

# The Implications of Multiple Partner Fertility for Efforts to Promote Marriage in Programs Serving Low-Income Mothers and Fathers

By Paula Roberts

Since the 1960's, both divorced and non-marital child bearing have become increasingly common. While divorce rates have stabilized in recent years, non-marital birth rates are still on the rise, reaching 37 percent in 2006. As a result, there has been a three-fold increase in the proportion of children growing up in single parent families since 1960.

The effect of these changes on the well-being of children has generated considerable concern. It has also generated a good deal of social-science research on which family structure is best for children. The research consensus is that, in general, children do best on all kinds of measures when raised by their married,

biological parents; as long as the parents have a low-conflict relationship. Children in these families achieve higher levels of education and are less likely to become teen parents. They are also less likely to be poor and to experience health, behavior, and mental health problems.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, government interest in promoting healthy marriage—particularly for couples with children—has greatly increased. Since 2002, more than 300 healthy marriage programs have been funded by the federal Administration for Children and Families, which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Several state and local governments have also funded marriage promotion activities.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the programs focus on young people who have not yet had children. These programs aim to help young men and women both avoid

becoming parents too soon and to make good choices

### ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

The eleventh in a series on Couples and Marriage Research Policy, this brief summarizes what is known about multiple partner fertility in fragile families, discusses the implications for efforts to promote healthy marriage in this population, and suggests major issues for policy makers and healthy marriage programs in addressing the needs of targeted couples. The author thanks her former CLASP colleagues Vicki Turetsky and Theodora Ooms for reviewing drafts of this document and making helpful suggestions and comments.

This policy brief is informed by a "Marriage Plus" perspective, which has two main goals centered on the well-being of children: (1) to help more children grow up in healthy, married families and (2) when this is not possible, to help parents—whether unmarried, separated, divorced, or remarried—cooperate better in raising their children.

about their potential partners. Others focus on couples who are already married but feel they need help in making their marriages stronger and better.

### About the Author

Paula Roberts was a Senior Staff Attorney at CLASP until her retirement in 2007.

Still others focus on unmarried couples who are experiencing the birth of their first mutual child.

The latter programs ask these couples to consider marrying in order to provide the optimum environment for their children. They also tend to focus on low-income couples, a population often referred to as “fragile families.” How best to serve these families is a subject of ongoing research and debate. One problem is that, until recently, very little was known about these couples. Even less was known about the best way to meet their needs. This is because conventional marriage programs were largely developed for white, middle class couples; adaptations for more diverse populations were rare.

This is beginning to change. The federal government has funded both an African-American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI), and a Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative (HHMI). It has also funded programs through the Administration of Native Americans. Coupled with the federal and state healthy marriage programs mentioned above, these initiatives have generated and publicized a number of curricula specifically addressing the needs of

low-income and minority couples.<sup>3</sup> A number of these initiatives—like the Building Strong Families Project—are designed for couples who have recently become parents. Supports and educational efforts are focused on the parents and their newborn, who are referred to in this brief as the “focal mother,” “focal father,” and “focal child,” respectively.

One issue that has not been greatly explored—even in these newer efforts—is the effect of multiple partner fertility (MPF) on a fragile family’s marital prospects. MPF occurs when one or both of the focal child’s parents have children from other relationships. Recent data suggest that this is an increasingly common phenomenon. Anyone who marries, has children, divorces, remarries, and has subsequent children with their new spouse is part of this trend. So too are those with children outside marriage by more than one partner.<sup>4</sup>

This brief explains the data, discusses the implications for efforts to encourage marriage in fragile families, and looks at some of the programmatic and public policy issues which should be addressed if these efforts are to succeed.

### **How Common is Parenting with More than One Partner?**

For the general population, the data only tell part of the story. The National Survey of America’s Families suggests that about 19 percent of children live with a single (non-cohabiting) mother, 3 percent live with a single (non-cohabiting) father, 3 percent live with their unmarried biological parents, 8 percent live with a biological parent and a step-parent, and 3 percent are living with a biological parent and a non-parent cohabitor. However, this data does not tell us which of these children have half-siblings either in or out of the household.

A more detailed picture of young, urban households has been produced as part of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. This longitudinal study is following a birth cohort of nearly 5,000 children and their parents randomly selected from 75 hospitals in 20 U.S. cities with a population of more than 200,000. Within the sample, there are 3,712 non-marital children. The typical unmarried mother and father are in their late twenties. More than one-third of the unmarried mothers are Hispanic, 44 percent are non-Hispanic African-American, and 21 per-

cent are non-Hispanic white or of other race or ethnicity. Forty-three percent of the mothers and 8 percent of the fathers receive some form of public assistance.<sup>5</sup>

Among the unmarried parents in the Fragile Families study, *59 percent have children by more than one partner*. This includes:

- 22 percent in which only the father has children with another person.
- 17 percent in which only the mother has children with another person.
- 20 percent in which both parents have children with other people.

One factor in *mothers* partnering with more than one man is overall fertility. The more times a mother gives birth, the more likely it is that she will have those children with different partners. Among mothers with two births, 24 percent have children by multiple fathers. This number rises to 48 percent for those having three children, 47 percent for mothers having four children, and 72 percent among those with five or more births.

Other correlates for having children with more than one partner in the Fragile Families

study include race/ethnicity, age at which the mother first gave birth, and father's incarceration history. Black non-Hispanic mothers and fathers are much more likely to have children from more than one partner than parents of other racial/ethnic groups. Mothers who had their first child at a young age are much more likely than others to have several partners. (Corresponding data are not available for fathers.) Fathers who have been incarcerated are twice as likely as fathers who have not been incarcerated to have children by more than one partner.<sup>6</sup>

A recent Wisconsin study finds similar high rates of multiple partnering in a low-income population.<sup>7</sup> This study uses administrative data in child support cases for custodial mothers receiving public assistance in Wisconsin. Thus, the population studied is low-income and includes both urban and non-urban families. Analysis of this data suggests that having children by several partners is quite common for both mothers and fathers. At least 30 percent of custodial mothers had children with more than one partner, as did 46 percent of non-custodial fathers. When both parents of a given child are considered, at least 50 percent

of mothers and 74 percent of fathers either have children with more than one partner or have been involved with someone who has children with another partner.<sup>8</sup>

Other new studies also confirm the high rates of multiple partnering in low-income populations.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it seems that any program focused on unmarried parents of a newborn will have a large number of participants who have children with another person.

### **How Could Multiple Partnering Affect Marital Decisions?**

There are a number of barriers to marriage in fragile families. Economics is a major factor: couples want sufficient financial security, assets, and money for a wedding before they marry. Concern about relationship quality and issues like faithfulness also play a major role.<sup>10</sup> A history of multiple partnering could also affect marital decisions. *Mothers* may be concerned about the effect a marriage will have on the well-being of their pre-existing children. Especially if they believe their pre-existing children will be negatively affected, their receptivity to healthy marriage programs could be compromised.

New mothers with children by previous partners also have both financial and emotional obligations to their pre-existing children. These obligations can make them less desirable as marriage partners to the *father* of the focal child. This is especially so if the mother's prior partners are making neither emotional nor financial contributions to the support of their biological children.

Similarly, *fathers* of focal children might be concerned about the effect of a marriage on the well-being of their pre-existing children. Even if these children are not part of his current household, a father might be concerned about his prior children's relationship with his new partner. He might also be concerned that his old partner(s) and new partner will have different parenting styles and attitudes which could affect the children.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, fathers with children from previous relationships have financial and emotional obligations to those children. To the extent that they meet those obligations, there is less financial support and emotional energy left for the new mother and their mutual child. If these obligations are not being met, the new mother may feel that the

father has not proven his reliability and sense of responsibility toward his children. In either case, he is a less desirable prospect for marriage.

#### **Child and Couple Wellbeing**

**From the focal mothers' perspective.** As noted above, the social-science literature supports the notion that the focal child will benefit if his/her biological parents enter a healthy marriage.

What about the mother's pre-existing children: would they also benefit? If she believes they would, a mother might be more inclined to consider marriage. If she believes there might be some harm to her other children, a mother might hesitate to marry.

If she marries him, the father of the focal child will become a step-parent to her pre-existing children. Social-science research generally finds that children in step-parent families do not do as well as children in married, biological parent families. However, the children are no worse off than children raised in single parent homes.<sup>12</sup> Thus, versus their current situation, the children will likely not be worse-off if their mother marries the father of the focal child.

Moreover, the literature on step-families is largely based

on middle- or upper-income divorced couples, not low-income step-families or minority families. Those studies that do exist suggest that the results might be different for children in these families. For example, one study has found that African-American girls with a step-father present have lower incidence of sexual activity and teen pregnancy than those raised by single mothers.<sup>13</sup>

Conversely, one could look at the situation if the new parents do not marry but live together: the focal child's father would become a social father to the mother's pre-existing children. The literature suggests that there is actually potential harm to the pre-existing children in this instance. One factor is that cohabiting relationships tend to be unstable, and instability is not good for children. In this context, marriage might be seen as a good thing for the pre-existing children (as well as the focal child). This is especially true if the social father and the mother's pre-existing children have a good relationship and this relationship does not disrupt any ongoing contact between the child and his/her biological father.

Data from the Fragile Families study suggest that involvement

by low-income resident social fathers is quite high.<sup>14</sup> One possible explanation for this is that the pre-existing children in the study were young when the social father became part of their lives. It is simply easier to bond with a young child than one who is older (especially an adolescent). Another possible explanation is that mothers who have a child with a new partner make better choices: they partner with men who have more human capital and fewer problems than the biological fathers of their previous children. They may even choose men who are particularly good with children.<sup>15</sup> Whatever the reason, the result is as beneficial for children as involvement by resident biological fathers. High social father involvement is associated with fewer behavioral problems and better overall health of mothers' pre-existing children in the Fragile Families study.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the Fragile Families data suggest that frequent contact with the child's non-resident biological father does not diminish the positive effect of social father involvement. The simple fact is that children with social fathers see very little of their biological fathers: less than one-fifth have daily or even weekly contact. Even when there is regular contact

with the biological father, social father involvement is a plus for the child.

It is inappropriate to draw conclusions based on just one study. However, the Fragile Families data does suggest that, on the whole, social father involvement is positive for pre-existing children in low-income households, especially minority households. Stabilizing these gains in a long-term, committed relationship such as marriage will likely not harm pre-existing children and may be quite beneficial to them. However, more research is needed in order to state this as fact.

**From the focal fathers' perspective.** The effect of multiple partnering on *fathers'* pre-existing children is largely unstudied. It seems logical to assume that the more children a man is involved with, the less attention he will be able to give to each child. Particularly, the children with whom he is not living might get less attention and child support.<sup>17</sup> However, this is a problem whether the father cohabits with the mother of his latest child (and her pre-existing children if she has any) or marries her. It is the presence of multiple children and their needs that is likely to cause strain for the pre-existing chil-

dren, not the legal relationship of the new couple. In any case, this is an issue which also warrants further study.

**From the couples' perspective.** Multiple partnering could also affect a couple's well-being. The existence of multiple obligations to children in different households could affect the quality of the relationship of the parents of the focal child. A paper based on data from the Fragile Families study documents this. This analysis finds that having more than one partner is negatively linked to both the quality of the relationship between the parents of the focal child and their ability to co-parent effectively. Fathers' multiple partner fertility is particularly deleterious, undermining his investment in his current partner and their mutual child as well as his investment in pre-existing children. Mothers' multiple partner fertility does not have as strong an effect and sometimes works in a positive direction, particularly if her pre-existing children are in the household of the focal child. This may be because—in contrast to her former partner—the new partner behaves more responsibly toward all the children in the household. It may also be the result of selection: as noted above, mothers may choose more

child-centered men as their subsequent partners and this choice adds to the quality of the new relationship and the ability to co-parent.

### **Paternity Establishment**

Paternity establishment is both an issue of child well-being and the precursor to financial ties to a child. Except when domestic violence, incest, or rape is an issue, it is usually a benefit to a child to have his or her paternity established. In addition to paternal ties, paternity establishment brings with it kinship networks, knowledge of family health history, and access to benefits such as social security survivors insurance. It may also provide a child with access to the non-resident parent's health care coverage.<sup>18</sup> If a mother with children by more than one partner establishes paternity for all of her children, they could receive these financial and non-financial benefits, easing the strain on her current household. If a father with children by more than one mother establishes paternity for all his children, he will have obligations to those children which could strain his current household.

In the past, paternity establishment was a highly technical legal proceeding. Today, while court cases can still be

brought, the majority of paternities are established early on through the voluntary acknowledgment process. Forms may be signed either in the hospital at the time of the child's birth or at the county or state birth records agency for other children. In some states, the acknowledgments can also be done at health clinics, Head Start programs, and other agencies serving the public.

Parents have likely used this process to establish paternity of the focal child. If they have not yet done so, the Healthy Marriage program may assist them with this process. Indeed, establishing paternity of the focal child may well be a condition of participation in a given program. What about the couple's pre-existing children? Should mothers be urged to establish paternity of the biological fathers of their other children? Should fathers be urged to establish their paternity of any children they know are theirs and whose fatherhood has not been acknowledged?

**From the focal mothers' perspective.** While in-hospital paternity establishment programs and the voluntary acknowledgment process have greatly increased the number of children whose paternity has been established,

there are still a significant number of low-income children for whom paternity is an issue.<sup>19</sup> Thus, a mother with children by more than one partner may have established paternity for all or just some of her pre-existing children. In some cases, her prior partner will have wanted to acknowledge his fatherhood and participate in the raising of his child. In some cases, he may be a reluctant parent, having been brought into the picture by the state child support agency.<sup>20</sup> In other cases, the father will have disappeared or the mother will not have pursued paternity for a variety of reasons including domestic violence, incarceration, or a feeling that the father is likely to be a bad influence on the child (e.g., is an addict or alcoholic).

To the extent that lack of paternity establishment is a proxy for lack of biological father involvement, her pre-existing children are largely fatherless. Her new partner may be willing to take on the role of father to the children either as their social father (if the couple cohabits) or their step-father (if the couple marries), and this will benefit the children. (See discussion above.) Should the mother, nevertheless, be urged to establish paternity with her

pre-existing children's biological father? What if he is not interested? What if paternity has not previously been established because of the mother's judgment about the inadvisability of the biological father's being involved in the children's lives (particularly where violence and addiction are concerns)?

**From the focal fathers' perspective.** A man with children by more than one partner may have established paternity for all of his children, some of his children, or none of his children. Unless there are serious concerns about rape, incest, or domestic violence, as a matter of social policy most would agree that he should establish paternity for all of his biological children. Indeed, this is a stated principle of most Responsible Fatherhood programs.

However, just as mothers have a variety of reasons for not establishing paternity, fathers too may have reasons. Perhaps the mothers of their children have not wanted them to establish paternity, preferring an informal relationship or no relationship at all. Perhaps the children now have new social or step-fathers who have taken responsibility for them, and it is not clear that they would benefit from having their bio-

logical father take a more active role in their lives. Should fathers still be encouraged to step up? Should a father's degree of prior involvement make a difference?

**From the couples' perspective.** While the unacknowledged children might benefit from having their paternity established, establishing the paternity of their biological father could add a level of complexity to their lives. It also injects complexity into the relationship of the parents of the focal child. Issues of co-parenting by three parties, as well as potential jealousy about former partners are likely to arise. Moreover, there are serious financial implications to establishing paternity as discussed below.

#### **Child Support**

Establishing paternity is a precursor to child support. Once paternity is established, a support order, based on the state's child support guidelines is usually set. These numeric guidelines are based on the parents' income and the number of children involved. They are used in all cases unless the result would be unjust or inequitable.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, few states have considered multiple partner issues in developing their guidelines, so

support orders for couples with more than one partner can vary greatly depending on the state issuing the order.

Major issues include: 1) how many formal support orders a paying parent already has; 2) whether there are children in the paying parent's household; 3) whether or not the ordered support is being paid; and 4) the children's birth order. There is great variation in how these issues are addressed. Some states consider only court ordered support and do not give credit for informal support paid by a non-resident parent. Some consider whether the non-resident has other children in his/her household that he/she is supporting, others do not. Most consider only support actually paid. Some favor pre-existing children over newer children. A discussion of all the guideline issues is beyond the scope of this brief. However, the size of a support order can have both positive and negative consequences on marital decisions.

**From the focal mothers' perspective.** In the vast majority of cases, the mother of the focal child will be the custodial parent of her pre-existing children. Child support can provide a real benefit to such mothers. The addi-

tional income lessens financial strain. It may also ease the fears of her new partner that he is taking on complete responsibility for the mother's pre-existing children. For these reasons, once the decision to pursue paternity has been made, few mothers would not want to obtain child support for their pre-existing children.

**From the focal fathers' perspective.** Some fathers are custodial parents and might want to pursue support from the biological mothers of their children. However, in the vast majority of cases, the father of the focal child will be a non-resident parent to his pre-existing children. If the children live in several different households because he has fathered children with many different partners, his financial obligation to them will be quite high in almost every state. While some adjustments may be made to leave the father with income to live on, only New Jersey authorizes its courts to review all orders of support and adjust them in a consolidated proceeding.<sup>22</sup> In other states, there will be multiple proceedings and the court or hearing examiner will not necessarily know what other orders exist, or their amounts. Unless the father aggressively raises the issue,

the multiple orders may even exceed his income.

In addition, if he has not been paying support, an arrearage amount will also be established. In addition to current support, he will have to pay an amount on the arrears each month until they are fully liquidated.<sup>23</sup>

**From the couples' perspective.** If only the mother of the focal child has children with other partners, then establishing paternity and pursuing support for pre-existing children is usually a plus. The child support will provide additional income to the household with which to meet the needs of the pre-existing child or children.

If the father of the focal child has other children (especially if these children have many different mothers), paying child support can pose genuine problems. Such a father may have so large a financial obligation to his pre-existing children that he will not be a good provider for the focal child. This may affect his desire to marry. It may also affect how the focal child's mother assesses the situation: a man with little income to bring to the household due to a lot of child support obligations may not fit the profile of a man she wishes to marry.

### **Step-Parent Deeming**

One additional issue that needs to be addressed is the financial obligation of the father of the focal child to the mother's pre-existing children. So long as the couple does not marry, the father of the focal child has no financial obligations to the pre-existing children. However, if the couple marries, he becomes the children's step-father, and in many states he will be financially obligated to help support them as long as he is married to their mother.

Even if he has no financial obligation to the pre-existing children under state law, public assistance policy may count his income in determining eligibility and benefits available to the pre-existing children from Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) or other public benefits programs. This is referred to as "step-parent deeming." If the pre-existing children are receiving TANF benefits, they may lose those benefits or have them severely reduced as a result of the marriage between their mother and the father of the focal child. This financial loss could make marriage unattractive to the couple.

## Conclusion and Implications

The data suggest that the Building Strong Families Program, as well as other initiatives serving low-income unmarried parents and step-parents, and responsible fatherhood programs, will be dealing with multiple partner issues. However, African-American healthy fatherhood and marriage programs are the most likely to see this as a major issue, since high rates of multiple partnering are associated with high fertility, early parenting, and male incarceration, all issues of particular salience in the African-American community.

Programs that feel unequipped to deal with the issues raised by multiple partnering that are discussed in this paper may want to screen their cases to eliminate couples where one or both parents of the focal child has children by other partners. However, if a program does not want to screen out these couples, it will need to include multiple partner issues in its curriculum and support services as suggested below.

### Child Well-Being

One area that programs need to address is child well-being. While the research is still in its

infancy, materials that explain the relationship between child well-being and healthy marriage must address more than the well-being of the focal child. Attention should be paid to the recent findings on low-income children in step-parent and cohabiting families. This would help the parents explore what is best for their mutual child and any pre-existing children in the household. In particular, the positive role of social fathers for low-income children should be explored and explained. Fears about this disrupting any existing relationship with a biological father should also be addressed. While the research is still thin, it does support the notion that pre-existing children will not be harmed if their mother marries a new partner—especially if the new partner is truly involved as a social father to the pre-existing children.

There is less information about the effect on the well-being of a father's pre-existing children who are not in the household when their non-resident father marries. Nonetheless, the issues that might arise (e.g. conflict between the child and his/her non-resident step-mother, conflicts between the pre-existing child's biological mother and the step-mother)

should be explored. As part of the parenting curriculum for new parents, trainers might raise these issues and help parents to develop ways to minimize these conflicts.

Programs will also need to be honest about the potential of pre-existing children (particularly the father's) to negatively affect the quality of a relationship and ability to co-parent. Just making parents aware that this can be an issue may help them identify the problems if they arise and talk them through.

### Paternity Establishment

Programs will also need to address issues of paternity establishment when one or both parents have pre-existing children whose paternity has not been established. Parents will need guidance on discussing the implications of formal paternity establishment for their pre-existing children and for their own relationship. For many couples, this may be a very complex discussion, as the reasons that paternity was not established for the children may raise painful memories.

### Child Support Issues

Similarly, child support issues will need to be explored and explained. In this regard, programs may also wish to be

involved in public policy in this area. For example, states review their child support guidelines at least once every four years. As part of the review, there are typically public hearings. Program staff and participants might want to testify at these hearings about the need for better rules for families with multiple partner issues. The guidelines may need to be adjusted or the latitude of the decision-maker in deciding when to make an adjustment under the “unjust or inequitable” standard might need clarification. Certainly, the idea of bringing all the potential orders into one hearing so that the full picture of an obligated parent’s liability is known should be considered.

#### Public Benefits

In addition, programs and their participants might want to address the public benefits implications of multiple partnering, including the issue of step-parent deeming, if the state has such a rule. If the program has seen the negative effect of such a rule on marital decision-making, public officials should be alerted to the problem.<sup>24</sup>

In short, there are many implications of having children by more than one partner for both healthy marriage programs and the participants in

these programs. Research is still in its infancy and practical experience is just now emerging. However, there can be no doubt that multiple partner fertility raises serious issues for low-income couples contemplating marriage.

#### Endnotes

- 1 For an excellent synopsis of this literature see Mary Parke, *Are Married Parents Really Better for Children? What Research Says About the Effects of Family Structure on Child Well-Being*, Center for Law and Social Policy, 2003, <http://www.clasp.org>. See also: Paul Amato, “The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social and Emotional Well-being of the Next Generation,” in *Marriage and Child Well-being*, Sara McLanahan, Elisabeth Donahue, and Ron Haskins, eds., The Future of Children, Princeton University and the Brookings Institution, Vol.15, No.12, Fall 2005, [www.futureofchildren.org](http://www.futureofchildren.org).
- 2 For more information on these efforts see Theodora Ooms, Stacey Bouchet, and Mary Parke, *Beyond Marriage Licenses: Efforts in States to Strengthen Marriage and Two-Parent Families*, Center for Law and Social Policy, 2004, <http://www.clasp.org>.
- 3 See Theodora Ooms, *Adapting Healthy Marriage Programs for Disadvantaged and Culturally Diverse Populations: What are the Issues?*, Center for Law and Social Policy, 2007, <http://www.clasp.org>.
- 4 While this brief focuses on fragile families, many of the issues discussed are also salient for step-families and other blended families, regardless of their income.
- 5 For a more detailed analysis of the Fragile Families Project see Mary Parke, *Who Are “Fragile Families” and What Do We Know About Them?*, Center for Law and Social Policy, 2004, <http://www.clasp.org>.
- 6 Fragile Families Research Brief No. 36, *The Prevalence and Correlates Of Multipartnered Fertility Among Urban U.S. Parents*, 2006, <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/ffpubs>.
- 7 Daniel Meyer, Maria Cancian, and Steven Cook, *Multiple Partner Fertility: Incidence and Implications for Child Support Policy*, 2005, Institute for Research on Poverty, <http://www.irp.wisc.edu>.
- 8 The data set is not exactly comparable to the Fragile Families data set so the differences are understandable. The point is that in both studies, the incidence of multiple partnering is high enough to warrant serious consideration.
- 9 See Marcia Carlson and Frank Furstenberg, Jr., *The Consequences of Multi-Partner Fertility for Parental Involvement and Relationships*, 2007, for a full discussion of the recent research on the extent of multiple partnering.

- 10 For further discussion see Kathy Edin and Joanna Reed, “Why Don’t They Just Get Married? Barriers to Marriage Among the Disadvantaged,” in *Marriage and Child Well-being*, Sara McLanahan, Elisabeth Donahue, and Ron Haskins, eds., The Future of Children, Princeton University and the Brookings Institution, Vol.15, No.12, Fall 2005, [www.futureofchildren.org](http://www.futureofchildren.org).
- 11 Another major concern is the new mothers’ distrust of the ongoing relationships new fathers have with their former partners. That this can be a serious issue has been documented in several recent studies. See, Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*, University of California Press, 2005.
- 12 For a discussion of the research in this area see Chandler Arnold, *Children and Stepfamilies: A Snapshot*, Center for Law and Social Policy, 1998, [www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org).
- 13 Mary Parke, *supra*.
- 14 Sharon Bzostek, *Social Fathers and Child Wellbeing: A Research Note*, 2007, <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu>.
- 15 Sharon Bzostek, Marcia Carlson, and Sara McLanahan, *Repartnering After a Nonmarital Birth: Does Mother Know Best?*, 2007, <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu>.
- 16 Bzostek, *supra*.
- 17 Two papers that do address this topic are Wendy Manning and Pamela Smock, *New Families and Non-Resident Father-Child Visitation*, 78 SOCIAL FORCES, 1999, pgs. 87-116 and Wendy Manning and Pamela Smock, “Swapping” Families: Serial Parenting and Economic Support for Children, 62 Journal of Marriage and the Family 11, 2000.
- 18 For more on the benefits of paternity establishment and details about the voluntary acknowledgement process see Paula Roberts, “Establishing Paternity Through Voluntary Acknowledgment,” *Clearinghouse Review*, March-April, 2007.
- 19 Paula Roberts, *supra*.
- 20 As a condition of eligibility for Medicaid and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), mothers are required to cooperate with the state in pursuing paternity. In some states, Food Stamp recipients are also required to cooperate in establishing paternity. The state child support agency is responsible for helping parents with this process. For a more detailed description, see Roberts, *supra*.
- 21 For an excellent explication of child support guidelines and state’s treatment of parents experiencing multiple partnering see Tonya Brito, *Child Support Guidelines and Complicated Families: An Analysis of Cross-State Variation in Legal Treatment of Multiple Partner Fertility*, Institute for Research on Poverty, 2005, <http://www.irp.wisc.edu>.
- 22 For a good discussion of the many issues and approaches see Tonya Brito, *Child Support Guidelines and Complicated Families: An Analysis of Cross-State Variation in Legal Treatment of Multiple-Partner Fertility*, Institute for Research on Poverty, 2005, <http://www.irp.edu>.
- 23 A few states do forgive arrears owed by parents of children receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families if the parents marry or reunite. These arrears are owed to the state, so the state can forgive them if it chooses. However, no state forgives arrears owed to the custodial parent and no state forgives state-owed arrears to facilitate an obligated parent’s marriage to a new partner.
- 24 There are also some public benefits issues related to low-income couples and marriage that are broader than just multiple partnering. For a discussion of these issues, see Paula Roberts and Mark Greenberg, *Rethinking Welfare Rules From a Marriage-Plus Perspective*, Center for Law and Social Policy, 2005, <http://www.clasp.org>.

## Couples and Marriage Series

March 2008  
Brief No. 11

### **ABOUT CLASP**

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) is a national non-profit that works to improve the lives of low-income people. CLASP's mission is to improve the economic security, educational and workforce prospects, and

family stability of low-income parents, children, and youths and to secure equal justice for all.

The Couples and Marriage Policy Brief series seeks to inform the debate about public policies to strengthen and stabilize two-parent families and marriage. The

series focuses on the effects on child well-being, with a special interest in couple relationships and marriage in low-income communities.

This series of briefs is made possible, in part, by funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

CLASP POLICY BRIEF

Couples and Marriage Series, No. 11

[www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org)

202.906.8000 main  
202.842.2885 fax

Washington, DC 20005

400

1015 15th Street, NW, Suite