Improved Employment and Earnings With Marriage Promotion Essential to Strengthen Families, Especially Among Low-Income Americans

Brookings-Princeton Panel Focuses on Ways to Promote Marriage to Reduce Poverty

CONTACT: Andrew Yarrow, 202-797-6483, ayarrow@brookings.edu

WASHINGTON, D.C., SEPTEMBER 13, 2005—Senator Sam Brownback (R-Ks.) and Del Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC), together with a panel of scholars and practitioners in the field of marriage promotion, discussed the impact of declining marriage in the United States on poverty and child well-being, and urged that marriage-promotion efforts and policies to improve employment and earnings among low-income Americans are essential to improve the lives and prospects of millions of American children and adults.

“Our fall has been fast from the institution of marriage,” said Senator Brownback, who has introduced a pilot program to provide a “marriage bonus” to low-income couples in Washington, D.C. He noted that 57 percent of Washington children are raised by single parents.

Noting the deterioration in rates of marriage among African Americans, whites, and Hispanics since the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan warned of the crisis of single-parent black families in the early 1960s, Delegate Norton said that “the flight of decent paying jobs correlates with the decline in black families.” Saying that “men without good jobs don’t feel like they’re men” and are not attractive marriage partners, she said that “the part of the issue that has had almost no focus is black men and boys.”

Julie Baumgardner, executive director of First Things First, a marriage-promotion initiative in Chattanooga, Tenn., said that marriage-promotion programs previously geared to middle-income Americans are working among the poor, and that “money spent upstream to prevent families from falling in the river is much better spent than on pulling them out of the river later.”

Quoting Washington Post columnist William Raspberry, Vivian Berryhill, founder and president of the National Coalition of Pastors’ Spouses, said: “The black family is failing,” and “it is the sociological equivalent of global warming.” Berryhill said that “the black church can do more to support healthy marriages.” She added: “The day is over for the black church to be silent.”

Kathryn Edin, associate professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Promises I Can Keep*, said that her research has found strong support for marriage and high standards for relationships among the poor, but said that marriage and childbearing no longer are closely linked among many poor Americans. Saying that the stigma of failed marriage is worse than that of out-of-wedlock childbirth, she quoted a poor woman who told her: “I don’t believe in divorce; that’s why none of my friends are married.”

Ron Mincy, professor of social policy and social work practice at Columbia University, emphasized that “the return to discussing family structure and poverty is long overdue.” Noting that there are only 46 employed black men for every 100 black women, compared to more than 70 employed white men per 100 white women, he urged that the nation needs to improve the employment prospects and curb the incarceration of black men if the black family is to be strengthened. He said that when researchers control for employment and incarceration, black and white marriage rates are similar.

-- more --
Isabel Sawhill, vice president and director of the Economic Studies Program at Brookings, said that marriage is “one of the best ways to reduce child poverty.” If U.S. marriage rates returned to what they were in the 1970s, child poverty would fall by 3-4 percentage points. She urged that a key strategy in marriage promotion is to reduce out-of-wedlock births.

“However, marriage is not a panacea for many problems that American children, particularly poor children face, and our nation must provide a range of assistance to needy families, regardless of their household structure,” Elisabeth Donahue, associate editor at Princeton University and an editor of this issue of the journal, said.

The event was held in conjunction with the release of the fall 2005 issue of The Future of Children, a twice-yearly journal published by Brookings and the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. The current issue, which is available at www.futureofchildren.org, focuses on “Marriage and Child Well-Being.”