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*2012 Working Paper Series*

**LONG-TERM COHABITATION AMONG UNWED PARENTS:  
DETERMINANTS AND CONSEQUENCES FOR CHILDREN**

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## **Abstract**

Though a great deal of prior research has examined the stability of cohabiting unions and child wellbeing in cohabiting unions, little research has attempted to integrate these two concepts.

Using 4 waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, I examine the determinants of long-term cohabitation among a recent group of unwed parents, and the consequences of different stable unions (marriage and cohabitation) for child wellbeing. Results indicate that relationship quality is the key determinant to both long-term cohabitation and marriage among unwed parents. Moreover, there are only slight negative implications for children raised in long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting relative to stable two biological married parent families. It appears that long-term cohabitation presents a viable family structure for children.

## 1. Introduction

Childbearing within cohabiting unions has become increasingly common in the United States, with estimates from the late 1990s and early 2000s suggesting that nearly 50% of nonmarital births and 18% of all births were to cohabiting parents (Kennedy & Bumpass 2008). These more recent estimates constitute a nearly 75% increase in childbearing within cohabiting unions since the early 1980s (Bumpass & Lu 2000). Such wide changes in fertility behavior have prompted a great deal of concern regarding the wellbeing of children residing in such families (see Brown 2010). This concern is not wholly unwarranted; even among those with children, cohabiting unions run a greater risk of disruption relative to their married counterparts (Manning, Smock, & Majumdar 2004), and there is increasing evidence that children in two-parent cohabiting families fare worse relative to their counterparts residing in married families on a variety of cognitive (Acs & Nelson 2002; Artis 2007), behavioral (Brown 2004a; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones 2002; Hofferth 2006), and economic (Manning & Brown 2006) outcomes (see Brown 2010 for a review).

However, the relationship between family structure and child wellbeing is often complicated by pervasive socioeconomic differentials found between cohabiting and married parents, as well as the level of heterogeneity among unmarried parents as a group (Brown 2010; Manning 2002). Though studies on the relative wellbeing of children in cohabiting unions are numerous, most early studies relied upon snapshot measures to infer family structure (see Manning & Bulanda 2007) and often ignored biological parentage, treating two-biological-parent cohabiting families and cohabiting stepfamilies as a singular family structure (Manning & Brown 2006). Only recently have researchers become more nuanced in their measurement of family structure, due in part to a wider recognition of family diversity and the availability of high

quality longitudinal data (Brown 2010). Despite recent advances in this area, large gaps in our understanding still persist. One significant gap has been a lack of research on the nature and determinants of long-term cohabitation, typically defined as coresidential unions lasting five years or more without transitioning to marriage (Smock, Casper, & Wyse 2008). A primary feature of current research has been a focus on instability and the transition to marriage among cohabiting parents, with many viewing instability as the major threat to the wellbeing of children in these unions (Brown 2010). Indeed, the majority of cohabiting parents will eventually break-up; however a sizeable minority do maintain long periods of coresidence without marrying (Fragile Families 2007). Though long-term cohabitation is relatively rare, research on this population would be a great benefit to scholars and policymakers alike. Research on parents in long-term cohabiting unions would not only help scholars to better comprehend the conditions which encourage stability among unwed parents, but would also generate a more complete picture of the consequences of cohabitation upon child wellbeing. Thus, by shifting focus from parental cohabitation in general to stable cohabitation specifically, researchers would be in a better position to evaluate the potential dangers (or benefits) of cohabitation for child wellbeing.

Drawing on four waves of data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, the current investigation address two important questions. First, what are the determining factors of long-term cohabitation among unwed parents, and how are these factors distinct from those which determine dissolution and the transition to marriage? Second, how do children fare in long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families, and how does the wellbeing of these children compare to that of their counterparts living in similar two-biological-parent married families?

### *1.1. Cohabiting parent families*

Though recent decades have witnessed increases in both cohabitation and childbearing within cohabiting unions, cohabiting parent families are demographically and socioeconomically distinct from both their childless contemporaries and married parent families (Manlove, Ryan, Wildsmith, & Franzetta 2010; Manning 2001). Estimates from the 2001 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort, indicate that cohabiting mothers tend to be minority, younger, and from less stable family backgrounds than their married counterparts, (Manlove, Ryan, Wildsmith, & Franzetta 2010). In terms of socioeconomic characteristics, cohabiting parents typically have fewer economic resources, lower levels of education, are more likely to be unemployed, and have less access to social and instrumental support (Manning 2002; Manning & Brown 2006; Manning & Lichter 1996; Osborne, Manning, & Smock 2007).

Cohabiting parents face an elevated risk of separation relative to their married counterparts (Guzzo & Hayford 2012; Manning, Smock, & Majumdar 2004). Additionally, estimates from multiple data sources indicate that cohabiting parents face similar levels of instability relative to their childless counterparts; five years after the birth of a child 45% of cohabiting parents had separated (Fragile Families 2007), compared to 40% of all cohabiting couples separating five years after initiation of the union (Bumpass & Lu 2000). Consequently, overall union stability for cohabitators and cohabiting parent families is similar, with some notable divergence in the resulting union type. The transition to marriage is less common among cohabiting couples with children than those without (Manning 2004). Long-term cohabitation is more prevalent among cohabiting parents; five years after the initiation of the union 50% of cohabiting couples had married and only 10% maintained long-term cohabitation, among

cohabiting parents 26% were married and 26% were still cohabiting five years after their child's birth (Bumpass & Lu 2000; Fragile Families 2007).

Though long-term cohabitation is generally rare, this family structure is a reality for little over a quarter of children born to unwed parents (Fragile Families 2007). While long-term cohabitation is structurally similar to marriage, cohabitation itself is associated with poorer outcomes for children. Given the high prevalence of long-term cohabitation among unwed parents, it is critical that researchers understand the factors which engender long-term cohabitation and how these factors impact the lives of children.

### *1.2. Determinants of union transition and dissolution*

Ultimately, long-term cohabitation results as other cohabiting couples select into either dissolution or marriage. Thus, understanding long-term cohabitation requires acknowledging the key determinants of union dissolution and the transition to marriage. The most prominent explanations regarding the transition to marriage revolve around couple relationship quality, human capital, and cultural norms and attitudes (Osborne 2005).

Cohabiting couples with greater happiness, commitment, and lower levels of male partner violence and disagreements are more likely to marry (Brown 2004b), and these findings generally extend to unmarried parents as well (Carlson, McLanahan, & England 2004; Osborne 2005). Higher levels of relationship quality among cohabiting parents have also been shown to increase the odds of continued coresidence relative to dissolution. Findings from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study indicate that only lower levels of male partner violence increased the odds marriage relative to continued cohabitation for cohabiting parents (Osborne 2005). That is, other relevant aspects of relationship quality (i.e. level of disagreement, emotional support, and marriage expectations) neither increased nor decreased the odds of marriage relative

to continued coresidence, though lower levels of couple disagreements, and high expectations of marriage among recent cohabiting parents were all associated with higher odds of continued coresidence relative to dissolution (Osborne 2005). Moreover, findings from the National Survey of Family Growth reported no differences in relationship quality among cohabiting and married couples who had maintained their relationship for at least four years (Willett 2006). Thus, available evidence indicates that relationship quality among cohabiting parents may be strongly predictive of both the transition to marriage and long-term cohabitation.

Qualitative evidence has shown financial concerns to be one of the most commonly cited barriers to marriage among cohabiting couples and parents (Edin & Kefalas 2005; Smock, Manning, & Porter 2005). Empirical research on children born to cohabiting parents has demonstrated that those with greater economic resources are more likely to marry following a birth, relative to continued coresidence (Osborne 2005). More recently, Gibson-Davis (2009) has shown that positive changes in economic resources are in fact associated with an increased likelihood of marriage among cohabiting parents. Alternatively, available empirical evidence does not seem to strongly suggest that low economic resources are associated with dissolution among cohabiting parents. Although economic resources and positive changes in economic resources are positively related to marriage, resources seem to be less influential upon the decision to exit or remain in a cohabiting union. Indeed, when money does figure into the decision to dissolve, it appears to be related to how parents (fathers especially) spend their money, rather than the actual amount of money present (Edin & Kefalas 2005; Reed 2007).

A final factor understood to be relevant to stability among unmarried parents are parental characteristics and behaviors. Qualitative evidence on unmarried mothers indicates that paternal drug use, intimate partner violence, and criminal involvement are common concerns, with sexual

mistrust, jealousy, and infidelity frequently cited as underlying motivations for parental separation (Edin & Kefalas 2005; Reed 2006). Quantitative evidence from the Fragile Families study seems to confirm this; fathers with significant substance use problems and patterns of violence were less likely to be cohabiting with the mother of their child (Waller & Swisher 2006). Using the same data Osborne (2005) found that higher levels of initial paternal involvement (operationalized as whether or not the father visited the mother during the birth) increased the odds of marriage relative to cohabitation and continued cohabitation relative to dissolution.

Though many of the studies mentioned above do reveal some of the factors which facilitate continued coresidence among unwed parents (Carlson, McLanahan, & England 2004; Gibson-Davis 2009; Osborne 2005; Waller & Swisher 2006), none of these studies present a direct focus on long-term cohabitation, with the majority focusing on union outcomes shortly after the birth of a child. Despite these limitations, the extant research seems to indicate that both couple relationship quality and parental characteristics/behaviors are strong determinants of long-term cohabitation among parents. Economic resources might play a role, however prior studies seem to indicate that these are more critical in facilitating the transition to marriage. In light of findings from prior research, the current study addresses three general hypotheses relating to long-term cohabitation. First, I expect that higher levels of relationship quality among two-biological-parent cohabiting families will increase their likelihood of long-term cohabitation relative to dissolution, but will be unrelated to marital transitions. Second, poorer economic resources will increase the likelihood of long-term cohabitation relative to the transition to marriage, but will be unrelated to dissolution. Third, positive parental characteristics and



behaviors will increase the likelihood of long-term cohabitation relative to dissolution and increase the likelihood of the transition to marriage relative to long-term cohabitation.

### *1.3. Cohabitation and child wellbeing*

Taking prior research into consideration, it is possible that children in long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families might fare very well; if high couple relationship quality and low instances of negative parental behaviors facilitate long-term cohabitation, then children would clearly benefit from these positive qualities. However, a great deal of extant research suggests that children living in two-biological-parent cohabiting families fared worse in terms of behavioral (Acs & Nelson 2002; Hofferth 2006), cognitive (Artis 2007; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones 2002), and health outcomes (Schmeer 2011) relative to their counterparts born in two-biological-parent married families.

Despite these numerous disparities in child wellbeing, it is unlikely that cohabitation itself is responsible; the association between family structure and child wellbeing is largely mediated by economic resources, parental socialization, and family instability (see Brown 2010). In terms of economic resources, children in cohabiting parent families fare better relative to those in single-mother families, but worse relative to those in married parent families, though variation exists across children's experience of cohabitation (Acs & Nelson 2002; Brown 2002; Manning & Brown 2006; Manning & Lichter 1996). Using official poverty estimates, Brown (2002) finds that two-biological-parent cohabiting families are considerably poorer than their married counterparts, more closely resembling single mother households. Analyses utilizing data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study yield similar results (Artis 2007). Using alternative measures of material hardship (i.e. social poverty, food insecurity, housing insecurity), Manning and Brown (2006) find that, controlling for an array of demographic characteristics, children in

two-biological-parent cohabiting families were no more likely to experience material hardship relative to their counterparts in two-biological-parent married families. However, considerable racial/ethnic differences were found; the general finding holds for non-Hispanic black and Hispanic families, however non-Hispanic white two-biological-parent cohabiting families were significantly more likely to have experience food and housing insecurity.

Though current evidence is somewhat conflicting, the majority of extant research seems to suggest that the parenting practices of cohabiting parents are often poorer than that of their married counterparts. Parents in two-biological-parent cohabiting families tend to exhibit lower levels of parental engagement with children (Artis 2007; Gibson-Davis 2008; Hofferth 2006), lower levels of school involvement (Artis 2007), parental sensitivity (Klausli & Owen 2009), cooperative parenting (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne 2008), and higher levels of corporal punishment (Gibson-Davis 2008; Guzzo & Lee 2008), relative to those in two-biological-parent married families. However, studies utilizing Fragile Families data find that disparities in parental engagement and corporal punishment disappear after relevant demographic and socioeconomic characteristics are taken into account (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne 2008; Gibson-Davis 2008; Guzzo & Lee 2008). Additionally, estimates from the 2003-2004 American Time Use Survey indicate that time spent in child-care activities and total time spent with children differed little for those in cohabiting families relative to those in married parent families (Kendig & Bianchi 2008). Finally, only a minority of the above mentioned studies (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne 2008; Klausli & Owen 2009) take the duration of the parental relationship into account, examining durations of two years or longer.

An additional element which impacts the wellbeing of children in cohabiting parent families, related but distinct from parenting capabilities, are the potentially negative behaviors

and characteristics of parents themselves. Unmarried fathers are more likely to be involved in a number of problematic behaviors relative to their married counterparts; behaviors such as physical abuse, involvement in criminal activity, and substance use can act as a major drain on resources and time, impacting both the quality of the romantic union and the parental relationship (Waller & Swisher 2006). While research on parenting among cohabiting families has overtly focused on fathers, unwed mothers may (and often do) engage in similar risky behaviors (Edin & Kefalas 2005; Reed 2006). Given the greater socioeconomic disparities among cohabiting parent families, harmful parental characteristics could engender a very toxic environment for children. Though it seems probable that many of the most risky parents would have dissolved their unions long before they reached a period of long-term cohabitation, such an assumption remains unknown.

Given prior evidence, I propose the following general hypotheses concerning the wellbeing of children in long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families relative to children in similar two-biological-parent married families. First, relative to children in stable two-biological-parent married families, children in long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families will have increased odds of experiencing material insecurity, and higher odds of exposure to parents who exhibit negative behaviors. Second, children in long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families will experience similar levels of parental involvement as children in stable two-biological-parent married families.

### **3. Materials and methods**

This study uses data from four waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Fragile Families), a national longitudinal survey following a birth cohort of 4,898 children born to unmarried and married parents in 20 large U.S. cities between the years 1998 and 2000.

Baseline data were collected from both parents shortly after the birth of a focal child, with follow-up interviews occurring 12, 36, and 60 months after the focal child's birth. Fragile Families collects information on a wide variety of subjects, including parental and focal child health, parental romantic relationships, parenthood and parental characteristics, and socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. One of the core goals of Fragile Families is to understand the "conditions and capabilities of new unwed parents," making this dataset ideally suited to examine characteristics of emerging long-term cohabiting parent families, and the consequences of these unions for children (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan 2000).

### *3.1. Sample selection*

Of the 4,898 new parents interviewed at the baseline, 1,109 mothers identified themselves as currently cohabiting with the biological father of the focal child and provided complete information on their relationship status at the 12, 36, and 60 month follow-up interviews. The durations of these unions were calculated from a retrospective variable collected at the 12 months follow-up, asking mothers both the year and month when their cohabiting union with the father began. The initial duration of these unions varied greatly; some parents had been cohabiting for a considerable length of time prior to the birth of the focal child, and many of these unions could have already been considered long-term. These high-duration relationships cohabiting at baseline are problematic for the purposes of this study; considerable time has already passed since the initiation of these unions, and the factors which determine stability have likely already been in operation for these couples. The goal of this study is to understand long-term cohabitation as it emerges, and the inclusion of baseline couples who have been together for a long time period could potentially bias findings. Thus, this study focuses on a subgroup of short-duration cohabiting parents at baseline in an effort to ensure a limited effect of selection.

Among the initial 1,109 couples, 554 (approximately 50%) had been cohabiting for less than 18 months prior to the birth of the focal child. At the most, these parents could only have been cohabiting for 9 months or less prior to the conception of the focal child, a relatively short duration. Though this restriction may seem initially arbitrary, the analyses required a sufficient analytic sample; the 18-month restriction was the shortest possible duration which both minimized potential selection issues and maximized the sample size. After taking into account missing information on selected variables and the loss of respondents between waves ( $n = 40$ ), the final result was an analytic sample of 514 short-duration cohabiting parents at baseline. The first set of analyses, the determinants of long-term cohabitation, was restricted to these 514 couples.

The second stage of the analysis examines relative levels of wellbeing among children in long-term cohabiting parent families and children in other long-term coresidential unions. This analysis required that all non-intact cohabiting unions be excluded, and that parents in other long-term coresidential unions be included. In addition to long-term cohabiting parents, and parents who transitioned from cohabitation to marriage, a sample of long-term married (never cohabiting) parents was added to the analytic sample. The sample of married parents was drawn in a similar fashion to that of cohabiting parents; the duration of the marital union was verified through a similar retrospective variable, and a group of short-duration at baseline married parents (18 months or less) was identified. The sample for the second analysis was 437 stable couples, with approximately 120 long-term cohabiting parents, 146 parents who transitioned from cohabitation to marriage, and 161 long-term married parents. The sample sizes presented here are not exact as they vary slightly for each dependent variable analyzed.

### *3.2. Determinants of long-term cohabitation*

For the first stage of my analyses I use multinomial logistic regression, a method using maximum-likelihood estimation to predict the statistical likelihood that cohabiting parents will transition to marriage or dissolve, relative to long-term cohabitation. The dependent variable is the relationship status of the focal child's biological parents at the time of the 60 month follow-up, roughly five years after the focal child's birth. Three main sets of independent variables are considered as potential determinants of long-term cohabitation: relationship quality, socioeconomic characteristics, and parental characteristics. Along with these, a range of demographic control variables (maternal race/ethnicity, parental age, maternal family background, and parental fertility history) are also included in the analysis.

A total of six distinct measures are used to examine the impact of relationship quality on long-term cohabitation: chances of marriage, couple interaction, partner support, couple disagreement, poor conflict resolution, and intimate partner violence. Each of these measures, as is the case for the majority of other measures utilized in this analysis, comes from the baseline mother survey. Chances of marriage consists of an ordinal variable (1 = "no chance" to 5 = "almost certain chance") which asks the mother to assess the likelihood that she will eventually marry the father of the focal child. Couple interaction is a constructed variable (0 = "lowest interaction" to 4 = "highest interaction"), it combines four binary indicators of specific couple activities in the month prior to the birth of the focal child (visited friends, gone out together for entertainment, ate together at a restaurant, and helped each other solve a problem). Partner support (1 = "low support" to 3 = "high support") is a constructed variable combining three measures which asks the mother how often the focal child's father encourages her, criticizes her, and expresses affection for her (1 = "never" to 3 = "often"). Couple disagreement is a constructed variable (1 = "low disagreement" to 3 = "high disagreement"), it consists of six items

assessing how often the parents got into arguments about money, spending time together, sex, the pregnancy, drinking and/or drug use, and being faithful in the last month (1 = “never” to 3 = “often”). Poor conflict resolution ask the mother how of the focal child’s father was fair and willing to compromise during disagreements (1 = “often” to 3 = “never”), with higher scores indicating poorer conflict resolution. The measure of intimate partner violence asks the mother how often the focal child’s father hits or slaps her when he is angry (1 = “never” to 3 = “often”).

The full range of socioeconomic characteristics includes measures of maternal and paternal income, maternal and paternal educational attainment, and the use of public assistance in the last year. Measures of income were obtained from categorical variables which accounted for a range of yearly incomes at the time of the baseline interview; these values were subsequently set to their mid-point for the analysis presented here. Close to 22% of the sample had missing information on either maternal or paternal income, to alleviate this issue mean substitution was performed for those missing on maternal income (= \$7,241) and paternal income (= \$18,318). Maternal and paternal educational attainment consists of two categorical variables (1 = “less than high school”, 2 = “high school or equivalent”, 3 = “some college or technical school”, 4 = “college or graduate school”) measured at the time of the baseline interview.

Three measures are utilized to determine the impact of parental characteristics on long-term cohabitation: pre-fathering, maternal substance use, and paternal substance use problems. Pre-fathering is a constructed variable (0 = “no pre-fathering” to 1 = “highest pre-fathering”) created from four binary indicators which asked the mother whether or not the focal child’s father gave her money for the baby during the pregnancy, promised to provide financial support to the baby after the pregnancy, provided other kinds of help (transportation etc.) during the

pregnancy, and told the mother that he wanted to be involved with the baby. Maternal substance use is a constructed variable (1 = “no substance use” to 5 = “substance use nearly every day”) created from two items, the first asked about the mother’s alcohol use during the pregnancy, and the second asked about her drug use (marijuana, cocaine, heroin etc.) during the pregnancy. An indicator of paternal substance use problems was assessed from a binary variable which asked the mother whether or not the focal child’s father had problems keeping a job or friends due to drug or alcohol use.

### *3.3. Child wellbeing*

The second stage of my analysis focuses on children raised in stable two-biological-parent families, and contrasts how these children fare on a number of distinct indicators of child wellbeing. Here I utilize both multiple linear regression and multinomial logistic regression to determine the effect of three categories of stable two-biological-parent families (long-term cohabitation, long-term marriage, and transition to marriage) on three domains of child wellbeing: experience of material insecurity, negative parental behaviors, and parental involvement. The primary independent variable for each analysis is type of two-biological-parent family; however, relevant demographic and socioeconomic controls (maternal race/ethnicity, parental age, educational attainment, maternal family background, and parental fertility history) are also included.

The analysis of material insecurity examines two distinct indicators: food and health insecurity and housing insecurity. A household experienced food and health insecurity (0 = “no”, 1 = “yes”) if the focal child’s mother reported any one of the following situations in the 12 months prior to the 60 month follow-up; child was hungry but could not afford food, mother could not eat because she could not afford to, someone in the household needed to go to the



hospital but could not because of cost, or mother received free food or meals because she had no money. A similar procedure was used to create the indicator of housing insecurity, respondents were coded as experiencing housing insecurity if the mother reported any of the following situations in the 12 months prior to the 60 month follow-up; could not pay full amount of mortgage or rent payment, did not have enough money to pay utilities, utilities were turned off due to lack of payment, faced eviction from residence due to lack of payment, had to move in with others due to financial problems, had to stay in a shelter or non-living space due to financial problems, or had to borrow money from family or friends due to financial problems.

The analysis of negative parental behaviors is examined in terms of maternal and paternal drug use. For both mothers and fathers drug use consists of a binary indicator which measures self-assessed use of “hard” drugs (marijuana, cocaine, heroin, etc.) in the week prior to the 60 month follow-up interview. The final analysis focuses on parental involvement, examining maternal and paternal involvement separately. Indicators of maternal and paternal involvement with the focal child were drawn from the mother’s 60 month follow-up interview; each is a construct of eight separate variables that report the mother’s assessment of the father and her own weekly involvement with the focal child. The items asked the mother whether the father and herself sang songs to the focal child, read to the focal child, told stories to the focal child, played games with the focal child, took the focal child on a special outing, and watched TV with the focal child. The resulting measures of maternal and paternal involvement are average weekly parental engagement with the focal child (0 = “none” to 7 = “seven days per week”).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Determinants of long-term cohabitation

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for all demographic, relationship quality, socioeconomic, and parental variables utilized in the analysis of determinants. Percentages and means for the first analytical sample, 514 low-duration (at baseline) two-biological-parent cohabiting families, are presented in the first panel. The panels following present additional statistics based upon the status of the parental relationship by the 60-month follow-up (i.e. dissolution, long-term cohabitation, or marriage). By the focal child's fifth birthday nearly 51% of these parents had dissolved their coresidential relationship and 49% had maintained stable coresidence. In terms of stable relationships, about one-quarter (27%) had transitioned from cohabitation to marriage, and an additional 22% were still cohabiting.

-Table 1-

Table 2 presents odds ratios of long-term cohabitation relative to dissolution and marriage for all potential determinants. Contrary to initial expectations, results only partially the hypothesized influence of relationship quality. Though it was hypothesized that all aspects of relationship quality should act as determinants, this was not found to be the case. Of the six aspects of relationship quality examined, only couple disagreement significantly increases the odds of long-term cohabitation relative to relationship dissolution. Moreover, several aspects of relationship quality were found to significantly increase the odds of marriage relative to long-term cohabitation. Cohabiting mothers who had indicated higher expectations of marriage were more likely to be married by the focal child's fifth birthday. Additionally, poor conflict resolution and the experience of intimate partner violence increased the likelihood of long-term cohabitation relative to the transition to marriage.

Contrary to expectations, socioeconomic characteristics did not strongly increase the odds of transition to marriage relative to long-term cohabitation. Surprisingly, baseline measures parental income, paternal educational attainment, and use of public assistance in the last year appear in no way related to the likelihood of marriage relative to long-term cohabitation. Though both income and levels of education vary considerably among parents within these three union outcomes (see Table 1), neither appears to be a salient predictor of who marries and who maintains cohabitation among this sample of unwed parents. The single exception was for maternal educational attainment; compared to having only a high school (or equivalent) degree, having some college or technical education was marginally ( $p \leq .10$ ) associated with both higher odds of marriage and dissolution relative to long-term cohabitation. Finally, somewhat in line with expectations, results for parental characteristics suggest that pre-fathering marginally ( $p = .055$ ) increases the likelihood of long-term cohabitation relative to relationship dissolution. However, parental substance use seems in no way related to relationship stability among this sample of unmarried parents. Moreover, none of these parental characteristics significantly impact the odds of marriage relative to long-term cohabitation.

-Table 2-

It appears that parental relationship quality, rather than socioeconomic or parental characteristics, plays the most salient role in the determination of long-term cohabitation relative to dissolution or marriage. Moreover, it is the negative aspects of relationship quality (couple disagreement, poor conflict resolution, and intimate partner violence), rather than the more positive aspects, which play the largest role in the likelihood of long-term cohabitation among two-biological-parent cohabiting families. Lower levels of couple disagreement distinguish long-term cohabiting parents from those who dissolve, whereas higher levels of poor conflict

resolution and intimate partner violence distinguish long-term cohabiting parents from those who transition to marriage.

#### *4.2. Child wellbeing in long-term cohabiting families*

Percentages and means for variables used in the following analyses of child wellbeing are presented in Table 3; please note the slight variation in sample sizes used in each analysis. Table 4 presents results on the likelihood of experiencing material insecurity among long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families, relative to stable two-biological-parent married families and cohabiting parents who transition to stable marriages. Analysis are conducted separately for two indicators of material insecurity: panels 1 and 2 of Table 4 present bivariate and multivariate models predicting food and health insecurity, and panels 3 and 4 of Table 4 present bivariate and multivariate models predicting housing insecurity.

-Table 3-

Results (see Table 4) do not present strong evidence that children in long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families face increased odds of material insecurity relative to their counterparts in stable marriages. As indicated by panel 1, children in long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families have increased odds of experiencing food and health insecurity, relative to children in stable two-biological-parent married families. However, this effect does not extend to those children whose parents have transitioned to marriage. Moreover, this effect reduces to only marginal significance ( $p = .082$ ) after parental race/ethnicity and educational attainment are taken into account (see panel 2). Results show in panels 3 and 4 reveal no significant differences in the experience of housing insecurity for children in long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families relative to their counterparts in married parent families, at the bivariate and multivariate level.

-Table 4-

Table 5 presents results on the likelihood that mothers and fathers in long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families exhibit potentially negative behaviors, relative to parents in stable two-biological-parent married families and cohabiting parents who transitioned to stable marriages. The analysis examines two separate indicators of negative parental behaviors: panels 1 and 2 of Table 5 present bivariate and multivariate models predicting maternal drug use in the last 12 months, and panels 3 and 4 of Table 5 present bivariate and multivariate models predicting paternal drug use in the last 12 months.

-Table 5-

Results strongly indicate that parents in long-term two-biological-parent families are significantly more likely to exhibit negative behaviors, relative to their counterparts in stable married parent families. Though no significant effects for maternal drug use are found, fathers in long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families were found to have higher odds of recent drug use relative to those in stable two-biological-parent married families. This effect persists before and after the inclusion of relevant demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. However, this effect exists only relative to stably married parents; results indicated that paternal drug use within long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families is no different from that found among cohabiting parents who have transitioned to marriage of paternal drug use for fathers in long-term cohabiting unions was not found to be significantly different from that of fathers who transitioned from cohabitation to marriage. Moreover, these findings should be interpreted with some caution; parental drug is relatively uncommon for all groups of parents in this sample (see Table 3), with small sample sizes leading to potential bias.

Regression results predicting the effect of stable family type on the level of parental involvement with the focal child are presented in Table 6. The analysis examines maternal and paternal involvement with children separately: panels 1 and 2 of Table 6 present bivariate and multivariate models of maternal involvement, and panels 3 and 4 of Table 6 present bivariate and multivariate models of paternal involvement. Findings strongly support the prediction that levels of parental involvement would vary little between different types of stable two-biological-parent families. Regardless of the type of stable family structure, descriptive statistics (see Table 3) show that involvement varies little; typically parents spend between 3 to 5 days a week engaged in a variety of activities with the focal child. At the bivariate level, maternal and paternal involvement within long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families is similar to that found in similar married parent families. . These results persist even after the inclusion of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, with only one notable exception. Interestingly, the level of maternal involvement among children with parents who have transitioned to marriage is significantly lower from that of children in long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families. This effect is not observed at the bivariate level, only becoming significant after the inclusion of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

-Table 6-

## **5. Discussion**

Despite recent advances in the study of unmarried parents and their children, long-term cohabitation among unwed parents had remained largely unexplored. This study demonstrates that relationship quality is a significant determinant of long-term cohabitation among unmarried two-biological-parent families, whereas initial socioeconomic and parental characteristics seem largely unrelated to the decision to dissolve, marry, or continue to cohabit. Though relationship

quality is a key determinant, the aspects which favor long-term cohabitation over dissolution and the transition to marriage are distinct. Lower instances of disagreement over subjects such as infidelity and drug use significantly increase the odds of long-term cohabitation relative to dissolution. However, cohabiting parents with poorer conflict resolution skills and greater instances of intimate partner violence are significantly less likely to transition to marriage. Thus, while relationship quality may be strong enough to protect against parental dissolution, it does not appear strong enough to warrant the transition to marriage.

Results for the analysis of determinants generally mirror findings from similar prior studies examining the stability of parental cohabitation with a less protracted timeframe. Examining the likelihood of marriage and continued cohabitation up to a year following the birth of a child, Osborne (2005) found that relationship quality among cohabiting parents had a positive association with marriage and continued coresidence. Moreover, that long-term cohabitation was largely determined by relationship quality fits well with available qualitative evidence. Though unmarried parents often view cohabitation as means of achieving the parenting benefits associated with marriage while forgoing the greater levels of commitment it demands, cohabitation is also viewed as a means of testing the durability of the relationship, with many citing relationship issues as a primary motivation for dissolution (Reed 2006; Reed 2007).

In contrast so some prior research (Gibson-Davis 2009; Osborne 2005), I found no evidence that socioeconomic characteristics increased the odds of marriage relative to continued coresidence. This may be due in part to the more extensive timeframe utilized in the current analysis (5 years as opposed to 1 year), or might be due to the fact that this analysis relied upon baseline measures of economic resources and did not account for change over time (see Gibson-Davis 2009). Beyond relationship quality, available qualitative evidence seemed to indicate that

fathers' willingness to parent would also have a positive influence on relationship stability (Edin & Kefalas 2005). Findings from this study provided some support to this effect, indicating that higher levels of pre-fathering increased the odds of long-term cohabitation relative to dissolution. However, findings were only marginally significant.

Child wellbeing, in terms of material insecurity, negative parental characteristics, and parental involvement, appears to vary little for children in different types of stable two-biological-parent families. Relative to stable two-biological-parent cohabiting families who have transitioned to marriage, children in long-term cohabiting families do not differ for any aspect of child wellbeing examined in the current study. When differences do arise, findings suggest that children born in stable two-biological-parent married families fare slightly better than those in long-term cohabiting families. Differences in material insecurity are present most strongly at the bivariate level, falling to only marginal significance following the inclusion of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. Significant differences for paternal drug use remain even after the inclusion of relevant controls, however this finding should be taken with caution as a very small number of fathers actually engage in any drug use at all.

Findings for child wellbeing are somewhat inconsistent with prior research indicating that children fare worse in the context of parental cohabitation (Acs & Nelson 2002; Artis 2007; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones 2002; Hofferth 2006; Schmeer 2011). However, the majority of prior research has tended to focus on cognitive, behavioral, or health outcomes. Moreover, with the exception of Schmeer (2011), few prior studies have examined child wellbeing in the context of stable cohabiting parent families. The particular indicators utilized in the current study, material insecurity and parental capabilities, were chosen due to the serious implications for child wellbeing these characteristics pose. That is, economic resources and parental socialization



often mediate the relationship between family structure and other indicators of child wellbeing such as cognitive or health outcomes (see Brown 2010). Thus, while the current study indicates that long-term cohabitation may be less of a threat to child wellbeing than suggested by prior research on cohabiting parents in general, these findings reflect only a handful of possible indicators of child wellbeing. Though the current study suggests that long-term cohabitation is a viable family structure for children, future research is required to evaluate this possibility further.

This paper has a few shortcomings. These analyses were restricted to those parents in short-duration coresidential unions at the time of a child's birth. Though long-term cohabitation is certainly possible among non-resident parents and cohabiting step families, such unions are excluded. This exclusion is for mostly practical reasons, as the number of long-term coresidential unions which follow the birth of a child are somewhat infrequent given the limited time frame. Thus, conclusions drawn from these analyses are exclusive to long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families. Future research is required to determine if the factors which impact long-term cohabitation are different for non-resident parents and cohabiting step-families. Additionally, such a focus on children in two-biological-parent families might underestimate the negative impact of long-term cohabitation on child wellbeing, as children in cohabiting step-families may fare considerably worse.

The current analyses also did not account for change in the potential determinants of long-term cohabitation over time. A number of key determinants, such as pre-fathering and some aspects of relationship quality were assessed differently across the survey waves. The majority of prior research examining union transition and dissolution which utilized Fragile Families data restricted analyses to baseline characteristics, with one notable exception (see Gibson-Davis 2009). However, much of this research was also excluded to transitions occurring shortly after

the birth of the focal child. This single instance measures might be better suited to predict rapid union transition, though less sensitive when predicting dissolution or stability over an extended period of time. This might explain why the current analyses found that no socioeconomic characteristics increased the odds of marriage relative to long-term cohabitation, despite quantitative and qualitative evidence to the contrary. Future research examining the determinants of long-term cohabitation should take the time-varying effects of relationship quality and socioeconomic characteristics into account.

Taken as a whole, the results of this study indicate that children fare well in long-term two-biological-parent cohabiting families, though they face slightly poorer outcomes relative to children in stable two-biological-parent married families, wellbeing is identical relative to parents who transition to marriage. Given the overall similarity between parents and children in these family structures, future research on unmarried parents should remain mindful of biological status and be more mindful of duration of the parental union.

## **7. Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Karen Benjamin Guzzo, Catherine T. Kenney, I-Fen Lin, and Wendy D. Manning for their useful comments during the development of this study.

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TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS, RELATIONSHIP QUALITY, SOCIOECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS, AND PARENTAL CHARACTERISTICS BY UNION STATUS: PERCENTAGES AND MEANS

	Parental Union Status			
	Baseline: Cohabitation	60-Month: Dissolution	60-Month: Long-Term Cohabitation	60-Month: Marriage
Demographic characteristics				
Maternal race/ethnicity				
Non-Hispanic white	23.74%	20.99%	16.81%	34.53%
Non-Hispanic black	42.41%	51.53%	35.40%	30.94%
Hispanic	31.91%	27.10%	44.25%	30.94%
Other	1.95%	0.38%	3.54%	3.60%
Maternal age	22.82	22.31	23.19	23.47
Paternal age	25.32	24.71	25.79	26.07
Mother's parents married at age 15	40.08%	36.64%	45.13%	42.45%
Mother has prior biological children	48.83%	49.62%	52.21%	44.60%
Father has prior biological children	42.59%	46.39%	41.76%	36.10%
Relationship quality				
Chances of marriage	4.34	4.23	4.12	4.71
Couple interaction	3.40	3.36	3.31	3.55
Partner support	2.82	2.79	2.79	2.89
Couple disagreement	1.39	1.46	1.37	1.27
Poor conflict resolution	1.40	1.48	1.45	1.22
Intimate partner violence	1.02	1.02	1.04	1.00
Socioeconomic characteristics				
Public assistance use in last year	40.27%	46.95%	38.05%	29.50%
Maternal income	7,351.74	7,015.92	6,102.31	9,000.46
Paternal income	18,731.82	17,389.62	16,568.80	23,020.16
Maternal educational attainment				
Less than high school	36.58%	39.31%	39.82%	28.78%
High school or equivalent	33.27%	30.53%	38.94%	33.81%
Some college or technical school	27.24%	27.48%	20.35%	32.37%
College or graduate school	2.92%	2.67%	0.88%	5.04%
Paternal educational attainment				
Less than high school	34.82%	37.02%	40.71%	25.90%
High school or equivalent	38.52%	39.69%	36.28%	38.13%
Some college or technical school	22.18%	20.23%	20.35%	27.34%
College or graduate school	4.47%	3.05%	2.65%	8.63%
Parental characteristics				
Pre-fathering	0.98	0.98	0.99	1.00
Maternal substance use	1.95%	2.29%	3.54%	0.00%
Paternal substance use problems	1.06	1.07	1.04	1.05
<i>N</i>	514	262	113	139

TABLE 2. RELATIVE RISK OF UNION TRANSITION BETWEEN CHILD'S BIRTH AND 60-MONTH FOLLOW-UP, REALITVE TO LONG-TERM COHABITATION

	Parental Union Status	
	60-Month: Dissolution	60-Month: Marriage
Relationship quality		
Chances of marriage	1.19	2.28 ***
Couple interaction	1.07	1.15
Partner support	1.39	0.77
Couple disagreement	2.56 *	0.71
Poor conflict resolution	0.90	0.46 *
Intimate partner violence	0.56	0.00 ***
Socioeconomic characteristics		
Public assistance use in last year	1.51	0.87
Maternal income	1.00	1.00
Paternal income	1.00	1.00
Maternal educational attainment ( <i>High school or equivalent</i> )		
Less than high school	1.59	1.67
Some college or technical school	1.88 †	1.87 †
College or graduate school	6.45	6.08
Paternal educational attainment ( <i>High school or equivalent</i> )		
Less than high school	0.76	0.62
Some college or technical school	0.81	0.85
College or graduate school	1.37	2.15
Parental characteristics		
Pre-fathering	0.01 †	0.08
Maternal substance use	1.92	1.68
Paternal substance use problems	0.58	0.00
Demographic characteristics		
Maternal race/ethnicity ( <i>Non-Hispanic white</i> )		
Non-Hispanic black	1.08	0.54
Hispanic	0.54 †	0.43 *
Other	0.08 *	0.57
Maternal age	0.95	0.99
Paternal age	0.97	0.97
Mother in Intact Family at Age 16	0.98	0.89
Mother has Prior Biological Children	0.91	0.88
Father has Prior Biological Children	1.39	1.51
<i>N</i>		514

† $p \leq .10$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$

TABLE 3. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND CHILD WELLBEING BY STABLE UNION TYPE: PERCENTAGES AND MEANS

	Stable Union Type		
	Long-Term Cohabitation	Transition to Marriage	Stable Marriage
Demographic characteristics			
Maternal race/ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic white	16.67%	32.88%	30.43%
Non-Hispanic black	36.67%	30.14%	32.92%
Hispanic	42.50%	32.88%	25.47%
Other	4.17%	4.11%	11.18%
Maternal age	23.14	23.56	27.04
Paternal age	25.98	26.29	29.39
Mother's parents married at age 15	44.17%	43.84%	55.28%
Mother has prior biological children	53.33%	44.52%	42.86%
Father has prior biological children	43.49%	36.43%	42.73%
Maternal educational attainment			
Less than high school	40.83%	28.77%	17.39%
High school or equivalent	38.33%	33.56%	20.50%
Some college or technical school	20.00%	32.88%	34.16%
College or graduate school	0.83%	4.79%	27.95%
Paternal educational attainment			
Less than high school	40.83%	27.40%	16.77%
High school or equivalent	36.67%	37.67%	29.19%
Some college or technical school	20.00%	26.03%	32.92%
College or graduate school	2.50%	8.90%	21.12%
<i>N</i>	120	146	161
Indicators of child wellbeing			
Material insecurity			
Food & health insecurity	17.50%	17.81%	8.07%
<i>N</i>	120	146	161
Housing Insecurity	35.00%	43.15%	31.06%
<i>N</i>	120	146	161
Parental Drug Use			
Maternal Drug Use	5.00%	7.53%	4.35%
<i>N</i>	120	146	161
Paternal Drug Use	13.21%	11.54%	5.52%
<i>N</i>	106	130	145
Parental Involvement			
Maternal Involvement	4.74	4.53	4.69
<i>N</i>	119	146	161
Paternal Involvement	3.82	3.61	3.66
<i>N</i>	113	145	150

NOTE: All samples take demographic controls into account



TABLE 4. RELATIVE RISK OF EXPERIENCING MATERIAL INSECURITY FOR CHILDREN IN STABLE UNIONS

	Material Insecurity			
	Food & Health Insecurity		Housing Insecurity	
Stable union type				
<i>(Long-term cohabitation)</i>	–	–	–	–
Stable marriage	0.41 *	0.47 †	0.84	0.86
Transition to marriage	1.02	0.94	1.41	1.28
Demographic characteristics				
Maternal race/ethnicity				
<i>(Non-Hispanic white)</i>				
Non-Hispanic black	–	0.29 **	–	0.49 *
Hispanic	–	0.33 **	–	0.44 **
Other	–	0.38	–	0.43 †
Maternal age	–	0.97	–	0.96
Paternal age	–	1.01	–	0.98
Mother's parents married at age 15	–	0.64	–	0.60 *
Mother has prior biological children	–	1.17	–	0.89
Father has prior biological children	–	2.02 *	–	1.65 †
Maternal educational attainment				
<i>(High school or equivalent)</i>				
Less than high school	–	1.31	–	0.77
Some college or technical school	–	0.84	–	1.13
College or graduate school	–	0.71	–	2.07
Paternal educational attainment				
<i>(High school or equivalent)</i>				
Less than high school	–	0.89	–	0.88
Some college or technical school	–	0.81	–	0.97
College or graduate school	–	0.67	–	0.39 †
<i>N</i>		427		427

† $p \leq .10$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

TABLE 5. RELATIVE RISK OF BEING EXPOSED TO PARENTAL DRUG USE FOR CHILDREN IN STABLE UNIONS

	Parental Drug Use			
	Maternal Drug Use		Paternal Drug Use	
Stable union type				
<i>(Long-term cohabitation)</i>				
Stable marriage	0.86	0.49	0.38 *	0.27 *
Transition to marriage	1.55	1.17	0.86	0.70
Demographic characteristics				
Maternal race/ethnicity				
<i>(Non-Hispanic white)</i>				
Non-Hispanic black	–	0.87	–	0.71
Hispanic	–	0.17 *	–	0.59
Other	–	0.38	–	0.72
Maternal age	–	1.14 *	–	0.96
Paternal age	–	0.92	–	0.98
Mother's parents married at age 15	–	0.93	–	0.37 *
Mother has prior biological children	–	0.29 *	–	0.53
Father has prior biological children	–	2.00	–	1.61
Maternal educational attainment				
<i>(High school or equivalent)</i>				
Less than high school	–	1.22	–	0.98
Some college or technical school	–	0.79	–	0.63
College or graduate school	–	0.92	–	2.54
Paternal educational attainment				
<i>(High school or equivalent)</i>				
Less than high school	–	0.25 †	–	0.57
Some college or technical school	–	0.84	–	1.79
College or graduate school	–	0.50	–	1.45
<i>N</i>		427		381

† $p \leq .10$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

TABLE 6. REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS ESTIMATES OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT FOR CHILDREN IN STABLE UNIONS

	Parental Involvement			
	Maternal Involvement		Paternal Involvement	
Stable union type				
<i>(Long-term cohabitation)</i>				
Stable marriage	-0.04	-0.20	-0.16	-0.12
Transition to marriage	-0.21	-0.34 *	-0.21	-0.24
Demographic characteristics				
Maternal race/ethnicity				
<i>(Non-Hispanic white)</i>				
Non-Hispanic black	–	-0.43 **	–	0.03
Hispanic	–	-0.60 ***	–	-0.27
Other	–	-0.06	–	0.18
Maternal age	–	0.00	–	-0.02
Paternal age	–	-0.01	–	-0.01
Mother's parents married at age 15	–	-0.08	–	0.03
Mother has prior biological children	–	-0.18	–	-0.15
Father has prior biological children	–	0.08	–	0.10
Maternal educational attainment				
<i>(High school or equivalent)</i>				
Less than high school	–	-0.11	–	-0.11
Some college or technical school	–	0.19	–	-0.14
College or graduate school	–	0.10	–	-0.39
Paternal educational attainment				
<i>(High school or equivalent)</i>				
Less than high school	–	-0.01	–	0.13
Some college or technical school	–	-0.12	–	0.19
College or graduate school	–	0.05	–	0.59 *
Intercept	4.74 ***	5.54 ***	3.82 ***	4.68 ***
$R^2$	0.01	0.08	0.00	0.04
$N$		426		408

† $p \leq .10$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .