



MARYLAND

FAMILY POLICY IMPACT SEMINAR

Rural Mothers Speak: About Relationships Implications for Marriage-Promotion Policy Initiatives

In the wake of the 2003 welfare reauthorization, states will be encouraged to expand their TANF services by developing marriage and relationship education programs. However, research findings to guide such programs are limited. Most of the research on low-income families explores urban populations and overlooks the distinctive life experiences of poor rural families. Literature on marriage is based primarily on economically advantaged samples and rarely resembles the families who are targeted by welfare policy.

Research documenting the relationship constellations and dynamics of low-income rural mothers has tremendous implications for marriage promotion policy and programs¹. Findings can be used for interventions that combat the fragile life circumstances of rural low-income mothers and help them build on their strengths.

Findings from recent research with low-income families living in two rural Maryland counties address relationships. Both rank at or near the lowest of Maryland's counties on economic indicators. Extensive interviews were conducted with 35 mothers as part of a longitudinal multi-state study. Part of the study investigated the economic well-being, depression, social support and levels of partner conflict of partnered and non-partnered rural low-income mothers.

Economic Well-Being

The average total household income of these families was \$13,634. Based on calculations of an income-to-needs ratio, 34% of the families were economically *in-crisis*, indicating their total household income fell below the federal poverty line. In contrast, 29% reported their families were economically *at-risk* – meaning their total household income was between the poverty line and 150% of the poverty line – with only 3% reporting their families were economically *safe*, or between 150% and

Maryland Mothers Interviewed

Average age: 28 **Average # of children:** 2

Married or living with partner: 60%

Education

Some high school or less: 31%

High school or GED: 20%

Beyond high school: 49%

Race/Ethnicity

White, Non-Hispanic: 54%

African American: 34%

Native American: 9%

Multiracial: 3%

200% of the poverty line. None of the families were economically *thriving* or over 200% of poverty.

Initial findings revealed no significant differences between the annual family incomes of mothers who were partnered with their children's fathers and those who were not.

The presence of two parents does not remove the economic risk for these rural low-income families.

Emotional Well-Being

Of these mothers, 43% reported depressive symptoms, indicating risk for clinical depression. There were no significant differences between the partnered and non-partnered mothers on their levels of depression. However, mothers without clinical depression symptoms reported significantly higher levels of support from families and others than depressed mothers.

Family and Community Support

Family and community support were two resources helping these mothers to function. Family support featured:

- (a) High frequency of contact;
- (b) Close emotional relationships; and
- (c) Regular practical assistance.

¹ Anderson, Braun, Oravec, & Kohler, 2003; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003.

Many mothers spoke to the regular contact they maintained with their families, particularly their own mothers, and how central these family members are to their lives. For example, one woman who had daily contact with her mother and weekly contact with her father reported turning to them for help on a regular basis. She acknowledged this support, stating, "They are supportive, they are always there [for me]." Another woman described the importance of her extended family, stating, "My relatives are very important. Like I said, I mean, they're always willing to help out."

Mothers spoke of ways that their family and friends helped to make everyday lives more manageable. One woman provided an example of this practical assistance when she stated, "My parents and my brothers and sisters, they'll send me whatever I need, if I need anything." Another woman who reported receiving high levels of social support from both her family and community stated,

The people in my church, especially the pastor and his wife, they've been very helpful. They have kids, and they go through all those same things...they can give you a good objective opinion about things to do.

Relationship Quality

In describing the quality of their relationships, 27% of mothers not partnered with their children's fathers reported relationship conflicts with the fathers. Of these mothers, 23% reported they and the fathers occasionally argue, yell and shout at one another when they have serious disagreements. Additionally, 20% reported they and the fathers occasionally end up hitting or throwing things at each other when they have a serious disagreement.

Since recent research has revealed that marital quality is more important than marital status in predicting a wide range of child outcomes, relationship quality should be considered when designing policies for economically disadvantaged populations who experience high levels of chronic stress and an increased likelihood of relationship conflict.

Recommendations

In addition to helping mothers obtain or maintain employment, programs should:

- Screen participants for depression and link services to local mental health providers;

- Assess the levels of relationship conflict experienced by mothers and the extent to which these negatively impact employment and parenting;
- Provide mothers who are experiencing violence access to appropriate support services, such as legal assistance, emergency housing, health care, and counseling; and
- Integrate informal family support into their service delivery plans.

Policymakers should:

- Exhibit caution when developing policies promoting marriage in low-income populations;
- Work to ensure that adequate protections are in place for mothers at risk of violence;
- Address the dramatic mental health service needs of rural low-income mothers since mental health impinges on both parenting and employment; and
- Ensure that a comprehensive array of services – including psychological assistance and emotional support – is available to rural, low-income families.

Summary

This research did not find evidence that married or partnered mothers fared economically or emotionally better than their non-married or non-partnered counterparts. The study also suggests some of these rural low-income mothers may be at risk of domestic violence. To maximize economic self-sufficiency among rural, low-income populations, appropriate programs and policies are needed.

This policy brief created by:

Elaine A. Anderson, Ph.D., Bonnie Braun, Ph.D., Linda Oravec, M.S., and Julie K. Kohler, Ph. D.

Data for this research come from the USDA multi-state, longitudinal research study NC223: "Tracking the Well-being of Rural Low-Income Families in the Context of Welfare Reform." For more information, please contact ea8@umail.umd.edu or bb157@umail.umd.edu.

References:

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