



Cohabitation, post-conception unions, and the rise in nonmarital fertility



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ABSTRACT

The majority of U.S. nonmarital births today are to cohabiting couples. This study focuses on *transitions* to cohabitation or marriage among pregnant unmarried women during the period between conception and birth. Results using the newly-released 2006–2010 *National Survey of Family Growth* show that nonmarital pregnancy is a significant precursor to cohabitation before childbirth (18%), exceeding transitions to marriage (5%) by factor of over three. For pregnant women, the boundaries between singlehood, cohabitation, and marriage are highly fluid. The results also reveal substantial variation in post-conception cohabiting and marital unions; e.g., disproportionately low percentages of black single and cohabiting women transitioned into marriage, even when conventional social and economic risk factors are controlled. The multivariate analyses also point to persistent class differences in patterns of family formation, including patterns of cohabitation and marriage following conception. Poorly educated women, in particular, are much more likely to become pregnant as singles living alone or as partners in cohabiting unions. But compared with college-educated women, pregnancies are less likely to lead to either cohabitation or marriage. This paper highlights the conceptual and technical challenges involved in making unambiguous interpretations of nonmarital fertility during a period of rising nonmarital cohabitation.

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1. Introduction

A recently released report by the National Center for Health Statistics showed that nearly one-half of all premarital first births during the late 2000s were to cohabiting women (Martinez et al., 2012). Moreover, 22% of *all* first U.S. births – more than one in five – occurred within cohabiting unions, up from 12.4% in 2002 (see also Copen et al., 2013). Cohabitation clearly has become an increasingly important context for childbearing and childrearing in America (Edin and Tach, 2012; Sassler et al., 2009; Rose-Greenland and Smock, 2013). Antiquated stereotypes of single mothers – raising children on their own – are inconsistent with new evidence that nonmarital births increasingly involve two co-residential parents who presumably share expenses and parental obligations.

The overriding goal here is to better understand the extent and etiology of relationship transitions associated with nonmarital conceptions. Few if any nationally-representative studies have examined recent shifts into and out of cohabiting unions among *pregnant* women (for an exception, see Gibson-Davis and Rackin, 2014). In the past, studies of this genre typically

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tracked whether a nonmarital pregnancy led to marriage (Bachrach, 1987; Cooksey, 1990). To “legitimize” a pregnancy meant to marry the father before the birth of the child (i.e., so-called “shotgun marriages”). Today, however, “shotgun cohabitations” rather than marriages are on the rise. They seemingly represent a new kind of legitimation based on co-residential partnership and shared parenting rather than on legal marriage (Reed, 2006; Rackin and Gibson-Davis, 2012; Holland, 2013). As Surra and Boelter (2013) rightly note, relationships start well before partners move in together, yet our understanding of the “properties of relationships” (226) that lead to cohabitation or marriage are rarely examined. Here we focus on a key relationship property – nonmarital pregnancy – which can either reinforce or disrupt the trajectory of nonmarital relationships. Previous studies typically measure childbearing of cohabiting couples at the time of birth (Martinez et al., 2012), but usually ignore shifts in living arrangements during the period between conception and childbearing.

This paper has two primary objectives. *First*, we build on previous studies of childbearing within cohabiting and marital unions (Copen et al., 2013; Martinez et al., 2012) by estimating the probabilities of various relationship transitions for a nationally-representative sample of pregnant women of reproductive age. Specifically, we provide evidence on how nonmarital pregnancies segue into cohabitation or marriage – or, instead, lead to union dissolution. This goal is accomplished using newly-released data from the 2006–2010 *National Survey of Family Growth* (NSFG). We show that so-called “shotgun cohabitations,” or post-conception cohabitations (to use a more accurate and less value-laden term), have supplanted “shotgun marriages” (post-conception marriages) as the modal union transition associated with nonmarital pregnancies.

Second, we fit various multivariate models that identify the family and sociodemographic background characteristics associated with transitions to cohabitation or marriage among pregnant women. Specifically, we ask: What accounts for variation in post-conception union transitions (i.e., either post-conception marriages or post-conception cohabitations)? Our results highlight the implications of nonmarital pregnancy for entering and exiting cohabiting and marital unions, which are expressed unevenly across racial and ethnic groups, family backgrounds, and educational levels. The results also provide additional evidence on the growing gap in union formation and partnered childbearing between more and less economically advantaged couples (i.e., fragile families), which places America’s children on divergent paths to adulthood (McLanahan, 2004).

2. Background

2.1. Nonmarital fertility in cohabiting unions

Childbearing among cohabiting couples has upended conventional interpretations of out-of-wedlock childbearing and its economic and developmental consequences for children (Bumpass et al., 1995; Raley, 2001). Recently updated estimates from the National Center for Health Statistics indicate that the share of all U.S. births to unmarried women exceeded 40% each year between 2008 and 2011, even as the rate of nonmarital childbearing declined slightly (Martin et al., 2013). But, unlike the past, most nonmarital births today involve two co-residential biological parents (Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008; Lichter, 2012). For the early 1990s, Kennedy and Bumpass (2008) reported that 39% of all nonmarital births occurred within cohabiting unions. This figure increased to roughly one-half by the 1997-to-2001 period. And, more recently, Lichter (2012) showed using data from the 2006 to 2008 NSFG that 58% of all nonmarital births were to cohabiting couples. Among first premarital cohabiting unions, the probability of a pregnancy increased from 15% to 19% between 1995 and 2006–2010 (based on NSFG), even as premarital pregnancies declined overall (Copen et al., 2013).

The boundaries of cohabitation and marriage clearly have blurred. In the past, an important distinction between cohabiting and married couples was the presence of children or the desire to have children (Bachrach, 1987). Children were best reserved for traditional marriage. In fact, Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel (1990) showed that fertility intentions (over the subsequent 2-year period) were much more similar between cohabiters and singles than between cohabiters and married persons, and this pattern persists among recent cohorts (Mosher et al., 2012). Of course, intentions are not always predictive of actual childbearing, especially among cohabitating and unmarried couples who are at a higher risk of unplanned pregnancy than married couples (Musick, 2002). If measured in terms of childrearing rather than childbearing, cohabiting couples are more like married couples than singles. Roughly 40% of cohabiters have co-residential children, split roughly 50–50 between current and past relationships (Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008; Rose-Greenland and Smock, 2013).

Scholars often conceptualize cohabitation – and childbearing – as a precursor or stepping stone to marriage (Smock, 2000). For example, a nonmarital conception, whether planned or unplanned, may trigger entrance into shared living – in this case a post-conception or shotgun cohabitation (Reed, 2006). Other unmarried couples – whether cohabiting or not – may decide to get married at the same time they make the decision to have children or to start a family. In this case, a post-conception marriage suggests that decisions about cohabitation, childbearing, and marriage are highly interrelated; they are not made in isolation of each other (Steele et al., 2005; Wu and Musick, 2008). This pattern of joint decision-making, however, seems to be less evident in Northern Europe, where fertility is especially common in cohabiting unions and less closely tied to marriage or union transitions (Holland, 2013).¹ Fertility in cohabiting unions, in fact, is so commonplace that

¹ The pattern, stability, and educational gradient of cohabitation (and childbearing within cohabitation) in Europe generally differ from patterns in the United States, but Europe is no monolith (Kalmijn, 2013). For example, post-conception marriages are more common in Eastern European countries than elsewhere (Perelli-Harris and Gerber, 2011).

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