

THE CASE AGAINST

Marriage Fundamentalism

Embracing Family Justice for All





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Overview

The idea that a family composed of a man and a woman in their first marriage is “the best” or “ideal” type of family—especially for children, but also for adults and for society—is a very old one. For much of U.S. history, this idea—central to a larger set of ideas that we call marriage fundamentalism—has been viewed as a matter of common sense, common law, and common morality.



THE CASE AGAINST MARRIAGE FUNDAMENTALISM





...if ‘equal rights’ had been the driving force of American politics in one era, three decades on, ‘family values’ had usurped that position.

Robert Self, Family Historian

Families have always more been more diverse than idealized accounts suggest.¹ But marriage was demographically dominant for much of U.S. history. Between 1850 and 1950, about 80 percent of households included a married couple. The married share of households has been declining ever since. In 2010, the percentage of households with a married couple fell below 50 percent for the first time. Today, it’s at 48 percent. The “unmarried majority” is unquestionably the new normal.

Partly in response to the rise of an unmarried majority as well as second-wave feminism, the civil rights movement, and the gay liberation movement, conservative foundations funded a culture war to promote marriage fundamentalism and move American politics to the right. As family historian Robert Self put it, “if ‘equal rights’ had been the driving force of American politics in one era, three decades on, ‘family values’ had usurped that position.”²

Conservative institutions fighting this culture war include Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. As part of the culture war, marriage fundamentalists inaccurately claim that the superiority of the “traditional” married family for children is a matter of scientific consensus. They also use dubious and misleading statistics to argue that marriage is central to reducing poverty and inequality.

Few centrists and liberals today are hard-line marriage fundamentalists and most accept

same-sex marriage and non-marital domestic partnerships. Yet, many still hold onto the idea that the two-parent family—two parents living under the same roof with their joint children—is the best kind of family. In public debates, elite liberals and centrists typically justify this belief, not purely on ideological grounds, but by agreeing with marriage fundamentalists that it reflects scientific consensus.

In this report, we argue that it is time to reject marriage fundamentalism, including the illiberal and unscientific claims that two parents in their first marriage are “the best” or “the ideal” for children, and that increasing marriage needs to be central to reducing poverty and inequality. At the same time, while this report calls for rejecting marriage fundamentalism, it is not “anti-marriage.” Marriage has deep personal meaning for many people, and it has become a fairer and more inclusive institution over time, largely due to cultural changes and liberal legal reforms. Our laws should provide a legal framework for people who want to marry, but marriage shouldn’t be the only option for people in close relationships of care and commitment.

We identify three reasons to reject marriage fundamentalism. First, it is inconsistent with liberal, feminist, and multicultural values, including equality and autonomy. Second, an objective evaluation of the research evidence does not support the contention that the two-parent family (married or not) is the superior family type for children, or that increasing the marriage rate is necessary to reduce poverty and inequality. Claims that

these ideas are a matter of scientific consensus are demonstrably false. Finally, marriage fundamentalism has caused, and continues to cause, considerable political, social, and psychological harms, especially to already marginalized communities, without any offsetting benefits.

At the center of our argument against marriage fundamentalism is the fact that it is racist, sexist, and classist. Marriage fundamentalists classify people based on the extent to which they conform to an idealized, White, heterosexual, married family model. They also classify groups based on the extent to which group members conform to this model. The injustices experienced by people in groups who least conform to this ideal are attributed to their failure to conform to it, rather than systemic injustice.

The list of groups targeted as failing to live up to this ideal is a long one that includes Black people, unmarried mothers, LGBTQ+ people, struggling working-class people of all races and ethnicities,³ and people who receive Medicaid, SNAP (food stamps), and other social assistance. According to the story told by marriage fundamentalists, these groups are more likely to include people who make “bad choices” and who are deficient as a matter of “culture” and “character.”⁴ However well-intentioned its proponents may be, marriage fundamentalism reinforces racist and sexist attitudes that remain widely held in the United States and harm people on a daily basis.

At the core of this report are four case studies that take an in-depth look at how marriage fundamentalism has played out in public

debates over the last half century, and support our argument for rejecting it.

In the first case study, we show how a controversial government report, now known as the Moynihan Report, set the stage for the culture wars that followed in its wake. Rather than bringing right and left together around “a national effort ... directed towards the question of family structure,” the divisive document is still used to justify discriminatory attitudes and harmful policies.⁵

Next, we document the right-wing origins of a repeatedly debunked and misleading formula—most recently rebranded as the “Success Sequence”—that purports to prove that marriage is central to individual financial success and reducing poverty. Often attributed to the Brookings Institution and figures associated with the Clinton administration, we trace it back to Charles Murray, a controversial right-wing figure who has called for ending nearly all social welfare programs, and aggressive stigmatization of non-marital births.

Our third case study outlines how marriage fundamentalism drove the repeal of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—a social-security program that provided an income floor for eligible low-income children—and established marriage promotion as explicit federal policy. Since 2006, some \$1.2 billion in federal funds have been dedicated exclusively to marriage promotion through the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program.⁶ Additional TANF funds—almost certainly over \$1 billion—have been used by states to

Our laws should provide a legal framework for people who want to marry, but marriage shouldn't be the only option for people in close relationships of care and commitment.

reduce “out-of-wedlock” births and promote marriage and two-parent families.⁷ As we show, these efforts have failed, but the use of TANF funds for marriage promotion continues.

In the final case study, we discuss the dual legacy of the Marriage Equality movement. The movement succeeded in extending marriage rights to same-sex couples, but it did not challenge the way in which marital relationships are systematically privileged over other equally valid relationships that deserve respect and recognition.

In the report’s conclusion, we argue for a new consensus around a set of principles and a policy agenda that promote “family justice.” A family-justice consensus would reject the idea that families and relationships can or should be ranked from best to worst based on their structure. Instead it respects the equal value and legitimacy of different kinds of family arrangements and believes the legal rights, benefits, and privileges of marriage should be available to unmarried people as well.

The core values of family justice include equality, autonomy, interdependence, and care. Equality requires the reduction of social and economic inequality within relationships and between family types, as well as legal equality among different types of families and relationships. Autonomy requires making it possible for people to freely choose their relationships and family types—including, but not limited to, marriage—by reducing structural and other barriers that stand in their way. Interdependence means acknowledging we all are interconnected and dependent on countless other people (not just ones to whom we are biologically related or with whom we have a legally recognized relationship). And care requires acknowledging all the ways that these different forms of relationships are supportive and meaningful, and the positive impact they can have on our lives and well-being.

Family justice builds upon, and is indebted to, the work of at least three major groupings of activists and theorists: 1) the reproductive justice framework developed by a visionary group of Black women more than two decades ago, 2) the strategic vision proposed by LGBTQ+ activists and allies in their 2006 statement *Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for All Our Families and Relationships*,⁸ and 3) the work of advocates and intellectuals, including legal theorists, sociologists, and philosophers.

A new family-justice consensus will require both cultural and policy change.

Like the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender activists and allies who drafted the *Beyond Same-Sex Marriage* statement, family justice advocates seek “recognition and respect for our chosen relationships, in their many forms...”⁹ Like reproductive justice, family justice is not simply “pro-choice” when it comes to questions of family and relationships. Family justice, like reproductive justice, focuses on the ways that “laws, policies, and public officials punish or reward” different groups of people differently.¹⁰

In practical terms, a new family-justice consensus will require both cultural and policy change. Necessary culture change involves increasing public acceptance and understanding of family diversity, and rejecting marriage fundamentalism. Necessary policy change includes reforming public policies to promote and support equality, autonomy, interdependency and care regardless of family type. Where legal benefits, privileges, and rights are limited to married couples only, family-justice advocates should ask whether the limitation makes sense given the goals of the law, and whether

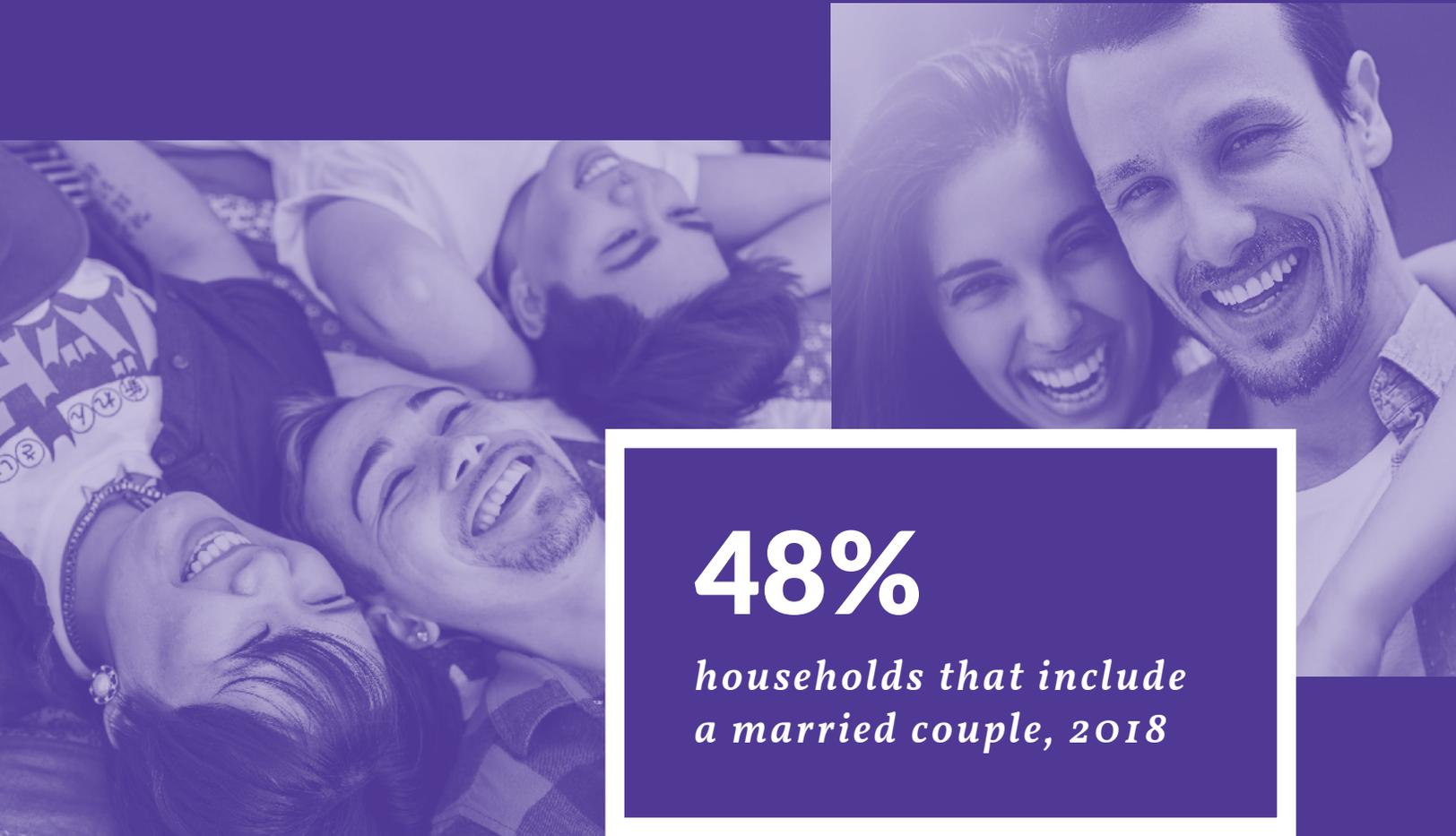
the denial of benefits to people in various other non-marital relationships is fair.

At the same time, family justice would seek to reform and repeal laws, policies and social norms that stand in the way of people having the families and relationships they want.

In short, family justice requires bringing elite opinion and public policy in line with what most people already believe: that married couples are no more worthy of recognition and support than unmarried individuals, and that marriage is only one of many paths to family.

The Rise of the Unmarried Majority

In this chapter, we document the rise of the unmarried majority.¹¹ Despite this demographic change and broad public acceptance of it, a long list of legal rights, benefits, and privileges available to married people remain unavailable to those who are not married.



48%

*households that include
a married couple, 2018*

The Married Couple Household is No Longer Dominant Demographically

For most of U.S. history, married-couple households have dominated demographically. In the 1800s, more than four out of every five households included a married couple.¹² In the 1900s, the married share remained at roughly 80 percent, until the early 1950s when, as shown in figure 1, it began a long descent. In 2010, the percentage of households with

married couples fell below 50 percent for the first time. Today, it's at 48 percent. Some of this decline is due to the increase in one-person households. But even if we look at individual adults (instead of households), the share who are married has fallen by over 20 percentage points since 1960, and is hovering around 50 percent today.¹³

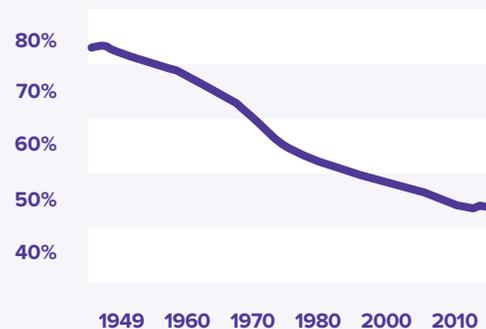
The Increase in Unmarried Partnerships

In 2018, 18.7 million adults—about 7.5 percent of adults living in the United States—lived with an unmarried partner.¹⁴ The Census Bureau didn't ask direct questions identifying all unmarried couples who lived together until 2007. Between just 2007 and 2018, the number of such couples increased by 5.2 million. Using statistical methods to get around the data limitations in earlier surveys, researchers at the Census Bureau have estimated that the percentage of households that include unmarried couples increased from 1.5 percent in 1977 to 4.8 percent in 1997.¹⁵

Roughly half of unmarried people living together are young adults (age 18–34), but the share of people living as unmarried couples is on the rise across the entire age distribution. For example, among people age 55 and older, the number of people living in an unmarried couple has doubled over just the last decade (to 3.2 million in 2018).

FIGURE 1

Percentage of Households that include a Married Couple, 1949-2018.



Source: Table HH-1 of U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Household Tables, November 2018, available at: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/households.html>.

The Unmarried Half of the Adult Population

There are nearly 126 million unmarried adults in the United States.¹⁶ They are a diverse group:

Age

44.4 percent of unmarried adults are between ages 18-34; 25.4 percent are between 35-54; and 30.2 percent are age 55 or over;

Race and Ethnicity

58.1 percent of unmarried adults are White, non-Hispanic; 17.1 percent are Black; 4.7 percent are Asian or Pacific Islander; 1 percent are American Indian or Alaskan Native; and 3 percent are multiracial. Some 17.3 percent of unmarried adults are Hispanic (across all race categories);

Ever Married

61 percent of unmarried adults have never been married; 12 percent are widowed; and 27 percent are divorced or separated;

Presence of Minor Children

13.1 percent of unmarried adults live with one or more of their minor children (under age 18);

Highest Education Level

14.3 percent of unmarried adults (age 25 or older) lack a high school degree; 30.3 percent have a high school degree; 29.8 percent have some post-secondary education, but not a four-year degree; 25.6 percent have a BA degree or higher;

Immigrant Status

87 percent of unmarried adults are U.S.-born citizens; 13 percent are immigrants, about half of whom are naturalized citizens.

As with the married half of the adult population, the unmarried half is comprised of a wide range of adults in different life stages and on different trajectories. Some will go on to marry or remarry at some point in their lives, while others will not.¹⁷

It's important to recognize that the rise of the unmarried majority is not a simple story. Some unmarried or unpartnered people

want to be married or partnered.¹⁸ And even unmarried couples sometimes feel trapped in their relationships for financial or other reasons.¹⁹ Moreover, as we discuss later in this section, the poorly compensated and insecure jobs available to many people in today's economy are hard on relationships and families, and likely contribute to class differences and income gradients in various family indicators.

Family Diversity is the New Normal for Children

For U.S. children, family diversity “is the new normal.”²⁰ As figure 2 shows, fewer than half of U.S. children live with two parents in a first marriage. Table 1 provides further detail of living arrangements (although people who are remarried are not split out separately). Substantial numbers of children live with both of their unmarried parents; many single parents are in couples, particularly single fathers. About 2.4 million children do not live with either parent, but do live with grandparents or other relatives.

Across family types, grandparents and other relatives may provide child care and make other contributions to the household that aren't captured in this table. And two-parent and coupled living arrangements differ by how work, child care, and household duties are split between the couple.

Where a child's two parents do not live together, the non-residential parent is often stereotyped as “absent” and the child assumed to be “fatherless” or “motherless.” This is particularly the case for Black children.²¹ In reality, many children who are categorized as living apart from one of their parents have strong connections with their non-residential parents. For example, among fathers who do not live with one or more of their children under age 5, about 10 percent play with them

on a daily basis.²² Among non-residential fathers with children ages 5-18, about 16 percent talk to them on a daily basis. Research also suggests that fathers' direct involvement in their children's lives has increased over time among both residential and non-residential fathers.²³

Moreover, a growing share of children live in “binuclear” families in which they spend substantial amounts of residential time with each of their parents. Research using court records from Wisconsin found that, in 2008, 45 percent of divorces involving minor children resulted in parents sharing physical custody. In 27 percent of all divorces involving children, custody was shared on a 50-50 basis between the parents. By comparison, in 1986, only 8 percent of divorces involving children resulted in shared custody.²⁴

Wisconsin could be an outlier, and court orders may not reflect how parenting time is actually distributed over time between divorced parents. But given changing social norms and the adoption of laws favoring shared parenting in a growing number of states, it seems likely that shared parenting arrangements are becoming common nationally. In 2012, Statistics Sweden (Sweden's official statistical agency) conducted a national survey of parents who do not live together.²⁵ Unlike

the Wisconsin study, Sweden’s survey was not limited to divorced parents. The share of children with parents who do not live together is about the same as in the United States (roughly one in four). Statistics Sweden found that 35 percent of children whose parents do not live together live alternately with each of their parents for about the same amount of time, a sharp increase from the 1980s.

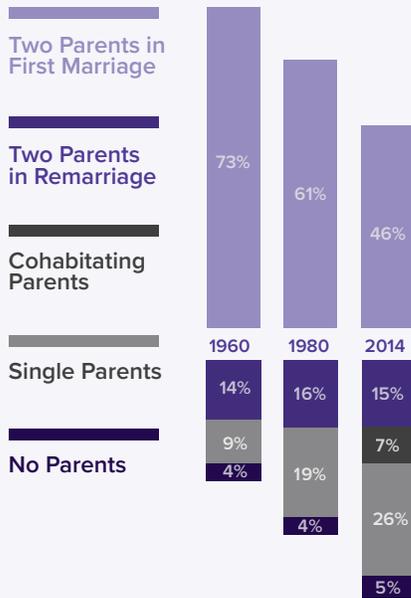
Unfortunately, federal household surveys in

the United States, including the American Communities Survey and the Current Population Survey, always treat children as residing in a single residence, even if they spend equal amounts of time between two parents who do not live together. In addition to distorting public understanding of parental involvement and children’s living arrangements, this introduces considerable bias into social science research on parenting and child well-being.

FIGURE 2 & TABLE 1
Children by family living arrangement

Figure 2. For Children, Growing Diversity in Family Living Arrangements

% of children living with....



Source: Pew Research Center, *Parenting in American*, December 2015, available at: <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/17/1-the-american-family-today/>.

Table 1. Percentage of Children by Primary Living Arrangement in 2017

	%	# (Thousands)
Two Biological / Adoptive Married Parents		
Married	60.0%	44,242
Cohabiting	3.3%	2,426
Biological / Adoptive Parent & Stepparent		
Married	5.0%	3,704
Cohabiting	0.6%	454
One Parent		
Mother Not Cohabiting	20.1%	14,855
Mother Cohabiting	2.6%	1,912
Father Not Cohabiting	3.3%	2,457
Father Cohabiting	1.0%	749
No Parents		
Grandparent	2.3%	1,679
Other Relatives (No Grandparent)	1.0%	719
Nonrelative only-not foster care	0.3%	213
Foster parent(s)	0.3%	247
All other	0.2%	124

Source: Table FAM1.B in *Forum on Child and Family Statistics, America’s Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*, 2018, available at: <https://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables.asp>.

Most Americans Accept Relationship and Family Diversity

Americans’ attitudes about relationships and family have become much more accepting over time. In a 2018 Gallup Poll, the percentage of Americans who said “having a baby outside of marriage” was morally acceptable reached a record high (65 percent, or 20 percentage points higher than in 2002).²⁶

Younger adults are more liberal on this and other related issues. As Table 2 shows, the vast majority of adults age 18-44, whether married or unmarried, cohabiting or not, agree that it is acceptable for unmarried couples and single parents to raise children.²⁷

But the attitudes of older adults have also become more liberal over time. According to Gallup’s polling, the percentage of adults over age 55 who say it is acceptable to have a baby outside of marriage increased from 29 percent in 2002 to 57 percent in 2013.²⁸

Family Disparities

If anything, people in the diverse working-class population hold more “traditional” views on marriage than those with higher incomes.²⁹ But economic insecurity, inequality, and misguided policies have shaped and constrained family-related choices for many of them. Differences in marriage and relationship stability between social and economic classes are not new; class gaps in marriage rates, for example, were observed as early as the late 1800s in the United States. As family sociologist Andrew Cherlin has documented, class gaps in marriage narrowed among white men in the two decades after World War II as marriage rates reached a historic peak.³⁰ Since

TABLE 2
Percentage who agreed or strongly agreed with attitude statements, among persons aged 18–44 by current marital or cohabiting status: United States, 2011–2015

It is okay to have and raise children when the parents are living together but not married		
		
Currently cohabiting	90%	89%
Currently married	73%	73%
Unmarried, not cohabiting	81%	83%

It is okay for an unmarried female to have and raise a child		
		
Currently cohabiting	86%	76%
Currently married	79%	73%
Unmarried, not cohabiting	84%	74%

Source: Centers for Disease Control, using National Survey of Family Growth, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr111.pdf>

then, as wage growth for men without college degrees stopped in its tracks and earnings inequality widened, marriage rates fell across the board. For the bottom of the income distribution, a decline in wages among service workers is associated with a disproportionate drop in marriage rates.

In recent research, Daniel Schneider, Kristin Harknett, and Matthew Stimpson have found that people in “less precarious jobs”—ones that have standard work schedules and provide fringe benefits—are more likely to get married, and that much of the educational gradient in marriage is explained by job

quality.³¹ Similarly, in research drawing on her extensive interviews with young working-class people currently in their mid-20s to early 30s, sociologist Jennifer Silva discusses how the decline of good union jobs and the rise of poorly compensated service jobs have impacted the relationships of working-class young people. She writes:³²

[These factors] made lasting marriages less attainable, exacerbating feelings of distrust or even fear about intimate relationships. Commitment, rather than a hedge against external risks of the market, becomes one demand too many on top of the already excessive demands of the post-industrial labor force.

Finally, as Paul Amato and his colleagues have found, using two studies of marital quality two decades apart: “lower levels of income, educational attainment, and occupational prestige were associated with higher rates of marital problems, less marital happiness, and greater instability.”³³

Some marriage fundamentalists have argued that “marriage transforms”³⁴ men’s finances by causing them to work harder and more, a view they claim is supported by research. But recent social science research does not support

this view. For example, Alexandra Killewald and Ian Lundberg find that “observed wage patterns are most consistent with men marrying when their wages are already rising more rapidly than expected and divorcing when their wages are already falling with no causal effect on wages.”³⁵ Similarly, based on their research, Volker Ludwig and Josef Brüderl conclude that “arguments postulating a wage premium for married men should be discarded.”³⁶

Mass incarceration and mass deportation actively separate families and weaken relationships; both have disproportionate effects by race, ethnicity, and class. One out of every two U.S. adults has had an immediate family member incarcerated, and one in seven have had a close family member spend more than one year in jail or prison.³⁷ Even before the Trump administration, mass deportation was tearing families apart. In fact, more immigrants were deported annually during the Obama administration (385,000 a year on average) than so far during the Trump administration.³⁸ The Trump administration, however, intentionally and recklessly used family separation as a weapon under a “zero tolerance” policy.³⁹

The decline of good union jobs and the rise of poorly compensated service jobs have impacted the relationships of working-class young people.

Our Laws and Policies Haven’t Kept Up

Despite the rise of the unmarried majority, and broad public acceptance of it, a long list of legal rights, benefits, and privileges available to married people remain unavailable to people who are not married, including to

people in coupled relationships that are otherwise similar to marriage. Moreover, despite the evidence that economic inequality and misguided policy have negatively shaped and constrained family-related choices and

relationship health and stability, little effort has been made to fundamentally reform economic and social policies in ways that would promote family justice.

In 2004, the U.S. Government Accounting Office identified over 1,000 provisions in federal law alone that make benefits, rights, and privileges contingent on marital status or otherwise take marital status into account.⁴⁰ State and local laws also provide rights, benefits and privileges on the basis of marital status.

The list of such laws is far too long to include in this report, but here are a few specific examples involving federal law:⁴¹

- Under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), most employees have the right to take job-protected leave to care for a spouse, parent or child who has a serious health condition. But employees have no right under FMLA to take job-protected leave to care for their unmarried partners, close friends, or other people they think of as family.
- Social Security provides spousal and survivor benefits that are not available to unmarried partners. Various other retirement and disability programs also provide spousal benefits.
- U.S. citizens can generally bring foreign spouses to live with them in the United States as lawful permanent residents (LPRs), meaning they have the right to work and live permanently in the United States, and can obtain U.S. citizenship within a few years. U.S. citizens cannot bring unmarried partners to live with them as LPRs, unless their partner is eligible for an immigration visa under some other, generally more restrictive, pathway (such as being a refugee or qualifying for an employment-based immigration visa).

Other examples include laws granting

automatic rights to make medical decisions on behalf of a spouse, inherit a spouse's estate in the absence of a will, and take actions after a spouse's death as their next-of-kin; the ability to refuse to testify against a spouse in a legal proceeding, and the ability to file joint tax returns.

In addition to rights and benefits provided by federal, state and local governments, married people are often eligible for benefits provided by employers and other private entities. These include employer-provided health insurance that covers spouses and reduced car insurance rates for married people.

Marriage also imposes legal duties, but these mostly come into play when couples separate or divorce. For example, one spouse may have a duty to provide financial support to the other spouse on a temporary or permanent basis after separation and divorce. Moreover, some public benefits treat married couples as financially obligated to one another in ways that affect their eligibility for benefits, or the amount of benefits they are entitled to receive. For example, under the rules of Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a disability-benefit program, two SSI-eligible people who live together will generally receive less in total benefits if they marry each other than if they remain unmarried.⁴² That said, these kinds of "marriage penalties" in public programs are the exception rather than the rule, and generally attributable to income and asset tests that disproportionately exclude households with two or more earners.⁴³

Some argue that marriage is penalized in the tax code, but in fact, more couples receive marriage bonuses (pay less in taxes because they are married) than are subject to marriage penalties.⁴⁴ And the greatest marriage bonuses in the federal tax code (21 percent of a couple's income) are larger than the greatest marriage penalties (12 percent of a couple's income).⁴⁵ A single worker generally pays more income tax than a married couple with only one worker earning the same as the single worker. There

is little evidence that marriage bonuses or penalties impact couples' decisions to marry. The only real way to eliminate marriage bonuses and penalties in the tax system would be to move from joint to individual taxation of income for all filers, as was the case in the United States before 1948.⁴⁶

In addition to the exclusion of unmarried people from many important rights and benefits, our economic and social policies have failed to respond to change in other major ways that have taken a toll on families and relationships. Some examples:

- The federal minimum wage (\$7.25/hour for covered, nonexempt workers) has not been increased since July 2009, nearly a decade ago.
- Laws and norms tilt the playing field against labor unions that provide

“increased income, regularity and stability of employment, and fringe benefits” associated with marriage.⁴⁷

- The child support system is overly punitive and burdensome, especially in its treatment of unemployed and poorly compensated non-residential parents.
- The United States has failed to enact federal work-family policies, including paid family leave, earned sick days, universal child care, and flexible and predictable work schedules.

To sum up, our laws and policies haven't kept up with the rise of the unmarried majority. Systemic reforms are needed to ensure that our laws recognize and support the full range of close personal relationships that are central to life today.

The Census Bureau's Definition of Family is Too Restrictive

Official U.S. statistics typically track both “households” and “families”

house·hold

/ˈhous,(h)ōld/

A “household” is composed of one or more people who occupy a housing unit. Examples include: an adult who lives alone; two or more adults who live together as roommates; two adults who live together as domestic partners or spouses married to one another; and siblings and other legally related family who live together.

fam·i·ly

/ˈfam(ə)lē/

The Census Bureau's definition of “family” in the United States limits it to people “living in the same household who are related to the householder by birth, marriage or adoption.” Thus, unmarried couples who live together and consider themselves family are not counted as such by the Census Bureau (unless they are both the parents of a child who lives with them). This was not always the case. For example, the 1920 Census defined “family” to mean “a group of persons, whether related by blood or not, who live together as one household, usually sharing the same table. Earlier Censuses used a similar definition.

Source: David Pemberton, “Statistical Definition of ‘Family’ Unchanged Since 1930,” Random Samplings (U.S. Census Bureau blog), January 28, 2015, available at <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2015/01/statistical-definition-of-family-unchanged-since-1930.html>.

A Short History of Marriage Fundamentalism

In response to the rise of an unmarried majority and social movements of the 1960s, conservative foundations have funded a culture war to promote what we call “marriage fundamentalism.”⁴⁸ This chapter outlines the beliefs at the core of marriage fundamentalism, discusses the rise of new right-wing organizations dedicated to promoting it, and describes how marriage fundamentalists falsely claim scientific consensus supports their views.

1970s

Right-wing Christian Ministries and think tanks emerge to promote narrow and exclusive concept of “traditional” family

Defining Marriage Fundamentalism

At the core of marriage fundamentalism is the idea that a family composed of a man and a woman in their first marriage is “the best” or “ideal” type of family, especially for children. Superlatives like “best” and “greatest” abound in arguments that marriage fundamentalists make for the superiority of married-couple families. According to the Heritage Foundation, marriage is “society’s best way of ensuring the well-being of children,”⁴⁹ “America’s greatest weapon against child poverty,”⁵⁰ and the “safest place for women and children.”⁵¹ W. Bradford Wilcox of the American Enterprise Institute calls marriage the “*gold standard*” for love and family.⁵²

In public debates, marriage fundamentalists typically stress the importance of marriage for the well-being of children, but they also see it as the best or ideal arrangement for adults, and for society as a whole. According to the Family Research Council, marriage is “the foundation of civilization, the seedbed of virtue, and the wellspring of society.”⁵³

Consistent with this line of thinking, marriage

Marriage fundamentalists say it is morally wrong for women to have children before marrying. An unmarried woman who has a child is viewed as having made an intrinsically bad choice.

fundamentalists believe that poverty and other economic risks are largely avoidable today if people stop making “bad choices.”⁵⁴ In particular, marriage fundamentalists say it is morally wrong for women to have children before marrying. An unmarried woman who has a child is viewed as having made an intrinsically bad choice.

Finally, for many marriage fundamentalists, there is no real family without marriage. As the Family Research Council puts it, “properly understood, ‘families’ are formed *only* by ties of blood, marriage, or adoption...”⁵⁵

The Rise of New Right-Wing Institutions Promoting Marriage Fundamentalism

A network of right-wing Christian ministries pushing to narrowly define the concept of family emerged in the 1970s in response to the rise of second-wave feminism, and to concerns about its impact on changing roles for women in society, as well as in opposition to the growing movements for LGBTQ+ rights. These organizations were formed to push conservative Christian viewpoints that value heterosexual marriage over all other relationships. This new wave of conservative organizations coalesced behind the goal of

elevating “traditional” family and gender roles, of which marriage was a key piece. This included evangelical parachurch organizations like Focus on the Family (established in 1977), the American Family Association (est. 1977), and the Family Research Council (est. 1983).⁵⁶

Over the same period, new right-wing think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation (est. 1973) and the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research (est. 1977) came together, united by a mission to pursue conservative cultural

and economic concerns, including those that upheld the dominance of the “traditional” family.⁵⁷ Over the last two decades, several smaller think tanks and institutes have been founded, including the Institute for American Values (est. 1988), the Witherspoon Institute (est. 2003), the National Marriage Project (est. 1997 at Rutgers University, and at the University of Virginia since 2009) and, most recently, the Institute for Family Studies and the Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture in Austin, Texas (both est. 2013).

Some of these institutes are closely related. For example, W. Bradford Wilcox, a sociology professor at the University of Virginia, is the Director of the National Marriage Project, a Visiting Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, and is a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Family Studies.⁵⁸

Older, more establishment think tanks have also funded the work of marriage fundamentalists. The American Enterprise Institute (est. 1938), a business-oriented think tank that had traditionally focused on economic policy, brought on the controversial right-wing author Charles Murray in the 1990s, after he was pushed out by the Manhattan Institute.⁵⁹ Writing as an AEI fellow in 1993 in the *Wall Street Journal*, Murray contended that “illegitimacy is the single most important social problem of our time,” one that could only be solved by ending “all economic support for single mothers” and making “an illegitimate birth the socially horrific act it used to be...”⁶⁰

At the Brookings Institution (est. 1916), the Center on Children and Families brought together former Clinton administration official Isabel Sawhill and former Republican House staffer Ron Haskins, who moved marriage promotion to the forefront of the Center’s work. Both have prioritized marriage promotion and proposed “making marriage and work a condition for receiving more types of [government] assistance” as part

Institutions Promoting Marriage Fundamentalism include:

Religious-Right / Evangelical Organizations

Focus on the Family
Family Research Council
American Family Association
World Congress of Families
National Organization for Marriage

Think Tanks and Academic Institutes

Heritage Foundation
Manhattan Institute
American Enterprise Institute
Witherspoon Institute
Brookings Institution
National Marriage Project
Institute for American Values
Institute for Family Studies
Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture

of their plan to “end poverty and welfare.”⁶¹ Along with William Galston, who is also at Brookings, Sawhill and Haskins have frequently highlighted the “success sequence,” a repeatedly debunked and deceptive formula with right-wing origins that purports to prove that marriage is central to reducing poverty.⁶²

Major funders of right-wing marriage fundamentalism include the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation and The John Templeton Foundation.⁶³ The Bradley Foundation has funded nearly all of the conservative groups noted above, as well as the National Organization for Marriage (an activist group founded in 2007 to oppose same-sex marriage and protect the “natural family”) and the World Congress of Families (founded in 1997 to promote “the natural family worldwide”).⁶⁴

In recent years, the Templeton Foundation has funded AEI, the Manhattan Institute, and the Brookings Institution.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that major foundations typically viewed as mainstream, and even liberal, have also funded work in this area, particularly work related to “responsible fatherhood.”⁶⁵ For example, the Annie E. Casey Foundation made substantial investments in “responsible fatherhood and marriage,” and has been a major supporter of Haskins’ and Sawhill’s

work at Brookings.⁶⁶ Both the Ford Foundation and Annie E. Casey Foundation funded a joint AEI-Brookings “consensus” report published in 2016 that called for a mass media campaign to promote marriage.⁶⁷ Like similar products promoted as representing a Washington consensus, the “consensus” was actually among a very select “working group.” In this case, a 15-person group composed of 11 White men, three White women, and one Black man; only two members, both White men, were under the age of 50.

How Marriage Fundamentalists Have Weaponized Social Science to Fight Culture-War Battles

Marriage fundamentalists typically make sweeping, misleading statements about the extent to which social science supports their two core claims: 1) that two parents in a first marriage are the “best” family for children; 2) that any sensible approach to reducing poverty must increase marriage, particularly among working-class people.

Examples of such wrongheaded, and typically hyperbolic, statements include:

- “the negative consequences of an out-of-wedlock birth on the mother, the child, the family, and society are well documented” (Section 101 of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, the federal law typically referred to as “welfare reform”);
- “in 1994, sociologists Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur published *Growing Up with a Single Parent*, after which it was nearly impossible to deny that there were serious costs to single parenting” (Ron Haskins, Brookings Institution);⁶⁸
- “Robert Rector ... has conducted research that reveals the *miraculous* impact that parental marriage alone can have on eliminating poverty for a child” (Rebecca Hagelin, The Heritage Foundation);⁶⁹
- “if you don’t do these three things [including “get married before you have children”] you’re 38 times more likely to end up in poverty” than people who do all three things and “married moms and dads are the pillars of strong communities raising good citizens” (Rick Santorum at the 2012 Republican National Convention);⁷⁰
- marriage is “the *greatest tool* to lift people, to lift children and families, from poverty” (Sen. Marco Rubio)⁷¹
- “married with kids versus unmarried with kids is *the difference* between living in poverty and not” (Sen. Rand Paul).⁷²

Claims like these are often paired with language suggesting that liberals who disagree are being hypocritical or inconsistent, and emotional rather than rational. Drawing a parallel with climate science, W. Bradford Wilcox calls people “family-structure denialists” if they disagree with marriage fundamentalists’ claims of scientific consensus on marriage, or otherwise “minimize or deny the importance of marriage and family structure.”⁷³

Some prominent liberal and centrist journalists have even made statements that seem to align in part with the spirit of these claims, although typically in a more muted fashion. For example, William Galston, a former Clinton administration official and Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, has claimed that “the intact two-parent family is best suited” to the task of “raising children who are prepared ... to take their place as law-abiding and independent members of their community, able to sustain themselves and their families and to fulfill their duties as citizens.”⁷⁴ David Leonhardt of the *New York Times* has claimed that “the evidence, when viewed objectively, points strongly to the value of two-parent households....”⁷⁵ Since no one is claiming that two-parent households lack “value,” this is a euphemistic way of

saying two-parent households are “the best” household type for children.

Similarly, Matthew Yglesias of *Vox* has written that “we really do have a lot of studies on this subject [whether two-parent families are the best family type] ... and they very much suggest a causal effect.”⁷⁶ To be fair to Yglesias, he has also correctly noted that “[i]t’s true there is a lot of very persuasive observational data to indicate that children raised by stable, loving couples end up better off than children whose family lives are disrupted by divorce or breakups. But what we don’t see is the aggregate increase in children borne by unmarried women leading to bad aggregate outcomes.”⁷⁷ In fact, as Yglesias goes on to note, “the current generation of teenagers is the best-behaved on record” and high school graduation rates have risen steadily in recent decades.

In the next chapter, we argue that liberals and centrists should reject marriage fundamentalism, including the claims it makes about there being scientific consensus when it comes to marriage, children, and poverty. In each of our four case studies, we also highlight these and other dubious claims made about marriage, children, and poverty.

Marriage fundamentalists typically make sweeping, misleading statements about the extent to which social science supports their core claims.

Against Marriage Fundamentalism

In this chapter, we argue for the rejection of marriage fundamentalism on three grounds. First, it is inconsistent with core liberal, feminist and multicultural values. Second, even if one believes that science should trump these values, an objective evaluation of the evidence does not support the contentions that the two-parent family (married or not) is the superior family type for children. Finally, marriage fundamentalism has caused, and continues to cause, considerable political, social, and psychological harms without any offsetting benefits. Unmarried mothers, Black women and men, and LGBTQ+ people are among the most harmed.



Values

Marriage fundamentalism is at odds with core liberal values. Most liberals value both liberty and equality. They are generally opposed to stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and various other characteristics, including both innate and acquired characteristics. Liberals generally support a strong separation of church and state, and do not think that government should privilege or promote a particular way of life based on religious doctrine or other prescriptive philosophies of life.⁷⁸ They understand that in a democratic, multicultural society, “citizens will come to affirm different and incompatible” sets of beliefs about what it means to live a “good” life.

These liberal commitments have been central to the undoing of laws, norms, and beliefs that sanctioned discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and parental marital status. This puts contemporary liberals at odds with marriage fundamentalism, which, as a historical matter, has been used to publicly justify discrimination on the basis of marital status and argue for government-imposed restrictions on the freedom of intimate association.⁷⁹ It also promotes a particular way of family life based on religious doctrine. Thus, as political theorist Iris Marion Young has argued, liberals must reject the “moral preeminence of the intact two-parent family” and “affirm a plurality of family forms as valid ways of life. By virtue of its structure, no one family form is inherently better at realizing the values of family life.”⁸⁰

Historically, marriage fundamentalism has reinforced discriminatory beliefs and actions in a variety of ways. For most of its long history, marriage was a patriarchal institution used by men, the church and the state to control populations, especially women and marginalized people. In the words of family



Liberals must reject the “moral preeminence of the intact two-parent family” and “affirm a plurality of family forms as valid ways of life. By virtue of its structure, no one family form is inherently better at realizing the values of family life.”

Iris Marion Young

law scholar Mary Ann Case, “marriage once licensed a husband’s control over his wife, her body, and the products of her labor, from the children she bore to her earnings and property.”⁸¹

For most of U.S. history, governments used marriage prohibition and marriage promotion as forms of social control. Under colonial and state slave codes, slaves could not legally marry. Colonial and state laws also prohibited interracial marriage. Both sets of laws were adopted to maintain and enforce White supremacy. The federal government viewed marriage promotion as a tool to “civilize” Native Americans. This “civilizing” meant “instituting faithful monogamous households, turning Indian men into farmers . . . , and urging Indian women toward norms of modesty and domesticity.”⁸²

After the end of the Civil War, freedpeople could legally marry. But southern states also passed laws “making cohabitation without legal marriage a misdemeanor punishable by fine.” The Freedmen’s Bureau “exhort[ed] and assist[ed] freedmen and women into

compliance, in some cases arresting ‘adulterers’”⁸⁵ According to legal scholar Kathleen Franke “matrimonial laws and norms” after the Civil War “afforded African American people social and economic benefits that had been previously foreclosed to them, but on the condition that African Americans abide by the race- and gender-based rules of bourgeois culture.”⁸⁴

Of course, marriage has changed over the years. During the 20th century, the ideal first shifted from “institutional marriage ... held together by the forces of law, tradition, and religious belief” to “companionate marriage.”⁸⁵ In the late 1960s, the Supreme Court started striking down laws that discriminated against children born to unmarried mothers.⁸⁶ At roughly the same time, states began reforming their divorce laws in ways that reduced legal barriers to exiting marriage.⁸⁷ The Supreme Court struck down bans on interracial marriage in 1967. In 1993, North Carolina became the 50th state to criminalize marital rape. In 2015, the Supreme Court opened marriage to same-sex couples across the United States. Today, the marital ideal has arguably shifted from companionate marriage to what Andrew Cherlin calls the “individualized marriage.”⁸⁸

Despite many positive changes to marriage, marriage fundamentalists seem to pine for the return of institutionalized marriage, especially for the diverse working class, and they continue to morally classify parents based on their marital status. This moral classification has spillover effects on disadvantaged groups. The harms experienced by them are attributed to their supposed insufficient embrace of a marriage culture, rather than choices made by policymakers to reinforce inequality and discrimination.

The list of groups targeted as failing to live up to marriage fundamentalists’ ideal is a long one that includes Black people, unmarried mothers, LGBTQ+ people, struggling working-class people of all races and ethnicities, and people who receive Medicaid, SNAP, and other social assistance. According to the story told by marriage fundamentalists, these groups are more likely to include people who make “bad choices” and who are deficient as a matter of “culture” and “character.”⁸⁹ Even if many marriage fundamentalists have come to accept same-sex marriage, it is hard to imagine them accepting the idea of unmarried same-sex families.

U.S. poverty really is due to bad choices, specifically the bad choices made by U.S. policymakers that end up putting Americans at much greater risk of poverty if they are not married, lose a job, or lack a high school or college degree.

Science

As religious and cultural justifications for marriage waned, marriage fundamentalists turned to science for proof that married, two-parent families are the best kind of

family for children. A common claim is that there is scientific consensus or overwhelming evidence on the superiority of married, two-parent families for children. As we noted

in Chapter 2, these claims typically sound like the following one, made by Focus on the Family: “Children do best when raised by their biological, married mother and father. It’s more than just an opinion: Decades of social research demonstrate this outcome.”⁹⁰ For some liberals, these dubious scientific arguments for marriage fundamentalism even trump the fact that it is inconsistent with their values.

It is true that there are “decades of social research” on family structure and child well-being. It is *not* true that there is scientific consensus on the causal relationship between family structure and child well-being. In fact, as we discuss below, the evidence from rigorous research is far too mixed to support such claims as a matter of science, and where research is suggestive of a causal effect, it tends to be small and comes with many complications that do not support the simple story told by marriage fundamentalists.

The Common-Sense Theory Behind Married Two-Parent Family Superiority for Children is Weak

While there may be “Common-sense” reasons to think two-parent families are superior to single-parent families, there are also plenty of countervailing common-sense reasons to think one’s optimal family type depends on individual characteristics, personalities, habits, and many other factors that vary considerably among individuals. Perhaps most importantly, every day, married and unmarried parents decide to stop living together for very good reasons, like not being happy together.⁹¹ There is little reason to think that keeping people together under the same roof, contrary to their preferences to live separately, will improve the well-being of children who live with them.

While there is little question that a second parent and other non-parental adults can make positive differences in children’s

lives, this involvement does not depend on marriage or everybody living under the same roof. Of course, strong empirical evidence can overcome weak theory. But, as we detail below, the empirical case for marriage fundamentalism is also weak.

No Scientific Consensus on Two-Parent Family Superiority for Children Based on Empirical Research

Several organizations and scholars have conducted large-scale literature reviews and meta-analyses of research on the causal impact of family structure on child well-being. Over the last decade, the organizations conducting reviews include the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Kingdom’s Department of Children, Schools and Families (UK DCSF), as well as U.S. and European scholars. We detail the key findings from all of these reviews and meta-analyses in the Appendix to this report.

The OECD review is the most comprehensive of the review studies in terms of analysis and conclusions. It takes into account both prior meta-analyses conducted by U.S. researchers (and mostly focused on U.S. research), conducts a new meta-analysis of non-U.S. research, and conducts a narrative review of the more limited body of research that uses more sophisticated approaches to obtaining information on causality.

The overall conclusion of the OECD report is “that the literature on the effects of sole parenthood on child well-being, while extensive and growing in sophistication, lacks a clear consensus on the existence of a causal effect. That any such effect is small is a conclusion which can be asserted with more confidence.”⁹² As we detail in the Appendix, the other reviews further support the OECD’s conclusion.

One other review by Härkönen, Bernardi,

and Boertien, detailed in the Appendix, is worth highlighting here because it discusses the heterogeneity of effects (differences by race, sex, and other factors) found in the literature.⁹³ (That said, they do not attempt to reach any conclusions whether these effects are causal.) Much of the public debate over family structure, from the Moynihan Report onward, has focused on Black Americans. But according to Härkönen, Bernardi, and Boertien, the evidence of family structure effects is “weaker in groups in which parental separation and single motherhood are more common” (including Black Americans in the United States).

Similarly, marriage fundamentalists often claim that boys are particularly harmed if they do not grow up under the same roof as their biological fathers.⁹⁴ But Härkönen, Bernardi, and Boertien conclude that gender differences in effects are modest at most.

Härkönen, Bernardi, and Boertien also question the extent to which family change contributes to social inequality. According to the “diverging destinies” thesis, which has received considerable media attention in the United States and is often cited by marriage fundamentalists, “socioeconomically uneven family change” will reduce children’s social mobility. But as Härkönen, Bernardi, and Boertien note, “if the effects [of family structure] are nil or weak, it does not matter who lives in which kind of family.”

Social Science Does Not Support the Idea that Increasing the Marriage Rate is Necessary to Reduce Poverty

Marriage fundamentalists often imply that few married people are poor. Yet, 55 percent of people in low-income families with children—nearly 28 million Americans—live in married households.⁹⁵ And more than half of the people—57 percent—who receive benefits from Medicaid, SNAP, and other major means-tested benefits live in married

families; another 12 percent are in unmarried (cohabiting) couples.⁹⁶

A closely related claim is that increasing the marriage rate and reducing nonmarital births are necessary to reduce the U.S. poverty rate. This is not true. As social scientists David Brady, Ryan Finnigan, and Sabine Hübgen have documented, “single motherhood is not the reason we have unusually high poverty in the United States, compared with other rich democracies.”⁹⁷ People in single-mother households account for a relatively small share of the U.S. population (about 9 percent in their research) and most low-income people do not live in single-mother households. As a result, even if we were somehow able to substantially reduce the percentage of people in single-mother households, they show that it would have hardly any impact on our poverty rate. In fact, even if the number of single-mother families dropped to zero in the United States, our poverty rate would only be about 1 percentage point lower (14.8 percent rather than 16.1 percent in their figures for 2013).

Brady and his colleagues also document how our policy choices increase the risk of poverty for single parents and other groups, compared to other countries. In 16 of the 29 countries included in their study, single-mother households are no more likely to be poor than other households. By contrast, Japan and the United States impose the greatest poverty penalties for single motherhood.⁹⁸ In the end, it turns out that U.S. poverty really is due to bad choices, specifically the bad choices made by U.S. policymakers that end up putting Americans at much greater risk of poverty if they are not married, lose a job, or lack a high school or college degree.

Marriage Fundamentalists Make Extremely Selective Use of Science

Marriage fundamentalists make extremely selective use of science, which includes ignoring research on child well-being that

contradicts their underlying belief system. Perhaps the best example of this ideological selectivity is that marriage fundamentalists have little to say about other key aspects of family structure, particularly the number of children in a family.

The main reason marriage fundamentalists give for the supposed scientific superiority of the married family—that they have more time and money than a single-parent family—also applies to the number of children in a family. Each additional child in a household imposes additional time and money costs (and other potential complexities of daily living) without bringing in any income. By the time-and-money logic of marriage fundamentalism, this should mean that the one-child family is superior to the multiple-child family when it comes to child well-being, and the good of society.

This lack of attention by marriage fundamentalists is not due to a lack of scientific research on the topic. There is in fact a large body of social science on the effects of sibling configuration (a term that encompasses number of siblings, child spacing, position in the age hierarchy of siblings, sex composition and other aspects). In her 1989 book, *Family Size and Achievement*, sociologist Judith Blake concluded that “single children and those from two-child families were better educated and more successful than those from larger homes, where parents had less time and money to invest in each child.”⁹⁹ In a 2002 review of the evidence, Lara Carr Steelman and her three co-authors state that the “evidence of a negative relationship between size of sibling group and academic success, at least in the United States ... and Western Europe ... has been virtually unequivocal” and the “regularity of this relationship is impressive.”¹⁰⁰

The evidence for the negative effect of more siblings on child outcomes appears to be stronger than the evidence for the effect of the number of parents they reside with. Yet, the number of siblings rarely, if ever, comes up in public debates about family structure and child outcomes. Blake’s book won the American Sociological Association Family Section’s William J. Goode Book Award five years before McClanahan and Sandefur’s *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*.¹⁰¹ Yet it is largely unknown today, even as McClanahan and Sandefur’s book continues to be regularly cited. There are no articles in conservative journals with titles like “Sibling configuration matters—science proves it” or “Sibling size, parenthood and public policy,” and marriage fundamentalists have not proposed adding “have no more than one or two children” to the success sequence.

A likely explanation for this lack of attention to scientific evidence on sibling configuration is that marriage fundamentalists have strong beliefs and values about the importance of marriage (independent of what science has to say about it), but do not have strong beliefs and values that are consistent with what science seems to say about sibling configuration. Some marriage fundamentalists believe, partly based on religious doctrine, that both marriage and having large numbers of children are good.¹⁰² They may also be more sensitive to stigmatization based on large family size than to stigmatization based on being an unmarried parent.¹⁰³ Yet, if they were being consistent, they would be more sensitive about how their beliefs lead to the stigmatization of unmarried parents and their children. Instead they imply that the harms caused by growing up with unmarried parents are so great that they outweigh any concerns about stigma or other harms caused by marriage fundamentalism.

Harm

In addition to its illiberal values and the lack of scientific consensus in support of its core claims, marriage fundamentalism causes concrete political, social and psychological harms. Unmarried mothers, Black women and men, and LGBTQ+ people are among the groups that have been most harmed by marriage fundamentalism.

Policy Harms

As we detailed in Chapter 2, marriage fundamentalism has produced a vast system of federal, state, and local laws that provide legal rights, benefits, and privileges to married people, while denying many of these same rights, benefits and privileges to unmarried people.

This is not simply due to policy choices that happened far in the past. Marriage fundamentalism continues to shape federal law and policy in harmful ways.¹⁰⁴ In Chapter 6, we discuss what is arguably the most recent harmful example at the federal level in the United States—how marriage fundamentalism drove the repeal of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program and the establishment of marriage promotion as explicit federal policy. As we show in that chapter, marriage promotion has failed, while diverting public resources from effective social assistance programs.

At its core, marriage fundamentalism justifies inequality, poverty, and hierarchy as the natural outcome of “bad choices” and “bad cultures.”¹⁰⁵ As a result, it inevitably ends up attributing social problems to individuals and groups who are disadvantaged. As long as systemic economic problems like family poverty are attributed to so-called bad choices like not getting married, then the only solution is to increase marriage by force, persuasion or other means. Alternative



solutions, like changing policies to create a more equitable economy or a stronger social security system, are routinely dismissed.¹⁰⁶

The most extreme marriage fundamentalists, like AEI’s Charles Murray, view progressive policy as inevitably counterproductive. They argue instead for the restoration of shame and stigma, combined with wholesale repeal of most social insurance and assistance programs.¹⁰⁷

Less extreme voices than Murray’s have called for public media campaigns promoting marriage—but these campaigns would inevitably shame and stigmatize unmarried people. In the AEI-Brookings report noted in the previous chapter, the authors called for a national campaign in which “presidents, politicians, church leaders, newspaper columnists, business leaders, educators, and friends” come together to “emphasize the value” of marriage, particularly for children.¹⁰⁸

While the report didn’t explicitly call for intentional shaming and stigmatization of unmarried people, there can be little doubt that a massive public campaign along these lines would have that effect.¹⁰⁹ Notably, one of the members of the AEI-Brookings working group, Robert Doar, who is now the incoming President of AEI, used public dollars for a

controversial public-shaming campaign (targeted at young people) when he was Commissioner of New York City’s Human Resource Administration under Mayor Michael Bloomberg.¹¹⁰

Another member of the working group, Richard Reeves of the Brookings Institution, wrote a *New York Times* op-ed supporting the campaign and its use of public shaming.¹¹¹ At the same time, the *Times* published a powerful op-ed opposing public shaming by Gloria Malone, a young mother, college senior, and, of course, not a member of the AEI-Brookings working group. Malone explained how the “bits of encouragement” she received kept her going as a mother and student. By contrast, “the blame, shame and stereotypes expressed by so many others simply told [her] to give up.”¹¹²

Gender Stereotyping

The majority of negative stereotypes regarding unmarried parents are aimed at women, particularly Black mothers, regardless of social class, and working-class mothers of all races and ethnicities. Unmarried mothers are painted as irresponsible and promiscuous, or as too undesirable to be able to find and keep a (male) partner.¹¹³

Of course, gender stereotyping and enforcement of hegemonic gender norms harm both married and unmarried women from all social classes and races. Because gender stereotyping is grounded in the sexist foundation that permeates our entire culture, no mothers are truly exempted. But marriage fundamentalism places a particularly intense focus on unmarried women and marginalized groups that include more unmarried women.

At times, marriage fundamentalism may present itself as benevolent sexism, where mothers are treated as better and more special than fathers, having a unique and irreplaceable bond with their children. On

its face this may appear to elevate women’s place in society. In reality it reinforces notions that a woman’s place, and especially a mother’s place, is within the married home. The ideal mother is economically dependent in whole or in part on her husband, who is a “breadwinner.” The ideal mother puts the needs of her family before her own individual needs.

Marriage fundamentalism also stereotypes and stigmatizes men who do not adhere to its ideal. Unmarried fathers are assumed to be completely “absent” or “missing” from their children’s lives; married ones are assumed to be completely present in both financial and emotional terms. The worst dad is the “deadbeat dad” who is assumed to go to great lengths to avoid providing any financial or emotional support for their children. As we discussed in Chapter 1, these kind of stereotypes don’t reflect the reality of today’s families and parents. Many non-resident parents are present in their children’s lives and not all married dads are emotionally “present” despite co-residing with their children.

Racial Stereotyping

Many of these stereotypes are highly racialized for both men and women. The stereotypes that have been applied to Black women are particularly harsh.

The “welfare queen” idea is almost always portrayed as an unmarried Black mother.¹¹⁴ At the same time, some marriage fundamentalists have attempted to racially sanitize these stereotypes and labels by applying them to White people too, particularly unmarried, working-class White people. For example, in his book *Hillbilly Elegy*, the author and investor J.D. Vance wrote, “I have known many welfare queens, some were my neighbors, and all were White.”¹¹⁵ If by “welfare queens,” Vance means people who have received Medicaid, SNAP, and other

benefits, he is probably telling the truth. But if he means people who have lived a life of luxury by receiving these benefits, he is almost certainly lying.

Another stereotype is the Jezebel, which paints Black women as “lascivious by nature.”¹¹⁶ During slavery, the stereotype was used “as a rationalization for sexual relations between White men and Black women, especially sexual unions involving slavers and slaves.”¹¹⁷ The “Sapphire” caricature also portrays Black women as “rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing.”¹¹⁸

Black men in particular are portrayed in stereotypes as either insincere lotharios who breeze through women’s lives leaving a trail of babies in their wake, or stereotypically “idle” men who hang around on urban street corners. In 2014, then-Speaker of the House Paul Ryan tapped into this racist stereotype when he claimed that:

*We have got this tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work, and so there is a real culture problem here that has to be dealt with.*¹¹⁹

As Rep. Barbara Lee noted, “when Mr. Ryan says ‘inner city,’ when he says, ‘culture,’ these are simply code words for what he really means: ‘black.’”¹²⁰

The conflation of unmarried fatherhood with absentee fatherhood is particularly notable when it comes to Black fathers. The trope of the “absent Black father” has been used to blame Black communities for everything from poverty to crime to shootings by police officers.¹²¹ High-profile promoters of these tropes include Bill O’Reilly, Tomi Lahren, and Sheriff David Clarke.

Black fathers are less likely to reside with the children and their mothers than Whites

or Latinos. Still, about 40 percent of Black children live in a two-parent family, and another 4.4 percent live with their father, but not their mother.¹²² Moreover, Black fathers who do not live with their children are generally more likely to be involved with them on a daily or otherwise regular basis.¹²³

Marriage Fundamentalism Denies the Reality of Positive Change and Moral Progress

Negative stereotypes cause harm to individuals and contribute to the stigmatization of unmarried parents and groups who are less likely to meet the marriage-fundamentalist ideal. It is unfair to hold families to artificial and often unattainable standards, and it’s dangerous to encourage people (especially women) to stay in relationships that are not in their best interests, and may be abusive.

While marriage fundamentalists paint the long-term decline in marriage as a devastating crisis without any upsides, the truth is that the decline of marriage is reflective of many positive changes. That women in the United States are now relatively free to exit bad marriages and relationships is a very good thing, not an indicator of moral decline.¹²⁴

One study found that women’s suicide rates decreased between 8 and 16 percent, and domestic violence decreased by 30 percent, in states that made it easier to obtain a divorce.¹²²

More generally, as Matthew Yglesias has noted, “the current generation of teenagers

is the best-behaved on record” and high school graduation rates have risen steadily in recent decades.¹²⁵ The crisis marriage fundamentalists keep predicting hasn’t happened.

Similarly, the phasing out of “illegitimacy” laws in the 20th century and the fact that women and men are able to be parents without being married is a sign of moral progress. The laws and norms that prohibited and stigmatized unmarried motherhood are directly responsible for the coerced mass

separation of millions of children from their birth mothers. In the 1950s and 1960s in the United States, roughly one out of every four children born to an unmarried mother was adopted by non-relative adoptive parents (this does not include those adopted by relatives of the child).¹²⁶ The 2012 discovery that hundreds of children died at the Tuam Mother and Baby Home in Ireland and were buried in a mass grave is only the most recent reminder of the historical horrors committed in the name of marriage fundamentalism.¹²⁷

Marriage Fundamentalism and the Moynihan Report

In 1965, the federal government released a report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a white sociologist and political appointee at the U.S. Department of Labor.¹²⁸ The report was intended to garner support, including from President Johnson, for the Labor Department's view that a large-scale national jobs program was needed to reduce high unemployment among Black men. To promote this liberal goal, Moynihan focused the report on Black family structure, which he placed at the heart of what he notoriously labeled a “tangle of pathology” in the Black community.

Like most liberal men during this period, Moynihan accepted patriarchy as the normal order of things, and the “male breadwinner” family as the normal family type.¹²⁹ As he wrote in the report, American society “presumes male leadership in private and public affairs.”¹³⁰ In particular, he claimed that “matriarchy” in the Black community—“the often reversed roles of husband and wife”—was the fundamental barrier to racial equality. To fix this perceived problem, he called for “a national effort ... directed toward the question of family structure.”¹³¹ Unsurprisingly, the reaction to the Moynihan report from civil rights advocates, faith leaders, feminists, and others was overwhelmingly negative, and the White House quickly disowned it.

This paper isn’t the place to further rehash the details of decades of debate about the Moynihan report. Public intellectuals like Ta-Nehisi Coates, Michelle Alexander, and others have already spoken at length and definitively about its failings.¹³² Coates, for example, has detailed how the report was rooted “in ugly assumptions in mid-20th century sociology and psychology about Black people in general and Black women in particular” and contributed to the rise of mass incarceration.¹³³ Historian Daniel Geary’s *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and its Legacy* is, for now at least, the definitive book-length historical account of both the report

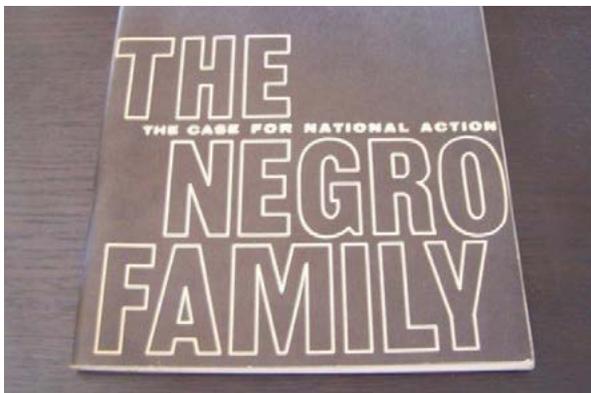


Fig. 3. The Moynihan Report, completed in March of 1965.

The Moynihan Report continues to serve as a model for today’s marriage fundamentalists, despite its patriarchal assumptions, divisiveness and failure to bring about the liberal policy reforms it was meant to advance.

and the half century of public debate about the report.¹³⁴

For the purposes of our analysis, it is most important to note how the Moynihan Report continues to serve as a model for today’s marriage fundamentalists, despite its patriarchal assumptions, divisiveness and failure to bring about the liberal policy reforms it was meant to advance.

Like today’s marriage fundamentalists, Moynihan deployed dubious statistics and social science research to make hyperbolic claims about marriage and family structure. As Gareth Davies notes, “the report moves uneasily between the academic and the political worlds, claiming for itself scientific justification, yet adopting the incautious tone of a polemicist’s brief.”¹³⁵ Moynihan seemed to think that framing racial inequality as a family-structure crisis would bring the political right and left together around a liberal national jobs program. But Moynihan’s framing mostly just provided ammunition to conservatives who opposed programs he supported. For example, in a 1971 article in *The Atlantic*, Irving Kristol, a prominent neoconservative intellectual, cited the Moynihan Report to advance the argument that “welfare robs the head of the household of his economic function, and tends to make of him a ‘superfluous man.’”¹³⁶

Even to this day, some prominent liberals contend that “Moynihan was right” and

Attempts to unite liberals and conservatives around “a national effort ... directed toward the question of family structure” are counterproductive, divisive, and are inevitably used to justify discriminatory attitudes and harmful policies.

that civil rights leaders, feminists, and other critics of the report “made a historic mistake” by not embracing it.¹³⁷ But revisionist accounts like these ignore the patriarchal assumptions of Moynihan’s argument. As Ta-Nehisi Coates has argued, the Report is “a fundamentally sexist document that promotes the importance not just of family but of patriarchy, arguing that Black men should be empowered at the expense of Black women.”¹³⁸

The lesson to take from the Moynihan report today is not that “Moynihan was right” or “well-intended” but that attempts to unite liberals and conservatives around “a national effort ... directed toward the question of family structure” are counterproductive, divisive, and are inevitably used to justify discriminatory attitudes and harmful policies. This was already obvious in the 1960s; there can be no question about it today.

Marriage Fundamentalists’ Favorite Formula: The Misleading “Success Sequence”

In this chapter, we review the history of a deeply misleading formula—most recently rebranded as the “success sequence”—that positions marriage as being part of a three-fold life path that provides a near-guarantee that a parent’s income will never fall below the poverty line.¹³⁹ Although often attributed to researchers at the Brookings Institution, the “father” of the factoid is actually controversial, right-wing writer Charles Murray. It is important to debunk the scientific pretensions of the formula and understand where it comes from, but ultimately the idea of a singular “success sequence” needs to be rejected on normative grounds as illiberal.



How the Success Sequence Misleads

The “success sequence” purports to show that people face almost no risk of poverty if they finish high school, work full-time continuously, and marry before having children. For example, in 2009, Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institute claimed that families who stick to all three “norms” have only a 2 percent chance of being poor.¹⁴⁰ As they put it, “adhering to all three norms virtually eliminates the possibility of a family living below the poverty line.” Norms is an interesting word choice, since roughly half of the U.S. adult population are not following the norms of full-time year-round work (54 percent do not work or work less than full-time year-round) or marriage (49 percent are not married).¹⁴¹

Politicians have latched on to the success sequence, including former Republican Senator Rick Santorum¹⁴² and Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL). In his 2017-19 budget, then-Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker even proposed spending \$1 million on a public messaging campaign promoting it (see text box on page 41). At the federal level, the Trump administration is highlighting the success sequence as something that “should give [young people] hope”¹⁴³ and has included it as part of a renewed push for abstinence education funding.¹⁴⁴

The success sequence is an example of ideological “mathiness.”¹⁴⁵ It uses seemingly precise numbers and complicated-looking statistics (like the ones in the figures below) in a misleading way to push a marriage-fundamentalist agenda. The sequence sends the message that complex social phenomena (in this case poverty and income distribution) are almost entirely determined by individual behavior. According to the logic of the sequence, people who do not or cannot make the deeply personal decision to marry are “norm violators” (as Sawhill and Haskins

Odds ratio of being in middle/higher income or poverty

% of adults ages 28-34 in poverty	Middle/Higher Income		Poverty	
	Odds ratio	s.e.	Odds ratio	s.e.
MARRIAGE & PARENTHOOD SEQUENCE (vs. <i>Baby first</i>)				
Marrying first	2.39***	0.09	0.40***	0.12
Unmarried, childless	1.35***	0.09	0.73**	0.10
WORKING FULL TIME				
	2.50***	0.07	0.34***	0.08
EDUCATION (vs. <i>less than HS</i>)				
HS or GED	1.34**	0.10	0.62***	0.10
Associate degree	2.58***	0.16	0.24***	0.23
Bachelor's or higher	5.14***	0.14	0.18***	0.19
RACE/ETHNICITY (vs. <i>white</i>)				
Black	0.65***	0.09	1.85***	0.10
Hispanic	1.10	0.09	0.88	0.12
Asian	0.99	0.31	0.77	0.49
ABOVE MEDIAN AFQT SCORE				
	1.62***	0.08	0.54***	0.11
FAMILY INCOME GROWING UP (vs. <i>lower income</i>)				
Middle income	1.12	0.08	0.77**	0.10
Higher income	1.77***	0.10	0.53***	0.13
N	5290		5274	

Notes: *** p<0.001 **p<0.01 *p<0.05. Model also controls for gender and whether young adults were living in central metro area. All variables are coded as 1 or 0. Whites, blacks and Asians include only non-Hispanics. Asians include Pacific islanders. Education and employment was measured in 2010, when the youngest adults in the cohort reached 25. Full-time workers include those who were in college or graduate school and married stay-at-home parents. Young adults' family income while growing up was measured in 1997.
Source: IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97).

American Enterprise Institute (AEI) Institute for Family Studies (IFS)

Fig. 4. Table from AEI report on success sequence. The success sequence is commonly presented in ways that imply it is an unquestionable scientific fact rather than a normative prescription.

describe them) who have made “bad choices” (as Wilcox puts it).¹⁴⁶

Several journalists and national experts have convincingly debunked the scientific pretensions of the sequence. In 2015, Dylan Matthews of Vox Media detailed many of the misleading aspects of Sawhill and Haskins’s version of the formula, noting that “there are more poor people who followed all three norms than none of them” and that “describing full-time work as a ‘norm’ is slightly bizarre, as plenty of people are out of work despite wanting a job.”¹⁴⁷

Subsequently, W. Bradford Wilcox and Wendy Wang produced a new, even mathier version of the sequence, a “millennial success

The “Success Sequence” uses seemingly precise numbers and complicated-looking statistics in a misleading way to push a marriage-fundamentalist agenda, sending the message that complex social phenomena are almost entirely determined by individual behavior.

sequence,” for the American Enterprise Institute. In response, Matt Bruenig debunked the AEI version.¹⁴⁸ As Bruenig notes, “full-time work is responsible for the low-poverty results of the various Success Sequences.” Marriage fundamentalists “realizing that full-time workers are rarely in poverty, end up advocating that ‘full-time work plus their cultural preferences’ will get you out of poverty. This is technically true, but only because full-time work plus *anything* will [often] get you out of poverty.”¹⁴⁹

In other words, the sequence “proves” that if you are an unemployed or underemployed single person, adding an *employed* person to your household will generally help boost your standard of living. But this holds only if your potential spouse or partner brings in enough income to meet their needs, and has money left over to meet some of yours. Typically, this requires that person to work full-time, year-round in a job that pays several dollars more an hour than the minimum wage.

In addition to misleading young people about the role marriage plays in “success,” this deceptive formula reinforces the mistaken notion that few married people are poor and that SNAP, Medicaid and other social programs mostly support single parents. One supporter claimed that “according to the social science data, if these three fundamentals are in place, government social policy is virtually unnecessary.”¹⁵⁰ The implication is that if you do not follow all three steps the Success Sequence prescribes, then any negative economic scenario you find yourself in is your own fault, and you are not deserving of assistance or support.

As we discussed in Chapter 3, the implication that married people are rarely poor, and that marriage promotion must be included in any strategy to reduce poverty, are false. Most people in low-income families with children live in married households, and more than half of the people who receive benefits from Medicaid, SNAP, and other major means-tested benefits live in married families.

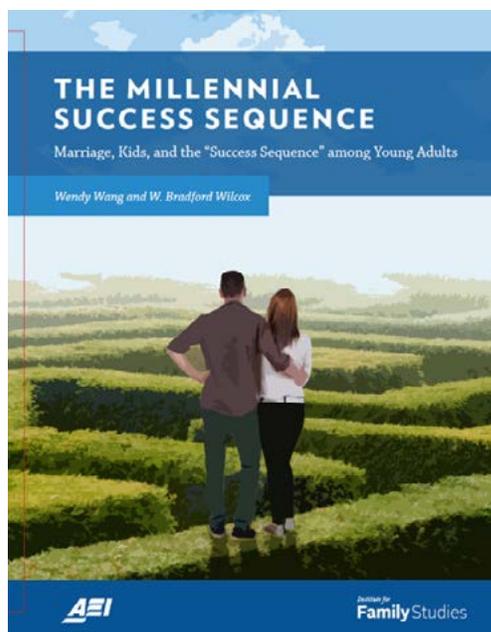


Fig. 5. Cover of *The Millennial Success Sequence*, by Wendy Wang and W. Bradford Wilcox, published by AEI and IFS.

Gov. Scott Walker, the Bradley Foundation, and an Idea Promoted by the Brookings Institution

In Wisconsin, a commission appointed by Republican Gov. Scott Walker recommended that Wisconsin high schools teach and promote the Success Sequence.¹⁵¹ While initial media reports focused on the Brookings Institution's work promoting the Success Sequence, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* subsequently reported that the commission itself was bankrolled by the conservative Bradley Foundation.¹⁵²

In a companion piece, the *Journal Sentinel* reported that previously unreleased documents "show the [Bradley Foundation] is working to duplicate its success in Wisconsin under Republican Gov. Scott Walker, focusing on such swing states as North Carolina and Colorado."¹⁵³ According to the news story, "the Bradley Foundation no longer simply favors groups promoting its signature issues: taxpayer-funded school choice and increased work requirements for welfare recipients. It now regularly funds nonprofits that are, among other things, hostile to labor unions, skeptical of climate change or critical of the loosening of sexual mores in American culture." In sum, it appears that Bradley views the Success Sequence as an important part of a larger hard-right political agenda it is pushing in the states.

In his 2017-2019 budget proposal, Gov. Walker proposed spending \$1 million on a public messaging campaign promoting the Success Sequence, which was described by proponents as "an idea promoted by the Brookings Institution." Ron Haskins of the Brookings Institution wrote an op-ed published in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* supporting the campaign.¹⁵⁴ Despite being controlled by Republicans, the Wisconsin Legislature rejected the Governor's proposal. However easy it is to pay lip service to marriage with misleading formulas, it seems harder to convince state legislators, even conservative ones, to use public funds to disseminate them.

The Right-Wing Origins of the Success Sequence

The widespread perception that researchers at the Brookings Institution discovered the Success Sequence almost certainly reinforces the idea that it deserves to be taken seriously as a matter of social science. But this perception is mistaken.

W. Bradford Wilcox describes the "success sequence" as follows:

I think the idea of a success sequence has been articulated by Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill at

the Brookings Institution. What they basically say is, get your education, at least your basic education completed, get a job, get married, have kids in that order. And if you do that, your odds of becoming poor—and of not climbing the ladders of opportunities into middle class—are slim.¹⁵⁵

In addition to Sawhill, a veteran of the Clinton administration, and Haskins, a conservative who was the lead GOP staffer on the 1996 welfare reform law, the Success Sequence is sometimes attributed to William Galston,

Part of the mythos of the sequence is that it was “discovered” by experts working at a venerable liberal think tank, rather than a misleading formula developed to promote a right-wing agenda.

another Clinton veteran, who also works at Brookings.¹⁵⁶ In short, part of the mythos of the sequence is that it was “discovered” by experts working at a venerable liberal think tank, rather than a misleading formula developed to promote a right-wing agenda.

In our research, however, we traced the sequence back to conservative Charles Murray and a report, *The New Consensus on Family and Welfare: A Community of Self-Reliance*, published by AEI in 1987 and funded by the Bradley Foundation and John M. Olin Foundation.¹⁵⁷ The AEI report cites a paper it commissioned from Murray in which he confidently concluded that:

... the requirements for getting out of poverty in the United States are so minimal that it takes a mutually reinforcing cluster of behaviors to remain in poverty, even for blacks and females. The following activities are enough to ensure permanent escape from poverty: (1) attending public school and completing high school; (2) finding a job and remaining with it; and (3) avoiding out-of-wedlock births.¹⁵⁸

So why do conservatives attribute the sequence to the Brookings Institution and Clinton administration veterans like Sawhill and Galston? Our best guess is they think the sequence would be more readily embraced by public opinion if associated with the Brookings Institution and former Clinton officials rather than to a conservative provocateur at a right-wing think tank who

attributes racial inequality to genetics rather than discrimination.¹⁵⁹ And Murray’s bigoted views about women (“no woman has been a significant original thinker in any of the world’s great philosophical traditions”¹⁵⁸) and particularly “single mothers” (“the dirty little secret about [about single mothers] is that very large numbers of them are rotten mothers”¹⁶¹) certainly don’t help.

The father of the success sequence also holds extreme right-wing views about social policy. Notably, the AEI report was published three years after Murray called for eliminating all means-tested assistance and social insurance programs (except unemployment insurance) for working-age adults. In a 1993 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, he took aim at unmarried women who have children, or in his words “illegitimacy ... the single most important social problem of our time.”¹⁶² His proposed solutions were characteristically cruel and extreme: an “to end all economic support for single mothers” and “make an illegitimate birth the socially horrific act it used to be.” Despite the extremist nature of Murray’s op-ed, it “gained widespread and mostly respectful attention at the time, including from President Clinton.”¹⁶³

A year later, in *The Bell Curve*, Murray and his co-author Richard Herrnstein wrote that:

The United States already has policies that inadvertently social-engineer who has babies, and it is encouraging the wrong women....The technically precise description of America’s fertility policy is that it subsidizes births among poor women, who are also disproportionately at the low end of the intelligence distribution. We urge generally that these policies, represented by the extensive network of cash and services for low-income women who have babies, be ended. The government should stop subsidizing births to anyone rich or poor.¹⁶⁴

In an April 2018 review of Murray’s work, journalist Matthew Yglesias wrote:

Murray's ideas are plain wrong. Diversity is demonstrably good for society and the economy, not the reverse. Social programs can and do improve lives. Murray's influence has damaged the interests of millions of people. Murrayism does harm on an ongoing basis, and, far from having been shut out of the discourse, it is at the heart of the ideological agenda that currently governs the United States.¹⁶⁵

Murray's pernicious ideas aren't limited to the success sequence, but the sequence is reasonably thought of as the distilled essence of a significant number of his fundamental beliefs. As we discuss in Chapter 6, there is no question that these ugly ideas—particularly ones about “illegitimacy” and single mothers—contributed to the fundamentally

A liberal, multicultural democracy should not tell its citizens and school children that basic economic security depends on pursuing a particular form of family life and intimate association.

flawed federal welfare reform legislation passed in 1996. As Murray himself has noted, “concern about the effects of nonmarital childbearing provided much of the impetus behind the welfare reform movement of the 1990s in general and the 1996 act in particular.”¹⁶⁶

The Success Sequence is Illiberal

Ultimately, the success sequence should be rejected not only because it's a misleading factoid masquerading as social science, but because it promotes the illiberal idea that there is one right way of life and one true path to prosperity. It's one thing to promote public education—which is free for all and is intended to help prepare young people for civic participation, work, and a fulfilling life (however they end up defining it). It's another thing to tell young people they must marry before having kids in order to have a successful life.

Unlike attending school, getting married is a fundamentally personal decision that one should not have to make in order to avoid poverty. Moreover, despite being a fundamentally personal decision, it is never completely within one individual's control. Many people who would like to marry, or remain married, are unable to do so for a wide variety of reasons.

There is obviously nothing wrong with individuals deciding to make marriage part

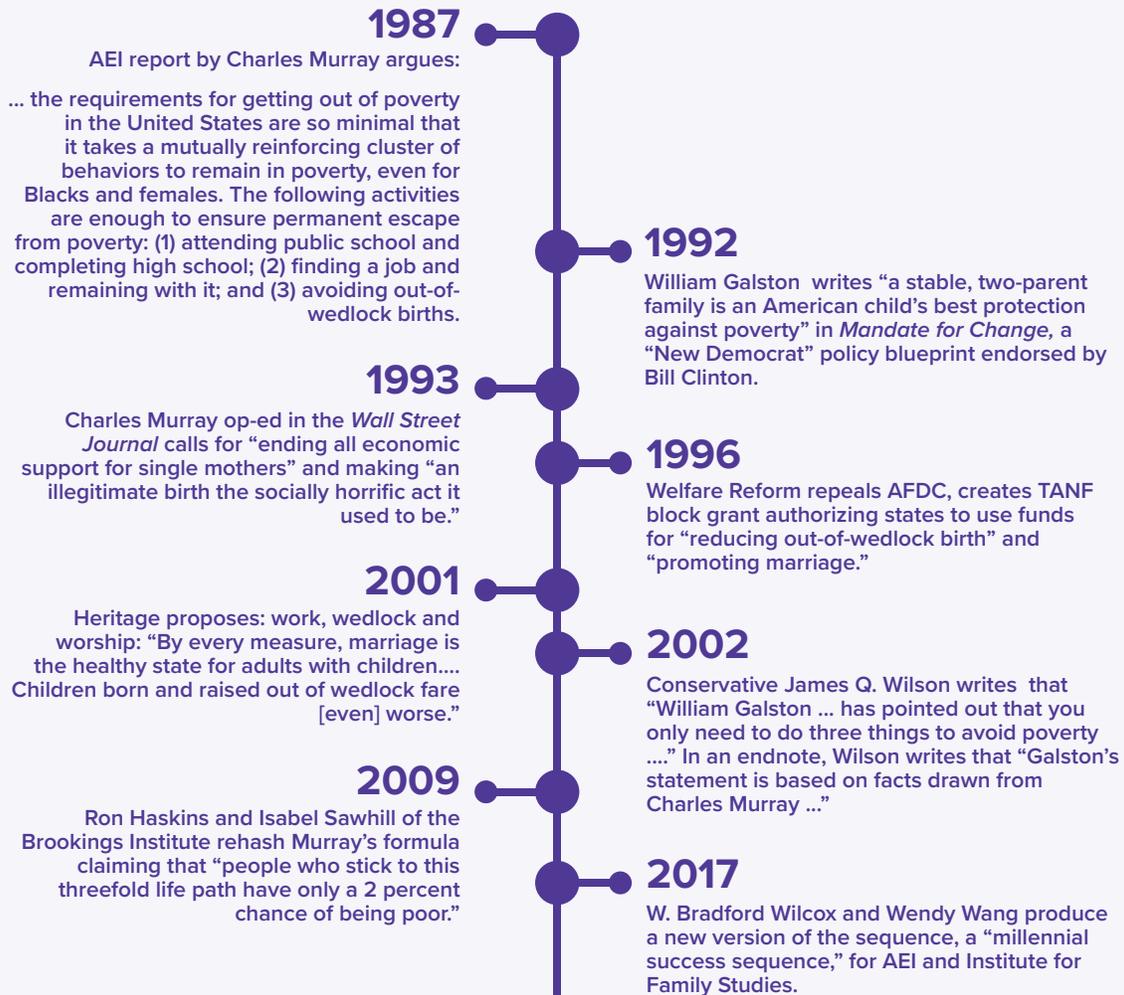
of their life path, but a liberal, multicultural democracy should not tell its citizens and school children that basic economic security depends on pursuing a particular form of family life and intimate association.

Some may argue that promoting the success sequence is consistent with liberal values because it is simply a fact that married parents are less likely to be poor than single ones. But it is also a fact that people who do not have any children at all are less likely to be poor than people who have children, and that people who have only one child are less likely to be poor than people who have two children. Thus, it would be easy to produce a mathy-looking “no child” or “one child” version of the success sequence that emphasized the importance of limiting one's family to one or no children to be successful. But despite being statistically correct, even most marriage fundamentalists would agree that a “no-child” or “one-child” version of the success sequence is illiberal and not something that public institutions should promote.

A "Sequence" For Success?

How a deceptive formula for alleviating poverty with radical right-wing roots became a mainstream idea

Most recently referred to as the "Success Sequence," this three-part sequence for avoiding poverty is unscientific (it's been repeatedly debunked), illiberal (should one really have to marry to avoid poverty?), funded by deeply conservative foundations, and it originated with Charles Murray, a controversial right-wing figure. How did this harmful idea - which blames all hardship on bad individual choices - get mainstreamed?



Sources include: Heritage Foundation, Time for Instruction in the Three W's, available at: <https://www.heritage.org/marriage-and-family/commentary/time-instruction-the-three-ws>; *The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families*, James Q. Wilson; *Creating an Opportunity Society*, Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill.

Policy Failure: Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and the Healthy Marriage Promotion Program

In this chapter, we discuss how marriage fundamentalism was written into federal law through the creation of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant in 1996, as part of what is commonly referred to as “welfare reform,” and the establishment of the “Healthy Marriage Promotion” (HMP) program in 2005. As we document in this chapter, some \$1.2 billion in federal TANF funds have been dedicated exclusively to marriage promotion by the federal government since 2006. This figure does not include the additional TANF funds—likely also over \$1 billion—that states have used to reduce “out-of-wedlock” births and promote marriage and two-parent families. TANF and HMP are among the foremost failures of marriage fundamentalist policy, but they remain in place. These funds should instead be redirected to provide direct financial assistance to struggling families.

Marriage Fundamentalism and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)

Initially established as part of the Social Security Act of 1935, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) provided federal funds to states for basic income assistance to children. Initially, state participation in the program was voluntary, and children in two-parent families were ineligible for assistance.¹⁶⁷ States had the power to set benefit levels, and most set them far below the amount needed to meet basic needs.

Although the program was eventually expanded to include two-parent families, it imposed such punitive work-related requirements that few married parents actually received assistance. Until the 1960s, many states and localities imposed additional eligibility rules that “systematically excluded African Americans and Mexican Americans” from the program.¹⁶⁸ Still, AFDC did ensure a basic income floor for many low-income children, and it was responsive to economic downturns. When the child poverty rate increased and more children became eligible, federal funding to states increased automatically. In the 1980s and early 1990s, about four out of every five eligible families received benefits.

Marriage fundamentalists have always argued that providing basic assistance to children

undermines marriage and the patriarchal family. The standard argument is that mothers “become married to the welfare state and to the U.S. taxpayer rather than to the fathers of their children.”¹⁶⁹ But in the large body of social science research on this question, there is little support for this notion.¹⁷⁰ Regardless, beginning in the 1960s and up until the repeal of AFDC in 1996, marriage fundamentalists attributed much of the decline in marriage, especially among low-income and Black women, to AFDC.

By the early 1990s, both the marriage-fundamentalist argument that AFDC undermined marriage and the closely related argument that AFDC undermined work, were widely accepted by Republicans and so-called “New Democrats.” In his 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton embraced conservative rhetoric about AFDC and pledged to “end welfare as we have come to know it.” Emboldened Congressional Republicans and conservative Democrats, as well as moderate Democrats fearful of looking “soft on welfare,” repeatedly upped the ante by putting forward AFDC reforms that grew increasingly radical.¹⁷¹

Ultimately, President Clinton signed a “welfare reform” bill crafted by a

The purpose of AFDC was to provide financial assistance to children so that they can remain in their own homes. By contrast, three of the four statutory purposes of TANF are attributable to the influence of marriage fundamentalists: “ending the dependence of needy parents by promoting ... marriage”; preventing “out-of-wedlock” pregnancies (with no limitation to unintended pregnancies); and “encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.”

Republican-controlled Congress that was far more extremist and focused on marriage fundamentalism than his original proposal. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) dismantled AFDC and replaced it with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant. In the same legislation, Congress increased funding for abstinence-only education, established a \$100 million “illegitimacy-reduction” incentive fund for states, and vastly expanded the powers available to law enforcement and child support officers to collect child support from non-custodial parents.¹⁷²

Under TANF, states have no obligation to provide monthly income assistance to financially eligible families, and federal funding for TANF has been frozen since 1996 at \$16.5 billion a year. (Because it is not adjusted for inflation, the value of the block grant is 36 percent below its 1997 value.)¹⁷³ The purpose of AFDC was to provide financial assistance to children so that they can remain in their own homes. By contrast, three of the four statutory purposes of TANF are attributable to the influence of marriage fundamentalists: “ending the dependence of needy parents by *promoting ... marriage*”; preventing “*out-of-wedlock*” pregnancies (with no limitation to unintended pregnancies); and “encouraging the formation and maintenance of *two-parent families*.”¹⁷⁴ States can effectively spend TANF funds on almost anything if they can claim it is “reasonably calculated” to meet one of these purposes.

As political scientists have documented, anti-Black racism and paternalism played a central role in the passage of PRWORA.¹⁷⁵ Both crime and welfare had become “racially coded” issues that activated White people’s racist beliefs that Black people are lazy and immoral. At the same time PRWORA was passed, political scientist Martin Gilens published research finding that “negative views of Black welfare mothers are more politically potent [than ones of White welfare mothers],

generating greater opposition to welfare...”¹⁷⁶

In the battle over PRWORA, Black mothers were used as symbols by the bill’s supporters, including President Clinton. The most iconic images are shown in Figures 6 and 7 below.

The first, the cover of the August 1996 issue of *The New Republic*, which included an editorial calling on President Clinton to sign PRWORA, shows a profile of a Black woman smoking while holding an infant who is looking into the camera.

The second shows a smiling President Clinton signing the PRWORA legislation with two Black women by his side. The Black women in the Clinton photo were meant to “symbolize Black people taking ‘personal responsibility’ for their poverty.”¹⁷⁷ In the mid-2000s, journalist Jason DeParle interviewed one of the women in the Clinton photo, Lillie Harden. Harden told him she had had a stroke in the 2000s and was unable to afford her \$450 monthly bill for medication. She sadly told DeParle that her work “didn’t pay off in the

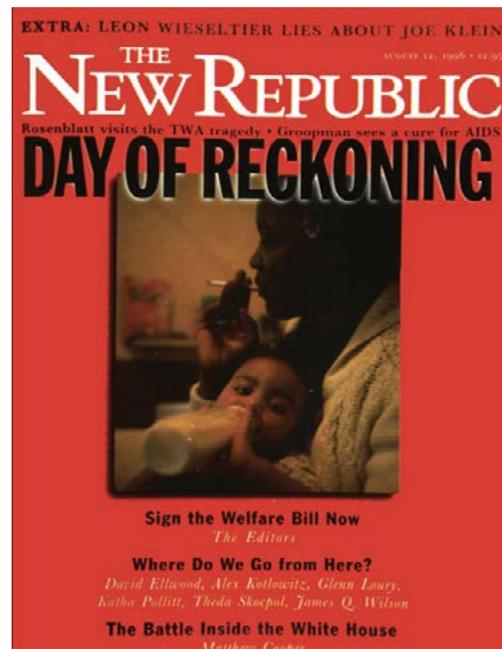


Fig. 6. August 1996 cover of *The New Republic*.



Fig. 7. Presidential signing ceremony for PRWORA in 1996.

end.” Harden died at age 59, two years before the 20th anniversary of the 1996 law.¹⁷⁸

In a way, the photo reveals much more than the Clinton Administration intended. Surrounding Clinton and the two Black women are ten White men and one white woman. As the *New York Times* noted at the time, “the Rose Garden ceremony was remarkable for the dearth of Democratic leaders in attendance and the presence of beaming Republicans.”¹⁷⁹

For at least a decade, conservatives, the Clinton administration and New Democrats hailed TANF as a resounding success, even though the program was never rigorously evaluated. Their main argument in favor of its success was based on the fact that the number of people—mostly low-income children and mothers—receiving income assistance dropped sharply in the latter half of the 1990s, while child poverty decreased and single mothers’ employment rate increased.

But the evidence that TANF is largely responsible for decreasing poverty and increasing employment is weak. Both trends started in 1994-1995, while just a few states implemented TANF before 1997.¹⁸⁰ It seems more likely that expanded Medicaid eligibility (for low-income children in the late 1980s and low-income parents in the 1990s) and large increases in the Earned Income Tax Credit (in

1987, 1991, and 1994) contributed to decreases in poverty and increases in employment.¹⁸¹ Other major factors include the economic boom from 1994 to 2001, and the general long-term trend toward increasing employment among mothers.¹⁸²

According to the policy’s proponents, repealing AFDC and replacing it with a block grant program should have increased marriage and sharply reduced non-marital births. After all, TANF placed onerous restrictions on access to cash assistance, and included both marriage promotion and reducing non-marital births among its core purposes. In reality, the percentage of births that were nonmarital increased from about 32 percent in 1997 to about 40 percent today.¹⁸³ In 1996, 5.2 percent of White, non-Latinas living with one or more of their minor children were never-married; today, that number has increased to 10.3 percent.¹⁸⁴

The one thing we can confidently say TANF has done is drastically reduce the number of low-income parents and children who receive income assistance from the federal government. Today, only about one in four parents and children who are financially eligible for TANF income assistance—meaning they have income below the poverty line and limited assets—actually receive it.¹⁸⁵ By comparison, in 1996, nearly 79 percent of parents and children eligible for AFDC received it. TANF is supposed to “provide assistance so that children can be cared for in their own homes” instead of in foster care or in institutions.¹⁸⁶ But in at least seven states, the number of children in foster care now exceeds the number of children being cared for by parents at home with the support of TANF.¹⁸⁷ The extraordinary decline in TANF participation by eligible parents and children is due to multiple factors, including the imposition of heavy-handed work and other behavioral tests as a condition of receiving assistance, and strong financial incentives for states to prevent eligible people from receiving assistance.

TANF has drastically reduced the number of low-income parents and children who receive income assistance from the federal government. Only one in four parents and children who are financially eligible for TANF income assistance actually receive it.

How much federal and state funding has been diverted from direct assistance to low-income children to ineffective efforts to directly promote marriage and reduce non-marital births? It's difficult to say, because states have so little accountability for how they spend TANF funds. But it almost certainly entails billions of public dollars over the last two decades. In 2017 alone, states reported spending \$412 million in federal and state TANF funds on "prevention of out-of-wedlock pregnancies" (TANF purpose 3) and another

\$155 million on "fatherhood and two-parent family formation and maintenance programs" (TANF purpose 4).¹⁸⁸ Programs funded under purposes 3 and 4 of TANF have included abstinence education, and ones that are questionable from a separation-of-church-and-state perspective, including Christian overnight camps.¹⁸⁹

To be sure, not all of this funding is wasteful. State can use TANF under purpose 3 for youth programs that "help young people stay in school," "keep them supervised after school," and "increase their motivation and self-esteem."¹⁹⁰ Examples include visiting nurse services and after school programs. Similarly, "fatherhood" programs, despite their gendered focus, can provide useful services and information to disadvantaged parents, and "two-family formation and maintenance" programs can include relationship education that isn't steeped in marriage fundamentalism.¹⁹¹ But it is a mistake to fund these kind of services with TANF dollars that should be going directly to struggling families.

Originally the Healthy Marriage Initiative Aimed to:

Increase the percentage of children raised by two parents in a healthy marriage

Increase the percentage of married couples in healthy marriages

Increase the percentage of premarital couples equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage

Increase the percentage of youth and young adults who have the skills and knowledge to make informed decisions about healthy relationships, including skills that can help them eventually form and sustain a healthy marriage

Increase public awareness about the value of healthy marriages and the skills and knowledge that can help couples form and sustain healthy marriages

Encourage and support research on healthy marriages and healthy marriage education

Increase the percentage of women, men and children in homes free of domestic violence

The Healthy Marriage Promotion Program



Even though marriage fundamentalists were influential in shaping TANF and other parts of the 1996 welfare reform law, they thought it didn't go far enough to require the federal government and states to focus on reducing non-marital births and promote marriage. Not long after the ink was dry on the law, they began urging further changes in federal law to promote their goals.

After George W. Bush became President in 2001, he nominated a conservative marriage fundamentalist, Wade Horn, to oversee the Administration for Children and Families, a major division within Health and Human Services that administers TANF, child support, Head Start, refugee resettlement efforts, and various child welfare programs. Horn had previously been the president of the National Fatherhood Initiative and an affiliate of the conservative Hudson Institute. In 1997, Horn argued that married couples should be given priority over unmarried people for a range of benefits, including Head Start, housing assistance, job training, and student financial aid. Women's and welfare rights organizations objected to Horn's nomination. But after Horn said he no longer supported giving married couples priority for benefits over unmarried people, he was approved by the Senate with no objections.¹⁹²

President Bush established a Healthy Marriage Initiative in Horn's division at HHS, and proposed dedicating \$240 million annually

to marriage promotion and an additional \$50 million to promoting "responsible fatherhood and marriage."¹⁹³ At the time, Bush's Healthy Marriage Initiative was framed as expanding on small-scale initiatives in a few states. But it was also promoted as a way to protect "traditional" marriage in the wake of the then-recent court ruling in Massachusetts that found same-sex marriage to be protected under the state constitution.¹⁹⁴

Originally the Healthy Marriage Initiative aimed to:

- Increase the percentage of children who are raised by two parents in a healthy marriage.
- Increase the percentage of married couples in healthy marriages.
- Increase the percentage of premarital couples equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage.
- Increase the percentage of youth and young adults who have the skills and knowledge to make informed decisions about healthy relationships, including skills that can help them eventually form and sustain a healthy marriage.
- Increase public awareness about the value of healthy marriages and the skills and knowledge that can help couples form and sustain healthy marriages.
- Encourage and support research on healthy marriages and healthy marriage education.
- Increase the percentage of women, men and children in homes that are free of domestic violence.¹⁹⁵

Overall these goals are similar, if somewhat

more nuanced (“healthy” marriages) than the TANF marriage promotion and non-marital birth reduction goals. The most notable addition is the domestic violence reduction goal, which is not included in TANF’s four purposes and has never been a focus of marriage fundamentalists. If anything, they have downplayed the extent and harm of domestic violence, and attributed it in part to women’s failure to marry, rather than to patriarchal power and control. The inclusion of domestic violence as one of the initiative’s goals is almost certainly due to the work of Horn’s feminist opponents who rightly argued that state action to push women to marry could increase and intensify domestic violence.

Congress passed the president’s proposal as part of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. The legislation established two dedicated funding streams, one for Healthy Marriage Promotion program (\$100 million a year from 2006 to 2010) and another for Responsible Fatherhood (\$50 million a year from 2006 to 2010). Both programs were subsequently extended through 2020 with the Healthy Marriage Promotion program funded at \$75 million a year and Responsible Fatherhood funded at \$75 million a year.¹⁹⁶

Healthy Marriage Promotion funds must be used to award competitive grants for research and programs. Funded programs must include one or more of the following activities: public relations campaigns on the value of marriage, education in high schools on the value of marriage, marriage education, premarital education, divorce reduction programs, marriage mentoring programs, marital skills training workshops, and programing aimed at high school students.

The Healthy Marriage Promotion program does include some important protections. Participation in the programs must be voluntary. So, for example, requiring a Medicaid beneficiary to enroll in the program under threat of sanction is prohibited.

Addressing domestic violence is a necessary component of any grantee’s programming, but funds cannot be used for stand-alone domestic violence prevention activities that do not include at least one of the marriage-promotion activities noted in the previous paragraph.

Current Healthy Marriage Promotion program grantees include 46 organizations and a National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education.¹⁹⁷ “Relationship education” was added to the branding of the program during the Obama administration.

Despite its ample resources and several efforts to retool the program, Healthy Marriage Promotion has been a resounding failure. An analysis of state level spending found that there was no statistically significant correlation with state marriage rates, and a positive association with divorce rates.¹⁹⁸

According to the rigorous research conducted to date, the programs are very expensive and have few, if any, meaningful positive effects. For example, the Supporting Healthy Marriage program was a year-long marriage education program for low-income married couples with children or for couples expecting a child.¹⁹⁹ The curriculum consisted of workshops, educational and social events, and family support services consisting of one-on-one meetings with staff. Given the length of the program and its relatively labor-intensive components, costs were high: an average of \$9,100 per couple. Thousands of couples were enrolled in the program across a number of states, with a total cost in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

In the end, a rigorous evaluation of the Supporting Healthy Marriage program found that it did not increase marriage. The program did not lead more couples to remain in their relationship, had only a small impact on women’s mental well-being, had no impact on men’s levels of sadness and anxiety, and

In at least seven states, the number of children in foster care now exceeds the number of children being cared for by parents at home with the support of TANF.

had little to no impact on parenting or child-outcomes.

Along a similar vein, the Building Strong Families program was targeted at unmarried low-income couples who had recently had a baby or were expecting one soon.²⁰⁰ The programming consisted of group sessions, one-on-one support from family coordinators, and referrals to relevant support services. The program was even more expensive, with an average cost of \$11,000 per couple.

Similar to the Supporting Healthy Marriage program, Building Strong Families failed to deliver results in spite of the millions of dollars spent. Couples who went through the program did not improve their communication skills or increase their relationship quality. The program had no impact on faithfulness, relationship duration, or marriage rates, no overall impact on co-parenting, and had a *negative* impact on some aspects of fathers' involvement in parenting. And in spite of claims that investments in these programs would lead to cost savings down the road in the form of decreased poverty rates, there was no impact at all on children's economic well-being.

The most recently evaluated program, Parents and Children Together (PACT), provides relationship skills classes (18 to 27 hours), job readiness workshops (about 2-4 hours a month), case management, and several other services.²⁰¹ PACT is the first HMP program to show some modest positive results, including slight changes in reports of "relationship commitment," "support and affection," domestic violence, and remaining married (94

percent of married PACT participants were still married at a one-year follow-up point, compared to 91 percent of married control group members).

At the same time, PACT had no impact on several other measures of quality and status, including no increase in relationship happiness or use of constructive conflict behaviors. It also had no impact on father involvement, and no significant impact on economic outcomes. PACT's most notable impact was a reduction in women's reports of depression. Measured using a 24-point scale, women in the PACT group had depression scale cores of 3.91, while those in the group had scores of 4.72, a 14-percent difference.

Is PACT worth it? It's hard to say because the evaluations of PACT to date don't look at the cost side of the cost-benefit equation. If PACT is as costly as Supporting Healthy Marriage or Building Strong Families, it seems hard to justify based on the results reported to date. The money would be better invested in benefits that we know directly improve families' health and finances, like basic income, health insurance, and child care assistance. And even if PACT could be justified from a cost-benefit perspective, if the program is actively "promoting marriage" over other equally valid ways of structuring one's relationships and family life, then it violates liberal values.

Researchers who study poverty, family, and race have long criticized marriage-promotion programs for not taking structural factors like income and racial inequality into account.²⁰² Even among researchers

who were sympathetic to the possibility that more marriage could lead to less poverty, there were significant reservations about the effectiveness of marriage promotion programs, or the strength and quality of the unions they might prompt. We now know they were right.

Marriage fundamentalists assume that people, particularly Black people and other working-class people, are unmarried in large part because of character deficits, a lack of

“relationship skills,” limited knowledge, and welfare programs that reduce women’s need to depend on men. They believe that denying basic income assistance and accusing them of making “bad choices” will push more working-class people into marriage, and keep more of them there. It is an inherently paternalistic approach, based in racist and classist assumptions about working-class people, and unsurprisingly it has not produced the results that marriage fundamentalists expected.

The Dual Legacy of Marriage Equality

In this chapter, we discuss the dual legacy of the marriage equality movement. Extending marriage rights to same-sex couples dealt a blow to some of the ideas that are central to marriage fundamentalism. As part of their campaign against same-sex marriage, marriage fundamentalists argued that children are harmed if they are raised in homes that do not include both their biological father and biological mother. This argument was ultimately rejected in the courts. At the same time, the marriage equality movement did not challenge the way in which marital relationships are privileged over other equally valid relationships that deserve respect and recognition.



The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)

In 1993, the Supreme Court of Hawaii ruled the state’s denial of marriage licenses to same-sex couples was a form of sex-based discrimination subject to “strict scrutiny” under the equal protection clause of the Hawaii state constitution. The Court instructed the trial court considering the constitutionality of the state’s marriage law to determine if denying marriage licenses to same-sex couples furthered compelling state interests and was narrowly tailored to avoid unnecessary abridgments of constitutional rights.

Partly in response to fears that same-sex marriage would eventually become legal in Hawaii, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996, only one month after passing welfare reform. DOMA codified

into law that “marriage” means only a legal union “between one man and one woman as husband and wife” and that “spouse” refers only “to a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife.”

The legislative history of DOMA is full of marriage fundamentalist claims about what constitutes the best type of family.²⁰³ These claims were typically presented as obvious and “natural” facts about the family. According to an op-ed quoted in the House Judiciary Committee report that accompanied DOMA: “Marriage’ is not an arbitrary construct; it is an ‘honorable estate’ based on the different, complementary nature of men and women—and how they refine, support, encourage, and complete one another.”²⁰⁴

The Marriage Equality Movement and the Beyond Same-Sex Marriage Statement

In a 2003 decision, *Lawrence v. Texas*, the U.S Supreme Court struck down Texas’s sodomy law making sexual activity between same-sex couples legal across the United States. The Court’s 6-3 majority decision was written by Justice Anthony Kennedy, a relatively conservative judge with libertarian leanings. On a court with four liberals and four conservatives, Kennedy often provided the deciding vote to one side or the other. Kennedy’s opinion in *Lawrence* was a “a springboard toward legal recognition of same-sex relationships.”²⁰⁵ After the decision, marriage equality was prioritized by mainstream activists in part because Kennedy was viewed as likely to vote with the Court’s liberals when the issue reached the Supreme Court.

In 2004, a group of 11 foundations came

together as the Civil Marriage Collaborative (CMC) to support the “freedom to marry,” and CMC worked closely with Freedom to Marry, an organization founded in 2003.²⁰⁶ The groups argued that advocates were “making a huge mistake leading with an ‘equal rights and benefits’ argument.”²⁰⁷ Ultimately, the movement adopted a new frame: “Gay marriage was not about rights and responsibilities—it was about love.” This new frame may have been more narrowly effective than one that focused on equality, but it also deemphasized the fact that access to marriage was about rights and benefits, and not just love.

In 2006, a group of LGBTQ+ leaders and allied scholars and advocates called for “mov[ing] beyond the narrow confines of marriage politics as they exist in the United States today.” In *Beyond Same-Sex Marriage*:

A New Strategic Vision For All Our Families and Relationships, they offered a “new vision for securing governmental and private institutional recognition of diverse kinds of partnerships, households, kinship relationships, and families.”²⁰⁸ They noted that household and family diversity were already the norm, and argued that having “our government define as ‘legitimate’ families only those households with couples in conjugal relationships does a tremendous disservice to the many other ways in which people actually construct their families, kinship networks, households, and relationships.”

They also acknowledged that “the transgender and bisexual movements, so often historically left behind or left out by the larger lesbian and gay movement, have powerfully challenged legal constructions of relationship and fought for social, legal, and economic recognition of partnerships, households, and families, which include members who shatter the narrow confines of gender conformity.”

Instead of attributing economic insecurity and inequality to family structure by drawing a sharp line between married and unmarried people, these activists noted the widespread nature of economic insecurity, and the ways in which people formed unions and relationships that “allow them to survive and create the communities and partnerships that mirror their circumstances, needs, and hopes.” And instead of a single-minded commitment to “defensive struggles to address the Right’s issue-by-issue assaults” they called for strategies that “engage these issues head-on, for the long term, from a position of vision and strength.”

Finally, the statement ended with a call for an “inclusive new civic commitment to the recognition and well-being of diverse households and families...” and the authors pointed to examples of “the ways in which an inclusive vision ... can promote practical, progressive change and open up new opportunities for strategic bridge-building.”

Examples of households that are “as socially, economically, and spiritually worthy” as married couples, including many highlighted in *Beyond Same-Sex Marriage* statement, include:

Single-parent households

Senior citizens living together, serving as each other’s caregivers

Adult children living with and caring for their parents

Grandparents and other family members raising their children’s or a relative’s children

Platonic co-parents

Blended families

Households in which there is more than one conjugal partner

Single / unpartnered adults

Extended families living under one roof

Close friends and siblings who live together and serve as each other’s primary support and caregivers

Although the *Beyond Same-Sex Marriage* statement was signed by thousands of people, including many movement veterans,

People form unions and relationships that allow them to survive and create the communities and partnerships that mirror their circumstances, needs, and hopes.

this statement and its signatories were marginalized, within the movement and beyond. One notable organization that played a key role in writing the statement and organizing signers was Queers for Economic Justice (QEJ), whose primary constituents and leadership were queer and trans people, largely of color, surviving the NYC public

benefits and shelter systems. It's unclear whether the statement had any impact on the strategic direction of the marriage equality movement at the time, or on its funders, but QEJ as an organization did not survive this period, despite a proliferation of new funders in the LGBTQ+ space.²⁰⁹

Marriage Fundamentalism in the Supreme Court Decisions

In 2013, the Supreme Court struck down DOMA (*United States v. Windsor*). Two years later, the Supreme Court required all states to perform and recognize same-sex marriages (*Obergefell v. Hodges*). Both decisions were written by Justice Kennedy and joined by the Court's four liberal members.

While the marriage-equality movement had accomplished its goal, the Court's decisions were based in part on marriage-fundamentalist logic. In *Obergefell*, Justice Kennedy begins his decision with a rapturous take on the history of marriage:

The annals of human history reveal the transcendent importance of marriage. The lifelong union of a man and a woman always has promised nobility and dignity to all persons, without regard to their station in life. Marriage

is sacred to those who live by their religions and offers unique fulfillment to those who find meaning in the secular realm. Its dynamic allows two people to find a life that could not be found alone, for a marriage becomes greater than just the two persons. Rising from the most basic human needs, marriage is essential to our most profound hopes and aspirations.

*The centrality of marriage to the human condition makes it unsurprising that the institution has existed for millennia and across civilizations...*²¹⁰

Later in the decision, Kennedy wrote that "marriage... affords the permanency and stability to children's best interests" and "allows children 'to understand the integrity and closeness of their own family and its concord with other families in their community and in their daily lives'."²¹¹

The Use of Social Science in the Legal Debate

Both sides of the same-sex marriage debate used social science research to build their case. Opponents used it to claim that same-sex marriage would harm children, while proponents used it to rebut these claims, and further argue that same-sex marriage would help children living in same-sex couples by increasing their stability and access to benefits tied to married.

The Family Research Council, a conservative marriage-fundamentalist group, claimed that “a large and growing body of scientific research indicates that the intact, married [different-sex] family is best for children.”²¹² They also quoted sociologists Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, who in *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* argued that “if we were asked to design a system for making sure that children’s basic needs were met, we would probably come up with something quite similar to the two-parent ideal.”²¹³

In an amicus brief to the Supreme Court, the American Sociological Association countered claims that same-sex marriage would harm children. They argued that “positive child well-being is the product of stability in the relationship between the two parents, stability in the relationship between the parents and child, and greater parental socioeconomic resources.”²¹⁴

In a study of the use of social science research in same-sex marriage litigation, sociologist Kathleen Hull identified several broad categories of research: optimal child development, marital and procreative behaviors of opposite-sex couples, marriage’s social purpose, harms imposed by same-sex marriage bans, and whether sexual orientation merits heightened scrutiny under equal protection jurisprudence.²¹⁵

Of these, she found that child development questions generally dominated legal debates about same-sex marriage, with opponents arguing that same-sex parenting harms children, and proponents arguing that the available research did not support such a claim. At the same time, some pro-marriage equality witnesses argued that children with same-sex parents were harmed by same-sex marriage bans because their parents weren’t eligible for benefits available to married parents. In the *Obergefell* decision, the majority seemed to agree, stating that...

without the recognition, stability, and predictability marriage offers, their children suffer the stigma of knowing their parents are somehow lesser. They also suffer the significant material costs of being raised by unmarried parents, relegated through no fault of their own to a more difficult and uncertain family life. The marriage laws at issue here thus harm and humiliate the children of same-sex parents.



Positive child well-being is the product of stability in the relationship between the two parents, stability in the relationship between the parents and child, and greater parental socioeconomic resources.

American Sociological Association

Hull concluded that on balance “the pro-[same-sex marriage] forces made greater use of social science in building their case, and overall their evidence was received more favorably by the courts” but that “the anti-[same-sex marriage] forces were somewhat effective in using social science evidence to sow doubt in the minds of some judges...” During oral arguments, for example Justice Scalia commented on the “the lack of scientific consensus on parenting effects.”

In sum, mainstream social science was used by both sides in the same-sex marriage debate. While same-sex-marriage proponents

While same-sex-marriage proponents ultimately prevailed, some of their claims reinforced the idea that marriage was necessary for family stability and “integrity.”

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After Same-Sex Marriage

The same-sex marriage debate has a dual legacy. On one hand, the extension of marriage rights and benefits to same-sex couples is a historic civil rights victory. The legal benefits currently attached to marriage, such as inheritance rights, access to survivor benefits, immigration status, and legal recognition as co-parents, are vitally important for married same-sex couples. On the other hand, the mainstream marriage equality movement did not heed the call made in the 2006 *Beyond Same-Sex Marriage* statement to directly challenge marriage fundamentalism, and non-married people continue to be denied a long list of rights and benefits available to married people.

Many marriage fundamentalists are demoralized by the legalization of same-sex marriage and have dedicated themselves to reactionary efforts to defend institutions and policies that continue to discriminate against LGBTQ+ people. Others have attempted to modernize marriage fundamentalism by accepting same-sex marriage, while shaming unmarried people and continuing to fight for a “marriage culture.”

David Blankenhorn, who testified in support of a 2008 California ballot initiative that banned same-sex marriage in California, publicly reversed his position in 2012, writing that he wanted to “help build new coalitions bringing together gays who want to strengthen marriage with straight people who want to do the same.”²¹⁶ In 2015, Blankenhorn released a Marriage Opportunity statement signed by 74 academics, researchers, and authors across the political spectrum and included gay and lesbian signatories in addition to those who identify as straight.²¹⁷

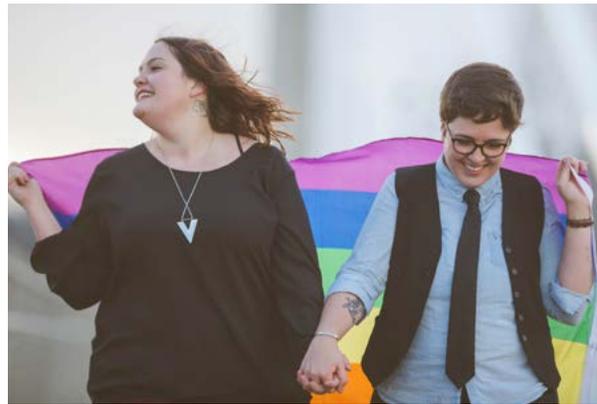
The Marriage Opportunity statement began with the claim that:

Some have attempted to modernize marriage fundamentalism by accepting same-sex marriage, while continuing to fight for a “marriage culture.”

... families are the seedbeds of civil society, and marriage is the basis of the family. Marriage creates kin. Marriage is a wealth producing institution. And because marriage is the main institution governing the link between the spousal association and the parent-child association, marriage is society's most pro-child institution.

Aside from the acceptance of same-sex marriage, this is not a noticeably different position than that held by conservative marriage fundamentalists. For example, the statement's characterization of marriage as "*the basis of the family*" recalls the Family Research Council's claim that, "properly understood, 'families' are formed *only* by ties of blood, marriage, or adoption..."²¹⁸ Saying that families "are the seedbeds of civil society" echoes the Council's claim that "marriage is the foundation of civilization, the seedbed of virtue, and the wellspring of society."²¹⁹

The statement goes on to argue that "the broad theme of marriage opportunity can help give birth to a new pro-marriage coalition that transcends the old divisions." Yet by calling for the restoration of a "marriage culture," the statement reinforces old divisions rather than transcending them.



At the same time, there is a nascent movement forming to advance parts of the vision outlined in the *Beyond Same-Sex Marriage* statement. A year after the *Obergefell* decision, A Better Balance and Family Values @ Work convened a meeting of advocates from national organizations "to knit together the intersecting and overlapping agendas of campaigns for LGBTQ rights and work-family leave policies."²²⁰ So far, this coalition has focused on developing "inclusive family definitions" in paid leave and other work-family policies. Their work points the way to a new consensus that moves "beyond the narrow confines of marriage politics" to focus on family justice.

CONCLUSION

For Family Justice

Marriage fundamentalism should be rejected because it is contrary to liberal, feminist, and multicultural values, not supported by a scientific consensus, and causes lasting political, social and psychological harm. Underlying our entire argument is the idea that marriage fundamentalism contributes to racial, gender, and class injustice.

In this concluding chapter, we move beyond critique and argue for a new consensus around a set of principles and a policy agenda that promotes “family justice.” Family justice views family, care, and community as central and enduring parts of most people’s lives, and critical to children’s well-being and success. It recognizes that “[s]o many people... long for a sense of caring, community and connectedness” and for “communities... in which conformity to a narrow and restricting vision is never demanded as the price of admission to caring civil society.”²²¹ But while family justice rejects marriage fundamentalism, it is not against marriage. For many married people, the fact of being married carries significant personal, cultural, and religious meaning. And many unmarried adults aspire to marriage for the same reasons.

We start by detailing what we view as the core values of family justice: equality, autonomy, interdependence, and care. We then acknowledge and discuss influences—the activists and thinkers that family justice builds on, and is indebted to. After that, we outline a set of family justice principles. Finally, we outline an agenda for policy.

Values

Core values of family justice include equality, autonomy, interdependence, and care.²²²

- *Equality* requires the reduction of social and economic inequality *within* relationships and *between* family types, and legal equality among different types of families and relationships.
- *Autonomy* requires making it possible for people to freely choose their relationships and family types—including marriage—by reducing structural and other barriers that stand in their way. A closely related value is *personal security*, within and outside relationships, including economic security and freedom from coercion and violence.
- *Interdependence* means acknowledging we all are interconnected and dependent on countless other people (not just ones to which we are biologically related or



with whom we have a legally recognized relationship).

- *Care* requires acknowledging all the ways that different relationships are supportive and meaningful, and the positive impact they have on our lives and well-being.



“So many people long for a sense of caring, community and connectedness — conformity to a narrow and restricting vision is never demanded as the price of admission to caring civil society.”

Beyond Same-Sex Marriage Statement

Influences

Family justice builds upon, and is indebted to, the work of at least three major groupings of activists and theorists: 1) the strategic vision proposed by LGBTQ+ activists and allies in their 2006 *Beyond Same-Sex Marriage* statement (discussed in the last chapter of this report), 2) the reproductive justice framework developed by a visionary group of Black women more than two decades ago, and 3) the work of family advocates and intellectuals, including legal theorists, historians, and political theorists.

Like the LGBTQ+ activists and allies who drafted the *Beyond Same-Sex Marriage* statement, family justice seeks “recognition and respect for our chosen relationships, in their many forms...”²²³ Perhaps the major difference between family justice and the *Beyond Same-Sex Marriage* statement is that the former is also centrally concerned with the ways in which seemingly non-family laws and institutions—including mass incarceration—and economic policies keep people from having the family relationships they want.²²⁴ Thus, minimum wage and collective bargaining laws are family justice issues because low wages and bad jobs negatively impact family relationships.



Like reproductive justice, family justice is not simply “pro-choice” when it comes to questions of family and relationships. Family justice, like the reproductive justice movement, focuses on the ways that “laws, policies, and public officials punish or reward” different groups of people differently.²²⁵ The reproductive-justice vision endorsed by 100 groups in 2018 is one we also endorse: “Each of us should have the chance to live safe, healthy lives and be free to determine our own path—including if, when, and how to create a family. Each of us, too, should be able to raise and care for children with dignity and freedom from violence, discrimination, or denial of our basic human rights and needs.”²²⁶

Family-justice advocates seek to repeal laws, policies and social norms that stand in the way of people having the families and relationships they want.

Family Justice Principles

The following family-justice principles flow from the values and influences detailed above:

- A person’s marital status, relationship status, and living arrangements say nothing about their character or value. Unmarried people should not be treated as less mature, less valuable, or less accomplished than married people. Families and relationships should not be ranked from best to worst based on their structure. Marriage is neither more nor less important than other close adult relationships involving care and commitment.
- People “do family” in a multitude of ways, including as married or unmarried couples; as “co-parents,” whether divorced, separated, or never together; as adults “living apart together,”²²⁷ as kin networks, and as chosen family. Neither children nor marriage are necessary to create family. Co-residence is not necessary to create relationships of commitment and care.
- There will always be people who do not achieve the relationships, living arrangements, and family goals to which they aspire. There will also always be people who prefer to live alone, to not have children, or otherwise opt to live their lives in ways that are not consistent with whatever the norm is at the time. None of this is a reflection of their self-worth, and they all have a right to equal respect and concern.
- Children do not need to live under the same roof as a same-gender parent (or a same-gender role model) for proper development. There are many ways children can have positive same-gender role models outside of the home. A society in which a child *must* live with a same-gender parent in order to flourish is not a just society.
- Children flourish in a variety of family types and living arrangements. Being raised in a two-parent nuclear household is not categorically better than being raised in a single-parent household, a “bi-nuclear” household, or a multi-generational household. Relationship quality is more important than household structure. Loving, supportive families come in all shapes and sizes. A society in which a child *must* live in a two-parent nuclear household in order to flourish is not a just society.
- Family justice rejects marriage fundamentalism but is not against marriage. For many married people, the fact of being married carries significant personal, cultural, and religious meaning. And many unmarried adults aspire to marriage for the same reasons.
- An adult’s ability to freely choose a particular relationship status or living arrangement should not be restricted or blocked (for example, by immigration laws that provide permanent legal residence automatically to spouses, but not to domestic partners).

Towards an Agenda for Change

In practical terms, a new family justice consensus will require a strategy for cultural and policy change. Necessary *culture change* includes public acceptance and understanding of family diversity. As we note in Chapter I, much of the public has already shifted away from marriage fundamentalism, so an important part of the work here involves changing attitudes held by elites.

Necessary *policy change* involves reforming public policies to promote and support equality, autonomy, interdependency and care regardless of family type. This includes reforming laws and policies that make marriage a precondition to accessing certain rights and benefits, while denying them to others.



Where legal benefits, privileges, and rights are limited to married couples only, family-justice advocates should ask whether the limitation makes sense given the goals of the law, and whether the denial of benefits to people in various other non-marital relationships is fair. At the same time, family-justice advocates would seek to repeal laws, policies and social norms that stand in the way of people having the families and relationships they want. Examples include criminal justice and immigration laws that separate people who want to be together, and make it more difficult for people to enter and maintain the relationships they desire.

Developing a comprehensive family-justice agenda for policy and cultural change is beyond the scope of this report, and needs to involve far more voices and organizations than just ours. But as a starting point we recommend the following:

- **Remove marriage promotion and “out-of-wedlock”-birth reduction as purposes of the TANF program, and repeal the Healthy Marriage Promotion program.** TANF should be reformed, including by removing references to marriage and “out-of-wedlock” births. Instead, TANF should be focused on providing financial assistance to individuals and families. The Healthy Marriage Promotion program should be repealed.
- **Provide additional legal options for relationships, like civil unions and registered partnerships.** Providing such options affirms “the capacity of people to establish for themselves the terms of their relationships while providing models for doing so.”²²⁸ Non-married couples expecting a child and planning to parent together should be able to register their parenting partnership (and not just paternity). There is almost certainly considerable unrecognized demand for additional legal options for relationships in the United States. In 1999, France established the Pacte civil de solidarité (PAC) as an alternative to marriage that comes with a somewhat different legal framework.²²⁹ Today PACs account for about 45 percent of the total number of legally recognized coupled relationships (marriages and PACs) entered into each year in France.²³⁰

- **Provide information easily accessible to the public about the legal rights and responsibilities of marriage and any other legal options for relationships.** Such information should be available from governments, relevant non-profit organizations, and legal services providers.
- **Review federal, state, and local laws that condition benefits and rights on marriage, and, where appropriate, provide such benefits and rights in a more inclusive manner.** Examples include: ensuring that work-family benefits like job-protected leave and paid sick days include non-marital partners and other “chosen family,” and treating domestic partnerships the same as marriage for purposes of federal immigration law. Members of Congress should ask GAO, the Congressional Research Service, or similar nonpartisan federal governmental agencies to identify all federal laws that provide legal rights, privileges, or benefits to married people, but not to non-married people. Similar efforts should be undertaken at state and local levels.
- **Reforming work-family laws to define family inclusively.** A growing number of states and localities are adopting inclusive family definitions as part of their paid sick time, paid family leave, and other work-family laws.²⁵¹ Many of these reforms are due to the work of A Better Balance, Family Values @ Work, and their local and state partners. Most recently, New Jersey adopted a paid sick leave law that allows workers to take time off to care for themselves or family members. Family members include people whose “close association with the employee is the equivalent of a family relationship,” even if they are not legally or biologically related.²⁵²
- **Treating domestic partners the same as married spouses for purposes of federal immigration law.** Under current U.S. law, U.S. citizens can obtain green cards (lawful permanent residence in the United States, and a path to U.S. citizenship) for their spouses, but not for partners in equivalent relationships. The United States should follow Canada in extending this right to citizens in common-law or conjugal partnerships.²⁵³
- **Reform the Child Tax Credit to make it a child allowance available to all low-income parents.** A child or family allowance is a fixed sum paid monthly to all parents or some subset of parents. Most wealthy countries provide such allowance to parents without conditioning the allowance on employment. In the United States, the closest program is the Child Tax Credit. However, the Child Tax Credit is conditioned on employment, paid annually, and excludes or provides only modest benefits to a substantial number of low-income parents, particularly unmarried mothers.
- **Reform crime, immigration, and child welfare laws to minimize forced family separation and harm to children.** Examples include visitation policies within jails/prisons, the Indian Child Welfare Act, and more. All of these laws have well-documented disproportionate effects by race and class. Particularly when it comes to punitive crime and child welfare laws, the U.S. is an outlier compared to other wealthy nations.

Conclusion

Married couples are no more worthy of recognition and support than unmarried individuals, and marriage is only one of many paths to family. Most Americans already know this; it's time for our laws to catch up and for elite opinion makers to stop promoting marriage as a solution for poverty and inequality.



Research on Marriage, Family Structure and Child Well-Being

Several organizations and scholars have conducted large-scale literature reviews and meta-analyses of research on the causal impact of family structure on child well-being. Over the last decade, these include the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); United Kingdom's Department of Children, Schools and Families (UK DCSF); Sara McClanahan, Laura Tach, and Daniel Schneider; and Juho Härkönen, Fabrizio Bernardi, and Diederik Boertien. In this appendix, we detail key findings from these studies.

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Review

The OECD is an intergovernmental economic organization with 36 member countries, including the United States. Most of the members are high-income countries. Published in 2009, the OECD's report is the most comprehensive of the review studies in terms of analysis and conclusions.²³⁴ It takes into account both prior meta-analyses conducted by U.S. researchers (and mostly focused on US research), conducts a new meta-analysis of non-U.S. research, and conducts a narrative review of the more limited body of research that uses more sophisticated approaches to obtaining information on causality.

The overall conclusion of the OECD report is “that the literature on the effects of sole parenthood on child well-being, while extensive and growing in sophistication, lacks a clear consensus on the existence of a causal effect. That any such effect is small is a conclusion which can be asserted with more confidence.”

In discussing the implications of these conclusions for policy makers, the OECD says:

For policy makers, the first point to note is that, in comparison say to some policy-related literatures like the impact of education on earnings or even the employment effects of minimum wages, the empirical literature on the impact of family structure on child outcomes is at an immature

stage. The immaturity is signalled by the lack of a consensus regarding the existence of a causal effect of sole-parent family structure. To draw stronger conclusions means the application of priors to the existing body of evidence.

They go on to explain:

Policy makers need to additionally keep in mind that average effects [here they refer to effect sizes from the large number of studies included in their meta-analysis and the earlier U.S. one] conceal an enormous amount of variation. Many children [brought up by] sole parents do well on all counts. Many children brought up in stable two-parent families do poorly. This is because many other factors—some well understood, others less so, influence the social outcomes for children of interest (Amato 2005). This additionally means that crudely targeting resources towards sole parents, in addition to possibly reinforcing social stigma which may undermine well-being of children from sole-parent families, is likely to lead to high false positives (providing a service to children of sole-parent families who have no need of it) and high false negatives (not providing a service to many children of two-parent families have need of it).

Finally, they note that “information on relative policy efficacy in this area is, at best, patchy and — probably for most member states of the OECD—non-existent.”

Härkönen, Bernardi, and Boertien

Published in 2017, this is the most recent review of evidence. It is particularly notable for its discussion of heterogeneity of effects.²³⁵ Similar to the OECD research discussed above, their study reviews findings on a variety of research topics related to family structure. Key findings include:

- *Parental Conflict*: “Parental separation [divorce or the dissolution of a non-married union] can be beneficial for children from high-conflict families, but is more likely to have negative effects when parental conflict was low and the separation came as a relative surprise.”
- *Child’s Gender*: “Although some studies have found gender-specific effects, most have not, leading Amato and James (2010) to conclude that the gender differences in effects are modest at most. Similar variation in findings characterizes research on effects of stepfamilies (Sweeney 2010).”
- *Child’s Age*: “Studies on educational outcomes often find the effects to be most pronounced when parents divorced close to important educational decision points.... Otherwise, findings differ in their conclusions about the childhood stages most sensitive to family disruption, and the specific pattern of heterogeneity is likely to depend on the outcome studied.”
- *Parental Socioeconomic Status*: “empirical results are mixed, with some findings pointing to stronger negative effects in families with high or low socioeconomic status.” Citing an accompanying review by Bernardi and Boertien, whose “substantive conclusion is that the negative effect of parental separation on educational choices is stronger for children whose high-socioeconomic status father moves out. The greater financial losses are an important

part of the explanation, which also suggests that the results might be different for outcomes that are less responsive to financial resources.”

- *Race, ethnicity, migrant status*: “Many US studies have found that Black children are less affected by growing up in a non-intact family than White children Some European studies have found variation in family structure effects by ethnic and immigrant background ... In general, the family structure effects are weaker in groups in which parental separation and single motherhood are more common, which has been explained by less stigma, better ways of handling father absence, a broadly disadvantaged position with less to lose, or differential selection by unobserved factors....”

Finally, the authors question Sara McLanahan’s “diverging destinies” thesis that “holds that socioeconomically uneven family change, in which the retreat from stable two-parent families is happening particularly among those with low levels of education, can reduce social mobility.” They conclude that:

... whether this is the case depends not only on differences in family structures by socioeconomic background, but also on the strength of the effects of these family structures on the outcomes in question; if the effects are nil or weak, it does not matter who lives in which kind of family. The inequality-amplifying effects of socioeconomic differences in family structures can furthermore be shaped by heterogeneity in family structure effects ... Bernardi’s and Boertien’s ... findings, that the negative effects of parental separation are weaker for children whose parents have low levels of education, imply that the socioeconomic differences in family instability are less important in affecting intergenerational inequality than often thought. Erman’s and Härkönen’s...

results show that parental separation effects are weaker among ancestry groups where parental separation is more common suggest the same for ethnic inequalities. Together, these findings refine arguments stating that divergence in family

structures will lead to an increase in inequality. Instead, the results imply that whether this happens or not is contingent on the strength of these effects and on whether they are similar across groups.

Adamsons and Johnson

Published in 2013, this is the most recent meta-analysis of research on “nonresident father involvement and child well-being.”²³⁶ Adamsons and Johnson update Amato and Gilbreth’s (1999)²³⁷ meta-analysis, and conceptualize “both nonresident father involvement and child well-being (rather than just father involvement) as multidimensional constructs.” They are careful to note that the effect sizes included in their meta-analysis are correlations, not causal relationships.

Adamsons and Johnson conclude that:

... nonresident father involvement can have positive effects on children, but the quality of such involvement matters more than the quantity. Our

meta-analyses indicated that overall, nonresident father involvement continues to be positively associated with a variety of child outcomes (social, behavioral, academic/cognitive, and emotional/psychological). Effect sizes in the present study were modest but consistently statistically different from zero, and the strength of the present effect sizes generally were comparable with those found by Amato and Gilbreth

The amount of contact and financial provision, however, were not associated with overall child well-being. Our finding regarding contact was similar to Amato and Gilbreth’s but our finding regarding financial provision was different, as they found statistically significant associations.

United Kingdom Department of Children, Schools and Families (UK DCSF) Review

This is a 2009 review of other “review-level evidence” rather than a systematic review of primary research.²³⁸ It draws mostly on the U.S. meta-analysis conducted by Amato, other reviews conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s. It does not discuss the more comprehensive OECD (2009) review, which was conducted at roughly the same time as the UK review.

Relying mostly on the Amato meta-analysis, as well as a 2003 review conducted for the

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (UK), the UK review concludes that:

There are significant differences between children who experience parental separation compared with children from intact families. Although the difference between the two groups is generally statistically significant, effect sizes are nevertheless small, reflecting the fact that within both groups, children vary widely in their experiences.

Unlike the OECD review, the UK report says little about causality. A notable aspect of the UK report is its discussion of parental conflict and “family functioning”:

Parental conflict is a key variable associated with negative outcomes in children from both intact and non-intact families. Research in this area clearly shows that family functioning has a greater impact on outcomes than family structure. High levels of conflict, stress resulting from the separation and/or resulting poverty can all negatively affect maternal mental health. Poor mental health affects the ability of parents, whether married, separated or divorced, to parent effectively, which in turn impacts on children’s well-being.

They also conclude:

Financial hardship and poor or disrupted parenting have a negative impact on outcomes for children growing up in intact as well as separated families. It is therefore important to avoid the risk of stigmatising certain family forms, such as single parent families, and to focus instead on the underlying mechanisms that contribute to poorer outcomes for children.

Finally, when it comes to policy, they explain:

... the evidence is weak on how best to strengthen and support family relationships, to reduce levels of family conflict, to enhance the stability of couples, and to support the ‘buffering’ necessary to protect the relationship and the quality of parenting in times of stress or difficulties..., such as through a period of maternal mental health problems.

A related set of UK reports looked specifically at differences between married and cohabiting parents. There is much less research on this question (the vast majority of historical research is on divorce), so these reports include both discussions of existing literature and new analyses. The overall conclusion from these studies is that:

The differences in relationship stability between cohabiting and married parents, and the cognitive and non-cognitive skills and behaviours of their children, mainly or entirely reflect the fact that different types of people choose to get married (the selection effect), rather than that marriage has a direct positive causal effect on relationship stability or children’s outcomes. On the basis of this evidence, therefore, there does not seem to be a strong rationale for policies that seek to encourage couples to get married, at least not if the aim is to increase these measures of relationship stability or child development.

McLanahan, Tach, and Scheider Review

Sara McClanahan is a leading U.S. researcher in the field of family structure research. Since at least 1994 she has taken the position that “growing up with only one biological parent frequently deprives children of important economic, parental, and community resources, and that these deprivations ultimately undermine their chances of future success.”

McLanahan and her co-authors review 47 studies that “take one of the more rigorous approaches” to isolating the causal effects of what they refer (problematically) to as “father absence.”²³⁹ Their review is more recent than either the OECD or UK review (2013 vs. 2009), but most of the studies they review were published in 2007 or earlier.

Based on this review, they find what they characterize as “strong evidence” that father absence negatively impacts certain outcomes (particularly externalizing behavior and adolescent risky behavior) and “weaker evidence” for other outcomes (cognitive ability; adult economic and family outcomes). Unlike the OECD and UK reviews, they do not discuss effect sizes.

The McClanahan review includes four tables with summary information for each of the studies. We used these tables to produce the table below that shows the number of studies finding an effect, mixed effects, or no effect by outcome studied.

When considered as whole, these results seem consistent with the OECD conclusion that there is no clear consensus on causality. The strongest evidence pointing in a causal direction is on childhood social-emotional problems, but it is not overwhelming or consistent (particularly in the absence of any discussion of effect sizes).

Perhaps most notably, these findings provide little support for the idea that the married, two-parent family is the best family type when it comes to adult outcomes. This suggests that if there are effects they may be transitory and adjustment-related, rather than long term.

TABLE 3

Summary of findings of studies included in Tables 1-4 of McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider

Type of child or adult outcome	Number of studies by whether effects found		
	No Effect	Mixed	Effect
Test scores	4	5	3
Educational attainment and engagement	7	3	7
School performance (such as GPA) & engagement	1	3	0
Social-emotional problems in childhood	3	6	14
Adult employment	0	5	0
Adult income/earnings	2	0	0
Marriage & divorce	0	3	0
Early childbearing	0	2	0
Adult mental health	2	1	3
Smoking	0	0	2

Source: Authors’ analysis of McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider.

End Notes

- 1 See, e.g., Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 2016 ed).
- 2 Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).
- 3 The term “working class” is often used to refer to White people without a college degree. But we use the term to refer to the very diverse group of people who identify as “working class.” This includes 56 percent of Black women and 47 of Black men. Both Blacks and Latinos are more likely to self-identify as working class than White, non-Hispanics. Shawn Fremstad, “America’s Invisible—and Very Diverse—Working Class,” *CEPR Blog*, February 21, 2014, available at <http://cepr.net/blogs/cepr-blog/americas-invisibleand-very-diverseworking-class>.
- 4 W. Bradford Wilcox, “Marriage Matters: The Left continues to deny the importance of matrimony to escaping poverty,” *City Journal*, July 25, 2017, available at <https://www.city-journal.org/html/marriage-matters-15362.html>.
- 5 Daniel Geary, “The Moynihan Report: An Annotated Edition,” *The Atlantic*, September 14, 2015, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-moynihan-report-an-annotated-edition/404632/>.
- 6 See discussion of Healthy Marriage Promotion program in Chapter 6 of this report.
- 7 See discussion of TANF in Chapter 6 of this report.
- 8 *Beyond Same Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for All Our Families & Relationships* (July 26, 2006), originally published on the now-defunct BeyondMarriage.org, but available at <https://mronline.org/2006/08/08/beyond-same-sex-marriage-a-new-strategic-vision-for-all-our-families-relationships/> (last accessed February 14, 2019).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Elena Gutierrez, and Loretta Ross, *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2004).
- 11 We are far from the first to note this demographic trend. Recent notable accounts written for general audiences include: Rebecca Traister, *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016); Bella DePaulo, *How We Live Now: Redefining Home and Family in the 21st Century* (New York: Atria Books, 2015); and Eric Klinenberg, *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone* (Penguin Books, 2012). See also Philip Cohen, *The Family: Diversity, Inequality, and Social Change*, 2nd Ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018); Barbara Risman and Virginia Rutter, eds., *Families as They Really Are* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015).
- 12 Steven Ruggles, “Patriarchy, power, and pay: The transformation of American families, 1800–2015,” *Demography* 52(6) (2015): 1797–1823, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5068828/>.
- 13 Authors’ analysis of American Community Survey (Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, Erin Meyer, Jose Pacas, and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 8.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2018).
- 14 All figures in this paragraph and the next were calculated by the authors using the Current Population Survey–ASEC (Sarah Flood, Miriam King, Renae Rodgers, Steven Ruggles, and J. Robert Warren. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 6.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2018). For more on couples who live together, see Colleen Nugent and Jill Daugherty, “A Demographic, Attitudinal, and Behavioral Profile of Cohabiting Adults in the United States, 2011–2015,” National Centers for Health Statistics, May 31, 2018, available at <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr111.pdf>. Notable recent books about couples who live together include Sharon Sessler and Amanda Jayne Miller, *Cohabitation Nation: Gender, Class, and the Remaking of Relationships* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017) and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Not Just Roommates: Cohabitation after the Sexual Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
- 15 Lynne Casper, Philip Cohen, and Tavia Simmons, “How Does POSSLQ Measure Up? Historical Estimates of Cohabitation,” U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division Working Paper No. 36 (1999), available at <https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0036/twps0036.html>.
- 16 The figures in this paragraph were calculated by the authors using the American Community Survey (Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, Erin Meyer, Jose Pacas, and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 8.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2018).
- 17 For more on family stability and transitions over time for individuals, see Shawn Fremstad and Melissa Boteach, *Valuing All Our Families: Progressive Policies that Strengthen Family Commitments and Reduce Family Disparities* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2015).

- 18 But see Bella DePaula, “The Badass Psychology of People Who Like Being Alone,” *Psychology Today*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/living-single/201805/10-years-living-single-badass-loners-are-your-favorite>.
- 19 For a classic account, see Lillian Rubin, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family* (Basic Books, 1976).
- 20 Philip Cohen, “Family Diversity is the New Normal for America’s Children,” Council on Contemporary Families, September 2014, available at <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/the-new-normal/>.
- 21 See Roberta L. Coles and Charles Green (eds.), *The Myth of the Missing Black Father* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
- 22 Jo Jones and William Mosher, “Fathers’ Involvement with their Children: United States, 2006–2010,” National Center for Health Statistics (2013), available at <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr071.pdf>
- 23 On growth in non-residential father-child contact, see Paul Amato, Catherine Meyers, and Robert Emer, “Changes in Nonresident Father-Child Contact from 1976 to 2002,” *Family Relations* 58 (1) (January 2009). On residential fathers’ time providing child care, see Giulia Dotti Sani and Judith Treas, “Educational Gradients in Parents’ Child Care Time Across Countries, 1965–2012,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 78 (4) (August 2016), and Liana Sayer, Suzanne Bianchi and John Robinson, “Are Parents Investing Less in Children? Trends in Mothers’ and Fathers’ Time with Children,” *American Journal of Sociology* 110 (1) (July 2004). In 1965, most fathers (59 percent) reported spending no time providing primary child care for children.
- 24 Maria Cancian, Daniel R. Meyer, Patricia R. Brown, and Steven T. Cook, “Who Gets Custody Now? Dramatic Changes in Children’s Living Arrangements After Divorce,” *Demography* (August 2014), available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13524-014-0307-8>. See also articles in *Special Issue: International Demographics of Joint Custody*, *Family Court Review*, 55: 4 (October 2017).
- 25 Statistics Sweden, Olika familjer lever på olika sätt—om barns boende och försörjning efter en separation, Demografiska Rapporter 2014:1, available at https://www.scb.se/Statistik/_Publikationer/BE0701_2013A01_BR_BE51BR1401.pdf.
- 26 “Moral Issues,” Gallup, available at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1681/moral-issues.aspx>.
- 27 Table 2 in “A Demographic, Attitudinal, and Behavioral Profile of Cohabiting Adults in the United States, 2011–2015, National Health Statistics Reports, May 2018, available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr111.pdf>.
- 28 Joy Wilke and Lydia Saad, “Older Americans’ Moral Attitudes Changing,” Gallup, June 3, 2013, available at: https://news.gallup.com/poll/162881/older-americans-moral-attitudes-changing.aspx?utm_source=link_news9&utm_campaign=item_210542&utm_medium=copy
- 29 Thomas E. Trail and Benjamin R. Karney, “What’s (not) wrong with low-income marriages,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 74 (3) (2012): 413–427, available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.00977.x/abstract>.
- 30 Andrew Cherlin, *Labor’s Lost Love: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class Family in America* (New York: Russell Sage, 2014), p. 22, available at <https://www.russellsage.org/publications/labors-love-lost>.
- 31 Daniel Schneider, Kristin Harknett, and Matthew Stimpson, “Job Quality and the Educational Gradient in Entry Into Marriage and Cohabitation,” *Demography* (January 2018), available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13524-018-0749-5>. In their review of prior research, Schneider and his co-authors note a long list of studies finding that employed men and men who earn more are more likely to marry, and that women’s employment and earnings, at least in recent cohorts, are positively associated with marriage.
- 32 Jennifer Silva, *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 33 Paul Amato, Alan Booth, David R. Johnson, and Stacy J. Rogers, *Alone Together: How Marriage in America is Changing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 34 W. Bradford Wilcox, “Don’t be a bachelor: Why married men work harder, smarter and make more money,” *Washington Post* (April 2, 2015), available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2015/04/02/dont-be-a-bachelor-why-married-men-work-harder-and-smarter-and-make-more-money/?utm_term=.664ab2f8504b and W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas Wolfinger, “Men and Marriage: Debunking the Ball and Chain Myth,” *Institute for Family Studies* (2017), available at <https://ifstudies.org/blog/debunking-the-ball-and-chain-myth-of-marriage-for-men>.
- 35 Alexandra Killewald and Ian Lundberg, “New Evidence Against a Causal Marriage Wage Premium,” *Demography* 54 (3) (June 2017), available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13524-017-0566-2>.
- 36 Volker Ludwig and Josef Brüderl, “Is There a Male Marital Wage Premium? New Evidence from the United States,” *American Sociological Review* 83(4) (July 9, 2018), available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0003122418784909>.

- 37 *Every Second: The Impact of the Incarceration Crisis on America's Families*, FWD.us (December 2018) available at <https://everysecond.fwd.us/downloads/EverySecond.fwd.us.pdf>.
- 38 Table 39 in U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2016*, available at <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2016>.
- 39 U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Unaccompanied Children, Agency Efforts to Identify and Reunify Children Separated from Parents at the Border* (February 7, 2019), available at <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-368t>.
- 40 Dayna K. Shah, "Defense of Marriage Act: Update to Prior Report," (Washington DC: General Accounting Office, 2004), available at <https://www.gao.gov/new.items/do4353r.pdf>.
- 41 Books written for general audiences that discuss legal discrimination against unmarried people and singles include: Nancy Polikoff, *Beyond (Straight) and Gay Marriage: Valuing All Families Under the Law* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), and Bella DePaulo, *Singled Out: How Singles are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After* (New York: MacMillian, 2004).
- 42 Richard Balkus and Susan Wilschke, Treatment of Married Couples in the SSI Program, Social Security, Office of Policy, Issue Paper No. 2003-1 (2003), available at <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/issuepapers/ip2003-01.html>
- 43 See Fremstad and Boteach, *Valuing All Our Families*. Still, it would be a good idea to expand eligibility for means-tested programs like Medicaid and SNAP, and ensure that currently rationed benefits (including child care assistance and rental housing) are available to all families who meet income-eligibility requirements. See also Shawn Fremstad, "Partnered But Poor," Center for American Progress (noting underappreciated extent to which both married and unmarried couples receive means-tested benefits).
- 44 Chye-Ching Huang, "Four Facts About the Tax Code's Marriage Penalties — and Marriage Bonuses," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (April 2015) available at <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/four-facts-about-the-tax-codes-marriage-penalties-and-marriage-bonuses>.
- 45 Amir El-Sibaie, "Marriage Penalties and Bonuses under the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act," Tax Foundation (February 2018) available at <https://taxfoundation.org/tax-cuts-and-jobs-act-marriage-penalty-marriage-bonus/>.
- 46 See, for example, James Puckett, *Rethinking Tax Priorities: Marriage Neutrality, Children, and Contemporary Families*, 78 U. of Cin. L. Rev. 104 (2009-2010).
- 47 Daniel Schneider and Adam Reich, "Marrying Ain't Hard When You Got A Union Card? Labor Union Membership and First Marriage," *Social Problems* 61(4) (2014): 625-643.
- 48 Another apt term for marriage fundamentalism is "One True Family Ideology", coined by sociologist Joshua Gamson. See "Interview with Joshua Gamson, author of *Modern Families*, *From the Square: NYU Press Blog*, September 10, 2015, <https://www.fromthesquare.org/an-interview-with-joshua-gamson-author-of-modern-families/#.XG10yal7kvo>. Terms like "traditional" family values" are also commonly used to refer to this set of beliefs and values. We don't use "traditional" because as Stephanie Coontz writes, "many of the things people think are unprecedented in family life today are not actually new" and "some things that people believe to be "traditional" were actually relatively recent innovations." Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a history: How love conquered marriage* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 2. We don't use "family values" because it implies that the main distinction is between those hold family values and those who do not, instead of the real difference being between the kinds of families that are valued.
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- 51 Patrick Fagan, Kirk Johnson, and Robert Rector, "Marriage: Still the Safest Place for Women and Children," The Heritage Foundation (March 2004), available at <https://www.heritage.org/marriage-and-family/report/marriage-still-the-safest-place-women-and-children>.
- 52 W. Bradford Wilcox, "Marriage remains the gold standard," *New York Times* (July 6, 2015), available at <http://www.aei.org/publication/marriage-remains-the-gold-standard/>. [italics added]
- 53 Family Research Council, *Marriage and Family*, <https://www.frc.org/Marriage-and-Family>, last accessed February 15, 2019.
- 54 W. Bradford Wilcox, *Marriage matters: The Left continues to deny the importance of matrimony in escaping poverty*, *City Journal* (July 16, 2017), available at <http://www.aei.org/publication/marriage-matters-2/>.

- 55 Family Research Council, *Marriage and Family*, <https://www.frc.org/Marriage-and-Family>, last accessed February 15, 2019.
- 56 See, e.g., Frances Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (Simon and Shuster, 2017). Recently, Focus on the Family persuaded the IRS to change its status for tax purposes from a non-profit, tax-exempt organization to a church. Miranda Blue, "Here's How Focus on the Family Convinced the IRS to Call It a Church," Right-Wing Watch, April 17, 2018, <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/heres-how-focus-on-the-family-convinced-the-irs-to-call-it-a-church/>.
- 57 James Chappel, "Modern Family" (review of Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*), *Dissent* (Summer 2017), available at <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/family-values-melinda-cooper-review>. On right-wing think tanks and conservative social movements, see Jason Stahl, *Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture since 1945* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2016).
- 58 According to tax filings made by the Institute for Family Studies, Wilcox worked an average of five hours per week as a Senior Fellow for them in 2014, 2015, 2016, for which he was paid \$80,400 each year. If his average hours were reported accurately on the tax form, this means he was paid roughly \$309 an hour during this period. In 2013, he was paid \$50,000 for a reported 5 hours a week. Form 990s from "The Institute for Family Studies," ProPublica, Nonprofit Explorer, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/270950140>. (last accessed February 20, 2019).
- 59 "By the late '80s, Murray and his wife had moved to rural Burkittsville, Maryland, where he was deep into research for a book on the social consequences of IQ coauthored with Richard Herrnstein of Harvard. The then-president of the Manhattan Institute, Bill Hammett, was reluctant to be associated with what was sure to be an explosive and polarizing work. 'I had essentially been fired,' Murray told me in a recent interview." Matthew Continetti, "The Intellectual Grenades of Charles Murray," *The Weekly Standard* (January 11, 2018), available at <https://www.weeklystandard.com/matthew-continetti/the-intellectual-grenades-of-charles-murray>.
- 60 Charles Murray, "The coming white underclass," *Wall Street Journal* (October 29, 1993): A14, available at <http://www.aei.org/publication/the-coming-white-underclass/>.
- 61 Ron Haskins and Isabel V. Sawhill, "Work and marriage: The way to end poverty and welfare," (Washington DC, Brookings Institution, 2003), available at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/work-and-marriage-the-way-to-end-poverty-and-welfare/>.
- 62 "Former Clinton advisor William Galston sums up the matter this way: you need only do three things in this country to avoid poverty—finish high school, marry before having a child, and marry after the age of 20. Only 8 percent of the families who do this are poor; 79 percent of those who fail to do this are poor." James Q. Wilson, "Why We Don't Marry," *City Journal* (Winter 2002), available at <https://www.city-journal.org/html/why-we-don%E2%80%99t-marry-12215.html>.
- 63 On the Bradley Foundation, see TEXT BOX ON PAGE 45. On Templeton, see, e.g., David Barash, "The Truth about the Temple of Templeton," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 15, 2012, available at: <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/the-truth-about-the-temple-of-templeton/44868> and Tate Williams, "What Makes Templeton Tick? And Just How Scary is this Place? An Inside Look," *Inside Philanthropy*, January 5, 2015.
- 64 See Doris Buss and Didi Herman, *Globalizing Family Values: The Christian Right in International Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
- 65 On responsible fatherhood programs, see Jennifer Randles, "Making Men into 'Responsible' Fathers," *Context* (Spring 2018), Jennifer Randles, "'Manning Up' to be a Good Father: Hybrid Fatherhood, Masculinity, and U.S. Responsible Fatherhood Policy," *Gender and Society* 32 (4) (2018) and Anna Gavanas, *Fatherhood Politics in the United States: Masculinity, Sexuality, Race, and Marriage* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).
- 66 Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Past Work: Responsible Fatherhood and Marriage," available at <https://www.aecf.org/work/past-work/responsible-fatherhood-and-marriage/>, last accessed February 15, 2019.
- 67 AEI and Brookings, "Opportunity, Responsibility, and Security: A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream," available at <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Full-Report.pdf>.
- 68 Ron Haskins, "Marriage, Parenthood and Public Policy," *National Journal* (Spring 2014), <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/marriage-parenthood-and-public-policy>. [italics added]
- 69 Rebecca Hagelin, "Creating a culture of belonging," The Heritage Foundation (August 2006), <https://www.heritage.org/marriage-and-family/commentary/creating-culture-belonging> [italics added].
- 70 "Rick Santorum RNC Speech (text and video)," Politico, August 29, 2012; Shawn Fremstad, "Santorum's Three Things to Avoid Poverty: The Very Serious Person's Version of Makers vs. Takers," *CEPR Blog* (December 5, 2012),

- available at <http://cepr.net/blogs/cepr-blog/santorums-three-things-to-avoid-poverty-the-very-serious-persons-version-of-makers-vs-takers>. Santorum has also said that “when the family breaks down, the economy breaks down.” Quoted in Joan Walsh, “When white people lack ‘bourgeois values,’” *Salon* (January 9, 2012), https://www.salon.com/2012/01/09/when_white_people_lack_bourgeois_values/.
- 71 Laura Matthews, “Among Rubio’s Solutions to War on Poverty: Get Married,” *International Business Times* (January 9, 2014), available at <http://www.ibtimes.com/among-rubios-solutions-war-poverty-get-married-1533214>. [italics added]
- 72 Sam Youngman, “Rand Paul Discusses Cutting Government Help for Unwed Mothers Who Continue Having Kids,” *Lexington Herald Leader* (January 24, 2014), available at <http://www.kentucky.com/news/politics-government/article44468157.html> [italics added]
- 73 W. Bradford Wilcox, “Family Structure Matters: Science Proves It,” *National Review Online* (October 23, 2015), available at <http://www.aei.org/publication/family-structure-matters-science-proves-it/>
- 74 William Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Welfare State* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 285. [italics added] Notable critiques of Galston on this point include Iris Marion Young, “Mothers, Citizenship, and Independence: A Critique of Pure Family Values,” *Ethics* (April 1995): 535-556 and Robin West, “The Limits of Liberal Pluralism: A Comment on William Galston,” *Nomos* 49, (2009): 149-166.
- 75 David Leonhardt, “A One-Question Quiz on the Poverty Trap,” *New York Times* (October 4, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/04/opinion/child-poverty-family-income-neighborhood.html>. On marriage-fundamentalist themes in the *New York Times*, see Shawn Fremstad, “Neo-Moynihanism in the *New York Times*” (August 2015), available at https://docs.google.com/document/d/iIAmsZuS3tup_LDdTILirMPxGCdImDxLcCkzNPrFUmb0/edit?usp=sharing and Shawn Fremstad, “The NYT and the ‘Disorganized Single Mother’ Meme,” *CEPR Blog*, August 28, 2012, available at: <http://cepr.net/blogs/cepr-blog/the-new-york-times-vs-single-mothers-and-other-qdisorganizedq-people-places-and-things>.
- 76 Matthew Yglesias, “Family structure matters, but can we do anything about it,” *Vox* (October 5, 2018), <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/10/5/17941456/family-structure-policy>.
- 77 Matthew Yglesias, “The ‘decline’ of marriage isn’t a problem,” *Vox* (March 25, 2015), <https://www.vox.com/2015/3/25/8285169/marriage-decline-causes>.
- 78 In a democratic, multicultural society, “citizens will come to affirm different and incompatible comprehensive doctrines.” Paul Voice, “Comprehensive Doctrine,” in Jon Mandle and David A. Reidy, eds., *The Cambridge Rawls Lexicon* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014). A comprehensive doctrine is “a set of beliefs affirmed by citizens concerning a range of values, including moral, metaphysical, and religious commitments, as well as beliefs about personal virtues, and political beliefs about the way society ought to be arranged.”
- 79 On the freedom of intimate association and the U.S. Constitution, see Kenneth L. Karst, “The freedom of intimate association,” *The Yale Law Journal* 89 (4) (1980): 624-692, available at <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=6590&context=yjl>.
- 80 Iris Marion Young, “Mothers, Citizenship, and Independence: A Critique of Pure Family Values,” *Ethics* (April 1995): 535-556. See also Robin West, “The Limits of Liberal Pluralism: A Comment on William Galston,” *Nomos* 49, (2009): 149-166.
- 81 Mary Anne Case, “Marriage Licenses,” *Minnesota Law Review* (2004) available at <https://www.law.uchicago.edu/files/files/case-marriagelicenses.pdf>.
- 82 Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 121. Cott notes: “since first contact, [Christian settlers, missionaries, and government officials] had derided Indian men for laziness and lack of manliness because they went out hunting and did not exert authority over wives and children, as heads of households.... To government officials, the native American marriage system represented an unintelligible foreignness.”
- 83 Cott, p. 89.
- 84 Katherine M. Franke, “Becoming a Citizen: Reconstruction Era Regulation of African American Marriages,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 12:2 (2013), available at <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2749/42a8a8d53326020561d7e67dfc632425a7d.pdf>
- 85 Andrew Cherlin, “American Marriage in the Early Twenty-First Century,” *Future of Children*, 15:2 (Fall 2005).
- 86 See, for example, *Levy v. Louisiana*, 391 U.S. 68 (1968). Under common law, a child born to an unmarried mother was *filius nullius* (the child of no one). Both common and statutory law in the United States discriminated against such children in a variety of ways. For a primer on the Western law of “illegitimacy,” see John Witte Jr, “Ishmael’s bane: The sin and crime of illegitimacy reconsidered,” *Punishment & Society* 5(3) (2003): 327-345.

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- 88 Andrew Cherlin, “American Marriage in the Early Twenty-First Century,” *Future of Children* 15:2 (Fall 2005).
- 89 W. Bradford Wilcox, “Marriage Matters: The Left continues to deny the importance of matrimony to escaping poverty,” *City Journal* (July 25, 2017), available at <https://www.city-journal.org/html/marriage-matters-15362.html>.
- 90 Jeff Johnson, “Kids Need a Mom and a Dad—That’s What the Research Shows,” Focus on the Family, (2018) <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/socialissues/marriage/marriage/30-years-of-research>.
- 91 See Scott Winship, “The Effects of Parental Marital Status and Living Arrangements on Child Outcomes in the United States: An Overview of the Field” (2004). Winship argues that “the evidence for this claim [that growing up with a single mother hurts children] is weak and its theoretical basis is not only shaky but to a great extent irrelevant to the empirical question at hand ...”
- 92 Simon Chapple, “Child Well-Being and Sole-Parent Family Structure in the OECD: An Analysis.” *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Paper* 823 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009), available at <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/225407362040.pdf?expires=1550339901&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=B89AD9265AA15FBO95D0C95A0DEEB8CC>. See also Paul Amato, who argues that family structure does have causal effects on child well-being, but also acknowledges that “increasing the share of children who grow up with continuously married parents would improve the overall well-being of U.S. children only modestly. The improvements are relatively small because problems such as being suspended from school, engaging in delinquent behavior, and attempting suicide have many causes, with family structure being but one.” Paul R. Amato, “The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation,” *The Future of Children* 15 (2) (2005): 75–96, available at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ795852.pdf>.
- 93 Juho Härkönen, Fabrizio Bernardi, Diederik Boertien, “Family Dynamics and Child Outcomes: An Overview of Research and Open Questions,” *European Journal of Population* 33 (2) (2017).
- 94 See, for example, W. Bradford Wilcox, “Family structure matters—science proves it,” *National Review Online* (October 23, 2015), <http://www.aei.org/publication/family-structure-matters-science-proves-it/>. (claiming “family change is having a major impact on our social environment and — in particular — our boys”).
- 95 Shawn Fremstad, “Partnered But Poor” (Washington DC, Center for American Progress, 2016), available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/10123038/PartneredButPoor.pdf>.
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- 97 David Brady, Ryan M. Finnigan and Sabine Hübgen, “Single Mothers are Not the Problem,” *The New York Times* (February 10, 2018), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/10/opinion/sunday/single-mothers-poverty.html>; David Brady, Ryan M. Finnigan, and Sabine Hübgen. “Rethinking the risks of poverty: a framework for analyzing prevalences and penalties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 123 (3) (2017): 740–786.
- 98 Ibid. On Japan’s treatment of unmarried mothers, see Anna Fifield, “In Japan, single mothers struggle with poverty and a ‘culture of shame,’” *Washington Post* (May 28, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-japan-single-mothers-struggle-with-poverty-and-with-shame/2017/05/26/01a9c9e0-2a92-11e7-9081-f5405f56d3e4_story.html?utm_term=.38f7cef3a41f
- 99 “Judith Blake, 66, Dies; Studied the Only Child,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1993, page B7, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/05/14/obituaries/judith-blake-66-dies-studied-the-only-child.html>. Blake’s book is available online at: <https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft6489porr&chunk.id=doe26072&toc.depth=1&toc.id=&brand=ucpress>.
- 100 Lara Carr Steelman and others, “Reconsidering the effects of sibling configuration: Recent advances and challenges,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28(1) (2002): 243–269. They go on to note that the “patterns are not only consistent, but strong, especially when compared to the effects of familial factors that typically have received much greater scholarly attention ... including paternal SEI, farm background, and family ‘intactness’ with the exception of parental education.” “Given the robust character of these patterns, efforts generally have been directed less toward testing the relationship between sibship size and academic advancement (and other status outcomes) and more toward understanding the means by which sibship size exercises its effect.” At the same time, Steelman and her colleagues note a few studies—published shortly before their review—that they describe as “pos[ing] a real threat to conventional wisdom about the effects of sibship size on intellectual development, especially if they are replicated with more nationally representative data sets.”
- 101 ASA Family Section, “William J. Goode Book Award,” <http://www.asafamilysection.com/william-j-goode-book-award-recipients.html>.

- 102 However, this should not be taken to mean that all families with multiple children are seen as a blessing by marriage fundamentalists; rather only those headed by two parents in an original marriage. The mythologized “welfare queen” with multiple children (often assumed to have been fathered by multiple men), and the stereotype of the immigrant mother coming to the United States to have multiple children on U.S. soil in order to gain citizenship, are prevalent and harmful tropes.
- 103 See criticism of French President Emmanuel Macron when he said: “I always say: ‘Please present me the lady who decided, being perfectly educated, to have seven, eight, nine children.’” Associated Press, “Mothers of big families challenge Macron’s fertility stance,” *The Washington Times* (October 18, 2018), available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/oct/18/angry-mothers-take-on-macron-over-fertility-commen/>. In 2015, Pope Francis was quoted saying “some think that, and excuse the word, in order to be good Catholics we have to be like rabbits.” Alan Holdren, “Pope: ‘Responsible Parenthood’ Doesn’t Mean Birth Control,” *National Catholic Register* (January 19, 2015), available at <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/pope-responsible-parenthood-doesnt-mean-birth-control>. The remark provoked considerable controversy. “Former Republican Sen. Rick Santorum, a Catholic father of seven, said, ‘It’s sometimes very difficult to listen to the Pope and some of the things he says off the cuff, and this is one of them.’” Edward Pentin, “Reverberations Continue From Pope’s ‘Rabbits’ Remark,” *National Catholic Register* (January 26, 2015), available at <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/reverberations-continue-from-popes-rabbits-remark>. Shortly afterwards, in remarks to Italy’s Association of Large Families, the Pope said, “In a world often marked by egoism, a large family is a school of solidarity and of mission that’s of benefit to the entire society. Every family is a cell of society, but large families are richer and more vital cells.” Edward Pentin, “The Pope and Responsible Parenthood,” *National Catholic Register* (February 2, 2015), available at <http://www.ncregister.com/site/article/the-pope-and-responsible-parenthood>.
- 104 Although not a topic of this report, right-wing populist leaders are typically marriage fundamentalists. Examples include Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. See, e.g., Balázs Pivarnik, “Family and gender in Orbán’s Hungary,” Heinrich Böll Stiftung (July 2018), at <https://www.boell.de/en/2018/07/04/family-and-gender-viktor-orbans-hungary>; Jen Kirby, “What you need to know about Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil’s far-right president,” *Vox* (January 2, 2010), <https://www.vox.com/2019/1/2/18165663/jair-bolsonaro-president-brazil-trump>.
- 105 See, e.g., W. Bradford Wilcox, “Marriage matters: The Left continues to deny the importance of matrimony in escaping poverty.”
- 106 In her book *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Zone Books/MIT Press, 2017), Melinda Cooper argues that social conservatives and neoliberals, despite their differences, have effectively worked together over several decades to limit the welfare state. As James Chappel puts in a review of Cooper’s book, for both neoliberals and social conservatives, “the neoliberal family, by privatizing risk and deficit spending, provided an alternative to both the New Dealers’ visions of a family supported by social insurance and the new kinship models proposed by feminists, gay rights advocates, and others.” James Chappel, “Modern Family,” *Dissent* (Summer 2017), available at <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/family-values-melinda-cooper-review>
- 107 Charles Murray, “The coming white underclass,” *Wall Street Journal* (October 29, 1993): A14, available at <http://www.aei.org/publication/the-coming-white-underclass/>.
- 108 AEI and Brookings, “Opportunity, Responsibility, and Security: A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream,” available at <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Full-Report.pdf>.
- 109 On the use of public shaming as a legal and policy tool, see Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law* (Princeton University Press, 2004). Nussbaum argues that a “liberal society has particular reasons to inhibit shame and to protect its citizens from shaming.”
- 110 “NYC teen pregnancy prevention campaign comes under fire,” CNN, March 7, 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/03/07/health/new-york-planned-parenthood/index.html> and Lauren Rankin, “New York’s Teen Pregnancy Campaign Quietly Gets Made Over, Still Misses the Mark,” *Rewire.News*, March 21, 2014, <https://rewire.news/article/2014/03/21/new-yorks-teen-pregnancy-campaign-quietly-gets-made-still-misses-mark/>. See also “2012 Urban Innovator,” Manhattan Institute (video of remarks of Robert Doar). Doar urged the media, when reporting on poverty, to “ask a simple question: where’s the father?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-ogyUvKq-E>, last accessed February 15, 2019.
- 111 Richard Reeves, “Shame is Not a Four-Letter Word,” *New York Times*, March 15, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/16/opinion/a-case-for-shaming-teenage-pregnancy.html>
- 112 Gloria Malone, “I Was a Teenage Mother,” *New York Times*, March 16, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/16/opinion/i-was-a-teenage-mother.html>. See also Alex Ronan, “Teen Moms Need Support, Not Shame,” *The Cut*, May 8, 2015 (interview with Gloria Malone and Natasha Vianna, founders of #noteenshame, who describe their experiences of being shamed and stigmatized).

- 113 See, e.g., Victoria Baily, “Language, Labels and “Lone Parents,” Vanier Institute, <https://vanierinstitute.ca/language-labels-lone-parents/>.
- 114 See, e.g., Franklin Gillam Jr., “The ‘Welfare Queen’ Experiment: How Viewers React to Images of African-American Mothers on Welfare,” *Nieman Reports*, 53(2) (Summer 1999) (“The welfare queen script has two key components: welfare recipients are disproportionately women, and women on welfare are disproportionately African-American. What I discovered is that among white subjects, exposure to these script elements reduced support for various welfare programs, increased stereotyping of African-Americans, and heightened support for maintaining “traditional” gender roles.”)
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- 116 David Pilgrim, “The Jezebel Stereotype” (2012), Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University, <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/jezebel/index.htm>
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- 118 David Pilgrim, “The Sapphire Caricature” (2012), Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University, <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/antiblack/sapphire.htm>
- 119 Charles Blow, Paul Ryan, Culture, and Poverty, March 21, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/22/opinion/blow-paul-ryan-culture-and-poverty.html>
- 120 Ibid.
- 121 For a compilation of examples in the media, see “The Absent Black Fathers Myth” at https://drive.google.com/file/d/19R8_8jvWZA_WnwxPoI46QNMiroyFfYXF/view.
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- 124 Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, “Bargaining in the Shadow of the Law: Divorce Laws and Family Distress,” (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2018), available at <https://www.nber.org/papers/w10175>.
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