



## Why Strong Families Still Matter

by Timothy Tardibono

### Introduction

Across the desert plains of East Africa, straddling the man-made border between Tanzania and Kenya lives the proud Maasai tribe. In order to display their bravery and battle skills, and as one of the historical male rites of passage, Maasai warriors hunt lions with only a spear.<sup>2</sup> Despite their proficiency as warriors, they welcome each other with a greeting that displays a surprising focus. Instead of asking “How are you today?,” the Maasai people’s traditional greeting is “Keserian ingera?” which translated means “How are the children?” The traditional response to the greeting is, “The children are well.”<sup>3</sup>

Although technologically, some would view the Maasai as lagging behind other world cultures, the Maasai people have grasped the critical fact that their children are an indispensable societal resource.

Oklahoma, and the U.S., has much to learn from the Maasai in that respect because if our society would honestly answer the question “How are the children?” the answer could *not* be, “The children are well.” A plethora of social and behavioral indicators verify this fact. From physical safety and well-being, to emotional and behavioral instability, our children face a host of challenges that obstruct their opportunity to grow into successful and productive citizens.

Yet numerous studies reveal one common denominator for how to markedly improve the status of our children: children have a far better chance to be physically well and safe, emotionally and behaviorally stable, and generally successful when they grow up in a stable home where their father and mother are married.<sup>4</sup>

This inaugural publication of the Family Policy Institute of Oklahoma (FPIO) provides a brief but substantive assessment of the status of Oklahoma’s children using five different indicators representing serious

challenges to their well-being. From this assessment, the FPIO will craft future reports and analysis regarding public policy and community proposals to strengthen families and improve childhood success.

Although family policy solutions are not easy to implement, focusing on family structure and child well-being will move Oklahoma and the U.S. toward a place where the answer to the Maasai’s greeting can be a resounding, “The children are well.”

### I. Child Safety

At the core of a child’s ability to grow into a successful adult is the need for physical safety. Unfortunately, child abuse is far too common in Oklahoma with over 11,000 cases of child abuse and neglect confirmed in 2013 according to the Oklahoma Department of Human Services.<sup>5</sup>

Yet recent data reveals that in relation to family structure, far and away the safest place for a child to be is in a home with their married biological mother and father. A 2010 report to Congress by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS) Administration for Children and Families, the *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect* (NIS-4) concluded:

*Children living with their married biological parents **universally** had the lowest rate [of maltreatment], whereas those living with a single parent who had a cohabiting partner in the household had the highest rate in all maltreatment categories. Compared to children living with married biological parents, those whose single parent had a live-in partner had more than 8 times the rate of maltreatment overall, over 10 times the rate of abuse, and nearly 8 times the rate of neglect. (Emphasis added.)<sup>6</sup>*

As Chart 1<sup>7</sup> shows, the rate of child maltreatment in a home where a child’s biological mother and father are married is 6.8 per 1,000 children, which is considerably lower than all other family structure categories. The rate of maltreatment increases to 23.5 for children with two unmarried parents, 24.4 for children with other married parents and 28.4 for single parents.

The most alarming fact is the dramatic disparity between the maltreatment rate for children living with a single parent who is cohabiting as compared to children living with their married biological parents. The maltreatment rate is 57.2 for children with a single parent who is cohabiting, which is almost double the next closest category, and nearly 10 times greater than the rate for married biological parents.

Much attention is often given to the risk factors that are associated with children living in single parent families, but the NIS-4 reveals that the greater risk occurs when that single parent is cohabiting with a partner that is not the child’s biological parent. Thus, as faith, community and policy makers consider child abuse prevention strategies, they should not overlook the role stable marriages play in protecting children from abuse.

## II. Child Poverty

In addition to a child being safe physically, a child also needs to be safe financially to have an increased chance of success as an adult. However, child poverty rates in Oklahoma and the U.S. have plenty of room for improvement. According to the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy, nearly 1 in 4 Oklahoma children lived in poverty in 2011 which mirrored the number of children in poverty nationally.<sup>8</sup>

In relation to family structure, data reveals that

children in a married family are considerably more likely to avoid poverty than if they are part of a single-parent family. In Oklahoma, marriage substantially reduces the risk of child poverty to 9.2% opposed to 43.9% for children in female-led, single-parent households (see Chart 2).<sup>9</sup>

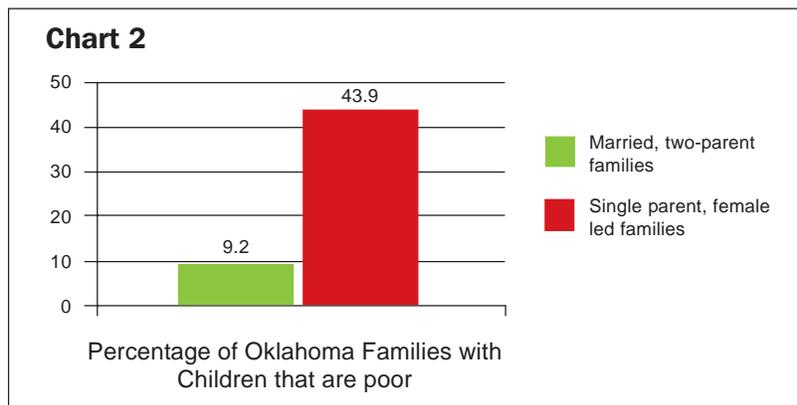
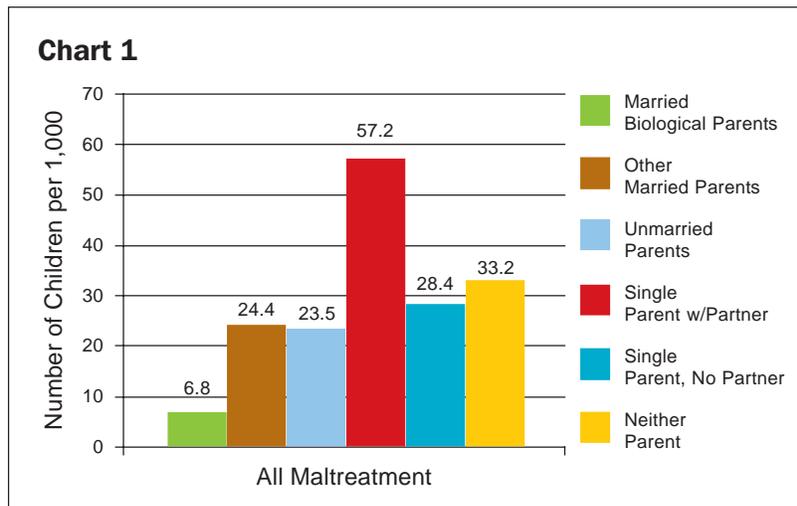
The impact of marriage on reducing the probability of child poverty in Oklahoma is consistent with national data. In 2010, 11% of U.S. children living with their married parents lived below the poverty level, but that number increased to 22% for children living with their single dad, 47% for children living in a cohabiting situation, and 48% for children living with their single mom.<sup>10</sup>

As with a child’s safety from abuse, marriage makes a measurably positive impact as it relates to a child’s financial safety. As a result, a child living with their married parents has a much greater opportunity to be insulated from child poverty.

## III. Educational Success

It is no secret that education is a key factor in predicting a child’s opportunity to succeed as an adult. Yet too many children are not succeeding in school and experience an uphill climb as they prepare for college and/or the workforce. For the last decade,

Oklahoma’s high school graduation rate has stubbornly hovered between 72-78%.<sup>11</sup> In addition to these low graduation rates, Oklahoma children are simply not making the grade when measured for 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency in reading and math, respectively.<sup>12</sup> According to *Education Week’s* 2012 Quality Counts report on educational achievement, Oklahoma scored a C -, or 72.2, for “Chance for Success,” and an even worse 65.4 score for “K-12 achievement,” which is equivalent to a letter grade of D.<sup>13</sup>



In relation to family structure, a child's opportunity to succeed academically increases if that child is raised by their married biological parents. It is well understood that a child's foundations for learning are important in helping the child's future educational achievement. To that end, "three- and four-year-old children growing up with their own married parents are three times less likely than those in any other family structure to experience emotional or behavioral problems such as Attention Deficit Disorder."<sup>14</sup>

As children continue into elementary school, the positive impact of being raised by their married parents persists, In the primary grades, the ability of children to perform in basic subject areas and at their grade

level is weaker for those children not living with their own married parents....Fourth grade students with married parents score higher on reading comprehension, compared to students living in stepfamilies, with single mothers, and in other types of families.<sup>15</sup>

This positive impact carries all the way through high school as children living with their married parents are significantly more likely to stay in school and graduate than those from any other kind of family structure.<sup>16</sup>

Again the evidence points both policy makers and community leaders interested in boosting academic achievement to consider policies and initiatives that facilitate marital stability.

#### IV. Teen births

Compounding the problems of child abuse, child poverty and substandard educational success is the fact that too many of Oklahoma's children are having children. Although both national and state rates for teen births have decreased in recent years, Oklahoma still ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> for teen births in the U.S. at 47.3, substantially higher than the national average of 29.4.<sup>17</sup> Children of teenage mothers are automatically at a higher risk for a bevy of negative social indicators including those listed in this report. For example, children of teen mothers are more than twice as likely to be victims of abuse and neglect, and two to three times more likely to run away.<sup>18</sup> Daughters of teen

mothers are 83% more likely themselves to become teen mothers and sons of teen mothers are 2.7 times more likely to be incarcerated sometime during their lifetime.<sup>19</sup> Heightening the alarm regarding teen births in the state is data that reveals Oklahoma ranks *in the top eight states nationally* for Repeat Teen Births.<sup>20</sup>

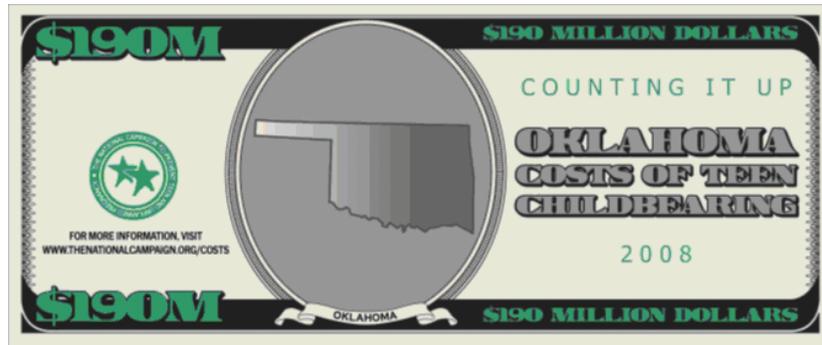
In addition to the social costs of teen pregnancy, there are associated financial costs. According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, teen childbearing in Oklahoma cost state

taxpayers at least \$190 million in 2008.<sup>21</sup> Aggregately, the cost of teen pregnancy nationwide was at least \$10.9 billion.<sup>22</sup>

However, family structure plays a substantial role in protecting teens from risky sexual activity.

Older teen females whose parents were married at the time of their birth were 42% less likely to report having engaged in sexual activity when compared to their peers whose parents were cohabiting at the time of the teen's birth and 26% less likely to be sexually active when compared to their peers whose parents were not living together at the time of the adolescent's birth.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, in an extensive adolescent survey of teenagers between ages 14-16, those teens living with their biological father and mother had the lowest rate of sexual activity than their peers in other family settings. Those teens living with their biological father and mother were 2.4 times less likely to be sexually active than those living with their mother and her cohabiting partner, 1.7 times less likely to be active than those living with a never married single mother, 1.8 times less likely to be active than those living with a divorced or separated single mother, and 1.9 times less likely to be active than those living with a stepfather after parental divorce.<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that once again, a child/youth is more at-risk in a *cohabiting situation than any other family structure*. The protective impact of a youth being in a natural family is further enhanced when parents are actively involved in their teenagers' lives and clearly express the value of abstinence and/or the dangers of unprotected intercourse.<sup>25</sup>

Because children having children results in a multiplied risk for negative social indicators to both mother and child, it is imperative that faith, community and



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policy leaders consider how to integrate the importance of marital stability in strategies that strengthen teens to avoid sexually risky behavior.

## **V. Youth Substance Abuse**

Another significant impediment to an Oklahoma child's chance of success is directly linked to substance abuse including smoking. For over a decade, Oklahoma's public health indicators have revealed problems on several fronts including substance abuse. Those troubling health indicators touch not only Oklahoma's adults but also its young people.

According to the federal HHS Office of Adolescent Health,<sup>26</sup> a survey of high school students found that 23% of Oklahoma high school students smoked cigarettes during the survey timeframe opposed to 18% nationally. For alcohol consumption, 19% of Oklahoma students had their first drink before age 13 which is consistent with the national average of 20%. The prevalence of Oklahoma students "who had five or more drinks of alcohol in a row within a couple of hours" at least once during the survey timeframe was 23% slightly ahead of the national average of 22%. Those Oklahoma students who had ever used marijuana one or more times dipped below the national average at 36% instead of 40% nationally. Although the data shows that Oklahoma teens are involved with substance abuse at about the same prevalence as their peers nationwide, the numbers still reveal a concerning trend of Oklahoma youth that are jeopardizing their futures by not avoiding risky behavior.

As with the other indicators, family structures with married biological parents have a noticeable impact on risk avoidance for underage substance abuse as compared to other family structures. Generally, the "lowest prevalence of use of marijuana and other illicit drugs is reported by adolescents who live in mother-father families..." which also "...report a relatively low prevalence of being drunk and problem drug use in the past year."<sup>27</sup> Specifically, adolescents living with their married biological parents were roughly 1.5 times less likely to have smoked than their counterparts living with their single mother or in married stepfamilies.<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, "teens in cohabiting stepfamilies experienced odds that were 2.5 times greater than those in two biological married parent families."<sup>29</sup>

The results for underage drinking were similar as adolescents living with their married biological parents were about 1.5 times less likely to drink than their counterparts in single-mother or married stepfamilies, and 2.2 times less likely to drink than their counter-

parts in cohabiting stepfamilies.<sup>30</sup> Those same ratios were almost identical when also measuring the co-occurrence of both smoking and drinking among adolescents.

It is important to note that multiple studies have found that youth risk behavior tends to cluster in that involvement in one risky behavior increases the risk of involvement in other risky behaviors. For example, 16% of Oklahoma's sexually active youth report drinking alcohol or using drugs before their last sexual intercourse.<sup>31</sup>

The protective impact of marriage continues to be evident including for the risky behavior of youth substance abuse. As substance abuse prevention programs are developed in communities across the state, strategies to improve marital stability should not be overlooked by faith, community, and policy leaders.

## **Conclusion**

It should be understood that FPIO is under no illusion that putting a ring on someone's finger is a panacea for the various social issues addressed above. Nor is FPIO unaware of the reality that some families are already dissolved with only slim chances for reconciliation. Additionally, FPIO in no way whatsoever is suggesting that domestic violence should be ignored in a family court's effort to expedite solutions for safety of the victims.

However, the data presented above which reveals that our children are not well, warrants the attention of faith, community and policy leaders because even marginal improvement in strengthening Oklahoma's families will put children on a path that gives them the optimal opportunity to be safe, stable and to succeed. As various community and policy endeavors are undertaken to improve opportunities for children, the Family Policy Institute of Oklahoma simply proposes that state and local leaders consider how marriage strengthening efforts should be included in such strategies.

Although not discussed at length in this report, there is an abundance of data that shows that couples can learn how to improve their positive communication skills, their support and helping roles, and the overall quality and satisfaction of their marriage.<sup>32</sup> Such marriage education efforts should be utilized and expanded to help reduce the incidence of unnecessary divorce and family breakdown in communities across the state.

The Oklahoma Legislature can do its part to assist by seriously considering policies that slow down the fast-paced of unilateral divorce, encourage more premarital

education, financially encourage long-term marriage, and increase the opportunity for reconciliation. Additionally, faith and community leaders should consider how best to expand efforts to encourage young people as to the benefits of marriage, to take advantage of opportunities to participate in premarital assessments and training, to not rush to the altar before being ready, and to then keep their marriage vows for the long run.

Oklahoma policy makers and community leaders should take special note of the data presented here that demonstrates that cohabitation has the most

detrimental impact on a child's opportunity for success and consider what solutions can be developed to lower the incidence of cohabitation and increase the prevalence of stable marriages.

If Oklahoma's faith, community and policy leaders come together to redouble their efforts to strengthen marriage in Oklahoma, we will be setting the stage for Oklahoma's greatest natural resource, our children, to thrive. Then, we will not shy away from the question, "How are Oklahoma's children?" because we will know, they are truly well. ♡

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Family Policy Institute of Oklahoma is a non-profit, non-partisan research and education organization dedicated to protecting families and strengthening communities by advancing positive cultural and societal initiatives that will improve the well-being of Oklahoma's children and families. To learn more visit: [www.okfamily.org](http://www.okfamily.org) The paper is authored by Timothy Tardibono, President of FPIO.

<sup>2</sup> The Maasai Association, "Facing the Lion: By Maasai Warriors." <http://www.maasai-association.org/lion.html>

<sup>3</sup> Email exchange with Kakuta Ole Maimai Hamisi of the Maasai Tribe through the Maasai Association. <http://www.maasai-association.org/kakuta.html>

<sup>4</sup> Princeton-Brookings: The Future of Children, "The Decline in Marriage: What To Do," Policy Brief Fall 2005, Haskins, R., McLanahan, S., and Donahue, E., pages 1-2, [http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/15\\_02\\_PolicyBrief.pdf](http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/15_02_PolicyBrief.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Oklahoma Department of Human Services, FY 2013 Annual Report, "State of Change, p. 28," [http://www.okdhs.org/NR/rdonlyres/B0939576-02F6-4C39-8714-5A6BE1E6851F/0/S13102\\_StateofChangeAnnualReport2013\\_11012013.pdf](http://www.okdhs.org/NR/rdonlyres/B0939576-02F6-4C39-8714-5A6BE1E6851F/0/S13102_StateofChangeAnnualReport2013_11012013.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> U.S. HHS, Administration for Children and Families, Sedlak, A.J., Mettenburg, J., Basena, M., Petta, I., McPherson, K., Greene, A., and Li, S. (2010). *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4): Report to Congress*, pp. 12, 5-19, and 5-20. [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse\\_neglect/natl\\_incid/reports/natl\\_incid/nis4\\_report\\_congress\\_full\\_pdf\\_jan2010.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse_neglect/natl_incid/reports/natl_incid/nis4_report_congress_full_pdf_jan2010.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Chart data taken directly from NIS-4 report, Figure 5.1 at p. 5-20.

<sup>8</sup> Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy, 2013 Kids Count Profile. <http://oica.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/2013-KC-State-Profile-OK.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> The Heritage Foundation, Impact of Marriage on Probability of Child Poverty—State by State. <http://www.heritage.org/multimedia/infographic/2010/marriage-poverty-charts/marriage-and-poverty-in-oklahoma>

<sup>10</sup> National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University, Williams, S. (2012). Child Poverty in the United States, 2010 (FP-12-17). <http://www.bgsu.edu/content/dam/BGSU/college-of-arts-and-sciences/NCFMR/documents/FP/FP-12-17.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> OKStateStat, Graduation Rate, [http://www.ok.gov/okstatestat/Performance\\_Statistics/Education/Graduation\\_Rate.html](http://www.ok.gov/okstatestat/Performance_Statistics/Education/Graduation_Rate.html)

<sup>12</sup> Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy, 2013 Kids Count Profile, supra note 8.

<sup>13</sup> Education Week, Quality Counts 2012: State Report Card for Oklahoma. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/qc/2012/16src.h31.html?intc=EW-QC12-LFTNAV>

<sup>14</sup> Institute for American Values, Center for Marriage and Families, Barbara Schneider, "Family Structure and Children's Educational Outcomes," p. 2. <https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/researchbrief1.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Oklahoma Data from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unwed Pregnancy, <http://thenationalcampaign.org/data/state/oklahoma>

<sup>18</sup> Oklahoma State Department of Health, Maternal and Child Health Service, Child and Adolescent Health Division, "Teen Pregnancy Prevention Facts About Oklahoma," September 2010, page 15. <http://www.ok.gov/health2/documents/TPP%20Fact%20Pack%20&%20Maps.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Child Trends, "Teen Pregnancy and Repeat Teen Pregnancy: Data and Key Determinants," Dr. Jennifer Manlove, December 6, 2011 presentation, slide 20. [http://childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Child\\_Trends-2011\\_12\\_06\\_SP\\_-OAPPresentation.pdf](http://childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Child_Trends-2011_12_06_SP_-OAPPresentation.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unwed Pregnancy, "Counting It Up," The Public Costs of Teen Childbearing in Oklahoma in 2008. <http://thenationalcampaign.org/resource/public-costs-teen-childbearing-oklahoma-2008>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> FamilyFacts.org, Brief No. 42, "Parent's Influence on Adolescents' Sexual Behavior," [http://thf\\_media.s3.amazonaws.com/familyfacts/briefs/FF\\_Brief\\_42.pdf](http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/familyfacts/briefs/FF_Brief_42.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> California Healthy Marriages Coalition, "Healthy Marriages, Healthy Society: Research on the Alignment of Marital Outcomes, Marriage Education and Key Societal Concerns," p. 15. <http://www.cam marriage.com/content/resources/1f250f81-d24d-4937-9ce1-595464e2b6c8.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unwed Pregnancy, "Parent Power: What Parents Need to Know and Do to Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy," p. 8, <http://thenationalcampaign.org/resource/parent-power>

<sup>26</sup> All Oklahoma specific substance abuse data taken from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescent Health, "Oklahoma Adolescent Substance Abuse Facts," <http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-health-topics/substance-abuse/states/ok.html>

<sup>27</sup> "A National Portrait of Family Structure and Adolescent Drug Use," by John P. Hoffman and Robert A. Johnson, in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Aug., 1998), p. 640.

<sup>28</sup> "Family Structure, Family Processes, and Adolescent Smoking and Drinking," by Susan L. Brown and Lauren N. Rinelli, in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 2010 June 1, 20(2): p. 6 in U.S. National Institutes of Health Public Access Manuscript, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2882304/>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Oklahoma State Department of Health, Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2011 Results, "Sexual Behaviors" [http://www.ok.gov/health2/documents/SexualBehaviors3\\_YRBS2011.pdf](http://www.ok.gov/health2/documents/SexualBehaviors3_YRBS2011.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> California Healthy Marriages Coalition, supra note 24, pages 21-22.