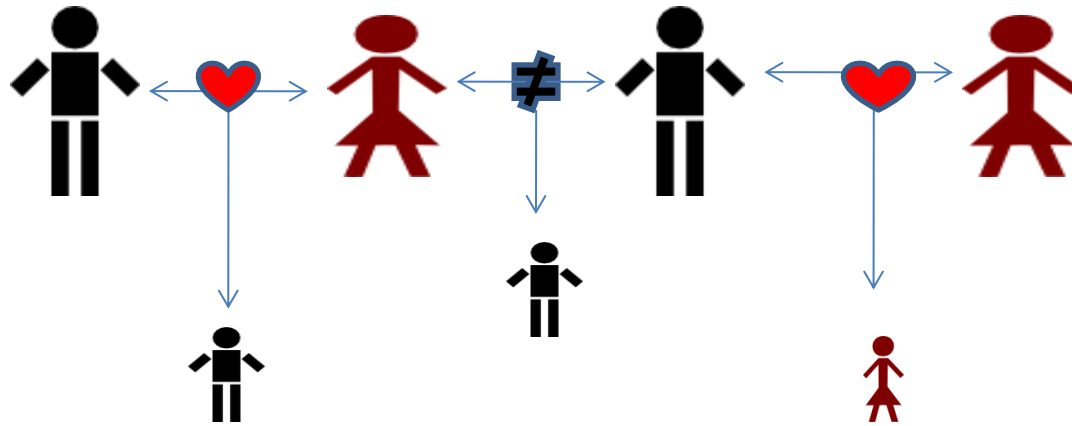


Adolescent Wellbeing amidst Family Instability: Demographic Trends and Family Processes



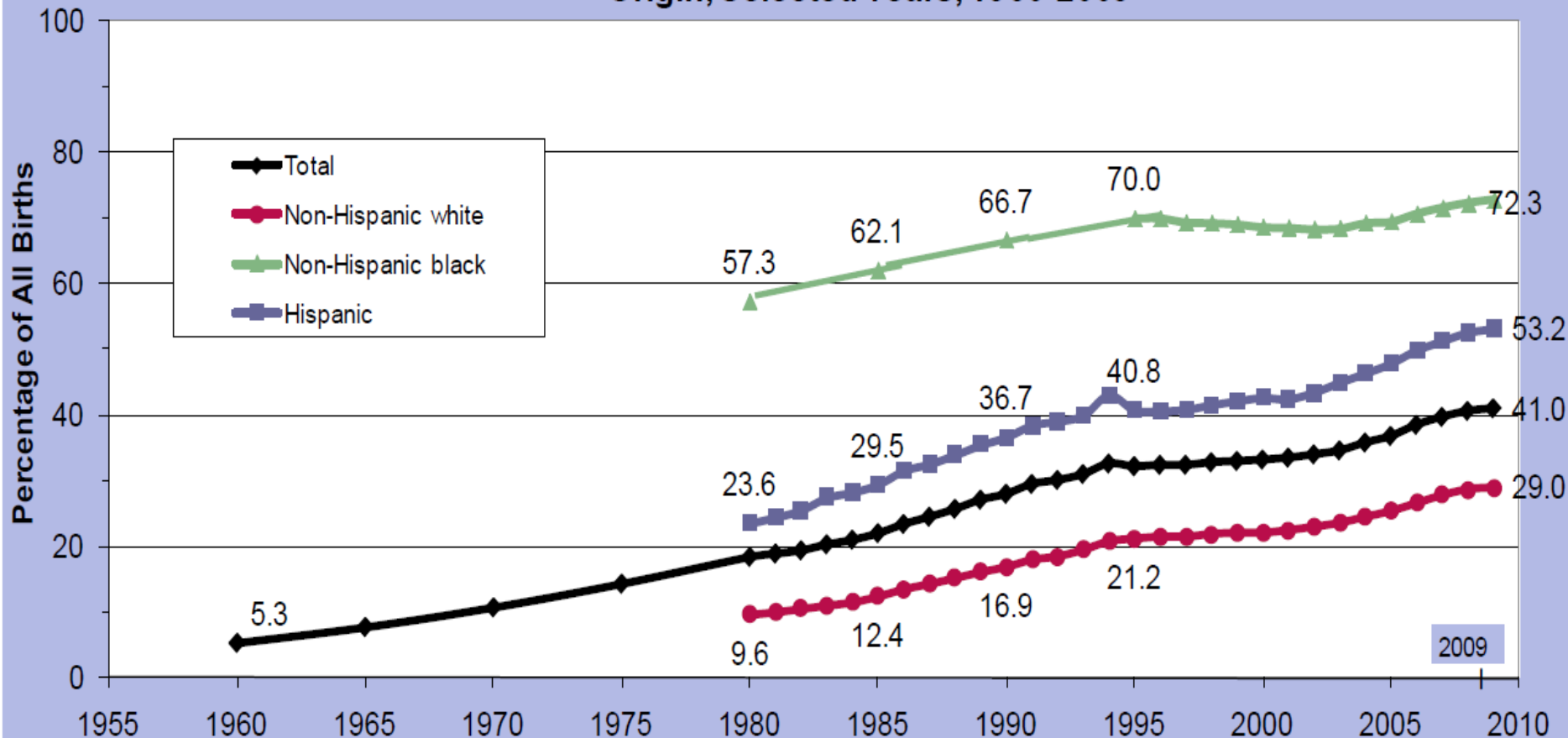
Laura Tach, PhD

Department of Policy Analysis and Management
Cornell University

Parenting In-Service
9/17/15

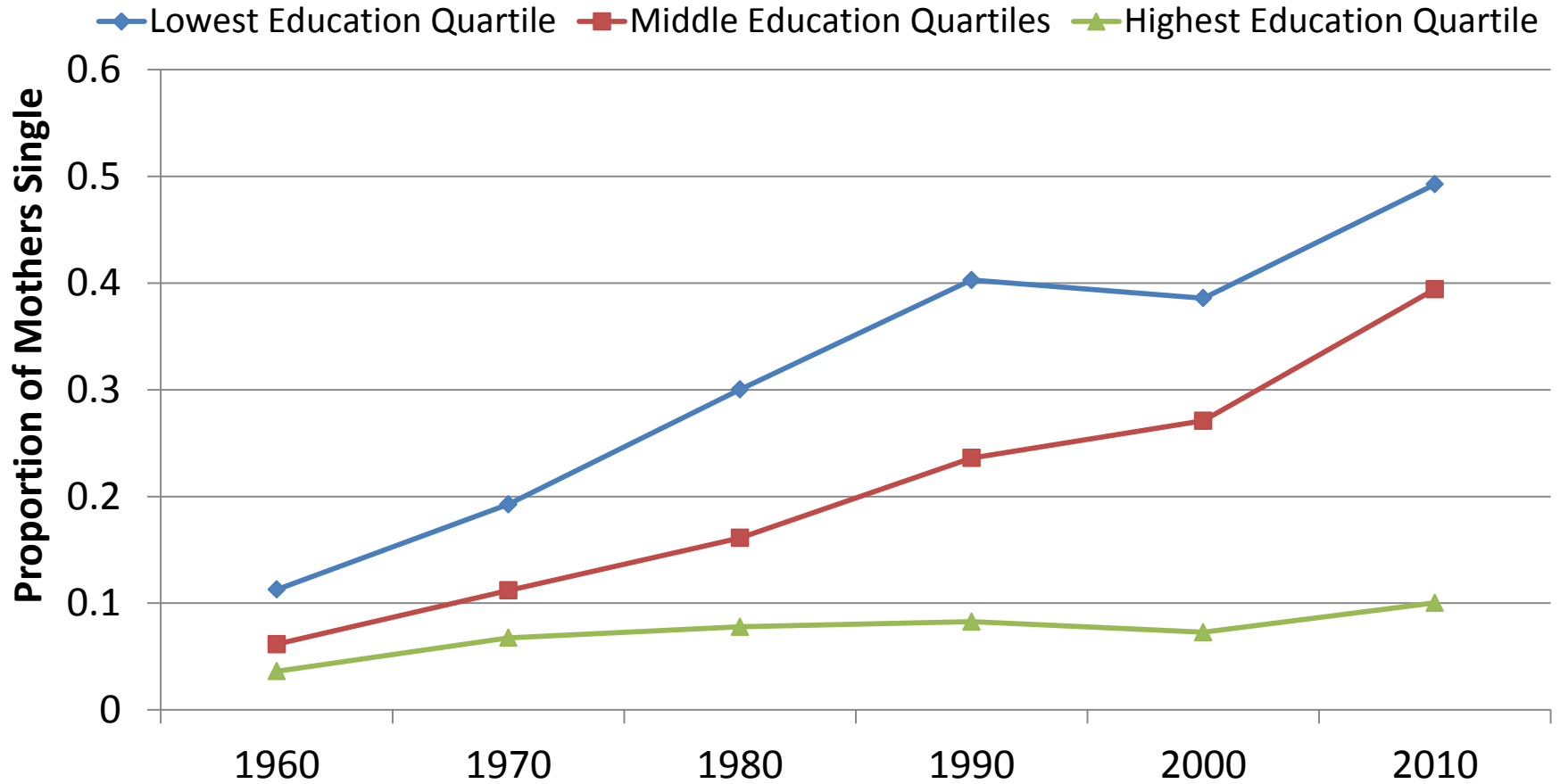
Trends in Nonmarital Childbearing by Race and Ethnicity

Percentage of All Births that were to Unmarried Women, by Race and Hispanic Origin, Selected Years, 1960-2009*



Source: National Vital Statistics Reports

The Growth in Single Motherhood



Source: IPUMS Census/ACS 1960-2010



- Quantitative Data

- Longitudinal survey of 5,000 children born in late 1990s

- Follows focal child, mother, and father from birth to child's 9th birthday, regardless of relationship status
(15-year follow-up survey currently in the field)
 - Urban sample: representative of cities with populations 200,000+
 - Oversample of nonmarital births

- Qualitative Data

- In-depth interviews with 75 families from the survey

- Selected to have racial-ethnic variation in sample

“Honey, I’m Pregnant!”

Relationship Contexts at Conception



“Honey, I’m Pregnant!”

Relationship Contexts at Conception

- **Precocious**: Childbearing starts young. A majority of disadvantaged mothers begin childbearing during their teens or early 20s (Edin & Tach, 2014).
- **Employment Challenges**: Many disadvantaged men and women face challenges to finding well-paying and secure employment (Sum et al. 2011).
- **Haphazard**: Median length of relationship prior to conception is 6-7 months for unmarried couples and 1 year for married couples (Tach & Edin 2011).
- **Casual**: Half of unmarried parents describe their relationship prior to conception as “casual” (Edin et al. 2007).
- **Unplanned**: Unmarried parents are much more likely to report that their child’s birth was “unplanned” than are married parents (74% vs. 27%) (Finer & Henshaw 2006).

Unpacking the “Unplanned” Pregnancy

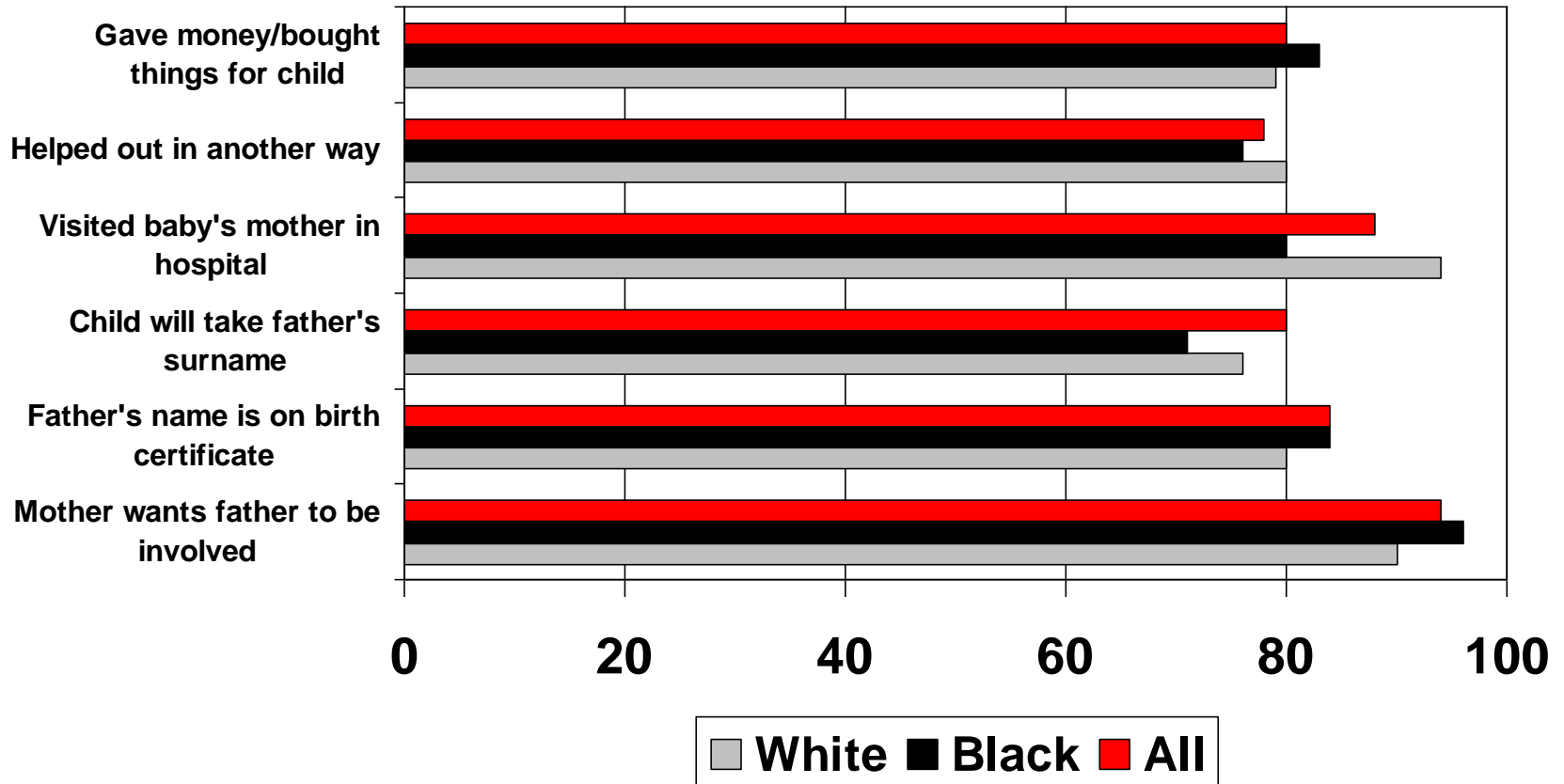
- In qualitative accounts, the modal pregnancy is neither actively planned nor avoided—according to men’s and women’s accounts they were “just not thinking” or “weren’t trying, but weren’t against it either” (Augustine et al. 2009; Tach & Edin 2011).

Survey data reveal:

- Inconsistent Contraception
 - Couples report knowledge of forms of contraception and access to them.
 - They report using contraception... but they use it inconsistently.
 - Some stop using condoms as a signal of commitment to the relationship.
 - They know what *could* happen when they do this.
- Ambivalent desires for children
 - True for both men and women.
 - They see little cost for their futures.
 - Many live in communities with few social sanctions for nonmarital childbearing.

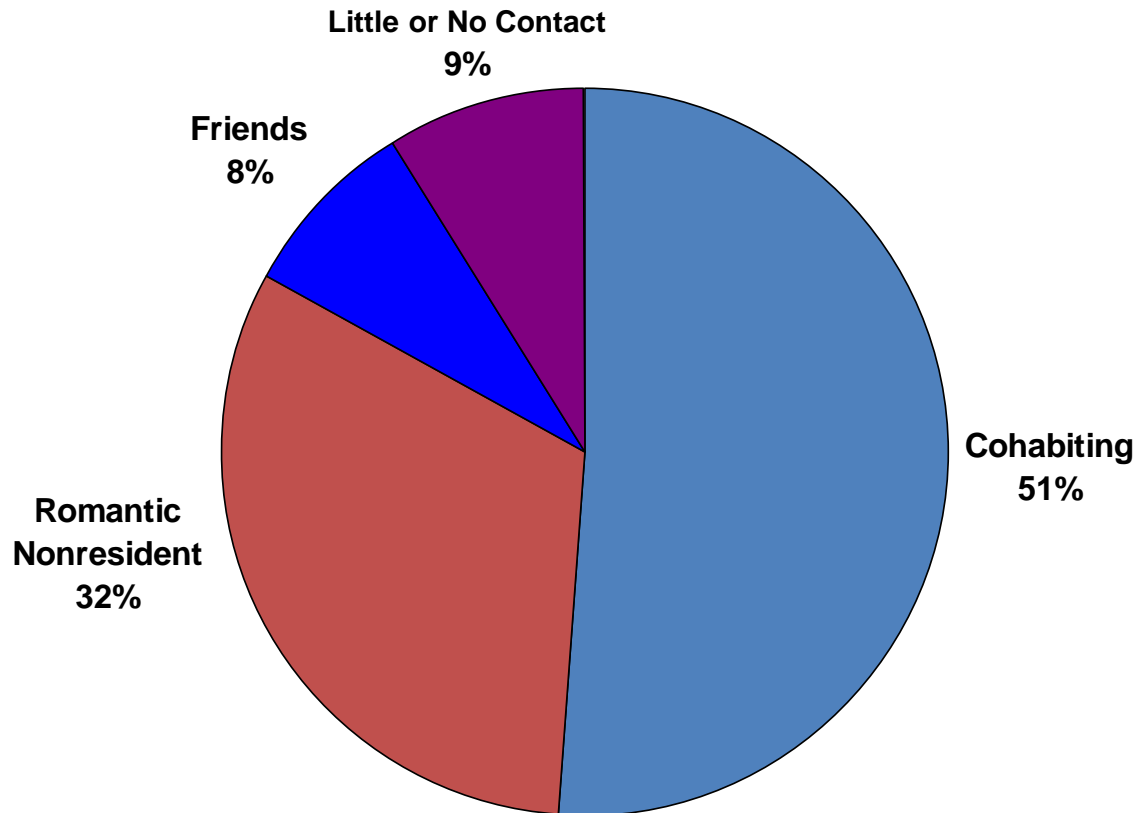
Unmarried Men Do Not Flee at News of Pregnancy

During pregnancy, % of men who...



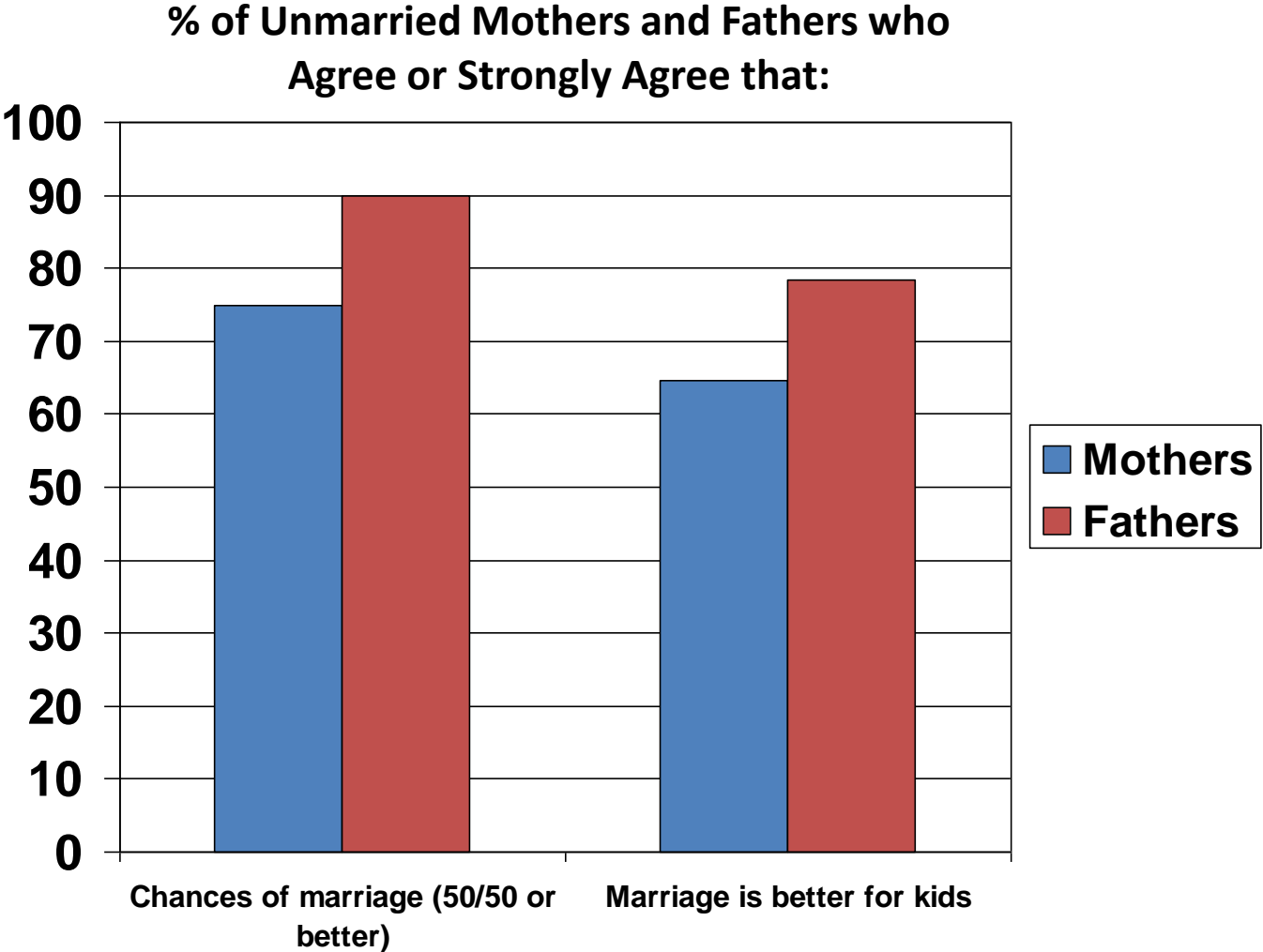
Source: Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Baseline Survey, Mother's Report

Relationship Contexts at Child's Birth



Only 1 in 5 nonmarital children born to a “single” mother.
The rest are born to “fragile families.”

Birth: The “Magic Moment” for Unmarried Couples



Source: Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Baseline Survey, Mother and Father Reports. McLanahan 2009

Risk Factors At Time of Birth

	Mothers	Fathers
Teen Parent	26%	14%
Poor/Fair Health	20%	14%
Depression	16%	13%
Heavy Drinking	8%	27%
Illegal Drugs	2%	9%
Father Ever Incarcerated	-----	36%
Domestic Violence	12%	-----
Men/Women Cannot Be Trusted to be Faithful	36%	26%

Sample is mothers with a high school degree or less.

Source: Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Baseline Survey and 1 Year Surveys,
Mother and Father Reports; McLanahan 2009

Economic Risk Factors At Time of Birth

	Married	Unmarried
Mother Received Welfare	20%	41%
Father Employed	92%	73%
Father's Education		
Less than high school	31%	42%
High school graduate	62%	55%
College graduate	7%	3%
Mother's Education		
Less than high school	39%	45%
High school graduate	61%	55%
College graduate		
Father's Earnings	\$28,342	\$16,010
Mother's Earnings	\$11,775	\$8,376

Sample is mothers with a high school degree or less.

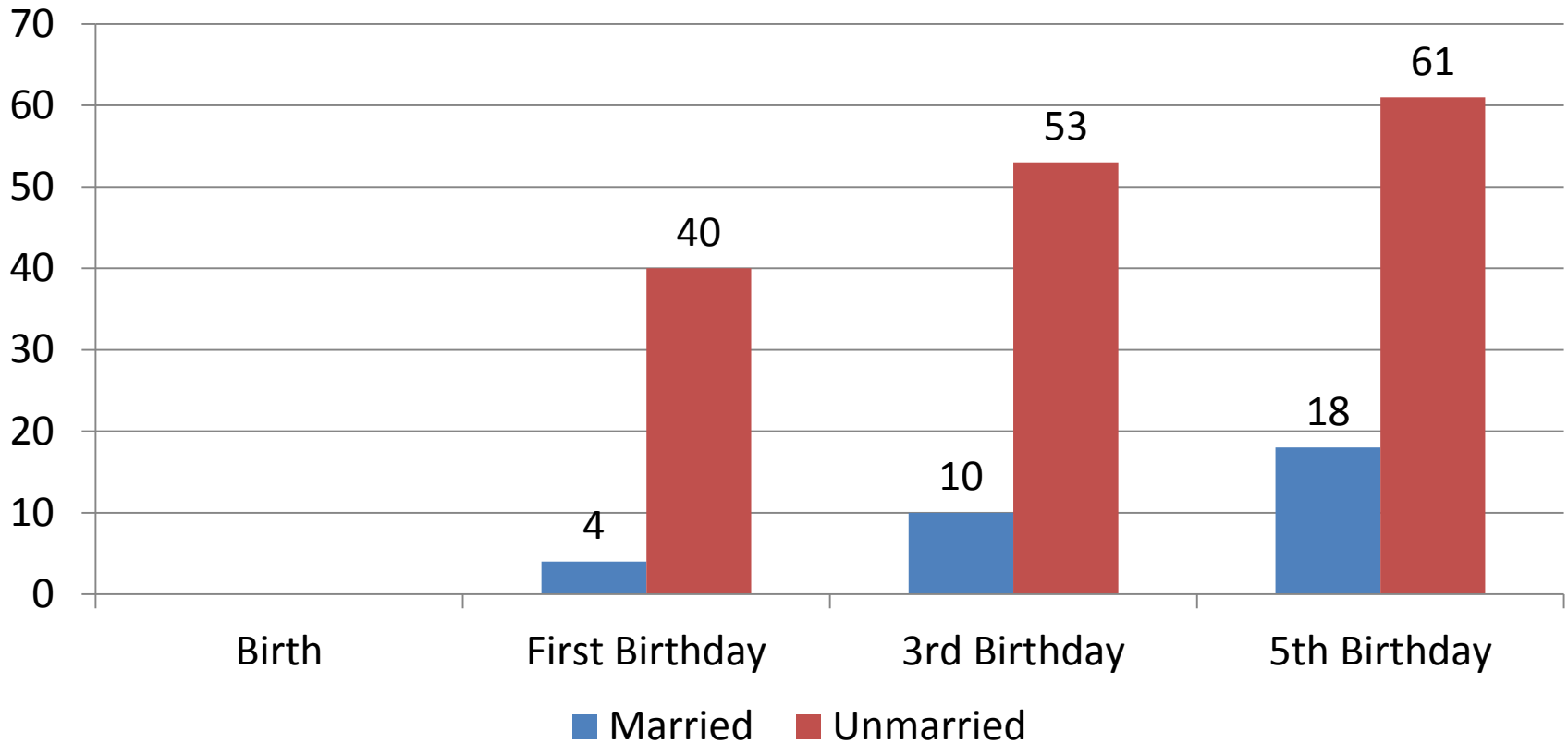
Source: Baseline survey of Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study

After the “Magic Moment”



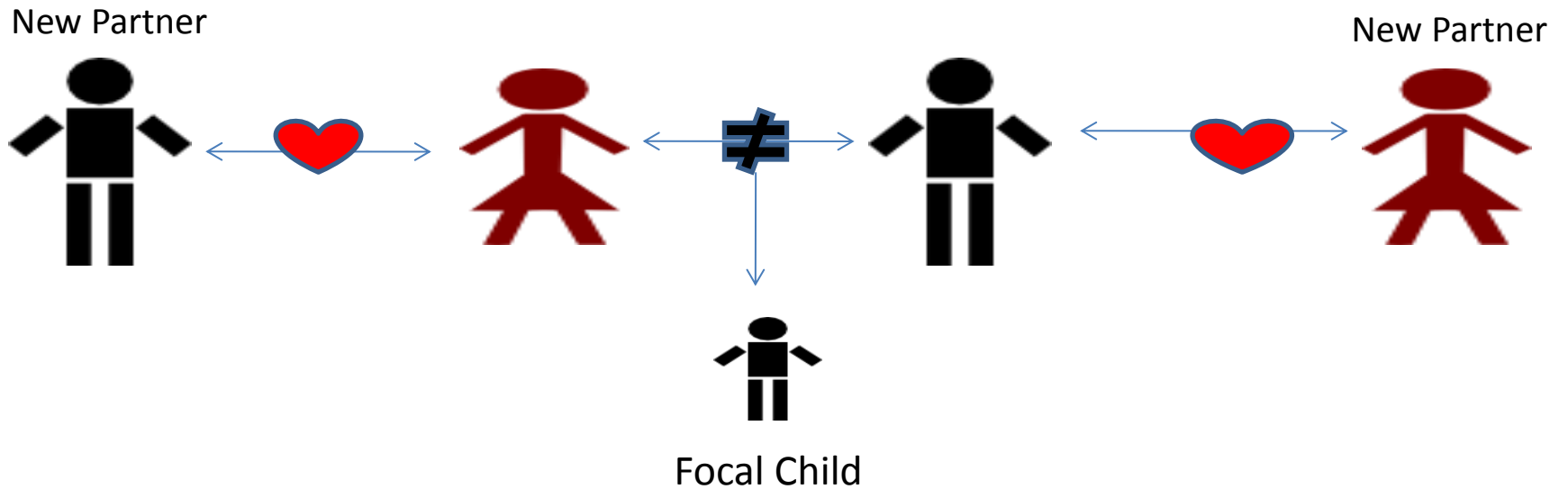
Relationships Are Unstable Following a Birth

% of couples who broke up by child's...

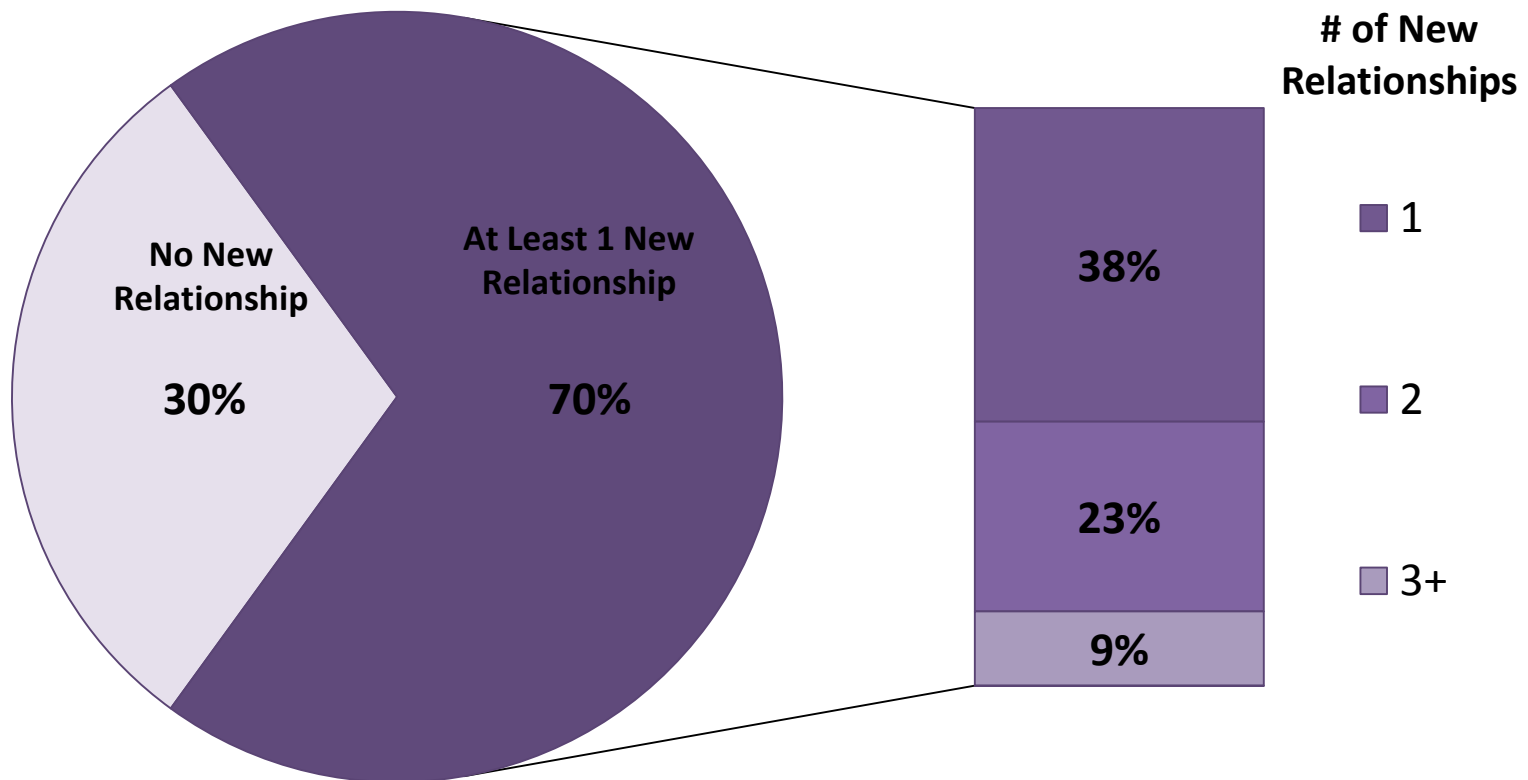


Sample restricted to couples who were in a relationship at the child's birth.

Parents Quickly Repartner

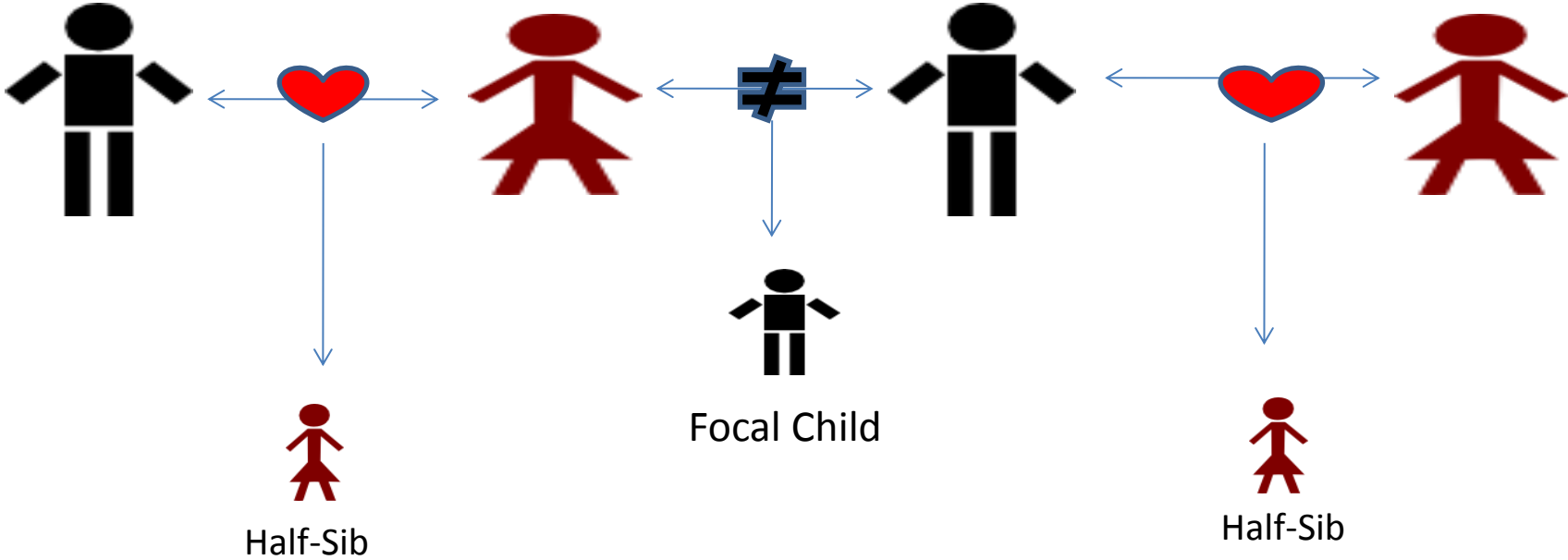


Total New Parental Romantic Relationships in Disadvantaged Families, by Child's 5th Birthday

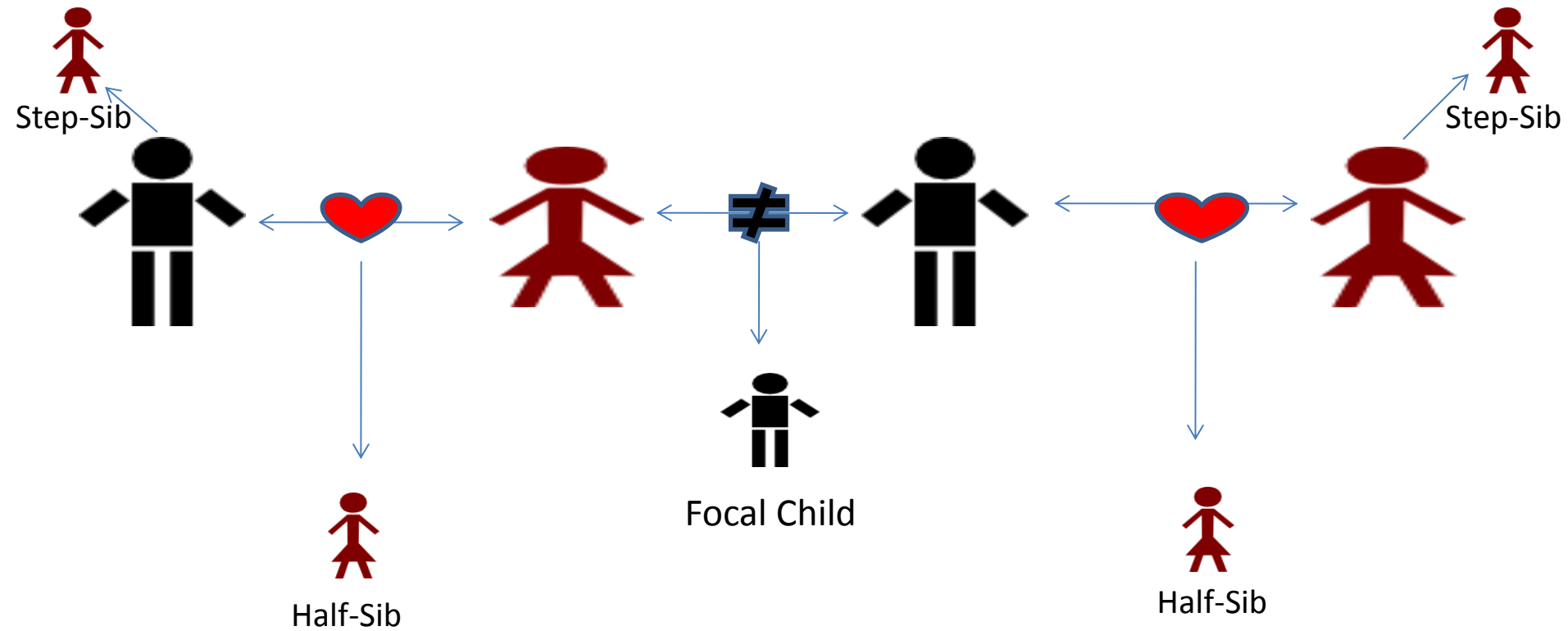


Source: Tabulated by Dr. Laura Tach from Waves 1-4 of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Survey, a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Counts total number of mothers' and fathers' new romantic relationships that lasted at least three months.

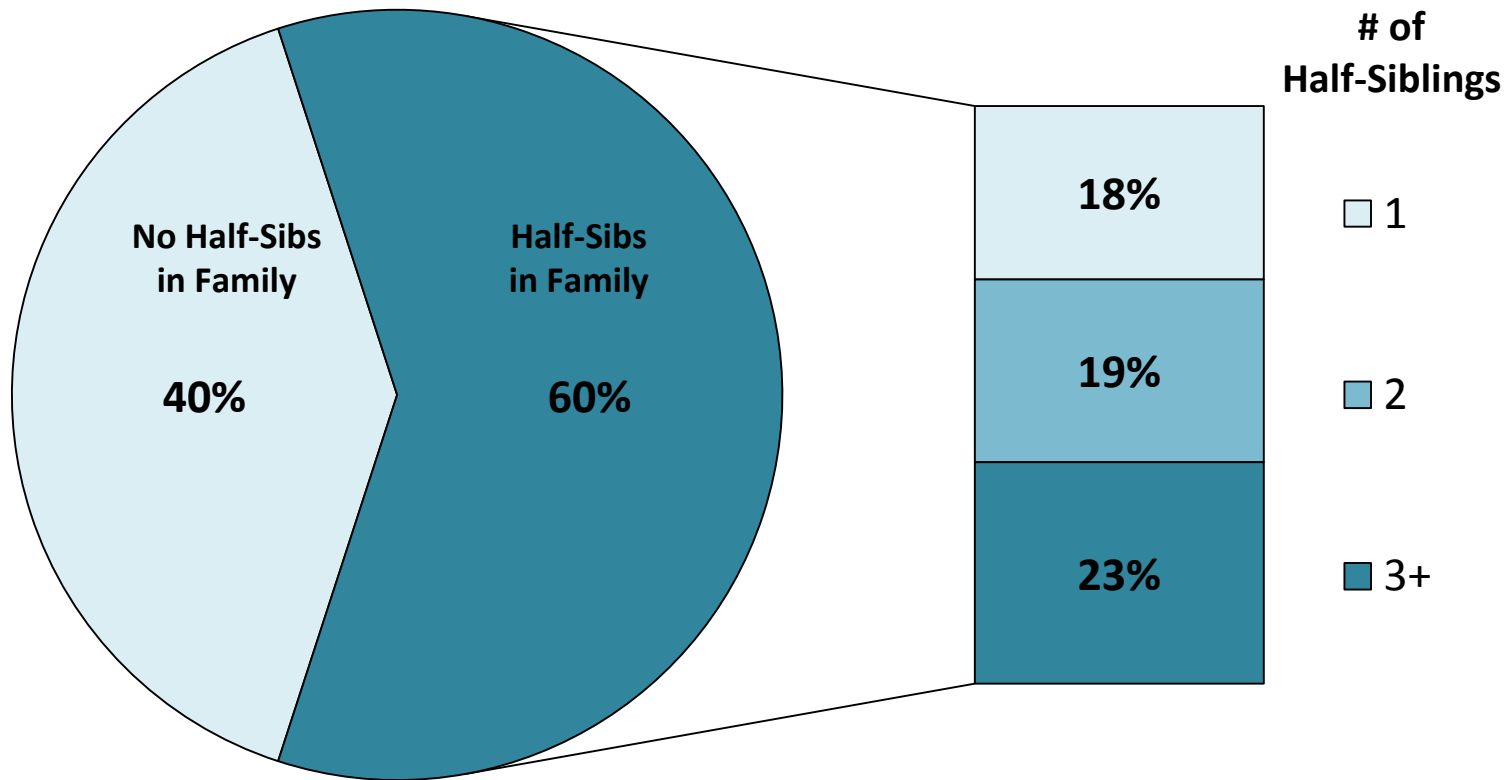
New Partnerships Often Produce New Children...



... and Bring With Them Children From Past Relationships



Amount of Multi-Partner Fertility (Half-Sibs) in Disadvantaged Families by Child's 5th Birthday



Source: Tabulated by from Waves 1-4 of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Survey, a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Counts total number of half-siblings (biological children of either mother or father, but not both).

Parenting in Complex Households



Fathering in Fragile Families

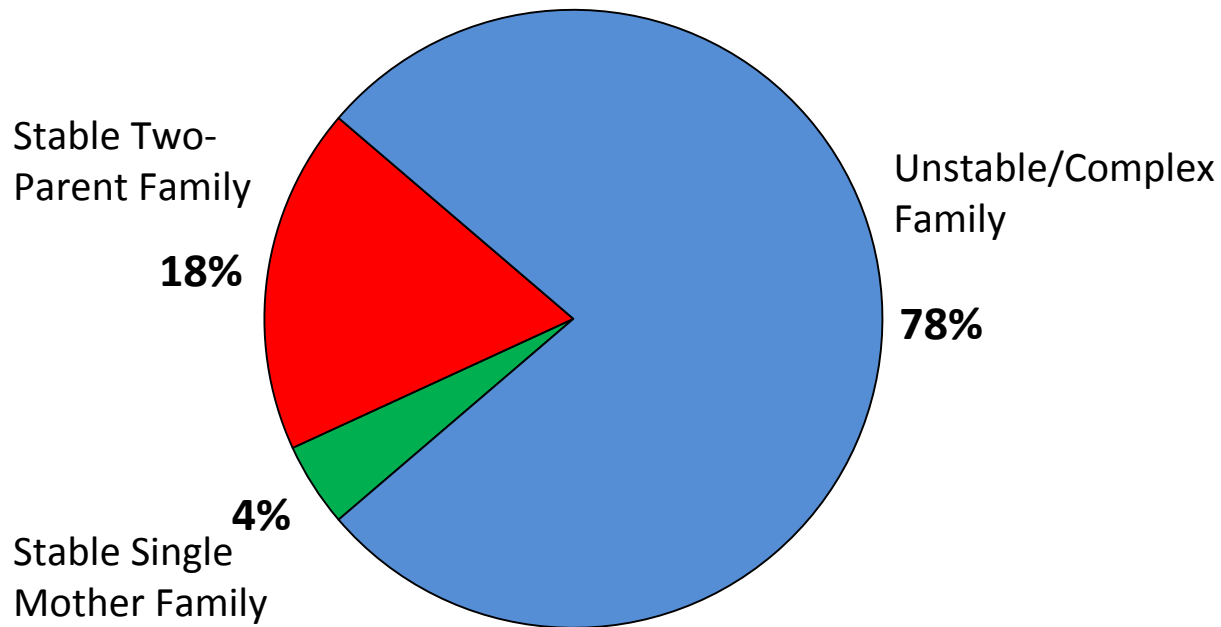
- **Salience of the father role:** most embrace fatherhood from the beginning and want to be there for their partners and children.
- **Rejecting the “package deal”:** most believe that they should stay in contact with their children even when romantic relationships with mothers end.
- **Declining paternal involvement:** is often an unintended consequence of transitions to new partners and economic hardships associated with poverty and low education.
- **Uncertainty about fathering in complex households:** many readily care for non-biological children and want to stay involved with non-resident children, but struggle with how they should parent them.
- **A portrait of continuous fathering:** many intensively father for long periods of time, but struggle to father all of their resident and non-resident children simultaneously.

Parental Relationships & Parenting Behaviors

- Good partners make good parents.
The quality of the parents' relationship is a strong predictor of positive engagement with children: declines in one lead to declines in the other
- Key predictors of declining parental relationship quality after parents break up:
 - Economic disadvantage and paternal unemployment
 - Repartnering (both moms and dads)
 - Mental health and substance abuse
 - Incarceration

From the Child's Point of View

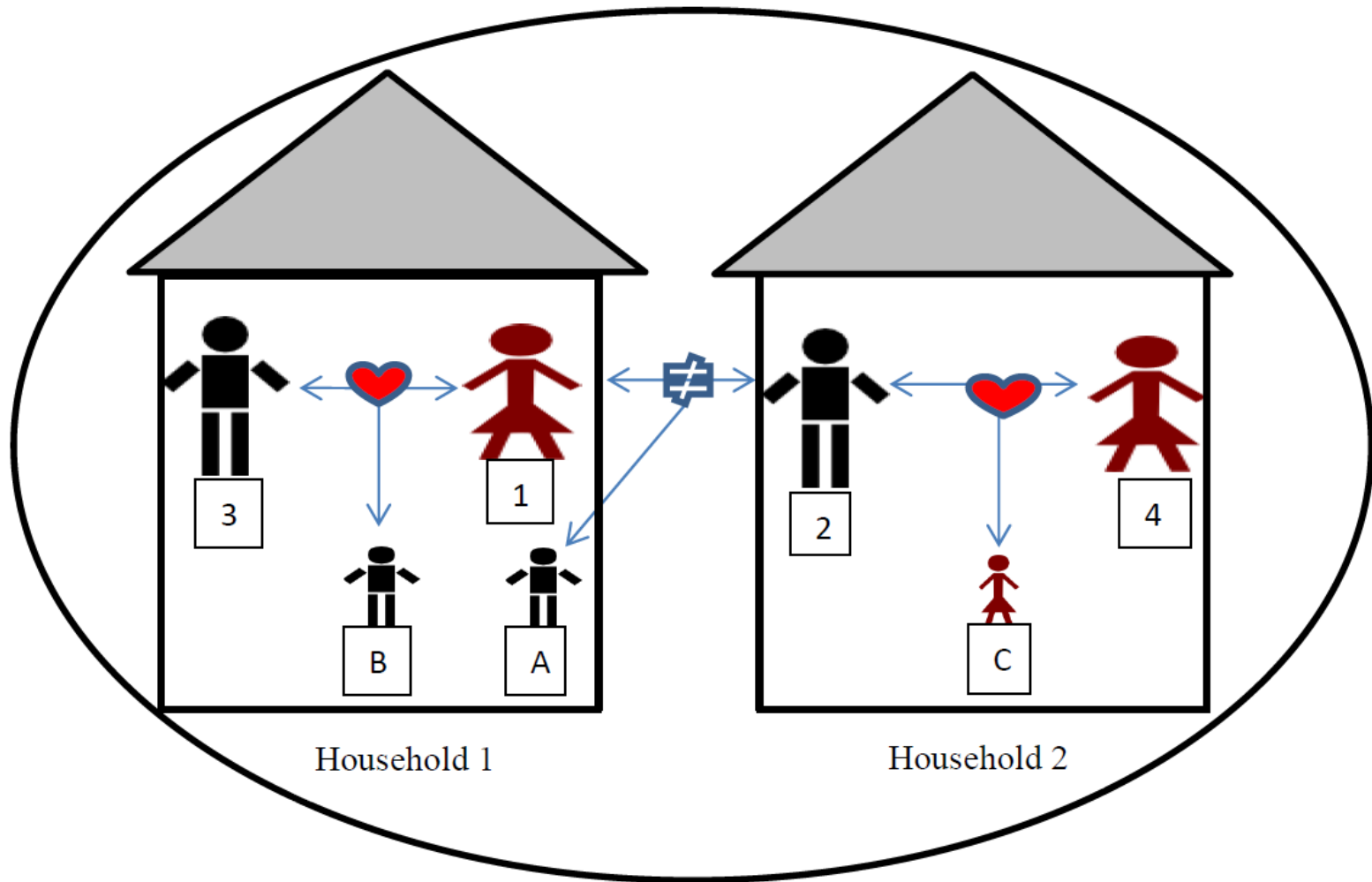
Children's Combined Experiences of Instability and Complexity by 5th Birthday



Unstable: relationship between biological parents ends and/or relationship with new partner begins
Complex: one or more parents has children by a different partner

Source: Tabulated from Waves 1-4 of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Survey, a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Fragile Families are defined as biological parents who were unmarried at time of birth.

Blended Family System from a Child's Point of View



How Complexity Matters for Children:

Mechanism
Resource Dilution
Role Ambiguity
Social Learning
Stigma
Social Support

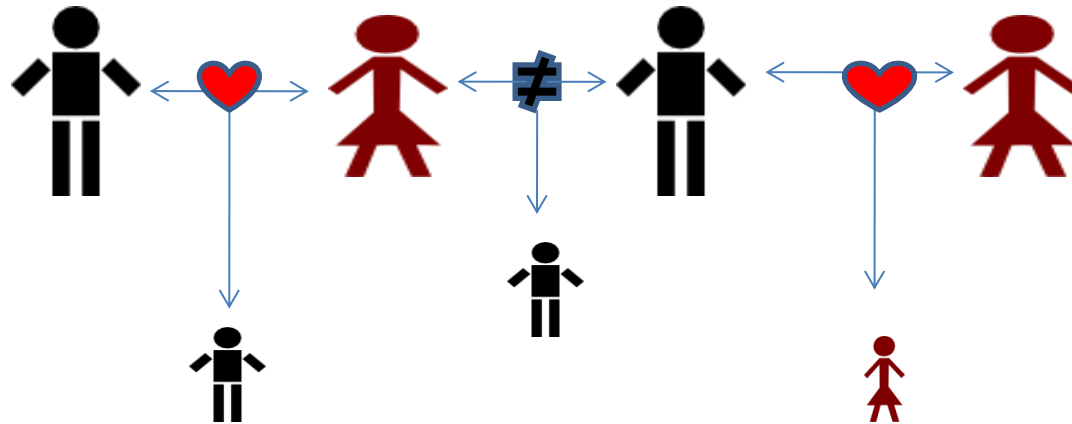
Implications for Child Wellbeing

- Implications for support and caregiving
 - Many men involved in care of infants and young children, but not the same men over time
 - Relationship instability lowers parents' social support, increases parenting stress, and worsens mental health (Beck et al. 2011; Meadows 2009; Harknett & Knab 2007)
- Implications for child well-being
 - Family instability is associated with more externalizing problem behaviors, fewer regular doctor's visits, and more injuries (Cooper et al. 2008; Waldfogel et al. 2010; McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider 2014)

Considerations for Policy & Programming

- Design for *fragile families*, rather than single mothers.
 - Capitalize on “magic moment” around time of birth for promoting paternal involvement and parenting and relationship skills.
 - Foster father involvement even after parents break up.
 - Parental relationship quality is very important.
 - Interventions that also offer employment or job training may be more effective at engaging disadvantaged fathers.
 - Supports not limited to custodial parents.

The End



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