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Podcast Transcript for “Vetting and Letting: Cohabiting Stepfamily Formation for Low-Income Black Families”

Featuring [Megan Reid](#)

Hosted by Dave Chancellor

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[Chancellor] Hello, you're listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor.

For this, our April 2016 podcast, we talked with Megan Reid, who is a National Poverty Fellow at the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation at the Administration for Children and Families in the federal Department of Health and Human Services. IRP administers the National Poverty Fellows program as a federal government-university partnership to build the capacity of researchers to do high-quality, policy-relevant research on poverty and inequality in the United States and Reid is in the second cohort of fellows.

I talked with Reid when she visited IRP in February of this year and gave a talk about cohabiting stepfamily formation among African Americans. Reid says we know that black Americans have the highest cohabitation rate compared to other racial and ethnic groups but there hasn't been a lot of research looking at how cohabitations are similar or different for different subpopulations within this group.

[Reid] There's kind of a surprising lack of research on the topic of cohabiting relationship formation. There have been a few studies that have kind of identified the “sliding” model, meaning that individuals just kind of end up living together, there's not a lot of deliberation, people just kind of move into these relationships without really thinking about the

consequences or thinking too much in advance about what it might mean. But these studies, they're kind of few and far between...

[Chancellor] For Reid's study, she was asking two main questions. The first was how do cohabiting relationships form in the low-income black population and second, how do children and child well-being factor into decisions about these relationships?

[Reid] Cohabiting relationships and cohabiting step families are becoming increasingly common among all population groups, but especially among the low-income black population. So I was kind of curious -- are their experiences consistent with what prior research has found or might there be something different going on? And the role of children in these relationships is kind of surprisingly absent from a lot of prior work so I wanted to also think about how does having children or thinking about child well-being kind of shape their decisions to kind of enter into cohabiting relationships and select partners.

[Chancellor] This study was a qualitative study and the researchers and field workers talked with a fairly specific population of individuals.

[Reid] These are mothers of adolescents and their current cohabiting partner who are not the biological father of their children. So what we were really interested in in this study was looking at kind of a cohabiting stepfather in the role of that person in the household and also at child development -- that wasn't my area but we worked with a team of psychologists up at the University of Vermont so they were kind of interested -- you know, there's increasing attention to understand the role of fathers and families which was kind of neglected in earlier family research. And this is something that's increasingly common, especially in the low income black population. These children already face a lot of disadvantage and there was some interest in whether and how these men become involved in the houses, and become involved in the children's lives, whether they have a positive or negative impact. And this was done in New York City, so everybody who was in the study had to have an adolescent child in the household, had to be in a low-income neighborhood, had to be themselves low-income, and identify as black.

[Chancellor] In trying to learn more about how these cohabiting relationships formed and how children factored into relationship decisions, Reid built on the sliding model of cohabiting union formation which, as she previously noted, sees these relationships being formed fairly casually without much planning. But, Reid found that, at least among the group she interviewed, there was more to what looked like sliding than what the previous research had described.

[Reid] I found what I called this vetting and letting process that I identified. The letting part, the second part is kind of similar to sliding, so I found that individuals did kind of... when it came to the moment of actually coresiding and moving in together, they were somewhat haphazard or chaotic and they'd say, oh, you've been here for a while, maybe you can stay, so that kind of confirmed this sliding thing. But what I found based on a further and deeper analysis was that there was more going on prior to that moment and that these women were really vetting their potential partners for how they would serve as a parent, whether they were interested in the child in general, in children in general.

[Chancellor] Further, Reid found that there was often consultation with the adolescent children in the household, focused on whether the man in question would be a good member of the household and if the child liked the man, as part of this deliberative process of "vetting" the partner before he moved in. Reid used the experience of one couple, who she called Tiffany and Lamar, to illustrate how the process of seeking the opinions of older children fit into the "vetting and letting" model.

[Reid] Tiffany described how she came to cohabit with Lamar and she said "Well, we discussed it. He didn't just move in, he moved in slowly. He didn't just pack up and leave and move in, it was like, you know, maybe one week he'll stay the whole week and he'll be like, I'm gonna go home. And then eventually, slowly but surely, he started moving in, bringing all of his clothes and stuff." And so I asked her -- she mentioned having a discussion with him -- after you had that discussion about potentially moving in and she said, "yeah, after. I think he didn't just want to move in because I had the three boys and it was just like a slow process." I asked her why she thought this was a slow process and she said "They was so used to it just being us, I actually had to sit down and converse with them two [meaning her older sons] about him. They was like 'he's cool, he's cool, he can move in' and I said 'ok, I wish I would have known that before and we wouldn't have waited so long.'" So, in this kind of example here, like other mothers, Tiffany explained that her child's approval was kind of an important factor in whether she would eventually kind of cohabit with her partner.

[Chancellor] In addition to seeking the opinions of older children, Reid found that determining a partner's interest in children and coparenting was an important part of the vetting process. To illustrate this, Reid talked about another couple, Janet and her partner, Marvin. In her interview, Janet said that Marvin expressed genuine interest in her children early on in the dating process.

[Reid] And this led her to want to date him and eventually let him move in when it worked out for their relationship. So, Janet explained the kind of conversation she had when she first met

Marvin and she said he would ask, 'let me hear more about your kids, what do your kids like to do? What are their interests? What are their goals? What are their hobbies? And that really attracted me to him because most of these guys are just trying to get in your pants and they don't care about the kids. And me, I'm the type like if my kids don't like you, I don't like you.'" So I think that's a good example of really placing the kids and concern about how the kids feel about adding this other person to the family as something that was kind of central in their relationship formation process.

[Chancellor] Reid says that one implication she takes from her findings is that cohabiting relationships mean different things to different populations of people.

[Reid] We know from this prior research I mentioned before about sliding into relationships -- that was conducted with primarily middle and working class families -- so there's this model of sliding that's kind of been universally applied to cohabiting relationships. I think the value of identifying this vetting and letting process is that there are other ways that individuals are thinking about and forming cohabiting relationships. And, as cohabitation becomes more common, I think it's becoming more varied. Different populations experience cohabitation in very different ways and it may have different meanings. So, in my study, it wasn't comparative, I can't compare directly what participants said, but when I kind of take it together with this sliding research, I think assuming that there's not any kind of deliberation or consideration about the consequences of a cohabiting relationship, might be selling some cohabiting relationships short.

[Chancellor] And the questions that women ask as part of the vetting process push back on some of the perceptions that are held about the partnering practices of low-income women.

[Reid] So, I think it might kind of do individuals in this population kind of a disservice to think to cohabitation only as a slide. Women, especially low income black mothers are often stigmatized for their partnering behaviors and for their parenting behaviors and low marriage is something that's often cited as a moral failing or something of that nature and I think that identifying this vetting process is something that kind of pushes back to that and says, at least the mothers I talked to (not everyone in the population, just like not everyone in any population does something), but these mothers are really taking their time, being considerate, thinking about the consequences and really concerned and trying to protect their children.

[Chancellor] Reid says that having a better understanding of cohabitation and of how cohabiting relationships form is important, especially when we think policy options related to, for example, marriage and relationship education programs.

[Reid] In terms of this kind of continued government focus on healthy marriage and relationship education programs, it's something that I certainly see value in, I think especially individuals who are in poverty and otherwise disadvantaged face a lot of stressors on their relationship and on all areas of their life, but I do think a focus on marriage specifically -- and this is something that continues to come up in recommendations, really from both sides of the aisle, there's a lot of seeming bipartisan support for marriage as, in some cases, a solution to poverty and something we should potentially encourage and facilitate among low income people. I think this research on cohabitation and the kind of larger project in general really shows that might not necessarily be the most applicable to the lived experiences of individuals who are impoverished. So, with the sample I saw, these women really seemed to think carefully about who their partners would be, what he might bring to the family, how the child might be involved with the partner, things like that. Child wellbeing being central to their thinking, so I think this suggests there might be kind of a mismatch between the lived experiences and relationships that individuals are having in the low income population compared to this policy focus on marriage. And I also think that this focus on cohabitation being kind of one kind of relationship might do a disservice to individuals, I mean, in a lot of ways, these relationships kind of sounded like what we might think of as a marriage with other populations. So I think it's just really important to be culturally sensitive and also population sensitive in terms of thinking about partnering preferences and patterns and not necessarily think there's kind of a one size fits all approach to supporting these types of individuals.

[Chancellor] Reid says developing a better understanding of how cohabiting relationships form is all the more important because of how big a part of the U.S. relationship landscape cohabitation has become.

[Reid] It's so common now, over half of all adults in the U.S. will have a cohabiting relationship at some point in their life. I think that as it becomes more common, there should be a lot more attention to the nuances of cohabitation and there shouldn't necessarily be an assumption that it's just necessarily one kind of relationship or that it means the same thing to everyone. Of course, marriages can be different across different groups, but we kind of have a general social understanding of what marriage is, what it means, there are kind of some norms and processes associated with it that we kind of know. And cohabitation, that's less clear and I think there should be continued research focus on that, especially looking at different subpopulations, things like parents vs. non parents, cohabitation might mean something very different. Or being low income as opposed to being middle class, there's certainly financial considerations when you're partnering and co-residing, so just kind of teasing out that difference that cohabitation might have among different populations might be important going forward.

[Chancellor] Thanks to Megan Reid for sharing her work with us. You've been listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.