

# Center for Marriage and Families

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## Religion, Race, and Relationships in Urban America

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*Churches are bulwarks of marriage in urban America. Analyses of data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study indicate that urban parents who attend church frequently are significantly more likely to marry before the arrival of children or to marry in the wake of a nonmarital pregnancy, and they are more likely to experience higher levels of relationship quality. The church attendance of fathers is a particularly powerful predictor of marital behavior and relationship quality. Religious attendance appears to foster behavior among urban fathers that makes them more attractive mates and better partners. African American parents in urban America are as likely to benefit from churchgoing as are whites. Indeed, the racial gap in marriage rates in urban America today would be even larger were it not for comparatively high levels of African American religiosity. Finally, religious attendance is associated with higher reports of relationship satisfaction for both married and unmarried parents in urban America. This brief is the first published research on the link between religiosity and relationship quality among unmarried couples in fragile families.*

### Introduction

**T**HE STATE OF MARRIAGE and family life in urban America has emerged as a central concern among scholars, policymakers, and social and religious leaders. This interest has been driven in part by an accumulating body of social scientific evidence indicating that marriage provides an array of economic and social benefits to children, adults, and the communities in which they live, and that these benefits extend to poor and minority communities in urban America. This interest is also linked to the dramatic retreat from marriage that has transformed family life in urban America and the rest of the United States in the last four decades.

**This brief is the first published research on the link between religiosity and relationship quality among unmarried couples in fragile families.**

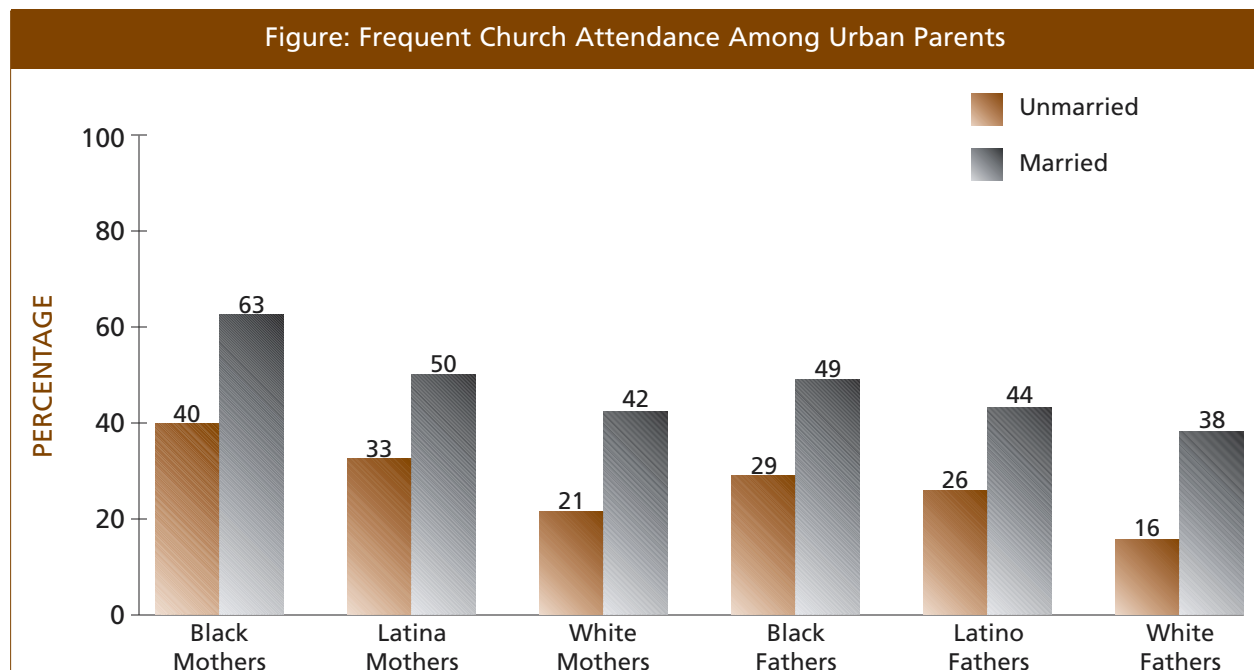
Despite this new interest in marriage and family life, comparatively little attention has been given to the influence of religion on family in urban America. Given longstanding ties between religion and the family, including the church's role as a primary custodian of marriage, and the key role that churches play in urban America, this lack of data constitutes an important gap in our knowledge about the state of marriage in urban America. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW), which is sponsored by Columbia and Princeton Universities, this research brief begins to fill this gap by discussing how religion influences family formation and relationship quality among married and unmarried urban parents.

## The Retreat from Marriage and the Rise of Fragile Families in Urban America

**T**HE UNITED STATES has witnessed a dramatic retreat from marriage in the last forty years. This retreat has been characterized by marked increases in nonmarital childbearing, divorce, cohabitation, and single parenthood. From 1960 to 2000, the percentage of children born out of wedlock rose from 5 to 33 percent, the divorce rate more than doubled to almost 50 percent, cohabitation increased eight-fold, and the percentage of children living in single-parent families rose from 9 percent to 27 percent.

The transformation of American family life has been particularly consequential for poor and minority families who have borne the brunt of the retreat from marriage. For instance, in 1996, 35 percent of African American children and 64 percent of Latino children were living in married households, compared to 77 percent of White children. Likewise, in 2000, 69 percent of African American births and 44 percent of Latino births were out of wedlock, compared to 29 percent of White births. Similar patterns can be seen by social class. Today, approximately 35 percent of children living with mothers who did not finish high school are living in single-mother households, compared to fewer than 10 percent of children living with single mothers with a college degree.

As a consequence of the retreat from marriage, African American, Latino, and poor children in urban America are much more likely to spend time in a single-parent family or a fragile family compared to White middle-class American children. Fragile families are defined as families in which parents cohabit or maintain a nonresidential romantic relationship with one another, or in which a residential parent cohabits with a romantic partner who is unrelated to the children in the household. In U.S. cities, 83 percent of children born out of wedlock are born into fragile families. Compared to married families, fragile families are typically marked by lower levels of commitment and stability between the adult partners and by more economic strain.



## **Parental Relationships and Child Well-being**

**T**HIS BRIEF FOCUSES on the ways in which religion influences family structure and parental relationship quality among urban families. The marital status of parents is important because married parents are more likely than cohabiting and single parents to provide their children with the emotional, social, and economic resources they need to flourish. Likewise, research on child well-being consistently finds that one of the most important determinants of child well-being is the quality of a child's parents' relationship. For instance, children who are raised in good marriages report significantly less psychological distress, greater self-esteem, and more life satisfaction as young adults, especially in comparison to children who grow up in high-conflict marriages.

Because so many children in urban America spend time in a fragile family, this brief focuses on the effect that religion has on the quality of parental relationships in both married and unmarried, fragile families. It focuses on two measures—partner supportiveness and global relationship happiness—to assess the health of the parental relationship.

## **Why Religion May Matter for Urban Families**

**S**OCIAL SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH on American families indicates that religious institutions play an important role in shaping the quality and stability of marriage in the United States. Religion shapes marriage in four important ways. First, religious institutions foster marriage-specific norms (for example, the idea that sex and childbearing ought to be reserved for marriage) and broader moral norms (such as the Golden Rule) that support happier, more stable marriages. Second, religious faith endows the marital relationship with a sense of transcendence. When spouses think of God as present in their marriage they are more likely to treat one another with respect and affection. Third, the family-oriented social networks found in most religious congregations offer spouses emotional and social support and a measure of social control that reinforce their commitment to the marital bond and help them negotiate the challenges of married life. For instance, these networks may discourage infidelity—one important source of marital unhappiness and instability—more than other social networks do. Fourth, religion also has an indirect effect on marriage because religious belief and practice tend to promote psychological coping in the face of severe stresses such as unemployment or the death of a loved one. This psychological resilience, in turn, is linked to higher quality marriages.

### ***Married Couples***

Despite these studies, virtually no research has yet determined the effect of religious belief and practice on marriage formation and marital quality among African American and Latino parents in urban America even though many married Black and Latino urban parents are regular churchgoers. As the figure on page 2 shows, the FFCW study indicates that 63 percent of married African American mothers and 50 percent of married Latino mothers attend religious services on a regular basis (several times a month or more), compared to 42 percent of married White mothers in urban America. (The attendance figures for married African American, Latino, and White fathers are, respectively, 49 percent, 44 percent, and 38 percent.)

Although the influence of religion on urban marriages has received relatively little scholarly attention, related ethnographic research suggests that religious organizations have been the primary institutional anchors of what sociologist Elijah Anderson calls the “code of decency” in urban communities that are struggling against the “code of street.” Urban religious congregations stress norms of mutual service, sexual fidelity, and hard work that in turn foster good marriages and relationships. Congregations provide family-oriented social networks that help married couples stay committed in communities in which the institution of marriage is weak. Religious faith can also help minority and low-income residents deal with psychological stresses associated with poverty, discrimination, and social disorder in positive ways rather than, for example, self-medicating with drugs or alcohol. This psychological resilience, and the attendant avoidance of drug and alcohol abuse, helps protect religious spouses from the lure of the street and from an array of relationship problems, including domestic violence.

**To date, no scholarship has been published on the role that religion might play in influencing the relationship quality of unmarried parents in urban America.**

### ***Unmarried Couples***

To date, *no scholarship* has been published on the role that religion might play in influencing the relationship quality of unmarried parents in urban America. Nevertheless, a large minority of unmarried parents attend religious services. Data from FFCW indicate that 26 percent of unmarried urban fathers and 33 percent of unmarried urban mothers attend religious services on a regular

basis (several times a month or more). Religious attendance is even higher among racial and ethnic minorities in urban America: For instance, 40 percent of unmarried African American mothers, 33 percent of unmarried Latino mothers, and 21 percent of unmarried White mothers attend religious services regularly (see figure on page 2).

Do religious institutions help to foster high-quality and stable relationships in urban America? One of the paradoxes of American religious life is that while religious practice is generally associated with a strong marriage culture, African Americans have the highest rate of religious practice of any racial or ethnic group and the lowest rate of marriage of any racial or ethnic group. Data from the General Social Survey (GSS) indicate that 49 percent of African American adults attend church several times a month or more, compared to 36 percent of Americans from other ethnic and racial backgrounds. Yet, at the same time, African Americans have the highest percentage of children born outside of marriage (69 percent).

Of course, many economic, political, and cultural factors account for distinctive marriage patterns among African Americans. But the Black church may have responded to the tension between its theological conservatism and high rates of out-of-wedlock birth and divorce in the African American community by downplaying pro-marriage norms. Thus, if Black Protestant churches in urban America are not focusing pastorally on marriage, it is possible that African American religious participation is not associated with higher-quality marriages. Accordingly, this brief also discusses whether or not the influence of religion on urban relationships varies by race.

## Findings

### *The Sample*

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey (FFCW) focuses on 4,898 children who were born between 1998 and 2000, including 3,712 children who were born to unmarried parents and 1,186 children who were born to married parents. This survey is representative of unmarried parents living in cities with populations over 200,000. The analyses in this brief focus on the first three waves of data collection: at the birth of the child, one year after the birth, and three years after the birth.

### *Religion, Race, and Family Structure*

Statistical analyses of the FFCW indicate that religious attendance is strongly associated with marital child-bearing among urban couples. For this outcome, father's church attendance appears to matter more. Fathers who attend services several times a month or more are 95 percent more likely to be married when their child is born, whereas mothers who attend regularly are 40 percent more likely to be married at this time (if both attend their odds of marriage to one another are even higher). The analyses indicate that African American mothers and fathers are significantly less likely to be married at the time of their child's birth, compared to whites.

#### **About This Research Brief**

This research brief summarizes the findings of research conducted by Professors W. Bradford Wilcox at the University of Virginia and Nicholas Wolfinger at the University of Utah. Financial support for the research was provided by the John Templeton Foundation, the Bodman Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Religion is also associated with transitions to marriage among unmarried mothers between the birth of the child and three years after the birth. Religious attendance is associated with a 67 percent increase in the odds of marriage for an unmarried mother if the father is a regular churchgoer and a 55 percent increase if the mother is a regular churchgoer. Once again, their odds of marriage are even higher if they both attend religious services several times a month or more. Data from the FFCW also indicate that the positive association between religious attendance and entry into marriage does not vary by race. In other words, churchgoing is as powerful a force for entry into marriage among African Americans as it is for whites. Most striking, FFCW analyses indicate that the current gap between White and Black marriage rates would be even larger were it not for the fact that African Americans attend church at higher rates than whites.

Taken together, these analyses suggest three broad conclusions. First, religious attendance—especially among fathers—is associated with higher rates of marriage among urban parents. Second, African American parents are significantly less likely to be married or get married in the wake of a nonmarital birth. There seems to be no evidence, however, that the effect of religion on entry into marriage is weaker for African Americans than for other groups. Churchgoing boosts the odds of marriage for African American parents in urban America in much the same way it boosts the odds of marriage for urban parents from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. And, third, the racial gap in U.S. marriage rates would be even larger were it not for the comparatively high level of religiosity among African Americans.

## ***Religion, Race, and Relationship Quality***

Statistical analyses of partner supportiveness—such as affection, understanding, and encouragement—indicate that fathers’ religious attendance is linked to higher reports of supportiveness by both partners at three years after the birth of the child. Specifically, both mothers and fathers are significantly more likely to rate their partner as supportive if the father attends church several times a month or more. These results hold for both married and unmarried parents and do not vary by race.

A measure of overall relationship quality—which ranged from poor to excellent and, again, was measured at three years after the birth of the child—is also related to fathers’ religious attendance. Once again, both mothers and fathers are significantly more likely to report that they have an excellent relationship with one another if the father, but not necessarily the mother, attends church frequently. The association between paternal churchgoing and relationship quality holds for married and unmarried couples, and it does not vary by race. However, fathers with Black partners were more likely to report that they were not happy in their relationships, compared to fathers with White partners. It is also interesting to note that married urban parents are significantly more likely to report that their relationships are high-quality, compared to parents who are romantically involved but not married.

These results reinforce the impression that paternal church attendance is particularly important for urban relationships. Not only is fathers’ church attendance more strongly associated with entry into marriage than is mothers’ attendance, it is also more predictive of high-quality relationships for both fathers and mothers. In all likelihood, fathers who attend church take a more favorable view of their relationships. And it would appear that urban mothers are more likely to be well-treated by “decent” churchgoing men and to trust these men to behave in a responsible and faithful manner, all of which would explain their greater willingness to enter marriage and their happiness in married and unmarried relationships with these men.

## **Recommendations for Faith Communities**

**R**ELIGION IS A BULWARK of marriage in urban America, as it is in the rest of the United States. In our nation’s cities, religious attendance is clearly associated with bearing a child within wedlock or with marrying soon after a nonmarital pregnancy. Religious attendance is also associated with higher-quality relationships among married and unmarried parents in urban America. Moreover, the associations between religious attendance and marriage are typically strongest for fathers. Men, more than women, it would seem, turn their hearts and minds to the needs of their partners when they are regular churchgoers, in large part because churches foster a code of decency that makes them more responsible and considerate. (Of course, it is also possible that “decent” men in urban America gravitate toward churches and good relationships.)

When considering the role of race in the nature and quality of parental relationships in urban America, research shows that African Americans are less likely to be married at the birth of a child and that men in relationships with African American women are less likely to be happy in their relationships. Nevertheless, this research team found no evidence that the positive effect of religious attendance on marriage and relationship quality is weaker for African Americans than for other

racial/ethnic groups. African Americans benefit as much from churchgoing as do other urban residents in the United States.

Thus, faith communities that are promoting better-quality family life in urban America can take comfort in some of our findings, even as they should be challenged by others. First, religious institutions foster marriage in urban communities where marriage is often embattled. Second, religious institutions do promote better relationships among their married parents. Third, religion is one of the few institutions in urban America that turns men's attention to their families. Religious institutions should build on these strengths as they seek to expand or initiate efforts to improve the quality of family life in urban America.

At the same time, religious institutions also face considerable challenges as they seek to improve the quality of family life in urban America. First, given the high prevalence of unmarried childbearing in urban communities and the negative outcomes associated with single-parent and fragile families, religious institutions need to expand efforts to help young men and women in their communities marry, preferably before they have children, and to remain married.

Second, given low attendance rates among men (see figure on page 2), faith communities should try to find ways to attract men—especially fathers—in greater numbers to their congregations. This challenge is particularly important because urban families seem to benefit the most when fathers are both married and religiously active.

Third, religious institutions should try to confront the profound difficulties that all too many urban married and unmarried parents struggle with in their relationships—domestic violence, sexual infidelity, or distrust. Religious groups need to consider programs and ministries that focus on a range of relationship virtues, including helping couples learn how to communicate, remain faithful to one another, and—above all—avoid domestic violence. As the literature on child well-being makes clear, marriage by itself is not enough. Children do best when they grow up in married families where parents enjoy a high-quality relationship with one another. Churches, mosques, temples, and faith-based organizations can help supply their members with the virtues they need to be good partners to one another and good parents to their children.

The last four decades have seen marked declines in marriage rates and religious attendance in urban America. Nevertheless, since the 1990s, religious attendance, out-of-wedlock childbearing rates, and child poverty rates in the United States have generally stabilized or even improved. In the last decade the percentage of African American children born out of wedlock fell slightly, from 70 percent in 1994 to 68 percent in 2002. This moment could represent a golden opportunity for religious congregations and other faith-based organizations seeking to turn a corner on family and religious decline in their communities. Now is the time to take stock of current trends in family life and to pursue a range of pastoral initiatives to strengthen marriage and family relationships in urban America. Importantly, such initiatives would also likely help strengthen their own congregational vitality. Overall, religious initiatives that seek to strengthen family relationships—and that work in partnership with other private and public initiatives—will serve the welfare of countless children and communities who depend upon strong and healthy families to survive and thrive.

Visit <http://center.americanvalues.org> for more on the future of the Black family.

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