



# Trump's Attacks on Families

Conservative politicians and the religious right routinely extol the importance of families, but unfortunately, not all families are seen or treated as equally important. As we discuss in our report, “The Case Against Marriage Fundamentalism,” a hierarchy exists in American public policy that prioritizes certain types of families over others. Men and women in their first marriages are treated as the “ideal” family structure, with unmarried cohabiting parents, single parents, queer families, and all other family formations considered less valuable and worthy of support. According to many on the right, and even some prominent liberals, married families are more likely to achieve economic security and produce better outcomes for children, a belief which they claim is supported by social scientific research. In reality, there is no scientific consensus on a causal relationship between family structure and economic security or child outcomes.

Policies promoted by the Trump Administration reinforce this worldview about families, as well as the racist and sexist ideas that undergird its foundation. It may seem strange that a thrice married man, who has children with multiple women and a history of extramarital affairs (not to mention admitted sexual assault) would promote a policy agenda rooted in so-called “traditional” Judeo-Christian notions of marriage and family. But as is the case with many political leaders, how they conduct their personal life is largely disconnected from their policy agenda.

# Discrimination in Foster Care and Adoption

While the conservative worldview that privileges some family forms over others harms everyone, queer families have been singled out and negatively impacted by the actions of the Trump Administration. Under an Obama Administration regulation, any agency receiving funds from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is banned from discriminating on the basis of religion or sexual orientation. However, in January 2019, HHS issued a [religious liberty waiver to the state of South Carolina](#) to allow faith-based foster care and adoption providers to discriminate against same-sex couples based on their religious beliefs, while still receiving federal funds. This is consistent with the Administration's [larger](#) and [ongoing](#) rollback of anti-discrimination measures intended to protect the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals.



Certainly, the Trump Administration's attacks on the rights of the LGBTQ+ community are much broader than just foster care and adoption placement in South Carolina. However, the HHS waiver illustrates how hostile the current Administration is toward families that do not include different-sex married parents. Privileging these couples over other types of families is not in the best interests of children, and certainly not the [one in five](#) youth in the foster care system who identify as LGBTQ+ and need loving and supportive homes.

## Marriage Promotion

It is not only queer families that are deemed “less than” under a fundamentalist view of marriage and families, a posture that's reflected in a range of public programs and policy decisions. Federal funding for marriage promotion is based on the idea that marriages are inherently better than non-marital relationships. This federal funding stream was first included in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), the law that ended cash transfers to the poor (Aid to Families with Dependent Children or AFDC) and replaced it with block grants to the states (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF). Since the 1990s, [ineffective](#) marriage promotion efforts have diverted funds away from successful anti-poverty programs.



Trump's Executive Order on Economic Mobility set out to further upend the current welfare system by directing federal agencies overseeing public assistance programs to [“promote marriage and family as a way of escaping poverty.”](#) Rigorous scientific evaluation of these marriage promotion efforts over the course of decades has shown virtually no positive results and, in some cases, a negative impact on relationships and parenting. While some conservatives have argued that receiving public assistance creates disincentives to marriage, [economic research](#) has found that low-income women who received welfare in the past are no more or less likely to marry than similar women who never received welfare. This indicates that it is more likely that economic instability, not welfare receipt, is what reduces marriage rates. Yet these expensive marriage promotion efforts continue unabated under the Trump Administration, using funds that could be better spent on programs that have actually been proven to have a positive impact on families and their economic well-being.

# Abortion and Trump's Attacks on Reproductive Rights

President Trump and the Trump Administration have repeatedly undermined reproductive rights. Highlights include:

- Nominated Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court, over many protests and concerns for his anti-choice views. In the first abortion case to come before the court, *June Medical Services v. Gee*, Kavanaugh dissented, arguing that a Louisiana anti-abortion law should be allowed to take effect.
- Issued a Title X rule change through HHS, dramatically overhauling the federal family planning program, banning any organization that provides abortions or abortion referrals from receiving funds through the program to provide services such as contraception and STD screenings.
- Criticized abortion in State of the Union speech, spreading misinformation about rights to access safe and legal abortion.
- Removed reproductive rights from the State Department's human rights report last year.

In addition to Trump Administration attacks, a steady stream of state-level efforts continue across the U.S., making abortion more difficult to obtain.

## Abstinence-Only Education

The Trump Administration has reformed funding eligibility requirements for sexual education programs intended to reduce teenage pregnancy. The Administration now explicitly references and encourages programs that promote “sexual risk avoidance,” another term for abstinence-only education. There is ample scientific evidence that abstinence-only education does not result in the delay of sexual intercourse among young people, nor does it reduce other sexual risk factors. But these efforts persist because they are linked to a worldview that understands sex as only, or mostly, appropriate within the legal bond of marriage. And because abstinence-only education is explicitly linked to reducing unintended teen pregnancies, such programs tend to erase, and/or further stigmatize, same-sex relationships.

The Trump Administration's rebranding of abstinence-only education also includes references to another scientifically dubious concept: the Success Sequence. This debunked but persistent formula claims that avoiding poverty is easy as long as one completes high school, works a full-time job, and waits to have children until after marriage. Abstinence-only programs have adopted this messaging to support the belief that both sex and childbirth should only occur after marriage.

The Success Sequence uses seemingly precise numbers and complicated-looking statistics in a misleading way to push marriage as superior to all other relationship structures. The sequence sends the message that complex social phenomena (in this case poverty and the income distribution) are almost entirely determined by



individual behavior. The Success Sequence also implies that those who, for whatever reason, are unable to finish school or find a job that pays a family-supporting wage should avoid having children. Because families created outside of this supposed formula for success are often assumed to be the result of “unplanned” pregnancies, this also further ignores the existence of queer families, blended families, and families created through connections other than biological relationships.

Neither marriage promotion, the Success Sequence, or abstinence-only education have been proven to be effective anti-poverty measures. But because they claim to offer solutions that do not require systemic social change, these ideas maintain cultural currency among conservatives to the detriment of those whose lives they touch.

## Biological Supremacy and Access to Paid Leave

In September 2016, Donald Trump released a [proposal for paid parental leave](#), heavily shaped by his daughter Ivanka Trump. The original policy explicitly excluded unmarried mothers and all non-birth parents from accessing the paid leave benefit.



In a now infamous interview with *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Ivanka Trump claimed that the proposal was “comprehensive family and maternity care” while she simultaneously doubled down on the notion that the benefit was only intended to [“enabl\(e\) the mother to recover after childbirth.”](#) She also reiterated that the program would only be available to mothers [“if they have legal married status under the tax code.”](#)

The connections to marriage fundamentalism here are quite transparent. First, both the initial proposal and Ivanka Trump stated that paid leave would only be available if a mother was legally married. Unmarried mothers, not to mention all non-birth parents, were unambiguously excluded. Second, by focusing exclusively on birth mothers, the proposal reinforced the supremacy of biological families and the primacy of the mother-child bond. Families created through fostering, adoption, or any other means would be categorically denied access to paid leave.

Moreover, in Ivanka Trump’s own words, paid leave is “critical for bonding with the child” but apparently from her perspective, only married mothers’ bonding is worthy of support. Unmarried mothers, adoptive parents, and all non-birth parents are either viewed as unimportant, unworthy, or undeserving of the same social benefits. Pushback from experts and activists led the Administration to change their original policy proposal, and its current iterations are slightly more inclusive, [albeit still inadequate and administratively unworkable](#). But the Trump Administration’s original paid parental leave policy proposal exposes that this framework is not about looking out for children’s best interests, but rather about punishing families who do not meet a certain standard. Although the initial Trump proposal was released in 2016, there has been no real movement on the issue from the Administration. [Competing paid leave bills](#) have been introduced in Congress, although they differ in the ways they would be funded and administered, and in their definitions of family. Since nearly [one in three](#) people in the U.S. report having taken off work to care for a chosen family member, ensuring an inclusive definition of family in paid leave laws is both important to combating marital privilege and to reflect the ways people live their lives.

# Family Separations at the Border

The negative impacts of a fundamentalist view of marriage and families goes beyond policies that explicitly relate to family formation. Donald Trump launched his presidential campaign by claiming that Mexican immigrants were “[rapists](#)” who were bringing drugs and crime into the United States. As president, one of his first acts [was to sign an executive order](#) colloquially known as the Muslim ban, which significantly curtailed the number of refugees admitted to the U.S. and suspended entry from a number of Muslim-majority countries. These actions were abhorrent, but some Trump supporters argued they were guided by a desire to help make the country, and by extension families and children, safer.



But soon after taking office, the Trump Administration began [floating the idea](#) of separating immigrant children from their parents when they crossed the border in an attempt to deter families from seeking asylum. It didn't take long for that idea to become a terrifying reality. As soon as families seeking asylum crossed the border – a necessary action in order to apply for asylum – children were separated from their parents at the direction of the Administration and the Department of Homeland Security. The parents were then charged with unlawful entry and imprisoned in federal jail, while their children were placed in [foster care](#) or detention centers, sometimes hundreds or thousands of miles away from their parents. Children were often held alone in cages, and reports of [neglect, mistreatment, and abuse](#) were rampant.

The number of children impacted has been difficult to verify, with the Department of Homeland Security [reporting](#) in June 2018 that approximately 2,000 children were separated from their parents in April and May 2018. As of December 2018, there were [reportedly 2,737 children](#) who had been separated from their guardians and held by the government. Since then, the assistant inspector general for evaluation and inspections at the Department of Health and Human Services has confirmed that the total number of children separated from their parents and guardians is unknown, but is likely [thousands higher](#) than reported, and reports suggest that those [separations might be dwarfed by the number of cases of other relatives](#) — siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents, cousins — bringing a child to the United States without their parents, to then be separated from her by immigration agents. Despite a court ruling against the practice, family separations at the border [continue to occur](#). The Trump Administration may espouse the virtues of family when it can be used to justify slashing the social assistance budget, but such concerns always disappear when it comes to immigrant families, especially when those families are Black or Brown.

# Conclusion

The actions of the Trump Administration indicate two things clearly. First, the policies of the president and his allies are firmly rooted in the idea that married two-parent families are best for children, adults and society. Married families are viewed as superior and treated better than unmarried families, and biologically-created families are granted recognition and benefits too often denied to families created through other means. Non-immigrant families are valued more than immigrant families, and native-born children are deemed worthy of protections denied to their equally worthy immigrant peers (though family separation policies also hurt many U.S.-born children). While marriage fundamentalists often claim that their worldview is informed by a desire to protect children and provide them with the best possible environment to thrive, the actions of the Trump Administration have been actively harmful to children and families — thus exposing this rationale as a sham. Marriage fundamentalism encourages discriminatory policies that promote a harmful racial, gender, and religious social hierarchy.



For more information on the harms of marriage fundamentalism, read our report, *The Case Against Marriage Fundamentalism: Embracing Family Justice For All*, at [familystoryproject.org](http://familystoryproject.org).