



Valuing All Our Families

Progressive Policies that Strengthen Family Commitments and Reduce Family Disparities

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Introduction

Stable, healthy marriages and relationships can bolster the economic security and well-being of adults and children. Too often, however, national debates about the American family have been limited to arguing the merits of married versus single parenthood or “traditional” families versus “alternative” ones. An underlying assumption often seems to be that these are static types of families that children are born into and remain in until they leave home.

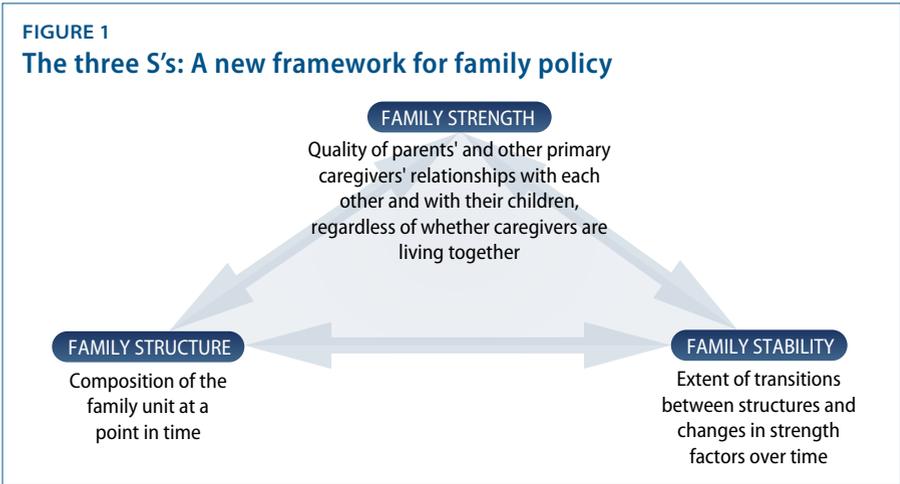
Reality is much more complex.¹ Relatively few children—less than one in four—currently live in families with married parents in which only the father is employed, compared to the roughly two in three children who did in 1960.² Families in the United States—including those headed by married parents—appear to be much more unstable than in most other wealthy nations.³ In fact, more than half of U.S. children today will spend at least part of their childhoods not living with two biological parents, even though the vast majority of children begin their lives living with both of them.⁴ A family headed by only one adult is typically not a permanent state; rather, it is more frequently a transitional situation. Moreover, grandparents, other kin, and parents living apart from their children often play major and supporting roles in their children’s upbringing.

This complex reality does not mean that policymakers should throw up their hands and conclude that public policy can do little to influence children’s or adults’ stability and well-being via family-related policies. As argued in this report, a clear-eyed approach that better aligns family policy with the lived experience of 21st century families could provide the necessary supports to improve American family life. Such an approach should eschew simple diagnoses and prescriptions, such as the idea held by some conservatives that only the decline in marriage needs to be reversed, primarily through cultural change, or the idea held by some progressives that only the economy needs to be fixed.

This report aims to move beyond these simple binaries that tend to structure public debate in this area. In addition to reviewing the extensive research that has been done on families today, this report offers a new framework for understanding family indicators that can influence child and adult outcomes and highlights some key economic and social policies that would strengthen family commitments and reduce family disparities. While the approach taken in this report is informed by empirical research, just as importantly, it is also based on core values. At a basic level, human beings need love, care, connection, and belonging. Family bonds that fulfill these basic needs come in many guises, each of which deserves society’s support and respect.⁵ The recommendations would update family policy in ways that make it more likely that all of our families are stable, healthy, and strong.

Part I of this report briefly reviews some key trends related to family change in recent decades, including the decline in the share of children living with their married parents and the increasing likelihood that children will spend part of their childhood with unmarried cohabiting parents, as well as stepparents.

Part II argues that a modern approach to family policy needs to encompass three related factors: family structure, family stability, and family strength—a new framework called the three S’s.



Considering these three factors together yields a richer and more balanced understanding of how family factors influence well-being and economic security than would focusing exclusively on any single one. Both rigorous research and widely held public understanding tell us that any of the three S's can trump one or both of the others when it comes to well-being, depending on the context and circumstances in which individual families find themselves.

Part III discusses class gaps related to the three S's. Noneconomic factors such as changes in social norms and technology, as well as economic factors such as growing inequality, have both contributed to major changes in family structure, stability, and strength since the 1960s. At the same time, the growth in economic inequality since the 1970s has profoundly shaped and constrained the family-related choices facing parents without four-year college degrees. As a result, compared to better-off families, struggling and working-class families increasingly lack the resources needed to avoid and navigate family instability and conflict.⁶ This has contributed to growing differences on indicators related to the three S's between socioeconomic classes.

The final part of this report outlines a policy agenda to reduce the risks that all families face related to the three S's but with a particular emphasis on reducing class gaps in these risks. The proposed policy agenda has both an economic and a social plank.

The economic plank includes recommendations to tackle economic factors that have made families—and particularly working-class families—more vulnerable to risks related to the three S's. These recommendations include:

- Increasing overall employment
- Increasing the minimum wage substantially, strengthening basic labor standards, and making it easier for workers to form and join labor unions
- Substantially increasing the earned income tax credit, or EITC, for adults without custodial children, and particularly young adults
- Ensuring that disadvantaged married and cohabiting couples have meaningful access to key work and income supports
- Reducing marriage penalties in the Supplemental Security Income, or SSI, program for people with disabilities
- Enacting work-family policies, including paid family leave, earned sick days, and high-quality child care, and increasing the availability of flexible and predictable work schedules
- Improving access to postsecondary education and training for both men and women

The social plank includes recommendations to provide social supports and services that reduce the risks that all families face related to the three S's but that would also disproportionately help low-income and working-class families. Specifically, these recommendations include:

- Increasing access to birth control and other reproductive health services
- Increasing access to effective couples counseling for adults and relationship education for high school students
- Modernizing the child support system and family law
- Continuing successful home-visitation programs and increasing access to parenting education

This report also highlights the need to reform the United States' immigration and criminal justice systems to avoid separating families unnecessarily.

This report provides much more detail on the social plank than the economic one, largely because the Center for American Progress has already written extensively on economic policies that would promote shared prosperity. It is important to note, however, that real progress on the three S's will only be made with the implementation of both economic and social reforms such as those outlined in this report.

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