

DOES MARRIAGE MATTER?

INTRODUCTION

What do we know about the importance of marriage for children, for adults and for society? There has been a sharp decrease over the last two generations in the proportion of British children who live with their own two married parents, spurred first by increases in divorce, and more recently by large jumps in unmarried or cohabiting childbearing. A vigorous public debate sparked by these changes in family structure has generated a growing body of social science literature on the consequences of family fragmentation. Much of the evidence comes from the United States, but similar results have been produced in the UK, as well as in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe. Where available, we have attempted to highlight studies and data from the UK.

This report is an attempt to summarise this large body of scientific research into a succinct form useful to people on all sides of ongoing family debates — to report what we know about the importance of marriage in our families and society. We also hope this report will be useful to people who are considering the role of marriage in their own families. Although social science research does not always answer specific questions about individual circumstances (e.g. ‘Will my particular children in my particular circumstances be harmed or helped by divorce?’), it does help to answer

general questions and provide information about how other people have fared in similar situations (e.g. ‘Are high rates of divorce and unwed childbearing likely to reduce overall child well-being?’).

Marriage in Great Britain has changed a great deal over the past two generations, including increased incidence and social acceptance of divorce, cohabitation, premarital sex, and unwed childbearing.¹ Fewer people are marrying, and those who do marry tend to wait longer before doing so (the average age at first marriage is now 28 for women and 30 for men).² Other important changes include dramatic increases in the proportion of working mothers and changes in gender roles. Over the past 40 years, both men and women have become increasingly likely to support greater participation by men in the household and women in the labour force, and less sharp differentiation between women’s and men’s roles. Yet when it comes to the benefits of marriage, research shows more impressive evidence of continuity than change or decline.

A Growing Consensus

Good social science is a better guide to social policy than uninformed opinion or prejudice. The public and policy makers deserve to hear what research suggests about the consequences of marriage and its absence for children and adults. This report represents what the current social science evidence reveals about the importance of marriage in our social system.

There is a growing consensus among scholars that marriage is important. Families based on marriage are, on

average, healthier, wealthier, and more stable than other family forms. In the United States, where marriage and family life has been studied intensively, thirteen of the most highly regarded social scientists considered all the evidence and came to the following fundamental conclusion: *'Marriage is an important social good, associated with an impressively broad array of positive outcomes for children and adults alike.'*³

Family structure and processes are of course not the only factors contributing to child and social well-being. The discussion here is not meant to minimise the importance of other social and economic factors, such as poverty, unemployment, neighbourhood safety, or the quality of education for both parents and children.

But whether our society succeeds or fails in building a healthy marriage culture is clearly a matter of legitimate public concern.

If you are interested in learning more about some of the complexities of how social scientists study families, turn to the technical appendix on page 31.

FAMILY FORMATION AND STABILITY

Marriage is a virtually universal human institution.

Marriage exists in virtually every known human society.⁴ It is not known exactly what family forms existed in prehistoric society, and the shape of human marriage varies considerably in different cultural contexts. But at least since the beginning of recorded history, in all the flourishing varieties of human cultures documented by anthropologists, marriage has been a universal human institution. The institution of marriage is about regulating the reproduction of children, families, and society. While marriage systems differ (and not every person or class within a society marries), marriage across societies is a publicly acknowledged and supported sexual union which creates kinship obligations and sharing of resources between men, women, and the children that their sexual union may produce.

Cohabitation is not the functional equivalent of marriage.

Cohabitation in Great Britain more often functions as a prelude to marriage or a trial marriage rather than a lasting alternative to marriage. The average length of a cohabiting union is two years before either converting to marriage or dissolving.⁵ As a group, cohabitees more closely resemble singles than married people.⁶ Children with cohabiting parents have outcomes more similar to children living with lone (or remarried) parents than to children from intact marriages.⁷ Adults who live together are more similar to singles than to married couples in terms of physical health⁸

and emotional well-being and mental health,⁹ as well as in assets and earnings.¹⁰

Selection effects account for a large portion, but not all, of the difference between married people and cohabiters. This means that, as a group, cohabiters (who are not engaged) start out with lower incomes and less education than married couples.¹¹ Couples who live together also, on average, report lower quality relationships than do married couples—with cohabiters reporting more conflict, more violence, and lower levels of satisfaction and commitment.¹² Even biological parents who cohabit have poorer quality relationships and are more likely to break up than parents who marry.¹³ Children born into married unions are estimated to be twice as likely as those born into cohabiting unions to spend their entire childhood with both natural parents (70 percent versus 36 percent).¹⁴ Only 8 percent of children born into a married household see their parents split before their fifth birthday, whereas 52 percent born into a cohabiting household see their parents split. Marrying after the birth is associated with a reduction in the risk of break-up—down to 25 percent.¹⁵ Cohabitation differs from marriage in part because people who choose to live together are often less committed to a lifelong relationship.¹⁶ For example, cohabiting men are less likely than married men to say they think that sexual fidelity within a partnership is important, and their behaviour reflects this belief. Cohabiting men actually engage in slightly higher rates of unsafe sex (having multiple partners and failing to use a condom) than single men, and much higher rates than married men.¹⁷

Couples who are considering whether to marry or cohabit also should understand that there is no such thing as ‘common law marriage’. If couples want legal protection and the social benefits of making a commitment, they should marry.

Marriage increases the likelihood that parents have good relationships with their children.

Mothers as well as fathers are affected by the presence of marriage. Married mothers on average report less conflict with and more monitoring of their children than do lone mothers.¹⁸ For example, even after taking other factors into account, lone mothers were still twice as likely as married mothers to report that their child’s behaviour was upsetting to them.¹⁹ As adults, children from intact marriages report being closer to their mothers on average than do children of divorce. In one American study, 30 percent of young adults whose parents divorced reported poor relationships with their mothers, compared to 16 percent of children whose parents stayed married.

But marriage is even more important for children’s relationships with their fathers. In one American study, sixty-five percent of young adults whose parents divorced had poor relationships with their fathers (compared to 29 percent from non-divorced families).²⁰ On average, children whose parents married and stayed married see their fathers more frequently than children whose parents divorced or never married²¹ and have more affectionate relationships with their fathers.²² In Britain, less than half of children in lone-mother families see

their fathers once a week, and the percentage is even smaller where the father was never married to his child's mother. Twenty to thirty percent of non-resident fathers have not seen their children in the last year.²³ There is even growing evidence that remaining in an unhappy marriage might have less of a negative effect on father-child relationships than divorce.²⁴

Why should marriage improve the relationship between children and their fathers? The major advantages are that married fathers spend more time with their children, they provide more material resources, they work more closely with their children's mother, and they are more emotionally and morally committed to contributing to their children's future.²⁵ Although it is not impossible for non-resident fathers to contribute to their children's lives, they often face special challenges, such as geographical distance, ongoing conflict with their children's mother, or inadequate resources to care for their children. Because cohabiting fathers are less likely to stay in a committed partnership with their children's mother, they are also less likely to provide the kind of attention, guidance, and material support provided by married fathers.

As evidence builds that fathers play an important role in their children's development—helping them to develop skills to get along with others and achieve in school and in life—it becomes difficult to dismiss the role of marriage in keeping fathers and children together.

Growing up within an intact marriage increases the likelihood that children will have healthy lasting marriages themselves.

Children whose parents marry and stay married are more likely to have stable marriages themselves and to wait until marriage to become parents.²⁶ For daughters, growing up in a married family seems to help them avoid engaging in early sexual activity. This is important because early sexual activity tends to lead to teenage pregnancy and early partnering—which itself can increase the risks of having children outside marriage or of divorcing.²⁷ Daughters raised outside marriage are twice as likely to become teenage mothers, twice as likely to have a child outside marriage (or outside a cohabiting union) and 50 percent more likely to divorce.²⁸ For sons, parental divorce doubles the odds that they will have a child outside marriage as well as the risk that they will divorce.

Daughters and sons whose parents married and stayed married are less likely to cohabit and more likely to marry as adults. Daughters from disrupted families are 70 percent more likely to cohabit before or instead of marrying in their first partnership, and men from disrupted families are 70 percent more likely to cohabit before marrying and twice as likely to cohabit instead of marrying. In this case, the increased risks do not seem to be related to whether they had experienced poverty or other problems in childhood. Rather, parental separation seems to have an independent effect on children's preference for cohabiting rather than marriage.²⁹

Scholars debate why children from disrupted families are themselves less likely to form healthy married families. Unlike the increased risks of educational and economic problems associated with disrupted families, fragile family formation seems to be less strongly related to poverty. Perhaps it has something to do with attitudes toward commitment learned during childhood. Evidence from the United States indicates that divorce is apparently most likely to be transmitted across the generations when parents in relatively low-conflict marriages divorce.³⁰

ECONOMICS

Divorce and unmarried childbearing increase poverty for both children and mothers.

In Britain, two-parent families are half as likely as lone-mother families to live in poverty.³¹ Most people are familiar with the strong relationship between poverty and divorce or unmarried childbearing. Part of this relationship can be explained by selection effects—people living in poverty are less likely to marry in the first place and more likely to divorce if they do marry. Even couples in cohabiting relationships often cite a lack of money or employment stability as the main reason they have not married. At the other end of the spectrum, there are many couples who put off marrying and having children until they feel that their finances are in order. In this way, many couples ‘select’ themselves into single, cohabiting, or married status, based on their pre-existing financial situation.

However, not all or even most of the differences between singles, cohabitees or married couples are due to pre-existing conditions. Research has shown consistently that both divorce and unmarried childbearing increase the economic vulnerability of both children and mothers.³² Changes in family structure are an important cause of entering into poverty, and the effects of family structure on poverty and material deprivation remain powerful, even after controlling for other factors such as race, age, and income.³³ Lone parents are also eight times as likely to be workless and

twelve times as likely to be on income support.³⁴ Not surprisingly, they are also twice as likely to have no savings.³⁵

Poverty or a reduction in income often occurs before, during or after divorce, separation and lone parenthood. This poverty in turn increases the risks of experiencing other problems, especially difficulties in achieving educational qualifications and finding stable, well-paid employment. Poverty generally is defined by household income level, but there usually is much more involved than just low income. Low income can be a sort of proxy for a number of other factors that cluster together such as poor health, high levels of unemployment, high crime rates, unsafe neighbourhoods, low quality schools and community resources, and low expectations. Moreover, many studies that measure and control for poverty do not measure other important factors such as the quality of parenting or the level of conflict in the home. Poverty is a serious problem, but it does not explain everything. Recent research has shown that, for many outcomes, except in cases of severe poverty, the amount of money parents have is less important than how they spend it.³⁶

Married couples seem to build more wealth on average than singles or cohabiting couples.

Marriage seems to be a wealth-creating institution. Married couples build more wealth on average than do otherwise similar singles or cohabiting couples, even those with similar incomes.³⁷ The economic advantages of marriage stem from more than just access to two incomes. Marriage

partners appear to build more wealth for some of the same reasons that partnerships in general are economically efficient, including economies of scale, specialisation and exchange. Marital social norms that encourage healthy, productive behaviour and wealth accumulation (such as buying a home) also appear to play a role. Married parents also more often receive money or gifts from both sets of grandparents than do cohabiting couples; lone mothers rarely receive financial help from the families of their children's fathers.³⁸ Some of the economic benefits of living together are shared by cohabiting couples when they also share household expenses. However, cohabiting couples do not, on average, behave in ways that build joint wealth.

Married men earn more money than do single men with similar education and job histories.

A large body of research throughout the developed world finds that married men earn between 10 and 40 percent more than do single men with similar education and job histories.³⁹ While selection effects may account for part of the 'marriage premium' (i.e. women tend to prefer marrying men who are good earners rather than lower-earning men),⁴⁰ the most sophisticated, recent research appears to confirm that marriage itself increases the earning power of men, in the order of 15 percent.⁴¹

Why do married men earn more? The causes are not entirely understood, but married men appear to have greater work commitment, less likelihood of resigning, and healthier

and more stable personal routines (including sleep, diet and alcohol consumption). Husbands also benefit from both the work effort and emotional support that they receive from wives.⁴²

Parental marriage appears to increase children's chances of school success.

Children of married parents score higher on measures of academic achievement, and are less likely to play truant or be excluded and more likely to leave school with qualifications. On the other hand, parental divorce or non-marriage has a significant, long-term negative impact on children's educational attainment. These effects remain significant even after controlling for poverty and other confounding factors.⁴³ The divorce itself seems to have an impact, which becomes apparent when we consider that children whose fathers have died do better than children of divorce,⁴⁴ and children whose parents remarry do no better, on average, than do children who live with lone mothers.⁴⁵

Parental marriage increases the likelihood that children will finish school, earn university qualifications, achieve high-status jobs, and stay out of poverty.

Parental divorce appears to have long-term consequences on children's socioeconomic attainment. Most children of divorce do not leave school at 16 or become unemployed. However, as adults, children of divorced parents

have lower occupational status and earnings and have increased rates of unemployment and economic hardship.⁴⁶ They are less likely to attend and graduate from university.⁴⁷

A report from the National Child Development Study (NCDS), a major study which followed over 10,000 British children from birth through young adulthood, found that children from married families were twice as likely to have some level of qualifications by the time they were 33 years old. For daughters, these improved odds are partly due to the fact that children in married families tend to experience less poverty and fewer behavioural problems, and therefore face fewer barriers to education. However, for sons, living in a married family seems to support educational achievement in ways that go beyond the protection from poverty and behaviour problems afforded by marriage. The interactions of parental divorce and other childhood problems and how they affect the education of young adults are quite complicated. The author of this study summarised the results this way: 'poverty and behavioural problems are important factors in reducing educational success and parental divorce can amplify both'.⁴⁸

Men's employment stability seems to be related not only to the level of poverty they experienced as children and whether they had behavioural or educational problems, but also to whether their parents married and stayed married.⁴⁹ For women, the connection between parental divorce and poverty tends to operate through a chain reaction. Parental divorce increases the odds of early childbearing, which in turn reduces the likelihood that women will be employed or married, which increases the likelihood that they will be on income support.⁵⁰

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Children who live with their own two married parents enjoy better physical health, on average, than do children in other family forms.

Marriage appears to have a protective effect on children's physical health and life expectancy, whilst divorce and unmarried childbearing have the opposite effects.⁵¹ Longitudinal research, which follows individuals over their lifecourse, suggests that parental divorce increases the incidence of health problems in children, perhaps by up to 50 percent.⁵² The health advantages of married homes remain, even after taking social class and income into account. For example, one British study found that, after controlling for other demographic factors, children living in lone-parent households were still 80 percent more likely to have health symptoms and illness such as pains, headaches, stomach aches, and feeling sick.⁵³

The health disadvantages associated with being raised outside of intact marriages persist long into adulthood. Even in Sweden, a country with extensive supports for lone mothers, adults raised in lone-parent homes were more likely to report that their health was poor and/or to die (during the study period) than were those from intact homes. This finding remained after taking account of economic hardship.⁵⁴

Parental marriage is associated with a sharply lower risk of infant mortality.

Babies born to married parents have lower rates of infant mortality. On average, the risk of infant mortality is increased by 25-30 percent if the mother is cohabiting and by 45-68 percent if the mother is unpartnered.⁵⁵

In England and Wales during 2000, the sudden infant death rate for babies jointly registered by unmarried parents living at different addresses was over three times greater than for babies born to a married mother and father. Where the birth was registered in the sole name of the mother, the rate of sudden infant death was seven times greater than for those born within marriage.⁵⁶

The cause of this relationship between marital status and infant mortality is not well known. There are many factors involved: unmarried mothers are more likely to be young, less educated and poor than are married mothers. But even after taking account of mothers' age and education, children born to unmarried mothers generally have higher rates of infant mortality.⁵⁷ Children born to unmarried mothers also have an increased risk of both intentional and unintentional fatal injuries.⁵⁸ Marital status remains a powerful predictor of infant mortality, even in countries with nationalised health care systems and strong supports for lone mothers.⁵⁹

Marriage is associated with reduced rates of alcohol and substance abuse for both adults and teenagers.

Married men and women have lower rates of alcohol consumption and abuse than do singles. Longitudinal research confirms that young adults who marry tend to reduce their rates of alcohol consumption, while divorce leads to increases in consumption (twice as high as married individuals), and high levels of consumption persist for those who remain single. In this case, there is virtually no selection effect. In other words, heavy drinking does not lead to divorce. Rather, divorce leads to heavy drinking. Moreover, marriage leads to less drinking.⁶⁰

Children whose parents marry and stay married also have lower rates of alcohol and drug abuse, even after controlling for family background factors. Young teenagers whose parents stay married are also the least likely to experiment with tobacco or alcohol.⁶¹

How does family fragmentation relate to teenage drug and alcohol use? Many factors are probably involved, including increased family stress, reduced parental monitoring, increased influence of peer groups and weakened attachment to parents, especially fathers.⁶²

Married people, especially married men, have longer life expectancies than do otherwise similar singles.

Married people live longer than do otherwise similar people who are single or divorced. Husbands as well as wives

live longer on average, even after controlling for race, income and family background.⁶³ In most developed countries, middle-aged single, divorced, or widowed men are about twice as likely to die as married men. Unmarried women face risks about one-and-a-half times as great as those faced by married women.⁶⁴

Marriage is associated with better health and lower rates of injury, illness, and disability for both men and women.

Both married men and women enjoy better health on average than do single or divorced individuals.⁶⁵ Selection effects may account for part of this differential (i.e. healthier people are more attractive marriage partners to begin with), although research has found no consistent pattern of such selection.⁶⁶ One review of more than a dozen longitudinal studies concluded that, above and beyond a selection effect, ‘marriage makes people live longer’ and ‘makes people healthier’, and ‘marriage quality and marital beliefs can increase these effects’.⁶⁷ Why are married people healthier? Marriage seems to offer a protective effect. Married people appear to manage illness better, monitor each other’s health, have higher incomes and wealth, and adopt healthier lifestyles than do otherwise similar singles.⁶⁸

Marriage is associated with lower levels of debilitating illness. For those aged 40 and over, women and men in their first marriage are the least likely to report a limiting, long-term illness, followed by the remarried, the widowed, and the divorced or single. Other partnership forms (cohabitation or

remarriage) provide some benefit (especially for men) compared to those who have experienced divorce, separation or widowhood, but still less than first marriages.⁶⁹

New research indicates that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the health benefits of marriage might be even more powerful for women than for men. A study of residential social and health care facilities (including hospitals, nursing homes, and homes for the elderly or disabled) in England and Wales found that (1) although unmarried people make up 40 percent of the population, they occupy 90 percent of the beds in such institutions, (2) unmarried men are seven times more likely than married men to be in institutional care, (3) unmarried women are even more likely to be in institutional care—sixteen times the rate of married women, and (4) the health benefits associated with marriage for both men and women have increased in the last two decades.⁷⁰

The most careful research into the health effects of marriage has taken place in the United State, where a recent study of 9,333 Americans between the ages of 51 and 61 compared the incidence of major diseases as well as functional disability in married, cohabiting, divorced, widowed, and never-married individuals. ‘Without exception’, the authors report, ‘married persons have the lowest rates of morbidity for each of the diseases, impairments, functioning problems and disabilities’. Marital status differences in disability remained ‘dramatic’ even after controlling for age, sex, and race.⁷¹

It is interesting to note that factors other than poverty contribute to health problems for lone-parent families. Results

from the British General Household Survey show that, even after controlling for demographic and socioeconomic circumstances, lone mothers still have significantly poorer health than partnered mothers for four out of five health variables.⁷²

Children whose parents are married have lower rates of psychological distress and mental illness.

Divorce typically causes children considerable emotional distress and increases the risk of serious mental illness.⁷³ These mental health risks do not always disappear quickly after the divorce. Instead, children of divorce remain at higher risk for depression and other mental illness, in part because of their increased risks of lower educational attainment, and their own experience of marital problems, divorce and economic hardship.⁷⁴ The psychological effects of divorce for children appear to differ, depending on the level of conflict between parents. When marital conflict is high and sustained, children benefit psychologically from divorce. However, where marriages with low conflict end in divorce, children seem to suffer more than if their parents had stayed together. While more research is needed, especially in the UK, it appears that more than half of divorces are taking place within low-conflict marriages. Very little is known about the levels of conflict and violence in cohabiting unions which split up.⁷⁵

Children living in lone-parent households are twice as likely to have a mental health problem as those from intact two-parent families. After controlling for other demographic

factors, they are 2.5 times as likely to be sometimes or often unhappy and 3.3 times as likely to score poorly on measures of self-esteem.⁷⁶ A major longitudinal study of 1,400 American families found that 20 - 25 percent of children of divorce showed lasting signs of depression, impulsivity (risk-taking), irresponsibility, or antisocial behaviour compared with 10 percent of children in intact two-parent families.⁷⁷

Why do so many children seem to suffer from divorce or parental separation? There are many reasons, including the lower quantity and quality of parental attention, increased levels of conflict or hostility, changes in routine, neighbourhood or school, or the introduction of new people into their mother's or father's life.⁷⁸ It might seem strange that, along with children who are caught in unresolved violent or highly conflicted families, children whose parents had a marriage with relatively low conflict before divorce are at most risk of psychological distress. This indicates that what might seem like a 'good divorce' for adults does not always feel like a 'good divorce' for children. When asked, children tend to care more about whether both their parents are together and there for them than whether their parents feel 'happy' or 'fulfilled'.

Conscientious parents can take steps to reduce some of the negative psychological effects of divorce for their children. For example, boys tend to have fewer behavioural problems when their non-resident fathers keep in contact and continue to play a strong role in helping them solve problems, explaining what kind of behaviour is expected, and enforcing discipline after the divorce. On the other hand, there seems to be little that parents can do to reduce the risk of depression for sons who experience divorce.⁷⁹

Marriage appears significantly to decrease the risk of suicide.

High rates of family fragmentation are associated with an increased risk of suicide among both adults and adolescents. Divorced men and women are more than twice as likely as their married counterparts to attempt suicide.⁸⁰ One British study suggested that two thirds of the increase in 15 - 44 year old men's rate of suicide since 1982 might be related to the lower rates of marriage for this age group. Likewise, they estimate that the 9 percent decrease in suicide rates for women over the same period might have been a 23 percent decrease had marriage rates not declined.⁸¹ Although women have lower rates of suicide overall, married women were also substantially less likely to commit suicide than were divorced, widowed, or never-married women.⁸²

Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do lone or cohabiting mothers.

Longitudinal studies following young adults as they marry, divorce, and remain single indicate that marriage boosts mental and emotional well-being for both men and women.⁸³ Lone mothers are seven times as likely as married mothers to report problems with their 'nerves', even after controlling for other demographic factors.⁸⁴ Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do lone or cohabiting mothers.⁸⁵ In the National Child Development Study, divorced and never-married mothers aged 33 were 2.5 times more

likely than married mothers to experience high levels of psychological distress. Even after accounting for financial hardship, prior psychological distress, and other demographic factors, lone mothers were still 40 percent more likely to have psychological distress.⁸⁶

Maternal depression is important because it is both a serious mental health problem for women and a serious risk factor for children.⁸⁷ Not only are lone mothers more likely to be depressed, but the consequences of maternal depression for child well-being are also greater in lone-parent families, probably because lone parents have less support and because children in disrupted families have less access to their (non-depressed) other parent.⁸⁸

CRIME AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Children raised in married-natural-parent families are less likely to engage in delinquent and criminal behaviour.

Even after controlling for factors such as race, mother's education, neighbourhood quality, and cognitive ability, boys raised in lone-parent homes are about twice as likely (and boys raised in stepfamilies are three times as likely) to have committed a crime that leads to imprisonment by the time they reach their early thirties.⁸⁹ Likewise, although 20 percent of all dependent children live in lone-parent families, 70 percent of young offenders identified by Youth Offending Teams come from lone-parent families.⁹⁰

Teenagers in both lone-parent and remarried homes display more deviant behaviour and commit more delinquent acts than do teenagers whose parents stayed married.⁹¹ Teenagers in lone-parent families are on average less attached to their parent's opinions and more attached to their peer groups. Combined with lower levels of parental supervision, these attitudes appear to set the stage for delinquent behaviour.⁹² In one study, children aged 11 to 16 years were 25 percent more likely to have offended in the last year if they lived in lone-parent families.⁹³ Young men from lone-parent families were 60 percent more likely to be persistent offenders as those from two-natural-parent families.⁹⁴

Marriage appears to reduce the risk that adults will be either perpetrators or victims of crime.

A study of crime in the United States found that, overall, single and divorced women are four to five times more likely to be victims of violent crime in any given year than are married women. Similarly, compared to husbands, unmarried men are about four times as likely to become victims of violent crime.⁹⁵ Single women in Britain are eight times as likely to be sexually victimised as married women and four times as likely to be raped; divorced women are five times as likely to be sexually victimised and six times as likely to be raped.⁹⁶

Marriage tends to decrease men's criminal behaviour while divorce increases it.⁹⁷ One study of 500 chronic juvenile offenders in the United States found that those who married and stayed married reduced their offense rate by two-thirds, compared to criminals who did not marry or who did not establish good marriages.⁹⁸ Married men spend more time with their wives, who discourage criminal behaviour, and less time with peers, who often do not.

Married women appear to have a lower risk of experiencing domestic violence than do cohabiting or dating women.

Domestic violence remains a serious problem both inside and outside of marriage. While young women must recognize that marriage is not a good strategy for reforming

violent men, a large body of research shows that being unmarried or living with a man outside of marriage is associated with an increased risk of domestic abuse.⁹⁹ The British Crime Survey showed that, in 1995, married women were at lowest risk of suffering from domestic violence. Moreover, women who suffered chronic domestic violence were 50 percent more likely to have been victimised by a current or past cohabiting partner than by a current or ex-spouse. The same study found that cohabiting men had the second highest risk of suffering domestic violence.¹⁰⁰ One large American study found that cohabitees were over three times more likely than spouses to say that arguments became physical over the last year. Even after controlling for race, age, and education, people who live together are still more likely than married people to report violent arguments.¹⁰¹ Overall, as one scholar sums up the relevant research: ‘Regardless of methodology, the studies yielded similar results: cohabitees engage in more violence than do spouses.’¹⁰²

Selection effects play a powerful role. Women are less likely to marry, and more likely to divorce, violent men.¹⁰³ However, scholars suggest that the greater integration of married men into the community, and the greater investment of spouses in each other, also play a role.¹⁰⁴ Married men, for example, are more responsive to policies such as mandatory arrest policies, designed to signal strong disapproval of domestic violence.¹⁰⁵

A child who is living in a married natural-parent family is at less risk of child abuse.

Children living with lone mothers, stepfathers, or mother's boyfriends are more likely to become victims of child abuse, and children living in lone-mother homes have increased rates of death from intentional injuries.¹⁰⁶ According to two international experts: 'Living with a step-parent has turned out to be the most powerful predictor of severe child abuse yet.'¹⁰⁷ According to data from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), young people are five times more likely to have experienced physical abuse and emotional maltreatment if they grew up in a lone-parent family, compared with children in two-birth-parent families.¹⁰⁸ All studies of child-abuse victims which look at family type identify the step-family as representing the highest risk to children¹⁰⁹ – with the risk of fatal abuse being 100 times higher than in two-biological-parent families in some studies.¹¹⁰ However, the use of the term step-father has become problematic, as, whilst it used to refer to men who were married to women with children by other men, it is now used to describe any man in the household, whether married to the mother or not. An NSPCC study of 1988 which separated married step-fathers from unmarried cohabiting men found that married step-fathers were less likely to abuse: 'for non-natal fathers marriage appears to be associated with a greater commitment to the father role'.¹¹¹ Analysis of 35 cases of fatal abuse which were the subject of public inquiries between 1968 and 1987 showed a risk for children living with their mother and an unrelated man which was over 70 times higher than it would have been for a child with two married biological parents.¹¹²

CREATING A HEALTHY MARRIAGE CULTURE

Marriage is more than a private emotional relationship. It is also a social good. Not every person can or should marry. And not every child raised outside of marriage is damaged as a result. But communities where healthy marriages are common have better outcomes for children, women, and men than do communities suffering from high rates of divorce, unmarried childbearing, and high-conflict or violent marriages. As policy makers concerned about social inequality and child well-being think about how to strengthen communities, more emphasis should be placed on research into both the causes of the ‘marriage gap’ in child and social well-being and ways to close that gap. Solid research is pointing the way toward new family and community interventions to help strengthen marriage. Ongoing, basic scientific research on marriage and marital dynamics contributes to the development of strategies and programmes for helping to strengthen marriages and reduce unnecessary divorce.¹¹³

Who benefits from marriage and why? How can we prevent both divorce and the damage from divorce? How can families, counselors, communities, and public policy help at-risk and disadvantaged parents build healthy marriages?

If marriage is not merely a private preference, but also a social good, then concerned citizens, as well as scholars, need and deserve answers to questions like these.

Marriage education

We already know much about which factors predict good marriages. Some of these factors—such as parental divorce, prior cohabitation, prior divorce, previous children, marrying young, different religious beliefs, or serious financial difficulties—cannot be changed by the individuals, but many others can. For example, spouses can learn to change a negative style of communication, difficulty with handling disagreements, unrealistic beliefs about marriage, or a low level of commitment to one another, or to deal constructively with different attitudes about important things.¹¹⁴

Researchers who study couples find that the best way to improve satisfaction with the marriage is to teach spouses how to make their interaction more positive, such as better communication and showing more affection. The best way to improve marital stability is to reduce the bad relationship habits many spouses have, such as belittling each other, interrupting each other, or giving each other the cold shoulder.

There are many programmes available to help couples contemplating marriage or those already married to improve their relationship.¹¹⁵ These programmes are offered by national family support groups, local community groups, churches, or even the local registrar. Some recommended sources for information are listed at the back of this booklet.

Conclusion

Marriage is not as widespread as it used to be, but it is still an ideal to which most people aspire, and it still provides the surest foundation for strong and healthy families. Something about marriage itself—perhaps the public as well as private commitment it requires or the stability it encourages—seems to encourage husbands, wives and children to support each other and work together to build lasting families whose positive contribution is felt not only by the family members, but also by the larger society.

APPENDIX:

Some of the complexities of social science research

What are Confounding Factors and Selection Effects?

Social science is better equipped to document whether certain social facts *are* true than to say *why* they are true. We can assert more definitively that marriage is associated with powerful social benefits than that marriage is the sole or main cause of these benefits. It can be difficult to disentangle the many factors and processes that contribute to these benefits. Good research seeks to tease out what scholars call ‘confounding factors’ and ‘selection effects’.

One of the most important confounding factors is poverty. It is well known that children from married families tend to experience less poverty than children from lone-mother families. Because poverty itself can lead to health problems, educational inequalities, and long-term unemployment, observers might therefore ask whether positive outcomes for some children are more the result of living in married families *per se*, or whether they are more the result of other factors, such as economic stability. Often divorce or unwed childbearing can start off a kind of chain reaction, causing poverty, which in turn causes other problems. To try and isolate the impact of marriage independent of confounding factors such as poverty, social scientists use statistical methods to ‘control’ for those factors.

This type of research is important because it addresses questions such as whether transferring more cash and resources to lone-parent families will eliminate completely the risk of them experiencing health, emotional or educational problems.

‘Selection effects’ refer to the pre-existing differences between individuals who decide to divorce, marry, or become unwed parents, and how those pre-existing differences affect people’s lives. In other words, some of the negative outcomes experienced by lone-mother families might stem from their earlier experiences living with poverty or conflict, conditions which might have continued even if the parents had maintained an intact family household. On the other hand, people who have had many advantages such as a stable and loving family background, economic security, and good education may be more likely to marry and maintain a parental partnership than those who had fewer advantages. Observers might ask whether positive outcomes in these cases are due more to the pre-existing advantages which were ‘selected into’ stable two-parent families or more to benefits conferred by marriage itself. Research which considers selection effects is important because it refutes the assertion that marriage itself adds nothing to relationships that are already strong and can do nothing to improve unhealthy relationships.

Good social science attempts to account for confounding factors and selection effects in a variety of ways. The studies cited here are for the most part based on large, nationally representative samples that control for poverty, education, family background, and other confounding factors. In many cases, social scientists have been able to use

longitudinal data to track individuals over many years as they marry, divorce or stay single, increasing our confidence that marriage itself—rather than just selection—matters. In general, the evidence indicates that, although a family’s economic circumstances are very important, marriage itself also makes a difference. It is not just a case of happier, healthier and wealthier people choosing to marry. Rather, something about marriage itself encourages people to work together to build strong families. Where the evidence is overwhelming that marriage causes increases in well-being, this report says so. Where marriage probably does so but the causal pathways are not as well understood, it is more cautious.

We recognize that, without random assignment to marriage, divorce or lone parenting, social scientists must always acknowledge the possibility that other factors are influencing outcomes. (For example, relatively few family-structure studies attempt to assess the role of genetics.) Reasonable scholars may and do disagree on the existence and extent of such factors and the extent to which marriage is causally related to the better social outcomes reported here.

And of course individual circumstances vary.¹¹⁶ For example, while divorce is associated with serious increased psychological risks for children, the majority of children of divorce are not mentally ill.¹¹⁷ While marriage is a social good, not all marriages are equal. Research does not generally support the idea that remarriage is better for children than living with a lone mother.¹¹⁸ Marriages that are unhappy do not have the same benefits as the average marriage.¹¹⁹ Divorce or separation provides an important escape route for

children and adults in violent or high-conflict marriages. For these reasons, families, communities, and policy makers interested in spreading the benefits of marriage more equally should not focus solely on discouraging divorce, but should also actively encourage healthy and stable marriages.

MARRIAGE EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

There are many types of marriage education programmes. Some possible sources are as follows:-

- www.2-in-2-1.org.uk is a website which aims to link married and engaged couples with advice and services for every aspect of marriage.
- The National Association of Community Family Trusts is a group of organisations which use a whole community approach to teaching relationship skills to everyone, empowering them to make better interpersonal relationships. It is not based on counselling but on teaching relationship skills aimed at prevention rather than cure.
 - Bristol Family Trust has a website (www.bcft.co.uk) which contains further information on the effects of marriage education.
- Churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship are a good source for support and education.
- Care for the Family aims to promote strong family life and to help those hurting because of family break-up.
www.care-for-the-family.org.uk
- Your local registrar may be able to point you in the right direction.

Endnotes

¹ It should be noted that there is variation among the constituent countries of the United Kingdom. For example in 2001, the rates of births outside marriage were 48.3 percent in Wales, 43.3 percent in Scotland, 39.6 percent in England and 32.5 percent in Northern Ireland. See *Health Statistics Quarterly* 18, 2003, Table 2.2, p. 46.

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