Race and Ethnicity in Fragile Families

Robert A. Hummer and Erin R. Hamilton

Summary

Robert Hummer and Erin Hamilton note that the prevalence of fragile families varies substantially by race and ethnicity. African Americans and Hispanics have the highest prevalence; Asian Americans, the lowest; and whites fall somewhere in the middle. The share of unmarried births is lower among most foreign-born mothers than among their U.S.-born ethnic counterparts. Immigrant-native differences are particularly large for Asians, whites, and blacks.

The authors also find racial and ethnic differences in the composition and stability of fragile families over time. Although most parents of all racial and ethnic groups are romantically involved at the time of their child's birth, African American women are less likely to be in a cohabiting relationship than are white and Hispanic mothers. Over time, these racial and ethnic differences become more pronounced, with African American mothers having the lowest rates of marriage and cohabitation and the highest breakup rates, and Mexican immigrant mothers having the highest rates of marriage and cohabitation and the lowest breakup rates.

Fragile families have far fewer socioeconomic resources than married families, though resources vary within fragile families by race and ethnicity. White mothers, in general, have more socioeconomic resources than black, Mexican American, and Mexican immigrant mothers; they are more likely to have incomes above the poverty limit, more likely to own a car, less likely to have children from a prior relationship, and more likely to report living in a safe neighborhood. Access to health care and child care follows a similar pattern. The exception is education; black and white unmarried mothers are equally likely to have finished high school, and Mexican immigrant and Mexican American mothers are less likely to have done so.

The authors argue that socioeconomic differences are by far the biggest driver of racial and ethnic differences in marriage and family stability, and they support reforms to strengthen parents' economic security. They also discuss how sex ratios and culture affect family formation and stability. In particular, they note that despite severe poverty, Mexican immigrant families have high rates of marriage and cohabitation—an advantage that erodes by the second generation with assimilation. To address the paradox that marriage declines as socioeconomic status improves, they support policies that reinforce rather than undermine the family ties of Mexican immigrants.

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One of the most striking demographic trends in the United States over the past half-century has been the increasing share of children born to unmarried parents. Nonmarital births accounted for 39.7 percent of all U.S. births in 2007,[1] up from 18.4 percent in 1980 and just 5.3 percent in 1960.[2] Current percentages are highest among African Americans, American Indians, and Hispanics, and lowest among Asian Americans. A major component of the growth in nonmarital childbearing has been births to unmarried but cohabiting parents; during the late 1990s, births to cohabiting parents made up about half of all nonmarital births.[3]

A second striking demographic trend in American society over the past half-century has been the racial and ethnic diversification of the population. The U.S. population grew from roughly 200 million during the mid-1960s to more than 300 million in 2006, with immigration—immigrants themselves, plus their U.S.-born children—accounting for 55 percent of this increase.[4] Because nearly 80 percent of immigrants to the United States since 1965 have come from Latin America and Asia, the growth of the Hispanic and Asian American populations has been especially rapid, with Hispanics now accounting for 15 percent of the total U.S. population and Asian Americans, nearly 5 percent, compared with approximately 4.7 percent for Hispanics and 0.8 percent for Asian Americans in 1970. The share of the population that is African American or black, now 13 percent, has also continued to grow, although more slowly. In contrast, the non-Hispanic white population—while continuing to grow in absolute terms—has dropped from 83.2 percent of the total in 1970 to an estimated 67 percent in 2006.[5]

Population projections suggest that the non-Hispanic white population share will fall to less than 50 percent by the middle of the twenty-first century, while the Hispanic and Asian American populations will continue to grow especially rapidly.[6]

Demographic changes like increases in the share of children born to unmarried parents (with particularly high levels among some racial and ethnic minority groups) and diversification of the population would have less meaning if they were not accompanied by differences across racial and ethnic groups in resources available to children. But these resources vary greatly from one group to another. Because children from most racial and ethnic minority groups are much more likely than white and Asian American children to be born to unmarried parents, and children of unmarried parents are substantially disadvantaged relative to those in married households, family structure is a key mechanism through which racial and ethnic inequality persists across generations.[7] Parental resources—particularly socioeconomic and health care resources—also vary quite extensively by race and ethnicity within unmarried families, as we document below.

In this paper, we review racial and ethnic differences in fragile families—those families in which the parents are unmarried at the time of their child's birth. First, we document racial and ethnic differences and trends in the prevalence, composition, and stability of fragile families. Second, we examine the extent to which parental resources differ by race and ethnicity within fragile families themselves and between fragile families and married families. Third, we review explanations for the racial and ethnic differences in the prevalence of, and trends in, fragile families. We conclude with a discussion of

Figure 1. Share of Births to Unmarried Mothers by Race/Ethnicity and Nativity, 2006
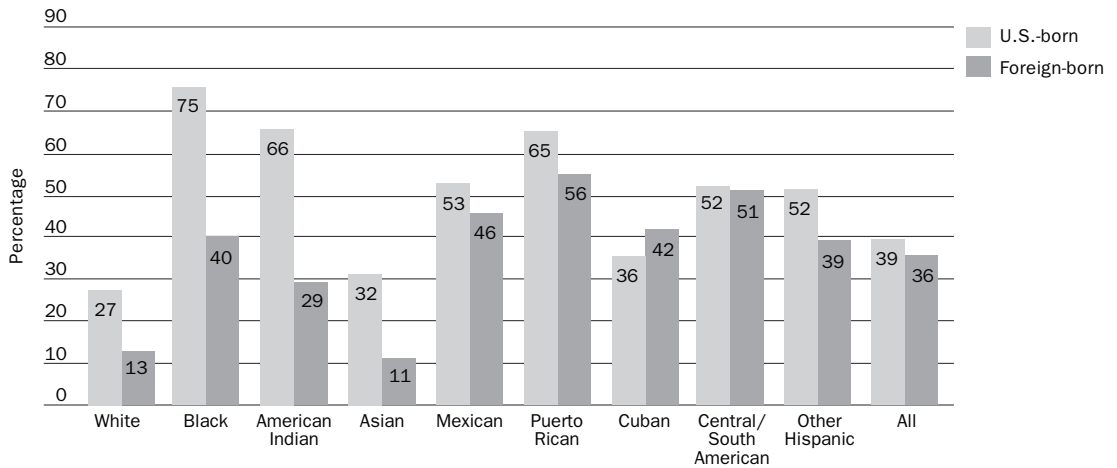
policy implications. Throughout the review, we compare immigrant and nonimmigrant families to the extent data allow because nativity is an important axis of differentiation for many social and demographic phenomena in the United States.

Prevalence, Composition, and Stability of Fragile Families by Race and Ethnicity

The prevalence of nonmarital childbearing, as well as trends in such childbearing over time, differs considerably across racial and ethnic groups, as does the relationship type and the level of instability among fragile families during their children's early years.

Unmarried Births: Prevalence and Trends
Recent national data on nonmarital births show large racial and ethnic differences in the prevalence of fragile families. In 2006, the share of births to unmarried mothers ranged from a high of 75 percent among non-Hispanic U.S.-born black women to a low of 11 percent among immigrant Asian women (see figure 1). Children of U.S.-born black

women were thus more than six times as likely as children of immigrant Asian American women to be born into fragile families; they were more than two and a half times as likely as children of U.S.-born non-Hispanic white women to be born into fragile families (the share of unmarried births to white women was 27 percent in 2006). Figure 1 also shows substantial diversity in the share of unmarried births among Hispanics by national origin group, ranging from a high of 65 percent among mainland-born Puerto Rican women to a low of 36 percent among U.S.-born Cuban women. Roughly half of children born to Mexican-origin women—46 percent among Mexican immigrant women and 53 percent among Mexican American women—were born in fragile families in 2006.

The share of unmarried births is lower among most foreign-born (that is, immigrant) groups of women than among their U.S-born co-ethnic counterparts,[8] even though the difference in the share of such births to the two groups as a whole is narrow (39 percent, compared with 36 percent). The

Figure 2a. Change in the Share of Births to Unmarried Mothers by Race/Ethnicity, 1970–2006
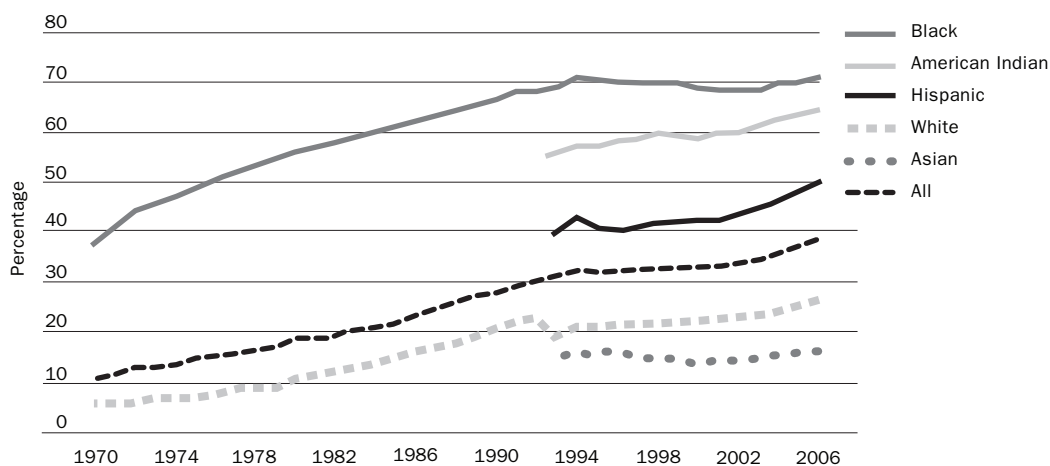
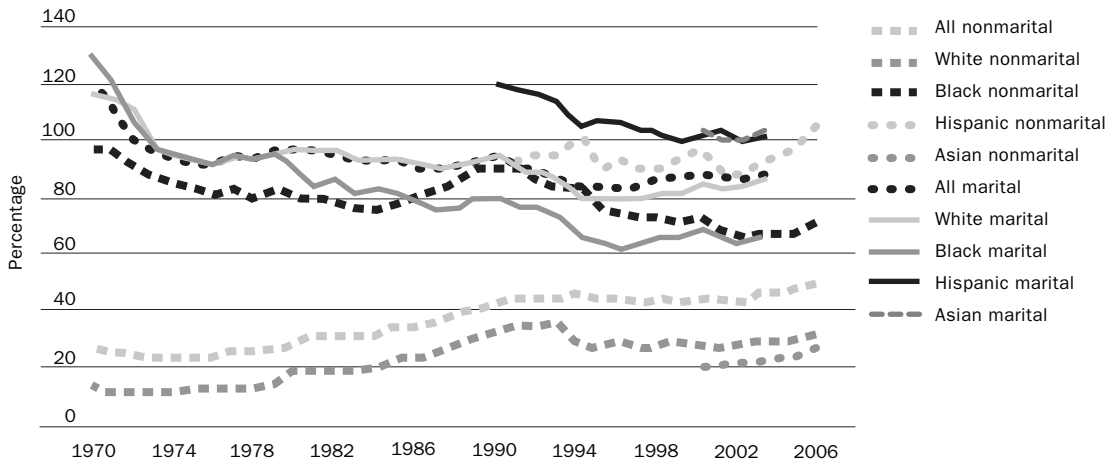Source: National Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics.

immigrant-native difference is particularly large among Asian Americans: births to unmarried women are 11 percent among immigrants, but 32 percent among those born in the United States. The immigrant-native difference is also large among non-Hispanic whites and non-Hispanic blacks; in both these groups, the share of unmarried births among immigrant women is about half that among U.S.-born women. Immigrant-native differences in the share of births to unmarried women tend to be smaller among the Hispanic national origin groups.

The share of births to unmarried women has been growing steadily over the past four decades. In 1970, fewer than one in ten U.S. births was to an unmarried mother, compared with 39 percent in 2006 (figure 2a).[9] Figure 2a also shows that the share of births to unmarried women increased for both white and black women over this period, although that for black women has remained steady at around 70 percent since the mid-1990s.[10] Among white women, the share of unmarried births in 1970 (6 percent) more

than quadrupled by 2006 (27 percent). Data for Hispanics, American Indians, and Asian Americans were not available until the 1990s. Although the share of unmarried births to Asian American women held fairly steady between 1993 and 2002, it has increased each year since then, up to almost 17 percent in 2007. The share of unmarried births increased rapidly for Hispanics (up to 50 percent) and American Indians (up to 65 percent) from 1993 until 2007.

The share of unmarried births reflects a mix of the birth rates for unmarried and married women in each racial and ethnic group, as well as the proportion of childbearing-aged women that is married in each racial and ethnic group. The share of unmarried births for a group can increase, for example, through a decline in the marital birth rate, an increase in the nonmarital birth rate, or both. Moreover, the share of unmarried births for a group can increase through a shift in the proportion of women of childbearing age who are not married. In the United States, the increasing proportion of both black and white

Figure 2b. Change in the Nonmarital and Marital Birth Rates by Race, 1970–2006

Source: National Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics.

women of childbearing age who were unmarried in recent decades has been important in helping to explain the rise in the share of unmarried births among both groups.[11]

Beyond shifts in the share of unmarried childbearing-aged women, trends in marital and nonmarital birth rates among women have also been important in explaining the overall rising share of nonmarital births among each racial and ethnic group. Figure 2b shows trends in both the nonmarital and marital birth rates by race and ethnicity and for all U.S. women since 1970. The nonmarital birth rate is equal to the number of nonmarital births in a year per 1,000 unmarried women, while the marital birth rate is the number of marital births in a year per 1,000 married women. Figure 2b clearly shows that, for the whole population, marital birth rates have sharply declined since 1970 while nonmarital birth rates have sharply increased. Nonmarital birth rates have been rising for most racial and ethnic groups except for blacks. Among blacks, the nonmarital birth rate declined from nearly 100 in 1970 to a low

of 66 in 2002; there has been a slight upturn over the past few years. In contrast, the nonmarital birth rates for whites rose from 14 in 1970 to 32 in 2006. Unmarried black women today are thus having fewer births than they did in 1970, while unmarried white women are having more. Hispanic women now have the nation's highest nonmarital birth rate (106) and, together with Asian American women, the highest marital birth rate (101).[12] The high level of marital fertility among Hispanic women is important in producing an overall percentage of nonmarital births (50 percent) that is lower than that among blacks, in spite of the higher nonmarital birth rate among Hispanics.

Relationship Types and Family Stability over Time

Fragile families are more complex than data on unmarried birth percentages and rates suggest, and their compositional complexity too varies across racial and ethnic groups. Figure 3 shows the distribution of relationship type among unmarried families included in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.

Figure 3. Unmarried Parents' Relationship Status at the Birth of a Child and Three and Five Years
Following the Birth, by Mother's Race/Ethnicity
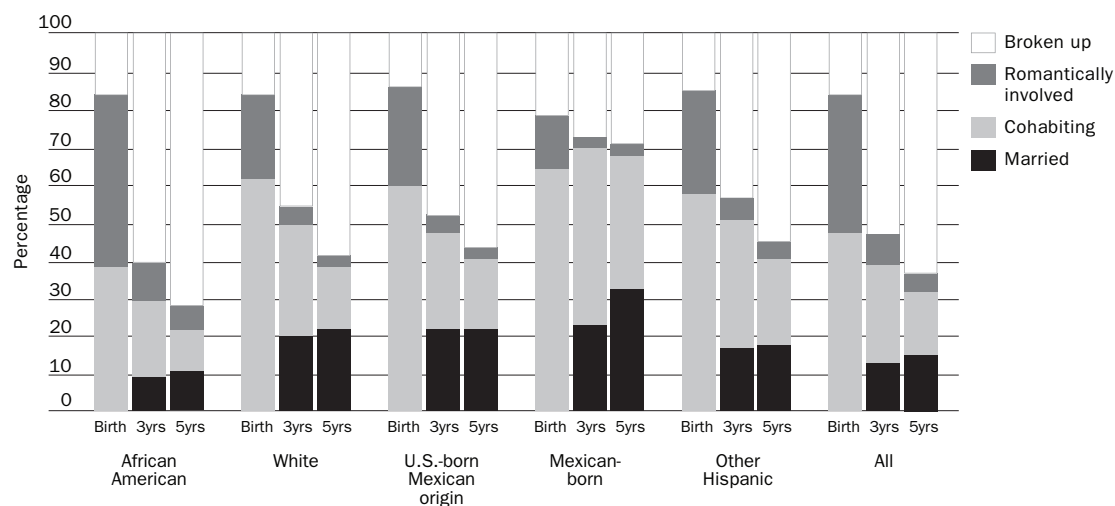
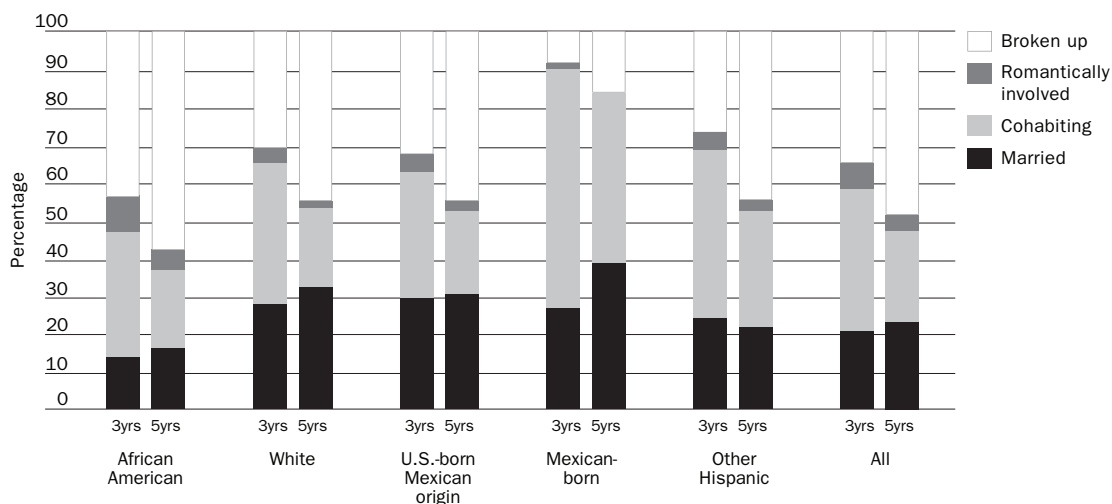Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.
Note: This presentation mimics figure 2 from Kristen Harknett and Sara McLanahan, "Racial and Ethnic Differences in Marriage after
the Birth of a Child," *American Sociological Review* 69 (2004): 790–811.

The first bar for each group shows relationship type among unmarried parents at the birth of their child. A commonality across all groups is that a large majority—between 79 and 86 percent—of parents are romantically involved at the time of the birth of their child. Among romantically involved parents, African American mothers are more likely to be in a noncohabiting union than other mothers, whereas white, Mexican-origin, and other Hispanic mothers are more likely to be cohabiting with the child's father at the time of the birth.

Figure 3 also shows that there is substantial relationship instability among unmarried parents in the five years following the birth of a child and that there are profound racial and ethnic differences in these compositional shifts over time. At the two extremes are African American and Mexican immigrant women. Five years following unmarried births, African American mothers have the lowest rates of

marriage (9 percent) and cohabitation (13 percent) and the highest relationship breakup rate (71 percent). They also are most likely (6 percent) to maintain a noncohabiting romantic union with the child's father. Mexican immigrant unmarried mothers, on the other hand, have the highest rates of marriage (33 percent) and cohabitation (36 percent) over the next five years, and the lowest relationship breakup rate (29 percent). These differences mean that children born to unmarried Mexican immigrant mothers are three times more likely than children born to unmarried African American mothers to be living with both biological parents at age five. Five years after the birth of a child, between 55 and 59 percent of white, Mexican American, and other Hispanic unmarried mothers have broken up with the child's father—a sharp contrast with the 14–17 percent who had broken up at the time of the child's birth. Clearly, instability among fragile families is very high, even within the first five years of a child's life.

Figure 4. Relationship Status Three and Five Years Following the Birth, by Mother's Race/Ethnicity, among Parents Who Were Cohabiting at Birth

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.
Note: This presentation mimics figure 2 from Kristen Harknett and Sara McLanahan, "Racial and Ethnic Differences in Marriage after the Birth of a Child," *American Sociological Review* 69 (2004): 790–811.

Figure 4 further illustrates instability in fragile families, and racial and ethnic variations within those families, by showing relationship change among unmarried mothers who were cohabiting at the time of the child's birth. Among all such women, less than half were still cohabiting (24 percent) or were married (23 percent) by the time the child reached age five, while 48 percent had separated. Mexican immigrant women were by far the least likely to separate from the father—only 9 percent by the time the child was three and 16 percent by the time the child was five. For all the other racial and ethnic groups shown, more than 40 percent of mothers cohabiting at birth had separated by the time their child was five. The share was highest among African American mothers, at 57 percent.

Racial and Ethnic Differences in Resources among Fragile Families
Resources available to fragile families vary by race and ethnicity in ways that generally favor white women and that illustrate the difficult socioeconomic circumstances faced by most unmarried black, Mexican American, and Mexican immigrant mothers. Table 1 summarizes these racial and ethnic differences in socioeconomic, social support, and health care and child care resources among single (that is, noncohabiting), cohabiting, and married mothers at the time of birth.[13] Baseline (at time of birth) national data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) are used for these comparisons because the survey contains in-depth information regarding parental resources among fragile families along with a comparison sample of married mothers.[14] Because of the relatively small sample sizes available for some groups in the survey, racial and ethnic categories must be limited. Thus, our discussion focuses on resource comparisons between non-Hispanic black, non-Hispanic white, Mexican American, and Mexican immigrant women and their families.

Table 1. Resource Differentials, by Maternal Race/Ethnicity and Nativity among Fragile Families and Married Families at Child's Birth

Percent unless otherwise indicated	Single mothers				Cohabiting mothers				Married mothers			
	Non-Hispanic black	Mexican American	Mexican immigrant	Non-Hispanic white	Non-Hispanic black	Mexican American	Mexican immigrant	Non-Hispanic white	Non-Hispanic black	Mexican American	Mexican immigrant	Non-Hispanic white
Socioeconomic resources												
Mother lacks high school degree	44.2	53.1*	82.4*	37.4	39.6	56.7*	75.2*	39.8	13.9*	35.3*	70.2*	8.1
Father lacks high school degree	31.1	36.2	52.9*	29.6	29.6	46.0*	77.6*	30.1	11.9*	33.8*	73.7*	6.1
Household in poverty	52.6*	41.5*	45.9*	29.1	41.5*	42.8*	48.5*	21.3	14.2*	23.5*	39.5*	3.0
Household near poverty	27.0	28.5	44.7*	24.3	25.7*	30.0	33.3	28.5	23.1*	20.6*	37.7*	10.1
Receipt of public assistance in past year	48.9	40.8	31.8*	47.1	47.2*	45.5*	18.2*	36.4	16.3*	22.1*	21.1*	4.9
Own car	23.6*	26.2*	10.6*	44.7	38.7*	38.5*	29.1*	57.7	66.8*	60.3*	39.5*	84.4
Live in safe neighborhood	78.4*	79.2*	77.7*	88.4	78.4*	84.5	72.7*	86.8	86.8*	94.1	73.7*	95.1
Mother under age 20	26.1	25.4	16.5	25.2	16.8	23.5	14.0	21.0	1.4	11.8*	3.5	2.4
Mother has other children	60.3*	50.0	55.3	44.2	72.2*	68.5*	58.8	49.8	77.0*	67.7	66.7	60.7
Partner and social support												
Father visited hospital at birth	61.1	55.4	40.0*	56.3	91.4*	94.7	94.6	96.9	92.2*	97.1	93.0*	98.6
Father wants involvement	89.8*	77.7	68.2	76.7	99.9	99.5	100.0	100.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Grandparent in home	45.4	55.4	23.5*	47.1	16.0	21.4	12.1	15.4	10.2*	13.2*	7.1	5.5
Access to support if needed:												
Financial help ($200)	87.5	90.8	83.5	89.8	85.7	91.4	84.9	89.3	92.2*	95.6	90.4*	98.0
Place to live	91.4	95.4	92.9	92.2	89.5	94.1	81.2*	91.9	91.9*	95.6	88.6*	97.4
Health care and child care resources												
Health insurance at birth												
Private or HMO	18.7*	24.6	7.2*	28.9	23.2*	20.9*	14.1*	31.9	62.3*	58.8*	30.1*	87.6
Medicaid	77.4*	73.9	81.9*	66.7	73.1*	76.5*	79.8*	62.5	35.3*	41.2*	62.8*	9.5
None	3.9	1.5	10.8*	4.4	3.7	2.7	6.1	5.7	2.4	0.0	7.1*	2.8
Help with child care during child's first year	92.8	93.1	84.7*	94.2	90.6	94.1	79.4*	94.0	89.2*	97.1	86.0*	96.4
Primary source of child care during child's first year†												
Parents	53.1*	50.4	60.0*	42.8	53.0	54.7	71.9*	56.8	44.1*	59.3	80.4*	59.0
Family	20.4*	26.5	20.0	27.2	22.1	22.4	18.0	19.7	20.9*	27.1*	10.3	12.6
Neighborhood	7.5*	5.8	20.0	12.2	8.7	7.7	7.9	12.8	16.0	6.8	7.2	13.5
Center	19.0	17.4	0.0*	17.8	16.3*	15.3	2.2*	10.7	19.0	6.8	2.1*	15.0
Sample size	1,226	130	85	206	790	187	165	319	295	68	114	494
Distribution	53.1	33.8	23.4	20.2	34.2	48.6	45.3	31.3	12.8	17.7	31.3	48.5

* p<.05, indicates statistically significant difference in comparison to non-Hispanic white women based on a two-sided t-test of equal means.
† Reported at year 1 by mothers completing year 1 follow-up survey.

Source: Authors' analysis of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study baseline survey (see note 14).

Socioeconomic Resources

As table 1 shows, unmarried new mothers (both single, or noncohabiting, and cohabiting) in each racial and ethnic group are much more likely to have less than a high school education, have a partner with less than a high school education, and to live in or near poverty than married new mothers in the same group. Further, unmarried women in each racial and ethnic group are less likely to own a car or report that they live in a safe neighborhood than married women. These fundamental socioeconomic disadvantages for unmarried mothers are apparent for every racial and ethnic category and are especially pronounced among single (that is, noncohabiting) mothers compared with married mothers.[15] For example, 37.4 percent of white women in the FFCWS who were single (again, noncohabiting) at the time of their child's birth had no high school degree compared with just 8.1 percent of married white women. Likewise, 52.6 percent of single (noncohabiting) black women were living in poverty at the time of their child's birth, compared with 14.2 percent of married black women.

Within groups of cohabiting and single mothers, white women have greater socioeconomic resources than black, Mexican American, and Mexican immigrant mothers. In particular, white single and cohabiting new mothers are far less likely to have household incomes below the federal poverty limit, are much more likely to own a car, are somewhat less likely to have other children, and are more likely to report living in a safe neighborhood than their black, Mexican American, and Mexican immigrant counterparts. Likely as a result of their lower incidence of poverty, cohabiting white mothers are also less likely to have received public assistance in the past year than cohabiting black or Mexican

American women (although a relatively high share of single white women reports receiving public assistance). The share of Mexican American and Mexican immigrant unmarried women without a high school degree is high, ranging from 53.1 percent among single Mexican American mothers to 82.4 percent among single Mexican immigrant mothers. By contrast, much lower shares of black and white unmarried women lack a high school degree and, for unmarried mothers in the same category of family relationship (that is, single or cohabiting), the shares of black and white women without a high school degree exhibit only minor differences. Patterns of paternal education largely reflect those of maternal education, with Mexican immigrant and Mexican American unmarried women reporting the highest shares of less than a high school degree among their children's fathers.

The share of mothers younger than age twenty at time of birth does not vary much between racial and ethnic groups within the same category of family relationship, with the share of Mexican immigrant teen mothers being modestly lower than those of other racial and ethnic groups within each family relationship category. Thus, racial and ethnic differences in socioeconomic resources among single, cohabiting, or married mothers are not attributable to maternal age disparities across groups.

All told, then, Mexican immigrant and Mexican American single and cohabiting women are particularly disadvantaged along most socioeconomic characteristics, with Mexican immigrants the most socioeconomically disadvantaged. About 80 percent of Mexican immigrant cohabiting mothers and about 90 percent of Mexican immigrant single mothers are in or near poverty, and more than 75 percent of single and cohabiting

Mexican immigrant new mothers have less than a high school degree. But Mexican immigrant women also have the lowest rates of public assistance receipt, likely because undocumented and recently arrived documented immigrants are ineligible for many public services. Black single and cohabiting women are also disadvantaged compared with white single and cohabiting women, respectively, especially in terms of poverty. More important even than these socioeconomic disparities between unmarried black and white mothers, though, is the much higher prevalence of births to unmarried black than white women.

Partner and Social Support Resources

Table 1 shows that differences in partner and social support across racial and ethnic groups are far less pronounced than differences in socioeconomic resources. Women cohabiting at the time of their children's birth in all racial and ethnic groups report (in a pattern virtually identical with that of married women) that fathers nearly universally want involvement with their children and have visited the hospital shortly after the birth. Cohabiting mothers in all groups also report very good access to social support at the time of their children's birth, a pattern that, again, differs little from that reported by married mothers. Among cohabiting women, reported social supports are modestly lower among Mexican immigrants, which might be expected given that some of their most important support networks may be in Mexico.

Single mothers report generally less partner support than cohabiting or married mothers among all racial and ethnic groups. Single mothers are, however, about twice as likely as cohabiting mothers to report having a grandparent of their new child living with them, likely because more single mothers live with

their parents for financial support and child care absent a cohabiting partner. Mexican immigrant single mothers are least likely to report having a grandparent of their children in the home, again most likely because parents of Mexican immigrant new mothers may be living in Mexico. Within the category of single mothers, however, most racial and ethnic differences in partner and social support are not large; for example, racial and ethnic groups report no differences in access to financial support or to a place to live in emergency situations. One pattern that does turn up among mothers who are not cohabiting at the time of birth is that black mothers are somewhat more likely to report that the fathers of their children visited the hospital and want to be involved in their children's lives than are other racial and ethnic groups. This finding is consistent with other recent evidence that black fathers' roles outside of marriage may be more strongly institutionalized than those of unmarried white fathers.[16] Overall, though, reported partner and social support differences across racial and ethnic groups are modest in comparison to the wide differences in socioeconomic resources across groups.

Health Care and Child Care Resources

As with socioeconomic resources, health care and child care resources available to women differ by race and ethnicity at the time of their children's birth, even within family structure categories. As table 1 shows, across all groups, single and cohabiting women are far less likely to have private or health maintenance organization (HMO) health care coverage than are married women and are far more likely to rely on Medicaid or to be completely uninsured. But single white women in fragile families are the most likely to be privately or HMO insured, while single Mexican immigrant women in fragile families are the least likely to have private or HMO

Research on explanations for the racial and ethnic differences in fragile families is complex because such differences involve historical patterns of family formation across groups, the effects of immigration and assimilation trends, and economic and social changes over time.

coverage and are most likely to be uninsured. For example, table 1 shows that 29 percent of single white mothers reported private or HMO insurance coverage at the time of their child's birth compared with just 7 percent for single Mexican immigrant mothers. This pattern is consistent with earlier work using the FFCWS and suggests that young children of Mexican immigrant women are especially at risk of not having insurance coverage and of not seeing physicians when ill or after accidents.[17] Black and Mexican American single and cohabiting mothers are also more likely to rely on Medicaid than white single and cohabiting mothers, which is not surprising given the reported racial and ethnic differences in household income.

Racial and ethnic differences in child care arrangements also reflect to some degree the particular socioeconomic and geographic disadvantages for Mexican immigrant single and cohabiting new mothers, who are least likely to have someone available to help them with care early in their children's lives and are most likely to be, themselves, their

primary source of child care. Related work using FFCWS data finds that, among unmarried mothers who work outside the home, Hispanics are most apt to use maternal relatives for care, while blacks are most likely to use day care centers, and whites, to use their children's fathers.[18] Such racial and ethnic differences reflect both socioeconomic differences across groups and culturally based preferences for child care arrangements.

Explanations for Racial and Ethnic Differences in Fragile Families

Research on explanations for the racial and ethnic differences in fragile families is complex because such differences involve historical patterns of family formation across groups, the effects of immigration and assimilation trends, and economic and social changes over time, including changing norms regarding the American family. We focus here on three themes prevalent in the research literature. The first is the effect of structurally based socioeconomic barriers to marriage and family stability. The second is the effect of sex ratios. The third is the effect of culture and norms on patterns of family formation and stability among some racial and ethnic groups. Although our review suggests that all three explanations are important for understanding racial and ethnic differences in fragile families, we believe the first—the effect of structurally based socioeconomic disadvantages—best explains current racial and ethnic differences in the formation, resource disparities, and stability of fragile families.

Structurally Based Socioeconomic Disadvantages as Barriers to Marriage and Family Stability

One important strand of research strongly suggests that structural conditions of socioeconomic disadvantage make marriage a

milestone that is harder to achieve for African Americans and other disadvantaged minority groups, such as American Indians and some Hispanic groups, than for whites and Asian Americans. In its most basic sense, the argument is that racial and ethnic differences in family structure reflect class differences in family structure and the differing distribution of racial and ethnic groups across classes.[19] Research focused on the early twentieth century convincingly showed large black-white differences in family structure that parallel much more recent patterns, strongly suggesting that persistent socioeconomic disparities are responsible for understanding long-term race differences in the formation and stability of fragile families.[20]

More recent changes in family structure among racial and ethnic groups since the middle of the past century, particularly the growth in the percentage of unmarried births for all groups over this time frame, can be attributed to several important economic and social factors.[21] First, economic inequality in both yearly income and wealth accumulation increased quite substantially between 1975 and 2000 as the U.S. economy became more technologically, informationally, and financially oriented. With this shift in the economy, particularly the accompanying loss of unionized manufacturing jobs, employment that offers wages adequate to support a family now depends to a much greater extent on postsecondary education. Second, tax policies were altered to provide increased advantages to the affluent, while government supports to protect the less well off, such as the minimum wage, stagnated or were sometimes even reduced in value. Third, rates of incarceration among young men soared.

These structural changes affected all racial and ethnic groups, including low-income

whites. In particular, economic reorganization away from manufacturing work disproportionately affected poorly educated working-class whites who had previously benefited from unionized labor.[22] In other words, the structural changes of the second half of the twentieth century affected all groups and, in the case of some measures of family structure, served to make racial and ethnic differences in family structure less, rather than more, pronounced.

Structural disadvantages in each group strongly influence marriage prospects and family stability. Recent work by Linda Burton and Belinda Tucker, for example, has documented that young women who are living in or near poverty (and possibly even some middle-class women, given uncertain employment and economic prospects in today's economy) face substantial uncertainty in their lives that makes marriage a less realistic option for them than for higher-income young women.[23] Such uncertainties, or insecurities, include intermittent employment for themselves as well as for their potential partners, the time demands of night and weekend jobs, concerns over caring for older relatives, burdensome debt, high costs and instability in housing, poor health or lack of access to affordable health care, neighborhood violence, and even public and partner scrutiny over the use of their time. While Burton and Tucker focus on socioeconomically disadvantaged African American women in describing the ways that uncertainty frames their attitudes toward, perceptions about, and decisions about forming marital unions, they also make clear that such uncertainty is common to all groups of socioeconomically disadvantaged women. But it is important to note that black, Hispanic, and American Indian women face much greater structural socioeconomic disadvantage than white and Asian American women.

Research also shows that although socioeconomically disadvantaged women often postpone or forsake marriage in the context of substantial uncertainty, they value motherhood highly and see no need to postpone motherhood until marriage, even if they view marriage as the preferred context for childbearing.[24] Indeed, through extensive interviews with low-income women in Philadelphia, Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas found that socially disadvantaged women value marriage symbolically as a milestone to be achieved by economically viable and stable couples.[25] Survey data also support this finding. Among low-income women surveyed in Boston, San Antonio, and Chicago in the Three-City Study, 80 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that nonmarital childbearing is embarrassing or harmful for future chances of marriage, and 70 percent agreed or strongly agreed that a woman does not have to be married to have a child.[26] At the same time, two-thirds of urban, unmarried mothers in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study felt that married parents are better for children.[27]

Sex Ratios
Another important barrier to marriage that influences racial and ethnic differences in family formation is the limited supply of partners for young women. Given a high degree of racial endogamy in marriage—intra-racial marriages are far more common than interracial marriages—differences in race- and ethnic-specific marriage markets are another primary structural reason for racial and ethnic differences in marriage.[28] Research shows that marriage markets—measured with race-, ethnic-, and age-specific ratios of non-incarcerated men to women in a given geographical area—help to account for racial and ethnic differences in marriage.[29] Ratios of men to women are substantially lower for

blacks than they are for whites, meaning that black women have far fewer marriageable partners within their race group from which to choose. Moreover, women of all racial and ethnic groups who live in a geographic area with a low sex ratio are less likely to marry than comparable women in a geographic area with higher sex ratios.

Sex ratios of men to women are also substantially higher for Hispanics than for blacks, meaning that Hispanic women have more marriageable partners to choose from. Kristen Harknett and Sara McLanahan show that although African American men are in short supply in local marriage markets, Hispanic men tend to outnumber women in those same markets.[30] These differential sex ratios are very important in helping to explain lower marriage rates among African Americans in comparison to Hispanics. Marriage markets also seem to matter more for Mexican immigrant women than for Mexican American women, perhaps because language barriers help to define a more restrictive supply of potential partners among Mexican immigrants.[31] The fact that racial and ethnic differences in the supply of marriageable partners account in significant ways for racial and ethnic differences in marriage implies that women of all racial and ethnic groups share a similar aspiration for marriage—that they would marry if they could find a suitable partner.

Cultural Explanations of Racial and Ethnic Differences in Fragile Families
The structurally based socioeconomic explanation of racial and ethnic differences in fragile families cannot account for the fact that some disadvantaged immigrant groups, such as Mexican immigrants, engage in less nonmarital childbearing and have more stable relationships as unmarried parents than do

Our findings clearly show that cohabiting Mexican immigrants have the highest rates of marriage following a nonmarital birth and the highest rate of relationship stability of all cohabiting couples, despite their pronounced socioeconomic disadvantages.

U.S.-born disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups. For example, although Mexican immigrants as a group have the poorest education and highest poverty rates in the Fragile Families data, they are also the most likely of all racial and ethnic groups to be married by age twenty-four, they have fewer nonmarital births as a proportion of all births than do U.S.-born Mexican Americans, and they are less likely than whites, blacks, or native-born Mexicans to divorce.[32] These patterns may be attributed to a Mexican cultural orientation known as familism, which strongly values family roles and elevates family responsibilities over individual needs.[33] Familism also emphasizes traditional gender roles that favor marriage and high fertility, as well as familial responsibility that translates into more stable relationships. Although some research has questioned the role that familism might play in the unique patterns of family formation and stability of Mexican immigrants, our findings from the Fragile Families data clearly show that cohabiting Mexican immigrants have the highest rates of marriage following a nonmarital birth and the highest rate of

relationship stability of all cohabiting couples, despite their pronounced socioeconomic disadvantages.[34] This finding indicates how powerful a family-centric cultural orientation such as familism can be in the face of socioeconomic disadvantage.

Another research finding regarding the respective roles of socioeconomic resources and culture (including norms) in explaining racial and ethnic differences in fragile families is that U.S.-born Mexican American women have higher levels of nonmarital births and lower levels of stability in their relationships than do Mexican immigrant women, even though they have much higher levels of socioeconomic resources. Familism, then, appears to erode over time in the United States.[35] And, in fact, all U.S.-born racial and ethnic groups have higher shares of nonmarital childbearing than the immigrant generation; as noted, the share of nonmarital births among U.S.-born Asian Americans is about three times that among Asian immigrants. Thus, to the extent that contemporary immigrants can be compared with the descendants of earlier-arriving immigrants, this more general pattern across all racial and ethnic groups—that is, that fragile families form more commonly in the generations that follow the initial immigrant generation—reflects a process of convergence to current U.S. norms that may not always be in the best interests of second-generation immigrants and their children.[36] The fading influence of familism may represent one example of how, more generally, the process of assimilation among all immigrant groups to current American family structures involves a shift away from particular family forms that are brought to the United States by immigrant families.

Since 1960, Americans' attitudes toward marriage and childbearing have also become

much more flexible, shifting substantially away from stigmatization of nonmarital childbearing and toward greater acceptance of it.[37] That attitudinal shift began earlier, and has been accepted more broadly, among blacks than among other racial and ethnic groups.[38] If the shift continues, racial and ethnic gaps in patterns of family formation and stability may narrow in the coming decades. But the continuing socioeconomic disadvantages of black, Mexican American, and American Indian populations and advantages of white and Asian American populations will most likely keep family formation and stability gaps from closing.

Policy Implications

Racial and ethnic differences in fragile families continue to be strongly influenced by socioeconomic inequality across groups. In all racial and ethnic groups, less education strongly predicts nonmarital childbearing, both planned and unplanned.[39] Perhaps even more important, uncertainties surrounding employment prospects, the cost of housing, health and access to health care, neighborhood violence, the criminal justice system, and other day-to-day stresses of coping with life in poverty or near-poverty conditions predict racial and ethnic patterns in forming fragile families, as well as the relative lack of available resources in, and the marked instability of, fragile families. This socioeconomic-based understanding of racial and ethnic differences in fragile families implies that such policy goals as increasing the rates of marriage and decreasing nonmarital childbearing will require structural change to improve opportunities—particularly educational and employment opportunities—for black, Hispanic, and American Indian men. Also important for marriage prospects are policies that directly or indirectly reduce the high rates of incarceration among disadvantaged minority group

members. Addressing these structural barriers to marriage among the socioeconomically disadvantaged will also reduce racial and ethnic inequality and, ultimately, racial and ethnic differences in family structure.

Policies that target particular communities might also assuage racial and ethnic differences in socioeconomic resources among fragile families. Data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study show that black and Mexican American unmarried mothers are more likely than white unmarried mothers to be in poverty, to depend on public assistance, to live in unsafe neighborhoods, not to own a car, and not to have private health insurance. Social policies must continue to address racial and ethnic inequalities in basic socioeconomic resources: employment and income, access to quality health insurance, access to credit, and access to quality housing in safe neighborhoods. Policies that build certainty and stability into the lives of U.S. young adults will raise marriage rates and reduce racial and ethnic disparities in fragile families.

The structural explanation for racial and ethnic differences in fragile families cannot, however, explain why some highly socioeconomically disadvantaged immigrant groups, such as Mexican immigrants, have higher rates of marriage and, among unmarried parents, of relationship stability, than some U.S.-born racial and ethnic groups. Here the explanation seems to be the strong role of family life in Mexican culture. Overall, because Hispanics are expected to make up nearly one-third of the U.S. population by 2050, they represent a very important group in terms of future social service provision.[40] Policy programs serving the Hispanic community should explicitly acknowledge—indeed, embrace and encourage—approaches to

marriage and childbearing that draw on the unique strengths of the Mexican family.

That the prevalence of childbearing is lower in almost all immigrant groups than in their U.S.-born co-ethnic counterparts suggests a different set of policy needs specific to immigrants. Policies that restrict undocumented and recently documented immigrants from public services, together with policies that criminalize, disenfranchise, and restrict the cross-border mobility of nominally undocumented immigrants, contribute to downward assimilation and instability in the lives of immigrants. Instead, U.S. immigration policy should embrace the strengths of immigrant family ties, thus keeping immigrant families together and helping them to stabilize their lives in the United States and to develop greater trust in U.S. institutions. Taking advantage of immigrants' strong family ties would also enable them to assimilate more effectively into the United States and create upwardly mobile prospects for the second generation and beyond.

In closing, we note that normative attitudes toward marriage and nonmarital childbearing in the United States have changed over the past few decades and show few if any signs of reverting to old patterns. Although policies to promote marriage among racial and ethnic groups are important in that most young U.S. men and women continue to regard marriage as an important goal, marriage promotion cannot be the only goal of effective family policy. Indeed, policy should stress tolerance—and support—for all types of family forms, particularly in the interest of child well-being, rather than attempting to turn back the clock. Greater acceptance of and attention to the needs of diverse family structures will also be another step toward racial and ethnic equality.

Endnotes

1. Stephanie J. Ventura, "Changing Patterns of Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States," *Data Brief* 18 (Hyattsville, Md.: National Center for Health Statistics, 2009).

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4. Pew Hispanic Center, "From 200 Million to 300 Million: The Numbers behind Population Growth," Pew Research Center Fact Sheet, October 10, 2006 (www.pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/25.pdf [June 25, 2009]).

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8. Joyce A. Martin and others, *Births: Final Data for 2000,* National Vital Statistics Report 50, no. 5, (Hyattsville, Md.: National Center for Health Statistics, 2002).

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10. Rates are shown for black and white women only because greater racial and ethnic detail is not available in vital statistics data before the early 1990s. Following 1994, the rates and percentages are specifically for non-Hispanic white and non-Hispanic black mothers. Hispanic rates and percentages are not presented in the figure for clarity of presentation. See Ventura and Bachrach, *Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States, 1940–1999* (see note 9).

11. Herbert L. Smith, S. Philip Morgan, and Tanya Koropecky-Cox, "A Decomposition of Trends in the Nonmarital Fertility Ratios of Blacks and Whites in the United States, 1960–1992," *Demography* 33, no. 2 (1996): 141–51.

12. These high fertility rates for Hispanics and Asian Americans also, in part, reflect the relatively young age structures of these two groups.

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14. See the following article for a description of the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being data set: Nancy E. Reichman and others, "Fragile Families: Sample and Design," *Children and Youth Services Review* 23 (2001): 303–26.

15. Sara McLanahan, for example, recently analyzed differences between unmarried and married families at the time of children's birth and summarized that "…married and unmarried parents come from very different worlds." See Sara McLanahan, "Fragile Families and the Reproduction of Poverty," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621 (2009): 111–31.

16. Kathryn Edin, Laura Tach, and Ronald Mincy, "Claiming Fatherhood: Race and the Dynamics of Paternal Involvement among Unmarried Men," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621 (2009): 149–77.

17. Erin R. Hamilton and others, "Health Insurance and Health-Care Utilization of U.S.-Born Mexican-American Children," *Social Science Quarterly* 87, no. 5 (2006): 1280–94.

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31. R. S. Oropesa, Daniel T. Lichter, and Robert N. Anderson, "Marriage Markets and the Paradox of Mexican American Nuptiality," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 56 (1994): 889–907.

32. Nancy S. Landale and R. S. Oropesa, "Hispanic Families: Stability and Change," *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (2007): 381–405.

33. Ibid.; R. S. Oropesa, "Normative Beliefs about Marriage and Cohabitation: A Comparison of Non-Latino Whites, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (1996): 49–62.

34. See, for example, Frank D. Bean and others, "The New U.S. Immigrants; How Do They Affect Our Understanding of the African American Experience?" *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621 (2009): 202–20.

35. Marta Tienda and Faith Mitchell, eds., *Multiple Origins, Uncertain Destinies; Hispanics and the American Future* (Washington: National Academies Press, 2006). See, in particular, pages 77–80 regarding concerns over the generational dilution of familism among Hispanic families. See also R. Kelly Raley, T. Elizabeth Durden, and Elizabeth Wildsmith, "Understanding Mexican-American Marriage Patterns Using a Life-Course Approach," *Social Science Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (2004): 872–90, for an empirical evaluation of the familism argument.

36. An exception is Cubans. The proportion of births to unmarried women is lower among U.S.-born Cubans than it is among immigrant Cubans. This likely reflects changing patterns of Cuban immigration to the United States from highly educated, upper-class immigrants in the first wave of immigration in the 1960s to, more recently, less-educated and low-skilled immigrants arriving after the Mariel Boat Lift in 1980. This case exemplifies why cross-generational comparisons are problematic for understanding processes of assimilation—cross-generational differences may reflect differences in the composition of immigrants arriving at different points in time, and in that case later generations are not an appropriate comparison point.

37. Arland Thornton and Linda Young-DeMarco, "Four Decades of Trends in Attitudes toward Family Issues in the United States: The 1960s through the 1990s," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 63 (2001): 1009–37.

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