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Then Comes Marriage?:

Religion, Race, and Marriage in Urban America

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Then Comes Marriage?:

Religion, Race, and Marriage in Urban America

Abstract

A growing body of research has focused on socioeconomic and cultural explanations for the fragility of marriage in urban America. This paper focuses on the role that religious participation—and the norms and behaviors it promotes—plays in encouraging marriage among new parents in urban America. Using longitudinal data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, we find that urban mothers who have a nonmarital birth are significantly more likely to marry within a year of that birth if they attend church frequently. For the most part, this religious effect cannot be explained by measured relationship-related beliefs and behaviors (such as affection between partners and the absence of domestic violence). Instead, religious beliefs and social supports associated with churches may help urban mothers make the transition to marriage in communities where marriage has become increasingly infrequent.

Introduction

For much of our nation's history, the institutions of marriage and religion have been closely related (Christiano 2000). To this day, religious attendance and belief are positively associated with marriage, marital childbearing, marital quality, and marital stability in the U.S. as a whole (Call and Heaton 1997; Christiano 2000; Lehrer 2000, 2004; Wilcox 2004). But we know little about how, if at all, religion influences marriage in urban America, where marriage no longer plays a dominant role in organizing childbearing, childrearing, and adult life (as it still does to a large extent in suburban and rural America) (Edin and Kefalis 2005; Ellwood and Jencks 2004; McLanahan 2005; Wilcox 2004). One possibility is that urban churches have responded to the pronounced retreat from marriage in U.S. cities by downplaying or de-emphasizing the value of marriage (Anderson, Browning, and Boyer 2002). Alternately, churches are bulwarks of marriage in urban communities where marriage is not otherwise given much normative or social support (Ellingson *et al.* 2004).

This study focuses on the role that religious institutions play in fostering marriage among new mothers in urban America using newly available national data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. In particular, we examine the relationship between religious participation and the transition to marriage for women who have recently experienced a nonmarital birth. We do so because a majority of urban mothers have children outside of wedlock, yet many eventually go on to marry (McLanahan 2005; U.S. Census Bureau 2003). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to offer a quantitative analysis of the association between religion and marriage among urban mothers.

This study also has an important ancillary objective: We hope to shed some light on the paradox that African American religion is unusually vibrant and the institution of marriage in the African American community is unusually fragile. General Social Survey data from 1990 to 1998 reveal that 52 percent of African American adults attend church several times a month or more, compared to the 39 percent of Americans from other racial and ethnic backgrounds who attend religious services regularly. But African Americans have high rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock birth; they are also much more

likely than whites to be unmarried at any point in time (Lichter *et al.* 1992; Patterson 1998; Blackman *et al.* 2005).

This is a paradox because religious practice is generally associated with marriage formation, quality, and stability (Call and Heaton 1997; Lehrer 2000, 2004; Wilcox 2004). To be sure, African American marriage patterns are shaped by a host of adverse, non-religious factors—discrimination, poverty, male unemployment, incarceration patterns, and the legacy of slavery (Blackman *et al.* 2005; Patterson 1998; Wilson 1996); these factors may more than offset the influence of religious factors on black marriage. Nevertheless, we do not know if religion is associated with marriage in urban America in much the same way that it is for the nation at large. We also do not know if religious involvement increases the likelihood of marriage subsequent to a nonmarital birth. This study will address these issues.

Religion, Marriage-Related Norms, & Relationship Behavior in Urban America

Relationships in Urban America

We begin this literature review by summarizing how the broader normative and behavioral climate in low-income urban communities influences relationships and marriage, then consider how religious institutions may foster marriage by encouraging relationship-related behaviors and norms that run counter to the normative and behavioral climate pervasive in urban America (Anderson 1999). Although we recognize that economic factors have exacerbated the fragility of marriage in urban America (Ellwood and Jencks 2004; Wilson 1996), we focus here on how norms and relationship-related behavior influence urban relationships.

Recent research on urban family life suggests that most urban adults value matrimony, but do not necessarily subscribe to the norms and beliefs conducive to maintaining a happy, lifelong marriage (Anderson 1999; Edin 2000; Edin and Kefalis 2005; Furstenberg 2001; Waller 1999). A large majority of urban residents tell interviewers that they support marriage in principle, and dream of marrying themselves. But a substantial proportion of poor, urban women tell family scholars that they are scared of marriage, both because of the high level of divorce they have witnessed among friends and family and

because they are not convinced that the men they know have the job opportunities and relationship skills required to make a marriage work. These women also report more general concern about male irresponsibility and sexual infidelity—what they describe as “‘rippin’ and runnin’ the streets” (Edin 2000: 30). Likewise, a substantial proportion of urban men report that women are too suspicious and controlling, and do not accord men sufficient respect (Forste 2006). These views are indicative of a “culture of gender distrust” in urban America (Furstenberg 2001). They are also suggestive of how a “code of the street” that valorizes sexual conquest and attaches no great moral significance to bearing a child out of wedlock has destabilized romantic relationships and undercut family formation in urban America (Anderson 1999). Thus, this research suggests that, at the attitudinal level, generic support for the institution of marriage among poor and minority groups coexists with gender distrust and a permissive attitude to premarital sex and nonmarital childbearing. This latter set of relationship-related beliefs may contribute to the fragility of marriage in urban America.

These beliefs both shape and are shaped by relationship-related strategies of action that are not conducive to marriage. Men and women in urban America often seek to maintain control in their relationships by asserting their dominance over romantic partners; sometimes, domestic violence is associated with efforts to assert dominance (Edin and Kefalis 2005; Furstenberg 2001). Furthermore, men often approach relationships with a strategy of securing as many sexual conquests as possible; this strategy of having sex with multiple partners is especially prevalent among African American men in urban America (Anderson 1999; Patterson 1998; Youm and Paik 2004). Finally, urban men living in low-income communities sometimes fall prey to a lifestyle associated with “the street”—substance abuse, criminal activity, and little or no connection to the world of legal employment (Anderson 1999; Edin and Kefalis 2005; Wilson 1996).

These strategies of action make sense in a world where many young people do not have access to economic resources and models of successful marriage are in short supply. But these strategies of action do not facilitate the kind of supportive and secure relational environment that is conducive to marriage. Instead, they lead to fractious relationships between men and women in many poor, urban communities.

In sum, then, relationship-related beliefs—gender distrust and sexual permissiveness—and strategies of action—poor relationship skills, promiscuity, and a lack of integration into conventional society—help to explain the fragility of marriage in urban America.

Religion, “Decent” Living, and Marriage in Urban America

But there is an important degree of cultural heterogeneity among urban residents. For instance, Elijah Anderson (1999) argues that a significant number of inner-city residents adhere to a “code of decency” marked by hard work, civility, self-reliance, and family-centered living. He also argues that these putatively “decent” people “derive great support from their faith and church community” (Anderson 1999: 38). His ethnographic work suggests that religious institutions may be one of the key institutional sources of support for relationship-related beliefs and strategies of action that foster marriage in communities where the fragility of marriage is most pronounced (see also Tolnay 1997).

Religious institutions have long endowed the marital vow with a sense of sacredness (Witte 1997). In particular, the two largest traditions in our nation’s cities—Roman Catholicism and Black Protestantism—view marriage as a covenantal commitment between a man and a woman that mirrors the relationship between Christ and the Church. Accordingly, the relationship between husband and wife is supposed to be marked by mutual, sacrificial service, and by high levels of affection. Furthermore, marriage in these traditions is held to be the only legitimate arena for sexual intercourse and childbearing, both because sex outside marriage is viewed as sinful and because children deserve two parents who are committed to them and to one another (Browning *et al.* 1997: 219-246). For instance, Wallace Charles Smith, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., writes, “God’s revelation clearly points to male-female monogamous relationships as the gift by God to humankind for the purposes of procreation and nurturing. Even for people of African descent, this concept of monogamy must be at the heart of even the extended family structure” (Smith 1985: 70).

The ethnographic literature suggests that the normative support that religious institutions lend to marriage and to relationship-related values like service and sexual fidelity helps to account for the

persistence of marriage in urban communities suffering from poverty, discrimination, and a weak marriage culture. As Furstenberg (2001: 242) observes, “[C]onventional notions of marriage are often carried forward [among the urban poor] within families actively involved in religious institutions and part of a broader religious community.” Other ethnographic work indicates that religious practice is tightly linked to marriage, and family-focused behavior more generally, in urban America (Anderson 1991). This ethnographic work suggests that religious institutions in urban America play a similar role to the one they play in the rest of the nation. As we have seen, research based on nationally representative survey data finds that religious practice is associated with family-related beliefs that lead to higher levels of marriage, lower rates of out-of-wedlock births, and lower rates of divorce (Bumpass 2000; Call and Heaton 1997; Lehrer 2000, 2004; Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992).

Religious institutions also lend important support to two strategies of action that are particularly important for a successful transition into marriage: strong relationship skills and sexual fidelity (Gottman 1998; Lauman *et al.* 1994; Youm and Paik 2004). As noted above, religious institutions foster these strategies through the normative support they place on service in marriage, traditional sexual morality, and more generally the ethic of care and consideration described by Ammerman (1997) as “Golden Rule Christianity.”

Equally important, religious institutions embed members in family-oriented social networks that monitor marital and sexual behavior, offer social support for relationship problems, and reinforce family-related norms (Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995; Wilcox 2002b). One of the functions that these networks provide is models to young people of successfully married adults (Furstenberg 2001). These networks also offer social and emotional support to church members, support that can buffer against the stresses that can otherwise harm relationships (Ellison 1994). Finally, these networks often encourage members to live in a “decent” manner: that is, to avoid sexual promiscuity, to seek steady legal employment, to avoid illegal drugs, and to refrain from domestic violence (Anderson 1999; Ellingson *et al.* 2004). Thus, these networks may lend crucial social support to two strategies of action—an

affectionate, sacrificial approach to relationships and a strong commitment to sexual fidelity in romantic relationships—that may foster marriage in urban America.

To summarize this section, we predict that religious attendance is associated with higher rates of marriage for couples who have recently had a child outside of wedlock. We think that the effect of religious attendance may be explained by the normative emphasis that churches place on marriage. This emphasis could well lead unmarried mothers to marry, even if they are in poor relationships. We also suspect that the effects of religious attendance may be explained by the normative and social support that churches often lend to three behavioral strategies: supportiveness, non-violent relationships, and sexual fidelity. These behavioral strategies should promote higher-quality relationships among urban couples who have recently had a baby, and therefore boost their chances of marriage (Edin and Kefalis 2005). In practice, then, the norms and behaviors associated with religious attendance could lead mothers in both low-quality and high-quality relationships to make the transition to marriage.

Religion and Marriage among African Americans

But it is also possible that religious institutions do not play a central role in fostering marriage in urban America. For instance, as noted earlier, one of the paradoxes of American religious life is that African Americans have the highest rate of religious practice—and the lowest rate of marriage—of any racial or ethnic group. Of course, as we have seen, many socioeconomic and cultural factors—for example, poverty, discrimination, and the legacy of slavery—account for distinctive marriage patterns among African Americans (Blackman *et al.* 2005; Patterson 1998; Wilson 1996). But the Black church may have responded to the tension between its theological conservatism and high rates of out-of-wedlock birth and divorce in the African American community by downplaying pro-marriage norms. Indeed, some observers of the Black church argue that this is precisely the strategy it has taken (Anderson, Browning, and Boyer 2002: 343). One study found, for instance, that many African American churches manifest a “conspiracy of silence” around issues of sexual activity, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation; in other words, many black churches do not openly address these issues because of the tension between the

churches' own moral traditionalism and some members' relationships and sexual activity (Franklin 2005: 16).

Moreover, as the key institutional player in many urban, African American communities, the Black church is a "semi-involuntary institution" for some members; it has also been a central vehicle for racial and economic justice and solidarity among African Americans (Ellison and Sherkat 1995; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; McRoberts 2003; Pattillo-McCoy 1998). Hence, it may not exercise as much normative influence over members' family behaviors if those members view it primarily in social or political rather than familial or religious terms. That is, individuals who are members of a Black church for primarily social or political reasons may pay less attention to the family norms it promotes than individuals who are members for primarily religious or familial reasons. For these reasons, it is possible that religious practice among African Americans is not associated with marriage, nor the cultural beliefs and strategies of action that foster marriage, in urban America.

Thus, this paper tests the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Urban mothers and fathers who attend church regularly are more likely to marry subsequent to a nonmarital birth.

Hypothesis 1a: Because African American churches may have responded to recent demographic changes by downplaying the normative importance of marriage and marriage-related behaviors, we test the possibility that religious effects on marriage vary by race.

Hypothesis 2: The effects of religious attendance are mediated by relationship-related beliefs and strategies of action conducive to marriage. Specifically, religious institutions foster pro-marriage norms that may make urban couples more likely to marry. They also may foster "decent" relationship-related behaviors that improve the quality of urban relationships and, in turn, the likelihood that urban couples who have recently had a child outside of wedlock will marry.

Methods

Data

We analyze data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a new national survey designed to study new unwed parents, their relationships, and their children in large U.S. cities (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, and McLanahan 2001). The survey follows approximately 3,700 children born to unmarried parents and 1,200 children born to married parents in 20 cities with populations over 200,000.¹ The baseline interviews were conducted between February 1998 and September 2000. New mothers were interviewed in the hospital within 48 hours of giving birth, and new fathers were interviewed at the hospital or elsewhere shortly after birth. A follow-up interview queried parents and children approximately 12 months after birth²; additional interviews have been conducted or are planned for 30 and 48 months. The survey's response rates are high—85 percent of eligible mothers and 76 percent of eligible fathers responded to the first wave of the survey. Only 11 percent of mothers and 12 percent of fathers interviewed at birth failed to participate in the 12-month follow-ups.

Our analyses include only respondents who were unmarried at childbirth and participated in both baseline and follow-up interviews. This yields a sample size of 3,069. Analyses are unweighted. Although the weights make the sample nationally representative of mothers in cities larger than 200,000 people, they discard more than one quarter of cases from analyses. In additional, unreported analyses we established that church attendance has much stronger effects on marriage when weighted data are used.

Missing data are deleted listwise except for the following variables: mothers' and fathers' education, wages, religious denomination, fathers' church attendance, presence of biological children born to fathers but not mothers, and mothers' attitudes towards marriage. For cases not deleted listwise, missing data on continuous variables are imputed at the respective sample means, with dummy variables measuring whether data are missing; missing data on categorical items are addressed with dummies. More sophisticated means of handling missing data, such as multiple imputation, do not perform appreciably better (Paul et al. 2003). Many data are missing because of nonresponse by fathers. For some variables, it

was possible to obtain information on fathers from mothers. As a result, the dummies measuring missing data do not have prohibitively high rates of inter-correlation.

Independent Variables

We employ one measure, *frequent attendance* at religious services, to measure the extent to which urban mothers and fathers are integrated into a religious institution. Specifically, we coded all mothers and fathers who report attending church “several times a month” or “once a week or more” as frequent attendees. We combine these categories because most respondents, presumably as well as many analysts of Fragile Families data, probably view “several times a month” and “week” as synonymous. Church attendance, rather than denomination, is the component of religious identity that most strongly predicts behavior in interpersonal relationships (Wilcox 2004).

All analyses adjust for religious denomination to account for faith-specific differences in religious participation. We use race and denominational affiliation to code female respondents into eight religious categories; an additional dummy variable measures whether mother and father have the same denominational affiliation. We divide African-American respondents who report a Protestant affiliation into one of three categories (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Steensland *et al.* 2000). Black respondents who report a Baptist or Methodist (including African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, etc.) affiliation are coded as *mainline Black Protestant*. Mainline Black Protestantism tends to be the dominant religion in African-American communities, has a strong social justice orientation, and often is less focused on personal morality than sectarian Black Protestantism. Black respondents who report a Pentecostal affiliation, such as Church of God in Christ, or other sectarian affiliation are coded as *sectarian Black Protestant*. Sectarian Black Protestantism has a strong other-worldly orientation and an intense commitment to “holiness,” which includes morally upright behavior. A very small number of Black respondents who report an Episcopalian, Lutheran, Congregational, or Presbyterian affiliation are coded as *mainline Protestant*, as are respondents from other ethnic backgrounds who report these

affiliations. White, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American respondents who report a Methodist affiliation are also coded as *mainline Protestant*.

White, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American respondents who indicate a Baptist, Pentecostal, or other sectarian denominational affiliation are coded as *conservative Protestant* (Steensland *et al.* 2000). Respondents who indicate a Catholic affiliation are coded as *Catholic*. Likewise, respondents who indicate that their faith tradition is Islam are coded as *Muslim*. Respondents who indicate a Jewish, Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, or other non-Christian/Muslim affiliation are coded as *Other*. Although members of these faiths may behave in different ways with respect to marriage, there are too few cases to test for specific denominational effects for these respondents. Finally, respondents who report no religious affiliation are coded as *None* (the reference category).

Four variables tap respondents' cultural beliefs and strategies of action. To measure *normative commitment to marriage*, we constructed a dichotomous measure based on respondents' agreement with two statements: "It is better for a couple to get married than to just live together" and "It is better for children if their parents are married." Respondents who responded "agree" or "strongly agree" to both statements were coded as normative supporters of marriage. This measure taps family-related beliefs that may influence marriage rates.

Respondents were also asked three questions about the father of their child: how often is he "fair and willing to compromise when you have a disagreement?"; how often does he express "affection or love for you?"; and, how often does he "encourag[e] or hel[p] you to do things that are important to you?". Mothers' scores on these items were combined into a scale measuring the presence of *highly supportive* fathers with strong relationship skills ($\alpha = .69$). Mothers were also asked how often the father "hits or slaps you when he is angry." Mothers who responded "never" were coded as reporting *no domestic violence*. Finally, mothers were asked if they had conflict with the father in the last month over sexual fidelity. Mothers who responded "never" were coded as reporting *no conflict over fidelity* with the father of their child. All three of these measures serve as indirect measures of men's family-related strategies of action regarding sexual activity and an affectionate style of relating to their romantic partner.

Our assumption here is that women are less likely to act on their religious and/or normative commitment to marriage unless their partners are supportive, non-violent, and faithful. We also assume that men who attend religious services frequently are more likely to display these behaviors.

Finally, we control for a variety of socioeconomic and demographic factors to account for potential spuriousness in the relationship between marriage and religious participation, marriage-related beliefs, and marriage-related strategies of action: *mother age* and *father age* (in years); whether the couple is *cohabiting* at the time of the baseline interview³; whether the child in the survey is the couple's *first child* and whether both mother and father each had all their children with the parent of the child in the survey; *mother's education* and *father's education* (from less than high school to college-educated; less than high school is the reference category); *race/ethnicity* of mother (white, African-American, Hispanic, other; white is the reference category); whether the mother *was living in an intact family at age 15*; and *mother's wages* and *father's wages* (both recoded into approximate quartiles; the lowest quartile for each is the reference category). Measures of recent labor force participation are also available but are highly correlated with wages and are therefore omitted. All independent variables are measured at the baseline interviews.

Analysis

We analyze the likelihood of marriage between birth and the one-year follow-up using log-logistic parametric event history models.⁴ Respondents remaining single at the one-year follow-up are censored. Time to marriage is measured in months, so a continuous time model is appropriate. The log-logistic specification was chosen over other customary parametric models (Weibull, Gompertz, gamma, log-normal) via a series of diagnostics suggested by Wu (1990). For each model, the inverse of the parametric survivor function was plotted against its nonparametric counterpart estimated via Kaplan-Meier. These two variables are identical if the model fits properly, so plotting them against each other should yield a straight line. This was the case with both the Weibull and the log-logistic models. To choose between them we took the further step advocated by Blossfeld and Rohwer (1995): for each

parametric model, we regressed the inverse of its corresponding survivor function against the Kaplan-Meier estimate. Based on these regressions, the log-logistic model yielded the highest R^2 value and therefore provides the best-fitting parametric event history model. Finally, multivariate analyses report the results of significance tests performed on Huber-White standard errors to offset the artificially inflated t-statistics that may result from cluster-sampled data.

The first model examines the effects of religious affiliation as well as various socioeconomic and demographic factors on the odds of marriage within a year of a nonmarital birth. The second examines the importance of religion for marriage among urban mothers, net of the sociodemographic factors that are known to influence entry into marriage. The third model includes both mothers' and fathers' religious attendance, while the fourth adds measures of relationship-related beliefs and strategies of action to assess the influence of culture on marriage and to see if these cultural factors mediate the influence of religious attendance. The second, third, and fourth models also allow us to determine if racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic influences on marriage are attenuated by religious and cultural factors.

Results

Figure 1 shows that marriage is more likely among urban mothers of infants who attend church frequently, although the association is marginal for white respondents. More specifically, Figure 1 indicates that 14 percent of white mothers in urban America who attend religious services several times a month or more got married within a year of a nonmarital birth, compared to 12 for white mothers who attend church less frequently. The effect of church attendance is markedly stronger for African American mothers in the nation's large cities: in this group, 8 percent of mothers who attend frequently marry within a year of a nonmarital birth, compared to 3 percent of those who do not attend frequently. Hispanic mothers in urban America fall between white and African American mothers in their marriage rates: 13 percent of Hispanic mothers who attend church frequently get married, compared to 9 percent of those who attend less than several times a month. In general, these data show that in large American cities 33 percent of mothers who are unmarried at childbirth attend church frequently. Finally, frequent church

attendance significantly increases the likelihood of matrimony ($X^2 [1] = 11.74, p < .01$); also significant is the relationship between race/ethnicity and marriage ($X^2 [2] = 38.93, p < .001$). Thus, Figure 1 indicates that church attendance and race are both strongly associated with marriage for mothers of newborn infants who live in urban America. Although the absolute numbers of mothers marrying within a year of a nonmarital birth is low, it should be noted that these percentages reflect hundreds of thousands of women.

Figure 1 Here

We now turn to the question of exactly when marriage occurs subsequent to childbirth. Figure 2 plots the hazard rates for marriage subsequent to a nonmarital birth; in other words, the duration-specific likelihood that new mothers marry in the interval between surveys.⁵ Although there is some fluctuation in the estimated hazards, the general trend is of decreasing marriage rates over time. Women who give birth out of wedlock are most likely to marry soon after childbirth. The longer they delay, the less likely marriage becomes. Perhaps over time the impetus to marry wanes as the “magic moment” of childbirth gives way to the responsibilities of parenthood (Edin and Kefalas 2005; McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2001).

Figure 2 Here

Table 1 depicts the results of our multivariate analysis of the likelihood of an urban mother’s transition to marriage subsequent to a nonmarital birth. Overall Table 1 reveals that religious attendance, a strong normative commitment to marriage, and family-related strategies of action are related to family formation among unwed urban mothers. However, these religious effects do not appear to vary according to mothers’ race.

Table 1 Here

Model 1 indicates that the father’s levels of income and education are positively related to the likelihood of marriage after an out-of-wedlock birth. Model 1 also indicates that African American mothers are less likely to marry subsequent to an out-of-wedlock birth. Thus, Model 1 shows that race and men’s socioeconomic status are associated with the transition to marriage among unwed couples. Furthermore, except for sectarian Black Protestants, religious affiliation is not associated with entry into

marriage for urban mothers who have had an out-of-wedlock birth. Sectarian Black Protestants are significantly more likely to marry in the wake of a nonmarital birth, in comparison to mothers with no religious affiliation. We suspect that there are no other denominational differences because we are examining marriage subsequent to a nonmarital birth, not marriage more generally. Thus denominational imperatives to bear children only within the bonds of matrimony may no longer be in play; in effect, the rules have already been broken, so they do not matter. Finally, fathers who have not had children with other women have higher marriage rates.

Model 2 indicates that frequent religious attendance is associated with the transition to marriage within a year of a nonmarital birth for urban mothers. This result confirms Hypothesis 1. Supplemental analyses, not shown here, revealed no statistically significant interactions between race and church attendance. Therefore Hypothesis 1a, which suggests that the effect of religious participation on marriage varies by race, is not supported. For all respondents, then, religious participation increases the likelihood of marriage by 63% ($\exp[.49] = 1.63$). Moreover, religious attendance cannot account for the low overall likelihood of marriage for Blacks: the coefficient measuring African-American marriage rates is even stronger in Model 2. These results are also noteworthy given that relatively few socioeconomic and demographic variables predict marriage subsequent to a nonmarital childbirth, compared to the likelihood of marriage before childbirth as suggested by the more general marriage formation literature (e.g., Goldstein and Kenney 2001).

Model 3 includes measures of both mothers' and fathers' religious participation. Compared to Model 2, the inclusion of the father measure slightly attenuates the effect of mothers' churchgoing on marriage. Since the only difference between the models is the inclusion of fathers' religious attendance, the Model 2 coefficient for mothers was probably accounting for both parents' religious participation. Further analyses (not shown) show no effect of religious homogamy on marriage; in other words, men's and women's attendance do not contribute interactively to the likelihood of matrimony subsequent to childbirth. Although fathers' church attendance increases the chances of marriage for respondents of all ethnicities, the coefficient measuring Black marriage rates has an even larger absolute value.

Model 4 demonstrates that marriage-related beliefs and behaviors are strong predictors of marriage within the first year of a nonmarital birth. Unwed urban mothers who affirm the normative value of marriage are significantly more likely to marry subsequent to a nonmarital birth. Unwed urban mothers with highly supportive partners and no conflict regarding sexual fidelity are also significantly more likely to wed in this time period. However, these normative and behavioral factors together have only modest effects on the relationship between religious attendance and marriage. Although the coefficients measuring mothers' and fathers' church attendance decline somewhat, they remain large and statistically significant. These findings suggest that the effects of religious participation on marriage cannot be explained by the relationship-related beliefs and behaviors presumably fostered by religious institutions. In all probability, the family-oriented social networks found in religious congregations—which we cannot measure with these data—are probably responsible for the relationship between religious participation and marriage. Such networks might provide mothers with access to “marriageable” men, reinforce pro-marriage beliefs, and provide social and emotional support to couples considering marriage. Explicit religious beliefs about the importance of marriage (e.g., marriage is the institution ordained by God for intimate relationships), which are also not measured in the data, may also account for the relationship between religion and marriage. Finally, the normative emphasis and social support that religious institutions lend to “decent” behavior more generally—legal employment, temperance, and so forth—may also account for the link between religion and marriage.

The normative and behavioral factors measured in Model 4 help explain the effects of socioeconomic status on marriage: the father's income coefficients, and the coefficient measuring “some college” decrease somewhat from Model 3 to Model 4. This suggests that one of the reasons men who earn over \$10,000 are more likely to marry after a nonmarital childbirth than men who earn less than \$10,000 is that they are more likely to practice the relationship behaviors that lead to marriage. However, the income and “some college” coefficients remain statistically significant in Model 4. On the other hand, the normative and behavioral factors incorporated into Model 4 increase the influence of race on marriage

rates. This means that the distinctively low levels of marriage among unwed mothers who are African American are not explained by the marriage-related beliefs and behaviors measured in this study.

In sum, Table 1 provides evidence consistent with Hypothesis 1 but not Hypotheses 1a or 2. Religious participation and cultural beliefs and strategies of action are strongly related to marriage among urban mothers. Urban mothers and fathers who are integrated into the life of a religious congregation are significantly more likely to marry within a year of a nonmarital birth, although this effect does not vary by ethnicity. Although relationship-related beliefs, especially a normative commitment to the institution of marriage, and relationship-related behaviors, notably the father's supportive approach to the mother, have strong, independent associations with marriage among unwed urban mothers, they largely do not mediate the effect of church attendance.

In additional analyses (not shown) we explore the effect of religious participation on marriage prior to childbirth. Church attendance is highly correlated with the odds of being married at the time of childbirth. For fathers, attendance increases the chances of marriage by 95 percent; for mothers, religious participation raises the likelihood of marriage by 40 percent. Furthermore, this pattern continues to hold in the nine month interval between conception and childbirth. Although incipient childbirth has traditionally served to motivate matrimony, only about 14 percent of future mothers who were not married at conception made the transition to marriage prior to childbirth.⁶ Despite the modest rate of “shotgun” weddings, religious participation continues to be an important determinant of marriage: mothers-to-be attending church several times a month or more have 63 percent higher shotgun marriage rates compared to those who attend less frequently, while frequent church attendance boosts men's chances of shotgun marriage by 54 percent. Even when the normative expectations and social pressure to wed are presumably at their greatest, religious participation exerts a powerful influence on marriage rates.

Since these ancillary analyses of marriage prior to childbirth are based on cross-sectional data, the direction of causality—in all probability—also goes in the opposite direction. That is, we know that marriage is associated with higher rates of church attendance, a stronger normative commitment to the institution of marriage, interpersonal behaviors more conducive to lasting relationships, and higher

earnings among men (Gorman 1999; Nock 1998a; Waite and Gallagher 2000). So, some portion of the relationship between religion and marriage prior to childbirth is likely a consequence as well as a cause of marriage.

Discussion

This study indicates that for urban mothers church attendance is strongly associated with marriage within one year of a nonmarital birth. Urban mothers who attend church several times a month are almost two-thirds more likely to get married than mothers who do not attend church frequently. Moreover, mothers who are in relationships with churchgoing fathers are especially likely to marry. Accordingly, this study suggests that urban religious institutions serve as moral and social bulwarks of marriage in communities where marriage as an institution has grown increasingly fragile. In other words, churches are important institutional carriers of the norms, strategies of action, and social networks that keep the practice of marriage alive in urban America. Their presence helps explain the heterogeneity in marital practice in urban America, a heterogeneity that can get lost in public and academic discussions of the urban underclass and the retreat from marriage in poor, minority communities (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Murray 1984; Wilson 1987).

To our surprise, this study does not provide much evidence that religious institutions foster marriage by promoting relationship-related beliefs and behaviors. We do find that urban mothers who believe that marriage is better for adults than cohabitation and better for children than alternative family forms are much more likely to get married than those who do not. Moreover, urban mothers who are in a relationship with the father of a child marked by supportive behavior on his part (affection, compromise, and encouragement) and by sexual fidelity are also much more likely to get married than those mothers who do not enjoy such a relationship with the father of their child. But these cultural factors do not appreciably reduce the effect of religious attendance on marriage rates.

So what does account for the strong association between religious attendance and entry into marriage among unmarried mothers? We speculate that the family-oriented networks grounded in

religious congregations may provide churchgoing mothers with helpful models of married life, social and economic support, and information/monitoring of their partners—all of which can help improve their relationship and their odds of marriage. Indeed, research on urban family formation suggests that networks play a central role in the transition to marriage for urban couples (Youm and Paik 2004). We also suspect that religious beliefs and rituals (e.g., church wedding ceremonies) not measured in our data may foster marriage among urban parents. Moreover, the religious beliefs and social supports associated with regular church attendance are known to buffer against the stresses that can otherwise harm relationships (Ellison 1994). Churchgoing mothers and fathers may have better resources for resolving the stress they experience in day-to-day life than their unchurched peers, and may consequently be better able to transition into marriage. Finally, we believe that religious institutions may promote prosocial behaviors that makes couples more confident that they can successfully transition into marriage (Edin and Kefalas 2005). Future research must determine the precise mechanisms that explain the strong associations between religious attendance and marriage among urban parents that we find in this study.

Our study also suggests that the effects of religion are somewhat stronger for men. Given the fact that men are often less interested in family life, and more likely to succumb to the lure of the streets, religion may be particularly important in orienting men to marriage (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Wilcox 2004). Future research should also determine if and how the effects of norms and behaviors vary by gender.

In all probability, the strong relationship between religion and marriage is partly a consequence of selection effects. That is, women who believe strongly in the importance of marriage are probably more likely to seek out religious institutions that reinforce their commitment to marriage. As Elijah Anderson (1999) has argued, inner-city residents committed to the “code of decency” see the church as a source of social and moral support for their efforts to lead a decent life. Nevertheless, even if selection plays an important role in accounting for this study’s findings, the fact that religious institutions are often the most important institutional supports to this code of decency in urban America suggests that their absence would translate into less support for marriage and, eventually, lower marriage rates.

This study also addresses the African American religion-family paradox. As noted earlier, African Americans have both unusually high rates of church attendance and unusually low rates of marriage. In view of these patterns, we considered the possibility that religious attendance is *not* associated with marriage for African American urban mothers. But our multivariate analysis refutes this notion: the link between religious attendance and marriage is no stronger or weaker among African American mothers than it is among mothers from other ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, adding religious and cultural effects to the statistical models in Table 1 only increased the negative effect of the Black coefficient. Thus, we are not able to offer new religious or cultural explanations for the distinctively low level of marriage among urban African Americans. If anything, this study just adds to the mystery surrounding low rates of marriage among African Americans.

Conclusion

A growing body of social scientific research suggests that the institution of marriage typically confers benefits to adults and children. Adults who get and stay married have better health, better earnings, higher levels of civic engagement, and better mental health (Nock 1998a; Putnam 2000; Waite and Gallagher 2000). Likewise, children who grow up in an intact, married family tend to enjoy better educational and psychological outcomes compared to children who grow up in a non-intact, unmarried family (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Amato and Booth 1997; Booth and Crouter 2002). Furthermore, recent research suggests that the material benefits of marriage also extend to low-income and African American families (Lerman 2002; Wilcox *et al.* 2005). For all these reasons, the United States' recent retreat from marriage would seem to have particularly baleful consequences in poor, minority communities in urban America, both because they suffer from lower rates of marriage and because the fragility of family life in these communities is exacerbated by persistent poverty and racism.

Much of the literature on marriage has focused on social structural factors—from male joblessness to the structure of Black and Hispanic marriage markets—to account for the recent retreat from marriage in the U.S. (Ellwood and Jencks 2004; Lichter *et al.* 1992; Lloyd and South 1996; Wilson

1996). But the findings from this study suggest that religious and cultural factors have also played a role in the retreat from marriage. Indeed, this is the first study to focus on the relationship between religion and marriage in urban America. We find that religious attendance, pro-marriage beliefs, and relationship skills—supportiveness and sexual fidelity—are strongly related to the likelihood that urban mothers will get married subsequent to a nonmarital birth. The importance of religious attendance in our analyses suggests that the secularization since the 1960s may help account for the retreat from marriage (cf. Thornton 1985). The importance of cultural factors suggests that declines in normative support for marriage, along with changes in relationship-related behavior such as increases in premarital sex, also may help to explain declining marriage rates (cf. Axinn and Thornton 2000; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Tolnay 1997).

But these religious and cultural changes have affected all sectors of American society. What might explain why these religious and cultural developments have been particularly consequential for marriage rates among lower-class and minority Americans since the 1960s (Ruggles 1994)?

One possibility is that socioeconomic and religious-cultural change since the 1960s have had an interactive effect on marriage rates, which in turn has been particularly consequential for disadvantaged communities (Wilson 2002). For instance, economic restructuring since the 1960s has left many inner-city residents, especially minority men, without access to jobs that offer sufficient income to support a family. This economic development, coupled with ongoing racial discrimination and public policies that penalize marriage, undercut the material incentives that undergird marriage and more generally a lifestyle encompassing regular employment and stable relationships; in other words, “decency” (Anderson 1999; Wilson 1987, 1996). In many urban communities, the material rewards for playing by the rules—staying out of trouble with the law, working in the legal economy, and marrying before one has children—have severely diminished. These socioeconomic developments paved the way for the triumph of a “code of the street”—marked by “violence and predatory activity”—in many urban communities that undercut marriage and other social institutions, such as churches, that lend it normative support (Anderson 1999).

At the same time, concomitant cultural shifts in the wider society in the direction of expressive individualism reinforced the cultural consequences of these socioeconomic trends (Axinn and Thornton 2000; Patterson 1998; Peterson 1991). Societal changes in attitudes and behaviors regarding sex, childbearing, and marriage may have been particularly consequential for lower-class and minority Americans who have lost much of their economic stake in marriage or who had a weaker normative commitment to marital childbearing in the first place (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Pagnini and Morgan 1996; Ruggles 1994; Wilson 2002). Indeed, some research suggests that increases in nonmarital childbearing among lower-class and minority Americans since the late 1960s are linked to shifts in sexual behavior (Akerlof, Yellen, and Katz 1996). We wonder if the dramatic changes in American economic *and* cultural life in the last four decades have had mutually reinforcing, rather than independent, effects on marriage rates among minority and lower-class Americans. Future research might explore the potential interactive effect of religious-cultural and socioeconomic change on marriage in urban America.

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ENDNOTES

1. The 20 cities are: Austin, TX; Baltimore, MD; Boston, MA; Chicago, IL; Corpus Christi, TX; Detroit, MI; Indianapolis, IN; Jacksonville, FL; Milwaukee, WI; Nashville, TN; Newark, NJ; New York, NY; Norfolk, VA; Oakland, CA; Philadelphia, PA; Pittsburgh, PA; Richmond, VA; San Antonio, TX; San Jose, CA; and Toledo, OH.
2. “12-month follow-up” reflects the official designation accorded to the fragile families data. The mean follow-up interview was conducted fifteen months after the baseline data collection, but up to three years separated surveys for some respondents. This is advantageous from a data analytic standpoint, because it provides more time in which to observe respondent marital behavior.
3. We acknowledge that the direction of causality in the relationship between premarital cohabitation and religious involvement is unclear. Accordingly, we repeated our analyses without the cohabitation variable and obtained almost identical results.
4. The log-logistic model is not appropriate for general models of marriage at first birth (Diekmann 1990; Goldstein and Kenney 2001). Marriage subsequent to childbirth has a substantially different hazard function, as Figure 1 shows.
5. For this figure we removed one respondent who married two years after childbirth. Since few respondents remained in the at-risk pool, this outlier produced a distracting spike in the figure.
6. This estimate is based on the weighted data and omits couples who have had children prior to the Fragile Families interviews.

Figure 1. Marriage Rates by Race and Church Attendance.

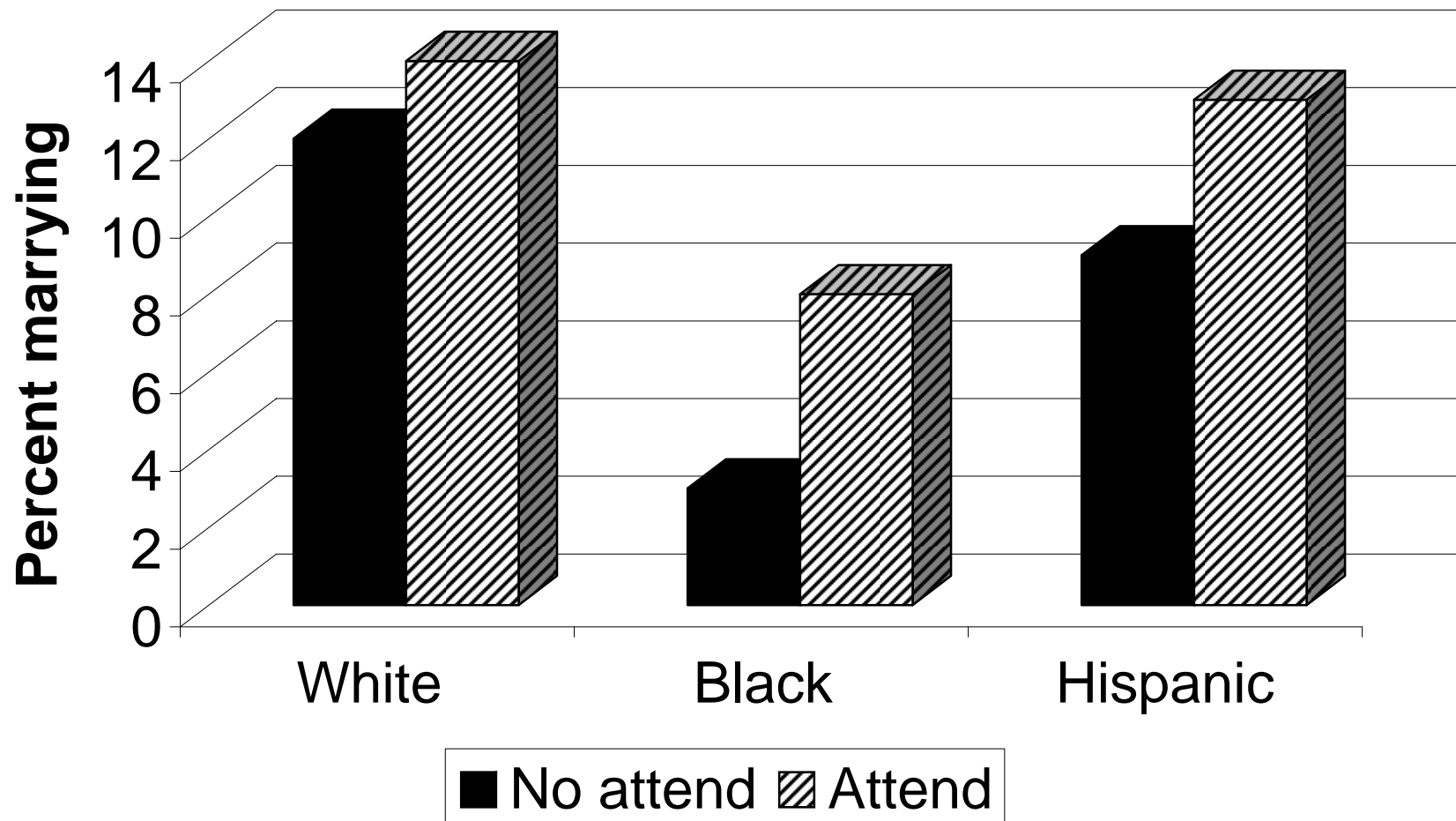


Figure 2. Hazard Rates for Transition to Marriage after Childbirth.

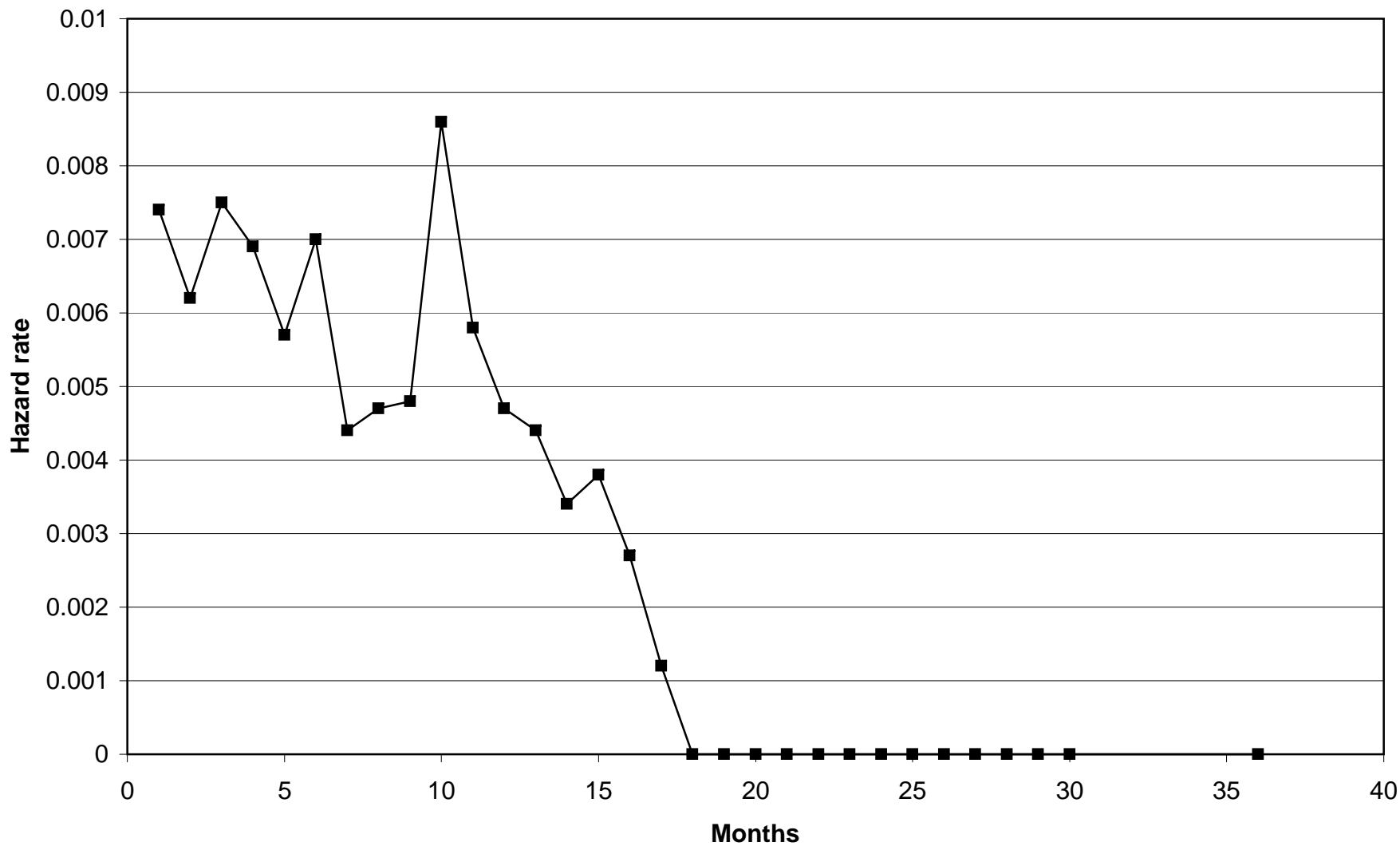


Table 1. Event History Estimates of Marriage Subsequent to Nonmarital Birth.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	Odds	<i>b</i>	Odds	<i>b</i>	Odds	<i>b</i>	Odds
<i>Demographic controls</i>								
Mother age	0.02	1.02	0.01	1.01	0.01	1.01	0.02	1.02
Father age	-0.01	0.99	-0.01	0.99	-0.01	0.99	-0.01	0.99
First child born to couple	0.01	1.01	0.02	1.02	0.01	1.01	-0.09	0.91
All mother's children with father	-0.05	0.95	-0.06	0.94	0.06	1.06	-0.05	0.95
All father's children with mother	0.36 *	1.43	0.35 *	1.42	0.35 *	1.42	0.29 +	1.34
Mother's family intact at age 15	0.13	1.14	0.10	1.11	0.10	1.11	0.08	1.08
Couple cohabiting at baseline	0.86 ***	2.36	0.90 ***	2.46	0.89 ***	2.44	0.61 ***	1.84
<i>Mother's race</i>								
White	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Black	-0.69 *	0.50	-0.80 **	0.45	-0.85 **	0.43	-0.95 **	0.39
Latino	-0.04	0.96	-0.11	0.90	-0.16	0.85	-0.23	0.79
Other	-0.13	0.88	-0.18	0.84	-0.27	0.76	-0.36	0.70
<i>Socioeconomic status</i>								
<i>Mother's education</i>								
Less than H.S.	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
High school	0.14	1.15	0.15	1.16	0.16	1.17	0.08	1.08
Some college	-0.16	0.85	-0.14	0.87	-0.11	0.90	-0.21	0.81
College graduate	0.34	1.40	0.42	1.52	0.48	1.62	0.51	1.67
<i>Father's education</i>								
Less than H.S.	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
High school	-0.05	0.95	-0.06	0.94	-0.07	0.93	-0.03	0.97
Some college	0.51 +	1.67	0.52 +	1.68	0.46 +	1.58	0.50 +	1.65
College graduate	0.55	1.73	0.51	1.67	0.37	1.45	0.32	1.38
<i>Mother's earned income</i>								
No earnings	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
\$0-4,999	0.02	1.02	0.04	1.04	0.04	1.04	0.06	1.06
\$5,000-14,999	-0.05	0.95	-0.02	0.98	0.00	1.00	0.02	1.02
\$15,000+	0.10	1.11	0.12	1.13	0.15	1.16	0.15	1.16
<i>Father's earned income</i>								
< \$10,000	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
\$10,000-19,999	0.53 *	1.70	0.52 *	1.68	0.54 **	1.72	0.43 *	1.54
\$20,000-34,999	0.66 **	1.93	0.61 **	1.84	0.62 **	1.86	0.54 *	1.72
\$35,000+	0.42	1.52	0.46	1.58	0.52 +	1.68	0.48 +	1.62
<i>Religious affiliation</i>								
<i>Mother</i>								
None	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Mainline Black Protestant	0.17	1.19	0.04	1.04	0.05	1.05	0.00	1.00
Sectarian Black Protestant	0.86 *	2.36	0.63	1.88	0.59	1.80	0.47	1.60
Mainline Protestant	0.39	1.48	0.26	1.30	0.22	1.25	0.22	1.25
Catholic	0.10	1.11	-0.05	0.95	-0.06	0.94	-0.13	0.88
Conservative Protestant	0.27	1.31	0.11	1.12	0.10	1.11	-0.03	0.97
Other	0.67	1.95	0.55	1.73	0.54	1.72	0.43	1.54
Muslim	0.13	1.14	-0.05	0.95	-0.13	0.88	-0.38	0.68
Mother and father same religion	0.09	1.09	0.06	1.06	0.01	1.01	-0.01	0.99
<i>Religious participation</i>								
Mother attends church frequently	---	---	0.49 ***	1.63	0.44 **	1.55	0.34 *	1.40
Father attends church frequently	---	---	---	---	0.51 **	1.67	0.45 **	1.57
<i>Relationship beliefs</i>								
Marriage better	---	---	---	---	---	---	0.61 ***	1.84
<i>Relationship behaviors</i>								
Father highly supportive	---	---	---	---	---	---	0.92 ***	2.51
No domestic violence	---	---	---	---	---	---	-0.19	0.83
No conflict over fidelity	---	---	---	---	---	---	0.53 **	1.70
Constant	-6.37 ***	0.00	-6.21 ***	0.00	-6.20 ***	0.00	-8.70 **	0.00
Shape parameter (γ)	0.93		0.93		0.92		0.91	
Log likelihood	-979.71		-971.06		-965.86		-937.75	
Improvement to previous model (L-R test)	---		***		**		***	

* $p < .10$ ** $p < .05$ *** $p < .01$ **** $p < .001$

Notes: Table omits missing data dummy variables. N is 3,069.

Appendix A. Coding of variables.

Mother age, father age	Continuous variables
First child born to couple	Dummy (0 = no, 1 = yes)
All mother's children with father of Fragile Families child	Dummy (0 = no, 1 = yes)
All father's children with mother of Fragile Families child	Dummy (0 = no, 1 = yes)
Couple cohabiting at baseline	Dummy (0 = no, 1 = yes)
Mother's race	Set of three dummies, one each for Blacks, Hispanics, members of other ethnicities; white is the reference category
Mother's education, father's education	Set of three dummies, one each for high school graduation, some college, college graduation; less than high school is the reference category
Mother's earned income, father's earned income	Set of three dummies for income quartiles; the bottom quartile for each is the reference category
Mother's religious affiliation	Set of seven dummies measured whether mother is: mainline Black Protestant, sectarian Black Protestant, mainline Protestant, catholic, conservative Protestant, Muslim, or other; no denomination is the reference category
Mother and father have same religious affiliation	Dummy (0 = no, 1 = yes)
Mother, father attends church several times a month or more	Dummies (0 = no, 1 = yes)
Mother evince normative support for marriage	Dummy (0 = no, 1 = yes)
Mother views father as highly supportive	Continuous variable; two item scale
Mother reports no domestic violence	Dummy (0 = violence, 1 = no violence)
Mother reports no conflict over sexual fidelity	Dummy (0 = conflict, 1 = no conflict)
Time to marriage	Coded as event histories
