



Family Structure and Child Development

Rachel Dunifon

Cornell University

Department of Policy Analysis & Management

red26@cornell.edu

www.parenting.cit.cornell.edu



Why should we care about family structure??

- Because most children do not live in “traditional” two-parent families
- To better understand the circumstances and needs of families with whom you work
- Welfare reform reauthorization: \$300 million for “Healthy Marriages”
 - Based in part on the assumption that increasing marriage will benefit children



Research Questions

- How does growing up in different types of family structures influence children?
 - Married-parent
 - Single-parent
 - Cohabiting-parent
- Do these effects differ by race?
- Does living with a grandparent help if one parent is missing?



Outline of Talk

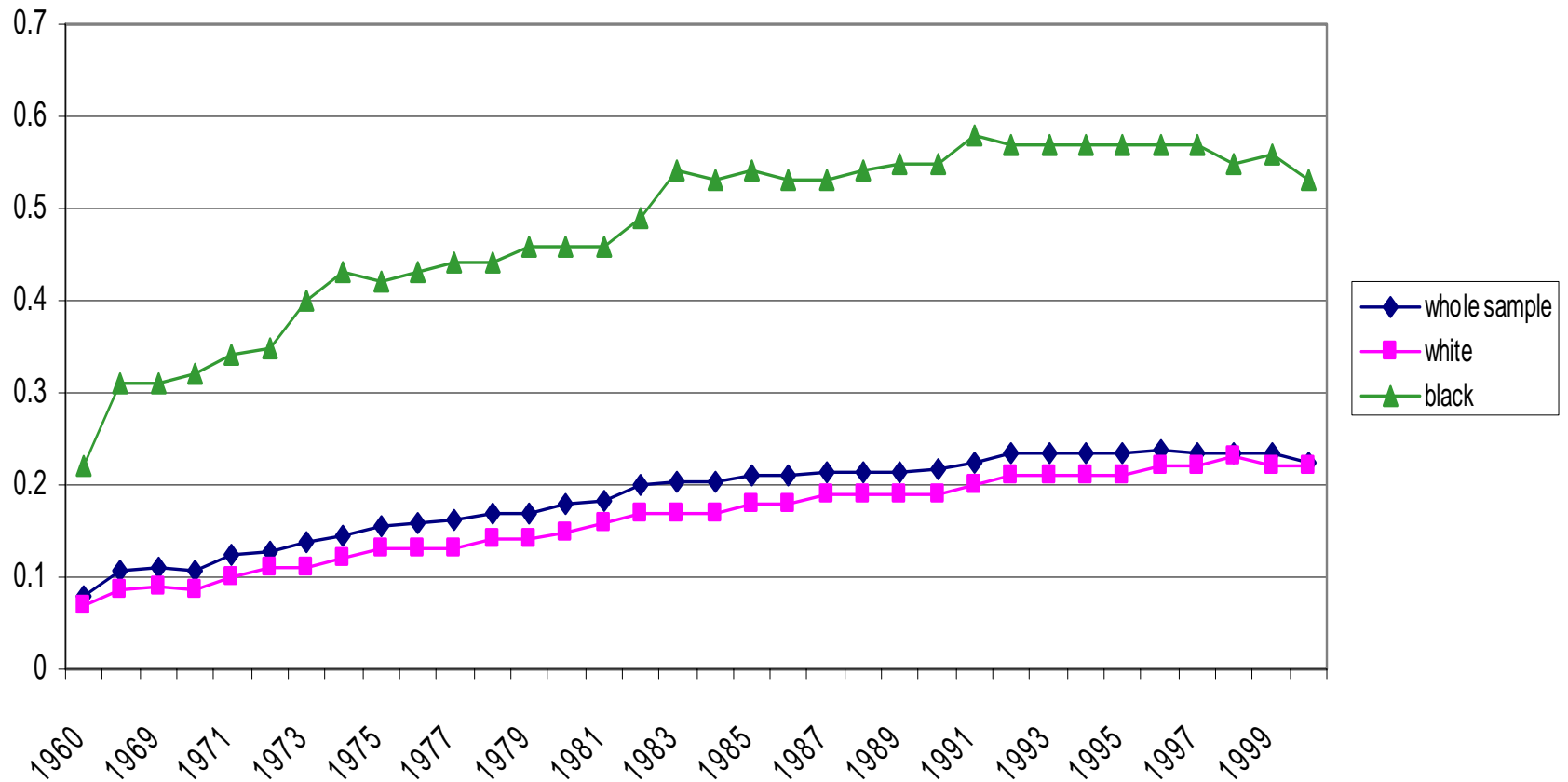
- Trends and previous research on single-parenthood, cohabitation, and grandparents
- Presentation of my research
- Conclusions, discussion and questions



Background

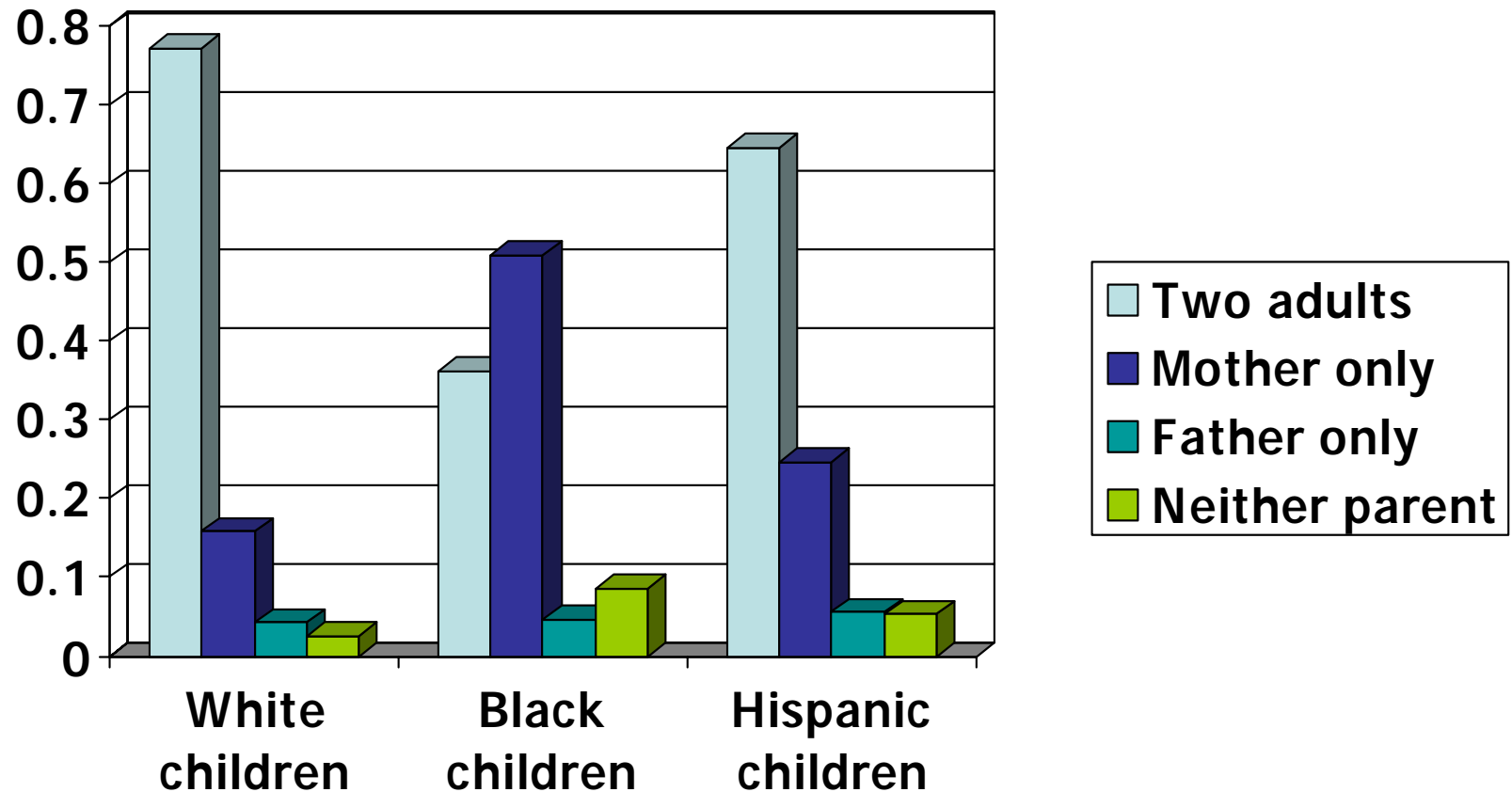
- Rise in single-parenthood and cohabitation
 - across all racial groups

Percent children living with a single parent



(U.S. Census Bureau)

Children's Living Arrangements, 2003



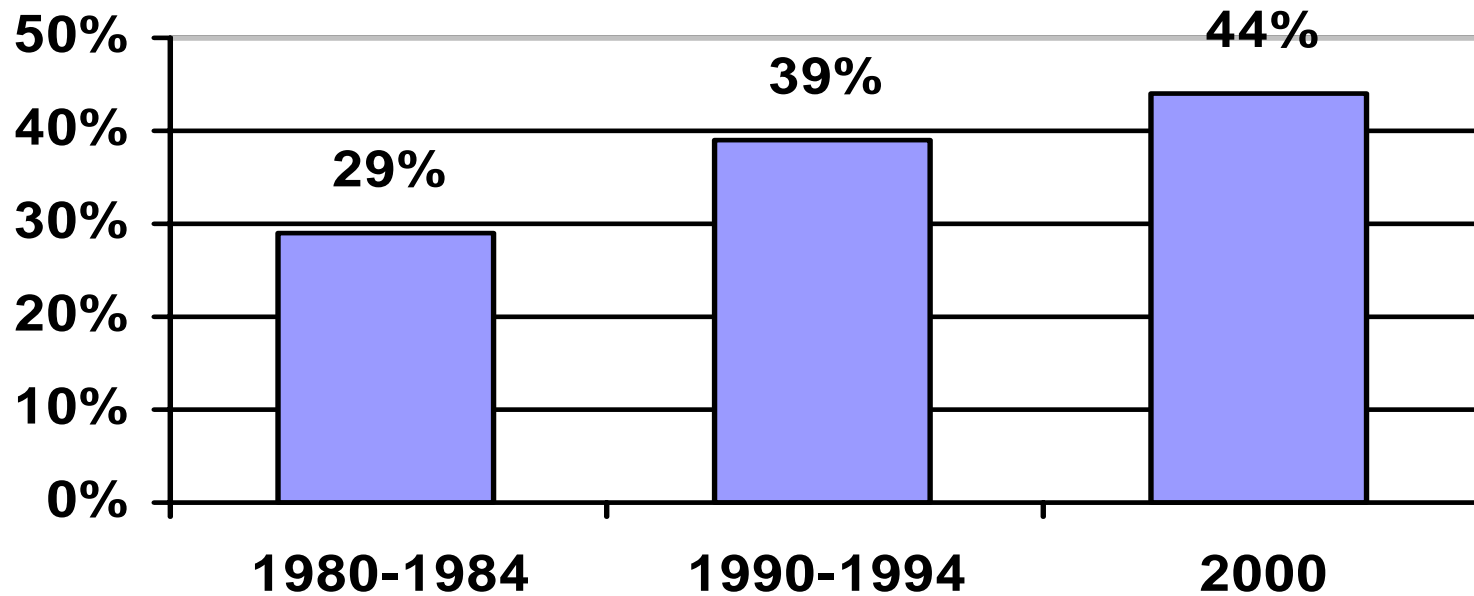
(U.S. Census Bureau)



Single-Parenthood and Cohabitation

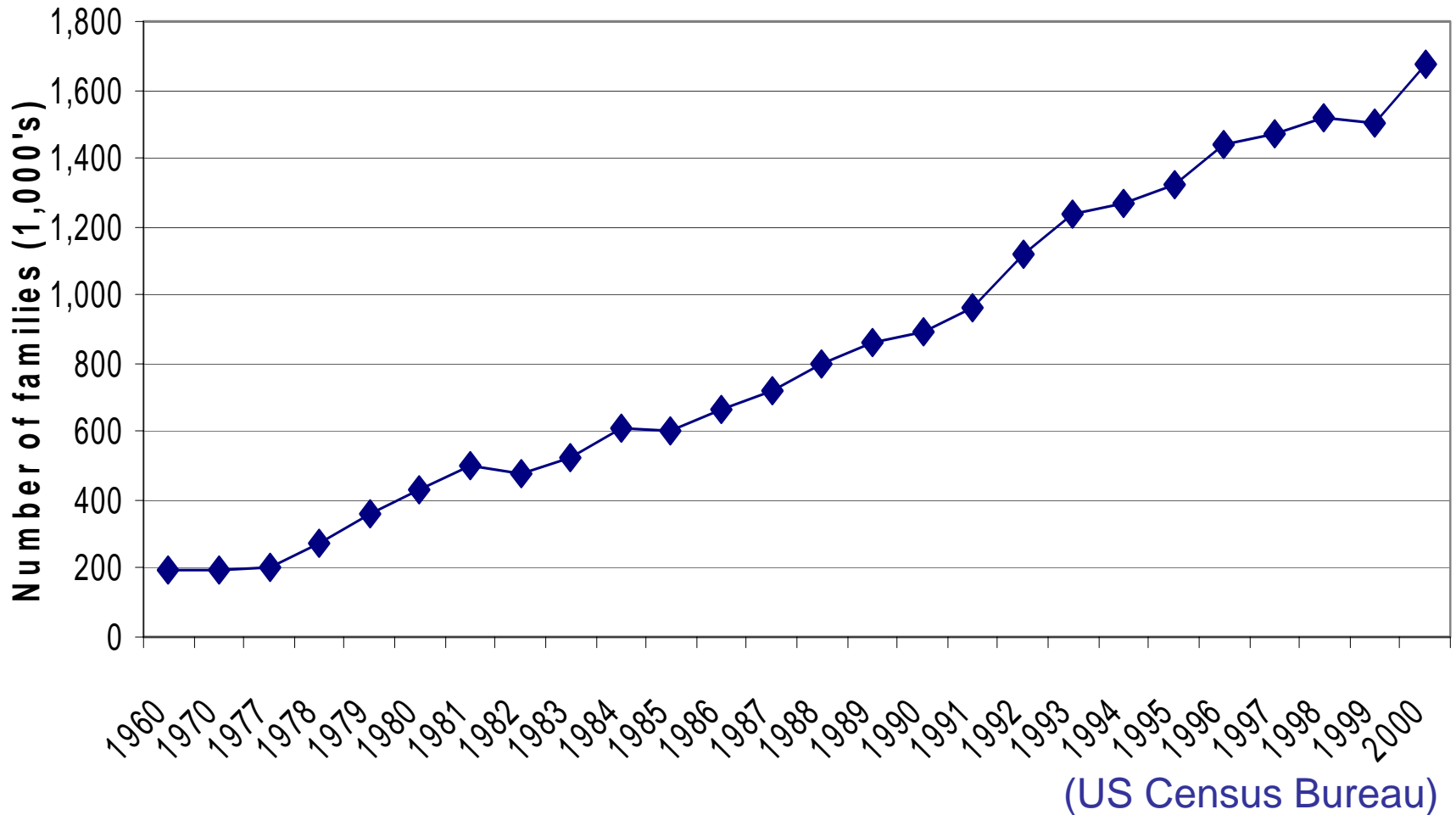
- It is estimated that 13% of all “single parents” are actually cohabiting with other adults (Manning and Lichter, 1996)

Percentage of all Unmarried Births to Cohabiting Parents

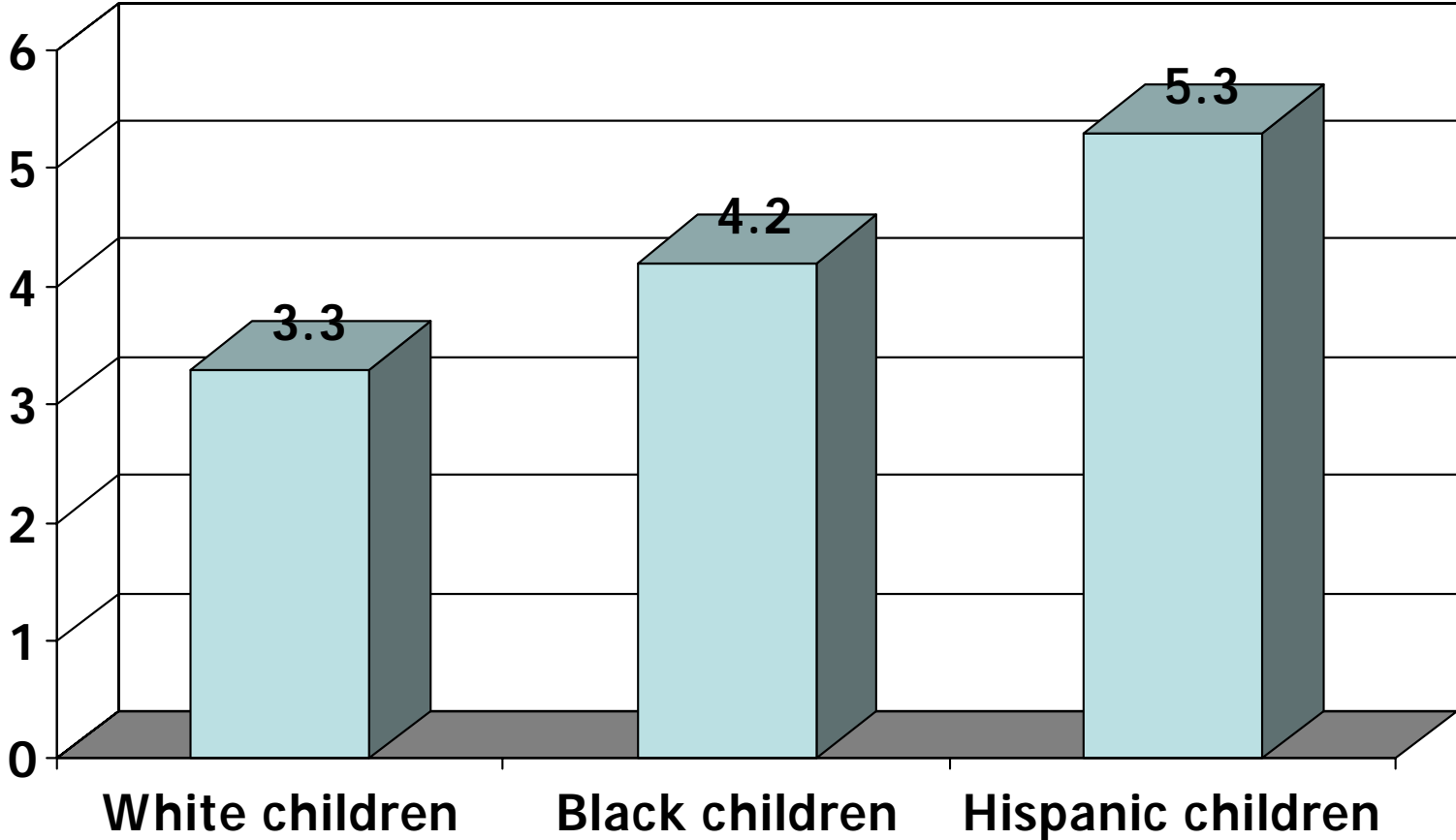


(Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Fragile Families Brief, 2000)

Number of Cohabiting Families with Children under age 15



Percentage of Children Living in a Cohabiting household, 2003



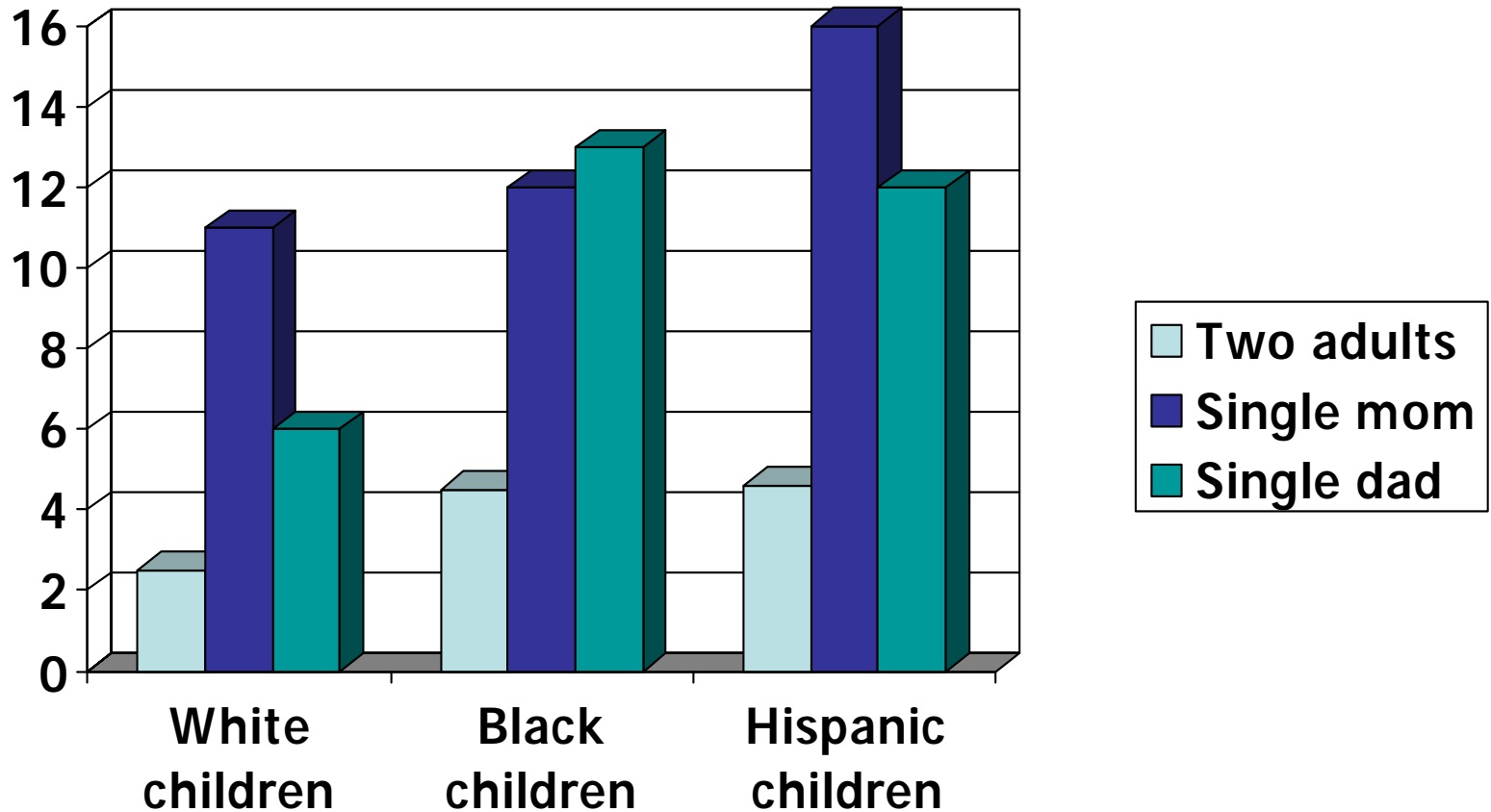
(U.S. Census Bureau)



Single-parenthood and Grandparents

- 14% of children living with a single parent also have a grandparent in the household (U.S. Census Bureau)
- The percentage of children living with a grandparent has increased in recent years

Percentage of children with at least one grandparent in the household, 2003



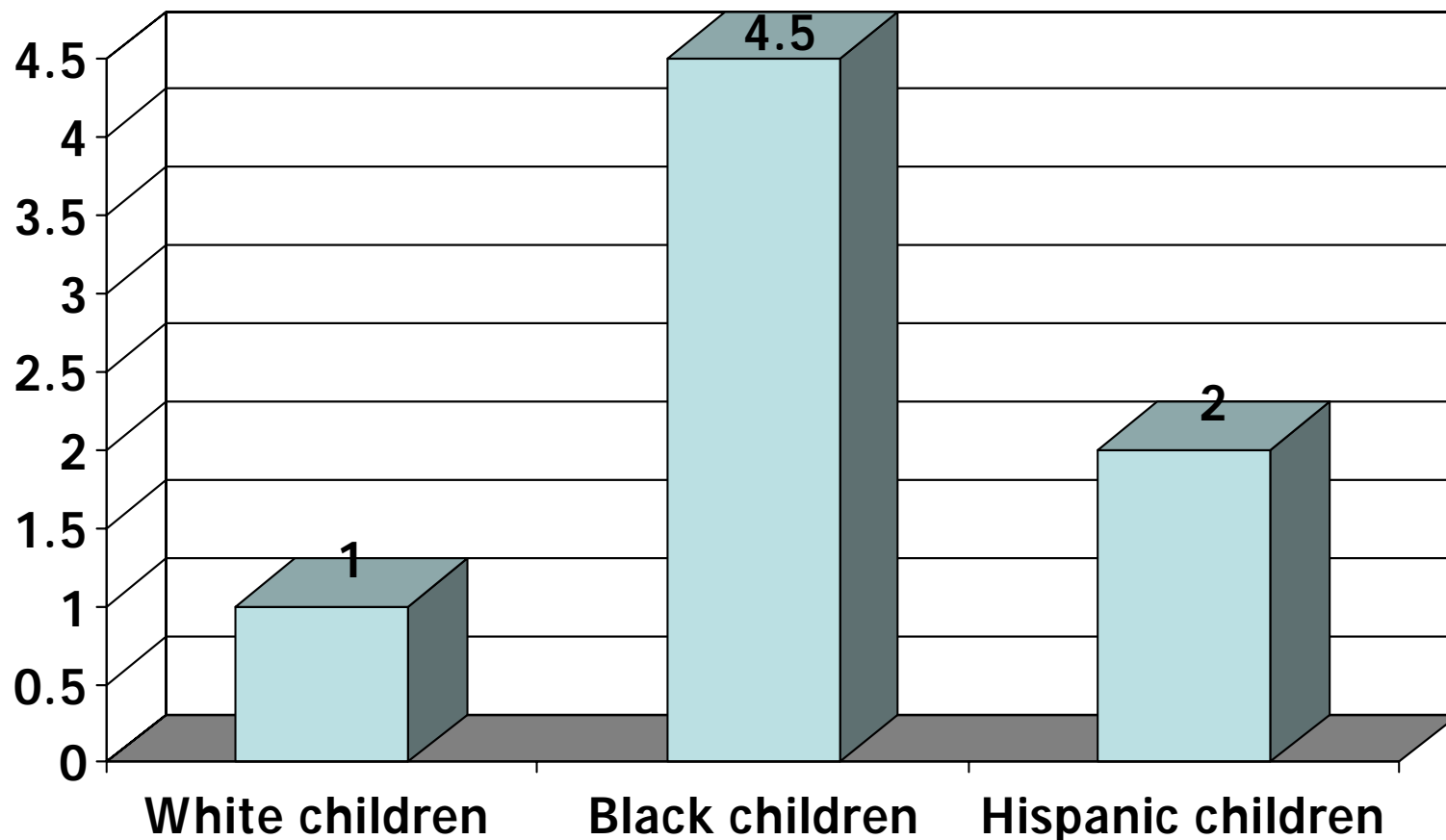
(U.S. Census Bureau)



Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

- The percentage of grandparents raising their grandchildren has increased from 1.4% in 1970 to 1.8% in 2003 (Bryson and Casper, 1999; U.S. Census Bureau)

Percentage of children being raised by grandparent, 2003



(U.S. Census Bureau)



Summary

- There has been an increase in single-parenthood, cohabitation, grandparent coresidence, and grandparents raising grandchildren
- Many “single” parents are actually living with a partner or the child’s grandparent
- How does this affect children?



Research: Single Parenthood

- Associated with undesirable outcomes among children: more behavior problems, higher rates of teenage pregnancy, and lower academic achievement (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994)
- This does not mean that living in a single-parent family *CAUSES* these outcomes
 - Single- and married-parent families differ from each other in many ways: income, maternal depression, parenting.
 - Many children from single-parent families are doing well.



Research: Cohabitation

- Cohabiting partner may be biological father, or (if child is older) a step-father
- Less consensus about influence of cohabitation on child outcomes



Research: Grandparents

- Very under-studied topic!
- Some evidence that living with a grandparent benefits children (DeLeire and Kalil, 2002)
- Hardly any research on grandparents raising grandchildren
 - Most plan to raise them over the child's lifetime (Dunifon & Taylor, 2004)



Now My Research

- How does living in a single-parent family or a cohabiting family predict child well-being, compared to living with two married parents?
- Are there race differences?
- What role does living with a grandparent play?
- Citations: Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones (2002); Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones (forthcoming)



Data

- National Longitudinal Survey of Youth
 - data on mothers from 1979-2000
 - data on children from 1988-2000
- We studied 2,000 children between ages 10 and 14



Measures

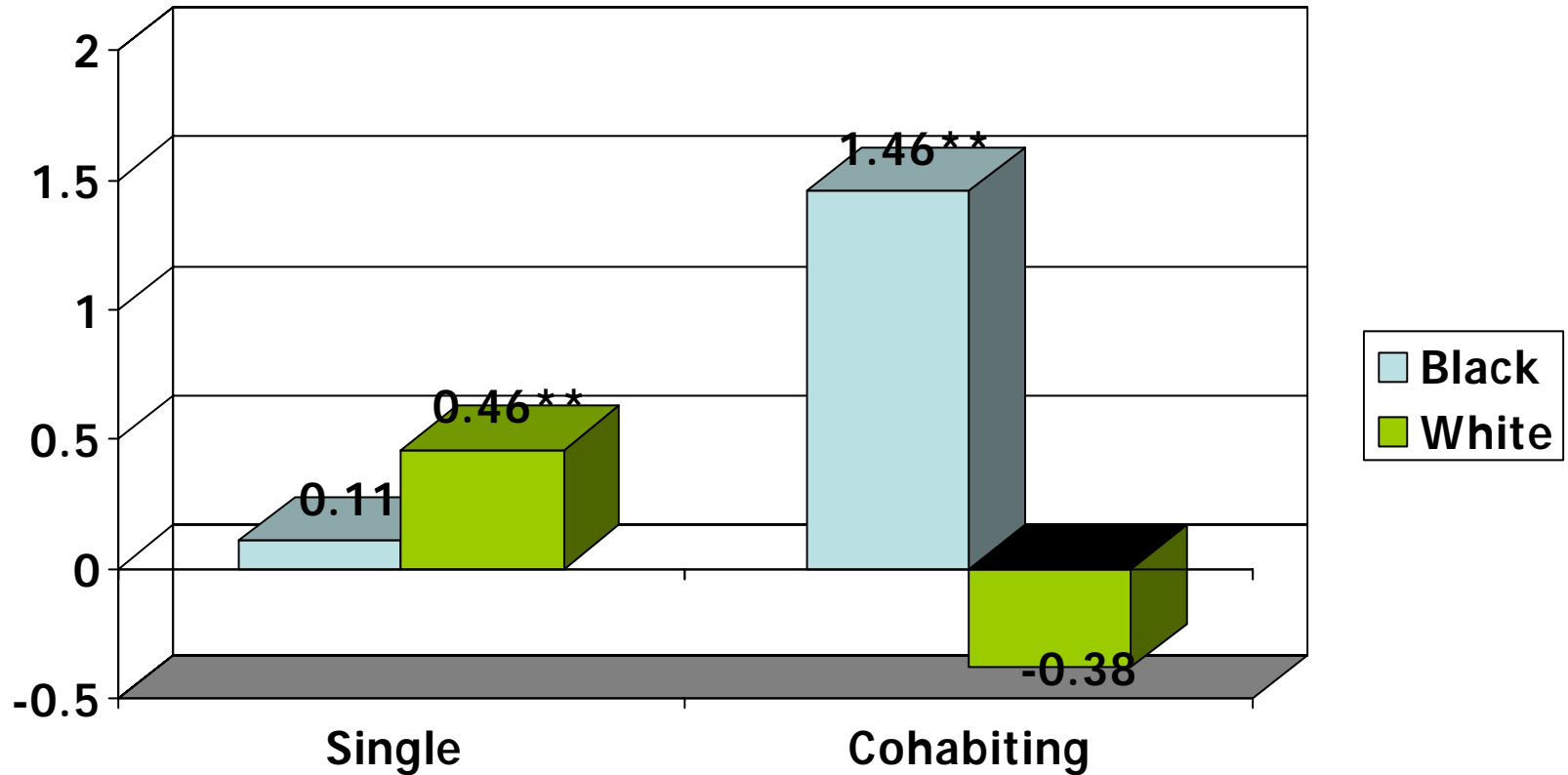
- **Outcomes—Child Well-Being**
 - Delinquency
 - Math scores
- **Family Structure:** Number of years spent with
 - single parent
 - married parent
 - cohabiting parent



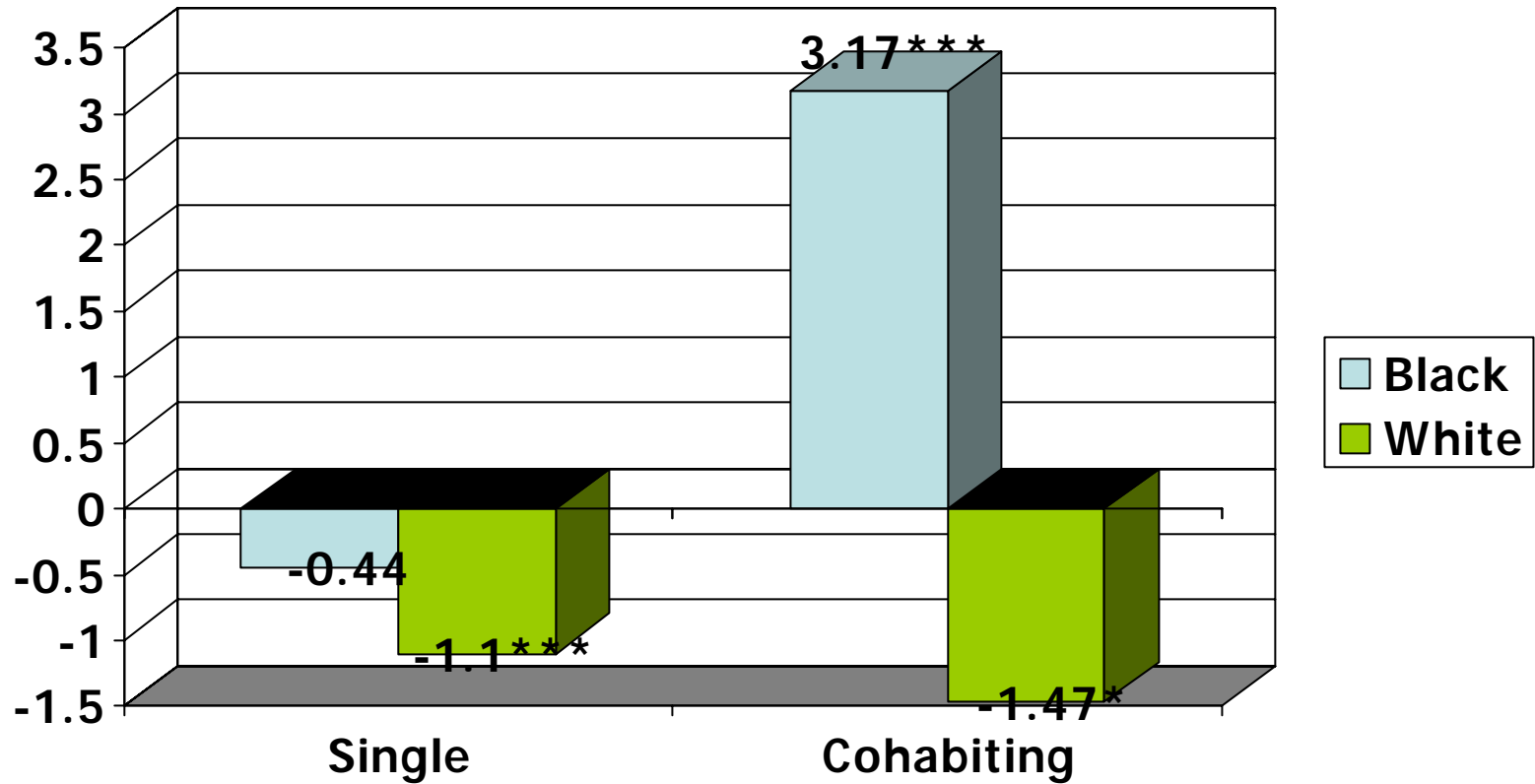
First Question

-
- Are there race differences in how living in a single-parent or cohabiting family influences children?

Results for Delinquency



Results for Math Scores





Summary of Results

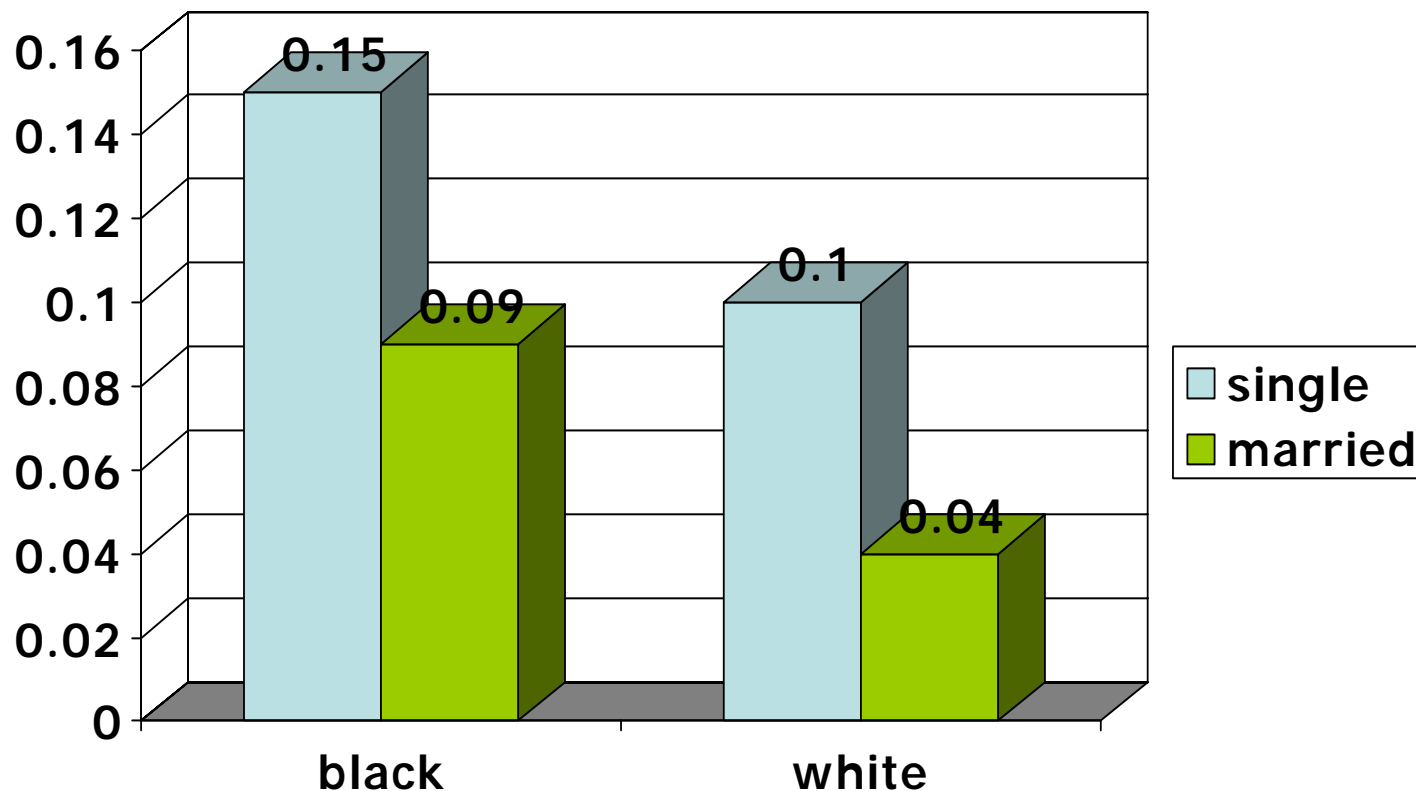
- For white children, cohabitation is associated with lower math scores
- For black children, cohabitation is associated with more delinquency but higher math scores
- For white children only, single-parenthood is associated with worse outcomes on both measures
 - For black children single-parenthood does not predict worse outcomes
 - WHY??



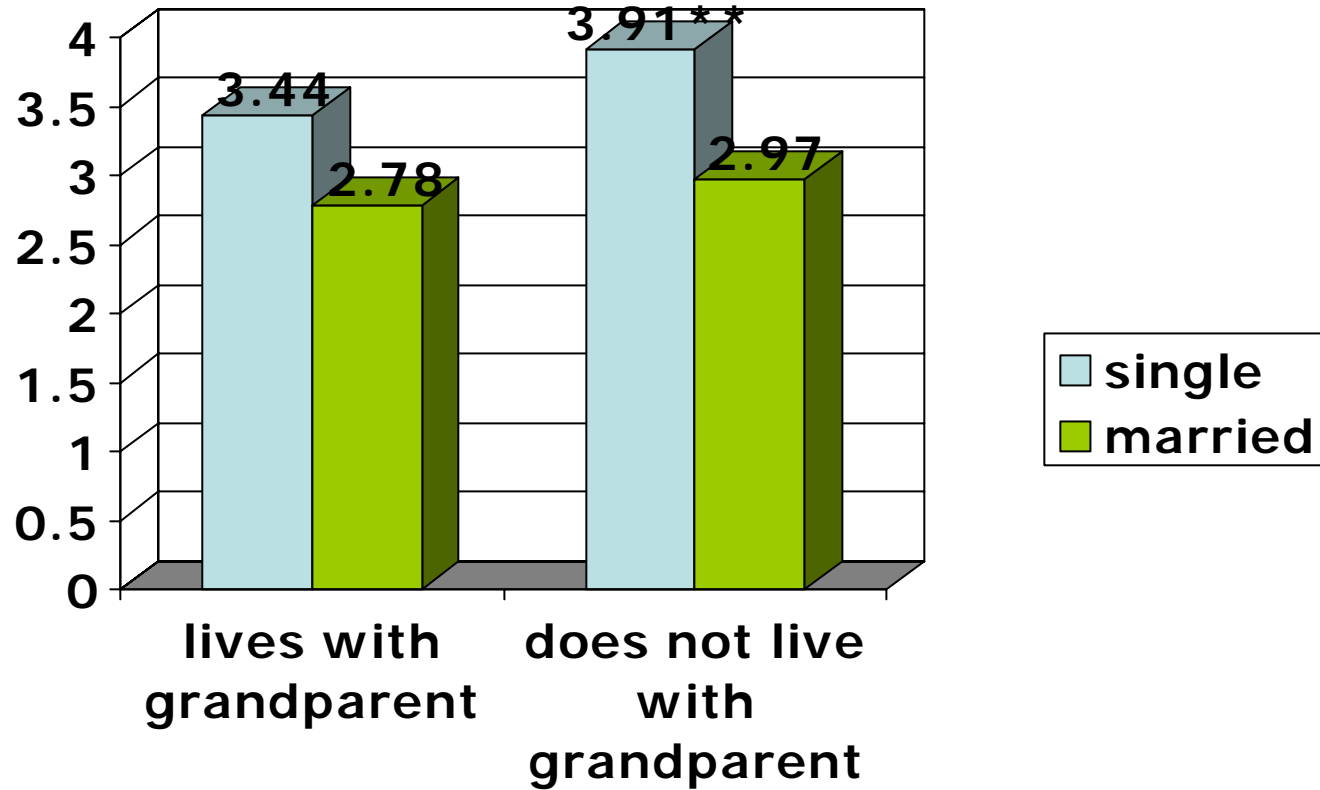
Second Question

- Are black children living in a single-parent family doing better because they are more likely to live with a grandparent?
 - Does living with a grandparent help protect against some of the negative correlates of single-parenthood?

Whether child lives with grandparent



Delinquency





Summary of Results

- Living with a grandparent helps explain why single-parenthood is not associated with worse outcomes for black children
 - Black children are more likely to live with a grandparent
 - Living with a grandparent is protective



Conclusions: Single parents

- **Time spent in a single-parent family is associated with detrimental outcomes only for white, not black, children**
 - Black children in single-mother families more likely to live with grandparent than white children
 - Living with a grandparent is associated with lower delinquency
 - May be because grandparents provide child care, emotional support, monitoring of children



Conclusions: Cohabitation

- **Cohabitation is predictive of different measures for black and white children**
 - Mixed results: higher math scores for black kids, but lower for white; more delinquency for black kids



Implications

- Not all single-parent families are alike
 - Some contain cohabitators, some contain grandparents
 - Important race differences
- There can be a positive role for extended family
 - Especially for black children living with a single parent
- There are a wide range of supports present in the lives of children
 - Educators can be aware of risks and also protective factors, think about how to reduce risks and increase supports



Works Cited

- Bryson, K. and Casper, L. (1999). "Coresident Grandparents and Grandchildren". U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Reports, P23-198.
- Bumpass, L. & Lu, H. (2000). Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts in the United States. *Population Studies*, 54, 29-41.
- DeLeire, T. and Kalil, A. (2002). "Good Things Come in Threes: Single-Parent Multigenerational Family Structure and Adolescent Adjustment". *Demography*, 39(2): 393-413.
- Dunifon, R & Taylor, C. (2004). "Characteristics of Relative Caregivers and Children in their Care". Research Brief, available online at www.parenting.cit.cornell.edu/research.html
- Dunifon, R., & Kowaleski-Jones, L. (2002). "Who's in the House? Race Differences in Cohabitation, Single-Parenthood, and Child Development". *Child Development*, Vol. 73(4), 1249-1264.
- Dunifon, R. & Kowaleski-Jones, L. (forthcoming) "Family Structure and Child Well-Being: Examining the Role of Parental Social Connections." In L. Kowaleski-Jones and N. Wolfinger, Eds. *Fragile Families and the Marriage Agenda*. Klewer Academic Press.
- Fragile Families Brief (2000) "Dispelling Myths About Unmarried Fathers," 2000. Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University and Social Indicators Survey Center, Columbia University.
- Manning, W.D. & Lichter, D.T. (1996). Parental Cohabitation and Children's Economic Well-Being. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 58, 998-1010.