

Cohabitation : An Elusive Concept

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Rates of out-of-wedlock births in the US have increased over the past three decades and rates of cohabitation among unwed parents have risen. Consequently, unwed parenthood is decreasingly synonymous with single parenthood. As we focus more attention on unwed parents, their living arrangements, and relationships, it is becoming clear that cohabitation is an ambiguous concept that is difficult to measure. In this study, we use the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing data to document how sensitive cohabitation estimates can be to various sources of information and we demonstrate that relationships among unwed parents fall along a continuum, from marriage-like cohabitation at one extreme to parents who have no contact at all with one another at the other. The results underscore the limitations of using binary measures of cohabitation to characterize parent relationships.

As rates of out of wedlock births in the US have increased over the past three decades, rates of cohabitation among unwed parents also have risen and unwed parenthood has become decreasingly synonymous with single parenthood. Recent results from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study demonstrate that most unwed fathers are involved with the mothers at the time of the birth and that they have intentions to remain involved as parents in the future (McLanahan et al., 2001; Teitler, 2001). While analyses of the Fragile Families data have dispelled the myth of the absent father, they have raised new conceptual and methodological questions about the relationships between unwed parents. The conceptual questions have implications for how we characterize parents' relationships and the methodological questions have to do with how we measure cohabitation.

As we focus more attention on unwed parents and their living arrangements and relationships, it becomes increasingly clear that cohabitation is an ambiguous concept that is difficult to measure. Since romantically involved couples may not spend *every* night together *all* the time, characterizing survey respondents as living together based on the traditional concept of full time cohabitation may inaccurately depict levels of father involvement with mother and child.

Not only may the conventional cohabitation dichotomy not reflect what we intend to measure, it also produces estimates that vary by how we ask about cohabitation, when we ask, and who we ask. These conceptual and measurement issues result in cohabitation estimates that can cloud our understanding of unwed parents' relationships. For example, some cohabiting couples may be as committed to each other as some married couples, while others may have relationships more akin to serial one-night stands. In light of these complexities, should we continue to hold onto the traditional dichotomous concepts of marriage and cohabitation to

characterize whether parents are involved with one another and share parenting responsibilities? And if we do, how can we best elicit the information we are looking for (how, when, and whom should we ask)? The answers depend on how elusive the concept of cohabitation has become.

The characterization of parents' relationships is intricately linked to public policy. Policies may be more effective at influencing household structure in an intended manner if they are tailored to actual rather than presumed parental relationships. At the same time, policies may influence parents' reports about their living arrangements. For example, unwed parents who live together may be reluctant to report that they are cohabiting if they live in a state with aggressive child support enforcement or in which welfare eligibility is based on household income.

In this paper, we use the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing data to describe, more comprehensively than most previous studies, the relationships and living arrangements of unmarried parents who have just had a child. We do so both from a measurement perspective and from a substantive perspective. The Fragile Families data are ideal for studying cohabitation and relationships for the following reasons: 1) They include rich measures of living arrangements and father involvement. 2) The sample of unwed parents is sufficiently large to permit analyses of relationships for racial/ethnic and other important subgroups. 3) Fragile Families is a panel study that enables us to assess the stability of reports of cohabitation over time, by comparing baseline reports to 12-month retrospective reports of cohabitation at birth.

We begin by presenting various estimates of cohabitation using different sources of information to show how difficult cohabitation is to measure precisely. We then demonstrate that relationships among unwed parents fall along a continuum, from marriage-like cohabitation at one extreme to parents who have no contact at all with one another at the other. Next, we show how the distribution of couples along this continuum varies by race, ethnicity, age, nativity,

reliance on public assistance, educational achievement, and health insurance status and city. The results underscore the limitations of using binary measures of cohabitation to characterize parent relationships.

BACKGROUND

A substantial proportion of all non-marital births are to cohabiting parents. Recent estimates indicate that 39% of unmarried parents are cohabiting at the time of the birth. However, there is substantial variation by race/ethnicity. The cohabitation rates among unmarried non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics are 50 and 53%, respectively, but it is less than half that (22%) among non-Hispanic blacks (Bumpass and Lu, 2000).

Not only is the cohabitation rate among unwed parents nontrivial, it also has been increasing. Only 25% of all non-marital births during the 1980s were to cohabiting parents (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989). The rise in cohabitation rates since then has been greatest for non-Hispanic whites (33% to 50%) (Bumpass and Lu, 2000). Casper and Cohen (2000) show similar increases using the Current Population Surveys from 1977 to 1997. These trends indicate that the US pattern of non-marital childbearing is converging with that of the European countries where the vast majority of unwed parents live together in ‘marriage like’ relationships.

The most frequently cited estimates of cohabitation rates are based on data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), and the Current Population Surveys (CPS). The first two surveys ask about cohabitation directly through retrospective cohabitation histories. The CPS collects current household roster information and asks about cohabitation, but as Casper and Cohen (2000)

point out, estimates are very sensitive to how cohabitation status is inferred from the rosters since these ask about cohabitation in relation to the head of the household.

Even asking about cohabitation directly can be problematic since we rely on subjective assessments from respondents. Parents sometimes disagree about whether or not they are living with each other (Nock, 1995; Seltzer, 2000) and whether or not they live with their child (Tuschen, 1994). These disagreements are consistent with research showing that couple relationships do not fall clearly into rigid one-or-the-other categories, but occur along a continuum (Ross, 1995; Seltzer, 2000).

Not only are reports of cohabitation subject to subjective individual interpretation, but the meaning of cohabitation also may vary depending on the race, ethnicity, age, educational level and income of respondents (Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Manning, 1993; Raley, 1999; Smock, 2000). Given the individual and group level variations in the interpretation of cohabitation, we expect estimates of cohabitation to vary by who is asked and exactly how they are asked.

While cohabitation, to the extent that it can be measured accurately, may be an important marker of relationships between parents, it is not a good indicator of father involvement with children or of “family functioning.” Early results from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study indicate that many more fathers are involved with their children than can be surmised from cohabitation rates alone (see McLanahan et al., 2001; Teitler, 2001). Though many unmarried couples do not live together, most view themselves as collaborative family units. Over 90 percent of the non-cohabiting mothers in the Fragile Families Study want the father to be involved in raising their child. This finding is true across all racial/ethnic groups, and to the extent that small differences exist, father involvement with their children and expectations for future involvement

tend to be highest among blacks. Moreover, nearly 80 percent of the mothers and 82 percent of the fathers who are cohabiting intend to marry their partner, and most of the parents who are romantically involved but not living together plan to live together or get married in the future. These results from the Fragile Families study support findings from ethnographic studies showing that many couples who do not consider themselves to be living together maintain cooperative and sometimes romantic relationships (see, for example, Edin and Lein, 1997; Furstenberg et al., 1992).

The dramatic changes in living arrangements among unmarried couples and the optimistic co-parenting expectations and intentions among parents who do not always live together have important implications for how we think about and define families. As mentioned earlier, they also have policy implications, particularly in the context of welfare reform and the recent focus on responsible fatherhood. In this paper, we build upon previous research on family relationships by exploring the measurement of cohabitation and by describing subgroup variation in how individuals classify their relationships.

DATA

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study follows a new cohort of (mostly) unwed parents and their children. The total sample size is 4900 families, made up of 3704 unwed couples, 1188 married couples and 8 couples of unknown marital status, interviewed in 75 hospitals in 20 large US cities (with populations of 200,000 or more). The new data, once weighted, will be representative of non-marital births in each of the 20 cities, and they also will be representative of non-marital births in US cities with populations over 200,000. Follow-up interviews with both parents take place when the child is 12, 30, and 48 months old. Data on

child health and development are being collected from the parents during each of the follow-up interviews, and in-home assessments of child wellbeing are carried out at 30 and 48 months (see Reichman et al., 2001 for a description of the Fragile Families research design). Ninety percent of eligible unmarried and 89 percent of eligible married mothers completed baseline interviews. Of completed mother interviews, 89% of married fathers and 75% of unmarried fathers were interviewed.

Table 1 describes the sample of unwed mothers in the Fragile Families study. The vast majority of mothers in this urban sample are minority and poor. Almost two thirds of the mothers are less than 25 years old, 15% are foreign-born, close to half rely on public assistance, over 40% have less than a high school education, and three quarters were on Medicaid when their child was born. All of these descriptive statistics are based on unweighted data and should not be interpreted as nationally representative.

RESULTS

Because the study focuses on relationships between parents, the surveys include numerous questions about living arrangements. Additionally, both mothers and fathers are interviewed so we can compare couples' responses. Finally, follow-up data 12 months after baseline allow us to compare current and retrospective reports about living arrangements at the time of the child's birth. Together, these features of the study allow us to gauge variation in reports in more ways than previous studies.

Table 2 presents cohabitation estimates using a number of different constructs, all based on questions asked of the mother right after the baby was born. For the overall sample of unmarried mothers, the rates range from 33% to 48%. The first three measures are based on

single questions and the last three are more restrictive in that they combine answers to more than one question. Responses to the question “Are you and [name of baby’s father] living together now?” are presented in the first row, yielding a cohabitation rate of 48% -- our highest estimate. The next measure is the mother’s response to the following question: “Who will the baby live with?” For this measure, we define the parents as cohabiting if the mother indicates both herself and the baby’s father in her response. This measure yields a slightly lower cohabitation rate (44%). Next, we use information from the household roster provided by the mother who was asked to list all individuals currently residing in her household and to specify their relationships to her. If she indicated that she was living with a partner or boyfriend, we classified her as cohabiting. This cohabitation estimate yields a rate very similar to that from the first two measures. However, when we consider agreement on two of the individual measures, cohabitation estimates decline to just over 40% and when we look at agreement on all three, the rate decreases to 33%. The general pattern – that cohabitation rates decline substantially as the specification becomes more stringent – holds for all racial/ethnic subgroups. However, it is most pronounced for blacks, for whom the estimate declines by 40% from the least to the most stringent measure (versus half that for whites).

Regardless of the measure used, the rates of cohabitation vary substantially by race/ethnicity. The rates for non-Hispanic blacks are dramatically lower than those for non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics. The figures we present are based on interviews that took place from late 1998 through early fall 2000 and have not been adjusted for race, age, and urban residence, so they are not directly comparable to those of Bumpass and Lu (2000).

Estimates of cohabitation also depend on when questions are asked. The Fragile Families study asks questions about baseline cohabitation at two different time points – right after birth

and one year later. In Table 3, mothers' baseline reports of whether or not they were living with the father are cross-tabulated with their retrospective reports of baseline relationship status one year later. The results are based on two cities for which 12-month follow-up data are currently available. From the marginal distributions, it appears that there is great stability in reports over time. Sixty-seven percent of the reinterviewed mothers reported cohabiting at baseline compared to 66% who reported "cohabiting always" when asked a year later what their relationship with the father was at the time of the birth. However, the marginals mask a considerable amount of movement at the individual level. Only 88% of the mothers who reported living together at the baseline interview gave consistent reports 12 months later. Of the other 12%, about half reported that they were married at baseline, and the other half reported that they were rarely or never living with the baby's father at baseline. The level of agreement for those reporting that they were not cohabiting at baseline is even lower: One third of the baseline non-cohabitators reported at 12 months that they were living with the baby's father at the time of the birth (either married or cohabiting).

We also find inconsistency in reports of whether or not parents live together depending on whether the mother or father is asked. Seventy-five percent of unwed fathers completed baseline interviews and were asked the direct questions about cohabitation, making it possible to compare mother and father baseline reports for these couples. Fifty-seven percent of mothers reported cohabiting at baseline versus 61% of the fathers (Table 4). Again, the discrepancy is even greater within couples. Among mothers (with interviewed partners) who claimed to live with the father at baseline, 6% of their partners reported otherwise. Among mothers who said they were not cohabiting at baseline, 17% of their partners said they were living together.

Anecdotal evidence reported by Fragile Families interviewers suggests that there was some underreporting of cohabitation in order to conceal partners from government agencies (e.g., welfare agencies, offices of child support enforcement and immigration authorities) and some overreporting of being married to dodge in-hospital paternity establishment efforts. While we cannot tell how prevalent such misreporting is in our data, the possibility that respondents are not always reporting truthfully is consistent with the variation we found in reports over time and between partners. Such misreporting may become more prevalent as welfare reform unfolds if the pressure on mothers to provide information about the fathers increases. Changes in the prevalence of misreporting of cohabitation over time could lead to inaccurate estimates of period and cohort trends in living arrangements.

The results shown so far indicate that cohabitation is neither a simple nor a singular concept, and that there is no one correct way to measure it. Its elusiveness suggests that cohabitation status may not adequately characterize the relationships of many unwed parents. For the remainder of the paper, therefore, we expand our measure to include not only living arrangements but relationship status as well. Specifically, we combine the question “Are you and [NAME OF BABY’S FATHER] living together now?” with “Which of the following statements best describes your current relationship with [NAME OF BABY’S FATHER]: We are romantically involved on a steady basis, we are involved in an on-again and off-again relationship, we are just friends, we hardly ever talk to each other, we never talk to each other.” We distinguish between mothers who live with the father, those who are in a romantic relationship but do not live with him, those who are friends, and those who have little or no contact with the father.

Characterizing parents’ relationships

We have shown that the concept of cohabitation is ambiguous in that it varies by what questions are asked, when they are asked, and to whom they are asked. We also indicated that the ambiguity is greater for blacks than for other racial/ethnic subgroups, and suggested that some of the ambiguity may result from difficulty respondents may have classifying their relationship using a cohabiting/non cohabiting dichotomy. Looking at relationships along a continuum from marriage-like cohabitation at one extreme to parents who have no contact with one another at the other, we now explore the extent to which relationship types at baseline fall along a continuum and how the distribution along that continuum varies by subgroup. In other words, it may be more reasonable and efficient to make the common assumption that couples are either living together or not involved for some groups than for others.

Table 5 presents the distributions of parents' relationship status by race/ethnicity, age, nativity, reliance on public assistance, education, and health insurance status. Since cohabitation varies by race, age, income and education, we expect variations in relationship types across most of these attributes. Since immigrants are often subject to stricter public assistance eligibility criteria than the native born and these may affect reported living arrangements, we also look at parents' relationships by nativity.

As we indicated earlier, non-Hispanic white and Hispanic unmarried parents are much more likely than their non-Hispanic black counterparts to cohabit. On the other hand, blacks are much more likely than whites or Hispanics to be in romantic non-cohabiting relationships. When we combine both categories (cohabiting and romantically involved but not cohabiting), the proportion of "couples" varies little by race/ethnicity. Blacks have the lowest rates of cohabitation, which could (erroneously) be interpreted as black fathers being less involved with

mothers than white and Hispanic fathers. However, black couples have a lower rate of little or no contact, and therefore, a higher rate of *any* relationship than do white or Hispanic couples.

An alternative interpretation of these findings is that whites are most likely to classify themselves into extreme ends of the continuum whereas blacks are more likely to opt for a middle ground. Three-quarters of white mothers report either cohabiting or having little or no contact compared to only half of the black mothers.

The patterns in relationships are very similar across Hispanic subgroups, although Puerto Rican couples are half as likely as other Hispanics to have little or no contact. Teen mothers are less likely to cohabit than mothers of other ages, but are more likely to be in romantic non-cohabiting relationships. Except for mothers age 35 and over, who are the least likely to have little or no contact with their child's father, the proportions of parents who are friends or have little or no contact do not vary by age. Foreign-born unmarried mothers are much more likely to cohabit and less likely to be in romantic non-cohabiting relationships than women who are US-born, but the proportions in other types of relationships are similar. Women not on public assistance are much more likely than those who receive assistance to report that they are cohabiting. Parents' relationship status does not vary by education, and finally, mothers with private insurance are more likely to cohabit and less likely to be in romantic non-cohabiting relationships than mothers who are on Medicaid or have other types of (or no) health insurance.

The most striking finding from Table 5 is that 80% of unwed mothers report at the time of the birth that they are cohabiting or romantically involved with the father, and that this is immutable across all racial, ethnic, age, education, nativity, and income related subgroups. While rates of cohabitation among romantically involved couples do vary, the rates of cohabiting *or* romantic involvement are remarkably stable.

Finally, we examine relationship types across the 20 cities in the Fragile Families sample. We do not believe that rates of romantic involvement would be affected by local social, economic and policy environments, since it is unlikely that there are incentive effects on love. However, cohabitation rates among romantically involved couples may vary by city as local contexts provide different incentives and disincentives to live together or to report living together. For example, couples living in cities with restricted welfare eligibility benefits for two-parent families may be discouraged from reporting that they are cohabiting. On the other hand, unmarried couples living in cities with high unemployment, high costs of living or in morally liberal cities may be more likely to “double up.” By design, the Fragile Families study includes cities with substantial variation in policy regimes and labor markets (see Reichman et al., 2001). Therefore, if these factors affect cohabitation rates, we would expect to see differences in cohabitation rates across the 20 cities.

Couple relationships by city are shown in Figure 1. Cities are ordered according to the proportion cohabiting. The cities marked with an asterisk are smaller samples (approximately 75 unmarried mothers versus 250 in the other cities). Cohabitation rates in these cities vary widely, ranging from a low of 33% in Detroit to almost twice that (64%) in San Jose. However, the proportion of couples either cohabiting or romantically involved varies much less. It is about 80% across all cities.

We next examine whether this city variation in cohabitation among romantically involved couples is due to compositional characteristics of the different cities. In Figures 2A, 2B and 2C we present city variation in relationship status by race. The city order is the same as in Figure 1. We do not present breakdowns by relationship status for cities with fewer than 20 unmarried

mothers, and we place asterisks beside the names of cities with between 20 and 50 mother respondents.

The substantial between-city variation in cohabitation rates shown in Figure 1 is not apparent in any of the race specific figures (2A, B, and C), indicating that the variation in cohabitation rates is explained largely by differences in the racial composition across cities. We also tested for city variation in cohabitation rates using multilevel random effects models (results not shown). First, we estimated a simple model with no covariates and found significant variation in cohabitation rates between cities. Next, we estimated a model with individual level dummy variables for race and another controlling for race, age, nativity, and health insurance status. In both of the conditional models, the between-city variation was entirely eliminated, indicating that policy variation across these cities is not resulting in variation in cohabitation rates.

These results do not necessarily mean that policies have no effect on living arrangements. It is possible that policies have different effects for different individuals, resulting in no average effects; that effects of certain policies cancel out those of other policies; or that even though policies may vary across cities, they have exactly the same effect (i.e., no dose-response effect). With our data, we can determine only that city differences in overall policy regimes are not associated with city differences in cohabitation rates.

CONCLUSION

Family sociologists, demographers, and other scholars generally have classified parents as married or unmarried, and more recently, unmarried parents as cohabiting or not cohabiting. The results from this paper support prior evidence that many fathers who do not live with the

mothers all the time still maintain strong ties and relationships with them. As father involvement outside the traditional confines of co-residency is not negligible, we may want to rethink how we define father involvement and how we measure relationship status. However, this is not an easy task.

Cohabitation status is difficult to determine for many reasons. It depends on how it is operationalized from survey data, when questions are asked, and who is being asked. Information obtained one year after the birth is not always consistent with information reported earlier. And parents sometimes contradict each other. It is not possible from survey data alone to tell how much of these discrepancies is due to intentional misreporting and how much is due to ambiguities in the questions that are asked. Regardless of the causes of the discrepancies, we need to be cautious about what we read into measures of living arrangements.

Not only should we be cautious about interpreting reports of cohabitation because the concept is so elusive, but we also should be aware that it may be more elusive for certain groups than for others. Estimates of cohabitation are less variable for whites than for blacks. Moreover, cohabitation is a poorer measure of parents' involvement for blacks than for whites. If we look only at cohabitation reports, it appears that black fathers are less involved with mothers (and consequently with children) than are white fathers. However, when we look at finer distinctions in relationship status, black fathers are in fact slightly more likely to be involved *at all* with the mothers. In other words, reading too much into a dichotomous measure of cohabitation can result not only in a potentially biased measure of involvement, but also in misguided conclusions about differences between subpopulations.

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Table 5. Relationship Status by Socioeconomic Characteristics (figures are percentages)

	Cohabiting	Romantic	Friends	Little or No Contact	N
Race:					
Non-Hispanic White	61	19	6	14	532
Non-Hispanic Black	39	43	9	8	2024
Hispanic	59	25	6	10	1028
Other	48	35	8	8	111
Hispanic Ethnicity:					
Mexican	62	21	5	12	565
Puerto Rican	57	28	9	5	148
Other Hispanic	56	29	5	11	263
Age:					
<20	40	42	8	11	808
20-24	50	32	8	10	1524
25-29	50	31	9	10	768
30-35	51	31	8	10	353
35+	50	35	9	7	231
Nativity:					
US-born	46	36	8	10	3147
Foreign-born	61	23	6	10	548
Reliance on public Assistance:					
Yes	44	37	8	11	1603
No	51	32	8	9	2077
Education:					
Less than High School	47	34	8	11	1502
High School Grad or More	49	34	8	10	2197
Health Insurance Status:					
Medicaid	47	35	8	10	2712
Private	53	31	8	9	744
Other	45	36	13	6	229
N	1782	1271	296	355	3704

Figure 1. City Variation in Relationships

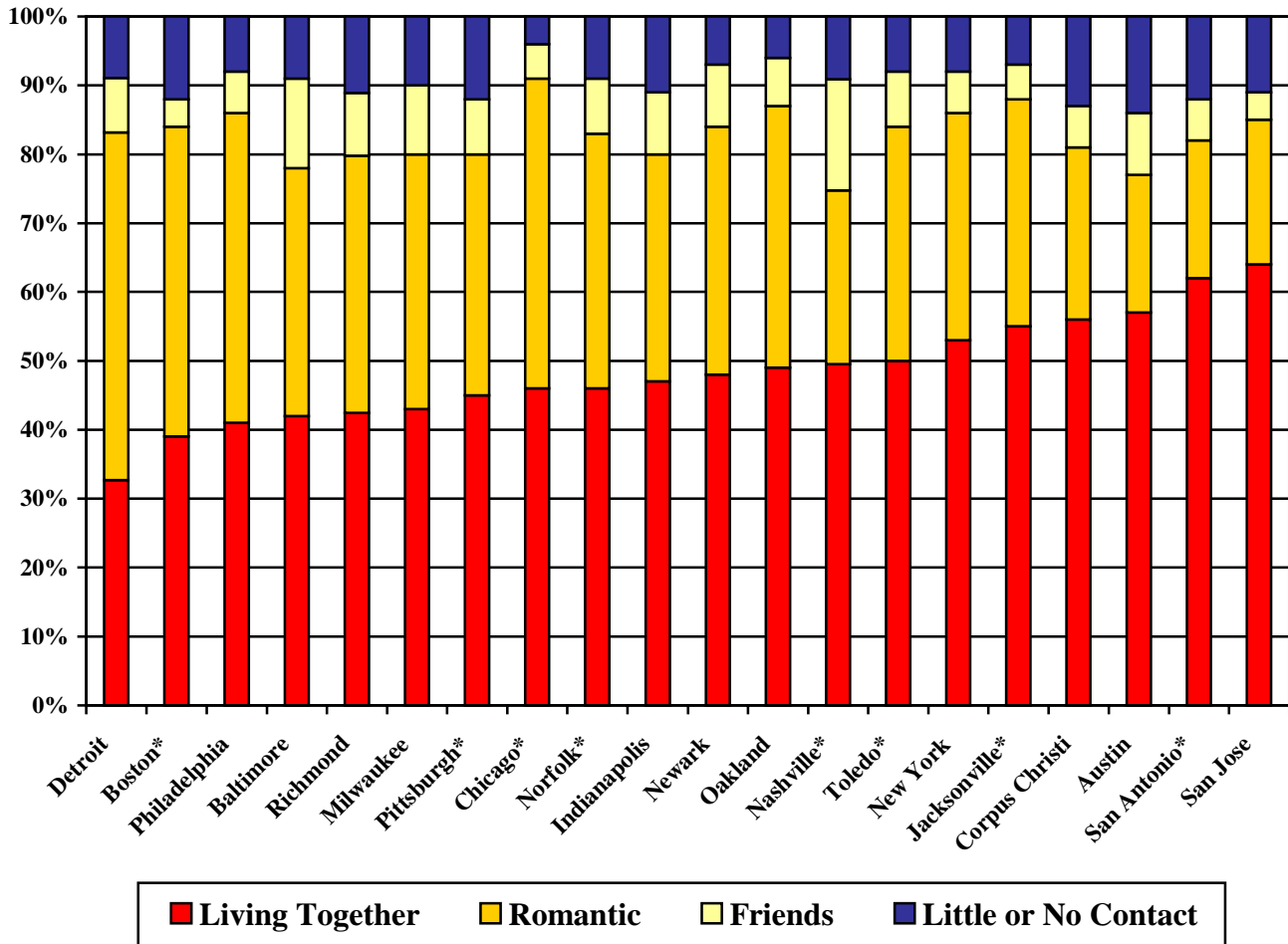


Figure 2A. City Variation in Relationships Among Non-Hispanic White Mothers

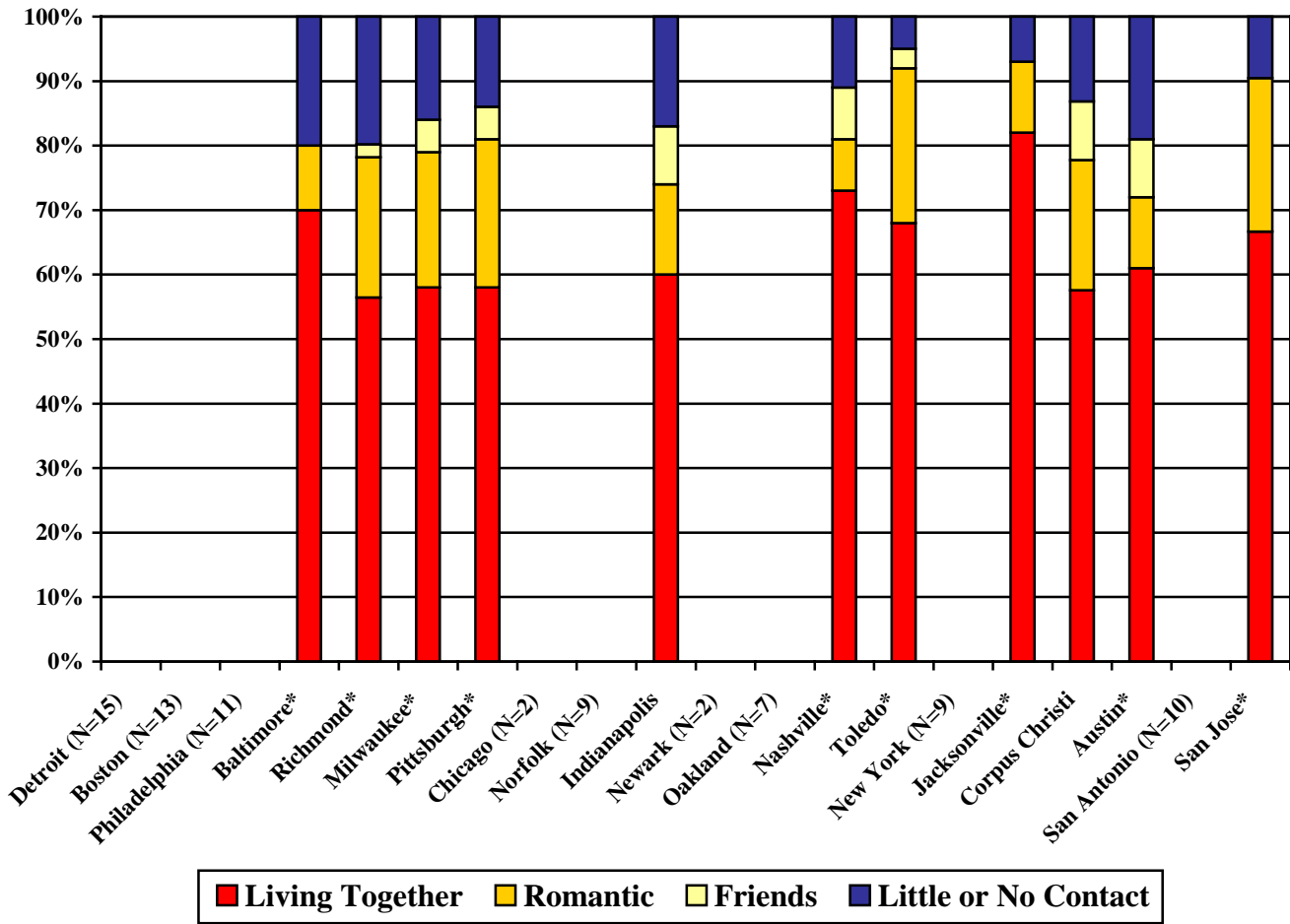


Figure 2B. City Variation in Relationships Among Non-Hispanic Black Mothers

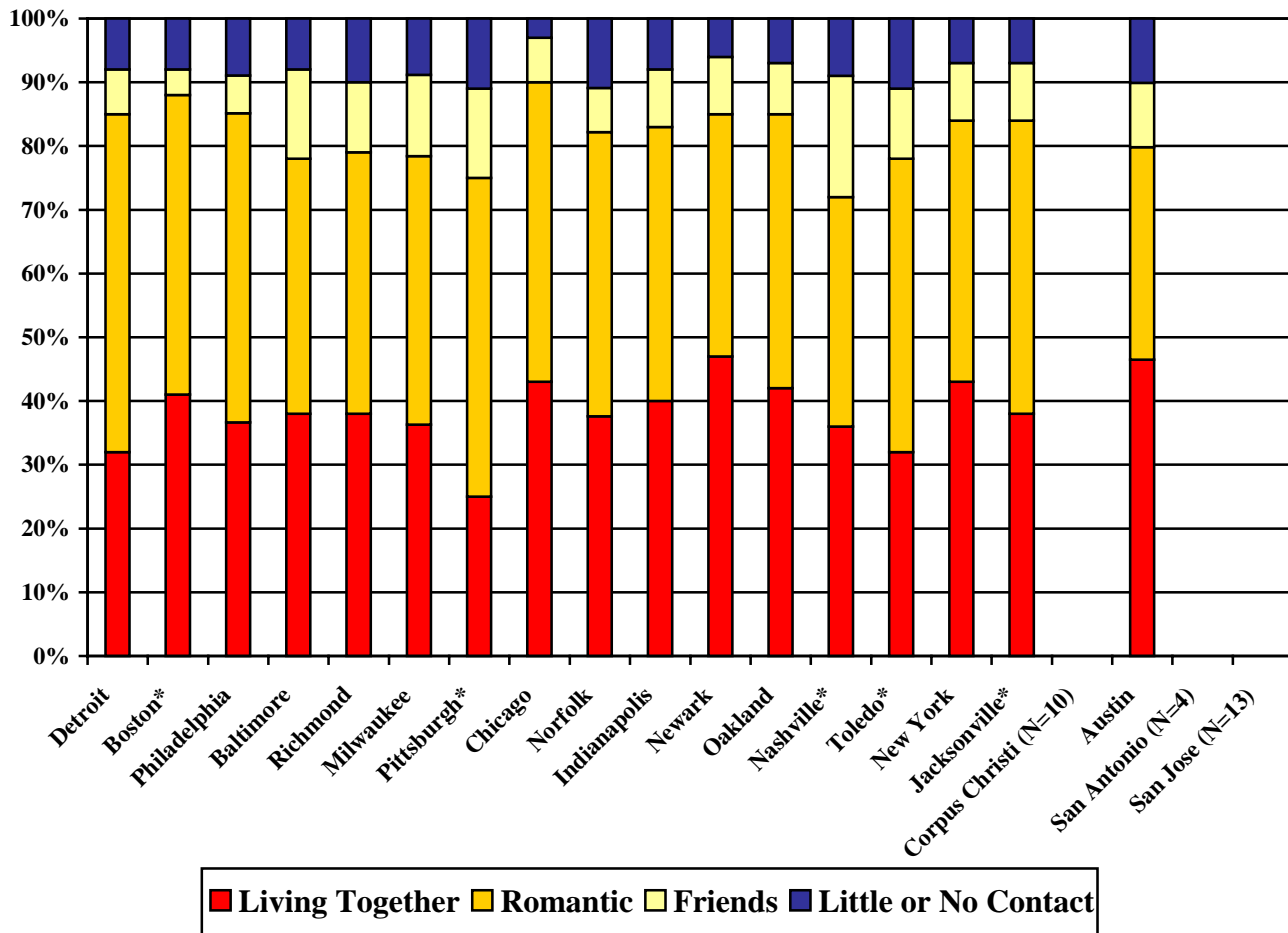


Figure 2C. City Variation in Relationships Among Hispanic Mothers

