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“The Effects of Building Strong Families: A Healthy Marriage and Relationship Skills Education Program for Unmarried Parents”

The announcement that promoting healthy marriages would be a major social policy goal of the Bush II administration was met with a great deal of skepticism from those who believed that federal policy should focus on improving employment prospects of low-income individuals, not their marital prospects. On the other hand, a large literature within psychology suggested that certain interventions could improve the relationship quality between couples. And, an emerging finding from the Fragile Families study suggested that low-income couples desired marriage, although relatively few attained that status in years following a nonmarital birth.

This article presents the first evidence as to whether or not this major shift in antipoverty policy fulfilled its intended outcomes. Overall, Building Strong Families (BSF) was shown to have no improvement in couples’ relationships or the likelihood that they married.

The data used in this article come from a large-scale, federally funded random assignment evaluation of BSF, an intervention designed to assist unmarried couples who recently became parents, or were about to become parents, improve their relationships and ultimately get married. The article goes beyond assessing these impacts and provides detailed information about the workings of each of the programs operating in the eight BSF sites, providing an opportunity to better explain mechanisms driving differences in outcomes. The authors also considered other very important outcomes, such as experiences of partner violence.

Although the study design used a random assignment, the authors used regression models to account for small initial differences between treatment and control groups as well as to account for nonresponse to the survey fielded 15 months after the random assignment. Their careful analytic techniques, coupled with a detailed presentation of their findings, are just two of the numerous strengths of this very policy-relevant article.

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