

## Marriage and Family

The Bush Administration has proposed improving children's well-being as the overarching purpose of welfare reform, and its marriage initiative is one of its chief strategies for doing so. This issue of *Poverty Research News* examines the latest research on marriage and family formation in low-income families.

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**Welfare Reform Reauthorization: Promoting Self-Sufficiency, Protecting Children, and Strengthening Marriage** page 3

*Wade Horn*

Wade Horn, Assistant Secretary for the Administration for Children and Families, outlines the Bush Administration's proposal for welfare reform reauthorization, with an emphasis on healthy marriage formation and child well-being.

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**How Family Structure and Living Arrangements Affect Children** page 6

*Kristin Anderson Moore and Susan M. Jekielek*

The authors review research on the key trends in family structure over the last few decades and their effects on child well-being. Although an extensive body of research suggests that children do best when they grow up with two biological parents in a low-conflict marriage, research on how to promote strong, low-conflict marriages is thin.

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**Marriage, Poverty, and Public Policy** page 9

*Stephanie Coontz and Nancy Folbre*

The authors argue that well-designed public policies could play a constructive role in helping couples develop healthy and sustainable relationships. The current pro-marriage policy agenda, however, is misguided, for several reasons.

---

**Welfare Reform and the Changing Family** page 12

*Andrew Cherlin and Paula Fomby*

This article reports on recent results from the Three-City study, finding that the increase in two-parent families can almost entirely be accounted for by growing numbers of stepfamilies, mainly through cohabitation.

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**The Impact of Welfare Reform on Living Arrangements** page 14

*Marianne Bitler, Jonah Gelbach, and Hilary Hoynes*

The authors find that several important goals of reform, such as encouraging the formation of two-parent families, have seen some success. Other outcomes, however, may have resulted in unintended consequences.

---

**Multigenerational Living Arrangements and Teens** page 16

*Thomas DeLeire and Ariel Kalil*

The authors consider teens' development in a variety of family structures and find that African American teens of never-married mothers fare better in multigenerational families than the same teens in married-parent families.

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**Strengthening Couples to Improve Children's Well-Being** page 18

*Philip A. Cowan and Carolyn Pape Cowan*

The authors point to some compelling evidence that the investment of resources to help parents make their relationships healthier can have important and long-lasting payoffs for their children's development.

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**Research Issues in the Marriage and Welfare Reform Debate** page 21

*V. Jeffery Evans\**

Evans considers the issues facing the research community in assessing the effects of marriage and family formation.

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**Also in this Issue**

*Book Review:*

*The Case for Marriage*, by Linda Waite and Maggie Gallaher

page 5

## POVERTY RESEARCH NEWS

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## For Better and For Worse: Welfare Reform and the Well-Being of Children and Families

**Greg J. Duncan** and **P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale**, editors  
Russell Sage Foundation Publications. 2001.  
<http://www.russellsage.org/publications/titles/forbetter.htm>

*For Better and For Worse* evaluates whether welfare reform has met one of its chief goals—improving the well-being of the nation's poor children. The book opens with a lively political history of the welfare reform legislation, which demonstrates how conservative politicians capitalize on public concern over such social problems as single parenthood to win support for the radical reforms. Part I reviews how individual states redesigned, implemented, and are managing their welfare systems. Part II focuses on national and multistate evaluations of the changes in welfare to examine how families and children are actually faring under the new system. Part III presents a variety of perspectives on policy options for the future.

### **Table of Contents**

- For Better and for Worse: Welfare Reform and the Well-Being of Children and Families, *Greg Duncan and P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale*
- Liberal and Conservative Influences on the Welfare Reform Legislation of 1996, *Ron Haskins*
- Welfare Reform, Management Systems, And Policy Theories Of Child Well-Being, *Cathy M. Johnson and Thomas L. Gais*
- How Do State Policymakers Think About Family Processes and Child Development in Low-Income Families? *Kristin Anderson Moore*
- Program Redesign by States in the Wake of Welfare Reform: Making Sense of the Effects of Devolution, *Alan Weil*
- Sanctions and Exits: What States Know about Families That Leave Welfare Because of Sanctions and Time Limits, *Jack Tweedie*
- How Different Are Welfare and Working Families? And Do These Differences Matter for Children's Achievement? *Greg J. Duncan, Rachel E. Dunifon, Morgan B. Ward Doran, and W. Jean Yeung*
- My Children Come First: Welfare-Reliant Women's Post-TANF Views of Work-Family Trade-Offs and Marriage, *Ellen K. Scott, Kathryn Edin, Andrew S. London, and Joan Maya Mazelis*
- Does Maternal Employment Mandated by Welfare Reform Affect Children's Behavior? *Ariel Kalil, Rachel E. Dunifon, and Sandra K. Danziger*
- Lessons from New Hope: The Impact on Children's Well-Being of a Work-Based Antipoverty Program for Parents, *Rashmita S. Mistry, Danielle A. Crosby, Aletha C. Huston, David M. Casey, and Marika N. Ripke*
- How Families View and Use Lump-Sum Payments from the Earned Income Tax Credit, *Jennifer L. Romich and Thomas S. Weisner*
- Welfare Waivers and Nonmarital Childbearing, *Ann E. Horvath-Rose and H. Elizabeth Peters*
- Reducing Child Poverty by Improving the Work-Based Safety Net, *Wendell Primus and Kristina Daugirdas*
- Effects of Welfare Reform at Four Years, *Ron Haskins*
- Reforming the Social Family Contract: Public Support for Child Rearing in the United States, *Paula England and Nancy Folbre*
- Lessons Learned, *P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale and Greg J. Duncan*

# Welfare Reform Reauthorization: Promoting Self-Sufficiency, Protecting Children, and Strengthening Marriage

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 aimed to shift our nation from a welfare policy of entitlement to one grounded in quintessentially American notions of independence and self-sufficiency. This amounted to a revolutionary change, and, like most revolutions, it had its share of doomsayers. Poverty was sure to skyrocket, we were assured. Children would go hungry. Failure was inevitable.

However, as some of those critics now acknowledge, their predictions proved altogether off-base. Welfare reform has been an overwhelming success by virtually any standard. Nationwide, poverty is down for the seventh year running. For black families, it is at its lowest level ever. Since 1996, the number of Americans in poverty has declined by 5.4 million, including 2.8 million children. Welfare caseloads are less than half their levels of five years ago. Welfare reform, as Tommy Thompson, secretary of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, told the House Education and Workforce Committee in April, "has exceeded our most optimistic expectations."

## Building on Past Success

Underlying these remarkable gains are the increased earnings of working people. The incomes of poor families have risen, not (as in the past) from rising welfare payments, but from the fruits of their own labors. Thanks to welfare reform, what was once a controversial proposition is now established beyond debate: work offers the only enduring path out of poverty.

Work opportunities, job-search skills, and training constitute the core of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), but they are not the only elements. Self-sufficiency involves more than a job. It can also require attention to learning disabilities, substance abuse, domestic violence, special child care needs, and other problems. For decades, welfare policymakers treated such problems as insuperable barriers. These clients, we were told, simply could not hold down a job. Now we know better.

Helping people toward self-sufficiency requires that we recognize, and try to alleviate, problems related to marriage and family formation. As Secretary Thompson told the Senate Finance Committee in March, "Children living in single-parent households are, on average, five times more likely to be poor and two to three times more likely to use drugs, experience educational, health, and emotional problems, and be victims of abuse." The point is not to stigmatize single parents, who deserve only praise for their dedication to children. The point, rather, is to do what we can to remove *all* obstacles to self-sufficiency.

Congress in 1996 recognized the value of stable, intact families. Among the goals it set forth in PRWORA were to: "end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage," "reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies," and "encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families." In fact, three of the law's four purposes concerned marriage and families. The states, however, concentrated on helping welfare recipients enter the workplace, which is understandable: one revolution at a time.

Now it is time to finish the task. We must build on the remarkable success of PRWORA, fine-tune the policies related to jobs and job preparation, and launch new initiatives related to strengthening marriage.

## Child Well-being and Healthy Marriages

When we set out to develop specific proposals, the President and the Secretary—both former governors—directed us to consult the people directly affected. During an eight-city listening tour, we heard from state and tribal officials, welfare caseworkers, welfare recipients, and nearly every state TANF administrator. We also published a notice in the *Federal Register* soliciting public input and received more than 3,000 comments.

Several messages came through loud and clear. The states value their flexibility under PRWORA, and they have used it to tailor

By Wade Horn\*

“Thanks to welfare reform, what was once a controversial proposition is now established beyond debate: work offers the only enduring path out of poverty.”

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assistance programs to their specific needs and priorities. Not surprisingly, they oppose any reduction in funding. Perhaps surprisingly, at least to some people, states do not object to time limits on welfare payments. The states want to maintain a focus on work—work first, but not work only. They share our goal of promoting healthy, stable families. They do not want mandates or funding earmarks, but they do want guidance. Officials in many states do not know how to go about promoting strong families, and they are eager to learn.

The President's proposal reflects what we heard. It retains the states' flexibility in designing and implementing TANF programs, a critical element of our success under the 1996 law. The proposal also includes a waiver authority, what Secretary Thompson has dubbed a "super-waiver," which lets a state propose innovations by seeking a single waiver for programs across a number of federal agencies, specifically HHS, Agriculture, Education, HUD, and Labor.

Thematically, the Administration's proposal advances three principal goals. First, we seek to strengthen the emphasis on work. Building on the successful record of the 1996 law, the President's proposal requires welfare recipients to devote 40 hours per week to a combination of work and programs designed to help them achieve independence. Of the 40 hours, 24 must be spent in the workplace; the remainder can be devoted to education, job training, substance-abuse treatment, or any other activity that addresses a purpose of the TANF program. These proposals, as the President said in April, seek to restore "an ethic of work as an important part of American life."

Second, our proposal seeks to improve the well-being of our nation's children. It maintains historically high levels of funding for child care. Considering all government sources, federal and state, we will spend almost \$11 billion on child care—a nearly tenfold increase over the past decade. The proposal also enhances child support enforcement. It seeks to increase collections to families by more than \$800 million during the next five years, while vastly simplifying the states' administrative burden in distributing support payments. In addition, the President's proposal makes explicit something that may have been implicit in the past: it establishes, as our paramount, overarching consideration in welfare policy the well-being

of America's children.

Finally, and very much related to children's well-being, the proposal aims to promote healthy marriages. Marriage and family issues, as I noted, were integral elements of the original welfare reform. The Administration's proposal seeks to move us toward realizing these vital but heretofore neglected purposes of the 1996 statute.

To that end, the proposal sharpens the TANF goal: we will encourage not merely two-parent families, but "healthy two-parent married families and responsible fatherhood." States will retain their flexibility. They must, in their state plans, describe their efforts to promote healthy marriage and to provide equitable treatment of two-parent, married families. However, the federal government will not dictate the shape or the scope of those efforts. The states are the laboratories of American democracy, and we look forward to seeing what innovations they develop.

A major impediment to strong marriage, both at the time and later in life, is having a baby as a teenager. Teen motherhood can also stand in the way of education and employment, and thereby drive the mother and children deep into poverty. Accordingly, the proposal increases funding for abstinence education and continues our rigorous efforts to determine which educational approaches are most effective.

## Funding and Innovation

We expect to learn a great deal about bolstering families thanks to two new funds. The first fund dedicates \$100 million annually to research, demonstrations, evaluation, and technical assistance on strengthening marriage. To fund this provision, we propose to eliminate a program that has proved ineffective, the Illegitimacy Reduction Bonus. The second fund is a \$100 million competitive matching grant program, under which a limited number of states, territories, and tribal organizations can develop new approaches to promoting healthy marriage and reducing out-of-wedlock births. A dollar-for-dollar match will be required, but federal TANF funds can be used to meet the matching requirement. In all, the Administration's proposal will provide up to \$300 million in federal funds and matching funds for states to innovate and learn. These funds are in addition to the TANF funds already available.

In developing initiatives to strengthen

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The Bush Administration's proposal advances three principal goals:

- Strengthen the emphasis on work
- Improve the well-being of children
- Promote healthy, two-parent married families

marriage, the states will not be starting from scratch. We already have a good deal of theory, empirical research, and field experience. Studies have found, for instance, that communication and conflict resolution are key skills in strong, enduring marriages. Other promising approaches include couple-to-couple mentoring, interventions for couples in crisis, and programs to prevent domestic violence. Some states have achieved noteworthy results, as have a good many faith-based and other private organizations. The President's proposal would make these programs available to a great many more needy families.

The proposal will also help us discover new, more effective programs. We need to know much more about how to promote healthy

marriages. Our knowledge is akin to the state of knowledge 20 years ago on how to move welfare recipients into the workforce. Then, there were scores of competing ideas about how to proceed. A few states had moved aggressively with experiments; most had not. Over the last two decades, state innovations, academic research, and our overall understanding have grown tremendously. The President's proposal, I am confident, will generate the same creative ferment and thereby help us refine our policies for promoting healthy marriage.

In these respects, the Administration aims to build on the remarkable success of the 1996 welfare reform by promoting self-sufficiency, protecting children, and strengthening marriage. ■

Two new funds will promote research on and state innovation in strengthening marriage.

### **Book Review:** *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially* by Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher.

New York: Doubleday, 2000. 258 pp.  
ISBN 0-385-50085-8.

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*Contemporary Sociology*, 30(6) (2001): 564–565.

The *Case for Marriage* summarizes social science evidence on the beneficial effects of being married for men and women, and recommends policies to encourage marriage. Like the Surgeon General issuing a warning against smoking, Waite and Gallagher's mission is to get out the message that the retreat from marriage has made us worse off.

The authors review research showing that married people report more satisfaction with their lives and fewer mental health problems. Despite stereotypes of "swinging singles," married people have sex more often than unmarried heterosexuals, and enjoy it more. Marriage seems to improve men's earnings, and is neutral on women's earnings (it is children that hurt women's earnings). Women gain access to men's earnings from marriage. Married people save more. Waite and Gallagher think the gains come because marriage encourages trust and cultivates love, because each partner's long-term commitment to the other encourages investment and provides some insurance against adversity, and because marriage allows efficiency gains from specialization. Some of the gains for men seem to come from the fact that they live less dangerous and risky lives when paired up with women, a fact that criminologists using the "routine activities" perspective have noticed.

There is one reason to doubt whether the authors' main claim is correct: selection bias. For

example, marriage is statistically associated with mental health, even controlling for standard sociodemographic variables. But is this causal? The association could arise if people with emotional problems have a harder time finding or keeping mates. For every good outcome claimed for marriage, you can imagine a compelling alternate selection hypothesis—that people are more able to attract and keep mates if they earn more, have more savings, enjoy sex, are healthier or happier. We cannot randomly assign people to marriage, so we have to adopt second-best strategies to try to isolate causal effects. One is controlling for other variables thought to affect both marriage and the outcome of interest in a regression model; but often we do not have the right measures. A better strategy is to use longitudinal data, observing how a given individual changes on the outcome of interest after moving from singlehood into marriage, or from marriage back into singlehood via divorce or widowhood. This effectively controls for any enduring characteristic of the individual, even those not measured.

Waite, a demographer, is acutely aware of these problems, and has authored some of the best longitudinal research on the salutary effects of marriage on men's health. In this book, the authors explain the selection problem, and assure us that research suggests these associations indicate more than selection. Perhaps the intended lay audience will not put up with more technical details, but the result is that the reader cannot tell which parts of the research being summarized have dealt how well with the selection problem.

My sense of the literature is that there are positive causal effects of marriage on men's health and earnings, and on men and women's family incomes and frequency of having sex. I am less convinced that the effects on happiness and life satisfaction are causal. A subtheme in the book is that cohabitation is not a good substitute for marriage, but I think the studies on this have not dealt effectively with the complicated processes of selectivity into and out of cohabitation (in part because satisfying cohabitations usually become marriages).

My other reaction to the book was disappointment with its failure to challenge gender inequality. In some areas, the gains from marriage are greater for men than women; whether this is true overall entails a confusing comparison and weighting of different areas. (How do you weight women's greater gain in income with men's greater gain in health and in someone to provide emotional TLC?) If the gains from marriage are greater for men (as they clearly are in health), then marriage increases the extent of gender inequality.

A subtle but important point is that Waite and Gallagher's claim that marriage is good for women as well as men is not inconsistent with feminist critiques of the patriarchal nature of marriage. The typical marriage is sexist; men have more power, are more likely to have affairs, provide less emotional empathy, and contribute less to childrearing and household work than is commensurate with spouses' relative hours of market work.

(continued on page 11)

# How Family Structure and Living Arrangements Affect Children

By Kristin Anderson Moore  
and Susan M. Jekielek\*

“The family structure that helps children the most is a family headed by two biological parents in a low-conflict marriage.”

1. J.A. Martin, B.E. Hamilton, S.J. Ventura, F. Menacker, and M.M. Park, “Births: Final Data for 2000, Table 18.” *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 50(5) (2000). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.

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Policies and proposals to promote marriage have been in the public eye for several years, driven by concern over the large percentages of American children growing up with just one parent. The Bush Administration has proposed improving children’s well-being as the overarching purpose of welfare reform, and its marriage initiative is one of its chief strategies for doing so. In this context, what does research tell us about the effects of family structure—and especially of growing up with two married parents—on children?

We review the research evidence on the key trends in family structure over the last few decades and effects on child well-being. An extensive body of research tells us that children do best when they grow up with two biological parents in a low-conflict marriage. At the same time, research on how to promote strong, low-conflict marriages is thin, at best.

## The Rise in Single-Parent Families

The increase in the percentage of children with just one parent has occurred for a variety of reasons. Rising divorce rates accounted for the initial increase in single parenthood during the latter half of the twentieth century. Births to unmarried women also increased steadily during the postwar decades, accelerating in the 1980s. By 2000, nearly one in ten children lived with a never-married parent. Today, nearly one-third of all births occur to unmarried women, accounting for more than a million births annually. Yet, contrary to popular perceptions, teenagers account for less than three in ten nonmarital births, with women in their twenties accounting for more than half.

The nonmarital birth rate stabilized during the late 1990s. Although this development has been hailed as good news, a closer examination of the data reveals a more complex and less optimistic picture. The overall decline in the nonmarital birth rate has been driven by declining birth rates

among teens. Among women in their twenties, the nonmarital birth rate continued to increase in the late 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, the increase in families headed by a never-married parent has been driven by a dramatic increase in cohabiting couples. The percentage of adults who have ever cohabited jumped from 33% in 1987 to 45% in 1995. (For more on cohabiting couples, see both Cherlin and Fomby and Bitler et al., in this issue.)

Other trends that have contributed to the rise in single-parent families include a delay in the age at which Americans first marry and have children. Within these broad trends, other factors have contributed to changes in family structure, often in offsetting ways. For example, low unemployment and the generally strong economy that characterized much of the late 1990s likely made many men more attractive marriage partners. These same factors, however, also likely increased women’s economic independence, lessening the financial “need” to marry. Rising male incarceration rates have also been cited as contributing to a diminished pool of “marriageable” men.

## Promoting Healthy Marriages and Reducing Nonmarital Childbearing

In this section, we review what we know (and don’t know) from research about how to promote healthy marriages and reduce nonmarital childbearing.

### Teen and Nonmarital Childbearing

Approximately eight in ten pregnancies to teens and unmarried adults are unintended at the time of conception. Helping couples avoid unintended pregnancies is, therefore, one logical strategy for increasing the likelihood that children are born to two married parents who are ready to assume the responsibilities of parenthood. Although there is a growing knowledge base about how to dis-

courage teen childbearing, there is little on how to reduce births outside of marriage by adult women. Accordingly, it seems prudent to evaluate approaches to reducing sexual risk-taking and increasing contraceptive use among couples older than age 20, as well as among teens.

## Preventing Teen Pregnancy

Several pregnancy prevention programs targeted at teens have been effective. Although didactic sex education does not seem to change behavior, education about pregnancy, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases is more effective when it is focused on specific behaviors; based on theory; offers a clear message; provides basic, accurate information; includes activities, models, and practice; uses trained staff; and uses approaches appropriate for the age, culture, and experience of its students.<sup>2</sup> In addition, youth development and service learning approaches that provide a sense of connectedness and positive alternatives, such as the Children's Aid Society program in New York City, have reduced adolescent sexual activity or childbearing at a number of study sites, as have several high-quality early childhood intervention programs, notably the Abecedarian program.<sup>3</sup> Given this knowledge base, combined with a strong public consensus on reducing teen childbearing, policy attention to this strategy seems fruitful.

## Helping Unmarried Parents to Marry

Nearly half of all the births that take place outside of marriage occur to cohabiting couples, making them a likely target of opportunity for marriage promotion efforts. Although many cohabiting couples have one or more children, the families they form are often fragile, with less than half of these relationships lasting five years or more. Andrew Cherlin and Paula Fomby, in this issue, report that 42% of cohabiting relationships dissolved in their 16-month study timespan.

Another fragile family structure is what social scientists call a "visiting relationship." This refers to an unmarried mother and father who, while not living

together, are romantically involved and have frequent contact.

The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study found that in both types of relationships, most fathers were highly involved during the pregnancy and around the time of the birth, and a majority of the couples were optimistic about a future

Although there is a growing understanding about how to discourage teen childbearing, there is little on how to reduce nonmarital births by adult women; women in their twenties, for example, account for more than half of all nonmarital births.

together.<sup>4</sup> These insights suggest that unmarried parents may be most receptive to "marriage promotion" efforts immediately around the time of birth. Moreover, the study found that many unmarried mothers hold pro-marriage attitudes and want to marry the fathers of their newborn children.<sup>5</sup>

Successful efforts to increase employment and education among disadvantaged adults may also indirectly promote marriage. The Fragile Families study suggests that the ability of either the mother or the father to get and keep a job increases the likelihood that an unmarried couple with a child will marry. The study also points to a declining likelihood that a couple will marry when the mother has a child by a previous partner, another reason to discourage teen childbearing.

## Strengthening Existing Marriages and Relationships

The research consensus is that a "healthy marriage," and not just any marriage, is optimal for child well-being. Characteristics that are highly predictive of divorce include negative communication patterns such as criticism, defensiveness, contempt, stonewalling, and rejection of a wife's influence. However, researchers are only beginning to understand how to promote strong, stable marriages. The knowledge gap is particularly acute for highly disadvantaged couples, many of whom have economic as well as relationship problems.

The "Becoming a Family Project" is a rare instance of a rigorously evaluated marriage promotion effort with middle- and

2. Doug Kirby. *Emerging Answers*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2001.

3. Doug Kirby. "Understanding What Works and What Doesn't in Reducing Adolescent Sexual Risk-Taking." *Family Planning Perspectives*, 33(6) (2001): 276-281.

4. Sara McLanahan, I. Garfinkel, and Ron Mincy. (2001). "Fragile Families, Welfare Reform, and Marriage." Policy Brief no. 10. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, Welfare Reform and Beyond project. For more on the Fragile Families study, see <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/>

5. C. Osborne, "A New Look at Unmarried Families: Diversity in Human Capital, Attitudes, and Relationship Quality." Working paper. New York: Center for Research on Child Well-being.

working-class couples, and its results suggest that a preventive intervention can both enhance marital stability and promote child well-being. (For more on this project, see Cowan and Cowan in this issue). Couples who took part in the program

“Unmarried parents may be most receptive to “marriage promotion” efforts immediately around the time of the birth of their first child.

reported less decline in marital satisfaction than did couples in a control group. Moreover, when the child was 18 months old, there were no separations or divorces among the intervention couples compared with a separation or divorce rate of 12.5 % in the control group. Interestingly, there were no differences between the experimental and control groups five years after enrollment in the study, suggesting that couples may benefit from periodic “booster shots.”

The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) has received considerable attention in policy circles, in part because it is the program at the heart of Oklahoma’s much-publicized marriage promotion efforts. PREP is an educational approach available both to married and unmarried couples that emphasizes strategies for lowering risk factors and raising protective factors to help marriages succeed. As Philip Cowan and Carolyn Pape Cowan report in this issue, communication skills and couple satisfaction improved; however, their effect on child development remains unknown.

### Premarital Counseling

Unmarried couples with plans to marry differ favorably from those without plans to marry, and therefore may be stronger targets for strengthening relationships. Compared with unmarried parents with low expectations to marry, those with a high likelihood of marrying have higher levels of agreement in their relationships, regardless of living arrangements. Moreover, they are similar to married couples on incidents of abuse and on levels of supportiveness.<sup>6</sup> Counseling to help couples identify and work on their relationships might both help them decide

whether to marry and help them to strengthen their relationship. Finally, evidence that unmarried couples who marry have higher levels of human capital suggests that efforts to provide job training and education for fathers as well as mothers may enhance their marriage prospects.

### Policy Implications

Marriage, divorce, and childbearing (particularly by teens and unmarried women) are highly controversial social issues. They are also intensely personal and profound individual decisions, with the potential to alter, for better or worse, the life trajectories of adults and children. Not surprisingly, there is relatively little societal consensus on the role of public policy in this arena.

At least three conclusions drawn from research may help shape a productive public dialogue. First, research clearly demonstrates that family structure matters for children, and the structure that helps children the most is a family headed by two biological parents in a low-conflict marriage.

Second, although there may be little societal consensus on nonmarital childbearing, there is consensus that childbearing by teens is undesirable—for the teen, for her baby, and for the larger society. There is also mounting evidence that a variety of programs and interventions are effective in discouraging teen pregnancy. Although specific interventions may be controversial, the knowledge that a variety of effective approaches exists to prevent teen childbearing should help parents, communities, and government make progress on this front. In particular, youth development and community service approaches are effective, and evidence indicates that high-quality early childhood programs can prevent adolescent childbearing a decade more or later.

Finally, there is not yet a proven approach for building strong marriages, particularly for disadvantaged unmarried couples, only promising insights from research studies and existing programs. This is an area in which carefully designed and rigorously evaluated demonstration programs could inform both private decisions and public policies. ■

6. C. Osborne, “A New Look at Unmarried Families: Diversity in Human Capital, Attitudes, and Relationship Quality.” Working paper. New York: Center for Research on Child Well-being.

# Marriage, Poverty, and Public Policy

One of the stated objectives of welfare legislation passed in 1996 was to end dependence by promoting marriage. In reauthorizing this legislation, many policymakers would like to devote more public resources to this goal, even if it requires cutting spending on cash benefits, child care, or job training. Such proposals reflect the widespread assumption that failure to marry, rather than unemployment, poor education, and lack of affordable child care, is the primary cause of child poverty. In this article, a shortened version of a paper prepared for the fifth annual Council on Contemporary Families conference, held April 26–28, 2002, Stephanie Coontz and Nancy Folbre question both this explanation of poverty and the policy prescriptions that derive from it.<sup>1</sup>

## Marriage and Public Policy

Marriage offers important social and economic benefits. Children who grow up with married parents generally enjoy a higher standard of living than those living in single-parent households. Two parents are usually better than one not only because they can bring home two paychecks, but also because they can share responsibilities for child care. Marriage often leads to higher levels of paternal involvement than divorce, nonmarriage, or cohabitation.

Well-designed public policies could play a constructive role in helping couples with the skills they need to develop healthy and sustainable relationships. It does not follow, however, that marriage promotion should be the centerpiece of antipoverty policy, or that public policies should provide a “bonus” to couples who marry.

The current pro-marriage policy agenda is misguided for at least four reasons:

- Not marrying is often a result of poverty and economic insecurity rather than the other way around.
- Prodding couples into matrimony without helping them solve problems that make relationships precarious could leave them worse off.

- Dual parenting does not guarantee an end to child poverty.
- Single parenthood does not inevitably lead to poverty. In countries with a more adequate social safety net, single-parent families are much less likely to live in poverty.

## The Marriage Pool

The notion that we can end child poverty by marrying off impoverished women does not take into account the realities of their lives. Unmarried men and women in poor neighborhoods are not average. That is often the reason they are not married. Researchers from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being study find that unmarried fathers were twice as likely as married fathers to have a physical or psychological problem that interfered with their ability to find or keep a job, and they were several times more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol. More than 25% of unmarried fathers were not employed when their child was born compared with fewer than 10% of married fathers.<sup>2</sup>

Several studies suggest that the decrease in real wages for low-income men during the 1980s and early 1990s contributed significantly to lower marriage rates in those years.<sup>3</sup> This trend has been exacerbated by the high incarceration rates for men convicted of nonviolent crimes, such as drug use. One study of the marriage market in the 1980s found that, at age 25, there were three unmarried black women for every black man who had adequate earnings.<sup>4</sup> As Ron Mincy emphasizes, simple pro-marriage policies are likely to offer less benefit to African American families than policies encouraging responsible fatherhood and paternal engagement.

## Quality Matters

Happy, healthy, stable marriages offer important benefits to adults and children. Not all marriages, however, fit this description. Studies show that a marriage marked

By Stephanie Coontz and Nancy Folbre\*

1. The full text of the report is available from the Council on Contemporary Families, “Discussion Paper on Poverty and Marriage.” Available online at: [www.contemporaryfamilies.org](http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org)
2. Wendy Single-Rushton and Sara McLanahan, “For Richer or Poorer?” Working paper no. 264. Chicago: Joint Center for Poverty Research, January 2002; Kathryn Edin, “What Do Low-Income Single Mothers Say about Marriage?” *Social Problems* 47 (2000): 112–33. For more information on the Fragile Families study, see [crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/](http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/)
3. Robert Nakosteen and Michael Zimmer, “Men, Money, and Marriage.” *Social Science Quarterly* 78 (1997); Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., “The Future of Marriage.” *American Demographics* 18 (June 1996): 39–40; Francine Blau, Lawrence Kahn, and Jane Waldfogel, “Understanding Young Women’s Marriage Decisions.” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 53 (2000): 624–48.
4. Daniel T. Lichter, D. McLaughlin, F. LeClere, G. Kephart, and D. Landry, “Race and the Retreat from Marriage: A Shortage of Marriageable Men?” *American Sociological Review* 57 (December 1992): 781–99.

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by serious conflict is often worse for children's well-being than divorce or single-parenthood.<sup>5</sup> The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University found teens in two-parent families who have a poor to fair rela-

" Dual parenting does not guarantee an end to child poverty.

In 2000, about 38% of all poor young children lived in two-parent households.

tionship with their father are more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol than teens in the average one-parent family.<sup>6</sup> Marriage to a stepfather may improve a mother's economic situation, but it does not necessarily improve outcomes for children, and in some cases leads to more problems than continued residence in a stable single-parent family (for more on outcomes in step-parent families, see both Cherlin and Fomby and Bitler et al., in this issue).

Also, there is no guarantee that, once married, couples will remain married. Andrew Cherlin and Paula Fomby (in this issue) find that 18% of marriages among low-income couples dissolved over the 16-month timespan of their study. Sociologist Scott South calculates that every time the unemployment rate rises by 1%, approximately 10,000 extra divorces occur.<sup>7</sup> Multiple marriages are worse for children psychologically than residence in the same kind of family, whatever its form, over long periods of time.

Finally, women and children in economically precarious situations are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence. Encouraging women in an unstable cohabiting relationship to marry their partners would not necessarily protect them or their children.

### Two-Parent Families Are Under Stress

Dual parenting does not guarantee an end to child poverty. In 2000, about 38% of all poor young children lived in two-parent homes. The costs of rearing children have increased in recent years because of the expansion of opportunities for women in the labor force, because of the longer time children spend in school, and because of the lack of support for parenting. Unlike other advanced industrial countries, the United

States fails to provide paid family leaves for parents, and levels of publicly subsidized support for child care remains comparatively low. Most employment practices penalize workers who take time away from work to provide family care. The high cost of parenting also helps explain many of the economic disadvantages that women face relative to men. It may also help explain why many men are reluctant to embrace paternal responsibilities.

### The Need for a Better Social Safety Net

The association of single parenthood with poverty is not inevitable. In Canada and France, single mothers are far less likely to live in poverty. Sweden and Denmark, with higher rates of out-of-wedlock births, have much lower rates of child poverty and hunger than does the United States. The reason for the difference is simple. These countries devote a greater percentage of their resources to assisting families with children than we do. Similarly, dramatic differences in child poverty rates within our country reflect differences in tax, child care, and income assistance policies across states.

Despite promises that work requirements and time limits under welfare reform would lead to a more generous package of assistance for those who "followed the rules," cash benefits have declined, especially as recipients increased their earnings. Punitive attitudes, time limits, and confusion over eligibility have discouraged many eligible families from applying for a range of assistance, including cash assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid. Although child poverty rates fell in the late 1990s as single mothers' earnings rose, the poverty figures fail to incorporate the rising costs of child care and other work-related expenses.

Unless a poor working mother is lucky enough to have a family member who can provide free child care or to find a federally subsidized child care slot, she is likely to devote more than 20% of her income to pay for child care. Although public support for child care has increased on both the federal and state levels, most families that made the shift from welfare to work in the late 1990s did not receive a child care subsidy.

5. Mavis Hetherington, *For Better or for Worse: Divorce Reconsidered*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001; Paul Amato and Alan Booth, "The Legacy of Parents' Marital Discord." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81 (2001): 627-38; Andrew Cherlin, "Going to Extremes: Family Structure, Children's Well-Being, and Social Science." *Demography* 36 (November 1999): 421-28.

6. National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, "Back to School 1999: National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse V: Teens and their Parents." New York: Columbia University, August 1999.

7. Scott South, Katherine Trent, and Yang Shen, "Changing Partners: Toward a Macrostructural-Opportunity Theory of Marital Dissolution." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63, (3) (2001): 743-54.

The most important federal policy promoting the welfare of low-income families is currently the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a fully refundable tax credit aimed at low-income families with children. Because benefits are closely tied to earnings, and phase out steeply after family income reaches \$12,460, the EITC imposes a significant penalty on two-earner, married couples. This penalty is unfair and should be eliminated.

Furthermore, families with three or more children receive no additional assistance than do families with two children. More than one-third of all children in the country live in families with three or more children. The EITC is phased out in ways that penalize middle-income families, who currently enjoy less public support for child-rearing than the affluent.<sup>8</sup> An expanded unified tax credit for families with children could address this problem.

### Support Families, Not Marriage

Given the pressing need for improvements in basic social safety net programs and the threat of rising unemployment, it is unconscionable to reallocate already inadequate Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to policies designed to promote marriage or provide a “marriage bonus.” There is little evidence that such policies would, in fact, increase marriage rates or reduce poverty among children. Indeed, the main effect of marriage bonuses would likely be to impose a “nonmarriage” penalty with a particularly negative impact on African American children. As Julianne Malveaux points out in her discussion of the

Bush proposal, “a mere \$100 million can be considered chump change. But the chump who could have been changed is the unemployed worker who misses out on job training because some folks find those programs—but not marriage-promotion programs—a waste.”<sup>9</sup>

Well-designed programs to help individuals develop and improve family relationships may be a good idea. However, they should not be targeted to the poor, but integrated into a larger provision of public health services (mandating, for example, that both public and private health insurance cover family counseling). Such programs should not be limited to couples who are married or planning to marry. Fathers and stepfathers who are not living with their biological children also need guidance and encouragement to develop healthy, nurturing relationships. Gay and lesbian families—who are currently legally prohibited from marriage—also merit support and assistance.

A variety of public policies could help strengthen families and reduce poverty among all children, including broadening the EITC, expanding publicly subsidized child care, promoting responsible fatherhood, improvements in public education and job training, and reducing income inequality and pay discrimination. Unlike some of the pro-marriage policies now under consideration, these policies would benefit couples who wish to marry but would not pressure women to enter or remain in intimate relationships they would not otherwise choose. ■

8. For more on this topic, see Paula England and Nancy Folbre, “Reforming the Social Contract,” *Poverty Research News*, July-August 2000. Available online at: [http://www.jcpr.org/newsletters/vol4\\_no4/index.html](http://www.jcpr.org/newsletters/vol4_no4/index.html)

9. Julianne Malveaux, “More Jobs, Not More Marriages, Lift Poor.” *U.S.A. Today*, February 22, 2002, p. 15A.

## Book Review (continued from page 5)

But what is the counterfactual? When feminists say that most marriages are patriarchal, I often sense an implicit counterfactual of an unmarried professional woman without children. The empirical counterfactual to marriage for most women is spending time as a single mother, via divorce or nonmarital childbearing. As single moms, women do as much or more of the care and housework necessitated by the child as they did in traditional marriage, but get much less money from the fathers. Whatever emotional and sexual

relationships they have with men are probably no better than marital relationships, and the odds of violence no less. This is the empirically observed counterfactual that is being picked up in the studies Waite and Gallagher review. Marriage looks good for women in part because the typical alternative is hardly a feminist panacea.

But maybe we should set our sights higher. Given that the authors are idealistic enough to think words can help turn back the retreat from marriage, I wish they had been idealistic enough to point out

that marriage will be more compelling to women if men’s roles change to include more contribution to childrearing, household work, and the kind of emotional TLC that has been women’s traditional responsibility. Then it would make sense to recommend policies that would reduce gender inequality within and outside of marriage along with those that encourage and support marriage.

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# Welfare Reform and the Changing Family

Based on research by  
Andrew Cherlin and Paula  
Fomby\*

1. Andrew Cherlin and Paula Fomby, "A Closer Look at Changes in Children's Living Arrangements in Low-Income Families." Working paper. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2002. Available online at: [www.jhu.edu/~welfare/work\\_paper\\_2-20.pdf](http://www.jhu.edu/~welfare/work_paper_2-20.pdf)
2. Gregory Acs and Sandi Nelson, "'Honey, I'm Home': Changes in Living Arrangements in the Late 1990s." *New Federalism: National Survey of America's Families*. Series B, no. B-38. Washington, DC: Urban Institute, June 2001.
3. Andrew Cherlin and Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., "Stepfamilies in the United States: A Reconsideration." *Annual Review of Sociology* 20 (1994): 359-81; and Robert E. Emery, *Marriage, Divorce, and Children's Adjustment*. 2d ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999.
4. E. Mavis Hetherington and Katherine M. Jodl, "Stepfamilies as a Setting for Child Development." In Alan Booth and Judy Dunn (eds.), *Stepfamilies: Who Benefits? Who Does Not?* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994, pp. 55-79.
5. Frances K. Goldscheider and Calvin Goldscheider. *Leaving Home Before Marriage: Ethnicity, Familism, and Generational Relationships*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993.

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As previous articles have noted, encouraging the formation of two-parent families was a goal of the 1996 welfare reforms and has received added attention in the latest Bush Administration proposals for reauthorizing the 1996 legislation. Andrew Cherlin and Paula Fomby, reporting on recent results from the Three-City study, look in more detail at the changing structure of households since welfare reform.<sup>1</sup> They, like others, find a modest trend toward two-parent families. However, the traditional marriage between two biological parents is not the norm. The increase in two-parent families can almost entirely be accounted for by growing numbers of stepfamilies, through either remarriage or cohabitation—and mainly cohabitation. They also find that cohabiting and married couples break up at high rates.

## Study Description

The authors draw on data from a sample of 2,100 low-income families (living below 200% of the poverty level) in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. The families were interviewed twice, roughly 16 months apart, as part of the Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study. The first set of interviews was held between March and December 1999, and the second set between September 2000 and May 2001. (For more information on the Three-City study, see <http://www.jhu.edu/~welfare>.)

The authors trace the formation and dissolution between interviews of several types of unions, including single-parent families, cohabiting step-parents, cohabiting biological parents, married biological parents, and married step-parents.

## A Rise in Step-Parent Families and Cohabitation

The authors first offer a snapshot of how families changed over the 16-month timespan. In line with the stated goal of welfare reform, the percentage of children living with a single mother (who was not cohabiting or married) declined by 3 percentage points, from 57% at the first interview to 54% at the second, and the decline was strongest among African Americans

and Puerto Ricans. This decline is consistent with recent national reports.<sup>2</sup>

Parsing the findings more carefully reveals that the increase in two-parent families was confined to stepfamilies formed by cohabitation and, secondarily, marriage. Mothers cohabiting with a stepfather increased 3.4 percentage points, from 2.2% of the sample to 5.6% (see table 1). This was the largest increase across all family types. The increase among mothers married to stepfathers was 1.6 percentage points, from 5.4% to 7%. The percentage of children living with both biological parents (either married or not) did not increase. In other words, virtually all of the cohabiting and marriage that began between the interviews involved a mother and a stepfather.

In much of the policy debates about fatherhood and marriage, it has been assumed that two-parent families are better for children than one-parent families. However, a number of studies now suggest that the well-being of children in mother-stepfather families is no greater, on average, than in single-parent families.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly true if the remarriage occurs when children are in early adolescence.<sup>4</sup> The addition of a stepfather requires a period of adjustment. Adolescents, who are coming to terms with their own emotional and physical development, may have a more difficult time adjusting. Studies suggest that adolescents in mother-stepfather households, particularly girls, tend to leave home earlier as a means of resolving tensions than do those in two biological parent households.<sup>5</sup> Even after a few years, step-parents tend to be less engaged with their stepchildren than with their biological children.

It is not yet clear whether spending time in a cohabiting family rather than with married parents is more or less beneficial to the children. It is clear, however, that these families break up more often. In Cherlin and Fomby's sample, 42% of cohabiting couples had ended their relationship by the second interview (16% had married).

Another family type is children living with neither parent, which they find, as did Hoynes (in this issue), is a sizable group, at 9% of all

family types. Unlike Hoynes, however, they find no change in this number over the interviews. Hoynes found that the proportion of low-income black children living with neither parent increased by 8 percentage points. (Cherlin and Fomby did not restrict the sample to black children and the timespans were different.)

### Stability of Families

The greater the number of family transitions children experience, the more detrimental the effect on their well-being. Research has found, for example, that the number of family transitions an adolescent girl experiences is a stronger predictor of becoming pregnant than is the amount of time she spends living with a single parent.<sup>6</sup> Another study found more behavior problems among boys when their mothers experienced more transitions.<sup>7</sup> In fact, a large study in New Zealand found that both children whose mothers had stayed married and children whose single mothers had stayed single had fewer behavioral problems than children whose mothers had changed partners.<sup>8</sup>

Cherlin and Fomby find that 22% of children in their sample had experienced a change in their caregiver’s living arrangement between interviews. Ironically, the most stable arrangement was living with neither parent. The next two most stable living arrangements were with married parents and single parents. Of the mothers who were married at the first interview, for example, 18% had separated by the second interview. This compares with 42% of cohabiting relationships that dissolved. The rate of break-ups was higher among African American families; 59% had dissolved by the second interview. Also, the rate of break-ups in both marriages and cohabiting relationships among this sample is higher than national averages.

Given the high rate at which cohabiting unions disrupt and the generally high rate of family transitions, it may be questioned whether the kinds of two-parent families being formed will benefit children.

### Policy Implications

There have been several reports of a reversal in the decades-long rise in single-parent families. However, none of these studies followed the same children over time. By tracking the same set of children over 16 months, the authors documented a modest rise in two-parent families, but the two-parent households being formed are not the “traditional” married biological parents. More families were forming outside of marriage, and with stepfathers. The families also were highly unstable. Almost half of the cohabiting couples had broken up between the interviews, with the rates of separation outstripping national estimates. Even 18% of married couples had broken up.

Policymakers often discuss so-called “fragile families”—low-income cohabiting couples who have had a child together. Most observers have assumed that marriages, once formed, are hardy enough to last. These results suggest that there may also be many low-income “fragile marriages” that need support.

The authors’ findings suggest only modest expectations for what the recent movement toward two-adult families will mean for children. It still may be true that children will benefit from targeted policies that provide services to biological parents who wish to marry. However, the modest benefits deriving from the types of families that are forming in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio lead the authors to caution that policies that broadly encourage the formation of two-parent families may have effects on the well-being of poor children that are more limited than their advocates expect. ■

“ The increase in two-parent families was confined to stepfamilies formed by cohabitation and, secondarily, marriages. Mothers cohabiting with a stepfather increased 3.4 percentage points.

6. Larry L. Wu and Brian B. Martinson. “Family Structure and the Risk of a Premarital Birth.” *American Sociological Review* 59 (1993): 210–32.
7. D. Capaldi and G. Patterson. “Relation of Parental Transition to Boys’ Adjustment Problems: 1. A Linear Hypothesis; 2. Mothers at Risk for Transitions and Unskilled Parenting.” *Developmental Psychology* 27 (1991): 489–504.
8. J. M. Najman, B. C. Behrens, M. Andersen, W. Bor, M. O’Callaghan, and G. M. Williams. “Impact of Family Type and Family Quality on Child Behavior Problems: A Longitudinal Study.” *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 36 (1997): 1357–65.

Table 1

Children’s Living Arrangements	Interview 1 (%)	Interview 2 (%)	Percentage Point Change
With neither parent	9.0	8.6	-0.4
With single mother	57.2	53.7	-3.5**
With mother cohabiting with stepfather	2.2	5.6	3.4**
With two cohabiting biological parents	5.5	4.3	-1.2*
With mother married to stepfather	5.4	7.0	1.6**
With two biological married parents	20.8	21.0	0.2

\* < .05 \*\* < 0.1 Percentage may not sum to 100 due to rounding

# The Impact of Welfare Reform on Living Arrangements

Based on research by Marianne Bitler, Jonah Gelbach, and Hilary Hoynes\*

The paper can be found at [http://www.econ.ucdavis.edu/faculty/hoynes/working\\_papers.html](http://www.econ.ucdavis.edu/faculty/hoynes/working_papers.html).

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**Marianne Bitler** is a NICHD post-doctoral research fellow at RAND. Her research focuses on social insurance programs and children's outcomes. **Jonah Gelbach** is an assistant professor at the University of Maryland, and for 2001-2003, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Scholar in Health Policy at UC Berkeley. His research focuses on incentive effects of public assistance programs. **Hilary Hoynes** is an associate professor of economics at UC Davis. Her research focuses on the incentive effects of tax and transfer programs for the poor.

Despite the attention afforded family formation in 1996 welfare reform legislation, we know very little about the impact of welfare reform on living arrangements. Research on the effects of these reforms has considered impacts on fertility, marriage, and single parenthood during the waiver period. However, very few studies have considered living arrangements more broadly, or during the post-PRWORA period. Marianne Bitler, Jonah Gelbach, and Hilary Hoynes, in their working paper, "The Impact of Welfare Reform on Living Arrangements," examine the effects of welfare waivers and the implementation of TANF on the changing living arrangements of children and women most likely to be affected by reforms.

They find some progress toward the TANF goal of encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. Among black and Hispanic children, reform leads to a decrease in the fraction living with an unmarried parent. However, for black children, welfare reform has doubled the fraction living with neither parent.

## Study Description

The authors use data from the March Current Population Surveys (CPS) from 1989–2000. The March CPS is an annual demographic file of between 50,000 and 62,000 households. The authors draw on a sample of children younger than 16 and a second sample of women aged 16–54. The results reported here focus on black central-city households and Hispanic youth living in all types of communities because these groups are more likely to be affected by welfare reforms.

The authors analyze changes in household composition (i.e., the total number of household members, including women, children, and men), and changes in co-residence and marital patterns. The latter includes whether a child lives with neither parent, an unmarried parent, a married parent, or with both a parent and a grandparent. Monitoring household composition allows the researchers to track doubling up and whether welfare reform has increased the number of

men living in households with children.

The authors use pooled cross-sectional data and regress outcome measures on reform variables. Unlike some previous studies, they also differentiate between states' implementation of TANF according to whether the state ever had a major waiver or whether the state never had a major waiver. These regressions also include demographic covariates, state-level policy and economic variables, state fixed effects and year effects.

## Changes in Black Households since Reform

The results suggest that welfare reforms had some important intended consequences. For example, TANF implementation reduced the fraction of black central-city children living with an unmarried parent by more than 10 percentage points, from a base of more than 60%. However, these reforms are not immune from the law of unintended consequences. The policy changes resulted in an 8 percentage point increase in the fraction of black children living with neither parent, double the rate prior to welfare reform. These children could be moving in with a grandparent without their mother, or the mother could be leaving the home (with another relative or the state assuming care). There was also a small but statistically significant decline in the number of children living with a parent and grandparent.

The increase in black children living with neither parent could be a negative consequence of policy, or it could represent an improvement in the children's lives. It is possible that children who are now living with neither parent are living in homes with more financial resources, which, at least from a financial perspective, could be a positive effect. The authors, however, find no evidence that this is the case. More black, central-city children are moving into poor households without their parents than into nonpoor households.

For black families living in central cities, welfare reform has led to an increase in household size, with most of the rise attributed to increasing numbers of children.

For example, black central-city families have seen a 25% increase in the number of children in a household (see table 1). These increases in household size are consistent with more doubling up (multiple families sharing a residence), or possibly children joining households with other children but without their mothers.

The analysis also shows that TANF implementation reduced the fraction of never-married black women living in central cities by about 15%. There was no increase in adult males in the household, indicating that the increases in marriage must be from marriages among previously cohabiting couples or from a decline in separations among currently married couples. TANF implementation is also associated with significant increases in divorce or separation for this population.<sup>1</sup>

### Changes in Hispanic Households since Reform

The results for Hispanics are more uniformly consistent with the stated goals of reform. Welfare reform is associated with a marked decline (10 percentage points, or 30%) in the propensity of Hispanic children to live with an unmarried parent. For Hispanic children, there is less evidence of an increase in household size, although the number of children increased somewhat. State waivers were associated with an increase in the number of men living in households. In contrast to black children, there is no indication that more Hispanic children are living with neither par-

ent. As with black central-city children, Hispanic children are less likely (2.8 percentage point decline) to live with a parent and grandparent.

Among Hispanic women, the fraction of never-married women increased with reform. Unlike black central-city women, there was no increase in divorce or separation.

### Policy Implications

Welfare reform has clearly had significant effects on living arrangements in black and Hispanic families. Some important goals of reform, such as encouraging the formation of two-parent families, have seen some success. Other outcomes of reform, such as the rise in the fraction of black children in central cities living with neither parent, may run counter to policy goals. Moreover, it is difficult to pin down which policies are associated with which impacts. Some aspects of reform directly targeted living arrangements (e.g., family caps, expansions for two-parent families, residency requirements for teen parents). Other aspects have had important indirect effects (e.g., financial sanctions, time limits, work requirements, increases in earnings disregards). Given the push and pull of these varied policies, as well as the wide leeway states have been given in implementing policies, the authors were unable to link their results to specific policies. These results suggest that policymakers should proceed with care in implementing reauthorization of PRWORA. ■

Policy changes resulted in an 8 percentage point increase in the fraction of black children living with neither parent, double the rate prior to welfare reform.

Table 1

### Summary of Findings: Effects of TANF on Black and Hispanic Households

	% Black Central-City	% Hispanic
Children living with an unmarried parent	- 23%	- 30%
Children living with married parent	Insignificant, positive	+ 13%
Children living with neither parent	+88%	No consistent change
Children living with grandparent and parent	- 52%	- 35%
Number of adult men in children's households	No consistent change	+ 11%
Fraction of women divorced/separated	+ 30%	- 15%
Household size, children's households	+ 17%	No consistent change
Number of children in children's households	+ 25%	+ 9%

Note: The full working paper allows the effects of TANF to differ between states that previously had waivers and states that did not have waivers. The estimates in the table are a combination of these reform effects.

1. The authors and Madeline Zavodny are currently working on another paper, "The Impact of Welfare Reform on Marriage and Divorce," that uses vital statistics data to examine more carefully the impact of welfare reform on divorce and marriage.

# Multigenerational Living Arrangements and Teens

By Thomas DeLeire and  
Ariel Kalil \*

The paper is available online at <http://www.jcpr.org/wp/WPprofile.cfm?ID=276>. Also forthcoming in *Demography*, 39(2) (2002).

1. R. Jayakody and A. Snyder, "Living Arrangements after a Nonmarital Birth." Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the Population Association of America, Chicago, 1998.

\*  
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Research has long found that young children in single-parent families have poorer developmental and other outcomes than those whose parents are married. However, relatively few studies have examined single mothers and their children in multigenerational families. What role, if any, might grandparents play in the developmental outcomes of children of single mothers? Thomas DeLeire and Ariel Kalil, in their JCPR working paper, "Good Things Come in Three's: Single-Parent Multigenerational Family Structure and Adolescent Adjustment," look at teens' development in a variety of family structures and uncover some surprising results.

They find that teens of single mothers have better outcomes when they also live with a grandparent in a multigenerational household. This is especially true of teens of never-married mothers in low-income families who, in fact, have better outcomes than even teens in married-parent families. The poorest outcomes, confirming past research, are found in single-parent families.

## Study Description

Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS), the authors follow 11,213 adolescents in a variety of family structures from eighth grade to two years beyond high school. The NELS is a nationally representative sample of 1,000 schools and 25,000 randomly selected eighth graders.

They examine four developmental indicators: high school graduation, college attendance, smoking and drinking, and sexual initiation. The authors control for a number of variables that might also affect outcomes, including economic resources, parenting characteristics, residential stability, and home and school characteristics, along with a set of student demographic controls.

## Background

Single mothers live in a variety of family settings. Past research has found, for example, that 43% of never-married mothers lived with their

parents at the time of their child's birth.<sup>1</sup> Data from the 2000 Census show that 3.7% of all households are multigenerational.

Among the teens in this study, 65% lived with married parents (biological parents); 12% lived in stepfamilies; 11% lived with divorced single mothers; 3.2% lived in cohabiting arrangements; 2% lived with two, unmarried biological parents; 2.2% lived with single fathers; 1.2% lived with never-married single mothers; 1.3% live with divorced mothers in multigenerational households; 2% lived in grandparent-headed households with no biological parent present; and 0.3% lived with never-married mothers in multigenerational households. The authors compare the outcomes of teens in these family structures to teens of married parents. The group residing in multigenerational families in this sample is mainly African American with young single mothers. Therefore, the results reported below on single mothers in multigenerational families mainly apply to African American teens.

## Teen Developmental Outcomes Vary by Household Type

Kalil and DeLeire find that youth with married parents are more advantaged economically than youth in all other nonmarried family types. Youth in these families also have better developmental outcomes than those in most other single-mother family structures—with two exceptions. Adolescents with a never-married or divorced single mother living in multigenerational families fare better.

Children of never-married mothers in multigenerational families are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college, less likely to smoke or drink, and no more likely to initiate sex than teens in married-parent families. This is despite being the poorest of all family types.

Children of divorced parents in multigenerational families fare similarly to children of never-married parents. They are no less likely to graduate from high school, no less likely to enroll in college, no more likely to smoke or

drink, and no more likely to initiate sex than teens in married-parent families. The authors find that demographic characteristics and income can explain some, but not all, of the differences in high school graduation and college attendance across different family structures. In contrast, demographic and income characteristics explain none of the differences in substance use and sexual initiation. In short, African American teens in low-income, multigenerational families fare better than those of married parents.

In addition to the above analysis, the authors compared different pairings of families. For example, they examined whether outcomes differed between youth in never-married, multigenerational families and those in never-married, single families and found significant differences in high school graduation, substance use, and (marginally) college attendance favoring youth in never-married multigenerational households. They also compared these same youth to teens in cohabiting families with similar results.

### The Importance of Grandparents

The multigenerational families in this study all contained grandparents. This study is consistent with past research that has shown that black children in single-mother families with grandparents present in the household had better school conduct and higher grades in reading relative to black children who lived with a single mother only.<sup>2</sup> Other research has found that teenagers who ever lived in a single-parent, multigenerational family had higher educational attainment than teens living with single mothers only.<sup>3</sup>

How do grandparents help? One theory centers on the age of the mother. Very young mothers, and specifically black teen mothers, may have a stronger network of relatives who contribute to the support of the young mother's children than would older mothers. These paired patterns of child-rearing may minimize the risk to child development associated with teen pregnancies and poverty. Having a strong support system may also minimize the forced tradeoffs a young mother might make concerning school, child care, and work.<sup>4</sup>

Another theory is that grandparents enhance both the economic and the parenting resources of the family. These extra resources provided

by the presence of grandparents might be particularly beneficial to low-income families. Grandparents might contribute in ways that benefit children relative to what the single mother can do by herself.

### Policy Implications

Research has consistently shown that growing up in single-parent families has detrimental outcomes for children, and those findings are supported here. What is interesting is the role that grandparents appear to play in alleviating some of the detrimental effects of single parenthood.

What can explain such positive outcomes for

Supporting multigenerational families might do more to promote the well-being of children than encouraging single mothers to marry men who are not the parents of their children.

children of single mothers in multigenerational families? The authors suggest that the presence of grandparents interacts with socioeconomic status and this is particularly beneficial among low-income families. Grandparents are likely providing additional resources to mitigate the negative effects that children might otherwise experience. In fact, grandparents in these low-income families might be even more beneficial than a father's presence, particularly if the marital relationship is unstable or conflicted.

In families with young single mothers, especially African American teen mothers, the grandparents are likely to be relatively young and healthy themselves, which would allow them to more actively participate in child-rearing.

Given the preponderance of evidence that children growing up with their married biological parents fare better in life, efforts to reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing and to educate young people on the benefits of marriage should be encouraged. However, a blanket policy to "promote marriage" among single mothers—as in the reauthorization of the 1996 welfare reform legislation—is not the right approach. Supporting multigenerational families might do more to promote the well-being of children than encouraging single mothers to marry men who are not the parents of their children. Promoting step-parent families could discourage the formation of multigenerational families or destabilize existing multigenerational families. ■

2. D. Entwisle and K. Alexander, "Family Type and Children's Growth in Reading and Math over the Primary Grades." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 58 (1996): 341–55.
3. W.S. Aquilino, "The Lifecourse of Children Born to Unmarried Mothers: Childhood Living Arrangements and Young Adult Outcomes." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (1996): 293–310.
4. A. Geronimus, "Teenage Childbearing and Personal Responsibility: An Alternative View," *Political Science Quarterly*, 112 (1997). Available online at: [epn.org/psq/geronimus.html](http://epn.org/psq/geronimus.html).

# Strengthening Couples to Improve Children's Well-Being: What We Know Now

By Philip A. Cowan and Carolyn Pape Cowan\*

How should we think about the Bush Administration's proposed family policy initiatives to increase federal resources to promote or strengthen marriage? Some opponents suggest that these are patriarchal proposals that would divert money from state Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) allocations and coerce women into potentially abusive relationships. Described this way, the initiative certainly sounds unwise. Wade Horn, Assistant Secretary for the Administration for Children and Families, argues that funds will be made available to "promote healthy marriages" in parents of young children to foster the children's development (see Horn, in this issue). Described that way, the initiative sounds sensible and potentially attractive.

Advocates on both sides of the debate argue that there is no evidence to support the notion that as yet untested interventions for couples will have the positive effects on children that proponents imply. Although we recognize that there is rarely one-to-one correspondence between family policies and social science research on family issues, we consider evidence that seems relevant to this policy discussion. Our conclusion is that if we look beyond marital status (single, married, or divorced) to the emotional tone of the parents' relationship, there is compelling evidence that the investment of resources to help parents make their relationships more effective could have important and long-lasting payoffs for their children's development.

## Marriage as an End State

We will not discuss whether marriage is a desirable end state in itself; in our view, this is a moral value that is not susceptible to evaluation by empirical research. We acknowledge a large body of research conducted by sociologists, demographers, and economists that concludes that children of married parents are likely to show more positive signs of adaptation than children of single or divorced parents. These results are often mistakenly inter-

preted as if marital status itself is responsible for better child outcomes. An alternative explanation would be that individuals with better adaptation and more effective couple relationships are more likely to marry and stay married, and that two parents are likely to have the benefit of higher family incomes than single parents. Even if we accept the idea that more children in two-parent, married families fare better than children in single-parent families, it does not make sense to use these findings as the basis of a policy to "get more parents married." Not that marital status does not matter, but without some attention to the quality of the relationship between parents, policy incentives for parents to marry, even if they benefit some children, risk greater harm to others.

## The Importance of Relationship Quality to Children's Development

Studies of two-parent families have consistently found that when a couple's relationship is characterized by unresolved conflict and unhappiness, their children tend to have more acting out aggressive behavior problems, more shy withdrawn behavior, and fewer social and academic skills.<sup>1</sup> To make matters worse, when parents are not getting along, their distress often "spills over" into relationships with the children.<sup>2</sup> Thus, some children get a double whammy—from the heated or frosty emotional tone of their parents' relationship as a couple and from their parents' harsh or ineffective patterns of caring and discipline. In addition to its central role within the family, the couple seems to act as a kind of thermostat that regulates outside forces.

## Lessons from Family-Based Interventions

A number of well-designed intervention studies suggest that it is possible to work effectively with families whose relationships are already at risk, by virtue of poverty or the children's behavior problems. For example, David Olds showed that a program in which

1. E.M. Cummings and P. Davies, *Children and Marital Conflict: The Impact of Family Dispute and Resolution*. New York: Guilford Press, 1994.

2. R.E. Emery, *Marriage, Divorce, and Children's Adjustment* (2d ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999.

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nurses visited low-income, single mothers regularly, beginning in pregnancy and continuing after their babies were born, had long-term positive effects on the mothers' and children's health.<sup>3</sup> So far, this work has not focused on fathers or on the parents' relationship as a couple, nor, except for one publication, has it focused on achievement and behavior problems in the children.

In families where children were having serious behavior problems, some interventions with a parent have been effective. Douglas Griest in the United States and Mark Dadds in Australia find that classes for mothers reduced aggressive problems in some children.<sup>4</sup> In both projects, if mothers had unresolved conflict with the children's fathers, the children continued to misbehave. Only when subsequent programs addressed the conflict between parents did the children's aggressive behavior decline.

There are several preventive intervention approaches focused on strengthening couple relationships in middle-class couples. In one of the best-known programs, Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), Howard Markman and colleagues evaluated a communication skills program for couples about to be married.<sup>5</sup> Although they report positive effects on the quality of communication and satisfaction as a couple over the next ten years, it is unclear whether the benefits of communication skills training are associated with positive child development outcomes (not their area of focus).

Our own research in the "Becoming a Family" project and the "Schoolchildren and Their Families" project evaluated over an extended time a group intervention for working- and middle-class couples. One study focused on couples expecting a first baby, and the other on couples whose preschooler was about to enter elementary school.<sup>6</sup> In the first study, couples were randomly chosen to participate in a six-month, weekly couples group with mental health professionals as leaders, or a comparison condition in which each couple was offered regular interviews and questionnaires but no consultation.

Results showed that the group intervention for new parents interrupted the typical declines in partners' satisfaction with the division of family labor and the marriage

overall. Fathers from the intervention groups described themselves as more psychologically involved with their babies than fathers with no intervention. We know of several

The birth of a first child is a vulnerable time for a couple, and interventions at this time are likely to be less costly and more effective than later treatments, when problems have become entrenched.

studies of group interventions for partners becoming parents that are in progress now in the United States and Germany, but the outcomes are still unknown.

Couples in our second intervention study were randomly offered a four-month, weekly couples group, or a brief consultation with the same mental health professional staff. Compared with parents offered the brief consultation, couples from the more intensive group intervention were more likely to modify both the way they handled conflict in front of their children and their responsiveness and structuring of difficult tasks when they worked with their children. By the end of kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 4, the earlier positive effects on parents' marital and parenting quality were supplemented with positive child benefits over the next five years: greater academic progress; getting along more successfully with their peers; and fewer acting out or withdrawn behavior problems at school.

### When to Intervene: The Transition to Parenthood as a Vulnerable Period

Because research has shown that the birth of a first child is a vulnerable time for a couple, we propose that interventions at this time will be less costly and more effective than later treatments, when problems have become entrenched. Our own studies of new parents, and more than 30 others in the United States, Canada, England, Israel, and Germany, reveal consistent trends. Both men and women experience changes in their sense of self, identity, work life, and relationships with parents and friends. Couples' division of family labor becomes more traditional, even in couples intending to be more egalitarian. Women are at risk for increasing symptoms of depression, and men's and women's satisfaction as a couple declines, as they report increasing conflict and less time to work out their problems after

3. For a review of this and other well-designed intervention studies, see P.A. Cowan, D. Powell, and C. P. Cowan, "Parenting Interventions: A Family Systems Perspective." In *Handbook of Child Psychology* (5th ed., vol. 4), edited by W. Damon. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998.
4. M.R. Dadds, S. Schwartz, and M.R. Sanders, "Marital Discord and Treatment Outcome in Behavioral Treatment of Child Conduct Disorders," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* (1987); D.L. Griest, "Effects of Parent Enhancement Therapy on the Treatment Outcome and Generalization of a Parent Training Program," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* (1982).
5. S.M. Stanley, S.L. Blumberg, and H.J. Markman, "Helping Couples Fight for Their Marriages: The PREP Approach." In *Preventive Approaches in Couples Therapy*, edited by R. Berger and M.T. Hannah Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 1999.
6. C.P. Cowan and P.A. Cowan, *When Partners become Parents: The Big Life Change for Couples*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000; C.P. Cowan, P.A. Cowan, and G. Heming, G., "Two Variations of a Preventive Intervention for Couples: Effects on Parents and Children during the Transition to Elementary School. In *The Family Context of Parenting in Children's Adaptation to Elementary School*, edited by P.A. Cowan, C.P. Cowan, J. Ablow, V.K. Johnson, and J. Measelle. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum (in press).

having a child.<sup>7</sup>

Is it that having children causes problems in the parents' relationship? Not exactly. As with many major life transitions, the best predictor of how well couples are doing after having a first child is the level of satisfaction they reported before they became parents. Infants do not destroy well-functioning

“ Earlier positive effects on parents' marital and parenting quality from participating in the School Children and Their Families project were supplemented with positive child benefits over the next five years.

couple relationships or bring warring partners together. However, the challenge of reorganizing family life as partners become parents increases the strain and exposes strengths and weaknesses that the partners may not have recognized before. If individuals who are faring badly receive no help during the transition, their relationship is more likely to spiral downward in the early years of child-rearing. Professional assistance could interrupt negative cycles and, by helping to improve the quality of the couple and parent-child relationships, promote healthier development in their children.

We should emphasize that almost all of the correlational and intervention studies we have described, including our own, have been carried out with working-class and middle-class families with two parents. Would these interventions make sense for low-income unmarried couples? The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being study has shown that the majority of unmarried mothers of newborns are in active relationships with the fathers of their babies, with many living together and intending to rear the child together.<sup>8</sup> Many also intend to marry eventually if their life

circumstances permit. Over and above their current state of poverty, these poor women and their partners are also making a major life transition, just as are married couples in more advantaged life circumstances. It seems reasonable to assume that these new parents could benefit from help in dealing with issues faced by most new parents, and the specific challenges that exacerbate the normal stress of this family transition for low-income couples.

### Implications for the Current Policy Discussions of Marriage

Here we reach the limits of relevant research. Correlational studies tell us that marital problems place children at risk for difficulties with school achievement and peer relationships, and marital quality tends to decline after the birth of a first child, a decline that continues as infants become toddlers, schoolchildren, and adolescents. Research suggests that interventions to strengthen parents' relationships with their children and as a couple can pay off in children's academic, social, and emotional well-being. If the intervention helps partners to have more satisfying relationships and decide to get married, this would likely be considered a positive outcome to those on all sides of the argument. If help for the couple resulted in lasting improvements in their relationship—even without a formal commitment to marriage—we are confident that the children would benefit as well. We are convinced that, either way, the benefits to the families and the communities in which they live would outweigh the programs' costs and make this a sound investment in family health and children's well-being. ■

7. For a review, see C.P. Cowan and P.A. Cowan, "Interventions to Ease the Transition to Parenthood: Why They Are Needed and What They Can Do," *Family Relations: Journal of Applied Family and Child Studies*, 44(4) (1995): 412-423.

8. Irwin Garfinkel, Sara McLanahan, and Kristen Harknett, "Fragile Families and Welfare Reform." Working paper no. 113. Chicago: Joint Center for Poverty Research. Available online at: <http://www.jcpr.org/wp/WPprofile.cfm?ID=113>. For more information on the Fragile Families study, see <http://cfcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/>

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# Research Issues in the Marriage and Welfare Reform Debate

By V. Jeffery Evans\*

There are some fascinating research issues involving marriage and family formation in the context of renewing welfare reform legislation. Not only are these issues interesting to social theorists, but they also involve matters of public policy of the highest practical importance.

At the center of the welfare reform debate is the notion that reform cannot be considered complete until poor families are equipped to rise out of poverty and the need for public assistance, and that incentives are needed to strengthen families and promote marriage to achieve this result. These proposals give rise to a number of research issues. Are strong family ties essential to achieve this result, or are strong families the result of a successful transition from poverty? Is marriage the best way to strengthen poor families? Does strength in families enable them to escape poverty now and empower them to prosper in the future? Are there obstacles that may inhibit attempts to strengthen families in poor communities? Can policy innovations exert enough influence to achieve the desired result? I will address the last question first.

## Incentives in Welfare Programs

To determine whether policy innovations will be effective, we first must confront the issue of incentive effects of the system of public assistance. Does welfare do more than provide a safety net for vulnerable people? Does it motivate individuals to eschew work and marriage and to have children out-of-wedlock? As an economist, it seems to me that there are well-motivated theoretical reasons to expect powerful incentive effects of public assistance. Yet the scientific literature is quite divided on the question.

One reason for the division is that we do not have the luxury of performing a perfectly controlled experiment in which we randomly vary public assistance incentives within the population. The results are often left to multiple interpretations and can vary because of rather artificial reasons deriving

from quirks of complicated statistical procedure or in data collection. Only gradually will a preponderance of evidence accumulate to produce a consensus. Fortunately, there is quite a bit of work underway.

## The Big Picture: System Effects

Another reason for the controversy about incentive effects is that we have not been very successful in characterizing the “big picture” of public assistance, but have instead focused on individual components of specific policies and programs. This is not to say that attempting to isolate the effects of specific policies and programs is a waste of time.

However, if we are to determine whether public assistance exerts incentives on marriage and fertility, then we should measure not only how specific programs and policies individually influence them, but also how the component parts of the system interact, and how cultural and ideational aspects of the community interact with everything else.

The interactions may be quite important in assessing whether there are “big system” effects that may precipitate powerful behavior sweeping through an entire community. It might be the case that individual effects of specific policy elements might be very small but, when combined in certain ways, interact to create a tipping point of behavior within the entire system, and ultimately produce a big effect. In addition, there are certainly cultural and ideational influences at work in every community, and changing these structures can change behavior in its wake. Could it be that the net effect of the old system of welfare created an antimarriage culture but that recent and proposed reforms will change this culture? If this is the case, policy effects may seem small at first but grow over time.

It could also be that a variety of elements of the former welfare policies interacted to produce an unintended, yet strong,

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antimarrriage incentive system. Reform attempts may affect these implications in hidden ways that erode the antimarrriage effect. Could we not then witness a movement toward stronger family ties and marriage that would really represent a tipping point at which the antimarrriage incentive system evaporates? My guess is that there will be big surprises in store because we do not currently think these forces exist and have not developed ways of understanding how they work.

The debate about welfare reform in the 1990s was notable for its lack of appreciation of how powerful “big system” and cultural effects could be in motivating people to leave or not enter the public assistance system. In my opinion, we in the research community generally failed to anticipate that welfare rolls would fall as dramatically as they did because we were, in part, content to dwell on individual-level analysis and failed to look for system and cultural effects.

In fact, studies designed to look for multiple levels of welfare reform influence within poor communities found intriguing clues that there was more at work in these communities than just the individual effect of welfare policies on individual behavior. Linda Burton, based on ethnographic work in the Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study, discovered that the message of welfare reform was understood and motivating behavior even before the reforms were in place.<sup>1</sup> She was able to measure this because she was actually examining how families and communities were reacting to the totality of the welfare reform process.

These observations do not prove that there are systemic or cultural effects at large, but they suggest that there are interesting things at work in welfare reform that we will miss unless we go looking for them. When we examine policy initiatives regarding marriage and fertility within the context of welfare reform, we should look for “big system” and cultural effects as well as any that we might attribute to specific elements of the new policy.

### Challenges to Strengthening Families in Low-Income Communities

The next question is one of strengthening

families and promoting marriage. Past observations of the family have noted a sharp rise in out-of-wedlock births, fathers who seem uninvolved in family life, and seemingly hopelessly fragmented families. A surprising challenge to this idea arrived several years ago when Sara McLanahan reported on the early results of the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Survey, in which she noted that poor, unmarried fathers and mothers generally aspired to a rather conventional family life at the moment of birth.<sup>2</sup>

### The Magic Moment

Fathers and mothers in poor, seemingly fragmented families were working together in a relationship that appeared to be good for them and their children. It was a moment that defined the beginning of an important stage in the life cycle, and it appeared to constitute the type of relationship that could easily strengthen and sustain the family as a unit. It was named the “magic moment.”

Can the new policy initiatives seize the opportunity of the “magic moment” and build strong families on this foundation of good will and lofty aspirations? (For more information on strengthening families at this critical juncture, see Cowan and Cowan, in this issue.)<sup>3</sup>

The task of the research community is to ascertain whether the magic moment is real, whether society can find ways of sustaining and strengthening the moment, and whether there are policy-sensitive influences that act to undermine the moment.

Interesting work is now underway on these questions, and my suspicion is that the opportunity to intervene is real but that there are daunting influences at work to defeat the aspirations of these new parents. We should be careful to understand how policy influences family life at different periods, dating from the nonmarital birth, and we should determine whether policy intervention at or near the magic moment is stronger than at other times.

### Obstacles Facing Low-Income Fathers

Are there unusual obstacles in poor communities that may inhibit attempts to strengthen

1. Linda Burton et al., “What Welfare Recipients Know about the New Rules and What They Have to Say About Them.” Policy Brief 00-1, July 2000; and “What Welfare Recipients and the Fathers of Their Children Are Saying about Welfare Reform.” Policy Brief 98-01. Baltimore: Welfare, Children and Families: A Three City Study, Johns Hopkins University, June 1998.. Available online at: <http://www.jhu.edu/~welfare/>
2. Sara McLanahan, “Dispelling Myths about Unmarried Fathers.” Research Brief, no. 1. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, Center for Research on Child Well-Being, Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, May 2000. For more information on the Fragile Families Study, see <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/>
3. The March-April 2000 issue of *Poverty Research News* is devoted to the topic of fathers’ contribution to child well-being. Available online at: [http://www.jcpr.org/newsletters/vol4\\_no2/index.html](http://www.jcpr.org/newsletters/vol4_no2/index.html)

families and promote marriages? There are daunting obstacles facing poor minority fathers who have accumulated large deficits over their life course by dropping out of school, participating in illegal activities, and gaining incarceration records. By the time they are released from jail, they face estrangement from their families, poor job prospects, a legacy of debt due to child support obligations, and a personal history that undermines their ability to function as a spouse and parent.<sup>4</sup>

Typically, these fathers are not successful in reattaching themselves to their families. Mothers will not take them back, and the structure of public assistance programs will certainly not encourage them to reevaluate their decisions, regardless of their aspirations. Because of recent interest in the problem of re-entry from prison to communities and families, researchers will have several state and local experiments to evaluate. It is important to ascertain not only whether the policy achieves the stated objective, but also how it achieves the result. With hope, the research community will help broaden the policy evaluations to examine these questions.

### The Fragile Stepfamily

Andrew Cherlin and Paula Fomby (in this issue) report an interesting trend from the Three-City study. There is already a slight increase in marriage in poor minority communities. However, mothers do not seem to be marrying the fathers of their children. Their decisions to form unions with men who are not the biological fathers of their children might lead to very different family dynamics than in families with a biological foundation for the parent-child relationship. Another complication has been reported by Ron Mincy from the Fragile Families study.<sup>5</sup> He finds that there may be multiple biological

fathers available to mothers with more than one child, and conversely, fathers with more than one child by different women. This greatly complicates decision-making and may lead to a number of unions that are not formalized by marriage, but still function as unions in many ways.

The net result of these trends could lead to unusual logistical and legal barriers to promoting marriage in some minority communities. The attempt to promote strong

The attempt to promote strong families and marriage might produce a complicated matrix of formal and informal unions that look more like “fragile stepfamilies” than the traditional biological family.

families and marriage might produce a complicated matrix of formal and informal unions that look more like stepfamilies than biologically intact ones. In fact, we may be describing what might be called the “fragile stepfamily.”

We know that stepfamilies operate somewhat differently than biological ones, and we should be prepared to understand that attempts to strengthen such families would necessarily obtain a distinctive result. Most of what we know about stepfamilies derives from research on remarriage after divorce. Stepfamilies created after a nonmarital birth and in minority communities were relatively rare events in these studies. For these reasons, it is an open question how stepfamilies in poor minority communities will function and endure, especially if they are formed by families that continue childbearing after the formation of the stepfamily. Nevertheless, strengthening stepfamilies is a worthy goal even if it results in an unusual bottom line in terms of family structure and function. Both the research and policy communities will be challenged to understand the subtle yet important differences in dealing with such families. ■

4. For more on the effects of incarceration on families, see Kathryn Edin, Timothy Nelson, and Rechelle Paranal, “Fatherhood and Incarceration.” Policy brief, vol. 1, no. 1. Chicago: Northwestern University, Institute for Policy Research. Available online at: <http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/publications/policy-briefs.html>
5. Ron Mincy, “Who Should Marry Whom? Multiple Partner Fertility among New Parents.” Working Paper, no. 2002-03-FF. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, Center for Research on Child Well-Being, Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, February 2002. Available online at: <http://crrw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.htm>

### New data from the Illinois Families Study

Results from year two of the Illinois Families Study show a big drop in welfare receipt and some improvement in well-being, although many poor families still face material hardships. Strong work supports are found to be key to self-sufficiency. For more information, see: [www.northwestern.edu/ipr/research/IFS.html](http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/research/IFS.html)

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