

Testimony of
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Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Science, Technology, and Space Subcommittee

“Social Scientific Data on the Impact of
Marriage and Divorce on Children”

May 13, 2004

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is Margy Waller. I am a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. where my research focuses on poverty, welfare, and low-income working families. Please note however that my testimony today reflects my own views and not the views of any organization with which I am affiliated.

It is an honor to appear before you to discuss the state of knowledge on the impact of marriage and divorce on children, with a particular focus on policy interventions to improve the well-being of children in low-income households.

The administration proposes to encourage states to promote healthy marriages and in doing so to “place a greater emphasis in TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families] on strengthening families and improving the well-being of children”.

There is little argument that the body of academic literature supports the conclusion that children do best when they live with their married mother and father, provided that the marriage is one of low-conflict. However, other findings have important implications for consideration of policy interventions to promote safe, healthy marriages in low-income households.

First, my testimony will review some important findings - and limitations of the research - for consideration in developing public policy to support the goals of healthy marriages and the well-being of children. Second, I will outline recommendations for public policy and federal investment in light of the research, including implications for the pending reauthorization of the 1996 welfare law.

What the Research Reveals

While there is much evidence to support the conclusion that children raised in a household with their married biological or adoptive parents do better than children in other family structures, we don't know much about why this is so.

Still, while children raised in single-parent households grow up *at greater risk* of emotional, social, educational, and employment difficulty, most children from single-parent households do not face these problems.

Furthermore, much of the research about the effects of family structure and transitions has focused on middle-income families, or national data sets controlling for income. There is much less information about the particular outcomes in low-income households, and not much is known about the effectiveness of marriage strengthening strategies for poor parents.

However, the data that we do have about family structure and the well being of low-income families and children suggest that we should proceed carefully as we attempt to fashion public policy in this arena.

- Children in families with married biological parents have lower rates of poverty than children living with single or cohabitating parents.
- A marriage simulation matching real single mothers and unmarried men who are similar in age, education, and race reveals that if it is possible to increase marriages to 1970 rates, the poverty rate would be reduced from 13.0 percent to 9.5 percent.
- The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is developing a rich database of information about the characteristics of unmarried parents, and how they differ from married parents. Researchers reviewing the data conclude that while one-third of the unmarried parents face no serious barriers to marriage, marriage promotion would not work or could cause serious harm for one-third of the parents (and their children), and another third could benefit only if the marriage initiatives included employment and mental health services.
- Ethnographic research by Kathryn Edin and others reveals that low-income parents believe in marriage, but desire economic security prior to marriage. Education, employment, and economic status impact the likelihood of getting and staying married for both men and women.
- Income accounts for much of the difference between child well-being in married households and other family structures. Married and unmarried parents are different in a number of ways: age, education, income, levels of domestic violence and other relationship conflict, and use of substances. Parents who are not married at the birth of their child are disadvantaged on these measures, suggesting that marriage alone will not deliver the full set of advantages that families with parents married at the birth enjoy in household income or child well-being.
- Some research points to household and parental income as more important determinants for various measures of child well-being than family structure. Notably, children's lasting educational deficits have been found to be more closely linked to early and deep poverty, while their risk of behavioral problems may be more linked to the family structure in which they grew up.
- Children may suffer when there are family structure changes, and living in a stepfamily can have negative effects as well. Children in stepfamilies do not do as well as those living with married, biological parents, and may do no better than children in single-parent or unmarried, cohabitating households. There is some evidence that growing up in a single-parent household leads to better outcomes for children than living through family structure transitions.

- Surveys of unmarried mothers in low-income households find a higher prevalence of domestic violence than in the national population. Couples experiencing domestic violence should not be encouraged to marry.
- Children of immigrants are more likely than those of native-born Americans to be poor, despite the fact that they are more likely to live in a two-parent household and in families with full-time workers.
- Teenagers who have a non-marital birth are less likely to get married later and even if teen parents do get married, these marriages are highly unstable and far more likely to fail than marriages between older individuals. While teen mothers face a host of economic and social challenges, their children bear the greatest burden and are at significantly increased risk of low birth weight and pre-maturity, mental retardation, poverty, growing up without a father, welfare dependency, poor school performance, insufficient health care, inadequate parenting, abuse and neglect, and becoming a teen parent themselves.
- Studies of a variety of programs that are often called “abstinence-plus” provide strong evidence of effectively reducing sexual activity and pregnancy among teens. Interestingly, some of the most compelling results are from programs that involve teens in supervised community services. On the other hand, there is no strong evidence that “abstinence-only” programs delay sexual activity or reduce pregnancy among teens. The jury is still out, although there is a federal evaluation underway.

Implications for Policy and Public Investment

A review of this research reveals the risk of unintended consequences from investment in marriage promotion as a means of improving child well-being, particularly in low-income households.

While we know that growing up in a household with biological parents in a low-conflict marriage is better for child well-being, we do not know why this is true. If we do not know exactly why it is true, then we are not certain how or whether to go about encouraging similar outcomes for children in single parent households.

For example, if marriage is encouraged and supported for step-parent families, it is not clear that children will be better off.

Many unmarried parents are at risk of factors known to contribute to marital disruption or conflict: domestic violence, unemployment, mental health problems, infidelity and others. If we end up encouraging marriage for such couples before addressing these issues, we put children at greater risk of experiencing marital conflict and a change in family structure with all of its negative consequences. If the policy goal is to encourage marriage, then the

policy should also support programs intended to ensure that the marriage will last.

There are serious questions about which parent population to target. For example, does it make sense to encourage step-parent marriages for cohabiting households when we have little evidence that one family structure is better than the other? Should we promote marriage for teenage parents? Is marriage a positive step for parents struggling with unemployment, mental health barriers, or a lack of education and skills to be self-sufficient? Should we focus on doing more to prevent people from becoming unmarried parents in the first place?

An Agenda for Improving Child and Family Well-being

The social science research provides important lessons for improving child and family well-being, with policies narrowly designed to support marriage, and using a broader approach in the pending welfare reauthorization legislation.

Given the limited knowledge about how to support healthy marriages that improve child well-being, Congress should approach public investment and public discourse on the issue with care.

Policies Intended to Encourage Marriage

- **Marriage Promotion Experimentation.** Given the lack of social science research that provides a roadmap for marriage promotion and support among low-income families, Congress should proceed cautiously and with the goal of learning more about how to encourage marriage, while reducing the risk of harm to children. Research evidence that provides guidance for improving child well-being is growing, and the best investments are those that may indirectly promote marriage. (See below.) Congress should not put funding ahead of the science: a relatively small investment in marriage promotion research makes sense, if carefully targeted. The legislation should dedicate funding to experimental designs, focused on the strategies with promise – particularly those that combine counseling and education with barrier removal activities like education, training, and mental health services.
- **Domestic Violence Prevention.** The research evidence is clear that low-income mothers targeted by the marriage promotion initiatives are at high risk of domestic violence. Accordingly, all marriage promotion programs and experiments must include requirements that 1) the program design be developed in coordination with local, state, or national domestic violence prevention advocates or experts; and 2) all participants are advised that the program is voluntary.
- **Teen pregnancy prevention.** While promoting marriage for teens who become parents is not likely to improve child well-being, we know that giving birth outside marriage reduces the likelihood of marriage. Thus,

one of the most effective marriage promotion investments is programs proven to reduce teen pregnancy. Unless new research results provide evidence of delayed initiation of sex and reduced pregnancy as an outcome of abstinence-only programs, the existing research suggests that resources should be directed to programs with proven effectiveness such as those that provide supervised community service opportunities for teens.

- Public Discourse. Since the research regarding the benefits of marriage for child well-being is quite slim, and applies to those children living with married, biological parents in low-conflict relationships, it is irresponsible to overstate the importance of marriage for child well-being. As we have experienced with the public debate over work-based, time-limited welfare reform, public understanding of policy shifts can impact culture and behavior. It would be a serious disservice to single parents and their children if the public comes to believe incorrectly that these children are necessarily worse off than they would be if their primary caretaker were to marry.

Welfare Reauthorization and Lessons from Research about Child Well-being

While the administration is apparently moving ahead of Congressional action by using existing funds for marriage promotion activities, the primary legislative vehicle for discussion of marriage promotion is the current debate over welfare reauthorization. If members of Congress and the administration are committed to focusing on child well-being as a primary goal of welfare reauthorization, they should shift the investment priorities reflected in pending proposals. Current knowledge of the benefits and risks of encouraging marriage for low-income parents is limited. This suggests that further experimentation and rigorous evaluation is critical. Since we have no evidence of what works, Congress should provide a relatively small appropriation dedicated to research purposes.

Overlooked for the most part in the marriage promotion debate is existing research on welfare and children that provides strong evidence of successful approaches to child well-being that policymakers should pursue in reauthorization. Some of these strategies may prove to support safe, healthy marriage indirectly, as well. In particular, programs designed to increase household income and economic security (by providing work supports like child care and transportation assistance or by improving employment income with education and training services) are known to improve the well-being of young children.

- Make work pay and increase household income by
 - providing new resources for education and training, including transitional jobs,

- creating a new credit to reward states for job placement rather than caseload reduction, with extra incentives to place recipients in higher paying jobs,
 - allowing states to count education, training, and barrier removal activities as primary work participation, and
 - providing an appropriation (not just authorization) for a car ownership demonstration program and evaluation.
- Provide adequate funding to maintain current levels of child care assistance to working poor families and add significant new resources for eligible families not currently receiving a child care subsidy. (Of course, any changes in work participation rates would require additional funding for the children of working welfare recipients.)
 - Protect families and children from the harm of income reducing sanctions by requiring outreach and review for alternatives to benefit reduction before eliminating household income. Do not require states to impose full family sanctions.
 - Do not mandate expensive work participation requirements that create incentives for states to utilize unpaid work (workfare) activities for the purpose of fulfilling federal requirements. Increasing work participation and work hours would lead to reduced state investment in more promising programs that are proven to improve child well-being. In contrast, increasing work hours decreases adult supervision of and interaction with adolescents who are already suffering academically when their parent(s) are participating in welfare-to-work activities.
 - Make it easier for states to reform child support rules so that children receive more of the child support collected for them as a means to increase household income and reduce poverty.
 - Allow states to provide legal immigrant households with “make work pay” supports, education, and other services intended to increase earnings.

Reauthorizing current welfare law appears more likely to produce better outcomes for children than House and Senate proposals

While welfare reauthorization provides an opportunity for policymakers to implement strategies and services likely to improve child well-being, all signs suggest that it is highly unlikely members can agree on legislation this year. The welfare law expired in September 2002, and Congress has passed six short term extensions of current law since then. Most recently, serious disagreements between members of the Senate and the administration led to the withdrawal of the bill from floor debate. The current extension will expire at the end of June.

These short term extensions create uncertainty for welfare administrators, program providers, and low-income families.

Furthermore, the current proposals are likely to reduce child well-being as a result of new mandates to increase work hours and otherwise reduce state flexibility. Since the proposals were introduced, many states and localities have created new marriage promotion initiatives. In 2002, some observers may have concluded that state policymakers were overlooking the opportunity to promote marriage as part of welfare to work initiatives. For good or for ill, that is not the case today.

Given these facts and the policy choices under consideration, the current best option for members of Congress to improve child outcomes through the welfare law would be a straight, multi-year reauthorization of the current law.

If Congress nevertheless chooses to implement a marriage promotion experiment while reauthorizing current law, a balanced approach is critical. Members should couple a small, targeted experiment with additional funding for child care because it is a strategy *known* to improve child well-being.

Policymaking should support promising research, but Congress should not let funding get ahead of the science.

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