

Reducing Poverty by Revitalizing Marriage in Low-Income Communities

A Memo to President-elect Obama

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[C]hildren living with single mothers are five times more likely to be poor than children in two-parent households. Children in single-parent homes are also more likely to drop out of school and become teen parents, even when income is factored out. And the evidence suggests that on average, children who live with their biological mother and father do better than those who live in stepfamilies or with cohabiting partners.... In light of these facts, policies that strengthen marriage for those who choose it and that discourage unintended births outside of marriage are sensible goals to pursue.

—Barack Obama,
*The Audacity of Hope*¹

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PRESIDENT-ELECT OBAMA, the collapse of marriage is the most important social problem facing the nation. When the War on Poverty began in the 1960s, 7 percent of U.S. children were born outside of marriage. Today, the number is 38 percent. Among blacks, it is 69 percent. You are in a unique position to reverse this alarming trend.

The decline of marriage is a major cause of child poverty. Roughly two-thirds of poor children live in single-parent homes. Marital collapse is also a major contributor to welfare dependence: Each year, government spends over \$250 billion for means-tested welfare benefits for single parents.

When compared to similar children raised by two married biological parents, children raised in single-parent homes are more likely to fail in school, abuse drugs or alcohol, commit crimes, become pregnant as teens, and suffer from emotional and behavioral problems. Such children are



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also more likely to end up on welfare or in jails when they become adults.

Revitalized marriage can have a powerful impact in reducing poverty in low-income communities. For example, if poor women who have children out of wedlock were married to the actual fathers of their children, nearly two-thirds would be lifted out of poverty immediately.² Because the decline in marriage is linked to many other social problems, an increase in healthy marriage would lead to a long-term drop in those problems as well.

Given these facts, policies that strengthen marriage for those who are interested and discourage births outside of marriage are indeed sensible. But the first step in developing such policies must be to look beyond the many misperceptions that cloud the issue. Effective policy must be based on facts.

Fact: Out-of-wedlock childbearing is not the same problem as teen pregnancy. Although 38 percent of children are born outside of marriage, only about one in seven of these non-marital births occurs to a girl under age 18. Most out-of-wedlock births occur to men and women in their early twenties. Half of the women who have children out of wedlock are cohabiting with the father at the time of birth; 75 percent are in a romantic relationship with the father.³ Policymakers seeking to reduce out-of-wedlock births must look far beyond teen pregnancy.

Fact: Few out-of-wedlock births are accidental. The overwhelming majority of young adult women who have a non-marital birth strongly want to have children. Although they are ambivalent about the best timing, they want and expect to have children at a fairly young age. Most are also interested in marriage, but they do not see marriage or a stable relationship as an important precondition to having a baby. To a significant degree, the decision to have a child outside of marriage is a deliberate choice for these women.

Fact: Lack of access to birth control is not a significant factor contributing to “unintended pregnancy” or non-marital births. A recent survey of low-income women who had had a non-marital pregnancy found that only 1 percent reported that lack of access to birth control played a role in the pregnancy.⁴

Fact: Out-of-wedlock childbearing is concentrated among low-income, less educated men and women. In general, the women most likely to have a child without being married are those who have the least ability to support a family by themselves.

Fact: Although the decline in marriage is most prominent among blacks, it is also a serious problem among Hispanics and lower-income whites: 44 percent of Hispanic children and 25 percent of white children are born outside of marriage.

Fact: Low male wages and employment are not the principal cause of out-of-wedlock childbearing. The overwhelming majority of non-married fathers were employed at the time of the child’s birth. Over half earn enough to support a family above the poverty level without the mother working at all.⁵ Before the child’s birth, the fathers-to-be, on average, earned more than the mothers-to-be. If, as some argue, the fathers were not economically prepared to support a family, the mothers were even less prepared. Other factors such as social norms concerning marriage, life-planning skills, and relationship skills play a far greater role than male wages in promoting out-of-wedlock childbearing.

Fact: Out-of-wedlock childbearing is not the result of a shortage of marriageable males. Nearly 40 percent of all American children, and 69 percent of black children, are born outside of marriage. The sheer magnitude of the problem undercuts the argument that it is caused by a shortage of marriageable men. The decline in marriage

1. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), p. 334.

2. Robert E. Rector, Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D., Patrick F. Fagan, and Lauren R. Noyes, “Increasing Marriage Will Dramatically Reduce Child Poverty,” Heritage Foundation *Center for Data Analysis Report* No. CDA03-06, May 20, 2003.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Kathryn Edin, Paula England, Emily Fitzgibbon Shafer, and Joanna Reed, “Forming Fragile Families: Was the Baby Planned, Unplanned, or In Between?” in Paula England and Kathryn Edin, eds., *Unmarried Couples with Children* (New York: Russell Sage Publications, 2007), p. 32.

5. Rector *et al.*, “Increasing Marriage Will Dramatically Reduce Child Poverty.”

in low-income communities stems from changing social norms and from a welfare system that for decades has penalized marriage, not from a lack of millions of marriageable men.

Government should help low-income couples to move toward more prosperous lives by providing such men and women with education that increases their understanding of the strong link between marriage and better life outcomes and that equips them to make critical life decisions concerning childbearing and family formation more wisely.

Paradoxically, most low-income men and women who are likely to have children out of wedlock have favorable attitudes toward marriage: If anything, they tend to over-idealize it. However, many low-income couples do not believe that it is important to form a stable marital relationship before conceiving children and bringing them into the world. They also tend to believe that haphazard cohabiting relationships are likely to endure and flourish when, in reality, this seldom occurs.

Many low-income individuals choose to have children first and *then* work on finding suitable partners and building strong relationships. They fail to understand that this pattern is not likely to be successful. Most low-income young women, in particular, strongly want children and hope those children will grow up to enter the middle class, but they fail to appreciate the vitally important role a healthy marriage can play in boosting a child's success.

In *The Audacity of Hope*, you wrote:

[R]esearch shows that marriage education workshops can make a real difference in helping married couples stay together and in encouraging unmarried couples who are living together to form a more lasting bond. Expanding access to such services to low-income couples, perhaps in concert with job training and placement, medical coverage, and other services already available, should be something everybody can agree on.⁶

You were exactly right. By and large, young low-income men and women aspire to have strong, healthy marriages. They also seek upward social and economic mobility. Marriage education can help at-risk individuals appreciate

the role that healthy marriage can have in meeting long-term life goals and can enable them to make decisions about childbearing that best match their life aspirations. These programs can also provide training in life partner selection and in skills that help to build healthy enduring relationships. Such programs should not be regarded as imposing alien middle-class values on the poor, but rather as providing vital tools to help individuals fulfill their real life goals.

You have also written, “most people agree that neither federal welfare programs nor the tax code should penalize married couples.”⁷ Again, you are right. Given the private and social benefits of marriage, it is absurd for the welfare industry to penalize marriage. Yet that is exactly what welfare does.

Specifically, welfare programs create disincentives to marriage because benefits are reduced as a family's income rises. A mother will receive far more from welfare if she is single than if she has an employed husband in the home. For many low-income couples, marriage means a reduction in government assistance and an overall decline in the couple's joint income. Marriage penalties occur in many means-tested programs such as food stamps, public housing, Medicaid, day care, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. The welfare system should be overhauled to reduce such counterproductive incentives.

Now is the time for action. You and your Administration, by launching the following specific initiatives, can help to revitalize marriage in America.

- **Recognize that the key to arresting the decline of marriage in the U.S. is moral leadership.** Use the White House bully pulpit to reaffirm the value and importance of marriage. You are uniquely suited to this task. Your strong personal affirmation of values will prove critical in transforming anti-marriage norms and in promoting a long-overdue renewal of marriage in low-income communities.
- **Use the bully pulpit to emphasize the historical importance of marriage within the black community.** Remind the nation that even at the height of Jim Crow

6. Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, p. 334.

7. *Ibid.*

segregation prior to World War II, nine out of ten black children were born to married couples. Warn the nation that the same decline in marriage that afflicted black communities a generation ago is now battering low- and moderate-income white communities.

- **Encourage public advertising campaigns on the importance of marriage** that are targeted to low-income communities.
- **Provide marriage education programs in high schools with a high proportion of at-risk youth.** Most low-income girls strongly desire to have children. They also wish and intend to be good mothers. These young women will be very receptive to information that shows the positive effects of marriage on long-term child outcomes. Such education could be funded under the current “healthy marriage initiative” program at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).
- **Make voluntary marriage education widely available to interested couples in low-income communities.** This could be done by expanding the small “healthy marriage initiative” currently operating in HHS. These programs may also provide job training to participants, but that should not be their primary emphasis.
- **Provide marriage education referrals in Title X birth control clinics.** Government-funded Title X clinics operate in nearly every county in the U.S., providing free or subsidized birth control to over 4 million low-income adult women each year. Many clients of these clinics go on to have children out of wedlock within a short

period. With 38 percent of children born outside of marriage, it is obvious that a policy of merely promoting birth control is highly ineffective in stemming the rise of non-marital births. In addition to providing birth control, Title X clinics should be required to offer referrals to education in relationships, marriage, and life-planning skills to clients who are interested.

- **Reduce the anti-marriage penalties in welfare.** The simplest way to accomplish this would be to increase the value of the earned income tax credit (EITC) for married couples with children; this could offset the anti-marriage penalties existing in other programs such as food stamps, public housing, and Medicaid.

Conclusion

More than 40 years ago, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then a member of the White House staff under President Lyndon Johnson, warned of the impending collapse of the black married family. He predicted the social calamities that this collapse would bring. Moynihan was right, but in subsequent decades, as the problem mushroomed, the nation largely hid its head in the sand and ignored the devastation. In the four decades since Moynihan’s warning, the government has done almost nothing to protect or restore marriage.

Today, the collapse of marriage about which Moynihan warned so long ago is escalating rapidly across other racial groups. Forty years of neglect and silence is enough. You now have a unique opportunity and ability to halt this destructive trend and to take the first decisive steps to restore marriage in our society.

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