# The Influence of Marriage, Cohabitation, and Family Structure Changes on Low-Income Adolescents' Development

Heather J. Bachman
Northwestern University

Rebekah Levine Coley
Boston College

P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale
Northwestern University



Prepared for presentation at the April 2004 annual meeting of the Population Association of America, held in Boston, MA. Address correspondence to Heather J. Bachman, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, 2040 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL, 60208-4100. (Phone) 847-467-1144. (Email) h-bachman@northwestern.edu

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the following organizations. Government agencies: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (RO1 HD36093 "Welfare Reform and the Well-Being of Children"), Office of the Assistant Secretary of Planning and Evaluation, Administration on Developmental Disabilities, Administration for Children and Families, Social Security Administration, and National Institute of Mental Health. Foundations: The Boston Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, The Lloyd A. Fry Foundation, The Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The Kronkosky Charitable Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, The Searle Fund for Policy Research, and The Woods Fund of Chicago. A special thank you is also extended to the families who participated in *Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study*.

Abstract

The present study investigated the effects of cohabitation and marital/partnership instability on young adolescents' cognitive and socioemotional trajectories. Using longitudinal data from *Welfare, Children and Families: A Three-City Study*, we tracked family structure changes for 884 low-income adolescents (10 - 14 years-old in wave 1) during the 16 months between interviews. In the short-term, no growth differences on standardized reading and mathematics assessments were detected between adolescents from stably single and stably partnered families (married or cohabiting) after controlling for demographic and economic covariates. However, adolescents experienced improved psychological and behavioral functioning if their mothers remained in married unions rather than cohabiting partnerships or single-parent families between waves. In contrast, while stably married unions appeared beneficial for low-income adolescents, adjustment problems increased when mothers entered marriage and such problems declined when marriages dissolved. Theoretical and applied implications of these findings are discussed.

# The Influence of Marriage, Cohabitation, and Family Structure Changes on Low-Income Adolescents' Development

Several important demographic shifts have occurred over the last few decades that hold serious implications for the structure and stability of American children's home environments. From 1990 to 1997, the percentage of children born to unmarried mothers increased from 28% to 32% (Seltzer, 2000). At the same time, the number of single-mother households modestly declined in the late 1990s, particularly among low-income families (Acs & Nelson, 2001; Dupree & Primus, 2001). These seemingly contradictory trends can be attributed primarily to the growing incidence of births and childrearing in cohabiting-couple families (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; Cherlin, 1992; Seltzer, 2000). Marriage rates have declined while rates of cohabitation have steadily increased, especially in disadvantaged populations (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Manning & Lichter, 1996). Although the number of children living in cohabiting households during a given year is relatively low (e.g., under 4% in 1990; Manning & Lichter, 1996), recent estimates project that 40% of children in the U.S. will reside in a cohabiting-couple household at some point during their childhood (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). However, cohabitations tend to be short-lived, and the proportion of cohabiting couples who marry has also declined (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Furthermore, even though the number of single-mother headed families has decreased over the last decade, the incidence of father absence and single-parenting remains disproportionately high in low-income populations (Acs & Nelson, 2001; Cherlin & Fomby, 2002; Primus, 2002). Consequently, strong associations between economic deprivation and marital/partnership instability have repeatedly surfaced in the extant literature.

Paradoxically, although low-income families most frequently experience changes in family structure, research examining the impact of household transitions, like divorce, on child well-being rarely targets this population. Instead, data are collected from middle-income samples (e.g.,

Hetherington, 1989, 1992), or national data sets are analyzed and the effects of poverty are statically controlled (e.g., Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, & Booth, 2000; McLanahan & Booth, 1989; Najman, et al., 1997). Imprecise and static indicators of family structure are also commonly used, such as intact versus nonintact families, which masks the variability and instability among poor families' living arrangements (Burton & Jayakody, 2001). Moreover, most family structure research reflects the partnering patterns of middle- and upper-class households where marriages are typically formed prior to childbirth, divorces involve children's biological fathers, and remarriages introduce stepfathers into the family. However, in low-income families, first marriages may be formed *after* a non-marital birth and could involve a stepfather rather than the child's biological father (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Moore & Chase-Lansdale, 2001; Sweeney, 2003). The effects of these less traditional partnerships, as well as the impacts of marital dissolution with a stepfather, have received considerably less attention. Finally, limited research has addressed how cohabiting partnerships may influence child and adolescent development, especially if the cohabiting partner is the child's biological father (Booth & Crouter, 2002; DeLeire & Kalil, 2002).

The present study seeks to examine partnering status and stability within a representative sample of low-income urban families and to address the influence of such partnerships on children's cognitive and socioemotional development over time. In particular, we focus on the years of early adolescence, a key developmental period in which the effects of family structure changes appear to be elevated (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001).

Several theories have been posited to explain why familial disruption effects are exacerbated for young adolescents. First, young adolescents encounter a number of biological, social, cognitive and school transitions to which adolescents and their families must adjust (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). The onset of puberty and expansions in cognitive skills and processes create changes in the manner in which adolescents view and relate to those around them,

and in the responses they elicit (Brooks-Gunn & Reiter, 1990). Parent-child relations evolve as young adolescents seek to establish autonomy and an individuated sense of self (Daniels, 1990; Sessa & Steinberg, 1991). In addition, school transitions are normative during early adolescence, as youth move to middle or high schools (Eccles et al., 1996; Entwisle, 1990). Research on cumulative changes (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987) or the "focal theory of change" (Coleman, 1974) has maintained that multiple transitions are much more challenging to cope with when they occur simultaneously rather than singly. Therefore, the combination of these normative developmental transitions with familial disruptions may exacerbate the adverse effects of maternal partnership instability for young adolescents. The challenges of early adolescent developmental transitions may also instigate delayed responses to earlier familial disruptions and stresses (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002). In addition, changes in family structure may impose expectations and responsibilities on youth that they are not yet behaviorally, cognitively, or emotionally ready to manage (Sessa & Steinberg, 1991). For example, adolescents in divorced families may be granted more independence and decision-making power than are normally afforded to adolescents in non-divorced families, or teenagers may need to provide increased emotional support to their single mothers, thereby impairing their efforts to attain autonomy (Hetherington, 1993; Sessa & Steinberg, 1991).

Clearly, early adolescence is an important developmental period for tracking the influence of family structure changes, especially for adolescents facing the added risks of financial instability. Therefore, we pursued the following research questions:

(1) After controlling for demographic and economic correlates of single-parent status, could stability in single-parent structures serve a protective role in low-income adolescents' development, or is marriage the key buffer for this population?

(2) Within stable family structures, does marriage confer a distinct advantage in comparison to cohabitation?

(3) How do changes in family structure, particularly the transition from single-parent to married-couple households, influence low-income adolescents?

The following literature review addresses these research questions in turn, although we acknowledge that some of the past findings may not generalize to low-income populations.

### *Marriage versus Single-Parenting*

An expansive body of research has delineated the advantages of stably married families for adolescent well-being. Adolescents in nondivorced, two-parent families show more academic success and greater behavioral competence than their peers raised in single-parent homes (Ackerman, et al., 2001; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Youth from single-parent families report receiving less educational support from their parents than do adolescents living with two biological parents, and they later display greater disengagement from school and higher drop-out rates (Astone & McLanahan, 1991). Adolescent girls from single-parent households are at higher risk of becoming single mothers themselves (Kiernan, in press; McLanahan & Booth, 1989; Wu & Martinson, 1993), and residing in a single-parent family predicts leaving home at younger ages for both male and female adolescents (Cooney & Mortimer, 1999; Kiernan, 1992). These adverse outcomes are generally attributed to four main sources of influence in single-parent homes: (1) substantially greater economic deprivation and poverty rates; (2) mothers' higher stress and fewer psychological resources; (3) more conflictual mother-child relations and less maternal monitoring and supervision of adolescent children; and (4) less interaction with fathers (Coley, 2001; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994, Klebanov, McLanahan & Booth, 1989; Baer, 1999; Hetherington, 1993; Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1995).

Within the population of single-parent families, there are also differences related to family stability and history. Never-married single-parent households are among the poorest families compared to other family structures (Demo & Acock, 1996), and never-married mothers report lower levels of education and higher unemployment rates than previously married single mothers (Thomson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994). However, once the effects of family income are controlled, children from never-married households tend to show more positive developmental outcomes than children from divorced single-parent families (Najman, et al., 1997), possibly due to interparental conflict before and after the marital disruption (Shaw, Winslow, & Flanagan, 1999). Indeed, transitions *per se* may be the riskiest factor for child development. For example, studies of multiple transitions into and out of single-parent status show the most deleterious consequences for children (Ackerman, Brown, D'Eramo, & Izard, 2002; Capaldi & Patterson, 1991; Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1994, 1995; Martinez & Forgatch, 2002; Wolfinger, 2000). Thus, while growing up in a single-parent household is associated with a variety of negative outcomes for children and adolescents, these effects are exacerbated by the cumulative effects of maternal partnering instability.

### *Marriage versus Cohabitation*

Trends in cohabitation have surged in the last few decades (Kiernan, 2002; Smock & Gupta, 2002). At least 50% of first unions in the United States are cohabitations (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Nonmarital birth rates have increased significantly in cohabiting couples, and approximately half of cohabiting couples live with children (Bumpass, et al., 1991; Seltzer, 2000). In fact, about 25% of stepfamilies are formed when cohabiting couples have children from prior relationships, thereby establishing "cohabiting stepfamily households" (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). However, cohabiting partnerships are more precarious and short-lived than marriages; only about one-sixth last at least three years, and more than half end within five years

either from breakup (40%) or marriage (55%) (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Smock, 2000). This dissolution rate translates into a significant proportion of children experiencing multiple family structure changes within a short period of time. Cohabitation occurs more frequently among economically disadvantaged families and adults with lower education (Bumpass, et al., 1991; Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Cherlin, 1992; Manning & Lichter, 1996), which may profoundly influence the family environments experienced by low-income children (Jayakody & Cabrera, 2002).

Although cohabitations appear less financially and relationally stable than marriages, potential benefits of cohabitations for low-income children and families could reasonably be expected, whereby the family's economic, psychological, and parenting resources are enhanced by the addition of another adult, especially if the adult male is the child's biological father. However, cohabiting couples face a number of challenges that may negatively affect adolescent well-being. For example, male cohabiting partners tend to contribute less financially to the household than do married men (Brandon & Bumpass, 2001; Graefe & Lichter, 1999, Manning & Lichter, 1996), and cohabiting partners pool less of their income than married spouses (Bauman, 1999). Despite many cohabitors' expectations to marry at some point (Bumpass, et al., 1991; Gibson, Edin, & McLanahan, 2003), cohabiting relationships are characterized by poorer relationship quality than is reported by married couples, even after controlling for the economic discrepancies between these family structures (Brown & Booth, 1996). Recent evidence has also documented higher rates of domestic violence between cohabiting partners in low-income adolescents' households (Lohman, Votruba-Drzal, & Chase-Lansdale, 2002).

Research that assesses the impact of cohabitation on child well-being is notably sparse (Brown, 2002), but the emergent evidence points to more adverse developmental outcomes for children and adolescents exposed to cohabiting-couple households (Acs & Nelson, 2002). Among school-aged children, negative effects of cohabitation compared to marriage have been detected for

socioemotional and behavioral measures (Ackerman, et al., 2001; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002). In comparisons across several family structures, adolescents in cohabiting-couple households scored the lowest on academic achievement and highest for behavior problems (Thomson, et al., 1994).

Mixed evidence has been found regarding the role of biological fathers in cohabiting families (Manning, 2002). Although descriptive analyses reveal more behavioral and emotional problems for children living with two biological cohabiting parents than two biological married parents (Brown, 2002), nonsignificant differences in psychological functioning and school behavior have been demonstrated in multivariate analyses (Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1997). Other research has found lower rates of high school completion and college attendance among adolescents in cohabiting-couple families (with the biological father or stepfather) compared to youths in married-parent families, as well as significantly greater incidence of smoking, drinking and sexual initiation among adolescents in cohabiting stepfather families (DeLeire & Kalil, 2002). Last, although a large body of research has documented the developmental challenges associated with divorce and remarriage for children (e.g., Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Cherlin, et al., 1991; Hetherington, 1989), it remains unclear how transitions into and out of cohabiting unions may differentially affect child well-being.

## *Family Structure Changes*

### *Marital Dissolutions: Short- and Long-Term Effects of Divorce on Adolescent Well-Being*

As stated previously, small but significant disparities in academic achievement, psychological adjustment, and behavioral functioning have been detected among adolescents of divorced parents when compared to their peers in married-parent homes (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991). During the two years following a divorce, sometimes referred to as a "crisis period" (Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990), adolescents display a variety of negative adjustment

patterns, such as lower grades and academic achievement and escalated depression, delinquency, and disruptive behaviors (Forehand, Thomas, Wierson, Brody, & Fauber, 1990; Hetherington, 1993). Because mothers typically retain child custody after a divorce (Seltzer, 1994), adolescents must cope with their father's absence (Hetherington, et al., 1998), as well as the increased economic hardship associated with this transition, such as lower household income (Bianchi, Subaiya, & Kahn, 1999; Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1997; Smock, Manning, & Gupta, 1999) and residential moves to poorer neighborhoods (Haveman & Wolfe, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; South, Crowder, & Trent, 1998). In the short-term, both mothers and adolescents report more strained and conflictual interactions with each other, and maternal parenting quality often declines, including greater coercion and irritability, less vigilant monitoring and supervision, weakened control, and diminished communication and affection (Demo & Acock, 1996, Hetherington, et al., 1998, Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1995). In the long-term, the majority of adolescents recover (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). However, for a subset of teenagers, the effects of divorce persist through young adulthood, especially if maternal partnering transitions continued after the first divorce. Adults who were exposed to a familial disruption in childhood or adolescence show modestly higher rates of mental health problems, use of psychological services, premarital births, and dissolution of their own first partnerships (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Kiernan, in press; Kiernan, & Cherlin, 1999; Wu, 1996; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993).

However, as researchers increasingly approach divorce as a multi-stage process rather than a singular disruptive event, selection and predisruption characteristics take on greater importance. For example, divorce effects on children's academic progress, mental health, and behavior problems are substantially reduced when predivorce levels of child functioning and/or maternal histories of antisocial behavior are controlled (Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1986; Cherlin, et al., 1991; Emery, Waldron, Kitzmann, & Aaron, 1999; Morrison & Cherlin, 1995; Sun, 2001). In other words,

personality and temperamental characteristics may increase the likelihood of some mothers experiencing marital instability; these traits would also be correlated with mothers' psychological functioning, parenting practices, and general home climate prior to a divorce, and may thus contribute both genetically and environmentally to their children's functioning (Cleveland, Wiebe, van den Oord, & Rowe, 2000). Therefore, the effects of divorce are a complex consequence of pre- and post-disruption factors (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998). Finally, it is important to note that the influence of divorce on adolescent adjustment is not uniformly negative. When adolescents are exposed to elevated parental conflict and adversity, transitioning into a less stressed single-parent household can facilitate improved psychological and behavioral functioning (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

*Marital Formations: Stepfamily Effects on Adolescent Well-Being*

Since declines in mothers' economic and psychological resources are related to adolescent well-being in single-parent and divorced homes, remarriage would be expected to alleviate familial hardship and instability and thus potentially to improve adolescent functioning. The addition of another adult can supplement household income and provide emotional and parenting support for mothers and children (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). However, this has not been the case; the detrimental effects of parental divorce on child functioning generally are not ameliorated when the custodial parent remarries (Chase-Lansdale, 1994; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Cooksey, 1997; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington, et al., 1998). Adolescents in stepfamilies resemble youth from single-parent households more than married-parent households in their disengagement from school and higher drop-out rates (Astone & McLanahan, 1991), as well as in their tendency to leave home at earlier ages (Cooney & Mortimer, 1999; Kiernan, 1992).

In fact, within the span of childhood, young adolescents seem to have more difficulty than younger children with adapting to their mothers' remarriage (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).

As children get older, they are less likely to form strong attachments to stepfathers or consider them "family" (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). If mothers remarried when children were older than 9 years of age, Hetherington (1993) found that stress and conflict in parent-child relations escalated, and maternal control and monitoring weakened to lower levels than exhibited by divorced mothers. Among adolescents older than 15 years of age, mother-child relations in stepfamilies were marked by increased negativity and diminished communication (Hetherington, 1993). A key issue is that there is very little research specifically examining the influence on adolescent development of parental remarriage versus a parent's first marriage to someone other than the teenager's father (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Moore & Chase-Lansdale, 2001; Sweeney, 2003).

### *The Present Study*

The data required to meet the aims of the current investigation must adequately capture the variability of living arrangements among low-income families. Data from *Welfare, Children and Families: A Three-City Study* is comprised of a large, representative sample of low-income children and their caregivers to allow for more refined analysis of these family structures and processes in a short-term longitudinal design. A rich assortment of cognitive, socioemotional, and psychological measures of adolescent well-being were collected from multiple respondents and sources (e.g., standardized assessments, separate interviews with mothers and adolescents) which provides the opportunity to examine more rigorously the influence of family structure changes across a number of important developmental domains for low-income adolescents.

We hypothesize that: (1) stable marriages will convey a developmental advantage for young adolescents in comparison to stably cohabiting or stably single families; (2) transitions into maternal partnerships will create developmental disturbances in the short term, although it is not clear if differential effects will emerge when entering married versus cohabiting unions; and (3) marital dissolutions will be more challenging to adjust to than the dissolution of a cohabiting partnership.

# Method

## *Participants and Procedures*

The present investigation utilizes data from *Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study*, a longitudinal, multimethod investigation of the well-being of low-income children and families in the wake of federal welfare reforms (Winston, et al., 1999). This study contains a household-based, cluster stratified random sample of approximately 2,400 children and their primary caregivers from low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. The majority of these families are African-American (42%) or Hispanic (47%). In households with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty line, interviewers randomly selected one focal child (ages 0-4 or 10-14) and conducted interviews and assessments with the focal child and the female primary caregiver (90% were biological mothers). Two waves of data were collected in 1999 and 2000-2001, with an average length of 16 months elapsing between interviews. In wave 1, the screening response rate was 90% and the interview completion response rate was 83%, yielding a total response rate of 74%. In wave 2, the response rate was 88%. Probability weights that adjust for sample selection and nonresponse create a sample that is representative of low-income children and their families in low-income neighborhoods in the three cities.

## *Measures*

An array of demographic, economic, psychological, parenting, cognitive and socioemotional measures were obtained from mothers and/or children at both waves.

### *Predictor Variables*

*Demographic characteristics.* Mothers provided information on their age, educational attainment (0 = did not complete high school diploma or GED; 1 = high school diploma or GED), and the number of children younger than 18 in their household. Mothers also reported on the focal

child's age, race/ethnicity (non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, or non-Hispanic White/Other), and gender (0 = male; 1 = female).

*Income, public assistance, and employment information.* Income-to-needs ratios were calculated from maternal reports of each household member's income from a variety of sources, using federal poverty designations dependent on household size. Mothers also reported their current employment status (0 = not employed; 1 = employed) and welfare receipt (0 = not currently receiving welfare; 1 = currently receiving welfare).

*Partnership status and identity of the male partner*. Information about current maternal partnerships was obtained at each wave of data collection in several ways. Mothers provided a roster of every member in their household that included each individual's age, sex, relationship to the mother, and relationship to the focal child. In addition, mothers were asked directly if they were married in wave 1. In wave 2, if mothers reported a spouse or live-in partner in their household roster, the computer program automatically coded them as married or cohabiting, respectively. We also identified cohabiting mothers who did not list a live-in partner in their household roster but later reported during the interview that their child's father figure was a live-in partner (wave 1, $n$ = 15; wave 2, $n$ = 13). From this information, mothers were coded as being married, cohabiting, or single, and for married and cohabiting mothers, the partner's identity was coded as biological father of the focal child or stepfather (the latter meant as a general term to include all non-biological partners, married or not). The data do not include complete marital histories for all respondents.

*Outcome Variables*

The following cognitive, psychological, and behavioral measures were obtained at each wave of data collection.

*Cognitive skills*. Adolescents were administered two subscales from the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Education Battery- Revised (Woodcock & Mather, 1989, 1990): Letter-Word Identification

(e.g., word decoding and reading skills) and Applied Problems (e.g., arithmetic and problem-solving). The Spanish version of the Woodcock-Johnson, Bateria Woodcock-Munoz: Pruebas de aprovechamiento-Revisada, was administered if either the child or parent reported that Spanish was the child's primary language ($n$ = 18; Woodcock & Munoz-Sandoval, 1996). Raw scores were converted to standard scores ($M$ = 100, $SD$ = 15) using the procedures and norms outlined by the developers of this measure. We also examined adolescents' reports of their grades, which were rated on an 8-point rating scale (*1* = mostly failing; *8* = mostly A's).

*Socioemotional functioning and behavior problems.* Mothers were administered the 4-18 version of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991). The CBCL has been used extensively to assess socioemotional and behavioral problems, and the total and subscale scores have generally high reliability (.65 - .95; Achenbach, 1991, 1992). The two primary subscales are utilized in the present study: Externalizing Problems (e.g., aggressive and destructive behaviors; alpha = .89 and .90 for wave 1 and wave 2) and Internalizing Problems (e.g., depressive, withdrawn, or somatic behaviors; alpha = .87 and .88).

Adolescents also self-reported on psychological distress, mother-child relationship quality, and delinquent behaviors using an Audio Computer-Assisted Self-Interview (ACASI) procedure to increase the validity of their reports for this sensitive information.

*Psychological distress*. Adolescents completed the Brief Symptom Inventory 18 (BSI 18; Derogatis, 2000), which was developed to screen for psychiatric disorders in medical and community populations. Respondents report the severity of their symptoms over the past seven days on a 5-point Likert scale (*1* = not at all; *5* = extremely). Two subscales were utilized in the present study, and scores were formed by averaging the items in each scale: Depression (e.g., no interest in things, lonely, and hopeless about the future; alpha = .75 and .87) and Anxiety (e.g., nervousness or shakiness, restlessness, and fearfulness; alpha = .78 and .92).

*Mother-Child Relationship Quality*. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) is a self-report measure of the affective and cognitive dimensions of adolescents' relationships with their parents and close friends (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Crowell, Fraley, & Shaver, 1999; Lopez & Gover, 1993). Based on past research with African American families (Coley, in press; Pittman & Chase-Landale, 2001), two subscales were formed, Trust and Communication, and Anger and Alienation. The Anger and Alienation subscale was examined in the present study to ascertain adolescents' frustration and perceived disconnection in their relationship with their mother (e.g., "My mother doesn't understand what I'm going through these days;" "I feel angry with my mother"). The six Anger and Alienation items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (*1* = never true; *5* = always true), and higher mean scores indicate greater anger and alienation (alpha = .60 and .74).

*Delinquency*. Adolescents also reported on the type and frequency of delinquent or illegal activities that they engaged in during the past 12 months. Seventeen items were administered from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY; Borus, Carpenter, Crowley, & Daymont, 1982) and the Youth Deviance Scale (Gold, 1970; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991). The present study employs a six-item subscale that indicated engagement in Serious Delinquency (e.g., stealing, vandalizing, fighting) to examine the correspondence of these youth reports to mother reports of externalizing behaviors. Items were standardized, averaged, and then transformed by taking the natural log to correct for skewness. Higher scores indicate greater engagement in serious delinquency (alpha = .65 and .82).

## Results

### *Descriptive Analyses*

The sample was restricted to young adolescents (10 - 14 years-old in wave 1; $N = 902$) whose primary caregivers were their biological mothers at both timepoints. Any youth who experienced familial disruptions other than maternal partnership instability, such as a relative

assuming custodial care due to parental incarceration or abandonment, were excluded. Inspection of the household data revealed that for a small number of families ($n$ = 11), multiple partnering transitions transpired between waves, whereby the partnership type remained the same (married or cohabiting) but the partner had changed (e.g., the biological father was in the household at wave 1 and a stepfather was in the household at wave 2). These multiple transition families, as well as the families who experienced the transition from cohabitation to marriage ($n$ = 7) were omitted from analyses due to low sample size, resulting in a sample of 884 adolescents (with missing data, the Ns in the regression analyses were on average 820).

Within this analysis sample, 20% of the adolescents experienced a change in maternal partnership between waves (see Table 1). Notably, the formation of maternal partnerships occurred at approximately twice the rate of partnership dissolutions, although the dissolution rate for this 16 month period remains higher than would be expected from national norms (Cherlin & Fomby, 2002). Descriptive statistics on the predictor and outcome variables are provided in tables 2 and 3 for the total sample and each family structure group. Briefly, the sample reflects primarily African American and Hispanic families with varying levels of education, employment, and welfare receipt, and low household income-to needs ratios ($M$ = .74; see Table 2). Both stably single and stably cohabiting families reported the lowest levels of household income in this sample (see Table 2). In addition, although adolescents in stably married households appeared to show more optimal cognitive and socioemotional functioning than the other groups at wave 1, youth in stably single households were not uniformly performing the worst (see Table 3). Teenagers in the stably cohabiting and marital dissolution groups also seemed to be functioning worse than other groups at wave 1.

When evaluating the benefits and risks of marriage and cohabitation for adolescents in the *Three-City Study*, there are two important caveats to consider. First, descriptive analyses revealed

that the stably married group is primarily comprised of Hispanic mothers married to the adolescents' biological fathers (68%), whereas the stably single households included more comparable numbers of Black (52%) and Hispanic (42%) families (see Table 2). Second, whether examining stable cohabitations or transitions into and out of cohabiting unions, low-income mothers of adolescents generally cohabited with stepfathers rather than their child's biological father (see Table 1).

### *Analytic Strategy*

To address the three research aims, weighted OLS regression analyses were performed that tested the effects of stable and transitioning maternal partnerships across several domains of adolescent well-being (cognitive, psychological, and behavioral). In an effort to analyze adolescents' trajectories between waves, rather than the level of functioning at wave 2, the OLS regression models were autoregressive, such that the wave 2 outcomes were predicted by the child's outcome score from wave 1. Including the wave 1 outcome measure as an independent variable provided a proxy for (1) unmeasured genetic influences; (2) selection characteristics that may discriminate families with stable versus changing family structures; and (3) children's pre-transition functioning, which would at least partially reflect the effects of earlier family conflict and maternal partnering histories (Cain, 1975; Chase-Lansdale, et al., 2003). In addition to these earlier assessments of child and adolescent well-being, each model included demographic and economic covariates from wave 1: maternal age, child's age, child's gender, child's race/ethnicity, number of minors in the household, maternal education, household income-to-needs ratio, and mothers' current employment and welfare status, thus helping to control for selection effects of families into particular partnership statuses. Results of the covariates from the models are not shown but are available from the authors upon request.

A nuanced definition of partnering was applied that distinguished marriage from cohabitation and modeled dissolution and formation as a function of the prior status (e.g., single → married vs. single → cohabiting; see Table 1). In the regression models, dummy variables representing the stable and transitioning groups were entered, and the stably single families were the omitted, comparison group. Post hoc adjusted Wald *F* tests were conducted to determine whether the regression coefficients significantly differed for each pair of family structure groups in the models. All analyses were weighted. Figures 1 through 9 present graphs of the standardized regression coefficients for each partnership group in comparison to the omitted group of stably single, with statistically significant post hoc differences between groups noted.

*Stable Family Structures (Married, Cohabiting, or Single) and Adolescent Well-Being*

Across the three measures of cognitive well-being, presented in Figures 1 through 3, few differences in developmental trajectories emerged between adolescents in stably married, stably cohabiting, or stably single-parent households. No differences were apparent in standardized measures of reading and mathematics (see Figures 1 & 2). The only significant difference was seen in Figure 3, in which adolescents in stably married families reported greater improvements in school grades than adolescents in stably single-parent homes. In contrast, consistent differences were apparent in measures of adolescents' socioemotional functioning. Adolescents in stable cohabiting-couple households exhibited more adverse psychological and behavioral trajectories than teenagers in stably married or stably single families. Mothers indicated that adolescents in stably cohabiting households exhibited greater increases in externalizing behavior problems than the stably married, marital dissolution, or marital formation groups (see Figure 5). This pattern was corroborated by the adolescents' accounts of serious delinquency. Adolescents in stably cohabiting households reported greater increases in serious delinquency than the adolescents in stably married, marital dissolution, and marital formation families (see Figure 6). Young adolescents in the stably cohabiting group also

revealed that their depression increased more over time than was experienced by the stably single, marital dissolution, or cohabitation formation groups (see Figure 8), although maternal ratings of internalizing problems did not generally mirror these adolescent reports (see Figure 7).

Along with the negative developmental trends related to living in a stable cohabiting household, there was some indication that the adolescents in stably single-parent households also faced developmental challenges. In addition to adolescents' lower academic performance, stably single mothers also reported significantly higher increases in their adolescents' externalizing problems than the stably married group (see Figure 5).

*Transitions into Marriage and Cohabitation and Adolescent Well-Being*

In the short-term, no positive effects on child well-being were detected for low-income adolescents whose mothers married between waves 1 and 2. The adolescents who experienced a marriage formation did not show significantly different growth rates from adolescents in stably single households across a wide range of developmental outcomes, with one exception. Adolescents whose mothers married reported significantly *greater* increases in anxiety than the adolescents exposed to stable single-parenting or marital dissolution (see Figure 9). These youth also expressed growing anger and alienation in their mother-child relationship when their mothers married (see Figure 10). In addition, adolescents in the marriage formation group showed significantly worse cognitive functioning (math achievement scores and school grades) than the adolescents in stably married households (see Figures 2 & 3).

Just as the growth rates of adolescents in the marriage formation group were more similar to adolescents from stably single than stably married households, adolescents exposed to the formation of a cohabitation were likewise more similar to the stably single than stably cohabiting groups. Adolescents whose mothers formed a cohabiting union did not differ significantly from stably single youths in growth rates across the outcome measures. Instead, comparable declines were

revealed, such as stably single and cohabitation formation groups' significantly lower growth in academic achievement than the adolescents in stably married families (see Figure 3). Conversely, adolescents who transitioned into cohabiting-couple households exhibited more positive socioemotional trajectories than the adolescents in stably cohabiting households, including less growth in delinquency, internalizing problems, and depression (see Figures 6 – 8).

*Marriage and Cohabitation Dissolution and Adolescent Well-Being*

Low-income adolescents exposed to marital dissolution generally progressed at the same rate on cognitive and academic outcomes as the other adolescent groups. However, these teens showed significantly less growth on one cognitive measure, math skills, than the adolescents in both stably married and dissolved cohabitation households (see Figures 1 - 3). Interestingly, whereas anxiety increased when marriages were formed, adolescents reported significant *reductions* in anxiety and depression when marriages dissolved, compared to adolescents in stably married and stably single families (see Figures 7 & 8). These youth also engaged in less serious delinquency over time than their peers in stably single or stably cohabiting households (see Figure 5). Moreover, adolescents who experienced marital dissolution reported significantly greater declines in anxiety and anger and alienation than the adolescents whose mothers formed a marriage (see Figures 8 & 9).

In contrast, adolescents displayed essentially no changes in cognitive, psychological or behavioral functioning when a cohabitation dissolved. These null findings may be attributable to the lower statistical power available for this smallest family structure group ($n$ = 18) and should be interpreted cautiously.

## Discussion

A substantial number of low-income families encountered family structure changes during the 16 months between interviews in the *Three-City Study*. We first examined whether stability in

household living arrangements could be protective for low-income adolescents' well-being, and whether marriage was the more optimal structure in comparison to cohabiting-couple and single-mother status. There is a long history in developmental science of the benefits of continuity and predictability in caregiving for optimal child development (e.g., Bowlby, 1969), and marital stability is hypothesized to be particularly important for early adolescents experiencing numerous other developmental transitions and changes (Coleman, 1974; Simmons et al., 1987). For this sample of young adolescents from poor and near-poor families, any buffering that family stability offered was dramatically qualified by the type of maternal partnership they experienced. As found previously in national samples (e.g., Najman, et al., 1997; Thomson, et al., 1994), low-income adolescents in stably married households displayed more growth in academic achievement and greater declines in externalizing behavior problems than adolescents in stably single families. However, differences between these two groups in standardized reading and math assessments and psychological distress were not detected. We should reiterate that we are investigating the benefits of stability in the short-term. Stably single families could include both never-married and previously married mothers, so it is not clear whether the adverse effects of single-mother status are more attributable to earlier marital histories (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1999) or consistent single-parenting.

Similarly, mothers and adolescents provided complementary evidence that living in stably cohabiting-couple households was linked to escalated externalizing behaviors and delinquency, such as fighting and stealing, and higher elevations in psychological distress in comparison to peers in stably married or stably single-parent families. Why might this be the case? In general, adolescent behavior problems and psychological distress are exacerbated by interparental conflict, which tends to be higher in cohabiting-couple households. Similarly, single mothers have difficulty

monitoring their teenagers, a second risk factor for behavior problems. At this point, we can only speculate about these family processes but plan to examine these directly.

In contrast to the behavioral and psychological findings, adolescents in stably cohabiting and and single-parent households did not differ in growth of grades or standardized reading and mathematics scores from the youth in stably married families. This was not expected since other studies have linked single parenthood to poorer academic achievement and high school dropout (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Our focus was on young adolescents, and thus we may see more negative academic outcomes in the long-term.

Nevertheless, converging evidence from mother and adolescent reports indicate that teenagers' behavioral and psychological development in stably cohabiting households is significantly different from youth in stably married families. This distinction may be attributable, at least in part, to the higher rates of financial insecurity (Brandon & Bumpass, 2001; Graefe & Lichter, 1999, Manning & Lichter, 1996), poorer relationship quality (Brown & Booth, 1996), and higher levels of domestic violence (Lohman, et al., 2002) evident in cohabiting-couple households. Moreover, descriptive analyses revealed that the large majority of cohabitations for mothers of adolescents were formed with stepfathers rather than with children's biological fathers, which may also contribute to young adolescents' adverse adjustment to this cohabiting stepfamily arrangement. It would be useful for future survey and ethnographic work to explore adolescents' expectations and perceptions about these partnerships to aid interpretation of these results.

Second, differential effects emerged for transitions into and out of married and cohabiting unions. Changes in adolescent well-being were more frequently detected when the partnership transition involved marriage. For example, marital dissolution was problematic for adolescents' cognitive growth and behavior problems, which coincides with past divorce research (Hetherington, et al., 1998). However, an interesting discrepancy was detected between maternal and adolescent

reports of socioemotional and psychological functioning after the dissolution of a marriage. Mothers did not report any changes in adolescents' internalizing or externalizing behavior problems following a marital dissolution. Adolescents, on the other hand, reported significantly diminished psychological distress (anxiety and depression), reductions in delinquent activities, and improved mother-child relations following marital dissolutions. An important corollary of these findings was adolescents' increased anxiety levels and worsened mother-child relations when their mothers married between waves. It may be that mother reports of adolescent well-being were affected by their own psychological distress or happiness following these transitions. On the other hand, adolescents may be responding more directly to the disruption in family relationships following the entrance of a new partner, or responding positively to a decrease in family conflict in the aftermath of a divorce. These adolescent reports offer insight into possible underlying tensions or conflicts associated with these marriages that the maternal reports did not reveal.

Although a heightened short-term adjustment to recent marital transitions was detected, few effects emerged when a cohabitation was formed or dissolved. These seemingly contradictory findings may be due to several factors. First, in comparison to a (re)marriage or divorce, movements into and out of cohabiting relationships may be more ambiguous and the commitment level less clear, especially from the perspective of the children in the household. It may be only after a cohabition persists over time, and the stepfamily begins to negotiate the parent-child roles and responsibilities, that the negative effects of this arrangement surface. In addition, the cohabitation dissolution group had the smallest sample size, and therefore more research into partnership dissolutions with a stepfather is needed to understand these transitions.

Several limitations should be noted when reviewing these findings. First, all of the partnership effects transpired over a relatively short period of time. Low-income adolescents' adjustment over the long-term to these familial transitions is not yet known. In addition, we do not

have full marital or partnership histories from mothers. The lagged regression includes adolescents' functioning at wave 1 as a strong step toward controlling for pre-existing differences due to past variations in living arrangements and genetic contributions. Still, our statistical models do not fully control for unmeasured characteristics of mothers that might be correlated with both family structure transitions and changes in adolescent developmental trajectories. Similarly, we cannot control for time-varying characteristics of teenagers that might be linked with mothers' marital or partnership transitions. Furthermore, given our nuanced approach for identifying variations in low-income families' living arrangements, some family structure groups contained a small proportion of cases. While we have focused on statistically significant patterns that were robust across several outcomes or reporters, the range in sample sizes among the groups, coupled with the number of analyses performed, warrants a cautious interpretation of the findings. Last, the effect sizes of most of our findings are small, averaging about .10. We believe they are worth reporting as small family structure effects are commonly found in more methodologically rigorous designs that utilize random sampling, multiple-item measures, and larger sample sizes (Amato, 2001).

In summary, we view this study as a first step in understanding the complexities of family structures in low-income families. Future work on other samples should examine whether these patterns are replicated. Moreover, further research should address the dynamic family processes that might explain the links between family structure and adolescents' well-being.

References

Achenbach, T. M. (1991). *Manual for the Child Behavior Checklist/4-18 and 1991 Profile*. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Department of Psychiatry.

Achenbach, T. M. (1992). *Manual for the Child Behavior Checklist/2-3 and 1992 Profile*. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Department of Psychiatry.

Ackerman, B. P., D'Eramo, K. S., Umylny, L., Schultz, D., & Izard, C. E. (2001). Family structure and the externalizing behavior of children from economically disadvantaged families. *Journal of Family Psychology, 15,* 288-300.

Ackerman, B. P., Brown, E. D., D'Eramo, K. S., & Izard, C. E. (2002). Maternal relationship instability and the school behavior of children from disadvantaged families. *Developmental Psychology, 38,* 694-704.

Acs, G., & Nelson, S. (July, 2002). *The kids are alright? Children's well-being and the rise in cohabitation.* New Federalism: National Survey of America's Families. Series B, no. B-48.

Acs, G., & Nelson, S. (June, 2001). *"Honey, I'm home." Changes in living arrangements in the late 1990s.* New Federalism: National Survey of America's Families. Series B, no. B-38.

Adam, E. K. & Chase-Lansdale, P.L. (2002). Home sweet home(s): Parental separation, residential moves, and adjustment problems in low-income adolescent girls. *Developmental Psychology, 38*, 792-805.

Amato, P. R. (2001). Children of divorce in the 1990s: An update of the Amato and Keith (1991) meta-analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology, 15,* 355-370.

Amato, P. R., & Keith, B. (1991). Parental divorce and the well-being of children: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 110,* 26-46.

Armsden, G. C., & Greenberg, M. T. (1987). The inventory of parent and peer attachment: Individual differences and their relationship to psychological well-being in adolescence. (1987). *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 16*, 427-454.

Astone, N. M., & McLanahan, S. S. (1991). Family structure, parental practices, and high school completion. *American Sociological Review, 56,* 309-320.

Baer, J. (1999). The effects of family structure and SES on family processes in early adolescence. *Journal of Adolescence, 22,* 341-354.

Bauman, K. J. (1999). Shifting family definitions: The effect of cohabitation and other nonfamily household relationships on measures of poverty. *Demography, 36,* 315-325.

Bianchi, S.M., Subaiya, L, & Kahn, J.R. (1999). The gender gap in the economic well-being of nonresident fathers and custodial mothers. *Demography, 36,* 195-203.

Block, J. H., Block, J., & Gjerde, P. F. (1986). The personality of children prior to divorce: A prospective study. *Child Development, 57,* 827-840.

Booth, A., & Crouter, A. C. (2002). *Just living together: Implications of cohabitation on families, children, and social policy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Borus, M. E., Carpenter, S. A., Crowley, J. E., & Daymont, T. N. (1982). *Pathways to the future, volume ii: A final report on the national survey of youth labor market experience in 1980*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Center for Human Resource Research.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss* (Vol. 1): *Attachment*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Brandon, P.D., & Bumpass, L. (2001). Children's living arrangements, coresidence of unmarried fathers, and welfare receipt. *Journal of Family Issues, 22,* 3-24.

Brooks-Gunn, J. & Reiter, E. O. (1990). The role of pubertal processes. In S. S. Feldman & G. R. Elliott (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent* (pp.16-53). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brown, S. L. (2002). Child well-being in cohabiting families. In A. Booth & A. C. Crouter (Eds.), *Just living together: Implications of cohabitation on families, children, and social policy* (pp. 173-187). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Brown, S. L., & Booth, A. (1996). Cohabitation versus marriage: A comparison of relationship quality. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 58,* 668-678.

Bumpass, L., & Lu, H-H. (2000). Trends in cohabitation and implications for children's family contexts in the United States. *Population Studies, 54,* 29-41.

Bumpass, L. L., Raley, R. K., & Sweet, J. A. (1995). The changing character of stepfamilies: Implications of cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing. *Demography, 32,* 425-436.

Bumpass, L. L., Sweet, J. A., & Cherlin, A. (1991). The role of cohabitation in declining rates of marriage. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 53,* 913-927.

Burton, L.M., & Jayakody, R. (2001). Rethinking family structure and single parenthood: Implications for future studies of African-American families and children. In A. Thornton (Ed.), *The well-being of children and families: Research and data needs* (pp. 127-153). Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Cain, G. G. (1975). Regression and selection models to improve nonexperimental comparisons. In C. A. Bennett and A. A. Lumsdaine (Eds.), *Evaluation and experiment: Some critical issues in assessing social programs* (pp. 297-317). New York: Academic Press.

Capaldi, D. M., & Patterson, G. R. (1991). Relation of parental transitions to boys' adjustment problems: I. A linear hypothesis. II. Mothers at risk for transitions and unskilled parenting. *Developmental Psychology, 27(3),* 489-504.

Chase-Lansdale, P.L. (1994). Policies for stepfamilies: Crosswalking private and public domains. In A. Booth & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Step-parent families with children: Who benefits and who does not?*, (pp. 205-216). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Chase-Lansdale, P. L., Cherlin, A. J., & Kiernan, K. E. (1995). The long-term effects of parental divorce on the mental health of young adults: A developmental perspective. *Child Development, 66,* 1614-1634.

Chase-Lansdale, P. L., & Hetherington, E. M. (1990). The impact of divorce on life-span development: Short and longterm effects. In P. B. Baltes, D. L. Featherman, and R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Life-span development and behavior* (pp. 105-150). Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Chase-Lansdale, P. L., Moffitt, R. A., Lohman, B. J., Cherlin, A. J., Coley, R. L., Pittman, L. D., Roff, J., and Votruba-Drzal, E. (2003). Mothers' transitions from welfare to work and the well-being of preschoolers and adolescents. *Science, 299*(5612), 1548-1552.

Cherlin, A. J. (1992). *Marriage, divorce, remarriage.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cherlin, A.J., Chase-Lansdale, P.L., & McRae, C. (1998). Effects of parental divorce on mental health through the life course. *American Sociological Review, 63*, 239-249.

Cherlin, A. J., & Fomby, P. (2002) A closer look at changes in children's living arrangements in low- income families. Manuscript in preparation.

Cherlin, A. J., & Furstenberg, F. F. (1994). Stepfamilies in the United States: A reconsideration. In J. Blake & J. Hagen (Eds.), *Annual review of sociology* (pp. 359-381). Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews.

Cherlin, A. J., Furstenberg, F. F., Chase-Lansdale, P. L., Kiernan, K. E., Robins, P. K., Morrison, D. R., & Teitler, J. O. (1991). Longitudinal studies of effects of divorce on children in Great Britain and the United States. *Science, 252,* 1386-1389.

Clarke-Stewart, K.A., Vandell, D.L., McCartney, K., Owen, M.T., & Booth, C. (2000). Effects of parental separation and divorce on very young children. *Journal of Family Psychology, 14,* 304-326.

Cleveland, H. H., Wiebe, R. P., van den Oord, E. J. C. G., & Rowe, D. C. (2000). Behavior problems among children from different family structures: The influence of genetic self-selection. *Child Development, 71,* 733-751.

Coley, R. L. (2001). (In)visible men: Emerging research on low-income, unmarried, and minority fathers. *American Psychologist, 56,* 743-753.

Coley, R. L. (in press). Daughter-father relationships and adolescent psychosocial functioning in low-income African American families. *Journal of Marriage and Family.*

Coleman, J. C. (1974). *Relationships in adolescence.* Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Coleman, M., Ganong, L., & Fine, M. (2000). Reinvestigating remarriage: Another decade of progress. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62,* 1288-1307.

Cooksey, E. C. (1997). Consequences of young mothers' marital histories for children's cognitive development. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 59,* 245-261.

Cooney, T. M., & Mortimer, J. T. (1999). Family structure differences in the timing of leaving home: Exploring mediating factors. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 9,* 367-393.

Crowell, J.A., Fraley, R.C., & Shaver, P.R. (1999). Measurement of individual differences in adolescent and adult attachment. In J. Cassidy & P.R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications* (pp. 434-465). New York : Guilford Press.

Daniels, J. A. (1990). Adolescent separation-individuation and family transitions. *Adolescence, 25,* 105-116.

DeLeire, T., & Kalil, A. (2002). Good things come in threes: Single-parent multigenerational family structure and adolescent adjustment. *Demography, 39,* 393-413.

Demo, D. H., & Acock, A. C. (1996). Family structure, family process, and adolescent well-being. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 6,* 457-488.

Derogatis, L.R. (2000). Brief Symptom Inventory 18, Administration, Scoring, and Procedures Manual. Minneapolis, MN: National Computer Systems.

Duncan, G. J., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Klebanov, P. (1994). Economic deprivation and early childhood development. *Child Development, 62,* 296-318.

Dunifon, R., & Kowaleski-Jones, L. (2002). Who's in the house? Race differences in cohabitation, single parenthood, and child development. *Child Development, 73,* 1249-1264.

Dupree, A., & Primus, W. (June, 2001). *Declining share of children lived with single mothers in the late 1990s*. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Eccles, J. S., Flanagan, C., Lord, S., Midgley, C., et al., (1996). Schools, families, and early adolescents: What are we doing wrong and what can we do instead? *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, *17*, 267-276.

Emery, R. E., Waldron, M., Kitzmann, K. M., & Aaron, J. (1999). Delinquent behavior, future divorce or nonmarital childbearing, and externalizing behavior among offspring: A 14-year prospective study. *Journal of Family Psychology, 13,* 568-579.

Entwisle, D. R. (1990). Schools and the adolescent. In S. S. Feldman & G. R. Elliott (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent* (pp.197-224). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Forehand, R., Thomas, A. M., Wierson, M., Brody, G., & Fauber, R. (1990). Role of maternal functioning and parenting skills in adolescent functioning following parental divorce. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 99,* 278-283.

Gibson, C., Edin, K., & McLanahan, S. (2003, June). *High hopes but even higher expectations: The retreat from marriage among low-income couples* (Working Paper No. 03-06-FF). Princeton, NJ: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing.

Gold, M. (1970). *Delinquent behavior in an American city*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Graber, J. A., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (1996). Transitions and turning points: Navigating the passage from childhood through adolescence. *Developmental Psychology, 32,* 768-776.

Graefe, D. R., & Lichter, D. T. (1999). Life course transitions of American children: Parental cohabitation, marriage, and single motherhood. *Demography, 36(2),* 205-217.

Hanson, T. L., McLanahan, S., & Thomson, E. (1997). Economic resources, parental practices, and children's well-being. In G. J. Duncan & J. Brooks-Gunn (Eds.), *Consequences of growing up poor* (pp. 190-238). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Haveman, R. H., & Wolfe, B. (1994). *Succeeding generations: On the effects of investments in children.* New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Hetherington, E. M. (1989). Coping with family transitions: Winners, losers, and survivors. *Child Development, 60,* 1-14.

Hetherington, E. M. (1993). An overview of the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage with a focus on early adolescence. *Journal of Family Psychology, 7,* 39-56.

Hetherington, E. M., Bridges, M., & Insabella, G. M. (1998). What matters? What does not? Five perspectives on the association between marital transitions and children's adjustment. *American Psychologist, 53(2),* 167-184.

Hetherington, E. M., & Clingempeel, G. (1992). Coping with marital transitions: A family systems perspective. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 57,* (2-3, Serial No.227).

Hetherington, E. M., & Kelly, J. (2002). *For better or for worse: Divorce reconsidered.* New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Hetherington, E. M., & Stanley-Hagen, M. (1999). The adjustment of children with divorced parents: A risk and resiliency perspective. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 40,* 129-140.

Jayakody, R., & Cabrera, N. (2002). What are the choices for low-income families?: Cohabitation, marriage, and remaining single. In A. Booth & A. C. Crouter (Eds.), *Just living together: Implications of cohabitation on families, children, and social policy* (pp. 85-95). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Kiernan, K. E., (in press). Cohabitation and divorce across nations and generations. In P. L. Chase Lansdale, K. Kiernan, & R. J. Friedman (Eds.), *Human development across lives and generations: The potential for change*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kiernan, K. E. (1992). The impact of family disruption in childhood on transitions made in young adult life. *Population Studies, 46,* 213-234.

Kiernan, K. (2002). Cohabitation in Western Europe: Trends, issues, and implications. In A. Booth & A. C. Crouter (Eds.), *Just living together: Implications of cohabitation on families, children, and social policy* (pp. 3-31). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Kiernan, K. E., & Cherlin, A. J. (1999). Parental divorce and partnership dissolution in adulthood: Evidence from a British cohort study. *Population Studies, 53,* 39-48.

Kurdek, L. A., Fine, M. A., & Sinclair, R. J. (1994). The relation between parenting transitions and adjustment in young adolescents: A multisample investigation. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 14,* 412-432.

Kurdek, L. A., Fine, M. A., & Sinclair, R. J. (1995). School adjustment in sixth graders: Parenting transitions, family climate, and peer norm effects. *Child Development, 66,* 430-445.

Lohman, B.J, Votruba-Drzal, E., & Chase-Lansdale, P.L. (November, 2002). Domestic violence, welfare experiences, and child well-being. In E. Votruba-Drzal (Chair), *Correlates and consequences of domestic violence for low-income women.* Paper presented at the 24th Annual Research Conference of the Association of Policy Analysis and Management, Dallas, TX.

Lopez, F. G., & Gover, M. R. (1993). Self-report measures of parent-adolescent attachment and separation-individuation: A selective review. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 11*, 560-569.

Manning, W. D. (2002). The implications of cohabitation for children's well-being. In A. Booth & A. C. Crouter (Eds.), *Just living together: Implications of cohabitation on families, children, and social policy* (pp. 121-152). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Manning, W. D., & Lichter, D. T. (1996). Parental cohabitation and children's economic well-being. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 58,* 998-1010.

Martinez, C. R., Jr., & Forgatch, M. S. (2002). Adjusting to change: Linking family structure transitions with parenting and boys' adjustment. *Journal of Family Psychology, 16,* 107-117.

McLanahan, S., & Booth, K. (1989). Mother-only families: Problems, prospects, and politics. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 51,* 557-580.

McLanahan, S., & Sandefur, G. (1994). *Growing up with a single parent: What hurts, what helps.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Moore, M. R., & Chase-Lansdale, P. L. (2001). Sexual intercourse and pregnancy among African American girls in high poverty neighborhoods: The role of family and perceived community environment. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 63,* 1146-1157.

Morrison, D. R., & Cherlin, A. J. (1995). The divorce process and young children's well-being: A prospective analysis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 57,* 800-812.

Najman, J. M., Behrens, B. C., Andersen, M., Bor, W., O'Callaghan, M., & Williams, G. (1997). Impact of family type and family quality on child behavior problems: A longitudinal study. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 36(10),* 1357-1365.

Pittman, L. D., & Chase-Lansdale, P. L. (2001). African American adolescent girls in impoverished communities: Parenting style and adolescent outcomes. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 11,* 199-224.

Primus, W. E. (November, 2002). *Child living arrangements by race and income: A supplementary analysis.* Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Seltzer, J. A. (1994). Consequences of marital dissolution for children. *Annual Review of Sociology, 20,* 235-266.

Seltzer, J. A. (2000). Families formed outside of marriage. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62,* 1247-1268.

Sessa, F. M., & Steinberg, L. (1991). Family structure and the development of autonomy during adolescence. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 11,* 38-55.

Shaw, D. S., Winslow, E. B., & Flanagan, C. (1999). A prospective study of the effects of marital status and family relations on young children's adjustment among African American and European American families. *Child Development, 70(3),* 537-548.

Simmons, R. G., & Blyth, D. A. (1987). *Moving into adolescence.* Hawthorne, NY: Aldine.

Simmons, R. G., Burgeson, R., Carleton-Ford, S., & Blyth, D. A. (1987). The impact of cumulative change in early adolescence. *Child Development, 58,* 1220-1234.

Smock, P. J. (2000). Cohabitation in the United States: An appraisal of research themes, findings, and implications. *Annual Review of Sociology, 26,* 1-20.

Smock, P. J., & Gupta, S. (2002). Cohabitation in contemporary North America. In A. Booth & A. C. Crouter (Eds.), *Just living together: Implications of cohabitation on families, children, and social policy* (pp. 53-84). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Smock, P.J., Manning, W.D., & Gupta, S. (1999). The effect of marriage and divorce on women's economic well-being. *American Sociological Review, 64,* 794-812.

South, S. J., Crowder, K. D., & Trent, K. (1998). Children's residential mobility and neighborhood environment following parental divorce and remarriage. *Social Forces, 77,* 667-693.

Steinberg, L., Mounts, N. S., Lamborn, S. D., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1991). Authoritative parenting and adolescent adjustment across varied ecological niches. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 1*, 19-36.

Sun, Y. (2001). Family environment and adolescents' well-being before and after parents' marital disruption: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 63,* 697-713.

Sweeney, M. M. (2003). Are stepfamilies associated with the emotional well-being of adolescents? In H. J. Bachman & L. P. Chase-Landsdale (Chairs), *An interdisciplinary examination of marriage and cohabitation effects on child and adolescent well-being*. Symposium paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Tampa, FL.

Thomson, E., Mosley, J., Hanson, T. L., & McLanahan, S.S. (2001). Remarriage, cohabitation, and changes in mothering behavior. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 63,* 370-380.

Winston, P., with Angel, R., Burton, L., Chase-Lansdale, P.L., Cherlin, A., Moffitt, R., Wilson, W.J. (1999). *Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study, Overview and Design Report.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, available at www.jhu.edu/~welfare.

Wolfinger, N. H. (2000). Beyond the intergenerational transmission of divorce: Do people replicate the patterns of marital instability they grew up with? *Journal of Family Issues, 21(8),* 1061-1086.

Woodcock, R. W., & Mather, N. (1989, 1990). WJ-R Tests of Achievement: Examiner's Manual. In R. W. Woodcock & M. B. Johnson, *Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery-Revised*. Itasca, IL: Riverside Publishing.

Woodcock, R. W. & Munoz-Sandoval, A. F. (1996). Bateria Woodcock-Munoz: Pruebas de aprovechamiento-Revisada, Supplemental Manual. In R. W. Woodcock & A. F. Munoz-Sandoval, *Bateria Woodcock-Munoz: Pruebas de aprovechamiento-Revisada*. Itasca, IL: Riverside Publishing.

Wu, L. L. (1996). Effects of family instability, income, and income instability on the risk of a premarital birth. American Sociological Review, 61, 386-406.

Wu, L. L., & Martinson, B. C. (1993). Family structure and the risk of a premarital birth. *American Sociological Review, 58,* 210-232.

Zill, N., Morrison, D. R., & Coiro, M. J. (1993). Long-term effects of parental divorce on parent-child relationships, adjustment, and achievement in young adulthood. *Journal of Family Psychology, 7,* 91-103.

Table 1

*Longitudinal Frequencies of Family Structures and Male Partners' Relation to Adolescents*

| | *n* | Biological Father | Stepfather |
|---|---|---|---|
| Stably Married | 204 | 172 | 32 |
| Stably Cohabiting | 24 | 6 | 18 |
| Stably Single | 476 | --- | --- |
| Single → Married | 70 | 23 | 47 |
| Single → Cohabiting | 52 | 4 | 49 |
| Married → Single | 39 | 23 | 16 |
| Cohabiting → Single | 18 | 4 | 15 |

*Note*. "→" indicates a transition has occurred.

Table 2

*Demographic Characteristics at Wave 1 (N = 884)*

| | Total Sample | Stably Married | Stably Cohabiting | Stably Single | Single → Married | Single → Cohabiting | Married → Single | Cohabiting → Single |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Maternal Age** | 37 (6.2) | 38 (6.6) | 35 (3.9) | 37 (6.2) | 36 (6.2) | 38.4 (6.2) | 34.6 (5.8) | 35.7 (4.7) |
| **Child Age** | 12 (1.4) | 11.9 (1.3) | 12.1 (1.2) | 12 (1.4) | 12.3 (1.5) | 11.5 (1.3) | 12.1 (1.2) | 12.9 (1.3) |
| **Child Gender** | | | | | | | | |
| Male | 422 (48%) | 109 (53%) | 11 (45.5%) | 214 (45%) | 24 (34%) | 42 (81%) | 30 (78%) | 14 (78%) |
| Female | 461 (52%) | 96 (47%) | 13 (54.5%) | 262 (55%) | 46 (66%) | 10 (19%) | 9 (22%) | 4 (22%) |
| **Child Race/Ethnicity** | | | | | | | | |
| Non-Hispanic White/Other | 66 (8%) | 15 (7%) | 1 (6%) | 28 (6%) | 14 (20%) | 7 (14%) | 0 | 0 |
| Non-Hispanic Black | 352 (40%) | 30 (15%) | 9 (37%) | 249 (52%) | 33 (47%) | 9 (17%) | 16 (41%) | 7 (36%) |
| Hispanic | 465 (53%) | 159 (78%) | 14 (57%) | 199 (42%) | 23 (33%) | 36 (70%) | 23 (59%) | 11 (62%) |
| **Maternal Education** | | | | | | | | |
| No high school diploma/GED | 326 (37%) | 74 (36%) | 14 (59%) | 188 (40%) | 15 (21%) | 13 (24%) | 18 (46%) | 4 (22%) |
| Completed high school diploma/GED | 552 (63%) | 125 (61%) | 10 (41%) | 288 (60%) | 55 (79%) | 40 (76%) | 21 (54%) | 14 (78%) |
| **Household income-to-needs ratio** | .74 (.55) | .83 (.63) | .66 (.38) | .68 (.51) | .80 (.62) | .80 (.51) | .82 (.49) | .92 (.72) |
| **Number of minors in the household** | 3.1 (1.4) | 3.1 (1.3) | 3 (1.2) | 3 (1.4) | 3.3 (1.5) | 2.8 (1.1) | 3.4 (1.5) | 3.6 (2.2) |
| **Current Employment** | | | | | | | | |
| Employed | 418 (48%) | 84 (41%) | 15 (63%) | 230 (49%) | 36 (51%) | 23 (44%) | 19 (49%) | 11 (63%) |
| Not Employed | 447 (52%) | 120 (59%) | 9 (37%) | 231 (48%) | 34 (48%) | 28 (53%) | 18 (47%) | 7 (37%) |
| **Current Welfare Status** | | | | | | | | |
| Not on welfare | 646 (73%) | 184 (90%) | 16 (67%) | 311 (65%) | 51 (74%) | 45 (86%) | 26 (68%) | 12 (64%) |
| On welfare | 238 (27%) | 20 (10%) | 8 (33%) | 164 (35%) | 18 (26%) | 8 (14%) | 12 (32%) | 7 (37%) |

*Note.* Means and standard deviations are presented for continuous variables, and sample sizes and percentages are presented for categorical variables. "→" indicates a transition has occurred.

Table 3

*Adolescent Well-Being at Waves 1 and 2 (N = 884)*

| | Total Sample | Stably Married | Stably Cohabiting | Stably Single | Single → Married | Single → Cohabiting | Married → Single | Cohabiting → Single |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Letter-Word Identification** | | | | | | | | |
| Wave 1 | 101.6 (20.5) | 104.3 (18.7) | 97 (19.7) | 100.6 (21.3) | 104.6 (19.3) | 100.9 (23) | 98.8 (17.7) | 102 (23.7) |
| Wave 2 | 99.8 (19.2) | 103.7 (18.7) | 96 (18.5) | 98.9 (19.3) | 100.2 (16.2) | 97.4 (23.1) | 95.8 (16.8) | 97.2 (21.9) |
| **Applied Problems** | | | | | | | | |
| Wave 1 | 98.2 (16.2) | 103.7 (11.6) | 102.2 (24.2) | 95.6 (17.2) | 100.4 (13.6) | 95.7 (17.3) | 94.9 (13.9) | 104.3 (16) |
| Wave 2 | 96.1 (13.1) | 102.4 (10.6) | 96.3 (10.4) | 93.8 (13.5) | 94 (10.4) | 96.5 (11.7) | 91 (13.4) | 101.8 (17.2) |
| **Grades** | | | | | | | | |
| Wave 1 | 5.5 (1.7) | 6.0 (1.5) | 5.4 (1.7) | 5.3 (1.7) | 5.9 (1.4) | 4.97 (1.7) | 5.2 (2.0) | 5.3 (1.3) |
| Wave 2 | 5.2 (1.8) | 5.9 (1.7) | 5.3 (1.6) | 5.1 (1.7) | 5.0 (1.7) | 4.4 (2.0) | 4.9 (1.5) | 5.0 (1.9) |
| **Externalizing Problems** | | | | | | | | |
| Wave 1 | -.06 (.88) | -.32 (.63) | .11 (.88) | -.03 (.98) | -.02 (.82) | .35 (.69) | .27 (.81) | -.14 (.54) |
| Wave 2 | -.04 (.95) | -.48 (.58) | .46 (1.04) | .07 (1.05) | -.13 (.79) | .28 (.96) | .004 (.65) | .32 (1.1) |
| **Serious Delinquency** | | | | | | | | |
| Wave 1 | -.15 (.47) | -.26 (.45) | -.30 (.35) | -.13 (.47) | -.15 (.40) | .12 (.62) | -.25 (.40) | -.02 (.45) |
| Wave 2 | -.13 (.49) | -.28 (.36) | .08 (.51) | -.07 (.55) | -.14 (.42) | -.08 (.52) | -.35 (.22) | -.02 (.41) |
| **Internalizing Problems** | | | | | | | | |
| Wave 1 | -.06 (.94) | -.18 (.71) | .58 (1.5) | -.13 (.95) | .15 (1.0) | .12 (.85) | .57 (1.2) | -.62 (.30) |
| Wave 2 | -.03 (.96) | -.23 (.78) | .68 (1.4) | -.04 (.98) | .10 (.93) | -.10 (.85) | .33 (.94) | .24 (1.3) |
| **Depression** | | | | | | | | |
| Wave 1 | .84 (.81) | .69 (.70) | 1.2 (1.2) | .85 (.82) | 1.1 (.76) | .77 (.89) | 1.0 (.81) | .79 (.78) |
| Wave 2 | .89 (.87) | .91 (.87) | 1.4 (.97) | .88 (.86) | 1.1 (1.0) | .66 (.82) | .67 (.61) | .56 (.80) |
| **Anxiety** | | | | | | | | |
| Wave 1 | .80 (.81) | .71 (.76) | .85 (1.04) | .80 (.82) | .96 (.81) | .79 (.78) | .99 (.79) | .65 (.82) |
| Wave 2 | .74 (.83) | .72 (.83) | .74 (.70) | .72 (.82) | 1.1 (.95) | .63 (.81) | .50 (.68) | .71 (.81) |
| **Anger & Alienation** | | | | | | | | |
| Wave 1 | 3.5 (.80) | 3.6 (.77) | 3.7 (.88) | 3.5 (.84) | 3.4 (.75) | 3.4 (.70) | 3.4 (.67) | 3.8 (.59) |
| Wave 2 | 2.4 (.91) | 2.4 (.77) | 2.4 (.95) | 2.3 (.94) | 2.8 (.99) | 2.2 (.87) | 2.2 (.99) | 2.2 (.63) |

*Note.* "→" indicates a transition has occurred. Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) are presented.

Figure Captions

*Figure 1*. Stable and transitioning family structures: Influences on adolescent Woodcock-Johnson Letter Word Identification.

*Figure 2*. Stable and transitioning family structures: Influences on adolescent Woodcock-Johnson Applied Problems.

*Figure 3*. Stable and transitioning family structures: Influences on adolescent grades.

*Figure 4*. Stable and transitioning family structures: Influences on adolescent CBCL Externalizing Problems.

*Figure 5*. Stable and transitioning family structures: Influences on adolescent serious delinquency.

*Figure 6*. Stable and transitioning family structures: Influences on adolescent CBCL Internalizing Problems.

*Figure 7*. Stable and transitioning family structures: Influences on adolescent depression.

*Figure 8*. Stable and transitioning family structures: Influences on adolescent anxiety.

*Figure 9*. Stable and transitioning family structures: Influences on adolescent anger and alienation.

*Figure 1*. Reading

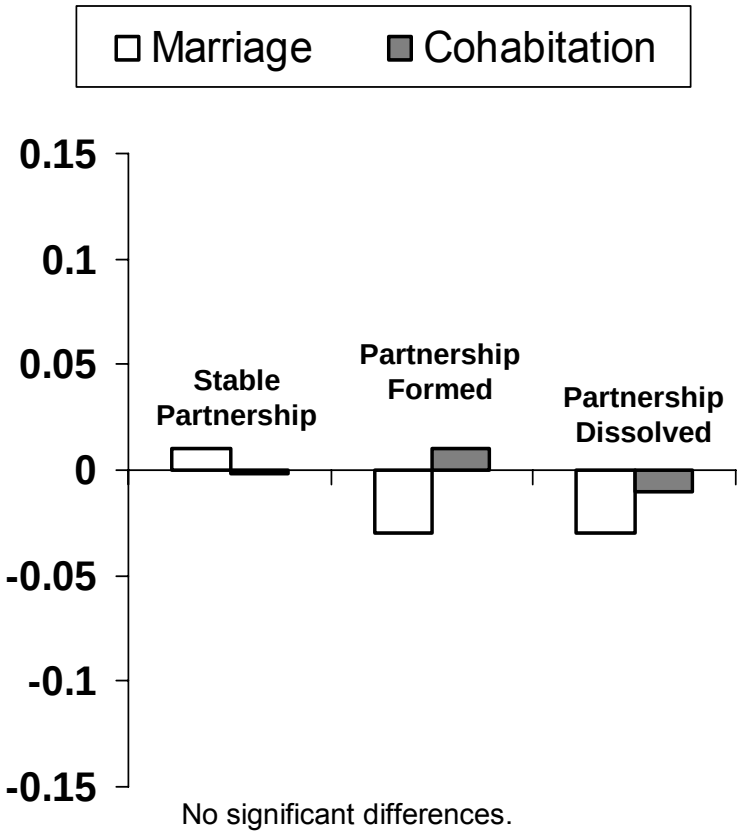
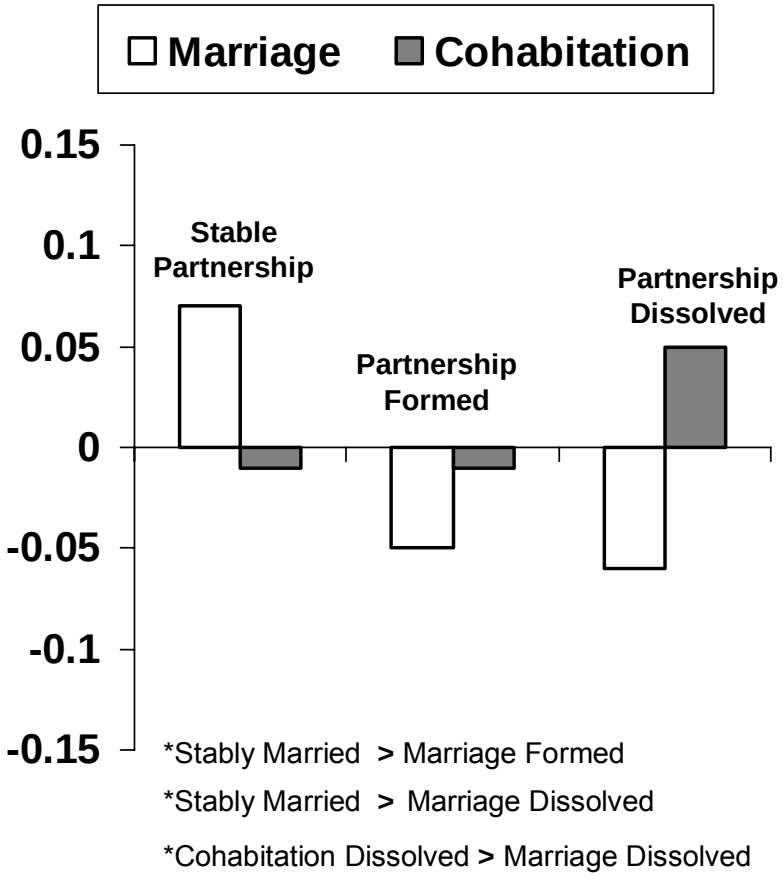


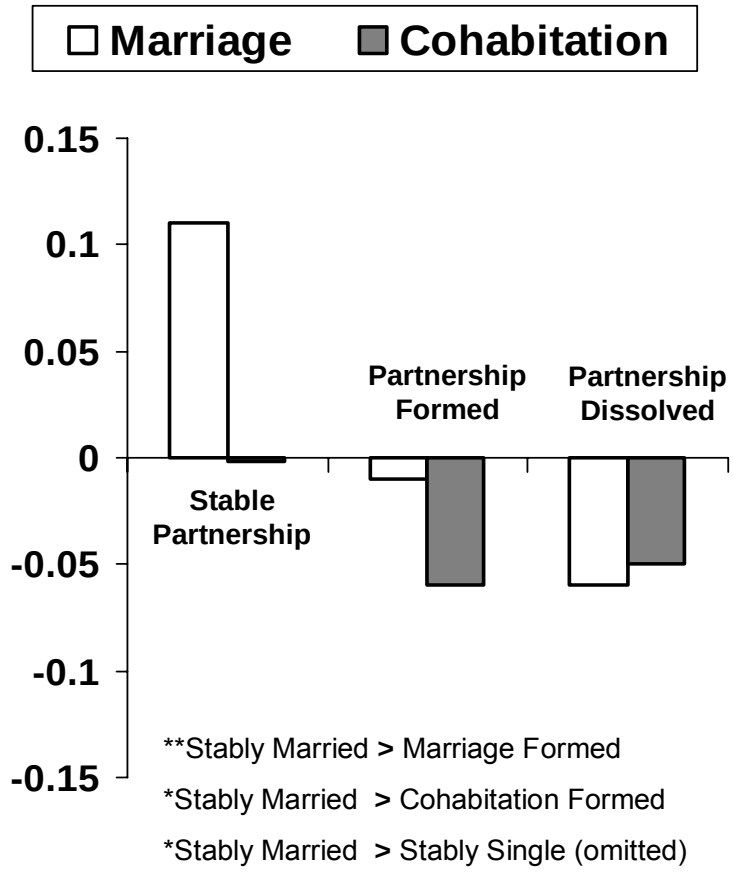

*Figure 2*. Mathematics




*Note.* Standardized beta coefficients are presented.

*$p < .05$.

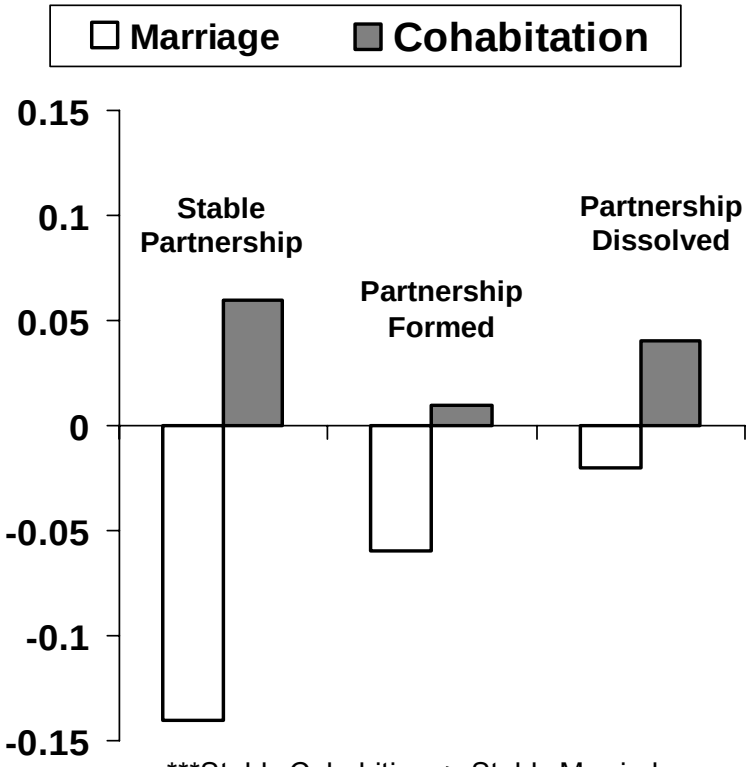
*Figure 3.* Grades




*Note.* Standardized beta coefficients are presented.

*$p$ < .05; **$p$ < .01.

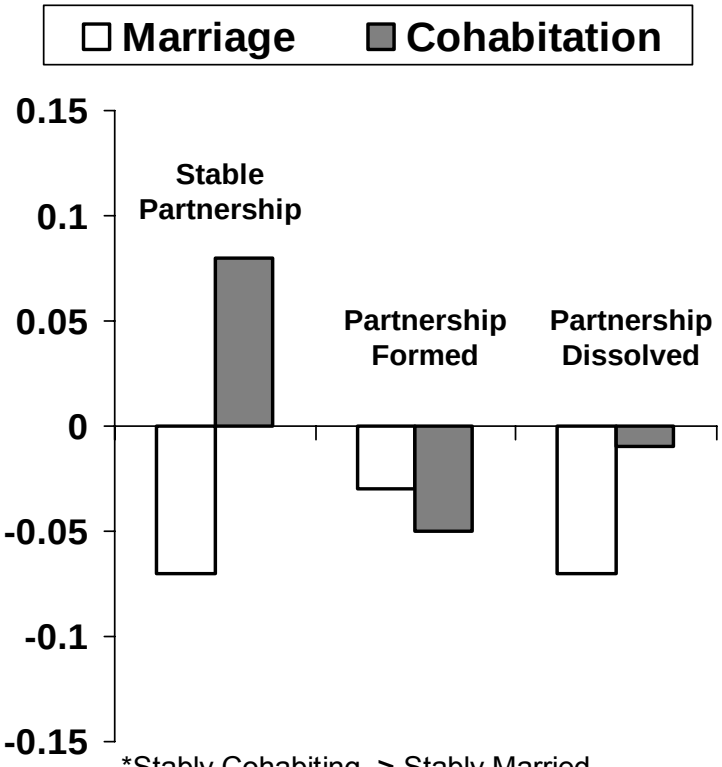
*Figure 4*. Externalizing Problems




***Stably Cohabiting > Stably Married
*Stably Cohabiting > Marriage Formed
*Stably Cohabiting > Marriage Dissolved
*Stably Cohabiting < Stably Single (omitted)

**Stably Married < Stably Single (omitted)
*Stably Married < Cohabitation Dissolved

*Figure 5*. Serious Delinquency




*Stably Cohabiting > Stably Married

**Stably Cohabiting > Marriage Dissolved

*Stably Cohabiting > Cohabitation Formed

*Marriage Dissolved < Stably Single (omitted)

*Note.* Standardized beta coefficients are presented. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

*Figure 6*. Internalizing Problems

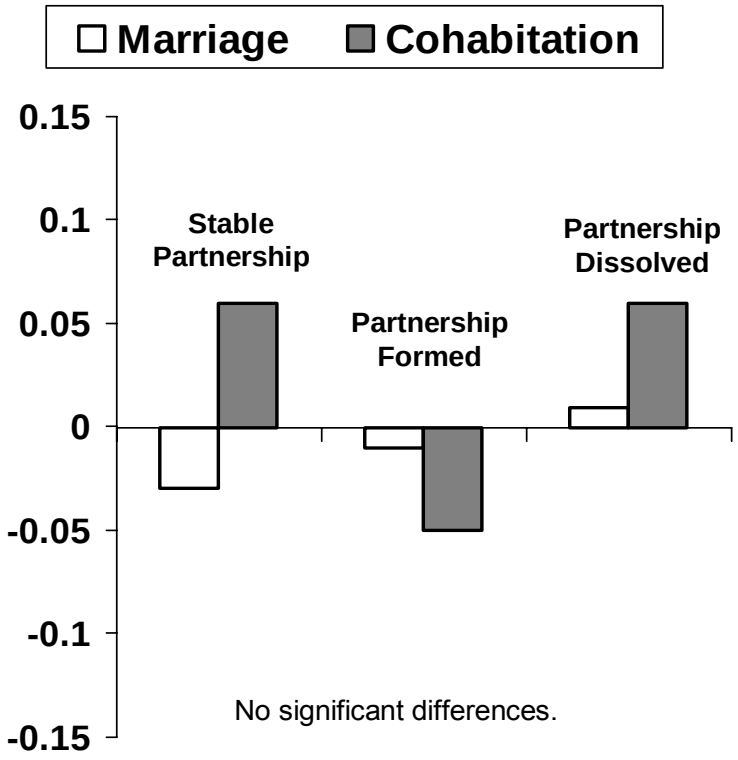
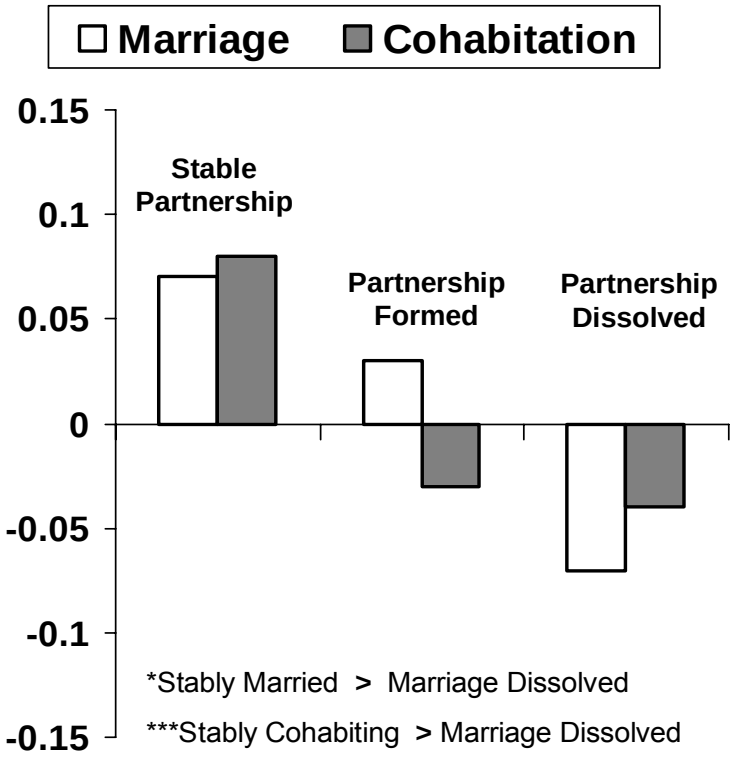



*Figure 7*. Depression




*Stably Married > Marriage Dissolved

***Stably Cohabiting > Marriage Dissolved

*Stably Cohabiting > Cohabitation Formed

*Stably Cohabiting > Cohabitation Dissolved

*Stably Cohabiting > Stably Single (omitted)

*Marriage Dissolved < Stably Single (omitted)

*Note.* Standardized beta coefficients are presented.

*$p \leq .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

*Figure 8.* Anxiety

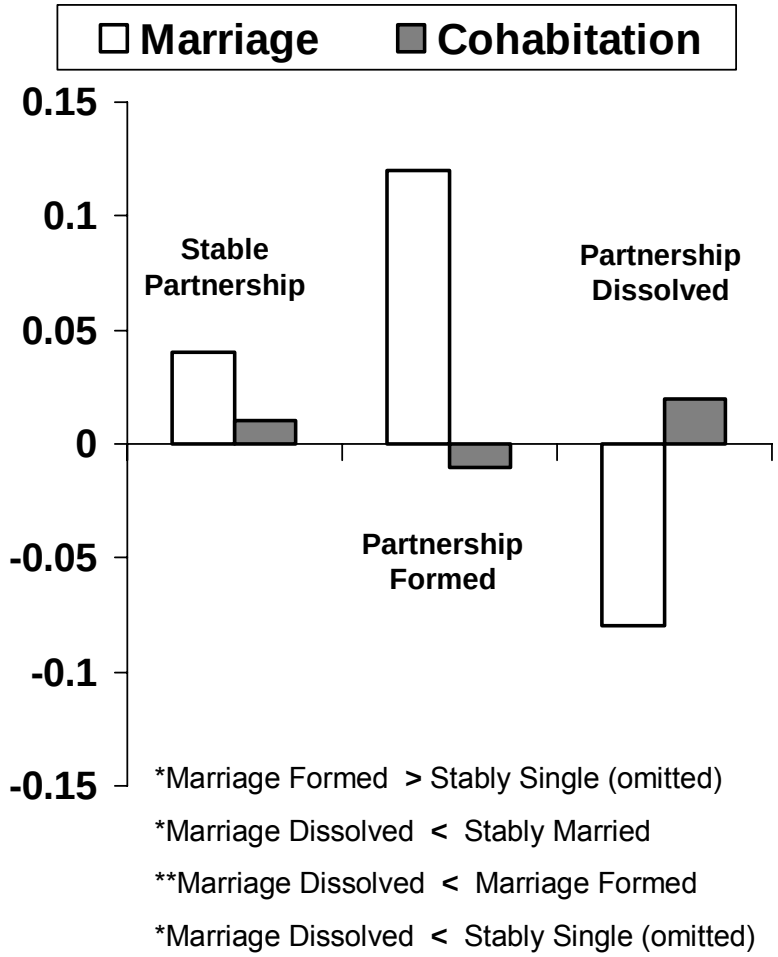
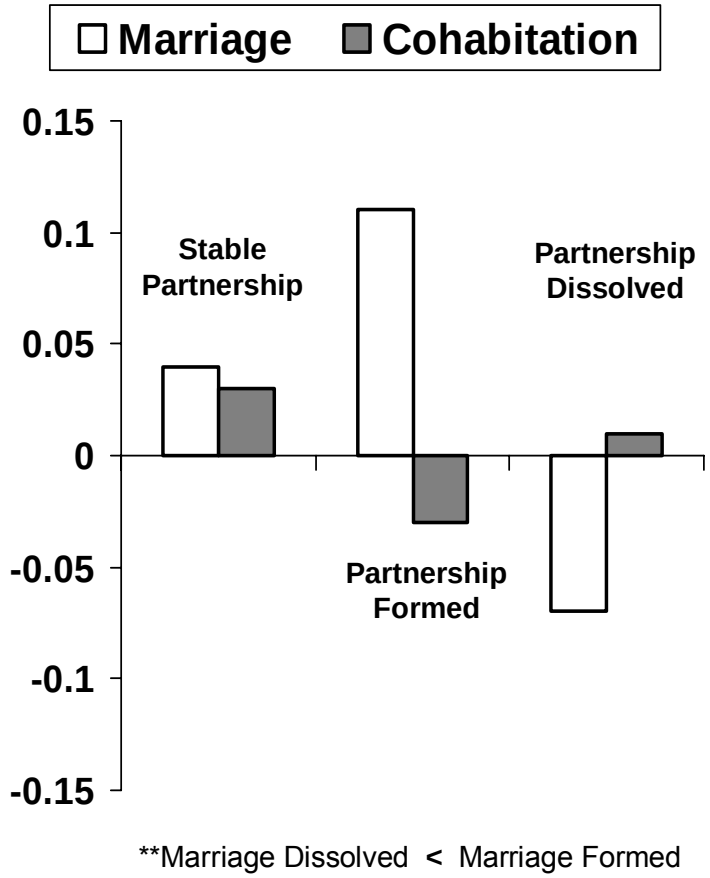



*Figure 9*. Anger & Alienation




*Note.* Standardized beta coefficients are presented.

*$p$ < .05; **$p$ < .01.