

KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief

**Increasing the Percentage of Children Living
in Two-Parent Families**

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Married couples with children, on average, have a higher standard of living and greater economic security than one-parent families (Thomas & Sawhill, 2005). Parents raising children together tend to have more money, more flexibility and more time to supervise their children, offer emotional support, take an active part in their education, and arrange other activities for them. In contrast, one-parent families are more likely to experience economic hardship and stressful living conditions—including fewer resources, more frequent moves, and less stability—that take a toll on adults and children alike. When economic hardship and stressful living conditions are present, children are at greater risk of poor achievement as well as behavioral, psychological, and health problems. When these circumstances are absent, children who grow up in one-parent families are at less risk for negative outcomes (Amato & Maynard, 2006).

Given the benefits associated with married parents, researchers and policymakers generally view the percentage of children living in two-parent families as an important indicator of child well-being. Today, many children go without these benefits. In 2007, nearly one-third of children in the U.S. (32 percent or 22 million children) were living with one parent, usually their mother (KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2009). The share of children in one-parent families has nearly tripled since 1970, when the rate was 11 percent (Amato, 2008).

This trend has disproportionately affected disadvantaged children and children of color: 65 percent of non-Hispanic black children, 49 percent of American Indian children, 37 percent of Hispanic children, 23 percent of non-Hispanic white children, and 17 percent of Asian American and Pacific Islander children lived in one-parent households in 2007 (KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2009). Reversing the trend would reduce the number of children growing up in poverty and, over time, enhance children's development, improving their life chances and shrinking their odds of living in poverty as adults (Amato & Maynard, 2006).

This *KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief* outlines four broad strategies for increasing the percentage of children who live in two-parent families:

- **Base policymaking on research linking economic security and family stability**
 - **Encourage and support stable marriages and families**
 - **Ensure that children benefit from both parents' emotional and financial support**
 - **Support research on the effects of family structure on children's well-being**
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- **Base policymaking on research linking economic security and family stability**

In recent years, researchers and policymakers have placed greater weight on economic factors that undermine family formation and stability, especially drops in the employment rate and earning power of unskilled men. For example, researchers have found that the high rate of unemployment among men in low-income African American communities helps to explain why many low-income mothers in those communities are not married (Parke, 2003). As one policy analyst has concluded, “Stable employment is the *sine qua non* of establishing life-long family commitments and re-establishing marriage as an important building block in the kinship system” (Furstenberg, 1998, p. 12). A critical challenge is therefore to help low-skill workers and workers living in low-income communities gain the economic stability needed to form and support families. (Numerous strategies for meeting this challenge are discussed in the KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief entitled “Increasing the Percentage of Children with Working Parents.”)

Address economic barriers to marriage. Marriage confers economic benefits on couples and their children. But, researchers say, it also works the other way around. Economic stability makes marriage more feasible. Studies suggest that public campaigns urging marriage do not reflect the perspectives of low-income couples on marriage, and do not take sufficient account of perceived barriers to marriage, especially male unemployment (Edin & Reed, 2005; Gibson-Davis, Edin & McLanahan, 2005). They show that men and women in disadvantaged communities value marriage highly, but share a common belief that marriage requires substantial economic stability, including the capacity to accrue significant common assets and the capacity to sustain a desired standard of living (Edin & Reed, 2005). This high standard is a key factor in delaying marriage (Gibson-Davis, Edin & McLanahan, 2005). Researchers need a better understanding of why the economic bar for marriage has been set so high by many cohabiting couples (Raley & Sweeney, 2007).

Expand job training and employment services to include more men in high-poverty communities. Many training and employment programs are designed to reduce welfare rolls by helping recipients of public assistance gain employment. Because most welfare recipients are women with children, these policies tend to overlook the training and employment needs of the men in their communities. They may have the unintended consequence of increasing tension between men and women, and reducing the pool of men available for marriage. The goal should be to expand current programs, not to shift resources from women to men. Job training, work experience opportunities, and employment assistance are keys to helping fathers and mothers become better marriage partners and providers.

Address the employment needs of men who have been incarcerated. Each year, nearly 650,000 adults are released from prisons (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). They often return to the nation’s most disadvantaged communities, where the supports needed for successful reintegration into the community may be few and far between. For ex-prisoners, finding gainful employment is especially difficult. Jobs initiatives need to address employers’ restrictive hiring practices as well as provide the intensive assistance ex-prisoners need if they are to develop marketable skills and win the trust of prospective employers. One such effort, supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and other

fundings, is Ready4Work: An Ex-Prisoner, Community and Faith initiative. Ready4Work recognizes that ex-prisoners often face multiple obstacles on the road to successful employment, including low levels of education, mental health issues, and a history of substance abuse. The initiative enrolls participants before or soon after release, assesses barriers to successful reentry, links them to services that can help them address those barriers, helps them prepare for, find, and retain jobs, and offers mentors who can support the reintegration process (Jucovy, 2006).

- **Encourage and support stable marriages and families**

Over the last two decades, the rate of nonmarital childbearing rose substantially—from 22 percent in 1985 to 39 percent in 2006. This statistic reflects a decline in the likelihood of marriage in every age group. Researchers report not only a rise in the divorce rate, but also an increase in the number of women who postpone marriage or never marry. Contrary to public perceptions, teenagers do not account for most births outside of marriage; in 2005, nearly three-quarters of such births were to women over the age of 20 (Mincieli et al., 2007).

Marriage entails a personal commitment and has, for many Americans, a religious aspect as well. Nevertheless, public policy has long played a role in providing incentives (or disincentives) for marriage. This has been especially true since the advent of welfare reform. An explicit aim of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was to end the reliance of disadvantaged parents on governmental benefits, in part by promoting marriage. The prereform welfare system was widely thought to discourage marriage by offering benefits mainly to single mothers. However, the impact of welfare reform on marriage has been more complex, and researchers continue to study and debate its impact. Some believe that welfare reform may in fact have weakened incentives to marry by emphasizing work, thereby giving women greater financial independence (Bitler et al., 2004).

Encourage healthy behaviors in young people. Many experts favor a broad, more positive approach to reducing the number of young, single mothers—one that addresses young men as well as young women, encourages a wide range of healthy behaviors, fosters sound decision-making, and provides incentives for postponing parenthood, staying in school, pursuing career goals, and forming positive, stable relationships. States can develop or expand programs designed to enhance the educational and social development of youth. Efforts to address the underlying predictors of early childbearing (poverty, family dysfunction, early behavior problems, and early school failure) can be part of this effort.

Focus on preventing subsequent pregnancies among teen mothers. In 2005, 19.4 percent of teen births were to young women who had already given birth to a child in their teens (KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2009). Prenatal and infancy home visitation programs by nurses have long been shown to help prevent subsequent pregnancies.

Identify and remove barriers to marriage. There is some evidence that removing or reversing economic disincentives can increase the likelihood that couples will view

marriage as a financially feasible option (Edin & Reed, 2005; Gassman-Pines & Yoshikawa, 2005). All levels of government can identify and root out laws, policies, regulations, and procedures that discourage the formation of stable relationships. Eliminating tax provisions that act as disincentives to marriage and two-parent families is a practical strategy to promote marriage. Revisions to the federal Earned Income Tax Credit and other provisions in the tax code are positive steps. States could have a positive impact by eliminating marriage penalties in their own tax codes.

Confer the benefits associated with married parents to children raised by same-sex parents. Today, many children live in families headed by same-sex partners or spouses. Census Bureau researchers say that it is difficult, given current methodologies, to confidently report the number of families in the U.S. headed by same-sex couples. Their best estimate comes from the 2007 American Community Survey, which reported approximately 741,000 households anchored by same-sex couples. According to the same survey, 21 percent of male-partnered unmarried couples and 31 percent of female-partnered unmarried couples report children living with them (O’Connell & Lofquist, 2009). Most of these children are currently denied the benefits associated with married parents, including: greater material well-being through such benefits as family leave from work and spousal health insurance eligibility; more financial continuity when one parent dies or becomes disabled; and increased social acceptance for parents and children (Meezan & Rauch, 2005).

Incorporate premarital education into high school curricula. In 1998, Florida became the first state to pass legislation requiring that marriage and relationship skill education be included in the “life management” class already taught in the state’s high schools. While a few additional states have since passed similar legislation, efforts in several others were defeated by voters.

Help cohabiting couples form lasting bonds. Recent declines in the percentage of births to married couples are due almost entirely to an increase in births to cohabiting parents. Recent decades have seen a steady increase in the percentage of non-marital births to cohabiting parents. In 2001, more than half (52 percent) of all non-marital births took place within a cohabiting union. That year, the majority of unmarried Hispanic (65 percent) and white (61 percent) women who gave birth were in cohabiting relationships. In contrast, a lower proportion (30 percent) of unmarried black women who gave birth were in cohabiting unions (Mincieli et al., 2007). At the time of their children’s births, many cohabiting parents expect to get married. However, research shows that relatively few of these partnerships become marriages (Mincieli et al., 2007). Efforts to support fragile families, and to sustain bonds between cohabiting parents, would likely benefit many children.

Offer counseling and education aimed at encouraging people to marry—and stay married. Men and women tend to face different daily realities and look at the world from different standpoints. There is a need to have counseling and education aimed at building both trust between the sexes and the relationship skills that will help a marriage endure the inevitable rough patches along the way. Programs that promote skill development can

also provide information about the many benefits of marriage—particularly in relation to raising children (Popenoe, 2007; Amato & Maynard, 2006; Furstenberg, 1998). Such programs can be offered as part of educational and social services, through family-life education, parent education, family support or mental health/counseling services. They can be situated in religious organizations or secular agencies. While fostering stable families, public policy must also recognize that some marriages pose dangers to spouses and children, taking fully into account the difficulties faced by victims of domestic abuse.

Create incentives for premarital education or counseling. Some states have introduced incentives, such as shorter waits or lower fees for marriage licenses, to couples who take part in premarital education programs. The U.S. military is strongly encouraging married enlistees to attend marriage-education classes and many members of the clergy are urging other pastors to use systematic premarital education for all engaged couples. A variety of programs exist. The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) is a short course that provides tools for discussing important relationship issues without fighting. Building Strong Families (BSF) is a large-scale, federally funded program that was developed and implemented in recent years at multiple sites across the nation. This marriage-education program is geared for unmarried low-income couples who are either expecting or recently had a child together. Marriage Savers enlists members of the clergy and community officials to support marriage in a variety of ways, including training older mentor couples to provide premarital education to engaged couples.

Expand marriage options for marrying couples. Since 1997, Louisiana, Arkansas and Arizona have sanctioned “covenant marriage”—a legal category of marriage that requires premarital counseling and offers very limited grounds for divorce—as an option for couples. This policy is controversial, however, because some marriage experts believe that laws making divorces difficult to obtain work against the interests of victims of spousal or child abuse.

- **Ensure that children benefit from both parents’ emotional and financial support** In 2007, 32 percent of single-parent families with related children had incomes that fell below the poverty line, compared with 6 percent of married families (KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2009).

In recent years, policymakers have taken steps to ensure that whatever their living arrangements, children benefit emotionally and economically from both parents. They have crafted policies and programs designed to support fragile families, help non-custodial parents become good nurturers and providers, and enforce child-support obligations.

Support fragile families. The term “fragile families” speaks to the risks faced by single-parent, low-income families. Researchers have found that, at the time of their children’s birth, 82 percent of unmarried couples are involved in a romantic relationship. About half of the parents are living together and a third are dating. Moreover, most fathers provide financial or other types of help during the pregnancy and put their names on their

children's birth certificates (McLanahan et al., 2003). Studies show that most unmarried fathers want to help raise their children and most mothers are eager to have help. However, most unmarried fathers are ill prepared to support their new family. Nearly half lack a high school diploma and only one-fifth have education beyond high school. Those who work tend to earn very low wages. Efforts to improve the prospects of men with low skills and education can make a difference—especially at the time a new baby arrives, when motivation is very high (Fein & Ooms, 2006).

Enforce fair child support requirements. Since 1996, most states have introduced stronger measures to enforce child support as part of welfare reform. Child support legislation reflects the widespread conviction that even low-income fathers can make contributions to their children's care. Proponents of tougher enforcement cite evidence that increasing nonresident fathers' financial investments in children may increase their motivation to spend time with them and take part in important decisions in their lives (Huang, 2007). In some cases, however, collecting child support may carry risks for mothers and children. Victims of domestic violence may incur risks in pursuing child support. Child support and public assistance agencies must therefore be prepared to coordinate information and services for victims of domestic violence (Josephson, 2005).

Develop fairer child-support requirements for poor fathers. A great deal of research has shown that the child-support obligations of low-income fathers are often too high for them to pay on a consistent basis—and may actually contribute to the high unemployment rates among low-educated men in poor communities (Huang et al., 2005). Small-scale pilot programs designed to help alleviate the problems caused by unrealistically large child-support arrears debt have shown increases in both the dollars received by custodial mothers and the time spent by these fathers with their children (Jones, 2002).

Increase pass-through to mothers on TANF. For families receiving TANF, there is, in most states, a disincentive to pay child support because it ends up reducing TANF benefits to the family, almost dollar for dollar (Roberts et al., 2005). If child support is to truly bolster family income, federal and state regulations need to allow larger shares of that support to flow directly to low-income families.

Help non-custodial fathers earn enough to support their children. Researchers have concluded that tougher child-support enforcement, by itself, will not improve children's economic status. Most nonresident fathers who do not pay child support have very low incomes. Harsher treatment of non-custodial low-income fathers is not likely to prove successful without efforts to help them qualify for, find, and keep jobs (Huang et al., 2005; Garfinkel et al., 1998). Recently, the number of federal and state policies, programs and resources aimed at re-engaging fathers in their children's lives is increasing. The most promising include education and employment assistance, job training, and peer support for low-income fathers and counseling and mediation for their families (Jones, 2002).

Support fathers as nurturers as well as breadwinners. In 2006, New York was the first state to enact legislation—called the Strengthening Families through Stronger Fathers Initiative—aimed at assisting low-income non-custodial fathers to get jobs and make their child-support payments. The ultimate goal of the initiative, however, is to strengthen non-custodial parents’ financial and emotional ties to their children (Sorensen et al., 2009).

Reinforce a shift in attitude. A strategic use of the media, including public service announcements, can promote positive images of responsible fathers.

- **Support research on the effects of family structure on children’s well-being**
In recent years, researchers have learned a great deal about the impact of different kinds of families on children, and about the kinds of interventions that can strengthen mother-father relationships, promote healthy parent-child interactions, and foster family formation and permanence. But many important questions remain unanswered and many misperceptions about nonmarital childbearing and single-parenthood remain unchallenged.

Support studies that continue to shed light on the effects of growing up in single-parent families. Researchers who study the impact of family structure on children generally agree that growing up in a one-parent family increases the likelihood that children will have academic and behavioral problems. However, these outcomes seem to stem more from the greater economic stress and time pressures associated with single-parent families than from any direct effects of living with one parent (Roberts 2004; Parke, 2003; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). More research is needed to differentiate the effects of family structure from the effects of diminished resources. When researchers find that children in single-parent families have poorer outcomes, are they actually seeing the impact of economic disadvantage? Are they viewing, from another perspective, the impact of maternal education—a factor that is known to have a major influence on children’s outcomes? Other questions need better answers as well. For example, does the effect of single-parent family structure depend on a child’s age or the involvement of the noncustodial parent? Are children’s outcomes affected by other factors that distinguish single-parent from two-parent households?

Support research that leads to a more nuanced understanding of the realities of two-parent families. Policy discussions of marriage and fatherhood tend to assume that children benefit from the presence in the home of two parents or two parental figures. However, several studies suggest that children’s well-being hinges on the composition of the household, not just the number of adults who are present. For example, mother-stepfather families do not produce better child outcomes, on average, than single-parent families (The National Marriage Project, 2007). This is particularly true when stepfathers are introduced into the household when children are adolescents (Cherlin & Fomby, 2002). More research on blended families is needed, since most studies focus on middle-class couples (Fein & Ooms, 2006).

Support research on the impact of welfare and economic policy on family formation.

Researchers have reported a modest trend toward two-parent families starting in the late 1990s. There is some evidence that welfare policies have influenced family structure, since a net movement toward two-parent families has been observed among families that stopped receiving public assistance after the implementation of welfare reform in 1996. But nearly half of the transitions into two-parent families occurred among families that had not received welfare since that time or had never received it. This suggests that factors other than welfare reform were involved. Research indicates that the strong economy and low unemployment of the late 1990s influenced family formation in low-income communities. (See www.aecf.org/upload/publicationfiles/da3622h1270.pdf) They point as well to the expansion of policies aimed at supplementing earnings, notably the Earned Income Tax Credit. New research will be needed to determine how family formation has been affected by years of recession and job loss.

In conclusion, many kinds of policies and programs can help to increase the number of children raised in two-parent families, but all such initiatives need to be rooted in a solid understanding of family structure and its effects on children. The public tends to view an unmarried mother as a teen, a member of a racial or ethnic minority group, a first-time mother, and a single parent. Today's realities are more complex. For example, teens now account for a diminishing share of all nonmarital births, and women aged 25 or older account for the largest percentage-point increase of births outside of marriage (Amato & Maynard, 2006). African American women still have the highest rate of both nonmarital births (72 percent) and nonmarital births outside of a cohabitating relationship (70 percent) (Mincieli et al., 2007); however, the late 1990s saw an uptick in the number of African American children born to married and cohabitating parents, and most African American children born during that period were living in two-parent households (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). Only about half of nonmarital births are first births (Terry-Humen et al, 2001). Finally, unmarried parents are not necessarily single parents; an increasing number of children born outside of marriage are born to cohabitating couples.

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Online resources

Center for Marriage and Families
<http://center.americanvalues.org/>

Child Trends
www.childtrends.org

Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study
<http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/>

Harvard Family Research Project
<http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources>

National Fatherhood Initiative
www.fatherhood.org

National Center on Fathers and Families
www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu/

National Marriage Project
<http://marriage.rutgers.edu/>

Ready4Work
www.ready4work.com

Welfare Information Network
www.welfareinfo.org