

Why Marriage Matters:

Marriage, Lone Parenthood,
Cohabitation, & Child Well-being in the West



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The Western Retreat from Marriage

- Divorce rate more than doubled from 1960 to 2003 in countries such as
 - Austria, France, Germany, Netherlands, & Sweden, & United States
- Nonmarital births up precipitously

	1970	2000
■ Netherlands	4%	25%
■ Spain	2%	17%
■ Sweden	19%	56%
■ United States	11%	33%



Two Married Parents are Better than One: Outcomes

Children reared in single-parent homes are two to three times more likely to experience serious negative outcomes

- About 10% of children in biological married-parent homes experience such outcomes
- About 25% of children in biological single-parent homes experience such outcomes



Findings from the U.S.

- The consequences of single parenthood for children:
 - Psychological:
 - Twice as likely to attempt suicide,
 - Twice as likely to suffer from substance abuse & depression
 - Social:
 - Boys more than twice as likely to end up in prison,
 - Girls six times as likely to have teen pregnancy
 - Neglect and abuse:
 - 75 percent more likely to be neglected or abused
 - Biological:
 - Girls have puberty at an earlier age (esp. when unrelated male in home)



Findings from Europe

- Similar findings even in countries with large welfare states and virtually no poverty
 - Psychological
 - Children in single-parent homes twice as likely to attempt suicide, abuse drugs, or be depressed (Sweden)
 - Children of divorce more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, and to end up getting divorced as adults (England)
 - Social
 - Children of divorce significantly more likely to engage in delinquent acts, be disciplined in school, and suffer from poor academic performance (Norway)



Social Scientists on the Evidence

- “Research clearly demonstrates that children growing up with two continuously married parents are less likely than other children to experience a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and social problems, not only during childhood, but also in adulthood... This distinction is even stronger if we focus on children growing up with two happily married parents.”
- – Paul Amato, *The Future of Children* (2005)



Explaining the Marriage Advantage

- Structure influences quality of parenting
 - Two sets of kin
 - Two sets of social networks
 - Mutual support and monitoring of one another
 - Less economic stress
 - Marital commitment ensures stability and investments in children
 - All these factors associated with →
 - More affection, consistent discipline, and monitoring
 - Children report higher quality relationships with father *and* mother



Two Unmarried Parents are Not Necessarily Better than One

- Cohabitation outcomes for children more positive in economic domain
 - Lower levels of poverty
- Cohabitation outcomes as negative as single parent outcomes
 - Depression
 - Suspension/expulsion from school
- Cohabitation outcomes worse than single parent outcomes
 - Low GPA
 - Delinquency/behavior problems
 - Sexual abuse of girls and violent deaths for boys & girls



Why are Cohabiting Unions Risky for Kids?

- Cohabiting unions tend to have less commitment, trust, sexual fidelity, and more violence than married unions
- They are also much less stable, even when biological kids are involved
 - 15% of children born into married families in U.S. see parents split by age 5
 - 50% of children born into cohabiting families in U.S. see parents split by age 5
 - Instability is linked to numerous problems for children—from delinquency to sexual abuse—and helps to explain why cohabiting unions are arguably more risky for children than a stable, single parent home



Findings from Europe

- But cohabitation is much more common & institutionalized in Europe. Might cohabitation be ok in Europe?
- No
 - University of Chicago Demographer Patrick Heuveline: "in most [European] countries children born to cohabiting families are two to four times more likely to see their parents separate than are children in married households."
 - Increases in cohabitation → Increases in family instability & single parenthood



Conclusion

- Causes of the Western Retreat from Marriage
 - Secularization, affluence, individualism, androgynous feminism
 - Public policies that devalue marriage (no-fault divorce, legal recognition of cohabitation, welfare policies that focus on single mothers)
- Marriage is vital to the welfare of children, adults, & the communities they live in
- To serve the common good, policy makers should support policies that strengthen and renew the institution of marriage