



# FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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## Barriers to Marriage Among Fragile Families

### Background

A primary goal of the Bush administration is to promote "healthy marriages" among low-income couples. To this end, the re-authorization of the welfare reform bill will provide substantial funds to states to develop programs designed to improve relationship skills among couples that have children outside marriage. Reactions to the proposed legislation has been mixed. Supporters of the bill argue that increasing marriage will reduce poverty and improve parenting and child well being. Opponents claim that marriage would have only a small effect on poverty while increasing women's exposure to domestic violence thereby making children worse off.

Implicit in this debate are assumptions about the nature of relationships between unmarried parents, the extent of economic resources, and the prevalence of domestic violence and related risk factors. This brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (See Box, page 2) to examine the characteristics of unmarried couples and, more specifically, to determine what proportion of unmarried parents are likely to benefit from (or be harmed by) marriage promotion programs. The FFS is following a birth cohort of nearly 5,000 children, including 3,712 children born to unmarried parents and 1,186 children born to married parents. The data are nationally representative of births in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. For more information about the study, visit the web site of the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing: <http://crew.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.htm>.

Critics of the marriage promotion programs argue that the major barriers to marriage among unmarried parents are (1) lack of stable employment, (2) mental health problems, and (3) domestic violence. While these areas do not cover all of the obstacles faced by new unmarried parents, they are the ones most often discussed by policy makers and critics. To measure economic capacity, we looked at whether unmarried fathers were working at the time their child was born. To measure mental health, we used the CIDI scale, which was developed to identify parents suffering from clinical depression or anxiety. To measure substance abuse, we used questions that asked parents whether drugs or alcohol interfered with their work or relationships during the past year or whether they had ever

Table 1: Barriers to Marriage

	Unmarried	Married
<b>Father working</b>	79	93
<b>Depressed</b>		
Mother	15	9
Father	10	7
Either	22	15
<b>Generalized Anxiety</b>		
Mother	3	2
Father	2	2
Either	5	4
<b>Drug or Alcohol Problem</b>		
Mother	7	2
Father	16	9
Either	21	11
<b>Domestic Violence</b>	9	3
<b>Father is Violent Offender</b>	10	3
Sample size = 3,489	2,659	830

These calculations are using the Fragile Families baseline sample and are weighted to be nationally representative

Father's work comes from mother's report at baseline.

Mother's drug/alcohol comes from mother's report at baseline.

Father's drug/alcohol comes from mother and father's report at baseline.

Domestic violence comes from mother's report at baseline and one-year reports of violence that occurred prior to the birth of the child.

Mother's depression and generalized anxiety come from mother's report at one-year.

Father's depression and generalized anxiety come from father's report at one-year.

Father is a violent offender comes from mother and father reports at one-year.

Missing data from fathers at baseline and from mothers and fathers at one-year were imputed using hot deck imputation with mother's age, race, education and marital status as covariates.

We did not impute father not working or violent criminal for marrieds and mother's generalized anxiety or drug/alcohol problem for marrieds or unmarrieds.

been treated for drug and alcohol problems. To measure violence we used a question that asked mothers whether they had been 'hit or slapped' or 'seriously hurt' by the father of their child. We also looked at whether the father had ever been incarcerated for a violent crime.

## Findings

Table 1 shows the extent to which the problems discussed above - unemployment, poor mental health, and violence - are prevalent among new unmarried parents. Married couples that have recently given birth are used as a comparison group.

According to our estimates, over 20 percent of unmarried fathers were not working at the time their child was born, compared with seven percent of married fathers. Unemployment poses a serious barrier to marriage, not only because it reduces the likelihood that marriage will improve the economic status of the family but also because unemployment reduces the chances that the marriage will be stable over the long run. Most studies find that fathers' employment is an important predictor of both marriage and marital stability. Moreover, the parents in the Fragile Families Survey report that 'father having a steady job' is essential to a stable marriage.

The prevalence of mental health problems is also high among unmarried parents. About 15 percent of mothers and 10 percent of fathers suffer from clinical depression. The prevalence of depression is 1.6 times as great among unmarried mothers, as compared to married mothers, and about 1.4 times as great among unmarried fathers, as compared to married fathers. Generalized anxiety is less common but still relatively high among unmarried parents. About 3 percent of unmarried mothers and 2 percent of unmarried fathers suffer from anxiety. Among married parents, the figures are 2 percent and 2 percent respectively. Over 20 percent of unmarried couples report substance abuse issues for at least one partner: Seven percent of unmarried mothers and 16 percent of unmarried fathers report drug or alcohol problems. These figures are substantially higher for unmarried parents than married parents. Finally, violence is much more common among unmarried parents than married parents. Nine percent of unmarried mothers report being 'hit, slapped, or seriously hurt' by the father as compared to only 3 percent of married mothers. Note that these figures are likely to under-estimate true prevalence rates of substance abuse and violence among parents. For example, mothers report higher levels of violence (for the same time period) after their relationship with the father has ended. Finally, unmarried fathers are much more likely than married fathers to report being incarcerated for a violent crime: 10 percent versus 3 percent.

Next, we used the information in Table 1 to sort unmarried parents into five groups that are ordered according to the likelihood that the couple would benefit from a program that improved their relationship skills and provided incentives to marry. Group 1 includes couples that were romantically

involved at the child's birth AND have none of the problems previously described. Each subsequent group may include the problems associated with the lower groups but not of the higher groups. Group 2 includes couples that were romantically involved at birth AND had a father who was not working during the two weeks prior to the baby's birth. Group 3 includes couples that were romantically involved at birth AND have a parent with a serious mental health problem such as depression, anxiety or substance abuse. Parents in group 3 may also have a father who was not working at the time their child was born but

**Table 2: Who Benefits from Marriage Promotion**

Percentage of Unmarried Couples	
Marriageable	36
Father Not Working	10
Mental Health Issues or Alcohol/Drug Problem	23
Violence	13
Not Romantically Involved	18
Sample Size = 2,659	

do not have any of the problems associated with group 4. Group 4 includes couples that were romantically involved at birth AND are at risk for domestic violence, either because the father has a history of domestic violence or because he has been incarcerated for a violent crime. The parents in Group 4 may also have problems with employment and mental health. Finally, couples in Group 5 are not romantically involved at the time of birth and therefore not likely to participate in programs designed to promote marriage. These parents may or may not have any of the problems previously discussed.

According to the figure, about 36 percent of unmarried parents fall into Group 1. This group is the most likely to be receptive to marriage initiatives and least likely to suffer negative consequences from such programs. Most of the parents in this group (79 percent) say that they plan to marry or live together. Nearly 10 percent of parents fall into group 2; that is, the father has employment problems but none of the other problems listed above. These parents might also benefit from a marriage program if the latter included services that helped the father obtain (and keep) a job. Even with a steady job, many of these couples are going to have a hard time maintaining a stable marriage. Over one-third of the fathers in this group have less than a high school education.

Twenty-three percent of unmarried parents fall into Group 3, that is, they are romantically involved and at least one of the parents has a mental health problem. Depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are serious problems that undermine relationships. If the

couples in this group are to benefit from marriage programs, they will probably need help that goes beyond relationship skills training. Twenty-eight percent of the couples in Group 3 also have a father who was not working when their child was born.

Thirteen percent of unmarried parents fall into Group 4, which indicates a high risk of violence. Just over one-half of these couples have a father who has been incarcerated for a violent crime and just less than one-half have a father who has used physical force against the mother. A substantial proportion of the couples in this group also suffer from employment (33 percent) and mental health (56 percent) problems.

Finally, 18 percent of parents fall into Group 5, which indicates that they were no longer romantically involved and unlikely to participate in marriage programs.

## Policy Implications

Our findings provide some support for those who claim that marriage initiatives could have positive effects on parents and children. One-third of unmarried parents appear to face no serious barriers to marriage, as defined here, and a substantial

proportion of parents appear to be open to the idea of participating in programs designed to improve their relationships. [When interviewed 3 years later, about 60 percent of the unmarried mothers in our sample said they would be very or somewhat interested in such a program.]

Our findings also provide some support for those who claim that marriage initiatives are unlikely to work and could cause serious harm. Nearly one-fifth of parents are not romantically involved at the time their child is born and thus are unlikely to participate in a marriage program. More seriously, another thirteen percent of parents have a history of violence, suggesting that marriage may not be a safe environment for mothers and children. Taken together, these findings suggest that about one-third of unmarried couples are not good candidates for marriage promotion programs.

Finally, our findings suggest that about one-third of couples might benefit from marriage programs if, in addition to strengthening relationship skills, these programs were expanded to address parents' employment problems and mental health needs.

## Recent Working Papers

The following comprises a list of the most recent Working Papers authored by the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) faculty and research associates. A complete list of Working Papers is also available for viewing and downloading on the CRCW Web site: [cwcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.htm](http://cwcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.htm)

2002-23-FF Pinka Chatterji, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn Dec 2002 "Does WIC Participation Improve Maternal Investments in Infant Health?"

2002-17-FF Angela Fertig, Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel Dec 2002 "Child Support Enforcement and Domestic Violence Among Non-Cohabiting Couples"

2002-22-FF Bruce Western, Leonard Lopoo, Sara McLanahan Dec 2002 "Incarceration and the Bonds Among Parents in Fragile Families"

2002-21 Leonard Lopoo Dec 2002 "Maternal Employment and Teenage Childbearing: Evidence from the PSID"

2002-20 Wendy Sigle-Rushton, Sara McLanahan Nov 2002 "Father Absence and Child Well-being: A Critical Review"

2002-19-FF Christina Gibson Nov 2002 "Understanding the Stick (or Is It the Carrot?): The Effect of Welfare Beliefs on Family Formation Decisions"

2001-08-FF Marcia Carlson, Sara McLanahan Nov 2002 "Early Father Involvement in Fragile Families"

Conceptualizing and Measuring Father Involvement. Randal Day and Michael Lamb, editors. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

2001-06-FF Marcia Carlson, Sara McLanahan, Paula England Nov 2002 "Union Formation and Dissolution in Fragile Families"

2002-14-FF Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel Oct 2002 "Strengthening Fragile Families"

2002-01-FF Cynthia Osborne Oct 2002 "Diversity Among Unmarried Parents: Human Capital, Attitudes, and Relationship Quality"

2002-18-FF Maureen Waller, Amanda Bailey Sept 2002 "How Do Fathers' Negative Behaviors Shape Relationships with Their Children?"

2002-16-FF Marcia Carlson, Sara McLanahan Aug 2002 "Do Good Partners Make Good Parents?"

2002-15-FF Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel Jul 2002 "Unwed Parents: Myths, Realities, and Policymaking"

2002-13-FF W. Bradford Wilcox Jul 2002 "Then Comes Marriage? Religion, Race, and Marriage in Urban America"

2002-12 W. Bradford Wilcox Jul 2002 "Focused on Their Families: Religion, Parenting, and Child Well-being"

2002-11-FF Nancy Reichman, Julien Teitler, Irwin Garfinkel, Sara McLanahan Jun 2002 "The Role of Welfare in New Parents' Lives"

2002-10-FF Marcia Carlson, Irwin Garfinkel, Sara McLanahan, Ronald Mincy, Wendell Primus Jun 2002 "The Effects of Welfare and Child Support Policies on Union Formation"