

Are We Still Married? Family Structure and Family Policy in the Emerging Age of the Unformed Family

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Recently I attended and helped to organize a symposium on family law and public policy. About 40 of us—mostly family law professionals, state and local government officials, and family scholars—spent most of one day in a comfortable conference room in a big downtown Chicago law firm discussing the state of American families and how family law in the future might better support them. The presenters were smart and attractive, the conversation was serious, and the ideas flowed freely. The vibes in the room were positive. Everyone’s sincerity was palpable.

But at a gut level, my main reaction to the event was dismay. What upset me was not the answers being offered, but the questions being asked.

For me, the fundamental question is “What’s best for families?” because the family as a US social institution is fragile and in crucial ways dysfunctional. An impressive body of research from numerous disciplines and diverse political perspectives suggests that the family is society’s seedbed institution and, therefore, that there is much truth to Margaret Mead’s famous dictum that “as the family goes, so goes the nation.”¹

To wrestle with the question of what is best for families, I’ve spent most of my professional life studying marriage and fatherhood and, in doing so, seeking to understand how family structure influences child outcomes. Why the focus on family structure? Because the evidence on families confirms a sociological truism: while process trumps structure, structure guides process.

Consider the role of fathers. Another of Margaret Mead’s family research dicta is that “every known human society rests firmly on the learned nurturing behavior of men.”² For the father and for the larger

society, what matters most is his behavior toward his child. Is he tender? Does he help her tie her shoes? Does he protect her? These are expressions of the fathering *process*, and nearly everyone (including me) agrees that these are the treasures we’re after.

But the research also shows, as common sense suggests, that the more impersonal questions of structure—Does the father live with the child? Is he married to the child’s mother?—can decisively influence whether he is likely to behave tenderly toward her, protect her, and help her tie her shoes. Mead is far from the only anthropologist to propose that, for most men everywhere, the preconditions for effective fatherhood—the *structural* social arrangements that permit and reward “learned nurturing behavior”—are coresidency with the child and a stable partnership with the child’s mother, otherwise known in all human groups as “marriage.”

Structure shapes process. Or to put the proposition a bit differently, the process outcomes we want in family life will likely elude us unless we also attend to the structures that fit and encourage them. To me, therefore, and to many of my colleagues and others who study marriage and the family, family structure should be one of family policy’s first and most important concerns. We might even say that family structure is to family policy as the nude is to art—that is, one of its basic disciplines.³

Yet in our conference on family policy that day, issues of family well-being generally, and issues of family structure in particular, evoked almost no interest. It was not that the conferees considered and rejected analyzing these topics as much as they simply acted as if these topics do not exist. (The greatest insult is not

to deny, but to ignore.) For us as a group that day—a group of policy and scholarly elites that struck me as fairly representative—the underlying question was *not* “What’s best for families?” Instead, it seemed to be “What’s best for the casualties?”

I’m familiar with this way of thinking. For example, it has deeply influenced the field of social work for decades, but among family scholars and policymakers, I have rarely seen it less questioned and therefore more intellectually dominant. We may be approaching a tipping point. Conceptually, what will matter most is no longer the family as an institution, but groups of individuals with increasingly dire needs. Worrying about family structure becomes a waste of time as family policy itself is transformed into something akin to performing triage on a battlefield. What is needed in light of such requirements is not a theory of social institutions, but medicine, bandages, and courage under fire. For everyone involved—from policymakers and program directors to legal professionals and social scientists—the main presumed goal is to do the best one can under terrible conditions to save as many lives as possible.

Consider again the role of fathers. Historically, family policy toward fathers has centrally reflected the idea that biological fathers—even if they do not live with their children or get along with the mothers—can and should invest in their children by acting, to the degree possible, as social and legal fathers. This idea has long seemed valid to scholars and policymakers largely because public policy regarding absent fathers has been understood primarily as responsive to the societal phenomenon of family breakup. Father-sensitive family policies typically presumed, at least implicitly, that the ex-partners had once made meaningful commitments to each other, that a socially affirmed family structure had been created, and that children had been born into it—but that at some point those commitments had been abandoned and that structure had been split apart.

In such a context, the goal of family policy was to make the broken or disrupted family resemble as closely as possible the intact family, particularly regarding the treatment of children. In this way family policy aimed to “undo” at least some of the family’s unraveling

and to reunite the fractured moieties to the degree possible. From this premise, certain policy objectives logically followed:

- If the absent father no longer voluntarily supports his child financially, should not public policy require him to maintain at least a certain level of child support payments to the mother?
- If the father no longer resides in the same home as his child, should not public policy permit and encourage him to visit the child as regularly as possible?
- If the father seems no longer willing to cooperate with the mother, should not public policy expect and enforce at least some cooperation?
- If the father no longer views his child’s mother as his spouse and lover, should not public policy create incentives and in some cases requirements for him to view her as a co-parent deserving of recognition and respect?

Today, this way of thinking about absent fathers seems increasingly anachronistic. Increasingly, many observers no longer view these men as even potentially a part of the solution to anything. Today’s paradigmatic social phenomenon regarding absent fathers is no longer family breakup, but the absence of effective family formation—not the old trend of viable family units fragmenting or weakening, but the new trend of them never having been formed in the first place. In short, for large and rapidly growing proportions of US absent fathers today, there has never been much of a family to break up.⁴

In our recent family policy conference, one could palpably sense that the old father-absence considerations, rooted in breakup, have been largely replaced by new ones, rooted in nonformation:

- Should fathers be presumed to have shared custody and visitation rights, even when the mothers do not want to share custody or encourage visitation? Well, maybe not. What exactly did these

guys do to deserve such a presumption? What good is likely to come of it?

- Should society expect and seek, insofar as possible, to require these fathers to be hands-on, attentive, loving, and protective fathers to their children? Well, maybe not. Few such expectations or requirements have ever been in place, from or for any of the adult parties involved. How can public policy reasonably be expected to protect, maintain, or institutionalize family connections that hardly existed in the first place? What good is likely to come from such efforts? What unintended and potentially harmful consequences for mothers and children might result from such efforts?

This newer way of thinking about absent fathers is only one example of a larger conceptual shift. When pervasive family dysfunction shifts in our thinking from a crisis we should confront to a condition we must realistically accept—from a foreground policy consideration to a background intellectual assumption—many questions of family well-being and nearly all questions of family structure become passé. After all, what can we realistically expect to gain? Is it worth our time to search through the rubble for bits of treasure?

A transformation in the field of family policy in which individuals increasingly replace families as our main objects of concern is a profound change indeed. At our recent family policy conference, many policy reforms were discussed, including a number I favor, but I do not recall a single idea or proposal during the entire conference offered specifically as a strategy for enhancing family well-being, much less strengthening family structure. Mostly, presenters seemed comfortable in their assumption that their favored macro-level policy reforms—in particular, for these presenters, those aiming at more social justice, less institutional racism, more and better jobs and job training, and a less punitive criminal justice system—willy-nilly constitute today’s best strategies for “helping families,” which seems, as best I could tell, little different from saying “helping people.”

To be fair, I agree that genuine economic, civil rights, and social justice improvements in the US in

addition to all the other good things they are likely to do, are likely to enhance family well-being and may help indirectly to strengthen family structure. So I am not disputing the idea that good economic policy, for example, can also be good family policy. On the contrary, I have been a part of several efforts to make just such arguments.⁵

But surely “family policy,” if such a way of thinking is to continue at all, must mean more than simply “desirable policy,” even after we all agree that the latter can be a friend of the former. At our family policy conference, I searched for this foundational notion of our work—the notion that meaningful family policy originates from and is animated by an articulated intention to strengthen the family as an institution and that strengthening marriage and family structure are therefore their own worthwhile public policy objectives—but did not find it.

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Moreover, in my view, this conference’s intellectual center of gravity is not idiosyncratic or unrepresentative today. On the contrary, what I am calling the new underlying question—*What’s best for the causalities?*—appears now to be thoroughly mainstream and may even be on its way to occupying pride of place in the US family policy debate.⁶

Representative or not, and notwithstanding some of its strengths, I dissent from this way of thinking. In this essay, I contest this view of family policy’s future and offer an alternative. Specifically, I argue for the continuing and even growing importance of family structure as a topic within family policy studies and for the importance in the years ahead, especially in light of current family trends, of establishing the strengthening of family structure in America as a legitimate and important goal of public policy. More broadly, I argue—in light of current trends and in some instances despite them—for

the possibility and desirability of an emergent trans-partisan cultural familism as a meaningful cue for public policy reform, particularly regarding marriage and family structure. In this essay, familism is defined as a cultural value placing a high priority on family identification and commitment, mutual assistance among family members, and sustained investment in family relationships.⁷

Here's a story. It's just pretend:

One day a villager went down to the river and saw a child thrashing in the currents. The villager jumped in and rescued the child. The next day, another villager pulled another child out of the water. The day after that, four children were discovered in the river, three of whom were rescued.

Distressed and alarmed, villagers began taking turns standing watch at the river's edge. And that was a good idea, because with each passing day, more and more children floated by in distress. As the villagers became better organized and more skilled and determined in their rescue efforts, many children were saved, but many were lost as well. After a while, despite the village-wide effort, and as the numbers of children in the river continued to grow, more were lost each week than were saved.

The villagers held a meeting to decide what to do next. Some wanted to continue their current efforts, only with more energy, resources, and expertise. But others wanted to travel upstream to learn what specifically was putting these children in the river in the first place and what might be done to stop it. They argued that, as a strategy, trying to rescue steadily growing numbers of distressed children as they floated by was absolutely necessary, but certainly not sufficient.

Ten Trends Likely to Influence the Future of US Families

In 1963, the highly distinguished family sociologist William J. Goode, examining family patterns worldwide as well as current economic and demographic trends, predicted a global convergence in the coming years based on the model of a "conjugal" married-couple family, a trend which he believed would include stable and

perhaps reduced levels of out-of-wedlock childbearing in the US and elsewhere. Goode was a brilliant scholar. But obviously, as regards family structure, he did not foresee what would become arguably the most important family structure trend of the next half-century. I say this not to criticize Goode, but to remind us that none of us can predict the future.⁸

I argue for the continuing and even growing importance of family structure as a topic within family policy studies and for the importance in the years ahead, especially in light of current family trends, of establishing the strengthening of family structure in America as a legitimate and important goal of public policy.

Trends are so tricky. For starters, it is simple and therefore tempting to assume that today's main trends are somehow locked into place, destined to continue unabated along current lines for as far into the future as we dare to look. Of course, no such assumption is warranted. In most cases, there is nothing permanent or inevitable about a trend, even a familiar one—quite the opposite. In addition, the emergence of new, large, and quite surprising trends that few had predicted or planned for—such as the post-World War II baby boom—is probably the only thing we can count on.

For these reasons, I want to insist, prior to any of my weak attempts at prognostication, that I simply do not know and cannot with any confidence predict what trends will be dominant in American family life two or three or four decades from now.⁹ The best any of us can do, I think, is to try to understand the meaning of *current* trends as clearly as possible, on the grounds that at least some of them *may* influence some aspects of the future.

Second, we should never assume that the proper stance toward a trend is servility. Treating a trend as a fixed variable is a choice, not a requirement, because trends cannot tell us what to do or why we should do it. They do not carry moral weight or have moral voices. They are certainly not self-justifying. Accordingly, scholars and policymakers have no reason to be submissive before even the most imposing trends. In fact, most of us find ample reason to stand against a trend we believe to be harmful, regardless of what the oddsmakers say. The famous management consultant Peter Drucker—who observed that “trying to predict the future is like trying to drive down a country road at night with no lights while looking out the back window”¹⁰—encapsulated this idea nicely when he said that “the best way to predict the future is to create it.”¹¹

At the same time, Don Quixote’s tilting at windmills was ultimately an act of inspired madness, rather than effective engagement with the world, because he declined to take certain basic social realities into account. He acted entirely without reference to current trends.

So let us not repeat his mistake. Even though it is true that demography is not destiny and that an “is” cannot be the same as an “ought,” our family choices *are* importantly conditioned by current societal realities and trends, which means that they can and should inform our thinking about the future of the family. Toward that end, I want to adumbrate the 10 current trends that I believe are most likely to influence both the future of US marriage and family life and the future of the US family policy debate.

1. Smaller Proportions of Children Growing Up with Their Fathers. The largest and most pervasive consequence of the family structure trends of our era is the loss of fatherhood. More US men are spending more of their lives estranged from their children and from the mothers of their children, and more US children are spending more of their lives living apart from their fathers and being less likely to receive the psychological, social, spiritual, and economic advantages that come from loving and being loved by a father.

Six then-and-now family structure comparisons reveal the main story:

- *Fewer children in married-couple homes.* In 1980, about 79 percent of US children lived in married-couple homes, and about 61 percent lived with two parents in a first marriage. In 2014, about 64 percent lived in married-couple homes, and about 46 percent—less than half of all children—lived with two parents in a first marriage.¹²

Comparing family structures *other than* two parents in a first marriage in 1960 with those in 2014, we discover that the proportion of children in remarried homes remained about the same over this 55-year period (from 14 percent to 15 percent); the proportion living with unmarried cohabiting parents increased from effectively zero to 7 percent; and the proportion living with only one parent (their mothers in about 80 percent of these cases) increased from 9 percent to 26 percent.¹³

- *More children born to unmarried women.* The proportion of US children born to unmarried women was 5 percent in 1960, 18 percent in 1980, and 41 percent in 2009—an astonishing 80 percent increase in less than five decades.¹⁴ Today, more than half of all births to US women under age 25 are to unmarried mothers.¹⁵
- *More cohabiting unmarried parents.* The phenomenon of unwed cohabiting parents was all but non-existent as late as 1960, but today large and rapidly increasing proportions of US children spend some of their childhood in this type of family. Remarkably, the demographers Sheila Kennedy and Larry Bumpass estimate that currently in the US more than half of all unmarried mothers who give birth are in a cohabiting relationship and that “almost half of the children in the United States can be expected to spend some time in a cohabiting family.”¹⁶

Research suggests that, for children, the fundamental consequence of increasing nonmarital cohabitation is an increase in family instability, as custodial parents (mainly mothers) move in and out of romantic and sexual relationships.¹⁷ For example, Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu report that

US children born to married parents spend about 88 percent of childhood in two-parent families. For those born to cohabiting parents, the number is 74 percent. For those born to unmarried mothers, it is 52 percent. More dramatically, US children born to married parents now spend about 84 percent of childhood in married-couple families. For children born to cohabiting parents, the number is 47 percent. For those born to unmarried mothers, it is 37 percent.¹⁸

- *More family complexity.* “Family complexity” refers to the presence in family households of half-siblings or step-siblings. Once associated primarily with stepfamilies, family complexity today is increasing in the US across family structures: in mother-headed homes as a result of multipartner fertility, in cohabiting couples and to a lesser extent in married-couple homes as a result of relationship dissolution and re-partnering, and as a result of remarriages creating stepfamilies.

Today an estimated 9 percent of all children are experiencing family complexity, including 8 percent of children in homes headed by the two biological unmarried parents, 9 percent in mother-headed homes, 21 percent in homes headed by one biological parent cohabiting outside of marriage with a partner who is biologically unrelated to the child (think “boyfriend”), and 39 percent in married-couple stepfamilies.¹⁹

Recent research suggest that family complexity is “independently associated with economic disadvantage” for children²⁰ as well as with negative child outcomes in the areas of academic performance and behavioral adjustment.²¹

- *Fewer children living with their biological fathers.* In 1990, about 70 percent of children under age 18 were living with their biological fathers. By 2013, the figure had dropped to 63 percent.²²
- *More children separated from their fathers for at least some of their childhood.* Of US children born between 1970 and 1984, about half are estimated

to have spent a significant part of their childhoods living apart from their fathers. For US children under age 18, at least 60 percent will likely spend some of their childhoods living apart from their fathers.²³

The Rise of the Unformed Family. The six then-and-now family structure snapshots shown here suggest that we may be entering into a new era of US family life—one characterized by the preponderance and cultural importance of a historically new family type that I suggest we call the *unformed family*.

If there is such a thing as an iconography of American family life, we might think of the 1950s as a peak period for the *married family*. It was an era of lots of families forming, familism as an important cultural value, and the middle-class married couple as iconographic.

Similarly, the 1980s might have been the peak for the *divorced family*. It was an era of lots of families breaking up, individualism as an important cultural value, and the upscale recent divorcee starting over as iconographic.

I am suggesting that the 2010s may represent movement toward a peak period for the *unformed family*. It would be an era of lots of families never really forming at all, with ambivalence toward individualism as an important cultural value, and young blue-collar parents looking and looking some more for partners as iconographic.

Let’s attempt a definition. By “unformed family,” I mean a family in which the biological father’s founding and continuing bonds to his child and to the mother of his child are tenuous to the point of being sociologically insignificant. Specifically:

- There is little if any serious or binding commitment to the mother, neither a certificate of marriage nor its informal equivalent;
- There is no enduring coresidency with either the child or the child’s mother;
- There is little, if any, cooperative joining of the two extended families;

Figure 1: Iconography of Trends in American Family Life, 1950s–2010s



The married family.
Longboat Key, Florida, 1958



The divorced family.
Newsweek, February 11, 1980



The unformed family.

Sources: Image #1: Joe Steinmetz, "Longboat Key, Florida, 1958," Photography Archive, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University. Image #2: *Newsweek*, February 11, 1980. Image #3: James McClatchy, "McClatchy-Tribune," Illustration Source, <http://www.illustrationsource.com/stock/collections/mcclatchy-tribune/info/>.

- There are few if any realistic personal expectations of or surrounding social supports for successful family formation; and
- The father's contributions over time to his child's well-being are minor to nonexistent, such that measurable child outcomes in such families are essentially the same as the outcomes in mother-headed families.

A child in an unformed family can and likely will experience family life over time in a variety of living arrangements. For example, she could live alone with her mother, with her mother and her mother's boyfriend or partner, or with her mother and father for a short period of time. Three fundamental traits of unformed families are high levels of partnership dissolution and repartnering, household and family instability, and family complexity.

Particularly important, especially for child well-being, is the fact that, compared with other family types, unformed families tend to experience a high number of

"family transitions." It is well known, for example, that large and growing numbers of US couples are unmarried and cohabiting at the time of their child's birth. Yet from a child's vantage point, the more likely way to experience the mother's cohabitation is *after* birth, either when she as a single mother begins cohabiting with a partner or when the birth parents split and the mother begins living with a new partner.²⁴

A weakness of "unformed family" as an analytic category is that it cannot be used to classify families at any one point in time. For example, the term "single-parent family" means that only one parent is living in the family home at the time of measurement. Similarly, the term "fragile family" means that the child's parents are unmarried at the time of the child's birth. The concept of the "unformed family" does not permit such precise, point-in-time demographic snapshots.

But the term's weakness is also its strength. The category is intended capture the reality and measure the consequences of family living arrangements over the duration of childhood from a child's point of view, for a very large and rapidly growing proportion of families

Table 1. Mother's Marital Status Among Children in Mother-Only Households, 1980–2014 (percent)

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2014
Married, spouse absent	3.9	4.2	5.2	5.3	6.1
Separated	23.5	19.3	15.9	14	12.6
Divorced	43.6	42.1	39	31.7	30.3
Widowed	11.5	6.2	4.6	3.3	3
Never married/single	17.5	28.2	35.3	44.8	48

Source: Analysis of the 1980, 1990, and 2000 Census and the 2010 and 2014 American Community Surveys by States of Change Project, via Steven Ruggles et al., Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 6.0, University of Minnesota, 2015.

that have certain defining features in common, the most important of which is structural and pervasive father-absence.

Particularly in the last several decades, as Bumpass and others have pointed out, the rapidity of change and the growing fluidity of American family structure appear to have overwhelmed the capacity of our existing conceptual tools to measure and understand it. The concept of the “unformed family” may be one way to address this problem.²⁵

How prevalent is the unformed family in the US today? How rapidly is it spreading?

The most important data are presented in Table 1. In 1980, two-thirds of all US children living only with their mothers got there due to divorce or marital separation, while fewer than one in five got there because their parents never married. That year, the children of marital breakdown outnumbered the children of non-marriage in the US by about 4 to 1.

Today, only 34 years later, we live in a remarkably different world, especially from a child's point of view. As a proportion of all US children living apart from their fathers, *the children of non-marriage have overtaken and now outnumber the children of marital breakdown*. This trend suggests that the unformed family has replaced the divorced family as the paradigmatic modality of American fatherlessness.

For US children, the change from the era of the divorced family to the era of the unformed family is a change of both degree and kind: there is much more fatherlessness, and the fatherlessness is harmful in more ways.

Much More Fatherlessness. In about half of the homes of these children, the mothers are living with the fathers at the time of the child's birth, which means that about 20 percent of children are born into unmarried cohabiting-couple households.²⁶ In another approximately 30 percent of these homes, the parents are not living together at the time of birth, but have a romantic and sexual relationship.²⁷

In the two to three years following the births of the children, most of these couples break up, including about 40 percent of the cohabiting couples.²⁸ By the children's fifth birthdays, only about one-third of the couples are living together. About one-third of the fathers have disappeared almost entirely from their children's lives. Researchers report that “new partnerships and new children are common, leading to high instability and growing complexity in these families.” They also report high levels of distrust of the opposite sex and a widespread belief among the mothers that a single mother can raise a child as well as a married mother.²⁹

One study finds that, by the age of nine, children born to cohabiting parents are more than twice as likely as children born to married parents to experience the breakup of their parents.³⁰ Examining these cohabiting-parent unions, the family sociologist Frank F. Furstenberg concludes: “Typically the cohabiting relationship dissolves before a marriage occurs; they are in effect ‘still-born’ marriages that never see the light of day.”³¹

To me, “still-born” seems to be another way of suggesting “unformed.” A key trait of these families is frequently changing family relationships. Family sociologist Andrew J. Cherlin, describes US family structure

patterns today as a “marriage-go-round”: “The percentage of children experiencing three or more mother’s partners today in the United States is probably higher than in any Western country at any time in the past several centuries.”³² More generally Cherlin concludes that “family life in the United States involves more transitions than anywhere else.”³³

Harmful in More Ways. Probably the most telling indicator of the degree of fatherlessness in today’s unformed families here is that child outcomes in homes in which unmarried parents are cohabiting appear to be about the same as outcomes for children in mother-only homes. These outcome areas include mother-infant relationships, home environments of children, behavioral and emotional problems, and school performance.³⁴

What explains such findings? Summarizing a large body of evidence, Cherlin tells us that “children who experience a series of transitions” appear to experience more problems than those who do not, including even children in stable one-parent homes, as suggested by some studies.³⁵

So let’s follow the bouncing trend. An overwhelming body of research suggests that the best outcomes for children are associated with married-couple families,³⁶ but what is the rest of the family-structure ranking? Helping to answer that question, here is a widely accepted research finding from the Census Bureau in 1997: “Children living with a divorced parent typically have a big edge over those living with a parent who has never married.”³⁷

That is a divorce-era statement. It is not surprising for such research to show that children of divorced fathers tend to fare better than children of never-married fathers. But as we enter into the era of the unformed family, a very surprising finding is that, when it comes to measuring whether and how a never-married father contributes to his child’s well-being over time, it does not seem to matter much whether he was living with the mother at the time of birth or not. In either case, the father-child bond is usually tenuous at best, and his positive contribution to the family tends to be sociologically trivial.

The unformed family as an important social presence appears to be something new in world history.

That fact alone does not prove that this family type is harmful, either to itself or to society, but it does suggest that we should pay attention and at least initially we should be more startled than blasé.

There is a seemingly universal principle of human kinship that anthropologists call bilateral affiliation. It seems that all or nearly all human groups clearly favor in both law and custom the principle that the human child should be raised by its mother and father together in a partnership. Many researchers at many times and in many ways have made this fundamental claim about human sexual and family life.

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An early and famous statement of it comes from the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who argued that in all known human societies “the group of mother and child is incomplete and the sociological position of the father is regarded universally as indispensable.” Specific features and expressions of bilateral filiation vary from society to society, depending upon a range of factors, but

through all these variations there runs the rule that the father is indispensable for the full sociological status of the child as well as of its mother, that the group consisting of a woman and her offspring is sociologically incomplete and illegitimate. The father, in other words, is necessary for the full legal status of the family.³⁸

The influential American sociologist Talcott Parsons similarly concludes that the nuclear family, which is “universal to all known human societies,” contains two core features. The first is a mother raising her child. The second feature is that the mother has “a special relationship to a man outside her descent group who is sociologically the ‘father’ of the child, and that this relationship is the focus of the ‘legitimacy’ of the child, of his referential status in the larger kinship system.”³⁹

Similarly, for the prominent kinship anthropologist Meyer Fortes, the weight of evidence constantly

brings us back to the proposition that no one can become a complete social person if he is not presentable as legitimately fathered as well as mothered. He must have a demonstrable *pater*, ideally one who is individually specified as his responsible upbringer, for he must be equipped to relate himself to other persons and to society at large bilaterally, by both matri-kinship and patri-kinship. Lacking either side, he will be handicapped, either in respect of the ritual statuses and moral capacities that every complete person must have . . . or in the political-jural and economic capacities and attributes that are indispensable for conducting himself as a normal right-and-duty bearing person.⁴⁰

These examples could be multiplied many times. Although belief in the universality of bilateral filiation is not universal among scholars, the consensus is broad and deep enough to be quite impressive, such that the remaining arguments tend to focus more on secondary issues than on its essentials.⁴¹ It really does seem that human groups have always been quite serious about fathers being connected to their children and to the mothers of their children.

Until now. The essential feature and consequence of the unformed family—and the main result of the family structure trend of our time—is the evisceration of fatherhood. As Sara McLanahan puts it, years of research suggest that the “first and most important” consequence of current family structure trends in the United States is the “weakening connection between the child and the father.”⁴² Arguably the two most tragic aspects of this weakening are the child’s loss of trust in the father, which appears to contribute to a loss of trust more generally, including in the possibility of loving and being loved,⁴³ and the diminishment of men’s well-being and life prospects.⁴⁴

In 2005, Paul Amato called the father-diminishing shifts in US family structure “perhaps the most profound change in the American family over the past four decades.”⁴⁵ Unless we decide to create some new trends, their continuance will likely be the most profound family change in the coming four decades as well.

2. Two Americas, Increasingly Separate and Unequal, Divided by Family Structure. Recently two of America’s most prominent public intellectuals, one a leading conservative and the other a leading liberal, published much-anticipated books on the American condition and the future of the American dream. The books make the same core argument: We are becoming two nations. About a third of Americans, whom we might call upscale America, are generally thriving and moving ahead, while the rest of us are falling increasingly behind on nearly every measure, such that what used to be the great American middle class is no longer great and no longer secure. Both authors view this new class bifurcation, now at least several decades in the making, as the most important domestic challenge facing the nation.

The essential feature and consequence of the unformed family—and the main result of the family structure trend of our time—is the evisceration of fatherhood.

The authors—Charles Murray in *Coming Apart* and Robert Putnam in *Our Kids*—create similar literary devices to tell their stories. Murray provides us with a finely grained, four-decade comparison of two American communities: the upscale world of “Belmont” and the working-class world of “Fishtown.” Putnam similarly frames his inquiry by revisiting Port Clinton, Ohio, the blue-collar town where he graduated from high school in 1959 to tell us with great poignancy what has happened in and to that blue-collar world since the 1950s. Notwithstanding their political differences—when it comes to end-of-the-book policy prescriptions, Putnam is reliably liberal, Murray is consistently libertarian, and therefore neither is particularly surprising—these authors see essentially the same America and offer their fellow citizens the same warning.⁴⁶

Both authors build their arguments largely on research done by others, and the proposition that America is splitting along class lines into two nations, increasingly separate and increasingly unequal, is not original to either of them.⁴⁷

This historically recent, class-based bifurcation involving the upscale and rising 30 percent and the downwardly mobile 70 percent is evidenced by many measurements, including education, family structure, income and job security, household debt, physical and mental health and life expectancy,⁴⁸ interpersonal and social trust,⁴⁹ happiness, faith in the future, the likelihood of experiencing poverty, neighborhood quality and safety, outcomes for children, and many others.

Of these indicators pointing to various domains of life, which indicators appear to be important causes—which are significantly *contributing* to the growing class divide—and which appear to be mainly results, or manifestations, of the divide? The short answer is that no one knows for sure and that scholars disagree on the answers. Murray and Putnam have apparent disagreements on these questions. At the same time, there is growing agreement among diverse scholars that family structure is not only a result or manifestation of the new class divide, but also an important cause.⁵⁰ For example, summarizing a large body of evidence, McLanahan and Christine Percheski conclude that “family structure has become an important mechanism for the reproduction of class, race, and gender inequalities.”⁵¹ In 2015, more than 100 family scholars and leaders of civil society (I was one of them) similarly concluded that “American marriage today is becoming a class-based and class-propagating institution.”⁵²

The sheer dimensions of the family-structure gap separating American classes are startling:

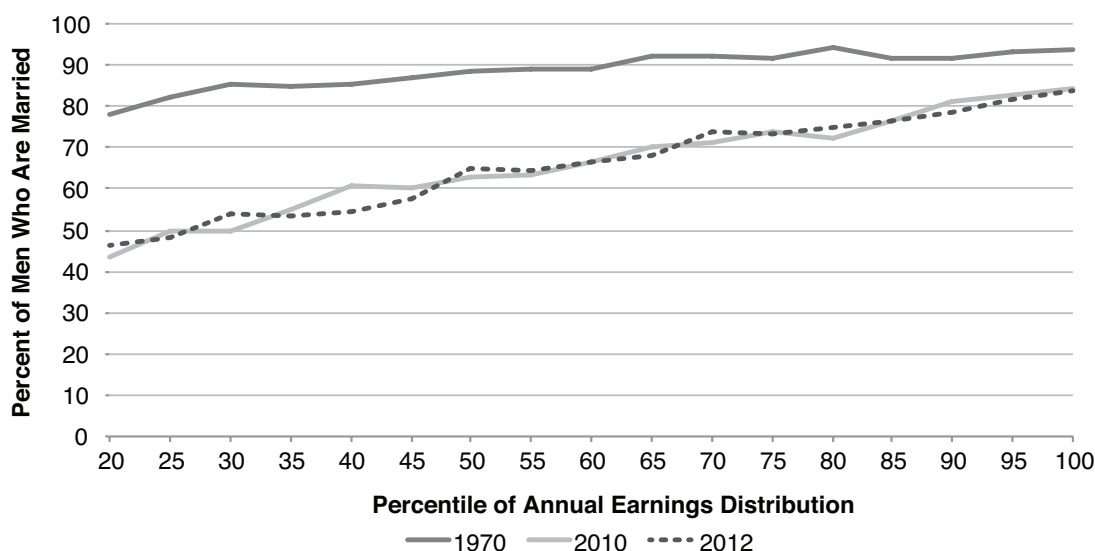
- In 2011, the child of a US woman with a bachelor’s degree or higher had a less than 10 percent chance of being born out of wedlock, while the child of a woman with a high school degree or less had a greater than 50 percent chance of being born to a single mother.⁵³ This gap has been growing steadily over time.
- If we examine, for example, trend lines in the percentages of US women who are unmarried mothers at age 35, we see significant class changes from 1970 to 2010. That proportion rose among all groups of women since 1970, but among the college-educated it rose only slightly, to about 3

percent. Among those with high school or less, it rose to more than one in six.⁵⁴

- Figure 2, which presents data from a 2012 Brookings Institution study, shows the relationship between earnings and marital status for men in 1970 and in 2010. In 1970, socioeconomic status barely affected men’s marital status because the vast majority of men were married, regardless of income level. By 2010, only about half of US men at the 25th earnings percentile were married, compared with 80 percent at the 90th percentile, with a steep gradient in between.

In the same 2012 study, researchers examining US men’s marital status and earnings since 1970 found “a strong correlation between changes in earnings and changes in marriage: men that experienced the most adverse economic changes also experienced the largest declines in marriage.”⁵⁵

- Among all US men who were between the ages of 45 and 52 in 2010–2011, about half of those with high school diplomas but no college were still in their first marriages. Within that same age cohort, about three-quarters of men who had bachelor’s degrees or higher were still in their first marriages.⁵⁶
- In the recent Pew study “The American Middle Class is Losing Ground,” the researchers describe the hollowing out of the American middle class and growing economic inequality in terms of current “demographic winners and losers.” The report says: “Winners [in the current economy] also included married adults, especially couples where both work. On the flip side, being unmarried is associated with an economic loss. This coincides with a period in which marriage overall is on the decline but is increasingly linked to higher educational attainment.”⁵⁷
- A 1999 study finds that during their 17 years of childhood about 81 percent of all children of unmarried parents experience poverty. For the children of married parents, the figure is 22

Figure 2: Percent of Married Men by Annual Earnings Distribution for 1970, 2010, and 2012

Note: Sample includes male non-institutionalized population between the ages of 30 and 50. Chart used with permission of the Hamilton Project of the Brookings Institution.

Source: US Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey*, March 1971, March 2011, and March 2013.

percent. These differences are dramatic: “Children in nonmarried households who are 1 year old have exceeded the risk of poverty than children in married households experience during their entire 17 years of childhood.”⁵⁸

- Between 1982 and 2006–2008, the percentage of 14-year-old US girls living with both parents did not change for the daughters of college-educated women. For both periods, the percentage was about 80 percent. Yet for 14-year-old girls of mothers who had graduated from high school but not a four-year college, the percentage dropped from 74 to 58. For the daughters of the least-educated mothers, it dropped from 65 to 52.⁵⁹

Similarly, Charles Murray estimates that in white working-class Fishtown, among children whose mothers turned age 40 between 1997 and 2004, about 30 percent or less lived with both of their parents. By contrast, in upper-middle-class Belmont, the figure was about 90 percent—a divergence so large that it, according to Murray,

“puts the women of Belmont and Fishtown into different family cultures.” These and similar findings lead Murray to conclude: “Over the last half century, marriage has become the fault line dividing American classes.”⁶⁰

Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution writes: “It used to be that most children were raised by their married parents. For the children of the college-educated elites, that’s still true. But for the rest of America, meaning roughly two-thirds of all children, it’s no longer the case.”⁶¹

It seems highly likely that these changing correlations over time also imply causation.

June Carbone and Naomi Cahn write: “For the majority of Americans who haven’t graduated from college, marriage rates are low, divorce rates are high, and a first child is more likely to be born to parents who are single than to parents who are married.” The result is that marriage “has emerged as a marker of the new class lines remaking American society. Stable unions have become a hallmark of privilege.” “The result of these changes is a new elite—an elite

whose dominant position is magnified by the marriage market.”⁶²

The trend of two Americas divided by family structure makes everything that I described about the loss of fatherhood both much better and much worse—much better for upscale America, where the presence and impact of these trends are comparatively slight, and much worse for the rest of the country, about two-thirds of us, where the presence and impact of these trends are dramatic indeed.

3. More Assortative Mating. Assortative mating refers to the likelihood of people marrying others like themselves, from within their group. It is the phenomenon of “like marrying like” and is common in human societies. In the United States assortative mating by education—for example, the likelihood of four-year college graduates marrying one another—slowly declined over the course of the first half of the 20th century, then in a broad U-turn reversed direction and began a steady increase, particularly after about 1970. Today in the US, the likelihood of endogamy, or marrying someone within one’s own group, in educational attainment is higher than at any time since the 1940s.⁶³

Some research suggests that trends in assortative mating correlate with trends in economic inequality—that is, the two trend lines tend to rise and fall in tandem.⁶⁴ There is also some evidence that endogamy in the US is intergenerationally transmitted.⁶⁵

Therefore, high and growing levels of assortative mating in the US also likely contribute to (and reflect) growing economic inequality in the society. They also likely contribute to (and reflect) class segregation and what Christine R. Schwartz and Robert D. Mare call “social closure,” or the tendency of Americans increasingly to separate themselves along economic, educational, and philosophical-cultural lines.⁶⁶

4. Smaller Proportions of Adults Who Are Married. In 1974, about 70 percent of eligible voters in the United States were married. Today that figure is 52 percent.⁶⁷

To partially control for the decline in the proportion of married adults due to delayed first marriages, we can look at the proportion of US adults ages 35–44 who are married. In 1960, that number was about 88 percent.

In 2011, it was about 65 percent.⁶⁸

From 1970 to 1995, the proportion of life that Americans spent never married increased for men from 37 percent to 47 percent and for women from 31 percent to 40 percent.⁶⁹

For as long as such numbers have been recorded, more than 90 percent of US women have been married at least once by the age of 45. In 1960, probably an historic high point, the number was 94 percent. For US women born in 1995 and after, the projected figure is about 88 percent. For men, the projected figure is about 82 percent.⁷⁰

These declines have been fairly steady across the decades and fairly consistent across the states.⁷¹

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5. Smaller Families. Birth rates have been gradually declining for most of US history. They reached a low point during the Great Depression of the 1930s and then suddenly began to increase after World War II. In 1957, at the high point of the postwar baby boom, an American woman gave birth to an average of 3.7 children during the years of her fertility.

About two decades later, in 1976, that number (measuring so-called total or completed fertility) had dropped to about 3 and in 1990 stood at about 2. In 2007, at the onset of the Great Recession, it was about 2.1, and in 2013 was about 1.9, just under the replacement level.⁷²

The modest decreases in total US fertility rates during the past decade are likely attributable primarily to short-term responses to economic recession and unemployment, the decline in immigration from Mexico, and declining fertility among both US Latinas and US teens and young adults.

Other factors that may contribute to stable and possibly lower US birthrates in coming years include

improvements in contraception; the weakening of marriage as a social institution; more US women enrolling in and completing college (currently more young women than young men go to college here); and higher women's wages and labor force participation, both absolutely and as compared with men. Both higher women's wages and labor force participation (like higher educational achievement) are associated with delayed childbearing and smaller families.⁷³

These trends have had, and will likely continue to have, important effects on US households and on what might be called American family culture. In the mid-19th century, for example, an estimated three of every four US households contained children under age 18. A century later, in the 1960s, that number was about half, and in 2011, it was only about 32 percent. Similarly, due to both declining fertility and more family breakups, the proportion of an American adult's life spent living with a spouse and children dropped from an estimated 62 percent in 1960, the highest in our history, to an estimated 43 percent in 1985, the lowest in our history to date.⁷⁴

As late as the mid-1970s, about 40 percent of US women by the end of their childbearing years had given birth to four or more children. Today about 40 percent of US women have a completed fertility rate of about two, and about 14 percent have had four or more children. During these same four decades, the proportion of US women who have had one child has doubled, from 11 percent to 22 percent.⁷⁵

6. More Older Americans. Decreasing fertility rates, longer life expectancy, and in shorter term the aging of the outsized baby-boom generation (born 1946–1964) are producing an aging US population, such that “Don't trust anyone over 30,” the popular youth slogan from the 1960s, is now well into its dotage and is unlikely to be revived any time soon.⁷⁶ As late as 1980, about half of the US population was under age 30, and about 11 percent was over age 65. Today about 40 percent are under age 30 and about 15 percent over age 65.⁷⁷

Looking ahead, the States of Change project estimates that, between 2015 and 2060, the proportion of Americans under age 18 will decline about 4 percentage points while the proportion age 65 and over will

increase by about 8 percentage points. Similarly, the proportion of the US population in the prime working years of ages 25–54, which peaked in the mid-1990s at about 44 percent (thanks largely to the baby boomers), is now at about 40 percent and is projected to stand at about 37 percent in 2060.

Due to both declining fertility and more family breakups, the proportion of an American adult's life spent living with a spouse and children dropped from an estimated 62 percent in 1960 . . . to an estimated 43 percent in 1985, the lowest in our history to date.

Currently, working-age (ages 18–64) Americans support more children than retirees, but that will change over the next few decades. Today the US old-age dependency ratio (the number of Americans age 65 and older relative to the number of working-age Americans) is about 25, while the youth dependency ratio (the number of Americans under age 18 relative to the number of working-age Americans) is about 38. By about 2033, both ratios will be about 36. By 2060, the old-age ratio will climb to about 42, significantly surpassing the youth ratio, which will be an estimated 35.⁷⁸

7. Less Political Support for Children. As William Galston points out in his essay for this project, compared with many European nations, US social spending has for generations tilted significantly toward support for the aged, compared with support for children. Galston also points to several current US trends that may contribute to even less political support for social spending on children in the coming decades.

One trend is changes in the age structure of the country, as we become a society in which smaller proportions of us are under age 18, smaller proportions live in family households with children, and larger proportions are over age 65. A second trend is differences

by age cohort in degrees of racial and ethnic diversity. In the next few decades, all US age cohorts will become more diverse, but diversity is increasing significantly more rapidly among the young. By 2020, for example, a majority (52 percent) of children will be members of minority groups, whereas the population as a whole will not reach “majority-minority status until about mid-century.”⁷⁹ By 2060, an estimated 64 percent of US children will belong to racial and ethnic minorities.⁸⁰

Robert Putnam and others have argued that, while in the long term racial and ethnic diversity tends to benefit societies, in the short term it tends to lower trust, altruism, and community cooperation.⁸¹ Therefore, as Galston puts it, looking at the prospects over the next several decades of effective political support for social spending on children: “Much depends on whether the oldest Americans will be willing to help finance opportunity-enhancing programs for predominantly nonwhite cohorts of children and young adults.”⁸²

8. Less Trust. Compared with historical levels dating back to the 1950s, Americans since the beginning of this century have become increasingly less trusting of government.⁸³ This trend likely has multiple sources, but several scholars have argued that “a primary consequence of [political] polarization is that it undermines citizens’ trust in the capacity of government to solve problems.”⁸⁴ It is probably more than coincidental that high levels of polarization in Congress coexist with low levels of public trust in Congress. Relatedly, Americans since 2000 have also been less trusting of numerous other key social institutions, including organized religion, banks, public schools, television news, and newspapers.⁸⁵

Finally and arguably most importantly, especially as regards marriage and family, Americans today compared with earlier generations are considerably less trusting of one another. For example, a 2013 study reports that, since the mid-1980s, trust in others in America has “declined dramatically,” in part due to “generational replacement” as “more trusting generations of Americans have been dying and being replaced by younger, less trusting Americans.”⁸⁶

Summing up these trends, a 2013 study reports: “Trust in others and confidence in institutions, two key indicators of social capital, reached historic lows among Americans in 2012 in two nationally representative surveys that have been administered since the 1970s.”⁸⁷ Looking at trend lines dating back to the 1960s, Putnam describes more than four decades in the US of “declining generalized trust and reciprocity.”⁸⁸

All our instruments agree that trust is a very important thing: the indispensable social glue that helps make possible the rule of law, effective governmental institutions, a thriving civil society, and economic dynamism. On many key indicators of well-being, high-trust societies do better than low-trust societies.⁸⁹

In particular, trust is important in building what scholars call social capital.⁹⁰ In fact, Putnam, arguably our finest scholar on the twin topics of social capital and civil society, succinctly defines social capital as “social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness.”⁹¹ Relatedly, the social scientist Robert Sampson points out that mutual trust is a critical component of what he calls “collective efficacy.”⁹²

Trends in trust in the United States also appear to correlate at least partially with trends in US family structure. As we have seen,⁹³ research suggests that the loss of fatherhood connected to the spread of unformed families leads both to a lowering of children’s trust in their fathers as well as to a growing sexual and gender mistrust between mothers and fathers, both of which in turn likely contribute to (as they are also influenced by) the more general decline of trust in the society. More broadly, as Putnam and others have argued, the overall weakening of many institutions of civil society, not just the family, in recent decades—famously described by Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*—appears to contribute to the diminishment of trust in the society, which in turn helps to deplete social capital.

Although interpersonal and social trust appear to have been declining since about the mid-1960s and therefore should inform our thinking about family and social policy as we look to the future, we should remind ourselves again that nothing is inevitable or irreversible about this trend or other trends. If US individuals and institutions become more trustworthy in the future, which certainly seems both desirable and possible,

interpersonal and social trust will surely increase. We will have reversed a key trend.

9. More Secularization and Religious Polarization.

Three decades ago, my friend, the late Richard John Neuhaus, convened a gathering of US thought leaders to discuss whether the United States could properly be called a “secular or secularizing society.” For many participants, including Neuhaus, the answer was “no.” As he put it, drawing in part on a large body of survey data on the depth and breadth of US religiosity, Americans in the 1980s were “as peculiarly religious as they have been thought to be in the past, and probably even more so.”⁹⁴

In 1985, this thesis was controversial but supportable. Today, it seems simply invalid. It seems clear that America in the 2010s, although not a secular society, is a secularizing one:

- In 1984, about 64 percent of Americans said they had a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the church or organized religion. In 2015, that number stood at 42 percent.⁹⁵
- In 1984, about 13 percent of Americans said that religion was “not very important” to them. In 2007, that number was 16 percent, and in 2014 it had risen to 22 percent.⁹⁶
- Arguably the single biggest shift in American religiosity in recent decades has been the growing proportion of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated (the so-called “nones”). In a national Election Day survey in 1984, about 99 percent of voters stated a religious affiliation. In 2014, about 23 percent of Americans said that they did not belong to any organized faith.⁹⁷
- Between 2007 and 2014, Christians as a proportion of the US population dropped from 78 to 71 percent. In those same years, the “nones,” rising from 16 to 23 percent of the population, experienced a stronger rate of growth than any US Christian group and any US non-Christian faith group.⁹⁸

Politically, among Democrats and Democratic-leaning adults, “nones” are now more numerous than Catholics, evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, or members of historically black Protestant traditions.⁹⁹

“Nones” are increasing as proportions of all US age cohorts, but the increases are particularly robust among millennials (adults who were born between 1981 and 1996), especially younger millennials. In 2014, about 35 percent of US millennials were “nones,” compared to 17 percent of baby boomers.¹⁰⁰

At the same time, among the significant majority of Americans who are religiously affiliated, some evidence—including how often people read scripture, share their faith with others, and participate in small prayer or scripture study groups—suggests modest *increases* in recent years in US religious observance and devotion.¹⁰¹

In addition, Richard Neuhaus and his colleagues got some important things right in the mid-1980s. Both then and now, religious belief and practice and religious institutions play a far more important role in US society than they do in many other rich countries.¹⁰²

Today, majorities of Americans say they believe in God (89 percent), identify with a religious faith (77 percent), pray daily (55 percent),¹⁰³ and say that their religious beliefs play a very important or important role in their charitable giving (55 percent). About three-quarters of US charitable giving currently goes to religious and religiously affiliated organizations.¹⁰⁴ Even among the expanding ranks of the “nones,” there is more going on than atheism. For example, about one-third of “nones” say that religion plays a very or somewhat important role in their lives. Nearly 4 in 10 say that they pray at least monthly, and about 6 in 10 say that they believe in God or a universal spirit.¹⁰⁵

It seems that these numbers help explain the intensity and some of the fault lines in today’s culture wars. On the one hand, we see growing secularization and the steady weakening of the role of Christianity in the society, including a declining share of Americans who are Christians, less public confidence in organized religion, and rising numbers of religiously unaffiliated

Americans, such that we can now see an increasingly open contestation of Christianity's once-dominant role in the shaping of American public life and culture. On the other hand, we see the continuing (and perhaps in some respects intensifying) robustness of American religious faith and commitment.

An unsurprising result of these divergent trends is polarization and political-cultural conflict over issues ranging from marriage rights for same-sex couples to climate change, particularly as Christians lose what Ed Stetzer calls "home-field advantage" in American culture.¹⁰⁶ In this context, recent assertions by some Christian leaders and Republican presidential candidates to the effect that America today is "waging war" on Christianity, while I believe to be defensive and unwarranted, are at least understandable.¹⁰⁷ Cultural conflicts of this type in the US seem likely to continue for a while.

Looking ahead, how might trends in secularization and religious polarization interact with trends in family structure, family well-being, and family policy in the coming decades? First, although the topic is complex and the evidence is mixed, some evidence suggests that healthy marriages, stable families, and good outcomes for children correlate positively with religious faith and (especially) regular participation in houses of worship and other religious organizations.¹⁰⁸

At least in some respects, then, marriage and religion as social institutions and influences seem to be mutually reinforcing, such that they might tend to gain and lose together. And why not? After all, marriage in nearly all human groups is partly a religious institution, commonly overseen by religious communities, consisting in part of sacred promises, and surrounded by religious symbols and rites seeking to sanction and idealize the marriage relationship. An important American question in the years ahead will be the degree to which secular values and institutions will contribute, perhaps in fresh ways, to the vitality of American marriage and family life.

In recent decades, public support for strengthening family structure in the United States has come disproportionately from evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and other Americans of traditional religious faith and practice. Looking ahead, will the declining influence of these sectors of our society mean a further weakening of

familism as a US cultural value and less public support for pro-family-structure change?

I do not know. But it certainly seems likely that, to be effective, any public efforts to strengthen marriage and family structure in the next few decades will need to be broadly based, inclusive of liberals as well as conservatives and able to speak convincingly to the nation in both secular and religious accents.

10. More Racial and Ethnic Diversity. In all likelihood, the single most important US population change in the next half-century will be the continuing growth of racial and ethnic diversity. We are headed toward a basic societal turning point. By the middle of this century, a majority of all Americans will be members of minority groups, which will make us a "majority-minority nation" and bring America much closer to becoming, as Ben Wattenberg envisioned in 1990, the world's "first universal nation."¹⁰⁹ The numbers in Table 2 tell the basic story.

These changes are quite dramatic.

- In 1965, non-Hispanic whites accounted for 84 percent of the US population. In 1985, it was 77 percent; in 2014, it stood at 62 percent; and by 2060, it will have dropped to an estimated 44 percent.¹¹⁰
- By 2060, nearly 30 percent of Americans will be Hispanics.
- The two fastest-growing groups in the coming decades will be persons of two or more races (an increase of 226 percent) and Asians (an increase of 128 percent).¹¹¹
- By 2060, the proportion of foreign-born Americans (about 19 percent) will be the highest in our history. It reached its current high of about 15 percent in the late 19th century and dropped to its all-time low of about 5 percent in 1965, the year that Congress passed the game-changing US Immigration and Naturalization Act, which opened the country to immigrants from around the world.¹¹²

Table 2. Estimated Percent of US Population by Selected Characteristics, 2014–2060

	2014	2060
Non-Hispanic White	62	44
Hispanic	17	29
African American	13	14
Asian	5.4	9.3
Two or More Races	2.5	6.2
Foreign Born	13	19

Source: Sandra L. Colby and Jennifer M. Ortman, "Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 2060," US Census Bureau, *Current Population Reports*, March 2015.

Will this dramatic increase in diversity affect US trends in family structure and family policy? Yes and no. With respect to family structure, in 2013 about 78 percent of Asian children in the United States lived with their biological fathers. So did about 72 percent of non-Hispanic white children, about 60 percent of Hispanic children, and about 33 percent of African American children.¹¹³ Clearly, there are significant correlations between race and family structure in the US.

Yet I am not sure exactly what, or how much, to make of these racial differences in family structure. In particular, I have seen no evidence suggesting that, for example, African American children need their fathers any more or less than any other group of children. If the question is what is to be done, it is likely that viewing the problem of US father-absence from a class perspective will be more helpful to policymakers than viewing it from a racial and ethnic perspective.

For example, in 2013, about two-thirds of African American children whose fathers graduated from four-year colleges lived with those fathers. Conversely, of US black children whose fathers did not graduate from college, about one-third lived with their fathers. If we look at white and Asian children whose fathers graduated from college, nearly 9 of 10 children in each group live with their fathers.¹¹⁴ For policymakers, these and similar facts concerning class, education, and privilege would appear to be diagnostic.

More broadly, I would suggest that, when it comes to the future of American family policy, the most important challenge stemming from our society's growing racial diversity is the challenge of empathy.¹¹⁵ It is a deeply American challenge. Arguably, America's greatest promise—its largest aspiration—is to be a place where people of many colors, languages, and ways of prayer can live together and try to thrive in conditions of unprecedented freedom as a people united only by a few key ideas about what the country is and should be. One of those key ideas—now reinforced by considerable social science evidence, including from the field of social psychology¹¹⁶—is that our diversity, even when it tests us, is ultimately more of a strength than a weakness. This idea may be what I like best about our country.

*Our diversity, even when it tests us,
is ultimately more of a strength
than a weakness.*

At the same time, considerable evidence suggests that diversity, including racial and ethnic diversity, can retard the development of empathy, trust, altruism, and cooperation.¹¹⁷ Looking to the future of American families, to what degree will our growing diversity trigger the worse—or give rise to the better—angels of our nature? When we consider policies to strengthen family structure and mobilize public support for such policies, will Americans in 2050 think mostly in terms of my group or my color in relation to other groups and colors? Or will we believe by then that they are all our children and that we are one family?

Family Policy in the Era of the Unformed Family

In light of where we are and where we seem headed, what if anything should we seek to do over the next few decades to improve family functioning by strengthening family structure?¹¹⁸ As far as I can tell, there are four main strategies from which to choose.

The first option is to *do nothing*. Many people from both sides of the political aisle, for many different reasons, seem to favor this approach, but ultimately in my view it is an illusion. It cannot be done. So much that society already does and is not about to stop doing—levying taxes, providing social services, regulating marriage and divorce, caring for those in need, and much more—establishes rules and incentives and sends cultural messages regarding family formation and structure. For this reason, doing nothing in this area is not really possible. Our only real choice is whether we want to influence family structure intentionally, with certain goals in mind, or unthinkingly.

A second option is to *do whatever we want and call it family policy*. Which policy goals do you believe are good for America? More jobs? Less racism? More income equality? More services for the poor? Lower taxes? More Americans with college degrees? Fewer people in prison? More school choice? More empowerment for women? More social justice? Less government? Less abortion? In this way of thinking about family structure and family policy, all of these goals fit.

The problem is that this approach usually depends for its intellectual validity on at least one of two assumptions, both of which are problematic in my view. The first is that good policy is a synonym for good family policy. This conveniently elastic concept may be serviceable as campaign-style political rhetoric, but its shortcomings as serious social analysis seem obvious.

The second and probably more important assumption is that causation in family structure is unidirectional—that is, family form is influenced by outside forces, but outside forces are not meaningfully influenced by family form. That’s why, from this perspective, the best and possibly only way to influence family structure is through extra-familial economic, political, and social change.

The underlying view here is that family form is primarily epiphenomenal, a product of external forces, usually assumed to be structural and usually further assumed to be economic. This view has a distinguished lineage, especially on the political and academic left, dating at least back to Marx’s concept of base and superstructure.

Count me as a skeptic. My own assumptions are that family structure is partly autonomous, with causation in family structure going both ways, and that culture and economics interacting together, not just the economic base, drive social change. From this perspective, family structure is not merely “done to” by larger forces. It also does things. It mediates and influences the external ecology, produces as well as absorbs social change, and generates as well as reflects human and social capital.

In 1966, writing about African American families, the distinguished sociologist Nathan Glazer describes “a view of the family in which it is seen as not only the product of social causes, but as itself a significant and dynamic element in the creation of culture, social character, and social structure.” He concludes: “We know that the family makes the social conditions. We know too that social conditions make the family.”¹¹⁹ This insight, which calls for a more holistic and complex understanding of family structure and family change, strikes me as much closer to the truth than the kind of simple methodological determinism that places most of the real action outside the family itself and very nearly beyond the range of human choice and agency.

This point is more than a quibble about scholarly method. As a practical policy matter, it is encouraging to believe, and likely to be true, that improving America generally will also help to improve family structure. But it seems quite unlikely that we can actually turn the corner on US family structure simply, or even mainly, by improving our economy or our general social condition. While indirect approaches to family structure are likely important, surely they should not become excuses to eschew direct approaches or, even worse, to be agnostic about whether improving family structure is even something we want to do.

A third possible strategy for family policy in the coming decades is to *help the casualties*. This was the favored strategy of many of the participants in the Chicago family policy conference. As we consider the damages wrought by family dysfunction and the loss of fatherhood in the era of the unformed family, what can we do to ease the pain and help those most affected to recover? There are many ideas. More support for low-income single mothers. Better maternal and infant health care. More and better early childhood education. Big Brother

and Big Sister programs. Stricter child support requirements for nonresidential fathers. Mandated education for divorcing couples on how to co-parent after divorce. Programs to help incarcerated fathers reconnect with their children. All of these efforts and many other similar ones would likely serve this objective.

As I have tried to make clear, I find much to admire in this strategy, but also much to regret. As a way of thinking about helping families, it is necessary but not sufficient, primarily because it treats symptoms while ignoring causes, which is ultimately a losing battle, like the villagers trying to rescue children from the river as more and more children each day are falling in.

This brings us to the fourth available strategy for family policy in the coming decades: *Improve the structure*. Let us be a bit more specific. There is no perfect indicator or set of indicators for the vitality of family structure in a society. But I think that many scholars could agree that the following five indicators constitute at least a good place to start:

- The proportion of childhood that children spend living with their two parents.
- The proportion of children living with their two parents.
- The proportion of children living with their two married parents.
- The proportion of intact first marriages.
- The proportion of married adults who are happy with their marriages.¹²⁰

Of necessity there is more to the proposal. Improving our society's score on these indicators—in fact, even developing a consensus that improving family structure is a worthwhile goal—will not happen spontaneously or even as a result of political leaders and intellectuals coming up with clever policy recommendations. Any serious effort to strengthen US family structure in the coming decades will require—to ignite, orient, and sustain it—at least a partial shift in US cultural norms in the direction of familism, by which is meant a cultural

value placing a high priority on family commitment and investment in family relationships.¹²¹ In short, the prerequisite for getting change on the ground—or getting larger proportions of in-the-home, love-the-mother fathers in our society—is a broader cultural values shift in favor of that change.

All of which, in turn, suggests the need for a US social movement for stronger families—and not just any old social movement. The “pro-family” movement that emerged in the US in the early 1980s and since consisted largely of religious and social conservatives—and in which I participated for years—is not suited to confront the issues and conditions of the coming decades. Only something quite new and different—a social change movement that is much more broadly based and inclusive—will be adequate to the family structure challenges we face.

A family policy strategy centered on strengthening family structure has many possible weaknesses, but also two strengths that to me are dispositive: that it is necessary and that it may be possible.

It is necessary because it is the only strategy of our four possible choices that, to the degree that it works, will actually fix what is broken. The other choices consist of putting our heads in the sand, putting different labels on the same ideas, and committing ourselves to the process of managing family decline. It may not be possible to revitalize American family structure, but in light of the stakes, it seems to me that the greatest failure is not trying.

And revitalizing family structure may be possible because, for the first time in five decades, Americans have an opportunity to think about family form in a way that brings us together rather than drives us apart. What for most of our lives has been a series of polarizing culture wars can now and into the future, just maybe, become a common cause.

During the 50 years from 1965—the year of the “Moynihan Report” on black family structure—and 2015, the year of the *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court decision holding that gay couples have the right to marry, three highly divisive culture wars have largely dominated the US public debate on families and family policy, each following closely on the heels of the other.

Starting in 1965, the issue dividing us on the family was *race*. Many Americans in those years believed that linking family structure to social problems was largely aimed at marginalizing African Americans or in the famous phrase of that period, “blaming the victim.”¹²² Not until the late 1980s did the discussion of US family structure begin to lose its presumed association with racism. A turning point was the 1987 publication of *The Truly Disadvantaged*, in which the distinguished black sociologist William Julius Wilson reengaged and largely rehabilitated the topic of family structure and race in the academy.¹²³

Starting in the mid-1970s, the issue dividing us on the family was *gender*. Many Americans in those years believed that those who publicly worried about family decline—especially as evidenced in rising rates of divorce and unwed childbearing and more permissive sexual mores—were unfairly blaming single mothers and seeking to turn back the clock (“go back to the 1950s”) on women’s equality. The fundamental underlying conflict seemed to be between personal freedom and civic equality, especially for women, on one hand, and family stability and traditional moral and gender norms on the other. To some degree, this conflict is still with us, but it has diminished greatly in this century, particularly as the principle of women’s equality in both family and society rapidly becomes the new normal across the society.

Starting in the early 2000s, the issue dividing us on the family was *gay rights*. Only a few years ago, most Americans (including me) opposed marriage equality

for gay and lesbian couples. Today, it is the law of the land, and most Americans (including me and including large majorities of younger Americans) favor it. Today, now that they can, many lesbian and gay couples are in fact marrying. About 18 percent of all same sex-couples in the US are married, and about one of every five of these married couples are also raising children.¹²⁴ Today, gay marriage is . . . marriage. Remarkably, the culture war over this issue is now in our society’s rear-view mirror.

With our half-century of culture war over the family now largely behind us, something quite new becomes possible. Looking ahead to the next several decades, a much broader and more diverse US pro-family coalition may be within our grasp. A coalition bringing together liberals and conservatives, gays and straights, religious and secular voices, higher- and lower-income Americans. A coalition seeking to expand family opportunity for all, but paying special attention to the two-thirds of America that is experiencing a crisis in family structure.¹²⁵

What policy reforms would such a coalition develop and recommend? There is a cornucopia of ideas.¹²⁶ Admittedly, the challenge is huge. But ultimately, the key question is not *how* we meet it. It is whether we want to.

About the Author

David Blankenhorn is founder and president of the Institute for American Values.

Notes

1. Margaret Mead, statement before the Subcommittee on Children and Youth, Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, US Senate, in *Congressional Record* 119 (September 28, 1973), 31962.
2. Margaret Mead, *Male and Female* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1949), 189.
3. Here I am gratefully borrowing and adapting language from Robin Fox, who writes: “Kinship is to anthropology what logic is to philosophy or the nude is to art; it is the basic discipline of the subject.” Robin Fox, *Kinship and Marriage* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), 10.
4. These phenomena are carefully and sympathetically explored in Ronald B. Mincy, Monique Jethwani, and Serena Klemplin, *Failing Our Fathers: Confronting the Crisis of Economically Vulnerable Nonresident Fathers* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Ronald B. Mincy and Hillard Pouncy, *Baby Fathers and American Family Formation: Low-Income, Never-Married Parents in Louisiana before Katrina* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2007). Mincy and his colleagues take a different view of absent fathers from the one I describe and criticize in this essay. They believe that nonresidential fathers, if they had more and better support, can and would—even if many today currently do not and cannot—play a distinct and valuable role in their children’s lives. Their criticism, therefore, is not mainly of these men’s failures as fathers, but of society’s effective abandonment of these men and indifference to their situation. I respect and admire this argument—it is pro-father, and it wrestles seriously with issues of family well-being and family structure—even though I am much less optimistic than Mincy and his colleagues about the possibilities of effective fatherhood in the absence of coresidence with children and a cooperative partnership with the mother. Notwithstanding this difference, I find much with which to agree in their policy recommendations, especially regarding child support enforcement and income supplements for low-income workers.
5. See David Blankenhorn, William Galston, Jonathan Rauch, and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, “Can Gay Wedlock Break Political Gridlock?” *Washington Monthly*, March/April/May 2015. See also Morehouse Conference on African American Fathers, “Turning the Corner on Father Absence in Black America,” Morehouse Research Institute and the Institute for American Values, 1999, <http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/turningthecorner.pdf>.
6. Another example of this (I believe) increasingly influential way of thinking about families and family policy can be found in another essay in the States of Change series by Naomi Cahn, June Carbone, and Howard Lavine. These scholars explicitly disavow the idea of “marriage promotion.” They conclude that “those who do not marry tend to do so for good reasons” and that “marriage as a legal commitment to an unreliable partner is not a good deal” and instead propose a “family stability” policy agenda consisting of greater social investments in human capital (better maternal and infant health care, more early childhood education, better schools, and more employer-sponsored child care and flexible work options); greater access to and use of contraception to allow women to prevent unplanned pregnancies; and (most of all) more and higher-paying jobs—“Jobs now’ should be the true family values slogan.” Naomi Cahn, June Carbone, and Howard Lavine, “A New Look at Demographics, Family Stability, and Politics,” American Enterprise Institute, February 2016.
7. See David Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest: Family Change and Decline in Modern Societies* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1988), 212–214.
8. William J. Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 1 and 37–39 passim.
9. Albert Einstein in 1939 put it this way: “To be sure, when the number of factors coming into play in a phenomenological complex is too large scientific method in most cases fails. One need only think of the weather, in which case the prediction even for a few days ahead is impossible.” Albert Einstein, “Science and Religion,” 1939, reprinted in Albert Einstein, *Out of My Later Years* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), 28.
10. Mallery Tytel, *Vision Driven* (Apache Junction, AZ: Gold Canyon Press, 2009), 12.
11. William A. Cohen, *Drucker on Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 4.
12. Married-couples: Analysis of the 1980, 1990, and 2000 Census and the 2010 and 2014 1-year ACS by States of Change Project, via Steven Ruggles, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, and Matthew Sobek, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 6.0, University of Minnesota, 2015. In a first marriage: Pew Research Center, *Parenting in America*, December 17, 2015, p. 15.

13. Pew Research Center, *Parenting in America*, 15.
14. The percentage of all US births occurring to unmarried women peaked at 41 percent in 2009 and essentially held steady for the next four years, possibly as a consequence of the Great Recession and its aftermath, standing at 40.6 in 2013. See Jane Waldfogel, Terry-Ann Craigie, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, “Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing,” *Future of Children* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2010), 88. Sally C. Curtin, Stephanie J. Ventura, and Gladys M. Martinez, “Recent Declines in Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States,” US Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics *NCHS Data Brief* 162, August 2014.
15. Sheela Kennedy and Larry Bumpass, “Cohabitation and Children’s Living Arrangements: New Estimates from the United States,” *Demographic Research* 19 (September 2008).
16. *Ibid.*
17. R. Kelly Raley and Elizabeth Wildsmith, “Cohabitation and Children’s Family Instability,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 1 (February 2004).
18. Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, “Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children’s Family Contexts in the United States,” *Population Studies* 54 (2000), 38–39.
19. Susan L. Brown, Wendy D. Manning, and Bart Stykes, “Family Structure and Child Well-Being: Integrating Family Complexity” (Working Paper 14-02, Bowling Green State University, National Center for Marriage and Family Research, July 2014), 19.
20. *Ibid.*, 2.
21. Sarah Halpern-Meekin and Laura Tach, “Heterogeneity in Two-Parent Families and Adolescent Well-Being,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 70, no. 2 (May 2008); Kathryn Harker Tillman, “Family Structure Pathways and Academic Disadvantage Among Adolescents in Stepfamilies,” *Sociological Inquiry* 77, no. 3 August 2007); and Lisa A. Gennetian, “One or Two Parents? Half or Step Siblings? The Effect of Family Structure on Young Children’s Achievement,” *Journal of Population Economics* 18, no. 3 (September 2005).
22. Analysis of the 1990 and 2000 Census and the 2001–2013 American Community Surveys by the States of Change project, via Ruggles et al., Integrated Public Use Microdata Series.
23. David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 2–3; David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 1 and 235, note 1; and Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 2–3.
24. Kennedy and Bumpass, “Cohabitation and Children’s Living Arrangements.”
25. Discussing the rise of cohabitation, Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu write: “Changing reality has again outstripped the capabilities of existing data, and we must struggle to meet the challenge of this ever changing target.” See Bumpass and Lu, “Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children’s Family Contexts in the United States,” 39. Regarding unformed families, none of the existing terms seem appropriate to describe this family type. Terms such as “broken,” “disrupted,” and “fragmented” inaccurately suggest that a socially viable family has been formed at some point. “Single parent” does not work because large and growing numbers of effectively unformed families involve either cohabiting couples or fathers who have some contact with their children, and “never-married” inaccurately suggests that an unmarried mother heading a household belongs in the same family structure category as an unmarried mother living with the father of her child. The closest existing term for what I am calling unformed families is “fragile families,” a term coined by the family scholar and Ford Foundation leader Ronald Mincy and his colleagues in the early 1990s. A fragile family is one in which the biological parents are unmarried at the time of birth. I appreciate the term and respect the work of the Strengthening Fragile Families Initiative, created and co-led by Dr. Mincy, primarily to study and support young unmarried couples whose children receive public assistance, so perhaps quibbling over terminology is an unnecessary distraction. Yet the concept of the fragile family is based on the parental relationship at the time of the child’s birth, which seems to limit its ability to shed light on the meaning and consequences of family living arrangements over time from the child’s point of view. In addition, to me the term “fragile families” again suggests that a viable, albeit fragile, mother-father family unit has been formed, whereas in reality, that is commonly not really the case. A third and less important quibble is that a small but probably growing number of unmarried couples in the US are not so fragile, with fathers playing a positive and continuing in-the-house family role—a trend that may continue as unwed parenthood continues to spread from low-income America to working- and middle-class America. See Sara

McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel, Ronald B. Mincy, and Elizabeth Donahue, "Introducing the Issue," *The Future of Children* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2010), 3; Ronald B. Mincy, ed., *Black Males Left Behind* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2006), 311–312; Elaine Sorenson et al., "Recommendations on TANF Reauthorization from the Strengthening Fragile Families Initiative," statement before the Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means, US House of Representatives, May 3, 2002; Paul R. Amato, Catherine E. Meyers, and Robert E. Emory, "Changes in Nonresidential Father-Child Contact from 1976 to 2002," *Family Relations* 58, no. 1 (February 2009).

26. Waldfogel et al., "Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing," 88. This number appears to be rising rapidly and today may be closer to 60 than 50 percent: A 2014 study finds that a remarkable 58 percent of all nonmarital births in the US in 2010 occurred to unmarried women in cohabiting unions, up from 41 percent in 2002. See Curtin et al., "Recent Declines in Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States."

27. Sara McLanahan and Audrey N. Beck, "Parental Relationships in Fragile Families," *The Future of Children* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2010).

28. Kathryn Edin, Paula England, and Kathryn Linnenberg, "Love and Distrust Among Unmarried Parents," revised version of a paper presented at the National Poverty Law Center conference "Marriage and Family Formation Among Low-Income Couples," September 2003.

29. McLanahan and Beck, "Parental Relationships in Fragile Families." On distrust of the opposite sex, see also Kathryn Edin and Maria Kafalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 34 and 125–128.

30. Kennedy and Bumpass, "Cohabitation and Children's Living Arrangements."

31. Frank F. Furstenberg, "Fifty Years of Family Change: From Consensus to Complexity," *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 654 (July 2014): 18.

32. Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 183.

33. *Ibid.*, 19.

34. Susan L. Brown, "Family Structure and Child Well-Being: The Significance of Parental Cohabitation," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 2 (May 2004); R. Kelly Raley and Elizabeth Wildsmith, "Cohabitation and Children's Family Instability," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 1 (February 2004); and Sarah Halpern-Meekin and Laura Tach, "Heterogeneity in Two-Parent Families and Adolescent Well-Being," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 70, no. 2 (May 2008).

35. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 20.

36. Summary statements from two highly respected family scholars make this point clear. Paul R. Amato states: "Research clearly demonstrates that children growing up with two continuously married parents are less likely than other children to experience a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and social problems, not only during childhood, but also in adulthood. Although it is not possible to demonstrate that family structure is the cause of these differences, studies that have used a variety of sophisticated statistical methods, including controls for genetic factors, suggest that this is the case. This distinction is even stronger if we focus on children growing up with two happily married biological parents." Paul R. Amato, "The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation," *The Future of Children* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2005), 88–89. Sara McLanahan writes: "Children who grow up in a household with only one biological parent are worse off, on average, than children who grow up in a household with both of their biological parents, regardless of the parents' race or educational background, regardless of whether the parents are married when the child is born, and regardless of whether the parent remarries." Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 1.

37. *Children with Single Parents—How They Fare*, US Census Bureau *Census Brief* 97-1, September 1997.

38. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Sex, Culture, and Myth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 62–63.

39. Talcott Parsons, "The Incest Taboo in Relation to Social Structure and the Socialization of the Child," *The British Journal of Sociology* 5, no. 2 (June 1954): 102.

40. Meyer Fortes, "Filiation Reconsidered," in Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company,

1969), 261–262. Fortes also defines filiation as “the relationship created by the fact of being the legitimate child of one’s parents.” *Ibid.*, 253

41. See David Blankenhorn, *The Future of Marriage* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), 248–254.

42. McLanahan and Sandefur, 3.

43. Valarie King, “Parental Divorce and Interpersonal Trust in Adult Offspring,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64, no. 3 (August 2002); and Susan E. Jacquet and Catherine A. Surra, “Parental Divorce and Premarital Couples: Commitment and Other Relationship Characteristics,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63, no. 3 (August 2001). Loss of trust in the father following divorce is a core theme in Judith Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* (New York: Hyperion, 2000); and Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005). See also W. Bradford Wilcox, *Why Marriage Matters*, 3rd ed. (New York: Institute for American Values, 2011), 33–36.

44. See especially Steven L. Nock, *Marriage in Men’s Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and John Snarey, *How Fathers Care for the Next Generation: A Four-Decade Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). See also W. Bradford Wilcox, Andrew J. Cherlin, Jeremy E. Uecker, and Matthew Messel, “No Money, No Honey, No Church: The Deinstitutionalization of Religious Life Among the White Working Class,” *Research in the Sociology of Work* 23 (2012); David Autor and Melanie Wasserman, “Wayward Sons: The Emerging Gender Gap in Labor Markets and Education,” *Third Way*, March 2013. For an overview of diminishing life prospects for US men, see Andrew L. Yarrow, “Ten Numbers That Explain the Roots of White Male Rage,” *Washington Monthly*, January 12, 2016.

45. Paul R. Amato, “The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation,” *The Future of Children* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2005), 76.

46. Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012); and Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2015).

47. For example, see W. Bradford Wilcox, “When Marriage Disappears: The New Middle America,” in W. Bradford Wilcox, ed., *The State of Our Unions 2010*, Institute for American Values and the National Marriage Project of the University of Virginia, 2010, <http://www.statefourunions.org/2012/SOOU2012.pdf>. See also Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, “What’s Missing from Our Middle Class Debate?” *Propositions* 9 (October 2012), <http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/2012-10.pdf>.

48. Louise Sheiner, “Implications of the Growing Gap in Life Expectancy by Income,” Brookings Institution, September 18, 2015.

49. See especially Murray, *Coming Apart*, 247–251.

50. Amato, “The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation”; Sara McLanahan, Laura Tach, and Daniel Schneider, “The Causal Effects of Father Absence,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 39 (July 2013); and Ron Haskins, “The Family Is Here to Stay—or Not,” *The Future of Children* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2015).

51. Sara McLanahan and Christine Percheski, “Family Structure and the Reproduction of Inequalities,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (August 2008). Elsewhere McLanahan says that family structure increasingly consigns US children to “diverging destinies.” See Jason DeParle, “Two Classes, Divided by ‘I Do,’” *New York Times*, July 14, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/15/us/two-classes-in-america-divided-by-i-do.html>.

52. Marriage Opportunity Council, “Marriage Opportunity,” Institute for American Values, 2015, <http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/Marriage-Opportunity.pdf>.

53. Rachel M. Shattuck and Rose M. Kreider, “Social and Economic Characteristics of Currently Unmarried Women with a Recent Birth: 2011,” US Census Bureau, May 2013, p. 4, <https://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/acs-21.pdf>.

54. Data and chart provided to Jonathan Rauch—to whom I’m indebted for his assistance in this section of this essay—by Ron Haskins of the Brookings Institution. See Ron Haskins and Maria Cancian, “Changes in Family Composition: Implications for Income, Poverty, and Public Policy,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 654, no. 1 (July 2014).

55. Michael Greenstone and Adam Looney, “The Marriage Gap: The Impact of Economic and Technological Change on Marriage Rates,” Brookings Institution, February 2, 2012.

56. Alison Aughinbaugh, Omar Robles, and Hugette Sun, “Marriage and Divorce: Patterns by Gender, Race, and Educational

Attainment,” US Bureau of Labor Statistics *Monthly Labor Review*, October 2013, Table 4, <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2013/article/marriage-and-divorce-patterns-by-gender-race-and-educational-attainment.htm>. See also Richard Fry, “New Census Data Show More Americans Are Tying the Knot, but Mostly It’s the College-Educated,” Pew Research Center, February 6, 2014. Fry reports that the marriage rate “among college-educated adults increased from 55.3 newlyweds per thousand eligible adults in 2011 to 56.7 newly married in 2012. In contrast, the new marriage rate among adults with some college education and adults with a high school diploma fell further from 2011 to 2012.”

57. Pew Research Center, “The American Middle Class Is Losing Ground,” December 9, 2015, 10–11.

58. Mark R. Rank and Thomas A. Hirschl, “The Economic Risk of Childhood in America: Estimating the Probability of Poverty Across the Formative Years,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61, no. 4 (November 1999): 1058–67.

59. Wilcox, “When Marriage Disappears,” 25–26.

60. Murray, *Coming Apart*, 149 and 167.

61. Isabel V. Sawhill, *Generation Unbound: Drifting into Sex and Parenthood Without Marriage* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2014), 6.

62. June Carbone and Naomi Cahn, *Marriage Markets: How Inequality Is Remaking the American Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19–20 and 70.

63. Robert D. Mare, “Educational Assortative Mating in Two Generations,” (draft paper, University of California, 2008); Christine R. Schwartz and Robert D. Mare, “Trends in Educational Assortative Mating from 1940 to 2003,” University of California, Center for Population Research, July 2005.

64. Schwartz and Mare, “Trends in Educational Assortative Mating from 1940 to 2003.” See also Jeremy Greenwood et al., “Marry Your Like: Assortative Mating and Income Inequality,” *Papers and Proceedings* 104, no. 5 (May 2014); Gary Burtless, “Globalization and Income Polarization in Rich Countries,” Brookings Institution *Issues in Economic Policy* no. 5, April 2007); and Lasse Eika, Magne Mogstad, and Basit Zafar, “Educational Assortative Mating and Household Income Inequality,” Federal Reserve Bank of New York *Staff Report* No. 682, August 2014, https://www.newyorkfed.org/medialibrary/media/research/staff_reports/sr682.pdf.

65. Mare, “Educational Assortative Mating in Two Generations.”

66. Schwartz and Mare, “Trends in Educational Assortative Mating from 1940 to 2003.” On growing philosophical-cultural segregation in the US, see also Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded Americans Is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008).

67. Ruy Teixeira, William H. Frey, and Robert Griffin, *States of Change: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1974–2060*, Center for American Progress, February 2015, p. 16.

68. University of Virginia, National Marriage Project, and Institute for American Value, Center for Marriage and Families, *The State of Our Unions 2012*, 64–66, <http://www.stateofourunions.org/2012/SOOU2012.pdf>.

69. Robert Schoen and Nicola Standish, “The Retrenchment of Marriage: Results from Marital Status Life Tables for the United States, 1995,” *Population and Development Review* 27, no. 3 (September 2001).

70. University of Virginia et al., *The State of Our Unions 2012*, 64.

71. Teixeira et al., *States of Change*, 16. See also Wendy Wang and Kim Parker, “Record Share of Americans Have Never Married,” Pew Research Center, September 24, 2014, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/09/24/record-share-of-americans-have-never-married/>.

72. Joyce A. Martin et al., “Births: Final Data for 2013,” *National Vital Statistics Reports* 64, no. 1 (January 15, 2015); Lindsay M. Monte and Renee R. Ellis, “Fertility of Women in the United States: 2012,” US Census Bureau, July 2014, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/demo/p20-575.pdf>; and Mark Mather, “The Decline in U.S. Fertility,” Population Reference Bureau, December 2014, <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Datasheets/2014/2014-world-population-data-sheet/us-fertility-decline-factsheet.aspx>.

73. Pew Research Center, “The American Family Today,” 20–21, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/17/1-the-american-family-today/>; and Mather, “The Decline in U.S. Fertility.”

74. University of Virginia and Institute for American Value, *The State of Our Unions 2012* (New York: Institute for American Values and the National Marriage Project of the University of Virginia, 2012), 86–88.
75. Pew Research Center, “The American Family Today,” 20.
76. The slogan appears to have been initially popularized by Jack Weinberg, a young leader of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, beginning about 1965. See “Don’t Trust Anyone over 30, Unless It’s Jack Weinberg,” *Berkeley Daily Planet*, April 6, 2000.
77. Teixeira et al., *States of Change*, 12.
78. Sandra L. Colby and Jennifer M. Ortman, “Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 2060,” US Census Bureau *Current Population Reports*, March 2015, p. 7, Figure 6, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2015/demo/p25-1143.html>.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 10, Figure 8.
80. *Ibid.*, p. 11, Figure 9.
81. Robert D. Putnam, “E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century,” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30, no. 2 (2007).
82. Bill Galston, “Demographic Change and the Future of the American Social Compact,” American Enterprise Institute, February 25, 2016, pp. 5–6.
83. In the early 1960s, more than 75 percent of Americans said that they trusted the federal government to do what is right always or most of the time. By 1979, that number had dropped to about 25 percent. In 2001 (just after 9/11), it was back up to nearly 50 percent, and today it stands at about 19 percent, a historic low. See Jeffrey M. Jones, “Confidence in U.S. Institutions Still Below Historic Norms,” Gallup, June 15, 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/183593/confidence-institutions-below-historical-norms.aspx>; Pew Research Center, *Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government*, November 23, 2015, pp. 18–22 and 124–125, <http://www.people-press.org/2015/11/23/beyond-distrust-how-americans-view-their-government/>; and Edelman, “Trust Barometer,” 2015, <http://www.edelman.com/insights/intellectual-property/2015-edelman-trust-barometer/>.
84. Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 180. More generally, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Philip D. Zelikow, and David C. King, eds., *Why People Don’t Trust Government* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
85. Jones, “Confidence in U.S. Institutions Still Below Historic Norms.”
86. April K. Clark, Michael Clark, and Daniel Monzin, “Explaining Changing Trust Trends in America,” *International Research Journal of Social Sciences* 2, no. 1 (January 2013): 7.
87. Jean M. Twenge, W. Keith Campbell, and Nathan T. Carter, “Declines in Trust in Others and Confidence in Institutions Among American Adults and Late Adolescents,” *Psychological Science* 25, no. 10 (2014), 1920. See also Wendy M. Rahn and John E. Trasue, “Social Trust and Value Change: The Decline of Social Capital in American Youth, 1976–1995,” *Political Psychology* 19, no. 3 (November 3, 1998); and Mark J. Hetherington, *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
88. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2000), 142.
89. See Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1995).
90. To define social capital, the sociologist Xavier de Souza Briggs in 1997 said: “‘Social capital’ has been used for about 40 years now to describe resources that are neither traditional capital (money or the things that money buys), nor human capital (skills, know-how). Social capital refers, then, to *resources stored in human relationships*, whether casual or close. It is *not* ‘civic engagement,’ though engagement in public life helps to generate social capital by usefully connecting people. It is *not* trust per se, but some of the best ‘goodies’ come from trusting, as opposed to wary, impersonal ties among people. Social capital is the stuff we all draw on all the time, through our connections to a system of human relationships, to accomplish things that matter to us and solve everyday problems. These distinctions in what social capital is, and, just as importantly, in what it is *not*, turn out to be very important.” Xavier de Souza Briggs, “Social Capital and the Cities: Advice to Change Agents,” paper presented at International Workshop on Community Building, Bellagio, Italy, October 1997. See also Glenn C. Loury, *One by One from the Inside Out* (New York: The

Free Press, 1995), 102–104. See also Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 18–24.

91. Putnam, “E Pluribus Unum,” 137. See also Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2003), 2–5 and 269–293. The authors call *Better Together*, stemming in part from an innovative Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, “a book of stories about social capital.” *Ibid.*, 5.

92. Robert J. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 127 and 151–153.

93. King, “Parental Divorce and Interpersonal Trust in Adult Offspring.” Jacquet and Surra, “Parental Divorce and Premarital Couples.” See also Tara K. Viitanen, “The Divorce Revolution and Generalized Trust: Evidence from the United States, 1973–2010,” *International Review of Law and Economics* 38 (June 2014).

94. Richard John Neuhaus, ed., *Unsecular America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), vii and 31. See also Neuhaus, “The Hidden America,” *First Things*, February 1992.

95. Neuhaus, *Unsecular America*, Appendix, Table 3; and Jones, “Confidence in U.S. Institutions Still Below Historic Norms.”

96. Neuhaus, *Unsecular America*, Appendix, Table 7. Pew Research Center, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*, November 3, 2014, p. 17, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>.

97. Neuhaus, *Unsecular America*, Appendix, Table 28; Pew Research Center, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*, 3–4.

98. Pew Research Center, *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, May 12, 2015, p. 3, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

99. Pew Research Center, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*, 9.

100. Michael Lipka, “A Closer Look at America’s Rapidly Growing Religious ‘Nones,’” Pew Research Center, May 13, 2005.

101. Pew Research Center, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*, 6.

102. For example, “[m]ore than half (54%) of Americans said religion was very important in their lives, much higher than the share of people in Canada (24%), Australia (21%) and Germany (21%), the next three wealthiest economies we surveyed from 2011 through 2013.” See George Gao, “How Do Americans Stand Out from the Rest of the World?” Pew Research Center, March 12, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/12/how-do-americans-stand-out-from-the-rest-of-the-world/>.

103. Pew Research Center, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*, 2, 5, and 17. See also in Neuhaus, *Unsecular America*, Appendix, Tables 1–2.

104. Melanie A. McKittrick et al., *Connected to Give: Faith Communities* (Los Angeles: Jumpstart, 2013), 6 and 21.

105. Pew Research Center, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*, 15. These 2014 numbers are down, however, since 2007; the trend lines among the “nones” clearly appear to be in the direction of secularization.

106. John Stonestreet, “Christians Losing ‘Home-Field Advantage’ as U.S. Reels from Political and Religious Polarization,” CNS News, November 30, 2015, <http://www.cnsnews.com/commentary/john-stonestreet/christians-losing-home-field-advantage-us-reels-political-and-religious>.

107. Rand Paul: “There is a war on Christianity.” David Brody, “Rand Paul’s Message to Evangelicals: ‘There Is a War on Christianity,’” *American Renewal Project*, June 20, 2013. Ted Cruz: “There is a war on faith in America today.” Katie Zezima, “Ted Cruz: There Is a ‘War on Faith,’” *Washington Post*, August 21, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/08/21/ted-cruz-there-is-a-war-on-faith/>. Mike Huckabee: “[We are] criminalizing Christianity in this country.” Sean Illing, “The Big Ted Cruz/Bobby Jindal Lie: There’s No War on Christianity,” *Salon*, July 13, 2015, http://www.salon.com/2015/07/13/the_big_ted_cruz_bobby_jindal_lie_theres_no_war_on_christianity/.

108. Linda J. Waite and Evelyn L. Lehrer, “The Benefits from Marriage and Religion in the United States: A Comparative Analysis,” *Population and Development Review* 29, no. 2 (June 2003). See also W. Bradford Wilcox, “Religion, Race, and Relationships in Urban America,” Institute for American Values *Research Brief* No. 5, May 2007; and W. Bradford Wilcox, “Religion, Convention, and Paternal Involvement,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64, no. 3 (August 2002).

109. Colby and Ortman, “Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 2060,” 1. Pew Research Center, *Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to U.S., Driving Population Growth and Change Through 2065*, September 28, 2015, p. 27, Figure 2.5. Teixeira, Frey, and Griffin, *States of Change*, 2. Ben J. Wattenberg, *The First Universal Nation* (New York:

The Free Press, 1990). When exactly is the U.S. likely to become a majority-minority society? The Census Bureau study cited here estimates that the turning point will have occurred by 2044, while the Pew study estimates that the turning point will occur between 2045 and 2055.

110. Pew Research Center, *Modern Immigration Wave*, p. 27, Figure 2.5, and p. 29, Figure 2.7.

111. Colby and Ortman, "Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population," p. 9, Table 2.

112. *Ibid.*, p. 2, Figure 1. Pew Research Center, *Modern Immigration Wave*, p. 6, Figure 1.

113. States of Change project data.

114. *Ibid.*

115. Empathy refers to the capacity to identify deeply and emotionally with other people's situations and feelings. Discussing the related concept of sympathy in 1759, the great economist and moral philosopher Adam Smith wrote that "it is by changing places in fancy with the sufferer, that we come either to conceive or be affected by what he feels." That is also a nice definition of empathy. See Adam Smith, *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, 3rd ed. (London: T Cadell, 1767), 3.

116. Richard P. Larrick, Albert E. Mannes, and Jack B. Soll, "The Social Psychology of the Wisdom of Crowds," in *Social Judgment and Decision Making*, edited by Joachim I. Krueger (New York: Psychology Press, 2011). See also Katherine W. Phillips, "How Diversity Makes Us Smarter," *Scientific American*, October 1, 2014.

117. Sophie Trawalter, Kelly M. Hoffman, and Adam Waytz, "Racial Bias in Perceptions of Others' Pain," *PLOS ONE* 7, no. 11 (November 14, 2012). Matteo Forgiarini, Marcello Gallucci, and Angelo Maravita, "Racism and Empathy for Pain on Our Skin," *Frontiers in Psychology* (May 23, 2011), <http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2011.00108/full>. On opinion diversity as a barrier to empathy, see Peter H. Ditto and Spassena P. Koleva, "Moral Empathy Gaps and the American Culture War," *Emotional Review* 3, no. 3 (July 2011). A 2001 study finds that differences between the U.S. and European countries in levels of support for the poor "appear to be the result of racial heterogeneity in the U.S. and American political institutions." Alberto Alesina, Edward Glaeser, and Bruce Sacerdote, "Why Doesn't the U.S. Have a European-Style Welfare System?" National Bureau for Economic Research *Working Paper* No. 8524, October 2001, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w8524>.

118. Terms such as "strengthening" or even "functioning" can seem politically or ideologically loaded, as can terms such as "family values," so perhaps it is a good idea to define them as clearly and objectively as possible. Family sociologists generally agree that the family as social institution is aimed performing five main social functions, or to put it a bit differently, meeting four basic social needs: producing and effectively rearing and socializing enough children to continue the group; providing care, affection, and companionship to family members; regulating sexual conduct in a pro-social manner; and engaging in economic cooperation and the sharing of economic resources. If families in a society are commonly performing these functions well (e.g., adequately meeting these basic needs), it is reasonable to describe them as strong or thriving. If not, it is reasonable to describe them as at least in part dysfunctional or growing weaker. See Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest*, 4–7.

119. Nathan Glazer, "Foreword," in E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), ix and xviii.

120. For a similar effort, aimed at establishing indicators for measuring the health of marriage in society, see Institute for American Values and the National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting, *The Marriage Index: A Proposal to Establish Leading Marriage Indicators* (New York: Institute for American Values and National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting, 2009).

121. See endnote 7.

122. What seemed effectively to trigger this culture war over race and family structure was the Moynihan Report of 1965: US Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1965), <https://web.stanford.edu/~mrosenfe/Moynihan's%20The%20Negro%20Family.pdf>. The Moynihan Report was also published in Lee Rainwater and William T. Yancey, eds., *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1967). For several of the seminal criticisms of the report, see Herbert J. Gans, "The Negro Family: Reflections on the Moynihan Report," *Commonweal*, October 15, 1965; William Ryan, "Savage Discovery: The Moynihan Report," *The Nation*, November 22, 1965; and William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976). Perhaps a

sign of the times, or at least of this conflict, is that in the index to *Blaming the Victim*, there is no entry for “fathers.” The only mention of fathers or fatherhood is under “Negro children,” and it reads, “myths about effects of fatherless homes on” Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*, 346.

123. William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

124. Gary J. Gates, “LGB Families and Relationships: Analyses of the 2013 National Health Interview Survey (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute of the UCLA School of Law, October 2014.)

125. A recent effort to put together such a coalition is described in Blankenhorn et al., “Can Gay Wedlock Break Political Gridlock?”

126. For example, recommendations for strengthening U.S. family structure are in Blankenhorn et al., “Can Gay Wedlock Break Political Gridlock?”; Wilcox, “When Marriage Disappears”; Institute for American Values and the National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting, *The Marriage Index*; and William J. Doherty and Leah Ward Sears, “Second Chances: A Proposal to Reduce Unnecessary Divorce,” Institute for American Values, 2011, <http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/second-chances.pdf>.