

## Just Not the Marrying Kind

By Rich Lowry March 5, 2012

**The old schoolyard taunt "first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in a baby carriage" badly needs a rewrite.**

**TIME Magazine U.S.**

A front-page New York Times article put an

exclamation point on a decades-long trend when it reported that more than half of births to mothers under age 30 now occur out of wedlock. We are casting aside the institution of marriage and with it the notion that children should be raised in stable two-parent families. This is a social catastrophe.

The benchmark for discussions of illegitimacy is always the controversial 1965 report on the perilous state of the black family authored by the liberal intellectual Daniel Patrick Moynihan. When he wrote it, 24% of births among blacks and 3% of those among whites were out of wedlock. It turned out those were halcyon days of traditional family mores. Today out-of-wedlock births account for 73% of births among blacks, 53% among Latinos and 29% among whites.

The unraveling that began in the underclass has crept up the income ladder, although illegitimacy is still a class-based phenomenon. Almost 70% of births to high school dropouts and 51% to high school graduates are out of wedlock. Among those with some college experience, the figure is 34%, and for those with a college degree, just 8%. Marriage is increasingly the exclusive province of college-educated Americans. Or to put it in Occupy terms, the top 30%.

The diminishment of the much maligned patriarchal family is not the declaration of independence by professional women famously imagined on TV's *Murphy Brown* 20 years ago. The *Murphy Browns* of the world--well educated, accomplished, deliberate in their choices--are a bastion of marital traditionalism. It is left to the poor and the working class to ignore age-old wisdom about how to order our lives and thereby suffer the consequences.

Insofar as we know anything from social science, we know the breakdown of the family is bad for kids. Children in two-parent families, University of Virginia sociologist Bradford Wilcox notes, are more likely "to graduate from high school, finish college, become gainfully employed and enjoy a stable family life themselves." An invaluable store of social capital is denied to kids who are born into or raised in single-parent households. Through no fault of their own, they begin the race of life a few paces behind.

The left argues that economics explain the decline in marriage. The most simplistic version of this argument is a canard. Wages for black workers were rising from 1940 to

1980--and catching up to those of white workers--at the same time the black family was coming undone. If the economic determinists were right, the Great Depression would have destroyed America's family structure.

Clearly it is the erosion of the cultural norm against out-of-wedlock childbearing that chiefly drives illegitimacy. But economics play a role. It is harder for working-class men to get good jobs, making them marginally less marriageable. It is easier, on the other hand, for working-class women to get employment, making them marginally less dependent on men.

Can marriage be saved? The college-educated have managed to preserve it. If nothing else, they realize how much more difficult single parenthood would make their lives and those of their kids. Single moms, by contrast, often consider marriage something they can achieve only after securing a place in the middle class. This gets it backward. Marriage is a means of getting and staying out of poverty rather than an economic capstone. The poverty rate for single-parent families is six times that of married families.

No one wants to be preachy about marriage when everyone knows its inevitable frustrations. ("Marriage is a wonderful institution," H.L. Mencken said, "but who would want to live in an institution?") At the very least, though, we should provide the facts about the importance of marriage as a matter of child welfare and economic aspiration. As a society, we have launched highly effective public-education campaigns on much less momentous issues, from smoking to recycling.

It's not hard to think of a spokeswoman. Michelle Obama is the daughter in a traditional two-parent family and the mother in another one that even her husband's critics admire. If she took up marriage as a cause, she could ultimately have a much more meaningful impact on the lives of children than she will ever have urging them to do jumping jacks.

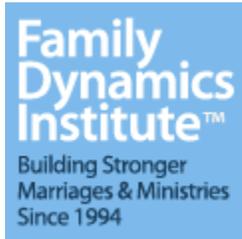
For now, the decline of marriage is our most ignored national crisis. As it continues to slide away, our country will become less just and less mobile.

Lowry is the editor of National Review

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