

Marriage is not as effective an antipoverty strategy as you've been led to believe

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Child poverty by parents' level of education

This chart shows the percentage of children in families living in poverty based on their parents' highest level of education.



National Center for Education Statistics

Credit: The Conversation

Brides.com predicts that 2024 will be the "[year of the proposal](#)" as engagements tick back up after a pandemic-driven slowdown.

Meanwhile, support for marriage has found new grist in recent books, including [sociologist](#) Brad Wilcox's "[Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families and Save Civilization](#)" and economist Melissa Kearney's "[The Two-Parent Privilege](#)."

Kearney's book was [hailed by economist Tyler Cowen](#) as possibly "the most important economics and policy book of this year." This is not

because it treads new ground but because, as author [Kay Hymowitz writes](#), it breaks the supposed "taboo about an honest accounting of family decline."

These developments are good news for the marriage promotion movement, which [for decades](#) has claimed that marriage supports children's well-being and combats poverty. The movement dates back at least to the U.S. Department of Labor's [Moynihan Report of 1965](#), which argued that [family structure aggravated Black poverty](#).

Forty years after the Moynihan Report, George W. Bush-era programs such as the [Healthy Marriage Initiative](#) sought to [enlist churches](#) and other community groups in an effort to channel childbearing back into marriage. These initiatives continue today, with the federally subsidized [Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs](#).

Still, nearly [30% of U.S. children](#) live in [single-parent](#) homes today, compared with 10% in 1965.

We are [law professors](#) who have written extensively about [family structure](#) and [poverty](#). We, and others, have found that there is almost no evidence that federal programs that promote marriage [have made a difference](#) in encouraging two-parent households. That's in large part because they forgo effective solutions that directly address poverty for measures that embrace the culture wars.

Marriage and social class

Today's marriage promoters claim that [marriage should not be just for elites](#). The emergence of marriage as a marker of class, they believe, is a sign of societal dysfunction.

According to census data released in 2021, 9.5% of children living with

two parents—and 7.5% with married parents—[lived below the poverty level](#), compared with 31.7% of children living with a single parent.

Kearney's argument comes down to: $1 + 1 = 2$. Two parents have more resources, including money and time to spend with children, than one. She marshals extensive research designed to show that children from married couple families are [more likely to graduate](#) from high school, complete college and earn [higher incomes as adults](#) than the children of single parents.

It is undoubtedly true that two parents—that is, two nonviolent parents with reliable incomes and cooperative behavior—have [more resources for their children](#) than one parent who has to work two jobs to pay the rent. However, this equation [does not address causation](#). In other words, parents who have stable incomes and behaviors are more likely to stay together than parents who don't.

Ethnographic studies indicate, for example, that the most common reasons [unmarried women](#) are no longer with the fathers of their children are the men's [violent behavior, infidelity](#) and [substance abuse](#).

Moreover, income volatility disproportionately affects parents who don't go to college. So while they may have more money to invest in children together than apart, when one of these parents experiences a substantial drop in income, the other parent may have to decide whether to [support the partner or the children](#) on what is often a meager income.

The impact of having single parents also plays out differently by race and class. As sociologist and researcher [Christina Cross explains](#), "Living apart from a biological parent does not carry the same cost for Black youths as for their white peers, and being raised in a two-parent family is not equally beneficial."

For example, Cross found that living in a single-mother family is less likely to affect high school completion rates for Black children than for white children. Also, Black families tend to be more embedded in extended family than white families, and this additional support system may help protect children from negative outcomes associated with single-parent households.

Making men more 'marriageable'

Kearney, to her credit, does note that economic insecurity largely explains what is happening to working-class families, and that no parent should have to tolerate violence or substance abuse. But she doubles down on the need to restore a norm of two-parent families.

Many of her policy prescriptions are sensible. She advocates for better opportunities for low-income men—to make them, in the words of [sociologist William Julius Wilson](#), "marriageable." Such policies would include wage subsidies to improve their job opportunities, investment in community colleges that provide skills training, and the removal of questions about criminal histories from job applications, so that candidates who have previously been incarcerated are not immediately disqualified.

A new marriage model

What marriage promotion efforts overlook, however, are the underlying changes in what marriage has become—both legally and practically.

The new marriage model rests on three premises.

The first is a moral command: Have sex if you want to, but don't have children until you are ready. While the shotgun marriage once served as

the primary response to unplanned pregnancy, such marriages today often derail education and careers and are [more likely to result in divorce](#) than other marriages. Research shows that lower-income women's pregnancies are much [more likely to be unplanned](#).

The second is the ability to pick a partner who will support you and assume joint responsibility for parenting. As women have attained more economic independence, they are less in need of men to raise children, particularly if their partners are insensitive or abusive. With healthy relationships, couples pick partners based on trust, commitment and equal respect. This is more difficult to do in communities with high rates of incarceration and few opportunities for stable employment.

And the third is economic and behavioral stability. Instability undermines even committed unions. Parents who wait until they find the right partner and have stable lives bring a lot more to parenting, whether they marry or not.

We believe that creating opportunities for low-income parents to reach this middle-class model is likely to be the most effective marriage promotion policy.

Economic support is key

In relationships that fall outside of these premises, $1 + 1$ often becomes $1 + -1$, which equals 0.

Being committed to a partner who can't pay speeding tickets, runs up credit card bills, comes home drunk or can't be relied on to pick up the [children](#) after school is not a recipe for success.

Economic principles suggest that businesses with more volatile income streams need a stronger capital base to withstand the downturns.

Working-class couples who face economic insecurity see commitment as similarly misguided; without a capital base, a downturn for one partner can wipe out the other.

The Biden administration's child tax credit expansion included in the [American Rescue Plan Act of 2021](#) helped cut the child poverty rate—after accounting for government assistance—to [a record low](#) that year. It did more to address child poverty than [marriage promotion efforts have ever done](#).

Researchers have described such income-support policies as the "[ultimate multipurpose policy instrument](#)." They improve the economic circumstances of single-parent families and, in doing so, may also provide greater support for two-parent relationships.

Policymakers know how to solve child poverty—and these measures are far more effective than efforts to put two married parents in every household.

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