

Marriage and Child Wellbeing Revisited: Introducing the Issue

Sara McLanahan and Isabel Sawhill

Marriage is on the decline. Men and women of the youngest generation are either marrying in their late twenties or not marrying at all. Childbearing has also been postponed, but not as much as marriage. The result is that a growing proportion of children are born to unmarried parents—roughly 40 percent in recent years, and over 50 percent for children born to women under 30.

Many unmarried parents are cohabiting when their child is born. Indeed, almost all of the increase in nonmarital childbearing during the past two decades has occurred to cohabiting rather than single mothers.¹ But cohabiting unions are very unstable, leading us to use the term “fragile families” to describe them. About half of couples who are cohabiting at their child’s birth will split by the time the child is five. Many of these young parents will go on to form new relationships and to have additional children with new partners. The consequences of this instability for children are not good. Research increasingly shows that family

instability undermines parents’ investments in their children, affecting the children’s cognitive and social-emotional development in ways that constrain their life chances.²

Previous Research

With these trends as background, the *Future of Children* first addressed the issue of marriage and its effects on children a decade ago, in 2005. Then, we found that children raised in single-parent families didn’t fare as well as those raised in two-parent families, that the rise of single parenthood was contributing to higher rates of poverty, and that children raised by same-sex couples fared no better or worse than those raised by opposite-sex parents (this last conclusion was tentative, given the lack of good research at the time). The issue went on to consider a variety of ways that government policy might encourage marriage or enhance the quality of parents’ relationships. Marriage education programs promoted and funded by the Bush administration received special attention, although at the time there were no findings from strong evaluations to tell us what those programs might have

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accomplished. We also reviewed financial incentives in tax and benefit programs and found that they create some penalties for marriage, although the effect of those penalties on behavior and the feasibility of altering them, given the budgetary costs, were unclear. After reviewing the evidence, the editors concluded that marriage was important for child wellbeing but that policymakers shouldn't focus on marriage to the exclusion of other strategies aimed at the same goal, such as alleviating poverty, reducing unintended pregnancies, and encouraging fathers' monetary and emotional involvement.

A Decade of Change

Although many of the findings and conclusions of the earlier issue remain relevant, the past decade has produced a number of developments and research findings that made it worthwhile to revisit marriage and child wellbeing.

Whereas most scholars now agree that children raised by two biological parents in a stable marriage do better than children in other family forms across a wide range of outcomes, there is less consensus about why. Is it the quality of parenting? Is it the availability of additional resources (time and money)? Or is it just that married parents have different attributes than those who aren't married? Thus a major theme we address in this issue is *why marriage matters* for child wellbeing. Although definitive answers to these questions continue to elude the research community, we've seen a growing appreciation of how these factors interact, and all of them appear to be involved.

While marriage is declining, new forms of partnership are emerging, giving rise to a second theme of this issue. The number

of cohabiting parents with children, for example, has increased dramatically during the past two decades. How should we view these partnerships? Are they just marriages without a piece of paper, or are they something else? We know that such relationships are, on average, less stable or durable than marriage, and they seem to entail less commitment. But cohabitation can be short- or long-term; it can be a precursor to marriage or to single motherhood; it can involve two biological parents, or only one parent plus an unrelated male or female partner; and it can involve a second parent who is either very engaged or very uninvolved in the child's life. Repartnering and serial cohabitation are common, often leading to half siblings and creating a shifting set of members in a child's household.

In addition to an increase in cohabiting parent families, we've seen much greater acceptance of families formed by same-sex partners. The data on married same-sex couples and their children are still not robust. Since marriage was prohibited among such couples until very recently, most of what we know about how children fare in gay or lesbian households is based on children born to heterosexual couples who later split up. This fact makes it difficult to directly compare children raised in stable, same-sex households with children raised in stable heterosexual households. In the future, more children will be raised by same-sex couples from birth, which should create additional advantages for them.

A third theme associated with the decline in marriage is the growing divide in family formation patterns by class and by race and ethnicity. The best-educated third of the population is continuing to marry before having children, while the rest of the population is not. However, the decline in

marriage and the rise of cohabiting unions have crept up the socioeconomic ladder and are increasingly found not just among the poor but among the middle class as well. The United States also shows striking racial and ethnic differences in marriage patterns, even after adjusting for differences in education. Compared to both white and Hispanic women, black women marry later in life, are less likely to marry at all, and have higher rates of marital instability. Many people believe that these disparities by both class and race/ethnicity are related to the decline in stable, well-paying jobs for men, along with women's enhanced ability to support themselves outside marriage. Others argue that changes in social norms and expectations are responsible for the trends. The relative importance of economics versus culture continues to be debated, but most experts believe that both have played a role.

Finally, and perhaps most important, we now have new research on the efficacy of various policy options for increasing marriage, and stable marriages in particular. Careful evaluation of marriage education programs suggests that they do little or nothing to change behavior, although they may have modest effects on the quality of parents' relationships. Some analysts believe that this means we should improve rather than abandon such efforts. Others argue that the costs versus the benefits of such programs make them a poor choice compared to alternative policies.

One such alternative is to improve disadvantaged young adults' educational and economic prospects, thereby making them more "marriageable." New research prepared for this volume (see the article by Daniel Schneider) suggests that this strategy may be less effective than often

assumed. Although some programs, such as Career Academies, have both improved young men's earnings and increased their likelihood of marrying, these programs appear to be outliers. Most experimentally induced improvements in the education or earnings of disadvantaged men have had little or no effect on their entry into marriage.

Still another alternative would be to reduce so-called "marriage penalties" in tax and benefit programs, especially the latter. One article prepared for this issue, by Ron Haskins, suggests that these penalties are a less serious problem than some people have assumed. A final policy option is to reduce the large number of unplanned pregnancies that so often lead to unwed childbearing and highly unstable cohabitations. One way to do this is to offer effective forms of long-acting contraception at no cost to women who are not planning to have a child. Where this has been tried, it has produced large declines in unintended pregnancy and saved taxpayer dollars at the same time.

Summary of the Articles

The first two articles in this issue explore the link between marriage and child wellbeing. In "Why Marriage Matters for Child Wellbeing," David Ribar theorizes that, all else equal, marriage should produce advantages that can improve children's wellbeing, such as better coordination between parents and economies of scale that make limited resources go further. Digging more deeply, he then examines specific mechanisms through which marriage appears to improve children's lives. Some of these have been well studied, including family income, parents' physical and mental health, and parenting quality. Others have received less attention, including net wealth, borrowing constraints,

and informal insurance through social networks. Ribar argues that although many of these mechanisms could be bolstered by public programs that substitute for parental resources—greater cash assistance, more generous health insurance, better housing, more help for caregivers, etc.—studies of child wellbeing that attempt to control for the indirect effects of these mechanisms typically find that a direct positive association remains between child wellbeing and marriage, strongly suggesting that marriage is more than the sum of these particular parts. Thus, Ribar argues, the advantages of marriage for children are likely to be hard to replicate through policy interventions other than those that bolster marriage itself.

In “The Evolving Role of Marriage: 1950–2010,” Shelly Lundberg and Robert Pollak offer a new perspective on why marriage is associated with increases in parental investments and child wellbeing. They argue that the sources of gains from marriage have changed in such a way that couples with high incomes and high levels of education have the greatest incentives to maintain long-term relationships. As women’s educational attainment has overtaken that of men, and as the ratio of men’s to women’s wages has fallen, they write, traditional patterns of gender specialization in household and market work have weakened. The primary source of gains from marriage has shifted from the production of household services to investment in children. For couples whose resources allow them to invest intensively in their children, Lundberg and Pollak argue, marriage provides a commitment mechanism that supports such investment. For those who lack the resources to invest intensively in their children, on the other hand, marriage may not be worth the cost of limited independence and potential mismatch.

The next two articles describe new family forms and their implications for children’s wellbeing. In “Cohabitation and Child Wellbeing,” Wendy Manning writes that cohabitation has become a central part of the family landscape in the United States—so much so that by age 12, 40 percent of American children will have spent at least part of their lives in a cohabiting household. Cohabitation, Manning notes, is associated with several factors that have the potential to reduce children’s wellbeing, including lower levels of parental education and fewer legal protections. Most importantly, cohabitation is often a marker of family instability, which is strongly associated with poorer outcomes for children. Children born to cohabiting parents see their parents break up more often than do children born to married parents; in this way, being born into a cohabiting parent family sets the stage for later instability. On the other hand, stable cohabiting families with two biological parents seem to offer many of the same health, cognitive, and behavioral benefits that stable married biological parent families provide. Overall, the link between parental cohabitation and child wellbeing depends on the type of cohabiting family and age of the child when he or she is exposed to cohabitation.

In “Marriage and Family: LGBT Individuals and Same-Sex Couples,” Gary Gates notes that although estimates vary, as many as 2 million to 3.7 million U.S. children under age 18 may have a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender parent, and about 200,000 are being raised by same-sex couples. After carefully reviewing the evidence presented by scholars on both sides of the issue, Gates concludes that same-sex couples are as good at parenting as their different-sex counterparts. Any differences in the wellbeing of children raised in same-sex and

different-sex families can be explained not by their parents' gender composition but by the fact that children being raised by same-sex couples have, on average, experienced more family instability, because most children being raised by same-sex couples were born to heterosexual parents, one of whom is now in a same-sex relationship.

Gates notes that although same-sex couples today are less likely to be raising children than same-sex couples a decade ago, those who are doing so are more likely to be raising their child since birth. This change should be associated with less instability and better outcomes for children. Gates also writes that whereas in the past, most same-sex parents were in a cohabiting relationship, this situation is changing rapidly. As more and more same-sex couples marry, we have the opportunity to consider new research questions that can contribute to our understanding of how marriage and parental relationships affect child wellbeing.

The next two articles examine disparities in marriage and review the evidence for economic and cultural explanations for these disparities. In "The Growing Racial and Ethnic Divide in U.S. Marriage Patterns," Kelly Raley, Megan Sweeney, and Danielle Wondra review the role of structural factors, such as declining employment prospects and rising incarceration rates for unskilled black men, in accounting for the decline in marriage. Such factors clearly play a role, the authors write, but they don't fully explain the divergence in marriage patterns. In particular, they don't tell us why we see racial and ethnic differences in marriage across all levels of education, not just among the unskilled. The authors argue that the racial gap in marriage that emerged in the 1960s, and has grown since, is due partly

to broad changes in ideas about family arrangements that have made marriage optional. As the imperative to marry has fallen, the economic determinants of marriage have become increasingly important. Race continues to be associated with economic disadvantage, and thus as economic factors have become more relevant to marriage and marital stability, the racial gap in marriage has grown.

In "One Nation, Divided: Culture, Civic Institutions, and the Marriage Divide," Brad Wilcox, Nicholas Wolfinger, and Charles Stokes provide another look at the causes of the retreat from marriage and the growing class divide in marriage. These include growing individualism and the waning of a family-oriented ethos, the rise of a "capstone" model of marriage, and the decline of civil society.

The authors argue that these cultural and civic trends have been especially consequential for poor and working-class American families. Yet if we take into account cultural factors like adolescent attitudes toward single parenthood and the structure of the family in which they grew up, the authors find, the class divide in nonmarital childbearing among U.S. young women is reduced by about one-fifth. For example, compared to their peers from less-educated homes, adolescent girls with college-educated parents are more likely to hold marriage-friendly attitudes and to be raised in an intact, married home, factors that reduce their risk of having a child outside of marriage. Wilcox, Wolfinger, and Stokes conclude by outlining public policy changes and civic and cultural reforms that might strengthen family life and marriage across the country, especially among poor and working-class families.