



FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

July 2004 • Number 25

Racial and Ethnic Differences in Marriage among New, Unwed Parents

Background

President Bush has proposed that \$1.5 billion be allocated to marriage-promotion programs over the next five years. In many states and localities, these programs will have to deal with the particularly low rates of marriage among African-American parents. The Fragile Families study finds that at least four out of five unmarried couples are romantically involved when their babies are born, and this fact is true among African-American, Hispanic, and White parents alike. Yet, White and Hispanic parents are 2.5 times more likely than African-American parents to formalize their romantic relationships through marriage during the year following their baby's birth (see Figure 1). Rates of cohabitation are also lower for the African-American parents and rates of breaking up are higher compared with White or Hispanic parents.

Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (see box on back), this brief examines the role of "marriage markets" in explaining differences across racial and ethnic groups in rates of marriage in the year following a nonmarital birth. We use the term marriage market to refer to the supply of men relative to women in a local area within age and racial groups. Past research suggests that one reason for relatively low marriage rates among African-Americans is a shortage of African-American males. Our research finds that a shortage of men continues to influence marriage decisions even after a couple has already formed a relationship and recently had a child together.

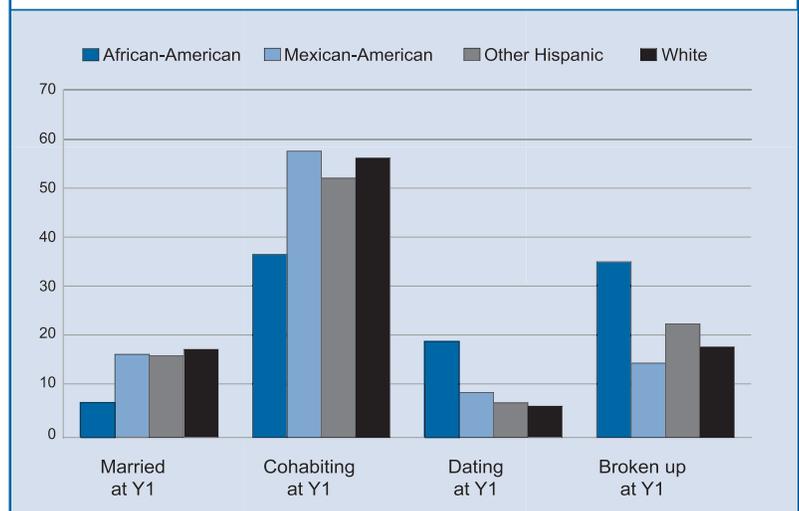
Data

Our sample includes 1,897 new parents in twenty U.S. cities who were romantically involved but unmarried at the time of their baby's birth. We concentrate on couples in a romantic relationship since they are the ones most likely to be targeted by marriage-promotion programs.

Our analyses estimate the effects of marriage market, individual, and relationship characteristics on racial differences in marriage after taking into account differences in household structure at birth. To test marriage market explanations, we use

sex ratios to measure whether there is a shortage of men relative to women. We also look at ratios of employed men to women to measure whether there is a shortage of "marriageable" men. On average, there are only 46 employed African-American males per 100 females in the twenty Fragile Families cities. In comparison, there are about 80 employed males per female in the Hispanic and White groups. Theory predicts that when alternative female partners are plentiful, men will be less likely to commit and relationship quality will suffer. We also expect that women will settle for lower quality partners when the pool of available men is more limited and that this may lower the chances of marriage.

Figure 1. Racial Differences in Relationship Outcomes One Year after a Nonmarital Birth



We also test the importance of individual and relationship characteristics in explaining racial and ethnic differences in marriage. Individual characteristics include attitudes about marriage, gender roles, and gender distrust. African-American mothers have stronger "pro-marriage" attitudes in terms of thinking marriage is better than and different from cohabitation compared with Hispanic and White mothers. At the same time, African-American mothers are the least traditional in their

attitudes about gender roles in marriage; for instance, they are least likely to think that the male breadwinner model of marriage is best. Hispanic mothers are more distrustful of men than African-American or White mothers. Relationship characteristics include questions about how well parents support one another, the amount of time they spend together, and how often they have disagreements. Relationship quality tends to be worse for African-American parents compared with Hispanic or White parents.

Findings

Table 1 shows what portion of racial and ethnic differences in marriage can be accounted for by sex ratios, sex ratios including incarceration, and sex ratios including employment. We find that marriage markets have a large influence on marriage decisions among couples who have recently had a child together and that an "undersupply" of employed African-American men explains most of the racial and ethnic differences in marriage following a nonmarital birth. The results suggest that African-American parents would be far more likely to decide to marry after a nonmarital birth if the ratio of employed African-American men to women were similar to the ratios for Whites or Hispanics.

	Baseline Model	Model Incl. Non-Incarceration	Model Incl. Employment
White	2.18 ** (3.62)	1.43 (1.20)	0.94 (0.15)
Mexican-American	2.08 ** (3.57)	1.06 (0.17)	0.85 (0.46)
Other Hispanic	2.05 ** (3.14)	1.32 (1.08)	1.21 (0.78)
Ratio of non-incarcerated males/females 18-24 years old		6.22 * (2.14)	
Ratio of employed males/females 20-24 years old			10.43 ** (3.16)
N	1897	1897	1897

Note: Odds ratios appear in tables. Z-statistics are in parentheses. Two-tailed tests of statistical significance: ** = p<.01, * = p<.05

Standard errors were adjusted to account for clustering of marriage market variables by city/race-ethnic group.

Odds ratios for control and household structure variables (mother and father age, mother and father children with another partner, mother lives with other adults, and parents cohabiting at birth) are not shown in table.

Table 2: Marriage Markets are Related to Father Quality, Attitudes, and Relationship Quality

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	
	Male/Female Ratio	Empld Male/Female Ratio
Father worked last week	7.017 ** (2.650)	7.374 * (2.350)
Two parents better than one for raising children	6.020 ** (3.970)	5.482 ** (3.150)
Father often fair	2.095 ** (2.640)	3.139 ** (3.530)

Notes: Odds ratios appear in the table. T-statistics are in parentheses. Each odds ratio is from a separate regression in which the log odds of Y is regressed on sex ratio or employed sex ratio controlling for race and ethnic group, where Y is one of the dependent variables listed in the left-most column. Two-tailed tests of statistical significance: ** = p<.01, * = p<.05

We next examine race/ethnic differences in mothers' attitudes and relationship quality to see whether attitudes and relationship quality can also explain differences in union transitions (not shown in tables). Pro-marriage attitudes are associated with transitions to marriage. However, since African-American mothers have the strongest pro-marriage attitudes, their lower rates of marriage cannot be explained by differential values. Nor does our evidence support the theory that distrust between African-American men and women account for their lower marriage rates relative to other groups since Hispanic mothers have the highest rates of gender distrust. Finally, measures of traditional attitudes toward marriage contribute only slightly to the racial and ethnic differences in marriage.

To understand more about how marriage markets influence couples' decision to marry, we also examine whether a shortage of men leads mothers to settle for lower quality fathers and affects attitudes and relationship quality (Table 2). When women outnumber men, we find that mothers are more likely to settle for an unemployed father. Also, as we might expect, when men are in short supply, we find that relationship quality tends to be worse and that parents place less emphasis on the two-parent, male breadwinner norm.

Policy Implications

One of the key components of marriage promotion programs is to build relationship skills. Our research suggests that in order to strengthen African-American families, policies will need to focus on structural and community-level barriers as well. The importance of marriage markets in explaining low African-American

marriage rates following a nonmarital birth highlights the need to curb high mortality and incarceration rates for African-American men (thus increasing the ratio of African-American men to women) and the need to improve urban labor markets for African-American men (thereby increasing the ratio of

African-American employed men to women). Such policies may seem more challenging than smaller-scale relationship skills program. However, without addressing these structural barriers, relationship skills programs may make little headway in strengthening African-American families.

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:
crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies

2004-10 Lonnie Berger June 2004 "Children Living Out-of-Home: Effects of Family and Environmental Characteristics"

2004-09-FF Joshua Goldstein, Kristen Harknett Jun 2004 "Parenting Across Racial and Class Lines: Assortative Mating Patterns of New Parents Who Are Married, Cohabiting, Dating, and No Longer Romantically Involved"

2004-08-FF Jean Knab, Sara McLanahan Jun 2004 "Measuring Cohabitation: Does How, When, and Who You Ask Matter?"

2004-07-FF Julien Teitler, Nancy Reichman, Heather Koball May 2004 "Bias in Retrospective Reports of Cohabitation Among New Parents"

2004-06-FF Cynthia Osborne May 2004 "The Relationship Between Family Structure and Mothering Behavior within Racial and Ethnic Groups"

2004-05-FF Jean Knab Apr 2004 "Who's In and for How Much? The Impact of Definitional Changes on the Prevalence and Outcomes of cohabitation"

2004-04-FF I-Fen Lin, Sara McLanahan Apr 2004 "Gender Differences in Perceptions of Paternal Responsibility"

2004-03-FF Lauren Rich, Irwin Garfinkel, Qin Gao Apr 2004 "Child Support Enforcement Policy and Unmarried Fathers' Employment in the Underground and Regular Economies"

2004-02-FF Anna Aizer, Sara McLanahan Apr 2004 "The Impact of Child Support on Fertility, Parental Investments and Child Well-being"

2004-01-FF Rachel Kimbro, Scott Lynch, Sara McLanahan Feb 2004 "The Hispanic Paradox and Breastfeeding: Does Acculturation Matter? Evidence from the Fragile Families Study"

2003-22-FF Julien Teitler, Nancy Reichman, Lenna Nepomnyaschy Dec 2003 "The Effects of State Policies on TANF Participation"

2003-21-FF Nancy Reichman, Hope Corman, Kelly Noonan Dec 2003 "Effects of Child Health on Parents' Relationship Status"

2003-20-FF Hope Corman, Nancy Reichman, Kelly Noonan Dec 2003 "Mothers' Labor Supply in Fragile Families: The Role of Child Health"

2003-19-FF Kelly Noonan, Nancy Reichman, Hope Corman Dec 2003 "New Fathers' Labor Supply: Does Child Health Matter"

2003-17-FF Nancy Reichman, Julien Teitler, Marah Curtis Dec 2003 "Hardships Among Sanctioned Leavers, Non-Sanctioned Leavers, and TANF Stayers"

2003-16-FF Sara McLanahan May 2004 "Fragile Families and the Marriage Agenda"

2003-15 Angela Fertig Nov 2003 "Healthy Baby, Healthy Marriage? The Effect of Children's Health on Divorce"

2003-14-FF Marcia Carlson, Frank Furstenberg, Jr. Oct 2003 "Complex Families: Documenting the Prevalence and Correlates of Multi-Partnered Fertility in the United States"

2003-13-FF Nancy Cohen Oct 2003 "Unmarried African American Fathers' Involvement with Their Infants: The Role of Couple Relationships"

2003-12-FF Ariel Kalil Oct 2003 "Fathers' Perceptions of Paternal Roles: Variations by Marital Status and Living Arrangement"

2003-11-FF Catherine Kenney Sept 2003 "Hardship in Marriage and Cohabiting Parent Households: Do Cohabiting Parents Underinvest in Household Public Goods?"

2003-10 Anne Case, Angela Fertig, Christina Paxson Jun 2004 "The Lasting Impact of Childhood Health and Circumstance"

2003-09-FF Cynthia Osborne, Sara McLanahan, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn Jul 2003 "Is There an Advantage to Being Born to Married versus Cohabiting parents? Differences in Child Behavior"

2003-08-FF Cynthia Osborne May 2004 "Maternal Stress and Mothering Behaviors in Stable and Unstable Families"

2003-07-FF Cynthia Osborne May 2004 "Marriage Following the Birth of a Child Among Cohabiting and Visiting Parents"

2003-06-FF Christina Gibson, Kathryn Edin, Sara McLanahan Jun 2003 "High Hopes But Even Higher Expectations: The Retreat From Marriage Among Low-Income Couple"

2003-05-FF Margaret Usdansky, Sara McLanahan Jun 2003 "Looking for Murphy Brown: Are College-Educated, Single Mothers Unique?"

2003-04 Margaret Usdansky May 2003 "Single-Parent Families and Their Impact on Children: Changing Portrayals in Popular Magazines in the U.S., 1900-1998" "Maternal Stress and Mothering Behaviors in Stable and Unstable Families"

FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

Center for Research on Child Wellbeing

Wallace Hall, 2nd Fl. • Princeton University • Princeton, NJ 08544

Presorted
First-Class Mail
U.S. Postage
Paid
Princeton, NJ
Permit No. 299

Inside...

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine the role of "marriage markets" in explaining racial and ethnic differences in marriage among new, unwed parents.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study 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> or email the CRCW at crew@opr.princeton.edu

This research brief was adapted from "Explaining Racial and Ethnic Differences in Marriage among New, Unwed Parents," by Kristen Harknett and Sara McLanahan. To download a copy of the paper on which this brief was based, visit <http://crew.princeton.edu>, go to the *Fragile Families* link, click on *Publications*, then click on *Working Papers Series*.

The Fragile Families Research Brief is funded in part by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We also thank the Joint Center for Poverty Research for helping to disseminate this brief.