

No Time for Marriage? Time Constraints and Low-Income Mothers' Marriage and Cohabitation Decisions

Rationale. Marriage rates among low-income mothers have received considerable attention of late as policymakers look for ways to keep the welfare caseloads down across the country. Since marriage is thought to reduce, on average, material hardship and lower poverty rates (Lerman 2002), the prevailing notion among proponents of welfare reform is that efforts to support union formation among low-income couples will improve their chances of economic self-sufficiency. Although theoretical and empirical research concerning women's marriage decisions is extensive, few studies focus on the marriage decisions of women who have a nonmarital birth (Bennett et al 1995; Lichter and Graefe 2003). Recent quantitative and ethnographic research is beginning to explore why unwed low-income mothers tend to remain single. Research from a national survey of unwed parents shows that the most important determinants of marriage are couples' human capital characteristics and attitudes towards marriage (Fragile Families Research Brief 2003). These findings are consistent with a large body of research literature on the marriage decisions of single, childless women. But findings from qualitative explorations of unmarried parents' relationships after childbirth suggests that, in addition to the major predictors of marriage common to childless adults, unwed mothers may face additional obstacles to union formation, namely the time constraints associated with raising and supporting a family (Gibson et al 2002). Multiple responsibilities may limit the time available for single mothers to search for and nurture relationships with potential or existing partners.

This paper explores the time constraints faced by single mothers and considers how the complex relationship between balancing work and parenting may limit opportunities to establish and maintain a stable relationship. Some of the documented time pressures that low-income parents face include heightened caretaking responsibilities for young or disabled children, long commuting times to work, and nonstandard work schedules such as evening and night shifts (Heymann 2000; Presser and Cox 1997). In this paper, we consider these work and family obligations of low-income mothers and explore whether these responsibilities detract from the likelihood of union formation, controlling for other important determinants of marriage.

Research Methods. Despite the voluminous literature on cohabitation and marriage among childless women, research on union formation among single mothers is just beginning. Traditional economic and sociological explanations of marriage may not capture the decision-making process for single parents with low economic resources. Emerging hypotheses about the determinants of union formation for this subgroup of women include their limited free time away from work and parenting to search. We build on this theme by examining in detail how the complexities of managing a household and employment may influence cohabitation and marriage patterns among a sample of low-income single mothers between 1999-2001. Our main research questions include: do time constraints associated with low-income mothers' work schedules such as night shifts, lengthy commute times or long work hours decrease the probability of cohabitation or

marriage over time? Similarly, does the time spent caring for a family with young children, disabled children, or tending to the needs of multiple children decrease the probability a single mother will form a union? Does the cumulative effects of time constraints associated with multiple work and family tasks decrease cohabitation or marriage among low-income single mothers over and above individual time constraints?

Data for this analysis come from the Welfare, Children and Families: A Three City Study, a longitudinal study of 2,400 low-income children between the ages of 0-4 and 10-14 and their caregivers in poor and near poor neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. We consider a subset of approximately 1,300 single biological mothers interviewed twice between 1999 and 2001. The survey has extensive questions about mothers' time use, employment and human capital characteristics as well as characteristics of their children.

We test a series of multinomial logit models to examine the probability that work and family time constraints negatively influence cohabitation or marriage. We also create an index of various work and family time constraints to test for significant effects of multiple time constraints. In addition, we control for mothers' human capital and demographic characteristics such as education, intellectual ability, city of residence, age, race, functional disability, marital history, social network attachment, neighborhood unemployment rate and previous time on welfare.

Preliminary Findings. Consistent with findings from national studies of unwed parents, multivariate models suggest that the most important predictors of both cohabitation and marriage are mothers' human capital characteristics. Specifically mothers' educational attainment above high school and higher intellectual ability significantly increase the probability of either one of these union formations between 1999-2001. Mothers' functional disabilities and age decrease the probability of cohabitation and marriage, holding other covariates constant. As expected, previous cohabitation with biological fathers of focal children increases the probability of cohabitation and marriage.

Other variables only influence marriage, but not cohabitation, indicating that there are distinct pathways predicting these relationships. Controlling for covariates, mothers' employment significantly increases the probability of marriage. Conversely, we find that the time constraints associated with working evening or night shifts significantly decreases the probability of marriage net of other characteristics. Long work hours and lengthy commutes are negatively associated with marriage, but these effects are not significant. Contrary to expectations, heightened family responsibilities associated with caring for numerous children increases the probability of marriage. There was no significant association between time constraints related to caring for disabled children or the presence of young children in the household and the probability of cohabitation or marriage. Additionally, there is no evidence of an association between multiple time constraints and marriage. This paper will discuss potential explanations of why the time constraints seem to affect marriage only and why cohabitation is more difficult to explain.

Finally, we discuss the policy implications of the findings, especially in light of the federal government's efforts to increase the work requirements for low-income, single mothers who receive welfare benefits. In tandem with these efforts to make low-income mothers work more, policymakers have also proposed initiatives to promote marriage among low-income parents. Both policies are intended to decrease rates of childhood poverty and increase parental involvement in young people's lives. These results suggest that policies that focus on increasing employment and marriage promotion, without considering the effects of mothers' work schedules, may be misguided.