

New Analysis Finds Unwed Parents in Stable Relationships Pre-Childbearing, Not After; Suggests Policies to Stabilize Fragile Families

With non-marital childbearing increasing dramatically over the past several decades -- growing ten-fold from 4 percent in 1940 to 40 percent in 2007 -- society has struggled with the consequences of this trend on the children in these families, impacts on society at large, as well as the government's role. In the most comprehensive analysis to date of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, the new issue of the Princeton-Brookings [The Future of Children](#) journal released today focuses on these so-called "fragile families," finding that unwed parents share a host of characteristics that complicate their getting good jobs, forming stable families, and performing successfully as parents.

Within five years after the birth, the analysis found, one-third of children born to unmarried parents see their father less than once a month, 55 percent of mothers have formed new relationships, and children are already showing problems in school in terms of both academic performance and behavior. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the study found that the majority of unwed parents have close and loving relationships at the time of their children's birth -- more than half were living together, and an additional one-third were dating. In other words, most babies in unwed families are not the product of one-night stands. The couples also discussed marriage: 87 percent of fathers and 72 percent of mothers gave their relationship a 50/50 chance of leading to legal union.

Given the study's findings, co-editors Ron Haskins of the Brookings Center on Children and Families, Sara McLanahan, Christina Paxson and Elizabeth Donahue of Princeton University, [Columbia's Irwin Garfinkel](#), and Columbia's Ronald Mincy [indentify several initiatives](#) for policymakers to address these issues:

- Aggressively implement and expand policies that have been shown to reduce nonmarital births;
- Strengthen safety net programs providing cash and in-kind support to custodial and noncustodial parents, and help them find work;
- Redesign tax and transfer programs so that children have access to high-quality early education and high-quality health care, and do not cut or reduce benefits if parents marry or live together;
- Revise criminal sentencing laws and experiment with policies designed to help men avoid prison, and if prison cannot be avoided, help integrate them back into their communities post-incarceration; and
- Continue healthy marriage programs that have shown at least some promise in achieving the stability and positive-parent relationships that could prove helpful for these couples, their children, and the nation.

The latest [Future of Children](#) volume includes the following papers:

- [Parental Relationships in Fragile Families](#). Analysis by co-authors Sara McLanahan and Audrey Beck of Princeton dispels the conventional wisdom that nonmarital births are a result of casual encounters; however, five years after birth, the authors find that one-third of fathers have virtually disappeared from their children's lives. New partnerships bringing new children are common, leading to high levels of instability and complexity in these families. They examine the predictors of instability: low economic resources; government policies that contain marriage penalties; cultural norms that support single motherhood; demographic factors, such as shortages of marriageable men; and psychological factors. They conclude that ongoing experiments to test the effectiveness of relationship programs are important for shaping future interventions.
- [Mothers' Economic Conditions and Sources of Support in Fragile Families](#). Co-authors Ariel Kalil of the University of Chicago and Georgetown's Rebecca Ryan find that very few unmarried mothers earn enough to support themselves and their children at more than twice the federal poverty level; however they find that these mothers do make ends meet in many ways. Given that the fragile family is likely an enduring fixture in this country, the authors argue that it is essential to strengthen policies that both support these families' economic self-sufficiency and alleviate

their hardship during times of economic distress. They advocate strengthening the public safety net and bolstering community-based programs.

- [Capabilities and Contributions of Unwed Fathers](#). Author Robert Lerman of American University examines how the capabilities and contributions of unwed fathers fall short of those of married fathers. Unwed fathers who marry or cohabit with their child's mother earn considerably higher wages and work substantially more; however, marriage alone does not explain the significant differences in earnings that are associated with the lower age, education, and work experience of unmarried fathers. Lerman points out that better-educated fathers, those who most identify with the father's role, and those with good relationships with their children's mothers are most likely to sustain a relationship with their children. He proposes initiatives aimed at increasing the earnings of fathers.
- [Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing](#) by Columbia's Jane Waldfogel and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and Princeton's Terry-Ann Craigie. The authors find that children who grow up in single-mother and cohabiting families fare worse than children born into married-couple households. The authors suggest policy reforms aimed at improving children's outcomes: reducing the rate of unwed births or promoting family stability among unwed parents; boosting resources in single-parent homes or fostering father involvement in fragile families; and addressing the risks these children face by providing high-quality early childhood education and home-visiting.
- [Race and Ethnicity in Fragile Families](#) by Robert Hummer of the University of Texas-Austin and Erin Hamilton of the University of California-Davis. The authors find that black mothers have the lowest rates of marriage and cohabitation and the highest breakup rates, while Mexican immigrant mothers have the highest rates of marriage and cohabitation and the lowest breakup rates. They also find that white mothers have more socioeconomic resources, access to health care and child care than black, Mexican American, and Mexican immigrant mothers, and that black and white unmarried mothers are equally likely to have finished high school, whereas Mexican immigrant and Mexican American mothers are less likely to have done so. The authors note that despite severe poverty, Mexican immigrant families have high rates of marriage and cohabitation -- an advantage that erodes by the second generation. To address the paradox that marriage in these families declines as socioeconomic status improves, they support policies that reinforce the family ties of Mexican immigrants.
- [An Ounce of Prevention: Policy Prescriptions to Reduce the Prevalence of Fragile Families](#) by Brookings' Isabel Sawhill, Adam Thomas and Emily Monea. The authors believe that policies should focus on the reduction in births to unmarried parents, especially since so many of these parents have their first children when they are teenagers. They present simulations of the costs and effects of a mass media campaign encouraging condoms use, a teen pregnancy prevention program discouraging sexual activity and educating teens about contraceptives, and expanded Medicaid-subsidized contraception. They find that the Medicaid expansion has the largest benefit-cost ratio, followed by the condom use campaign and then by the teen pregnancy program.
- [Incarceration in Fragile Families](#). Yale's Christopher Wildeman and Harvard's Bruce Western examine the effects of the prison boom and how it has been concentrated among the same segments of society in which fragile families are most likely to be formed. The authors argue that mass imprisonment may exacerbate future racial and class inequality and may even lead to more crime in the long-term, and advocate for limiting prison time for drug offenders and for parole violators, relying instead on alternatives such as intensive community supervision, drug treatment, graduated sanctions, and post-prison support. However, they argue that criminal justice reform alone will not solve the problems that pave the way to prison; they call for a greater commitment to education, health, and the employment opportunities of low-skilled men and women.
- [Unmarried Parents in College](#) by Sara Goldrick-Rab and Kia Sorensen of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The authors focus on how postsecondary education affects the lives of

unmarried mothers in fragile families, arguing that because current postsecondary educational policy and practice is insufficiently supportive, college attendance may, ironically, have substantial downsides for many families headed by unmarried parents. They point out that many public programs, such as Pell Grants, federal subsidized loans, and welfare, offer support to unmarried mothers attending college, but that the programs are neither well coordinated nor easily accessed. They point to several programs that could make a difference if implemented on a larger scale.

- [Marriage and Fatherhood Programs](#) by Phillip Cowan and Carolyn Pape Cowan of the University of California-Berkeley and Virginia Knox of MRDC. The authors present a conceptual model to explain why couple-relationship and father-involvement interventions that were developed for middle- and low-income married couples might be expected to provide benefits for children of unmarried parents. They note few evaluated programs have included unmarried couples as participants and none has investigated whether interventions may have different effects when unmarried fathers live with or apart from the child. The authors emphasize the need for more research on program development to understand the most effective ways to strengthen co-parenting by couples who are the biological parents of a child but who have relatively tenuous, or already dissolved, relationships with one another.

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