

Testimony of Ron Haskins  
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Before the Social Security and Family Policy Subcommittee  
of the Committee on Finance  
U.S. Senate  
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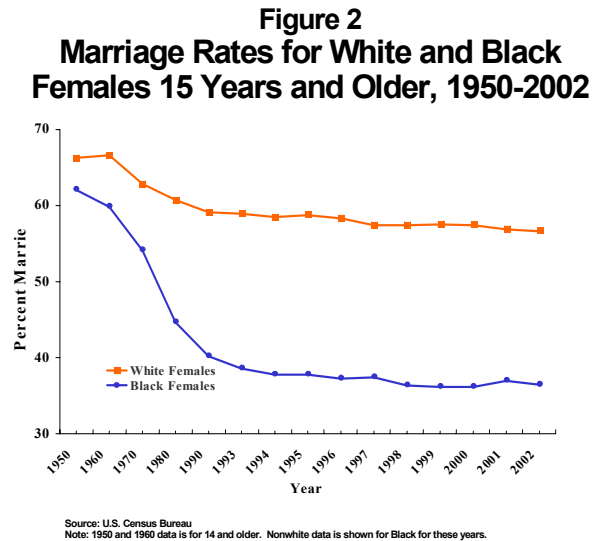
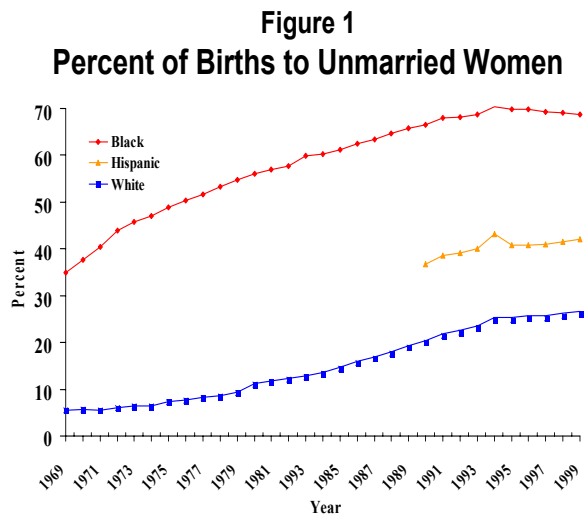
Chairman Santorum, Ranking Member Breaux, and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Ron Haskins. I am a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and a Senior Consultant at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. I am honored to be invited to talk with your committee about the case for federal programs to promote marriage. My major goal is to briefly summarize the evidence from social science research about the impact of marriage on poverty, on children's development, and on adults. My conclusion is that there is widespread agreement among social scientists that marriage reduces poverty and helps make both children and adults happier and healthier. It is reasonable to project from these studies that if marital rates could be increased, especially among poor and minority Americans, many of the social problems that are the target of social programs under the jurisdiction of the Finance Committee would be reduced.

#### What's the Problem

America is engaged in a great experiment to test whether our children can be properly reared without providing them with a stable, two-parent environment during childhood. The experiment consists of three major trends. First, as long ago as 1965, the great Senator and former chairman of this subcommittee Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in one of the most important and controversial papers in the history of social science, declared that the black family was in the process of disintegrating because of rapidly increasing rates of nonmarital births. Further, he argued that family dissolution was the major reason black Americans were not making more social and economic progress. At that time, the nonmarital birth rate for blacks was around 25 percent. Today the percentage for blacks is 70. Now both Hispanics, at about 45 percent, and whites, at about 25 percent, equal or exceed the level of nonmarital births that Moynihan saw as alarming. Indeed, over 33 percent of all our nation's children are now born outside marriage. Thus, the problem of nonmarital births has skyrocketed among all ethnic groups (Figure 1).

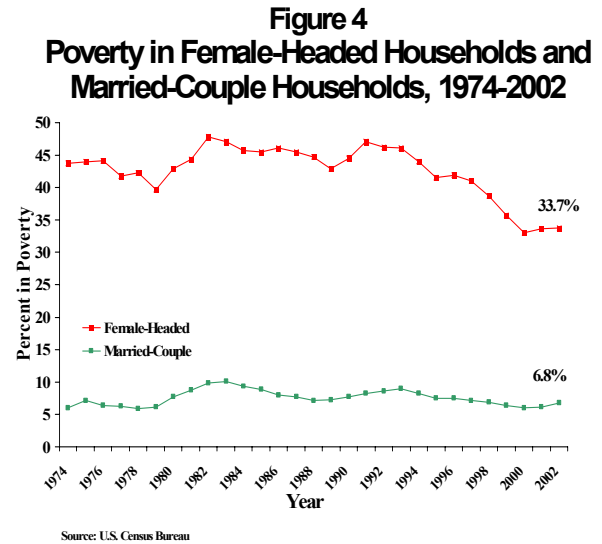
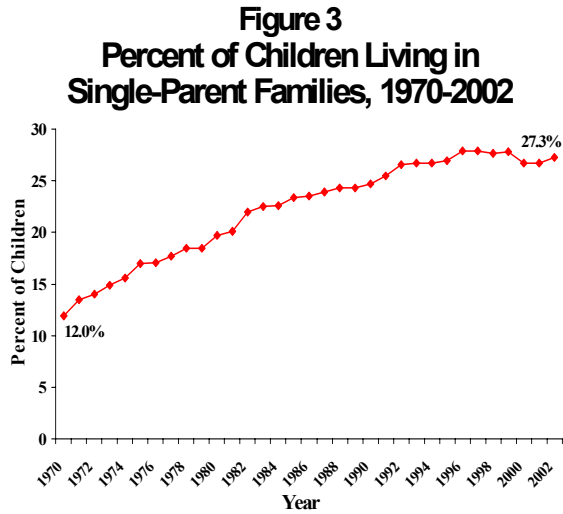
Second, if love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage, so do nonmarriage and nonmarital births. Specifically, a major cause of nonmarital births is that the marriage rates have declined so precipitously in recent decades. When marriage rates decline, more and more women have more and more years during which they are at risk of becoming pregnant and giving birth outside marriage. Figure 2 shows the marriage rate for black and white Americans since 1950. Clearly, the rates for both groups have plummeted. If marriage confers benefits on the adults and children involved, and if reducing marriage reduces these benefits, the decline of marriage could be having broad impacts that affect all of society.



Third, the divorce rate contributes greatly to the decline of marriage in our society. By 1975, about 20 percent all women over age 15 had experienced a divorce, about twice the rate of divorce that prevailed as late as the mid-1960s. Divorce rates rose only modestly after 1975 and have actually declined slightly over the last two decades. Even so, demographers estimate that a little less than half of the marriages formed today will end in divorce. Though no longer increasing, the divorce rate is high by historical standards and now exposes well over one million children per year to the difficulties of adapting to a new way of life and to the vagaries of life in a single-parent family.

Taken together, nonmarriage, nonmarital births, and divorce have caused a rapidly increasing percentage of the nation's children to live in single-parent families. As shown in Figure 3, between 1970 and 2002 the percentage of children living with just one parent more than doubled, increasing from 12 percent to over 27 percent. Of course, these numbers provide the number of children living in single-parent families at a given moment. Over time, the percentage of children who have ever experienced life outside a two-parent family is much greater than the percentage on a given day. The percentage of children who spend some portion of their childhood in a single parent family has probably increased to nearly 60 percent and has reached the shocking level of 85 percent for black children.

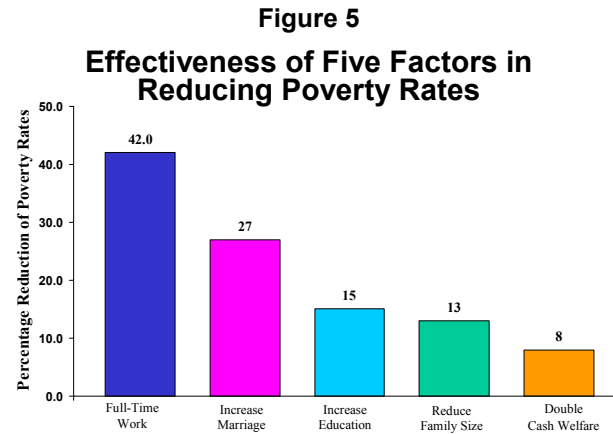
Most of the nation's single parents make heroic efforts to establish a good rearing environment for their children. But they are up against many obstacles and challenges. Not the least of these is poverty. Figure 4 shows the poverty rate of female-headed families with children as compared with married-couple families with children between 1974 and 2002. In most years, children living with a single mother suffer from poverty rates that are five or six times the rates of children living with married parents. Children living with never-married single mothers have even higher poverty rates.



Although this difference in poverty rates between single-parent and married-couple families is impressive, social scientists know that marital status is not the only difference between parents in single-parent and parents in married-couple families. On the contrary, there are many differences between the two groups of parents. For example, single parents are more likely to have had a baby outside marriage, are more likely to have had poor parents and parents with little education, and are more likely to be black or Hispanic. All of these background characteristics contribute to the difference in poverty rates between married and single parents and raise some doubt about whether marital status itself causes the difference in poverty rates.

This is a vital issue for members of Congress trying to decide whether a marriage initiative would be worthwhile. One of the major claims of those who support a marriage initiative is that increasing marriage rates would reduce poverty rates. Fortunately, there have now been a large number of studies, some quite sophisticated, of whether marriage itself, independent of all the other differences between married and single parents, is a cause of the lower poverty rates enjoyed by married parents and their children. Taken together, these studies provide strong evidence that increasing marriage rates would indeed reduce poverty.

A closer look at two of these studies will illustrate the power of marriage as a means of reducing poverty. Research at the Brookings Institution by Adam Thomas, Isabel Sawhill, and Ron Haskins examined the impact of various changes in family composition and parent characteristics on poverty rates. Specifically, Thomas and his colleagues used Census Bureau data from 2001 to determine the degree to which child poverty would be reduced by full-time work, marriage, increased education, reduced family size, and doubling welfare benefits. By far the greatest impacts on poverty are increasing work effort and increasing marriage rates (Figure 5).



Based on Thomas and Sawhill, 2002; and Haskins and Sawhill, 2003.

The relationship between work and poverty reduction is especially impressive. According to the Census Bureau, poor parents work about half as many hours as nonpoor parents. The Brookings analysis shows that if poor parents were to work full time at the wages they currently earn (for those who work) or could earn (based on their education for those who don't work), the poverty rate would plummet from 13 percent to 7.5 percent, a reduction of nearly 45 percent. It is interesting to note that this statistical simulation has now received a test in the real world. By requiring mothers on welfare to work and imposing a time limit on their cash welfare benefit, the 1996 welfare reform law and the state welfare-to-work demonstrations that preceded it – along with a strong economy and other policy changes such as increases in the Earned Income Tax Credit – were associated with a substantial increase in work effort by previously poor single mothers on welfare. Between 1993 and 2000, employment among single mothers, many of whom had previously been on welfare or who could have qualified for welfare, increased from 58 percent to nearly 74 percent, an increase of nearly 30 percent. An increase in employment of this magnitude by any demographic group over such a short period is unprecedented. The burst in employment among all female heads of families led directly to a decline in their children's poverty rate from 46 percent to 33 percent, another reduction of nearly 30 percent. Thus, a substantial increase in work by single mothers led to a robust reduction in poverty, exactly as predicted by the Brookings simulation.

If the single most potent antidote to poverty is work, marriage is not far behind. The likelihood of being married is a striking difference between the poor and the nonpoor. Indeed, again according to the Census Bureau, the poor are only half as likely to be married as the nonpoor -- 40 percent for the poor as compared with 80 percent for the nonpoor. Of course, as we have seen, the adults in these families differ in other ways as well, so the huge difference in poverty rates between married couples and single parents cannot be attributed solely to marital status. The Brookings simulation examined the poverty impact of an increase in marriage rates among the poor without changing any of their other characteristics. Specifically, the simulation increased the marriage rate to the rate that prevailed in 1970. Between 1970 and 2001, the overall marriage rate declined by 17 percent while the marriage rate for blacks declined by over 34 percent. The

simulation works by matching single mothers and unmarried men who are similar in age, education, and race. In other words, these virtual marriages take place between real single males and single mothers with children who report their status to the Census Bureau. Thus, the actual incomes of real single men, who are paired with real single mothers, are used in the analysis. All that changes is marital status.

The effect of the increase in marriages to the rates that prevailed in 1970 is to reduce the poverty rate from 13.0 percent to 9.5 percent, a reduction of 27 percent (Figure 5). Although not as great as the impact of full-time work, increasing the marriage rate nonetheless has a very substantial impact on poverty.

To judge the magnitude of this impact it is useful to consider one more finding from the Brookings analysis. A great deal is made of the importance of education for achieving economic stability. Members of this subcommittee will recall that both during the 1995-96 welfare reform debate and during the current welfare reform reauthorization debate, there was sharp conflict over whether the goal of welfare reform should be to help mothers get jobs or increase their education and training. We now have very good evidence from scientific research – much of which was funded with money Congress provided to the Department of Health and Human Services in the 1996 welfare reform law – that work first is a more effective strategy for helping poor mothers leave welfare and for saving public dollars that otherwise would be used for paying welfare benefits.

The Brookings simulation is consistent with this research. In particular, the simulation tested the impact on poverty of providing all heads of poor families with a high school education. The simulation assumed that all heads of poor families had a high school diploma and earned as much as the typical high school graduate. Under these assumptions, increased education reduces the poverty rate from 13 percent to 11.1 percent, a reduction of not quite 15 percent. Thus, whereas increasing work reduces poverty by 45 percent and increasing marriage reduces poverty by 27 percent, increasing education reduces poverty by only 15 percent. After reviewing these results, those who strongly support policies that would improve the education of poor parents because they believe additional education promotes work and reduces poverty might decide that they also favor policies designed to increase marriage rates because these policies could have an even greater impact on poverty than improved education.

A second example of the impact of marriage on poverty is provided by a superb series of studies – again supported by research dollars from the Department of Health and Human Services – conducted by Robert Lerman of the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. In separate studies, Lerman used three national data sets that capture information on representative samples of the U.S. population. According to a summary prepared by Kelleen Kaye of the Department, Lerman's studies show that:

- Married families with two biological parents have lower rates of poverty and material hardship, even after controlling for other factors such as education and race, than any other type of family including single parents and cohabiting parents. Even in the case of families with lower levels of education, those headed

- by married biological parents are better off than either single parents or cohabiting parents.
- Married biological parents provide a more stable rearing environment for their children and are able to weather hard times better than single or cohabiting couples in part because they receive more assistance from friends, family, and community.
  - Marriage itself makes actions that limit hardship – better budgeting, planning, pulling together in a crisis – more common, even among people with similarly low income and education.

As illustrated by the Brookings study and the Lerman research, most studies find that marriage reduces poverty and material hardship even when other differences between single and married parents are controlled and even when the analysis is confined to low-income families. But another benefit of marriage may be of even greater interest to the members of the Finance Committee. Since 1994, with publication of a seminal volume on children in single-parent families by Sara McLanahan of Princeton and Gary Sandefur of the University of Wisconsin, there has been growing agreement among researchers that children do best in married, two-parent families. On balance, the evidence now indicates that children who grow up in married two-parent families achieve higher levels of education, are less likely to become teen parents, and are less likely to have behavioral or health problems. As with studies of family economic well-being, many factors other than family composition contribute to these outcomes. Even so, when social scientists use statistical techniques to control for these other differences, children from single-parent families still show these educational, social, and health problems to a greater degree than children reared by married biological parents.

Nor are children the only members of families whose well-being is affected by marriage. As shown in a recent book by Linda Waite of the University of Chicago and Maggie Gallagher of the Institute for American Values in New York, marriage confers a wide range of benefits on adults. Based largely on their review of the empirical literature, Waite and Gallagher find that people who get and stay married live longer, have better health, have higher earnings and accumulate more assets, rate themselves as happier and more satisfied with their sex lives, and have happier and healthier children than people who don't marry or people who divorce their spouses.

Taken together, empirical studies provide a strong case for the benefits of marriage. If marriage rates could be increased, it can be predicted with some confidence that poverty rates would decline; that children would improve their school achievement, have fewer teen pregnancies, and have better health and mental health; and that adults would live longer, be happier, be more productive, be wealthier, and be more effective parents.

### What To Do

But how can healthy marriages be promoted? I believe it is a good thing that this question is now a leading issue of public policy at both the federal and state level. If as a nation we can figure out the answer, we will “promote the general welfare” of the nation.

We should begin with a frank assessment of the evidence on marriage promotion. If the evidence on the benefits of marriage is strong, the evidence on good ways to promote marriage is modest. Thus, I would propose a three-part strategy to the committee: jaw-boning, continuing the already strong record of creating programs to reduce nonmarital births, and creating a program with the explicit goal of promoting healthy marriages.

Jaw-Boning. Congress has already taken several actions to focus the public’s attention on the importance of family composition to the nation’s general welfare. The 1996 welfare reform law was perhaps the first time that Congress forcefully brought the issue of family composition to public attention. Not only did the law contain several provisions to reduce nonmarital births, but the law converted the old Aid to Families with Dependent Children program into the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program and gave it four specific goals. Three of the four goals address family composition; namely, reducing dependence on welfare by promoting work and marriage, reducing nonmarital pregnancies, and encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

Thanks in large part to the Bush administration, Congress is now returning to family composition as a major part of the debate on reauthorizing the 1996 welfare reform law. This debate has once again forcefully brought the issue of family composition to public attention and has ignited a debate that is being taken up, not just in Congress, but on the nation’s editorial pages and in campaigns for political office around the country. If the years of Congressional debate on the importance of work as a replacement for welfare is any example, this kind of debate serves the vital purpose of clarifying the nation’s values on marriage and child-rearing and reminding the public of how important it is to preserve and promote marriage and two-parent families.

Reducing Nonmarital Births. In addition to promoting public debate on the value of marriage, Congress should continue its efforts to reduce nonmarital births. Research shows clearly that having a child outside marriage, in addition to portending numerous problems for both the mother and child, substantially reduces the likelihood that the mother will subsequently marry. Nonmarital birth is precisely the problem that Senator Moynihan emphasized in his infamous paper nearly four decades ago. Unfortunately, Congress waited many years before doing anything about the problem, but several important programs are now well underway. Before the 1996 welfare reform law, these programs were aimed almost exclusively at reducing nonmarital births through family planning. But the 1996 welfare reform law contained several provisions designed to reduce nonmarital births through the use of other strategies. These included allowing states to stop increasing the size of welfare checks when mothers on welfare have babies, allowing states to deny benefits to unmarried mothers, strengthening paternity establishment requirements and child support enforcement, requiring teen mothers to live

under adult supervision and to continue attending school or lose their cash welfare benefit, giving a cash bonus to states that reduce their nonmarital pregnancy rate, and establishing a new program of abstinence education.

The abstinence education program has now been implemented in every state except California and has been substantially expanded by legislation enacted in 1997. Congress also enacted legislation requiring that the abstinence education program be subjected to a scientific evaluation. The Mathematica Policy Research firm of Princeton, New Jersey is now conducting the evaluation and results should be available later this year. Meanwhile, the Bush administration has adopted the policy of expanding abstinence programs until the amount of money the federal government spends on abstinence is roughly equal to the amount spent on family planning. There are ongoing disputes between many of the advocates who support family planning and the advocates who support abstinence, but it seems likely that both approaches contribute to reducing nonmarital birth rates. In any case, the birth rate to teenagers has fallen every year since 1991 and has declined by a little less one-third during that period. This is exceptionally good news. In addition, the nonmarital birth rate among all women leveled off in 1995 after more than three decades of continuous growth and has increased only slightly since then. There is still a great deal of room for improvement, but some progress is being made.

All the more reason the federal government, working with the states, should continue and even expand its campaign against nonmarital births. Policies that support both family planning and abstinence education should be continued, as should the goal of equalizing expenditures on the two approaches. One issue that deserves attention, however, is whether all entities receiving federal support are making a serious effort to offer an abstinence message. There are indications that many programs, especially Title X clinics, dispense birth control without engaging recipients in a full assessment of the health and other consequences of sexual activity. It would also be appropriate, especially for older clients, to discuss the advantages of marriage with those who indicate some interest in marriage in response to standard inquiries. If the website of the Title X program is any example, any thought about abstinence or marriage is completely beyond the purview of Title X clinics.

Fund Healthy Marriage Programs. The third component of a federal strategy to promote healthy marriages is to fund programs that aim explicitly to either reduce divorce or promote healthy marriage among unmarried couples, especially those that have had or are expecting to have a baby. The proposals adopted by the House and the Senate in their respective welfare reform reauthorization bills would provide an excellent start toward establishing programs of this type. State and local governments and private organizations, including faith-based organizations, could participate, thereby preventing the federal government from directly conducting the programs. Further, both bills make it clear that only states, organizations, and individuals who want to participate would do so. No program of mandatory marriage education or other pro-marriage activity should be funded. Similarly, in awarding funds on a competitive basis, the Department of Health and Human Services should ensure that programs consider the issue of domestic



violence and make provisions for addressing it where necessary. Finally, because we know so little about marriage-promotion programs, especially with poor and low-income families, the Department should insist that all projects have good evaluation designs, based on random-assignment where possible. Our primary goal over the next decade or so should be to learn what works and for whom.

Research has already produced good evidence that marriage education programs can be effective in the short run in improving communication, reducing conflict, and increasing happiness. Most of these programs have been implemented with married couples that are not poor, but there is good reason to believe that the short-term benefits of marriage education would be achieved with poor families as well.

It is to be hoped that many states and other organizations will attempt to work specifically with poor and low-income, unmarried parents. Sara McLanahan at Princeton and a host of top researchers around the nation are conducting a large-scale study of couples that have children outside marriage. The couples are disproportionately poor and from minority groups. This important research has already exploded several myths about couples that have nonmarital births. First, about 80 percent of the couples are involved exclusively with each other in a romantic relationship. In fact, about half of the couples live together. Couples that produce nonmarital births, in other words, typically do not have casual relationships. Second, a large majority of both the mothers and fathers think about marriage and say that they would like to be married to each other. Third, most of the fathers earn more money than the myth of destitute and idle young males would have us believe. Although nearly 20 percent of the fathers were idle in the week before the child's birth, showing that employment is a problem for some of these men, the mean income of fathers was nonetheless over \$17,000. Fourth, almost all the fathers say they want to be involved with their child – and almost all the mothers want them to be. If these young parents are romantically involved, if most say they are interested in marriage and want the father to be involved with the child, and if most have the economic assets that could provide a decent financial basis for marriage, then why don't more of these young couples marry? It would make great sense for states and private, especially faith-based, organizations to mount programs that attempt to help these young couples make progress toward marriage. The Department of Health and Human Services is already funding research programs of this type, but more such programs should be undertaken all over the nation.

The provision passed by this committee as part of welfare reform reauthorization would provide the funding, direction, and federal leadership necessary to move the nation in this direction. If the program is enacted and projects are initiated all across the country, a great deal of attention and energy will be focused on marriage as a vital national issue. Equally important, good programs carefully evaluated will inevitably increase our knowledge of what works. There is no issue on the nation's domestic agenda that holds greater promise to substantially reduce the nation's major social problems.

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