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Who Should Marry Whom? : Multiple Partner Fertility Among New Parents

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Abstract

This paper documents the extent and correlates of multiple partner fertility among parents in the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Survey in order to assess the opportunities and challenges that await marriage promotion policies which are attracting the attention of policy makers. We find that the majority of mothers who responded to the baseline and 12-month follow-up surveys are not first time mothers and the majority of mothers with two or more children have had at least one child with someone other than the father of their newborn. According to mothers' reports, fathers are equally likely to exhibit multiple partner fertility. While the descriptive analysis cannot speak to causation, our results are certainly consistent with the hypothesis that multiple partner fertility reduces the probability of marriage for mothers and fathers. Multiple partner fertility is rare among teenaged mothers, but fairly high among African American mothers and fathers, which may help to explain the low-marriage probabilities. Our results suggest that marriage promotion strategies will have their greatest opportunity among unwed mothers in their early twenties and the fathers of their children, but high rates of multiple partner fertility are expected to reduce the effective of such efforts among African Americans.

Introduction

After nearly four decades of silence on the issue, federal lawmakers have begun to renew their interest in welfare legislation as a vehicle through which to increase the role of fathers in families. This interest was last witnessed in 1961, when the Kennedy Administration created the AFDC-U program in an ill-fated attempt to reduce desertion as a cause of the unexpected rise in the welfare caseload that had been occurring since the ADC program was launched in the mid-30s (Steiner, 1966). Then as now, reducing marital dissolution was at the center of policymakers' interest in welfare, marriage, and fathers. However, financial contributions to children and families are no longer the primary focus. Instead, Rep. Shaw (E. Clay Shaw, Jr. R-FL), who chaired the House Subcommittee on Human Resources, and a number of his colleagues, were deeply concerned that the abandonment by the general public of the "biblical principles on which this Nation was founded"¹ was having adverse effects on individuals and the society at large.

Consistent with this broader goal, the strategies now being contemplated by policymakers and proponents of using welfare to promote marriage go well beyond reducing the marriage disincentives in our tax and transfer systems. Thus, hearings before the same subcommittee on May 11, 2001 mainly addressed funding efforts to prevent divorce through pre-marital education and counseling, or efforts to reduce divorce through marriage enrichment or marriage saver services. While such efforts would reduce the

¹105th Congress, Congressional Record; H1219 _ H1221, Search for Values; March 17, 1998

number of new welfare cases that occur through divorce or separation, one wonders: What effect they would have on the poverty and welfare dependency arising from children being born to low-income, unwed, parents who were poor or near poor even before their child was born. Recent estimates suggest that more than a quarter of all poor children in the United States are born to such fragile families (Sorenson, Mincy, and Halpern, 2000) and that nearly two thirds of poor children in the child support caseload are born to unwed parents (Sorenson, 19xx). Is marriage promotion the best way to encourage the formation and maintenance of two parent families for these children?

Analyses based upon recent studies of young disadvantaged unwed parents are encouraging. Nearly 50 percent of young unwed mothers intended to marry the fathers of their children (Mincy and Durpre, 2000). Nevertheless, these parents faced several important barriers to marriage and parenting. Two fifths of the mothers and fathers lacked a high-school diploma; nearly a fifth of the fathers were neither at work nor in school during the week before the child's birth (McClanahan and Carlson, 2001), which radically reduces the probability that mothers want to marry or actually marry them (Mincy and Dupree, 2000, Testa, et. al. 1989). Finally, although they have just given birth some of these new mother (and fathers) are not first time parents and some have had children with more than one partner. Thus, moving these couples from their current visiting or cohabiting relationships to marriage, involves a transition from a fragile family to a blended family, which poses certain risks for child-well-being even controlling for income (McClanahan and Sandefuer, 1994).

The purpose of this paper is to document the extent and correlates of multiple partner fertility among parents in the FFWCS in order to assess the challenge that marriage promotion policies face with respect to a population of children who will soon rival those entering the welfare population as a result of a marital dissolution. Section one first briefly reviews the literature on the effects of previous children on women's marriage (or remarriage) probabilities and on fathers' earnings, marriage or remarriage prospects. Section two describes data from the FFWCS used in this analysis. Section three presents and analyzes data on multiple partner fertility. Section four interprets these data in terms of their implications for approaches on which policymakers could rely to "encourage the formation and maintenance of two parent families.

Premarital Births and Marriage Prospects

While several studies have shown that children lower the remarriage probabilities of women, the effects of premarital births on a woman's first marriage prospects have received much less attention (Koo and Suchindran 1980, Koo, Suchindran, and Griffith 1984, Teachman and Keckert 1985, and Thornton 1977). However, Bennet, Bloom and Miller (1995) provide a thorough treatment of this question. Using a sample of women who did not marry within six months of a nonmarital the birth, and controlling for race, mother's educational attainment, and region, they find that women with a non-marital birth have a one fifth to one half lower probability of a first marriage, depending upon

which (of four) data sets is used.² They explore several possible explanations for this result and find that non-marital births are unrelated to lower marriage expectations of women who may feel that suitable marriage partners are unavailable. Instead, the direction of causality seems to run from an unanticipated or unwanted birth to diminished marriage prospects. They also find little support for the hypothesis that stigma associated with a premarital birth is responsible, since, after controlling for several demographic characteristics, a premarital birth has no additional effect on the probability of remarriage for divorced women who also have children from a previous marriage. Finally, AFDC benefits do reduce the effect of a premarital birth on marriage prospects. Thus, besides the loss of a cash benefit, the primary explanation of the diminished marriage prospects of women with children from a previous union appears to be the reluctance of prospective husbands to assume financial and other responsibilities for non-biological children.

While several authors have examined the consequences of a premarital birth for the schooling, employment and earnings of men, studies of the effects of premarital birth on the marriage prospects of men are also rare (Hanson, et. al. 1989; Lerman 1993a, 1993b). However, Nock (1998) examines this question using data from the NLSY, which makes it impossible to distinguish between the effects of a premarital birth on marriage to the mother of a man's children and the effects of such a birth on marriage to other women. However, he reasons that the effects will be similar. Thus, some men with a premarital birth avoid or delay marriage to avoid or delay the financial obligations that would follow

² Bennett, Bloom, and Miller (1995) produce estimates for the full samples; before excluding mothers who married within six months of giving birth reduce the possibility that the marriage was to the

if they legitimated the birth. Having delayed marriage to the mother of their first child, unmarried fathers do not benefit from the social capital and returns to work experience that arise as their married counterparts attempt to meet the higher provider-role expectations they face. Having placed themselves on a lower employment and earnings trajectory, unmarried fathers become less attractive marriage partners later in life.

Nock finds support for his hypothesis. After controlling for race and family background characteristics, he finds that men with a premarital birth in the previous year have a probability of first marriage 47 percent lower than men without a premarital birth. This estimate is unaffected by the inclusion of selection-control variables, observed before a premarital birth, that are reasonably correlated with men's future earnings capacity and their ability to meet financial obligations. Moreover, he finds that though self-selection and premarital births account for some of the reduced socioeconomic attainment of young adult men, their decisions to cohabit, rather than marry, also play a significant role.

Thus, avoiding the financial (and other responsibilities) for their own premarital children or the prospective financial (and other responsibilities) for the pre-marital children of their current partners is expected to play a central role in reducing the marriage probabilities of new mothers and fathers who have a child in common. Finally, even men who meet their financial obligations to their children from a previous union (married or not) should have lower marriage prospects, because they have lower disposal income to

biological father.

bring to their new families if he meets those obligations, and they signal their duplicity as providers if they do not.

However, how many new parents face reduced marriage prospects, because they have children from a previous union?

The Data

The Fragile Families and Child Well-being Survey permits a more precise answer to this question for both mothers and fathers. This survey is a national study designed to provide longitudinal data on the conditions and capabilities of new unmarried parents and the consequences for child well-being. The survey includes information about fathers the nature of the relationships between unmarried mothers and fathers and extent which fathers are involved in with children. The study follows a birth cohort about 3700 children born to unmarried parents and 20 U.S. cities, selected based on variations in their labor market conditions, generosity of welfare benefits and strictness of child support enforcement. This variation will allow for comparisons of family formation, father involvement, and child well-being outcomes in a variety of policy and employment conditions. The full sample is representative of all nonmarital births to parents residing in cities with populations over 200,000. To permit comparisons across critical domains, a total of 1,100 married parents were interviewed in all 20 cities, in the full baseline survey. New mothers were interviewed in hospitals or birthing clinics within 48 hours after giving

birth, and fathers were interviewed either in the hospital, birthing clinic, or elsewhere as soon as possible following the birth of their child. Follow-up interviews are scheduled when the child is 12, 30, and 48 months old.

Despite assertions that fathers are unresponsive to surveys, response rates for both mothers and fathers in the baseline Fragile Families and Child-wellbeing Survey are encouraging: fully 85 percent of eligible mothers and 76 percent of eligible fathers participated in the study. However, response rates were much higher for fathers who maintained some positive relationship with the mothers. Additionally, the interviewer asked the mother to provide some basic demographic information for use in situations in which the father was not interviewed. This will allow larger samples to be used in the analysis, with control variables to account for missing data on some fathers.

We use data from a special interim, 12-month follow-up sample of the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Survey. This file includes complete samples for Oakland CA and Austin TX and partial samples for the remaining 18 cities. Missing data reflect fathers who could not be reached during the initial follow-up interview cycle. We are undertaking additional efforts to contact these fathers in order to increase the response rate of biological fathers in the survey. While data reported for all fathers by mothers indicate that these fathers match fathers for whom we have data on employment, education, demographic, and other characteristics, the former are less likely than the latter to have maintained close relationships with the mother over the first 12 months of the child's life. Even at this early stage, response rates to the follow-up survey are

encouraging, as the interim file includes about 64 percent of the mothers and fathers who responded to the baseline survey.

Nevertheless, long-standing gender biases in the social science research are evident in the asymmetric questions asked of mothers and fathers and in the interim release data file. For example, because mothers were asked detailed questions about the couples' fertility history and living arrangements, we can observe the total fertility of the mother, her knowledge of the father's total fertility, the number of fathers with whom she has had children, and mother's responses about the living arrangements of the father of the focal child (i.e., Is he living with or married to another woman?). Unfortunately, fathers were not asked straightforward or complete questions about their total fertility or about the couples' living arrangements. As a result estimates, based on the 12-month interim release file, of the fathers' total fertility or assessments of the extent to which he is being responsible will exhibit a downward bias.

That is, the release file includes data on the number of children that the father reports having with the mother of the focal child and the number of biological children who are not living with him. However, it does not include data on the number of his other biological children who are residing with him, perhaps in a reconciled marital or cohabiting relationship, which he may regard as his main family. Information on child support obligations compounds this problem. Fathers were asked detailed information about the number of children for which they have a child support obligation and whether or not they are paying. Thus, we can measure the extent to which fathers are being responsible for the focal child, that child's siblings, and for their non-residential children. However,

we cannot observe if fathers are living with and providing for biological children born to a partner other than the mother of the focal child, which may adversely effect child support payments for a focal child with whom the father does not reside (Manning and Smock, 2000). Correcting this problem would require going back to the household roster, which is not available in the interim release file. While we did not have the time or resources to prepare these data, we are seeking support to correct this and other problems that limit the potential of the Fragile Families and Well-being data for research on fathers and their interactions with their partners, children, and families.

Results

We begin by examining the basic fertility of new mothers, which indicates the fraction of new mothers who are at risk of multiple partner fertility because the focal child is not their only child. We disaggregate these results by demographic factors that theory suggests affects multiple partner fertility, including age, race and ethnicity, and marital and father involvement status. Though new mothers are unlikely to have given birth to another child within the year, conceptually it is important to distinguish between fertility at baseline and follow-up because some unwed mothers may have married during the year since the focal child was born (Bachrach, 198?). Similarly, some married mothers would have divorced or separated. Next, we then examine multiple partner fertility our main subject of interest. We examine data from mothers and fathers (reported by mothers) separately.

Mother's Fertility Table 1 shows that the focal child is the only child of 37 percent of the mothers in our sample; thus sixty three percent of the mothers are at risk of multiple partner fertility. Not surprisingly, total fertility generally increases with age. For example, only 7 percent of teenaged mothers (column 3, row 2) have three or more children, while nearly half (47 percent) of mothers who are thirty years old or more have three or more children. Column 4 shows the mean number of children as well as the F-statistic for the null hypothesis that the mean is the same for all age groups. Thus, the mean number of children is 2.07 for our sample and the hypothesis of equal means by age is rejected at the .1 percent level.

-Table 1 about here-

The next panel of table 1 shows total fertility by race and ethnicity. Black mothers appear to be at somewhat higher risk of multiple partner fertility, since the focal child is the only child of just under one third of black mothers, but just under two fifths (or more) of other mothers. Thirty-six percent of black mothers have three or more children (column 3), while approximately one quarter of other mothers have three or more children. Black mothers have just over 2 children on average, while other mothers have fewer children and these differences in the means are statistically significant.

The third panel of table 1 shows total fertility by family structure at baseline. Surprisingly, the fertility of married and unmarried mothers appears to be the same. The focal child is the only child of 36 percent of the married women and 37 percent of unmarried women. Twenty-nine percent of married women had three or more children, while 31 percent of unmarried women do so. Indeed, there is no statistically significant

difference between the mean number of children of married and unmarried women at conventional significance levels. Thus, norms about marriage as a prerequisite for child bearing appear to be inoperative among respondents in our data.

While marital status does not affect total fertility, the relationship between unmarried parents does appear to have such an affect. In particular, column 1 shows that the focal child is the only child of just under one-third of mothers who cohabit with fathers of the children, just over two-fifths of mothers who maintain visiting relationships with the fathers of their children, and nearly half of the mothers who were no longer involved with fathers of their children at baseline. Plausibly, mothers who live with the fathers of their first child are at higher risk of having more children, so the mean number of children (2.17) is highest among cohabiting married mothers; lower (2.05) for mothers who maintain visiting relationships with the fathers of their first child, and lowest (1.81) for mothers who are no longer involved with the father of their child.

These variations in fertility by relationship or father involvement status are one reason that policymakers should expand their view of family structure, despite the short duration of non-marital relationships. For example, policymakers are prone to dismiss cohabiting relationships because their short duration means that they provide less stable parenting arrangements for children. While this is true, that unmarried mothers who cohabit with the fathers of their children have more children, raises the prospects that if these relationships later dissolve, these mothers and their children will face higher risks of long-term poverty than mothers who maintain visiting or no relationships with the fathers of their children.

Mother's Multiple-Partner Fertility We turn now to our main topic, multiple partner fertility in Table 2. From the first row, it becomes clear that there is a substantial amount of multiple partner fertility among new mothers. Sixty-four percent of the mothers report that they have no children with a father other than the father of the focal child, thus over a third of the mothers exhibit multiple partner fertility. Put differently, 56 percent of the mothers who were at risk of multiple partner fertility actually had a second child by someone other than the father of the focal child.³ Moreover, 15 percent of new mothers had two or more children by someone other than the father of the focal child.

-Table 2 about here-

The first panel shows that multiple partner fertility is rare (12 percent) only among teenaged mothers. By contrast almost a third of mothers in their early twenties and 40 to 45 percent of mothers twenty-five years old or older exhibit multiple partner fertility. More importantly, one fifth or more of mothers in their late twenties and thirties have two or more children by a father who is not the father of the focal child.

Though there were only small variations in the fertility among women, table 2 shows that black women are much more likely to exhibit multiple partner fertility than other women. Fewer than twenty-nine percent of the non-black mothers in our sample exhibit multiple partner fertility and having two or more children by someone other than the father of the focal child is rare (12 percent or less). By contrast, 45 percent of black mothers exhibit multiple partner fertility and almost one fifth of black mothers have two or more children by a father other than the father of the focal child. Given the reluctance

³ From table 1, sixty-four percent of the mothers had two or more children, thus $1976 = .64 * 3088$

of men to take responsibility for non-biological children, this may help to explain the low marriage rates among black fragile families.

In contrast to the results presented in table 1, which showed virtually no difference between the fertility of married and unmarried mothers at baseline, the third panel of table 2 indicates vast differences. Fully 85 percent of mothers who were married at baseline had all their children with the father of their focal child, while only 57 percent of unmarried women did so. Again, it is useful to calibrate multiple partner fertility among unmarried mothers in terms of the risk. Nearly 70 percent of unmarried mothers who were at risk of multiple partner fertility in fact have a child by a father other than the father of the focal child.⁴ While these data do not indicate causation, they are certainly consistent with the hypothesis that multiple partner fertility reduces the probability of marriage.

The father's relationship with the mother has no effect on the likelihood that unmarried mothers have all their children by the same father. However, visiting and cohabiting mothers are somewhat more likely than unmarried mothers who are no longer involved, to have had more than one child by a father other than father of their focal child. Again, small changes in marital or father involvement status over the first year of the child's life have no effect on multiple partner fertility.

Mother's Reports of Father's Fertility

mothers were at risk and 1112 ($= .36 * 3088$) actually had a child by more than one father. $1112/1976 = .56$
⁴ From table 1, 1435 ($= .63 * 2277$) unmarried women were and 949 ($= (.43 * 2277)$) unmarried women actually had multiple partner fertility. Thus .68 ($= 979/1435$) percent of unmarried women who were at risk actually had multiple partner fertility.

We face two obstacles to the study of multiple partner fertility among fathers. First, response rates of fathers are lower than response rates of mothers in the baseline and interim 12-month follow-up surveys and the father's who are missing are less likely to remain involved with the mother's of their children. Therefore, our data on fathers' fertility is systemically biased. Second, the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Survey does not ask fathers straightforward questions about their fertility. Instead, fathers are asked about the number of children they have with the mother of the focal child and the number of biological children they have who are not living with them. They are not asked if they have other biological children with whom they are living. Thus, unless the father is living with the focal child, we cannot observe if he has biological children with whom he is living. However, we can use mother's reports of the father's multiple partner fertility for all types of fathers.⁵ This, at least, provides a consistent set of reports for all types of fathers, although mother's reports about the multiple-partner fertility of married fathers may be more accurate than mother's reports for fathers with whom mothers maintain cohabiting, visiting, and no relationships. We present results based upon mothers' reports only, and we are able to disaggregate mothers' reports by characteristics of the mother (age, race/ethnicity, and marital/father involvement status), not characteristics of the father.

Multiple Partner Fertility Among Fathers. According to mother's reports, (table 3) 64 percent of the fathers have children only with the mother of the focal child. Thus, 36

⁵ In future research we hope to return to the raw data to see if it is possible

percent of fathers exhibit multiple partner fertility. Notably, this is the same rate of multiple partner fertility as mothers.

-Table 3 about here-

While the fathers of children born to older mothers are more likely than the fathers of children born to teenagers to exhibit multiple partner fertility, more than a quarter (28 percent) of the fathers in the latter group have had children with another mother, while more than a third of fathers with children by older mothers did so. Indeed, there are very small variations in the patterns of multiple partner fertility for fathers who have had children with mothers in their early twenties, late twenties, and thirties. Because women tend to have relationships with men who are 3-5 years older than they are, even women in their early twenties will have had the focal child with a man who is 25 years old. Thus, the lack of variation in multiple partner fertility among fathers who have children with women who are twenty years old or older may be explained by the tendency of men to settle down into stable relationships as they mature and eventually bring their fertility in line with their means.

Again, mothers report multiple partner fertility patterns for the fathers of focal children that are remarkably similar to mothers' self-reports of multiple partner fertility. For example, in table 2, we showed that 54 percent of black mothers had all their children with the same father. In the second panel of table 3, these mothers report that 53 percent of the men with whom they have had children have had all their children with them. Thus, while black women are more likely than other mothers to exhibit multiple partner fertility, the men with whom they have children are also more likely than other men to exhibit

multiple partner fertility. This further suggests that multiple partner fertility may help to explain why black mothers have the lower probabilities than other women of marrying the fathers of their children.

Similar to the results for mothers, fewer than twenty-nine percent of the fathers of children of non-black mothers in our sample exhibit multiple partner fertility. However, having two or more children by someone other than the mother of the focal child is rare (10 percent) only for the fathers of children of white mothers. Fourteen percent of the fathers of children of Hispanic mothers and one quarter of the fathers of children of black mothers have two or more children by someone other than the mother of the focal child.

Thus, both the high rate of multiple partner fertility of black mothers and of the fathers of their children reduces the probability that black mothers marry the fathers of their children. As compared with the fathers of children born to other mothers, the fathers of children born to black mothers will be less likely to legitimate the birth of the focal child, because he wants to avoid responsibility for her other children. Similarly, black mothers are less likely than other mothers to legitimate the birth of the focal child, because the fathers of their children are more likely to bring financial obligations for other children into the relationship. Those who meet their obligations will have less income to bring into a new family. Those who fail to meet their obligations will signal their duplicity as providers.

The third panel of table 3 shows the large differences between multiple partner fertility of fathers who were married at baseline and others. Four fifths of the fathers who were married at baseline have had all their children with their current wives, the mothers

of their children. By contrast fewer only 57 percent of the fathers of children born to mothers who were unmarried at baseline had all their children with that mother. Moreover, more than a fifth of these fathers have two or more children with another partner. Finally, like the inverse relationship between multiple partner fertility and marriage, the father's multiple partner fertility also appears to be inversely related to the couple's commitment at baseline. Thus, only a third of cohabiting fathers, more than two fifths of visiting fathers, but more than three fifths of fathers who are no longer involved with the mother of the focal child exhibit multiple partner fertility.

Discussion and Implications

There is growing evidence that the ideal context to promote child well-being is a healthy, conflict-free marriage involving a couple who live only with their common, biological children. Findings from a new survey of young, low-skilled, unwed parents young show that after the birth of their child, many of these couples are still romantically involved and intend to marry. This has encouraged some policymakers and policy analysts to recommend using TANF funds to pay for marriage promotion efforts among fragile families (Horn and Sawhill, 2001). Such optimism must be tempered by our findings that the majority of mothers in these families are not first time mothers and the majority of mothers with two or more children have had at least one child with someone other than the father of their newborn. The fathers are equally likely to exhibit multiple partner fertility.

A child from a previous union reduces mother's and fathers' marriage prospects. Fathers are reluctant to assume responsibility for a new mother's previous children.

Mothers are reluctant to marry a father who has previous obligations for children, because paid obligations reduce the disposable income available to the new family; and unpaid obligations signal his duplicity as a provider. Moreover, if the father never married, he is likely to have lower earnings as a result of lower work effort, work experience and social capital. While our descriptive results do not provide evidence of a causal link, they are consistent with the hypothesis that multiple partner fertility discourages marriage.

Of course the incidence of multiple partner fertility is lower among some groups than others. Policymakers may be able to use this information to target marriage promotion programs to groups for whom success is more likely. For example, multiple partner fertility is rare among teenaged mothers. On the other hand, encouraging teenagers to marry the fathers of their children may not be good public policy. They may be too young to make lifelong commitments to someone with whom they have had a premature birth and more than a quarter of the fathers of their children have other children with another partner. Improving upon the progress we have already seen in reducing teenaged pregnancy is probably the wiser course.

Parents in their early twenties may be the most appropriate targets for marriage promotion efforts. Only a third of mothers in this age group have had children with someone other than the father of their newborn and few of these mothers have had two or more children with another partner. Such efforts would face more difficulty among new mothers in their late twenties and thirties, because a significant minority (two fifths or more) of these mothers have had children with a someone other than the father of their newborn, who is just as likely to have other children for which he is responsible.

However, there are several ways that policymakers could increase the marriage prospects of these parents. First, more (and more effective) workforce development services for unwed fathers could put these fathers in a better position to provide all of their children. Second, changing a number of child support practices that increase fathers' child support burdens. These include complex and costly procedures for obtaining downward modifications of child support orders and adding birthing costs to the child support obligations of unwed fathers. Adopting debt leveraging programs, such as the programs being developed in the state of Maryland in which arrearages owed to the state are gradually reduced as fathers come into compliance with their current child support obligations. Finally, providing team parenting services to both parents, near the birth of their children. The goal of such services, which are being developed by community based responsible fatherhood programs, is to help parents work together to improve the well-being of their children. In the process of learning how to collaborate, however, some couples learn more about one another and develop relationship-management skills, which will actually improve their relationship. Some will self-select into marriage. Thus, team parenting services can be used to screen couples to determine which are the most appropriate for referral to marriage promotion programs.

However, policy makers must acknowledge that family formation patterns vary by race and ethnicity. Despite having overall fertility similar to that of white and Hispanic mothers, black mothers (and fathers) are about twice as likely as white mothers (and fathers) to exhibit multiple partner fertility. Multiple partner fertility among Hispanics mothers and fathers is between the rates for whites and blacks. Thus, we

expect marriage promotion efforts to be less successful among blacks than among other race and ethnic groups.

Race and ethnic variations in family formation patterns have arisen for a variety of complex and sometimes painful reasons. Some analysts blame welfare for weakening the black family (Murray, 1984). However, Ruggles (1994, 1997) has shown that single parenting was much more common among blacks almost a century before the federal government created the original welfare program. Moreover, single parenting was sometimes characteristic of more affluent black families.⁶ Anything that made single parenting more common in the black community, would make it difficult for that community to stigmatize single and unwed parenting. For example, the high labor force participation rates of black mothers throughout most of the 20th century, coupled with high rates of migration, mortality, and unemployment among black men have made single parenting a common experience even among non-poor black families. And in recent years falling wages and labor force participation among black men as compared with rising labor force participation rates among women continue to lower the marriage probabilities of young blacks. Under these circumstances, a social stigma against single and unwed parenting would be difficult to develop and sustain. Lacking such a stigma, marriage no longer becomes a pre-requisite for fertility, unwed birth rates rise, which increases the probability of a future multiple partner fertility, which, in turn, reduces future marriage prospects.

⁶ The treatment of former concubines by Louisiana plantation owners could explain this anomaly.

Policy makers should take an interest in fragile families even if they do not marry. For one thing, multiple partner fertility among unwed fathers appears to be inversely related to the couple's commitment at baseline. Thus, unwed fathers who were living with their newborn's mother were less likely to have had children with another partner, than unwed fathers who were visiting or had no relationship with the mother. Even if this commitment falls short of the commitment of married fathers, it may provide the child with some of the benefits of contact with both biological parents. Finally, the process of family formation among fragile families may not be dichotomous (married vs. unmarried), but may resemble a progression toward more stable and intense forms of father involvement. Elsewhere, we have shown that much of what policymakers can do to increase the prospect of marriage will also increase the likelihood that mothers will want to move up along this progression (Mincy and Dupree, 2000). If the result would improve child well-being, taking these steps on behalf of unmarried children born to parents who remain unmarried is also an appropriate role for public policy.

Obviously this descriptive analysis does not allow us to measure the net effects of demographic factors on multiple partner fertility or to test hypothesis about the effects of multiple partner fertility on marriage prospects. These are pressing research questions that we hope to take up in future research relying on the Fragile Families and Child Well-being survey.

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