

Fragile Families

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The swift rise in nonmarital childbearing in the United States over the past fifty years has given rise to a new family form: fragile families, defined as couples who are unmarried when their children are born. Compared with more traditional families, these fragile families face greater risks in terms both of family stability and of economic security—risks that can imperil child well-being. In this volume experts explore the ramifications of this new reality and fashion policy recommendations that will both reduce the number of children born into fragile families in the first place and ensure that children born into fragile families receive the support they need to grow into healthy, productive adults.

Research Issues

To build a body of research about the causes and consequences of nonmarital childbearing based on sound evidence, a team of researchers at Columbia and Princeton Universities designed and implemented, in 1998, a large and ongoing national survey of some 5,000 newborns in hospitals in large cities. The resulting Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) forms the underpinnings of the findings presented in this volume.

Contributors to the volume examine three broad sets of research issues. The first is the capabilities of the parents, their relationships with each other and with their children, and how both change over time. The second is how being raised in fragile families affects the well-being of children. The third is whether the ongoing trend toward forming fragile families should be of concern to researchers and policy makers, and if so, what the role of policy should be in solving any problems posed.

Key Research Findings

*At the time of their child's birth, most parents in fragile families are romantically involved and have high hopes that they will get married; most, however, are not able to establish stable unions or long-term co-parenting relationships.

*Both mothers and fathers in fragile families have low earnings capacities stemming from low-quality education and from physical, emotional, and mental health problems. These families make ends meet through various public and private programs and help from family and friends, but the stability of the public programs is threatened by the slow recovery from the recent recession.

* The capabilities and contributions of unwed fathers fall short of those of married fathers and differ in important ways by the kind of relationship the fathers have with their child's mother.

*Children who grow up in single-mother and cohabiting families fare worse than those born into married-couple households, although being raised by stable single or cohabiting parents seems to entail less risk than being raised by single or cohabiting parents when these family types are unstable.

* Racial and ethnic differences in the prevalence of fragile families are substantial as are differences in the socioeconomic well-being of the racial and ethnic groups themselves.

* The costs of nonmarital births are high, both to children and parents in fragile families and to society as a whole; reducing births to unmarried parents should be policy makers' primary goal.

* The effects of mass incarceration have been concentrated among those who are most likely to form fragile families: poor and minority men and women with little schooling. Imprisonment diminishes the earnings of adult men, compromises their health, reduces familial resources, contributes to family breakup, and adds to the deficits of poor children.

* Contrary to the widespread expectation that access to college always promotes family stability and economic security, current postsecondary educational policy and practice is insufficiently supportive for parents in fragile families and many parents find it impossible to work, raise their families, and attend school.

* To improve the quality and stability of couple- and father-child relationships in fragile families, researchers are beginning to consider how to tailor existing couple-relationship and father-involvement interventions (which generally target married or middle-income couples) to the specific needs of unwed couples in fragile families.

Policies to Strengthen Fragile Families

Policy makers should take five important steps to strengthen fragile families.

*Support the three T's: Treat early, Treat often, and Treat together. Although many fragile families break up in the years after their babies are born, most of the parents are together at the time of the birth and most have high hopes for a future together. Services to fragile families at this "magic moment" should be immediate, intense, and focused on the couple in their role as cooperative parents.

* Decrease the number of nonmarital births by "going to scale" with programs designed to encourage more responsible sexual behavior and by expanding access to effective contraception among men and women who might not otherwise be able to afford it.

* Increase union stability and father involvement in fragile families by building on marriage-education programs aimed at improving relationship skills and community-based programs aimed at raising nonresident fathers' earnings, child support payments and parental involvement. For marriage and fatherhood programs, expand services to include employment and training and mental health components, and conduct rigorous evaluations to determine what works.

* Redesign tax and transfer programs, especially in-kind programs, so that children have access to high-quality early education and high-quality health care, and so that these benefits are not cut or reduced if parents marry or live together.

*Develop and rigorously evaluate new demonstrations in the areas of how postsecondary education and penal policy affect the lives of fragile families. Strengthen social, financial, and academic supports to low-income community college students and provide alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent offenders.