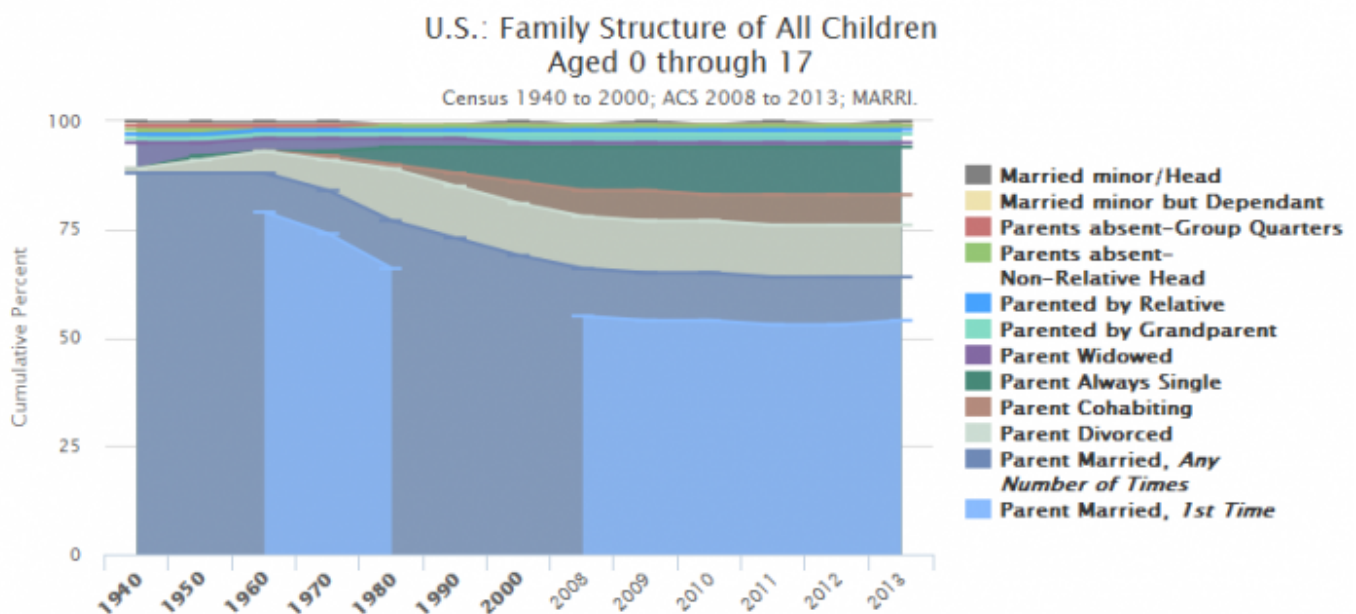


# Marriage and Child Poverty

The married, intact family is the strongest generator of upward mobility for children. Reducing child poverty requires the active promotion of the intact family.<sup>1)</sup>

The 1960s War on Poverty was intended to eliminate child poverty nationwide through a variety of income transfers and human development programs. Fifty years later, the government had spent over \$22 trillion on anti-poverty programs.<sup>2)</sup> Yet, the child poverty rate barely budged—only decreasing from 20.7 percent in 1965 (when the War of Poverty programs were initiated) to 19.2 percent in 2015.<sup>3)</sup>

The War on Poverty largely failed because it ignored the role of marriage in alleviating poverty. As government programs increased, the American family eroded. In 1960, 79 percent of children were being raised by their married parents (in their first marriage); by 2013, only 54 percent of children were being raised by their married parents.<sup>4)</sup> Poverty is principally a problem of non-intact families. Whereas 43 percent of children being raised by single mothers live in poverty, only 10.6 percent of children raised by their married parents experience similar economic plight.<sup>5)</sup>



## 1. Entering Marriage Decreases Child Poverty

### 1.1 Marrying Out of Single Parenthood

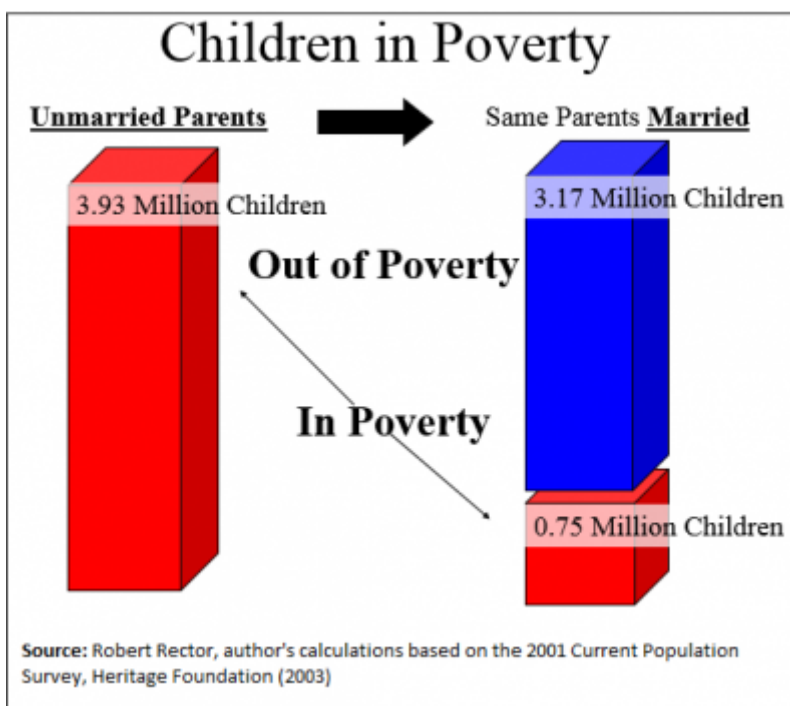
The decline of marriage since the 1960s has been a substantial factor behind the current high levels of child poverty. If marriages in 2000 were restored to their 1960s figures, then:

- The number of children living in single-parent homes would be cut by nearly 60 percent. The number of children living in married-couple families would increase by almost 11.5 million, and the number residing in single-parent homes would be reduced by a corresponding amount. These 11.5 million children represent 16.2 percent of all children.
- Among the 11.5 million added children residing in married-couple homes in this scenario, the

poverty rate would fall by 80.4 percent. Some 34.2 percent of these children are now poor and live in single-parent homes. If their parents were married to spouses with matching demographic characteristics, only 6.7 percent of these children would remain poor.

- Overall, restoring marriage to 1960 levels would remove more than 3 million children from poverty nationwide. The U.S. child poverty rate would fall by nearly a third, from 15.7 percent to 11.2 percent.<sup>6)</sup>

The decline in marriage since the inception of the War on Poverty in the 1960s has contributed to child poverty. Child poverty would be nearly a third lower if the traditional two-parent family had not decreased as much as it did between 1960 and 2000. By contrast, moving from a single-parent to a married family is a straightforward way to rise above the poverty threshold. Only one additional family member is added, normally the father rather than the mother, but the total family income might double or more, depending on the level of work participation exhibited by the husband and wife. If single parents with children were married to similar single persons of the opposite gender, the poverty rate of children nationwide would decrease.



## 1.2 Overcoming Out-of-Wedlock Births

Similarly, 2001 data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study shows that marriage between romantically involved non-married parents would dramatically reduce poverty:<sup>7)</sup>

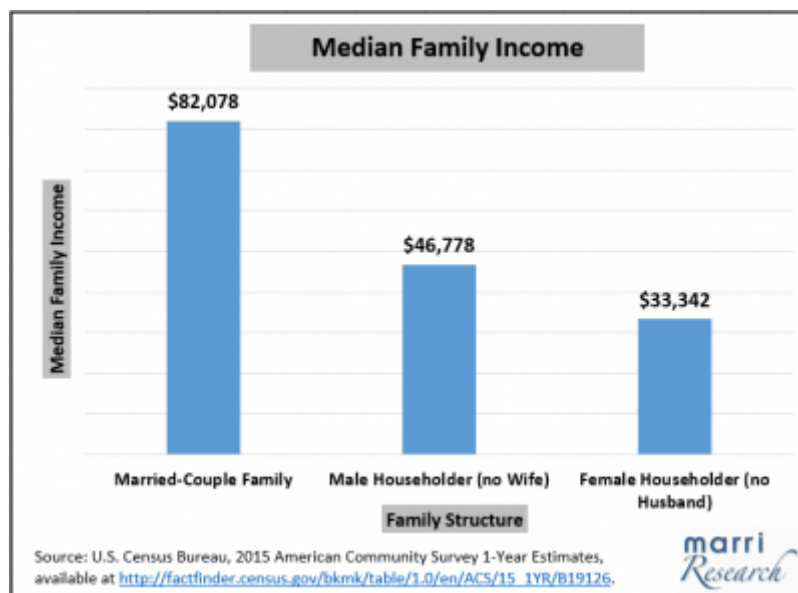
- If these mothers do not marry but remain single, about 55 percent will be poor. By contrast, if all the mothers married their child’s father, the poverty rate would fall to less than 17 percent. Thus, on average, marriage would reduce the odds that a mother and a child will live in poverty by more than 70 percent.
- Marriage would increase median family income of mothers in the study by between \$10,200 and \$11,400 per year. (The increase in median family income is less than the median annual earnings of the fathers—\$17,500— because marriage entails an offsetting loss of welfare benefits for the mother.)
- Marriage reduces the probability that mothers will live in poverty by at least two-thirds. Marriage would lift the incomes of many mothers above 150 percent of the poverty level. When

the mother is unemployed, some 30 percent of married families would have incomes above 150 percent of the poverty level. When the mother is employed full-time, nearly two-thirds of married families would have incomes above that level.

The contention of critics that increased marriage will not reduce child poverty because fathers do not earn enough to lift a family out of poverty is inaccurate. While the marriage of mothers and fathers would not eliminate child poverty in every case, in the overwhelming majority of cases marriage would lift families out of poverty. Overall, the insights culled from the Fragile Families dataset and described in “Increasing Marriage will Dramatically Reduce Child Poverty” strongly indicate that a culture of marriage would be a culture of much lower rates of poverty. Any effort successful in promoting healthy marriage among young parents is an effort to be replicated nationwide, if only for its potential to reduce child poverty.

## 2. How Marriage Affects Child Poverty

Married families have better economic security than their unmarried counterparts, and therefore have a lower risk of being poor. According to the 2015 American Community Survey, married-couple families have a median family income of \$82,078, compared with \$46,778 for single father families and \$33,342 for single mother families.<sup>8)</sup> Moreover, married men exhibit more advantageous job traits and are more likely to be steadily employed than unmarried men.<sup>9)</sup> During the Great Recession (2007-2009), the employment rate of married fathers barely fell below 90 percent, whereas the post-Recession employment rate of unmarried men hovered around 75 percent. The benefits of marriage for employment also applies to less educated men and to racial minorities.<sup>10)</sup>



## 3. The Impact of Marriage on Children’s Economic Future

Children raised in intact married families have more economic and human resources than those in non-intact families. The rate of American children raised in intact families dropped by 10 percent between 1980 and 2000.<sup>11)</sup> Between 1976 and 2000, family structure changes accounted for 41 percent of the increase in inequality.<sup>12)</sup> Furthermore, parents' marriage strongly promotes the economic mobility of their children.<sup>13)</sup> Children raised in intact married families tend to have higher

educational attainment,<sup>14)</sup> and therefore have better job prospects. As adults, men and women who grew up in married families worked more hours per a year and had a higher family income than those raised in non-intact families.<sup>15)</sup>

Men and women who belong to each other and to their children in marriage cooperate much more successfully in the business of providing for the material needs of their families and of raising children who are more capable of higher levels of productivity in the marketplace.

<sup>1)</sup> Henry Potrykus and Patrick Fagan, "U.S. Social Policy Dependence on the Family Derived from the Index of Belonging" (2012). Available at

<http://marri.us/research/research-papers/u-s-social-policy-dependence-on-the-family/>.

<sup>2)</sup> \$22 trillion in constant 2012 dollars; Robert Rector and Rachel Sheffield, "The War on Poverty After 50 Years" Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 2955 (September 2014),

[http://thf\\_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2014/pdf/BG2955.pdf](http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2014/pdf/BG2955.pdf) (accessed November 2016).

<sup>3)</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Poverty Tables: People and Families 1959 to 2015," Poverty Status of People, by Age, Race, and Hispanic Origin Table 3,

<http://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-people.html> (accessed November 2016).

<sup>4)</sup> Henry Potrykus, Forthcoming publication at [www.marri.us](http://www.marri.us).

<sup>5)</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2015" Poverty Status, Food Stamp Receipt, and Public Assistance for Children Under 18 By Selected Characteristics: 2015 Table C8, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/cps2015C.html> (accessed November 2016).

<sup>6)</sup> Robert Rector, Kirk A. Johnson, and Patrick F. Fagan, "The Effect of Marriage on Child Poverty," Heritage Foundation, Center for Data Analysis Report #02-04 (April 2002),

<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2002/04/the-effect-of-marriage-on-child-poverty> (accessed November 2016).

<sup>7)</sup> Robert Rector, Kirk A. Johnson, Patrick F. Fagan, and Lauren R. Noyes, "Increasing Marriage Would Dramatically Reduce Child Poverty," Heritage Foundation, Center for Data Analysis Report #03-06 (May 2003),

<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2003/05/increasing-marriage-would-dramatically-reduce-child-poverty> (accessed November 2016).

<sup>8)</sup> U.S. Census Bureau/ American FactFinder, B19126: Median Family Income in the Past 12 Months (in 2015 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars) By Family Type by Presence of Own Children Under 18 Years), 2015 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, available at

<http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk> (accessed November 2016).

<sup>9)</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox, and Robert I. Lerman, "For Richer, for Poorer: How Family Structures Economic Success in America," Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute (2014).

Alexandra Killewald and Margaret Gough, "Does Specialization Explain Penalties and Premiums?" *American Sociological Review* 78 (2013): 477-502.

<sup>10)</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox, and Robert I. Lerman, "For Richer, for Poorer: How Family Structures Economic Success in America," Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute (2014).

<sup>11)</sup> Henry Potrykus, Forthcoming publication at [www.marri.us](http://www.marri.us).

<sup>12)</sup> Molly A. Martin, "Family Structure and Income Inequality in Families with Children, 1976 to 2000," *Demography* 32 (2006): 421-45.

<sup>13)</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox, Joseph Price, and Robert I. Lerman, "Strong Families, Prosperous States: Do Healthy Families Affect the Wealth of Nations?", The American Enterprise Institute (2015), available at <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/IFS-HomeEconReport-2015-FinalWeb.pdf> (accessed November 2016).

Thomas DeLeire and Leonard M. Lopoo, *Family Structure and the Economic Mobility of Children*, Economic Mobility Project, (2010), available at

[http://www.economicmobility.org/assets/pdfs/Family\\_Structure.pdf](http://www.economicmobility.org/assets/pdfs/Family_Structure.pdf) (accessed March 2011).

<sup>14)</sup> Donna K. Ginther, "Family Structure and Children's Educational Outcomes: Blended Families, Stylized Facts, and Descriptive Regressions," *Demography*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (November 2004), pp. 671-696.

<sup>15)</sup> Robert I. Lerman and W. Bradford Wilcox, "For Richer, For Poorer: How Family Structures Economic Success in America," *American Enterprise Institute/ Institute for Family Studies* 32 (2014).

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