

POLICY BRIEF

Couples and Marriage Series

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Marriage and Government: Strange Bedfellows?

By **Theodora Ooms**

No Longer the “M-Word”

Since the mid-seventies, scholars, public officials, and analysts across the political spectrum have raised concerns about the plight of the increasing numbers of children being brought up in single-parent families.¹ During these discussions and debates, however, opinion leaders generally avoided public mention of the “M-word”—marriage.

In 1996, Congress enacted welfare reform legislation. Although it was little noticed at the time, three of the four purposes of the new law were related to marriage and family formation: the states were exhorted to promote marriage, reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing, and “encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.” Since the 2000 election, marriage has been thrust upon the public agenda. President Bush has declared, “. . . my Administration will give unprecedented support to strengthening marriages.” Congressional leaders in both

political parties have proposed spending significant new welfare monies over the next five years to promote “healthy” marriages, and to a lesser extent, responsible fatherhood.² Meanwhile, a small but growing number of state governments have modified welfare policies and set up programs to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce—including Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, Michigan, Oklahoma, and Utah. Many local communities have developed marriage initiatives as well, with leadership coming from the faith-based and non-profit sectors. Most of these initiatives are aimed at the general population.

Some are reacting to this new marriage agenda with bewilderment and even alarm. Marriage is considered by many to be strictly a private matter—with the government’s role limited to granting marriage licenses and divorce decrees. There is no public consensus that promoting marriage is the government’s business. In addition, many wonder if the government knows *how* to encourage marriage.

When most Americans value marriage and get married at some point in their lives, why is marriage such a controversial policy issue? Should the public care about the

SUMMARY

Marriage has become a hot topic in Washington policy circles, stimulated in large part by new Congressional proposals to promote “healthy” marriages as part of the reauthorization of welfare. A vigorous debate is underway about the role of government in strengthening marriage. This brief, the first in a new series on Couples and Marriage Research and Policy, explores the question of what the legitimate role of government in promoting marriage might be, outlines some of the objections to government intervention in marriage, discusses the relationship between marriage and poverty, and offers a framework for a reasonable Marriage-Plus approach that focuses on promoting child well-being.

decline in marriage in general, or only when children are involved? What does the research tell us about the link between marriage and child poverty? Is there an appropriate role for federal, state, and local governments in addressing marriage? If so, what are the goals and strategies of a reasonable policy agenda on marriage that could gain broad public support? This first brief on couples and

About the Author

Theodora Ooms is a Senior Policy Analyst at the Center for Law and Social Policy.

marriage policy from the Center for Law and Social Policy will address these and other overarching questions. Future briefs will examine some of the key research questions and a range of policy strategies (see the box below for a list of future topics).

Why Is Marriage a Public Policy Issue?

Individual decisions to marry and have children are indeed very personal, but, in the aggregate, they have important public conse-

quences. The facts are well-known but bear repeating.³

- Roughly 50 percent of all recent first marriages are projected to end in divorce, and about 60 percent of all divorces involve children. The majority of divorced persons eventually remarry.
- One-third of all births are out-of-wedlock, and 40 percent of these children are born to cohabiting parents.
- Over one-third of all children do not live with their biological fathers, and too many nonresident fathers neither support nor see their children.

As a result of these trends, more than half of all children can expect to spend some time living in a single-parent household. It should also be noted that these trends cut across class, religion, and race; however, they are considerably more marked among the poor. Low-income populations have higher rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing, cohabitation, and separation and divorce.

Family relationships today are increasingly complex and unstable. Parents often have children by more than one partner, and consequently children may have relationships with biological, married and step-parents (legal and informal), grandparents and step-grandparents, and half- and step-siblings.

These dramatic changes in family formation and marital behavior have not, in general, been good for children. Research has found that:

- Children living with single mothers are five times as likely

to be poor as those in two-parent families.⁴

- The proportion of all American children who were poor increased from 15 to 20 percent between 1970 and 1996, and some economists have attributed virtually all the increase to the growth in single-parent families.⁵
- Growing up in a single-parent family also roughly doubles the risk that a child will drop out of school, have difficulty finding a job, or become a teen parent. About half of these effects appear to be attributable to the reduced income available to single parents, but the other half is due to non-economic factors, such as less parental time and attention for children.⁶
- Divorce has been found to have long-term, non-economic effects on children. Twenty years later, children of divorced, middle-class parents were twice as likely to suffer from serious emotional or psychological problems compared with children whose parents remained married.⁷

It's not just the presence of two adults in the home that helps children. Children living with cohabiting parents and in step-families generally do less well than those living with their married, biological parents.⁸ It appears that living with married, biological parents strengthens children's claims to the economic resources, love and affection, nurturing, and social capital of both parents, including access to the resources of both sets of extended families.

However, there is an important caveat: the quality of the marriage

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This is the first in a series of **Couples and Marriage Research and Policy Briefs**. The series is informed by a "Marriage-Plus" perspective, which has two main goals centered on the well-being of children: (1) to help more children grow up in healthy, married families and (2) when this isn't possible, to help parents—whether unmarried, separated, divorced, or remarried—cooperate better in raising their children.

Future briefs will address these and other questions:

- What are states doing to promote and strengthen marriage?
- What is the appropriate role of the federal government in marriage?
- What is the effect of family structure on child well-being?
- How important is male "marriageability" to understanding the rise in single parenthood in low-income populations?

matters. When parents have a seriously troubled, high-conflict marriage, their children suffer and are better off if their parents divorce. About a third of divorces where children are involved appear to involve highly-conflicted marriages.⁹ Research also suggests that a higher proportion of the marriages of low-income couples ending in divorce involve high-conflict relationships and domestic violence than the marriages of better-off couples who divorce.¹⁰

The meaning of the research findings about the risks to child well-being of growing up in a single-parent home should not be exaggerated, however. While these risks are substantial and clearly warrant concern, it remains the case that the majority of children of single parents grow up without serious problems.¹¹

What Do the Skeptics Say?

The controversy about the role of government in promoting marriage is not so much about the research as it is about values. Many critics suspect that there are hidden (or not-so-hidden) ideological agendas behind marriage promotion proposals. Some who value the gains women have made in the workplace fear a return to traditional gender roles. Others concerned about the darker side of marriage—domestic violence and child abuse—worry that pregnant teens or adults will be coerced or “bribed” into risky, unsuitable marriages and that battered women will be discouraged from leaving abusive marriages. Still others are concerned that holding out marriage as the “ideal” appears to blame single parents, many of whom do a terrific job under diffi-

cult circumstances. Some worry that marriage promotion is being defined narrowly in ways that are insensitive to the culture and norms of minority racial and ethnic communities. Others argue that treating marriage as exclusively a heterosexual institution discriminates against gay and lesbian unions and their children.

Skeptics of marriage promotion argue that the decline in marriage is world-wide, a result of overwhelming social and economic forces that cannot be reversed whatever anyone does. For others, the concern is less about the value of promoting marriage and more about whether individuals, communities, or faith institutions, rather than government, should lead the charge. Finally, some worry that funds spent on untested marriage promotion activities will be diverted from other sorely needed services for single parents, such as child care and job training.

Even people who are interested in supporting marriage promotion activities have very different ideas about what the “marriage problem” actually is. Is the problem that:

- Too many couples have children outside of marriage, or that married couples with children do not stay married?
- Too many teenagers have children before they are ready to be parents, or before they marry?
- There are too many cohabiting couples, too many bad choices about marital partners, or too few skills to negotiate the challenges of contemporary marriage?
- Gender inequality persists within marriage, making the

institution itself problematic to many women?

- In some communities with high rates of male joblessness, there are not enough men who are viable marriage partners?
- People nowadays have unrealistic expectations of marriage and too weak a sense of commitment?

The proportion of all American children who were poor increased from 15 to 20 percent between 1970 and 1996, and some economists have attributed virtually all the increase to the growth in single-parent families.

The “marriage problem” may encompass all of the above and more. The important point for policy purposes is that these issues are not separate from each other; they are interrelated.

Marriage and Poverty

A reason often given for promoting marriage is to reduce child poverty. Poverty and marital status are indeed strongly linked, but it is hard to distinguish cause from effect. Are single parents poor because they are not married, or are they not married because they are poor?

If more low-income parents married, or stayed married, child poverty would certainly not magically disappear—but research suggests that it could be reduced. Several new studies find that parents at high risk of poverty who are married experience less economic hardship than parents with the same characteristics who cohabit or do not live together.¹² Part of the reason is that married couples

are more likely to pool their earnings and receive assistance from family and friends. In addition, men who are married typically work longer hours and earn more.

This research does not tell us whether those who marry have attributes—such as commitment, loyalty, and future orientation—that distinguish them from those

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who don't marry and may help explain their decisions to marry and their success in marriage and in work. Nevertheless, the research suggests that *if we knew how* to help more low-income parents marry and stay married, family economic hardship would be lessened, and, presumably, children would be better off.

That being said, focusing on the effects of family structure on income is only half the story. Single parenthood is both a cause and an effect of poverty. We know that many single mothers may find themselves poor in part because they view the unemployed and under-educated fathers of their children to be unattractive marriage partners.¹³ So they do not marry. For those who do marry, chronic economic hardship, lack of child care, bad housing, and violent neighborhoods can wreak havoc on couples' relationships and may often lead to breaking up.¹⁴ In short, money matters in both

forming and sustaining marriage. So, even if encouraging low-income couples to marry may help improve their economic situation, federal and state governments should not rely on marriage promotion as the centerpiece of their strategy to help reduce poverty.

Interestingly enough, new evidence suggests that income support strategies may have the added benefit of increasing marriage rates and marital stability. For example, the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), a pilot demonstration that subsidized the earnings of employed welfare families but included no explicit marriage promotion activities, increased marriage rates for single-parent, long-term recipients and reduced divorce rates among two-parent families. MFIP also reduced the rates of domestic violence.¹⁵

Shouldn't It Be Marriage-Plus?

The current debate about marriage is in danger of becoming overly politicized. Yet since most Americans—rich and poor—continue to value marriage, get married, and want their marriages to succeed, it should be possible to forge an approach that would receive broad support—one that we call Marriage-Plus. The complex patterns of contemporary families require more nuanced policy responses than are being proposed by some proponents of marriage promotion. For example, since men and women often have children by more than one partner, it is not always clear who one should encourage to marry whom.¹⁶ Thus, the “plus” in Marriage-Plus signifies a set of

broader goals, more flexible and comprehensive strategies, and more diverse actors than described in many of the current marriage promotion proposals.¹⁷

Goals. The primary purpose of any marriage promotion initiative should be to promote the well-being of all children. Thus, the Marriage-Plus approach has two goals. First, society should try to help more children grow up with their two biological, married parents in a reasonably healthy, stable relationship. This would include working to prevent teen and out-of-wedlock childbearing. However, for many children, marriage is not a feasible or desirable option for their parents. Thus, the second goal is to help these parents—whether never-married, separated, or divorced—to be financially responsible and cooperate, whenever appropriate, in raising their children. These are not alternative goals. Children need us to pursue both.

Principles. The Marriage-Plus approach is guided by several principles. “Healthy” marriage, not marriage for its own sake, should be encouraged and supported. Participation in marriage-related programs should be voluntary. Strategies should be designed based on the best available research evidence and tailored to meet the diverse needs of different populations. For example, low-income parents may need both economic resources and non-economic supports to increase the likelihood of stable, healthy marriages and/or better co-parenting relationships. Finally, a Marriage-Plus approach focuses more on the front end (making marriages better

to be in) rather than the back end (making marriages more difficult to get out of).

Actors. A Marriage-Plus approach is not the responsibility of government alone. It recognizes that many parts of the community—including the legal, education, health, business, faith, and media sectors—all have important roles to play and need to work in partnership with public officials to pursue these goals.

Strategies of a Marriage-Plus Approach

States and communities are beginning to try out a range of economic, legal, and educational strategies to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing.¹⁸ Consistent with the principles of a Marriage-Plus approach, several of these initiatives are reaching out to involve potential critics to ensure that necessary protections against coercion and domestic violence are in place, and that services offered are inclusive and sensitive to the diversity of participants' backgrounds. In Oklahoma, for example, the Governor's Marriage Initiative is working closely with the domestic violence community, and is building capacity to provide statewide relationship skills workshops to couples of all income levels, whether married or unmarried, as well as to single parents. Within Michigan's Greater Grand Rapids Community Marriage Policy—a multi-sector, community-wide initiative—a group of African-American pastors created a task force to develop marriage promotion activities that would be rele-

vant for the couples in their community.

Here are some examples of activities that could be included in a Marriage-Plus approach:¹⁹

- Reduce program and policy disincentives to marriage, and provide a package of “hard” and “soft” services to low-income, unmarried parents around the time of the birth of their child to help stabilize their relationship—and, for those who are interested, to facilitate and support their marriage. “Soft” services are relationships skills and marriage education workshops, financial management classes, and peer support groups, while “hard” services could include job training and placement, housing, medical coverage, and substance abuse treatment, if necessary.
- Provide job assistance and better paying jobs for low-income men, as well as women, to help them be responsible, involved, and cooperative parents and, perhaps, become more attractive as marriage partners.
- Increase investment in efforts that reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing, especially programs that have been proven to prevent teen pregnancy, since 80 percent of teen births are non-marital.
- Institute workplace policies to lessen work/family stresses on all couples. Research has found that married couples with children who work night and rotating shifts are at a higher risk of separation and divorce.
- Educate young people and those who want to marry and stay married about the skills and attitudes necessary to have healthy relationships and good marriages.
- Encourage and stabilize marriage in low-income populations by reducing economic stress and poverty.

Conclusion

In sum, a Marriage-Plus approach would offer a number of options for states and communities to consider when designing policies and programs to strengthen couples and marriage, reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing, and promote child well-being. But first the groundwork needs to be laid. It took two decades of welfare-to-work demonstrations before the public was ready to support national welfare reform legislation. Similarly, in the couples and marriage arena, federal and state governments must move forward cautiously, informing and educating the public along the way. Since little is known about what works to strengthen marriage, policy should encourage the development of flexible, creative approaches and should support sound, rigorous evaluation of new ideas before applying them widely. Such an approach will not only lead to more effective policy; it is an essential step in addressing the public's understandable skepticism about government involvement in promoting marriage.

Endnotes

1

In 1973, the Senate Subcommittee on Children held hearings, chaired by Senator Walter Mondale, on “American Families: Trends and Pressures.” These provided the first national public forum to highlight the dramatic changes underway in family life and raised questions about the effects of public policies on families.

2

For analysis and comparisons of the marriage-related provisions in various welfare reauthorization proposals, see www.clasp.org.

3

For recent reports discussing these and other related family trends, see: Rose M. Kreider and Jason M. Fields, *Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 1996*. Current Population Reports, pp. 70-80. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, Department of Commerce, February 2002. David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions*. New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project, 2001; Wade F. Horn and Tom Sylvester, *Father Facts* (4th Edition). Gaithersburg, MD: National Fatherhood Initiative, 2002; Alan Booth and Ann C. Crouter (Eds.), *Just Living Together: Implications of Cohabitation on Families, Children, and Social Policy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2002.

4

Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, *America’s Children: Key Indicators of Well-Being*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001.

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Robert I. Lerman, “The Impact of Changing US Family Structure on Child Poverty and Income Inequality,” *Economica*, 63, (250[S]), S119-S139, 1996; Isabel Sawhill, “Families at Risk.” In Henry Aaron and Robert D. Reischauer (Eds.), *Setting National Priorities: The 2000 Election and Beyond*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999.

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Sara McLanahan and Julien Teitler, “The Consequences of Father Absence” in Michael E. Lamb (Ed.), *Parenting and Child Development in “Non-Traditional” Families*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1998. Also see Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

7

E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly, *For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered*. New York: Norton, 2002.

8

See McLanahan and Teitler, 1998.

9

Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth, *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. Amato and Booth measure marital conflict by “the extent of disagreement, frequency of serious quarrels, and occurrence of physical violence” (p. 35).

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For instance, in a recent survey in Oklahoma, 47 percent of divorced respondents (with and without children) who had received government assistance reported domestic violence as a major contributor to their divorce, while 17 percent of divorced respondents who never received government assistance did. In addition, divorced respondents who had received government assistance were more likely to report “too much conflict and arguing” as a major contributor to their divorces. Christine A. Johnson, Scott M. Stanley, Norval D. Glenn, Paul R. Amato, Steve L. Nock, Howard J. Markman, and M. Robin Dion, *Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce*. Oklahoma City, OK: Oklahoma Department of Human Services, July 2002, p. 34, Table 28.

11

Kristin Moore, Susan Jekielik, and Carol Emig, *Marriage from a Child's Perspective: How Does Family Structure Affect Children, and What Can We Do About It? Child Trends Research Brief*. Washington, DC: Child Trends, June 2002.

12

Robert I. Lerman, *Marriage as a Protective Force Against Economic Hardship*. Presented at 23rd Annual Research Conference of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, Washington, DC, November 1-3, 2001; Robert I. Lerman, *The Relationship Between Marriage and Other Family Structures and the Material Hardship Experienced by Households with Children: Evidence from the Survey of Income and Program Participation*. Urban Institute, 2002; Adam Thomas and Isabel Sawhill, *For Richer or Poorer: Marriage as an Anti-Poverty Strategy. A Policy Brief*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001; Daniel Lichter, Deborah Roempke Graefe, and J. Brian Brown, *Is Marriage a Panacea? Union Formation Among Economically Disadvantaged Unwed Mothers*. Paper presented at the Population Association of America Annual Conference, Washington, DC, 2001.

13

William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996; Kathryn Edin, "Few Good Men: Why Poor Mothers Don't Marry or Remarry," *The American Prospect*, January 2, 2000.

14

Financial stress has long-term consequences for marital quality and child well-being. Paul Amato and Alan Booth, 1997, p. 214.

15

Virginia Knox, Cynthia Miller, and Lisa A. Gennetian, *Reforming Welfare and Rewarding Work: A Summary of the Final Report on the Minnesota Family Investment Program*. New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, September 2000.

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Ronald B. Mincy, *Who Should Marry Whom? Multiple Partner Fertility Among New Parents*. Center for Research on Child Wellbeing Working Paper #02-03-FF. Prepared for Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management Research Conference, November 1, 2001. Available at: <http://crcw.princeton.edu>

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For instance, the House-passed welfare reauthorization bill (H.R. 4737) would create a program of Healthy Marriage Promotion Grants that, with only one exception, could only be spent on different types of marriage education and public advertising campaigns.

For more information, contact:

Theodora Ooms

tooms@clasp.org

202.906.8010

Mary Parke

mparke@clasp.org

202.906.8014

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For additional examples of state activity, see Mary Parke, *More Than a Dating Service: State Activities Designed to Strengthen and Promote Marriage*. Couples and Marriage Policy Brief #2. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, forthcoming.

19

See also, Theodora Ooms, "Marriage-Plus," *The American Prospect*, 13(7), April 8, 2002. www.prospect.org.

POLICY BRIEF

Couples and Marriage Series

AUGUST 2002, BRIEF NO. 1, MARRIAGE AND GOVERNMENT: STRANGE BEDFELLOWS?

ABOUT CLASP

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1968, conducts research, legal and policy analysis, technical assistance, and advocacy on issues related to economic security for low-income families with children.

The Couples and Marriage Research and Policy Brief series seeks to inform the debate about public policies to strengthen and stabilize two-parent families and marriage. The series will focus on the effects on child well-being, with a special interest in couple relationships and marriage in low-income communities.

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www.clasp.org
202.842.2885 fax
202.906.8000 main
Washington, DC 20005
1015 15th Street, NW, Suite 400