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The Marriage Crisis No One is Talking About

By: Mike Hoey

Same-sex partners may want to marry but increasingly heterosexual couples are failing to tie the knot, while non-marital births are on the rise. A father may declare his intent to marry but over time he drifts away and the children are raised by the mother, or by the mother and a new live-in partner. Meanwhile, schools and social service agencies are given the unenviable task of trying to address the myriad challenges faced by the children of these unstable unions.

Among family scholars of all political persuasions, it is widely accepted that children raised by their mother and father have better outcomes—academically and socially—but the new family formations are placing more children at risk of failure. All this change causes confusion for children and creates a whole array of problems for schools, and when the schools and families fail, the criminal justice system is the last resort.

What is more a class divide appears to be opening up where marriage is increasingly the preserve of the well-educated and affluent, while for everyone else, marriage is put off in favor of having children and raising them in informal ad-hoc families of partners with varying forms of commitment to each other.

Family scholars have been noting these trends for years but much of the general public seems to think it is a problem of only the urban poor. It isn't. This is the marriage crisis no one is talking about. A crisis that is moving into what used to be known as the middle working class. It wasn't always this way.

In the years after World War II, veterans came home, married, and the baby boom began. Frank Sinatra summed up the ethos of a generation: "Love and marriage/Love and marriage...they go together like a horse and carriage." But those days are long gone. Nationally, over 40% of births now occur outside of marriage. If the current trend continues, half of the babies in the U.S. could end up being born outside of marriage.

The crisis facing the institutions of marriage and family are of grave concern to Pope Francis. He has convened an extraordinary synod of bishops to meet at the Vatican this October. Instead of condemning couples for their failures in marriage or their failure to marry, the pope is calling for pastoral outreach in which people may recognize that God's mercy offers an invitation to conversion and rebirth. Reversing the rise in non-marital births and the decline of marriage will not be easy. The first step is to understand what is going on, even if this uncovers some uncomfortable facts. The next step is to begin a conversation about what can be done to create a society that will foster strong marriages and stable families.

Marriage is in trouble in Missouri, too. For example, while nationally, 40.7% of births occur outside of wedlock, the non-

marital birth rate in Missouri stands at 40.2% as of 2011 (most recent data available; based on births in last 12 months). And, as with the national picture, there are distinct differences by social and economic class. You can see these differences when looking at the non-marital birth rate by county (see Figure 1, Percent of Non-Marital Births, 2011).

As has been the case for several decades, non-marital birth rates are the rule, not the exception, in very poor areas. In the city of St. Louis over 60% of the births took place outside of marriage. In Missouri Bootheel counties, non-marital births were equally high: Dunklin: 51.9%; Mississippi: 64.4%; New Madrid: 54.5%; Pemiscot: 65.3%; and Scott: 47.3%.

In contrast, in areas with more wealth and education, fewer babies are born outside of marriage, though the difference with other counties is marginal. St. Charles County, for example, had a non-marital birth rate of 25.5%, while in Boone County, the home of the University of Missouri-Columbia, 32.1% of the births occurred outside marriage. In general, areas with four-year institutions of higher education have lower non-marital birth rates.

Marriage Among the Middle Working Class

The fact that non-marital births are high among the poor and lower among the affluent is well known, but the retreat from marriage by young adults of the middle working class is new (see charts "Marriage Rates: Comparing

Percent of Non-Marital Births, 2011

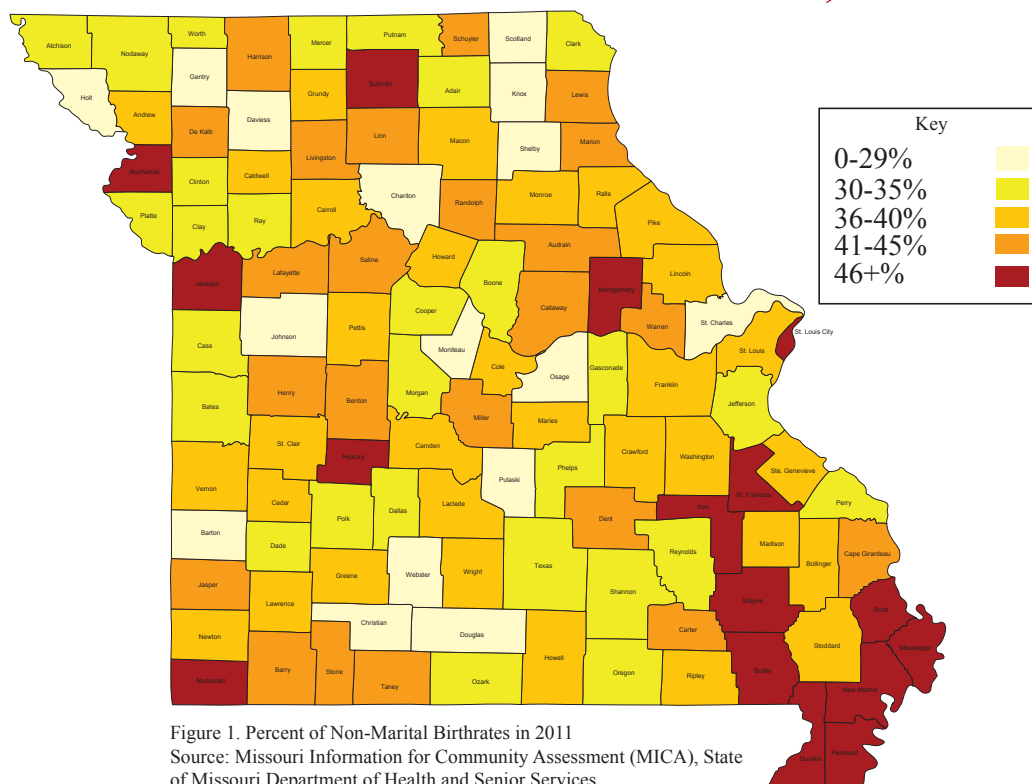


Figure 1. Percent of Non-Marital Birthrates in 2011
Source: Missouri Information for Community Assessment (MICA), State of Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services

Women with Some College to Women with a College Degree”). Recent studies have looked at this group - young adults with a high school education and some college but not a four-year degree. They represent about 51% of the young adult population.

A summary of this research can be found in a report by W. Bradford Wilcox and Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marginalization of Marriage in Middle America*. The Brookings Institute brought these two family scholars together to examine the causes of the decline of marriage in Middle America and to explore possible policy responses (Wilcox briefed the U.S. Bishops on these issues at their 2014 Spring meeting).

Wilcox and Cherlin state that: “By the late 2000s, moderately educated American women were more than seven times as likely to bear a child outside of marriage as compared to their college-educated peers.” While Wilcox and Cherlin have somewhat different “takes” on the issue, both agree that the causes for the decline of marriage are both economic and cultural.

On the economic front, they point to the decline of decent paying jobs since the 1970s due to automation and global competition. The new economy is especially difficult for young men with only a high school education. The jobs they find tend to offer lower wages and may be short-term or part-time.

Yet Wilcox and Cherlin find that “a strong norm still exists among both young men and young women in Middle America that men, at least, should have a steady, stable source of income before a marriage is feasible.” So, marriage is often put off until times are better, but those good times may never come about.

But economic conditions cannot fully explain the demise of marriage among the working class. After all, during the Great Depression couples married and stay married despite catastrophically hard times. Accordingly, another cause is cultural. Wilcox and Cherlin point to three cultural changes:

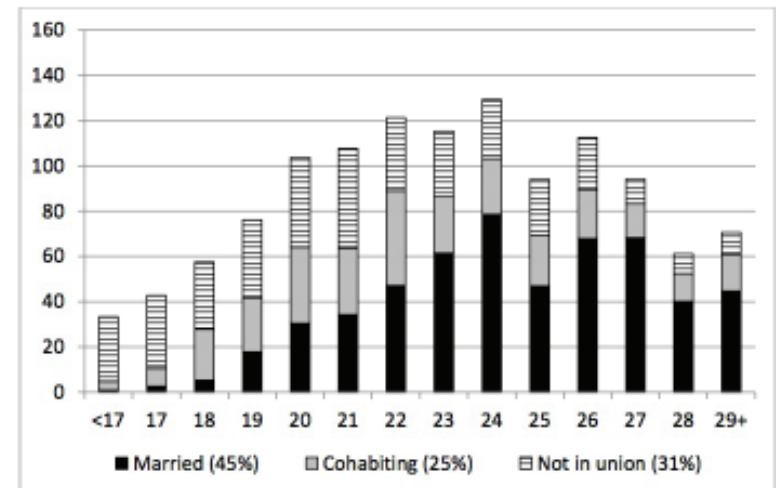
- 1) new norms concerning sexual activity, births and marriage;
- 2) declines in religious participation; and,
- 3) laws that uphold individual rights rather than marriage.

The availability of birth control pills has relaxed concerns about sex outside of marriage for young adults of all social classes. However, while the college-educated have become more marriage-minded, with a desire to have children only after marrying, the opposite trend is at work among the couples of Middle America.

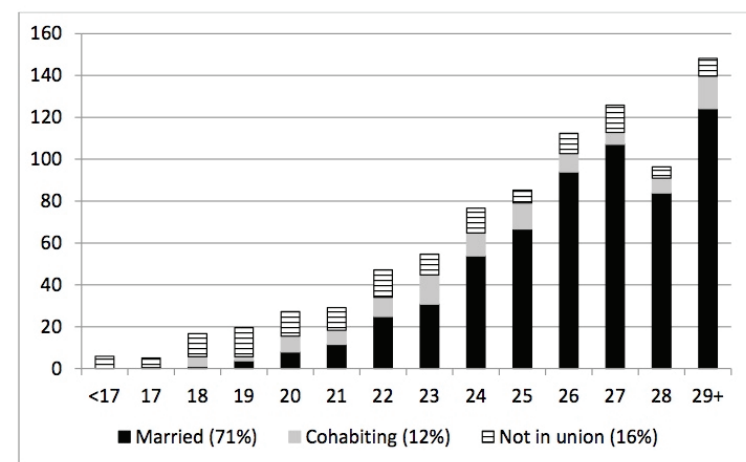
Indeed, the stigma of having a child outside of marriage is fading among this group of young adults. Wilcox and Cherlin observe: “They increasingly embrace the same, somewhat counterintuitive position that many poor Americans hold, namely, that one should not marry until several

Marriage Rates: Comparing Women with Some College to Women with a College Degree

C. Women with one to three years of college completed (27% of all births)



D. Women with four or more years of college completed (19% of all births)



criteria are met, including steady employment and a loving relationship, but that having children is too important to delay.”

Meanwhile, there has been a shift away from organized religion: “From the 1970s to the present, the share of moderately-educated Americans attending church about once a week or more fell 12 percentage points, from 40 to 28 percent.” This trend may also be undermining marriage as Church attendance fosters strong marriages and stable family life. Finally, Wilcox and Cherlin believe that the emergence of “no-fault” divorce laws may have undermined respect for the institution of marriage.

Marriage Among the Poor

The sequence of getting married and then having children is especially rare among the poor. A study of fathers in high-poverty areas of Philadelphia and inner suburbs of Camden, New Jersey uncovered countless stories of precarious relationships. (“Daddy, Baby: Momma, Maybe” in *Social Class and Changing Families in an Unequal America*.) Monte, a 21-year-old white male, described a typical sequence of events:

I had just come out of a juvenile institution. I think I just turned 17... and I started going with her friend. And then one day she came around and we started talking, then I went with her and left her friend, and me and her got together and started



having kids together, then we got closer and closer. Then we started living together.

These relationships tend to get more serious after the birth of the child. Fathers may proclaim the desire to get married but the actual tying of the knot keeps receding into the distance. The mother may wonder whether the father can provide a stable income. The fathers know this and may resent it. Jeff, a 47-year-old black father, commented: “I hear a lot of people say that love is good but I am telling you, money will rule over a relationship real quick.” As time moves on, the father typically drifts away from the mother and child.

A Closer Look at Father Involvement

Princeton and Columbia Universities are collaborating in a Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study that examines how children fare in single parent and cohabitating families compared to outcomes of children in married couple families. The project, conducted over the last decade, finds that children raised by single parents or cohabitating couples do not fare as well as those raised in married couple families.

The Fragile Families research indicates that most unmarried fathers are “very involved during pregnancy and immediately after the birth.” They provide some support and declare their commitment to help raise the child. But over time these fathers begin to drift away. After five years, just 36% still lives with the child.

If the unmarried father already lived with the mother at the time of birth, there was a better chance he was still around five years later. In general, involvement by unmarried fathers declines over time, with only 51% of nonresident fathers indicating they have seen their child in the last month.

Once the unmarried father has left, many single moms end up with a new live-in partner. Over 45% of the mothers have had one or two new partners by the time the child has reached age 5.

All this coming and going of partners and new children from different fathers adds to the instability of the family and can be especially troubling for children. In fact, some research indicates children fare better in a stable single parent household than in families disrupted by a series of new partners. Still, single parenting remains a challenge and some studies show more behavioral problems for children raised by single mothers. More involvement by the father can help in these situations.

When Dad Isn’t There...

Absent fathers can spell trouble for the children left behind. Princeton University researcher Sara McLanahan and Nancy Harper at the University of California, San Francisco found that boys raised by a single parent were more than twice as likely to end up in prison or jail, even after controlling for poverty, race, and other factors. In their 2004 study - *Father Absence and Youth Incarceration* - McLanahan and Harper suggest that a father’s “distance from his adolescent son’s development presents a risk for negative expressions of the adolescent’s autonomy.”

Interestingly, the entry of a stepdad into the household did not improve the odds of the children staying out of prison. McLanahan and Harper

Unmarried Parents' Relationship Status at Child's Birth

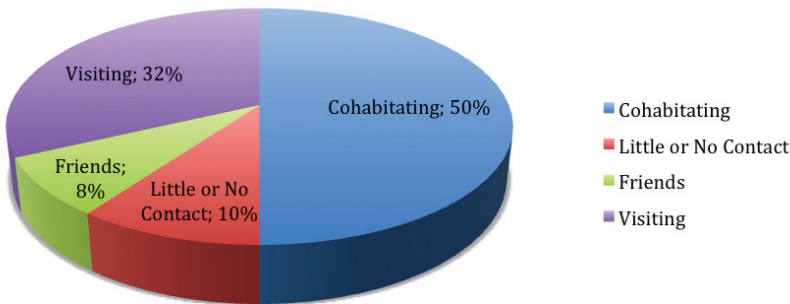


Figure 5.2. Unmarried parents’ relationship status at child’s birth. Source: Data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (weighted by national sampling weights).

Table 5.9
Unmarried fathers’ involvement with their children after a non-marital birth (percent)

Years After Birth			
Father’s Involvement	One Year	Three Years	Five Years
All Fathers ¹			
Lives with child	51%	42%	36%
Nonresident Fathers			
Saw child in past year	88%	78%	72%
Saw child in past month	63%	55%	51%

Sources: ¹Carlson, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn 2008.

noted: “These stepparent results indicate that certain processes within a stepparent family such as conflict or divided loyalties, rather than a father-absent family per se, might present greater difficulties for adolescents.”

Daughters are placed at greater risk for early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy when their father has left the family, according to a team of researchers who posed the question: *Does Father Absence Place Daughters at Special Risk for Early Sexual Activity and Teenage Pregnancy?* The team of researchers found that risk factors were especially high when the father left before the daughter reached age 5. In fact, in these situations girls were five times more likely to experience an adolescent pregnancy than in families where father was present.

In discussing possible reasons why the father’s absence may encourage early sexual activity among daughters, the researchers cited Thornton and Camburn (1987): “We expect that many children know whether their parents are sexually active after a marital dissolution and that formerly married parents who continue to be sexually active serve as behavioral models for their maturing children, thus increasing he children’s levels of permissiveness.” Another possible explanation discussed by Draper and Harpending (1982, 1988) is that girls in father-absent families conclude that parental investment is unreliable and unimportant, thus leading them to settle for similarly unstable relationships.

How to Reverse the Decline of Marriage

Many family scholars agree that both economic and cultural factors are at work in undermining the institution of marriage. One would like to believe that marriage is respected by young people of

all social classes, but the research clearly shows that while the college educated and affluent are marrying, others are not.

Part of the explanation for this may be the lack of decent paying jobs that lead working middle class couples to conclude that marriage is not feasible. Yet, couples married and stayed married during the Great Depression, so economic factors cannot fully explain the current decline in marriage. So what can be done?

This is far too complex a problem to be solved solely by passing new laws or having churches escalate their evangelization efforts. All this is needed, but much more is required. In *The Marginalization of Marriage in Middle America* family scholars W. Bradford Wilcox and Andrew J. Cherlin offer several recommendations.

- Boost training for middle-skill jobs. The auto plant jobs that used to pay good wages may be gone, but there are jobs available that will pay well if young people obtain the proper training. These jobs typically don't require a college graduate but well-trained technicians, such as licensed practical nurses, respiratory therapists, x-ray technicians, and electricians.
- Increase the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). EITC is essentially a wage subsidy for lower income workers. It enjoys bipartisan support from both Republicans and Democrats as a way to reward those who enter the workforce and try to get ahead. EITC could be restructured so as not to penalize lower-income couples who marry and have a slightly better income than those who remain single for legal purposes but are cohabitating.
- Promote marriage through marketing campaigns. Marketing campaigns have been successful in discouraging the use of tobacco, why not mount this kind of concerted public campaign on behalf of marriage.
- Increase the Child Tax Credit. Right now parents can claim a federal income tax credit for their child dependents. One way to encourage marriage and the formation of families may be to increase the existing child credit. This could create more stable economic conditions for married couples, making marriage more attractive.
- Better fund preschool children's development. Young men and women who have not had a good K-12 education will not be in a position to take advantage of training opportunities for jobs such as x-ray technicians and electricians. Research shows that pre-school education is the essential first step, especially for the economically disadvantaged.
- Reform divorce laws. The no-fault divorce laws enacted by many states in recent years may be undermining the public's respect for the institution of marriage and weakening the commitment of couples to work out their differences. One idea would be to increase the waiting period before a couple can proceed with a divorce, as well as encouraging more marriage counseling.

Obviously, none of these suggestions offer a silver bullet solution. The larger point is that a crisis is underway and solutions are needed to revitalize marriage and family.

Catholic Perspective and Responses

Until recently, having many children marked the parents as Catholics. Even today Catholics are known for strong family ties and the esteem in which family life is held. But powerful economic and cultural forces are eroding this bedrock of American society. Today, many couples either don't marry or don't stay married. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of children – the products of these unstable unions – find themselves confused and struggling to make their way into adulthood.

The happily married, looking at this situation, can react in a variety of ways. One response can be condemnation. Why can't "these people" get their act together? A more reflective response might start with a feeling of sadness—so many couples just don't know what they are missing.

Marriage and family are great gifts given to us by God. One recalls their wedding day and that sacred vow "till death do us part." And looking back, a couple smiles and admits, "we didn't know what we were getting into." But the risk was worth it, and then the children came and a family was created.

A strong family creates bonds of affection and commitment that last a lifetime and extend to succeeding generations. No social service program can replace that. At the same time, families need support from the larger community. In fact, laws and public policies can either undermine or promote marriage and family.

If, as Catholic teaching proclaims, the family is the bedrock of society, then how can this foundation be rebuilt? This is surely one of the most essential questions facing American society today, and Catholics can play an important role in finding new ways to revitalize marriage and family.

—Mike Hoey is the Executive Director of the MCC; research assistance and editing provided by Nikki Pursley, MCC Communications Specialist

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY at the crossroads



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