

Welfare Reform: Impact on Marriage, Abortion, Poverty, and Dependence

THE ISSUE

The rise in abortion and the collapse of marriage are intrinsically linked. Some 86 percent of abortions occur to non-married women. Some 35 percent of pregnancies among non-married women are ended by abortion. Among married women, the figure is 3 percent. An unborn child of an unmarried woman is 11 times more likely to have its life ended by abortion than is the child of a married woman.

Pro-marriage welfare reform policies and abortion reduction policies are synergistic because increased marriage inherently reduces abortion. What should be avoided are policies that seek to reduce abortion by restoring permissive welfare and increasing subsidies for single parenthood. Such policies are counterproductive and sure to backfire, resulting in less marriage and more abortion.

THE ROLE OF WELFARE REFORM

- President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty declaration was followed by decades of permissive welfare policies, higher benefits and spending, and a vast array of new welfare programs.
- The welfare reforms of the 1990s sought to reduce dependence and stop the debilitating rise of non-marital childbearing by emphasizing personal responsibility, prudent limits on benefits, and work requirements.
- These reforms halted the rapid collapse of marriage, stopped the rise in non-marital childbearing, increased work, slashed

poverty in single-parent families, shrank welfare dependence, and sharply reduced abortion. The pro-marriage, pro-work principles of welfare reform should be intensified and expanded.

THE IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM

- **Marriage.** For more than two decades before welfare reform, the percentage of children residing in married two-parent families fell steadily. In 1970, 85 percent of children lived in two-parent homes; by 1996, the number had fallen to 68 percent. Welfare reform was intended to stop this steady collapse of marriage by limiting the utility of government subsidies to single parenthood relative to marriage. This effort was remarkably successful. Immediately after reform, the decline in two-parent families halted abruptly. The married family rate has remained stable for nearly three decades. If the pre-reform trend in family disintegration had continued, an additional 9 million children would be in single-parent rather than married families today.
- **Abortion.** Both non-marital pregnancy and birth rates climbed in the decades before welfare reform. With reform, non-marital pregnancy rates fell and were one-third lower in 2022 than in 1992. By shrinking non-marital pregnancy, reform reduced both non-marital births and abortions together, resulting in at least 400,000 fewer abortions each year. Altogether, the social changes

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initiated and promoted by welfare reform have led to 9.8 million fewer abortions.

- **Poverty.** Before welfare reform, the poverty rate among single-parent families was relatively flat. Immediately after reform, poverty among these families began to decline sharply, falling from 33 percent in 1996 to 11 percent in 2020.
- **Dependence.** Before welfare reform, nearly one in seven children was receiving monthly cash welfare benefits. More than 90 percent of these recipient children were in single-parent families, and, on average, these families remained on the program for 13 years. After reform, caseloads plummeted. By 2019, only 3 percent of children were receiving traditional cash benefits, cutting the rate of dependence by nearly 80 percent.

WELFARE REFORM 2.0

Many now seek to overturn welfare reform, restoring work-free cash welfare for single parents. This reversal would destroy marriage and greatly increase demand for abortion. Policymakers should instead follow a two-track strategy that, in addition to limiting abortion directly, would:

- **Reduce marriage penalties that exist across the welfare state.** Under the current welfare system, if lower-income or working-class parents marry, government benefits will be sharply cut; total income for the family will fall. These penalties have made marriage economically irrational for millions of low-income and moderate-income families. Some 81 percent of the public believe the welfare system “should not penalize parents when they get married.” Reducing marriage
- penalties would strengthen marriage, shrink poverty, and greatly improve overall family well-being. Pro-marriage reform can be accomplished without added cost by curtailing existing waste, fraud, and excess benefits in the welfare system.
- **Expand and strengthen work requirements in traditional welfare programs.** Over 90 percent of Americans believe that “able-bodied adults who receive cash, food, housing, and medical assistance should be required to work or prepare for work as a condition of receiving those benefits.” Work requirements promote self-support and strengthen marriage. Yet most means-tested welfare programs still hand out benefits to millions of adults who are able to work but do not. Work requirements for able-bodied, non-elderly adults receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) should be expanded, and similar requirements should apply to able-bodied adults receiving food stamps. Work requirements in the Earned Income Tax Credit should be strengthened
- **Replace existing welfare programs with a transparent pro-work, pro-marriage system that ensures working families have incomes above poverty.** The various welfare programs should be simplified and restructured to ensure that working families with children do not face poverty. This can be accomplished by eliminating waste, fraud, and excess benefits and rechanneling funds into a system that truly incentivizes positive behavior and supports the well-being of the family. This will also make the actual value of benefits obvious and transparent to the public and recipients.