

Strong Families, Prosperous States

W. Bradford Wilcox

I WANT TO BEGIN BY TALKING ABOUT the conventional wisdom. From Hollywood to the halls of academia, we often hear the message that marriage doesn't matter. Kids and families, we are told, need not enjoy the shelter and security of a married home to thrive. Take, for instance, Jennifer Anniston, who said, "Women are realizing it more and more: knowing that they don't have to settle with a man just to have that child." Or in the book *Raising Boys Without Men: How Maverick Moms Are Creating the Next Generation of Exceptional Men*, which celebrates women who have had boys without fathers, the Cornell psychologist Peggy Drexler said that "Women possess the innate mompower [sic] that in itself is more than sufficient to raise fine sons." And this Pollyannish message is also taken up by some in the media. Last year, for instance, Matthew Yglesias at *Vox* gave explicit voice to the idea that the decline of marriage isn't a problem for women, children, and the country as a whole.

Of course, the only problem with this new conventional wisdom about marriage and family life is that it's not true. This is indicated by some of the highlights from the newest research I've done with the economists Joseph Price and Robert Lerman, research that underlines the connection between marriage and the economic health of states across the country.¹

1. W. Bradford Wilcox, Robert I. Lerman, and Joseph Price, "Strong Families, Prosperous States: Do Healthy Families Affect the Wealth of States?" American Enterprise Institute and the

Let's begin this conversation by considering how it is that marriage matters in this country of ours. A publication just out from Princeton and Brookings demonstrates how marriage is connected to the welfare and well-being of our kids. More specifically, "reams of social science and medical research convincingly show that children who are raised by their married biological parents enjoy better physical, cognitive, and emotional outcomes on average than children who are raised in other circumstances."² Clearly, the social science is telling us that kids are more likely to flourish when they are raised in intact married homes. And I say this to you as someone who was raised by a single mother. Many kids like me and my sister turn out "just fine," but I am also speaking as a social scientist, and, on average, our kids are more likely to flourish, as this new publication from Princeton and Brookings tells us, when they have the benefit of an intact married-parent family behind them.

But I want to turn our thinking away from just the kids and towards thinking about how family structure matters for the larger society. How is what is happening to our marriages in our states linked to what is happening in state economies? As we were exploring this issue, Lerman, Price, and I found that virtually no research had been published on the connection between the health of marriage and economic growth. This is ironic because the term *economics* is rooted in the Greek term *oikonomia*, which means "the management of the household." It is for that reason that Joseph Price, Robert Lerman, and I set out in our report "Strong Families, Prosperous States," to study the link between marriage and economics at the state level. What was the connection between the health of a state's marriage culture and its economy?

What we found is that when families are stronger in a state, when there are more married-parent families in a state, you see higher levels of economic growth, you see less child poverty, you see higher levels of median-family income, and you see that the American dream is more

Institute for Family Studies, October 19, 2015, available at <https://www.aei.org/publication/strong-families-prosperous-states/>.

2. David C. Ribar, "Why Marriage Matters for Child Wellbeing," *The Future of Children* 25.2 (Fall 2005): 11-23, at 12, available at <https://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/Full%20Journal%20Marriage%20Revisited.pdf>.

likely to be realized by poor kids.

So if you look, for instance, at Figure 1, what you see is that states like New Mexico, Louisiana, and South Carolina have some of the highest levels of child poverty in the country, in part because these states have comparatively few married parents in them.³ By contrast, states like New Hampshire, Minnesota, and North Dakota have comparatively low levels of child poverty, in part because so many of the families in those states are headed by married parents; these parents can bring more economic resources to the table in part because they are married. There is a connection at the state level between child poverty and the health of the married-parent family.

States with highest and lowest child poverty rates

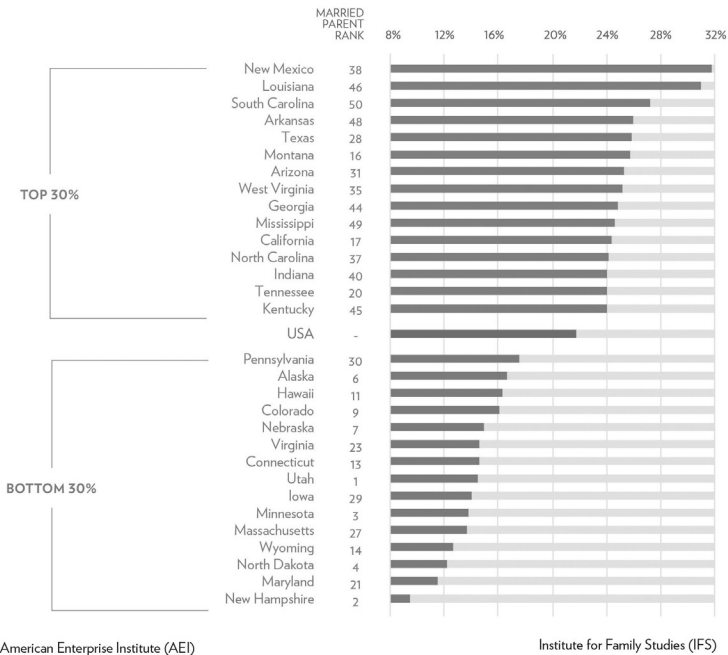


Figure 1

3. Wilcox *et al.*, figure 8. Tabulations by authors from the Current Population Survey, 2012-2013. Married parent rank is based on the share of parents with children under 18 that are married, according to the 2013 Current Population Survey. Ages restricted to 25-59. All states included.

We also see a very similar story when it comes to the American Dream (see Figure 2).⁴ Looking at the odds that a child growing up in a poor family—the 25th percentile—moves up to a higher percentile as an adult, we see that some states are more likely to make that American Dream come true. But states like New Mexico, Louisiana, and South Carolina, again, are not doing so well. Kids from these kinds of states are less likely to move toward the middle class, toward the 50th percentile, as adults. By contrast, kids in states like Utah, for example, which has the

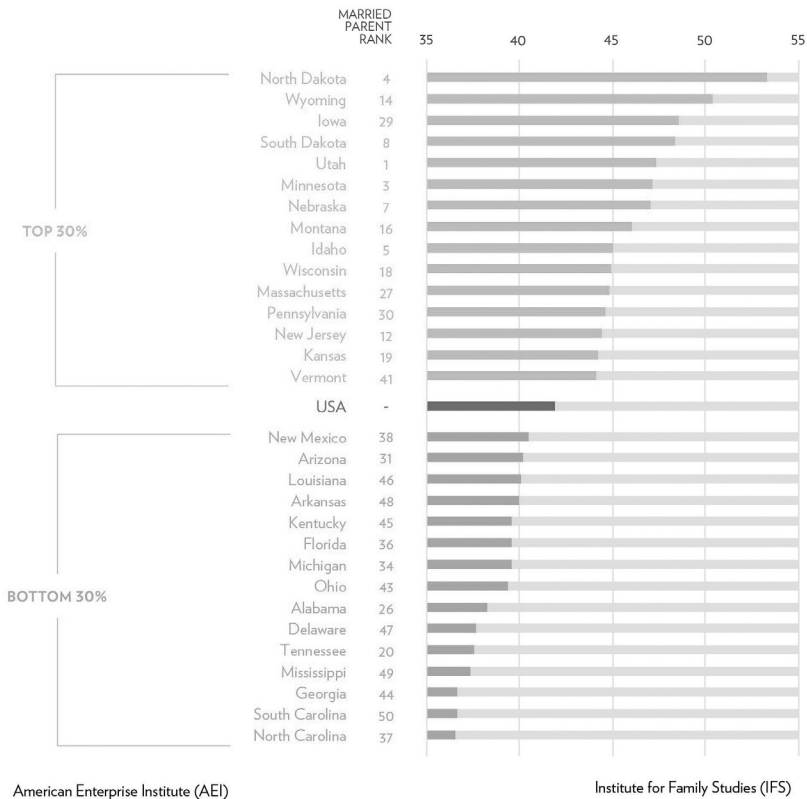


Figure 2

4. *Ibid.*, figure 6. Tabulations by authors from the Equality of Opportunity Project’s absolute upward mobility data by county, collapsed to the state level. Married-parent rank is based on the share of parents with children under 18 that are married, according to the 2013 Current Population Survey. Ages restricted to 25-59. Mobility is from the 1980-1982 cohort.

highest share of married-parent families in our nation, are more likely to move toward that 50th percentile as adults because they benefit from growing up in a community, a neighborhood, and area where there are lots of married parents in the mix. Again there is a connection between the health of the American dream for poor kids and the health of the married-parent family in our states.

If we think about this in a broader sense, what would the economic profile of our states look like if our states enjoyed, on average, 1980-levels of married parenthood? We would see state per capita GDP about 4 percent higher. We would see child poverty rates about 17 percent lower. And we would see family median income resting at a level about 10 percent higher. There is clearly a connection between what is happening in our families and what is happening in our state economies.

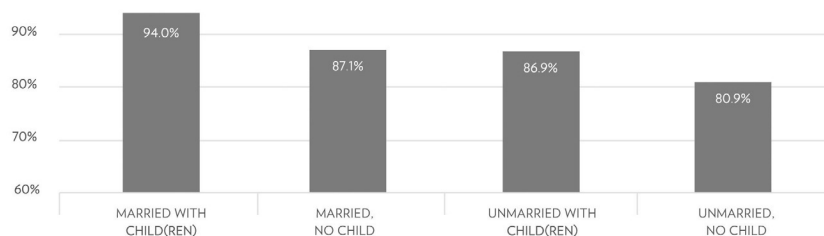
In our culture today there has been a lot of discussion in policy circles, in media circles, in academic circles about the impact of education and race on the economic arena. These are important factors, but what is striking about this new report is that we find, at least at the state level, that family structure is a better predictor of outcomes like economic mobility, child poverty, and median family income than are race or education. Family matters here; it seems to be a very powerful factor when it comes to the health of our state economies.

The bottom line is that if you care about growth and child poverty, and family income, and the American Dream, you should care about the health of the family, both for the country at large, and in your state and community more particularly. So why does marriage matter? Why it is that there is such a strong connection between healthy families and healthy state economies? Let me begin by taking a point that was elucidated by Jason Carroll, which is that men especially are affected by marriage and family life (see Figure 3)⁵. This is a point that is not unique to me. It was articulated back in 1998 by Nobel Laureate George Akerlof, who is married to our Fed chair Janet Yellen, who said, “Men settle down when they get married.”⁶ His basic argument is that the responsibilities

5. *Ibid.*, figure 11. Tabulations by authors from the Current Population Survey, 2010-2013. All states included.

6. George A. Akerlof, “Men Without Children,” *The Economic Journal* 108.447 (March 1998): 287-

Male labor force participation (ages 25–59), by marital and parental status



American Enterprise Institute (AEI)

Institute for Family Studies (IFS)

Figure 3

attendant to being a married father are likely to motivate men to be more responsible, and more directly engaged in the labor force.

The research indicates that men who are married tend to work more hours than their single peers. They tend to work more strategically. They are less likely, for instance, to be fired than their comparable single peers. And they work more successfully—they make more money—than their comparable single peers.

We can see this at the level of labor force participation. Married men with kids are 13 percentage points more likely to be in the labor force than their comparable single peers. Again, there is a connection between marriage, men, and work in our society.

The organization of the household also matters. We know that married families have more money to manage, and they tend to manage it more prudently than families headed by single parents and cohabiting couples. They draw on economies of scale. They pool income. They have higher rates of saving. They get more financial support from their kin. And they are more likely to stay together, which also reinforces their economic position. So, again, there is a connection between what is happening in the household, and what is happening in the checking account. We see a family income premium for African Americans, for Hispanics, for Whites, for less educated Americans, and for college-educated Americans

that are married.

Finally, we know that strong families foster the accumulation of human capital. We know that kids who come from married families tend to graduate from high school and graduate from college at higher rates. They are more likely to be gainfully employed as adults and to work more hours. This is true for both young men and young women; if you are concerned about women's professional opportunities you should be concerned about their family structure growing up. At the state level, we see that states that enjoy higher levels of married parenthood also have higher levels of high-school completion. So again, both at the household level and at the state level, there is a connection between education and strong families.

In our report, then, we hypothesize that there is a connection between strong families and state prosperity, because marriage and family life deepen men's connection to the labor force, they boost income and assets, and they improve the accumulation of human capital.

Which states have been more affected by the retreat from marriage, and why? When progressives are thinking about this question, about why some groups have been more affected by the retreat from marriage, they tend to gravitate towards what is called "social structure explanations," usually economic explanations. For example, in talking about this issue, Annie Lowrey wrote for the *New York Times* that "from the economist's perspective, our collective allergy to matrimony might be a macroeconomic issue. In order to save marriage, we'd have to end poverty."⁷ Or in more simple terms, it's the economy, stupid. Economic factors are driving this retreat from marriage, especially in states with large numbers of working class and poor people.

A different perspective would say that it is about more than money, that culture matters, that public policy matters. Isabel Sawhill at the Brookings Institution wrote, "A purely economic theory falls short as an explanation of the dramatic transformation of family life in recent

7. Annie Lowrey, "Can Marriage Cure Poverty?" *The New York Times Magazine*, February 4, 2014, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/magazine/can-marriage-cure-poverty.html?_r=0.

decades.”⁸ There is evidence from the last century that we can use to back up Dr. Sawhill’s observation. We know, for instance, that at the height of the Great Depression, in the 1930s, when the economy was in terrible shape, we had much higher levels of family stability, much lower levels of divorce, and much lower levels of single parenthood than we do now. Clearly, what is happening in the family is not simply about economics.

What does that say about what is happening today in states across the country? What we find in this new report is that some states, primarily in the North, from Utah across to New England, are doing pretty well on the married-parent front. By contrast, states in the South, states like Georgia and Louisiana, are not doing so well, as Figure 4 suggests.⁹ That leads us to consider social structural and cultural explanations regarding what is happening to marriage and family life in our country today. I think there is something to this progressive idea that economics matters, that education matters, that states like Mississippi and Louisiana are doing not so well, for example, in part because they have low levels of education. By contrast, states like Minnesota and New Hampshire are doing comparatively well on the married-parent front in part because they have higher levels of education. So this set of findings is broadly consistent with a more progressive view on family life in America.

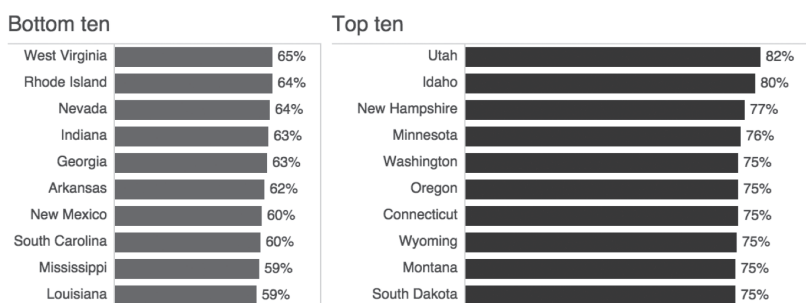


Figure 4

8. Isabel Sawhill, “The Economics of Marriage, and Family Breakdown,” Opinion, July 15, 2014, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2014/07/15-economics-of-marriage-family-breakdown-sawhill>.
9. Wilcox *et al.*, “Share of Children With Married Parents” interactive graphic. Data from the Current Population Survey, a 2014 Gallup Poll, and the American Presidency Project (% voting Republican).

But if we turn to a different set of states, states like Idaho, South Dakota, and Utah, we see even middling or even lower levels of education coexisting with higher degrees of marriage. Here I think a cultural explanation, about the way in which these states and these communities value marriage, is more compelling. I echo the words of David Leonhardt of the *New York Times*, who has written about this subject three times in *The Upshot*: “the more respect and even reverence for the idea of marriage [found] in conservative communities [may] affect people’s behavior and attitudes” in ways that reinforce the strength and stability of married life in more conservative communities and states.¹⁰ Putting all of this together, our bottom line is that those structural and cultural factors explain why some states—largely in the North—have proved to be more successful in resisting the nation-wide retreat from marriage.

Given all of this, where do we go from here? What is to be done? One key point to make here is that given the structural realities that I mentioned, we need to think more about how we can shore up the economic foundations of working class and poor families and communities across the United States. One area we can do this is in the arena of educational policy. We need to recognize that even today, most Americans will not get a college degree. And yet our educational system tends to focus solely on that as the primary goal. We need to serve our kids who are not on the college track much better, with better vocational and apprenticeship training, for instance. That would improve their sense of identity, their economic prospects, and, down the road, their marriage prospects as well.

A second point when it comes to public policy is that we need to take very seriously this idea of “doing no harm” when it comes to marriage and family life. An unfortunate reality is that too many of our public policies targeting lower income Americans unintentionally penalize marriage. That matters, because a third of Americans are receiving some kind of means-tested benefit, from Medicaid to food stamps. Because these policies penalize marriage, they may also be undercutting the value of

10. David Leonhardt, “Republicans Say They Are Happier In Their Marriages,” *The Upshot*, *The New York Times*, August 17, 2015, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/18/upshot/republicans-say-they-are-happier-with-their-marriages.html>.

marriage in working-class and poor communities.

But we also need to realize that what is happening in our families is affected only at the margins by what is happening in Washington or Salt Lake City or Sacramento, in our federal and state capitals; public policy only matters so much. We need to be thinking about creative cultural and civic strategies to change marriage and family life, to change relationships in our culture. I think we can take some comfort from the successful campaign that was inaugurated in the early 1990s by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Working with a range of partners, from Hollywood to religious institutions, to schools, they have helped to bring down the rate of teen pregnancy by more than 50% since 1990. That is the kind of example that we should use as we think about ways to reintegrate or resurrect what Jason Carroll called “the success sequence,” encouraging adults to put education, work, marriage, and parenthood in that order, as a newly reinvigorated public norm.

Let me conclude: given the central role that marriage plays in fostering growth, prosperity, and the American dream, the nation needs to renew the economic, the policy, civic, and cultural foundations of marriage and family life for the twenty-first century. Clearly, there is no magic bullet when it comes to dealing with marriage and families. Some will doubt the justice and even feasibility of such a project. But this report demonstrates that some states have achieved a measure of success in resisting the nation’s retreat from marriage. If more states could get behind public policies that do not penalize marriage, educational efforts that strengthen the earning power of working-class and poor young men, and civic efforts to make the culture more marriage-friendly, we just might see a renaissance in marriage and family life in America. And that would bring about improvements not only in the state of our unions, but also, in the wealth of our states.

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