

KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief

**Increasing the Percentage of Children
Living in Two-Parent Families**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

July 2005

Produced by Dr. Rima Shore for the Annie E. Casey Foundation

KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief
**Increasing the Percentage of Children Living in
Two-Parent Families**

Today, some 22 million children—about one-third of all children in the U.S.—do not live with two married parents. In 2003, the percentage of children living in single-parent families ranged from 17 percent in Utah to 42 percent in Mississippi. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005). While most single-parent families are comprised of women and children, the number of children living with a single father doubled during the 1990s and now accounts for about 18 percent of all families led by a single parent (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005; Whitehead and Popenoe, 2004).

Over the past three decades, there has been a 40 percent drop in the number of Americans who are getting married. This decrease reflects a combination of factors—delaying marriage until older ages, an increase in unmarried cohabitation, a higher divorce rate (nearly 60 percent of new marriages end in divorce) and a small decrease in the number of remarriages among divorced people, and a growing number of people who never marry. (Whitehead and Popenoe, 2004; Terry-Humen, Manlove, and Moor, 2001; Edin, 2000).

The decline in the likelihood of marriage in every age group has been accompanied by an increase in childbearing outside of marriage. The percentage of nonmarital childbearing increased sharply in recent decades, then leveled off in the mid-1990s. Approximately one in ten births was to an unmarried woman in 1970, compared with one in three in 1998 (Terry-Humen, Manlove, and Moore, 2001). This trend tells us more about the state of marriage in the U.S. than it does about childbearing.

Cohabitation—two people living together in a marriage-like relationship—is a key factor in the rise of births outside of marriage. Over 4 million children lived in cohabitating couple households in 2003 (AECF, 2005). Today, nearly 40 percent of cohabitating couple households include children (Whitehead and Popenoe, 2004). While most children belong to only one of the partners, a growing number of children are born to cohabitating couples who never marry. In fact, recent declines in the percentage of births to married couples are due almost entirely to an increase in

births to cohabiting parents (Terry-Humen, Manlove, and Moore, 2001). Giving birth outside of marriage is not necessarily synonymous with single parenthood.

Experts continue to debate whether promoting or enhancing marriage among adults may enhance children's well-being. A recent study concluded that, on average, children living with their two married biological or adopted parents fare better than those in other types of households. Children living with married parents (biological or step parents) are least likely to experience economic hardship. The study also found that children who live with both biological parents—whether or not they are married—are less likely to have behavior problems in school compared with children in other situations (Golden, 2005).

Other researchers have found that even when they live with a partner, women who have births outside of marriage are more disadvantaged—and their children are likely to have worse life outcomes—than women who have births within marriage. On average, women who are single parents as well as those who cohabit with their children's other parent have lower educational attainment, less income, and higher rates of child abuse and domestic violence than married women (Whitehead and Popenoe, 2004).

Among employed adults, unmarried women who support families have the greatest risk of living in poverty. Of this group, teen mothers are not the only group of single mothers to face economic hardship. Unmarried women in their twenties or older at the time they give birth are just as likely to live in poverty as unmarried women who give birth as teens (Terry-Humen, Manlove, and Moore, 2001).

Moreover, unmarried mothers often have time constraints that can affect their ability to supervise their children, offer emotional support, take an active part in their education, and arrange other activities for them. When children live with one parent, it is still most often the mother.

Policymakers have therefore expressed concern about the opportunities afforded to children in one-parent households to have relationships with male role models who might contribute to their development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

For all of these reasons, researchers and policymakers generally view the percentage of children living in two-parent families as an important indicator of child well-being. This indicator brief

outlines six broad strategies for increasing the percentage of children living in two-parent families:

- **Address the linkages between economic security and stable families.**
- **Discourage nonmarital childbearing and encourage family formation.**
- **Remove obstacles to marriage.**
- **Adopt policies aimed at increasing the chances of marital success.**
- **Ensure that children benefit from both parents' emotional and financial support.**
- **Support research on the effects of family structure on children's well-being.**

1. Address the linkages between economic security and stable families.

In recent years, researchers and policymakers have placed greater weight on economic factors that undermine family formation and stability, especially drops in the employment rate and earning power of unskilled men. As one policy analyst has concluded, "Stable employment is the sine qua non of establishing life-long family commitments and re-establishing marriage as an important building block in the kinship system" (Furstenberg, 1998, p. 12). A crucial challenge is therefore to help low-skill workers gain the economic stability needed to form and support families. (Numerous strategies for meeting this challenge are discussed in the KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief entitled "Increasing the Percentage of Children with Working Parents.")

- **Base public policies and investments on a clear understanding of the relationship between economic opportunity and family formation.** Some researchers link the decline in marriage rates to a scarcity, in low-income neighborhoods, of marriageable men who are perceived as suitable partners and reliable breadwinners (Edin, 2000). They observe that marriage is more common in areas where men's employment opportunities and earnings are high (McLanahan & Casper, 1996). Other research, however, has suggested that the traditional assumption that men will assume the provider role creates a social condition in which higher-earning men are more likely to marry than those who earn lower wages. As one researcher noted, "Ethnographic research suggests that the inability to fulfill the provider role creates an impediment to marriage for low-income, inner-city men with poor employment prospects (Anderson, 1990; Liebow, 1967; MacLeod, 1995). These qualitative findings may apply to the general population" (Koball, 2004).

- **Expand job training and employment services to include more men in high-poverty communities.** Many training and employment programs are designed to reduce welfare rolls by helping recipients of public assistance gain employment. Because most welfare recipients are women with children, these policies tend to overlook the training and employment needs of the men in their communities. They may have the unintended consequence of increasing tension between men and women and reducing the pool of men available for marriage. The goal should be to expand current programs, not to shift resources from women to men. Job training, work experience opportunities, and employment assistance are keys to helping fathers and mothers become better marriage partners and providers.
- **Address the employment needs of men who have been incarcerated.** In high-poverty communities, substantial numbers of men have prison records. For these individuals, finding gainful employment is especially difficult. Jobs initiatives need to provide intensive assistance and support to these men if they are to gain marketable skills and win the trust of prospective employers. Jobs initiatives may also need to challenge employers' restrictive hiring practices.

2. Adopt policies that discourage nonmarital childbearing and encourage family formation.

The rhetoric of welfare reform has reflected a desire to strengthen marriage and the family. The 1996 welfare reform legislation took steps to reduce the number of single-parent families by mandating restrictions on benefits to unwed teenage parents under age 18 who do not live at home and attend school; offering bonuses to the five states that rank highest in decreasing nonmarital births while decreasing abortion; and requiring states to outline their plans for establishing goals and taking action to prevent and reduce the incidence of nonmarital pregnancies, with special emphasis on teen pregnancies.

- **Encourage healthy behaviors in young people.** Many experts favor a broad, more positive approach to reducing the number of young, single mothers—one that addresses young men as well as young women, encourages a broad range of healthy behaviors, fosters sound decision making, and provides incentives for postponing parenthood, staying in school, pursuing career goals, and forming positive, stable relationships. States can develop or expand programs designed to enhance the educational and social development of youth. Efforts to address the underlying

predictors of early childbearing (poverty, family dysfunction, early behavior problems, and early school failure) can be part of this effort.

- **Focus on preventing subsequent pregnancies to teen mothers.** About one-fifth of teen births are to mothers who already have one or more children (Child Trends Data Bank, 2003). Prenatal and infancy home visitation programs by nurses have been shown to help prevent subsequent pregnancies.

3. Remove obstacles to marriage.

When it comes to family matters, federal authority tends to be weak. States vary greatly in terms of the political will and capacity to promote marriage and enforce parental obligations (Garfinkel, McLanahan, Meyer, & Seltzer, 1998). While promoting marriage may be problematic, governments can remove and avoid obstacles to marriage.

- **Identify and remove disincentives to marry.** The 1996 welfare law relaxed prohibitions that kept two-parent families from receiving public assistance. Every state now allows two-parent families to receive TANF. There is some evidence that removing or reversing economic disincentives can increase marriage rates (Hu, 1998). All levels of government can identify and root out laws, policies, regulations, and procedures that create a disincentive to form stable relationships.
- **Change tax policies that penalize marriage.** Eliminating tax provisions that act as disincentives to marriage and two-parent families is a practical strategy to promote marriage. The recent revisions to the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and other provisions in the tax code are positive steps. States could further progress in this direction by eliminating marriage penalties in their own tax codes.

4. Adopt policies aimed at increasing the chances of marital success.

Because marriage entails a personal commitment and has, for many Americans, a religious aspect as well, public policies related to marriage and divorce often spark heated debate. Policies intended to sustain marriage can also become controversial when they fail to take into account the difficulties faced by victims of domestic abuse. Nevertheless, concern about a high divorce rate has moved some communities and states to take measures to increase couples' chances of staying together, especially when children are involved. Existing strategies include:

- **Incorporate premarital education into high school curricula.** In Florida, for example, a marriage education bill requires that marriage and relationship skill education be included in the “life management” class already taught in high school.
- **Offer counseling and education aimed at fostering trust between men and women.** Some researchers observe that in communities where unemployment is especially high, distrust between men and women has increased in recent decades. Men and women tend to face different daily realities and look at the world from different standpoints. There is a need to have counseling and education aimed at building trust between the sexes. Such programs can be offered as part of educational and social services, through family-life education, parent education, family support or mental health/counseling services. They can be situated in religious organizations or secular agencies (Furstenberg, 1998).
- **Create incentives for premarital education or counseling.** Some states have introduced incentives, such as shorter waits or lower fees for marriage licenses, to couples who take part in premarital education programs. The U.S. military is strongly encouraging married enlistees to attend marriage-education classes. Many members of the clergy are urging other pastors to use systematic premarital education for all engaged couples. A variety of program models exist. PREP (The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) is a short course that provides tools for discussing important relationship issues without fighting. Marriage Savers enlists members of the clergy and officials in a given community to support marriage in a variety of ways, including training older mentor couples to give premarital education to engaged couples.
- **Expand the options for marrying couples.** Louisiana has legislated “covenant” marriage as an option for couples. Couples who choose this option cannot easily dissolve the marriage. This policy is controversial, however. Some authorities on marriage believe that laws that make divorce difficult to obtain work against the interests of victims of spousal or child abuse.

- **Educate divorcing couples about the impact of their decision on minor children.**
Some states have formal procedures for apprising divorcing couples of research on the impact of divorce on minor children.

5. Ensure that children benefit from both parents' emotional and financial support.

Single-parent families are especially vulnerable to poverty. Policymakers have stressed personal responsibility in its approach to children living in these households, taking steps to ensure that whatever their living arrangements, children benefit emotionally and economically from both parents. They are crafting policies and programs designed to support fragile families, help non-custodial become good nurturers and providers, and enforce their child support obligations.

- **Support fragile families.** Recent studies show that the great majority of unwed fathers are strongly attached to their families, at least at the outset, and that when they give birth, most unwed mothers are living with or have ongoing relationships with the father of their children. Researchers refer to these families as “fragile families.” According to researchers, most unwed fathers want to help raise their child, and most mothers are eager to have help. However, most unwed fathers are ill prepared to support their new family. Nearly half lack a high school degree and only one-fifth have education beyond high school. Those who work tend to earn very low wages. Efforts to improve the prospects of men with low skills and education can make a difference—especially at the time a new baby arrives, when motivation is very high (McLanahan, 1999).
- **Enforce fair child support requirements.** In recent years, most states have introduced stronger measures to enforce child support as part of welfare reform (Bernard & Knitzer, 1999). In 2005, for example, Governor George Pataki of New York proposed an initiative aimed at encouraging low-income, non-custodial fathers in the state to forego welfare and pay child support in exchange for expanded tax credits. Child support legislation reflects the widespread conviction that even low-income fathers can make some contribution to their children’s care. Proponents of tougher enforcement cite evidence that increasing nonresident fathers’ financial investments in children may increase their motivation to spend time with them and take part in important decisions about their lives. In some cases, however, collecting child support may carry risks for mothers and children. Victims of domestic violence

usually want to pursue child support, but may incur risks in doing so. Child support and public assistance agencies must therefore be prepared to coordinate information and services for victims of domestic violence.

- **Address the need to improve the regularity of child support payments.** Because families living in or near poverty have credit constraints, the regularity of child support payments can be as important as the total annual amount. A recent study followed nearly 15,000 single-parent families over three years and found that only 16 percent received nearly all of the ordered child support for at least 30 of the 36 months. Policies and practices aimed at making payments more predictable are crucial to families who have difficulty paying rent or putting food on the table (Cancian & Meyer, 2005).
- **Develop more realistic child support requirements for poor fathers.** A study by Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation found that 60 percent of poor non-custodial fathers had child support orders for more than half of their monthly incomes (Miller & Knox, 2001). Small-scale pilot programs designed to help alleviate the problems of unrealistically huge child support arrears debt have shown increases in both the dollars received by custodial mothers and the time spent by these fathers with their children (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002).
- **Increase pass-through to mothers on TANF.** For families receiving TANF, there is, in many states, a disincentive to pay child support because it ends up reducing TANF benefits to the family, almost dollar for dollar. If child support is to truly bolster family income, then federal and state strategies need to allow larger shares of child support payments to flow directly to low-income families.
- **Help non-custodial fathers earn enough to support their children.** Researchers have concluded that tougher child support enforcement, by itself, will not change children's economic status. Most nonresident fathers who do not pay child support have very low incomes. According to a recent report by the Urban Institute, nearly 30 percent of the 2.5 million poor non-custodial fathers are incarcerated, while the remainder were either unemployed or earned an average annual income of just \$5,600 (Sorenson & Zibman, 2000). Harsher treatment of non-custodial low-income

fathers makes no sense absent efforts to help them qualify for, find, and keep jobs (Garfinkel et al., 1998). Recently the number of federal and state policies, programs and resources aimed at re-engaging fathers in their children's lives is increasing. The most promising include education assistance, job training and peer support groups for low-income fathers and counseling and mediation for their families (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002).

- **Support fathers as nurturers as well as breadwinners.** States can take advantage of changes in welfare laws that give them the flexibility to make responsible parenthood part of their welfare reform agendas. They can use monies available from case closures to support parent education and family support programs, especially those that help both mothers and fathers become better nurturers as well as economic providers (Bernard & Knitzer, 1999). Creating more father-friendly workplaces and employment policies is a major challenge.
- **Reinforce a shift in attitude.** A strategic use of the media, including public service announcements, can promote positive images of responsible fathers (Cohen, 1999).

6. Support research on the effects of family structure on children's well-being.

Researchers are beginning to learn more about the impact of different kinds of families on children, and about the kinds of interventions that can strengthen mother-father relationships, promote healthy parent-child interactions, and foster family formation and permanence. But many important questions remain unanswered. At the same time, many misperceptions about nonmarital childbearing and single-parenthood remain unchallenged and may, at times, influence policymaking.

- **Support studies that shed light on the effects of growing up in single-parent families.** Those who study the impact of family structure on children generally agree that growing up in a single-parent family increases the likelihood that children will have academic and behavioral problems. However, these outcomes seem to stem more from the greater economic stress and time pressures associated with single-parent families, than from any direct effects of living with one parent (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). More research is needed to differentiate the effects of family structure from the effects of diminished resources. When researchers find that

children in single-parent families have poorer outcomes, are they actually seeing the impact of economic disadvantage? Are they viewing, from another perspective, the impact of a factor that is known to have a major influence on children's outcomes, namely maternal education? Other questions need better answers as well. For example, does the effect of single-parent family structure depend on a child's age? Are children's outcomes affected by other factors that distinguish single-parent from two-parent households? (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000).

- **Support studies that lead to a more nuanced understanding of the realities of two-parent families.** Policy discussions of marriage and fatherhood tend to assume that children benefit from the presence in the home of two parents or two parental figures. However, several studies now suggest that children's well-being hinges on the composition of the household, not just the number of adults who are present. For example, mother-stepfather families do not produce better child outcomes, on average, than single-parent families. This is particularly true when stepfathers are introduced into the household when children are adolescents (Whitehead and Popenoe, 2004; Cherlin & Fomby, 2002).
- **Support research on the impact of welfare and economic policy on family formation.** Researchers have reported a modest trend toward two-parent families in the late 1990s. There is some evidence that welfare policies have influenced family structure, since a net movement toward two-parent families has been observed among families that left the welfare rolls after the implementation of welfare reform. But nearly half of the transitions into two-parent families occurred among families that had not received welfare since that time, or who never received it. This suggests that events other than welfare reform were also involved. Researchers believe that the strong economy and low unemployment of the late 1990s influenced family formation in low-income communities. They point as well to the expansion of policies aimed at supplementing earnings, notably the Earned Income Tax Credit (Cherlin & Fomby, 2002).
- **Translate research findings about births outside of marriage so that public perceptions match realities.** The public tends to view an unmarried mother as a teen, a member of a racial or ethnic minority group, a first-time mother, and a single

parent. The realities are more complex (Whitehead and Popenoe, 2004; Terry-Humen, Manlove, and Moore 2001):

- Teens now account for a diminishing share of all nonmarital births; women in their early twenties have the highest rate of nonmarital births. Since 1970, the largest percentage-point increase of births outside of marriage was among women aged 25 and older.
- Racial and ethnic disparities in nonmarital childbearing are narrowing, and Caucasians show the greatest increase in births to cohabiting couples. Hispanic women now have the highest nonmarital birth rate of all racial and ethnic groups.
- Only about half of nonmarital births are first births.
- Unmarried parents are not necessarily single parents. Many children born outside of marriage are born to cohabiting couples. In the early 1980s, the percentage of nonmarital births to cohabiting couples was 29 percent; by the early 1990s, the figure was 39 percent.

Efforts to paint a more realistic picture of the composition of today's families and the challenges they face might help to displace myths about single families and, over time, influence both public perceptions and public policy.

For further information:

Child Trends

(202)362-5580

www.childtrends.org

Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study

Princeton University Center for Research on Child Wellbeing
and Columbia University's Social Indicators Survey Center

(609) 258-5894 Princeton

(212) 854-9046 Columbia

www.crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/

Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

(609) 275-2341

www.mathematica-mpr.com

National Fatherhood Initiative

(301) 948-0599

www.fatherhood.org

National Center on Fathers and Families

215) 573-5500

www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu/

Welfare Information Network

(202) 587-1000

www.welfareinfo.org

References:

- Berlin, Gordon. (2004). The effects of marriage and divorce on families and children. Congressional testimony before the Science, Technology and Space Subcommittee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, United States Senate. Available on the internet at <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/386/testimony.html>.
- Bernard, S.N. & Knitzer, J. (1999). *Map and track: State initiatives to encourage responsible fatherhood, 1999 edition*. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty.
- Cancian, M. & Meyer, D.R. (2005). *Child support in the United States: An uncertain and irregular income source?* Madiscon, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison Institute for Research on Poverty.
- Cherlin, A.J. & Fomby, P. (February 2002). *A closer look at changes in children's living arrangements in low-income families*. Welfare, children, and families: A three-city study working paper. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University.
- Child Trends Data Bank. (2003). Teen Births. Available on the internet at <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/indicators/13TeenBirth.cfm>.
- Cohen, D. (1999). The state dads are in. In Bernard & Knitzer, *Map and track: State initiatives to encourage responsible fatherhood, 1999 edition*. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty.
- Edin, K. (2000). Few good men: Why poor mothers don't marry or remarry. *The American prospect*, January 3, 2000, pp. 26-31.
- Fremstad, S. (2004). Recent welfare reform research findings: Implications for TANF reauthorization and state TANF policies. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.
- Furstenberg, F.F. Jr. (1998). *The effects of welfare reform on the family: The good, the bad, and the ugly*. Philadelphia, PA: The University of Pennsylvania. Available on the internet at www.jcpr.org.
- Garfinkel, I., McLanahan, S., Meyer, D. & Seltzer, J. (1998). *Fathers under fire: The revolution in child support enforcement*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Golden, O.A. (2005). *Assessing the new federalism eight years later*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Hu, Wei-Yin. (October 1998). Marriage and economic incentives: Evidence from a welfare experiment. Los Angeles, CA: University of California. Available on the internet at www.jcpr.org.
- Koball, Heather L. (2004). Crossing the threshold: men's incomes, attitudes toward the provider role, and marriage timing. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, October 2004.
- Lav, I.J. & Sly, J. (February 2000). Large cost of the Archer "marriage penalty relief" provisions reflects poor targeting. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Available on the internet at <http://www.cbpp.org/2-2-00tax.htm>.
- Lerman, R.J. (1996). The impact of the changing U.S. family structure on child poverty and income inequality. *Economica*, May 1996.
- McLanahan, S. (1999). Testimony before the House Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources hearing on fatherhood, April 27, 1999. Available on the internet at http://www.house.gov/ways_means/humres/106cong/4-27-99/4-27mcla.htm.
- McLanahan, S., & Casper, L. M. (1996). Growing diversity and inequality in the American family. In R. Farley (ed.) *State of the union*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation
- Miller, C. & Knox, V. (2001) *The Challenge of Helping Low-Income Fathers Support their Children*, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, p. 33, November.

- Moore, K.A., Manlove, J., & Connon, L. (March 1998). *Repeat teen births*. Washington, DC: Child Trends, Inc.
- Russo, F. (1997). Can the government prevent divorce? *The Atlantic monthly*, October 1997. Available on the internet at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/97oct/divorce.htm>.
- Shonkoff, J. & Phillips, D.A. (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.
- Sorenson, E. and Zibman, C. (2000) *Poor dads who don't pay child support: deadbeats or disadvantaged?* New Federalism Report, No. B-30, Urban Institute, Washington, DC.
- Terry-Human, E., Manlove, J., and Moore, K.A. (April 2001). *Births outside of marriage: Perceptions vs. reality*. Washington, D.C.: Child Trends.
- Wertheimer, R. & Moore, K. (2000). *Childbearing by teens: Links to welfare reform*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. Available on the internet at <http://newfederalism.urgan.org/html/ant24.html>.
- Whitehead, B.D. & Popenoe, D. (2004). *The state of our unions: The social health of marriage in America 2004*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Marriage Project of Rutgers University. Available on the internet at <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/TEXTSOOU2004.htm>.
- Winship, S. & Jencks, C. (2004). *How did the social policy changes of the 1990s affect material hardships among single mothers? Evidence from the CPS Food Security Supplement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government Faculty Research Working Paper Series.