

Center for Marriage and Families

FACT SHEET NO. 1, FEBRUARY 2006

What is America's Most Serious Social Problem?

AMERICA FACES many urgent challenges. Crime. Poverty. Education. And many others. Each is important. But many leading scholars now conclude that our nation's single most important problem is the weakening of marriage.

- Today, more than one of every three children is born to a never-married mother.
- About 45 percent of marriages today end in divorce.
- Only about 60 percent of U.S. children are living with their own biological (or adoptive) married parents.

Why is the decline of marriage so serious? There are two reasons:

1. The decline of marriage is the problem that drives so many other problems.

Children raised outside of intact marriages are significantly more likely than other children to use drugs ... to drop out of school ... to commit crimes ... to suffer from depression and emotional distress ... to be neglected or abused ... to be sexually active early ... to commit or consider suicide ... and later in life to get divorced themselves and to bear children outside of marriage.

The weakening of marriage costs taxpayers billions of dollars — in more jails, welfare payments, medical costs, court costs, remedial education, and juvenile justice systems — and creates untold suffering for millions of children and for society as a whole.

2. Marriage is the good that produces so many other goods.

Marriage is linked to higher levels of health and happiness and lower levels of alcohol and drug abuse for both adults and teens. Marriage is a wealth-creating institution — married people earn more, save more, and build more wealth, compared to people who are single or living together. There is an inverse relationship between marriage and crime — in communities where marriage is common, crime is much less common. Marriage is our most pro-child institution. It is our society's best arrangement for helping children to thrive.

(over)

The New Consensus that Marriage Matters

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

— *National Council on Family Relations, the nation's largest organization of family therapists*

Both scholars and politicians now agree that married two-parent families are good for children, and that poverty would be greatly reduced if marriage could be increased.

— *Two policy experts, a Republican and a Democrat, writing for the Brookings Institution*

Children in two-parent families generally had access to more financial resources and greater amounts of parental time. They also were more likely to participate in extracurricular activities, progress more steadily at school, and have more supervision over their activities such as television watching. The presence of two parents continues to be one of the most important factors in children's lives.

— *U.S. Census Bureau*

The Recent Good News

- Divorce rates today seem to be modestly declining.
- Teen pregnancy is declining dramatically.
- Marital happiness, after declining for decades, has stabilized and may be improving.
- The proportion of Black children living in married-couple homes has risen modestly since 1995. The proportion of all U.S. children living in married-couple homes has stabilized and may be slightly increasing.

THIS GOOD NEWS shows that there is nothing inevitable about the decline of marriage. What happens to marriage in the future — whether it fails or thrives — depends on what we do today.

Quotable

“The weakening of marriage is *the* most important social problem facing America today.”

— James Q. Wilson, one of the nation's most acclaimed social scientists

The Center for Marriage and Families, based at the Institute for American Values, provides briefs, fact sheets, DVDs, and other material related to marriage, families, and children. Please visit our website at <http://center.americanvalues.org>.