

## Where's the Glue? Policies to Close the Family Gap

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### INTRODUCTION

When a childless couple divorces, how much should we care? If they are friends, we might feel sad for the individuals involved. The end of a romantic relationship almost always means some pain and some loss imposed on others. Equally, we might be relieved or happy that they are able to move on, perhaps to a happier relationship. Adult decisions affecting adults are one thing; it is quite another when children are affected. Hence the concern with *family* breakdown, rather than simply divorce or separation, especially among policymakers.

When addressing these issues, it is important to be as clear and specific as possible about the nature of the problem – or problems – being addressed. The “family divide” may refer to differences in rates of births outside marriage, rates of marriage, duration of marriage, rates of single parenthood, family stability, family structure, rates of divorce, parental engagement after divorce, parenting styles and investments, just to mention just a few. The gap can also be examined through the lenses of income, education, race, age, geography, and so on. Which gap, or gaps, are the ones that really count?

Answering that question requires us to answer another one first. What are we worried about? Poverty? For children, or adults too? Child development? Moral goodness? Well-being? Health? Rates of intergenerational mobility? Public expenditure? Given the strong interconnections between many of these, it may seem like splitting hairs, but unless we have a clear grasp of what problem we are trying to solve, and what success will look like, policy is likely to follow a scattergun approach and be less effective as a result.

I argue that we should care about family gaps because we care about poverty and inequality, and because we care about intergenerational mobility. Policy interventions may influence both of these, but more often aim at one more than the other.

I argue for policies of two kinds with regard to family stability, applicable to the United States and most European countries: Prevention and mitigation.

- *Preventing* family instability means helping families stay together in the first place, through policies that reduce unintended pregnancy rates, raise skills (especially through quality vocational training), and promote “family-friendly” work opportunities.
- *Mitigating* the family instability means attempting to limit the impact of family breakdown on the life chances of children. Mitigation can be achieved by reducing material poverty, supporting better parenting, and enhancing learning opportunities. Here, the need is for a “One Generation” approach, largely focused on children’s outcomes.

I conclude with a note of humility. The reach of public policy is necessarily limited here. Sex, love, marriage, child-rearing; these are intimate, emotional, personal, and complex issues. By comparison to family policy, foreign policy is a breeze. The forces influencing changes in family life are tectonic, a combination of evolving social norms and public morality, and the shape and structure of the labor market. Still, there are policies that can and should be pursued. Strong families are not a quaint relic of the past. They are a necessary ingredient of a better future.

### *The “Family Gap”*

Other contributors have detailed key trends in family life, especially the rise in nonmarital births, single parenthood, and increased relationship turnover. In the United States, four in ten children are born to unmarried parents; among women under 30, the number is closer to half. In most cases the mother is cohabiting; but only a minority of cohabitees are still with their partner by the time the child reaches five (McLanahan and Sawhill 2015). Two thirds have split up before their child reaches age 12, compared with a quarter of married parents (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008).

The “stability gap” between cohabiting and married couples can be seen in all countries and at every level of education (DeRose et al. 2017). In Norway, for example, children born to highly educated cohabiting mothers are twice as likely to see their parents’ relationship end before the age of 12 as those born to highly educated married mothers (17 percent vs. 8 percent).

While there is a stability gap between married and cohabiting couples, there is also stability gap by social background. Rates of lone parenthood vary widely by education, race, and income. College graduates are unlikely to become single parents, compared to those with less education (Reeves 2017). Six in ten

black children are in a single-parent family, almost double the rate for white and Hispanic children (Reeves and Rodrigue 2015a). The “retreat from marriage” has been much more rapid among less-educated, poorer Americans (Reeves 2014b).

Indeed, on every measure of family stability, including rates of unintended pregnancies and births, marriage, single parenthood, and divorce, there are wide, and in many cases, widening, gaps by education, income, and background. Trends in poverty, income inequality, or intergenerational mobility cannot be properly examined in isolation from trends in family life.

#### REASON TO CARE 1: POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

The economic circumstances of families are influenced by a wide range of factors, including rates of employment, levels of wages, welfare eligibility, job security, capacity to save, housing costs, and so on. One very simple factor – how many adults are in the household – has a significant impact. Two (or more) adults means two potential earners and two potential carers. Two adults living together reap big savings, since one home is cheaper than two. The way the federal government defines poverty gives some idea of that difference. Dispensing with the idea that either the mother or father has to be labeled the “head” of the household, it is clear that, other things equal, two heads are better than one.

The federal poverty levels, flawed in many ways though they are, put some numbers to these assumptions. The federal poverty level (FPL) for a single parent with two children in 2015 was \$20,090, while for a family of two adults and two children, the FPL was \$24,250 (US Department of Health and Human Services 2015). In other words, the additional adult only has to bring an additional income of just over \$4,000 a year to enable the family to get above the official poverty line. It is no surprise then that almost 60 percent of children in poverty are being raised by a single mother, or that the household income of married parents is higher than for single parents (Entmacher et al. 2014; Thomas and Sawhill 2015).

From an economic point of view, the “two heads better than one” point is pretty obvious. A more interesting question is why the household income of married parents is so much higher than of cohabiting parents. Three main possibilities present themselves: (1) they are older, so have higher earnings; (2) their earnings are higher for reasons other than age (e.g., education, hours, or motivation); (3) their rates of employment are higher, with a higher chance of either of them working, of both working, and of one or both working full-time.

It looks like all of these factors play a role; but rates of employment are a big part of the story. Married women with children have increased their labor force participation rate faster than any other group, including single mothers (Engemann and Owyang, 2006). In 1970, about half of married couples with at least one child younger than 18 in the household had two paychecks coming into the home. By 2015, this had increased to two thirds (Parker and Livingston 2017). The model of twenty-first century marriage is of two breadwinners.

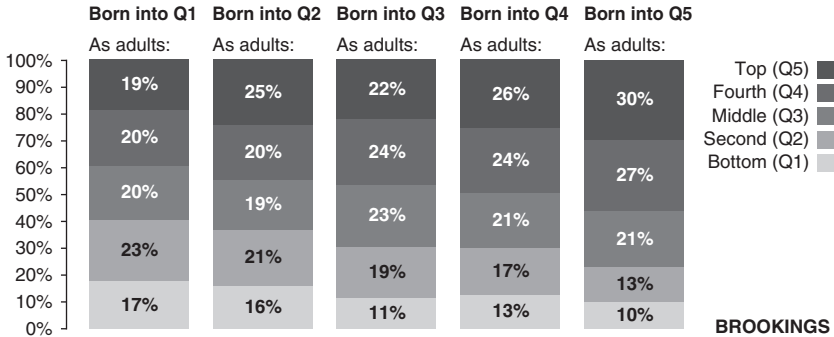
Sawhill and Karpilow (2013) highlight the strong link between household poverty and household structure. They model the impact on incomes for families in bottom third of the income distribution from various “what if” scenarios: More employment, higher wages, greater educational attainment, and more two-adult households. They estimate that the average single parent would see a 32 percent increase in her income if she were joined by another adult – far and away the biggest impact they report. None of this is to suggest, of course, that family structure is the principal cause of poverty, let alone that policies to promote family stability are the necessary response; indeed, the causes of poverty – for example lower education, poorer health, higher risks of incarceration – are also likely, other things being equal, to reduce marriageability and stability. However, it is fair to say that examining trends in poverty without taking into account changes in family structure results in an incomplete picture.

#### REASON TO CARE 2: LACK OF UPWARD INTERGENERATIONAL MOBILITY

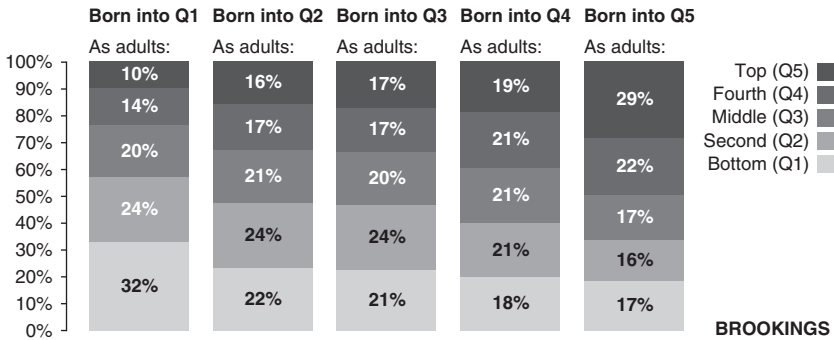
At any particular time, the structure of family life will, then, influence rates of income poverty, and by extension income inequality. However, there are longer-term concerns, in particular, family stability has a strong influence on life chances and therefore on rates of intergenerational mobility. It may take a village to raise a child, but it takes a family, too.

Children of divorce have lower rates of both absolute and relative income mobility compared to kids whose mothers are continuously married between birth and nineteenth birthday. Children born to unmarried mothers have lower rates of relative mobility than kids of continuously married parents, though there are not significant differences in absolute mobility (Deleire and Lopoo 2010). Simple descriptive differences in relative mobility patterns for children raised in different family types are striking, as a number of studies (including my own) have shown (Reeves and Venator 2014), as seen in Figure 10.1.

(a) Growing up with a continuously married mother:



(b) Growing up with a non-continuously married mother:



(c) Growing up with a never married mother:

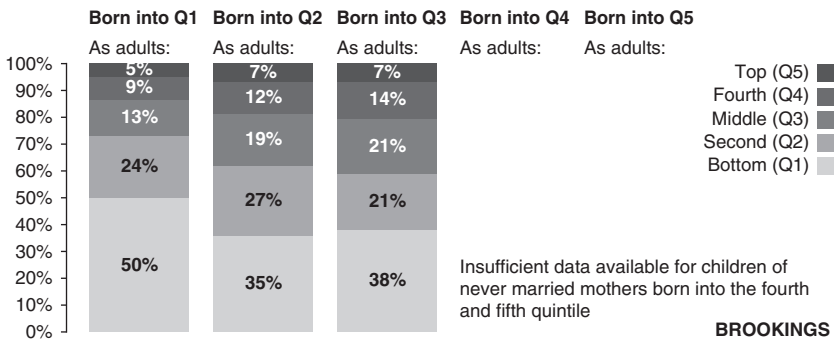


FIGURE 10.1 Intergenerational mobility by wealth quintile at birth and family inequality

There are also quite big differences in the numbers of children falling into these three categories: 11 percent are raised by mothers who remain unmarried throughout their childhood (as far as our data constraints allow us to say), 39 percent by a mother married for at least part of their childhood, and 50 percent by continuously married mothers (Reeves and Venator 2014). The dismal mobility prospects of the first group – half of those born into the bottom quintile staying there – reflect a series of disadvantages that reach well beyond material poverty.

Children living with a single mother score lower on academic achievement tests, get lower grades, have a higher incidence of behavioral problems, and experience a greater tendency toward drug use and criminal activity (Autor and Wasserman 2013; McLanahan 2004). The impact of family breakdown appears to be greater when fathers lose contact. Daughters are more likely to have sex at a younger age and to become pregnant as a teenager (Ellis et al. 2003). Boys seem to be influenced most strongly by the absence of a father. Boys from single-mother-headed households are 25 percentage points more likely to be suspended in the eighth grade than girls from these households, compared to a 10 percentage point gap between boys and girls from households with two biological parents. Boys are also more likely to engage in delinquent behavior during adolescence and early adulthood if raised in single-parent household with no father in lives (Autor and Wasserman 2013). In his groundbreaking research drawing on administrative tax data, Professor Raj Chetty and his team show that rates of upward mobility are lowest in the areas with the highest proportion of single parents (Chetty et al. 2014a).

There is an important distinction here between family structure and family stability. What seems to harm children the most is a lack of stability, that is, a changing composition of the family unit, as different adults move in and out during childhood. As Manning (2015) concludes after a review of child health, “the family experience that has a consistent and negative implication for child health in both cohabiting and married parent families is family instability.” However, certain family structures, namely marriage, are associated with greater stability. Married couples are very much more likely to stay together, and it is this family stickiness that provides a positive and stable environment for children, as seen in Figure 10.2.

It certainly looks as though marriage both expresses and enables the commitment of parents to raise their children together. The decision to marry in the twenty-first century is closely connected to a decision to become parents. As I have written elsewhere, for many married couples, especially the most-educated, marriage provides an important commitment device for shared child-rearing (Reeves 2014b). It should not be surprising then that most

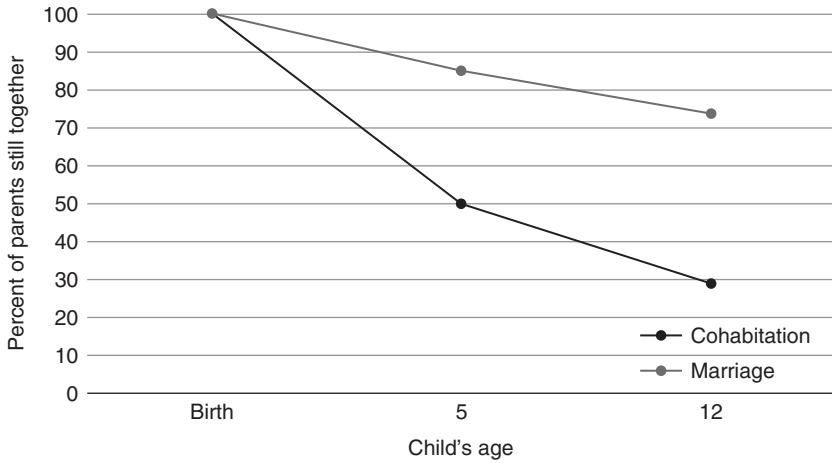


FIGURE 10.2 Staying together: married vs. cohabiting parents

pregnancies within marriages are planned, and that most pregnancies outside marriage are not.

Stability is more likely to come through marriage; but marriage and stable families are not the same thing. Take J.D. Vance as an example. In his best-selling book *Hillbilly Elegy*, he describes the chaos of his early childhood, with a drug-addicted mother perpetually moving between homes and partners (Vance 2016). In the end, he finds some family stability: With his grandmother (who he calls Mamaw):

Now consider the sum of my life after I moved in with Mamaw permanently. At the end of tenth grade, I live with Mamaw, in her house, with no one else. At the end of eleventh grade, I live with Mamaw, in her house, with no one else. At the end of twelfth grade, I live with Mamaw, in her house, with no one else . . . What I remember most is that I was happy – I no longer feared the school bell at the end of the day, I knew where I’d be living the next month, and no one’s romantic decisions affected my life. And out of that came the opportunities I’ve had for the past twelve years.

Mamaw becomes, in effect, Vance’s single parent, having separated from her own husband. The point here is not that marriage does not matter, but that it matters most as a means to the end of family stability. “No one’s romantic decisions affected my life.” In a stable marriage, the romantic decision-making predates the arrival of the children.

Not all marriages are stable; not all stable homes feature a married couple. From an inequality perspective, it is striking that marriage is now strongest

among the upper middle class, with college graduates much less likely to have a child outside marriage, more likely to be married, and more likely to make their marriages last (Blau and Winkler 2017). Although the most liberal on general social issues, including same-sex marriage, college graduates are now the most conservative on divorce (Reeves 2014b).

Upper middle-class families tend to be quite stable, but for low-income and, increasingly, middle-income Americans, family formation has become a more complex business. More parents now have multiple relationships while raising their children, a trend the sociologist Andrew Cherlin (2010) describes as a “Marriage-go-Round.” As Sawhill (2014) puts it in her book, *Generation Unbound: Drifting into Sex and Parenthood without Marriage*, “family formation is a new fault line in the American class structure.”

The rising disparity in earnings for both men and women is therefore amplified by class gaps in the chances of being in a relationship where resources and risks can be shared, but highly educated Americans are not just more likely to be married, they are more likely to be married *to each other*. This process, with the stunningly unromantic label of “assortative mating,” means that college grads marry college grads. To the extent that cognitive ability is reflected in educational attainment and passed on genetically, assortative mating is likely to further concentrate advantage. As the British sociologist Michael Young (1958) put it in his book *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, “Love is biochemistry’s chief assistant.”

The class divide in family formation, structure and stability reflects and reinforces the opportunity gap vividly outlined by writers such as Robert Putnam (2015) in *Our Kids* and Charles Murray (2012) in *Coming Apart*.

#### WHAT TO DO 1: NARROWING THE GAP

So, what to do? The editors of this volume have asked me to “present policy solutions and cultural changes that will narrow the growing family divide in the West or minimize its effects on children.” Nothing too difficult, then, but their framing is helpful, since it makes clear the difference between “policy solutions” and “cultural changes,” as well as between those that “narrow the family divide” and those that “minimize its effects on children.”

First, I will address some possible approaches toward narrowing the family gap, both in terms of policy and culture. My focus here is on the US policy context, though many of the lessons and dilemmas are more broadly applicable. In the next section, I will turn to some options for minimizing its effects on children.



One of the reasons policymakers often shy away from discussions of family structure and stability is that both issues feel beyond the reach of policy. The changes affecting family life are not only economic, but also cultural, as social norms regarding sex, gender relations and child-rearing have altered. Equally, economic shifts, for example in the earning power of women, have altered cultural norms around the timing of marriage, premarital sex, and divorce.

However, there are a number of ways in which policy could help to encourage and support family stability, especially in terms of reducing unintended pregnancy and childbearing; improving the quality of education and training for young adults not headed to four-year colleges; reducing the unpredictability of work schedules; and helping parents to balance paid work and family life through paid leave arrangements.

### *Supporting Family Planning*

The vast majority of Americans become sexually active before marriage: To be precise, 95 percent compared to 80 percent in the 1970s. One in three has had at least six sexual partners before marrying (Daugherty and Copen 2016). Social norms on this issue have evolved even more quickly than behavior. Most Americans aged between 15 and 35 (58 percent of women and 68 percent of men) agree with the following statement: “It is all right for unmarried 18 year olds to have sexual intercourse if they have strong affection for each other” (Daugherty and Copen 2016).

Sex (between a man and woman) usually holds the promise – or threat – of resulting in pregnancy. Of course, effective contraception can prevent this, but not enough couples are being “planful,” to use Paula England’s phrase, about their fertility (England et al. 2016). There are now highly effective, convenient forms of contraception available, known in wonky circles as LARCs (long-acting reversible contraceptives), but only a minority use them. Over a five-year period, among those relying solely on condoms for contraception, 63 percent will get pregnant. For women using the best IUDs, the rate is just 1 percent (Reeves 2016), but progress toward greater promotion of LARCs among policymakers and health professionals has been slow. As a result, among sexually active women aged 15 to 24, just 10 percent use a LARC method of contraception. By comparison, around 20 percent of women in their early 20s report using an illegal drug in the previous month (US Department of Health and Human Services 2014). When there are twice as many young women using an illicit drug as using an effective contraceptive, we can be sure there is room for improvement.

We care because unintended childbearing is significantly associated with poorer child outcomes (Haskins, Sawhill, and McLanahan 2015; Sawhill 2015). It is hard to read Robert Putnam's book *Our Kids* and not notice the recurring pattern of chaotic starts to parenthood (Putnam 2015). Darleen got pregnant two months into a relationship with Joe, her boss at Pizza Hut. "It didn't mean to happen," she reports. "It just did. It was planned and kind of not planned." David, an 18-year-old in Port Clinton, Ohio (Putnam's home town), becomes a father. "It wasn't planned," David says. "It just kind of happened."

Given the rapid liberalization of social norms regarding sex but slow take-up of effective contraception, it should be no surprise to learn that 50 percent of pregnancies are unintended (Coleman and Garratt 2016), or that 60 percent of births to single women under age 30 are unplanned (Sawhill 2014). The high rate of unintended pregnancies and births, especially among women in their 20s, has serious implications for poverty, inequality, public spending, housing, and health care provision. There is a strong class dimension to this story too; women from affluent families are more likely to use contraception, much more likely to use the most effective kinds, and very much less likely to have an unintended pregnancy or birth (Reeves and Venator 2015). One reason for this is that young women from affluent families are more likely to be in regular contact with health providers, who often prescribe contraception for other health issues such as menstrual cramps. Although hard to pinpoint empirically, there is no doubt that unintended pregnancy and childbearing – what Sawhill and Venator (2015) call "drifting" into parenthood – is a very big factor influencing family stability. When a couple become parents by mistake, which is true of most cohabiting couples, it is little surprise that their relationship is less likely to endure than those who plan, as seen in Figure 10.3.

Ensuring access to affordable, effective contraception is the most powerful pro-family policy available. For a start, this means ensuring equal access to family planning services. Even if the Affordable Care Act (ACA) is repealed in the United States (which seems highly uncertain at the time of going to press) we must hope legislators see the value of this element of the plan. If not, geographic inequalities within the United States may deepen as many states are likely to bolster their own efforts in this area.

It is worth noting here that if all states had implemented Medicaid expansion under the ACA – at a cost to the federal government of around \$952 billion over ten years – millions more low-income women would have been able to access family planning services more easily (Holahan et al. 2012; Ranji, Bair, and Salganicoff 2016). (Vice President Mike Pence, as Governor of Indiana, was one of ten Republicans accepting Medicaid expansion under the ACA.)

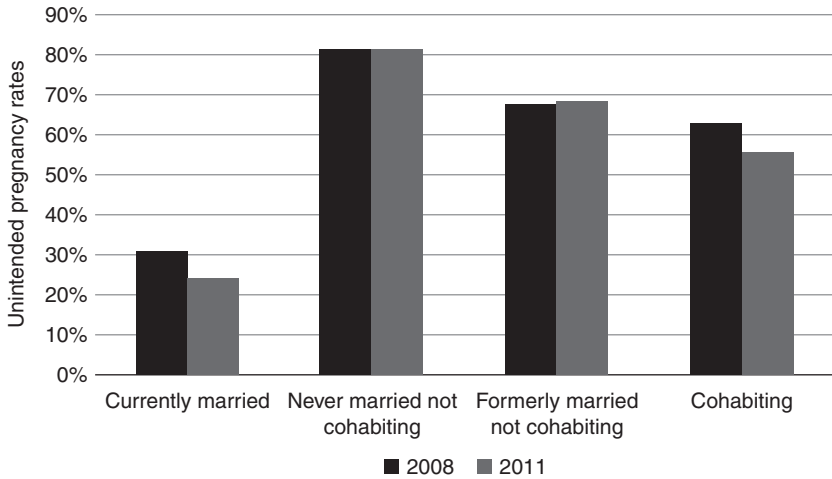


FIGURE 10.3 Unintended pregnancy rates are much higher among unmarried couples

There is also a need for greater awareness-raising and training among health professionals. Indeed, staff training alone seems to have a significant impact on the take-up of LARCs, according to a randomized control trial. The work of organizations like *UpStream* training providers in states including Ohio, New York, Texas, and Delaware is extremely promising.<sup>1</sup> Other steps can be taken to broaden access, including ensuring sufficient supplies in health clinics, simplifying billing procedures, and providing same-day service.

What is most needed here is a cultural shift, specifically with regard to responsibility around childbearing. Premarital sex among adults is now the norm, both in terms of attitudes and behavior. Nine in ten US adults under 44 now have sex before they marry (NSFG 2016). What is needed is a cultural shift toward more planfulness in childbearing, as Sawhill (2014) argues:

The old norm was “don’t have a child outside of marriage.” The new norm should be “don’t have a child before you want one and are ready to be a parent.” If children were wanted and planned for, they would be better off.

I think this is exactly right. The key is to ensure that the liberalization of attitudes toward sex does not lead to a liberalization of attitudes toward the

<sup>1</sup> For a description of UpStream’s approach, see [www.upstream.org/impact/](http://www.upstream.org/impact/) (accessed March 22, 2017).

moral responsibility to plan when, how, and with whom we bring children into the world. Casual sex may be fine; casual childbearing is not.

Here the popular media is likely to be much more important than policymakers or pundits. As work by Kearney and Levine (2015) shows, MTV's *16 and Pregnant* had a measurable impact on teen pregnancy rates.

There are, nonetheless, ways policymakers can nudge cultural change along toward more responsible parenting, and use of effective contraception. Sawhill and Venator (2014) propose social marketing campaigns to increase awareness of pregnancy risks and to inform individuals about the most effective forms of contraception, modeled on Iowa's "Avoid the Stork," Colorado's "Prevention First," and other similar initiatives. Specifically, they propose that \$100 million a year of Title X money be invested through the Office of Population Affairs to state-led campaigns. On fairly conservative assumptions, they predict \$5 of savings from each \$1 spent on well-crafted campaigns.

### *Skills and Education: Not Just BAs*

Family poverty and instability are strongly associated with employment status, security, and wages, which in turn are greatly, and increasingly, tied to levels of education and skill. The United States is particularly weak in the area of vocational training, compared for example to most European countries. Germany provides a particularly strong model. One important step forward would be to elevate the status of vocational postsecondary learning. The obsessive focus on four-year degrees is now starting to do some real harm, as inexperienced, unprepared students are taking on debt in order to attend low-quality, often profit-seeking institutions. Many drop out, meaning that they end up with the downsides of debt without the upsides of higher earnings potential (Akers and Chingos 2016).

Community colleges, which have so much potential as an engine of upward mobility, remain "America's forgotten institutions," in Darrell West's (2010) phrase. "Two-year colleges are asked to educate those students with the greatest needs, using the least funds, and in increasingly separate and unequal institutions," was the conclusion of an expert task force assembled by The Century Foundation (2013). Fewer than half of those enrolling in community colleges make it through their first year. Six in ten community college students need some extra developmental or remedial education when they arrive (Complete College America 2012).

Given the growing economic, racial, and social divide between two-year and four-year institutions in the United States, there is a strong case for some Title I-style federal investments in community colleges, increasing funds for

those working with the most challenging students. Other important steps include simplifying and streamlining the pathway through community college, as Thomas Bailey, Shanna Jeggars, and Davis Jenkins (2015) argue in their book, *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (Reeves and Rodrigue 2015b); improving transfer options from two-year to four-year colleges (Reeves and Rodrigue 2016); and providing more academic support (most community colleges are able to fund one academic adviser per 800 to 1,200 students). (Bailey, Jeggars, and Jenkins 2015).

Apprenticeships offer another promising alternative pathway to traditional college-based education, especially for young men. Improving earnings potential may increase the chances of family stability. Providing more vocationally oriented options at high school is a fruitful avenue too; it is striking that the only educational intervention shown to increase marriage rates among men is Career Academies (Kemple and Willner 2008). These typically work with around 200 students from grades nine to twelve, and combine academic and technical learning around a specific career theme. They also establish partnerships with local employers to provide work-based learning opportunities.

### *Family-Friendly Jobs*

Many households now need two incomes; and huge changes in women's education opportunities, aspirations, and labor market participation have rendered the old breadwinner-male plus homemaker-wife model almost obsolete. Most families need to juggle paid work and raising children, but the workplace is still often constructed around previous norms. As a result both men and women can become stretched. Very often policy is focused on extending the school day, or providing child care at unusual hours, essentially attempting to create job-friendly families, rather than family-friendly jobs.

Two potential areas for policy illustrate the potential for promoting more family-friendly jobs. Paid leave for both mothers and fathers would ease the pressure on families, especially when children are young. There is some bipartisan interest in this issue, and right now, the United States is the only advanced country without a national paid leave policy. President Trump's proposals in this area are restricted to women. Senator Marco Rubio has proposed a 25 percent tax credit for companies that provide at least four weeks of paid leave to employees. A joint AEI-Brookings working group on this issue has recommended a new federally mandated right to paid leave. (AEI-Brookings 2017).

Another area of potential reform is in relation to the unpredictability of hours for paid work, especially in lower paid jobs. Four in ten hourly workers aged 26 to 32 learn their schedules less than a week in advance, according to a study by Lambert, Fugiel, and Henly (2014) at the University of Chicago, drawing on the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). Half of them have children. Among the 74 percent of workers who report weekly fluctuations in hours, average hours varied by 49 percent of their “usual” weekly hours. A 10-hour week can follow a 30-hour week. Half have no say over their hours.

Policy-makers have some ideas about stabilizing hourly employees' schedules, some of which have been put into practice. San Francisco passed a bill requiring employers to set schedules at least two weeks in advance (Ludden 2014). Similar legislation has previously been introduced into the US Congress (Kasperkevic 2014). Some business-owners oppose these efforts, and successful legislation will have to balance the interests of employees and firms. Policy-makers who are serious about family stability, though, have to be serious about job stability too.

It is worth mentioning here one area of policy that I have not argued for: Direct marriage promotion. This is partly because of a liberal sensibility about governments lecturing adults on how to conduct their lives, but also partly because such efforts rarely work. In the case of marriage promotion, extensive evaluations of various projects funded under the “Building Strong Families” (BSF) initiative have shown little if any impact. The summary of the evaluation reads as follows: “After three years BSF had no effect on the quality of couples' relationships and did not make couples more likely to stay together.” As Haskins (2014) concludes:

Given the resources invested in the Bush marriage initiative and the programs' quite limited success, there is little reason to be optimistic that programs providing marriage education and social services on a large scale will significantly affect marriage rates.

Of course, in just the same way that public individuals and institutions can use their voices to promote contraceptive use and responsible childbearing, they could also send out a much stronger pro-marriage message, to “preach what they practice,” in Charles Murray's (2012) phrase. This was in fact one of the recommendations of a AEI-Brookings working group on poverty and opportunity (AEI-Brookings Working Group 2015).

My own view is that the way to promote marriage is to promote the things that predict and bolster marriage, rather than as a head-on goal of policy. Delayed, responsible childbearing; greater economic security and resources through better education; and more family-friendly workplaces. These will likely lead to more marriage, and to more stable families, which is what we are really after.

WHAT TO DO 2: MITIGATING THE EFFECTS OF THE FAMILY  
GAP ON CHILDREN

The second part of my brief is to examine policies and cultural changes that could “minimize the effects of the family divide on children.” There have always been big differences in family background by social class, but these have become bigger, and likely more consequential, too. Given that so many children are being raised in families of different shapes and sizes, and with different levels of stability and resources, a key goal for policy is to reduce the impact of family instability, or lack of familial resources on the life chances of children. Otherwise family instability simply repeats itself, generation after generation.

Strategies to mitigate the effects of the family gap fall into three broad categories: Increase material resources to unmarried parents; improve parenting skills especially among the less educated; and enhance learning opportunities for children outside the home.

*Enhance Material Resources*

One reason children in single-parent, or cohabiting, or unstable households do less well is simply that they are more likely to be poor. A straightforward solution then is to give these families more money, through transfer payments, tax credits, higher minimum wages, or some combination of all of these. Great care however needs to be taken to structure support in a way that does not reduce incentives for paid work or for family formation.

The big question is how far extra money will go in producing better outcomes for the children, especially given that any increases are likely to be fairly modest. The evidence here is that cash does make a difference. Studies of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), for example, show that in families receiving higher payments, test scores go up (Duncan, Morris, and Rodrigues 2011). Even college enrolment numbers seem to be positively affected (Manoli and Turner 2015). Russ Whitehurst summarizes a series of studies that link increased EITC payments to the performance in school of children in the home, and estimates that, for each \$1,000 spent on a higher credit, bigger increases in test scores can be observed than in most studies of pre-K education or smaller class sizes (Whitehurst 2016), as seen in Figure 10.4.

These effects are not trivial, but they are not large either. Given the huge differences in outcomes between children from different backgrounds, the best we can hope for is a modest lessening of the disadvantages faced by children in poorer homes. It also seems likely that there will be considerable

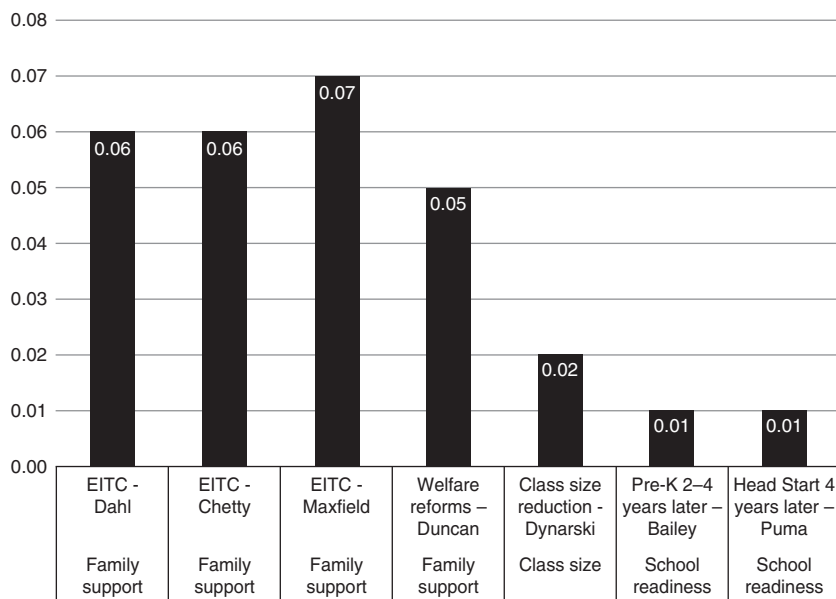


FIGURE 10.4 Impact on test scores of low-income children during the school years: reports in effect size of \$1,000 of public expenditure on family support, class size reduction, or school readiness

heterogeneity in the relationship between additional income and child outcomes. EITC recipients, by definition, are active in the labor market, and while far from comfortable, financially speaking, they do not make up the poorest household, which typically lack wage income. There is however, some evidence that access to food stamps is associated with better health and, at least for women, better long-term economic outcomes (Hoynes, Schanzenbach, and Almond 2016).

### *Improve Parenting*

To say that children are deeply influenced by their parents, for good and for ill, is to state the obvious. In earlier work with Kimberly Howard on the parenting gap, I showed stark inequalities in parent quality across class and family structure. Children from under-resourced, less stable families are more likely to have parents who are struggling to parent well, which hinders their opportunities (Reeves and Howard 2013). Waldfogel and Washbrook (2011) estimate that parenting behavior (including maternal sensitivity, reading to a child, out-of-home activities, parenting style, and expectations) explains about 40 percent



of the income-related gaps in cognitive outcomes for children at age 4. There are large gaps on measures of parenting by income, education, race, and family structure (and of course these strongly overlap with each other). Focusing specifically on the last of these in Waldfogel and Washbrook's data, family structure, shows that the odds of being raised by a strong or weak parent (in fact, in these data, mother) varies significantly across household types. Single or cohabiting mothers are significantly more likely to fall into the weakest parents category. However, controlling for other variables, including income and education, the specific effect of being unmarried drops sharply. This suggests that it is the circumstances and traits that are associated with being an unmarried mother that are important, not just the fact of being unmarried itself. Nonetheless, improving the skills of parents, if this is possible, would go a long way to mitigating some of effects of the family gap on child outcomes.

Is it possible, though? Perhaps. Some home visiting programs, aimed at strengthening parenting, have shown positive results (Reeves and Rodrigue 2015c). Initiatives targeting reading, such as the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPI) program, seem to improve literacy among children. For example, the DC Briya/Mary's Center program may be effective in giving parents skills and building clusters of opportunity in the mold of the Harlem Children's Zone (Butler, Grabinsky, and Masi 2015). This is a policy area where not only constant, high-quality evaluation is required but there also looks to be some real potential. Early indications are that the Trump administration is turning away from funding for home visiting. This would be premature and almost certainly counterproductive in terms of promoting family life.

Here too the cultural side is likely to have much stronger effects than policy. There are some signs that in some dimensions at least, such as reading to children, the parenting gap is beginning to close, as less-advantaged parents "catch up," resulting in some narrowing of school-readiness gaps, too (Reardon and Portilla 2016). That parenting styles diverge by class is hardly news. In recent decades, however, time investments in parenting toward the top of the distribution have increased, widening the gap. At the same time, the importance of parenting is now being appreciated more broadly, altering behavior more generally, and potentially narrowing the gap again (Ryan et al. 2015).

### *Enhance Learning Opportunities for Children Outside the Home*

If children are negatively affected by their home and family circumstances, the natural inclination for policymakers is to try and improve those circumstances,

for instance, through greater redistribution of money or by upskilling parents, as described above. However, it may be that mitigation for family circumstances will lie outside the family, in the shape of better formal education, access to mentors, stronger and safer communities, and so on.

Here I restrict my attention to two potential areas for nonfamily interventions to help mitigate the family gap: More intensive schooling and better communities. Schools can extend the length of their day, and the length of their year. Many charter schools do so. In many cases here the goal is, either explicitly or implicitly, to keep the children *away* from their families and neighborhoods. Going further still, some schools catering to students from very disadvantaged backgrounds have become boarding schools: The SEED schools in Baltimore, Washington, DC, and Miami provide one example, though there are many others. These schools are expensive, for obvious reasons; and research suggests a higher rate of return from extended-day charters (Curto and Fryer 2014). The effects are not trivial, though: "We show that attending a SEED school increases achievement by 0.211 standard deviations in reading and .229 standard deviations in math, per year of attendance." Boarding schools are likely to be most valuable to students from the most-disadvantaged, unstable backgrounds, but so far, little evaluation of impact for students of different types has been undertaken.

Another way to improve the nonfamily environment is through housing policy, and specifically through programs that allow and encourage low-income families to move to more affluent neighborhoods. Recent studies suggest that Moving to Opportunity (MTO), which provides vouchers that enable families to move, have positive long-term effects for children. Specifically, moving to a less poor neighborhood in childhood (i.e., before the age of 13) increased future annual income by the mid-twenties by roughly \$3,500 (31 percent), enhanced marriage rates (by 2 percentage points), and raised both college attendance rates (by 2.5 percentage points) and quality of college attended. The age of the child moved was a critical factor: Moving to a less poor neighborhood in the teenage years had no significant impact on later earnings or other adult outcomes (Rothwell 2015).

The causal factors of these improved outcomes are inevitably hard to tease out. However, the wealth of sociological research on the importance of place suggests that a mixture of school quality, peer effects, social capital, physical security, and safety all likely played a part. Children of single parents benefit from moving to an area where they are the exception, rather than the rule. One important point about the MTO is that the short-term impact on the adults looked to be virtually nonexistent; it was the next generation who really benefited from the move.

## CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR JUDICIOUS POLICY

Wide gaps in the formation, structure, and stability of families contribute to the broader problems of inequality and poverty, and lack of upward intergenerational mobility. Weak families make for less equal societies, but these gaps are the result of deep, broad cultural shifts, many of which bring good news as well as bad news along with them. More liberal attitudes toward gender roles, sexuality, and sex have brought advantages, but for many they have also challenged family stability. Old norms about sex, gender, marriage, and work have weakened. New norms that promote both gender equality and family stability are developing, especially among more educated couples, but too slowly (Reeves and Sawhill 2015).

Public policy has a role to play, in both narrowing the family gap, and in mitigating its effects. Various strategies, from better contraception to more housing vouchers, have been discussed here, but we should be realistic. Public policy can only reach so far. Social norms are where most of the action is. There are reasons for optimism. Some traditional norms – for example, with regard to premarital sex, or specific gender roles – have evolved, but the fears of a descent into hedonistic, expressive individualism have not, by and large, been realized. Especially among the most-educated, affluent and powerful, marriage, adapted to gender egalitarianism, is if anything stronger than ever. The potential to improve family planning, with the emergence of LARCs, is very great – if the norms standing in the way of their adoption evolve quickly enough.

Restoring outdated family models is not the way to reduce the family gap. It is an old joke that conservatives want to bring back the family of the 1950s and liberals want to bring back the labor market of the 1950s. If this were true, both sides would be set for disappointment. That world is not coming back. (Though it is noteworthy that most of those who supported President Trump believe the United States has become a worse society since the 1950s.) Instead, we need to craft policies and support the development of a culture that is pro-family, without being anti-modern. Responsible childbearing, committed parenting, stable families – these are not antiquated ideas. Rather, they are necessary ingredients for giving children a strong start in life, which is more important than ever.