

The Heritage Foundation  
**Background**  
**Executive Summary**

No. 1283

June 11, 1999

## HOW BROKEN FAMILIES ROB CHILDREN OF THEIR CHANCES FOR FUTURE PROSPERITY

*PATRICK F. FAGAN*

Much of the debate about the growing gap between rich and poor in America focuses on the changing job force, the cost of living, and the tax and regulatory structure that hampers businesses and employees. But analysis of the social science literature demonstrates that the root cause of poverty and income disparity is linked undeniably to the presence or absence of marriage. Broken families earn less and experience lower levels of educational achievement. Worse, they pass the prospect of meager incomes and family instability on to their children, making the effects intergenerational.

A child's path to achieving a decent income as an adult—and avoiding the poverty trap—is still the traditional one: complete school, get a job, get married, and have children, in that order. Obviously, a stable income cannot be guaranteed; ultimately, children's own decisions affect their income potential, and dropping out of school, taking drugs, or having children early and outside of marriage could derail their progress at any time.

Beyond those decisions, however, studies show that income disparity in America is affected most by the stability of a child's home environment—primarily, whether that child has married parents or is part of a broken family. Consider:

- In 1950, 12 out of every 100 children born entered a broken family; by 1992, 58 out of every 100 children born entered a broken family.
- Children living with a single mother are six times more likely to live in poverty than are children whose parents are married.
- Of families with children in the lowest quintile of earnings, 73 percent are headed by single parents; 95 percent in the top quintile are headed by married couples.
- In 1994, over 12.5 million children lived in single-parent families that earned less than \$15,000 per year; only 3 million such children lived with families who had annual incomes greater than \$30,000.

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- Three quarters of all women applying for welfare benefits do so because of a disrupted marriage or live-in relationship. Those who leave the welfare system when they get married are the least likely to return.
- Cohabitation doubles the rate of divorce. Cohabitation with someone other than one's future spouse quadruples the rate of divorce.
- Divorce reduces the income of families with children by an average of 42 percent. Almost 50 percent of these families experience poverty.
- Married couples in their mid-fifties amass four times the wealth of divorced individuals (\$132,000 versus \$33,600).
- Children in stepfamilies and single-parent families are almost three times more likely to drop out of school than are children in intact families.

It is time to change direction. Congress, states, and local communities can play important roles in rebuilding the family to ensure that America's children escape the poverty trap and reach their full potential. Specifically:

- **Congress** should focus on ways to undo the bias against marriage in federal programs. For example, it should direct the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) to review federal programs to identify those for which the demand for assistance grows with an increase in broken families. Congress should eliminate the marriage penalty in the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and all other poverty programs. It should examine the evidence in the states on the success of their welfare-to-work programs

and consider making federal welfare assistance to the states conditional on an immediate work requirement for all recipients. It could direct federal dollars to study the effects of marriage on income potential and direct federal agencies to consider the results of this research in developing and administering programs as much as feasible. It should require that federal funds to schools are not used in programs that downplay the importance of marriage or the virtues of abstinence. And it should give local governments access to the same tools that state governments have to track absentee fathers who owe child support.

- **State governments** should require parents who want a divorce to prove that the divorce is necessary for the well-being of their children. They should enforce zero tolerance for out-of-wedlock fathers who do not pay child support. And they should examine the school curriculum to ensure that it does not undermine the marriage-based family and clearly demonstrates the risks and effects of divorce and cohabitation as well as the high financial cost of being an unmarried father.
- **Churches and the local community** should encourage the use of "community marriage covenants" to reduce the likelihood of divorce. And because regular religious worship has been linked to more stable marriages and other benefits, they should make facilitating church membership and regular worship among the poor a priority.

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*PATRICK F. FAGAN<sup>1</sup>*

Much of the debate about the growing gap between rich and poor in America focuses on the changing job force, the cost of living, and the tax and regulatory structure that hampers businesses and employees. But analysis of the social science literature demonstrates that the root cause of poverty and income disparity is linked undeniably to the presence or absence of marriage. Broken families earn less and experience lower levels of educational achievement. Worse, they pass the prospect of meager incomes and family instability on to their children, ensuring a continuing if not expanding cycle of economic distress.

Simply put, whether or not a child's parents are married and stay married has a massive affect on his or her future prosperity and that of the next generation. Unfortunately, the growth in the number of children born into broken families in America—from 12 for every 100 born in 1950 to 58 for every 100 born in 1992<sup>2</sup>—has become a seemingly unbreakable cycle that the federal

government not only continues to ignore, but even promotes through some of its policies.

Numerous academic and social science researchers have demonstrated how the path to achieving a decent and stable income is still the traditional one: complete school, get a job, get married, then have children, in that order. Obviously, the journey toward a secure income can be derailed by choices growing children make, such as dropping out of school or getting pregnant before marriage. But generally, children who grow up in a stable, two-parent

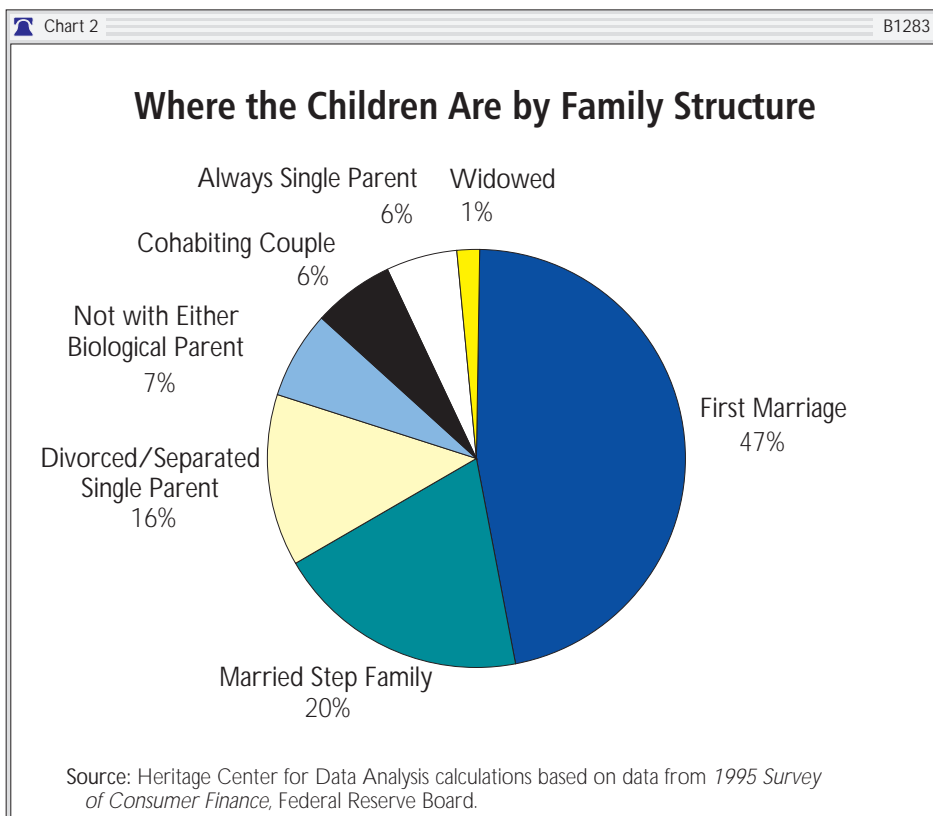
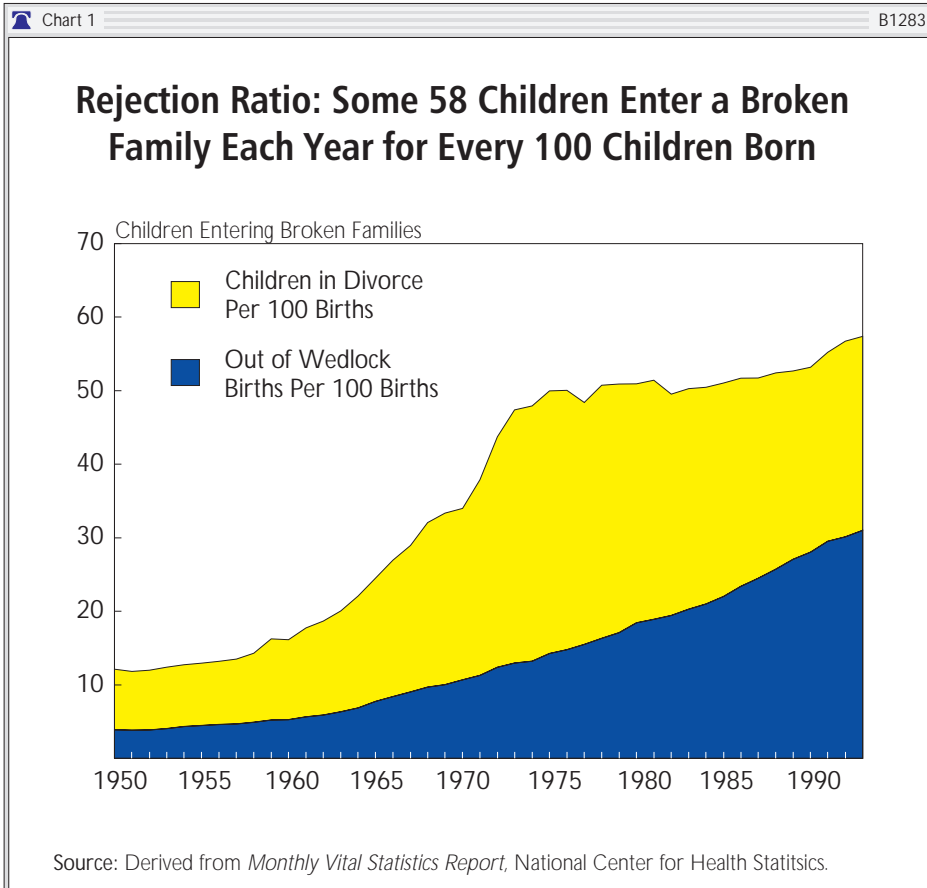
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1. The author is deeply indebted to Kirk Johnson, Ph.D., of the Center for Data Analysis at The Heritage Foundation for his contributions on the Survey of Consumer Finance data and to former Domestic Policy intern Melanie Malluk for her invaluable research efforts.
  2. The federal statistics system since 1992 has been unable to provide accurate data on the number of children who move into broken families. Complete data on divorce are no longer collected by the National Center for Health Statistics and the Bureau of the Census.



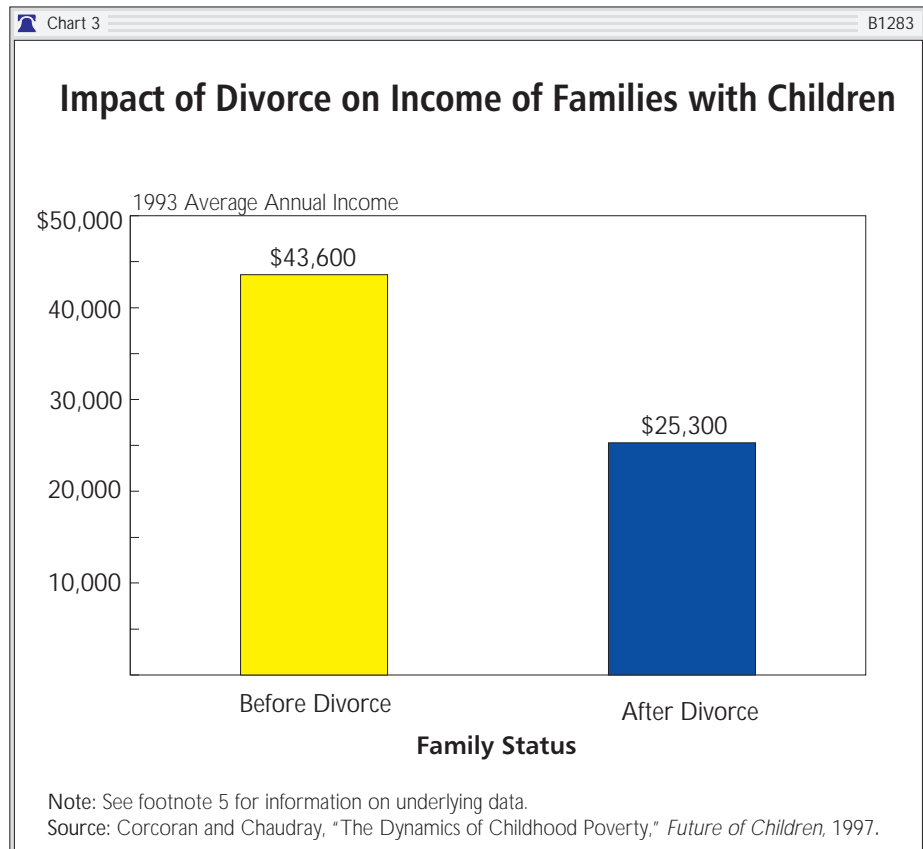
family have the best prospects for achieving income security as adults.

Because of recent advances in the methods social scientists and economists use to collect data, researchers are taking a broader intergenerational view of America's poor. From this vantage point, it has become clear that federal policies over the past three decades have promoted welfare dependency and single-parent families over married parents while frittering away the benefits of a vigorous free market and strong economy. Today, the economic and social future of children in the poor and the middle class is being undermined by a culture that promotes teenage sex, divorce, cohabitation, and out-of-wedlock birth.

Fortunately, the federal government and states and local communities can play important roles in changing this culture to ensure that all children reach their full income potential and do not languish in the poverty trap.

## THE LINK BETWEEN DIVORCE AND POVERTY

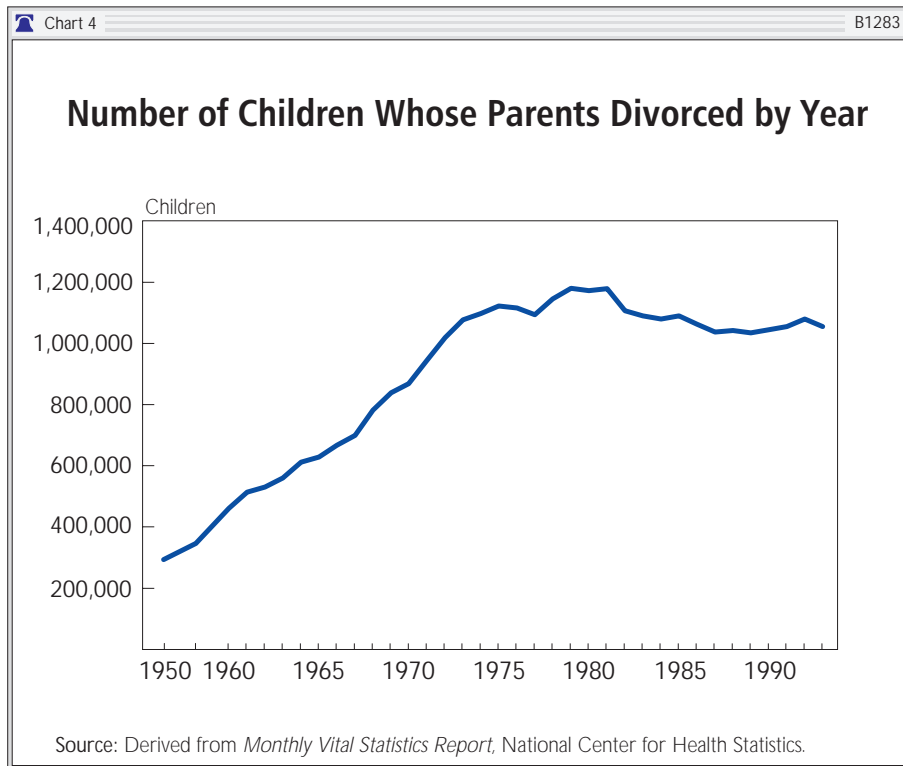
To understand the importance of marriage to prosperity, and what the determinants of a stable marriage are, it is important to look first at the evidence surrounding the effects of its alternatives—divorce, cohabitation, and out-of-wedlock births—on children and on income.



Sadly, almost half of American families experience poverty following a divorce,<sup>3</sup> and 75 percent of all women who apply for welfare benefits do so because of a disrupted marriage or a disrupted relationship in which they live with a male outside of marriage.<sup>4</sup>

Divorce has many harmful effects on the income of families and future generations. Its immediate effects can be seen in data reported in 1994 by Mary Corcoran, a professor of political science at the University of Michigan: "During the years children lived with two parents, their family incomes averaged \$43,600, and when these same children lived with one parent, their family incomes averaged \$25,300."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the household income of a child's family dropped on average about 42 percent following divorce.<sup>6</sup> By

3. Julia Heath, "Determinants of Spells of Poverty Following Divorce," *Review of Social Economy*, Vol. 49 (1992), pp. 305–315.
4. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Factors Affecting the Labor Force Participation of Lone Mothers in the United States*, prepared by the Panel on Evaluation Factors Affecting the Labor Force Participation of Lone Mothers, Paris, 1989.



1997, 8.15 million children were living with a divorced single parent. As Chart 4 illustrates, there has been an increase of 354 percent since 1950.<sup>7</sup>

As substantial as this income reduction is, little public attention is paid to the relationship between the breakdown of marriage and poverty. Consider, by comparison, the reaction to a comparable decrease in the national economy. When America's economic productivity fell by 2.1 percent from 1981 to 1982, it was called a recession. And when the economy contracted by

30.5 percent from \$203 million to \$141 million (in constant 1958 dollars) from 1929 to 1933,<sup>8</sup> it was called the Great Depression. Yet each and every year for the past 27 years, over one million children have experienced divorce in their families with an associated reduction in family income that ranged from 28 percent to 42 percent. It is no wonder that three-fourths of all women applying for welfare benefits do so because of a disruption of marriage.<sup>9</sup>

Understandably, mothers who are employed at the time of divorce are much less likely to become welfare recipients than are mothers who do not work.

And mothers who are not employed in the workforce at the time of divorce are as close to going on welfare as are single mothers who lose their jobs.<sup>10</sup> Divorce is the main factor in determining the length of "poverty spells,"<sup>11</sup> particularly for women whose pre-divorce family income was in the bottom half of the income distribution.<sup>12</sup> Divorce, then, poses the greatest threat to women in low-income families. Moreover, almost 50 percent of households with children move into poverty following divorce.<sup>13</sup> Simply put, divorce has become too prevalent and

5. Mary E. Corcoran and Ajay Chaudry, "The Dynamics of Childhood Poverty," *Future of Children*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1997), pp. 40-54, quoting from G. J. Duncan et al., "Lone-Parent Families in the United States: Dynamics, Economic Status, and Developmental Consequences," unpublished research paper, Survey Research Center, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, May 1994.
6. Peggy O. Corcoran, unpublished paper, Survey Research Center, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, May 1994.
7. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Monthly Vital Statistics Reports*.
8. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Bicentennial Edition Colonial Times to 1970, Part 1*, p. 228.
9. OECD, *Factors Affecting the Labor Force Participation of Lone Mothers in the United States*.
10. Philip K. Robins, "Child Support, Welfare Dependency, and Poverty," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (September 1986), pp. 768-786.
11. Heath, "Determinants of Spells of Poverty Following Divorce."

affects an ever-increasing number of children. (See Chart 4.)

In the 1950s, the rate of divorce was lower among high-income groups; by 1960, there was a convergence of rates among all socioeconomic groups.<sup>14</sup> By 1975, for the first time, more marriages ended in divorce than in death.<sup>15</sup> Since 1960, there has been a significant shift in the ratio of children deprived of married parents by death compared with those so deprived by divorce. Compared with the number of children who lost a parent through death, 75 percent, 150 percent, and 580 percent as many, respectively, lost a parent through divorce in 1960, in 1986,<sup>16</sup> and in 1995.<sup>17</sup>

Divorce is linked to a number of serious problems beyond the immediate economic problem of lost income. For instance, the children of divorced parents are more likely to get pregnant and give birth outside of marriage, especially if the divorce occurred during their mid-teenage years,<sup>18</sup> and twice as likely to cohabit than are children of married parents.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, divorce appears to

result in a reduction of the educational accomplishments of the affected children, weakens their psychological and physical health, and predisposes them to rapid initiation of sexual relationships and higher levels of marital instability.<sup>20</sup> It also raises the probability that they will never marry,<sup>21</sup> especially for boys.<sup>22</sup>

For a mother with children, divorce increases her financial responsibility and, typically, her hours of labor outside the home. Divorce and additional work hours also disrupt her network of support for parenting her children.<sup>23</sup> These additional stresses take their toll: Single mothers experience increased levels of physical and mental illness, addictions, and even suicide following divorce.<sup>24</sup> All of these outcomes have an effect on family income.

Moreover, the consequences of divorce flow from generation to generation, since the children of divorce are more likely to experience the same problems and pass them on to their own children.<sup>25</sup> Significantly, these effects are markedly different from the effect that the death of a married

12. Greg J. Duncan, Martha S. Hill, and Saul D. Hoffman, "Welfare Dependence Within and Across Generations," *Science*, Vol. 239, No. 4839 (January 1988), pp. 467–471.

13. Heath, "Determinants of Spells of Poverty Following Divorce."

14. Paul C. Glick, "Fifty Years of Family Demography: A Record of Social Change," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 50 (November 1988), pp. 861–873.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. See Chart 6; data from the Federal Reserve Board's 1995 Survey of Consumer Finance.

18. Sara S. McLanahan, "Family Structure and Dependency: Early Transitions to Female Household Headship," *Demography*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (February 1988), pp. 1–16.

19. Arland Thornton, "Influence of the Marital History of Parents on the Marital and Cohabitational Experiences of Children," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (1991), pp. 868–894.

20. *Ibid.*

21. France E. Kobrin and Linda J. Waite, "Effects of Childhood Family Structure on the Transition to Marriage," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 46 (1984), pp. 807–816.

22. Larry L. Bumpass, Teresa Castro Martin, and James A. Sweet, "The Impact of Family Background and Early Marital Factors on Marital Disruption," *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (March 1991), pp. 22–42.

23. Thornton, "Influence of the Marital History of Parents."

24. *Ibid.*

25. Kobrin and Waite, "Effects of Childhood Family Structure on the Transition to Marriage."

parent has on children; in fact, such children are *less* likely than the average to divorce when they grow up.<sup>26</sup>

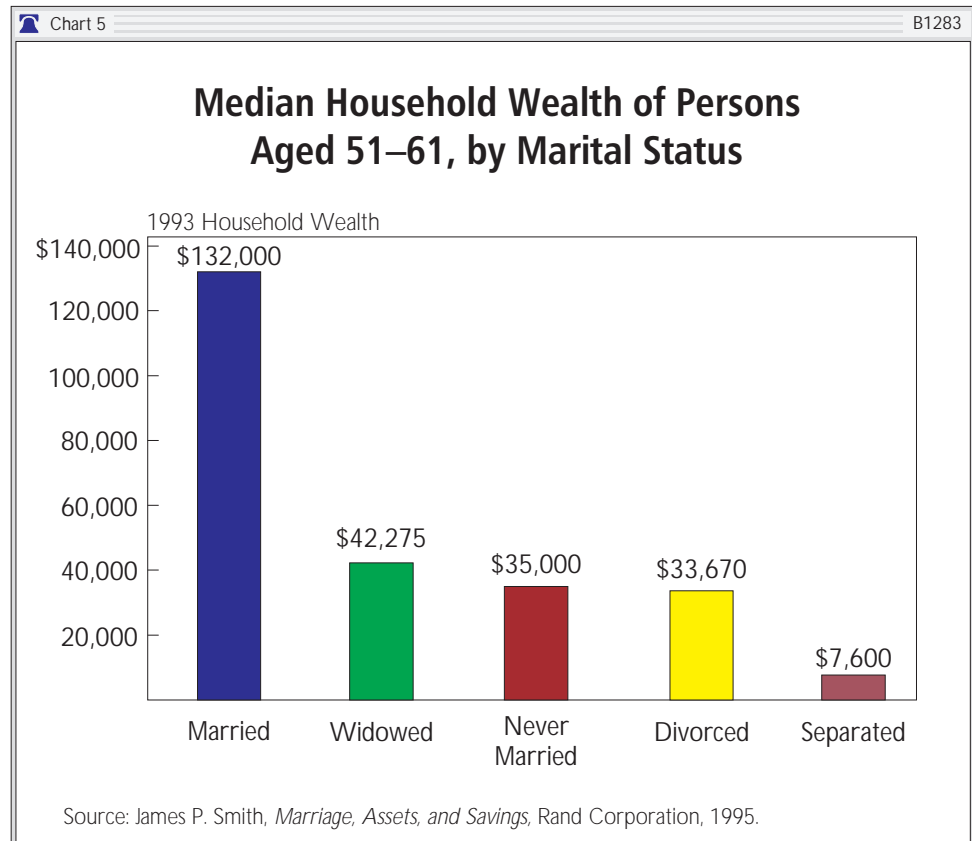
**Divorce and Asset Formation.** Little research has been done on the effect of divorce on the assets accumulated over time by a household, but a RAND Corporation study indicates that the effect may be dramatic: Family structure is strongly tied to wealth by the time one reaches the sixth decade of life. The assets of married couples in their fifties (who are approaching retirement) are four times greater than those of their divorced peers.

(See Chart 5.) Even when the two divorced households' assets on average are combined, the RAND study shows that their asset base is half that of married couples.<sup>27</sup>

Upon reflection, this makes sense. After a divorce, the largest asset—the family home—frequently is sold and the proceeds used to finance the divorce and start new homes. In addition, the evidence indicates that the income of divorced households with children drops significantly, thereby lessening the likelihood of asset formation.

### Cohabitation and Divorce

Our understanding of cohabitation's effect on income derives, to date, mainly from its significant



relationship to divorce. People who live together before marrying divorce at about twice the rate of couples who do not cohabit before marriage, and four times the rate if they marry someone other than their present partner.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, many of these young adults express uncertainty about their future together.<sup>29</sup> It is both a direct and an indirect factor in reducing average family income.

Today, more Americans than ever before are living together before marriage—an average of 1.5 years.<sup>30</sup> Men and women in their twenties and thirties are living together at much the same rate as before, but with a significant difference: Many more now cohabit rather than marry.

26. Bumpass et al., "The Impact of Family Background."

27. James P. Smith, "Marriage, Assets, and Savings," *RAND Issue Paper DRU-1055-NIA*, 1995.

28. Bumpass et al., "The Impact of Family Background."

29. Larry L. Bumpass, "What's Happening to the Family? Interactions Between Demographic and Institutional Change," Presidential Address to the Population Association of America, *Demography*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (November 1990), pp. 483–498.

30. *Ibid.*



## The Risks and Rates of Divorce

The risk of divorce is tied directly to factors in one's family background and such other factors as the divorce or cohabitation of one's parents<sup>a</sup> and being born to a very young mother.<sup>b</sup>

The research also shows that divorce is linked to level of education. In general, the more educated a person, the less likely he or she will be to divorce. Divorce rates are one-third lower among women who have completed high school, and 80 percent lower among women who have completed college, than among those who have not completed high school.<sup>a,f</sup> Divorce also is linked to lower intelligence scores.<sup>c</sup>

The risk of divorce is greater among marriages of mixed faiths<sup>l</sup> and among those who do not attend religious worship regularly.<sup>d</sup>

The risk doubles for those who live together before marriage, and doubles yet again if the person cohabits with someone other than the current spouse.<sup>e</sup>

Other risks for divorce include a prior divorce;<sup>f</sup> marrying into a step family;<sup>g</sup> getting married as a teen (divorce rates are two-thirds lower among women married after age 25 than among those married as teenagers);<sup>a</sup> and, especially, getting married as a pregnant teenager.<sup>h</sup>

In general, the greater a man's income relative to his spouse's, the higher the marriage rate and the lower the divorce rate. For women, marriage rates are highest in local areas that offer the fewest economic alternatives to marriage.<sup>i</sup> The more women earn, the less attractive marriage appears to be in general.<sup>j</sup> As University of Wisconsin professor Larry Bumpass said in his 1990

presidential address to the Population Association of America, "If marriage assures neither a two parent family for the child nor lifetime economic security for the woman, the importance of marrying to 'legitimate' a birth is much less compelling."<sup>e</sup> This seems to apply to marriages in general, not just to "shotgun" marriages.

The divorce rate doubles for young married couples if the husband is unemployed at any time during the first year of marriage, and is 50 percent higher again if both are unemployed.<sup>a</sup> If the unemployment is due to continuing education, however, there is no increased risk to the marriage.<sup>a</sup> Data from the 1980 census showed that one of every four wives earned more or only slightly less income than their husbands earned. Forty percent of wives who had five or more years of college education earned more or slightly less than their husbands did.<sup>f</sup>

The rate of wives' participation in the marketplace has accompanied a rise in the divorce rate: The number of wives participating in the marketplace jumped from 18 percent in 1950 to 64 percent in 1992.<sup>k</sup> During the same period, the divorce ratio jumped from one in every four marriages to one in every two.<sup>l</sup>

In 1989, Sara McLanahan, professor of sociology at Princeton University, reported that women in troubled marriages were more than twice as likely as men to report that they wanted a separation.<sup>e</sup> Wives working full-time are twice as likely to report having trouble in their marriage if they regard the division of labor in the household unfair.<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Larry L. Bumpass, Teresa Castro Martin, and James A. Sweet, "The Impact of Family Background and Early Marital Factors on Marital Disruption," *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (March 1991), pp. 22-42.

<sup>b</sup>Tom Luster and Harriette Pipes McAdoo, "Factors Related to the Achievement and Adjustment of Young African American Children," *Child Development*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (April 1994), pp. 1080-1094.

<sup>c</sup>Charles Murray, *Income Inequality and IQ* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1998).

<sup>d</sup>Darwin L. Thomas and Gwendolyn C. Henry, "The Religion and Family Connection: Increasing Dialogue in the Social Sciences," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 47 (May 1985), pp. 369-370.

<sup>e</sup>Larry L. Bumpass, "What's Happening to the Family? Interactions Between Demographic and Institutional Change," Presidential Address to the Population Association of America, *Demography*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (November 1990), pp. 483-498.

<sup>f</sup>Paul C. Glick, "Fifty Years of Family Demography: A Record of Social Change," *J. of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 50 (1988), pp. 861-873.

<sup>g</sup>Larry L. Bumpass, James Sweet, and Andrew Cherlin, "The Role of Cohabitation in Declining Rates of Marriage," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 93 (1995), pp. 913-927.

<sup>h</sup>F. Furstenburg, J. Brooks-Gunn, and P. Morgan, *Adolescent Mothers in Later Life* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and "Adolescent Mothers and Their Children in Later Life," *Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (July/August 1987).

<sup>i</sup>Daniel T. Lichter, Felicia B. LeClere, and Diane K. McLaughlin, "Local Marriage Markets and the Marital Behavior of Black and White Women," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (January 1991), pp. 843-867.

<sup>j</sup>Steven L. Nock, "Commitment and Dependency in Marriage," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 57 (1995), pp. 503-514.

<sup>k</sup>June O'Neill, "Can Work and Training Programs Reform Welfare?" *J. of Labor Research*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1993), pp. 265-281.

<sup>l</sup>Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1996*, Table No. 90.

### The Likelihood of Marriage

Children raised in their original family with two parents are more likely to marry as adults, and children of early-marrying parents tend to marry early as adults.<sup>a</sup> Children of low-income married families tend to marry much earlier than children of high-income married families, while those who were raised from early childhood in an intact marriage tend to delay the onset of marriage.<sup>b</sup>

Those who experience the disruption of their parents' marriage tend to marry or cohabit at earlier ages.<sup>c</sup> Grown children whose parents are divorced experience a 3 percent to 6 percent reduction in the likelihood of marriage at any particular age.<sup>a</sup>

Young single mothers are more likely to marry their way out of poverty than are older women, a trend supported by the findings of studies that show that poor single-parent mothers hold mainstream values about marriage.<sup>e</sup> For older mothers, education provides a more likely way out of poverty.<sup>d</sup>

June O'Neill, professor of economics and finance at Baruch College of the City University of New York and former director of the Congressional Budget Office, estimates that about 50 percent to 60 percent of single mothers who go on welfare leave the program within two years; most leave because they marry, while others leave because their income has increased.<sup>f</sup> According to a 1994 report in *American Economic Review*, those who leave welfare because of marriage are the least likely to return.<sup>g</sup>

However, as the evidence shows, early marriage is not the key to achieving stable family income: Couples who marry young or who are expecting a child when they marry have substantially higher levels of separation and divorce than those who marry later or who first marry and then conceive.<sup>a</sup> For example, a study of Baltimore adolescent mothers showed that only 16 percent remained married 18 years later to the father of a child conceived during a teen pregnancy.<sup>h</sup>

Once a person is married, a number of factors inoculate that person against divorce: sharing a religious faith, particularly when accompanied by regular worship;<sup>i</sup> getting married over the age of 25;<sup>j</sup> and completing more education.<sup>k</sup> All of these factors lead to greater economic prosperity.

<sup>a</sup>Arland Thornton, "Influence of the Marital History of Parents on the Marital and Cohabitational Experiences of Children," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (1991), pp. 868–894.

<sup>b</sup>France E. Kobrin and Linda J. Waite, "Effects of Childhood Family Structure on the Transition to Marriage," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 46 (1984), pp. 807–816.

<sup>c</sup>Paul Amato, "Explaining the Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 58 (1996) p. 629.

<sup>d</sup>Julia Heath, "Determinants of Spells of Poverty Following Divorce," *Review of Social Economy*, Vol. 49 (1992), pp. 305–315.

<sup>e</sup>Robin L. Jarrett, "Living Poor: Family Life Among Single Parent, African-American Women," *Social Problems*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1994), pp. 29–49.

<sup>f</sup>June O'Neill, "Can Work and Training Programs Reform Welfare?" *J. of Labor Research*, Vol. 14, No. 3, (1993), pp. 265–281.

<sup>g</sup>Rebecca M. Blank and Patricia Ruggles, "Short-Term Recidivism Among Public-Assistance Recipients," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (May 1994), pp. 49–53.

<sup>h</sup>F. Furstenburg, J. Brooks-Gunn, and P. Morgan, *Adol. Mothers in Later Life* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>i</sup>David B. Larson, Susan S. Larson, and John Gartner, "Families, Relationships and Health," in Danny Wedding, ed., *Behavior and Medicine* (Baltimore, Md.: Mosby Year Book Inc., 1990), pp. 135–147.

<sup>j</sup>Larry L. Bumpass, Teresa Castro Martin, and James A. Sweet, "The Impact of Family Background and Early Marital Factors on Marital Disruption," *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (March 1991), pp. 22–42.

<sup>k</sup>Paul C. Glick, "Fifty Years of Family Demography: A Record of Social Change," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 50 (November 1988), pp. 861–873.

The proportion of marriages preceded by a period of cohabitation increased from 8 percent in the late 1960s to 49 percent in 1985.<sup>31</sup> Over half of Americans in their thirties today live in a cohabiting relationship, and more than half of recent marriages were preceded by cohabitation.<sup>32</sup> Larry Bumpass, a University of Wisconsin–Madison professor in the Center for Demography and Ecology, noted in an address to the Population Association of America that “Sex, living arrangements and parenting depend less on marriage.”<sup>33</sup>

One reason for this change in American values lies with parents who divorce: Their children are more likely to cohabit before marriage as young adults. In 1990, 29 percent of those who had continually married parents had cohabited before their own marriage, but between 54 percent and 62 percent of children from divorced families cohabited before marriage.<sup>34</sup>

Cohabitation doubles the rate of divorce, and the rates double again for those who cohabit before marriage with someone other than a future spouse.<sup>35</sup> Forty percent of cohabiting couples have children in the home, and 12 percent of all cohabiting couples have had a biological child during cohabitation.<sup>36</sup> More than half of adults (56 percent) who live together outside of marriage and beget children and then marry will divorce. About 80 percent of children who have lived in a household with cohabiting parents will spend some of their childhood in a single-parent home.<sup>37</sup>

Given this high level of disruption, cohabitation can be a good marker of future weakness in house-

hold income and the economic and social situation of children in these unions. The problem is further aggravated by the growing cultural acceptance of what used to be described as “illicit” relationships. Larry Bumpass found that by the early 1990s, only 20 percent of young adults disapproved of pre-marital sex, even for 18-year-olds, and that only one-sixth explicitly disapproved of cohabitation under any circumstances.<sup>38</sup>

## OUT-OF-WEDLOCK BIRTHS AND POVERTY

Today, social science research broadly characterizes the children who are most likely to attain a good income as adults: They have parents who are married; they finish school, get a job, abstain from intercourse until marriage, and marry before having children of their own. But family structure plays an even larger role in children’s future prosperity than those who have formulated public policy over the past 30 years have been willing to admit.

Having a baby out of wedlock usually derails progress toward achieving a stable family structure and income. Teenage out-of-wedlock births rose from 15 percent of all teen births in 1960 to 76 percent in 1994.<sup>39</sup> Fewer than one-third of those who have a baby before reaching age 18 complete high school, compared with the 50 percent completion rate for teens of similar backgrounds who avoid pregnancy.<sup>40</sup>

It is not that the number of babies born to teens has changed; it is that marriage within this group

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. Thornton, “Influence of the Marital History of Parents.”

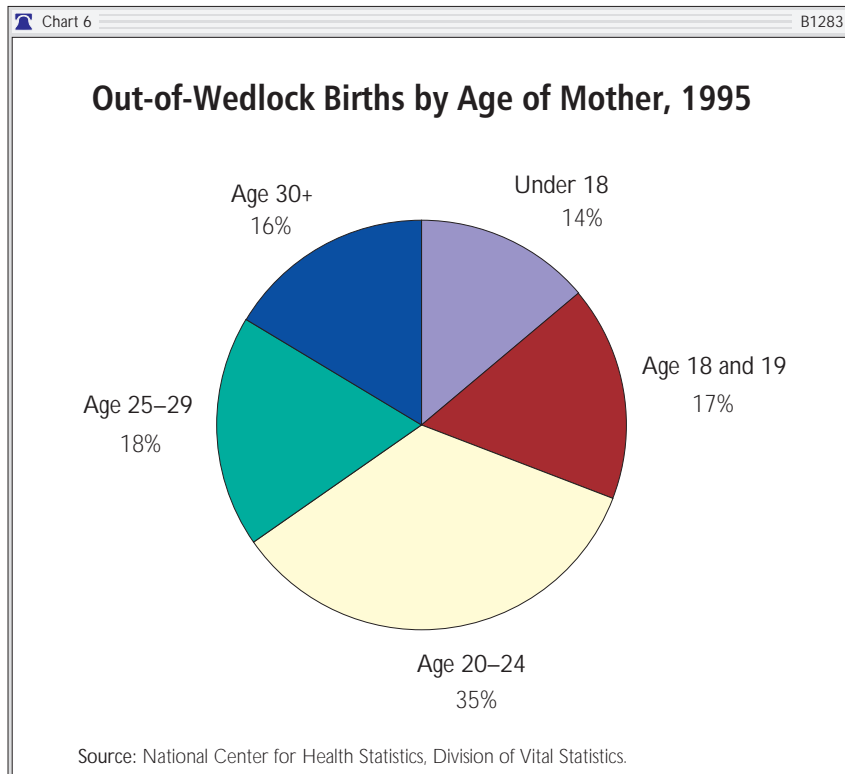
35. Bumpass, “What’s Happening to the Family?”

36. Bumpass et al., “The Role of Cohabitation in Declining Rates of Marriage.”

37. Bumpass et al., “The Impact of Family Background.”

38. Bumpass, “What’s Happening to the Family?”

39. S. J. Ventura, S. C. Clarke, and T. J. Matthews, “Advance Report of Final Natality Statistics, 1994,” *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 44, No. 11 (June 24, 1996), Supplement, pp. 1–88.



times higher for second out-of-wedlock births. (See Charts 6 and 7.) The increase in these births among older women accompanies a decline in teenage out-of-wedlock births and abortions.

Two very different changes in American society may explain this decline: the rise in teenage virginity<sup>43</sup> and an increase in the use of contraceptives. The editor of *Teen People* magazine recently reported very high interest among teenagers in the subject of virginity.<sup>44</sup> Access to the specific implant contraceptives Depo-Provera and Norplant also has been associated (but not documented as yet) with the reduction in the number of out-of-wedlock teen births.<sup>45</sup> Aside from the avoidance of pregnancy, the decision not to

has vanished. In addition, almost half of the mothers of out-of-wedlock children will go on to have another child out of wedlock.<sup>41</sup>

abstain from sex is linked to habits of risk-taking related to alcohol and drug abuse, school dropout rates, and crime.<sup>46</sup>

The vast majority of out-of-wedlock births occur to mature adults age 20 and older, and more out-of-wedlock births occur to women over 30 than to teens below age 18;<sup>42</sup> the number is eight

More than any other group, teenage mothers who give birth outside of marriage spend more of their lives as single parents.<sup>47</sup> Not surprisingly,

40. V. J. Hotz, S. W. McElroy, and S. G. Sanders, "The Impacts of Teenage Childbearing on the Mothers and the Consequences of Those Impacts for Government," in R. A. Maynard, ed., *Kids having Kids: Economic Costs and Social Consequences of Teen Pregnancy* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1997), pp. 55-94.

41. National Center for Health Statistics/Centers for Disease Control, data from forthcoming study by Robert Rector of The Heritage Foundation.

42. *Ibid.*

43. "Trends in Sexual Risk Behaviors Among High School Students—United States, 1991-1997," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, Vol. 47, No. 36 (September 18, 1998).

44. Amy Paulsen, Executive Editor, *Teen People* magazine, in address to the annual meeting of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, April 28, 1998.

45. Stephanie Ventura, National Center for Health Statistics, address at The Heritage Foundation, June 23, 1998, and Jacqueline Darroch, Vice President, Alan Guttmacher Institute, April 29, 1999.

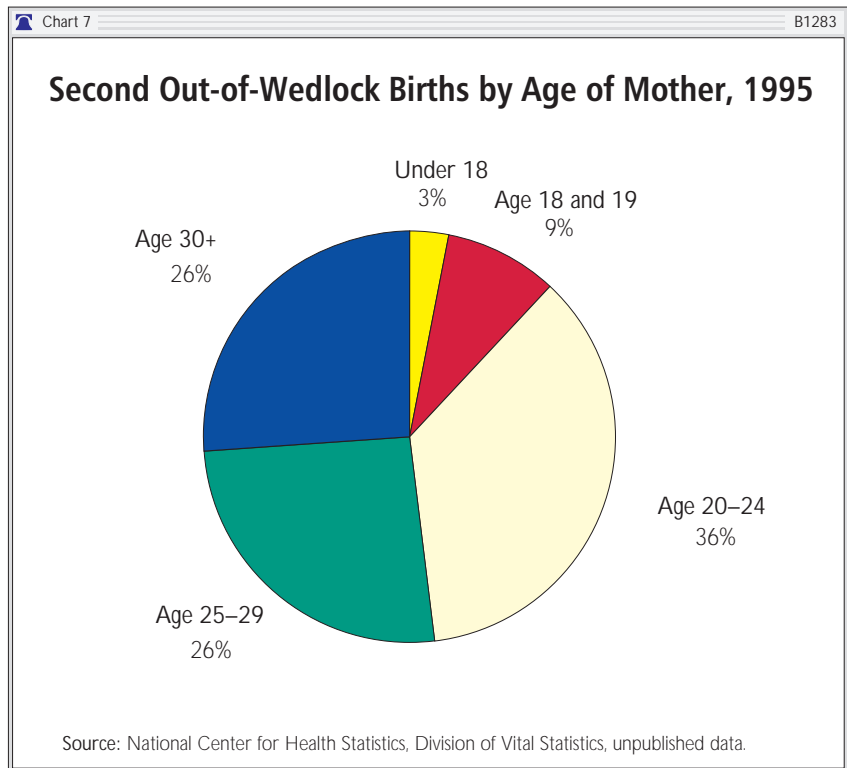
46. D. P. Orr, M. Beiter, and G. Ingersoll, "Premature Sexual Activity as an Indicator of Psychosocial Risk," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 87 (February 1991), pp. 141-147.

47. Hotz et al., "The Impacts of Teenage Childbearing on the Mothers and the Consequences of those Impacts for Government."

their children spend more time in poverty than do the children of any other family structure.<sup>48</sup>

A single-parent family background and the poverty that usually accompanies it render children twice as likely to drop out of high school, 2.5 times as likely to become out-of-wedlock teen parents, and 1.4 times as likely to be unemployed.<sup>49</sup> These teens miss more days of school, have lower educational aspirations, receive lower grades, and eventually divorce more often as adults.<sup>50</sup> They are almost twice as likely to exhibit antisocial behavior as adults; 25 percent to 50 percent more likely to manifest such behavioral problems as anxiety, depression, hyperactivity, or dependence; two to three times more likely to need psychiatric care; and much more likely to commit suicide as teenagers.<sup>51</sup>

Mark Testa, a professor in the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration, conducted studies that show the linkage between family background, education, and work habits and out-of-wedlock pregnancy. According to Testa, "premarital pregnancy risks are significantly higher among single women who are not in school or [are] out of work and who have dropped out of high school. Being raised in a family that received welfare also appears to raise the risk of premarital pregnancy."<sup>52</sup>



The research of Yuko Matsushashi of the University of California at San Diego and his colleagues shows that few mothers (14 percent) were living with both parents at the time of their first out-of-wedlock baby's conception, and fewer still (2 percent) were living with both parents at the time of their second baby's conception.<sup>53</sup> In other words, single-parent households become much more entrenched with the second baby, and fewer of these mothers stay in school, thereby lessening their chances of attaining a good income in the future.<sup>54</sup>

48. *Ibid.*

49. S. S. McLanahan, "The Consequences of Single Motherhood," *The American Prospect*, Vol. 18 (1994), pp. 48-58.

50. K. A. Moore, "Age at First Childbirth and Later Poverty," *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1993), pp. 393-422.

51. Robert Rector, "Combating Family Disintegration, Crime, and Dependence: Welfare Reform and Beyond," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 983, April 8, 1994.

52. Mark Testa and Marilyn Krogh, *Nonmarital Parenthood, Male Joblessness and AFDC Participation in Inner-City Chicago*, University of Chicago, prepared for Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, November 1990.

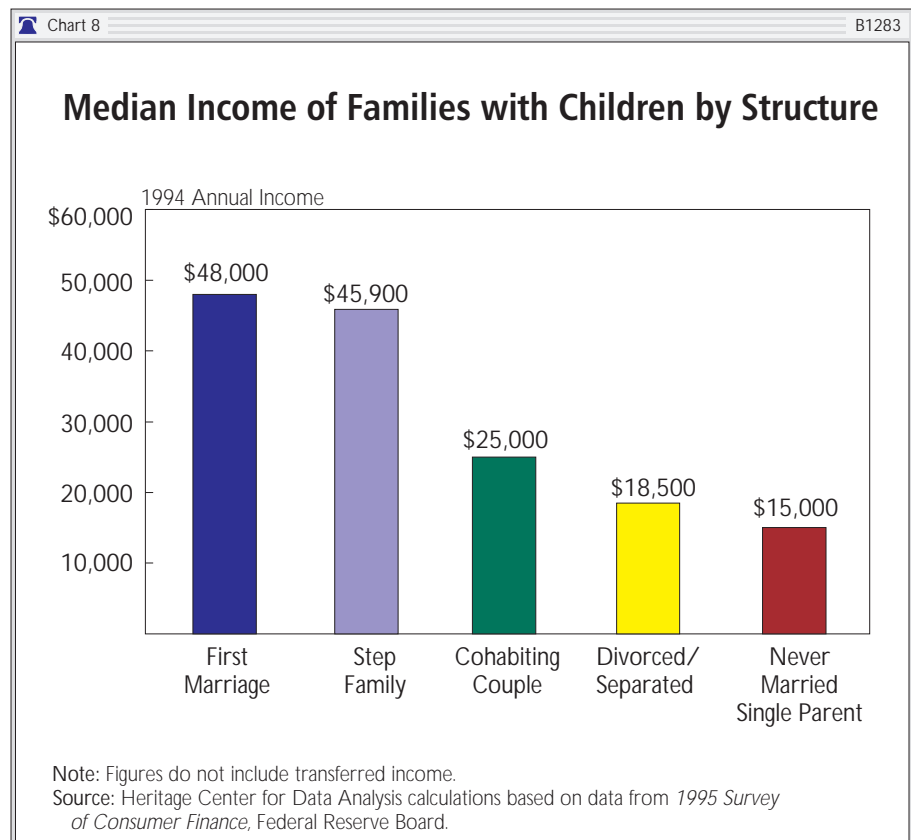
53. Yuko Matsushashi et al., "Is Repeat Pregnancy in Adolescents a 'Planned' Affair?" *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*, Vol. 10, No. 5 (September 1989), pp. 409-412.

Nearly 80 percent of men do not marry the teenage mothers of their children.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, cohabitation and cooperation in some form generally does occur between biological parents. About 40 percent of mothers plan to care for their first baby with the father of the baby, but not to marry him.<sup>56</sup> Many more mothers of second out-of-wedlock babies plan to take care of their babies alone than do the mothers of first out-of-wedlock babies, and fewer of them live with their own parents. The downward economic spiral accelerates.

Typically, the household income of those who have out-of-wedlock children in their teens is low. Over 75 percent will be on welfare within five years.<sup>57</sup> These women comprise more than half of all mothers on welfare.<sup>58</sup> The average family income for children who lived with their never-married mothers was only about 40 percent of the family income for children who lived with either a divorced or a widowed mother.<sup>59</sup> The family background of most teenage out-of-wedlock mothers includes such factors as early age at marriage (or cohabitation) for the teen mother's own parents and lower educational levels for both the teen mother's parents and the teen mother herself.<sup>60</sup>

## THE FAMILY STRUCTURE OF CHILD POVERTY

As Chart 8 shows, the relationship between poverty and the absence of intact marriages is indeed very strong. The continuous cooperation and lifelong commitment involved in marriage have much to do with significant income differences in households with children. For example:



54. *Ibid.*

55. Maynard, *Kids Having Kids: Economic Costs and Social Consequences of Teen Pregnancy*.

56. Matsushashi et al., "Is Repeat Pregnancy in Adolescents a 'Planned' Affair?"

57. J. Jacobson and R. Maynard, "Unwed Mothers and Long-Term Dependency," Paper presented at American Enterprise Institute Conference on Welfare Reform, September 1995.

58. K. A. Moore, D. R. Morrison, C. Blumenthal, M. L. Daly, and R. Bennett, "Data on Teenage Childbearing in the United States," *ChildTrends*, January 1993.

59. Susan M. Bianchi, "America's Children: Mixed Prospects," *Population Bulletin*, Vol. 45 (1990), pp. 3-41.

60. Bumpass et al., "The Impact of Family Background."

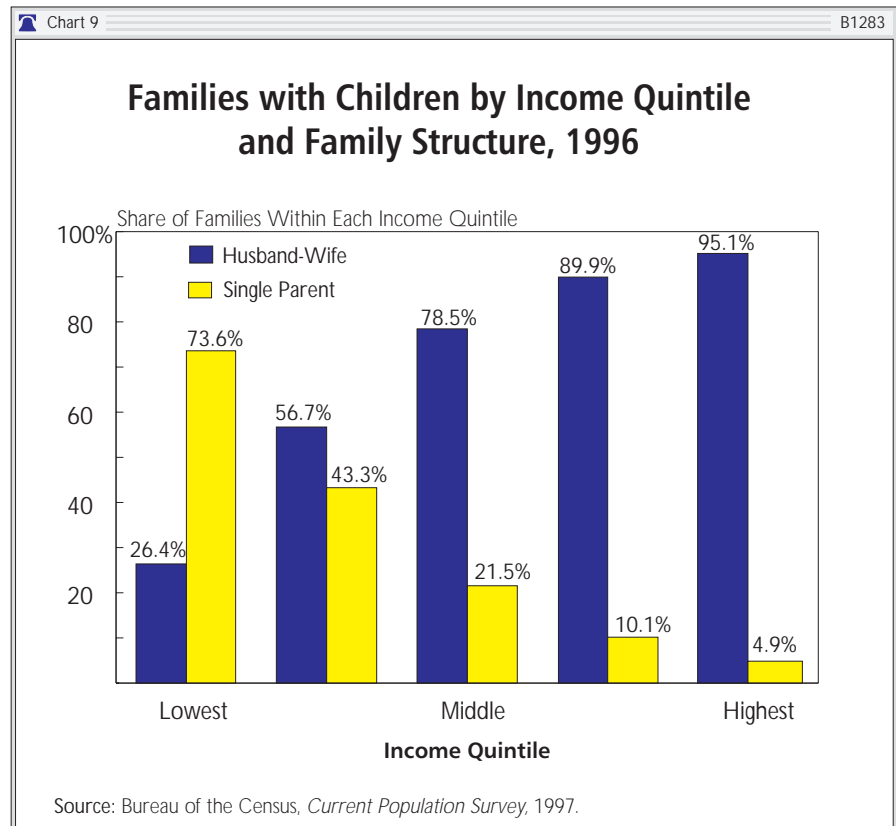
- **The vast majority of children who live with a single parent are in households in the bottom 20 percent of earnings.** Specifically, about 74 percent of families with children in the lowest income quintile are headed by single parents.<sup>61</sup> Conversely, 95 percent of families with children in the highest quintile of income are headed by married parents.<sup>62</sup> (See Chart 9.)
- **Children living with a single mother are six times more likely to live in poverty than are children whose parents are married.**<sup>63</sup> (See Chart 10.) As this analysis will show, family background also can be linked with less education and fewer hours worked, on average, when the child grows up.
- **Over 12.5 million children in 1994 lived in single-parent families that earned less than \$15,000 per year.** Only 3 million such children lived with families that had annual incomes greater than \$30,000.<sup>64</sup> (See Chart 11.)

## WHY FAMILY STRUCTURE AFFECTS INCOME

The research discussed above clearly indicates that family structure has much to do with income levels and asset building, both of which lead to economic prosperity. This section will explain why this occurs.

A family's income is used to finance immediate needs and, if it is sufficient, may allow the family to save for future needs. There are two elements in the amount of income received: the dollar value of hours worked and the number of hours worked. These in turn are affected by, among other things, the parents' education level (see Chart 12) and work habits that typically are formed in the early years.

The marriage of the parents has much to do with a child's educational attainment and work ethic. The relationship can be expressed as an equation:  $\text{Income} = (\text{education attained}) \times (\text{work ethic}) \times (\text{unity of family structure})$ .

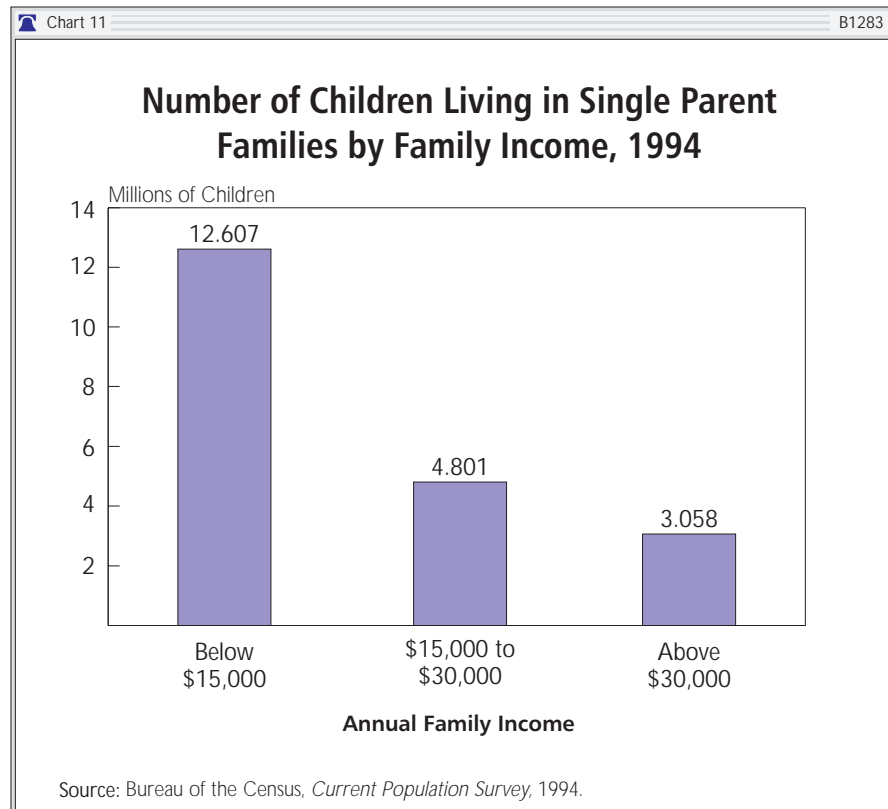
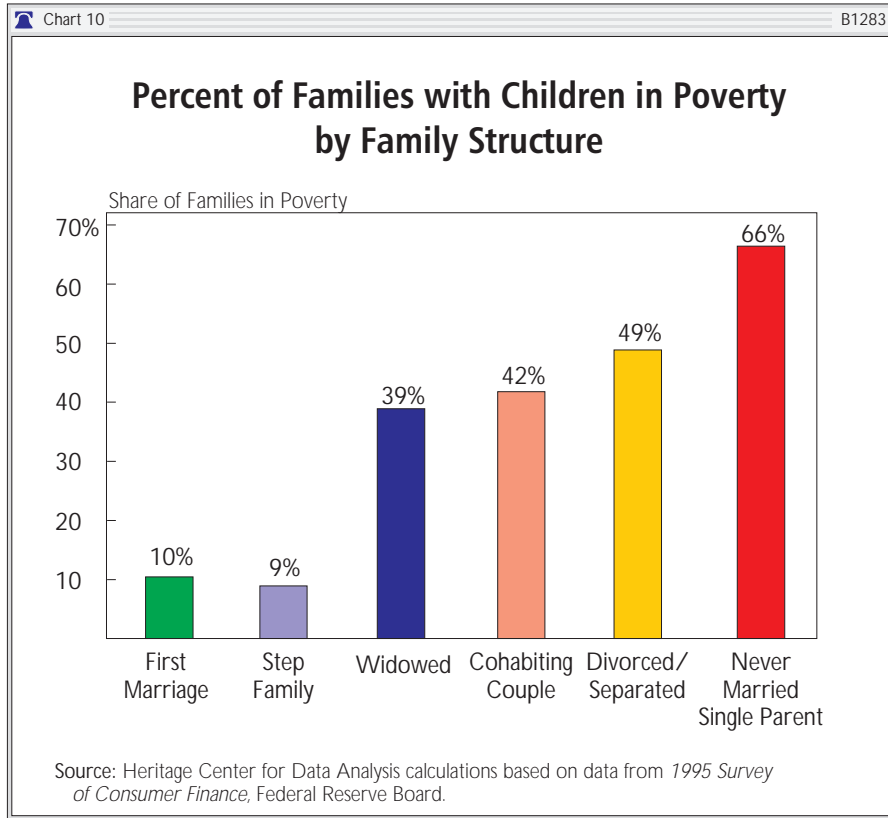


61. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey*, 1997.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Major reservations exist about the reliability of readily available Census Bureau data on poverty (see, for example, Robert Rector, "The Myth of Widespread American Poverty," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1221, September 18, 1998); in the absence of alternatives, however, the author has used these data.

64. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey*, 1994.





## Marriage, Education, and Income

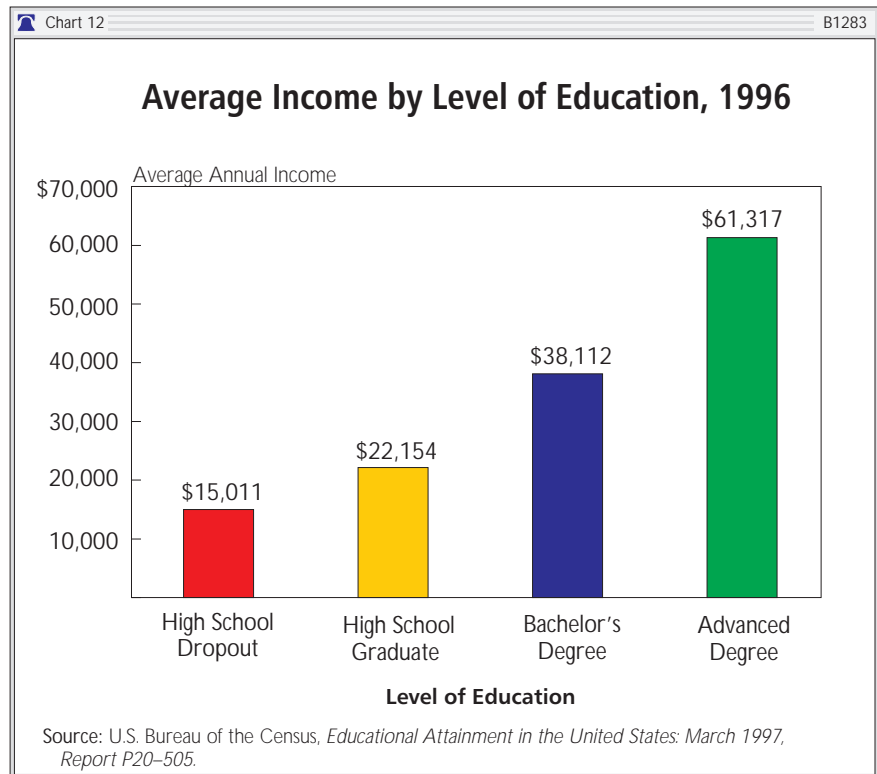
Of course, one does not obtain an adequate and steady income just by marrying. Increasing the number of hours worked at a job valued by the marketplace will provide more income. The number of hours worked is linked directly to educational achievement and family structure. (See Charts 13 and 14.) Families whose members have lower levels of education normally will have to work longer to reach a modest level of financial security than do those whose members achieve higher levels of education.

However, people who are not married and have less education work the fewest hours per year. In general, married couples have higher levels of education and work longer (see Charts 15 and 16), and make sure that their children achieve higher levels of education.<sup>65</sup>

Although the income of a family household depends on the educational level of parents, it is the parents' *income* rather than their *level of education* that predicts more accurately the level of education their children will achieve.<sup>66</sup> In general, children with high-income parents receive more education than do children of lower-income parents.<sup>67</sup> But higher income is less likely without

marriage (see Chart 8), and poverty is much more likely without it.

Education gives the child from a high-income family a great advantage. The federal government's Panel Study of Income Dynamics showed the large economic gains that can be realized by completing high school, both in the level of wages earned and in the longer hours per week that a person will work.<sup>68</sup> But family background accounts for at least half the variance in educational attainment.<sup>69</sup> Students from intact families score more positively on all measures than do those from both step and single-parent families.<sup>70</sup> Adolescents who do not



65. Susan J. Popkin, "Welfare: Views from the Bottom," *Social Problems*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (February 1990), pp. 64-79.

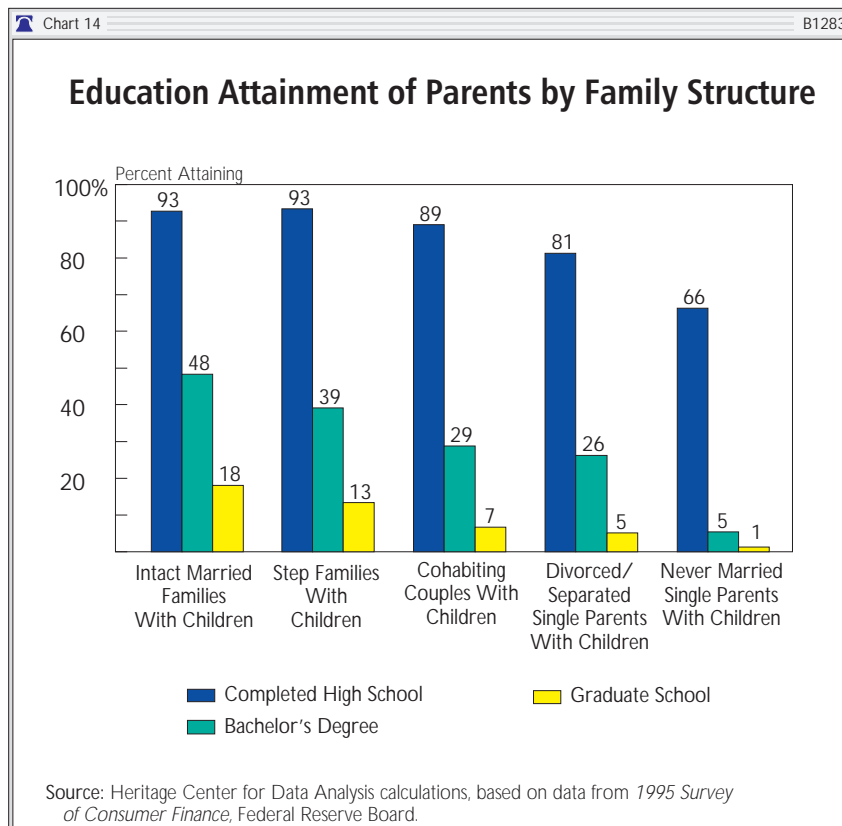
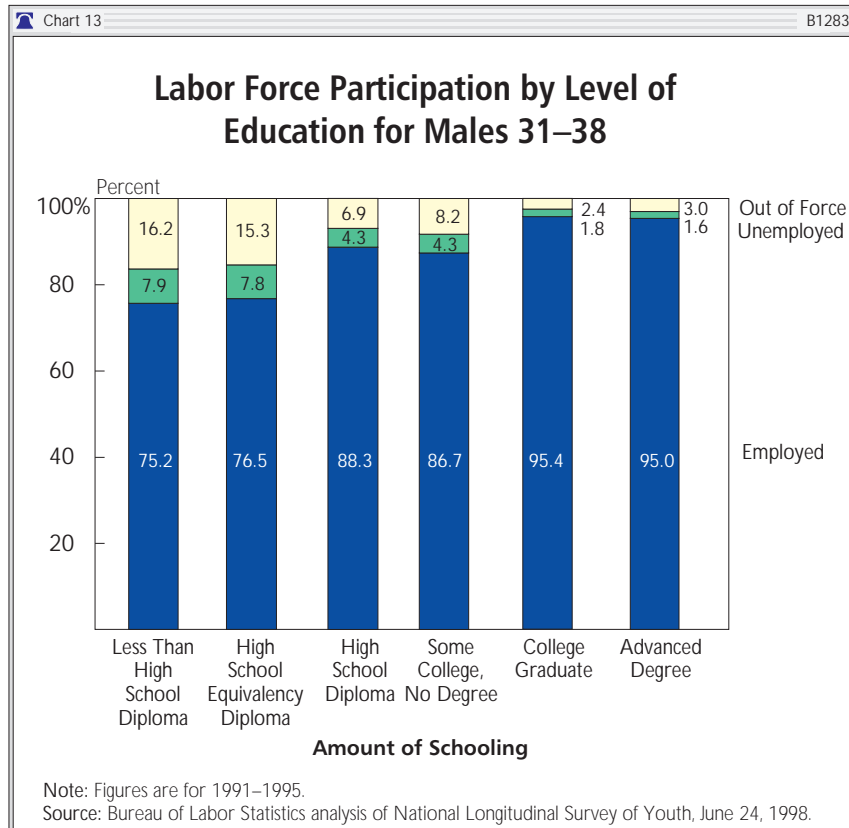
66. M. S. Hill and G. Duncan, "Parental Family Income and the Socioeconomic Attainment of Children," *Social Science Research*, Vol. 16 (1987), pp. 39-73.

67. Martha S. Hill and Jodi R. Sandfort, "Effects of Childhood Poverty on Productivity Later in Life: Implications for Public Policy," *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 17, Nos. 1 & 2 (1995), pp. 91-126.

68. *Ibid.*

69. Hsiang-Hui, Daphne Kuo, and Robert M. Hauser, "Trends in Family Effects on the Education of Black and White Brothers," *Sociology of Education*, Vol. 68 (1995), pp. 136-160.

70. Darin R. Featherstone, Bert P. Cundick, and Larry C. Jensen, "Differences in School Behavior and Achievement Between Children from Intact, Reconstituted, and Single-Parent Families," *Adolescence*, Vol. 27, No. 105 (1992), pp. 1-12.



## Why Measuring the Risk of "Poverty" Is Really Measuring "Family"

Many family conditions are seen as factors that increase the likelihood of poverty. Regarding risk factors, Tom Luster and Harriett McAdoo of Michigan State University summed up the findings of 17 eminent researchers in the field in 1994 by noting: "Over the past 15 years, research on diverse samples of children has shown that children who are exposed to several risk factors simultaneously tend to experience learning or behavioral problems."<sup>a</sup> Poor families are more likely to have multiple risk factors.

Jean Brooks-Gunn of Teachers College at Columbia University and her colleagues estimated that in 1995, only 2 percent of poor families had no risk factors, while 35 percent experienced six or more. By contrast, among families that were not poor, 19 percent experienced no risk factors and 5 percent experienced six or more risk factors.<sup>b</sup> Many of these risks are measures of conditions linked to broken families.

The instrument used most widely in social science research to assess risk factors is the "HOME" measurement, used in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). The factors in the HOME scale below can be shown to be associated with the presence or absence of marriage and with family structure, as noted within the parentheses. References cited in the footnotes for each factor are studies that illustrate the correlation between the risk and family structure.

The HOME assessment factors are:

- Low birth weight (most prevalent in out-of-wedlock births).<sup>c</sup>
- Low neonatal health index score (most prevalent in out-of-wedlock births).<sup>c</sup>

- Unemployment of the household head (least likely in a two-parent family).<sup>d</sup>
- Mother has less than a high school education (less likely if parents are married).<sup>e</sup>
- Mother has a verbal comprehension score below the 25th percentile (associated strongly with educational level, which is linked extensively to her parent's family structure).<sup>f</sup>
- High maternal depression score (less likely if married).<sup>g</sup>
- More than three stressful life events (less likely if married).<sup>h</sup>
- Teenagers at time of child's birth (most unlikely to marry).<sup>f</sup>
- Low social support network (less likely if married and have married parents).<sup>i</sup>
- Father absent at time of interview.
- Child-to-adult ratio is greater than 2:1 (50 percent less likely if married, since marriage doubles the number of adults).
- Simplistic categorical view of child development.
- Of ethnic minority<sup>b</sup> (two married parents are less likely in African-American and Hispanic households).<sup>j</sup>

Rather than being immutable conditions, many of these risk factors are the result of individual choices, particularly regarding marriage. Restoring marriage among the poor would create home environments that are more likely to reduce these factors significantly. But this will require a coordinated effort by the public, private, and parochial sectors of society.

<sup>a</sup>Tom Luster and Harriette Pipes McAdoo, "Factors Related to the Achievement and Adjustment of Young African American Children," *Child Development*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (April 1994), pp. 1080-1094.

<sup>b</sup>Jean Brooks-Gunn, Pamel Kato Klevbanov, and Fron-ruey Liaw, "Learning, Physical and Emotional Environment of the Home in the Context of Poverty: The Infant Health and Development Program," *Children & Youth Services Review*, Vol. 17, (1995), pp. 251-276.

<sup>c</sup>Nicholas Eberstadt, *The Tyranny of Numbers* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1995), pp. 58-59.

<sup>d</sup>Hiroshi Ono, "Husbands' and Wives' Resources and Marital Dissolution," *J. of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 60 (1998), p. 678.

<sup>e</sup>Janet B. Hardy et al., "Self-Sufficiency at Ages 27-33 Years: Factors Present Between Birth and 18 Years That Predict Educational Attainment Among Children Born to Inner-City Families," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 99 (1997), pp. 80-87.

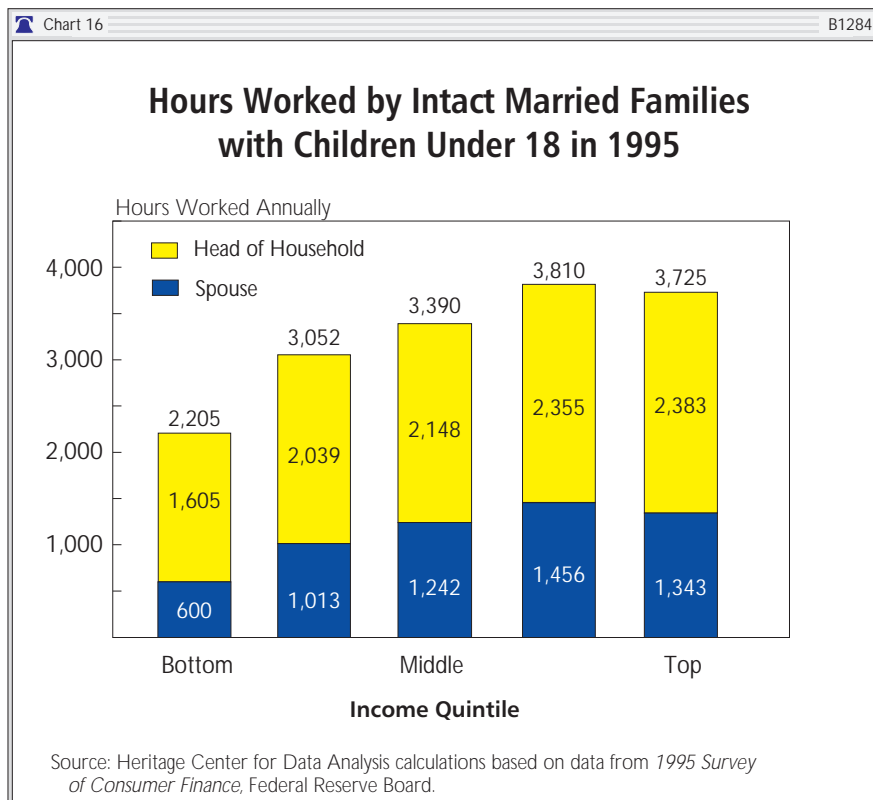
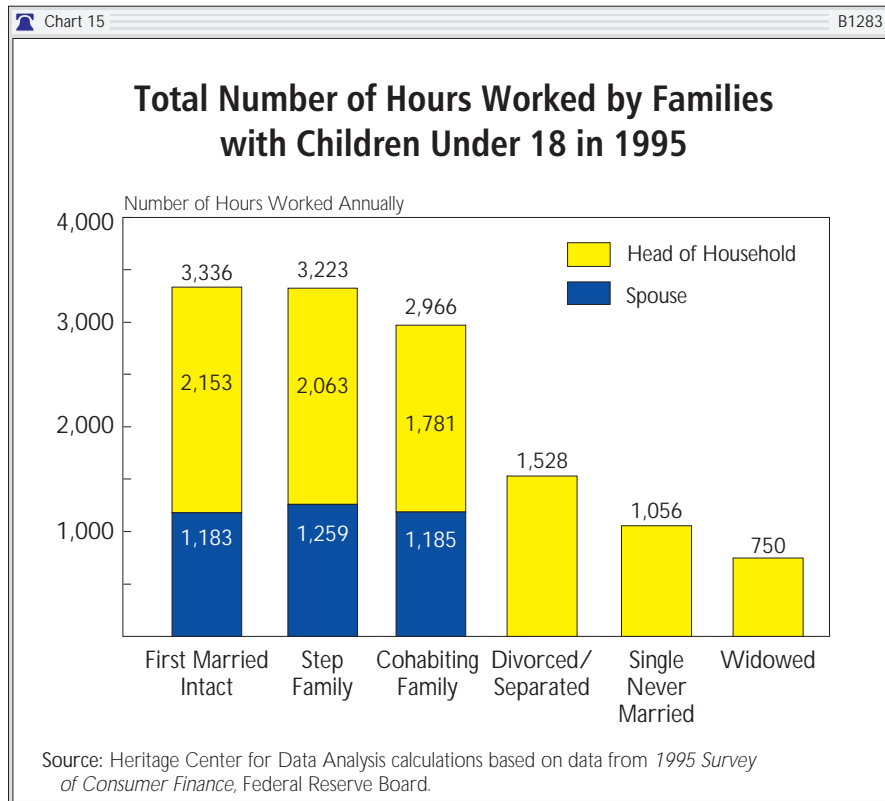
<sup>f</sup>Patrick F. Fagan, "Rising Illegitimacy: America's Social Catastrophe," Heritage Foundation *FYI* No. 19/94, June 29, 1994.

<sup>g</sup>Allan V. Horowitz, Helene Raskin White, and Sandra Howell-White, "Becoming Married and Mental Health: A Longitudinal Study of a Cohort of Young Adults," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 58 (1996), pp. 900-901.

<sup>h</sup>Susan Kennedy et al., "Immunological Consequences of Acute and Chronic Stressors: Mediating Role of Interpersonal Relationships," *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, Vol. 61 (1988), pp. 77-85, and Robin W. Simon, "Parental Role Strains, Salience of Parental Identity and Gender Differences in Psychological Distress," *J. of Health and Social Behavior*, Vol. 33 (1992), pp. 25-35.

<sup>i</sup>Jan E. Stets, "Cohabiting and Aggression: The Role of Social Isolation," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 53 (August 1991), pp. 669-680, and Sylvie Drapeau and Camil Bouchard, "Support Networks and Adjustment Among 6 to 16-Year-Olds from Maritally Disrupted and Intact Families," *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, Vol. 19 (1993), pp. 75-94.

<sup>j</sup>U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Report*, No. P20-514, March 1998, Table 2.



live with both natural parents are at significantly greater risk of leaving high school before graduating.<sup>71</sup> And the number of years of education received translates into a better first job and better jobs later at higher salaries.<sup>72</sup>

### Marriage, Work Ethic, and Income

A significant portion of two-parent families have moved out of the poverty range because both parents work,<sup>73</sup> which also increases—and in many cases doubles—the total number of hours worked within the household. Among America's poor, there has been a significant shift in the number of hours worked per household, which indicates that much of the disparity in young men's economic status is concentrated in the number of hours worked.<sup>74</sup>

In 1960, nearly two-thirds of households in the bottom quintile of income were headed by individuals who worked—primarily married fathers. By 1991, this figure had fallen to around one-third, and only 11 percent of these households were headed by someone who worked full-time throughout the year.<sup>75</sup>

The total number of hours worked in married households has increased significantly over the past 40 years. According to former Congressional Budget Office Director June O'Neill, in 1950 only 18 percent of married mothers with children under 18 worked outside the home. By 1975, 41 percent of married mothers worked and that

proportion reached 64 percent in 1992. Yet mothers on welfare appear to work little—only 7 percent report any employment.<sup>76</sup> (These data were collected before the enforcement of the Welfare Reform Act (1996).)

Not only are those in the lowest quintile generally working fewer hours than their counterparts were in the 1950s and 1960s, but they are doing so despite a national family trend in the rising number of hours worked.

A reverse trend accompanies the disappearance of marriage: The number of hours worked in the family household declines. Present-day single heads of households are working fewer hours than the married heads of poor households in the 1950s (typically, married men). At the same time, married couples are increasing the total number of hours worked, and although there are some unwelcome consequences from this increase in working hours in married households, there is no doubt that it has increased the number of families exiting a life of poverty.

**Welfare's Impact on the Number of Hours Worked.** Welfare payments have had a predictable if pernicious effect on the overall response of recipients to marriage as well as work.<sup>77</sup> Consider data from the past decade. Again, according to former CBO Director June O'Neill:

Findings from the Seattle–Denver Income Maintenance Experiment (U.S. Office of Income Security Policy, 1983) show that

71. Herbert Zimiles and Valerie E. Lee, "Adolescent Family Structure and Educational Progress," *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (1991), pp. 314–320.

72. Hill and Sandfort, "Effects of Childhood Poverty on Productivity Later in Life."

73. David M. Betson and Robert T. Michael, "Why So Many Children Are Poor," *The Future of Children*, Vol. 7 (1997), pp. 25–39.

74. Mary Corcoran, Roger Gordon, Debroah Laren, and Gary Solon, "The Association Between Men's Economic Status and Their Family and Community Origins," *Journal of Human Resources*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (1991), pp. 575–601.

75. Rector, "Combating Family Disintegration, Crime, and Dependence."

76. June O'Neill, "Can Work and Training Programs Reform Welfare?" *Journal of Labor Research*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Summer 1993), pp. 265–281.

77. Duncan et al., "Welfare Dependence Within and Across Generations," and Ann M. Hill and June O'Neill, *Underclass Behaviors in the United States: Measurement and Analysis of Determinants*, Baruch College, City University of New York, August 1993.

female heads of families responded to income guarantees by significantly reducing their work effort. Other studies have found that women are less likely to work in states with high levels of AFDC benefits.<sup>78</sup>

Historically, O'Neill found, higher welfare benefit levels have had dramatic negative effects on the behavior of young men, especially young African-American males, by reducing their participation in the workforce and increasing the likelihood that they will father a child or children out of wedlock.<sup>79</sup> Sheldon Danziger, professor at the School of Social Policy at the University of Michigan, concluded in 1986 that because only one-third of the poor were expected to work, most poor households would not benefit from an improved economy.<sup>80</sup> Thus, even when the national economy improved, welfare families who were disconnected from a market-based economy remained stuck in poverty because their income was not connected to the number of hours worked or to a rise in the hourly value of their labor that is commonly connected with a more robust economy.

**The Value of Effort.** If the level of education and the number of hours worked are important to a child's future income, the acquisition of a positive work ethic is vital. If a child's parents already espouse a belief in effort, the child has a much better chance of believing in the positive results of effort.

For some time, social scientists have presented "personal effort believers" as typically successful, competent, and emotionally stable people. Their opposites are "external pressure believers," who tend not to make long-term plans or to think of ways to control or change their circumstances since they do not believe their efforts will really matter. The latter group generally is far less successful.<sup>81</sup>

Martin Seligman, professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and president of the American Psychological Association, is world-renowned for his work on changing external pressure believers into personal effort believers and on learned optimism and learned helplessness. His work on "Learned Efficacy/Learned Optimism" shows that the coaching children receive from their parents and teachers as they tackle the early and tougher tasks of life has everything to do with deep-seated beliefs they acquire regarding effort (beyond their own awareness).<sup>82</sup>

Learned helplessness also can be acquired in the early years,<sup>83</sup> with such beliefs frequently having taken hold by age six.<sup>84</sup> Many of the children who are external pressure believers jeopardize their economic future in adolescence by dropping out of school or getting pregnant before marriage.<sup>85</sup>

The presence or absence of a belief in effort, then, has much to do with poverty or attaining a desired income level. Middle-class children are more likely to pick up belief in effort from their parents and teachers. Children raised on welfare, in many cases, have the opposite experience.<sup>86</sup>

78. June O'Neill, "Transfers and Poverty: Cause and/or Effect?" *Cato Journal*, Vol. 6, No.1 (Spring/Summer 1986), pp. 55–76.

79. Hill and O'Neill, *Underclass Behaviors in the United States*.

80. Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk, "Do Rising Tides Lift All Boats? The Impact of Secular and Cyclical Changes on Poverty," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (May 1986), pp. 405–410.

81. Morley D. Glick, "Transgenerational Welfare Dependency," *Journal of Contemporary Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Summer 1981), pp. 31–41.

82. See Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

83. Donna S. Johnson, "Naturally Acquired Learned Helplessness: The Relationship of School Failure to Achievement Behavior, Attributions, and Self-Concept," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (April 1981), pp. 174–180.

84. Duncan et al., "Welfare Dependence Within and Across Generations."

85. OECD, *Factors Affecting the Labor Force Participation of Lone Mothers in the United States*.

The longer a person is on welfare, the greater the erosion of the belief in effort.<sup>87</sup> Some welfare recipients report that they are aware of the bad effects welfare has on attitudes within their families, but having a low belief in their own abilities, they see few viable alternatives.<sup>88</sup> In other words, they lose confidence.

As the research cited above shows, parents' achievement in the marketplace leads to achievement by their children in the schoolroom. The earlier the parents pass on a belief in effort, the longer and deeper the educational and economic benefits to the child will be.

### WHAT LEADERS IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS SHOULD DO

The overwhelming evidence of recent social science research clearly demonstrates that the pathway to a stable, secure income and family life for children starts with married parents. But the child must get a good education, develop sound work ethics, and abstain from sexual relationships before marrying and having children. Each departure from these traditional norms decreases a child's chance of achieving a decent and secure income. Yet another factor that is associated with staying married is regular worship by both married parents.<sup>89</sup>

In the past, many poverty experts neglected and even denigrated these influences. They argued that providing money and a "helping hand" would be more than enough to overcome the effects of broken families on children.

In reality, however, strong cultural norms are needed to reinforce behaviors that make a positive

difference for the poor. For instance, the incidence of cohabitation, which has deleterious effects for the family and community life of America's poor children, cannot be changed if America's professionals and role models continue to accept it as normal. The sins of the social and economic elite are visited most dramatically on the poor.

The old liberal nostrum that poverty in one generation is caused by poverty in the previous generation is both simplistic and largely wrong. Poverty is the result of many factors, but most have to do with marriage, sex before marriage, living together outside of marriage, and divorce after marriage. It is no coincidence that marriage has all but disappeared among America's very poor (see Chart 9) and has been replaced with serial cohabitation. This breakdown in stable families burdens women and children first, but it also burdens the larger community.<sup>90</sup> Such family structure chaos effectively robs children of future economic independence.

For far too long, the federal government effectively supported family instability. The 104th Congress changed some of that by reforming welfare to workfare and devolving much of the welfare program back to the states. The results from the states thus far have been impressive. For example, Wisconsin, which has had its welfare reforms in place the longest, has achieved a 90 percent reduction in its welfare rolls.<sup>91</sup>

Today, Americans understand that the best federal remedies are not bigger handouts, but support for the family—one of the foundations of society—and the philosophy that income should be tied to effort. Congress, the states, and local communities can play important roles in

86. Glicken, "Transgenerational Welfare Dependency."

87. Susan J. Popkin, "Welfare: Views from the Bottom," *Social Problems*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (February 1990), pp. 64–79. See also Glicken, "Transgenerational Welfare Dependency."

88. Popkin, "Welfare: Views from the Bottom."

89. Larson et al., "Families, Relationships and Health."

90. Patrick F. Fagan, "The Child Abuse Crisis: The Disintegration of Marriage, Family, and the American Community," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1115, June 3, 1997.

91. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Administration for Children and Families," April 1999.

rebuilding the family to ensure that America's children escape the poverty trap and reach their full potential. Specifically, Congress should:

- **Eliminate the marriage penalty in the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) program and all other poverty programs.** Serious anti-poverty policy must include as a goal the restoration of marriage. Yet one of the heaviest penalties against marriage is the EITC, which is targeted specifically to those income groups in which marriage is most absent.
- **Require all welfare recipients to work in return for benefits.** Every person who seeks public assistance, other than the totally disabled and possibly mothers with very young infants, should be required to work in exchange for that assistance. Welfare without work distorts the work ethic by giving something for nothing, and these families transmit this distortion to their children. Instead of a five-year limit on welfare, Congress should require work by all recipients immediately. Welfare thus would become the first rung on the ladder of full-time work.
- **Demand that the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) ensure that the federal statistics delivery system includes accurate data on marriage and divorce.** At present, divorce data—especially data on the number of children affected by divorce each year—are not available from the federal statistical system generally or the NCHS and Bureau of the Census specifically. What is available has come from the Federal Reserve Board, an unlikely but welcome source. Although this information is probably the most powerful for explaining many of the outcomes of federal programs that are being measured, such departments as Health and Human Services, Education, and Justice fail to gather family structure data. A thorough review of all federal social surveys should be undertaken.
- **Direct more federal dollars to researching the effects of marriage on children and income.** For over 30 years, Congress poured hundreds of millions of tax dollars into “family research,” yet very little has been directed toward understanding the benefits of or strengthening marriage. Given the decline of marriage among the urban poor and the increase in violence, addiction, school drop-outs, and out-of-wedlock births, as well as the growing divorce rate among the middle and upper classes, a study of marital stability and its relationship to these societal problems should become a federal social policy priority. Congress, for example, could mandate in the budget that a serious portion of the funds of the National Institute of Child Health and Development and the National Institute of Mental Health be directed toward studying marriage. Congress could instruct the National Science Foundation to request that the next round of research in the Panel Study of Income Dynamics at the University of Michigan be devoted to gathering detailed marital history on all respondents, and that funding be directed to that end, so that the impact of family structure on income can be studied by the social science community in depth.
- **Consider funding demonstration grants to facilitate current efforts that yield progress in reducing divorce, such as the Marriage Covenant efforts of the Marriage Savers, a group in Potomac, Maryland.<sup>92</sup>**
- **Explore using “Learned Efficacy/Learned Optimism” principles as a component of welfare-to-work job training and education enhancement.** The belief that one's efforts are linked to the results desired is especially important in building a commitment to work and marriage. Although much is already known from research in this field, policymakers should enhance its application to those who need it most by holding exploratory

92. For more on the Marriage Covenant, contact Marriage Savers, Inc., 9311 Harrington Drive, Potomac, Maryland 20854, telephone 301-469-5873, or see <http://www.marriagesavers.org/index.htm>.



hearings that lead to demonstration grants on learning work habits.

- **Examine the relative contribution to tax revenues and the relative drawdown from the Treasury** of households with different family structures: always single parent, always married parents, step parents, divorced parents, and cohabiting adults.
- **Require the GAO to report on the differential costs of abstinence education and contraceptive training for teenagers.** Recent research indicates that these very different strategies for reducing teen pregnancy have contributed to recent reductions in the number of out-of-wedlock births among teenagers.<sup>93</sup> But these two options also lead to different sets of social behavior and foster different family structures. They should be studied in depth to confirm their different outcomes. Future policy decisions then will be based on considerations of the different health and lifestyle consequences of these strategies.

State governments should:

- **Change the requirements for obtaining a divorce.** State legislatures should require parents to prove that a divorce is necessary for the well-being of their children. Social scientists now recognize how “no fault” divorces harm children. Research also demonstrates that the costs to society are too great for the states to ignore. Certain legal, social, and cultural constraints should make divorce less appealing and less easy to obtain, especially when children are involved.
- **Enforce child support.** Children living with a single mother are six times more likely to live in poverty than are children whose parents are married. To discourage this, states should ensure that 100 percent of out-of-wedlock or

divorced fathers pay full child support. Local governments, as key players in the enforcement of child support laws, should have access to the tools that state governments already have available to trace absentee fathers.

- **Examine school curricula to ensure that the benefits of marriage and costs of divorce are covered fairly.** It is clear from the work of Professor Norval Glenn of the University of Texas at Austin<sup>94</sup> that many textbook publishing companies not only neglect marriage, but also distort the research on the benefits of marriage and the harmful effects of divorce and out-of-wedlock parenting on children. This lack of support for the married family structure threatens society. States should examine their course curricula and promote resources that support marriage as a viable and desirable structure within which to raise healthy children.

Church leaders and nonprofit organizations should:

- **Work to restore marriage among the poor whom they serve.** The restoration of marriage among the poor ought to be one of the most important goals of faith communities that are concerned about the plight of the poor and the future of children. Both social science data and common sense indicate this will not happen without restoring regular religious worship for both men and women.
- **Foster local “community marriage covenants.”** Programs in churches that prepare couples for marriage and attempt to save troubled marriages are reducing divorce rates as much as five to six times faster than the declining divorce rates at the national level.<sup>95</sup> These programs can help couples to avoid bad marriages before they begin, prepare couples

93. Stephanie Ventura, National Center for Health Statistics, address at The Heritage Foundation, June 23, 1998, and Jacqueline Darroch, Vice President, Alan Guttmacher Institute, April 29, 1999.

94. Norval D. Glenn: “A Critique of Twenty Family and Marriage and the Family Textbooks,” *Family Relations*, Vol. 46 (1997), pp. 197–208.

95. See Marriage Savers Web site: <http://www.marriagesavers.org/>.

for a lifelong marriage, strengthen existing marriages, and save up to 80 percent of most marriages that come to them for help.<sup>96</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Marital and family stability is undeniably linked to economic prosperity for American families. Even though America has achieved a level of prosperity unrivaled in history, too many families still do not share in these benefits. The effects of marital breakdown on national prosperity and the well-being of individual children are like the action of termites on the beams in a home's foundation: They are weakening, quietly but seriously, the structural underpinnings of society.

The contradiction between Washington's concern for economic prosperity and its disregard for stable marriage and family life must be resolved. The longer reform is delayed, the more children will be doomed to living in poverty with its life-changing effects. Congress, state legislators, community leaders, and church officials can and must take clear steps to restore the primacy of marriage—the backbone of the family and society in America.

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96. *Ibid.*