

## 23. Marriage Promotion

MARRIAGE is a fundamental social institution, deeply rooted in all societies, that has been tested and reaffirmed over thousands of years. The erosion of the institution of marriage over the past four decades has had large-scale negative effects on children and adults and lies at the heart of many social problems with which government is currently grappling. The beneficial effects of marriage, both for individuals and for society, are beyond reasonable dispute. There is a broad and growing consensus that government policy should promote rather than discourage healthy marriage.

by Robert Rector

### Recommendations

#### 1. Expand President George W. Bush's Healthy Marriage Initiative.

Despite the fact that the landmark 1996 welfare reform legislation set forth clear goals to increase the number of two-parent married families and reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing, little has been done to promote and encourage healthy marriage. Out of more than \$100 billion available to states over the past seven years through the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, only 0.02 percent (\$20 million) has been spent promoting healthy marriage. President Bush's Healthy Marriage Initiative, designed to implement welfare reform's original goal of strengthening marriage, would spend one cent to promote healthy marriage for every \$7 spent subsidizing single parents. This program was enacted in February 2006.

The Healthy Marriage Initiative will provide individuals and couples with information on the value of marriage to men, women, and children; teach conflict resolution skills that will increase marital happiness and stability; and experiment in reducing the financial penalties against marriage among welfare programs. All participation in the program would be voluntary. The primary focus of these marriage programs would be preventative, not reparative. They would seek to prevent the isolation and poverty of welfare mothers by intervening at an early point before a pattern of broken relationships and welfare dependence had emerged. By fostering better life decisions and stronger relationship skills, marriage programs can increase child

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well-being and adult happiness and reduce child poverty and welfare dependence. Congress should promote healthy marriage within other social service programs that address problems related to the collapse of marriage, such as domestic violence programs within the Department of Justice.

**2. Reduce penalties for married couples under government means-tested welfare programs.** All government means-tested programs (such as the welfare system) penalize marriage financially. This lamentable public policy must be reversed. While it is difficult to eliminate the anti-marriage bias fully in programs such as the welfare system, it is possible to reduce it. The most effective way to do so would be to increase the value of the Earned Income Tax Credit for married couples with children.

## Facts and Figures

- Nearly one-third of all American children are born out of wedlock, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control. A child is born to an unmarried parent every 35 seconds in the United States.
- Each year, more than 1 million American children suffer the divorce of their parents. More than half of the nation's children will spend all or part of their childhood in never-formed or broken families.
- Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth reflect that a child raised by a never-married mother is seven times more likely to live in poverty than a child raised by both biological parents in an intact marriage. Overall, some 80 percent of long-term child poverty in the United States is found among children from broken or never-formed families.
- Compared with their peers in intact families, reports the Alan Guttmacher Institute, children raised in single-parent homes are more likely to become involved in crime, to have emotional and behavioral problems, to fail in school, to abuse drugs, and to end up on welfare as adults.
- Mothers who are married are 50 percent less likely to suffer from domestic violence than are those who have never been married.
- The U.S. welfare system comprises more than 70 means-tested aid programs that provide cash, food, housing, medical care, and social services to low-income persons through programs such as TANF, food stamps, Medicaid, public housing, and the Earned Income Tax Credit.

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■ Each year, more than \$200 billion flows through these 70 programs to reach families with children. More than three-quarters of that aid—around \$150 billion annually—goes to single-parent families. Thus, the welfare system exists largely to subsidize single parenthood.

■ Because of the inherent design of means-tested programs, benefits are reduced as non-welfare income rises. Thus, under any means-tested system, a mother will receive greater welfare benefits if she remains single than she will if she marries a working husband who earns an income.

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*This chapter is available at [issues2006.org/marriage](http://issues2006.org/marriage).*

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### Additional Reading

Robert E. Rector, Patrick F. Fagan, and Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D., “Marriage: Still the Safest Place for Women and Children,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1732, March 9, 2004, at [www.heritage.org/Research/Family/bg1732.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/bg1732.cfm).

Patrick F. Fagan and Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D., “Marriage: The Safest Place for Women and Children,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1535, April 10, 2002, at [www.heritage.org/Research/Family/BG1535.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/BG1535.cfm).

Patrick F. Fagan, Robert E. Rector, Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D., and America Peterson, *The Positive Effects of Marriage: A Book of Charts* (Washington: The Heritage Foundation, April 2002), at [www.heritage.org/Research/Features/Marriage/index.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Features/Marriage/index.cfm).

Robert Rector and Patrick Fagan, “How Welfare Harms Kids,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1084, June 5, 1996, at [www.heritage.org/Research/Welfare/bg1084.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Welfare/bg1084.cfm).