

Marriage in Welfare Reform

Research Synthesis: [Marriage and Welfare Reform: The Overwhelming Evidence that Marriage Education Works](#)

1. Importance of Marriage

The importance of marriage and the intact, two-parent family to the success of welfare reform cannot be overestimated. The family is the building block of society. As America's founders—particularly John Adams and John Witherspoon—put it, marriage is the bulwark of the social order and the “seedbed of virtue” upon which the Republic rests.¹⁾ It is the organism through which the very life of a nation is nurtured and passed on to future generations.

As social science research and government surveys document, the retreat from marriage in America since the 1960s has been accompanied by a rise in a number of serious social problems. Compared to children in two-parent intact families, children who are born out of wedlock or whose parents divorce are much more likely to experience poverty, abuse, and behavioral and emotional problems, to have lower academic achievement, and to use drugs more often. Compared to married mothers, single mothers are much more likely to be victims of domestic violence.²⁾ On the other hand, when parents marry or remain married, the benefits to their children are substantial. Adolescents from such families have been found to have better health and fewer developmental problems, and are less likely to repeat a grade in school or be depressed.³⁾

2. Anti-Marriage Bias of Welfare System

The collapse of marriage is a predominant factor behind high rates of child poverty, welfare dependence, and a host of other social problems. While the social science literature makes this compelling case for marriage, welfare policy has consistently undermined the institution. Means-tested aid programs, such as TANF, food stamps, and public housing, encourage single parenthood by implicitly penalizing low-income mothers who marry employed men.

This welfare bias against marriage is widely accepted, but relatively few understand how this bias operates. Many erroneously believe that welfare programs have eligibility criteria that directly exclude married couples. This is not true. Nevertheless, welfare programs penalize marriage and reward single parenthood because of the inherent design of all means-tested programs. In a means-tested program, such as food stamps or TANF, the benefits are reduced as nonwelfare income rises. Thus, under any means-tested system, a mother receives greater benefits if she remains single than she would if she were married to a working husband. Welfare not only serves as a substitute for a husband, but actually penalizes marriage because a low-income couple will experience a significant drop in combined income if they marry. For example, the typical single mother on TANF receives a combined welfare package of various means-tested aid benefits worth about \$14,000 per year. Suppose this typical single mother receives welfare benefits worth \$14,000 per year while the father of her children has a low-wage job paying \$15,000 per year. If the mother and father remain unmarried, they will have a combined income of \$29,000 (\$14,000 from welfare and \$15,000 from earnings). However, if the couple marries, the father's earnings will be counted against the mother's welfare eligibility. Welfare benefits will be eliminated or cut dramatically; the couple's combined

income will fall substantially. Thus, means-tested welfare programs do not penalize marriage per se, but instead implicitly penalize marriage to an employed man with earnings. The practical effect is to significantly discourage marriage among low-income couples.

While the anti-marriage bias of the welfare system is widely recognized as a mistake, change has come slowly. The 1996 welfare reform law, which created the TANF program, established a national goal of increasing two-parent families—but state governments failed to respond to this directive. Out of more than \$100 billion in TANF funds disbursed throughout the past six years, only about \$20 million (a minuscule 0.02 percent) has been spent on marriage programs.

3. Marriage Education Programs

Programs that could be funded by the government to encourage healthy marriage initiative included:

- Public advertising campaigns promoting marriage;
- Education programs in high schools on marriage;
- Marriage education and relationship-skills instruction for non-married pregnant women and non-married expectant fathers;
- Premarital training for engaged couples, including marriage mentoring programs that use older married couples as role models;
- Marriage enhancement programs for married couples;
- Divorce reduction programs; and
- Experimental programs for reducing the anti-marriage penalties in means-tested welfare programs.

Such legislation would provide skills to low-income couples to help them build and sustain healthy marriages. It would also foster experiments in reducing the anti-marriage penalties in welfare programs. Such proposals are still relevant and in-demand. This type of bill would begin the vital task of repairing the fabric of family in low-income communities.

4. Why Marriage Initiatives Matter

Three of the paramount goals of welfare reform are reducing child poverty, reducing welfare dependence, and improving child well-being. Efforts to strengthen marriage can and must play a critical role in meeting each of these goals.

A large share of current spending in the welfare and social service industries represents efforts to deal with social and economic problems that result from the collapse of marriage. Both inefficient and unsuccessful, this approach focuses exclusively on social and economic symptoms, not on the root cause. In contrast, marriage initiatives deal with the underlying causes of child poverty, welfare dependence, and dysfunctional behaviors by strengthening marriage itself. A \$300 million pilot marriage-promotion programs represent only one penny for every five dollars that government currently spends subsidizing single-parent families.

Opponents of marriage proposals have suggested that there is no evidence that these programs will prove successful, but at least 29 journal articles covering well over 100 separate evaluations show that marriage-strengthening programs are effective in reducing strife, improving communication, increasing parenting skills, enhancing marital happiness, and reducing divorce and separation.

- ¹⁾ Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 19-21.
- ²⁾ U.S. Department of Justice, National Crime Victimization Survey, 1999.
- ³⁾ See Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 124-140.

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