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## Weekly Standard: Fix Families, Economy Will Follow

by MITCH PEARLSTEIN



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David McNew/Getty Images

In this May 2009 photo, Maya Ramirez, a single mother of five, helps her daughter with homework. Ramirez lives in El Centro Calif., which has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country.

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Don't look now, but the fiscal mountain blocking our path is rockier than usually advertised. Why? Because even if House Budget chairman Paul Ryan prevails on every contentious detail of his long-term plan for prosperity, family fragmentation — more severe in the United States than in any other industrialized nation — will make it more difficult than generally assumed to balance our books.

Very high rates of family breakdown, as it used to be known, are subtracting from what many American students learn in school and so holding them back economically. That harms the country by making millions of citizens less competitive than they should be in the worldwide marketplace — which, in turn, is dividing a nation that has never viewed itself as segmented by class. Governments, already stretched, are expected to offer remedies while social cohesion frays and increasing numbers of men and women, especially in the lower half of the income scale, grow more and more discouraged or angry.

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It's easy to imagine, for instance, millions becoming less accepting than in the past of top CEOs' making hundreds of times more money than they do. Conservatives' attempts to debunk, say, tax increases on the rich as reflecting "class envy" and "class warfare" may be less effective than they have been till now.

The sheer numbers are staggering. In round terms, about 40 percent of all births in the United States are out of wedlock. That figure for the entire population conceals wide variation: Thirty percent of white children, 50 percent of Hispanic children, and 70 percent of African-American children are born to unmarried parents. As for divorce, 40 percent or more of first marriages break up, with the odds increasing to about 50 percent for second and subsequent marriages. How could rates like these *not* be a major drag on the country?

The linkages between family collapse and various forms of social failure were established decades ago. (A fine roundup of solid social science is *The Case for Marriage*, by Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher.) Reams of sophisticated research have documented what everyday experience confirms: that family fragmentation damages enormous numbers of boys and girls. Not all children in tough family situations do poorly, but more than enough do. "It is very hard," two sober scholars concluded in a 2010 Educational Testing Service report, "to imagine progress resuming in reducing the education attainment

and achievement gap without turning these family trends around." The very idea, they said, of a "substitute for the institution [of marriage] for raising children is almost unthinkable."

Others have developed ways of measuring the most obvious economic and social effects of family fragmentation. Perhaps the most elementary is to calculate how much money government spends to keep single mothers and their children out of dire poverty. In 2008, Georgia College & State University economist Benjamin Scafidi calculated that family fragmentation cost U.S. taxpayers \$112 billion annually. And Scafidi purposely *left out* some quite substantial costs:

- The study considered only female-headed households, although male-headed households represent about one-sixth of single-parent homes.
- Scafidi disregarded a number of major government programs, notably the Earned Income Tax Credit, insofar as "existing data" didn't allow his team to "quantify them with confidence."
- He disregarded the not-trivial sums public schools wind up spending on social problems tied to out-of-wedlock births and divorce.
- He did not attempt to monetize the human and social capital that stably married parents provide their children, though the increase in young people's well-being reduces the likelihood of their requiring pricey governmental services when they repeat grades, burden the juvenile-justice and child-protective systems, and so on.
- Scafidi assumed no benign effects of marriage on fathers' earning power, although it is well established that stable marriages tend to increase men's earnings while decreasing the likelihood of their committing crimes and being incarcerated.
- Scafidi assumed that married households avail themselves of governmental services to which they are entitled at the same rate as single-mother households, though in fact lower-income married couples are only about half as likely as single mothers to take advantage of such benefits.
- Scafidi disregarded the Medicare expenses associated with unmarried adults and the elderly even though, as he noted, "high rates of divorce and failure to marry mean that many more Americans enter late middle-age (and beyond) without a spouse to help them manage chronic illnesses, or to help care for them if they become disabled."

Like a good academic, Scafidi felt compelled to be methodologically cautious; perhaps overly so. But the rest of us are free to observe that the actual cost is considerably above \$112 billion a year.

A second way of estimating costs is to figure out how much lower the poverty level would be if out-of-wedlock birth rates and divorce rates were lower. In 2009, Brookings scholars Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill wrote that if the "United States had the same proportion of children living in single-parent families as in 1970, all else equal, today's poverty rate would be roughly one-quarter lower than it is." Even more dramatically, Sawhill and another colleague earlier wrote that if family structure had not changed between 1960 and 1998, the poverty rate for black children in the latter year would have been 28.4 percent instead of 45.6 percent.

A third approach reflects the work of several econometricians on the connections between academic achievement and economic growth. In several invaluable studies, economist Eric Hanushek demonstrated the vital importance of a nation's competence in mathematics and science for its economic success. The quality of learning in these two subjects — which is significantly depressed by

family fragmentation — is best measured by standardized tests that have been administered internationally since the 1970s.

"There is now considerable evidence," Hanushek wrote, "that cognitive skills measured by test scores are directly related to individual earnings, productivity, and economic growth. A variety of researchers document that the earnings advantages to higher achievement on standardized tests are quite substantial." But if the relationship between cognitive skills and individual productivity and incomes is strong, the relationship between labor force quality and economic growth for nations as a whole is perhaps even stronger. A more skilled society may generate more invention, enable companies to introduce improved production methods, and lead to faster introduction of new technologies. And while these patterns hold for developed and developing nations alike, Hanushek wrote, enhanced cognitive skills have their "greatest positive economic impact" in nations with the most open economies — like the United States.

Here it is natural to wonder why the U.S. economy remains dominant when our students do so poorly in math and science. Hanushek noted that many factors determine a nation's economic vitality. In our case, the openness and fluidity of markets, including a comparative lack of governmental intrusion, may be decisive. But in a 2002 essay, Hanushek warned that a day of reckoning was approaching. The expansion of education in the United States, he argued, outpaced that of the rest of the world in the 20th century. We opened secondary schools to all our citizens and enlarged higher education by further developing land-grant universities, adopting the GI Bill, and funding grants and loans to students. The U.S. labor force came to be better educated — despite the lesser achievement of our high school graduates — than that of most other countries. In other words, Hanushek argued that "more schooling with less learning each year" had yielded more human capital than found in nations with fewer years of schooling but more learning in each of those years. That approach, however, "appears on the verge of reaching its limits."

Even if it is not possible to calculate the precise degree to which educational shortcomings burden our economy, the sequence is inexorable: Family breakdown weakens educational performance, which in turn weakens economic performance.

Now, it might still be the case that the U.S. economy has enough going for it that high family fragmentation is not yet drastically damaging. But we can already observe the fallout in individual cases, as men and women who grew up in fractured families and performed poorly at school simply lack the tools to succeed in an economy that continues to demand strong cognitive and other skills — with similarly constrained fates awaiting disproportionate numbers of their own children and grandchildren.

What might this portend for our social and political fabric? Clearly nothing good, as family breakdown can only deepen social cleavages in un-American ways. It's hard to ignore the fact that from 1980 to 2005, according to one calculation, more than 80 percent of the increase in Americans' income was enjoyed by the top 1 percent of earners. Meanwhile, there is now less upward mobility in the United States than in countries like Canada, France, and Germany. Recent data have led Sawhill, the Brookings scholar and former Clinton administration economist, to underline three core points: Income in the United States is less equally distributed than it was several decades ago; income is more closely correlated with education; and it's more closely correlated with family structure.

Americans don't like to think of individuals, cohorts, or generations locked into a fixed social or economic condition. But with family fragmentation making it hard for people to achieve the higher educational level demanded by worldwide changes, debates about class are becoming difficult to avoid.

Among the few who have not shied away is the writer Kay Hymowitz. In *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age*, she describes "poor or working-class single mothers with little education having children who will grow up to be low-income single mothers and fathers with little education who will have children who will become low-income single parents — and so forth." That perverse cycle is producing what Hymowitz calls "a self-perpetuating single-mother proletariat." She asks, "Not exactly what America should look like, is it?"

Not that high nonmarital birth rates and high divorce rates are exclusively a low-income phenomenon. Bradford Wilcox leads the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia and Elizabeth Marquardt is director of the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values. Their 2010 study describes growing family fragmentation among the "moderately educated" middle, the 58 percent of the adult population who have graduated from high school but don't have four-year college degrees. Today, the marital patterns of the men and women in this group increasingly resemble those of the least educated. As Wilcox and Marquardt report:

- In the early 1980s, only 2 percent of births to mothers with four-year college degrees were outside of marriage. For moderately educated mothers the figure was 13 percent, and for mothers who didn't finish high school it was 33 percent. The recent figures on out-of-wedlock births for these three educational groups are much higher: 6 percent, 44 percent, and 54 percent respectively.

Between the 1970s and the 2000s, the percentage of 14-year-old girls with highly educated mothers who lived with both parents was stable, at 80 to 81 percent. The percentage of 14-year-old girls with moderately educated mothers who lived with both parents fell markedly, from 74 to 58 percent, while the corresponding number for girls with the least-educated mothers fell, but less sharply, from 65 to 52 percent.

Wilcox and Marquardt sum up: "The family lives of today's moderately educated Americans increasingly resemble those of high-school dropouts, too often burdened by financial stress, partner conflict, single parenting, and troubled children." Moderately educated Americans are decreasingly likely to embrace "bourgeois values and virtues" such as delayed gratification, temperance, and an emphasis on education — the "sine qua nons of personal and marital success in the contemporary United States." Most highly educated Americans, by contrast, still "adhere devoutly" to the sequence education, work, marriage, and only then childbearing, thus maximizing their chances of "making good on the American dream and obtaining a successful family life."

What, then, is the conservative remedy for all of this? Free-market principles, of course, are sound and fitting whenever economic hurdles are to be jumped. And a cultural and religious revival would be welcome, if hard to summon up. But what else might reverse the family bleeding? Here is just one idea.

Under normal circumstances, boys grow up and marry the women who become the mothers of their children. If, however, they reach adulthood unable to hold a job, stay sober, or keep out of jail, they quickly find that desirable women have little interest in hitching themselves to them. In communities where marriage is vanishing, it cannot be revived unless millions of boys (and girls) get their lives in decent order. Aimless or felonious men are not the only reason for the decline of marriage, but they are a sizable one.

Many of these young men grew up without their fathers and suffered what some call "father wounds." Would it not make sense for such boys to attend schools properly described as "paternalistic"? These would be tough-loving places, like the celebrated (but still too few) KIPP Academies, with their Knowledge Is Power Program. Would it not also make sense to allow many more boys and girls to attend religious and other private schools, which have their "biggest impact," according to Harvard's


Paul Peterson, by keeping minority kids in "an educational environment that sustains them through graduation"?

That idea of "sustenance" deserves pondering. Minor wounds usually heal fast. Deep ones take longer. Children scarred by father wounds and other family absences and disruptions, very much including missing mothers, need *sustenance* of the most personal and vital kind. Such sustenance can be provided by some kinds of schools. I once asked a nun, the principal of a Catholic elementary school, what her school's mission was. As best I remember, her words were, "To manifest God's love to every child." As educational mission statements go, this is one of the briefest yet meatiest ever devised. Schools with this purpose might powerfully nourish the boys and girls — fathers and mothers in training — who are most in need of food.

One more reason for real school choice, then, is to prevent a divided and declining postmarital America from wrecking Paul Ryan's plan to rekindle our prosperity.

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