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Unmarried Parents in Oakland More Likely to Separate Than to Marry

One-third of all children in California are now born to unmarried women. Although increases in nonmarital births have leveled off in recent years, families headed by unmarried parents continue to present significant policy challenges. Children born outside marriage are more likely than other children to be poor and to receive welfare. They are also less likely to receive child support. In light of these facts, federal welfare legislation and "responsible fatherhood" initiatives have sought to promote marriage and to strengthen two-parent families.

Despite growing interest in these initiatives, there is surprisingly little information on the nature of unmarried parents' relationships and why these parents do or do not marry. In *Unmarried Parents, Fragile Families: New Evidence from Oakland*, Maureen Waller investigates how parents' relationships change in the first year of their child's life. The study focuses on 250 families in Oakland that participated in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCW) survey, a national, longitudinal study of unmarried parents and their children. Oakland was the first city surveyed in this study and the first for which follow-up data are available. Drawing on two waves of surveys with parents, the report tracks transitions toward increased or decreased involvement in the first year of their child's life. It also analyzes the economic and personal issues parents faced during that same time. Finally, it examines the links between these issues and parents' expectations about marriage.

Few Couples Marry, Many Live Together in the First Year

About half the unmarried parents in Oakland were living together at the time of their child's birth. Another 35 percent were in romantic relationships but not cohabiting, and 15 percent were not romantically involved with the other parent. Despite generally high expectations about marriage at the time of their child's birth, only 7 percent of these parents married in the first year. Almost half were living together one year later and 40 percent were not in a romantic relationship with the other parent. Cohabitation was the most stable relationship type in the first year. About three-quarters of couples cohabiting when their child was born were still living together one year later. Yet even these parents were slightly more likely to separate than to marry.

Interviews with parents help explain these results. Parents who ended their relationships often mentioned a specific event (such as a violent incident, drug relapse, or deportation) that triggered the break-up. Other parents mentioned general relationship problems such as conflicts about trust, infidelity, and commitment. These accounts also indicate that financial instability, including not having a place to stay together, coincided with relationship problems and most likely contributed to them. When discussing reasons for delaying marriage, parents who stayed together in the first year mentioned many of the same general problems as those who did not. The major difference between the two sorts of couples was that parents with intact relationships had usually been living together at the time of their child's birth.

In general, couples in Oakland regarded their relationships as highly vulnerable. Although many were hopeful that their economic and personal circumstances would improve, few couples had reached the point where they felt prepared for marriage. Couples in the general population share some of the problems reported by these parents, but Waller notes that the material hardships observed in Oakland exacerbated common relationship problems and introduced new ones.

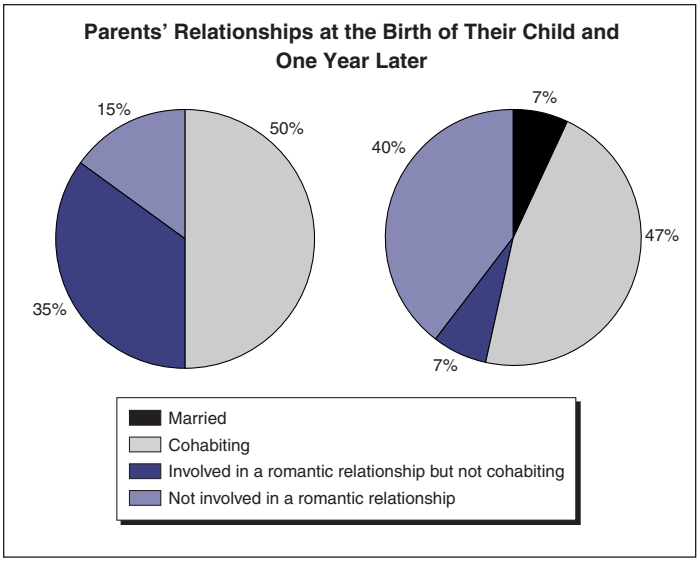
The report also tracks the relationships between issues identified in the interviews and how parents assessed their chances of marrying each other. Factors associated with low

expectations for marriage include high levels of conflict, violent incidents, drug or alcohol problems, and the belief that the other gender cannot be trusted to be faithful. Factors associated with high expectations for marriage were fathers' employment, relatively high educational attainment among mothers, and cohabitation. Cohabitation had the strongest positive effect on marriage expectations, indicating that unmarried parents viewed it as a step toward marriage. Also, the experience of cohabitation may have increased parents' expectations that they would marry.

Policy Implications

About half the unmarried parents in Oakland were living together when their children were born, suggesting a relatively high level of commitment in their relationships. Furthermore, most parents expressed high expectations about marriage. After one year, however, few couples were married and 40 percent were not involved in romantic relationships. These results suggest that federal efforts to encourage marriage face serious obstacles (see the figure).

Waller notes that policymakers can help stabilize fragile families by considering more programs for unmarried couples still involved in romantic relationships, particularly cohabiting couples. For example, cash assistance programs (such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and in-kind assistance (food stamps, health insurance, and housing) could be extended to cover more two-parent families, regardless of their marital status. Some community-based fatherhood programs offer employment services and emphasize cooperative parenting, but these programs tend to target noncustodial fathers with child support obligations, many of whom are no longer romantically involved with the mother. Programs that support cohabiting parents (and not only single mothers or noncustodial fathers) also could enhance family cohesion and child well-being.



Although many unmarried parents in Oakland were cohabiting, they were more likely to dissolve their relationships than to marry after one year.

Helping parents overcome drug or alcohol problems would allow parents to stabilize their families and increase their capacity for employment. However, promoting marriage or increased involvement for parents with drug or alcohol problems may be unrealistic or even detrimental to other family members. Likewise, encouraging relationships characterized by domestic violence is dangerous. Knowing more about these parents' circumstances will help policymakers identify cases in which encouraging marriage would be appropriate or feasible. As the FFCW study continues, policymakers will also have a clearer idea of which issues affect parents' relationships the most.

This research brief summarizes a report by Maureen R. Waller, Unmarried Parents, Fragile Families: New Evidence from Oakland *(2001, 126 pp., $12.00, ISBN 1-58213-035-3). The report may be ordered by phone at (800) 232-5343 [U.S. mainland] or (415) 291-4400 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas]. A copy of the full text is also available on the Internet (www.ppic.org). The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.*

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