

# Family Stability and Instability among Low-Income Hispanic Mothers With Young Children

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## Why research on low-income Hispanic children and families matters

Hispanic or Latino children currently make up roughly 1 in 4 of all children in the United States,<sup>a</sup> and by 2050 are projected to make up 1 in 3, similar to the number of white children.<sup>b</sup> Given this increase, how Hispanic children fare will have a profound impact on the social and economic well-being of the country as a whole. Notably, though, 5.7 million Hispanic children, or one third of all Hispanic children in the United States, are in poverty, more than in any other racial/ethnic group.<sup>c</sup> Nearly two thirds of Hispanic children live in low-income families, defined as having incomes of less than two times the federal poverty level.<sup>d</sup> Despite their high levels of economic need, Hispanics, particularly those in immigrant families, have lower rates of participation in many government support programs when compared with other racial/ethnic minority groups.<sup>e-g</sup> High-quality, research-based information on the characteristics, experiences, and diversity of Hispanic children and families is needed to inform programs and policies supporting the sizable population of low-income Hispanic families and children.

<sup>a</sup> Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. (2015). *America's children: Key national indicators of well-being, 2015*, Table POP3. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office. Retrieved from <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables.asp>

<sup>b</sup> Ibid.

<sup>c</sup> DeNavas-Walt, C., & Proctor, B.D. (2015). *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2014*, Table B-2, Current Population Reports, P60-252. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p60-252.pdf#TableB-2>

<sup>d</sup> Lopez, M. H., & Velasco, G. (2011). *Childhood poverty among Hispanics sets record, leads nation*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Hispanic Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/09/28/childhood-poverty-among-hispanics-sets-record-leads-nation/>

<sup>e</sup> Williams, S. (2013). *Public assistance participation among U.S. children in poverty, 2010*. Bowling Green, Ohio: National Center for Family & Marriage Research. Retrieved from <http://www.bgsu.edu/content/dam/BGSU/college-of-arts-and-sciences/NCFMR/documents/FP/FP-13-02.pdf>

<sup>f</sup> Lichter, D., Sanders, S., & Johnson, K. (2015). *Behind at the starting line: Poverty among Hispanic infants*. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Carsey School of Public Policy. Retrieved from <http://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1250&context=carsey>

<sup>g</sup> Child Trends Databank. (2014). *Health care coverage*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends. Retrieved from <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=health-care-coverage>

## Overview

Families in the United States have undergone tremendous change in the last few decades. Since the 1960s, fewer couples are marrying, more are divorcing, more couples are cohabiting, and childbearing is increasingly taking place outside of marriage.<sup>1,2</sup> All of these changes have resulted in more diversity in family and living arrangements for children, but also in arrangements that are less stable.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneous trends of increased divorce and cohabitation, decreased marriage, and greater social acceptance of having children outside of marriage have led to significant changes in what a “typical” U.S. family looks like, how they are formed, and what factors are associated with different family structures.<sup>4,5</sup>

These changes have not affected all racial/ethnic groups equally. Changes in family structure and stability among Latinos<sup>a</sup> are not as well understood as are changes among other groups in the country. There is even less information on changes in family structure among immigrant Latinos.<sup>6</sup> This is an important omission, as Latinos are the largest, and one of the fastest-growing, ethnic groups in the United States—currently comprising 17 percent of the U.S. population.<sup>7</sup> As a group, Hispanics hold strong views about the sanctity of marriage and highly value family cohesion and commitment. This has implications for the family formation and stability of Hispanic couples.<sup>8</sup>

In this brief, we examine patterns of stability and instability in family structure (i.e., change in romantic residential relationship status) among urban low-income Hispanic mothers with young children. We focus on mothers with young children because children’s early home experiences can have a profound influence on their well-being and life trajectories.<sup>9,10</sup> Moreover, while couples tend to stay together during and immediately after a birth, relationship dissolution, one form of family instability, becomes more common during the child’s first years of life.<sup>11</sup>

We compare the family experiences of low-income Latina mothers with those of low-income white and black mothers. Because the experiences of Latinos vary markedly by *nativity status* (whether they were born in the United States versus elsewhere), we also compare changes in family structure among foreign-born and U.S.-born low-income Latina mothers.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, we describe how psychosocial risks (parenting stress, depressive symptoms, and economic stress) and family processes (co-parenting and

<sup>a</sup> Throughout this brief, we use the terms *Hispanic* and *Latino* interchangeably.

parenting) vary by race, ethnicity, and nativity status, as well as by mothers' family (in)stability experiences. Psychosocial risk and family processes are likely to shape the way mothers experience family instability. Understanding variation in these can provide a glimpse into the early family environment in which children develop and can help inform programs aimed at supporting positive child outcomes.

Data used in this brief are from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCW) study, a longitudinal study of urban children and their families.

## Key findings

For this brief, we examined family change and stability among low-income mothers, and the correlated factors. Differences between foreign-born and U.S.-born Hispanic mothers in patterns of family formation, psychosocial risks, and family processes highlight the heterogeneity of the experiences of Hispanic children. Our findings reveal different strengths and risks based on mothers' nativity that should be considered when designing interventions; one-size-fits-all policy and intervention approaches will likely be ineffective. Future research should examine the factors associated with the relative advantage of Hispanic immigrants over their U.S.-born counterparts.

Here is what we found:

**In the first 5 years of their child's life, Hispanic (foreign-born and U.S.-born) mothers are more likely to experience stable family life (i.e., stable residential relationship or stably single) than their black counterparts. Foreign-born Latina mothers are also less likely to re-partner than their low-income U.S.-born Hispanic, white, and black counterparts.**

- The majority of low-income, foreign-born Latina mothers, and close to half of U.S.-born Latina and white<sup>b</sup> mothers report being in a stable residential union or stably single during the first 5 years of their child's life, compared with roughly one third of black mothers.
- Eleven percent of foreign-born Hispanic mothers move in with a new partner (*re-partner*) during the child's first 5 years of life, compared to 31 percent of U.S.-born Hispanic mothers, 42 percent of white mothers, and 56 percent of black mothers.

**Low-income, foreign-born Latina mothers have fewer psychosocial risks than their U.S.-born Latina, white, and black counterparts.**

- Foreign-born Latina mothers are less likely to report depression<sup>c</sup> than are their low-income U.S.-born Latina, white, and black counterparts.
- Foreign-born Latina mothers report levels of parenting and economic stress similar to those of U.S.-born Latina, white, and black mothers.

<sup>b</sup> Differences between low-income white, Hispanic, and black mothers in stable families are not statistically significant, due to the relatively small sample size of low-income white, urban mothers.

<sup>c</sup> The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing variable for depression is based on whether the mother reports depressive symptoms consistent with a clinical diagnosis (in terms of number of symptoms and severity). However, her report of depression was not assessed by a clinician.

<sup>d</sup> Mothers' partner and the father may not be the same person.

**Maternal parenting stress differs by family instability group, but depression and economic stress do not.**

- Stable single mothers (e.g., those who did not live with the baby's father at the baby's birth and did not move in with a romantic partner during the child's first 5 years of life) report more parenting stress than stable residential mothers or mothers who report family instability.

**Low-income U.S.-born Latina mothers report supportive co-parenting relationships with their partner,<sup>d</sup> that they spend as much time with their child as their white and black peers, and that their child's father is as involved as white and black mothers report that their children's fathers are.**

- Both foreign-born and U.S.-born Latina mothers report higher levels of co-parenting support from their partner (not necessarily the child's father) than white mothers.
- U.S.-born Latina mothers report spending as much time with their young children as their white and black counterparts, and more time than their foreign-born Latina counterparts.
- U.S.-born Hispanic mothers also report that their child's father spends as much time with their child as white and black mothers report—and more time than their foreign-born Hispanic counterparts report.

**Across race, ethnicity, and nativity status, stable single mothers have less-supportive co-parents than stable resident mothers, and their child's father is less involved than all other fathers.**

- Stable resident mothers report the most supportive co-parenting relationships with their partner of any group.
- Stable single mothers report their child's father spends the least amount of time with their child, compared to mothers from stable resident relationships and mothers who broke up with the father after the child's birth.

## Data source and methodology

The data for this brief come from four waves (birth through age 5) of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, a longitudinal birth cohort study of nearly 5,000 children born between 1998 and 2000 and their mothers who live in large urban centers (U.S. cities with populations 200,000 or more). The study over-sampled unmarried mothers (3,600 unmarried mothers versus 1,100 married mothers), most of whom are low-income. We limited the sample to low-income Hispanic (foreign-born  $n = 420$  and U.S.-born  $n = 509$ ), U.S.-born white ( $n = 320$ ), and U.S.-born black ( $n = 1488$ ) mothers who reported living with their children at least half of the time. We excluded foreign-born white and black mothers ( $n = 162$ ) and “other ethnicity” mothers ( $n = 194$ ) because there were not sufficient numbers of these groups of mothers for the analyses. These inclusion criteria resulted in an analytic sample size of 2,737 mothers with children born between 1998 and 2000.

The Fragile Families dataset is unique in that it followed mothers, fathers, and children from birth through adolescence, regardless of changes in living arrangements and romantic partners. Therefore, both resident and nonresident fathers were asked about their involvement with their children. Moreover, mothers and fathers were asked about new partners, which provides information about instability in romantic partners and living arrangements over time. The sample represents urban, low-income mothers who live with their children. On average, participating urban, low-income mothers reported household annual incomes ranging from \$13,000 to \$19,000, depending on their race, ethnicity, and nativity status. Table 1 provides proportions of married and unmarried mothers by race, ethnicity, and nativity.

We conducted descriptive analyses across a range of measures, including mothers’ reports of change in family structure (i.e., a residential breakup or a re-partnering) between their child’s birth and 5 years of age; mothers’ ethnicity, race, and nativity status (all measured at birth); mothers’ depressive symptoms and stress (parenting and economic, measured at 1 year); and the quality of co-parenting relationships and frequency of both biological parents’ involvement (measured at 1 year). All analyses were conducted in Stata and were weighted to be representative of low-income Hispanic (foreign-born and U.S.-born), white (U.S.-born), and black (U.S.-born) urban mothers who lived with their child born between 1998 and 2000. We conducted tests of difference between racial/ethnic groups, as well as family instability groups; significant group differences are noted in the figures and appendix.

## Definitions

*Family instability* is defined as any change in family structure that included a residential breakup or a re-partnering during the first 5 years of the child’s life. *Family stability* is defined as no change in family structure—that is, either being stable single or stable residential during the first 5 years of the child’s life. Mothers reported on their residential relationship status (i.e., married or cohabiting) at each interview between their child’s birth and age 5. Because mothers were not asked about their residential relationship status changes between interviews, it is likely the FFCW data undercounts family instability. Mothers were categorized as *stable residential* if they reported no change in their residential romantic relationship and continually lived with their child’s father from birth to age 5; as *stable single* if they stayed single (e.g., not romantically living with anyone) during this time; as having experienced a *break-up* with their child’s father *and not* having re-partnered; and *re-partnered* if they partnered with a man other than the child’s father during this time (this includes mothers who were residentially single or who experienced a break-up and re-partnered).<sup>a</sup>

Mothers also reported their *race/ethnicity* as non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black, or Hispanic. *White* refers to non-Hispanic white and *black* refers to non-Hispanic black throughout this brief.

Mothers reported on depressive symptoms using a clinical interview (the Composite International Diagnostic Interview – Short Form; CIDI-SF), which was then coded into 1 = reported symptoms that meet criteria for *depression*. The CIDI has been used in many studies with Hispanic populations.<sup>b, c, d</sup>

*Parenting stress* was reported by mothers using a measure of how overwhelmed they felt as parents when their child was 1 year old. The scale is validated with a Latino population.<sup>e, f</sup>

*Economic stress* refers to mothers’ report of how many problems they had as a result of not having enough money, such as not being able to pay bills, buy food, or go to the doctor, when their child was 1 year old (range 0-12).

<sup>a</sup> The survey does not include questions about same-sex relationships.

<sup>b</sup> Alegria, M., Mulvaney-Day, N., Torres, M., Polo, A., Cao, Z., & Canino, G. (2007). Prevalence of psychiatric disorders across Latino subgroups in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health*, 97(1), 68-75.

<sup>c</sup> Robison, J., Gruman, C., Gaztambide, S., & Blank, K. (2002). Screening for depression in middle-aged and older Puerto Rican primary care patients. *The Journals of Gerontology Series A: Biological Sciences and Medical Sciences*, 57(5), M308-M314.

<sup>d</sup> Lagomasino, I. T., Dwight-Johnson, M., Miranda, J., Zhang, L., Liao, D., Duan, N., et al. (2005). Disparities in depression treatment for Latinos and site of care. *Psychiatric Services*, 56(12), 1517-1523.

<sup>e</sup> Yu, S. M., & Singh, G. K. (2012). High parenting aggravation among US immigrant families. *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(11), 2102-2108

<sup>f</sup> Cardoso, J. B., Padilla, Y. C., & Sampson, M. (2010). Racial and ethnic variation in the predictors of maternal parenting stress. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 36(5), 429-444.

## Data source and methodology, cont.

*Co-parenting support* refers to mothers' report of how supportive they felt their partner (resident or nonresident) was as a co-parent when their child was 1 year old. Questions included, for example, how much they felt the partner was trustworthy to take good care of the child and how much the partner respected the parenting rules they set for the child.

*Mother involvement* was assessed by asking mothers to report on how many days per week they engaged with their child in play

(e.g., peek-a-boo), caretaking such as putting the child to bed, and cognitive activities such as book-reading, singing songs, and telling stories.

*Father involvement* was assessed by asking mothers to report on how many days per week their child's father engaged with the child in play (e.g., with blocks), caretaking such as feeding, and cognitive activities such as book-reading, singing songs, and telling stories.

## Results

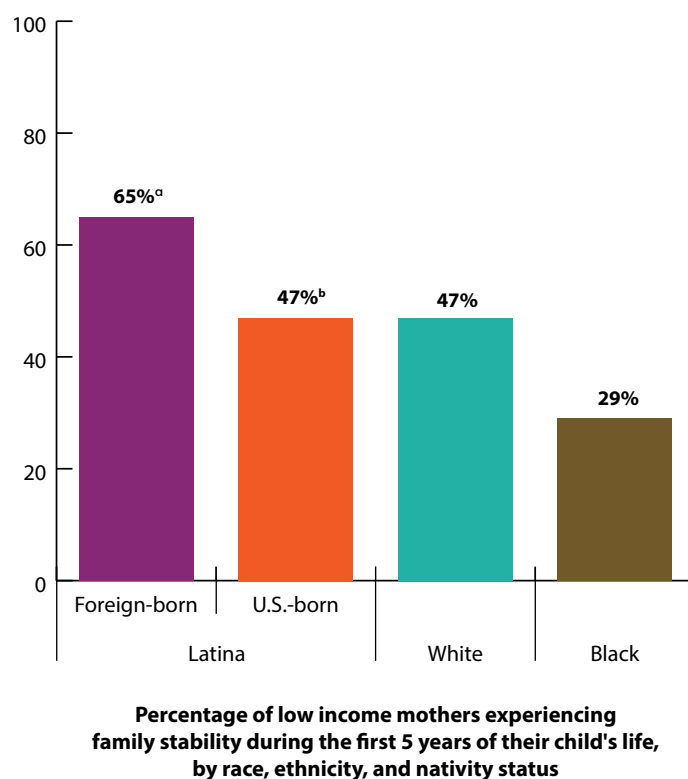
### Stability of Hispanic households

**Most low-income mothers, with the exception of black mothers, live with their child's biological father at their child's birth.** More than two thirds of low-income foreign-born Hispanic (79 percent), white (71 percent) and U.S.-born Latina (67 percent) mothers are living with their child's biological father at the time of their child's birth. In contrast, fewer than half (44 percent) of low-income black mothers are living with their child's father at the time of birth. Among low-income mothers, fewer than half of all mothers, except foreign-born Hispanic (56 percent), are married to their child's father at the child's birth (Table 1).

**Latina (foreign-born and U.S.-born) mothers are more likely to live in stable homes during their child's first 5 years of life than black mothers.** The majority (65 percent) of low-income foreign-born Latina mothers and almost half (47 percent) of U.S.-born Hispanic and white<sup>e</sup> mothers report that they were in stable residential relationships or stably single during their child's first 5 years, compared with 29 percent of black mothers (see Figure 1). Although a higher percentage of foreign-born Latina mothers report being stably residential than all other racial/ethnic groups, differences between foreign-born Latina mothers and their white and native-born counterparts are not significant.

Latina (foreign-born and U.S.-born) mothers are more likely to live in stable homes during their child's first 5 years of life than black mothers.

**Figure 1.** Latina mothers are more likely to have stable families during their child's early years than their black counterparts.



Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing, 1998-2007

Note: Differences between white and black mothers are not statistically significant due to the relatively small sample size of low-income white, urban mothers.

<sup>a</sup> Indicates significant difference between foreign-born Latina and black mothers at the  $p=.01$  level.

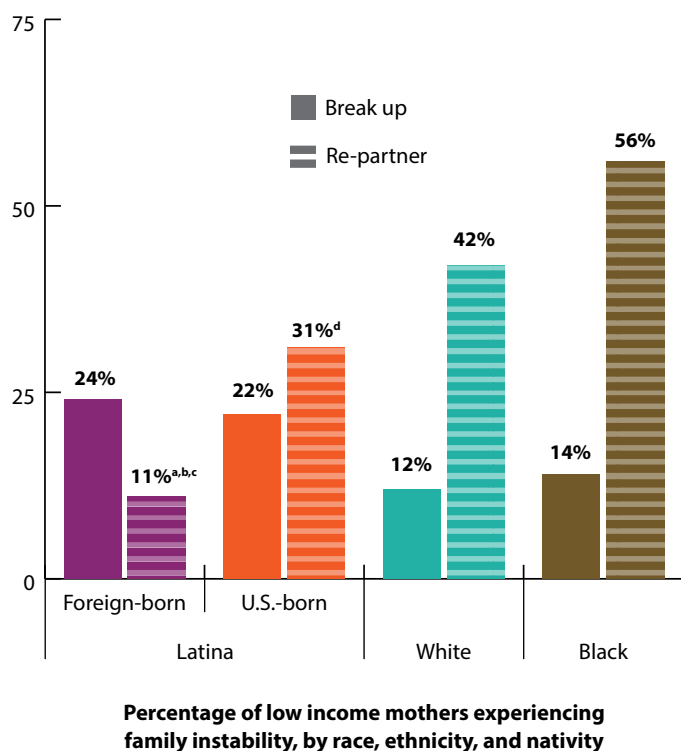
<sup>b</sup> Indicates significant difference between U.S.-born Latina and black mothers at the  $p=.10$  level.

<sup>e</sup> Differences between white and black mothers are not statistically significant due to the relatively small sample size of low-income white, urban mothers.



**Low-income foreign-born Hispanic mothers experience little family instability (i.e., did not break up or re-partner) during the first 5 years of their child's life.** Just over 1 in 3 (35 percent) foreign-born Latina mothers experience family instability in their child's early years (see Table 1). Nearly 1 in 4 (24 percent) foreign-born Latina mothers report a break-up, and an additional 1 in 10 (11 percent) foreign-born Hispanic mothers report re-partnering (that is, a new male romantic partner moved into the household; see Figure 2). In contrast, more than half of U.S.-born Hispanic (53 percent) and white (53 percent) mothers, and nearly 3 out of 4 black (71 percent) mothers, report some type of family instability during their child's early childhood (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Foreign-born Latina mothers are less likely to re-partner than their counterparts.



Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing, 1998-2007

Note: Re-partner indicates a residential re-partnering (e.g., a new partner moves into the household whether preceded by a break-up or not).

<sup>a</sup> Indicates significant difference between foreign-born and U.S.-born Latina mothers at the p=.01 level.

<sup>b</sup> Indicates significant difference between foreign-born Latina and white mothers at the p=.01 level.

<sup>c</sup> Indicates significant difference between foreign-born Latina and black mothers at the p=.01 level.

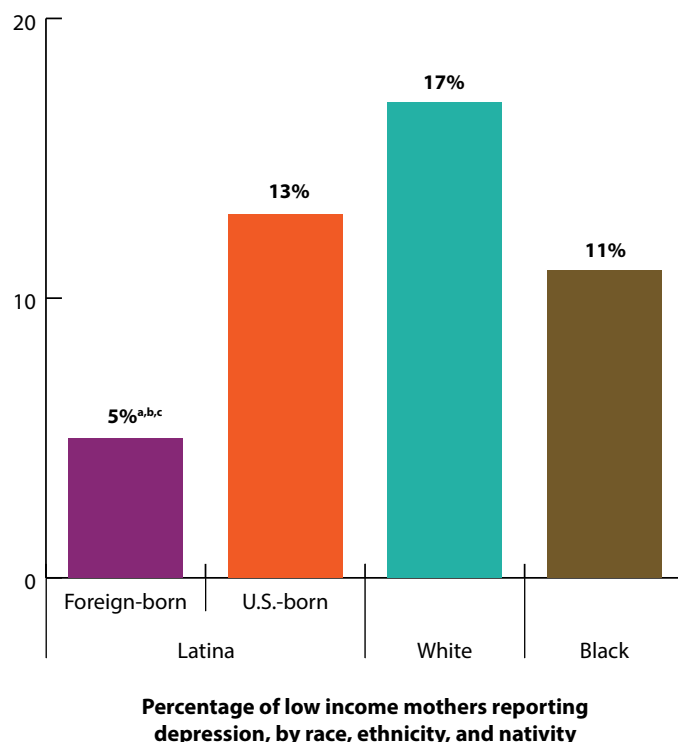
<sup>d</sup> Indicates significant difference between U.S.-born Latina and black mothers at the p=.01 level.

## Mothers' psychosocial risk

**Foreign-born Latina mothers report relatively low psychosocial risk compared to their U.S.-born Latina, white, and black counterparts.** Specifically, foreign-born Hispanic mothers are less likely to report depression than white, black, or U.S.-born Hispanic mothers (see Figure 3). Across race, ethnicity, and nativity status, low-income mothers in our sample report relatively low levels of parenting stress (see Figure 4) and economic stress (e.g., worry about being evicted for failure to pay rent, see Figure 5). There were no differences between family instability groups in reported depression or economic stress. However, there were group differences in mothers' parenting stress by her family instability status (see Table 2).

Foreign-born Hispanic mothers are less likely to report depression than white, black, or U.S.-born Hispanic mothers.

**Figure 3:** Foreign-born Latina mothers are less likely to report depression than their peers.



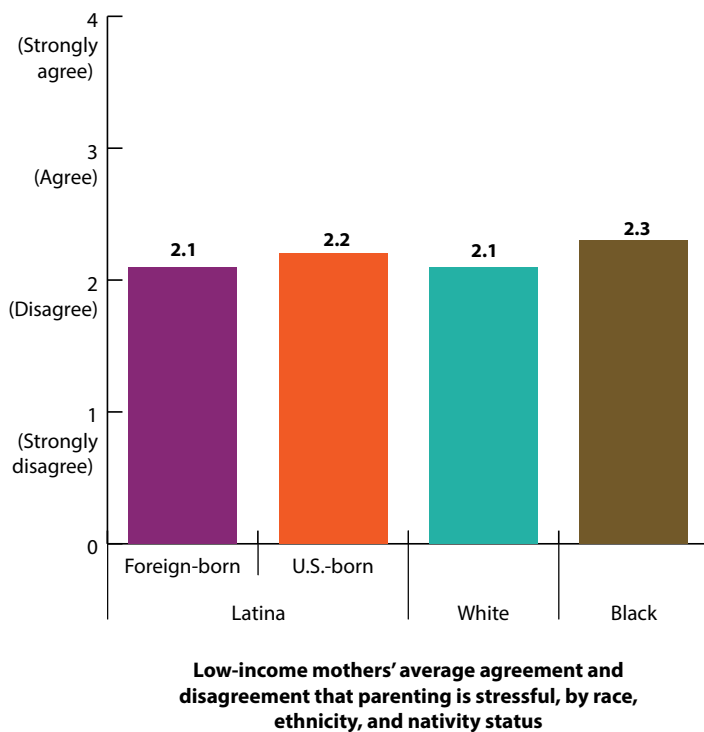
Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing, 2001-2003

<sup>a</sup> Indicates significant difference between foreign-born and U.S.-born Latina mothers at the p=.10 level.

<sup>b</sup> Indicates significant difference between foreign-born Latina and white mothers at the p=.05 level.

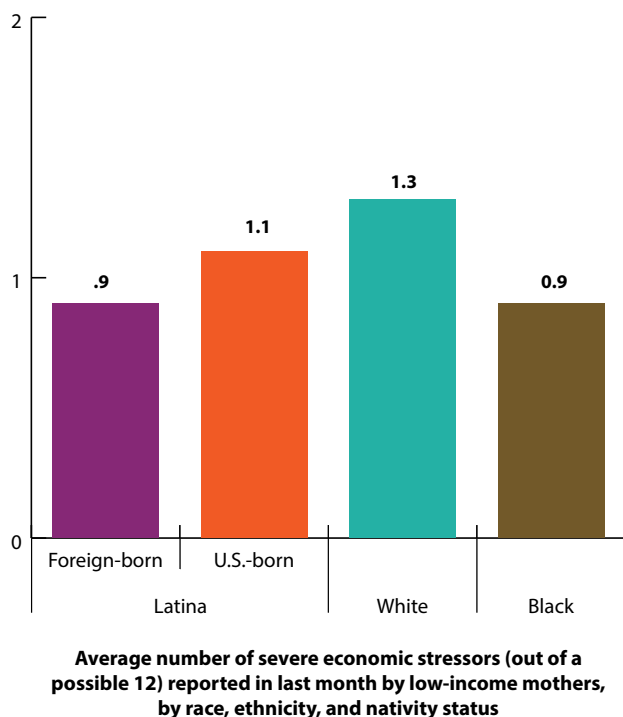
<sup>c</sup> Indicates significant difference between foreign-born Latina and black mothers at the p=.10 level

**Figure 4.** Across race, ethnicity, and nativity status, most mothers disagree that parenting is stressful.



Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing, 2001-2003

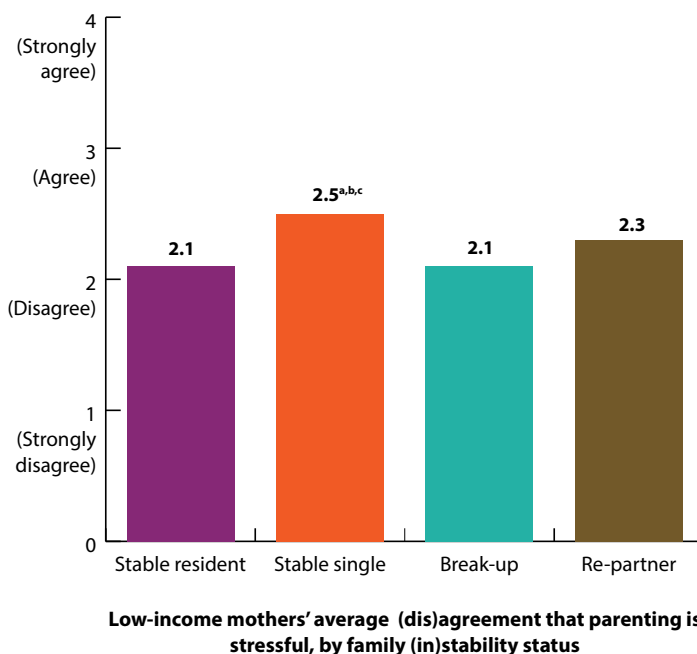
**Figure 5.** Across all groups, low-income mothers also report a similar number of economic stressors.



Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing, 2001-2003

**Mothers in stable single relationships reported higher levels of parenting stress than mothers from any other family instability group (Figure 6).**

**Figure 6.** Stably single mothers report more parenting stress than mothers in other family types, across all racial, ethnic and nativity groups.



Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing, 2001-2003

<sup>a</sup> Indicates significant difference between stable single and stable resident at the  $p=.05$  level.

<sup>b</sup> Indicates significant difference between stable single and break-up at the  $p=.10$  level.

<sup>c</sup> Indicates significant difference between stable single and re-partner at the  $p=.10$  level



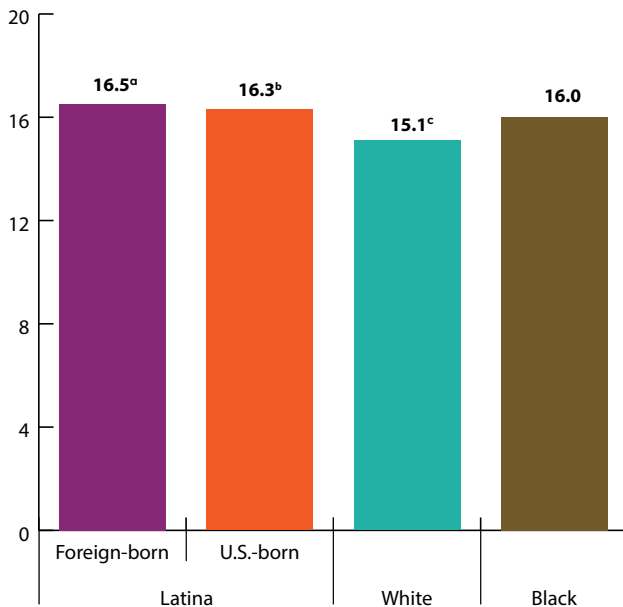
## Mothers' co-parenting and father involvement

**Foreign-born and U.S.-born Hispanic mothers in our sample report higher levels of co-parenting support than their white peers (see Figure 7).**

However, across all groups, mothers in our study generally report receiving support from their partners and feel that they can trust them. Not surprisingly, **stable resident mothers report more co-parenting support than all other groups (Figure 8).**

Foreign-born and U.S.-born Hispanic mothers in our sample report higher levels of co-parenting support than their white peers.

**Figure 7.** Latina mothers report higher levels of co-parenting support from their partner than white mothers.



**Low-income mothers' average report of co-parenting support, by race, ethnicity, and nativity**

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing, 2001-2003

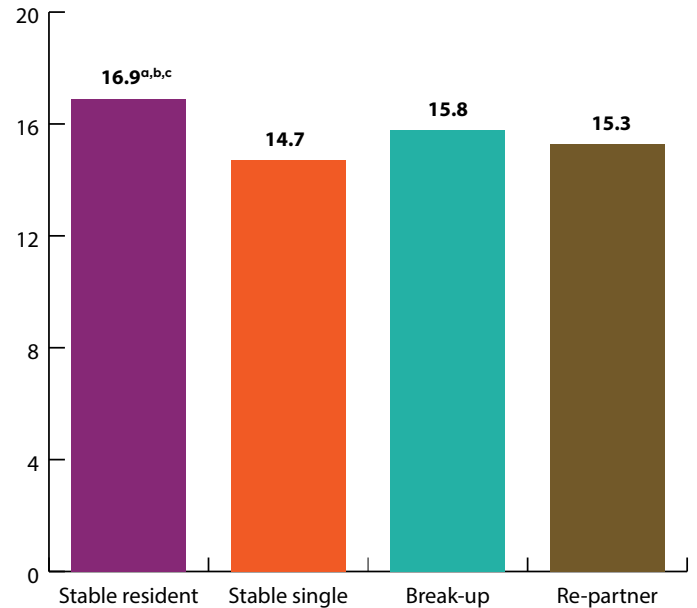
Note: The co-parenting support scale is drawn from 6 items and coded from a low of "6" to a high of "18."

<sup>a</sup> Indicates significant difference between foreign-born Latina and white mothers at the  $p=.05$  level.

<sup>b</sup> Indicates significant difference between U.S.-born Latina and white mothers at the  $p=.01$  level.

<sup>c</sup> Indicates significant difference between white and black mothers at the  $p=.10$  level.

**Figure 8.** Stable resident mothers report higher levels of co-parenting support from their partner than all other mothers, across racial, ethnic, and nativity groups.



**Low-income mothers' average report of co-parenting support, by family (in)stability status**

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing, 2001-2003

Note: The co-parenting support scale is drawn from 6 items and coded from a low of "6" to a high of "18."

<sup>a</sup> Indicates significant difference between stable resident and stable single at the  $p=.01$  level.

<sup>b</sup> Indicates significant difference between stable resident and break up at the  $p=.05$  level.

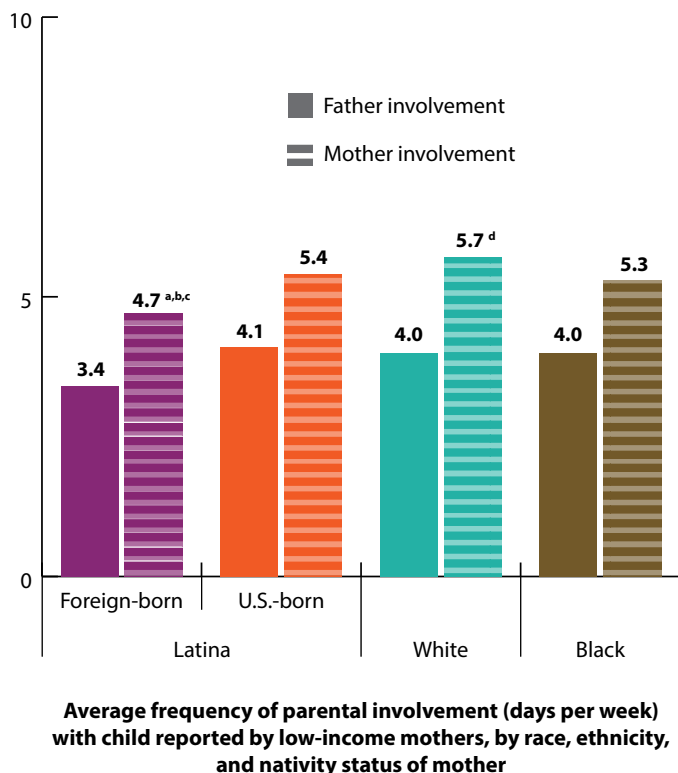
<sup>c</sup> Indicates significant difference between stable resident and re-partner at the  $p=.01$  level.



**U.S.-born Hispanic mothers spend as much time in play, caregiving, and reading activities with their child as their white and black peers, and more time than their foreign-born Hispanic peers.** U.S.-born Latina mothers also report that their child's father spends as much time with the child as white and black mothers, and more time with the child than foreign-born Latina mothers report (see Figure 9). Mothers' time spent with their child does not differ by mothers' family instability status, but mothers' reports of fathers' time with their child does.

**Mothers in stable single relationships report their child's father is significantly less involved in play, caregiving, and reading activities with their child than mothers who experience a break-up and those who are stably residential (see Table 3).**

**Figure 9.** U.S.-born Latina mothers report they and their child's father spend as much time engaged with their children as their white and black counterparts report, and more than their foreign-born Latina counterparts do.



Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing, 2001-2003

<sup>a</sup> Indicates significant difference between foreign-born and U.S.-born Latina mothers at the  $p=.05$  level.

<sup>b</sup> Indicates significant difference between foreign-born Latina and white mothers at the  $p=.01$  level.

<sup>c</sup> Indicates significant difference between foreign-born Latina and black mothers at the  $p=.01$  level.

<sup>d</sup> Indicates significant difference between white and black mothers at the  $p=.05$  level.

<sup>f</sup> We caution against generalizing these findings to same-sex couples.

## Summary and discussion

This brief examines family (in)stability among low-income, urban mothers. Hispanic mothers in our sample, in particular those who are foreign-born, experience relative stability in their family structure during their child's early years, compared to black mothers. Additionally, compared to white, black, and U.S.-born Latina mothers, foreign-born Latina mothers are less likely to re-partner. These findings suggest that low-income Latino children are likely to live in stable families that may offer some protection against the negative effects of poverty.

Low-income, foreign-born Hispanic mothers also report relatively little psychosocial risk (i.e., depression), a major marker of children's maladjustment. This finding is remarkable given their low-income status and stands apart from findings about other low-income mothers, especially white mothers, who are more than 3 times as likely to report depression. By contrast, U.S.-born Latina mothers report levels of psychosocial risk similar to those of low-income white and black mothers. Overall, an important finding is that immigrant Latina mothers seem to have more protective factors (relative family stability and psychosocial well-being) than U.S.-born Latina, white, and black mothers of similar circumstances (low-income and urban). Although it is unclear whether family stability leads to better family functioning and psychosocial well-being or vice versa, we found that being in a stable residential relationship is linked with lower psychosocial risk (e.g., parenting stress), better co-parenting support, and more frequent father involvement. This is a finding that warrants further exploration.

Another important conclusion is that foreign-born and U.S.-born Hispanic mothers report more co-parenting support than low-income white mothers in our sample. Additionally, immigrant Latina mothers report lower levels of involvement with their child and that their child's father is also less involved. Qualitative data show that low-income immigrant parents work long hours and multiple jobs that may take them outside the home for the majority of the day, limiting the time they have to spend time with their children.<sup>13</sup> If this is the case, our findings suggest that compared to other ethnic groups, low-income foreign-born Hispanic mothers (and fathers) may have to choose between providing financial support for their children and spending time with them.<sup>14</sup> Despite more family stability, foreign-born Hispanic mothers may face additional challenges beyond work-family conflict. We do not know the legal status of the foreign-born Hispanic mothers in our sample, but it is likely that some are undocumented and could face additional stressors, such as fear of deportation, compared to U.S.-born Hispanic mothers. This issue needs further examination as research shows that mothers and fathers each make a unique contribution to their children's development.<sup>15,f</sup>

When we examined family functioning by mothers' family (in) stability across all racial, ethnic and nativity status groups, we found that mothers' frequency of involvement with her child does not differ by her level of family (in)stability, but her report



of the frequency of the child's father's involvement does. This is expected because mothers live with their children and are thus presumably available to them on a daily basis, and is consistent with previous research that father involvement is more dependent on his relationship with the child's other parent than is mother involvement.<sup>16</sup>

Although research has shown that early father involvement, such as during the prenatal period, is important for continued father involvement throughout early childhood,<sup>17</sup> other studies have shown that when mothers re-partner, father involvement declines.<sup>18</sup> We found that mothers who are stably single during the first 5 years of the child's life (i.e., mothers who report not being with the baby's father at the birth and who did not move in with a romantic partner by the time the child was 5 years old) report lower levels of biological father-child involvement than mothers who break up with the father during the child's first 5 years. In other words, fathers who lived with the mother and child during the first 5 years are more involved with the child than fathers do not live with the child during this period of time.

Cultural context may offer some potential explanation for the variability in family change across immigrant status. The relative stability of Hispanic mothers, especially for the foreign-born, might reflect strong cultural beliefs about the importance and centrality of the family. Correlational research has shown that the belief in the importance of family cohesion might weaken as families live for longer periods of time in the United States, suggesting that later generations may be less constrained by family loyalty and more willing to break up or re-partner.<sup>19</sup> Future work should

explore whether the relatively low levels of family instability observed here among foreign-born Latina mothers is related to low levels of maternal depressive symptoms and positive co-parenting relationships also observed. An alternative explanation is that families who are not functioning well do not legally divorce or separate because they do not have the support or resources to do so, thus they appear stable but may not necessarily be better off. Clearly, these issues merit further investigation.

This brief contributes to our understanding of family change and stability among U.S. low-income, urban Hispanic, black, and white parents of young children. The dataset we used is unique because it has rich data on mothers, fathers, and children in urban U.S. centers.<sup>9</sup> Our findings suggest that Hispanics experience family processes differently from other groups and that nativity status is an important factor in understanding the diversity in this group. Efforts to improve family stability, such as healthy marriage and family strengthening programs, should take into account that many Latino parents, in particular those who are foreign-born, are already in a stable relationship. For this group, policy and programmatic efforts may be more effective if they focus on improving the quality of those stable relationships and building economic mobility.



<sup>9</sup> We caution against generalizing these findings to rural populations.

## Appendix

**Table 1.** Low-income mothers' co-residence at birth and (in)stability, by race, ethnicity, and nativity status (n = 2737)

	Latina		White (N=320)	Black (N=1488)
	Foreign-born (N=420)	U.S.-born (N=509)		
Co-residence at birth	79% <sup>a,c</sup>	67% <sup>d</sup>	71% <sup>e</sup>	44%
Married at birth	56% <sup>a,c</sup>	34%	39% <sup>e</sup>	18%
Family (in)stability (0-5 years)				
Stable (no change)	65% <sup>c</sup>	47% <sup>d</sup>	47% <sup>#</sup>	29%
Stable resident	63% <sup>c</sup>	43% <sup>d</sup>	44% <sup>e</sup>	19%
Stable single	2% <sup>c</sup>	4% <sup>d</sup>	3% <sup>f##</sup>	10%
Unstable (change)	35% <sup>c</sup>	53% <sup>d</sup>	53%	71%
Break-up	24%	22%	12%	14%
Re-partner	11% <sup>a,b,c</sup>	31% <sup>d</sup>	42%	56%

<sup>a</sup>Indicates significant difference between foreign-born and U.S.-born Latina mothers at the p=.10 level or less.

<sup>b</sup>Indicates significant difference between foreign-born Latina and white mothers at the p=.01 level.

<sup>c</sup>Indicates significant difference between foreign-born Latina and black mothers at the p=.05 level or less.

<sup>d</sup>Indicates significant difference between U.S.-born Latina and black mothers at the p=.10 level or less.

<sup>e</sup>Indicates significant difference between white and black mothers at the p=.10 level or less.

<sup>f</sup>Differences between white and black mothers are not statistically significant due to the relatively small sample size of low-income white, urban mothers.

<sup>##</sup>Significance level should be considered with care given the small cell and relatively small white sample size

**Table 2.** Low-income mothers' psycho-social risk and family functioning, by race, ethnicity, and nativity status (n = 2737)

	Latina				White (N=320)		Black (N=1488)	
	Foreign-born (N=420)		U.S.-born (N=509)					
	%	M(SD)	%	M(SD)	%	M(SD)	%	M(SD)
M depression	5 <sup>a,b,c</sup>		13		17		11	
M parenting stress		2.1(0.1)		2.2(0.1)		2.1(0.1)		2.3(0.1)
M economic stress		0.9(0.3)		1.1(0.2)		1.3(0.2)		0.9(0.1)
Co-parenting		16.5(0.3) <sup>b</sup>		16.3(0.3) <sup>d</sup>		15.1(0.5) <sup>e</sup>		16.0(0.2)
M involvement		4.7(0.2) <sup>a,b,c</sup>		5.4 (0.1)		5.7(0.1) <sup>e</sup>		5.3(0.1)
F involvement		3.4(0.2) <sup>a</sup>		4.1(0.2)		4.0(0.3)		4.0(0.2)

Note: "M" refers "mother" and "F" refers to "father."

<sup>a</sup>Indicates significant difference between foreign-born and U.S.-born Latina mothers at the p=.10 level or less.

<sup>b</sup>Indicates significant difference between foreign-born Latina and white mothers at the p=.05 level or less.

<sup>c</sup>Indicates significant difference between foreign-born Latina and black mothers at the p=.10 level or less.

<sup>d</sup>Indicates significant difference between U.S.-born Latina and white mothers at the p=.01 level.

<sup>e</sup>Indicates significant difference between white and black mothers at the p=.10 level.

**Table 3.** Low-income mothers' psycho-social risk and family functioning, by family type (n = 2737)

	Stable resident (N=530)		Stable single (N=150)#		Break-up (N=339)#		Re-partner (N=870)	
	%	M(SD)	%	M(SD)	%	M(SD)	%	M(SD)
M depression	9		19		6		13	
M parenting stress		2.1(0.1)		2.5(0.2) <sup>a,d,e</sup>		2.1(0.2)		2.2(0.1)
M economic stress		0.9(0.2)		1.3(0.3)		1.4(0.3)		1.0(0.1)
Co-parenting		16.9(0.2) <sup>a,b,c</sup>		14.7(0.7)		15.8(0.4)		15.3(0.5)
M involvement		5.2(0.2)		5.0 (0.3)		5.2(0.2)		5.4(0.1)
F involvement		4.0(0.2) <sup>a</sup>		2.9(0.5) <sup>d</sup>		4.2(0.2)		3.8(0.2)

Note: Numbers do not add to 2737 in the family instability categories due to missing data. "M" refers "mother" and "F" refers to "father."

<sup>a</sup> Indicates significant difference between stable resident and stable single at the p=.10 level or less.

<sup>b</sup> Indicates significant difference between stable resident and break-up at the p=.05 level.

<sup>c</sup> Indicates significant difference between stable resident and re-partner at the p=.01 level.

<sup>d</sup> Indicates significant difference between stable single and break up at the p=.10 level or less.

<sup>e</sup> Indicates significant difference between stable single and re-partner at the p=.10 level.

<sup>#</sup> Significance level should be considered with care given the relatively small stable single and break-up sample size

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## About the Center

The National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families is a hub of research to help programs and policy better serve low-income Hispanics across three priority areas—poverty reduction and economic self-sufficiency, healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood, and early care and education. The Center was established in 2013 by a five-year cooperative agreement from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to Child Trends in partnership with Abt Associates and New York University, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and University of Maryland, College Park. This publication was made possible by Grant Number 90PH0025 from OPRE. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of OPRE, ACF, or HHS.

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