

Poverty, Family Structure, and the Way Forward

September 14, 2019 at Saint Louis University

Featuring Dr. W. Bradford Wilcox

The Current Landscape:

Where We Were and Where We Are Now

- According to the 2016 American Community Survey, 61% of St. Louis children are living in single-parent households.
- Before the 1970s, there were not large class divides in American family life. The vast majority of Americans got and stayed married, and most children lived in stable, two-parent families. (“The Marriage Divide,” 2)
- In 1960, almost 90 percent of American children lived with their married parents, whereas today one out of three children do not. Among African American children, fewer than two out of five children live with their married parents. (“The State of Our Unions, 2019,” 27-28)
- The share of births to unwed mothers stands at 40 percent—up from 5 percent in 1960. Approximately half of births start as an unwed pregnancy, including two-thirds of first births to women under 30. (“Love, Marriage, and the Baby Carriage,” 1)
- According to a 2013 Pew report, 44% of single mothers in 2011 had never been married, up from 4% in 1960.
- Nearly 70 percent of births to Black women are nonmarital, compared to 35 percent among White women, 50 percent among Hispanic women, and just 17 percent among Asian women. (“The State of Our Unions, 2019,” 28-29)
- 72% of poor, 38% of working-class, and 13% of middle- and upper-class native-born children are born out of wedlock. (“The Marriage Divide,” 16)
- Among those age 18 to 55, 26 percent of poor Americans and 39 percent of working-class Americans are currently married, compared to 56 percent of middle- and upper-class Americans (“The Marriage Divide,” 1)
- Adolescents in poor and working-class homes are significantly less likely to live with their biological parents than their peers from middle- and upper-class homes (55 percent versus 77 percent). (“The Marriage Divide,” 1)
- Poor Americans are almost three times more likely to cohabit, and working-class Americans are twice as likely to cohabit, compared with their middle- and upper-class peers age 18-55. (“The Marriage Divide,” 3)
- Cohabiting households now constitute one in ten family households in the United States, up from less than one in 100 households 50 years ago. (“The State of Our Unions, 2019,” 22)
- The share of teenage women who are sexually active is 2.5 times higher today than in the early 1960s. (“Love, Marriage, and the Baby Carriage,” 1)
- The divorce rate (divorces per 1,000 married women) rose sharply between 1958 and 1979. It has fallen since, but it remains above 1970 levels. (“Love, Marriage, and the Baby Carriage,” 7)
- While 71.5 percent of women ages 15-44 were married in 1960, just 41.5 percent were in 2016. (“Love, Marriage, and the Baby Carriage,” 8)

Explanations for How We Got Here

- Shifts in the culture weakened marriage before shifts in the economy directly affected working-class families. The counterculture, sexual revolution, and rise of expressive individualism in the 1960s and 1970s undercut the norms, values, and virtues that sustain strong and stable marriages and families. (“The Marriage Divide,” 9)
- Starting in the 1960s, the policy context also changed in ways that have undercut marriage and stable family life, especially in poor and working-class communities. Authorizing no-fault divorce, eliminating man-in-the-house rules, and passing more generous welfare programs in the 1960s and 1970s all weakened the legal and economic importance of marriage and two-parent families. (“The Marriage Divide,” 11)
- There was no marked increase in divorce, family instability, or single parenthood at the height of the Great Depression in the 1930s. A different policy, cultural, and civic context in that era meant that economic distress did not automatically lead to greater family instability. (“The Marriage Divide,” 8)
- The decline of marriage and rise of single parenthood in the late 1960s *preceded* the economic changes that undercut men’s wages and job stability in the 1970s. (“The Marriage Divide,” 9)
- One analysis of nonmarital childbearing found that family income growing up explained about 15 percent of the difference in nonmarital childbearing between young women from college-educated homes and those from less-educated homes, whereas cultural factors—for example, an adolescent woman’s orientation toward college, her history of sexual activity, and her attitudes to single parenthood—accounted for about 20 percent of the class difference in nonmarital childbearing. (“The Marriage Divide,” 10–11)
- Today, according to the Urban Institute and Brookings Institution’s “Marriage Bonus and Penalty Tax Calculator,” government benefit programs add much more to the income of single parents than does a potential spouse working full-time at \$11.00 per hour. (“For Richer, For Poorer,” 51)

How Intact Families Matter for Children:

Children: Family Structure and Poverty

- Men and women who are currently married and were raised in an intact family enjoy an annual “family premium” in their household income that exceeds that of their unmarried peers who were raised in nonintact families by at least \$42,000. (“For Richer, For Poorer,” 3)
- Having grown up with the presence of both parents was associated with an extra 179 hours of work per year for women and 156 hours of work for men, relative to hours of work for those who grew up in single-parent families. (“For Richer, For Poorer,” 24)
- Family income, adjusted for family size, is 73 percent higher for married women than for single women. For men, the gain in family income when married is still very high, at 43 percent. (“For Richer, For Poorer,” 41)
- The fraction of children living in single-parent households is the single strongest correlate of upward income mobility among all the variables we explored. (“Where is the Land of Opportunity?,” 40)

Children: Family Structure and Other Outcomes

- Only 13 percent of children born to married parents experience a maternal partnership transition by age 3, compared to 50 percent of those born to cohabiting parents, 69 percent of those born to dating but not cohabiting parents, and 74 percent of those born to a single mother. (*Why Marriage Matters*, 15)
- Extensive research by psychologist Bruce Ellis and others indicate 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. (*Why Marriage Matters*, 22)
- In one recent longitudinal study the probability that a five-year-old child with stably-married parents was in excellent health was .69, compared to probabilities of .65 for those whose parents divorced, .62 for those whose parents stably cohabited, and .59 for those whose parents dissolved their cohabitation. (*Why Marriage Matters*, 28)
- 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. (*Why Marriage Matters*, 30)
- Parental divorce increases the odds that adult children will also divorce by at least 50 percent. (*Why Marriage Matters*, 19)
- A study focusing on fatal child abuse in Missouri found that preschool children were 47.6 times more likely to die in a cohabiting household, compared to preschool children living in an intact, married household. (*Why Marriage Matters*, 40)
- On average, having an unmarried mother is associated with an approximately 50 percent increase in the risk of infant mortality. (*Why Marriage Matters*, 29)
- 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. (*Why Marriage Matters*, 37)
- Growing up with both parents is associated with a 10 percentage point rise in the marriage rate for men and a 12 percentage point rise for women, over those who grew up in single-parent families. ("For Richer, For Poorer," 23-24)

How Intact Families Matter for Communities:

Communities: Family Structure and Poverty

- 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. (*Why Marriage Matters*, 23)
- The growth in median income of families with children would be 44 percent higher if the United States enjoyed 1980 levels of married parenthood today. ("For Richer, For Poorer," 3)
- States with a higher number of families headed by married parents enjoy significantly higher levels of economic growth, not to mention greater economic mobility, higher median family income, and less child poverty than states with more families headed by single and cohabiting parents. ("The U.S. Economy Needs Some 'Family Time,'")
- The average state per capita GDP would be 4.2% higher if states enjoyed their 1980 levels of married parenthood. Likewise, across the states, child poverty would be 17% lower and family median income would be 10 percent higher if states enjoyed 1980 levels of married parenthood. ("The U.S. Economy Needs Some 'Family Time,'")

- “As with race, parents’ marital status does not matter purely through its effects at the individual level. Children of married parents also have higher rates of upward mobility in communities with fewer single parents. Interestingly, we find no correlation between racial shares and upward mobility once we control for the fraction of single parents in an area.” (“Where is the Land of Opportunity?,” 4)

Communities: Family Structure and Other Outcomes

- In 2005, Sociologist Paul Amato estimated the effects of returning marriage rates for households with children to the level they were in 1980: “Increasing marital stability to the same level as in 1980 is associated with a decline or 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.” (*Why Marriage Matters*, 42)
- Robert Sampson: “Family structure is one of the strongest, if not the strongest, predictor of variations in urban violence across cities in the United States.” (*Why Marriage Matters*, 38)
- The difference in family structure between whites and blacks is one of the most consistent explanations for the black-white homicide gap. (*Why Marriage Matters*, 38)
- We find that states in the top quintile of married parenthood have high school graduation rates that are 7.7 percentage points higher than states in the lowest quintile, even after controlling for states’ median family income, educational attainment, age and racial composition. (“The U.S. Economy Needs Some ‘Family Time,’”)
- Violent crime rates are 39% lower in states in the top quintile of married parenthood compared to states in the bottom quintile. (“The U.S. Economy Needs Some ‘Family Time,’”)

The Way Forward:

Ideas for how YOU can Promote Intact Families:

- **Live:** Witness to the power of marriage and family
- **Learn:** Read through the socioeconomic data in this handout and consult the listed sources
- **Share:** Share the information you have learned with family, friends, and religious and community leaders
- **Join In:** Look for additional offerings to continue the conversation!

Additional Ideas from Presentation and Panel Discussion:
