

## Cohabiting on the Edge: Living Together Apart

by

Caitlin Cross-Barnet

and

Andrew J. Cherlin

Johns Hopkins University

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, New Orleans, April 18, 2008.

We wish to acknowledge the contributions of Linda Burton, Duke University, the director of the Three-City Study ethnography. We also gratefully acknowledge core support to the Three-City Study from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development through grants HD36093 and HD25936, as well as the support of many government agencies and private foundations. For a complete list of funders, please see [www.threecitystudy.johnshopkins.edu](http://www.threecitystudy.johnshopkins.edu).

## Abstract

Cohabitation is usually viewed in terms of already established relationships types, particularly marriage. However, for low-income women, who are increasingly unlikely to enter successful marriages, cohabitation is becoming a relationship form in its own right. While cohabitation is generally believed to involve a serious, interdependent union, those who cohabit are not necessarily engaged in one. Among low-income couples, a combination of need and obligation, often accompanied by shared parenting and a previous committed relationship, can create cohabiting relationships in which the cohabitators do not view themselves as a couple. Such couples share living space and may share financial, household, or parenting responsibilities even though they feel little attachment to each other. We term such relationships living together apart, or LTA. These relationships emphasize the bonds that shared parenting creates and may explain some disparate accounts of cohabitation status. In addition, LTA relationships demonstrate that cohabitation is a diverse relationship form that can stretch the boundaries of how we define families.

Over the last 20 years, cohabitation has emerged as a common practice among all social classes and racial and ethnic groups (Bumpass and Lu, 2000). In analyses, sociologists have generally viewed cohabitation in one of three ways (Smock, 2000): as a precursor to marriage (e.g. Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Lichter, Qian, and Mellott, 2006), as an alternative to marriage, especially among minority groups (Landale and Fennelly, 1992), or, less commonly, as an alternative to being single (Rindfuss and van den Heuvel, 1990). These conceptualizations make use of already commonly established relationship forms and try to place cohabitation in their context. The family, however is changing rapidly. Budgeon and Roseneil (2004) point out that the traditional concept of “the family” seems outdated, as families take on such diverse forms that it is now seemingly impossible to encompass them under the umbrella of a single definition. As cohabitation becomes more and more common, it is becoming evident that it often is not an alternative to anything in particular, but instead exists as a unique relationship that is quite diverse in its own right. As such, cohabitation takes on forms that don’t fit neatly into a continuum of singlehood to marriage, but rather map a new relationship landscape.

### *Theoretical Background*

In her study of women’s choices regarding work and motherhood, Kathleen Gerson (1985) points out that women must “respond to the social conditions they inherit” and “construct their lives out of the available raw materials” (p. 37). She notes that “class position exerts a particularly powerful influence upon a woman’s choices, shaping her

alternatives and defining her strengths and opportunities” (p. 40). Similar constraints shape women’s relationships. Some question why low-income women choose not to marry (Edin and Reed, 2005) or lament the low marriage rates of low-income couples, especially those with children (e.g. USDHHS, 2006). Even though survey data indicate that most young people value marriage and would like to marry one day (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001), people also have to make choices that make sense in the context of their own lives.

In his analysis of culture and cognition, Paul DiMaggio (1997) points out that people are able to embrace multiple traditions simultaneously, even when the traditions contain contradictory elements. DiMaggio identifies “schemata” as “knowledge structures” that represent objects or events and thus allow the observer or participant to fill in gaps when complete information is not available (p. 269). He says that many schemata “enact widely held scripts that appear independent of individual experience” (p. 273). The schemata available to individuals make up their own “cultural toolkit” (Swidler, 1986), and this toolkit may contain multiple, inconsistent schemata that individuals use in navigating their own lives. DiMaggio says these schemata emerge in the context of “external cultural primers” (p. 274), which takes us back to Gerson’s assertion that women must construct their lives in the context of what’s available.

Our culture places a high value on marriage, and, as we have become more individualistic, has increasingly emphasized personal development and shared intimacy over practical role expectations within marriage (Cherlin, 2004). However, using either schemata of marriage, one of practical roles or one of intimacy and personal growth, many low-income women are likely to find that they cannot amass the necessary

resources for making a marriage work. Wilson has emphasized the practical inability of low-income men to earn sufficient wages to support a household (1990, 1996). In looking at both the practical and individualistic components of marriage, Edin and Kefalas (2005) say that the low-income urban women they interviewed had little trust that the men available to them could earn a living, remain faithful, refrain from illegal activity, treat them as equals, or make their family their top priority. In addition, the women saw themselves as unprepared for marriage because they were too immature and financially unstable. In periods of social change, people use their ideologies to create new strategies of action (Swidler 1986). Women hold to ideologies and schemata that still lead to entering into relationships and having children with men. However, in a context in which there are no tools for making a marriage work, it becomes necessary to develop new ways of having relationships. Individuals may try to shoehorn these new ways of living into familiar, existing schemata, when, in fact, they are actually creating new schemata.

### *Marriage and Cohabitation among Low-Income Women*

Assessments of cohabitation generally assume the primacy of the relationship between the members of the couple. For many relationships, this makes sense, but people enter into cohabiting relationships for all sorts of reasons. Some *are* based on wanting to form an intimate union. Especially among middle-class couples, cohabitation is usually a step in the marriage process (Lichter, Qian, and Mellott, 2006). For those creating new strategies of action, however, cohabitations are formed with very different motivations and are disconnected from marriage. Sassler's (2004) qualitative study of the process of

entering into cohabitation indicates that finances and housing were two of the main reasons couples gave for why they began to cohabit, with a marriage trial rarely mentioned by any of the respondents. In Edin's (2000) study of low-income mothers, many professed enforcing a "pay and stay" rule, in which men were invited to cohabit only as long as they provided necessary economic support to the household. Even women who felt romantic love for their partners might force them out if they lost employment.

In her analysis of the Time, Love and Cash in Couples with Children (TLC3) study, Joanna Reed (2006) found that nearly three-quarters of the respondents began their cohabitations in response to a pregnancy. These couples talked about their decisions to cohabit in terms of wanting to be a family and allowing them to share expenses, have more convenient parenting and have some companionship. Regarding his baby daughter, one father said it was important to "be a part of her everyday living...at least for the first year or whatever" (p. 1123). His decision to live with his partner was not based on wanting to live with her, but on having access to his child. Similarly, one mother says her primary reason for cohabiting is that her partner "can help me with the baby" (p. 1123). Rather than viewing cohabiting relationships as marriage-like, these couples specifically valued the ease with which they can leave the *relationship* should they want or need to, while still being able to share in *parenting* their child.

Edin and Kefalas (2005) found that the low-income couples they interviewed generally did not plan to marry but still wanted children. For them, "marriage is both fragile and rare, and the bond shared children create may be the most significant and enduring tie available" (p. 31). The primacy of the parenting relationship over the couple

relationship is evident when the terms “baby mama” and “baby daddy” are more common terms for former partners than “ex-girlfriend” or “ex-boyfriend.” Despite the fact that cohabitation supposedly offers participants the ability to exit a relationship with ease, sharing a child establishes a legally permanent tie through the child. Couples who view cohabitation as a temporary convenience find that their children have created an enduring bond.

Nock (1995) argues that cohabitation, like remarriage, is an “incomplete institution.” And like remarriage, cohabitation is rife with boundary ambiguity. There is no institutional ceremony and no law that enforces or recognizes the inception or demise of a cohabiting relationship. Those analyzing previously collected data have found discrepancies in direct versus inferred reports of cohabitation. Manning and Smock (2005), for example, observe that cohabitators often have trouble citing exactly when a cohabitation began, as they often “slide into cohabitation,” blurring the lines between cohabitation and singlehood (p. 995). In their analysis of data from the Fragile Families study, Teitler, Reichman, and Koball (2006) find that cohabitation reports are influenced by relationship quality. They note that in two surveys a year apart, retrospective reports of cohabitation are influenced by current relationship status. Those currently cohabiting tended to revise past cohabitation status upward, while those who were no longer cohabiting revised downward. In their analysis of cohabiting stepfamilies in the Add Health data, Brown and Manning (forthcoming) identify “boundary ambiguity” among teens and their mothers, in which adolescents and mothers living in the same household report different family structures. In particular, they say that “boundary ambiguity is associated with less effective family functioning and reduced relationship quality” (p.

10). In other words, in some cases in which there may have been co-residence, the teen and the parent could not agree that a cohabiting relationship existed.

### *New Relationship Forms*

Because cohabitation is so often framed in terms of marriage, it is usually interpreted as a serious, interdependent, couple-based relationship that includes a genuine interest in being together. When this is not the case, what do we call ambiguous cohabitations/co-residences? Irene Levin (2004) recently explored what she calls “living apart together,” or LAT, a relationship that, like cohabitation, has developed recently in response to changing norms. To be considered LAT, “the couple has to agree they are a couple; others have to see them as such; and they must live in separate homes” (p. 227). These LAT couples are more serious than “going steady”; they are often married or have marriage-like levels of commitment, yet they are not living together. We would suggest that, in contrast, some couples who co-reside may *not* agree that they are a couple, and others may not see them as such, even though they *are* living together. Rather than living apart together, these couples are living together apart, or LTA.

### *Data*

In this paper, we analyze the Three City Study, a survey of the well-being of children and their families who were residing in low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio, and an ethnographic sample of families in the same neighborhoods. The Three-City Study began in 1999 with a random-sample survey of 2,402 children and their caregivers. The survey was conducted as follows. In households



in low-income neighborhoods (93 percent of the selected block groups had poverty rates of 20 percent or more) with a child age zero to four or age 10 to 14, with a female primary caregiver, and with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty line, interviewers randomly selected one child (the “focal child”) and conducted in-person interviews with that child’s primary caregiver (a mother in over 90 percent of the cases). Families receiving benefits from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the main cash welfare program, were over-sampled. The response rate was 74 percent. The survey data are weighted to correct for over-sampling and to give equal weight to the experiences of families in each city (see Cherlin, Fomby, and Moffitt, 2002).

Families were recruited into the ethnographic sample between June 1999, and December 2000. Recruitment sites include formal childcare settings (e.g., Head Start), the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, neighborhood community centers, local welfare offices, churches, and other public assistance agencies. Of the 256 families who participated in the ethnography, 212 families were selected if they included a child age 2 to 4. The other 44 were recruited specifically because they had a child age 0 to 8 years with a moderate or severe disability. Families were visited an average of once or twice per month for 12 to 18 months and then every six months thereafter through 2003.

### *Methods*

To determine whether women in the survey may have been involved in an LTA relationship, we first selected all women from Wave 1 who said they were not currently married or cohabiting. We looked at the household roster, in which the women listed all of the people in the household. The rosters identified each person’s relationship to the

mother and to the focal child. We selected all the cases in which the focal child's father was on the roster. We also selected cases in which the roster listed a man not related to either the mother or the focal child, but who was less than five years younger and no more than 20 years older than the mother. Women who had one of these two types of men on the household roster were considered to be in LTA relationships. We then ran a series of cross-tabulations looking at how LTA status interacted with age, race-ethnicity (white, black and Hispanic), number of children in the home, and measures of childhood abuse and domestic violence experienced by the mother.

In the ethnography, we reviewed the family profiles of all 212 non-disability cases. These profiles range from approximately 10-150 pages and categorize relevant information, gleaned from transcripts and ethnographers' field notes, on a broad range of topics. All profiles were read at least twice. Women were classified as being in an LTA relationship if they were living with a man with whom they were intimate or had been intimate in the past but said that they were not currently in a relationship with that man. The relationship had to exist in this state for a significant period of time, generally a few months or more. For some cases for which more information was needed, we further examined full transcripts and field notes. Women were classified by race-ethnicity, including Hispanic sub-categories. We also observed the race ethnicity of the men, the ages of the men and women, the number of children in the household and their sexes and ages, and the number of children in the home who were the offspring of the couple.

### *Results (Quantitative)*

An analysis of the first wave of the survey indicated that on the day the survey was conducted, 52 women were potentially in LTA relationships. Of these 52 women, 28 listed the father of the focal child on the household roster, and another 24 listed a man no more than 5 years younger or 20 years older who was not biologically related to them or the focal child (it is possible that this man could be a father of another child in the household). However, all of these women said they were neither married nor in a cohabiting relationship.

Women in the survey who appear to be in LTA relationships tend to be younger than average (around 28, versus a mean of 33 for the sample as a whole). While 22% of respondents are 40 or older, only 1 of the 52 women in LTA relationships is over 40, and that woman is only 43 (see Table 1). Differences by race are marginally significant ( $p=.053$ ), with black respondents most likely to indicate that they are in an LTA relationship (see Table 2). The number of children in the household was not significant. Women in LTA relationships were not more likely than other women to have experienced domestic violence or childhood abuse.

### *Results (Qualitative)*

An analysis of the non-disability cases in the Three City Study ethnography produces 20 women—almost 10%—who were in an LTA relationship during the course of the study (see Table 3). In the ethnography, LTA relationships usually involve a combination of need and obligation that results in people co-residing in a relationship that does not look like what is ordinarily considered cohabitation. The women in these relationships generally have little trust in men. If they trust their partners at all, they

often exhibit “compartmentalized trust” (Burton, Cherlin, Winn, & Estacion, 2008), in which they trust their partners to fulfill certain roles, such as financial obligations or parenting responsibilities, but they do not trust them overall as husbands or partners, and they do not call them such. Shared children were present in the LTAs of 19 of the women. Two LTA relationships involved couples who were legally married, and one other was a divorced couple. Most of the other couples would have considered themselves as being in a committed relationship at some point in the past. In all but one case, the woman identifies the relationship as LTA, usually specifically saying that she and the man she lives with are “not together” or “separated” and referring to the him as a “roommate,” a “tenant” or her children’s father (it is generally unclear what the man thinks, as only the women were interviewed). Of the women in the ethnography who reported an LTA relationship, 2 are non-Hispanic white, 4 are Puerto Rican, 6 are U.S. born women of Mexican heritage, and 8 are African American.

Women engage in LTA relationships with both practical and emotional motives. These relationships are based on housing, co-parenting, companionship, or a combination of these. Mothers may rely on an LTA partner for needs such as housing or childcare. Conversely, they might feel obligated to provide housing to a man because he is the father of their children, or they might believe that he and his children should be together. An LTA couple may have little or no interest in being with one another but be quite committed to co-parenting. In other cases, the couple engages in an LTA in part for companionship or sex. Sometimes the woman has one primary motivation for the LTA while the man has another.

### *Parenting Based LTAs*

A woman who is uninterested in having a relationship with her child(ren)'s father may still value the man's fathering role. Sonny, who is Hispanic, and Joanne, who is white, live in San Antonio and have an 11-year relationship history riddled with domestic violence. Joanne no longer sees them as a couple. However, Sonny lives with her, even though this jeopardizes Joanne's housing status, primarily because Joanne sees his role as a father to her six children as very important (he is the biological father of at least four of them). The ethnographer writes:

Sonny has been helping Joanne with the day-to-day care of the children.

Importantly, she notes that she and this man work together to be mother and father to their children, even though they cannot be together as husband and wife.

Joanne says she has had only one boyfriend since she and her children's father separated, and she tried to keep it clear that he was not taking over their father's role with them. She says she would never bring a guy into the house because she thinks it would be disrespectful and confusing to the children.

Of course, Sonny does sleep there, but Joanne is clear that they are not intimate, as that would give Sonny the kind of control over her that she feels a husband or cohabiting partner expects to have: *"Because once we sleep together, it's all over but the*

*complaining and 'you can't go here, you can't go there.'*” Sonny contributes financially to the household when he can, but there are times when Joanne supports him.

Similarly, Yasmin, a 23-year old Puerto Rican mother of a preschooler in Chicago, allows her former boyfriend to live with her in part because she sees him as the “perfect father.” When asked about their relationship status however, Yasmin says, “*We live together but we are not really together together.*” She does not trust him as a partner because of his previous infidelities, but she trusts him as a parent and roommate. She outlines the conditions of his living in her home: “*I was like, the only way you gonna stay here is if you do what I want you to do, if you do what I tell you to do. That's pay all the bills...and do everything.*” The ethnographer notes that “Joel cleans the house and washes. Yasmin doesn't want him there but he's helping out a lot and [Yasmin says] ‘*That's why I haven't kicked him out yet.*’” Joel sleeps in the same bed with Yasmin and their son Jake because the apartment is so small, but Yasmin says, “*We need more space; I need more space.*” When asked her relationship to Joel, she calls him her “baby's father.” She dates other men and plans to terminate the relationship as soon as she no longer needs Joel's assistance. She does not want to stay with Joel on a permanent basis. Though they have lived together for the majority of the time they have known each other, she feels little obligation to the relationship that she and Joel have with each other.

Marka, a Puerto Rican mother in her mid twenties, began dating John when she was in her teens. They have had an on-and-off relationship involving frequent domestic violence, and in the past Marka has moved to try to escape from John. Marka has dated others, but at age 22 gives birth to Tia, who is fathered by John. The parenting tie seems especially strong for Marka for her own sake as well as her daughter's. While

John is serving a three-year jail sentence, he is anxious to resume his relationship with Marka when upon his release. Marka is reluctant, but says she believes he will change in part because “*he is Tia’s father.*” Though she says, “*I don’t feel anything for him anymore*” and she is dating another man, she allows John to move back in with her when he is released from prison. Later, she conceives another child with him. She says that “*I am not in love, you know?*” and that she is ready to terminate the relationship. However, she does not want to “*be having kids in my 30’s*” and she does not like when women have children with several different men. She continues to let John live with her when he becomes unemployed.

#### *Housing based LTA: Men*

When a former partner needs housing, the bonds of shared parenthood may lead to an LTA relationship. Even when there is no reciprocal support, one parent may be willing to help the other. Lizzy, a white mother in Boston, has her white ex-husband and the father of her two grown children living in the house, though they separated about 20 years ago and are now divorced. She says, “*He just needed a place to stay but he is not in my life.*” In emphasizing how much she is not interested in an actual relationship with anyone, Lizzy says that as a single woman and foster parent, she is “*happier and does not want to take anyone’s crap.*” Even though her former husband meets no needs of hers, she feels obligated to let him live with her because of *his* needs.

A similar situation exists between Tonya, an African American mother in Boston, and Curtis, the African American father of her youngest child. The ethnographer refers to Curtis as Tonya’s “recliner tenant” because he sleeps on a recliner in her living room.

Tonya does not find the relationship worthwhile: “Tonya is giving Curtis until May or June to find a new place to live; she does not want to be bothered with maintaining a relationship with him. He only wants to sit around the house and does not contribute to the household finances. He is 36 years old and wants to be treated like one of Tonya’s children. They do not sleep together and Tonya does not even want him near her. He has lived in Tonya’s apartment for about one year and Tonya has not given him a key.”

Tonya may have initially hoped that Curtis would contribute more. Her decision to end the LTA is indicative of the “pay and stay” rule (Edin, 2000): Those who cannot contribute cannot live in the household. On the other hand, while Curtis contributes little or nothing, Tonya does not want to see her child’s father living in the street, so he is not put out immediately. Tonya may also have hopes that if she gives it time, the relationship will change for the better. In a follow-up interview conducted long after Curtis moves out, Tonya says that she no longer lives with or sees Curtis because “he just wasn’t for me. Just too boyish, wasn’t grown up yet.” However, while he is living with her, she has so little trust in him and so little faith in their relationship that after a year of co-residing, he does not even have a key to the apartment. Without the connection of their shared child, Tonya probably would not have let Curtis stay for so long nor maintained any hope for their relationship.

### *Housing Based LTA: Women*

While public assistance provides some low-income women with housing resources that men may try to access, other women themselves lack social, familial, and financial resources and risk homelessness. These women may call on the obligations to



their children to obtain housing and other financial support. For instance, Tashina, an African American mother in Chicago with a history of substance abuse, has exhausted the generosity of her extended family. Her daughter's father, who was abusive in the past, pays regular child support, though the amount is small. Her current partner, her son's father, is not a consistent provider. While her children lived with relatives, Tashina has sometimes lived in her car. To avoid homelessness for herself and her children, she moves in with her daughter's father for several months, even though his two-bedroom apartment is "totally wrecked," and she shares it with him and his mother, three brothers, sister, two nephews, and niece. During this time, she continues her relationship with her son's father.

When men control the residence, they may be able to set certain parameters regarding issues such as housework or sex. In describing the LTA situation of Margerita, a Mexican-American mother in Chicago, the ethnographer says, "Margerita has been at the mercy of her callous, selfish [partner] since the birth of their first child 15 years ago. She feels dependent on the little financial contribution he makes. Jesus pays only the mortgage and Margerita covers everything else. In the past, Margerita was homeless without Jesus. She has not been able to rely on assistance nor her parents for support." Margerita does all of the housework, and Jesus does nothing—not even repair a broken window in the winter. However, avoiding homelessness drives Margerita to stay; although she is employed, she does not believe she can make it on her own. In describing Margerita's perspective, the ethnographer writes:

Margerita says that [Jesus] makes twice as much as she does and that it's his money, "*That's why I say we are only roommates.*" I ask her if they are only

roommates, we both laugh, and she says, "*Well once in a little while.*" Margerita blushes, tilts her head a bit to the right and shrugs her shoulders. The ethnographer blushes too because they both understand that she is admitting to having intimate relations with him. "*I see it as roommates, because we don't get along, we just try to live day by day calm because of our kids.*" He has told her that if she leaves that he will take her kids away. She tells me that that is part of the reason that she stays with him because she does not have the money to hire a lawyer.

Margerita has no trust in Jesus other than her belief that he will continue to provide housing for her. She does not value his fathering skills, but rather believes staying preserves her own role as a mother and gives her children stable housing. In contrast to Yasmin, who controls Joel because she controls their housing and access to their son, Margerita sees Jesus as the person with all the control, thus obligating her to stay in their LTA relationship on his terms.

#### *Companionship-Based LTA*

Women may sometimes meet both practical needs and their own emotional needs for companionship and sex through an LTA. For instance, Marla, an African American mother in Boston, feels very strongly about remaining independent. She has one daughter who is four when the study begins, and she is the only mother whose LTA relationships are all with men who did not father her child. She wants to model independence for her daughter. She expects the men who live with her to be supportive "physically and financially." Though she lives with Junior, she says he is someone she

“hangs out with” but does not consider a boyfriend. She says it would take “a lot of work” to get her to be in a relationship. While Marla maintains a “pay and stay perspective,” her emphasis on “physical” support indicates that she wants more than just money from men who co-reside with her. At the same time, even when men live with her and provide some level of physical and financial support, she isn’t willing to view these men as boyfriends nor see herself as being in a relationship. In discussing a planned move to New Jersey, Marla mentions a man she wants to “hang out” with there. For her, as long as a man meets some level of her needs but does not seem like a good long-term prospect, he seems to be interchangeable with other men.

In contrast, Anita, an African American mother in Boston who lives with her younger child’s father, would like her relationship to be serious. While she complained of his lack of financial support when they were not living together, once he moves in with her, she is upset because *he* views their relationship as LTA. The ethnographer writes, “He is living, unofficially, with the rest of the family, but is not technically ‘with’ Anita. Anita is frustrated with the double standard of him living with her, but denying they are together in public.” She allows him to continue living in the home even when he later becomes unemployed. This is the one case in which the mother does not see the relationship as LTA but acknowledges that the father does. Living stably with her child’s father and having the companionship he provides meets a need more important than having him acknowledge their relationship or even providing material support to the household.

### *Conclusion*

While cohabitation often does fulfill the roles commonly associated with it—as a marriage precursor or alternative or as a serious dating relationship – social class affects women’s ability to create relationships within these parameters. As such, low-income women create new strategies of action regarding their relationships. In the case of LTA relationships, women have practical or emotional connections with men whom they do not view as boyfriends, much less committed partners. Usually these connections stem from shared parenthood, a connection that ties people together long after their interest in their relationship as a couple has ended. These ongoing ties can lead to co-residence that does not fit any current notions of cohabitation. LTA relationships may account for some disparate accounts of cohabitation that others have observed. Such relationships also add to conditions of boundary ambiguity, as even the couple may not agree on the status of their relationship. In evaluating cohabitation, researchers should consider its meaning for the partners and not assume that co-residence fits previous perceptions of cohabiting relationships.

More generally, some may ask whether these LTA relationships constitute “families.” On the one hand, they are comprised of two adults who live in the same household and, in most cases, share parenthood of a child in the household. On the other hand, the parents do not, in most cases, have the regular sexual relations and the emotional companionship that is associated with intimate unions today. There is no clear answer to this question. In some sense, the reasons women give for maintaining LTA relationships resemble the practical considerations that were central to marriage until the twentieth century, such as shared parenthood and the pooling of resources. Until the twentieth century, sexual relations and companionship were less important for marriage.

In this way, LTA relationships resemble the marriage-based families of the past more than the present. However, sharp differences with families of the past also exist, most notably the short-term nature of these relationships and the frequent sexual relationships that parents often have with persons outside of the household. If LTA relationships are to be considered as families, we must, at the least, stretch the definition of a family beyond the usual criteria we use to recognize a family when we see one. Some critics would suggest that to incorporate LTA relationships, we must stretch the definition of a family so far that it breaks. To them, the question of whether LTA relationships are families is, in the end, beside the point. Rather, they would urge that we accept LTA-based households on their own terms without attempting to fit them into the cultural schemata of conventional marriage and family life.

**Table 1: Age and LTA Status of Caregivers in Wave One of the Three City Survey**

Current LTA	Caregivers' Age Range				
	14-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	Total
No	116	853	863	516	2348
Yes	6	23	22	1	52
Total	122	876	885	517	2400
Chi Square=15.15, p=.002					

**Table 2: Race-ethnicity and LTA status of Caregivers in Wave One of the Three City Survey**

Current LTA	Caregiver's Race-ethnicity			
	white	black	Hispanic	Total
No	207	979	1118	2304
Yes	2	30	19	51
Total	209	1009	1137	2355
Chi Square=5.86, p=.053				

**Table 3: LTA Relationships in the Three City Study Ethnography**

Names and ages	City*	Race/ Ethnicity**	Woman's Children (sex, age)	# w/LTA partner	Type of LTA***
Lizzie 42 ++Jeffrey n/a	B	W W	G 24 B 22 2 foster sons	2 (G24, B22)	Housing (M)
Anita 25 Namon n/a	B	AA AA	B 5 G 3	1 (G3)	Companionship
Marla 23 Junior n/a	B	AA AA	G 4	none	Companionship, Pay and stay
Tonya 40 Curtis 36	B	AA AA	G 22 G 15 G 4	1 (G4)	Housing (M)
Marka 24 John n/a	B	PR PR	G 3	1	Parenting (W) Housing (M)
Joanne 27 Sonny 30	SA	W MA	B 9 B 7 B 6 B 3 G 2 B 1	6	Parenting
Marika 21 Eric n/a	SA	AA AA	G 3 G 9mo. pregnancy	1 (G 9mo.) pregnancy	Housing (M)
Mary 23 James 40	SA	MA	B 3 G 9mo	2	Housing
Simone 26 Jaxon 30	SA	MA	B 9 B 8 B 4 B 2	2 (B9, B8)	Companionship, pay and stay
Marissa 21 Robert	SA	PR PR	G 3 G 6 mo.	2	Parenting
Yuri 30  Caleb n/a  +Saul 39  Raphael 42	SA	MA  W  n/a  AA	B 14 B 11 B 7 B 5 G 3	Caleb-1 (G3)  Saul-3 (B14, B11, B7)  Raphael-0	Caleb- Companionship  Saul- Housing (W)  Raphael- Companionship
Yasmin, 23 Joel n/a	C	PR PR	B 3	1	Parenting

Maria 16 Estefan 19	C	PR PR	G3 pregnancy	1 pregnancy	Companionship
Darleen 26 Senior n/a	C	MA n/a	B 9 B 5 B 3 B 1	2 (B3, B1)	Companionship (M)
Margerita 32 Jesus 36	C	MA FBM	B 13 B5 B1	3	Housing (W)
Celia 24 Rico 28	C	MA n/a	G 4	1	Housing (both)
Marjorie 43 Jamal 30	C	AA AA	G 24 B 22 B 21 B 19 G 17 G 9 B 4 B 3 G 1	3 (B 4, B 3, G 1)	Housing (M)
Dana 38 Fletcher n/a	C	AA AA	B 17 B12 B 12 B 8 B 6 B 4 B 2 B 9 mo.	5 (B12, B12, B8, B6, B4)	Housing (M)
Nadine 25 Joel n/a	C	AA AA	G 6 G 3	1 (G3)	Housing (W)
Tashina 25 Ervin	C	AA AA	G 5 B 2 Pregnancy	1 (G5)	Housing (W)

\* B=Boston, SA=San Antonion, C=Chicago

\*\* W=white, AA=African American, PR=Puerto Rican, MA=Mexican-American,  
FBM=Foreign-born Mexican

\*\*\* W=woman, M=Man

+ woman is currently legally married to this man

++ woman is divorced from this man



## References

Brown, S. and Manning, W. Family boundary ambiguity and the measurement of family structure: The significance of cohabitation. Forthcoming in *Demography*.

Budgeon, S., and Roseneil, S. (2004). "Editors' Introduction: Beyond the Conventional Family." *Current Sociology* 52: 127-134.

Burton, L., Cherlin, A., Winn, D., Estacion, A. (2007). "The Role of Trust in Low-Income Mothers' Intimate Unions." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York.

Cherlin, A. (2004). The deinstitutionalization of American marriage. *Journal of Marriage & Family* 66: 848-861.

DiMaggio, P. (1997). Culture and cognition. *Annual Reviews of Sociology* 23: 263-287.

Edin, K. (2000). What do low-income single mothers say about marriage? *Social Problems* 47: 112-133.

Edin, K. and Reed, J. M. (2005). Why don't they just get married? Barriers to marriage among the disadvantaged. *The Future of Children* 15: 117-137.

Edin, K. and Kefalas, M. (2005). *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gerson, K. (1985). *Hard Choices: How Women Decide about Work, Career, and Motherhood*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Landale, N. and Fennelly, K. (1992). Informal unions among mainland Puerto Ricans: Cohabitation or an alternative to legal marriage." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54: 269-280.

Levin, I. (2004). Living apart together: a new family form. *Current Sociology* 52: 223-240.

Lichter, D. T., Qian, Z. and Mellott, L. M. Marriage or dissolution? Union transitions among poor cohabiting women. *Demography* 43: 223-240.

Manning, W. D. and Smock, P. J. (2005). Measuring and modeling cohabitation: new perspectives from qualitative data. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 67: 989-1002.

Nock, S. (1995). A comparison of marriages and cohabiting relationships. *Journal of Family Issues* 16: 53-76.

Reed, J. (2006). Not crossing the 'extra line': how cohabitators with children view their unions. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68: 1117-1131.

Rindfuss, R. and VandenHeuvel, A. (1990). Cohabitation: A precursor to marriage or an alternative to being single? *Population and Development Review* 16: 703-726.

Sassler, S. (2004). The process of entering into cohabiting unions. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 66: 491-505.

Smock, P. (2000). Cohabitation in the United States: An appraisal of research themes, findings, and implications. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 1-20.

Swidler, A. (1986). Culture in action: Symbols and strategies. *American Sociological Review* 51: 273-286.

Teitler, J., Reichman, N., and Koball, H. (2006). Contemporaneous versus retrospective reports of cohabitation in the Fragile Families Survey. *Journal of Marriage & Family* 68: 469-477.

United States Department of Health and Human Services. (2006). "Healthy Marriage Initiative." Administration for Children and Families, Washington, DC. Retrieved 03/28/08 from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/index.html>.

Wilson, W. J. (1990). *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wilson, WJ (1990). *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Knopf.