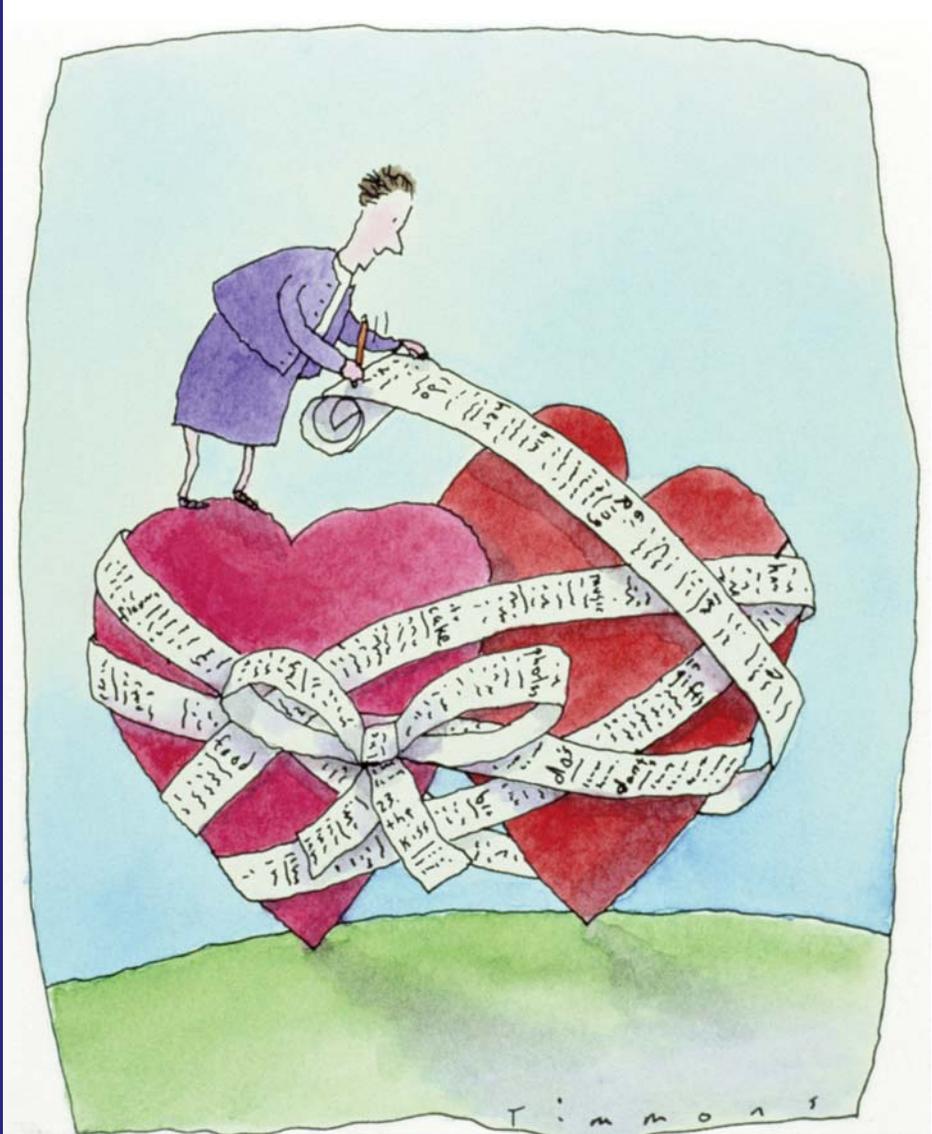


A Report from Family Scholars

## **Why Marriage Matters, Third Edition**

Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences



**Institute for American Values  
National Marriage Project**

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# Why Marriage Matters, Third Edition

## Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences

### Introduction

**I**N THE LATTER HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, divorce posed the biggest threat to marriage in the United States. Clinical, academic, and popular accounts addressing recent family change—from Judith Wallerstein’s landmark book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, to Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur’s award-winning book, *Growing Up with a Single Parent*, to Barbara Dafoe Whitehead’s attention-getting *Atlantic* article, “Dan Quayle Was Right”—focused largely on the impact that divorce had upon children, and rightly so. In the wake of the divorce revolution of the 1970s, divorce was the event most likely to undercut the quality and stability of children’s family lives in the second half of the twentieth century.

No more. In fact, as divorce rates have come down since peaking in the early 1980s, children who are now born to married couples are actually more likely to grow up with both of their parents than were children born at the height of the divorce revolution (see figure 1). In fact, the divorce rate for married couples with children has fallen almost to pre-divorce revolution levels, with 23 percent of couples who married in the early 1960s divorcing before their first child turned ten, compared to slightly more than 23 percent for couples who married in the mid 1990s.

Today, the rise of cohabiting households with children is the largest unrecognized threat to the quality and stability of children’s family lives. In fact, because of the growing prevalence of cohabitation, which has risen fourteen-fold since 1970, today’s children are much more likely to spend time in a cohabiting household than they are to see their parents divorce (see figure 2).<sup>1</sup>

Now, approximately 24 percent of the nation’s children are born to cohabiting couples, which means that more children are currently born to cohabiting couples than to single mothers.<sup>2</sup> Another 20 percent or so of children spend time in a cohabiting household with an unrelated adult at some point later in their childhood, often after their parents’ marriage breaks down.<sup>3</sup> This means that more than four in ten children are exposed to a cohabiting relationship. Thus, one reason that the institution of marriage has less of a hold over Americans than it has had for

most our history is that cohabitation has emerged as a powerful alternative to and competitor with marriage.

For this reason, the third edition of *Why Marriage Matters* focuses new attention on recent scholarship assessing the impact that contemporary cohabitation is having on marriage, family life, and the welfare of children. This edition also picks up on topics that surfaced in the first two editions of the report, summarizing a large body of research on the impact of divorce, stepfamilies, and single parenthood on children, adults, and the larger commonweal. The report seeks to summarize existing family-related research into a succinct form useful to policy makers, scholars, civic, business, and religious leaders, professionals, and others interested in understanding marriage in today's society.

## **Five New Themes**

**1. *Children are less likely to thrive in cohabiting households, compared to intact, married families.*** On many social, educational, and psychological outcomes, children in cohabiting households do significantly worse than children in intact, married families, and about as poorly as children living in single-parent families. And when it comes to abuse, recent federal data indicate that children in cohabiting households are markedly more likely to be physically, sexually, and emotionally abused than children in both intact, married families and single-parent families (see figure 3). Only in the economic domain do children in cohabiting households fare consistently better than children in single-parent families.

**2. *Family instability is generally bad for children.*** In recent years, family scholars have turned their attention to the impact that transitions into and out of marriage, cohabitation, and single parenthood have upon children. This report shows that such transitions, especially multiple transitions, are linked to higher reports of school failure, behavioral problems, drug use, and loneliness, among other outcomes. So, it is not just family structure and family process that matter for children; family stability matters as well. And the research indicates that children who are born to married parents are the least likely to be exposed to family instability, and to the risks instability poses to the emotional, social, and educational welfare of children.

**3. American family life is becoming increasingly unstable for children** (see figure 4).<sup>4</sup> Sociologist Andrew Cherlin has observed that Americans are stepping “on and off the carousel of intimate relationships” with increasing rapidity.<sup>5</sup> This relational carousel spins particularly quickly for couples who are cohabiting, even cohabiting couples with children. For instance, cohabiting couples who have a child together are more than twice as likely to break up before their child turns twelve, compared to couples who are married to one another (see figure 5). Thus, one of the major reasons that children’s lives are increasingly turbulent is that more and more children are being born into or raised in cohabiting households that are much more fragile than married families.

**4. The growing instability of American family life also means that contemporary adults and children are more likely to live in what scholars call “complex households,”** where children and adults are living with people who are half-siblings, stepsiblings, step-parents, stepchildren, or unrelated to them by birth or marriage. Research on these complex households is still embryonic, but the initial findings are not encouraging. For instance, one indicator of this growing complexity is multiple-partner fertility, where parents have children with more than one romantic partner. Children who come from these relationships are more likely to report poor relationships with their parents, to have behavioral and health problems, and to fail in school, even after controlling for factors such as education, income, and race. Thus, for both adults and children, life typically becomes not only more complex, but also more difficult, when parents fail to get or stay married.

**5. The nation’s retreat from marriage has hit poor and working-class communities with particular force.** Recent increases in cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, family instability, and family complexity have not been equally distributed in the United States; these trends, which first rose in poor communities in the 1970s and 1980s, are now moving rapidly into working-class and lower-middle-class communities. But marriage appears to be strengthening in more educated and affluent communities. As a consequence, since the early 1980s, children from college-educated homes have seen their family lives stabilize, whereas children from less-educated homes have seen their family lives become increasingly unstable (see figure 6). More generally, the stratified character of family trends means that

the United States is “devolving into a separate-and-unequal family regime, where the highly educated and the affluent enjoy strong and stable [families] and everyone else is consigned to increasingly unstable, unhappy, and unworkable ones.”<sup>6</sup>

We acknowledge that social science is better equipped to document whether certain facts *are* true than to say *why* they are true. We can assert more definitively that marriage is associated with powerful social goods than that marriage is the sole or main cause of these goods.

### **A Word about Selection Effects**

Good research seeks to tease out “selection effects,” or the preexisting differences between individuals who marry, cohabit, or divorce. Does divorce cause poverty, for example, or is it simply that poor people are more likely to divorce? Scholars attempt to distinguish between causal relationships and mere correlations in a variety of ways. The studies cited here are for the most part based on large, nationally representative samples that control for race, education, income, and other confounding factors. In many, but not all cases, social scientists used longitudinal data to track individuals as they marry, divorce, or stay single, increasing our confidence that marriage itself matters. Where the evidence appears overwhelming that marriage *causes* increases in well-being, we say so. Where marriage probably does so but the causal pathways are not as well understood, we are more cautious.

We recognize that, absent random assignment to marriage, divorce, or single parenting, social scientists must always acknowledge the possibility that other factors are influencing outcomes. Reasonable scholars may and do disagree on the existence and extent of such selection effects and the extent to which marriage is causally related to the better social outcomes reported here.

Yet, scholarship is getting better in addressing selection effects. For instance, in this report we summarize three divorce studies that follow identical and nonidentical adult twins in Australia and Virginia to see how much of the effects of divorce on children are genetic and how much seem to be a consequence of divorce itself. Methodological innovations like these, as well as analyses using econometric models, afford us greater confidence that family structure exercises a causal influence for some outcomes.

Departures from the norm of intact marriage do not necessarily harm most of those who are exposed to them.<sup>7</sup> While cohabitation is associated with increased risks of psychological and social problems for children, this does not mean that every child who is exposed to cohabitation is damaged. For example, one nationally representative study of six- to eleven-year-olds found that only 16 percent of children in cohabiting families experienced serious emotional problems. Still, this rate was much higher than the rate for children in families headed by married biological or adoptive parents, which was 4 percent.<sup>8</sup>

While marriage is a social good, not all marriages are equal. Research does not generally support the idea that remarriage is better for children than living with a single mother.<sup>9</sup> Marriages that are unhappy do not have the same benefits as the average marriage.<sup>10</sup> Divorce or separation provides an important escape hatch for children and adults in violent or high-conflict marriages. Families, communities, and policy makers interested in distributing the benefits of marriage more equally must do more than merely discourage legal divorce.

But we believe good social science, despite its limitations, is a better guide to social policy than uninformed opinion or prejudice. This report represents our best judgment of what current social science evidence reveals about marriage in our social system.

## Our Fundamental Conclusions

- 1. *The intact, biological, married family remains the gold standard for family life in the United States***, insofar as children are most likely to thrive—economically, socially, and psychologically—in this family form.
- 2. *Marriage is an important public good***, associated with a range of economic, health, educational, and safety benefits that help local, state, and federal governments serve the common good.
- 3. *The benefits of marriage extend to poor, working-class, and minority communities***, despite the fact that marriage has weakened in these communities in the last four decades.

**F**AMILY STRUCTURE AND PROCESSES are only one factor contributing to child and social well-being. Our discussion here is not meant to minimize the importance of other factors, such as poverty, child support, unemployment, teenage childbearing, neighborhood safety, or the quality of education for both parents and children. Marriage is not a panacea for all social ills. For instance, when it comes to child well-being, research suggests that family structure is a better predictor of children's psychological and social welfare, whereas poverty is a better predictor of educational attainment.<sup>11</sup>

But whether we succeed or fail in building a healthy marriage culture is clearly a matter of legitimate public concern and an issue of paramount importance if we wish to reverse the marginalization of the most vulnerable members of our society: the working class, the poor, minorities, and children. ■

## The Thirty Conclusions: A Snapshot

### Family

1. Marriage increases the likelihood that fathers and mothers have good relationships with their children.
2. Children are most likely to enjoy family stability when they are born into a married family.
3. Children are less likely to thrive in complex households.
4. Cohabitation is not the functional equivalent of marriage.
5. Growing up outside an intact marriage increases the likelihood that children will themselves divorce or become unwed parents.
6. Marriage is a virtually universal human institution.
7. Marriage, and a normative commitment to marriage, foster high-quality relationships between adults, as well as between parents and children.
8. Marriage has important biosocial consequences for adults and children.

### Economics

9. Divorce and unmarried childbearing increase poverty for both children and mothers, and cohabitation is less likely to alleviate poverty than is marriage.
10. Married couples seem to build more wealth on average than singles or cohabiting couples.
11. Marriage reduces poverty and material hardship for disadvantaged women and their children.
12. Minorities benefit economically from marriage also.
13. Married men earn more money than do single men with similar education and job histories.
14. Parental divorce (or failure to marry) appears to increase children's risk of school failure.
15. Parental divorce reduces the likelihood that children will graduate from college and achieve high-status jobs.

### **Physical Health and Longevity**

16. Children who live with their own two married parents enjoy better physical health, on average, than do children in other family forms.
17. Parental marriage is associated with a sharply lower risk of infant mortality.
18. Marriage is associated with reduced rates of alcohol and substance abuse for both adults and teens.
19. Married people, especially married men, have longer life expectancies than do otherwise similar singles.
20. Marriage is associated with better health and lower rates of injury, illness, and disability for both men and women.
21. Marriage seems to be associated with better health among minorities and the poor.

### **Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being**

22. Children whose parents divorce have higher rates of psychological distress and mental illness.
23. Cohabitation is associated with higher levels of psychological problems among children.
24. Family breakdown appears to increase significantly the risk of suicide.
25. Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do single or cohabiting mothers.

### **Crime and Domestic Violence**

26. Boys raised in non-intact families are more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal behavior.
27. Marriage appears to reduce the risk that adults will be either perpetrators or victims of crime.
28. Married women appear to have a lower risk of experiencing domestic violence than do cohabiting or dating women.
29. A child who is not living with his or her own two married parents is at greater risk of child abuse.
30. There is a growing marriage gap between college-educated Americans and less-educated Americans.

### Family

#### **1. Marriage increases the likelihood that fathers and mothers have good relationships with their children.**

Mothers as well as fathers are affected by the absence of marriage. Single mothers on average report more conflict with and less monitoring of their children than do married mothers.<sup>12</sup> As adults, children from intact marriages report being closer to their mothers on average than do children of divorce.<sup>13</sup> In one nationally representative study, 30 percent of young adults whose parents divorced reported poor relationships with their mothers, compared to 16 percent of children whose parents stayed married.<sup>14</sup>

But children's relationships with their father depend even more on marriage than do children's relationships with their mother. Sixty-five percent of young adults whose parents divorced had poor relationships with their fathers (compared to 29 percent from non-divorced families).<sup>15</sup> On average, children whose parents divorce or never marry see their fathers less frequently<sup>16</sup> and have less affectionate relationships with their fathers<sup>17</sup> than do children whose parents got and stayed married. Studies of children of divorce suggest that losing contact with their father in the wake of a divorce is one of the most painful consequences of divorce.<sup>18</sup> Divorce appears to have an even greater negative effect on relationships between fathers and their children than remaining in an unhappy marriage.<sup>19</sup> These detrimental relationship effects may be long-term; unpartnered disabled elderly individuals who divorced receive less in the way of social support and practical assistance from their children than those who were widowed. Those who remarried were less likely to receive cash transfers from their children.<sup>20</sup>

Some evidence suggests even cohabiting, biological fathers who live with their children are not as involved and affectionate with their children as are married, biological fathers who reside with their children,<sup>21</sup> although others have found no difference between these types of fathers or even a positive effect of cohabitation.<sup>22</sup> Even so, the effect of marriage on higher-quality parenting practices is even stronger for social fathers (i.e., stepfathers) than for biological fathers.<sup>23</sup> And fathers who are married to the mother of their children prior to birth are much more likely to maintain a long-term relationship with their children than fathers who are not married at birth.<sup>24</sup>

## **2. Children are most likely to enjoy family stability when they are born into a married family.**

There is an emerging scholarly consensus that family stability in and of itself is linked to positive child outcomes.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, children who are exposed to family transitions—from a divorce to the breakup of a mother’s romantic relationship with a live-in boyfriend—are more likely to experience behavioral problems, drug use, problems in school, early sex, and loneliness. The evidence also suggests that multiple transitions (where children are exposed to more than one breakup or new relationship) are especially harmful for children.<sup>26</sup>

Family transitions are thought to harm a mother’s ability to interact positively with her child(ren) by affecting her economic, social, and psychological resources. They also necessitate the establishment of new routines and relationships that may be difficult for children to navigate.<sup>27</sup> Selection may also be at work; that is, pre-existing maternal attributes made lead both to multiple union transitions and poor child outcomes, though selection does not appear to tell the whole story.<sup>28</sup>

Children born to married parents are the most likely to enjoy family stability over their childhood. According to data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which follows children in twenty cities around the U.S., only 13 percent of children born to married parents experience a maternal partnership transition (i.e., the end or start of a relationship) by age 3, compared to 50 percent of those born to cohabiting parents, 69 percent of those born to “visiting” (i.e., dating but not cohabiting) parents, and 74 percent of those born to a single mother (i.e., a mother no longer in a romantic relationship with the father).<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, a number of studies suggest that cohabitation in a range of cultural and national contexts is less stable than marriage.<sup>30</sup> Latino and African American children born into cohabiting unions were more likely to see their parents break up than their peers who were born to married parents.<sup>31</sup> Cohabitations are unstable not just in the United States. In one study of seventeen Western countries, parental cohabitation was associated with higher risk of parental separation, even in Sweden where parental cohabitation is very common (although the difference between parental cohabitation and marriage in Sweden is less pronounced than in other countries).<sup>32</sup> In fact, one new study of family instability in Sweden found that children born to cohabiting couples are more than 70 percent more likely to see their

parents separate by age fifteen, compared to children born to married couples.<sup>33</sup>

Unfortunately, in part because childbearing and childrearing in a cohabiting household is becoming more common in the United States, family stability has declined for children in the United States over the course of the last three decades even though the divorce rate has declined.<sup>34</sup> This overall decline in family stability for children is particularly striking because children born to married couples now enjoy more stability than they did thirty years ago. This decline is also striking because the deinstitutionalization of marriage has largely been limited to working-class and poor communities in the United States. For both economic and cultural reasons, more educated and affluent Americans are now markedly more likely to succeed in marriage than their less privileged fellow citizens.<sup>35</sup> This means that children in poor and working-class communities are triply disadvantaged: they have fewer economic resources, their parents are less likely to be married, and they are more likely to be exposed to numerous family transitions over the course of their lives.

### **3. Children are less likely to thrive in complex households.**

Over the last four decades, increases in divorce, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing have increased the prevalence of complex households—where children share a household with stepsiblings, half-siblings, stepparents, or with adults with whom they are unrelated by marriage, adoption, or blood. Children are more likely to suffer economically, psychologically, and socially when they live in complex households, in part because such households often do not have clear norms, boundaries, and a clear family identity to provide stability, direction, and purpose to their members, and to the relationships within these households.

Research indicates that children in stepfamilies are more likely to experience school failure, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, and incarceration than children growing up in intact, married families.<sup>36</sup> This is in part, as Andrew Cherlin has pointed out, because stepfamilies are “incomplete institutions” that have fewer commonly understood norms, roles, and rituals than intact, married families.<sup>37</sup> As a consequence, stepparents often have more difficulty relating to their stepchildren than do biological parents, which is one reason that stepchildren are less likely to thrive than children from intact, married families.

Children whose parents have engaged in multiple-partner fertility (MPF), where adults have children with two or more partners, have similar problems. Because MPF can be associated with “baby mama drama” (i.e., conflict between former romantic partners or spouses who had a child together, or between one of them and a new romantic partner of the other partner or spouse), and because it is practically difficult for mothers and fathers to invest financially, emotionally, and temporally in children across different households, children from such MPF families are more likely to suffer health problems, externalizing behaviors such as fighting, lower academic achievement, and lower quality relationships with their parents, compared to children in intact, married families.<sup>38</sup>

Interestingly, even children living in a family with their own biological, married parents appear to be more likely to suffer if they are exposed to complexity, in the form of step- or half-siblings located in their own household. New research suggests that children living with their married biological parents were more likely to fail in school, to suffer from depression, and to engage in delinquent behavior if they live with stepsiblings from a parent’s prior union.<sup>39</sup> This is probably because the stresses of stepfamily living and the challenges of supporting a former spouse can undercut the parenting of mothers and fathers who head up a blended family. This new research provides more evidence that children are more likely to thrive when their parents succeed in channeling their reproductive lives into one marriage.

#### **4. Cohabitation is not the functional equivalent of marriage.**

As a group, cohabitators in the United States more closely resemble singles than married people, though cohabitation is an exceptionally heterogeneous status, with some partners treating it as a prelude to marriage, others as an alternative to marriage, others as an opportunity to test for marriage, and still others as a convenient dating relationship.<sup>40</sup> Adults who live together are more similar to singles than to married couples in terms of physical health<sup>41</sup> and emotional well-being and mental health,<sup>42</sup> as well as in assets and earnings.<sup>43</sup>

Children with cohabiting parents have outcomes more similar to the children living with single (or remarried) parents than children from intact marriages.<sup>44</sup> In other words, children living in cohabiting unions do not fare as well as children living in intact,

married families. For instance, one recent study found that teenagers living in cohabiting unions were significantly more likely to experience behavioral and emotional difficulties than were teenagers in intact, married families, even after controlling for a range of socioeconomic and parenting factors.<sup>45</sup> Another problem is that cohabiting parents are less likely to devote their financial resources to childrearing. One study found that cohabiting parents devoted a larger share of their income to alcohol and tobacco, and a smaller share of their income to children's education, compared to married parents.<sup>46</sup>

Selection effects account for a portion of the difference between married people and cohabitators. As a group, cohabitators (who are not engaged) have lower incomes and less education.<sup>47</sup> Couples who live together also, on average, report relationships of lower quality than do married couples—with cohabitators reporting more conflict, more violence, and lower levels of satisfaction and commitment.<sup>48</sup> This lower relationship quality among cohabitators explains their higher levels of depression compared to married individuals.<sup>49</sup> Even biological parents who cohabit have poorer quality relationships and are more likely to part than parents who marry.<sup>50</sup>

Cohabitation differs from marriage in part because Americans who choose solely to live together are less committed to each other as partners and their future together.<sup>51</sup> Partly as a consequence, cohabiting couples are less likely than married couples to pool their income.<sup>52</sup> Another challenge confronting cohabiting couples is that partners often disagree about the nature and future of their relationship—for instance, one partner may anticipate marriage and the other partner may view the relationship as a convenient form of dating.<sup>53</sup> New research also suggests that the instability and lower levels of commitment associated with cohabitation can be deleterious for the elderly, who appear to be more likely to be institutionalized or abandoned if they are cohabiting rather than married.<sup>54</sup>

In a society that still largely reveres marriage—even if marriages are less and less likely to happen—nonmarriage often means something relative to marriage. Marriage is a clear, mutual, non-ambiguous signal of commitment; in contrast, cohabitation is widely recognized as ambiguous when it comes to signaling commitment in the absence of some other strong signal of marital intention such as engagement.<sup>55</sup>

## **5. Growing up outside an intact marriage increases the likelihood that children will themselves divorce or become unwed parents.**

Children whose parents divorce or fail to marry are more likely to become young unwed parents, to enter their marriages with lower commitment, to experience divorce themselves someday, to marry as teenagers, and to have unhappy marriages and/or relationships.<sup>56</sup> Daughters raised outside of intact marriages are approximately three times more likely to end up young, unwed mothers than are children whose parents married and stayed married.<sup>57</sup> Parental divorce increases the odds that adult children will also divorce by at least 50 percent, partly because children of divorce are more likely to marry prematurely and partly because children of divorce often marry other children of divorce, thereby making their marriage even more precarious.<sup>58</sup> Divorce is apparently most likely to be transmitted across the generations when parents in relatively low-conflict marriages divorced.<sup>59</sup> There is ongoing debate about whether the link between parental and offspring divorce has weakened over time (as divorce rates increased up through the early 1980s and then fell slightly), but there is consensus that this association remains significant.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, remarriage does not appear to help children. For instance, girls in stepfamilies are slightly more likely to have a teenage pregnancy compared to girls in a single-parent family, and much more likely to have a teenage pregnancy than girls in an intact, married family.<sup>61</sup> Children who grow up in stepfamilies are also more likely to marry as teenagers, compared to children who grow up in single-parent or intact, married families.<sup>62</sup> Finally, research also indicates that the effects of divorce cross three generations: that is, grandchildren of couples who divorced are significantly more likely to experience marital discord, negative relationships with their parents, and low levels of educational attainment, compared to grandchildren whose grandparents did not divorce.<sup>63</sup>

## **6. Marriage is a virtually universal human institution.**

Marriage exists in virtually every known human society.<sup>64</sup> The shape of marriage varies considerably in different cultural contexts, but at least since the beginning of recorded history—in all the flourishing varieties of human cultures documented by anthropologists—marriage has been a universal human institution. As a virtually universal human idea, marriage involves regulating the reproduction of children, families, and society. While marriage systems differ (and not every person or class

within a society marries), marriage across societies is a publicly acknowledged and supported sexual union that creates kinship obligations and resource pooling between men, women, and the children that their sexual union may produce.

## **7. Marriage, and a normative commitment to marriage, foster high-quality relationships between adults, as well as between parents and children.**

Some say that love, not marriage, makes a family. They argue that family structure per se does not matter; rather, what matters is the quality of family relationships.<sup>65</sup> Others argue that the marital ethic of lifelong commitment needs to be diluted if we seek to promote high-quality relationships; instead, the new marital ethic should be conditional, such that spouses should remain together only so long as they continue to love one another.<sup>66</sup>

However, these arguments overlook what we know about the effect of marriage, and a normative commitment to the institution of marriage, on intimate relationships. By offering legal and normative support and direction to a relationship, by providing an expectation of sexual fidelity and lifelong commitment, and by furnishing adults a unique social status as spouses, marriage typically fosters better romantic and parental relationships than alternatives to marriage.<sup>67</sup> For all these reasons, in part, adults who are married enjoy happier, healthier, and less violent relationships, compared to adults who are in dating or cohabiting relationships.<sup>68</sup> Even among older adults who were previously married, remarriage seems to lead to happier relationships than cohabitation, though differences on several other aspects of relationship quality are not evident.<sup>69</sup> Parents who are married enjoy more supportive and less conflictual relationships with one another, compared to parents who are cohabiting or otherwise romantically involved with one another.<sup>70</sup> In turn, as we have seen, married parents generally have better relationships with their children than do cohabiting, divorced, unmarried, or remarried parents.<sup>71</sup> Some of the associations between family structure and family process are products of selection—that is, couples with better relationships are more likely to get and stay married. But, as this report makes clear, the research also suggests that social, legal, and normative supports provided by marriage foster better intimate relationships and parent-child relationships.

But so does the idea of marriage. Individuals who value the institution of marriage for its own sake—that is, who oppose easy divorce, who believe that children ought to be born into marriage, and who think marriage is better than cohabitation—are more likely to invest themselves in their marriages and to experience high-quality marital relationships. Ironically, individuals who embrace a conditional ethic to marriage—that is, one that suggests marriages ought to continue only so long as both spouses are happy—are less happy in their marriages. One longitudinal study found that individuals who oppose divorce are more likely to devote themselves to their spouse, even after controlling for the initial quality of the marriage.<sup>72</sup> Two studies show that spouses, particularly husbands, are more likely to sacrifice for their spouse if they are strongly committed to the future of their marriages.<sup>73</sup> A recent study finds that women’s marital happiness, and their reports of happiness with their husband’s affection and understanding, are strongly and positively linked to high levels of shared spousal commitment to pro-marriage norms.<sup>74</sup> Another study found that fathers who are normatively committed to marriage are significantly more likely to praise and hug their children than fathers who are not committed to marriage.<sup>75</sup> Scholars speculate that a strong normative commitment to marriage makes married adults less likely to look for alternative partners and more conscious of the long-term character of their relationship, both of which encourage them to invest more in their current relationship.<sup>76</sup> Thus, adults who hold a strong normative commitment to marriage appear to enjoy higher-quality relationships with family members, compared to adults who are not strongly committed to the institution of marriage.

## **8. Marriage has important biosocial consequences for adults and children.**

Marriage has biological consequences for adults and children. We are just beginning to discover the myriad ways that marriage seems to promote good outcomes in what social scientists call the “biosocial” area of life—the connection between our social relationships and how our bodies function. In the last decade, two marriage-related biosocial outcomes have emerged as particularly important.

First, marriage appears to reduce men’s testosterone levels. More than five studies analyzing different populations find that married men (especially married fathers) have lower testosterone levels than similar men who are never-married or divorced.<sup>77</sup> For this outcome, however, cohabiting

men appear to be affected just as much as are married men. What seems to matter for men's testosterone levels are intimate, ongoing, and everyday relationships with one woman.<sup>78</sup> Given that testosterone is associated with aggression, sensation-seeking, and a range of other antisocial behaviors, one of the ways that marriage may influence men is by reducing their levels of testosterone.<sup>79</sup> Of course, there may be selection effects at work: that is, it may be that men with lower levels of testosterone are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior and more likely to marry. The two longitudinal studies done so far have obtained mixed results. One strongly suggests that, for men, marriage plays a causal role in driving down testosterone (as well as cortisol).<sup>80</sup> The other has found no effect of becoming partnered (defined as a long-term monogamous relationship) on men's testosterone level.<sup>81</sup> Future research will have to further unpack the relationships between marriage, testosterone, fatherhood, and antisocial behavior among men.

Second, girls appear to benefit in their sexual development from growing up in an intact, married family. Extensive research by psychologist Bruce Ellis and others indicates that adolescent girls who grow up apart from an intact, married household are significantly more likely to have early menstruation, premature sexual activity, and a teenage pregnancy.<sup>82</sup> He finds that girls who have close, engaged relationships with their fathers have menstruation at a later age and that girls who lose their biological father as young children have menstruation at an earlier age. Moreover, girls who live with an unrelated male (e.g., stepfather, mother's boyfriend) have menstruation even earlier than girls living in a single-mother household. Ellis speculates that girls' sexual development is influenced by the male pheromones—biological chemicals that individuals emit to one another, which have been associated with accelerated sexual development in mammals—they encounter in their social environment. The pheromones of their father appear to inhibit premature sexual development, while the pheromones of an unrelated male appear to accelerate such development. In Ellis's words: "These findings...are broadly consistent with the hypothesis that pheromonal exposure to the biological father inhibits pubertal development in daughters."<sup>83</sup>

Early sexual development, in turn, is associated with significantly higher levels of premature sexual activity and teenage pregnancy on the part of girls, even after controlling for economic and psychological factors in the household that might otherwise confound the relationship between family structure and girls' sexual activity.<sup>84</sup> So this line of research strongly suggests that an intact, married household protects girls from premature sexual development and, consequently, teen pregnancy. One

genetically-informed study, however, suggests that much of this association may be due to selection into family structure by genetic predisposition (i.e., both mother and daughter have an underlying biological make-up that makes them more likely to have early menstruation). In a study of children of sisters, including twin sisters, there was no difference in age at first sex for the offspring of twin sister dyads where one child had a father in the home and the other did not, but there was for the children of non-twin sisters.<sup>85</sup> Future research will have to determine if genes, environment, or some combination thereof account for the association between father absence and early menstruation among adolescent girls.

## **Economics**

### **9. Divorce and unmarried childbearing increase poverty for both children and mothers, and cohabitation is less likely to alleviate poverty than is marriage.**

Research has consistently shown that both divorce<sup>86</sup> and unmarried childbearing<sup>87</sup> increase the economic vulnerability of both children and mothers. The effects of family structure on poverty remain powerful, even after controlling for race and family background. Changes in family structure are an important cause of new entries into poverty (although a decline in the earnings of the household head is the single most important cause). Child poverty rates are high in part because of the growth of single-parent families.<sup>88</sup> In fact, some studies indicate that all of the increase in child poverty since the 1970s can be attributed to increases in single parenthood due to divorce and nonmarital childbearing.<sup>89</sup> When parents fail to marry and stay married, children are more likely to experience deep and persistent poverty, even after controlling for race and family background. The majority of children who grow up outside of intact, married families experience at least one year of dire poverty (family incomes less than half the official poverty threshold).<sup>90</sup> Divorce as well as unmarried childbearing plays a role: between one-fifth and one-third of divorcing women end up in poverty following the divorce.<sup>91</sup> Cohabitation does not alleviate poverty as well as marriage does. The ratio of income to needs for children in cohabiting families is .43 points lower than that of those in married families.<sup>92</sup>

The effect of divorce on women's incomes persists in contemporary America, but it appears to have lessened since 1980 as women's labor market position has improved.<sup>93</sup> Single mothers' income gains have been only marginal across the same time period.<sup>94</sup>

## **10. Married couples seem to build more wealth on average than singles or cohabiting couples.**

Marriage seems to be a wealth-creating institution. Married couples build more wealth on average than do otherwise similar singles or cohabiting couples, even after controlling for income.<sup>95</sup> Analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1979 cohort), which tracked respondents from adolescence to their early forties, reveals that the per person net worth of married individuals is 93 percent higher than it is for single individuals, and divorced individuals have a per person net worth 77 percent lower than single respondents.<sup>96</sup> The economic advantages of marriage stem from more than just access to two incomes. Marriage partners appear to build more wealth for some of the same reasons that partnerships in general are economically efficient, including economies of scale and specialization and exchange. Marital social norms that encourage healthy, productive behavior and wealth accumulation (such as buying a home) also appear to play a role. Married parents also more often receive wealth transfers from both sets of grandparents than do cohabiting couples; single mothers almost never receive financial help from the child's father's kin.<sup>97</sup> Interestingly, the effect of fatherhood on asset accumulation varies by marital status: married fathers increased their rate of asset accumulation after becoming fathers while unmarried fathers saw their rate of asset accumulation decline.<sup>98</sup>

## **11. Marriage reduces poverty and material hardship for disadvantaged women and their children.**

A growing body of research by economist Robert I. Lerman and others indicates that the economic benefits of marriage extend even to women who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Focusing on low-income families, Lerman found that married couples with children generally had lower levels of material hardship—that is, they were less likely to miss a meal or fail to pay their utilities, rent, or mortgage—compared to other families, especially single-mothers living alone.<sup>99</sup> In another study, he found that mothers with low academic abilities who married saw their living standards end up about 65 percent higher than similar single mothers living with no other adult, over 50 percent higher than single mothers living with another adult, and 20 percent higher than mothers who were cohabiting.<sup>100</sup> Other research has found that disadvantaged mothers are significantly less likely to be in poverty if they had their first child in marriage, compared to similar mothers who had their first child

out-of-wedlock. This research found that 35 percent of disadvantaged African American mothers who had a nonmarital first birth are below the poverty line, compared to 17 percent of African American mothers who had a marital first birth. The protective effect of marriage is even stronger among women at high risk of poverty versus those at low risk.<sup>101</sup>

Why is marriage more likely to help poor women and children than cohabitation? Married couples appear to share more of their income and other property, they get more support from extended families and friends, and they get more help from civic institutions (churches, food pantries, etc.).<sup>102</sup> There are two caveats to this work. First, marriage does not produce as many benefits for women who have a premarital birth.<sup>103</sup> Second, marriage also does not produce much of an economic boost for women who go on to divorce, and divorce is more common among women with comparatively low levels of income and education.<sup>104</sup> So women, particularly poor women, do not much benefit economically from marriage unless their marriages are stable.

## **12. Minorities benefit economically from marriage also.**

The economic benefits associated with marriage are not limited to whites. Research also suggests that African Americans and Latinos benefit materially from marriage. Studies find marriage effects at the community and individual levels. At the societal level, black child poverty rates would be almost 20 percent lower than they currently are had the proportion of black children living in married families not fallen below 1970 levels.<sup>105</sup>

At the individual level, one study found that black single mothers who marry see their income rise by 81 percent (compared to an income increase of 45 percent for white single mothers). This same study found that the income of black children fell by 53 percent two years after a divorce.<sup>106</sup> Another study of older women indicates that married African American women enjoy significantly more income than their widowed, divorced, and never married peers.<sup>107</sup> Both black and Hispanic older women experience declines in household income and assets following marital disruption, be it divorce or widowhood.<sup>108</sup> Black men who marry also see a significant increase in their income, about \$4000 according to one estimate.<sup>109</sup> Black men see bigger increases in their household incomes than do white men (increases of 31 percent and 23 percent, respectively) because black women are more likely to work than white

women.<sup>110</sup> Finally, African Americans and Latinos who are married also enjoy significantly higher levels of household equity, compared to their peers who are not married.<sup>111</sup>

### **13. Married men earn more money than do single men with similar education and job histories.**

A large body of research, both in the United States and other developed countries, finds that married men earn between 10 and 40 percent more than do single men with similar education and job histories.<sup>112</sup> While selection effects may account for part of the marriage premium (insofar as men with more stable and better-paying jobs are more likely to marry),<sup>113</sup> the most sophisticated, recent research appears to confirm that marriage itself increases the earning power of men on the order of 21 to 24 percent.<sup>114</sup> A study of identical twin pairs, which was able to account more rigorously for selection effects, similarly found an earnings increase of 26 percent.<sup>115</sup>

Why do married men earn more? The causes are not entirely understood, but married men appear to have greater work commitment, more strategic approaches to job searches, and healthier and more stable personal routines (including sleep, diet, and alcohol consumption). One study found that married men were more likely to quit with a new job in hand, less likely to quit without a new job in hand, and less likely to be fired, compared to unmarried men.<sup>116</sup> Husbands also benefit from both the work effort and emotional support that they receive from wives.<sup>117</sup> A study of German men finds that married men may also be less content with their earnings, which may spur them to work harder and earn higher wages.<sup>118</sup>

All of the findings along these lines are consistent with the larger proposition advanced by sociologist Steven Nock that men undergo an important average transformation in their sense of themselves and their responsibilities in the transition from nonmarriage to marriage.<sup>119</sup>

### **14. Parental divorce (or failure to marry) appears to increase children's risk of school failure.**

Parental divorce or nonmarriage has a significant, long-term negative impact on children's educational attainment. Children of divorced or unwed parents have lower grades and other measures of academic

achievement, are more likely to be held back, and are more likely to drop out of high school. The effects of parental divorce or nonmarriage on children's educational attainment remain significant even after controlling for race, family background, and genetic factors.<sup>120</sup> Another nationally-representative study of more than 1,000 adolescents that controlled for differences in parental education and income found that teenagers were 60 percent less likely to graduate from high school if they came from cohabiting families, compared to their peers who came from intact, married families.<sup>121</sup> Likewise, kindergarteners living with cohabiting parents have lower reading, math, and general knowledge scores—whether they are living with their biological cohabiting parents or one parent and a cohabiting partner. The differences in math and general knowledge are explained by differences in parenting practices and maternal depression, but differences in reading ability remain even after having accounted for these factors.<sup>122</sup> Adolescents who live in stable cohabiting families become less engaged in school than those in stable biological married families, single-mother families, or married stepfamilies. Those in single-mother families have decreased engagement compared to those in stable biological married families. Transitioning into a cohabiting family lowers school engagement as well, as does transitioning from a cohabiting family to a married stepfamily.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, family transitions in general have been linked to poorer academic achievement,<sup>124</sup> and both family structure and transitions appear to matter for educational outcomes.<sup>125</sup> Children whose parents divorce end up with significantly lower levels of education than do children in single-mother families created by the death of the father.<sup>126</sup> Children whose parents remarry do no better, on average, than do children who live with single mothers.<sup>127</sup> It is not yet clear if the effects of family structure vary by race. Some studies indicate that African American educational performance is affected more than white performance by father absence, whereas other studies come to the opposite conclusion.<sup>128</sup>

## **15. Parental divorce reduces the likelihood that children will graduate from college and achieve high-status jobs.**

Parental divorce appears to have long-term consequences on children's socioeconomic attainment. While most children of divorce do not drop out of high school or become unemployed, as adults, children of divorced parents have lower occupational status and earnings and have increased rates of unemployment and economic hardship.<sup>129</sup> They are less likely to attend and graduate from college and also less

likely to attend and graduate from four-year and highly selective colleges, even after controlling for family background and academic and extracurricular achievements.<sup>130</sup> One reason for this may be that divorced parents contribute significantly less money to their children's college education. While married parents contribute a median of \$1,804 per year to college costs, divorced (and not remarried) parents contribute just \$502, and remarried parents just \$500—differences that persist after controlling income and other relevant factors. Divorced parents may have underreported their ex-spouse's contribution, but even so their contribution is not likely to rise anywhere near the level of married parents.<sup>131</sup>

## **Physical Health and Longevity**

### **16. Children who live with their own two married parents enjoy better physical health, on average, than do children in other family forms.**

Divorce and unmarried childbearing appear to have negative effects on children's physical health and life expectancy.<sup>132</sup> Longitudinal research suggests that parental divorce and cohabitation increase the incidence of health problems in children.<sup>133</sup> For example, in one recent longitudinal study the probability that a five-year-old child with stably-married parents was in excellent health was .69, compared to probabilities of .65 for those whose parents divorced, .62 for those whose parents stably cohabited, and .59 for those whose parents dissolved their cohabitation.<sup>134</sup> The health advantages of married homes remain, even after taking socioeconomic status into account. Even in Sweden, a country with an extensive social welfare system and a nationalized health care system, children who grow up outside an intact family are much more likely to suffer serious disadvantages. One recent study of the entire Swedish population of children found that boys who were reared in single-parent homes were more than 50 percent more likely to die from a range of causes—e.g., suicide, accidents, or addiction—than boys who were reared in two-parent homes. Moreover, even after controlling for the socioeconomic status and psychological health of parents, Swedish boys and girls in single-parent families were more than twice as likely as children in two-parent families to suffer from psychiatric diseases, suicide attempts, alcoholism, and drug abuse; they were also more likely to experience traffic injuries, falls, and poisonings than their peers in two-parent families.<sup>135</sup>

The health effects of family structure extend into adulthood. One study that followed a sample of academically gifted, middle-class children for seventy years found that parental divorce reduced a child's life expectancy by four years, even after controlling for childhood health status and family background, as well as personality characteristics such as impulsiveness and emotional instability.<sup>136</sup> Another analysis found that forty-year-old men whose parents had divorced were three times more likely to die in the next forty years than were forty-year-old men whose parents stayed married. "[I]t does appear," the researchers conclude, "that parental divorce sets off a negative chain of events, which contribute to a higher mortality risk among individuals from divorced homes."<sup>137</sup>

## **17. Parental marriage is associated with a sharply lower risk of infant mortality.**

Babies born to married parents have lower rates of infant mortality. On average, having an unmarried mother is associated with an approximately 50 percent increase in the risk of infant mortality.<sup>138</sup> While parental marital status predicts infant mortality in both blacks and whites, the increased risk due to the mother's marital status is greatest among the most advantaged: white mothers over the age of twenty.<sup>139</sup>

The cause of this relationship between marital status and infant mortality is not well known. There are many selection effects involved: Unmarried mothers are more likely to be young, black, less educated, and poor than are married mothers. But even after controlling for age, race, and education, children born to unwed mothers generally have higher rates of infant mortality.<sup>140</sup> While unmarried mothers are also less likely to get early prenatal care,<sup>141</sup> infant mortality rates in these instances are higher not only in the neonatal period, but through infancy<sup>142</sup> and even early childhood.<sup>143</sup> Children born to unmarried mothers have an increased incidence of both intentional and unintentional fatal injuries.<sup>144</sup> The sharp differences in infant mortality between married women who list a father's name on the birth certificate and both married and unmarried women who don't, compared to the smaller (but still significant) difference between married and unmarried women who list a father's name on the birth certificate, suggests paternal involvement may be a key factor in avoiding infant mortality and explaining the marital advantage.<sup>145</sup> Marital status remains a powerful predictor of infant mortality, even in countries with nationalized health care systems and strong supports for single mothers.<sup>146</sup>

## **18. Marriage is associated with reduced rates of alcohol and substance abuse for both adults and teens.**

Married men and women have lower rates of alcohol consumption and abuse than do singles (including cohabitators). Longitudinal research confirms that young adults, particularly men, who marry tend to reduce their rates of alcohol consumption and illegal drug use.<sup>147</sup> Children whose parents marry and stay married also have lower rates of substance abuse, even after controlling for family background and the genetic traits of the parents.<sup>148</sup> Twice as many young teens in single-mother families and stepfamilies have tried marijuana (and young teens living with single fathers were three times as likely). Young teens whose parents stay married are also the least likely to experiment with tobacco or alcohol.<sup>149</sup> Data from the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse show that, even after controlling for age, race, gender, and family income, teens living with both biological parents are significantly less likely to use illicit drugs, alcohol, and tobacco.<sup>150</sup>

How does family fragmentation relate to teen drug use? Many pathways are probably involved, including increased family stress, reduced parental monitoring, and weakened attachment to parents, especially fathers.<sup>151</sup>

## **19. Married people, especially married men, have longer life expectancies than do otherwise similar singles.**

Married people live longer than do otherwise similar people who are single or divorced.<sup>152</sup> Husbands as well as wives live longer on average, even after controlling for race, income, and family background.<sup>153</sup> In most developed countries, middle-aged single, divorced, or widowed men are about twice as likely to die as married men, and nonmarried women face risks about one-and-a-half times as great as those faced by married women.<sup>154</sup> These differences by marital status have persisted over time, and the differences between married and widowed individuals may even have intensified in recent years.<sup>155</sup>

One recent study argues that rather than crude measures of marital status, marital *histories*—the nexus of marital status, timing, transitions, and duration—are predictive of mortality. Indeed, marital status was the least robust indicator of longer life, and accumulation of marriage duration the most robust. Nevertheless, each of these marital factors was important in predicting survival. The effect of marriage on life expectancy

begins in young adulthood and accrues across the life course as individuals remain in, exit, and reenter marital relationships.<sup>156</sup> Thus, even for adults, the stability of married life across the life course plays an important role in fostering adult health.

## **20. Marriage is associated with better health and lower rates of injury, illness, and disability for both men and women.**

Both married men and women enjoy better health on average than do single, cohabiting, or divorced individuals.<sup>157</sup> Selection effects regarding divorce or remarriage may account for part of this differential, although research has found no consistent pattern of such selection.<sup>158</sup> Married people appear to manage illness better, monitor each other's health, have higher incomes and wealth, and adopt healthier lifestyles than do otherwise similar singles.<sup>159</sup> For example, one recent study finds married men have higher serum carotenoid levels than never-married, divorced, or widowed men, and married women have higher levels of the same than do widowed women, suggesting marriage promotes diets higher in fruit and vegetable intake.<sup>160</sup>

A recent study of the health effects of marriage drawn from 9,333 respondents to the Health and Retirement Survey of Americans between the ages of fifty-one and sixty-one compared the incidence of major diseases, as well as functional disability, in married, cohabiting, divorced, widowed, and never-married individuals. "Without exception," the authors report, "married persons have the lowest rates of morbidity for each of the diseases, impairments, functioning problems and disabilities." Marital status differences in disability remained "dramatic" even after controlling for age, sex, and race/ethnicity.<sup>161</sup> Another study from the federally-funded Centers for Disease Control found that married adults were less likely to be in poor health, to have activity limitations, to have headaches, to suffer serious psychological distress, to smoke, and to have a drinking problem, compared to widowed, divorced, and cohabiting adults.<sup>162</sup>

However, studies also suggest that the health effects of marriage vary by marital quality, especially for women. Research by psychologist Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and her colleagues indicates that women's health is particularly likely to suffer when they are in poor-quality relationships and thrive when they are in high-quality relationships. For instance, negative marital behaviors (e.g., criticisms, put-downs, sarcasm) are associated with increased levels of stress hormones (epinephrine, ACTH, and

norepinephrine), with higher blood pressure, and with declines in immune functioning.<sup>163</sup> So, particularly for women, marital quality, not simply marital status, is strongly correlated to better health outcomes. Moreover, there is a negative effect of poor marital quality on self-rated health that appears to grow with age,<sup>164</sup> and remaining in a long-term, low-quality marriage may actually be worse for one's overall health than getting divorced.<sup>165</sup> Low marital quality has been implicated as one reason why single mothers who marry do not reap the marital benefits that childless women who marry do.<sup>166</sup> Marital conflict also appears to be tied to functional impairment among midlife and older adults.<sup>167</sup>

As with studies of marriage and mortality, marital status may not adequately gauge the effect of marital history on physical health. For both men and women, marriage duration is associated with lower rates of disease. For women, early marriage (at or before age eighteen) and number of divorce transitions predict poorer health outcomes; for men, divorce duration and widowhood transitions are important.<sup>168</sup> But here, again, the research suggests that a stable, lifelong marriage typically benefits women and men's health.

Despite the overall health advantages for married individuals, the transition to marriage is associated with at least one disadvantage: weight gain.<sup>169</sup> In one recent study, researchers found that those who married had BMI scores 1.129 units higher, on average, than those who remained unmarried three years later—the equivalent of gaining eight pounds for a person 5'10" tall and weighing 170 pounds.<sup>170</sup> Both men and women who marry are more than two times more likely to become obese than those who are in a non-cohabiting, dating relationship.<sup>171</sup> Here, adults who marry probably feel less pressure to stay fit to attract or keep a partner, compared to their unmarried peers.

## **21. Marriage seems to be associated with better health among minorities and the poor.**

A recent report from the Centers for Disease Control indicates that African American, Latino, and low-income adults also enjoy health benefits from marriage. African American and Latino adults who are married are less likely to be in poor health, to have activity limitations, to smoke, to have a drinking problem, and to suffer serious psychological distress, compared to cohabiting, never-married, divorced, and widowed adults who were African American or Latino. Poor married adults were less likely to be in poor health, to have activity limitations, to smoke, to have

a drinking problem, or to suffer serious psychological distress, compared to cohabiting, divorced, and widowed adults. (However, they did not do consistently better than never-married adults).<sup>172</sup> Nevertheless, marriage may also increase the risk of obesity for African American women.<sup>173</sup>

Marriage also has implications for child health. Studies indicate that Latino and African American infants are significantly more likely to die at or around birth, suffer from low birth weight, or be born premature if they are born outside of marriage.<sup>174</sup> More research needs to be done on the health consequences of marriage for low-income and minority populations to confirm and extend these findings.

## **Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being**

### **22. Children whose parents divorce have higher rates of psychological distress and mental illness.**

In the last four decades, a large body of research on divorce has accumulated that generally indicates that divorce often causes children considerable emotional distress and doubles the risk that they will experience serious psychological problems later in life.<sup>175</sup> Children of divorce are at higher risk for depression and other mental illness over the course of their lives, in part because of reduced educational attainment, increased risk of divorce, marital problems, and economic hardship.<sup>176</sup> A twenty-five-year study by psychologist Judith Wallerstein and her colleagues found that the effects of divorce on children crescendoed as they enter adulthood. Their relationships with the opposite sex were often impaired by acute fears of betrayal and abandonment, and many also complained that they had never witnessed a man and a woman in a happy relationship and doubted that achieving such a relationship was possible.<sup>177</sup> Indeed, the recent growth of cohabitation flows in part from the loss of confidence that many children of divorce have in marriage.<sup>178</sup> Having witnessed divorce up close, many young adults are afraid that they will not achieve lifelong love and they feel handicapped in their search for love and marriage by their lack of models of a happy relationship between a man and a woman, their lack of knowledge about how to resolve differences, and their expectation of betrayal and abandonment by their lover, wife, or husband.<sup>179</sup> So they cohabit, date, or hookup instead of marrying.

Since Wallerstein published her pioneering book, *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce*, which suggested

that divorce was associated with a fear of abandonment, sleeplessness, a rise in aggression, and chronic anxiety among the children of divorce, a large body of research on divorce has accumulated, which generally indicates that divorce often causes children considerable emotional distress and doubles the risk that they will experience serious psychological problems later in life. Children of divorce are at higher risk for depression and other mental illness over the course of their lives, in part because of reduced educational attainment, increased risk of divorce, marital problems, and economic hardship.

The timing of the breakup may matter as well. Family instability prior to the end of kindergarten (be it divorce or another type of parental breakup) but not from first through fourth grades heightens externalizing behavior problems and lowers peer competency among fifth graders.<sup>180</sup>

There is mixed evidence as to whether these higher rates of psychological distress are causally related to parental divorce or instead to some genetic factor(s). Studies from two sites—Australia and Virginia—conducted by the same research team report very different results. Two of these studies followed identical and nonidentical twins in Australia who married and had children. Some of these twins went on to divorce. By comparing the children of divorce with children from intact families in this sample, the researchers were able to determine the role that genetic factors played in fostering psychological problems among the children of divorce. Specifically, these studies found that children of divorce were significantly more likely to suffer from depression, alcohol and drug abuse, delinquency, and thoughts of suicide.<sup>181</sup> In the researchers' own words: "The results of the modeling indicated that parental divorce was associated with young-adult offspring psychopathology even when controlling for genetic and common environmental factors related to the twin parent."<sup>182</sup> However, in a similarly-designed study of Virginians, the researchers found that the apparent effect of parental divorce on emotional problems could be attributed to genetic differences among parents who divorced, even as genetics did not explain the association between parental divorce and alcohol problems.<sup>183</sup> The researchers note that cross-cultural differences, measurement differences, or sampling differences may account for the discrepancy.

There is some additional evidence that the psychological effects of divorce differ depending on the level of conflict between parents prior to divorce. When marital conflict is high and sustained, children benefit psychologically from divorce. When marital conflict is low, children

suffer psychologically from divorce. Unfortunately, about two-thirds of divorces appear to be taking place among low-conflict spouses.<sup>184</sup>

### **23. Cohabitation is associated with higher levels of psychological problems among children.**

Studies find that children in cohabiting families are significantly more likely to experience depression, difficulty sleeping, feelings of worthlessness, nervousness, and tension, compared to children in intact, married households.<sup>185</sup> For example, one nationally-representative study of six- to eleven-year-olds found that 15.7 percent of children in cohabiting families experienced serious emotional problems (e.g., depression, feelings of inferiority, etc.), compared to just 3.5 percent of children in families headed by married biological or adoptive parents.<sup>186</sup>

Kindergartners in cohabiting stepfamilies report more sadness and loneliness than those who live with their married biological parents. Those who cohabit with their biological parents do not differ from those who live with their married parents. Both types of cohabiting families, however, are associated with lower levels of self-control among kindergartners.<sup>187</sup> Adolescents in stably cohabiting stepfamilies experience more increases in depression than their counterparts in stable biological parent families, and transitioning from a cohabiting stepfamily to a married stepfamily also appears to increase depression among adolescents.<sup>188</sup>

The effect of cohabitation may be contingent on its social institutionalization. For example, children born to Latina mothers in countries where cohabitation is more prevalent and accepted exhibit less externalizing behavioral problems than those born in countries where it is less institutionalized.<sup>189</sup> But, in the United States at least, cohabitation is a risk factor for children's mental health.

### **24. Family breakdown appears significantly to increase the risk of suicide.**

High rates of family fragmentation are associated with an increased risk of suicide among both adults and adolescents.<sup>190</sup> Divorced men and women are more than twice as likely as their married counterparts to attempt suicide.<sup>191</sup> Married individuals were also substantially less likely to commit suicide than were divorced, widowed, or never-married individuals.<sup>192</sup> In the last half-century, suicide rates among teens and

young adults have tripled. The single “most important explanatory variable,” according to one new study, “is the increased share of youths living in homes with a divorced parent.” The effect, note the researchers, “is large,” explaining “as much as two-thirds of the increase in youth suicides” over time.<sup>193</sup> Another study suggests that if family structure remained as it was in 1970, 179,000 fewer children per year would consider suicide and 71,000 fewer children would attempt suicide.<sup>194</sup>

## **25. Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do single or cohabiting mothers.**

The absence of marriage is a serious risk factor for maternal depression. Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do cohabiting or single mothers. Cohabiting mothers are more likely to be depressed because they are much less confident that their relationship will last, compared to married mothers.<sup>195</sup> Married mothers also perceive that they receive more support from their child(ren)’s father.<sup>196</sup> Single mothers are more likely to be depressed by the burdens associated with parenting alone. One study of 2,300 urban adults found that, among parents of preschoolers, the risk of depression was substantially greater for unmarried as compared to married mothers.<sup>197</sup> Single mothers who marry (and remain married), moreover, receive the same mental health benefits as childless women who marry.<sup>198</sup> Marriage protects even older teen mothers from the risk of depression. In one nationally representative sample of eighteen- and nineteen-year-old mothers, 41 percent of single white mothers having their first child reported high levels of depressive symptoms, compared to 28 percent of married white teen mothers in this age group.<sup>199</sup>

Longitudinal studies following young adults as they marry, divorce, and remain single indicate that marriage boosts mental and emotional well-being for both men and women.<sup>200</sup> We focus on maternal depression because it is both a serious mental health problem for women and a serious risk factor for children.<sup>201</sup> Not only are single mothers more likely to be depressed, the consequences of maternal depression for child well-being are greater in single-parent families, probably because single parents have less support and because children in disrupted families have less access to their (nondepressed) other parent.<sup>202</sup>

One study found that single mothers who are no longer in a romantic relationship (of any kind) with their child’s father one year after the birth exhibit the most mental health problems, but even those who are

cohabiting with the father or in a romantic, non-cohabiting relationship with the father have more mental health problems than married mothers. In this study, about 29 percent of mothers who were no longer in a romantic relationship with their child's father report at least one mental health problem, compared to 24 percent of those in a romantic, non-cohabiting relationship, 23 percent of those in a cohabiting relationship, and 16 percent of those who were married. These differences persisted even after controls for relevant background characteristics.<sup>203</sup>

## **Crime and Domestic Violence**

### **26. Boys raised in non-intact families are more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal behavior.**

Even after controlling for factors such as race, mother's education, neighborhood quality, and cognitive ability, one recent study found that boys raised in single-parent homes are about twice as likely (and boys raised in stepfamilies are more than two-and-a-half times as likely) to have committed a crime that leads to incarceration by the time they reach their early thirties. (The study found that slightly more than 7 percent of boys were incarcerated at some point between the ages of fifteen and thirty.)<sup>204</sup>

Teens in both one-parent and remarried homes display more deviant behavior and commit more delinquent acts than do teens whose parents stayed married.<sup>205</sup> Teens in one-parent families are on average less attached to their parent's opinions and more attached to their peer groups. Combined with lower levels of parental supervision, these attitudes appear to set the stage for delinquent behavior.<sup>206</sup> However, some research indicates that the link between single-parenthood and delinquency does not hold for African American children.<sup>207</sup>

The research on cohabiting families and youth crime and delinquency is still in its infancy. Nevertheless, studies indicate that adolescents in cohabiting families are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior, to cheat, and to be suspended from school.<sup>208</sup> Moreover, white and Latino adolescents in cohabiting households were more likely to have behavioral problems than adolescents living in intact, married households and adolescents living in single-mother households.<sup>209</sup> One reason that teens in cohabiting households appear to do worse than teens living in single-parent homes is that cohabiting households are usually led by their mother and an unrelated male. Such boyfriends are more likely to be

abusive than a married father, and they are also more likely to compete with the child for the attention of the mother.<sup>210</sup>

Family transitions are also related to increases in delinquency among adolescents. Specifically, moving from a two-biological parent family to a single-mother family and moving from a single-mother family to either a cohabiting or married stepfamily is associated with an increase in delinquency for adolescents. However, moving to a single-mother family from a married or cohabiting stepfamily does not appear to matter, nor does moving from a cohabiting stepfamily to a married stepfamily. In other words, children who transition out of a stable, intact, married family are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior.<sup>211</sup>

## **27. Marriage appears to reduce the risk that adults will be either perpetrators or victims of crime.**

Overall, single and divorced women are four to five times more likely to be victims of violent crime in any given year than are married women. Single and divorced women are almost ten times more likely than are wives to be raped, and about three times more likely to be the victims of aggravated assault. For instance, the U.S. Department of Justice estimates that the violent victimization rate was 17 per 1000 married women compared to more than 60 per 1000 single and divorced women in 1992–1993. Similarly, compared to husbands, unmarried men are about four times as likely to become victims of violent crime.<sup>212</sup>

Marriage also plays a crucial role in reducing male criminality.<sup>213</sup> A study of five hundred chronic juvenile offenders found that those who married and enjoyed high-quality marriages reduced their offense rate by two-thirds, compared to criminals who did not marry or who did not establish good marriages.<sup>214</sup> Research by sociologist Robert Sampson indicates that murder and robbery rates in urban America are strongly tied to the health of marriage in urban communities. Specifically, he found that high rates of family disruption and low rates of marriage were associated with high rates of murder and robbery among both African American and white adults and juveniles.<sup>215</sup> In his words, “Family structure is one of the strongest, if not the strongest, predictor of variations in urban violence across cities in the United States.”<sup>216</sup> Another recent study comes to a similar conclusion, claiming that the difference in family structure between whites and blacks is one of the most consistent explanations for the black-white homicide gap.<sup>217</sup> Marriage also reduces criminality in the Netherlands, indicating the

effect is not unique to the American context.<sup>218</sup> Other research indicates that declines in marriage rates among working-class and poor men in the 1970s drove crime rates markedly higher in that decade. The reason? Married men spend more time with their wives, who discourage criminal behavior, and less time with peers, who often do not.<sup>219</sup> Some of the most rigorous research on the causal relationship between marriage and crime finds that marriage reduces the odds of a man committing a crime by about 35 percent.<sup>220</sup>

## **28. Married women appear to have a lower risk of experiencing domestic violence than do cohabiting or dating women.**

Domestic violence remains a serious problem both inside and outside of marriage.

While young women must recognize that marriage is not a good strategy for reforming violent men, a large body of research shows that being unmarried, and especially living with a man outside of marriage, is associated with an increased risk of domestic abuse.<sup>221</sup> One analysis of the National Survey of Families and Households found that cohabitators were over three times more likely than spouses to say that arguments became physical over the last year (13 percent of cohabitators versus 4 percent of spouses). Even after controlling for race, age, and education, people who live together are still more likely than married people to report violent arguments.<sup>222</sup> Mothers of infants likewise report higher incidence of partner violence when they are either cohabiting or in a non-cohabiting romantic relationship.<sup>223</sup> During young adulthood, however, when marriage is less normative and dating more so, there does not appear to be differences in relationship violence between marrieds and daters. Even so, the difference between marrieds and cohabitators persists for young adult women.<sup>224</sup> Another study of domestic violence among African Americans found that African American women were more likely to be victimized if they were living in neighborhoods with higher proportions of cohabiting couples.<sup>225</sup> Overall, as one scholar sums up the relevant research, “Regardless of methodology, the studies yielded similar results: Cohabitators engage in more violence than do spouses.”<sup>226</sup>

Selection effects play a powerful role. Women are less likely to marry, and more likely to divorce, violent men. So, one reason that women in cohabiting relationships are more likely to have a violent partner is that cohabiting women in nonviolent relationships are more likely to move

into marriage, whereas cohabiting women in violent relationships are less likely to move on to marriage; this means that the most violent relationships are more likely to remain cohabiting ones.<sup>227</sup> However, scholars suggest that the greater integration of married men into the community, and the greater investment of spouses in each other, also play a role.<sup>228</sup> Married men, for example, are more responsive to policies such as mandatory arrest policies, designed to signal strong disapproval of domestic violence.<sup>229</sup>

## **29. A child who is not living with his or her own two married parents is at greater risk of child abuse.**

Children living with single mothers, mother's boyfriends, or stepfathers are more likely to become victims of child abuse.<sup>230</sup> Children living in single-mother homes have increased rates of death from intentional injuries.<sup>231</sup> Another national study found that 7 percent of children who had lived with one parent had experienced sexual abuse, compared to 4 percent of children who lived with both biological parents, largely because they had more contact with unrelated adult males.<sup>232</sup> Other research found that, although boyfriends contribute less than 2 percent of nonparental childcare, they commit half of all reported child abuse by nonparents. The researcher concludes that "a young child left alone with a mother's boyfriend experiences elevated risk of physical abuse."<sup>233</sup> A recent federal report on child maltreatment found that "[c]hildren living with two married biological parents had the lowest rate of overall Harm Standard maltreatment, at 6.8 per 1,000 children," whereas "[c]hildren living with one parent who had an unmarried partner in the household had the highest incidence of Harm Standard maltreatment (57.2 per 1,000)."<sup>234</sup> Another study focusing on fatal child abuse in Missouri found that preschool children were 47.6 times more likely to die in a cohabiting household, compared to preschool children living in an intact, married household.<sup>235</sup>

Stepfathers also present risks to children. As psychologists Martin Daly and Margo Wilson reported, "Living with a stepparent has turned out to be the most powerful predictor of severe child abuse yet."<sup>236</sup> Studies have found that young children in stepfamilies are more than fifty times more likely to be murdered by a stepparent (usually a stepfather) than by a biological parent.<sup>237</sup> One study found that a preschooler living with a stepfather was forty times more likely to be sexually abused than one living with both of his or her biological parents.<sup>238</sup>

### **30. There is a growing marriage gap between college-educated Americans and less-educated Americans.**

As late as the 1970s, the vast majority of adult Americans were living in an intact marriage, and almost nine in ten children were born into married families. No longer. Now, less than half of adults are married, and almost half white high-school educated Americans.<sup>239</sup> Clearly, the nation's retreat from marriage has dramatically reshaped the nature of adult life, and the context of family life for children.

But this retreat from marriage has hit poor, working-class, and minority communities with particular force. By contrast, marriage trends among more educated and affluent Americans have largely stabilized or taken a turn for the better. For instance, nonmarital child-bearing rose more than six-fold from 5 percent in 1982 to 34 percent in 2006–2008 among white high-school educated Americans. Over this same period, it did not rise at all for white college-educated Americans, among whom only 2 percent of children were born outside of marriage in the 1980s and the 2000s. Similarly, over this same period, family instability rose among Americans who did not have college degrees, but *fell* among college-educated Americans. Since 1982, the percentage of fourteen-year-olds living with both of their parents has declined for children living with parents who do not have college degrees, while it has increased for children whose parents have college degrees.<sup>240</sup>

Thus, in the United States today, there is a growing marriage gap such that the educated and the affluent are enjoying more stable and high-quality marriages, and the less educated and less affluent are experiencing lower-quality and less stable marriages. Indeed, poor and working-class Americans are increasingly foregoing marriage entirely, opting instead for cohabiting unions that often do not serve them and their children well over the long term.

The growing marriage gap is troubling for at least two reasons. It leaves working-class and poor adults more distanced from an institution that has historically lent purpose, meaning, responsibility, mutual aid, and a sense of solidarity to the lives of countless men and women. And it leaves children in poor and working-class communities doubly disadvantaged, insofar as children in these communities have access to fewer socioeconomic resources and fewer intact, married families.

## Conclusion

**MARRIAGE IS MORE THAN A PRIVATE EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIP.** It is also a social good. This is not to claim that every person can or should marry. Or that every child raised outside of marriage is damaged as a result. Marriage is not a panacea that will solve all of our social problems.

But marriage matters. Children in average intact, married families are more likely to thrive than children in average single- and stepparent families, and families headed by cohabiting couples. Communities where good-enough marriages are common have better outcomes for children, women, and men than do communities marked by high rates of divorce, unmarried childbearing, cohabitation, and high-conflict or violent marriages. Moreover, as we have seen, the benefits of a strong marriage culture extend across lines of race, ethnicity, and class.

Indeed, if we adapt a public health perspective in thinking about the effects of marriage on the commonweal, we can see that the effects of marriage are—at the societal level—quite large. Sociologist Paul Amato recently estimated the effects of returning marriage rates for households with children to the level they were in 1980. This is what he found:

Increasing marital stability to the same level as in 1980 is associated with a decline of nearly one-half million children suspended from school, about two hundred thousand fewer children engaging in delinquency or violence, a quarter of a million fewer children receiving therapy, about a quarter of a million fewer smokers, about 80,000 fewer children thinking about suicide, and about 28,000 fewer children attempting suicide.<sup>241</sup>

So the institutional strength of marriage in our society has clear consequences for children, adults, and the communities in which they live.

If policy makers are concerned about issues as varied as poverty, crime, child well-being, rising economic inequality, and the fiscal limits of the contemporary welfare state, they should recognize that the nation's retreat from marriage is closely connected to all of these issues. To strengthen marriage, more funding is needed for research that points the way toward new public policies, community initiatives, and public campaigns to help strengthen marriage, particularly in minority and low-income communities most affected by the retreat from marriage. We also need ongoing, basic scientific research on marriage, cohabitation,

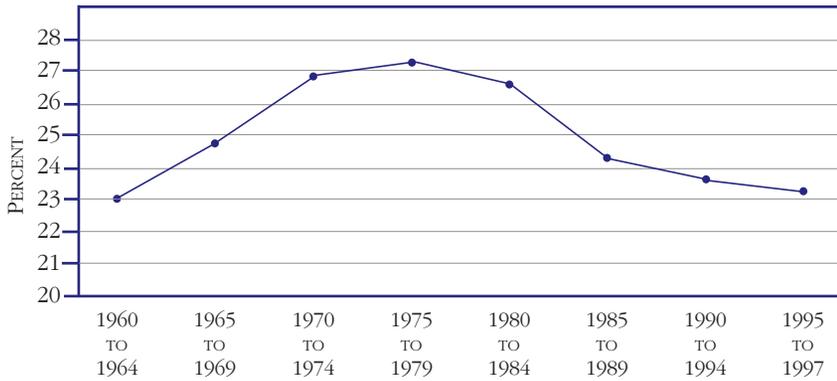
and family instability that contributes to the development of strategies and programs that help strengthen marriage and slow the relational merry-go-round that all too many adults and children now find themselves riding.<sup>242</sup> There is promising evidence of successful strategies,<sup>243</sup> but such strategies should continue to be informed by ongoing research.

We need to answer questions like the following: What are the long-term consequences for children of growing up in increasingly unstable and complex families? How can we prevent nonmarital childbearing and bridge the marriage gap? How can families, marriage educators, therapists, and public policy help working-class and poor parents recognize that cohabitation does not compare to marriage when it comes to starting a family? How can communities be mobilized to promote a marriage-friendly culture? And how do we bring together those who are doing the grassroots work of strengthening marriage with researchers and public officials in order to create synergies of knowledge, practice, and public policy?

If marriage is not merely a private preference, but also a social and public good, concerned citizens, as well as scholars, need and deserve answers to these and similar questions. ■

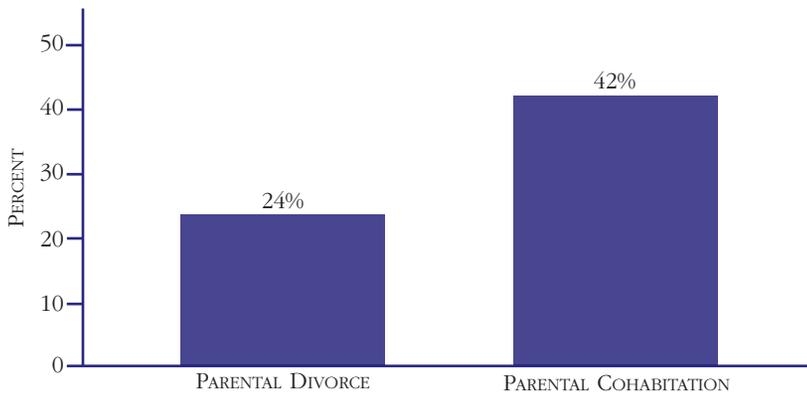
## Appendix: Figures

FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF FIRST CHILDREN EXPERIENCING PARENTAL DIVORCE BY AGE 10, BY PARENTS' YEAR OF MARRIAGE (1960-1997)



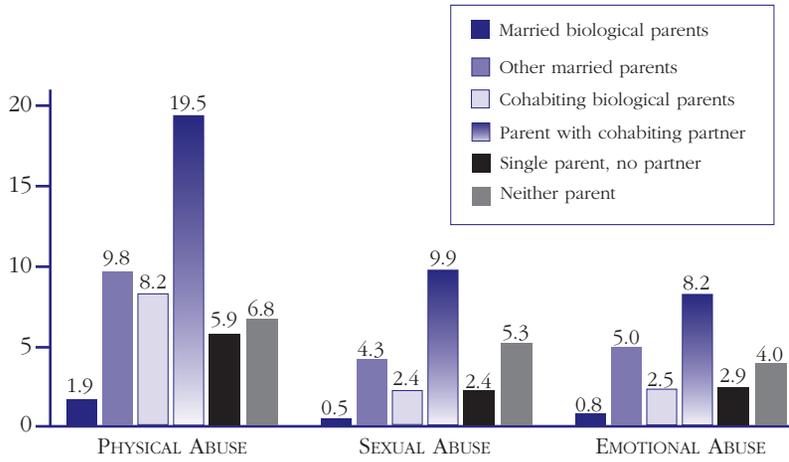
Source: SIPP Data, 2001, 2004, and 2008. Women with premarital births excluded.

FIGURE 2. PERCENT OF CHILDREN EXPERIENCING PARENTAL DIVORCE/SEPARATION AND PARENTAL COHABITATION, BY AGE 12; PERIOD LIFE TABLE ESTIMATES, 2002-07



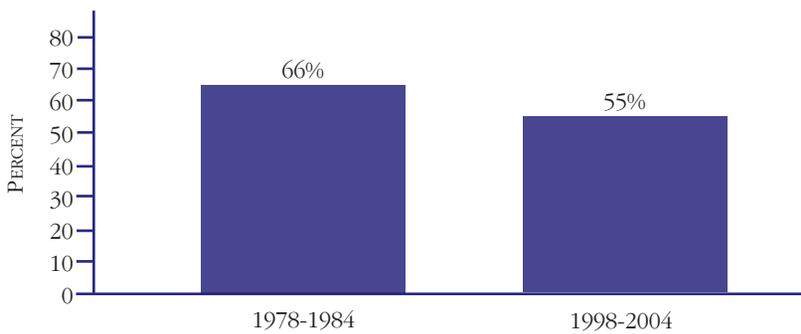
Source: Kennedy and Bumpass, 2011. Data from National Survey of Family Growth. Note: The divorce/separation rate only applies to children born to married parents.

FIGURE 3. INCIDENCE PER 1,000 CHILDREN OF HARM STANDARD ABUSE BY FAMILY STRUCTURE AND LIVING ARRANGEMENT, 2005-2006



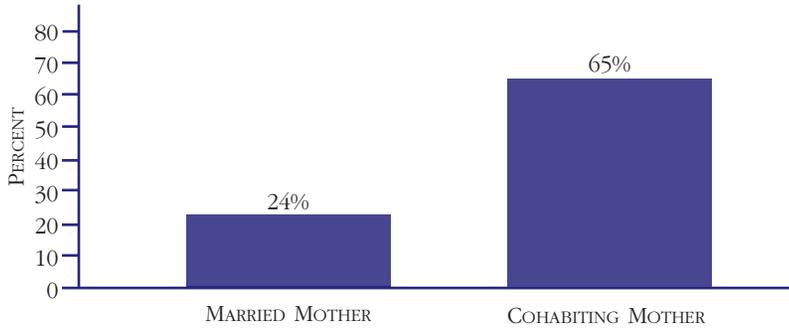
Source: Figure 5-2 in Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4); Report to Congress.

FIGURE 4. PERCENT OF 16-YEAR-OLDS LIVING WITH MOTHER AND FATHER, 1978-1984 AND 1998-2004



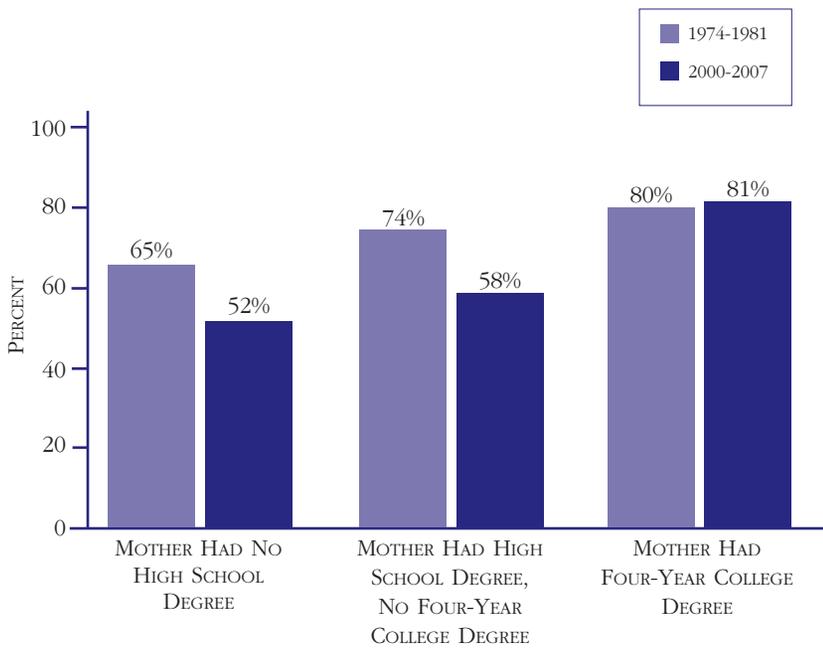
Source: General Social Survey, 1980-2010.

FIGURE 5. PERCENT OF CHILDREN EXPERIENCING PARENTAL SEPARATION BY AGE 12 BY MOTHER'S RELATIONSHIP STATUS AT BIRTH; PERIOD LIFE TABLE ESTIMATES, 2002-07



Source: Kennedy and Bumpass, 2011. Data from National Survey of Family Growth.

FIGURE 6. PERCENT OF 14-YEAR-OLD GIRLS LIVING WITH MOTHER AND FATHER, BY MOTHER'S EDUCATION AND YEAR



Source: National Survey of Family Growth, 1982 and 2006-08.

## **Endnotes**

Endnotes are located online at:  
<http://www.americanvalues.org/wmm/endnotes.php>

## **About the Institute for American Values**

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.

## **About the National Marriage Project**

The National Marriage Project, founded in 1997 at Rutgers University, is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian, and interdisciplinary initiative now located at the University of Virginia. The Project's mission is to provide research and analysis on the health of marriage in America, to analyze the social and cultural forces shaping contemporary marriage, and to identify strategies to increase marital quality and stability.

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