

Opening Statement
JEC Hearing on “Improving Family Stability for the Wellbeing of Children”
February 25, 2020, 2:15pm
106 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Good afternoon, and thank you for joining us for this hearing of the Joint Economic Committee.

Today’s hearing will focus on the most important institution in our society—the family.

As most members of this committee are aware, the American family is in a precarious state: although the vast majority of Americans still desire to marry, the marriage rate has declined for decades and stable family life has disappeared for millions of American children.

The trends in family life are concerning: whereas just 5 percent of children were born to unmarried mothers in 1960, 40 percent of children are born to unmarried mothers today. Meanwhile, 30 percent of children today live without one or both parents, twice the proportion of children that lived without one or both parents 50 years ago.

Over the past few years, the Social Capital Project has worked to document these trends in American “associational life,” the web of social relationships through which we pursue joint endeavors—our families, communities, workplaces, and religious congregations. The Project recognizes the family as a crucial source of these relationships, which is why our policy agenda aims to make it more affordable to raise a family and to increase the number of children raised by happily married parents.

But although the Project has sometimes emphasized the social value stable family life provides, the declines in family stability have economic, physical, and emotional consequences as well. For a variety of reasons, children raised in single-parent families are far more likely to experience child poverty, less likely to graduate from high school or attend college, and less likely to be connected to the labor force as adults.

In addition, children raised in single-parent families are less likely to have positive relationships with their parents, and are far more likely to experience physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.

Conversely, children raised by two married parents in a healthy relationship are likely to be happier, healthier, and better prepared for life.

The positive outcomes associated with stable home life are outcomes Americans want for all children, no matter their background. But tragically, the decline of the family is concentrated among some vulnerable groups, including minorities and low income families.

For example, over two-thirds of births to black mothers and over half of births to Hispanic mothers occur outside marriage, and minority women are much more likely to see their marriages end in divorce. Meanwhile, two-thirds of births among non-college educated women occur outside marriage, and non-college educated adults are also less likely to stay married. Although these trends are most stark for disadvantaged groups, they affect us all.

What factors have driven these declines in family stability? The breakdown of the family is at least partly caused by cultural changes that have reverberated throughout our society—including changing romantic norms that led to greater relationship ambiguity, a culture of individualism that too often emphasizes the desires of individuals over the wellbeing of the family, and the retreat from religion, which is one of the strongest supports of marriage and family life.

But while cultural factors may have contributed to declining marriage rates over time, the federal government has also played an active role. For example, our government penalizes marriage through the welfare system and tax code.

Our federal government should not be in the business of punishing marriage. Instead, it should support policies that strengthen marriage and thus improve the likelihood of family stability for children. State and local leaders should also seek ways to strengthen marriage and increase family stability.

Some of us have been working toward that goal: today we will hear from expert panelists, who will speak to the state of the American family and address various policy solutions we might pursue. I look forward to hearing their testimonies on this critical topic.

I now recognize Vice Chair Beyer for opening remarks.