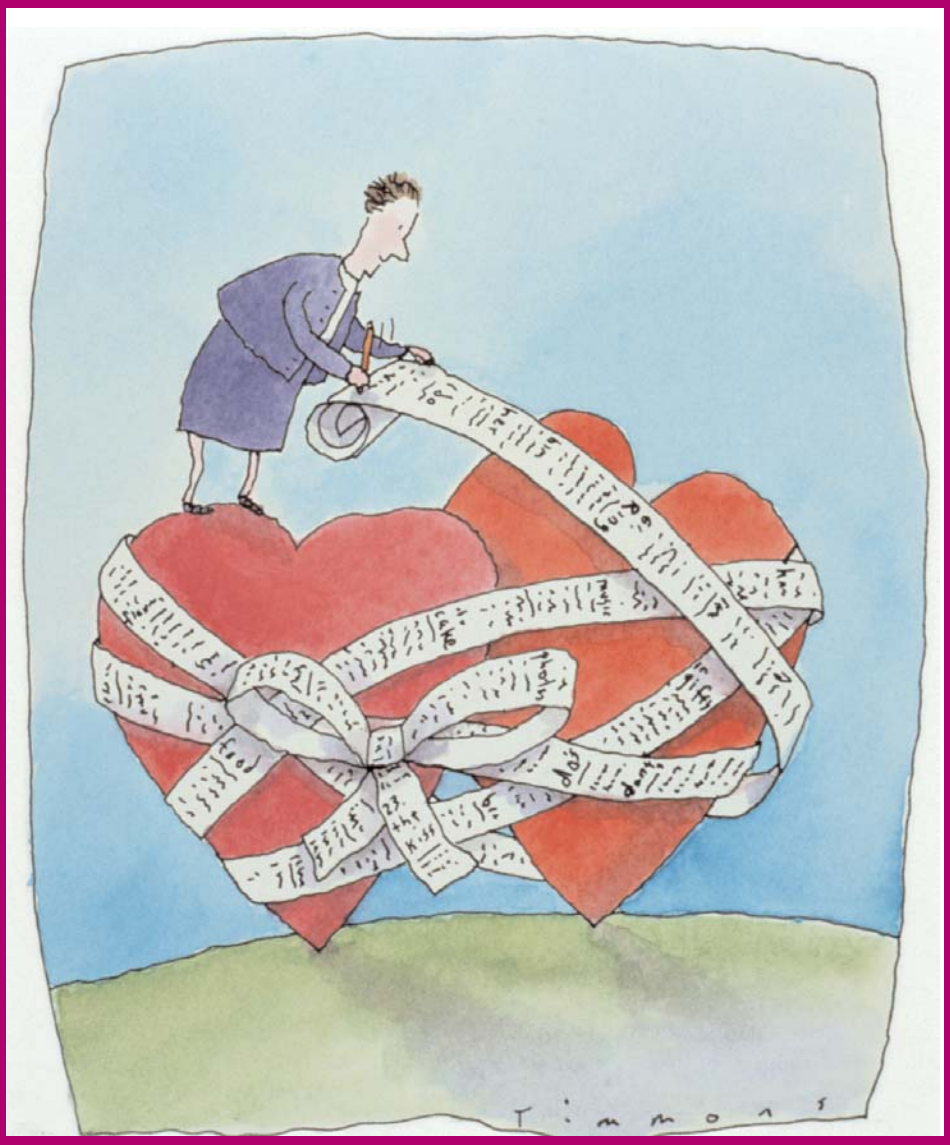
A Report from Family Scholars

Why Marriage Matters, Second Edition

Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences



Institute for American Values

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Table of Contents

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Why Marriage Matters
Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences

Introduction

IN ALL TOO MANY communities in the United States, especially poor and minority ones, marriage is in retreat. The statistics tell part of the story. In 1960, 5 percent of children were born outside of wedlock. Today, 34 percent of children are born outside of wedlock. In 1960, more than 67 percent of adults were married. Today, fewer than 56 percent of adults are married. As a consequence, American children are much less likely to spend their entire childhood in an intact, married family than they were 50 years ago. Likewise, men and women are less likely than they were 50 years ago to get married as a young adult and stay married. The bottom line is this: *The institution of marriage has less of a hold over American men, women, and children than it did earlier in the last century.*

These trends are even more dramatic in minority and lower income communities. In 2002, 68 percent of African American births and 44 percent of Latino births were out of wedlock, compared to 29 percent of white births. Similarly, although only about 5 percent of college-educated mothers have children out of wedlock, approximately 25 percent of mothers without a high school degree have children outside marriage.[1] Most of the women in the latter group hail from low-income families. African Americans and men and women without college degrees are also significantly more likely to divorce than their Anglo college-educated peers.[2]

The changes that have swept over American families in the last two generations have inspired a large body of social scientific research and a growing number of marriage education programs aimed at better preparing couples for marriage and better equipping couples with the knowledge, values, and skills required for successful marriage in today's world. This report, the second edition of *Why Marriage Matters*, is an attempt to summarize the research into a succinct form

useful to Americans on all sides of ongoing family debates — to report what we know about the importance of marriage for our families and for our society.

What does the social science tell us? In addition to reviewing research on family topics covered in the first edition of the report, this report highlights five new themes in marriage-related research.

Five New Themes

1. ***Even though marriage has lost ground in minority communities in recent years, marriage has not lost its value in these communities.*** This report shows that African Americans and Latinos benefit from marriage in much the same way that Anglos benefit from marriage. We also present evidence that marriage matters in countries, such as Sweden, that have markedly different approaches to public policy, social welfare, and religion than does the United States. In other words, marriage is a multicultural institution.

2. ***An emerging line of research indicates that marriage benefits poor Americans, and Americans from disadvantaged backgrounds, even though these Americans are now less likely to get and stay married.*** Among other findings, this report shows that women from disadvantaged backgrounds who marry and stay married are much less likely to suffer poverty or other material hardship compared to their peers who do not marry.

3. ***Marriage seems to be particularly important in civilizing men, turning their attention away from dangerous, antisocial, or self-centered activities and towards the needs of a family.*** Married men drink less, fight less, and are less likely to engage in criminal activity than their single peers. Married husbands and fathers are significantly more involved and affectionate with their wives and children than men in cohabiting relationships (with and without children). The norms, status rewards, and social support offered to men by marriage all combine to help men walk down the path to adult responsibility.

4. ***Beyond its well-known contributions to adult health, marriage influences the biological functioning of adults and children in ways that can have important social consequences.*** For instance, marriage appears to drive down testosterone in men, with clear consequences for their propensity to aggression. Girls who grow up in non-intact families — especially girls who are exposed to unrelated males in their homes — are more likely to experience premature sexual development and, consequently, are more likely to have a teenage pregnancy. Thus, marriage, or the lack thereof, appears to have important biosocial consequences for men, women, and children.

5. ***We find that the relationship quality of intimate partners is related both to their marital status and, for married adults, to the degree to which these partners are normatively committed to marriage.*** So, claims that love, not marriage, are crucial to a happy family life do not hold up. Marriage matters even or especially when it comes to fostering high-quality intimate relationships.

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

A Word about Selection Effects

Good research seeks to tease out "selection effects," or the pre-existing differences between individuals who marry, become unwed parents, or divorce. Does divorce cause poverty, for example, or is it simply that poor people are more likely to divorce? Good social science attempts to distinguish between causal relationships and mere correlations in a variety of ways. The studies cited here are for the most part based on large, nationally representative samples that control for race, education, income, and other confounding factors. In many, but not all cases, social scientists have been able to use longitudinal data to track individuals as they marry, divorce, or stay single, increasing our confidence that marriage itself matters. Where the evidence is, in our view, overwhelming

that marriage causes increases in well-being, we say so. Where the causal pathways are not as well understood, we are more cautious.

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

Nevertheless, scholarship is getting better in addressing selection effects. For instance, in this report we summarize two divorce studies that follow identical and non-identical adult twins in Australia to see to what extent the effects of divorce on their children are genetic and to what extent the effects of divorce on their children seem to be a consequence of divorce itself. Methodological innovations like these, as well as complex analyses using econometric models, are affording us greater confidence that family structure exercises a causal influence for some outcomes.

Of course individual circumstances vary.[3] While divorce is associated with increased risks of serious psychological and social problems for children, for example, about 75 percent of children of divorce do not suffer such problems (compared to approximately 90 percent of children from intact families).[4] While marriage is a social good, not all marriages are equal. Research does not generally support the idea that remarriage is better for children than living with a single mother.[5] Unhappy marriages do not have the same benefits as the average marriage.[6] Divorce or separation provides an important escape hatch for children and adults in violent or high-conflict marriages. Families, communities, and policy makers interested in distributing the benefits of marriage more equally must do more than merely discourage legal divorce.

Despite its inherent limitations, good social science is a better guide to social policy than uninformed opinion or prejudice. The public and policy makers deserve to hear what research suggests about the consequences of marriage and its absence for children and adults. This report represents our best judgment of what the current social science evidence reveals about the importance of marriage in our social system.

Fundamental Conclusions

Here are our three fundamental conclusions:

1. ***Marriage is an important social good,*** associated with an impressively broad array of positive outcomes for children and adults alike.

2. ***Marriage is an important public good,*** associated with a range of economic, health, educational, and safety benefits that help local, state, and federal governments serve the common good.

3. ***The benefits of marriage extend to poor and minority communities,*** despite the fact that marriage is particularly fragile in these communities.

FAMILY STRUCTURE and processes are of course only one factor contributing to child and social well-being. Our discussion here is not meant to minimize the importance of other social and economic factors, such as poverty, child support, unemployment, teenage childbearing, neighborhood safety, or the quality of education for both parents and children. Marriage is not a panacea for all of our social ills. For instance, when it comes to child well-being, research suggests that family structure is a better predictor of children's psychological and social welfare, whereas poverty is a better predictor of children's educational attainment.[7]

But whether American society and, indeed, the world, succeeds or fails in building a healthy marriage culture is clearly a matter of legitimate public concern. In particular, marriage is an issue of paramount importance if we wish to help the most vulnerable members of our society: the poor, minorities, and children.

The Twenty-Six Conclusions: A Snapshot

Family

1. Marriage increases the likelihood that fathers and mothers have good relationships with their children.
2. Cohabitation is not the functional equivalent of marriage.
3. Growing up outside an intact marriage increases the likelihood that children will themselves divorce or become unwed parents.
4. Marriage is a virtually universal human institution.
5. Marriage, and a normative commitment to marriage, foster high-quality relationships between adults, as well as between parents and children.
6. Marriage has important biosocial consequences for adults and children.

Economics

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

Physical Health and Longevity

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

Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being

20. Children whose parents divorce have higher rates of psychological distress and mental illness.
21. Divorce appears to increase significantly the risk of suicide.
22. Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do single or cohabiting mothers.
23. Boys raised in single-parent families are more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal behavior.
24. Marriage appears to reduce the risk that adults will be either perpetrators or victims of crime.
25. Married women appear to have a lower risk of experiencing domestic violence than do cohabiting or dating women.
26. A child who is not living with his or her own two married parents is at greater risk for child abuse.

Family

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

Mothers as well as fathers are affected by the absence of marriage. Single mothers on average report more conflict with and less monitoring of their children than do married mothers.[8] As adults, children from intact marriages report being closer to their mothers on average than do children of divorce.[9] In one nationally representative study, 30 percent of young adults whose parents divorced reported poor relationships with their mothers, compared to 16 percent of children whose parents stayed married.[10]

But children's relationships with their fathers depend even more on marriage than do children's relationships with their mothers. Sixty-five percent of young adults whose parents divorced had poor relationships with their fathers (compared to 29 percent from nondivorced families).[11] On average, children whose parents divorce or never marry see their fathers less frequently[12] and have less affectionate relationships with their fathers[13] than do children whose parents get and stay married. Studies of children of divorce suggest that losing contact with their fathers in the wake of a divorce is one of the most painful consequences of divorce.[14] Divorce appears to have an even greater negative effect on relationships between fathers and their children than remaining in an unhappy marriage.[15] Even cohabiting, biological fathers who live with their children are not as involved and affectionate with their children as are married, biological fathers who reside with their children.[16]

2. Cohabitation is not the functional equivalent of marriage.

As a group, cohabitors in the United States more closely resemble singles than married people, though cohabitation is an exceptionally heterogenous status, with some partners treating it as a prelude to

marriage, others as an alternative to marriage, others as an opportunity to test for marriage, and still others as a convenient dating relationship.[17] Adults who live together are more similar to singles than to married couples in terms of physical health[18] and emotional well-being and mental health,[19] as well as in assets and earnings.[20]

Children with cohabiting parents have outcomes more similar to children living with single (or remarried) parents than children from intact marriages.[21] In other words, children living in cohabiting unions do not fare as well as children living in intact, married families. For instance, one recent study found that teenagers living in cohabiting unions were significantly more likely to experience behavioral and emotional difficulties than were teenagers in intact, married families, even after controlling for a range of socioeconomic and parenting factors.[22]

A major problem associated with cohabitation for children is that cohabiting unions are much less stable than married unions. One recent study found that 50 percent of children born to a cohabiting couple see their parents' unions end by age five, compared to only 15 percent of children born to a married couple.[23] This study also found that Latino and African American children born into cohabiting unions were particularly likely to see their parents break up.[24] Another problem is that cohabiting parents are less likely to devote their financial resources to childrearing. One study found that cohabiting parents devoted a larger share of their income to alcohol and tobacco, and a smaller share of their income to children's education, than do married parents.[25]

Selection effects account for a large portion of the difference between married people and cohabitors. As a group, cohabitors (who are not engaged) have lower incomes and less education.[26] Couples who live together also, on average, report relationships of lower quality than do married couples — with cohabitors reporting more conflict, more violence, and lower levels of satisfaction and commitment.[27] Even biological parents who cohabit have poorer quality relationships and are more likely to part than parents who marry.[28] Cohabitation differs from marriage in part because Americans who choose merely to live together are less committed to each other as partners and their future

together.[29] Partly as a consequence, cohabiting couples are less likely than married couples to pool their income.[30] Another challenge confronting cohabiting couples is that partners often disagree about the nature and future of their relationship — for instance, one partner may anticipate marriage and another partner may view the relationship as a convenient form of dating.[31]

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

Children whose parents divorce or fail to marry are more likely to become young unwed parents, to experience divorce themselves someday, to marry as teenagers, and to have unhappy marriages and/or relationships.[32] Daughters raised outside of intact marriages are approximately three times more likely to become young, unwed mothers than are children whose parents married and stayed married.[33] Parental divorce increases the odds that adult children will also divorce by at least 50 percent, partly because children of divorce are more likely to marry prematurely and partly because children of divorce often marry other children of divorce, thereby making their marriage even more precarious.[34]

Divorce is apparently most likely to be transmitted across the generations when parents in relatively low-conflict marriages divorce.[35] Moreover, remarriage does not appear to help children. For instance, girls in stepfamilies are slightly *more* likely to have a teenage pregnancy compared to girls in single-parent families, and much more likely to have a teenage pregnancy than girls in intact, married families.[36] Children who grow up in stepfamilies are also more likely to marry as teenagers, compared to children who grow up in single-parent or intact, married families.[37] Finally, new research also indicates that the effects of divorce cross three generations. *Grandchildren* of couples who divorced are significantly more likely to experience marital discord, negative relationships with their parents, and low levels of educational attainment, compared to grandchildren whose grandparents did not divorce.[38]

4. Marriage is a virtually universal human institution.

Marriage exists in virtually every known human society.[39] The shape of human marriage varies considerably in different cultural contexts. But at least since the beginning of recorded history, in all the flourishing varieties of human cultures documented by anthropologists, marriage has been a universal human institution. As a virtually universal human idea, marriage is about regulating the reproduction of children, families, and society. While marriage systems differ (and not every person or class within a society marries), marriage across societies is a publicly acknowledged and supported sexual union that creates kinship obligations and resource pooling between men, women, and the children that their sexual union may produce.

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

Some say that love, not marriage, makes a family. They argue that family structure per se does not matter. Instead, what matters is the quality of family relationships.[40] Others argue that the marital ethic of lifelong commitment needs to be diluted if we seek to promote high-quality relationships. Instead, the new marital ethic should be conditional, such that spouses should remain together only so long as they continue to love one another.[41]

These arguments, however, overlook what we know about the effects of marriage, and a normative commitment to the institution of marriage, on intimate relationships. By offering legal and normative support and direction to a relationship, by providing an expectation of sexual fidelity and lifelong commitment, and by furnishing adults a unique social status as spouses, marriage typically fosters better romantic and parental relationships than do alternatives to marriage.[42] For all these reasons, in part, adults who are married enjoy happier, healthier, and less violent relationships, compared to adults who are in dating or cohabiting relationships.[43] Parents who are married enjoy more supportive and less conflictual relationships with one another, compared to parents who are

cohabiting or otherwise romantically involved with one another.[44] In turn, married parents generally have better relationships with their children than do cohabiting, divorced, unmarried, or remarried parents.[45] Some of the associations between family structure and family process are products of selection — that is, couples with better relationships are more likely to get and stay married. But as this report makes clear, the research also suggests that the social, legal, and normative supports provided by marriage foster better intimate relationships and better parent-child relationships.

So does the *idea* of marriage. Individuals who value the institution of marriage for its own sake — that is, who oppose easy divorce, who believe that children ought to be born into marriage, and who think marriage is better than cohabitation — are more likely to invest themselves in their marriages and to experience high-quality marital relationships. Ironically, individuals who embrace a conditional ethic to marriage — an ethic based on the idea that marriages ought to continue only as long as both spouses are happy — are less happy in their marriages. One longitudinal study found that individuals who oppose divorce are more likely to devote themselves to their spouses, even after controlling for the initial quality of the marriage.[46] Other research indicates that spouses, particularly husbands, are more likely to sacrifice for their spouses if they are strongly committed to the marriage.[47] A recent study finds that women's marital happiness, and their reports of happiness with their husband's affection and understanding, are strongly and positively linked to high levels of shared spousal commitment to pro-marriage norms.[48] Another study found that fathers who are normatively committed to marriage are significantly more likely to praise and hug their children than are fathers who are not committed to marriage.[49]

Scholars speculate that a strong normative commitment to marriage makes married adults less likely to look for alternative partners and more conscious of the long-term character of their relationship. Both of these factors encourage adults to invest more in their current relationship.[50] Thus, adults who hold a strong normative commitment to marriage appear to enjoy higher-quality relationships with family members, compared to adults who are not strongly committed to the institution of marriage.

6. Marriage has important biosocial consequences for adults and children.

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

First, marriage appears to reduce men's testosterone levels. More than five studies analyzing different populations find that married men (especially married fathers) have lower testosterone levels than do similar men who never-married or divorced.[51] For this outcome, however, cohabiting men appear to be affected just as much as are married men. What seems to matter for men's testosterone levels is having an intimate, ongoing, and everyday relationship with one woman.[52] Given that testosterone is associated with aggression, sensation seeking, and a range of other antisocial behaviors, one of the ways that marriage may influence men is by reducing their levels of testosterone.[53] Of course, there may also be selection effects at work. It may be that men with lower levels of testosterone are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior and more likely to marry. But the one longitudinal study done so far on men strongly suggests that marriage plays a causal role in driving down testosterone (as well as cortisol).[54] Future research will have to unpack further the relationships between marriage, testosterone, and antisocial behavior among men.

Second, girls appear to benefit in their sexual development from growing up in an intact, married family. Extensive research by Bruce Ellis and others indicates that adolescent girls who grow up apart from an intact, married household are significantly more likely to have early menstruation, premature sexual activity, and a teenage pregnancy.[55] He finds that girls who have close, engaged relationships with their fathers have menstruation at a later age and that girls who lose their biological father as young children have menstruation at an earlier age. Moreover, girls who live with an unrelated male (e.g., stepfather or mother's boyfriend) have menstruation even earlier than do girls living in a single-mother

household. Ellis speculates that girls' sexual development is influenced by the male pheromones — biological chemicals that individuals emit to one another, which have been associated with accelerated sexual development in mammals — that the girls encounter in their social environment. The pheromones of their father appear to inhibit premature sexual development, while the pheromones of an unrelated male appear to accelerate such development. In his words, "These findings . . . are broadly consistent with the hypothesis that pheromonal exposure to the biological father inhibits pubertal development in daughters."[56] Early sexual development, in turn, is associated with significantly higher levels of premature sexual activity and teenage pregnancy on the part of girls, even after controlling for economic and psychological factors in the household that might otherwise confound the relationship between family structure and girls' sexual activity.[57] This research strongly suggests that an intact, married household protects girls from premature sexual development and, consequently, teen pregnancy.

Economics

7. Divorce and unmarried childbearing increase poverty for both children and mothers.

Research has consistently shown that both divorce[58] and unmarried childbearing[59] increase the economic vulnerability of both children and mothers. The effects of family structure on poverty remain powerful, even after controlling for race and family background. Changes in family structure are an important cause of new entries into poverty (although a decline in the earnings of the household head is the single most important cause). Child poverty rates are high in part because of the growth of single-parent families.[60] In fact, some studies indicate that all of the increase in child poverty since the 1970s can be attributed to increases in single-parenthood due to divorce and nonmarital childbearing.[61] When parents fail to marry and stay married, children are more likely to experience deep and persistent poverty, even after controlling for race and family background. The majority of children who grow up outside of intact married families experience at least one year of dire poverty (family incomes less than half the official poverty threshold).[62] Divorce as well as unmarried childbearing plays a role: Between one-fifth and one-third of divorcing women end up in poverty following their divorce.[63]

8. Married couples seem to build more wealth on average than singles or cohabiting couples.

Marriage seems to be a wealth-creating institution. Married couples build more wealth on average than do otherwise similar singles or cohabiting couples, even after controlling for income.[64] The economic advantages of marriage stem from more than just access to two incomes. Marriage partners appear to build more wealth for some of the same reasons that partnerships in general are economically efficient, including economies of scale and specialization and exchange. Marital social norms that encourage healthy, productive behavior and wealth accumulation (such as buying a home) also appear to play a role. Married parents also more often receive wealth transfers from both sets

of grandparents than do cohabiting couples; single mothers almost never receive financial help from the child's father's kin.[65]

9. Marriage reduces poverty and material hardship for disadvantaged women and their children.

A growing body of research by Robert Lerman and others indicates that the economic benefits of marriage extend even to women who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Focusing on low-income families, Lerman found that married couples with children generally had lower levels of material hardship — that is, they were less likely to miss a meal or fail to pay their utilities, rent, or mortgage — compared to other families, especially single mothers living alone.[66] In another study, he found that mothers with low academic abilities who married saw their living standards rise about 65 percent higher than similar single mothers living with no other adult, over 50 percent higher than single mothers living with another adult, and 20 percent higher than mothers who were cohabiting.[67] Other research has found that disadvantaged mothers are significantly less likely to be in poverty if they had their first child in marriage, compared to similar mothers who had their first child out-of-wedlock. This research found that 35 percent of disadvantaged African American mothers who had a non-marital first birth are below the poverty line, compared to 17 percent of disadvantaged African American mothers who had a marital first birth.[68]

Why is marriage more likely to help poor women and children than cohabitation? Married couples appear to share more of their income and other property, they get more support from extended families and friends, and they get more help from civic institutions (churches, food pantries, etc.).[69] There are two caveats to this work. First, marriage does not produce as many benefits for women who have had a premarital birth.[70] Second, marriage also does not produce much of an economic boost for women who go on to divorce, and divorce is more common among women with comparatively low levels of income and education.[71] So women, particularly poor women, do not much benefit economically from marriage unless their marriages are stable.

10. Minorities benefit economically from marriage.

The economic benefits associated with marriage are not limited to whites. Research also suggests that African Americans and Latinos benefit materially from marriage. Studies find marriage effects at the community and individual levels. At the societal level, research suggests that black child poverty rates would be almost 20 percent lower than they currently are had the proportion of black children living in married families not fallen below 1970 levels.[72]

At the individual level, one study found that black single mothers who marry see their income rise by 81 percent (compared to an income increase of 45 percent for white single mothers who marry). This same study found that the income of black children fell by 53 percent two years after a divorce.[73]

Another study of older women indicates that married African American women enjoy significantly more income than their widowed, divorced, and especially unmarried peers.[74] Black men who marry also see a significant increase in their annual income, about $4,000 according to one estimate.[75] Finally, African Americans and Latinos who are married also enjoy significantly higher levels of household equity, compared to their peers who are not married.[76]

11. Married men earn more money than do single men with similar education and job histories.

A large body of research, both in the United States and other developed countries, finds that married men earn between 10 and 40 percent more than do single men with similar education and job histories.[77] While selection effects may account for part of the marriage premium,[78] the most sophisticated, recent research appears to confirm that marriage itself increases the earning power of men, on the order of 24 percent.[79]

Why do married men earn more? The causes are not entirely understood, but married men appear to have greater work commitment, more strategic approaches to job searches, and healthier and more stable personal

routines (including sleep, diet, and alcohol consumption). One study found that married men were more likely to quit with a new job in hand, less likely to quit without a new job in hand, and less likely to be fired, compared to unmarried men.[80] Husbands also benefit from both the work effort and emotional support that they receive from wives.[81]

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

Parental divorce or nonmarriage has a significant, long-term negative impact on children's educational attainment. Children of divorced or unwed parents have lower grades and other measures of academic achievement, are more likely to be held back, and are more likely to drop out of high school. The effects of parental divorce or nonmarriage on children's educational attainment remain significant even after controlling for race, family background, and genetic factors.[82] Children whose parents divorce end up with significantly lower levels of education than do children in single-mother families created by the death of the father.[83] Children whose parents remarry do no better, on average, than do children who live with single mothers.[84] It is not yet clear if the effects of family structure vary by race. Some studies indicate that African American educational performance is affected more than white performance by father absence, whereas other studies come to the opposite conclusion.[85]

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

Parental divorce appears to have long-term consequences on children's socioeconomic attainment. While most children of divorce do not drop out of high school or become unemployed, as adults, children of divorced parents have lower occupational status and earnings and have increased rates of unemployment and economic hardship.[86] They are less likely to attend and graduate from college and also less likely to attend and graduate from four-year and highly selective colleges, even after controlling for family background and academic and extracurricular achievements.[87]

Physical Health and Longevity

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

Divorce and unmarried childbearing appear to have negative effects on children's physical health and life expectancy.[88] Longitudinal research suggests that parental divorce increases the incidence of health problems in children.[89] The health advantages of married homes remain, even after taking socioeconomic status into account. Even in Sweden, a country with an extensive social welfare system and a nationalized health care system, children who grow up outside an intact family are much more likely to suffer serious disadvantages. One recent study of the entire Swedish population of children found that boys who were reared in single-parent homes were more than 50 percent more likely to die from a range of causes — such as suicide, accidents, or addiction — than were boys reared in two-parent homes. Moreover, even after controlling for the socioeconomic status and psychological health of parents, Swedish boys and girls in single-parent families were more than twice as likely as children in two-parent families to suffer from psychiatric diseases, suicide attempts, alcoholism, and drug abuse. They were also more likely to experience traffic injuries, falls, and poisonings than were their peers in two-parent families.[90]

The health effects of family structure extend into adulthood. One study that followed a sample of academically gifted, middle-class children for 70 years found that parental divorce reduced a child's life expectancy by 4 years, even after controlling for childhood health status and family background, as well as personality characteristics such as impulsiveness and emotional instability.[91] Another analysis found that 40-year-old men whose parents had divorced were three times more likely to die in the next 40 years than were 40-year-old men whose parents stayed married:

> [I]t does appear that parental divorce sets off a negative chain of events, which contribute to a higher mortality risk among individuals from divorced homes.[92]

15. Parental marriage is associated with a sharply lower risk of infant mortality.

Babies born to married parents have lower rates of infant mortality. On average, having an unmarried mother is associated with an approximately 50 percent increase in the risk of infant mortality.[93] While parental marital status predicts infant mortality in both blacks and whites, the increased risk due to the mother's marital status is greatest among the most advantaged: white mothers over the age of 20.[94]

The cause of this relationship between marital status and infant mortality is not known. There are many selection effects involved: Unmarried mothers are more likely to be young, black, less educated and poor than are married mothers. But even after controlling for age, race, and education, children born to unwed mothers generally have higher rates of infant mortality.[95] While unmarried mothers are also less likely to get early prenatal care, infant mortality rates in these instances are higher not only in the neonatal period, but through infancy[96] and even early childhood.[97] Children born to unmarried mothers have an increased incidence of both intentional and unintentional fatal injuries.[98] Marital status remains a powerful predictor of infant mortality, even in countries with nationalized health care systems and strong supports for single mothers.[99]

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

Married men and women have lower rates of alcohol consumption and substance abuse than do singles. Longitudinal research confirms that young adults, particularly men, who marry tend to reduce their rates of alcohol consumption and illegal drug use.[100] Children whose parents marry and stay married also have lower rates of substance abuse, even after controlling for family background and the genetic traits of the parents.[101] Twice as many young teens in single-mother families and stepfamilies have tried marijuana (and young teens living with single fathers were three times as likely). Young teens whose parents stay married are also the least likely to experiment with tobacco or alcohol.[102] Data from the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse show that,

even after controlling for age, race, gender, and family income, teens living with both biological parents are significantly less likely to use illicit drugs, alcohol, and tobacco.[103] How does family fragmentation relate to teen drug use? Many pathways are probably involved, including increased family stress, reduced parental monitoring, and weakened attachment to parents, especially fathers.[104]

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

Married people live longer than do otherwise similar people who are single or divorced. Husbands as well as wives live longer on average, even after controlling for race, income, and family background.[105] In most developed countries, middle-aged single, divorced, or widowed men are about twice as likely to die as married men, and nonmarried women face risks about one and a half times as great as those faced by married women.[106]

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

Both men and women who are married enjoy better health on average than do single, cohabiting, or divorced individuals.[107] Selection effects regarding divorce or remarriage may account for part of this differential, although research has found no consistent pattern of such selection.[108] Married people appear to manage illness better, monitor each other's health, have higher incomes and wealth, and adopt healthier lifestyles than do otherwise similar singles.[109] A recent study of the health effects of marriage drawn from 9,333 respondents to the Health and Retirement Survey of Americans between the ages of 51 and 61 compared the incidence of major diseases, as well as functional disability, in married, cohabiting, divorced, widowed, and never-married individuals. "Without exception," the authors report, "married persons have the lowest rates of morbidity for each of the diseases, impairments, functioning problems and disabilities." Marital status differences in disability remained "dramatic" even after controlling for age, sex, and race/ethnicity.[110] Another study from the federally-funded Centers for Disease Control

found that married adults were less likely to be in poor health, to have activity limitations, to have headaches, to suffer serious psychological distress, to smoke, and to have a drinking problem, compared to widowed, divorced, and cohabiting adults.[111]

Studies also suggest, however, that the health effects of marriage vary by marital quality, especially for women. Research by psychologist Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and her colleagues indicates that women's health is particularly likely to suffer when they are in poor-quality relationships and thrive when they are in high-quality relationships. For instance, negative marital behaviors (e.g., criticisms, put-downs, sarcasm) are associated with increased levels of stress hormones (epinephrine, ACTH, and norepinephrine), with higher blood pressure, and with declines in immune functioning.[112] So, particularly for women, marital quality, not simply marital status, is strongly correlated to better health outcomes.

19. Marriage seems to be associated with better health among minorities and the poor.

A recent report from the Centers for Disease Control indicates that African American, Latino, and low-income adults also enjoy health benefits from marriage. African American and Latino adults who are married are less likely to be in poor health, to have activity limitations, to smoke, to have a drinking problem, and to suffer serious psychological distress, compared to cohabiting, never-married, divorced, and widowed adults who are African American or Latino. Poor married adults were less likely to be in poor health, to have activity limitations, to smoke, to have a drinking problem, or to suffer serious psychological distress, compared to cohabiting, divorced, and widowed adults (though they did not do consistently better on these measurements than never-married adults).[113]

Marriage has similar implications for child health. Studies indicate that Latino and African American infants are significantly more likely to die at or around birth, suffer from low birth weight, or be born premature if they are born outside of marriage.[114] More research needs to be done on the health consequences of marriage for low-income and minority populations to confirm and extend these findings.

Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being

20. Children whose parents divorce have higher rates of psychological distress and mental illness.

Divorce typically causes children considerable emotional distress and doubles the risk that they will experience serious psychological problems later in life.[115] Children of divorce are at higher risk for depression and other mental illness over the course of their lives, in part because of reduced educational attainment, increased risk of divorce, marital problems, and economic hardship.[116] The negative psychological outcomes associated with divorce do not appear to be a consequence of some underlying genetic predisposition towards psychological difficulty that both divorcing parents and children share. Two recent studies followed identical and non-identical twins in Australia who married and had children. Some of these twins went on to divorce. By comparing the children of divorce with children from intact families in this sample, the researchers were able to estimate the role that genetic factors played in fostering psychological problems among the children of divorce. Specifically, these studies found that children of divorce were significantly more likely to suffer from depression, alcohol and drug abuse, delinquency, and thoughts of suicide.[117] As the researchers put it: "The results of the modeling indicated that parental divorce was associated with young-adult offspring psychopathology even when controlling for genetic and common environmental factors related to the twin parent."[118]

There is some evidence that the psychological effects of divorce differ depending on the level of conflict between parents prior to divorce. When marital conflict is high and sustained, children benefit psychologically from divorce. When marital conflict is low, children suffer psychologically from divorce. Currently, about two-thirds of U.S. divorces appear to be taking place among low-conflict spouses.[119]

21. Divorce appears to increase significantly the risk of suicide.

High rates of family fragmentation are associated with an increased risk of suicide among both adults and adolescents.[120] Divorced men and

women are more than twice as likely as their married counterparts to attempt suicide.[121] Although women have lower rates of suicide overall, married women were also substantially less likely to commit suicide than were divorced, widowed, or never-married women.[122] In the last half-century, suicide rates among teens and young adults have tripled. The single "most important explanatory variable," according to one new study, "is the increased share of youths living in homes with a divorced parent." The effect, note the researchers, "is large," explaining "as much as two-thirds of the increase in youth suicides" over time.[123]

22. Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do single or cohabiting mothers.

The absence of marriage is a serious risk factor for maternal depression. Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do cohabiting or single mothers. Cohabiting mothers are more likely to be depressed because they are much less confident that their relationship will last, compared to married mothers.[124] Single mothers are more likely to be depressed by the burdens associated with parenting alone. One study of 2,300 urban adults found that, among parents of preschoolers, the risk of depression was substantially greater for unmarried as compared to married mothers.[125] Marriage appears to protect even older teen mothers from the risk of depression. In one nationally representative sample of 18- and 19-year-old mothers, 41 percent of single white mothers having their first child reported high levels of depressive symptoms, compared to 28 percent of married white teen mothers in this age group.[126]

Longitudinal studies following young adults as they marry, divorce, and remain single indicate that marriage boosts mental and emotional well-being for both men and women.[127] We focus on maternal depression because it is both a serious mental health problem for women and a serious risk factor for children.[128] Not only are single mothers more likely to be depressed, the consequences of maternal depression for child well-being are greater in single-parent families, probably because single parents have less support and because children in disrupted families have less access to their (nondepressed) other parent.[129]

Crime and Domestic Violence

23. Boys raised in single-parent families are more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal behavior.

Even after controlling for factors such as race, mother's education, neighborhood quality, and cognitive ability, one recent study finds that boys raised in single-parent homes are about twice as likely (and boys raised in stepfamilies are more than two and a half times as likely) to have committed a crime that leads to incarceration by the time they reach their early thirties. (The study found that slightly more than 7 percent of boys were incarcerated at some point between the ages of 15 and 30.)[130]

Teens in both one-parent and remarried homes display more deviant behavior and commit more delinquent acts than do teens whose parents stayed married.[131] Teens in one-parent families are on average less attached to their parent's opinions and more attached to their peer groups. Combined with lower levels of parental supervision, these attitudes appear to set the stage for delinquent behavior.[132] However, some research indicates the link between single-parenthood and delinquency does not hold for African American children.[133]

The research on cohabiting families and youth crime and delinquency is still in its infancy. Nevertheless, studies indicate that adolescents in cohabiting families are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior, to cheat, and to be suspended from school.[134] Moreover, white and Latino adolescents in cohabiting households were more likely to have behavioral problems than either adolescents living in intact, married households or adolescents living in single-mother households.[135] One reason why teens in cohabiting households appear to do worse than teens living in single-parent homes is that cohabiting households are usually led by their mother and an unrelated male. Boyfriends are more likely to be abusive than a married father. They are also more likely to compete with the child for the attention of the mother.[136] In sum, studies suggest that two married, biological parents have the means and the motivation to appropriately monitor and discipline boys in ways that reduce the likelihood that they will pose a threat to the social order.

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

Overall, single and divorced women are four to five times more likely to be victims of violent crime in any given year than are married women. Single and divorced women are almost ten times more likely than are wives to be raped, and about three times more likely to be the victims of aggravated assault. For instance, the U.S. Department of Justice estimates that in 1992-1993 the violent victimization rate was 17 per 1,000 married women compared to more than 60 per 1,000 single and divorced women. Similarly, compared to husbands, unmarried men are about four times as likely to become victims of violent crime.[137]

Marriage also plays a crucial role in reducing male criminality.[138] A study of 500 chronic juvenile offenders found that those who married and enjoyed high-quality marriages reduced their offense rate by two-thirds, compared to criminals who did not marry or who did not establish good marriages.[139] Research by Robert Sampson indicates that murder and robbery rates in urban American are strongly tied to the health of marriage in urban communities. Specifically, he found that high rates of family disruption and low rates of marriage were associated with high rates of murder and robbery among both African American and white adults and juveniles.[140] In his words, "Family structure is one of the strongest, if not the strongest, predictor of variations in urban violence across cities in the United States."[141] Other research indicates that declines in marriage rates among working-class and poor men in the 1970s drove crime rates markedly higher in that decade. The reason? Married men spend more time with their wives, who discourage criminal behavior, and spend less time with peers, who often do not.[142]

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

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

While young women must recognize that marriage is not a good strategy for reforming violent men, a large body of research shows that being unmarried, and especially living with a man outside of marriage, is associated with an increased risk of domestic abuse.[143] One analysis of the National Survey of Families and Households found that cohabitors were over three times more likely than spouses to say that arguments became physical over the last year (13 percent of cohabitors versus 4 percent of spouses). Even after controlling for race, age, and education, people who live together are still more likely than married people to report violent arguments.[144] Another study of domestic violence among African Americans found that African American women were more likely to be victimized if they were living in neighborhoods with higher proportions of cohabiting couples.[145] Overall, as one scholar sums up the relevant research, "Regardless of methodology, the studies yielded similar results: Cohabitors engage in more violence than do spouses."[146]

Selection effects play a powerful role. Women are less likely to marry, and more likely to divorce, violent men. Consequently, one reason why women in cohabiting relationships are more likely to have a violent partner is that cohabiting women in nonviolent relationships are more likely to move into marriage, whereas cohabiting women in violent relationships are less likely to move on to marriage. This fact means that violent relationships are more likely to remain cohabiting ones.[147] Scholars suggest, however, that greater integration of married men into the community and greater investment of spouses in each other also play roles.[148] Married men, for example, are more responsive to policies such as mandatory arrest, designed to signal strong disapproval of domestic violence.[149]

26. A child who is not living with his or her own two married parents is at greater risk for child abuse.

Children living with single mothers, mothers' boyfriends, or stepfathers are more likely to become victims of child abuse. Children living in single-mother homes have increased rates of death from intentional injuries.[150] Another national study found that 7 percent of children who had lived with one parent had been sexually abused, compared to 4 percent of

children who lived with both biological parents, largely because children in single-parent homes had more contact with unrelated adult males.[151] Other research found that, although boyfriends contribute less than 2 percent of nonparental childcare, they commit half of all reported child abuse by nonparents. The researcher concludes that "a young child left alone with a mother's boyfriend experiences elevated risk of physical abuse."[152]

Stepfathers also present risks to children. As Martin Daly and Margo Wilson report, "Living with a stepparent has turned out to be the most powerful predictor of severe child abuse yet."[153] Studies have found that young children in stepfamilies are more than 50 times more likely to be murdered by a stepparent (usually a stepfather) than by a biological parent.[154] One study found that a preschooler living with a stepfather was 40 times more likely to be sexually abused than one living with both of his or her biological parents.[155]

Conclusion

MARRIAGE IS more than a private emotional relationship. It is also a social good. Not every person can or should marry. And not every child raised outside of marriage is damaged as a result. Marriage is not a cure-all that will solve all of our social problems.

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

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

> "[I]ncreasing marital stability to the same level as in 1980 is associated with a decline of nearly one-half million children suspended from school, about two hundred thousand fewer children engaging in delinquency or violence, a quarter of a million fewer children receiving therapy, about a quarter of a million fewer smokers, about 80,000 fewer children thinking about suicide, and about 28,000 fewer children attempting suicide."[156]

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

As policy makers concerned about poverty, crime, and child well-being think about how to strengthen marriage, more funding is needed for research that points the way toward new family and community interventions to help strengthen marriage, particularly in those minority and low-income communities most affected by the retreat from marriage. We also need ongoing, basic scientific research on marriage and marital dynamics, which contributes to the development of strategies and programs for strengthening marriages and reducing unnecessary divorce.[157]

We need to answer questions like the following: Who benefits from marriage and why? How can we prevent both divorce and the damage from divorce? How can families, marriage educators, therapists, and public policy help at-risk and disadvantaged parents build good marriages? How can communities be mobilized to promote a marriage-friendly culture? And how do we bring together those who are doing the grassroots work of strengthening marriage with researchers and public officials in order to create synergies of knowledge, practice, and public policy?

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

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