Marriage and Child Well-Being the Focus of New Issue of Brookings, Princeton Future of Children Journal

Marriage Improves Child Outcomes; Marriage Promotion Can Make a Difference

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WASHINGTON, D.C., SEPTEMBER 13, 2005—The fall issue of The Future of Children, “Marriage and Child Well-Being” -- released today by The Brookings Institution and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University – features eight articles on marriage and its effects on children, presenting evidence that stable marriages improve children’s emotional, intellectual, and economic well-being, and that some well-designed marriage-promotion initiatives may benefit children and families.

The articles draw on research on the current state of marriage; the effects of family structure on income; the impact of family formation on outcomes for children during childhood and adulthood; social and economic barriers to marriage among low-income Americans; tax and welfare-program penalties and subsidies for marriage; gay parenting and America’s children; the current public debate about marriage; and existing marriage-education programs.

Although marriage has declined over the last 50 years, Americans are more likely to marry – and divorce – than adults in other developed countries, and U.S. children are more likely to live in single-parent families. Evidence suggests significant net economic benefits for two-parent families. However, policies that rely too heavily on marriage alone will not help many children destined to live in single-parent or cohabiting-parent households or mitigate the effects of teen pregnancy, the lack of good jobs for parents, and other risk factors for child poverty. Children in two-parent families also tend to receive more effective parenting, are emotionally closer to both parents, are subjected to less stress, and have fewer social, and other developmental problems. The scant research on children in same-sex families finds that marriage benefits children by increasing material well-being and the stability of parents’ relationships.

Poor men and women highly value marriage, but face economic and relational barriers to successful marriages. Many feel that they do not have the financial stability to marry, even though they have children out of wedlock. Moreover, U.S. transfer programs tend to perversely penalize low- and moderate-income families with children.

Given the relative decline of marriage, policymakers and others are engaged in a heated and wide-ranging debate about marriage in American life. Based partly on evidence that marriage is good for children and adults, government officials, clergy, therapists, educators, and others have launched an array of programs to strengthen marriage, lower divorce rates, reduce teen and out-of-wedlock births, and encourage responsible fatherhood.

“While marriage-education programs for middle-class couples have been demonstrated to be effective, a number of new state and community programs have been developed to address the needs and circumstances of low-income couples, although research on their effectiveness is just beginning,” Sara McLanahan, director of the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing and Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University, and lead editor of this issue of the journal, said.
“Stable marriage confers significant benefits on children and adults, and well-conceived, rigorously tested initiatives to strengthen marriage should be encouraged,” Ron Haskins, co-director of the Center on Children and Families at Brookings and an editor of this issue of the journal, said.

“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 journal’s editorial board includes McLanahan: Haskins; Isabel Sawhill, co-director of Brookings’ Center on Children and Families; and Princeton Professors Christina Paxson, director of the Wilson School’s Center for Health and Wellbeing, and Cecilia Rouse, director of the Education Research Section.

*The Future of Children*, a twice-yearly journal, also organizes briefings in Washington for Congress, the press, and the public; and conferences in Princeton and Washington for practitioners and state and local policymakers. A briefing on marriage and child well-being will be held at the Brookings Institution on September 13. Future issues will focus on child obesity and social mobility. For more information, please visit the project Web site at www.futureofchildren.org.