

The Decline in Marriage: What To Do

Ron Haskins, Sara McLanahan, and Elisabeth Donahue

High U.S. rates of family dissolution and lone-parent child rearing impose large costs on individuals and society. A variety of new federal and state initiatives are attempting to promote family formation and healthy marriage among interested couples, including poor and minority couples who have had babies outside marriage. Careful evaluations of these programs should identify which are most effective.

Marriage provides benefits both to children and to society. Although it was once possible to believe that the nation's high rates of divorce, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing represented little more than lifestyle alternatives brought about by the freedom to pursue individual self-fulfillment,

many analysts now believe that these individual choices can be damaging to the children who have no say in them and to the society that enables them.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: Ron Haskins is a senior editor of *The Future of Children* and a senior fellow in the Economic Studies program and co-director of the Initiative on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution. Sara McLanahan is editor-in-chief of *The Future of Children* and director of The Center for Research on Child Well-being at Princeton University. Elisabeth Donahue is associate editor of *The Future of Children* and a lecturer at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University.

To read the full report on marriage and child well-being, go to www.futureofchildren.org.

Articles by Adam Thomas and Isabel Sawhill and by Paul Amato in the fall 2005 volume of the *Future of Children*, "Marriage and Child Well-being," review evidence showing that marriage is associated with better health, higher earnings, and greater wealth among adults as well as with academic success and mental health among children. The evidence also shows that although the differences between children reared by married biological parents and children reared by only one biological parent are modest in percentage terms, these small differences translate into surprisingly large numbers when applied to the entire population of children. Amato reports that if the same share of children lived with their biological parents today as did in 1980, about 300,000 fewer children between the ages of twelve and eighteen would repeat a grade, 485,000 fewer would be suspended from school, 250,000 fewer would need psychotherapy, 210,000 fewer would be involved in violence, and

30,000 fewer would attempt suicide every year. In addition, child poverty would be much lower. The total savings to society from greater marital stability would be considerable.

Despite the advantages of a stable marriage, U.S. rates of family dissolution have been on the rise for five decades. The share of children living with a single parent—12 percent in 1970—is now 27 percent. American adolescents and adults have mastered every means of producing lone-parent families. The nation's teen birth rate, which finally began to take a downward turn a decade ago, nevertheless exceeds that of other industrialized nations; marriage has declined precipitously, especially among minority groups; divorce has stabilized, but at one of the world's highest levels; and one of every three children—and seven of every ten black children—are born outside marriage. Worse, the families who have experienced the greatest decline in marriage and the greatest increase in nonmarital births are minority and low-income. Already suffering from numerous disadvantages, poor and minority children are disproportionately reaping the negative effects of family dissolution.

A Case for Government Action?

The questions that confront the nation are whether the rise of family dissolution is a public problem worthy of attention by government and, if so, how government should respond. Ironically, conservatives, who are normally skeptical about government programs, are leading the charge for government involvement, while liberals, who are normally supportive of government programs, are hesitant. In part, the opposition of liberals is due to the fractious nature of the current political debate and the strong pro-marriage positions taken by conservatives and President George W. Bush. Liberals also worry that public funds now going to support low-income single mothers will be diverted to programs designed to promote marriage. Although the authors of this policy brief represent different political views and affiliations, we all agree that the rise of family dissolution imposes such heavy costs

on individuals, government, and society that it merits government action.

We recognize that many government programs fail and that the evidence that pro-marriage programs will produce benefits is thin. Even so, research has provided some reason for thinking that many poor and low-income couples who now have babies outside marriage might freely choose marriage if they received the right supports from government. Sara McLanahan of Princeton and Irwin Garfinkel of Columbia are heading a team of scholars conducting research on a national sample of couples who have babies outside marriage, so-called fragile families. Because the couples were selected for having nonmarital births, the sample is disproportionately minority and low-income. Of these new, unmarried parents, some 80 percent were already in close personal relationships and nearly half were living together. Moreover, both the men and women in most of these relationships said that they were thinking about marriage. These findings imply that low-income couples themselves realize that marriage is important and are contemplating it for themselves. Yet one out of ten of these couples is still unmarried one year after the birth—a finding that suggests that without some external supports, they will continue to separate.

The Bush administration has put the force of federal influence and financing behind several intervention and research programs designed to help couples like those in the McLanahan-Garfinkel study. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has encouraged refugee, child protection, and child support enforcement demonstration programs, all of which have disproportionate numbers of poor and low-income families, to include marriage education. The department has also consulted widely with Hispanic and African American groups, especially inner-city leaders, to stimulate their involvement in marriage education and promotion and to get their advice. As part of these efforts, the administration has also consulted extensively with local and national organizations devoted to reducing domestic violence and has

required many of the local initiatives it supports to detect and address domestic violence.

Marriage Education Programs

The signature characteristic of the administration's approach has been an emphasis on marriage education. As Robin Dion explains in her article in the new *Future of Children* volume, marriage education is usually delivered in an informal setting with one or two group leaders and four to eight couples meeting in multiple sessions—ten, fifteen, or more—that typically last for an hour or two. The leaders follow one of more than 100 curriculums that have been developed, sometimes over the course of many years, to promote understanding and build and strengthen relationship skills between members of a couple. Topics can include listening, solving conflicts (often with an emphasis on avoiding violence), child rearing, finances, intimacy, forgiveness, managing stress, and many others. Most of these curriculums have been subjected either to no evaluation at all or to evaluations with inferior designs. Some, however, have been scientifically evaluated and have proven to be effective in improving the communication and relationship satisfaction of married or other romantically involved couples. No curriculum however, has been shown to have an impact on poor or minority couples.

The administration and experts in the field recognized early on that few of the existing curriculums were designed specifically for low-income or minority group couples. They thus encouraged curriculum developers to consult with specialists experienced in working with low-income and minority groups and to adapt and test their curriculums with low-income couples. Several developers responded by modifying their curriculums, simplifying instructional language and adding topics such as dealing with multiple-partner parenting, financial problems, and lack of trust.

To date, the most important initiative undertaken by the administration is a large-scale research effort that will cost well over \$80 million over the

next decade if all research contracts are completed. The initiative has three main components: research on programs to help interested low-income couples who have given birth to a child outside marriage strengthen their relationships and form a healthy marriages if they so choose; research on programs to help low-income married couples improve their relationships and avoid divorce; and research on programs to help communities promote marriage on a community-wide basis by

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involving government and nonprofit and faith-based groups. The research, most of which uses random-assignment designs, is being conducted by some of the nation's most highly respected research organizations including Mathematica, MDRC, the Research Triangle Institute, Abt Associates, the Urban Institute, Child Trends, and the Lewin Group. In addition, HHS has required the contractors for these research projects to create advisory groups composed of the nation's top experts in marriage research, marriage education, and research design.

A Model for Marriage Education

A second feature of the administration's approach to promoting healthy marriage deserves special attention. When it first became clear in 2001 that the administration would focus on marriage, the initiative was seriously questioned by Democrats in Congress, by libertarian Republicans, by many in the academic world, and by women's groups. The ensuing debate forced the administration to think carefully about every aspect of its initiative. Perhaps the most important issue was whether the ini-

tiative was primarily about marriage education. Influential conservatives wanted to be certain that the initiative remained focused on marriage and did not become simply a new way of justifying services for the poor. Indeed, some conservatives brought pressure on Congress and the administration to direct new funding to marriage education and not to services. Part of their argument was that other sources of funding are available for services.

Perhaps in response to the criticism, HHS contracted with Mathematica to develop what amounted to a position paper on the Building Strong Families research project, one of the administration's major research initiatives. The paper included a model for promoting healthy relationships and marriage. After some adaptation, the model now consists of three primary elements: marriage education (or relationship skills enhancement), linkage to services, and coordinators who work on a continuing basis with couples and who coordinate services. This program model solved three major issues. First, because of its simplicity, it brought coherence and definition to what the administration meant by marriage education. Second, although the marriage education funds could not be used to purchase services, the model made it clear that the administration intended to allow services in its approach to promoting healthy relationships and marriage, at least in the Building Strong Families project. And third, the model excluded from the program couples who were involved in serious domestic violence.

We strongly endorse the inclusion of services in the Building Strong Families program model and recommend that more of the research and demonstration projects supported by the administration recognize the need for services. As shown clearly in the article by Kathryn Edin and Joanna Reed in the new *Future of Children* volume, low-income couples face many obstacles. Research by Edin, by the McLanahan-Garfinkel team, and by others shows that lack of employment and income is a major obstacle to marriage for many poor couples. Both mothers and fathers say they want to achieve a

level of financial security, including having enough money for a down payment on a house and for a nice wedding, before they would be willing to marry. A second important obstacle, not well understood until recently, is a lack of trust between the mothers and fathers. Sexual promiscuity is an important part of this problem, but the issue is broader and includes being unable to rely on the partner's word and consistency in providing support. Third, many of these couples operate within a complex social network that often includes previous relationships, some of which involve children. Ron Mincy, of Columbia University, has labeled this problem "multiple partner fertility." Research has already shown that poor couples, not unlike their more affluent counterparts, often need help to prevent their previous relationships from disrupting their current one. As a result of these and similar problems, some poor and low-income individuals make the reasonable decision not to marry.

The research-based approach taken by the administration seems well-advised, particularly the emphasis on reducing domestic violence, on using random-assignment designs, on encouraging curriculum modification to accommodate the characteristics and needs of poor and minority couples, on selecting competent and experienced research organizations, and on drawing advice from leading experts. If it is possible to create programs that improve relationships, increase rates of healthy marriage, and improve outcomes for children, the administration's research and demonstration approach is well-designed to create and detect these impacts.

Will Congress Fund the Marriage Programs?

Not surprisingly, given this level of activity to promote knowledge about and programs on marriage, the administration has seized on congressional reauthorization of the 1996 welfare reform law as the occasion to propose a \$1.5 billion (over five years) initiative to promote improved relationships and healthy marriage. Unfortunately, partisan conflicts, primarily over issues other than marriage,

have for three years prevented Congress from passing a reauthorization bill, although another attempt is now under way. If Congress manages to pass the welfare reform legislation, the administration's \$1.5 billion proposal on marriage seems certain to become law. Thus, this proposal and its potential implementation deserve careful scrutiny.

The proposal would create two new marriage programs. The first is a grant program that would provide states \$100 million a year for five years in funds that would have to be matched dollar-for-dollar to promote "family formation and healthy marriage." States could use the money to conduct public advertising campaigns on the importance of marriage and the skills needed to promote marital stability; family budgeting; school-based courses on the value of marriage, relationship skills, and parenting; marriage education; marriage skills enhancement for married couples; mentoring; and several other programs with similar purposes. If the states matched the entire \$100 million every year, the nation would spend \$1 billion on these programs over five years.

The second Bush proposal is for a \$100 million a year research, demonstration, and technical assistance program to be initiated by the secretary of HHS. These funds would be available to public and private entities, would not require matching funds, and would be primarily for research on the same types of activities as in the first program proposal.

Identifying Effective Programs

This set of proposals is reminiscent of the precursors of the sweeping welfare reform bill enacted by Congress in 1996. The presidential administrations of Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton had the foresight to stimulate research and demonstration programs on welfare reform at the state and local level. With HHS providing guidance to states and funding high-quality research, a host of studies showed that strong work requirements could increase the number of mothers finding jobs and leaving welfare. Findings like this from scientific studies, combined with the federal leadership

in encouraging states to try innovative welfare-to-work programs, created great interest across the nation in welfare reform and increased understanding of what worked and what did not work. By the time federal welfare reform legislation passed in 1996, forty states had conducted or were conducting welfare reform demonstration programs, most of which tested various approaches to

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encouraging or requiring mothers to work. The 1996 legislation, in short, capped more than a decade of innovation in program development and scientific research in welfare reform. Experience with the 1996 welfare legislation and its implementation suggests that one set of ingredients for an effective reform movement includes high-quality research allowing identification of effective programs, widespread state demonstrations based on programs shown to be effective by the growing body of research, and federal legislation giving states the opportunity to have their voices heard.

The administration's proposed state demonstrations and ambitious research agenda on marriage could provide the foundation for a national movement to promote family formation and healthy marriage comparable with the movement that preceded welfare reform. The shortage of evidence on how to build successful relationships and marriage among low-income and minority couples argues for a strategy of letting a hundred flowers bloom. Logic suggests that the more quality demonstrations that state and private entities conduct, the higher the probability of discovering effective

approaches. Fortunately, several recent reviews, including the article by Steven Nock in the new *Future of Children* volume and recent papers by Theodora Ooms and her colleagues, show that many state and local organizations, and a few foundations, are planning and conducting a wide variety of marriage initiatives. If the approach of encouraging diversity accompanied by careful evaluation is successful, at some point it will be necessary to focus public funding on what has been shown to work. But for the immediate future, more and more diversity is better.

Unfortunately, the bills pending in Congress on state marriage-promotion programs do not require evaluations. Requiring them, particularly random-assignment evaluations that are inherently difficult and expensive, would likely cause more states to opt out of the grant program. Even so, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that rigorous evaluations are essential if successful programs are to be reliably identified.

One way to encourage state participation in the grant program while getting good information on program impacts is for the secretary of HHS to select the most promising state proposals as targets for high-quality evaluations. The secretary could then use some of the new research funds provided by the legislation to pay for the evaluations. The secretary—or the state—could also try to attract funding from foundations to help pay for the evaluations. This approach would ensure that the most promising state programs would be evaluated, increasing the chances that successful program models could be effectively implemented elsewhere.

Addressing Domestic Violence

Domestic violence raises perhaps the broadest and most important issue that must be addressed if the nation is to reverse the course of family dissolution for low-income families. Research by Kathryn Edin and others, reviewed by Edin and Joanna Reed in the new *Future of Children* volume, shows that many poor mothers have serious reservations about the men with whom they are involved.

Although surprising to middle-class sensibilities, many poor mothers are willing to have babies with men they consider unsuitable for marriage. Perhaps the thinking of these mothers is somewhat more subtle; like other young adults who believe they are in love, they may believe that their partner will improve over time. Meanwhile, poor mothers are well aware that their boyfriends or cohabiters have problems that make a long-term relationship difficult. As Edin and her colleague Maria Kefalas put it: “. . . quarrels result from chronic infidelity, physical abuse, alcoholism and drug addiction, criminal activity, and incarceration.” Although less well established by research, the men may have similar reservations about their girlfriends.

Not all these problems can be solved, but it is likely that at least some can be managed with quality marriage education augmented by employment, mental health, and other services. Some young men and women will, as they always have, respond to faith-based programs, some to employment programs, some to interventions for addicts, some to relationship skills training, and so forth. The potential diversity of the programs that will be attempted if funds are forthcoming—especially if the funds for marriage education can be joined to funds for services—will be the strength of the research and demonstration approach. If the nation tries enough new ideas, in enough places, with evaluations to identify programs that make a difference, solutions will begin to appear over a period of years.

Two Cautions

Two caveats are in order. First, these programs must uphold the principle of individual choice. Some of these couples already want a future together; others may decide to stay together if they receive timely support. But government must fund programs that provide such support without relying on coercion. Both the administration’s proposals and many of the bills in Congress already reflect the principle of individual choice. Second, the history of intervention programs counsels modest expectations. Successes will not come quickly. It follows that for the foreseeable future, millions of children

will continue to live in female-headed families. Thus, government must not sacrifice programs for lone-parent families to promote marriage.

Whatever else might be said about the administration's proposals on family composition and marriage, they have captured the attention of the media, researchers, and the public. There seems to be nearly universal agreement, based on years of research, that lone-parent child-rearing imposes serious costs on individuals and society. That government should play an assertive role in trying to

reduce family dissolution and promote marriage is still controversial, but it has been a case of ready or not, here we come. A host of research and demonstration programs are now under way, with funds provided by state and federal governments and by private sources. More programs seem all but certain to follow, especially if Congress enacts funding for the new proposals on additional grants and research. If these programs are well implemented and carefully studied, the United States could disrupt, and perhaps even reverse, the demographic trends that now afflict us as a nation.

Additional Reading

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The Future of Children would like to thank the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for their generous support.

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