

Marriage Decline in America

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As the recent results of the Year 2000 Census confirm, marriage as the basis of family life continues to decline in America. Since 1970 the rate of marriage has dropped by about one third, the out-of-wedlock birth ratio has climbed from 11% to 33% of all births, the divorce rate has doubled, and the number of people living together outside of marriage has grown by over 1000%. With the exception of nonmarital cohabitation, which increased dramatically, the marriage-decline trends decelerated a little in the 1990s. But they have continued in the same direction. As of now, there is no tangible evidence of a turnaround, although a more pro-marriage attitude does seem to be gaining ground in the media and the culture at large. Why should this marriage decline be of national concern? Principally, because of its effects on our nation's children. The social science evidence is now overwhelming that children fare better in life if they grow up in a married, two-parent family. Children who grow up in other family forms are two to three times at greater risk of having serious behavioral and emotional problems when they become adolescents and adults. Many of today's youth problems can be attributed, directly or indirectly, to the decline of marriage. This includes high rates of juvenile delinquency, suicide, substance abuse, child poverty, mental illness, and emotional instability. One important new study has found that the *average* American child in recent decades reported more anxiety than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s. Indeed, as former Senator Moynihan once observed, the United States "may be the first society in history in which children are distinctly worse off than adults."

Much of the linkage between the decline of marriage and the rise of problems in childhood rests with the absent father. The evidence is now strong that fathers *do* matter in the lives of their children. And, although there are many caring and responsible non-resident fathers, the alarmingly simple fact is that men are much less likely to stay close to their children when they are not married to their children's mother. Men tend to view marriage and childrearing as a single package. If they are not married or are divorced, their interest in and sense of responsibility toward children greatly diminish. Many studies have found that a high percentage of all unmarried or divorced fathers lose regular contact with their children over time.

Why is marriage so important to fatherhood? Because being a father is universally problematic for men in a way it is not for women. Put simply, as marriage weakens, fathers stray. While mothers the world over bear and nurture their young with an intrinsic acknowledgement of their role, fathers are often filled with conflict and doubt. Left culturally unregulated, men's sexual behavior can be promiscuous, their paternity casual, their commitment to families weak. Marriage is society's way of engaging the basic problem of fatherhood—how to hold the father to the stronger mother-child bond. As a cultural institution, marriage stresses the long-run commitment of the male, the durability of the marital relationship, and the importance of the union for children.

Our national goal should be no less than to rebuild a marriage culture, one in which as many children as possible grow up with their fathers and mothers providing care and nurture and

stability. We should be every bit as much concerned with our nation's family environment as we are with our nation's economic and natural environments. Yet if ever there was a serious domestic problem almost entirely ignored by our national elected representatives, this is it. Despite the fact, for example, that many Americans believe the current state of marriage to be one of the major problems of our time, no high-level government body in memory has examined the issue. Indeed, in recent years the government even has cut back on the collection of marriage statistics.

Is the goal of renewing a marriage-based society impossible to achieve? It certainly will not be easy. Much of the needed change must come, of course, in the cultural, moral and spiritual realms. But there are many things that can be done at the federal level to smooth the path. Perhaps the most important is merely to recognize—as societies in the past have nearly always done as a part of public policy—that the benefits to children of having married parents are so great that the institution of marriage should be encouraged by every reasonable means possible. Fortunately, many ways exist to strengthen and stabilize marriage, to make marriage a more satisfying as well as more durable social relationship. And, of course, government should seek to do no harm in this realm. It should never institute policies, for example, that provide disincentives to marriage, or that fail equally to support children not in a two-parent family.

Some believe that pro-marriage policies can not be put forth without stigmatizing and penalizing those who for one reason or another, sometimes through no fault of their own, are not married. Yet the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of young people today wish to marry for life, and the parents of these young people, no matter what their marital state, also hold that goal for their offspring. There is actually an enormous reservoir of support for a marriage-based culture. In addition to the significant and enduring benefits for children, the evidence is clear that having a solid, long-term marriage greatly enhances the wealth, health, longevity, and overall happiness of adults.

More than 2000 years ago the Roman statesman Cicero noted that "marriage is the first bond of society." Surely this observation is no less true today.

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