Building Evidence to Strengthen Families: Charting a Research Agenda

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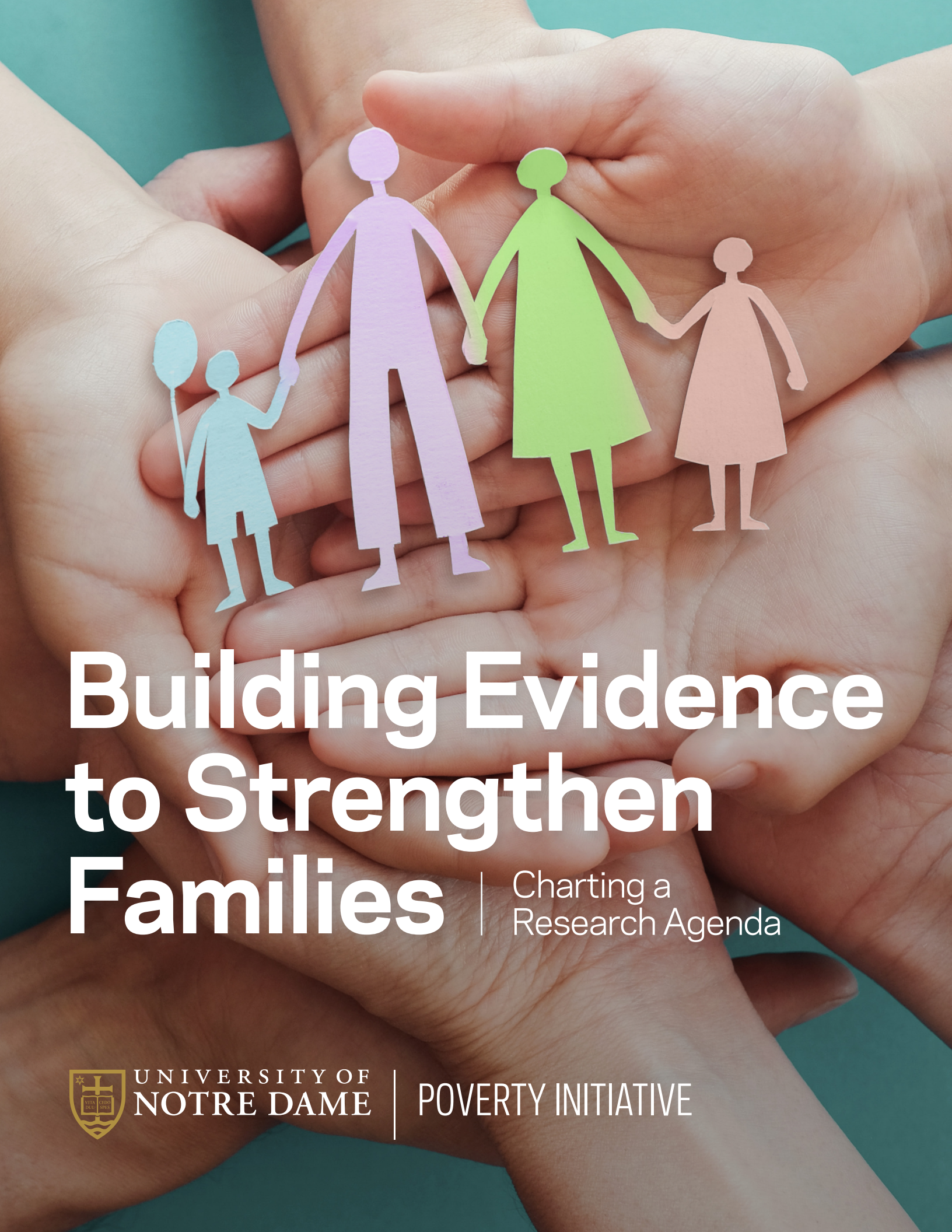

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Charting a Research Agenda

UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME | POVERTY INITIATIVE

Building Evidence to Strengthen Families

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Families are the foundational unit of society. Families shape our economic circumstances, our character, and the way we experience the world. Children's outcomes in life are profoundly shaped by their family and home experiences. Children who have the benefit of two parents in their home tend to have more highly resourced, enriching, stable childhoods, and they consequently do better in school and have fewer behavioral challenges. Social science research shows very clearly that children who grow up in stable married-parent homes go on to complete more years of education, earn more in the workforce, and have a greater likelihood of being married. And yet, the share of American children growing up with the benefit of two parents in their home is strikingly low.

Nearly 40 percent of American children now live outside a married-parent home, reflecting a tremendous and consequential change in the way children are being raised. Roughly 20 percent of American children live with only their mother, with no second parent figure in the home. Children whose parents do not have four-year college degrees are substantially less likely to have the benefits of a married-parent home, and non-college-educated parents are substantially more likely to bear the burden of managing a household and raising children without a spouse. This family gap contributes to class gaps in childhood resources, experiences, and outcomes. It simultaneously reflects and exacerbates inequality. It undermines social mobility. It is part of a cycle that will have to be disrupted to break the cycle of poverty and shrink class gaps in opportunities for people to thrive and flourish.

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This research agenda will inform the initial scope of work for the Strengthening Families Research Initiative being launched in 2025 in the Department of Economics at the University of Notre Dame under the leadership of Professor Melissa S. Kearney. The Initiative is dedicated to advancing scholarly understanding and developing practical, evidence-based approaches to supporting families and promoting widespread economic security.

The Notre Dame Strengthening Families Initiative aims to advance research around this issue with the goal of building and elevating evidence about how to strengthen families to promote economic security and human flourishing. An extensive body of evidence from across academic disciplines shows that in general, children do best when they grow up in a stable, married-parent home. This paper lays out an initial framework for a research agenda focused on building evidence about how to promote stable, married-parent families and how to improve family outcomes for those outside such an arrangement.

We are guided by a focus on poverty alleviation and the promotion of economic security. Government programs aimed at reducing poverty among single-parent families are important, and we strongly favor such efforts. But government redistribution is largely insufficient when it comes to addressing the resource deficits of single-parent families. Efforts are needed to help strengthen families.[1] Below, we provide relevant context for a research initiative centered around the economics of families. We then propose a set of guiding questions to shape an initial research agenda.

1 Ample research exists on the effectiveness of programs aimed at reducing income poverty among single-mother families, both in the US and across high-income countries. See, for instance, the vast number of studies referred to and summarized in the Annals volume "Single-Parent Families and Public Policy in High-Income Countries," edited by Gornick et al. (2022).

The Challenge

The share of US children living with married parents has declined dramatically over the past four decades.

In 1980, 77 percent of children in the US lived with married parents; by 2023, that share had fallen to 63 percent.[2] Twenty percent are living with an unpartnered mother, 8 percent are living with one biological parent and that parent's partner (who may or may not be the child's other biological parent), about 5 percent are living with an unpartnered dad, and the rest are living with neither parent.[3] Furthermore, while some unpartnered-mother households have another adult in the household—for example, a child's grandparent or aunt—a majority of them (about 66 percent) do not.

The decline in married-parent homes for children has happened predominantly outside the college-educated class, both reflecting and exacerbating economic insecurity among less educated parents. In 2023, 84 percent of children whose mothers had four years of college lived with married parents, a decline of only 6 percentage points since 1980. Meanwhile, only 60 percent of children whose mothers had a high school diploma or some college lived with married parents, a whopping 23-percentage-point drop since 1980. A similarly large decline occurred among children of mothers who didn't finish high school; the share of children in this group living with married parents fell from 73 percent in 1980 to 56 percent in 2023.

Family structures differ significantly by education, race, and ethnicity.

Children's family structures vary widely across racial and ethnic groups. Children whose mothers identify as White or Asian are significantly more likely to live with married parents, as compared to Hispanic, Black, or American Indian/Alaskan Native children.[4] Based on data from the 2023 American Community Survey, the shares of children living with married parents by mother's reported race are 77.9 percent among the children of White mothers and 87.6 percent among the children of Asian and Pacific Islander mothers, as compared to 60.7 percent for children of Hispanic mothers, 39.2 percent for children of Black mothers, and 47.4 percent for children of American Indian/Alaskan Native mothers.

Notably, there are large differences *within* racial and ethnic groups by maternal education. Figure 2 shows the percentage of children living in married-parent, cohabiting-parent, and unpartnered-mother households based on mother's reported race/ethnicity and education level. Among children of White mothers, the share living with married parents is 88 percent for college-educated mothers and 68 percent for non-college-educated mothers. Among the children of Hispanic mothers, the analogous

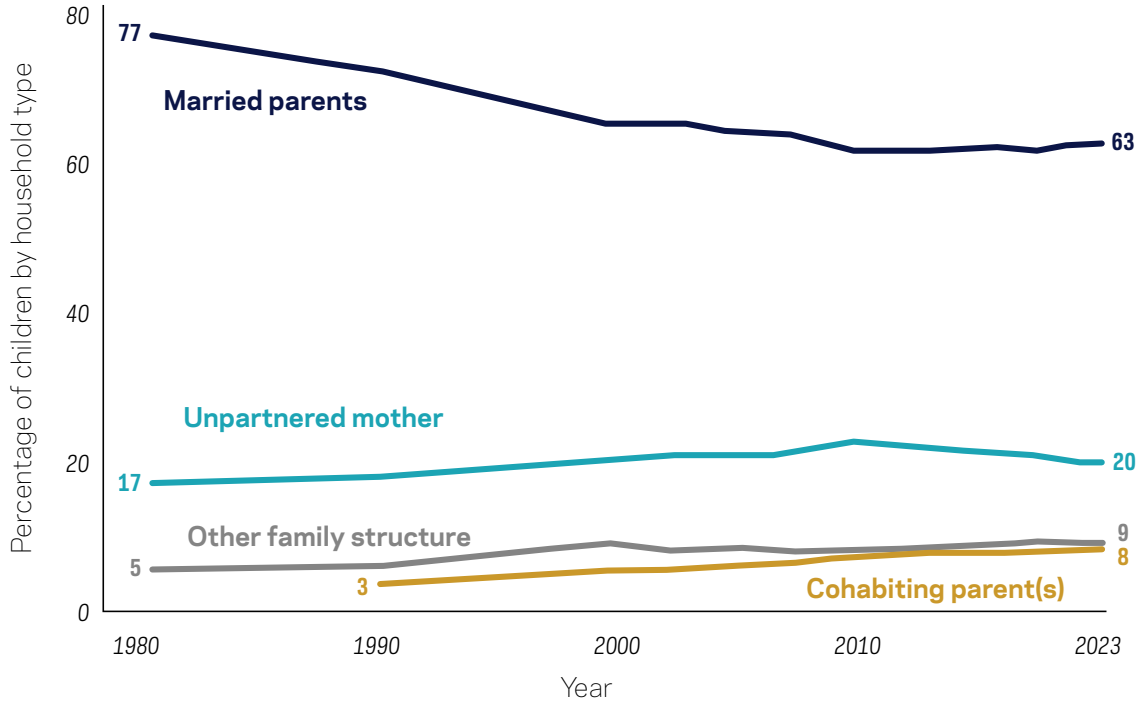
2 Statistics on family structure are based on authors' calculations using 1980 and 1990 US decennial census and 2000–2023 American Community Survey data.

3 Family types are defined as follows: A married-parent household is a household where both a mother and a father are present and married to each other, or where a mother and second mother or father and second father are present and married to each other. This category includes biological parents, stepparents, and adoptive parents An unmarried-couple household is a household where both a mother and a father are present and neither is married, or a mother and second mother or father and second father are present and unmarried. An unpartnered-mother household is a household where a mother is present, but neither a father figure nor a second mother is present. An unpartnered-father household is on where a father is present, but neither a mother nor a second father is present. In a no-parent-present household, neither a mother nor a father is present.

4 Census respondents who identify as Hispanic are categorized as Hispanic, regardless of any other reported race, so that all other categories are explicitly non-Hispanic.

Figure 1

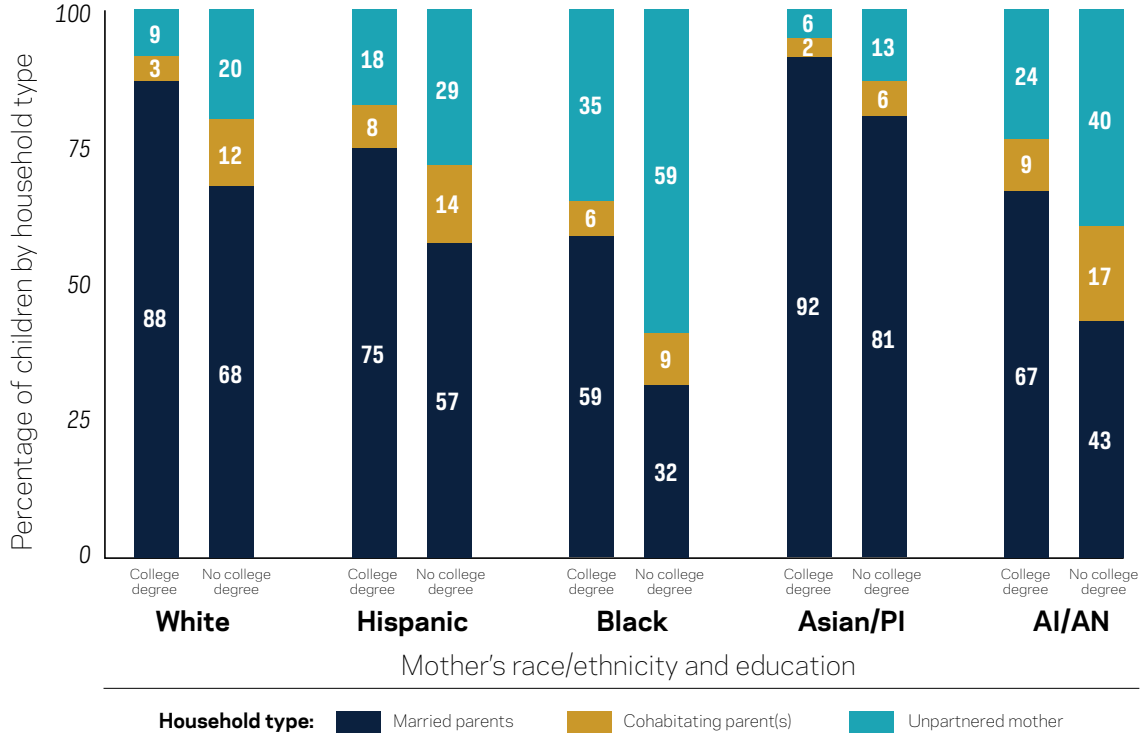
Children's living arrangements, 1980 through 2023



Source: Author's calculations using 1980 and 1990 US decennial census and 2000–2023 American Community Survey data. Observations are weighted using the child's survey weight. Cohabiting parents cannot be identified in the 1980 census.

Figure 2

Children's family structure by race/ethnicity and mother's education



Source: Author's calculations using 2023 American Community Survey data. Tabulations include all children ages 0 to 18 who live with their mother, weighted using children's weights. Race and education refer to the mother's reported race and educational attainment. Unpartnered fathers are excluded. Among children in the 2023 American Community Survey living with their parents, the percentage of children who live with mothers or unpartnered fathers of different racial and ethnic groups breaks down as follows: 52.5% White, 23.7% Hispanic, 12.3% Black, 6.5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.6% American Indian/Alaskan Native.

shares are 75 percent and 57 percent. Children of Black mothers are nearly twice as likely to live with married parents if their mom has a four-year college degree as compared to not: 59 percent versus 32 percent. Among the children of American Indian and Alaskan Native mothers, the share living with married parents is 67 percent for college-educated mothers and 43 percent among non-college-educated. Among the children of Asian and Pacific Islander mothers, the shares living with married parents are uniformly high: 92 percent for those with college-educated mothers and 81 percent for those without a college degree.

The rise in the share of children living with unpartnered mothers over the past forty years is a result of an increase in nonmarital childbearing and a decline in marriage, not a rise in childbearing or a rise in divorce among married parents. (This is documented extensively in Kearney 2023.) In 2022, roughly four out of ten babies in the US were born to unmarried mothers, more than twice than in 1980, when 18 percent of babies were born to unmarried mothers. The share of babies born to unmarried mothers was only 5 percent in 1960. The nonmarital birth share is even higher among non-White and less educated women. Vital-statistics birth data on US births show that the share of births to unmarried women was 53.2 percent for Hispanic, 69.3 percent for Black, and 68.1 percent for American Indian and Alaskan Native women; the comparable shares were 27.1 percent for White and 12.3 percent for Asian women (Osterman et al. 2024). These differences in family structure across education and racial and ethnic groups matter because they exacerbate and perpetuate class and race differences in poverty and economic opportunity.

Children growing up outside married-parent homes are at an elevated risk of poverty and other measures of economic and social disadvantage.

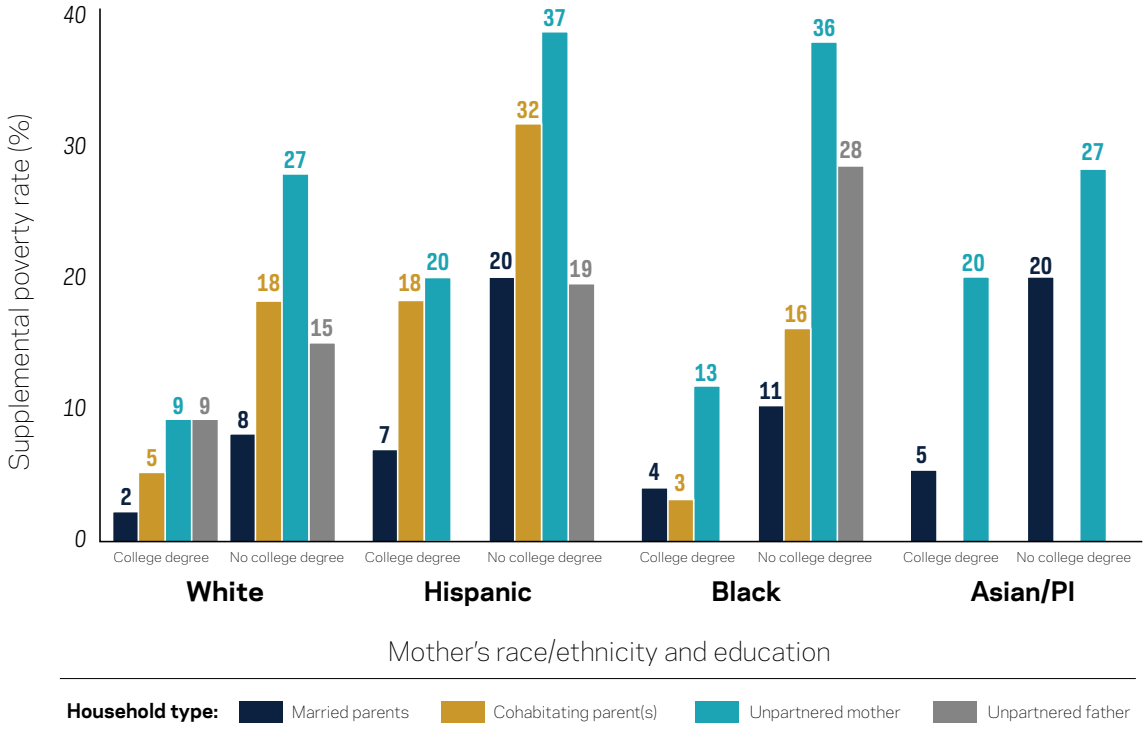
Adults and children living in single-parent homes have much higher rates of poverty than those living in married-parent homes. The poverty rate among children living with unpartnered mothers is almost four times as high as it is for children living with married parents: 28.6 percent versus 8.1 percent. It is 16.2 percent among children living with unpartnered fathers. This gap is largely reflective of the fact that two parents tend to bring in more combined income than one parent alone. In fact, the poverty gap by marital status is roughly on par with the poverty gap by education. The poverty rate for people in families in which the mother does not have a college degree is 19.7 percent, as compared to 4.6 percent for families in which the mother is college educated.

The link between family structure and poverty rates is seen within education and race groups. Figure 3 reports child poverty rates by family type, maternal education, and race or ethnicity.[5] Poverty rates are substantially higher among families headed by unmarried parents, as compared to married parents, for all major racial and ethnic groups. Poverty rates are especially high among children living with unpartnered mothers without a four-year college degree: 27 percent among White, 37 percent among Hispanic, 36 percent among

5 The poverty rate among American Indian/Alaskan Native children is relatively high: 17.8 percent in the 2024 Current Population Survey. However, they comprise less than 1 percent of the child population, so there are too few observations on children in this ethnic group in the Current Population Survey to allow researchers to generate reliable statistics by education and family structure within this ethnic group. American Indian/Alaskan Native children are thus not included in the figure.

Figure 3

Child poverty rate by maternal education, race, and family type



Source: Author's calculations using Current Population Survey 2024. Tabulations include all children ages 0 to 18 who live with their mother, weighted using children's weights. Race refers to the mother's reported race except in the case of unpartnered fathers. Among children in the 2024 Current Population Survey living with their parents, the percentage of children who live with mothers or unpartnered fathers of different racial and ethnic groups breaks down as follows: 52.8% White, 24.2% Hispanic, 13.7% Black, 7.1% Asian/Pacific Islander. All groups less than approximately 0.2% of the population and American Indian/Alaskan Natives are excluded.

Black, 27 percent among Asian and Pacific Islander, and 28 percent among American Indian/Alaskan Native children. These rates are uniformly higher than the rates of poverty among children of married, non-college-educated mothers for all racial and ethnic groups: 8 percent among White, 20 percent among Hispanic, 11 percent among Black, and 20 percent among Asian children.

Marriage is protective against poverty and more generally tends to offer enhanced economic security, largely because two adults are contributing their resources to a shared household. At a most basic level, we can see these differences in median household income figures. In 2023, median household income was approximately $127,000 for married-parent households and $76,000 for households with cohabiting parents; these figures compare to $45,000 for unpartnered-mother households and $75,000 for unpartnered-father households.[6] Of course, there are confounding differences across households of different family types that contribute to these differences in household incomes, including parental education, but the general point holds: Households with two adults tend to benefit from the combined income of two adults.

6 Authors' calculations using 2024 Current Population Survey data. Observations are weighted using Annual Social and Economic Supplements (ASEC) household survey weights.

The higher level of household income, along with higher parental resources more generally, benefits children, such that children are substantially more likely to achieve various markers of educational and economic success when they grow up in a married- or two-parent home. Numerous studies have established that this correlation holds even after accounting for a host of parental characteristics and potential confounding factors (see Kearney 2023). Evidence also suggests that boys are particularly disadvantaged from growing up in a single-mother home (Autor, Figlio, et al. 2019; Bertrand and Pan 2013).

A key driver of the better outcomes experienced by children raised in married-parent homes is the increased income associated with that family structure. But research has established that income is not the only driver of those differences. Children raised in a married-parent home tend to have better emotional and behavioral outcomes, and mothers tend to report having lower levels of stress. This finding is consistent with the fact that when there are two parents in a home, there are two people available to contribute their time, energy, and emotional bandwidth to the many responsibilities involved with taking care of a household and children. (See Kearney 2023 for a review of the relevant evidence.) For all these reasons, it is important to build evidence about how to help more people from economically vulnerable groups achieve strong families. Importantly, the benefits of marriage—for both children and adults—depend on what financial or emotional resources each adult would bring to the family or household. If one of the parents would bring violence, abuse, or chaos into a home, then these generalizations do not apply. We are adamant that efforts to build strong families should not be confused with efforts to promote or preserve marriages where there is violence or abuse, or even to promote marriage in all situations. Efforts to build strong families must be guided by the goal of advancing the conditions that foster economically secure and emotionally healthy and stable families.

Building Evidence Around Ways to Strengthen Families

In the remainder of this paper, we lay out a set of overarching research questions around ways to strengthen families. We organize a set of specific questions and avenues for research around three main aims: promoting marriage and family stability; improving outcomes for fragile and unmarried families; and reforming systems that work with vulnerable families.

Promoting marriage and family stability

What are effective ways to improve the economic position of non-college-educated men, and to what extent do such efforts promote stable families and better outcomes for men, women, and children?

Evidence suggests that the decline in marriage among non-college -educated adults—and the corresponding rise in the share of children living in less economically secure single-mother households—has in large part been driven by economic changes that have hurt non-college-educated men in the labor market. This notion is related to the thesis put forward by William Julius Wilson (1987) proposing that differences in the availability of what he called "marriageable men"—approximated by the share of men who were gainfully employed—was a key contributor to the Black-White gap in married-parent families that grew in the late 1960s and 1970s. Since 1980, the divergence in family structure that has occurred more generally across the population fits with Wilson's notion. College-educated men have done very well economically over the past forty years, and rates of marriage among college-educated adults and parents remain high. In contrast, men with less education

have done less well economically, and those are the groups for whom marriage rates have fallen. Multiple studies document a causal link between the economic struggles of men and the rise in single-mother families. For instance, research by Autor, Dorn, and Hanson (2019) and Gould (2021) shows a causal link between a reduction in US manufacturing jobs, which had historically employed many men and provided good wages, and a reduction in marriage and a rise in single-mother households and child poverty in affected communities.

The idea is that as men have become less reliable as financial providers for their families, the value proposition of marriage (between a man and a woman) falls. In practice, the decline in marriage could reflect men themselves deciding they can't provide for a family and so deciding not to commit to it; or it could reflect women deciding they're better off providing for themselves and their children, rather than setting up a household with a man who is often out of work and potentially brings other personal struggles to the relationship. Broadly speaking, the fact that economic challenges have spilled over from the labor market and economic sphere into the sphere of family, with profound implications for children and society, heightens the imperative to address these economic challenges and promote employment and economic security. For this reason, the research agenda we outline below emphasizes the need to boost employment and economic security for non-college-educated men.

Much remains to be learned about *how* to boost the employment and earnings of less educated adults, and about the extent to which economic improvements for men will advance the formation of stable marriages and families. To what extent do and could well-designed apprenticeship programs, training programs, and career and technical educational programs boost employment and earnings? Do programs that are successful at improving economic security for program participants also improve participating students' relationship and family outcomes? In what contexts and for whom do such programs have any such effects? Does pairing training programs with relationship and co-parenting classes have larger effects on family formation outcomes than either type of program in isolation?

Numerous studies investigate the causal effects of workforce, vocational, and career and technical education training programs. A recent review of this evidence concludes that high-quality public-sector offerings can improve early labor-market outcomes for young men (Huff-Stevens 2019). One notable recent study includes a quasi-experimental study of the Goodwill Excel High School conducted by Notre Dame economists affiliated with the Lab for Economic Opportunity (Brough et al. 2024). Future research should explore

whether programs that successfully improve the economic trajectory of young adults, men in particular, also improve relationship, marriage, and parenting outcomes.

Beyond studying workforce interventions, exploring the link between military service and family outcomes would be a fruitful avenue for research. Studies have reported a positive causal effect of military service on men's subsequent employment and earnings (for example, Greenberg et al. 2022; Angrist and Krueger 1994). Work by Greenberg et al. (2022) finds that Army service leads to increased marriage rates, especially among Black men. More work is needed to understand the mechanisms through which military service improves outcomes. To what extent is the increase in marriage among veterans driven by military policies toward housing and other benefits for married spouses, or by explicit family programming and services run on military bases? To what extent does the military alter the character of discipline of men such that they are subsequently more reliable workers and marital partners, and can that type of character formation be replicated in other settings? What lessons, if any, does this finding hold for interventions outside the military context?

Relatedly, more research is needed into the question of what "marriageability" means for men and women today, given that the majority of women work and gender roles are less well defined than in the past. What do people expect of marriage in terms of shared work, household, and childcare responsibilities? This line of inquiry is important for a research agenda around family formation and family stability in today's world.

How should government tax codes and transfer programs be reformed to promote, rather than discourage, the formation of stable marriages and families?

The question about how to encourage marriage also raises questions about whether the design of safety net programs and the personal income tax code can be improved so as to preserve critical material support for low-income families without unintentionally discouraging marriage.

Evidence shows that income assistance provided to low-income families through government programs and tax credits causally leads to better outcomes for children. For instance, evidence from the Earned Income Tax Credit, which provides a tax credit to working parents, finds improved educational and health outcomes for infants and children, including into early adulthood (for example, Barr et al 2022; Bastian and Michelmore 2018; Hoynes et al. 2015; Dahl and Lochner 2012). Studies also show that low-income children who had access to food stamps and Medicaid health insurance during their childhood, or for more years of their childhood, have better health, education, and economic outcomes into adulthood, as compared to low-income children who did not (for example, Hoynes et al. 2016; Bailey et al. 2024; Miller and Wherry 2019; Brown et al. 2020.)

It is crucial to maintain these safety net programs to promote the well-being of low-income families with children. However, income eligibility for these programs depends on family income, which means that unmarried couples risk losing eligibility for the EITC, SNAP, Medicaid, housing vouchers, and other forms of government assistance if they marry and pool their income. Research by Elias, Kotlikoff, and Pitts (2022) documents the substantial "marriage tax" implicit in the US tax

and transfer system. They document that the average marriage tax rate is twice as high for low-income individuals as it is for high-income individuals and varies across states. They estimate that the so-called marriage tax has a small overall impact on rates of marriage but a substantial impact on low-income women with children.

More research is needed into the link between marriage penalties implicit in tax and transfer programs. Variation across states in tax codes and program eligibility criteria provides a useful source of identifying variation for studying these causal links. Research is also needed into the question of how income-based eligibility for Medicaid, SNAP, and housing assistance affects marriage decisions, and what types of reforms could ameliorate marriage disincentives without negatively impacting single-parent families.

Growing policy interest in these questions and efforts by state legislatures to enact family friendly policies raises the urgency for evidence of how programs can be most effectively designed to promote strong families. In addition, as policy debates around the Child Tax Credit and housing affordability take shape, researchers should look for opportunities to study how resulting policy reforms and expansions affect marriage formation and family well-being.

How do media and social messaging around marriage and families contribute to attitudes and behaviors around marriage, childbearing, and family formation?

Social norms matter, and they are in part shaped by the implicit and explicit messaging of role models, trusted leaders, entertainment content, and social media.[7] Research into the role and formation of social norms constitutes an important area for research for the Strengthening Families Initiative.

Social messaging that comes organically in the form of entertainment and social media can have an impact on how people think and act when it comes to decisions about family and fertility. For instance, economists have documented how the introduction of telenovelas, which featured smaller families and divorce as part of their plot lines, to television programming in Brazil led to a drop in fertility and a rise in divorce and separation among Brazilians exposed to the programming (La Ferrara et al. 2012; Chong and La Ferrara 2009). Jensen and Oster (2009) found that the introduction of cable television in rural Indian villages led to a change in attitudes toward women, with decreased acceptance of domestic violence and increased school enrollment among girls. In the US context, the depictions of the difficulties associated with being a teen mom as shown on the MTV reality television show *16 and Pregnant* have been causally linked to a decline in rates of teen childbearing (Kearney and Levine 2015). All this evidence demonstrates that social norms around relationships and childbearing are malleable and responsive to implicit messaging absorbed through media, or what has been referred to as "edutainment."

An interesting question for researchers to consider is how popular television programs or movies portray family, marriage, and raising children, and how these portrayals vary across programming type, by target audience, and over time. To what extent have television

7 For a review of the evidence on this point, see Kearney and Levine 2020.

and movie portrayals of families, by way of a normalization effect, reinforced the underlying trend toward a decoupling of marriage and child-rearing? Popular TV shows often portray fathers as uninvolved or incompetent, and programs such as *The Bachelor* or *Love Island* may promote unhealthy views of relationships and marriage. Meanwhile, family-vlogging channels and social-media influencers giving relationship advice have proliferated on newer platforms. Research into the promise and pitfalls of the influences of messages being promoted through both traditional media platforms and the newer world of Instagram and TikTok, among other platforms, is urgently needed.

Research is also needed into the role of implicit or explicit messaging coming from prominent celebrities or trusted leaders. A recent paper examines how the content of speeches given by Pope John Paul II during his visits to Latin American countries affected subsequent fertility outcomes, finding that subsequently fertility was increased in places where the Pope mentioned marriage or admonished the use of abortion or contraception (Iyer et al. 2024.) More research into this line of inquiry is needed. Do pronouncements from other trusted leaders have similar effects? What about explicit or implicit messaging from celebrities, through either their comments or behaviors?

Finally, there is much to be learned from studying the role of social messaging and community norms around marriage and family through qualitative studies of population subgroups with high rates of stable marriages as compared to others with similar economic circumstances, including Asian Americans and immigrants. Research has tended to focus on empirical examinations of the decline of marriage or high rates of nonmarital childbearing. But non-college-educated and lower-income individuals are capable of achieving stable marriages. A mix of qualitative and empirical studies could assist researchers and policymakers in understanding the mechanisms that foster marital and family stability among economically vulnerable groups.

What role can dedicated media campaigns and curricula play in promoting strong families?

Researchers should also investigate the effectiveness, or potential effectiveness, of explicit advertising or messaging campaigns around relationship and family formation. Consider the case of the "dadvertisements" created as a collaboration between the US Administration for Children and Families (ACF) National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse and the Ad Council to promote and celebrate fatherhood (ACF 2023). Kofi Kingston, a professional wrestler and the only African-born world champion in WWE history, is the star of a #Dadication PSA in which he is shown teaching his young children how to skip stones, while describing how he overcame his anxiety about being a parent (Fatherhoodgov 2021). Kofi's story is just one example of the dad stories being featured as part of a feel-good ad campaign featuring fathers playing with their children, telling dad jokes, and doing things like teaching their child how to ride a bike, while also directing viewers to resources that contain helpful information on how to get more involved with their kids (ACF 2017). According to tracking surveys for the #Dadication ad campaign, fathers who had seen the PSAs were far more likely over the course of six months to actively seek out information about how to get involved with their children than fathers who had not (ACF

2023). Interest is growing in these kinds of ad campaigns, but research is needed to determine whether they are effective and if so, for whom and under what conditions.

The use of messaging campaigns to alter attitudes and behaviors in the world of health policy and social policy has precedent. For example, public messaging has helped shift cultural attitudes against smoking, enhancing the impact of education, taxation, and interventions aimed at smoking cessation. Many questions remain about what such a campaign around fatherhood and families might look like. Recent work has studied how particular types of imagery affect viewers of ads about fatherhood. Mueller et al. (2023) presented different types of ads to a sample of new and expectant first-time fathers and found that ads that featured nurturing and progressive dads evoked more positive emotions, were seen as more empowering, and gave viewers more confidence in their ability to be capable parents than ads that portrayed more hyper-masculine and traditional dads. Much more research is needed into this nascent area of "dadvertisements."

Can such campaigns meaningfully effect change, in what settings, for whom, and through what mediums? What types of messages resonate and lead to positive fatherhood engagement, and what types of messages have counterproductive effects? Is there a role for positive message delivery through apps or other social media outlets? This area of research is promising and would benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration and the use of recent developments in AI applications and large language models.

A recent development in the sphere of attempts to influence social norms around marriage and fertility is the teaching of the "success sequence" to young people in school or program settings. The success sequence is a concept rooted in social-science research that promotes a specific life pathway to increase the likelihood of avoiding poverty and achieving upward mobility: Graduate from high school, work full-time, and get married before having children (Wilcox and Wang 2017). Several US states have initiated or are considering implementation of the success sequence in school curricula, aiming to promote a pathway believed to enhance economic stability. For instance, in early 2025, Tennessee's legislature passed House Bill 178, known as the Success Sequence Act, mandating that public schools teach the success sequence in family life education classes. The curriculum will include age-appropriate lessons on the benefits of this sequence, with an opt-out provision for parents. The law is set to take effect in the 2026–2027 school year. Research is needed into the effectiveness of this type of social messaging curriculum aimed at children and young adults.

The prospect of changing social norms toward marriage or family through active intervention strikes some people as infeasible. But the rapid change in social acceptance toward same-sex marriage illustrates just how quickly attitudes toward marriage and family structures can change. Poll data from the Pew Research Center (2019) suggests that attitudes towards same-sex marriage flipped from 60 percent of Americans opposing it in 2004 to 61 percent supporting it in 2014. A consideration of the reasons for this rapid change in attitudes is well beyond the scope of this paper; we highlight this context to illustrate that rapid change in attitudes toward marriage is quite possible. The potential of targeted social messaging to shift norms and behaviors around parenting and family structures is both

immense and underexplored. By addressing the questions posed here, researchers, service providers, and policymakers can harness the transformative power of media and messaging to support stronger, healthier families across diverse communities.

What is the causal link between the legal and institutional frameworks around marriage and divorce and the decline in marriage and married-parent homes? How do these legal and institutional frameworks affect child and parent well-being?

An important question is whether institutional and legal arrangements around marriage, divorce, and child support have undermined the strength of the marriage contract in ways that have discouraged the formation of stable marriages and thereby disadvantaged children.

Unilateral divorce laws that allow one spouse to file for divorce without the consent of the other were introduced in the US in 1969 and spread across states throughout the 1970s, replacing mutual-consent divorce laws. Research indicates that unilateral divorce

laws led to sharp increases in the divorce rate throughout the 1970s (Friedberg 1998; Gruber 2004) and, furthermore, that the shift from mutual-consent to unilateral divorce regimes led to a reduction in income and an increase in the poverty rates among mothers and children, as well as to a longer-term decrease in the educational attainment and marriage stability of affected children (Gruber 2004; Caceres-Delpiano and Giolito 2008). Research has also found that unilateral divorce laws have led to a decrease in specialization in marriage, meaning that married mothers responded to the weakening of the marriage contract with increased rates of labor force participation and a lower rate of childbearing (Stevenson 2007; Fernández and Wong 2017). This response makes sense from an economic perspective—when it is easier for one spouse to unilaterally exit a marriage, it becomes riskier for the other spouse to invest all or most of their time and effort into the household and child-rearing, which would leave them more financially exposed later if their marriage fails.[8]

Though the shift to unilateral divorce led to a weakening of family stability and negative economic consequences for women and children, on average, it did have the critical benefit of making it easier for women at risk of domestic abuse to exit violent marriages. Stevenson and Wolfers (2006) find that the adoption of unilateral divorce laws led to a reduction in female suicides and a decline in domestic-violence incidents. This body of evidence indicates the importance of maintaining the option of unilateral divorce to enable vulnerable adults to exit harmful marriages, while also indicating that, on average, children and mothers are disadvantaged when the marriage contract is weaker and divorce is easier to obtain.

Mandatory divorce waiting periods are intended to encourage reconciliation and reduce impulsive decisions. Some studies suggest that longer waiting periods may decrease divorce rates (see, for instance, Lee 2013), by encouraging couples to reconsider. The direct impact of these waiting periods on children's outcomes is not well researched and warrants study. An important question for researchers and policymakers is whether there are ways to strengthen the legal and institutional features of marriage to promote family stability and well-being, while preserving the necessary option of exit for at-risk and vulnerable spouses. In addition to mandating cooling-off periods, some states require that couples be legally separated for a specified amount of time before they can be granted a divorce. What is the effect of such requirements on divorce outcomes and subsequent family outcomes? In addition, the Lafortune and Low (2012) study described in a footnote above points to a policy question ripe for research: Would policies like credit access for low-income homebuyers and homeowner protection clauses increase home ownership and correspondingly marriage stability among low-income couples?

8 This way of thinking about the strength or weakness of the marriage contract and the riskiness of entering into marriage and specializing in marital capital finds support in the recent study of Lafortune and Low (2023). This study concludes that adults with more assets—namely, with an owned home—are more likely to enter into marriage and specialize within marriage, since their assets serve as a form of collateral for the relationship. This observation can help explain the socioeconomic divergence in marriage rates. Higher-income couples are more likely to own a home, such that if one person decides to exit the marriage, the remaining spouse has financial and legal claims to their shared asset (the home). In contrast, lower-income couples have lower rates of home ownership and asset holdings more generally. If one spouse decides to exit that marriage, the remaining spouse has no assets to claim and nothing to compensate them for any time they might have taken away from the workforce to devote to raising children or caring for a household. Marriage, for them, is a riskier and less attractive proposition, especially in the context of unilateral divorce.

Improving outcomes for fragile and unmarried families

What are the features of effective fatherhood programs, and can they be scaled? To what extent are existing programs delivering meaningful improvements in family well-being, and how can such programs be enhanced?

Scholars of "involved fatherhood" characterize the goal of fatherhood engagement programs to be fatherhood that is "sensitive, warm, close, friendly, supportive, affectionate, nurturing, encouraging, comforting, and accepting." Studies document that this type of fatherhood is positively associated with outcomes on children from infancy through adulthood (Walsh 2021), but many nonresident and noncustodial fathers struggle with personal, practical, and systemic barriers to achieving this type of fatherhood engagement, as well as to forming the types of beneficial social-support networks that mothers are more typically able to access.

The landscape of fatherhood programs has evolved considerably over recent decades to address the range of challenges facing many nonresident fathers. The recognition of the importance of engaging fathers is a promising shift away from the historical focus of social-policy efforts on mothers only. As Kenneth Braswell, director of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse and founder of Fathers Incorporated, observed at a recent convening at the University of Notre Dame, "If you're not supporting fathers, you're not supporting families."[9] Today's programs generally attempt to account for the reality of complex family structures and the myriad challenges facing economically vulnerable fathers. Much more evidence is needed about how to effectively boost involved fatherhood, healthy relationships, and productive co-parenting.

To promote positive fatherhood engagement, the federal office of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) grants $75 million annually to fund fatherhood programs through their Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) grant. Responsible Fatherhood grants were used to fund fifty-four fatherhood programs in the 2020–2025 cohort and 258 programs since its inception in 2006 (ACF 2020). Eight of the forty fatherhood programs in the 2015–2020 cohort completed impact evaluations. Results tend to indicate slight improvements in economic stability and co-parenting behavior but no significant effects on father engagement or healthy parenting practices. Researchers suggest that the effectiveness of fatherhood programs is often hindered by low take-up rates, low rates of completion, and staffing shortages. Much more work is needed to identify effective ways to leverage fatherhood programs to improve family outcomes. More research is also needed on long-term outcomes for program participants; much of the existing impact research tracks short-term outcomes through surveys. A productive avenue of research would involve linking participants to administrative data to track long-term family and child outcomes.

In addition, much more work is needed to understand how to address the specific challenges faced by men with past criminal histories and/or incarceration and how to help these men successfully integrate into the workforce and family life. A recent meta-analysis by Nur and Nguyen (2023) summarizes findings from approximately thirty evaluations and concludes that prison-based work and training programs can

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significantly reduce recidivism, particularly when participation is voluntary and structured. It is an open question as to whether and under what conditions such programs might lead to sustained improvements in mental health, relationship stability, positive parenting, and family outcomes broadly speaking. More generally, much more research is needed into how family dynamics are affected by parental incarceration and how community programs can help formerly incarcerated men reunite with family, reduce relationship strain, and avoid intergenerational cycles of incarceration.

Future research should focus on holistic fatherhood programs that aim to address the multitude of economic, personal, and relationship obstacles that many men face. Many of these men did not grow up with the benefit of a present, nurturing father in their own home, which is a source of trauma and limitation for many of the men served by these types of programs. Figuring out how to help these men and dads is crucial to breaking the intergenerational cycle of family disadvantage.

What types of programs and interventions advance healthy relationship formation and effective co-parenting? How successful are such programs at improving children's and parents' outcomes?

High levels of conflict between parents, whether they live together or not, can be detrimental to children. Children exposed to parental conflict may experience anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems. An important question for research is how to design and implement programs that

are effective at helping parents achieve healthy, productive methods of co-parenting, whatever their romantic status might be. A related, but distinct, important set of questions is concerned with how to help more people achieve healthy and stable romantic relationships, which advance both adult and child well-being.

Since 2006, the US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families has allocated over $1.2 billion through a Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education initiative to community organizations providing relationship education services for lower-income couples and individuals. Relationship education is a type of programming that teaches skills and strategies to help people build and maintain healthy relationships; its curriculum includes communication skills, conflict management, and boundary setting. Meta-analyses of community based and ACF-funded relationship education program evaluations by Hawkins et al. (2012; 2022) document small-to-medium effect sizes for couple relationship quality, mental health, and co-parenting but no significant effects on parenting, relationship stability, or child well-being. The existing body of evidence points to the limited potential for well-designed relationship education programs to improve couple stability. Much remains to be learned about how to structure and implement programs to elicit larger, sustained benefits for participating adults and their children.

In terms of co-parenting, correlational studies show that positive co-parenting leads to better marital relationships, greater parental well-being, more paternal involvement, and positive children's development (Campbell 2023). Causal evidence from co-parenting programs shows promising, albeit limited, results for improving co-parenting skills and family outcomes. (See, for instance, evaluations of the Family Foundations co-parenting curriculum, including Feinberg and Kan 2008; Feinberg et al. 2010; and Feinberger et al. 2014, among others.) A limitation of generalizing from these studies is that the program was delivered to married or cohabiting couples participating in prenatal programs. More research is needed into the effectiveness of co-parenting programs in the context of unmarried, low-income, and high-conflict co-parenting teams. A promising study of the Supporting Father Involvement (SFI)—which includes thirty-two hours of a facilitated co-parenting curriculum, case management services, on-site child care, and family meals—finds benefits on the co-parenting outcomes of the low-income, unmarried parenting teams who participated in the program (Pruett et al. 2019). The program intentionally engaged in outreach to fathers, suggesting that fatherhood and co-parenting programs might mutually benefit from smooth referrals. More research is also needed into ways to encourage productive co-parenting relationships, especially among economically vulnerable people.

Additional research is also needed about how to build strong families in a context where co-parenting teams outside of a mother-father pairing are increasingly common. For instance, if a child is primarily being raised by his mother and grandmother, is it in the child or family's interest that the father be deliberately engaged? If a father is not engaged during the prenatal and infancy period, does it become increasingly hard to productively bring him into an active co-parenting role? Researchers and program implementers need to be extremely careful and thoughtful about what type of relationship and co-parenting promotion is in the best interest of the family.

A fruitful area of research would be to study the impact of layering promising relationship education, co-parenting, and/or fatherhood programs onto workforce or career training programs. Perhaps programs that have limited effects on their own could be combined to form a more effective, holistic approach to addressing the multitude of barriers that economically vulnerable men and women face.

How do prevailing legal institutions and frameworks around child custody and child support affect family formation and child outcomes? Are there ways these systems can be reformed that would strengthen families and improve child and parent well-being?

The laws and practices governing child support and child custody are also important to family outcomes and well-being. More research is needed into how child custody determination promotes or hinders child and parent well-being. This policy area is also very difficult, because policies that might seem to be obviously beneficial have been shown to have unintended consequences.

Joint-custody laws were introduced across US states in the 1970s and 1980s, allowing both parents, even when unmarried or divorced, to be responsible for making decisions for and about their children. Causal analyses cast doubt on the notion that joint-custody arrangements are, on average, beneficial for children. Analyzing fifty years of census data for the United States population, Maiti (2015) documents that growing up in a joint-custody regime leads to lower educational attainment and worse labor-market outcomes for children. Fernández-Kranz et al. (2021) study how children's outcomes vary across states with different child support and joint-custody laws. They find that economic incentives for joint custody have negative effects on the educational attainment and health of the children of divorced parents, with especially large negative effects for girls and children under age twelve. Their analysis of parental characteristics and time use data suggests that economic incentives for joint custody limit children's time spent with relatively high-quality mothers, as fathers pursue joint custody in response to the policy.

The research on the effects of other legal incentives aimed at increasing noncustodial parental involvement, such as In-Hospital Voluntary Paternity Establishment (IHVPE) options, has also produced disappointing results in terms of the documented effects for children.

Rossin-Slater (2017) documents that the implementation of IHVPE programs across US states increased paternity establishment rates by 40 percent, but that this increase in paternity establishment led to a reduced likelihood of marriage post-childbirth. This finding can be rationalized by the fact that paternity establishment increases the ability of mothers to extract financial support from fathers outside the context of marriage. She further finds that the net effect on father engagement and child well-being is negative or zero. She finds no effects of IHVPE on children's physical or mental health measures, nor does she find impacts on income, poverty status, or welfare benefit receipt in the child's household. These findings provide an important note of caution, as they suggest that legal and policy arrangements that increase interaction with nonresident biological fathers do not necessarily improve children's outcomes as a result.

These findings bring us back to the discussion above about needing to find evidence-based

ways to improve productive and healthy father engagement with children, especially among noncustodial fathers. Joint-custody arrangements are not inherently flawed. Rather, noncustodial parents, particularly fathers, often lack the financial and behavioral support that they need to actively contribute to their children's lives, indicating a potential opportunity for collaboration with fatherhood, co-parenting, and relationship education programs.

Child support mandates are another important policy lever in the area of family law. The goal of child support mandates is to increase the income to children and custodial parents by imposing financial responsibility on the nonresident parent. But child support collection is fraught with challenges, and receipt rates are low. Data from the US Census Bureau on child support receipt indicates that in 2017, only 43.5 percent of the total amount of child support due ($30 billion) was received by custodial parents (Grall 2020.) One-half of all custodial parents (49.4 percent) had either legal or informal child support agreements. About seven in ten custodial parents (69.8 percent) who were supposed to receive child support in 2017 received at least some payments, and less than half (45.9 percent) of custodial parents who were supposed to receive child support received full child support payments.

Many fathers subject to child support mandates have low or volatile income, and increased efforts to collect child support from economically struggling dads are often at odds with efforts to encourage work and economic advancement among less educated men. Furthermore, stricter child support mandates can sometimes put parents in adversarial positions, which is not always in the best interest of family or child well-being. Causal studies have found that stricter child-support enforcement mandates lead to a reduction in births among less educated and unmarried women (Aizer and McLanahan 2006), but they also lead to a reduced likelihood of marriage between parents, since custodial mothers can more readily extract financial assistance from fathers without marrying them (Tannenbaum 2020).

The challenge for researchers and policymakers in this area is figuring out how to optimize child support mandates and enforcement such that children and unmarried parents receive income support, without creating an adversarial situation between parents and placing too much financial strain on economically struggling noncustodial parents. Much remains to be learned about what types of institutional and procedural changes would promote stable marriages and/or welfare enhancing arrangements among unmarried parents or parents in precarious relationships. What types of arrangements around child support, custody, and visitation rights are most conducive to positive outcomes for affected children?

Reforming systems that work with vulnerable families

How can Child Protective Services be reformed and leveraged to better serve and strengthen families?

Millions of vulnerable families in the US interact with state and local Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies, as well as with the foster care system. CPS was created in 1974 as a part of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) with the primary intention of being the frontline agency in responding to child maltreatment reports.

A shockingly high share of US children—37 percent—are subject to a CPS investigation at some point in their lives (Bullinger et al. 2020). A leading question for this research agenda is whether there are ways to better leverage these systems to invest in parents and bolster their ability to productively and safely care for their children.

An estimated 7.9 million children are referred to CPS per year, typically by mandated reporters (teachers, medical staff, and law enforcement). Many of the cases brought to the attention of CPS are due to limited resources and poverty, as opposed to outright abuse. These cases are run through an initial screening by a CPS caseworker. About half of all reports are substantiated and subject to an investigation, which involves a CPS caseworker visiting a child's home and interviewing the child and caregivers to assess the safety of the home environment. Of the investigated cases, 17 percent of investigated children are deemed to be in a high-risk environment, warranting direct intervention by CPS.

The fact that half of reported cases are deemed to be unsubstantiated is indicative of programmatic inefficiency, potentially with severe consequences, burdening caseworkers and tying up agency resources that could be more effectively deployed. An important question for researchers is how this inefficiency can be reduced. Can improvements be made to the way mandated reporters are trained, so that cases unlikely to trigger a CPS investigation are not referred to CPS? Future research should explicitly observe and measure the reporting behaviors of mandated reporters and provide suggestions for standardized training procedures. Another potential avenue for future research is to examine changes in the way state CPS agencies implement processes and employ caseworkers and link these changes to child outcomes. What lessons can be learned about how to effectively boost personnel capacity in child welfare services to the benefit of families and children?

Among substantiated CPS child maltreatment cases, about 80 percent are due to "neglect" (Bullinger et al. 2020). These cases reflect an omission of the necessary financial and emotional resources a child needs to survive, as opposed to active physical or sexual abuse. This finding raises questions about whether and how the child welfare system could be leveraged to better help resource-deprived families meet their children's needs (Feely et al. 2020). If poverty is the underlying cause of child neglect, then coercive removals by CPS are not an efficient solution. Are there a set of common factors that characterize a large share of unsubstantiated claims that could be better addressed by referral to, say, a local organization providing food or clothing assistance to help a family address their material needs? Research is needed into this possibility and ways to implement such an approach. In addition, it is important to evaluate to what extent the current system features an inherent tension for families, who risk having a neglect report being filed against them if they seek necessary resources or benefits. Do current rules and procedures inefficiently deter people in need from seeking help, and could the system be reformed to prevent that deterrence?

The CPS system interacts with the foster care system, which has its own set of challenges. If a CPS case is substantiated and it is decided that the child needs to be removed from their home, they are placed into foster care. It is estimated that up to 5.91 percent of US children come into contact with the foster care system at some point between their birth

and age eighteen, with higher shares among Black children (approximately 10 percent) and Native American children (approximately 15 percent) (Doyle 2007; Wildeman and Emanuel 2014). Foster care children fare substantially worse than their peers in terms of educational attainment, earnings, and incarceration rates (Kroeger et al. 2022). Doyle (2007) documented causal negative effects of foster care placement for vulnerable children, finding that children assigned to child welfare investigators who were more likely to place similarly situated children in foster care subsequently had higher delinquency and teen birth rates, as compared to children who were at the same level of risk but were assigned to more lenient investigators who did not recommend they be placed in foster care.

How can foster care systems be reformed and leveraged to better serve and strengthen families?

The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) was passed in 2018 and allows states to use federal funding to prevent children from being separated from their families through the foster care system. Funding may be used for measures including preventative services for high-risk families such as mental healthcare, substance use treatment, and healthy-parenting-skills programs. For children who must be removed from their home, FFPSA rewards states that prioritize placement with relatives or close family friends as opposed to group care. FFPSA also strives to reunite foster children with their families when it is safe or to allow adoption by their foster parents when appropriate. This relatively new approach in the US warrants careful study. In what contexts and to what extent is kinship care beneficial for

children? Rigorous evaluations are needed of the long-term outcomes of children placed in different types of care.

A recent study of a foster care intervention in Chile demonstrates the potential for case management in the foster care setting to improve children's outcomes. In 2017, the Chilean government introduced the Mi Abogado (My Lawyer) program, which provides legal aid and social services to foster children living in institutions. Using administrative data and empirically exploiting the randomized rollout of the program, Cooper et al. (2023) find that the program reduced the length of stay of children in foster care with no increase in subsequent placement. The program also led to a reduction in criminal-justice involvement and an improvement in school attendance. The findings of this study highlight the potential power of case management services for improving foster care quality and duration. A study of this type of intervention in the US would be very valuable.

In general, much remains to be learned about how to reform and leverage the child welfare system to improve outcomes for vulnerable families and children. There is also a need for research about potential ways to reform the foster care system to strengthen families who are engaged with the foster care system.

Conclusion

A focus on building strong families as part of an anti-poverty research and policy agenda is, in many ways, more complicated than a focus on education, labor market, health care, or housing interventions. Families are deeply personal affairs, and relationships are complicated. But they are too important to economic realities, children's life trajectories, and societal outcomes to be ignored or set aside. Schools and community programs can only go so far in making up for the disadvantages people suffer from living in a fragile, resource-deprived, conflict-ridden home environment. Researchers, community leaders, and policymakers need to work to address the barriers that people face when it comes to achieving strong and supportive family environments for themselves and their children. Building evidence about how to strengthen families needs to be a research priority.

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