

Fragile Families in the Twenty First Century

This presentation is based on data from the *Fragile Families Study* which is following nearly 5000 children born in large US cities between 1998 and 2000. The study, which over-samples children born to unmarried parents, interviews mothers and fathers shortly after the birth of their child and re-interviews both parents when the child is one, three and five years of age. Children's cognitive and social adjustment is assessed at ages three and five.

The study examines several questions

What is the nature of unmarried parents' relationships at birth – why aren't they married? What are their intentions?

What happens to parental relationships over time?

How involved are unmarried fathers in the lives of their children? How does father involvement change over time?

How do parents and children fare?

How do welfare, child support enforcement and incarceration policies affect relationships and wellbeing?

Major findings include:

- Parents have 'high hopes' for their relationships at birth. However, most parents face serious barriers to marriage, including low human and social capital.
- Parental relationships are very unstable and new partnerships are common.
- Father involvement is closely linked to the quality of their relationship with mothers.
- Single parenthood and family instability are both associated with lower well being for parents and children.
- Welfare, child support and incarceration policies loom large in the lives of unmarried parents.