

**What Realities Do Policy Makers  
Interested in Encouraging  
Unmarried Parents To Marry Need  
to Confront?**

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# Our goal

- Present descriptive portrait of couple relationships among unmarried parents still romantically involved at their baby's birth
- Illustrate what policy makers wanting to get parents married are up against

# Data

## ■ Fragile Families Survey

- N=3,700 unmarried couples who just had a baby

## ■ TLC3 Qualitative Interview Study

- Qualitative interviews with 50 unmarried FF couples still romantically involved at birth (most cohabiting) in Chicago, Milwaukee, New York. K Edin, PI

## Realities of Unmarried Parents' Disadvantage (For Couples Romantically Involved at Birth)

- Dad ever incarcerated 39%
- Dad earned < \$10,000 last year 33%
- Dad isn't employed now 24%
- Mom (Dad) a high school dropout 40%
- Mom has child with previous partner 42%
- Dad has child with previous partner 41%
- Either has child with previous partner 61%

From FF survey

# Relationship Before Conception

- Most in their early to mid 20s
- Seeing each other an average of 1 year before conception (some just a few months)

# Were Pregnancies Planned?

- 11% Planned
- 9% Contraceptive Failure
- 42% Unplanned, but they weren't  
contracepting
- 38% “In Between” Planned and  
Unplanned

From TLC3 data

# Once she was pregnant

- Many moved to cohabitation if not already cohabiting
- Many of the relationships probably wouldn't have lasted but for the pregnancy

# Unexpected Discovery: Pervasive Distrust about Sexual Infidelity

- % reporting distrust of partner's sexual fidelity
  - 39% of Moms
  - 19% of Dads
- Many complain about the other's *unwarranted* distrust
- At least 1 parent reports own or other's distrust in 58% of couples



# Actual Cheating

- % of Dads who have cheated on Mom
  - Dad's report: 13%
  - Mom's report: 19%
- % of Moms who have cheated on Dad
  - 4% by Dads' or Moms' report

# A Common Focus of Distrust: Dad's Relationship with his Other "Baby Mama"

- "That's like the biggest problem, his other daughter and her mother...it's just him like always being over there, I don't really know what...relationship...they had, but it's... kinda interfering with ours..."
- Interviewer: You think he still has feelings for her?
- "I don't know. Probably so...he say he doesn't, but yeah, I think so." (Mother, 27)

# His Other Baby Mama

- “He said ‘I wish you wasn't so jealous...’ ‘cause you know, I be telling him ‘Well, you fittin to go see your kids. Yeah...their baby mama fittin to be in the house. You'll... talk.’ You never know what happens. I don't like that, you know. So we'll get into it.” Mother, 22

## A less frequent theme: Her Other Baby's Daddy

- “He [her other kids’ dad] had come to get his kids and I bumped into him then, and he dropped me off at my sister’s house. And I told him [current partner] he dropped me off...and he got jealous. So the man is married now...What do I want with him? I don’t want him. He’s always jealous.”

Mother, 32

# Distrust leading to surveillance

- “He was still getting girl phone calls... As smart as I am, I was calling the people back and find out what was really going on between him and her.” Mother, 20

## Distrust leading to surveillance

“He...gets to go out and do whatever he wants and I don’t know what he’s doing ...When we got back together [after his infidelity during pregnancy]...I always checked his pockets because I don’t trust him *at all*... Maybe it’s just in my head, or maybe it’s not.” Mother, 18

# Generalized distrust *probably* about sexual fidelity

“Cause I stopped trusting...she used to go out every day. **EVERY DAY**. She'd lie to me...‘I'm going to my auntie house,’ but she won't come back for six, seven hours. I **KNOW** you not at your auntie house for six hours. Your auntie live walking distance!”

Father, 22 [This couple seemed very happy 2 years later.]

# Norms of Fidelity

- Most believe in norm of fidelity (at least for their partner!)
- When asked what they'd break up over, *almost all* say they'd leave if partner cheated
- Cheating figures in many later-wave breakup stories
- Many relationships survive cheating, but distrust increases (though many distrust partners who have no history of cheating on them)



# What' *Love* Got to Do With It?

Many told us about touching expressions of love and caring. There's less talk of love where there's more distrust, but surprisingly often, love and caring coexist or alternate with distrust.

# Things Dads say Moms Do to Show Love

- Hugs, kisses, tell him she loves him
- Buys him things
- “Cook me a special dinner”
- “Run me a bath,” “Rubs his head”
- “Treats me like a king” when his back is hurt
- Dedicates herself to his other kids
- Gives him compliments
- Watches movies with him on the couch

# Things Moms say Dads Do to Show Love

- Tells her he loves her
- Cards, flowers, hugs, kisses, hold hands, foot rubs
- “We always all over each other”
- Run bath water
- Lets her talk about her feelings
- “Just willing to sacrifice”
- Wrote her from jail

# Chances For Marriage?

## At birth

- 83% romantically involved, 50% cohabiting
- Cohabitors: 82% of moms, 91% of dads  
saw a “good or certain” chance they would marry
- But few actually married within 3 years
  - By 1 yr: 9% of all, 15% of cohabitors married
  - By 3 yrs: 14% of all, 21% of cohabitors married\*
  - By 3 yrs: 47% of all, 40% of cohabitors broken up\*

From FF survey. \*3 year info is early results from 7 cities

# In depth interviews revealed:

- When they said there was a good chance of marriage, they meant it, but often see it as years in the future
- Women and men seem ~ equally intent on meeting conditions *before* getting married
- Having a child a reason to try to stay together, but not a reason to marry “prematurely.” No deadline.

From Gibson, Edin, McLanahan 2003, TLC3 analysis

# The Economic Bar

- Economic ability to set up household together **NOT** enough (most already cohabiting)
- The “white picket fence” dream includes:
  - Decent house, furniture, car, modest savings
  - A ring, dress, and modest wedding reception
- Not *respectable* to marry without meeting bar. But many can't meet it anytime soon.

From Gibson, Edin, McLanahan 2003; TLC3 analysis

# The Relational Bar

- Takes time to be sure this person is right (divorce seen as BAD)
- Distrust creates hesitancy
- Women worry men will feel more right to control them if married (more than if cohabit)
- No deadline (as in “shotgun marriages”)

From Gibson, Edin, McLanahan 2003, TLC3 analysis

# Factors Encouraging Marriage by 1 Year After Birth

(Carlson, McLanahan, England 2003, FF analysis)

- Quality of couple relationship (his or her report)
- Dad's employment and annual earnings
- Her education and wage rate
- Pro-marriage attitudes
- Mom's general distrust of men hurts
- His kids by another mother hurt
- All of above are net of relationship status at birth  
(broken up, visiting, cohabiting)



# Lessons for Policy Interventions

- Improving quality of relationships will encourage marriage/discourage breakups
- Need to confront
  - Men's Sexual Infidelity and men and women's distrust
  - Problems due to kids by other partners
  - Low earnings and assets that even cohabiting couples see as a bar to marriage

**THE END**

# EXTRA SLIDES NOT FOR PRESENTATION

- Extra slides we can use to answer questions

# The Economic Bar

He: ...I don't [want] to rush into everything yet.

She: Right. And we don't want to go to the City Hall.

He: Get myself situated...I want to do everything right.

She: Make sure everything is together....

Interviewer: How long do you think that'll take?...

He: I give it about 3 or 4 years...

She: I...give it about a year or 2.

He: And I'm VERY serious we have to get our money together.

# The Economic Bar

- “Once we get a job. Once we both have jobs. And like, I’m waiting on his insurance to get free daycare, and then if I decide to put him in daycare, then I can get a job and work. And I still have to finish school. So once I finish school and get a job and everything, and he’s working.” [referring to when they would get married]

# Unplanned Conception

“We did it so much without... [it] never happened before... I just thought maybe I couldn't have kids or something, so I didn't worry about it. Should have watched Sally Jesse Raphael...” Mother, 18

# In Between Planned and Unplanned

“I wanted to have a baby before I was 30... Well, I thought if I did get pregnant... I mean it wasn't planned, but if it did happen, I was going to have it.” Mother, 29

# After they found out she was pregnant, were they happy?

- If “in between” planned & unplanned
  - Mom: 45% happy, 18% unhappy
  - Dad: 55% happy, 9% unhappy
- If unplanned
  - Moms: 16% happy, 63% unhappy
  - Dads: 16% happy, 26% unhappy
  - The rest in between happy & unhappy, or “shocked”



# A less frequent theme: the Other “Baby’s Daddy” Problem

- “ I asked her, ‘...did you speak to the baby’s father a month ago?’ ‘No, I haven’t.’ But her facial expression...told me...that she did...You know, the expression she pulls when she gets nervous, when she’s saying something that’s not true and deep down inside my heart I think she was lying to me...She couldn’t look at me in my eye you know?...She says that...he’s got more of a right than I do, because he is the baby’s father...’  
Man, 29

# Breakup #1

Puerto Rican couple was together for 3 years before the baby came. At birth they seemed happy, though poor. By Round 2 they have broken up; she says right after the birth he stopped coming home, was always out with his friends, and got violent; once she called the police. He returned to Puerto Rico after the breakup. She gets no child support from him. Once she took the baby to see him there. By now, she has a child by a 2<sup>nd</sup> man, and is living with a third man. We couldn't find him to interview after the breakup.

# Breakup #2

(Well, not entirely clear if they *are* broken up)

- Mexican-American couple got married right after the birth (a “late shot gun”). He’s an immigrant. Child “in between” planned and unplanned, but she seems not to like motherhood. By 2 years later, she goes out dancing a lot leaving him with baby. He is jealous and thinks she should spend more time at home. She says being a dancer is her dream and he isn’t supporting her. She has proposed a temporary breakup and is about to move out at the 2 year interview. Neither thinks they’ll divorce, but the conflict seems bitter with each unyielding.

# Breakup Story #3

- African American couple has unplanned conception and starts cohabiting during the pregnancy (this is what transcript says altho Kate says living together before so check) (shot gun). He says she's not willing to have sex after the birth; they are more like platonic coparents. He does web chat lines with women. She's furious that she learns he had sex with a woman in their house (he claims her relative made up the story). She threw him out. There was police involvement. She says he was violent; he says she lied to police. She concedes that at the time, she was already seeing another guy that she met on a phone date line service, though she hadn't told him. She now lives with this guy who is a social father and she Dad doesn't see his child (not clear if she'll let him).

# Breakup Story #4

- White mom and Mexican-American dad have unplanned pregnant when she's 18, he's XX. Start living together during pregnancy (is that right?). He has sex with someone else during pregnancy before cohabitation which leads to distrust. Her family doesn't like him. He works sporadically; she thinks he doesn't look for a job hard enough. By 24 mo interview, she has a job. She has asked him to move out for a "time out" though she tells interviewer she never wants to get back together (but says she didn't tell him that or it would have been too hard to get him to leave). He says in his interview that says he knows conditions to get back together. He goes over ever few days to see their son.

# Breakup Story #5

- Puerto Rican couple is living with her mother at the birth. His other baby's mother tries to make Mom think Dad is still interested in her (he says it is a lie). She breaks up one day, calling the police and accusing him of physical abuse (he says he wasn't violent). She goes to her mom's in Puerto Rico. She calls and sometimes says she'll return if he moves to another city. He's worried he'd be too far from his other kid. He says he isn't sexual with other women hoping for reconciliation but she isn't sure.

# Breakup Story #6

- Puerto Rican couple has had their second child. He has a drug problem at birth. Everytime he goes home to PR he seems to get back into drugs. He gets into a physical fight with her sister (who is holding their baby). He moves to CT. She follows later. He gets back on drugs. Seems mutual violence all along. He cheats on her in CT and that is the last straw. She leaves his uncle's house, goes on welfare, sends her kids back to WI with her mom, and is trying to get back to WI. He wants to reconcile. He ends up in jail for drugs. By Round 2 she and new boyfriend living in FL with their new baby and her kids. She gets involved in drugs with him and leaves him (kate says tring to—check) but doesn't have the cash to get out of Florida.

# Atypical breakup story (#7)

- Two African American attorneys cohabit for several years. Not contracepting because thought she was sterile. She's thinking of breaking up when she learned she was pregnant. Wanted a baby. They try to make it work, but have broken up w/in a year (reads like a typical middle class divorce). He says he "saw" other women (but "nothing serious") all along, but she never knew. He would like to see the child more than she agrees to, and may file for joint custody. They have an informal child support agreement; no conflict about that. He holds out hope of reconciliation so they could be together with the child, but says he'd prefer a more traditional partner.



# Money Problems

- A few couples can't live together because of lack of \$ to set up a household, but almost all TLC3 couples cohabiting by the birth
- Many cohabiting couples don't completely pool their money, and those who don't more likely to break up
- Not ENOUGH money, but money disagreements seem similar to those in working/middle class in that one often thinks the other irresponsible or spends too much
- Money generally not key to breakup *stories*

# Unmarried parents are mostly low income: % of Moms who are Never Married, 1960-2000

