

The Importance of Measuring Marriage

**Presentation at the Interagency Forum
on Child and Family Statistics Meeting**

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Introduction

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to speak about the importance of measuring marriage. (I use the word "marriage" in a very broad sense, to talk about the spectrum of behaviors that researchers refer to as family formation and couple unions, and also as a legal, economic, social, and spiritual institution.) I've been invited to speak with you as an agent or intermediary, if you will, of the program and policy community that relies so much on the data and research produced by your agencies.

The Family Impact Seminar (FIS) is a 22 year-old, nonpartisan, policy research institute. Our mission is to help policy officials become aware of the impact of their decisions on families and enact policies that strengthen and support, rather than weaken and hurt family life. We do so by acting as a "knowledge broker," bringing to policymakers' attention sound, balanced, and in-depth information. We synthesize, analyze, package, and disseminate data, research, and program information through policy seminars, meetings, conferences, and publications. As a result of this activity we have had a strong interest in improving the amount, quality and utility of family data and was glad to have played a role in the creation of the Interagency Forum. I am so impressed with how much the Forum has already accomplished.

In 1976, when FIS was founded, the field of family policy was in its infancy, and we were one of only a very small handful of organizations working in the area. The field has grown enormously since then and there are now several dozen national organizations working on child and family policy. The existence of this Interagency Forum is evidence that child and family issues are now high on the government's agenda. However, marriage—which many believe is the cornerstone of family life—is not on the agenda, at least not yet.

A decade or more ago people noticed that in the emerging family policy debate a very important element was missing—males and fathers. Programs and policies designed to study and support families, in fact only focus on mothers and children. If fathers were thought about at all it was only as "dead-beat" dads. The new field of fatherhood is now well launched. I commend the Interagency Forum for its work over the past 18 months on male fertility and fathers. You have developed an impressive and practical agenda of collaborative activities designed to improve the knowledge base about fathers and fatherhood.

This Forum initiative is very timely. Policymakers are finally putting fathers on their radar screens. This is an exciting week for the fatherhood field. At the National Governor's Association winter meeting last weekend, 18 Governors participated in the first meeting of the newly formed Task Force on Fatherhood Promotion. And just yesterday the Chair of the House Sub-Committee on Human Resources, Rep. Clay Shaw, announced the introduction of a bill to

authorize a \$2 billion block grant to the states for fatherhood promotion. I am told that this bill has the strong personal support of Clay Shaw and the Chairman of Ways and Means Bill Archer, who is not known for his interest in social policy.

Marriage Matters

Clearly one of the best and most direct ways of promoting father involvement with their children is to strengthen couples' relationships and marriage. The language used in the resolution setting up the NGA Task Force and in the Fatherhood block grants legislation makes this point.

But marriage is not an issue on the family policy agenda. No think tanks, institutes, or advocacy organizations have focused on couples and marriage. No foundations have funded efforts to study or strengthen marriage. Indeed, "marriage" is not even a word in the Foundation Directory subject index. As a result there has been no sustained, serious attempt by the private or public sectors to pull together what we know about couples and marriage, and to examine whether and how we can strengthen the institution. It is as if marriage was a dirty word --- the "m" word.

When you stop to think about it, this is really quite extraordinary.

The public still places a high value on marriage: 90 per cent of people marry at least once. Nearly everyone wants their marriages to succeed. The media is fascinated by the topic and hungry for information.

Finally, policymakers are beginning to pay attention to the mounting body of research documenting the fact that the rising rates of single parenthood have had serious and costly consequences for children, adults, communities and, consequently, to the budgets of public agencies. Many of the programs federal agencies fund and administer are created to respond to the problems and needs caused in large part by the dramatic increases in out-of-wedlock childbearing, divorce, and remarriage. In addition marital stress and divorce place untold costs on work productivity. (A British study estimated that in 1992 about 5.5 billion dollars were spent on welfare payments, legal and health care costs as a direct consequence of divorce. As far as I know there have been no comparable attempts to estimate these costs for the U.S.)

Much less well known, however, is the fact that marriage brings so many benefits to individuals and to society. In 1995, in her Presidential address to the Population Association of America, demographer Linda Waite summarized the findings of several streams of research to document the benefits of marriage for children and adults. In brief she found that on average married men and women are healthier, live longer, have fewer emotional problems, are wealthier, earn more, save more and have better sex than single people. And, of course,

children do best on all kinds of measures when raised by two parents. Importantly Linda shows that these positive outcomes of marriage are not primarily the result of self-selection but reflect the fact that people behave differently when they are married. Linda points out that these benefits of marriage are not well known to the general public. Hopefully her forthcoming book will help make them more so.

The "M" Word

At FIS, as we struggled to launch our new program of activities on marriage, we thought long and hard about why this subject has been officially ignored. Clearly different people have different reasons for avoiding the "m" word. For almost everybody the subject is highly personal and sensitive, and perhaps for this reason it is easier to just not deal with it. The institution of marriage is in state of transition, many would say turmoil. We are struggling to make couple relationships and marriage work. Most people have had some direct experience of the pain of marital stress and failure in their own families or their friends. I have noted that when one cites the negative consequences of divorce and single parenthood on children, people get very defensive and are quick to point out situations in which children and spouses are clearly better off after divorce. Others cite high levels of domestic violence, or the distaste for the patriarchal model of marriage promoted by the Promise Keepers and others as reasons to stay away from the issue.

A key barrier to talking about marriage as a policy issue is the fear that if you promote marriage you stigmatize single parents many of whom are struggling to do a good job under difficult circumstances.

These fears and sensitivities, however real, must not, in our view, be permitted to stifle study and debate on a topic that is clearly of such importance to the vast majority of Americans and that has such widespread ramifications for society. Some scholars argue that the decline in marriage is a worldwide trend that we just have to accept. I believe this judgment is premature since we have not yet seriously studied and debated what could be done to try to arrest or reverse these trends. Nor have we discussed whose responsibility it is to do so.

Marriage is Now on the Public Agenda

In the last few years the public debate about marriage has begun, in part as a result of the public attention to research on father absence. The research of Sara McLanahan and Gary Sanderfur and others on the negative consequences for children of being raised in single parent got a great deal of attention in 1993 when popularized in the *Atlantic Monthly* article by Barbara Whitehead titled "Dan Quayle Was Right or the Re-education of Sara McLanahan." The Institute for

American Values in N.Y. also broke the ice when it issued a report in 1995 on the state of **Marriage in America**.

The urge to "do something" to arrest or reverse the decline in marriage is getting stronger. Unfortunately however this new debate is not well informed. The policy proposals are simplistic and have virtually no basis in research. They focus on the back-end of marriage problem—too little and too late—and not the front-end. Most of the state legislative proposals have focused on making divorce more difficult, or prohibiting gay marriage.

The federal government is also beginning to focus on marriage. The TANF legislation states that one of the purposes of the block grants is to promote two parent families and marriage as well as reduce out-of-wedlock births. This spring several legislative proposals have been introduced into the U.S. Congress to reduce the marriage penalty in the tax code.

In 1996, the FIS Board of Directors decided to launch a program designed to put marriage on the public agenda in comprehensive, thoughtful, and balanced way. In June 1997, FIS held a two-day roundtable on *Strategies to Strengthen Marriage: What Do We Know? What Do We Need to Know?* The rich array of panelists and papers provided evidence that a great deal is known about couples and marriage—thanks to the data collection and studies that several Forum agencies have sponsored. And we learned that there are some promising programs and preventive strategies being tried on a small scale to improve the quality as well as the stability of couples' relationships and marriage—but they are not well known.

We also learned that there remain many gaps in our understanding of couples and marriage, especially in low-income minority communities where the decline has been so severe.

What Are Some of the Big Questions About Marriage?

I'll take a moment here to mention what some of the big questions are that were discussed:

- How can we explain the disconnect between the continuing high value the public places on marriage and behavior which demonstrates that the commitment to marriage has weakened so much? Is the institution of marriage simply going through a period of struggle and transition, to be restructured and stabilized along more egalitarian lines? Or is it disappearing, like the dinosaurs, to be replaced by a variety of alternative family forms?
- What accounts for such persistently high divorce rates? Is it a result of the weakening of legal, social, moral and economic barriers? Or is it because

expectations for marriage have risen so high, are unrealistic and cannot be fulfilled? Or is it due to excessive individualism?

- Out-of-wedlock birth rates in some low-income communities are now as high as 70-80%. Only one third of these are to teen mothers. Clearly childbearing and marriage have become de-coupled (as high divorce rates have de-coupled child rearing and marriage). Does this mean marriage has disappeared in these communities and is no longer valued? We have a few clues that is not the case. Many of these couples are cohabiting, and will later marry each other or someone else. But why? To what extent are the whopping financial marriage penalties for the poor and low income a disincentive to marriage? (Eugene Steurele, of the Urban Institute, presented data at our 1997 meeting to show that a couple each working full time at the minimum wage would stand to lose around \$8,000 in increased taxes and lost benefits if they were to marry.)
- Cohabitation is rapidly becoming a normative experience. The NSFG data for 1995 show that half of all persons under age 40 have lived in a cohabiting relationship. Most of these relationships are however short lived. We need to understand better the effects of cohabitation on marital stability and quality, and its implications for children, especially in low-income communities where cohabiting may be more permanent.
- What should the goal of policy be, to increase marital stability or improve quality? Or, another way of putting it, should we make marriage harder to get out of or more rewarding to enter and stay in? What are the most effective strategies to pursue: legal, economic, educational, or spiritual?
- Serious parental conflict clearly has major negative consequences for children. As Paul Amato and Alan Booth point out in their recent book, if divorce were limited only to high-conflict marriages, then divorce would generally be in the child's best interest. But from their 15-year study they estimate that less than a third of parental divorces involve highly conflicted marriages. From the point of view of children, are some divorces unnecessary? We know that many children are exposed to serious parental conflict within marriage. Do we know how to reduce couple conflict? What is a "good enough" marriage?

These are just a few of the questions that are beginning to be raised as we seriously begin to study and debate marriage policy. Research cannot by itself answer many of these questions since they involve value dilemmas and choices that will need to be discussed and debated in the public arena. However better data and research about couples and marriage are urgently needed to inform these discussions and assure that new policy and program proposals are at least grounded in what we know.

What Could the Interagency Forum Do?

I have given you some reasons why marriage is a vitally important subject that I hope you will turn your attention to. I now want to take a few minutes to sketch a few areas in which I believe collaboration among members of this Forum could be very useful.

- **First, public education.** The Forum has an opportunity and responsibility to educate the public about what we know about couples and marriage. So much of the basic research that has been funded on couple and marriage remains buried in academic journals and is largely inaccessible to the public. An occasional scholar, such as Andy Cherlin, writes an excellent synthesis, but such books quickly become outdated and are not found in most bookstores. The Census Bureau has done an admirable job of making its data and periodic reports available to the research community on the Web and in periodic reports but, quite frankly, detailed tables are not very useful to the public, busy media or policy officials. By contrast, *America's Children* is an extremely useful, attractive, reader friendly document that I commend you for. And I look forward to the 1998 report. (I especially appreciate the fact that you include a discussion of gaps and indicators needed.) We urgently need a similar volume on *Couples, Marriage and Divorce in America*.
- **Cohabitation.** The second area is to build on the steps that the Census Bureau has recently taken in the CPS, SIPP, and PSD to collect better information about cohabitation. Failure to do so in the past has led to over estimates of the significance of the decline in divorce rates, and underestimates of the number of children living with a father or father figure. I should add that from the perspective of the children, it is really important that the relationship between the child and the cohabiting partner be made very clear. We also need cohabiting histories, which I understand will be added to the Survey on Program Dynamics. We need to understand why people decide to cohabit, break up, or move on to marry.
- **Improved research.** Third, at our marriage roundtable, many people pointed out the need for more interdisciplinary and longitudinal research on family formation and couple unions, including research that integrates qualitative and clinical measures. As noted, it is very important to capture the quality of couple relationships and effects of quality on various adult and child outcomes. We need to explore ways of integrating some of the process measures that clinical, small sample studies have found to be so useful into our larger national surveys.
- **Restore marriage and divorce statistics.** Fourth, it was ironic that in 1996 just as state policy makers began to focus on marriage, NCHS, in

response to the pressure of budget cuts, decided to cut back on the collection of marriage and divorce statistics from the states. (All they obtain now is total counts with no background characteristics.) I understand that a justification at that time was that the state marriage and divorce data was uneven and of poor quality, and that NCHS believed that marriage and divorce are not central to the health mission of the agency.

In view of the governors and state legislators emerging interest in this issue, I believe this decision needs to be reconsidered. It seems imperative to me that the federal government identify the resources needed not just to restore the cuts but to work with the states to improve the marriage and divorce registration data much as it has the birth and death statistics. This would be a major initiative, and require the cooperation and support of the Congress. However given TANF's directives to promote marriage and two-parent families and reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing, and Chairman Archer and Clay Shaw's commitment to promoting fatherhood, I believe such support may eventually be forthcoming. But a strong case will need to be made for this investment. I believe a useful first step would be for the Forum to study what kinds of improvements are needed in these vital statistics that are so important to the health and welfare of children and the nation as a whole.

Finally, it goes without saying that I think it will be critical to fund the next wave of the NSFH, which is a unique and invaluable source of our knowledge about marriage. And I'm very excited about the plans for the NICHD June conference on the *Ties that Bind*, which will bring together a stellar interdisciplinary group of scholars to share what is being learned about cohabitation and family formation. These are just some initial suggestions. I know that when the members of this Forum start exchanging ideas, they will undoubtedly identify many other creative opportunities to improve our research base about couples and marriage. Thank you for letting me share my thoughts and I look forward to working with you if — perhaps I should say **when**— the Forum decides to move forward on this agenda.