The Social History of the American Family: An Encyclopedia

Fragile Families

Contributors: Kristin Turney
Editors: Marilyn J. Coleman & Lawrence H. Ganong
Book Title: The Social History of the American Family: An Encyclopedia
Chapter Title: "Fragile Families"
Pub. Date: 2014
Access Date: December 03, 2014
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.
City: Thousand Oaks
Print ISBN: 9781452286167
Online ISBN: 9781452286143
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452286143.n246
Print pages: 584-587

http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452286143.n246
The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, an ongoing and longitudinal data collection effort of about 5,000 families that began in 1998, was initially developed to assist researchers and policymakers in better understanding the characteristics and capabilities of unmarried mothers and fathers. Unmarried parents have rapidly increased as a demographic group in the United States since the 1970s. Since the study's inception by a research team at Princeton University and Columbia University (led, most notably, by Sara McLanahan and Irv Garfinkel), the Fragile Families data has yielded an immense body of important and nuanced findings about unmarried parents and their children.

Inception and Purpose

The Fragile Families data were designed in response to the dramatic decoupling of marriage and childbearing in the United States. Though nonmarital childbearing (e.g., having a child outside of marriage) used to be a rare occurrence, with only 4 percent of births in 1940 and 5 percent of births in 1960 to unmarried mothers, rates of non-marital childbearing have dramatically increased since then. In 2011, the latest year for which data are available, more than 41 percent of all births in the United States were to unmarried mothers (and more than 53 percent of births to women under the age of 30 were to unmarried mothers). Though increases in nonmarital childbearing have occurred across all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, it is not randomly distributed across the population. Instead, it is more common among minority mothers and mothers with low levels of educational attainment. This unequal distribution means that it is especially important to understand the causes and consequences of nonmarital families.

Prior to the inception of the Fragile Families study, researchers and policymakers knew very little about the causes and consequences of nonmarital childbearing, and this gap in knowledge was a strong motivating factor behind the survey design. This lack of research and understanding was due in part to the data sources commonly used to study family behavior, which included the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY; begun in 1979) and the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH; begun in 1987), both collected data **[p. 584 ↓]** before rates of nonmarital childbearing

became high, and as such, include relatively few unmarried parents. Additionally, though these existing data sources had success in interviewing unmarried mothers, they contain very little information about unmarried fathers. It is especially challenging to survey unmarried fathers because many of them are disconnected from households. Many do not live with their children, and they have high rates of residential mobility and incarceration. The pilot studies that preceded the Fragile Families survey design, which took place in 1995 and 1996, found that many unmarried fathers were present at the hospital when their children were born, and as such, concluded that interviewing fathers during the “magic moment” of childbirth would minimize non-response among fathers.

The following four specific research questions guided the development of the Fragile Families study:

- 1. What are the characteristics and capabilities of unmarried parents?
- 2. What is the nature of relationships between unmarried parents?
- 3. What characteristics are associated with union formation and dissolution among unmarried parents who share children together?
- 4. How do local welfare regimes, child-support enforcement, and rules for paternity establishment affect unmarried parents and their children?

These four questions were at the forefront of early research using the Fragile Families data, but researchers have since expanded their analytic frames to answer a variety of additional questions.

Sample and Design

The baseline wave of the Fragile Families study, which includes an oversample of nonmarital births, was collected between February 1998 and September 2000. First, researchers employed stratified random sampling to choose 20 cities in the United States with populations greater than 200,000. The cities were stratified across welfare generosity, child support enforcement, and the strength of the local labor market in order to maximize variation across explanatory variables and to account for how local contexts may affect relationships and family behavior. The final 20 cities were Austin, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Corpus Christi, Detroit, Indianapolis, Jacksonville,

Milwaukee, Nashville, Newark, New York, Norfolk, Oakland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Richmond, San Antonio, San Jose, and Toledo. Hospitals were then sampled within cities, and births were sampled within hospitals. The oversample of unmarried parents yielded a sample that included about 24 percent married parents and 76 percent unmarried parents. Because unmarried parents are not randomly distributed across the population, this sample over-represents minorities, low-income parents, parents without high school diplomas, and nonresidential fathers. When survey weights are applied, the data are representative of all births in U.S. cities with populations of greater than 200,000.

During the baseline wave, mothers completed a 30- to 40-minute in-person interview at the hospital after the birth of their child. Fathers were interviewed as soon as possible after the child's birth. About 77 percent of fathers interviewed at baseline were interviewed in the hospital. The other fathers were interviewed by telephone, usually less than two weeks after the child's birth. Baseline response rates varied by marital status and gender, but were still relatively high. At baseline, 82 percent of married and 87 percent of unmarried mothers completed the survey, as well as 89 percent of married and 75 percent of unmarried fathers. Mothers and fathers were also interviewed by telephone when the focal child was approximately 1, 3, 5, and 9 years old.

These telephone interviews with parents ask questions about, among other things, demographics, romantic relationships (with the focal child's parent and/or a new partner), attitudes, physical and mental health, economic and employment status, program participation, and neighborhood characteristics. Of the 4,898 mothers who participated in the baseline survey, 89 percent, 86 percent, 85 percent, and 72 percent participated in the 1-, 3-, 5-, and 9-year surveys, respectively. Response rates among fathers was, respectively, 69 percent, 67 percent, 65 percent, and 54 percent. In 2013, data collection was underway for the 15-year follow-up survey.

In addition, at the 3-, 5-, and 9-year surveys, a subsample of families participated in in-home **[p. 585 ↓]** surveys that included a parent survey questionnaire and an activity booklet. In the parent survey, the child's caregiver (the child's mother in 96 percent of observations) answered questions about family functioning and child well-being. The activity booklet includes anthropometric measures of the mother and child,

the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test scores (and in later waves, other cognitive measures), childcare information, and observations about the child's home environment.

Additional information has been collected from children's child care providers (when children were 5 years old) and teachers (when children were 9 years old). This research has been funded by numerous government agencies and foundations, including the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the William T. Grant Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Key Findings

The Fragile Families data have yielded an immense amount of information about diverse topics such as family structure and stability, fatherhood and father involvement, multipartnered fertility (when parents have children by more than one partner), parenting, incarceration, and child well-being. Indeed, as of June 2013, nearly 400 peer-reviewed journal articles had been published using the Fragile Families data.

The Fragile Families data suggest that unmarried parents are diverse and that such parents are often in romantic relationships when their child is conceived and born. Of the approximately 3,700 unmarried parents in the sample, more than half (51 percent) were cohabiting when the focal child was born. Another 32 percent were in dating relationships, 8 percent reported being friends, and 9 percent reported no contact with one another. Therefore, contrary to popular belief, nonmarital births do not commonly result from one-night stands or casual sexual encounters. Relatedly, at birth, the vast majority of unmarried parents—including 92 percent of cohabiting mothers and 95 percent of cohabiting fathers—report that there is at least a 50 percent chance they will eventually marry the focal child's other parent.

But few of these parents end up transitioning into marriage, and instead, nearly two-thirds end their relationship within five years after the birth. Many go on to form new relationships with different partners. Researchers have found that the disconnect between expectations and realities about union formation can generally be explained by

the high, often unattainable economic and relationship standards that couples hold for marriage.

Second, the Fragile Families data suggest that most unmarried fathers are involved in pregnancy and childbirth. For example, 97 percent of cohabiting mothers reported that the father helped out financially during her pregnancy, as did 84 percent of fathers in nonresidential romantic relationships with the mother and 28 percent of fathers in no relationship with the mother. Similar percentages of fathers visited mothers at the hospital during or immediately after giving birth. Mothers also reported, with variation by relationship status, that most fathers' names are on the birth certificate (95 percent of cohabiting, 80 percent of nonresidential romantic, and 52 percent of separated) and that most children will take the fathers' last name (93 percent of cohabiting, 74 percent of nonresidential romantic, and 37 percent of separated). Finally, nearly all (99 percent of both cohabiting and nonresidential romantic and 71 percent of separated) mothers report wanting the fathers involved in their children's lives.

Third, the Fragile Families data show that unmarried parents are more disadvantaged than married parents. These differences exist across a variety of demographic characteristics. For example, although only 4 percent of married mothers in the sample had their first child as a teenager, this was true of 18 percent of cohabiting mothers and 34 percent of mothers not married or cohabiting. Unmarried mothers and fathers are also more likely to have multipartnered fertility.

These parents are also disadvantaged across a variety of socioeconomic characteristics because they have less education, are less likely to be employed, and are more likely to experience material hardship. Unmarried parents are also disadvantaged in their health and well-being. They are more likely to be depressed, more likely to report fair or poor health, and to report drug or alcohol abuse. Importantly, incarceration is much more common among unmarried fathers than married fathers. For **[p. 586 ↓]** example, although only 7 percent of married fathers had ever experienced incarceration, this was true of 34 percent of cohabiting fathers and 37 percent of fathers in neither marital nor cohabiting relationships with their children's mothers.

Finally, the vast differences between unmarried and married parents mean that adults and children in unmarried families have very different experiences. The Fragile Families

data show that unmarried parenthood—and the instability associated with it—is linked to a host of deleterious outcomes for adults and children. Among mothers, family instability is associated with worse mental health, lower social support, less favorable parenting, and more economic hardship.

Both unmarried parenthood and family instability are independently, negatively associated with children's cognitive, behavioral, and health outcomes, and some of these associations are especially strong for boys. Given that unmarried parents are disproportionately disadvantaged, and that unmarried parenthood is associated with a host of deleterious outcomes for children, some researchers have suggested that families can reproduce social inequalities.

KristinTurney, *University of California, Irvine*

http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452286143.n246
See Also:

- Child Support
- Coparenting
- Multiple Partner Fertility
- Parenting
- Poverty and Poor Families
- Single-Parent Families

Further Readings

Carlson, Marcia, SaraMcLanahan, and PaulaEngland. “Union Formation in Fragile Families” . Demography , v.45/2 (2004).

Edin, Kathryn, ed. and Paula England, eds. Unmarried Couples With Children . New York: Russell Sage, 2007.

Gibson-Davis, Christina, KathrynEdin, and SaraMcLanahan. “High Hopes but Even Higher Expectations: The Retreat From Marriage Among Low-Income Couples” . Journal of Marriage and Family v.67/5 (2005).

Reichman, Nancy E., Julien O.Teitler, IrwinGarfinkel, and Sara S.McLanahan. “Fragile Families: Sample and Design” . Children and Youth Services Review v.23/4–5 (2001).

Tach, Laura and KathrynEdin. “The Compositional and Institutional Sources of Union Dissolution for Married and Unmarried Parents” . Demography , forthcoming.