

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

Thank you Chairman Lee.

This is my first hearing as Vice Chair of the Joint Economic Committee. I feel privileged to be a member of the committee and to have the opportunity to work on issues that are of real importance to most Americans.

I would like to thank former Vice Chair Carolyn Maloney for her leadership. And I'd like to thank Chairman Lee for his hard work, commitment and collegiality.

Today, we are focused on family stability and the connection to the wellbeing of American children.

We all share a commitment to the same goal—delivering the best outcomes for children, families and the economy.

The question is—how do we get there?

I want to start with good news. Teen pregnancy, which leads to poor health and economic outcomes for mothers and their children, is at an all-time low.

Between 1991 and 2015, the teen birth rate dropped by almost two-thirds, thanks in part to the Affordable Care Act.

This is an issue I have worked on for many years, and I think we can all feel good about the substantial progress that's been made.

Part of the impetus for today's hearing may be that marriage rates have declined in the past several decades. A good portion of that decline is the result of economic challenges.

If you're struggling financially, your wages haven't gone up or you've lost your job—getting married is neither feasible nor practical.

Perhaps less known is that divorce rates have also been falling. Since its peak in 1980, the divorce rate has fallen to a 40-year low.

Hearing statement

Young Americans today want to get their economic footing before they get married. They correctly understand that they must get an education or training to achieve financial success. They want to get a firm foothold on a career and earn a degree of financial stability.

If they wait longer to get married, it's not because they are anti-marriage. It's because they are pragmatic. They are pro-success.

They are adapting to current conditions—not wishing for a return to the past.

And the reality is that the traditional male-breadwinner model of the past failed to work for so many—as wages stagnated and the costs of housing and college soared higher and higher.

My friends on the other side sometimes talk about the so-called break down of family and the increase in households headed by single mothers.

It's true, that as people delay marriage, there are more babies born to unmarried parents. That holds across demographic groups and race. And it's true in the United States and elsewhere.

But what the research also shows is that children raised by loving adults do well. There are lots of loving and supporting arrangements.

It's also true that fathers today spend significantly more time caring for their children than in previous generations—in fact, three times as much as in 1965.

On average, the households with the highest incomes are married with both spouses working. But not every household is going to look like that and the government should be working to support children in all types of families—especially those with access to only limited financial resources.

The real challenges facing families—whether living in small rural communities or large metro areas—are economic.

Forty-four percent of workers earn just \$18,000. And many are working two and three jobs.

Millions of American families are one accident, one car breakdown, one trip to the emergency room from financial crisis or ruin.

When people are living paycheck to paycheck, when wages are basically where they were 40 years ago, is it any wonder adults postpone marriage?

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Step number one, then, is to do more to help people build their financial base.

Increase the minimum wage. Expand the EITC. Provide affordable, quality child care. Protect nutritional supports. Ensure workers have real bargaining power—to negotiate wage increases, predictable hours and better working conditions.

Children whose families benefit from expanded EITC are more likely to graduate high school and enroll in college.

Similarly, access to SNAP leads to better educational and health outcomes.

If we care about child outcomes, we should invest in programs that drive those outcomes higher.

Making paid family leave a reality—for women and men—would be another important step.

I'm pleased and encouraged that federal workers will be able to take 12 weeks paid leave to care for a newborn or adopted child.

We should expand that same policy to workers in the private sector.

Finally, part of the challenge for families is that our government hasn't kept pace with the way people are living their lives.

For example, the share of multigenerational households is growing, but our policies haven't changed.

Grandparents and aunts and uncles are taking care of kids—they're doing a great job. But, often they can't access family leave or food assistance or other important supports that would help.

We need to catch up.

I thank all of the witnesses for being here today, and I look forward to your testimony.