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We are writing on behalf of the Brookings Institution's Center on Children and Families to express our concerns about the proposed revisions to the American Community Survey (ACS). In particular, the removal of the five questions on marital history would negatively impact scholarship and policy about family formation. Access to quality data on marriage and divorce is vital for demographic research and we ask that you reconsider eliminating these survey questions.

If these questions on marital history are removed from the ACS, we lose important granularity in data on marriage and divorce rates. No other survey allows researchers to look at annual changes in relationship formation as accurately. National Center for Health Statistics stopped collecting data at a national level on marriage and divorce in 1996. As of the mid 2000s, six states – California, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, and Minnesota – no longer report their numbers, meaning that estimates of national marriages rates are based on less than 80 percent of the country's population. Moreover, NCHS has not reported any statistics on marriage or divorce based on state reports since 2011. The other surveys that collect data on marriage, such as the National Survey of Family Growth or Survey of Income and Program Participation, do not collect data yearly and data issues with both (e.g., limited age sample, underreporting of divorce statistics, etc.) make them less ideal sources for this information. If the questions are dropped from the ACS, we will no longer have reliable annual counts of the number of marriages and divorces in the United States.

The five ACS marital history questions not only provide researchers with information on aggregate rates of marriage and divorce, but also with a large enough data set to look at rates within sub-groups. For our research specifically, these questions have allowed us to look at changes in marriage rates across both income groups and race. In smaller surveys, cutting the data into sub-groups – say, looking at marriage rates for Black female college graduates – runs up against small sample sizes.

The landscape of family formation is changing rapidly with important implications for child and family well-being, economic inequality and mobility, and policy decisions at both the state and federal level. The proposed elimination of these questions on marriage hinders researchers' and policymakers' ability to document changing relationship choices of Americans and predict future trends in family formation. We urge you to reassess the decision to remove these questions.

Sincerely,



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