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The Influence of Physical and Sexual Abuse on Marriage and Cohabitation

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Using ethnographic and survey data on low-income families residing in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio, we examine the relationship between women's patterns of union formation and their experience of physical and sexual abuse. Both sets of data suggest that women who have been physically or sexually abused are substantially less likely to be married or to be in stable, long-term cohabiting relationships. The data also suggest that the timing and different forms of abuse may have distinctive associations with union formation. Women who have experienced abuse beginning in childhood, particularly sexual abuse, are less likely to be in sustained marriages or stable cohabiting relationships and instead are more likely to experience transitory unions: multiple short-term, mostly cohabiting unions with brief intervals between them. Women who have not been abused in childhood but experience adult physical abuse, however, are less likely to be in either a marriage or a cohabiting union, long-term or transitory; and some have withdrawn from having relationships with men. The relevance of these findings for the decline of marriage among low-income women and men is discussed.

Across all social classes, Americans are more likely to cohabit prior to and after marriage, marry at older ages, divorce more, never marry at all, and have children outside of marriage compared to a half-century ago. The decline of marriage as a social institution has been greatest among low-income populations, and particularly among African Americans; only about two-thirds of the latter group are projected to marry at current rates, down from

nearly 90 percent in the 1950s (Rodgers and Thornton 1985; Goldstein and Kenney 2001). Yet despite considerable scholarly attention to the topic, we still do not fully understand why there are so few lasting marriages or even long-term cohabiting unions among low-income women and men. In this article, we examine the role of an often overlooked factor in the scholarly and policy discourse on the decline of marriage: the trauma of physical and sexual abuse

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that some women experience in childhood and adulthood. Although there is extensive literature on abuse and on marriage formation, few studies have explored the connection between them (Macmillan 2001).

Our central claim is that, for many women, the experiences of physical abuse and sexual abuse influence intimate relations in ways that reduce the likelihood of stable, long-term unions. (By a “union,” we mean a marriage or a cohabiting relationship.) Physical and sexual abuse may affect union formation in several ways. Exposure to physical abuse by intimate partners in adulthood can create a wariness about relationships with men that leads women to be cautious about making long-term commitments (Edin 2000) and, in some circumstances, to avoid relationships altogether. At the same time, physical and sexual abuse beginning in childhood can predispose women toward more frequent sexual unions and multiple, transient relationships, some of them abusive (Butler and Burton 1990; Loeb et al. 2002; Noll, Trickett, and Putnam 2003). Using both the ethnographic and survey components of a study of low-income families in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio, we identify patterns of union formation and test hypotheses derived from our collaborative multi-method research and from the literature on physical and sexual abuse.

We also argue more speculatively that the effects of physical and sexual abuse on union formation may have increased over the past several decades. There is little evidence of an increase in abuse; but changes in the social and economic context of union formation may have altered how women experience and respond to it. Because of the increased acceptance and feasibility of nonmarital relationships and child-bearing outside of marriage, it is easier today for women to resist binding commitments to men who may be abusive. It is also easier to live openly in a series of cohabiting relationships. Moreover, women’s expectations for marriage appear to have changed: we will discuss evidence that low-income women want the same kind of companionship-oriented marriage as middle-class women, including a partner who is loving, sexually faithful, and not sexually or physically abusive.

BACKGROUND

Our exploration of the relationship between union formation and the experience of physical and sexual abuse among low-income women is the result of an iterative collaborative process that integrates demographic and ethnographic approaches. We began by analyzing the survey data at the frequency and cross-tabular levels to study the empirical relationship between patterns of union formation, on the one hand, and reported experiences of physical and sexual abuse. When an association was found we looked to our ethnographic data to identify detailed patterns of abuse and union formation with the intent of using the ethnographic results to deepen our understanding and to develop hypotheses that could be tested with the survey data. Generally speaking, our ethnographic analysis suggested that the timing of abuse—whether it occurred in childhood, adulthood, or in both periods—and the form of abuse—whether it was sexual or physical—were strongly related to distinctive union patterns. The extant literature on sexual abuse and physical abuse also guided the development of hypotheses, although not in ways that were as specific as the ethnographic findings. We were then able to estimate a multivariate statistical model from the survey data that, although more limited, appears to confirm some of the relationships between abuse and union formation in the ethnographic analysis.

ABUSE IN CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD: ISSUES OF TIMING AND FORM

CHILDHOOD ABUSE

It is difficult to estimate accurately the percentage of women who experience physical or sexual abuse. A review of the available evidence concluded that “several million” children experience physical or sexual abuse yearly (English 1998). Another review of 19 surveys containing questions about sexual abuse concluded that “at least 20%” of American women had experienced some form of sexual abuse as children (Finkelhor 1994). Childhood sexual abuse does not appear to vary according to family income, race, or ethnicity, although there is evidence that it is more common among children in single-parent families (Finkelhor 1994).

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Most of the abuse is carried out by family members or friends of the parents: In a 1992 national survey of sexual activity, women who acknowledged that someone had “touched them sexually” before they reached puberty were asked who did the touching; and the most common responses were an “older relative” or a “family friend” (Laumann et al. 1994).

In ethnographic studies, information on abuse often emerges naturalistically rather than through direct questioning. A number of studies have identified childhood sexual abuse as a significant factor in the lives of girls and women. In a synthesis of eight years of ethnographic research with low-income women and girls, Dodson (1998) found that 14 to 17 percent reported childhood sexual abuse. Musick’s (1993) qualitative study of 445 low-income teenage mothers found that 61 percent of the respondents had been sexually abused as children. In their ethnographic study of poor- and working-class young adults in two major north-eastern cities, Fine and Weis (1998) and their colleagues (Weis et al. 1998), reported that stories of sexual abuse among the white, African American, and Latina young women “seeped” into focus groups and interviews.

In addition to direct sexual abuse or physical abuse, children can suffer severe long-term effects from witnessing adult domestic violence and sexual abuse within their families (Feerick and Haugaard 1999; Jouriles et al. 2001; Luster, Small, and Lower 2002; McCloskey, Figuero, and Koss 1995; McNeal and Amato 1999; Whitfield et al. 2003). Data from the National Family Violence Surveys indicated that as many as 10 million children per year are exposed to such violence (Straus 1992). Examples of exposure to adult domestic violence include awareness of abuse or its physical and emotional aftermath, direct witnessing of severe physical or sexual violence, and bystander injury from having been caught in the middle of an incident (Edleson 1999a). Although exposure to domestic violence has been found to have a distinct traumatic impact separate from direct abuse of the child, research indicates that the combined effects of domestic violence exposure and child maltreatment are more severe than either alone (Edleson 1999a). Recent reviews of the literature reveal that such overlap occurs in 30 to 60

percent of cases (Edleson 1999b; Appel and Holden 1998).

CONSEQUENCES OF CHILDHOOD ABUSE

Extensive research literature suggests that having been sexually abused as a child can have profound long-term consequences for an adult’s sexual behavior and intimate relationships (Cichetti 1996; Davis and Petretic-Jackson 2000; Elam and Kleist 1999; Loeb et al. 2002). The seriousness of the consequences is associated with factors such as the number of incidents, the severity and duration of the incidents, and the age of the child during the incidents. Traumatic sexual experiences can produce inappropriate sexual behavior and feelings of betrayal, lack of trust, and powerlessness (Kendall-Tackett, Williams, and Finkelhor 1993). They can produce later-life sequelae such as low self-image, depression, and no clear sense of boundaries between oneself and others (Briere and Elliott 1994). In adolescence and adulthood, these conditions can lead to early onset of sexual activity, riskier sexual activity, and multiple partners (Davis and Petretic-Jackson 2000; Fergusson, Horwood, and Lynskey 1997; Thompson et al. 1997).

Thus, women who were sexually abused as children may have more frequent sexual encounters and relationships from which they derive less satisfaction than other women. The 1992 national survey of sexual activity found that women who said they had been touched sexually as children by older persons were, as adults, more likely to experience forced sex, to have multiple sex partners, to engage in riskier sexual behavior, and to experience difficulties such as greater anxiety about sex and less pleasurable sex (Laumann et al. 1994). Another national study found that women who had been sexually abused as children were more likely to engage in behavior that put them at risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, such as using drugs or alcohol in conjunction with sexual activity, having sex soon after meeting a partner, and having multiple partners (Whitmire et al. 1999).

In addition, childhood sexual abuse has been linked to relationship difficulties, such as distrust of others and discomfort with sexual intimacy. Intrusive thoughts and defensiveness



resulting from abuse can prevent the formation of close relationships (Loeb et al. 2002). One review concluded that childhood sexual abuse is associated with greater difficulties in interpersonal relationships, lower relationship satisfaction, and a greater probability of revictimization in adulthood (Polusny and Follette 1995). These relationship problems could limit a woman's commitment to her partner and the duration of her marital and cohabiting unions (Briere and Elliott 1994). Overall, the relationship difficulties associated with childhood sexual abuse would seem to be more consistent with frequent, short-term unions than with long-term unions.

The literature on the consequences of childhood physical abuse suggests a diffuse array of potential difficulties, including depression, aggressive behavior, and a diminished capacity for intimacy and trust (English 1998). There is also some evidence that childhood physical abuse, like childhood sexual abuse, can predispose adolescents toward multiple sex partners (Elliott et al. 2002). Like childhood sexual abuse, then, childhood physical abuse could inhibit the formation of lasting adult unions. However, childhood sexual abuse may have the larger inhibiting effect because of its direct consequences for sexual functioning and behavior.

PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL ABUSE BY INTIMATE PARTNERS IN ADULTHOOD

In the 1995–96 National Violence Against Women Survey, 15 percent of women reported having been raped, and another 3 percent reported an attempted rape (U.S. National Institute of Justice 1998). About half of these women reported that the completed or attempted rapes first occurred after they reached age 18, suggesting a 9 percent prevalence rate for adult sexual violence without prior childhood or adolescent experience. In the 1992 survey of sexual activity, 22 percent of all adult women said they had been forced to have sex at least once in their lives by an acquaintance, boyfriend, or spouse, although it is unclear how greatly these incidents reflect adult-onset abuse (Laumann et al. 1994). More data exist on prevalence rates for physical violence among adult intimate partners, although the estimates vary depending on the definition of violence and the sample being

studied. In the National Violence Against Women Survey, 22 percent of women reported ever being victimized by a physical assault of any kind by intimate partners (U.S. National Institute of Justice 1998).

THEORETICAL MECHANISMS AND HYPOTHESES

The literature provides little theoretical guidance for understanding the consequences of childhood and adulthood abuse for union-formation patterns. On a social-psychological level, one might expect the experience of abuse to facilitate avoidant behavior. The negative reinforcement of past experiences with abusive men could lead women to stay away from intimate relationships. Our ethnographic data, as we will discuss, showed that some women seemed to have withdrawn from serious relationships with men altogether, a pattern we will call *abated unions*. Even among women who do have intimate unions, the experience of past abuse could lead to emotional distance from partners and hesitancy to make long-term commitments (Hoff 1990; Kirkwood 1993). Because it is easier to leave a cohabiting relationship than a marriage, women who have experienced abuse and wish to maintain an exit route from relationships may prefer cohabitation to marriage.

In addition, the personal and social resources that women can draw upon may influence union-formation patterns. Women who successfully resist abusive men must be resourceful (Johnson and Ferraro 2000): They must actively solve problems, respond quickly, and negotiate firmly. Those who bring more psychological resources to their adult intimate relationships and who have more social support in adulthood will be more likely to separate themselves from potentially abusive men. Childhood abuse may erode psychological resources by engendering feelings of self-blame, guilt, low self-esteem, and depressive symptoms (Wolfe, Wolfe, and Best 1988). In adulthood, a support network of kin and friends may provide a crucial social resource that allows women to avoid and escape from abusive relationships.

These perspectives and our preliminary analyses led us to expect the following associations between abuse and patterns of marriage and cohabitation in our ethnographic sample:

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1. Women who have never been abused will be more likely to show a pattern of sustained, long-term unions than women who have experienced abuse.
2. Women with a history of childhood abuse, particularly childhood sexual abuse, will be more likely to manifest a pattern of frequent, short-term nonmarital relationships, compared to women who have not experienced childhood abuse.
3. Women who were not abused in childhood but encounter abuse in adulthood will be more likely to show a pattern of abated unions, relative to women who were abused in childhood and who also encounter abuse in adulthood.

The survey data that we will present is cross-sectional and measures only union status at the time of the survey: married, cohabiting, or single (not cohabiting or married). Nevertheless, the survey data should correspond to the ethnographic data in the following ways: women with a lifetime pattern of sustained unions should be overrepresented among the currently married at the time of the survey; women with a lifetime pattern of frequent, short-term nonmarital unions should be overrepresented among the currently cohabiting; and women with a pattern of abated unions should be overrepresented among the currently single. We therefore formulated three hypotheses that we could test with the survey data:

Hypothesis 1: Women with no history of abuse are more likely to be currently married than to be cohabiting or single, compared to women who have been abused.

Hypothesis 2: Women with a history of childhood abuse, particularly childhood sexual abuse, are more likely to be currently cohabiting than to be married or single, compared to women who have not experienced childhood abuse.

Hypothesis 3: Women who experience physical abuse in adulthood are more likely to be currently single than to be married or cohabiting, relative to women who have not experienced adult physical abuse.

THE THREE-CITY STUDY

STUDY DESIGN

The data are drawn from a study of the well-being of children and their families in low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and

San Antonio that included both a random-sample survey of 2,402 children and their caregivers and an ethnographic study of 256 additional children and families, recruited non-randomly, who were not in the survey sample but resided in the same neighborhoods.¹ The survey was conducted as follows. In households in low-income neighborhoods² 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 and conducted in-person interviews with that child's primary caregiver (a mother in over 90 percent of the cases). If the child was in the 10-to-14 year-old age group, he or she also was interviewed. Interviews were conducted between March and November of 1999 with 2,402 families, including an oversample of families receiving benefits from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the main cash welfare program. The response rate was 74 percent. Thirty-seven percent of the families were receiving TANF at the time of the interview, and an additional 20 percent had received TANF in the two years prior to the interview.³ The survey data are weighted to correct for oversampling and to give equal weight to the experiences of families in each city.⁴

Families were recruited into the ethnography between June 1999 and December 2000.

¹ We do not present data from a third component: an embedded developmental study of children that involved a second visit to the homes of families with children ages two to four, videotaping of children and parents, interviews with fathers, and visits to child-care settings.

² Ninety-three percent of the selected block groups had poverty rates of 20 percent or more.

³ These are unweighted percentages. All other survey statistics in this report use weights that adjust the statistics to be representative of all the families in the areas of the cities from which the sample was drawn. The cities are given equal weight. In weighted terms, 32 percent of the sample was receiving TANF at the time of the interview and another 16 percent had received TANF in the previous two years. The difference between the unweighted and weighted percentages on TANF occurred because families that were likely to be receiving TANF were intentionally oversampled.

⁴ See Cherlin, Fomby, and Moffitt (2002).

Recruitment sites included 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 two to four. The other 44 were recruited specifically because they had a child aged zero to eight years with a moderate or severe disability. To gather ethnographic data on the families the method of “structured discovery” was used, in which in-depth interviews and observations were focused on specific topics but allowed flexibility to capture unexpected findings and relationships (Burton et al. 2001; Winston et al. 1999). Families were visited an average of once or twice per month for 12 to 18 months and then every six months thereafter through 2003. In addition to these interviews, which were primarily conducted with the biological or adoptive mother or primary caregiver (e.g., grandmother or aunt) of a target child age two to four, ethnographers engaged in participant observation with the family. The latter often involved accompanying the mother and her children to the welfare office, doctor, grocery store, or workplace, and taking note of the interactions and contexts of those places.

Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of the survey and ethnographic samples of families, which are roughly comparable.⁵ Both samples are heavily African American and Hispanic (including, but not limited to, substantial numbers of Mexican Americans in San Antonio and Chicago, Puerto Ricans in Boston and Chicago, and Dominicans in Boston). The survey sample is slightly older and better educated. The ethnographic sample was more likely to be receiving TANF at the start of the study and to be working outside the home. The children in the ethnographic sample tended to be younger.⁶ The majority of caregivers in both

samples were neither married nor cohabiting at the start of the study, although the ethnography included a greater percentage of cohabiting caregivers than did the survey.

Information on either union histories or domestic violence and abuse was incomplete for 28 cases in the ethnographic sample.⁷ The tables presented from the ethnography were constructed based on the remaining 228 families. Where specific case examples are used in this article, family members have been assigned pseudonyms.

MEASURING ABUSE

ETHNOGRAPHY

Sixty-four percent (N = 147) of the mothers who participated in the ethnography and had complete information disclosed that they had been sexually abused or experienced domestic violence in childhood, adulthood, or both. These disclosures occurred at various times and in varying fieldwork situations during the ethnographers' monthly visits. Approximately 12 percent of these mothers told ethnographers of sexual abuse and domestic violence experiences during the first three months of their involvement in the study. Twenty-nine percent disclosed having experienced abuse during months four through six, 40 percent during months seven through nine, and 19 percent during months 10 through 24. The range in disclosure times reflects variation in what we would call turning points, the moments when participants trusted the ethnographer enough to share intimate, highly sensitive, and often painful information about abuse.

Reports of abuse were obtained under one of three circumstances. Only 10 percent of the disclosures occurred in response to specific questions about abuse in a semi-structured interview on intimate relationships that the ethnographers generally conducted during the third through sixth month of the study. In contrast, 71 percent unexpectedly revealed information about abuse when they were asked about related topics such as health or seemingly unrelated topics such as

⁵ The characteristics described are based on the primary caregivers' attributes unless otherwise specified. We provide the age distribution for all children in the caregivers' households, and so the total number of children exceeds the number of caregivers.

⁶ Recall that the sample selection criteria for the ethnography included families with at least one child age two to four.

⁷ These cases were not measurably different from others in terms of the characteristics listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics, Ethnography, and Survey

Characteristic	Ethnography		Survey	
	N	%	N	%
City				
Boston	71	28	926	39
Chicago	95	37	762	32
San Antonio	90	35	714	30
Ethnicity/Race				
African American	98	38	1009	43
Latino/Hispanic	108	42	1137	48
Non-Hispanic White	50	20	209	9
Ages of Primary Caregivers (yr.)				
15–19	21	8	122	5
20–24	67	26	412	17
25–29	62	24	464	19
30–34	36	14	466	19
35–39	35	14	419	17
40+	35	14	517	22
Education				
Less than high school	110	43	843	35
Completed high school or GED	67	26	567	24
College or trade school	79	31	986	41
TANF Status				
TANF	125	49	894	37
Non-TANF	131	51	1499	63
TANF/Work Status				
TANF/Working	40	16	170	7
TANF/Not working	85	33	688	30
Non-TANF/Working	64	25	658	28
Non-TANF/Not working	67	26	814	35
Number of Children Primary Caregiver Is Responsible For				
1 Child	64	25	530	22
2 Children	70	27	775	32
3 Children	63	25	570	24
> 3 Children	59	23	526	22
Children's Ages (yr.)				
< 2	190	28	769	12
2–4	174	25	1214	19
5–9	205	30	1712	27
10–14	88	13	1931	31
15–18	28	4	609	10
Total	685		6235	
Marital Status/Living Arrangements ^a				
Not married, not cohabiting	142	56	1642	69
Married, spouse in home	42	17	324	14
Married, spouse not in home/separated	24	10	276	12
Cohabiting (any marital status)	43	17	151	6

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Ethnography: N = 256 families. Survey: N = 2,402.

^a There are missing data for five cases in the marital status and living arrangements category.

transportation, family demographics, and inter-generational care-giving. For example, general questions about health, particularly stress and coping, often triggered mothers' disclosures of sexual abuse and domestic violence experi-

ences. During a health interview conducted during the seventh monthly visit, the ethnographer asked Darlene, a 26-year-old Latina mother of four, how she coped with stress. She responded:



I used to keep a journal of my life, because, when I was younger, I was molested. And so was my sister, so you know, one of our things of therapy was, you know, to write down what we felt for the next time we [would see] our counselor, and I was just like, alright, you know, well, and then I just kept a habit of constantly writing.

In several subsequent interviews, Darlene provided explicit descriptions of her abuse experiences.

Finally, 19 percent disclosed abuse when the ethnographer unexpectedly encountered a violent situation when visiting the participant or when the participant experienced an episode of abuse shortly before the ethnographer's regularly scheduled visit. In both instances, the abuse situation was fresh in the minds of mothers and they chose to discuss it with the ethnographers in great detail. In most of these cases, the ethnographers suspected abuse (as indicated in ethnographers' field notes and in discussions with their supervisors and team members), but they did not feel that they could directly ask the participant about it until the crisis prompted disclosure. For instance, the ethnographer for Patrice, a 28-year-old European American mother of two, described the circumstances that led to Patrice's crisis-related disclosure:

I arrived at Patrice's house 10 minutes before the interview only to find the streets covered with cops, patrol cars, and an ambulance. "Oh my God," I thought, "What has happened?" They were taking one man out of Patrice's house. He appeared to be shot or stabbed. Patrice was on the porch

screaming, her face bloody and cut. The kids were running around everywhere screaming and crying. . . . When I visited Patrice three weeks later the floodgates opened without me asking. I listened as she told me everything about the incident and about other incidents of physical and sexual abuse that she had experienced since childhood nonstop.

Based on disclosures under all these circumstances, we coded mothers' reports of rape, molestation, parentally enforced child prostitution, and witnessing of incest-acts as sexual abuse. Physical beatings, attacks with weapons, and witnessing consistent physical violence among parents, partners, and children were coded as physical abuse. As Table 2 will show, most women who reported sexual abuse also reported physical abuse, suggesting that sexual abuse often occurs in the context of physical violence. Some might argue that the inclusion of the experience of witnessing abuse expands the definition of abuse too broadly. But many studies underscore the impact of witnessing sexual abuse and domestic violence on adults' intimate relationships (Feerick and Haugaard 1999; Luster, Small, and Lower 2002; McCloskey, Figueredo, and Koss 1995; McNeal and Amato 1999; Whitfield et al. 2003). We did not include experiences of short duration or of questionable intensity such as watching one's mother's boyfriend slap her once. Rather, the experiences of witnessing abuse that we included tended to be serious and of long duration, such as the one recounted by Noel, a 34-year-old mother of five:

Table 2. Union Patterns by Abuse Categories: Ethnography Sample

Union Patterns	None	Childhood Only	Adulthood Only	Childhood and Adulthood
A. By Timing of Abuse, %				
Sustained unions	88	54	29	18
Transitory unions	9	31	25	72
Abated unions	4	15	46	10
Total %	101	100	100	100
N	81	13	63	71
	None	Sexual	Physical	Sexual and Physical
B. By Type of Abuse, %				
Sustained unions	88	33	27	24
Transitory unions	9	50	15	72
Abated unions	4	17	58	4
Total %	101	100	100	100
N	81	6	59	82

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Ethnography sample total N = 228 (28 cases were not included in this analysis because of insufficient data).

My sister and I slept in the same bedroom in bunk beds. I slept on the top bunk and my sister on the bottom. Every night for as long as I can remember, my father would come to my sister's bed and force her to have sex with him. I laid there and listened quietly.

Witnessing abuse was highly correlated with experiencing it personally. Overall, more than half of the women whom we coded as having been abused both witnessed and personally experienced the abuse; about one-third only experienced it; and about one-tenth only witnessed it.

With respect to the initiation of violence, in most cases it was directed toward women and children by men, but in three instances women were perpetrators as well. For example, Serena, a 35-year-old European American mother, suspected her abusive partner of cheating on her and "followed him to the club with a gun." They argued, she pulled the gun on him, and in the struggle that ensued, Serena's partner was shot in the hand. Serena was charged with assault with a deadly weapon and received two years probation.

In the 81 cases that we have coded as not experiencing abuse, the mothers did not report any abuse during the interview on intimate relationships and did not subsequently disclose abuse. It is possible, of course, that some of these women may also have experienced abuse but were reluctant to mention it. Still, the long duration of our fieldwork makes it likely that our reports are more complete than in many other studies.

SURVEY

In the survey, specific questions about several sensitive topics, including physical and sexual abuse and sexual activity, were asked using the audio computer-assisted self-interview (Audio-CASI) method: Respondents were given a laptop and provided with earphones. They saw and heard questions that no one else in the room could see or hear. They responded to these questions by pressing number keys on the laptop, as instructed by the program. Studies have shown that this technique raises substantially the reported rates of injection-drug usage, violent behavior, risky sex (Turner et al. 1998b), and abortion (Turner et al. 1998a). Given the possibility that the perpetrators of abuse were in the home dur-

ing the interview, we viewed this method of improving confidentiality as essential. Nevertheless, it is possible that these reports are incomplete.

SEXUAL ABUSE. Women were first asked the following question: Before you turned 18, did anyone—a stranger, friend, acquaintance, date, or relative—ever try or succeed in doing something sexual to you or make you do something sexual to them against your wishes?

Twenty-four percent said yes. All women were then asked the following:

Since you turned 18, did anyone—a stranger, friend, acquaintance, date, or relative—ever try or succeed in doing something sexual to you or making you do something sexual to them against your wishes?

Eleven percent said yes. Childhood and adult abuse were correlated: Among women who were sexually abused as children, 37 percent reported being sexually abused as adults and 84 percent reported experiencing serious physical abuse (defined later in this article) as adults.

PHYSICAL ABUSE. Women also were asked about physical abuse as a child: Before you turned 18, were you ever hit, beaten up, burned, assaulted with a weapon, or had your life been threatened by an adult in your family or household?

Twenty-one percent said yes. Women were also asked a series of questions about physical abuse that they may have suffered as an adult. We use a scale composed of affirmative responses to four questions about the more serious forms of violence.⁸ Forty-four percent of the women reported experiencing at least one of these four forms as an adult, and 19 percent had experienced three or four of them.

All told, 52 percent of the women responded that they had been sexually abused or had suffered serious physical abuse as a child or an adult. Thus, a majority of women in the survey reported that they had experienced abuse at some point. Table 3 will show that, as in the ethnography, most women who reported sexual abuse also report-

⁸ The four questions asked whether a romantic partner had ever "slapped, kicked, bit, or punched you," "beaten you," "choked or burned you," or "used a weapon or threatened to use a weapon on you." We did not include affirmative answers to the categories "thrown something at you" or "pushed, grabbed, or shoved."

Table 3. Current Union Status by Abuse Categories: Survey Sample

Current Union Status	None	Childhood Only	Adulthood Only	Childhood and Adulthood
A. By Timing of Abuse, % ^a				
Married	42	24	20	24
Cohabiting	4	11	6	9
Single	54	64	74	67
Total %	100	99	100	100
N	1,139	224	539	494
	None	Sexual	Physical	Sexual and Physical
B. By Type of Abuse, % ^b				
Married	42	32	23	18
Cohabiting	4	9	6	11
Single	54	59	71	72
Total %	100	100	100	101
N	1,139	149	669	439

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Survey sample total N = 2,396.

^a $\chi^2 = 133.2$, $df = 6$; $p < .0001$

^b $\chi^2 = 125.9$, $df = 6$; $p < .0001$

ed physical abuse. Two-thirds of the women who reported abuse (sexual or physical) in childhood or adolescence also reported abuse as adults, suggesting continuity through the life course in experiences with abuse.⁹

MEASURING UNION STATUS

ETHNOGRAPHY

The detailed information that the ethnographers obtained allowed us to examine patterns of

⁹ The reader may have noted that the percentage of women acknowledging abuse in the survey exceeded the percentage who initially acknowledged it in the early months of the ethnography, although the final percentage identified in the ethnographic sample was higher. The ethnographers chose to build rapport with the informants before asking about sensitive issues such as abuse and also to allow information on abuse to emerge in other contexts during the study. In contrast, the limited and private way in which the information was acquired in the survey using the Audio-CASI procedure may be more suitable for eliciting immediate disclosures (but without the possibility of additional reports emerging at a later time from women who did not disclose abuse in response to the survey questions). Survey respondents knew that the interviewer would not see their responses; moreover, they knew that a positive response would not elicit further conversation. On the other hand, informants in the ethnography presumably expected that a positive response would likely lead to further conversation on the topic.

union formation in adulthood. We attempted to classify these patterns in ways that could capture the fluidity that some women's histories showed. A thorough, systematic analysis of the ethnographic data indicated that many mothers could be classified as showing one of two union-history categories that we expected a priori and a third pattern that emerged from the data during the analysis. The defining characteristic of *sustained unions* is that the woman has been in long-term unions most of her life with only one or two men. About half of the women had union histories that fit this category. *Transitory unions* may be sequential unions with different men or they may take the form of a long-term involvement with a man that cycles between living together and breaking up, with the woman living with other men during the break-up periods. Women in this category experience unions as short-term partnerships and rarely live without partners for substantial periods of time. About one-third of the women had union histories that fit this category.

In addition, about one-sixth of the women had not lived in a union for at least one year prior to the field period, did not begin a union during the field period, and told the ethnographers that they did not currently want to be involved with a man. We classified them as having *abated unions*. These women indicated that they are not interested in forming another union with a man and have effectively taken themselves off the market, as noted in one ethnographer's field

notes about Justine, a 32-year-old African American mother of three:

Justine reports that at the moment she is not involved in any intimate relationships and does not wish to be. She sees her time and energy as being spent on raising her children and “not raising a man who’s going to act like a child.” She reports that she has spent more than half her life going through tumultuous relationships that did not get anywhere. She reports that the only man in her life at the moment is her brother, who sometimes helps her with raising the children. She reports that she is quite contented to be living her life without a man who will be controlling and manipulative.

SURVEY

As mentioned, in the survey, women could be classified only according to their union status at the date of the interview, because the survey did not include enough life history information to construct complete union histories. Thus, the data allow only for a cross-sectional analysis of the determinants of union status at the interview date. We classify each woman as being married, cohabiting, or single (i.e., not cohabiting or married) at the time of the 1999 survey. Although the survey classification of union status is cross-sectional and the ethnographic classification is longitudinal, the two are related, as we noted earlier.

MULTIVARIATE MODELS

The ethnographic data are based on much more detailed observations than the survey data and are suggestive of complexities in ways the survey data are not. Nevertheless, the number of cases, although very large for an ethnography, is still modest enough that it is difficult to take into account multiple influences simultaneously through a cross-tabular analysis; and the non-random nature of the sample and the oversampling of families with a child with a disability leave one unsure whether the findings would hold in the general population being studied.

Therefore, we use the survey data to estimate a multivariate model of current union status, in which we control for other factors, within the limits of our cross-sectional, nonexperimental survey design. We employ a multinomial logistic regression model, which is appropriate when the dependent variable of

interest has more than two discrete categories. In this case, there are three: married, cohabiting, and single. We include the four survey measures of abuse described earlier, three of which are dummy variables: childhood physical abuse (yes = 1), childhood sexual abuse (yes = 1), and adult sexual abuse (yes = 1). The fourth, serious adult physical violence, is a scale that runs from 0 if a woman had experienced none of the four forms of violence to 4 if she had experienced all of them. In addition, we include the following variables:

- *Age* at the time of the interview and *age squared* (the latter is included to model nonlinearities in the relationship between age and the probability of being in a union).
- *African American*: A dummy variable coded 1 if a woman is African American and 0 otherwise. Most non-African American women in the sample are Hispanic (see Table 1).
- *Received welfare as a child*: A dummy variable coded 1 if the woman responded affirmatively that her family had received “public assistance such as welfare, public aid, Food Stamps, WIC (Women, Infants and Children Nutrition program) or SSI (Supplemental Security Income)” “most of the time” before she was age 16, and 0 otherwise.
- *Brief Symptom Inventory*: A woman’s score on an 18-item scale of psychological distress, reflecting symptoms of anxiety, depression, and somatization (DeRogatis 2000). To address skewness, the natural logarithm of the mean score is used in these analyses.
- *High school degree*: A dummy variable scored 1 if a woman had attained at least a high school degree, 0 otherwise.
- *U.S. territory-born*: A dummy variable scored 1 if a woman said she was born in a U.S. territory outside of the U.S. mainland, and 0 otherwise. Nearly all of the women who responded affirmatively to this question were born in Puerto Rico. Thus, the variable serves as a measure of Puerto Rican ethnicity.
- *Foreign born*: A dummy variable scored 1 if a woman said she was born in a foreign country, and 0 otherwise.

The most common foreign country was Mexico, the second most common was the Dominican Republic, and nearly all of the other countries were in Latin America. Consequently, the variable *foreign born* serves as a proxy for being an immigrant from Mexico or elsewhere in Latin America. Women who were coded as 0 on both *U.S. territory-born* and *foreign born* were born in one of the 50 United States.

RESULTS

We will present comparable tables from the ethnography and the survey that cross-classify union history (or current union status) by the timing and the type of abuse a woman has experienced. We must caution that because the ethnographic sample was not randomly selected, the frequencies in the table should not be taken as statistically representative of families in the neighborhoods that were studied. We also present evidence from the ethnography that illustrates the findings.

ETHNOGRAPHY

Panels A and B of Table 2 presents cross-tabulations of union history patterns by timing of abuse and type of abuse, respectively, for the ethnographic sample.¹⁰ Both panels show strong relationships.¹¹ Consider Panel A of Table 2 first. Eighty-eight percent of women who had never been abused showed a pattern of sustained unions. Women who had been abused in either childhood or adulthood, but not both, were less likely to experience sustained unions, and women who were abused in both childhood and adulthood were the least likely to experience sustained unions. Note also that women who had been abused in adulthood only were substantially more likely to show a pattern of abated unions. Thus, the patterns of union formation differed sharply across the categories of abuse history.

Panel B of Table 2 reports union patterns by type of abuse. Note that among women who had experienced sexual abuse, either alone or in

combination with physical abuse, the most common pattern was transitory unions. In contrast, among women who had been abused physically but not sexually, the most common pattern was abated unions. To be sure, a modest number of women who had been abused reported a pattern of sustained unions. Further analysis showed that the majority of women in this category were first generation Mexican American immigrants and were distributed fairly equally across the three cities.

Overall, Table 2 suggests that the timing and nature of abuse are strongly associated with union patterns. Women who had experienced abuse were much less likely to have sustained unions. Women who experienced abuse beginning in childhood or who reported sexual abuse (alone or in combination with physical abuse) were more likely to develop a transitory union pattern in adulthood. Women who did not experience abuse in childhood but later experienced physical abuse in adulthood were more likely to display the abated union pattern than were other women. Let us illustrate these findings with some brief ethnographic profiles that show links between mothers' abuse histories and their current intimate relationship patterns.

SUSTAINED UNION PATTERN. Channel, a 27-year-old African American mother of one said that she never would have married her husband, Reginald, if "abuse had been anywhere on the radar screen." She notes,

I was poor all my life and so was Reginald. When I got pregnant, we agreed we would marry some day in the future because we loved each other and wanted to raise our child together. But we would not get married until we could afford to get a house and pay all the utility bills on time. I have this thing about utility bills. Our gas and electric got turned off all the time when we were growing up and we wanted to make sure that would not happen when we got married. That was our biggest worry. We never worried about violence, like hitting each other because we weren't raised that way. We worked together and built up savings and then we got married. It's forever for us. Fighting and slapping each other around is not how we do business. No matter how hard it is, we just don't roll like that.

SUSTAINED UNION, FIRST-GENERATION MEXICAN AMERICAN IMMIGRANT. As noted, most of the mothers who had been abused but were still in sustained unions were first-generation Mexican immigrants. They often told the ethno-

¹⁰ Initially, Table 2 was comprised two subtables. Since time must pass before a woman's union pattern emerges, the first subtable included the subsample of 152 women age 25 and over, who have had more time to develop what we would call "demonstrated union patterns," whereas the second subtable presented the "emerging union patterns" for women under 25. However, the relationships between the timing of abuse, type of abuse, and union patterns were consistent for both groups, and so we merged the subtables into one. The subtables are available from the authors upon request.

¹¹ Because the ethnographic cases were not randomly selected, we do not present goodness-of-fit tests.

graphers that they would remain with their partners despite the abuse. This stance is similar to a recent study suggesting the first-generation Mexican immigrant women are more likely to tolerate infidelity than are their daughters and granddaughters (Hirsch 2003). For example, Guadalupe, now 27 years old, married José when she was age 15. On the surface the couple leads a fairly ordinary life: they have three children; José has a fairly stable low-paying job as a mechanic; and they live in a small, well-kept house that they rent from one of their relatives. Guadalupe, however, is very anxious about her ordinary life in ways that consistently come through in interviews. Guadalupe makes sure to schedule her interviews during the day, when José is not home. She flinches every time the phone rings. She often arranges to meet the ethnographer in places other than her home. After a year of interviews, one afternoon she discloses to the ethnographer that José has physically abused her for many years and that her father had sexually abused her when she was a child. She mentions that she wants to leave José but cannot because she is Catholic, she worries about her children, and her mother will not allow it. The next day, her mother calls the ethnographer and says, “You are putting things in my daughter’s head. You are making trouble for her and José. Leave her alone. She will stay with José. Do not call again.”

TRANSITORY UNION PATTERN. Marilyn is a 45-year-old European American woman with four children—two teenage daughters and a daughter and son in middle childhood. Marilyn’s history of abuse is long-standing. She was sexually and physically abused as a child and adolescent and witnessed frequent domestic violence involving her parents. As a young adult and now as a woman in mid-life, Marilyn continually enters and exits relationships with men, moving them into her household only a few days after meeting them and allowing them to stay for a maximum of six to eight months. Most of the men that Marilyn has invited into her home, her life, and the lives of her children have abused her or abused her children. Marilyn appears unable to recognize the pattern of revolving-door relationships and the risks that these relationships create for her children.

In fact, the majority of mothers in the transitory union category seemed to be psychologically unaware of the link between abuse and

their relationship patterns. Musick (1993) characterizes this level of unawareness and the abuse that leads to it as “victimization [which] leaves a psychological residue of emotional discontinuity—a break between present and past, between thought and feeling, between actions and intentions—making [abused women] inclined to both security-seeking behavior and security-threatening behavior.” Such appears to be the case for Dee, a 29-year-old African American mother of two. Dee was raped in early adolescence and reported repeated physical abuse from her various adult partners. During one of her interviews, the ethnographer asked her about her new boyfriend and how they met:

Ethnographer: You have a new boyfriend? How did you meet him? Do you remember how you met him?

Dee: I think I met him when I was drinking.

Ethnographer: You were drinking?

Dee: I was drinking and I can’t remember.

Ethnographer: Over here at home?

Dee: No I was out in a club. It was weird. He just kept looking at me and I just kept turning my head just so he could ask me later why do you keep looking at me like that? And he was like my name is Steven, and I said hi my name is Dee, glad to meet you. He’s like how you getting home? I said I only live up the street and he’s like is it all right if I walk with you. I don’t even know who you are. But he ended up walking me home. It just happened.

Ethnographer: Since when?

Dee: Umm?

Ethnographer: We are in March.

Dee: December

Ethnographer: December?

Dee: Yeah, December. No, Thanksgiving.

Ethnographer: How old is he?

Dee: He’s 36.

Ethnographer: Okay so Steven, he’s 36, does he work?

Dee: I don’t think so, I’m not sure.

Ethnographer: You’re not sure if he works?

Dee: I don’t know.

Ethnographer: How is he to you?

Dee: He treats me okay.

Ethnographer: Is he nice to you?

Dee: Yeah

Ethnographer: Do you ever see signs of abuse?

Dee: He doesn’t look like the type that would do that.

By the end of the study, Steven had been jailed twice for beating Dee.



ABATED UNION PATTERN. Tanya, a 26-year-old African American mother of two, found herself in an abusive relationship with her children's father at age 23. Physical and sexual abuse were not a part of her history. But, at age 19, she describes herself as getting "caught up with James" after both her parents tragically and quite unexpectedly were killed. Tanya reports that James starting hitting her regularly after the birth of their second child. He wanted to marry her when the second child was born, but she refused. She notes that during this time in her life, she felt like she was "dying inside," losing herself, with nowhere to turn. As her feelings of helplessness grew, James's abuse became more frequent. But things changed when Tanya got a job. To comply with work requirements for welfare recipients, Tanya started working full-time in a community center. On the job she met three older African American women who took her under their wings, offering her guidance and support. Within a few months Tanya asked James to leave, indicating that she would get a protection from abuse order against him if he didn't leave or if he hit her again. James did leave, but continued to "bother" Tanya for several months thereafter. At one point he elicited the help of their minister to "get Tanya back in line." With the support of her "other-mothers," Tanya keeps James at bay and has decided to take some time off from relationships until she can get herself and her children together. These days she spends most of her time engaged in learning and recreational experiences with her children and also in personal self-development activities (e.g., weight loss program).

Mary, a 33-year-old African American mother of one indicated that she has taken herself "off the marriage market." She divorced her husband after he "went crazy," beating her and causing her to lose the child she was pregnant with. Mary's parents supported her through the divorce, acknowledging that they would not allow "any man to beat on their child." Since the divorce, Mary has moved three doors down from her parents and has adopted a little girl whom she adores. Mary indicated that all her energy and time will be spent mothering her daughter and that there is no room for a man in the "new order" that she was creating in her life.

Unlike mothers in the transitory union category, most of those in the abated union category seemed to have a clear understanding of the

link between abuse and their relationship patterns. For example, Justine, whom we coded in the abated union category, reported that after her first adult relationship, which involved physical violence, she found herself becoming involved in subsequent relationships that were destructive. She stated, "It seemed as if I was a magnet for attracting a certain kind of man." She pointed to a gap in her teeth and said, "You see this, my last boyfriend did this to me." Justine noted that her children would witness incidents where she would be hit by her partners and looked on helplessly while it occurred. She reported that she now feels guilty for allowing this to continue for so long without stopping it and that she has learned from these relationships. She is now "taking a break from" intimate relationships.

SURVEY

Let us now turn to the findings from the survey sample. Panel A of Table 3 shows a cross-tabulation that is analogous to Panel A of Table 2: current union status by timing of abuse. It shows an association between being currently married and never having been abused. Forty-two percent of women who said that they had not been abused were currently married, compared to 20 to 24 percent of women who reported abuse. Panel B displays a cross-tabulation according to type of abuse. It suggests that women who had experienced physical abuse (alone or in combination with sexual abuse) were most likely to be currently single. The associations in Table 3 are consistent with the ethnographic findings, and chi-squared tests reject the null hypotheses at the $p < .0001$ level; nevertheless, the relationships between union status and timing and type of abuse are not as strong as in the ethnographic tables.

We next turn to the multinomial logistic model of current union status, in which we control for other factors. Table 4 presents the results from three specifications of the multinomial logistic regression model. Each specification produces two sets of estimated parameters. The first set compares the odds of being single with being married; the second set compares the odds of cohabiting with being married. The parameters have been exponentiated to produce odds ratios: a parameter greater than one indicates that a one-unit change in the associated

Table 4. Multinomial Logistic Regression of Current Union Status on Abuse History and Other Variables

	Model 1 Odds Ratio	Model 2 Odds Ratio	Model 3 Odds Ratio
A. Single v. Married (omitted category)			
Age	.888*	.894*	.898
Age squared	1.002*	1.002*	1.002*
African American	5.16***	5.28***	4.96***
Received welfare as a child	2.00*	2.02*	1.66
Any abuse	2.34***		
Childhood physical abuse		1.48	1.16
Childhood sexual abuse		1.57	1.31
Adult sexual abuse			.831
Adult serious physical violence scale			1.29**
Brief symptom inventory score			1.16
High school degree			.959
U.S. Territory-born			2.48*
Foreign born			.536*
B. Cohabiting v. Married (omitted category)			
Age	1.10	1.10	1.13
Age squared	.998	.998	.998
African American	2.00	2.09*	2.27*
Received welfare as a child	4.25***	4.30***	3.71**
Any abuse	2.99***		
Childhood physical abuse		1.18	1.03
Childhood sexual abuse		2.93**	3.09*
Adult sexual abuse			.447
Adult serious physical violence scale			1.12
Brief symptom inventory score			1.23
High school degree			1.09
U.S. Territory-born			3.13*
Foreign born			.817
Pseudo R ²	.128	.118	.148
-2 log likelihood	3373.6	3413.4	3296.6

Note: N = 2,320.

* = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$

independent variable increases the odds of being single (or cohabiting) rather than being married; a parameter less than one indicates that a one-unit increase decreases the odds of being single (or cohabiting) relative to being married.

The first specification (the first column of odds ratios) examines the association between experiencing any form of abuse (physical or sexual, childhood or adulthood) and union status, controlling for age, age squared,¹² African

American ethnicity, and whether the woman's family received welfare when she was a child. It shows that the experience of abuse more than doubles the odds of being currently single versus married, and virtually triples the odds of being currently cohabiting versus married, even after the background factors are taken into account. The second specification replaces the "any abuse" variable with measures of childhood sexual and physical abuse, which can be reasonably considered as exogenous to the woman's current union status. (That is, a woman's decisions about whether to marry or cohabit cannot have influenced whether she was abused as child.) It is still possible, of course, that unmeasured factors may have influenced both current union status and childhood experiences of abuse; consequently one must be cautious about drawing conclusions about cause

¹² The parameter for age squared, which is a significant predictor of being single versus married, reflects the well-known nonlinearity in age at marriage: people are less likely to be single as they age, but the rate of decrease in the odds of being single decreases they reach middle age.

and effect. As the parameters in the upper half of column 2 show, neither childhood physical nor sexual abuse is significantly associated with the risk of being single versus married. However, childhood sexual abuse is significantly associated with a higher risk of cohabiting versus being married (see the lower half of column 2). This result is consistent with our hypothesis that women with a history of early sexual abuse are more likely to be currently cohabiting.

The third specification adds a number of variables that are plausible controls for confounding factors, but are potentially endogenous. (That is, their values may have been influenced by the woman's decision to marry or cohabit.) Two findings are of interest: First, the parameter for the association between childhood sexual abuse and the odds of cohabiting rather than being married remains statistically significant. Its value of 3.09 indicates that, other things being equal, a woman who had experienced sexual abuse as a child was three times more likely to be currently cohabiting rather than married, compared to a woman who had not been sexually abused as a child. Second, the scale measuring adult serious physical violence is significantly associated with the risk of being single compared to being married. This result is consistent with our hypothesis that women who have experienced adult physical abuse are more likely to be single. No other associations between abuse experiences and current union status are statistically significant.¹³

The results of the regression model can be used to calculate predicted probabilities of being in the various union statuses according to variations in a particular independent variable. Figure 1 shows the predicted union status for two hypothetical women. One was sexually abused in childhood, whereas the other was not. On all other variables in the model, both women scored at the mean level. Figure 1 shows little difference between the two women in the predicted probability of being single (see the left-most set of bars). In other words, childhood sexual abuse is not associated with a lower probability of being in a union. Rather, childhood sexual abuse more than doubles the probability of cohabiting (middle set of bars), while reducing the probability of being married (right set of bars).

Adult physical abuse displays a different pattern. Figure 2 compares two hypothetical women, one of whom had experienced three of the four forms of violence included in the scale, whereas the other had experienced one of the four. Both women scored at the mean on all other variables. Figure 2 shows that the woman who had experienced three of the four forms of

¹³ A likelihood-ratio test shows that specification 3 improves the fit with the data over specification 2 at the $p < .0001$ level. However, since we have used weighted data, likelihood-ratio tests should be interpreted with caution.

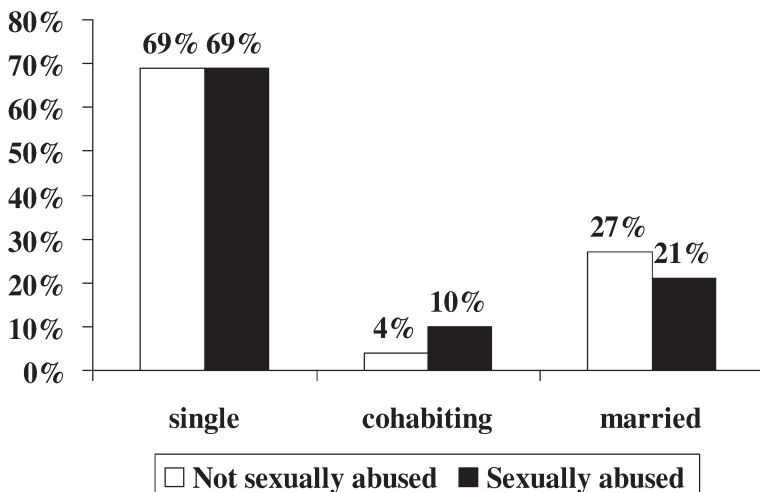


Figure 1. Predicted Union Status by Childhood Sexual Abuse, Survey Sample

violence has a greater predicted probability of being single (left set of bars), but she is not more likely to be cohabiting.

DISCUSSION

We have used information from an ethnography and a survey of low-income families in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio to investigate the relationship between experiencing sexual or physical abuse and patterns of union formation. Both sets of data suggest that women who have been abused are substantially less likely to be in sustained marital or cohabiting unions. Both sets of data also suggest that different forms of abuse have distinctive associations with union formation. Childhood abuse, and particularly childhood sexual abuse, is associated with a pattern in which women are less likely to be in a stable marriage or a long-term cohabiting relationship but are instead more likely to experience multiple short-term unions. Adult abuse, and particularly adult physical abuse, on the other hand, is associated with a reduction in the probability of being in either form of union.

The ethnographic data analysis identified a group of women in the sample who had not been abused as children, for the most part, and who subsequently experienced adult physical abuse and then withdrew from having relationships with men. We called this pattern abated

unions. However, women who *had* been abused as children and who then experienced adult abuse were less likely to withdraw from relationships; rather, they tended to have a series of them—a pattern we called transitory unions. Since the distinction between abated and transitory union patterns emerged somewhat unexpectedly from our analysis, we do not presume to have a full understanding of the role of abuse in the formation of these patterns. Nevertheless, our ethnographic observations and the research literature lead us to suggest the following possible explanation: Women who have not been abused as children are more likely to have families, or to be in networks of friends, that they can draw upon for emotional, material, and protective support if, as adults, they are abused by romantic partners. These women are also more likely to have clearer ego boundaries, self-protective capacities, and other psychological resources necessary to recognize and exit from relationships with abusive partners. On the other hand, women who were abused as children often have strained ties with families and friends who have fewer emotional and material resources. These women are also more likely to have weaker, highly permeable relationship boundaries and a greater incidence of undiagnosed depression and other mental health issues, all of which make it more difficult for them to avoid repeatedly abusive romantic entanglements.

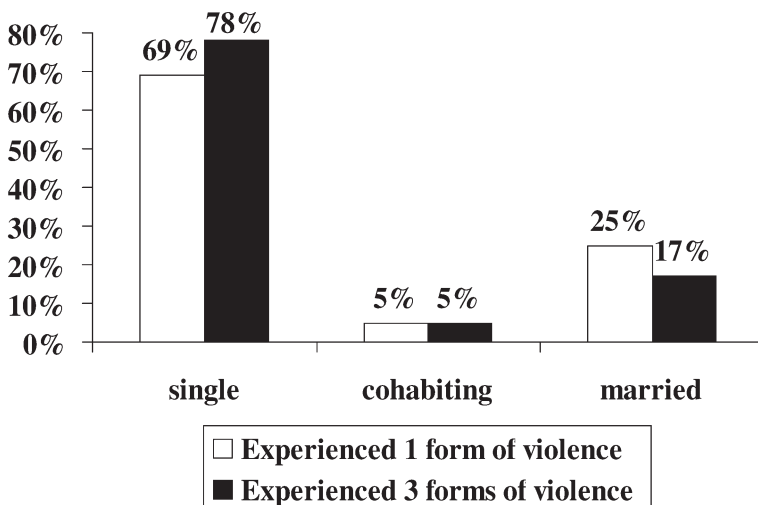


Figure 2. Predicted Union Status by Adult Physical Violence Scale, Survey Sample

The findings that we obtained from the survey data suggest the utility of including detailed questions on both physical abuse and sexual abuse in large-scale surveys. When possible, the information should distinguish between childhood and current abuse. Most of the older longitudinal national surveys analyzed by sociologists do not include this information.¹⁴ These surveys usually were designed to study topics such as educational attainment, income, labor force participation, or health; family and household issues were not initially a major focus. More recent national longitudinal studies¹⁵ and specialized national surveys¹⁶ have included some information. To be sure, information on sensitive topics such as abuse is difficult to collect, but techniques such as the Audio-CASI procedure used in the Three-City Study help to preserve the respondents' privacy and probably increase their willingness to acknowledge abuse.

PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE DECLINE IN MARRIAGE

The pattern of associations that we report raises the question of whether physical and sexual abuse have been a factor in the declining rates of marriage among low-income women and men. As we stated, there is no hard evidence that rates of abuse have increased. In fact, substantiated cases of child sexual abuse declined by one-third between 1992 and 1998 (U.S.

Department of Justice 2001). Still, if living in a single-parent family is a risk factor for childhood sexual and physical abuse (Finkelhor 1994), then the increase in single-parent families over the past several decades could have caused a rise in the prevalence of abuse. But whether or not there has been an increase, we would argue speculatively that the role of abuse in discouraging marriage may be greater than a half-century ago because of changes in the social and economic context in which abuse is experienced and understood. These changes have made alternatives to marriage more feasible and more acceptable for abused women as well as altering women's expectations of marriage.

First, cohabiting and having an intimate relationship without cohabiting have become more workable options for women who wish to have children without being married. Although cohabitation has increased greatly among all social classes over the past few decades, at all times it has been (and remains) more common among the least educated (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991). The acceptability of cohabitation provides mothers with the option of living openly with partners outside of marriage. Cohabitation provides mothers with more control over their relationships because it is easier to exit from than a marriage. We would speculate that the greater control and easier exit may be important to women who are hesitant to marry because of past sexual or physical abuse. Moreover, as is well known, the number of single mothers raising children outside of unions has increased, with the least-educated again having the highest prevalence. The rise of single parenthood provides the option of living without a partner to women who experience physical abuse in adulthood. In the past, when marriage was the only acceptable context for having children, abused women had no good alternative. Now there are options that allow for intimacy and motherhood but avoid the risk of living with a potentially abusive man.

Second, low-income women may expect companionship, fidelity, and nonviolence from spouses and partners more so than in the past. For example, in a 21-city survey, African Americans were as likely as non-Hispanic whites to rate highly the emotional benefits of marriage, such as friendship, sex life, leisure time, and a sense of security; and Hispanics

¹⁴ Neither the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth, nor the National Educational Longitudinal Survey has questions on domestic violence or sexual abuse. However, the National Survey of Families and Households (<http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/nsfh/home.htm>) did include questions about violence between spouses or partners in its first two waves and again in a recent follow-up.

¹⁵ For example, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (<http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth>) included questions on physical violence and sexual abuse among partners.

¹⁶ For example, some information exists in a survey of black Americans, the National Survey of American Life (<http://www.rcgd.isr.umich.edu/prba/survey.htm>); the National Latino and Asian American Study (no website available); and a survey of family formation behaviors and attitudes, the Study of Families and Relationships (<http://www.npi.ucla.edu/mate/>).

rated these benefits somewhat higher than either group (Tucker 2000). Moreover, in a study of unmarried low- and moderate-income couples who had just had a child together, Carlson, McLanahan, and England (2004) found that mothers and fathers who scored higher on a scale of relationship supportiveness were substantially more likely to be married one year later. The items in the scale included whether the partner “is fair and willing to compromise” when they have a disagreement, “expresses affection or love,” “encourages or helps” the individual do things that are important to her or him, and does not insult or criticize the individual’s ideas.

POLICY RELEVANCE

We suggest that our findings, if confirmed by other studies, have implications for both the typical conservative and the typical liberal accounts of the decline of marriage among low-income women and men. Conservatives tend to extol the benefits of marriage and to suggest that a cultural breakdown is the reason for the decline, but they rarely mention men’s abuse of women. For example, James Q. Wilson (2002) urges women to marry for the benefit of their children but never discusses physical or sexual abuse except to criticize the concept of marital rape. One could infer from Wilson’s lack of discussion that sexual abuse and physical abuse are minor difficulties to which women should turn the other cheek. Our study suggests that abuse is a widespread and serious problem to which women have been responding by pursuing options other than marriage. Unless the problem is addressed, the feasibility—and the fairness—of pro-marriage exhortations and public policies is in question.

Liberals, in contrast, often write as if income and employment are the only parts of the marriage story to which attention must be paid. Without doubt, income and employment are very important. The difficulty of finding men who are reliable earners is undoubtedly a reason for the low rates of marriage, as William Julius Wilson (1987) and others have argued. Yet it is unrealistic to think, under current circumstances, that if men had better job opportunities, marriage rates would automatically jump. Our study suggests that until levels of abuse decline appreciably, many women might still refuse to

marry men who have steady incomes unless they are convinced that those men will treat them well. It is possible, of course, that if more low-income men did find steady employment, they might moderate their behavior. But the association is not assured. We live in a cultural context in which alternatives to marriage are possible and low-income women judge potential partners using similar cultural standards as the middle class—standards that include fair treatment and companionship. If we are concerned about the decline in stable, long-term unions among the poor and near-poor, then we may need to consider measures that would directly reduce the high levels of physical and sexual abuse that women must bear.

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