

## Couples Employment: A New Approach to Family Strengthening

The Center for Urban Families: [Helping Fathers & Families Work](#)



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The Presidents' FY11 Budget presents a new opportunity for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program to meet two of its primary objectives: (1) "reducing the dependency of needy parents by promoting job preparation, work and marriage and (2) encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families."<sup>1</sup> The proposed Fatherhood, Marriage, and Families Innovation Fund would infuse \$500 million dollars into the TANF program to provide three-year competitive grants for states to invest in comprehensive responsible fatherhood initiatives and comprehensive family self-sufficiency demonstrations that seek to improve child and family outcomes by addressing the employment and self-sufficiency needs of custodial parents who face serious barriers.

Ensuring that these funds are invested in programs that provide employment services and financial literacy in conjunction with relationship and parenting skills to both partners in committed relationships will be a critical step in enhancing federal and state efforts to strengthen and support low-income families. Research from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal birth-cohort study of unmarried couples with children in large US cities revealed strong relationships and high aspirations for family formation among unmarried couples around the time of child birth. Over 80% of mothers and 90% of fathers in the study reported being involved in romantic relationships with the biological parent of their child at birth. The majority of mothers and fathers in the study also expressed strong expectations for marriage and the father's involvement in raising the child.<sup>2</sup>

<b>Unmarried Couples' Relationship Status, Marriage Views, And Father Involvement</b>		
	Mothers	Fathers
<b>Relationship status</b>		
Romantic-Cohabiting	51%	66%
Romantic-not Cohabiting	31%	25%
<b>Chances of marrying baby's father</b>		
"50-50" or Greater	74%	90%
<b>Marriage is better for kids</b>		
Agree	43%	43%
Strongly Agree	21%	19%
<b>Father contributed during pregnancy</b>		
Gave money or bought items for baby	81%	92%

Helped in other ways	79%	90%
<i>Source: The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study: Baseline National Report</i>		

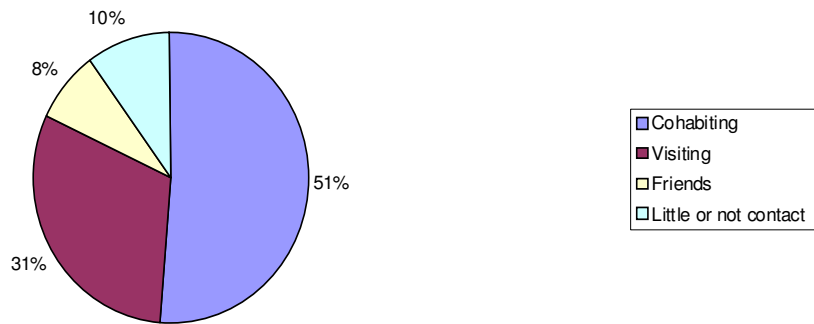
Despite the prevalence of high family aspirations among unmarried couples around the “magic moment” of child birth, the Fragile Families Study found that five years after their child was born only 17% had married, 22% remained unmarried but romantically involved, and an overwhelming 62% were no longer in romantic relationships.<sup>3</sup> While the Fragile Families’ research does not identify the precise cause of relationship disintegration within these families, data from the study does reveal a number of characteristics about unmarried couples indicating that many are ill equipped to financially support themselves and families. When compared to couples who were married at child birth, unmarried couples are younger, have significantly lower levels of education, experience higher unemployment, and have a higher rate of fathers who have been incarcerated.<sup>4</sup> These factors limit the ability of low-income couples and families to access needed resources, negatively impacting family stability.

<b>UNMARRIED COUPLES AGE AND ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS</b>		
	Mothers	Fathers
<b>Age</b>		
Under 20	27%	13%
20-24	39%	35%
25-29	16%	24%
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	43%	48%
High school only	36%	40%
<b>Employment</b>		
Worked in past year	85%	98%
Father worked in last week	--	80%
<b>Earnings in past 12 months</b>		
Under \$5,000	44%	14%
\$5,000-\$9,999	18%	16%
\$10,000-\$19,999	26%	37%
<b>Poverty Status</b>		
Below Poverty	45%	27%
100-199% of Poverty	28%	29%
<i>Source: The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study: Baseline National Report</i>		

In recognition of these challenges to family stability among low-income families, as well as the financial, emotional, and behavioral benefits provided to children when they are raised in families where two-parents actively contribute to their development, the federal government has established a policy goal in the TANF program and across many social service agencies to support and promote the formation and maintenance of two-

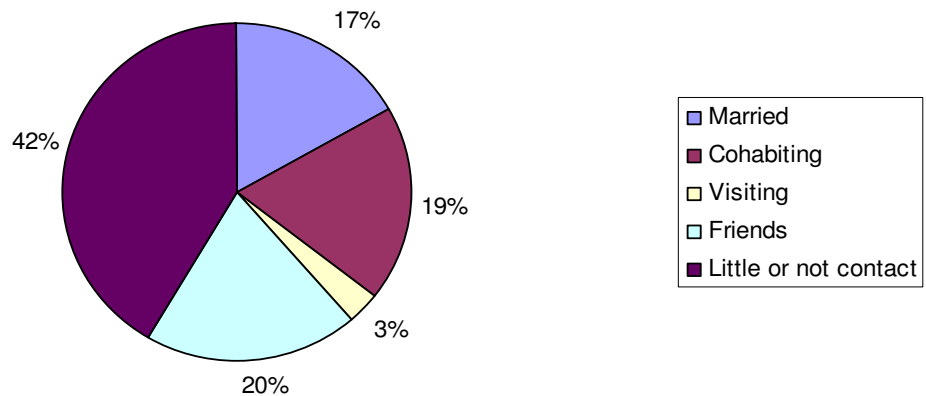
parent families. In spite of the stated policy goal of promoting healthy two-parent families, many state TANF programs have developed a fragmented and limited approach which often hampers healthy family formation, undermines the family strengthening efforts of other state programs, and fails to provide comprehensive supports for all members in a particular family unit. Findings from research, policy observations, and anecdotal evidence suggests that many state TANF programs are designed to assist low-income custodial families, which primarily consist of mothers and children, while not addressing the support needs of the fathers that are connected to these women and children. In many cases TANF policies may directly contribute to the disintegration of low-income families by imposing negative consequences upon fathers when the mothers of their children apply for benefits.<sup>5</sup> In response to these programmatic challenges service delivery models that provide a set of comprehensive supports for both men and women in low-income families are being explored in some states and communities.

### Relationship Status of Unmarried Parents at Child Birth



Source: *The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study: Baseline National Report*

### Relationship Status of Unmarried Parents at Child Birth-5yrs Later



Source: Carlson, M., Högnäs, R. (2009). *Co-parenting in Fragile Families*

### *Couples Employment Approach*

An emerging and promising approach for comprehensively addressing family stability among low-income families is the Couples Employment (CE) approach, which provides economic, relationship and parenting supports to both partners in a committed relationship. CE is distinct from traditional family strengthening and workforce development strategies because it provides supports that address both economic needs as well as relationship and parenting issues that impact families. CE also differs from traditional workforce development models by jointly serving both partners in a committed relationship as opposed to providing support to only one member within a family unit.

The CE approach works with couples who are actively engaged in stable and committed relationships, jointly raising at least one child, and interested in working together as a couple to address challenges to economic and family stability. CE seeks to strengthen relationships by improving relationship quality, marital/relationship status, family structure and living arrangements. Additionally, CE seeks to enhance family economic stability by improving both partners' employability, employment status, education, and addressing issues related to criminal backgrounds. Intervention services include family-focused employment plans, group-based workshops, and couples case management. Services may also include more stringent employment training, job placement, and financial education paired with core responsible fatherhood, parenting and healthy relationships and marriage training. Program outcomes focus on collaborative plans for family and financial stability and long-term economic success through employment.

### *Couples Employment Program Model*

In 2007, The Administration for Children and Families funded a CE program at the Center for Urban Families (CFUF). CFUF's Couples Employment program provides employment and financial resources, combined with healthy relationship skill building, to couples in the Baltimore area. CFUF designed its Couples Employment program to meet clients' requests for financial literacy training and career planning, while simultaneously developing skills to sustain healthy relationships and families. With the help of employment development specialists and trained facilitators, participants develop a written family-focused employment plan and learn what is needed to compete in the job market. These skills are combined with healthy relationship/marriage support like conflict resolution, family planning, and trust building.

## Research Outcomes

From 1997-2000 the Department of Labor funded the Full Family Partnership (FFP) at Jobs for Youth/Chicago. In this CE model, low-income partners in committed relationships participated in a 2-3 week job readiness and job placement program. The participation and outcome results of these couples were compared to those of participants in two other employment assistance programs that did not use the CE approach. Participants in FFP were more likely to finish the program and be placed in a job, experienced significantly higher earning gains when both partners completed the program, were less likely to receive TANF, and demonstrated greater relationship stability.<sup>6</sup>

Research in Minnesota has demonstrated how welfare reforms can improve marriage rates<sup>7</sup> and stability. The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) measured the effects of TANF incentive policies, designed to encourage work among welfare recipients. While not exclusively designed to support couples, MFIP found that raising family income increased marriage stability among very low-income two-parent families. In addition, MFIP found that providing more generous benefits that enabled two-parent families to establish a greater work and family balance also helped to foster greater marriage stability and reduced union dissolution. Analysts have suggested that reduced relationship stress resulting from MFIP contributed to the gains in marriage stability experienced by couples in the program<sup>8</sup>. Other research studies have also found links between employment gains and couple's relationship stability<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, responsible fatherhood programs have demonstrated better outcomes when job and family supports are incorporated along with core responsible fatherhood activities.<sup>10</sup>

These findings illustrate the great potential of working together with partners in committed relationships to address employment and other financial needs. Integrating these economic supports with core services provided by responsible fatherhood and healthy relationships or marriage programs will further enhance the ability of state TANF systems and other government agencies to work in collaborative efforts with community based organizations to bolster family and financial stability among low-income families.

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<sup>1</sup> 42 USC Sec. 7 (IV-A)

<sup>2</sup> McLanahan, S., Garginkel, I., Reichman, N., Teitler, J., Carlson, M., Audigier, C., (2003). *The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study: Baseline National Report*. Center for Research on Child Wellbeing <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/publications.asp> and Sorensen E., (2002). *Recommendations on TANF Reauthorization from the Strengthening Fragile Families Initiative: Statement before the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee, Subcommittee on Human Resources*. The Urban Institute <http://www.urban.org/publications/900508.html>

<sup>3</sup> Carlson, M., Högnäs, R. (2009). *Coparenting in Fragile Families*. Center for Research on Child Wellbeing <http://crcw.princeton.edu/publications/publications.asp>

<sup>4</sup> McLanahan, S., Garfinkel, I., Reichman, N., Teitler, J., Carlson, M., Audigier, C., (2003). *The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study: Baseline National Report*. Center for Research on Child Wellbeing <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/publications.asp> and Carlson, M., Högnäs, R. (2009).

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*Coparenting in Fragile Families*. Center for Research on Child Wellbeing

<http://crcw.princeton.edu/publications/publications.asp>

<sup>5</sup> Center on Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University and Social Indicators Survey Center, Columbia University (2006) *Effects of Welfare Participation on Marriage: Fragile Families Research Brief No. 36*. Carlson, M., Garfinkel, I, McLanahan S, Mincy, R., Primus, W. (2004) *The Effects of Welfare and Child Support Policies on Union Formation*. Population Research and Policy Review. 23(5/6): 513-542. Rangarajan, A., Castner, L., and Clark, M. (2005) *Public Assistance Use Among Two-Parent Families: An Analysis of TANF and Food Stamp Program Eligibility and Participation*. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. Center for Urban Families (2010). [Focus group with TANF recipients in Baltimore, MD]. Unpublished

<sup>6</sup>Gordon, R. and Heinrich, C. (2009) *The Potential of a Couples Approach to Employment assistance: results of a nonexperimental evaluation* and Kristin Abner, Rachel Gordon and Carolyn Heinrich (2009) *Utilizing a Couples Approach to Promote Employment Stability*

<sup>7</sup> MFIP significantly raised marriage rates among single-parent families. Because this document is focused on outcomes for couples these results were not included but should be noted.

<sup>8</sup> Gennetian, L., and Miller, C., (2004) *How Welfare Reform Can Affect Marriage: Evidence from an Experimental Study in Minnesota*. Review of Economics of the Household and Gennetian, L., Miller, C., and Smith, J., (2005) *Turning Welfare into a Work Support: Six-Year Impacts on Parents and Children from the Minnesota Family Improvement Program*. MDRC

<sup>9</sup> Carlson, M., Garfinkel, I, McLanahan S, Mincy, R., Primus, W. (2004) *The Effects of Welfare and Child Support Policies on Union Formation*. Population Research and Policy Review. 23(5/6): 513-542.

<sup>10</sup> Bronte-Tinkew, J., Horowitz, A, Metz, A. (2007) *“What works” in fatherhood programs? Ten lessons from evidence-based practice*. National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse Research Brief.