This presentation briefly describes the Fragile Family and Child Well-Being study. In it, I present some data from the first two cities in the study that relate both to the prevalence of cohabitation and the effects of poverty and discuss the implications of cohabitation for both welfare and child-support policy.¹

The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being study will ultimately collect data in twenty cities. It will be nationally representative of nonmarital births in all cities with populations greater than 200,000. We used a stratified random sampling process to pick the cities, and we stratify by welfare, child-support, and labor-market regimes.

We pick the extremes: very generous and very penurious welfare states. We pick effective and ineffective child-support enforcement regimes. And we pick cities on the basis of whether they had a relatively strong or relatively weak labor market. Picking the extremes, we have eight cells. We have another eight cities that are in the middle on at least one of those variables. In addition to these sixteen cities, we have another four cities in which our foundation funders had particular interest; they were picked because of that interest, not randomly.

We interview the mothers before they leave the hospital after giving birth, and we ask them to introduce us to the fathers. More than 90 percent of the mothers we ask agree to participate. In the first two cities, we reached 75 percent of the fathers. We have now finished data collection in five additional cities, and in four of those cities, the father response rate was 74 percent. In the fifth city, the response rate for fathers is only about 62 or 64 percent. We may do some more work in that last city.

We are particularly interested in answering four different questions. First, who are the fathers? I have been doing research on child support for twenty-some years, and the big problem is that the fathers are not there or do not identify themselves. In a nationally representative sample, one obtains information about a much smaller number of nonresident fathers than about

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mothers who reside with the child but apart from the child’s father. We wanted to get a sample that would allow us simply to describe the fathers. We knew from the start that we would not get all the fathers to participate, so we asked the mothers about the characteristics of the fathers to obtain some information about them.

Second, what proportion of the parents live together? What proportion are romantically involved?

Third, how do the environments in which the parents live affect their relationships and, ultimately (the fourth question), how do the fathers, their relationships, and the environments affect child well-being? We are trying to measure child well-being from the outset, so we get measures of how the children are doing at birth. We also have a proposal for obtaining even more detailed measures from the hospital, but we have birth weight from our survey. Our principal interest is the long-run effects on the children.

So much for background on fragile families and child well-being. In the cities that are in the extreme environments, we have an \( N \) of 325 births. Of those, 75 are marital births and 250 are nonmarital births. The data are from Oakland and Austin, our first two cities, both of which are cities with large sample sizes. The sample of nonmarital births numbers 500, which is relatively small, but it consists of only two of the twenty cities; the data are preliminary but still relatively informative.

What proportion of the couples who had nonmarital births are cohabiting? In Oakland and Austin, almost half. We were kind of taken aback by that finding, because Larry Bumpass’s estimate, until recently, was about one-third. We realized, however, that his estimate was based on data that go back to the 1980s. The most recent estimate, as Wendy Manning reports here, is 40 percent in the early 1990s, and our sample was drawn in 1998. So nearly half is quite consistent, if one projects the trend. My guess is that figure will hold up when we get our full sample. That nearly half of the unwed parents are cohabiting at birth underlines the point that Wendy made, which is that cohabitation is an important phenomenon.

Data from Austin and Oakland also suggest that in addition to the large proportion of cohabiters, a huge proportion of mothers are living with either their mother or another adult. Roughly three-quarters of the women who have nonmarital births are living with somebody else.

The distinction between household and family measures of well-being is important. To illustrate, a comparison of household income with the mothers’ income shows that the mother’s income averaged about $5,000 in 1997 and the household income about $16,000. Calculating a poverty rate on a family basis, approximately 80 percent of the unwed mothers are poor. The proportion drops to just a little more than 50 percent if one uses a household definition of income.
The question is, What kind of sharing is going on? The few studies that we have suggest that sharing occurs less in cohabitation than in marriage; that is what one would expect. The difference between cohabitation and marriage in part is a lifestyle choice. Some people—primarily middle class—just do not believe in marriage and think that the blessing of the state or of a religion is to be shunned. Even in the groups in which cohabitation is widespread, however, marriage is still a statement of a stronger commitment. As a consequence, it is not surprising that sharing occurs less without marriage.

What is the implication of cohabitation for both welfare and child-support policy? As an expert on child support and welfare, I was startled to realize how frequent and important cohabitation was and surprised that I had not really thought about the implications of cohabitation for policy.

We know that the biggest success of child-support enforcement in the past fifteen years has been the relatively dramatic increases in paternity establishment. Twenty years ago, the rates were in the teens; they are now approaching 50 percent. We have not seen an equivalent increase in child-support orders for nonmarital births. Why? Cohabitation is the answer. Consider a couple that lives together in a marriage-like relationship. They have a child. The proud papa goes to the hospital and wants to establish paternity. If they are not on welfare, why would they get a child-support order? As long as the father lives with the mother and child and contributes to the child’s support, neither he nor the mother have any reason to secure a child-support order. Thus the increase in cohabitation increases paternity establishment but not awards.

Yet the Fragile Families data suggest that many cohabiting couples are on welfare. That is a problem. Do we want to start enforcing child-support orders against a man and a woman who are living together? If they are on welfare and drawing public benefits, maybe yes. However, it is a little bizarre to think about taking money from the person who is living with the mother of the child and reimbursing the state.

The 1960s Supreme Court decision striking down state “man-in-the-house” rules said that if a man lived in the house, one could not assume that he was sharing his income with the child. His income could not be counted for the purpose of determining eligibility and benefits. The man envisioned in the house, however, was not the biological father of the child. Given the startling increase in cohabitation since the Supreme Court decision, it may be appropriate to revisit the issue. How different is a cohabiting from a married biological father?

Reference

A new consensus has developed that fatherlessness is a significant risk factor for poor developmental outcomes for children. Research consistently finds that, even after controlling for income and other sociodemographic variables, children who grow up without the active involvement of a committed and responsible father, compared with those who do, are more likely to fail at school, develop behavioral and emotional problems, get into trouble with the law, engage in early and promiscuous sexual activity, or become welfare dependent later in life.1 The question no longer is whether fatherlessness matters, but what to do about it.

Despite this important shift in thinking about the importance of fathers to child well-being, fathers received little mention in the historic 1996 welfare reform legislation, except in the tougher child-support enforcement measures and a new grant program supporting visitation by noncustodial parents. The underlying assumption of this legislation seems to be that when it comes to welfare reform, the only fathers worth caring about are nonresident fathers.

But three categories of fathers are relevant to a discussion of welfare reform and child well-being: nonresident fathers, cohabiting fathers, and married fathers. What do we know about these three types of fathers and the influence of each on the well-being of children?

Nonresident Fathers

Today, nearly four of every ten children in the United States are growing up in homes without their biological fathers. In low-income households, the percentage of children growing up without their biological fathers is even higher. Indeed, nearly 90 percent of all households receiving welfare are headed by a single mother.

The historical policy answer to the problem of absent fathers has been child support enforcement—and for good reason. Any man who fathers a child ought to be held responsible for helping to support that child financially. Moreover, research generally substantiates that child...

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1For a review of this literature, see Wade F. Horn, *Father Facts*, 3d ed. (Gaithersburg, Md.: The National Fatherhood Initiative, 1999).
well-being is improved when nonresident fathers pay child support. Nevertheless, child support enforcement alone is unlikely to improve substantially the well-being of children for several reasons.

First, although receipt of child support has been consistently associated with improvements in child outcomes, the magnitude of the effects tends to be quite small because the average level of child support is quite modest, only about $3,000 per year. Such a modest amount of additional income, although certainly helpful, is unlikely to change significantly the life trajectory of most children.

Second, many fathers of children residing in low-income households are undereducated and underemployed themselves, and as such they may lack the resources to be able to provide meaningful economic support for their children. Too strong a focus on child-support enforcement may lead many of these already marginally employed men to drop out of the paid labor force altogether in favor of participation in the underground economy. It is difficult to be an involved father when one is in hiding. Thus, the unintended consequence of strong child support enforcement policies may be to decrease, not increase, the number of children growing up with the active involvement of their father, proving once again that no good public policy goes unpunished.

Third, an exclusive focus on child-support enforcement ignores the many noneconomic contributions that fathers make to the well-being of their children. If we want fathers to be more than cash machines for their children, we need public policies that support their work as nurturers, disciplinarians, mentors, moral instructors, and skill coaches and not just as economic providers. Doing otherwise is to downgrade fathers to, in the words of Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, “paper dads.”

Dissatisfaction with the results of child-support enforcement alone as the primary strategy for dealing with nonresident fathers has led some analysts to advocate enhanced visitation as the mechanism for improving the well-being of children. But most studies have not found frequency of visitation by nonresident fathers to be associated consistently with improvements in child outcomes.

In a recently published meta-analysis of sixty-three studies, however, Paul Amato and Joan Gilbreth question whether frequency of visitation is the most important aspect of a

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4Personal communication.
nonresident father’s relationship with his children. Rather, they argue, the quality of the father-child relationship and the degree to which nonresident fathers engage in authoritative parenting (that is, not only encouraging their children but also monitoring their children’s behavior and enforcing age-appropriate limits) are more important to child well-being.

Indeed, Amato and Gilbreth found that children who report feeling close to their fathers were more likely to succeed in school and evidenced fewer internalizing and externalizing problems. But the strongest predictor of child well-being—even stronger than payment of child support—was the degree to which nonresident fathers engaged in authoritative parenting. Children whose nonresident fathers listened to their problems, gave them advice, provided explanations for rules, monitored their academic performance, helped with their homework, engaged in mutual projects, and disciplined them were significantly more likely to do well at school and to evidence greater psychological health, compared with children whose fathers mostly engaged them in recreational activities, such as going out to dinner, taking them on vacations, and buying them things.

Unfortunately, other research has found that nonresident fathers are far less likely than in-the-home dads to engage in authoritative parenting. One reason, as Amato and Gilbreth point out, is the constraints inherent in traditional visitation arrangements. Because time with their children is often severely limited, many nonresident fathers strive to make sure their children enjoy themselves when they are with them. As a result, nonresident fathers tend to spend less time than in-the-home fathers helping their children with homework, monitoring their activities, and setting appropriate limits and more time taking them to restaurants or the movies, activities that have not been found to be associated with enhanced child outcomes. Thus, although visitation by nonresident fathers is certainly something to be encouraged, the context of visitation discourages nonresident fathers from engaging in the kinds of behaviors most associated with improvements in child well-being.

Cohabiting Fathers

Cohabitation is one of the fastest growing family forms in the United States today. In 1997, 4.13 million couples were cohabiting outside of wedlock, compared with fewer than 0.5 million in 1960. Of cohabiting couples, 1.47 million, or about 36 percent, have children younger


than age eighteen residing with them, up from 21 percent in 1987. Of unmarried couples in the twenty-five to thirty-four age group, nearly 50 percent have children living with them.\(^8\) Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu estimate that nearly half of all children today will spend some time in a cohabiting family before sixteen.\(^9\)

Cohabitation also appears to be quite common among the poor. According to recent research by Sarah S. McLanahan and Irv Garfinkel with so-called “fragile families,” at the time a child is born out of wedlock, more than half of low-income parents are cohabiting.\(^10\)

Some argue that cohabitation is the equivalent of marriage. But cohabitation is a weak family form, especially compared with marriage. Cohabiting couples break up at much higher rates than do married couples, and although 40 to 50 percent of couples who have a child while cohabiting go on to get married, they are more likely to divorce than are couples who get married before having children.\(^11\) Three-quarters of children born to cohabiting parents will see their parents split up before they reach sixteen, compared with only about one-third of children born to married parents.\(^12\)

Once a father no longer lives with his children, his involvement with his children declines rapidly.\(^13\) Indeed, 40 percent of children in father-absent homes have not seen their father in more than a year. Of the remaining 60 percent, only 1 in 5 sleeps even one night per

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\(^12\) David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage* (New Brunswick, N.J.: The National Marriage Project, 1999), 7.

month in the father’s home. Only 1 in 6 children living without their fathers see their father an average of once or more per week.\textsuperscript{14}

The fact is that children born to cohabiting couples are likely, before too long, to see their dads transform into occasional visitors. Extrapolating from the research literature on attachment theory, it may be that children whose fathers are involved early on but then disappear have worse outcomes than children whose fathers are continuously absent. If so, focusing on strengthening cohabitation may, in reality, be making a bad situation worse.

Moreover, many men in cohabiting relationships are not the biological father of the children in the household, or at least are not the biological father of all the children in the household. By one estimate, 63 percent of children in cohabiting households are born not to the cohabiting couple but to a previous union of one of the adult partners, most often the mother.\textsuperscript{15} This situation is problematic in that substantial evidence indicates that cohabitation with a man who is not biologically related to the children substantially increases the risk of both physical and sexual child abuse.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, cohabitation not only is unlikely to deliver a long-term father to a child but also puts children at an increased risk for child abuse if they are cohabiting with a man other than their biological father.

\section*{Married Fathers}

Although speaking of the importance of fathers to the well-being of children is becoming increasingly popular, speaking of the importance of marriage to the well-being of fatherhood or of children is still out of fashion. Yet, the empirical literature clearly demonstrates that children do best when they grow up in an intact, married-parent household. We know, for example, that children who grow up in a household with continuously married parents do better at school, have fewer emotional problems, are more likely to attend college, and are less likely to commit crime or develop alcohol or illicit drug problems. That these results are not simply a result of differences in income is attested to by the fact that stepfamilies, which have household incomes nearly equivalent to continuously married households, offer few of these benefits to children.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14}Furstenberg and Nord, 896.


\textsuperscript{17}Horn.
The empirical evidence also is quite clear that married adults—women as well as men—are happier, healthier, and wealthier than their single counterparts. Married adults also report having more satisfying sex than nonmarried adults, and married men show an earnings boost that is not evident in cohabiting relationships.\textsuperscript{18} Married fathers also, on average, are more likely to be actively engaged in the lives of their children and, perhaps just as important, are more accessible to them.

In contrast, research consistently finds that unwed fathers are unlikely to stay connected to their children over time. Longitudinal research by Robert Lerman and Theodora Ooms, for example, found that 57 percent of unwed fathers visited their child at least once per week during the first two years of their child’s life, by the time the child reached age seven and one-half, that percentage dropped to less than 25 percent.\textsuperscript{19} Other research suggests that three-quarters of fathers who are not living with their children at the time of their birth never subsequently live with them. Marriage may not be a certain route to a lifetime father, but it is a more certain route than any other.

Of course, some married households, especially in which domestic violence and child abuse are present, are horrible places for both children and adults. But contrary to the stereotypes perpetuated by the media and some advocacy groups, domestic violence and child abuse are substantially less likely to occur in intact, married households than in any other family arrangement. The truth is, if we really care about the well-being of children, public policy needs to do a better job of encouraging marriage.

Why Not Marriage?

Given that marriage is good for children and adults, why is everyone not rushing to the altar to get married? First, the past forty years have seen an extraordinary shift in cultural norms concerning sex, marriage, and childbearing. With the advent of effective birth control in the 1960s, sex became separated from marriage. Then, as increasing numbers of women entered the paid labor force, childbearing became separated from marriage. As the data on cohabitation indicate, living together is increasingly becoming separated from marriage as well.

As a result of these cultural and social changes, there is simply less pressure today to get and stay married than there was just two or three generations ago. Forty years ago, there existed an extraordinary consensus that couples in troubled marriages should “stay together for the sake


of the kids.” Today, couples are increasingly likely to say, “We’re getting divorced for the sake of the kids.” One can hardly imagine a more dramatic cultural shift.

Second, when couples do get married, public policy frequently punishes them economically. The marriage penalty within the U.S. tax code for higher wage earners is well known. Somewhat less well known is the financial penalty for marriage found in the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).

The EITC is an income supplement that provides up to $4,000 a year to a low-income working parent with children. This tax credit is now the largest antipoverty measure in the federal arsenal. The good news is that the EITC, unlike the old welfare system it is beginning to replace, encourages work because only those with earnings are eligible. The bad news is that it can make marriage prohibitively expensive. That’s because the EITC is pegged to wages, not to family structure. Thus, two low-wage earners would be far better off, at least as far as the EITC is concerned, if they stay single than if they marry.

Suppose, for example, a single mother is working full-time at a minimum-wage job. This mother will have take-home pay of less than $7,000 after paying taxes and child-care expenses. With the help of the EITC, her take-home pay increases to about $10,000, still not enough to escape poverty. If she marries the father of her children, it can make all the difference—even if he, too, has few work skills and only a minimum-wage job. But marriage will cost this woman about $1,800 in EITC benefits, or almost 20 percent of her net income. Making low-income women choose between $1,800 in tax benefits or a husband and a father for her children simply makes no sense.

A legitimate question is whether low-income couples change their behavior because of the marriage penalties in the EITC. The honest answer is no. Little evidence indicates that low-income communities are filled with mini economists busily calculating the extent of the EITC marriage penalty before deciding to get married. But anecdotal evidence suggests that people in low-income communities have a sense that if they get married they “lose stuff.” They may not know exactly how much “stuff” they lose when they marry, but they know marriage is a bad deal. And they are right.

According to calculations by Eugene Steuerle of the Urban Institute, when one takes into account the full package of welfare benefits, the marriage penalty for a single mother who chooses to marry an employed man can be quite severe. For example, when an unemployed single mother marries a man working at minimum wage, the total marriage penalty is $2,688. When a single mother working full-time at minimum wage marries an $8-per-hour full-time worker, the marriage penalty is a shocking $8,060. In such circumstances, marriage simply makes no economic sense.

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Bringing Back the “M” Word

Although some counsel resignation when it comes to nonmarriage in low-income communities, new data from Sarah S. McLanahan and Irv Garfinkel indicate that at the time of the child’s birth, two-thirds of low-income, unwed couples want—and expect—to get married. It is not a question, therefore, of imposing middle-class “marriage values” on reluctant low-income couples but of helping low-income couples achieve something they say they want for themselves—lasting, stable marriages. The question is, How?

First, we have to become more willing to bring up the topic. Anyone who has ever spent time in a welfare office can attest to the striking absence of any posters, literature, or conversation promoting the virtues of marriage. Our reluctance to even bring up the topic of marriage sends the not-so-subtle message that marriage is neither expected nor valued. The wonder is not that so few go on to get married, but that some actually do. If we want more marriages in low-income communities, we have to be more willing to bring up the topic.

Second, public policy has to stop punishing couples when they get married. It seems patently unfair to promote the value of marriage and then impose a financial penalty of between $2,000 and $8,000 on couples who get married. At the very least, the EITC needs to be reformed to ensure that it does not punish low-income couples who choose to marry.

Third, states should do more to promote the employment of low-income men so that they are seen as better “marriage material.” Some evidence indicates that women—especially women living in low-income communities—are reluctant to marry males whom they consider to have lower economic prospects than themselves. In fact, the availability of a suitable potential husband, primarily defined as employed and not in jail or prison, has been found to have a greater effect on marriage and nonmarital fertility than AFDC benefit levels. One way to

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encourage marriage, then, is to expand participation in welfare-to-work programs to include low-income men as a means of increasing not only their own life prospects but their marriageability as well.

In expanding employment services to low-income males, however, care should be taken not to condition receipt of services on having fathered a child out of wedlock. To do so would only introduce perverse incentives for men to father children out of wedlock, in much the same way that the current system provides perverse incentives for unmarried women to bear children.

Finally, states should take affirmative steps to enhance the marital and parenting skills of high-risk families. Marriage alone is not sufficient to improve the well-being of children. For marriage to have a positive impact on the development of children, parents must have the skills both to sustain a marriage and to be good parents. Unfortunately, many men and women lack the necessary skills to sustain a marriage and raise children well. Some may have grown up in broken homes and never experienced positive marital role models. Others may have had inadequate or abusive parents themselves. To help couples sustain a marriage and be good parents, states should encourage religious and civic organizations to offer parenting and marriage enrichment classes to mothers and fathers applying for public assistance. Although results vary according to the specific curriculum, a substantial body of literature indicates the success of parent skills training and marital enrichment programs.

Conclusion

The new consensus is that fathers do matter to the well-being of children. Regrettably, welfare reform has yet to take this consensus fully into account. Doing so will require that clear distinctions be made between nonresident, cohabiting, and married fathers. Although it is certainly important to help all three categories of fathers be a positive influence in the lives of their children, both experience and research teach us that the category of fathers most likely to improve the well-being of children is married fathers.

References


5: Family Versus Household


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Discussion

Father’s Absence

*Lawrence W. Sherman:* The finding that having no father is better than having one and then losing him replicates the finding of the Cambridge-Somerville delinquency prevention experiment from the 1930s, which found that the children who were given mentors from age twelve on, compared with the control group that was deprived of this wonderful program, were much more likely to be dead, mentally ill, or alcoholic by the time they were fifty. This is the rub: The mentors were young men who went off to World War II about five years after the program started. The children not only lost their original fathers, but they lost the mentors—a double whammy.

We have to think about the issue of how bad it is if a man is making babies and never comes around to see the babies. It might be better for reasons totally unrelated to any morality of intent to have that situation than for him to go home with the baby, stay for a couple years, then leave or create other circumstances. That brings us to policy implications.

There is no evidence that the awareness of loss of income is a real deterrent to marriage. That does not mean that the opposite would not be true. If we had a highly publicized innovation that said “Hey, new law, get married, get more stuff,” it could have a huge effect. It is one of the ways we know to change cultures quickly and is how we gave up smoking in public places.

Has anyone put on the table in the Congress the idea of a marriage penalty exemption under a certain income level and not above, which is where all the hit in revenue comes and is the major obstacle to eliminating the marriage penalty? The ceiling would be $35,000, so that those whose total household income was under $35,000 would be totally exempt from the marriage penalty. Then we could come in with my publicity campaign and get everybody married.

*Richard J. Gelles:* A perfectly laudable proposal that I think Irv Garfinkel came up with years ago is to abolish the personal exemption and replace it with a tax credit for every child born within a legal marriage. Then, like a longevity pay raise, the tax credit could increase for every five years that the couple stays married. Children growing up in cohabiting families in which they are not related to the male caretaker run an extraordinarily high risk of fatal child maltreatment. So you would kill multiple birds with one stone. It is not new money. It is an offset against the personal exemption.
Measuring “Household” Income

Daniel H. Weinberg: One of the lesser known recommendations of the National Academy of Sciences panel on poverty measurement and family assistance was that we should be counting cohabiting couples’ income together in determining the poverty rate for a family—in other words, consider them a family. When you do that, as Wade Horn mentioned and as Don Hernandez and some others at the Census Bureau have done, yes, you get a lower poverty rate. The issue, then, is why stop there in terms of sharing of resources? When you start counting roomers and boarders—who, after all, are in the household explicitly to share resources—the poverty rate declines further. Why not go to the household? Why else are they living together but to share resources?

A little-known fact about poverty is that most foster children are nowhere in the poverty universe unless they are older than age fifteen because they are not in a family. They are not related by blood, marriage, or adoption to anybody else in the household, and we do not compute poverty for unrelated children. We only do that for adults.

We ought to do more research on income pooling and what that means. We would then have a basis for making an argument for what the unit should be for calculating eligibility or poverty.

Cohabitation

Wendell Primus: I have started to give some thought to the interaction between child support and welfare rules. I agree with Irv Garfinkel that for fragile families—the 50 percent of couples who are cohabiting at the time of birth—we have to rethink our policies and make sure that both sides of the couple understand the implications.

It probably is true that in these cohabiting families, mothers often walk into the welfare office and say “I’m single” and the welfare office doesn’t know. The child-support office is eventually going to catch up with the natural father, and then we have a bad situation, because we’re either going to give the dad a retroactive order, with all the implications of that for arrearage, or we’re going to accuse the mother of fraud because she didn’t say that it was a two-parent family. Both of those situations are undesirable from a policy perspective. We have to do a lot more counseling and so forth.

Another problem is that the participation rates in all of our programs are low, whether two-parent married families or cohabiting families consisting of both natural parents. If there are differences in benefits for cohabiting natural families versus cohabiting stepfamilies, we do have the incentives in the right direction in most of those cases, when you take into account child support. We are just at the tip of the iceberg here in terms of what all of this means for policy.
Wendy D. Manning: There has been a lot of concern that marriage is disappearing among the African American community, and many books and articles have been written about the problem. Rarely do people even talk about cohabitation, but we now need to pay attention to cohabitation as a family form.

About one-fifth of black children born in the United States are born into cohabiting-parent families; the proportion is only about 10 percent among whites. Researchers need to acknowledge these differences and pay attention to what these patterns mean for children’s lives. Some of these arrangements are short-term unions, but some of them are long-term. We already know from prior research that African American nonresident fathers visit more often than white nonresident fathers. Men who become nonresident fathers as a result of cohabitation may be more or less involved than divorced nonresident fathers. We don’t know about race differences in ties to children among nonresident fathers who were cohabiting at the time of the child’s birth.

Data starting in 1976 and continuing through 1996 show consistent levels of marriage among whites and blacks. Most people want to get married. It is not that cohabitation is replacing marriage; it is usually something that is occurring during early adulthood prior to marriage. Cohabitation also is occurring among divorced people. We often view cohabitation as an event among young people in their twenties, but some cohabiters are divorced mothers who are living with someone after divorce, and some have children within the union.

David Murray: It just strikes me as being too narrow to focus on the couple or the couple and the children. Marriage and cohabitation have different implications. Our cultural message is, “Get married, get stuck.” We have that message now: It’s called a wedding. We have ritual public performances in which people, in fact, get stuck. It is not just appliances; it’s loans, it’s transportation, and it is in-laws.

People in marriages have kinship structures of multiple grandparents and in-laws. These structures create a vast support network that is amplified and solidified formally by the extension of kinship ties through marriage that don’t appear as naturally or as coherently under cohabitation. Kin terms are formal badges for public performances with moral norms that reinforce them. When I am married to a woman and she has a brother, I have a brother-in-law. If I’m cohabiting with Cindy, that is Tony. A different set of implied relationships exists, from the child’s perspective, in terms of their protection, in terms of the obligations we owe each other. Marriage brings these structures into visibility and provides them with standing.

Wendy D. Manning: I would argue that among some racial and ethnic groups, cohabitation is treated as almost equivalent to marriage, particularly among the Hispanic population, which has longstanding cultural support for cohabitation and consensual unions. I don’t think we can talk about it as a monolithic family form that means the same thing for everybody.
Clarice Walker: The literature documents that in some cultural groups, family and marriage are viewed as the same even without the legal status of marriage, and that such groups do adopt kinship forms and have those extensive relationships.