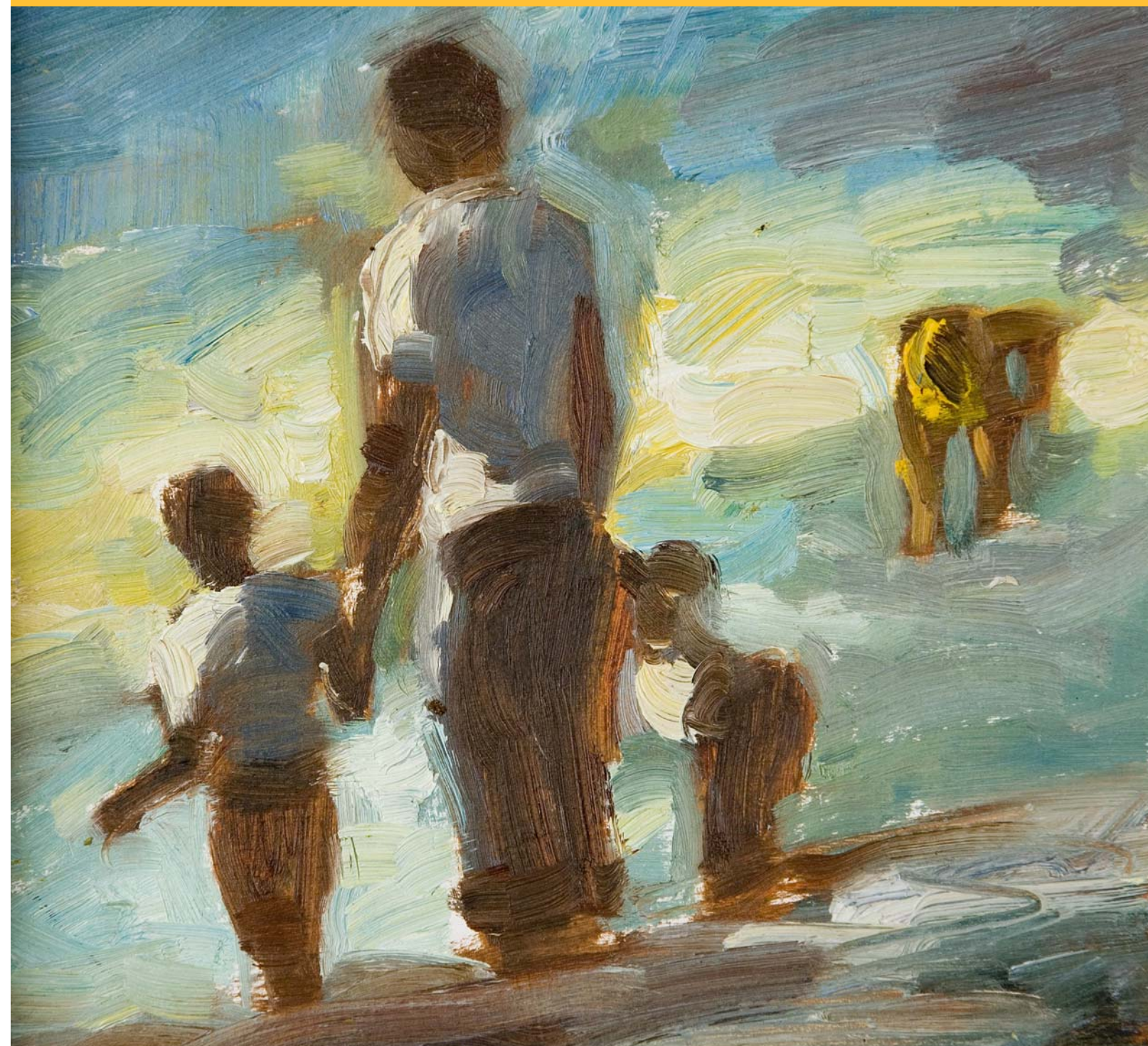


Ronald B. Mincy and Hillard Pouncy
An Essay in the Future of the Black Family Series

Baby Fathers and American Family Formation

Low-Income, Never-Married Parents in
Louisiana before Katrina



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Introduction

WHEN WE BEGAN this study on family formation among the poor in pre-Katrina Louisiana, we thought of ways to remind ourselves how great the gulfs were between mainstream family formation patterns and the formation patterns characteristic of families in our sample. We thought of Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist who wrote about the rural rich in Russia almost a century and a half ago. By contrast we studied the urban, mostly African American, poor in Louisiana a few short years before a catastrophic hurricane changed their lives forever.

Tolstoy divided the families of his day between the happy (“All happy families are alike;”) and the unhappy (“each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”).¹ He focused on the unhappy ones. We divided the families of our day between the married ones (all married families are married in the same legal way) and the unmarried, or fragile, ones (each “fragile” family is fragile in its own way.) When we say that each of these families is fragile in its own way we mean that no two never-married couples begin their relationship, have a baby, and end or continue that relationship in quite the same way. In this study, we are interested only in fragile families.

This report is based on a study commissioned in 2002 by Dana Reichert, who was then Director of Louisiana’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The study was envisioned as a tool for assessing needs and developing policies affecting the state’s many fragile families. This investigation was particularly salient because Louisiana has more fragile families per capita than any other state in the nation. The study is based on a survey conducted by Phil Richardson for Maximus Inc., of Washington, DC, which interviewed 1,200 never-married mothers receiving Food Stamps as well as 800 fathers who had children with the identified mothers. The parents were surveyed two to five months after the birth of their child. (Maximus also interviewed a second sample, consisting of mothers and fathers with two- and three-year-old children to gain insights into what happens to the relationship among parents over a longer time frame.)

The two- to five-month time frame provided a unique opportunity to assess exactly how long a so-called “magic moment” lasts—that is, how long after the birth of a child a low-income, never-married couple tends to believe that their relationship will endure. We thought that such insight might help researchers, policy makers, and other social and civic leaders who are interested in helping never-married parents stay together and avoid breaking up.

In the end, however, we determined that this “magic moment” was so fleeting and challenging that it provided few opportunities for practitioners to intervene and address family formation issues. Instead, we found a far more promising “daddy moment.” We use this term to refer to the period during which a never-married father is likely to remain involved in the life of his child with the biological mother’s support. This longer “daddy moment”

offers a potentially rich period in which the couple might reflect on how they got to this point; deal with tensions and issues arising from their shared parenting roles; and imagine future partners, relationships, or—possibly—marriage to one another.

This report concentrates on descriptive data drawn from the study that are explicitly relevant to our policy conclusions regarding the “daddy moment.” Please note that these conclusions await further, rigorous, multivariate evaluation.

A Katrina Connection

AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA, many of the young mothers with babies at the Superdome or Convention Center and some of the young male offenders released from a flooded jail and kept outdoors at the roadside could easily have been the “baby mothers” and “baby fathers” we surveyed in the New Orleans portion of our Louisiana Fragile Family Study. Here are some characteristics of those in that sample:

- More than 80 percent of the interviewees were African American.
- More than half were between 20 and 24 years old (51%) and another quarter were between 25 and 29.
- The estimated average household income for mothers was \$9,830. The estimated average household income for fathers was \$16,300. Louisiana is one of the nation’s poorest states. In 2001, its median household income was \$33,322 with only three states having lower median household incomes.²
- Most mothers and fathers had worked in the past year. The average mother had worked in a low-paying job (often in the food service industry) within the past year. At the time of the survey there was a 50/50 chance that she currently had that job. If she was not working, she was looking for work. Further, almost a third of the mothers worked in health services or office settings.
- About half the Louisiana fathers had spent time in a jail or prison, but despite that fact almost all fathers (95%) had worked in the past year. Twenty percent also told the surveyors that they had additional, unreported income.
- Seventy percent of the mothers already had at least one child prior to the “focal” child whose arrival was the subject of our study. Moreover, 50 percent had one or more children with men who were not the father of the focal child.

Babies, Mamas, and Dramas

IN ANALYZING THE DATA we found it useful to draw upon theories and typologies developed by Caribbean family scholars who have assessed the consequences of non-marital fertility in their own region.³

Since much of the fertility these scholars discuss takes place outside residential unions,⁴ they extend their family structure typologies to include “visiting unions.” These are sexual unions, many of which lead to childbirth, in which the partners reside separately in their own or their parents’ households. Family scholars in the U.S. have begun to use this term as well.⁵

Researchers also use the special terms “baby mother” and “baby father.”⁶ Baby mothers and baby fathers are parents who acknowledge joint responsibility for the children they have conceived together but who need not be involved in a residential or sexual union at present.

Definitions Used by Caribbean Scholars*

Inside Child: A child that a mother and father have had exclusively with one other.

Outside Child: A child that either the mother or father have had in a previous relationship with another partner.

Multiple Partner Fertility: A situation in which a parent has had children with more than one partner.

Cohabiting Couple: A mother and father who are living together all or most of the time and who are in a steady, committed relationship.

Visiting Relationship: A relationship in which a couple are romantically involved but not living together. A visiting relationship might include overnight visits.

Baby Father Relationship: The mother and father are no longer in any type of committed, romantic, or sexual relationship, but the father continues to be involved in his child’s life.

Absent Father Relationship: The mother and father are no longer in a relationship and the father is no longer involved in the child’s life. He might, however, pay child support.

**This list summarizes the terms and definitions used in this report that owe their origins to Caribbean scholars.*

These parents are bound in a relationship, which they and society acknowledge, that involves rights and responsibilities toward their child. As with other separated (or divorced) parents, however, baby fathers might fail to provide necessary financial support and moral guidance and baby mothers might deny baby fathers access to their child.

Interestingly, the terms “baby mother” and “baby father” are becoming part of the popular culture in countries with significant numbers of Caribbean immigrants. A five-part series by novelist Patrick Augustus (*Baby Father* and *Baby Father 2* were published in 1997; *Baby Father 5*, in 2006) chronicles the complexities of male-female relationships among black unwed fathers who are separated from their children. Intended to counter negative stereotypes about irresponsible black fathers, the series is so popular that the British Broadcasting Corporation began a television series entitled “Baby Father.” A 2003 novel by Carl Weber treating the same subject has not enjoyed quite the same success, but its title, *Baby Mama Drama*, is now in widespread use by young African American men to describe the complexities of dating, mating, and fatherhood when there is multiple partner fertility.

Findings: Father Involvement after the Birth of the Child

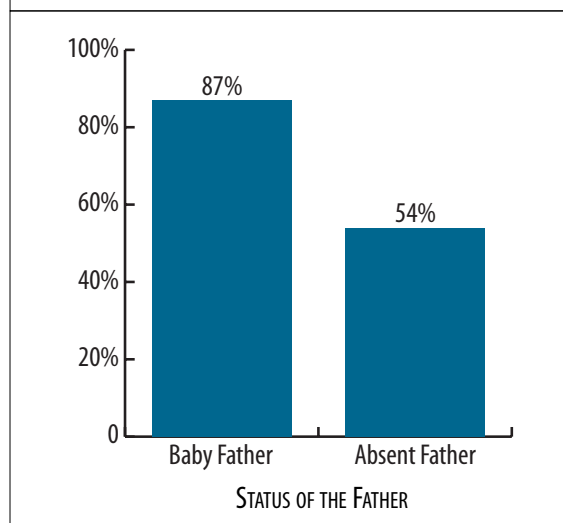
- **Most of the mothers wanted the father to stay involved in the child’s life, and most fathers also wanted to be involved.**

Some researchers discount claims of high involvement and monetary payments by never-married fathers because they think that fathers inflate such reports. Notably, in this study mothers corroborate high levels of father involvement, especially among fathers in visiting fragile families and among baby fathers.

Fewer than half of the new mothers in this study were in committed relationships shortly after the birth of the child, but a large percentage of them wanted the father to remain involved in the child’s life and to help with at least some aspects of child rearing. For example, 87 percent of the new mothers who were in a baby father relationship and 54 percent of the mothers in an absent father relationship wanted the father to stay involved with the child (Figure 1).

Similar percentages of new mothers said that they had made plans as a couple about how they wanted to raise the child. In addition, two-thirds of new fathers who

Figure 1. Percent of New Mothers Who Wanted the Father to Be Involved in Raising Their New Child in the Coming Years



were absent fathers when interviewed reported that they wanted to stay involved with the child.

Even after a father’s infidelity ended a mother’s commitment to him, most mothers wanted the father to stay involved in helping to raise the child. The mother’s interest in having a father involved had little to do with his economic status. Even in cases in which the father had reacted poorly to the pregnancy (did not visit, did not support the pregnancy, or did not sign the birth certificate), most mothers wanted him to stay involved with the child.

At two to three years after the birth of the child, very few mothers were still in a committed relationship with the father. But almost nine in ten (88 percent) of the mothers wanted the father to be involved in raising the child, and 71 percent believed that the father also wanted to stay involved with the child (Figure 2).

• Most of the fathers who were no longer living with the mother continued to see the child once a month or more.

All non-cohabiting fathers with children who were two to three years old said that they had seen their child since the child was born. Almost seven in ten (69 percent) of the non-cohabiting mothers with children that age reported that the father had seen the child once or more in the past month. Close to half (44 percent) of the fathers had visited the child at least once a week (Figure 3).

The percentage of fathers who had seen their child in the last week, however,

Figure 2. Mothers with Two- to Three-Year-Old Children Interested in Having the Father Involved in Raising the Child

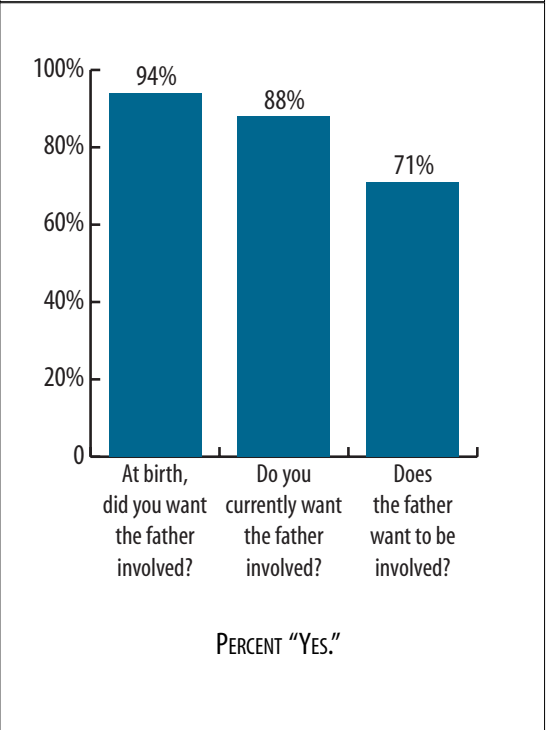
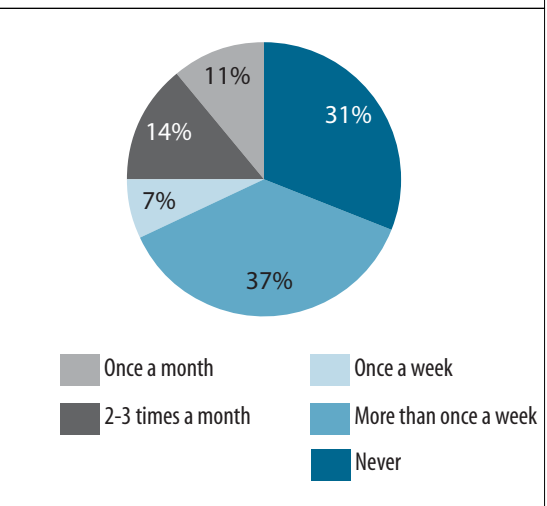


Figure 3. Mothers with Two- to Three-Year-Old Children and Not Living with the Father—How Often Has the Father Seen the Child in the Last Month?



varied according to the type of fragile family structure. Almost three in four (74 percent) of the fathers in visiting relationships had seen the child in the last week, compared to only 39 percent of the fathers in baby father relationships (Figure 4).

Both mothers and available fathers reported high levels of interaction during these visits. Father-child interactions included playing with and feeding the child, reading stories and putting the child to bed, or visiting together with relatives.

- **Almost half of the children had stayed overnight with the father in the past year.**

If non-cohabiting fathers had seen the child during the past year, we asked the mothers if the child had stayed with the father overnight at least once during the year. Almost 48 percent of these mothers responded yes, and they were more likely to do so if they were in

Figure 4. Mothers with Two- to Three-Year-Olds and Not Living with the Father—Percent of Fathers Who Had Seen the Child in the Last Week, by Father Status

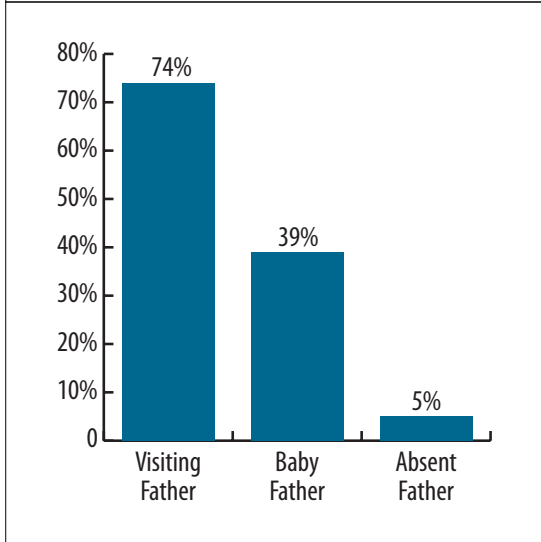
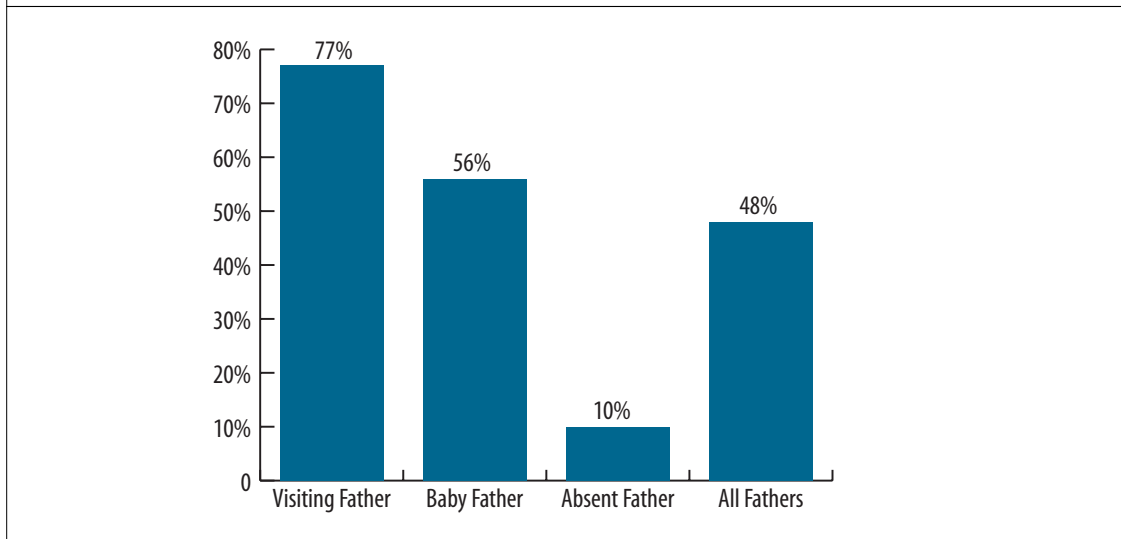


Figure 5. Mothers with Two- to Three-Year-Olds and Not Living with the Father—Percent of Children Who Had Stayed Overnight with the Father in the Past Year, by Father Status



visiting fragile families or if they were associated with baby fathers (Figure 5). Overall, 77 percent of fathers in visiting fragile families had an overnight visit with the focal child, and just over half (56 percent) of baby fathers had such a visit. By contrast, only 10 percent of absent fathers had an overnight visit with the child.

- **The fathers' employment status affects their level of involvement with the child.**

In the past year, fathers who worked full-time (94 percent) were somewhat more likely to have stayed overnight with the child than fathers working part-time (89 percent) and unemployed fathers (87 percent).

The majority (55 percent) of non-cohabiting fathers had an overnight visit with the focal child at least once a week. About half had such a visit at least twice a week. Interestingly, a somewhat smaller proportion (42 percent) of fathers who maintained weekly visits with the child worked part-time, compared to 57 percent of those who worked full-time and 55 percent of those who did not work at all.

It is possible that fathers who worked part-time were more likely than other fathers to be engaged in other activities (such as school) that interfered with overnight visits. It could also be that fathers who worked part-time had less control over housing, at least temporarily, than fathers who worked full-time or those who did not work at all.

While fathers who worked part-time had fewer overnight visits with the child, they had seen their child about the same number of days during the past month as fathers who worked full-time and those who did not work at all, possibly because fathers who work part-time are more likely to see their children in the home in which the mother resides.

These reports are consistent with the perception that non-cohabiting fathers have less access, at least temporarily, to housing services than fathers who reside with their children. Compared to fathers who work part-time, those who work full-time are more likely to be able to secure their own housing. Those who do not work at all might be relying upon financial support from relatives, which could (at least temporarily) give them more access to housing services and more time with their children at night.

- **Father involvement with the child declines over time as more of the fathers move into baby father and absent father status.**

Among mothers with two- to three-year-old children, 28 percent characterized the father as completely out of their and their child's lives and another 50 percent said he was a baby father.

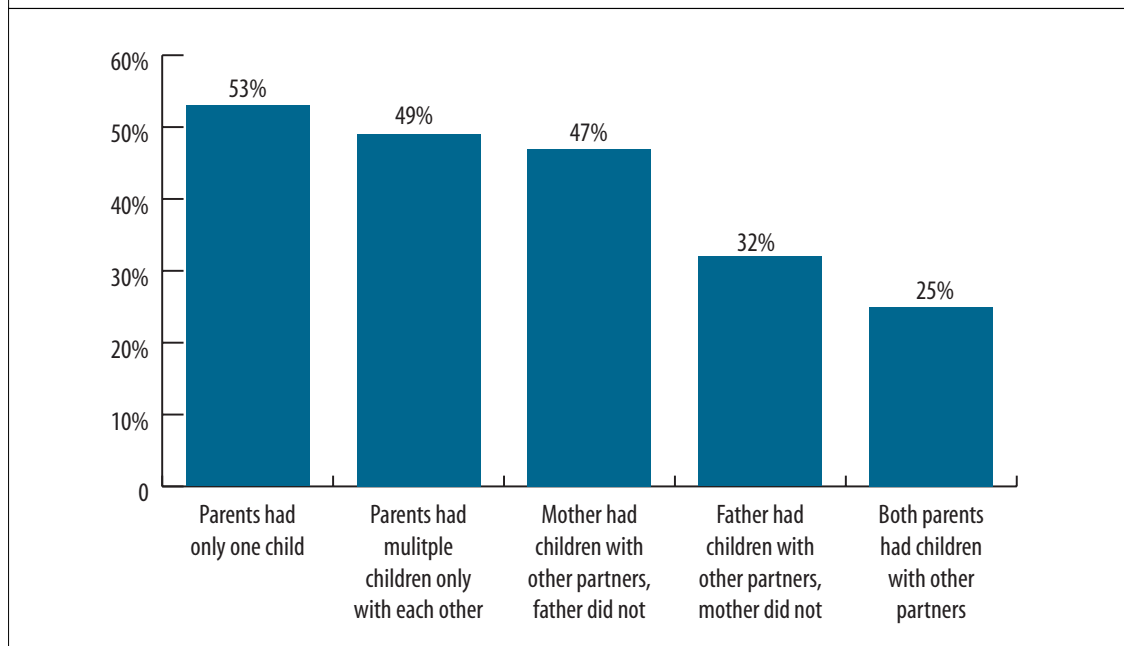
- **The presence of outside children impacts the frequency of interaction between the father and the focal child.**

Among non-cohabiting parents with two- to three-year-old children, fathers were more likely to see the child if the parents had fewer outside children. Eighty-one percent of the fathers who had children only with the mother had spent one or more hours with the child at least once a week in the past month, compared to 69 percent of fathers who had children with other women.

In cases in which the couple had no outside children, more than half (53 percent) of the fathers had seen the two- to three-year-old child in the past week. In cases in which the father had outside children but the mother did not, only a third of the fathers had seen the two- to three-year-old child in the past week. Finally, in cases in which both the mother and the father had outside children, only one in four (25 percent) of the fathers had seen the child in the past week (Figure 6).

Part of the reason for these patterns may simply be that parents with outside children are less likely than other couples to be in visiting relationships with one another. Another likely factor is that fathers with multiple outside children have less time to spend with any particular child.

Figure 6. Mothers with Two- to Three-Year-Olds and Not Living with the Father—Percent of Fathers Who Had Seen the Child in the Last Week, by Multiple Partner Fertility



We also asked non-cohabiting fathers: “In the past month, how often have you spent one or more hours with the child?” More than three-quarters of the fathers said they had done so daily or a few times a week.

• At the time of the child’s birth, almost all new fathers planned to provide financial support for the child, but in most cases they were planning to provide informal support only.

At the birth of their child, almost all new fathers (95 percent) asserted that they would provide for their child, independent of their relationship with the mother. In practical terms it appeared that the father meant only that he expected to make a contribution toward expenses (75 percent). Just 20 percent of the new fathers said that they would pay support on a regular, fixed schedule to provide for the mother and child. Based on the survey data and focus groups, it appears that most of the new mothers and fathers have general conversations about support for the child but most of them do not make specific plans.

• Only about half of the new fathers had signed the child’s birth certificate.

Although most of the fathers planned to provide support for the child, only half (51 percent) of the new mothers said that the father’s name was on the newborn’s birth certificate. In addition, only half of the mothers reported that the father wanted his name on the birth certificate. About one-third (34 percent) of the new mothers said that someone at the hospital had talked to them about establishing paternity. The fact that only half of the fathers signed the birth certificate is a further indication that the proportion of committed relationships that had existed at the time of conception had already declined by the time the child was born.

• Despite frequent contacts between the father and the child, most of the mothers did not have a court order for child support.

Only one in four of the mothers with two- to three-year-old children said that they had a legal agreement or court order for child support (Figure 7). These agreements were more common in cases involving baby fathers and absent fathers. Slightly more than a third (34 percent) of baby fathers and more than one-fifth (22 percent) of absent fathers had legal agreements or child support orders. In contrast, only 5 percent of fathers in cohabiting fragile families and 9 percent of fathers in visiting relationships had such agreements or orders.

Based on these findings, most of the mothers apparently felt that they did not need a formal agreement for child support so long as they were cohabiting with the father or were still in a visiting relationship. If the relationship declines into a baby father or absent father

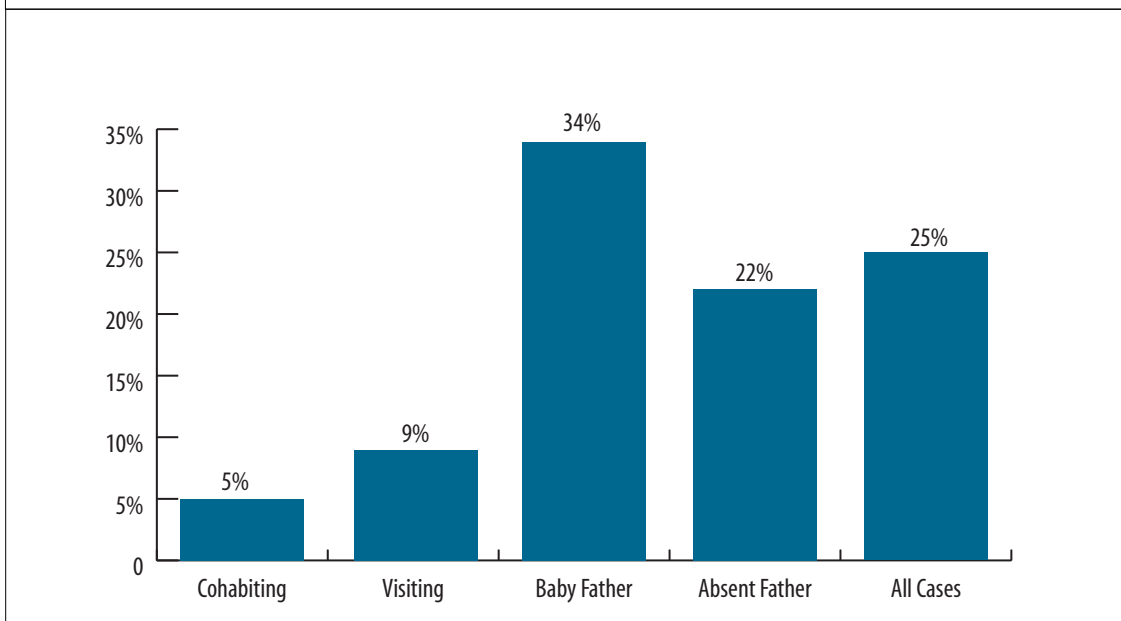
status, however, the mothers feel the need for a more formal agreement. At that time they are apparently more likely to turn to the child support system for help. It is also possible that fathers begin paying less support when they become baby fathers or absent fathers, thus depriving the mother of whatever informal support the father had been providing to the child.

• Of the mothers who did *not* have legal agreements or child support orders, only one-quarter had informal agreements for the payment of support.

Among the mothers with two- to three-year-old children, those who did not have legal agreements or court orders for the payment of child support were asked if they had informal agreements or an understanding (not spelled out in a legal agreement) that the father would make payments to support the child. Overall, only 25 percent of the mothers had such an agreement. The percentage of mothers who had these informal agreements was highest among mothers in visiting relationships (45 percent), followed by mothers in baby father relationships (31 percent), cohabiting mothers (25 percent), and mothers in absent father relationships (only 3 percent).

In combination, more than half (56 percent) of the fathers of two- to three-year-old children did not have child support orders, legal agreements, or informal agreements for the payment of child support.

Figure 7. Mothers with Two- to Three-Year-Olds—Percent Who Had a Legal Agreement or Court Order for Child Support, by Father Status



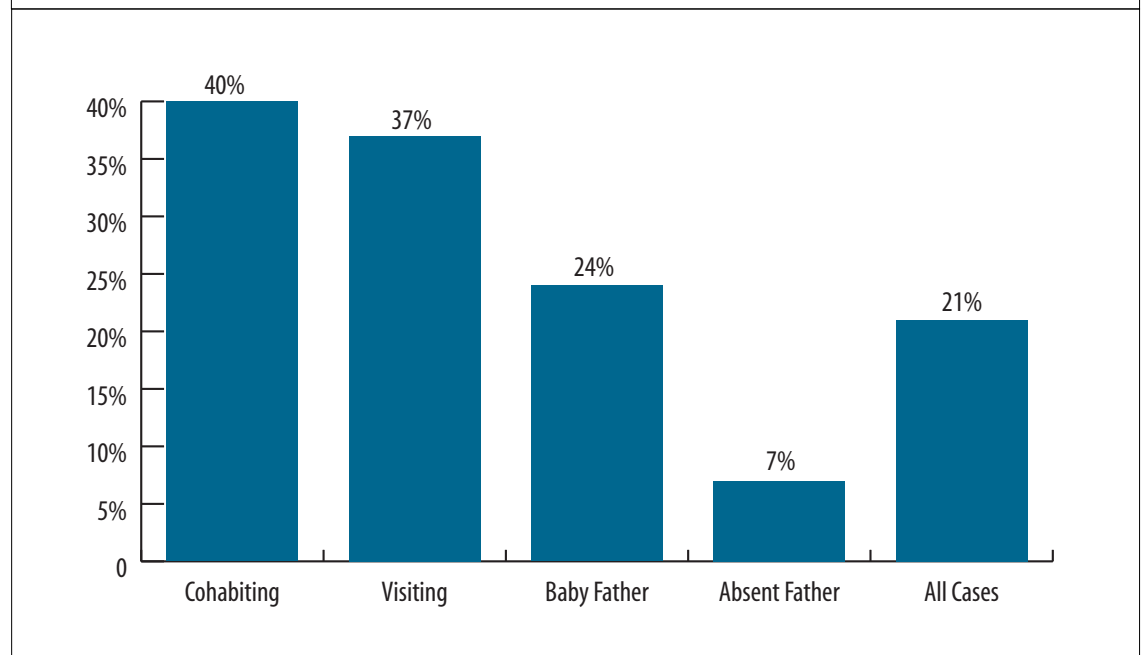
- **Only one in five of the mothers who did *not* have formal or informal agreements for child support had ever received any kind of payments from the father.**

In cases in which the mother did not have a child support order, legal agreement, or informal agreement for the payment of child support, only one in five (21 percent) of the mothers had ever received any kind of child support payment from the father since the child's birth (Figure 8). The proportion of fathers paying anything at all was noticeably related to the quality of the relationship between the parents. Almost two in five (37 percent) of the fathers who were in visiting relationships with the mother had made payments, compared to only 24 percent of the baby fathers and 7 percent of the absent fathers.

- **Only a quarter of the fathers said that they had a legal agreement or court order to pay child support.**

Fathers reported the same overall pattern as the mothers. Only 25 percent of the fathers with two- to three-year-old children reported that they had a legal agreement or court order to pay child support. The percentage varied markedly, however, by whether or not the father had outside children. One-third of fathers with an outside child had a legal agreement or child support order for the two- to three-year-old child, while only 18 percent of those without outside children had such an order.

Figure 8. Mothers with Two- to Three-Year-Old Children Who Did Not Have Court Orders or Informal Agreements—Percent Who Had Ever Received Payments from the Father, by Father Status



Having a formal agreement or child support order was less common among fathers in close relationships with the mother. For example, only 17 percent of the fathers in visiting relationships had a court order or similar legal agreement, compared to 38 percent of baby fathers and absent fathers.

- **In focus groups, many mothers thought that the father had a narrow definition of taking care of his responsibilities.**

In the focus groups, we asked mothers about the father's view of his responsibilities in helping to raise the child. Many women believed that the fathers had a narrow view of what it took to raise a child. The most common complaints were as follows:

- Some fathers think that it is enough to buy small items occasionally, such as diapers, instead of making a realistic payment in dollars toward the costs of raising the child.
- Some fathers think that it is enough to provide money for the child without recognizing that other types of support are important.

For those women who were living with the child's father, there was general agreement that, for a father, taking care of his responsibilities involves having a job and being faithful. For women who were *not* living with the father, taking care of his responsibilities or "doing the right thing" meant something slightly different. One aspect of doing the right thing was visiting the child, although not all women permitted the father to do this. More generally, it meant helping out with taking care of and raising the child. As one woman noted:

"It's hard because they think it is all about the money. It is more than just taking care of the child financially. It is hard raising kids, letting them know right from wrong, teaching them religion, telling them what not to do, and mothers cannot do all that, especially if they have more than one kid and no one to help you."

Among the mothers there were some examples of fathers who did the right thing. These were men who maintained a commitment to the mother and child even though they might not live with the mother. One woman described her relationship as follows:

"[The father of my child] is a good father. He works at two jobs. He picks up his son, even though he works till 2 o'clock. We don't live together. He lives with his parents, and I live in my own apartment. We live about 5 minutes away from each other. . . . Every day I deal with [the father of my child]. He has to pick up his son. I could leave for school at 5 in the morning, and he will have to come and pick up his son. He will get up at 3 in the morning to come pick up his son on his way to work."

For some fathers, taking care of the baby mainly meant buying things for the child. Diapers and clothes were frequently mentioned among the items purchased. Some fathers took on the added responsibility of taking care of the family in spite of deep divisions and troubles in the relationship. One father described the following situation:

“When I found out [the mother] was pregnant, I decided to take care of my responsibility. She lives with me and my grandmother right now, for a certain amount of time. I don’t know how long it will last. The baby lives with us. I don’t talk to her about marriage. If she can get her stuff straight I will probably talk to her about it.”

Others had a broader and perhaps more flexible definition of doing the right thing. One father expressed himself in the following way:

“Doing right means doing right by the baby. And doing right by you means being able to see the baby. I can’t do for the baby unless I keep myself happy. So doing right means to make sure I keep myself happy, being right for me. So it means taking care of my baby and making myself happy, which means being who I want to be with, not necessarily the baby’s mama.”

Findings: Marriage Attitudes and Expectations

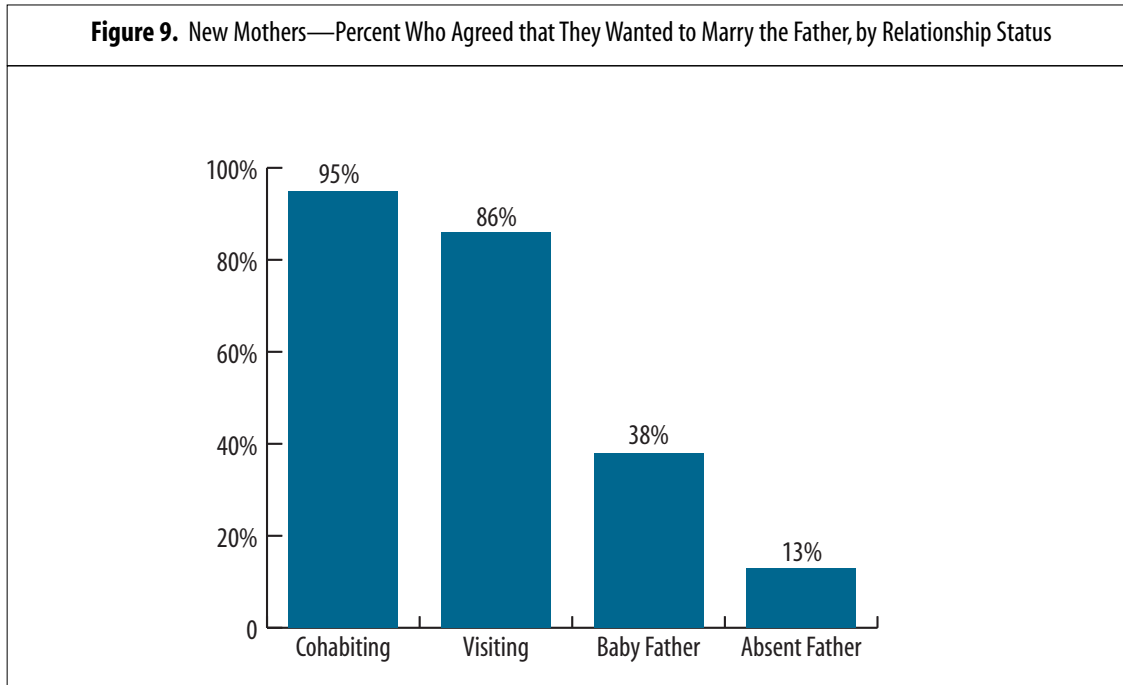
ONE OF THE PRIMARY GOALS of the study was to examine the attitudes and perceptions of Louisiana’s low-income, unmarried parents about marriage. Information about their attitudes could help policy makers assess the degree to which parents are interested in, and might benefit from, healthy marriage services or other services intended to build strong families or help low-income unmarried persons in other ways.

- **Most of the new mothers and fathers who were in committed relationships wanted to get married to their partner at some time.**

Almost all (95 percent) of the new mothers who were cohabiting with the father when the child was born agreed that they wanted to marry the father, as did the overwhelming majority (86 percent) of the mothers in visiting relationships (Figure 9). Similar results were found for the fathers in these types of relationships. Not surprisingly, interest in getting married was much lower among mothers who were no longer in committed relationships. Only 38 percent of the new mothers who were in baby father situations, and only 13 percent of the mothers in absent father relationships, agreed that they wanted to marry the father.

The mother’s interest in marrying the father was also affected by how well the father had supported the mother during the pregnancy. For example, in cases in which the father had given the mother money during the pregnancy, the mother wanted to marry the father. In cases in which the father had not provided financial support, only 26 percent of the mothers wanted

Figure 9. New Mothers—Percent Who Agreed that They Wanted to Marry the Father, by Relationship Status



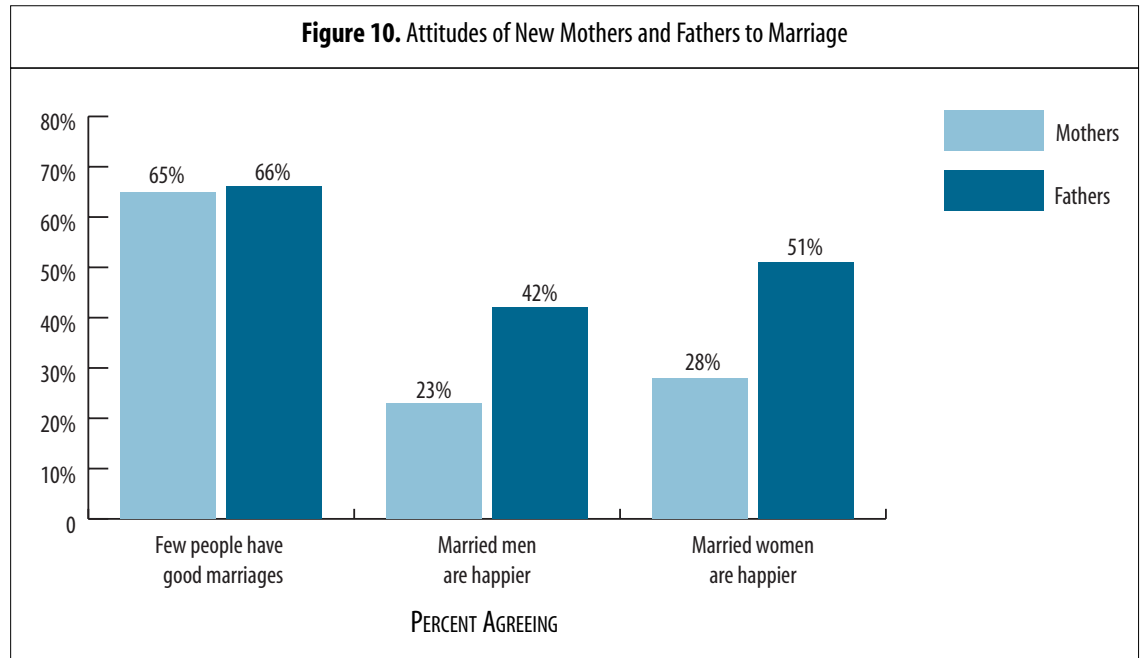
to marry the father. Mothers were also much more interested in marrying the father if he visited her in the hospital when the child was born.

- **Most of the new mothers and fathers thought that it was important to get married to someone in the future.**

Most of the new mothers (78 percent) thought that it was very important or somewhat important for them to get married to someone in the future. This perception tended to vary by the mother's current situation. For example, 61 percent of mothers in cohabiting relationships thought that it was *very* important to get married some day, compared to just under half of mothers in visiting relationships, and about a third of mothers in baby father or absent father relationships.

- **Although most mothers and fathers wanted to get married some day, most were skeptical about the institution of marriage and the benefits of being married.**

Independent of their relationship status, most mothers and fathers expressed skepticism about the benefits of being married. For example, two-thirds of the mothers and fathers thought that few people had good marriages (Figure 10). In addition, only 23 percent of the mothers agreed that married men are generally happier than unmarried men; and only 28 percent agreed that married women are happier than unmarried women. The fathers



were more likely than the mothers to think that married men and women were happier, reflecting the fact that most of the fathers were in committed relationships with the mother. Still, only about half of these fathers generally agreed that married women and men are happier.

Skepticism about the link between marriage and happiness held for mothers in all types of fragile family structures, although mothers who were cohabiting with the father were slightly less skeptical than others. Attitudes toward marriage were not greatly influenced by whether there were outside children.

Some of the women in the focus group doubted whether they would be happy in a marriage. They also doubted whether they would meet a man with whom they could experience equality in a relationship. Two of the mothers explained:

“I think of marriage as no good. It does not make any sense. A lot of couples I know that are married are not happy. They cheat. It don’t make no sense. I don’t see why they got married. They get married just to get out of sin. They get married to get a ring. I never met a man that I think is good enough for me to marry that is going to make me happy, where it will be 50/50 all the time. I haven’t met anyone like that. . . . I want the baby. I want the children but I don’t want the man.”

“Like I say, you outgrow a man. I plan to take care of myself and my life. I am only 23 and I have a lot to do. If a man come along and on my level . . . I am chilling right now. Not just any man, but he got to be on my level. Work as hard as I do.

He has to work and have a plan. I want my child to have everything other kids have.”

Other women stressed their concerns about independence. One woman made the following observation about her partner:

“I am used to all my life taking care of me, all about me. He should want me to be more independent and not dependent on him. . . . I don’t want to be with nobody who tries to put me down and who tells me everything I do is wrong. He gives me all the problems and responsibilities. . . . Yes, he works. He brings the money home, but I worry whether he will take care of the kids. These are his kids and he don’t realize that.”

In focus groups many fathers, especially those in unstable relationships, said that they were “still in the market” or that they were uncertain about their feelings toward the mother of their children. Many men indicated that they did not intend to be faithful to their partner and still considered themselves players in the dating game. Men’s desire for independence was represented in the following statement:

“I have never been with anybody who wants me to be there 24/7. I am not used to that. I am used to running the streets and doing what you gotta do.”

Another father said the following:

“Our relationship has been rocky, on and off, and I am waiting till I can see some kind of light come on. Other than that, I am not going to jump into it and spend more money. She is the one who wants to get married, but I am not ready.”

• Most of the mothers and fathers believed that cohabiting produced the same benefits as marriage and that single mothers could raise a child as well as a married couple.

Consistent with research on the general population’s ideas about marriage, the low-income mothers and fathers in the study believed that cohabiting produced the same benefits as marriage without the legal complications. Almost six in ten (58 percent) of the new mothers and two-thirds of the fathers agreed with this view (Figure 11). In addition, two-thirds of the mothers and almost four in five of the fathers believed that cohabitation without marriage was acceptable. More than half of the mothers and two-thirds of the fathers believed that cohabiting before marriage would reduce the chances of the marriage ending in divorce. One of the focus group mothers explained:

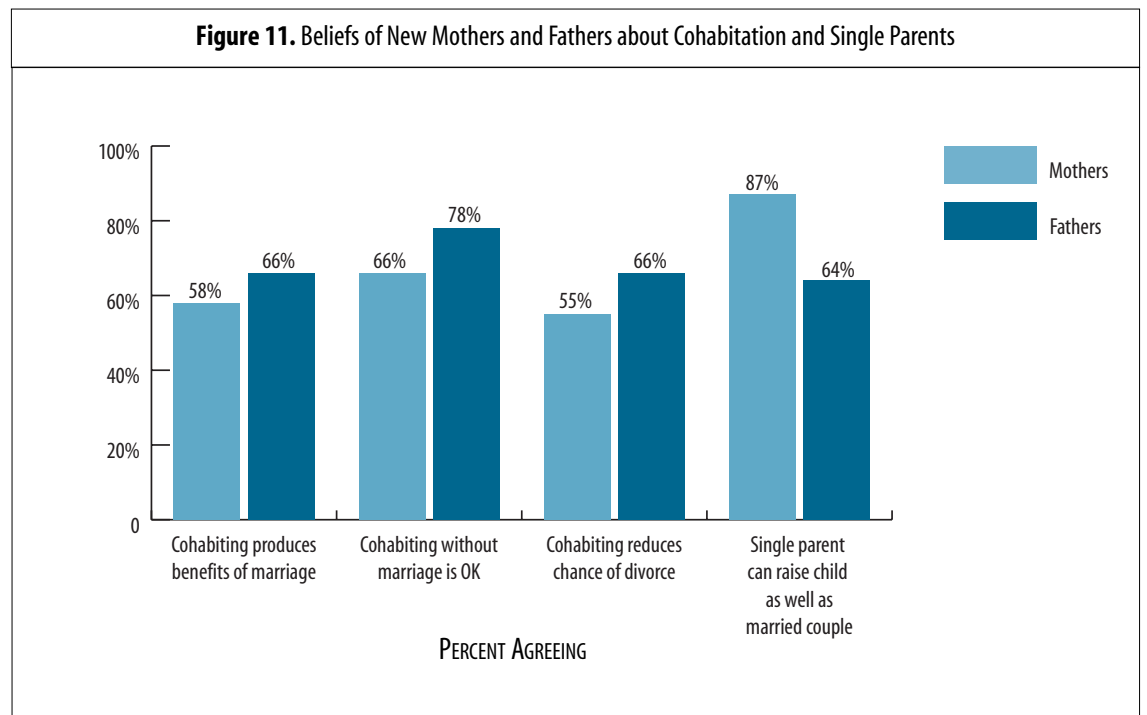
“It seems like things like that work out better than being actually married, but it is the fear of becoming married that was causing problems for everyone. There are

too many people afraid of getting married; there are lots of people like that in the world. There are people who say that someone will control them. That's why I don't want to get married."

Nearly all (87 percent) of the mothers and almost two-thirds of the fathers believed that a single mother could raise a child as well as a married couple (Figure 11). In addition, almost two-thirds of the new mothers agreed that, "It's OK for a woman to have a child on her own if she has not found the right man to marry."

• Few of the mothers and fathers had positive views about other partners who might potentially be available in the marriage market.

When they thought beyond their current partner, few of the mothers and fathers held very positive views about other men or women who would be available to them in a hypothetical marriage market. Among parents with newborns, for example, almost seven in ten (69 percent) of the mothers said that most men they met could not be trusted to be faithful (Figure 12). Likewise, two-thirds of the fathers felt that most women they met could not be trusted to be faithful. Two-thirds (65 percent) of the mothers and almost six in ten of the fathers said that they rarely met people they wanted to marry. More than 60 percent of the mothers and almost half of the fathers said that most people they meet are not interested in making a commitment.



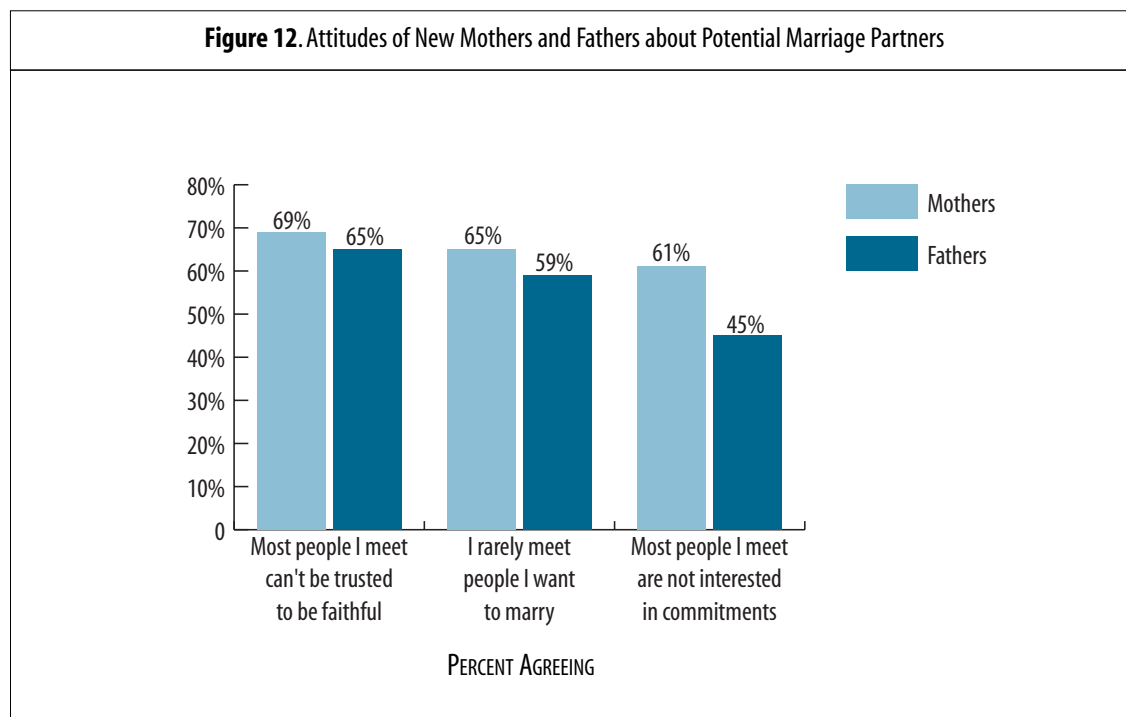
- **Although mothers regarded marriage as having little or no benefits for themselves, they believed that children were better off if the father was in the home and the parents were married.**

Almost all of the new mothers (91 percent) and new fathers (97 percent) agreed that children were better off if the father is in the home to help raise the children. In addition, four in five of the parents who were in committed relationships agreed that children were generally better off if the parents are married to each other. About six in ten of the mothers with absent fathers also agreed with this view.

Overall, these findings suggest that many of the mothers have a positive view of marriage as providing an environment for child rearing but have a less positive view of marriage as a way of providing a potentially satisfying relationship with a partner (Figure 11).

- **Most of the mothers and fathers believed that financial security was an important factor in relationships and marriage.**

Almost half of the new mothers believed that if a man cannot hold a steady job, it is better to leave him and look for someone else. Similarly, 94 percent of the fathers said that having a steady job and being able to provide for the family is an essential element for marriage. Over half of the fathers believed that it is more important for the man to earn the liv-



ing for the household. Yet, only about 40 percent of mothers and available fathers said that they typically meet potential partners with steady jobs. Focus group participants explained:

“She knows I am not financially stable and I got to take care of my wife, otherwise I can’t push the issue of marriage. You see, the man is the backbone. You got to take care of your household, you got to take care of your wife, otherwise somebody else will do it.”

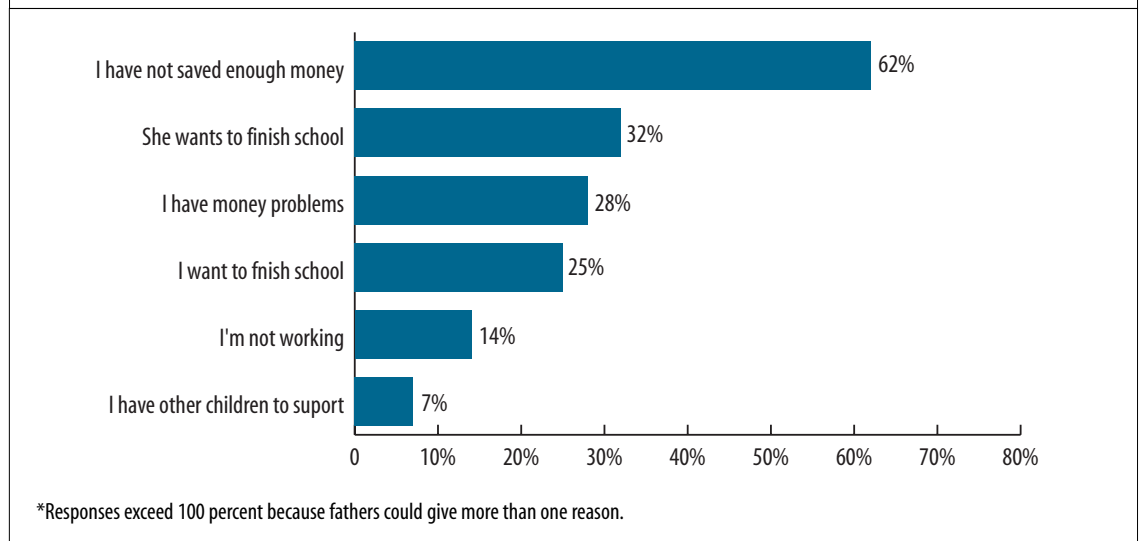
“I can’t be making all this money while he sits at home all day playing Play Station. That’s not going to work. We have to be equal.”

Financial concerns also affected the mother’s interest in marrying the father. Among new mothers, for example, interest in marrying the father was affected by concerns about whether the father would provide money to support the child in the future. Of the mothers who were not concerned about this issue, 71 percent wanted to marry the father. Of those who were very concerned, only 43 percent wanted to marry the father.

• Many couples stated that financial concerns and related problems were a major reason why they were not married.

Mothers and fathers who indicated that they were planning to marry their partner were asked why they were not married now. Among new mothers and fathers who were cohabiting, the most common reasons for not being married were inadequate savings, money problems, and the desire to finish school (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Fathers with Newborns Who Were Cohabiting with the Mother and Who Had Plans to Marry the Mother — Why Are You Not Married Now? (Most Common Reasons)*



For example, 62 percent of new fathers in cohabiting fragile families cited “inadequate savings” as the main reason why they had not married the mother. The second and fourth most common critical barriers were education-related. Almost one-third of new fathers said they were not married already because the mothers of their children wanted to finish school, and more than a quarter of the fathers were not married already because they themselves wanted to finish school. Finally, “money problems” was the third most frequently mentioned critical barrier chosen by new fathers in cohabiting fragile families. Similar overall results were found for new mothers.

We also asked the new fathers who were *not* living with the mothers of the children, but who planned to marry the mothers, why they were not married already. While the responses provided by these fathers were somewhat different than the responses given by the cohabiting fathers, the same four critical barriers emerged as the most important: inadequate savings, the mother’s desire to finish school first, money problems, and the father’s desire to finish school first.

Financial reasons were also important for new fathers who were in visiting relationships and did not have plans to marry the mother. Problems in the relationship, however, were also an important factor in these cases.

In the focus groups, some fathers expressed receptivity toward marriage but were caught up in the uncertainty about whether they had their finances sufficiently in order to support a family. One father who was currently living with the mother of his children was asked why they had not married. He said:

“Financial reasons. It is a money thing. But, I think we will have the money to get married. If I don’t have money, we won’t get married. If I do have money, we will get married. I am saving up for it. I just recently lost my job at a paint and body shop, so that interrupted the plan. I know that I gotta find another job . . . that’s what I am trying to do now.”

Three Conclusions

OUR FINDINGS lead to three important conclusions and recommendations for policy makers and community leaders.

First, the “magic moment” associated with father involvement lasts much longer than the period in which the parents will feel a romantic commitment to each other. Therefore, the time frame for services that maintain the father’s involvement with the child is much longer than the time frame for providing family strengthening services to couples.

It appears that most mothers are not seeking to prevent the father from having access to his child or placing burdensome conditions on the father’s access and that most fathers are committed to their children, at least during the child’s early years. We found that most of the new fathers continued to visit the child, with the mother’s encouragement, even though the parents were no longer in a committed relationship.

To sustain this involvement, parents could use help in managing their parental responsibilities in light of the changing developmental needs of their children. Helping couples maintain child-focused, co-parenting relationships that evolve as the child grows might have larger payoffs than we anticipated at the time of the original study. Subsequent research suggests that such efforts might increase the father’s child support commitment and decrease the mother’s subsequent fertility.

Given the drop-off in father-child interaction that we saw even by the child’s second or third birthday, it is still important to intervene as early as possible to support paternal involvement.

Second, the findings raise serious questions about why mothers are not turning to the formal child support system in more cases. Learning more about mother’s motivations and concerns could lead to improvements in child support policy and enforcement.

Despite the extensive contacts between the fathers and their children, relatively few fathers had formal or informal arrangements to provide financially for their children. In addition, too many had paid nothing in financial support since the child’s birth. It appears that many mothers who are in frequent contact with the father are not turning to the formal child support system to ensure the payment of child support. In fact, mothers who are living with the father or who are still in a visiting romantic relationship are much less likely to have court orders or other legal agreements than mothers who are no longer involved with father.

Mothers might feel that the father will be annoyed if they turn to the child support system. Perhaps he will break off contact with her and the child or stop making informal payments. This concern might be particularly significant for the mother if she feels that the father has

unstable employment and limited ability to make regular child support payments of any kind. While it is understandable that many mothers might wish to avoid the formal child support system for this reason, it is surprising that they tolerate a situation in which most of the fathers do not even pay informal support.

Since a large percentage of these mothers are neither working nor receiving regular child support payments, presumably they are relying upon other sources of support to survive. More than a fifth (22 percent) of the mothers with two- to three-year-old children reported that they were living rent-free with family members. All of the mothers with two- to three-year-old children were on Food Stamps, although only 13 percent were receiving TANF benefits. A quarter of mothers were living with an employed adult who was not the cohabiting father of their child.

It is possible that many of the mothers preferred to eke out an existence with these types of support rather than “rock the boat” by referring the father to the child support system. It is also possible that many of the mothers were foregoing TANF benefits because they did not want to cooperate with child support enforcement requirements.

Third, services to low-income, never-married parents should include a mix of marriage education services as well as services designed to help couples with their financial barriers.

Unwed parents who are the most interested in marriage to one another—and those who are still in steady and committed relationships with one another—are remarkably consistent in their views about the barriers to marriage. They cite inadequate savings, a desire to complete schooling, and the fathers’ money problems as the primary reasons they have not already married. Problems with the relationship are also barriers for unwed parents who are in committed and steady relationships but who have no marriage plans.

These findings suggest that the current array of services being contemplated to strengthen families may fall short of the barriers that these parents face. Relationship education could help those without marriage plans to address their relationship problems and determine if marriage is desirable. These couples, however, will face other barriers that cannot be overcome by the kinds of marriage programs that have been the focus of debates thus far. For example, standard marriage education programs usually spend some time on helping couples to manage a family budget. But before you can address money management issues, you have to have money to manage. Recognition of the significant financial barriers these couples face must be part of any marriage/relationships skills intervention that is offered to them.

This study focused on low-income, never-married parents in New Orleans. In August 2005, not long after our interviews were complete, Hurricane Katrina swept through. This tragedy further compromised whatever security these already-fragile families had managed to put together. We have much more to learn about these families’ struggles today.

Endnotes

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