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Adolescent Well-Being in Cohabiting, Married, and Single-Parent Families

Cohabitation is a family form that increasingly includes children. We use the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to assess the well-being of adolescents in cohabiting *parent stepfamilies (N = 13,231). Teens living with cohabiting stepparents often fare worse than teens living with two biological married parents. Adolescents living in cohabiting stepfamilies experience greater disadvantage than teens living in married stepfamilies. Most of these differences, however, are explained by socioeconomic circumstances. Teenagers living with single unmarried mothers are similar to teens living with cohabiting stepparents; exceptions include greater delinquency and lower grade point averages experienced by teens living with cohabiting stepparents. Yet mother's marital history explains these differences. Our results contribute to our understanding of cohabitation and debates about the importance of marriage for children.*

An extensive literature exists that examines the importance of family structure (defined by marital status) for child well-being. Marital status acts as an indicator of the potential number of caretakers and may imply certain characteristics or qualities of the child's family life. This emphasis on marital status was perhaps more appropriate when relatively few children lived in cohabiting unions. Recent estimates indicate that two fifths of children are expected to spend some time in a cohabiting parent family (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), and 41% of cohabiting unions have children present (Fields & Casper, 2000). Despite this shift in children's experience in cohabitation, research on the implications of cohabitation for children's lives is relatively sparse.

In this paper we examine the well-being of adolescents in cohabiting stepparent families. We use the term cohabiting stepfamily to indicate living with one biological parent and the parent's partner (cohabiting stepfamily). We address three key questions in this paper. First, do teenagers in cohabiting stepparent families have similar academic and behavioral outcomes as teenagers living with two married biological parents? We begin with this question because over half of the children in the United States live with two married biological parents (Fields, 2001), and most research on family structure contrasts how children in specific family types fare compared with children living with married, two-biological-parent families. Second, do children residing with cohabiting stepparents fare better or worse than children living with single mothers? We focus on children living with unmarried mothers and determine how their cohabitation status influences child well-being. Third, do adolescents in cohabiting stepfather families fare as well as adolescents living in married stepfather families? We test whether children living with step-

fathers fare better when their mother is married, rather than cohabiting. For each question, we evaluate whether the effects of parental cohabitation are explained by socioeconomic circumstances, parenting, and family instability.

This paper builds on prior research and moves beyond previous work in several key ways. First, by employing a large data source (National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health), our analyses are based on a relatively large number of adolescents in cohabiting stepfather families. Second, the rich nature of the data allows us to include potentially important factors that represent family processes and may help account for some observed effects of family structure. Third, we are not limited to a single indicator of well-being and focus on multiple measures of well-being that are appropriate for teenagers. Finally, to better understand the implications of cohabitation on child well-being, we focus on family-type comparisons based on similar household structure (stepfather presence; cohabiting stepfather vs. married stepfather) or mother's marital status (unmarried mothers; cohabiting mother vs. single mother).

BACKGROUND

Cohabitation As a Family Structure

Children in the United States are increasingly likely to spend some of their lives residing in a cohabiting parent family. Indeed, two fifths of cohabiting households include children (Fields & Casper, 2000). In 1999, 6% of children were living with a cohabiting parent (Acs & Nelson, 2001). Bumpass and Lu (2000) estimate that two fifths of children in the United States are expected to experience a cohabiting parent family at some point during their childhood, and children born during the early 1990s will spend 9% of their lives living with parents who are in cohabiting unions.

Adolescents in cohabiting parent families typically are living with their mother and her cohabiting partner. Based on the 1996 Survey of Income and Program Participation, half (54%) of the children in cohabiting parent families lived with one biological parent (Fields, 2001). Given the instability of cohabiting unions for children, older children in cohabiting parent families primarily live with their mother and her partner who is not their biological parent (Manning, Smock, & Majumdar, in press). Brown (2002) reports that almost all children over the age of 12 in cohabiting parent families are living with only one biological parent.

Thus, cohabitation for adolescents (unlike for young children) represents a family that is structurally similar to a stepfamily.

Cohabitation and Family Life

Children in cohabiting parent families experience family life that differs from those raised with married or single parents. Children raised in cohabiting couple families may experience different developmental outcomes, in part because of the family environment or context in which children are raised. We discuss three potential contextual mechanisms through which family structure, and specifically cohabiting parent families, may influence child well-being: economic circumstances, instability, and parenting.

Economic status. Children raised in families with higher socioeconomic status experience more positive cognitive and social developmental indicators of well-being (e.g., Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Indicators of both family income and mother's education exert positive effects on child development, but income rather than mother's education seems to have a stronger influence on child outcomes (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn). It appears that income typically does not explain the effects of family structure on child well-being, but for some outcomes, it does reduce the effect of family structure (Carlson & Corcoran; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn; Hill, Yeung, & Duncan, 2001; McLanahan & Sandefur). On average, children raised in cohabiting parent families experience economic situations that are better than those of children in single-parent families (e.g., greater parental education and family earnings), but more stressful economic situations than children in married couple families (e.g., greater poverty and food insecurity; Acs & Nelson, 2002; Manning & Lichter, 1996).

Family stability. Family stability is positively related to child and young adult behavior (Hao & Xie, 2001; Hill et al., 2001; Wu & Martinson, 1993). At times family stability has a stronger influence on child outcomes than family structure. It is argued that the stress of family change hinders normal developmental transitions among children (Hao & Xie; Hill et al.; Wu & Martinson). Family stability may be particularly important in assessments of the effect of cohabitation because children born to cohabiting parents ex-

perience higher levels of instability than children born to married parents (Manning et al., in press).

Parenting. Parental monitoring is important for keeping children's behavior on task and ensuring that children meet their individual responsibilities. Empirical evidence supports the notion that parental monitoring has positive effects on children. For example, McLanahan (1997) reports lack of supervision by parents is associated with poor school performance among children in single and stepparent families. Another core feature of parenting is parental support, which is positively related to desirable outcomes for children and adolescents (e.g., Baumrind, 1991). For instance, interacting with children in positive ways has been shown to raise grade point averages and decrease externalizing behaviors (e.g., O'Connor, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1997). Parent-child relationships that cross household boundaries also influence children's development. Evidence suggests that closeness to nonresident fathers is positively associated with child well-being (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; White & Gilbreth, 2001).

Parenting in cohabiting unions may have become easier as cohabitation moves toward social acceptance, but cohabiting unions with children present still do not benefit from legal and social recognition (e.g., Durst, 1997; Mahoney, 2002). Thus the responsibilities of cohabiting partners to children are not specified, creating sources of parenting ambiguity in terms of obligations and rights of cohabiting partners to their partner's children. Research that distinguishes parenting behaviors of cohabitors from married couples or single parents supports the notion that slightly more negative parenting practices occur among cohabiting parents (Brown, 2002; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2000; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992). Yet parenting indicators do not explain the effect of parental cohabitation on child well-being (Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones; Thomson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994; White & Gilbreth, 2001).

Cohabitation and Child Outcomes

To date, a limited but growing number of studies examine the social well-being of children living in cohabiting parent families (e.g., Brown, 2001; DeLeire & Kalil, 2002; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Hao & Xie, 2001; Nelson, Clark, & Acs, 2001; Thomson et al., 1994). Often these researchers contrast the well-being of children in co-

habiting parent families with children living with two biological married parents. The focus of most of these studies is not specifically on cohabitation but more broadly on how family structure influences child well-being. The results of these studies indicate that children in cohabiting parent families fare worse than their counterparts in married, two-biological-parent families.

A limitation of this approach is that it confounds the effects of marriage and living with two biological parents. Research on family structure recognizes the importance of adults' biological ties to children and argues that children in two-biological-parent families fare better than children living with a stepparent (see Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Following this logic, the biological relationship of cohabiting partners should be considered in the analysis of child well-being. Many of the children who are living in cohabiting parent families, particularly older children, are not living with their biological father, making the traditional married stepparent family a more appropriate comparison group. To better understand the influence of cohabitation, we argue that comparisons should be made across families who share either the same biological relationships to parents (two biological parents or stepfamilies) or parental marital status (married or unmarried), and differ in terms of the presence or absence of a cohabiting partner (Manning, 2002).

The findings from empirical work suggest that teenagers and children in cohabiting parent stepfamilies sometimes fare worse in terms of behavior problems and academic performance than children in married stepparent families (Brown, 2001; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Morrison, 2000; White & Gilbreth, 2001). Other research suggests that adolescents and children in cohabiting stepparent families share similar levels of behavior problems and academic achievement as children in married stepparent families (Brown; Morrison, 1998, 2000). The findings seem to depend on the gender and age of the child as well as the specific dependent or outcome variable (e.g., math scores vs. verbal scores or internalizing vs. externalizing behavior).

Only a few studies contrast the well-being of children in unmarried mother families who have a cohabiting parent with those who do not. Analysis of the 1999 National Survey of American Families (NSAF) suggests teenagers living in single-mother and cohabiting stepparent families share similar levels of behavior problems (Acs & Nelson, 2002). Work using longitudinal data and

multivariate, fixed effects models finds that teenagers living with cohabiting mothers and unmarried mothers share similar levels of behavior problems (Morrison, 1998).

Two shortcomings of prior work are limited samples and a narrow range of covariates. First, a few studies are restricted only to children of divorce (Buchanan et al., 1996; Morrison, 1998, 2000). The implications of cohabitation may differ among children who have lived with married biological parents compared with children who have never lived with their biological father. In addition, other data sources (such as the National Survey of Families and Households [NSFH]) have small numbers of children in cohabiting, two-biological-parent and cohabiting stepparent families, and sample sizes become even smaller when two waves of data are used (e.g., Hao & Xie, 2001; White & Gilbreth, 2001). Finally, data sources such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) include less than optimal measures of parental cohabitation. Parental cohabitation is measured annually, so research using these data is biased toward longer term cohabiting unions (more than 1 year; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Morrison, 2000). Thus, analyses using the NLSY may be underestimating the negative effects of cohabitation because only longer term unions are included in the data.

A second shortcoming is that some research includes only a narrow set of independent variables. Thus, prior studies cannot explore potential explanations about why children in cohabiting parent families fare differently than children in other family types, disentangling the effects of family structure from other factors. First, a few studies include only socioeconomic indicators, such as gender, parental education, and poverty (Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1997; Nelson et al., 2001). Second, other research does not include measures of family instability or indicators of relationship quality (Acs & Nelson, 2002; Thomson et al., 1994). The NSAF does not include questions about duration of the parents' relationship or relational history (Acs & Nelson; Brown, 2001; Nelson et al., 2001). Other studies that include measures of family stability do not incorporate measures of the resident parents' relationship quality (DeLeire & Kalil, 2002; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Hao & Xie, 2001). Third, many studies do not include measures of parenting strategies when evaluating the effects of parental cohabitation on well-being (exceptions include Brown, 2001, and Dunifon & Kowaleski-

Jones). Also, nonresident biological fathers are often ignored. Rarely have relationships with nonresident fathers been considered in assessments of how children living with cohabiting parents fare, despite the fact that this relationship may be advantageous to the child's well-being (White & Gilbreth, 2001).

CURRENT INVESTIGATION

Three broad questions are addressed in this paper. First, the literature shows that children are generally better off when they live with two biological, married parents (e.g., Brown, 2002; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). In addition, in 1996 over 50% of the children in the United States were living in married, two-biological-parent families (Fields, 2001). Therefore, a basic starting point is to demonstrate whether teenagers living with cohabiting stepparent families fare the same or worse than children living with two married, biological parents.

Given the vast literature that supports the relative strength of the married, two-biological-parent family, of greater interest in this analysis will be other family structure comparisons. Our second question is whether cohabitation provides any advantage for children living with unmarried mothers. Based on both social control and economic deprivation perspectives, children in single-parent families may fare worse than children in cohabitation because they lack the benefits of income and parenting that a cohabiting partner may provide. As a result, we anticipate that children in cohabiting-parent families will fare better than children in single-mother families. A competing hypothesis is that children experience some disadvantages by living with a mother's unmarried partner who may not be a fully integrated family member and may compete for their mother's time and attention. Family roles may not be as clearly established in cohabiting stepfamilies, perhaps creating confusion over parenting responsibilities and weak child-stepparent relationships. This hypothesis is consistent with the role ambiguity perspective used to understand stepfamilies. In this case, adolescents in cohabiting stepfamilies would fare worse than adolescents in single-mother families. Finally, we may find no effect of cohabitation as the benefits and costs of a cohabiting parent outweigh one another. The bulk of research on stepfamilies indicates that children in stepfamilies and single-mother families share similar developmental outcomes (Coleman et al., 2000). Thus

we may find that adolescents who live in cohabiting stepfamilies fare as well as children who reside with a single mother.

Third, do children experience any advantage by living in a married (or traditional) rather than in a cohabiting stepparent family? We determine whether children in married stepparent families fare as well as children in cohabiting stepparent families. Marriage provides the socioeconomic benefits and stability that cohabitation does not offer. Moreover, family roles may be clearly defined and child-stepparent relationships more formalized in married than in cohabiting stepparent families. We expect children in married stepfamilies to have better developmental outcomes than children in cohabiting stepfamilies. Once we account for the parent's relationship with the child, family stability, and socioeconomic characteristics, however, these differences according to marital status may no longer exist. These findings may suggest that marriage itself does not create the advantage experienced by children in married stepparent families. If differences persist, then such findings would indicate that some feature of cohabitation itself (i.e., role ambiguity) may have negative consequences for children in this type of family structure.

Previous work provides some initial evidence about the effects of cohabitation on child well-being. In this project we build on previous studies in four key ways. First, many of the previous studies do not distinguish between adolescents and younger children. Our focus on adolescents limits our conclusions to one stage of childhood, but at the same time allows us to detail the effects of family structure for a critical period of development. We examine outcomes that are most salient for adolescents.

Second, most adolescents in cohabiting parent families are living with only one biological parent (Brown, 2001). Thus, answers to questions about the effects of cohabitation require being specific about the family type contrasts. The traditional approach is to compare the well-being of all children in cohabiting families with those in married, two-biological-parent families. Yet, contrasting the well-being of adolescents in married and cohabiting stepfamilies is more appropriate because these families share the same basic structure (biological mother and her cohabiting partner).

Third, we include a range of indicators of well-being. For example, we do not rely on a single measure to indicate academic achievement. We include measures of Peabody Picture Vocabulary Tests, grades in school, and college expectations. As any one measure may suffer some shortcomings, taken together we have indicators of well-being that tap several dimensions of adolescent behavior and academic well-being.

Fourth, we are able to include key variables that may explain some of the effects of family structure on child outcomes. We include measures of parenting characteristics (closeness to mother and nonresident father, as well as monitoring); socioeconomic status (mother's education and family income); and family stability (number of mother's marriages and duration of relationship). Most prior work has accounted for one or more of these measures, but no study has accounted for all of these factors simultaneously.

In addition to our measures of socioeconomic status, family stability, and parenting, we control for a number of sociodemographic and child characteristics, including race and ethnicity, mother's age, child's age and sex, number of children in the household, and importance of religion to the child. Although residing in a cohabiting or single-parent family is increasingly common for all children, it is a more common feature of the life experiences of Black and Hispanic children (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). We also control for mother's age; older mothers may be more skilled at parenting, which in turn may result in increased attentiveness to children's needs. The number of one's siblings is related negatively to academic achievement (e.g., Carlson & Corcoran, 2001), presumably because more children in the household means parents possess fewer instrumental and emotional resources to invest in each child individually. In terms of the characteristics of the adolescent, boys tend to experience more behavior problems than girls, and girls tend to have higher academic achievement than boys (Carlson & Corcoran). We control for child's age, as older children may experience fewer behavior problems as a function of maturity. We also control for the importance of religion to the adolescent, as involvement with an institution that encourages adherence to particular moral standards may act as an agent of social control to discourage deviant behavior in young people. Families who encourage religious attendance may also more closely monitor the actions of their children.

METHOD

Data

We draw on the first wave of the National Longitudinal Adolescent Study of Adolescent Health

(Add Health). The Add Health is based on interviews with students in grades 7 through 12 and their parents in 1995. These data are based on a sample of 80 high schools and 52 middle schools from the United States. We use the contractual data that include in-home interviews administered to 18,924 students with a response rate of 78.2% (Udry, 1998). These sample schools were selected with unequal probability of selection. Once design effects are taken into account, these data are nationally representative of adolescents in the United States (see Bearman, Jones, & Udry, 1997). We use procedures in a software package, STATA, to ensure our results are nationally representative with unbiased estimates (Chantala & Tabor, 1999).

In this paper we use the first wave of the Add Health data. This cross-sectional analysis provides a basic starting point for understanding whether parental cohabitation is associated with indicators of child well-being. Researchers often emphasize how changes in family structure influence child outcomes without understanding whether and how specific family structures are associated with child outcomes. Furthermore, fixed effects models do not allow for the analysis of how core, fixed, sociodemographic variables such as race or gender influence adolescent outcomes.

The Add Health is appropriate because it contains a large number of adolescents living in cohabiting parent families, includes key measures of consequential adolescent outcomes, and has rich measures of family processes that may explain some of the observed differences in family structure. Other data sources, such as the National Survey of American Families and Current Population Survey, provide information only about the current family situation and no details about family stability. Yet the Add Health data do not include details about family structure histories.

Our analytic sample depends on the question that we address. Dividing the sample is necessary because not all of the predictors used for analyses of married, two-biological-parent families can be applied to the unmarried and stepparent families (e.g., number of mother's prior marriages and nonresident father closeness). We begin by contrasting the well-being of children in cohabiting stepparent families to those living in married, two-biological-parent families, including all possible family types. Our analytic sample consists of 13,231 adolescents. Our next analysis is limited to teens living in stepfamilies and single-mother families. We make two sets of specific family comparisons. First, we examine the well-being of

adolescents living with unmarried mothers (single-mother vs. cohabiting-mother families) so we can estimate the effect of cohabitation among unmarried mothers. Second, we focus on teenagers living with stepfathers (married stepfather families vs. cohabiting stepfather families) so we can determine the influence of formal marital status among children living with stepfathers. Our analysis of teens living with single mothers and stepfathers is based on 5,504 respondents.

Dependent Variables

We include a range of indicators of well-being. The indicators of behavior problems are ever having been expelled or suspended from school, experiencing trouble in school, and self-reported delinquency scores. The suspension or expulsion measure is a dichotomous measure simply indicating whether the respondent ever received an out of school suspension from school or an expulsion from school. This is coded such that $1 = yes$ and $0 = no$. Unlike the other outcomes, expulsion or suspension may occur prior to the formation of the current family, but provides a rough indicator of problem behavior. The second measure, problems in school, assesses the respondent's difficulty in the school context. The four items comprising the scale indicate the degree, since the start of the school year, the respondent has had problems getting along with teachers, paying attention in school, getting homework done, and getting along with other students. (All items are coded such that $0 = never,$ $1 = just a few times,$ $2 = about once a week,$ $3 = almost every day,$ and $4 = every day$.) The responses are summed so the scores may range from 0 to 16. This measure has a Cronbach α reliability of .69. The delinquency scale is composed of 15 items asking the frequency that respondents engaged in a series of delinquent acts over the past 12 months, including painting graffiti or signs on someone else's property or in a public place; deliberately damaging property; lying to parents or guardian about whom respondent had been with; taking something from a store without paying for it; getting into a serious physical fight; hurting someone badly enough to need medical care; running away from home; driving a car without the owner's permission; stealing something worth more than $50; going into a house or building to steal something; using or threatening to use a weapon to get something from someone; selling marijuana or other drugs; stealing something worth less than $50; taking

part in a fight where a group of friends was against another group; or being loud, unruly, or rowdy in a public place. Responses (scored such that 0 = *never,* 1 = *one or two times,* 3 = *three or four times,* 3 = *five or more times*) were summed such that the scores ranged from 0 to 45. After the items were summed, cases were omitted from analysis when less than 75% (11 items) of the items had valid responses. Cases where 75% or more of the items had valid data were given the mean of the scale on any items with missing data. This strategy allows us to retain respondents in our sample and base delinquency scores on a minimum of 11 items. The delinquency measure has a high Cronbach α reliability of .85.

Measures of cognitive development or academic achievement and expectations are student-reported grade point average, Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, and college expectations. Only one measure may not be an adequate indicator of academic achievement. Low grade point average is a dichotomous measure indicating whether, of four subject areas in school (English, mathematics, history or social studies, and science), the respondent received two or more grades of D or lower. Respondents receiving *two or more Ds or Fs* were coded as 1, and respondents receiving *one or no Ds or Fs* were coded as 0. We use this measure of poor academic performance because grading systems vary considerably across schools, and student grades depend on the types of classes students attend (e.g., advanced placement courses vs. a general curriculum). The second indicator is an abbreviated version of the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. We use the age-standardized scores with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. This is considered a measure of verbal cognitive ability or development. The third indicator measures expectations for college. Respondents were asked how much they want to go to college (responses ranging from 1 = *low* to 5 = *high*). The mean response on this question was high with a value of 4.

Independent Variables

Family structure. The key independent variable is family structure. Cohabitation family status is established by the adolescent response in the household roster question and by the parent's response to relationship questions. If either the adolescent or the parent reports that the parent has a cohabiting partner, then the family is coded as a cohabiting parent family. We find very few adolescents live in two-biological-parent cohabiting families. This is consistent with findings from other data (Brown, 2002). Thus, we limit our analyses of cohabitation to adolescents living with their biological mother and her cohabiting partner (cohabiting stepfather families). Our family structure categories include two married biological parents, single mother, married stepfather, and cohabiting stepfather. Table 1 shows the distribution of the independent variables according to each family type. Among adolescents living in stepfamilies, one third live with cohabiting parents and two thirds live with married parents. Among adolescents living with unmarried mothers, 13% are living with their mother and her cohabiting partner. The unmarried mothers may be never married, divorced, or widowed. These findings mirror those reported in the NSAF and NSFH (Brown, 2002; Bumpass, 1994).

The remaining independent variables are divided into three categories: sociodemographic, parenting or socialization variables, and family stability. The distribution for each of the independent variables is provided in Table 1.

Sociodemographic. Race and ethnicity respondents is based on their own response and coded into four categories: Black, White, Latino, and Other. The ''other'' category includes groups that are too small to distinguish in analyses. In both stepparent and unmarried mother families, the majority of the adolescents are White, whereas 15% are Black and 12% Latino. The family income measure is logged and the family income values are higher among teens in married stepparent families than in the other family types. A shortcoming of the Add Health data is that a considerable share (23%) of the sample has missing data on income. To avoid deleting all of these cases, respondents with missing income are coded to the mean value of income and a dummy variable is included in the model that indicates which respondents were missing on income. Mother's age is coded as a continuous variable, and the mean value is 32. Mother's education is coded on an ordinal scale (1 = *eighth grade or less*; 2 = *more than eighth grade, but did not graduate from high school*; 3 = *went to a business, trade, or vocational school in place of high school*; 4 = *received a GED*; 5 = *high school graduate*; 6 = *went to college but did not graduate*; 7 = *graduated from a college or university*; 8 = *had professional training beyond college*). On average, single mothers have a high school education, and mothers in married

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF INDEPENDENT VARIABLES, BY FAMILY STRUCTURE (*N* = 13,231)

	Married Two Biological Parents	Single Mother	Married Stepfather	Cohabiting Stepfather
Sociodemographic				
Race				
White	.75	.49	.73	.56
	(.02)	(.04)	(.02)	(.04)
Black	.07	.33	.11	.19
	(.01)	(.04)	(.02)	(.03)
Hispanic	.11	.13	.11	.19
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.03)
Other	.07	.05	.06	.07
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)
Log family income	3.75	3.01	3.63	3.19
	(.03)	(.04)	(.03)	(.05)
Missing income (1 = *yes*)	.12	.21	.08	.15
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.03)
Mother's age	41.2	39.15	38.19	37.53
	(.17)	(.22)	(.23)	(.28)
Mother's education	5.49	5.04	5.43	4.89
	(.09)	(.10)	(.09)	(.13)
Child's age	15.28	15.35	15.33	15.20
	(.12)	(.14)	(.13)	(.17)
Child's sex (1 = *male*)	.52	.47	.51	.54
	(.01)	(.01)	(.02)	(.03)
Importance of religion to child	3.34	3.33	3.31	3.21
	(.02)	(.02)	(.03)	(.04)
Number of children in household	1.24	1.28	1.45	1.41
	(.03)	(.06)	(.05)	(.09)
Family Stability				
Number of mother's marriages	1.01	1.45	2.12	2.16
	(.25)	(.03)	(.03)	(.06)
Duration of relationship	15.20	—	6.67	4.44
	(.20)		(.23)	(.27)
Parenting				
Monitoring by parents	1.93	1.70	1.97	1.82
	(.06)	(.07)	(.08)	(.10)
Closeness to mother	4.56	4.58	4.63	4.49
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.05)
Closeness to nonresident father	—	3.06	3.13	3.11
		(.03)	(.05)	(.07)
Missing closeness to nonresident father (1 = *yes*)	—	.25	.26	.27
	—	(.01)	(.02)	(.03)
N	7,727	3,593	1,352	559

Note: From the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health.

stepfamilies have the highest levels of education. Religiosity is measured by responses to questions about the importance of religion in the life of the adolescent. The responses range from 1 to 4, with 1 indicating *not at all important* and 4 indicating *very important*. The mean response is 3.3, indicating religion is considered *fairly important*. The mean age of the child is 15 and the ages range from 11 to 21. The sample is evenly split between boys and girls. On average, about one other child lives in the household.

Family stability. Indicators of family stability include mother's relationship history and duration of current relationship. The number of mother's prior *marriage-like* relationships is included as a control variable. These relationships are asked about in reference to the 18-year period prior to Wave I, or from 1977–1995, so these refer to changes in mother's relationships during the course of the child's lifetime. Single mothers have been in, on average, only one marriage-like relationship, and cohabiting and married mothers in

this sample have been in, on average, two relationships. The following indicator of stability is applied only to the stepfamily analysis. Stability of the stepfamilies is measured in terms of the duration of the parental relationship. The mean duration of the cohabiting stepfamilies is 4.4 years, and the mean duration of the married stepfamilies is 6.7 years. This is consistent with findings from the NSFH (Hao & Xie, 2001).

Parenting. The parenting measures focus on control and support. Parental control is based on a seven-item scale with high values indicating high control. The questions are coded dichotomously (0 = *yes* and 1 = *no*) and then summed. Adolescent respondents are asked whether parents let them make their own decisions about the time they must be home on weekend nights, the people they hang around with, what they wear, how much TV they watch, which TV programs they watch, what time they go to bed on week nights, and what they eat. The α reliability of the scale is .64. The mean level of control is 1.83, indicating a fairly low level of parental supervision.

Closeness to resident mother is an individual item, asking teens how close they feel to their mothers, coded 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *very little*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *quite a bit*, 5 = *very much*. The average closeness to mothers ranges between *quite a bit* to *very much*. Unfortunately, the data do not include questions about closeness to cohabiting stepfathers. For those respondents who report having a nonresident biological father, the same question is included as a predictor. The average value is *somewhat close*. We also include a dummy variable measuring whether responses were missing on closeness to nonresident father. This strategy allows us to retain the variable in our analyses; approximately one quarter of the sample is missing on the indicator of closeness to nonresident father.

Design

We correct for design effects and the unequal probability of selection using STATA (Chantala & Tabor, 1999). The analytic method depends on the nature of the dependent variables. Logistic regression is used for analyses of dichotomous dependent variables, whether the adolescent was expelled or suspended from school and whether the teen received low grades. Ordinary least square regressions are estimated for all remaining outcomes.

Our analytic strategy is to estimate a series of models for each outcome. We first estimate a zero-order or bivariate model that includes only the family structure variable. The second model we present adds the remaining factors, including socioeconomic, parenting, and family stability measures. We also enter variables separately to assess how they contribute to the fit of the models, but because of space constraints, we do not present the results in the tables.

RESULTS

Distribution of Adolescent Outcomes

Table 2 presents the mean and median values of the dependent variables according to each family type. This provides information about the basic levels of the well-being indicators and shows the range of values for the measures of well-being. Most teenagers, regardless of family type, were not expelled or suspended from school. Two fifths of the adolescents in single-mother and cohabiting stepfather families were expelled or suspended, and three tenths of teens living in married stepfather families experienced school suspension or expulsion. Delinquency levels range from 0 to 45, so those reported are quite low, and the mean values are highest for teens living in cohabiting stepfather families. In terms of school problems, the values fall within a narrow range from 3.95 to 4.79, suggesting that the majority of teenagers have just a few troubles in school. The measure of academic achievement shows that the vast majority of teens in each family type have not received Ds or Fs in two or more subjects. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test is an indicator of cognitive development, and the scores range from 98 to 104, with adolescents in married, two-biological-parent families scoring best. Finally, most teens possess high expectations for attending college, and there appears to be only slight variation according to family type.

Cohabiting Stepparent and Married, Two-Biological-Parent Families

Our first aim is to contrast the well-being of children in cohabiting stepfamilies to children living in married, two-biological-parent families (reference category in Table 3). The inclusion of the entire sample for these analyses prevents us from using the couple-level indicators (duration, relationship quality); number of mother's prior mar-

TABLE 2. MEANS (STANDARD ERRORS) OF OUTCOME VARIABLES (*N* = 13,231)

Dependent Variables	Married Two Biological Parents	Unmarried Single Mother	Step Married	Step Cohabiting
Suspension/expulsion				
M	.18 (.01)	.39 (.02)	.30 (.02)	.41 (.30)
Median	0	0	0	0
Delinquency				
M	3.76 (.10)	4.67 (.15)	4.29 (.18)	5.44 (.33)
Median	3	3	3	3
School problems				
M	3.95 (.06)	4.52 (.09)	4.60 (.11)	4.79 (.19)
Median	3	4	4	4
Low grade point average				
M	.09 (.01)	.15 (.01)	.14 (.01)	.19 (.02)
Median	0	0	0	0
PPVT				
M	103.87 (.56)	98 (.78)	102 (.62)	98 (1.02)
Median	104	97	101	98
College expectations				
M	4.50 (.03)	4.37 (.03)	4.42 (.04)	4.28 (.07)
Median	5	5	5	5

Note: From the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health. Means are weighted using Wave I grand sample weight. PPVT = Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test.

riages; and relationship with nonresident fathers in the models. We highlight the findings related to the well-being of teenagers living in cohabiting stepparent families. Notably, adolescents living in married, two-biological-parent families generally fare better than teenagers living in any other family type.

The first three columns show that teens who reside in cohabiting stepfather families experience 122% (exponential value of 0.80) higher odds of being expelled from school, greater levels of delinquency, and more school problems than teenagers residing with two married, biological parents. The next three columns indicate that adolescents living with cohabiting stepfathers are more likely to have a low grade point average or experience 90% (exponential value of 0.64) greater odds of low grades and score worse on the vocabulary test. Teenagers living with cohabiting stepfathers have similar expectations of going to college as teenagers living with two married, biological parents. At the bivariate level, college expectations are lower among teens living with cohabiting stepfathers than teens living with two biological married parents. The effects of the other covariates vary across adolescent outcomes. We find that higher levels of family income and mother's education are typically related to higher levels

of child well-being. Girls appear to fare better than boys. Younger children more often have higher levels of delinquency, school problems, low GPA, and lack college expectations. Religiosity often is associated with higher levels of child well-being. Teenagers who are closer to their mothers have fewer behavioral and academic problems.

Cohabiting Stepparent, Married Stepparent, and Single-Mother Families

The first row of Table 4 shows the effect of living with married rather than cohabiting stepparents on adolescent problem behaviors. These sets of findings reflect the importance of formal marital status. The second row presents the effect of living with a single mother rather than cohabiting stepparents on teenage problem behaviors. These results indicate how mothers' cohabitation influences teenage well-being among unmarried mothers. The first model shows the zero-order or bivariate effects, and the second model presents the effects of family structure, net of the other variables. We present the family structure effects for each model and then discuss the effects of the remaining covariates.

The first column shows that at the bivariate

TABLE 3. REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS ESTIMATES OF ADOLESCENT BEHAVIORAL AND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES
($N = 13,231$)

	Suspend/Expel[a]	Delinquency	School Problems	Low GPA[b]	PPVT	College Expectations
Family structure (Married, two biological)						
Cohabiting stepfather	.80***	1.32**	.76***	.64***	−2.36**	−.10
	(.13)	(.32)	(.17)	(.17)	(.70)	(.06)
Married stepfather	.56***	.61**	.69***	.52***	−.93	−.05
	(.08)	(.21)	(.12)	(.12)	(.47)	(.04)
Single mother	.62***	.95***	.66***	.38***	−.85*	−.04
	(.09)	(.19)	(.09)	(.10)	(.40)	(.03)
Sociodemographic characteristics						
Race (White)						
Black	.99***	.22	−.20	0.005	−9.09***	.10**
	(.11)	(.18)	(.14)	(.12)	(.68)	(.04)
Hispanic	.17	1.02	−.27	.19	−7.10***	.08
	(.13)	(.24)	(.17)	(.14)	(.74)	(.05)
Other	.03	.72	−.003	−.18	−3.42***	.16**
	(.13)	(.26)	(.17)	(.15)	(.86)	(.05)
Log family income	−.25***	−.03	.01	−.20***	2.16***	.10***
	(.06)	(.11)	(.05)	(.05)	(.27)	(.02)
Missing income (no)	.01	−.35	−.0001	.24*	−1.59**	−.02
	(.07)	(.20)	(.11)	(.12)	(.51)	(.04)
Mother's age	−.01*	.005	0.002	−.01	.03	.01**
	(.005)	(.01)	(.006)	(.01)	(.03)	(.002)
Mother's education	−.14***	−.006	−.03	−.13***	1.44***	−.07***
	(.02)	(.03)	(.02)	(.02)	(.11)	(.01)
Child's age	.11***	−.12**	−.04	−.03	−.30*	.07***
	(.03)	(.04)	(.03)	(.03)	(.12)	(.01)
Child's sex (female)	.97***	1.62***	.81***	.51***	1.36***	−.17***
	(.06)	(.11)	(.07)	(.08)	(.30)	(.03)
Importance of religion to child	−.15***	−.75***	−.27***	−.25***	−.29	.10***
	(.04)	(.09)	(.06)	(.05)	(.24)	(.02)
Number of children in household	.04	−.001	.02	0.002	−.79***	−.01
	(.03)	(.05)	(.03)	(.03)	(.15)	(.01)
Parenting						
Monitoring	.002	−.11*	−.04	.01	−1.14***	−.03*
	(.02)	(.05)	(.03)	(.03)	(.14)	(.01)
Closeness to mother	−.17***	−1.29***	−.64***	−.19***	−.75***	.11***
	(.04)	(.10)	(.05)	(.04)	(.20)	(.02)
Intercept	−.45	12.4**	7.80***	1.36*	91.79***	3.55***
	(.58)	(1.07)	(.57)	(.58)	(2.38)	(.21)
F-value[c]	−6585.5***	25.7***	26.7***	−4396.2***	77.9***	29.1***
R^2 [d]	.13	.09	.06	.05	.25	.07

Note: Reference category for variables is presented in parentheses. Unstandardized coefficients are presented, and standard errors are shown in parentheses. PPVT = Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test.
[a]Logistic regression was used for suspended or expelled, 1 = *yes*. [b]Logistic regression was employed for low grade point average (1 = *low grades*). [c]The log likelihood is shown for the models predicting suspension or expulsion and low grade point average. [d]The R^2 is the *pseudo R^2* for the models predicting suspension or expulsion and low grade point average.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

level, teenagers living in married stepparent families have significantly lower odds of being suspended or expelled from school than teens residing in cohabiting stepparent families. The second model shows that this family structure effect can be explained by the other covariates. No single factor explains the effect of family structure: Sociodemographic variables in conjunction with the parenting variables (closeness to mother and monitoring) reduce the effect of marital status. Thus in the multivariate model teens living in married and cohabiting stepparent families share similar odds of being suspended or expelled from school. We shift the reference category to single mothers and find that children living in married stepfather families have similar odds of being suspended or

TABLE 4. REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS ESTIMATES OF ADOLESCENT BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES ($N = 5{,}504$)

	Suspension/Expulsion[a]		Delinquency		School Problems	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Family structure (Cohabiting stepfather)						
Married stepfather	−.52***	−.21	−1.15**	−.68*	−.19	−.10
	(.14)	(.15)	(.36)	(.35)	(.22)	(.20)
Single mother	−.11	−.06	−.76*	−.06	−.27	0.005
	(.12)	(.14)	(.35)	(.37)	(.19)	(.20)
Sociodemographic characteristics						
Race (White)						
Black		.97***		.23		−.30
		(.12)		(.25)		(.18)
Hispanic		.11		1.17**		−.33
		(.17)		(.39)		(.21)
Other		.15		1.00*		.16
		(.18)		(.47)		(.30)
Log family income		−.22***		.05		.07
		(.06)		(.15)		(.07)
Missing income (no)		.15		−.31		.01
		(.11)		(.27)		(.14)
Mother's age		−.01		.01		.02
		(.01)		(.02)		(.01)
Mother's education		−.16***		−.04		−.05
		(.02)		(.05)		(.03)
Child's age		.07*		−.21***		−.09*
		(.03)		(.06)		(.04)
Child's sex (female)		.96***		2.01***		.94***
		(.09)		(.22)		(.12)
Importance of religion to child		−.17**		−.72***		−.25**
		(.05)		(.15)		(.08)
Number of children in household		.05		0.001		.04
		(.03)		(.08)		(.05)
Family stability						
Number of mother's marriages		.16***		.39**		.15*
		(.04)		(.15)		(.07)
Parenting						
Monitoring		−.02		−.13		−.06
		(.02)		(.10)		(.05)
Closeness to mother		−.21***		−1.18***		−.55**
		(.05)		(.16)		(.07)
Closeness to nonresident father		−.06*		−.29***		−.13**
		(.03)		(.08)		(.06)
Missing closeness to nonresident father (no)		.02		−.16		−.06
		(.09)		(.24)		(.12)
Intercept	−.35**	.73	5.44***	13.97***	4.79**	7.95***
F-value[b]	−3591.45	−3225.41	4.84*	11.95***	2.03	7.73***
R^2 [c]	.01	.11	.00	.09	.00	.06

Note: Reference category for variables is presented in parentheses. Unstandardized coefficients are presented, and standard errors are shown in parentheses.

[a] Logistic regression was used for suspended or expelled, 1 = *yes*. [b] The log likelihood is shown for the models predicting suspension or expulsion. [c] The R^2 is the *pseudo* R^2 for the models predicting suspension or expulsion and low grade point average.

*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$.

expelled as their counterparts living in single-mother families (results not shown). The next row indicates that adolescents living with single mothers have similar odds of being expelled or sus-

pended from school as adolescents living with their mother and her cohabiting partner. This is true in both the bivariate and multivariate models.

In terms of delinquency, teens living in married

stepfather families have significantly lower levels than teens living in cohabiting stepfather families. The results in the next column suggest that the inclusion of the remaining covariates reduces but does not fully explain the marital status effect. The multivariate model indicates that teenagers living in married rather than cohabiting stepparent families have significantly lower delinquency scores. We also find that teenagers living with married stepfathers have lower levels of delinquency than teens living with single mothers (results not shown).

Delinquency is significantly lower among adolescents living with just their mother than those living with their mother and her cohabiting partner. Yet the next column includes all of the covariates and shows that these differences are no longer statistically significant. The effect of family structure on delinquency is primarily explained by the number of mother's marriages.

The last two columns in Table 4 present the effects of the covariates on school problems. The bivariate and multivariate model results show that teenagers in cohabiting and married stepfather families have similar levels of school problems. Further analyses indicate that married stepfathers and single mothers have similar school problems (results not shown). The next row shows teenagers living with single mothers and cohabiting partners share similar levels of trouble in school.

The remaining covariates in Table 4 operate in the expected direction and vary somewhat depending on the particular outcome. Younger teenagers and boys consistently are more likely to experience problems. The indicator of importance of religion is also negatively associated with problem behaviors. The greater the number of mother's marriages, the higher the incidence of problem behaviors. Closeness to mother as well as closeness to nonresident father are associated with fewer problem behaviors.

Further analyses of only teenagers living in stepfamilies reveal that duration of the parental relationship is usually not associated with adolescent behavior problems (results not shown). We also tested whether the effects of family type differ according to the duration of the parental relationship. Analyses of interaction effects indicate that the effects of family type differ according to duration for only one outcome, school problems (results not shown). The effect of marital status on school problems is greater early in the relationship and then diminishes at later union durations.

Table 5 shows the effects of cohabitation on academic well-being, and the table format mirrors Table 4. The first column of Table 5 shows that teenagers living in married stepfather families have lower odds of earning low grades than teens in cohabiting stepfather families. Yet the inclusion of the remaining covariates (income in particular) explains this difference. We also do not find statistical differences between teens living in married stepfamilies and single-mother families (results not shown). The next row shows that adolescents living with unmarried mothers who are cohabiting have higher odds of having low grades than teens living with single mothers. The inclusion of the remaining covariates shifts the relationship between family structure and grades such that teens in cohabiting stepparent and single-mother families share similar odds of having low grades. The family structure differences are explained by our indicator of family stability, the number of mother's marriages.

The next two columns present the effects of family structure on verbal ability. At the bivariate level, adolescents in married stepfather families score higher on the vocabulary test than teens in cohabiting stepfather families. The effect of cohabitation is reduced with the inclusion of the explanatory variables; however, the family effect is marginally significant ($p = .06$). In contrast, teenagers living in married stepfather and single-mother families share similar levels of verbal ability (results not shown). Adolescents living in unmarried mother families without cohabiting partners and with cohabiting partners have statistically similar verbal ability scores, suggesting that teens' mother's cohabitation status is not related to cognitive development.

The last two columns focus on college expectations. The bivariate results demonstrate that adolescents living in married stepfather families possess higher college expectations than adolescents living in cohabiting stepfamilies. The final column, however, shows that these family structure differences no longer persist when the remaining covariates are included. The positive effect of marriage on college expectations reduces to nonsignificance when income or mother's education is included in the model. Similarly, teenagers living with married stepfathers and single mothers do not differ in terms of college expectations (results not shown). In both bivariate and multivariate models, youth living in cohabiting stepfather families and single-mother families share similar expectations for college. Among children living

TABLE 5. REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS ESTIMATES OF ADOLESCENT ACADEMIC OUTCOMES ($N = 5,504$)

	Low Grade Point Average[a]		Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test		College Expectations	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Family structure (Cohabiting stepfather)						
Married stepfather	−.38*	−.11	4.21***	1.65	.13*	.06
	(.18)	(.19)	(.99)	(.86)	(.06)	(.07)
Single mother	−.33*	−.20	.36	1.29	.09	.04
	(.16)	(.18)	(.98)	(.80)	(.07)	(.06)
Sociodemographic characteristics						
Race (White)						
Black		.03		−8.62***		.11*
		(.15)		(.77)		(.05)
Hispanic		.20		−6.17***		.03
		(.18)		(.98)		(.08)
Other		−.03		−2.91*		.14*
		(.23)		(1.12)		(.07)
Log family income		−.20**		1.97***		.09***
		(.06)		(.33)		(.02)
Missing income (no)		.37*		−2.39***		−.09
		(.18)		(.64)		(.06)
Mother's age		−.01		.03		0.004
		(.01)		(.05)		(.003)
Mother's education		−.09**		1.51***		.05***
		(.03)		(.14)		(.01)
Child's age		−.04		−.49**		−.09***
		(.03)		(.16)		(.01)
Child's sex (female)		.48***		1.64***		−.20***
		(.11)		(.46)		(.04)
Importance of religion to child		−.16*		−.58		.11***
		(.08)		(.39)		(.03)
Number of children in household		−.03		−1.00***		−.01
		(.04)		(.19)		(.02)
Family stability						
Number of mother's marriages		.13**		−.37		−.03
		(.05)		(.31)		(.02)
Parenting						
Monitoring		−.04		−1.29***		−.02
		(.03)		(.20)		(.02)
Closeness to mother		−.22**		−.96***		.08***
		(.07)		(.30)		(.02)
Closeness to nonresident father		−.09*		−.08		.04*
		(.04)		(.23)		(.02)
Missing closeness to nonresident father (no)		−.12		−1.80***		−.10
		(.12)		(.49)		(.05)
Intercept	−1.43***	1.75*	97.74***	95.39***	4.28**	4.20***
F-value[b]	−1778.52	−2245.05	.11	45.68***	2.03	12.54***
R^2 [c]	.08	.04	.01	.26	.001	.07

Note: Reference category for variables is presented in parentheses. Unstandardized coefficients are presented, and standard errors are shown in parentheses.

[a]Logistic regression was employed for low grade point average (1 = *low grades*). [b]The log likelihood is shown for the models predicting low grade point average. [c]The R^2 is the *pseudo R^2* for the models predicting suspension or expulsion and low grade point average.

*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$.

with unmarried mothers, the cohabiting parent does not appear to improve or worsen adolescents' school aspirations.

In terms of the remaining covariates, we find minority youth more often have lower academic outcomes than Whites. Mother's education, family income, and religiosity are associated with higher academic achievement. Boys have lower college expectations and grades than girls. Closeness to mothers and nonresident fathers is related to higher college expectations and grades. Additional analyses of just teenagers in stepfamilies show that the quality of parental relationships and duration of parental relationship are not associated with most adolescent academic outcomes. One exception is that duration of stepparent's relationship is positively tied to adolescent college expectations.

DISCUSSION

Recent debates have emerged about the advantage of marriage for adults and children (e.g., Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Adolescents in married, two-biological-parent families generally fare better than children in any of the family types examined here, including single-mother, cohabiting stepfather, and married stepfather families. The advantage of marriage appears to exist primarily when the child is the biological offspring of both parents. Our findings are consistent with previous work, which demonstrates children in cohabiting stepparent families fare worse than children living with two married, biological parents (e.g., Acs & Nelson, 2002; Brown, 2001; DeLeire & Kalil, 2002; Hao & Xie, 2001).

Researchers argue that we need to expand our traditional understanding of stepfamily life to include cohabiting stepfamilies (Stewart, 2001). The marital status of men in stepfamilies appears to influence adolescent well-being. Among adolescents living in stepfamilies, those living with married rather than cohabiting mothers are sometimes advantaged, although this is not consistent across all outcomes. At the bivariate level, teenagers living with married stepfamilies experience more positive behavioral and academic outcomes (except school problems), than teens living in cohabiting stepfamilies. Yet, at the multivariate level, many of the observed family structure differences can be explained by the covariates in our models. Differences in delinquency attributable to cohabitation and marital status, however, cannot be explained by the factors included in our model. Ad-

ditional data about the relationship between cohabiting and married stepfathers' relationships to their wives and partners' children may help to explain this marriage advantage. We lack measurement of role ambiguity, which may serve to distinguish parenting roles in cohabiting and married stepfamilies. Married stepfathers may have a more clearly defined obligation to their stepchildren than cohabiting stepfathers (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). The act of remarriage may carry with it a more pronounced expectation of stepfather involvement (e.g., spending time with stepchildren and contributing financially to their upbringing) that has positive consequences for child well-being.

The results from this paper suggest that teenagers living with unmarried mothers do not seem to benefit from the presence of their mother's cohabiting partner. We argued at the outset that it may be important to distinguish between unmarried mothers who are cohabiting and those living alone. In terms of adolescent outcomes, we do not appear to gain much by distinguishing between cohabiting stepfather and single-mother families. We do find differences at the bivariate level, however, in terms of delinquency and low grades in school. Thus, as found in the stepfamily literature (e.g., Coleman et al., 2000), men's presence alone seems neither sufficient nor necessary to create positive outcomes for children. Indeed, our results show that stepfathers (married or cohabiting) provide limited benefit when contrasted with single-mother families. Our findings suggest that neither parental cohabitation nor marriage to a partner or spouse who is not related to the child (stepfamily formation) is associated with uniform advantage in terms of behavioral or academic indicators to teenagers living in single-mother families. These results are consistent with research focusing on behavior problems (Acs & Nelson, 2002; Morrison, 1998). Our findings are not consistent with Nelson et al. (2001) who reported negative effects of parental cohabitation. One explanation may be that we explain our negative effects of parental cohabitation on delinquency and grade point average by mother's marriage history, a variable that is not included in the data set used by Nelson et al.

We attempt to capture the fluidity and stability of families. Our core measure of family stability, the number of the mother's prior marriage-like relationships (during the child's lifetime), is an important contributor to children's well-being. Mother's relationship history is related to many

adolescent outcomes. In fact, this measure explains differences in delinquency and low grade point average among teenagers living with cohabiting stepfathers and single mothers. This is consistent with researchers who emphasize the importance of family stability rather than family structure for predicting child well-being (Hao & Xie, 2001; Hill et al., 2001; Wu & Martinson, 1993). We also evaluate whether family structure effects differ according to duration of the relationship. In stepfamilies, duration of the current relationship is only related to college expectations. Perhaps the stability of the relationship reflects the stepfather's willingness to provide financial assistance for college. This is similar to findings reported by Hao and Xie (2001), that time spent in the current union is not associated with child misbehavior. We find that family structure effects do not differ according to duration of the stepparent's relationship, except for school problems. This suggests that the effect of cohabitation is typically similar when stepfamilies first form and during later years.

We try to account for economic status (mother's education and family income), and similar to prior studies find that economic circumstances are associated with adolescent well-being (e.g., Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). These factors are particularly important for understanding differences in the effect of cohabitation in stepfamilies. Most of the bivariate differences based on parental marital or cohabitation status in stepfamilies are explained by socioeconomic factors (e.g., family income, race or ethnicity, mother's education, child's sex and age). Thus, the higher levels of mother's education and family income observed in married stepfather families explains some of the differences in child outcomes in stepfather families.

Our findings also speak to how parenting and the complexity of family influence children's lives. Parental control is not uniformly associated with better teenage outcomes, but this measure is not capturing early adolescent parenting and focuses narrowly on limit setting. With regard to parental support, we find that closeness of teens to their biological mothers and nonresident fathers is positively related to many indicators of adolescent well-being and is more often a significant predictor of adolescent outcomes than parental monitoring. Hence, our findings appear to be more consistent with attachment than with social control theories of child development. Our work suggests that it is important to account not only for the

structure of families, but also for the nature of relationships that exist within and across households. Another measure, which could be considered to be part of family life socialization, is religiosity, and we observe similar levels across family types. We find that the teens who were more religious than other teens fared better in terms of behavior and academic outcomes, but this variable does not explain the effects of family structure.

This paper suffers from several shortcomings. First, we employ cross-sectional data, so our findings are suggestive because longitudinal analyses are necessary to accurately evaluate how parental cohabitation or marriage causes changes in an adolescent's well-being (see Hao & Xie, 2001). For example, we may find that mothers with children who have greater behavior problems and poor school performance are more likely to cohabit than marry. Thus, there could be selection into family types based on the adolescent behaviors. In a similar vein, the causal nature of the covariates is not clearly specified in our models. Our covariates represent factors that may be related to entry into specific types of families (e.g., education or religiosity) as well as effects of family structure (e.g., income). We are not able to account for selection in our models, but we believe that we have provided important baseline information about parental cohabitation and adolescent well-being. Second, some potentially important variables are omitted from our analyses. Measures that tap into stepfamily processes, such as relationships with cohabiting stepfathers or parenting problems in stepparent families, are not available in the Add Health. As discussed above, stepfathers who are cohabiting may face quite different parenting circumstances than stepfathers who are married. Another factor that is associated with child well-being and found to be important among cohabiting families is maternal depression (Brown, 2001). Unfortunately, measures of maternal depression are not included in the Add Health. Finally, our measure of economic circumstances is far from ideal. There is a high level of missing data on family income in the Add Health. We hoped to alleviate this limitation by accounting for mother's education, but acknowledge it is not a substitute for income.

The issue of cohabitation and child development has become more important as cohabitation has become an increasingly large part of children's family experiences (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Graefe & Lichter, 1999). The findings from this

paper represent an initial step toward understanding the implications of parental cohabitation on adolescent well-being. Research that focuses on younger children and examines the well-being of children born into cohabiting parent families is warranted. Future efforts must consider potential selection issues from both the adult's and child's perspective as well as model the fluid nature of cohabiting unions.

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