

More Research Needed to Put Marriage Policies on Track

Although one of the original goals of welfare reform in 1996 was to “encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent households,” few policies were designed to directly address marriage issues, and most state efforts to date have focused on moving previously welfare-dependent mothers into the paid labor force.

For many years, the welfare program has been criticized for having financial disincentives that discourage marriage, and although some of these disincentives have been removed since 1996, some remain. For example, a low-wage mother who marries another low-wage earner typically moves into an earning’s range that reduces eligibility for the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Moreover, several states have different rules under TANF—Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (the current cash assistance program)—for two-parent versus one-parent families, even when both families have similarly low incomes.

In terms of current marriage trends, data from the National Center for Health Statistics show a continued decline in the national marriage rate, and data from the National Survey of America’s Families point to a decrease in the percent of children living in single-parent families and an increase in cohabitation rates.

Marriage has become a major component of the TANF reauthorization debates, as proposals in the Senate, House, and White House have allocated significant resources to marriage promotion activities and related research. Although there is an existing body of research on marriage from fields such as psychology, demography, and child development, research on marriage policy is sparse. In September 2003, the National Poverty Center hosted a conference to synthesize what is known from existing research about marriage policies and family formation issues (see Box 1). This newsletter is not intended to provide an exhaustive review of all

prior research efforts from all relevant research fields, but rather to present information from the conference that may stimulate thinking on future research and methodological issues.

Differences in Family Structure Impact Children

The core objective of most marriage promotion/healthy marriage strategies is to improve the well being of children by strengthening families. To address the question of whether or not marriage can improve the well being of children, one strain of current research attempts to clarify the relationship between family structure and child outcomes. Data from the Urban Institute’s National Survey of America’s Families indicate that the composition of households changed in the late 1990s, with a decrease in the share of children living in single parent families and increases in the share living in both married and cohabitating families.

Although the consequences of these trends are unknown, several studies help to illuminate potential impacts on children. Child outcome data from the Urban Institute survey show that having married parents eases material hardship and that children living in two-parent homes, regardless of marital status, demonstrated fewer behavioral problems than their counterparts living in single-mother families.

Note from Research Forum Director—Barbara B. Blum

This issue of *the forum* describes two recent conferences at which research on marriage was the subject for discussion. While it should be noted that the agendas for the conferences were not all encompassing—research from other fields such as child development has been covered in-depth elsewhere and is available to inform policies—the level of activity is clearly growing, and the issues raised are of particular relevance at this time.

BOX 1: Recent Conferences in Family Formation Research

Title: Marriage and Family Formation Among Low-Income Couples: What Do We Know From Research?

Date:	September 4–5, 2003
Sponsor:	National Poverty Center (www.npc.umich.edu)
Funders:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation• U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families
Attendees:	150 scholars, policy analysts, and practitioners who work on issues related to marriage, cohabitation, and family functioning among low-income populations.
Goals:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To synthesize findings from existing research about marriage policies and family formation issues among low-income populations• To increase and enhance dialogue among social science researchers, policy analysts, and practitioners• To set directions for future research

Title: Measurement Issues in Family Demography, the Second “Counting Couples” Conference

Date:	November 13–14, 2003
Sponsors/Funders:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• NICHD Family and Child Well-Being Research Network (www.familychildnetwork.org)• U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families (www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/opre)• Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (www.childstats.gov)• National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Demographic and Behavioral Sciences Branch (www.nichd.nih.gov/about/cpr/dbs/dbs.htm)• Maryland Population Research Center (www.popcenter.umd.edu)
Goal:	To raise issues in measuring marriage and family demography

Research from the longitudinal Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study following mothers, fathers, and their children from birth reveals that children born to cohabitating mothers are reportedly more aggressive, withdrawn, anxious/depressive, and experience more overall behavioral problems at age three than children born to married parents. Half of this difference is due to differences in parents' age, race, and education. While findings from these studies generally report positive benefits of marriage for young children, research on adolescents from the Johns Hopkins' Three-City Study is less conclusive. Researchers found no short-term difference in standardized math and reading assessments among adolescents in stable single, stable cohabitating, or married homes. While adolescents with married mothers showed improved psychological and behavioral functioning, those with mothers entering marriage exhibited an increase in adjustment problems.

Keeping Fathers Connected Helps Children

A major goal of increasing marriage is to provide children with the benefits of having a father in the household. However, research indicates that various issues may complicate the role of fathers, particularly those

living in low-income communities. One small ethnographic study by Loyola University examining barriers to healthy marriage among poor, urban black men found that key factors serve to thwart healthy marriages, including multiple children with multiple partners, violence and drug abuse in communities, entrenched underemployment, and early fathering responsibilities. This research emphasized the continued need to focus on the community-level factors that may play a major role in influencing marital success.

An analysis of the large-scale Panel Study of Income Dynamics by the University of Maryland reported that children with stepfathers experienced academic and behavioral problems; however, these problems were reduced when father engagement and warmth were taken into account. This study points to the importance of certain behaviors of potential stepfathers in ameliorating any negative consequences of remarriage for children.

The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study also found that married fathers had a higher level of connectedness to their children than unmarried fathers. Among unmarried fathers, cohabiting fathers were more likely to regularly engage in activities with their children than nonresident fathers. Additionally, supportiveness

*Research on the factors affecting marriage, cohabitation, and divorce
among low-income parents is relatively limited.*

in the mother-father relationship at the time of their child's birth, net of many other factors, was strongly associated with the father's remaining engaged in his child's life. Fathers with a history of incarceration were less likely to remain involved. This research points to the importance of the mother-father relationship (both quality and residential status) for fathers' remaining connected to their children.

Marriage, Union Dissolution Factors Are Complex

Research on the factors affecting marriage, cohabitation, and divorce among low-income parents is relatively limited. A study reviewing quantitative research on the determinants of union formation by Abt Associates found a need for more explicit analysis of determinants of union formation for all economically disadvantaged populations. The study noted that much research has been organized along disciplinary lines and recommended more integrative efforts to understand how the external factors typically studied by sociologists, demographers, and economists operate on union outcomes (formation, quality, stability) through the intrinsic relationship processes studied by marriage psychologists

To examine marital outcomes among unwed mothers, a researcher at Columbia University's National Center for Children in Poverty analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 cohort and found that fewer than a third of mothers who gave birth outside of marriage married the father of the child by the time the child was age eight. The best predictor of marriage to the father was cohabiting with him at the time of the child's birth. However, the study also indicated that divorce rates were high among all young mothers.

A study using survey and qualitative data collected as part of the Fragile Families project found that unmarried parents are forward looking and delay marriage when they perceive a high likelihood of divorce. Consistent with unmarried parents' expectations, divorce was more likely in the sample of married parents when they were younger, had not completed college, experienced a high level of conflict in the relationship, and the father had been abusive. The study also found that unmarried couples with a high predicted probability of divorce were significantly less likely to marry within three years

of their child's birth. The authors concluded that policies aimed at strengthening two-parent families may need to consider how to address factors that both contribute to divorce and lead unmarried couples to conclude their relationships are not sustainable.

To study the effects of an existing marriage enrichment program option, researchers at Bowling Green University compared newlyweds in Louisiana who had participated in covenant marriages, a type of marriage which includes a requirement of premarital counseling and restricts the use of no-fault divorce, to those in traditional marriages. The study found that covenant marriages reduced perceived chances of separation but did not diminish the effects of actual relationship troubles. In addition, when both parents had family histories of marriage dissolution, couples were more likely to divorce or separate in the early years of marriage. Overall, the study concluded that interventions that encourage premarital counseling may significantly lower divorce rates.

Relationship Problems, Income, Impact Marriage

According to participants at the conferences, research on influences affecting couples' relationships reveals that nonmarital unions are more likely to experience economic uncertainty and suffer from serious relational problems, such as infidelity, sexual jealousy, and distrust. Nonmarital unions also tend to have complexities caused by couples having to deal with children of past partners as well as their own. These problems reduce the quality of the couple relationship, deter marriage, and cause breakup.

Data from the Three-City Study on the effects of domestic abuse on patterns of marriage indicate that timing and different forms of abuse may have distinctive associations with union formation. Women who have experienced sexual and physical abuse beginning in childhood are less likely to be in sustained stable marriages or stable cohabiting relationships. Instead, they are more likely to experience transitory unions. However, women who have not been abused in childhood but experience adult physical abuse are less likely to be married or in a cohabiting union. This research highlights the importance of addressing issues of sexual and physical abuse among women in order to ensure stable long-term unions.

In assessing economic influences such as job stability and high wages on the quality and stability of marriage, a study by Hebrew University, Urban Institute, and American University using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 cohort found that job change and job instability are associated with lower wages, and both reduce the likelihood of becoming and remaining married. Secondly, when taking into account labor market impacts on job stability and wages, there is strong evidence linking marriage to higher job stability and higher earnings.

Welfare Research Insufficient for Conclusions

Researchers involved in synthesizing findings from impact studies report that past research on the effects of welfare policies on family formation has been unlikely to yield comprehensive conclusions because welfare programs were not designed to directly influence marriage, making it difficult to draw conclusions about the potential effects of policies that target marriage. Moreover, the number of single parents in TANF studies who get married or cohabit (as measured in follow-up surveys) is small, making it difficult to generalize findings to the broader low-income population.

A synthesis of MDRC's large-scale random-assignment studies found no effect of welfare policies on decisions to marry or cohabit. Other research confirms this finding, suggesting that attempts to encourage marriage should not focus too narrowly on welfare recipients alone. In a study of New Jersey welfare recipients by Mathematica Policy Research, women on TANF who married experienced better economic outcomes than similar women who did not. However, relatively few women married in the years after entering TANF (only about one in 10 were married five years after entering the program). In addition, more than a third of those who did marry subsequently divorced or separated within three years, pointing to the need to focus attention on finding ways to sustain marriage.

State Family Formation Programs Under Study

More conclusive insight into the implementation and impact of family formation interventions will be provided by several evaluations currently in progress. Although these state interventions are a relatively new innovation, research on relationship programs has existed for decades.

To draw on this existing set of research, Urban Institute researchers have embarked on a large-scale system-

atic review of high quality evaluations of marriage and relationship programs conducted since 1960. Using meta-analytical techniques, they will attempt to determine the average impact of different types of interventions on various measures of satisfaction, relationship quality, and communication.

In addition, to more directly address issues facing current state efforts, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is sponsoring and cosponsoring several large-scale research projects (see Box 2). The Administration for Children and Families within DHHS has also launched a new project entitled Supporting Healthy Marriage. It is the first large-scale, multi-site, long-term (nine-years), rigorous test of marriage skills programs for low-income married couples. The results will inform program operators and policymakers of the most effective ways to help couples strengthen and maintain healthy marriages.

Outstanding Measurement, Research Issues

At the second of a series of "Counting Couples" conferences held at the National Institutes of Health in November 2003, various measurement issues concerning marriage and family demography were discussed. It was found that to increase the detail and accuracy of household information and to facilitate cross-study comparisons, large-scale surveys, longitudinal surveys, and other studies concerning marriage and children should include the following elements:

- Nontraditional descriptors of families and households, such as various types of cohabiting relationships, part-time and visiting relationships, and same-sex relationships.
- Standard definitions of variables (e.g., "cohabitation").
- Details regarding complete family networks, such as multigenerational households and parents living outside the home.
- New, validated, and standardized instruments to measure constructs such as marriage and parenting quality.
- Ways to increase and retain the involvement of non-residential fathers.
- Data on who is the most accurate "reporter" for different measures (e.g., is the mother, child, or father the best reporter of the father's financial support).

Drawing on the research that was presented at the National Poverty Center conference, panelists identified the following research needs and policy issues.

BOX 2: Selected Research Studies on Marriage

PROJECT	EVALUATOR
Healthy Families Projects	
Supporting Healthy Marriage Multi-site experimental evaluation of marriage skills programs for low-income couples.	MDRC; Abt Associates; Child Trends; Optimal Solutions Group
Building Strong Families Multi-site experimental evaluation of interventions for low-income unwed couples around the time of a child's birth.	Mathematica Policy Research; MDRC; Public Strategies, Inc.; Urban Institute; Decision Information Resources, Inc.
Systematic Review of the Impact of Marriage and Relationship Programs	Urban Institute
The Determinants of Marriage and Cohabitation Among Disadvantaged Americans: Research Findings and Needs, and Guide to Data Sources on the Determinants of Marriage and Cohabitation Reports published in March, 2003, and available at www.abtassociates.com .	Abt Associates, Inc.
Evaluation of Community Healthy Marriage Initiatives Multi-site evaluation of community-level initiatives	RTI International; The Urban Institute; the Crider Group
Review of the state of the art in measuring couple relationships. Reports are available at www.childtrends.org/HealthyMarriageCompendium.asp	Child Trends
Service Delivery and Evaluation Design Options for Strengthening and Promoting Healthy Marriages	Urban Institute
Other Family Formation Projects	
Documenting and Analyzing Marriage Incentives for Low Income Families Across States	Urban Institute
Explore Options for the Collection of Marriage and Divorce Statistics at the National, State, and Local Levels	The Lewin Group; Urban Institute
Evaluating the Implementation of Programs to Strengthen Families with Children Born Out-of-Wedlock	Mathematica Policy Research
Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study	Princeton University; Columbia University
National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle 6 project	Center for Disease Control
Study of State and County Responses to the Family Formation and Pregnancy Prevention Policy Goals of PRWORA 1996	Rockefeller Institute

Research Needs

- Patterns of marriage and family formation over a range of different groups.
- How poor couples that marry overcome obstacles and what benefits they perceive to marriage.
- Appropriate interventions for men and women that address issues such as having children with multiple partners, as well as experiences of childhood sexual/physical abuse.
- An understanding of the male perspective by using the male as the unit of analysis.
- Incarceration issues and how to deal with a population with diminished skills.
- The role of religious institutions in supporting secular family policy.

Policy Issues

- How best to maintain and strengthen relationships given that different people choose different pathways to family formation.
- How children's relationships with noncustodial parents can affect their well-being.
- How to apply current programs that focus on middle-class families to low-income populations.
- The need to address program design and implementation issues prior to program initiation to maximize program effectiveness.
- The need for program impact research to identify program outcomes of interest, such as short-term vs. long-term effects and parents' impacts vs. children's impacts, prior to the implementation of studies.

RESEARCH FORUM

The Research Forum, an initiative of the National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, encourages collaborative research and informed policy on welfare reform and vulnerable populations. The Research Forum's ultimate goal is to identify and promote strategies that protect and enhance the well-being of low-income children and their families.

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