



BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES is an evaluation of programs designed to help interested unwed parents achieve their aspirations for healthy marriage and a stable family life. It is being conducted under a contract from the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## What We Know About Unmarried Parents: Implications for Building Strong Families Programs

Marcia Carlson (Columbia University), Sara McLanahan (Princeton University), Paula England (Stanford University), and Barbara Devaney (Mathematica Policy Research)

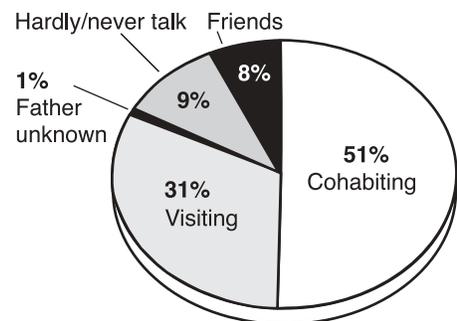
*The Building Strong Families (BSF) project aims to foster the development of programs designed to enhance children's wellbeing by helping new, unmarried parents build stronger relationships and achieve a healthy marriage if they so choose. The motivation and design of BSF programs draw heavily on findings about unmarried parents from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. This research brief summarizes information from that study about the characteristics and relationship patterns of unwed parents. While not representative of all unwed parents, the study sample is representative of unwed parents in large urban centers and, as such, the findings can help state and local agencies and other groups designing BSF programs gain a better understanding of the characteristics and circumstances of the target population.*

### Who Are Fragile Families?

Today, one-third of all births are nonmarital, up from only six percent in 1960. Marriage is less prevalent, while cohabitation and divorce are more common. The decline in marriage and increase in nonmarital childbearing have had profound consequences for children and their families. Children born to unwed couples are, on average, more likely to experience family instability than children born to married biological parents, and they are at greater risk of poverty and adverse health, behavioral, and academic outcomes. Because of this heightened vulnerability to economic and social problems, unwed couples having a child together have been called "fragile families."

The relationships of many unmarried parents offer a foundation on which BSF programs might help them build a life together. As shown in Figure 1, the vast majority of unmarried parents who responded

**Figure 1. Unmarried Parents' Relationship Status at Time of Birth**



Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study baseline data.

## The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

The Fragile Families study follows about 3,700 unmarried couples who gave birth between 1998 and 2000 in 20 large cities throughout the United States. The sample is representative of nonmarital births in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. Mothers were interviewed at the hospital shortly after giving birth, and fathers were interviewed in the hospital, if possible, or wherever they could be located. Follow-up interviews with both parents take place when the child is about one, three, and five years old. Seventy-five couples from three cities who were romantically involved at the time of the birth (50 unmarried and 25 married) were selected for an additional series of intensive, in-depth qualitative interviews. See <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies> for more information about the study.

to the Fragile Families survey were in some type of romantic relationship (82 percent) at the time their child was born. Fifty-one percent of the unmarried parents were living together, while another 31 percent were romantically involved but living apart (“visiting” relationships). Since unmarried couples who are romantically involved at the time of the baby’s birth are most likely to be interested in marriage-related programs, we limit our analyses in this brief to these couples. Also, since BSF programs are likely to be operated by agencies that serve lower-income (and, thus, generally lower-education) populations, we exclude unwed couples in which either parent had a college degree (5.5 percent of romantically involved couples).

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Unmarried Parents<sup>1</sup>**

	Mother	Father
	Percentages	
<b>Age</b>		
Less than 20	27	13
Ages 20-24	40	35
Ages 25-29	16	24
30 and older	17	27
Mean age	23.6	26.4
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
White, non-Hispanic	17	14
Black, non-Hispanic	43	46
Hispanic	36	36
Other, non-Hispanic	4	4
Parents are of different race/ethnicity	13	NA
<b>Immigrant</b>	12	13
Number of cases ( <i>n</i> )	2,892	2,892

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study baseline data.

<sup>1</sup>The sample includes all unmarried couples who were romantically involved at the time of their baby’s birth and where neither parent has a college degree. All figures are weighted by national sampling weights and are based on mothers’ reports, except fathers’ immigration status.

## Demographic Characteristics

The Fragile Families data indicate that at the time of their baby’s birth, most romantically involved unmarried parents are beyond their teen years (Table 1). Almost three-quarters of the mothers, and even more of the fathers, are age 20 or older. Still, the parents are young; two-fifths of the mothers and just over one-third of the fathers are in their early twenties. Unmarried fathers are, on average, about three years older than unmarried mothers.

Most parents in large urban areas who have a birth outside marriage are either African American or Hispanic (about 80 percent). Overall, 12 to 13 percent are immigrants, and over one-third of Hispanic unmarried parents are immigrants (figure not shown in table). Programs for unmarried parents will need to be sensitive to racial and cultural factors as they relate to marriage.

## Relationship Strengths

BSF programs will focus on those couples who are romantically involved and interested in services to help them gain the skills shown to be associated with healthy marriage and a successful transition to parenthood. At the time of their child's birth, romantically involved couples have generally positive attitudes about marriage, are hopeful about their future together, and are supportive of each other (Table 2). The research has identified the following relationship strengths:

- ***At the time of their child's birth, most unmarried parents who are romantically involved have high hopes for marriage and believe that marriage is better for children and themselves.***

More than 80 percent of cohabiting mothers and fathers report their chances of marrying as “pretty good” or “almost certain,” and more than half of visiting parents give this response. More than three-fifths of unmarried parents believe that children are better off if their parents are married, and a significant fraction believe they themselves would be happier if they were married. Fathers are equally or more optimistic about marriage than mothers, although results for fathers are affected to some extent by nonresponse.<sup>1</sup> Follow-up data on fragile families show that both mothers' and fathers' attitudes about marriage are associated with getting married within a year of the birth.

- ***Many unmarried parents have supportive and affectionate relationships.***

“Supportiveness” reflects each parent's report of how often the other parent encourages and helps him or her, is fair and willing to compromise, and shows love and affection. The average score for all unmarried parents is between 2 and 3, on a 3-point scale where 1 is “never,” 2 “sometimes,” and 3 “often.” The average score on frequency of conflict falls between 1 and 2 on a similar scale. Relationship quality appears to be somewhat higher among parents who are cohabiting at the birth of their child, compared with those who are visiting, but the differences are small. The in-depth interviews underscored that many couples have affectionate relationships. The level of emotional supportiveness of the other parent is associated with getting married after a nonmarital birth. Further, supportiveness appears to help relationship stability more than conflict hurts it; this is consistent with psychological research showing that how conflict is resolved is more important than the frequency of conflict.

- ***Most fathers are involved in their family and committed to their child.***

The majority of both cohabiting and visiting fathers are involved in various ways around the time of their baby's birth. The high levels of engagement by cohabiting fathers are particularly noteworthy. Nearly all cohabiting fathers provided financial and instrumental support to the mother during the pregnancy and visited her in the hospital, and 100 percent said they want to be involved in raising their child. The majority of visiting fathers are also involved around the birth and intend to remain involved in the future.

## What Happens to the Relationships of Fragile Families Over Time?

The time around a baby's birth is typically a challenging time for all couples, including those who are married and those with higher incomes. For unmarried parents, the stresses of parenthood may be even more pronounced, because of their social and economic vulnerabilities. The Fragile Families study found that:

<sup>1</sup> About 90 percent of cohabiting fathers, and 73 percent of fathers in visiting relationships, participated in the baseline survey. It is likely that the men interviewed are more positive about their relationships than the men not interviewed.

- *Despite high hopes around the time of their child's birth, only a small minority of couples subsequently marry.*

By about one year after birth, only 12 percent of all parents who were romantically involved at the birth had married (Table 3). The percentage of couples who married varied by relationship status at baseline: 16 percent of cohabiting couples married, while only 7 percent of visiting couples married.

**Table 2. Parents' Relationship Strengths<sup>1</sup>**

	Cohabiting	Visiting
<b>Expectations about Marriage (Percentages)</b>		
<i>Chances will marry other parent pretty good/almost certain</i>		
Mother's report	83	51
Father's report	86	67
<i>Marriage is better for children (agree/strongly agree)</i>		
Mother's report	69	61
Father's report	79	79
<i>How life would be different if married to other parent</i>		
<i>Overall happiness would be somewhat/much better</i>		
Mother's report	42	61
Father's report	51	58
<b>Relationship Quality (Means)</b>		
<i>Level of supportiveness of other parent (range = 1-3)</i>		
Mother's report about father	2.70	2.58
Father's report about mother	2.68	2.60
<i>Frequency of conflict between them (range = 1-3)</i>		
Mother's report	1.42	1.49
Father's report	1.41	1.51
<b>Father's Commitment and Involvement<sup>2</sup> (Percentages)</b>		
Gave money during the pregnancy	97	84
Helped in an instrumental way	98	79
Visited mother in the hospital	96	72
Baby will have father's surname	94	76
Father's name is on birth certificate	97	82
Mother says father wants to be involved	100	95
Mother wants father to be involved	100	97
Number of cases ( <i>n</i> )	1,671	1,221

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study baseline and one-year data.

<sup>1</sup> The sample includes all unmarried couples who were romantically involved at the time of their baby's birth and where neither parent has a college degree. All figures are weighted by national sampling weights.

<sup>2</sup> Reported by mothers about all fathers.

**Table 3. Relationship Status at Birth and One Year Later for Couples Unmarried at Baby’s Birth<sup>1</sup>**

Time of Birth	One Year After Birth of Child (Percentages)			
	Married	Cohabiting	Visiting	Not Romantic
<b>Romantically Involved</b>	12	48	8	31
Cohabiting	16	59	4	21
Visiting	7	31	15	48

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study baseline data.

<sup>1</sup> The sample includes all unmarried couples who were romantically involved at the time of their baby’s birth and where neither parent has a college degree. All figures are weighted by national sampling weights.

### Potential Challenges for BSF Programs

Building on couples’ relationship strengths, including positive attitudes about marriage and generally supportive relationships, BSF programs will nonetheless face several challenges in supporting healthy marriage among unwed couples. Fragile Families data indicate that most unmarried parents have limited economic opportunities, and many face personal challenges that could influence their ability to achieve healthy marriage and strong relationships. Some also have unrealistic beliefs and expectations about marriage. Challenges they face may include:

- **Many—but not all—unmarried parents have limited education and low earnings.**

More than half of unmarried mothers and fathers completed high school, but fewer than 20 percent of both sexes have any education beyond high school (Table 4). Most parents have recent work experience, yet, not surprisingly, many parents report low earnings; three-fourths of cohabiting mothers and 80 percent of mothers in a visiting relationship earned less than \$10,000 in the year prior to birth. However, earnings for men are substantially higher. Seventy-one percent of men in a cohabiting relationship, and 56 percent of men in visiting relationships, earned at least \$10,000 at the time of their child’s birth; 22 percent of cohabitators and 13 percent of visitors earned \$25,000 or more. One year after the baby’s birth, unmarried mothers still had low earnings, with median annual earnings of less than \$5,000. Fathers’ earnings remained notably higher than mothers’ earnings, with a median of \$20,904 among cohabitators and \$16,110 among visitors.

Economic circumstances are clearly associated with the likelihood of marriage. Analysis of the one-year follow-up data from the Fragile Families study shows that men with higher annual earnings were more likely to marry. Women’s education is associated with relationship stability and marriage, and among employed mothers, those with a higher wage rate were more likely to marry.

- **Trust and sexual fidelity are common concerns.**

Overall, couples reported having high-quality relationships, but some unmarried parents in the study reported problems with their relationship, with distrust being the central theme. These issues emerged in the qualitative study; about half of the unmarried parents interviewed expressed some doubt about the sexual fidelity of their partner. Fears about sexual fidelity often provoke monitoring behaviors, which in turn cause strain and conflict in a couple’s relationship. Both men and women complained that their partners watch them and do not trust them, and many report being suspicious of any contact their partner has with the opposite sex, especially with ex-partners. About one-fifth of the fathers had been unfaithful before the birth, according to mothers’ reports. Lack of trust is a powerful deterrent to marriage. In the qualitative study, one-third of couples had broken up since their baby’s birth, and cheating figured in many of their stories of relational dissolution. In the survey

# IN BRIEF

data, 14 to 24 percent of mothers and 11 to 14 percent of fathers agree that the opposite sex cannot be trusted to be faithful. Analysis of the follow-up survey data shows that mothers' distrust of men was significantly related to lower rates of marriage.

**Table 4. Unmarried Parents' Economic and Social Capacities<sup>1</sup>**

	Cohabiting	Visiting
	Percentages	
<b>Economic Capacities</b>		
<i>Mother's education</i>		
Less than high school	44	42
High school or the equivalent	37	39
Some college	19	19
<i>Father's education</i>		
Less than high school	42	39
High school or the equivalent	40	43
Some college	18	18
<i>Parents' employment</i>		
Father worked in last week <sup>2</sup>	88	73
Mother worked in last year	80	74
<i>Mother's earnings in year before birth</i>		
Zero	31	38
Under \$10,000	43	42
\$10,000–\$24,999	23	18
\$25,000 and higher	3	2
<i>Father's earnings in year before birth</i>		
Zero	2	6
Under \$10,000	27	38
\$10,000–\$24,999	49	43
\$25,000 and higher	22	13
<i>Mother's earnings in year before 1-year survey (median)</i>	\$4,095	\$3,036
<i>Father's earnings in year before 1-year survey (median)</i>	\$20,904	\$16,110
<b>Social Capacities</b>		
<i>Previous children</i>		
Parents have other children together	36	20
Mother has child(ren) by another partner	39	47
Father has child(ren) by another partner <sup>2</sup>	35	47
<i>Gender distrust</i>		
Mother agrees men cannot be trusted to be faithful	14	24
Father agrees women cannot be trusted to be faithful	11	14
<i>Father was ever incarcerated<sup>2</sup></i>	33	42
Number of cases ( <i>n</i> )	1,671	1,221

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study baseline and one-year data.

<sup>1</sup> The sample includes all unmarried couples who were romantically involved at the time of their baby's birth and where neither parent has a college degree. All figures are weighted by national sampling weights.

<sup>2</sup> Reported by mothers about all fathers.

- ***Many unmarried parents have children by other partners.***

Having children with another partner is quite common among unmarried parents (Table 4). Among cohabiting couples, 39 percent of unmarried mothers and 35 percent of unmarried fathers had children by another partner. Among couples in visiting relationships, 47 percent of both mothers and fathers had children by another partner. Multi-partner fertility is important because, among fragile families, the probability of marriage is significantly lower for couples in which the father has had children with another woman. In contrast, a mother having children with a previous partner does not appear to affect the chances of marriage.

- ***A high proportion of unmarried fathers have been incarcerated.***

One-third of cohabiting fathers and 42 percent of visiting fathers have been incarcerated at some point in their past (Table 4). Programs should be mindful of the fact that many fathers have spent time in jail, and that about one-fifth of these men were in prison for a violent crime (figure not shown). A prison record may affect a man's ability to get certain jobs and, depending on the charges (whether a felony), may limit a couple's ability to qualify for some public benefits (for example, public housing). Importantly, a record of violent crime may indicate that a father is not a good prospect for marriage because of the risk of future violence toward the mother and child.

- ***Many parents postpone marriage because they feel they should achieve economic stability and a sense of certainty about their relationship first.***

The qualitative data shed light on the barriers to marriage among unwed parents. Mothers and fathers report that before they marry, they want a certain level of assets and financial security, such as a modest home, some furniture, a car, and some savings to pay for an engagement ring and a wedding. In their view, it is necessary to achieve these standards before marriage. Also, given the turbulence and infidelity in some couples' relationships, unmarried parents may be genuinely unsure if their relationship will ever attain the quality that would make it worthy of a lifelong commitment. Given these economic and relationship criteria for marriage, some couples consider it best to "wait and see" about marriage.

## Implications for BSF Programs

Program designers can be encouraged by the very positive responses of many unmarried parents about their hopes for and strength of their relationships, as well as by the strong association between both positive attitudes and supportiveness and the likelihood of marriage. For unmarried parents in committed relationships, these results suggest that the period before and around the birth of a child may be an opportune time to help young couples who are interested in marriage achieve their aspirations as a couple and as parents. Yet, BSF programs will need to take account of the challenges that confront unmarried parents and affect their relationship quality and likelihood of marriage. The findings described in this brief suggest several lessons related to program design:

- ***Programs can build on the high hopes and affection in many unmarried parents' relationships.***

At the time their child is born, most unmarried parents believe they will marry, and many couples have relationships that are supportive and affectionate. Program designers should consider how to emphasize these positive attributes of participants' relationships in order to strengthen and sustain their relationships. BSF programs should incorporate curricula that address a range of topics associated with healthy marriage, such as enhancing fondness and supportive behaviors, and improving communication and conflict resolution skills in relationships.

- ***Programs will have to recognize the economic needs of parents.***

Most unmarried parents face economic constraints, which may pose an additional burden on their relationship stability both before and after marriage. BSF programs should address this challenge by connecting participants

with services that can help them improve their financial situation. Well-trained staff, as well as good working relationships and agreements with other service providers, may play an important role in ensuring that couples receive the range of services they need.

- ***Program curricula must address issues of distrust and fidelity, along with the high relational “bar” many unmarried parents set for marriage.***

BSF programs should focus on helping couples develop the mutual trust that is essential to a healthy relationship. This may necessitate dealing with untrustworthy behavior among both parents (especially sexual infidelity), or helping couples integrate children from other relationships into their families and relating appropriately to ex-partners who are the parents of the other children. Programs should provide services to guide unmarried parents in such situations on how to maintain constructive cooperation with their former partner without threatening their present relationship. They should also present couples with models of healthy marriage as part of an exploration of reasons they could consider for making (or not making) such a commitment.

## References

This brief is based on recent research using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, particularly the papers listed below:

- Carlson, Marcia, Sara McLanahan, and Paula England. “Union Formation in Fragile Families.” *Demography*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2004, pp. 237-262.
- Edin, Kathryn, Paula England, and Kathryn Linnenberg. “Love and Distrust Among Unmarried Parents.” Paper presented at the National Poverty Center, Annual Research Conference, Washington, DC, September 2003.
- Gibson-Davis, Christina, Kathryn Edin, and Sara McLanahan. “High Hopes But Even Higher Expectations: The Retreat from Marriage Among Low-Income Couples.” Princeton, NJ: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University Working Paper #2003-06-FF, 2004.

The Building Strong Families (BSF) project is testing whether well-designed interventions can help interested couples fulfill their aspirations for a healthy marriage and enhance child wellbeing. The interventions will target parents before, or around the time of, their children’s birth. BSF programs will provide instruction and support to help couples develop the relationship skills that research has shown are associated with a healthy marriage. Programs also will link couples with services to address employment, health, substance abuse, and other problems that can erode relationships and reduce the chances of having a healthy marriage. Under contract with the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the BSF evaluation is being conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., and its subcontractors MDRC, Public Strategies, Inc., the Urban Institute, and Decision Information Resources.

Mathematica® is a registered trademark of Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

Visit our website at [www.buildingstrongfamilies.info](http://www.buildingstrongfamilies.info) or [www.mathematica-mpr.com](http://www.mathematica-mpr.com)

**To Find Out More:**  
Contact: Alan M. Hershey  
Phone: (609) 275-2384  
Fax: (609) 799-0005

**Princeton Office**  
PO Box 2393  
Princeton, NJ 08543-2393  
Phone: (609) 799-3535  
Fax: (609) 799-0005

**Washington Office**  
600 Maryland Ave., SW, Suite 550  
Washington, DC 20024-2512  
Phone: (202) 484-9220  
Fax: (202) 863-1763

**Cambridge Office**  
50 Church St., 4th Floor  
Cambridge, MA 02138-3726  
Phone: (617) 491-7900  
Fax: (617) 491-8044