

Marriage and Cohabitation Transitions among Unwed Mothers: Implications for Marriage
Promotion Policies

Heather Koball
Columbia University

National Center for Children in Poverty
125 West 215th St, 3rd floor
New York, NY 10027
(646)284-9636
hk2163@columbia.edu

Abstract

This research tracks parents' marital outcomes for eight years after their first child's birth, with a primary focus on parents whose first child was born outside of marriage. Data come from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979. Though much has changed since the 1980s, when many of the respondents had their first child, the longitudinal data allow for an analysis of parents' marital outcomes over the long-term.

Fewer than one-third of mothers who gave birth outside of marriage married the father of their child by the time the child was eight years old. The best predictor of eventual marriage to the father was cohabiting with him at the time of the child's birth. This suggests that cohabitation was often a step toward marriage for unmarried mothers. Teen mothers were most likely to marry the father between conception and birth (i.e., shotgun weddings). The resulting marriages were quite unstable, with the majority ending in divorce by the time the child reached age 8. Divorce rates were high among all young mothers. In fact, most children who lived apart from their fathers at age 8 had divorced parents. Mothers who married after the birth of their first child experienced higher divorce rates than mothers who were married prior to conception; however, once mothers' background characteristics were taken into account, these differences in divorce rates were no longer significant. These findings suggest that programs that focus on divorce prevention for all young mothers should be an important component of marriage promotion programs. Mothers' characteristics, such as age, race, and income, were associated with marital decisions, suggesting that marriage promotion programs should be tailored to meet the varying needs of specific sociodemographic groups.

Key Words: Marriage, Cohabitation, Non-Marital Childbirth, Divorce, Marriage Policy

Introduction

In February 2002, President Bush released his welfare reform reauthorization proposal entitled "Working Toward Independence" (Bush Administration 2002). The proposal states that one of welfare's main objectives should be "to encourage the formation and maintenance of healthy two-parent *married* families" (20). To meet this goal, the proposal earmarks \$300 million annually in welfare funds for programs to promote marriage and reduce divorce.

Even before Bush's proposal, several states had begun financing marriage promotion efforts with welfare funds. For example, Oklahoma's 1999 Marriage Initiative, funded with \$10 million in annual welfare dollars, aims to reduce the state's divorce rate by a third by 2010. The program builds relationship skills courses into social service programs and educates the public about marriage's benefits. In 2000, Arizona allocated \$1 million in welfare funds toward marriage promotion programs, including marriage skills courses and marriage counseling vouchers for low-income couples.

Today with welfare reauthorization approaching, marriage promotion has emerged as a prime topic in many debates. Marriage proponents cite research showing that, regardless of income, children raised by their married biological/adoptive parents behave better and do better in school than children raised by single mothers, cohabiting parents, or stepparents (Parke 2003). Families headed by never-married mothers are at a particularly high risk of poverty and welfare dependency. As policymakers craft new initiatives, it is important to have more information about unwed parents decisions to marry and how these marriages turn out over the long-term. This research tracks the marital outcomes of unwed parents over eight years after their first child's birth.

Literature

Currently, one out of three children is born to an unmarried woman (Offner 2001), and most non-marital births are to adult women, rather than teenagers (Terry-Humen, Manlove and Moore 2000). Recent surveys reveal that over three-quarters of unwed parents are either living together or romantically involved at the time of their child's birth (Norland 2000), and about half of these couples expect to marry. The majority of unwed mothers want the fathers to be involved in the children's lives (Norland 2001).

Within a few short years, however, many of these parents' relationships have dissolved (Carlson, McLanhan, and England 2001). Findings from studies of unwed parents suggest that the birth of a child is a "magic moment" because couples have high expectations about their future together. These couples, however, face several barriers to marriage, including high levels of unemployment, low wages, and incarceration histories among the fathers (McLanahan, Garfinkel and Mincy 2001). As a result, unwed parents relationships are often unstable. One out of five couples who were cohabiting at the time of their child's birth are no longer cohabiting one year later (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2001). About half of unmarried, dating parents are no longer romantically involved one year later (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2001).

After unwed parents' relationships break-up, nonresident fathers quickly withdraw from their children's lives (Sorensen, Mincy and Halpern 2000; Hardy, Duggan, Masnyk, and Parson 1989). Children born outside of marriage are at a higher risk for poor economic, academic, and social outcomes, in large part, because these children lose the financial and emotional support of their fathers at a young age. Furthermore, fathers who never marry their children's mothers are less likely to pay child support.

Evidence suggests that marriage itself may be economically beneficial to unwed mothers. In fact, a recent study found that women who married shortly after their child was born had similar economic outcomes to women who bore their child while married (Driscoll, Hearn, Evans, Moore, Sugland, and Call 1999).

Cohabitation tends to be associated with poor economic outcomes, in part, because low-income mothers are more likely to cohabit (Graefe and Lichter 1999). Longitudinal studies reveal that cohabiting mothers had lower family incomes (which included their partners' income) primarily because the mothers had lower wages before entering the relationship as compared to mothers who married (Morrison and Ritualo 2002). Divorce is also associated with poor economic outcomes for mothers. Mothers and children experience a sharp, significant drop in their income-to-needs ratio following divorce (Holden and Smock 1991).

The potential benefits of marriage have encouraged policies that aim to promote marriage for unwed parents. To best develop and implement such policies it is important to better understand the marriage patterns of unwed parents and the long-term stability of marriages that follow a non-marital conception or birth. Research has shown differential effects of non-marital births on the likelihood of marriage, depending on the group under study. Cohabitors often respond to a birth by marrying (Manning and Smock 1995); however, unwed mothers are less likely to ever marry (Lichter, Graefe, and Brown 2001). There is little information available about the long-term marital outcomes of parents who are not cohabiting at the time their child is born. Some evidence suggests that having a child prior to marriage decreases future marriage stability (Bramlett and Mosher 2002), although it is unknown whether these marriages are between the child's biological parents. There is mixed evidence about whether marriages that

occur between conception and birth (i.e., shotgun weddings) are more likely to lead to divorce than marriages that occur prior to conception (Fein, Burstein, Fein, and Lindberg 2003).

This paper tracks young unwed parents' marital outcomes until their first child is eight years old. The research describes the marriage and divorce rates of parents following a non-marital birth. The role of cohabitation in predicting marriage and subsequent divorce is also examined. The research contributes to the current literature in two ways. One, the analysis focuses on marriages between biological parents of children born outside marriage. Previously, this type of analysis was not possible with many large scale, longitudinal surveys because the surveys did not ascertain the relationship of a child to a mother's spouse or partner. With the release of new data from the NLSY79, it is possible to determine whether the child's father is present in the household. Two, parents' relationships are followed until the child is eight years old. This allows an examination of marriage and divorce rates between unwed parents over the long term.

Data

Data come from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79). The NLSY79 survey began collecting data in 1979 from a nationally representative sample of young men and women ages 14 to 21. Follow-up survey data were collected from the sample in every year until 1994 and in every other year since then. The survey includes detailed questions about family formation and background characteristics.

For this analysis, three restrictions were placed on the NLSY79 sample. First, the sample was restricted to women who had not had a child before 1979, the first year of the survey, so data could be observed for every year of the child's life. Second, only women ages 14 to 17 in the first year of the survey were included because many of the women ages 18 to 21 had already had

children by 1979. Third, only women who had a child prior to age 26 were included to focus the analysis on younger mothers. These restrictions resulted in a sample of 990 women. The youngest children in the sample were born in 1990 (children born to 25 year old mothers who were 14 in 1979). At the time the analysis was performed, the most recently available data were from the 1998 survey, thus all the mothers' marital outcomes could be followed until their children were age 8. The results reflect the circumstances of children born primarily in the 1980s and whose mothers are currently ages 37 to 40.

Determining Whether the Father Lives in the Household

Through combining retrospective data and newly released spouse/partner data, it was possible to determine whether an unwed mother ever married the *father* of her child. In later survey years, the NLSY79 asked whether the child's father currently lived in the household. If the mother responded "no," she was asked when the father had last lived in the household. Using these questions, it was possible to determine the last year in which the father lived in the household. However, it was *not* possible to determine the year the father entered the household, which was essential for knowing the cohabitation and marital status of parents following a non-marital birth.

Recently, new spouse/partner data for NLSY79 respondents was released. These data were created by matching confidential information (e.g., names) from the household roster across survey years to track the presence of a particular spouse or partner in the household from year to year. Using these data, I compared the date the father left the household with the dates the spouse/partner was a household member, according to the household roster. I then traced backward, using the spouse/partner data, to the year the spouse/partner was first identified on the household roster. There was a surprisingly high level of agreement between the two pieces of

data. Only 8 percent of the mothers had substantial discrepancies between the two survey questions (please contact the author for more detail about these data).

Analytic Methods

Using these data, I examined the marital/cohabitation status at the time of the survey that immediately followed the child's birth (referred to as "at the child's birth" from henceforth) and every year thereafter. The analysis is primarily descriptive. I use logistic regression to examine the impact of the mothers' characteristics on their marital/cohabitation status. Unfortunately, I was unable to include the characteristics of the fathers in the analysis because data are not collected on fathers who did not live in the household, and there were high levels of missing data for cohabiting fathers. Previous studies have shown that men's characteristics have a strong impact on the marital outcomes of cohabiting couples (Manning and Smock 1995) and parents (Fragile Families Research Brief 2003a).

Mothers' Characteristics

Several of the young mothers' characteristics, which are associated with family formation patterns, were included in the analysis. These variables include:

Teen. Mothers under the age of 20 at the time the child was born. The reference group is mothers who were ages 20 to 25.

African-American. Mothers who reported they were African-American. The reference group includes whites and Hispanics.

Raised by Divorced or Single Mother. Defined as living with a divorced or never married mother at the age of 14 (includes remarried divorced mothers).

Lived in Poverty. Defined as having a family income below poverty in 1978 (the year before the survey began), when the respondents were between 13 and 16 years old.

Less than High School. Mothers who had not completed high school at the time their child was born

High School. Mothers who completed high school, but had no education beyond high school at the time their child was born.

Results

Marital and Cohabitation Status at Child’s Birth

In the 1980s, about one in three young women bore their first child before marriage (Table 1). Many of these young mothers married following a non-marital conception, but before their child was born. Eighteen percent of young mothers married the father between conception and birth. These two groups combined — those who married before conception and those who married after conception, but before the child's birth — constitute the two-thirds of young mothers who were married at the child’s birth.

Table 1. Young Mothers’ Marital Status at Birth of Child by Various Characteristics: Weighted Percents

	All	Teens	Lived in Poverty
Marital Birth	68	53	44
Marital Conception	50	25	34
Marriage Post-Conception	18	28	10
Non-Marital Birth	32	47	56
Cohabiting at Birth	13	15	18
No Father in HH at Birth	19	32	38
Total	100%	100%	100%

Mothers characteristics were associated with marital status at conception and birth. Most teens who were married at the time they gave birth married following conception. Over half of mothers who had lived in poverty as a youth gave birth outside of marriage, and the majority of these mothers were not cohabiting at the time their child was born.

Propensity to Marry

Mothers characteristics also predicted whether they were likely to marry between conception and birth. Teens were twice as likely as non-teens to marry between conception and birth, even after controlling for family background and education (see Table 2). African-Americans were only one-tenth as likely to marry between conception and birth as non-African-Americans, also controlling for the background characteristics of poverty, age, education, and being raised by a single or divorced mother. Experiencing poverty as a youth, being raised by a single or divorced mother, and having less education at the time of conception significantly reduced the likelihood of marriage between conception and birth.

Table 2: Likelihood of a Marriage Before Birth Among Young Mothers who Conceived Outside Marriage, Logistic Regression Results (N=566)

	Odds Ratio of Marriage
Teen Mothers	2.2**
Lived in Poverty	.48*
African-American Mothers	.10**
Raised by Divorced or Single Mother	.53*
Completed Less than High School	.13**
Completed High School	.18**
Completed Some College (ref)	-

* Significant at $p < .05$

** Significant at $p < .01$

About one-third of non-marital *births* to women under the age of 26 were followed by marriage between the biological parents by the time their children were 8 years old. If parents were living together in the year their child was born they are almost twice as likely to ever marry. Logistic regression models revealed mothers' characteristics did a poor job of predicting whether marriage to the child's father took place following a non-marital birth, once cohabitation was controlled (see Table 3). These results may reflect that the decision to cohabit captures the effects of mothers' characteristics on marriage, or perhaps that father's characteristics play a more important role than mothers' characteristics in predicting marriage (Smock and Manning 1997)

Table 3: Likelihood of Marriage to Father After Child’s Birth, Among Mothers who Gave Birth Outside Marriage, Logistic Regression Results (N=413)

	Odds Ratio of Marriage
Teen Mothers	1.3
Lived in Poverty	.67
African-American Mothers	.86
Raised by Divorced or Single Mother	.82
Completed Less than High School	.73
Completed High School	.37*
Completed Some College (ref)	-
Father <i>Not</i> in Household at Child’s Birth	.40**

* Significant at p<.05

** Significant at p<.01

The marriage rates presented here are substantially higher than the marriage rates reported in recent studies using the Fragile Families data (see Fragile Families Research Brief 2003b). The difference is likely due to the longer time frame used in this study. Recent fragile families data include marriage rates at one year after the child’s birth. On average, marriages between parents who have a child out of wedlock occurred several years after the child was born. Parents who were cohabiting at the birth of their child and eventually married waited a median of 2.3 years to marry after their child’s birth. The median time until marriage among parents who did not live together at the child’s birth was 4 years.

Marriage Stability

The timing of marriage relative to the child’s birth may have some impact on the stability of marriage, if the child was conceived out of wedlock. One-third of pre-conception marriages ended in divorce, compared to 42 percent of marriages that occurred between conception and birth. Only one-third of marriages that occurred after the child’s birth ended in divorce by the child’s age 8. However, parents who were married after the child’s birth were not married for as many years as parents who married before the child’s birth, and thus these parents were exposed to the risk of divorce for fewer years.

To equalize the length of exposure to divorce, I examined the proportion of marriages that lasted at least three years. After controlling for the length of marriage, divorce rates were more similar for all parents who married after conception. Three-quarters of marriages that occurred between conception and birth, marriages between cohabiting parents, and marriages between non-cohabiting parents lasted at least three years, while 86% of parents who conceived their children within marriage were still together three years after their children were born. The discrepancy in divorce rates between parents who married following a child's birth and those who married before conception are reflective of recent vital statistics (Bramlett and Mosher 200). Once background characteristics were controlled, however, the difference in divorce rates was no longer significant (see Table 4).

Table 4: Likelihood of Marriage Lasting at Least Three Years, Among Marriages Formed by Child's Age 5, Logistic Regression Results (N=647)

	Odds Ratio of Marriage
Teen Mothers	.75
Lived in Poverty	.85
African-American	.84
Raised by Divorced or Single Mother	.56*
Completed Less than High School	.50
Completed High School	.44*
Completed Some College (ref)	-
<i>Not Married at Conception</i>	.75

* Significant at $p < .05$

** Significant at $p < .01$

The percentage of non-marital children's fathers who remained in the household was substantially lower than the percentage of marital children's fathers who remained in the household. By the time the first child was 8 years old, 69% of the fathers who were married prior to conception remained in the household, while just 58% of the fathers who married between conception and birth did. Among cohabitators, just 36% of the fathers were in the household at the time their child was 8. Among non-cohabitators, 21% of fathers were living in the household at the time their child was 8 years old (see Table 5). Clearly, parents who were

married before conception or birth were much more likely to be living together when the child reaches age 8.

Table 5. Weighted Percentage of Fathers Remaining in the Household by Mothers Marital Status at the Time of the First Child's Birth.

	Married	Married After Conception	Cohabiting	No Partner
At Birth	100	98	100	0
Child's Age 1	96	94	72	2
Age 2	94	90	56	10
Age 3	90	79	49	13
Age 4	84	74	46	21
Age 5	80	70	43	21
Age 6	75	65	39	22
Age 7	72	59	37	21
Age 8	69	58	36	21

That said, because of the high divorce rate, half of all children who did not live with their fathers by age 8 had divorced parents, rather than never married parents. Thus, divorce is an important contributor to children living apart from their fathers.

Conclusions

Marriage promotion policies for young unwed mothers must focus on marriage stability as much as on the decision to marry. In the 1980s, one in three young mothers who had a non-marital conception married the father of their child before the child's birth. Unfortunately, nearly half these marriages ended in divorce. One-third of marriages that followed a child's birth ended in divorce by the time the first child was 8 years old. Encouraging young women to marry within unstable relationships will likely increase divorce and fuel family instability. In addition, as long as divorce rates remain high, many young couples will likely remain skeptical about marriage's advantages. Marriage promotion programs that focus on reducing divorce may be an important first step in ultimately increasing marriage rates among unwed parents.

Cohabitation was a transitional step toward marriage among many of the women studied. Nearly half of all young mothers cohabiting at the child's birth ended up marrying the child's father. Thus, marriage promotion policies that view cohabitation as a step toward marriage, and offer these couples relationship support, could lead to a greater number of marriages. However, the high level of instability within these marriages would need to be addressed.

No one marriage promotion and support policy will fit all groups. In this sample, 75 percent of teens giving birth in the 1980s got pregnant outside of marriage. As noted, most of these teens eventually married the father, but these unions were highly unstable. Preventing unwed teen pregnancies, is probably the best starting point for ensuring that fewer children are born into unstable family situations.

In contrast, most young mothers who experienced poverty never married the father of their first child, a finding that suggests these women face unique marriage barriers. Poor women often have partners who face equally poor economic prospects (Edin 2000). Thus, marriage promotion programs that serve poor mothers should help promote employment or coordinate with other job programs.

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