

Marriage is on the decline, and a growing proportion of children are born to unmarried parents, many of them in unstable cohabiting unions. Research increasingly shows that family instability affects children's cognitive and social-emotional development in ways that constrain their life chances. With an eye on these trends, the *Future of Children* [first examined marriage and its effects on children in 2005](#). In the decade since, new developments and research findings have made it worthwhile to revisit the topic. These developments and findings fall into four categories.

*New insights into the relationship between marriage child wellbeing*

In “Why Marriage Matters for Child Wellbeing,” David Ribar examines mechanisms through which marriage appears to improve children's lives, such as family income, parents' physical and mental health, net wealth, informal insurance through social networks, and more. Although many of these mechanisms could be bolstered by public programs that substitute for parental resources—greater cash assistance, more generous health insurance, better housing, more help for caregivers, etc.—studies of child wellbeing that attempt to control for the indirect effects of these mechanisms typically find that a direct positive association remains between child wellbeing and marriage, strongly suggesting that marriage is more than the sum of these particular parts.

In “The Evolving Role of Marriage: 1950–2010,” Shelly Lundberg and Robert Pollak argue that in recent decades, the sources of gains from marriage have changed. Women's educational attainment has overtaken that of men, the ratio of men's to women's wages has fallen, and traditional patterns of gender specialization in household and market work have weakened. The primary source of gains from marriage has thus shifted from the production of household services to investment in children. Couples with high incomes and high levels of education now have the greatest incentives to maintain long-term relationships; for them, marriage is a commitment mechanism that supports such investment. For those who lack the resources to invest intensively in their children, marriage may not be worth the cost of limited independence and potential mismatch.

*New kinds of families*

In “Cohabitation and Child Wellbeing,” Wendy Manning writes that cohabitation has become a central part of the family landscape in the United States— so much so that by age 12, 40 percent of American children will have spent at least part of their lives in a cohabiting household. Cohabitation, Manning notes, is associated with several factors that have the potential to reduce children's wellbeing, including lower levels of parental education and fewer legal protections. Most importantly, cohabitation is often a marker of family instability, which is strongly associated with poorer outcomes for children. Overall, however, the link between parental cohabitation and child wellbeing depends on the type of cohabiting family and age of the child when he or she is exposed to cohabitation.

In “Marriage and Family: LGBT Individuals and Same-Sex Couples,” Gary Gates notes that about 200,000 children are being raised by same-sex couples. After carefully reviewing the evidence presented by scholars on both sides of the issue, Gates concludes that same-sex couples are as good at parenting as their different-sex counterparts. Gates also writes that whereas in the past, most same-sex parents were in a cohabiting relationship, this situation is changing rapidly. As more and more same-

sex couples marry, we have the opportunity to consider new research questions that can contribute to our understanding of how marriage and parental relationships affect child wellbeing.

*Increasing disparities in marriage by social class and by race and ethnicity*

In “The Growing Racial and Ethnic Divide in U.S. Marriage Patterns,” Kelly Raley, Megan Sweeney, and Danielle Wondra find that structural factors, such as declining employment prospects and rising incarceration rates for unskilled black men, don’t fully explain the divergence in marriage patterns. In particular, they don’t tell us why we see racial and ethnic differences in marriage across all levels of education, not just among the unskilled. The authors argue that the racial gap in marriage is due partly to broad changes in ideas about family arrangements that have made marriage optional. As the imperative to marry has fallen, the economic determinants of marriage have become increasingly important. Race continues to be associated with economic disadvantage, and thus as economic factors have become more relevant to marriage and marital stability, the racial gap in marriage has grown.

In “One Nation, Divided: Culture, Civic Institutions, and the Marriage Divide,” Brad Wilcox, Nicholas Wolfinger, and Charles Stokes trace the retreat from marriage and the growing class divide in marriage to growing individualism and the waning of a family-oriented ethos, the rise of a “capstone” model of marriage, and the decline of civil society. The authors argue that these cultural and civic trends have been especially consequential for poor and working-class American families. The authors suggest public policy changes and civic and cultural reforms that might strengthen family life and marriage across the country, especially among poor and working-class families.

*New research on policies designed to promote marriage*

In “The Family Is Here to Stay—or Not,” Ron Haskins finds strong evidence for five propositions. First, we might encourage marriage by reducing marriage penalties in means-tested benefits programs and expanding programs that supplement the incomes of poorly educated men. Second, offering long-acting, reversible contraception and other forms of birth control to low-income women can reduce unintended pregnancies and nonmarital births. Third, although the “couples relationship programs” piloted by the Bush administration produced few positive results, there were some bright spots that could form the basis for designing and testing a new generation of such programs. Fourth, we could create more opportunities for disadvantaged young men to prepare for employment, and we could reduce their rates of incarceration. And, fifth, we could do more to help single mothers raise their children, for example, by expanding child-care subsidies.

In “Lessons Learned from Non-Marriage Experiments,” Daniel Schneider reviews evidence from social experiments to assess whether programs that successfully increased the economic wellbeing of disadvantaged men and women also increased the likelihood that they would marry. These programs weren’t designed to affect marriage. But to the extent that they increased participants’ economic resources, they could have had such an effect. Overall, he finds little evidence that manipulating men’s economic resources increases the likelihood that they will marry, though there are exceptions. For women, on the other hand, there is more evidence of positive effects.



*The Future of Children* is a collaboration of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and the Brookings Institution. For more information on *The Future of Children* please visit: [www.futureofchildren.org](http://www.futureofchildren.org).