



Marriage and the Common Good

Why the Wellbeing of North Carolina Depends on the Health of Its Families

written by:
**Patrick
Fagan,
Ph.D.**

FAMILY, CHURCH, AND SCHOOL ARE THE THREE BASIC PEOPLE-FORMING INSTITUTIONS, AND IT IS NO WONDER THAT, WHEN THEY COOPERATE, THEY PRODUCE THE BEST RESULTS FOR SOCIETY, INCLUDING A THRIVING ECONOMY AND HEALTHY GOVERNMENT.

There is a lot of talk these days about the economic problems facing North Carolina and the United States, and it often centers around the need for better jobs, tax modernization and reform, and a more streamlined or more powerful government (depending on your political persuasion). Missing from this discussion, however, is a major contributing factor to the economic and social wellbeing of any state or nation: the health of its families. Without healthy families, societies naturally decline, which is why family policy should be a key part of any serious effort to improve the social and economic wellbeing of North Carolina and the nation.

Marriage is the great engine of society, and every household is a building block that either contributes or takes away, millions of times over. This is why what happens inside of every family should matter to North Carolina, the nation, and the world, and why government has a vested interest in helping

to protect and sustain intact married families for future generations.

Men, Marriage and Work

Within the economy exist the people, whose cumulative capacities operate that economy. A society that is producing fewer people capable of hard work, especially married men with children, is not as capable of operating a great economy. As the retreat from marriage continues apace, there are fewer and fewer of these capable, hard workers, resulting in a slowly, permanently decelerating economy,¹ as well as a host of other social ills.

When men get married, their sense of responsibility and drive to provide gives them the incentive to work much harder. This translates into an average 27 percent increase in their productivity and income. With the retreat from marriage, instead of this “marriage premium,” we get more single men (who work the least), more cohabiting men (who work less than married men), and more divorced men (who fall between the singles and cohabiters).

All this is visible in the changing work patterns of the country, resulting in real macro-economic

consequences.² Fifty years ago, family life and the economy were quite different.

Around 1960, just prior to the sexual revolution, the United States was the world's heavyweight champion in economic productivity and earnings. Today, the U.S. can still lift a lot, but, to extend the analogy, it is moving down to the middle-weight class. For example, Dr. Henry Potrykus has shown that divorce alone has reduced the annual growth rate of the economy by at least one sixth since the mid-1980s, which, with its compounding effect, has by now had quite a significant impact.³

The Family and the Economy

A productive household does not simply happen when parents beget a child. The foundation for a productive household begins with marriage. Other union arrangements cannot measure up, not for the child, not for the couple, not for society, and certainly not for the economy.

Cohabitation does not take the place of marriage, and there are very strong indications that cohabitation may rival single parenthood as the largest generator of child poverty, while divorce is the cause of most women and children entering poverty in any given year. If marriage makes the world and the economy go 'round, these newer family structures truncate productivity, and cause society to operate in a less efficient manner.

Within the married household, children are like tender young plants that thrive on the unity and love of their father and mother, but wilt when their parents fight or bicker. And tragically, the budding capacities of children are further weakened when their parents reject each other, either through divorce, or separation, or simply by walking away from each other as in single parenthood.

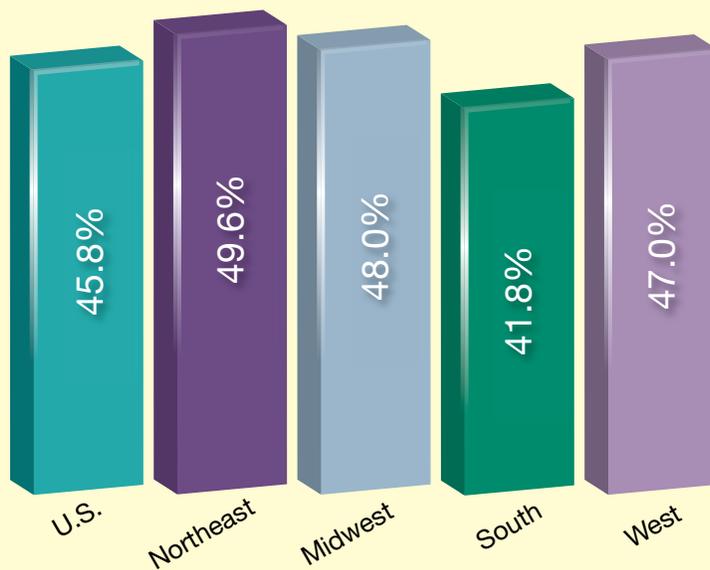
For American children, the situation is dire, with more than half of 17 year-olds (54 percent) experiencing parental rejection in some form, whether through divorce or through their cohabiting parents splitting. Only 46 percent of American teenagers by age 17 have lived their whole life in an intact married family.⁴ In North Carolina, only 42 percent of 17 year-olds have lived their entire life in an intact married family, which is lower than the already disturbing national average.⁵

Among African Americans, only 17 percent come from families with always-intact married parents. By comparison, 90 percent of African American families were intact when Pearl Harbor was attacked in 1941.⁶

Where marriage is concerned, Asian Americans are the strongest ethnic group (only 38 percent of Asian American children at age seventeen are not in an intact married family), and yet they are now in much the same marriage situation that African Americans were in two generations ago, when Daniel Patrick Moynihan caused an uproar in 1965 with his prescient work, *The Negro Family: The Case*

Growing Up With Married Parents

Proportion of U.S. Teenagers Aged 15-17 Who Have Grown Up With Both Married Parents, by Region 2009



For National Action. To situate the Asian American family in the history of the retreat from marriage, America's strongest family ethnic group is as weak, marginally, now as our present weakest family ethnic group was in the 1960s.

Married vs. Broken Families

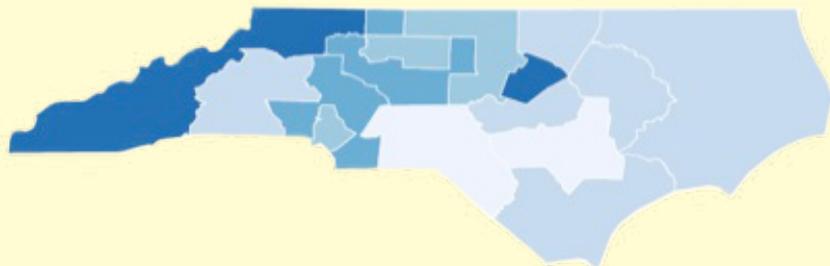
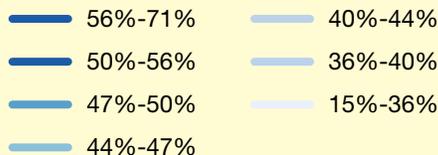
Love, not rejection, gives strength to a child and a child's family. Life is qualitatively better for children whose parents have always been married: they have higher grade-point averages, greater educational attainment, longer and happier lives, and a better chance at a lasting marriage. On every measure they do better.⁷

Rejection between parents weakens children, slows them down and lowers their potential. Though the extent to which they are affected var-

“**Only 46 percent of American teenagers by age 17 have lived their whole life in an intact married family.**”

North Carolina Fraction of Families Intact

The chart below divides North Carolina into demographic areas of equal population, around 400,000 people. Each different shade of blue represents the percent of always-intact married families in that demographic area.



ies from child to child, as a demographic, children from broken families attain lower grades, receive less education, have poorer mental health, are less employed, are less likely to be happily married, and will live shorter lives.⁸

Adding all this together, the conclusion (visible in the federal data) is that married families with children are the main source of the higher income, education, and productivity that grows the economy and society.

Marriage, Religion, and School

Besides marriage, the other foundational institution that fosters human flourishing is religion.⁹ The relationships with religious worship are dramatically visible in U.S. national survey correlational studies and increasingly in causal studies in such areas as education, crime reduction, and health.¹⁰ Religious practice and prayer are good for marriage, and when combined in marriage and worship, children thrive even more. And a decade or two later, the economy benefits when those children have become the more productive earners.

When marriage and worship are united with a school that upholds the same fundamental ideals, a small community is formed, eminently capable of raising children to their optimum capacities. Family, church, and school are the three basic people-forming institutions, and it is no wonder that they produce the best results when they cooperate. We see these results in the national data: not surprisingly, home-schooled children (who typically reside in intact, married, religious families) thrive the most; children in private religious schools come next; and children in public schools after them.

Marriage and the Common Good

Thus, the core strategy for forming great workers for the economy and a healthy society is to grow and nourish intact married families who are united in worship through their community of belief, and who send their children to schools that inculcate those values and beliefs. Not only does that produce the greatest average human capital for the marketplace; it also produces the best citizens for the *polis* and the common good. And from such strong families, other benefits abound: marriage, education, health, income, savings, tax revenues for government, longevity, and even the most satisfying and fulfilling sexual experience. At the same time, society is most shielded from the many costs and sufferings of crime, addictions, sexual perversions, bad health, poverty, and abuse. On every measure in federal surveys that permit the analysis, the intact married family that worships God weekly does best, always.¹¹ As a national or a state social strategy, this single focus or strategic center gradually improves the common good in every way. No one can make society perfect, but the persistent practice of the love of one's spouse and the worship of God can improve society beyond what modern social policy can even imagine—or dare to promise.

Intact Families Preserve Societies

If all three of society's people-forming institutions (family, church and school) fail to deliver (and they are failing more and more in the present day), then the two instrumental institutions that build societies—the marketplace, which provides material goods, and the government, which preserves order and peace, and provides a number of necessary fundamental services to those most in need—will also deliver less and less, and the delivery will be all the harder because workers will have increasingly less capacity.

The intact married family is the community where the tasks of these institutions are first learned, and so ensures that these institutions are maintained by the rising generation. Children learn about the marketplace when they first see their

“Love, not rejection, gives strength to a child and a child's family.”

parents taking care of the family's material needs, earning, saving, and investing in the home and the children's education. As children grow, they start making their own contributions to these material needs through their own chores, earnings, and savings. They learn about government by seeing their parents cooperate closely to foster peace and order in the family, both exercising the self-control needed for a united "governing body."

But when parents divorce, children no longer learn these lessons. The mother and father as a couple have ceased to work for the common good of the family, and the family marketplace (income and capital) suffers very significantly, frequently pushing them into poverty. Children's experience of this fracturing of the marriage and the family is further clouded by major negative experiences and feelings, which lessen their own prospects of a future happy marriage and family life. Many are less inclined to stay in school and their religious worship decreases or ceases.¹²

These five tasks or institutions—family, church, school, marketplace, and government—are fully reflected in and reinforced by the flourishing married family. These tasks and institutions are fundamental, interconnected, and irreplaceable: any one that is weak necessarily weakens all the others, and none of them can compensate for the failing of the others.

History is littered with stories writ large of the damage caused when one institution tries to displace or take on the tasks of another, most especially when government and religion try to do each other's work. While government often tries to take unto itself the work and prerogatives of the other institutions through the use of force, embodied in laws, it cannot fulfill a purpose for which it does not have the capacity. This is because the government's fundamental capacity is force, its role is the exercise of justice, and its object is peaceful order.

The work of growing a society is much like the work of a farmer growing his crops. There are seasons and cycles: a time to sow, a time to grow, and a time to reap. He needs good seed or else his crop yields are meager. He must also pay attention to the seasons and plan his work accordingly, for he has no control over them. Society has analogous seeds, seasons, and crops: a time to sow (marriage soon after entering the marketplace), a time to grow in good soil (children in a married, worshipping family), and a time to reap (the celebration of young adulthood well-attained and poised to repeat the cycle).

Thus the person-forming institutions move through their generational cycles every 25 to 30 years or so, while the youngest generation replaces those who are aging and dying. All the while, the two instrumental institutions are kept humming if they are "supplied" with productive workers for the marketplace and good citizens for the work of the commons.¹³



A Core Responsibility

The intact married family with children is the household that generates the most law abiding and healthy citizens, and yields the most productive work, income, and savings. For the wellbeing of this State, North Carolina policymakers must not neglect the fundamental importance of the family, particularly the intact married family with children. Family law—from how marriage is defined to how divorce is treated—is a key component of the economic and social health of North Carolina, and should be part of the conversation in the halls of the General Assembly. Encouraging and sustaining the intact married family—a mother and a father and any children that result from that union—is not only a legitimate concern of good government, it is a core responsibility. Good government must ensure the freedom of all families to worship, and the freedom of family, church and school to cooperate. Government has a duty and a vested interest in the strength of society's three people-forming institutions. ❖

Dr. Patrick Fagan, is Senior Fellow and Director of the Marriage and Religion Research Institute at the Family Research Council. For a footnoted version of this article, please visit ncfamily.org.

Marriage and the Common Good

Endnotes

1. Potrykus, Henry, Fagan, Patrick, and Robert Schwartzwalder, “Our Fiscal Crisis: We Cannot Tax, Spend and Borrow Enough to Substitute for Marriage,” Research Synthesis, Marriage and Religion Research Institute, June 2011, as found at: <http://marri.us/our-fiscal-crisis-we-cannot-tax-spend-and-borrow-enough-to-substitute-for-marriage>
2. Potrykus, Henry and Patrick Fagan, “Non-Marriage Reduces U.S. Labor Participation,” Marriage and Religion Research Institute at FRC, 8/27/12, as found at: <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF12H57.pdf>
3. Potrykus, Henry, and Patrick Fagan, “The Divorce Revolution Perpetually Reduces U.S. Economic Growth,” Marriage and Religion Research Institute at FRC, 3/8/12, as found at: <http://marri.us/the-divorce-revolution-perpetually-reduces-economic-growth>
4. Fagan, Patrick and Nicholas Zill, *Second Annual Index of Family Belonging and Rejection*, Marriage and Religion Research Institute, 11/17/2011, as found at: <http://marri.us/get.cfm?i=RS11K01>
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. For the benefits of marriage for children and adults, see: Marriage and Religion Research Institute, Mapping America Project, as found at: <http://marri.us/publications/mapping-america>
8. Ibid.
9. Fagan, Patrick, “Why Religion Matters Even More: The impact of religious practice on social stability,” Backgrounder #1992, The Heritage Foundation, 12/18/2006, as found at: <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2006/12/why-religion-matters-even-more-the-impact-of-religious-practice-on-social-stability>
10. Op. Cit., Mapping America Project.
11. Ibid.
12. Fagan, Patrick and Aaron Churchill, “The Effects of Divorce on Children,” Marriage and Religion Research Institute at FRC, 1/11/12, as found at: <http://marri.us/effects-divorce-children>
13. Potrykus, Henry and Patrick Fagan, “Decline of Economic Growth: Human Capital and Population Change,” Marriage and Religion Research Institute, 8/3/11, as found at: <http://marri.us/decline-of-economic-growth-human-capital-and-population-change>