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New 'State of Our Unions' Report Focuses on Money and Marriage During Great Recession

December 7, 2009: It's a bad time to be a working-class man with no college education. Such men have borne the brunt of job losses since 2007, and new research finds that men are 61 percent less likely to be happy in a marriage if they work fewer hours than their wives.

The study predicts that the so-called "mancession" will undercut marriage in working-class communities, furthering a "divorce divide" that has been growing since the 1980s between couples with college degrees and those with less education.

That's one of the findings of the 2009 "State of Our Unions" report, issued by the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia and the Institute for American Values. With a focus on how the so-called "Great Recession" may be roiling or solidifying marriages, the "Money and Marriage" report includes several new studies alongside a statistical wrap-up of marriage in America based on the latest numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau and elsewhere.

Among the findings:

- Divorce fell during the first full year of the Great Recession – evidence that the challenges of job losses, foreclosures and depleted retirement accounts may be driving some couples to stick together. The divorce rate fell from 17.0 divorces per 1,000 married women in 2007 to 16.9 in 2008 (and from a rate of 17.3 in 2005).

If trends observed during and after the Great Depression of the 1930s are once again at work, some of the decline is due to economic factors that lead couples merely to temporarily delay divorce, but there is also another dynamic at work: Tough times foster real family solidarity and encourage many couples to stick together, said U.Va. sociology professor W. Bradford Wilcox, director of the National Marriage Project. Many couples are rediscovering the longstanding sociological truth that marriage is one of society's best social insurance plans, he said.

- Credit card debt and financial conflict are corrosive to marriages, whereas financial assets strengthen the marital bond, finds new research by Jeffrey Dew, a professor of family studies at Utah State University and formerly a postdoctoral research associate at U.Va. His research indicates that financial conflict is a top predictor of divorce. Couples who report disagreeing over finances once a week are over 30 percent more likely to

divorce than couples who disagree about finances a few times per month. Dew also finds that couples who had no assets were 70 percent more likely to divorce than couples with \$10,000 in assets.

- Men, particularly working-class and poor men, have absorbed 75 percent of job losses since 2007. This "mancession," particularly among those with only a high-school education, might foster gender-role reversals in contemporary marriages as unemployed or underemployed men take up more child care and housework. That's good news for gender equality and marital comity, argues Christine Whelan, a professor of sociology at the University of Iowa.

But new research by Wilcox suggests the "mancession" will undercut marriage in working-class communities, furthering a "divorce divide" between college-educated couples and those with less education that has been growing since the 1980s. His analysis of the 2000 Survey of Marriage and Family Life finds that, among couples with children at home, husbands who work less hours than their wives are 61 percent less likely to report that they are "very happy" in their marriages compared to men who work as many or more hours than their wives.

- Couples can improve their finances by reversing a stereotypical division of labor – let her do the investing while he handles the shopping. Research from Ron Wilcox, a professor at U.Va.'s Darden School of Business and author of the book "Whatever Happened to Thrift?," finds that men tend to be more thrifty shoppers because they take less pleasure in shopping. Meanwhile, women tend to have a less inflated view of their own investing skills compared to men, so they are more likely to seek professional investment advice, and less likely to engage in active stock trading that runs up fees and reduces long-term profits.

In his essay, "Smart Money: She Saves, He Spends," Wilcox explains further: "Men think they know what they are doing but often do not, and women think they do not know what they are doing but often do, or at least know enough to turn to a professional."

About the National Marriage Project

The National Marriage Project is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian and interdisciplinary initiative located at the University of Virginia. The project provides research and analysis on the health of marriage in America (including the annual "State of Our Unions" report) to analyze the social and cultural forces shaping contemporary marriage, and to identify strategies to increase marital quality and stability. The National Marriage Project was founded at Rutgers University in 1997 by family scholars David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead. The project moved to U.Va. in the fall of 2009 and is now directed by W. Bradford Wilcox, a professor of sociology at the University of Virginia.

About the Institute for American Values

The Institute for American Values is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening families and civil society in the U.S. and the world. The institute brings together approximately 100 leading scholars – from across the human sciences and across the political spectrum – for interdisciplinary deliberation, collaborative research and joint public statements on the challenges facing families and civil society.

The "Money and Marriage" issue of State of Our Unions is part of the "Nest and Nest-Egg Initiative," a multi-year inquiry, supported by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, into the prudential values and institutions that are essential to sustaining a secure and thriving American middle class.

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