



Marriage: America's Greatest Weapon Against Child Poverty

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Robert Rector

About the Author

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Abstract

Child poverty is an ongoing national concern, but few are aware that its principal cause is the absence of married fathers in the home. Marriage remains America's strongest anti-poverty weapon, yet it continues to decline. As husbands disappear from the home, poverty and welfare dependence will increase, and children and parents will suffer as a result. Since marital decline drives up child poverty and welfare dependence, and since the poor aspire to healthy marriage but lack the norms, understanding, and skills to achieve it, it is reasonable for government to take active steps to strengthen marriage. Just as government discourages youth from dropping out of school, it should provide information that will help people to form and maintain healthy marriages and delay childbearing until they are married and economically stable. In particular, clarifying the severe shortcomings of the "child first, marriage later" philosophy to potential parents in lower-income communities should be a priority.

Child poverty is an ongoing national concern, but few are aware of its principal cause: the absence of married fathers in the home. According to the U.S. Census, the poverty rate for single parents with children in the United States in 2009 was 37.1 percent. The rate for married couples with children was 6.8 percent. Being raised in a married family reduced a child's probability of living in poverty by about 82 percent.¹ (See Chart 1)

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 level of education, the married poverty rate will still be more than 75 percent lower. Marriage is a powerful weapon in fighting poverty. In fact, being married has the same effect in reducing poverty that adding five to six years to a parent's level of education has.²

Decline in Marriage and Growth in Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing

Regrettably, marriage is declining rapidly in the U.S. The current decline is unusual. As Chart 2 shows, throughout most of the 20th century, marital childbearing was the overwhelming norm in the United States. Nearly all children were born to married couples.

For example, when President Lyndon Johnson launched the War on Poverty in 1964, 93 percent of children born in the United States were born to married parents. Since that time, births within marriage have declined sharply. In 2010, only 59 percent of all births in the nation occurred to married couples.

The flip side of the decline in marriage is the growth in the out-of-wedlock childbearing birth rate, meaning the percentage of births that occur to women who are not married when the child is born.³ As Chart 3 shows,

throughout most of U.S. history, out-of-wedlock childbearing was rare. When the War on Poverty began in the mid-1960s, only 6 percent of children were born out of wedlock. Over the next four and a half decades, the number rose rapidly. In 2010, 40.8 percent of all children born in the U.S. were born outside of marriage.⁴

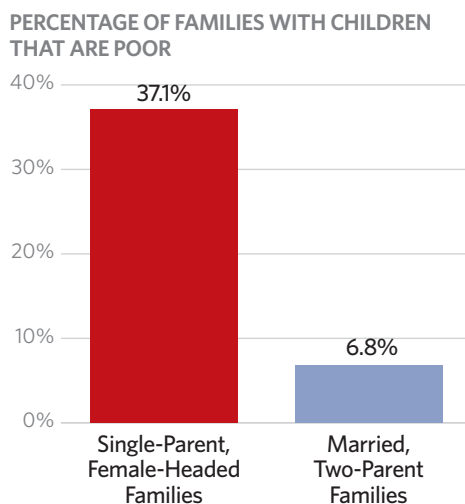
Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing Not the Same as Teen Pregnancy

Out-of-wedlock births are often confused with teen pregnancy and births. In fact, few out-of-wedlock births occur to teenagers. As Chart 4 shows, of all out-of-wedlock births in the United States in 2008 only 7.7 percent occurred to girls under age 18. Three-quarters occurred to young adult women between the ages of 19 and 29.⁵ The decline in marriage and growth in out-of-wedlock births is not a teenage issue; it is the result of a breakdown in

CHART 1

**In the United States,
Marriage Drops the
Probability of Child
Poverty by 82
Percent**

Source: Author's calculations based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2007-2009 data, http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_09_3YR_S1702&prodType=table (accessed August 6, 2012).



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relationships between young adult men and women.

A Two-Caste Society

In 2008, 1.72 million children were born outside of marriage in the United States.⁶ 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. As Chart 5 shows, nearly two-thirds of births to women who were high school drop-outs occurred outside of marriage.

Among women who had only a high school degree, well over half of all births were out of wedlock. By contrast, among women with at least a college degree, only 8 percent of births were out of wedlock, and 92 percent of births occurred to married couples.⁷

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.

**Unwed Childbearing,
Single Parenthood,
and Child Poverty**

The rise in out-of-wedlock childbearing and the increase in single parenthood are major causes of high levels of child poverty. Since the early 1960s, single-parent families have roughly tripled as a share of all families with children. As noted, in the U.S. in 2009, single parents were nearly six times more likely to be poor than were married couples.

Not surprisingly, single-parent families make up the overwhelming majority of all poor families with children in the U.S. Overall, single-parent families comprise one-third of all families with children, but as Chart 6 shows, 71 percent of poor families with children are headed by single parents. By contrast, 73 percent of all non-poor families with children are headed by married couples.⁸

**Both Marriage and
Education Reduce Poverty**

The poverty rate among married couples is dramatically lower

1. Calculated from data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey, 2007-2009, at http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_09_3YR_S1702&prodType=table. The relative poverty rates of married and single-parent families change very little from year to year and will be very similar in 2009 and 2010.

2. Robert Rector and Kirk A. Johnson, PhD, "The Effects of Marriage and Maternal Education in Reducing Child Poverty," Heritage Foundation *Center for Data Analysis Report* No. 02-05, August 2, 2002. See also Chart 7, *infra*.

3. In each year, the marital birth rate in Chart 1 and the out-of-wedlock birth rate in Chart 2 will sum together to equal 100 percent of all births.

4. Centers for Disease Control, National Center for Health Statistics, *National Vital Statistics Report*, "Births: Preliminary Data for 2010," November 17, 2011, Table 7, at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr60/nvsr60_02.pdf.

5. *Ibid.* Overall, births to girls under 18 are rare in the U.S.; only 3.3 percent of total births (both marital and non-marital) occur to girls in that age range.

6. *Ibid.*

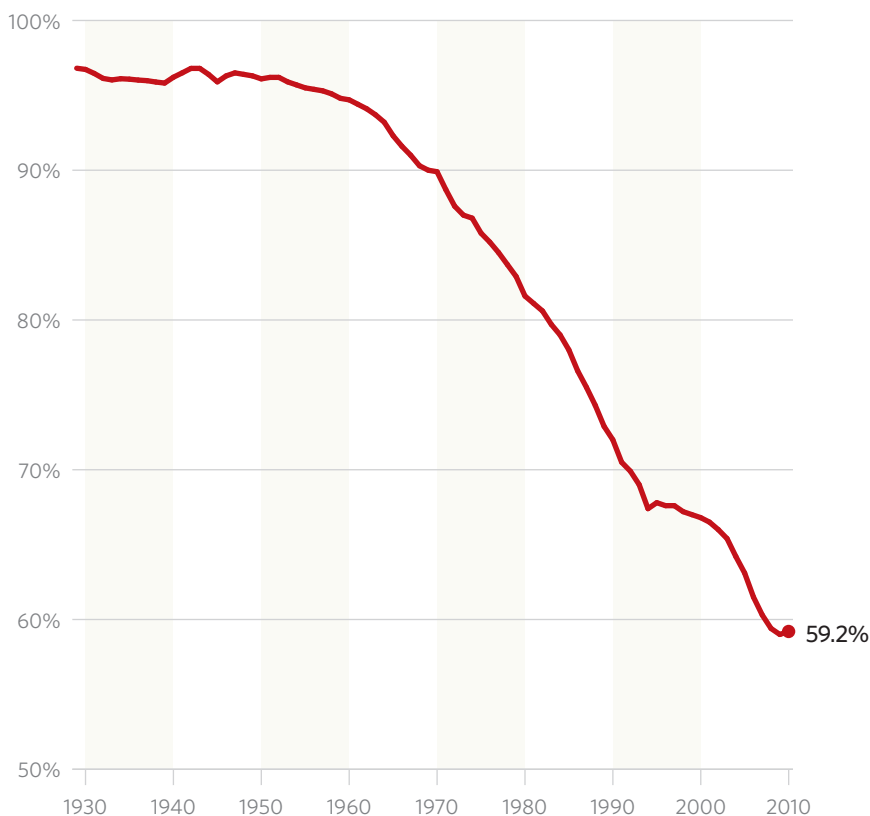
7. Calculated from Centers for Disease Control, National Center for Health Statistics, 2008 national health statistics.

8. Calculated from data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey, 2007-2009, at http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_09_3YR_C17010&prodType=table.

CHART 2

Death of Marriage in the United States, 1929-2010

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN BORN TO MARRIED PARENTS



Source: U.S. Government, U.S. Census Bureau, and National Center for Health Statistics.

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than the poverty rate among single-headed households, even when the married couple is compared to single parents with the same level of education. For example, as Chart 7 shows, the poverty rate for a single mother with only a high school degree is 38.8 percent, but the poverty rate for a married-couple family headed by an individual who is only a high school graduate is 8.9 percent: Marriage

drops the odds of being poor by 76 percent.⁹

Being married has roughly the same effect in reducing poverty that adding five to six years to a parent's education has. Interestingly, on average, high school dropouts who are married have a far lower poverty rate than do single parents with one or two years of college.

Welfare Costs of Single-Parent Families

The federal government operates over 80 means-tested welfare programs that provide cash, food, housing, medical care, and targeted social services to poor and low-income persons.¹⁰ In fiscal year 2011, federal and state governments spent over \$450 billion on means-tested welfare for low-income families with children. Roughly three-quarters of this welfare assistance, or \$330 billion, went to single-parent families. Most non-marital births are currently paid for by the taxpayers through the Medicaid system, and a wide variety of welfare assistance will continue to be given to the mother and child for nearly two decades after the child is born. On average, the means-tested welfare costs for single parents with children amount to around \$30,000 per household per year.

Racial Differences in Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing

Out-of-wedlock childbearing varies considerably by race and ethnicity. To understand this, it is important to understand the difference between an *out-of-wedlock birth rate* and the *out-of-wedlock birth share* for a particular racial or ethnic group.

The out-of-wedlock birth *rate* for a particular group equals the total number of out-of-wedlock births to mothers of that group divided by all births to the group in the same year. Thus, if 50 babies were born outside of marriage to Hispanic mothers in a given year and total births to all Hispanic mothers (both married and non-married) in the same year were 100, the out-of-wedlock birth rate

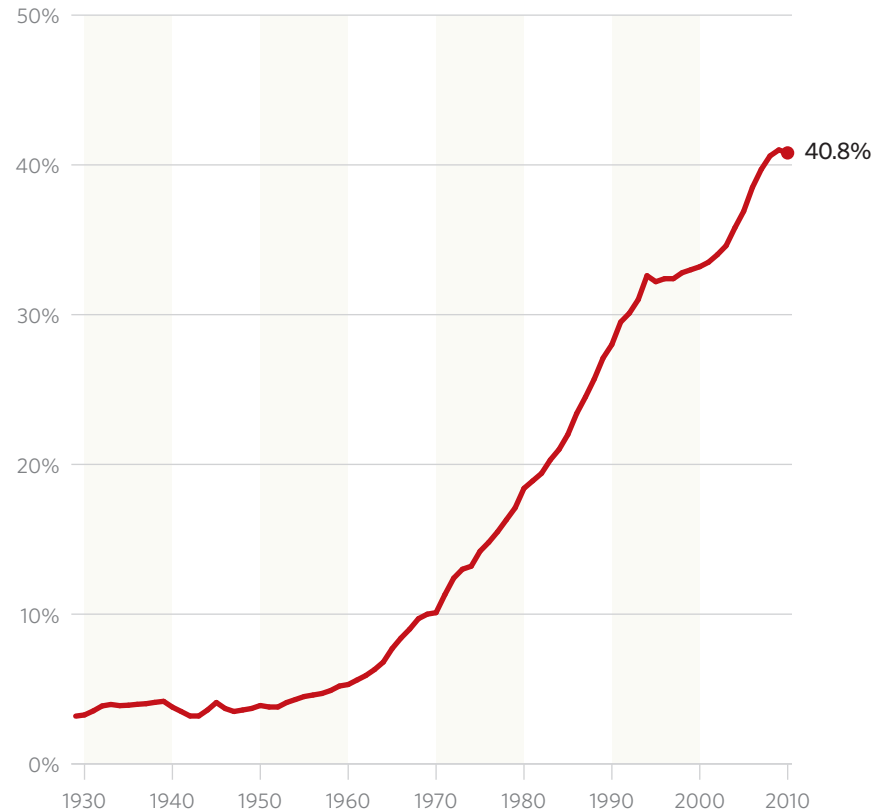
9. Calculated from data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey, 2005-2009.

10. 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.

CHART 3

Growth of Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing in the United States, 1929-2010

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN BORN OUT OF WEDLOCK



Source: U.S. Government, U.S. Census Bureau, and National Center for Health Statistics.

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for Hispanics would be 50 divided by 100, or 50 percent.

Chart 8 shows the out-of-wedlock birth rates for different racial and ethnic groups in 2008. The out-of-wedlock birth rate for the entire population was 40.6 percent. Among white non-Hispanic women, the out-of-wedlock birth rate was 28.6

percent; among Hispanics, it was 52.5 percent; and among blacks, it was 72.3 percent.¹¹

By contrast, the out-of-wedlock birth *share* equals the total number of babies born to non-married mothers of a particular racial or ethnic group divided by the total number of babies born outside of marriage for

all racial and ethnic groups. Thus, if 50 babies were born outside of marriage to Hispanic mothers in a given year and total out-of-wedlock births to mothers from all racial and ethnic groups were 150, the out-of-wedlock birth share for Hispanics would be 50 divided by 150, or 33.3 percent.

Chart 9 shows the out-of-wedlock birth shares for different racial and ethnic groups.¹² Although black and Hispanic women are more likely to give birth out of wedlock than are white non-Hispanic women because non-Hispanic whites are far more numerous in the overall population, the greatest number (or plurality) of out-of-wedlock births still occurs to that group. Of all non-marital births in the U.S., some 38 percent were to non-Hispanic whites, 32 percent were to Hispanics, and 26 percent were to black non-Hispanic women.¹³

Growth in Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing Among Blacks and Whites. Historically, the black out-of-wedlock childbearing rate has always been somewhat higher than the white rate; however, through much of the 20th century, the rates for both groups were comparatively low. For example, as Chart 10 shows, 2 percent of white children and 14 percent of black children born in 1940 were born out of wedlock.

These rates remained relatively low until the onset of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty in the early 1960s. Then the black out-of-wedlock birth rate skyrocketed, doubling in little more than a decade from 24.5 percent in 1964 to 50.3 percent in 1976. It continued to rise rapidly, reaching 70.7 percent in 1994.

11. Centers for Disease Control, National Center for Health Statistics, *National Vital Statistics Report*, "Births: Preliminary Data for 2008," April 6, 2010, Table 1, at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr58/nvsr58_16.pdf.

12. The birth shares of all births (both marital and non-marital) in the U.S. were 53.4 percent white non-Hispanic, 24.5 percent Hispanic, and 14.7 percent black non-Hispanic.

13. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008 NHS data.

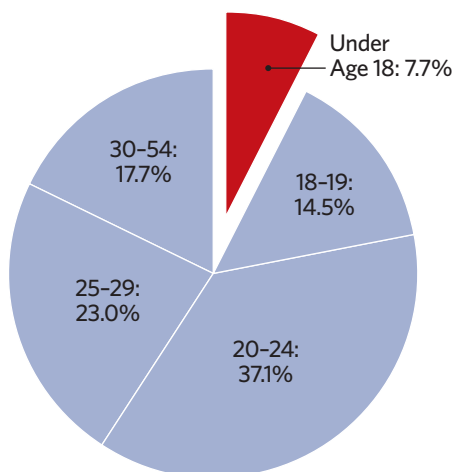
CHART 4

In the U.S., Few Unwed Births Occur to Teenagers

PERCENTAGE OF OUT-OF-WEDLOCK BIRTHS, BY AGE OF MOTHER

Note: Figures have been rounded.

Source: Author's calculations based on data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics Report, "Births: Preliminary Data for 2008," April 6, 2010, Table 7, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr58/nvsr58_16.pdf (accessed August 6, 2012).



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Over the next decade, it declined slightly but then began to rise again, reaching 72.3 percent in 2008.

The white out-of-wedlock birth rate followed a similar but less dramatic pattern. It remained almost unchanged at around 2 percent between 1930 and 1960 and then began a slow but steady rise in the 1960s that accelerated in the 1980s, reaching 20 percent by 1990. It slowed in the 1990s but then resumed its upward rise. In recent years, it has been increasing at a rate of 1 percent per annum, reaching 28.6 percent in 2008.¹⁴

Marriage and Poverty Among Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics.

Marriage is associated with lower rates of poverty separately for whites, blacks, and Hispanics. Within each racial and ethnic group, the poverty rate for married couples is substantially lower than the poverty rate for non-married families of the same

race or ethnicity. For example, as Chart 11 shows, in 2009:

- Among non-Hispanic white married couples, the poverty rate was 3.2 percent, while the rate for non-married white families was also seven times higher at 22.0 percent.
- Among Hispanic married families, the poverty rate was 13.2 percent, while the poverty rate among non-married families was three times higher at 37.9 percent.
- Among black married couples, the poverty rate was 7.0 percent, while the rate for non-married black families was seven times higher at 35.6 percent.¹⁵

Corroborating Data from the Fragile Families Survey

The Census data presented so far demonstrate that married couples

have dramatically lower poverty rates than single parents. These substantial differences in poverty remain even when married couples are compared to single parents of the same race and level of education. The pattern is almost exactly the same in all 50 states.

However, in the Census comparisons, the married couples and single parents are obviously different (albeit similar) persons. It is therefore possible that much of the difference in poverty between married families and single-parent families might be due to hidden differences between married and single parents as individuals rather than to marriage *per se*. For example, it is possible that unmarried fathers might have substantially lower earnings than married fathers with the same racial and educational backgrounds. If this were the case, then marriage, for these men, would have a reduced anti-poverty effect.

Fortunately, we have other direct data on poverty and unmarried parents that corroborate the Census analysis. These data are provided by the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Survey conducted jointly by Princeton and Columbia universities.¹⁶ The Fragile Families survey is a representative national sample of parents at the time of a child's birth, with a heavy emphasis on lower-income unmarried couples. The survey is unusual in collecting information not only on single mothers, but on non-married fathers as well, including (critically) the actual employment and earnings of the father in the year prior to birth.

14. Calculated from data in various sources from the U.S. Government, U.S. Census Bureau, and National Center for Health Statistics.

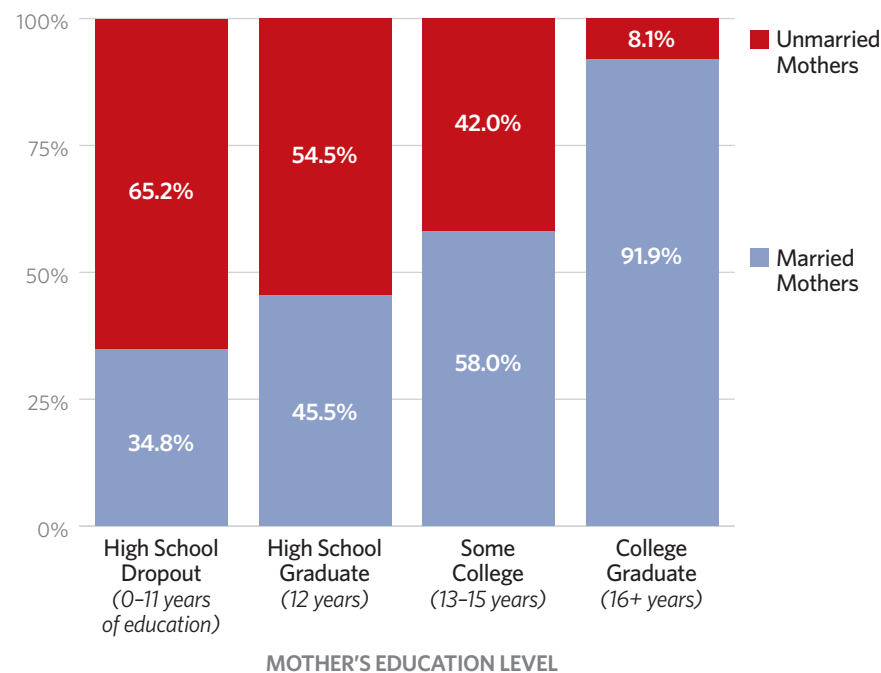
15. Calculated from data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey, 2007-2009 http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_09_3YR_S1702&prodType=table.

16. See Fragile Families and Child Well-being Survey at <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/>.

CHART 5

Less-Educated Women Are More Likely to Give Birth Outside of Marriage

PERCENTAGE OF ALL BIRTHS THAT ARE MARITAL OR OUT-OF-WEDLOCK



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008 NHS data.

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Because the Fragile Families Survey reports both the mothers' and fathers' earnings, it is simple to calculate the poverty rate if the non-married mothers remain single and if each unmarried mother married her child's father (thereby pooling both parents' income into a joint family income). The Fragile Families

data show that if unmarried mothers remain single, over half (56 percent) will be poor. (This high level of poverty will persist for years: half of all unwed mothers will be poor five years after the child is born.)¹⁷ By contrast, if the single mothers marry the actual biological fathers of their children, only 18 percent would

remain poor.¹⁸ Thus, marriage would reduce the expected poverty rate of the children by two-thirds.

It is important to note that these results are based on the actual earnings of the biological fathers of the children and not on assumed or hypothetical earnings. Moreover, the non-married fathers in the sample are relatively young. Over time, their earnings will increase and the poverty rate for the married couples will decline farther.

The Lifelong Positive Effects of Fathers

Census data and the Fragile Families survey show that marriage can be extremely effective in reducing child poverty. But 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 emotional 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.¹⁹ Many of these negative outcomes are associated with the higher poverty rates of single mothers. In many cases, however, the improvements in child well-being

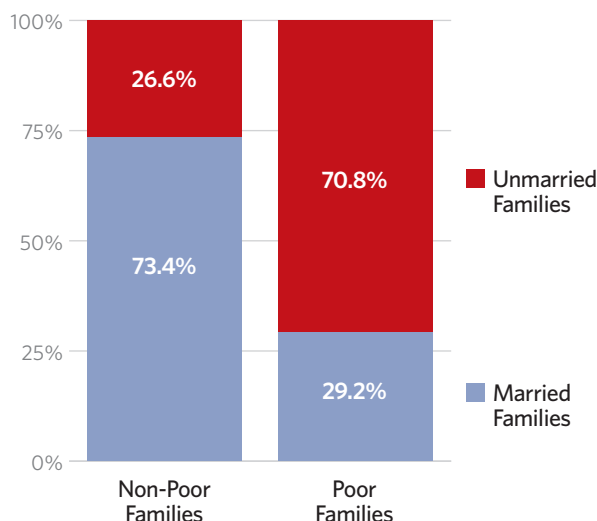
17. "Mothers' and Children's Poverty and Material Hardship in the Years Following a Non-Marital Birth," *Fragile Families Research Brief*, Number 41, January 2008, <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/briefs/ResearchBrief41.pdf>

18. These figures assume that the father's employment and earnings will continue at the same level enjoyed in the year prior to the child's birth and that the mothers (whether single or married) will work part time at their historic wage rates after the child's birth. On average, part-time employment is the most likely activity for the mothers; however, marriage will produce similar strong poverty reductions if the mothers work full-time or not at all. See Robert 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. CDA03-06*, May 20, 2003, p. 13.

19. Throughout this paper, the term "intact married family" refers to the biological father and biological mother of the child, united in marriage.

CHART 6

In the United States, 71 Percent of Poor Families with Children Are Not Married



Source: Author's calculations based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2007-2009, http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_09_3YR_C17010&prodType=table (accessed August 7, 2012).

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that are 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 crime;²⁰
- Twice as likely to be treated for emotional and behavioral problems;²¹

- Roughly twice as likely to be suspended or expelled from school;²² and
- A third more likely to drop out before completing high school.²³

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.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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.²⁶

20. 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.

21. 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.

22. 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 from Add Health study. See also Dawson, "Family Structure and Children's Health and Well-Being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health."

23. 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.

24. 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 from National Longitudinal Study of Youth, the 1979 cohort (NYLS79).

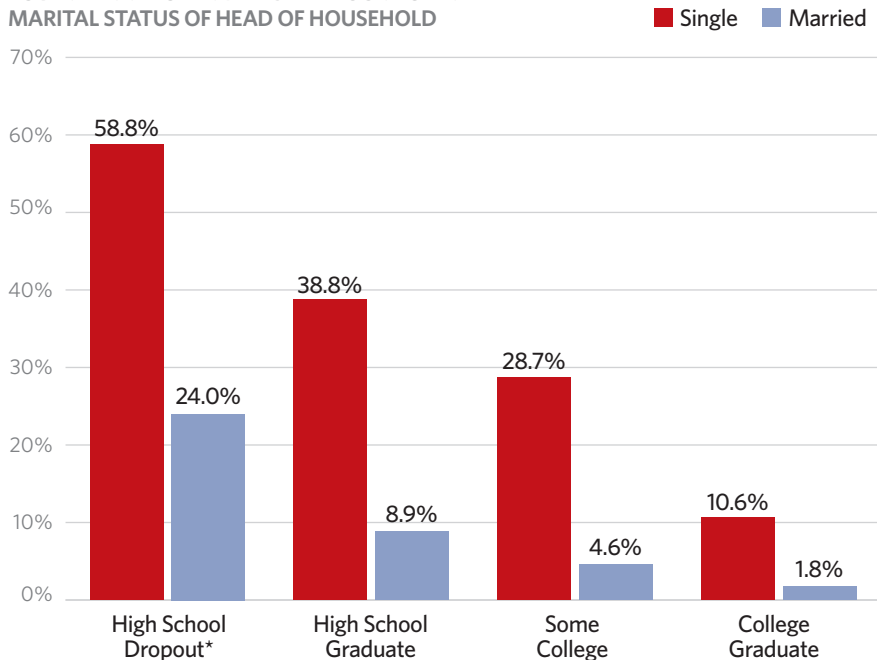
25. Martha S. Hill, Wei-Jun J. Yeung, and Greg J. Duncan, "Childhood Family Structure and Young Adult Behaviors," *Journal of Population Economics*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2001), pp. 271-299.

26. Mary Corcoran and Terry Adams, "Race, Sex, and the Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty," Chapter 12 in Greg J. Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, eds., *Consequences of Growing Up Poor* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997), pp. 461-517. Data from Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID).

CHART 7

Both Marriage and Education Are Highly Effective in Reducing Child Poverty in the United States

POVERTY RATE OF FAMILIES BY EDUCATION AND MARITAL STATUS OF HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD



* Virtually none of the heads of families who are high school dropouts are minor teenagers.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2005-2009 data.

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Understanding the Cultural Context of Non-Marital Pregnancy and Childbearing

Clearly, the rise in unwed childbearing and the decline in marriage play a strong role in promoting child poverty and other social ills. Dealing with these issues will require an understanding of the social context of non-marital pregnancy and childbearing. The best source of information on this topic is *Promises*

I Can Keep: Why Poor Mothers Put Motherhood Before Marriage by Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas.²⁷

Edin, professor of public policy at Harvard, is the nation's most distinguished researcher on low-income single mothers; her findings overturn much conventional wisdom about "unintended" pregnancy, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and low-income single parents. In popular perception, out-of-wedlock childbearing occurs

as a result of accidental pregnancies among teenage girls who lack access to or knowledge about birth control. This perception is completely inaccurate.

In reality, unwed births rarely involve teenage girls, are almost never caused by a lack of access to birth control, and generally are not the result of purely accidental pregnancies.

- As noted previously, only 8 percent of non-marital births occur to girls under 18. Non-marital births and pregnancies are phenomena that mainly involve young adult men and women.
- Research on lower-income women who have become pregnant outside of marriage (either as minors or adults) reveals that virtually none of these out-of-wedlock pregnancies occurred because of a lack of knowledge about and access to birth control.²⁸
- Out-of-wedlock births are generally not the result of purely accidental pregnancies. In fact, most women who become pregnant and give birth out of wedlock strongly desire children. Their pregnancies are partially intended or at least not seriously avoided.²⁹

Most Unwed Mothers Strongly Desire Children

Kathryn Edin explains that children born out of wedlock are "seldom conceived by explicit design, yet are rarely a pure accident either."³⁰

27. Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

28. Kathryn Edin, Paula England, Emily Fitzgibbons Shafer, and Joanna Reed, "Forming Fragile Families: Was the Baby Planned, Unplanned, or In Between?" in Kathryn Edin and Paula England, eds., *Unmarried Couples with Children* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), pp. 25-54.

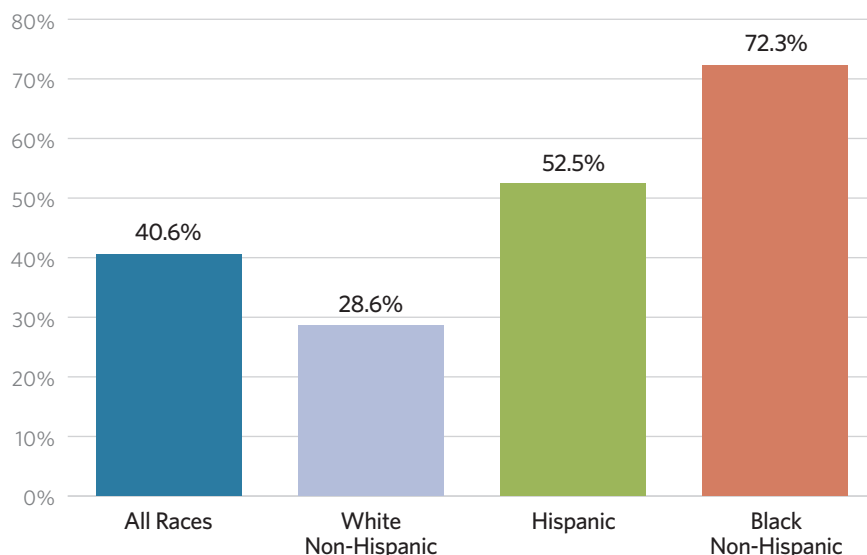
29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., p. 7.

CHART 8

Unwed Birth Rates Vary Strongly by Race in the United States

PERCENT OF BIRTHS THAT ARE OUT OF WEDLOCK



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics Report, “Births: Preliminary Data for 2008,” April 6, 2010, Table 1, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr58/nvsr58_16.pdf (accessed August 7, 2012).

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Young single mothers typically “describe their pregnancies as ‘not exactly planned’ yet ‘not exactly avoided’.... [O]nly a few were using any form of contraception at all when their ‘unplanned’ child was conceived.”³¹ But this lack of contraceptive use was not due to a lack of knowledge about or access to contraceptives.

The overwhelming majority of lower-income women who have children out of wedlock strongly desire to have children. In fact, having children is generally perceived as the most important and fulfilling thing in their lives, giving their lives purpose and meaning. According to Edin, low-income non-married mothers view “children [as] the best of what

life offers.”³² Whether planned or not, children “are nearly always viewed as a gift, not a liability—a source of both joy and fulfillment.”³³ Low-income single mothers “credit their children for virtually all that they see as positive in their lives”³⁴ and rely on their children “to bring validation, purpose, companionship, and order to their often chaotic lives.”³⁵

Most low-income non-married mothers see children not merely as desirable, but as a “necessity.”³⁶ Without children, their lives are hollow and chaotic; having children is a “heroic” choice that rescues them from emptiness. For many, parenthood is the point “at which they can really start living.”³⁷

Although most of these young women believe they should wait until they are somewhat older before having children, this belief is weak in comparison to the very strong positive feeling about motherhood in general. Given this emotional context, it should not be surprising that any plans to delay pregnancy are carried out haphazardly or not at all.

The Role of Marriage

Critically, almost none of the lower-income women who have a child out of wedlock feel that it is important to be married before having children. Although roughly half of non-married mothers were cohabiting with the father at the time of birth (nearly 75 percent were in some sort of romantic relationship with

31. Ibid., p. 37.

32. Ibid., p. 170.

33. Ibid., p. 43.

34. Ibid., p. 70.

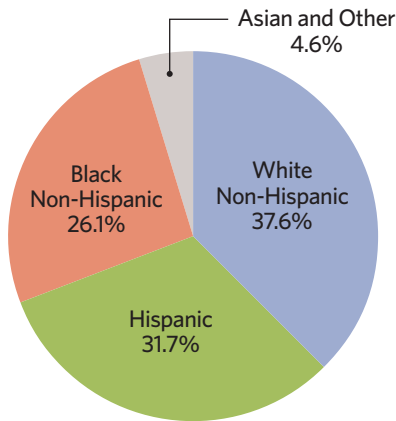
35. Ibid., p. 172.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., p. 35.

CHART 9

Non-Marital Birth Shares by Race



Note: Figures have been rounded.
Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008 NHS data.

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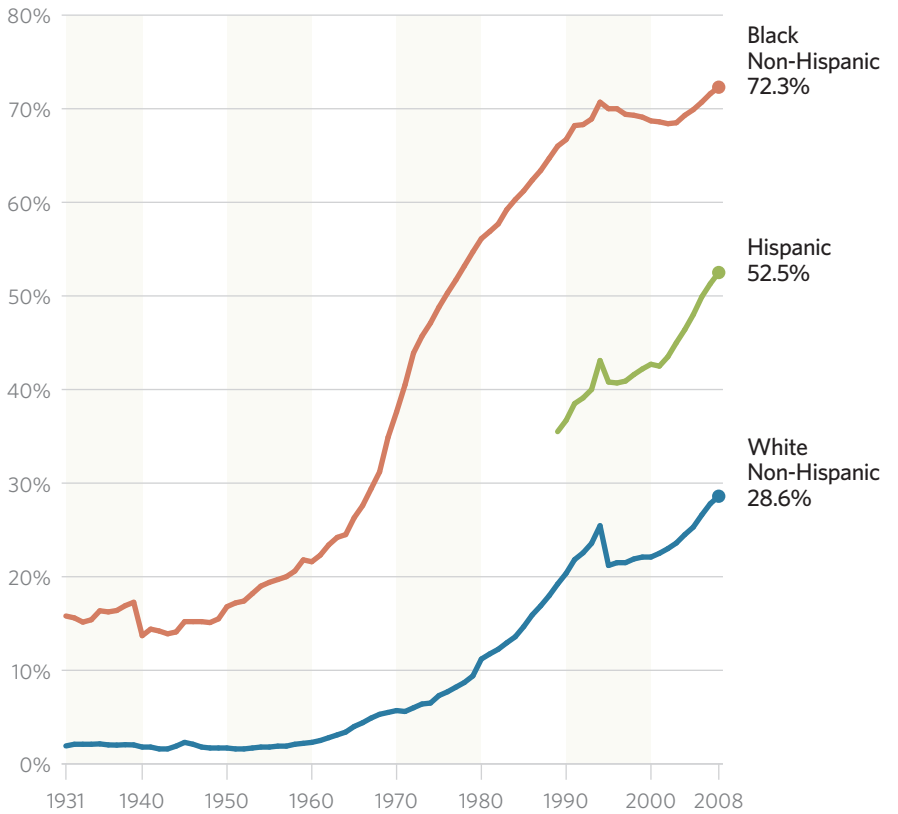
the father), these relationships are usually of short duration and unstable. Mutual understanding and commitment are lacking, and although the couples usually think and speak favorably about marriage, most tend to drift apart after the child is born.³⁸

However, low-income non-married parents are not hostile to marriage as an institution or a life goal. Ironically, most highly esteem marriage and, in fact, tend to over-idealize it. Most low-income young women have traditional family goals; they hope to have a husband, children, a minivan, and a house in the suburbs “with a white picket fence.”³⁹ Tragically, few have a life plan that

CHART 10

Growth of Unwed Childbearing by Race in the United States, 1931-2008

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN BORN OUT OF WEDLOCK



Source: U.S. Government, U.S. Census Bureau, and National Center for Health Statistics.

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will enable them to realize their goals.

A major obstacle is that most low-income women plan to marry *after* having children, not before. Their life plan is the exact opposite of the normal sequence in the upper middle class. In the upper middle class, men and women still follow

the traditional pattern: A man and woman become attracted to each other; a relationship develops; the couple assess each other and at some point deliberately choose to become lifetime partners; emotional bonds deepen; they marry and after a few years have children.

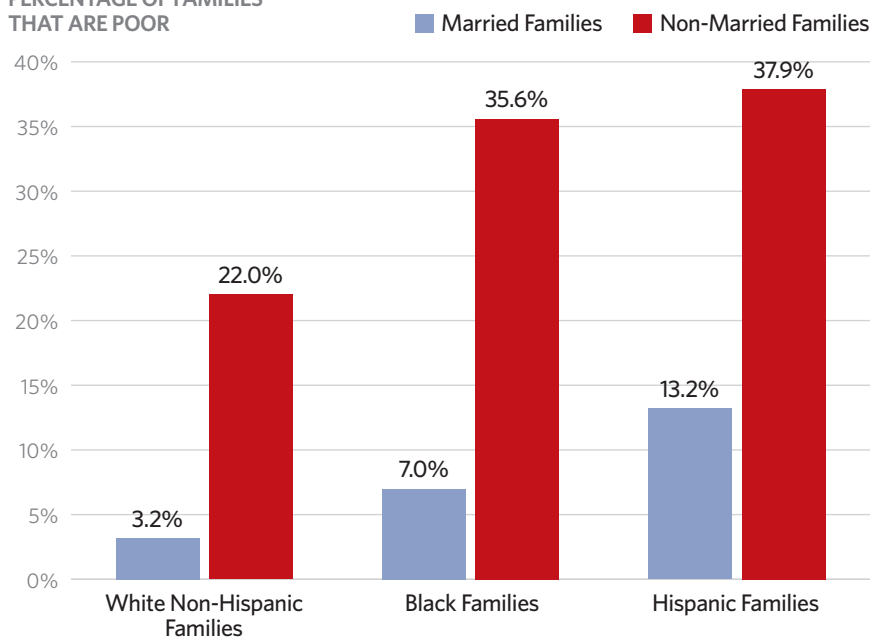
38. Two-thirds of unmarried parent couples separate within five years after their child is born; one-third reside together five years after the birth. Overall, one in five unmarried couples will marry within five years after the child's birth. By contrast, over 80 percent of couples who are married at the time their child is born will still be together five years later. Marcia, J. Carleson, "Trajectories of Couple Relationship Quality after Childbirth: Does Marriage Matter?" Center for Child Wellbeing Working Paper #2007-11-FF, April 2007. <http://crcw.princeton.edu/workingpapers/WP07-11-FF.pdf>.

39. Ibid., p. 202.

CHART 11

Marriage Reduces Poverty for Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics

PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES THAT ARE POOR



Source: Author's calculations based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2007–2009 data, http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_09_3YR_S1702&prodType=table (accessed August 8, 2012).

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In the lowest-income third of the U.S. population, this traditional sequence of family formation and childbearing is now explicitly reversed. Women first have children and then seek to find or build a stable relationship that will eventually lead to marriage. Typically, low-income single mothers do not see marriage either as an important part of childrearing or as an important element of financial security or upward social mobility. Instead, marriage is seen as a symbolic event that should occur

later in adult life. Marriage is regarded as an important ceremony that will celebrate one's eventual arrival in the middle class rather than as a vital pathway that leads upward to the attainment of middle-class status.

Low-income single mothers “believe that marriage, not children, is what requires the years of careful planning and preparation and [that] childbearing is something that happens along the way.”⁴⁰ While conceiving a child with a man you have

known only a few months is not a problem, most non-married mothers believe they should get to know a man steadily for four or five years before marrying him.⁴¹ The idea that you should carefully select a suitable partner and diligently build a successful relationship with him before conceiving a child is a foreign concept.

In many communities, the pattern of children first and (hopefully) marriage later is so entrenched that couples have difficulty understanding an alternative; but as a means for building long-term loving relationships and nurturing homes for children, this pattern is a disaster. While low-income young women earnestly dream of having children, a husband, and a house in the suburbs with a white picket fence, they have no practical plan to make this dream a reality. Sadly, their choice to have children before marriage and before forming a stable committed relationship with the child's father usually leads to the opposite outcome, dooming mothers and children to lives of poverty and struggle.⁴²

In summary, the strong desire to have children coupled with the belief that it is not important to be married before having children explains the dramatic rise in out-of-wedlock childbearing in lower-income communities. While most non-marital pregnancies are not deliberately planned, they are also not seriously avoided. The unfortunate reality is that children are usually born haphazardly to couples in unstable, uncommitted relationships that fall apart within a few years after their children are born.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

42. As noted earlier, half of mothers who are unmarried at the time of their child's birth remain in poverty five years after that birth. “Mothers' and Children's Poverty and Material Hardship in the Years Following a Non-Marital Birth,” <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/briefs/ResearchBrief41.pdf>.

Unwed Parents Drift Apart

Although most non-married parents aspire to remain together and eventually to marry, they generally lack the skill and understanding that are needed to build enduring relationships. Often, a woman will conceive a child with a man well before she has determined whether she regards him as a suitable lifetime partner and before the couple has made serious commitments to one another.

Trying to decide whether you want to spend the rest of your life with a partner after you have had a baby with him (or her) rather than before is a recipe for disaster. Frequently, couples will seek to resolve fundamental issues such as sexual fidelity only after a child is born. They fail to understand that these issues should have been resolved at the beginning of the relationship, not in the maternity ward.

Even though they aspire to remain together, most unmarried-parent couples also fail to understand the role of commitment to successful relationships. In the real world, all relationships have stressful and troubled periods; successful couples have an enduring commitment to each other that enables them to weather difficult periods and emerge with stronger, happier relationships. In our culture, such strong commitment to a relationship rarely exists outside of marriage. Because they fail to understand the importance of commitment, most unmarried-parent couples tend to fall apart when they hit the difficult periods that are inevitable in all relationships.

Do Unwed Fathers Lack Earnings?

Some argue that encouraging marriage in lower-income communities is irrelevant because the fathers do not earn enough to contribute significantly to the support of the mother and child. This is not true in most cases. Eight out of 10 unmarried fathers were employed at the time of their child's birth.⁴³ Ironically, given the degree to which the earnings capacity of non-married fathers is generally maligned, these men actually earn more than the mothers in the period prior to the child's birth. If the fathers are economically unprepared to support a family, the mothers are even less prepared.⁴⁴

Most non-married fathers have sufficient earnings to help their children escape from poverty. As noted, if women who had children out of wedlock were married to the actual father of their child, their probability of living in poverty would be cut by two-thirds.⁴⁵

In fact, over 60 percent of fathers who have children outside of marriage earned enough at the time of their child's birth to support their potential family with an income above the poverty level even if the mother did not work at all. If the unmarried father and mother married and the mother worked part-time, the typical family would have an income above 150 percent of poverty, or roughly \$35,000 per year. In addition, at the time of birth, the fathers are young; their wages can be expected to increase over time and are likely to rise faster if they became married and committed to a family.

Is There a Shortage of Marriageable Men?

A related argument is that single mothers do not marry because the fathers of their children are non-marriageable. This is a stunning argument given the fact that 40 percent of all children are now born outside of marriage. Are policymakers to believe that 40 percent of young adult men in America are non-marriageable? In reality, while some of the fathers are not suitable marriage partners, most would be.

Three-quarters of non-married fathers are still romantically involved with the mother at the time of birth. Among these men, alcohol, drug, and physical abuse are infrequent.⁴⁶ While many of the men have potential problems, so do many of the non-married mothers. In most cases, both the men and women would be better off if they were older, more mature, and in a stable, committed marriage before conceiving children.

But, this is an argument for encouraging stronger, more mature relationships before conception, not for writing off the men in general. The decline in marriage in low-income communities stems from changing social norms and from a welfare system that for decades has penalized marriage, not from a lack of millions of marriageable men.

Unwed Fathers and Marriage

Like unwed mothers, most non-married fathers express positive attitudes toward marriage. Many of these young men were raised in fatherless homes and often state that

43. Rector, Johnson, Fagan, and Noyes, "Increasing Marriage Would Dramatically Reduce Child Poverty."

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

they do not wish the same fate for their own children.

But like unwed mothers, these men also attach little importance to being married before having children. They frequently fantasize about having close, long-term, stable relationships with their children and the child's mother even without marriage. In fact, such an outcome is extremely unlikely. Without marriage, the relationship with the mother is very likely to collapse; over time, the fathers will have little contact with their children and are likely to reach their thirties with lonely and difficult lives.

Although unwed fathers tend to view the idea of marriage positively at the time of their child's birth, they are also aware that marriage will entail restraint and sacrifice. A married husband must relinquish sexual freedom and shoulder heavy financial responsibilities. Becoming a husband means growing up, making a transition from prolonged semi-adolescence to true male adulthood. Like many other men, young unwed fathers view this transition with uncertainty and ambivalence.

Historically, society established strong norms and values that supported and encouraged young men in this transition. The role of married father and breadwinner was seen as essential and important. Men who stepped into the role of husband were esteemed in their communities.

Today, the historic norms and values concerning marriage and fatherhood have all but disappeared in low-income neighborhoods. In the larger society, opinion leaders treat unwed fathers as socially marginal, an unmarriageable residue of little

social or economic significance. To the extent that the fathers are remembered at all, they are seen as largely useless, capable of little more than modest child support payments.

The collapse of norms concerning marriage and having children has been a disaster. In marriage, men will usually devote a very large part of their earnings to support wives and children; they will be reluctant to make this financial sacrifice unless society tells them it is vital and strongly encourages their embrace of responsibility. Since society no longer demands, expects, or encourages low-income young men to become married fathers, it should be no surprise that these young men experience difficulty in making the transition to married adulthood.

The problem is compounded by the fact that most unwed mothers do not seriously plan to be married to the fathers of their children.⁴⁷ Without social encouragement or positive role models, many unwed fathers drift through disordered and empty lives. This is a tragedy for the fathers, the mothers, and their children.

The Analogy to Dropping Out of School

Since marriage appears to be in the long-term interests of mothers, fathers, and children, why do lower-income parents fail to marry? How has the peculiar ethos of "child first, marriage later" evolved in low-income neighborhoods? These are complex questions. The best analogy is to dropping out of school. Completing high school is clearly in the long-term economic interests of individuals. Despite this, hundreds of

thousands drop out each year before obtaining a high school diploma.

People drop out of school and have children without marriage for similar reasons. For many, finishing school is difficult: it involves having a strong future orientation, delaying gratification, forgoing short-term income, and sticking to educational tasks that may seem unpleasant and boring. Many are unable or unwilling to stick to the difficult path and finish school; they drop out despite the long-term negative consequences.

Similarly, delaying childbearing until marriage entails postponing the pleasures of having a child, carefully selecting a long-term partner, exercising restraint by being sexually faithful to that partner, and developing and maintaining a committed relationship. These are not simple tasks. In low-income communities, having a child without marrying is the common choice, the path of least resistance. Many choose this path while failing to appreciate the long-term negative consequences.

However, dropping out of school and having a child outside of marriage have one crucial difference. Everyone in our society is told incessantly from childhood that dropping out of school will harm one's future; despite this constant refrain, a great many still drop out each year. In bold contrast, young people in low-income communities are never told that having a child outside of marriage will have negative consequences. They are never told that marriage has beneficial effects. The schools, the welfare system, the health care system, public authorities, and the media all remain scrupulously silent on the subject. In the face of this

47. Both mothers and fathers will talk favorably about marriage and fantasize about marrying each other, but they will rarely take concrete steps to bring this about.

pervasive social silence, it should be no surprise that out-of-wedlock childbearing has become the norm in so many communities.

Imagine how high the school dropout rate might be if, for 50 years, lower-income youth were never told that failing to finish school would harm their future. Tragically, on the issue of non-marital childbearing, a deliberate social silence has reigned for almost half a century. Low-income youth have never been told that marriage is beneficial; they have never been told that having a child outside of marriage is likely to have harmful consequences. In this context, it should be no surprise that non-marital childbearing has soared.

Foundations of a New Policy

As long as the current social silence concerning the benefits of marriage and the harm of out-of-wedlock childbearing persists, marriage will continue to erode in low-income communities. To combat poverty, it is vital to strengthen marriage, and to strengthen marriage, it is vital that at-risk populations be given a clear factual understanding of the benefits of marriage and the costs and consequences of non-marital childbearing.

To develop this understanding, government and society should establish a broad campaign of public education in low-income areas. This campaign should be similar in scope to current efforts to convince youth of the importance of staying in school or to inform the public about the health risks of smoking. While the costs of such an effort would be small, its impact could be considerable.

If society wishes to slow the growth of non-marital births and pregnancies, then the government must clearly communicate that, on

average, having and raising children inside of marriage is more beneficial than having and raising a child outside of marriage. Government should communicate not merely the desirability of delaying childbearing to an older age, but also the advantages of delaying childbearing until one has found a suitable long-term partner, formed a stable and healthy relationship, and, as a couple, made a sincere long-term commitment to each other through marriage.

The new pro-marriage message should address the deepest concerns of lower-income young women. Above all else, these women desire to be mothers, but they also desire to be good mothers. The well-being and life prospects of the children they will bring into the world are very important to them. Thus, government should inform lower-income men and women of the positive effects of healthy marriage on the well-being of children. It could then further address the benefits of healthy marriage for adults and society. While there is a voluminous literature on these topics, such information is utterly unavailable in lower-income communities.

Going further, the new policy should communicate practical skills in planning children's births in a manner to meet long-term life goals. It should teach practical skills in selecting suitable partners, in building stable and healthy relationships, and in understanding the role of commitment to sustaining healthy marriages. Given the high esteem with which low-income women and men regard marriage as an institution, this message should fall on a receptive audience, although the idea of delaying childbearing until after marriage will initially be a real shock.

Even for those on the left whose only concern is that low-income

women complete more education before having children out of wedlock, this policy should prove to be advantageous. Urging young women to select partners carefully, build strong relationships, and marry before having children would (if it has any effect) result in a necessary delay in the age of childbearing in lower-income communities.

Policies to Communicate the Truth About Marriage

In order to communicate a new pro-marriage message and strengthen marriage in low-income communities, government should undertake the following specific policies.

- **Encourage public advertising campaigns on the importance of marriage** that are targeted to low-income communities. These campaigns should communicate the value of marriage to adults, children, and society.
- **Provide marriage education programs in high schools with a high proportion of at-risk youth.** As noted, most low-income girls strongly desire to have children. They also wish and intend to be good mothers. These young women will be very receptive to information that shows the positive effects of marriage on long-term child outcomes.
- **Strengthen federal abstinence education programs that provide critical information on the value of marriage to adults, children, and society.** These programs already provide some information on the value of marriage to lower-income youth. This message needs to be expanded, not reduced.

- **Make voluntary marriage education widely available to interested couples in low-income communities.** This could be done by expanding the small “healthy marriage initiative” currently operating in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. These programs may also provide job training to participants, but that should not be their primary emphasis.
- **Provide marriage education materials and referrals in Title X birth control clinics.** Government-funded Title X clinics operate in nearly every county in the U.S., providing free or subsidized birth control to over 4 million low-income adult women each year. Many clients of these clinics go on to have children out of wedlock within a short period. With 40 percent of children born outside of marriage, it is obvious that a policy of merely promoting birth control is ineffective in stemming the rise of non-marital births. In addition to providing birth control, Title X clinics should be required to offer educational materials on the benefits of marriage and referrals to education in relationships and life-planning skills to clients who are interested.

Reducing the Anti-Marriage Penalties in Welfare

Another important public policy to strengthen marriage would be to

reduce the penalties against marriage in the welfare system. Welfare programs create disincentives to marriage because benefits are reduced as a family’s income rises. A mother will receive far more from welfare if she is single than if she has an employed husband in the home. For many low-income couples, marriage means a reduction in government assistance and an overall decline in the couple’s joint income.

Marriage penalties occur in many means-tested programs such as food stamps, public housing, Medicaid, day care, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. The welfare system should be overhauled to reduce such counterproductive incentives.

The simplest way to accomplish this would be to increase the value of the earned income tax credit (EITC) for married couples with children; this could offset the anti-marriage penalties existing in other programs such as food stamps, public housing, and Medicaid. In addition, the appeal of welfare programs as an alternative to work and marriage could be reduced by requiring able-bodied parents to work or prepare for work as a condition of receiving aid.

Conclusion: Strengthening Marriage as an Antidote to Poverty

Marriage remains America’s strongest anti-poverty weapon, yet it continues to decline. As husbands disappear from the home, poverty and welfare dependence will

increase, and children and parents will suffer as a result.

Since marital decline drives up child poverty and welfare dependence, and since the poor aspire to healthy marriage but lack the norms, understanding, and skills to achieve it, it is reasonable for government to take active steps to strengthen marriage. Just as government discourages youth from dropping out of school, it should clearly and forcefully articulate the value of marriage. It should provide information that will help people to form and maintain healthy marriages and delay childbearing until they are married and economically stable. In particular, clarifying the severe shortcomings of the “child first, marriage later” philosophy to potential parents in lower-income communities should be a priority.

Marriage is highly beneficial to children, adults, and society; it needs to be encouraged and strengthened. Under current government policies, however, marriage is either ignored or undermined. This needs to change.



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