

Marriage has become a hot topic on the American domestic policy scene. The Bush administration is proposing to spend \$1.5 billion during the next five years on marriage programs, and legislators are scrutinizing tax and transfer policies for “marriage penalties.” Gays and lesbians are demanding the right to marry, and a few states are considering laws to make it more difficult to obtain a divorce. These initiatives have been spurred by changes in marriage and childbearing during the latter part of the twentieth century and by mounting social science evidence that these changes are not in the best interests of children.

Since 1960, couples have been postponing marriage, and cohabiting unions have become more common. Divorce rates are at historic highs, and the share of children born to unmarried parents has increased sharply. These trends have led to a dramatic increase in single-mother families. Whereas in 1970 only 12 percent of families with children were headed by a single parent, by 2003 that share had more than doubled, to 26 percent. Roughly half of all children born today are expected to live apart from a parent before they reach age eighteen; the shares are even higher among African-American children.

Why Marriage Matters

The decline in two-parent families since 1960 has been closely linked with a rise in child poverty, primarily because poverty rates are far higher in single-mother families than in two-parent families. The post-1960 changes in marriage and family formation also appear to be depriving children of such documented benefits of marriage as better physical and emotional health and greater socioeconomic attainment.

Focus of the Volume

This volume of *The Future of Children* lays out the major issues in the debate over marriage and provides readers with some facts and a context to understand and interpret the economic, demographic, and social influences on marriage and the effects of marriage on the well-being of children.

Questions addressed in the volume include:

- What are the benefits to children of growing up with two married parents?
- What should the role of government be in the promotion of marriage?
- What is the best way to increase marriage rates, especially for low-income families? Is it better to focus on changing attitudes, life styles, and interpersonal skills or on reducing penalties to marriage in the nation’s tax and transfer systems?
- What can be done to ensure that federal and state policymakers do not fund marriage-promotion programs by reducing benefits to single-parent families?
- Will allowing gays and lesbians to marry help or hurt child well-being?

Strengthening Marriage and Improving Child Well-being: What Works?

Federal and state governments can help encourage the formation and maintenance of stable, low-conflict, two-parent families in at least two ways: by improving the incentives for low-income couples to marry or stay married and by enhancing relationship quality among low-income couples.

Marriage Programs

Although the scientific evidence for programs to promote and strengthen marriage is weak, there is some evidence to suggest that middle-class couples have benefited from these programs. A movement is now under way to tailor such programs to the needs of lower-income couples. The Bush administration's plan to make funds available to design and implement such programs and to evaluate them rigorously is good policy. Marriage programs aimed at low-income couples need to address the serious financial issues facing these couples, as well as the problems created by partners having children from previous relationships, domestic violence, and the lack of trust between partners. Such programs would teach relationship skills and help couples reach their economic goals by bolstering their employment and providing other supportive services. The Department of Health and Human Services should make findings of the evaluations available and provide technical assistance to programs started by states or other groups. Programs that receive federal or state funding should also be required to show that they are effective for the population being served.

Reduce the Marriage Penalty.

Because of unintentional features built into the U.S. tax and transfer system over the years, a low-income single mother often faces a larger financial penalty than a middle-income mother if she decides to marry. The decision to marry should not result in a loss of tax or transfer benefits for lower-income families, because such losses have negative repercussions for children. Economic security is essential to the development of healthy children; indeed, it is one of the main arguments for increasing marriage rates. Because most of the penalties for low-income couples come from transfer programs rather than the tax system, reform efforts should be focused there.

Marriage as Part of a Broader Goal of Reducing Poverty and Increasing Child Well-being

Marriage is not a cure-all for poverty, and single-parent households will always be a part of the American family scene. It would be a mistake for policymakers to focus on marriage to the exclusion of other strategies. Among such strategies, alleviating poverty, improving parent-child bonds, and reducing teenage childbearing and unintended pregnancies are especially promising. Efforts to reduce out-of-wedlock births, teen pregnancy in particular, are an essential part of a marriage-promotion strategy. Promoting marriage should not be a proxy for cutting programs for single parents. Programs to encourage fathers' involvement—both monetary and emotional—must also be continued. A strong child support system and a fair court system that encourages joint involvement of separating parents must be continued and improved. All these programs are crucial to the overall mission to increase the number of healthy marriages and improve the well-being of children.

Although marriage has undergone profound changes in the past forty years, it continues to be the most effective family structure in which to raise children. Low-income children and society stand to reap large gains if marriage can be restored as the norm for parents.

