Published in final edited form as:

J Marriage Fam. 2015 October ; 77(5): 1234–1249. doi:10.1111/jomf.12217.

Vetting and Letting: Cohabiting Stepfamily Formation Processes in Low-Income Black Families

Megan Reid and Andrew Golub

National Development and Research Institutes, Inc., 71 West 23rd St., 4th Floor, New York, NY 10010

Megan Reid: reid@ndri.org

Abstract

The authors examined cohabiting union formation processes by analyzing in-depth interview data collected from 30 individuals in cohabiting relationships: 15 low-income Black mothers of adolescents and their partners. Prior research suggests that cohabiting union formation is a gradual, nondeliberative process. In contrast, most couples in this study described a gradual but highly deliberative process. Mothers focused primarily on vetting their partners to ensure child well-being and less on when and how their partners officially came to live with them, a process the authors call vetting and letting. Mothers delineated 4 strategies to ensure their child's well-being when vetting their partners, and their partners reported that they understood the importance of participating in this process. The authors argue that vetting and letting is a child-centered family formation process, not a partner-centered union formation process, and that cohabiting union processes may vary substantially by subpopulation.

Keywords

African Americans; cohabiting couples with children; low-income families; mothers; qualitative research; stepfamilies

Family structure is growing increasingly varied, complex, and stratified in the United States (Cherlin, 2010; McLanahan, 2004; Stykes & Williams, 2013). In recent years, single-parent households have increased, and cohabitation has emerged as a common family form (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Dunlap, Golub, & Benoit, 2010; Raley, 1996; Rinelli & Brown, 2010). Cohabitation is especially common among Black families (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Golub, Reid, Strickler, & Dunlap, 2013; Ruggles, 1997). This means that children, especially Black children, are increasingly likely to spend at least part of their childhood in a cohabiting family (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). Accordingly, family researchers have begun to examine cohabiting families as an increasingly important population for understanding broader family dynamics (Brown, 2003) as well as both adult (Williams, Sassler, & Nicholson, 2008) and adolescent (Brown, 2004; Williams, Sassler, Frech, Addo, & Cooksey, 2013) health and socioeconomic disparities.

Research suggests that cohabitation is not a singular phenomenon but an arrangement that varies on the basis of the life circumstances of the partners in the union. Impoverished and Black individuals are less likely to transition from cohabitation to marriage than nonpoor

and White individuals (Brown, 2000; Guzzo, 2009; Lichter & Qian, 2008; Manning & Smock, 1995; Raley, 1996). Lichter, Qian, and Mellot (2006) suggested that cohabitation among poor women is more likely to be an alternative to or substitute for traditional marriage than among nonpoor women. Despite the seeming variation in cohabitation across subpopulations, and cultural and policy attention focused on the partnering behaviors of low-income Black mothers specifically, few researchers have examined the processes of cohabiting union formation in this population.

In this study, we examined cohabiting union formation processes among Black low-income single mothers of adolescents and their partners by analyzing in-depth interview data collected from both partners in 15 currently cohabiting couples. Prior research, which we review below, suggests that cohabiting union formation involves gradually sliding into a relationship as opposed to deliberately deciding to cohabit, conceptualized in the literature as the *sliding* model. Most couples in our study described their transition into their cohabiting relationship as a gradual but also very deliberative process. Mothers reported vetting their partner for whether he would be a good parent and be compatible with her children before letting him move in. Their partners largely reported that they understood and sought to pass this deliberative vetting process. Therefore, we refer to the family formation process we observed as *vetting and letting*. Mothers described a greater focus on this vetting process when they came to officially coreside with the partner. We identify four strategies mothers described using in the vetting process and argue that vetting and letting is a child-centered family formation process as opposed to a partner-centered union formation process.

Background

In this section, we review current literature on family formation patterns and cohabitation to provide a background for our analysis.

Contemporary Family Formation Trends

Romantic union and family formation processes in the United States are becoming more varied and complex, as evidenced by the decoupling of marriage and childbearing and declining marriage rates in general (Cherlin, 2004; Sassler, 2004; Seltzer et al., 2005). As marriage rates decline, cohabitation is becoming more common. Cohabitation rates are now at an all-time high, with 54% of all women spending time in a cohabiting relationship by age 44 (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). The rate of *serial cohabitation*—an individual having two or more premarital cohabitations—increased nearly 40%, from 8.7% in 1995 to 12.1% in 2002 (Lichter, Turner, & Sassler, 2010). Correspondingly, children are increasingly being raised for at least part of their lives in cohabiting families. Of children born between 1997 and 2000, 34% were born to unmarried mothers, half of whom were in cohabiting relationships (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). As of 2000, 43% of all cohabiting-couple households included minor coresidential children (Lichter & Qian, 2008). Children being raised in cohabiting families is much more common in the Black population than in the non-Hispanic White and Hispanic populations: Sixty-eight percent of births to Black mothers (1997–2001) were to unmarried women, with 40% of these to cohabiting mothers (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008).

Researchers estimate that almost half of U.S. children will spend time in a cohabiting (biological or step-) parent family (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). In the present study we focused on cohabiting stepfamilies, meaning unmarried cohabiting partners raising children from prior relationship(s) together, because this family form is increasingly common yet largely unexamined. This family structure is especially common for Black children; Kennedy and Bumpass (2008) estimated that almost half of Black children born to (noncohabiting) single or married mothers will experience maternal cohabitation by age 12. This growth in cohabitation and cohabiting stepfamilies, and their concentration in Black families, is significant for child well-being. A few studies have suggested that child outcomes such as school achievement and behavior problems are similar in married and cohabiting stepfamilies (Brown, 2002, 2004; Morrison & Ritualo, 2000), but most studies have found that developmental outcomes in cohabiting stepfamilies are more similar to those in single-mother families and worse than those in married-parent families (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne, 2008; Brown, 2004; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Manning & Lamb, 2004; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Morrison & Ritualo, 2000; Sweeney, 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001).

Cohabiting Union Formation Processes

Although cohabitation is becoming more common, and research suggests it is associated with disadvantages for children, surprisingly little work has examined the cohabiting union formation process itself (Sassler, 2004; Sassler & Miller, 2011) and its variation across subpopulations. In their seminal study of lower middle class and working-class adults between ages 21 and 35 with current or recent cohabiting relationship experience, Manning and Smock (2005) found that “the lines between cohabitation and singlehood are quite blurry, with the movement into cohabitation often described as a gradual or unfolding process that occurs over a week, or even months” (p. 995). Their analysis suggests that many couples gradually come to cohabit without much discussion or deliberation about the transition and its potential consequences, a process they referred to as a *slide*. Manning and Smock contrasted this model of union formation with the deliberative deciding process associated with transitioning to marriage, in which one partner asks the other to marry him or her and they subsequently have a wedding ceremony to formally mark the beginning of the union.

In a study of predominantly White college-educated cohabiters age 20–34, Sassler (2004) found that more than half of the participants moved in very soon after dating, without a focus on the larger meaning of or future of the union, and often not recognizing it until it had already occurred, consistent with the sliding model. Instead of a testing phase for marriage, she found cohabitation in this population to be part of the dating process and that commitment came after, not before, the couple came to cohabit. Stanley, Rhoades, and Markmann (2006) voiced a central concern about sliding into cohabitation: that it can “land people in relationships they might not have otherwise chosen if they had been more deliberative” (p. 504).

Nevertheless, prior work reviewed at the beginning of this article suggests that cohabitation is a different phenomenon for different populations. Sassler and Miller (2011) advocated for

a more nuanced understanding of how cohabitation processes operate, given that their research suggests such processes vary by social class. In the present study, we contribute to an expanded understanding of cohabiting union formation processes by examining cohabitation transitions among a population that has surprisingly yet to be examined in this context: low-income Black single mothers of adolescents and their partners.

Partnering, Parenting, and Child Well-Being

Researchers and policymakers have increasingly focused on the partnering and parenting processes of single low-income mothers as this population continues to grow and to be associated with disadvantages for children. Relationships in this population tend to be nonmarital and short in duration (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Lichter et al., 2006), which can, as we outlined above, have negative consequences for children (Brown, 2004). Much research into this topic examines why such women do not enter into and/or maintain long-term relationships, marital or cohabiting, and focuses on financial circumstances and expectations.

Many scholars identify a lack of “marriageable” partners, meaning partners who are not involved with the criminal justice system and can provide for a family financially, as a reason for lower marriage rates among low-income mothers. Edin and Lein (1997) found that low-income mothers required their partners to contribute to the family financially to maintain the romantic relationship. Burton and Tucker (2009) argued that uncertainty in the temporal organization of their lives and changing gender dynamics with regard to finances and domestic labor influence low-income Black mothers’ relationship patterns. Recent analyses by Sassler, Roy, and Stasny (2014), however, suggested that standard economic predictors for partnering are less applicable among low-income mothers and their partners. Although financial burdens and contributions are no doubt significant and central concerns for low-income mothers, little work has examined whether such mothers consider other factors when entering into a romantic union (Burton, 2014).

Scholars have identified child well-being as a central concern of low-income mothers in their partnering decisions, often conceptualized primarily as ensuring economic stability for children. There may be other ways mothers ensure their children’s well-being when searching for a new partner (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012). As Roy and Burton (2007) argued, “a sole focus on men’s financial support in previous studies has limited understanding of mothers’ strategies to enhance their children’s well-being” (p. 35). For example, they found that protection of children and reduction of risk to family well-being is an important consideration for mothers who seek to recruit men to serve as fathers or male role models to their children.

Ensuring well-being is important, because the introduction of a new family member, especially a mother’s romantic partner, could disrupt family relationships and child well-being. Cohabiting couples raising an adolescent may face additional unique challenges to partnering that parents of younger and joint biological children do not. Transitioning into a preexisting family system is especially complicated for the partners of single mothers of adolescents (Kurdek & Fine, 1995; Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007; Speer & Trees, 2007). Young children tend to be more accepting of a stepfather than adolescents (Hetherington &

Stanley-Hagan, 2000). Moreover, adolescents are at an age where they can have opinions on, and potentially input into, the decision. They may also have experience with their mothers' previous partners, including their biological father, which may influence their actions and feelings about a new union. Our sample comprised parents of adolescents because current research on cohabiting families is limited in scope and has focused primarily on families with joint biological and younger children (McHale, Waller, & Pearson, 2012; Waller, 2012). Manning and Brown (2013) called for researchers to pay attention to other types of cohabiting families and to focus on demographic subgroups, and we heed this call.

Goldscheider and Sassler (2006) noted that the specific role of children in transitions to both cohabitation and marriage is rarely addressed, and called for "moving the research lens to the effects of children on union entry" (p. 275). They argued that children matter substantially in union formation decisions. Nevertheless, work that has focused on cohabiting union entry has not yet considered how having children from previous relationships might influence the union formation process among single mothers and their partners, and work on low-income mothers and relationships has not often focused on child well-being outside of economic security. Missing from the research and policy discussions about low-income Black mothers and their partnering and parenting behaviors are answers to two central questions about their lived experiences: (1) How are cohabiting relationships formed in this population? and (2) does child well-being influence this process and, if so, how? These two research questions guided our analysis.

Method

The data for this study come from The Impact of Transient Domesticity Coparenting in Poor African American Families study, funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (see <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/DSDR/studies/35862?recency=QUARTER&sortBy=5>). The study is composed of a longitudinal quantitative panel study of 136 low-income Black cohabiting stepfamilies formed less than 5 years prior to baseline and that include an adolescent child, and a qualitative substudy with 15 of those families. We limited the overall study sample to those in relationships of less than 5 years to foster recall responses about the process of union formation and examine the evolution of relatively new cohabiting relationships. To be eligible for study inclusion, participants had to be low income (below 200% of the federal poverty line when considering both partners' incomes), identify as Black (in the qualitative substudy, one mother and three children also identified as Hispanic), and live in a low-income neighborhood of New York City. All mothers had to be the residential custodial parent of at least one adolescent child between ages 11 and 17. For this study we analyzed the qualitative in-depth interview data collected from the 30 adult participants.

Field staff members experienced in working with low-income Black residents of New York City recruited study participants. They used existing networks of research study participants, field informants, street recruiting, and social services agency contacts to recruit potential participants. Our recruitment method was geographically wide reaching and brought us a varied sample. At initial recruitment we had seven field staff members recruiting throughout

the city, and we had at least one respondent from each of the five New York City boroughs. Participants in the qualitative substudy lived in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx.

Families in the panel study were administered the quantitative survey by field staff and asked about their willingness to participate in an additional in-depth interview study. The families in the substudy were selected on the basis of their willingness to participate and diversity of cohabitation experience, to obtain a fuller understanding of cohabitation among this population. Families that varied by participant age, child gender, educational attainment, length of cohabitation, and past relationship experience were included in the sample, which is described in Table 1.

The first author conducted qualitative interviews with each family member (both partners and the adolescent focal child) separately in the family's home or a convenient location selected by the participants, such as a park, restaurant, or the interviewer's car. Adult participants were asked to describe their transition to cohabitation, their relationships with their partner and the study focal child, and other topics related to cohabitation and family. They were each paid \$40 for their participation. Interviews ranged between 30 and 90 minutes and were digitally recorded. Recordings were transcribed and entered into ATLAS.ti software for analysis. Our readings of successive cases became repetitive and provided no additional insights, which achieved saturation, meaning that the collection of new data would not have revealed any additional insights into the issue under investigation (Charmaz, 2007; Mason, 2010). In the Results section, specific identifying information has been removed, and all names are pseudonyms.

Both authors met with project team members weekly to discuss themes emerging from the project as a whole based on participant survey responses, staff field observations, and staff informal conversations with participants. Field staff prepared weekly memos on topics that emerged at the previous week's meeting. The coding process and resultant themes were discussed by the project team at each meeting. Although all interview data were analyzed for this article, two survey prompts were particularly related to the topic of the transition to cohabitation: (a) "Talk about your transition into living together with your partner" and (b) "Tell me how the focal child reacted to you and your partner moving in together." It is important to note that we did not specifically ask whether the child's opinions or well-being had factored into their union formation process; this theme emerged in participant responses.

Project team discussions and memos influenced the first author's analysis of the data. The author used a combination of deductive and inductive techniques (Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007; Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2008) to analyze interview transcripts, with careful attention not to force data into predetermined code categories. First, she conducted a deductive coding process focused on identifying sliding processes in descriptions of relationship formation. Next, according to the principles of inductive grounded theory, she cycled back and forth between reading participants' transcripts and field staff memos, and developing additional conceptual frames and coding systems (Charmaz, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thematic codes were identified on the basis of emergent topics and themes by first reading through the data using an open coding technique, creating additional memos about common themes, and then moving to focused

coding, using and expanding the most frequent codes to further sort the data (Charmaz, 2007). During this inductive process two major themes emerged: (a) ensuring child well-being using multiple strategies and (b) a process of cohabiting family formation we came to refer to as *vetting and letting*.

In addition to debriefing with project members weekly as described above, the rigor of the data and analysis was ensured in several ways. We triangulated the data by interviewing each family member separately and by collecting and analyzing field notes based on informal conversations and observations every time a project member had contact with a participant. The longitudinal nature of the study—more than 2 years so far, at the time of this writing—and our repeated contact with participants allowed for continued refinement of the coding scheme and identified themes. Finally, both authors' prior experience with researching similar populations allowed additional insights into the data and the analytic process.

It is important to note up front that this study's sample is limited in several ways that suggest caution in generalizing the findings pending further research in this area. The participants were a select group of individuals who chose to enter into cohabiting relationships and had maintained the relationship for at least a few months (and, in many cases, for several years). Their experiences are likely different from individuals who do not make the transition from dating to cohabitation, who enter into cohabiting relationships that do not work out, or who cohabit and subsequently marry. Furthermore, the sample was composed of low-income Black couples who lived in New York City. These characteristics and unique social context may influence relationship transitions in ways that are not the same in other demographic groups and geographical areas. In addition, the focal child in the study was an adolescent. The cohabitation process might be very different for women who have no children, who have younger children, or whose older children have left the household. Finally, participants' accounts are retrospective, and in many cases the transition occurred a year or more prior to the interview, which may bias their descriptions. The retrospective nature of the data may very well make the relationship formation process appear to be more streamlined than it was.

Results

Most couples in our sample described a process of vetting and letting in the formation of their cohabiting unions, with mothers drawing on several vetting strategies centered around child well-being. In the sections that follow, we elaborate on these findings.

Vetting and Letting

Thirteen of 15 couples described their union formation as a gradual yet deliberative process, a family formation paradigm that we call vetting and letting. Mothers described vetting partners for whether they would be a good parent and be compatible with their children before letting them move in. Their partners largely reported that they understood and sought to pass this vetting process. Mothers focused primarily on vetting their partners for compatibility with their children and on incorporating them into the family and focused less on when and how their partners came to officially coreside with them. First we present

mothers' descriptions of the vetting-and-letting process, which demonstrate four strategies mothers used: (1) determining whether the partner shows interest in parenting, (2) monitoring and fostering the relationship between the partner and child, (3) consulting the child's opinion of the partner, and (4) applying lessons learned from past relationships. We then present partners' understandings of and participation in this process. We found that vetting and letting was a child-centered *family* formation process, not a partner-centered *union* formation process.

Mother's descriptions—Kayla is a 35-year-old mother of four children, including 11-year-old Brandy, who she called “extremely smart, outgoing, and always helping out with her [younger] sisters.” Kayla described a gradual process of moving in with her partner, Rodney. She explained that she met him when she was shopping with her children one afternoon and was friends with him for 4 years before they started dating. After her previous partner, her youngest child's father, went to jail, she and Rodney dated for about a year before he moved in with her. Kayla explained how she decided to let Rodney live with her, and how Brandy reacted:

Megan: So how did you come to live together?

Kayla: I don't know. I guess it was the traveling back and forth here. He is out working all day and he wasn't staying here. So I didn't get to see him because he would be tired and he would go home. But at first he just started spending nights and then after awhile he just started staying here.

Megan: Okay. So was there a particular moment when you decided, okay, now you are living here?

Kayla: No, it just happened.

Megan: Okay. How did Brandy react when he moved in?

Kayla: Like I said, I knew him for awhile so they knew each other. He's been around. They have always had a good relationship because I always hung in the same group with this person so they have known him. I assumed [there would be] some adjustment, of course, from a friendship to seeing him actually staying here. It happened gradually so it wasn't like it was just, “Oh man, he's here and he's never leaving!”

Consistent with the sliding model, Kayla's description of her entry into her cohabiting relationship was characterized by an unfolding process. Her description also, however, demonstrates a deliberative vetting process at multiple points in time. She monitored the relationship between Brandy and Rodney and fostered its growth before she committed to a relationship with him. She was friends with him first and oversaw a gradual but purposive adjustment period to ensure that her daughter did not experience an abrupt transition.

Similarly, Dionne was friends with her partner, George, for several years before becoming romantically involved with him. She explained that while they were friends she observed him being a good father to his son. This led to her eventually deciding that she could let him move in with her and her daughter when the opportunity arose:

We was friends like three years prior. He was always around and I think one of the reasons I wanted to get with him was because I would always see him with his son and I liked the way he was with his child. I figured if he's good with his kid and he's trustworthy by how he cares for his son then he has to be a good dad. So I figured he was someone I could have around my daughter, because she is a girl and you have to watch who you have around your female kids. So I seen how he was.

Dionne expressed caution about jumping into a relationship and emphasized the importance of taking time to get to know her partner. She focused on vetting him with regard to his parenting skills and how he acted around children, especially girls, to ensure her daughter's well-being.

When she described how she and George came to actually live together however, Dionne described an unplanned but welcome transition. She explained that they were just friends while they were both in other unsatisfying relationships, and "then one day he just came to me and was like 'I'm yours.'" Soon after this, she got her own apartment through a housing voucher program for which she had been waitlisted, broke up with her previous partner, and moved out of her mother's house. George moved into her new place with her:

We moved right in! When I moved in [to this apartment], we moved in together. He helped me move the stuff from my mother's house He was helping me move and then I see his stuff and then I see my stuff and I'm like, "Okay!" ... I'm not even sure really how it happened.... I can't even really say we were like dating. It was like, we just got together. I mean really, seriously, because he was with someone else and I was with someone and then all of a sudden it was like I got my apartment and everything just. ... We moved in and was happy.

Dionne said that they did not have any conversations prior to this about moving in together and though "everyone thinks [she is] lying" when she described what happened, she is emphatic that this was exactly how they came to live together. Her explanation illustrates that the cohabiting union formation process can appear to be haphazard when it is actually quite deliberative. After vetting him for more than 4 years and feeling comfortable with him being around her daughter, Dionne was happy to let cohabitation occur when the opportunity arose. For her the important decision point was accepting George as part of her family, not when and how they came to officially live together.

Most mothers explicitly discussed monitoring the relationship their child and partner had before letting the partner move in. They emphasized that his showing interest in and creating a relationship with the child was an important part of their vetting process. Mothers made sure their children were happy and comfortable with their new partner before they came to cohabit. When asked how she and her partner, Marvin, began dating, Janet explained that, although most men she encountered were just interested in sex, Marvin took the time to get to know her kids:

With my kids he was more ... [He would ask,] "Let me hear more about your kids. What do your kids like to do? What are their interests? What are their goals? What are their hobbies?" And that really attracted me to him because most of these guys

are just trying to get in your pants, and they don't care about the kids. And me, I'm the type like if my kids don't like you, I don't like you.

Janet said that Marvin's interest in her children is what led her to begin dating and eventually falling in love with him. Janet's feelings about her potential partner were closely tied to her child's feelings about him. She felt like he genuinely cared about learning about her children and was not just looking for sex. Janet explained that before Marvin moved in he took the time to get to know and create a good relationship with her children, and this helped her feel comfortable with letting him move in. This was in contrast to previous boyfriends she had who did not take an interest in her children, which led to the end of those relationships:

Janet: With my boyfriend now, he took time with them. He knew that he had to win them over to win me over so he catered to them first. Like he got to know them, got to know what they like, what they like to do, what they don't like. So he started taking them out, taking them to games, taking them to movies and stuff like that. And my oldest son, he likes that. So he ... eventually, one day he (her oldest son) came up to me and was like, "Ma, I like him. I like him. Like I really, really like him." And that made me so happy! He was like, "Yeah! Keep him! He's a keeper!"

Megan: Was that after he moved in?

Janet: No, that was before he moved in.

It is clear that Janet put a lot of thought into her decision to be in a romantic relationship with Marvin. She applied what she had learned from past relationships, monitored the relationship her partner had with her sons, and consulted her children's opinions in the process of vetting Marvin. She emphasized that this process took place before he moved in, but she described the transition to living together as relatively unceremonious:

He's originally from New Jersey and I am from out here so [there was a lot of] traveling back and forth. I had my own place. So after, I guess, three months, I was like, "Well you spend the nights here mostly every night, you have clothes here, so you might as well make it official." So that is how he came to live with us.

Like for other mothers, the point at which they officially came to live together was less important to Janet than the vetting of the partner for how he would integrate into the family. Once she felt comfortable with him being part of her family, she let him move in with them because it was more convenient.

Tiffany had been living with her current partner, Lamar, for over a year. She explained that she entered her first cohabiting relationship at age 19 and that it did not work out because soon after moving in together she realized that her children did not like her ex-partner. When he asked why she wanted him to move out, she recalled telling him:

Because *we* are not getting along. *We*! "I don't speak as me and you, I speak as me and my two sons." I didn't have the little one yet. I said "I speak as me and them. *We* don't want you here no more" ... I choose my kids first."

She explained that this time she was sure to talk to Lamar about their relationship and about how it might affect the children, in contrast to her prior relationship. When asked to describe how she came to cohabit with Lamar, Tiffany explained:

Well we discussed it. He didn't just move in. We talked about it. We agreed on it. [We considered] that it would save a little more money for him. So that is how we ended up living together. He moved in slowly. He didn't just pack up and leave and move in. It was like, you know, maybe one week he'll stay the whole week and then he will be like, "I'm going to go home." And I say, "No! Don't go home! Just stay!" He is like, "Well, all right. Well, I'll come when I get off from work." And then eventually, slowly but surely, he started moving in, bringing all of his clothes and stuff.

Megan: So was that after you had the conversation [with Lamar]?

Tiffany: Yeah, after. I think he didn't want to just move in because I had the three boys. It was just like a slow process.

Megan: What do you think the hesitation was with the boys?

Tiffany: I mean they get along but they are so used to just being us three. Me and the three boys. They was just so used to it, just being us, and I actually had to sit down and [converse] with them two (her oldest sons) about him. They was like, "He is cool! He's cool! He can move in." I said, "Okay! I wish I would have known that before and we wouldn't have waited so long."

She explained further: "I can say that I learned a lot of things from my past relationships not to do in my now relationship. And I think that is probably why it's going so well."

Tiffany's description exemplifies the vetting process that preceded many of these couples coming to cohabit. She consulted the children's opinion about Lamar before letting him move in slowly, like Kayla did with Rodney, so as not to bring a sudden disruption to the family. She learned from past relationships to vet her partner with regard to compatibility with the children before moving in with him. Like other mothers, Tiffany emphasized that the "we" she was primarily concerned about was herself and her children, not herself and her partner, illustrating the child-centered nature of this family formation process.

In a fashion similar to Tiffany, Tanisha described being careful to monitor and foster the relationship between Roland and her daughter by his gradually staying overnight at her apartment:

[We were] dating. And then slowly he'd start spending the night. And [my daughter] would go to school in the morning. I'd make sure, you know, that gradually as the weeks went by that she seen him, and that they got to their talking stage. And he just, one night he just stayed and he [didn't leave]. It just happened.

Although she said that Roland just stayed one night and did not leave, this description indicates that it was not a haphazard process. She explained that he gradually moved in so that she could monitor the relationship and make sure her daughter slowly got used to him

being there. For Tanisha, the process of moving in together was gradual because she wanted to vet her partner and ensure her daughter was comfortable with the change to their household and family.

Delia described her partner Reggie's relationship with her children as "good and positive" and noted that she also monitored his relationship with them before he moved in. She paid close attention to whether and how he participated in parenting.

Megan: How did [your daughter] react when he moved in with you guys?

Delia: Well he gained a friendship relationship with the kids before we moved in. So when I told them that [Reggie] was moving in they was like, "Okay Mommy."

Megan: So how did he build the relationship with them? How did that start?

Delia: Well, I got [my kids] back through foster care. So when he saw the kids coming over the weekends, he started talking to them. And I introduced them to him. When they acting out and stuff, he sits them [down] and tells them, "You shouldn't be doing that," and stuff like that. "If you keep acting up, I can't reward you." He tell them, "You know what? You go to school and you be good for a week, I'll give you ten dollars." So the kids is like, they see then because most of the time they didn't have a dad in their life, except for the baby girl—her dad is in her life—but my other four kids, their dad wasn't in their life. So they see this nice gentleman coming around talking good things, positive, and that's how he built a relationship with them.

Like most other couples we interviewed, Delia described the actual transition to living together as somewhat of an afterthought. She explained that Reggie had his own place, and then:

He stopped paying his rent and he said he wanted to live with me, and I didn't want him in the street. I didn't want him to go [live in] the street or nothing. And he did that to stop paying rent 'cause he knew that I would let him move in with me. So that's how he got in.

Although it was not her idea, Delia explained that because Reggie knew the kids and had a good relationship with them she let him move in. Whether he lived with her or not was less important than him having a good relationship with and being a positive influence on her children.

Mothers such as Janet and Tiffany both explained above that their children's approval was an important factor in their decision to cohabit with a new partner. Vivian emphatically expressed this sentiment as well:

Your kids come first! A man come last. A man can always come either way, and sometimes when that man is trying to treat you bad, it's no way. You understand? For real, 'cause you and your kids come first. It's not "He got to approve of my kids. My kids have to approve of you!"

When mothers described how they vetted their potential partners, several explicitly discussed consulting their children and asking for their input.

Although the actual transition to cohabitation for many study participants may have been gradual or blurry, as the sliding model suggests, the overall family formation process they described was characterized by deliberation. It is clear that the mothers in this study placed a lot of emphasis on the relationship between their children and a new potential partner. Mothers expressed caution about bringing a partner into their family and emphasized that before they lived with someone they vetted the potential partner to determine whether he would be a good parent in general, and specifically whether he was compatible with their children. Partners also seemed to know that children were central to forming a relationship with these mothers and made child well-being part of their union formation process as well.

Partners' understandings of joining the family—Partners' descriptions confirmed their understanding of the vetting-and-letting process. Most explained that they understood that single mothers and their children are a package deal, illustrating that this is a family formation as opposed to a union formation process. For example, when asked about his relationship with Tanisha's daughter Jaye, Roland said: "You know, she comes with the package, so I had to [create a relationship with her]. She's part of the package, so I treat her like she's my daughter." Roland knew that he needed to create a relationship with Jaye to have a successful relationship with Tanisha, and he now describes his relationship with Jaye as father–daughter.

DeMarco, a maintenance worker at an apartment building in Harlem, gets a discount on rent that allows him to live on his own. His partner, Tyra, was living with her mother in a crowded family apartment in a nearby housing project when she met DeMarco, and she and her daughter Tatiana moved in with him about a year after they started dating. DeMarco calls Tatiana his stepdaughter and explained that making sure that Tatiana felt comfortable being around him and in his apartment was a big aspect of his transition to living with Tyra :

First we started off and she (Tyra) would spend the night. That is how it started out, and then when she came over to spend the night, my stepdaughter wanted to stay the night. She asked me and I am like, "Yeah! Come on!" The way I felt about it was like, you know, the only way for her to get comfortable around me and get comfortable here is for her to actually be here one day ... and she loved it here. She felt comfortable here, you know. So that was a big, like, that was some way to let me know that, you know what, this is probably going to work. A lot of times when a child feels comfortable in a situation, then you know that situation, most likely, is a good situation.

DeMarco described Tatiana's beginning to stay the night at his place when Tyra did as a sign that the transition would likely work out. It seems that he understood that if Tatiana did not like him or feel comfortable at his place—if he did not pass the vetting process—then his relationship with Tyra would not work out either.

For some partners, the process of moving in together was purposely gradual because they wanted to ensure that the children were comfortable with the change to their household and family. Lamar explained that, before he moved in with Tiffany, he made sure to create a relationship with her kids:

Megan: So how did they react when you moved in?

Lamar: I got to know the kids. That is one thing I did. I really got, I really had to know the kids first.

Megan: First, like before you moved in?

Lamar: Yeah. It wasn't no, like I said, I got to know the kids first. We knew each other for a long time, so I got to know the kids first, you know. Make friends with the kids, get good with the kids, and then after that it wasn't no problem.

Lamar displayed an understanding that he needed to develop this relationship with Tiffany's children first so that there would not be problems in the relationship down the line.

Dionne's partner, George, also explicitly described that they took their time in forming their relationship because they wanted to consider the consequences, especially for the children:

We just took our time. We just wanted to get to know each other, make sure this was the right thing that we was doing and getting into before we made a decision, especially with me moving in. And then she has two kids and I have two kids, so we just wanted to make sure everything would be right, so it wouldn't be no commotion.

As you might recall, Dionne explained above that she and George moved in together when he was helping her move, without a discussion beforehand. What is important here is that, to both of them, this was a vetting process, even though the moving in together itself was impromptu. This underscores the primary importance of the children to both mothers and their partners in this family formation process.

Greg explained that he knew when he moved in with his partner, Malaya, and her daughter, Nina, upon learning Malaya was pregnant that he would need to play the roles not only of her partner and father of the son they were expecting but also of a father to Nina. He understood the expectations that came along with it:

Greg: I had to be conscientious that I was walking into a ready-made family, so I would know the stipulations set that had to be met. And, I had to be man enough to reach those goals, you know? I'm here to do what I got to do, and more if it need be. Because not only do she got my son, she got my daughter. Her daughter is not by me, but that's my child. So this is where it's all at. It's kids first, then us, no matter what the situation is.

Megan: You said you knew coming into this ready-made family there would be stipulations. What do you mean by that?

Greg: Stipulations meaning that I'm going to have to take on responsibilities that are required. ... 'Cause you got some women that's independent. They the mother and father of their kids, and that woman's got to be really conscientious and understanding to bring somebody into her family when she already got a ready-made family. You know, you got a lot of [men] that only want to be around their own kids. They don't want to be around kids that's not theirs. So [mothers] got to make the right choice.

Later in the interview, Greg explained that he is the type of man who can be with someone like Malaya because he is a family man and ready to be a father. That partners appeared to understand and participate in the vetting-and-letting process with regard to parenting and child well-being suggests that this is a norm of family formation with a single mother that is not only expected by the mother but also understood by her partner.

Sliding Into Cohabitation

Although most couples in the sample described a vetting-and-letting process, two couples' descriptions of their cohabiting relationship formation process generally conformed to the gradual and nondeliberative characteristics of the sliding model identified in prior work (Manning & Smock, 2005; Stanley et al., 2006). Angela and Brandon are one of those couples. They met through Brandon's cousin and immediately started dating. About 6 months later, they moved in together, and they have been living together for more than 2 years. When asked how she and Brandon came to live together, Angela replied:

I don't know. Just him coming back and forth, and I said "You might as well just stay." He would stay most nights. So, you know, it's like "You might as well come here and stay. It makes no sense for you to be paying rent somewhere and then I'm paying rent here." You might as well move in together. And that is what we did.

Brandon described the transition to cohabitation in a similar manner:

Megan: How did you decide that you would move in?

Brandon: Um, basically I kept coming and spending the night and eventually I just stayed ... stopped going home. ... I was living in Ohio and I came back from Ohio. Then I was staying with my mother for a little while. Then I started hanging out with my cousin over here. Then I met [Angela]. Then I started to spend the night and eventually lived here.

Megan: Was there any kind of key moment when you said, okay, now I'm living here?

Brandon: No, it just happened.

Megan: When you moved in did you have any discussions, like all right here is what you need to do, or now that we are living together there is some kind of agreement?

Brandon: No.

This description is similar to the letting component of the vetting-and-letting model, but both partners' discussions of Angela's daughter indicate a lack of vetting. Angela did not discuss deliberating about Brandon's relationship with her 16-year-old daughter, Ruby, and did not think that Ruby should have input into whether Brandon lived with them. She explained: "Like I'm more of a, 'This is my house, I pay the bills, you know, so as long as he don't bother you, [you cannot complain about him].' He's mostly in my room." Brandon also did not seem as though he considered the consequences of living with Angela and Ruby. When asked how Ruby reacted when he moved in, he replied: "I don't even know.

She ain't never showed me like she didn't want me there or anything. So, I guess she probably didn't care. Or she was hiding her feelings. I'm not too sure."

In this case, neither partner seemed to remember exactly when or how moving in together happened, and both described it as something that they realized after it had occurred. They did not express concern for Ruby or the consequences of their union for her. For them, their cohabiting relationship formed through a gradual, nondeliberative process consistent with the sliding model of cohabiting union formation. Although most couples in this study described a clear vetting process with regard to partners being incorporated into the family, it is important to note that not all did.

Discussion

We examined the cohabiting stepfamily formation process among low-income Black mothers and their partners and found that child well-being is central to this process. Most mothers and their partners described participating in a vetting-and-letting process of cohabiting stepfamily formation. They described gradually and/or unceremoniously coming to live with their partner, consistent with prior studies that observed that cohabiting relationships are formed through a sliding process (Manning & Smock, 2005; Sassler, 2004; Stanley et al., 2006). Although this process was gradual, in contrast with the sliding model, it was characterized by deliberation. Mothers described a process of vetting partners and establishing their compatibility with the family. We identified four vetting strategies described by these mothers: (1) determining whether the partner shows interest in parenting/children, (2) monitoring and/or fostering the relationship between the partner and child, (3) consulting the child's opinion of the partner, and (4) applying lessons learned from past relationships. Their partners described understanding and participating in this process. For these reasons, we argue that the phenomenon our participants described is a child-centered family formation process, not a partner-centered union formation process.

Our analysis revealed that most mothers took quite awhile to gradually get to know and vet their potential new partners. Study participants often described their transition to living together as largely unplanned or unceremonious, explaining that it happened when and if an opportunity or need arose. Their descriptions revealed that the important part of these relationships to a large extent was not when they officially came to live together, which may be fostered or hindered by circumstances beyond one's control, but the creation of a child-centered stepfamily regardless of coresidence. For these couples in our study, the relationship became serious before cohabiting, not after.

These findings are consistent with work suggesting that cohabitation may have different meanings and expectations in different populations that vary by socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, parental status, and age (Lichter et al., 2006; McLanahan, 2004; Sassler & Miller, 2011; Seltzer et al., 2005). We found a qualitatively different process of cohabiting relationship formation among low-income Black couples raising children than prior research has found in other populations. Burton and Tucker (2009) argued that "the legacy of pathologized ascriptions [of Black mothers] has discouraged the development of more mature analytical frames that consider the ordinary features of life that emerge for all groups

as a function of broader social change” (p. 134). We agree and posit that in a population in which moving in and out among family, friends, and partners is common because of economic uncertainty, residential instability, and the growing gap between the rich and the poor, living together might not be as significant of a relationship marker as it is in middle-class populations. Living together with anyone—partner or otherwise—may be more a result of circumstances, need, and opportunity that are largely out of one’s control in the low-income Black population and may not necessarily run parallel to the degree of seriousness of a relationship or to a relationship’s progression. Indeed, many individuals in our sample had temporary and more permanent housemates, both relatives and nonrelatives, and some could not easily determine exactly how many people lived in their apartment at the time of the interview.

It is also possible that the difference between our findings and prior findings about transitions to cohabitation, beyond class differences, is partially attributable to the fact that our study focused on relatively older mothers with older children, whereas prior studies of the transition to cohabitation have focused on younger adults with younger children, if any. Mothers’ age (and experience) may partially explain the gradual and thoughtful nature of the union formation process we observed, given that most of these mothers were in their 30s and 40s with at least one prior cohabitation or marriage. We found that many mothers knew their current partners for awhile before dating them, and many also discussed learning what to look for on the basis of past relationship experiences. Parents may be more deliberate in their relationship transitions than nonparents, even to cohabitation, because of a belief in putting their children first. Parents of adolescents may be even more deliberative given that their children are able to develop and express their opinions and to participate in family decisions.

It is interesting that financial concerns were not a common theme in mothers’ discussions of their relationships and their transitions to cohabitation. It may be that this was an early screening criterion that weeded out men who were not financially sufficient. It could also be that this was not a primary concern given the relatively universal low-income status of available partners (Sassler et al., 2014). Either way, this suggests that financial viability is not the only, and perhaps not even the primary, criterion low-income mothers use in looking for a partner. This highlights the fact that men may make contributions to families that are deemed valuable by their partners that are unrelated to economic provisioning, such as participating in parenting and creating meaningful relationships with children. We echo Roy and Burton (2007) in arguing that a focus on men’s financial contributions and appeal may obscure other valuable contributions men can make to families (also see Marsiglio & Roy, 2012).

Conclusion

The results of the present study suggest that specific norms and expectations have become associated with cohabiting stepfamily formation, at least among low-income Black cohabiting couples raising an adolescent. Most centrally, mothers have an overarching focus on good parenting by their partners and the well-being of their children. Partners who end up cohabiting understand the importance of adhering to these expectations from the very

beginning of the dating process. As Goldscheider and Sassler (2006) noted, surprisingly little research has examined how children, especially children from prior relationships, factor into union transitions. We encourage further work that examines how the age of parent(s) and age of children play into norms associated with cohabiting union formation processes.

Our sample comprised couples who had “successfully” made it to cohabitation, so it is important to note that these results represent somewhat of a best case scenario: The partners generally understood and agreed on these norms and on the importance of the vetting process. Future work should explore what makes for a successful cohabiting relationship and stepfamily, what differentiates those who slide into cohabitation versus those who vet and let, and why children in cohabiting families often fare worse than children in married families despite overarching concern for child well-being by at least some cohabiting mothers.

Prior studies have found that, among working- and middle-class adults (Manning & Smock, 2005; Sassler, 2004), cohabitation was an extended part of the dating process and that commitment came after the couple began to cohabit. Our findings indicate that this is not always the case; we found the opposite among low-income Black mothers and their partners. We argue that the cohabiting stepfamily should be understood to be, at least in this population, a family form in its own right that can be successfully formed with caution and concern for child well-being. It is clear that the mothers in our study put their children’s well-being at the forefront of their family formation processes and should not be characterized as parentally negligent for being in a cohabiting relationship.

Family researchers and policymakers should continue to examine the nature of this family form and consider how to best understand and support it. Our findings suggest that current understandings of cohabitation largely do not apply to the experiences of low-income Black couples raising adolescents in cohabiting stepfamilies. In future work, scholars may want to consider a reconceptualization of family formation and relationship progression, and the meaning of cohabitation specifically as a significant relationship marker, especially in populations facing conditions of economic uncertainty and residential instability. Direct comparisons among union types and subpopulations are beyond the present analysis, and we hope future work will continue to examine the varied nature of cohabitation formation processes and meanings of cohabitation.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R01 HD064723). The points of view expressed do not represent the official position of the U.S. government, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Services, or National Development and Research Institutes, Inc.

References

- Berger LM, Carlson MJ, Bzostek SH, Osborne C. Parenting practices of resident fathers: The role of marital and biological ties. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2008; 70:625–639. [PubMed: 21909158]

- Bradley EH, Curry LA, Devers KJ. Qualitative data analysis for health services research: Developing taxonomy, themes, and theory. *Health Services Research*. 2007; 42:1758–1772. [PubMed: 17286625]
- Brown SL. Union transitions among cohabitators: The significance of relationship assessments and expectations. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 2000; 62:833–846.
- Brown, SL. Child well-being in cohabiting families. In: Booth, A.; Crouter, A., editors. *Just living together: Implications of cohabitation for children, families and social policy*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum; 2002. p. 173-188.
- Brown SL. Relationship quality dynamics of cohabiting unions. *Journal of Family Issues*. 2003; 24:583–601.
- Brown SL. Family structure and child well-being: The significance of parental cohabitation. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2004; 66:351–367.
- Buchanan, CM.; Maccoby, EE.; Dornbusch, SM. *Adolescents after divorce*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1996.
- Bumpass L, Lu H. Trends in cohabitation and implications for children's family contexts. *Population Studies*. 2000; 54:29–41.
- Burton, L. Confronting family poverty and social exclusion: Ensuring work–family balance advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity In North America. Mexico City, Mexico: International Federation for Family Development; 2014. Social exclusion, social capital, and socioeconomic mobility: How micro-level processes obfuscate reductions in poverty; p. 19-38.
- Burton L, Tucker MB. Romantic unions in an era of uncertainty: A post-Moynihan perspective on African American women and marriage. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 2009; 621:132–148.
- Carlson MJ, McLanahan S, England P. Union formation in fragile families. *Demography*. 2004; 41:237–261. [PubMed: 15209039]
- Chambers AL, Kravitz A. Understanding the disproportionately low marriage rates among African Americans: An amalgam of social and psychological constraints. *Family Relations*. 2011; 60:648–660.
- Charmaz, K. Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In: Denzin, NK.; Lincoln, YS., editors. *Strategies for qualitative inquiry*. 3rd ed.. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 2007. p. 249-291.
- Cherlin A. The deinstitutionalization of American marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2004; 66:848–861.
- Cherlin A. Demographic trends in the United States: A review of research in the 2000s. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2010; 72:403–419. [PubMed: 22399825]
- Crabtree, B.; Miller, W. A template approach to text analysis: Developing and using codebooks. In: Crabtree, B.; Miller, W., editors. *Doing qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage; 1999. p. 163-177.
- Dunlap, E.; Golub, A.; Benoit, E. The invisible partners: Cohabiting males as “caring daddies” in inner-city “mother-only” households. In: Columbus, F., editor. *Family life: Roles, bonds and impact*. Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science; 2010. p. 33-54.
- Edin, K.; Lein, L. *Making ends meet: How single mothers survive welfare and low wage work*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; 1997.
- Fereday J, Muir-Cochrane E. Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 2008; 5:80–92.
- Goldscheider FK, Sassler S. Creating stepfamilies: Integrating children into the study of union formation. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2006; 68:275–291.
- Golub A, Reid M, Strickler J, Dunlap E. Cohabitation duration and transient domesticity. *Marriage & Family Review*. 2013; 49:623–646.
- Guzzo KB. Marital intentions and the stability of first cohabitations. *Journal of Family Issues*. 2009; 30:179–205.
- Hetherington, EM.; Stanley-Hagan, M. Diversity among stepfamilies. In: Demo, DH.; Allen, KR.; Fine, MA., editors. *Handbook of family diversity*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2000. p. 173-196.

- Kennedy S, Bumpass L. Cohabitation and children's living arrangements: New estimates from the United States. *Demographic Research*. 2008; 19:1663–1692. [PubMed: 19119426]
- Kurdek LA, Fine MA. Mothers, fathers, stepfathers, and siblings as providers of supervision, acceptance, and autonomy to young adolescents. *Journal of Family Psychology*. 1995; 9:95–99.
- Lichter DT, Qian Z. Serial cohabitation and the marital life course. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2008; 70:861–878.
- Lichter DT, Qian Z, Mellot LM. Marriage or dissolution? Union transitions among poor cohabiting women. *Demography*. 2006; 43:223–240. [PubMed: 16889126]
- Lichter DT, Turner RN, Sassler S. National estimates of the rise in serial cohabitation. *Social Science Research*. 2010; 39:754–755.
- Manning WD.; Brown, SL. Cohabiting fathers. In: Cabrera, NJ.; Tamis-LeMonda, CS., editors. *Handbook of father involvement: Multidisciplinary perspectives*. New York: Routledge; 2013. p. 281–296.
- Manning WD, Lamb KA. Adolescent well-being in cohabiting, married, and single parent families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2004; 65:876–893.
- Manning WD, Smock PJ. Why marry? Race and the transition to marriage among cohabitators. *Demography*. 1995; 32:509–520. [PubMed: 8925943]
- Manning WD, Smock PJ. Measuring and modeling cohabitation: New perspectives from qualitative data. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2005; 67:989–1002.
- Marsiglio W, Hinojosa R. Managing the multifather family: Stepfathers as father allies. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2007; 69:845–862.
- Marsiglio, W.; Roy, K. *Nurturing dads: Social initiatives for contemporary fatherhood*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; 2012.
- Mason M. Sample size and saturation in PhD studies using qualitative interviews. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung*. 2010; 11(3) Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1428/3027#g11>.
- McHale J, Waller MR, Pearson J. Coparenting interventions for fragile families: What do we know and where do we need to go next? *Family Process*. 2012; 51:284–306. [PubMed: 22984970]
- McLanahan S. Diverging destinies: How children are faring under the Second Demographic Transition. *Demography*. 2004; 41:607–627. [PubMed: 15622946]
- McLanahan S, Percheski C. Family structure and the reproduction of inequalities. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 2008; 34:257–276.
- Morrison DR, Ritualo A. Routes to children's economic recovery after divorce: Are maternal cohabitation and remarriage equivalent? *American Sociological Review*. 2000; 65:560–580.
- Raley RK. A shortage of marriagable men? A note on the role of cohabitation in Black-White differences in marriage rates. *American Sociological Review*. 1996; 61:973–983.
- Rinelli LN, Brown SL. Race differences in union transitions among cohabitators: The role of relationship features. *Marriage & Family Review*. 2010; 46:22–40.
- Roy K, Burton L. Mothering through recruitment: Kinscription of nonresidential fathers and father figures in low-income families. *Family Relations*. 2007; 56:24–39.
- Ruggles S. The rise of divorce and separation in the United States, 1880–1990. *Demography*. 1997; 34:455–479. [PubMed: 9545625]
- Sassler S. The process of entering into cohabiting unions. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2004; 66:491–505.
- Sassler S, Miller AJ. Class differences in cohabitation processes. *Family Relations*. 2011; 60:183–177.
- Sassler S, Roy S, Stasny E. Men's economic status and marital transitions of fragile families. *Demographic Research*. 2014; 30:71–110.
- Seltzer JA, Bachrach CA, Bianchi SM, Bledsoe CH, Casper LM, Lindsay Chase-Lansdale P, Thomas D. Explaining family change and variation: Challenges for family demographers. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2005; 67:908–925. [PubMed: 20376277]
- Speer RB, Trees AR. The push and pull of stepfamily life: The contribution of stepchildren's autonomy and connection-seeking behaviors to role development in stepfamilies. *Communication Studies*. 2007; 58:377–394.

- Stanley SM, Rhoades GK, Markmann HJ. Sliding versus deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect. *Family Relations*. 2006; 55:499–509.
- Strauss, AL.; Corbin, JM. Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques. Newbury Park, CA: Sage; 1990.
- Stykes, JB.; Williams, S. Diverging destinies: Children's family structure variation by maternal education. Vol. FP-13-16. Bowling Green, OH: National Center for Family and Marriage Research, Bowling Green State University; 2013.
- Sweeney MM. Stepfather families and the emotional well-being of adolescents. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. 2007; 48:33–49. [PubMed: 17476922]
- Waller MR. Cooperation, conflict, or disengagement? Coparenting styles and father involvement in fragile families. *Family Process*. 2012; 51:325–342. [PubMed: 22984972]
- White L, Gilbreth J. When children have two fathers: Effects of relationships with stepfathers and noncustodial fathers on adolescent outcomes. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2001; 63:155–167.
- Williams K, Sassler S, Frech A, Addo F, Cooksey EC. Mothers' union histories and the mental and physical health of adolescents born to unmarried mothers. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. 2013; 54:278–295. [PubMed: 23956357]
- Williams K, Sassler S, Nicholson LM. For better or for worse: The consequences of marriage and cohabitation for single mothers. *Social Forces*. 2008; 86:1481–1512.

Table 1

Descriptive Characteristics of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Educational attainment	Prior cohabs	Prior marriages	Joint children	Months cohabited
Angela	39	F	HS degree/GED	3	0	0	20
Brandon	25	M	HS degree/GED	1	0		
Ruby	17	F					
Alisha	41	F	Some college	0	1	0	10
Carl	48	M	HS degree/GED	2	1		
Sarah	14	F					
Malaya	39	F	HS degree/GED	1	0	0	24
Greg	45	M	HS degree/GED	2	1		
Nina	13	F					
Kayla	35	F	Some college	3	1	0	4
Rodney	23	M	HS degree	1	0		
Brandy	11	F					
Dionne	31	F	Some college	1	0	0	28
George	36	M	No HS degree	2	0		
Dara	11	F					
Janet	29	F	HS degree/GED	2	0	0	6
Marvin	25	M	HS degree/GED	0	0		
Andreas	11	M					
Tiffany	35	F	HS degree/GED	1	0	0	16
Lamar	47	M	HS degree/GED	2	0		
Corey	15	M					
Tanisha	44	F	Some college	1	0	0	15
Roland	46	M	HS degree/GED	1	0		
Jaye	13	F					
Delia	44	F	No HS degree	1	1	0	26
Reggie	38	M	Some college	2	0		

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Educational attainment	Prior cohabs	Prior marriages	Joint children	Months cohabited
Alice	11	F					
Tyra	38	F	HS degree/GED	1	1	0	4
DeMarco	29	M	HS degree/GED	1	1		
Tatiana	12	F					
Courtney	32	F	No HS degree	3	1	0	15
Ben	46	M	HS degree/GED	2	1		
Kayce	15	F					
Brenda	41	F	No HS degree	0	1	0	55
Christopher	51	M	HS degree/GED	0	1		
Tonya	13	F					
Wanda	48	F	HS degree/GED	0	0	0	45
Jamal	56	M	Some college	1	0		
Will	12	M					
Vivian	34	F	No HS degree	2	0	1	57
Robert	49	M	HS degree/GED	0	0		
Dixon	14	M					
Ranisha	29	F	No HS degree	3	0	1	56
Darius	46	M	No HS degree	2	1		
Kordell	11	M					
Averages and percentages							
Mother	37.3	F		1.5	0.4	13%	25.4
Partner	40.7	M		1.3	0.4	—	—
Child	12.9	67% F					

Note. cohabs = cohabitations; M = male; F = female; HS = high school; GED = general equivalency diploma.