

The Poverty Forum: Family Policy

Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Promotion

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Area: Family Policy

Issue: Healthy Marriage

Problem:

Over the past 30 years, the prospects of divorce have diverged sharply by class. Rates of non-marital childbearing also differ dramatically by class, though this is not new. In depth qualitative studies of low income couples find that such couple relationships often form by chance more than by plan, and have extraordinarily high rates of serious problems such as infidelity and domestic violence. These couples usually want to stay together and marry, yet desperately need tools to make their relationships strong.

Solutions/Goals:

Promote healthy marriage to help couples, who have chosen marriage for themselves, to gain greater access to marriage education services where they can acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage. Also promote responsible fatherhood so that more children have an active and engaged father in their lives. The goals are to:

- Increase the percentage of children who are raised by two parents in a healthy marriage;
- Increase the percentage of married couples who are in healthy marriages;
- Increase the percentage of premarital couples who are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage;
- Increase the percentage of youth and young adults who have the skills and knowledge to make informed decisions about healthy relationships including skills that can help them eventually form and sustain a healthy marriage;
- Increase public awareness about the value of healthy marriages and the skills and knowledge that can help couples form and sustain healthy marriages;
- Encourage and support research on healthy marriages and healthy marriage education; and
- Increase the percentage of women, men and children in homes that are free of domestic violence.

Research shows there are many benefits to healthy marriage. Children raised by parents in healthy marriages, compared to unhealthy marriages, are more likely to succeed academically, are physically and emotionally happier, are less likely to commit delinquent behaviors, and are less likely to be raised in poverty. Women and men who are in healthy marriages, compared to unhealthy marriages, experience many benefits, including being less likely to remain or end up in poverty

Sources:

Why Marriage Matters, Second Edition: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences, September 2005.

"Also see What Is a Healthy Marriage? Kristin Anderson Moore; Susan M. Jekielek; Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew; Lina Guzman; Suzanne Ryan; Zakia Redd. September 2004."

Policy Recommendations:

- 1) Strengthen and protect the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives at the Administration for Children and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services. The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 provided funding of \$150 million each year for healthy marriage promotion and fatherhood. This program should continue to exist, should continue to stress the benefit of marriage over cohabitation, should continue to strengthen the marriage field, should continue to promote responsible fatherhood, and should continue to research the impact marriage has on poverty and other outcomes. This program should also continue developing best practices based on research and experience in the field.
- 2) Expand access to marriage education for those who participate in government assistance programs and want that education. Specifically, it should be the policy of the federal government to evaluate current anti-poverty programs, and any expansion of anti-poverty programs, to determine how to structure them in a way that encourages healthy family formation and does not create disincentives to marriage or fatherhood. Any expansion of anti-poverty programs should not repeat mistakes of the past, but should instead recognize the important role family formation plays in providing better outcomes for children, women, and men.

Previous Legislation (if applicable):

The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005

Political Outlook:

There is a question as to whether the new Administration and the new Congress will want to promote a program with marriage as the goal, or instead change the program to focus more on relationship education that does not specifically promote marriage. This debate will probably take place immediately in the context of changes in implementation of the Healthy Marriage Initiative. The new Congress may also want to make changes in TANF, which will provide an opportunity for the Healthy Marriage Initiative to be revisited. Fatherhood programs have strong bipartisan support, but they have been challenged in court by the National Organization of Women (NOW).

References for more Information:

Administration for Children and Families information on the Healthy Marriage Initiative:
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/index.html>