

## Extended Abstract

Policymakers concerned with child well-being, poverty and responsible fatherhood are in need of research which addresses the determinants of the living arrangements of new parents. The ability to understand which factors affect parents, as they negotiate the first few years of their child's life, can yield valuable information for the creation or adjustment of public policy. One of the four major goals of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, P.L. 104-193 is to "encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families." This overarching policy goal is guided, in large part, in reaction to striking changes in the composition of families over the last 30 years, high poverty rates of single-mother households and research linking the benefits for children of growing up in a family with both biological parents (Committee on Ways and Means 2000, McLanahan & Sandefur 1994, Powell & Parcel 1997).

An increase in cohabitation since the 1970's combined with the simultaneous decline in marriage rates is well documented (Bumpass & Lu 2000, Bumpass & Sweet 1989, Bumpass et al. 1991) Recent estimates from the National Survey of Families and Households as well as the Fragile Families Child and Well-Being study note rates of cohabitation among mothers at between 40 and 50% (Bumpass & Lu 2000, Bumpass & Sweet 1989, Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan 2002). The poverty rates of single mothers are most accurately measured with a careful accounting of who is in the household by explicitly measuring cohabitation and residence with extended family (Bumpass & Raley 1995, Folk 1996, Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan 2002). Cohabiting couples represent a growing and important group of parents who will be affected by rules governing a

number of public benefits such as TANF, public housing and child support enforcement. The current policy environment, with its emphasis on marriage promotion as a poverty reduction strategy, would benefit from a direct examination of the impact of local area economic conditions, public benefits as well as personal characteristics on the living arrangements of unmarried mothers.

This paper uses longitudinal data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being study to look at the impact of personal characteristics and local area economic conditions on the living arrangements of mothers 3 years after the birth of the focal child. Local area economic conditions such as unemployment rates, sex-ratios, housing costs and the availability of subsidized housing as well as TANF/FS benefit levels and child support enforcement are considered. The inclusion of the availability of subsidized and public housing has not been considered in previous research.

The Fragile Families data offer distinct advantages in the measurement of living arrangements. A complete household roster along with a number of specific questions about cohabitation allow for a refined look at mothers living arrangements. Along with the inclusion of the availability of public housing and cost measures, this analysis is strengthened by the addition of several measures which are not generally available in national data but emerging research suggests are important. The Fragile Families data provides information on both parents multiple partner fertility, the number of children in common as well as the father's incarceration history. This analysis builds on the growing body of work emerging from Fragile Families researchers who have focused on the family formation patterns of mostly low-income urban parents (Carlson et al. 2004a, Carlson et al. 2004b, Mincy & Dupree 2001, Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan 2002).

This paper estimates the relative likelihood of residing alone, cohabiting, with a roommate or with extended family relative to marriage about three years after the birth of the focal child controlling for baseline living arrangements as well as multiple partner fertility an incarceration history. Controlling for baseline living arrangements serves as a control for the underlying unobserved characteristics that may be correlated with living arrangements at baseline and three years. Multinomial logistic regression is used with the full sample as well as a sub-sample of mothers with lower human capital. Results suggest a negative relationship between the local area housing costs and the probability of living alone relative to marriage. Increases in the availability of subsidized and public housing are associated with increases in the likelihood of either living alone or with extended family relative to marriage. TANF/FS benefits are positively associated with the probability of cohabiting or living alone relative to marriage. Higher unemployment is associated with an increase in the probability of cohabiting relative to marriage as well as a marginally significant increase in the probability of living with extended family relative to marrying. Sex ratios do not prove important in the full sample but an increase in the local area sex ratio is associated with a decrease in the likelihood of living alone relative to marriage in the low human capital sample. The effects of sex ratios are sensitive to the measurement construction and level of refinement of the measure. Both a history of incarceration and father's multiple partner fertility significantly decrease the likelihood of marriage.

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