

## 2. Marriage and the Family

THE basic unit of society is the family, and the cornerstone of the family is marriage, the union of one man and one woman. Deeply rooted in all societies, marriage is a fundamental social institution that has been tested and reaffirmed over thousands of years. Children especially need marriage. The family yields significant “social capital” and other benefits to society, and children in an intact family have the most promising life prospects. Parents have the right and responsibility to oversee the education and upbringing of their children.

by *Patrick F. Fagan*

### Notes

### Recommendations

**1. Defend and strengthen marriage and the family in federal and state law and policies.** As an institution, marriage is the foundation of a harmonious and enriching family life and the basic building block of our society. It is not a casual relationship, but one that carries many obligations and benefits affecting husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, and thus every individual in society. All household forms other than the intact family—a man and woman who are married and raising their biological children—increase children’s risk of poor development and achievement, which in turn increases the likelihood that they will need costly social services.

**2. Ease economic and other burdens on families.** Federal and state governments should encourage marriage as the foundation of family life. Government benefits should not be distributed in ways that will create a disincentive to marry or that would effectively establish institutions parallel to marriage. Children fare best and have the most promising life prospects when they are raised in intact families. Data from alternate household forms over the past several decades have reaffirmed that the intact family remains the best environment for children. The law has an interest in setting marriage apart from all other household forms. These other forms have not been able to guarantee the same level of security for the welfare of the next generation, nor do they give children the institution they need: their married parents.

**3. Encourage healthy marriages through welfare reform and other social service programs.** Family breakdown is closely associated with child poverty. Efforts to strengthen the family and discourage unwed childbearing have yielded impressive results since the 1996 reforms, and the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative—included in the recent welfare reauthorization—is a good next step. Promoting marriage has the potential to significantly decrease poverty and dependence, increase child well-being and adult happiness, and provide the safest environment for women and children.

**4. Reserve major decisions on marriage to legislatures, not judges.** Marriage is not merely a private contract or personal consensual relationship, but a matter of common interest and public concern. It is a fundamental and universal institution whereby a man and woman are joined together for the primary purpose of forming and maintaining a family. Individual marriages are recognized by the state, but the institution of marriage itself was not created—and thus cannot be redefined—by government.

**5. Defer to parental rights regarding the education and welfare of minor children.** Federal and state government policy should not overturn the rights of parents. Policies should provide for ultimate parental decision-making, particularly when it regards the health and welfare of children.

## Facts and Figures

■ Today, nearly one-third of all American children are born outside marriage. That translates to one out-of-wedlock birth every 35 seconds. Of those born within marriage, a great many will experience their parents' divorce before they reach age 18. More than half of the nation's children will spend all or part of their childhood in never-formed or broken families.

■ In 1960, just 5.3 percent of children were born outside marriage, compared with 35.7 percent in 2004.

■ In 2000, federal and state governments spent more than \$150 billion each year subsidizing single-parent families. The number has risen steadily since then.

■ According to the Fragile Families Survey, the overwhelming majority of children born out of wedlock have parents who are living together or who are seeing each other on a regular basis; they are not born to single mothers with absentee fathers. Moreover, a majority of unwed mothers say they are interested in marrying the father and believe they have a 50 percent chance of doing so, and an even greater percentage of these fathers believe their chances to be the same.

## Notes

- The collapse of marriage is the principal cause of child poverty in the United States. A child raised by a never-married mother is seven times more likely to live in poverty than a child raised by his 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.
- Married people are more than twice as likely to be happy as divorced or never-married individuals.
- Research indicates that marriage actually protects women from depression rather than contributing to it as some have suggested. Even when one controls for the hypothesis that those who are inclined to be happy are those who marry, it is shown that marriage leads to an increase in well-being for both young men and women and that this difference only increases with age. After controlling for race, education, family structure, income, and living arrangements, married people—with or without children, male or female—are less depressed and emotionally healthier than singles.
- Married families have higher incomes. The economic benefits of marriage are not limited to the middle class; some 70 percent of never-married mothers would be able to escape poverty if they were married to the fathers of their children.
- Children in intact families are less likely to be depressed, to have difficulty in school, to have behavior problems, or to use marijuana.
- Married mothers are half as likely to be victims of domestic violence. Married women with children are far less likely to suffer from violent crime in general or at the hands of intimate acquaintances or strangers. Mothers who have never married—including those who are single and living either alone or with a boyfriend and those who are cohabiting with their child's father—are more than twice as likely to be victims of violent crime than are mothers who have ever married.
- Serious child abuse is less likely in married families. Children of divorced or never-married mothers are six to 30 times more likely to suffer from serious child abuse than are children raised by both biological parents in marriage.

## Notes

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*This chapter can be read online at [issues2006.org/family](http://issues2006.org/family).*

## 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).

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Patrick F. Fagan, Robert E. Rector, and Lauren R. Noyes, "Why Congress Should Ignore Radical Feminist Opposition to Marriage," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1662, June 16, 2003, at [www.heritage.org/Research/Family/bg1662.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/bg1662.cfm).

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lies Survey," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1560, June 13, 2002, at [www.heritage.org/Research/Family/bg1560.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/bg1560.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, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, April 2002), at [www.heritage.org/Research/Features/Marriage/index.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Features/Marriage/index.cfm).

Patrick F. Fagan, "Encouraging Marriage and Discouraging Divorce," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1421, March 26, 2001, at [www.heritage.org/Research/Family/BG1421.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/BG1421.cfm).

Patrick F. Fagan, Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D., and Jonathan Butcher, *The Map of the Family* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2000), at [www.heritage.org/Research/Family/upload/76145\\_1.pdf](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/upload/76145_1.pdf).