



**The Challenged**  
*American Family*  

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**What Should We Do?**

**A Community Dialogue**

**July 30, 2015 ● 6 p.m.**

Jody Berry Theatre at RiverPark Center

**ISSUE BRIEF & DISCUSSION GUIDE**

# **The Challenged** *American Family*

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**The purpose of this forum is to examine the changing dynamics of modern American families. Marriage patterns are changing. Families are increasingly redefined, creating pressures on children, policymakers and communities.**

This is not a debate, but an opportunity to listen, share and learn from people representing different walks of life. Our intent is not to persuade, but to engage one another in meaningful dialogue toward common ground and mutual respect.

This issue brief reflects a good faith effort by a volunteer citizens committee to provide balanced and reliable information. We ask that the dialogue be respectful and that everyone have an opportunity to participate. Please, no side conversations. The booklets are yours to keep, so feel free to make notes in the margin or underline text.

This is an open meeting and all are welcomed. We have worked hard to attract a cross-section of the community, but this is not presented as a scientific sample.

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*Over half of all births to young adults in the United States now occur outside marriage, and most are unplanned. The result is increased poverty and inequality for children.*

*The political left argues for more social support for unmarried parents; the right argues for a return to traditional marriage. Is there another way?*

**Isabel Sawhill**

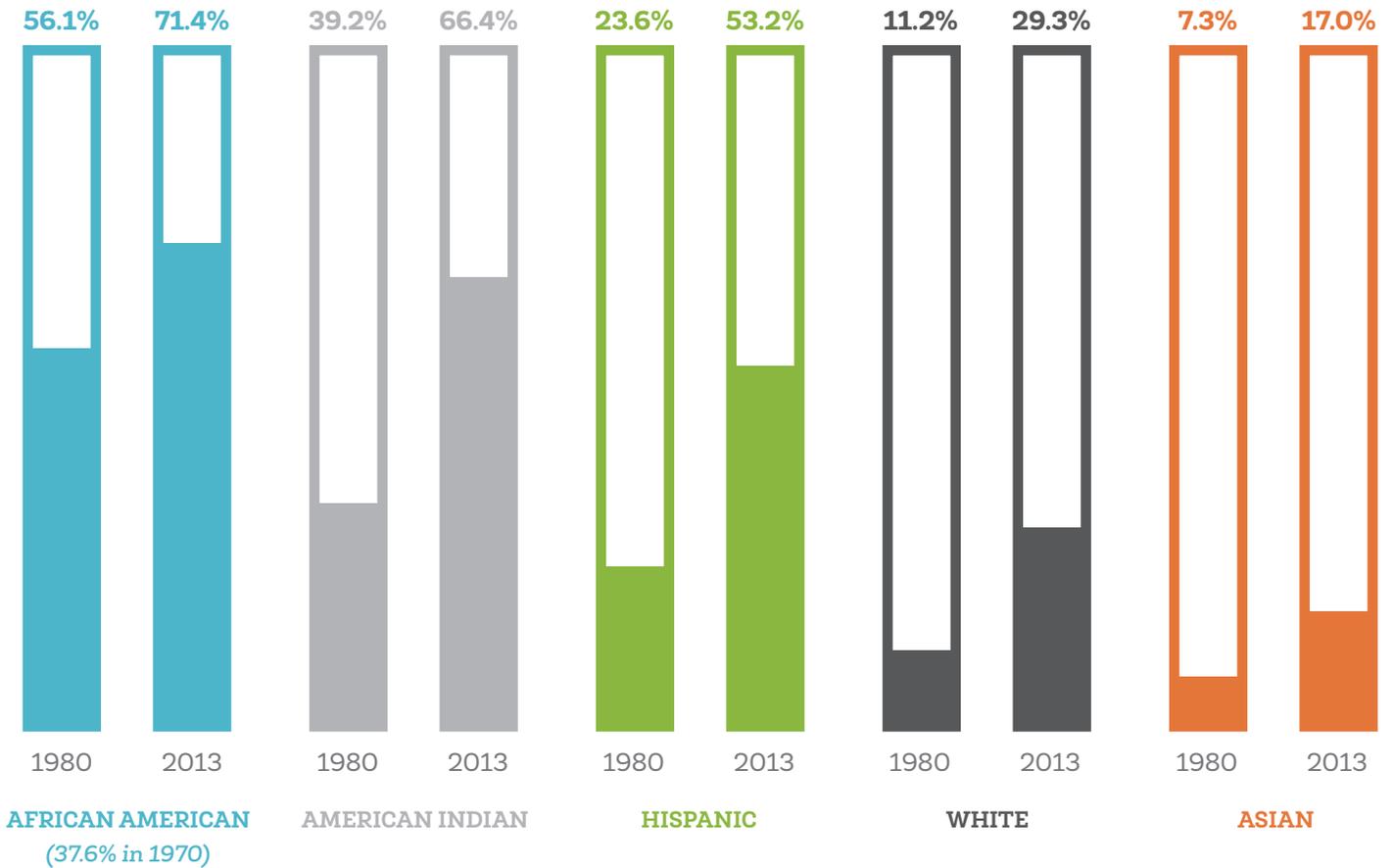
The American family life has changed since 1965, just 50 years. Too many families struggle to care for and educate their children to become responsible productive adults.

Since 1965, divorce rates have doubled; by 1980 an estimated one out of every two marriages ended in divorce.

Today, Americans are delaying marriage; the average age of a bride in the fifties was 20, by 2010 it was 26.

And many skip marriage, although not parenthood. Today, the share of children born outside of marriage now stands at 41 percent, up from just 5 percent in 1960. (Pew Charitable Research)

### Nonmarried Birth Rate



Children in single parent households are much more likely to live in poverty. They are significantly less likely to be healthy, succeed in school and become productive adults. According to Pew Charitable Research, 41 percent of all children born into the bottom (20 percent) household income will remain there throughout their lives.

This issue brief suggests several policy options to reduce the occurrence of childhood poverty. Each option proposes a strategy for addressing a problem and includes roles for citizens to play. Each option presents a drawback connected to each action and trade-offs to be considered in pursuing any action.

*The truth is, the greatest tool to lift children and families from poverty ... isn't a government spending program. It's called marriage.*

**Marco Rubio**

# How Can We Help America's Challenged Families?

## Option #1: Re-inforce Time-Tested Values

The virtues of respect for authority, civility, the sanctity of marriage and father led families have given way to "if it feels good, do it." This has eroded the role of the family which is the source of structure, support and guidance which every child needs to become a productive member of society. The married two parent family provides the best opportunity for nurturing and educating our children. While we cannot order people to adopt behaviors of an earlier time, we can defend their importance by promoting public policies which encourage/support.

### A Primary Drawback:

Zealous implementation of these values could become too intrusive and compromise our constitutional freedoms which permit the pursuit of happiness for all Americans as they see fit to do so.

#### Those who support this option may say...

- Restrict public welfare benefits to single parents which serve to reward them for having more children.
- Schools should vigorously encourage sexual abstinence.
- Tax policies should eliminate the marriage penalty (higher tax rates for married couples than those for two single individuals) to reduce the tax burden and make it easier for mothers to not have to work outside the home.
- Local communities should adopt ordinances which promote family well-being, such as curfew for children, restriction of adult entertainment, alcohol sales and gambling.
- Both the government and the private sector should promote the primacy of the married two parent family as the best way to ensure children are educated to become responsible productive adults.

#### Those who oppose this option may say...

- The connection between having more children to get more benefits is not supported by research. Denying benefits to needy parents will only harm children.
- Current research indicates sex education exclusively focused on abstinence has not been found to be effective.
- Today's economy requires two incomes for most families to make it financially, and most women today want their own career.
- Adoption of this kind of law has often been ruled unconstitutional and represents efforts to legislate morality which should be left to the family and religious institutions.
- Financial status according to some research is more important than family structure. All children deserve support and should not be stigmatized because of their parents.

## Option #2: Promote Responsibility

### Encourage Parents to Accept Responsibility and Be Accountable for Their Decisions.

Too many Americans are exercising their rights, but ignoring their responsibilities. Children are expensive to nurture and educate, but the people responsible for bringing them into the world must be accountable for meeting their basic needs. Child bearing should be planned, not a thoughtless accident, and both mothers and fathers should be expected to use available family planning services and make this a reality.

### A Primary Drawback:

This option would penalize low income families who, with modest community support services, could effectively raise their children to become responsible, productive adults.

#### Those who support this option may say...

- Curtail no-fault divorce laws which have often contributed to financial hardship for women and children.
- Parents should be more accountable for meeting the basic needs of their children. If they are unwilling or unable, the children should be taken away.
- Expand low cost or free voluntary family planning services including LARCs (Long-Acting Reversible Contraception) to low income citizens. LARCs do not depend on a person making a thoughtful decision about the consequences of sex in a heated moment.

#### Those who oppose this option may say...

- Prior divorce laws diminished opportunities for women and children to escape abuse.
- Parents want to provide for their children and most can do so with community support services. Children want to be with their parents and the government is not good at raising children.
- This intrusive approach means neither partner has to think about their sexual behavior which will contribute to promiscuity.

*If young people finish high school, get a job, and get married before they have children, they have about a 2 percent chance of falling into poverty and nearly a 75 percent chance of joining the middle class by earning \$50,000 or more per year.*

**Ron Haskins** ● Advisor, President George W. Bush  
**Isabel Sawhill** ● Advisor, President Bill Clinton

## Option #3: Expand Societal Responsibility

In an age of declining birth rates, now more than ever, it is important that all children grow into productive, well-adjusted adults. When family incomes are insufficient, we should expand societal responsibility to make sure families have the support needed to nurture and educate their children.

### A Primary Drawback:

This approach could contribute to decreasing the number of two parent families, and increase benefits available to nurture and educate the children of those parents who are unable or unwilling to do so.

#### Those who support this option may say...

- Public funding should ensure that age appropriate quality child care is available for all children whose parents are in the work force.
- The American economy needs female participation in the work force, and government should help working parents by increasing the child care tax credit, expanding after school programs, health care, paid family leave, and the Earned Income Tax Credit\*.

*\*The Earned Income Tax Credit is a federal tax refund that helps working families.*

- Federal funding of services and benefits to the elderly is out of balance and should be flat lined and funding to support families and children should be increased.

#### Those who oppose this option may say...

- These encourage both parents to be in the work force rather being home with their children.
- U.S. citizens do not want to pay the higher taxes this would require

- Elderly citizens have made a significant contribution to our earlier generations. We must honor our commitment to them by meeting their basic needs in their final years.

*...to bring a child into existence without a fair prospect of being able, not only to provide food for its body, but instruction and training for its mind is a moral crime, both against the unfortunate offspring and against society.*

**John Stuart Mill** ● On Liberty

## Do you agree or disagree with the statements below?

**Because of the sexual revolution, morality and value are in decline.**

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Not Sure

**Marriage has been our most enduring and successful institution. More should be done to encourage and support it including both private and public funding of initiatives that strengthen it.**

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Not Sure

**The government should set a goal of reducing the number of children born into single parent families and use its resources to encourage marriage and two parent families.**

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Not Sure

**Citizens should establish strongholds of decency for their communities that reflect local standards of morality.**

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Not Sure

**Tax policies which penalize married couples should be repealed and the child tax credit should be increased and made refundable for low income families whose incomes are insufficient to qualify for the tax deductions.**

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Not Sure

**Cultural messages and schools should teach abstinence and government should eliminate policies which encourage illegitimacy and single parenthood.**

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Not Sure

**The government should not liberalize divorce laws or allow family planning programs to undermine the values of caution and delay, or the institution of marriage itself.**

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Not Sure

**Parents must be held accountable for children they bring into the world and it is only fair to expect parents to limit their number of children to what they can afford.**

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Not Sure

**Low or no cost comprehensive family planning services (including long acting reversible contraceptives - LARC's) should be promoted as a voluntary means of reducing unintended pregnancies for low income women.**

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Not Sure

**Society has no right to limit the ability of poor people to have children.**

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Not Sure

**Promoting increased use of contraception long acting reversible contraceptives (LARC's) is intrusive and contributes to permissiveness leading to sex outside the institution of marriage.**

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Not Sure

**Single parenthood is the current reality and here to stay, and society should provide greater assistance in the difficult job of raising children on their own.**

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Not Sure

**Government should substantially increase its support of child care, pre-school, K-12 education and after school programs which are a benefit to all children.**

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Not Sure

**Increased public investment in social-welfare support services for unmarried mothers and their children will reinforce irresponsible behavior.**

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Not Sure