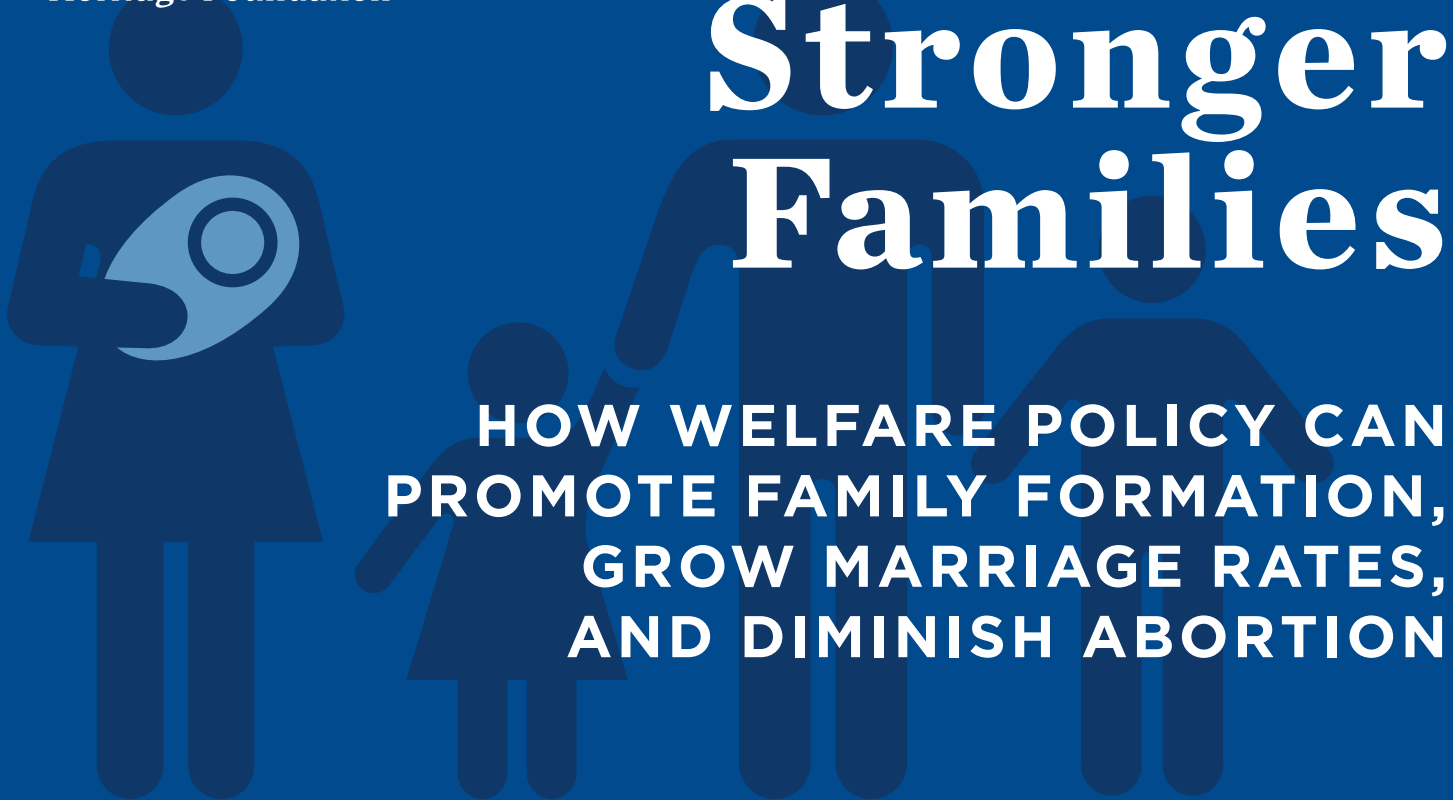


# Stronger Families

HOW WELFARE POLICY CAN  
PROMOTE FAMILY FORMATION,  
GROW MARRIAGE RATES,  
AND DIMINISH ABORTION





All children conceived deserve to be born and raised by married mothers and fathers who will love, guide, and protect them throughout their lives. Marriage is like a universal antibiotic protecting against a full range of social problems. But family breakdown is widespread. Americans are worse off as a result. Research shows that those who graduate high school, find full-time work, get married, and then have children after marriage will not be poor and will have far better life outcomes. The children of those who do not follow this “success sequence” are much more likely to be poor and have reduced life prospects.

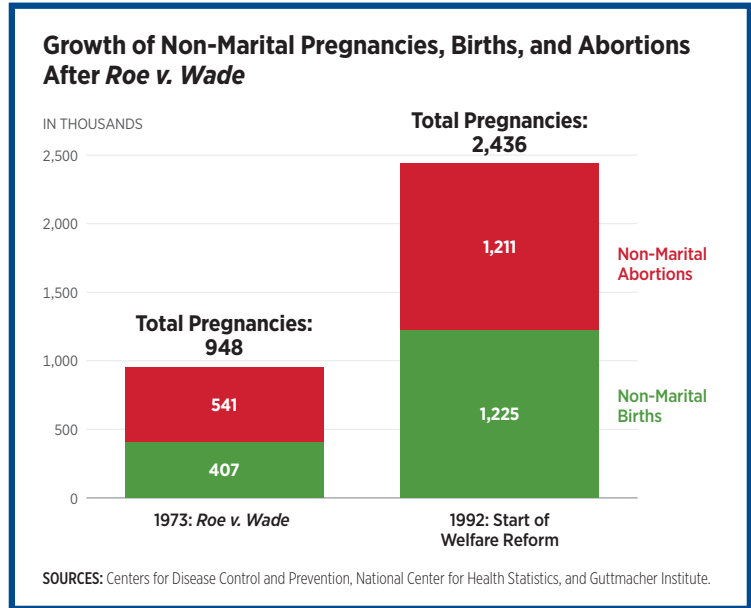
Many factors have contributed to the erosion of the family, but the U.S. welfare system is at the center of the problem. Welfare heavily subsidizes single parenthood and actively penalizes marriage. In addition, traditional welfare dramatically increased non-marital pregnancies which, in turn, led to increases in both non-marital births and abortions. Welfare reform in the 1990’s dampened these negative effects: strengthening family formation and leading to substantial fewer non-marital pregnancies, births, and abortions. But much more needs to be done.

Read on to learn about the surprising relationship between welfare policy, marriage, and abortion rates and see recommendations for pro-family welfare reforms that strengthen American families.

# How Has American Public Policy Hurt Family Formation

## *ROE v. WADE*

When *Roe v. Wade* established nationwide abortion on demand, abortion increased dramatically. *Roe v. Wade* also dramatically altered social norms: Marriage declined, non-marital sexual activity increased, and non-marital pregnancies skyrocketed. Over the next two decades, annual non-marital abortions rose by 670,000. Annual non-marital pregnancies increased nearly twice as fast, by nearly 1.5 million annually.



## WELFARE REFORM

*Roe v. Wade* was not the only factor leading to the explosive growth in abortion on-demand and the collapse of marriage. President Lyndon Johnson's 1964 "War on Poverty" declaration was followed by decades of permissive welfare policies, higher benefits and spending, and a vast array of new welfare programs. These programs backfired by undermining families, the greatest source of financial and social stability for children. The programs incentivized single parenthood and made it less likely that people would get and stay married and raise children in households with both parents.

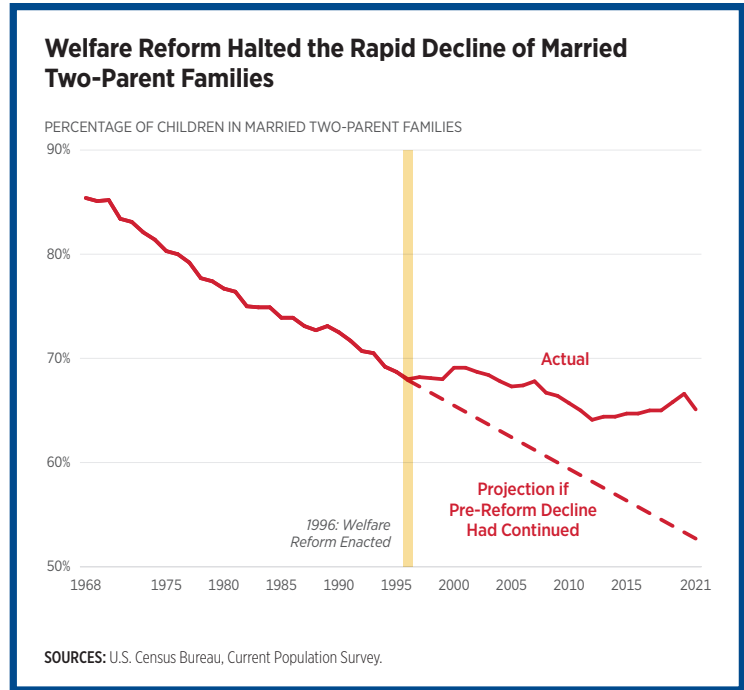
The welfare reforms of the 1990s produced a broad array of positive outcomes, reversing or diminishing many of the corrosive effects of the older permissive welfare system. Welfare reform sought to stop the debilitating rise of non-marital childbearing and reduce dependence by emphasizing personal responsibility, prudent limits, and instituting work requirements.

**These welfare reforms halted the rapid collapse of marriage, stopped the rise in non-marital childbearing, increased work, slashed poverty in single-parent families, and shrank welfare dependence. They also sharply reduced abortion; altogether, the social changes initiated and promoted by reform have led to 9.8 million fewer abortions.**

# Eight Ways Welfare Reform Supported Families

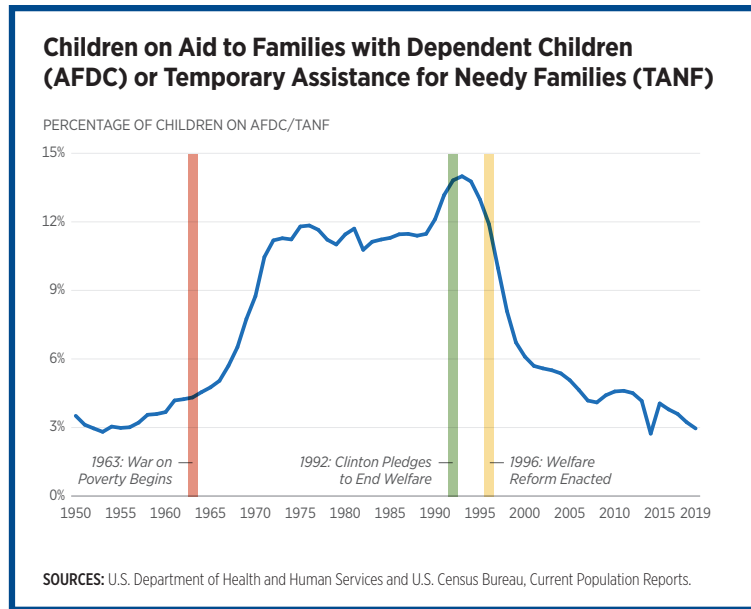
## #1: HALTED THE STEADY DECLINE IN TWO-PARENT FAMILIES

For more than two decades before welfare reform, the percentage of children residing in married, two-parent families fell steadily. In 1970, 85 percent of children lived in two-parent homes; by 1996, the number had fallen to 68 percent. Welfare reform stopped the steady collapse of marriage by reducing the unintended incentives given to non-married parents over married ones. This effort was remarkably successful. Immediately after the reforms, the decline in two-parent families halted abruptly. The married family rate has remained stable for nearly three decades. If the pre-reform trend in family disintegration had continued, an additional 9 million children would be in single-parent families today.



## #2: DRAMATICALLY REDUCED TRADITIONAL WELFARE DEPENDENCE

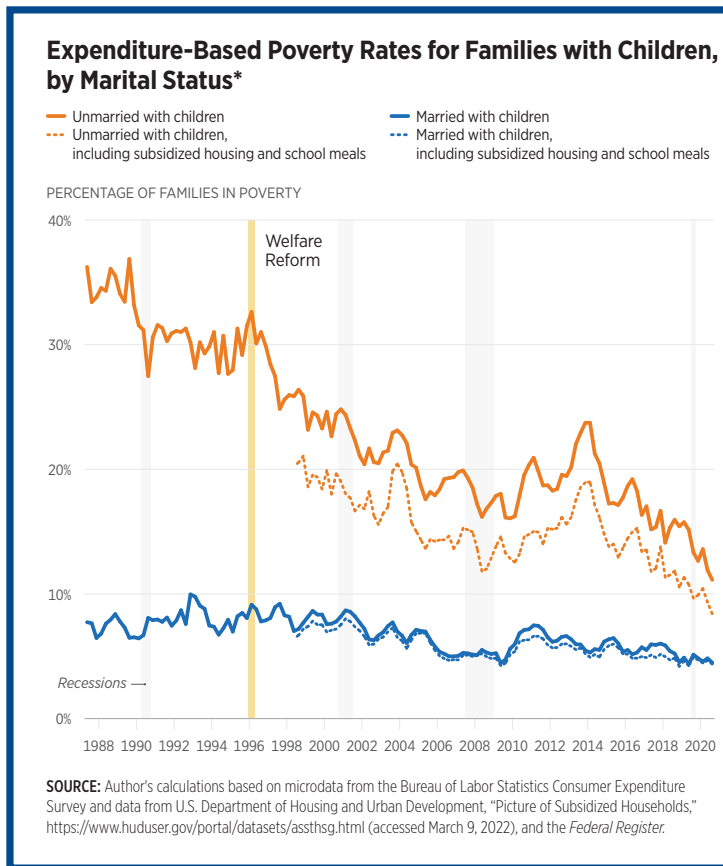
Before welfare reform, nearly one in seven children (9 million) was receiving monthly cash welfare benefits. More than 90 percent of these recipient children were in single-parent families, and, on average, these families remained on the program for 13 years. After reform, due in part to work requirements and time limited benefits, caseloads plummeted. By 2019, only 3 percent of children were receiving traditional cash benefits, cutting the rate of dependence by nearly 80 percent.



### #3: REDUCED CHILD POVERTY AMONG SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES BY TWO THIRDS

More than 90 percent of families in AFDC and TANF welfare programs were single-parent families. Before reform, the poverty rate among single-parent families was relatively flat. Immediately after reform, poverty among these families began to decline sharply, falling from 33 percent in 1996 to 11 percent in 2020, a decline of more than 60 percent. If the value of subsidized housing and school meals is counted, only around 8 percent of such families are poor today. By contrast, married-parent families, who had a lower initial poverty rate to begin with, experienced some reductions, although smaller due in part to being less affected by the reform.

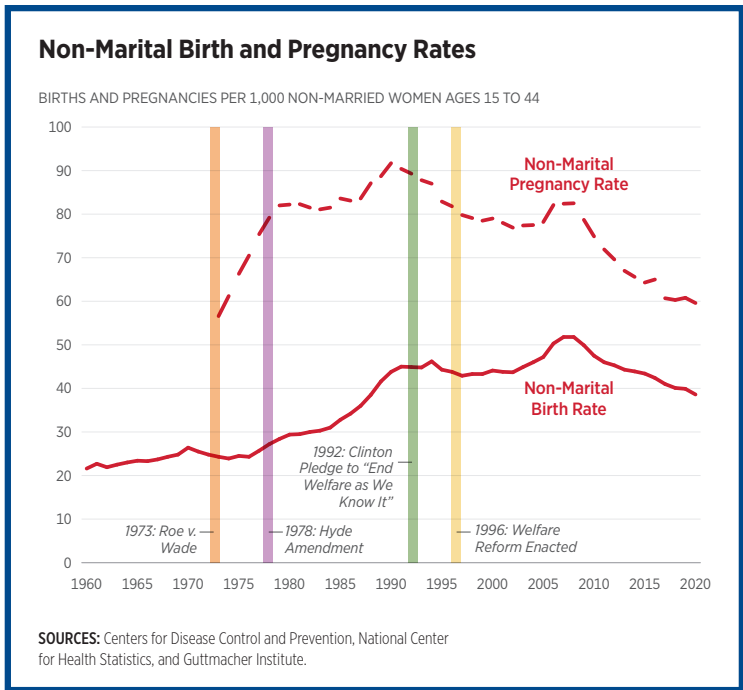
\*NOTE: Expenditure-based poverty rates are presented as a rolling four-quarter average for all households whose final interview occurred during the current quarter or any of the previous three quarters.





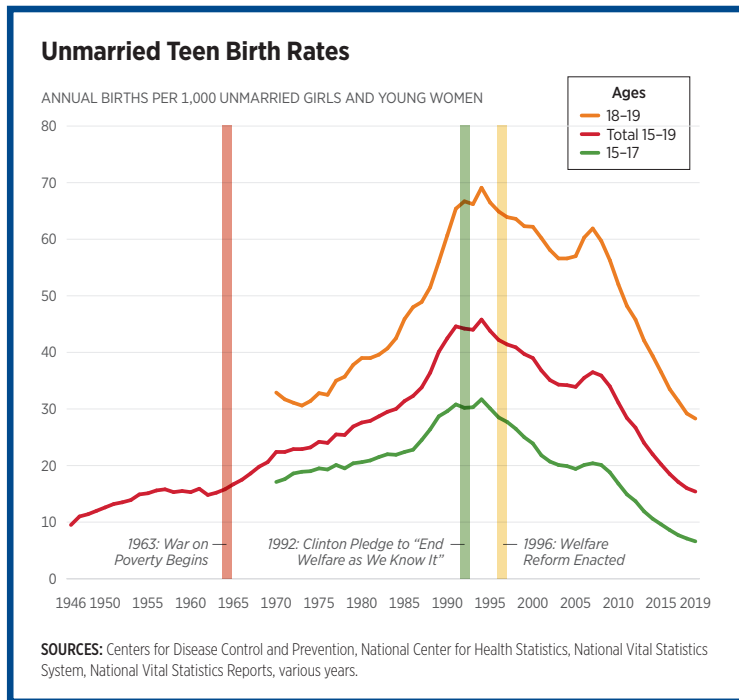
## #4: HALTED THE GROWTH IN NON-MARITAL BIRTH RATE

With the onset of the War on Poverty, non-marital childbearing and single parenthood began to soar. With the establishment of the permissive welfare system in the late 1960s, non-marital births as a share of all births were rising by approximately 1 percent each year. This alarming trend continued relentlessly up to the early 1990s. The non-marital birth rate more than doubled in the three decades before welfare reform, rising from around 20 per 1,000 women in 1960 to 30 per 1,000 in 1980, and then exploded upward in the next decade, reaching 45 births per 1,000 in 1990. With the onset of welfare reform, the trend line abruptly shifted, and has remained relatively flat for 30 years.



## #5: REVERSED THE RAPID RISE IN THE TEEN NON-MARITAL BIRTH RATE

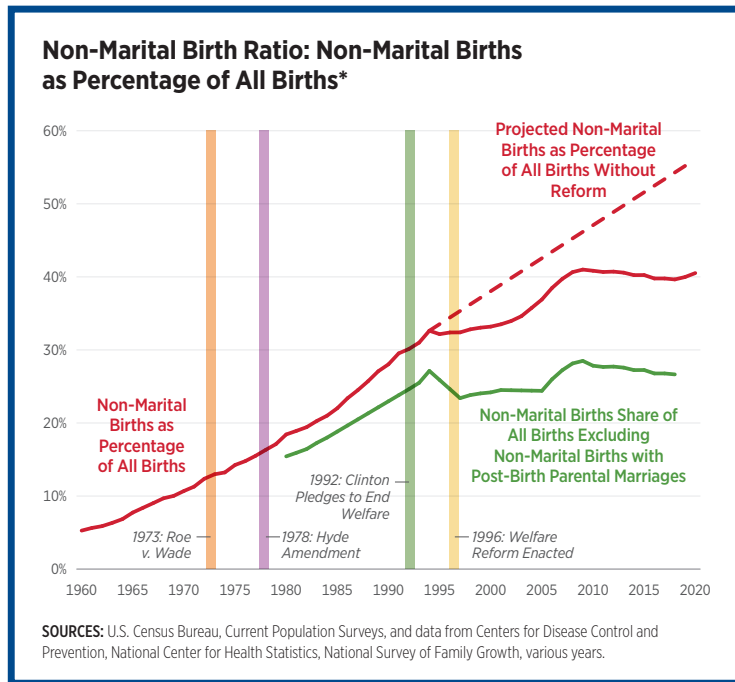
Welfare reform also coincided with and contributed strongly to a dramatic drop in the teen non-marital birth rate. For three decades before reform, the teen non-marital birth rate skyrocketed. In 1960, there were 15 non-marital births for each 1,000 non-married girls and young women. By 1992, the rate had nearly tripled to 44 births per 1,000 non-married girls and young women. With the onset of welfare reform, this steady increase promptly reversed, and the non-marital teen birth rate began to fall rapidly. By 2019, the non-marital teen birth rate had dropped all the way back to the 1960 level of 15 non-marital births per 1,000.



## #6: HALTED THE RAPID RISE IN THE PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN BORN OUTSIDE OF MARRIAGE

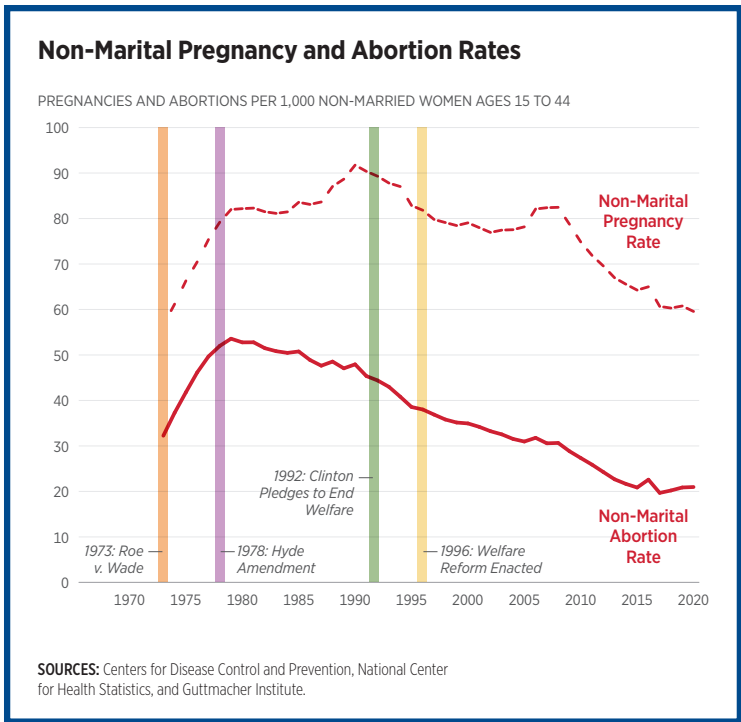
For three decades, the rate of children born to unmarried parents was rising steadily, growing from just 7% in 1960 to 30% in 1990. If the trend had continued, more children would be born to unmarried parents than married parents today. Welfare reform halted this trend. Today, sixty percent of children are born to married couples and forty percent to unmarried. Notably, twenty-five percent are born to unmarried cohabiting parents. Taken together, 85 percent of children are born to parents who are either married or cohabiting.

\*NOTE: The green trend line, which omits families with post-birth marriages, includes interpolated data.



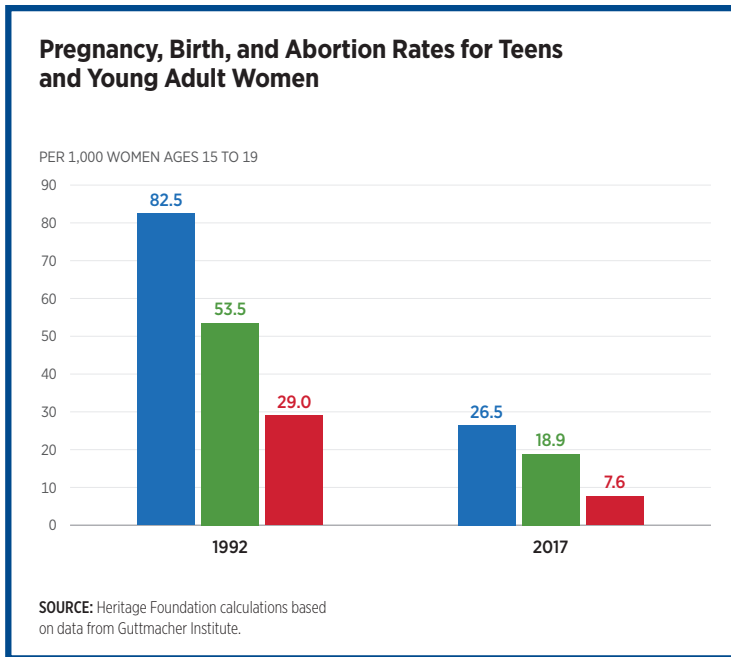
## #7: REDUCED THE NON-MARITAL ABORTION RATE

Both non-marital pregnancy and birth rates climbed in the decade before welfare reform. With reform, non-marital pregnancy rates fell and were one-third lower in 2022 than in 1992. By shrinking non-marital pregnancy, reform reduced both non-marital births and abortions together, resulting in at least 400,000 fewer abortions each year. Altogether, the social changes initiated and promoted by welfare reform have led to 9.8 million fewer abortions.



## #8: REDUCED TEEN PREGNANCY AND ABORTIONS

Some opposed welfare reform in 1996 because they believed it would increase abortions, particularly among teens. However, welfare reform marked the onset of a rapid and concurrent decline in pregnancies, abortions, and births among girls aged 15 to 19. All three metrics fell together in nearly equal proportions. In 1992, there were 36 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15 to 19; by 2017, the number had fallen to eight per 1,000 women aged 15 to 19.



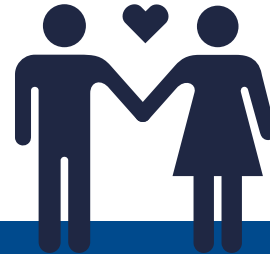
## **WELFARE 2.0: PRO-MARRIAGE, PRO-WORK, PRO-FAMILY REFORM**

Despite its success, many now seek to overturn welfare reform, restoring work-free cash welfare for single parents. This reversal would destroy marriage and two-parent families, increase government dependence and spending, and greatly increase demand for abortion.

**Policymakers should instead work to reduce marriage penalties, expand and strengthen work requirements, and restructure existing welfare programs to prioritize marriage and family.**

## **Reduce Marriage Penalties Across the Welfare State**

Some 81 percent of the public believe the welfare system “should not penalize parents when they get married.” Yet, under the current welfare system, if lower-income or working-class parents marry, government benefits will be sharply cut; total income for the family will fall. These penalties have made marriage economically costly for millions of low-income and moderate-income families. Reducing marriage penalties would strengthen marriage, shrink poverty, and greatly improve overall family well-being. Pro-marriage reform can be accomplished without added cost by curtailing existing waste, fraud, and excess benefits in the welfare system.



## Expand and Strengthen Work Requirements in Welfare Programs

Over 90 percent of Americans believe that “able-bodied adults who receive cash, food, housing, and medical assistance should be required to work or prepare for work as a condition of receiving those benefits.” Work requirements promote self-support and strengthen marriage. Yet most means-tested welfare programs still hand out benefits to millions of adults who are able to work but do not. Work requirements for able-bodied, non-elderly adults receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) should be expanded, and similar requirements should apply to able-bodied adults receiving food stamps. Work requirements in the Earned Income Tax Credit should be strengthened.



## Restructure Existing Welfare Programs with Pro-Marriage, Pro-Family Reforms

The U.S. spends over \$1.2 trillion a year on means-tested welfare assistance; roughly half goes to families with children with a predominate focus on single-parent families. The various welfare programs should be simplified and restructured to ensure that working families with children do not face poverty. This can be accomplished by eliminating waste, fraud, and excess benefits and rechanneling funds into a system that truly incentivizes positive behavior and supports the well-being of the family. This will also make the actual value of benefits obvious and transparent to the public and recipients.





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