

# **Fragile Families in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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# What are fragile families and why do we care?

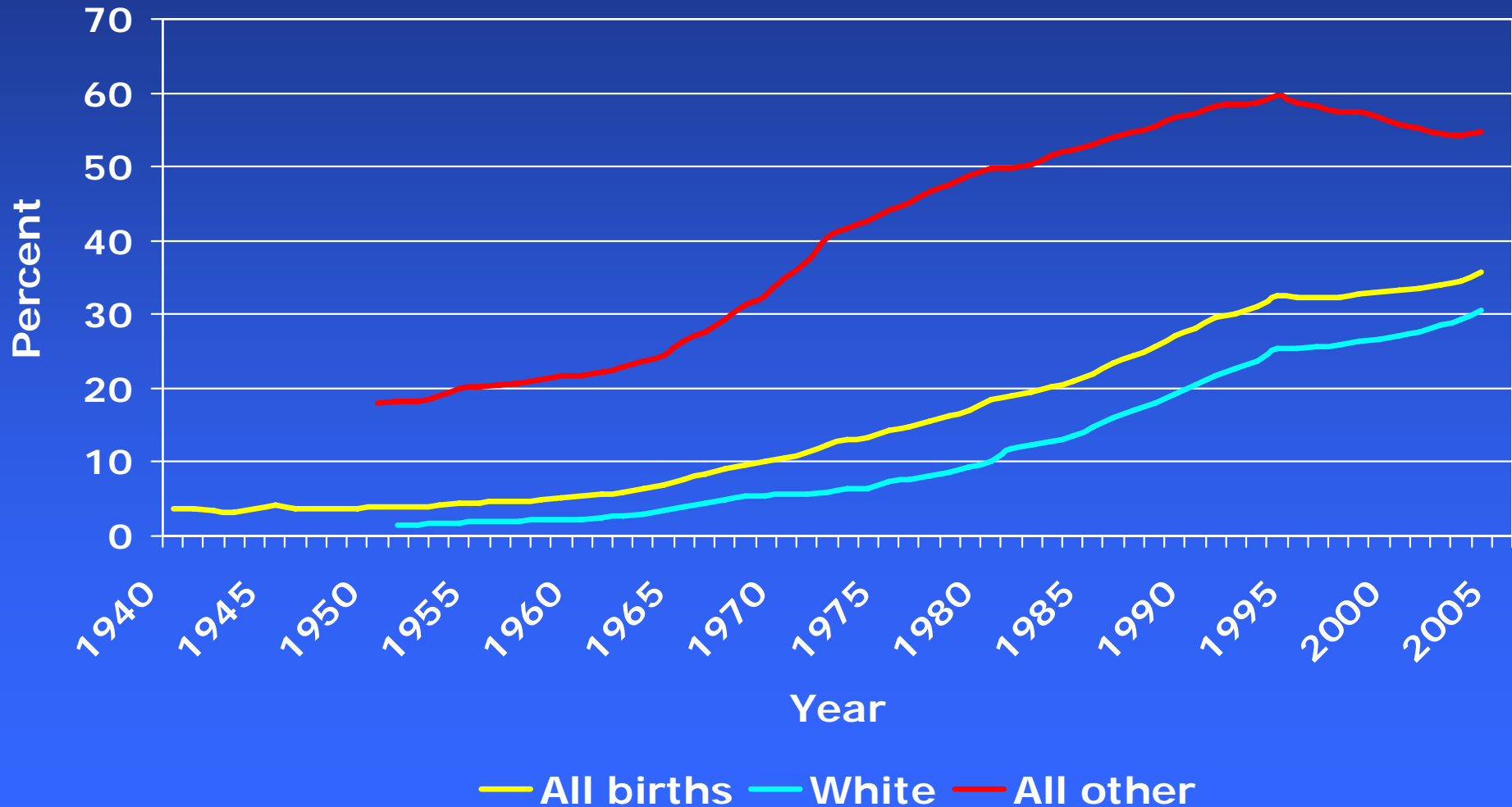
## What?

- Unmarried parents and their children
- Fragile in terms of economic and social resources
- Families in terms of biological and social ties

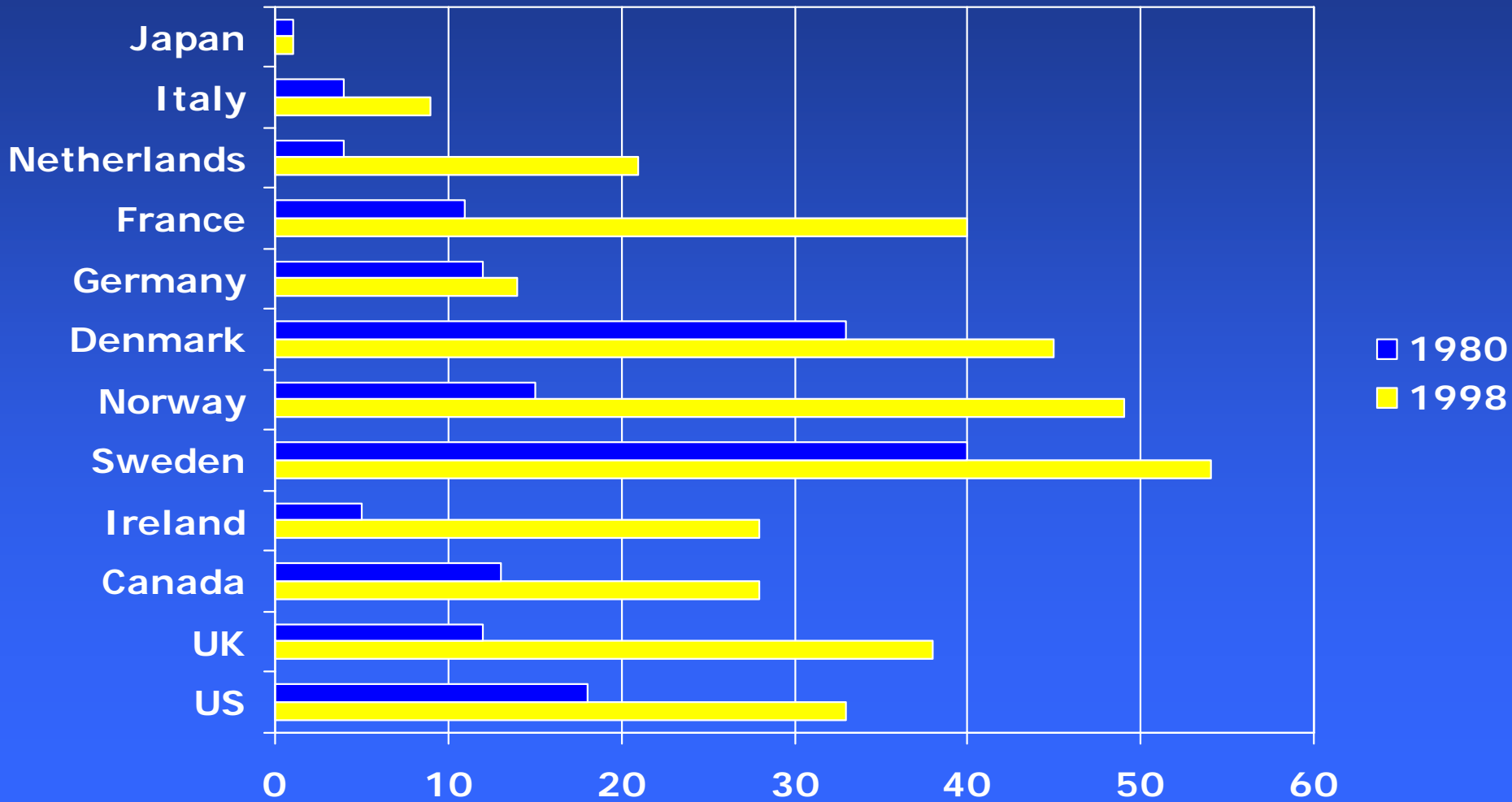
## Why?

- Large increases since 1965
- Disparities by race/ethnicity and education
- Links to wellbeing and mobility

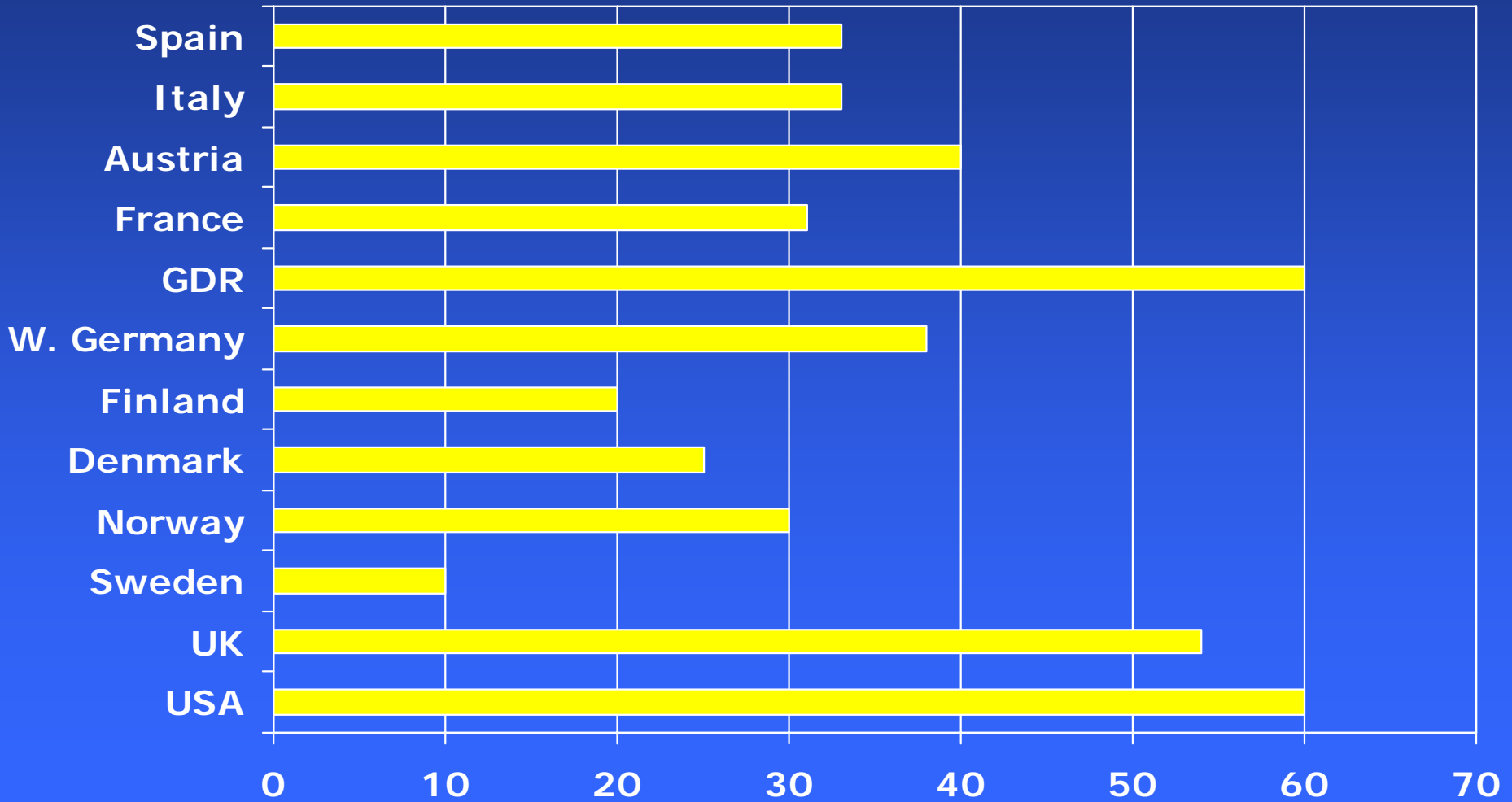
# Births to Unmarried Mothers, U.S.



# Percent of Non-marital Births in Industrialized Countries



# Percent of Non-marital First Births to Single Mothers



# The Questions

- What is the nature of parents' relationships at birth? Why aren't they married?
- What happens to relationships over time?
- How involved are unmarried fathers in the lives of their children?
- How do parents and children fare?
- How do child support, welfare and incarceration policies affect fragile families?
- What are the implications for marriage programs?

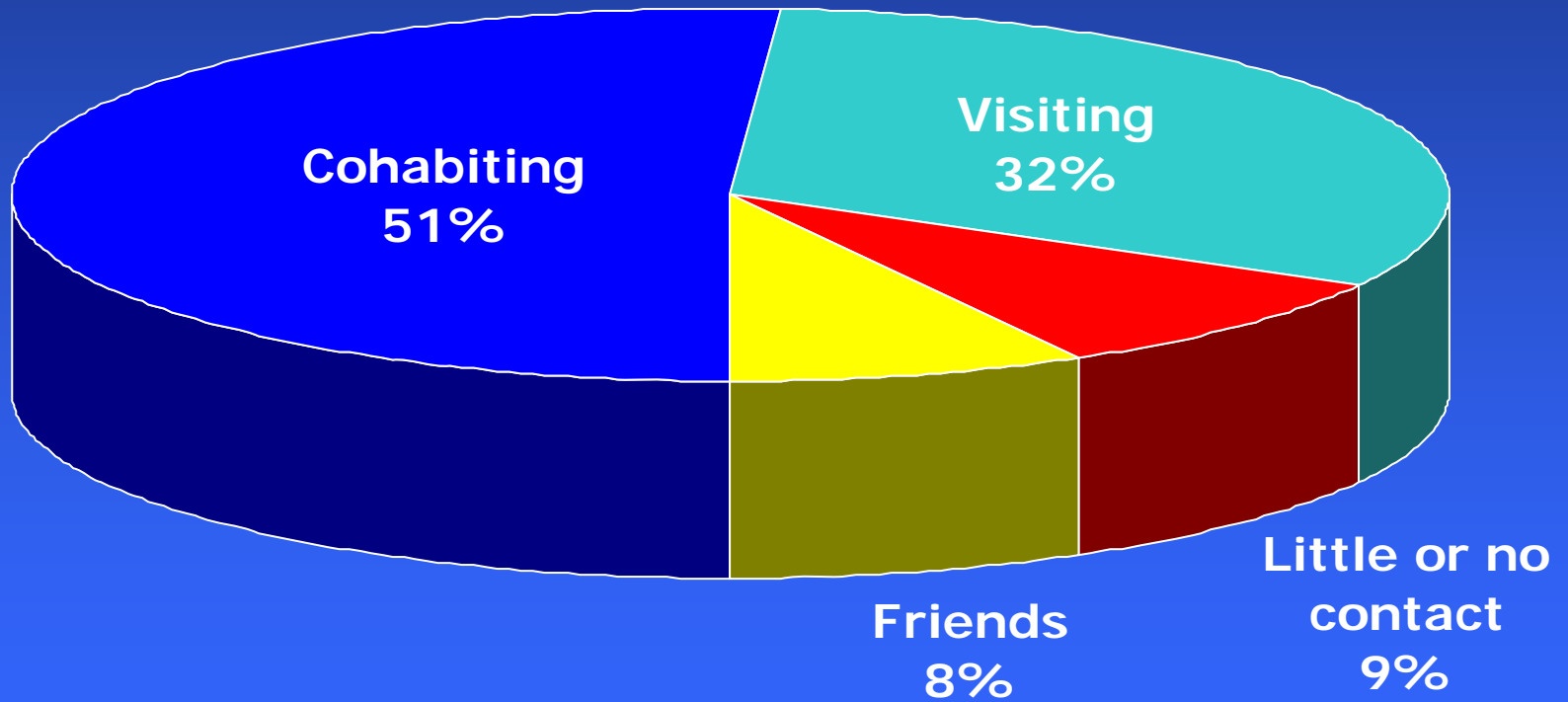
# The Fragile Families Study

- Probability sample of 4900 new births (3700 non-marital and 1200 marital)
- Data collected in 20 cities and 75 hospitals (representative of births in large US cities)
- Interviews conducted with mothers and fathers soon after birth (high response rates)
- Follow-up interviews conducted with both parents when children were 1, 3, and 5 years old
- Child assessments taken at 3 and 5 years
- 9 year survey is about to begin
- Google 'fragile families' for publications and data

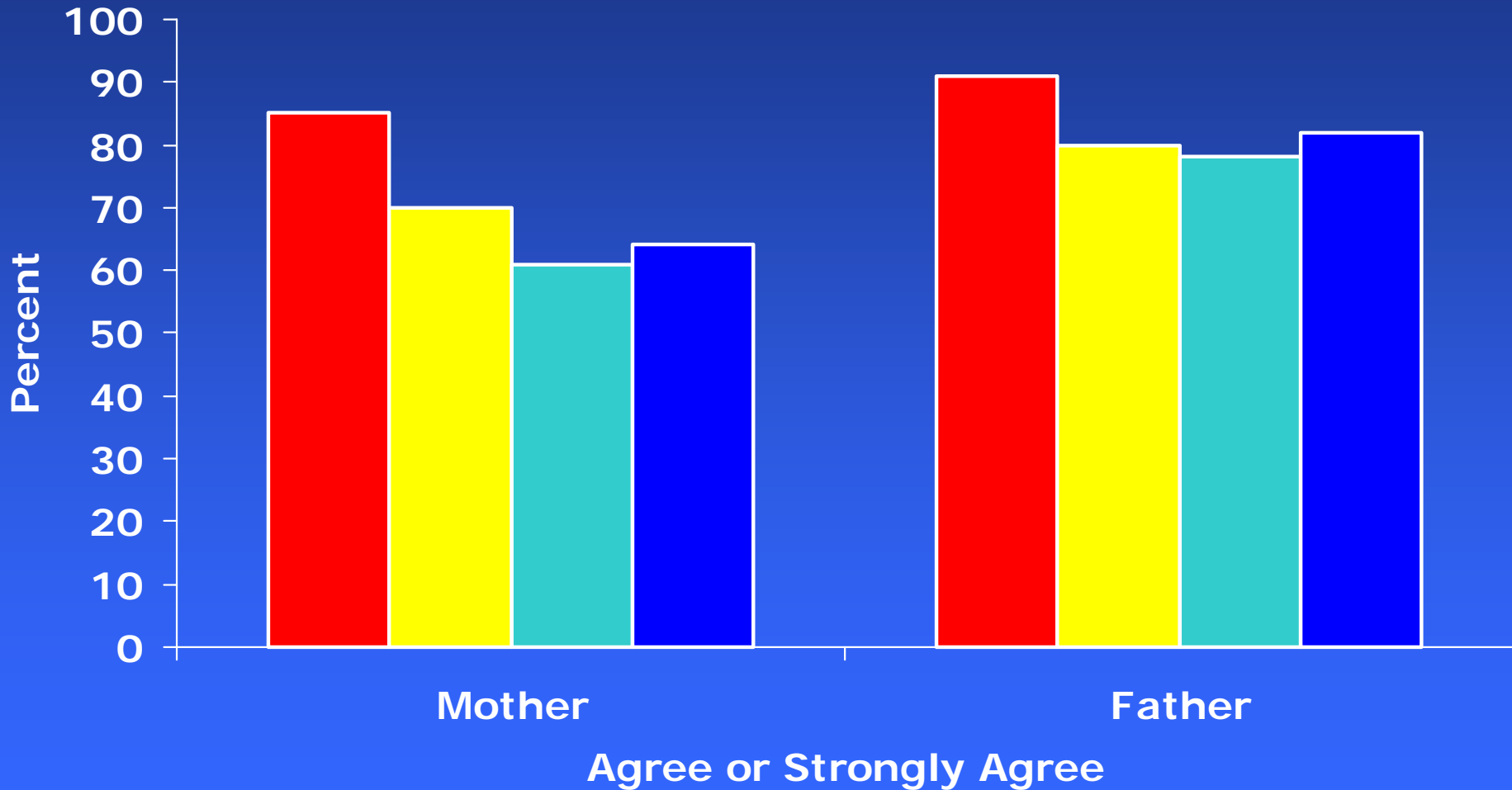
# **What is the nature of parental relationships?**

“high hopes and low capabilities”

# Relationships at Birth



# "Marriage is better for kids..."



■ Married ■ Cohab ■ Visit ■ No Rel

# "Chances of Marriage are..."

	Mothers (%)	Fathers (%)
Almost certain	37	50
Good	22	25
Fifty/fifty	16	15
Not so good	9	5
No chance	17	5

# Capabilities

	Mothers		Fathers	
	Married	Unmarried	Married	Unmarried
Age (mean)	29.6	23.3	31.9	26.7
Teen parent (%)	4	25	0	13
Child with other partner (%)	14	42	16	43
Education (%)				
Less than HS	18	45	19	38
High school	25	38	21	40
Some college	21	16	27	18
College	36	1	34	4
Weeks worked (mean)	21	22	48	42
Earnings (mean)	\$17,107	\$7,997	\$40,499	\$20,962

# Capabilities, cont'd

	Mothers		Fathers	
	Married (%)	Unmarried (%)	Married (%)	Unmarried (%)
Depression	13	16	7	11
Heavy drinking	3	7	22	27
Illegal drug use	1	2	4	8
Either has problem	42	52	-	-
Both have problem	6	10	-	-
Father incarcerated	-	-	6	40

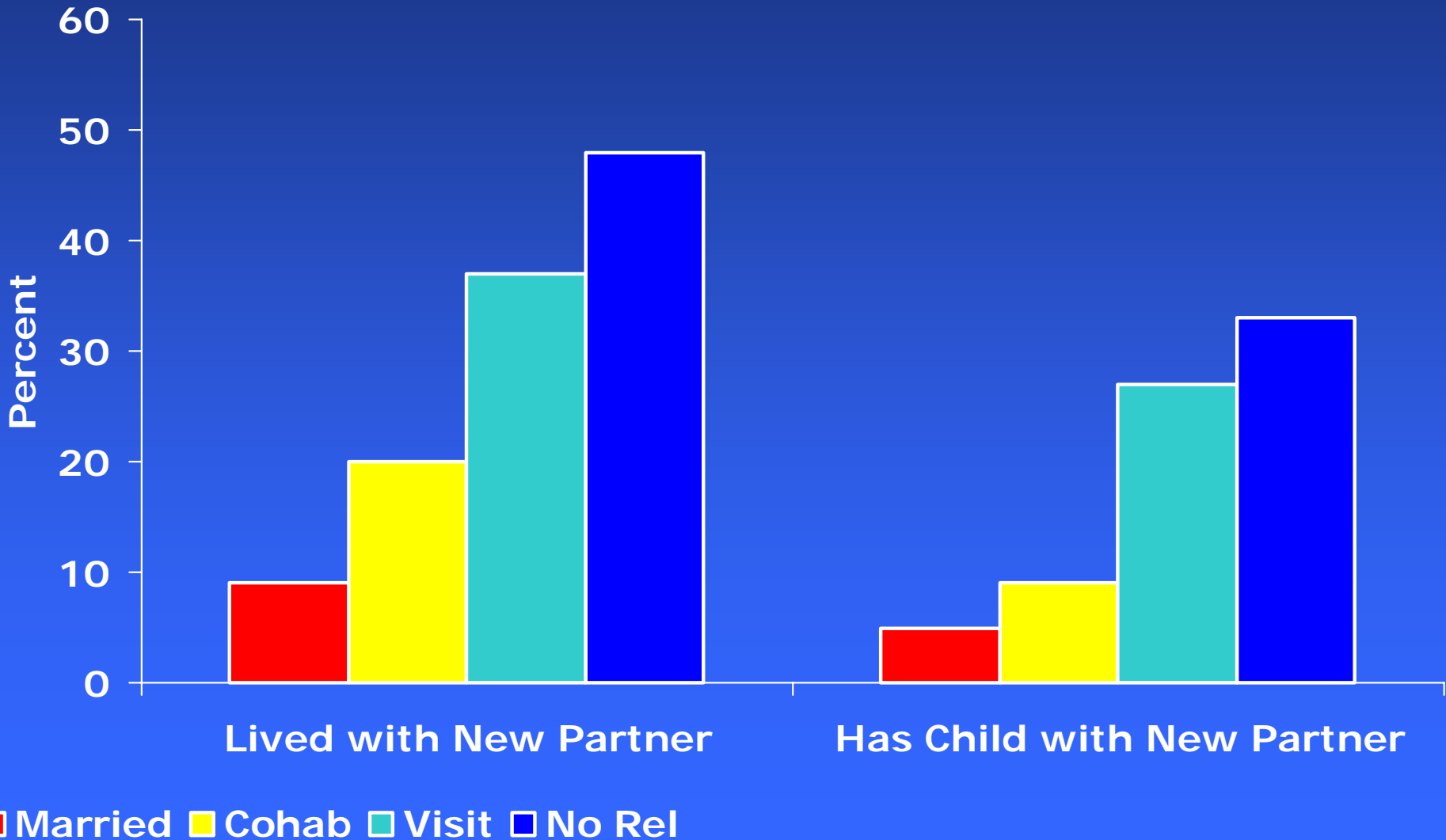
# How do relationships change over time?

“instability and increasing complexity”

# Partnership Trajectories

- By year 5, only 22% of biological parents have ever married
- At year 5, 16% are currently married and 20% are cohabiting
- Partnership changes are common
  - 50% of mothers have experienced 2 or more changes (begin or end a relationship)
  - 25% have experienced 3 or more changes
- Multiple-partner fertility is common

# New Partnerships (by year 5)



# The Big Tradeoff

- Partnership changes are associated with upgrades in father-quality

Low Education	36	8
Unemployment	26	15
Incarceration	50	18
Substance problems	9	1
Domestic violence	18	1

- Partnerships changes are associated with stress

# How involved are unmarried fathers?

“a mixed picture”

# Bio-Father Involvement (at birth)

	Total (%)
Gave money/bought things for child	80
Helped in another way	76
Visited baby's mother in hospital	88
Child will take father's surname	92
Father's name is on birth certificate	84
Mother says father wants to be involved	95
Mother wants father to be involved	94

# Bio-Father Involvement

(over time)

	Year 1 %	Year 3 %	Year 5 %
<i>All fathers</i>			
Lives with child	51	42	36
<i>Non-resident fathers</i>			
Saw child in past year	88	78	72
Saw child in past month	63	55	51

# How do parents and children fare?

“the reproduction of disparities”

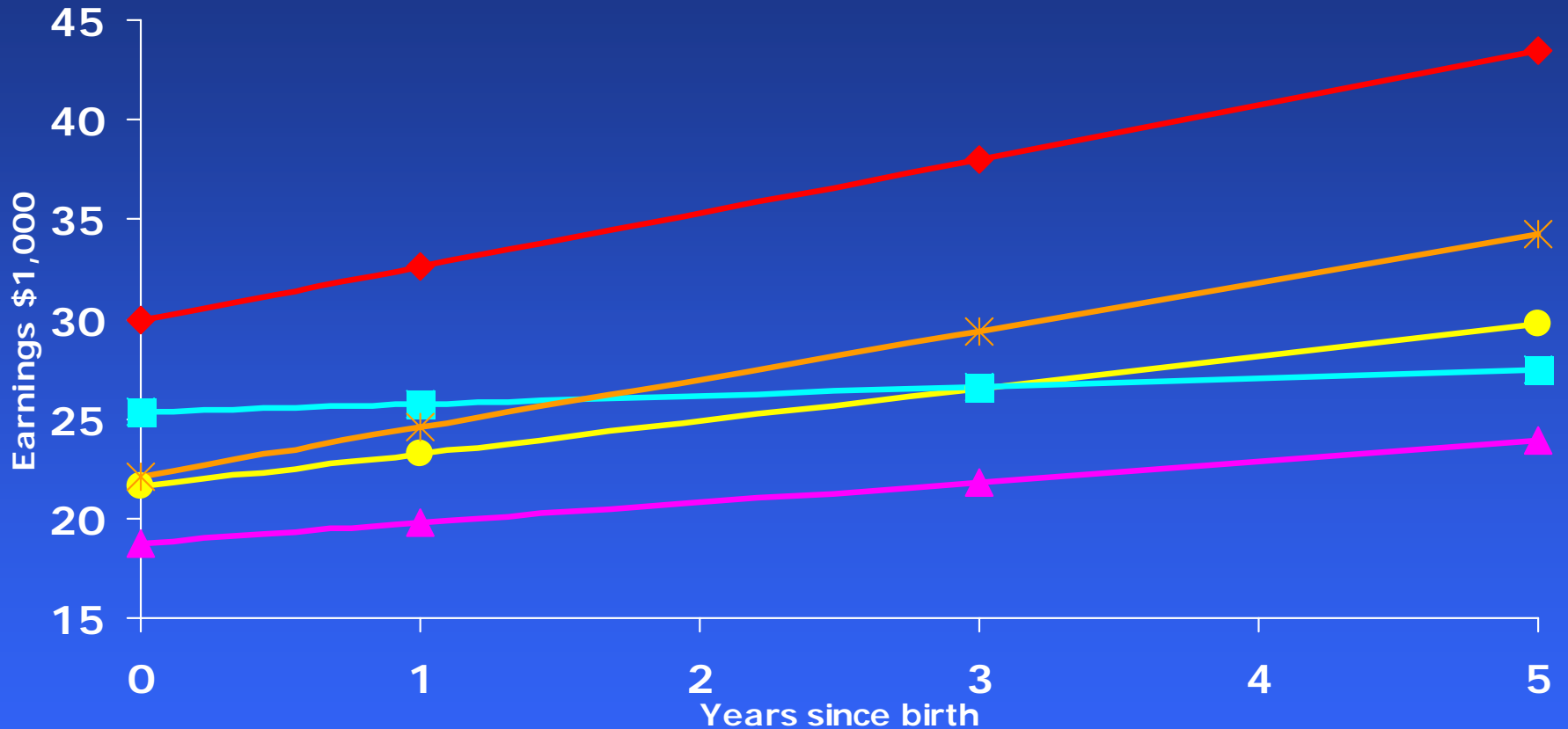
# Outcomes

Relationship instability and single motherhood are associated with:

- Lower earnings trajectories for fathers
- Higher mental health problems for mothers
- Higher maternal stress
- Higher harsh parenting for mothers
- Higher child aggression and depression

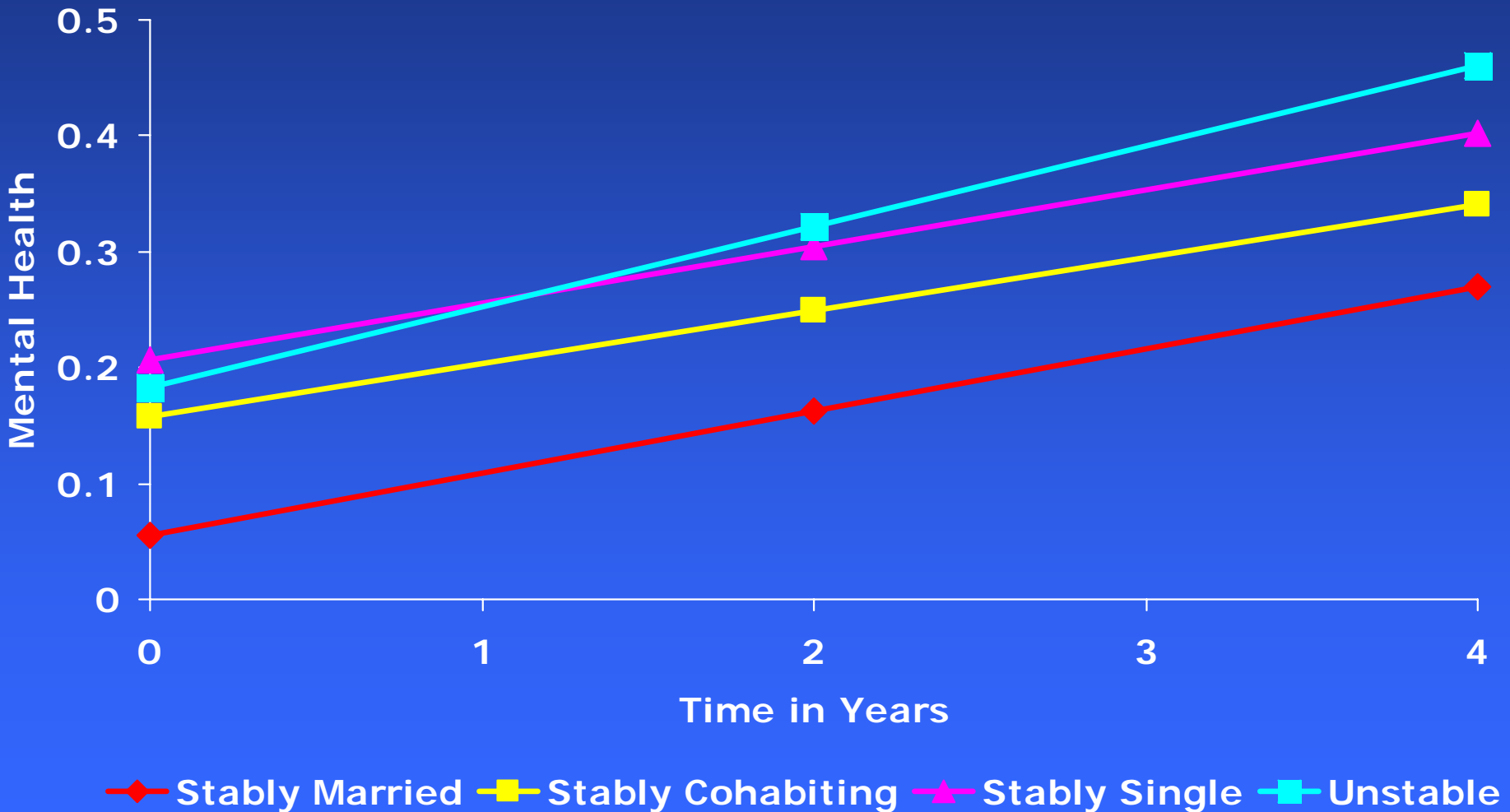
\* Effects are more negative for children of less educated mothers

# Fathers' Earnings



◆ Stably Married ● Stably Cohabiting ▲ Stably Single ■ Exit Marriage \* Enter Marriage

# Mothers' Mental Health Problems



Meadows, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn (2006)

# What role do policies play?

Policies may have unintended consequences

# Welfare-TANF

- **Prevalence**

About 30% of mothers receive welfare  
(range from 15% to 44%)

- **Effects**

Generous benefits may discourage marriage

Generous benefits may increase depression

Effects are modest

# Child Support

- **Prevalence**

About 30% of eligible mothers receive child support (range from 15 to 46 percent)

- **Effects**

Strong enforcement may *not* increase income

Strong enforcement may reduce domestic violence among married moms and increase violence among non-co-resident moms

# Incarceration

- **Prevalence**

40%-50% of unmarried fathers have been incarcerated

- **Effects**

Incarceration may reduce fathers' earnings

Incarceration may reduce fathers social skills

# Implications for Marriage and Fatherhood Programs

\$150 Million per year for programs to increase “healthy marriage” and father involvement (TANF reauthorization)

Good news

- High hopes at birth – “magic moment”
- Healthy marriage and stability have benefits for parents and children

Bad news

- Low capabilities – “marriage plus”
- Trade off between stability and quality

# Summing Up

- Fragile families are a growing part of American family life
- Fragile families are a consequence of pre-existing disparities (race and class)
- Fragile families create new disparities (via instability and complexity)
- Fragile families are an important mechanism in the reproduction of race, class and gender disparities

# Thank You

National Institute of Child Health & Development (NICHD), California HealthCare Foundation, Commonwealth Fund, Ford Foundation, Foundation for Child Development, Fund for New Jersey, William T. Grant Foundation, Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Hogg Foundation, Christina A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, Kronkosky Charitable Foundation, Leon Lowenstein Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, A.L. Mailman Family Foundation, Charles S. Mott Foundation, National Science Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Public Policy Institute of California, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, St. David's Hospital Foundation, St. Vincent Hospital and Health Services, and US Department of Health and Human Services (ASPE and ACF).

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Julien Teitler, Nancy Reichman, Lenna Nepomnyaschy, Irwin Garfinkel "Effects of Welfare Participation on Marriage" CRCW [Working Paper 2005-24-FF](#)

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