



## Marriage Promotion in Low-Income Families

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past four decades there has been a dramatic increase in divorce, out-of-wedlock births, cohabitation and single-parent hood, and these increases cut across class, religion and race. These trends are more striking among the poor; yet there has been very little research on how to promote and sustain marriage in low-income families.

**A large body of social science research indicates that healthy, married-parent families are an optimal environment for promoting the well-being of children.** Children raised by both biological parents are less likely than children raised in single- or step-parent families to be poor, to drop out of school, to have difficulty finding a job, to become teen parents or to experience emotional or behavioral problems. Children living with single mothers are five times as likely to be poor as those in two-parent families.

It is also important to note that although children of single- or stepparent families bear somewhat higher risks for these difficulties, the majority of these children grow up without serious problems.

Even when family income is taken into account, differences among children in two-parent families and single-parent families remain significant. A recent population study in Sweden - where the social safety net is stronger and the poverty rate among single mothers is low - found that children raised in Swedish single-parent families had many of the same problems as children raised in American single-parent families.

### POVERTY AND MARRIAGE

**There is a strong link between poverty and marital status.** Economic factors such as unemployment play a significant role in both discouraging marriage and creating stress leading to marital breakup, especially in low-income communities. Living in a low-income family may be partly the result and/or partly the cause of family disruption.

Reduced household income accounts for about half of the risk for children living without both married parents. Other factors include less parental time and attention, and less outside support. Furthermore, married couples are more likely than unmarried couples to receive help from family, friends and the community. Such supports can help reduce the risks associated with poverty.

### INCOME SUPPORTS CAN HELP

Evidence from the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) suggests that income supports can increase and stabilize marriage among low-income families. This pilot demonstration program subsidized earnings for employed welfare families and found increased marriage rates for single-parent families, as well as decreased divorce rates and decreases in domestic violence.

### Purpose

The role of government in strengthening marriage has recently emerged in the national dialogue largely because of new Congressional proposals to promote marriage as part of the reauthorization of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA).

Little is known about effective strategies to strengthen marriage at the population level and especially among low-income couples. However, this fact sheet describes the evidence that is available from empirical research related to marriage and building healthy relationships in low-income families.

Evidence suggests that policies based on a "marriage-plus" agenda would benefit children and their families, by helping more of them grow up in married, healthy, two-parent families and when this isn't possible, to help parents - regardless of marital status - to cooperate in raising their children."

The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), a non-profit, nonpartisan organization focused solely on family research, policy, and practice, recognizes that families are our most important resource and **public policy should enable more children to grow up in strong, healthy families.**

Public programs, such as child support and TANF, often include policy barriers and disincentives to marriage and two-parent families. For example, some states continue to impose stricter TANF eligibility requirements on two-parent families than on single-parent families.

### JOBS AND JOB-ASSISTANCE

**One major reason that low-skilled, unemployed men do not marry the mothers of their children is that they cannot support their families.** Better employment opportunities encourage low-income fathers - and men in general - to be more responsible fathers. Men with steady jobs are also more attractive and economically stable marriage partners.

### FRAGILE FAMILIES AND MARRIAGE

A new national study finds that at the time of their child's

birth, half of unmarried parents are living together, and another third are romantically attached but not cohabiting. The majority of these couples hope to marry someday. From other studies, we know that their relationships often fall apart by the time their children reach school age. Research suggests that providing a variety of services both soft skills such as relationship skills and hard skills such as job training and placement - may help stabilize these relationships. Help with housing and medical insurance would also assist low-income families to achieve stability.

The study also suggests that at the time of the birth of the child, unmarried parents may be most receptive to intervention - a "magic moment" which could be built upon to prevent deterioration of the relationship.

### REDUCING STRESSES CAUSED BY WORK

Work itself can increase stress on families. This is especially true for low-income families where parents may work nonstandard schedules, at night or on weekends. Employers are increasingly demanding such schedules of workers. In some families, one parent may work during the day, while the other works at night so as to care for the children. The availability of affordable and reliable childcare would reduce stress for many families and allow them to spend more time together as a couple and a family. This is important since a recent study found that when married couples with children work nights or rotating shifts, their risk of separation and divorce increases.

### MARRIAGE IS NOT A PANACEA

**Not all two-parent families are good for children and not all couples with children should marry.** When there is family violence or high levels of conflict, children are often better off if their parents are not together.

Roughly 60 percent of remarriages (compared to roughly 50 percent of first marriages) are projected to end in divorce. Children in stepfamilies face many of the risks of children of never-married or divorced parents, despite higher family incomes and more time available for adults in the family to parent.

Many research studies do not separate out findings according to income or race, and most programs serving couples and families are not specifically designed to meet the needs of low-income or ethnically diverse populations. Although there is promising evidence that skill-based interventions are helpful for couples, more information is needed in order to develop policies and programs that strengthen marriage and build healthy relationships in low-income and ethnically diverse communities.

**REFERENCES** For references please visit our website [www.ncfr.org](http://www.ncfr.org).

### ABOUT NCFR

The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) is the only professional organization focused solely on family research, policy, and practice. NCFR provides a forum for family researchers, educators, and practitioners to share in the development and dissemination of knowledge about families and family relationships, establishes professional standards, and works to promote family well-being. It is the oldest multidisciplinary family organization in the United States and is highly regarded as an authority for information on a broad range of family concerns.

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### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Because there are many different reasons for the decline in marriage, many policy and programmatic strategies may be needed to help reverse this trend. Public policy should help more children grow up in strong families. Building strong families involves the development of healthy relationships - marital or not. This goal applies to the population as a whole - not just low-income families. Based on research, policy recommendations include:

- **Create policies and programs that focus on making marriage better to be in**, rather than harder to get out of. Policies to promote marriage should be non-coercive and focus on the quality of the relationship.
- **Take advantage of the "magic moment"** when a child is born to a non-married couple by providing services to parents who wish to stay together and raise their children as a couple.
- **Help low-skilled, unemployed fathers and mothers** learn the skills needed to get and keep a job, and take steps to increase the availability of jobs.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, since little is known about effective strategies to strengthen marriage among low-income couples, strategies should be designed based on the best available research evidence and tailored to meet the needs of different populations. **New efforts should be evaluated to inform the field.**

### ADVISORS

NCFR wishes to thank the following for their assistance in the development of this fact sheet:

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