Family and Poverty: Recent Findings from a Mixed-Methods Study
Dr. Kathryn Edin

Thank you for being here. I’m delighted to be here with you today and I thank the faculty and staff of the University of Montevideo for offering my family and I a warm welcome. My children and husband are here today as well.

I’m going to tell you about some research I’ve been doing in conjunction with a team of economists and psychologists in the United States, on poverty and family life. The work is driven by a common concern I suspect brought each of us to this room today, and that is a concern for what is every society’s chief and most valuable resource, and that is its children. And so, the bottom line of all of the work I am going to share today and the work I hope we can begin to do together in countries like Uruguay, is to the end of promoting the well being of children; that’s why most of us study the family and that’s why we’re passionate about what we do. So, bear with me while I learn to use this technology.

American society, like the US society, like many of the American and Latin American countries is experiencing some new and very important trends that have huge implications for the well being of children. First of all, in America we have a growing rate of inequality: we are now the most unequal society in the Western industrialized world. Our wealth gap is three times as large as our income gap, so if we look at both wealth and income together, America is more unequal than at any time in recorded history. We also have the highest divorce rate in the Western industrialized world. But a lesser known fact is that we also have the most fragile cohabitations. Cohabitations in Western Europe last as long as many of our marriages. And because of the very fragile marriages, the very fragile cohabitations, and the increasingly growing rate of non-marital child bearing, American children at age fifteen are actually less likely to live with two biological parents, than they are in any other country in the Western industrialized world. So, changes in family structure, research has revealed, have really put American children at risk, because at least in US society and in many American and Latin American countries, family structure and poverty are highly correlated.

Now, we used to think that a single mother meant a mother who was raising her children alone with no man in the picture. But in 1995 a very innovative and deep thinking scholar named Ronald Mincy, at Columbia University, began arguing that there was another kind of family we were missing. He called it “The Fragile Family”. He hypothesized that they were young people out there, young men and women, having children together and living in family-like relationships, wanting to raise their children together, even wanting to eventually marry, but failing to realize their hopes. So he hypothesized that, rather than our view of the single mother, we should be thinking about the possibility that there was another family format there that was worthy of study: people who were trying to achieve a two-parent family but for some reason were failing. Just about the time that Mincy was making these arguments, we were in the field, living in low-income neighborhoods in Philadelphia, one of America’s poorest cities, and trying to figure out what was happening with single mothers and the men that fathered their children. We too saw this family form that Ron Mincy was talking about.

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We saw that couples when they first had their babies seemed to be living together often
times in family-like relationships, and hoping to keep their relationship alive, hoping to
keep the family together for the sake of the child. But at that time we had no idea how
prevalent this new fragile family form was. Now, as you may know, what we will call
“fragile families” now, single parents with children, have grown dramatically in the
United States. Half a century ago, less than five percent of American children were born
to unmarried parents. Now the rate is thirty-five percent. This of course does not happen
equally to all groups of Americans: less educated Americans are much more at risk. In
fact, a college-educated American woman only has about a five percent chance of ever
having a child outside of marriage. It’s also true that single motherhood or fragile
families are highly correlated with race in the United States. African-Americans and
some groups of Latinos bear a disproportionate burden. They are much more likely to
fall into this fragile family category, even holding constant their income and other
attributes. However what’s most striking is the consequence of this new family form -
that has grown from less than five percent to thirty-five percent- on the well being of
children. A huge volume of research really began by my collaborator Sarah Mc Lanahan
at Princeton University, has now shown that almost every negative child outcome is
strongly correlated with your chances of being born into a fragile family. Just to offer a
few examples, the risk of poverty, behavioral problems, delinquency, teen pregnancy,
high school dropout and the transition to stable employment in adulthood, are all highly
correlated with what kind of family you grew up in.

Here is a graphic representation of what I just talked about (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**
**Births to Unmarried Mothers, U.S.**

Now, the decline in 1990 and 2000 is largely due to the fact that in the United States we
have fewer and fewer teen births. But look at how dramatic these trends are by race:
single motherhood is growing for all groups, except the decline in teenagers, but
particularly for non-white Americans who are disadvantaged in other ways. Here are
the same figures by the education of mothers: again you see the slight decline due to the
decline in teenage parenthood (see Figure 2).
Now, if I had time, I would extend this presentation to show you graphs on divorce. The same is true for divorce as is true for single parenthood. African-Americans, some groups of Latinos, and less educated adults are much more prone to divorce. So, even those who do marry are more likely to end up raising their child in a fragile family, than would be the case if they were more educated or they were white.

So we wanted to know what these families were really like. In 1995 Ron Mincy put forth his provocative hypothesis: how many of these families were there? Up to this point, even the most basic questions about these fragile families had never been answered. For example, to what extent were these families really families? In other words, were the mother and the father together? Do they desire to stay together, eventually get married and raise their child together? Or are the mothers just living in the context of an extended family, with their own mothers and grandmothers and thus less in need of a man? How good were these mothers and fathers as parents? How committed were they to the children? And, more specifically, how committed were the fathers? What role did our public policies play in shaping these families’ behaviors and decisions and well being? And what could policy do to change the destinies of these families and more specifically the destinies of the children within them?

So, out of these questions came a very innovative study that I’m very excited to tell you about. Beginning in 1997 and continuing into 2000, Sarah McLanahan and her team at Princeton University mounted a huge survey of unmarried parents. Now, up until this point it was very hard to get a portrait of unmarried parents because our national data sets did not have enough of them and did not ask the right questions of them. More
Importantly, we could not get the fathers in our survey. Even our best surveys were missing about half of the unmarried fathers. So we could ask Mom what she said but we didn’t know Dad’s side of the story. This survey which is called “The Fragile Family Survey” stumbled upon a finding that we had actually arrived at in our earlier field studies in Philadelphia, and that is that almost all fathers come to the hospital to visit their children or to be there for the births of their children. So, in twenty cities across the United States we staked out hospital maternity wards, sitting there with our clipboards and our friendly faces and waiting for babies to be born. We knew from the mother whether she was married or unmarried; if she was unmarried she was in our sample. We surveyed her just minutes after giving birth, as soon as possible, because these days hospitals discharge mothers quickly. And then we waited around for the father. The minute the father came through the door we were there with our clipboard. And what we learnt is that fathers were very excited to answer our questions, because they were very proud to be fathers, very excited about the fact that they had just become a father and at that point very committed to being involved in their child’s life. Using this innovative strategy, we were able to sample virtually all of the mothers - these unmarried mothers- and eighty-five percent of the fathers, by far the largest representation of unmarried fathers in any American data set. We were also able to sample four-thousand of these couples, both the mother and the dad, and we also collected data from about a thousand married couples, for purposes of comparison. This constituted the largest study of fragile families in history. Then we followed these families over time. In fact, currently we are collecting data on the families: the kids have just turned eight. I will be sharing some data with you on when the children were first born, when they were three, five; the eight year-old figures are not in yet, but if you invite me back I will tell you more about that.

Okay, this is just a summary of what I just said. Here, this just gives you a vision of some of the wonderful measures and data in this rich data set. These data, by the way, are publicly available.

So let’s return to the four questions we said we were going to ask at the beginning. First of all, what are these parents really like? What are their capabilities? How competent are they to become parents at the point in which they learn that they are about to have a baby together? The answer is astonishingly low. This is a very depressing table (see Table 1). You will see, looking at the age figures, that this is not a sample of first births, it could be any birth. And the ages reflect that fact. You will see we have a comparison of the married and unmarried, and the unmarried are dramatically more at risk in terms of their economic and educational backgrounds. They are more likely to be non-white, their earnings are dramatically lower, but the most sobering feature of this chart might be invisible to you at the outset, and that is the third line on the chart: children with other partner. You can see that the figure exceeds 40 percent for both the mothers and the fathers. This means that when any given non-marital child comes into the world, forty percent of those children have a mother who already has a child from another relationship. Forty percent of those children have a father who already has a child from another relationship, and taken together, sixty percent of children have either a mother or a father or both, that has a child from another relationship. We call this in the United States, “multiple partner fertility”, and this turns out to have huge implications for the stability of the family, as we will soon see.

Table 1
What else can we tell you about the capabilities of parents? These parents have serious personal problems, and remember they were only twenty-five years on average when the baseline survey was done, when these children were born. Look at the rates of incarceration. We know that American incarceration rates are the highest in the industrialized world, but these rates of past incarceration among fathers are astonishingly high. What is invisible in this table is what happens if you put mothers’ and fathers’ reports of incarceration together: both mothers and fathers were asked if the father was ever incarcerated and fathers tend to underreport their incarceration a little bit. If you put those two reports together, half of all dads have already been to jail or prison by the time this baby enters the world.

Now on to question two: What are these couple relationships really like? What is their texture in content? How supportive are they? How together are these families? Prior to this study being done, there was a strong view that the Americans, the US public, held
about these families, which turned out to be utterly false. First they assumed that there was no couple relationship, that when this baby was born, the mother was on her own. Second, they assumed that the fathers were only in this for sex, not commitment, and that once these women turned up pregnant, the fathers would flee because they wanted nothing to do with the responsibilities associated with parenthood. What we will learn is that both of these assumed views were the opposite of what the facts turned out to be.

First of all, let's look at relationships at the time of the birth. This shocked the US public: fully eighty-five percent of unmarried mothers say that they are in a romantic relationship with the father of their child at the time of the birth. Eighty-five percent! If you look at fathers’ reports, interestingly enough the figures are even higher. So these are couples, they are not lone mothers. Furthermore, half are already living together in a family-like relationship when that child was born (see Figure 3). We learnt later from the qualitative study that I will talk about -because this is a presentation about the power of mixed method research, both qualitative and quantitative, both stories and numbers, to really learn about the family in depth- that the couples are really endearingly committed at the beginning. It’s a very striking and a hopeful time for them. But also we learnt that many of the cohabitations are what in the US we call “shotgun”. This term comes from the old wild wild west movies: when a man got an unmarried girl pregnant, the father would come out with a shotgun and he would say: “You marry my daughter or else”. Well these days, fathers do not do that. They are more likely to say “don’t marry that boy”, but many couples feel tremendous pressure to live together so they can raise their child together. And the pregnancy really prompts that response. We also learnt from the qualitative study that most of these relationships are only a couple of months old when that pregnancy occurs, and it is seldom planned. So these couples are trying very hard despite a very, very fragile romantic relationship, to get it together, to build a family around the fact of a pregnancy they did not intend. I should say also here that there is very little evidence in the survey that these pregnancies are resulting from casual sex as the American public had believed.

Figure 3
Relationships at Birth
Now look at father involvement, these rates are really astonishing (see Table 2). In fact many audiences have a hard time believing these numbers. Fathers are very involved at the time of the child’s birth and in fact they are passionately wanting these children, they are embracing the role of fatherhood, they see it as key to their personal identities that they want to participate in fathering, not just as a paycheck but as a parent, they want to be there to watch the first steps, hear the first words; they want the whole experience of parenting, and you really see that in the very high rates of father involvement early on. Look at how many are living with their children, seeing them daily. And if you add those together with those who are seeing their children weekly, at least weekly, it is a huge proportion of the total. Very few fathers are uninvolved with their children or uncaring. These, by the way, are mothers’ reports which are more conservative than fathers’ reports which are even higher. We also see that the state of the couple relationship is surprisingly good (see Table 3). Most parents are very pro marriage; eighty five percent or seventy percent of them say that there’s a good or certain chance that they are going to marry each other, that is not on this table, but it is really astonishing. Not only are eighty-five percent of them in a romantic relationship but seventy percent of the total say “we’re going to get married to each other”. There is a good or certain chance of it in the near future. So they have very positive views of the future of their relationship, very high hopes. They believe their partner is supportive, they are very pro marriage, yet there is contradiction evident in these figures: mistrust is high; also the level of conflict both partners report in their relationship is quite high, and there is a strong approval for single motherhood, even among folks who believe they will marry each other and are very positive about the idea of marriage.

### Table 2
Father Involvement at Birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gave money/bought things for child</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped in another way</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited baby’s mother in hospital</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child will take father’s surname</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s name is on birth certificate</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother says father wants to be involved</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother wants father to be involved</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3
Attitudes & Relationship Quality
On to question number three: How stable are these relationships? Because ultimately children can’t reap the full benefits of a two-parent family if their family is unstable. As we can see, despite these high hopes for the couple relationship, and the high commitment to fatherhood, as the longitudinal data roll out, as the movie of these families goes on, neither of these hopes are realized. Here in the red (see Figure 4) are those who started out married, in the yellow are those that started out living together in these family-like relationships when the child was born, in the light blue are those where the Dad was romantically involved in visiting back and forth with the mother and the child, and in the dark blue are those with no relationship at the time of the birth, a fairly small proportion. Only about fifteen percent had no romantic relationship. Now, as one might expect, how the relationship began largely determines how it ends. Look particularly at the second two figures. Here we see this problem of multiple partner fertility is more common among those with more fragile relationships. The more fragile the relationship, the more likely a break-up and the more likely the mother and the father will transition to new relationships, often bearing children with partners in those new relationships, creating immense complexity in the family.

Figure 4
Endings and Beginnings
Here’s what happens to biological father involvement by the time the child is five years-old (see Figure 5). Some fathers are still living with those kids, seeing those kids daily. We learnt from the qualitative study though, that many of these relationships, because they did not translate into marriage, are very low quality. Those that were of higher quality, did translate into marriage, but many of those who did not get married subsequently broke up and in the aftermath of that many fathers are loosing contact with their children, both in frequency and intensity.

**Figure 5**
**Bio-fatherInvolvement**
*(age 5)*

So how did the children do? Oh, I was going to show you one more thing: this is actually a very important slide (see Table 4). When mothers repartner they usually
either stay single or repartner with a man that has considerably more human capital and less personal problems than the man they left. This provides a tremendous temptation to these mothers to shut the biological father out of the child’s life. Because after all, the biological father has a lot of problems and many mothers find themselves in the position of finding considerable better quality partners as the children age. Sometimes they are tempted to swap daddies, to get rid of daddy number one and try to substitute daddy number two as a better role model for their child. The problem with this strategy is that children really seek and need to be attached to their biological parents as well, but the more fundamental problem is that these relationships are too highly unstable.

Table 4
New Partnerships: A Surprise!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fathers’ Characteristics</th>
<th>Social Father (%)</th>
<th>Bio Father (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not working</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever Incarcerated</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So how well did the parents fare? The relationships are quite unstable, they lead to a lot of multiple partner fertility, and this in turn leads to lower resources. Here we look at mothers’ household income over time, and see that the more unstable her relationship, the more her household income is likely to decline over time (See Figure 6). The more stable her relationships (relative to income of other mothers), the better she shapes up in terms of her earnings relative to other mothers; and these are the resources that are available to children. Here we return to this theme of multiple partner fertility (See Figure 7). The more likely it is that a mother and a father have children from other partners, the less likely it is that they will feel supported by their current partner, further undermining the quality of the relationship.

Figure 6
Mothers’ Household Income
And finally, what do we know so far about how the children fare? Both instability and low resources matter greatly for children. They are associated with both good or bad parenting: the more stable and highly resourced the family, the better the parenting, and with direct measures of child well being, including depression, aggression and other measures of cognitive development. For those of you out there who are educational
researchers, you know that these are crucial for helping children get ready for school and to achieve once they are in school, so these have long-term implications.

We are going to skip the social policy slide for a moment, and go on to these very exciting qualitative study which I directed, along with the Mc Arthur Network on the family and the economy, a multidisciplinary group of economists, sociologists and developmental psychologists. What this study allowed us to do, was to kind of get under the skin of the prior study and to really understand up close by meeting actual families and following them over time, what these fragile families look like and what their children look like. We just published a book on this study (Unmarried Couples with Children, 2007). I am going to just preview a few of these findings to show you how rich the combination of qualitative and quantitative data can be.

What we did in this study is we selected seventy-five of the five-thousand families in the survey. We went in their homes and we followed them in depth for a four-year period. We met them in the hospital along with the survey researchers, so we too were waiting in the maternity ward for these babies to be born and these fathers to show up, and then we said to the couples after they had been surveyed: “Would you like to talk to us more in depth? Can we come to your house? Can we meet with you as a couple and talk to you?”. So a couple of months after baby had gone home, we went into their homes, all over Chicago, Milwaukee and New York -three of the twenty fragile family cities- often hauling our tape recording equipment with us, in all kinds of neighborhoods, from public housing neighborhoods to more stable working class neighborhoods. We interviewed whites, African-Americans and Latinos and asked them to describe in depth how they were doing, what their family lives were like, what their hopes were, what their dreams were. We did this at twelve different times over a four-year period, both talking with the couple together, watching them communicate directly (we even asked them to argue in front of a video tape so we could see how well they communicated with each other), and at twelve different intervals during this period we were with them, and part of their daily lives. Many of these couples got very connected to us, some couples would call us up and say: “You know, we are having problems, You haven’t been here for three months, where are you”?. Another couple lost a child to crib death and asked our interviewers to come and comfort them and go to the funeral just the day after the death had occurred. So we really got into close contact with these seventy-five couples. Two thirds of them were unmarried and these two thirds are the focus of the story I am going to tell you now.

So just to give you a few nuggets of insight as to what this qualitative addition, this qualitative study that was embedded within the survey offered, let’s start with the circumstances of conception (See Figure 8). Now, you may assume that either babies are planned or they are not. Either the couple decides together to have a child or they decide to use contraception in order to prevent child bearing. It turns out that about fifteen percent of the couples plan their pregnancies, twelve percent exactly, to be exact, another small fraction are actively using contraception and trying to avoid a pregnancy. But the vast majority of these pregnancies—and remember they are occurring to couples whose relationships are just a couple of months old - are neither planned nor fully accidental. And when you ask couples in depth to describe what they are thinking at the time of conception, you learn they have a strong positive orientation to child bearing. Just days or weeks into their courtship the man is saying to the woman “I want to have a baby by you”. This does no happen among middle class young people. This would not
be a good pick-up line for middle-class men to use with middle-class women. But this is very flattering to lower class women, because they really value the mother role and both men and women are very, very attached to the notion of parenthood. Fathers often tell us that they have always wanted to be fathers and they have always been child-type people, which is also quite a surprise. So what happens is that couples know that they are not in a position to really have a baby, they don’t have the money, they have a lot of personal problems, they don’t have the education, but they desperately want to become parents. And they are not sure whether their circumstances will ever improve. So, they decide to take a chance and they engage in unprotected sex without any contraception, knowing what the eventual result will be. We call these pregnancies unplanned but not accidental. What is really instructive about these pregnancies is what mothers and fathers say their reaction was when they first heard that the pregnancy was a reality. Fifty-eight percent of mothers say they were happy or very happy (this is actually not on the slide), a fairly high percentage. But seventy-five percent of fathers say they are happy or very happy, even though these pregnancies were not fully planned. This just shows the strong salience of children for both mothers and maybe especially fathers and the sense that children are the chief source of meaning and identity among men and women who have little hope for achievement in other avenues of life. Children become the means of attaining a sense of meaning when other sources of meaning seem beyond their grasp.

**Figure 8**
**Forming Fragile Families**
*Edin et al. 2007*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average time from courtship to first conception together, less than 1 year.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Was the pregnancy planned, accidental, or somewhere in between?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Between</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent Contraception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unplanned, Not Contracepting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contraceptive Failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reaction? Most at least somewhat happy!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman Unhappy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man Unhappy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We also learnt, however, that the more stable the relationship, the more likely it is that a baby will be at least semi-planned (See Figure 9). So unstable relationships lead to unplanned pregnancies, this is no surprise. What is kind of interesting though, is this unplanned no-contraception group. It is in this group that we do find some women and men saying “I absolutely did not want to have a baby with this partner, and I absolutely don’t want the child”. That is a small minority, but it is kind of a tragic outcome and it speaks to the importance of helping couples realize they need to wait to have children until the relationships are more stable.

**Figure 9**
**Relationships at time of conception**
Now, another tidbit of insight from this qualitative study is: What is behind these very high hopes the survey measured for marriage? One of our students investigated this in depth. As you remember, the survey found that eighty-five percent of couples are in a romantic relationship and seventy percent say they are going to get married to this partner in the near future. Of course these responses were measured in the hospital in the euphoria that followed the birth. We went into these households two to three months later when the euphoria of becoming a parent had faded into the tedium of sleepless nights and asked the same questions of parents, but asked them to sort of respond in depth. What we found was a high reverence for marriage but an enormous fear of divorce. One woman told us “I don’t believe in divorce. That’s why none of the women in my family have ever gotten married.” Think about that statement: I don’t believe in divorce that’s why none of the women in my family have ever gotten married. It turned out they had almost a sacred sense of what marriage was and they did not want to alter the sacred institution of marriage with their own less than perfect relationships. In fact, they had very high standards for marriage. Marriage ought to be between two people who have some financial well being, who are able to achieve what in the United States people refer to as the “white picket fence dream”. You know, in the movies the perfect house in the small town has a little white picket fence around it. Believe it or not, couples even in New York, where there are no white picket fences, said “I want the white picket fence dream. I want a house, I want to pay off my debt, I want some savings and I want enough to host a decent wedding. I want the dress, I want the cake, I want a bridesmaid.”. And they actually believed that it was improper to marry without having these pieces of evidence that they could show to the larger community, that they were on the road to a middle class life. Now, to offer two vivid stories of how important this was: one of the couples in our study was very, very poor, they were homeless for a while. They finally got a spot in public housing and they said: “you know, we can’t achieve the white picket fence dream but we love each other, we’re going to get married anyway.” They went down to the courthouse, they got married, they came home and told their relatives who strongly criticized them for getting married in the wrong way. Another couple we met, told us they were unmarried at the time of the birth. Two years later when we were again in their house, they sheepishly admitted that actually they had been married all along. But they did not have a house and they were too ashamed to tell

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstable</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned</td>
<td>96%</td>
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<tr>
<td>In Between</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unplanned, NC</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
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<td>Casual</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>32%</td>
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anyone that they had actually been married at the time that their baby was born. So they hid the fact from us and from other folks in their community until they could get enough money together to actually put a down payment on the modest home, and then they announced that they had been married for over two years.

The other thing Christina did is she said “Well, is this for real”? If people achieve some financial well being, if they advance in their financial position over time, since the baby was born, will they actually marry? And strikingly, she found that seventy-eight percent of couples who had some modest financial achievement between the time the baby was born and the end of the study, actually did marry one another. There are two other very important studies in America that also indicate that modest improvement in economic wellbeing both lessen divorce dramatically and also conspire marriage. So what separates families, as we learnt earlier, you can almost see the writing on the wall in many of these relationships. We learnt from these qualitative stories that people tell, that there are disagreements among men and women about what this thing called a “fragile family” really means, and what the rules are. Everyone knows what a marriage is: marriages are between two people who are going to be faithful to each other. Marriages don’t end just because you have an argument. Marriages should last forever. Both men and women know the rules associated with marriage. But there are no such rules associated with being a fragile family. This can cause tremendous problems, especially since men and women often disagree about what the rules are. The most common source of break-up is infidelity, two thirds of the infidelity is male initiated. Women are sometimes unfaithful, but usually in retaliation to their partners infidelity. Women believe that one should be faithful as soon as the couple deems themselves an exclusive parent, especially if a couple has a child together. So if a man has an other relationship during pregnancy or after the birth, women will leave if they find out about it. In prior generations this was less true, but today American women are intolerant of infidelity, for the most part. Men, on the other hand, believe the expectation of infidelity starts with marriage, so they are confused by their partner’s reactions. Now, they know that their partners are going to be upset, but they don’t expect their partners to react quite in the way that they do. So the deinstitutionalized state of a fragile family, the fact that we as a culture don’t have norms around what it means, really causes a lot of problems for these low-income couples. We also see a tremendous amount of relationship strife among these couples, and again, the more unstable the couple relationship at the beginning, the less time the couple were dating before they became pregnant, the less planned the pregnancy, the fewer the financial resources and the more the multiple partner fertility, the worst these problems are. Virtually all couples in this sample have some level of violence in their relationship, both his violence and her violence. They are desperate to figure out how to get along. Many don’t have models of how to communicate as a couple because they themselves are either from single parents families or from families where there was tremendous conflict and divorce. So they are hungry for tools to communicate with one another, but by and large, they are unable to do so. And I can talk more about that on the question and answer period.

Relationship quality, in the end, is what predicts break-up. Men and women say they need economic stability to marry and economic stability is crucial in predicting the transition to marriage. But it’s really relationship quality that breaks the couple up, and it’s often men’s serious personal problems that stand in the way of the couple staying together. Interestingly enough, women almost always initiate the break-up and the men move out; it’s an interesting cultural feature probably reflecting the fact that women
often have the public housing voucher in their name. So, another tidbit from this study is what infidelity is really all about and how it works. One of our students, Heather Hill, wrote this chapter of the book. You can see that infidelity just plays a huge role in the breakup of fragile families, so this is kind of emphasizing this finding that there is this gender mismatch in expectations regarding fidelity between men and women. And by the way, male infidelity is far less common among our married men, really indicating that men do act on this norm of the expectation of fidelity when they do get married, much more often than when they are just living together with their partner.

So, what separates fathers from children? Once the couple relationship breaks up, theoretically the Mom and the Dad should be able to stay together. Well, here there is a very interesting “he said, she said” story. Mothers say fathers don’t want to be involved, they can’t be trusted, they don’t show up on time. Fathers say mothers find new partners and then keep them out. We were able to test this hypothesis: is it men’s personal problems? Is it women’s gate keeping? In a quantitative framework, really taking the ideas from the qualitative study, going back to the survey to see who was right: the “he said” or the “she said”. We found that the strongest predictor of the decline in father involvement was not a man’s income, not his employment history, not his incarceration history, not his drug abuse, not the quality of the couple relationship, but her subsequent partnering. So it seems as if he’s largely right. Yes, he does have that behavior, but yes, she is trading up partners, and while she is trading up in terms of the quality of her partner, she is also trading daddies and trying to give her children a better quality father. Again, this solution looks great in the short term but because these new relationships are also quite unstable, what ends up happening is children have a revolving door of father figures in their lives, none of which stays involved for very long. And when these children move into adulthood, especially the boys, they desperately need a father figure to guide them. Because of this process of gatekeeping and multiple partners, many of these children arrive at adolescence without such figures, and this has implications for how boys do, especially during adolescence.

So what happens in the new blended family where mothers and fathers repartner? Moms legitimate the new stepfather role by saying that money and time count more than blood. They discount the biological father relationship and they say, you know, it’s what a father does in terms of his money and his time, not whether he is biologically related to the child. Now this puts the new social father at a huge advantage because he is living with the child and, of course, helping to pay the household bills. Also what is fascinating about this analysis is that mothers seem to really hold to this norm of the two-parent family, the traditional family, and in some senses it appears that they are trying to recreate the traditional family in every new partnership that they form. There is evidence that men are doing this too. In every single case where there is a new marriage, the father is no longer involved, he has been shut out, suggesting that couples can’t really form stable lasting marital relationships unless they get rid of the extra partners. There is too much interference between the blended family situation and the demands of keeping that new family stable.

So, I hope we have given you just a taste of some of the exciting findings of this study and I hope we have given you a vision for the power of this kind of a research approach, a high quality survey focused on a particular and perplexing demographic group, that has huge implications for the well being of children, and mixing methods, using both qualitative data, in-depth talks with families in their homes, collecting stories and
experiences in world views with the survey data, and the exciting potential of working back and forth between the stories and the numbers to really flesh out a portrait of the American family.

I am going to put my earphones on, so I can hear the translator, and I welcome your questions.

Q: I would like to ask you a question: I think I understood that you lived in a neighborhood and you went to live with your family where there was the highest crime rate in the United States. Did you actually go to live there with your family for two and a half years? Did I understand that properly? I wanted to know what kind of policies are in place to you help those families increase their stability, etc. Could you comment on that? What policies do you recommend?

A: At the beginning of this study, my family and I moved to America’s poorest neighborhood, Camden, New Jersey, which is part of the Philadelphia metropolitan area. Our goal there was to learn more about what was causing the rise in single parent families. Lots of scholars had put forth powerful hypothesis about why single parenthood had spread, why the fragile family had become so prevalent. Gary Becker said it was women entering the labor market and thus less in need of men’s wages. Another scholar, William Julius Wilson from Harvard, said it was men’s declining income, which meant they couldn’t support a family. And a third scholar, Charles Murray said the welfare system was so generous it was breaking families up, so they could collect the federal benefits. It turned out in the aftermath of these very innovative ideas that none stood the test, the empirical test. None could really explain this increase in the family. So we decided that if we were going to do better than Nobel Prize winners like Gary Becker, we better do something extra special to try to understand what was going on. So we moved to this community, lived there for two and a half years. The first year that we were there the city became the murder capital of America. We had four murders within a one block radius of our home in the years that we lived there. But we learnt a tremendous amount about the struggles that these young people face, their desire to be good parents, which is really quite touching, and all of the barriers that stood in the way of actualizing their dream. Actually the Fragile Family Survey was in part based on the stories we collected from the three hundred parents that we met in Camden in Philadelphia and interviewed during those early years. High poverty neighborhoods in the United States have declined somewhat since the 1990s, they grew a lot in the 1980s. This is in part because we demolished a lot of our high rise public housing and because our economy in the 1990s was very good, but we still have a lot of young people living in very high poverty neighborhoods like Camden. And those neighborhoods shake the world views of young people profoundly. If you live in a neighborhood like Camden, becoming a father is viewed as a good thing, not a bad thing, even if you are still a teenager, have no money and have to drop out of school. Why? Because the fact that you are changing diapers and trying to raise your baby, is better than if you are out murdering someone, dealing drugs and getting involved in other neighborhood trouble. Young people growing up in poor communities, particularly boys say: “I could be out in the streets, or I could be raising a child, what could be better?” So the high poverty context pushes young men in particular into parenthood, before they are really ready. And this lack of readiness ends up getting them in the end and destroying their hopes to continue to be active fathers. Same thing
for the mothers: mothers too who are growing up in these high poverty neighborhoods really desire a way to forge meaning and identity in their lives. Everything around them is depressing and hopeless. They don’t feel they have a way of making meaning in the legitimate society through employment or education, the schools are failing them, there are no jobs, and so having a child becomes a means of achievement within their grasp. This is a theme that is probably very similar to what you would find if you would go into low income neighborhoods here in the city, based on what I have heard from some of your social service providers. So, social conditions that create this strive to parents can be ameliorated. For example, in the United States, there are several high quality after school programs for teenage girls, that get them involved in what we call “Service Learning”. In other words, after school they are sent out to work in a nursing home, in a childcare center, to clean up a park and girls find great meaning in these activities, so much so that the pregnancy rates in some of these programs has declined by over fifty percent. So the policy recommendation here is to find alternative sources of meaning and identity for young people. It is not enough to say: “well, if you graduate from high school five years from now, I’ll give you a college scholarship. That is not immediate enough for these young people, they don’t really feel they can do that. We need to find immediate ways of creating meaning and identity for these young people that they see as achievable, and there’s evidence that with rather modest efforts you can reduce the rate of pregnancy quite dramatically.

Q: I am a professor of criminal law and I wanted to ask Professor Edin’s opinion on the following: there is a trend in criminal law to create special rules with respect to specific sectors of society. In some cases they even talk about a theory of criminal law of the enemy, where you include tragic situations, dramatic situations, such as terrorism, but also they start to include new social categories such as immigrants and also the poor, very often holding them responsible for violence in society and for the high crime rates, especially in high-crime rate sectors of society. However, one could also see the reverse of this phenomenon: those sectors of society, precisely because they are the weakest, tend to also be the most damaged by crime within society. So, not only are they the authors of crimes but they are also especially the victims when their private property is not respected or their personal freedom in general. Why? Because they don’t have the money to build houses with bars on them, they don’t have the possibility of placing video cameras or security systems in their houses and they don’t have the economic power to pay for private security services, so they end up being the victims of thefts and the little they have gets stolen. That will be all. Thank you very much.

A: Well, in the United States the treatment of the poor has changed fairly dramatically in the last fifteen years. Men are left out and they are given no rights. Women used to be given assistance when they had no work. Now they can virtually get no assistance if they don’t have work, but they get a generous subsidy if they do work. So, the way things work out now, it’s kind of like an all-or-nothing situation for women. First of all they have to be single and they have to have dependent children in order to get anything. Second, they have to be working. So for mothers who are disabled or caring for a disabled child or a disabled relative, there is no longer any social safety net for these families, and many of these families are really desperate and suffering from a lot of other problems like mental illness, many of them live in very dangerous neighborhoods and so on. We as a nation have no idea how these families are surviving. We have collected no data on them. On the other hand, about two thirds of women who
used to be on welfare, who used to get government support for not working, are now working, and most are working close to full-time full-year. Those mothers can now keep their wages and get a subsidy of about five-thousand dollars, so they are better off than ever before. So again, among women we have kind of a “winner-take-all and loosers-take-nothing” situation. Among men the situation is very different and a lot of the political candidates are talking about this. Men are usually not the custodians of children; if you are unmarried, the mother is presumed by the law to be the child’s custodian, so you are eligible for no social programs even if you do work. Your wages have declined dramatically over the last thirty years. They are also very unsteady, yet there is no real program to subsidize your wages and help you make ends meet at a low wage job. If couples marry there is a huge tax in this program, so that if you have two minimum wage workers each with a dependent child and they marry, they can loose up to six-thousand dollars in Government benefits. So there are a lot of inequities in this system we support some people, especially full-time workers, but people who can’t work for one reason or another, get nothing, and men are really left out. Most tragic of all, men are assigned the responsibility for supporting their children economically –the state will throw them in jail if they don’t- but they are given no rights with regard to their children if they were unmarried when their child was born. They have no right to visit the child, no right to make decisions over the child, they are completely reliant on the mother’s goodwill in order to maintain that relationship with their children. That’s why when she says he can’t come over, she wins.

Q: I am a counselor for high school public education, and I want to know whether the study can be conclusive about the need of having higher expectations from boys, because here they are blamed for all, and they drop out and they have higher repetition rates. Do you think establishing politics with regard to these boys would be a good measure?

A: There are huge gender differences that are evident very early on between boys and girls in schools, in some of the experimental work we have done with young people, where their parents have gotten special vouchers to move out of high-poverty neighborhoods into low-poverty neighborhoods, girls benefit, boys fail to benefit. There is a lot of evidence that boys are far more fragile than girls, they have a hard time connecting in school, creating positive relationships with peers, so boys do need our special attention. One interesting study done in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, offered parents a subsidy for working, much like this program I was talking about, it was an earlier study. And one thing that was interesting about mother’s behavior – because in this study too they had an in-depth qualitative study in addition to a survey – is that mothers really saw that their boys needed more supervision than their girls did, and they were using more of this extra money to send their boys to after-school programs and other organized supervised activities, than they were for their girls. In this study, the boys were actually benefitting more than the girls were. Another thing that is kind of evident from the qualitative research is the importance of father figures for boys and the lack of them. Often times it does not end up being the father but it could be the uncle, the mother’s brother or even the mother’s boyfriend or the mother’s former boyfriend who really connected with that child. One of the difficulties with moving poor families out of poor neighborhoods is that boys loose connection to those father figures, so that’s part of why boys don’t tend to benefit as much as girls do, from programs that allow them to move from high-poverty neighborhoods to low-poverty neighborhoods. They loose that important adult that allows them to navigate the transition to adulthood, and
they get into a lot of trouble as a result. So we need to do a lot more work with boys.
I’ve studied boys only a little bit, but you can see from the very high rates of personal
problems, these fathers have at twenty-five years of age that the problems with men
start much earlier and deserve our research attention. I’m not sure what to do about
them until I figure out more what’s going on with them. For me, I would have to know
more, I would have to have more research-based knowledge to think about policy.

**Usually law educates, because the law says: “you can do this, you cannot do this”. What has law in the United States done in favor of the family and what has law done which has not favored the family?**

A: Well, I think that one thing that a lot of people think is good, is that the way
American culture is, you cannot really be a full citizen without working. Work is critical
to the American identity. One thing that the law has done is it has said to single
mothers: “we expect you to work” and it has offered this subsidy for working. So that a
low-wage jobs – and our jobs are very low-wage on the bottom – becomes a source of
dignity and respect. Families who where not able to make it before with a low-wage job,
can now scrape by and they can even sometimes save a little bit towards the future.
Families have responded to this new incentive. Single mothers by working in higher
numbers than ever before, it’s a very dramatic increase. The problem is we have not
said the same thing to men. We have said to them “we expect you to work, we expect
you to be of child support”, but we have not sort of lined up our incentives with our
message. When we did it for women it worked. Now, increasingly people from the left
and the right are saying that, given the fact that men’s wages have declined so
dramatically over time, we need to do the same for men and actually give them a reward
for working and meeting their obligations to their children.