

Who Are “Fragile Families?”

Fragile families is a term used to describe most typically unmarried parents and their children. These families are at greater risk of living in poverty and of family dissolution than are married families. Most often in these families the parents are living together or have close relationships with the father living in a separate household.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study collected data about parents, their relationship to each other and the well-being of their children. In the longitudinal study about 5000 children and their parents who were most typically unmarried and in their twenties reported about the quality of their relationship, their expectations to marry and reasons for not marrying. It has provided much insight into the reality of these families lives. The study tells us that:

- Unwed parents are strongly connected to each other and to their children at the time of the child’s birth.
- Most of the unwed parents are poorly equipped to support themselves and their children. They lack education, work experience and family support to obtain and retain work.
- Unmarried parents are younger and much more likely to already have children with more than one partner than married parents.
- Employment, education and relationship quality affect the stability of these families and their plans to marry.
 - Men viewed employment as an essential element for a successful marriage.
 - The higher a woman’s educational level the likelihood she is to maintain a stable relationship.
 - Pro-marriage attitudes increase the chance of marriage while the women’s distrust of men has a negative effect.
 - The quality of the couples’ relationship has a greater effect on decision to marriage than employment.
 - Women viewed cohabitation as a safe relationship that provided them control over their lives and their children’s lives.

These couples had high hopes and expectations for marriage yet they created barriers to marrying. The most significant was that they considered marriage as a long-term goal that was achievable when other short-term goals had been accomplished. The two major short-term goals were financial stability and relationship quality. Financial stability often included being able to afford a home and being debt free. Marriage was viewed as the crowning achievement after other goals had been accomplished.

Reference

Parke, M. (2004). Who are “fragile families’ and what do we know about them? Washington D.C.: Center for Law and Social Policy.