

Let Them Eat Wedding Rings

Second Edition, June 2007

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**Alternatives
to Marriage**
PROJECT
www.unmarried.org

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Introduction

When the first edition of *Let Them Eat Wedding Rings* was going to press in late 2001, Congress was preparing to reauthorize the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) the 1996 law intended to “end welfare as we know it”. PRWORA made major changes to America’s safety net programs for the poor, including an increased focus on issues of marriage and family form. PRWORA created Temporary Assistance for Needy Families as the nation’s umbrella anti-poverty program.

The goal of the first edition of *Let Them Eat Wedding Rings* was to remind readers that (1) the purpose of welfare is to reduce poverty, and (2) individuals and families should be treated fairly regardless of their marital status. The first edition provided: a short overview of marriage-promoting welfare policies; research into the varied reasons why some people are not married; and international evidence debunking the claim that marriage and poverty are inevitably linked. Based on the lessons of history, a body of sound research, and a belief in freedom and social justice, the Alternatives to Marriage Project (AtMP) called for society to reconsider the role of marriage in our nation’s welfare laws.

In the five years since AtMP first published *Let Them Eat Wedding Rings*, government-funded marriage programs have grown explosively. Hundreds of programs were launched using federal, state and local government funding. Congress finally reauthorized TANF in February 2006. Despite protests by AtMP and others, Congress diverted \$750 million from anti-poverty programs to marriage initiatives. In October 2006, 225 programs received 5-year funding awards worth almost \$600 million.

Also during the past five years, the Census Bureau revealed that the majority of households are unmarried. Same-sex couples won the right to marriage, civil union and domestic partnership in a few states. Over 1,730 people signed AtMP’s Affirmation of Family Diversity. College professors and students incorporated *Let Them Eat Wedding Rings* into their review of social policy.

Official government documents now tone down both the desire to convert the unmarried to marriage and

the purported link between marrying and leaving poverty. However, non-governmental commentators avidly tout marriage as better for children and as a solution to the increasingly visible problem of economic inequality. Therefore, as observers who care deeply about fairness for all families, AtMP renews its call for the critical evaluation of government-funded marriage programs based on these three principles:

1. The purpose of welfare is to reduce poverty.

Can marriage programs that are funded under TANF or state and local anti-poverty mandates be proven to reduce poverty?

2. Individuals and families should be treated fairly regardless of their marital status.

Do unmarried partners, solo singles, and same-sex married couples benefit equally from government-funded programs compared to married people? Or setting a lower bar, do they even have equal access to such programs?

3. Policies designed to help children should support all the types of families in which children really live.

Does rigorous research distinguish the effect on children of their parents’ marital status from the effect of the quality of parenting they receive? Besides the legal credential of marriage, what factors help married parents raise children, and how can publicly-funded programs build those factors into the lives of all parents?

“If marriage were a solution to poverty, it wouldn’t take an act of Congress to promote it.”- *Patricia Ireland, past president of the National Organization for Women, on the use of TANF fund to promote marriage. At the NOW conference, June 2001*

The first edition provided a strong analytical base; this second edition adds:

- a brief assessment of how the marriage money has been spent, and how it has been spun;
- a consolidated and enhanced section on reasons for skepticism;
- a wary celebration of the demise of the Illegitimacy Bonus; and
- suggestions for program evaluation and further study.

The remainder of the text is largely identical to that in the first edition; however, a few sentences have been updated from present or future to past tense, and a few Census figures have been added or updated.

Marriage and Public Policy: Poverty Was the Hook, but Politics May Be the Key

Marriage played a starring role in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). Of the welfare reform law's four listed purposes, one includes promoting marriage, a second focuses on reducing pregnancies among unmarried women, and a third encourages the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. Since the law passed, states, government leaders, and think-tanks have increasingly proposed and implemented programs that use welfare funds to attempt to influence family form.

When the first edition of *Let Them Eat Wedding Rings* was published in January 2002,

- In West Virginia, unmarried families were receiving \$100 less in monthly welfare benefits than many married families, effectively punishing the children in households where parents choose not to or are unable to marry. Wade Horn, the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), recommended that Congress require states to provide this kind of marriage bonus / unmarried penalty.[1]
- The Heritage Foundation was recommending spending at least ten percent of federal welfare funds (about \$1.5 billion per year) to promote marriage. Proposed reforms included advertising campaigns, celebrity endorsements promoting marriage,[2] and payments of \$5,000 to women "at high risk" of unwed birth if they are married when their first child is born. Mr. Horn supported this proposal, as well, writing that government should "reward those who choose [marriage]."[3]
- Arizona, Oklahoma, Utah, and Wisconsin were among states spending TANF dollars to promote marriage. Their campaigns included funding a "marriage handbook," media campaigns to promote marriage, and "marriage scholars" on college campuses. Other states were considering following their lead, with the support of the Bush administration.

In 1997, Mr. Horn wrote that unmarried families should only be eligible to receive "limited-supply" benefits like public housing, job training, and Head Start if there are any available after all married families receive them. He also argued that cohabiting couples and their children should not be eligible for

family benefits.[4] Mr. Horn was not a government official when he wrote that, and he has more recently modified his public statements. At ACF from 2001 through mid 2007, "'Wade Horn has shown the influence a bureaucrat can have,' says Ronald Haskins, a welfare expert who has worked for Congress and the current President Bush's White House. 'Anything that wasn't nailed down over there is now devoted to marriage.'"[5]

Federal programs that had nothing to do with marriage now serve the marriage-only movement. For example,

- ACF's financial asset-building website encourages collaboration with marriage programs: "Grantees can also apply using methods that integrate asset-building work with other related vital activities such as promoting healthy marriage and family formation as a means of achieving safety, permanency, and well-being for children and families."[6] A federally-funded program in Washington, DC offers to help low-income people build assets by granting them \$3 in matching federal funds for each \$1 that they save for school, home ownership, or self employment. Eligibility is limited to married couples, engaged couples (with payment contingent on their marriage), and single persons age 16-22 who are not parents. Single parents are not eligible.[7]
- ACF encourages states to target abstinence-only-until-marriage programs at people aged 19-29. Mr. Horn states "The message is 'It's better to wait until you're married to bear or father children. The only 100% effective way of getting there is abstinence.'"[8] Some may hear the message as 'only in marriage is an adult's sex life private from government oversight', or 'only married parents merit government approval and support'.

From 2002 – 2005, ACF funded "Healthy Marriage Sites" in 44 states and the District of Columbia. In total, over \$62 million was distributed through ACF's five administrative units: the Administration for Native Americans, the Children's Bureau, the Office of Child Support Enforcement, the Office of Community Services, and the Office of Refugee Resettlement.[9] An additional 42 programs were funded by the Compassion Capital Fund, part of ACF's 2002 Faith-based and Community Initiative.[10]

One of the programs that received Compassion Capital Funds in 2005 was sued by Americans United for Separation of Church and State for using taxpayer

funds to set up a website that promoted the organization's religious beliefs. For example, a quiz on the website asked what is meant when "the Bible says that the 'husband is head of the wife'" and when "the Bible says that the wife should submit to the husband." [11] To many people, the institution of marriage is inextricably linked to religion; faith-based marriage programs may be more likely to proselytize than faith-based programs providing food, shelter, employment training etc. In 2006, a Government Accountability Office review of the Faith-based and Community Initiative looked at a variety of program types, and found violations of the Initiative's requirement to separate religion from government-funded programs in 31% of its inspections. [12]

Other than the Compassion Capital Fund, all of the 2002-2005 grants stemmed from welfare funding. However, not all of the grants required targeting low-income populations; as a result, many grantees used the money to promote marriage generally, with no focus on serving the poor. [13]

The lack of focus on low-income people was one of the primary flaws identified in the 2005 "Systematic Review of the Impact of Marriage and Relationship Programs" commissioned by HHS. The review tried to determine "how programs may help improve the relationships of couples (specifically low-income couples) and how their improvement may affect the well-being of children." The result: "As there are no studies that include "low-income" couples, the review cannot determine the impact of marriage programs on low-income populations. ... [T]hese studies do not evaluate the impact of relationship programs on clients' children. Some studies do mention whether or not the clients have children, but there are no measures taken on their well-being. Thus the review is not able to assess the programs' effectiveness on children of clients. In the future, it will be necessary for researchers to examine programs that serve low-income clients and assess the well-being of clients' children in order to inform policymakers on questions of greater interest." [14] Thus, eight years after these programs started, with \$62 million spent, it was still impossible to evaluate their effectiveness.

In May 2004, ACF posed the important question "Why is the healthy marriage initiative part of welfare reform?" in its list of Frequently Asked

"It is remarkable that just when the ranks of single people are larger than ever before, pundits and politicians advocate discriminating against them." - *Judith Stacey, University of Southern California sociologist and co-founder of the Council on Contemporary Families, in The Nation, July 2001*

Questions. Its answer strangely ignores the key word '-why-': "The President's healthy marriage initiative is NOT intended just for welfare or other low-income families. States may design programs in ways they feel will help improve the proportion of children being raised in healthy married households. Such programs need not be run only for TANF families, nor run by a state's TANF agency." [15] This answer fails to provide justification for why it is appropriate to shift money intended as a safety net for the poor into marriage promotion.

In fact, the official government line is that "The ACF Healthy Marriage Initiative is Not About:

- Coercing anyone to marry or remain in unhealthy relationships.
- Withdrawing supports from single parents, or diminishing, either directly or indirectly, the important work of single parents.
- Stigmatizing those who choose divorce.
- Limiting access to divorce.
- Promoting the initiative as a panacea for achieving positive outcomes for child and family well-being.
- Running a federal dating service.
- An immediate solution to lifting all families out of poverty." [16]

Nonetheless, Congress used Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the nation's umbrella anti-poverty program, to commit \$750 million for Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs through September 2010. All of these funds were awarded in September and October 2006, going to over 300 non-profit, faith-based, academic and local government initiatives around the country. In addition to the administrative units involved in previous years, funds were also awarded through the Community Service Block Grant.

Why did the Bush Administration and the Republican-dominated Congress dedicate three-quarters of a billion dollars to unproven marriage programs while cutting other welfare initiatives? The *Wall Street Journal* notes that Mr. Horn "pushed to include funding for marriage promotion, despite some reluctance from his boss, HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson. 'It wasn't my first priority,' Mr. Thompson acknowledges, but says he came to see the political advantages. 'The religious right certainly found this a plus and we could find more supporters for the legislation.'" [17]

The so-called “religious right” is not alone in seeking more government emphasis on marriage. Conservatives (or neoconservatives) who are generally considered secular, and who generally oppose government-funded social programs, also support marriage money. For example, influential *New York Times* columnist David Brooks writes: “Once you acknowledge that there is a basic tear in the way the market economy is evolving, you begin trying to figure out the causes. In declining order of importance, they seem to be: First, the generally rising education premium. ... Second, the widening marriage gap. Middle-class people are increasingly likely to raise kids in stable two-parent homes, while kids in poorer families are increasingly less likely to have these advantages.”[18] “[T]he most important thing we can do to increase social mobility is to come up with second-generation human capital policies. The first-generation policies gave people access to schools, colleges and training facilities. The second-generation policies will help them develop the habits, knowledge and mental traits they need to succeed once they are there. ... [This] means strengthening marriage. Only half of American kids can expect to live with both biological parents at age 15 (compared with two-thirds of kids in Western Europe). That has calamitous effects on education and development.”[19]

“This program trains people in how to make their marriages conform to one narrow interpretation of faith. The federal government has no business forcing the taxpayer to subsidize that.” - *Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State*

The alignment of marriage and politics has paid off royally, but marriage-only activists are not satisfied with their awards of \$150 million per year for five years. They are now lobbying their elected officials to allocate additional TANF funds to their cause. The Fatherhood and Marriage Leadership Institute (FAMLI) – which describes itself as “a public policy coalition designed to help state and local healthy marriage coalitions participate effectively in American politics” – points out that states may use both TANF and Safe and Stable Families block grants for “marriage strengthening purposes”. FAMLI trains marriage activists to “focu[s] on the political process and creat[e] allies with others organizations” so that state and local officials will divert anti-poverty funds from other programs to marriage programs. Calling it the One Percent Solution, FAMLI proposes that the political process could divert “over \$400 million annually”. [20]

In January 2007, Utah became the first state to divert 1% of its welfare funds to marriage programs. Melanie Reese of Utah Healthy Marriage Initiatives

stated on FAMLI’s website “The most common question asked has been ‘How did they do it?’ It helps that the Utah Commission on Marriage has been functioning statewide since 1998 and is now housed within the Department of Workforce Services! We have worked hard to build credibility and a trust level demonstrating that our work is good. We submitted a five-year objectives plan to the TANF director focusing on Research, Services, and Public Awareness. In short, WE SIMPLY

ASKED for 1% and provided justification. If you don’t ask, the answer is no. I also credit participation with Chris Gersten and the FAMLI network.” [21] FAMLI Chairman, Chris Gersten is the former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Administration on Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services, 2001-2004.[22]

Skepticism about Linking Marriage and Poverty

Those who favor promoting marriage in welfare policy typically base their arguments on “the good of the children.” Yet existing marriage-promoting policies harm children in low-income unmarried families. Denied recognition, their families are eligible for fewer benefits than equivalent married families. In addition, their parents are sometimes mandated to receive state-sponsored “counseling” that advocates marriage regardless of whether that is in a given family’s best interest. The diversion of funds from poverty-fighting programs (such as job training or food stamps) into pro-marriage media campaigns and incentives eclipses the real needs of Americans in poverty.

1. U.S. Studies Show Marriage Doesn’t End Poverty[23]

In 2001, Princeton University researchers asked: would poor mothers be lifted out of poverty if they married the fathers of their children? The researchers used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, the first survey with the capability to follow unmarried parents from the birth of their child and compare them with a control group of married parents. The study examined 4,900 births in 20 large U.S. cities, and is representative of births in cities with populations exceeding 200,000.

The study's authors analyzed the age, educational level, employment status, hourly wages, and other factors for all the parents in the study. Then they experimented with three different potential economic scenarios for the unmarried parents. In the first, the unmarried mothers live alone and work full-time without any support from their babies' fathers. In the second, the unmarried mothers marry and stay home with the babies while the fathers work full-time outside the home. In the third, the couples marry and both work outside the home, the fathers full-time and the mothers part-time.

The findings are striking: In the scenario where the parents marry and the mother stays home with the baby, 22% of families would be below the federal poverty line, and an additional 37% would be between 100% and 150% of the poverty line. (At that time the poverty line was \$13,874 for a family of three). Even in the scenario where the parents marry and both work outside the home, 28% of families would still be at or below 150% of the poverty line. Clearly, getting married would not lift enough of these families out of poverty.

Why? The article finds major differences between currently married and unmarried parents; differences that, in their words, "cannot be magically altered with a marriage license." Unmarried parents are far younger, on average, than their married counterparts (the median age of unmarried mothers is 22, compared to 29 for married mothers). They have less education (26% of unmarried mothers were educated beyond high school, compared with 63% of married mothers), resulting in lower hourly wages and earning capacities. Only three-quarters of the unmarried fathers have steady jobs, compared with nine out of ten married fathers. In short, the researchers conclude, most of the difference in poverty rates between married and unmarried families has nothing to do with marital status. "Proponents of marriage are overstating its benefits when they compare the median earnings or poverty rates of single mother families to those of married, two-parent families," they conclude.

Yes, on average married couples are less likely to be poor than unmarried couples. But it does not follow that marriage would end poverty among unmarried couples.

As historian Stephanie Coontz explained it in 1997, "marriage will not resolve the crisis of child well-being in our country. According to Donald Hernandez, chief of the U.S. Census Department Bureau of Marriage and Family Statistics, even if we could reunite every child in America with both biological parents – and any look at abuse statistics tells you that's certainly not in the best interest of every child – two thirds of the children who are poor today would *still* be poor." [24]

More recent figures support this point. In 2006, the National Center for Children in Poverty reviewed

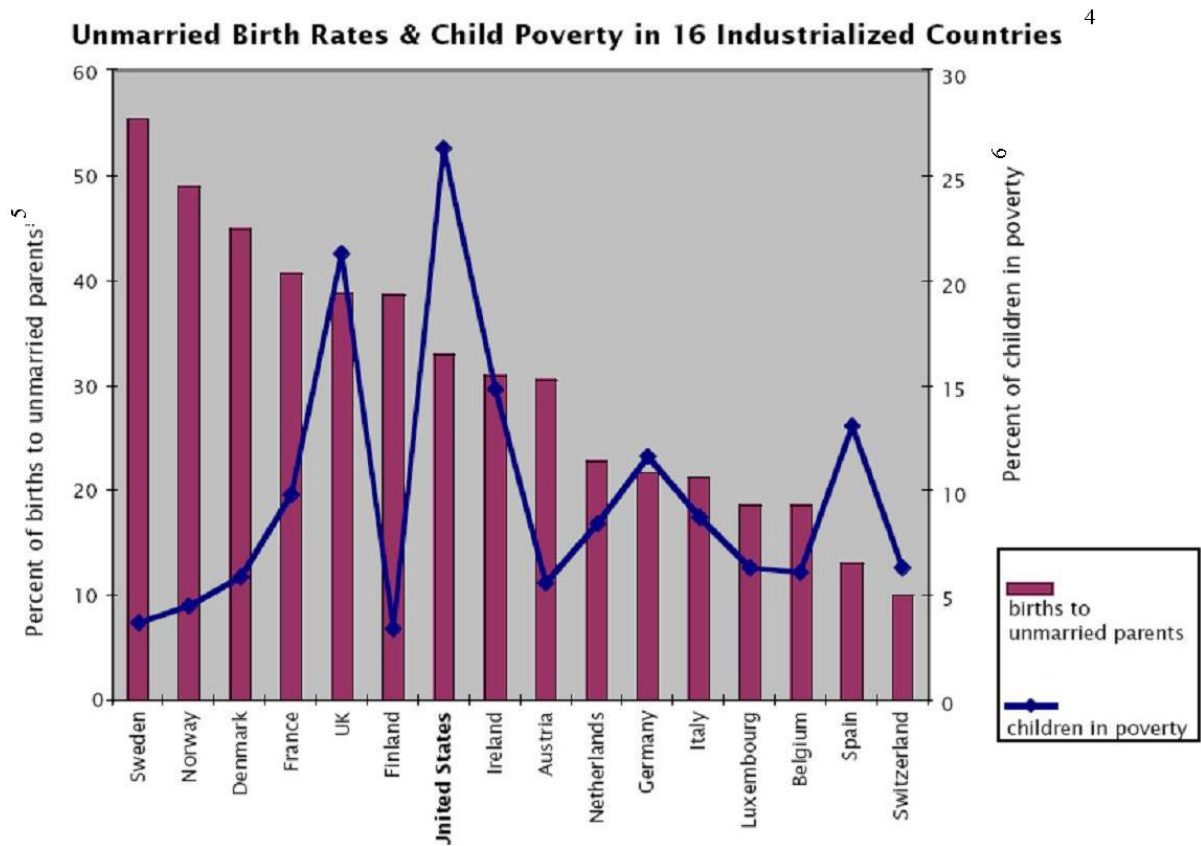
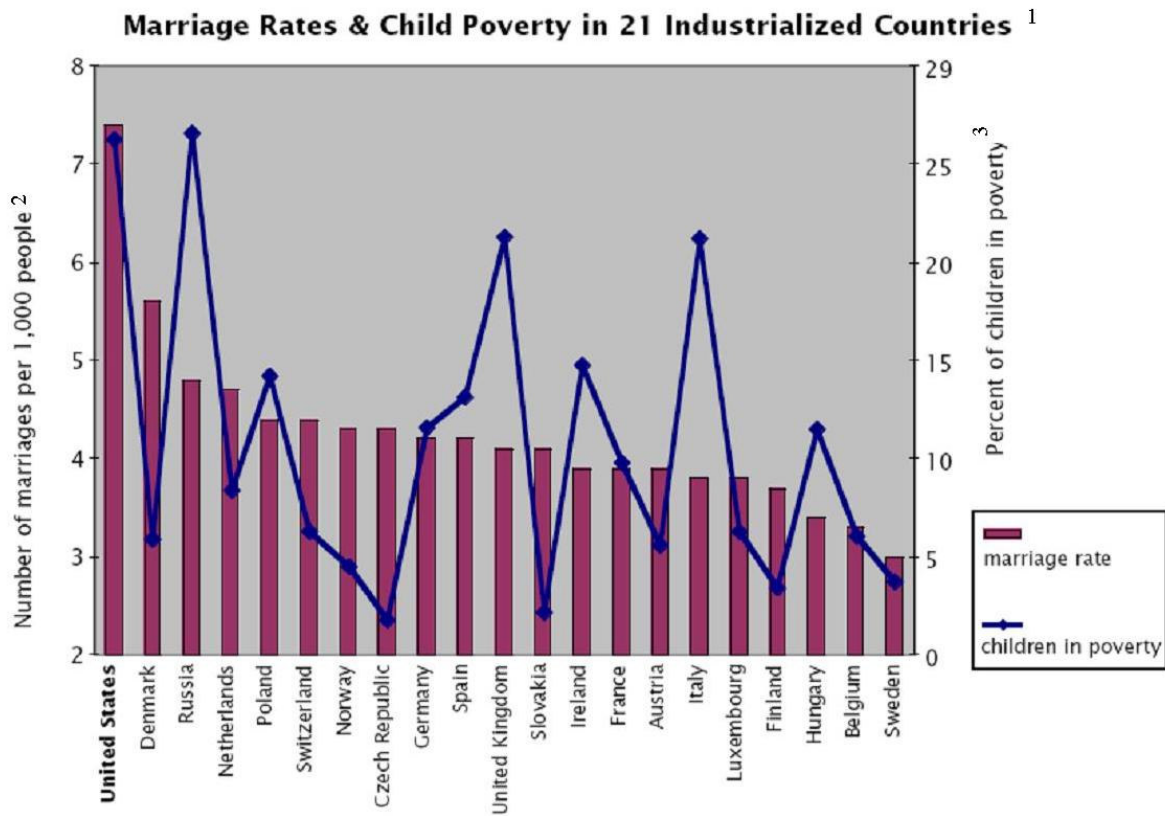
"The Institute for Women's Policy Research has not found any scientific research to support the claim that programs and policies promoting marriage actually reduce poverty." - *Institute for Women's Policy Research, Statement on Marriage Promotion and TANF Reauthorization, December 2001*

Census data on low-income families, defined as those earning up to twice the federal poverty level (for example, earning up to \$40,000/year for a family of four). They found that 51% of low-income children live with an unmarried parent, while 49% live with married parents. [25] Having married parents appears to have almost no impact on whether a child grows up in a household that can make ends meet.

2. International Perspective Casts Doubt on Marriage-Poverty Link

The experiences of other industrialized countries yield new insights into the debate over the link between marriage and poverty. The country-to-country comparisons in the graphs on page 7 show little correlation there is between marriage rates and child poverty, and between births to unmarried parents and child poverty. For instance, the four countries with some of the lowest child poverty rates in Europe (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and France) all have unmarried birth rates far higher than the United States'. Yet Sweden's child poverty rate is seven times lower than the rate in the U.S., despite the fact that the majority of babies there are born to unmarried parents.

Similarly, these data reveal the flaws in arguments promoting marriage as a form of poverty reduction by showing that the marriage rate in the U.S. is already far higher than that of any European country. Yet despite this high rate of marriage (and re-marriage), our percentage of children in poverty is the second highest of the 21 countries considered. It is four to six times higher than the countries with the lowest marriage rates.



Obviously, dozens of factors affect each country's marriage, unmarried birth, and child poverty rates, so one cannot conclude that any individual policy can be praised or blamed for a given country's situation. But the trends that emerge across nations clearly disprove any notion that the only, easiest, or best way to reduce poverty is to promote marriage or reduce the number of births to unmarried parents.

3. Researchers Emphasize Difficulty of Solving Poverty and Improving Child Wellbeing through Marriage Programs

Many researchers have concluded that, while married families fare better on several socio-economic indicators, programs to encourage marriage have slim chance to affect the nation's poverty rate and/or the quality of life of low-income children. In a 2004 article, Pamela Smock and Wendy Manning offered a particularly cogent list of hurdles that marriage programs would need to overcome in order to make a meaningful difference.[26] We quote from it extensively below.

"If we're concerned with the well-being of families with children, we may have to rethink our policies in ways that will allow us to provide adequate benefits for families that don't meet the formal marriage definitions that have prevailed in the past." - *Larry Bumpass, University of Wisconsin sociologist and demographer, and one of the nation's leading experts on cohabitation, on NPR's Talk of the Nation, November 11, 1998*

"The first challenge is that marriages are extremely stressed by low income and income instability; sufficient income and its stability are quite important protectors of marriage. ... As long as a couple has little money, a divorce may be just around the corner.

"The second challenge concerns stepfamilies. Marriage promotion may support the formation of stepfamilies, with many single mothers who marry not marrying the biological father of their children. ... for many outcomes, children in stepfamilies fare no better than those in single-parent families. Similarly, ... adolescents are not benefited on several measures of well-being by the arrival of a stepparent (whether a married or cohabiting one).

"Third, healthy marriage initiatives are unlikely to result in substantial numbers of marriages forming among unwed parents that wouldn't otherwise form." [Smock and Manning describe two well-designed studies that tested the impact of improving the conditions surrounding the relationships of low-income couples. In one study, "increasing all three measures (male employment, hourly wages and relationship quality) would increase the proportion who married from 10% to 15%." In the other, "7% of single parents who did not receive the 'treatment'

were married at the three-year follow-up, compared to 11% in the treatment group."]

"The fourth challenge is straightforward. The kinds of marriage enhancement and skills programs referenced in the bill have, to date, never been tested, let alone rigorously tested, on poor populations; what testing has been done has largely been done on white, middle-class people. We simply have no evidence that they will work to strengthen and support (healthy) marriage among the poor.

"The fifth and final challenge is whether encouraging healthy marriage can change the shape of U.S.

inequality, or at least bring the floor upward by lifting those who marry out of poverty. ...

[P]overty rates were substantially higher in 1959 than 2000 (the decline holds for both families as a whole and single parents). Thus, in a time of rapid changes in family patterns, which many argue are destructive of the family, there has simultaneously been a marked decrease in poverty. Now, we're not going to argue that changes in the family caused the decline in poverty; that

would be ridiculous, at worst, and, at best, we would surely be guilty of mistaking correlation for causation. Our point is, however, that it is important to take a long and broad perspective, rather than focus on narrow slices of time, when evaluating family phenomena, especially family phenomena that are being interpreted and constructed as social problems.

"[C]ohabitation is not going away, and will most likely become a more prominent feature of family patterns, even among the advantaged. ... [O]ur reading of the policy and social science research on family structure, economic well-being and child well-being, leads us to conclude that promoting or strengthening marriage will not go far over the long haul in alleviating poverty and improving child well-being unless equal attention is paid to improving access to other resources that undergird marriage (e.g., stable, well-paying jobs, good schools for children, safe communities). In this regard, we are struck by the economic and racial stratification in the likely impact of the "case for marriage" on individual lives. While in some respects the marriage movement has been a broad conversation, it is important to recognize that it is largely the disadvantaged (poor people, minorities)

whose family lives are being interpreted as needing change.”

4. Promoting Marriage vs. Promoting Marriageability

[In this witty essay that AtMP had previously published elsewhere, AtMP co-founder Dorian Solot sees a silver lining in the policy focus on marriage.]

In 2003, I attended a conference where a speaker was talking about government-funded programs to promote marriage and stable families. One of the goals she discussed for these programs was to increase the “marriageability” of poor, disadvantaged unmarried people.

My gut response was to laugh. The government is going to fund programs designed to increase marriageability? Would the Department of Health and Human Services hire dating consultants and pay for matchmaking services?

But as I listened to this policy expert describe marriageability programs, I stopped laughing.

The kinds of things she was calling “marriageability” programs were good old social service programs. Helping substance abusers get clean makes them more likely to get married. Men who are employed are more marriageable, too, since women generally don’t rush to marry guys who can’t earn a living. Research shows that people with more education are more likely to get married and stay married.

Call me crazy, but maybe we’ve uncovered an unexpected diamond, however rough, among the crackerjack-box jewelry of marriage-promoting rhetoric. I think substance abuse programs have value quite apart from whether they can help someone get married, but if “marriageability” is the buzzword that puts smiles on grant reviewers’ faces in this era of marriage-fanaticism, we’d be fools not to start using it.

Since poor people are less likely to marry, living wage activists can argue that paying the working class living wages is fundamentally a marriageability program. Domestic violence shelters might be a long-term marriageability strategy, since they can help women leave a violent relationship and someday find a better prospect for marriage. When it comes down to it, nearly any social program that improves people’s lives also boosts their marriageability, because people who are hungry, cold, sick, jobless, or

poor are usually too busy trying to survive to worry about planning a wedding.

I’m not a marriage-promoter by any stretch of the imagination. But do I support using “marriageability” if that’s what it takes to get funding and support for programs to help people? I don’t use these words often, but – I do.

Ten Golden Principles

Despite the government disavowals described on page 43, we cannot ignore the fact that marriage promotion and debates about family structure were prominent features of welfare reform. No one can deny that the TANF money now flowing to marriage programs could otherwise be used for programs that are explicitly anti-poverty. These are our recommendations for how issues of family structure should be framed in the context of welfare reform. Our priorities are the reduction of poverty, improved well-being for poor children and adults, and respect for families of all kinds.

1. Use welfare to reduce poverty, not to increase marriage.

Poverty is a major national concern, since poor children and adults are at increased risk for a broad range of health and safety concerns. Regardless of their marital or relationship status, all individuals should have the same opportunities to become economically self-sufficient.

For some people, marriage does reduce poverty. But research shows that for a significant portion of poor unmarried mothers, marrying the father of their children would not lift them out of poverty and might actually increase their economic vulnerability.[27] If marriage were the solution, poor women wouldn’t need to be bribed or bullied into marriage. You can’t feed your children wedding rings or pay your electric bill with your marriage license. As it’s been said, when one poor person marries another poor person, they’re both still poor. The much-touted ill effects of life in a single parent family – children’s higher mortality, ill health, poor school performance – correlate with poverty, not marital status.[28] Marriage does not solve these problems. Statistically speaking, if every poor child in America were living with both biological parents, two-thirds of them would still be living below the poverty line.[29] New Census figures show that 49% of low-income children live with married parents.[30] Marriage does not indicate that parents can make ends meet.

2. Reduce poverty by meeting the basic needs of the poor.

We know that when people have access to high-quality education, decent health care and housing, job training opportunities, work transportation options, living wages, and family-friendly workplace policies, families are able to escape poverty and stay above the line. Pilot programs show that children in poor families do best when welfare programs increase their parents' incomes through wage and salary earnings, cash assistance, and food stamps.[31] In fact, most poor parents want to get married and say they believe marriage would be best for them and their children.[32] For them, being unmarried is more a symptom of poverty than a cause; when incomes rise, so does the likelihood that the poor will marry. Policies that help families become economically stable are more likely to lead to marriage, not vice versa.[33] Ensuring these basics is not easy, but they are essential for both married and unmarried people if we are serious about reducing poverty in America.

“Giving preferential treatment to the married when considering applications for services like Head Start does more to punish the children of single parents than to encourage marriage.” - *Salt Lake Tribune*, “Don’t Penalize Kids” editorial, September 30, 2001

3. Respect privacy and freedom in relationships and families.

It is difficult to think of any matter more personal than an individual’s decisions about forming a relationship or a family. Welfare policies must respect the many reasons why people choose whether or not to be in a relationship, and whether or not to marry. The alternative risks setting a dangerous precedent of interference in citizens’ personal lives. Whether it is in the form of bonuses, rewards, promotional “education,” ad campaigns, the routine exclusion of unmarried people, or other techniques that apply pressure to marry, government interference in marriage decisions is inappropriate, even dangerous. Given the alarming rate of divorce among couples in freely chosen marriages, there is a real possibility that marriages resulting from government-sponsored pressure do not yield stability or long-term benefits. As far as we are aware, there has been no research on this subject.

4. Help unmarried people, don’t punish them.

Married people enjoy a position of privilege in the United States. Married couples are eligible for joint health and other workplace benefits, receive social support from families, communities, and religious

groups, and enjoy positive representations in popular culture. Promoting marriage increases the privilege divide between married and unmarried. It ignores the fact that many people cannot marry, and is profoundly disrespectful of the many others who choose not to marry.

At the time of this writing, 14 states[34] have amended their constitutions to prohibit all unmarried relationships from having legal recognition that might be comparable to marriage. Cases in Ohio (regarding domestic violence) and Michigan (regarding health insurance) prove that such amendments not only impede progress but take away legal protections formerly enjoyed by unmarried people. At the same time, ten states[35] permit same-

sex (and in some cases different-sex) couples to access many of the legal meanings of marriage by marrying or registering civil unions / domestic partnerships / reciprocal beneficiaries. Although attempts to amend the U.S. Constitution have so far failed, the U.S. Defense of Marriage Act ensures that the federal government need not recognize any of these legal relationships.

Rather than barring the unmarried from privileges, condescending to the unmarried or giving them incentives to marry, the federal and state governments should extend social and economic privileges to encompass all individuals and families. Legal statuses such as domestic partnership and reciprocal beneficiary have demonstrated their usefulness, especially in providing recognition to non-conjugal households and relationships. Many people already rely on the existing alternatives (through businesses, universities and municipalities), and so many more would benefit from expanding recognition of their real family and care-taking relationships.

5. Help children and dependents of unmarried people, don’t punish them.

Decades ago most legal constructs that treated “illegitimate” children differently were eliminated in response to widespread agreement that “children should not be punished for the [so-called] sins of their parents.” Yet existing and proposed policies that provide financial incentives for marriage inadvertently revert to a system that advantages the children of married parents over the children of unmarried ones. Other dependents like elderly

parents or other relatives are similarly punished by a system that bases benefit levels on marital status. Children and other dependents should not suffer because of policies intended to modify the welfare recipient's behavior. In any system that increases payments or benefits for married couples, children and other dependents in families where parents choose not to or are unable to marry are harmed, even if this was not the original intent of the policy. To ensure that families get the support they need, states must eliminate barriers and eligibility restrictions that limit access to services on the basis of marital status.

6. Take the money out of the marriage market.

Existing laws and policies include both incentives and disincentives to marry. Of course people should not be penalized for getting married, nor prevented from marrying for financial reasons. By the same token, people should not be penalized for remaining unmarried, nor coerced into marriage for financial reasons. It is not possible to create incentives for marriage without simultaneously penalizing unmarried people. Accepting the government's role in shaping family structure for the poor, as current welfare law does, sets a dangerous precedent for government interference in private life. The U.S. government does not sponsor counseling to convert people to a different religion, although some faith traditions have much lower divorce rates than others. States do not regulate who may or may not bear children, although many factors predict which households might be better for children. There are no federal tax breaks for pet owners, although evidence shows significant physical and mental health advantages to having a pet. Most people agree that this is as it should be. It is important to respect the differences that exist in America, embrace this diversity as part of what makes our country so vibrant, recognize our national responsibility to help the needy, and accept the freedom of individuals to make their own relationship and family decisions.

7. Help all people build strong relationships.

Relationship education cannot replace anti-poverty programs, but it is certainly a valuable supplement. Everyone, not just married or engaged couples, benefits from learning the skills involved in creating healthy, strong relationships. Programs that teach communication, conflict resolution, and decision-

making skills are valuable for spouses and partners, parents and children, extended family members, employees, and friends. Limiting their focus to marriage and their audience to spouses or engaged couples denies others an opportunity to strengthen the web of human relationships that make us effective citizens. Furthermore, while relationship education can enhance individuals' chances for success, it cannot replace the central components of poverty-reduction.

8. Recognize the difference between social science averages and individual lives.

Much of the debate about whether marriage improves the prospects of poor families has been grounded in social science research, which examines factors in large groups (hundreds or thousands) of people and finds averages. For instance, some studies say that

“No matter how much we encourage, pressure, preach, and give incentives to get people to marry, we still have to deal with the reality that kids are going to be raised in a variety of ways, and we have to support all kinds of families with kids.” - *Stephanie Coontz, family historian at Evergreen State College, speaking at the Council on Contemporary Families conference, April 2001*

married people are happier or healthier than unmarried people. But these studies also find that most people are happy and healthy, regardless of their marital status. In many cases the differences between the groups are small, potentially explained by many variables beyond marital status, and result from pooling thousands of people's answers. This kind of research does not in fact predict whether a given individual will be happier or healthier if he or she

marries. Likewise, some studies find that unmarried couples are more likely to have violent relationships than married couples. The conclusion that unmarried couples should be encouraged to get married in order to be safer makes little sense. Most unmarried couples already are safe, because violence affects only a minority of both married and unmarried couples.

9. Consider policies' potential effects on victims of domestic violence.

Any program that intends to affect people's decisions about forming relationships, staying in relationships, getting married, or staying married must take into consideration the impact on those affected by domestic violence. Most studies find that 20-30% of women on welfare currently or recently experienced physical abuse.[36] If an unmarried person's partner is violent, marrying won't end the violence. In fact, recent studies suggest the higher level of violence among cohabiters can be explained by the fact that non-violent couples are more likely to marry.[37]

The group of couples “left over” after the non-violent couples marry are likely using excellent judgment by choosing not to make a lifetime commitment to a dangerous partner. No one believes anyone should be trapped in a violent or abusive relationship. Yet because of the myriad dangers and challenges of leaving an abusive relationship, including economic dependence, even small incentives can be a barrier to leaving. Financial incentives and social pressure to get married or stay married can put women, their children, and other family members at risk.

10. Consider policies’ potential effects on those who cannot marry.

Policies that promote or reward marriage assume that marrying is an option for their target population of

unmarried people. In reality, it often is not. Many people would like to marry but for a variety of reasons cannot. Some cohorts, such as African-American women, are at a statistical disadvantage when it comes to finding mates,[38] and are therefore disproportionately penalized by marriage-rewarding policies. There are numerous reasons why marriage may be a poor choice or not a possibility at all for many people. You can’t plan a wedding if your partner died. There’s no partner to marry if you’ve been abandoned. Rarely is your marriage recognized if your partner is the same sex.[39] Telling these people they will be rewarded if they marry is like offering them a prize for breathing underwater – it simply cannot be done.

De-Legitimizing “Illegitimacy”

The 1996 welfare law created an “illegitimacy bonus”: money was made available to the five states with the largest reductions in the rate of births to unmarried parents and with no increase in their abortion rates. The bonus had numerous problems.

First, there was no minimum percentage change required in order for states to qualify. The result of this was that, in eight of the first thirteen times the bonus was awarded, the change in the rewarded state’s unmarried birthrate was 2% or less. In 2000, Illinois received \$20 million for a reduction of less than one-tenth of one percent, and in 2001 Michigan, Alabama, and Washington, D.C. each received \$25 million “illegitimacy bonuses” from federal welfare funds for reducing their rates of births to unmarried parents. The change was miniscule: a 0.009% reduction in Michigan between 1996 and 1999, 0.249% in Alabama, and 3.976% in the District of Columbia during the same time period.[40] Brookings Institution fellow Ron Haskins said, “There is no discernible reason why some states win the bonus and others don’t.”[41]

Second, while births to unmarried parents are sometimes shown to correlate with somewhat poorer outcomes for children on average, unmarried births are not themselves a poor outcome. Babies born to unmarried parents include those conceived by affluent “single mothers by choice” and lesbian couples who can’t marry, both groups whose children tend to have better outcomes than those raised by poor married couples.[42] A report by the Children’s Defense Fund found that poverty puts children at greater risk of death, poor health, and poor school performance than living in a single parent family.[43] Incentives to increase child well-being should be targeted at the desired end result, such as a reduction in the percentage of a state’s children living in poverty. Under the system established in 1996, states could receive bonuses even if the percentage of children living in poverty increased.

Finally, contrary to the nursery rhyme’s claim about sticks and stones, names do hurt. Decades ago governments stripped the word “illegitimate” of its meaning as a legal category because most people agreed that children should not be punished because of their parents’ marital status. If we believe that every individual child has value as a human being, it’s time for those who claim to care about children to stop labeling them – as the welfare law does – with an anachronistic word that says they’re not genuine, not legal, and not acceptable. More appropriate terms include “nonmarital births,” and “births to unmarried parents.”

The first edition of *Let Them Eat Wedding Rings* urged the government to reward states for reducing poverty, not changes in marital status at time of birth, because the two are not the same thing. Today we can celebrate that the “out-of-wedlock bonus” was eliminated by law in 2006.

Our celebration is tempered, however, by the fact that spokespeople with access to broad audiences still use the word “illegitimate”. For example, an article titled “Hispanic Family Values? Runaway illegitimacy is creating a new U.S. underclass” appears in the Autumn 2006 issue of *City Journal*. [44] Public officials may avoid the word, but still use sensationalized descriptions that are at least as stigmatizing to the children of unmarried parents. For example, this July 2006 quote from Wade Horn: “Children who grow up in healthy, stable, married households don’t wake up one day and decide they want to run away to Hollywood and become street prostitutes.”[45]

Unmarried Americans: A Diverse and Growing Population

The population of unmarried adults is growing steadily. According to the 2005 American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, 50.3% of households are headed by unmarried people, 46.9% of people over age 15 are unmarried, and 31.7% of children live in unmarried households.[46]

Discrimination against unmarried people and their families is common. Marital status discrimination, like other forms of discrimination, is often based on stereotypes and assumptions. Those who favor welfare policies promoting marriage often presume that the main reason unmarried people are not married is that they don't fully appreciate the value of marriage. The widespread acceptance of these kinds of simplistic generalizations calls for a more complex understanding of unmarried lives.

In fact, there are a wide variety of reasons why some people are not married. Here are some of the extraordinarily diverse factors that underlie the decisions of unmarried people.[47]

- They have been unable to find a marriage partner.
- They have been widowed or abandoned by their spouse or partner.
- They are in relationships that are abusive or dysfunctional, or feel that their partner would make a poor choice for a lifetime commitment. Some may be waiting to see if a partner can “clean himself or herself up” from drug or alcohol addiction, criminal involvement, or other negative activities. (Evidence shows that among couples who start relationships around the same time, those where one partner is violent or has a substance abuse problem are less likely to marry.[48]) Some new parents or parents-to-be may realize that an acceptable boyfriend or girlfriend is not necessarily a dependable partner for life.[49]
- They are unwilling to marry a partner with few financial assets if they are poor themselves, since the partner's income or potential future income is unlikely to improve their own economic situation.[50]
- They are in a “trial period” to decide if this person would make a good spouse.

- They feel they cannot afford their vision of a wedding or married life (which may include a big party, fancy dress, house, car, steady job, and children.). They prefer to wait and save money in order to have the wedding or marriage of their dreams.[51] As people's income increases, so does the likelihood that they will get married.[52]
- They aren't legally allowed to marry because they are in a same-sex relationship and live in a state that doesn't recognize same-sex marriage.[53]
- They would lose significant financial benefits (perhaps a pension from a previous spouse) if they were to marry. This predicament is especially common among senior citizens and disabled people.
- They do not want the government to “regulate” their relationship.
- They feel marriage is too strongly based in religion for their comfort.
- They have chosen a religious life path that involves a vow of celibacy.
- They are disturbed by the divorce rate, or have experienced a divorce themselves, and wish to avoid such a risk.
- In solidarity with those who are not legally allowed to marry, they refuse to take advantage of a privilege available only to some.
- They are happy in a long-term, unmarried relationship and say, “If it ain't broke, don't fix it.”
- They are uncomfortable with the oppression of women associated with the institution of marriage.
- They simply feel no desire to marry and feel deeply satisfied living alone, with family members or close friends, or with an unmarried partner.

It is likely that readers will find some of the reasons on this list more acceptable to them than others. Regardless of personal feelings about these reasons, each represents the lives of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Americans. People in every one of these categories are affected when benefits are linked to marital status. Attempts to create policies that target or exempt certain “types” of unmarried people and families would only result in further discrimination.

Evaluating Government-funded Marriage Programs

The federal government is now extravagantly committed to marriage through policy pronouncements and budget allocations. Marriage-only advocates are pressing state and local governments to follow suit. It would be a minimal expectation of good government to evaluate whether individual programs and overall initiatives achieve their stated goals. A few short-term, limited-scope reviews have been completed.[54] There are three major evaluations underway:[55]

- Building Strong Families (BSF) began in late 2002 in anticipation of TANF funding and will “assess the effectiveness of interventions targeting low-income unwed parents at or near the birth of their child;”
- Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) began in 2003 and will “document the implementation and assess the effectiveness of marriage education services for low-income married couples;”
- Community Healthy Marriage Initiative (CHMI) Evaluation began in 2003 and will “examine the impact of community-wide interventions.”

As these are long-term evaluations (ending in 2011, 2012, and 2010, respectively), there is not yet data available. However, we do know a little about the criteria these evaluations will use. For instance, the BSF study will be taking domestic violence into account through surveys of mothers and fathers as well as through program operation evaluations, and will track the rate of marriage and the stability and quality of relationships among parents.[56] While the overview of this study does include “economic” as one of the measures of “parental wellbeing,” it is clear that BSF will focus on marriage more than on poverty.[57]

When spending at least \$750 million of the nation’s anti-poverty budget, it makes sense to evaluate the impact on poverty. When promoting a marriage-only perspective that reflects the reality of a minority of American households, it makes sense to evaluate the underlying policy framework as well as whether individual programs achieve their stated objectives.

This is especially important because marital status discrimination causes real hardships for unmarried people.

Here is a starting list of research questions that we would like to see explored.

- How did/does the marriage-only movement participate in the political process, and how did/does its participation affect budget allocations and grant awards?
- How do the effects of healthy unmarried relationships, or programs supporting them, compare to the effects of marriage and marriage programs?
- Is there a “theory of change” behind the initiative? If so, does it propose specific and measurable steps that lead from marrying to living without poverty?
- Do low-income individuals and families participate in marriage programs at the same rate that they participate in other TANF-funded programs? If TANF funds had been spent elsewhere, would they have benefited more people in need or people in greater need?
- Can marriage, or participation in marriage programs, be shown to cause (rather than correlate with) income gains that raise participants’ incomes above the poverty level?
- Can marriage, or participation in marriage programs, be shown to cause other outcomes (such as higher levels of education and higher rates of employment) that help people escape poverty?
- Are single people and those choosing not to marry, and people in same-sex relationships excluded from funded programs? How does this exclusion affect them and their families?
- Do funded programs denigrate or stigmatize healthy relationships and family structures by promoting only government-certified, different-sex marriage?
- Do programs use government funding to promote a narrowly religious definition of healthy marriage?
- Is enough care being taken to deal with issues of domestic violence? If and when potential abuse has been detected, to what extent are appropriate steps taken by qualified professionals?

“Programs that address multiple needs faced by both mothers and fathers (such as expanding labor market skills and capabilities, developing parenting and relationship skills, and overcoming substance abuse or mental health problems) across multiple family circumstances (married or unmarried, living together or living apart) hold the greatest promise.” - Sara McLanahan and Marcia Carlson, *Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University, in “Welfare Reform, Fertility, and Father Involvement,” August 2001*

Although we are skeptical, we would welcome persuasive evidence that marriage programs help

people escape poverty. If that result should emerge, we must also ask: At what cost? Is the benefit worth the cost? And how can the benefit be extended to the millions of people for whom marriage is not the best option, or even an available option?

Research Ideas for Students and Other Readers

This publication is part of the curriculum at the Universities of Texas, Michigan, Massachusetts, Delaware and Iowa, as well as many other colleges and high schools. Are you reading this for a class? Do you want to pursue the issues raised here in your own research? We encourage you to apply our starter list of questions above to one of these potential research projects:

- **Interview managers, workers or participants at a government-funded program.** AtMP has a list (without contact information) of over 300 entities that were awarded funds in September 2006 – email us at atmp@unmarried.org. ACF’s Healthy Marriage Initiative website (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/>) lists past and current funded programs, as well as contact information for ACF regional offices that oversee these programs.

- **Track some of the evaluations already underway.** Ask ACF’s Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) whether any interim reports have been issued. Interview the evaluators:
 - For Building Strong Families: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., (609) 799-3535 or <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/>
 - For Supporting Healthy Marriages: the evaluation team includes professionals from several firms – to establish contact one must email shm@mdrc.org
 - For Community Healthy Marriage Initiative: Urban Institute, (202) 833-7200 or <http://www.urban.org/>

- **Explore state and local government funding.** Does your state allocate TANF funds to marriage programs? What policy factors were debated during the allocation decision? How much money is involved, who got the money, and how are they using it? What program goals and guidelines does the state impose? Are the programs being evaluated?

- **Review another report or book on marriage promotion.** Think tanks, advocates, and others are producing volumes to support or oppose marriage

initiatives. Read one or more of these reports and critically review its conclusions. From what perspective were the statements written? What research informed the findings? What new questions do they raise?

- **Assess media reports on marriage as public policy.** The media covers marriage policy constantly: national media covers statistics about marriage rates, divorce rates, births to unmarried parents etc.; local media also covers grants to local programs. To what extent do the media include the marriage-only perspective, AtMP’s Ten Golden Principles, or other views?

- **Compare recent statistics from the U.S. and Europe.** Is it true that more European than American children grow up in two-parent homes even though marriage rates in Europe are lower than in the U.S.? How do European demographics and public policies vary from those of the U.S.? What conclusions do you draw from the data you find? What conclusions do you draw from the way this data is presented in the American media?

When beginning your research, you may contact AtMP at atmp@unmarried.org or 718-788-1911 for further suggestions. Whether you choose one of these ideas as a springboard or come up with a totally unique research plan, we’d love to hear what you’ve found! Send a summary of your findings or a copy of your report to atmp@unmarried.org or PO Box 320151, Brooklyn NY 11232. We will get back to you upon reading it.

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Affirmation of Family Diversity

We believe that all families should be valued, that the well-being of children is critical to our nation's future, and that people who care for one another should be supported in their efforts to build healthy, happy relationships.

One of America's strengths is its diversity, which includes not only a wide range of races, ethnicities, creeds, abilities, genders, and sexual orientations, but also a range of family forms. One family form is marriage, and we agree with the newly-formed "Marriage Movement" that marriages should be supported. What worries us is the mistaken notion that marriage is the only acceptable relationship or family structure.

Well more than one in three American adults are currently unmarried. Policies that benefit only married relationships routinely exclude this considerable percentage of ordinary people, whose lives and families do not fit the married ideal upheld by the marriage movement. The family diversity that exists in America today includes people who have chosen not to marry and those who are prevented from marrying, such as same-sex couples. It includes people who have chosen to live together before marriage (the majority of marriages today are preceded by cohabitation) and those who are single. It includes older people and disabled people, who may risk losing needed benefits if they get married. And it includes children, half of whom live in a family structure other than their two married parents.

We believe it is essential to recognize, embrace, and support the family diversity that exists today. Stigmatizing people who are divorced, punishing single parents, casting stepfamilies as less-than-perfect, shaming unmarried couples, and ignoring the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people are not positive approaches for supporting families. Many opponents of diverse families misrepresent and oversimplify both the history and research on which they base their claims. The picture that is painted by these opponents is bleak. In reality, however, there are millions of happy, healthy unmarried families. The challenge is to find effective approaches to supporting these successful families, as well as the ones who are having difficult times.

We believe:

- that discrimination on the basis of marital status should be prohibited
- that policies designed to help children should focus on supporting all the types of families in which children live
- that laws and policies should be changed to allow for the full range of families to be recognized (this includes domestic partner benefits, family and medical leave, hospital visitation, and survivors' benefits)
- that more research is needed on unmarried relationships and families, so that we can address their needs directly
- that same-sex couples should be able to choose marriage as an option
- that there is much we can learn from the countries around the world that have already taken steps to recognize diverse families
- that the challenge that lies before us as a nation is how to support all relationships and families, not just married ones.

Let us not forget how many people were oppressed, humiliated, and stigmatized during historical eras in which it was considered unacceptable to be single, divorced, or gay. We celebrate the strides we have taken in recent decades towards making the world more supportive of the vibrant diversity of families that exist. We support principles that work toward creating happy, healthy, loving relationships and families for all people, married and unmarried.

The Affirmation of Family Diversity has been signed by over 1,730 experts, authors, therapists, religious leaders, community leaders, and citizens. The full list of signatories is online at www.unmarried.org/family.html, where additional people continue to sign on.

Notes for the charts

1. Because of the number of variables that affect child poverty and marriage, and the varying dates of the available data, this graph is not intended to claim that any specific correlation exists. We intend only to disprove claims of correlation and causation between the two factors graphed. Eurostat. "First Results of the Demographic Data Collection for 1999 in Europe." Statistics in Focus, 2000. Eurostat. "100 Basic Indicators from Eurostat Yearbook 2001." Eurostat Yearbook 2001, 2001. Bruce Bradbury and Markus Jantti. "Child Poverty Across Industrialized Nations." Innocenti Occasional Papers: Economic and Social Policy Series No. 71. 1999.
2. Data is from 1998 & 1999.
3. Data is from 1991 - 1995 except Austria (1987), France (1989), Ireland (1987), Spain (1990), Switzerland (1982).
4. Because of the number of variables that affect child poverty and unmarried births, and the varying dates of the available data, this graph is not intended to claim that any specific correlation exists. We intend only to disprove claims of correlation and causation between the two factors graphed. Eurostat. "100 Basic Indicators from Eurostat Yearbook 2000." Eurostat Yearbook 2001, 2001. Bruce Bradbury and Markus Jantti. "Child Poverty Across Industrialized Nations." Innocenti Occasional Papers: Economic and Social Policy Series No. 71. 1999.
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- be used to provide “family support” and “family preservation” activities that include relationship and conflict resolution skills building, and these services are available to same-sex couples.”
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