

Study: Marriage Key to Healthy Economy

The economic well-being of the United States is strongly tied to family structure, a new study suggests. While marriage helps the economy grow, divorce helps it regress.

The Family Research Council's Marriage and Religion Research Institute's study shows how intact married-couple families outperform remarried families, divorced families, single-parent families and cohabiting families in the economic areas of: employment status and income; net worth; poverty and welfare receipt; child economic well-being.

"Long-term income, wealth and hence poverty are largely a matter of choice in America today—the choice of marriage and the pathways to it," Patrick F. Fagan, MARRI senior fellow and director, says in his report.

The study notes that only 5.8 percent of married couples lived in poverty in 2009. Husbands' employment histories tend to be more stable, and on average they earn almost 30 percent more than unmarried men. Wives are less likely to be impoverished, and children experience more economic mobility and less poverty in childhood, making it more likely that they will work their way to better jobs in their lifetimes, the data shows.

Even remarried families can have positive economic outcomes. "Remarriage after divorce increases a family's income, though income and net worth rarely rise to pre-divorce levels," Fagan says. He also points out that children are less likely to live in poverty if their mothers remarry, rather than cohabit, after divorce.

"Cohabiting relationships are frequently unstable and of short duration. Cohabitation produces weaker economic outcomes than

marriage,” Fagan explains.

On the other hand, divorced families face sudden decreases in their income. Single mothers are percent more likely to be impoverished than women who stay married. The study says half of single mothers live in poverty, while an estimated 60 percent live on welfare.

Children of divorced families also experience negative economic effects. “Children of single mothers are at increased likelihood of dependence on welfare benefits during childhood and enjoy less economic mobility than children in married families as adults,” Fagan’s report says.

“There is an intimate relationship between our income and wealth and our sexual culture,” Fagan concludes. “They rise or fall together, and thus, strange though it may seem, there is a significant connection between our sexual culture and our national economic strengths and weaknesses.”

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