

**UNION FORMATION AND
STABILITY IN FRAGILE FAMILIES**

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INTRODUCTION

A vast number of studies have examined the predictors of marriage and marital dissolution, and more recent studies have explored entry into and exit from cohabiting unions. At the same time, much attention has been paid to the rise in nonmarital childbearing and single motherhood. Yet, far less is known about a topic at the intersection of these two research literatures, namely the predictors of union formation, stability and change among couples that have children outside of marriage. Much of the research on union formation does not include unwed parents or explore the link between the timing of childbearing and relationship transitions. Most of the research on single mothers has focused exclusively on the mother-child dyad, with little recognition of the potential or actual role of the father in the lives of mothers or children. New research shows that more than four-fifths of unmarried couples are in a romantic relationship at the time they have a child, and just under half are living together (McLanahan et al., forthcoming). These findings suggest that many unmarried parents and their children are in “family-like” relationships, at least initially. Thus, researcher need to consider the factors associated with both stability and change in parents’ relationships over time.

Beyond its importance for family demography and sociology, the topic of family stability and change among unwed parents is particularly timely from a policy perspective because the 1996 welfare reform placed limits on the receipt of public assistance for mothers on welfare, the vast majority of whom are unmarried. Some policy analysts have suggested that marriage may obviate the economic disadvantage among low-income women. In order to understand the possible role for marriage, it is critical to understand the characteristics associated with entry into marital versus nonmarital unions, as well as factors that influence the relationship trajectories of couples that have a child outside of marriage. In this paper, we use new data from the Fragile

Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine patterns of union formation among new unwed parents—first by looking at differences in parents’ relationship status at birth, and then by looking at what happens to relationships one year following the birth. This paper provides an initial investigation into family formation among unmarried parents; as additional data from the Fragile Families Study become available, we will be able to explore this topic using longitudinal data on the full sample.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

A multitude of studies across the social sciences have explored the causes and correlates of marriage and marital dissolution. Recently, this work has been extended to the factors affecting entry into or exit from cohabiting unions, although still very little is known about other kinds of relationships that do not involve co-residence (Raley 1998). Further, few empirical studies have examined possible linkages between nonmarital childbearing and union formation (Lichter and Graefe 1999).

Several major theoretical perspectives have been used to explain whether and when people choose to marry.¹ Economic theory predicts that individuals will choose to marry if they expect their total utility to be higher if they marry than if they remain single (Becker 1991). Sociological theory draws our attention to the importance of cultural norms, values and attitudes (Axinn and Thornton 1992; Clarkberg et al. 1995), the availability and quality of potential partners (Wilson 1987), and expectations about living standards based on earlier socialization and experiences (Oppenheimer 1988). Sociologists have also emphasized the importance of power dynamics between couples, noting that the partner with greater resources will be more

¹ We briefly summarize key theoretical perspectives here but do not test them in this paper; in future work we intend to further develop and test hypotheses driven by theory.

able to achieve his or her objectives with respect to the relationship (England and Farkas 1986; England and Kilbourne 1990).

The empirical literature points to several key factors that are linked to the formation and dissolution of marital unions. Economic status and opportunities at both the individual and aggregate levels are positively associated with entry into marriage (Lichter et al. 1992; Mare and Winship 1991). Blacks are less likely to marry, even holding constant the composition of potential partners (Schoen and Kluegel 1988). Older age and higher education are also linked to a greater likelihood of marriage. Also, as would be expected, individuals who highly value marriage are more likely to marry (and less likely to cohabit) (Clarkberg et al. 1995). Factors associated with greater marital dissolution include younger age at marriage and lower male earnings (Becker et al. 1977).

Research on cohabiting unions indicates that cohabitation is a ‘looser bond’ with less stringent criteria for partner selection (compared to marriage), at least with respect to ascribed characteristics such as age, race and religion (Schoen and Weinick 1993). Cohabitation is more frequent among those with low-education and those who did not grow up in an intact family (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Bumpass and Lu 2000). As with marriage, economic resources are associated with stability—and deprivation with instability—in cohabiting unions (Wu and Pollard 2000).

DATA, SAMPLE AND VARIABLES

Data

We use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a new national study designed to provide a longitudinal examination of the conditions and capabilities of new

unmarried parents and the consequences for children.² The study provides detailed information about the characteristics of fathers, the nature of relationships between unmarried mothers and fathers, and the extent to which fathers are involved with their children. The study follows a birth cohort of about 3,700 children born to unmarried parents in twenty U.S. cities; the full sample is representative of all nonmarital births to parents residing in cities with populations over 200,000. Also, a comparison group of married parents is interviewed in each of the twenty cities, and the full sample of married births is approximately 1,100. New mothers are interviewed in person at the hospital within 48 hours of having given birth, and fathers are interviewed in person either in the hospital or are located as soon as possible thereafter. Follow-up interviews will be conducted when the child is 12, 30 and 48 months old.

Overall response rates in the Fragile Families study are extremely high. Eighty-five percent of eligible mothers were interviewed (89 percent of unmarried and 83 percent of married mothers). Of the eligible fathers, 76 percent participated in the study, but response rates varied greatly by fathers' relationship status with the mothers; the study is most representative of fathers who are in a romantic relationship with the mother, moderately representative of fathers who are friends with the mother, and least representative of fathers who have little or no contact with the mother. However, since all mothers are asked questions about the fathers, we have some information about the missing fathers which enables us to generalize about all unmarried fathers for some characteristics.

² Unmarried parents and their children are deemed "fragile" because of the multiple risks associated with nonmarital childbearing (including poverty) and to signify the vulnerability of the parents' relationship.

Sample

In this paper, we use data from the baseline interviews conducted in all twenty cities in the Fragile Families Study.³ Our baseline sample includes the 4,900 mothers who were interviewed shortly after their child's birth—3,712 unmarried and 1,188 married mothers. We include married mothers in our analyses because we want to compare the effects of different variables across various relationship statuses. We also use data from the 12-month follow-up survey available only for the first two cities—Oakland, California and Austin, Texas—to examine union dissolution and transitions into marriage. For these two cities, we have information on 577 mothers, interviewed approximately one year after their child's birth.⁴

Variables

For our dependent variables, we use several dichotomous indicators of parents' relationship status, all based on mothers' reports about their marital status, cohabitation status, and the type of relationship they have with the baby's father. From this information, we develop mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories of: married, cohabiting, visiting (romantically involved but living apart), and not in a romantic relationship. Mother's age is specified as a continuous variable. Mother's race is represented by dummy variables for non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black (omitted), Hispanic, and other race. Mother's family background is represented by a dichotomy for whether she lived with both of her parents at age 15. Mother's and father's education are each included as continuous variables (to conserve degrees of freedom, given some of our small sample sizes) ranging from 1 (less than high school education)

³ The twenty cities are: Oakland, CA; San Jose, CA; Jacksonville, FL; Chicago, IL; Indianapolis, IN; Boston, MA; Baltimore, MD; Detroit, MI; Newark, NJ; New York City, NY; Toledo, OH; Philadelphia, PA; Pittsburgh, PA; Nashville, TN; Austin, TX; Corpus Christi, TX; San Antonio, TX; Norfolk, VA; Richmond, VA; and Milwaukee, WI.

⁴ We will utilize follow-up data for all 20 cities when they become available.

to 4 (college degree or higher). Father's work status is determined by whether the mother reports that he worked in the week prior to the survey.

Mother's distrust of men is represented by a dichotomous variable coded 1 if she "agrees" or "strongly agrees" with the statement: "Men cannot be trusted to be faithful." Mother's attitudes toward marriage are determined by the average score of her responses to three statements about the importance of marriage: 1) "It is better for a couple to get married than to just live together", 2) "It is better for children if their parents are married", and 3) "Living together is just the same as being married" (coding reversed); responses range from 1 "Strongly disagree" to 4 "Strongly agree".⁵ An additional dummy variable is included for mothers who exhibit very positive attitudes toward marriage (score of 3.0 or higher on the attitudes index) and who have a college degree or higher education.

Whether the father has a substance abuse problem is indicated by the mother reporting that the father "[has] problems such as keeping a job or getting along with family and friends because of alcohol or drug use." Father's physical violence is represented by a dummy variable coded as 1 if the mother responds that the father "often" or "sometimes" "hits or slaps [her] when he is angry." Frequency of conflict is represented by the mean of mothers' reports about whether they have "never" (1), "sometimes" (2), or "often" (3) had conflict over six items in the last month—money, spending time together, sex, the pregnancy, drinking or drug use, and being faithful (alpha=.65).⁶ Supportiveness in the relationship is measured by mothers' reports about the frequency that the father: is fair and willing to compromise when they have a disagreement; expresses affection or love; insults or criticizes her or her ideas (coding was reversed); and

⁵ Factor analysis was used to determine that these items could be combined into an index (alpha=.64).

⁶ For couples who are no longer romantically involved, mothers are asked about the frequency of conflict during the last month they were together with the father; since this was likely a contentious time in their relationship,

encourages or helps her to do things that are important to her. Again, response options are “never” (1), “sometimes” (2), and “often” (3). Factor analysis showed that these items could be combined into a single index, so the items were averaged to obtain an overall supportiveness score (range=1 to 3; $\alpha=.52$); higher scores indicate a greater level of supportiveness.

DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTICS

Descriptive information about the sample, by relationship status at the time of the child’s birth, is shown in Table 1. As can be seen, the biggest differences we observe are between married and unmarried parents. Married mothers are older, more likely to be non-Hispanic white, to have lived with both parents at age 15, and to have higher educational attainment than their unmarried counterparts. Married fathers also have higher education and are more likely to be working than unmarried fathers. Large differences are also observed in mothers’ attitudes and in relationship characteristics: married mothers are less likely to distrust men and (not surprisingly) more likely to have higher positive attitudes toward marriage than unmarried mothers; married mothers are less likely to report that the father has a problem with substance use or that he is physically violent. The mean frequency of conflict score is also lower among married mothers, and the mean level of supportiveness is higher, although cohabiting mothers report similar levels of support. Examining differences across categories of unmarried parents, cohabitators are somewhat more advantaged than parents in “visiting” relationships and parents who are not romantically involved. Again, these within-group differences are much smaller than the differences between married and unmarried parents overall.

Table 2 shows relationship status at the 12-month follow-up survey by categories of relationship status at the time of the child’s birth (i.e. the percentages shown are of the row

differences in conflict between couples still together versus those no longer romantically involved may be

totals) for the two cities for which we have follow-up data. Not surprisingly, marriage is the most stable status; 93 percent of married couples remain married one year after having a child together.⁷ Among unmarried couples, cohabiting relationships are much more stable over time than other types of relationships, including those where the parents are romantically involved but living apart. Apparently, having made the decision to cohabit by the time of the child's birth implies a certain commitment to the relationship and to raising the child together. Overall, 78 percent of couples that were cohabiting at the time their child was born remain in a co-residential union at 12 months—15 percent are now legally married and 63 percent are continuing to cohabite; four percent of the parents who were cohabiting at birth indicate that they are still romantically involved but living separately, 9 percent say they are “friends,” and 9 percent have broken up completely.

Couples who were romantically involved but not living together at the time their child was born (which we refer to as “visiting”) are very likely to have changed statuses in the year subsequent to the child's birth—only 17 percent remain in the visiting category one year after the child's birth. Thirty-two percent of visitors have “moved up” in their relational involvement—26 percent are cohabiting, and six percent have gotten married. Yet, the majority of visitors at baseline (52 percent) are no longer romantically involved—one-quarter are “friends” and 27 percent of mothers report that they are not in any kind of relationship with the father. Of those who began as “friends,” over half say they are not in any relationship 12 months later, and 37 percent remain friends; nine percent of such couples are romantically involved one year later—three percent are visiting, and six percent are cohabiting. Finally, of the small number of mothers who had no relationship at the time their child was born (indicated by their report that

exaggerated.

they “hardly ever” or “never” talk to the father), nearly three-quarters still have no relationship one year later; 22 percent say they are friends, and four percent indicated that they are cohabiting.

Taken together, these figures indicate that stability and change in relationships among couples with a new child are highly dependent on their status at the time of their child’s birth. As might be expected, stability appears to correspond to the level of commitment implied by the various statuses. Marriage—which reflects both a legal agreement and co-residence—is most stable, followed by cohabitation—which involves co-residence but no legal contract, and visiting—which implies neither a legal arrangement nor shared living space. Those without any sort of romantic involvement at the time of birth are least likely to be closely involved one year later.

MULTIVARIATE RESULTS

Given the strong correlation between parents’ relationship at the time of the child’s birth and their relationship one year later, we are interested in the characteristics of parents that are associated with being in particular types of romantic relationships at the time of the child’s birth (using the full sample), as well as the factors that predict relationship changes over time (using the follow-up data). In this vein, we estimate multivariate regression models predicting five outcomes. First, we investigate the characteristics associated with the mother’s being in *any* romantic relationship with the father at baseline (married, cohabiting or visiting versus no relationship). Second, among couples who are romantically-involved, we examine the factors that differentiate co-residential unions —cohabiting or married—from living separately. Third, among those who are co-resident (either cohabiting or married), we examine the attributes that

⁷ It is unclear why 2.8 percent of married couples identify themselves as “cohabiting” one year later; this could be

are associated with marriage (compared to cohabitation).⁸ Finally, using the follow-up data from two cities, we examine the factors that predict breaking-up (among all couples that were romantically involved at birth), and marriage (among couples that were cohabiting or visiting at baseline).

Identical models are estimated for each of the five outcomes.⁹ The first model includes background characteristics of the mother—race/ethnicity, age and whether she lived with both parents at age 15. In model 2, three measures of socioeconomic status are added—mother’s education, father’s education and whether the father worked in the week prior to the survey. Finally, in the third model, general attitudes of the mother (toward men and marriage) are entered into the equation, as well as aspects of the relationship with the father—whether he has a substance abuse problem, whether he is physically violent toward the mother, the frequency of conflict in the mother-father relationship, and the level of father’s supportiveness in the relationship.

Relationship at the Time of the Child’s Birth

Table 3 presents regression results for being in particular relationship types at the time of the child’s birth. The left-most panel shows the likelihood that couples are in *any* romantic relationship at the time their child is born. Focusing on the full model (model 3), Hispanics and

due to coding errors.

⁸ With this approach, we are effectively treating relationship decisions as ordered and linear, with each subsequent decision dependent upon previous decisions (i.e. the decision to marry is conditional on having decided to co-reside, which is conditional on having decided to be romantically involved). While it seems logical that decisions about the type of union might be conditional on any romantic involvement, it is less clear that deciding to co-reside necessarily precedes deciding to marry. The literature is ambiguous on this subject, with some research supporting cohabitation as a transitional stage between singlehood and marriage (Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990), and other research refuting the notion of cohabitation as a “middle” category (Clarkberg 1999).

⁹ Two exceptions to this are that because of the small sample size for the follow-up data, we were not able to include the variable indicating whether the father is physically violent as well as the dummy variable for mother’s being pro-

older mothers are more likely to be romantically involved; otherwise, the background factors do not appear to affect romantic involvement. It is striking that the mother's family background does not affect whether she is able or willing to enter into a romantic relationship, although subsequent analyses will show that family experiences do affect the type of relationship she is likely to enter. Socioeconomic factors also do not differentiate couples that are romantically involved from those that have broken up. Thus, economic resources (current or potential) do not appear to be a pre-requisite for unwed couples being able to maintain a romantic attachment with each other, at least up until the time of the birth.

Women who have positive attitudes toward marriage are more likely to be romantically involved with the father than women who are less positive. The fact that the coefficient for the dummy variable of being very pro-marriage and having a bachelor's degree or higher is marginally significant provides some support for the idea that women with a high level of resources are better able to achieve their intentions with respect to family formation; in other words, controlling for education and pro-marriage attitudes, women with a college degree (who represent 11 percent of the total sample) and very pro-marriage views are even *more* likely to be in a relationship with the father than other mothers.

With respect to characteristics of the father and the father-mother relationship, several negative behaviors and conditions discourage romantic relationships. If the father has a problem with substance abuse (reported by the mother), the couple is less likely to be romantically involved at the time of the child's birth. Also, the father's being physically violent has a marginally-significant negative association with being in a romantic relationship. Thus, if the father has some types of serious personal problems, relationships are more likely to have

marriage and having a bachelor's degree or higher in the models predicting relationships at 12 months. We will include such in future analyses with the full 12-month sample.

dissolved prior to the child's birth. This could, in fact, be a positive outcome for children and mothers insofar as continued involvement with such men may threaten their physical or emotional wellbeing. While the frequency of conflict between the parents does not have any link to whether the couple is romantically involved or not, the quality of their relationship (measured by father's supportiveness toward the mother) has a strong positive association with being romantically involved.

The middle panel in Table 3 shows results for the likelihood that couples who are romantically involved (at baseline) are in a co-residential union (either marriage or nonmarital cohabitation). Among the background factors, race/ethnicity is an important factor affecting whether a couple is co-residing: non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics are much more likely to be sharing a household than non-Hispanic blacks. Older mothers are also more likely to be living with the father. While intact family background is initially associated with being in a co-residential union, this coefficient is reduced to insignificance after other variables are included in models 2 and 3. With respect to socioeconomic status, the mother's economic potential (represented by her education) does not appear to affect being in a co-residential union, whereas father's economic potential is positively associated with co-residence. Also, the coefficient on father's employment status is significant, indicating that the father's current economic capacity is important for whether the couple decides to share a household.

Gender distrust is also an important factor for co-residence—mothers who say they do not trust men to be faithful are less likely to be living with the father in either marriage or cohabitation. Also, having positive views of marriage is associated with a greater likelihood that a couple is co-residing versus living apart. Beyond the main effects of education and marriage attitudes, being very pro-marriage and highly-educated has an additional effect on the likelihood

of co-residence. This finding provides some evidence that women with greater resources are better able to achieve their objectives with respect to relationships.

It is striking that father's substance problems and violence don't seem to effect whether the parents are living together, conditional on the existence of some type of romantic relationship. Rather, these behaviors appear to be most salient for whether the couple maintains a romantic relationship up until the birth of the child. Also, the frequency of conflict between the parents doesn't affect whether they live together which is notable given the attention in the literature to the negative effects of parental conflict. Yet, the positive quality of the relationship (father's supportiveness) is strongly linked to being in some sort of co-residential union, with better relationships more likely to have "moved up" to co-residence than lower-quality relationships.

The right-most panel of Table 3 shows logistic regression results for the likelihood of being in a marital union for couples who are co-residential. Background factors are highly predictive of which couples are married—non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics are much more likely to be married than blacks, conditional on co-residence. Also, older mothers are more likely to be married than younger mothers, as are mothers who lived with both parents at age 15. The socioeconomic variables are also strongly associated with being married: both mother's and father's education, as well as father's current employment status, are all positively related to marriage.

Of the variables entered in the third model, mothers who believe men cannot be trusted are less likely to be married. This implies that a higher 'threshold' of trust is required for marriage than for cohabitation. As would be expected, mothers who hold more positive views of marriage are more likely to be married. Contrary to the results for co-residence, there is no

additional effect on marriage of being very pro-marriage and having a bachelor's degree.¹⁰ None of the variables related to the mother's relationship with the father—his substance abuse, his being violent, the frequency of conflict, or the father's supportiveness—have any significant effect on whether couples are married as opposed to cohabiting.

Relationships One Year after Child's Birth

Table 4 presents regression results for relationships one year following the child's birth among couples that were romantically involved at the time of the birth. The first panel shows results for whether the couple broke up during the year subsequent to the birth. As would be expected, given the bivariate results in Table 2, couples in visiting relationships at the time of the child's birth are much more likely to have broken up by 12 months after birth. While in model 1, cohabitators are more likely to have broken up than married couples, after the other socioeconomic variables are added in model 2, the effect of cohabitation is only marginally significant. (However, this effect would likely be significant with a larger sample). Controlling for baseline relationship status, race/ethnicity is not related to whether or not couples break up. Mother's older age decreases the likelihood of breaking up, indicating that her maturity fosters relationship stability. While family background is initially significant, it becomes insignificant once variables in models 2 and 3 are included. Better-educated mothers are slightly less likely to be in relationships that break up than less educated mothers, but the significance is only marginal. Neither father's education nor his employment status (at birth) are significantly associated with the dissolution of the couple's relationship. Thus, it appears that while parents' socioeconomic characteristics affect their entry *into* particular relationship types (shown in Table 3), they do not

¹⁰ We also ran multinomial logit models for marriage, cohabitation and visiting among couples who were romantically involved. In these models, the variable of being highly pro-marriage and highly educated had a marginally-significant positive association with marriage compared to being in a visiting relationship.

affect their exits from relationship, at least not in the short time-frame examined here. Also, it is striking that none of the attitudinal or relationship variables are significantly related to breaking up. Overall, these results indicate that the type of relationship at the time of birth is the key factor in determining whether or not the couple will break up within one year. Beyond mother's higher age (which decreases the likelihood of dissolution), none of the other individual or relationship characteristics examined here appear to matter.

Finally, we were interested to explore what factors might be associated with getting married among couples who are romantically involved at birth (either visiting or cohabiting). These results must be viewed as particularly tentative because the number of cases in the analysis is very small ($n=271$). While not significant in these models when other controls are included, the effect of cohabiting is large and will likely be significant with data for all 20 cities (and is significant in bivariate models). Race/ethnicity is an important factor predicting marriage—both whites and Hispanics are more likely than blacks to get married, conditional on being romantically involved at the time of a nonmarital birth. Mother's age does not affect marriage however. Family background also has no effect on marriage. While this finding may initially seem counter-intuitive, we should point out that these women have *already* had a nonmarital birth (which is counter to the effect of intact family structure increasing the likelihood of being married at the time of birth shown in Table 3). To the extent that the women in this analysis are 'nontraditional' as evidenced by their having had a child outside of marriage, we wouldn't necessarily expect their (traditional) family background to affect their subsequent marriage.

With respect to the socioeconomic factors, the effect of mother's education is only marginally significant, but the coefficient is large and would probably be significant with the full

sample. Father's education and employment have no discernible effect on the likelihood of marriage. For the attitudinal variables, mother's distrust of men doesn't appear to deter marriage, but the mother's having positive views of marriage increases the likelihood of marriage. The father's having a problem with substance abuse does not affect marriage, which corroborates our earlier finding that his problems matter for getting *into* a romantic relationship but do not differentiate which type of relationship he is in. Finally, more supportive relationships are more likely to move toward marriage; although the significance is only marginal, the magnitude of the effect is large.

DISCUSSION

These results show that characteristics of parents and of their relationships differentially affect the nature of parents' relationship around the time a child is born, as well as what happens to the relationship over time. Overall, we find support for the idea that relationships lie along a continuum of sorts, with varying 'thresholds' for entering into particular statuses. Marriage is the most stringent union type, followed by cohabitation and then visiting. Older age and Hispanic ethnicity are the only factors that are consistently and positively associated with each of the relationship outcomes at baseline (while non-Hispanic whites are equally likely as non-Hispanic blacks to be in a romantic relationship). Beyond these two background factors, the pattern of results diverges across the various specifications.

To some extent, being romantically involved at the time a child is born could be considered the default status; this is because all couples in the sample have had a child together, indicating that they were romantically—or at least sexually—involved approximately nine

months prior to the birth (and the interview).¹¹ Not surprisingly, couples are more likely to be romantically involved if the mother wants to marry and if the relationship is of higher quality. On the contrary, the father's having serious problems—either with substance abuse or violence—is a key factor associated with couples having broken up. Thus, the minimum 'threshold' for keeping any romantic relationship together appears to be the father's lack of negative behaviors. Socioeconomic status does not appear to be important for whether couples are romantic.

Moving to the analyses of whether couples that are romantically involved are co-residing, we find that additional criteria are salient for whether couples have entered into a co-residential union by the time their child is born. Non-black race/ethnicity and older mother age are both positively associated with co-residing with the father. Family background is not important—controlling for socioeconomic and relationship characteristics, mothers who lived with both parents at age 15 are no more or less likely to be co-residing than mothers from non-intact families. While the mother's economic potential appears not to matter for the formation of co-residential unions, the father's socioeconomic status *is* important, and both his current and potential economic resources are strongly associated with co-residence. Thus, economic stability of the male partner appears to be an important criteria for whether mothers are willing (or able) to set up a household with the father of their child(ren). This finding supports ethnographic work on low-income couples indicating that women have a “pay and stay” rule: if a father is not able to contribute financial resources to the household, mothers are typically unwilling to cohabit with

¹¹ It is possible that for some unmarried mothers, the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest; while we do not have information about this from the survey, we suspect that it is a small fraction of mothers. Even among mothers who indicate that they are not in a relationship with the baby's father at the time of birth (i.e. they “hardly ever” or “never” talk), 48 percent report that they want the father to be involved in raising the child. We cannot, however, directly determine the nature of relationships among the other 52 percent and what may be the reasons for which they don't want the father involved.

him (Edin and Lein 1997). This point is all the more true for marriage, where the man's ability to provide a steady income remains a "cultural requirement" (Cherlin 1998). Gender distrust is also important for co-residence; while women who don't generally trust men to be faithful are willing to be in a romantic relationship with the father, they are significantly less-likely to be co-residing with him. This implies that there is a higher level of trust required to move in with the father—either in a married or cohabiting state. (Or perhaps men who are unfaithful are unwilling to move in with the mother or vice versa). Positive attitudes toward marriage also increase the likelihood that couples are living together, and this is even more the case among women who are very positive about marriage *and* highly educated.

In contrast to being in any kind of romantic relationship, fathers' having a substance problem or being violent are not linked to whether the couple is co-residing at the time of the child's birth. Instead, these criteria operate at the more fundamental level of determining whether there will be any romantic relationship at all: mothers who are not romantically involved with the father at the time of the child's birth are much more likely to report that he has a substance problem (17 percent) or is physically violent (12 percent), compared to mothers who are romantically involved (four percent report a substance problem and three percent that the father is violent). A higher level of supportiveness appears to differentiate co-residential relationships from non-co-residential relationships, just as it does for whether the couple is romantically involved at all or not.

Marriage represents the highest 'level' of relationship since it implies the greatest commitment and is the most difficult status to exit. As with co-residence, race/ethnicity also affects whether the co-residential couple is married (non-Hispanic white and Hispanic mothers are much more likely to be married than black mothers), and older mothers are more likely to be

married. Contrary to the results for co-residence, family background has a strong, significant effect—among mothers co-residing with the father, those who lived with both parents at age 15 are much more likely to be co-residing within marriage than outside of marriage.

All three socioeconomic variables distinguish marriage from cohabitation—mother’s and father’s education and father’s employment status.¹² This indicates that only the most advantaged mothers and fathers (in terms of socioeconomic status) formalize their relationship legally, while cohabitation substitutes for marriage among the less well-off. Gender distrust also distinguishes married from cohabiting relationships, although it is unclear who is rejecting whom. Mothers with positive attitudes about marriage are more likely to be married, but there is no additional effect on marriage of mothers being very pro-marriage and highly-educated. It is striking that none of the variables relating to father’s relationship with the mother affect whether parents who are co-residing are doing so within or outside of marriage. Thus, overall, we find that the quality of relationships does not differ between married and cohabiting couples, whereas parents’ background characteristics and socioeconomic status are associated with marriage.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides new information about union formation in fragile families. This topic is particularly important given the current policy environment that assumes greater reliance by unmarried mothers on private support rather than public assistance. Our results point to important differences between marital and nonmarital unions—and within nonmarital unions—as well as in the characteristics of parents who enter into them.

¹² This result is counter to the finding of Smock and Manning (1997) that only *men’s* economic circumstances affect marriage among cohabitators. This difference merits further investigation using better measures of economic status that will likely be available in subsequent waves of the Fragile Families Study.

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Table 1. Sample Description by Relationship Status at Time of Child's Birth

	Married	Unmarried			
		Total	Cohabiting	Visiting	Not romantic
<u>Background characteristics</u>					
<i>Mother's age</i>					
Under 20	3.3	21.9	18.2	27.2	22.0
20-24	18.2	41.4	43.4	38.6	41.2
25-29	31.1	20.8	21.7	19.1	21.9
30 and older	47.4	15.9	16.7	15.1	14.9
Mean age	29.33	23.97	24.26	23.58	23.90
<i>Mother's race</i>					
Non-Hispanic white	42.0	14.4	18.2	8.0	16.5
Non-Hispanic black	24.9	54.7	44.5	69.0	55.1
Hispanic	25.4	27.9	34.3	19.9	25.6
Other	7.8	3.0	3.0	3.2	2.8
Mother lived with both parents at age 15	65.2	36.3	39.8	32.2	34.5
<u>Socioeconomic status</u>					
<i>Mother's education</i>					
Less than high school	16.6	40.5	39.9	40.8	42.1
High school or the equivalent	20.0	33.5	33.5	34.2	32.0
Some college	28.9	22.9	23.3	22.1	22.7
College degree or higher	34.6	3.1	3.3	2.8	3.2
<i>Father's education</i>					
Less than high school	16.7	35.7	36.6	35.0	34.4
High school or the equivalent	24.3	41.1	38.8	44.8	40.5
Some college	27.8	19.5	20.6	18.0	19.2
College degree or higher	31.2	3.7	4.0	2.2	5.9
Father worked last week	90.9	74.9	80.4	68.7	69.2
<u>General attitudes</u>					
Mother distrusts men	10.7	24.5	19.4	26.2	34.9
Mean attitudes toward marriage (range=1-4)	3.10	2.68	2.65	2.71	2.70
Mother is pro-marriage & has B.A.+	16.3	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.5
<u>Mother's relationship with father</u>					
Father has substance abuse problem	2.3	6.4	3.7	5.5	16.6
Father is physically violent	2.0	4.8	3.1	3.7	11.8
Mean frequency of conflict (range=1-3)	1.31	1.47	1.42	1.48	1.61
Mean supportiveness score (range=1-3)	2.73	2.58	2.70	2.58	2.23
Number of cases (<i>n</i>)	1,188	3,704	1,782	1,271	651

Table 2: Relationship Status of Mothers in Austin and Oakland

Time of Birth	12 Months after Birth of Child					Number of Cases (<i>n</i>)
	Married	Cohabiting	Visiting	Friends	Not in Relationship	
Married	93.1	2.8	0.0	0.0	4.2	144
Cohabiting	15.2	63.0	4.4	8.7	8.7	230
Visiting	5.8	25.8	16.7	25.0	26.7	120
Friends	0.0	5.7	2.9	37.1	54.3	35
Not in relationship	0.0	4.4	0.0	21.7	73.9	46
Number of cases (<i>n</i>)	176	184	31	73	111	575

Note: Cohabitation at 12 months is defined as living together "all or most of the time" or "some of the time."

Table 3: Logistic Regression Results for Relationship Status at Time of Child's Birth (Odds Ratios)

	Romantic (of all parents)			Co-residing (of romantic)			Married (of co-residing)		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<u>Model 1</u>									
<i>Mother's race (omitted=black)</i>									
Non-Hispanic white	1.462 *	1.375 +	1.219	4.979 ***	4.315 ***	4.129 ***	3.381 ***	2.604 ***	3.183 ***
Hispanic	1.689 **	1.664 **	1.695 **	2.624 ***	2.710 ***	2.775 ***	1.130	1.508 **	1.924 ***
Other	3.011 *	2.847 *	3.263 *	2.379 ***	1.980 **	1.984 **	3.128 ***	2.074 **	2.164 **
Mother's age	1.040 **	1.032 **	1.048 ***	1.074 ***	1.054 ***	1.059 ***	1.155 ***	1.108 ***	1.114 ***
Mom with both parents age 15	1.240	1.206	1.080	1.240 *	1.161 +	1.120	1.907 ***	1.610 ***	1.567 ***
<u>Model 2</u>									
Mother's education	1.085	.992	.992		1.124 *	1.042		1.625 ***	1.506 ***
Father's education	.993	.860 +	.860 +		1.216 ***	1.162 **		1.471 ***	1.414 ***
Father worked last week	1.316 *	.972	.972		1.653 ***	1.537 ***		1.489 *	1.541 *
<u>Model 3</u>									
<i>General attitudes</i>									
Mother distrusts men	.807		.807			.746 **			.700 *
Mother's positive attitudes toward marriage	1.278 *		1.278 *			1.206 *			3.773 ***
Mother very pro-marriage and has B.A.+	3.824 +		3.824 +			2.629 *			1.766
<i>Mother's relationship with father</i>									
Father has substance problem	.544 **		.544 **			.809			1.257
Father is violent	.656 +		.656 +			1.245			1.134
Frequency of conflict	.917		.917			.903			.870
Father's supportiveness	7.568 ***		7.568 ***			2.045 ***			1.088
Log likelihood	-1039.60	-1036.87	-906.92	-1859.12	-1826.20	-1787.85	-1311.35	-1209.35	-1091.31
Chi-square	45.67 ***	51.13 ***	311.03 ***	423.92 ***	489.76 ***	566.46 ***	676.30 ***	880.32 ***	1116.39 ***
Pseudo R-squared	.022	.024	.146	.102	.118	.137	.205	.267	.338
Number of cases (n)	3,779	3,779	3,779	3,473	3,473	3,473	2,488	2,488	2,488

+p < .10 **p < .05 ***p < .01 ****p < .001

Table 4: Logistic Regression Results for Relationship Status at 12 Months (Odds Ratios)

	Broken up by 12 months (of romantic at baseline)			Married at 12 months (of unmarried romantic at baseline)		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<u>Model 1</u>						
<i>Relationship at baseline</i>						
Cohabiting	3.249 *	3.061 +	2.643 +	(omitted=visiting)	1.770	1.762
Visiting	13.565 ***	12.248 ***	10.161 ***	(not in model)		
<i>Race (omitted=black)</i>						
Non-Hispanic white	.787	.895	.843	7.373 **	6.049 **	7.784 **
Hispanic	.650	.658	.555	3.304 *	3.612 *	4.863 **
Other race	.496	.539	.392	6.644 *	5.119 *	7.930 *
Mother's age	.881 ***	.893 **	.880 **	1.034	1.020	1.026
Mom with both parents age 15	.533 *	.545 +	.591	.692	.689	.497
<u>Model 2</u>						
Mother's education		.679 +	.679 +		1.685 *	1.672 +
Father's education		1.263	1.275		.804	.830
Father worked last week		.748	.872		1.235	1.051
<u>Model 3</u>						
<i>General attitudes</i>						
Mother distrusts men			.848			1.493
Mother's positive attitudes toward marriage			.726			2.488 *
<i>Mother's relationship with father</i>						
Father has substance problem			2.929			1.077
Frequency of conflict			1.241			.677
Father's supportiveness			.596			3.668 +
Log likelihood	-150.07	-147.75	-143.82	-93.73	-91.63	-86.38
Chi-square	88.42 ***	93.06 ***	100.92 ***	21.08 **	25.29 **	35.78 **
Pseudo R-squared	.228	.240	.260	.002	.121	.172
Number of cases (<i>n</i>)	399	399	399	271	271	271

+*p* < .10 ***p* < .05 ****p* < .01 *****p* < .001