

Why Marriage Matters

Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences

Executive Summary

IN THE LATTER HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, divorce posed the biggest threat to marriage in the United States. Clinical, academic, and popular accounts addressing recent family change—from Judith Wallerstein’s landmark book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, to Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur’s award-winning book, *Growing Up with a Single Parent*, to Barbara Dafoe Whitehead’s attention-getting *Atlantic* article, “Dan Quayle Was Right”—focused largely on the impact that divorce had upon children, and rightly so. In the wake of the divorce revolution of the 1970s, divorce was the event most likely to undercut the quality and stability of children’s family lives in the second half of the twentieth century.

No more. In fact, as divorce rates have come down since peaking in the early 1980s, children who are now born to married couples are actually more likely to grow up with both of their parents than were children born at the height of the divorce revolution (see figure 1). In fact, the divorce rate for married couples with children has fallen almost to pre-divorce revolution levels, with 23 percent of couples who married in the early 1960s divorcing before their first child turned ten, compared to slightly more than 23 percent for couples who married in the mid 1990s.

Today, the rise of cohabiting households with children is the largest unrecognized threat to the quality and stability of children’s family lives. In fact, because of the growing prevalence of cohabitation, which has risen fourteen-fold since 1970, today’s children are much more likely to spend time in a cohabiting household than they are to see their parents divorce (see figure 2).¹

Now, approximately 24 percent of the nation’s children are born to cohabiting couples, which means that more children are currently born to cohabiting couples than to single mothers.² Another 20 percent or so of children spend time in a cohabiting household with an unrelated adult at some point later in their childhood, often after their parents’ marriage breaks down.³ This means that more than four in ten children are exposed to a cohabiting relationship. Thus, one reason that the institution of marriage has less of a hold over Americans than it has had for

most our history is that cohabitation has emerged as a powerful alternative to and competitor with marriage.

For this reason, the third edition of *Why Marriage Matters* focuses new attention on recent scholarship assessing the impact that contemporary cohabitation is having on marriage, family life, and the welfare of children. This edition also picks up on topics that surfaced in the first two editions of the report, summarizing a large body of research on the impact of divorce, stepfamilies, and single parenthood on children, adults, and the larger commonweal. The report seeks to summarize existing family-related research into a succinct form useful to policy makers, scholars, civic, business, and religious leaders, professionals, and others interested in understanding marriage in today's society.

Five New Themes

1. *Children are less likely to thrive in cohabiting households, compared to intact, married families.* On many social, educational, and psychological outcomes, children in cohabiting households do significantly worse than children in intact, married families, and about as poorly as children living in single-parent families. And when it comes to abuse, recent federal data indicate that children in cohabiting households are markedly more likely to be physically, sexually, and emotionally abused than children in both intact, married families and single-parent families (see figure 3). Only in the economic domain do children in cohabiting households fare consistently better than children in single-parent families.

2. *Family instability is generally bad for children.* In recent years, family scholars have turned their attention to the impact that transitions into and out of marriage, cohabitation, and single parenthood have upon children. This report shows that such transitions, especially multiple transitions, are linked to higher reports of school failure, behavioral problems, drug use, and loneliness, among other outcomes. So, it is not just family structure and family process that matter for children; family stability matters as well. And the research indicates that children who are born to married parents are the least likely to be exposed to family instability, and to the risks instability poses to the emotional, social, and educational welfare of children.

3. American family life is becoming increasingly unstable for children (see figure 4).⁴ Sociologist Andrew Cherlin has observed that Americans are stepping “on and off the carousel of intimate relationships” with increasing rapidity.⁵ This relational carousel spins particularly quickly for couples who are cohabiting, even cohabiting couples with children. For instance, cohabiting couples who have a child together are more than twice as likely to break up before their child turns twelve, compared to couples who are married to one another (see figure 5). Thus, one of the major reasons that children’s lives are increasingly turbulent is that more and more children are being born into or raised in cohabiting households that are much more fragile than married families.

4. The growing instability of American family life also means that contemporary adults and children are more likely to live in what scholars call “complex households,” where children and adults are living with people who are half-siblings, stepsiblings, step-parents, stepchildren, or unrelated to them by birth or marriage. Research on these complex households is still embryonic, but the initial findings are not encouraging. For instance, one indicator of this growing complexity is multiple-partner fertility, where parents have children with more than one romantic partner. Children who come from these relationships are more likely to report poor relationships with their parents, to have behavioral and health problems, and to fail in school, even after controlling for factors such as education, income, and race. Thus, for both adults and children, life typically becomes not only more complex, but also more difficult, when parents fail to get or stay married.

5. The nation’s retreat from marriage has hit poor and working-class communities with particular force. Recent increases in cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, family instability, and family complexity have not been equally distributed in the United States; these trends, which first rose in poor communities in the 1970s and 1980s, are now moving rapidly into working-class and lower-middle-class communities. But marriage appears to be strengthening in more educated and affluent communities. As a consequence, since the early 1980s, children from college-educated homes have seen their family lives stabilize, whereas children from less-educated homes have seen their family lives become increasingly unstable (see figure 6). More generally, the stratified character of family trends means that

the United States is “devolving into a separate-and-unequal family regime, where the highly educated and the affluent enjoy strong and stable [families] and everyone else is consigned to increasingly unstable, unhappy, and unworkable ones.”⁶

We acknowledge that social science is better equipped to document whether certain 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 preexisting differences between individuals who marry, cohabit, or divorce. Does divorce cause poverty, for example, or is it simply that poor people are more likely to divorce? Scholars attempt 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 used longitudinal data to track individuals as they marry, divorce, or stay single, increasing our confidence that marriage itself matters. Where the evidence appears overwhelming that marriage *causes* increases in well-being, we say so. Where marriage probably does so but 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.

Yet, scholarship is getting better in addressing selection effects. For instance, in this report we summarize three divorce studies that follow identical and nonidentical adult twins in Australia and Virginia to see how much of the effects of divorce on children are genetic and how much seem to be a consequence of divorce itself. Methodological innovations like these, as well as analyses using econometric models, afford us greater confidence that family structure exercises a causal influence for some outcomes.

Departures from the norm of intact marriage do not necessarily harm most of those who are exposed to them.⁷ While cohabitation is associated with increased risks of psychological and social problems for children, this does not mean that every child who is exposed to cohabitation is damaged. For example, one nationally representative study of six- to eleven-year-olds found that only 16 percent of children in cohabiting families experienced serious emotional problems. Still, this rate was much higher than the rate for children in families headed by married biological or adoptive parents, which was 4 percent.⁸

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.⁹ Marriages that are unhappy do not have the same benefits as the average marriage.¹⁰ 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.

But we believe good social science, despite its limitations, is a better guide to social policy than uninformed opinion or prejudice. This report represents our best judgment of what current social science evidence reveals about marriage in our social system.

Our Fundamental Conclusions

- 1. The intact, biological, married family remains the gold standard for family life in the United States,*** insofar as children are most likely to thrive—economically, socially, and psychologically—in this family form.
- 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, working-class, and minority communities,*** despite the fact that marriage has weakened in these communities in the last four decades.

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND PROCESSES are only one factor contributing to child and social well-being. Our discussion here is not meant to minimize the importance of other 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 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 educational attainment.¹¹

But whether we succeed or fail in building a healthy marriage culture is clearly a matter of legitimate public concern and an issue of paramount importance if we wish to reverse the marginalization of the most vulnerable members of our society: the working class, the poor, minorities, and children. ■

Please see next page for figures.

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For additional information, or to request the entire report, please contact:

Institute for American Values

1841 Broadway, Suite 211

New York, NY 10023

Tel: (212) 246-3942

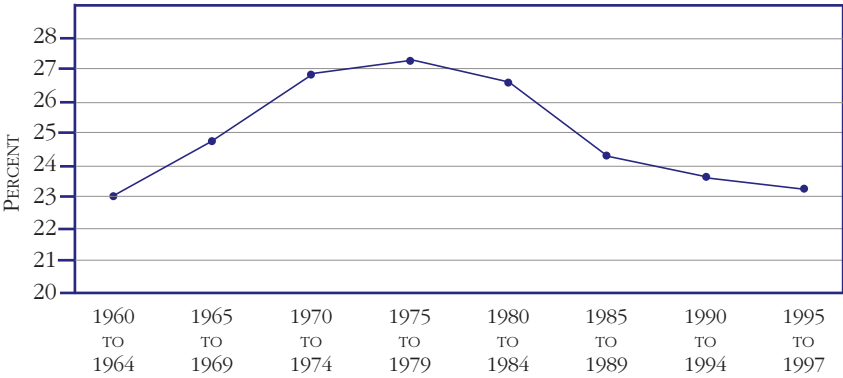
Fax: (212) 541-6665

Website: www.americanvalues.org

Email: info@americanvalues.org

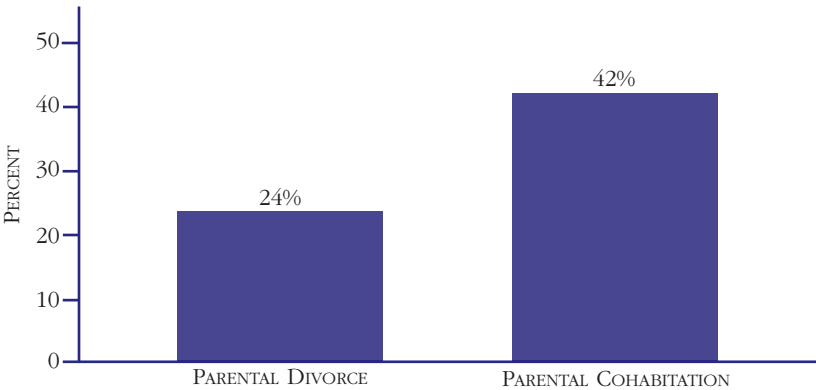
Appendix: Figures

FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF FIRST CHILDREN EXPERIENCING PARENTAL DIVORCE BY AGE 10, BY PARENTS' YEAR OF MARRIAGE (1960-1997)



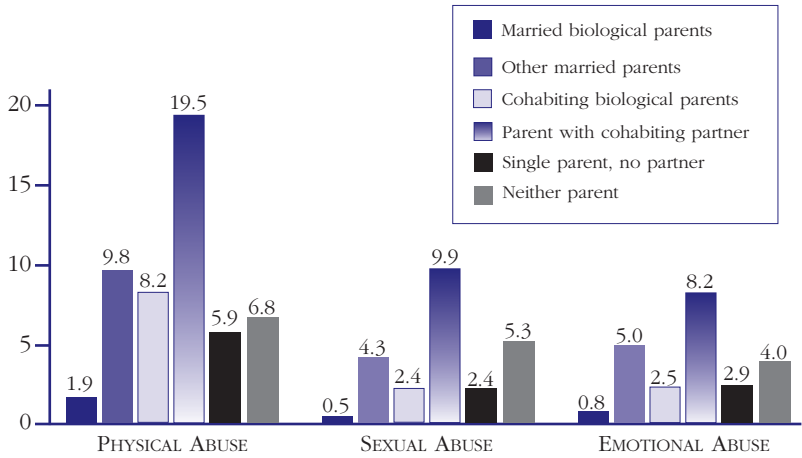
Source: SIPP Data, 2001, 2004, and 2008. Women with premarital births excluded.

FIGURE 2. PERCENT OF CHILDREN EXPERIENCING PARENTAL DIVORCE/SEPARATION AND PARENTAL COHABITATION, BY AGE 12; PERIOD LIFE TABLE ESTIMATES, 2002-07



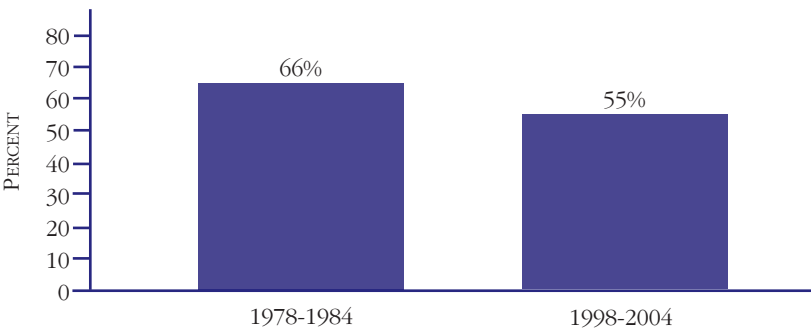
Source: Kennedy and Bumpass, 2011. Data from National Survey of Family Growth. Note: The divorce/separation rate only applies to children born to married parents.

FIGURE 3. INCIDENCE PER 1,000 CHILDREN OF HARM STANDARD ABUSE BY FAMILY STRUCTURE AND LIVING ARRANGEMENT, 2005-2006



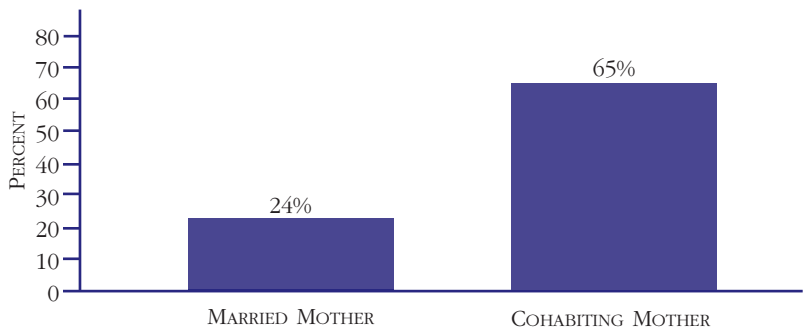
Source: Figure 5-2 in Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4): Report to Congress.

FIGURE 4. PERCENT OF 16-YEAR-OLDS LIVING WITH MOTHER AND FATHER, 1978-1984 AND 1998-2004



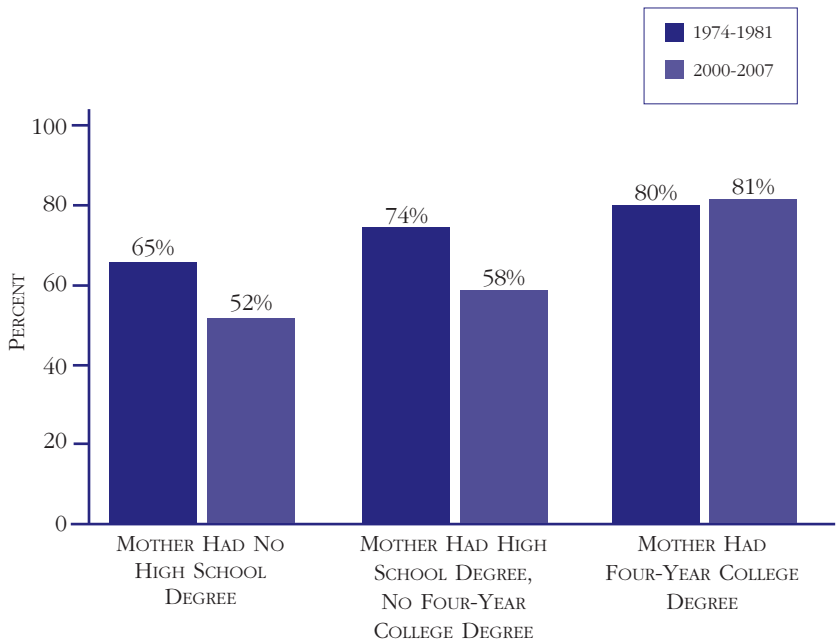
Source: General Social Survey, 1980-2010.

FIGURE 5. PERCENT OF CHILDREN EXPERIENCING PARENTAL SEPARATION BY AGE 12
BY MOTHER’S RELATIONSHIP STATUS AT BIRTH; PERIOD LIFE TABLE ESTIMATES, 2002-07



Source: Kennedy and Bumpass, 2011. Data from National Survey of Family Growth.

FIGURE 6. PERCENT OF 14-YEAR-OLD GIRLS LIVING WITH MOTHER AND FATHER,
BY MOTHER’S EDUCATION AND YEAR



Source: National Survey of Family Growth, 1982 and 2006-08.