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STRENGTHENING FAMILIES AND RESCUING MARRIAGE

REDUCING VERY HIGH FRAGMENTATION RATES AND STRENGTHENING ALL FAMILIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Problem

Very high rates of family fragmentation in the United States are subtracting from what very large numbers of young people are learning in school and holding them back in other ways. This, in turn, is damaging our 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 which is leading, and can only lead, to deepening class divisions in a nation which has never viewed itself or operated in such splintered ways. The same dynamic is destined play out in Minnesota unless attitudes, behaviors, and numbers change.

Consequences of Not Acting

One of the final questions I asked almost all interviewees for a new book of mine released last summer, *Broken Bonds: What Family Fragmentation Means for America's Future*, went like this: "In sum, considering all we've been talking about as well as at the risk of melodrama, what do you think the United States might look like in the days of your last breath? A radically reduced composite answer might read something like this:

On the more optimistic, albeit much slimmer side of the ledger, a few respondents placed their faith in the overcoming power of free markets. Or they speculated about a possible religious reawakening or simply cited the hope they already derive from religious belief. But such comments were decidedly in the minority, as much more numerous were worries and worse about our nation's future.



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No respondents predicted anything apocalyptic with certainty; no one saw very high rates of family fragmentation necessarily doing us in completely or nearly so. To the extent they viewed such as rates as an ailment, they used terms such as a “wasting disease” rather than a “heart attack.” They talked about slow declines, not fast ones. They saw a future America suffering the kinds of troubles we currently have, only more so. A place where have-nots have a harder times becoming haves. They imagined the United States as still the world’s leader, but perhaps not. Still an economically successful nation, but a less innovative one. They assumed a less unified America with whiffs or stronger scents of unraveling.

For Minnesota families to prosper the above is what we must reverse.

Recommendations

There is no magic bullet or simple set of ideas when it comes to restoring marriage in America or dramatically reducing out-of-wedlock births. This is the case as marriage and its improvements have more to do with elusive culture than manageable policy. Still, the following significantly abbreviated list of suggestions under each of the nine headings would help.

1. **Retrieve our voice about marriage.** One of the very first things we need is for leaders and key institutions to retrieve their voice when it comes to the centrality of marriage. This very much includes religious leaders and institutions.
2. **More effectively serve healthy marriages.** Writers Ross Douthat and Rehan Salam recommend a “family-friendly tax reform” which “keeps taxes lowest for young families making investments in their offspring.” Might it work at the state level? In Minnesota?
3. **More effectively help troubled and potentially troubled marriages.** Prof. William H. Doherty of the University of Minnesota has developed a grassroots project called “Marital First Responders.” As he says in *Broken Bonds*: “What I want to do is develop grassroots ways for people who are already confidantes to up their game in terms of how to respond helpfully to people who come to them.” His creative initiative deserves support.
4. **Make marriage more likely in the first place.** The unintended consequences of no-fault divorce fall heaviest on couples with fewer emotional and financial resources. We should take advantage of research showing that “at least 10 percent of couples going through a divorce are open to efforts to reconcile.”
5. **More effectively reduce nonmarital births.** What should Minnesota do to reduce teenage births in particular? Consider Milwaukee, which started a city-wide campaign in 2006 led by a broad coalition, which in turn was led by the United Way of Greater Milwaukee. They have had remarkable success. The Greater Twin Cities United Way should do the same.

6. **More effectively help girls and boys in fragmented families.** We all need help at times, often a lot. But at the end of days and lifetimes, only individuals—first as young people and then as adults—strengthened by the love and generosity of others, can break self-destructive cycles. Or if you will, “programs” don’t overcome; people do. And while urging individuals in harsh situations to pull up their moral socks can be a simplistic suggestion, by no means is it always.
7. **Help boys, more specifically, become marriageable men.** If millions of boys (as well as girls) have holes in their hearts where their fathers (and sometimes their mothers) should be, what type of education might work best at filling such gaps, eventually enabling them to financially support children of their own? One word that comes to mind is “nurturing” suggesting schools in which religious belief, to one degree or another, animates. Meaning vouchers.
8. **More effectively help men in the criminal justice system.** If there is any hope whatsoever of re-institutionalizing marriage in inner cities we must find safe ways for ex-offenders to cleanse their names, get decent jobs, and support their families so they might become marriageable in the reasonably discerning eyes of women.
9. **Better allow our religious traditions and institutions to help.** In interviewing National Public Radio’s Krista Tippett for *Broken Bonds*, I asked how we might take greater advantages of our religious institutions for various purposes, not just fortifying marriage. “We can have robust discussions,” she said, “without in anyway questioning the wall of separation. The wall between church and state should not be a wall through the integrity of our citizens. . . . I fault the culture. But I fault the traditions, too.”

PROLOGUE

Ideas about how to reinforce healthy marriages and families are to be found not only in the pages that follow but also in several other chapters of Center of the American Experiment’s new *Minnesota Policy Blueprint*. Policy changes that help build a Culture of Prosperity and help strengthen families. The particular emphasis of this chapter, however, is on what might be done to strengthen *less-healthy* and *less-secure* marriages, as well as what might be done to reduce very high rates of nonmarital births which are severely hurting not only children and adults but also our state and nation.

Much of what follows likewise draws on a new book of mine, *Broken Bonds: What Family Fragmentation Means for America’s Future*. Based largely on interviews with forty sage men and women from Minnesota and across the country, the book seeks to rigorously speculate about what our country might come to look like given that the United States has more family fragmentation and “churning” than any other place in the industrialized world. The book’s ultimate aim is forewarning and reducing the chances that interviewees’ fears come





to fruition nationwide. The more localized aim of this chapter is forewarning and reducing the chances of such fears coming to fruition in Minnesota.

THE PROBLEM

Very high rates of family fragmentation in the United States are subtracting from what very large numbers of young people are learning in school and harming them in other ways. This, in turn, is damaging our country economically by making millions of Americans less competitive in an increasingly demanding worldwide marketplace and, as a result, creating a culture that is less open to innovation. All of which is leading, and can only lead, to deepening class divisions in a nation which has never viewed itself as having a fixed class structure.¹

The same dynamic, on a smaller but similarly destructive scale, is destined play out in Minnesota unless attitudes, behaviors, and numbers change.

As for national numbers,² about 40 percent of American babies are currently born outside of marriage. This breaks down to almost 30 percent of non-Hispanic white girls and boys, somewhat more than 50 percent of Hispanic children, and somewhat more than 70 percent of African American children. All these numbers are substantially higher in inner cities and other low-income communities, as well as among women and men with less than four-year college degrees.

In regards to divorce, calculating rates is harder than most people assume, if many people assume anything about it at all. Nevertheless we do know that divorce rates have been reasonably stable since the 1980s after having exploded in the two preceding decades. Even better, divorce rates have been decreasing among well-educated couples. But even with this good news, it's still estimated that between 40 percent and 50 percent of first-time married couples in the United States divorce. This is still a terribly high number.

Moreover, there has been a stunning increase in cohabitation in recent decades, with these relationships typically, especially in our country compared to many other places, shorter-lived than marriages.

What is all this leading to?

In a report by the Educational Testing Service, two veteran researchers write: “If we are looking for a ‘shock’ that roughly coincides with the end of the long-term relative economic and educational gain for Black children . . . [the] steep rise in children being raised without fathers, and mostly without the benefit of earnings, coincides with the . . . curtailed progress in narrowing the achievement gap.”³

There is also the frequently cited three-part sequencing about how people who finish high school, work fulltime, and marry before having children are “virtually guaranteed a

place in the middle class” and that only about two percent of them end up in poverty.⁴

And there is this fascinating finding about men who marry and those who don't. In a study of 500 chronic juvenile delinquents aimed at determining why some young men stopped their criminal behavior while others continued into their early thirties, researchers found that a good marriage made more than a little difference. Statistically controlling for everything needing controlling, the men “who entered a good marriage reduced their criminal activity sharply.” More specifically, they did so by about two-thirds compared to men who did not establish good marriages or had not married at all.⁵

CONSEQUENCES OF NOT ACTING

With data and matters like these in mind, one of the final questions I asked almost all of *Broken Bond's* forty eclectic interviewees, from Massachusetts to California, went something like this: “In sum, considering all we've been talking about as well as at the risk of melodrama, what do you think the United States might look like in the days of your last breath? A radically reduced composite answer—which is not necessarily an “on-average” answer, would read something like this:

On the more optimistic, albeit much slimmer side of the ledger, some respondents were confident their own middle-class and comparatively affluent children and grandchildren, along with their similarly situated friends, likely would have good lives and that their generation likely would well-serve the nation. A few respondents placed their faith in the problem-solving power of free markets. Or in the generative power of immigration. Or in the ability of low-income neighborhoods to turn themselves around. Or in the emergence of new and better-suited family forms. Or they speculated about a possible religious reawakening or simply cited the hope they already derive from religious belief. But such comments and spirit—and not just in response to the question above—were decidedly in the minority. Much more numerous were worries and worse about our nation's future.

No respondents predicted anything apocalyptic with certainty; no one saw very high rates of family fragmentation necessarily doing us in completely or nearly so. To the extent they viewed such as rates as an ailment, they used terms such as a “wasting disease” rather than a “heart attack.” They talked about slow declines, not fast ones. They saw a future America suffering the kinds of troubles we currently have, only more so. A place where problems caused and exacerbated by family fragmentation are managed, not fixed, and where have-nots have a harder times becoming haves.

They imagined the United States as still the world's leader, but perhaps not. Still an economically successful nation, but a less innovative one. They assumed a less unified America with whiffs or stronger scents of unraveling. When talking about disparities and divisions, several respondents spoke unusually starkly about matters of culture, values, behavior, and race. Some spoke of a commonweal with further eroding trust, especially between men and women, with nonmarital birthrates and divorce rates perhaps even higher than are those today. A place where millions of boys and girls are no better





educated than they currently are, and consequently no better prepared for marriage-hospitable careers.

For Minnesota families to prosper, and without being the least melodramatic this time, the above is what we must reverse.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the risk of an extreme cliché, there is no magic bullet, no simple set of ideas or programs, when it comes to restoring marriage in America, dramatically reducing out-of-wedlock births, or anything of the sort. As a result, the recommendations filling the rest of this chapter are broader and less concrete than others in the *Blueprint*, as the problems of family fragmentation have more to do with elusive culture than manageable policy. For additional ideas and suggestions, you might want to take a look at both *Broken Bonds* and its 2011 predecessor, *From Family Collapse to America's Decline: The Educational, Economic, and Social Costs of Family Fragmentation*.⁶

Recommendation 1: Retrieve Our Voice about Marriage

One of the very first things we need is for leaders and key institutions to retrieve their voices when it comes to the critical importance of marriage. This very much includes religious leaders and institutions. (See, for instance, what NPR's Krista Tippett says below.)

While the importance of fathers is now more widely recognized than was the case for several strange decades starting in the 1960s, many people persist in stopping short before getting to marriage and its distinctive and essential contributions. A perfect example of this was an otherwise superb Father's Day message that then-presidential candidate Barack Obama brought in June 2008, in which he said things such as:

Of all the rocks upon which we build our lives, we are reminded today that family is the most important. And we are called to recognize and honor how critical every father is to that foundation. They are teachers and coaches. They are mentors and role models. . . . But if we are honest with ourselves, we'll admit that too many fathers are also missing—missing from too many lives and too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it.

Beautiful and necessary words, but nowhere in his combination sermon/campaign speech was there a single mention of marriage. This is not to single out the president, as I could have selected from a long list of politicians, scholars, and others across the political and ideological spectrum. But he was uniquely positioned that morning to talk about the importance of marriage, and the fact that he and his wife have a wonderful one made him even better primed as a teacher. A great opportunity missed.

Social service bureaucracies and offices at state and county levels (the latter being where services are actually delivered) are also largely voiceless when it comes to speaking up for marriage. This has long been the case throughout the welfare establishment across the nation, which is particularly unfortunate given that increasing marriage rates among welfare recipients was one of the two main goals of federal welfare reform in 1996. The other was significantly reducing the number of people on welfare.

The replacement of AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) by TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) led to extraordinary success nationally regarding the latter aim but none to speak of regarding the former. As for Minnesota, caseloads have trended downward over time, with a slight uptick during the recession and then continuing downward. But state and county governments are uniformly uneager to make the case for marriage, develop policies which could encourage it, or get rid of policies which undermine it.

With the elevation of same-sex marriage to the top of the political agenda, one of *Broken Bonds'* respondents talked about how it has become increasingly difficult to “valorize the biologically two-parent family.” And when Utah Senator Mike Lee talks about America’s “other marriage debate,” he’s not referring to the one about same-sex unions. This chapter, and Center of American Experiment, have nothing to say about same-sex marriage except the following: Encouraging couples to get married before they have children and stay married afterward will have a far larger impact on the future of our society than anything we do or don’t do about same-sex unions.

Recommendation 2: More Effectively Serve Healthy Marriages

In speaking about “healthy” marriages, this is a propitious moment to emphasize that healthy, “equal regard” marriages (to use the jargon) are the only kind we are advocating. While a couple of programs aimed at rescuing troubled marriages are described below, “troubled” in this usage does not come close to subsuming “violent.” Domestically abusive unions need to be escaped, abused partners need protection, and abusive partners need cops called.

It’s also important to note that millions of kids growing up in single-parent situations are doing well while millions of kids growing up in two-parent homes are not. Family life is “so personal, so complex, so angular and many-sided” as actually lived (in Michael Novak’s beautiful phrasing), generalizations are necessarily incomplete. Nevertheless, the bottom line is a straight line: statistically, children who grow up in homes headed by married parents fare better, often much better, than those who don’t. Rampant family fragmentation in the United States undercuts personal well-being and societal success. This is not to chastise single parents, especially single moms, as millions are raising their children heroically and successfully. But sobering findings about the effects of fragmentation need to be made clear to men and women who are contemplating having children so as to give them the best possible odds of success.





Writers such as Ross Douthat, Reihan Salam, and Ramesh Ponnuru have argued in recent years that many conservatives, for all their essential advocacy of keeping taxes low, have failed to adequately address the anxieties of many working-class and middle-class families. For instance, Douthat and Salam have persuasively argued that conservatives have confused “being pro-market with being pro-business, by failing to distinguish between spending that fosters dependency and spending that fosters independence and upward mobility, and by shrinking from the admittedly difficult task of reforming the welfare state so that it serves the interests of the working class rather than the affluent.”⁷

In a chapter titled “Putting Families First,” Douthat and Salam highlight four areas in which conservatives need to offer more: making parenthood less burdensome, and not just in terms of taxes; recognizing the benefits of sprawl; allaying anxieties about health care; and reforming taxes so they better enable young families to handle the costs of raising children. Ponnuru’s threesome in 2012 were health care, higher education, and energy. Conservatives, he argued, need to better acknowledge and respond to the increased degree to which many middle-class families are viewing themselves as economically marginalized, with these three areas being sources of economic stress.⁸

As to how to do this, Douthat and Salam borrow from something Ponnuru had proposed earlier. They call for a “family-friendly tax reform—one that keeps taxes lowest for young families making investments in their offspring as such a plan would “treat children as a species of investment, one that is currently overtaxed.” Might such an approach work at the state level? In Minnesota? Lowering overall tax burdens on couples who are struggling with the many expenses and other challenges of raising young children would reduce stress on their marriages.

At the same time and in complementary spirit, we would argue that conservatives, in the drive to reduce the size and scope of government, need to recognize how family formation and stability, not just capital formation and returns, must animate policy.

Other chapters of this *Blueprint* address many of the other policy areas these and other writers have identified: The benefits of sprawl (Transportation and the Met Council); Education (although we do not address higher education or the debts many young people are carrying); plus Health Care and Energy. Policies advocated in this *Blueprint* are aimed at bringing more and better jobs to Minnesota, which is the best cure for economic anxieties of all kinds. In shaping all of these policies we need to keep in mind the effect they will have on families, particularly young families that have or are contemplating children, and try to minimize the stresses that contribute to family fragmentation.

Recommendation 3: More Effectively Help Troubled and Potentially Troubled Marriages

Let's start with two intriguing programs, each owing to the work of Prof. William J. Doherty, a family social scientist at the University of Minnesota.⁹

For several years now, Bill has been building on an Australian program which provides basic mental health first-aid training for lay people. His particular contribution has been to create a grassroots project in Minnesota and the United States called "Marital First Responders."¹⁰ As he says in *Broken Bonds*:

"I want to do something similar around marriage and romantic relationships. We're not going to professionalize our way out of our problems. We could quintuple the number of professional marriage counselors and it won't be sufficient. What I want to do is develop grassroots ways for people who are already confidantes to up their game in terms of how to respond helpfully to people who come to them. That's the group I want to reach."

Doherty notes that we know from a large body of research that people in "relationship struggles" turn to their family and friends long before they turn to any professional, including their clergy. As for the project's prospects, a number of faith communities, he says, are "very interested," and he allows that some people have been using the term "game-changer."

A second, seminal project is "Back from the Brink," which takes advantage of research by Bill and others, including Hennepin County District Judge Bruce Peterson, showing that more couples going through divorce are open to reconciliation than had previously been thought. This insight, if pursued wisely, should give therapists, mediators, lawyers, judges and others professionally involved greater cause and confidence in urging some couples to slow down and reconsider. Bill's shorthand is "discernment counseling."

A third idea, also suggested by Doherty, has to do with stepfamilies, which routinely are difficult to make work well for all concerned. This is illustrated by the fact that substantial research shows that children in stepfamilies often actually do less well than those in single-parent homes. For that matter, such households are more than occasionally tough on stepparents, too.

Should "stepfamily training" be mandated, as has been suggested, when two families come together by way of marriage? I have no interest mandating much of anything. But it would be smart if soon-to-be stepparents had more opportunities to participate, along with their new combinations of children, in programs, perhaps on-line, regarding the difficulties they may face.

Recommendation 4: Make Marriage More Likely in the First Place

W. Bradford Wilcox is director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. Andrew J. Cherlin is a professor of sociology and public policy at Johns Hopkins University. Wilcox is self-identified as a conservative and Cherlin as a liberal.¹¹ In a paper titled "The Marginalization of Marriage in Middle America," they focus on the damaging





ways in which moderately educated Americans increasingly resemble lower-income citizens when it comes to very high out-of-wedlock birth rates and divorce rates. “We come to this brief,” they write, “with somewhat different perspectives.” Wilcox emphasizes the primacy of promoting and supporting marriage. Cherlin argues that stable care arrangements for children, whether achieved through marriage or not, are what matter most. Both of them agree that “children are more likely to thrive when they reside in stable, two-parent homes.” Out of this mix of views they jointly propose several efforts to either strengthen marriages, or make them more likely in the first place, among Americans who have high school degrees but not four-year college degrees. Here is one of them.

The unintended consequences of no-fault divorce, Wilcox and Cherlin write, “seem to have been most powerful for couples with fewer emotional and financial resources.” One thing to do, they continue, is take advantage of aforementioned research by family scholar William J. Doherty and others showing that “at least 10 percent of couples going through a divorce are open to efforts to reconcile.” Making efforts at reconciliation mandatory, at least when children are involved and violence is not, is something we ought to consider.

Of interest here is a recent report by the U.S. House Budget Committee Majority Staff, officially known as *Expanding Opportunity in America*, but forever to be better known as the *Ryan Report*, after Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, chairman of the Committee. The “Discussion Draft” recommends that community groups be allowed to test different ways of reweaving safety nets so as to more effectively help people “not just to avoid hardship—but build a successful career.” And hence, for our purposes, better enable people to get and stay married. That’s Ryan and the Committee’s very large hope, even though all concerned recognize, in the specific matter of federally funded job-related programs, success rates over the decades frequently have been dismal.

We need to be realistic about how much government can do, as evidenced by the limited success of the programs originating in the Healthy Marriage Initiative during George W. Bush’s administration.¹² I spent two days in Oklahoma City in late 2013 visiting the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, often considered the most effective such program in the country, only to find that it had come to focus less on ways of increasing marriage rates and decreasing divorce rates and focus, instead, more on bringing greater stability to romantic relationships generally. Which, as a practical matter, means dwelling on cohabitation to a much greater extent than envisioned by the White House and Congress a decade ago.

This is a cautionary tale. The main reason for OMI’s broader emphasis on “relationships” is that the relative absence of marriages affords relatively few opportunities for rescuing faltering ones. Reviving marriage in lower-income communities is a very tough business. But the fact remains that cohabiting relationships in the United States (as opposed to many other places) are routinely short-lived, meaning that children once again are ill-served.

Recommendation 5: More Effectively Reduce Nonmarital Births

Continuing with non-married men and women, particularly non-married teenagers, let's take a look at out-of-wedlock births—starting, actually, with some good news. Birthrates for girls and young women aged fifteen to nineteen across the country have been going down for most of the last two decades, with the drop between 2007 and 2011 an amazing 25 percent. Overall, the teen birthrate nationally in 2011 was at an all-time low of 31.1 per 1,000 teenagers.¹³ Still, these encouraging numbers can't erase the fact that since marriage is close to absent in these situations, an enormously high proportion of children will try to grow up minus one of their parents, usually their father. And these data can't erase the fact that it's women in their 20s and 30s, not teenagers, who give birth to the overwhelming majority of American babies who come into this life outside of marriage.

As for Minnesota, we compare relatively well to other states, with the sixth lowest rate of teen births in 2011: 18.5 per 1,000 females between 15 and 19 years old. This is a dramatic drop of 50 percent since the peak year of 1991.¹⁴ (Regardless of the age of mothers, data in recent years show that approximately 84 percent of all births to non-Hispanic black women in Hennepin County were outside of marriage.¹⁵)

What should Minnesota do?

As with educational vouchers, we should once again look to Milwaukee, which started a city-wide campaign in 2006 led by the United Way of Greater Milwaukee. The group's statistical goal was to reduce the birthrate of fifteen-to-seventeen-year-olds in the city by 46 percent by 2015. That audacious number was actually exceeded—hitting 50 percent—two years early in 2013.¹⁶ As a former member of the board of directors of the Greater Twin Cities United Way, a terrifically led organization, I've informally suggested once or twice over the last year that the GTCUW lead a similar campaign. I hereby do so again.

Recommendation 6: More Effectively Help Girls and Boys in Fragmented Families

Rigorous social science research has left no doubt that children growing up in fragmented families, on average, do less well than boys and girls growing up in families headed by stable married couples by every conceivable measure. The list includes educational performance, mental illness, drug use, criminal behavior, early sexual initiation, and new generations of nonmarital pregnancies, with government at all levels spending extraordinary sums in order to compensate. But what about the obligations of young people themselves for moving ahead?

Ron Haskins, a *Broken Bonds* respondent, was staff director of the House Ways and Means Human Resources Subcommittee when comprehensive welfare reform was passed in 1996. In other words, he was the lead staffer in getting the most successful social welfare reform of the last generation turned into law. He recently blogged this:





“A typical child from a poor family enjoys income and housing support for their family, health care, preschool education, public school education, college loans or scholarships, and employment and training programs. But unless adolescents and young adults make wise decisions about their schooling, about marriage before childbearing, and about work . . . all this programmatic spending will do little to boost their chances of moving into the middle class. Federal and state policymakers, program operators and teachers, and parents need to constantly remind themselves and their children that personal responsibility is the key to success and insist that children and adolescents demonstrate more of it.”¹⁷

We all need help at times, often a lot. But at the end of days and lifetimes, only individuals—first as young people and then as adults—strengthened by the love and generosity of others, can break the kinds of cycles we’ve been talking about. Or if you will, “programs” don’t overcome; people do. And while urging individuals in harsh situations to pull up their moral socks can be a simplistic suggestion it is by no means always the wrong thing to do.

It’s impossible, both at this point of the paper as well as at this moment in educational and political time, not to say something about early childhood education. Yes, it can help. Yes, we need it. Yes, momentum behind its expansion is irresistible. Yes, it is encouraging that Minnesota is affording low-income parents choices, in effect using vouchers, in where to enroll their young children. But expectations for early childhood education are often unrealistically high given that large numbers of children still will wind up attending weak schools and living in disorganized homes (to use gentle terms both times). We’ve been trying a variety of government programs to address these problems for half a century, without success. We should set our expectations accordingly.

Recommendation 7: Help Boys, More Specifically, Become Marriageable Men

In a Twin Cities visit a long time ago, the late Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Bill Raspberry was asked something like, “How to fix poverty?” Simple enough. He said the problem was big enough so that a person could jump in anywhere and make a contribution, but his preference was to start with the boys. This is sound advice, as boys often become the men who women don’t want to marry, and for good reasons. This is not to ignore helping girls become marriageable women. But increasingly girls and young women are faring much better than boys and young men. That is a fact we should not be afraid to face.

So it’s off to school, most vitally.

If millions of boys (as well as girls) have holes in their hearts where their fathers (and sometimes their mothers) should be, what type of education might work best at filling such gaps, eventually enabling them to financially support children of their own? Other than *rigorous*, adjectives coming quickest to mind are *paternalistic* and *nurturing*. With “paternalistic” suggesting tough loving charter schools in the “sweat-the-small-stuff”

spirit of KIPP academies. And with “nurturing” suggesting places in which religious belief, to one degree or another, animates.

This is how Harvard’s Paul Peterson, who has done extensive work evaluating voucher programs across the country, put it during our *Broken Bonds* conversation in regards to both religious and secular private schools:

“Most of the students in our studies are living in single-parent families. I think a private school, especially when talking about urban settings, is a quieter place. A more closed space. Students are protected from hostile elements in the larger environment. The street culture is a good example of what’s out there especially for boys, but also girls living in single-parent families. This peer group culture is very pernicious to learning and achievement, and it could be beneficial if we could protect kids from that, to some extent, by enabling them to attend private schools. It’s not a cure-all. It’s not a silver bullet. But it’s a positive step.”

Recommendation 8: More Effectively Help Men in the Criminal Justice System

If there is any hope whatsoever of re-institutionalizing marriage in inner cities, we must find ways for ex-offenders to cleanse their names, get decent jobs, and support their families so they might become (in sociologist William Julius Wilson’s already noted famous description) “marriageable” in the reasonably discerning eyes of women.

Infinitely better yet, it goes without saying, would be for men not to offend in the first place. But in addition to their own deep and demanding obligations when it comes to redemption, political scientist Lawrence Mead argues in *Broken Bonds* that “we have to make it quite clear to any man who comes out of prison, whatever his previous life, we’re going to make it possible for him to lead a civilized life going forward.” Mead, who teaches at NYU, has written as influentially as anyone on the right about ways of truly reforming welfare and getting people back to work. In the matter at hand he has argued elsewhere:

“Much of my approach is modeled on welfare reform. Poor fathers, like poor mothers, need both help and hassle. That is, they need more help from government than they are getting. But they must also be expected to help themselves. We need to demand work—and, if necessary, to enforce it.” He has proposed doing this by building on the fact that governments already demand child support from absent fathers and they expect that men leaving prison to work as a condition of parole.¹⁸

Questioning and rethinking the immense extent to which we incarcerate in the United States is increasingly occurring on both the Right and Left, as witness for instance the reformist, Texas-based group Right on Crime,¹⁹ and comments like this one by Sen. Mike Lee again, a Republican from Utah, at a Heritage Foundation anti-poverty conference in November 2013:





“The simple fact,” he said, “is that in America today, we put too many people in prison for too long with too little benefit to our society. If inmates are violent and threats to our communities then we have a moral responsibility to keep them locked up.” But if they are not violent, pose no such threat, and are ready to return to their communities and families, then “we have just as much moral duty to get them reintegrated into our nation’s networks of social and economic mobility.”²⁰ Suffice it to say these are welcomed developments as long as protecting public safety remains Job One.

(As I prepared to write a first draft of this section, a Mendota Heights police officer was murdered in West St. Paul by a habitual criminal. One of the biggest difficulties in making progress in imprisoning fewer people is that most citizens, very much including legislators, are ill-disposed to doing so when someone who should have been imprisoned was not and then does something hideous.)

Recommendation 9: Better Allow Our Religious Traditions and Institutions to Help

Finally, sociologist Brad Wilcox, who we heard from before, has written how “Churches are bulwarks of marriage in urban America.” Drawing on data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study headquartered at Princeton and Columbia universities, he said indications were that “urban parents who attend church frequently are significantly more likely to marry before the arrival of children or to marry in the wake of a nonmarital pregnancy, and they are more likely to experience higher levels of relationship quality.” And that, “Religious attendance appears to foster behavior among urban fathers that makes them more attractive mates and better partners.”²¹

A religiously rooted private school is not the best option for everyone. But they work well, sometimes wonderfully, for a large number of children. The research on the question is clear. Which is another way of saying the case for vouchers is a strong one, especially for low-income kids whose family lives are most likely to be complicated and diminished by fragmentation. These institutions cannot only help students get a better education, but help them to lead a better life.

In interviewing National Public Radio’s Krista Tippett for *Broken Bonds*, I asked how we might take greater advantages of our religious institutions for various purposes—not just fortifying marriage—while also fully respecting the Constitution and American variety. (We agreed that we both preferred “variety” to “diversity.”) “We can have robust discussions,” she said, “without in anyway questioning the wall of separation. The wall between church and state should not be a wall through the integrity of our citizens. It shouldn’t be something that decouples how we are in our work places, in our families, and in civil society from the sources of our deepest values. I fault the culture. But I fault the traditions, too.”

Of the “traditions,” and with marriage in mind, she added: “I really want the traditions to begin fully articulating what they know, what they’ve known for generations and centuries about what it means to lead a worthy life, about what matters in life, and about who we are to be for each other. They are incredible repositories. We need them. We need them more than we ever have before.”

ENDNOTES

¹ Mitch Pearlstein, *From Family Collapse to America’s Decline: The Educational, Economic, and Social Costs of Family Fragmentation* (2011): p. xiii.

² Mitch Pearlstein, *Broken Bonds: What Family Fragmentation Means for America’s Future* (2014): pp. xviii-xix.

³ Paul E. Barton and Richard J. Coley, *The Black-White Achievement Gap: When Progress Stopped* (Educational Testing Service, July 2010): p. 16, available at <http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/PICBWGAP.pdf>.

⁴ Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill, *Creating an Opportunity Society* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2009): p. 9.

⁵ Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (2000): pp. 157-58. The quotes are Waite and Gallagher’s; not the original researchers.

⁶ See Endnotes Nos. 1 and 2 above.

⁷ Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam, *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream* (2008; 2009): p. 11. I interpret Douthat and Reihan’s use of “working class” as including a significant portion of the middle class. And as for the word “Republican” in their title, suffice it to say as 501(c)3 tax-exempt organization, American Experiment has everything to do with ideas and nothing to do with partisanship. This, in fact, is one of the few times in recent years I’ve typed the word “Republican.”

⁸ Ramesh Ponnuru, “Right to the Middle: Conservatives Need Not Surrender Voters of Moderate Income to the Democrats,” *National Review*, December 17, 2012.

⁹ Pearlstein, *Broken Bonds*: Chapter Seven.

¹⁰ See Marital First Responders [Website], accessed November 12, 2014, <http://maritalfirstresponders.com/>.

¹¹ W. Bradford Wilcox and Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marginalization of Marriage in Middle America*, Brookings Institution Center on Children and Families Brief No. 46 (August 2011), available at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2011/08/10-strengthen-marriage-wilcox-cherlin>.

¹² Pearlstein, *From Family Collapse to America’s Decline*: pp. 19-21.

¹³ Alexandra Sifferlin, “What’s Behind the Drop in U.S. Teen Birth Rates,” *Time Magazine*, May 24, 2013, available at <http://healthland.time.com/2013/05/24/whats-behind-the-drop-in-u-s-teen-birth-rates/>.

¹⁴ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy [Website], accessed November 12, 2014, <http://thenationalcampaign.org/>.





¹⁵ Response to a data request from Shel Swaney, Supervisor, Assessment & Epidemiology, Hennepin County Human Services & Public Health Department, August 3, 2011.

¹⁶ “Teen Pregnancy Prevention,” Greater Milwaukee United Way, accessed November 12, 2014, <http://www.unitedwaymilwaukee.org/TeenPregnancyPrevention>; and phone conversation with the Greater Milwaukee United Way’s Lori Holly, December 5, 2013.

¹⁷ Ron Haskins, “Mobility Is a Problem: Now What?” *Brookings Institution Up Front* (blog), December 23, 2011, at <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2011/12/23-mobility-opportunity-haskins>.

¹⁸ Lawrence M. Mead, *Expanding Work Programs for Poor Men* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2011): pp. 1-2.

¹⁹ Right on Crime endorsers include leading conservatives such as Gary Bauer, Bill Bennett, Jeb Bush, Newt Gingrich, David Keene, Ed Meese, Grover Norquist, and J.C. Watts.

²⁰ Mike Lee, “Bring Them In,” Heritage Foundation Anti-Poverty Forum, Washington, DC, November 13, 2013, transcript available at <http://www.lee.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2013/11/bring-them-in>.

²¹ W. Bradford Wilcox, *Religion, Race, and Relationships in Urban America*, Center for Marriage and Families Research Brief No. 5 (Institute for American Values, May 2007), available at <http://www.americanvalues.org/search/item.php?id=29>.