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## CONNECTING PARENTAL MARITAL STATUS WITH TEEN ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An increasing number of Canadian couples are choosing to live together rather than marry. Is this simply a benign cultural shift or does marital status have implications for families and children?

IMFC Research Fellow, Dr. Frank Jones pursues this question, using data from Statistics Canada's *National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*. The research examines children of married and cohabiting parents at age six to eleven and again eight years later at age fourteen to nineteen, measuring responses to forty attitudes and behaviours based on family form.

The study finds that teens with cohabiting parents when younger are more likely to:

- smoke
- sell drugs
- engage in sexual intercourse
- have a lower age of sexual initiation
- have poor relationships with their mom and dad
- have parents who do not get along

The study further explores the hypothesis that children of cohabiting couples are at a three-fold disadvantage because:

1. Cohabiting couples are more likely to be younger and have less educational experience, collectively called *human capital*.
2. Cohabiting couples are less likely to be committed to a long term union.
3. Cohabiting unions are less committed to raising children.

Children of parents with higher levels of human capital including formal and informal education as well as religious affiliation were less likely to use substances, have sexual intercourse and more likely to delay sexual initiation and more likely to report being happier with life.

Children benefit when their parents are in a healthy, stable marriage. Public policy can help stabilize marriages by reducing fiscal stressors and by removing policies that act as disincentives towards marriage. Many of these challenges can be addressed through the tax system, particularly through programs that assist lower income Canadians.

## INTRODUCTION

A growing number of Canadians are foregoing marriage and are choosing to live together. Though many Canadians believe that marriage and cohabitation are the same, a research consensus exists suggesting some major differences: cohabiting relationships are more susceptible to dissolution than marriage, and living together prior to marriage increases the risk of a marriage ending in divorce.<sup>1</sup> As more and more people live together, more children are born into non-married parent families, or raised in a home shared with a parent's partner. The question is, does the marital status of a child's parents influence the child's attitudes and behaviours?

New research by Institute of Marriage and Family Canada Research Fellow, Dr. Frank Jones examines the association between early home environments and teen behaviour eight years later. The study explores forty attitudes and behaviours of teens such as substance use and quality of family relationships, comparing teens who had married parents when younger with teens who had cohabiting parents when younger.<sup>2</sup> The study compares living arrangements of children age six to eleven with behaviours and attitudes eight years later at age fourteen to nineteen using longitudinal data from the *National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*.

Teens in the study who had cohabiting parents as children are more likely to engage in certain risk behaviours. They are more likely to:

- smoke
- sell drugs
- engage in sexual intercourse
- have a lower age of sexual initiation
- have poor relationships with their mom and dad
- have parents who do not get along.<sup>3</sup>

## DATA SOURCE

The study data was extracted from Statistics Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of children and Youth (NLSCY). The survey examines child development from the first year of life to age 17. This study uses data from cycle 1 (1994-1995) and cycle 5 (2002-2003). Please consult the full text research for more information on the data, model estimates and variables.

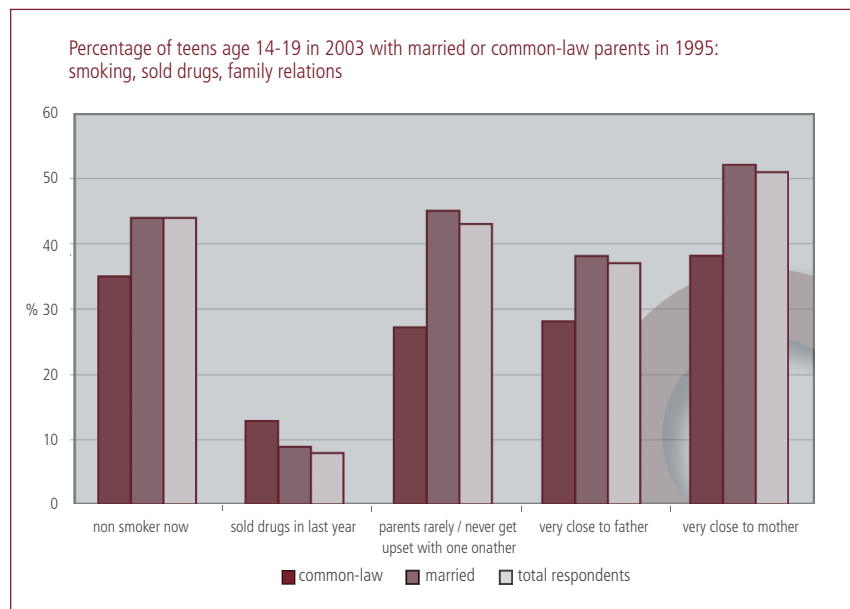
The hypothesis explored in the report is that children of cohabiting couples are at a three-fold disadvantage.

1. Cohabiting couples are more likely to be younger and have less educational experience, collectively called *human capital*.
2. Cohabiting couples are less likely to be committed to a long term union.
3. Cohabiting unions are less committed to raising children.

This does not mean that all children of couples living together will experience disadvantage, but that they are statistically more likely to, than children of married couples.

The second part of the study examines the association between human capital and the forty attitudes and behaviours through regression analysis.

The study concludes by examining the hypotheses regarding cohabiting individuals' commitment to partnership and children. Studying human capital and relational commitment enhances our understanding of how marriage and cohabitation differ and how these differences impact children.



See Appendix for chart A of percentages

## HUMAN CAPITAL

Cohabiting couples are more likely to be younger and have less educational experience than their married counterparts. A 2007 study by Cynthia Osborne and Sara McLanahan found that married women in their study-sample were more likely to be older and more highly educated than cohabiting women living with partners.<sup>4</sup> Rutgers professor emeritus David Popenoe has also noted that cohabiting couples tend to be younger and are more likely to be secular.<sup>5</sup> Harvard scholars David Ellwood and Christopher Jencks argue that unwed childbearing is far less common among college educated women.<sup>6</sup>

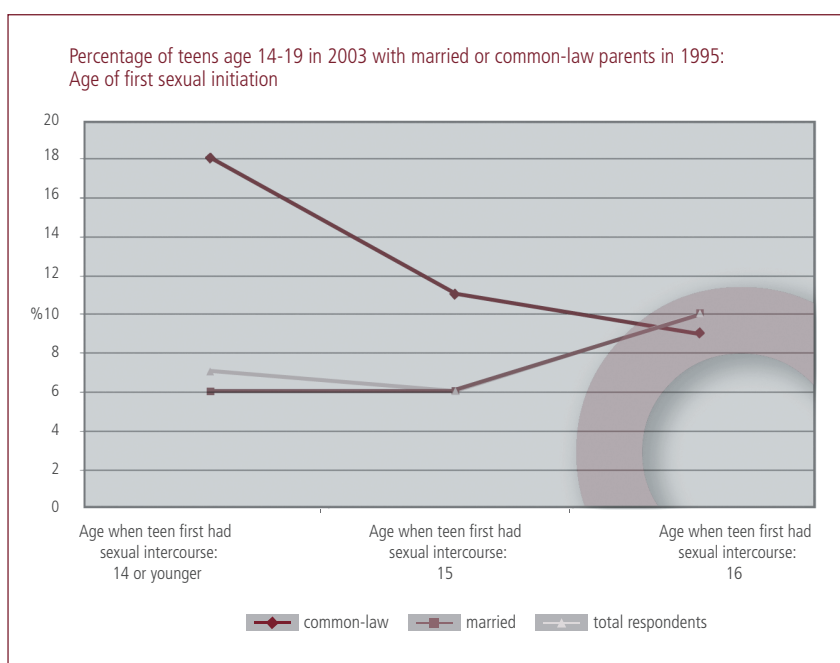
The IMFC study explores the association between the level of human capital of parents and the behaviour and attitudes of their teen children.

The first measure of human capital in this study examines levels of *formal education*. Forty teen behaviours and attitudes were examined based on the level of the parents' educational attainment and the child's junior kindergarten experience irrespective of parental marital status. Consistent with the studies above, married parents in the current study generally had higher levels of education than their cohabiting counterparts.<sup>7</sup> Teens whose parents had higher levels of education were more likely to be non-marijuana users and have friends who did not smoke. These teens were also more likely to be happy with life and were less likely to engage in sexual intercourse, however those who were sexually active, were active at a younger age.<sup>8</sup>

The second form of human capital in the study is the level of *life experience* gained outside the classroom.<sup>9</sup> Life experience includes parental age and behaviours modelled to children, like smoking. It includes time children spend watching television, time spent with friends and the influence of geographic location. The study found that teens with older parents were less likely to smoke and less likely to have friends who used marijuana or drank. These teens, however, were less likely to be happy with life and more likely to have lower quality relationships with their parents.<sup>10</sup>

Children with a parent who smoked had a greater propensity as a teen to get drunk, use drugs and have friends that did the same. They were also more likely to sell drugs, be dissatisfied with how they looked, be unhappy about life and to have had contemplated suicide.<sup>11</sup>

Regional differences were also noted in the sample. When compared to their counterparts in Ontario, teens in Quebec had a higher propensity to use marijuana, smoke and have friends who smoked, and have had sexual intercourse. Quebec teens were more likely to anger easily and feel more distant in their relationship



See Appendix for chart B of percentages

with their parents. These teens were more likely to have unmarried parents as children and less likely to have witnessed their parents marry by their teen years. Despite some of the negative associations, Quebec teens reported being happier than Ontario teens and more inclined to help others.<sup>12</sup>

The final form of educational experience considered under human capital is the level of *informal instruction*.<sup>13</sup> This includes optional, non-diploma or certificate forms of education and training including religious instruction, Sunday school, lectures and performing arts. Informal instruction, in particular church attendance, was associated with reduced propensity towards drug and alcohol use, selling drugs, sexual intercourse and engaging in damaging property. Teens who attended church were more likely to report being happy with life and having married parents who got along. In families where the main parent attended church during the teen's childhood, the study found lower propensities among teens to get drunk, use drugs and have friends who did the same. These teens are more likely to have been questioned by police about something they may have done.<sup>14</sup>

As the other studies referenced above demonstrate, married couples are more likely to possess higher levels of education than couples who live together. The current study demonstrates an association between parental human capital which includes educational attainment, and the propensity of children towards certain high risk behaviours.

### COHABITATION AND UNION STABILITY

Children of couples living together may be at a second disadvantage because their parents are less likely to commit to a long-term union. One study found unwed parents experience significantly more partner changes. This increases the stress on children, leading to modest increases in behavioural problems.<sup>15</sup> An American study found that children of cohabiting relationships are five times more likely than children of married parents to experience a parental split.<sup>16</sup> British researchers suggest that nearly half of cohabiting parents in the U.K. split before the child's fifth birthday.<sup>17</sup> Other studies have found correlations between multi-partner change and early sexual initiation among boys and early childbearing among girls.<sup>18</sup>

Our study collected information on home environments when the participants were six to eleven years old in 1995. Nearly 49 percent of children of cohabiting parents lived with only one biological parent in the home.<sup>19</sup> During the same period, 94 percent of two-parent married families had both biological parents in the home.<sup>20</sup> Children of married parents are more likely to live with both biological parents, suggesting that children of cohabiting parents in our study may have been more likely to have experienced a partner change or lived with an adult who was not a biological parent.

### COHABITATION AND COMMITMENT TO CHILDREN

Finally, cohabiting couples' relational commitment to children may be weaker than married parents. Union dissolution and increased partner change may contribute to this as one partner may have no biological connection to children living in the home. Similarly, a biological parent not living in the home may have less contact with their offspring. In another study, American sociologist Bradford Wilcox reports that married fathers are more likely to demonstrate affection to their wives and families than cohabiting men.<sup>21</sup>

To test this hypothesis, the study examined the reported perceptions of expressed love, support and discipline. Many indicators showed little notable differences with a couple of exceptions. Married parents were more likely to report in 1995 that they had little trouble managing their children or with following through on discipline than their cohabiting counterparts.<sup>22</sup> Children of married parents were also less likely to be repeatedly disciplined for the same behaviour.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, cohabiting parents reported spending more time with their children than married parents. One explanation is that married parents in the sample were more likely to work fulltime, work weekends and have more children resulting in less time spent per child.<sup>24</sup>

### DISCUSSION

This study examines the influence of early home environments on teen behaviour eight years later. The study examines forty attitudes and behaviours, comparing teens of cohabiting parents with teens of married parents, eight years earlier. With few exceptions, the data shows teens who had cohabiting parents when younger demonstrated greater propensity towards several risk behaviours. In particular, these teens were more likely to smoke, sell drugs, engage in sexual intercourse and initiated sexual intercourse at an earlier age. These teens were less likely to have a good relationship with parents and more likely to have parents who didn't get along.

The study also examines the association between human capital in the form of education and teen attitudes and behaviours. The data shows higher levels of human capital are generally associated with lower propensities towards risk behaviours with few exceptions. Teens from backgrounds with higher levels of human capital generally reported being more happy with their lives.

Readers are cautioned against interpreting the association between family form in 1995 and teen behaviours and attitudes eight years later as causal. However, there is a stronger argument for causation in the regression results. This study contributes to the body of research demonstrating the significant differences between marriage and cohabitation, particularly for children and teens. As cohabitation rates rise, Canadians should not assume that cohabitation is the same as marriage. Policy makers should weigh the social benefits of marriage for children when considering family policies.

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The attitudes and behaviours associated with family form affect public policy, whether it is prevention programs or services addressing social ills. Changes in family structure such as divorce and unwed childbearing have a fiscal consequence in addition to the emotional and psychological costs. An American study reports that family breakdown costs taxpayers in that country (U.S.) \$ 112 billion a year.<sup>25</sup> That's an estimated \$809.28 per tax file. Government must be concerned with family breakdown.

Public policy can help stabilize families and marriages by reducing fiscal stressors that make forming married families difficult and by removing policies that act as disincentives towards marriage. One policy option is to let families keep more of their earnings by introducing a family taxation model rather than a system focused on individual taxpayers. Nine industrial countries incorporate family taxation models.<sup>26</sup> This reduces the tax burden, providing families with greater autonomy.

Marriage is a poverty fighter—it offers many social benefits to adults and children and assisting the marriages of low-income Canadians is in society's best interest. A 2005 Canadian study found that a low income mother who marries increases her chances of exiting poverty in one year from 29 percent to 84 percent.<sup>27</sup> Canada's Working Income Tax Benefit introduced in the 2007 tax year compensates low income working families. However, the program does not recognize the increase expense of an additional adult in the home in two parent families as compared with a single-parent family. The Canadian system should recognize this through a marriage bonus similar to the Earned Income Tax Credit in the United States.<sup>28</sup>

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An intriguing idea in the United States is the *Healthy Marriage Initiative* that offers voluntary counselling programs for low-income couples in addition to a publicity campaign. As the program is only a few years old, the long term success of the program is currently unknown.<sup>29</sup>

Cohabitation and marriage are different and do not provide the same benefits to children. Public policy should stabilize families and marriages by reducing fiscal burdens and removing disincentives for marriage. These options are fiscally responsible and would enhance the lives of Canadians.

The full research can be viewed at <http://www.ccri.ca/rcm44.pdf>



**APPENDIX: CHARTS**

**CHART A**

Percentage of teens age 14-19 in 2003 with married or common-law parents in 1995:  
smoking, sold drugs in past year, family relations

Attitude / Behaviour	Common-law	Married	Total Respondents
Non smoker now	35%	44%	44%
Sold drugs in the past year	13%	8%	8%
Parents rarely/never get upset with one another	27%	45%	43%
Very close to father	28%	38%	37%
Very close to mother	38%	52%	51%

**CHART B**

Percentage of teens age 14-19 in 2003 with married or common-law parents in 1995:  
Age of first sexual initiation

Age of first Sexual intercourse	Common-law	Married	Total Respondents
Age 14 or younger	18%	6%	7%
Age 15	11%	6%	6%
Age 16	9%	10%	10%

## LIST OF TEEN BEHAVIOURS ANALYZED IN REGRESSION TABLES

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. Teen has smoked                        | 21. I get angry easily: 1-4 (1=mostly true)        |
| 2. Frequency of drinking alcohol          | 22. I like doing things for others: 1-4            |
| 3. Teen smokes now                        | 23. I get upset easily: 1-4 (1=mostly true)        |
| 4. Now drinks alcohol                     | 24. I like the way I look: 1-5 (1= false...5=true) |
| 5. Frequency of marijuana use past year   | 25. Happy with life: 1-5=strongly agree            |
| 6. Frequency of LSD/acid use past year    | 26. Relationship with mother: 1-3= very close      |
| 7. Teen uses marijuana now                | 27. Next 5 yrs look good: 1-4=strongly agree       |
| 8. Used LSD/acid past year                | 28. Relationship with father: 1-3= very close      |
| 9. Has close friend who has smoked        | 29. Has had a boy/girl friend                      |
| 10. Has close friend who tried marijuana  | 30. Degree of closeness to mother and father       |
| 11. Has close friend who drunk alcohol    | 31. One known committed suicide                    |
| 12. Has friend who has tried other drugs  | 32. BMI, slim to obese                             |
| 13. Times drunk past year                 | 33. Sometimes birth control not used               |
| 14. Times damaged things past year        | 34. Age when first had sex                         |
| 15. Has had sexual intercourse            | 35. Months with boy/girl friend                    |
| 16. Damaged or destroyed things past year | 36. Frequency of seeing boy/girl friend            |
| 17. Times sold drugs past year            | 37. Parents married 2003                           |
| 18. Times attempted suicide               | 38. Parents separated/divorced 2003                |
| 19. Times questioned by police            | 39. Parents cohabit 2003                           |
| 20. Seriously considered suicide          | 40. Parents upset with one another: 1 to 4= often  |

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE RESEARCH

Dr. Frank Jones is a former Senior Analyst with Statistics Canada, Adjunct Professor of Economic Science, Université d'Ottawa, Protestant Lay Chaplain at the University of Ottawa, and current Director of Research of the Christian Commitment Research Institute, Research Fellow of the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, and member of the Advisory Council on Research of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. Frank has a Ph.D. (Economics, 1975) from McMaster University, Hamilton; and a B.A. (Geography and History) from Carleton University, Ottawa. His most recent articles and monographs appear at [www.CCRI.ca](http://www.CCRI.ca)

## Endnotes:

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- 2 Jones, F. (2008) *Canadian children with cohabiting and married parents in 1995: contrasts in family, parent, child/teen and community functioning in 1995 and in 2003*. Ottawa: Christian Commitment Research Institute conducted for the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 4 Osborne, C., McLanahan, S. (2007, November) Partnership instability and child well-being. *Journal of Marriage and Family* vol. 69, no. 4, p. 1065.
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- 6 Ellwood, D. and Jencks, C. (2002, October) *The spread of single-parent families in the United States since 1960*. Cambridge: John F. Kennedy School of Government.  
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- 7 Jones, p. 40.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.
- 9 "Life experience" is labelled "informal education" by Dr. Jones in the expanded study. It has been relabelled here for clarification.
- 10 Jones, p.35.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 "Informal instruction" is labelled "non-formal education" by Dr. Jones in the expanded study. It has been relabelled here for clarification.
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- 15 Osborne and McLanahan, p. 1079.
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- 17 *The State of the Nation Report: Fractured Families*. (2006) The Social Policy Justice Group, p.13.
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- 19 Jones, table 1c (4), p. 178.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 W. Bradford Wilcox, et al. (2005) *Why Marriage Matters. Twenty-Six conclusions from the social sciences*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Institute for American Values, p. 2.
- 22 Jones, table 1c (7-8), pp. 181-182.
- 23 *Ibid.*, table 1c (8), p. 182.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 25 Scafidi, B. (2008) *The taxpayer cost of divorce and unwed child bearing: First-ever estimates for the nation and for all fifty states*. New York: Institute for American Values.  
The per tax file estimate was calculated by Mitchell using the number of federal income tax filings during the 2006 tax year as reported by the Internal Revenue Service. Files may represent more than one taxpayer. The estimate does not account for the fact that taxpayers cost may vary from state to state.
- 26 Mintz, J. (2008) Taxing families: Does the system need an overhaul? *IMFC Review*. Ottawa: The Institute of Marriage and Family, p.17.
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- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

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