

**"...low-income children living in married parent families show more positive development across a range of functioning areas than children in single-parent families."**

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## Abstract

*This study investigated the association of family structure and instability patterns with children's cognitive and socioemotional well-being among a sample of low-income, primarily Hispanic and African American children. Analyses employed longitudinal data from the "Three-City Study" to track maternal partnerships; data were stacked across the three waves, leading to a sample size of 2,216 children aged 2 to 11 years. Children in married-parent households scored higher in reading and math skills and lower in internalizing and externalizing problems than children in single-parent households. In contrast, measures of recent and cumulative instability were largely unrelated to child well-being. The family structure and instability findings remained robust to selection controls and were generally not moderated by current status or the male partner's identity (biological or social father).*

## Introduction

There is increasing awareness that the impact of low-income families' partnership history on children's development could overshadow the influence of current family structure, even if mothers are currently married. Over the last several decades, marriage rates have declined while rates of cohabitation have steadily increased, especially in disadvantaged populations (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Manning & Lichter, 1996). Although the number of single-mother headed families has decreased, the incidence of father absence and single-parenting remains disproportionately high in low-income populations (Acs & Nelson, 2001; Cherlin & Fomby, 2002; Primus, 2002).

In addition to family structure, emerging literature has identified cumulative family instability as centrally important for child development. Family instability in early childhood disrupts family processes during an important developmental period (Hetherington, et al. 1998; Teachman, 2003).

Together, this recent scholarship suggests the importance of three aspects of family structure for children's healthy development: current status, recent transitions, and cumulative transitions.

## Data and Methods

Analyses used longitudinal survey data from *Welfare, Children and Families: A Three-City Study*, a multimethod study that followed a representative sample of low-income urban families over six years in the wake of federal welfare reform. Thirty-eight percent of families were African American and 58% Hispanic. Data from three waves of the

survey were stacked, leading to a sample of 2,216 cases with children aged 2 to 11 years, residing with their biological mothers. Mothers reported on current relationship status, lifetime relationship histories, children's behavioral and emotional functioning, and child and family demographics, while children's cognitive skills were directly measured. OLS regression analyses assessed children's cognitive and socioemotional skills as a function of current maternal marital status, recent relationship instability (previous two years), cumulative relationship instability (since the child's birth), and child and family demographic variables, including important controls for maternal age, education, literacy skills, and relationship transitions prior to the child's birth. Additional analytic models assessed whether effects of current marital status were moderated by father identity or past relationship instability.

## Results

The table on page 2 presents results from OLS regression models predicting each of the four child functioning measures with current status, cumulative transitions, recent transitions, and the child and family controls. Results suggest that beneficial effects of maternal marriage on low-income African American and Hispanic children are widespread, cutting across numerous arenas of child functioning. More importantly, results suggest that both new and more stable marriages, as well as marriages to both biological and stepfathers, appear similarly protective. Moreover, results indicated that current maternal marital status is a more important predictor of children's well-being than prior relationship

## Data Source

*Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study*

### Key findings:

- Maternal marriage was significantly linked to children's higher math & reading skills & lower internalizing & externalizing problems.
- The benefits of maternal marriage appeared relatively universal.
- No significant links were found between either recent partnership transitions or cumulative transitions & children's cognitive or behavioral functioning.

## Sources

- Brown, S. L. (2002).  
 Bumpass, L. & Lu, H-H. (2000).  
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This brief draws on NCFMR working paper WP-09-07: [http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/working\\_papers/file78713.pdf](http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/working_papers/file78713.pdf)

transitions and instability and provides a supportive context for child development.

## Strengths and Limitations

The Three-Study longitudinal survey data provide great strengths, including an exclusive focus on low-income families; rich, extensive, and well-validated data on children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral well-being; endogeneity controls for earlier maternal partnership histories and direct assessment of mothers' literacy skills and education; maternal, child, and family characteristics; and mothers' reports of their full partnership history.

It is important to note that the data are correlational and causation cannot be assessed, and the results may not generalize to other populations such as higher income families. Another limitation is the use of retrospectively reported relationship histories, and additional analytic techniques are required to assess whether family structure and transitions are linked with trajectories of children's functioning over time.

## Policy Implications

In this sample of low-income families, marriage supported children's healthy development regardless of past partnership instability or whether the union involved the child's biological father or a stepfather.

Table 1  
 OLS Regression Models Predicting Achievement and Behavioral Outcomes from Current Status, Recent Instability, and Cumulative Instability

Predictor Variables	Reading Skills Coeff (SE)	Math Skills Coeff (SE)	Internalizing Behaviors Coeff (SE)	Externalizing Behaviors Coeff (SE)
<b>Model 1 "Main Effects of Status and Instability"</b>				
Currently Cohabiting	-0.87 (2.33)	-0.26 (2.43)	-0.47 (1.23)	-0.42 (1.22)
Currently Married	2.98 (1.78) <sup>T</sup>	4.23 (1.82) <sup>*</sup>	-1.76 (0.89) <sup>*</sup>	-2.24 (0.87) <sup>*</sup>
Cumulative Transitions	0.29 (1.03)	0.85 (1.00)	0.36 (0.51)	0.28 (0.51)
Recent Transitions	0.34 (2.16)	-2.96 (1.95)	0.39 (1.14)	0.80 (0.95)
F score	589.88 <sup>***</sup>	424.20 <sup>***</sup>	2.97 <sup>***</sup>	4.91 <sup>***</sup>
R <sup>2</sup>	0.87	0.83	0.05	0.08
<b>Model 2 "Interactions of Status x Father Identity"</b>				
Currently Cohabiting	17.93 (8.97) <sup>*</sup>	15.75 (7.58) <sup>*</sup>	-0.17 (1.89)	0.26 (1.91)
Currently Married	26.03 (8.88) <sup>**</sup>	19.70 (8.28) <sup>*</sup>	-0.79 (1.61)	-2.65 (1.38) <sup>T</sup>
Cumulative Transitions	-12.66 (3.62) <sup>***</sup>	-9.48 (2.91) <sup>**</sup>	0.10 (0.54)	0.12 (0.50)
Recent Transitions	28.92 (7.83) <sup>***</sup>	20.58 (6.29) <sup>**</sup>	0.73 (1.20)	1.46 (0.98)
Father in Household	-43.47 (9.95) <sup>***</sup>	-44.68 (10.97) <sup>***</sup>	1.56 (2.90)	0.78 (3.93)
Father in HH X Cohabiting	8.38 (13.99)	15.21 (14.03)	-2.06 (3.74)	-1.85 (4.63)
Father in HH X Married	13.16 (14.10)	23.81 (14.21) <sup>T</sup>	-2.77 (3.35)	0.05 (4.30)
F score, Interactions	0.44	1.42	0.34	0.24
F score, Model	15.44 <sup>***</sup>	15.44 <sup>***</sup>	2.39 <sup>**</sup>	3.72 <sup>***</sup>
R <sup>2</sup>	0.08	0.11	0.05	0.07
<b>Model 3 "Interaction of Status x Instability"</b>				
Currently Cohabiting	-0.25 (7.64)	2.61 (6.72)	-0.59 (1.28)	-0.46 (1.30)
Currently Married	0.79 (7.48)	5.27 (6.02)	-1.39 (1.08)	-2.28 (1.05) <sup>*</sup>
Cumulative Transitions	-5.42 (3.57)	-5.83 (2.82) <sup>*</sup>	0.29 (0.61)	0.59 (0.63)
Recent Transitions	25.75 (8.85)	23.54 (7.07) <sup>**</sup>	1.18 (1.17)	1.15 (1.10)
Cumulative X Cohabiting	-11.46 (9.09)	-4.05 (7.00)	-1.01 (1.67)	-1.00 (1.51)
Cumulative X Married	-11.07 (10.78)	-5.48 (8.48)	-0.11 (1.10)	-1.33 (1.03)
Recent X Cohabiting	-1.07 (20.30)	-6.72 (15.62)	0.38 (4.92)	0.28 (4.44)
Recent X Married	7.34 (18.30)	-8.41 (14.35)	-2.08 (2.80)	-0.04 (2.21)
F score, Interactions	1.19	0.35	0.18	0.87
F score, Model	10.98 <sup>***</sup>	11.29 <sup>***</sup>	2.41 <sup>**</sup>	3.63 <sup>***</sup>
R <sup>2</sup>	0.06	0.09	0.05	0.07

Note: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ;  $T < .10$ . Currently single group omitted comparison group. Analyses control for maternal Woodcock-Johnson reading scores, prebirth transitions, maternal age and education, and child gender, race, and age.

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