We discovered four types of trust — misplaced, suspended, compartmentalized, and integrated — that lead mothers to serially seek and enter unhealthy romantic unions.

About the Study

The findings we report are from the ethnographic component of the Three-City Study. This study examined the impact of welfare reform on the lives of low-income families residing in poor neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. The study involved 7 years of in-depth interviews and observations of 256 mothers and their 685 children. Fifty-three percent (53%) of the children were under 4 years of age.

- 42% of the mothers were Latino or Hispanic; 38% were African American; and 20% were White;
- 58% were age 29 or younger, and 57% had a high school diploma, GED, or had attended trade school or college;
- 49% were receiving TANF and 33% were also working;
- 42% of the mothers were Latino or Hispanic; 38% were African American; and 20% were White;
- 42% were married; 56% indicated that they were neither married nor cohabiting; but 82% were involved in some type of romantic union over the course of the study.

Two years into the study we discovered that 65% of the mothers had been sexually or physically abused in their lifetimes. Sexual abuse included rape, molestation, paternally-enforced child prostitution, and witnessing incest acts. Physical abuse comprised physical beatings, attacks with weapons, or witnessing extreme physical family violence.

Important Insights for Policymakers

Pay more attention to trust. It matters, but not in the way you think.

Most marriage promotion and education programs for low-income couples do not address the issue of how partners develop trust in their relationships. These programs are not designed to attend to the needs of women (or men) who have severe lifetime histories of sexual and physical abuse that adversely impact their adult relationships. Providing women (and men) with strategies that address these issues will likely enhance their abilities to make sounder judgments about how to develop healthy forms of trust and how their partners care.

Domestic violence and sexual abuse prevention and treatment programs should be a top priority for strengthening families.

Our study illustrates the long-debated effects of domestic violence and sexual abuse on women’s romantic choices and on their physical and mental well-being. Well-funded programs that address the prevention and treatment of domestic violence and sexual abuse must be a top priority in social policies aimed at building stronger families.

More research-based evidence on romantic relationships within low-income populations is needed to inform marriage promotion and education programs.

Most marriage promotion and education programs available to low-income couples are based on research about romantic relationships in economically advantaged populations. Researchers and policymakers would be well-served by research that focuses on low-income couples’ actual relationship dynamics. Federal funding of such research is critical for building relevant pre-marriage policies and programs.

Results: Forms of Trust and Patterns of Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse

87% of these mothers experienced domestic violence and sexual abuse in both childhood and adulthood

75% of these mothers experienced domestic violence and/or sexual abuse primarily in adulthood

63% of these mothers experienced domestic violence and/or sexual abuse in childhood and/or adulthood

31% of these mothers experienced domestic violence and/or sexual abuse in childhood and/or adulthood

80% of these mothers’ husbands have also experienced domestic violence in their life.

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