

***Low-Income Mothers' Patterns of
Partnership Instability and Adolescents'
Behavioral and Emotional Well-Being***

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Family Structure and Instability in Low-Income Households

- Significant national policy focus for increasing and sustaining marriage within low-income families (ACF, 2006).
- In low-income families, first marriages may be formed after non-marital birth(s) and involve stepfathers (Cherlin, 2009).
- Multi-partner fertility becoming more common (Mincy, 2002).
- Thus, marital or cohabiting unions among low-income couples are likely to be preceded by a period of partnership instability (Mincy, 2002).
- Limited research has linked family structure and instability to adolescent well-being in low-income families.

A Life-Course Perspective of Low-Income Adolescents' Well-Being

- **3 Important Aspects of Maternal Partnering:**
 - Family Structure
 - Partnership Stability
 - Biological relatedness of male partner
- **Developmental Protection and/or Risk from Stability?**
 - Stability, predictability, and continuity of care hallmarks of developmental theory (Sroufe, 2000)
 - Cumulative risks experienced by low-income families
 - Partnership instability risky?
 - Stable single-parenting protective?
 - Marriage to stepfather protective?
 - Stable cohabitations risky?

Research Questions

- Whether marriage benefits differed by instability patterns?
- Whether marriages were linked with more beneficial youth functioning than maternal cohabitations?
- Whether benefits/risks differed by whether partnerships were formed with the adolescent's biological father or stepfather?
- Whether family processes, including economic hardship, psychological functioning, and parenting practices, helped to explain the associations between maternal partnership patterns and adolescents' emotional and behavioral skills?

Welfare, Children & Families: A Three-City Study

Three waves of surveys/assessments with representative sample of children and mothers in low-income families in low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio.

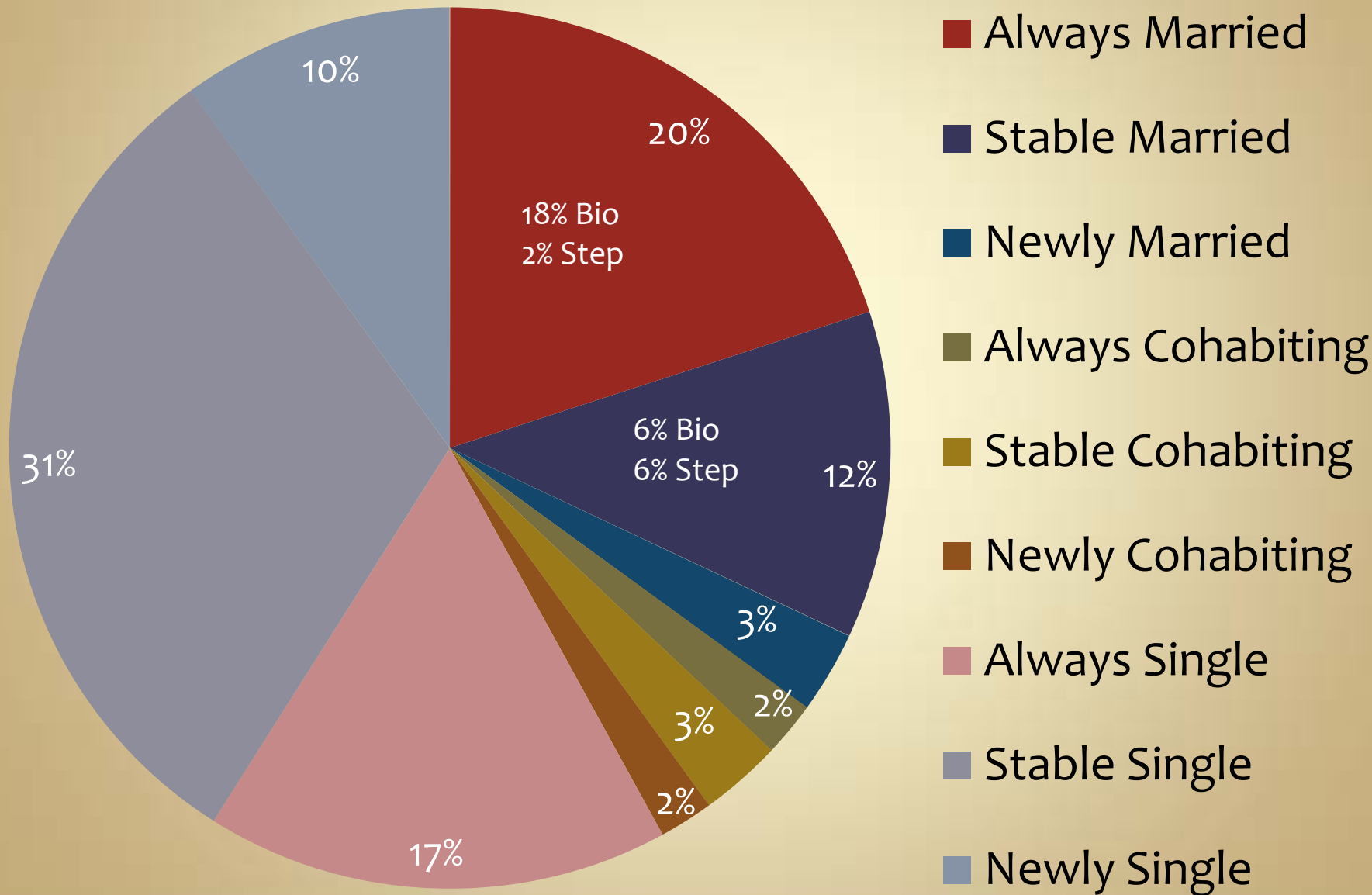
Analytic sample: Adolescent cohort from survey. Data stacked over 3 waves (N=2305).

- Maternal age: **40** years
- **2.5** minors in household
- Average education = **HS/GED**
- Average income-to-needs **1.10**
- Adolescent age: **14.7** years
 - **40%** African American
 - **54%** Latino
 - **6%** White/Other
 - **45%** Male
 - **55%** Female

Longitudinal Maternal Partnership Patterns

- Current relationship status
 - **Single, married, or cohabiting**
- Partnership history interview
 - Start and end dates of each marriage and cohabitation, created:
 - **Always**
 - Mothers in the same partnership since the adolescents' birth
 - **Stable**
 - Mothers in longer-term statuses (more than 2 years in length) preceded by partnership transitions
 - **New**
 - Mothers in a recently formed partnership or recently single status in the last two years
- The 3 longitudinal groups were divided by 3 current statuses to form 9 groups.

Maternal Partnership Histories



Analysis Plan

Weighted OLS regressions with Huber-White SE adjustment.

- **4 Models:**

1. Adolescent outcomes regressed on longitudinal partnership groups and covariates (adolescent age, gender, race/ethnicity; mother age, #children, education, literacy skills; # prebirth transitions)
2. Same, with always married and stable married groups distinguished by biological father vs. stepfather
3. Family process variables (economic resources, maternal functioning, parenting) regressed on longitudinal partnership groups and covariates
4. Adolescent outcomes regressed on longitudinal partnership groups, family process variables, and covariates

Model 1: Associations among Maternal Partnership Histories and Adolescent Functioning

| | Psychological Distress | Delinquency | CBCL Internalizing | CBCL Externalizing |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Always married | -0.07 | -0.44^{*abcd} | -1.08 ^a | -4.85^{***abcd} |
| Stable married | -0.27 | 0.04 ^a | -2.06 | -1.35 ^a |
| Newly married | -0.14 ^a | 0.25 ^b | 0.07 | 0.92 ^b |
| Always cohab. | 0.18 | 0.46 ^c | 11.13^{**ab} | 6.03^{*c} |
| Stable cohab. | -0.19 ^b | 0.11 | 2.78 ^b | 1.03 |
| Newly cohab. | 0.65^{*abc} | 0.88 | 3.64 | 3.15 |
| Stable single | -0.02 | 0.09 ^d | 0.28 | -0.38 ^d |
| Newly single | 0.09 ^c | 0.31 | -0.19 | -0.14 |

Note. Omitted category = Always Single. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Model 2: Longitudinal Marital Patterns Separating Biological Fathers and Stepfathers

- No significant differences between *always marriages* to biological and stepfathers.
- No significant differences between *stable marriages* to biological and stepfathers.
- New marriages and cohabitations were too infrequent to separate into biological vs. stepfather partnerships.

Model 3: Associations among Maternal Partnership Histories and Family Processes

| | Income to Needs | Financial Strain | Family Routines | Parenting Stress | Psych. Distress | Harsh Punish. | Father Inv. |
|----------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Always married | 0.35***a | -0.30***a | 0.20*abc | -0.30* | -0.38*a | -0.14 ^t a | 0.92***a |
| Stable married | 0.49***b | -0.16 ^{bc} | -0.04 ^a | -0.10 | -0.15 ^c | -0.09 ^b | 0.73***b |
| Newly married | 0.54* ^d | -0.17 | -0.24* ^b | -0.08 | -0.22 | -0.27** ^{bdf} | 0.85*** ^{df} |
| Always cohab. | 0.11 ^a | 0.08 ^a | -0.17 ^c | 0.15 | 0.36 ^a | 0.64** ^{ac} | 0.58***a |
| Stable cohab. | 0.22 ^t b | 0.21 ^c | -0.08 | 0.02 | 0.63* ^{bc} | 0.10 ^c | 0.63*** ^c |
| Newly cohab. | 0.49 ^t | -0.01 | -0.36* ^d | 0.24 | 0.19 | 0.34* ^{ef} | 0.36* ^{ef} |
| Stable single | 0.12* ^c | 0.13* ^b | -0.02 | 0.11 | 0.14 ^b | -0.00 | -0.04 ^{bc} |
| Newly single | 0.01 ^{cd} | 0.04 | 0.03 ^d | -0.07 | 0.10 | -0.04 ^{de} | -0.00 ^{de} |

Note. Omitted category = Always Single. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; ^t $p < .10$.

Model 4: Mediation Results

- Overall, family process variables reduced, but did not eliminate, associations between maternal partnership patterns and youth functioning.
- Lower delinquency and externalizing problems for always married compared to always single group
 - Reduced 32% and 47%, respectively
- Higher psychological distress for new cohabitation group compared to always single
 - Reduced 35%
- Higher internalizing and externalizing problems for always cohabiting compared to always single groups
 - Reduced 22% and 51%, respectively

Limitations

- Historical partnership data were gathered retrospectively, presumably increasing measurement error in the transition variables.
- Limited statistical power for longitudinal partnership groups that occurred less frequently.
- Despite array of covariates, selection effects possible.
- This sample representative of low-income families in the 3 cities; findings not necessarily generalizable to other families.

Conclusions

- Both structure and stability are uniquely important for low-income adolescents' well-being
 - Always married groups functioning better than new or stable married groups
 - Suggests importance of stability, at least within marriage
 - Findings similar for lifelong marriages involving biological fathers or stepfathers
 - Youth in always married groups showing better emotional and behavioral functioning than always single and always cohabiting groups
 - Suggests marriage itself is important, beyond the stability than marriage may provide
 - Cohabiting partners do not support healthy functioning in families and youth as married partners do