

One Nation, Divided: Culture, Civic Institutions, and the Marriage Divide

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Summary

Since the 1960s, the United States has witnessed a dramatic retreat from marriage, marked by divorce, cohabitation, single parenthood, and lower overall marriage rates. Marriage is now less likely to anchor adults' lives or provide a stable framework for childrearing, especially among poor and working-class Americans.

Much research on the retreat from marriage has focused on its economic foundations. Bradford Wilcox, Nicholas Wolfinger, and Charles Stokes take a different tack, exploring cultural factors that may have contributed to 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.

These cultural and civic trends have been especially consequential for poorer 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.

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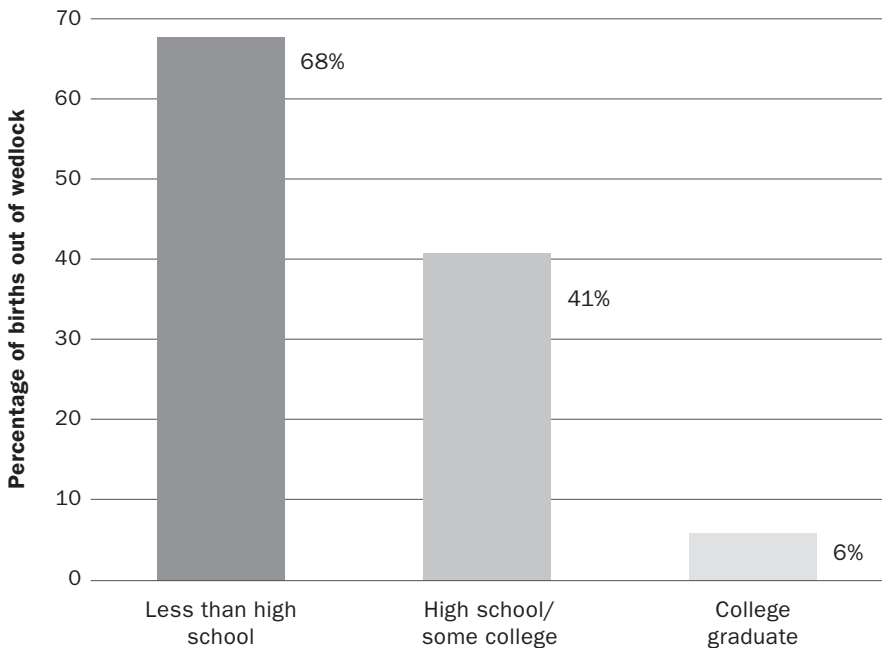
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Over the past half century, the United States has witnessed a dramatic retreat from marriage. The increases we've seen in nonmarital childbearing, age at first marriage, divorce, single parenthood, and cohabitation mean that marriage is less likely to anchor both the adult life course and the lives of children. Perhaps most remarkably, only 5 percent of children were born out of wedlock in 1960. Today the figure is 40 percent. Marriage also plays a smaller role in guiding the exchange of sex, emotional intimacy, mutual aid, and financial support between adults. This retreat from marriage is noteworthy both because adults are less likely to thrive emotionally, physically, and economically outside of marriage, and because children who grow up outside of an intact, two-parent married family are more likely to suffer from psychological and social problems, and less likely to acquire the education

and life experiences they need to realize the American dream of stable work and a comparatively high income.¹

The retreat from marriage has not affected all Americans equally. People with less education and income have been hit especially hard, as figure 1 indicates.² Today, 68 percent of American women who didn't graduate from high school have a child outside of wedlock by age 25, compared to 41 percent of women with a high school degree or some college but not a bachelor's degree, and just 6 percent of women who are college graduates. This growing marriage divide in America has left adults and children in less-educated and lower-income communities doubly disadvantaged: not only do they face life with fewer socioeconomic advantages, but they are less likely to enjoy the stability, social support, and economies of scale that marriage typically furnishes.³

Figure 1. Nonmarital Births by Age 25, by Women's Education



Source: National Survey of Family Growth, 2006–10.

This article explores America's retreat from marriage and the growing class divide in marriage that has accompanied it, focusing on its roots in culture, civic life, and social class (as measured by education). Many on the left argue that the retreat from marriage is primarily an economic problem, whereas many on the right argue that it is largely a policy problem. Both arguments generally overlook the role of cultural and civic factors that have proved especially consequential for less-educated Americans. On the cultural side, we've seen a rise in individualism and the fall of a family-centered ethos; on the civic side, religious and secular engagement has declined. The growing class divide in American marriage is linked to these cultural and civic changes.

Explaining the Retreat from Marriage: Culture and Civil Society

Progressive scholars have emphasized economic explanations for the retreat from marriage, whereas conservative scholars have stressed shortfalls in public policy. In perhaps the most well-known account, sociologist William Julius Wilson argued that the shift to a post-industrial economy starting in the 1970s undercut the availability of good jobs for men, thereby making them less "marriageable."⁴ In contrast, political scientist Charles Murray contends that the increased generosity of welfare benefits in the late 1960s and 1970s played a key role by reducing the need for male breadwinners in lower-income communities and thereby eroded the practical and normative importance of marriage.⁵

Studies find qualified support for both the liberal and the conservative position, though neither can fully account for either the overall retreat from marriage or the growing educational divide in marriage. Welfare

benefits have been linked to higher rates of nonmarital childbearing and lower levels of marriage.⁶ But the evidence is mixed, and the explanatory power of welfare is modest at best.⁷ Likewise, economic restructuring—deindustrialization, deunionization, the declining ratio of men's to women's income, and, consequently, men's diminished marriageability—also appears to have played a role in the retreat from marriage, especially among African Americans and the less educated.⁸ Nevertheless, economic factors account for only a modest portion of the dramatic retreat from marriage.⁹

The fact that neither public policy nor economics can fully explain the retreat from marriage suggests that we must incorporate cultural and civic factors into any serious consideration of family trends over the past half-century. In particular, shifts in attitudes, aspirations, and norms, coupled with declining participation in secular and religious civic institutions, have undercut the social pressure to marry, to have children within marriage, and to stay married. But let us be clear: By considering cultural and civic factors, we're not advancing individualistic or "personal responsibility" explanations for the retreat from marriage. Culture and civil society are collectively produced, just as much as economics and public policy. Moreover, changing economic conditions have made some Americans particularly susceptible to cultural conditions that undercut marriage.¹⁰

Since the late 1960s, five cultural trends have been particularly consequential for marriage and family life. First, the rise of "expressive individualism"—the idea that personal desires trump social obligations—means that Americans feel less obligated to get and stay married, and have come to expect more fulfillment from marriage. In

turn, rising expectations for marriage have made Americans more hesitant to marry, quicker to divorce, and less likely to believe that marriage and parenthood must be bundled together.¹¹ Second, the changes in mores and behavior associated with the sexual revolution diminished the connection between sex, marriage, and parenthood, thereby making marriage less necessary and nonmarital childbearing more acceptable and more common.¹² Third, second-wave feminism, which arose concurrently with women's rising labor force participation in the 1960s and 1970s, fostered a sense of independence among women and raised their expectations for equality and intimacy in marriage, all of which reduced the imperative to get and stay married.¹³ Fourth, an increasing number of children were reared in nonintact families.¹⁴ Many became pessimistic about their own prospects for a lasting marriage, so they remained unmarried.¹⁵ Together these developments made a family-centered ethos less central to American life.

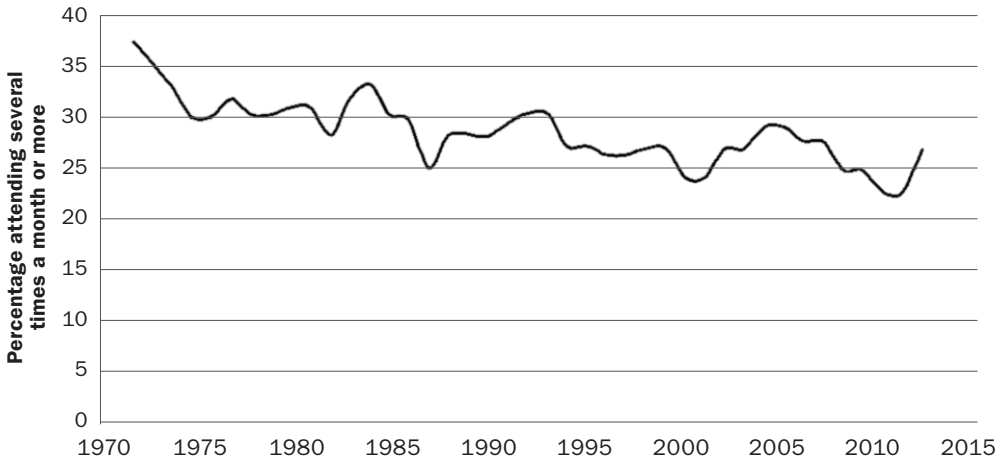
All these developments helped fuel the fifth cultural trend: what sociologist Andrew Cherlin calls the transition from a "cornerstone" to a "capstone" model of marriage. Men and women became less likely to see marriage as a foundation for adulthood, as the exclusive venue for sexual intimacy and parenthood, and as a "union card for membership in the adult world."¹⁶ Instead, marriage became an opportunity for men and women to consecrate their arrival as successful adults, to signal that they were now confident they could achieve a fulfilling romantic relationship built on a secure, middle-class lifestyle. The advent of the capstone model of marriage means that more Americans see marriage as out of their reach, given the perceived economic and emotional requirements to get married nowadays.¹⁷

Consequently, Americans are spending less of their lives within the bonds of matrimony.

The collective result of these cultural changes is that a less family-oriented, more individualistic approach to relationships, marriage, and family life has gained ground since the 1960s. For instance, young adults have become less likely to associate parenthood with marriage. In the late 1970s, less than 40 percent of high school seniors thought that having a child outside of marriage was "experimenting with a worthwhile lifestyle" or "not affecting anyone else." By the early 2000s, that figure stood at more than 55 percent.¹⁸ In sum, expressive individualism, the sexual revolution, feminism, the growing number of children reared in nonintact families, and the rise of the capstone model of marriage all coalesced to weaken the social and behavioral connections among sex, marriage, and parenthood. Consequently, stable marriage functions far less as an anchor and guide to adult life and to the bearing and rearing of children.

The retreat from marriage has been fueled by a parallel retreat in American civil society, especially with respect to religious participation. In *Bowling Alone*, political scientist Robert Putnam documented how many forms of secular and religious civic engagement, from membership in the Shriners to church attendance, have declined since the 1960s.¹⁹ Figure 2 shows the downward trend in regular religious attendance (attending several times a month or more). Civic institutions have traditionally supplied Americans with social solidarity, moral guidance, financial support, and family-friendly social networks, all of which reinforce the marriage norm and strengthen family life. In particular, religious attendance and belief have long upheld

Figure 2. Frequent Church Attendance in the United States, 1972–2012



Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2012.

the institutional power and stability of marriage.²⁰ Still, adherence to conservative religious beliefs without attending church regularly is associated with worse family outcomes, whereas combining adherence with regular attendance is associated with better family outcomes.²¹ This may explain why single parenthood is high in Arkansas, with its many nominal Baptists, and low in Utah, with its many active Mormons.

As we've seen, accounts that stress either economic factors or public policy (or both) in explaining the retreat from marriage in America don't tell the whole story. First, cultural shifts that gathered steam in the late 1960s and the 1970s undercut a cornerstone model of marriage as the preeminent venue for sex, childbearing and childrearing, mutual aid, and economic support—all understood to be secured by an ethic of marital permanence. Second, participation has been declining in the secular and, especially, the religious institutions that long nurtured the social conditions conducive to strong marriages.

The Growing Class Divide in Marriage

The changing cultural and civic fabric of the United States likely accounts for a meaningful share of the nation's retreat from marriage. What's more, these cultural and civic changes also figure in the large and growing class divide in marriage.

To be sure, public policy and especially economic forces play a substantial role in the class-based schism in marriage. Most obviously, federal and state welfare policies make marriage less economically necessary. And since they target low-income Americans and often penalize marriage financially (that is, two people can often receive more total benefits if they remain unmarried than they would if they were married to one another), they are likely to have had a disproportionate impact on nonmarital childbearing and marriage among the less educated.²² As economists Adam Carasso and C. Eugene Steuerle note, "most households with children who earn low or moderate incomes (say, under \$40,000) are significantly penalized for

getting married.”²³ (See the article in this issue by Ron Haskins for further discussion of marriage penalties.) More importantly, real wages have fallen for men without college degrees and increased for women without college degrees; these developments have reduced the pool of marriageable men and at the same time made marriage less financially necessary for less-educated women in poor and working-class communities.²⁴ These policy and economic changes together have helped drive down marriage rates and increase nonmarital childbearing among less-educated Americans.²⁵

What’s more, all of these developments have been magnified by the cultural trends of the past four decades. As sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas argue, highly educated women have much greater financial and personal incentives to postpone motherhood than do poor and working-class women, for whom work provides fewer opportunities to pursue self-development and a substantial salary.²⁶ For that reason, the sexual revolution’s decoupling of sex and marriage has proved more consequential for nonmarital childbearing among less-educated Americans. College graduates, and those on the college track, have far greater incentives to use contraception consistently to avoid a nonmarital pregnancy than do their less-educated peers. By contrast, as Edin and Kefalas point out, adolescents and young adults who are not on a college or professional track are more likely to welcome the birth of a child before marriage because motherhood gives their life new meaning and purpose.²⁷

Or take the rise of the capstone model of marriage. Edin and Kefalas note that the high economic and emotional expectations associated with modern marriage put it out of the reach of many working-class and poor

couples, who are burdened by financial hardship and the stresses associated with low-wage jobs.²⁸

Secularization may also be particularly consequential for working-class and poor Americans, insofar as religious institutions offer not just guidance but also financial and social support to their members, and they are one of the few venues where poor and working-class Americans, including lower-income African Americans, have leadership opportunities.²⁹ These opportunities can engender a sense of meaning and self-worth, as well as civic skills such as public speaking, budgeting, and planning, that benefit relationships and family life.

More broadly, the cultural and civic changes of the last half-century have deinstitutionalized marriage, leaving fewer norms, roles, and durable social practices to guide adults’ romantic relationships, entry into marriage, childbearing, and roles within marriage and family life more generally.³⁰ The freedom, choices, and options associated with contemporary relationships and family life are more easily navigated by educated Americans, or adolescents who are on track to become college-educated. After all, they typically enjoy more problem-solving skills, more income, and habits of delayed gratification.³¹ All of these make it easier for the college-educated to navigate a social world where sex, relationships, childbearing, and family life no longer need occur in any consistent order, and where many of the available options, such as having children outside of marriage with one or more partners, make it harder for adults to realize their goal of a strong and stable marriage. That is, college-educated Americans are more likely to make prudent choices for their professional and family futures, and to have the financial and social resources to recover from imprudent choices.

In contrast, less-educated Americans have more difficulty navigating relationships without clear norms, especially when they have ready access to options that may be appealing in the short term but that make it more difficult to realize prosperity and stable marriages in the long term. As legal scholar Amy Wax has observed, “the conventions and customs surrounding marriage [were] designed to bridge the gap between aspirations and the mundane steps necessary to achieve them.”³² Now, with fewer marriage-friendly conventions and institutionalized customs, less-educated Americans have more difficulty taking the steps, and avoiding the detours, that would allow them to realize their aspirations for marriage.³³

More specifically, Americans without college degrees (and from homes where their parents don’t have college degrees) are less likely to avoid the behaviors and attitudes that make it hard to establish a strong and stable romantic relationship, and less likely to have the resources, social or economic, for the capstone model of marriage. These cultural and civic factors, and not just economic disadvantage per se, may help explain why less-educated Americans are now more likely to have children outside of marriage, less likely to marry, and more likely to see their relationships dissolve.

As Edin and Kefalas have noted, it’s not just financial challenges that can threaten relationships. Behaviors that are inimical to good long-term relationships are also a problem:

Lack of money is certainly a contributing cause [of relationship problems] . . . But rarely the only factor. It is usually the young father’s criminal behavior, spells of incarceration that so often follow, a pattern of intimate violence, his chronic infidelity, and an inability to leave drugs and alcohol alone that cause relationships to falter and die.³⁴

Are these behaviors more common among less-educated Americans? Generally, yes. Marital infidelity, idleness, drug use, more accepting attitudes toward single parenthood, and lower levels of religious attendance, all of which can affect relationships, are more common among the less-educated, as table 1 indicates. These beliefs and behaviors may have made it more difficult for people from poor and working-class communities to forge strong and stable relationships by making it harder for men and women to trust one another, have confidence in a shared future, and move toward or maintain a strong marriage, as well as steer clear of a nonmarital birth.³⁵ Future research will have to determine

Table 1. Adult Attitudes and Behaviors by Education for Men and Women Ages 18–60

	Less than high school	High school grad/some college	College graduate	Sample size
Ever cheated on your spouse	22%	19%	15%	7,634
Attend church frequently	22%	26%	32%	14,559
Employed or enrolled in school	81%	87%	90%	14,523
Ever smoked crack or injected heroin	17%	9%	4%	11,367
Single moms do just fine	71%	65%	56%	2,336

Sources: General Social Survey 2000–12; National Survey of Religion and Family Life.

Table 2. Adolescent Attitudes and Behaviors by Mother’s Education

	Mother did not finish high school	Mother is high school grad and/or has some college	Mother graduated from four-year college
Definitely expects to attend college	32%	51%	76%
Didn’t use birth control at most recent sex (if sexually active)	36%	31%	26%
Not sexually active	55%	59%	72%
Would be embarrassed if got pregnant	45%	58%	73%
OK with being a single parent	27%	22%	18%
Frequent religious attendance	50%	54%	67%
Biological parents married	41%	46%	59%
Median household income	\$30,000	\$41,000	\$50,000

Source: Add Health, 1994–95.
 Note: Sample size = 14,782.

whether these cultural and civic differences among adults indeed help to account for class divides in marriage- and family-related behaviors.

Among adolescents from less-educated homes, these experiences, aspirations, attitudes, and behaviors may elevate the risk that they go on to have a child outside of marriage, or not form strong marriages. Table 2 indicates that children from less-educated homes are less likely to expect to get a college education. Less than half of teenagers whose mothers don’t have college degrees expect to attend college, compared to three-quarters from homes with college-educated mothers. This orientation to education may reduce not only their odds of attending college but also of avoiding a nonmarital pregnancy. Teenagers with less-educated parents are also more likely to be sexually active and not to have used birth control in their last sexual encounter, both of which are risk factors for nonmarital childbearing.

Adolescents from homes with college-educated mothers are also much more likely to come from an intact family, meaning that

their biological parents are married to one another: almost 60 percent of teens in these homes hail from such a family, versus less than half from less-educated homes. Teens from homes with college-educated mothers are more likely to view marriage as an ideal and as a real possibility for themselves.³⁶ Indeed, table 2 shows that teens from less-educated homes are less likely to be embarrassed by a teen pregnancy and more inclined to be OK with being a single parent. Seventy-three percent of adolescents from homes with college-educated mothers say they would be embarrassed by a teen pregnancy, compared to about half of adolescents from less-educated homes. This orientation to parenthood and pregnancy has implications for childbearing and marriage.

And teenagers from less-educated families are less likely to be embedded in a religious community that could help them steer clear of a nonmarital pregnancy and propel them toward marriage as an adult.³⁷ Table 2 shows that two-thirds of adolescents from homes with college-educated mothers regularly attend religious services (that is, several times a month or more), compared to about

half of adolescents from less-educated homes.

Economist Isabel Sawhill has observed that “family formation is [one] new fault line in the American class structure.”³⁸ Accordingly, we explore the links between culture, civic engagement, and the class divide in nonmarital childbearing. Using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), a nationally representative survey that has tracked thousands of Americans from adolescence in the mid-1990s through adulthood, we conducted a statistical analysis of nonmarital childbearing among 7,859 young women. We wanted to see what percentage of these women had a child out of wedlock by their late twenties or early thirties (measured in 2009), and how this varies by their mothers’ education. Our analysis lets us test the idea that a distinctive set of family-related experiences, beliefs, and behaviors, along with beliefs and expectations related to education among teens, can help account for educational divides in nonmarital childbearing. We also explored the extent to which family income during the young women’s teenage years accounts for educational divides in nonmarital childbearing.

We found that 20 percent of women whose mothers were college graduates had given birth outside of marriage, compared to 44 percent of women whose mothers were high school dropouts, and 37 percent of women whose mothers had a high school degree or some college but no bachelor’s degree, controlling for race, ethnicity, and the age of the respondent. (To statistically control means we held these three factors constant, to better determine the direct role education plays in determining nonmarital childbearing.) This means that young

women with the least-educated mothers are more than twice as likely to have a nonmarital birth, and young women whose mother has a high school degree or some college, but no bachelor’s degree, are almost twice as likely to have a nonmarital birth, compared to young women who come from a home where their mother is college-educated.³⁹ What happens when income is factored into the model? In our statistical analysis, educational differences in nonmarital childbearing decline by about 15 percent after controlling for household income during adolescence. So growing up with fewer material resources seems to be one reason that young women from less-educated homes are more likely to have a child out of wedlock.

What about cultural and civic factors? According to our statistical analysis, these factors—an adolescent’s family structure, orientation toward college, history of sexual activity and birth control use, attitudes toward teenage childbearing and single parenthood, and religiosity—reduce the differences in expected nonmarital childbearing between women with college-educated mothers and those without by approximately one-fifth.

This result suggests that cultural and civic differences between Americans from college-educated homes and those from less-educated homes may help explain the growing marriage divide in the nation. We’ve presented our own analysis of the Add Health data because so little data-driven research has explored the possibility that cultural and civic factors can help explain the growing class divide in marriage in the United States. A fuller understanding of this trend will require more research, exploring a range of outcomes and using a variety of statistical techniques. And

we stress that we aren't denying the role that structural factors play in explaining America's marriage divide; indeed, we agree with William Julius Wilson that distinctive cultural and civic patterns found in working-class and poor communities may arise from systematic disadvantage and social isolation.⁴⁰

Once such patterns are better established, they will help us better understand how relationships and family life among more disadvantaged Americans aren't entirely the product of structural factors. Cultural and civic factors shouldn't be ignored when trying to explain the marriage divide. Our results suggest that divergent experiences and orientations to education, family, and religion between the college educated and the less educated may deepen the class divide in marriage in America.

Policy, Cultural, and Civic Strategies for Stronger Families

America's growing marriage divide, along with the retreat from marriage itself, poses three challenges:

- Growing family fragility undercuts the American dream. Children are much less likely to acquire the material resources or human capital they need to thrive, or to avoid the detours that can derail their chances of success, when they are raised outside of an intact family. Indeed, economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues found that when it comes to poor children's chances for upward mobility across the United States, "the strongest and most robust predictor is the fraction of children with single parents" in their communities.⁴¹
- Growing family fragility is fueling inequality, measured in both social and economic terms. Studies suggest that

between one-fifth and two-fifths of the growth in family income inequality in recent decades can be attributed to the fact that less-educated Americans are now much less likely to get and stay married—and to enjoy the economies of scale and male wage premiums associated with marriage—than their better-educated peers.⁴²

- Growing family fragility is reinforcing gender inequality among less-educated Americans. High rates of single parenthood leave women with the burdens of childrearing and maintaining a home. They also seem to have a disproportionate impact on the educational and economic futures of boys from working-class and poor homes. As economists David Autor and Melanie Wasserman point out, "Even more concerning is that male children born into low-income, single-parent headed households—which, in the vast majority of cases are female-headed households—appear to fare particularly poorly on numerous social and educational outcomes."⁴³

For these reasons, the nation should experiment with a range of public and private strategies to narrow the growing marriage divide. These strategies must be sensitive to the complex roots of this divide: that is, they must address the economic, policy, cultural, and civic factors that we've identified in this article.

At the level of public policy, policies targeting the economic and educational welfare of lower-income adults, couples, and families are particularly important. To strengthen and stabilize the economic foundations of lower-income families and relationships, the federal government should expand the child tax credit (CTC)

from \$1,000 to \$3,000 (and extend it to payroll taxes). This would allow families to deduct up to \$3,000 per child from their federal income tax, as well as the taxes they pay for Social Security and Medicare. Any money that families received from the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) would not count against this expanded child tax credit. Measures like increasing the CTC would strengthen the economic foundations of middle-income families as well. To reduce the possibility that an expanded CTC might encourage single-parenthood, we would not make it refundable for people beyond their payroll and income tax liability. That is, the expanded CTC would mean that families would pay lower taxes on income, but wouldn't receive a CTC check from the federal government based on the number of children they have.

Public policy should also seek not to penalize marriage among lower-income families. Although the EITC can reward lower-income couples when one partner earns markedly more than his or her partner, most transfer policies end up penalizing marriage.⁴⁴ Marriage penalties associated with Medicaid are particularly worrisome, given that many lower-income couples use Medicaid to pay for births and the health care of their young children.⁴⁵ And lower-income couples with similar incomes often stand to receive substantially less from the EITC if they marry.⁴⁶ Indeed, one study indicates marriage penalties reduce the odds of marriage, especially among lower-income couples.⁴⁷ Marriage penalties associated with tax and transfer policies targeting low-income families must be eliminated or at least minimized for the first five years of a couple's married life, to reduce the disincentives to marriage that millions of lower-income couples and their families face, particularly in the first few

years of their relationship when children often enter the picture.

On the educational front, we need to pursue efforts to expand vocational and apprenticeship opportunities for less-educated adults, both to renew the economic foundations of working-class families and to give young adults a renewed sense of dignity. Research suggests that at least one such approach, Career Academies, holds promise for improving both the economic and marital prospects of young men.⁴⁸ Likewise, some relationship education programs—for example, the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative and Supporting Father Involvement—have improved the quality and stability of low-income parents' relationships, or the emotional welfare of children whose parents have participated in them.⁴⁹ However, other vocational and relationship programs have failed to show a positive impact on couples and their kids. Federal and state governments should continue to experiment with vocational, apprenticeship, and relationship education programs to see which ones are most likely to make a real difference in the lives of lower-income couples, families, and their children. (Daniel Schneider discusses vocational programs in depth elsewhere in this issue.)

The public policy ideas we've mentioned don't directly address the cultural and civic challenges facing less-educated Americans. But insofar as they encourage work, make family life more affordable, or teach valuable relationship skills, they may create a context where marriage-friendly beliefs, behaviors, and civic institutions are more likely to flourish. Still, public policy is not the only answer to the family challenges confronting the United States. Given that a large share of public policies don't achieve

their intended effect,⁵⁰ these may not offer a great deal of hope for bridging the marriage divide.

Hence the nation also needs new cultural and civic initiatives to strengthen family life. On the cultural front, a social marketing campaign and nonprofit initiatives to provide relationship education to couples seem particularly promising. Campaigns against smoking, drunken driving, and teenage pregnancy have shown both that culture matters in shaping behavior, and that coordinated efforts to change behavior can actually work.⁵¹ Take the National Campaign to Prevent Teenage and Unplanned Pregnancy. It has worked with state and local organizations, advertising agencies, Hollywood producers, and religious institutions in its successful efforts to change norms and behaviors related to teen pregnancy, which has fallen by more than 50 percent since the early 1990s.⁵² A similar campaign organized around what Brookings Institution scholars Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill have called the “success sequence”—where young adults are encouraged to pursue education, work, marriage, and parenthood in that order—could also play a valuable role in delaying parenthood, strengthening marriage, and stabilizing family life.⁵³ If such a campaign received widespread support from a range of educational, media, pop cultural, business, and civic institutions, and partnered where necessary with federal, state, and local governments, it might meet with the same level of success as the nation’s campaign to prevent teen pregnancy.

Promising local civic initiatives designed to strengthen family life already exist, such as First Things First in Chattanooga, Tennessee.⁵⁴ This program, which works primarily with African American and

non-Hispanic white families in southeastern Tennessee, provides education on marriage, fatherhood, and parenting, and sponsors a range of public events, such as Chattanooga’s Ultimate Date Night, to help couples forge strong and happy relationships. First Things First has not yet been thoroughly evaluated, but it seems to have been successful in targeting a primarily non-college-educated clientele. Programs like this need to be scrutinized and, if they prove to be effective, replicated across the country.

We also need religious efforts to strengthen family life among Americans from poor and working-class communities, whether at the congregational, regional, or national level. Such efforts should focus on helping men learn how to find employment, find a partner, and forge a strong marriage. Why men? The answer is simple: they are more at risk for engaging in behaviors like infidelity or criminal activity that put their relationships at risk.⁵⁵

For this reason, churches and other religious groups should target men with messages and ministries that stress fidelity, emotional engagement in marriage and family life, and sacrificing for one’s family. Research suggests that fidelity, men’s emotional engagement, and generosity toward family life pay real dividends for men, their mates, and their children.⁵⁶ Churches should also be smart about how they deliver these messages to men. For example, one black Baptist pastor in Seattle scheduled a men’s ministry in conjunction with *Monday Night Football* and delivered his message at halftime. The point is that such messages are most likely to be heard and internalized in contexts where men feel comfortable. Messages and ministries targeting men could also help churches close the large gender gap in religious participation.

Given the challenges that less-educated men and women, especially African Americans, face in today's job market, churches should establish employment ministries, either as congregations or on a regional or national basis. These ministries should provide tips about finding and keeping jobs, cultivate job skills (for example, basic computer experience, office etiquette or customer service know-how, and other valuable skills for the modern work force), and offer an emotional outlet for parishioners who are unemployed or underemployed. Considering the importance of employment (especially men's) for the quality and stability of family life, such ministries could play a vital role in strengthening families in poor and working-class communities.⁵⁷

Given the complexity, confusion, and ambiguities associated with dating, marriage, and family life, we believe that churches, or local ecumenical groups, should address these topics early and often, but in a manner that is pastorally sensitive to the lived experience of the audience to whom messages are addressed. Clergy can't ignore the large numbers of single parents and other unmarried adults in their congregations. The precise message will vary by religious tradition, race, ethnicity, region, and the family status of the audience, but two themes are worth highlighting.

First, when it comes to dating and mating, churches should encourage adolescents and young adults to take things slowly and to save childbearing for marriage. Couples should be required to take a premarital preparation course before they marry in a church. Young adults who do these things are more likely to enjoy strong marriages.⁵⁸

Second, churches and other ministries should do more to speak honestly about both the

good parts and the challenges of married life for both children and adults. This should include messages about forgiveness, fidelity, and mutual generosity, as well as the value of building a spiritual life together. The research is clear: pursuing these virtues fosters strong and stable families, especially when rooted in a shared faith.⁵⁹ Moreover, religious institutions must be adamant that domestic violence is not to be tolerated, and that afflicted couples should consider separating. Clergy also need to take chemical dependency seriously, with appropriate referrals to rehabilitation programs, support groups, and 12-step programs. Honesty is key in all of this: clergy and lay leaders need to be candid about the joys and struggles that they and other lay members have faced, both to be believable and to give succor to spouses and parents who are struggling in their marriages or other family relationships. Indeed, research suggests that couples are more likely to have hope for their relationship when they realize that other couples struggle with similar challenges.⁶⁰

To be clear: We don't believe that the cultural and civic initiatives we've mentioned will bridge the marriage divide in America on their own. Any successful effort to strengthen marriage and family life in the 21st century will require a range of public policy, cultural, and civic strategies. But given the importance of marriage and family life to the welfare of our children, the need for equal opportunity, and the value that ordinary Americans of all persuasions attach to a good marriage and family life, we can think of few worthier causes.

For more information about the Add Health survey, visit <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth/data>.

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