

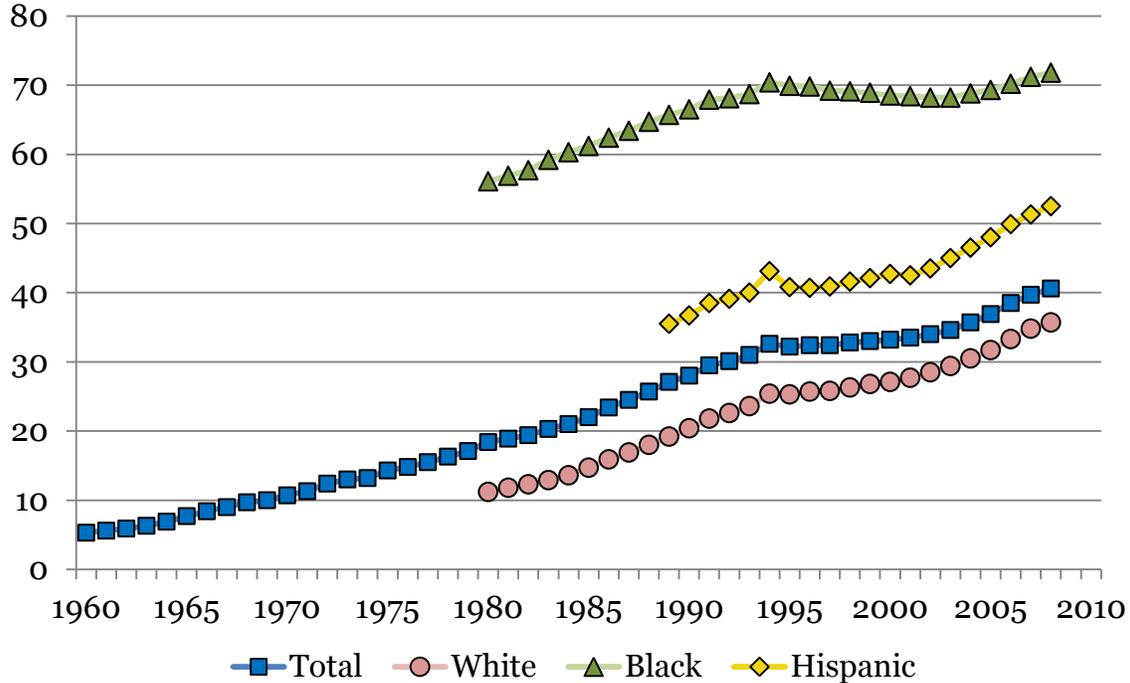
# Fragile Families and Children's Opportunities

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The context of family life has changed dramatically over the past 50 years. Today, over 40 percent of children in the U.S. are born to unmarried parents, up from only 5 percent in 1960. My research tries to understand why this change is happening and what it means for parents, children and society.

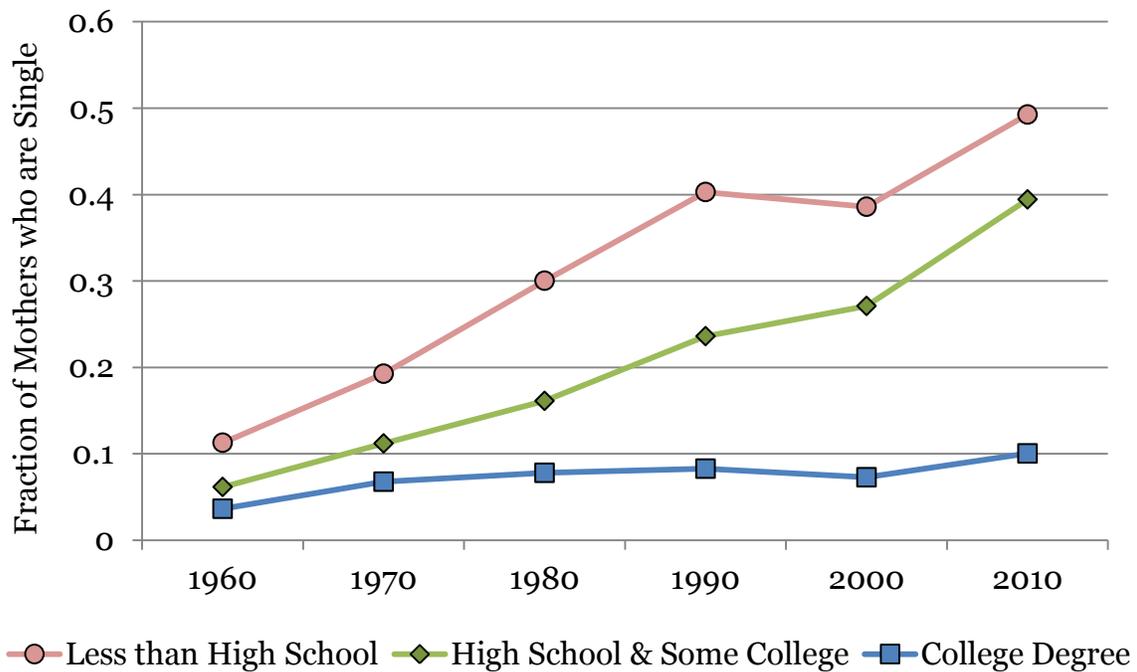
**Figure 1. Unmarried Births as a Percent of All Births in the U.S.**



*Source: National Center for Health Statistics*

As shown in the Figure 1, the proportion of children born outside marriage has increased steadily since 1960. The dark blue line shows the trend for the total population, and the other lines show trends for different race/ethnic groups. Here we see that while births outside marriage are more common among African Americans and Hispanics, the increase is similar for all groups.

Figure 2. Fraction of Mothers Who Are Single, by Education



Source: IPUMS Census/ACS

The fact that we see such similar trends across race/ethnic groups might lead us to conclude that the trends represent a broad change in the meaning of marriage, affecting the entire population. However, when we look at the trends by social class, we see this is not the case. As shown by the blue line in Figure 2, women with college degrees are continuing to have children almost exclusively in the context of marriage, while women in the other two groups – those with a high school degree or less – have seen a dramatic increase in non-marital births, as shown by the red and yellow lines. Not surprisingly, these trends have stimulated a great deal of debate over the meaning, causes and consequences of the change.

To inform this debate, my colleagues and I launched the *Fragile Families Study*, which has been following a cohort of approximately 5000 children born around 2000. The study is based on a probability sample of births in large U.S. cities and includes an oversample of births to unmarried mothers. Mothers were interviewed in the hospital shortly after giving birth, and fathers were interviewed either at the hospital or by phone. Both parents were re-interviewed when the child was 1, 3, 5 and 9, and children were assessed at ages 3, 5 and 9. Saliva samples were collected from mothers and children at the 9-year interview. We are currently working on the next round of interviews which will take place when the children turn 15.

**Table 1. Unmarried Mothers' Capabilities at Birth**

	Mothers	
	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>Married</i>
College Degree	3%	30%
Age	23 years	29 years
Depression	15%	12%
Poor	44%	14%

*Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study*

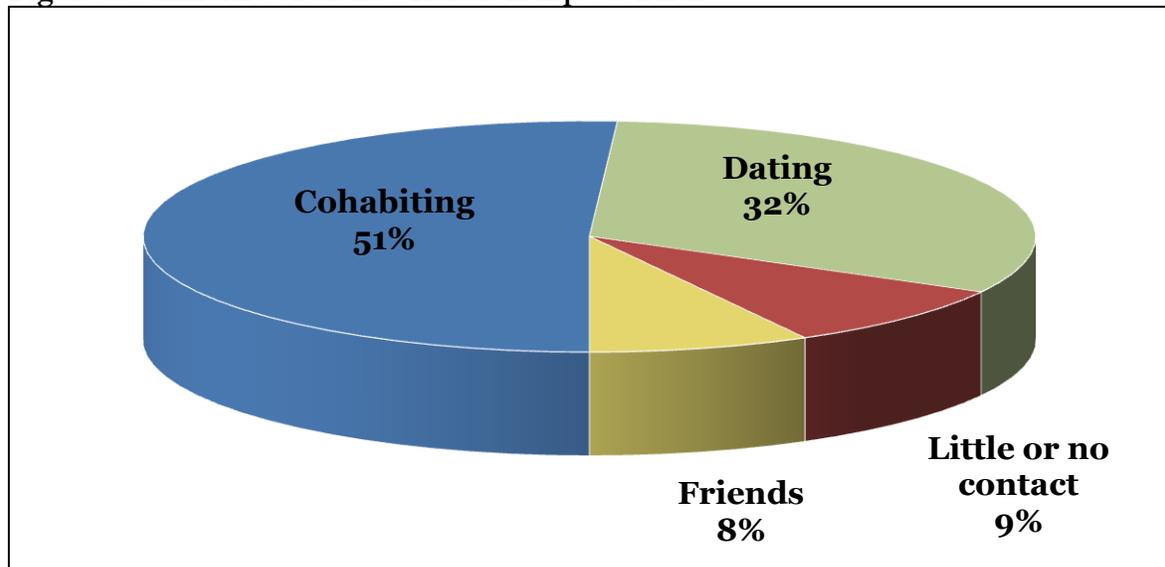
**Table 2. Unmarried Fathers' Capabilities at Birth**

	Fathers	
	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>Married</i>
Unemployed	24%	6%
Previously Incarcerated	40%	8%

*Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study*

Our study has produced several insights about the conditions and experiences of unmarried parents and their children. **Our first major finding is that unmarried parents are much more disadvantaged than married parents.** Although we knew these parents were less educated when we began our study, we didn't fully appreciate the depth and breadth of their disadvantage. As shown in Table 1, unmarried mothers are much less likely to have a college degree (3% versus 30%), they are younger, by 5 years, more likely to be depressed, and much more likely to be poor than married mothers. Similarly, Table 2 indicates that unmarried fathers are much more likely to be unemployed than married fathers, and much more likely to have been incarcerated at some point in their lives. The high rate of incarceration among unmarried fathers was another big surprise and highlights the importance of the criminal justice system in the lives of these families.

**Figure 3. Unmarried Parents' Relationships at Birth**



*Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study*

A second key finding is that non-marital births are not the product of casual sex or one-night-stands, as some commentators have suggested. As shown in Figure 3, 51 percent of unmarried parents are cohabiting when their child is born, and another 32 percent are dating. Only 9 percent have no contact with one another.

**Table 3. Mothers' Attitudes at Birth**

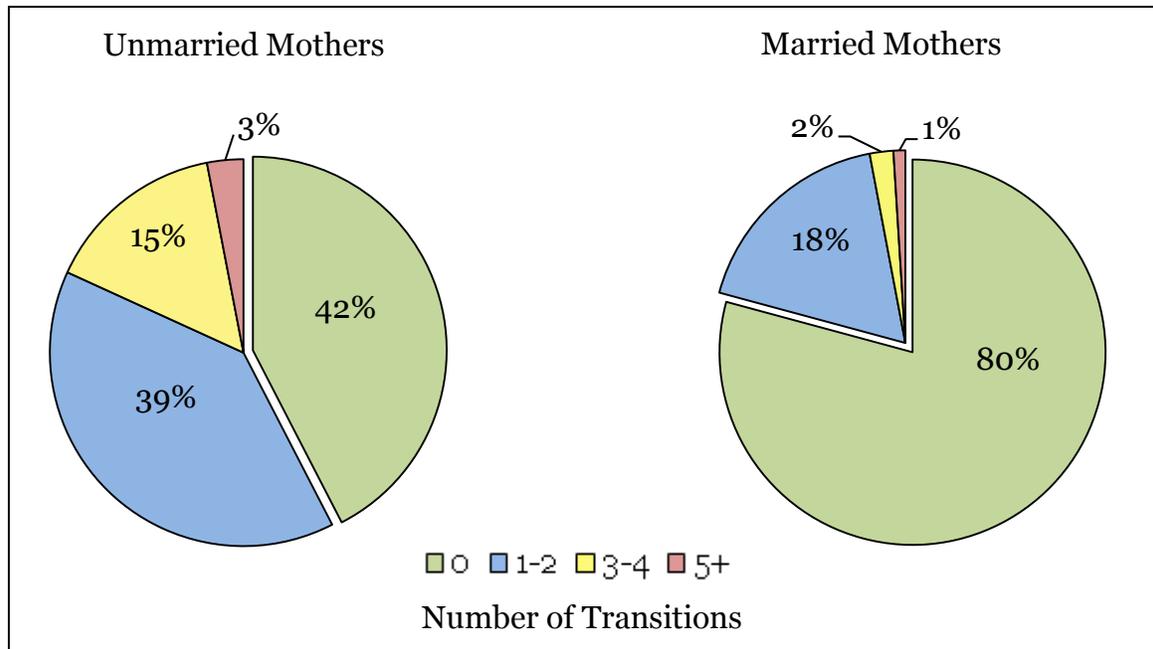
	Mothers	
	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>Married</i>
"Chances of marriage are good"	75%	--
"Marriage is better for kids"	65%	83%
"A single mother can raise a child alone"	84%	60%

*Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study*

We also found that unmarried parents' attitudes towards marriage were quite positive. As shown in Table 3, three quarters of mothers say their chances of marrying the father are good, and nearly two thirds agree with the statement that 'marriage is better for children.' Unmarried mothers are less positive than married mothers, but both groups are high. The only thing we found that might be construed as evidence for anti-marriage was that 84 percent of unmarried mothers agree with the statement that, "a single mother can raise a child alone." Note, however, that this statement is more about what is *doable* rather than what is *desirable*.

A third key finding is that, despite parents' high hopes, most relationships do not last. By the time their child is 5 years old, only a third of unmarried parents are still together, as compared with over 80 percent of married parents. And a large proportion of these parents have gone on to form new partnerships and to have children with new partners. **This finding underscores the point that non-marital childbearing in the U.S. is very different from non-marital childbearing in countries like Sweden and France, where most unmarried parents are in long term cohabiting unions.**

**Figure 4. Relationship Transitions by Year Five**



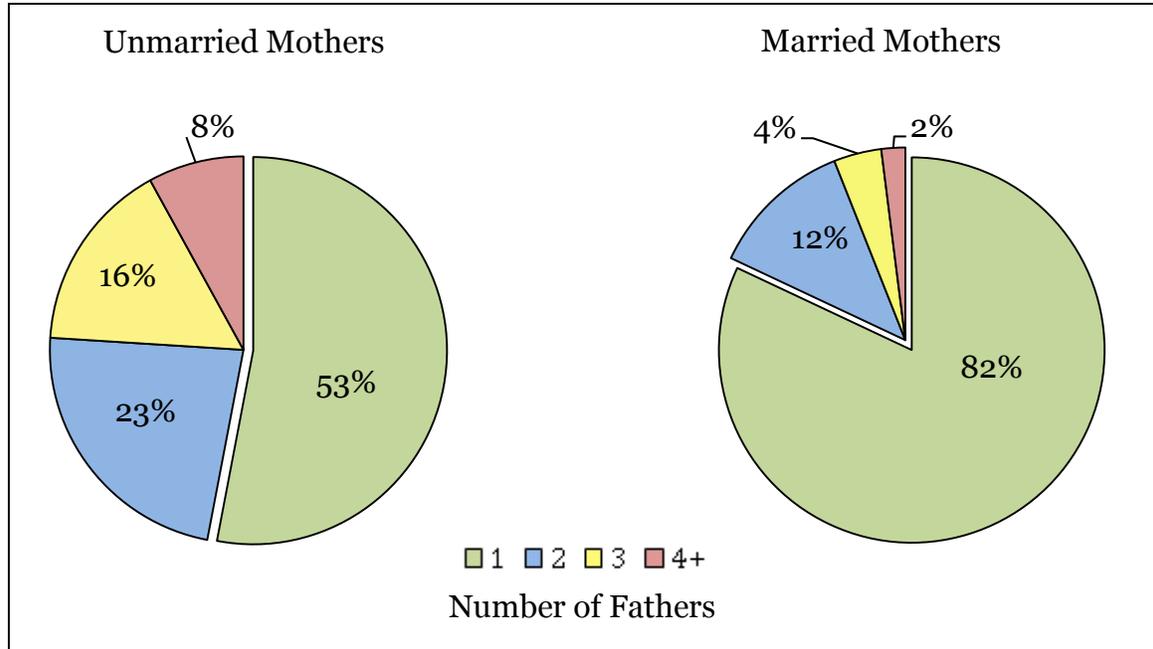
*Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study*

The fact that so many relationships do not last led us to take a closer look at the amount of instability in the lives of these families. What we found was shocking. As shown in Figure 4, by the time their child is five years old, over half of unmarried mothers have experienced at least one change in a residential partnership – either a move in or a move out by a romantic partner. Thirty nine percent have experienced one or two transitions, 15 percent have experienced three or four transitions and 3 percent have experienced five or more changes. If we count changes in dating partnerships, the numbers are even higher. **The highest level of instability is found among mothers who are living alone at birth, suggesting that the term “single-mother” family may be a misnomer since very few of these households are composed of mothers who are stably single.**

These findings are quite disturbing given what we know about the effects of instability. Instability causes stress, and chronic instability causes chronic stress, which taxes the immune system and increases the risk of physical and mental health problems. Instability also undermines the quality of the home environment by diverting mothers' attention away

from the child and creating uncertainty over parental authority. Empirical support for these ideas comes from animal research as well as laboratory experiments and observational data.

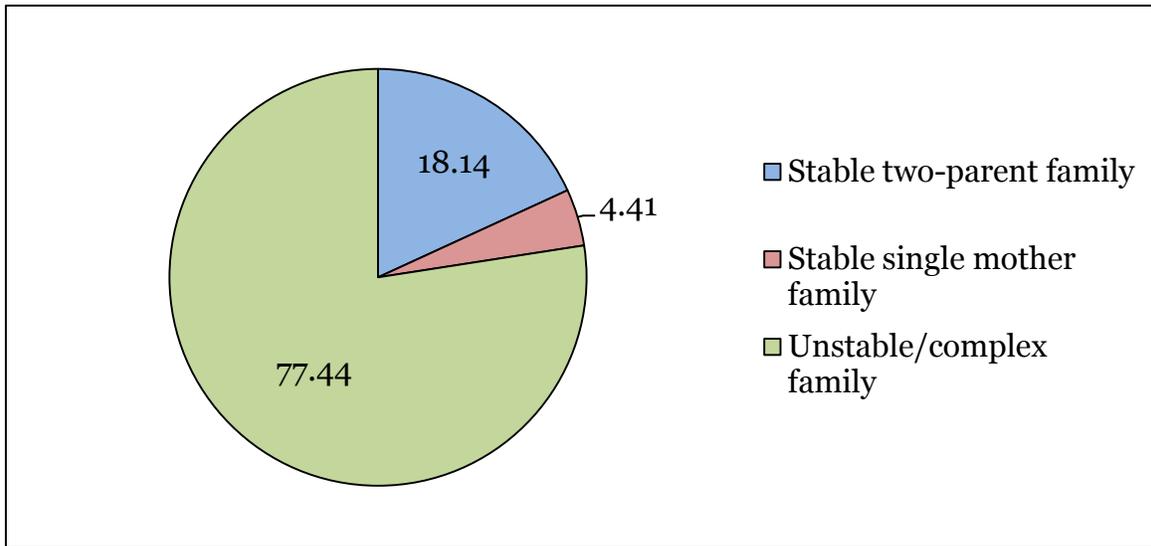
**Figure 5. Family Complexity by Year Five**



*Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study*

A second surprise was the high level of complexity in these families. As shown in Figure 5, by the time their child is five years old, 23 percent of unmarried mothers have had a child by at least two different fathers, 16 percent have had a child by three different fathers, and 8 percent have had a child by 4 or more fathers. Having children with different fathers is a serious concern because it creates divided loyalties and free-rider problems. We know, for example, that non-resident fathers are often reluctant to pay child support because they cannot monitor how their money is spent. When a household contains other men's children, this problem is much worse. Similarly, the difficulties parents face in trying to schedule visits between children and non-resident fathers increase exponentially when multiple fathers are involved.

**Figure 6. Instability and Complexity Combined at Year Five**



*Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study*

Figure 6 shows what happens when we look at instability and complexity together. Here we see that the vast majority of children born to unmarried parents – over three quarters – are living in households that are either unstable or complex or both. Only 18 percent are living in stable, two-parent families with no half siblings, and only 4 percent are living in stable single mother families.

Finally, and not so surprising, children born to unmarried parents are not doing as well as children raised in married-parent families, even after we adjust for differences in parental resources that exist at birth. They score lower on tests of reading and math, they report more mental health problems, and they are more likely to suffer from asthma and obesity.

Instability and complexity appear to account for some of the disparities in child wellbeing.

**An important take-away point from the last few slides is that many of the negative consequences attributed to single motherhood in the past may actually be due to the high levels of family instability and complexity.**

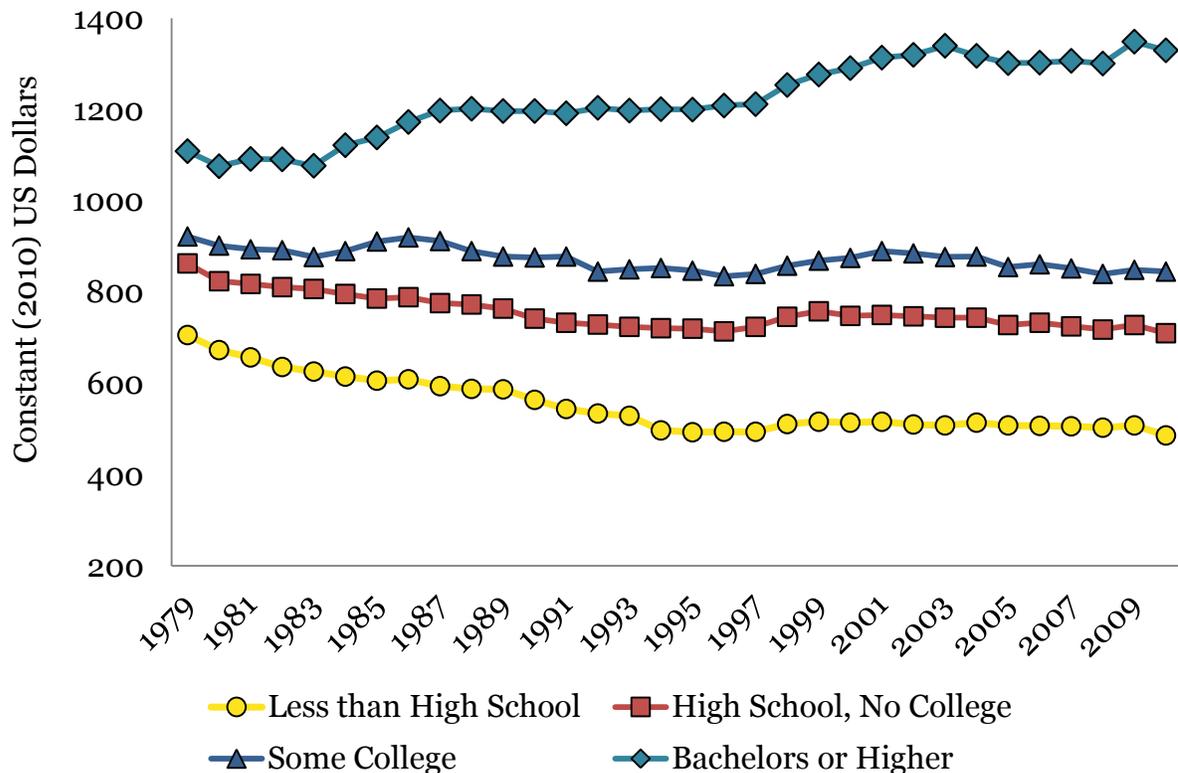
**So, what is driving the increase in non-marital childbearing?** I would argue that the trend can be explained by three key factors: (1) the marriage bar, which is the economic standard a couple must achieve in order to marry, (2) the actual economic prospects of young couples, and finally (3) social norms about sex outside marriage.

With respect to the marriage bar, the ability to establish an independent household and support a family has long been viewed as a prerequisite for marriage, both in the U.S. and throughout most northern European societies. This norm was strong at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when many people married late or didn't marry at all, and it continues to be strong today. The following is a quote from one of the fathers in our study who is explaining to the interviewer why he is waiting to get married.

*“I want to be secure. I don’t want to get married and be like we have no money or nothing . . . I don’t want to live here. I want to get my little house in Long Island . . . white-picket fence, and two-car garage, me hitting the garbage cans when I pull up in the driveway. You know . . . stuff like you see on TV. ”*

Whereas the marriage bar has remained high over time, the other two factors – economic conditions and attitudes about sex outside marriage – have changed dramatically since the 1960s. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the economy was growing, making it easier for young couples to afford ‘the little house on Long Island’ and the ‘two car garage.’ Since the 1960s, however, economic conditions have made it increasingly difficult for young couples to reach the marriage bar, especially those with only a high school degree.

**Figure 7. Median Weekly Earnings of Full-time Working Men 25 Years and Older**



*Source: Current Population Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics*

As shown in Figure 7, while college-educated males have seen a small increase in weekly earnings since 1979, less educated males have seen a decline. And this figure does not include men who are unemployed or working less than full time, which would make the decline even greater.

The 1960s saw dramatic changes in birth control technology and social norms about premarital sex, which made it more acceptable for a woman to have a child outside marriage. Prior to the 1960s, premarital sex was highly stigmatized. If a young woman became pregnant, the typical response was a ‘shot gun’ marriage. Once the stigma was gone, the

decision to have a child no longer depended on the decision to marry. Note that if stigma had remained high, we probably would have seen more ‘shot-gun marriages’ and fewer non-marital births. Similarly, if economic prospects had remained high, the decline in stigma might not have matter much. The point is that it took both a decline in economic prospects and a decline in stigma to produce the current situation.

**So what can be done to change the current dynamic?** As noted earlier, unmarried parents are not that different from married parents in terms of their aspirations and even their behaviors. Both groups value marriage, both spend a long time searching for a suitable marriage partner, and both engage in pre-marital sex and cohabitation. What is different is that one group has children *while they are searching for a suitable partner*, whereas the other group has children after they marry.

In order for this dynamic to change, two things would have to happen. First, we would need to give less-educated women a good reason to postpone motherhood. Women who are currently postponing motherhood are typically investing in education and careers. These women use contraceptive methods that are more reliable, and they use these methods more consistently. Postponing fertility would have several benefits: women would be more mature when they became mothers, and they would probably do a better job of selecting suitable partners.

That said, postponing fertility will not solve the problem of non-marital childbearing unless the economic prospects of young men also improve. Women are not likely to marry men whom they view as poor providers, regardless of their own earnings capacity. Thus, in addition to encouraging young women to delay fertility, we also need to improve the economic prospects of men, especially men with no more than a high school degree. This will not be an easy task, but nothing could be more important for preserving the institution of marriage.

To sum up, the increase in non-marital childbearing has negative consequences for parents, children and society. The fact that it is concentrated among poor and working class parents is especially worrisome insofar as these families are struggling already. The basic drivers of the trend are the decline in economic opportunities for those with a high school degree or less combined with changes in social norms that have de-stigmatized pre-marital sex. In addition, the current fertility dynamic in which couples are having children *while* they are searching for a suitable partner is making things worse. To reverse the trend, we will need to provide stronger incentives for young women to postpone motherhood, and we will need to make sure that their prospective partners have something to bring to the table. Failing to do so is likely to exacerbate inequality and reduce the mobility of the next generation.

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