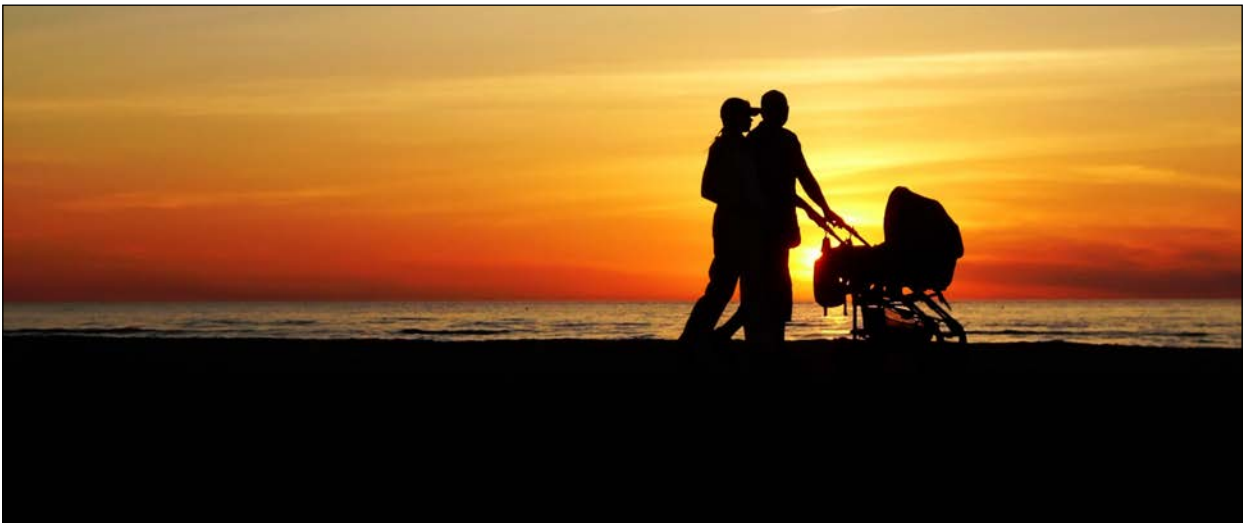


FROM FAMILY COLLAPSE TO AMERICA'S DECLINE

THE EDUCATIONAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL
COSTS OF FAMILY FRAGMENTATION
—ABRIDGED—



BY
MITCH PEARLSTEIN

Abridgement by Kent Kaiser



BUILDING A CULTURE
OF PROSPERITY FOR
MINNESOTA AND
THE NATION

"Not since the 1965 'Moynihan Report' has anyone written so frankly, so soberly, so reasonably, or so persuasively on the devastating social consequences of single-parent families."

— Paul E. Peterson, Harvard University

FROM FAMILY COLLAPSE TO AMERICA'S DECLINE

THE EDUCATIONAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL COSTS OF FAMILY FRAGMENTATION



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INTRODUCTION

The argument that follows is straightforward. Very high rates of family fragmentation in the United States are subtracting from what very large numbers of students are learning in school and holding them back in other ways. This, in turn, is damaging the country economically by making us less hospitable to innovation while also making millions of Americans less competitive in an increasingly demanding worldwide marketplace. All of this is leading to deepening class divisions in a nation which has never viewed itself or operated in such splintered ways.



**"FAMILY FRAGMENTATION"
HAS COME TO BE THE FAVORED
TERM FOR OUT-OF-WEDLOCK
BIRTHS, SEPARATIONS,
AND DIVORCE.**



The United States leads virtually the entire world in family fragmentation, with a non-marital birth rate of more than 40 percent (more than twice as high in many urban communities) and an overall divorce rate of about 45 percent. Yet leaders in a variety of fields skip around the multiple and handicapping products of non-marital births and divorce.

Pull a half-dozen books from the shelves that deal in one way or another with the education of poor or otherwise disadvantaged boys and girls. Now go to their indexes and see how many times words such as "fathers," "marriage," or anything pertaining to what more frequently and offensively used to be called "illegitimacy" are cited. The number doubtless will be tiny, quite possibly zero.

What's missing in most discussions of disadvantaged boys and girls is any reference whatsoever to broken families of a routine, even everyday sort. It's as if we've graduated to a new order of political correctness, one in which researchers, writers, and others are no longer silenced merely by intimidating cant and fear of ostracism, but rather by now habitual, barely conscious acquiescence that children and fathers living separately is the new normal.

When it comes to how children fare when two-parent families dissolve or never combine in the first place, this essay wouldn't have amounted to even a gleam if the answer was just as well as other kids on average. This, however, is obviously not the case as boys and girls growing up in

single-parent homes, generally speaking, do less well than young people growing up with their two biological parents by every important measure one can think of.

Why is this? What are the dynamics at play in undercutting kids in this way?

This essay begins to answer these questions. The bottom line is a straight line: Rampant family fragmentation subtracts from personal and societal success and well-being and does so not just a little, but a lot.

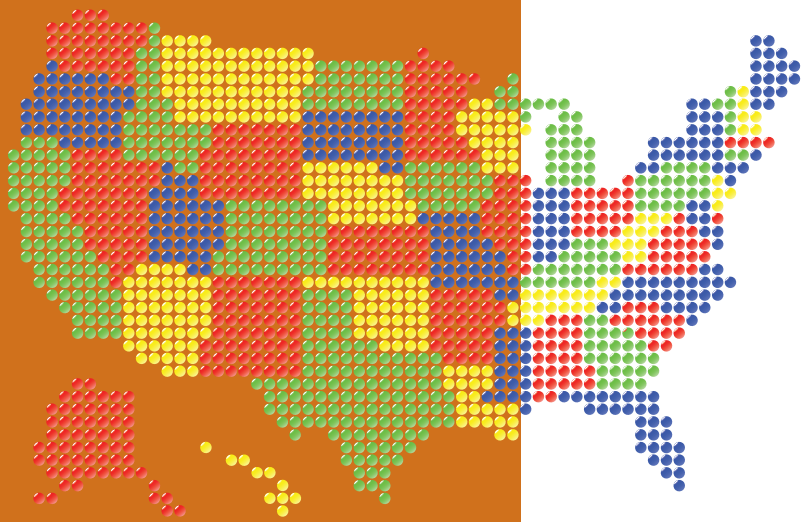


The book *From Family Collapse to America's Decline*¹ connects dots that have never been adequately connected before: How family fragmentation leads to educational weakness; how that, in turn, leads to economic weakness; how that results in a loss of U.S. economic competitiveness; and how they all lead to growing and very disturbing class cleavages. It considers how the United States can maintain its economic preeminence when, in addition to being out-peopled by several countries, so many American young people are held back and damaged by family problems. The book and this summary essay also discuss how we've fallen into this social, scholastic, and business hole and how we might climb our way out.

No solution proposed here is equal to the central problem it aims to solve. There is no tax break, no welfare reform, no marriage education program, no public service campaign or anything of the sort that can reduce out-of-wedlock birth rates and divorce rates to what they were 50 or 60 years ago.

Intimately and intricately, family fragmentation has more to do with the cultural and spiritual air we breathe than with legislation we pass; more to do with what we believe to be right and wrong rather than with the economic return of this or that. It's not that economic and legal incentives and disincentives—the stuff of policy—don't matter; they can matter significantly. It's that they don't matter enough in this instance.

THE UNITED STATES LEADS VIRTUALLY THE ENTIRE WORLD IN FAMILY FRAGMENTATION, WITH A NON-MARITAL BIRTH RATE OF MORE THAN 40 PERCENT AND AN OVERALL DIVORCE RATE OF ABOUT 45 PERCENT.



THIS ESSAY'S GOALS:

- Grasp the connections between family breakdown and educational troubles, going beyond surface recitations of what is now well-documented (if downplayed) empirical evidence.
- Explore how diminished academic performance is leading inescapably to diminished economic performance for the United States as a whole.
- Show how such compromised economic strength is leading to a loss of economic competitiveness – including on the part of individuals, not just the nation collectively – and how it is leading to deepening class divisions.



PERSONAL NOTE:

Please note: My aim is not to gang up on or hurt anyone – single parents wholly included. While I'm not without passion on the subject and while I very much do believe family fragmentation is the overwhelming social disaster of our times, I also recognize that *stuff* happens. My wife of 22 years, for example, was a single mother with three young sons for a long time after her divorce many years ago. I'm also in my second and *ultimate* marriage.

ULTIMATE GOAL:

- Draw connections to strike enough chords – both broadly public and deeply personal – so as to improve the way we bring children into the world and raise them, with educational and economic betterment only two among many benign results.





FAMILY FRAGMENTATION'S EFFECTS ON CHILDREN, OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

A sampling of findings on family fragmentation's effects on the out-of-school and non-cognitive lives of children:²

- Marriages and cohabiting relationships in the United States are much more fragile than elsewhere in the world. After only 5 years, more than one in five Americans who married had separated or divorced as compared to half that many or even fewer in other Western countries.
- Because of such fragile partnerships, American children born to married or cohabiting parents are more likely to see their parents' partnerships break apart than are children most anywhere else.
- American women give birth at earlier ages and are much more likely to spend time as lone parents while still in their teens or twenties than are women in Western Europe. By age 30, one-third of American women had spent time as lone mothers; comparable proportions in France, Sweden, and the western part of Germany were half as large or even less.

The bottom line: Life in America “involves more transitions than anywhere else.”³

"THE USA STANDS OUT AS AN EXTREME CASE WITH ITS VERY HIGH PROPORTION OF CHILDREN BORN TO A LONE MOTHER, WITH A HIGHER PROBABILITY THAT CHILDREN EXPERIENCE A UNION DISRUPTION THAN ANYWHERE ELSE, AND WITH MANY CHILDREN HAVING THE EXPERIENCE OF LIVING IN A STEPFAMILY."⁴
—GUNNAR ANDERSSON, SWEDISH DEMOGRAPHER



KEY QUESTIONS:

- How has the United States come to be an outlier when it comes to affording children a fighting chance of reaching maturity free of major familial disruptions?





It's clear that for many powerful cultural, economic, political and other reasons, women of all stations no longer necessarily need what husbands have traditionally brought to the table financially – if enough potential husbands are still in a position to provide in such traditional ways in the first place. As a result, many women are going without, and many men have been successfully staying clear and wiggling off hooks. There's no question that welfare programs, at the very least, *enable* many women to raise babies alone and allow many men to abandon their heretofore life-shaping responsibilities.

KID FACTS:

- Children growing up with their biological fathers scored higher on achievement tests than those growing up with stepfathers.
- Children of biological albeit *unmarried* parents experienced higher levels of behavioral problems than those of biological and *married* husbands and wives.
- Stable cohabiting families are associated with lower levels of child well-being than are stable married stepfamilies. Yet perhaps surprisingly, “formalization” of a cohabiting stepfamily by means of marriage “did not translate into any appreciable benefits for adolescent well-being.” Cohabitation and its reach, in other words, can be tough on kids.⁵



- “How about two unmarried adults,” Chester E. Finn has asked, “one (or both) of whom has young children on site?” How might the young ones fare? Things can work out, he argued in a symposium on making marriage more child centered, if the “adult-to-adult relationship is durable, loving, and sharing.” But how often does that really happen? How often do the children “get what they need from the second adult by way of love, attention, guidance, and role modeling?”⁶
- Jay Teachman writes that children of divorce are “certainly” more likely to see their own marriages eventually end in divorce than is the case with counterparts whose parents’ marriages remained intact. But he also writes of how kids growing up in homes in which their parents never married in the first place “experience a *very* high risk of marital disruption [emphasis supplied].”⁷





- “In addition to high poverty rates,” Sara McLanahan wrote, “single motherhood is a proxy for multiple risk factors that do not bode well for children.” Unmarried mothers with low education (defined as a high school degree or less) are more likely to suffer clinical depression and to have used drugs and alcohol while pregnant than married mothers with similar levels of education.⁸

- The fathers of unwed mothers’ children, moreover, also have more problems, including higher substance abuse, disability, violence, and incarceration rates.⁹
- In a sample of mothers with high school educations or less, those who were single were more than 8 times more likely to use drugs while pregnant than were mothers who were married at the time.¹⁰
- Children from families with unmarried parents who break up routinely contend with “partnership instability and household complexity” as their mothers form new partnerships and have children with other men. “These findings,” Sara McLanahan concludes, “underscore the fact that children born into fragile families are disadvantaged relative to other children in terms of both parents’ capabilities and social capital.”¹¹

- Kids in single-parent households have a greater tendency to “act out” and otherwise misbehave than do most other kids.¹²
- “Children living with cohabiting parents have more externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems than children living married parents, even at age three.”¹³
- “Behavioral problems are intensified with each additional change in family structure the child experiences;” for example, changing from a single-parent to a cohabiting parent situation, or from a cohabiting to single-parent arrangement.¹⁴





"THE BIOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FATHER AND CHILD IS WELL ESTABLISHED IN THE LITERATURE AS A BASIS FOR PATERNAL INVESTMENT AND, THEREFORE, CHILD WELL-BEING. [THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LEGAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS] IS A RELATIVELY NEW AND IMPORTANT DISCOVERY."¹⁵

—SANDRA HOFFERTH





FRAGMENTATION'S EFFECTS ON EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE

If the United States is to continue leading the world economically, it will have to rely on something other than the educational wherewithal of its rank-and-file citizens. Family breakdown, obviously, is by no means the lone reason why Americans on the whole are underperforming academically. But severely compounding matters is the unlikelihood of significantly improving learning as long as nonmarital birth rates and divorce rates remain essentially where they are. The same unreality applies to adequately shrinking immense

achievement gaps as long as the health and well-being of marriage remain, not merely terrible but calamitous, in many American minority communities.

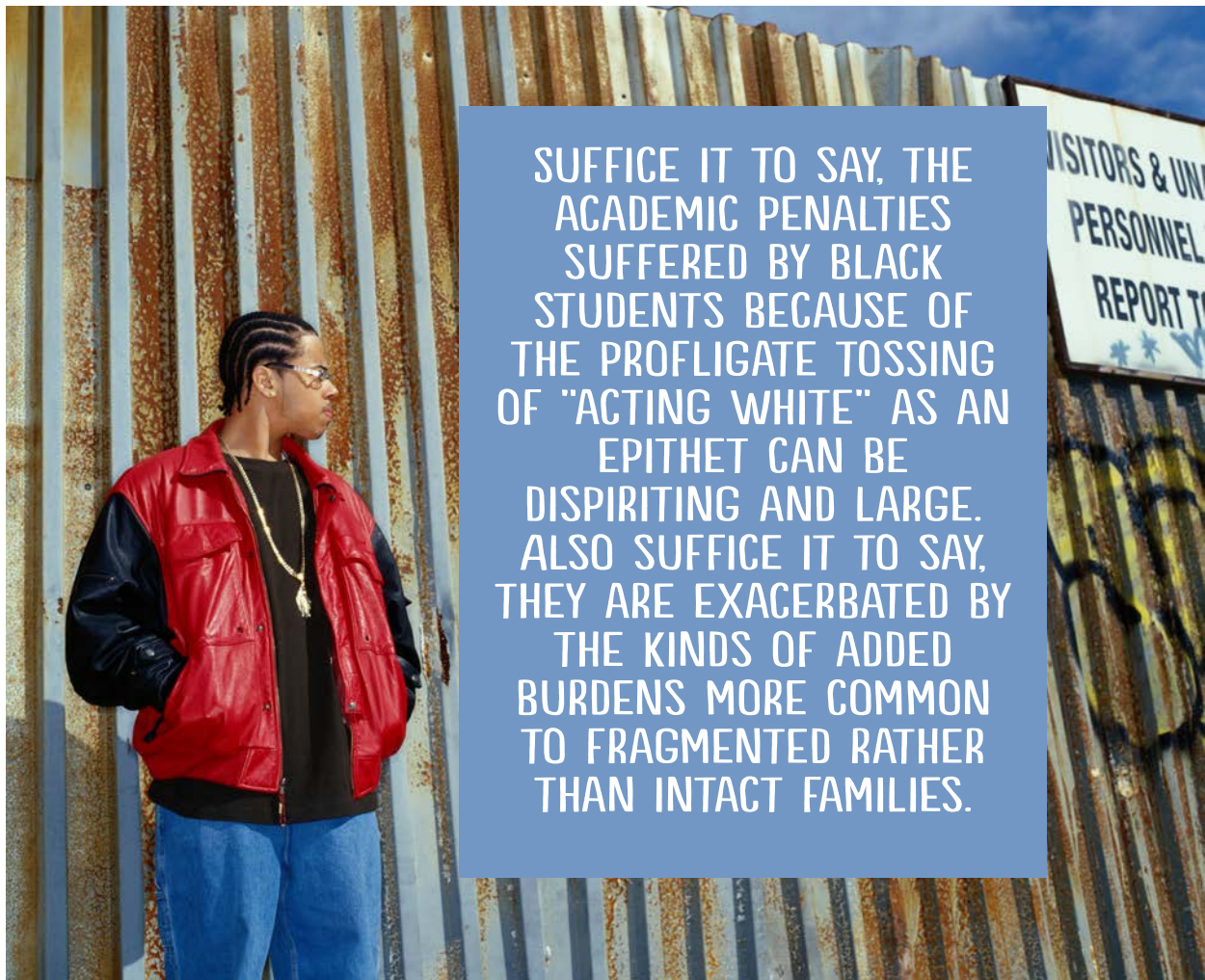


“It is very hard,” two scholars concluded in a 2010 Educational Testing Service report, “to imagine progress resuming in reducing the education attainment and achievement gap without turning these family trends around,” by which they meant “increasing marriage rates and getting fathers back into the business of

nurturing children.” The very idea, they said, of a “substitute for the institution of marriage for raising children is almost unthinkable,” although they did add that “stronger support for the family is not.”¹⁶

There are many more kids out there than we either assume or fear who, because of the holes and disorganization of their home lives, find it too hard to concentrate and work hard enough so as to perform well enough academically. Or, if they are, in fact, equipped to pass and perhaps even excel in their studies, I would argue there are more boys and girls throughout the country than we seem to think or acknowledge who are nonetheless unmotivated to break scholastic sweats in good measure because of their fractured home lives.

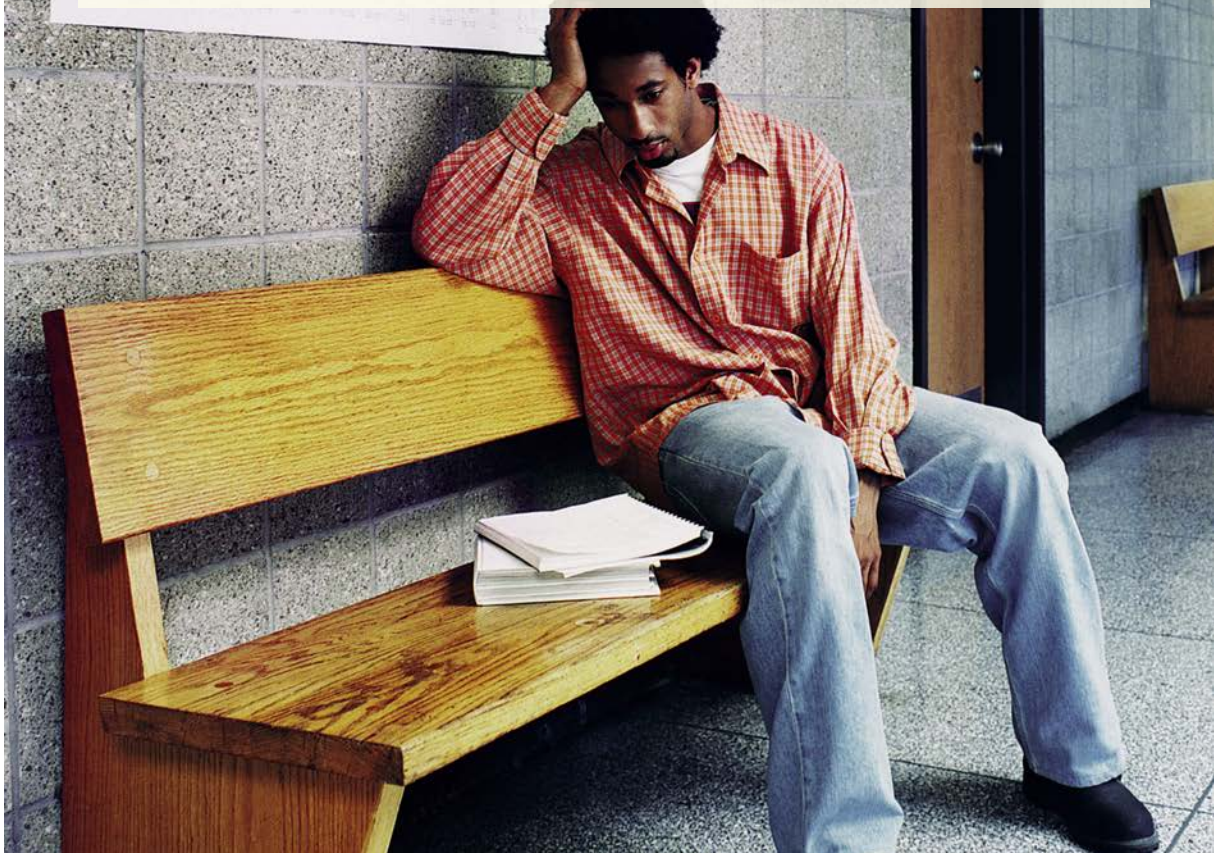
Viewing matters less individually and more communally (as in largely fatherless *communities*, of which we have vast numbers), I work from the evidence-based assumption that neighborhoods in which sizably more than 80 percent of children are born outside of marriage, and where divorce ends a large proportion of marriages that do manage to exist, are not particularly conducive places for high or even middling achievement. Peer pressures confronted by kids in such situations (picking just one crippler) are almost always more perverse than those faced by other kids in more benign circumstances and settings. No such sets of norms, beliefs, and behaviors are more toxic when it comes to the academic fortunes of many children of color – which is to say, disproportionately boys and girls growing up in single-parent homes – than the notion that working hard and succeeding in school is tantamount to “acting white.”



SUFFICE IT TO SAY, THE ACADEMIC PENALTIES SUFFERED BY BLACK STUDENTS BECAUSE OF THE PROFLIGATE TOSSING OF "ACTING WHITE" AS AN EPITHET CAN BE DISPIRITING AND LARGE. ALSO SUFFICE IT TO SAY, THEY ARE EXACERBATED BY THE KINDS OF ADDED BURDENS MORE COMMON TO FRAGMENTED RATHER THAN INTACT FAMILIES.

EXAMPLE:

After spending an ethnographic year in a Catholic high school in Harlem, journalist Peter McCloskey wrote of how it's "difficult for inner-city minority youngsters to focus on academics," citing a freshman in one illustrative instance: "Eric McBride attended a junior high school in Harlem where he was threatened every day for trying to do school work in class. His peers warned that they would beat him up after school if he dared to study and thus 'act white.' The young man invented circuitous routes from the school to his home in a housing project on what used to be the Polo Grounds, where the New York Giants and Mets baseball teams originally played."¹⁷



WHAT ABOUT THE "ACHIEVEMENT GAP?"

Let's start with *The Black-White Achievement Gap: When Progress Stopped*, by Paul E. Barton and Richard J. Coley. Concentrated in this report's 40 pages is a substantial and balanced analysis of why the gulf between black and white academic achievement is as large as it is, paying full respect to historical and more recent economic, political, and other conditions and constraints that have hurt some groups more than others. Barton and Coley ask:

- Are strong neighborhood churches still available to the community, or has their prevalence and impact waned?
- Are there safe and well-maintained community playgrounds where children and parents can gather?
- Do neighbors interact and support one another, and do they look out for neighborhood children?
- Does fear of crime in the neighborhood keep children indoors?
- Are libraries safely accessible, and do they have programs for children?
- In short, is there a neighborhood and community?¹⁸

Barton and Coley say important things about incarceration, poisonous music, fears of “acting white,” and more than most, they recognize that when talking about economic differences among groups, it’s essential to consider not just disparities in income, but also those in wealth, which are routinely much bigger. They draw on some of these factors in trying to understand why, after nearly a full century of movement in the right direction, progress in reducing academic gaps between blacks and whites stalled around 1980, then resumed briefly around the turn of the millennium, only to stall again.¹⁹

Barton and Coley pay particular attention to two possible “shocks,” the first being the prevalence of crack cocaine and the long prison sentences associated with violations involving that drug, shrinking the pool of potential fathers able to support their children.

The second shock is the continuation of huge differences in the rate of black and white children born into and growing up in highly disadvantaged communities. On average, they note, children in such neighborhoods are “impaired in their development, lack family capital, and face hostile neighborhood environments. They are also likely to attend lower-quality schools staffed by lower-quality teachers.” While in them, moreover, they confront greater violence, disruption, and fear. “Children growing up in these places are hit with a triple whammy in the home, neighborhood, and school.”

It’s precisely Barton and Coley’s argument’s full context that makes their description of family breakdown as a giant disruption and impediment that much more persuasive. “If we are looking,” they write, “for a ‘shock’ that roughly coincides with the end of the long-term relative economic and educational gain for black children described earlier in the report, [the] steep rise in children being raised without fathers, and mostly without the benefit of earnings, coincides with the overall scenario of curtailed progress in narrowing the achievement gap.”²⁰





THE PERCENTAGE OF BLACK CHILDREN LIVING WITH ONLY ONE PARENT OR ZERO PARENTS GREW FROM 33 PERCENT IN 1960 TO 67 PERCENT IN 1995 — FROM ONE-THIRD TO A FULL TWO-THIRDS OF ALL AFRICAN-AMERICAN BOYS AND GIRLS.²¹

There are studies which do not focus on nonmarital births and single-parenthood as such, but rather on statuses and conditions disproportionately tied to them. For example, in a 2009 study, two University of Nebraska researchers concluded that “smaller birth weight is associated with lower math and reading scores at age five” and that “findings painted a complex picture of disadvantage, beginning in the womb and extending through a variety of mechanisms into adolescence.” While they found that such birth-weight-related achievement gaps did not grow significantly after age five, they tended not to shrink, either. “Much of the birth-rate gap in early childhood,” they write, “at least for reading comprehension, appears to be at least partly explained by the racial background of smaller babies, to less favorable home lives, and disadvantaged characteristics of their mothers. This pattern of findings paints the picture of a complex gestalt of disadvantage, one that begins in the womb and persists across childhood into adolescence.”²²

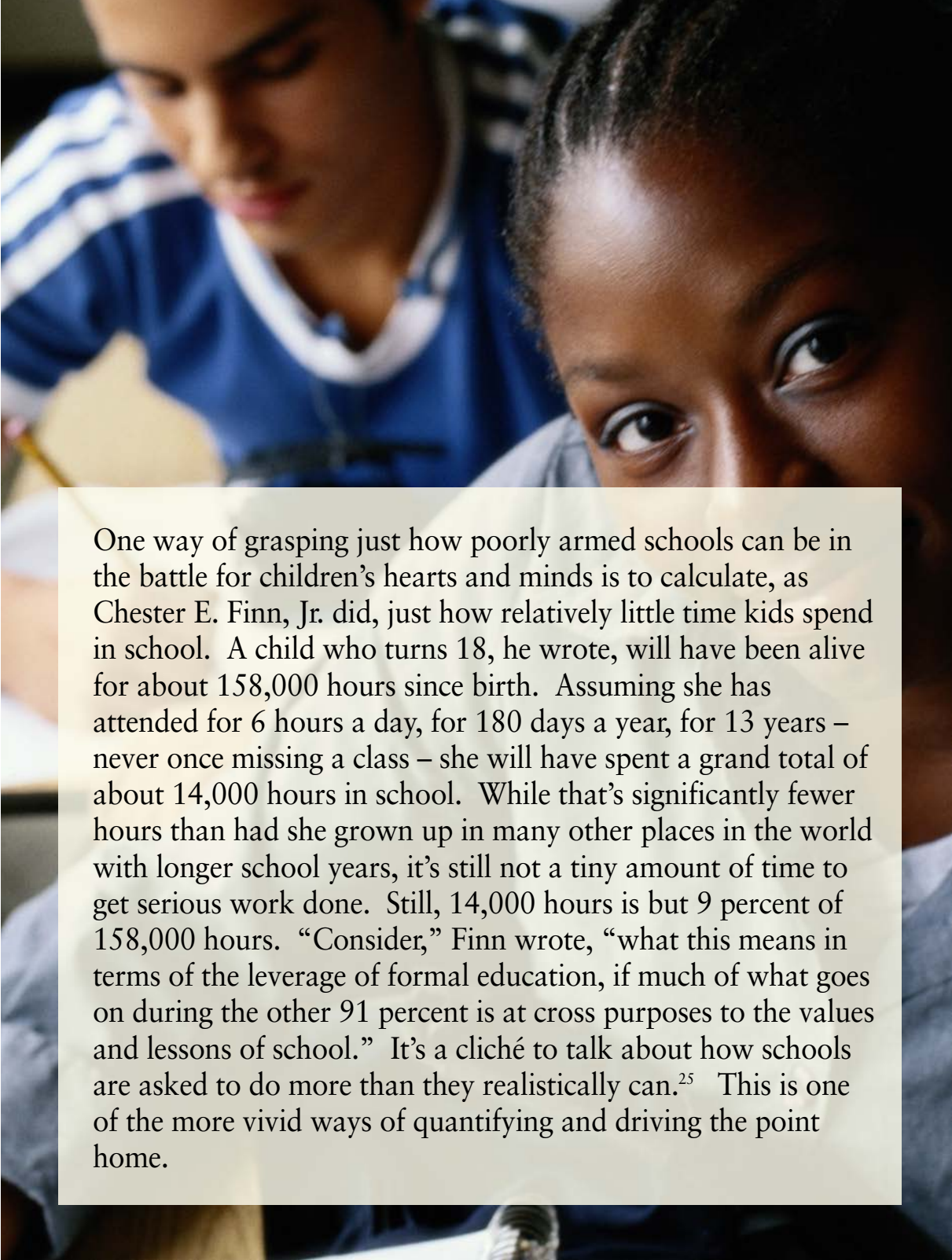
The obvious dots, of course, in need of connecting are those having to do with birth weight and marital status. More precisely, are babies born out of wedlock more likely to be low weight (defined by the authors as less than 2,500 grams, or 5.5 pounds) than babies born within marriage? The short answer, according to scholars, is yes, as “studies have consistently found that children born to unwed parents are at higher risk” of arriving tiny. Reasons include the greater likelihood of unmarried girls and women smoking cigarettes and using illicit drugs during pregnancy and their smaller likelihood of receiving prenatal care anytime in their first trimester.²³

Doris R. Entwisle, Karl L. Alexander, and Linda Steffel Olson also wrote about perverse persistence, this time in a Baltimore-based study that connected the socioeconomic environments of first graders to their educational success as 22-year-olds, 16 years later. Much research pertaining to the stubbornness of social stratification, they write, relies on student experiences in high school. Their lead finding, however, was that first-grade experiences are essentially as predictive, insofar as “social contexts and personal resources explain educational attainment levels in early adulthood about as well as do similar resources measured in adolescence.” Meaning and reconfirming that millions of kids are handicapped from earliest days by the kinds of social, economic, cultural, and interpersonal environments that are disproportionately synonymous with lone-parent households. “The correlations between social class and children’s marks or test scores,” the authors correspondingly wrote, “are a product of life experiences *outside* the classroom and, for this reason, strongly reflect socioeconomic status differences (emphasis in the original).”²⁴

In any case, reams of empirical research are definitive that boys and girls growing up in fragmenting and fragmented families do less well academically and in other vital ways than other children on average. While great schools demand and propel many students into doing better than they otherwise might, that’s not to say they wind up doing nearly well enough when measured against reasonable national, much less international standards. Replicating such schools and bringing them to scale, moreover, will continue proving impossible for a host of reasons, starting with the fact that exceptional programs are usually the inspiration and handiwork of exceptional and sometimes brilliant leaders; men and women who, by definition, are neither mass trained nor hired in bulk.



WHAT'S SCHOOL TIME UP AGAINST?



One way of grasping just how poorly armed schools can be in the battle for children's hearts and minds is to calculate, as Chester E. Finn, Jr. did, just how relatively little time kids spend in school. A child who turns 18, he wrote, will have been alive for about 158,000 hours since birth. Assuming she has attended for 6 hours a day, for 180 days a year, for 13 years – never once missing a class – she will have spent a grand total of about 14,000 hours in school. While that's significantly fewer hours than had she grown up in many other places in the world with longer school years, it's still not a tiny amount of time to get serious work done. Still, 14,000 hours is but 9 percent of 158,000 hours. "Consider," Finn wrote, "what this means in terms of the leverage of formal education, if much of what goes on during the other 91 percent is at cross purposes to the values and lessons of school." It's a cliché to talk about how schools are asked to do more than they realistically can.²⁵ This is one of the more vivid ways of quantifying and driving the point home.

School reform will continue to fail as long as we continue to focus so much time on how schools work rather than how our culture does. Another commonsense but important finding is that students who recognized the importance of effort (as opposed to luck, fate, or discrimination) in determining their success in life tended to do better than students who were less persuaded that hard work matters.²⁶ A superb cross-national study making a similar point contrasted how mothers in the United States, China, and Taiwan comprehend their children's success or failure in school. In simplest terms, if an American mother was asked why her child was doing well, say, in math, she was apt to say it was because her son or daughter was good at it. Or conversely, if her son or daughter was doing poorly in math, it was because that just wasn't one of her better subjects. Chinese and Taiwanese mothers, on the other hand, were more likely to attribute their children's academic success to burning lots of late-night oil – and lesser performances to burning a lot less of it.²⁷

Just think through the implications of such a cultural difference when it comes to learning more and getting better. Whereas American kids wrestling with algebra might infer from their parents that conceding is genetically justifiable, their Asian counterparts with similar “x” and “y” problems are more likely to be informed (by their more likely two parents) to quit whining and get to it. On first reading of this study in the *New York Times* in about 1983, I concluded again that until cultural gaps like these shrank significantly, academic gaps between the United States and an increasing number of nations around the world wouldn't shrink nearly enough. For exactly the same reasons, I also once again concluded that exclusively policy-driven stabs at “reform” just couldn't and wouldn't cut it. Nothing in the three decades since has caused me to change my view.







FRAGMENTATION'S EFFECTS ON ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

In regard to fragmentation's effects on our economy, skeptics might wonder: It's not as if the United States has been home to huge numbers of fragmented families for only a short economic quarter or two, but rather, for more than a generation now. Yet despite it all, we've somehow continued enjoying the biggest economy in the world throughout the period, with no other country coming particularly close. So how, exactly, have nonmarital births and divorce

sapped our Gross National Product (GNP) in consequential ways? And if nonmarital births and divorce haven't yet damaged us dangerously, why should we be worried they eventually will? These are more than fair questions, with answers of two sorts.



The first answer is that it would be a mistake to contend, just because family fragmentation has not shredded the economy, that it hasn't caused tears – leakages which have curtailed our productivity and quality of life. Or putting it another way, compared to the rest of the world, the United States continues to do very well economically. But how much better could we be doing?

A second way of thinking about how fragmentation already has caused harm and threatens doing even more has less to do with our nation's overall economic output and more, instead, with how it's shared. The biggest economically rooted danger posed by massive family breakdown is not the way it will continue subtracting from our GNP, but rather, the way it will make it increasingly difficult for millions of young people to make more of themselves, thereby exacerbating class divisions in profoundly un-American ways.

This is not to say that all groups, to one degree or another, won't continue benefiting from America's enormous bounty; our economy is more than vital enough, and there's little to suggest it will erode in any perilous way. But even more than is currently the case, some groups – more specifically, those which least frequently sire, bear, and raise their children in the fortifying confines of marriage – will fare less well than others. It's impossible to see how large numbers of people will not be hurt by this and how economic, social, and other cleavages will not grow because of these disparities, as the mass of non-marrying Americans has reached a critical mass and stage.

SOME COSTS OF FRAGMENTATION

- Q:** How many governmental dollars are allocated to keeping single mothers and their children out of dire poverty as opposed to spending those same funds on what some might view as more productive public and private uses?
- A:** One researcher calculated conservatively that family fragmentation costs the U.S. economy at least \$112 billion annually in social welfare and foregone tax revenues.²⁸ This, however, is a ridiculously low figure, considering all that was excluded from the calculation.
- Q:** How much lower might current poverty levels be if out-of-wedlock birth rates and divorce rates had stayed what they were a generation or two ago?
- A:** Research suggests that if 1998 family fragmentation rates more closely resembled those of 1960, the poverty rate would have been only 28.4 percent, instead of 45.6 percent.²⁹

Q: How much bigger would our economy be if such gaps didn't exist?

A: In focusing on various domestic and international achievement gaps, another study suggested Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2008 could have been \$1.3 trillion to \$2.3 trillion (9 to 16 percent) higher than it was, if American students in recent years had succeeded in matching the achievement levels of “better-performing nations such as Finland and Korea,” and between \$310 billion and \$525 billion higher than it actually was, if “black and Latino student performance and white student performance had been similarly narrowed.”³⁰

Q: What have econometricians learned about the relationship between a nation's math and science skills on the one hand, and its economic growth on the other, and how does family breakdown constrain those very skills?

A: Yet another study emphasized the importance of math and science skills – both of which are curtailed when children grow up without two parents at home – in determining a nation's GDP and economic growth. The study noted that, going into the future, the United States appears unlikely to continue dominating others in human capital unless it can improve on education quality and also noted that almost a third of all start-ups in Silicon Valley in the previous dozen years had been founded by Indian or Chinese immigrants.³¹

THERE IS NOW CONSIDERABLE EVIDENCE THAT COGNITIVE SKILLS MEASURED BY TEST SCORES ARE DIRECTLY RELATED TO INDIVIDUAL EARNINGS, PRODUCTIVITY, AND ECONOMIC GROWTH.³²

Let's proceed from the premise that while family fragmentation surely doesn't spur growth, the U.S. economy has enough going for it so that high out-of-wedlock and divorce rates (as well as generally short-term cohabiting relationships) are not drastically damaging. Yet where might that leave us economically? I would argue that the most acute answer, at least as gauged by mega-measures such as GDP, is in comparatively better shape as a national whole than as specific individuals in many millions of cases. Fragmentation's major fallout likely will be the way in which large numbers of men and women, following disproportionately poor performances as students, simply won't have the tools to succeed in an economy that will continue demanding strong cognitive and other skills – with similarly constrained fates often waiting disproportionate numbers of their children and grandchildren. What, in turn, might this suggest, not necessarily for our economic health overall (which may well remain superior), but for our social and political fabric? Clearly not good things, as it's impossible to see how family breakdown will not deepen demarcations and cleavages in very un-American ways.



So as not to get bogged down over whether the United States has already turned into an overly skewed nation economically, let's simply stipulate that current matters of income inequality and mobility might be viewed simultaneously as glasses both half full and half empty, as highlighted on the next two pages.

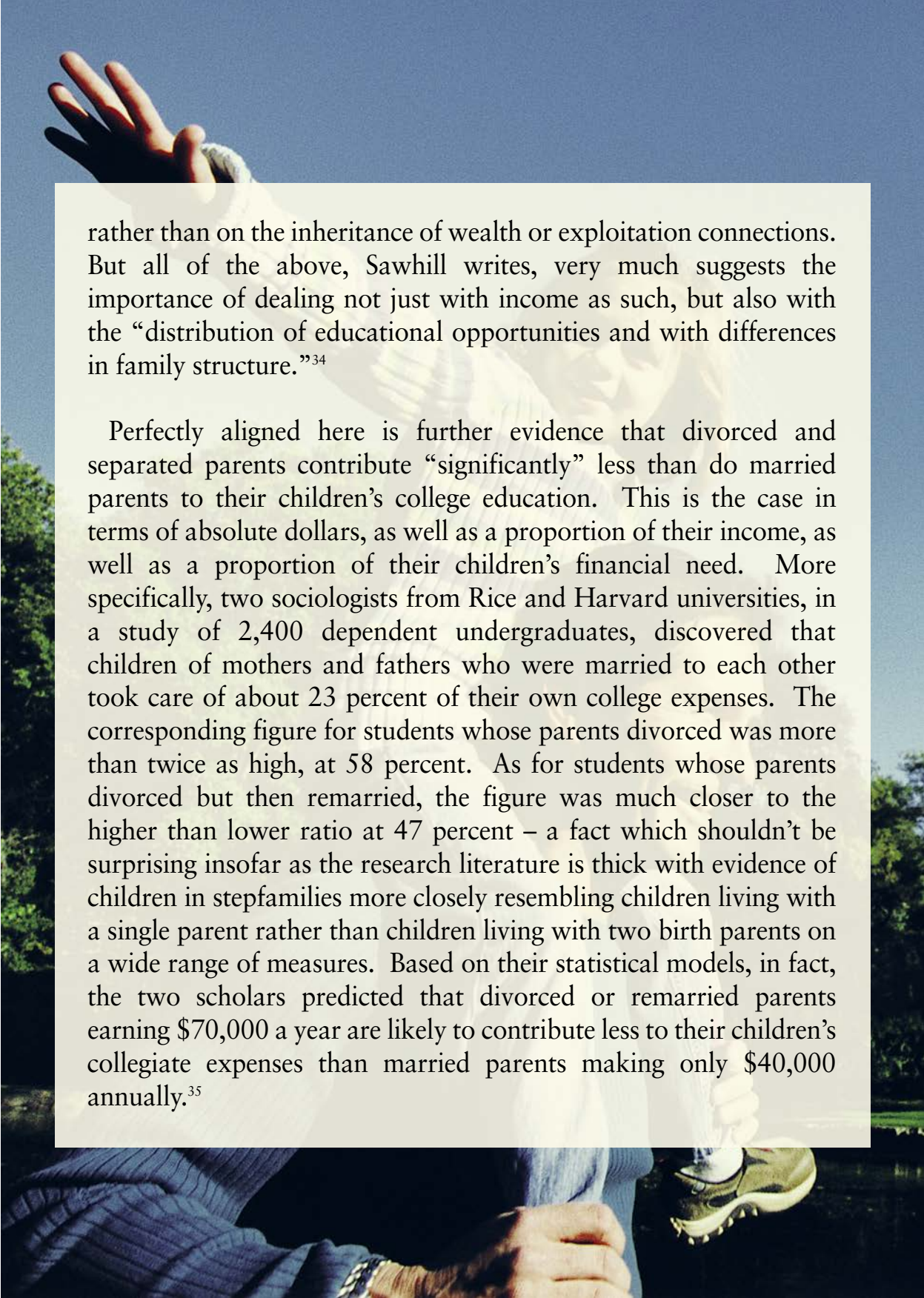
INCOME INEQUALITY AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY

American mobility is far from stuck, particularly for those with good educations. More specifically, while increasing proportions of income indeed have been gravitating to top quintiles and deciles, regularly lost in discussion is the fact that actual earners move from one category to another all the time. According to another study, about half of taxpayers in the bottom one-fifth in 1996 (56 percent by one estimate and 42 percent by another) moved to a higher one-fifth by 2005.³³

Economist Isabel Sawhill, long of the Brookings Institution and late of the Clinton administration, has come to make three core points:

- (1) **income in the United States is less equally distributed than it was several decades ago;**
- (2) **income is more correlated with education than it had been; and**
- (3) **it's also more correlated with family structure than it had been.**

Even if parental income were not tied to children's success, Sawhill writes, we would still have "good reasons to believe that the particular form of income inequality we have experienced in the U.S. has set the stage for the greater persistence of class in the future." To be sure, she adds, class structure here is largely grounded on "meritocratic principles and on stable family ties"



rather than on the inheritance of wealth or exploitation connections. But all of the above, Sawhill writes, very much suggests the importance of dealing not just with income as such, but also with the “distribution of educational opportunities and with differences in family structure.”³⁴

Perfectly aligned here is further evidence that divorced and separated parents contribute “significantly” less than do married parents to their children’s college education. This is the case in terms of absolute dollars, as well as a proportion of their income, as well as a proportion of their children’s financial need. More specifically, two sociologists from Rice and Harvard universities, in a study of 2,400 dependent undergraduates, discovered that children of mothers and fathers who were married to each other took care of about 23 percent of their own college expenses. The corresponding figure for students whose parents divorced was more than twice as high, at 58 percent. As for students whose parents divorced but then remarried, the figure was much closer to the higher than lower ratio at 47 percent – a fact which shouldn’t be surprising insofar as the research literature is thick with evidence of children in stepfamilies more closely resembling children living with a single parent rather than children living with two birth parents on a wide range of measures. Based on their statistical models, in fact, the two scholars predicted that divorced or remarried parents earning \$70,000 a year are likely to contribute less to their children’s collegiate expenses than married parents making only \$40,000 annually.³⁵

FRAGMENTATION CHANGES OVER TIME— QUICK FACTS:

- In the 1970s, moderately educated and highly educated Americans were equally likely to be married. Current odds, however, of a moderately educated man or women being married more closely resemble those of the least educated.
- Going back to the early 1980s, only 2 percent of babies born to highly educated mothers (those with at least four-year college degrees) and 13 percent of babies born to moderately educated mothers (having a high school diploma but not a four-year college degree), as opposed to 33 percent of babies born to the least-educated mothers (without high school degrees), came into this life outside of marriage. By the late 2000s, the corresponding proportions were 6, 44, and 54 percent, respectively. This means that members of the moderately educated middle are now significantly more likely than highly educated Americans to have children without first getting married.
- Between the 1970s and 2000s, the percentage of 14-year-old girls with highly educated mothers who lived with both parents actually increased, albeit barely, from 80 to 81 percent. The percentage of 14-year-old girls, however, with moderately educated mothers who also lived with both parents fell markedly from 74 to 58 percent, while the corresponding numbers for 14-year-old girls with least educated mothers fell from 65 to 52 percent.³⁶

"[T]HE FAMILY LIVES OF TODAY'S MODERATELY EDUCATED AMERICANS INCREASINGLY RESEMBLE THOSE OF HIGH-SCHOOL DROPOUTS, TOO OFTEN BURDENED BY FINANCIAL STRESS, PARTNER CONFLICT, SINGLE PARENTING, AND TROUBLED CHILDREN."³⁷



As worrisome conclusions go, there is precious tiny doubt that large-scale family fragmentation is implicit in very large numbers of citizens doing less well in school than they otherwise might. This, in turn, leads to their doing economically less well than they otherwise might. With everything compounded by our best-educated citizens reaping bigger and bigger financial rewards all the time, cleavages and gaps grounded in class and race cannot help but grow.



STRENGTHENING LEARNING

AN INCOMPLETE LIST OF MAJOR EDUCATIONAL MOVEMENTS AND STRATEGIES PURSUED OVER THE LAST NEARLY HALF-CENTURY: 38

- *The three-legged stool of standards, assessments, and accountability.* No change in K-12 over the last two decades-plus has been wider and deeper than the drive to strengthen academic standards, then testing whether students meet them, and subsequently and somehow holding schools and other players accountable if boys and girls fail to do well.
- *Increased spending.* While growth in K-12 spending has slowed in recent years along with the rest of the economy, it still has grown on an inflation-adjusted, per-pupil basis going back to mid-20th-century by factors of two, three, and more.
- *Smaller classes.* As spending has gone up dramatically, class sizes have gone down, albeit not as dramatically. By one calculation cited in 2005, while K-12 enrollments grew by about 50 percent over the previous approximately 50 years, the number of teachers nearly tripled over the same period.³⁹ One of the great mysteries of modern education (or not so great, given the substantial rise in administrators and other non-classroom personnel) is why class sizes aren't as small as the increase in dollars suggests they should be.



- **Smaller schools.** Admiration for smaller schools – “where everyone knows your name” – has been rediscovered in recent years. Sometimes this is implicitly framed as a matter of small schools being more educationally helpful than small classes. It’s also an implicit or explicit acknowledgment that for all their frequent benefits, school mergers and district consolidations have come with costs.

- **Teacher-run schools.** Perhaps the best known example is Minnesota New Country School in rural Henderson, a charter covering 6th through 12th grades.
- **Privately managed public schools and districts.** Perhaps the best known private contractor nationally (or “partner” as it prefers) is Edison Schools.
- **Public school choice.** This category also can be divided into several components, particularly when it comes to pivotally important charter schools, first adopted in Minnesota in 1991. In the half-dozen years beforehand Minnesota also led the way in adopting open enrollment across district lines, as well as “Post-Secondary Enrollment Options,” a program enabling high school students to take college courses.
- **Private school choice.** This category once again can be divided, principally into publicly funded and privately funded programs enabling low-income children to attend private, including religiously animated schools. While these ventures have been energetically pursued by eclectic coalitions across the country, few have been instituted, as opposition from the educational establishment and other sources, especially the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, continues to be ceaseless and powerful.
- **Extra courses.** The 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education (the “rising tide of mediocrity” report) urged that all students take four years of English, three years of math, three years of science, three years of social studies, and a half year of computer science. College-bound students were said to need two years of a foreign language, as well.

- ***Extra-intensive new schools.*** The best known example here is KIPP (“Knowledge is Power Program”). Among other key differences, these are institutions, located invariably in lower-income communities, in which school days and school years are much longer than those found almost anywhere else, at least in the United States. Related are charter schools.
- ***Early childhood education.*** Increasingly seen as the educational endeavor for which expansion is most essential if low-income children are to catch up academically and otherwise make it, advocates routinely reinforce their view by citing a small number of well-studied programs mainly in Michigan, Illinois, and North Carolina.
- ***Compensatory education.*** Nothing like federally funded Title I programs existed before 1965 aimed at helping low-income students behind in their work. They now constitute a significant source of income for many schools and districts.
- ***Special education.*** Although originally intended, by definition, to help but a small minority of children, special education programs (and funding for them) have grown markedly as definitions of handicapping conditions have grown, especially in terms of learning as opposed to physical disabilities.
- ***Multicultural education.*** Perhaps no word in American education has had a more meteoric and consequential rise in the last generation than “diversity.” No desideratum has been more ubiquitous than “celebrating” it, and barely a textbook or curriculum has escaped being rewritten by it.
- ***Bilingual education.*** Propelled by friendly legislation, friendly court rulings, friendly colleges of education, and not-always-smiling proponents, many boys and girls for whom English is not their first language have been assigned to classes in which English has been spoken hardly at all.
- ***Different ways of teaching reading.*** “Whole Word” replaced phonics in many instances. Stellar results did not follow.





- *Different ways of teaching math.* “New Math” often replaced what was dismissed as “Old Math.” Stellar results did not follow.
- *Different ways of teaching teachers.* Various commissions, foundations, and professional associations have conducted major studies and projects aimed at improving the preparation of new and veteran teachers as well as strengthening the rigor of colleges of education more broadly.
- *Different ways of compensating teachers.* Many merit-pay plans aimed at improving student performance have been proposed, with far fewer adopted.
- *Different ways of hiring teachers.* Under the nomenclature of “alternative teacher certification,” states either aggressively or not-so-aggressively have made it feasible for mid-career men and women, as well as other non-education majors, to enter teaching without spending years earning traditional teaching degrees.
- *Desegregation.* Attempts have included the creation of magnet schools and the busing (both voluntarily and involuntarily) of millions of boys and girls. Increasingly, efforts to integrate focus on class rather than race.
- *Neighborhood schools.* Once desegregation efforts mostly failed, the virtues of neighborhood schools (both real and imagined) often were rediscovered, not least by parents and political leaders of color.
- *High tech.* Rarely have schools taken more than minuscule advantage of what technology has had to offer instructionally. Nevertheless, not only is virtual education or digital learning growing in sophistication and acceptance, but as opposed to conventional reforms which can be politically blocked, they are best understood as a force susceptible to slowing, but immune to being stopped entirely or for long, no matter the political opposition.

- ***Improved ties between schools and parents.*** Many have sought to strengthen communication and collaboration between teachers and administrators on the one hand, and low-income parents on the other.
- ***Improved ties between schools and businesses.*** In addition to collaborations often involving gifts of computers and employee mentoring of students, business groups also are routinely key players in blue-ribbon commissions reviewing the state of American education in various cities and states as well as the nation as a whole and proposing recommendations for improvement.
- ***Decentralization.*** Many school districts, especially in big cities, have sought to improve academic performance by decentralizing governance in various ways. Sometimes this has taken the form of parent-rich school and community councils. Other times, principals have been given greater authority in site-based management reorganizations.
- ***Centralization.*** Many school districts, especially in big cities, have sought to improve academic performance by centralizing governance in various ways. Sometimes they have done so by hiring retired military officers to spiff things up. Occasionally, these have been the very same districts that first tried decentralizing.



Questions of a skeptic:

- What makes anyone think it's anything less than extraordinarily hard and improbable to bring exceptional educational programs to national scale?
- What makes anyone think, more specifically, that great numbers of educators are sufficiently eager to adopt various policies developed by "others," no matter how intrinsically terrific such approaches may be?

- For that matter, what makes anyone think that adequate numbers of powerful state and local players over and beyond teachers and administrators might be so inclined?
- Or, that there is enough money in state and local tills to the extent more dollars are required?
- Or on the chance that breakthrough practices are, in fact, adopted by large numbers of practitioners, what makes anyone think they will be replicated faithfully and accurately enough so as to succeed as originally celebrated?

Heather Zavadsky, a University of Texas official, acknowledges that “some education commentators voice skepticism about the ability of educational reforms to actually affect student achievement on a scalable level, as few large-scale reforms have had significant measurable effect on student learning.” She goes on to outline one such scholar’s doubts and agrees that districts will continue to find such improvements to be “difficult.” Yet she’s very much of the mind that “intentional, sustained, patient focus on improving teaching and learning” by means of aligning instructional practices throughout a school system is something that “can be done in any district given the right knowledge and tools.”⁴⁰

More questions of a skeptic:

- What disaster or conspiracy has been preventing more districts from already taking advantage of these “right knowledge and tools?”
- Haven’t the right knowledge and tools been far from secrets for quite a spell now?
- There must be something menacing standing in the way. Might it be politics?
- Might it be bureaucracy?
- Might there be too few leaders willing to get almost everybody in town mad at them?
- Might creators of successful programs better grasp and more readily fight and die for them than second and third rounds of adopters?
- Might we live in a very big country?
- Or might the everyday and handicapping complexities and stuff of urban – and suburban and not infrequently rural – education simply muck things up?

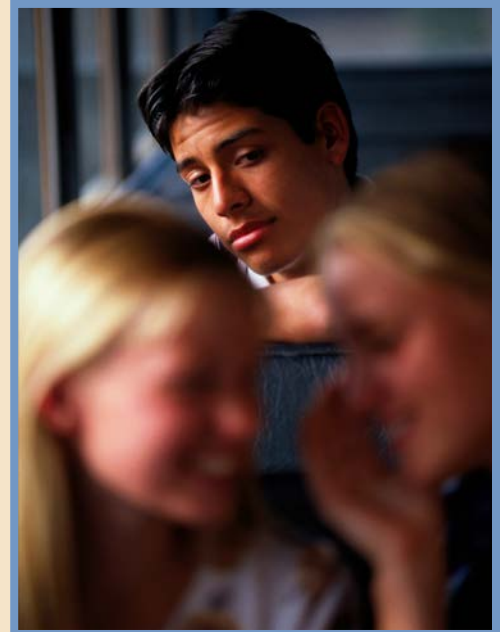


To the extent that we really do know what works quite well in some settings, that doesn’t begin to mean we know how to replicate and bring highly effective programs to anything approaching decent scale.

EXAMPLE:

David Whitman writes with detail about 6 secondary schools in which achievement gaps between white and minority children have narrowed significantly, sometimes closing completely. Three of the schools are charter middle schools, one is a traditional neighborhood public school, one is a parochial high school, and one is the nation's lone urban boarding school for low-income students.⁴¹

According to Whitman, tying the schools together (despite a variety of age mixes) are “deeply committed teachers” and “dedicated, forceful principals.” Academic standards are high, and students are tested frequently in order to monitor their performance and assess where they might need help. Rather than a dirty word, “accountability” is a “lodestar.” All students pursue college-prep curricula, with none of the schools countenancing social promotions. Most of the schools have dress codes or require uniforms, extended days, and three weeks of mandatory summer school. Above all, Whitman, a journalist, writes of how the schools “share a paternalistic ethos supporting a common school culture that prizes academic achievement.”



Beyond focusing on such virtues as abstractions, the schools make it clear to students precisely how they are expected to act. Boys and girls, Whitman continues, are required to “talk a certain way, sit a certain way, and dress a certain way,” with even minor transgressions unacceptable. “These schools thus require and teach students to meet high expectations for behavior and academic achievement – rather than just encouraging them to aim high.” As for what’s wrought, Whitman persuasively concludes that the “new breed of paternalistic schools” looks to be the “single most effective way of closing the achievement gap,” as no other model or method “seems to come close to having such a dramatic impact on the performance of inner-city students.”⁴²

Looking at some of the numbers, it would seem impossible to disagree, and I have no interest in even trying, as I'm no less impressed and amazed than many others. For example, while only 31 percent of low-income 18- to 24-year-olds across the country ever enroll in college, the three featured high schools send 85 percent of their graduates and more. As for the three middle schools, students regularly score in the 80th and 90th percentiles on nationally normed tests. This is an apt spot to note that 12th-grade black students nationally score no higher than 8th-grade white students on various NAEP exams, with Hispanic students not doing much better.



Think of Whitman's conception of paternalism not just as directive, but as in *loco parentis* epitomized.

"BY PATERNALISTIC I MEAN THAT EACH OF THE 6 SCHOOLS IS A HIGHLY PRESCRIPTIVE INSTITUTION THAT TEACHES STUDENTS NOT JUST HOW TO THINK BUT HOW TO ACT ACCORDING TO WHAT ARE COMMONLY TERMED TRADITIONAL, MIDDLE-CLASS VALUES. MUCH IN THE MANNER OF A RESPONSIBLE PARENT, THESE SCHOOLS TELL STUDENTS THAT THEY NEED AN ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT. LIKE SECONDARY SCHOOLS ELSEWHERE, PATERNALISTIC SCHOOLS CAN VALUE FREEDOM, CURIOSITY, AND SELF-EXPRESSION, TOO — BUT NOT AT THE EXPENSE OF INCULGATING DILIGENCE, THRIFT, POLITENESS, AND A STRONG WORK ETHIC."⁴³

—DAVID WHITMAN

For the boys and girls we've thinking most about, what might all this suggest so they might have better fighting chances?

I would argue that the nation has an obligation – no less moral than pedagogical – to make it more feasible for them to attend schools in which *loco parentis* is more than unused Latin. Which brings us to vouchers and variations on that access-expanding theme; a pleasing thought to many, but far from all.

While I have long been involved in efforts to make vouchers much more widely available, it's easy to overestimate what they can realistically accomplish – exactly as is the case with every other educational idea or strategy on current or future agendas. A careful reading of the best empirical research on the topic suggests that the low-income and overwhelmingly African-American and Hispanic students in the still-small number of publicly and privately funded voucher programs across the country often do better than they otherwise might in their former public schools, but by no means stunningly so.

In the lives of many children, it's hard to conceive of hurts much deeper than father wounds and other family absences and disruptions, very much including missing mothers, and not just rarely so. For many boys and girls in such situations, I would argue, the most sustaining type of education – providing *sustenance* of the most personal and vital kind – is best found in the sort of school led by a nun I once met. The principal of a Catholic elementary school, she said the school's mission was “to manifest God's love in every child,” or words close to that. As educational mission statements go, this was simultaneously one of the briefest yet meatiest ever devised. One can easily envision intellectually, as well as viscerally *feel*, how such a command might powerfully and uncommonly nourish many of the children, including those most in need of feeding.

“Demographics are not destiny.” All true, but that doesn't mean they can't make for powerful and nasty shoves. If having marketable skills is more important all the time, but educational achievement is not increasing commensurately, if at all, how can our nation not have problems? Or how can men and women without sufficient skills not have problems of both practical and intimate sorts? But improving education adequately for great numbers of young people without first re-institutionalizing marriage, as I've argued, is in the neighborhood of impossible.







STRENGTHENING MARRIAGE

Exactly as with ideas for strengthening education, if there were easily replicable programs for significantly strengthening marriage in the United States to be had, they



would have been pounced on long ago. The same holds for the simultaneously similar and different matters of preventing teenage and other unwanted pregnancies. Actually, it's much more realistic to imagine viable ideas in education, as the term "education policies" doesn't sound the least strange, while talking about "marriage policies" borders on it, given the ways in which intimate and elusive matters of culture and faith, as well as economics, sculpt marriage more than lawmaking and rule-making. This is the case as opposed to education, where new policies and directives, effective or not, flow from governments. Still, this is not to say policy-rooted recommendations, tepid as they almost always are, aren't perpetually offered for getting more people married and then encouraging fewer of them to separate and divorce.

Three policy areas that haven't been considered sufficiently.

- First, unless more men get their lives in decent order, no number of implorations will adequately bolster marriage rates in the United States. By “men,” what we're really talking about is “boys,” just a handful of years earlier on. “Decent order” means staying out of trouble (out of the criminal justice system), gaining an education, becoming gainfully employed, and taking responsibility for fathering children.
- The second cluster of recommendations (or at least grist for discussion) has to do with the prevalence and power of crime, which obviously is tightly linked to the unattractiveness and shortcomings of many men. Here's a too-easy question: What is the likelihood of young and not-so-young men with long rap sheets, often including felonies, building the kinds of work histories and careers that make them interesting to employers, not to mention sufficiently appealing as lifelong partners to the women in their lives? The odds are tough.
- The third area pivots on a harder question: Who speaks for girls and boys of fragmented families explicitly, especially those having the hardest times? To the constrained extent that single-parenthood is publicly lamented in the United States, rarely is there sufficient attention paid specifically to how children are being hurt by it. Rather, the focus is more diffuse, having

to do with how one-person parenting can be extremely rugged – albeit not necessarily damaging – for all concerned, grownups and kids alike.



When it comes to crime, research is congruent with common sense in showing how married men are less likely than single men to break the law. Yet men already caught up in the criminal justice system are less attractive marriage partners, and not just because they may be incarcerated at the time, but because rap sheets are not conducive to good-paying, family-supporting jobs and careers. Yet by not marrying, they lose a major support and spur in their lives for staying out of jail and prison going forward. How to escape the maze?

Here are three quick thoughts.

- *First, review collateral sanctions with an eye to safely reducing their number and duration.* A “collateral sanction” is penalty or disadvantage that is imposed automatically on a convict, even if it is not included in the convict’s sentence. Granted, when compared to all the problems faced by former inmates in trying to turn their lives around, my sense is that specific laws and rules prohibiting them from filling certain jobs (an example of a collateral sanction), as opposed to the barriers posed by the great gamut of everything else, are usually not the main obstacle they face. In Ohio, for example, it’s just not that burdensome that people convicted of a felony, or who have pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor, are forever disallowed from serving as a police chief or even a constable. Likewise, it’s no unjust calamity that no one in Ohio can be an auctioneer or apprentice auctioneer for ten years if convicted of a felony or any other crime involving fraud. Then, again, the fact that Ohio disqualifies anyone with a “second conviction arising from two or more separate incidents” from ever getting a commercial vehicle driver’s license can well mean additional shackles on an ex-offender’s ability to make a living.⁴⁴ More than a few states have more than a few collateral sanctions that can be done without, as they’re more the product of overkill than necessity.



- *Second, come to realistic grip with widespread Internet access to criminal records.* One possible safety valve would be for police to make greater use of citations (which don't necessarily wind up on the Net) rather than actual arrests. The idea, which was proposed several years ago by the Minneapolis-based Council on Crime and Justice, presumably would help a significant number of disproportionately minority kids avoid life scarring records and serious damage.⁴⁵ By serious damage, I mean unfairly being denied jobs, apartments, and other opportunities and benefits. Viewing the issue in terms of race, some share of the immense number of young and not-so-young African-American men arrested every year get picked up because they really were in the wrong place at the wrong time.
- *Third, investigate safest possible ways of helping former offenders cleanse their name.* Traditional means for helping individuals who have completed their sentences get on with their lives have included legal and administrative devices such as pardons and the expunging of records. These and others are flawed in one way or another. For example, expunging records requires a willingness to "rewrite history," something that is "hard to square with a legal system founded on the search for truth." Also, to the degree it tends to hide an individual's criminal record from public view, "it tends to devalue legitimate public safety concerns."⁴⁶

Drawing on a "Model Penal Code" drafted by the American Law Institute a half-century ago, Margaret Colgate Love offered a route worth investigating. Her aim was and remains integrating offenders into society "not by trying to conceal the fact of conviction, but by advertising the evidence of rehabilitation." She and the model code proposed doing this in a two-tiered process. First, the original sentencing court "may issue an order relieving all disabilities after an offender has satisfied his sentence." Second, after a further period of "law-abiding conduct" (the model codes suggested five years), the sentencing court "may issue an order 'vacating' the convictions." Love concludes, "The resulting scheme provides the offender both incentive and reward for rehabilitation, and satisfies the need for a ritual of reconciliation. In relying primarily on the sentencing judge, it provides a more reliable and accessible process than pardon or other executive restoration devices, and a more respectable one than automatic statutory provisions. In contrast to expungement, it does not sacrifice the legitimate concerns of law enforcement or undermine respect for the value of truth in our legal system."⁴⁷

INCARCERATION IN THE UNITED STATES

- The incarceration rate in the United States is approximately 7 times the average for Western Europe and is approached only by South Africa and several former Soviet republics.⁴⁸
- At year's end in 2009, there were more than 1.6 million inmates in federal and state prisons. During the 12-month period ending on June 30, 2009, 12.8 million inmates had been admitted to local jails.⁴⁹
- As of the early 2000s, more than 11 percent of American men could expect to go to prison sometime in their lives.⁵⁰
- Across the country, studies show that more than 40 percent of low-income men who father a child out-of-wedlock have already been in jail or prison by the time their first son or daughter is born.⁵¹
- For men born between 1975 and 1979, one in five African-Americans had experienced imprisonment by the ages of 30 to 34. The comparable ratio for white men was one in 30. For African-American men who had not graduated high school their chances of experiencing imprisonment by the ages of 30 to 34 were two out of three.⁵²
- As of 2000, about 25 percent of African-American men between the ages of 22 and 30 were married. The marriage rate for incarcerated African-American men was less than half of that, at 11 percent. This was the case even though (as of 1997-98) African-American men, be they in prison or not, were similarly likely to have children: 70 percent for incarcerated men; 73 percent for non-incarcerated men. "As a result," criminologist Bruce Western has written, "African-American children growing up in fragile families are likely to have fathers who have been incarcerated at some point."⁵³

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO A YOUNG WOMAN OR MAN WHO WAS EAGER TO HAVE A CHILD OUT OF WEDLOCK?

Presuming that you think it's generally not great for children to live with only one parent, and that it's similarly not great for the commonweal either, what might you be tempted to say if etiquette and manners weren't all that important and feelings were hard to be hurt to a young woman or a man who was blasé, perhaps even eager, to bring a child into the world in which it was understood, from Day One, that one of his or her parents was essentially out of the family portrait and would remain that way? This is what I might say, although still with as much empathy and grace as I could:



I assure you I know that life can be terribly unpredictable and difficult. In fact, it usually is. This is especially case when it comes to the most personal and treasured things going on in our lives, starting with our children and other people we love. It also can be especially the case when it comes to people we may not love very much anymore at all, if we ever really did.

And I very much assure you as well that I'm far from the best person in the world to talk to you about these matters, as my own life has been jammed with mistakes and disappointments.

You might say what we're discussing are holy matters, but my interest in being holier than thou or anyone else is zero, and to the extent I may come across as presumptuous or arrogant, I'm truly sorry. But whatever the risk of intrusion on my part and discomfort on yours, we each owe it to everyone we love and are obliged protect to consider several uncomfortable facts about current American life, most of all those facing and holding back young people.

In simplest and starkest terms, the United States has one of the very highest out-of-wedlock birth rates in the world. We also have one of the very highest divorce rates in the world. These stubborn patterns and trends are the opposite of good news for any group, but they're particularly bad news for boys and girls, as they diminish their well-being now and undercut their futures, as scholarly research on this has grown absolutely clear. Does

single parenthood always hurt kids educationally and in other ways? Of course not, is the answer. But the fuller and unavoidable answer is that children's odds of doing well are measurably better if they grow up under the same roof with their married mother and father than if they grow up in any other setting.

Children are the most joyous of blessings. And I deeply appreciate how enormous numbers of Americans believe that siring and bearing them are the



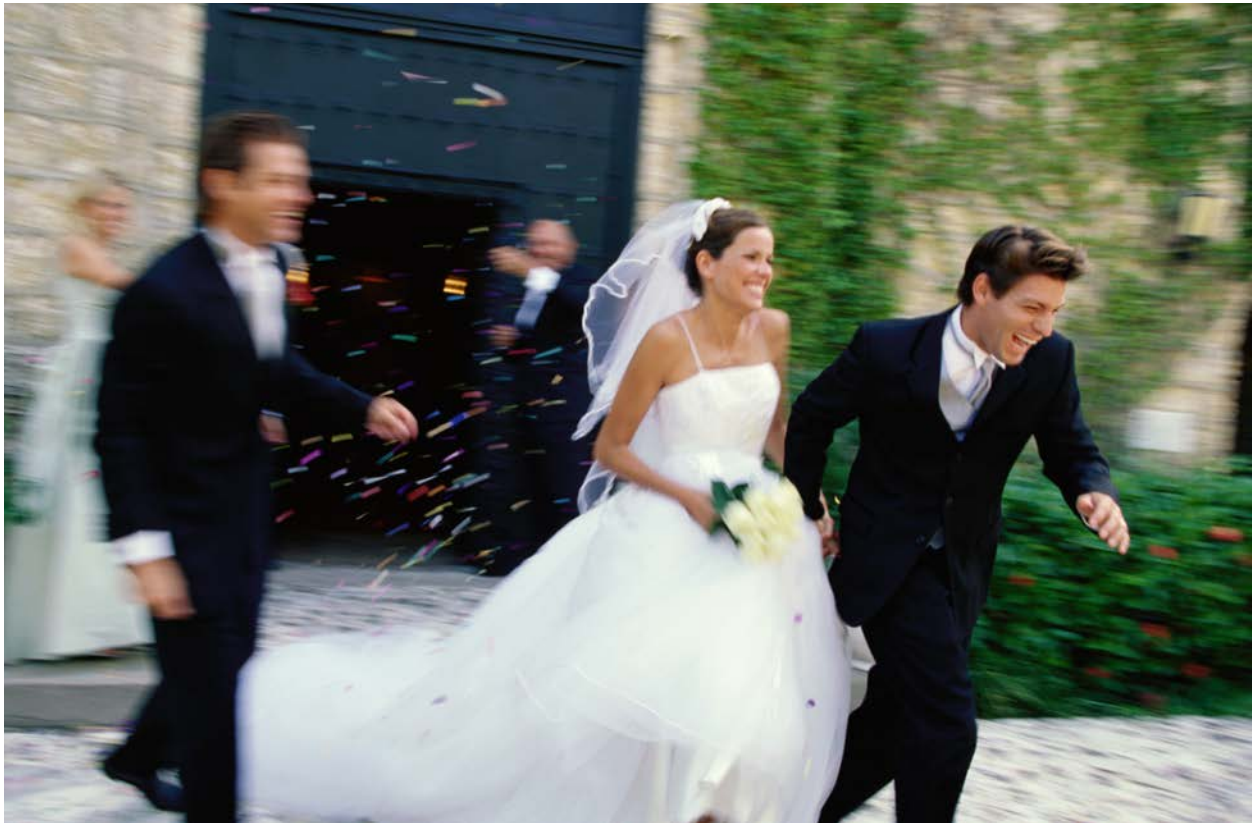
most meaningful things they ever will do in their lives. But I'm afraid we've reached a stage in which we must recognize that while the happiness and hopes of adults are surely important, the health and prospects of children must be considered more so, as far too many of them are doing poorly on their often unduly rocky road to adulthood. For millions of kids, more specifically, trying to grow up with gaps and absences where a parent should be is a very big reason why this is the case. Or more specifically still, unless we change and start bringing far fewer babies into this world outside of marriage, and likewise, unless we divorce and separate far less often, our children will not do nearly as well as they otherwise might and as we all hope and pray.



Mothers and fathers have always sacrificed for their children. It's what they're supposed to do. But we've come to a time and place in which parents, as well as people who are not yet parents, must think first and foremost about boys and girls they're responsible for or someday may come to be. One way or another, both men and women – and especially teenagers – must better commit to not having children without first being married. And if and when married, they must better commit to building unions that are loving and respectful and lasting.

I would suggest what's finally called for is a campaign whose singular focus is on how family breakdown can in fact be harmful to children and saying with some precision in what ways. If I were to frame a mission statement for my proposition (until we can come up with something snappier, let's call it "The National Campaign to Talk Candidly about Family Fragmentation"), it might read something like this: "The Campaign seeks to significantly increase the number of American children growing up in stable, two-parent families by drawing attention to the many ways in which out-of-wedlock births and divorce hurt and limit the life chances of boys and girls. We do this by encouraging and publicly conducting unusually frank discussions about the entwined well-being of children and responsibilities of adults, as well as about how rampant family fragmentation damages and holds back our nation."

In other words, I'm suggesting the kinds of discussions in which cameras usually don't roll, recorders don't record, and participants (especially those in public life) don't clam up in fear of being pilloried either immediately or years later when a tape surfaces on some blog.





ENDNOTES

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- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Gunnar Andersson, "Children's Experience of Family Disruption and Family Formation: Evidence from 16 FFS Countries," *Demographic Research*, Vol. 7, Article 7, August 14, 2002.
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- 12 Cynthia Osborne, Sara McLanahan, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, "Young Children's Behavioral Problems in Married and Cohabiting Families," Working Paper 03-09-FF (Princeton: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, September 2004). The quote ("relative importance of family structure . . .") is actually that of Waldfogel and her two collaborators, in Jane Waldfogel, Terry-Ann Craigie, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, "Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing," *The Future of Children*, Vol. 20, Number 2, Fall 2010, p. 87.
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