

Unwed moms far more likely to face poverty

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Fragile families
Rising poverty and declining marriage rates are a chicken-and-egg issue for so-called "fragile families," researchers say. Some of the findings in 2008, according to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey:

	FRANKLIN COUNTY	OHIO	U.S.
► Women ages 20-34 who have never been married	56.4%	54.9%	54.4%
► Births to unmarried women	38.3%	40%	35.2%
► Married-couple families with children living in poverty	8.4%	6.9%	7.5%
► Nonmarital households with children living in poverty	43.7%	43.6%	38.2%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

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Among the nation's social problems, few are as vexing as the rocky relationship between parenthood and matrimony.

Marriage reduces the likelihood that families will live in poverty. Yet the poor are the least likely to wed when they're expecting a baby.

"There's a lot of evidence of a real class divide in how families are formed," said Anastasia Snyder, an Ohio State University professor who studies family structure.

"We have two different trajectories, and it's worrisome," she said. "The rich are getting richer in terms of family behavior, too."

Data released by the U.S. Census Bureau last week show both high rates of poverty and out-of-wedlock births. Although researchers note that causes and effects aren't simple to connect - especially during a recession - there's little doubt that growing numbers of so-called fragile families make life harder on children.

In Franklin County, where the overall child-poverty rate rose to nearly 26 percent last year, households headed by single women with children were more than five times as likely to be poor. About 8 percent of married couples with children lived in poverty; nearly 44 percent of single mothers did.

"I think people are shocked when they look at the numbers," Snyder said.

It used to be that college-educated women had lower marriage rates than less-educated women, probably because they didn't need support. "That has flipped," Snyder said. "It's also an educational gap."

She and other researchers say one bright spot is that the census survey numbers don't reflect unmarried parents who live together, at least for a while. Thirty-five percent of all births in the U.S. are to unmarried women, and about half live with the fathers, Snyder said.

But, she added, "The downside is that those relationships are not very stable."

An ongoing national study of unwed parents by researchers at Princeton University and the Brookings Institution found that, within five years after a birth, much had unraveled. A third of children born to unmarried parents were seeing their fathers less than once a month, about 55 percent of the moms had formed new relationships, and their kids were showing poor test performance and behavior.

Robert I. Lerman of the Urban Institute, a social- and economic-policy research group in Washington, said family stability belongs high on a list of national priorities. "It's something we have to keep at because it's so critical," said Lerman, also an economics professor at American University in Washington. "It's not everything, but I personally think family structure is the single-most-important thing in dealing with the array of issues we face."

Dr. Pat Temple Gabbe, a clinical professor of medicine at OSU, runs a nutrition and cooking project for pregnant women in Weinland Park, a low-income neighborhood in the southeastern part of the University District. Of the eight women in her class, none is married, although some are in relationships.

"They're wonderful women," Gabbe said, "and they're all well below the poverty level. They sometimes don't have enough to eat."

She and others know that the trend away from traditional family structures has been long in the making and is difficult to reverse. Years of government policy that made it easier for women to get cash, housing or other types of public assistance when they're single didn't help, Gabbe said. "Some of this really interferes with marriage," she said.

For now, policymakers should do all they can to strengthen programs that help with stability, the

Princeton-Brookings report on fragile families says. That can mean everything from safety-net assistance such as food stamps to revised criminal-sentencing laws to pregnancy prevention.

In many ways, Lerman said, the nation's health depends on it.

"We have to keep it on the radar screen," he said. "If one thing doesn't work, try something else."

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