



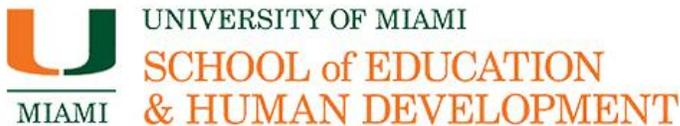
# UNDERSTANDING LOW- INCOME UNMARRIED COUPLES WITH CHILDREN

A Briefing Paper Prepared for the  
Council on Contemporary Families

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## Executive Summary

Why do so many low-income couples postpone marriage but fail to postpone childbearing? Which couples eventually do marry? Why do the rest of the couples break up? How would knowing the answers to these questions affect public policy?

A new briefing report by the Council on Contemporary Families offers an advance look at the answers to these questions, based on research to be published in a forthcoming book (October, 2007) by Stanford sociologist Paula England and Harvard sociologist Kathryn Edin.

The report, "Unmarried Couples with Children," follows below. Among the questions to which it provides surprising answers:

- Why low-income unmarried couples with children believe they will have a longer-lasting relationship if they postpone marriage, even after they have a child, and even though most say they expect to marry each other;
- Which couples are most likely to use contraception; and why some couples do not;
- How the issues that eventually break most of these couples up differ from the issues that initially cause them to postpone marriage;
- Why liberal and conservative policy proposals for these couples each fail to address half the problem.

Other topics covered in the study:

- Couples who do not use birth control consistently are NOT the uncommitted couples we often hear about, who have a short fling, leaving the woman pregnant and the man long gone. It is the committed couples who do not regularly use birth control, and the report explains why;
- What issues create conflict for low-income couples with children, and why it is women who usually initiate the breakup;
- What predicts good fathering in a relationship when a man has a child from a previous relationship, as so many of the men (and women) in these couples do.

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# Understanding Low-Income Unmarried Couples with Children

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One third of babies born in the United States today have unmarried parents (Carlson et al. 2004), up from about 5 percent in 1960 (Moore 1995). The more economically disadvantaged couples are, the more likely they are to be unmarried when their children are born (Ellwood and Jencks 2004; Moore 1995). Thus, studying the relationships of couples who have children outside marriage helps us understand a large group of low-income couples. This briefing paper summarizes findings from a new book studying such couples, entitled *Unmarried Couples with Children*, edited by Stanford sociologist Paula England and Harvard sociologist Kathryn Edin, published in 2007 by Russell Sage Foundation. Together with our assistants, we conducted in-depth interviews with unmarried couples right after their baby was born, and followed and reinterviewed them until their baby turned 4, whether they married, stayed together unmarried, or broke up. Parents were interviewed together and apart.

Many of us have a stereotypical view of a woman having a baby out of wedlock—we assume that unmarried fathers are long gone from the mothers' lives by the time of the birth. But, in fact, nothing could be farther from the truth. A large national survey of nonmarital births in 20 large urban areas, the *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study*, found that over 80% of unmarried parents were romantically involved with the other parent when their baby was born, and about half of the couples were living together at the time of the birth. Of mothers romantically involved with the father at the birth, 78 percent of the cohabitators and 49 percent of those not living together said they saw at least a good or almost certain chance that the two would marry sometime in the future (from mothers' reports; Carlson and McLanahan 2002). An even higher percent of fathers predicted that the couple would marry eventually. But, in fact, most couples did not marry within a few years and many broke up. Among the approximately half of the unmarried parents in the larger *Fragile Families* survey where the parents were cohabiting at the birth, five years after the baby is born, almost half had broken up and only about a quarter had married. Among the approximately 30 percent of unmarried parents who are romantically involved but not cohabiting when their baby is born, over three quarters were broken up and only 7 percent married to each other five years later.

Our qualitative study of 48 unmarried couples who shared a nonmarital birth in 2000 is embedded in the *Fragile Families* study, discussed above, which sampled thousands of births in hospitals in 20 cities, interviewing both parents where possible. We drew the couples for our study from among the couples in the larger survey in three of the 20 cities. Our study was called the "TLC3 Study" (for "Time, Love, and Cash Among Couples with

Children"). Our study included only couples who were still romantically involved when their baby was born (as mentioned above, national data show this is true in about 80% of nonmarital births). The average household income of TLC3 couples who were cohabiting was quite low, \$22,500. Twenty-nine percent of fathers and 26 percent of mothers had neither a G.E.D. nor a high school degree. Thus, like unmarried parents nationwide, this is a very disadvantaged group.

Are pregnancies planned? Our study started by asking whether the pregnancies that led to the nonmarital births that our respondents had experienced were planned, unplanned, or in between.<sup>[i]</sup> While a small number (12%) of the nonmarital conceptions are planned, most are not. Those that were planned were almost universally to couples in serious relationships. Twenty-two percent were the result of inconsistent contraception, most of these to couples in serious relationships as well. These couples often use contraception consistently when their relationship is new, but let their vigilance lapse when the relationship becomes more serious. Eighteen percent had used contraception but it failed; another five percent had thought they were sterile, so weren't contracepting. One of the most important findings is that roughly another 25% were neither planned nor unplanned, but in between. That is, there is a continuum of how "intended" pregnancies are. Individuals characterizing the pregnancy as "in between" are almost always in a serious relationship and want children together eventually. Unsure that their current circumstances are ideal, their ambivalence leads them to leave conception to chance.

A quarter of the pregnancies were truly unintended, but occurred when couples were not contracepting. These individuals did not want-even ambivalently-to have a child now, but somehow didn't align their contraceptive behavior with their wishes. These are the pregnancies where abortion is most often considered or pursued. The group of parents having these pregnancies have the least efficacy in achieving their own goals and some are caught up in lifestyles that are risky in many ways.

Overall, we identified two important factors affecting whether unmarried individuals have children. One is how serious their relationship is. The more serious it is, the more likely they are to have a child, even while unmarried, and to have a pregnancy that is truly planned or at least "in between" planned and unplanned. The second factor is individuals' degree of efficacy in "getting it together" to contracept consistently when they truly did not want a pregnancy.

Will They Marry Later? Do couples who are together but unmarried when their baby is born aspire to marriage with this partner? Most truly do, but not many tie the knot. So we explored what they say about what is keeping them from marrying.<sup>[ii]</sup> For some, problems with the relationship held them back. But the even more common-almost universal-response by men and women to our questions about what it would take for them to decide to marry was that they were waiting to meet certain economic standards. Of course, the idea that couples need to be able to afford to set up a household and support a child before getting married has long been traditional. What is interesting about today's unmarried couples who've had a child together is that they articulate this standard for marriage even when they have already started living together and have had a child together. Indeed,

couples who hadn't married four years after their baby's birth, but hadn't broken up either, still clung to this bar as a major reason they hadn't married yet. What parents meant by this economic bar was usually something like wanting one or both of them had a good job so they didn't need family or friends or the government to give them money to pay all their bills each month. Based on how they described their economic situation, the study classified parents into those who met this bar by four years after the baby was born and those who did not. Most of the parents in the study did not meet this economic bar by four years after the birth, and did not marry. But 78 percent of those who met this bar married, while only 19 percent of those who did not meet the bar did so by four years after the birth. Given their values and criteria, the inability to get decent paying jobs is a real constraint to marriage among low income unmarried parents.

**What Do They Fight About?** We also looked at what issues create conflict for low-income couples with children.<sup>[iii]</sup> After the interviews with the couples still together three and four years after their baby's birth, interviewers asked couples to identify the two most important issues that they don't see eye to eye on. The video camera continued to run while the interviewer left the room for 10 minutes, leaving the couple to discuss the issue. The four issues that came up most often were emotional attention and companionship, child discipline, housework, and money issues. Earlier studies suggested that it is only in the middle class that women expect emotional intimacy and shared activities with men. But this has clearly changed. The low income women in our study complained bitterly that their men don't listen to them or talk to them enough, and don't spend "quality time" with them. Women also complained about men spending time "on the street" or with male friends or kin rather than with them. Child discipline was another hot issue. Men generally wanted a stricter regime than women. Either Dad wanted Mom to run a tighter ship while doing the child minding that they both agreed was her job, or Dad himself wanted to discipline children (especially sons) more harshly than Mom thought was appropriate.

**Fathering When Dad Lives with Mom.**<sup>[iv]</sup> We also zeroed in on how involved Dads are in taking care of children when the couple is living together. The worst couple relationships with the most conflict had the least and lowest quality father involvement. However, at the opposite end of involvement, the very most involved fathers, who did at least half the child care, were not the ones with the best (nor the worst) relationships. The most involved dads were in couples where she was employed and he was unemployed. His nonemployment was not usually a based on a choice that he would be the one to stay home with children, but a result of not finding a job or being employable. The care work done by these fathers is appreciated by the mother, but the men often have economic and behavioral problems that strain their relationships. When men are employed, the father's primary role is typically as a "playmate" to the child who does actual care mostly only when mothers scrutinize and supervise their work.

**Unmarried Step Parenting.**<sup>[v]</sup> Many of the cohabiting couples in our study lived in a household including not only the baby they had together, but also Mom's child from a prior relationship. Often Dad also had a child from a prior relationship, although typically this child was living with his female ex-partner. Jealousy is often the cause of conflicts in these "blended" families. When Dad goes to see his other children by a previous woman, his

current partner is jealous of the time away from her and her kids, and she may worry that he will get sexually and romantically reinvolved with his "ex." Dad, too, may be jealous about his new partners' dealings with her "ex" with whom she has a child, for example, when he comes by to pick up children for visitation. Among couples with blended families, those who married each other were those in which Mom's prior partner was no longer an active father to her kids and Dad was no longer involved with any of his kids who live with their mother. This poses a dilemma-it appears that a good way to encourage marriage among new unmarried parents is to encourage fathers to be "dead-beat dads" to their kids by former partners, hardly a compelling policy suggestion. What is best for his kids by one partner may not be best for his kids by the new partner.

**Jealousy and Cheating.**<sup>[vi]</sup> American couples in committed romantic relationships overwhelmingly expect sexual exclusivity regardless of their marital status, though infidelity is higher among unmarried than married couples. More than half (58%) of the unmarried couples in our study had experienced at least one instance of infidelity over the course of their relationship. Most of the time it was men who cheated, though some women did as well. Incidents of infidelity often occurred around events that brought the future of the relationship into question, such as the incarceration of one partner or a major argument. If there was chronic infidelity, the relationship seldom survived. Sexual jealousy and sexual mistrust are even more pervasive than reports of actual infidelity, with at least one of the partners in three quarters of the couples reporting some such issue.

**What Leads To Breakups Among Unmarried Parents?**<sup>[vii]</sup> Respondents who had broken up with the other parent reported infidelity, arguing, verbal and physical abuse, lack of love and attention, and substance abuse as primary reasons for their break ups. Often those who broke up had multiple problems. Relationship quality is central, and men's bad behavior is key. It is almost always women who initiate the breakup, and the men who move out. Although economic problems figure prominently in why couples say they don't get married, economic problems were never central to their stories of how the breakup occurred. Not surprisingly, couples who broke up had much worse relationships at the outset. Indeed, it appears that the bad relationships were usually bad from the beginning, and over half the breakups that occurred within four years actually happened in the first year after the baby's birth.

**Do Unmarried Dads Pay Child Support After a Breakup?**<sup>[viii]</sup> We found little evidence of fathers with decent jobs who could support their children but choose not to pay any child support-the stereotypical "dead beat dad." However, this may be at least in part because child support systems are now sufficiently stringent that those who are employed have support automatically garnished from their wages. We don't know how many of these fathers would have paid in a less stringent regime. For those not paying, both mothers and fathers point to incarceration, unemployment, and a lack of resources as reasons for the low levels of support. However, fathers portray their contributions in a much more positive light than their female ex-partners do. Most young mothers without support from fathers are relying on a new partner to help provide for their families by the time their babies were 4 years old. However, we couldn't really tell whether having the new partner caused her to

stop trying to get her former partner to pay child support, or whether the lack of his child support increased her motivation to find a new partner; the causal order was unclear.

Do Dads Visit their Kids After Breakup?[ix] At the time of a child's birth, most unmarried fathers are dedicated to staying involved with their child, and most mothers want them to as well. Yet studies consistently show that as children whose parents are separated grow older, many fathers disconnect, particularly those who were never married to the mother. Our study considered two sides of the story of how fathers become uninvolved, offering a rare "he said, she said" account. Fathers blame mothers, and charge them with "gatekeeping," while mothers say there are good reasons for limiting fathers' access to their children. Mothers offer three main justifications for their gate-keeping: previous inconsistency in visitation, safety concerns about the dangers associated with the father's lifestyle (usually his drug or alcohol use), and the inability of the parents to get along after the breakup. While one might assume that safety concerns would prompt mothers to completely shut fathers out, this was not so. In fact, fathers whose contact was limited for these reason alone often had some degree of contact, though mothers controlled when the contact occurred. These mothers usually arranged for the fathers to visit in the mother's home. It was when the two parents just couldn't get along that fathers were most likely to be shut out completely, sometimes through the mother getting a restraining order against the father. Some fathers claimed that these orders were obtained fraudulently. Most mothers who "gate-keep" their children's fathers out have repartnered, and the existence of a new man is straining an already tenuous coparenting relationship. In cases where no gatekeeping is evident, mothers say they value the role the father plays in the child's life and they are sometimes reliant on the fathers for childcare.

Our Study Compared To What We Know About Low Income Families in Past Decades. In earlier decades, it was common for unmarried low income couples to find the woman pregnant out of wedlock, just as our unmarried sample members did. But intercourse typically would not have started until relationships were more serious (Hollingshead 1949). Within or outside of marriage, though, having children only when planned has long been more frequent in the middle than working and lower class (Rainwater 1960, 1965). Like decades ago, it is common today for low income couples to get pregnant without explicitly planning it, inside or outside marriage. One thing contributing to the increase in nonmarital births is the reduction in how often pregnancies prompt couples to move to marriage or to stable common law arrangements (Moore 1995; Akerlof et al. 1996). The extent to which the sexual revolution reduced shot-gun marriages underscores the degree to which these marriages in earlier eras reflected the shame entailed in having premarital sex revealed, shame that was heaped particularly on the women.

Our study suggests that the meaning of marriage has changed. As long as they are still romantically involved, unmarried parents almost always see marriage to the co-parent as something to aspire to, but they don't want to marry until certain relational and economic bars are met, even when they are already living together and have a child together. In contrast, in earlier decades, one virtually had to be married and have children to "count" as a social adult (Morland 1958). Today, marriage is seen as more optional, but its symbolic value has increased (Cherlin 2004; Edin and Kefalas 2005). People feel it is worse to marry

before the couple's relational and economic status are above a certain threshold than it is to have a child while unmarried (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Gibson et al. 2006; Edin 2000). Rising emotional standards for marriage are a continuation of a longterm trend; Coontz (2005) argues that the trend dates all the way back to the love revolution of the eighteenth century. But, while love was the ideal, ethnographies of the 1950s and 1960s pointed out how little companionship and shared leisure there often was between low-income spouses (Bott 1957; Gans 1962). Women often resigned themselves to little mutuality and considered themselves lucky if their men brought home most of their paycheck and didn't beat them (Komarovskiy and Phillips 1962; Rubin 1976). Today's low income women, black, white, and Hispanic, clearly have much higher relationship standards. Indeed, in our study, women's top complaint was that men didn't talk to them enough, show enough affection, and spend enough "quality time" with them. It is probably not that today's relationships among low income couples are worse than those of prior decades. Part of the problem is that the earnings of men in the bottom half of the class hierarchy have fallen since the 1970s (Bernhardt et al. 2001), but this explains only some of the retreat from or delay of marriage (Ellwood and Jencks 2004). Rising cultural standards are also key to the explanation. As modest as the standards of the couples we study here seem, they are undoubtedly much higher than those held by their counterparts decades back (Edin and Kefalas 2005). Given that relational and economic problems are worse toward the bottom of the class structure, as they have always been, today's rising emotional and economic standards for marriage have left many low income couples in the situation where neither their relationships nor their budgets meet their own standards for marriage.

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## Endnotes

[i] Whether the pregnancies were planned is discussed in the chapter entitled "Forming Fragile Families: Was the Baby Planned, Unplanned, or In-Between?" by Kathryn Edin, Paula England, Emily Shafer, and Joanna Reed. Respondents were asked about all their nonmarital births, abortions, or miscarriages.

[ii] What unmarried parents say about what is keeping them from marrying is explored in the chapter entitled "Expectations and the Economic Bar to Marriage Among Low-Income Couples" by Christina Gibson-Davis.

[iii] The content of relationship conflicts was explored in the chapter entitled "Everyday Gender Conflicts in Low-Income Couples," by Paula England and Emily Shafer. This chapter used the unmarried couples as well as a comparison sample of married couples who had babies in the same urban hospitals, since the content of their conflicts was not significantly different.

[iv] This topic is examined in the chapter entitled "'#1 Father or Fathering 101: Couple Relationship Quality and Father Involvement When Fathers Live with their Children" by Kathryn Linnenberg. It too included married and unmarried parents.

[v] Households with unmarried step-parents are explored in Lindsay Monte's chapter entitled "Blended But Not the Brady's: Navigating Unmarried Multiple Partner Fertility,"

[vi] Cheating and jealousy about possible cheating are discussed in the chapter by Heather Hill entitled "Steppin' Out: Infidelity and Sexual Jealousy among Unmarried Parents."

[vii] The stories of the couples in the study who broke up are chronicled and analyzed in the chapter entitled "Anatomy of the Breakup" by Joanna Reed.

[viii] Child support payment is explored by Katherine Magnuson and Christina Gibson-Davis in the chapter entitled "Child Support Patterns Among Low-Income Noncustodial Fathers."

[ix] This is explored in the chapter entitled "Gate-keeper Moms and (Un)Involved Dads: What Happens After a Breakup?" by Amy Claessens..

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