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How Broken Families Rob Children of Their Chances for Future Prosperity

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Much of the debate about the growing gap between rich and poor in America focuses on the changing job force, the cost of living, and the tax and regulatory structure that hamstring businesses and employees. But analysis of the social science literature demonstrates that the root cause of poverty and income disparity is linked undeniably to the presence or absence of marriage. Broken families earn less and experience lower levels of educational achievement. Worse, they pass the prospect of meager incomes and family instability on to their children, making the effects intergenerational.

A child's path to achieving a decent income as an adult--and avoiding the poverty trap--is still the traditional one: complete school, get a job, get married, and have children, in that order. Obviously, a stable income cannot be guaranteed; ultimately, children's own decisions affect their income potential, and dropping out of school, taking drugs, or having children early and outside of marriage could derail their progress at any time.

Beyond those decisions, however, studies show that income disparity in America is affected most by the stability of a child's home environment--primarily, whether that child has married parents or is part of a broken family. Consider:

- In 1950, 12 out of every 100 children born entered a broken family; by 1992, 58 out of every 100 children born entered a broken family.
- Children living with a single mother are six times more likely to live in poverty than are children whose parents are married.
- Of families with children in the lowest quintile of earnings, 73 percent are headed by single parents; 95 percent in the top quintile are headed by married couples.
- In 1994, over 12.5 million children lived in single-parent families that earned less than \$15,000 per year; only 3 million such children lived with families who had annual incomes greater than \$30,000.
- Three-quarters of all women applying for welfare benefits do so because of a disrupted marriage or live-in relationship. Those who leave the welfare system when they get married are the least likely to return.
- Cohabitation doubles the rate of divorce. Cohabitation with someone other than one's future spouse quadruples the rate of divorce.
- Divorce reduces the income of families with children by an average of 42 percent. Almost 50 percent of these families experience poverty.
- Married couples in their mid-fifties amass four times the wealth of divorced individuals (\$132,000 versus \$33,600).
- Children in stepfamilies and single-parent families are almost three times more likely to drop out of school than are children in intact families.

It is time to change direction. Congress, states, and local communities can play important roles in rebuilding the family to ensure that America's children escape the poverty trap and reach their full potential. Specifically:

Congress should focus on ways to undo the bias against marriage in federal programs. For example, it should direct the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) to review federal programs to identify those for which the demand for assistance grows with an increase in broken families. Congress should

eliminate the marriage penalty in the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and all other poverty programs. It should examine the evidence in the states on the success of their welfare-to-work programs and consider making federal welfare assistance to the states conditional on an immediate work requirement for all recipients. It could direct federal dollars to study the effects of marriage on income potential and direct federal agencies to consider the results of this research in developing and administering programs as much as feasible. It should require that federal funds to schools are not used in programs that downplay the importance of marriage or the virtues of abstinence. And it should give local governments access to the same tools that state governments have to track absentee fathers who owe child support.

State governments should require parents who want a divorce to prove that the divorce is necessary for the well-being of their children. They should enforce zero tolerance for out-of-wedlock fathers who do not pay child support. And they should examine the school curriculum to ensure that it does not undermine the marriage-based family and clearly demonstrates the risks and effects of divorce and cohabitation as well as the high financial cost of being an unmarried father.

Churches and the local community should encourage the use of "community marriage covenants" to reduce the likelihood of divorce. And because regular religious worship has been linked to more stable marriages and other benefits, they should make church membership and regular worship among the poor a priority.

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