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PROMOTING MARRIAGE AS WELFARE POLICY: LOOKING AT A PUBLIC ROLE IN PRIVATE LIVES

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OVERVIEW—*This paper discusses the interest in and politics surrounding government's using welfare reform legislation to carve out a stronger role in promoting marriage. It examines trends in family formation, their impact on society, and the effect of single parenting, divorce, and stepparenting on child well-being. The paper also looks at the treatment of marriage in current government programs, new state activities to promote marriage, proposals for a stronger government role, and marriage experts' expectations for the success of marriage education programs.*

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PROMOTING MARRIAGE AS WELFARE POLICY: LOOKING AT A PUBLIC ROLE IN PRIVATE LIVES

American society is struggling with the fallout from decades of change in traditional family structure. In 1970, the divorce rate was less than one-third, 13 percent of children lived in single-parent families, and 11 percent of all births were nonmarital. Today, about 50 percent of marriages are expected to dissolve, half of all children can expect to live some time with a single parent, and 33 percent of all births are to unmarried women. Marriage as a permanent arrangement is no longer widely presumed, nor is it the only culturally accepted arrangement in which to raise children. The public consequences of this shift go far beyond societal upheaval. Nearly 40 percent of single-parent families live below the poverty line, and the economic resources devoted to improving their situation are substantial. Government spends over \$20 billion a year in cash welfare and over \$100 billion in other income support programs (for example, food stamps, housing, and energy aid, and job training)—a large portion of which assists single-parent families. And child poverty carries considerable social costs. Poor children experience school failure, early parenthood, delinquency, and joblessness at rates significantly higher than their more economically advantaged peers.

Since the 1980s, federal welfare policy has focused on lowering welfare dependence by raising income—through job training, work mandates, hikes in the minimum wage and the Earned Income Tax Credit, and more subsidized child care. In 1996, Congress began to emphasize another way to reduce the welfare rolls—marriage. Why promote an institution with such a high failure rate? The math alone offered a strong argument for government entry in the personal arena of family formation. Less than 10 percent of children in married-couple families are poor. Moreover, research on how single parenting and family breakup affects children suggests a larger societal interest in having children's parents live together. On average, children raised in single-parent families (as well as those in stepparent families) are found to have higher social, academic, behavioral, and delinquency problems than children raised by both biological parents.

Three out of four stated goals of the 1996 welfare reform law (the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act, or PRWORA) speak directly to family formation. States are called on to reduce nonmarital pregnancies, use marriage as one way to end welfare dependence, and encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. However, the law sets no requirements and offers no guidance on how states should promote marriage.

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Discussions about the law's 2002 reauthorization delve more deeply into this question of how to accomplish the goal. Ideas being floated range from identifying and removing all marriage penalties in current laws to putting married couples first in line to receive limited cash aid to something more provocative—funding marriage education programs under the premise that, given the proper training, people can have happy and stable marriages.

Many believe that marriage education as social policy is the mark of a psychologically evolved society—one that recognizes that success in relationships, as well as in the workplace, requires skills. A handful of states are already funding these programs. But there is concern that other policies intended to promote marriage may cross the line into coercion, setting a climate where couples unfit for each other marry because the public penalties for staying single are too high. Many also worry that marriage promotion policies would set a dangerous precedent for government intrusion into private lives, as well as breed intolerance for other family forms.

FAMILY FORMATION TRENDS

Marriage is still the most popular living arrangement for adults; about 90 percent of all people marry. Overall, however, Americans today are less likely to marry, less likely to report that they are happily married, and more likely to divorce than in previous decades.¹ Between 1970 and 2000, the proportion of married adults dropped about 12 percentage points. Two trends are driving the marriage decline: more adults are choosing to live alone, up from 17 percent in 1970 to 26 percent in 2000, and more couples are cohabiting, a phenomenon that has increased by more than 70 percent over the past decade.²

Cohabitation

Cohabitation has been one of the most striking changes in family formation over the past few decades, both in the United States and in other industrialized countries. According to the 2000 census, about 11 million people live with an unmarried partner in America; roughly 8 million of them live with a different-sex partner. Today, among unmarried adults in their prime marriage years (ages 25 to 29), about 25 percent are cohabiting,³ and most couples who marry today have first lived with each other (53 percent of women's first marriages are preceded by cohabitation).⁴

Research suggests that this living arrangement is largely transitional. Within five years of living together, about 55 percent of different-sex cohabitators get married and 40 percent break up. The rest stay together for more than five years.⁵ Many of these couples are parenting. In 2000, an estimated 40 percent of unmarried partner households included children under age 18.⁶

TABLE 1
Marital Status of White, Black, Hispanic, & Total Adult Population 1970 and 2000
(in percent)

	1970	2000
All Adults		
Married*	68	56
Divorced	3	10
Never Married	16	24
White Adults		
Married*	70	59
Divorced	3	10
Never Married	16	21
Black Adults		
Married*	53	35
Divorced	4	12
Never Married	21	39
Hispanic Adults		
Married*	n/a	53
Divorced	n/a	8
Never Married	n/a	28

* Represents married with spouse present; excludes individuals who are married with spouse absent, widowed, or separated.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *America's Families and Living Arrangements, Detailed Table A1, "Marital Status of People 15 and over by Age, Sex, Personal Earnings, Race, and Hispanic Origin"*; accessed February 2, 2002, at <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/p20-537/2000/tabA1.pdf>. The data presented here are for ages 18 and over.

Divorce

If the divorce rates of the 1990s continue, about 50 percent of marriages started today are projected to end in divorce or permanent separation.⁷ Between 1960 and 1998, the divorce rate more than doubled, peaking in 1980, and has since stabilized. In 1998, nearly 20 out of every 1,000 adults (ages 15 and older) were divorced.⁸

Most divorces, about 60 percent, involve children. Most divorced people (60 percent) remarry, and most of their remarriages (about 60 percent) end in divorce. Divorce rates have varied among different population groups, being higher for blacks than for whites, higher for couples with less income than for those with more income, and higher in the Bible Belt states (for example, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Tennessee) than in the Midwest and the East. However, the gap between blacks and whites has been closing, largely because fewer blacks are marrying.

Children and Family Formation

There are far more varieties of households raising children today than in previous decades. Today, in addition to the approximately half of all children expected to spend some time in a single-parent household, half are expected to spend some time in a stepfamily. As mentioned above, more children are also living with cohabiting couples. While the Census Bureau officially captures them as children in single-parent households, in 1996 about 3.3 million, or 5 percent, of all children were living with cohabiting couples.⁹ Many single women who bear children are also cohabiting; about 41 percent of births to unmarried women are infants born to cohabiting couples.¹⁰ (See Figure 1, page 5, for a breakdown of the percentage of children under age 18 living in various family arrangements in 1996.)

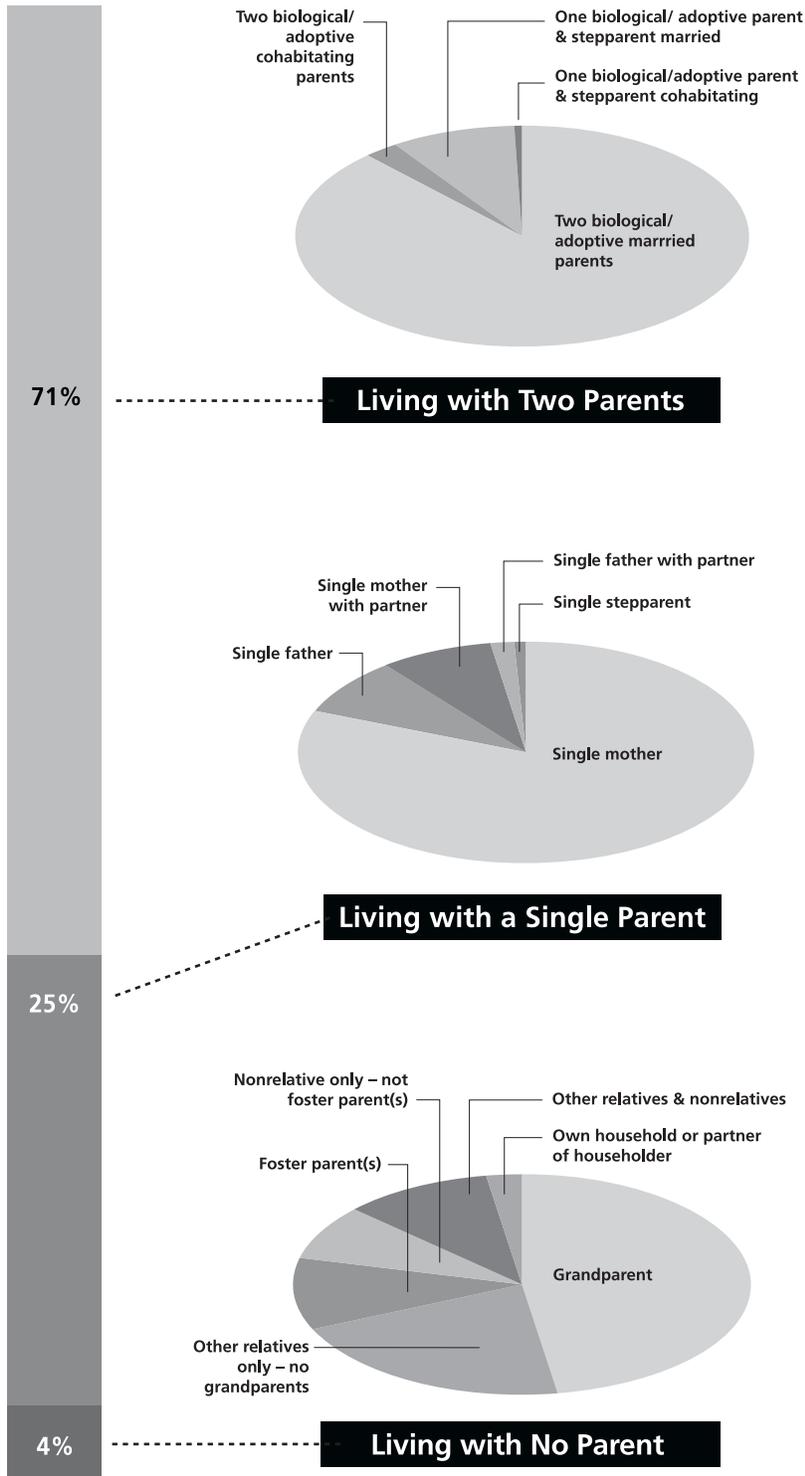
IMPACT OF FAMILY FORMATION ON ADULT AND CHILD WELL-BEING

For adults, research suggests that most fare better—both emotionally and financially—when married than when single. Married people are wealthier, report better health, and are found to have more (and, on average, better-quality) sex than single people.¹¹

On strictly economic terms, there is no question that children raised in two-parent families, including stepfamilies, fare better than children raised by single parents. As shown in Figure 2, in 1999, only 8 percent of children in married-couple families were living in poverty, compared with 42 percent of those in female-headed households (85 percent of all single parents are mothers).¹² Never-married mothers are nearly twice as likely to be poor than are divorced mothers (in 1998 poverty rates in these two groups were 51 percent and 28 percent, respectively).¹³

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FIGURE 1
Percentage of Children under Age 18 Living in Various Family Arrangements, 1996



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation.

On measures of social well-being, the impact of family arrangements on children varies. Research has been conducted on children in intact families (with both biological parents) children of divorce, children raised by unmarried single parents, and children in stepfamilies. Less is known about the growing portion of children raised by cohabiting adults, including those in same-sex unions.

Studies find that children do best on many measures—school achievement, rates of juvenile delinquency, social interaction skills, and later marital happiness—when they are raised by both biological parents who are in a relatively stable and happy marriage. This is true “regardless of the parents’ race or educational background, regardless of whether the parents are married when the child is born, and regardless of whether the resident parent remarries,” say researchers Sara McLanahan and Gary Sanderfur in their 1994 book, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*.¹⁴ They found that original families offer children access to pooled resources and the extended support systems of both parents’ families; that biological parents, on average, have more of a vested interest in their children’s well-being; and that fathers are more apt to be emotionally connected to their children when they are married to the children’s mother.

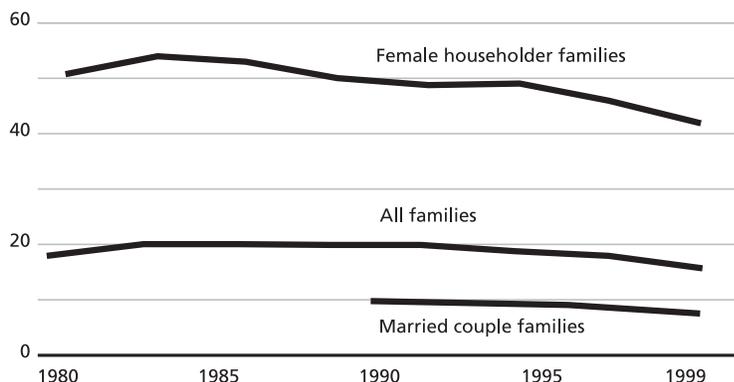
If raised by single parents, children are twice as likely to drop out of high school (17 percent versus 8 percent), girls are twice as likely to become pregnant, and boys are twice as likely to end up in prison than if raised by both biological parents.¹⁵ Children raised in stepfamilies are found to have similar social outcomes; their reported problems include getting along with and accepting authority from a stepparent, spending less time with their biological parent, and being at greater risk for sexual abuse by a stepparent.

Some studies have delved deeper to find that children in single and stepparent families do worse in school and misbehave more because they more frequently move residences. The disruption of moving is believed to contribute to children’s problems.¹⁶

It is important to note, however, that most children raised by single parents or in stepfamilies do not appear to be in crisis. Studies find that between two-thirds and three-quarters of children in stepfamilies do not exhibit serious emotional or behavioral problems.¹⁷

Do these outcomes mean that parents should stay together at all costs? A landmark 15-year study of families found that children living within

FIGURE 2
Percentage of Related Children under Age 18
in Poverty, by Family Structure, 1980–1999



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, March Current Population Survey, Current Population Reports, Consumer income, Series P-60, various years.

high-conflict marriages do better when the parents divorce, even when accounting for the negative effects of divorce on children. Sociologists Paul Amato and Alan Booth found that, in an intact family, the quality of the marriage is the most important influence on children's well-being. Children caught in high-conflict marriages chronically worry about whether their parents will attend to their needs, when and how bad the next fight is going to be, and how much they will be able to see both parents if the marriage dissolves. These feelings greatly erode the parent-child relationship, which is the most important element in determining children's social and emotional competency.¹⁸ The resulting emotional insecurity impairs children's ability to pay attention in school, to behave calmly, to cope well with stress, and to feel that they can control situations in their lives. Booth and Amato also found that only one-third of divorces in their study were high-conflict, the other two-thirds of couples divorced because they claimed they had grown apart.

CAUSES OF MARRIAGE FAILURE

To say that the American psyche concerning marriage has changed dramatically over the past 50 years is an understatement. Economists, sociologists, psychologists, and the clergy are among the many who have offered their perspectives on what has changed and why. Most agree the factor that has most altered the calculus of marriage is greater workforce participation by women.

Women's economic independence has meant more freedom (*a*) for women to avoid marriage, if they prefer, and (*b*) for both men and women to leave unhappy or harmful marriages. Working wives have also changed their outlook on what constitutes marital fairness, demanding a more equal division of labor in household and childrearing duties. Other factors have contributed to the lower allure of marriage and Americans' failure to make it stick. These include society's greater emphasis on personal happiness and gender equality, the destigmatization of sex outside of marriage, and a greater tolerance for lifestyles other than marriage.

Marriage experts believe that the destruction of traditional roles of husbands and wives, absent new roles that are just as clear, has greatly contributed to marital failure. Having to negotiate so many aspects of the relationship—from income contribution to child care to household chores to managing finances to whose job merits relocating—has created many more arenas for conflict, increasing the odds of marital failure. This stress of negotiation stands against the backdrop of high expectations for personal happiness and greater societal acceptance of marriage alternatives.¹⁹

Given the high rate of marriage failure and of births to unmarried women, some have questioned whether marriage as a personal aspiration in the United States is fading, and whether single parenting or cohabiting and raising children are lifestyles that are at least equally preferred in this

In an intact family, the quality of the marriage is the most important influence on children's well-being.

culture. At the very least, some question whether lifelong monogamy, given humans' increasing lifespan, should remain a cultural standard for marriage.

Yet public surveys suggest that Americans still highly value and desire marriage. One large-scale study of high school seniors found that nine-tenths thought it was quite or extremely important to have a good marriage and family life, and most expected to marry.²⁰ In the African American community, where nearly 60 percent of children today are raised in single-parent families, surveys have found that both black men and women very highly value marriage and raising children within marriage.²¹ In low-income black communities, women are found to value marriage very highly, but only if it confers the hope of financial stability and upward mobility. Ethnographer Kathryn Edin has commented that as long as the earnings of black men in these communities remains low, black women will not seek marriage.²²

MARRIAGE EDUCATION

Psychologists say they can predict, with 80 to 95 percent accuracy, whether a marriage will succeed or fail within its first 2 to 5 years (most first marriages that dissolve last seven to eight years). A number of factors are common among unhappy couples, including neurotic personality, poor observed communication, stressful events, childhood adversity, and marrying young.²³

But the best predictor of marital failure, suggests 20 years of research on marital outcomes, is not the number of differences between partners, nor their frequency of arguing. It is how couples handle their differences. "It is the immediacy of the interchange between two people that most directly affects the story of a marriage over time," writes Scott Stanley, Ph.D., psychologist and codeveloper of a widely used marriage instruction curriculum.²⁴ The hallmarks of couples headed for trouble, he asserts, are hurtful ways of arguing and withdrawal during problem conversations.

The emerging field of marriage education, in which some states have already invested, seeks to prevent divorce by teaching couples communication and conflict resolution skills, preferably before they are married. It differs from therapy in that it seeks to reach couples early in the relationship (before major conflict occurs), can often be taught by lay people with proper training, and is a relatively short course of instruction—usually between 8 and 20 hours over a period of weeks.

A number of marriage education curricula have been developed. They all share a common goal of teaching partners to speak to each other in a way that increases openness and self-understanding and decreases defensiveness, anger, and withdrawal. Curricula are often taught through a mix of instruction, role-playing, and skills practice. Classes have been

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offered through churches and synagogues, community colleges, high schools and other community education centers.

Program Effectiveness

The research base on marriage education programs is relatively young, and marital experts are still fine-tuning answers to why certain approaches work better than others. Research has found that, on the whole, marriage education programs can improve relationships and that, in the case of one program, the benefits endured at a five-year follow-up.

In 1985, a meta-analysis of programs involving 4,000 couples revealed that most programs clearly helped couples and that, the more distressed the couples, the more they gained from the program. But the strength of the programs varied dramatically, with few clues as to why. Analysts have related the disparities to differences in teaching methods (lecture versus skill practice), the amount of individual coaching provided, and program format (weekly meetings that allow for practice between sessions versus a day or weekend workshop). Researchers note that studies to date are flawed. They have inherent methodological problems, many contain selection biases (couples volunteered for the program, so they may have been more committed to their relationship), and few study how minority couples fare with these interventions.²⁵

The most-studied couples intervention program is the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), developed over 20 years ago by clinical psychologists Scott Stanley, Howard Markman, and Susan Blumberg. PREP is a 12-hour sequence of lectures, discussion, and skills practice on topics such as communication, conflict management, forgiveness, religious beliefs and practices, marital expectations, fun, and friendship. Most of the findings on PREP have involved premarital couples.

Research suggests that PREP can work. One study found that, four years following the program, PREP couples communicated more positively than control couples. Another study found that, three years after the program, PREP couples were more satisfied with their relationships and their sex lives and reported less intense problems than control couples. To date, the strongest outcomes were found among couples participating in a 1997 study in Germany. Five years after taking the course, PREP couples had a divorce rate of 4 percent, compared with 24 percent for control couples.²⁶

EARLY GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN MARRIAGE

A renewed interest in promoting marriage comes on the heels of more than 100 years of action to undo government and court rulings that sanctioned marriage as the only legitimate family form, made it difficult to divorce, and granted husbands more legal power than wives. In a

recent essay, legal historian Jana Singer describes the common law doctrine of marital merger, whose remnants lasted until late in the 20th century. Under this doctrine, wives forfeited all property rights and income to their husbands and could not form any legal contracts by themselves. "More generally, the legal fiction that the husband and wife were a single entity was one of the rationales that supported the law's traditional refusal to recognize marital rape or to provide remedies for victims of spousal violence," she writes.²⁷

In addition, state laws criminalizing adultery, fornication, and nonmarital cohabitation "effectively carved out marriage as the only legitimate arena for sexual intercourse." Other state laws forbade interracial marriage and made divorce difficult. For instance, until 1971 spouses in Idaho filing for divorce had to prove such issues as extreme cruelty, chronic drunkenness, desertion, permanent insanity, or a felony conviction. South Carolina had no general divorce law in its legal code until the 1940s.²⁸

Starting in the early 20th century, a number of judicial rulings have granted wives the same types of individual rights as husbands. In the 1960s, federal welfare policies became more sympathetic to the needs of single mothers—a reflection of society's greater acceptance of single-parent families and nonmarital births. And states in the 1970s widely adopted no-fault divorce laws which made it easier for couples to dissolve their marriages.

Many fear that a renewed government interest in promoting marriage may usher back earlier inequities. Dorian Solot, executive director of the Alternatives to Marriage Project, writes,

We do not believe it is possible for public policy to promote marriage without simultaneously stigmatizing people who are divorced, withholding resources from single parents, shaming unmarried couples, and ignoring the needs of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people for whom marriage is not an option. Such policies disadvantage the children growing up in such families, and deepen social inequality.²⁹

BIASES IN GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

While for decades Congress has avoided discussion of society's stake in the institution of marriage, federal laws have for years carried implicit incentives and disincentives towards marriage. In 1997 the General Accounting Office issued a report, at the request of Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), that identified 1,049 federal laws in which marital status was a factor. These laws were grouped into 13 categories, including Social Security and related programs, housing and food stamps; veterans' benefits, taxation, and civilian and military service benefits.³⁰

Many of the benefit programs serving middle-income citizens, such as veterans', Social Security, and military service benefits, favor married people by offering benefits to recipients' partners only if they are married. Income maintenance programs for the poor—including the old Aid

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to Families with Dependent Children program (and, in some states, its successor Temporary Aid to Needy Families, or TANF), food stamps, and Medicaid—have historically favored single mothers.

The marriage penalties in the tax code are notorious. Cohabiting couples pooling incomes identical to married couples are taxed at much lower rates. Less known is that large marriage penalties extend to low-income couples. For instance, tax expert Eugene Steurle describes that a single mother with two children earning the minimum wage would have an extra \$8,060 if she lived with, instead of married, a partner working full time earning \$8 an hour. The marriage penalty in this example, which Steurle calls “a charge on vows and commitments,” represents 25 percent of household income.³¹

SETTING THE STAGE FOR A MORE EXPLICIT DISCUSSION

Over the past ten years, Congress has markedly altered its perspectives on poverty. The first major welfare overhaul came in 1988. Family formation trends had already changed dramatically since 1970, when the child poverty rate stood at an all-time low of 14 percent. By 1988, the rate was 19.5 percent. Divorce rates had doubled to over 40 percent since the 1960s. The proportion of single parent families—26 percent—had doubled since 1970, while the portion of families headed by never-married mothers—7 percent—had increased more than seven-fold during that same period. Overall, government spending on income-tested benefits, which by 1988 stood at \$172 billion, had more than tripled since 1970 (although, since 1982, health care spending had accounted for more than 50 percent of this sum).³²

Congress’s response was to try to get welfare mothers to work. The Family Support Act of 1988 called on states to train able-bodied recipients for jobs. Working mothers had become the norm in America, and Congress believed that welfare policy should reflect that change. In the early 1990s welfare rolls continued to increase (following a recession), as did government spending on cash aid. The Clinton administration’s response was an expanded version of getting welfare mothers to work, based on the premise that welfare dependency was caused by poor job skills, low wages, lack of child care, poor motivation to work, and fathers delinquent in paying child support. President Clinton proposed more job skills training, stricter work and child support requirements, a rise in the Earned Income Tax Credit and the minimum wage, and subsidized child care.³³ Personal decisions about family formation were not emphasized.

In 1994, with a Republican takeover of Congress, conservatives’ concerns about the societal fallout from nonmarital births and family break-up—arguments which for years had been discarded or refuted by liberals and by a Democratic House—were given a larger platform. One result was

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PRWORA, which called on states to promote marriage as a way to reduce the welfare rolls. Its enactment in 1996 was influenced by the belief that single parenthood is the driving force behind welfare dependence.

Other actions have followed. In 1999 the House passed a responsible fatherhood bill to establish grants to help low-income, noncustodial fathers improve their parenting skills and train for jobs; the proposal, which ultimately died in the Senate, also allowed for activities to promote marriage. This January, President Bush signed the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001, allowing states for the first time to use child support block grant money earmarked for vulnerable families to “promote healthy marriages.” The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is looking to give states flexibility to use money from other federal program funds to promote marriage, according to Miranda Lynch, child support analyst at ACF.

Finally, President Bush’s fiscal year 2002 budget proposal, unveiled in February, redirects the current \$100 million annual out-of-wedlock pregnancy reduction bonus to fund “research, demonstrations, and technical assistance efforts, primarily directed at building strong families, reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and promoting healthy marriages.”³⁴

Rep. Nancy L. Johnson (R-Conn.), cosponsor of a responsible fatherhood bill that passed the House in 1999, best summed up the direction that she and some of her colleagues want to take on marriage with the following remarks made in committee:

Marriage is good for both adults and children and public policy must begin to effect that fact. We should not compel young couples to marry, but we can certainly hold it out as the expected standard and track the skills necessary to have a successful relationship....If we can restore marriage to its rightful place at all levels of society, we will have accomplished more than could be achieved by any government program we might design.³⁵

FUTURE FEDERAL DIRECTION

Prompted by TANF’s upcoming reauthorization in October 2002, a number of proposals have been floated that would craft a more explicit role for TANF in promoting marriage. As mentioned above, some would place married couples first in line for receiving limited cash welfare funds; others would provide married couples with cash bonuses.

In a congressional hearing on marriage and welfare last May, Patrick Fagan of the Heritage Foundation recommended that a portion of TANF funds be earmarked for state marriage activities (use of funds would require a state plan of action) and that a new Office of Marriage Initiatives be created within ACF to identify promising pro-marriage programs, design demonstration projects, and advise states on how to use surplus TANF money to increase marriage rates. This new office would

ACF is looking to give states flexibility to use money from other federal program funds to promote marriage.

be funded with money from TANF, family planning programs, and the Child Support Enforcement Program. "A sound social policy that targets a portion of the federal budget to programs that reduce illegitimacy and divorce would decrease the future demand for federal assistance and entitlements," he said.³⁶

Women's advocacy groups have strongly opposed these ideas. Laurie Rubiner of the National Partnership for Women and Families (formerly the Women's Legal Defense Fund), comments,

The mission of welfare reform should be to reduce poverty and help people achieve economic independence, not to engage in social engineering or discrimination against families that do not meet a particular ideal about family composition, nor should welfare reform legislation be used as a vehicle to punish families who fail to conform to our individual views of what a family should or should not be.³⁷

Preventing domestic violence is a key reason that many liberals oppose a welfare policy that rewards those who marry or punishes those who do not, a concern that conservatives have publicly recognized. Numerous studies suggest that between 15 percent and 25 percent of women on welfare have suffered domestic abuse, which is often cited as a reason for living apart from their children's father.³⁸ A group of studies in Colorado found that nearly one-quarter of welfare applicants reported current domestic abuse; three-quarters of them reported the abuser was the father of their children.³⁹

STATE ACTIVITY

State activity around promoting marriage has ranged from toughening divorce laws to offering free marriage education classes at the community level.⁴⁰ Some states have targeted their programs to low-income people, while others are taking a more universal approach. To date, only four states—Oklahoma, Michigan, Arizona, and Utah—are using TANF funds to run their programs.

Oklahoma, for instance, is one of several states offering marriage education to married or premarital couples, and single parents. Last year Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating launched a \$10 million marriage initiative, paid out of TANF funds, to cut the divorce rate by one-third in ten years. Oklahoma has the fourth-largest divorce rate in the nation, a fact the governor says is largely to blame for the state's poverty rate.

The program is training pastors, paraprofessionals, and other educators to teach the PREP course in all of the state's 77 counties. Health department and welfare staff are encouraged to refer clients to the program, which is free for TANF participants. As part of the initiative so far, about 750 of the 7,000 pastors in Oklahoma have agreed to perform marriages only for couples who have taken a training class—either PREP or another program. About 75 percent of state residents get married in churches.⁴¹

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Keating and governors from two other states—Utah and Arkansas—have made reducing their states' divorce rates a stated goal of their administrations and are pursuing various programs to accomplish it. Utah recently earmarked \$600,000 of its TANF surplus funds to promote marriage education over the next two years. The legislature formed a Marriage Commission and raised the minimum marriage age from 14 to 16. In addition, Gov. Mike O. Leavitt presides over an annual Marriage Week each February.

In Arizona, a marriage initiative was passed in April 2000 that allocates one million in TANF dollars for marriage courses provided by community-based groups, subsidizes marriage skills courses for low-income couples, and establishes a Marriage and Communication Skills Commission. The state also has a \$3.5 million abstinence-until-marriage program.⁴²

Arizona has also joined Louisiana and Arkansas in passing covenant marriage legislation, whereby couples can choose to marry under a contract that forbids no-fault divorce. These contracts require couples to seek premarital counseling, as well as counseling before filing for divorce, and go through a lengthy waiting period before divorces are granted. In Louisiana, for example, someone married under a covenant contract who files for divorce must first be separated for two years, as opposed to the 180 days required under the state's no-fault divorce law. Exceptions are made for those who can prove adultery, spousal imprisonment as the result of a felony, desertion for one year, or spousal or child abuse. Covenant marriage options have been proposed in several other states.

Florida is the only state to mandate that all high schools provide marriage and relationship skills training. It is also one of a number of states that offer incentives, such as a reduced marriage license fee, for couples to take marriage education training. Florida also allows couples who complete a four-hour course to get married the same day, instead of having to wait three days.

CONCLUSION

States are currently the laboratories in implementing policies that promote marriage. Their task is formidable—to balance society's distaste for funding welfare programs and their stake in child well-being against individuals' freedom to determine the style in which they raise their children. It will be important to learn the extent to which these programs reduce poverty and enhance child well-being and whether they have the unintended consequence of coercing the poor into unwise unions. With TANF reauthorization deliberations underway, issues related to the appropriate role of government in private lives and decision making will be debated in the months to come.

ENDNOTES

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