Abstract

Although many nonmarital births are to cohabiters, roughly 40% of such births are to those not living with a partner. Many of these individuals will go on to form unions, some of which are likely to be with their child's biological parent. In this paper, I will use the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) to analyze the likelihood that never-married, never-cohabited young adults with a first birth outside a coresidential union will remain single, form a coresidential union with the child’s other biological parent, or form a union with a new partner, paying attention to differences across race-ethnicity, socioeconomic and demographic characteristics as well as considering partner characteristics and relationship quality. I will also investigate the stability of these unions, comparing whether unions formed with the child’s biological parent are more or less stable than those formed with new partners.
Union Formation and Stability among Non-Cohabitating, Unmarried Parents:
Incorporating Unions with Their Child’s Parent

The rise of nonmarital fertility over the past few decades has been widely documented and studied. Roughly 40% of all births in recent years have been among unmarried women (Martin et al. 2015). Much of the rise of nonmarital fertility can be attributed to increasing fertility in cohabiting unions, with more than half of nonmarital births occurring to cohabiting couples (Lichter, 2012). Although many single women respond to a pregnancy by cohabiting or, less frequently, marrying prior to birth with their child’s father (Lichter, Sassler, and Turner, 2014), this is not always this case, leaving a substantial pool of unmarried, noncohabiting parents who may form unions in the future. Existing research on unmarried mothers suggests that union formation after a nonmarital birth is becoming rarer and taking longer (Gibson-Davis, 2011).

Union formation among unmarried parents is both a policy and a social concern – following the 1996 welfare reform, union formation became an important policy target as an avenue to reduce poverty among single parents, despite evidence suggesting that new unions were both unstable and unlikely to reduce poverty (Lichter, Graefe, and Brown, 2003).

One of the implications of the growing lag between a nonmarital birth and subsequent union formation is that it is unlikely these unmarried parents are forming unions with their child’s biological parent, yet the underlying assumption of marriage promotion programs for unwed parents is that biological parents will marry each other (Mincy, 2002). With the exception of the Fragile Families and Well-Being Survey (Fragile Families), most sources of data, such as the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), used to examine nonmarital childbearing and subsequent union formation and stability do not include information on whether later cohabiting and marital partners are the biological parent of an individual’s child. Instead, biological
parenthood is essentially assumed – when a child is born within the start and end dates of a cohabitation or marriage, the partners in the union are considered the biological parents of the child. For children born outside of a union, then, it is difficult to know whether subsequent unions are with a biological parent or a new partner (who would be the child’s stepparent).

Not only do we know little about the partners in post-birth unions formed among unmarried parents, there is reason to believe that the likelihood of forming such a union with a child’s biological parent varies by sociodemographic characteristics, particularly race-ethnicity. Research suggests race-ethnic differences in responses to nonmarital births as well as union formation; relative to whites, pregnant black women are less likely to either cohabit or marry prior to birth than remain single (Lichter, Sassler, and Turner, 2014). Less than half of black unmarried mothers (47%) in recent cohorts marry within 10 years of birth whereas the majority (82%) of white unmarried mothers marry (Gibson-Davis, 2011). Other socioeconomic characteristics also come in to play, as research generally shows that more advantaged individuals are more likely to form a union overall. And of course, the characteristics of the other parent likely play a role, too.

In addition to socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, relationship factors are certainly important. The more casual the relationship at conception and/or birth, the less likely an individual will be to form a coresidential union with the child’s other biological parent (McLanahan, 2011). Relationship quality, such as closeness and conflict, will also play a role (Hohmann-Marriott, 2008). Additional childbearing with this partner, indicative of an ongoing relationship as well as potentially more incentive for union formation, will also encourage union formation between biological parents.
Although many of these issues have been studied with the Fragile Families data, there are several drawbacks and limitations to those data. One of these is the sampling frame – the Fragile Families sampled births to unmarried parents in major cities in 1988-2000. As a result of this frame, parents in the Fragile Families tend to be more disadvantaged than parents in other samples (Wagmiller, 2010). Moreover, union formation seems to differ across the spectrum of rural-to-urban, with more and earlier unions in more rural areas (Kefalas, Furstenberg, Carr, and Napolitano, 2011; Uecker and Stokes, 2008), and so the likelihood of union formation with a biological parent may be higher overall in the United States than in urban areas. Another issue is, in sampling births, the focal birth in the Fragile Families data may be of any parity, and prior births may have been with other partners (i.e., multipartnered fertility, or MPF); similarly, the parents may have previously cohabited or married. Parity, MPF, and past unions affect the odds of union formation (Carlson, McLanahan, and England, 2004; Lichter and Qian, 2008). Finally, nearly all of the work using Fragile Families data has focused primarily on women, yet first-time mothers and fathers differ on a range of characteristics (Stykes and Guzzo, 2013) that may affect union formation.

Another important wrinkle is whether the stability of post-birth unions differ whether they are with a biological parent or not (and whether stability varies by sociodemographic characteristics). Specifically, although stepfamily unions tend to be less stable than intact two-biological parent unions (Bramlett and Mosher, 2002; Sweeney, 2010), post-birth biological-parent unions may also be unstable. It is possible that the problems that inhibited pre-conception or pre-birth union formation may still exist; that is, the strongest couples likely formed unions prior to birth, so these couples may be particularly weak. A union with a new partner, though, may be a fresh start, and a coresidential union that forms among those with children from a prior
union may be selective of those most equipped or invested in dealing with stepfamily challenges. Conversely, post-birth unions formed with the other biological parent will have survived the challenges of parenting and remaining romantically involved (or becoming more seriously involved) in order to reach the point in which coresidence seems like a good option. Thus, it is unclear whether post-birth unions would be more or less stable with a biological parent than a new partner.

In this paper, I will use the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), which is uniquely suited to examine union formation among unwed parents because it identifies the parent of each of the respondent’s children. Specifically, I will analyze the likelihood that never-married, never-cohabited young adults with a first birth outside a coresidential union will form a coresidential union with the child’s other biological parent or with a new partner, paying attention to differences across race-ethnicity, socioeconomic and demographic characteristics as well as considering partner characteristics and relationship quality. I will also investigate the stability of these unions, comparing whether unions formed with the child’s biological parent are more or less stable than those formed with new partners.

Data

The NLSY97 is a representative cohort study of individuals born 1980-84 who were first interviewed in 1997, with yearly interviews thereafter. The original sample included 8,984 respondents, including oversamples of black and Hispanic youth. I use data from all available rounds, up to round 15 (2011, when respondents were aged 26-32) to identify a sample of parents (n = 4,613 with valid dates of first birth). As with other surveys, the NLSY97 has a full history of cohabiting and marital unions with start and end dates as well as dates of birth. What is unique about the NLSY97 is that it created ID variables for the other parent of nearly all of the
respondent’s biological or adopted children (missing for only 12 first births). Additionally, it created ID variables for most (but not all) coresidential partners; for instance, for first cohabitations, 725 (13.6%) of the 5,336 cohabitations do not have a partner ID, and for first marriages, 77 (2.2%) of the 5,316 marriages do not have a partner ID.

To identify births occurring outside of a coresidential union, I used information from both the union histories and the union and parent partner IDs to match births to unions, excluding respondents without a parent partner ID or a union partner ID for one or more unions since the union context of births to these respondents cannot be determined (n = 602). Of the remaining 4,011 respondents with a birth, 1,588 were neither cohabiting nor married at first birth, and I further excluded those who had cohabited or married prior to their non-union first birth (n = 137). I also exclude those in the “other” race category due to too few cases (n = 26). I exclude very young parents (those less than 16), for a final sample size of 1,300 men and women with a non-cohabiting, nonmarital first birth with an identified other parent and partnership IDs for all relationships.

Analytical approach

The planned analyses will have two components. First, I will use event history methods to predict a three-category dependent variable: no coresidential union, coresidential union with the first biological child’s parent, and coresidential union with a different partner. Respondents will enter the analysis the month of the first birth and will exit the first month they report a coresidential union or will be censored at the date of the last interview. Second, among those who form a coresidential union, I will analyze stability. Again using event history methods, respondents will enter the month their coresidential union begins and exit when the union ends or
at the time of the last interview; union type will be treated as a time-varying variable (allowing respondents to move from cohabitation to marriage) but will not be explicitly modeled.

In the full analysis, I will include socioeconomic and demographic characteristics: age at birth, race-ethnicity, gender, education level (time-varying), employment status, and family background characteristics. Additional covariates will include characteristics of the other parent: age, race, education, employment status. Relationship-specific characteristics will include closeness, conflict, how much the respondent cares about the other parent, and measures of the relationship status at conception and birth. I will also include a time-varying measure of additional births with the same or a different partner. Analyses will be weighted to account for attrition.

Preliminary Bivariate Findings

Table 1 shows weighted cross-tabulations of having no union, forming a cohabiting or marital union with the child’s biological parent, or forming a cohabiting or marital union with a new partner by race-ethnicity. Overall, the sample is fairly evenly split into thirds – 32% formed no union, 36% formed a union with their child’s other parent, and 33% formed a union with a new partner (totals due not equal 100% due to rounding). Of those that formed a new union, then, slightly more parents moved in with their child’s other parent (52%) than with a new partner (48%), not shown. This pattern, however, varied by race-ethnicity (the global chi-square indicated these differences were statistically significant). More non-Hispanics blacks (41%) than non-Hispanic whites (26%) or Hispanics (19%) stayed ‘single’ (i.e., did not form a cohabitation or marriage). Roughly equal proportions of whites moved in with their child’s other parent as formed a union with a new partner (38% vs. 37%, respectively). Among blacks, slightly more moved in with a new partner than with their child’s other parent (29% vs. 27%). Hispanics
presented a much more pronounced pattern in favor of union formation with their child’s other parent – 48% cohabited or married their child’s mother or father but only 33% formed a union with a new partner.

- Table 1 here -

In Table 2, we see weighted cross-tabulations of whether first unions are intact by whether the partner is the respondent’s first child’s other parent or a new partner. The majority, 71%, of these unions are intact at the most recent interview. However, it varies by the type of partner – 76% of unions formed with their child’s other parent are still intact but only 67% of unions formed with a new partner are intact, and these differences are statistically significant. There are also race-ethnic differences in stability by partner type. Overall, more of Hispanics’ unions are intact (78%) than the unions of whites (77%), and only 62% of blacks’ unions are intact. And although the same general patterns holds within groups – unions with their child’s other parent are more stable than those with new partners – there is variation in the extent to which a union with the other parent is more stable by race-ethnicity. Unions with new partners are particularly unstable for Hispanics (67% are intact) relative to those with the other parent (85%), but the differences are much smaller for blacks (59% vs. 65%) and whites (74% vs. 80%).

This work will provide important updated information on union formation and stability among first-time parents who were neither cohabiting nor married when their child was born, using a nationally representative sample. These preliminary results show that the process of union formation, either with their child’s other parent or with a new partner, differs by race-ethnicity, as does the stability of these unions. In the full analyses, I will examine how characteristics of the parental relationship, the other parent, and socioeconomic factors affect
these bivariate patterns. The final paper will situate the analyses in theories of union formation and discuss the policy implications of the findings.
REFERENCES


Table 1. Subsequent Union Formation among Those with Non-Cohabiting, Nonmarital 1st Birth at Age 16 or Older

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No coresidential union</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coresidential union w/ other parent</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coresidential union w/ new partner</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>33.2%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>748</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>1300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Stability of Subsequent Unions Formed among Individuals w/ a Non-Union 1st Birth by Partner Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Other Parent</th>
<th>New Partner</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dissolved</td>
<td></td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intact</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
<td>66.5%</td>
<td>71.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>80.2%</td>
<td>73.6%</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>85.3%</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
<td>78.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>862</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>