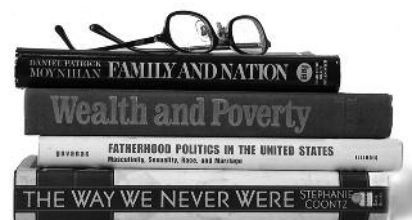


# Marriage as a Cure for Poverty?

Social Science  
Through a  
“Family Values”  
Lens



Jean Hardisty

## Marriage Promotion Series, Part II

A co-publication of Political Research Associates  
and the Women of Color Resource Center

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# Preface

Political Research Associates owes founder, and President Emerita, Jean Hardisty a great debt not only for its existence but for the ongoing support she offers and, most especially, for the work she continues to do with us and in the world. Throughout her career Jean has noticed and expounded on things that had not yet caught others' attention. This report, and its companion piece, *Pushed to the Altar: The Right Wing Roots of Marriage Promotion*, continue that tradition.

These two reports demonstrate the Right's use of federal funds to exert social control and their use of agenda driven treatises, masquerading as science, to justify, and elicit support for, this ideological maneuvering. As always, liberty is at stake. We, at PRA, thank Jean for her vigilance.

Katherine Hancock Ragsdale  
President  
Political Research Associates

# Foreword

**M***arriage As A Cure For Poverty? Social Science Through A “Family Values” Lens* is an groundbreaking exposé of the Right’s use of defective social science methodology to mislead the United States public, in this case about the causes of and solutions to poverty. Jean Hardisty’s demonstration of how the logical error of “singular causation” appears over and over again in the Right’s publications provides a useful insight that progressives can use to analyze much of the Right’s deeply flawed social science literature.

But to truly appreciate the importance of Hardisty’s debunking of right-wing research regarding poverty, the reader should know a bit of history about how United States policymakers have addressed poverty programs and how public opinion has portrayed poor people.

Progressives frequently, and mistakenly, date the attack on social programs in the United States to the beginning of the Reagan years. More accurately, there have always been influentials and others who blamed poverty on individual fault and who were unable to perceive or understand the structural causes of poverty. The general public, whose understanding of poverty in the United States harks back to the thinking behind Britain’s Poor Laws, has always been ambivalent about assisting the poor and unsure about whether the poor are good people facing difficult times and circumstances or bad people who bring about their own misfortune.

As a result, public welfare in the United States originated as programs that differentiated the “worthy” from the “unworthy” poor. Local asylums or poorhouses separated the “deserving” poor, such as the blind, deaf, insane and eventually the orphaned, from the “undeserving” poor, comprising all other paupers including children living with one or both parent/s. These programs were widely varied and allowed broad local administrative discretion. “Traditional family values” has always been part of

the discourse. This rhetoric supported the early 20th century claim that “outdoor relief” (welfare assistance that did not feature incarceration in a poor house) undermined initiative and dignity. It was employed by reformists’ movements that sought to “help” and “better” poor immigrant women by controlling their behavior.

When Congress enacted Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in 1935, a program for children in single-parent households that was the precursor to the current Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program, the supporting political rhetoric and imaging focused on white widows of West Virginia coal miners. Advocates for the program portrayed these mothers as needing and deserving financial assistance in order to stay home and raise their children. At that time, there was virtually no talk among policymakers of work programs for this population and certainly none about a marriage initiative. However, moralistic attitudes, particularly about abstaining from sexual activity outside of marriage, were deeply imbedded in the rhetoric and implementation of the program.

From 1935 until the 1960s, the vast majority of AFDC recipients were White, primarily because of a wide range of discriminatory governmental practices that excluded women and children of color from the AFDC rolls. However, in the 1960s, efforts initiated by the civil rights movement and the welfare rights movement, as well as aggressive legal advocacy, opened the rolls to families of color. At that point the rhetoric about poverty and assistance changed. Whites had always expected African-American women to engage in wage work as opposed to doing family work in their own homes. Congress soon amended the AFDC statute to mandate work programs for its mostly female parents. Then, in 1965, the Moynihan Report announced the demise of the Black family, citing “fatherlessness” as the cause of

family dysfunction. In this period, the two main threads of the discussion were the immorality and the laziness of poor women, erroneously perceived as primarily women of color. The Right's propaganda in this era systematically misled the public by blaming the victim, thereby diverting attention from the structural causes of poverty.

Given this historical background, it would be easy to view the George W. Bush administration's almost singular focus on marriage as a solution to poverty as only the latest initiative in decades of policymaking based on the premise that poverty results from immorality and immorality is cured by marriage. True, the Bush program echoes these age-old attacks on the poor. But this particular initiative is uniquely nefarious for two reasons. First, the Right's "marriage as the solution to poverty" program tries to reframe the discourse by placing the old moralistic rhetoric on an economic foundation. According to the standard prejudices, both sex outside of marriage and "illegitimacy" indicate character flaws that have to be corrected before poor people can pull themselves out of poverty. In the new world of Bush-speak, non-marital relations are an *economic* cause of poverty, so that heterosexual marriage becomes the *only* route out.

Second, the Bush initiative mobilizes flawed research to put a scientific gloss on its mean-spirited and ideologically-driven political program. As is well known, the Bush administration raised the use of junk science to an art form in order to promote the Right's agenda in such diverse fields as reproductive rights and climate change. It took the same approach to social welfare issues.

In *Marriage As A Cure For Poverty? Social Science Through A "Family Values" Lens*, Jean Hardisty demonstrates that the "scientific studies" cited by the Right not only often commit the elementary logical error of relying on "singular causation," but also are often elevated above many stronger studies that reach a conclusion contrary to the Right's ideology. Further, such fundamental standards of research as the size of the research sample or the randomness of the

sample's selection are often downplayed or ignored altogether. Although beginning students in the empirical social sciences are trained to avoid these research deficiencies, this sort of methodology is very often the basis of the Right's "scientific" analysis.

In Hardisty's review of the literature cited to support the assertion that marriage will cure poverty, the Right's spokespersons observe that single parents are poorer than married parents and conclude that, therefore, marriage alleviates poverty. Through simplistic arguments like this, the Right recasts the old moralistic condemnation and reliance on individual fault as an equally simplistic and complementary *economic* argument. Labor market problems and structural economic issues are not considered. Low wage levels, unstable employment for unskilled workers (both for women and the men they might marry), inaccessibility of educational opportunities that could provide class mobility, lack of affordable child care, institutional racism, substandard health care, and unaffordable housing, to name a few additional factors that contribute to poverty, become irrelevant. Structural, distributional inequality disappears from mainstream analysis.

Jean Hardisty has devoted her life to exploring the aspects of U.S. politics and economics that generate race, gender, and class inequality. Her work is unfailingly insightful. It draws on impeccable scholarship and is motivated by a deep commitment to social justice and redistribution. This is what makes her work so deeply relevant to those who work for progressive causes. In this work, she exposes the simplistic mentality and flawed social science "evidence" that has characterized the last eight years of right-wing anti-poverty policy. Hardisty's work provides all of us with tools and insights to respond to and debunk the Right's flawed use of "social science" data. She has made a valuable contribution to rolling back the massive, tragically effective attacks on the poor.

Lucy A. Williams  
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## Acknowledgements

Although I had retired as Executive Director at Political Research Associates (PRA) before I started work on *Marriage as a Cure for Poverty? Social Science through a “Family Values” Lens*, my greatest assistance throughout the research and writing process came from the staff of PRA. I am especially indebted to the editor of *The Public Eye*, Abby Scher and PRA senior researcher, Pam Chamberlain. Katherine Ragsdale, Chip Berlet, Tarso Ramos, and PRA interns Aaron Rothbaum and Maria Planansky were stalwart in their support and assistance. Pam Chamberlain, with whom I have worked for many years, is responsible for the Bibliography and the Index. These are the “extras” that make a report useable and timeless.

I was fortunate during the research and writing process to be a Senior Scholar at the Wellesley Centers for Women and am grateful to its Director, Susan Bailey, for supporting my work for the last four years.

I am also grateful to colleagues who gave me advice and encouragement, including Nancy Folbre, Stephanie Coontz, Bill Tucker, and Lucy A. Williams. And I thank Barbara Klugman of the Ford Foundation for her support for the project and for my work.

I see this report as a first step in a lengthy project I hope will be taken up by others: the thorough examination of the claims of the political movement I call simply “the Right.” Having dominated the U.S. political scene for over 25 years, its ideology and policy arguments have penetrated our culture and institutions.

It is a serious mistake to take the Right’s justifications for its policies at face value. Social science research is no more rigorous than the standards of its practitioners. When those practitioners are using social science trappings to support their ideological positions, it is time for their flawed procedures to be exposed.

I would never claim that it is possible for social science research to be free of the ideological bias of its researchers. Accepting that, it is possible for social scientists to diligently pursue objectivity. I applaud the researchers cited in this book who attempt to interrupt the slick packaging and professional marketing of the U.S. political Right.

–Jean Hardisty

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# Executive Summary

**M***arriage as a Cure for Poverty? Social Science Through a “Family Values” Lens* is the second in a two-part series by political scientist Jean Hardisty. Part One of the series, *Pushed to the Altar: The Right Wing Roots of Marriage Promotion*, explores the intellectual roots and the implementation of the George W. Bush administration’s campaign to promote marriage as a cure for poverty.\*

This report, Part Two, examines conservative marriage promoters’ reliance on questionable research that supports their ideological agenda. Dr. Hardisty critiques the flawed social science behind marriage promotion and exposes the dissemination of ideas by rightist think tanks and movement intellectuals who make dubious—if often influential—claims and point selectively to research that backs those claims.

The U.S. political Right has pursued a campaign to restore the traditional family and claim it as the dominant achievement of men and women in a values-oriented society. This family model often includes a value that places Christianity at the center of family life. With that model in mind, rightists see the poverty often associated with single mothers and their children as the result of a “cultural deficit” on the part of poor communities. They argue that, with the entire free market apparatus available to any American, poverty can only be explained as a personal failing. Further, according to the Right, the failure of low-income women to marry and/or stay married to the father of their children results in an array of social problems, many caused by their “fatherless” children.

The Right promotes these ideas through an echo chamber of pundits, talk radio hosts, newspaper journalists, academics, and think tank researchers that has swept public opinion with a message of old time values. This report reviews the work of the core group of conservative scholars who write in favor of marriage as the cure for poverty: Maggie Gallagher, Director of the Manassas, Virginia-based Institute for

Marriage and Public Policy; Allan C. Carlson, Director of the conservative Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society and former Director of the Rockford Institute; Robert Rector, Senior Research Fellow on Welfare and Family Issues at The Heritage Foundation; Lawrence Mead, Professor of Politics at New York University; and Judith Wallerstein, founder of the Judith Wallerstein Center for the Family in Transition.

Their research, combined with conservative marriage and fatherhood movement organizing, promotes the idea that marriage is a good thing for every *heterosexual* citizen. As a result, some states now dip into scarce federal TANF block grants for welfare recipients to fund marriage and fatherhood programs. These programs are also widespread in the military, bringing a rightist perspective to social issues that have little to do with the national defense.

What follows is a summary of the findings in *Marriage as a Cure for Poverty: Social Science Through a “Family Values” Lens*.

### ***One of the Right’s core arguments for the benefits of marriage violates a fundamental tenet of social science research: using the correlation of two variables to prove causality.***

Rightists argue that, because married women and their children are better off in many ways than are single mothers and their children, the reason for the correlation between marriage and prosperity is the fact of marriage. That is, they assert that because two characteristics of welfare recipients co-occur, one is caused by the other. This is a logical flaw. It draws a conclusion from a single association between two variables that one factor is the cause of the other. Research indeed associates marriage with an increased family wage and finds a positive relationship between greater job stability and higher levels of marriage. But the converse is also true: greater job instability is associated with lower levels of marriage.

\* *Pushed to the Altar: The Right Wing Roots of Marriage Promotion* (Somerville, MA and Oakland, CA: Political Research Associates and Women of Color Resource Center, 2008).



***In arguing that marriage is the cure for women and children who are poor, rightists employ the single causation fallacy.***

It is a fundamental rule of social science that to prove causality, you must consider all factors that might cause the phenomenon being studied. The long list of factors that affect low-income single-mother households, such as poor nutrition, poor housing, poor health care, lack of child care, race and gender discrimination, or lack of jobs, are rarely considered by conservative scholars. They identify marriage as *the* independent variable in family prosperity, and stop there.

For instance, Lawrence Mead and Robert Rector, among others, argue that nonmarital births are an epidemic that is destroying the fabric of society and causing poverty, drug abuse, crime, school failure, and the collapse of the family. This makes the need for government programs to promote marriage seem even more urgent to traditionalists.

***The assertion that liberal antipoverty programs create dependency and discourage individual initiative has been influential, although it doesn't withstand careful scrutiny.***

Rightwing scholars seek to undercut liberalism's approach to poverty which tends to see it as rooted in the economic and social systems that support discrimination by race and gender and marginalization by class, and which sees poverty as itself a cause of many challenges faced by low-income families. The rightist scholars argue liberal programs that address poverty create “dependence”—a vague term that implies an unwillingness to take charge of one's life and accept responsibility for it. This case against liberalism was carefully built, using anecdotes and exaggeration to paint welfare recipients as made dependent by liberal programs.

For instance, teenagers, it was alleged, had babies in order to “go on welfare,” thus assuring their indefinite poverty and dependence. But teenage motherhood had already begun declining in the early 1990s, even before federal legislation denied increased benefits to “welfare” recipients who mothered additional children. Moreover, in contrast to the Right's characterization of unwed mothers as single parents, in 1992 one-third of unwed births were among cohabiting couples (i.e., two-parent households). Today that figure has risen to one-half.

***Social science research is equivocal, at best, about the benefits of marriage in reducing poverty.***

In fact, for a number of reasons, pushing low-income women and men to marry might actually decrease a low-income woman's chances of rising out of poverty and can increase her chances of experiencing domestic violence. Yet this policy has become the centerpiece of welfare reform, foisting on welfare recipients an unproven and questionable “solution” to their poverty in order to get them off the welfare rolls.

***Rightists' claims that women who are married are safer than those who are not rely on anecdotal evidence that fails to meet scholarly standards.***

This assertion, which has been made by Robert Rector and other researchers at the influential Heritage Foundation, should be backed up by hard research and should also take into account “hidden” domestic violence that occurs within marriage, when the woman involved is unable or unwilling to go to the police.

***Rightists minimize or outright deny racism's significant role in creating and maintaining poverty.***

Racism's role in subjecting people to poverty is denied by scholars such as Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom, who argue that *de jure* racial discrimination is now illegal, that institutional racism cannot be “proven,” and that African Americans have made great progress in the past thirty years. Ignoring the role of persistent structural racism creates political “permission” for both the federal and state governments to push women of color off the welfare rolls and to subject them to marriage programs, often offered by religious organizations.

***Studies citing the effectiveness of marriage promotion in reducing poverty fail to control for economic class.***

There are no social scientific studies showing marriage promotion programs “work” as a poverty fighter. Even when marriage promotion programs are classified as having “worked,” that conclusion is often based on the experiences of middle-class couples.

***The rightist fatherhood movement relies on biased scholarship to support its assertion that a family is not complete without the presence of a father.***

Such scholars' claims for the benefits of the presence of a father ignore the institutional and structural factors that make it difficult for low-income women of color to maintain a prosperous household. Rather than advocating for higher and more equitable wages and access to education for low-income women, these scholars argue for low-income women to marry and become dependent on a man. This man is always portrayed as a good provider and father figure, making low-income women appear even more immoral and irrational for opting not to marry.

***Those who promote marriage as a cure for poverty rely on questionable findings regarding the affects of divorce on children.***

The influence of divorce on children is a highly contested area of research, with the strongest scientific evidence challenging the work of Judith Wallerstein, which suggested severe long-term affects on those whose parents divorced. Wallerstein, whose work is widely referenced by marriage promotion advocates, used a very small sample while more recent work by E. Mavis Hetherington looking at 2500 children found that a substantial number of divorced women and some daughters were strengthened by it and "about 75 to 80 percent of adults and children show few serious long-term problems in adjustment."

***Rightist scholars seldom examine the compelling reasons why many low-income women don't marry.***

These scholars consider childbearing outside marriage and children fathered by multiple partners to be "moral" decisions and blame low-income women for their "immoral" behaviors, while ignoring

a range of barriers to marriage. A partial list of such barriers includes disproportionately high rates of incarceration among low-income men; scarce jobs, low wages, and unstable employment for low-income women and men; and increasing acceptance of single motherhood in the larger society. These variables suggest broader reasons for the limited appeal of marriage to many heterosexual low-income women. Women seeking to marry other women face particularly severe legal, cultural, and economic barriers.

Studies show low-income women want to marry only if the marriage will truly stabilize their families and lift them out of poverty. Most are looking for employed wage-earning men, just as most low-income men are looking for employed women.

***Some marriage promotion analysts inject their conservative theological preference for "male headship" into debates over the best policy options for reducing poverty.***

Analysts such as David Blankenhorn and Maggie Gallagher borrow from ideas dominant among conservative evangelicals to argue for "male headship," a concept associated with conservative Christianity which not only assigns ultimate dominance to the father/husband, but also argues that a family does not really exist without his presence.

***In pursuit of their ideological goals, rightist scholars risk violating the social scientist's responsibility not to deceive or manipulate his or her research subjects.***

There is among most social scientists an agreement that social science should not be used to deceive or manipulate the subjects being studied. Scholars attracted to marriage promotion schemes should refrain from justifying government programs that manipulate low-income women to conform to the Right's ideological agenda.

## Introduction

Not everything written in books is true. In the case of nonfiction writing based on social science research, the use of statistics and logical argumentation can increase the aura of truth regardless of the soundness of the research and argumentation. The legitimacy attached to “being published” spills over onto the content of what appears in print. In fact, books filled with misinformation, inaccuracies, and even lies can become influential opinion-shapers.

As a political scientist, I have struggled with the very concept of truth. No matter how critical a reader I think myself to be, I can at times be swayed by a well-written argument, even when the facts referenced are a little thin. But in examining the Right’s campaign to restore the traditional family, I have recoiled at the distortions and exaggerations used to recruit people to the cause. Outrageous oversimplifications, such as “marriage will cure the poverty of poor women,” are passed off as common sense assertions. Significant sectors of the U.S. public often appear to accept these statements and the policies that flow from them as true. After all, they are backed up by books. Books of social science research, no less.

In this report, I will debunk the claim that marriage is a cure for poverty—not because it is the most destructive right-wing policy we have endured since the Reagan revolution, but because it is a case study in the way the Right so often misleads the public. By taking concepts that resonate with the public, such as marriage, family values, and fatherhood, and setting them against their collective sinister opposite—divorce, illegitimacy, and dependency—it is hard to stand up for the sinister side. Rightists offer up what seems like obvious choices. Further, they marshal social science in defense of the path they have already deemed morally virtuous, adding scientific “proof” to moral “truth.” Social science serves as the ultimate proof of the case for the “virtuous” side.

On close examination, social science research is

equivocal, at best, about the benefits of marriage in reducing poverty. In fact, for a number of reasons, urging and pushing low-income women and men to marry might actually decrease a low-income woman’s chances of rising out of poverty and can increase her chances of experiencing domestic violence. Yet this policy has become the centerpiece of welfare reform, foisting on welfare recipients an unproven and questionable “solution” to their poverty in order to get them off the welfare rolls. As an added benefit to the Right, marriage promotion draws funds and attention away from existing programs to address poverty, such as education, housing subsidies, child care, and living wage jobs. These programs were crafted by liberals and therefore must be debunked if the Right is to make its case for more reactionary policies.

How did the Right accomplish such a *coup* against liberal anti-poverty programs? I describe the full marriage promotion campaign in *Pushed to the Altar: The Right Wing Roots of Marriage Promotion*. In this companion report, I focus on the arguments of rightist scholars who deployed their expertise to support their political position, as well as the social science that refutes, or at least complicates, their interpretations. One of their most effective methods is to violate a fundamental tenet of social science research: using the *correlation* of two variables to prove *causality*. That is, they assert that because two characteristics of welfare recipients co-occur, one is caused by the other. An example might be: 1) single mothers who live in poverty often raise children who do not complete high school; therefore, 2) it is the unmarried status of the mother that accounts for the high drop-out rate, not the poverty of both mother and child, and the child’s lack of access to high-quality

*Even as the government defunded welfare programs, it diverted funding to experimental programs not supported by sound social science research.*

## Marriage as a Cure for Poverty?

ity schooling as well as other conditions of life in poverty.

As a social movement, the Right is skillful, highly organized, and sophisticated. It single-handedly created a concept now prominent in U.S. social and political life—“family values.” Originally used as code for antiabortion arguments, the concept resonated with the public and has since come to represent the entire right-wing social agenda, including marriage and fatherhood. As a theme, it has served the Right well, giving a “frame” to its politics of backlash against liberalism and feminism. It also served as a substitute for the outdated and rejected central values of the Old Right—segregationism and overt jingoism.

*If welfare recipients are used by politicians and bureaucrats to test an ideologically driven assertion without basis in social science research, they are surely being deprived of their ability to act as agents of their own destiny.*

The Right has created an echo chamber of pundits, talk radio hosts, newspaper journalists, academics, and think tank researchers that has swept public opinion with a message of old time values. Many of the Right’s policies are promoted and legitimized by social science researchers, most often by those at conservative think tanks, but sometimes by researchers based in colleges and universities. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, conservative aca-

demics and even right-wing movement advocates gained ground within colleges and universities, often at the expense of more liberal-leaning faculty. Outside funding supported their research and publishing and right-wing publications promoted their books.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the echo chamber spreads the “truth” of right-wing scholars far and wide.

The superiority of the traditional heterosexual, nuclear model of the family to any other form of social arrangement is now accepted as popular wisdom. We are told over and over that: married people are healthier; children do better in heterosexual, two-parent families; children suffer all their lives from the scars of their parents’ divorce; and marriage, by doubling the family income, is the road to prosperity.

It seems that politicians and policy makers across the political spectrum accept these “truths.” And, with both good and bad intentions, they are experimenting with the lives of welfare recipients by imposing their faith in marriage on them as a way to

cure a host of social ills. The 2005 Federal Appropriations Act allocated \$100 million annually for five years for the promotion of marriage to advance “Healthy Families” among low-income people. It also designated another \$50 million annually for five years to support “fatherhood” programs.<sup>2</sup> But \$150 million annually is just the tip of the iceberg of federal and state money allocated to programs to promote marriage and fatherhood among low-income people.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the “welfare rolls” have dropped by more than half since President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996, which, among other measures, limits welfare benefits to five years in a lifetime, allows states to deny benefits to children born when their single mothers are on welfare; and stereotypes welfare recipients who do not find jobs as “undeserving.”

For those who still receive welfare benefits, the Bush administration and many state administrations have a stated goal that women should marry and men should thereby become fathers within “properly formed” families. Indeed, this goal was written into the 1996 welfare reform legislation, and recipients of TANF funds are the major target of Bush administration marriage promotion programs. Many right-wing politicians, and centrists as well, support this ideologically driven plan which implicitly stereotypes the women as lacking the skill and motivation to enter marriages and create healthy and stable nuclear families.

During the eight year tenure of President George W. Bush, funding for marriage promotion and fatherhood was generously granted to organizations across the country years before it was mandated legislatively. As noted by Tim Casey of the nonprofit organization Legal Momentum, before the assignment of specific marriage promotion and fatherhood money in the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act, HHS had already committed between \$100 and \$200 million in existing funding to marriage promotion and seemed to believe that it already had the legal authority to spend much more.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, even as the government defunded welfare programs, it diverted funding to experimental programs not supported by sound social science research.

In light of the official policies promoting marriage as a poverty fighter, this report will explore two questions:

- 1) Does social science research support marriage as a solution to poverty for low-income women who received welfare benefits?
- 2) Are the programs that encourage low-income women and men to marry based in a deep knowledge of the realities of their lives, in the many specific ways that low-income life circumstances differ from the circumstances of middle- and upper-income people?

These questions are important. The U.S. public needs to know whether we are wasting huge sums of federal and state dollars in an intrusive, misguided, and ideologically driven set of programs. And the women and children who are affected need to have a voice in the programs that virtually control their lives. If welfare recipients are used by politicians and bureaucrats to test an ideologically driven assertion without basis in social science research, they are surely being deprived of their ability to act as agents of their own destiny. But mainstream journalists have not asked this question of government-supported marriage and fatherhood programs.

The Right’s agenda of restoring the traditional family has resulted in a snow job of bad information that has swayed public opinion. Marriage promotion and fatherhood policies are just one example of the misuse of social science research to promote the Right’s ideological agenda. It is the job of social science researchers to point out the limitations of social science, hard as it may be to be appropriately humble about your own field. As this case study demonstrates, social science can strive for objectivity, but its practitioners should be the first to say that not everything written in books is true.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ellen Messer-Davidow, “Manufacturing the Attack on Liberalized Higher Education,” *Social Text*, vol. 36, Fall, 1993, 40-80.

<sup>2</sup> “Welfare Reauthorization in the 109th Congress: An Overview.” Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, August 8, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See: Jean Hardisty, *Pushed to the Altar: The Right-Wing Roots of Marriage Promotion*, (companion report to this report) (Somerville, MA and Oakland: Political Research Associates and The Women of Color Resource Center, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Casey, “HHS Marriage Promotion Activities,” *Legal Momentum*, May 20, 2005. Available in the files of the author. Because the Bush administration promotes the funding of faith-based groups, a substantial percentage of marriage promotion and fatherhood funding goes, and will continue to go, to those groups.

# Marriage as a Cure for Poverty?

## THE “CULTURE OF POVERTY” ARGUMENT

Even before the creation of marriage promotion programs as putative poverty fighters, scholars on the Right embarked on a campaign to dismantle the Depression-era welfare program by charging that the “liberal welfare system” itself was a cause of poverty and a host of social ills. In the eyes of the Right, not only was that system a major factor in creating social problems, but it also depleted character and created dependence, as well as allowed underserving recipients to engage in fraud and to have babies in order to collect welfare.

*Murray, Mead, and Gilder all cite many sources to legitimate the claims they make about liberalism’s failures. But they seldom, if ever, examine counter-evidence.*

This argument was central to the New Right’s political agenda in the 1980s and 1990s, and has now become so established in the public mind that a return to “welfare as we knew it” seems unlikely. It was only a few short steps from opposing liberal poverty-fighting policies to promoting marriage and other moral “solutions” to the ills of the poor.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 government report on the Black family was an early inspiration. He concluded that female-headed households were dysfunctional and that the African-American community was plagued by “fatherlessness,” resulting in a culture of pathology.<sup>1</sup> It was an early example of bad science: reducing the explanation for phenomena as complex as family formation and poverty alleviation to one single causal factor: heterosexual marriage. Yet his work was enormously influential in creating support for the conservative goal of dismantling social welfare supports for poor people—and highlighting the problems of single parent families.

In later decades, right-wing scholars and politicians—including George Gilder, an independent author supported by right-wing foundations, Patrick Fagan and Robert Rector, both originally of the Heritage Foundation, Charles Murray of the American Enterprise Institute, and Lawrence Mead, now at New York University—asserted a link between liberal welfare programs and poverty. Gilder himself devotes a full chapter of his influential 1981 book *Wealth and Poverty* to “The Coming Welfare Boom,” arguing that:

[Sociological] studies focus on poverty and unemployment as the prime factors in family breakdown because the scholars fail to comprehend that to a great extent, poverty and unemployment, and even the largely psychological conditions of “unemployability,” are chiefly reflections of family deterioration.... In the welfare culture money becomes not something earned by men through hard work, but a right conferred on women by the state.<sup>2</sup>

Two African-American scholars, Thomas Sowell and Walter Williams, played prominent roles in Black conservative circles and as spokespersons for this position. They argued that both liberal programs and even the civil rights movement created the poverty of the urban Black community—interfering with the “natural” benefits of the free market system and steering African Americans away from self-help and capital accumulation.<sup>3</sup> Their answer to liberalism was the work of another Black conservative, Robert Woodson, whose Washington, DC-based National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise trained young people in free market economics and criticized welfare programs as “handouts.”

Charles Murray went so far as to suggest that welfare benefits influenced African-American behavior:

Black behavior toward both marriage and out-of-wedlock child-bearing during the period in which welfare benefits rose so swiftly behaved exactly as one would predict if one expected welfare to discourage women from getting married and induced single women to have babies.<sup>4</sup>

By the early 1980s, the negative stereotype of the “welfare queen” was fully developed and actively marketed by the New Right and President Ronald Reagan.<sup>5</sup> The Heritage Foundation has justifiably been accused of: cherry-picking its research findings; drawing conclusions not intended by the researchers it quotes; and confusing correlation with causality.<sup>6</sup> The same can be said for two researchers who have played key roles in demonizing welfare recipients and liberalism. The politically influential books of NYU professor Lawrence Mead and Charles Murray of the American Enterprise Institute do not even make an effort to appear in favor of delivering relief to poor people. Mead, in his 1986 book *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship*, focused on a lack of work ethic among welfare recipients and blamed liberal entitlement programs for increasing the despair of “the poor.” He says:

Federal benefits transferred federal payments to the poor, but they also took responsibility for their lives *from* them. It was a devil’s bargain. The moral lessons most people learn, that they must work and take care of their families if they are to prosper, were blocked for much of the underclass by federal policy. Society normally exacts work or other contributions from its



George Gilder in his 1981 book *Wealth and Poverty* heralded a wave of conservative authors who blame the welfare state for the disintegration of low-income families.

Brian W. Smith/Time and Life Pictures

members in return for support. Government demands no such reciprocity from its dependents, and that helps explain why so many exist on the fringes of society. (Emphasis in the original)<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in 1986, Mead made the case for the changes wrought by welfare reform passed by Congress in 1996. That is, if people need assistance from the government to support themselves and their children, then they must go to work. In any case, that assistance will only be provided for five years during a lifetime.

We see the logical conclusion of Mead’s analysis in the new rule known as child exclusion or “family cap.” This provides what Mead would deem an appropriate punishment by the government in response to an unmarried welfare recipient’s pregnancy—that she not be provided any additional assistance to support her new family member. This policy is intended to halt the “pathology” of mothers receiving welfare

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giving birth to children.

Murray, Mead, and Gilder all cite many sources to legitimate the claims they make about liberalism's failures during the 1960s and 1970s. But they seldom, if ever, examine counter-evidence. Another reading of the period by Michael B. Katz, Stanley I. Sheerr Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania and a Fellow of the Princeton Institute of Advanced Studies and the Russell Sage Foundation, argues that in the last decades three great forces—a ferocious assault on “dependence”; the devolution of authority from the federal government to the states; and the application of market models to social policy—have affected every element of the social contract and redefined both Republican and Democratic policy and rhetoric.

Katz notes that:

Although the Great Society did not alter the structure of social welfare, its accomplishments belie the contemporary conventional wisdom that either ignores or belittles the great achievements of the era. Between

1965 and 1972, the government transfer programs lifted about half the poor over the poverty line. Between 1959 and 1980, the proportion of elderly poor people dropped, almost entirely as a result of government transfer programs, from 35 percent to 16 percent. Medicare and Medicaid improved health care dramatically.... Between 1965 and 1972, poor women began to consult physicians far more often during pregnancy, and infant mortality dropped 33 percent. Food stamps successfully reduced hunger, and housing programs lessened overcrowding and the number of people living in substandard housing.<sup>8</sup>

In 2005, six well-respected social scientists published their study of child outcomes, posing the question of their title, “Are Public Expenditures Associated with Better Child Outcomes in the U.S.? A Comparison Across 50 States.” They studied the indicators of: child mortality, elementary school test scores, and adolescent behavioral outcomes. They



Dante Sheppard, of Baltimore, Maryland, holds up a support traditional marriage car magnet during the Washington Briefing of the 2006 Values Voter Summit.

Brendan Smialowski/Getty Images



found a strong relationship between state generosity toward children and children’s well-being.<sup>9</sup> It would seem that liberal poverty programs were reasonably effective in reducing poverty after all.

### PROMOTING FAMILY CHANGE THROUGH WELFARE REFORM

Promoting marriage among welfare recipients as a means to address poverty and to restore the model of the traditional family explicitly aims to change mores and this campaign has its academic backers. New York University’s Lawrence Mead — the culture of poverty theorist — laid out the reasoning for deploying welfare reform as a means of obtaining cultural change in family patterns: the government has a right to withhold support from women for their failure to comply with its rules (such as not finding a job or getting pregnant while on welfare).

This argument advances a long-standing Republican Party value of reducing government for social welfare expenditures. But for right-wing analysts, government policies should also force changes in recipients’ behavior, thus using government policy to manipulate individuals. Speaking of the development of the ideas behind welfare reform, Mead himself says, in his 1992 book, *The New Politics of Poverty*:

In an inversion of the progressive pattern, Republicans were now more willing than their opponents to deploy federal power, at least to enforce mores. Traditionally, Republicans had defended local governments against regimentation from Washington, but now Democratic governors and the American Public Welfare Association defended localities against the Republican participation rules. Local officials wanted “funding” and “flexibility” from Washington, not standards.<sup>10</sup>

He targets the “sociological approach” or “the sociological outlook” as the source of wrong-headed thinking and frequently backs up his statements with the work of colleagues of his conservative political stripe, such as George Gilder, Charles Murray, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. In critiquing the sociological approach he describes it as:

...the tendency to view social problems always from the viewpoint of the client, not of society. Since most people understand their behavior in self-justifying ways, the effect is to deny government any authority to *ask* them to behave differently. (Emphasis added)<sup>11</sup>

Mead and his allies deploy their own research to argue that, from the standpoint of the “Culture of Poverty” thesis, nonmarital births are an epidemic that is destroying the fabric of society and causing the collapse of the family. This makes the need for government programs to promote marriage seem even more urgent to traditionalists.

In 1996, Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation wrote that, “Family collapse is the root cause of other social problems: poverty, crime, drug abuse, and school failure.” Yet he makes a common mistake that will continue through the George W. Bush welfare programs; in looking at the number of poor children with unmarried mothers, he implies a causal link between these two variables without examining whether these two variables are otherwise related. He simply writes, “Children born out of wedlock are seven times more likely to be poor than are those born to couples who stay married.” He goes on to call for explicit programs to address “illegitimacy” in what was to become welfare reform legislation.<sup>12</sup> It would seem that his view prevailed, since the 1996 welfare reform legislation passed by Congress included the “family cap” provision.

To win “family cap” in the national legislation, conservatives mischaracterized early research on state experiments with family caps enacted before the passage of welfare reform in 1996, says Michael J. Camasso, whose “Rutgers Study” on New Jersey’s family cap was often cited by organizations on both sides of the family cap debate.<sup>13</sup> He complains that:

This research, my research, was beginning to receive close scrutiny by politicians and the interest groups and policy experts who sought to influence the future course of welfare reform as a values-instilling initiative. What I was about to learn was that the

*Mead and his allies argue that nonmarital births are an epidemic that is destroying the fabric of society and causing the collapse of the family.*

Family Cap research conducted by my colleagues and me was released into an environment where, Hugh Hecho describes, “the past lack of trustworthy, understandable information has poisoned both public understanding and the politics of welfare reform,” where emotion and reason blend too easily in a red state-blue state kaleidoscope, and where, in Larry Mead’s words, political groups appear neither accountable to each other nor to the facts. As we shall see, it is an environment where great efforts are expended to control the meaning and influence of research findings.<sup>14</sup>



Mary Ann Glendon, traditional family advocate and U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican, meets with Pope Benedict XVI in February 2008.

AFP/Getty Images

Camasso says his findings were mischaracterized by those suggesting that single motherhood among welfare recipients is, essentially, deviant behavior that should be changed and molded by the government and that welfare recipients had children in order to obtain greater welfare benefits.

The Right’s attack on welfare also had a racial spin, as many scholars have noted: conservatives painted the “bad” welfare recipient as a young African-American woman even though African

Americans have never been a majority of welfare recipients (though they are disproportionately low-income).<sup>15</sup>

Teenage “illegitimate” childbirth was often used in the campaign for welfare reform to demonize welfare recipients. Teenagers, it was alleged, had babies in order to “go on welfare,” thus assuring their indefinite poverty and dependence. But teenage motherhood had already begun declining in the early 1990s, even before federal welfare reform legislation was enacted. Moreover, one-third of unwed births were among cohabiting couples in 1992. The figure is one-half today.<sup>16</sup> From 1991 until 2004 teen birth rates (per 1000 births) for women aged 15-19 dropped from 61.8 to 41.1, a drop of 20%. For girls in the 10-14 age group, the drop was an even greater, 50%.<sup>17</sup> As sociologist Scott Coltrane points out: “Remarkably, the marriage crusaders are able to avoid mentioning

the fact that ...teenage birthrates have been declining for almost a decade.”<sup>18</sup>

### SUPPORTING THE “NATURAL FAMILY” AGAINST DIVORCE CULTURE

Government policy promoting marriage gains power from conservative notions that the heterosexual nuclear family headed by a man is both natural and the basis of a free and democratic society. Yet the love-based heterosexual nuclear family is not a long-standing model, but rather an invention of the late 18th Century. Prior to the dominance of love as a reason to marry (still not universally accepted throughout western industrialized societies), marriage had been primarily a financial or political arrangement.<sup>19</sup> In the contemporary conservative model in western countries, a woman belongs to a family by virtue of her birth into it, but she must undergo a marriage to form a new family. Thus an unmarried daughter, no matter what partnership she may form, is a member of her parent’s family; she has not formed her own family. Slavery denied this model to African Americans in the United States, who were considered to be property and often sold away from their own families.

In conservative, White American culture, it is the presence of a father as well as a mother that makes a family. This argument has gained visibility in recent years as a result of the increased political influence of Christian Right voters and organizations that use the “natural family” as a counter-argu-

*The Carlson and Mero book features 225 footnotes, so it would likely be seen by the average reader as a work of social science. That appearance is, undoubtedly, intended.*

ment to the increasing acceptance of same-sex marriage and single motherhood.

Another equally popular and politically dynamic analysis of the family swirls around the issue of single mothers raising children. In the rightist analysis now prominent in federal and state policy toward Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients, children raised without a father are most likely doomed. This belief can be found in the work of Maggie Gallagher, David Blankenhorn and James Q. Wilson.<sup>20</sup>

A God- and religion-centered home life, characterized by a stable marriage and successful children, is not only a fundamental conservative Christian value, but also a well-established myth in our culture. The Right—both secular and Christian—has exploited this myth by maintaining that: 1) this family model was the reality of the 1940s and 1950s; and 2) its decline accounts for contemporary social problems, such as drug use, crime, and poverty.

Weighing in on behalf of the Christian Right, Allan Carlson, founder and President of the Rockford, Illinois-based Howard Center for Family, Religion & Society and formerly affiliated with the ultraconservative Family Research Council, has published the definitive right-wing statement on the family. Titled *The Natural Family: A Manifesto* and co-authored with Paul T. Mero, president of the Sutherland Institute, a conservative Utah policy think tank, the book begins with a paean to the heterosexual nuclear family:

A just political life also flows out of natural family homes. True sovereignty originates here. These homes are the source of ordered liberty, the fountain of real democracy, the seedbed of virtue.... States exist to protect families and to encourage family growth and integrity.<sup>21</sup>

There is no evidence cited to back up this description of the “natural family,” but for the reader, it is alarming to read that the natural family is in crisis. Carlson and Mero say:

And yet, the natural family — *part of the created order, imprinted on our natures, the source of bountiful joy, the fountain of new life,*



*the bulwark of ordered liberty—stands reviled and threatened in the early twenty-first century. (Emphasis in the original)*<sup>22</sup>

The villains are industrialization and The Sixties. And it doesn't take Carlson and Mero long to get to the policy recommendations that follow from their manifesto's principles. Some of them are simply family-friendly and are supported by many people, such as financial allowances for a mother so she could stay at home to provide day-

care for her pre-school child, and increased per-capita child tax deductions and credits. But other of their recommendations are reactionary and threaten the gains in women's rights over the past thirty years, such as restoring “fault” as the only grounds for divorce, and “family impact” legislation that:

- (1) recognizes the pre-existing nature of the family,
- (2) includes a normative definition of the natural family
- (3) includes a check on actions that would be unfriendly to the family
- (4) provides tools for assessing whether an action will maintain or undercut the family.<sup>23</sup>

Carlson and Mero subtitle their book “A Manifesto,” which gives them leeway to express their views without the need to provide social science evidence for them. But the book features 225 footnotes, so it would likely be seen by the average reader as a work of social science. That appearance is, undoubtedly, intended.

David Blankenhorn, Mary Ann Glendon, David Popenoe, Barbara Defoe Whitehead and Maggie Gallagher employ a somewhat less simplistic analysis to promote restoring the traditional family model.<sup>24</sup> They see a national threat in the decline of the American family and blame feminism and an increase in personal liberty. Blankenhorn and Gallagher, though recognizing that the needs and conditions of the traditional family have changed, nevertheless argue for “male headship,” a concept associated with conservative Christianity which not

*Contrary to the Right's alarmist message about the death of marriage, the actual rate of divorce and nonmarital births has been declining.*

only assigns ultimate dominance to the father/husband, but also argues that a family does not really exist without his presence.<sup>25</sup> The critique and recommendations of all these writers are substantially reflected in the “welfare reform” policies of marriage and fatherhood promotion.

Although both “pro-family” and “family diversity” activists and researchers at times rely on an ideological lens and anecdotal evidence, for those who are conservative evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, their reading of the Bible is an adequate defense of traditional marriage and male headship. Much like battles over reading the U.S. Constitution, people can read the Bible literally or take it as a guide for an evolving Christianity. For more secular right-wing analysts, alarming statistics about rising divorce rates and increasing rate of out-of-wedlock births are reason enough to raise the flag for traditional marriage.

But contrary to the Right’s alarmist message about the death of marriage, the actual rate of divorce and nonmarital births has been declining. According to Arlington, VA anti-divorce attorney John Crouch, Director of Americans for Divorce Reform, who describes himself as “a divorce lawyer who believes in discouraging, restricting and reducing divorce.”<sup>26</sup>

There is consensus that the overall U.S. divorce rate had a brief spurt after World War II followed by a decline, then

started rising in the 1960s and even more quickly in the 1970s, then leveled off in the 1980s and declined slightly. (A decline in the divorce rate, however, does not necessarily reduce married people’s perceived exposure and vulnerability to the risk of a financially and personally ruinous divorce or decades-long custody war. It also reflects fewer and later marriages).<sup>27</sup>

The statistics that underlie Crouch’s analysis are assembled by the National Vital Statistics Reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Center for Health Statistics.<sup>28</sup> Specifically, the divorce rate has declined almost one point since 1991:

### Divorce rate per 1000 population:

1991	4.7
1996	4.4
1998	4.3
2003	3.8
2007	3.6

Restoring the stigma that for many years attached to divorce (especially for women) does nothing for the decline in income and standard of living that a woman and her children face after a divorce. The strategy of the Right is to maintain a marriage through any level of adult unhappiness “for the sake of the children.”

## FAMILY INCOME AND SINGLE PARENTING

While women receiving welfare benefits have long been demonized for their supposed loose morals, laziness, and drug use,<sup>29</sup> only recently has the federal government concluded that the relationship between single motherhood and mother and child poverty is caused by the absence of a male breadwinner and father figure. This absence, the argument goes, creates a “culture of poverty” that is characterized by drug use, crime, and sexual irresponsibility.

Certain facts are uncontested by researchers of all political stripes. Less than half of women and men in the United States are now married. Journalists and researchers often claim that fifty percent of those who do marry go on to divorce, though the meaning of that figure is controversial and the statistics themselves may not be entirely accurate. The collection of detailed data by the federal government was suspended in January 1996 due to budgetary considerations. Statistics are now collected by each state’s health department.<sup>30</sup>

But there is little disagreement that the United States has the highest rate of children living in poverty of any industrialized western country.<sup>31</sup> Fifty two percent of “low income” children — 15 million — live in families headed by their single mothers; 48 percent, or 13.6 million low income children, live with married parents.<sup>32</sup> Put another way, 38.4 percent of children in single parent households are low income, compared to 8.4 percent of children in two parent households.<sup>33</sup> (See box on definition of poverty.) It does seem that divorce and/or single motherhood can lead to poverty for both the mother and her chil-

*Restoring the stigma that for many years attached to divorce (especially for women) does nothing for the decline in income and standard of living that a woman and her children face after a divorce.*

dren. The drop in income is larger for White women as a whole than for Black women, whose family incomes were comparatively much lower when they were married.<sup>34</sup> In the face of these statistics, right-wing think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Manhattan Institute promote marriage by arguing that: 1) the association between poverty and single motherhood means that the first is caused by the second; and 2) the reason for the decline in heterosexual nuclear family formation is the liberal welfare system of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s.

Maggie Gallagher, Director of the Manassas, Virginia-based Institute for Marriage and Public

Policy, is perhaps today's most prominent right-wing proponent of marriage as a cure for poverty. In books and articles, she documents a strong association between poverty and single status, and an equally strong association between increased net worth and marriage.

After accurately documenting these two associations—between poverty and households headed by a single parent, and higher net worth of those who are married—Gallagher, like Rector before her, then makes the significant error of assigning causality to association. She claims that, because low-income women are so often single, then it must be the case that their singleness causes their poverty. Gallagher concludes: “Married people earn more money and build more wealth than their single counterparts, because they are married.”<sup>35</sup>

Such broad simplifications are at the heart of the difference between right-wing and liberal social policy. For conservative analysts, the explanation for poverty lies in the cultural deficiencies of the poor. For liberals, the cause of poverty lies in the economic and social system that supports discrimination by race and gender, marginalization by class, and unequal opportunities associated with both.

The Bush administration and its allies at the Heritage Foundation and within the marriage and fatherhood movements correctly claim that women who are married to men have higher incomes than single women. They also assert that divorce results in a downward financial plunge for many women. From these correct claims, they conclude that marriage is the cure for poverty for low-income women. This is a logical flaw known as “single causation.” It draws a conclusion from a single association between two variables that one factor is the sole explanatory one. Single motherhood is associated with poverty. Married motherhood is less associated with poverty. Therefore marriage is the cure for poverty.

Of course, multiple factors create poverty and wealth and the real challenge is to identify which of those many factors are the most important ones. To do that, a researcher would have to list all the factors associated with poverty and all those that inhibit wealth accumulation—an exercise seldom undertaken by right-wing researchers, who focus on culture

### DEFINING POVERTY

Debates over the effectiveness of anti-poverty programs all flounder over the difficulties of tracking poverty using federal poverty statistics.

In general, the quality of “data” varies enormously, depending on:

- the uniformity and transparency of collection techniques,
- the reliability of sources (including self-reporting individuals),
- the efforts of the person reporting the data to report without bias.

A popular saying in the social sciences is “garbage in, garbage out.” That is, if the data are not good, the researcher's analysis will be flawed. In the case of poverty statistics, the data are particularly problematic because: 1) these data often rely on self-reporting; 2) the definition of “poverty” changes (often for political reasons); and 3) “poverty” is a category that can encompass a broad range of standards of living. It is very easy to manipulate the interpretation of these data to make an argument that poverty is increasing or decreasing.

Further, the “poverty line” is based on a statistical technique developed in the mid-1960s by Mollie Orshansky, a researcher who intended it to be used only for her own research. The resulting calculation has been updated only to account for inflation. Recommendations have been made repeatedly over the years since to improve the method of calculating poverty, but in each case, a new and better method would undoubtedly raise the number of those calculated to be living in poverty. Such a change would be a political liability for the politicians under whose administration it occurred.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor*, 115-117.

*The advice of the marriage movement is not that women be paid a gender-equitable wage so that they are able to support their children, but that they become dependent on a man by marrying.*

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and behavior rather than other factors such as institutional racism, substandard health care, unaffordable housing, low-wage jobs or no job opportunities, and lack of affordable child care.

A more plausible thesis is that, because both low-income and higher income women and men are trending away from marriage, low-income women are responding to many of the same factors that are causing the universal U.S. trend. Although low-income women are most often condemned for bearing children as single mothers, sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kafalas conclude after five years of study of low-income women that “...now there are few differences between the poor and the affluent in attitudes and values toward marriage.” (Emphasis in the original)<sup>36</sup>

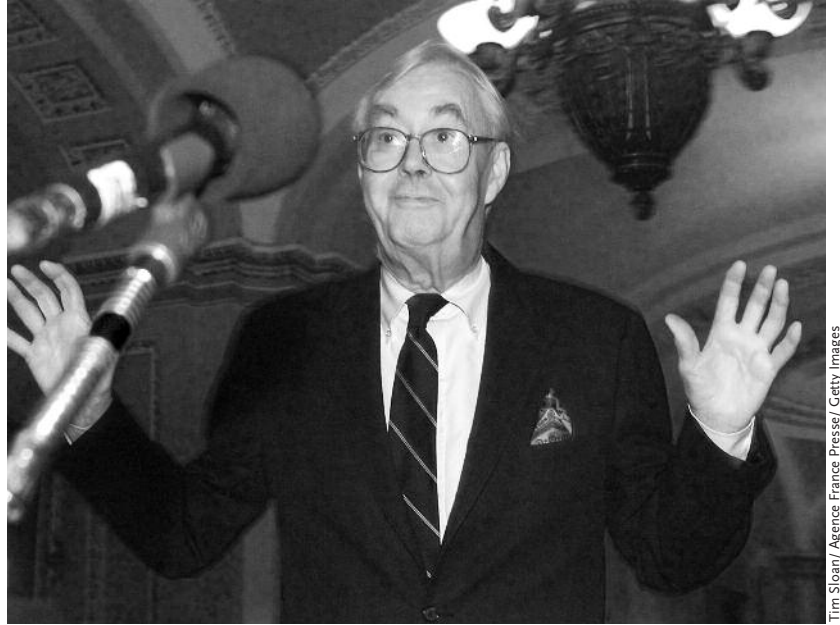
Further, the Bush administration fails to point out that a major underlying cause for single mothers’

*Research associates marriage with an increased family wage and finds a positive relationship between greater job stability and higher levels of marriage. But the converse is also true: greater job instability is associated with lower levels of marriage.*

poverty is that women are not able to earn the wages earned by men, especially if the single mother lacks formal education, so it is more difficult for single mothers to find a job that pays enough to support themselves and their children. When a woman is the sole provider for herself and her children, the wage gap between women and men can determine the prosperity of the family. Women working full-time in the paid labor force earn 23 percent less than men despite their superior levels of educational attainment. Women at every educational level continue to earn less

than men at the same level, and almost always even less than men at the educational level below them.<sup>37</sup> And while 16 percent of single father households have incomes below the poverty line, 32 percent of single-mother households do.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, a growing body of literature that examines the increase in single motherhood among mid-



Tim Sloan/ Agence France Presse/ Getty Images

Before becoming a U.S. Senator from New York, Daniel Patrick Moynihan made a name for himself as the author of *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, “The Moynihan Report,” which blamed the “pathology” of the African-American family for fatherlessness and poverty.

dle-class and professional women shows that being single on its own is not necessarily a major predictor of poverty. “Today, the typical woman who gives birth outside of marriage is more likely to be White than Black, and more likely to be an adult than a teenager. That wasn’t true a generation ago,” reports the Pew Research Center.<sup>39</sup> Qualitative studies catching up with some of today’s middle-class single mothers—who may be single due to divorce, parenthood in a lesbian couple where the mother is usually counted as “single,” or the decision to parent children without a partner—share stories of those who tend not to experience poverty as the result of bearing or adopting children.<sup>40</sup> Although the Right may attack them for their “selfishness” in deciding to raise a child without a father present,<sup>41</sup> sociologists often praise them as women who have taken charge of their lives and are courageously exercising their own agency. They are not poor, tend to be successful in raising well-balanced children (including boys), and live in an increasingly accepting mainstream culture.<sup>42</sup>

Men, who earn more and are unlikely to be single heads of household, bring their higher earning power to the family when they wed (though lack of education among men also traps them in lower wage work). The advice of the marriage movement is not that women be paid a gender-equitable wage so that

they are able to support their children, but that they become dependent on a man by marrying.

There is widespread agreement among researchers that the two greatest predictors to leaving poverty are education and a good job.<sup>43</sup> Yet the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act cut the funding available for welfare recipients to participate in education and a Republican-controlled Congress refused to raise the minimum wage for nine years. It was only raised in 2007, when Democrats gained control of Congress. It is clear that, in the fight to end poverty, ideology often trumps facts.

Perhaps the cut-back for welfare recipients of access to education (and the childcare necessary to participate in it) is meant to placate voters who argue that welfare recipients do not deserve to have a social benefit (education) that many non-recipients either cannot afford or do not want to access. This sort of attack on welfare is part and parcel of the demonization of welfare recipients as undeserving, not unfortunate. It is hard to imagine any other explanation, since an educated worker is far more likely to get a living wage job, and need less help from the government over her/his lifetime.<sup>44</sup> As researcher Mary Jo Bane puts it, “Investments in education at all levels, from preschool to graduate school, have been shown to have important effects on income poverty as well as to enhance human flourishing by increasing cognitive capabilities.”<sup>45</sup>

Many low-wage jobs do not pay enough to support a family and allow the family to live without welfare benefits. On October 12, 2006, 650 economists, including five Nobel Prize winners, published a call for an increase in the federal minimum wage, then set at \$5.15 an hour, saying the value of the last increase, in 1997, had been “fully eroded.” They stated that the real value of today’s federal minimum wage was less than at any time since 1951. The scientists stated, “We believe that a modest increase in the minimum wage would improve the well-being of low-wage workers...and that research has shown that most of the beneficiaries are adults, most are female, and the vast majority are members of low-income working families.”<sup>46</sup> In recognition that a family cannot live at the current federal minimum wage, 22 states and the District of Columbia had set their minimum wages above the federal level.

Unlike this policy recommendation, which is based on the research and opinion of economists, the politics of the George W. Bush administration make no connection between the minimum wage and

poverty. Instead, marriage remains the centerpiece of its policy for welfare recipients. Fortunately, soon after the 2006 election, a “new” Congress passed the Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2007, providing for an incremental increase in the Federal minimum wage, beginning at \$5.85/hr and culminating at \$7.25/hr in 2009.<sup>47</sup>

Factors that mitigate against welfare recipients securing living wage jobs include: 1) the economic fallout from the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that has encouraged many industrial and manufacturing concerns to move “offshore” to another country in search of lower wages; 2) a lack of public transportation in rural areas, where job locations may be one or two counties away; 3) the awarding of contracts to move welfare recipients into jobs to private firms with little or no experience in this area; 4) difficulties with childcare due to delayed payments by the state to childcare workers or long waiting lists to access child care; and 5) race discrimination based on age-old patterns of African Americans’ holding low-skill, low-wage jobs (now also true for immigrant workers who do not have access to welfare benefits).<sup>48</sup>

Research associates marriage with an increased family wage and finds a positive relationship between greater job stability and higher levels of marriage. But the converse is also true: greater job instability is associated with lower levels of marriage. Job instability is increasing among young men of all classes. In a 2004 Urban Institute study that does not focus on low-income workers, researchers find that “job instability contributes to reductions in wages and that high job turnover and low wages reduce the likelihood of getting and remaining married.” They also find “robust evidence that marriage leads to higher job stability and higher wage rates” and, based on their findings, the authors recommend a combined jobs and marriage initiative.<sup>49</sup> The Bush administration, defying even the most widely-accepted social science research on poverty reduction, has pursued only the policy of marriage promotion. Stable jobs, good wages, and an end to wage discrimination by gender and by race are not included in its agenda.

*The Bush administration, defying even the most widely-accepted social science research on poverty reduction, has pursued only the policy of marriage promotion.*

### BARRIERS TO MARRIAGE AND POVERTY REDUCTION

Marriage proponents argue that single, low-income women are poor because they are unmarried. However, historian Stephanie Coontz and economist Nancy Folbre argue that they are unmarried because they are poor. Poverty makes it difficult for people to marry or sustain stable relationships, and marriage is not the cure-all for poverty that its proponents claim. Marriage itself does not address the condition of poverty, whereas job training, education, and child care do.<sup>50</sup>

*Conservatives do not suggest programs to counteract the family disruption caused by mandatory prison sentencing or the “war on drugs” when they seek to address marriage among low-income women.*

Coontz is always careful to give credit to the arguments of rightist authors when it is warranted. She agrees that a healthy marriage is good for all involved, but also sees the poverty of most unmarried welfare recipients as the result of multiple, interactive causes. Because these external causes can be so daunting, marriage cannot, under most circumstances, act as a magic bullet to end the poverty of a single mother and her children.<sup>51</sup> For instance, income in the United States is more unequally distributed than in other developed countries, and low-income women face child care costs, a

low-wage workforce, and, often, a lack of education.

Further, it is clear that there is a shortage of employed, single men in low-income communities, although those men are presumed to be available in the design of marriage promotion programs. An absence of jobs and affordable housing locks single men, as well as women, into an income that is inadequate to support a family. And the Fragile Families Survey, based at Princeton University, finds that unmarried fathers are twice as likely as married ones to have a physical or psychological problem that interferes with their ability to find or keep a job and are several times more likely to abuse drugs.<sup>52</sup>

Although low-income women highly value and seek marriage, they face barriers to marriage, even marriage late in life, not faced by middle-class women. These include: high levels of incarceration among the marriageable men in their circles; joblessness, low wages and unstable employment available to them and the men they might marry; lack of

education that might improve their class mobility; and a history of “bad luck with men” (including violence, divorce, and abandonment) that both result from their poverty and contribute to it. These barriers, and the increasing acceptability of single motherhood, make marriage a hard sell to the mothers receiving welfare benefits, and create enormous pressure on families of all types. Yet by interpreting such social ills as being *caused* by single mother families, marriage promotion scholars fail to support programs that would help women and poor communities face these challenges.<sup>53</sup>

Ironically, boosting wages may be one of the easiest ways to improve conditions so that poor women who want to marry do marry. Wages at the lower end of wage distribution have fallen since 1973. A February 2007 report by Gordon L. Berlin of the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) documents those declining wages and makes the case that:

The problems of falling wages and single parenthood are intertwined. As the wages of men with a high school education or less began to tumble, their employment rates also fell, and, in turn, the share of men who could support a family above the poverty line began to decline – and with it the professed willingness of low-income mothers and fathers to marry.<sup>54</sup>

Aggravating the systemic decline in wages among low-income women and men are the loss of union jobs, the flight of jobs to the suburbs and out of the country, and the loss of jobs due to automation.<sup>55</sup> As after-tax income inequality increases, not only does the gap between rich and poor grow dramatically, but the ability of a low-wage job to support a family declines.<sup>56</sup>

Low income women and men need a variety of tools to help them overcome barriers to their prosperity as married or unmarried couples. First, they need help — in the form of child care, and food and housing assistance—to support themselves in the face of ever-lower wages. Without this basic assistance, a vicious cycle of job instability and related marital instability will doom their chances of rising out of poverty. But equally important is that public policy address the low wages and instability of jobs typically held by low-income workers. An initiative that addresses marriage alone and not jobs, wages,





Ron Wurzer/ Getty Images

Christian groups mobilized 20,000 supporters of traditional marriage at a rally in Seattle on May Day, 2004 where James Dobson of Focus on the Family was a highlighted speaker. One hundred counterprotesters from Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays also attended.

and job stability will surely fail.<sup>57</sup>

Another barrier to marriage among low-income couples is a dramatic increase in rates of incarceration and the disproportionately high rate of incarceration of men of color. According to The Sentencing Project, increasingly draconian sentencing policies, especially regarding drug arrests, have resulted in a 500 percent increase in prison incarcerations in the last 30 years, and an incarceration rate of 715 per 100,000. The United States leads internationally in this ratio. Much of that increase is the result of changes in sentencing laws.<sup>58</sup> And recent research predicts that the number of inmates in U.S. prisons will rise by 13 percent in the period of 2007 to 2011. Without changes in mandatory sentencing and drug laws, one of every 178 Americans will be incarcerated in all but four states in 2011.<sup>59</sup>

Two-thirds of the people in prison are now racial and ethnic minorities. For Black men in their twenties, one in eight is in prison or jail on any given day. This trend has been intensified by the disproportionate impact of the “war on drugs,” with three-fourths of all persons in prison for drug offenses now being people of color.<sup>60</sup>

In addition to a steep increase in male incarceration, especially among men of color, the number of women in prison since 1980 has increased at nearly double the rate of men. Thirty percent of women prisoners are African American and sixteen percent are Latinas. In 1997, 65% of women in state prisons were parents of minor children, compared with 55% of men. Two-thirds of mothers incarcerated in state prison had lived with their children prior to their arrest.<sup>61</sup>

In low-income neighborhoods, both mothers and fathers are often cycling in and out of prison, many men are “missing” due to incarceration and as a result, family stability is frequently disrupted by a loss of economic support, the burden of providing emotional support to a loved one in prison, and the stigma of incarceration.<sup>62</sup> Despite these devastating conditions, conservatives do not suggest programs to counteract the family disruption caused by mandatory prison sentencing or the “war

*Changing social attitudes among low-income women correspond to changing attitudes in the country as a whole and are a major factor in many decisions not to marry.*

## Marriage as a Cure for Poverty?

on drugs” when they seek to address marriage among low-income women.

Access to post-secondary education is another barrier to the interrelated goals of financial stability and family health. Prior to the passage of The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) in 1996, Assistance to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) had incorporated education provisions as a part of programs to address poverty. But in the run-up to the passage of PRWORA, an analysis that education failed to help recipients to address their poverty gained in popularity. Its principal social science legitimizing study by the

*51% of unmarried mothers and 60% of unmarried fathers say they would prefer marriage to cohabitation. But low-income women want to marry only if the marriage will truly stabilize their families and lift them out of poverty.*

MDRC that argued against education as an effective way to raise women out of poverty. Erika Kates, then at the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, published a compelling critique of the MDRC study and other studies that apply a “traditionalist” approach to collecting data on welfare recipients, one that relies on “narrow data for success and limited definitions of education; depersonalizing women by referring to them as ‘experimentals’ and the hard-to-place, and imply-

ing a universality of low skill levels; focusing on personal deficiencies rather than structural and policy constraints as major barriers; and adapting to existing policy constraints rather than focusing on changing those policies.”<sup>63</sup>

In Massachusetts, a state that changed its welfare rules in 2003 and 2004 to allow recipients to fulfill their mandatory work requirements with education and training programs, it was nevertheless difficult for recipients to access those programs. In a study titled “Low-Income Women’s Access to Education? A Case Study of Welfare Recipients in Boston,” Kates finds that:

Simply stated, both the focus groups and the statewide data show no increase in the percentage of women engaged in educational activities since the 2003 and 2004 statute, either in the Boston neighborhoods included in this study or in the statewide population. Moreover, it appears that women in the Boston neighborhoods had

less access to postsecondary education than women in other parts of the state.<sup>64</sup>

Based in focus group data, Kates finds nine barriers to accessing postsecondary education:

- Personal and family problems
- Lack of options
- Lack of childcare and transportation
- Onerous welfare policies and practices
- Negative caseworker/client interactions
- Inadequate dissemination of critical information
- Limited interpretations of the 12-month rule (on the part of administrators)
- Restrictive interpretations of the 20-, 24-, and 30- hour work requirement
- Lack of interaction between agencies.<sup>65</sup>

Other barriers to marriage are less obvious. As noted above, changing social attitudes among low-income women correspond to changing attitudes in the country as a whole and are a major factor in many decisions not to marry. Higher standards for a good marriage, a lower social stigma attached to single motherhood, an aversion to the possibility of a future divorce, and the tendencies of both men and women to bring children from previous partners to a marriage (which can cause stress in the relationship) are all powerful factors in cautious attitudes toward marriage. According to Kathryn Edin, who has researched welfare recipients extensively, these attitudinal factors are as important barriers to marriage as are economic factors.<sup>66</sup>

Contrary to popular myth, research shows that low-income communities do not oppose marriage as a matter of culture or principle. The Fragile Families study found that 51% of unmarried mothers and 60% of unmarried fathers say they would prefer marriage to cohabitation.<sup>67</sup> But low-income women want to marry only if the marriage will truly stabilize their families and lift them out of poverty. They are looking for employed wage-earning men, just as low-income men are looking for employed women. Their opposition to marriage is based on a self-interested calculation — sometimes bolstered by past experiences with abusive relationships — that marriage must lead to tangible gains in the family’s welfare.<sup>68</sup> Further, many low-income women are averse to divorce and therefore are reluctant to enter a marriage that may end in divorce.<sup>69</sup>

According to four researchers who have actually asked welfare recipients what they would like in their

lives, low-income women follow a somewhat thoughtful and reality-based pattern of self-interested behavior. We know from this research that a large percentage of single, heterosexual low-income mothers would like to be married at some time in their lives. They seek marriages that are financially stable and characterized by a loving, supportive husband who is employed, has no addictions, and is supportive of their childrearing. Welfare recipients, like most women in the United States, aspire to a romantic notion of marriage and family that often features a “white picket fence” in the suburbs. But they are cautious, if not cynical, about the marriage possibilities that lie before them.<sup>70</sup>

According to marriage proponents, women and men just need a little nudge to encourage them to take the step that will lead in the direction of that picket fence—to marry and stay married.<sup>71</sup> But a low-income woman’s life experience very often teaches her another lesson. Like many mothers of all classes, low-income women usually see their children as their greatest accomplishment, and they are clear that their job is to take care of them. That means providing a safe environment and “being there” for them. Contrary to the characteristic middle-class view of teenage childbirth as the curtailment of a young

woman’s chances for success, low-income mothers often credit their early motherhood with keeping them from a life of drugs, crime, or violence.<sup>72</sup>

If marriage remains as an ideal (and idealized) vision for low-income women, why are they more and more reluctant to marry? Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas identify three explanations dominant in the literature on the “retreat from marriage” by low-income women and men, and then offer a new one based on their own research. The three popular explanations, proposed by researchers across the political spectrum, are:

- Women’s entry into the labor market has led to a growing independence and less pressure to marry in order to obtain a means of supporting a family (promoted by University of Chicago-based economist Gary Becker);<sup>73</sup>
- Women have been seduced away from marriage by welfare payments that allow them to live without employment or an

*The Right constantly attacks affirmative action in education and housing yet targets low-income mothers (who are stereotyped as African-American) for marriage promotion programs.*

### THE DISTORTIONS OF RACE

Race plays a prominent role in nearly every aspect of U.S. public policy. In the case of welfare reform, race plays so prominent a role that it is nearly the defining variable from Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s popularization of the stereotype of “cultural pathology” in the Black community to the Heritage Foundation’s and others’ assertion that Black welfare recipients were having babies in order to increase their welfare payments.<sup>i</sup>

Despite the anti-government rhetoric of the political Right, in this case the Right supports and advances interventionist government policies that play a paternalistic role in the lives of low-income women.<sup>ii</sup> Further, the intervention in the personal lives of welfare recipients is justified, in part, by race. It is a simple formula: 1) welfare recipients are stereotyped by rightist researchers as African-American; 2) the African-American community has high rates of divorce and nonmarital births; therefore, 3) it is logical that government especially target African-American welfare recipients and the African-American community for programs to teach an understanding of the value of marriage.

Most researchers agree that, in the minds of the White public, a welfare recipient is an African-American woman; though, to date, Black recipients have never been the majority of welfare recipients. African Americans are, however, disproportionately represented among those who receive welfare benefits, which itself should cause social scientists to examine the extent to which this is the result of racial discrimination.<sup>iii</sup>

The George W. Bush administration is pursuing a form of marriage promotion affirmative action program. How ironic that the Right constantly attacks affirmative action in education and hiring, yet targets low-income mothers (who are stereotyped as African-American) for marriage promotion programs.

<sup>i</sup> Diana Zuckerman, “Welfare Reform in America: A Clash of Politics and Research,” *Journal of Social Issues* 56, (Winter, 2000): 587-599.

<sup>i</sup> For an especially thoughtful exploration of negative attitudes toward the poor, see: Vincent D. Rougeau, “A Crisis of Caring: A Catholic Critique of American Welfare,” *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 27 (2003): 100.

<sup>iii</sup> In FY 1996, out of 4,553,000 TANF recipients, 35.9% were White, 36.9% were African American, and 20.8% were Hispanic. This is before AFDC became TANF, therefore it serves as a baseline. In FY 2003, seven years after “welfare reform” legislation, out of 2,027,600 TANF recipients, 31.8% were White, 38.0% were African American, and 28.2% were Hispanic. See: “TANF: Seventh Annual report to Congress,” (Administration for Children and Families: Washington, D.C., December 2006). Chapter X, Table B, X-16. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/annualreport7/ar7index.htm>.

employed partner (promoted by Charles Murray and by other rightist authors);<sup>74</sup>

- Women encounter a declining number of men who are eligible or desirable partners for marriage — the “male marriageable pool” hypothesis (promoted by Harvard-based sociologist William Julius Wilson).<sup>75</sup>

Edin and Kafalas dispute all three of these explanations and propose a fourth. They suggest that the principal factor in the declining rate of marriage among low-income women and men since the 1970s results from a redefinition of marriage that has occurred in the entire society as the consequence of profound cultural change. Across class lines, divorce is now considered to be better for children and parents than an unhappy marriage. Childbirth outside marriage is far more widely accepted, and premarital sex and partners living together without marriage are both now much more widely acknowledged. Edin and Kafalas conclude that:

*Liberalized divorce laws led to an increase in divorce, at a rate that alarmed cultural traditionalists and conservative Christians who launched the backlash marriage and fatherhood movements.*

For the poor and affluent alike, marriage is now much less about sex, co-residence, and raising children than it used to be.... The sexual revolution, the widespread availability of birth control, the dramatic increase in the social acceptability of cohabitation, and the growing rejection of the idea that a couple should get or stay married just because there is a child

on the way, have all weakened the once nearly absolute cultural imperative to marry....The truth is that the poor have embraced a set of surprisingly mainstream norms about marriage and the circumstances in which it should occur.<sup>76</sup>

Of course, it is impossible to generalize about low-income women, just as it is about any category of people. But we can learn from the findings of research that actually listens to low-income women, scarce though those findings are. This research challenges the myths created by rightist politicians and academics.

## DIVORCE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Conservative scholars’ interpretation of the “catastrophic” social effects of the “divorce revolution” that started in the 1960s markedly shapes their support for government programs to promote marriage. With the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, the public became more aware of women’s unequal rights within marriage and the widespread presence of domestic violence in the home. By the end of the 1970s, all 50 states had enacted no fault divorce in some form.<sup>77</sup>

Liberalized divorce laws led to an increase in divorce, at a rate that alarmed cultural traditionalists and conservative Christians who launched the backlash marriage and fatherhood movements. Pointing to an increase in single motherhood and gay marriage, as well as a (mythical) increase in teen pregnancy, the Right promotes a doomsday scenario of “the end of marriage” often identifying no-fault divorce laws as the principal agent of that outcome.<sup>78</sup> As described on the website [www.divorcereform.org](http://www.divorcereform.org):

Under so-called “no-fault” divorce laws, anybody can end any marriage just by leaving. No-fault doubled an already high divorce rate shortly after it was introduced. Even families with young children started divorcing. The social and cultural realities that used to keep most families together have disappeared...and nobody predicted any of these catastrophic changes.<sup>79</sup>

The welfare of children is at the center of the ideological and policy debates over divorce. Children’s lower standard of living following a divorce is one widespread concern.<sup>80</sup> But conservatives also focus in on the supposed warping of children’s development. The principal spokesperson for this view is clinical psychologist, Judith Wallerstein. Appearing on the right-wing lecture and conference circuit, Dr. Wallerstein has sounded the alarm on divorce in three popular books based on a longitudinal study of children of divorced parents she began in 1971.<sup>81</sup> Wallerstein’s findings indicate that children of divorced parents experience disrupted childhoods, and suffer even more in adulthood, when “it affects personality, the ability to trust, expectations about relationships, and ability to cope with change.”<sup>82</sup>

Rather than argue that divorce is bad for parents,

Wallerstein has framed divorce as “bad for children,” a theme adopted by the secular right. For conservative Christians, divorce is a matter of faith and in some branches of Christianity is even forbidden. But in federal policy debates, the issue of child welfare has received more attention.

Wallerstein’s research put a scientific sheen on arguments by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, James Q. Wilson, Robert Rector of the conservative Heritage Foundation, and Dr. James Dobson of the evangelical Christian organization Focus on the Family that divorce is bad for children, and hence for society.<sup>83</sup> But, despite her bestseller status, Wallerstein’s work and conclusions are controversial among psychologists and other social scientists. Her sample is considered: too small (131 children and adolescents from 60 families); not sufficiently random (all came from Marin County, California); and insufficiently diverse (88 percent of the families were White). Her conclusions are therefore considered by many to be unjustified.<sup>84</sup>

One of the most substantive challenges to Wallerstein came in 2002, when a widely respected psychologist at the University of Virginia and a leader in the field of child development, E. Mavis Hetherington, published the results of a study of 1,400 divorced families, including 2,500 children over time, some for as long as 30 years. Her study was the most comprehensive ever undertaken. Its

results were complex and disallowed simplistic conclusions.

Dr. Hetherington found that men do indeed benefit from marriage and are more stable and healthier when married. Women, on the other hand, “are more sensitive to the emotional quality of the marriage. They benefit from being in a well-functioning marriage, but in troubled marriages they are likely to experience depression, immune-system breakdowns, and other health-related problems.”<sup>85</sup>

The study followed children of divorced parents at six, eleven, and twenty years after the parents’ divorce. The results by no means supported Wallerstein’s view of the troubled adult of divorced parents. Hetherington’s findings agree that the time of divorce is stressful for both parents and children, with many parents and children identifying it, in retrospect, as the most stressful time in their lives. But she finds that:

About 75 to 80 percent of adults and children show few serious long-term problems in adjustment following divorce and are functioning within the normal range.... Moreover, a substantial group of our divorced women and some daughters were actually strengthened by developing new competencies to deal with the pressing demands that follow divorce and life in a single-parent family.<sup>86</sup>

*Wallerstein has framed divorce as “bad for children,” a theme adopted by the secular Right.*



Chip Somodevilla / Getty Images

The Heritage Foundation’s Robert Rector has been a leading proponent for marriage as a cure for social ills.

In other words, divorce is not necessarily a disaster for children. Violence in the home, neglect, or depression and unhappiness on the part of one or both parents are, however, harmful to children and adults alike.

Because Hetherington’s research was of higher quality than that of Wallerstein and thus had a stronger claim to credibility, it soon came under attack from rightists eager to defend the thesis that divorce always harms children. Writing

in *The National Review*, conservative Maggie Gallagher takes on Hetherington's book, criticizing her for categorizing only social science pathologies as damage done by divorce and pointing out that two-thirds of boys and three-quarters of girls had poor relationships with their fathers. She reiterates that divorce, rather than being harmless, causes brutal pain to children.<sup>87</sup>

The influence of divorce on children is a highly contested area of research, with the strongest scientific evidence falling on the side of divorce as a necessary tool for social health and welfare. This argument, however, is not a popular one with the advocates of marriage promotion, the current Bush administration bureaucrats who oversee funding for those programs, or the Christian Right that supports them.

### DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND MARRIAGE PROMOTION

No one is more alarmed and appalled by federal- and state-funded marriage promotion programs than the researchers and advocates who work on the issue of violence against women. Knowing that 25 percent of women in the United States say they have been physically or sexually assaulted by a spouse, partner, or date, they found it particularly enraging that Wade Horn, Assistant Secretary for Children and Families at Health and Human Services in the George W. Bush administration, did not include in early drafts of his marriage promotion initiatives

an exception for women who are battered by their partner or the father of their child.<sup>88</sup>

Marriage proponents claim that marriage reduces domestic violence because the family is a uniquely safe place for women and children. Patrick Fagan and Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation have been especially insistent that marriage increases the chances for a woman to be safe, and question the validity of studies showing that rates of domestic violence are especially high among the very population targeted by marriage promotion programs — low-income welfare recipients. Heritage authors conclude that, though a rate of 20 to 30 percent of welfare recipients who experienced domestic abuse within the last years or in their current relationship

are “regrettably high,” most welfare recipients are not currently in an abusive relationship.<sup>89</sup>

Seeing heterosexual marriage through this rose-colored lens, marriage proponents insist that marriage promotion programs will increase the ability of couples to deal with conflict within their relationship and will result in marriages that are happy and healthy.<sup>90</sup> It is equally likely, however, that these programs push women to formalize relationships that are dangerous for them and their children.<sup>91</sup>

It seems possible that counseling and conflict resolution training might improve a couple's relationship and improve the chances that a woman will be safe. Anecdotal evidence claims that some couples defined as “at risk” benefit (at least in the short run) from such programs. But conservatives are not asking five fundamental questions as the government is allocating marriage promotion monies for this type of counseling:

- Should such work with low-income couples — paid for with federal dollars — be done by secular social workers who have no agenda but the welfare of the couple and who are trained to watch for evidence of domestic abuse, or by faith-based counselors who all-too-often are motivated by the promotion of a religious belief in heterosexual marriage and who promote traditional sex-role-defined models of marriage?
- Should couples who are receiving this counseling and training be pushed to marry, thereby applying a federal agenda to their personal lives?
- Can rightists possibly claim that this is not social engineering with a vulnerable population, undue interference in personal decisions, and in many cases underwriting the agenda of faith-based organizations?
- Should states be able to use TANF grant monies to pay for this ideologically- and religiously- driven federal initiative, thereby reducing the monies available to meet the concrete needs of low-income welfare recipients for housing, healthcare, childcare, food, and education?
- Wouldn't using TANF funds for concrete needs go further toward decreasing a welfare recipient's financial dependence on an abusive or potentially abusive partner?

Even when marriage promotion programs are classified as having “worked,” that conclusion is often based on the experiences of middle-class couples. For instance, in a much-touted Heritage

*Like marriage, having a father in the home is not a cure for poverty or a guarantee of the success of the children or the safety of the mother and her children.*

## SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Although the Bush administration promotes marriage as a solution to social ills, it is heterosexual marriage alone that it promotes. In 2004 a spate of new books defending traditional marriage as the only legitimate family form was inspired by the same-sex marriage movement.<sup>i</sup> Many of these authors are faith-based, and they have succeeded in creating a counter-movement to the somewhat successful efforts of the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (lgbt) movement to open the public mind to the fairness of granting full rights to lgbt people.

Much of the backlash is a continuation of a rear-guard action prompted by the American Psychological Association’s 1973 vote to remove homosexuality from the psychiatric manual. Leading the charge against same-sex marriage is Dr. James Dobson, a psychologist who is the founder and head of Focus on the Family (FOF), the largest U.S. Christian Right communications organization. Dobson is known for giving genial parenting advice as a sort of mass media family therapist. FOF is assisted by an organization that in 1992 spun off from Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council (FRC).

In the analysis of Dr. Dobson and Tony Perkins, head of the Family Research Council, same-sex marriage is an abomination and a violation of Biblical teaching. It will lead to the collapse of the family as we have known it for centuries.

The most “mainstream” argument against gay marriage is that same-sex parents do not provide a good environment for raising children. Because many same-sex couples have children—either from previous heterosexual relationships, by donor insemination or other reproductive technologies, or through adoption—the “defense of children” argument allows opponents of same-sex marriage to appear simply to be advocating what’s best for children. The anti-gay logic here is that legalizing same-sex marriage would encourage gay parenthood, which is harmful to children.

But here again, the research proves otherwise. Four committees of the American Academy of Pediatrics were asked by the Board of Directors to “develop an analysis examining the effects of marriage, civil union, and domestic partnership statutes and amendments on the legal, financial, and psychosocial health and well-being of children whose parents are gay or lesbian.” The researcher, who extensively reviewed the literature on lesbian and gay parenting, concludes that:

There is ample evidence to show that children raised by same-gender parents fare as well as those raised by heterosexual parents. More than 25 years of research have documented that there is no relationship between parents’ sexual orientation and any measure of a child’s emotional, psychosocial, and behavioral adjustment. These data have demonstrated no risk to children as a result of growing up in a family with one or more gay parents. Conscientious and nurturing adults, whether they are men or women, heterosexual or homosexual, can be excellent parents.<sup>ii</sup>

After examining fatherhood and marriage promotion programs, Sean Cahill, then of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, concluded:

Promoting married, heterosexual families as the only acceptable ideal, and disproportionately channeling public resources to those families, put government in the position of actively causing and promoting negative outcomes for children and families that do not conform. Such a policy is punitive, wasteful, shortsighted, and wrong.<sup>iii</sup>

The Bush administration justifies excluding same-sex marriage in its marriage promotion policies by pointing to the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), passed by Congress and signed by President Bill Clinton in 1996.<sup>iv</sup> The trickle-down effect of the ban observed by HHS sends a strong political message to organizations receiving healthy marriage grants that they too should not serve lesbian and gay couples. Unless all welfare recipients are heterosexual, this bias excludes those recipients who are lesbian, gay, or transgender. The programs funded by the Healthy Marriage Initiative should accurately be called “heterosexual marriage promotion” and should be publicly recognized as discriminatory.

<sup>i</sup> For example, see: James Dobson, *Marriage Under Fire: Why We Must Win this Battle* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 2004); and Glenn T. Stanton and Dr. Bill Maier, *Marriage on Trial: The Case Against Same Sex Marriage and Parenting* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

<sup>ii</sup> James G. Pawelski, Ellen C. Perrin, Jane M. Foy, Carole E. Allen, James E. Crawford, Mark Del Monte, Miriam Kaufman, Jonathan D. Klein, Karen Smith, Sarah Springer, J. Lane Tanner, and Dennis L. Vickers, “The Effects of Marriage, Civil Union, and Domestic Partnership Laws on the Health and Well-being of Children,” *Pediatrics* 118, (2006): 361.

<sup>iii</sup> Sean Cahill, “Welfare Moms and the Two Grooms: The Concurrent Promotion and Restriction of Marriage in U.S. Public Policy,” *Sexualities* 8:2: 169-187.

<sup>iv</sup> “The Federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) defines marriage as a legal union between one man and one woman for purposes of all federal laws, and provides that states need not recognize a marriage from another state if it is between persons of the same sex. Forty states have their own Defense of Marriage Acts (DOMAs).” - <http://www.domawatch.org/index.php>

Foundation Report, “Marriage and Welfare Reform: The Overwhelming Evidence that Marriage Education Works,” the authors derive their success stories primarily from counseling with middle-class married couples.<sup>92</sup> In critiquing the paper’s claim that this success would apply to low-income women and men, Pamela Smock and Stephanie Coontz note that:

Claims that marriage education and counseling programs developed for middle-class married couples can create stable marriages among the poor are quite problematic .... The attempt to translate existing programs into quick-fix workshops for impoverished populations is not sensible scientifically, especially if this involves diverting funds from proven anti-poverty efforts.<sup>93</sup>

*A combination of de facto and institutional racial and gender discrimination exerts disproportionate pressure on many families of color headed by a single mother.*

When the Department of Health and Human Services commissioned the Washington, DC-based Urban Institute to study the impact of marriage and relationship programs, the resulting 2005 report, which reviewed 39 studies of marriage programs, showed some improvement in communications and relationship satisfaction as the consequence of marriage programs. But, the authors conclude that they cannot say the government is pursuing an effective policy with its marriage promotion initiative:

As there are no studies that include “low-income” couples, the review cannot determine the impact of marriage programs on low-income populations. Also, because very few of these studies follow an “intent-to-treat” model, the review cannot measure the impact of these interventions on couples that drop out of the program, nor can it predict how likely couples would be to want to participate in such a program in the first place. Another concern is that while this review does report on the effectiveness of programs evaluated by the field, it is not able to speak to the effectiveness of current programs in operation at the moment... [and] thus, the review is not able to assess the programs’ effectiveness on children of clients.<sup>94</sup>

The positive results reported for marriage training programs are largely based on trainings for White, middle-class couples. Relationship training may or may not benefit low-income women; there is only anecdotal evidence about this question. But it speaks volumes about federal officials’ understanding of the lives of welfare recipients that domestic violence prevention was an afterthought in the drafting of the federally funded “Healthy Marriage” Initiative.

Needless to say, the relationship “counseling” and “training” promoted to heterosexual women receiving TANF benefits and their partners are not available to same-sex partners or to transgender welfare recipients. Although, in these relationships too, counselors need to be alert for evidence of domestic violence, there is no counseling made available to these couples, who do not fit the conservative definition of relationships ripe for marriage.

### THE CLAIMS OF FATHERHOOD

There is little doubt that children benefit from being raised in a loving two-parent family. On measurements of academic achievement, avoiding trouble with law enforcement, and ability to succeed financially, children of two-parent families are statistically likely to show higher scores than children raised by one parent (usually the mother).

Most often the increased welfare of children from two-parent families is attributed to the presence of a father in the family. Some of the claims for fatherhood are undoubtedly specious, such as a father’s superior ability to impart democratic values to the family’s children. However, objective social conditions may explain why the presence of a male figure in the family benefits the family. Women earn less than men, often have trouble finding housing if they are raising children alone, must balance work and childcare (as do men if they are raising children alone), and if they are welfare recipients, they may also live with a social stigma that could be harmful to their self-esteem. A combination of *de facto* and institutional racial and gender discrimination exerts disproportionate pressure on many families of color headed by a single mother. The resulting challenges faced by these families are often entirely ascribed to “fatherlessness.”

But research indicates that children in high-conflict two-parent families often fare worse than those in divorced families.<sup>95</sup> Researchers Wendy Sigle-Rushton and Sara McLanahan, for example, acknowl-



edge the benefit to children of being raised in two-parent families, but offer cautious conclusions about government policies:

Compared to two-parent families, economic resources are relatively scarce in mother-only families. For those children whose parents divorce, economic resources are severely reduced, creating a financial shock, if not poverty. Many children born outside of a union are born into poverty. There is a good deal of evidence that this accounts for much of the association of father absence with child outcomes.<sup>96</sup>

Later, in a discussion of the policy implications of their research, they conclude:

The government has made great strides toward strengthening child support enforcement during the past two decades and these efforts should be continued. Some non-resident fathers, however, are not able to provide much support, in which case the United States should follow the lead of its European neighbors who are much more generous in helping low-income families. We now have good experimental evidence suggesting that improving the material conditions of low-income families improves child outcomes.<sup>97</sup>

Like marriage, having a father in the home is not a cure for poverty or a guarantee of the success of the children or the safety of the mother and her children. In a stable, loving family, characterized by self-esteem among all of its members, the outcomes for all involved are usually very beneficial. Although that description does not fit all heterosexual marriages, it does fit some single-mother households. Here again, traditionalists often justify the benefits of heterosexual marriage by confusing association with causality. It may be likely that they will co-occur — that they are associated — but it would be a mistake to say that one causes the other. The Right often uses association to imply causality in its research on families, where no hard evidence for this exists. This unjustified use of association as if it were causality drives many of the anti-poverty policies of the George W. Bush administration.

### THE MORAL DIMENSION OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

So far, this report has examined marriage promotion and fatherhood programs and the research gathered to justify and legitimize them. But a critique of social science as handmaiden to public policy should also address the moral dimension of that research. In this case, social science is used to vilify liberal anti-poverty programs and to advance government control over low-income women. At the same time, it is also used to justify withdrawing government support from low-income women by pushing them off the “welfare rolls.” Lawrence Mead, Charles Murray, and George Gilder do not pretend to apply principles of social justice to their work, though they do claim to have the best interests of low income people at heart. Social science, they may claim, is a matter of “letting the chips fall where they may.” In the case of these and other right-wing researchers, for reasons discussed above, the chips all fall against liberal programs.

But should social science research, especially when its subjects are the most vulnerable people in society, entirely lack a moral dimension? If social scientists were to admit that they cannot be entirely unbiased in their research, then they would also bear responsibility for the use of their biased research results. When research makes questionable claims to objectivity, then points toward inhumane conclusions, should the research prevail over a moral calculus?

Of course, moral judgments are individual decisions and social science sees its research as objective—representing systematic investigation that produces results that are reproducible. So, a purist social scientist would say that there is no room in social science for such subjective judgment as a concern with morality. On the other hand, when ideology drives the work of social scientists, as we have seen in so much of the research that supports marriage and fatherhood promotion, subjectivity has come into the research through the back door—unacknowledged but nevertheless controlling the research and its conclusions.

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By recommending marriage as a cure for poverty, right-wing scholars disingenuously advance the ideological agenda of the Right. Low-income women, in this case, are objects in an experiment that is based on the manipulation of their most personal and private choices. White voters seem to tolerate this invasion of privacy, perhaps based on a belief that welfare recipients are undeserving women of color.

Rightist social scientists have contributed heavily to the public's increasing cynicism and hostility to the poor by arguing that U.S. society offers opportunity equally to everyone and, therefore, if a person is poor, it is because he or she is irresponsible, lazy, or

*Is it defensible to provide a social science cover for policy makers to cultivate social hostility and apply social pressure on low-income or no-income people whose family formation is following the same trends found in the larger society?*

otherwise undeserving. Despite undeniable evidence that low-income people have a mountain of cards stacked against them and their children, right-wing social scientists continue to blame them for their poverty and assert that liberalism robbed them of their judgment. Further, these scholars encourage a satisfied view of current American society, especially the increasing inequality of wealth, by attributing wealth accumulation to hard work and frugality alone. Playing this role may not be immoral, but is questionably moral at best. Marriage levels have

declined across groups, but only those who are susceptible to pressure because they are unable to meet their basic needs are funded to participate in marriage promotion programs.

Is it defensible to provide a social science cover for policy makers to cultivate social hostility and apply social pressure on low-income or no-income people whose family formation is following the same trends found in the larger society?

Feminists, whose loyalty lies with the women who are the object of marriage promotion, become furious at the hubris of the policy-makers, researchers, and policy experts who feel justified in manipulating the lives of low-income women. Understanding that government support has always been given with a heavy dose of condemnation, sexual control, and racial stereotyping, Smith College professor Gwendolyn Mink expresses her outrage over marriage promotion and other aspects of "welfare reform" targeted at welfare recipients:

In exchange for welfare, TANF recipients must surrender vocational freedom, sexual privacy, and reproductive choice, as well as the right to make intimate decisions about how to be and raise a family. Ordinarily, these rights are strongly guarded by constitutional doctrine, as they form the core of the Supreme Court's jurisprudence of (heterosexual) personhood and family. Not so for a mother who needs welfare.<sup>98</sup>

In U.S. society as a whole, marriage rates are declining and divorce is now quite prevalent. About 49 percent of marriages entered into in the 1970s ended in divorce over the course of thirty years.<sup>99</sup> Interestingly, born-again Christians have as high a divorce rate as the adult population in general.<sup>100</sup> But when the marriage and divorce statistics of low-income people reflect these trends, it is often these same conservative evangelical and fundamentalist Christians who treat cohabitation, single motherhood, and divorce as social problems.

Social science-driven policies have been questioned on other grounds as well. Social science data collection categorizes individuals into groups, by class, race, age, or many other categories. Professor Leroy Pelton of the University of Nevada argues that this data-gathering by group construct is a poor basis for policy making. He worries those group generalizations, on which much of "welfare reform" policy is based, are a flawed approach to determining "truth." Unless a policy is universal (e.g., Social Security), it will invariably simplify or even distort the circumstances of some individuals and—despite good intentions—may result in inappropriate policies in their cases. He asks: If aggregate data indicates that certain policies will harm individuals, and policies are formed based on that data, what about the people for whom the categorization is ill-suited?<sup>101</sup> This strikes me as a moral question that social science has not considered.

Further, how we define a policy's success may in itself be a difficult, if not impossible, process. Conservatives and rightists claim that welfare reform was a success because approximately 2 million families per month get cash assistance, down from 5 million families in the mid-1990s.<sup>102</sup> Certainly it is equally likely that this was a disaster for low-income people. Is it a social good that three million families have been pushed off the welfare rolls, some to enter

jobs paying meager wages? How has this affected child nutrition, which is a predictor to adult health and success? What is the moral equation that should accompany the social science statistics and resulting policies?

In the case of marriage and fatherhood promotion, as is true of the moral dimension of many policies, the bottom line is the question of the value of a human being, no matter what that person’s life circumstances. Income level, race, gender, disability, addiction, and immigration status, should not ever, in my opinion, be allowed to interrupt the status of each person as a human being. Much of religious doctrine is based not on judgment of a person’s worth, but on the assumption that by being a person (in the case of Christianity, created in God’s image), one has inherent worth and deserves respect. In this view, a human being’s dignity should be respected and his/her own personal agency preserved by virtue of the status of “human.” This assumption is also the basis of the increasingly influential doctrine of human rights—the theory that rights adhere to people by the mere fact of their humanity.

A question that is endlessly contested in the debate over abortion rights is whether or not a woman has a right to privacy concerning her reproductive life. Political scientist Karen Streuning argues that, in the case of the child exclusion or “family cap” policy:

...the right of privacy protects the individual’s liberty in sexual and intimate relationships. When the state uses its power to influence the form that families take, it deprives its citizens of associational autonomy and denies them the right to form the families of their choice. It makes decisions for its citizens in the area of life that is most closely bound up with our feelings for others and that is most likely to have an enormous impact on our identity. Moreover, it denies us the freedom to decide on the meaning and values of sexuality, procreation, marriage and parenting for ourselves.<sup>103</sup>

While I believe a case could be made for government subsidies for counseling for low-income women and men—with the sole goal of improving their lives, conducted by professional, qualified counselors who were accountable to an oversight peer group, and as one part of a comprehensive federal program to address poverty—there should be no room in such a program for pressure or manipulation of the lives of vulnerable people.

It is folly to suggest that to “encourage” welfare recipients to enter marriage promotion programs is not a form of social engineering by the federal government and some state governments. Although Wade Horn of the Department of Health and Human Services was quick to insist that no woman is forced into marriage in marriage promotion programs, the attempt to subtly control welfare recipients, especially recipients of color, is obvious. Within dominant U.S. culture and most religions, heterosexual marriage imparts respectability. In much of White public opinion, a “welfare recipient” has become a young Black single mother who lacks “personal responsibility” and respectability. Therefore, the single mother who does not take advantage of marriage opportunities is opting out of respectability and is a candidate for classification as one of the “undeserving” poor. This ideologically-driven formulation of the options available to a low-income woman attempting to act in her own self-interest places the burden on her to conform to the social expectations attached to her welfare benefits.

*The single mother who does not take advantage of marriage opportunities is opting out of respectability and is a candidate for classification as one of the “undeserving” poor.*

• • •

## Conclusion

It is alarming that a society as wealthy as the U.S. can tolerate a poverty rate in 2006 of 12.3 percent (up from 11.3 percent in 2000).<sup>104</sup> In addressing this high and increasing rate, the central question of the policy debate should be: What lifts people out of poverty? Is it education, a job that pays a living wage, or marriage? Is it decent housing, accessible health

care, or transportation? A strong case can be made that the two best methods to address poverty are education and a job that pays a living wage. Marriage is not a proven path out of poverty. Yet observers estimate that the Bush administration is investing more than \$200 million per year in marriage promotion and fatherhood programs, primarily targeting low-income women and men.

At the same time, The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 increases pressure on welfare recipients to hold a job—any job—while cutting resources for education and childcare. “Traditional values,” advocated by the marriage move-

ment and the fatherhood movement, as well as a plethora of other conservative non-governmental organizations, think tanks, and religious groups,

have become national, federally-funded policy. Conservative and right-wing social scientists have published articles and studies that lend a veneer of legitimacy to their policy recommendations. The result is ideologically-driven programs and decisions rather than sound social policy based on solid evidence that they will help the targeted group. In this instance, the targeted group is welfare recipients, primarily vulnerable women who are economically dependent and therefore more susceptible to manipulation.

Offering marriage counseling that encourages marriage and discourages divorce to low-income women reasserts a traditional, patriarchal definition of what makes a family. It downplays the danger of violence that women face in marital and nonmarital relationships, assumes that heterosexual marriage is a magic bullet that will cure poverty, and further demonizes low-income single women who decide that marriage is not the best course for them and their children.

Surely a country that claims compassion and democracy as core values should reject as inadequate and misleading the marriage and fatherhood formula as a response to poverty. True compassion and democracy would respect the right of low-income women to make their own decisions and provide proven pathways out of poverty as the first line of assistance.

*Marriage is not a proven path out of poverty. Yet observers estimate that the Bush administration is investing more than \$200 million per year in marriage promotion and fatherhood programs, primarily targeting low-income women and men.*

## Notes

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## Marriage as a Cure for Poverty?

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