

Healthy Marriages, Healthy Women & Girls



*Research on the Alignment of
Marital Outcomes,
Marriage Education and
Key Health, Social and
Economic Factors
Affecting Women and Girls*



“When it comes to solving the problems of this world, I believe in girl power... study after study has proved that helping women and girls raises economic productivity, lowers infant and maternal mortality and improves health. When women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier; they are better fed; their income, savings and investment go up. And what is true of families is true of communities and, eventually, whole countries.”

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in keynote address to the International Women’s Health Coalition, January 16, 2004.

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“The empowerment of women is irrevocably tied to the safety, security, and prosperity of the world.”

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, International Women’s Day, March 7, 2007.

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“The education and empowerment of women throughout the world cannot fail to result in a more caring, tolerant, just and peaceful life for all.”

Aung San Suu Kyi, Daw Burmese-Myanmarese dissident and politician; Leader of National League for Democracy, Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

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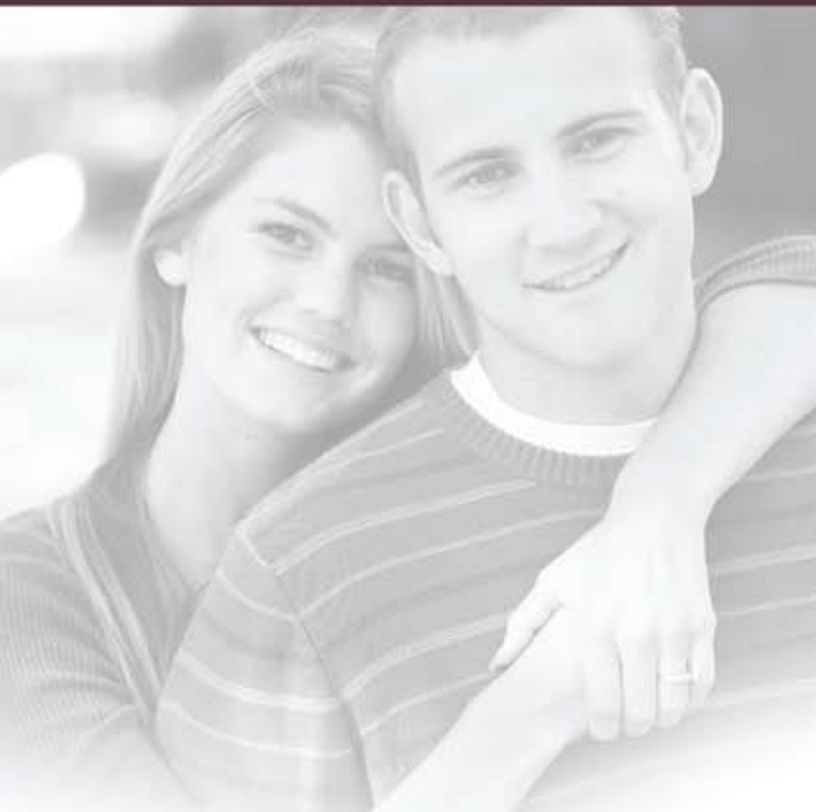
Introduction

Every person in this world—every member of our species—is born of a woman. A woman is the first source of nurturance to every child—or, she becomes the first person who fails that child. For those raised by a conscientious and capable mother, this woman becomes the primary source of every vital ingredient we need from the moment we are born to when we fledge the nest. She gives us food, support, protection, and lessons about behavior, relationships, and society. She nurtures our body, our soul, and our confidence in ourselves. There is no human being whose relationship with their mother—whether good or bad—has less than a profound impact on what they learn about life.

For too many of our species, this relationship is less than optimal. Our mother, we soon learn, has more things on her mind than just ourselves. There may be other siblings, demands from her job outside the home, financial, social or health concerns, and there may or may not be a husband, for better or for worse.

Our mother, it turns out, has a life of her own and what she experiences in her life has a tremendous bearing on our own. The quality of a mother's relationship with her children's father is one of the most significant factors impacting her life and those of the children she gives birth to. Whether or not she is married to their father is of profound importance in that equation, as is the quality of the marriage. The correlation between marital outcomes and Marriage Education makes it clear that Marriage and Relationship Education classes present a promising approach for improving the lives of women, of couples, and of the children they give birth to and raise.





Regrettably, a survey of the research literature today reveals a relative lack of data on the impact of marital outcomes on the lives of women and girls. Given that marriage is arguably the most fundamental of social institutions, in which the vast majority of women participate as intimate partners and upon whose dynamics and outcomes their lives are profoundly shaped, it is surprising that this fertile territory is not yet the subject of extensive, penetrating investigation. It seems likely that this is a symbol of the work still left in moving toward full recognition of the integral roles of women across the fabric of our society.

Girls become the women who become the chain of life upon which our entire species is dependent. The data in this booklet make it evident how important it is—and what an opportunity we have—to move our society in directions that insure that our girls, our women and our species thrive.

Contextualizing The Data in This Booklet

An examination of research on the impact of marital outcomes on the lives of women and girls reveals that, in many cases, the literature does not differentiate between the impact on females in particular versus the impact on “couples” and/or “children”. Thus, numerous studies exploring the relationship between marital failure and well-known factors such as increased poverty, mental and physical problems, domestic violence/

sexual abuse, crime, as well as various social and academic difficulties for the children of divorce are not included in this booklet as a specific, differential impact on women and/or girls has not been looked at and/or specified. Nevertheless, these combined data pertaining to couples and children are compelling and important to a fuller understanding of the relationship between marital outcomes and the lives of women and girls. They are reported in three previous booklets in this series: *Healthy Marriages, Healthy Lives*; *Healthy Marriages, Healthy Societies*; and *Healthy Marriages, Healthy Children*.¹

It is apparent from a review of the literature that many of the factors impacted by marital outcomes are clusters of interdependent factors which combine to exacerbate the impact on women and girls. One such example is the well-established link between unmarried childbirth, lower school attainment and poverty. No attempt has been made in this booklet to describe, or even identify, the interconnections between such factors, although there are many of great interest and importance.

Although the research on the impact of marital outcomes on the lives of women and girls is compelling and important, this is a new and highly complex field of investigation that cannot yet fully address the issue of causality. Further investigations are needed and will be of great value.

Finally, although the size and context of referenced studies differ, the weight of evidence supports the difference that marital outcomes make on the lives of women and girls in the following areas:

Domestic Violence & Sexual Violence

- Married women with children suffer far less abuse than single mothers. The rate of spousal, boyfriend, or domestic partner abuse is 2x as high among mothers who have never been married than it is among mothers who have ever married (including those separated or divorced.)²



- Compared to female respondents ages 18-28 (n = 3,295) in cohabiting relationships, married peers were 1/3 less likely to report being victims of relationship violence in the 12 months prior to the survey, controlling for relationship quality and duration, education level of respondents and their partners, employment status, income, presence of children in the home, race, age, family of origin factors, and religiosity. Compared to young adult female respondents in cohabiting relationships, married peers were also 50% less likely to report perpetrating relationship violence, controlling for the same set of factors.³
- The victimization rate for women separated from their husbands is about 25x higher than that of married women.⁴
- Husbands commit about 5% of all rapes against women, compared to 21% by ex-spouses, boyfriends, or ex-boyfriends.⁵
- Canadian data found that separated women reported nine times the prevalence of violence, and divorced women reported about four times the prevalence of violence compared with married women. The strongest predictors of violence against married women, namely, patriarchal domination, sexual jealousy, and possessiveness, were not significant predictors of violence against separated and divorced women, suggesting that “post-separation violence is a complex phenomenon affected by much more than domination and ownership.”⁶
- A large body of research shows... that marriage is much less dangerous for women than cohabitation.⁷





- British data show that the lowest level of serious abuse occurs in the always-intact married family; stepfamily abuse levels are six times higher; always-single mother family abuse levels are 14 times higher. The most dangerous family structure is when the mother cohabits with a boyfriend who is not the father of the child, where the abuse rate was found to be 33 times greater than in the intact married family.⁸
- Analyses of 7 types of childhood traumas with marital outcomes in a large, national probability sample indicated that the probability of marital disruption was higher among people who during childhood had experienced physical abuse, rape, or serious physical attack or assault, and that current marital satisfaction was lower among people who during childhood had experienced rape or sexual molestation.⁹
- The rate of sexual abuse of girls by their stepfathers is at least 6x higher,¹⁰ and may be as much as 40x greater,¹¹ than sexual abuse of daughters by their biological fathers who remain in intact families.
- A large body of research shows that being unmarried—and especially living with a man outside of marriage—is associated with a considerably higher risk of domestic violence for women; married men are less likely to commit domestic violence because they are invested in their wives' well-being, and more integrated into the extended family and community.¹²

Mental & Physical Health

- Non-married women have 50% higher mortality rate than married women.¹³
- Women who reported “keeping their mouths shut” during conflict with their spouse—an indication of resentment over buried issues—had 4x the risk of dying from heart disease over a 10-year follow up study.¹⁴

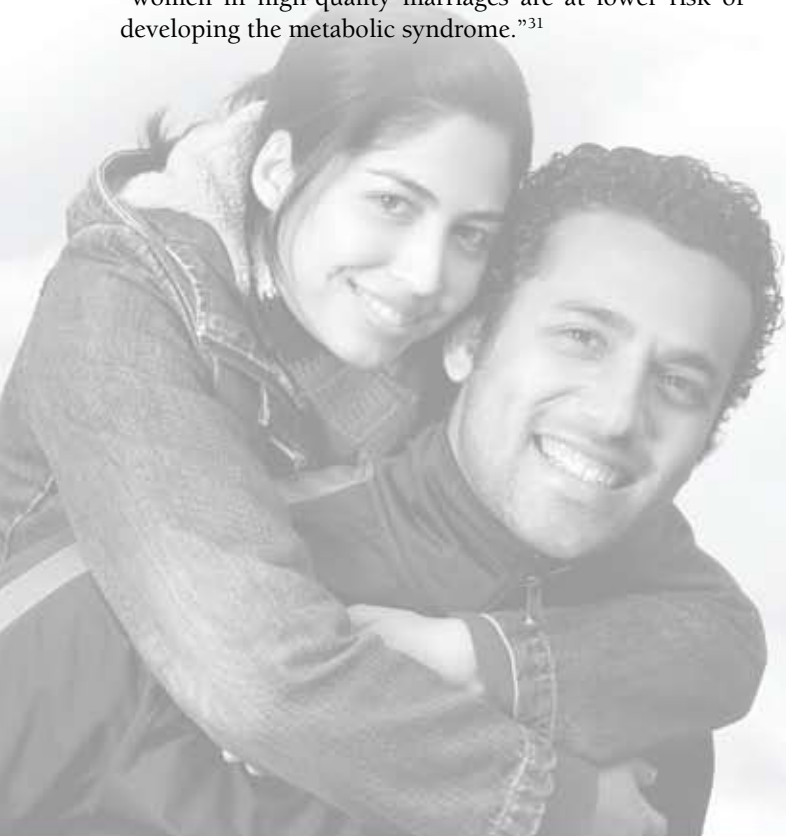


- Marriage reduced the proportion of women who reported binge drinking behavior by 20% in the first two years surrounding marriage.¹⁵
- In looking at same-sex twins who lived together during childhood, an analysis of their adult marital status found that divorced/widowed women had higher depression scores and those twins who were divorced/widowed or had never married were more likely to be smokers than their married female twin.¹⁶
- In analyzing data from the 1987 National Medical Expenditure Survey to examine the extent to which economic assets gained through marriage explain inverse relationship between marriage and poor health for women, the researcher found that married women rated their health higher than did divorced, separated, widowed, and never married women, and found that much though not all of variation was explained by economic factors.¹⁷
- Girls with divorced parents are at particularly high risk to develop depressive symptoms during adolescence.¹⁸ Among girls, the long-term impact of divorce was mediated via low self-esteem and lack of closeness to father.¹⁹ Divorce and parental distress contributed independently to adolescent distress, supporting the notion of “double exposure” effects. Long-term effects of divorce on symptoms of anxiety and depression were stronger among girls than among boys.²⁰
- A study of the timing of early parental separation in regard to psychological development of daughters found that disruptive behavior across contexts was prevalent in girls separated between birth and two years of age. Girls separated from a parent between 3-5 years of age showed more externalizing behavior problems, but only in school. Results suggest that early parental separation has more pervasive and stable negative effects on psychosocial adjustment of girls.²²

- Self-report measures of psychological adjustment and substance abuse from adolescent girls whose parents had separated between 12 months before and 5 months after the divorce revealed that girls showed negative reactions prior to the separation, with these effects not worsening after the divorce.²²
- Among white 18-19 year olds, about 41% of the unmarried, first-time mothers reported many symptoms of depression, compared to 28% of married, primiparous mothers of that age.²³ Maternal depression is a significant risk factor for children, often leading to problems in adjustment that may linger for years after the mother's recovery.²⁴
- In a study of adults who experienced their parents' divorce when they were aged 7-18, researchers found women aged 22-27 whose parents divorced displayed poorer mental health than the matched comparison group whose parents had not divorced. These women had experienced a significantly larger number of life events described as negative with difficult adjustment.²⁵ Females from divorced families, compared to non-divorced families, reported more psychological problems (higher scores in the Beck Depression Inventory, General Health Questionnaire and Psychosomatic Symptoms Score) and more problems in their interpersonal relationships."²⁶
- In the years immediately after their divorce, divorced women reported significantly higher levels of psychological distress than married women, but no differences in physical illness. A decade later, the divorced women reported significantly higher levels of illness, even after controlling for age, remarriage, education, income, and prior health. Researchers concluded that there appears to be a link between the higher number of physical illnesses and the different stresses associated with divorce, including financial problems, demotions, layoffs and parenting problems.²⁷



- In a study of 1,938 middle-aged married women (ages 42-52), those who believe they have happy marriages reported less difficulty falling asleep, less likelihood of waking up during the night or too early in the morning, and less restless sleep compared to women who report less happiness in their marriages. Researchers eliminated social support network, depressive symptoms, economic hardship/employment status, alcohol/caffeine consumption, presence of children in the home, sexual activity, age, and hormonal status as variables and concluded that “the level of marital happiness (is) an independent risk factor for the existence of sleep disturbances.”²⁸
- In a study of post-natal women with histories of affective disorders, those who did not relapse in the six months following childbirth had husbands who were more positive about them than spouses of the women in the control group who had no previous psychiatric history.²⁹
- Women over 50 have more cardiovascular risk than men if they are divorced, remarried, or widowed. The risk of cardiovascular disease for women was about 60% higher for divorced women and 30% higher for widows between 50-60, compared to women still married.³⁰
- In the Pittsburgh Healthy Women Study, in comparisons with marital satisfied women, those that were maritally dissatisfied, divorced and widowed were significantly more likely to have symptoms of metabolic syndrome at follow-up 11.5 years later. Researchers concluded that “women in high-quality marriages are at lower risk of developing the metabolic syndrome.”³¹





- In a study of the physiological consequences of marital behavior, researchers measured 90 newlywed couples' cortisol levels and found that women whose cortisol levels increased used more negative words when describing their marriage. Researchers concluded that women appear to function as the “barometers” of distressed marriages and are in part more sensitive to negative marital interactions than men. Those women having high cortisol levels when talking about their marriage were twice as likely to be divorced 12 years later.³²
- A study of 276 couples married an average of two decades found that women whose marriages were tense and strained were more likely than men to suffer from depression, high blood pressure and obesity, and be at increased risk of developing the physiological conditions of metabolic syndrome. Researchers concluded that the association of stress and heart health was stronger in women.³³
- In a study of 927 women who were married at baseline with 101 no longer married at follow-up three years later, marital dissolution, alone and together with marital quality, was associated with worsened mental and physical health and increased mental health service use. Marital harmony was associated with better sleep and fewer depressive symptoms and physician visits. Women separated from a marriage they had rated as harmonious increased their alcohol consumption.³⁴



- Higher marital relationship quality predicted long-term survival (over 4-year period) in a study of heart disease patients, independent of other known risk factors including severity of the diagnosis. The most seriously ill patients, if they were in satisfied, low-conflict marriages, lived significantly longer than much healthier patients in less-satisfying marriages; follow-up results on patients with Heart Failure continued to predict survival during an 8-year period ($p > 0.001$), especially when the patient was a woman, and did so substantially better than individual (patient-level) risk and protective factors.³⁶
- In comparing baseline assessments regarding marital status and quality of 393 women along with assessments of cardiovascular risk factors, women in satisfying marriages 11 and 14 years after baseline had the least atherosclerosis in the carotid arteries and aorta, especially relative to those in low-satisfying marriages. The women in satisfying marriages also tended to show less rapid progression of carotid atherosclerosis. The researchers concluded that “high quality marriages may protect against cardiovascular disease for women.”³⁷
- Having unequal decision-making power in marriage is associated with a higher risk of death for women; physiological effects of marital stress are stronger and last longer in women. In a study of congestive heart patients, seven out of eight women with the poorest quality marriage died within two years.³⁸


Educational Attainment

- Approximately 20-25% of children from divorced families experience long-term difficulties in relationships, academics, occupation, mood or behavior. It seems to be particularly important for girls' long-term prospects for academic and occupational success "to see their father as an active presence during adolescence."³⁹
- The absence of the father lowers cognitive test scores for young children in general,⁴⁰ especially the math scores of daughters.⁴¹
- Data from a study conducted under the auspices of the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the Institute for Development of Education Activities showed education attainment to be highest among higher income girls with two parents (mean 1.701), followed by higher income girls with one parent (mean 1.537), lower income girls with two parents (mean 1.421), followed by lower income girls with one parent (mean 1.235).⁴²
- In a study to differentiate pre- and post-divorce effects, girls from subsequently divorcing families showed a decline in academic functioning which began prior to divorce and continued beyond the time of divorce.⁴³

Premarital Sex & Unwed Births

- Women raised in female-headed families are 53% likelier to have teenage marriages, 111% likelier to have teenage births, 164% likelier to have premarital births, 93% likelier to experience marital disruptions.⁴⁴



A photograph of a woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a white short-sleeved button-down shirt and blue jeans. She is leaning forward, holding the hand of a child whose arm is visible on the right. They are standing near a stream with large, smooth, light-colored rocks in the foreground. The background is a lush, green, out-of-focus natural setting.

“Marriage organizes kinship, establishes family identities, regulates sexual behavior, attaches fathers to their offspring, supports childrearing, channels the flow of economic resources and mutual caregiving between generations, and situates individuals within families, kin groups and communities... Women gain financially from marriage... Married women also enjoy their sex lives more than sexually active single or cohabiting women. In addition, marriage makes for happier mothers.”

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Ph.D., Co-Director, National Marriage Project—Rutgers University. Testimony before the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, Subcommittee on Children and Families, U.S. Senate, April 28, 2004.



“My parents got divorced when I was four. Now I’m nine, and both are remarried. Every night I look up at the stars and wish they were together.” K.S.

Nancy Holyoke. (1999) *HELP! A Girl's Guide to Divorce and Stepfamilies*. Middleton, WI: American Girl Library, pg. 42.



- For white adolescent women, the number of family changes (parental divorce, remarriage, etc.) experienced during childhood and adolescence was significantly related to the likelihood of engaging in sexual intercourse. Those that reported multiple family transitions were more likely to report having engaged in non-marital sexual intercourse.⁴⁵
- Young women ages 13-19 that have ever lived with a single, solo parent have a greater risk of having a premarital teen pregnancy than young women that have never lived with a single, solo parent.⁴⁶
- For teenage girls from intact or step-families, the odds of getting pregnant as a teenager were approximately 75% lower compared to girls from all other types of families, suggesting that “the marital union of parents may act as a demonstrative or socializing tool in preventing teen pregnancy.”⁴⁷
- In a demographic questionnaire assessing ego development, daughters of unmarried mothers were found to be more likely to become sexually active in their teen years and more likely to become involved with men that will abuse them.⁴⁸
- Adolescent girls who grow up apart from an intact, married household are significantly more likely to have early menstruation, premature sexuality, and a teenage pregnancy.⁴⁹
- Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth found that adolescent girls who reported a poor relationship with their parents and whose parents had a poor marital relationship were “dramatically” more likely to engage in sex by age 16 (OR=1.17, $p>.001$); by age 18, the strongest risk factor for their being likely to engage in sex was the poor quality of the parents’ marital relationship.⁵⁰

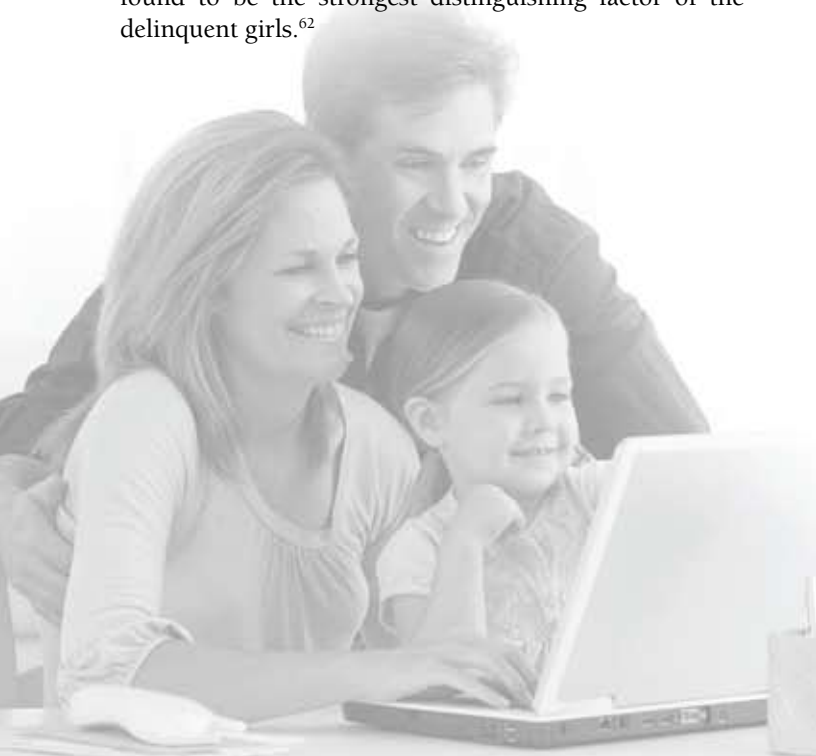
- In a study of sexual awareness, attitudes and social context of pregnant adolescent English girls, the data revealed these girls were likely to come from homes where the parents were divorced, where the mother married when she was under 21 years of age, and where her first child was conceived out of wedlock.⁵¹
- Among African American adolescent females, those living with a cohabiting parent had more than three times the odds of engaging in sexual activity when compared to adolescents living with married parents. Those living with a single parent as a result of marital disruption faced 2.8 times the odds of engaging in sexual activity, relative to those living with married parents.⁵²
- In a comparison of psychosexual development of 771 Czech girls aged 16-18 who lived in complete and stable families with 166 probands from divorced marriages, the sexual development of the latter group was found to be accelerated ($p < 0.02$).⁵³
- A study of family risk factors associated with adolescent pregnancy in Ecuador found that parental separation or divorce and poor parent-daughter communication were associated with adolescent pregnancy. Families of non-pregnant girls also showed better problem-solving strategies, parent-daughter communication, higher levels of cohesion, connectedness and life satisfaction in general, along with higher future expectations.⁵⁴
- In surveying 3,828 adolescents ages 14-16, those living with their biological father and mother were 2.4 times less likely to be sexually active than those living with their mother and her cohabiting partner, 1.7 times less likely to be active than those living with a never married single mother, and 1.8 times less likely than those living with a divorced or separated single mother.⁵⁵



- Women who experience changes in their caretaking situation during childhood (e.g., parental divorce, remarriage, mother's partner moves in, etc.) are significantly more likely to have an early pregnancy. Data from the National Survey of Family Growth (n = 10,141) found that females experiencing such a childhood transition were 1.7 times more likely to have a pregnancy during adolescence, those experiencing two transitions were 3.13 times more likely to become pregnant as an adolescent, and those experiencing 3 or more transitions were 5.73 times more likely to have an adolescent pregnancy than cohorts experiencing no changes in their caretaking situation during childhood.⁵⁶

Crime & At-Risk Girls

- Adolescent girls who experienced parental divorce when they were younger than aged 6 or between 6-9 years old reported becoming involved with alcohol or drugs in greater proportions than girls from intact families; those for whom it occurred before they were aged 6 more frequently reported skipping school.⁵⁷
- Among adolescent girls, there is a strong correlation between family structure and delinquency,⁵⁸ hostile behavior,⁵⁹ drug use, larceny, skipping school,⁶⁰ and alcohol abuse.⁶¹
- In data comparing families of delinquent daughters with those of matching socioeconomic class whose daughters were not delinquent, the frequency of broken homes was found to be the strongest distinguishing factor of the delinquent girls.⁶²





Poverty

- 75% of all women who apply for welfare benefits do so because of a disrupted marriage or disrupted relationship in which they live with a male outside of marriage.⁶³ After divorce, ... (women and children's) standard of living is 20% lower, and home ownership drops by 12 percentage points.⁶⁴
- Parental divorce is associated with declines in economic resources especially for women and children. On average, never-married and divorced mothers had much lower per-capita family incomes compared to married mothers regardless of their living arrangements. Cohabiting single-mothers did the best among non-married mothers but still had lower per-capita incomes than married mothers.⁶⁵
- In “plausible” matching scenarios between single mothers and single males of the same race and similar in age and education levels, such theoretical marriages occurring would reduce poverty 80% among these single-mother households;⁶⁶ other researchers using a similar approach concluded that such marriages would reduce poverty among single mothers by about 65%.⁶⁷
- Analyses on the impact of marriage on poverty rates under conditions where the proportion of households in different family structures remain constant over time (“share-shift” analyses) reveal that over 80% of poverty is related to changes in family structure such as increase in households headed by single mothers.⁶⁸
- Children raised by never-married mothers are seven times more likely to live in poverty than children raised by their biological parents in intact marriages. Overall, approximately 80% of long-term child poverty in the United States occurs among children from broken or never-formed families.⁶⁹



- Daughters from female-headed households are much more likely than daughters from two-parent families to themselves become single parents and to rely on welfare for support as adults... [L]iving with a single mother at age 16 increases a daughter's risk of becoming a household head by 72% for whites and 100% for blacks. In comparing daughters continuously living in two-parent families with those living with an unmarried mother at any time between ages 12 and 16, researchers concluded that exposure to single motherhood at some point during adolescence increases the risk of the daughter later becoming a household head... White girls living in a single-parent household at any time during adolescence are 127% more likely to receive welfare benefits as an adult, and black girls living in a single-parent household at any time during adolescence are 164% more likely to receive welfare benefits as an adult, in comparison with daughters from two-parent households.⁷⁰

Links between Marriage Education & Marital Outcomes

Contextualizing these Data

The quality of marriages range widely and the impact of marriage across populations has an equivalent range, both with respect to its impact on the couple and on the children involved. As healthy marriages are associated with various benefits for health and wellbeing, these advantages, as indicated in the MIDUS—Midlife in the United States study, “depend, in part, on marital quality.”⁷¹ The work of Marriage Education presents a promising approach for increasing marital quality.

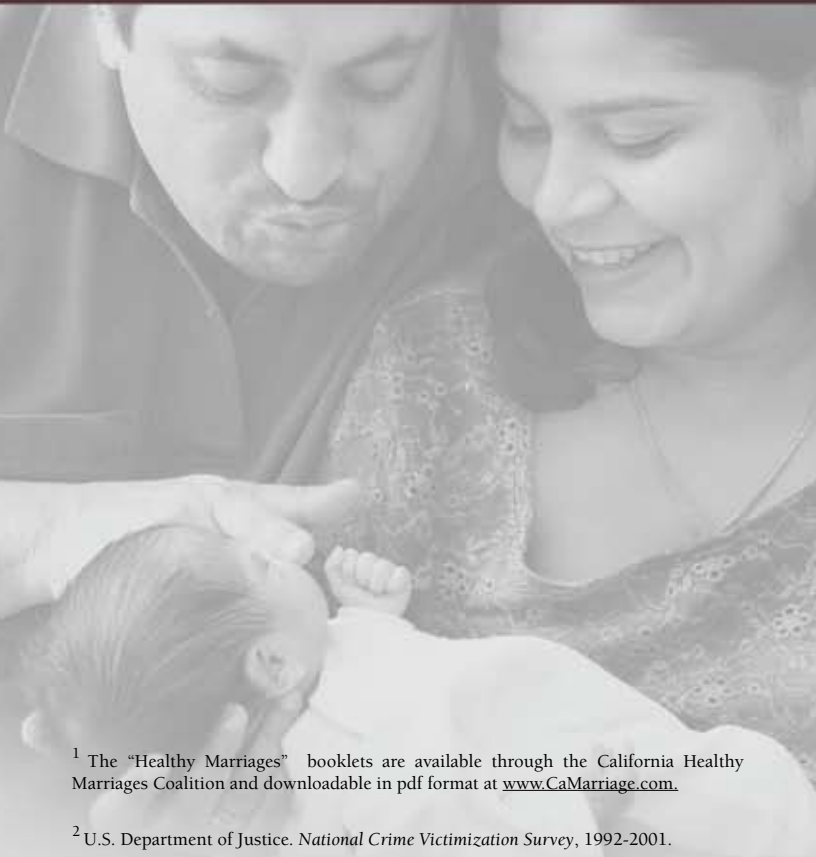
Data from Meta-Analytic Studies

- A meta-analysis of over 100 studies on the impact of Marriage Education found clear evidence that Marriage Education programs work—“to reduce strife, improve communication, increase parenting skills, increase stability, and enhance marital happiness.” Researchers conclude that “...Marriages can do more than merely survive: They can also thrive when couples learn the skills to make their relationship work.”⁷²
- A meta-analysis of 20 different Marriage Education programs across 85 studies involving 3,886 couples found an average positive effect size of 0.44, indicating that the average couple participating in any one of the Marriage Education programs studied improved their behavior and quality of relationship so that they were better off than more than two-thirds of the couples that did not participate in any Marriage Education program.⁷³
- A meta-analysis of 16 studies observed meaningful program effects with regard to gains in communication skills, marital satisfaction, and other relationship qualities. The average couple after taking the Marriage Education training was able to out-perform 83% of couples who had not participated in the program in the critical area of marital communication.⁷⁴



- A longitudinal study on a well-known Marriage Education program found that, compared with couples without the training, participating couples maintained high levels of relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction and lower problem intensity three years after training; they also demonstrated significantly greater communication skills, less negative communication patterns, and greater conflict-management skills up to 12 years after instruction, and reported fewer instances of physical violence with their spouses three to five years after training.⁷⁵
- In a meta-analysis of studies on the relationship between ME programs and problem-solving skills, marital conflict and marital satisfaction, 12 of the 13 studies found significant differences favoring couples who received the treatment, with the mean effect size being .80 of a standard deviation. Across all marital outcomes, the typical couple who received marital education scored higher than 79% of the couples who did not.⁷⁶
- In a meta-analytic study on 117 studies, Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) was found to produce “significant, moderate effect sizes on two different outcomes that were commonly examined... For relationship quality, those effects range from .24 to .36. For communication skills, the effects were somewhat larger, ranging from .36 to .54. Moreover, when follow-up assessments were employed and evaluated, there was not much evidence of diminishing effects... Thus, it seems reasonable that federal and state policy makers are interested in exploring whether greater availability of MRE services can help more couples form and sustain healthy marriages.”⁷⁷
- In a review of 97 Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) reports that yielded 143 distinct evaluation studies, researchers concluded that MRE “appears to be capable of functioning as universal, selective, and indicated prevention”, results described as “encouraging” because they address the dilemma about how to balance the need for universal prevention programs provided to all interested individuals with the need for selective or indicated prevention programs designed to serve more at-risk or distressed individuals.” In answering the question “Does MRE work?”, the researchers conclude “There is mounting evidence that, in general, it does”, both as a universal preventive and also as a selective or indicated intervention.⁷⁸





¹ The “Healthy Marriages” booklets are available through the California Healthy Marriages Coalition and downloadable in pdf format at www.CaMarriage.com.

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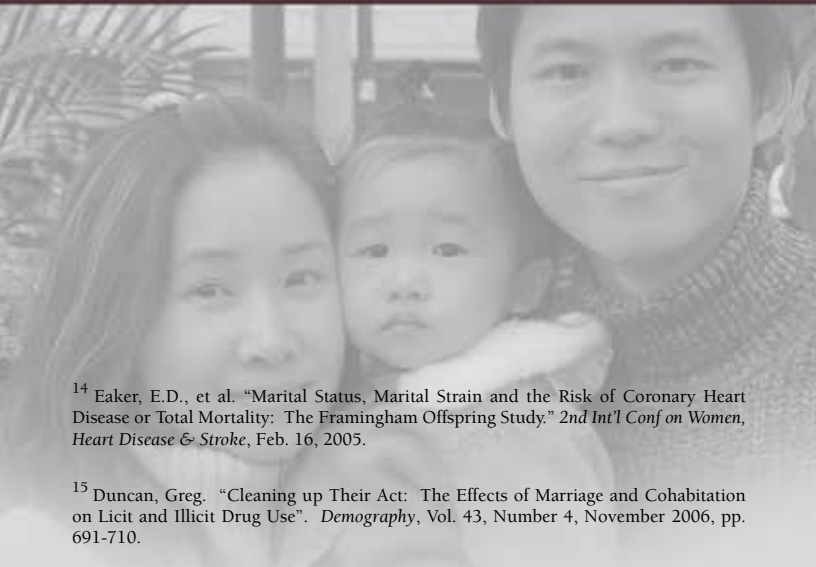
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