

Family and Religion

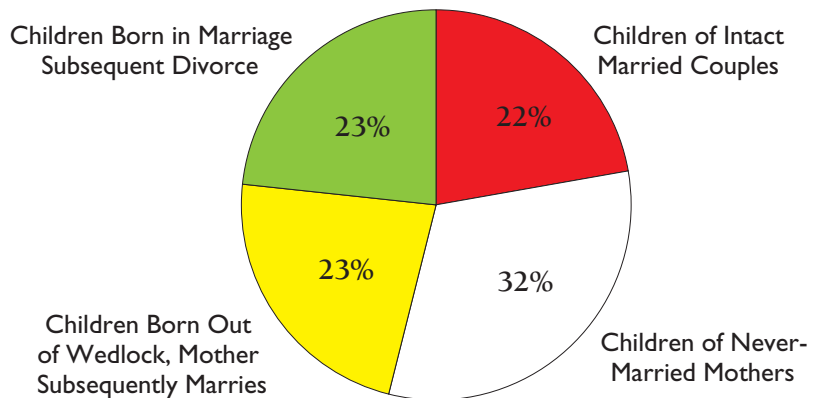
Family and religion are foundational to American freedom and the common good. For example, the married family plays an essential part in promoting economic opportunity: Children raised by never-married mothers are seven times more likely to be poor when compared to children raised in intact, married families. Meanwhile, religious institutions and individuals form the backbone of America’s thriving civil society, providing for the welfare of individuals more effectively than government programs. Yet the role of these institutions in maintaining ordered liberty is poorly understood, and policy and social developments have factored in undermining their important contributions.

Expanding government intervention in family life and curtailing religious influence in the public square erode powerful foundations of self-government. Policymakers should strengthen marriage and the family and advance a robust understanding of religious liberty and the role of religion in society.

Nearly 80 Percent of All Children Suffering Long-Term Poverty Come from Broken or Never-Married Families

This chart shows the percent of all children who experience long-term poverty in each of four categories: Within Wedlock/Marriage Intact—children born to married parents who remain married through the child’s life; Within Wedlock/Subsequent Divorce—children born to married parents who later divorce; Out-of-Wedlock/Subsequent Marriage—children born outside marriage whose mothers marry after birth; and Out-of-Wedlock/Never-Married Mother—children born outside marriage whose mother has never married.

For the purposes of this chart, a child in long-term poverty is defined as a child who has been poor for at least half of the years since birth. (The analysis is restricted to children over age 4, since for younger children it is difficult to separate long- and short-term poverty.) Of all children who experience long-term poverty, 31.9 percent come from families of never-married mothers; another 22.7 percent are children born out of wedlock whose mother has subsequently married; and 23.3 percent were born inside wedlock to parents who later divorced. Overall, 77.9 percent of all children suffering from long-term poverty come from broken or never-married families. Only 22.1 percent of children experiencing long-term poverty come from intact married families.



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979-2000.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promote a robust understanding of religious freedom for individuals and institutions. Religious freedom is critical to sustaining our political and civil liberties and a healthy social order. The Constitution forbids a national church, but it does not prohibit religion in the public square. Religion and morality play an indispensable role in encouraging the virtues necessary for self-government. Consequently, public policy must protect the religious liberty of individuals and institutions.

Religious communities tend to foster a sense of responsibility in their members to care for each other and those in the surrounding community. Local congregations have the ability to bind members in horizontal relationships in pursuit of shared goals. These personal bonds tend to be more effective than impersonal laws in generating effort and sacrifice for the common good. Also, considerable research shows that religious belief and practice are associated with improved child welfare, higher educational performance, better physical and mental health, lower crime rates and divorce rates, and lower rates of out-of-wedlock births, alcohol and drug use, and domestic violence.

Vibrant religious communities can also help foster freedom and resist government expansion. By serving as public communities of moral authority, social institutions like the local church help to prevent the government from drawing to itself inordinate expectations and authority. When civil society institutions decline in significance in the minds of their members, the role of the state is likely to increase.

Faith-based ministries and other charities are likewise indispensable for serving the public good. These ministries understand the needs of individuals and communities up close, and they can provide personal forms of assistance that government programs cannot mimic. Government should encourage rather than hinder the work of such organizations. This can be done not only through favorable tax policies but also through protecting their right to take faith into account when making employment decisions.

For all these reasons, civil society should be acknowledged and protected as the seedbed for a free and just society. Families, businesses, churches, and ministries are the most effective pathways to combat poverty and maintain social justice.

2. Defend and strengthen marriage in law and policy. Societies throughout the ages have considered marriage to be a fundamentally procreative relationship that is related in an essential way to the raising of children. The public interest in marriage stems from the social need to maximize the number of boys and girls who enjoy the bonds of home life that prepare them for the duties of public life. Decades of research provide evidence that children living in a two-parent, married family fare

better than peers in other family structures with regard to issues ranging from poverty and health to depression and substance abuse.

Society, therefore, has compelling reasons to protect this ideal by defending marriage as the union of husband and wife and vigorously resisting any attempt by courts to remove this issue from democratic deliberation. Even when society extends support to family situations that for one reason or another lack the influence of a father or a mother, it is entirely reasonable for society to promote both fatherhood and motherhood as the ideal for the life of each child.

The absence of either parent has emotional and behavioral impacts on children that no amount of government funding can counter.

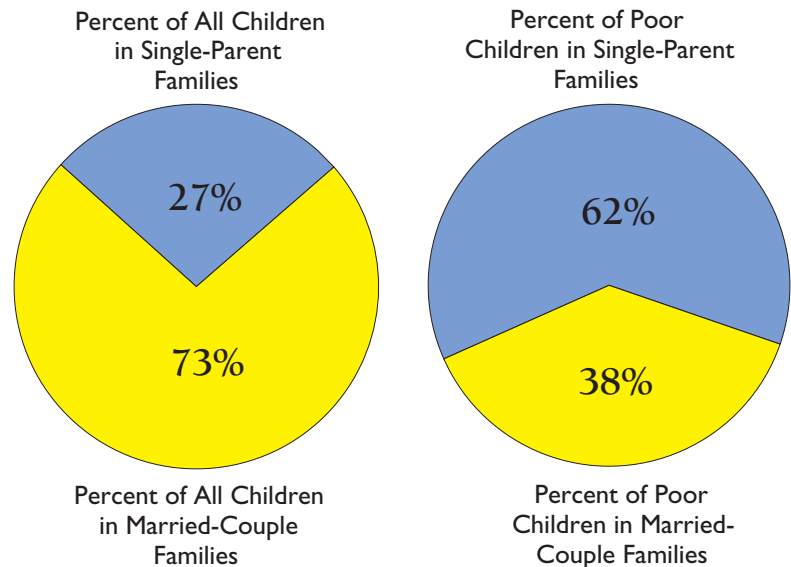
Redefining marriage to include homosexual unions poses serious threats to the religious liberties of people who believe that marriage is the union of husband and wife. The principles underlying marriage as a fundamental social institution can be articulated in terms of widely shared concepts relating to the common good of society, but for many Americans marriage is also a matter of deep moral conviction informed by religious teachings. The freedom to express this belief will face growing pressure if courts, public officials, and private institutions come to regard the traditional understanding of marriage as a form of irrational prejudice that should be purged from public life.

Six states have redefined marriage to include homosexual unions and efforts to redefine marriage in other states will continue. Furthermore, the Obama Administration has expressed support for repealing the Defense of Marriage Act, which was passed by an overwhelming majority of both houses of Congress in 1996. Given the enduring public interest in promoting fatherhood and motherhood through marriage, leaders should use all available means to resist these efforts to undermine marriage.

3. Encourage healthy marriage to decrease child poverty. The predominant causes of child poverty in the United States are the high levels of

Most Poor Children Reside in Single-Parent Families

Children residing in single-parent families comprise 27 percent of all American children. However, children in single-parent families are 62 percent of all poor children.



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March 2000.

unwed childbearing and low levels of parental work. Thirty-nine percent of children in the U.S. are born outside of marriage. Among blacks, seven out of 10 children are born to unwed mothers.

The life prospects of these children are significantly lower than those of peers born to and raised by two married parents. Children who do not live in intact families are nearly seven times more likely to live in poverty. Yet the impact of broken marriages and single-parent households goes far beyond economic concerns. Children from such households are more likely to be depressed and have lower self-esteem. In addition, on average, they have lower levels of academic achievement, are less likely to graduate from high school, are more likely to exhibit anti-social and delinquent behavior, and are more likely to engage in sexual activity and substance abuse as adolescents—all of which can significantly affect their well-being and life trajectory.

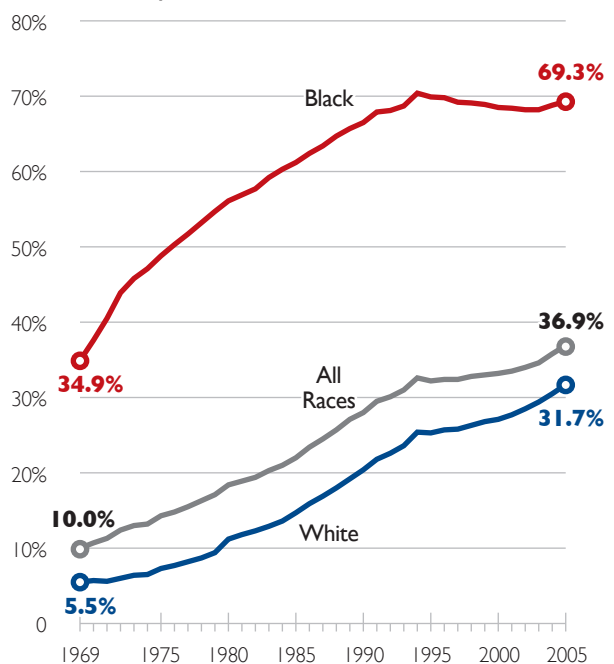
The vast majority of out-of-wedlock births occur to the least-educated women in society, mainly in their early twenties. Virtually zero non-marital births are associated with lack of access to birth control. Almost all of the non-married fathers-to-be are employed and their earnings would rescue the mother and child from poverty. In fact, if poor single mothers married their child's father, nearly 75 percent would be immediately relieved from poverty.

Healthy marriages have strong, positive economic and social effects and are a strong antidote to poverty. Government should reduce anti-marriage penalties in means-tested welfare programs. Voluntary marriage education should be widely available to interested couples in low-income communities, and marriage education programs should be offered at high schools with a high proportion of at-risk youth.

4. Continue to advance welfare reform centered on overcoming poverty by promoting work and marriage. Since its inception in the 1930s, the welfare state has ballooned to more than 70 different “means-tested” programs, ranging from social services to the provision of food, housing, medical care, and cash, and the numbers of dependents has soared. For example, the caseload of one program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) skyrocketed from just over a million in 1965 to over five million by 1995. Why?

Births to Unmarried Women on the Rise

Births to Unmarried Women as a Percentage of All Births, by Race



Note: Data for 1969–1979 reported by race of the child; data for 1980–2005 reported by the race of the mother.

Source: Various, primarily National Center for Health Statistics: National Vital Statistics Report, Volumes 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 54, and 56.

By their very nature, with qualification for benefits hinging on household income, these programs implicitly created roadblocks to the two main avenues for economic progress: marriage and employment—both of which would raise income and, thus, jeopardize welfare benefits. In addition, states were rewarded for maintaining families in dependency rather than promoting progress to self-sufficiency. The longer their welfare rolls, the more federal funds they received.

In 1996, legislation was passed to reform these counterproductive and perverse incentives in the AFDC program, replacing it with a new program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which provided incentives to move recipients toward self-sufficiency. Each state was given a flat funding level that remained constant, regardless of the size of caseloads, and states were allowed to retain savings from caseload reductions. In addition, states were required to have at least half of their welfare recipients engaged in work or activity that would prepare them for employment. The reform also initiated relatively nominal, but powerfully significant, support for programs to promote marriage and strengthen families.

Within 10 years, the size of welfare caseloads shrank by more than 60 percent, and the number of children in poverty fell by 1.6 million. By 2001, even within a period of recession, the poverty rate for black children was at the lowest point in national history.

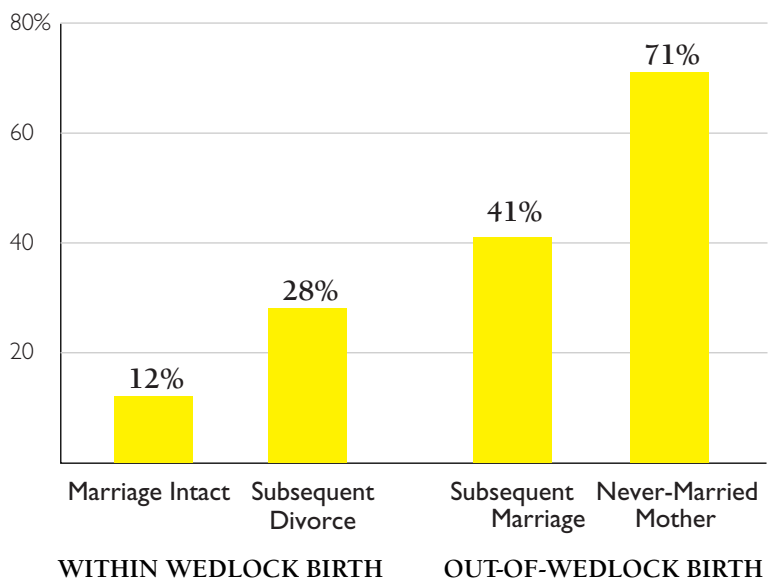
One would hope that, modeled after this remarkable success of reform in just one program, similar reforms would be incorporated in the other programs of the welfare system. Unfortunately, recent policy changes have *moved away* from such commonsense measures. The dramatic reduction in welfare dependency and child poverty that was generated by the 1996 reform is now in jeopardy.

Welfare Dependence Dramatically Increases Outside of Marriage

This chart divides children into four categories: Within Wedlock, Marriage Intact—children born to married parents who remained married after the birth; Within Wedlock, Subsequent Divorce—children born to married parents who later divorce; Out-of-Wedlock, Subsequent Marriage—children born out of wedlock whose mothers marry after the birth; Out-of-Wedlock, Never-Married Mother—children born out of wedlock whose mothers never marry after the child's birth. The chart shows the average percent of a child's life spent on welfare in each category.

An average child born and raised outside marriage will receive some type of means-tested welfare aid (AFDC; food stamps; Medicaid; Women, Infants, and Children [WIC] food subsidy; or Supplemental Security Income [SSI]) during 71 percent of his childhood. By contrast, an average child born and raised by both parents in an intact marriage will receive welfare during 12 percent of his childhood years.

Share of Average Child's Life on Welfare



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979–96.

A new \$5 billion cash welfare program that was tucked into the massive 2009 “stimulus” bill disregards the history-making reform and undermines the incentive system it established. Within that new program, for the first time since 1996, *states will receive more funds for increasing their caseloads.*

This decreases motivation to move people into jobs and self-sufficiency, increases dependency on government, and sustains the culture of poverty. Moreover, the stimulus bill alone adds nearly \$800 billion in spending over the next 10 years on programs such as food stamps, government housing, and Medicaid. Expansion of these programs ironically increases the burden on taxpayers while decreasing the responsibilities of recipients.

In the current economic climate, the government must make programs more cost-efficient. It should promote policies that increase the number of welfare recipients participating in work. The primary goal of welfare programs should be to enable people, not limit their capacity to live independently.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- Each year, the government spends over \$150 billion in subsidies to single parents. Much of this expenditure would have been avoided if the mothers were married to the fathers of their children. Nearly 75 percent of poor single mothers would be lifted out of poverty immediately if they were married to their children’s father.
- Compared with peers in blended or single-parent families, children in intact families tend to finish more years of schooling and are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, and graduate from college.
- Teenage girls in intact families are less likely to give birth in high school than peers in other family forms.
- Children born and raised outside marriage are nearly seven times more likely to live in poverty than children born to and raised by a married couple.
- Out of more than \$100 billion in federal TANF funds disbursed over the past seven years, only about \$20 million—a minuscule 0.02 percent—has been spent on promoting marriage.
- Couples who are more religious tend to exhibit greater marital commitment than couples who are less religious. Wives who weekly attend religious services with their husbands report, on average, greater marital happiness.

- Fathers who exhibit higher levels of religiosity tend to be more involved with their children and have higher-quality relationships with their families than do fathers with lower levels of religiosity.
- Individuals who more frequently attend religious services exhibit, on average, lower levels of stress than peers who attend less often.
- Teens from intact families with frequent religious attendance were least likely to have ever used hard drugs.
- Individuals who attend religious services weekly are more likely to give to charities and to volunteer.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Family Facts.org

Findings from decades of sociological research on the relationship between family structure and religiosity and individual and societal well-being are presented.

www.FamilyFacts.org

Robert Rector, Katherine Bradley, and Rachel Sheffield, "Obama to Spend \$10.3 Trillion on Welfare: Uncovering the Full Cost of Means-Tested Welfare or Aid to the Poor," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 67, September 16, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Welfare/sr0067.cfm>

Robert Rector, "Understanding and Reducing Poverty in America," testimony before the Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Senate, September 25, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Welfare/tst040209b.cfm>

Patrick F. Fagan, Robert W. Patterson, and Robert E. Rector, "Marriage and Welfare Reform: The Overwhelming Evidence that Marriage Education Works," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1606, October 25, 2002, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Welfare/bg1606.cfm>

Thomas M. Messner, "ENDA and the Path to Same-Sex Marriage," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2317, September 18, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/religion/bg2317.cfm>

Thomas M. Messner and Jennifer A. Marshall, "Defending Marriage: A Memo to President-elect Obama," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 46, January 13, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/sr0046.cfm>

Thomas M. Messner, "Same-Sex Marriage and the Threat to Religious Liberty," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2201, October 30, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/bg2201.cfm>

Robert Rector, "Reducing Poverty by Revitalizing Marriage in Low-Income Communities: A Memo to President-elect Obama," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 45, January 13, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/sr0045.cfm>

Robert E. Rector, Kirk A. Johnson, Patrick F. Fagan, and Lauren R. Noyes, "Increasing Marriage Would Dramatically Reduce Child Poverty," Heritage Foundation *Center for Data Analysis Report* No. 03-06, May 20, 2003, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/cda0306.cfm>

Robert Rector, Kirk A. Johnson, and Patrick F. Fagan, "The Effect of Marriage on Child Poverty," Heritage Foundation *Center for Data Analysis Report* No. 02-04, April 15, 2002, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/CDA02-04.cfm>

Ryan Messmore, "Private Faith, Big Government: Understanding the Impact of Marginalizing Religion," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 2123, April 15, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Religion/bg2123.cfm>

Patrick F. Fagan, "Why Religion Matters Even More: The Impact of Religious Practice on Social Stability," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 1992, December 18, 2006, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Religion/bg1992.cfm>

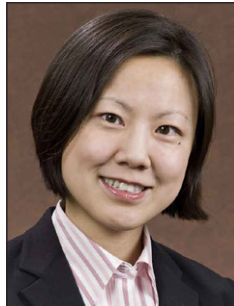
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