

# *Fragile Families One Year Later: Oakland, California*

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Any opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect any position of the Public Policy Institute of California.

## INTRODUCTION

Non-marital childbearing has dramatically increased over the last forty years. Today nearly one of every three births occurs outside of marriage. Unmarried parents are disproportionately black and Hispanic and are at greater risk of poverty and family dissolution than traditional families. Thus, policymakers are particularly interested in how these families and their children fare. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was designed to increase self-sufficiency and reduce dependence on welfare. The new legislation set time limits on welfare receipt, required welfare recipients to work, and required unmarried fathers to establish paternity and pay child support. More recently, the Bush administration is calling on states to develop programs to promote marriage and union stability among unwed parents. Unfortunately, very little is known about the resources of and relationships between unmarried parents, or the ways in which government policies affect their lives. Consequently, public perceptions are often shaped by unsubstantiated myths about these couples, and policymakers and community leaders are forced to rely on anecdotal evidence when designing policies and programs to improve their lives.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is designed to redress this lack of knowledge by providing previously unavailable information about the conditions and capabilities of new unmarried parents, the nature of parents' relationships, and the factors—including public policies—that encourage or discourage family formation. We use the term *fragile families* to describe unmarried parents and their children, first to underscore the fact that they are families, and second to highlight the fact that they have high rates of economic and union instability. By gaining a more complete understanding of the lives of unmarried parents, community leaders and policymakers will be able to design programs and policies that more effectively meet their needs and those of their children.

*Unmarried fathers continue to be involved with their children in the year following the birth. Fifty-four percent of Oakland children who were born outside marriage were living with their fathers and another 16 percent see their fathers at least once a week.*

Oakland, California is one of twenty cities across the United States in which parents are participating in the Fragile Families Study.<sup>1</sup> The study is following a birth cohort of approximately 3,700 children born to unmarried parents. The national sample is representative of all non-marital births to parents residing in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. The data also are representative of non-marital births within each city. A comparison group of approximately 1,200 children born to married couples is also being followed.

In Oakland, mothers and fathers of newborn children were interviewed between February and June of 1998, shortly after the mothers gave birth. Results from the interviews with approximately 250 unmarried parents were presented in the *Oakland Baseline Report* (November 1999).<sup>2</sup>

Approximately 12 to 18 months later (between May and October of 1999), parents were asked to participate in a follow-up survey. Overall, 85 percent of the mothers and 71 percent of the fathers in Oakland completed the follow-up interview. An additional nine fathers who were not interviewed at baseline completed a follow-up interview. The findings presented in this report are based on interviews with 212 mothers and 144 fathers, all of whom were unmarried when their child was born. Four findings stand out:

- Among unwed parents, cohabiting relationships are more stable than other types of relationships. Overall, 85 percent of the couples in Oakland that were cohabiting at baseline were still living together at the follow-up survey.
- Unmarried fathers continue to be involved with their children in the year following the birth. Fifty-four percent of Oakland children who were born outside marriage were living with their fathers and 34 percent of children not living with their fathers have contact at least once a week.
- Parents in fragile families—and mothers in particular—are in precarious economic circumstances. Thirty-nine percent of mothers and 16 percent of fathers report no earnings from regular employment in the year following the birth of their child. Among parents who worked, mothers report mean earnings of \$6,344 and fathers report earnings of \$15,567. Forty-eight percent of mothers report receiving welfare, and 58 percent report receiving food stamps during the previous year.
- Most children born outside of marriage are healthy and doing well at 12 to 18 months of age. Seventy-five percent of mothers report that their child’s health is “very good” or “excellent,” and only three percent report that their child’s health is “fair” or “poor.”

## I. PARENTS' DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

**Table 1. Parents' Demographic Characteristics at 12 Months**

	Mothers (%)	Fathers (%)
<b>Age</b>		
Under 20	11	3
20 to 24	36	24
25 to 29	29	32
30 and over	24	41
<b>Average age difference</b>		
Standard Deviation	-	3.2
	-	6.1
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	50	46
High school only	30	32
Some college	18	21
College and higher	2	1
<b>School/Training Enrollment</b>		
	21	8
<b>Race/ethnicity<sup>1</sup></b>		
White, non-Hispanic	2	2
Black, non-Hispanic	58	56
Hispanic	33	37
Other	7	6
<b>Non-U.S. Birth<sup>2</sup></b>		
	31	35
<b>Other children</b>		
Mother has more than one child with father	35	-
Mother has child(ren) with another man	50	-
Father has child(ren) with another woman	43	-
<b>Total number of respondents</b>		
	212	144

<sup>1</sup> Race and ethnicities are based on baseline reports. Nine fathers who were interviewed at 12 months were not interviewed at baseline: information on their race/ethnicity is based on mother's reports.

<sup>2</sup> Nativity is based on baseline reports. Information on nativity is missing on nine fathers who were interviewed at 12 months but not at baseline.

The demographic composition of the Oakland sample at the follow-up interview is very similar to the composition at the baseline interview (Table 1). Most of the parents are in their twenties and most of the fathers are roughly three years older than the mothers.<sup>3</sup>

Parents' educational attainment is strikingly low as compared with state and national averages. Only 16 percent of U.S. and 20 percent of California residents age 18 and older lack a high school degree.<sup>4</sup> Yet, about half of both the mothers and fathers in the Fragile Families Study have no high-school diploma. About one-half of parents have at least a high-school education, and one-fifth have more than a high school degree. Twenty-one percent of mothers and eight percent of fathers report that they are enrolled in some type of school or training program at the time of the follow-up

survey. The racial composition of the sample is predominantly black and Hispanic. Fifty-eight percent of mothers and 56 percent of fathers are black, over one-third of parents are Hispanic, and less than 10 percent are of other racial or ethnic backgrounds (including non-Hispanic white). About one-third of the parents were born outside of the U.S. Blended families are common. Fifty percent of the mothers and 43 percent of the fathers have children with other partners. Thirty-five percent of couples have other children together.

## II. PARENTS' HEALTH STATUS AND SUBSTANCE USE

**Table 2. Parents' Health Status and Substance Use at 12 Months**

	Mothers (%)	Fathers (%)
<b>Health</b>		
Self-reported health status		
Excellent	26	33
Very good or good	54	46
Fair or poor	20	21
Any serious health problem	11	15
<b>Substance Use</b>		
Used marijuana in past month	7	13
Used hard drugs in past month	2	0
Smoked cigarettes in past month	27	39
Had five or more drinks in one day in past month	1	4
Drinking or drug use has interfered with relationships or managing day-to-day	3	6
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>144</b>

In general, Oakland parents report good health (Table 2), however the self-reported values are far below national averages. Twenty percent of parents reported being in fair or poor health, but the national average for males and females is far lower, with only five percent of males and six percent of females reporting fair or poor health<sup>5</sup>. Eleven percent of mothers and 15 percent of fathers report having a serious health problem. In terms of self-reported health behaviors at twelve months, seven percent of mothers and 13 percent of fathers report using marijuana in the past month. For hard drug use, the percentages are lower, two percent reported for mothers and zero percent reported for fathers. Also, one percent of mothers and four percent of fathers report having five or more drinks in a single day at least once in the past month. Only three percent of mothers and six percent of fathers report that drinking or drug use interfere with their daily lives. In contrast, smoking is relatively common among the parents in our sample: 27 percent of mothers and 39 percent of fathers report smoking cigarettes in the last month.

### III. RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN FRAGILE FAMILIES

#### *Mother-Father Relationships*

Policymakers were surprised to learn that 86 percent of the unmarried parents in Oakland were romantically involved with each other at the time their child was born; about half of unmarried parents were living together. Given the high prevalence of romantic relationships at birth, we were particularly interested in whether, and how, these relationships might have changed in the year between the birth and follow-up interview.

*Over half of the parents that were re-interviewed are still living together at the time of the follow-up survey.*

According to the first row of Table 3, over half of the parents that were re-interviewed are still living together at the time of the follow-up survey: Seven percent are married, and 47 are cohabiting. Six percent are in a “visiting” relationship (romantically involved but living separately), 19 percent are “just friends,” and 21 percent of mothers are not in any kind of relationship with the child’s father.<sup>6</sup>

Table 3 also compares couple-relationships at the time of the follow-up survey to relationships at birth (figures shown are percentages of the row totals). Co-residence

**Table 3. Parents’ Relationship Status at 12 Months (as reported by Mother) Percentage (%)**

	Married	Cohabiting	Visiting	Friends	No Relationship <sup>1</sup>	Totals
Overall	7	47	6	19	21	100
By relationship status at child's birth (percent of row):						
Cohabiting	10	75	2	9	4	100
Visiting	4	27	15	29	25	100
Friends	0	0	0	33	67	100
No relationship	0	0	0	27	73	100
<b>Total number of Respondents<sup>2</sup></b>	14	99	13	41	44	211

<sup>1</sup>Five couples who are separated/widowed/divorced are included in this category.

<sup>2</sup>One case is missing on the relationship status variable, so the columns add to 211

appears to be an important predictor of the continuity of relationships. The vast majority of cohabiting parents are still living together (either married or cohabiting) at the follow-up interview. Seventy-five percent of cohabiting couples at baseline are still cohabiting, 10 percent are married, and most of the remaining 15 percent are friends. Visiting relationships are much less stable, with most couples transitioning from visiting to another type of relationship by the time of the follow-up survey. Only 15 percent of visiting couples are still “visiting” a year later. Approximately one-third of visitors at baseline increased their commitment as twenty-seven percent are now living together and four percent are married. Over half are no longer romantically involved: 29 percent report being “just friends,” and 25 percent report having no relationship with the baby’s father.

None of the couples that were *not* romantically involved at baseline became involved between the baseline and follow-up interview. Among mothers who said they were friends with the father of their baby at baseline, only one-third reported being friends at the follow-up interview, with two-thirds indicating that they had no relationship at all with the baby’s father. Of mothers who said they had no relationship with the father at baseline, 27 percent now say they are friends, and 73 percent continue to have no relationship.

**Table 4. Relationship Quality of Romantically-involved Mothers at 12 Months**

All Romantically- Involved Mothers (%)	
<b>Since child's birth, the parents' relationship has:</b>	
Gotten better	63
Stayed the same	8
Gotten worse	29
<b>Chances of Marrying the Baby's Father<sup>1</sup></b>	
No or a little chance	14
"50-50" chance	16
Pretty good chance	28
Almost certain chance	41
<b>Father "often":</b>	
Is fair and willing to compromise	43
Expresses affection or love	74
Encourages or helps	64
<b>Father "sometimes" or "often":</b>	
Tries to keep mother from seeing/talking to family	27
Tries to prevent mother from going to work or school	15
Withholds money, made ask for money or took money	10
Insults or criticizes mother or her ideas	49
Mother was ever cut, bruised or hurt in fight with father	5
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>126</b>

<sup>1</sup>Eleven percent of romantically-involved parents had married since the child's birth. The percentages for this question are based on the 111 romantically-involved mothers who did not marry the baby's father.

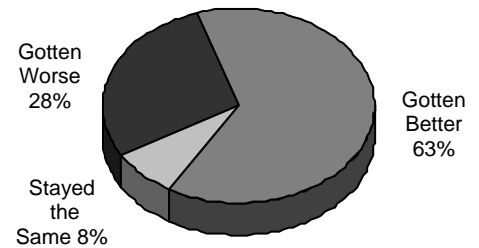


### Quality of Romantic Relationships

Programs designed to promote marriage often focus on increasing parents' relationship skills. The assumption behind these programs is that better skills will lead to better relationship quality, better parenting, and, ultimately, healthier children. Figure 2 provides data on the quality of the relationships between parents who are still romantically involved at the time of the follow-up interview. Sixty-three percent of romantically involved mothers report that their relationship has gotten better since their baby was born.

These figures are surprising, given that the birth of a child is often a difficult transition for many parents.

Figure 2. According to the Mother, Since Child's Birth Parents' Relationship Has:



Most unmarried mothers who are romantically involved with the child's father one year after giving birth are still quite optimistic about their future with the baby's father. Seventy percent report that their chances of marrying the baby's father are "pretty good" or "almost certain," and an additional 16 percent say their chances are "50-50." We also asked romantically involved mothers about the positive aspects of their relationships with the fathers. Forty-three percent of the mothers say that the father is often "fair and willing to compromise," 64 percent say that he often "encourages or helps her," and 74 percent say he often "expresses affection or love" towards her. We also examined a range of destructive behaviors that fathers might exhibit towards mothers. Just under half of the mothers report that the father sometimes or often insults or criticizes them or their ideas. Over one-quarter report that the father sometimes or often keeps them from seeing or talking to their families, 15 percent report that the father tries to prevent them from going to work or school, and 10 percent report that the father withholds, takes, or makes them ask for money. Five percent of romantically involved mothers report having been cut, bruised, or seriously hurt in a fight with the baby's father since the birth of the child. This figure rises to nine percent when asked of all mothers in the survey. The prevalence of destructive behaviors among unmarried parents indicates that many of these mothers would benefit from policies to improve their relationship and that some might be better off if they were *not* involved with their baby's father.

*The high rate of paternity establishment and the fact that paternity was initiated by both parents indicates a high level of commitment between unmarried parents.*

Among couples that had broken up at the time of the follow-up interview, "relationship problems" was by far the most common reason given for the breakup. About three-fourths of the mothers gave this reason, 11 percent cited "distance," 11 percent reported "violence or abuse," and three percent said the relationship ended because the father was incarcerated. (Results not reported in table). Notably, financial problems were rarely mentioned as a reason for ending a romantic relationship.

## IV. PARENTING AND CHILD CARE

### *Fathers' Commitment*

Questions about how and to what extent a father should be involved in his child's life are at the core of many moral, social, and economic debates today. A striking finding from the baseline interviews of the Fragile Families Study was that most unmarried fathers in Oakland were highly involved with the mothers of their children during pregnancy and around the time of birth. At baseline, 90 percent of the mothers reported that they planned to put the father's name on the birth certificate, and approximately 80 percent reported that the father had contributed financial support or helped in other ways (such as providing transportation) during the pregnancy. Ninety-five percent of the Oakland fathers who were interviewed told us that they wanted to be involved in their child's life in the future. Given these early findings, we were eager to see if the fathers' initial expectations were sustained in the year following the birth.

Table 5 presents mothers' reports of paternity, and formal and informal child support. Establishing paternity is an important prerequisite to the provision of long-term child

**Table 5. Fathers' Financial and Legal Obligations**

	Mothers (%)
<b>Paternity Establishment</b>	
Father's legal paternity has been established	59
Paternity was established at the hospital (of those who established legal paternity)	92
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	212
	Mothers Not Cohabiting <sup>1</sup> (%)
<b>Financial and In-Kind Support</b>	
Legal child support order is in place	16
Have informal agreement about support <sup>2</sup>	28
Father "often" or "sometimes:"	
Buy clothes or toys for child	47
Buys child care items, such as diapers and baby wipes	42
Buys food or formula for child	33
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	99

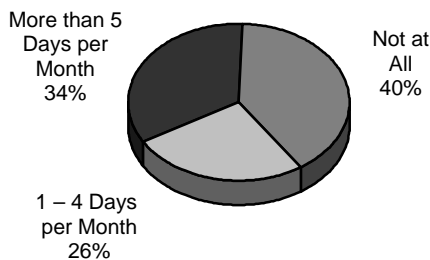
<sup>1</sup>Only the 99 mothers who were not married or cohabiting all or most of the time with the baby's father were asked questions about child support arrangements or informal support arrangements.

<sup>2</sup>Asked of the 81 unmarried mothers in Oakland who do not live with their baby's father *and* who have no legal child support order.

support. Overall, paternity has been legally established for 59 percent of the children in the Oakland sample. The vast majority of parents for whom paternity has been established—92 percent—report that this was done at the hospital. The high rate of paternity establishment and the fact that paternity was initiated by both parents indicates a high level of commitment between unmarried parents.

Paternity is only a first step in making sure that unmarried fathers support their children. A child is not entitled to financial support from a non-residential parent until a legal child support order is in place and here the findings are less positive. Only 16 percent of Oakland children with a non-cohabiting parent have a legal child support order.<sup>7</sup> The low rate of formal child support orders may be due to the fact that mothers on welfare do not receive any of the child support that is paid through the formal system. Rather, if a mother is on welfare, the money goes to the welfare agency to reduce the cost of public assistance. Because of this policy, parents may be reluctant to cooperate with the child support enforcement system. Approximately one-quarter of mothers without a legal child support order receive informal support from the fathers. In addition, most non-resident fathers provide some kind of in-kind support to their children. Forty-seven percent buy clothes or toys, 42 percent buy diapers or “baby wipes,” and 33 percent buy food or formula for their child.

**Figure 3. Father-Child Contact for Non-Cohabiting Parents**



#### *Father-Child Interaction*

Table 6 provides information on fathers' contact and interactions with children. Recall that 54 percent of the fathers are living with their child at the time of the follow-up interview (Table 3), and most of these men have daily contact with their child. Among the fathers who live apart from their child, one-third see their child more than once a week (at least 5 days per month), and only 40 percent see their child less than once a month.

Fathers who live with their child are likely to engage in various activities with him or her. According to mothers' reports, 92 percent of resident fathers play with their child nearly every day, 65 percent feed or give a bottle to the child, and 19 percent read to the child. In contrast, only 34 percent of non-cohabiting fathers play with their child nearly every day, only 26 percent feed their child, and only eight percent read to him or her.

#### *Mother-Child Interaction*

Oakland mothers also have frequent, stimulating interactions with their children, regardless of whether or not they are cohabiting with the child's father. About two-thirds of the mothers report that they play games like “peek-a-boo” and “gotcha” with their child, two-thirds report singing songs or nursery rhymes, and about 28 percent say they read stories to their child almost daily.

### *Child Care Arrangements*

Childcare arrangements are important factors affecting children's health. Furthermore, a mother's access to safe and reliable childcare affects her ability to obtain and keep a job. Particularly for women who face work requirements on TANF, access to adequate childcare is very important. Overall, nearly half of the children in the Oakland sample are cared for on a regular basis by someone other than their mother. The type of care that children receive does not differ much by whether the mother is cohabiting or not. About 50 percent of children are cared for by their grandmother or other relative, and about 30 percent are in day care centers. Over 80 percent of mothers say that they are "very satisfied" with their main child-care provider and only 15-18 percent report that they missed work or school because their childcare arrangement fell through. This finding is encouraging given that the typical Oakland child who is cared for by someone other than his or her mother spends slightly over four days per week in childcare regardless of cohabitation status.

*A mother's access to safe and reliable childcare affects her ability to obtain and keep a job.*

## **V. PARENTS' ACCESS TO PUBLIC AND PRIVATE RESOURCES**

We now turn to a description of parents' access to and use of public and private resources. This information is important in determining the needs of fragile families, as well as in assessing their potential and actual sources of support. We are particularly interested in monitoring parents' "income packaging" over time and observing any changes in their packaging, as welfare reform continues to unfold.

Table 7 presents information about parents' economic resources, including support from friends or relatives. These data speak to important issues such as mothers' and fathers' ability to financially support their children, the kind of help they can count on in times of crisis, and the economic conditions in which these families are living. Overall, the parents' economic resources were generally meager at the time of the follow-up interview, with mothers having fewer economic resources than fathers.

### *Parents' Employment*

Oakland had a low unemployment rate—about 3.3 percent—at the time of the follow-up survey.<sup>8</sup> Table 7 indicates that seven out of ten fathers and four out of ten mothers that we interviewed were employed in the formal economy in the week prior to the interview. Particularly surprising is the low employment rate for women. In part, this finding may be related to the high rate of welfare receipt among unmarried mothers in Oakland (see Table 8). On average, employed fathers are working more than full time (43 hours per week), and employed mothers are working close to full time (36 hours per week). About six percent of mothers and 16 percent of fathers report working more than one regular job simultaneously at some point in the last year.

**Table 6. Parenting and Child Care**

	Cohabiting/Married (%)	Not Cohabiting (%)
<b>Father-child contact</b>		
Child saw father:		
Not at all	-	40
Once a month	-	10
2-4 days per month	-	16
5-12 days per month	-	12
13-20 days per month	-	10
More than 20 days per month	-	12
<b>Parent-child interaction<sup>1</sup></b>		
Father did the following "nearly every day":		
Read to child	19	8
Fed or gave a bottle to child	65	26
Played with child at home	92	34
Mother did the following "nearly every day":		
Read stories to child	28	27
Played games like "peek-a-boo" or "gotcha"	68	63
Sang songs or nursery rhymes	69	64
<b>Child care arrangements<sup>2</sup></b>		
Child is regularly cared for by someone else	40	52
Primary child care provider (of those in some type of care) <sup>3</sup>		
Grandparent	18	38
Day care center	30	29
Family day care	11	15
Other relative	32	17
Other care	9	2
Mother missed work or school because arrangement fell through	18	15
Very satisfied with main provider	82	85
Mean number of days per week in care <sup>4</sup>	4.1	4.40
Standard deviation	1.3	1.2
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>99</b>

<sup>1</sup>Father-child activities were based on mothers reports. Non-cohabiting mothers were only asked about father-child activities if the child saw their father more than once in the last month. (N= 46)

<sup>2</sup>Reported only for resident mothers, N=206

<sup>3</sup>For cohabiting mothers, N=44. For mothers who are not cohabiting, N=48

<sup>4</sup>Reported for primary caretaker only.

**Table 7. Parents' Economic Resources and Other Sources of Support at 12 Months**

	Mothers	Fathers
<b>Regular employment</b>		
Did regular work for pay last week (%)	39	70
Mean hours worked per week in current/most recent main job (if hrs > 0)	35.6	43.0
Standard deviation	10.6	11.1
Worked more than one regular job at a time in last 12 months (%)	6	16
Reported no earnings from regular employment in last 12 months <sup>1</sup> (%)	39	16
Mean earnings from all regular employment in last 12 months (if earnings>0)	\$6,344	\$15,567
Standard deviation	\$5,917	\$13,895
<b>Underground employment</b>		
Worked "off-the-books" or "under the table" in last 12 months (%)	10	29
Mean earnings from all underground labor in last 12 months (if earnings >0)	\$941	\$6,144
Standard deviation	\$1,132	\$11,020
	Mothers	Fathers
	(%)	(%)
<b>Incarceration</b>		
Father has ever been incarcerated <sup>2</sup>	41	24
Father has ever been on probation / required to do community service	-	22
Father has been ever been convicted of any charges	-	26
Average age of first conviction	-	19.6
Standard deviation	-	6.4
Average number of months served in correctional institution	-	23.8
Standard deviation	-	38.0
Father has ever been convicted for violent crimes	-	6
<b>Support from relatives/friends</b>		
Respondent could count on someone to:		
Loan him/her \$1,000 <sup>3</sup>	38	62
Provide him/her a place to live	77	82
Help with emergency child care	80	91
Received financial help from relatives or friends since child's birth	35	22
<b>Owns car or truck</b>	44	59
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	212	144

<sup>1</sup>Twenty mothers and 12 fathers had missing earnings information.

<sup>2</sup>Twenty-one mothers did not report father's incarceration history.

<sup>3</sup>Seventeen mothers did not report this family support measure.

Despite the fact that many parents are working close to full time and some are working two jobs, parents' income from employment is low. Of those parents who reported annual earnings, mothers earned about \$6,350 and fathers earned about \$15,600 from work in the regular economy. However, fathers' average earnings are about 21 percent higher than what their earnings would have been if they had worked full-time, full-year at a minimum wage job in Oakland.<sup>9</sup>

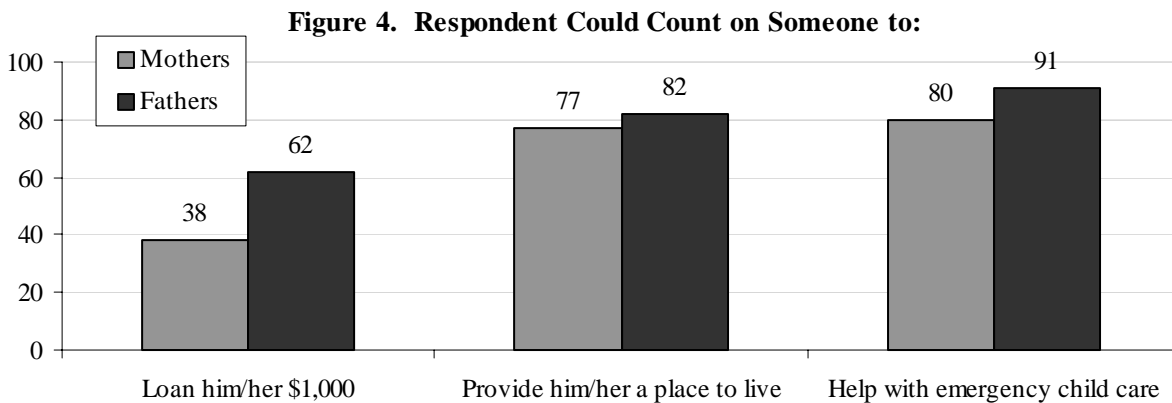
*High levels of incarceration are likely to play an important role in the family formation process insofar as they impede fathers' ability to secure employment and they diminish long-term earnings potential.*

Given these parents' relatively low levels of employment in the formal sector, we also looked at their participation in the informal economy. Work in the "underground" economy may supplement or substitute for earnings from regular employment. In some cases, work in the underground economy may be an indicator of illegal activity. About 10 percent of mothers and 29 percent of fathers report that they have worked "off the books" or "under the table" in the previous year. Reported earnings from employment in the informal sector are lower than reported earnings in the formal sector; average earnings for those who report any such work are \$941 for mothers and \$6,144 for fathers

Parents' low employment and earnings in the formal sector and their participation in the informal sector also may be influenced by the fact that about 24 percent of fathers interviewed report that they have spent time in jail. Forty-one percent of mothers report that their child's father has spent time in jail. (The disparity in mothers' and fathers' reports is due in part to the fact that we are less likely to interview fathers who have spent time in jail. It also is due to the fact that mothers are more likely to report father's incarceration than are fathers.) High levels of incarceration are likely to play an important role in the family formation process insofar as they impede fathers' ability to secure employment and they diminish long-term earnings potential. Another factor that may impede parents' ability to find and keep a job is lack of transportation. Only 44 percent of Oakland mothers and 59 percent of Oakland fathers report owning a car or truck.

*Parents' Access to Private Resources*

In addition to asking about the parents' own economic resources, the Fragile Families Study also measures parents' access to support from family or friends (Table 7). Most parents who were unmarried at the time of their child's birth appear to have potential support available from family and friends. According to parents' reports, 38 percent of mothers and 62 percent of fathers had someone they could count on to lend them \$1,000, 77 percent of



others and 82 percent of fathers had someone they could count on to help with housing, and about 80 percent of mothers and 91 percent of fathers had someone they could count on to provide emergency child care. However, only 35 percent of mothers and 22 percent of fathers report actually having received financial help from relatives or friends in the last year. The disparity between reports of actual and potential support may reflect either that support from friends or relatives is not needed, or that parents overestimate their access to support. Also, the fact that more fathers than mothers report having access to support from friends and family—but fewer receive such support—could reflect the greater selectivity of the sample of fathers who were interviewed; these fathers are generally more advantaged than their counterparts who were not interviewed.

#### *Parents' Financial Hardship and Access to Government Resources*

According to Table 8, Oakland mothers experienced significant levels of material hardship. Fifty-seven percent of mothers reported at least one type of material hardship. The most common hardships were: having to borrow money from friends or relatives to pay bills (experienced by 32 percent of the mothers), not being able to pay the full amount of a utility bill because there was no money (25 percent of mothers), not being able to make a rent or mortgage payment (16 percent of mothers), and receiving free food or meals (17 percent of mothers). Also, mothers were more likely to report going hungry themselves than to report that their children went hungry.

Table 8 also reports information on parents' access to government resources and suggests that parents have more access to some components of a safety net than others. Although Oakland parents are living in an expensive housing market, only four out of ten mothers live in public housing or receive a rent subsidy; about 13 percent of fathers also receive government help with housing. While fathers' receipt of housing assistance does not vary by whether or not he is cohabiting with the mother, mothers who are cohabiting with the baby's father are much less likely to receive government housing assistance (nine percent) than mothers who are not living with the father (19 percent, figures not shown in table). This may indicate that the requirements for receiving housing assistance—or potential recipients' *perceptions* of the rules—discourage parents' co-residence; on the other hand, this may simply imply that mothers living alone are more likely to need, and qualify for, housing assistance because they are not pooling income with a cohabiting partner.

Low-income parents are likely to be highly mobile and the parents in our survey are no different. Forty-six percent of Oakland mothers and 44 percent of fathers say they moved at least one time since their child was born. Mothers that have married the baby's father and those that report having no relationship with the father are least likely to move (figures not shown). The high rates of residential mobility suggest that parents may have difficulty finding stable housing for their families. For those who do not live in public housing or receive a housing subsidy, the high cost of housing in Oakland may contribute to high rates of mobility.<sup>10</sup> Mothers receiving some type of housing assistance are slightly less likely to have moved in the past year (35 percent) than mothers without such assistance (50 percent, figures not shown in table).

*Despite mandatory participation in the child support system, only one in ten Oakland mothers report receiving any help from a child support agency.*

Collecting more child support for children born outside of marriage has been an important theme in recent welfare reform and child support legislation. Participation in the child support system is now mandatory for mothers receiving welfare. However, only one in ten Oakland mothers report receiving



*The fact that eight out of ten Oakland mothers received help from Medi-Cal or a public health program in the past year suggests that Oakland parents are generally well informed about these programs.*

any help from a child support agency. A similar percentage of mothers report that their child participated in the Head Start or Early Head Start program, and twice as many mothers (21 percent) report getting help from a visiting nurse, Healthy Start, or parenting classes. Nearly nine out of ten mothers received help from the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, indicating a very high level of coverage for women and children's nutritional needs.

Eight percent of fathers reported receiving help from an employment office. Also, although fatherhood programs have gained increasing public support in recent years, only one percent of Oakland fathers have participated in such a program.

The 1996 welfare reform act placed work requirements on recipients and limited the amount of time they could receive assistance. In California, current recipients can receive 24 cumulative months of assistance and new recipients can receive 18 cumulative months of assistance before facing work requirements.<sup>11</sup> Others are diverted from entering the welfare system through job search and other strategies. Forty-eight percent of the mothers report receiving welfare in the previous year. A higher percentage of mothers (58 percent) received food stamps in the past year, and three percent received Supplemental Security Income (assistance for disabled adults and children) at the time of the follow-up interview.

**Table 8. Parents' Financial Hardship and Access to Government Resources at 12 Months**

	Mothers (%)	Fathers (%)
<b>Hardship</b>		
Occurred in the past twelve months because of financial problems:		
Any hardship	57	-
Moved in with others	13	-
Stayed in a shelter/aband. bldg/car for at least one night	6	-
Received free food or meals	17	-
You went hungry	11	-
Your child(ren) went hungry	5	-
Did not pay full amount of rent/mortgage	16	-
Did not pay full gas/oil/electric bill	25	-
Gas/oil/electric was shut off or withheld	9	-
Telephone service disconnected for nonpayment	13	-
Borrowed money from friends/relatives to pay bills	32	-
<b>Government Transfers and Services</b>		
Residential Mobility	46	44
Lives in public housing <sup>1</sup>	14	8
Receives public subsidy for rent <sup>2</sup>	26	5
Received help since child's birth from:		
Agency to help collect child support	10	-
Visiting nurse, Healthy Start or parenting classes	21	-
Head Start or Early Head Start	9	-
Women, Infants & Children program (WIC)	89	-
Father received assistance from:		
Employment office	-	8
Fatherhood programs	-	1
Received benefits in last year from:		
Welfare or TANF	48	10
Food stamps	58	12
Currently receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI)	3	6
Parent or co-resident child(ren) covered by Medi-Cal or other public health program	79	62
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>144</b>

<sup>1</sup> Of the 199 mothers and 132 fathers not in jail or living in a homeless shelter or halfway house.

<sup>2</sup> Of the 171 mothers and 102 fathers who reported they did not live in public housing, jail, a homeless shelter or halfway house. Thirteen percent of cases have missing values.

The fact that about eight out of ten Oakland mothers received help from Medi-Cal (the Medicaid program in California) or a public health program in the past year suggests that Oakland parents are generally well informed about these programs. Oakland fathers also report a high participation rate (62 percent) in Medi-Cal or other health programs and a low participation rate in TANF (10 percent), food stamps (12 percent), and SSI (six percent). Of fathers receiving welfare assistance, 57 percent were living with their child's mother (figure not shown).

## **VI. HOW ARE THE CHILDREN DOING?**

A key objective of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is to learn about the health and well-being of children born outside of marriage. Table 9 suggests that such children in Oakland are quite healthy, according to the mothers' reports. About 78 percent of mothers consider their child to have "excellent" or "very good" health, which is only slightly lower than the national average of 85 percent.<sup>12</sup> Three percent of mothers report that their child has "fair" or "poor" health. Two percent of Oakland mothers report that the child has a physical disability. Oakland children also appear to receive good health care. Ninety-five percent of mothers report that their child made four or more "well-baby" visits to the doctor during the past year.

We also are interested in children's behavior as an indicator of their early development. Parents' reports of children's behavior also tell us something about their early parenting experiences. On average, Oakland parents do not tend to report extremely negative or positive behaviors. On a scale in which "1" indicates that a specific behavior is "not at all like child" and "5" indicates the behavior to be "very much like child," most responses to questions about the children's behavior were clustered in the middle category. For items that reflect the child's irritability, mothers indicate that their children react strongly when upset. With respect to sociability, mothers report that their children are not shy and, in fact, are very sociable.

**Table 9. Children's Health and Wellbeing at 12 Months**

	Reported by Mother <sup>1</sup> (%)	Standard Deviation
<b>Health</b>		
Child's health is:		
Excellent or Very Good	78	-
Good or Fair	22	-
Poor	0	-
Child has a physical disability	2	-
Number of "well-baby" doctor visits since birth		
No visits	0	-
1-3 visits	5	-
4 or more visits	95	-
Child has stayed overnight in a hospital since being released at birth	20	-
Child has been taken to the emergency room or hospitalized due to accident or injury	8	-
Mother ever breastfed child	71	-
Average age of child when mother stopped breastfeeding (in months) <sup>2</sup>	5.2	5.1
<b>Behaviors</b>		
Childhood behavior scale, mean score: <sup>3</sup>		
Often fusses and cries	2.7	1.6
Gets upset easily	2.8	1.6
Reacts strongly when upset	3.5	1.6
Tends to be shy	2.3	1.6
Is very friendly with strangers	2.8	1.6
Is very sociable	4.2	1.3
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	206	-

<sup>1</sup>These questions were only asked of mothers who reside with the child (N = 206).

<sup>2</sup>Figure uses child's current age in the 18 percent of cases in which the child still breastfeeds.

<sup>3</sup>Range is from 1 (not at all like child) to 5 (very much like child).

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The other 19 cities, which were selected to represent different policy environments and labor markets, are: Austin, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Corpus Christi, Detroit, Indianapolis, Jacksonville, Milwaukee, Nashville, New York, Newark, Norfolk, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Richmond, San Antonio, San Jose, and Toledo.

<sup>2</sup> This report is available at the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing website, <http://crcw.princeton.edu/CRCW/papers/cityreports/oakland11-99.pdf>, and at the Public Policy Institute of California website, <http://www.ppic.org/publications/occasional.html>.

<sup>3</sup> In Oakland hospitals, mothers under age 18 were not interviewed due to restrictions from the hospital institutional review boards.

<sup>4</sup> Current Population Statistics, March 1999 and March 2000.  
U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Educational Attainment in the U.S.: March 2000* (P20-536).  
<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/education/p20-536/tab14.pdf> and  
<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/education/p20-536/tab12.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> National health reporting averages are based on males and females ages 18-44, with 5.2 percent of males and 6.1 percent of females reporting fair or poor health. Department of Health and Human Services. "Summary Health Statistics for U.S. Adults: National Health Interview Survey, 1997." *Vital Health Statistics*. 10 (205) May 2002: tables 20, 21.

<sup>6</sup> These figures exclude relationships with new partners.

<sup>7</sup> Mothers cohabiting with the baby's father were not asked questions about child support arrangements.

<sup>8</sup> unemployment figure is the average for 1999, from: <http://www.ca.rand.org/cgi-bin/employment/employment.cgi>.

<sup>9</sup> Unemployment figure is the average for 1999, from: <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/surveymost>.

<sup>10</sup> The Property Counselors Link Corkery 13<sup>th</sup> Oakland Apartment Rent Survey (<http://www.pclclink.com/MarketData/surveys/rent.htm>) for the year 2000 reports the average rent per month in Oakland was \$551 for a studio, \$695 for a one-bedroom, and \$829 for a two-bedroom apartment (information not available for 1999).

<sup>11</sup> California Department of Social Services Fact Sheet on California's Welfare-to-Work Plan, December 30, 1997. <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/calworks/caworks.html>

<sup>12</sup> "Percentage of Children Under 18 in the United States Who are Reported by Their Parents to be in Very Good or Excellent Health, by age, gender, poverty status, and family income: Selected Years, 1984-1998." Table HC 2.3 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth 2001*. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Washington, D.C.; U.S. Government Printing office, 2001 (p113).