

Relationship Dynamics Among Unmarried Couples: Findings from a Study of Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs



December 2022



Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services

OPRE Report Number 2022-318

This page has been left blank for double-sided copying.

OPRE Report Number:
2022-318

Contract Number:
HHSP233201500095G

Mathematica Reference Number:
50098.04.072.645.002

Submitted to:
Samantha Illangasekare, Project Officer
Kathleen McCoy, Project Monitor
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Submitted by:
Brian Goesling, Project Director
Mathematica
P.O. Box 2393
Princeton, NJ 08543-2393
Telephone: (609) 799-3535
Facsimile: (609) 799-0005

Relationship Dynamics Among Unmarried Couples: Findings from a Study of Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs

December 2022

Katie Gonzalez
Brian Goesling

This report is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce is not necessary. Gonzalez, Katie and Brian Goesling (2022). *Relationship Dynamics Among Unmarried Couples: Findings from a Study of Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs*. OPRE Report #2022-318, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This report and other reports sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation are available at www.acf.hhs.gov/opre.



[Sign up for the OPRE Newsletter](#)



Follow OPRE
on Twitter
[@OPRE_ACF](#)



Like OPRE's
page on
Facebook
[OPRE.ACF](#)



Follow OPRE
on Instagram
[@opre_acf](#)



Connect on
LinkedIn
[company/opreacf](#)



This page has been left blank for double-sided copying.

Acknowledgements

We thank the many people who made this study possible and who contributed to this report as well as the broader Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation. We are especially grateful to the many clients who enrolled in the evaluation and provided data about their lives. In addition, the evaluation would not have been possible without the vital support provided by staff of the MotherWise, Career STREAMS, and Empowering Families programs.

We also acknowledge the valued support of staff at the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. We particularly thank our project officer, Samantha Illangasekare, and project monitor, Kathleen McCoy, for guidance and support throughout the study and broader STREAMS evaluation. We also thank Seth Chamberlain, Melinda Leidy, and Lauren Supplee for reviewing the report.

We thank our partners at Public Strategies who provided program technical assistance for the broader STREAMS evaluation. At Mathematica, Sarah Avellar provided careful review of this report. Chloe Shawah provided excellent programming support. Jennifer Brown provided expert editorial assistance; Sharon Clark provided production support; and Svetlana Sadovskaya and Katie Bodenlos provided project management.

Katie Gonzalez
Brian Goesling

This page has been left blank for double-sided copying.

Contents

Acknowledgements	iii
Overview	xi
Introduction	1
Data and sample	2
Reasons for relationship dissolution among unmarried adults	5
Differences in reasons for relationship dissolution based on relationship status and whether the couple has a child together	9
Discussion	13
References	17
Technical Appendix.....	21

This page has been left blank for double-sided copying.

Figures

1	Percentage of respondents who broke up with their partner, by relationship status at baseline	4
2	Reasons for relationship dissolution	6
3	Assigned fault for the relationship dissolution	7
4	Reasons for relationship dissolution, by whether respondents thought the end of the relationship was a good thing.....	8
5	Assigned fault for the relationship dissolution, by whether respondents thought the end of the relationship was a good thing	9
6	Reasons for relationship dissolution, by relationship type	10
7	Assigned fault for relationship dissolution, by relationship type.....	11
8	Reasons for relationship dissolution, by whether respondent and partner had a child.....	12
9	Assigned fault for relationship dissolution, by whether respondent and partner had a child.....	13

This page has been left blank for double-sided copying.

Tables

1	Characteristics of three STREAMS grantee sites	3
2	Sample characteristics	5
A.1	Number of respondents who reported breaking up with their baseline romantic partner	24
A.2	Percentage of respondents who reported breaking up with their baseline romantic partner, by baseline relationship status and grantee site.....	25
A.3	Baseline characteristics for respondents included and excluded from the analytic sample.....	26
A.4	Reasons the respondent’s relationship with their baseline romantic partner ended, by grantee site.....	29
A.5	Percentage of respondents who thought the end of the relationship was a good thing, by grantee site	30
A.6	Reasons for relationship dissolution, by respondent treatment assignment.....	31
A.7	Perceptions on whether the end of the relationship was a good thing, by respondent treatment assignment	31
A.8	Reasons for relationship dissolution, by respondent gender.....	32

This page has been left blank for double-sided copying.

Overview

Introduction

Understanding the relationships of unmarried adult couples is central to understanding contemporary family life in the United States. As a growing share of adults in the United States are postponing or foregoing marriage, marriage rates have declined and the percentage of adults in unmarried and cohabiting relationships has increased. Unmarried relationships can range from fragile on-again, off-again relationships to highly committed relationships that resemble marriage.

Despite the growing prevalence of unmarried adult relationships, evidence about why these relationships end is limited. In contrast to the many studies that have examined individuals' and couples' self-reported reasons for divorcing, fewer studies have looked at the reasons for relationship dissolution among unmarried couples. Evidence on the reasons adult unmarried relationships end can both (1) help address a key gap in the knowledge base on relationship dynamics and (2) help curriculum developers and program providers improve the delivery and effectiveness of healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs. Many HMRE programs funded by the federal government aim to support relationship stability among unmarried parents and strengthen couples' relationships regardless of their level of commitment or the presence of children in the relationship. At the same time, unhealthy and high-stress relationships have serious negative consequences for partners and their children and exiting these relationships can improve individuals' well-being. As a result, some HMRE programs also help participants learn the skills to recognize and safely exit unhealthy relationships.

This report examines survey data collected from a diverse sample of 356 unmarried adults about their breakups with a romantic partner. The data come from the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation conducted by Mathematica and Public Strategies for the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation with funding from the Office of Family Assistance (OFA). The evaluation included random assignment impact studies of five HMRE programs funded by OFA. For three of the five sites, the evaluation team collected longitudinal survey data on participants' romantic relationships and reasons for relationship dissolution among participants who reported ending a romantic relationship during the study period.

Primary research questions

This report addresses the following primary research questions:

1. What reasons did respondents report for the relationship dissolution?
2. What proportion of respondents perceived that the end of the relationship was a positive outcome?
3. How did the reasons for relationship dissolution, as reported by respondents, differ based on whether respondents perceived the end of the relationship as a positive outcome?
4. How did the reasons for relationship dissolution, as reported by respondents, and respondents' perception of whether the end of the relationship was a positive outcome vary based on relationship type?
5. How did the reasons for relationship dissolution, as reported by respondents, and respondents' perception of whether the end of the relationship was a positive outcome vary based on whether the respondent and their partner had a child together?

Purpose

This report describes the findings from an analysis of relationship dissolution among unmarried adults in a variety of relationship circumstances who were part of the STREAMS evaluation. It describes how many participants in the STREAMS evaluation experienced a relationship dissolution and the characteristics of those participants. It also describes the reasons they reported for the relationship dissolution, whether respondents perceived that the end of the relationship was a positive outcome, and how the reasons for relationship dissolution and the perception of the end of the relationship as a positive outcome differed for unmarried adults in different circumstances. The report also describes the study methods and implications for HMRE programming and research.

What we learned

- Communication challenges were one of the most commonly reported reasons for relationship dissolution. A substantial proportion of respondents also reported the relationship ended because of cheating or infidelity and abuse or violence. When asked to assign fault for the end of the relationship, less than half of respondents pointed to their partner's behavior only.
- Most respondents felt good that the relationship ended; these respondents were also more likely to report that the relationship ended for reasons that indicated an unhealthy relationship.
- Overall, respondents in different types of unmarried relationships reported similar reasons for relationship dissolution; however, where they assigned fault for the relationship dissolution differed. Compared to respondents in other types of relationships, those in a steady relationship at baseline were more likely to report that neither the partner nor respondent was directly at fault. In addition, respondents who were in a steady relationship were less likely to fault their partner only, compared to engaged respondents.
- Respondents who had a child with their partner were more likely to report that the relationship ended because of abuse or violence, drug or alcohol use, financial reasons, or because the respondent or their partner was not a good parent or role model.

Methods

We conducted a descriptive analysis to understand the causes of the causes of relationship dissolution among 356 unmarried adults in a variety of relationship circumstances. First, we calculated the percentage of respondents who reported that their relationship ended for a variety of reasons. Next, we calculated the percentage of respondents who reported that the end of the relationship was a positive outcome, and conducted chi-square tests to examine whether reported reasons for relationship dissolution differed based on whether respondents perceived the end of the relationship as a positive outcome. Finally, we conducted chi-square tests to examine whether the reported reasons for relationship dissolution differed based on relationship type or whether the couple had a child together.

Considerations for HMRE programs and research

Findings point to several ways HMRE programs could support unmarried adult couples. The finding that most respondents reported communication challenges as a reason their relationships ended points to the importance of helping participants develop positive conflict management behaviors and communication skills that can promote relationship stability. However, the finding that many participants also reported serious relationship issues such as infidelity and abuse suggests the need for additional supports beyond effective communication. For example, participants need the skills and supports to safely leave unhealthy

relationships. Adults in unmarried relationships with children, in particular, may benefit from additional supports to help recognize and address the warning signs of unhealthy relationships, take steps to enhance healthy aspects of the relationship, and, in some cases, decide to end unsafe or unhealthy relationships.

The study findings also point to directions for future research. First, studies should examine the distinct challenges faced by unmarried couples with children, the types of supports they need to promote relationship stability if in a healthy relationship, and the factors that can support positive co-parenting relationships if an unhealthy relationship ends. Second, more research is needed to understand the factors that differentiate positive and negative relationship dissolutions. Most respondents in our sample reported that they were glad the relationship ended; future research should examine the association between relationship dissolution and a broader array of respondents' later outcomes, such as mental health and financial well-being, and examine whether the factors that predict positive perceptions of the breakup also predict improved later outcomes.

Third, studies of the impacts of HMRE programs should explore whether these programs are effective in helping individuals and couples identify unhealthy relationships and exit them safely. Studies should also examine the extent to which helping individuals and couples identify and exit unhealthy relationships ultimately leads to the improved participant mental health and, for couples with children, improved child outcomes. Finally, future research should examine the reasons for relationship dissolution among other samples of unmarried adults. Our sample was drawn from the participants in three federally funded HMRE programs that served adult individuals and couples in a variety of relationship circumstances. However, we cannot be certain that our findings for this sample generalize to other unmarried adults.

This page has been left blank for double-sided copying.

Introduction

Understanding the relationships of unmarried adult couples is central to understanding contemporary family life in the United States. As a growing share of adults in the United States are postponing or foregoing marriage, marriage rates have declined (Curtin and Sutton 2020; Eickmeyer et al. 2020) and the percentage of adults in unmarried and cohabiting relationships has increased (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Horowitz et al. 2019). Between 1980 and 2018, the marriage rate declined from 10.6 to 6.5 per every 1,000 people (Curtin and Sutton 2020). The percentage of women ages 19 to 44 who had ever cohabited nearly doubled over a similar period, from 33 percent in 1987 to 64 percent in 2013 (Eickmeyer et al. 2020). Unmarried relationships can range from fragile on-again, off-again relationships to highly committed relationships that resemble marriage (Cherlin 2009; Halpern-Meekin and Turney 2016). On average, however, compared with married couples, unmarried couples face more barriers for creating stable relationships (Horowitz et al. 2019; Moore et al. 2018; Stanley et al. 2014) and see their relationships dissolve (a concept known as relationship dissolution) at higher rates (Carlson and VanOrman 2017; Center for Research on Child Wellbeing 2007). This is particularly true of unmarried parents with children (Carlson et al. 2004, 2005).

Despite the growing prevalence of unmarried adult relationships, evidence about why these relationships end is limited. In contrast, many studies have examined individuals' and couples' self-reported reasons for divorcing (Amato and Previti 2004; Cohen and Finzi-Dottan 2012; Gigy and Kelly 1993; Hawkins et al. 2012; Ponzetti et al. 1992; Scott et al. 2013; Thurnher et al. 1983) and the predictors of divorce among married couples (Amato and Hohmann-Marriott 2007). These studies have found that reasons for relationship dissolution vary, including behavioral factors involving a particular partner's behavior (such as cheating or infidelity) and relational factors about the relationship between partners (such as growing apart) (de Graaf and Kalmijn 2006; Price and McKenry 1988). Fewer studies have looked at the reasons for relationship dissolution among unmarried couples, and those that have typically focus on college-age young adults (Cui et al. 2011; Lantagne et al. 2017; Vennum et al. 2017). Only a handful studies have looked at the causes of relationship dissolution for unmarried older adult couples (Clarkwest et al. 2015; Lampard 2014; Machia and Ogolsky 2021) or compared causes of relationship dissolutions among adults in married and nonmarried relationships (Gravningen et al. 2017; Lampard 2014). However, these studies typically exclude couples who are in steady relationships but not cohabiting and couples in less steady relationships.

Empirical evidence on the reasons adult unmarried relationships end can help address a key gap in the knowledge base on relationship dynamics. However, investigating the reasons unmarried adults' romantic relationships end is also important for practical reasons. Many healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs funded by the federal government aim to support relationship stability among unmarried parents (Wood et al. 2014) and strengthen couples' relationships regardless of their level of commitment or the presence of children in the relationship (Patnaik and Wood 2021; Zaveri and Baumgartner 2016). At the same time, unhealthy and high-stress relationships have serious negative consequences for partners and their children (Beydoun et al. 2012; Cano and O'Leary 2000; Donovan et al. 2016), and exiting these relationships can improve individuals' well-being (Amato and Hohmann-Marriott 2007). As a result, some HMRE programs also aim to help participants develop the skills to recognize and safely exit unhealthy relationships (Patnaik and Wood 2021). The success of these programs for supporting relationship stability and promoting participants' relationship knowledge and skills has been mixed (Hawkins and Erickson 2015; Moore et al. 2018; Patnaik and Wood 2021; Wood et

al. 2014). Additional evidence on the reasons for relationship dissolution among unmarried adults might help curriculum developers and program providers improve the delivery and effectiveness of these programs.

This report examines survey data collected from a diverse sample of 356 unmarried adults about their breakups with a romantic partner. We used the data to address the following research questions:

1. What reasons did respondents report for the relationship dissolution?
2. What proportion of respondents perceived that the end of the relationship was a positive outcome?
3. How did the reasons for relationship dissolution, as reported by respondents, differ based on whether respondents perceived the end of the relationship as a positive outcome?

We also used the data to examine how the reasons for relationship dissolution, and the perception of whether the end of the relationship was a positive outcome, differed for unmarried adults in different relationship circumstances—namely, the level of commitment in the relationship and the presence of children in the relationship. Specifically, we asked the following:

1. How did the reasons for relationship dissolution, as reported by respondents, and respondents' perception of whether the end of the relationship was a positive outcome vary based on relationship type?
2. How did the reasons for relationship dissolution, as reported by respondents, and respondents' perception of whether the end of the relationship was a positive outcome vary based on whether the respondent and their partner had a child together?

Data and sample

The data for our analysis come from the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation conducted by Mathematica and Public Strategies for the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation with funding from the Office of Family Assistance (OFA). The STREAMS evaluation included random assignment impact studies of five HMRE programs funded by OFA. For three of the five sites, the evaluation team collected longitudinal survey data on participants' romantic relationships and reasons for relationship dissolution among participants who reported ending a romantic relationship during the 12-month (for two sites) or 30-month (for one site) study period. We used data from these sites to form a convenience sample of unmarried adults who had experienced a relationship dissolution. The three sites varied in terms of the type of HMRE services offered and characteristics of study participants (Table 1). In each site, the evaluation team randomly assigned study participants to an intervention group that was offered HMRE programming or to a control group that was not. For the analysis presented in this report, we included participants regardless of their random assignment status, meaning that our sample included participants who did and did not participate in HMRE programs.

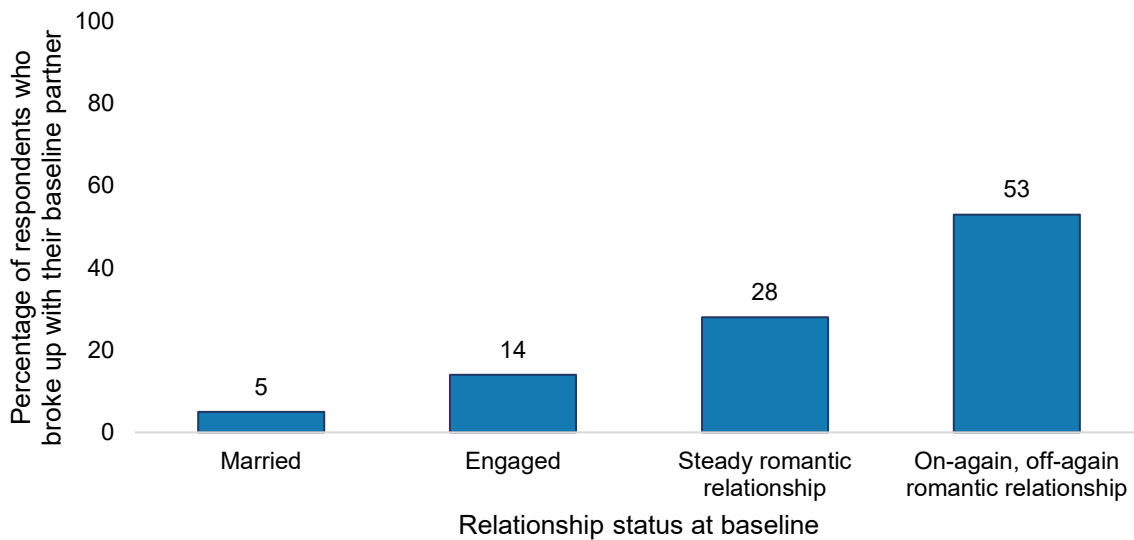
Table 1. Characteristics of three STREAMS grantee sites

Grantee name	HMRE intervention	Study participants
University of Denver	MotherWise, a relationship education program for women with low incomes who are expecting or have just had a baby; based on the Within My Reach curriculum	949 pregnant women or new mothers from the Denver Health hospital system in Colorado. 134 participants from this site were included in this analysis.
Family and Workforce Centers of America	Career STREAMS, an integrated relationship education and employment training program designed for young adults	908 young adult job seekers from an employment center in St. Louis, Missouri. 131 participants from this site were included in this analysis.
The Parenting Center	Empowering Families, a program for couples with low incomes who are romantically involved and raising children together; features workshop-based relationship education along with case management, employment services, and financial coaching	879 romantically involved couples (1,758 individual adults) raising children in Fort Worth, Texas. 91 participants from this site were included in this analysis.

Forming a convenience sample of participants from across the three sites enabled us to examine the reasons for relationship dissolution among adults in different types of unmarried relationships. Study participants across the three sites included a mix of adults who were married, engaged, in a steady romantic relationship, and in an on-again, off-again relationship at study enrollment. For example, the Empowering Families program in Fort Worth, Texas, served only couples in committed romantic relationships (Wu et al. 2021). In comparison, the MotherWise program in Denver, Colorado, served pregnant women and new mothers regardless of their relationship status. Most women who enrolled in the MotherWise impact study were married, engaged, or in a steady relationship with their child’s father (Patnaik and Wood 2021). Like MotherWise, the Career STREAMS program in St. Louis, Missouri, enrolled participants regardless of their relationship status. Most participants in the Career STREAMS impact study were unmarried and not in a committed relationship at the time of study enrollment (Friend et al. 2020).

The participants in our analysis are not representative of everyone who participated in the STREAMS evaluation. Figure 1 shows the percentage of participants in the full STREAMS sample who experienced a relationship dissolution during the study period by their relationship status at study enrollment (that is, at baseline). Participants who were not married to their partner at study enrollment were much more likely to break up with their partner as compared to married participants, and unmarried participants in on-again, off-again relationships were the most likely to break up. Because we only analyzed participants who experienced a breakup during the study period, we were naturally more likely to include participants from less committed relationships. We describe the characteristics of these participants in greater detail below.

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who broke up with their partner during the follow-up period, by relationship status at baseline



Source: STREAMS baseline, 12-month follow-up, and 30-month follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica.

The 356 participants included in our analysis represent approximately 10 percent of the full STREAMS evaluation sample across the three impact study sites. For STREAMS, all study participants completed a baseline survey and, one year after enrollment, completed a follow-up survey. For one of the three sites (MotherWise), participants completed an additional follow-up survey 30 months after enrollment. We defined the sample for this analysis as study participants who (1) were in a romantic relationship at baseline, (2) were not married to their romantic partner at baseline, and (3) reported that their romantic relationship with their baseline partner ended during the follow-up period (12 months after study enrollment for Empowering Families and Career STREAMS and 30 months after study enrollment for MotherWise). We excluded married couples from this analysis to focus on adults in other types of relationships and add to the limited evidence base on relationship dynamics among unmarried adult couples.

The majority of participants in our sample were women who were in a steady relationship at study enrollment. The sample includes a mix of adults who were engaged (18 percent), in a steady relationship (52 percent), and in an on-again, off-again relationship (30 percent) at baseline (Table 2). Most participants in the sample were women (82 percent), and 62 percent had a child with their baseline partner. The large proportion of women in our sample reflects the fact that one program served only women (MotherWise) and another program served mostly women (CareerSTREAMS). Nearly half of participants reported that they had experienced psychological abuse (47 percent) or physical abuse (20 percent) by a romantic partner in the past year. About half of participants had a high school diploma or GED (51 percent) and about two-thirds received SNAP, TANF, or WIC in the past 30 days. Participants were spread roughly equally across the three grantee sites. The technical appendix to this report provides additional information about the selection of the sample and how it compares to the full sample of STREAMS participants.

Table 2. Sample characteristics

Characteristic	Percentage or mean
Family and relationships	
Relationship status at baseline (%)	
Engaged	18
In a steady romantic relationship	52
In an on-again, off-again relationship	30
Respondent has a child with baseline partner (%)	62
Any psychological abuse by a romantic partner in the past year (%)	47
Any physical abuse by a romantic partner in the past year (%)	20
Demographics	
Women (%)	82
Men (%)	18
Average age (mean)	27
Highest educational level (%)	
Less than high school	16
High school diploma or GED	51
Some college or vocational technical school	27
College degree	6
Receipt of SNAP, TANF or WIC in past 30 days (%)	68
Grantee site	
University of Denver (%)	38
Family and Workforce Centers of America (%)	37
The Parenting Center (%)	26
Sample size	356

Source: STREAMS baseline surveys conducted by Mathematica.

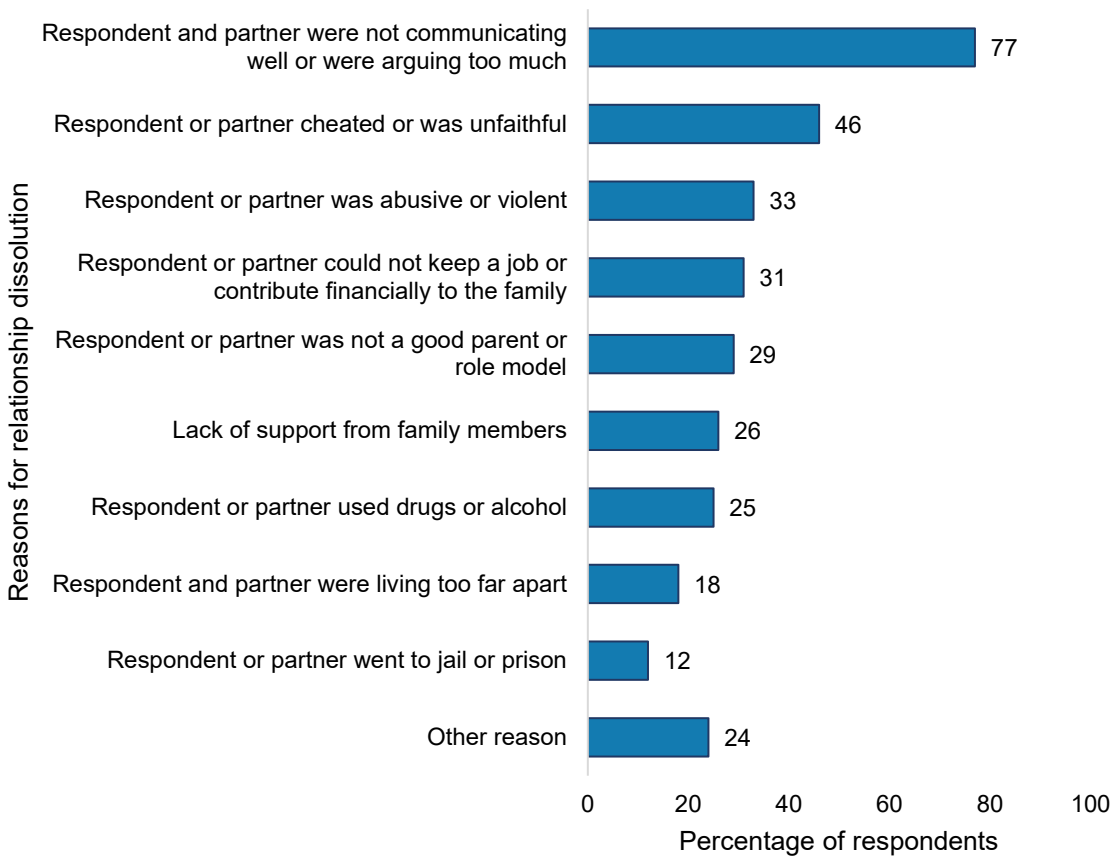
Reasons for relationship dissolution among unmarried adults

For participants who reported breaking up with the partner they were in a relationship with at study enrollment, the STREAMS follow-up surveys asked them to consider a list of possible reasons for the breakup. Participants could select more than one reason that contributed to their breakup. For the purposes of this analysis, we categorized each reason as a *behavioral reason* or *relational reason*, following frameworks from the literature on relationship dissolution (de Graaf and Kalmijn 2006; Lampard 2014; Price and McKenry 1988). Behavioral reasons involve the behavior of a particular partner. We coded the following six items as behavioral reasons: whether the respondent or their partner (1) had cheated or been unfaithful, (2) was abusive or violent, (3) was unable to keep a job or contribute financially to the family, (4) was not a good parent or role model, (5) used drugs or alcohol, and (6) went to jail or prison. Relational reasons involve the relationship between partners but not the behavior of a particular partner. We coded the following four items as relational reasons: the couple (1) not communicating well or arguing too much, (2) living too far apart, (3) not having enough support from family members, and (4) breaking up due to other reasons such as growing apart or no longer being happy.

Communication challenges were one of the most commonly reported reasons for relationship dissolution. A substantial proportion of respondents also reported the relationship ended because of cheating or infidelity and abuse or violence.

Among the 356 unmarried adults in our sample, respondents frequently pointed to a relational reason, specifically communication challenges, and certain behavioral reasons as causes of the relationship dissolution. More than three-quarters of respondents (77 percent) reported their relationship ended because the couple was not communicating well or arguing too much (Figure 2). However, it was uncommon for respondents to report communication challenges alone as the cause of the relationship dissolution. Nearly half of respondents (46 percent) reported the relationship ended because of behavioral reasons including cheating or infidelity. Roughly one-third reported the relationship ended because of abuse or violence (33 percent), or because the respondent or their partner could not keep a job or contribute financially to the family (31 percent). About one-quarter of respondents reported that a lack of support from family members (26 percent) or drug or alcohol use (25 percent) was a reason the relationship ended, and about one-fifth (18 percent) pointed to the respondent and their partner living too far apart. These or other behavioral factors may have contributed to the reported communication challenges.

Figure 2. Reasons for relationship dissolution



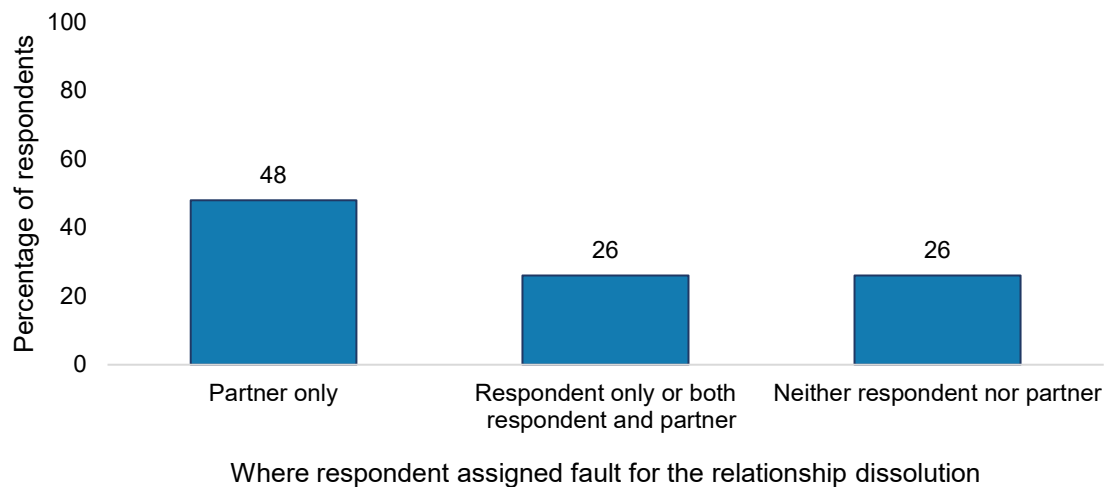
Source: STREAMS follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica.

Note: Respondents could select more than one response, so percentages might sum to more than 100.

When asked to assign fault for the end of the relationship, less than half of respondents pointed to their partner’s behavior only.

For each of the six behavioral reasons for breakup listed on the STREAMS follow-up survey, the survey also asked respondents to indicate which member of the couple had demonstrated the behavior: themselves, their partner, or both. Just under half of respondents (48 percent) reported that the relationship ended because of their partner’s behavior only (Figure 3). Approximately one-quarter of respondents (26 percent) faulted themselves; this includes respondents who pointed to their own behavior or the behavior of both themselves and their partner. An additional one-quarter of respondents (26 percent) faulted neither themselves nor their partner; this included respondents who reported the relationship ended due to one or more relational reasons only, such as the couple not communicating well or living too far apart.

Figure 3. Assigned fault for the relationship dissolution



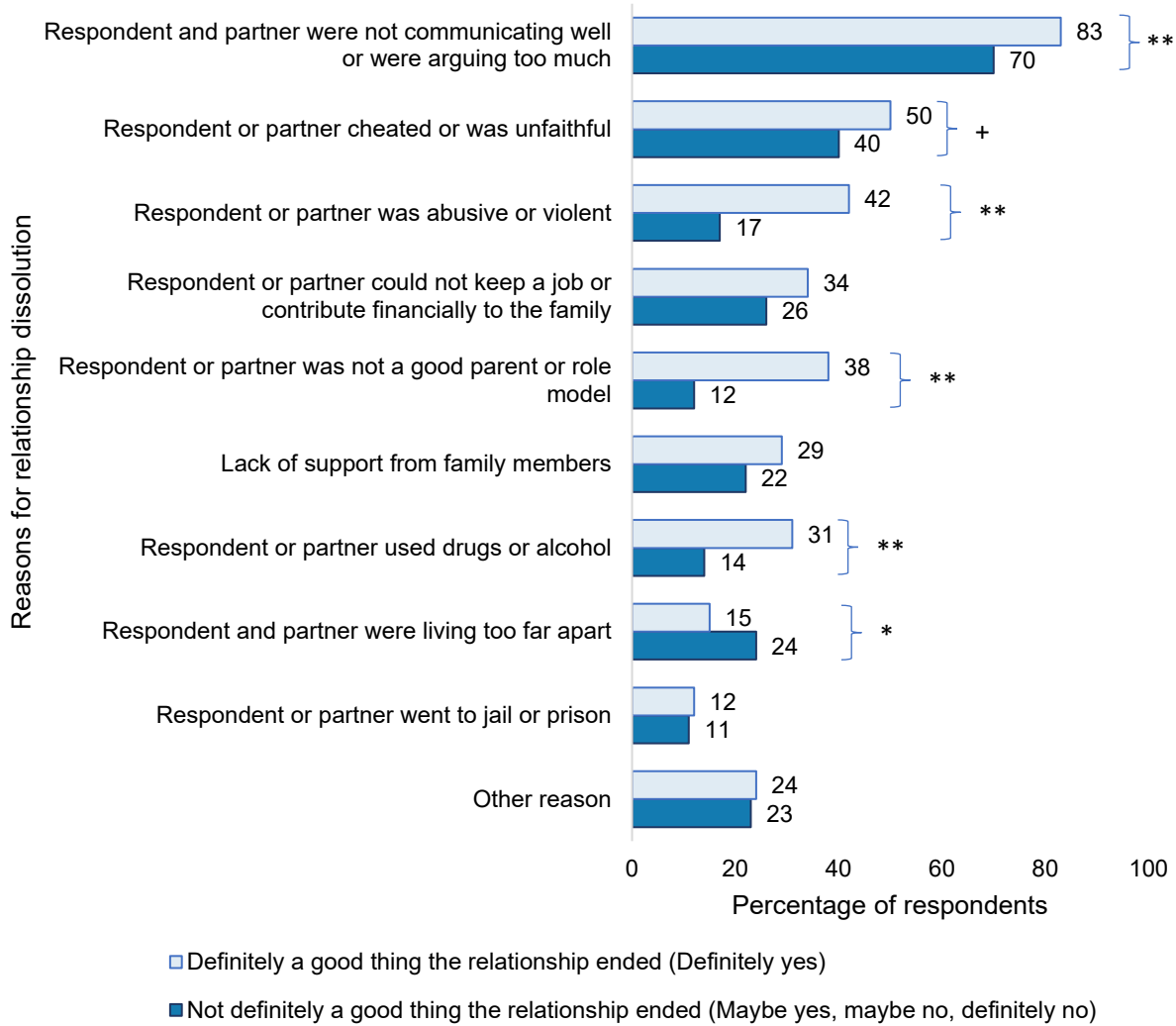
Source: STREAMS follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica.

Most respondents felt that the end of the relationship was a positive outcome; these respondents were also more likely to report that the relationship ended for reasons that indicated an unhealthy relationship.

We asked respondents their opinion of whether the end of the relationship was a “good thing,” and 64 percent of respondents reported “definitely yes.” We categorized these respondents as perceiving that the end of the relationship was a positive outcome. An additional 24 percent of respondents reported that the end of the relationship may have been a good thing, and only 13 percent of respondents said that it was maybe or definitely not a good thing that the relationship ended.

Compared to other respondents, those who were definitive in feeling the end of the relationship was a positive outcome were more likely to report that the relationship ended due to behavioral reasons that suggest the relationship was unhealthy (Figure 4). For example, they were more likely to report that the relationship ended for reasons such as cheating or infidelity, abuse or violence, and drug or alcohol use. These respondents were also more likely to report the relationship ended because of communication challenges and because the respondent or their partner was not a good parent or role model. They were less likely than other respondents to report the relationship ended because the couple was living too far apart.

Figure 4. Reasons for relationship dissolution, by whether respondents thought the end of the relationship was a positive outcome



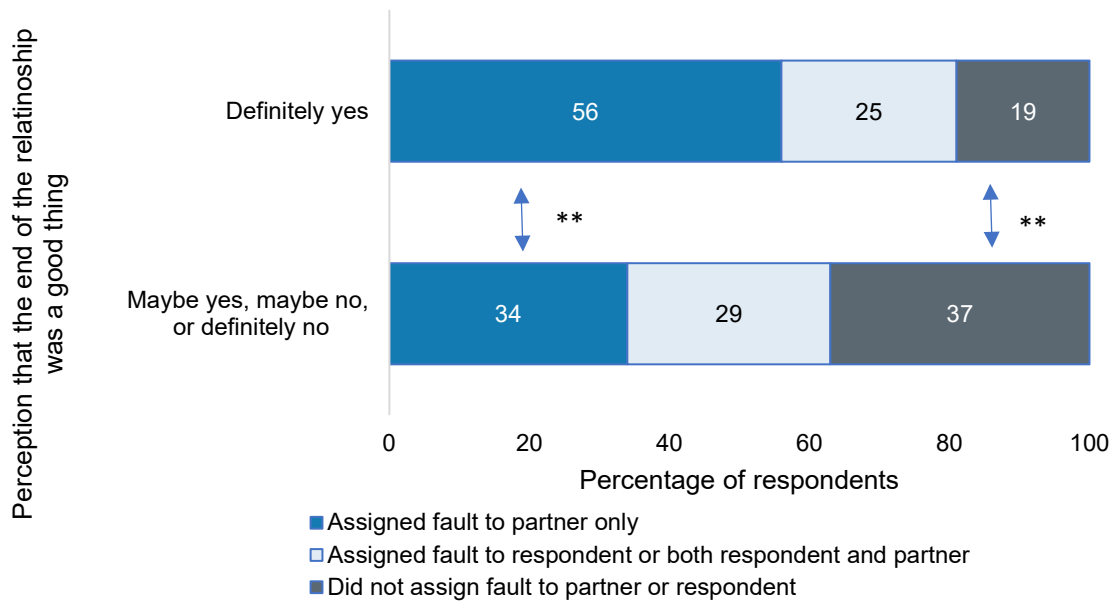
Source: STREAMS follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica.

Note: Respondents could select more than one reason, so percentages might sum to more than 100.

**/*/+ Differences are statistically significant at the .01/.05/.10 levels, respectively, using a chi-square test.

Compared to other respondents, respondents who were definitive in feeling the end of the relationship was a positive outcome were also more likely to fault the behavior of their partner (and not themselves) for the end of the relationship (Figure 5). These respondents were also less likely to report that the relationship dissolution was due to relational reasons only (that is, not due to their or their partner’s specific behavior).

Figure 5. Assigned fault for the relationship dissolution, by whether respondents thought the end of the relationship was a positive outcome



Source: STREAMS follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica.

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

***/+ Differences are statistically significant at the .01/.05/.10 levels, respectively, using a chi-square test.

Differences in reasons for relationship dissolution based on relationship status and whether the couple has a child together

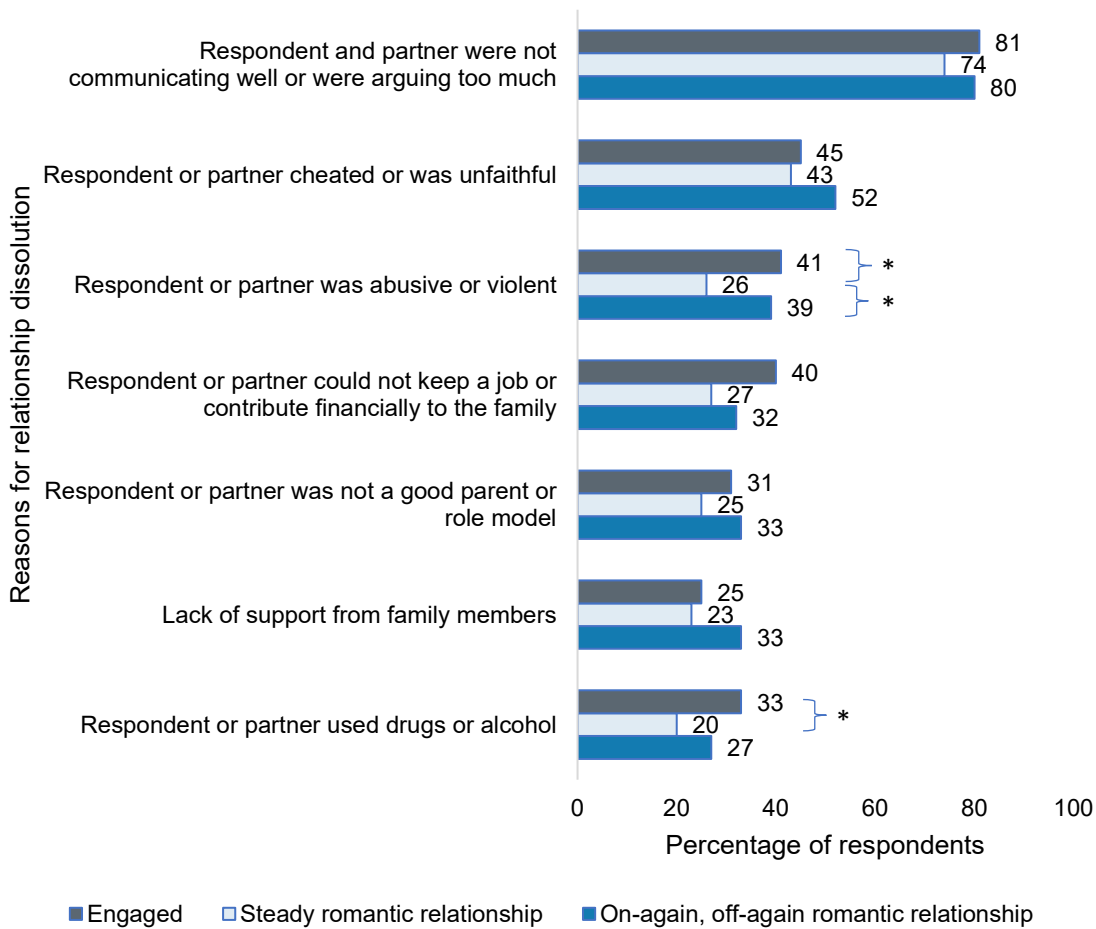
To understand how the causes of relationship dissolution varied across adults in different types of romantic relationships, we compared the reasons for relationship dissolution for three groups of respondents: those who were (1) engaged, (2) in a steady relationship, and (3) in an on-again, off-again relationship at study enrollment. We also compared the reasons for relationship dissolution for respondents who had a child with their partner, and respondents who did not. We conducted similar analyses of how assigned fault for relationship dissolution and respondents’ general feelings about the relationship dissolution varied by relationship status and the presence of a child.

Overall, respondents in different types of unmarried relationships reported similar reasons for relationship dissolution; however, where they assigned fault for the relationship dissolution differed.

In general, respondents reported similar reasons for the relationship dissolution regardless of relationship type. Most respondents in all three types of relationships (engaged, steady relationship, and on-again, off-again relationship) reported that communication challenges were a reason for the end of the relationship (74 to 81 percent), and roughly half of respondents in each group pointed to cheating or infidelity (43 to 52 percent) (Figure 6). Respondents in different types of relationships were also similarly likely to report other reasons for the relationship dissolution, such as the respondent or their partner not being able to keep a job or contribute financially, the respondent or partner not being a good parent or role model, and lack of support from family members.

However, for two of the seven reasons for relationship dissolution reported by at least one-quarter of respondents, we found a statistically significant difference based on relationship status at study enrollment. Compared to respondents in a steady relationship ($n = 185$), both engaged respondents ($n = 65$) and respondents who were in an on-again, off-again relationship ($n = 106$) were more likely to report that the relationship ended due to abuse or violence. Engaged respondents were also more likely to report that the relationship ended because of drugs or alcohol, compared to respondents in a steady relationship.

Figure 6. Reasons for relationship dissolution, by relationship type



Source: STREAMS follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica.

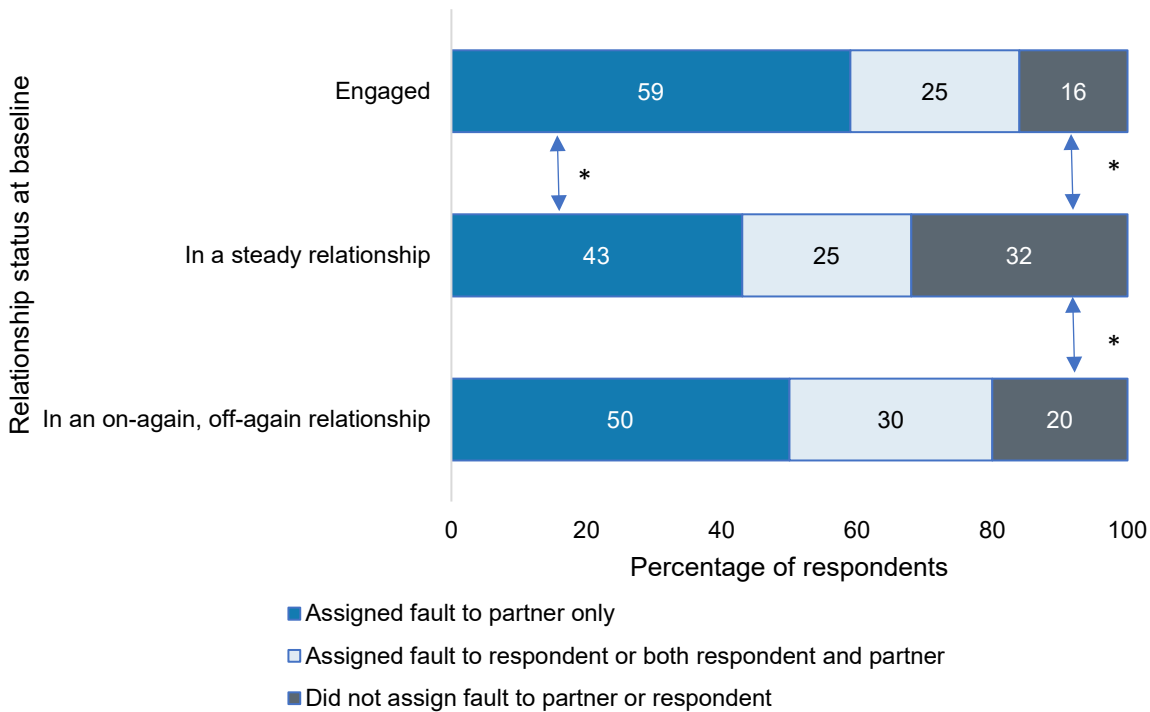
Note: Includes reasons for relationship dissolution that at least 25 percent of respondents overall reported. Respondents could select all reasons that applied, so percentages sum to more than 100. Relationship type refers to the relationship type at baseline.

**/*/+ Differences are statistically significant at the .01/.05/.10 levels, respectively, using a chi-square test.

We found some differences in where respondents assigned fault for the end of the relationship, based on relationship type. Compared to respondents in other types of relationships, those in a steady relationship at baseline were more likely to report the relationship ended for relational reasons—meaning that neither the partner nor respondent was directly at fault (Figure 7). In addition, respondents who were in a steady relationship were less likely to fault their partner only for the end of the relationship, compared to engaged respondents. Respondents who were engaged and respondents in an on-again, off-again relationship at baseline assigned fault for the end of the relationship in similar ways.

Patterns in respondents' reports about whether the end of the relationship was a positive outcome were similar across the three relationship groups. In each group, most respondents (62 to 69 percent) reported the end of the relationship was definitely a good thing. We found no statistically significant differences across groups.

Figure 7. Assigned fault for relationship dissolution, by relationship type



Source: STREAMS follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica.

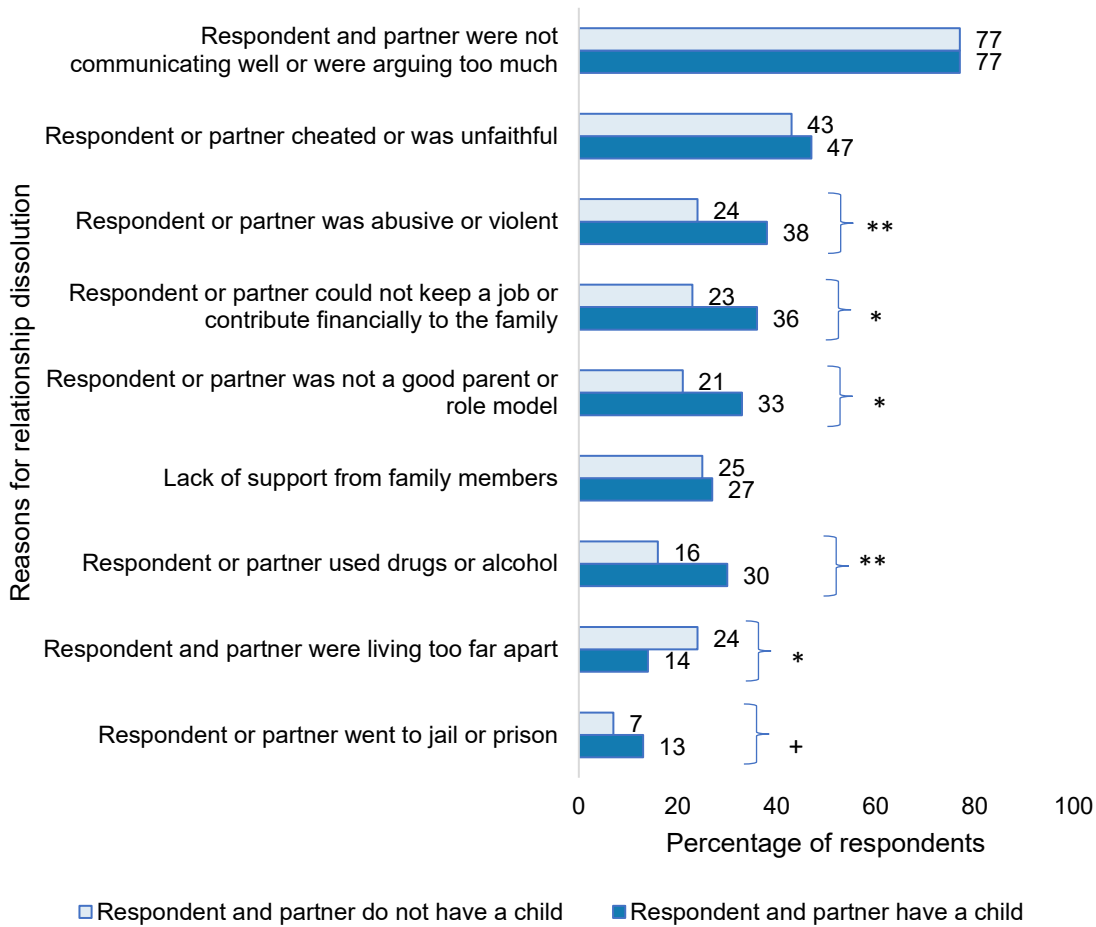
Note: Relationship type refers to the relationship type at baseline.

**/*/+ Differences are statistically significant at the .01/.05/.10 levels, respectively, using a chi-square test.

Respondents who had a child with their partner were more likely to report that the relationship ended because of abuse or violence, drug or alcohol use, financial reasons, or because the respondent or their partner was not a good parent or role model.

We found bigger differences in the reasons for relationship dissolution based on whether respondents had a child with their partner. Compared to respondents who did not have a child with their partner ($n = 135$), respondents who had a child with their partner ($n = 217$) were more likely to report that the relationship ended due to behavioral reasons including abuse or violence (38 percent versus 24 percent), or because the respondent or their partner could not keep a job or contribute financially (36 percent versus 23 percent), was not a good parent or role model (33 percent versus 21 percent), used drugs or alcohol (30 percent versus 16 percent), or went to jail or prison (13 percent versus 7 percent) (Figure 8). Respondents who had a child with their partner were also less likely to report that the relationship ended because the respondent and their partner were living too far apart.

Figure 8. Reasons for relationship dissolution, by whether respondent and partner had a child



Source: STREAMS follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica.

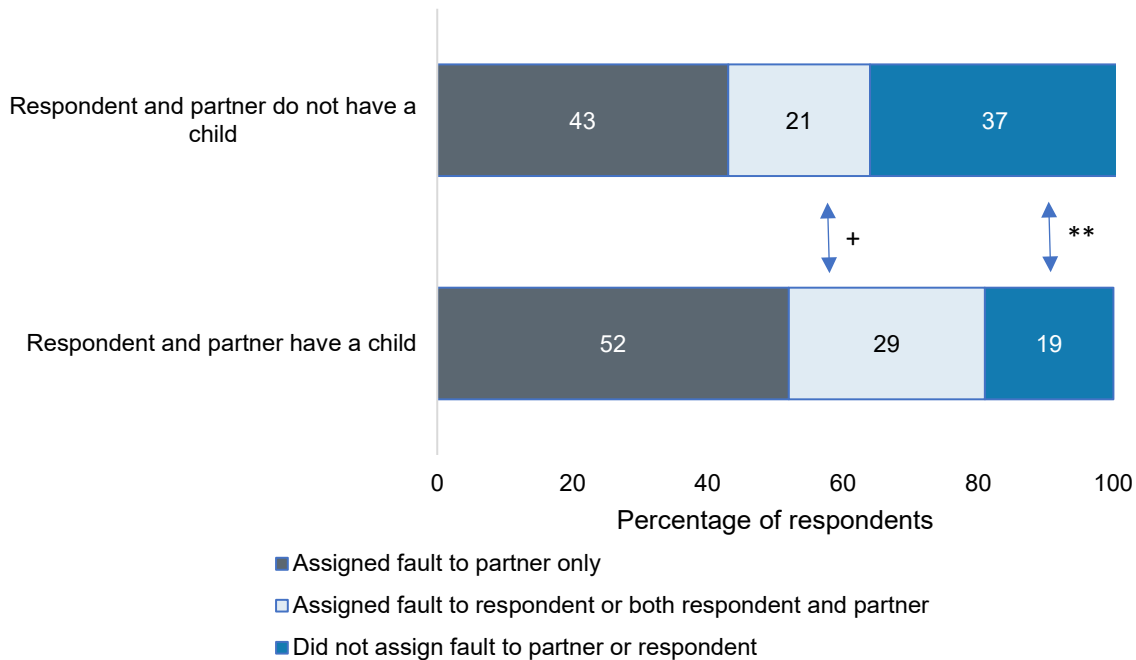
Note: Includes reasons for relationship dissolution that at least 25 percent of respondents overall reported, or where there were significant differences between respondents who did and did not have a child with their partner. Respondents could select all reasons that applied, so percentages sum to more than 100.

**/*/+ Differences are statistically significant at the .01/.05/.10 levels, respectively, using a chi-square test.

We also found differences in assigned fault for the end of the relationship between respondents with and without a child. Respondents who did not have a child with their partner were more likely to report the relationship ended for relational reasons—meaning that neither the partner nor respondent was directly at fault (Figure 9). Just over one-third of these respondents (37 percent) reported relational reasons for the end of the relationship. In comparison, respondents with a child were more likely to report the relationship ended because of their behavior or both their and their partner’s behavior, and less likely to report that the relationship ended due to relational factors only (that is, to not fault their or their partner’s behavior).

Despite the differences in reported reasons and assigned fault for the relationship dissolution, respondents who did and did not have a child with their partner had similar perceptions about whether the end of the relationship was a positive outcome. Sixty-three percent of respondents who had a child with their partner thought the end of the relationship was definitely a good thing, and 65 percent of respondents who did not have a child with their partner thought the same.

Figure 9. Assigned fault for relationship dissolution, by whether respondent and partner had a child



Source: STREAMS follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica.

**/*/+ Differences are statistically significant at the .01/.05/.10 levels, respectively, using a chi-square test.

Discussion

In this report, we examined the causes of relationship dissolution among 356 unmarried adults in a variety of relationship circumstances. Although a growing share of adults in the United States are entering unmarried and cohabiting romantic relationships (Curtin and Sutton 2020; Eickmeyer et al. 2020), there is relatively less evidence on the causes of relationship dissolution among these adults than among married couples. Unmarried couples often face barriers for creating stable relationships (Horowitz et al. 2019; Moore et al. 2018; Stanley et al. 2014) and have high rates of relationship dissolution (Carlson and VanOrman 2017; Center for Research on Child Wellbeing 2007). Our findings add to the limited research base on relationship dynamics among unmarried adults and have practical implications for the design and implementation of programs aimed at supporting relationship stability among adults in diverse relationship circumstances (Patnaik and Wood 2021; Wood et al. 2014; Zaveri and Baumgartner 2016).

Communication challenges (not communicating well or arguing too much) were the most common reasons for relationship dissolution among the adults in our sample. However, for most respondents, these communication challenges occurred in tandem with other reasons. Nearly half of respondents reported cheating or infidelity, and nearly one-third of respondents reported abuse or violence. This suggests that, despite the prevalence of communication challenges or arguing as a reason for the relationship dissolution, other serious behavioral factors (on the part of the respondent or their partner) may have driven both the communication problems and the end of the relationship. Although roughly half of respondents reported that the behaviors in question were their partners' only, about one-quarter also faulted their own behavior. Most respondents (64 percent) were definitive that the end of the relationship was a positive outcome.

Although the rate of dissolution varies by relationship type, we found that those who were engaged, in a steady relationship, or in an on-again, off-again relationship generally reported similar reasons for ending the relationship. They were similarly likely to report that the end of the relationship was a positive outcome. Although there are likely to be many differences in the characteristics of unmarried adult relationships based on level of commitment in the relationship, our findings suggest that these differences do not necessarily lead to differences in *why* these relationships end.

In contrast, we found differences in the reported reasons for relationship dissolution based on whether the respondent had a child with their partner. Compared to respondents who did not have a child with their partner, respondents with a child were more likely to report that the relationship ended because of several behavioral factors, such as abuse or violence, the respondent or their partner not being a good parent or role model, and drug and alcohol abuse. One explanation is that respondents may have been likely to end the relationship if they perceived something could be harmful to their children, but were less likely to break up for relational reasons compared to respondents without children. They were also more likely to assign fault for the end of the relationship (because of their behavior or both their and their partner's behavior) and less likely to report that the relationship ended due to relational factors only (that is, to not fault their or their partner's behavior). Despite these differences, respondents both with and without children with their partner were equally likely to report that the end of the relationship was a positive outcome. Although navigating a relationship dissolution may be particularly challenging for unmarried couples with children, for the adults in our sample, this did not change their overall feelings about whether the end of the relationship was a positive outcome.

For program providers, these findings point to several ways HMRE programs could support unmarried adult couples. For example, the finding that most respondents reported communication challenges as a reason their relationships ended points to the importance of helping participants develop positive conflict management behaviors and communication skills that can promote relationship stability. However, the finding that many participants also reported serious relationship issues such as infidelity and abuse suggests the need for additional supports beyond effective communication. For example, participants need the skills and supports to safely leave unhealthy relationships. Although a large proportion of our sample recognized and ended unhealthy relationships, the prevalence of these issues in this sample suggests that HMRE programs should help participants learn skills to recognize unhealthy relationships. Findings suggest that adults in unmarried relationships with children, in particular, may benefit from additional supports to help recognize and address the warning signs of unhealthy relationships, take steps to enhance healthy aspects of the relationship, and, in some cases, decide to end unsafe or unhealthy relationships.

Our findings raise questions for future research. First, findings point to a need to better understand the dynamics of relationship dissolution among unmarried parents. Results suggest that unmarried couples with children are particularly likely to have their relationships end due to serious issues such as abuse or violence. More research is needed to understand the challenges these relationships experience, the types of supports they need to promote relationship stability, and the factors that can support positive co-parenting relationships after the end of the romantic relationship. Second, more research is needed to understand the factors that differentiate positive and negative relationship dissolutions. Most respondents in our sample reported that they were glad the relationship ended; future research should examine the association between relationship dissolution and a broader array of respondents' later outcomes, such as mental health and financial well-being, and examine whether the factors that predict positive perceptions of the breakup also predict improved later outcomes.

Findings also suggest directions for future research on the impacts of HMRE programs. Specifically, studies should explore whether HMRE programs are effective in helping individuals and couples identify unhealthy relationships and exit them safely. Studies should also examine the extent to which helping individuals and couples identify and exit unhealthy relationships ultimately leads to the improved participant mental health and, for couples with children, improved child outcomes.

Finally, future research also should examine the reasons for relationship dissolution among other samples of unmarried adults. Our sample was drawn from the participants in three federally funded HMRE programs that served adult individuals and couples in a variety of relationship circumstances, allowing us to examine the reasons for relationship dissolution among a diverse sample of unmarried adults in different types of relationships. However, we cannot be certain that our findings for this sample generalize to other unmarried adults. Future studies can address this issue by collecting and analyzing information on the reasons for relationship dissolution among other unmarried adult couples.

This page has been left blank for double-sided copying.

References

- Amato, P. R., and B. Hohmann-Marriott. "A Comparison of High and Low-Distress Marriages That End in Divorce." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 69, no. 3, 2007, pp. 621–638.
- Amato, P. R., and D. Previti. "People's Reasons for Divorcing: Gender Social Class, the Life Course and Adjustment." *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 24, no. 5, 2004, pp. 602–626.
- Beydoun, H. A., M. A. Beydoun, J. S. Kaufman, B. Lo, and A. B. Zonderman. "Intimate Partner Violence Against Adult Women and its Association with Major Depressive Disorder, Depressive Symptoms and Postpartum Depression: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 75, no. 6, 2012, pp. 959–975.
- Bumpass, L., and H. H. Lu. "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts in the United States." *Population Studies*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2000, pp. 29–41.
- Cano, A. and K. D. O'Leary. "Infidelity and Separations Precipitate Major Depressive Episodes and Symptoms of Nonspecific Depression and Anxiety." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, vol. 68, no. 5, 2000, pp. 774–781.
- Carlson, M., S. McLanahan, and P. England. "Union Formation in Fragile Families." *Demography*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2004, pp. 237–261.
- Carlson, M., S. McLanahan, P. England, and B. Devaney. "What We Know About Unmarried Parents: Implications for Building Strong Families Programs." Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, 2005.
- Carlson, M. J., and A. G. VanOrman. "Trajectories of Relationship Supportiveness After Childbirth: Does Marriage Matter?" *Social Science Research*, vol. 66, 2017, pp. 102–117.
- Center for Research on Child Wellbeing. "Parents' Relationship Status Five Years After a Non-Marital Birth." Fragile Families Research Brief #39. 2007.
<https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/sites/g/files/toruqf2001/files/researchbrief39.pdf>.
- Cherlin, A. J. *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.
- Clarkwest, A., A. A. Killewald, and R. G. Wood. "Stepping Up or Stepping Back: Highly Disadvantaged Parents' Responses to the Building Strong Families Program." In *The Cultural Matrix*, edited by O. Patterson and E. Fosse (pp. 444–470). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Cohen, O., and R. Finzi-Dottan. "Reasons for Divorce and Mental Health Following the Breakup." *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, vol. 53, no. 8, 2012, pp. 581–601.
- Cui, M., F. D. Fincham, and J. A. Durtschi. "The Effect of Parental Divorce on Young Adults' Romantic Relationship Dissolution: What Makes a Difference?" *Personal Relationships*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2011, pp. 410–426.
- Curtin, S. C., and P. D. Sutton. "Marriage Rates in the United States, 1900–2018." *Health E-Stats*. National Center for Health Statistics, 2020.
https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/marriage_rate_2018/marriage_rate_2018.pdf.

- Donovan, B. M., C. N. Spracklen, M. L. Schweizer, K. K. Ryckman, and A. F. Saftlas. "Intimate Partner Violence During Pregnancy and the Risk for Adverse Infant Outcomes: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology*, vol. 123, no. 8, 2016, pp. 1289–1299.
- de Graaf, P. M., and M. Kalmijn. "Divorce Motives in a Period of Rising Divorce: Evidence from a Dutch Life-History Survey." *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2006, pp. 483–505.
- Eickmeyer, Hemez, Paul Hemez, Wendy D. Manning, Susan L. Brown, and Karen B. Guzzo. "Trends in Relationship Formation and Stability in the United States: Dating, Cohabitation, Marriage, and Divorce." Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center, 2020.
http://mastresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/MAST-PA1-Trends-Brief_May-2020_final.pdf.
- Friend, Daniel, Heather Zaveri, and Kathleen Feeney. "Implementation of Career STREAMS: An Integrated Employment and Healthy Relationship Program for Young Adults." OPRE Report No. 2020-80. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020.
- Gigy, L., and J. B. Kelly. "Reasons for Divorce: Perspectives of Divorcing Men and Women." *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, vol. 18, no. 1-2, 1993, pp. 169–188.
- Gravningen, K., K. R. Mitchell, K. Wellings, A. M. Johnson, R. Geary, K. G. Jones, S. Clifton, et al. "Reported Reasons for Breakdown of Marriage and Cohabitation in Britain: Findings from the Third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3)." *PLoS ONE*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2017, article e0174129.
- Halpern-Meekin, S., and K. Turney. "Relationship Churning and Parenting Stress Among Mothers and Fathers." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 78, no. 3, 2016, pp. 715–729.
- Hawkins, A. J., and S. E. Erickson. "Is Couple and Relationship Education Effective for Lower Income Participants? A Meta-Analytic Study." *Journal of Family Psychology*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2015, p. 59.
- Hawkins, A. J., B. J. Willoughby, and W. J. Doherty. "Reasons for Divorce and Openness to Marital Reconciliation." *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, vol. 53, no. 6, 2012, pp. 453–463.
- Horowitz, J., N. Graf, and G. Livingston. "Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S." Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/11/06/the-landscape-of-marriage-and-cohabitation-in-the-u-s/>.
- Lampard, R. "Stated Reasons for Relationship Dissolution in Britain: Marriage and Cohabitation Compared." *European Sociological Review*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2014, pp. 315–328.
- Lantagne, A., W. Furman, and J. Novak. "'Stay or Leave' Predictors of Relationship Dissolution in Emerging Adulthood." *Emerging Adulthood*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2017, pp. 241–250.
- Machia, L. V., and B. G. Ogolsky. "The Reasons People Think About Staying and Leaving Their Romantic Relationships: A Mixed-Method Analysis." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 47, no. 8, 2021, pp. 1279–1293.
- Moore, Q., S. Avellar, A. Patnaik, R. Covington, and A. Wu. "Parents and Children Together: Effects of Two Healthy Marriage Programs for Low-Income Couples." OPRE Report No. 2018-58. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018.

- Patnaik, Ankita, and Robert G. Wood. "Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education for Expectant and New Mothers: The One-Year Impacts of MotherWise." OPRE Report No. 2021-183. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021.
- Ponzetti, J. J. Jr., A. Zvonkovic, R. M. Cate, and T. L. Huston. "Reasons for Divorce: A Comparison Between Former Partners." *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, vol. 17, no. 3-4, 1992, pp. 183–201.
- Price, S., and P. McKenry. *Divorce*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1988.
- Scott, S. B., G. K. Rhoades, S. M. Stanley, E. S. Allen, and H. J. Markman. "Reasons for Divorce and Recollections of Premarital Intervention: Implications for Improving Relationship Education." *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2013, pp. 131–145.
- Stanley, S. M., G. K. Rhoades, B. A. Loew, E. S. Allen, S. Carter, L. J. Osborne, D. Prentice, and H. J. Markman. "A Randomized Controlled Trial of Relationship Education in the U.S. Army: 2-Year Outcomes." *Family Relations*, vol. 63, no. 4, 2014, pp. 482–495.
- Thurnher, M., C. B. Fenn, J. Melichar, and D. A. Chiriboga. "Sociodemographic Perspectives on Reasons for Divorce." *Journal of Divorce*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1983, pp. 25–35.
- Vennum, A., J. K. Monk, B. K. Pasley, and F. D. Fincham. "Emerging Adult Relationship Transitions as Opportune Times for Tailored Interventions." *Emerging Adulthood*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2017, pp. 293–305.
- Wood, R. G., Q. Moore, A. Clarkwest, and A. Killewald. "The Long-Term Effects of Building Strong Families: A Program for Unmarried Parents." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 76, no. 2, 2014, pp. 446–463.
- Wu, April Yanyuan, Quinn Moore, and Robert G. Wood. "Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education with Integrated Economic Stability Services: The Impacts of Empowering Families." OPRE Report No. 2021-224. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021.
- Zaveri, H., and S. Baumgartner. "Parents and Children Together: Design and Implementation of Two Healthy Marriage Programs." OPRE Report No. 2016-63. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016.

This page has been left blank for double-sided copying.

Technical Appendix

This page has been left blank for double-sided copying.

The main body of this report described the reasons that unmarried adults' relationships end, examined whether respondents perceive the end of the relationship as a positive outcome, and explored whether reasons for relationship dissolution depend on this perception. It also examined how the reasons for relationship dissolution, and the perception of whether the end of the relationship was a positive thing differed for unmarried adults in different types of relationships.

This technical appendix is divided into five sections. First, we provide additional information about the selection of the analytic sample for this report. Second, we describe the measures used for this analysis. Third, we present the results of subgroup analyses that examine reasons for relationship dissolution by HMRE grantee site. Fourth, we present the results of subgroup analyses that examine differences in reasons for relationship dissolution by respondent treatment assignment. Finally, we present subgroup analyses that examine differences in reasons for relationship dissolution by respondent gender.

Selection of the analytic sample

Table A.1 provides additional information about how we selected the analytic sample from the full sample. In total, 3,615 adults participated in the evaluations of the HMRE programs at the three STREAMS sites of interest to this analysis. Of these, 2,947 adults responded to the follow-up survey. Among those who responded to the follow-up survey, 419 adults were in a relationship at study enrollment and were no longer in that relationship at the follow-up survey. The 356 adults who were not married to their partner at study enrollment comprise the analytic sample for this report.

Table A.2 provides information about the number of individual adults in different types of relationships—married, engaged, steady relationship, on-again, off-again relationship—and the percentage of respondents in each group who reported a relationship dissolution. This information is presented for all participants across the three sites, and separately by site.

Table A.3 provides additional information about the baseline characteristics of the analytic sample and shows how the analytic sample compares to the full sample of all participants in the three sites. Respondents in the analytic sample differed from the full sample along many characteristics including age; gender; race and ethnicity; language spoken at home; level of education; receipt of SNAP, TANF, or WIC in the past 30 days; number of children; whether they were expecting a baby at enrollment; and baseline relationship status. Respondents in the analytic sample were also more likely to report experiencing psychological or physical abuse from a romantic partner in the past year, compared to the full sample. Differences between the analytic sample and the full sample are not surprising, as the analytic sample comprises approximately 10 percent of the full sample and only includes respondents who (1) were in a relationship but not married at study enrollment, (2) broke up with the partner they were in a relationship with at study enrollment, and (3) completed the follow-up survey.

Two of the three sites enrolled individual adults in the study. However, one site (The Parenting Center) enrolled couples. In several cases, only one individual was included in the analysis sample (for example, because only one individual in the couple completed the follow-up survey, or only one individual reported that they had broken up). In other cases, both individuals completed the follow-up survey and reported that they had broken up; therefore, the analysis included responses from both individuals in the couple. Of the 356 individual adults in the analysis sample, 32 individual adults (9 percent) were part of a couple where both partners were included in the analytic sample. Moreover, responses from both partners (including why the relationship ended and whether it was a positive outcome) did not necessarily align. We therefore treated each individual adult as an independent observation for this analysis, rather than

select only one observation per couple (resulting in a loss of information) or attempting to aggregate responses across individuals within a couple (when responses were often not aligned). Although this approach could overstate our ability to detect differences between subgroups, the degree of nesting in our data is likely to be small for the reasons described above.

Table A.1. Number of respondents who reported breaking up with their baseline romantic partner

	All respondents	Treatment	Control
Participated in the STREAMS evaluation at one of three sites: University of Denver, FWCA, and The Parenting Center	3,615	1,931	1,684
Responded to follow-up survey ^a	2,947	1,597	1,350
Responded to follow-up survey and in a romantic relationship at baseline (including married respondents)	2,538	1,402	1,136
Broke up with baseline romantic partner at follow-up	419	245	174
Broke up with baseline romantic partner at follow-up and not married to romantic partner at baseline ^b	356	205	151
University of Denver	134	75	59
FWCA	131	77	54
The Parenting Center	91	53	38

Source: Baseline surveys conducted by Mathematica.

Source: The Parenting Center enrolled 879 couples (1,758 individuals). Counts here represent the number of individuals.

^a Includes all study participants who responded to the 12-month follow-up survey for FWCA and The Parenting Center, and all study participants who responded to one or both of the 12-month and 30-month follow-up surveys for the University of Denver.

^b Includes respondents who were engaged in a steady relationship, or in an on-again, off-again relationship at baseline.

FWCA = Family and Workforce Centers of America.

Table A.2. Percentage of respondents who reported breaking up with their baseline romantic partner, by baseline relationship status and grantee site

	Baseline relationship status							
	Married		Engaged		Steady romantic relationship		On-again, off-again romantic relationship	
	n	Percentage who broke up with baseline romantic partner	n	Percentage who broke up with baseline romantic partner	n	Percentage who broke up with baseline romantic partner	n	Percentage who broke up with baseline romantic partner
All sites	1,199	5	460	14	667	28	200	53
University of Denver	310	11	151	19	212	30	69	61
FWCA	19	16	33	21	219	37	83	51
The Parenting Center	870	3	276	11	236	17	48	46

Source: Baseline surveys conducted by Mathematica.

^a Includes all respondents to the 12-month follow-up surveys for FWCA and Parenting Center, and all respondents to the 12-month or 30-month follow-up surveys for the University of Denver.

^b Includes respondents who were engaged in a steady relationship, or in an on-again, off-again relationship at baseline.

FWCA = Family and Workforce Centers of America.

Table A.3. Baseline characteristics for respondents included and excluded from the analytic sample

Baseline characteristics	Included in analytic sample?		Difference
	Yes	No	
Demographics			
Average age (years)	27	31	-4**
Female (%)	82	65	17**
Race and ethnicity (%)			◇◇◇
Hispanic	28	48	-21
Black, non-Hispanic	57	39	18
White, non-Hispanic	8	9	-1
Other, non-Hispanic	7	3	4
Language spoken at home (%)			◇◇◇
English	88	65	23
Spanish	12	35	-23
Other	1	1	0
Highest educational level (%)			◇◇◇
Less than high school	16	27	-11
High school diploma or GED	51	41	10
Some college or vocational technical school	27	25	2
College degree	6	7	-1
Receipt of SNAP, TANF or WIC in past 30 days	68	57	11**
Family and relationships			
Number of biological and adopted children (average)	1.5	2.1	-0.6**
Expecting a baby at study enrollment (%)	36	25	11**
Relationship status (%)			◇◇◇
Not in a relationship	0	17	-17
Married	0	42	-42
Engaged	18	15	3
In a steady relationship	52	21	31
In an on-again off-again relationship	30	5	25
Any psychological abuse by a romantic partner in the past year (%)	47	33	14**
Any physical abuse by a romantic partner in the past year (%)	20	12	8**
Sample size	356	3,259	

Source: Baseline surveys conducted by Mathematica.

Note: The analytic sample includes all respondents who were in a relationship at baseline, were not married at baseline, and reported that they were not in a romantic relationship with their partner at one of the follow-up surveys. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

***/+ Differences are statistically significant at the .01/.05/.10 levels, respectively, using a two-tailed test.

◇◇◇/◇◇◇ Difference is significantly different from zero at the .01/.05/.10 level, respectively, using a chi-square test.

Measures

The baseline and follow-up surveys gathered information participants' romantic relationships, including whether and why participants' relationships with their partner ended, and if the end of the relationship was a positive outcome. All measures are based on an individual respondent's self-reported perceptions, which may differ from their partner's perception or some other objective assessment.

- **Baseline relationship status.** The baseline survey asked respondents about the status of respondents' romantic relationship with their partner. We used these responses to categorize respondents' baseline relationship status as (1) married, (2) engaged, (3) in a steady romantic relationship, (4) in an on-again, off-again relationship, and (5) not in a romantic relationship. The sample for this brief includes respondents who were engaged, in a steady romantic relationship, or in an on-again, off-again relationship at baseline.
- **Relationship dissolution.** The follow-up survey asked respondents about whether they were still in a romantic relationship with their partner. The sample for this brief includes respondents who reported they were not in a romantic relationship with their partner at the time of the follow-up survey. For the University of Denver site, we include participants who reported the relationship had ended at either the 12-month or 30-month follow-up survey.
- **Reasons for relationship dissolution.** For participants who reported that their romantic relationship with their partner had ended, the follow-up survey asked a series of questions about the reasons the relationship ended. The survey included 10 reasons that relationships end (nine specific reasons plus an "other" response), and asked the respondent to indicate whether each was a reason their relationship with their partner ended. Participants could select more than one reason.

Six reasons were *behavioral reasons* that asked about specific behaviors on the part of either the respondent or their partner. These included the following:

- *Cheating or infidelity:* The respondent or partner cheated or was unfaithful.
- *Jail or prison:* The respondent or their partner went to jail or prison.
- *Abuse or violence:* The respondent or their partner was abusive or violent.
- *Drugs or alcohol:* The respondent or their partner used drugs or alcohol.
- *Not keeping a job or contributing financially:* The respondent or their partner could not keep a job or contribute enough financially to the family.
- *Not a good parent or role model:* The respondent or their partner was not a good parent or role model.

If the respondent selected a behavioral reason, the survey asked about whether the behavior in question was on the part of the respondent, their partner, or both.

The remaining four reasons were *relational reasons* that are about the relationship between partners but not about the behavior of a particular partner. These included the following:

- *Not communicating well or arguing too much:* The respondent and their partner were not communicating well or were arguing too much.
- *Lack of support:* The respondent and their partner did not have enough support from family members.
- *Living far apart:* The respondent and their partner were living too far apart.

- *Other*: The relationship ended for another reason. This was an open-ended response. A large proportion of these responses referenced themes such as growing apart or feelings having changed, or else referenced factors that did not refer to the specific behavior of the respondent or their partner (for example, lack of trust).
- **Who was at fault for the relationship dissolution.** We used the responses to the behavioral reasons for relationship dissolution to construct a measure of participants' reports of who was at fault for relationship dissolution:
 - *Respondent only or both respondent and partner*: The respondent selected one or more of the behavioral reasons and indicated that at least one behavior was on the part of themselves only or both themselves and their partner. We grouped together *respondent only* and *both respondent and partner* because a very small number of respondents indicated the relationship ended because of their behavior only.
 - *Partner only*: The respondent selected one or more of the behavioral reasons and indicated the behaviors were on the part of their partner only.
 - *Neither respondent nor partner*: The respondent did not select any of the six behavioral reasons for which respondents assigned fault. This means that the relationship ended due to relational reasons only. For example, this includes respondents who indicated that the relationship ended because the couple was not communicating well or was not receiving enough support from family members.
- **Whether breaking up was a positive outcome.** The follow-up survey also asked respondents who reported that their romantic relationship ended if respondents think it is a “good thing” that the relationship ended. This question had the following response options: (1) definitely yes, (2) maybe yes, (3) maybe no, or (4) definitely no. There were a small number of *maybe no* and *definitely no* responses, and so we grouped them with *maybe yes* when examining differences in reasons for relationship dissolution based on respondents' perceptions of whether the end of the relationship was a positive outcome.

Reasons for relationship dissolution by grantee site

Table A.4 presents information about reasons for relationship dissolution, grouped by grantee site. Table A.5 presents information about the percentage of respondents who thought the end of the relationship was a positive outcome, grouped by grantee site. Respondents enrolled by FWCA and The Parenting Center reported similar reasons for the end of the relationship and the extent to which respondents thought the end of the relationship was a positive outcome. However, respondents enrolled by the University of Denver were more likely to report certain reasons for the relationship dissolution compared to respondents in the other two sites (particularly abuse or violence, and drugs or alcohol). The percentage of respondents who thought the end of the relationship was definitely a positive outcome was also higher for the respondents enrolled by the University of Denver (74 percent) compared to FWCA (58 percent) and The Parenting Center (57 percent).

Table A.4. Reasons the respondent's relationship with their baseline romantic partner ended, by grantee site

	All respondent	Grantee site		
		University of Denver	FWCA	The Parenting Center
Reasons for relationship dissolution				
Respondent or partner cheated or was unfaithful	46	55	40	42
Respondent or partner went to jail or prison	12	16	9	8
Respondent or partner was abusive or violent	33	47	23	25
Respondent or partner used drugs or alcohol	25	37	14	22
Respondent or partner could not keep a job or contribute financially to the family	31	40	24	27
Respondent or partner was not a good parent or role model	29	39	21	23
Respondent and partner were not communicating well or were arguing too much	77	78	74	80
Lack of support from family members	26	28	23	30
Respondent and partner were living too far apart	18	17	21	15
Other reason	24	29	14	31
Who is at fault for relationship dissolution				
Respondent (respondent only or both respondent and partner)	26	30	24	24
Partner only	48	57	40	46
Neither respondent nor partner	26	13	36	30
Sample size	356	134	131	91

Source: Follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica.

Note: The analytic sample includes all respondents who were in a relationship at baseline and reported that they were not in a romantic relationship with their partner at one of the follow-up surveys.

FWCA = Family and Workforce Centers of America.

Table A.5. Percentage of respondents who thought the end of the relationship was a positive outcome, by grantee site

	All respondents	Grantee site		
		University of Denver	FWCA	The Parenting Center
Breaking up with baseline romantic partner was a good thing				
Definitely yes	64	74	58	57
Maybe yes	24	19	29	24
Maybe no	9	6	7	15
Definitely no	4	1	6	4
Sample size	351	133	129	89

Source: Follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica.

Note: The analytic sample includes all respondents who were in a relationship at baseline and reported that they were not in a romantic relationship with their partner at one of the follow-up surveys. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

FWCA = Family and Workforce Centers of America.

Reasons for relationship dissolution by treatment assignment

We also compared reasons for relationship dissolution for respondents who were assigned to the treatment and control conditions. Table A.6 presents information about reasons for relationship dissolution for respondents in the treatment and control groups. In general, respondents in the treatment and control groups reported similar reasons for relationship dissolution. Respondents in the treatment group were less likely to fault their partner only for the end of the relationship (41 percent versus 58 percent) and were more likely to fault neither themselves nor their partner (31 percent versus 19 percent). Table A.7 presents information about whether respondents perceived the end of the relationship as a positive outcome, by treatment assignment. In general, respondents in the treatment and control groups had similar perceptions about whether the end of the relationship was a positive outcome.

Table A.6. Reasons for relationship dissolution, by respondent treatment assignment

	Treatment assignment		p-value from chi-square test
	Treatment	Control	
Reasons for relationship dissolution			
Respondent or partner cheated or was unfaithful	50	41	◇
Respondent or partner went to jail or prison	12	11	
Respondent or partner was abusive or violent	32	33	
Respondent or partner used drugs or alcohol	21	29	
Respondent or partner could not keep a job or contribute financially to the family	28	35	
Respondent or partner was not a good parent or role model	24	35	◇◇
Respondent and partner were not communicating well or were arguing too much	79	75	
Lack of support from family members	25	28	
Respondent and partner were living too far apart	20	15	
Other reason	24	24	
Who is at fault for relationship dissolution^a			◇◇◇
Respondent (respondent only or both respondent and partner)	28	24	
Partner only	41	58	◇◇◇
Neither respondent nor partner	31	19	◇◇
Sample size	205	151	

Source: Follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica.

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

◇◇◇/◇◇/◇ Difference is significantly different from zero at the .01/.05/.10 level, respectively, using a chi-square test.

^a We conducted an overall chi-square test to examine differences in where respondents assigned fault for the relationship dissolution by treatment assignment, and we conducted post-hoc chi-square tests to examine differences in each response category by treatment assignment.

Table A.7. Perceptions on whether the end of the relationship was a positive outcome, by respondent treatment assignment

	Treatment assignment		p-value from chi-square test
	Treatment	Control	
Whether the end of the relationship was a positive outcome			
Definitely yes	65	63	
Maybe yes, definitely no, or maybe no	35	37	
Sample size	201	150	

Source: Follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica.

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

◇◇◇/◇◇/◇ Differences are statistically significant from zero at the .01/.05/.10 level, respectively, using a chi-square test.

Reasons for relationship dissolution by gender

We also compared reasons for relationship dissolution for men and women. Table A.8 presents information about reasons for relationship dissolution by gender. Women were more likely to report that the relationship ended because of cheating or infidelity (48 percent versus 37 percent), abuse or violence (36 percent versus 17 percent), or because the respondent or their partner was not a good parent or role model (31 percent versus 19 percent). Women were more likely than men to report that the relationship ended because of their partner’s behavior only (53 percent versus 23 percent) and were less likely to fault neither themselves nor their partner for the end of the relationship (21 percent versus 46 percent).

Table A.8. Reasons for relationship dissolution, by respondent gender

	Respondent gender		p-value from chi-square test
	Male	Female	
Reasons for relationship dissolution			
Respondent or partner cheated or was unfaithful	37	48	◇
Respondent or partner went to jail or prison	10	12	
Respondent or partner was abusive or violent	17	36	◇◇◇
Respondent or partner used drugs or alcohol	20	26	
Respondent or partner could not keep a job or contribute financially to the family	25	32	
Respondent or partner was not a good parent or role model	19	31	◇
Respondent and partner were not communicating well or were arguing too much	75	78	
Lack of support from family members	26	26	
Respondent and partner were living too far apart	25	16	
Other reason	23	24	
Who is at fault for relationship dissolution^a			◇◇◇
Respondent (respondent only or both respondent and partner)	31	25	
Partner only	23	53	◇◇◇
Neither respondent nor partner	46	21	◇◇◇
Sample size	65	291	

Source: Follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica.

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

◇◇◇/◇◇◇ Difference is significantly different from zero at the .01/.05/.10 level, respectively, using a chi-square test.

^a We conducted an overall chi-square test to examine differences in where respondents assigned fault for the relationship dissolution by gender, and we conducted post-hoc chi-square tests to examine differences in each response category by gender.

This page has been left blank for double-sided copying.

Mathematica Inc.

Princeton, NJ • Ann Arbor, MI • Cambridge, MA
Chicago, IL • Oakland, CA • Seattle, WA
Woodlawn, MD • Washington, DC

EDI Global, a Mathematica Company

Operating in Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, and the United Kingdom

Mathematica, Progress Together, and the “spotlight M” logo are registered trademarks of Mathematica Inc.



mathematica.org