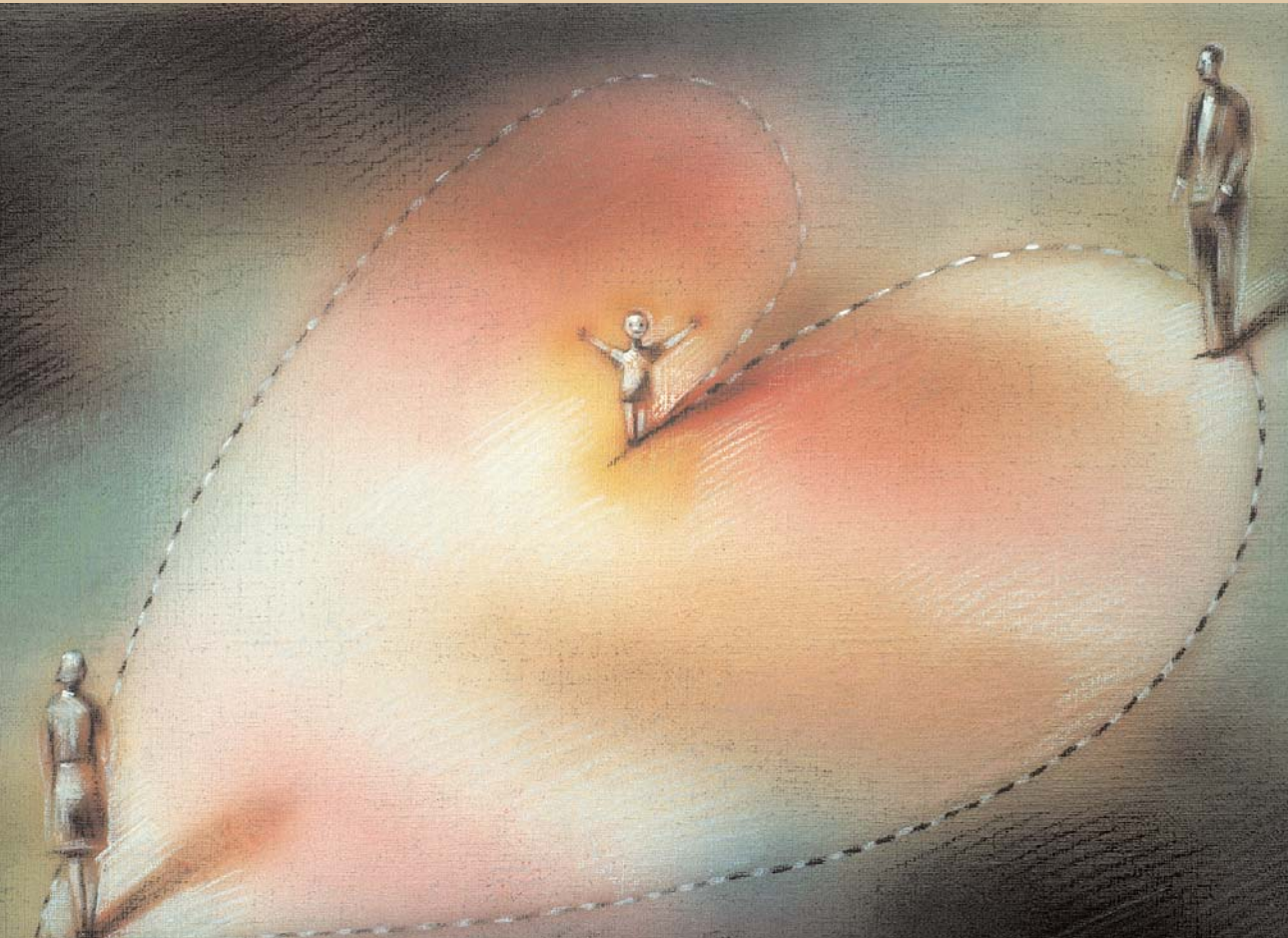


Can Government Strengthen Marriage?

Evidence from the Social Sciences



**National Fatherhood Initiative
Institute for Marriage and Public Policy
Institute for American Values**

THIS REPORT WAS COMMISSIONED by the National Fatherhood Initiative, in partnership with the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy and the Institute for American Values, and written by Maggie Gallagher of the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy. The sponsors are grateful to their academic advisors for their review and suggestions, and to their financial contributors for their generous support.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2001-DD-BX-0079 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Institute of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crimes. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Department of Justice.

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ISBN #1-931764-05-0

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Foreword

NATIONAL FATHERHOOD INITIATIVE, in partnership with the Institute for American Values and the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, commissioned this report with an important goal in mind: to provide a diverse audience with an indispensable tool for engaging in the public discourse about the role of marriage in public policy.

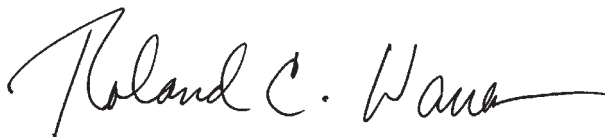
Elected officials and their staff, scholars, marriage educators, journalists, columnists, family therapists, clergy, and anyone working with couples or families are encouraged to read this timely and informative monograph.

The report addresses important questions such as:

1. Why should law and public policy support marriage?
2. What are the principles of successful marriage policy?
3. What can government do?

The report candidly answers these questions with evidence from the social sciences and from the burgeoning marriage education field.

One of public policy's highest goals is to ensure that every child grows up in a stable, loving home. As our great nation debates the merits of a range of solutions to our most intractable social ills, it is imperative that we do not forget that one of the main reasons that the government is involved in these areas is to protect and provide for children. This report illustrates why the support of healthy marriages in all communities is essential and necessary to ensure that every child has an equal chance at the American Dream.



Roland C. Warren
President
National Fatherhood Initiative



**National
Fatherhood
InitiativeSM**

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Executive Summary

A GROWING CONSENSUS of family scholars confirms that marriage matters: Both adults and children are better off living in communities where more children are raised by their own two married parents.¹ Both adults and children live longer, have higher rates of physical health and lower rates of mental illness, experience poverty, crime and domestic abuse less often, and have warmer relationships, on average, when parents get and stay married.

In turn, high rates of family fragmentation generate substantial taxpayer costs. According to a report by over one hundred family scholars and civic leaders released in 2000,

Divorce and unwed childbearing create substantial public costs paid by taxpayers. Higher rates of crime, drug abuse, education failure, chronic illness, child abuse, domestic violence and poverty among both adults and children bring with them higher taxpayer costs in diverse forms: more welfare expenditure; increased remedial and special education expenses; higher day-care subsidies; additional child-support collection costs; a range of increased direct court administration costs incurred in regulating post-divorce or unwed families; higher foster care and child protection service costs; increased Medicaid and Medicare costs; increasingly expensive and harsh crime-control measures to compensate for formerly private regulation of adolescent and young-adult behaviors; and many other similar costs. While no study has yet attempted precisely to measure these sweeping and diverse taxpayer costs stemming from the decline of marriage, current research suggests that these costs are likely to be quite extensive.²

This growing consensus on the importance of marriage has led to new efforts to generate public policies that may help reduce rates of unmarried childbearing and divorce.

This report reviews existing research to find ways that public policy can strengthen marriage and reduce divorce and unmarried childbearing. Three key questions are addressed. First, why should the law and public policy support marriage? Second, what are the principles of successful marriage policy? Third, what can government do? What strategies correspond to the best current evidence from the social sciences? ■

Can Government Strengthen Marriage?

Evidence from the Social Sciences

1. Why Should Law and Public Policy Support Marriage?

WHY SHOULD LAW and public policy support marriage? A large body of social science evidence confirms that marriage is a wealth-creating institution. Marriage changes the relationship between men, women, and their children in a way that leaves men, women, children, *and* society better off.³ These are not just “selection effects.” The best evidence suggests that marriage itself makes a difference in both adult and child well-being.

Marriage protects children.

A growing consensus confirms that children raised outside of intact marriages are at higher risk for experiencing a variety of negative outcomes including higher rates of poverty, welfare dependency, crime, school failure, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency and adult criminality, Medicaid costs, mental illness and emotional distress, domestic violence, unwed teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, poor quality family relationships, and child abuse.⁴

Marriage improves adult well-being.

Both men and women who make long-term marriages are better off as a result: They live longer, healthier lives with higher levels of emotional well-being and lower rates of mental illness and emotional distress. Married people, especially married men, make more money than otherwise similar singles, and married couples build more wealth and experience less economic hardship than do single or cohabiting couples with similar income levels.⁵ The evidence strongly suggests these are not just “selection effects” but real consequences of marriage.

Family fragmentation imposes significant public costs.

High rates of divorce and unmarried childbearing drive a significant portion of social problems that government social programs are asked to address. Even small reductions in rates of divorce and unmarried childbearing would likely carry a significant payoff for children and for taxpayers, reducing the need for certain government supports.

A marriage gap threatens equality of opportunity.

Marriage is a wealth-creating institution. Not only individuals but also whole communities do better, on average, when good-enough marriages are common. The costs of marriage decline are not equally shared across ethnic and socioeconomic lines. When society abandons its role of supporting and sustaining marriage, a marriage gap between advantaged and disadvantaged communities emerges that threatens cherished social goals of equal opportunity. Through no fault of their own, children whose parents fail to make and sustain a good-enough marriage experience the suffering and the economic, educational, health, and emotional disadvantages associated with family fragmentation. They are less likely to make and sustain healthy marriages as adults, creating a downward cycle of reduced social capital and economic opportunities.

Marriage is a public status and not merely a private relationship.

Marriage is not merely the product of government or of religious institutions, but neither is marriage merely a private relationship. Marriage is a universal human institution; virtually every known society has had some system of marriage, some way of linking the rights and responsibilities of mothers and fathers to each other and to the children they share that is public not private—socially shared not invented or sustained merely by private individuals.⁶

Marriage is a multifaceted institution with strong personal, religious, and other social meanings prior to the positive law (which government and public policy ought to respect). But marriage also has an indispensable public purpose to regulate (or provide socially supported pathways for) sex, love, and loyalty so as to increase the likelihood that children are born to mothers and fathers in one family household, publicly committed to caring for each other and their children.

Marriage aims to create a family, not merely an intimate couple relationship, and is sustained in part by shared norms about what marriage means and how married people ought to behave. As a result of the greater shared commitment, permanence, and behavioral norms attached to marriage, children who are raised by married mothers and fathers do better in virtually every way social scientists know how to measure.

Marriage is also one of a small number of private institutions that is essential to a free and self-regulating society. When ties between mothers and fathers fray, when mothers and children cannot know what to expect from fathers and their kin (and vice versa), a host of unmet social needs are created that government must step in to attempt to fill—with decidedly mixed results.

Poverty, crime, substance abuse, special education, foster care, child abuse services, teen pregnancy—there is hardly a single major domestic program that state, local, and federal agencies spend money on that is not the result of social problems driven in part by the decline of marriage. The result is not only an expansion of the government sphere but also of radical inequalities of opportunity, as families and communities that privately sustain marriage transmit key advantages and forms of social capital, of which other children, through no fault of their own, are deprived.

A group of 13 leading family scholars recently concluded:

*Marriage is an important social good, associated with an impressively broad array of positive outcomes for children and adults alike. . . . Whether American society succeeds or fails in building a healthy marriage culture is clearly a matter of legitimate public concern.*⁷

2. What Are the Principles of Successful Marriage Policy? How Do We Define Success?

TO DESIGN AND EVALUATE the effectiveness of public policies on marriage, legislators and policy makers need a clearly defined goal. Here is one suggestion: The goal of marriage law and public policy reforms is *to increase the proportion of children who are raised by their own two married parents in low-conflict marriages*.

If this is the goal, then logically to move toward this goal, pro-marriage policy reforms must target one or all of the following objectives:

- reduce unmarried pregnancy;⁸
- increase the likelihood that unmarried couples expecting a baby will marry before the child's birth (or increase "legitimation" rates);
- reduce unnecessary divorce;
- reduce or prevent excessive conflict (and violence) in married couples; and
- do not discourage married couples from having children if they want them.⁹

In addition, because marriage is a social institution that is broader than any set of legal or public policy incidents—a role that is inherently normative—policies strengthen marriage only when they do the following:

Protect the boundaries of marriage.

For marriage to function as a social institution, the community must know who is married. To support marriage, laws and policies must distinguish married couples from other family and friendship units so that people and communities can tell who is married and who is not. Treating cohabiting couples as if they were married is one example of such a legal change that tends to blur the distinction between marriage and non-marriage. The harder it is to distinguish married couples from other kinds of relationships, the harder it is for communities to reinforce norms of marital behavior, the harder it is for couples to identify the meaning of their own relationship, and the more difficult it is for marriage to fulfill its function as a social institution.

Treat the married couple as a social, legal, and financial unit.

Legal and public policy reforms that either treat married couples as if they were unmarried individuals or treat unmarried couples as if they were married are likely to weaken marriage as a social institution.

Transmit and reinforce shared norms of responsible marital behavior.

Marriage changes behavior because it is more than a private relationship created by the couple for the couple's private purposes. Marriage changes behavior in healthy ways because marriage has shared social meanings. Marriage is inherently normative. Law and public policy help strengthen marriage when they reinforce (or at a minimum clearly communicate) social concern surrounding basic norms of responsible marital behaviors, such as encouraging permanence, fidelity, financial responsibility, and mutual support and discouraging violence or destructive conflict.

Communicate a socially shared preference for marriage as the ideal family form, particularly to young people of reproductive age.

When reviewing public policies aimed at strengthening marriage, one should not consider policies whose conceptual goal is to create marriage neutrality, or a level-playing field between married and unmarried individuals, unless there is substantial independent evidence that such a reform would reduce family fragmentation. Such policies, while they may further other legitimate public interests, are not likely to strengthen marriage as a social institution. A preference for marriage is not a public policy trump card. Any number of theoretical marital preferences may be imprudent or conflict with vital competing social values (such as protecting children in single-parent families). On the other hand, any law or public policy that explicitly operates on the principle that preferences for marriage are in themselves a form of discrimination against unmarried individuals cannot be viewed as a pro-marriage initiative. If

marriage is a social good, and a key social institution, neutrality is not an appropriate goal for public policy.

A government and a society that actively supports marriage (in fair, reasonable, and prudent ways) is the goal, not marriage neutrality in public policy.

3. What Can Government Do?

GIVEN THE HIGH COSTS of unmarried childbearing and divorce, what can government do? Here are some strategies based on evidence from the social sciences.

Reduce unmarried childbearing, delay pregnancy, and legitimate births.

Why are so many more American children now born out of wedlock? One of the biggest reasons is the large drop in the likelihood that a pregnant single woman will marry before the child's birth.¹⁰ By the early 1990s, pregnant single women in their early twenties were about twice as likely to pick unwed motherhood over marriage as they had been in the early 1970s.¹¹ Most of the increase in unwed childbearing in the 1990s was not to solo mothers, but to cohabiting couples. About 40 percent of births outside of marriage are to cohabiting couples.¹²

According to new research from the Fragile Families study, the vast majority of unmarried mothers in urban neighborhoods are interested in marriage at the time of the baby's birth. Only 19 percent of all unmarried mothers (and 3 percent of cohabiting unwed mothers) say there is no chance they will marry their baby's father. Thirty-seven percent of all unwed mothers of newborns (and 50 percent of cohabiting mothers of newborns) say that they are almost certain they will marry.¹³ Yet relatively few such parents do marry, and cohabiting families are especially fragile. Cohabiting biological parents of newborns are much less likely to remain together than married parents of newborns even after controlling for economic hardship, family background, relationship history,

and many other variables.¹⁴ Cohabiting families are twice as likely as married couples to be poor and more than four times as likely to be on welfare.¹⁵

How might government programming increase the likelihood that interested unwed parents make a successful marriage? Here are two ideas: (1) fund marriage preparation and education services; and (2) add a marriage message to teen-pregnancy prevention programs.

Fund marriage preparation and education services for cohabiting and other unmarried new parents who want them.

Demonstration or pilot projects can nurture a network of community and faith-based marriage education and preparation services for new parents who say that they are interested in marriage.

Are these programs effective? Research suggests that marriage preparation programs increase relationship satisfaction, reduce negative interactions, and may reduce divorce, at least in the early years of marriage.¹⁶ In an American sample, married couples who had received PREP, a premarital education program developed by Howard Markman and Scott Stanley at the University of Denver, were only half as likely as the control group to have divorced five years later. Premarital education also appears to reduce the likelihood that married couples experience domestic violence.¹⁷

These kinds of premarital education programs (for example, PREP, PAIRS,¹⁸ Couple Communication,¹⁹ Relationship Enhancement²⁰) are relatively inexpensive. Clergy and lay leaders appear to be at least as effective as trained psychologists in administering many kinds of skills-based training.²¹ The emerging trend in these programs (which are available in secular and religious versions) is to emphasize the importance of sacrifice and commitment and the need for forgiveness, reconciliation, and acceptance as part of a loving marriage, as well as good communication skills.

Pilot programs or demonstration projects with rigorous research evaluations would provide two enormous potential benefits: They would (1) increase our understanding of best practices in this field; and (2) broad-

en the existing research base to include low-income and ethnically diverse samples. Demonstration projects and evaluations that accomplished these two goals would not only help guide future government programming but also encourage private community and faith-based groups to pursue their own marriage education initiatives since the key, but expensive, evaluation research out of the reach of most private groups was no longer an obstacle.

How can government policy serve at-risk couples interested in marriage? There are many potential points of referral for such programs from initial welfare, food stamp and Medicaid applications, Head Start, home-visit programs, and paternity identification programs. Such services need not and should not be coercive. For example, case workers who visit hospitals to encourage paternity identification could also ask new parents whether they are interested in marriage and, if so, whether or not they would like vouchers or referrals to community or faith-based premarital education services.

Marriage preparation programs may encourage and strengthen marriage in three different ways: (1) by signaling to young parents and parents-to-be that the community perceives marriage as an important protection for them and their children; (2) by stimulating the growth of a supportive network of faith-based and other community marriage programs that can serve couples through the life cycle; and (3) by providing at-risk couples with strategies and skills for handling conflict that increase relationship satisfaction, reduce violence, and may reduce future divorce risk.

Add a marriage message to teen-pregnancy prevention. Currently, teen-pregnancy prevention programs educate teenagers on the need to delay childbearing—but delay until when? Research confirms that, in terms of the best outcomes for parents and children, teens should delay pregnancy until they are grown, educated, *and married*.

The government is heavily involved in developing, funding, and evaluating teen-pregnancy prevention programs scattered across a variety of funding streams. In 1996, according to one estimate, the federal government spent almost \$140 million on various programs to prevent

adolescent pregnancy.²² Since then the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, as one scholar noted, has placed a “special emphasis” on teen-pregnancy prevention as part of a strategy to prevent out-of-wedlock births.²³

Teen-pregnancy prevention programs are designed to teach young people to decide to wait before they get pregnant. But wait for what? Most Americans believe that, ideally, teens should delay pregnancy until they are older, educated, *and married*. The 1996 Welfare Reform Act explicitly views teen-pregnancy prevention as a strategy for reducing unwed births.

However, because both existing law and public policy have narrowly framed the issue in terms of age of the mother, government-funded teen-pregnancy prevention does not necessarily convey a marriage message to teens. Instead, as Isabel Sawhill, Brookings fellow and president of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, recently testified before Congress, “Too many teen-pregnancy prevention programs have left the impression that it’s fine to have a baby without being married as long as you wait until you are aged 20.”²⁴

Young people are apparently responding to this imperfect message. While teen births dropped significantly in the nineties, births rates to single women in their early twenties continued to rise. The majority of unwed births today are to young women in their twenties. Six-sevenths of all unwed births are to adult women (18 and older).

Unfortunately for our young people, there is little or no evidence that postponing unwed childbearing from the late teens to the early twenties has any benefit for mother or child. Consider, for example, the following data:

- A study that followed 1,000 Nova Scotia mothers for 10 years after the birth of their first child concluded: “[The] disadvantaged position [of young unmarried mothers] vis-a-vis the older married women is not, however, merely a function of age. The older unmarried mothers also experienced more difficult circumstances than their married counterparts and in some instances appear more disadvantaged than the young unmarried mothers.”²⁵

- Analyses of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, following 990 adolescent girls for over a decade, compared the effects of early childbearing and unwed childbearing on the mental health of mothers and concluded, “Overall these results suggest that marital status is a more important factor in young adult depressive symptoms than is age at first birth.” This was true even after controlling for race, age, family structure, school involvement, juvenile delinquency, and other background factors.²⁶

- An analysis of data from the National Survey of Family Growth (10,847 women ages 15–44 in 1995) concluded that older unwed mothers are actually less likely than teen unwed mothers to get married by age 40. Eighty-nine percent of white teen unwed mothers had married by age 40 compared to 70 percent of white adult unwed mothers. Among Hispanics, 65 percent of unwed teen moms had married by midlife, compared to 55 percent of older unwed mothers. For African Americans the gap is even wider: 59 percent of single teen moms had married by age 40, compared to 43 percent of older unwed mothers.²⁷ Since a successful marriage has a considerable positive impact on women’s mental and physical health as well as economic well-being,²⁸ this marriage gap between teen and older unwed mothers is troubling. While women who avoid nonmarital births are the most likely to get and stay married, older unwed mothers appear to be even more disadvantaged than teen single mothers when it comes to making a marriage.

- The best economic analysis to date comparing outcomes for families of adult unwed mothers and teen unwed mothers found no economic advantage to merely postponing unwed births: “How are the families of women who have nonmarital births after age 20 faring? The simple answer is not very well. Neither their educational attainment (which exceeds that of teenage mothers) nor the contributions of a cohabiting partner serve, on average, to ameliorate the adverse economic circumstances these women face. Much to our surprise we found that as a group . . . teenage mothers were better off than women with postadolescent nonmarital births, a finding that many demographers would not have predicted.” The

scholars concluded: “Our analyses reveal that focusing on a woman’s age at first birth may obscure the importance of marital status as a factor associated with economic well-being among women giving birth after their teenage years, and especially among women having a second birth.”²⁹

Research shows that deferring childbearing until marriage is important for building warm, effective family relationships. Children raised in intact marriages have on average warmer relationships with both mothers and fathers.³⁰ Single mothers (including cohabiting mothers) have elevated rates of depression³¹ and poverty³² and other stressors that can interfere with warm and effective parent-child relationships. Children raised outside of intact marriages are at increased risk of many serious problems, including infant mortality, child abuse, school dropout, poverty, suicide, juvenile delinquency, and substance abuse.³³

Thus, not only do current government programs fail to reflect the values of most Americans, but also they are teaching a message to vulnerable teens that research shows to be false: *For most teen mothers, waiting until you are 20 or older to have an out-of-wedlock child does not appear to increase the well-being of either you or your child.*

In welfare reform and in other areas where government funds teen-pregnancy prevention, programs should be required to teach teenagers that the goal is to delay pregnancy until they are grown, educated, and have made a healthy marriage.

Recommendation: *Evaluate all teen-pregnancy prevention programs funded under TANF for their impact on the attitudes of teenagers toward births out of wedlock and unmarried pregnancy.*

All current teen-pregnancy prevention programs funded under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (commonly called “welfare”) should be evaluated for their impact on unwed births in general. Merely helping delay unwed births until mothers are in their early twenties should not be an acceptable measure of success. All evaluations of TANF-funded teen-pregnancy prevention programs should ask teenagers if they personally would consider getting pregnant outside of

marriage. Research suggests that any answer other than a firm, unambivalent “no” puts a teenager at high risk of getting pregnant and becoming an unwed mother.

This makes sense. After all, all the paths to avoiding unwed pregnancies require a high degree of motivation—whether it is abstinence until marriage, using contraception perfectly, or confining relationships to partners who are ready and able to be good husbands in the event of a pregnancy. Because avoiding an unwed pregnancy is difficult, successful programs must give teens powerful reasons that motivate them to avoid unmarried childbearing. The good news is that the success of teen-pregnancy prevention programs in delaying births suggests that such powerful messages from adults and communities do have an impact on behavior. There is reason to be optimistic that adding a marriage message to teen-pregnancy prevention programs would help reduce rather than merely postpone unmarried pregnancy and childbearing.

Would making the marriage message explicit help teen-pregnancy programs become more effective? There are strong reasons for believing so. Research on effective teen-pregnancy prevention programs revealed the difference between effective and ineffective teen-pregnancy programs. *Effective programs explicitly told teens it was a bad idea to have a baby while a teenager.* Every other strategy no matter how ideologically or theoretically appealing (including better access to contraceptives, values-clarification, or strategies to increase school commitment) failed. By contrast, many diverse sorts of programs built around a strong anti-teen-pregnancy message were successful at reducing teen-pregnancy rates.³⁴

Similarly, research shows that the attitudes and values of teens are an important predictor of early, unwed pregnancy.³⁵ In one study, girls and young women who had positive attitudes toward unmarried childbearing were five times more likely to become young unwed mothers.³⁶ When it comes to preventing unwed childbearing (whether through sexual abstinence or effective contraception), developing a strong commitment to avoiding pregnancy is key. Only girls and young women who are firmly committed to avoiding unwed pregnancy actually succeed in doing so. Yet attitude surveys suggest the majority of teens cur-

rently approve of unmarried childbearing, putting them at high risk of both teenage and unwed pregnancy.³⁷

This research suggests government policy can set a relatively clear and measurable goal for a new generation of teen-pregnancy programming: to increase the proportion of young women who answer with a firm “no” when asked, “Would you personally consider deliberately conceiving an out-of-wedlock child?”

Our success at turning around the teen-pregnancy crisis suggests an opportunity: Adding a marriage message to teen-pregnancy programs would likely have a measurable effect on the proportion of children born outside of marriage. If we would like teenagers to wait until they are grown, educated, and married before getting pregnant, our best bet is to tell them so and tell them why.

Recommendation: Consider creating a new, expanded, dedicated stream of funding for pilot programs for teen-pregnancy prevention built around a marriage message.

In testimony before Congress last year Isabel Sawhill noted the importance of preventing early, unwed childbearing as part of a strategy to increase the proportion of children living in intact married families:

[T]he most effective and least controversial way [to promote marriage as a social goal] is to ensure that more young women reach the normal age of marriage having finished school, established themselves in the workplace, and done both without having a child. The chances that they will then have children within marriage, that their marriage will be a lasting one. . . will be much greater. The chances of achieving this goal will be enhanced if the message young people receive from society is not just that delaying parenthood is important, but also that children belong within marriage.

The case for teen-pregnancy prevention programs as an important part of family formation initiatives would be much stronger if we added a marriage message to these programs.

Work toward preventing unnecessary divorce.

High rates of divorce and unmarried childbearing tend to go hand in hand. In communities where marriage appears unlikely to succeed, young women see little reason to postpone childbearing until marriage. As Fragile Families researcher Maureen Waller put it, “[M]ost unmarried parents hope to marry. At the same time, unmarried parents perceive marriage as a risk, and they frame the decision not to marry in terms of minimizing the high likelihood of divorce.”³⁸

Efforts to reduce unmarried childbearing that ignore the high rates of divorce in low-income communities are unlikely to succeed over the long run. Moreover divorce is one area where the government is already intimately involved in family life. Over half of all counties now have court-connected divorce education or mediation programs.³⁹ If one goal of public policy should be to help more at-risk, low-income married couples succeed at marriage, what kinds of interventions are likely to prove helpful?

Give vouchers for low-income marriage education and other interventions to reduce conflict, violence, and unnecessary divorce in at-risk couples. Research suggests that marriage counseling and marriage education may help many couples improve relationship satisfaction, reduce conflict and violence, and avoid divorce.⁴⁰ A recent review of the literature found behavioral marriage therapy improved marital satisfaction for about half the couples. About one-third of these couples moved from the distressed to the normal range, and 60 percent maintained these gains at six-month follow-up.⁴¹

Many different (but not all) kinds of marriage counseling appear to be effective.⁴² Many marriage counselors use eclectic approaches, drawing on elements of behavioral marriage therapy along with emotion-focused, insight-oriented, and cognitive strategies. New research has focused on the importance of integrating acceptance⁴³ and forgiveness (or reconciliation)⁴⁴ into marriage counseling and marriage education. Effective marriage interventions share at least one common trait: marriage counselors or educators who play an active role in helping couples improve satisfaction and avoid divorce.⁴⁵ New research suggests

that with time, many unhappy marriages improve even without outside intervention.⁴⁶ One important function of marriage counseling or marriage education, then, may be to offer distressed couples hope,⁴⁷ delaying the divorce decision long enough for marriage problems to dissipate or for couples to put problems into perspective. If providing hope and support for staying married is one key therapeutic variable, faith-based and community marriage educators may be as effective as therapists and counselors.

Is there any reason to believe that marriage counseling or marriage education might be helpful in low-income, at-risk populations—many of whom face the additional stresses of poverty, high crime, unemployment, substance abuse, and discrimination? While marriage counseling has been a mostly middle-class activity, there are important and mostly overlooked indications in the research literature that marriage interventions are more effective with at-risk couples than with the average married couple.

A burgeoning literature, for example, finds benefits to tailored marriage interventions in high-risk circumstances, including alcoholism,⁴⁸ drug use,⁴⁹ domestic violence,⁵⁰ and depression.⁵¹ For example, a study of 88 male alcoholics and their wives found that the proportion of wives reporting any violence by their husbands dropped from 48 percent before a special alcohol-focused behavioral marriage therapy to 16 percent two years later. Reports of severe violence dropped from 24 percent before therapy to 2.7 percent. Levels of violence among alcoholics who remained sober dropped to a level not significantly different than a demographically matched comparison group.⁵²

Creating an infrastructure of marriage counseling and marriage education in low-income and at-risk communities shows significant promise for reducing divorce and improving relationships even among high-risk couples. Faith-based or community marriage education and counseling programs would expand the support available to married couples in low-income communities, benefiting not only the specific recipients but also others in the community. Referrals (or vouchers) for couples interested in marriage counseling, marriage mentoring, or marriage education could be offered through Head Start, unemployment offices, drug

rehab centers, child support enforcement, TANF offices, fatherhood programs, youth shelters, child care centers, disability programs for parents of children, refugee resettlement programs, refugee support organizations, and community and faith-based marriage organizations.

Provide divorce education or mediation designed to reduce unnecessary divorce. Court-connected divorce mediation and education programs are now commonplace. A recent survey found that half of U.S. counties have court-connected divorce education programs. In many jurisdictions divorce education programs are mandatory.⁵³ The goals of existing divorce education and mediation programs, however, are too limited. Most programs aim at (1) reducing acrimony and/or encouraging co-parenting in divorcing families; and (2) reducing rates of litigation.

Divorce mediation has been shown to lead to dramatic reductions in litigation, especially around the time of divorce.⁵⁴ Research suggests that divorce education can reduce parents' negative behaviors after divorce (although generally not enough to improve the psychological adjustment of children).⁵⁵

Can appropriate mediation or divorce education programs help some divorcing couples reconcile? Judges in western Michigan are currently seeking to launch such a pilot program. If some forms of divorce education or mediation are more conducive to reconciliation, the social and legal costs of divorce could be substantially reduced at relatively little extra costs (since court-connected mediation and education programs are already commonplace and often self-funding). Money for research and evaluation of such pilot programs should be a high priority.

Some have argued that any divorce intervention will prove futile in altering the behavior of people determined to split. Certainly in some cases, divorce or separation may be inevitable, or the best alternative. But are *all* couples who file for divorce absolutely determined or locked in the kind of angry conflict that makes divorce the best or only realistic alternative?

Research suggests otherwise. Well into the divorce process, a surprisingly high proportion of divorcing couples are ambivalent about their

divorce decision. In one major study of divorcing couples one year after the divorce, at least one spouse in three-quarters of divorcing couples reported second thoughts.⁵⁶ Various state polls confirm that even many years later, a significant proportion of divorced people believe their divorce may have been a mistake. In New Jersey, for example, 46 percent of divorced people reported that they wished that they and their ex-spouse had tried harder to work through their differences.⁵⁷ In one Minnesota poll, 40 percent of currently divorced people say they have at least some regrets about their divorce.⁵⁸ Sixty-six percent of currently divorced Minnesotans answered “yes” to the question “Looking back, do you wish you and your ex-spouse had tried harder to work through your differences?”⁵⁹

Qualitative research suggests that even among married couples who eventually choose to divorce, divorce was not necessarily inevitable or the best outcome:

At the same time that they listed complaints, however, divorcing people easily reported good things about their marriage. They liked having someone at home, someone to talk to about their day. They described camping trips, holidays and birthdays, the dream of having one’s own family and home. They loved their children. They described feelings of security, safety, and comfort. . . . It seemed that many outcomes were possible in nearly every marriage that I learned about. The partners might have stayed together, for example. Or the noninitiating partner might have been the one to call the marriage off.⁶⁰

The majority of divorces today appear to be taking place in relatively low-conflict marriages. Less than a third of divorcing parents appeared to be in violent or high-conflict marriages.⁶¹ One nationally representative study found that even absent any known intervention about a third of physically separated married couples successfully reconcile.⁶²

Thus, research suggests a substantial minority of couples filing for divorce may be candidates for successful reconciliation. Timing of interventions may be crucial. Standard divorce education programs, for example, appeared to be more effective if parents attended within a few

weeks of filing rather than at a later period. In a pilot study of the influence of divorce education, 12.5 percent of parents attending a program within three weeks of the initial court hearing relitigated within two years, compared to 60 percent who attended a program at a later date. A replication study found a similar effect of timing of the intervention.⁶³

Government-funded pilot projects testing a variety of strategies and establishing best practices for meeting all three of these goals (reducing acrimony, litigation, and unnecessary divorce) could have a profound impact on divorce rates, at relatively low cost. Court-connected programs are often self-funding, and can generally be spread by family court judges or appended to existing court-connected divorce education programs. Evaluation research to establish effective practices, by contrast, is outside the reach of many local communities and private organizations.

Examine other potential policy levers.

Tax policies, Medicaid marriage penalties, and job training for low-income fathers should all be examined.

Keep or increase tax exemptions for children. How does tax treatment of marriage and family affect family formation? Despite the considerable public attention to the so-called marriage penalties in the tax code, there is little evidence that these policies exert significant effects on unmarried childbearing or divorce.⁶⁴ Research suggests these policies do have significant impact on the labor force decisions of wives. Like maternity leave policies,⁶⁵ proposals to reduce tax rates on working wives function to keep more women working more continuously. Advocates interested in government policies that increase the labor force participation of mothers may find these attractive, but they do not appear to be effective tools for reducing divorce or increasing the proportion of children born within marriage.

What kind of tax policies might be more effective? Perhaps the single most successful profamily initiative has been the increases in the tax exemptions available for children that help protect family income.

Research in this country shows that married couples have more children when they are able to protect more family income through child tax credits and dependent exemptions.⁶⁶ The ability of tax codes to influence marital childbearing decisions is particularly striking because at best (prior to the most recent proposed child tax credit) tax exemptions cover 15 percent of the cost of an extra child. Even small, marginal improvement in the economic well-being of families causes married parents to invest in a second or third child, which in turn reduces the proportion of children raised outside of intact married families.

Comparison of recent trends in European and American fertility (including marital fertility) highlight the likely effects of policy changes. As Allan Carlson has pointed out, the United States is perhaps the only developed nation in the world that recorded an increase in its total fertility rate over the last 20 years. Between 1981 and 2000, U.S. total fertility rate climbed 16 percent, up from 1.81 children per woman to 2.1 children, which is the replacement level. This is not just an immigrant-related phenomenon. Fertility among Americans of European descent jumped 19 percent, to 2.065 children per woman. Since 1996, marital fertility has begun rising; something that has not happened in this country since 1957.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, between 1980 and 1995, total fertility in the European Union plunged from 1.82 children per woman to 1.4 children per woman (despite impressive social benefits, including paid maternity leaves and subsidized child care).⁶⁸ Many European countries have rates of birth so low that the United Nations is now issuing reports about the dangers of depopulation.⁶⁹ Italy, for example, had a fertility rate of 1.66 children per woman in 1980. By 1995, Italian women were having, on average, just 1.17 children.

Joint taxation of the family (or treating married couples as a financial unit) along with increases in child exemptions help sustain families, especially married families (because single mothers are less likely to face high tax rates on income).

Research Medicaid policies and their effects on marriage.

Considerable scholarly debate has focused on the existence and size of marriage penalties in the welfare system and their potential effects on unmarried childbearing.⁷⁰ Less attention has been paid to Medicaid.

How much (if any) of the large increase in births to cohabiting parents in the 1990s was driven by Medicaid policy (especially combined with drops in insurance benefits for men who work sporadically or at low-income jobs)? More research is needed, but one analysis of reforms to extend Medicaid coverage to more children concluded, “[T]hese reforms were associated with an increase in the probability of marriage. . . .”⁷¹ Marriage effects of Medicaid extensions appeared to be larger among mothers of infants than other mothers. Studies that target the marriage decisions of Medicaid-dependent pregnant single women are particularly needed to determine if, at the key point of entry (the birth of the first child), Medicaid policies are discouraging marriage and therefore increasing the long-term risk of poverty and welfare dependency. More consideration and better understanding of the marriage effects of Medicaid coverage policies on pregnant women and mothers of newborns should be a high priority.

Target job training and earnings supplements for low-income married fathers. There is considerable evidence that male wages and job stability play a significant role in the formation and maintenance of stable marriages. While economic factors alone cannot explain all or even most of the decline of marriage,⁷² men and women are more likely to get and stay married when men are able to get and keep jobs. Male unemployment, low earnings, and job instability are cross-culturally associated both with lower marriage rates and with marital disruption.⁷³ Daniel Lichter and colleagues recently concluded:

In men, having a steady job is arguably a prerequisite for being “ready for marriage,” and for the economic commitments required of family life (Sassler and Goldscheider 2003). Work also makes unmarried men more attractive partners . . . the policy implication is clear: a stable job at good pay, in the end, may be an effective marriage promotion strategy.⁷⁴

Job training programs, or earnings broadly distributed regardless of family status, are not by themselves likely to have a significant impact on marriage rates. Men with higher incomes can spend earnings on acquiring a wife or children. Or they can spend it on their own status enhancement or avocations, to improve the living standards of their

mothers and other kin, or to attract multiple sexual partners. While research on wages of men and marriage confirms that income and marriage are related, single guys with a good income do not necessarily choose to marry (especially in a social environment in which such men are in short supply).

Job benefits are most likely to help create and sustain healthy marriages if they are directly targeted to low-income married fathers. Historically, market preferences for married men (judged to be steadier and more reliable workers than singles) have functioned to reinforce the emotional satisfaction of marriage for men and to support social norms favoring responsible fatherhood. For low-skilled men, re-creating these economic incentives (and thus also increasing their attractiveness to mothers as reliable providers) would be most likely to have significant marriage effects, while boosting family income for poor children. Marriage penalties in the Earned Income Tax Credit are one fruitful area for future research.

Moreover, research on the Minnesota Family Investment Program provides intriguing evidence of how policies that affect family income can influence rates of divorce. MFIP was a program that offered extensive earnings disregards for two-parent families. Families could keep more of their income without losing all of their welfare and medical benefits. Two-parent families displayed a distinctive response to this welfare policy:

For these families, MFIP's extra benefits relieved some of the financial pressure they felt to have both parents working. The program did not change the likelihood that someone in the family worked, but some second earners reduced their hours or delayed entering the workforce.

The result? In terms of increasing work, the experiment was an apparent failure. MFIP earnings regard, however, which functioned as an earnings subsidy for low-income husbands (not apparently by design) had unexpectedly large effects on divorce rates and also therefore on important indicators of economic well-being such as home ownership. After three years 33 percent of the MFIP married couples had divorced or separated, compared to 51.5 percent of the AFDC families. MFIP

couples were almost twice as likely to own their own home three years later as were couples who entered traditional welfare programs.⁷⁵

Conclusion

CAN GOVERNMENT POLICY help strengthen marriage and reduce unmarried childbearing and divorce? Research suggests a variety of promising, noncoercive strategies to help young parents interested in marriage succeed, to educate young Americans on the importance of delaying childbearing in marriage, and to provide new support for at-risk couples in low-income communities. Marriage interventions work by signaling the importance of marriage, by helping build a wider infrastructure of marriage supports in at-risk communities, and by offering young parents the encouragement, hope, and skills that help make their marriages succeed.

Even small reductions in rates of divorce and unmarried childbearing would carry a big payoff later for children, who suffer when mothers and fathers fail to forge a good-enough marital bond; and for taxpayers, who currently pay enormous costs for programs addressing problems generated (in part) by high rates of family fragmentation—including child support enforcement, TANF, Medicaid, food stamps, foster care, criminal justice programs, drug abuse, teen mothers, special education, and drop-out prevention.

Government is deeply involved in the family lives of poor single parents and their children. Government actively instructs youths in the value of contraceptives, sexual abstinence, education, jobs, and delaying childbearing until the post-teen years. In this context, the absence of any government effort to support marriage does not represent neutrality. Instead, the message conveyed by the looming absence of the M-word in programs serving low-income couples and communities is this: The government does not believe that marriage matters. Balancing supports and programming for single parents with a powerful marriage message is the minimum obligation a government concerned about the well-being of poor children should assume. Absent such an effort, mar-

riage and the powerful advantages it conveys on children and adults are likely to remain another middle-class entitlement, increasing dependency and inequality of opportunity.

Americans are an optimistic people. We believe social problems demand solutions. The new consensus that marriage is a powerful protector of children has led to new calls to spread the benefits of marriage more equally. If public education and community and faith-based marriage interventions can help more youth avoid unwed childbearing and more at-risk couples succeed in making their marriage dreams come true, it would be foolish to remain content with the status quo. ■

Endnotes

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8. The excluded category is the effort to increase nonmarital abortion rates. This reflects not only the author's views but a substantial public consensus across ideological lines (prochoice and prolife) that public programs designed to persuade pregnant women to abort are inappropriate.
9. The proportion of children born outside of marriage is a combination of (a) the likelihood that single women will have babies and (b) the likelihood that married couples will have babies. Changing either of these variables reduces the proportion of children born outside of marriage.
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About National Fatherhood Initiative

National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) was founded in 1994 to confront the most consequential social problem of our time: the widespread absence of fathers from children's lives. NFI's mission is to improve the well-being of children by increasing the proportion of children growing up with involved, responsible, and committed fathers in their lives. NFI accomplishes this mission through its "Three-E" strategy of *educating* and inspiring all people, especially fathers, through public awareness campaigns, research, and other resources; *equipping* and developing leaders of national, state, and community fatherhood initiatives through curricula, training, and technical assistance; and *engaging* every sector of society through strategic alliances and partnerships.

About the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy

The Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, founded in 2003, is a private, non-partisan organization. iMAPP's unique mission is high quality research and public education on ways that law and public policy can strengthen marriage as a social institution.

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The Institute for American Values, founded in 1987, is a private, nonpartisan organization devoted to research, publication, and public education on issues of family well-being and civil society. By providing forums for scholarly inquiry and debate, the Institute seeks to bring fresh knowledge to bear on the challenges facing families and civil society. Through its publications and other educational activities, the Institute seeks to bridge the gap between scholarship and policy making, bringing new information to the attention of policy makers in the government, opinion makers in the media, and decision makers in the private sector.

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