

Marriage Promotion and the Living Arrangements of Black, Hispanic, and White Children

Laura Wherry and Kenneth Finegold

With the enactment of welfare reform in 1996, encouraging and supporting marriage became priorities for the federal government and the states. Research findings that children in married families generally fare better than those in single-parent families on measures of poverty, hardship, and well-being have provided the rationale for marriage promotion policies. In this brief, we examine racial and ethnic differences in children's living arrangements. We give special attention to racial and ethnic variation in the characteristics of single-parent households and the implications for child well-being. Current proposals to promote marriage, we suggest, may be too narrow to benefit most low-income black children, the group of children least likely to be living with two married parents.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 created the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. Three of the four statutory purposes of TANF refer to family formation or the promotion of marriage. The Bush administration, as part of its TANF reauthorization proposal, has asked Congress to place more emphasis on marriage by earmarking TANF funds for marriage promotion (White House 2002). The House of Representatives and the Senate Finance Committee have each approved reauthorization bills that include funds for marriage promotion. Both versions direct spending to specific marriage

promotion activities, including public advertising and education on the value of marriage, divorce reduction programs, couples training, and marriage mentoring. States may also develop programs to remove financial disincentives to marriage within means-tested programs, but only if the programs are offered with the other activities. This approach to family policy is narrower than what some authors have proposed.¹

To analyze racial and ethnic variation in children's living arrangements, we use data from the 1997 and 2002 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF).² Because marriage promotion efforts aim to increase the share of children living in married two-parent families, we classify children's living arrangements according to the number of biological or adoptive parents in the household and their marital status:

- **Married-parent families.** Children living with two biological parents who are married or two adoptive parents who are married.
- **Married-blended families.** Children living with a biological parent who is married to an adoptive parent or stepparent, or an adoptive parent who is married to a stepparent.³
- **Cohabiting-parent families.** Children living with two unmarried biological parents or two unmarried adoptive parents.

Current efforts to change American family structure through state and national policies may have different results for black, Hispanic, and white families.

- **Single-parent families.** Children living with one unmarried biological, step, or adoptive parent.⁴ A single parent, as we use the term, may be the only adult in the household, or may live with an unmarried partner who is not related to the child, with the child's grandparents, or with other relatives.
- **No-parent families.** Children living independently or under foster or kinship care.

Living Arrangements by Race and Ethnicity

Differences in children's living arrangements have important implications for the quality of children's lives. Children living in families with married parents have better outcomes than children in all other living

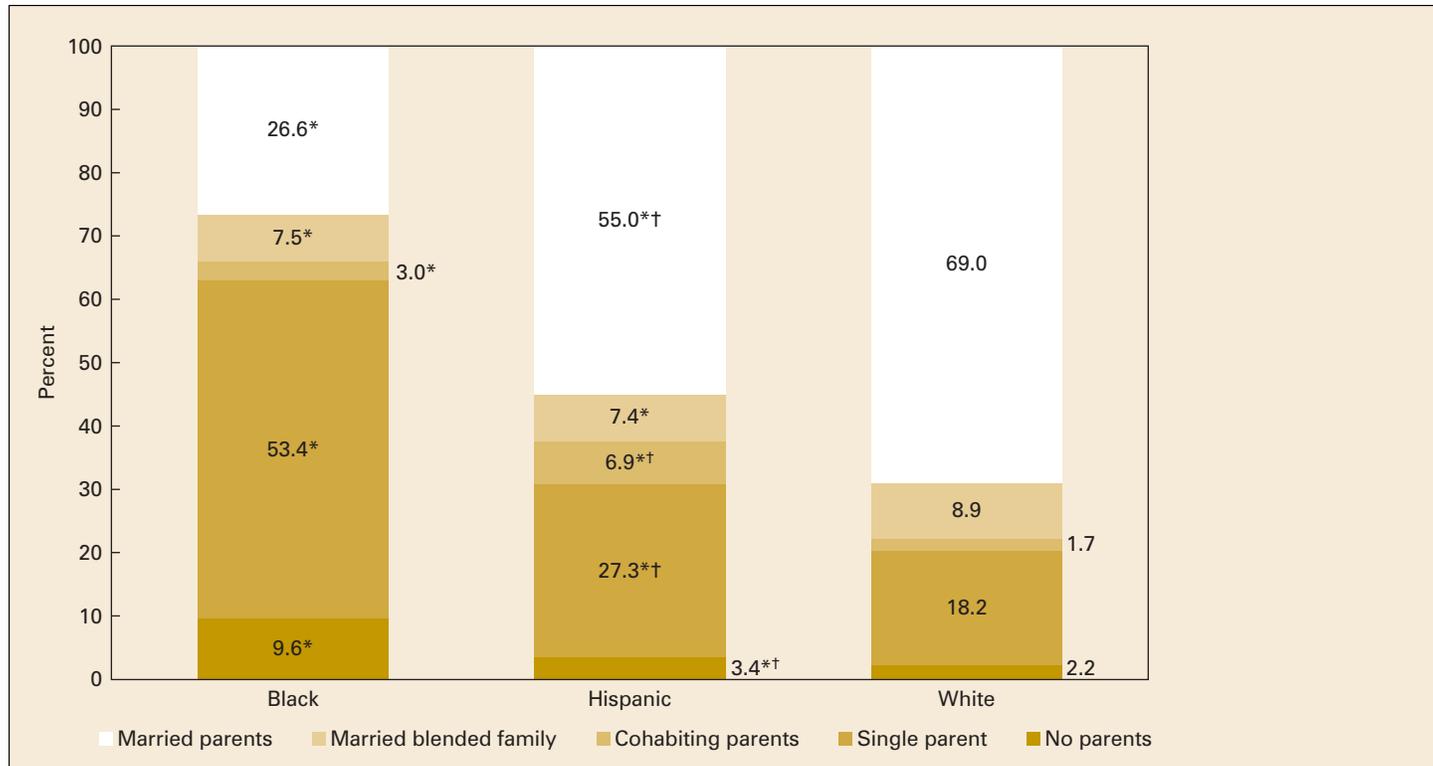
arrangements on a broad range of measures, including economic well-being, behavioral and emotional health, and educational attainment, even when researchers control for differences in income and other characteristics (Acs and Nelson 2002b, 2004; Gallagher 2004; Lerman 2002; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Nelson, Clark, and Acs 2001; White House 2002).⁵ Children living in married-blended or cohabiting-parent families generally have greater economic security than children living in single-parent families (Acs and Nelson 2002b, 2003).

Figure 1 shows substantial variation in the living arrangements of black, Hispanic, and white children. White children are more likely than black or Hispanic children to live in families based on marriage. Sixty-

nine percent of white children lived in married-parent families in 2002. Hispanic children followed as next likely to live in such families at 55.0 percent, while less than one-third (26.6 percent) of black children lived with married parents. White children were also more likely to live in married-blended families at 8.9 percent, compared with 7.5 percent of black children and 7.4 percent of Hispanic children.

Hispanic children are more than twice as likely as black children, and about four times as likely as white children, to live in cohabiting-parent families. Other studies suggest that Hispanics are more likely than blacks or whites to consider cohabitation an acceptable context for raising a family (Manning 2001; Smock and Manning 2004).

FIGURE 1. Children's Living Arrangements, by Race and Ethnicity, 2002 (percent)



Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

Notes: "White" and "black" include non-Hispanics only; "Hispanic" includes all races. Children are age 17 and younger. Married parents are identified by the marriage of either two biological or adoptive parents. Married blended families involve either a biological parent married to an adoptive or stepparent, or an adoptive parent married to a stepparent. Cohabiting parents are those with children in common, either two biological or two adoptive parents who live together but are not married. A single parent may be either biological, adoptive, or step and may or may not live with a partner.

* Estimate is significantly different from estimate for whites at the .10 level.

† Estimate is significantly different from estimate for blacks at the .10 level.

Black children are more likely than white and Hispanic children to live with a single parent and more likely to live with no parents. Over half of all black children (53.4 percent) lived with a single parent in 2002, compared with less than a third of Hispanic children (27.3 percent) and less than one-fifth of white children (18.2 percent). Nearly 10 percent of black children lived with no parents in 2002, compared with 3.4 percent of Hispanic children and 2.2 percent of white children.

The Single-Parent Family

The “single-parent family” category encompasses a broad range of household scenarios. Characteristics such as the adult composition of the

household (Folk 1996; Manning and Smock 1997; Winkler 1993) and the marital history of the single parent (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Parke 2003) affect child well-being. When we narrow our analysis to single-parent families, we again find different patterns for blacks, Hispanics, and whites.

Differences within the Household

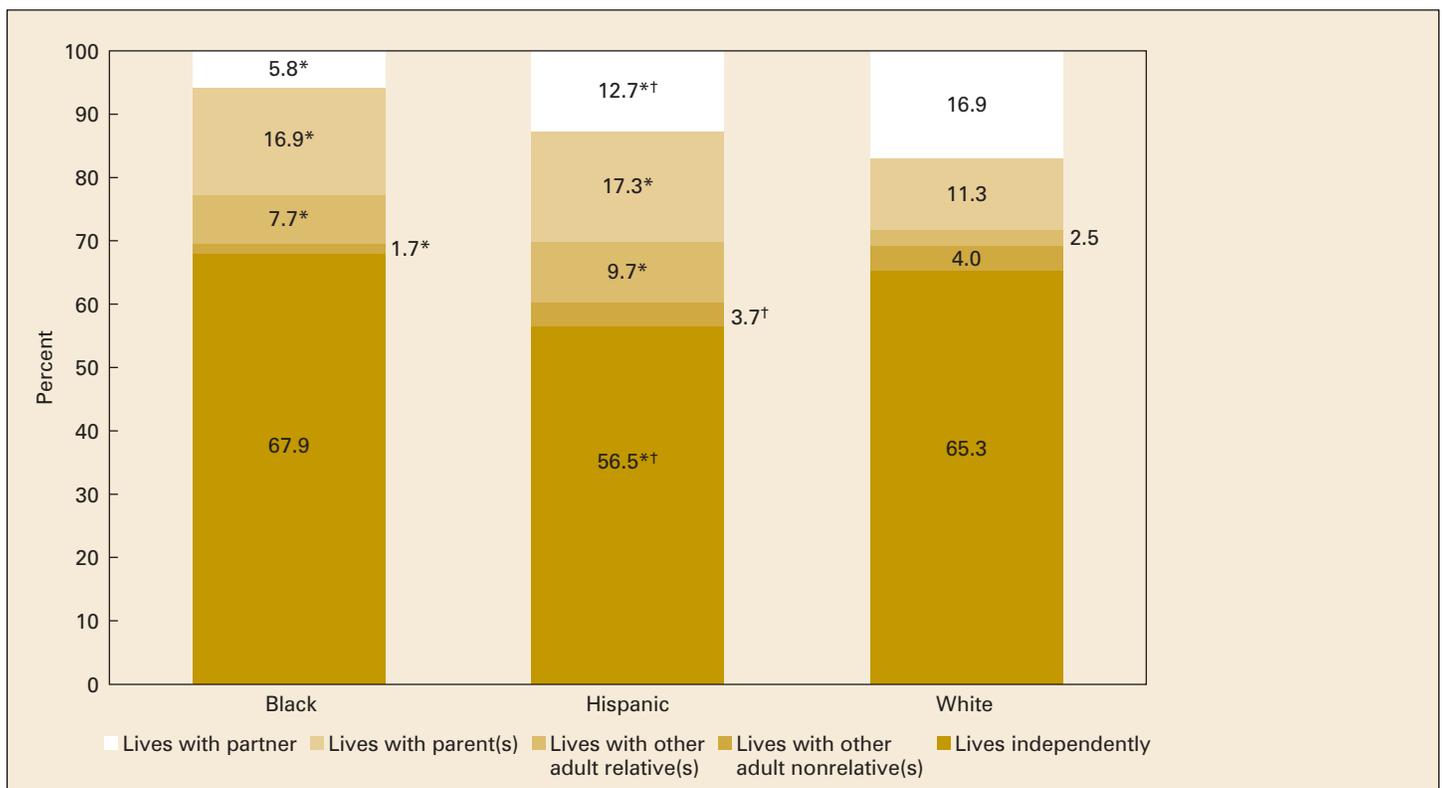
The presence of other adults in a single-parent household may improve the situation of the child. Acs and Nelson (2002b) found that children who live with a single mother and her unmarried partner generally have higher levels of family income and food security than children in other single-mother house-

holds. Partners who are unemployed or earn low wages, however, may actually reduce the net economic resources available to the family.

The single parents of white children are more likely to live with a partner than the single parents of black or Hispanic children (figure 2).⁶ Seventeen percent of white single parents lived with a partner in 2002, compared with 12.7 percent of Hispanic and only 5.8 percent of black single parents. Black and Hispanic single mothers who cohabit tend to receive less economic benefit from doing so than cohabiting white single mothers (Folk 1996; Manning and Brown 2003).

A child whose single parent lives with his or her parents (the child’s grandparents) or other adult relatives

FIGURE 2. Household Composition of Single Parents, by Race and Ethnicity, 2002 (percent)



Source: 2002 National Survey of America’s Families.

Notes: “White” and “black” include non-Hispanics only; “Hispanic” includes all races. A single parent may be the biological, adoptive, or stepparent of a child age 17 or younger. Cohabiting parents with children in common are not included in this category. Adult relatives and nonrelatives are age 18 and older. Estimates were calculated by identifying the relationship of the single parent to other adults in the household and then categorizing that parent into one of five categories: lives with a partner; lives with parent(s); lives with other adult relative(s); lives with other adult nonrelative(s); or lives independently. Household composition was defined using a hierarchy; if single parents lived with a partner and with parent(s), they were classified as living with parent(s) if under age 30 and living with a partner if age 30 or above.

* Estimate is significantly different from estimate for whites at the .10 level.

† Estimate is significantly different from estimate for blacks at the .10 level.

may also benefit from the supplementary income available to the family. Further, the extended family may provide free child care or additional emotional support. Like cohabiting partners, however, extended family members can decrease the net economic resources of the single-parent family, especially if the relatives are elderly, disabled, or ill (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994).

Approximately 17 percent of black and Hispanic single parents lived with their parents in 2002, compared with 11.3 percent of white single parents. Eight percent of black single parents and 9.7 percent of Hispanic single parents lived with other adult relatives; only 2.5 percent of white single parents lived in such an arrangement. Single parents of black and Hispanic children are thus more likely to reside with extended

family than single parents of white children. There is some evidence, however, that black and Hispanic single mothers who live with extended family receive less economic benefit from doing so than white single mothers who live with extended family (Manning and Smock 1997).

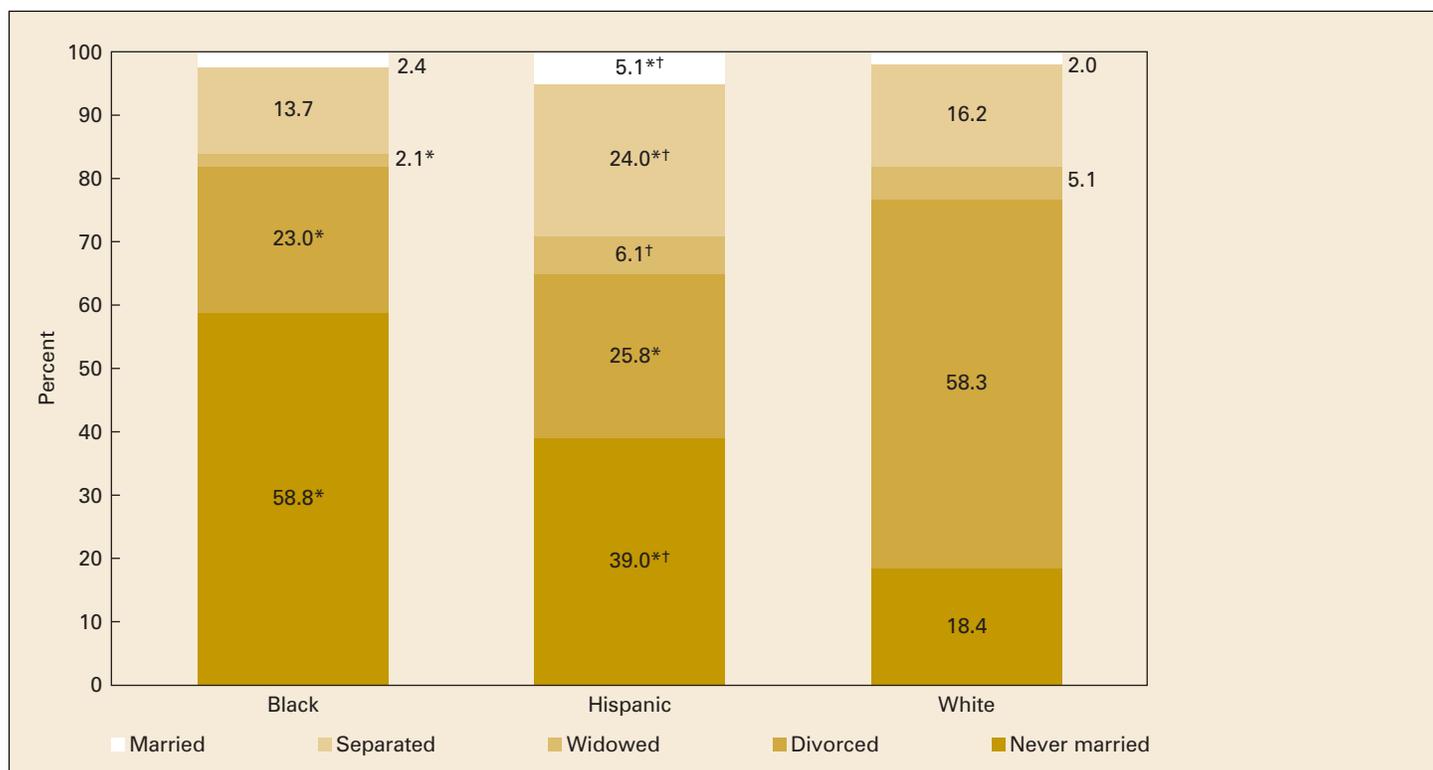
Single mothers living independently generally fare worse economically than those residing with a partner or extended family (Acs and Ratcliffe 2001; Folk 1996). Single parents of Hispanic children are less likely to live independently than single parents of black and white children. Fifty-seven percent of Hispanic single parents lived alone in 2002. The proportions of white single parents and black single parents living alone were 65.3 percent and 67.9 percent, respectively.

Differences in Marital Histories

Child well-being also varies by single parents' marital histories. Never-married parents are significantly younger, less likely to be employed, and more likely to be poor than divorced parents (U.S. Census Bureau 1997). Children born to never-married parents, moreover, are more likely to drop out of high school or become teen mothers than children of divorced parents (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Most black single parents have never been married (58.8 percent) while most single white parents are divorced (58.3 percent), as seen in figure 3.⁷ Hispanic single parents are in between; 25.8 percent are divorced and 39.0 percent have never been married.

Children of widowed parents are less likely to drop out of high school or become pregnant than children of never-married or divorced parents

FIGURE 3. Marital History of Single Parents, by Race and Ethnicity, 2002 (percent)



Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

Notes: "White" and "black" include non-Hispanics only; "Hispanic" includes all races. A single parent may be the biological, adoptive, or stepparent of a child age 17 or younger. Cohabiting parents with children in common are not included in this category.

* Estimate is significantly different from estimate for whites at the .10 level.

† Estimate is significantly different from estimate for blacks at the .10 level.

(McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Because blacks have lower marriage rates than Hispanics or whites, they are also less likely to be widowed. Only 2.1 percent of black single parents are widowed, compared with 6.1 percent of Hispanic single parents and 5.1 percent of white single parents.

Changes between 1997 and 2002

The share of children living in single-parent families has dropped since the mid-1990s (Acs and Nelson 2002b, 2003; Dupree and Primus 2001). Some authors have linked the decline to welfare reform and other social policy changes (Acs and Nelson 2001, 2002a; Bitler, Gelbach, and Hoynes 2003; Primus 2002). Other explanations include changing attitudes toward marriage, a decline in teen

birth rates, and the labor market effects of a strengthened economy, which are generally associated with family stability. The decline in single-parent families was offset by a rise in the share of children living in cohabiting-parent families, which may be related to welfare reform or the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (Ellwood 2000). The share of children living in no-parent families also increased during this period.

Analyzing these trends by race and ethnicity, we find that the increase in the share of children with cohabiting parents was statistically significant for all groups (table 1). The decrease in the share of children in single-parent families, however, was significant among Hispanic children only. The recent increase in Hispanic immigration (Schur and Feldman 2001) has contributed to this change, since chil-

dren of immigrants are less likely to live in single-parent families than children of natives (Brandon 2002).

Among low-income children, who are more likely than other children to have been affected by welfare reform policies, the trend toward cohabiting-parent families occurred among all racial and ethnic groups, but the decline in single-parent families was again significant only for Hispanics.⁸

Conclusion

The living arrangements of children vary significantly by race and ethnicity. Most white children live in married-parent families and most black children live in single-parent families; Hispanic children are more likely than black or white children to live with cohabiting parents. Racial

TABLE 1. Children's Living Arrangements, by Race and Ethnicity, 1997–2002 (percent)

	Black		Hispanic		White		All	
	1997	2002	1997	2002	1997	2002	1997	2002
All children								
Married-parent	27.2	26.6	52.7	55.0	68.6	69.0	59.6	60.0
Married-blended	6.7	7.5	5.8	7.4*	9.6	8.9	8.2	8.2
Cohabiting-parent	1.9	3.0*	4.8	6.9*	1.3	1.7*	2.0	2.9*
Single-parent	55.4	53.4	33.4	27.3*	18.9	18.2	27.1	25.3*
No parents	8.8	9.6	3.4	3.4	1.6	2.2*	3.1	3.6*
Low-income^a								
Married-parent	14.4	14.4	47.7	50.0	52.4	52.3	42.2	42.3
Married-blended	4.2	4.5	4.5	5.0	9.1	8.0	6.5	6.2
Cohabiting-parent	1.6	3.0*	5.5	8.4*	1.9	3.1*	2.8	4.8*
Single-parent	69.9	67.6	38.9	33.5*	33.9	33.4	43.8	41.7
No parents	10.0	10.5	3.5	3.1	2.6	3.3	4.8	5.0
Higher-income								
Married-parent	48.9	42.5*	63.4	62.8	75.8	74.6	72.3	70.3*
Married-blended	10.9	11.4	8.6	11.0	9.8	9.2	9.5	9.4
Cohabiting-parent	2.5	3.1	3.3	4.6	1.1	1.2	1.4	1.8
Single-parent	30.8	34.8	21.6	17.7	12.2	13.1	14.9	15.8
No parents	6.9	8.3	3.2	3.9	1.1	1.8*	2.0	2.7*

Sources: 1997 and 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

Notes: "White" and "black" include non-Hispanics only; "Hispanic" includes all races. "All" includes black, Hispanic, white, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and American Indian/Alaska natives. Children are age 17 and younger. Married parents are identified by the marriage of two biological or two adoptive parents. Married-blended parents involve either a biological parent married to an adoptive or stepparent, or an adoptive parent married to a stepparent. Cohabiting parents are those with children in common, either two biological or two adoptive parents who live together but are not married. A single parent may be either biological, adoptive, or step and may or may not live with a partner. Estimates for 1997 use new weights based on the 2000 Census and may differ from previously published estimates using weights based on the 1990 Census.

a. Bold indicates estimates for low-income children are significantly different from estimates for higher-income children at the .10 level.

* Differs significantly from the percentage in 1997 at the .10 level.

and ethnic variations also extend to analysis of the single-parent family, with divorce likely among white single parents and black single parents likely to have never married. White single parents are more likely than blacks and Hispanics to cohabit with an unmarried partner, while black and Hispanic single parents are more likely than whites to live with extended family.

Between 1997 and 2002, there was an overall decline in the share of children living with a single parent and a rise in the share living in cohabiting-parent families. Further analysis reveals variation in these trends by race and ethnicity. While all groups saw an increase in two-parent cohabitation, only Hispanic children experienced a significant decline in single-parent families.

These findings suggest that current efforts to change American family structure through state and national policies may have different results for black, Hispanic, and white families.⁹ Divorce is the primary pathway to single-parenthood in white families, so white children may benefit most from policies intended to improve marriage stability. Hispanics, who are especially likely to form cohabiting-parent families, may be most responsive to policies that target such “fragile families” for services or remove the disincentives to marriage that are still in many tax and transfer programs.¹⁰

Most black single parents have never been married, and unmarried black parents are much less likely than unmarried white or Hispanic parents to be cohabiting when a child is born (Harknett and McLanahan 2004). Policies to help couples stay married or assist fragile families will affect a smaller share of black children than white or Hispanic children. In addition, programs tied to welfare or otherwise aimed at people with low incomes will have little impact on the well-being of higher-income black chil-

dren. Yet these children are less likely to live in married-parent families than low-income white children (table 1).¹¹

Under the current TANF reauthorization bills, states are unable to spend marriage promotion money on job training, and can only use this money to reduce marriage disincentives in conjunction with other specified approaches. The reauthorization bills authorize a separate set of grants to the states for responsible fatherhood programs, but do not appropriate any funds for the programs, and the funding authorized for the fatherhood programs is much less than the amounts authorized and appropriated for marriage promotion. A more comprehensive approach to marriage promotion would expand the range of allowable activities to include responsible fatherhood programs, job training, and elimination of marriage disincentives in the list of allowable activities from which state officials can choose. Such an approach would give the states more flexibility to develop programs that best match the characteristics of their own diverse populations.

Notes

1. For example, see Robert Lerman, “Should Government Promote Healthy Marriages?” (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2002); Ronald Mincy and Helen Oliver, “Age, Race, and Children’s Living Arrangements: Implications for TANF Reauthorization” (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2003); and Theodora Ooms, Stacey Bouchet, and Mary Parke, *Beyond Marriage Licenses: Efforts in States to Strengthen Marriage and Two-Parent Families* (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2004). See also Acs and Nelson (2004) and Smock and Manning (2004).
2. Throughout this brief, children are defined as age 17 and younger. Our analysis groups children into three different racial and ethnic categories: white non-Hispanic, black non-Hispanic, and Hispanics of all races. To be concise, we refer to these groups as white, black, and Hispanic. Data for all races and ethnicities include the above categories, in addition to American Indian, Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, and Asian populations.
3. This category also includes a small number of other cases involving a married parent, such as a stepparent married to another stepparent.
4. We also classify children residing with one biological parent and one adoptive parent, not married to each other, as living in single-parent families.
5. Manning and Brown (2003), however, found that differences in race, ethnicity, and education explained the differences in outcomes between children living with married and unmarried parents.
6. These estimates were calculated by identifying the relationship of the single parent to other adults in the household and then categorizing that parent into one of five categories: lives with a partner; lives with parent(s); lives with other adult relative(s); lives with other adult nonrelative(s); or lives independently. Household composition was defined using a hierarchy; if the single parent lived with a partner and with parent(s), he or she was classified as living with parent(s) if under age 30 and living with a partner if age 30 or above.
7. Information on marital history is unavailable for approximately 5 percent of single parents identified in 2002.
8. Family income is calculated using an expanded “social” definition of a family. The social family includes not only married partners and their children, but also unmarried partners, all their children, and members of the extended family (anyone related by blood, marriage, or adoption to the respondent, the spouse or partner, or their children).
9. For overviews of current efforts, see Theodora Ooms, Stacey Bouchet, and Mary Parke, *Beyond Marriage Licenses: Efforts in States to Strengthen Marriage and Two-Parent Families* (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2004); Deborah A. Orth and Malcolm L. Goggin, *How States and Counties Have Responded to the Family Policy Goals of Welfare Reform* (Albany, NY: The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, 2003); and Richard Wertheimer and Angela Romano Papillo, “An Update on State Policy Initiatives to Reduce Teen and Adult Nonmarital Childbearing” (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2004).
10. Elwood (2000) suggests that unmarried cohabitators with children are most likely to be sensitive to economic incentives that encourage or discourage marriage.
11. The difference between the share of higher-income black children living in

married-parent families in 2002 (42.5 percent) and the share of low-income white children living in married-parent families (52.3 percent) was significant at the 0.10 level. The difference in 1997 was not statistically significant.

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This series presents findings from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). Information on more than 100,000 people was gathered in each round from more than 42,000 households with and without telephones that are representative of the nation as a whole and of 13 selected states (Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin). As in all surveys, the data are subject to sampling variability and other sources of error. Additional information on the NSAF can be obtained at <http://newfederalism.urban.org>.

The NSAF is part of *Assessing the New Federalism*, a multiyear project to monitor and assess the devolution of social programs from the federal to the state and local levels. Olivia A. Golden is the project director. The project analyzes changes in income support, social services, and health programs. In collaboration with Child Trends, the project studies child and family well-being.

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