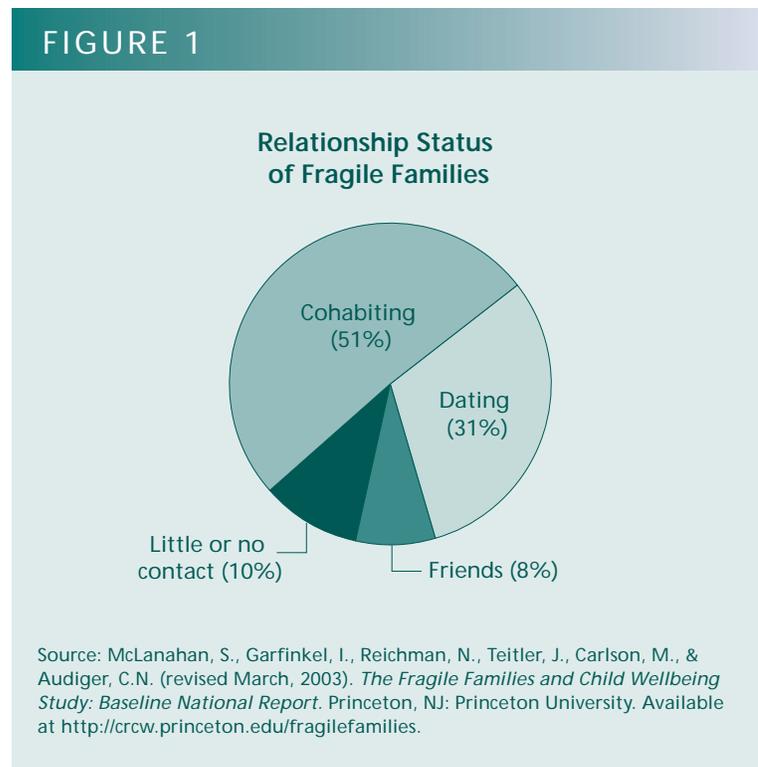
What Is the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study?⁵

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWB) is the first national study of unmarried

parents, their relationships to each other, and the well-being of their children. The longitudinal study follows a birth cohort of about 5,000 children and their parents, randomly selected from 75 hospitals in 20 cities in the U.S. with populations over 200,000.⁶ Within the sample, 3,712 of the births were non-marital, and there is a comparison group of 1,186 births to married parents. In the study sample, the typical unmarried mother and father are in their twenties, and the father is, on average, three years older than the mother. Over one-third of the unmarried mothers are Hispanic, 44 percent are non-Hispanic African American, and 21 percent are non-Hispanic white or of other race or ethnicity. Forty-three percent of the mothers and eight percent of the fathers receive welfare, food stamps, or other forms of public assistance.

The researchers are interviewing the mothers and fathers at the time of the birth of their child, one year later, three years later, and again five years later. To date, the second wave (or one year follow-up) interviews have been completed. The parents are asked about many issues, including the health and development of their children, parenting styles, relationships, and economic well-being. In-home assessments for a sample of the children are conducted at the three- and five-year interviews.

The study has a few limitations. The sample is of births in urban areas; therefore, the findings may not be representative of rural and suburban unmarried parents and their children. In addition, only 76 percent of unmarried fathers



were interviewed—so while the researchers are confident that their sample of unmarried mothers is representative of the population who gave birth in large cities in the U.S., they are less confident that the sample of unmarried fathers is representative. To help address this issue, all mothers were asked questions about the fathers of their children. Significant information in the survey is drawn from the mothers' reports about the fathers, including data about their level of education, work status, drug use, age, and race. Furthermore, because of restrictions in some hospitals, researchers were not able to interview all the teen mothers who were otherwise eligible for the study because the hospital required consent from the minor mother's parents. Minor teen mothers were interviewed when

hospitals gave permission; however, this population—which is at high risk for poor outcomes—is under-represented in this study.

What Does the Study Tell Us About Fragile Families?⁷

Unwed parents are strongly connected to each other and to their children at the time of their child's birth. Eighty-two percent of unmarried parents are romantically involved,⁸ either living together (51 percent) or dating (31 percent) (see Figure 1). Eighty percent of unmarried fathers provide financial or other types of support during the pregnancy, and the overwhelming majority of the mothers want the father to be involved in raising their child.

Most unmarried parents in the survey are poorly equipped to support themselves and their children.

The majority of new, unmarried parents live either below or near the federal poverty line (see Figure 2), and have low levels of human capital (i.e., they have few non-financial resources, such as work experience, education, or support from the family and community to draw upon). Forty-five percent of unmarried mothers in the survey are poor, and another 28 percent are “near poor,” with incomes below 200 percent of poverty.⁹ More than one-quarter of mothers live at less than 50 percent of the poverty line. Fathers are a little better off financially. More than one-quarter of the fathers are poor—with 10 percent living below 50 percent of the poverty line—and another third have incomes below 200 percent of poverty. Unmarried parents are twice as likely to live below the poverty line as married parents (four out of ten, compared to two out of ten), and are twice as likely to be “near poor” as married parents (seven out of ten unmarried parents, versus three out of ten married parents).¹⁰

Lack of education is a substantial problem for unmarried parents. Only 20 percent of mothers have some college education, and 43 percent have less than a high school diploma. Fathers are only slightly more likely to have a high school diploma, and about equally likely to have attended college. Unmarried parents are twice as likely to have dropped out of school as married parents and half as likely to have attended college. Eighty-one percent of unmarried fathers worked

the week prior to being surveyed, as compared to 93 percent of married fathers in the sample.

While drug or alcohol problems and physical or mental health problems are relatively rare, unmarried parents are twice as likely to report experiencing these problems as married parents. In addition, a small percentage of unmarried parents report being hit or slapped by their partner.¹¹

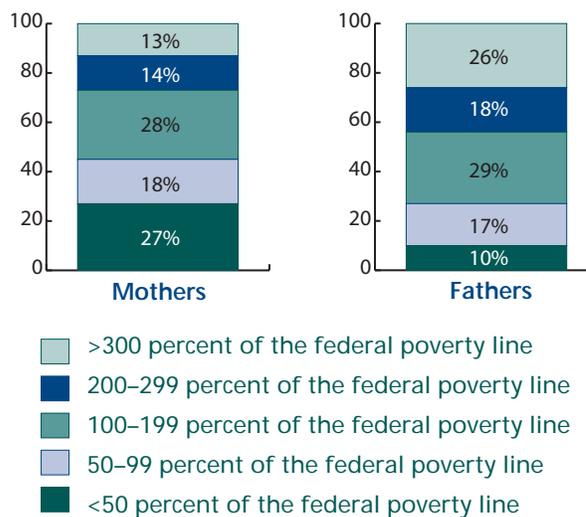
Unmarried parents are younger and much more likely to already

have children with more than one partner than married parents.

Forty-three percent of unmarried mothers have children with at least two men, while only 15 percent of married mothers have children with different fathers. Despite this likelihood, unmarried parents are younger than married parents, an average of seven years younger for mothers (the median age for unmarried mothers is 22) and six years younger for fathers (the median age for unmarried fathers is 25).

FIGURE 2

Poverty Status of Mothers and Fathers in Fragile Families



Note: The federal poverty line in 1999 (the year of the baseline survey) was \$11,549 per year for a family of two, \$14,126 for a family of three, and \$18,103 for a family of four.

Source: McLanahan, S., Garfinkel, I., Reichman, N., Teitler, J., Carlson, M., & Audiger, C.N. (revised March, 2003). *The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study: Baseline National Report*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University. Available at <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies>.

At the time of their child's birth, unmarried parents value marriage and have high hopes for the future of their relationships, but their hopes are typically not fulfilled. Two-thirds of mothers and three-quarters of fathers agree with the statement that “marriage is beneficial for children.” Seventy-four percent of unmarried mothers and 90 percent of unmarried fathers

THE MARRIAGE-PLUS PERSPECTIVE

This series is informed by a “Marriage Plus” perspective, which has two main goals centered on the well-being of children: (1) to help more children grow up in healthy, married, biological-parent families, and (2) to help parents (whether unmarried and living apart, cohabiting, separated, divorced, or remarried) cooperate better in raising their children. The “plus” in Marriage-Plus also means adopting flexible and comprehensive strategies, including both economic and non-economic supports, to increase the likelihood of stable, healthy marriages and better co-parenting relationships, regardless of marital status.

say the chances that they will marry the baby's other parent are “50–50 or greater.” While whites are more optimistic about marrying their partners than African Americans and Hispanics, a significant majority of African American respondents—both mothers and fathers—say they plan to marry each other. Nevertheless, of the 31 percent of couples in a dating relationship when their baby was born, only 11 percent had married one year later, while nearly one-third had broken up. The 51 percent of cohabiting parents in the sample were somewhat more likely to marry and less likely to break up—15 percent had married and one in five had broken up one year later.¹²

Employment, education, and relationship quality affect union formation and stability for fragile families.¹³ Employment is highly valued by survey respondents as an element of a successful marriage, with the large majority of parents responding that both parents having a steady job is “very important.” Men's earnings at the birth of their child are associated with an increase in the likelihood of marriage one year later. Women's education levels have positive effects on the likelihood of moving into marriage, cohabitation, and dating relationships,¹⁴ suggesting that both human capital and economic resources are critical to the formation of relationships between unmarried parents.

Attitudes and relationship quality also affect union outcomes. Emotional maturity is reported as essential for a successful marriage. Feeling emotionally supported by one's partner is very important for movement into a more committed relationship, whether marriage, cohabitation, or dating. Not surprisingly, pro-marriage attitudes increase the chance of marriage. Distrust of men by women has a negative effect on the likelihood of union formation and stability at all levels, but especially on the likelihood of marriage. The presence of children from a father's prior relationships has negative effects. When the father has had one or more children by another partner, chances of union formation (whether moving from dating to cohabitation or from cohabitation to marriage) and stability decrease. Researchers found that relationship quality has a larger effect on likelihood of marriage than employ-

ment. They also hypothesize that if relationship quality, employment, and wages were all improved, there might be an interactive effect in which better employment and wages would improve relationship quality, and vice versa.¹⁵

High Hopes—But Even Higher Expectations?¹⁶

A related study, the Time, Love, Cash, Care and Children Study (TLC3), is conducting in-depth ethnographic interviews over the course of three years with a subsample of 75 romantically involved couples in the Fragile Families survey who live in three cities—Chicago, Milwaukee, and New York. (Romantically involved couples can be either married, cohabiting or dating. In TLC3, 77 percent of the romantically involved couples are cohabiting.) The interviews began two to three months after the baby's birth, with follow up waves at 12 and 24 months. Parents are interviewed as a couple and alone. The qualitative approach permits the exploration of some of the questions and issues identified in the quantitative FFCWB study.

TLC3 findings confirm the findings of the FFCWB survey that new parents hold positive views of marriage and that they consider employment and emotional maturity essential ingredients to a good marriage. The TLC3 interviews reveal a pro-marriage attitude among new, unmarried parents, most of whom had talked with each other about getting married. In probing the seeming mismatch between the intentions of these couples to marry and their actual marriage rates, researchers found

that these couples consider marriage a long-term goal that can only be achieved after reaching other milestones or overcoming numerous obstacles.

The interviews reveal that these parents see two significant types of obstacles to marriage: financial and relational.

Financial Obstacles. The couples generally have three financial “pre-conditions” to marriage: sufficient financial security, assets (e.g., new car, house in the suburbs), and money for a wedding and reception. Given the nature of these goals, the TLC3 researchers suggest that, for these parents, getting married indicates the achievement of middle-class status. In fact, most of the parents in the TLC3 study are living together, demonstrating that they are financially able to set up an independent household with each other, yet these couples want more long-term financial security before they are willing to marry.

Relational Obstacles. Having a child together is not viewed as a sole or sufficient basis for marriage—instead, parents in the sample say that the decision to marry should be made on the basis of the quality of the relationship between two adults, irrespective of their common ties to a child. They are uncertain of their emotional readiness for marriage, meaning they believe that one or both partners are not emotionally mature enough to make the necessary commitment that marriage requires. Among the women, there is often a very low level of trust that the father would be sexually faithful. Many of these

parents indicate that divorce is worse than having a child out-of-wedlock, and some express concerns about whether their relationship is strong enough “to last.”

The authors of the study conclude: “rather than seeing marriage as a starting point after which a couple will work toward common goals, these couples see marriage as the crowning achievement that follows the accomplishment of these goals. Many of these goals are substantial and may take years to accomplish.”

To the surprise of the TLC3 researchers, other potential obstacles to marriage, such as barriers created by public assistance rules, children’s needs, and ideological objections to marriage, are seldom, if ever, mentioned.

Conclusion

The findings of the FFCWB study have attracted considerable public attention because they contradict stereotypes of the children of unmarried parents as the products of casual sexual liaisons. On the contrary, both the survey and the ethnographic data strongly indicate that, at the time of the birth, many unmarried parents think highly of marriage, mothers want the assistance of fathers in raising their children, and fathers want to be a part of their children’s lives. The authors of the baseline FFCWB study hypothesize that the time of a child’s birth offers a “magic moment” for intervention with unmarried parents and that policies and programs should build upon the commitment that unmarried fathers articulate at that time.

The FFCWB study finds that one-third of the couples in fragile families are romantically involved (either dating or living together) and have relatively few obstacles to marriage; one-third are romantically involved and face serious obstacles to marriage (including lack of employment by fathers and mental health problems for either partner); and one-third are either not romantically involved at birth or the father has a history of violence. The researchers concluded

THE CLASP COUPLES AND MARRIAGE POLICY BRIEF SERIES

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No. 4: *Who Are “Fragile Families” and What Do We Know About Them?* by Mary Parke (January 2004)

Future briefs in the series will address these questions:

- **How important is male “marriageability” to understanding the rise in single parenthood in low-income populations?**
- **What do we know about couples and marriage education, its research base, and its relevance to low-income populations?**

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that the first third may benefit from relationship skills training alone, that the second third would need both relationship skills training and employment, mental health, and possibly other services, and that efforts to strengthen the parents' relationship would not be appropriate for the last third.

COMING IN 2004!

Beyond Marriage Licenses: Efforts in States to Strengthen Marriage and Two-Parent Families. A State-by-State Snapshot by Theodora Ooms, Stacey Bouchet, and Mary Parke

Provides a state-by-state snapshot of activities begun since the mid-1990s that are explicitly designed to strengthen and promote marriage and to reduce divorce and that involve some level of government as a sponsor, funder, or otherwise active partner. In addition, reflecting CLASP's Marriage-Plus perspective, the report includes activities designed to promote cooperative relationships between parents who are not married.

The data also suggest that *both* mothers and fathers could benefit from skills and services. At present, unmarried mothers and their children are provided with various kinds of assistance, but there are few services offered to the fathers, and even fewer programs work with parents as couples. Supports for low-income unmarried parents (including relationship skills, job assistance for both men and women, substance abuse treatment, and medical care) could help these parents—who have high hopes for their relationships, but who often experience significant obstacles—to overcome these challenges and better raise their children together. Authors of the study suggest that

services for fragile families target new parents—who are at a time in their lives when they are motivated and open to changing behavior—and that these services should include both employment and relationship skills services.

What More Do We Need to Know?

The FFCWB and TLC3 studies will be providing findings for years to come as new waves of data and in-home visits are conducted and analyzed. While both studies have already revealed important information about fragile families, a number of questions remain, including:

- How do findings differ among parents of different races and ethnicities?
- How are the children of fragile families faring over time? How are the relationships of their parents faring over time?
- How do low-income married parents differ from those with similar demographic characteristics who do not marry?
- What kinds of programs and settings can be designed to address the needs of unmarried parents?¹⁷

Endnotes

The FFCWB study is co-directed by Sara McLanahan, Professor at Princeton University, and Irwin Garfinkel, Professor at Columbia University. TLC3 is directed by Kathryn Edin, Professor at Northwestern University. For more information about both studies, visit: <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies>.

- 1 Ventura, S., & Bachrach, C. (2000). Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States, 1940–99. *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 48(16). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Healthy Statistics.
- 2 U.S. Census Bureau. (2003, February). Married-Couple and Unmarried Partner Households 2000. *Census 2000 Special Reports*. Washington, DC: Author. Available at www.census.gov.
- 3 Smock, P. (2000). Cohabitation in the United States. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 1–20.
- 4 Findings are scheduled to be released in January 2004. For more information, visit: www.state.la.us/tanf/fragfam.htm or contact Dana Reichert at dreiche@doa.state.la.us.
- 5 McLanahan, S., Garfinkel, I., Reichman, N., Teitler, J., Carlson, M., & Audiger, C.N. (revised March 2003). *The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study: Baseline National Report*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University. Available at <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies>.

- 6 The 20 cities are Austin, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Corpus Christi, Detroit, Indianapolis, Jacksonville, Milwaukee, Nashville, Newark, New York, Norfolk, Oakland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Richmond, San Antonio, San Jose, and Toledo. Data have been adjusted to make this sample representative of all non-marital births in the 77 U.S. cities with populations of 200,000 or more in 1999.
- 7 McLanahan, S., Garfinkel, I., Reichman, N., Teitler, J., Carlson, M., & Audiger, C.N. (revised March 2003). *The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study: Baseline National Report*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University; Sigle-Rushton, W., & McLanahan, S. (Revised July 2003). *For Richer or Poorer? Marriage as an Anti-Poverty Strategy in the United States*. Center for Research and Child Wellbeing Working Paper #01-17-FF. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University. Both available at <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies>.
- 8 Couples are asked to define their relationship as romantic, just friends, or no relationship.
- 9 The poverty threshold in 1999, the time of the baseline interviews, was \$11,549 per year for a family of two, \$14,126 for a family of three, and \$18,103 for a family of four. From the Census Bureau website at: www.census.gov/hhes/poverty/histpov/hst.
- 10 Carlson, M., Assistant Professor at Columbia University School of Social Work. (November 2003). Personal communication.
- 11 About 4 percent of unmarried mothers and 14 percent of unmarried fathers report being hit or slapped by their partner at baseline. This higher rate of male reporting suggests that “slapping” may not be a useful measure of domestic violence. Mother reports of stronger measures of violence, such as being “seriously hurt” by the father, were included in the one-year follow-up interviews, finding 5.6 percent of mothers reporting being seriously hurt by the father at the 12-month interview. This compares to 1.3 percent of married mothers reporting being seriously hurt by the father of their child. Source: Fertig, A., Postdoctoral Fellow, Princeton University. (November 2003). Personal communication.
- 12 Other studies have found that, by the time the child reaches school-age, about half of unmarried parents have drifted apart, with the fathers seldom visiting their children. Lerman, R., & Sorenson, E. (2000). Father Involvement with Their Non-marital Children: Patterns, Determinants, and Effects on Their Earnings. *Marriage & Family Review*, 29(2/3), 137–158.
- 13 Carlson, M., McLanahan, S., & England, P. (August 2003) *Union Formation and Dissolution in Fragile Families*. Center for Research and Child Wellbeing Working Paper #2001-06-FF. Available at <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies>.
- 14 These cases indicate moving “up” from a lower level in a relationship continuum, with marriage being the highest.
- 15 McLanahan, S. (October 2003). Personal communication.
- 16 Gibson, C., Edin, K., & McLanahan S. (June 2003). *High Hopes But Even Higher Expectations: The Retreat from*

For more information, contact:

Mary Parke	Theodora Ooms
mparke@clasp.org	tooms@clasp.org
202.906.8014	202.906.8010

Marriage Among Low-Income Couples. Center for Research and Child Wellbeing Working Paper # 2003-06-FF. See also The Center for Research on Child Wellbeing. (June 2003). *The Retreat from Marriage Among Low-Income Families*. Fragile Families Research Brief, No. 17. Both available at <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies>.

- 17 Building Strong Families, a project run by Mathematica Policy Research, is currently investigating this question. BSF is an evaluation of programs designed to help unwed parents achieve their aspirations for healthy marriage and stable family life. For more information about the project, see www.buildingstrongfamilies.info.

Couples and Marriage Series

January 2004
Brief No. 4

ABOUT CLASP

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1968, conducts research, legal and policy analysis, technical assistance, and advocacy on issues related to economic security for low-income families with children.

The Couples and Marriage Policy Brief series seeks to inform the debate about public policies to strengthen and stabilize two-parent families and marriage. The series focuses on the effects on child well-being, with a special interest in couple relationships and marriage in low-income communities.

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