Family and Poverty: Recent Findings from a Mixed-Methods Study

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Harvard University
(with the assistance of Sara McLanahan,
Princeton University)
Overview of Presentation

- What are fragile families and why do we care?
- The Fragile Families Study
- Findings from quantitative analyses
- Implications for social policy
- The Qualitative Addition to Fragile Families (TLC3)
- Findings from the qualitative data
- Implications for social policy
What are Fragile Families and Why do we Care?

What -
• Unmarried parents and their children
• Fragile in terms of economic and social resources
• Families in terms of biological and social ties

Why -
• Large increases since 1965
• Disparities by race/ethnicity and education
• Links to wellbeing and mobility
Disparities in Single Motherhood

The Questions

• What are the capabilities of unmarried parents, especially fathers?

• What is the nature of parental relationships at birth; how stable are relationships?

• How do parents and children fare?

• What role do policies play in the lives of fragile families?
The Fragile Families Study

  - 20 cities (200,000 or more people)
  - 75 hospitals
  - 3700 non-marital births; 1200 marital births
- Data are representative of births in large cities
- Interviews conducted with both parents at birth
- Follow-up interviews are conducted when child is 1, 3, and 5 years old (9 year interviews are currently underway)
- Child assessments at 3 and 5 years
- Public use data for core surveys at baseline, 1 year and 3 years; Also data from qualitative interviews, medical records, neighborhood characteristics
Special Features

- Large sample of ‘high risk children’ (naturally occurring)
- High response rates
  - 88% of unmarried mothers
  - 75% of unmarried fathers (60% at the hospital, 85% at least once)
  - 85% of mothers were interviewed at year 5
- Mixed methods
  - Phone and in-person surveys
  - Interviews with childcare providers and teachers
  - Qualitative interviews in 4 cities – TLC3 and Oakland
  - Medical records data
Survey Content

- Parental characteristics: health, education, behavior problems, incarceration
- Attitudes toward marriage, fertility, gender roles, fatherhood
- Family structure and stability
- Mother-father relationships: Parent child relationships: stability and quality
- New partnerships
- Child assessments: cognitive and behavioral
- Employment (underground activities), earnings
- Income, assets, money management
- Program participation: welfare, child support, housing, etc.
- Contextual variables: unemployment, neighborhood, safety
- Religion and religiosity
- Race/ethnicity, identify and immigrant status
What are parents’ capabilities?

Low human capital and earnings
Poor health and other barriers
## Parental Capabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mothers</th>
<th>Fathers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (mean)</strong></td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teen parent (%)</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child with other Partner - MPF (%)</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than HS</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-white (%)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant (%)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Earnings (mean)</strong></td>
<td>$17,107</td>
<td>$7,997</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Capabilities, cont’d

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mothers</th>
<th>Fathers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married (%)</td>
<td>Unmarried (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy drinking</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal drug use</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Either has problem</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both have problem</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father incarcerated</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What is the nature of relationships?

High Hopes
High father involvement
Relationships at Birth

- Cohabiting: 51%
- Visiting: 32%
- Friends: 8%
- Little or no contact: 9%
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<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>
## Attitudes & Relationship Quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mothers</th>
<th>Fathers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-marriage attitudes</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportiveness</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>2.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval of single mom</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender distrust</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pro-marriage, Approval, Distrust mean on scale of 1-4 (strongly disagree – strongly agree)
Supportiveness, Conflict mean on scale of 1-3 (never, sometimes, often)
How stable are relationships?

Growing instability and complexity
Declining father-involvement
Endings and Beginnings

- Still with bio dad
- Begin New Partnership
- Child with New Partner

- Married
- Cohab
- Visit
- No Rel
Bio-father Involvement (age 5)

- Lives with Child: 37%
- NonRes High: 25%
- NonRes Low: 18%
- NonRes None: 20%
## 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>
How well do parents fare?

Instability and multi-partnered fertility lead to lower resources
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neither parent has MPF</th>
<th>Both parents have MPF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>74%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mother perceives financial, housing, and child care support

MPF = multipartnered fertility
How well do children fare?

Instability and low resources are associated with poor parenting and poor child outcomes
(depression, aggression, cognitive dev)
Implications for social policy

- **Marriage policy**
  - Modest evidence that current policies (welfare and housing) *may* discourage marriage and cohabitation
  - Some evidence that new marriage programs *may* work
  - High hopes at birth
  - But, low capacities create barriers
  - Some relationships should not be saved

- **Fatherhood involvement policy**
  - Relationship with mother is the key

- **Child support policy**
  - *May* reduce fertility
  - *May* increase domestic violence among TANF moms
The Qualitative Addition to Fragile Families (TLC3)

McArthur Network on the Family and the Economy

Robert Pollak, Nancy Folbre
TLC3 Study
Macarthur Network on the Family and the Economy, National Science Foundation, W. T. Grant Foundation

- 75 couples from the Fragile Families Survey, 48 unmarried and 27 married.
- Fragile Families baseline survey
  - In depth interviews with mom, dad, and couple at:
    - 2-3 months
    - 1 year
    - 2 years
    - 4 years
  - 1,200 pages of transcript per couple
- 3 year long mixed methods Fragile Families workshops
New book

*Unmarried Couples with Children*
Edited by Paula England
and Kathryn Edin
October 2007
Forming Fragile Families

*Edin et al. 2007*

Average time from courtship to first conception together, less than 1 year.

Was the pregnancy planned, accidental, or somewhere in between?

- Planned: 12%
- In Between: 18%
- Inconsistent Contraception: 22%
- Unplanned, Not Contracepting: 25%
- Contraceptive Failure: 18%

Reaction? Most at least somewhat happy!

- Woman Unhappy: 44%
- Man Unhappy: 24%
# Relationships at time of conception

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Type</th>
<th>Stable</th>
<th>Casual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstable</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Between</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unplanned, NC</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Barriers to marriage, are they real?

*Gibson-Davis et al. 2005*

*Gibson-Davis 2007*

- Economic barriers 83%

- Do they really matter?
  - If income increased by 10%
  - Both are working and going to school
  - Economically self-sufficient
  - Paid all bills each month
  - No mention of financial shakiness

- 78% who met the bar married, 19% of those who didn’t meet the bar married anyway.
What separates fragile families?

*Reed 2007*

- Factors implicated in break up stories.
  - Infidelity
  - Constant arguments
  - Verbal or Physical Abuse
  - Lack of Love and Attention
  - Substance Abuse

- Relationship quality central.

- Men’s bad behavior is key.

- Women almost always initiate the breakup, men move out.
#1 Relationship wrecker: infidelity

*Hill 2007*

- All breakups involve infidelity.
- 55% had at least once incident over the course of their relationship.
- 75% suffer from sexual jealousy.
- Mostly men. 30% involved both, 13% involved her only.
  Chronic infidelity almost always ended the relationship.
  Isolated incidents usually did not.
What separates fathers from children? Claessens 2007

- Fathers blame mothers for gatekeeping.

- Mothers say there are good reasons to restrict fathers’ access to children. 72 percent show gatekeeping, though 6 in 10 fathers still say their child in the last two months. Mom’s reasons: inconsistency with visitation, the father’s lifestyle, and high conflict. Lifestyle concerns rarely kept fathers out entirely. Where conflict is the reasons, mothers shut fathers out entirely, often have restraining orders.

- Gatekeeping is strongly related to mothers’ re-partnering, suggesting not all gatekeeping is warranted.
What happens in new "blended" families?

**Monte 2007**

- Moms legitimate the stepfather role by asserting that time, love and money count more than blood.

- When dad visits other kids, mom is jealous of his time, but visitation prompts sexual mistrust.

- In every case where the new partnership led to marriage, the ex-partner was no longer an active father to her kids and dad was no longer involved with any of his other kids.
Thank you

UPDATE: Multipartnered fertility references


Predictors of marriage references


Predictors of marriage references – continued


Working papers
Predictors of father involvement references


Mental health references


