

# Welfare Reform and Marriage Promotion: The Marital Expectations and Desires of Single and Cohabiting Mothers

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Using nationally representative data, this examination of marital expectations, desires, and behaviors of single and cohabiting unmarried mothers suggests that a majority of unmarried women, including disadvantaged single and cohabiting mothers, value marriage as a personal goal. Among disadvantaged women, single mothers, and racial minority women, systematic differences point to subgroups with lower marital expectations. However, our results also indicate that marital desires do not easily translate into marriage. Accordingly, from a public policy perspective, single mothers' attitudes about marriage need not be changed. The problem lies in identifying and reducing barriers that prevent single women from realizing marital aspirations.

The U.S. Congress plans to set aside monies for marriage-promotion demonstration programs and evaluation under the legislation to reauthorize Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The reasons

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are clear: married women have lower rates of poverty and welfare dependency than single mothers. Recent research also shows that marriage is associated with better physical and mental health, job productivity, and longevity (Waite and Gallagher 2001; Cohen 2002; Wu and Hart 2002). In most studies, children growing up with their biological married parents have more positive developmental outcomes than children who are born out of wedlock or who experience the divorce (and remarriage) of their parents (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Moore, Jekielek, and Emig 2002). Children growing up with both parents also fare better than children living with unmarried cohabiting parents (Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones 2002; Manning 2002).

Critics believe that marriage-promotion activities intrude in the private lives of low-income women, divert attention from the root causes of poverty (e.g., lack of education and good jobs), and squander monies that are best used for programs that benefit poor women directly (i.e., cash assistance or work supports, such as child care; Coltrane 2001; Coontz and Folbre 2002). But perhaps a key consideration is whether marriage-promotion initiatives will be successful in encouraging marriage among low-income single mothers. This is far from certain (Ooms 1998; Lerman 2002).

At present, comprehensive evaluations of existing marriage-promotion programs are sparse (Johnson et al. 2002; Dion et al. 2003). We have only a limited understanding of the intimate relationships and marital aspirations of unmarried mothers (Edin 2000; Lichter, Graefe, and Brown 2003). In addition, we know surprisingly little about whether their desires to marry are frustrated or, instead, come to fruition in stable, healthy marriages. We do know that low-income women face severe barriers or obstacles to marriage (e.g., shortages of marriageable men or mental health problems), and such obstacles work against successful marriage-promotion initiatives (Jayakody and Stauffer 2000; Lichter et al. 2003).

Whether government policy can be effective and appropriately targeted will depend, at least in part, on our understanding of whether unmarried mothers are receptive to marriage (i.e., they intend or want to marry) and whether they act on their receptivity (i.e., they marry). It will also depend on whether marriage-promotion initiatives can identify and address the specific barriers that prevent disadvantaged unmarried mothers from realizing marital aspirations that they may have.

In this article, we examine the marital expectations, desires, and behaviors of single and cohabiting unmarried mothers using nationally representative data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY; 1994–98 waves). Our goals are threefold: to examine the extent to which single and cohabiting mothers (compared with childless single women) expect to marry in the future or would like to get married,

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to evaluate whether differences in marital attitudes reflect personal and family circumstances (e.g., education and other resources) of childless single women and unmarried mothers, and to assess the extent to which single women realize their marital aspirations by actually marrying.<sup>1</sup>

#### Marital Attitudes among Unmarried Mothers

Only a handful of empirical studies of marriage center on the marital expectations or desires of unmarried women. This is surprising because most studies of marriage implicitly assume that marital attitudes or the desire to marry mediate the effects of marriage market conditions (e.g., shortages of marriageable men) or women's personal resources (e.g., financial independence or education; South 1993; Sassler and Schoen 1999). Unfortunately, most studies of attitudes about marriage or marital aspirations focus on the general population (usually of women) rather than on the poor women or single mothers who are the targets of welfare reform. What we do know from ethnographic accounts paints a complex picture of low-income women's views about marriage (Edin 2000; Waller 2001; Gibson, Edin, and McLanahan 2003).

One long-standing view, perhaps the conventional wisdom, is that low-income women are reluctant to marry and that their family values are out of step with mainstream America (i.e., white and middle-class families). Such perceptions may motivate states to adopt media campaigns and marital education or counseling programs, similar to those in Florida and Oklahoma, extolling the virtues of marriage in order to change attitudes about marriage and family values. Indeed, the conventional argument is that the welfare culture, growing up poor and living with a welfare-dependent single mother, negatively affects young women's attitudes toward marriage (Murray 2001). For many poor women, there may be little stigma associated with having children outside of marriage. According to this view, marriage and the two-parent norm have not occupied a central position in their lives. The receipt of public assistance (and the antimarriage disincentives built into welfare policy) presumably shapes family values and attitudes that work against marriage and traditional two-parent families (Murray 2001).

The available, related research provides little support for the conventional wisdom that lower socioeconomic status groups are unfavorably disposed toward marriage. For example, Scott South (1993) shows that women's desire to marry is largely unaffected by their employment patterns or earnings, although marital desires tend to increase slightly as education increases. Despite large racial and ethnic differences in marriage, South (1993) also finds relatively small racial differences in women's desire for marriage. Richard Bulcroft and Kris Bulcroft (1993) report similar findings. They discern no statistically significant relation-

ship between women's perceived likelihood of marriage and education, income, employment, or public assistance receipt (see Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1995). In a study using data from the 1995 NSFG, Jane Mauldon and colleagues (2002) show that over 70 percent of unmarried women receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which was in effect at the time, expected to marry. This is only slightly lower than the findings for the expectations of unmarried women not on welfare. Only about one-half of the difference in marital expectations between AFDC and non-AFDC recipients can be attributed to differences in existing characteristics (i.e., race, educational level, religiosity, income, and number of children). These authors also show that only about 10–15 percent of women (in their Delaware and Indiana samples) indicated that welfare reform made them think more seriously about getting married. The least-educated women and those with young children, however, were most likely to say that welfare reform has caused them to think about getting married. Mauldon and colleagues (2002, p. 7) conclude that policies that focus on “educating women about the value of marriage are thus unlikely to have much effect.”

Most ethnographic and survey data indicate that marriage is highly valued and respected in low-income communities. Yet many, if not most, poor women are single or have great difficulty staying married. Abstract expressions of support for marriage obfuscate low-income women's complicated (and often ambivalent) views about marriage and about their willingness to marry the men available to them. In some cases, women's plans to marry are sabotaged by mistrust about infidelity and the unstable employment of their partners (Edin 2000). Many low-income women also place the well-being of their children above their personal desire to marry (Scott et al. 2001). According to Avis Jones-DeWeever (2002, p. 1), “the marriage ‘ideal’ is balanced with daily survival needs for themselves and their children; needs that vary from physical safety to emotional and economic security.” Kathryn Edin (2000) claims that most low-income women aspire to marriage but that the perceived rewards often fail to outweigh the risks. Women are not willing to marry unless marriage “represents an increase in their class standing and if, over a substantial period of time, their prospective husband's behavior indicates he won't beat them, abuse their children, refuse to share in household tasks, insist on making all the decisions, be sexually unfaithful, or abuse alcohol or drugs” (Edin 2000, p. 113).

Another approach is to assess the marital expectations of unmarried women who have recently given birth to a child, and who may still be romantically involved with the child's father or live with him. From a public policy perspective, these women may be most receptive to marriage. Maureen Waller (2001), using data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Survey, examines the marital expectations of 3,069

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new, unmarried parents in seven large metropolitan cities. These young mothers were asked whether they had no chance, a little chance, a 50–50 chance, a pretty good chance, or an almost certain chance of marriage in the future to the other parent. Like the work by Mauldon and colleagues (2002), this study indicates that aspirations for marriage are very high. Over 70 percent of the unmarried mothers reported that their chances of marriage are 50–50 or higher. Almost one-third indicated an almost certain chance of marriage. Among the unmarried cohabiting mothers, over 90 percent indicated at least a 50–50 chance of marriage, while 50 percent indicated an almost certain chance of marriage. Unfortunately, a limitation of the Fragile Families study is that it does not include a comparison sample of unmarried women without children, something we remedy in our study of both childless women and mothers. Wendy Manning and Pamela Smock (2002), using nationally representative data from the NSFG, show that roughly three-fourths of cohabiting women expect to marry their partners. For many women, cohabitation clearly is viewed as a step toward marriage. Nevertheless, expectations to marry are strongly affected by financial concerns, gender mistrust (regarding infidelity and commitment), conflict, physical abuse, and negative perceptions of the benefits of marriage (Waller 2001; Gibson et al. 2003). Under these specific circumstances, it may be imprudent for public policies to actively encourage marriages that are unlikely to be healthy or successful.

We build on previous research in several important ways. First, we provide nationally representative data on the marital expectations and desires of unmarried mothers who are the targets of state welfare reform under TANF. Previous national studies of marital aspirations have not evaluated whether attitudes about marriage among unmarried women are affected by the presence of children, that is, whether children diminish women's desire for marriage (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993; South 1993). Second, we evaluate whether cohabiting women expect to marry their current partners, and we compare their expectations with those women who do not cohabit with their partners. As the study by Waller (2001) shows, if marriage promotion is to be effective, it will be important to evaluate how cohabitation is associated with plans to marry. This is especially true of cohabiting unions involving children. We have very little understanding about the future marriage expectations of disadvantaged cohabiting mothers. Third, we track the experiences of single mothers who want to marry, and we identify barriers that prevent single women from realizing their marital preferences. We are unaware of any published studies that assess the marriage rates of disadvantaged single mothers who say that they want to marry.

## Data and Methods

### *Data*

The 1995 NSFG survey, comprised of 4,290 unmarried women ages 15–45, includes 558 currently cohabiting women, and is used to examine marital expectations. Single women are defined here as noncohabiting unmarried women at the 1995 interview date. We define cohabiting women as unmarried women currently living with a male partner. We define unmarried mothers as women who are living with at least one biological child. The never married comprise 80 percent of the NSFG sample of unmarried women, with single mothers being substantially less likely than childless single women to have never been married (62 percent compared with 95 percent). Nearly 35 percent of the single women in our NSFG analysis are mothers, while 57 percent of the cohabiting women are mothers (see appendix table A1 for additional characteristics of the NSFG sample).

For the second half of our analysis, we draw a sample of 1,605 single women, ages 29–37, from the 1994 wave of the 1979 NLSY. We use this sample to examine marital desires and subsequent marital behavior. We limit our NLSY sample to single women (i.e., unmarried women not living with a male partner), since cohabiting women were not asked about marital desires. Our sample of unmarried women may be selective on women with low expectations or desires for marriage. The implication is that women with especially high desires may be selected out of the sample because they are most likely to become married. While our results should be interpreted with caution, our approach is not unusual (i.e., using a sample of unmarried women), and we do not believe that our estimates of marital expectations or desires are seriously misrepresented here. First and foremost, we show that both the desire and expectation to marry are very high; if selection were a serious issue, we would expect much lower percentages on these variables. In other words, those with low expectations would be disproportionately left in the unmarried sample. Second, the fact that high marital desires and expectations are observed across various population groups also suggests that the differentials observed here are not misrepresented by the data. Indeed, racial differences in selection into marriage would seem to lead to much different results from those reported in this article. An extreme example best illustrates the point: if all whites who desired marriage actually married, then those left in our sample would mostly be those who did not desire marriage. By contrast, if blacks desired marriage but could not marry because of limited opportunities or cultural preferences, then our sample of single black women would include a large share of blacks who desired

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marriage. Any artifact of selection would likely diminish race differences or even suggest that blacks have higher marital desires than whites. Yet, our empirical analysis reveals that blacks are less likely to expect or desire marriage than whites.

We define mothers at the 1994 interview date as those living with at least one minor biological child. Sixty-one percent of the single women in our NLSY analysis are mothers (see app. table A2 for the characteristics of the NLSY sample). This is a higher percentage than observed in the NSFG, a fact reflecting the higher percentage of older and previously married women in the 1994–98 waves of the NLSY.

### *Measuring Marital Expectations and Desires*

The NSFG provides information about expectations of marriage. Single (i.e., noncohabiting unmarried) women were asked, “Do you expect to marry (again) at some time in the future?” Cohabiting women were asked, “Do you expect to marry your current boyfriend?” These questions were answered with “yes” or “no” responses. Seventy-nine percent of NSFG single women expected to marry in the future, while 75 percent of cohabiting women expected to marry their current partner.

The expectation to marry (or not) reflects many considerations and has an ambiguous interpretation. For example, having little or no expectation to marry may result from a lack of desire to marry; that is, women with little desire to marry will have a very low expectation to marry. But women with a high desire to marry may also have low marital expectations. One common argument is that low expectations may reflect the perceived lack of opportunities to marry (e.g., living in areas with shortages of men to marry). The empirical evidence, however, is inconclusive. For example, Belinda Tucker and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan (1995) show that the perceived sex ratio (i.e., number of men per 10 women) and perceptions of the availability of opposite-sex partners in the neighborhood are statistically unrelated to women’s expectations of marriage. Their analysis does not focus on low-income populations. Low marital expectations may also reflect a negative self-assessment of one’s own marriageability. Single mothers, for example, may have a low expectation of marriage because they believe that men are reluctant to assume a parental role or to share time with children (Lichter and Graefe 2001). Conversely, a high expectation of marriage presupposes the desire to marry, the belief that marriage opportunities exist, and a belief in one’s attractiveness for marriage.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the limitations of marital expectation data, we also examine data from the NLSY. Such data have at least two advantages over that from the NSFG. First, the NLSY includes data on questions about marital desires, and, second, these panel data allow us to link marital desires to subsequent marital behavior. The desire to marry is

fundamentally different from marital expectations. A low desire may reflect a general aversion to marriage, while a high desire to marry (unlike marital expectations) may represent a general receptivity to marriage-promotion initiatives. A high desire for marriage may also reflect a subjective assessment of the availability of likely marital partners. Women who believe that only unattractive men are available to them may indicate a low desire for marriage. It is unclear whether women consider the desirability of marriage in the abstract, or whether the desire to marry takes into account their likely marriage partners. In the NLSY, single women were asked the following questions: “Thinking of the future, would you (a) like to get married; (b) like to get married sometime, but not right now; or (c) rather not get married?” For our purposes, we combine results from the first and second responses to indicate whether a single woman would like to get married (or not).<sup>3</sup> Overall, 77 percent of single women without children indicated that they would like to marry, compared with 69 percent of single mothers.

#### *Analytic Approach*

Our analysis proceeds as follows: first, we provide baseline information on the marital expectations of unmarried women (including unmarried mothers) in the NSFG sample. We then evaluate whether differences in marital expectations between childless unmarried women and unmarried mothers reflect differences in social and economic background.

Turning to the analysis of the marital desires data from the sample of NLSY single women, we use logistic regression models to evaluate whether the marital desires of single women without children differ appreciably from those of single mothers and to identify social and economic factors that may account for observed differences. We are also interested in whether single women are able to realize their marital desires. Therefore, in the last part of our analysis, we link these same NLSY respondents to their marital histories over the ensuing 4 years. Because of low attrition between the 1994 and 1998 surveys, we are able to determine which of 1,498 (out of the 1,605 in 1994) single women married within 4 years. We use Cox proportional hazard models (where the dependent variable is risk of marrying) to determine the extent to which single women without children are more likely than single mothers to marry in the next 4 years, whether marrying is a function of marital desires, and whether single mothers are less able to realize their marital desires. We show that the large majority of single women, including single mothers, do not realize their desire for marriage (at least not within 4 years).

## Findings

### *Marital Expectations*

Table 1 details the percent of single (i.e., noncohabiting) women who expect to marry in the future, by maternal status (cols. 1–2). Table 1 also includes the percentage of cohabiting women who expect to marry their current partners. Overall, 89 percent of childless single women expect to marry in the future, compared with 69 percent of single mothers. For cohabiting childless women, 88 percent expect to marry their current partners. By contrast, 74 percent of cohabiting mothers expect to marry their partners. Clearly, whether they are cohabiting or not, unmarried mothers have a lower expectation of marriage than unmarried childless women. Nevertheless, a significant majority of unmarried mothers expect to marry. Our results are consistent with previous work showing that most women expect or desire marriage (South 1993). As we have shown here, this is true for unmarried mothers, just as it is true for unmarried childless women.

The results in table 1 also reveal differences in marital expectations across various groups of unmarried women. For example, previously married women tend to have lower expectations of marriage than never-married women, a result consistent with evidence that the expectation to marry declines sharply with age and that divorced women are, on average, older than never-married women. This marital status differential exists whether women are childless or not, and whether they are cohabiting or not. Significantly, employment status and education are only modestly associated with marital expectations. Expectations to marry are lower (but still high) for unmarried women with children under age 18 than they are for those without children. Also of importance is the fact that expectations to marry partners are no higher among cohabiting mothers who have had children with their current partner than they are for cohabiting mothers who previously had children with another partner (75.0 vs. 72.5 percent).

Among single women (both childless and those with children), the receipt of AFDC is not associated with marital expectations. In other words, in the bivariate context, there is no evidence that single noncohabiting AFDC recipients have a strong aversion to marriage, if the expectation of marriage is our measure.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, cohabiting mothers who received AFDC are substantially less likely than their nonrecipient counterparts to expect to marry their partners. This result is consistent with the view that welfare creates disincentives to marriage (i.e., cohabiting women may lose their eligibility for welfare benefits by marriage) and with previous research (Manning and Smock 2002). These descriptive results also suggest that single women who grew up in an economically disadvantaged family have slightly lower expectations of marriage than

**Table 1**

PERCENT OF SINGLE AND COHABITING WOMEN WHO EXPECT TO MARRY, BY  
MATERNAL STATUS

	SINGLE		COHABITING	
	Without Children	Children	Without Children	Children
Has children:				
Yes	...	68.7	...	73.9
No	88.8	...	87.5	...
Ever cohabited:				
Yes	81.2	66.8	87.5	73.9
No	90.0	70.5	...	...
Marital history:				
Never married	90.0	73.0	90.6	78.9
Previously married	67.5	61.6	71.8	67.4
Age:				
Less than 25	95.4	78.0	97.3	84.6
25-34	82.6	75.0	86.6	72.0
35 or older	51.5	50.4	56.3	64.3
Race:				
White	89.4	68.6	89.2	74.7
Hispanic	90.1	67.1	89.5	73.6
Black	86.1	69.1	73.1	73.0
Education:				
Less than high school degree	94.1	62.4	90.0	70.5
High school degree	83.9	71.1	83.8	77.2
Beyond high school	86.7	72.9	89.0	74.7
Employment status:				
Currently employed	87.0	68.6	87.6	78.0
Not employed	92.0	68.8	86.8	67.5
Biological child with partner:				
Yes	...	...	...	75.0
No	...	...	...	72.5
Partner is low income:				
Yes	...	...	93.9	72.3
No	...	...	85.1	74.6
Partner is working:				
Yes	...	...	89.2	75.5
No	...	...	78.4	66.0
Urban or rural residence:				
Rural	92.4	65.4	82.6	69.2
Urban	88.3	69.0	88.0	74.3
Received AFDC:				
Yes	87.0	68.1	100.0	65.1
No	88.8	69.1	87.2	77.2
Disadvantaged background: <sup>a</sup>				
Yes	81.9	63.9	88.1	76.2
No	90.0	70.7	87.4	72.8
Sample size	2,436	1,296	240	318

NOTE.—AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Analyses based on 1995 National Survey of Family Growth.

<sup>a</sup> Respondents are considered disadvantaged if they grew up in a nonintact family and met either of two conditions: their mothers had low education (i.e., were high school dropouts) or were not employed.

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**Table 2**

ODDS RATIOS FROM LOGISTIC REGRESSIONS OF SINGLE, NONCOHABITING WOMEN'S EXPECTATION TO MARRY, BY MATERNAL STATUS

	All Single Women	Single without Children	Single with Children
Has children	.72*	...	...
Ever cohabited	1.07	.78	1.15
Never married	1.13	1.16	1.27
Age (reference = 35 or older):			
Less than 25	10.04***	22.84***	3.85***
25-34	3.76***	4.87***	3.16***
Race (reference = white):			
Black	.83	.70*	.91
Hispanic	.96	.97	1.02
Education (reference = less than high school degree):			
High school degree	1.09	.65	1.64***
Beyond high school	1.41**	1.09	2.05***
Employed	.92	1.26	.89
Rural	1.10	1.21	.87
Received AFDC	.65**	...	.78
Disadvantaged background <sup>a</sup>	.66***	.55***	.77
Sample size	3,732	2,436	1,296

NOTE.—AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Analyses based on 1995 National Survey of Family Growth.

<sup>a</sup> Respondents are considered disadvantaged if they grew up in a nonintact family and met either of two conditions: their mothers had low education (i.e., were high school dropouts) or were not employed.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

women who grew up in advantaged circumstances.<sup>5</sup> Overall, the message is clear: most disadvantaged and minority women, including most single mothers, expect to marry in the future. This is perhaps surprising because many disadvantaged women may lack both access to economically attractive men and qualities conducive to marriageability themselves (by virtue of low education and unwed childbearing).

The multivariate results reported in table 2 nevertheless show that the odds of expecting to marry are about 28 percent lower for single mothers than for childless single women (table 2, col. 1). These data also indicate that single women from disadvantaged family backgrounds have lower odds of expecting to marry, as do women with low education and those who are currently receiving AFDC (unlike the bivariate results reported above).<sup>6</sup> In this respect, these estimates may provide some initial support for the welfare culture hypothesis that poorly educated and disadvantaged single women may be less receptive to marriage than other single women. But some caution is required here. The lower marital expectations of disadvantaged women may have more to do with

objective marriage market opportunities (e.g., few marriageable men) than with any lack of receptivity toward marriage.

Table 2, columns 2–3, report the results for single childless women and for single mothers, respectively. These results are less conclusive. One important point here is that disadvantaged single women without children have a lower expectation of marriage than their counterparts who grew up in more advantaged circumstances. A similar result is apparent for single mothers, whose expectations of marriage increase significantly with education. Single mothers with more than a high school education are twice as likely to expect to marry as those who are high school dropouts. In some additional analyses, we find that a disadvantaged background is associated with significantly lower marital expectations when education is removed from our models. One substantive conclusion is that the effects of a disadvantaged childhood on later marital expectations are mediated by education (i.e., the disadvantaged have lower levels of education. This in turn affects marital expectations).

Table 3 provides parallel estimates of the effects of various predictors on marital expectations among cohabiting women. While the modest sample sizes limit the power of the test, the results for cohabiting mothers indicate that employment is positively associated with a higher expectation of marriage to their current partners. Moreover, as with the results for single women (table 2), the receipt of AFDC is negatively associated with the expectation of marriage among cohabiting mothers. Cohabiting mothers who received AFDC have an odds of expecting to marry that is only 46 percent as high as cohabiting mothers who did not receive AFDC. One interpretation is that AFDC dampens cohabiting women's expectation of marriage because marriage would affect eligibility for cash assistance. A second interpretation is that the low expectation of marriage is associated with unwed childbearing (i.e., women with few potential partners are more likely to have families outside of marriage) and subsequent welfare receipt.

Finally, we also evaluate whether the employment and income of cohabiting women's male partners affects marital expectations.<sup>7</sup> The odds of expecting to marry are uniformly higher if the partner is employed. However, only in the case of cohabiting women without children is the effect statistically significant at conventional levels (i.e.,  $p < .05$ ).

#### *Marital Desires*

We turn next to our examination of marital desires using a sample of single (noncohabiting) women from the 1994 NLSY (see table A2 for characteristics of the sample). Women who desire marriage (as opposed to those expecting to marry) may be most receptive to state marriage-promotion initiatives. Table 4 provides the percentage of single women

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**Table 3**

ODDS RATIOS FROM LOGISTIC REGRESSIONS OF COHABITING WOMEN'S EXPECTATION TO MARRY, BY MATERNAL STATUS

	All Cohabiting Women	Cohabiting without Children	Cohabiting with Children
Has children	1.06	...	...
Never married	1.88*	1.51	1.99*
Age (reference = 35 or older):			
Less than 25	6.23***	28.51***	3.19**
25-34	2.00*	4.78**	1.47
Race (reference = white):			
Black	.68	.41	.75
Hispanic	.56	.29	.61
Education (reference = less than high school degree):			
High school degree	1.10	.18	1.31
Beyond high school	1.35	.47	1.20
Employed	1.46	1.45	1.45
Biological child with partner	.72	...	.79
Partner is low income	1.06	1.54	.91
Partner is working	1.53	3.24*	1.23
Rural	.56	.60	.58
Received AFDC	.55	...	.54
Disadvantaged background <sup>a</sup>	1.27	1.14	1.29
Sample size	558	240	318

NOTE.—AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Analyses based on 1995 National Survey of Family Growth.

<sup>a</sup> Respondents are considered disadvantaged if they grew up in a nonintact family and met either of two conditions: their mothers had low education (i.e., were high school dropouts) or were not employed.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

(with and without children) who would like to marry (as of 1994). The results point to a singular conclusion: most women would like to marry; approximately seven out of every 10 single women expressed a desire to marry at the time of survey or in the future. At the same time, the results show that the desire to marry is slightly lower among most groups of single mothers than among childless single women (compare cols. 2 and 3). It is also the case that differences in marital desires between childless women and single mothers are generally smaller than differences in marital expectations (as shown in table 1). The substantive implication is that children may dampen marital expectations but not the desire to marry.

These data also reveal substantial variation in the desire to marry across most but not all of the population subgroups considered here. In particular, employed women, especially those without children, have a stronger desire to marry than women who are not employed. For

Table 4

PERCENT OF SINGLE WOMEN WHO DESIRE MARRIAGE, BY MATERNAL STATUS

	All	Single without Children	Single with Children
All single women	72.3	77.2	69.2
Marital history:			
Never married	77.0	79.3	74.3
Previously married	67.2	71.8	65.9
Age:			
29–32	73.9	78.8	70.4
33–37	71.0	75.8	68.3
Race:			
White	73.3	75.9	70.1
Black	73.9	79.1	71.7
Hispanic	66.2	76.7	60.0
Educational attainment:			
Less than high school degree	60.6	59.6	60.9
High school degree	69.4	69.5	69.4
Beyond high school	79.1	84.0	73.7
Employment status:			
Currently employed	74.3	80.2	69.5
Not employed	67.9	65.4	68.8
Urban or rural residence:			
Rural	62.5	59.0	63.8
Urban	74.3	80.0	70.4
Received AFDC:			
Yes	67.6	...	67.6
No	73.6	77.7	69.9
Disadvantaged background: <sup>a</sup>			
Yes	70.8	73.5	69.9
No	73.0	78.1	68.8
Sample size	1,605	628	977

NOTE.—AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Analyses based on 1994 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

<sup>a</sup> Respondents are considered disadvantaged if they grew up in a nonintact family and met either of two conditions: their mothers had low education (i.e., were high school dropouts) or were not employed.

childless single women, the desire to marry increases significantly with education; over eight out of 10 women with at least some college education or more expressed a desire to marry. This association is also evident but weaker among single mothers. Such data are clearly inconsistent with the commonplace argument (e.g., Becker 1981) that more education encourages women's economic independence from men, transforms gender role orientations, and reduces the likelihood of marriage (and presumably, marital desires). We find little evidence that this is the case, at least as reflected in educated women's desire to marry. We also find little evidence that a disadvantaged background is associated with a lack of desire to marry.

Table 5 provides the multivariate logistic regression models of the desire

Table 5

ODDS RATIOS FROM LOGISTIC REGRESSIONS OF SINGLE WOMEN'S DESIRE TO MARRY, BY MATERNAL STATUS

	Single Women (1)	Single without Children (2)	Single with Children (3)
Has children	.90	...	...
Never married	1.45**	1.23	1.52***
Ages 33–37 (reference = 29–32)	.91	.86	.96
Race (reference = white):			
Black	1.02	1.28	.88
Hispanic	.72*	1.03	.57**
Education (reference = less than high school degree):			
High school degree	1.40*	1.62	1.48*
Beyond high school degree	2.00***	2.91**	1.72***
Employed	1.13	1.80*	.87
Rural	.61**	.43***	.71
Receives AFDC	.97	...	.85
Disadvantaged background <sup>a</sup>	1.03	.99	1.07
Sample size	1,605	628	977

NOTE.—AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Analyses based on 1994 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

<sup>a</sup> Respondents are considered disadvantaged if they grew up in a nonintact family and met either of two conditions: their mothers had low education (i.e., were high school dropouts) or were not employed.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

to marry. Unlike our bivariate results (table 4), table 5, model 1, shows that, net of other variables in the model, single mothers are no more or less likely to desire marriage than childless single women. These data also show that education is positively associated with the desire to marry. This finding is consistent with the bivariate results and with previous research showing that education is positively associated with marital transitions (Lichter et al. 1992; Sassler and Schoen 1999; Goldstein and Kenney 2001). The results also indicate that Hispanic and rural single women have a lower desire to marry.<sup>8</sup> Never-married women are 45 percent more likely to want to marry than previously married women, a result similar to that reported for marital expectations (see table 2). The receipt of AFDC is not associated with the desire to marry.<sup>9</sup> Our earlier models (table 2) suggested that single AFDC recipients have lower expectations of marriage than nonrecipient single women. Together, these results suggest a plausible interpretation: AFDC mothers may want to marry but are less likely to expect marriage given their current circumstances (including marriage disincentives built into welfare policy and lower marriageability associated with previous childbearing).

Table 6

PERCENTAGE OF SINGLE WOMEN WHO MARRIED WITHIN 4 YEARS, BY MARITAL DESIRE AND MATERNAL STATUS IN 1994

	SINGLE MOTHERS		SINGLE WITHOUT CHILDREN	
	Desired Marriage	Did Not Desire Marriage	Desired Marriage	Did Not Desire Marriage
Married within 4 years	19.8	7.5	22.0	2.3
Sample size	637	282	450	129

NOTE.—Analyses based on 1994 and 1998 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. The difference between single mothers who desired marriage (19.8 percent) and childless single women who wanted to marry (22.0 percent) is not statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

In model 2, we restrict our sample to single childless women. The results indicate that employed women are more likely than nonemployed women to desire marriage, that education is positively associated with the desire to marry, and that rural women have a lower desire to marry than urban women. The results for single mothers (table 5, model 3) also show that the most-educated and never-married single mothers have the highest odds of desiring to marry and that rural women have the lowest odds of desiring to marry. Again, there is little evidence here to indicate that welfare receipt is negatively associated with the desire to marry among single mothers. Like other women, welfare recipients would like to marry.

#### *Marital Desire and Behavior*

The expectation and desire to marry are very high among single women, including single mothers. There is little evidence to suggest that either single mothers or women on welfare would be unreceptive to efforts aimed at encouraging marriage. Nonetheless, an important point remains: if single mothers have generally positive attitudes toward marriage, why do so few seem to get married? As a final objective, we examine the actual marital behavior of single women who expressed a desire to marry in 1994 to determine whether they married between 1994 and 1998.

Table 6 provides the percentage of single women who married between 1994 and 1998, conditional on whether they wanted to marry in 1994. The results support three general conclusions. First, single women who expressed a desire to marry were, in fact, substantially more likely to marry by 1998 than women who did not express a desire to marry. Second, the large majority of women who wanted to marry, roughly 80 percent, did not actually marry by 1998. Third, single mothers were no more or less likely to realize their marital desires than childless single

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Table 7

COX PROPORTIONAL HAZARD MODEL OF MARRIAGE RISK BETWEEN 1994 AND 1998  
AMONG SINGLE WOMEN

	(1)	(2)	Models (3)	(4)	(5) <sup>a</sup>
Has children	.97	...	1.36	4.02*	...
Desires marriage	3.83***	...	3.83***	10.22***	...
Never married	...	.79	.79	.79	.70
Ages 33–37 (reference = 29–32)	...	.68**	.70**	.69**	.74
Race (reference = white):					
Black	...	.44***	.43***	.42***	.38***
Hispanic	...	.56**	.58**	.57**	.71
Education (reference = less than high school degree):					
High school degree	...	.92	.87	.88	1.00
Beyond high school degree	...	.20	1.09	1.10	1.40
Employed	...	1.31	1.29	1.27	1.55
Rural	...	.88	.98	.99	.96
Receives AFDC	...	1.04	.98	.94	1.11
Disadvantaged background <sup>b</sup>	...	.95	.94	.94	1.03
Interaction: single mother × would like to marry	...	...	...	.29*	...
Sample size	1,498	1,498	1,498	1,498	637

NOTE.—AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Analyses based on 1994 and 1998 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

<sup>a</sup> Model 5 includes only those single mothers who desire marriage.

<sup>b</sup> Respondents are considered disadvantaged if they grew up in a nonintact family and met either of two conditions: their mothers had low education (i.e., were high school dropouts) or were not employed.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

women, at least in the bivariate context. Clearly, these data beg an answer to a straightforward question: Why is the transition to marriage so low among single women who want to marry?

In table 7, we address this question by estimating several Cox proportional hazards models of marriage for the period 1994–98. Table 7, model 1, includes two variables: whether single women have children (i.e., are mothers) and whether they desire marriage. Single mothers are no less likely to get married than single childless women, once we control for marital desires (which are strongly associated with subsequent marriage). Women who expressed a desire to marry are nearly four times more likely to do so than women who indicated no such desire. Table 7, model 2, shows the effects of various conventional predictors of marriage (e.g., Lichter et al. 1992; Xie et al. 2003). Our results

suggest that highly educated and currently employed women (as of 1994) are more likely to marry, but the estimates are not statistically significant. The only clear result is that Hispanic and black women have a substantially lower risk of marrying than white women. This result for minority women does not simply reflect a lower desire to marry or the higher percentage of mothers among the single population of minority women (table 7, model 3). Even when marital desires and maternal status are controlled, the odds of marriage among black women are still only 43 percent as high as for white women. Clearly, lower marriage rates among minority women cannot be explained by marital attitudes, nor can they be explained by other social and economic variables in our model, including welfare receipt.

A final goal is to evaluate whether single mothers who desire marriage are less likely to realize their desires than are childless single women who desire marriage. In table 7, model 4, we include an interaction term between maternal status (mother = 1) and the desire to marry (desires marriage = 1). The significant interaction term (.29) has a straightforward interpretation: the positive effect of marital desires on marital behavior is weaker for single mothers than for childless single women. Single mothers are less able to transform their desires into behavior. To identify potential barriers to marriage among single mothers who desire it, we fit a final model limited to single mothers who desired marriage (see table 7, model 5). These data are singularly unsatisfying in the sense that they provide few conclusive results about what the barriers to marriage are among single mothers who express a desire to marry. The only statistically significant result is the .38 odds ratio associated with being black. Black mothers who want to marry are only 38 percent as likely to marry as their similarly situated white counterparts. Clearly, black single mothers are unlikely to realize their preferences for marriage. While we control for employment and other social and economic circumstances of single mothers, we do not include (for obvious reasons) the marital desires and characteristics of potential male partners.<sup>10</sup> Marital desires of black women may be affected by characteristics of the potential male partners available in the marriage market.<sup>11</sup> Our results are consistent with those of Susan Brown (2000), who shows that plans to marry are only weakly associated with transitions to marriage among black cohabiting couples.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Whether state TANF plans should actively promote marriage has continued to be a central part of the recent debate over reauthorization of the 1996 welfare reform bill, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Most recent research shows that marriage has benefits, economic and otherwise, for both women and chil-

dren. Proponents of marriage-promotion activities believe that the government should no longer be indifferent to marriage as a fundamental institution that benefits society. Critics, by contrast, often worry that the emphasis on marriage is misplaced and that states have limited track records in successfully promoting marriage or reducing divorce among disadvantaged groups (Ooms 2002; Sawhill 2002). Our goal has been to help frame the debate over marriage-promotion policy by evaluating the extent to which single mothers themselves expect to marry or desire marriage. In other words, we have sought to assess whether disadvantaged unmarried mothers are receptive to marriage in their own lives.

Our results indicate that most women, including unmarried mothers, expect to marry in the future and have a high desire to marry. Both proponents and critics of marriage-promotion policies must accommodate the fact that most single mothers would like to marry. On the one hand, our results buttress claims that the government should now help single mothers attain their personal goals for a stable married family life. Although relatively few achieve it, single mothers generally have a positive view of marriage in their own lives. On the other hand, our results do not suggest that a strong desire for marriage necessarily means that unmarried mothers, including cohabiting women, will support or respond favorably to specific government efforts to promote marriage, such as marriage campaigns, counseling, or other support services. Our empirical results cannot speak to this issue.

Our study provides a clear message that marriage is highly valued as a personal goal among most unmarried women, including low-income and disadvantaged single mothers. But our empirical analyses have been less successful in identifying factors that may dampen marital expectations or desires. Our results suggest that single mothers have lower expectations (but not desires) of marriage than do single childless women. Women with fewer resources, including women who grew up in disadvantaged families and who receive cash assistance, also are found to have lower marital expectations, but not desires. Racial minority women, regardless of social and economic circumstances, have lower marital expectations and desires. But our study cannot speak to why minority women hold less positive views about marriage. Do these attitudes about marriage reflect marital constraints (e.g., shortages of marriageable men) or other factors, including cultural ones? Lacking answers to this question, our study provides a starting point rather than final answers about the etiology of marital expectations and desires among single mothers.

Attitudes about marriage and marital behaviors are two different things. Unlike most previous research, we sought to evaluate whether marital desires are associated with subsequent marriage behavior. We show that marital desires do not translate easily into marriage; only 20 percent of single women who expressed a desire for marriage are actually married

within 4 years. From a public policy perspective, the problem is not one of changing public attitudes or values about marriage among the poor. Rather, it is a problem of identifying and eliminating specific barriers that prevent women (and men) from realizing their preferences. Our analysis shows that single mothers are less able than other women to realize their marital desires, at least in the short-term. But our analysis also provides few clues about why this is the case. Instead, we learn that black and Hispanic single mothers who desire marriage are substantially less likely to marry than are white single mothers. Additional research will be needed to understand better the specific social and economic circumstances that prevent minority women from marrying.

Finally, our study seeks to inform the current debate over marriage-promotion policy by evaluating the marital expectations and desires of single mothers. Critics of marriage-promotion policy worry that low-income women may be coerced into marriage by perverse economic incentives or forced to stay in unhealthy marriages. But as our results show, unmarried women have generally positive attitudes about marriage, if their high expectations or desire for marriage serve as our guide. Disadvantaged mothers do not have to be convinced about the value of marriage (see Mauldon et al. 2002). The more pertinent issue, in our opinion, is how best to help the large majority of women realize their desire for marriage.

## Appendix

### Sample Descriptions

**Table A1**

CHARACTERISTICS OF 1995 NSFG SAMPLE OF SINGLE NONCOHABITING AND COHABITING WOMEN, AGES 15–45 (%)

	SINGLE WOMEN		COHABITING WOMEN	
	Without Children	With Children	Without Children	With Children
Expects to marry	88.8	68.7	87.5	73.9
Ever cohabited	13.3	49.2	100.0	100.0
Never married	94.8	62.0	83.8	56.6
Age:				
Less than 25	70.9	29.2	46.3	28.6
25–34	19.6	41.6	40.4	49.4
35 or older	9.5	29.2	13.3	22.0
Race:				
White	65.2	31.5	81.3	45.9
Black	21.6	54.9	10.8	31.4
Hispanic	13.3	13.6	7.9	22.6

**Table A1** (Continued)

	SINGLE WOMEN		COHABITING WOMEN	
	Without Children	With Children	Without Children	With Children
Education:				
Less than high school degree	36.1	33.6	12.5	40.6
High school degree	20.1	38.5	30.8	35.8
Beyond high school	43.8	27.9	56.7	23.6
Employed	64.4	58.7	84.2	61.3
Biological child with partner	...	...	...	56.6
Partner is low income	...	...	27.1	29.6
Partner is working	...	...	84.6	83.3
Rural	11.8	8.3	9.6	8.2
Received AFDC	4.7	41.9	2.5	27.0
Disadvantaged background <sup>a</sup>	14.9	29.7	17.5	31.8
Sample size	2,436	1,296	240	318

NOTE.—AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

<sup>a</sup> Respondents are considered disadvantaged if they grew up in a nonintact family and met either of two conditions: their mothers had low education (i.e., were high school dropouts) or were not employed.

**Table A2**

CHARACTERISTICS OF 1994 NLSY SAMPLE OF SINGLE, NONCOHABITING WOMEN, AGES 29–37 (%)

	Single without Children	Single with Children
Desires marriage	77.2	69.2
Never married	72.9	38.7
Age:		
29–32	48.7	42.9
33–37	51.3	57.1
Race:		
White	47.0	25.0
Black	36.6	57.1
Hispanic	16.4	17.9
Education:		
Less than high school degree	7.5	19.3
High school degree	33.9	47.2
Beyond high school	58.6	33.5
Employed	79.8	62.3
Rural	13.2	17.8
Received AFDC	0.0	30.0
Disadvantaged background <sup>a</sup>	18.0	35.4
Sample size	628	977

NOTE.—AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) sample of unmarried women does not include cohabiting women; they were not asked about their marital desires.

<sup>a</sup> Respondents are considered disadvantaged if they grew up in a nonintact family and met either of two conditions: their mothers had low education (i.e., were high school dropouts) or were not employed.

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## Notes

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1. Our study focuses on single women (rather than men) for two reasons. First, the large majority of custodial single parents are women, who are disproportionately at risk of poverty and welfare receipt. Single mothers are the targets of welfare reform. Second, the fertility data employed in this article are based on reports from women rather than from men. Moreover, the NSFG is a survey of women of reproductive age; men are not included in the sample.

2. It is also conceivable that low expectations of marriage (because of few marriage partners or low marriageability) may affect marital desires. For example, as a psychological defense, unmarried women may dampen the desire to marry if they perceive that they are unlikely to find a suitable spouse.

3. In analyses not shown, combining responses *a* and *b* proved to be a more parsimonious way of analyzing and presenting the data. We found that various predictors of wanting to marry now or later, vs. not wanting to marry, had similar effects in multinomial regression models.

4. The receipt of AFDC refers to the calendar year prior to the survey. At the time of the survey, nearly 18 percent of the NSFG single mothers recently received at least some cash assistance.

5. For our analyses, respondents are considered disadvantaged if they grew up in a nonintact family and met either of two conditions: their mothers had low education (i.e., were high school dropouts) or were not employed. Nearly 21 percent of our sample has an at-risk or disadvantaged family background. We show in app. table A1 that unmarried mothers (either single or cohabiting) are roughly twice as likely as unmarried women without children to have a disadvantaged background.

6. Our model assumes that cash assistance depresses the expectation of marriage. It is also plausible that a low expectation of marriage is associated with marital and childbearing decisions (e.g., out-of-wedlock childbearing) that lead directly to welfare receipt (South 1996).

7. The cohabiting partner is considered to have a low income if his yearly earnings are less than \$16,000. To put this figure in perspective, the average poverty threshold for a family of four in 1995 was nearly \$15,600. We consider the cohabiting partner to be employed if he is working at least part-time at the time of the interview.

8. The results for rural women are counterintuitive in light of higher marriage rates in rural than in urban areas (McLaughlin, Lichter, and Johnson 1993). One plausible explanation is that rural women who desire marriage move to larger urban areas, where the pool of marital prospects is larger.

9. The receipt of AFDC refers to receipt in the calendar year prior to the survey. At the survey year, about one-third (36 percent) of the NLSY single mothers recently received at least some cash assistance.

10. As a proxy for the quality of potential marriage partners among the NLSY respondents, we estimate the effects of metro-level unemployment rate on marital desires. This variable is not statistically significant at the .05 level.

11. This is one potential explanation, but it would need to be reconciled with other evidence that shows that black men, on balance, have a positive attitude toward marriage and a strong desire for marriage (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993; Sassler and Schoen 1999).