

The Family Is Here to Stay—or Not

Ron Haskins

Summary

The past four decades have seen a rapid decline in marriage rates and a rapid increase in nonmarital births. These changes have had at least three worrisome effects on children. Scholars disagree about the magnitude of these effects, but surveys and other research evidence appear to definitively establish that the nation has more poverty, more income inequality, and less salutary child development, especially as a result of the rise in nonmarital births and single-parent families.

Ron Haskins examines whether and how government policies could do something to reverse these trends, or deal with their consequences if they can't be reversed. He finds evidence that some policies could produce enough impacts to be worth pursuing further, at the very least by developing and testing pilot programs.

First, writes Haskins, we might encourage marriage by reducing marriage penalties in means-tested benefits programs and expanding programs like the Earned Income Tax Credit to supplement the incomes of poorly educated men. Second, we have strong evidence that offering long-acting, reversible contraception and other forms of birth control to low-income women can reduce nonmarital births. Third, although the couples relationship programs piloted by the Bush administration in an effort to encourage marriage produced few positive results, there are some bright spots that could form the basis for designing and testing a new generation of such programs. Fourth, we could create more opportunities for disadvantaged young men to prepare for employment, and we could reduce their rates of incarceration. And, finally, we could do more to help single mothers raise their children, for example, by expanding child care subsidies.

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Sanders Korenman of Baruch College reviewed and critiqued a draft of this article.

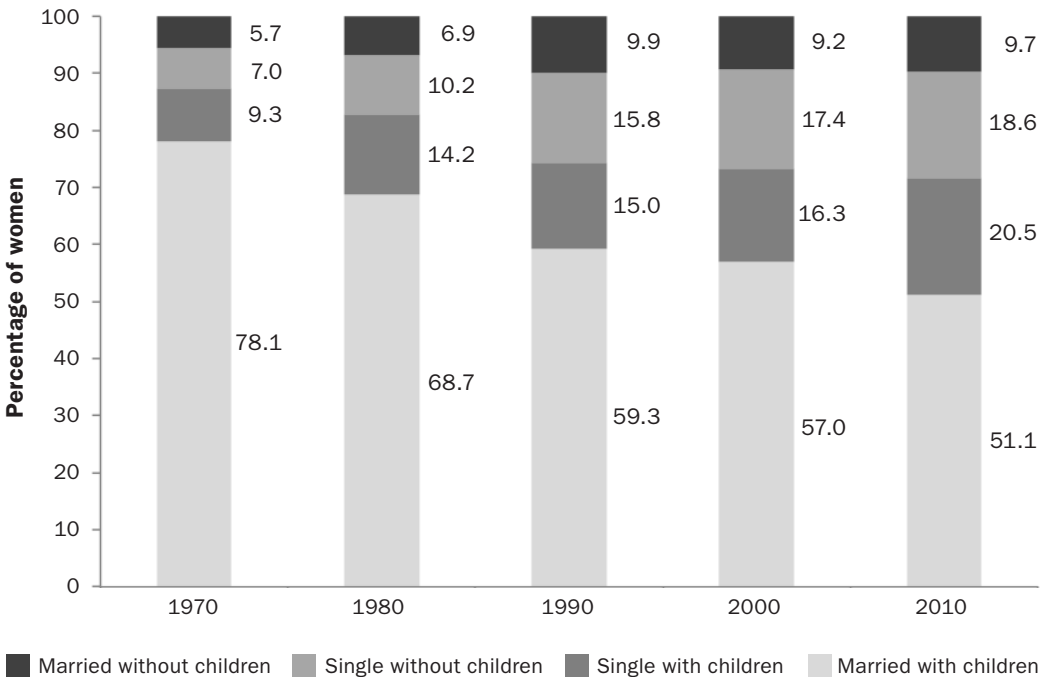
In 1976, Mary Jo Bane, who went on to become academic dean at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, published *Here to Stay: American Families in the Twentieth Century*. The book, which was widely admired, argued that the heralded decline of marriage and the two-parent family was a wild exaggeration. I doubt that Bane or any other scholar would publish such an optimistic book today. What appeared in the 1970s to be a trickle of changes in family composition has become a flood. The two most consequential changes are the decline in marriage rates, especially among minorities and people with modest education and low income, and the rise of unmarried childbearing. Many of these changes and their consequences are detailed elsewhere in this issue of *Future of Children*, and I will review them only

briefly here. My main purpose is to examine whether and how government policies could do something to reverse the trends in family dissolution, or deal with their consequences if they can’t be reversed. For this, we first need a clear understanding of the dimensions of the problem.

A Revolution in Children’s Living Arrangements

Figure 1 shows changes in family structure between 1970 and 2010 for women at age 35. The changes can be succinctly summarized: the proportion of women who were married and living with their children declined by about 35 percent, to about half; the proportion living in other family structures increased. The share of families consisting of single women with children grew by 120 percent over the period, to more than one in five. About half of these

Figure 1. Changes in Women’s Family Structure at Age 35, 1970–2010



Source: Author’s calculations from the decennial census (U.S. Census Bureau, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000) and the American Community Survey (2010).

Note: Some columns total slightly more or less than 100 percent due to rounding.

single mothers had never been married, and about one-quarter had a live-in partner.¹

These remarkable changes in family structure were produced by two related factors that also changed dramatically from 1970 to 2010, namely, the rapid decline in marriage rates for most but not all demographic groups and, due in part to the decline in marriage rates, the rapid increase in nonmarital births. By 2013, the proportion of children living in two-parent families had fallen to 69 percent, a historic low, from about 85 percent in 1970.² But this figure is somewhat misleading, because many children now living in a married-couple family were either born outside marriage or have experienced a divorce and the remarriage of one or both of their parents. In addition, some of the children now living with their married parents will experience their parents' divorce before reaching age 18. The demographer Larry Bumpass estimates that about half of children will spend some time in a single-parent family before they turn 18.³

In the next section, I describe the evidence that, on average, children's development suffers when their parents split. With this cautionary tale in mind, I then turn to examining government policies that could halt or reverse the decline in marriage rates or ameliorate the negative effects of these demographic changes on children and families.

Changes in Family Composition: So What?

The changes in family composition traced above have at least three worrisome effects on children: increased poverty rates, increased income inequality, and harm to children's growth and development. Scholars disagree about the magnitude of these effects, but surveys and other research

evidence appear to definitively establish the fact that the nation has more poverty, more income inequality, and less wholesome child development as a result of the changes in family composition, especially the rise in nonmarital births and single-parent families.

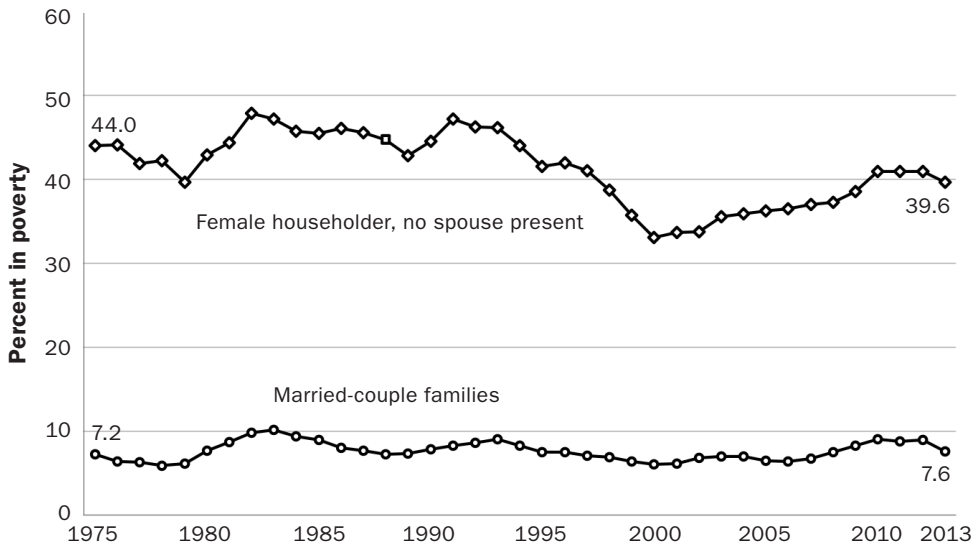
Impacts on Poverty

Figure 2 presents the poverty rates for female-headed and married-couple families with children. Since 1980, children in female-headed families have been four or five times more likely to be poor than children in married-couple families. The increasing share of children in female-headed families has been like a motor powering the child poverty rate curve, constantly pushing it up. Thus, even if the American economy or government programs helped more single mothers escape poverty, the poverty rate would nonetheless hold steady or even increase because a growing share of children have been moving from the family form with the lowest poverty rate into the family form with the highest poverty rate. Brookings Institution economist Isabel Sawhill estimates, based on a statistical analysis, that if the proportion of children in female-headed families had held steady at its 1970 level of 12.0 percent, and everything else influencing family poverty rates had remained the same, in 2013 the poverty rate for children would have been 16.4 percent rather than its actual rate of 21.3 percent.⁴ Without any additional government spending or new government programs, different decisions by mothers and fathers about fertility and marriage could have produced an impressive reduction in childhood poverty of nearly 25 percent.

Impacts on Income Inequality

Speaking in an inner-city neighborhood in 2013, President Barack Obama said that income inequality is the "defining

Figure 2. Poverty Rates for Female-Headed and Married-Couple Households with Children, 1975–2013



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see <http://www.census.gov/prod/techdoc/cps/cpsmar13.pdf>.

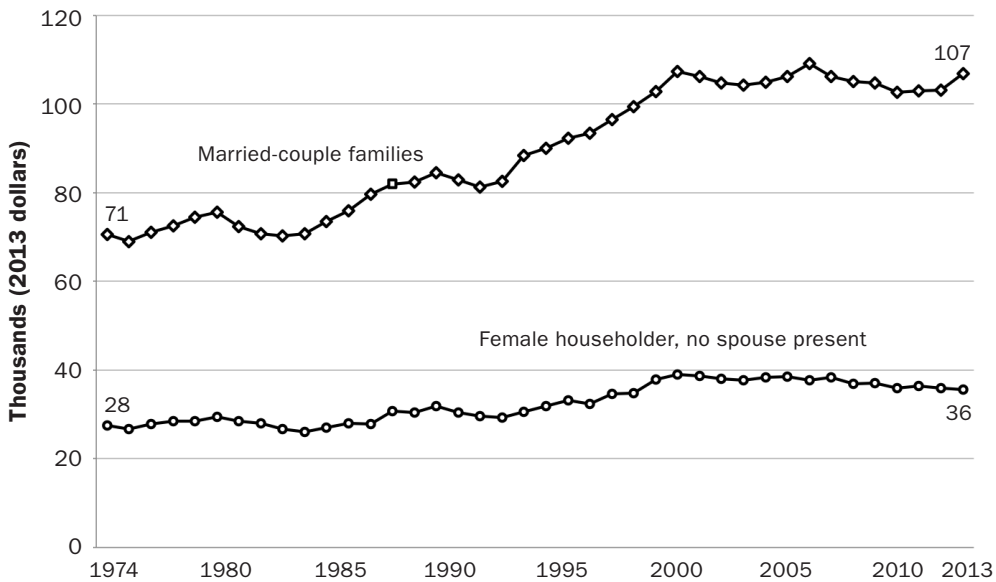
challenge of our time.”⁵ The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office has examined income inequality by reviewing the income of households between 1979 and 2010.⁶ The budget office’s report, which divides the distribution of household income into fifths, with an equal number of households in each fifth, shows that although income grew over the period for all groups, the magnitude of the increase was greater the higher up the distribution we go. In inflation-adjusted dollars, the increase in after-tax, after-transfer income for the bottom 20 percent, the top 20 percent, and the top 1 percent was 49 percent, 85 percent, and over 200 percent, respectively. Clearly, income inequality has grown substantially.

Figure 3 shows the mean income, based on Census Bureau data, of female-headed families with children and married-couple families with children since 1974. The

increase in female-headed families over the last four decades is reducing the share of children from families in the figure’s top line, who enjoy relatively high family income, and increasing the share from families in the lower line, who experience lower family income. By definition, these two demographic changes increase income inequality.

Looking beyond increasing inequality in the current generation, sociologists Sara McLanahan and Christine Percheski conducted one of the first thorough analyses of how changes in household structure affected income distribution and economic opportunity in the children’s generation. They concluded that “single motherhood ... decreases intergenerational economic mobility by affecting children’s material resources and the parenting they experience.”⁷ Single parenthood, then, affects not just

Figure 3. Mean Income of Married-Couple and Female-Headed Households with Children, 1974–2013



Source: Author's calculations from the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements (table F-10).

children's current economic circumstances but their economic circumstances once they become adults as well.

Impacts on Children

Since the early 1990s, when sociologists Paul Amato and Bruce Keith reviewed studies of how divorce affects children and McLanahan and her sociologist colleague Gary Sandefur wrote *Growing Up with a Single Parent*, the ranks of those who deny that living in a single-parent family is not optimal for children's development have diminished greatly.⁸ A more recent review that focuses on children born outside marriage updates and expands these earlier findings.⁹ In addition, McLanahan and her colleagues have recently reviewed the best scientific studies and reached the conclusion that not having a father present has negative consequences for children, especially when it comes to high school graduation rates, social-emotional adjustment, and adult

mental health.¹⁰ The article in this issue by David Ribar thoroughly reviews this research and reaches the same conclusion.

Single parenthood affects not just children's current economic circumstances but their economic circumstances once they become adults as well.

One additional finding suggests a mechanism that could explain impacts on children's wellbeing. Based on the nationally representative sample of nonmarital births from the Fragile Families study, which has been following 5,000 children born in large U.S. cities in the late-1990s, two

researchers examined changes over the first five years of a child's life in the composition of families formed by a nonmarital birth.¹¹ The data give an idea of the turmoil that these children experience at home. Fifty-five percent of the birth mothers or fathers had at least one new romantic relationship before the child turned five, and most of these mothers had two or more new romantic relationships. If we define an unstable family as one in which the relationship between the biological parents ends or relationships with new partners begin, and a complex family as one in which one or both parents have a child with a parent who doesn't live in the household, nearly 80 percent of the children experienced family instability, family complexity, or both by their fifth birthday. These changes in family and household composition are not helpful to children's development.¹²

Given the malign impact of single-parent families on poverty rates, family income, and child development, it's especially regrettable that nonmarital births and broken families afflict black people much more than any other demographic group. The annual rate of births per 1,000 teen females is 44 for blacks versus 27 for whites; the proportion of births to unmarried women is 71 percent for blacks compared with 29 percent for whites; and the proportion of children not living with their married parents is 66 percent for blacks versus 26 percent for whites. These stark racial differences make policy proposals regarding fertility and family structure, to which we now turn our attention, all the more important.¹³

What to Do: Government Policy

It's good advice for politicians to lower their expectations before they sponsor reform policies, because most policies don't

produce major impacts. It follows that making big claims for their effectiveness almost always produces disappointment. So it is in scholarly reviews of policy proposals. Most readers will have grasped the fact that I see major problems in the collapse of the American married-couple family, the rise of nonmarital births and single parenting, and the consequent impact on the development and wellbeing of the nation's children. But the policy solutions for which we have evidence suggest that we have no policies that, even if well financed and implemented, would reverse these trends or fully ameliorate their consequences. On the other hand, we do have evidence that some policies at our disposal produce modest impacts and might, with some justification, be called promising. Promising or not, we must face the fact that we are likely to always have millions of female-headed families. It follows that, as we explore ways to reverse the collapse of the two-parent family, we must also help single-parent families improve their economic circumstances and promote opportunity for their children.

Marriage and the Tax Code

The tax code and means-tested programs can present disincentives for marriage, because single people who marry and combine their incomes could see higher taxes and fewer means-tested benefits. Two features of the federal tax code create marriage incentives and penalties.¹⁴ The first is tax rates that vary with income; the second is the requirement that married couples file jointly to qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and other tax credits. If the tax code had a flat rate for all incomes, the total tax bill for two individuals, whether married or single, would be the same. Take the EITC as an example of how tax penalties arise. The EITC, which is intended

primarily to increase the incentive to work and augment income among low-income workers, especially parents, is designed so that qualified workers receive more money as they earn more up to a certain amount; then their EITC payment is flat for several thousand dollars of additional earnings; then the EITC payment phases out over a broad income range. In 2014, a married couple with two children qualified for an EITC equal to 40 percent of their combined earnings up to \$13,650, or a maximum EITC of \$5,460; their EITC remains at \$5,460 until their earnings reach \$23,260, at which point their EITC phases out at the rate of about 21 percent of each additional dollar of earnings so that the credit equals zero at \$49,186. If a mother with two children and \$20,000 in earnings marries a man earning \$30,000, her EITC falls from the maximum of \$5,460 to zero.

To understand the net impacts of the EITC on marriage penalties and incentives for all low-income couples, we need descriptive data on a representative sample of low-income adults who could marry. Then we could analyze the size of the marriage penalties and bonuses they encounter based on their actual combined income. One of the few studies of this type used data from the 2002 National Survey of America's Families, which collected information on household composition, income, welfare receipt, and a number of other variables from a representative sample of the U.S. population.¹⁵ To conduct their analysis, the authors identified the 744 cohabiting couples with children in the sample who had a combined income under 200 percent of the poverty level. They calculated the impact that marriage would have on their EITC benefit as it existed in 2008 (the EITC has been expanded since 2008) as well as the couples' Temporary Assistance

for Needy Families (TANF) welfare benefit, if the mother received one. They examined what would happen to the income of these actual low-income couples, given their number of children and their combined earnings, if they should decide to marry.

A major finding was that 75 percent of the cohabiting low-income couples would receive a marriage bonus from the EITC, while only 10 percent would receive a penalty (the remaining 15 percent would experience little to no change). The average increase in the EITC for the 75 percent who received it would be about \$1,400. Other tax code exemptions, deductions, and credits these couples could qualify for if married increased the marriage bonus to a total of around \$2,400. For the 10 percent who were hit with a marriage penalty from the EITC, the average total penalty was around \$1,750.

Turning to the TANF program, because TANF benefits phase out rapidly as earnings increase, almost all the cohabiting couples who received TANF would have their benefit reduced. But only 14 percent of the couples were receiving TANF benefits. For this small minority of couples, the TANF benefit was between \$1,800 and \$2,100. Of the 14 percent of couples who received TANF, fewer than 4 percent got both a tax penalty and a TANF reduction; for these families the combined loss was substantial, about \$3,300. But 70 percent of the 14 percent who received a TANF reduction also received an EITC bonus. The combined tax bonus and TANF reduction for these couples still left them with a net marriage bonus that averaged \$1,300.

Two conclusions are justified. First, a small minority of cohabiting couples with combined income under 200 percent of

poverty who marry would be subjected to an EITC marriage penalty. The number of couples who are subjected to the marriage penalty is smaller now because another program, the Child Tax Credit, which provides a refundable tax credit of up to \$1,000 per child, was expanded in 2009. This additional money from the Child Tax Credit would offset some of the EITC penalty for couples whose combined income places them in the phase-out range. Second, the marriage penalty for the group of mothers and fathers who receive means-tested benefits seems likely to be substantial. The study considered only the EITC and related tax credits and TANF cash benefits, but other welfare benefits such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), housing, school lunch, and child care also have phase-out rules. A recent study by researchers at the Urban Institute found that nearly 80 percent of a representative sample of families with children below 200 percent of the poverty line received at least one welfare benefit, and 45 percent received two or more.¹⁶ In many cases, there would be marriage penalties from these programs. An especially serious disincentive occurs in the Medicaid program, where eligibility ends abruptly at a given income level. This annual income level, which varies greatly across states and demographic groups, ranges from about \$21,000 to \$50,000 for children's eligibility, although most children under 185 percent of poverty are eligible for coverage.¹⁷ It's likely that some adults and children who lose their Medicaid benefits because marriage increases their earnings may be covered under the Affordable Care Act, but it's difficult to generalize because health insurance coverage varies so much across states.¹⁸

It follows from these considerations about means-tested benefits that we should worry

more about the marriage penalty low-income couples encounter from means-tested programs than about the EITC and other tax credits, especially because the Tax Relief Act of 2010 extended the bottom 15 percent tax bracket for married couples filing jointly, increased the standard deduction, and extended the EITC phase-out range for married couples. The cost of correcting any remaining marriage penalty for low-income couples is likely to be substantial. For this reason, it seems unwise to call for changes in the law until it's clear that these penalties actually reduce marriage rates. One way to find out would be to conduct experiments in which several states are given the authority and funding to allow some low-income couples who marry to keep their TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, and perhaps other benefits for a year or two while other randomly assigned couples would continue to be subject to current program rules. It seems especially likely that SNAP could produce both marriage and work disincentives, because its nearly 46 million recipients can receive as much as \$6,000 in annual benefits that would be terminated once gross earnings reach about \$25,000 for a family of three.

A proposal for expanding the EITC that has received attention in the nation's capital is a credit for childless adults. Many economists have attributed falling work rates among poorly educated males to the low wages they receive. If a government program supplemented these low wages, more young men might be drawn into the job market because they could earn a reasonable income when their earnings and the wage supplement are combined. Both President Obama and Sen. Paul Ryan, the chairman of the tax-writing Ways and Means Committee, have released proposals of this type. They would both double the EITC's value for

childless workers to about \$1,000, expand the phase-out range, and reduce the age of eligibility from 25 to 21.¹⁹ There is at least a reasonable chance that such a credit could be enacted in the near future, especially because many Republicans and Democrats support such an expansion.

Several proposals to expand the EITC for childless workers have been reviewed and analyzed by scholars at the Urban Institute.²⁰ None of the proposals they've reviewed has been implemented or tested. However, former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg implemented a wage subsidy experiment of this type before he left office. The research company MDRC is conducting a study of Bloomberg's initiative, having recruited about 6,000 low-income New Yorkers between the ages of 21 and 64 (with a mean age of 37) who don't have custody of dependent children for the experiment.²¹ Half were assigned to an experimental group that is now receiving a wage supplement of up to \$2,000 a year for three years. Thus we will soon have good information on whether supplementing wages will draw more low-income people into the work force, increase their marriage or cohabitation rates, reduce their incarceration or recidivism rates (18 percent of the sample has been incarcerated), or increase their child support payments (12 percent are noncustodial parents).²² In a perfect world, before enacting an EITC expansion, it might be wise for Congress and the president to wait until the results of the New York City experiment are in. But the results of one experiment are almost never definitive because conditions vary so widely across the nation's cities and states. Thus, Congress should give the Department of Health and Human Services the authority to plan and conduct demonstrations like the one now being implemented in New York

City in states or large cities that are willing to bear up to a quarter of the costs.

Reducing Nonmarital Births

If we could lower the proportion of nonmarital births, more than 55 percent of which are unplanned, we would likely see an array of benefits.²³ Voluntary birth control could reduce teen pregnancy rates, unintended pregnancies at older ages, and abortion rates. In addition, by reducing the number of single-parent families, it could reduce poverty and income inequality and promote children's development. Finally, birth control saves the government money. In fact, it already produces this entire range of benefits, but more effective use of birth control would expand them.

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Several studies show a surprising range of impacts when couples decide to avoid unplanned pregnancies. For example, economist Martha Bailey identified two historical events that were associated with increased access to birth control.²⁴ The first was the broadening of legal access to contraception that followed 1965's *Griswold v. Connecticut* Supreme Court case, in which the court overruled Connecticut's laws restricting the sale of contraceptives. The second was the expansion of funding for local family planning clinics provided by federal legislation between 1964 and 1973. Using data from various national

surveys, Bailey found “suggestive evidence” that “individuals’ access to contraceptives increased their children’s college completion rate, labor force participation rate, wages, and family incomes decades later.”

In an earlier issue of *Future of Children*, Sawhill, along with her Brookings colleagues Adam Thomas and Emily Monea, reviewed several policies that, they believed, showed nonmarital and unplanned births could be reduced.²⁵ They also presented results from simulations of the effects of a mass media campaign encouraging men to use condoms, a comprehensive teen pregnancy prevention program that both discouraged sexual activity and provided education in contraceptive use, and an expansion of Medicaid eligibility for contraceptive services. Their simulations suggested that all three policies produced positive benefit-to-cost ratios (\$3.60 to each dollar invested for the mass media campaign, \$2.07 for teen pregnancy prevention programs, and \$4.26 for an expansion of Medicaid payments for contraception services).

As impressive as the results from simulation and modeling might be, the evidence of what actually happens to pregnancy and abortion rates when women are offered birth control is even more persuasive. In recent years, there have been two well reported, large-scale studies of carefully planned efforts to increase the voluntary use of birth control, especially the use of long-acting, reversible contraception (LARC) by low-income mothers. These prospective studies involved training medical personnel, conducting a campaign to advertise the availability of free LARCs and other forms of birth control, and using a straightforward procedure to explain the advantages and disadvantages of various types of contraceptives. The first study, conducted in the St. Louis area and

called the Contraceptive CHOICE Project, enrolled 9,256 low-income mothers.²⁶ The mothers were given the option of choosing their contraception method at no cost. The choices included birth control pills, a vaginal ring, the hormonal patch, or injections of depot medroxyprogesterone acetate (DMPA), a long-lasting hormonal contraceptive; or a LARC (an intrauterine device or IUD, or a hormone-releasing implant). Participants were 14 to 45 years old; were either not using any contraception or were willing to consider switching to a different method; did not want to become pregnant for at least the next 12 months; and were either sexually active or planning to be sexually active with a male partner during the next six months. Once they were enrolled, participants underwent an initial interview and then were contacted by phone every six months.

At the end of three years, the mothers who used LARCs or DMPA were much less likely to have become pregnant. The pregnancy rate for those who used the pill, patch, or ring was 9.4 percent; the rate for those who used IUDs and implants was 0.9 percent; and the rate for those who received DMPA injections was 0.7 percent. There were also fewer abortions.

The second large-scale study, this one involving almost the entire state of Colorado, also produced interesting results.²⁷ Colorado was experiencing high rates of unintended pregnancy, especially among teens and people in their twenties. Colorado health officials found, based on a state monitoring system, that nearly 80 percent of women using contraception covered by Medicaid were using condoms, withdrawal, or the rhythm method, none of which are particularly effective at preventing pregnancies (withdrawal and the rhythm method are inexpensive, though). Health officials were confident that increasing the use of LARCs by

these women would prove more effective in preventing unwanted pregnancies. Thus, in 2009, supported by a private donation of \$23 million, health officials implemented the Colorado Family Planning Initiative.²⁸ The initiative provided 30,000 LARCs to women who requested them in many of the state's family planning clinics, as well as extensive training for staff and doctors regarding use of LARC methods.

In counties that had access to LARCs, births per 1,000 women aged 15–19 fell from 91 in the year before the initiative began to 67 two years later; for low-income women aged 20–24, births fell from 131 to 110 per 1,000 women. Comparing birth rates in the counties that gave LARCs to women who requested them with rates in counties that continued under the previous system also implied that LARCs had a substantial impact on birth rates. In addition, statewide enrollment in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC, which had increased in the three years before the study, declined by 23 percent over the study period. This suggests that in addition to spending less public money on births, the state also spent less on the means-tested WIC program because fewer babies eligible for the program were born. As in the St. Louis study, abortion rates also declined, in this case by 34 percent for teens and 18 percent for 20- to 24-year-olds. Neither the St. Louis nor the Colorado study met the highest standards of scientific evaluation, so some caution is in order.

We've also seen impressive success with efforts to reduce pregnancy rates specifically among the nation's teenagers. Since the early 1990s, teen birth rates have declined almost every year and have fallen by well over 50 percent, from 59.9 per 1,000 teen

females in 1990 to 26.5 per 1,000 in 2013.²⁹ Even so, American teenagers still have much higher birth rates than teens in many other nations with advanced economies. Japan, Denmark, and the Netherlands, for example, all have rates under 5 per 1,000.³⁰

Thus it's fortunate that the Obama administration has launched a major initiative to reduce the teen pregnancy rate by expanding what is now widely referred to as evidence-based policy. Although definitions vary, the two primary characteristics of evidence-based policy in this area are directing the highest possible proportion of federal grant funds to teen pregnancy prevention programs that have been shown by rigorous evaluations (those that meet high scientific standards) to produce positive impacts and requiring all programs receiving federal funds to conduct high-quality evaluations and use the results to improve themselves.³¹

As part of its teen pregnancy initiative, the administration, with help from experts at Mathematica Policy Research and Child Trends, both known for their high-quality research on children, reviewed all published and unpublished evaluations of teen pregnancy prevention programs they could find.³² After reviewing nearly 1,000 studies in accord with detailed procedures developed by the Department of Health and Human Services, the team identified 31 model teen pregnancy prevention programs with strong evidence (mostly from randomized controlled trials) of impacts on sexual activity, use of contraceptives, sexually transmitted infections, or pregnancy rates.³³ The administration is now funding and evaluating 75 initiatives that replicate one of these model programs, enrolling over 100,000 teens annually in 37 states.³⁴

The individual programs are being subjected to rigorous evaluations.³⁵ Over the next several years, the results from these evaluations of model teen pregnancy prevention programs should provide a burst of information about whether they can be scaled up and maintain their effectiveness. This approach holds promise for further reducing teen pregnancy and producing the impacts on poverty, income inequality, opportunity, and child development that the research I've reviewed here shows to be possible.

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One of the most impressive findings from research on family planning is the number of studies that have shown net savings from subsidized payments for birth control, as a recent review on the website the Incidental Economist demonstrates.³⁶ As blogger Ezra Klein put it in a post on Vox, here's the basic math: the average cost of a vaginal delivery is \$18,329; the cost of a C-section is \$27,866. By comparison, the average cost of contraception, including LARCs, is between \$100 and \$600 annually.³⁷ Combine these numbers with the fact that a little over 30 percent of unmarried women ages 18–29 have had an unplanned pregnancy; that nearly 70 percent of births to unmarried women ages 20–29 are unplanned; and that, when given a choice between types

of birth control provided without charge, around 70 percent of low-income women select the most effective forms (LARCs); and it will come as no surprise that there are serious savings to be had if we expand the availability of subsidized birth control to low-income women.³⁸ At least four studies have produced estimates of the benefit-cost ratios of expanded use of effective contraception; the estimates range from savings of \$3.74 to \$7.00 for every \$1 spent on birth control.³⁹

Clearly, there's little doubt that programs have been developed that will increase use of effective birth control by both teens and older women, that increased use of birth control will reduce both unplanned pregnancies and nonmarital births, and that reducing these pregnancies will save money. Further, reducing pregnancies among single women could mean that they have babies later in life, when they are more prepared to give them effective mothering. In addition, avoiding nonmarital births can increase the chance that women will marry later in life.⁴⁰

The Bush Marriage Education Initiative

As we've seen, increased marriage rates would affect poverty, inequality, and child development. A major question, of course, is whether we can increase marriage rates. A 2005 comprehensive review of marriage education programs by the Urban Institute showed that, on average, the programs produced substantial positive impacts on relationship satisfaction and communication between couples. But none of the studies involved low-income couples, and none reported long-term impacts on marital stability or children's development or behavior. Nonetheless, as the authors concluded, "The review brings good news, as it indicates that evaluations of marriage programs show significant positive effects on average."⁴¹

Based on the view that marriage and even improved relationships among low-income unmarried couples would be good for the adults and children involved, the Bush administration launched a marriage initiative in 2001 to test two propositions. The first was that marriage education and associated services for couples might improve relationship quality and help couples either get married or prolong their relationship. The second was that the impacts on couple relationships and marriage rates, if they occurred, might in turn have a positive impact on children's development and behavior.

One part of the Bush initiative was the Building Strong Families (BSF) program, evaluated by the research firm Mathematica.⁴² The BSF program aimed to strengthen the relationships and parenting skills of young couples who had a baby together outside marriage. The program was implemented at eight sites, with about 5,100 couples randomly assigned to an experimental or a control group. Parents in the experimental group were offered marriage education classes in groups, using a formal curriculum, as well as advice and support from a family-services coordinator who encouraged participation in the marriage education classes, met with parents individually to help them with problems, and, if necessary, referred them to community services.

The Mathematica evaluation measured the quality of the couples' relationships, their coparenting relationships, family stability, children's social-emotional development, and other outcomes. These measures were collected both at 15 months and 36 months after participants had enrolled in the program. At 15 months, averaged across all sites, the BSF program saw few significant

effects, including on whether the couples stayed together or got married. Looking at individual sites, six of the eight saw few effects. However, the Oklahoma program saw a pattern of positive effects, while the Baltimore program saw some negative impacts, including a slight increase in physical assaults by the father. The positive effects in Oklahoma included relationship happiness, parenting skills, support and affection, use of constructive behaviors to resolve conflicts, avoidance of destructive conflict behaviors, marital fidelity, quality of coparenting, whether the father lived with the child, and whether the father provided "substantial financial support."

Mathematica's 36-month follow-up again showed few impacts across the eight sites.⁴³ There was a modest positive improvement in the children's socio-emotional development, but no significant differences on any of the other measures. At individual sites, the negative impacts of the Baltimore program had disappeared, but so had most of the positive impacts of the Oklahoma program. The other six programs saw few significant effects, with the exception that the Florida site saw negative impacts on a few outcomes. Although most of the Oklahoma impacts had disappeared by 36 months, there was one important difference there between the treatment and control groups: 49 percent of the children in the treatment group, but only 41 percent of control children, were still living with both of their parents.

Marriage advocates inclined to emphasize positive findings could point out that the Oklahoma results at 15 months were very positive and that, although most of them had faded by 36 months, children were still more likely to be living with both their parents, one of the major goals of those who advocate for programs to increase marriage

rates. On the other hand, none of the other programs saw a pattern of positive results. A reasonable conclusion is that the BSF program can't be counted on to positively affect the quality and stability of parents' relationships, or the quality of their parenting. Even so, it might be worthwhile to continue the Oklahoma program to see whether its strong results at 15 months can be replicated and to figure out how the program was able to be so successful at that point.

The second Bush marriage initiative was called Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM). SHM is similar to BSF; it attempts to increase the relationship skills of couples who are already married, which in turn could help them establish a better marital relationship and a more harmonious and stable home environment for their children. The program was implemented at eight sites. It involved couples in group workshops based on well-developed marriage education curricula, supplemental activities based on the workshop discussions, and family support services to overcome participation barriers and connect families to other services if necessary.

In 2012, MDRC published a detailed report on how the program affected couples 12 months after the program began. Summarizing across the eight sites, the report found that compared with the control group, "the program group showed higher levels of marital happiness, lower levels of marital distress, greater warmth and support, more positive communication, and fewer negative behaviors and emotions in their interactions with their spouses."⁴⁴

In 2014, MDRC published a second follow-up report on data collected 30 months after SHM began. The results were similar to the results at one year—couples

who participated in the healthy marriage program had higher levels of marital happiness; lower levels of marital distress and infidelity; greater warmth, support, and positive communication; and fewer antagonistic and hostile behaviors with their spouses.⁴⁵

These results were more encouraging than those obtained from BSF. But the size of many of the effects was not statistically significant (that is, they might have occurred by chance), and even the effects that were statistically significant were very small in size. More importantly, program couples were no more likely to stay together, and there were no effects on measures of their children's behavior or development, arguably the most important outcomes that the Bush initiatives aimed to improve.

The Bush administration initiative was the first large-scale effort to develop marriage programs for poor couples and to test their effectiveness. It wouldn't be surprising if the initial effort to conduct such large and complex programs produced disappointing results, nor would it be surprising if the programs could be improved over time. This is especially the case because other high-quality studies have shown that marriage education can have a positive effect on couples' relationships and breakup rates.⁴⁶

BSF and SHM cost an average of between \$9,000 and \$11,000 per couple. When the modest impacts of these programs are compared with their cost, many observers would conclude that the programs need to increase their impacts, reduce their costs, or both. Some researchers and policy makers have concluded that the programs should be abandoned. On the other hand, Philip and Carolyn Cowan, two of the most experienced researchers and designers

of couple relationship programs, recently reviewed the evidence on education programs for couples and reached three conclusions: first, that without intervention, “average couple relationship satisfaction declines”; second, that including fathers in the programs “results in value-added contributions to family functioning”; and, third, that eight of nine studies of couple relationship programs that include child outcomes show benefits for children. The Cowans conclude that “there are too many positive findings to give credence to the claim that couple relationship education programs should be discontinued.”⁴⁷

Thus it’s worth replicating the Oklahoma program, with a focus on finding ways to reduce its costs and maintain its impacts. It would be especially important to study problems with attendance in the other BSF programs. Averaged across sites, couples who signed up for the program attended only enough sessions to receive about 20 percent of the curriculum.⁴⁸ It seems unlikely that any curriculum can be effective when participants miss an average of 80 percent of its sessions. Oklahoma led the pack in attendance, so a close study of that program should begin with how its leaders were able to get couples to attend their sessions. All in all, however, we can be only modestly optimistic that marriage education programs can have long-term impacts on the nation’s problem with declining marriage rates among low-income and minority Americans.

Helping Young Men

In his heralded 1987 book *The Truly Disadvantaged*, sociologist William Julius Wilson was one of the first to develop the idea that unemployment among young black men is a key to explaining the decline of marriage among black Americans.⁴⁹ Wilson

constructed a “black marriageable male index” based on comparing the number of employed black men to the number of black women in the same age range. He shows that in 1960 the ratio was about 70 employed black men for every 100 black women in the 20 to 24 age range. Even that ratio is less than desirable, but by the 1980s, it had fallen to 50 employed black men for every 100 black women.

In addition to their high rates of unemployment and nonwork, young black males are very likely to serve time in prison. Nearly 60 percent of black high school dropouts born between 1965 and 1969 had been in prison by the time they reached their early thirties.⁵⁰ Having a prison record makes it even more difficult to find work when these men leave prison. In addition, prison disrupts their relationships with relatives and friends, including their wives, girlfriends, and children. It would be hard to imagine a combination of factors that would do more to reduce marriage prospects than a lousy work history and a prison record.

It would be hard to imagine a combination of factors that would do more to reduce marriage prospects than a lousy work history and a prison record.

One reason some young men have such difficulty with the law is that their development is impaired by being reared without consistent contact with their fathers. In a compelling review of research on this issue, economists David Autor and Melanie Wasserman show

that over the past three decades, men have performed poorly in educational and economic terms while women have improved their educational and economic status.⁵¹ Though technological change, the decline of unions, and globalization have contributed to men's economic decline, Autor and Wasserman also argue that what they call "premarket" factors have played an important role. They review evidence that single mothers spend less time with sons and harshly discipline them more often than daughters. Similarly, they note that although boys in general act out in school more often than girls, the gap is greater for boys and girls from female-headed families than for boys and girls from married-couple families. Autor and Wasserman also point out that girls who moved from poor, high-risk neighborhoods to new neighborhoods with less poverty engaged in fewer risky behaviors and had better health than girls who did not.⁵² In sharp contrast, boys who moved were more likely to be arrested, abuse drugs and alcohol, and have poorer health. Autor and Wasserman argue that an important cause of the boys' problems is that the move disrupted their relationship with their fathers or father figures. Boys also see their fathers much less often after their parents separate, so the negative effects of disrupting the bond between fathers and sons seem likely to apply in that case as well.⁵³

At least two public policies are backed by moderate evidence that suggests they could improve young men's life situations, increase their chances of finding work, and help them develop a healthy relationship, perhaps leading to marriage, with young women: creating more opportunities for disadvantaged young men to prepare for employment and reducing their rates of incarceration. A number of programs that

have been tested by random-assignment evaluations have shown positive impacts on young men's employment.⁵⁴ Foremost among them are the Career Academies program and apprenticeship programs that give young people a skill and a certificate, often through community colleges, which can greatly increase their employment rates.⁵⁵ The Career Academies program even led to higher marriage rates.

But in that respect, Career Academies may be an outlier. In this issue of *Future of Children*, Daniel Schneider reviews 16 experimental programs involving early childhood development, workforce training, and income support that aimed to improve the economic wellbeing of low-income men and women. These experiments also collected information on the difference in marriage rates (and sometimes cohabitation rates) between people in the experimental and control groups.⁵⁶ Most of the programs produced positive effects on the economic wellbeing of young men, young women, or both, but only a few, including Career Academies, had strong impacts on marriage rates. Based on Schneider's review, there is only modest evidence that programs that increase economic wellbeing can also increase marriage rates.

States and the federal government should also change mandatory sentencing laws and thereby reduce the number of nonviolent offenders who serve long prison sentences. Many states, sometimes forced by budget shortages, are already beginning to change their mandatory sentencing laws, although we know little yet about the effects of these changes. At the federal level, many politicians from both parties have proposed reforms in mandatory sentencing laws for nonviolent offenses as well as new or improved prison release programs to help former prisoners

adapt to life on the outside, especially by finding a job.

In February 2014, President Obama proposed a third policy that he believes will help young men from poor families—especially young men of color—grow into responsible adults. The president appointed a high-level administration task force to write a report that explained the initiative, called *My Brother’s Keeper*, and make recommendations for its goals and activities.⁵⁷ The task force recommended six key “milestones” that the initiative should pursue, such as ensuring that young male children are ready to begin public schooling, that male teens graduate from high school ready for college or a career, and that young men successfully enter the job market. The initiative is an attempt to get local officials from both the government and private sector to plan activities to achieve these goals. By the time *My Brother’s Keeper* issued its first-year report, foundations had pledged about \$300 million to support the initiative, and businesses, mayors, and education leaders had pledged well over \$100 million. The initiative has inspired lots of activity at the local, state, and federal level to achieve its goals, but so far there has been little or no evaluation of its effectiveness in helping young men.⁵⁸ For the time being, we should keep *My Brother’s Keeper* in the category of interesting ideas that do not yet have evidence of how well they work.

Perhaps the Urban Institute’s Karin Martinson and Demetra Nightingale, who is now the chief economist at the Department of Labor, best sum up the results of the most promising and best-evaluated fatherhood programs that aim to help low-income fathers gain employment, transition from incarceration to life in

their community, or become better fathers to their children: “The mixed results of programs to date indicate that improving the lives of low-income men and their families is not an easy undertaking.”⁵⁹

Helping Single Mothers

With apologies to Mary Jo Bane, single mothers are “here to stay.” In 2013, about 28 percent of the nation’s children were living in single-parent families, and nearly 80 percent of those children, about 17.5 million, lived in female-headed families. Over the course of their childhood, up to half of the nation’s children spend some time in a single-parent family. About 16 percent of unmarried mothers with children are living with a male partner at any given time.⁶⁰ Trends in family composition have now reached the point at which by age 25 more women have had babies outside marriage than are married.⁶¹ We may hope that the trends in declining marriage rates and increasing nonmarital birth rates will turn around, but, meanwhile, a huge share of the nation’s children will continue to live in female-headed families. Thus it seems wise to maintain or even expand the focus of state and federal policy on these female-headed families.

The federal and state governments have taken two broad approaches to help poor single mothers and their children. One is to provide cash and noncash support. Since the beginning of the War on Poverty in the mid-1960s, both the number of means-tested programs and federal and state spending on such programs have grown dramatically. The federal government and the states now spend about \$1 trillion annually on these programs, a considerable portion of which goes to female-headed families.⁶² The major programs included in this estimate are Medicaid, food and nutrition

programs, Supplemental Security Income, the EITC, the Additional Child Tax Credit (the version of the Child Tax Credit for low-income parents who have no or limited tax liability), and housing programs. The second approach is to encourage poor mothers to work, usually at low-wage jobs, and then use government programs to subsidize their earnings.⁶³ One of the great tensions in American social policy centers on whether it's better to give welfare benefits to able-bodied mothers or to encourage, cajole, or try to force them to work and then subsidize their earnings, which are often below the poverty level.⁶⁴ A key event in the work approach was passage of the 1996 welfare reform law, which greatly strengthened work requirements and gave states incentives to enforce them.

Although the welfare reform law had some shortcomings, its passage was followed by a huge increase in the proportion of poor single mothers who were employed. In the years before welfare reform, the work rate of single mothers averaged around 69 percent. But by 2000, the figure had jumped to nearly 83 percent, an increase of about 20 percent. In that year, the poverty rate for families headed by single mothers, under a definition of income that included earnings and government-provided work supports, was 29.6 percent, its lowest level ever until that time.⁶⁵ That's the good news—harnessing the efforts of the mothers themselves, augmented by government work support benefits, turned out to be an effective strategy for helping single mothers and their children leave poverty. Even after the recessions of 2001 and 2007–09, mothers in the bottom of the earnings distribution still had higher work rates and lower poverty rates than before the large increase in employment following welfare reform.

However, their work rates fell and their poverty rates increased during both recessions, showing that, like other families, single-mother families depend on the economy to generate jobs if they are to continue making economic progress. Thus the bad news is that the American economy sometimes falls short, especially during recessions. Another piece of bad news is that some mothers were not able to make the transition to work and either used up their time-limited TANF benefits, were eliminated from the rolls for rule violation, or left the rolls voluntarily, perhaps to work at a job that they later lost. This group of mothers lacks both earnings and TANF benefits. In one study, their annual income was \$6,178, compared with \$17,681 for working mothers who left TANF. Not surprisingly, these mothers and their children also have high rates of poverty and food insecurity.⁶⁶

Despite the bad news, several policy changes could help poor, single mothers increase their income and in some cases escape poverty. First, we could do more to ensure that they get child support, especially by persuading states, perhaps with financial incentives, to give all child support collections to the mothers by ending the state and federal practice of retaining part of child support payments to reimburse taxpayers in the case of parents who have been on welfare. A second reform to child support policy would be to help states mount work programs for noncustodial fathers who owe child support so they have earnings with which to make their payments.⁶⁷

Another worthwhile improvement in the work support system would be to expand child care subsidies. The federal government expanded child care payments as part of welfare reform and then expanded the amount of available money several times after that. Unfortunately,

the money is still insufficient to help all eligible low-income mothers. Helping more low-income parents with their child care bill would increase their incentive to work, provide an income supplement, and reduce a serious inequity in current law that allows only some low-income working families to receive a child care subsidy while similar families receive no subsidy.

Yet another promising policy would be to give states additional federal dollars to subsidize jobs for low-income parents, both mothers and fathers. Congress included a provision in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, enacted in 2009 in response to the Great Recession, that gave states an additional \$5 billion for the TANF program. This money could be used for three purposes: to provide regular TANF cash benefits, to give one-time payments to families that needed immediate help, or to subsidize jobs. States took full advantage of the provision, allowing the creation of 260,000 jobs, most of them in the private sector.⁶⁸ Because of their experience using these extra funds to create jobs during the Great Recession, many states should now have the ability to set up such jobs and establish the administrative systems necessary to run them. The federal government should provide states with a sum of money, perhaps \$1 billion annually (and more during recessions), to create jobs in the private or government sectors for people who can't find work. Developing state expertise in subsidizing jobs would be especially appropriate if Congress strengthened the work requirements in the nation's food stamp and housing programs to extend the message that the able-bodied must work or prepare for work as a condition of receiving means-tested benefits.

Concluding Thoughts

The breakdown of the married-couple family has increased the nation's poverty rate, increased income inequality, and, through both of these mechanisms—as well as the depressing effect on child development associated with single parenting and father absence—increased spending on social programs. We have dug a very deep hole.

Many scholars have all but given up on the possibility that marriage can be restored to its former status as the central feature of American family life and the culturally accepted way to raise children.⁶⁹ Reversal of demographic trends that have been moving in the same direction for four decades and more seems unlikely (though not impossible). Thus we must review our policies on female-headed families and take steps to help them gain at least a modicum of financial security outside the welfare system.

However, based more on an appreciation for what we have lost than on an argument based on social science, I plan to continue searching for and supporting public spending on policies that have the potential to strengthen marriage, including community-based initiatives like those supported by President Bush that so far have been disappointing. In my view, the primary victims of the decline of the married-couple family are young men. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in the strongest possible language, emphasized this problem nearly a half-century ago with his famous (or infamous, depending on your politics) 1965 report on “the Negro Family.”⁷⁰ Autor and Wasserman have updated and greatly strengthened the Moynihan report's conclusion that black males are deeply affected by being reared without

fathers; their case is built on an original and creative interpretation of the social science evidence.⁷¹ I know of no better way to herald the current and future consequences of trying to rear a considerable portion of American men, especially minority men, in female-headed families than to end with the words Moynihan wrote in the Catholic journal *America* the same year his report on “the Negro Family” appeared:

From the wild Irish slums of the 19th century Eastern seaboard, to the riot-torn suburbs of Los Angeles, there is one

unmistakable lesson in American history: a community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectation about the future—that community asks for and gets chaos. Crime, violence, unrest, disorder—most particularly the furious, unrestrained lashing out at the whole social structure—that is not only to be expected; it is very near to inevitable. And it is richly deserved.⁷²

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