

# Prevalence and Determinants of Domestic Violence Among Unmarried Mothers

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## **Extended Abstract:**

Buoyed by the success of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act, whose time limits and work requirements played a large role in the reduction of the welfare rolls, conservative advocates of welfare reform are now moving to ensure that our welfare system reflects traditional family values as well. Responding to this sentiment, the Bush Administration is encouraging states to use TANF to support marriage promotion efforts. Most women's groups and traditional welfare reform advocates were sharply opposed to the whole idea given the majority of welfare recipients and/or low-income mothers are victims of domestic violence. Advocates for low-income women and children are skeptical of efforts to encourage the involvement of low-income fathers in the lives of children. Nevertheless, most of previous studies depend on non-representative sample. Using the baseline, year 1, and year 3 follow-up data of the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Survey, the purpose of this paper is to use representative and more recent data to examine prevalence and determinants of domestic violence, including sexual abuse, among unmarried mothers in order to assess the challenge that marriage promotion policies face with respect to a population with high risk of family violence.

## **Background**

Previous studies on family violence focus on severe violence like physical or sexual abuse and heavily depend on non-representative welfare and/or low-income sample

(please see Tolman and Raphael, 2000 for a thorough review). The prevalence of lifetime family violence among welfare recipients ranges from 34% to 65%, with most rates in the 50%-60% range. The prevalence of violence in previous 12 months, recent or current violence, is around 8% to 33%, with most rates in 20%-30% range. The substantial difference on the prevalence of family violence is largely due to measurement differences, and time and area of data collection (Tolman and Raphael, 2000). Studies that use more inclusive definition of violence and include many behavior-specific items produce higher prevalence rates, as well as studies not limit who is perpetrator. The prevalence of family violence may increase over time among welfare recipients given that welfare caseloads rapidly reduce since 1996 and that the most employable recipient move off welfare first. Still, empirical evidence clearly shows that welfare recipients report higher prevalence of family violence than other comparable women who are not on welfare (Lloyd, 1997; Honeycutt, Marshall, and Weston. 2001). This fact makes advocates for low-income women and children skeptical of efforts of marriage promotion on well-being of these women and children.

## **Data and Method**

### Data

The data of this paper is from the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Survey (FFCWS). This survey is a national study designed to provide longitudinal data on the conditions and capabilities of new unmarried parents and the consequences for child well-being. The survey includes information about the relationship between unmarried mothers and fathers, as well as the relationship between mothers and subsequent partners. The study follows a birth cohort about 3700 children born to unmarried parents and 20

U.S. cities, selected based on variations in their labor market conditions, generosity of welfare benefits and strictness of child support enforcement. The full sample is representative of all nonmarital births to parents residing in cities with populations over 200,000 (Reichman, Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Teitler, 2000). To permit comparisons across critical domains, a total of 1,100 married parents were interviewed in all 20 cities, in the full baseline survey. New mothers were interviewed in hospitals or birthing clinics within 48 hours after giving birth, and fathers were interviewed either in the hospital, birthing clinic, or elsewhere as soon as possible following the birth of their child. Follow-up interviews are scheduled when the child is 12, 36, and 48 months old. We use data from the baseline, and year 1 and 3 follow-up sample of the FFCWS.

### Measures

We use six questions to measure the prevalence of domestic violence among unmarried mothers. We measure domestic violence in three dimensions: physical control, violence, and sexual abuse. Questions on physical control include 1) He tried to isolate you from family and friends, 2) He tried to prevent you from going to work and/or school, and 3) He withheld money, made you ask for money, or took your money. We use questions of “He slapped or kicked you” and “He hit you with his fist or an dangerous object” to measure violence. The question of “He tried to make you have sex or do sexual things you don’t want to do” is used to measure sexual abuse. Mothers are asked to answer these questions based on the frequency that father, or subsequent partner, commits. There are three levels of response for each question: “never happened”, “sometimes”, and “often” (code as 0, 1, 2 respectively).

## Analysis Techniques

We will begin the analysis by comparing the response of domestic violence questions over time, and then examine determinants of domestic violence by multivariate regression.