



Statement before the Joint Economic Committee

On “Improving Family Stability for the Wellbeing of American Children”

Family Stability and the American Dream

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Chairman Lee, Vice Chair Beyer, and distinguished members of the Joint Economic Committee, thank you for convening this hearing on improving family stability. I am a sociologist at the University of Virginia, a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, and a senior fellow of the Institute for Family Studies. This testimony reflects my own views and not those of any organization with which I am affiliated. Thank you for having me here today.

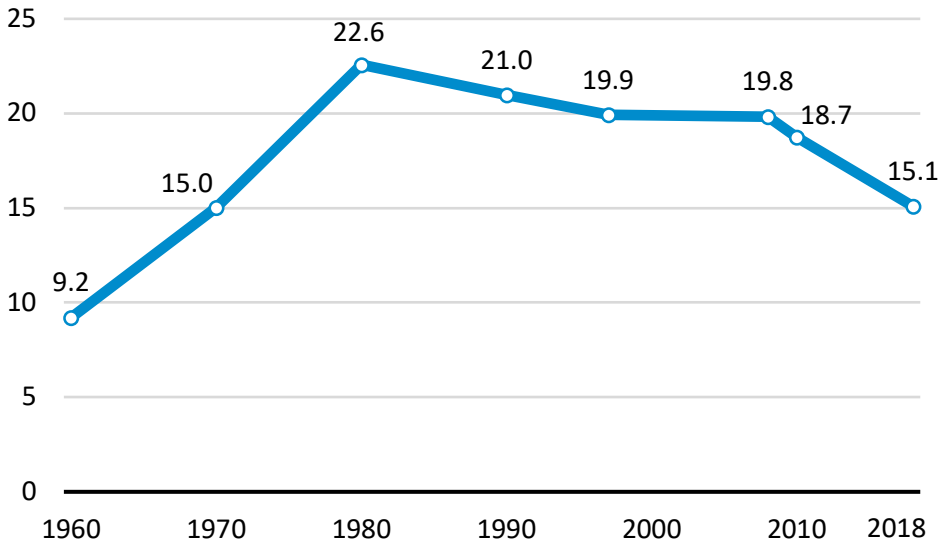
If your only sense of the state of our unions was drawn from the pop culture and the prestige press, you could be forgiven for thinking that the state of marriage and family life in America is dire. From the Oscar-winning movie *Marriage Story*, which leaves the impression that divorce remains an endemic feature of married life, to the title of the new *Atlantic* cover [story](#), “The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake,” much of the culture today paints a dystopian portrait of the state of our unions.

The Good and Bad News About Family in America

But, in truth, the data tell a sunnier story than you might get from just following the pop culture and the prestige press. There is good news about marriage and family life in America—news that is under reported and not well known by the general public. First, as Figure 1 indicates, divorce is down more than 30% since the height of the divorce revolution, in 1980, and seems to be headed lower. This means that the fabled statistic—that 1-in-2 marriages end in divorce—is no longer true. A clear majority of marriages being formed today will go the distance. Second, in the wake of the Great Recession, the decades-long increase in nonmarital childbearing has come to a halt and is now falling, albeit modestly.

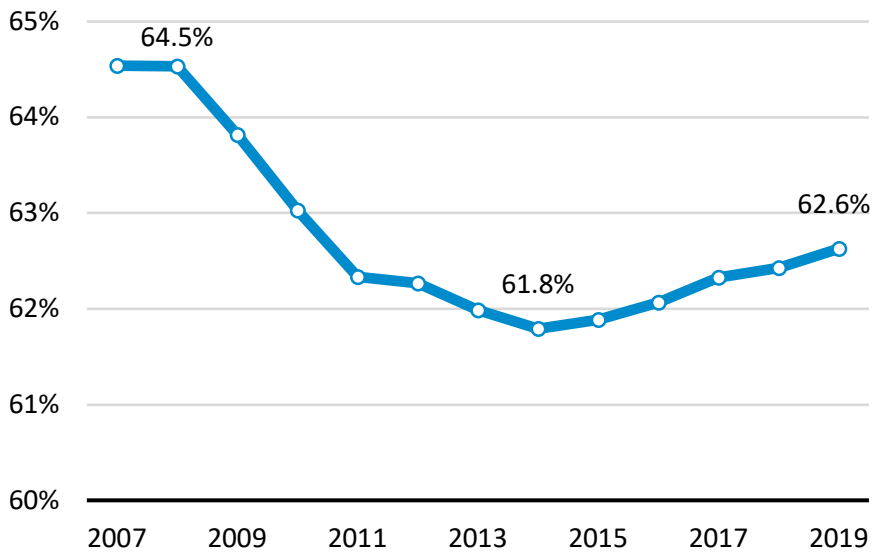
Less divorce and less nonmarital childbearing equal more children being raised in intact, married families. In fact, as Figure 2 shows, since 2014, the share of children being raised in intact, married family has climbed from 61.8% to 62.6%. Especially noteworthy here is that an uptick in children living in intact families has been strongest for black children and children born to disadvantaged mothers, as Figure 3 indicates. The good news about family in America, then, is that a growing share of children are being raised in intact, married families.

Figure 1: The Divorce Rate, 1960-2018



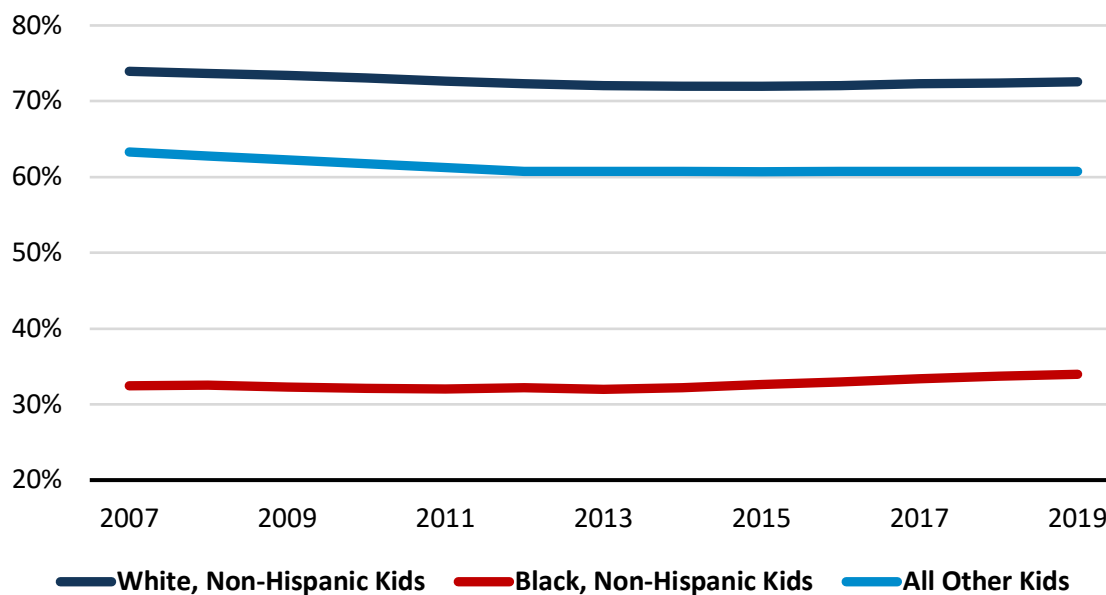
Source: 1960–1997 estimates based on NCHS data; 2008–2018 estimates based on American Community Survey.

Figure 2: Children in Intact Married Families, 2007-2019



Source: 2007–2017 estimates based on American Community Survey, and 2018–2019 estimates are projections based on 2018 and 2019 Current Population Survey.

Figure 3: Share of Children Living in a Married, Two-Parent Household, by Major Racial or Ethnic Group, 1870-2018



Source: Decennial Censuses, American Community Survey, and Current Population Survey queried through the Integrated Public Use Microdata System.

The bad news, by contrast, is that the nation still faces a deep divide when it comes to family structure and stability, with children from black and less-educated homes facing markedly higher rates of family instability and single parenthood. Single parenthood is about twice as high for children from families with less education and for black children, compared to children, respectively, from college-educated families and children from white and Asian families.¹ This form of family inequality is particularly troubling because it leaves many working class and poor children “doubly disadvantaged”—navigating life with fewer socioeconomic resources *and* an absent parent.²

The Roots of Family Inequality

This family inequality has been driven by shifts in the economy, culture, and public policy (Cherlin 2009; Jencks et al 1998; Wilcox et al 2015; Wilson 1987). Economic gains since the 1970s have disproportionately gone to the most educated Americans.

¹ W. Bradford Wilcox, Jeffrey P. Dew, and Betsy VanDenBerghe. 2019. <http://stateofourunions.org/2019/SOOU2019.pdf>

² Sara McLanahan. 2004. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1515222?seq=1>

By contrast, Americans without a college degree, especially men, have not seen marked wage gains, even as employment instability and non-participation have increased precipitously for less educated men (Autor and Wasserman 2013; Eberstadt 2016; Opportunity America/Brookings/AEI 2018). This matters because stable employment is a powerful predictor of men’s odds of getting and staying married (Killewald 2016; Wilson 1987).

But growing inequality in family life is not simply an economic story; shifts in culture, civil society, and policy have also had a hand in the family changes of the last half century. Since the 1960s, American culture has de-emphasized many of the values and virtues that sustain strong and stable marriages in the name of “expressive individualism” (Cherlin 2009; Wilcox 2010). But what’s interesting about this well-known cultural trend is that a cultural counter-current has quietly emerged in recent years among elite Americans: While they overwhelmingly reject a renewed marriage-centered ethos in public, in private they embrace a marriage-centered ethos for themselves and their children, thereby affording their families a signal cultural advantage when it comes to forging a strong and stable family life (Wang and Wilcox 2020; Wilcox 2010). This marriage-minded ethos, unfortunately, seems not to have yet caught on as much in less advantaged communities (Wang and Wilcox 2020; Wilcox et al 2015).

Likewise, declines in religious and secular engagement have been concentrated among working-class and poor Americans, thereby robbing these families of the social support they need to thrive and endure (Putnam 2015; Wilcox et al 2015). Finally, means-tested programs and policies from the federal government often penalize marriage among lower-income families (Carasso and Steuerle 2005).³ Taken together, these shifts have weakened the strength and stability of family life in poor and working-class communities across the United States.

The shift away from stable marriage over the last half century has also hit African American families especially hard for two sets of reasons. First, the legacy of slavery (Patterson 1998) and the ongoing reality of American racism (McAdoo 2007) have exacted a toll on black families since the postbellum era. Slavery’s “ethnocidal assault” on black marriage and black men left its marks on black family life (Patterson 1998), and the economic and social stresses and injustices of racism — from racist policing to redlining — have made black relationships and family life much more difficult (McAdoo 2007). Second, the economic and policy changes of the post-1960s world have had a disparate impact on the black family. For instance, from an economic

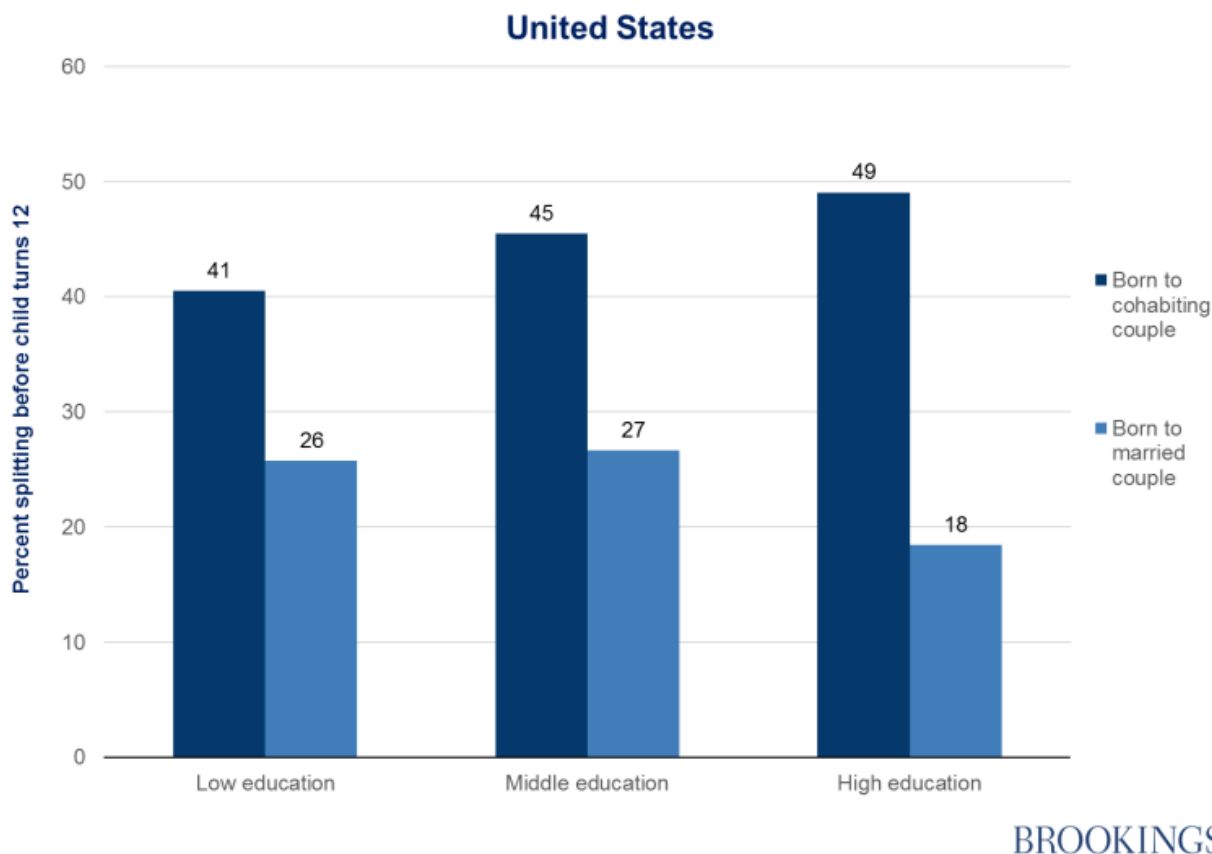
³ (Wilcox, Price & Rachidi 2016; Wilcox, Gersten & Regier 2020
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ofa/hmrf_marriagepenalties_paper_final50812_6_19.pdf)

perspective, the shift to the postindustrial economy has proved particularly difficult for the economic fortunes of black men (Wilson 1987); similarly, on the policy front, the rise of mass incarceration has taken an especially large toll on black family life (Western 2009). All of these factors and more have left African American families more deeply affected by the post 1960s changes in American family life than any other group.

Why Family Structure and Stability Matter

The family divide in America matters because the American Dream is in much better shape when stable marriage anchors the lives of children—and the communities they grow up in. Note: my use of the term marriage here is deliberate. No family arrangement besides marriage affords children as much stability as does this institution. For instance, children born to cohabiting couples are almost twice as likely to see their parents break up, compared to children born to married couples, even after controlling for confounding sociodemographic factors like parental education (Musick and Micheltore 2018 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13524-018-0683-6>; Wilcox and DeRose 2017 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2017/03/27/in-europe-cohabitation-is-stable-right/>). Figure 4, which displays the likelihood that children will see their parents break up by age 12 for different levels of education and different relationship statuses, is emblematic of the superior stability of married families in America (Wilcox and DeRose 2017).

Figure 4: Percent of Families Breaking Up Before Child Turns 12, by Parents' Marital Status and Education



Source: 2006–2020 estimates from the National Survey of Family Growth.

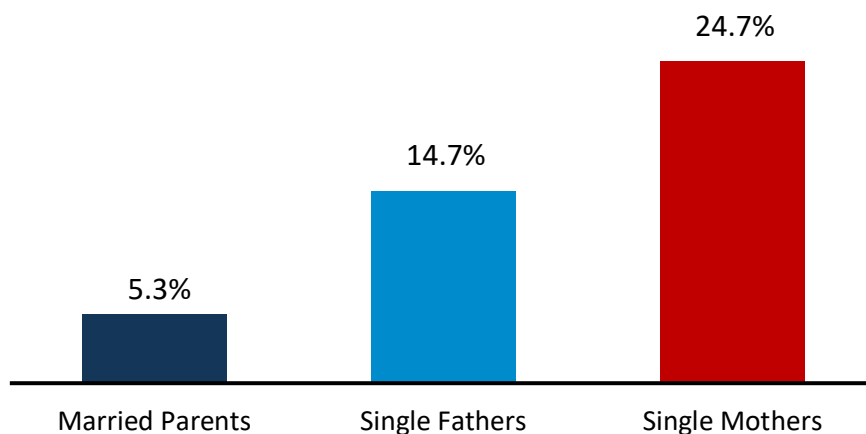
I cannot here summarize the voluminous literature on family structure and child well-being. But outcomes related to education and economics are suggestive of the ways in which marriage advantages children. When it comes to education, for instance, children raised in stable, married families are more likely to excel in school, generally earning higher grade point averages (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1475-682X.2007.00198.x>). The effects of family structure are generally stronger for social and behavioral outcomes related to schooling like school suspensions, schools contacting parents about child behavior, and dropping out of high school.⁴ Research also indicates that children from married homes are more likely to attend and graduate from college (Ginther and Pollak 2003; Kearney and Levine 2017; Wojtkiewz and Holtzman 2011 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02732173.2011.574048>). In other words, children are more likely to acquire the human capital they need to later flourish

⁴ (Autor et al 2016 <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.p20161074>; Kearney and Levine 2017; Lerman and Wilcox 2014; <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2003.00876.x>; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; McLanahan 199x;)

in today’s competitive marketplace when they are raised in stable, married families.

The relationship between family structure and children’s economic well-being is also well established. Because families that have two parents are more likely to have not only a full-time earner but also two earners, children in stable, married families enjoy markedly higher income and lower risks of poverty and material deprivation (Lerman 2000; Lerman, Price and Wilcox 2017). Figure 5 indicates that children living in single parent homes are at least two times more likely to be in poverty compared to children in married-parent families. Obviously, much of the association between family structure and child economic well-being is about selection effects: married parents tend to be better educated and employed in better-paying jobs, even before they marry (Autor and Wasserman 2013; Cherlin 2009; Wilcox 2010). However, part of the marriage effect seems to be causal, as well. That is, marriage increases the odds that families have access to two earners, reduces the odds that households go through costly family transitions such as a break up, engenders more support from kin, and fosters habits of financial prudence including more savings.⁵ Indeed, research suggests that child poverty would be markedly reduced if the nation enjoyed 1970s levels of marriage.⁶ Likewise, when it comes to the racial divide in poverty, Penn State sociologist John Iceland’s work indicates that the effect of family structure is “the most significant factor among blacks—not only for poverty, but also for affluence, explaining about a third of the [racial] disparity in poverty and affluence in 2015.”⁷

Figure 5: Percent of Families in Poverty, by Parents’ Marital Status



Source: 2019 Current Population Survey data queried through the Integrated Public Use Microdata System.

⁵ (Eggebeen 2005 <https://academic.oup.com/sf/article/83/3/1097/2234728>; Lerman 2002;)

⁶ (Lerman 1996; Thomas and Sawhill 2005 <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2005.0020>)

⁷ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11113-019-09512-7>

Family structure also matters for communities, as well. Scholarship by Harvard economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues indicates that neighborhoods with more two-parent families are significantly more likely to foster economic mobility for poor children.⁸ In their words, “the strongest and most robust predictor is the fraction of children with single parents.”⁹ They have also found that black boys are [more likely to achieve upward economic mobility](#) if there are more black fathers in a neighborhood—and [more married couples](#), as well. At the community level, we can see that strong and stable families—including father-present homes—are strongly linked to the health of the American Dream.

Perhaps not coincidentally, neighborhoods, towns, and cities are also safer and less likely to function as pipelines into prison for our young men when they are anchored by strong and stable families. The work of Harvard sociologist Robert Sampson tells us that neighborhoods with many two-parent families are much safer; in his own [words](#), “Family structure is one of the strongest, if not the strongest, predictor[s] of variations in urban violence across cities in the United States.” My own research indicates incarceration rates for boys are markedly lower in neighborhoods with lots of two-parent families. Using Chetty’s publicly available dataset, my colleagues and I [find](#) that the share of single parents in a neighborhood is one of the most powerful predictors of later incarceration for young men.

In all these ways, and more, the research on family structure and stability tells us that children typically do better and the American Dream is in better shape when the intact, married family anchors their lives.

Public and Civic Efforts to Bridge America’s Family Divide

An increasing share of children today are being raised by married parents in a stable family environment. That’s the good news. But the bad news is that a large divide in family structure and stability now marks American family life. To bridge this divide, the following public policy and civic measures would strengthen and stabilize marriage and family life in the United States:

- 1) End the marriage penalty in means-tested programs.** Currently, means-tested programs such as Medicaid, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and the Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) often penalize low-income couple who choose to marry.¹⁰ These penalties fall particularly hard on working-class Americans, with one study showing that more than 70% of

⁸ (Chetty et al 2014 <https://academic.oup.com/qje/article/129/4/1553/1853754>)

⁹ (Chetty et al 2014 <https://academic.oup.com/qje/article/129/4/1553/1853754>)

¹⁰ (Carasso and Stueurle 2005 https://www.jstor.org/stable/3556568?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

American families with young children with incomes in the second and third quintile face marriage penalties related to Medicaid, cash welfare, or SNAP receipt.¹¹ Studies suggest that these penalties can reduce the odds that lower-income families marry, and one survey found that almost one-third of Americans aged 18 to 60 report they personally know someone who has not married for fear of losing means-tested benefits.¹² Congress should eliminate, or minimize, marriage penalties facing lower-income families with children aged four and under by doubling income thresholds for means-tested programs and policies — or pursuing other legislative remedies.

- 2) Strengthen career and technical education and apprenticeships.** One reason marriage is fragile in many poor and working-class communities is that job stability and income are inadequate, especially for young adults without college degrees. This labor force reality can be remedied, in part, by scaling up career and technical education and apprenticeship programs (Lerman 2014; Cass 2018; Sawhill 2018). Raising the skills, earnings, maturity, and self-confidence of young men and women who are not initially on the college track would likely increase the ability of more young men and women to forge strong and stable marriages (<https://www.mdrc.org/publication/career-academies-long-term-impacts-work-education-and-transitions-adulthood>). I endorse recent Administration, Congressional, and state initiatives to increase apprenticeships in the U.S. The increased federal appropriations for apprenticeship (from about \$30 million to \$200 million) have funded state expansion efforts, grants to community colleges, modernization and expansion of apprenticeships' occupational range, and industry intermediary and equity projects. Congress should do more to expand apprenticeships and career and technical education, and to make sure that young men and women who are pursuing these options have access to Pell Grants and other forms of federal aid in much the same ways as their peers in four-year colleges and universities (Opportunity America, AEI and Brookings 2018).

- 3) Subsidize lower-income work.** To strengthen the economic foundations of poor and working-class family life, and to increase the returns of work for less-educated men and women, the federal government should subsidize lower-income work (Cass 2018; Sawhill 2018). A wage subsidy would reinforce the value of work and also send a powerful signal to working-class families that the nation stands with them. One approach would set the value of the subsidy relative to a “target wage” of \$15 per hour and “would close half the gap

¹¹ (Wilcox, Price & Rachidi 2016; Wilcox, Gersten & Regier 2020
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ofa/hmrf_marriagepenalties_paper_final50812_6_19.pdf)

¹² (Wilcox, Gersten & Regier 2020; Wilcox, Price & Rachidi 2016)

between the market wage and the target” wage.¹³ Unlike the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), this wage subsidy would also be added to worker’s paychecks to provide them with an ongoing, paycheck-to-paycheck boost to their family budget.

4) Launch civic efforts to strengthen marriage. In the realm of civil society, national, state, and local initiatives to provide social marketing and relationship education on behalf of marriage could prove helpful. Campaigns against smoking and teenage pregnancy have taught us that sustained efforts to change behavior can work. I would like to see a civic campaign organized around what Brookings Institution scholars Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill (2009) have called the “success sequence,” where young adults are encouraged to pursue education, work, marriage, and parenthood in that order (Wang and Wilcox 2017). Ninety-seven percent of young adults today who have followed the sequence are not poor (Wang and Wilcox 2017). A campaign organized around this sequence—receiving widespread support from educational, civic, media, pop cultural, and religious institutions—might meet with the same level of success as the recent national campaign to prevent teen pregnancy, a campaign which appears to have helped drive down the teen pregnancy rate by more than 65 percent since the 1990s.¹⁴ Initiatives like these are especially needed because elites tend to value marriage for themselves and their kids, but are reluctant to communicate the value of stable marriage to the wider public (Wang and Wilcox 2020). This means many young men and women from poor and working-class communities grow up never knowing the value of a stable family life for their own economic prospects and those of their children. Initiatives relying on schools, community organizations, churches and social media campaigns could help bridge this class gap in support for a marriage-centered orientation.

Measures like the ones articulated above are necessary to bridge the American divide in family stability and structure. The alternative to acting decisively is accepting a world where the educated and affluent—and their children—hoard strong and stable families for themselves, and everyone else has a diminished shot at forging such families for themselves. Given the importance of strong and stable families for realizing the American Dream, it is imperative that federal, state, and local governments—as well as civil society—do all they can to ensure that every American man, woman, and child has an equal shot at forging a strong and stable family.

¹³ <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/11/case-for-wage-subsidy-government-spending-book-excerpt/>

¹⁴ (Haskins and Sawhill 2017; Kearney and Levine 2014; <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-development/reproductive-health-and-teen-pregnancy/teen-pregnancy-and-childbearing/trends/index.html>)