

A Road Map for Conservative, Pro-Family Welfare Reform

Robert Rector, Jamie Bryan Hall, and Leslie Ford

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Policymakers should not respond to the *Dobbs* decision by seeking to restore aspects of the pre-reform welfare system that heavily subsidized single parenthood.

Instead, reforms should follow the 1996 welfare reform, which halted the decline of marriage, decreased abortions, increased work, and reduced child poverty.

Programs intended to support mothers, children, and families should eliminate marriage penalties, improve work incentives, reduce fraud, and pay for real outcomes.

The Supreme Court's landmark *Dobbs* decision¹ has renewed interest in policies intended to support mothers, children, and families. This development opens the door for conservatives to advance a pro-family safety net that builds on the success of the 1996 reform. Not since then have conservatives had a better opportunity to promote marriage, reward work, and ultimately support the long-term well-being of lower-income families.²

Before the 1996 welfare reform, single parents and their children faced long-term poverty.³ Families remained welfare dependent for years, and nearly nine in 10 families on welfare were not employed.⁴ The longer they remained dependent on government welfare, the worse were the educational outcomes their children faced.⁵

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5298>

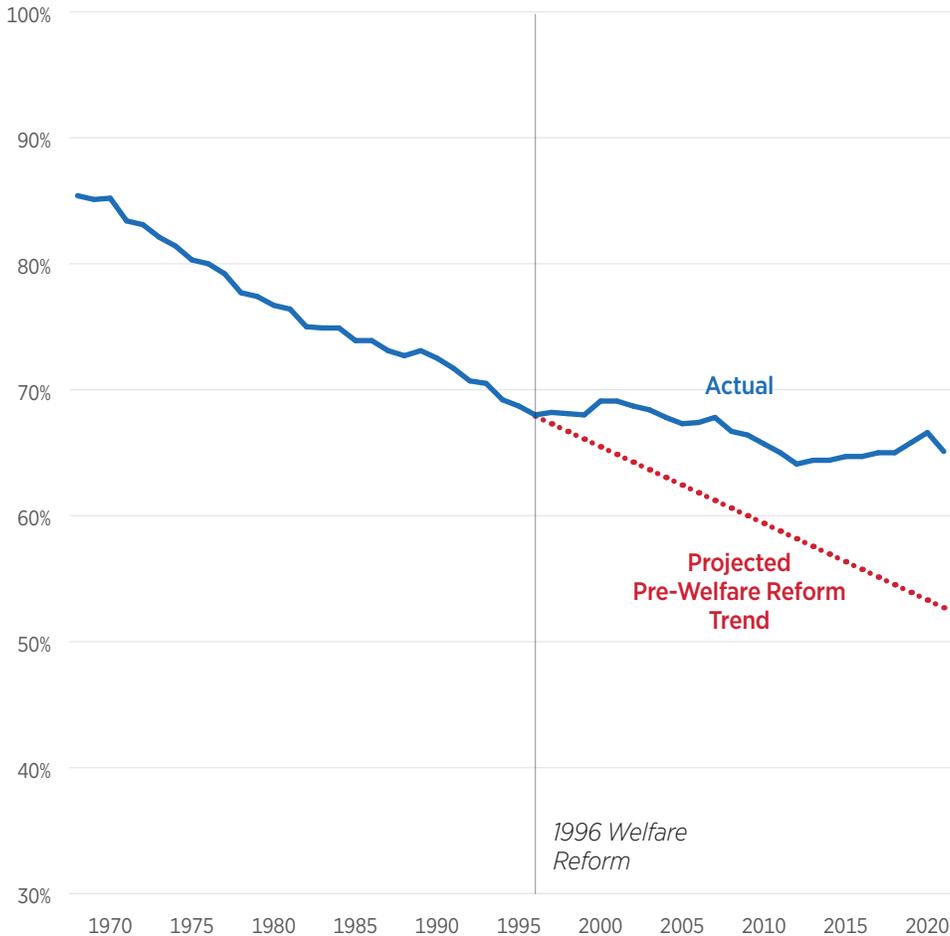
The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

CHART 1

Welfare Reform Halted the Rapid Decline of Married Two-Parent Families

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN IN TWO-PARENT FAMILIES



SOURCE: Heritage Foundation calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau data.

IB5298 heritage.org

Welfare Reform Halted the Collapse of Two-Parent Families

Before welfare reform, family structure was rapidly disintegrating. In 1970, 85 percent of children resided in married two-parent families; by 1996, the number had fallen to 68 percent.⁶ However, as Chart 1 shows, the enactment of welfare reform in 1996 abruptly halted the relentless collapse of two-parent families. The long-term trend line kinked sharply, and for a quarter-century, family structure has been largely stable.

The dotted line on the chart shows the percentage of children who would have lived in married two-parent families if the alarming trend in family deterioration before welfare reform had persisted. If family structure had continued to collapse at the pre-reform rate, only 53 percent of children would currently reside in married two-parent families; an additional 9 million children would now reside in single-parent homes. Thus, if the negative trend had not sharply shifted with welfare reform, more than one-fifth of the children now living in two-parent homes would instead live in single-parent or no-parent families.

Understanding the Link between Abortion and Welfare

The 1996 welfare reform, with its emphasis on personal responsibility and reducing unnecessary dependence, not only halted the decline of marriage, increased work, and reduced child poverty; it also substantially reduced the number of abortions.

Some 85 percent of abortions are performed on non-married women. Following *Roe v. Wade*,⁷ pregnancies among non-married women skyrocketed from 947,000 in 1973 to 2.44 million in 1991. Non-marital abortions more than doubled from 541,000 to 1.2 million.⁸

But with the onset of welfare reform in the early 1990s, this rapid increase in non-marital pregnancy came to an abrupt halt, and the number of abortions to non-married women declined steadily.

In contrast to the pre-reform era, the number of non-marital pregnancies since welfare reform has remained almost completely flat for nearly three decades and is slightly lower today than at the onset of reform. Since between 30 percent and 50 percent of non-marital pregnancies are terminated by abortion, the long-term halt in the dramatic rise of non-marital pregnancy has almost certainly resulted in millions fewer abortions.

Roe v. Wade did not realize its promise of reducing child poverty, including among African Americans. Instead, it was welfare reform that was dramatically successful in reducing child poverty—which has been cut in half—and strengthening marriage.⁹

A Pro-Family Safety-Net Agenda

Policymakers should not respond to the *Dobbs* decision by seeking to restore aspects of the pre-reform welfare system that heavily subsidized and therefore promoted single parenthood. This approach would not only devastate families, but also would likely increase abortion in the long term through its negative effects on non-marital pregnancy and family formation.

Today, policymakers have the opportunity to pick up where the 1996 reforms left off. A pro-family policy agenda should be guided by the following policies to improve the well-being of families through marriage, work, and accountability in the safety net.

- **Strengthen marriage by eliminating marriage penalties within the welfare state.** A healthy marriage is fundamental to the well-being of the family; couples should be rewarded—not penalized—when they commit to raise their children together. But nearly all welfare programs have significant marriage penalties.

The anti-marriage bias of the welfare state has played a large role in undermining the married family. When the War on Poverty started in 1964, only 7 percent of children were born to single mothers. That’s now 40 percent.¹⁰

This is a social tragedy. Children raised in the context of marriage have substantially better life outcomes, including higher education attainment levels and better emotional health.¹¹ When fathers are absent, the consequences are dire: During their teen years, boys are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior, and girls are seven to eight times more likely to experience a teenage pregnancy.¹²

The 1996 welfare reforms greatly slowed the steady collapse of two-parent families (which had been ongoing for several decades), and teen pregnancy and abortion rates fell sharply.¹³ Policymakers who want to support healthy marriage should take the next step and eliminate the marriage penalties across the welfare system.

Policymakers should also recognize that one in four children today is born to parents who are cohabiting but not married.¹⁴ Steps should be taken to strengthen these nascent families. In addition to removing the significant marriage penalties facing these low-income parents, sound information should be provided to them on the value of marriage for adults and children and the techniques needed to build durable relationships.

- **Reward work by strengthening work requirements and improving work incentives.** Before the 1996 welfare reform, the federal government distributed cash aid without conditions to support vulnerable

mothers and their children. When the landmark 1996 welfare reform bill connected welfare to work, overall well-being improved. Government dependence declined for the first time in a half-century.¹⁵ Employment of never-married mothers with a high school degree or less rose from 51 percent in 1992 to 76 percent within eight years.¹⁶ Child poverty, which had been static for decades, fell sharply by almost 10 percentage points, and the poverty rate among single-parent families dropped by nearly 60 percent.¹⁷ We should build on this success by extending requirements for work-capable adults to work or prepare for work as a condition of receiving aid across the welfare system.

Policymakers should recognize that in addition to raising income, work fulfills a basic human need. A strong sense of competence, industry, or mastery—usually achieved through work—is essential to human well-being. This need is identified by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt as “effectance” and classified as a higher order need in Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.¹⁸

This understanding is rooted in Aristotle’s *Ethics*: “[I]n his activity the maker is, in a sense, the work produced. He therefore loves his work, because he loves existence.”¹⁹ Founding Father Benjamin Franklin summarized this basic need succinctly: “It is the working man who is the happy man. It is the idle man who is the miserable man.”

This need is also a common religious theme, as seen in the Bible: “[B]ut if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”²⁰ As John Paul II wrote, “Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes ‘more a human being.’”²¹

When families have at least one working parent, the positive impacts go beyond economic outcomes. When unemployment lasts more than six months, it is also associated with decreased well-being, even measurably affecting mortality, reducing life expectancy by as much as a year and a half.²² When mothers who were formerly dependent on welfare find employment, we see increased physical health as well as emotional and psychological well-being.²³ The health and behavioral outcomes for their children are even better.²⁴

- **Reduce fraud.** Without real accountability in our safety net, there is no way to ensure that the \$1.2 trillion spent on means-tested welfare each year will meet the needs of the poor efficiently and effectively. In 2019—before COVID policies weakened oversight even more—at least one-quarter of the \$59 billion in annual Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) spending was improperly paid.²⁵ Other programs such as food stamps have similar high error and fraud rates but lack the rigorous audits performed on the EITC to measure them. Fraud should be dramatically reduced, and this can be done by removing program loopholes and verifying eligibility information with better data.
- **Pay for outcomes.** Many federal social programs spend billions to reduce negative behaviors and empower the vulnerable. But with rare exceptions, these programs fail to prove that they make a difference for at-risk Americans. It is time to change how these programs are funded. Currently, these programs simply pay third-party providers for services. For instance, there are 43 employment and training programs that spent \$18.9 billion in 2019 intending to help beneficiaries build skills and identify and obtain employment.²⁶ However, these programs have not demonstrated successful outcomes for recipients.²⁷ Instead of using ineffective payment models, federal social programs should reward providers for achieving verifiable outcomes that change lives for the better. To improve the lives of the poor, programs should be restructured to fund positive outcomes achieved rather than merely to fund services provided.²⁸

Commonsense program integrity measures, including reducing fraud and paying providers for achieving verified outcomes such as reducing drug abuse or prison recidivism among program participants, are necessary to ensure that current funding truly helps the poor.²⁹

Conclusion

The *Dobbs* case reinforces the importance of a sound and effective safety net. Proposals intended to support mothers, children, and families should not return to the pre-reform welfare model. Instead, policymakers should seize the opportunity to fix the distortions in the safety net that remain. The reforms listed above would both convert the current failed system into a helpful support for mothers, fathers, and children and significantly reduce abortion rates by strengthening marriage.

Robert Rector is Senior Research Fellow in the Center for Health and Welfare Policy at The Heritage Foundation. **Jamie Bryan Hall** is Research Fellow for Quantitative Analysis in the Center for Health and Welfare Policy. **Leslie Ford** is a Visiting Fellow in the Center for Health and Welfare Policy.

Endnotes

1. *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, 597 U.S. ____ (2022), https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392_6j37.pdf (accessed December 6, 2022).
2. The Heritage Foundation, "Welfare Reform (Part 1): How We Got Here," *Heritage Explains*, August 8, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/welfare/heritage-explains/welfare-reform-part-1>, and "Welfare Reform (Part 2): Where We Stand," *Heritage Explains*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/welfare/heritage-explains/welfare-reform-part-2>.
3. Committee Print, *1996 Green Book: Background Material and Data on Programs Within the Jurisdiction of the Committee on Ways and Means*, Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives, 104th Cong., 2nd Sess., November 4, 1996, Section 8, "Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Related Programs (Title IV-A)," pp. 383–528, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CPRT-104WPRT23609/pdf/GPO-CPRT-104WPRT23609-2-8.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2022).
4. *Ibid.*
5. Renata Forste and Marta Tienda, "Race and Ethnic Variation in the Schooling Consequences of Female Adolescent Sexual Activity," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (March 1992), pp. 12–30, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4862&context=facpub> (accessed December 6, 2022); M. Anne Hill and June O'Neill, "Family Endowments and the Achievement of Young Children with Special Reference to the Underclass," *The Journal of Human Resources*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Fall 1994), pp. 1064–1100, <https://doi.org/10.2307/146134> (accessed December 6, 2022); Inho Ku and Robert Plotnick, "Do Children from Welfare Families Obtain Less Education?" *Demography*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2003), pp. 151–170, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dem.2003.0005> (accessed December 6, 2022).
6. Based on Census surveys of family living arrangements. The primary Census data are presented in Table CH-1, "Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years Old: 1960 to Present," in U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Arrangements of Children," page last revised November 10, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/children.html> (accessed December 7, 2022). However, the Census changed the CH-1 data series over time. Data before 2007 include only married two-parent families; the data after 2007 include families with two non-married, cohabiting biological parents in the count of married families. Some 4.7 percent of children currently reside in these cohabiting families with two biological parents. For consistency over time, cohabiting families have been excluded from the count of married two-parent families in the chart in this paper. Including those families as married would probably improve the post-reform trend line.
7. *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973), <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/l1/usrep/usrep410/usrep410113/usrep410113.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2022).
8. Robert Rector, "The Impact of Welfare Reform and Work-based Welfare on Marriage, Poverty, and Abortion," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder*, forthcoming.
9. Jamie Bryan Hall, "Child Poverty Has Been Cut in Half Since 1996 Welfare Reform," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3964, March 14, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/welfare/report/child-poverty-has-been-cut-half-1996-welfare-reform>.
10. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "FastStats: Unmarried Childbearing," page last reviewed May 16, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/unmarried-childbearing.htm> (accessed December 6, 2022).
11. William H. Jaynes, "A Meta-Analysis: The Relationship Between Father Involvement and Student Academic Achievement," *Urban Education*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (June 2015), pp. 387–423, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085914525789> (accessed December 6, 2022); Eirini Flouri and Ann Buchanan, "The Role of Father Involvement in Children's Later Mental Health," *Journal of Adolescence*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (February 2003), pp. 63–78, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0140197102001161> (accessed December 6, 2022). (No longer published by Elsevier.)
12. Jamie R. Yoder, Daniel Brisson, and Amy Lopez, "Moving Beyond Fatherhood Involvement: The Association Between Father-Child Relationship Quality and Youth Delinquency Trajectories," *Family Relations*, Vol. 65, Issue 3 (July 29, 2016), pp. 462–476, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12197> (accessed December 6, 2022); Colin Allen, "Absentee Fathers and Teen Pregnancy," *Psychology Today*, May 1, 2003, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/200305/absentee-fathers-and-teen-pregnancy> (accessed December 6, 2022).
13. Isaac Maddow-Zimet and Kathryn Kost, "Pregnancies, Births and Abortions in the United States, 1973–2017: National and State Trends by Age," Guttmacher Institute *Report*, March 2021, <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/pregnancies-births-abortions-in-united-states-1973-2017#> (accessed December 6, 2022).
14. At the present time, as many as half of these cohabiting parent couples will marry within five years of the child's birth; the quality and stability of these post-birth marriages will be equivalent to the quality and stability of most other marriages in society. See Kelly Musick and Katherine Michelmore, "Change in the Stability of Marital and Cohabiting Unions After Birth of a Child," *Demography*, Vol. 52, No. 5 (October 2015), pp. 1463–1485, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43697532?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents (accessed December 6, 2022). The pro-marriage reforms described in the text would be likely to increase the prevalence and stability of marriage among cohabiting parents while improving the quality of those relationships.
15. Executive Office of the President, Council of Economic Advisers, *Expanding Work Requirements in Non-Cash Welfare Programs*, July 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Expanding-Work-Requirements-in-Non-Cash-Welfare-Programs.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2022).

16. Danilo Trisi, "The Myth That Single Mothers Don't Work," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities Off the Charts Blog, October 9, 2012, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/the-myth-that-single-mothers-dont-work> (accessed December 6, 2022).
17. Scott Winship, "Poverty After Welfare Reform," Manhattan Institute *Report*, August 2016, <https://media4.manhattan-institute.org/sites/default/files/R-SW-0816.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2022).
18. Jonathan Haidt, "Lovin' Your Work," *The Guardian*, August 18, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2006/aug/19/careers.work3> (accessed December 6, 2022); A. H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review*, Vol. 50, No 4 (1943), pp. 370–396, <https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm> (accessed December 6, 2022).
19. Book IX, ch. 7, sec. 1168a, ll. 7–9, in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), p. 259, [https://isidore.co/CalibreLibrary/Aristotle/Nicomachean%20Ethics%20\(8468\)/Nicomachean%20Ethics%20-%20Aristotle.pdf](https://isidore.co/CalibreLibrary/Aristotle/Nicomachean%20Ethics%20(8468)/Nicomachean%20Ethics%20-%20Aristotle.pdf) (accessed December 8, 2022).
20. 1 Timothy 5:8 (New King James Version).
21. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens: On Human Work*, September 14, 1981, <https://www.cctwincities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Laborem-Exercens-%C3%A2%E2%82%AC%C5%93On-Human-Work%C3%A2%E2%82%AC%C2%9D.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2022).
22. Austin Nichols, Josh Mitchell, and Stephan Lindner, "Consequences of Long-Term Unemployment," Urban Institute, July 2013, https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/23921/412887-Consequences-of-Long-Term-Unemployment.PDF?source=post_page (accessed December 6, 2022); Sarah A. Burgard, Jennie E. Brand, and James S. House, "Toward a Better Estimation of the Effect of Job Loss on Health," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (December 2007), pp. 369–384, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27638722> (accessed December 6, 2022).
23. Rebekah Levine Coley, Brenda J. Lohman, Elizabeth Votruba-Drzal, Laura D. Pittman, and P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, "Maternal Functioning, Time, and Money: The World of Work and Welfare," *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (June 2007), pp. 721–741, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1948836/> (accessed December 6, 2022); Kristen Shook Slack, Katherine Magnuson, and Lawrence N. Berger, "How Are Children and Families Faring a Decade After Welfare Reform? Evidence from Five Non-Experimental Panel Studies," *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (June 2007), pp. 693–697, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4260333/> (accessed December 6, 2022).
24. Cynthia Osborne and Jean Knab, "Work, Welfare, and Young Children's Health and Behavior in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study," *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (June 2007), pp. 762–781, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/222669522_Work_welfare_and_young_childrens_health_and_behavior_in_the_Fragile_Families_and_Child_Wellbeing_Study (accessed December 6, 2022).
25. According to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, "improper payments are payments that did not meet statutory, regulatory, administrative, or other legally applicable requirements and may be overpayments or underpayments." See Fact Sheet, "2020 Estimated Improper Payment Rates for Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) Programs," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, November 16, 2020, <https://www.cms.gov/newsroom/fact-sheets/2020-estimated-improper-payment-rates-centers-medicare-medicaid-services-cms-programs> (accessed December 6, 2022). Nearly all improper EITC payments are overpayments. For a detailed discussion of erroneous and fraudulent EITC claims, see Robert Rector and Jamie Bryan Hall, "Reforming the Earned Income Tax Credit and Additional Child Tax Credit to End Waste, Fraud, and Abuse and Strengthen Marriage," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3162, November 16, 2016, <https://www.heritage.org/welfare/report/reforming-the-earned-income-tax-credit-and-additional-child-tax-credit-end-waste>.
26. For a full list of these 43 programs and their respective agencies, see Figure 2, "Federally Funded Employment and Training Programs, by Agency, Fiscal Year 2017," in U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Employment and Training Programs: Department of Labor Should Assess Efforts to Coordinate Services Across Programs*, GAO-19-200, March 2019, p. 11, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/698080.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2022). See also Executive Office of the President, Council of Economic Advisers, *Government Employment and Training Programs: Assessing the Evidence on Their Performance*, June 2019, p. 1, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Government-Employment-and-Training-Programs.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2022).
27. See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 9 *et seq.*
28. Leslie Ford and Robert Rector, "Pay-for-Outcomes: Transforming Federal Social Programs to Expand Individual Well-Being," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3550, November 5, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/welfare/report/pay-outcomes-transforming-federal-social-programs-expand-individual-well-being>.
29. Leslie Ford, "Safety-Net Reform: How State Policymakers Can Lead," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3619, May 10, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/welfare/report/safety-net-reform-how-state-policymakers-can-lead>; Rector and Hall, "Reforming the Earned Income Tax Credit and Additional Child Tax Credit to End Waste, Fraud, and Abuse and Strengthen Marriage."