

WebMemo



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Married Fathers: America's Greatest Weapon Against Child Poverty

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The mainstream media, liberal politicians, activists, and academia bewail child poverty in the U.S. But in these ritual lamentations, one key fact remains hidden: The principal cause of child poverty in the U.S. is the absence of married fathers in the home.

According to the U.S. Census, the poverty rate in 2008 for single parents with children was 35.6 percent. The rate for married couples with children was 6.4 percent. Being raised in a married family reduces a child's probability of living in poverty by about 80 percent.

True, some of this difference in poverty is due to the fact that single parents tend to have less education than married couples. But even when married couples are compared to single parents with the same education level, the married poverty rate will still be about 70 percent lower.

Marriage is a powerful weapon in fighting poverty. In fact, being married has the same effect in reducing poverty as adding five to six years to a parent's education level.¹

A Two-Caste Society. Unfortunately, marriage is rapidly declining in American society. When President Lyndon Johnson launched the War on Poverty in 1963, 93 percent of American children were born to married parents. Today the number has dropped to 59 percent.

In 2008, 1.7 million children were born outside marriage. As noted, most of these births occurred to women who will have the hardest time going it

alone as parents: young adult women with a high school degree or less. College-educated women rarely have children outside marriage.

The U.S. is steadily separating into a two-caste system, with marriage and education as the dividing line. In the high-income third of the population, children are raised by married parents with a college education; in the bottom-income third, children are raised by single parents with a high school degree or less. Single parents now comprise 70 percent of all poor families with children. Last year, government provided over \$300 billion in means-tested welfare aid to single parents.

(For more graphical representations of the connection between unwed childbearing and poverty, see "Marriage and Poverty in the U.S.: By the Numbers," at http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2010/pdf/wm2934_bythenumbers.pdf.)

The Lifelong Effects of Fathers. The positive effects of married fathers are not limited to income alone. Children raised by married parents have substantially better life outcomes compared to similar children raised in single-parent homes. When compared to children in intact married homes, children raised by single parents are more likely to have emo-

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tional and behavioral problems; be physically abused; smoke, drink, and use drugs; be aggressive; engage in violent, delinquent, and criminal behavior; have poor school performance; be expelled from school; and drop out of high school.² Many of these negative outcomes are associated with the higher poverty rates of single mothers. But, in many cases, the improvements in child well-being associated with marriage persist even after adjusting for differences in family income. This indicates that the father brings more to his home than just a paycheck.

The effect of married fathers on child outcomes can be quite pronounced. For example, examination of families with the same race and same parental education shows that, when compared to intact married families, children from single-parent homes are:

- More than twice as likely to be arrested for a juvenile crime³;
- Twice as likely to be treated for emotional and behavioral problems⁴;
- Roughly twice as likely to be suspended or expelled from school⁵; and
- A third more likely to drop out before completing high school.⁶

The effects of being raised in a single-parent home continue into adulthood. Comparing families of the same race and similar incomes, children from broken and single-parent homes are three times more likely to end up in jail by the time they reach age 30 than are children raised in intact married families.⁷ Compared to girls raised in similar married families, girls from single-parent homes are more than twice as likely to have a child without being married, thereby repeating the negative cycle for another generation.⁸

Finally, the decline of marriage generates poverty in future generations. Children living in single parent homes are 50 percent more likely to experience poverty as adults when compared to children from intact married homes. This intergenerational poverty effect persists even after adjusting for the original differences in family income and poverty during childhood.⁹

The Left's Misdiagnosis. Marriage matters. But mentioning the bond between marriage and lower poverty violates the protocols of political correctness. Thus, the main cause of child poverty remains hidden from public view. And even when the Left reluctantly mentions the decline of marriage in low-

1. Robert Rector and Kirk A. Johnson, "The Effects of Marriage and Maternal Education in Reducing Child Poverty," *Heritage Foundation Center for Data Analysis Report No. CDA02-95*, August, 2, 2002, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2002/08/The-Effects-of-Marriage-and-Maternal-Education>.
2. Throughout the paper the phrase "intact married family" refers to the biological father and biological mother of the child united in marriage.
3. Chris Coughlin and Samuel Vuchinich, "Family Experience in Preadolescence and the Development of Male Delinquency," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (1996), pp. 491–501.
4. Deborah A. Dawson. "Family Structure and Children's Health and Well-Being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (August 1991), pp. 573–584.
5. Wendy D. Manning and Kathleen A. Lamb, "Adolescent Well-Being in Cohabiting, Married, and Single-Parent Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (2003), pp. 876–893. Data came from the Add Health study. See also Deborah A. Dawson, "Family Structure and Children's Health and Well-Being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (August 1991), pp. 573–584.
6. Timothy Biblarz and Greg Gottainer, "Family Structure and Children's Success: A Comparison of Widowed and Divorced Single-Mother Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 62 (May 2000), pp. 533–548.
7. Cynthia C. Harper and Sara S. McLanahan, "Father Absence and Youth Incarceration," *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2004), pp. 369–397. Data came from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, the 1979 cohort.
8. Martha S. Hill, Wei-Jun J. Yeung, and Greg J. Duncan, "Childhood Family Structure and Young Adult Behaviors," *Journal of Population Economics*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2001), pp. 271–299.
9. Mary Corcoran and Terry Adams, "Race, Sex, and the Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty," in Greg J. Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, eds., *Consequences of Growing up Poor* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997), pp. 461–517. Data come from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics.

income communities, most of what they say about it is untrue. For example,

- Liberals insist that poor women become pregnant outside marriage because they lack knowledge about, and access to, birth control. In fact, virtually no non-marital pregnancies in low-income communities occur for that reason.¹⁰
- Liberals insist that the main problem in low-income communities is “teen pregnancy.” In fact, only 8 percent of all out-of-wedlock births occur to teens under 18; most occur to young adult women in their 20s.
- Liberals insist that most out-of-wedlock pregnancies and births are accidental. In fact, most women who give birth out of wedlock strongly desire children. Their pregnancies are partially intended or at least not seriously avoided.¹¹

The Left also argues that poor single mothers do not marry because the fathers of their children lack jobs, income, and are largely “non-marriageable.” This also is untrue: Nearly all non-married fathers are employed at the time their children are born. Most have higher earnings than the mothers. In fact, if poor single mothers were married to the actual fathers of their children, two-thirds would immediately be lifted out of poverty.¹²

Finally, the Left argues that poor mothers and fathers are uninterested in marriage. Research by Harvard sociologist Kathryn Edin shows the opposite.¹³ Low-income men and women greatly value marriage and aspire to be married. However, they no longer believe it is important to be married before having children. They idealize marriage, viewing it the same way the upper middle class might view a trip to Paris: an event that would be

wonderful in the future but is not necessary or important at the present time. While the upper middle class get married first and then have children, the poor follow the opposite path; they have children first and then look for suitable partner to help raise them.

Edin’s research shows that most poor single mothers have traditional life goals.¹⁴ They want a house in the suburbs, two kids, a husband, a minivan, and a dog. But they fail to understand the importance of marriage to achieving these goals. They see marriage as a symbolic ceremony that should occur in middle age, a celebration of one’s successful entry into the middle class. They do not appreciate that for most families in the middle class, marriage is a necessary pathway to financial stability and prosperity, rather than a symbolic event that comes after prosperity is achieved.

What Government Should—and Should Not—Do. To reinvigorate marriage in lower-income communities, government could provide factual information on the role of healthy marriages in reducing poverty and improving child well-being. It could explain why it is important to develop a stable marital relationship before bringing children into the world. It could teach skills for selecting potential life partners and building stable relationships.

But nothing could be farther from actual government practice. In social service agencies, welfare offices, schools, and popular culture in low-income communities across America, one finds deafening silence on the topic of marriage. The welfare system actively penalizes low-income couples who do marry.

The gag rule about marriage is nothing new. At the beginning of the War on Poverty, a young Daniel

10. Kathryn Edin, Paula England, Emily Fitzgibbon Shafer, and Joanna Reed, “Forming Fragile Families: Was the Baby Planned, Unplanned, or in Between?,” in Edin and England, *Unmarried Couples with Children* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), pp. 25–54.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Robert Rector, Kirk Johnson, Patrick Fagan, and Lauren Noyes, “Increasing Marriage Would Dramatically Reduce Child Poverty,” Heritage Foundation *Center for Data Analysis Report* No. CDA03-06, May 20, 2003, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2003/05/Increasing-Marriage-Would-Dramatically-Reduce-Child-Poverty>.

13. Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

14. *Ibid.*

Patrick Moynihan (later Ambassador to the United Nations and Senator from New York), serving in the Administration of President Lyndon Johnson, wrote a seminal report on the negative effects of declining marriage among blacks. The Left exploded, excoriating Moynihan and insisting that the erosion of marriage was either unimportant or benign.

Four decades later, Moynihan's predictions have been vindicated. The erosion of marriage has spread to whites and Hispanics with devastating results. But the taboo on discussing the link between poverty and the disappearance of husbands remains as firm as it was four decades ago.

Historically, the Left has been indifferent or hostile to marriage. For decades, feminists actually taught that marriage harmed women psychologically and economically. While few would accept those ideas literally anymore, an instinctive hostility to marriage remains imprinted on the synapses of most liberal academics. In most faculty lounges, enthusiasm for marriage would be quite gauche.

For most on the Left, marriage is, at best, an antiquated institution, a red-state superstition. From this viewpoint, the real task is to expand government subsidies as a post-marriage society is built. Given this backdrop, it is not surprising that the Obama Administration seeks to abolish the one existing government program aimed at strengthening marriage in low-income communities: the minis-

cule Healthy Marriage Initiative operated through the Department of Health and Human Services.

Marriage: The Antidote to Poverty. Despite the politically correct gag rule, marriage remains America's strongest anti-poverty weapon. Unfortunately, marriage continues to decline. As husbands disappear from the home, poverty and welfare dependence will increase. Children and parents will suffer as a result.

Since the decline of marriage is the principal cause of child poverty and welfare dependence in the U.S., and since the poor aspire to healthy marriage but lack the norms, understanding, and skills to achieve it, it would seem reasonable for government to take steps to strengthen marriage. In particular, clarifying the severe shortcomings of the "child first, marriage later" philosophy to potential parents in lower-income communities would seem to be a priority.

To reduce poverty in America, policymakers should enact policies that encourage people to form and maintain healthy marriage and delay childbearing until they are married and economically stable. Marriage is highly beneficial to children, adults, and society. It needs to be encouraged and strengthened, not ignored and undermined.

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