

Parental Relationships in Fragile Families

Sara McLanahan and Audrey N. Beck

Summary

As nonmarital childbearing escalated in the United States over the past half century, fragile families—defined as unmarried couples with children—drew increased interest from researchers and policy makers. Sara McLanahan and Audrey Beck discuss four aspects of parental relationships in these families: the quality of parents' intimate relationship, the stability of that relationship, the quality of the co-parenting relationship among parents who live apart, and nonresident fathers' involvement with their child.

At the time of their child's birth, half of the parents in fragile families are living together and another third are living apart but romantically involved. Despite high hopes at birth, five years later only a third of parents are still together, and new partners and new children are common, leading to high levels of instability and complexity in these families.

Drawing on findings from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, McLanahan and Beck highlight a number of predictors of low relationship quality and stability in these families, including low economic resources, government policies that discourage marriage, gender distrust and acceptance of single motherhood, sex ratios that favor men, children from previous unions, and psychological factors that make it difficult for parents to maintain healthy relationships. No single factor appears to have a dominant effect.

The authors next discuss two types of experiments that attempt to establish causal effects on parental relationships: those aimed at altering economic resources and those aimed at improving relationships.

What can be done to strengthen parental relationships in fragile families? The authors note that although economic resources are a consistent predictor of stable relationships, researchers and policy makers lack good causal information on whether increasing fathers' employment and earnings will increase relationship quality and union stability. They also note that analysts need to know more about whether relationship quality in fragile families can be improved directly and whether doing so will increase union stability, father involvement, and co-parenting quality.

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Nonmarital childbearing increased dramatically in the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century, changing the context in which American children are raised and giving rise to a new family form—fragile families, defined as unmarried couples with children. Some analysts see these changes as a positive sign of greater individual freedom and women’s economic independence; others argue that they contribute to poverty and income inequality.¹ Given the importance of families to children’s health and development, researchers and policy makers have become increasingly interested in the nature of parental relationships in fragile families and their implications for children’s future life chances, especially children’s access to resources and the stability and quality of these resources. Parents living in cooperative, stable unions tend to pool their incomes and work together to raise their child. By contrast, those living apart in noncooperative relationships can jeopardize their child’s resources, both financial and social.²

In this article we review research findings about parental relationships in fragile families. We focus on four aspects of the parental relationship: the quality of intimate relationships, relationship stability, nonresident fathers’ involvement with their child, and the quality of the co-parenting relationship between parents who live apart. Each of these indicators tells us something important about the parental relationship, and viewing them all together provides a more complete picture than looking at only one or two. In the first section of this article, we describe parental relationships at the birth of the child and examine how they evolve during the first five years after birth. In the second, we describe what is known (from

nonexperimental research) about the determinants of good relationships. In the third, we discuss experiments that identify causal effects on parental relationships, as well as the implications of these findings for policy makers and practitioners. The first two sections are based primarily on analyses using the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study because these data provide the most extensive (and recent) information on the population of interest—unmarried parents. Although a broader literature examines cohabiting unions and transitions into and out of cohabiting unions, it is based mostly on samples that combine childless adults with parents or divorced mothers with never-married mothers.³ When such studies are included, we note it.

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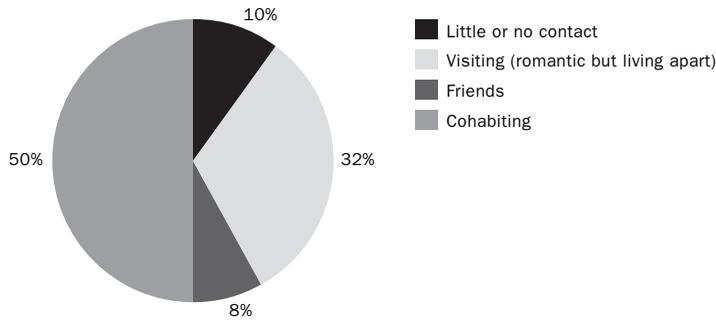
In the following discussion we describe what we have learned about parental relationships in fragile families, starting with a description of the parental relationship at the time of the child’s birth and continuing up to five years after the birth.

Relationships at Birth

According to data from the Fragile Families study, most unmarried parents are in a romantic relationship at the time their child is born. (See figure 1.) Approximately 50 percent are cohabiting, and another 30 percent are romantically involved but living apart (visiting). The proportion of romantically involved parents is similar for whites, blacks, and Hispanics, although blacks are less likely to be cohabiting than other groups.⁴

At the time of the birth, most parents are optimistic about their future together and report relatively high levels of relationship quality. As shown in table 1, more than 91

Figure 1. Parental Relationships at Birth



percent of cohabiting mothers and over half of single mothers say their chances of marrying the father are “fifty-fifty or better.” Reports of relationship quality are measured on a supportiveness scale that notes how often the other parent is “fair and willing to compromise, loving and affectionate, critical or insulting, and encouraging.” Such reports are quite positive among unmarried parents, with cohabiting parents reporting the same level of supportiveness as married parents. On a supportiveness scale from 1 (rarely) to 3 (very often), unmarried parents score 2.6 whereas married parents score 2.7. (These findings, it should be noted, are based on parents who are in a romantic relationship at

birth and do not include parents who have ended the romantic relationship.) Unlike the largely positive reports of relationship quality, mothers’ reports of domestic violence are nearly twice as high among unmarried mothers as among married mothers.⁵

Most unmarried parents also have very positive attitudes toward marriage. As shown in table 1, close to two-thirds of unmarried mothers and three-quarters of unmarried fathers agree with the statement that “it is better for children if their parents are married.” At the same time, a high proportion of unmarried mothers—between 80 and 88 percent—also agree that “a mother living

Table 1. Marriage Attitudes and Relationship Quality at Time of Child’s Birth

Percent unless otherwise specified	Mothers				Fathers			
	Married	Cohabiting	Single	Total Unmarried	Married	Cohabiting	Single	Total Unmarried
Chances of marriage are 50/50 or better	—	91.8	52.2	72.0	—	95.2	74.6	90.0
Marriage is better for kids*	83.4	68.1	61.2	64.6	90.5	78.8	77.4	78.3
Single mother can raise child alone*	59.5	80.4	88.2	84.3	33.8	48.8	56.7	51.9
Men/women cannot be trusted to be faithful*	10.4	18.1	33.1	25.7	4.5	12.7	20.6	15.8
Men/women are out to take advantage*	11.6	15.4	22.7	19.1	5.1	15.5	20.6	17.5
Supportiveness scale (1–3)	2.7	2.7	2.4	2.6	2.7	2.7	2.6	2.6
Any violence**	4.5	7.0	7.6	7.3	—	—	—	—

*Agree or agree strongly. **Uses questions from 1-year follow-up.

Table 2. Father's Involvement at Birth

Percent	Cohabiting	Visiting	Single
Gave money/bought things for child	96.5	84.0	27.9
Helped in another way	97.7	74.6	21.9
Visited baby's mother in hospital	96.5	71.4	29.2
Child will take father's surname	92.9	73.8	37.2
Father's name is on birth certificate	96.1	80.3	51.6
Mother says father wants to be involved	99.4	98.6	73.9
Mother wants father to be involved	99.3	98.5	70.7

alone can raise a child just as well as a married mother.” These responses indicate that although most mothers believe that marriage is the ideal setting for raising children, they also think that a single mother can do the job alone. That mothers hold both beliefs at the same time is consistent with the view that marriage is an ideal but not a necessity. Andrew Cherlin, for example, argues that marriage has become a “capstone” rather than a normative life transition.⁶ Similarly, Kathryn Edin and her colleagues argue that couples are reluctant to marry until they have reached an imaginary “marriage bar,” which they associate with a middle-class lifestyle and view as essential for maintaining a stable marriage.⁷

Some researchers claim that gender distrust is an important obstacle to a successful marriage,⁸ and indeed, these data indicate that a nontrivial share of unmarried mothers hold opinions of men that might discourage forming long-term stable unions. One-quarter of unmarried mothers believe that men cannot be trusted to be faithful, as compared with only 10 percent of married mothers. Unmarried mothers are also more likely to agree that “men are out to take advantage of women.” Levels of gender distrust tend to be higher among unmarried couples than among married mothers, although cohabiting

mothers are, on average, more trusting of men than mothers who are living alone.⁹ These findings are supported by in-depth interviews with a subsample of mothers that indicate that most unmarried couples experience infidelity, most commonly by the father, and 73 percent report sexual jealousy.¹⁰

Unmarried fathers are highly involved with the mothers of their child during the pregnancy and around the time of the birth. As shown in table 2, virtually all cohabiting fathers provide financial support or other types of assistance during the pregnancy, come to the hospital to see the mother and baby, and say they want to help raise the child. Among nonresident fathers, fathers in visiting relationships with the mother are more likely to be involved than others, although involvement is high even among fathers who are not in a romantic relationship with the mother. Most important, perhaps, a high proportion of all unmarried fathers say that they want to be involved in raising their child, and the mothers say they want the father's involvement.

Racial and Ethnic Differences

As noted, white and Hispanic unmarried parents are more likely to be living together at the time of their child's birth than are black parents. There also are racial and ethnic

differences in parents' expectations about marriage and views about marriage. In most instances, these differences are consistent with what one might expect. For example, minority parents are less likely than whites to say their chances of marriage are fifty-fifty or better and less likely to say that marriage is the best setting for raising children. Minority parents are also more likely than whites to say that a single mother can do as good a job of raising a child as a married mother. Finally, minority parents, especially Hispanic mothers, report more mistrust and more domestic violence than white parents. Whereas only 3 percent of white single mothers report that the father was violent in the past, the shares for black and Hispanic mothers are 8 and 12 percent, respectively. The gap among cohabiting mothers is even higher, with 32 percent of Hispanic mothers reporting violence as compared with 6 and 7 percent of white and African American mothers. One reason for the high rates of violence reported by Hispanic mothers in cohabiting unions is that such unions are more durable among Hispanics than among other groups, and thus mothers are at risk for violence longer.

Relationship Trajectories

Despite their high hopes, unmarried parents' bonds are fragile, with over 60 percent of nonmarital unions dissolving within five years of their child's birth. Couples that are cohabiting at birth are the most likely to remain in stable unions; 60 percent are still together in either a cohabiting or marital relationship five years after the birth. Couples that are visiting at birth are the most likely to dissolve their unions; only 20 percent are still together five years after the birth.¹¹

Racial and ethnic differences in union dissolution are substantial. Black couples are more likely to end their relationships than white

and Hispanic couples. Hispanic couples in cohabiting unions have a particularly low rate of dissolution, consistent with the view that cohabitation is a substitute for marriage in the Hispanic community. The gap in dissolution rates between married and cohabiting parents also differs by race and ethnicity, with whites having the greatest disparity and blacks having the least. Among blacks, the dissolution rates are 73 percent and 46 percent for cohabiting and married couples, respectively. Among whites, they are 65 percent and 17 percent.¹²

Growing Instability and Complexity

Not surprisingly, once the romantic relationship with the father ends, many unmarried mothers go on to form new partnerships.

As shown in table 3, 27 percent of mothers who were unmarried at birth either have had a new cohabiting or marital relationship or are currently living with a new partner (again, either a marital or nonmarital partner) five years after the birth. Not surprisingly, new partnerships are much more common among mothers who were not in a romantic relationship with their child's father at birth, because these mothers have had more time to search for a new partner. Interestingly, although black cohabiting mothers are more likely than whites to end their partnerships early, the prevalence of new cohabiting unions is similar for the two groups of mothers. This finding highlights the fact that cohabiting unions are much less common among black mothers than among whites. This difference, noted at birth, is repeated in the formation of new partnerships. Finally, many unmarried mothers have children with their new partners. According to table 3, a third of single mothers (20 percent of all unmarried mothers) have had a child by a new partner by year five.

Table 3. Unmarried-at-Birth Mothers' New Romantic Relationships and New Children by Year Five, by Race and Ethnicity and by Baseline Status

<i>Percent</i>	All	White	Black	Hispanic
New co-residential partners*				
All unmarried mothers	26.7	30.3	28.2	21.6
Cohabiting	19.7	25.1	21.6	14.7
Visiting	27.1	24.7	28.0	23.2
Single	45.0	51.7	43.8	43.7
Children with new partners				
All unmarried mothers	20.8	17.6	23.6	16.9
Cohabiting	14.9	15.8	17.6	11.3
Visiting	23.0	18.4	24.2	20.8
Single	32.6	22.8	35.4	32.1

*Includes cohabiting and marital relationships

The search for new partners results in high levels of instability for children, both in co-residential partnerships and in dating relationships, defined as relationships lasting at least two months. (Changes in mothers' dating relationships may affect children directly if the new partner is involved with the child, or they may operate indirectly by affecting the quantity and quality of mothers' parenting.) The average number of residential (cohabiting or married) partnership changes is three times higher among children of unmarried mothers than among children of married mothers, 1.09 compared with 0.32.¹³ Even more striking, the average number of changes in dating relationships lasting two months or more is nearly four times as high for unmarried mothers as for married mothers, 1.46 compared with 0.35. The latter finding underscores the importance of taking dating relationships into account when describing children's exposure to family instability—a point that is especially important for children living with single mothers. Asking what share of unmarried mothers who were single at birth never cohabited with a man during the five-year period yields an answer of 30 percent. In contrast, asking

what share of single mothers never changed partners during the five-year period, the answer is 3 percent. In short, stability is rare among single-mother families.

Father Involvement and Co-Parenting Relationships

Even after parental romantic relationships are over, a substantial majority of nonresident fathers continue to maintain a high level of contact with their child, although contact declines over time. One year after their child's birth, about 63 percent of nonresident fathers report seeing their child on a regular basis (at least once in the past month and twelve days on average). The share declines as the child gets older, to 55 percent at age three and to 51 percent at age five.¹⁴ Nonresident fathers also continue to make financial contributions to their children, including both formal child support and informal support. Five years after the birth, 27 percent of fathers are providing formal support to their child, 33 percent are providing informal cash support, and 45 percent are providing in-kind contributions such as buying toys.¹⁵ Father involvement continues to be high even among men with new partners

and new children. For example, 71 percent of fathers without new partners or children report having contact with their child in the previous year as compared with 63 percent of fathers with new partners and children.¹⁶

Finally, many unmarried parents are able to maintain a positive co-parenting relationship even after their romantic relationship ends. Co-parenting quality is measured by questions that ask mothers whether the father: “acts like the father you want for your child, can be trusted to take good care of the child, respects your schedules and rules, supports you in the way you want to raise the child, talks with you about problems that come up with raising the child, and can be counted on to help when you need someone to look after the child for a few hours.” On a scale from 1 (rarely true) to 3 (always true), mothers who are living apart from the father report a score of 2.12 as compared to 2.77 for mothers who are living with the father.¹⁷ These scores, it should be noted, are based on the two-thirds of fathers who have some contact with their child. Hispanic mothers report somewhat higher levels of cooperation; otherwise, there are no racial differences.

Summary

In sum, at the time their child is born, unmarried parents have high hopes for a future together. About half of these parents are living together, and another 30 percent are romantically involved. Relationship quality and father involvement are high. Underlying this optimism, however, are signs of problems, including distrust of the opposite sex and a belief that a single mother can raise a child as well as a married mother. Five years later, the picture is more mixed. On the positive side, about a third of parents are living together, about half of noncohabiting fathers see their child on a regular basis,

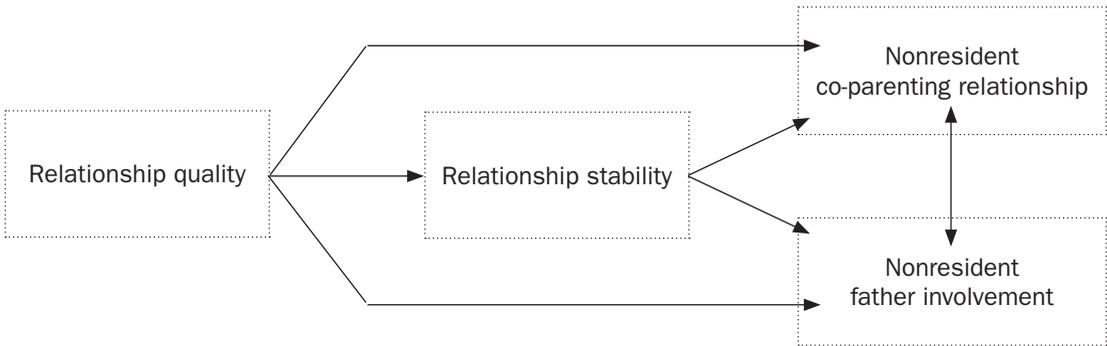
and co-parenting relationships are positive. On the negative side, a third of fathers have virtually disappeared from their children’s lives, and new partnerships and new children are common, leading to high instability and growing complexity in these families.

Identifying Key Predictors of Parental Relationships

What explains the fragility of relationships among unmarried parents? We examine this question by looking at the key determinants of parental relationships, as reported by studies using data from the Fragile Families study. We focus on the same four aspects of parental relationships as in the previous section: co-residence and the stability of cohabiting unions, the quality of parents’ intimate relationships, nonresident father involvement, and the quality of the co-parenting relationship among parents who live apart.

Figure 2 depicts how these four aspects of parental relationships are related to one another. As the diagram shows, the quality of the intimate relationship between parents predicts the stability of the union and also predicts nonresident father involvement and the quality of the nonresident co-parenting. Among these parents, cooperative co-parenting increases father involvement, and greater father involvement increases cooperative co-parenting, in part because mothers serve as gatekeepers to the child and discourage the involvement of fathers with whom they do not get along. The diagram assumes that most of the romantic relationships are limited to parents who live together. Although a substantial proportion of romantically involved parents are living apart at the time their child is born, these so called “visiting” relationships are very unstable, with most couples either moving in together or ending their relationship soon after the child’s birth. The

Figure 2. Determinants of Parental Relationships



quantity of empirical evidence available for each of these four outcomes varies widely. Many studies examine union stability after a nonmarital birth, and a substantial number examine father involvement. Fewer look at relationship quality and co-parenting quality.

We focus on predictors in four categories—economic, cultural, demographic, and personal—that correspond roughly to different social science theories about the causes of family formation and parental relationships. According to economic theory, for example, couples with more economic resources will be more likely to form and maintain stable unions because they have more to share with one another than couples with fewer resources. Economic theory also predicts that couples will be responsive to economic incentives created by government policies such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and child support. Sociological theory emphasizes the importance of social norms and values in shaping family behavior. The male breadwinner role, for example, has long been viewed as essential for sustaining a successful marriage. Couples with traditional views of marriage and gender roles will be more likely to form stable unions than couples with nontraditional views, and religious institutions are believed to reinforce

such views. Demographers, by contrast, emphasize the importance of age, race and ethnicity, sex ratios, and prior family characteristics in shaping future relationships. And, finally, psychological theory sees relationship skills and the characteristics associated with such skills—for example, mental health and the ability to manage conflict—as important determinants of relationship quality and union stability.

Economic Resources

With respect to economic resources, some studies look at total family income; others, at a parent’s individual earnings, employment, and educational attainment. A few studies attempt to measure parents’ relative economic contributions, and at least one study examines the ratio of the father’s to the mother’s earnings. A diversity of economic predictors is found in studies of government policies, culture, demographic characteristics, and personal characteristics.

Comparing the findings of different studies can be difficult because studies often use different models. For example, in looking at the effects of economic resources on union stability, some researchers include measures of parental attitudes, such as whether or not they believe marriage is important, and

relationship quality in their models, and others do not. If fathers' earnings have a causal effect on attitudes or relationship quality, including the latter two measures in the model will attenuate the benefits of fathers' earnings and may even make them insignificant. The same problem exists for studies that examine the effects of culture on parental relationships.

With that caveat in mind, we conclude that the empirical studies provide strong support for a link between parents' economic resources and relationship stability and quality. The strongest link is between fathers' economic resources and family behavior.¹⁸ Paternal employment and earnings are positively associated with relationship quality and union stability. Among nonresident couples, employed fathers are more likely than unemployed fathers to have regular contact with their child and to be engaged with their child (for example, spend more days of the week engaged in shared activities).¹⁹ The father's educational attainment is typically unrelated to relationship outcomes, presumably because earnings do a better job than education of capturing a father's economic resources.²⁰

For mothers, the story is somewhat different. Education, rather than earnings and employment, is the strongest predictor of union stability, with more education being associated with more stability.²¹ Although one study finds some evidence that mothers' earnings are associated with cohabitation, the link holds only for the contrast between mothers with low earnings (less than \$10,000 a year) and mothers with no earning.²² Earnings and employment are thought to be weaker measures of mothers' true economic resources because childbearing and rearing often result in spells of nonemployment or part-time

employment for mothers. Many of the same difficulties in interpretation exist for research on broader samples of women. In some cases where maternal economic indicators appear unimportant, models either include many indicators of the same concept or include variables that mediate the impact on marriage.²³ Similar to the findings on unmarried parents, women's economic indicators tend to be inconsistent predictors of marriage among women more generally.²⁴

The few studies that examine mothers' and fathers' relative economic contributions to family income find no evidence that mothers' relative employment or earnings reduce union stability or relationship quality, as suggested by some theories of marriage.²⁵ Indeed, there is some evidence that gender role specialization is associated with higher union dissolution among cohabiting couples.²⁶ Finally, two studies, using different samples and focusing on different stages of childhood, look at the link between family income and union stability and find mixed results.²⁷

Government Policies

Many unmarried parents are eligible for government benefits such as TANF, food stamps, and public housing. These benefits, in turn, affect union formation behavior by creating incentives for couples to live apart in order to receive the benefit. To date, most research on the link between government programs and parental relationships in fragile families has focused exclusively on welfare generosity or other in-kind benefits such as housing subsidies. Studies using state-level measures of welfare generosity typically find a negative association between welfare and marriage, although one paper finds that higher welfare benefits deter the breakup of visiting unions.²⁸ Of particular interest, Jean Knab and her colleagues report estimates of

“welfare effects” that are much larger than those reported by other studies, which typically include population groups, such as married mothers, that are much less likely to be affected by welfare. According to Knab’s estimates, an 18 percent increase in generosity (\$100) decreases marriage by 2 percent, while changing regimes from a permissive or moderately permissive environment to a strict one results in a 4 percent decrease. (The strictness of the welfare environment is measured by whether states enforce work requirements and time limits on recipients.) There is also evidence that the availability of housing subsidies acts as a disincentive to marriage and cohabitation.²⁹ Both public housing and section 8 housing are income-tested and may have other rules that favor single-mother families. Marah Curtis finds that an increase in section 8 housing significantly decreases the odds of marriage (relative to living alone).³⁰ In sum, the evidence indicates that income-tested cash and housing subsidies affect the family formation decisions of unmarried parents.

The empirical evidence shows a strong link between cultural factors and parental relationships.

Child support policies also affect incentives to marry or break up by altering the costs and benefits of cohabitation. For mothers, stronger child support enforcement reduces the costs of living apart from the father, whereas it increases the costs for fathers. Child support enforcement may also affect the co-parenting relationship between parents who live apart.

The empirical evidence suggests that stronger enforcement lessens the chances that a couple will marry.³¹ Nearly all of the effect of child support enforcement on marriage is concentrated among mothers whose partners have a child with a previous partner, suggesting that stronger enforcement deters marriage by reducing the income that fathers bring to the household.³² The only study that has looked at the link between child support enforcement and domestic violence suggests that stronger enforcement reduces violence among cohabiting couples and increases violence among some groups of single mothers.³³

Cultural Factors

As with economic resources, the empirical evidence shows a strong link between cultural factors and parental relationships. Measures of culture include attitudes toward marriage and single motherhood, distrust of the opposite sex, and religious denomination and church attendance. Studies show that mothers and fathers who view marriage favorably are more likely to marry.³⁴ The association between pro-marriage attitudes and cohabitation is weaker, and there is no association between pro-marriage attitudes and union dissolution.³⁵ There is also evidence that parents’ distrust of the opposite sex decreases the chances of marriage and cohabitation³⁶ and increases the likelihood of breaking up.³⁷ No studies examine the link between pro-marriage attitudes and relationship quality or father involvement. Finally, religiosity is consistently related to both relationship stability and quality. The mother’s and father’s religiosity are both important in predicting entrance into marriage.³⁸ One study finds that fathers’ religiosity is associated with lower rates of cohabitation (as compared with being single), perhaps because most religious fathers have already married and those who have chosen to be

single may be different in a special way. In terms of relationship quality, the father's religiosity is more important than mother's religiosity in determining overall quality and supportiveness, both for unmarried couples generally and for particular subgroups of the population, such as Latino couples.³⁹ One study finds that consistent church attendance is a stronger predictor of union quality than a recent increase in attendance, suggesting that the benefits of religiosity take time to accrue and require consistency of church attendance.⁴⁰ The only paper that examines the link between religiosity on the one hand and father involvement and co-parenting on the other hand finds no association between nonresident fathers' religiosity and involvement or co-parenting.⁴¹ Finally, religious denomination is unrelated to relationship quality or stability among unmarried couples, and no study to our knowledge has examined its association with nonresident father involvement or co-parenting.

Demographic Factors

Researchers have identified a number of demographic factors that are associated with parents' relationship quality and stability. Mate availability, as measured by the ratio of men to women in a community, is positively linked with both relationship quality and marriage.⁴² Mate availability is strongly associated with mothers' reports that fathers are "fair and willing to compromise"; lack of availability is associated with domestic violence. Research also finds that divergent sex ratios of men to women can explain a good deal of the racial disparity in marriage. Race and ethnicity are also consistently associated with union instability. Black couples are less likely to marry and more likely to break up,⁴³ although black nonresident fathers are more involved with their children than other fathers and tend to have higher-quality

co-parenting relationships.⁴⁴ Immigrant mothers report better-quality relationships, but their reports about transitioning into marriage are mixed,⁴⁵ perhaps because long-term cohabitation is normative among Hispanics (for a more detailed discussion see the article by Robert Hummer and Erin Hamilton in this volume), who make up the majority of the Fragile Families immigrant sample.

Parents' partnership and fertility histories are also important predictors of parental relationships and father involvement. Of particular interest is multipartnered fertility (having a child with another partner), which varies over time and by gender. For parents who are in a romantic relationship at birth, fathers' (but not mothers') children from a previous partnership have a negative effect on the quality and stability of the couple relationship.⁴⁶ Once the romantic relationship ends, however, if either parent has a new child with yet another partner, the quality of the co-parenting relationship deteriorates. More generally, contact between the nonresident father and child is very sensitive to the presence of new partners, especially mothers' new partners. When mothers form a new partnership, nonresident fathers' involvement declines; when the new partnerships end, father involvement increases.⁴⁷ This pattern of contact is similar when fathers have a new partner, although the association tends to be weaker.⁴⁸

Personal Characteristics and Behaviors

Although it is not necessarily the major focus of their work, many researchers include information on parents' personal characteristics and behaviors, such as the father's incarceration history, drinking and drug use, and physical and mental health, in their studies of parental relationships. A growing literature examines the link between the father's prior incarceration and parents' relationship

stability and quality, father involvement, and co-parenting, with all the evidence showing a negative association between incarceration and these outcomes.⁴⁹ Fathers' drinking and drug use show a similar association with union quality and nonresident father contact, but less so with union stability or co-parenting quality.⁵⁰ Finally, neither the father's nor mother's physical health is related to union stability, father involvement, or co-parenting,⁵¹ although one study finds that mothers' poor or fair health is associated with greater conflict in relationships.⁵² In contrast, some evidence shows that mothers' poor mental health reduces the chances of marriage, whereas fathers' mental health risk (measured by a family history of mental health problems) decreases co-parenting quality.⁵³ The occasional absence of a significant link between personal characteristics and union stability is explained by the inclusion of relationship quality itself in the model.

Relationship Quality

Thus far, we have treated relationship quality as an outcome variable. A number of studies, however, treat it as a predictor of union stability and father involvement. In this literature, researchers examine both positive and negative dimensions of relationship quality. Positive quality is measured as supportiveness; negative quality, as conflict and violence. As one would expect, the former is strongly linked with union stability and father involvement,⁵⁴ whereas violence and conflict reduce marriage and union stability.⁵⁵ Mothers' reports of father violence or conflict are generally unrelated to days of contact or father engagement, likely because violence and involvement have reciprocal relationships with one another that work in opposite directions.⁵⁶ On the one hand, father contact increases the opportunity for violence; on the other, violence reduces further contact with the father.⁵⁷

What Do Social Experiments Show?

In the previous section, we examined the predictors of parental relationships based on studies using survey data. Next, we review experimental evidence—that is, evidence from social science experiments in which participants are randomly assigned to treatment groups and control groups so that the effects of the treatment can be evaluated accurately and independently of the characteristics of the treatment group. We look first at experiments that assess how economic resources affect union stability and father involvement and then at experiments aimed at improving relationship quality. There is little experimental evidence on the other predictors discussed in the previous section—personal, cultural, and demographic.

Economic Determinants and Government Programs

Several evaluations of welfare-to-work experiments during the 1990s provide information on the effects of economic interventions on marriage and union stability. The Minnesota Family Investment Program, for example, included a 38 percent earnings disregard for mothers in the treatment group. An evaluation found increases in marriage among all single mothers (although these effects dissipated over time for all but a few subgroups of mothers)⁵⁸ and also found declines in union dissolution rates, as well as in domestic violence, among couples who had received welfare before the program. Similarly, Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project, which allowed individuals to accumulate assets without losing their benefits, found small increases in marriage among single mothers. (Although the employment of participants in the Vermont program increased, their family income did not increase, which means that family income

was not the cause of the increases in marriage.)⁵⁹ In contrast, Florida's Family Transition Program, which increased neither income nor assets, showed no increase in marriage.⁶⁰

Two other social experiments provide evidence on the causal effects of income on family stability. The Canadian Self-Sufficiency Project, which provided income subsidies to single mothers on welfare, found a positive effect on marriage in New Brunswick but not in British Columbia.⁶¹ Similarly, the New Hope Anti-Poverty Program, which provided income subsidies to families in two communities in Milwaukee, found large increases in marriage among never-married mothers in the treatment group.⁶²

In addition to income programs described above, several large-scale demonstrations designed to increase the human capital of disadvantaged youth have reported mixed evidence on marriage. Whereas early programs, such as Job Corps and JOBSTART, found no effects on marriage, career academies, which are career-oriented academic programs with employer partnerships, found substantial effects among young men.⁶³

Another set of experiments provides some information on the effects of economic resources on father involvement, although again, it is unclear whether the improvements came from gains in fathers' economic circumstances or some other facet of the program. For example, the Parent's Fair Share Demonstration (see the article by Philip Cowan, Carolyn Cowan, and Virginia Knox in this volume), which targeted low-income noncustodial fathers whose children were receiving welfare, increased involvement among the least-involved fathers. There is also some evidence that the program led to

an increase in couple disagreements, largely about childrearing.

Relationship Quality

Another area that offers a good deal of experimental evidence is relationship quality. Although our discussion of studies using survey data focused primarily on determinants of relationship quality such as income, employment, and religion, most experiments on relationship quality are conducted by psychologists who focus on teachable skills relevant to interpersonal interaction—for example, communication, problem solving, and conflict management—as well as expectations and attitudes. Psychologists have also honed in on specific transitions, such as marriage, parenthood, and divorce, as critical points of intervention. Over the past few decades, their experiments in relationship quality have evolved toward a therapy-centered approach facilitated by professionals. Most recently, those experiments have begun to address the multifaceted needs of low-income populations.

One of the most widely studied programs, representative of an early wave of relationship quality experiments, the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), focused on improving communication skills among engaged couples as they negotiated the transition to marriage. Evaluations of the PREP program found that couples in the treatment groups had better marital quality and were less likely to divorce than those in the control group.⁶⁴

The Becoming a Family Program represented two important departures from the early experiments. It used skilled clinicians, and it focused on a transition (parenthood) wherein couples might be more amenable to relationship intervention. The program showed positive effects on marital quality at

both the five- and ten-year follow-up, but, surprisingly, no effect on marital stability.⁶⁵ Findings from a related program, Bringing Baby Home, also showed higher marital quality at the one-year follow-up.⁶⁶

These studies have a number of limitations for our purposes. First, early experiments were conducted on samples of largely middle-income couples, rather than fragile-family couples. It is unclear whether programs that succeed with more advantaged groups will be sufficient for this latter population, which faces multiple problems. A few pilot experiments, however, have focused on low-income couples. The Supporting Father Involvement Program,⁶⁷ for example, found that parenting counseling for fathers or relationship counseling for couples increased father involvement and improved the co-parenting relationship among cohabiting couples.

Second, experiments sometimes have a selection bias: people who are offered the program but do not enroll, or who later drop out of the program (attrite), often have different characteristics than those who remain in the treatment sample, potentially biasing the results. For example, PREP's positive results may be subject to selection bias as 50 percent of potential participants declined the offer—and were more likely to break up before marrying than participants were.⁶⁸ A third limitation of some relationship quality programs is that they have only short-term effects, dissipating within a few years; in some cases, long-term effects are never assessed. Finally, many of these programs do not examine whether improving marital quality affects union stability, co-parenting quality, or father involvement.

Two recent healthy marriage initiatives with experimental designs, launched by the

Administration for Children and Families, capitalize on the strengths and lessons learned from previous studies to address relationship quality among more disadvantaged families. The Building Strong Families Project (BSF) focuses on strengthening unmarried-couple relationships, whereas the Supporting Healthy Marriage Project (SHM) focuses on economically disadvantaged married couples. Building Strong Families was prompted by the finding of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study that many unwed mothers were in cohabiting relationships at the time of the child's birth. Supporting Healthy Marriage aimed to address the high divorce rates among low-income couples. Both include group sessions with trained facilitators focused on healthy marriage skills, such as communication and anger management, as well as additional support services. Additionally, BSF includes a service coordinator, whereas SHM includes extracurricular activities designed to enhance the couple's relationship. Evidence from these programs will become available in the next few years.

Conclusions

In examining the trajectories of parental relationships in fragile families, we find that despite high hopes at the time of their child's birth, most unmarried parents are not able to establish stable unions or long-term co-parenting relationships. Among the predictors of instability in these families are low economic resources; government policies that contain marriage penalties; cultural norms that support single motherhood; demographic factors, such as sex ratios that favor men and children from prior unions; and, finally, psychological factors that make it difficult for parents to maintain healthy relationships. Although each appears to play a role in shaping parental relationship and union

stability, no single factor appears to have a dominant effect.

What, then, can be done to improve the quality and stability of relationships in fragile families? Economic resources are a consistent predictor of positive outcomes, but the evidence is mixed with respect to whether the effect is causal. There is also some discrepancy between the lessons learned from survey data and the findings from the social experiments. Whereas the former show that fathers' earnings are the most important economic factor in predicting union stability and parental relationship quality, the social experiments do not really test this hypothesis. Instead, they typically target single mothers and focus on increasing mothers' income or earnings. Thus good information is lacking on the potential effect of increasing fathers' employment and earnings. That said, it is notable that the two experiments that had the largest impact on marriage—the New Hope Anti-Poverty Program and the Minnesota Family Investment Program—also provided the largest income gains to two-parent families.

Attitudes and religion are consistent predictors of parental relationships, although, again, evidence is lacking that these associations are

causal. Demographic characteristics, such as race and sex ratios, are also important, but most are not amenable to intervention. An important exception is multiple-partner fertility, which is a product of instability and which is associated with all four domains of parental relationships, including the quality and stability of parents' romantic relationship, nonresident father involvement, and co-parenting quality. Although no experimental evidence is available on multiple-partner fertility, statistical models offer reasonably good evidence that it has a causal effect on parental relationships.⁶⁹

Finally, strong evidence shows that relationship quality has a causal effect on union stability, father involvement, and co-parenting quality, although most of the experimental evidence available to date is based on samples of married couples with stable incomes and no serious behavior problems. Whether these programs will be able to substantially improve parental relationships in fragile families and how large the effect will be is unclear at this time, although better answers will be available soon once the evaluations of the marriage programs (Building Strong Families Project, Community Healthy Marriage Initiative, and Supporting Healthy Marriage Project) are complete.

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