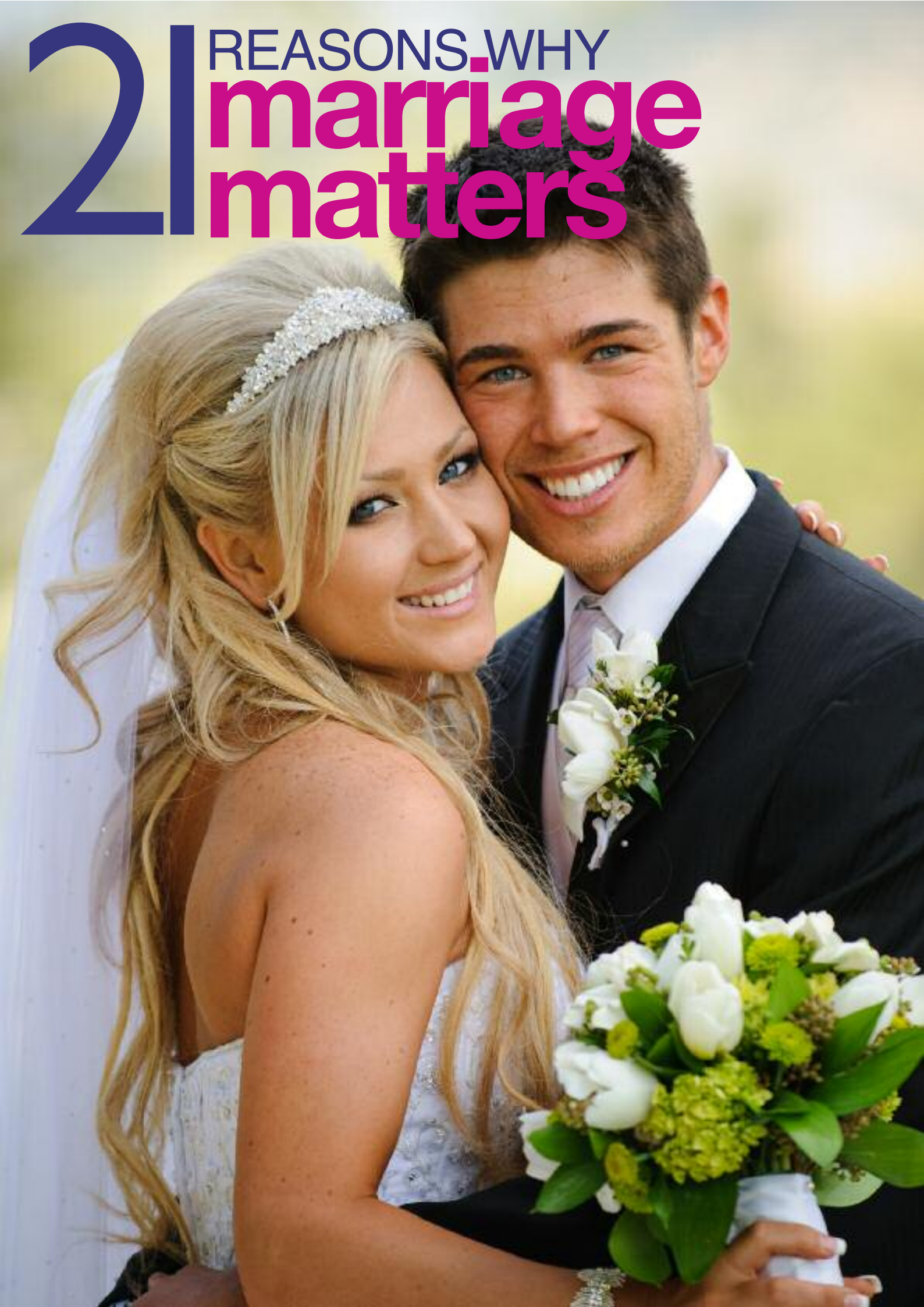
21 REASONS WHY marriage matters



21 REASONS WHY marriage matters

"Two is better than one. Serving each other and working as a team is the best way to build a long-lasting marriage."
- Michelle & Soane Tonga

NATIONAL MARRIAGE COALITION

STRENGTHENING AND SUPPORTING MARRIAGE

The National Marriage Coalition is a coalition of like minded organisations which believes that every child has a fundamental right to both a mother and a father. The best way to secure this right is to establish a loving and stable marriage between a man and a woman for life. The best way to protect and support children, is to protect and support marriage. Therefore marriage should be encouraged and supported by government, society and individuals in every possible way.

The greatest resource we have lies in the families of our nation. Therefore the strength and quality of our nation's families will determine the success of our nation. The quality of our nation's marital relationships will determine our nation's destiny. For this reason marriage needs the full economic and legal protection of our government.

The National Marriage Coalition believes that there should be a coordinated national government campaign to publicise the benefits of marriage as shown in the *Why Marriage Matters* research document. Marriage needs the full support of government at every stage and every level including premarital counselling, marriage education, marriage enrichment and pre-divorce counselling. The National Marriage Coalition believes that there needs to be a dramatic increase in government funding to support and strengthen marriage.

The National Marriage Coalition includes many young people. According to a recent family study 75-85% of young people wish to build a strong and stable marriage, have children and establish loving and long-lasting families. The five young couples whose photos are featured in this document, tell the story well.

Marriage for us is a sacred union that expresses the complimentarity of our masculinity and femininity. It's more

than a contract; it's a call to a lifetime of unbroken commitment. – Karolina & Richard Fowler.

Marriage is best described as a commitment to being committed and to love your spouse forever no matter what. – Katie & Levi Marsh.

Marriage is a sacred lifelong journey between two best friends, founded on commitment, love, trust, passion and forgiveness. - Alana & Peter Miller

We only got married a few months ago and we are really enjoying it. - Kate & Brad Weeks.

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INTRODUCTION

WHY MARRIAGE MATTERS — A REPORT FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

What do we know about the importance of marriage for children, for adults and for society? There has been a sharp increase over the last two generations in the proportion of children who do not live with their own two married parents, spurred first largely by increases in divorce, and more recently by large jumps in unmarried or cohabiting childbearing. A vigorous public debate sparked by these changes in family structure has generated a growing body of social science literature on the consequences of family fragmentation.

This report is an attempt to summarize this large body of scientific research into a succinct form useful to everyone on all sides of ongoing family debates — to report what we know about the importance of marriage in our families and social systems.

Marriage has changed a great deal over the past two generations, including increased incidence and social acceptance of divorce, cohabitation, premarital sex, and unwed childbearing. Other important changes include dramatic increases in the proportion of working wives, reduced tolerance for domestic violence, and a change in gender roles. Over the past 40 years, both men and women have become increasingly likely to support greater participation by men in the household and women in the labour force, with less sharp differentiation between women's and men's roles. Yet when it comes to the benefits of marriage, research shows more impressive evidence of continuity than change or decline.

Social science is better equipped to document whether certain social facts *are* true than to say *why* they are true. We can assert more definitively that marriage is associated with powerful social goods more definitively than we can say that marriage is the sole or main cause of these social goods.

Good research seeks to tease out what scholars call "selection effects," or the pre-existing differences between individuals who decide to divorce, marry, or become unwed parents. Does divorce cause poverty, for example, or is it simply that poor people are more likely to divorce? Good social science attempts in a variety of ways to distinguish between causal relationships and mere correlations. The studies cited here are for the most part based on large, nationally representative samples that control for race, family background, and other compounding factors. In many, but not all cases, social scientists have been able to use longitudinal data to track individuals as they marry, divorce or stay single, increasing our confidence that marriage itself matters. Where we consider the evidence is, in our view, overwhelming that marriage *causes* increases in well-being, we say so. Where marriage probably does so, but the causal pathways are not as well understood, we are more cautious.

We recognise the possibility that factors other than marriage, divorce or single parenting may be influencing outcomes. Relatively few family-structure studies attempt to assess the role of genetics, reasonable scholars may and do disagree on the existence and extent of such selection effects, and the extent to which marriage is causally related to the better social outcomes reported here.

And of course individual circumstances vary.[1] While divorce is associated with serious increased psychological risks for children, for example, the majority of children of divorce are not mentally ill.[2] While marriage is a social good, not all marriages are equal. Research does not generally support the idea that remarriage is better for children than living with a single mother.[3] Marriages that are unhappy do not have the same benefits as the average marriage.[4] Divorce or separation provides an important escape hatch for children and adults in violent or high-conflict marriages. Families, communities, and policy makers interested in distributing the benefits of marriage more equally must do more than merely discourage legal divorce.

Social science is typically better equipped to answer general questions (eg., Are high rates of divorce and unwed childbearing likely to reduce overall child well-being?) than to answer questions facing individual parents (eg., Will my particular children in my particular circumstances be harmed or helped by divorce?).

But we believe good social science, despite its inherent limitations, is a better guide to social policy than uninformed opinion or prejudice. The public and policy makers deserve to hear what research suggests about the consequences of marriage or its absence for children and adults. This report represents our best judgement of what the current social science evidence reveals about the importance of marriage in our social system.

Here is our fundamental conclusion: ***Marriage is an important social good, associated with an impressively broad array of positive outcomes for children and adults alike.***

Family structure and processes are of course only one factor contributing to child and social well-being. Our discussion here is not meant to minimisze the importance of other social and economic factors, such as poverty, child support, unemployment, neighbourhood safety, or the quality of education for both parents and children. Whether our society succeeds or fails in building a healthy marriage culture is clearly a matter of legitimate public concern.

FAMILY

1. Marriage increases the likelihood that fathers have good relationships with their children.

Mothers as well as fathers are affected by the absence of marriage. Single mothers on average report more conflict with and less monitoring of their children than do married mothers.[5] As adults, children from intact marriages report being closer to their mothers on average than do children of divorce.[6] In one nationally representative study, 30 percent of young adults whose parents divorced reported poor relationships with their mothers, compared to 16 percent of children whose parents stayed married.[7]

But children's relationships with their fathers are at even greater risk. Sixty-five percent of young adults whose parents divorced had poor relationships with their fathers (compared to 29 percent from nondivorced families).[8] On average, children whose parents divorce or never marry see their fathers less frequently[9] and have less affectionate relationships with their fathers[10] than do children whose parents got married and stayed married. Divorce appears to have an even greater negative effect on relationships between fathers and their children than remaining in an unhappy marriage.[11]

As Pennsylvania State University Sociology Professor David Eggebeen has said, "The evidence is in and it is clear that fathers do matter for the lives of children. Hundreds of studies over the past two decades have shown a measurable impact on their children."[12] [13] The harmful effects of fatherlessness have been well documented in "The Facts of Fatherlessness".[14]

2. Cohabitation is not the functional equivalent of marriage.

As a group, cohabitors in the United States and Australia more closely resemble singles than married people.[15] Children with cohabiting parents have outcomes more similar to the children living with single (or remarried) parents than children from intact marriages.[16] Adults who live together are more similar to singles than to married couples in terms of physical health[17], emotional well-being and mental health[18], as well as in assets and earnings.[19]

> *"Adults who live together are more similar to singles than to married couples in terms of physical health."*

Selection effects account for a large portion of the difference between married people and cohabitors. As a group, cohabitors (who are not engaged) have lower incomes and less education.[20] Couples who live together also, on average, report relationships of lower quality than do married couples — with cohabitors reporting more conflict, more violence and lower levels of satisfaction and commitment.[21] Even biological parents who cohabit have poorer quality relationships and are more likely to part than parents who marry.[22] Cohabitation differs from marriage in part because couples who choose merely to live together are less committed to a lifelong relationship.[23]

Also, worldwide evidence demonstrates that existing cohabitations with children tend to break up at four- to five-fold the rate of marriages. Consider some research from New Zealand for example. In the Christchurch Child Development Study, cohabitation was found to be the foremost risk factor for breakdown of the child's family in its first five years. 43.9 percent of de facto couples separated, compared to 10.9 percent of those who were married.[24]

3. Growing up outside an intact marriage increases the likelihood that children will themselves divorce or become unwed parents.

Children whose parents divorce or fail to marry are more likely to become young unwed parents, to divorce themselves, and to have unhappy marriages and/or relationships.[25] Daughters raised outside of intact marriages are approximately three times more likely to end up young, unwed mothers than are children whose parents married and stayed married.[26] Parental divorce approximately doubles the odds that adult children will also divorce. Divorce is apparently most likely to be transmitted across the generations when parents in relatively low-conflict marriages have divorced.[27]

4. Marriage is a virtually universal human institution.

Marriage exists in virtually every known human society.[28] Exactly what family forms existed in prehistoric society is not known, and the shape of human marriage varies considerably in different cultural contexts, but at least since the beginning of recorded history, in all the flourishing varieties of human cultures documented by anthropologists, marriage has been a universal human institution. As a virtually universal human idea, marriage is about regulating the reproduction of children, families, and society. While marriage systems differ (and not every person or class within a society marries), marriage across societies is a publicly acknowledged and supported sexual union which creates kinship obligations and sharing of resources between men, women, and the children that their sexual union may produce.

ECONOMICS

"Married men appear to have greater work commitment, lower quit rates, and healthier and more stable personal routines."

5. Divorce and unmarried childbearing increase poverty for both children and mothers.

Research has consistently shown that both divorce[29] and unmarried childbearing[30] increase the economic vulnerability of both children and mothers. The effects of family structure on poverty remain powerful, even after controlling for race and family background. Changes in family structure are an important cause of new entries into poverty (although a decline in the earnings of the household head is the single most important cause). Child poverty rates are very high primarily because of the growth of single-parent families.[31] When parents fail to marry and stay married, children are more likely to experience deep and persistent poverty, even after controlling for race and family background. The majority of children who grow up outside of intact married families experience at least one year of dire poverty (family incomes less than half the official poverty threshold).[32] Divorce as well as unmarried childbearing plays a role: Between one-fifth and one-third of divorcing women end up in poverty following the divorce.[33]

In Australia, a study of 500 divorcees with children five to eight years after the separation, found that four in five divorced mothers were dependent on social security after their marriages dissolved. Also, mothers still suffer income losses of up to 26 per cent five to eight years after divorce.[34] Moreover, figures from Monash University's Centre for Population and Urban Research show that family break-up, rather than unemployment, is the main cause of the rise in poverty levels in Australia.[35]

Research from the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University has further demonstrated this strong link between poverty and single-parent families. As of September 1996, 43.3 per cent of poor families were headed by lone parents.[36] Recent research by the Australian Bureau of Statistics has found that half of single parents are on welfare. The study showed that 52 per

cent of one-parent families are living in a household where the parent is not working.[37]

A more recent study also shows the damage of divorce to economic wellbeing. A joint report from AMP Life and Canberra University's National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling says that divorce leaves both partners worse off economically, but women tend to experience the biggest fall in disposable income.[38]

Similarly, research on poverty in New Zealand has consistently illustrated that sole parents are relatively likely to lie toward the lower end of the income distribution.[39]

Moreover, the fiscal cost to the New Zealand taxpayer of family breakdown and decreasing marriage rates has been estimated at around $1 billion (around $300 per taxpayer) in 2008-09, even before we consider the potential for family breakdown and decreasing marriage rates to lead to foregone tax revenue.[40]

6. Married couples seem to build more wealth on average than singles or cohabiting couples.

Marriage seems to be a wealth-creating institution. Married couples build more wealth on average than do otherwise similar singles or cohabiting couples, even after controlling for income.[41] The economic advantages of marriage stem from more than just access to two incomes. Marriage partners appear to build more wealth for some of the same reasons that partnerships in general are economically efficient, including economies of scale and specialization and exchange. Marital social norms that encourage healthy, productive behaviour and wealth accumulation (such as buying a home) also appear to play a role. Married parents also more often receive wealth transfers from both sets of grandparents than do cohabiting couples; single mothers almost never receive financial help from fathers' kin.[42]

A survey conducted by the Australian National University found that an unmarried person needs to earn $70,000 a year to be as happy as a married person on a family income of $20,000 a year. The survey also noted that money "is a less important ingredient of a satisfying life than marriage and churchgoing".[43]

Also a Monash University study found that in economic terms, married couples are concentrated more amongst the affluent, while those from broken marriages, lone parents, and single people are concentrated more amongst the poor.[44]

7. Married men earn more money than do single men with similar education and job histories.

A large body of research, from a number of developed countries, finds that married men earn between 10 and 40 percent more than do single men with similar education and job histories.[45] While selection effects may account for part of the marriage premium,[46] the most sophisticated, recent research appears to confirm that marriage itself increases the earning power of men, in the order of 15 per cent.[47]

Why do married men earn more? The causes are not entirely understood, but married men appear to have greater work commitment, lower quit rates, and healthier and more stable personal routines (including sleep, diet and alcohol consumption). Husbands also benefit from both the work effort and emotional support they receive from their wives.[48]

8. Parental divorce (or failure to marry) appears to increase children's risk of school failure.

Parental divorce or nonmarriage has a significant, long-term negative impact on children's educational attainment. Children of divorced or unwed parents

have lower grades and other measures of academic achievement, are more likely to be held back, and are more likely to drop out of high school.[49] The effects of parental divorce or nonmarriage on children's educational attainment remain significant even after controlling for race and family background. Children whose parents divorce end up with significantly lower levels of education than do children in single-mother families created by the death of the father.[50] Children whose parents remarry do no better, on average, than do children who live with single mothers.[51] An Australian survey of 512 children found that children of cohabiting couples were assessed by their teachers to be performing at lower levels in language, mathematics, social studies and sport than children of wedded parents.[52]

The Western Australian Child Health Survey in 1997 found that 30 per cent of children from sole-parent families were low academic performers, compared with 17 per cent from couple families.[53] Australian research has also found that children from two-parent families have a better chance of getting a job than those from sole-parent families.[54]

A study of Australian primary school children from three family types (married heterosexual couples, cohabiting heterosexual couples and homosexual couples) found that in every area of educational endeavour (language; mathematics; social studies; sport; class work, sociability and popularity; and attitudes to learning), children from married heterosexual couples performed better than the other two groups. The study concludes with these words: "Married couples seem to offer the best environment for a child's social and educational development".[55]

A Melbourne University study of 212 children found that fathers, even more than mothers, had a major beneficial influence on children in their first year of school. The study found that children with regular father involvement were more cooperative and self-reliant in school than children who did not have father involvement. The more regular involvement the father has with the child, the study's author said, the better the child does in his or her first year of school.[56]

9. Parental divorce reduces the likelihood that children will graduate from college and achieve high-status jobs.

Parental divorce appears to have long-term consequences on children's socioeconomic attainment. While most children of divorce do not drop out of high school or become unemployed, as adults, children of divorced parents have lower occupational status and earnings and have increased rates of unemployment and economic hardship.[57] They are less likely to attend and graduate from college and also less likely to attend and graduate from four-year and highly selective colleges, even after controlling for family background and academic and extracurricular achievements.[58]

"As adults, children of divorced parents have lower occupational status and earnings and have increased rates of unemployment."

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND LONGEVITY

10. Children who live with their own two married parents enjoy better physical health, on average, than do children in other family forms.

Divorce and unmarried childbearing appear to have negative effects on children's physical health and life expectancy.[59] Longitudinal research suggests that parental divorce increases the incidence of health problems in children.[60] The health advantages of married homes remain, even after taking socioeconomic status into account.

The health disadvantages associated with being raised outside of intact marriages persist long into adulthood. Even in Sweden, a country with extensive supports for single mothers and a nationalized health care system, adults raised in single-parent homes were more likely to report that their health was poor and/or to die (during the study period) than were those from intact homes; this finding remained after controlling for economic hardship.[61]

One study which followed a sample of academically gifted, middle-class children for 70 years found that parental divorce reduced a child's life expectancy by four years, even after controlling for childhood health status and family background, as well as personality characteristics such as impulsiveness and emotional instability.[62] Another analysis found that 40-year-old men whose parents had divorced were three times more likely to die than were 40-year-old men whose parents stayed married: "It does appear," the researchers conclude, "that parental divorce sets off a negative chain of events, which contribute to a higher mortality risk among individuals from divorced homes . . ."[63]

A recent Australian study also confirms these findings. A researcher from the University of South Australia's School of Health Sciences found that children from single families do less well than those from married families because they are less active and do not have as much opportunity for physical activity.[64]

11. Parental marriage is associated with a sharply lower risk of infant mortality.

Babies born to married parents have lower rates of infant mortality. On average, having an unmarried mother is associated with an approximately 50 percent increase in the risk of infant mortality.[65] While parental marital status predicts infant mortality in both blacks and whites, the increased risk due to the mother's marital status is greatest among the most advantaged: ie. white mothers over the age of 20.[66]

The cause of this relationship between marital status and infant mortality is not well known. There are many selection effects involved: Unmarried mothers are more likely to be young, black, less educated and poor than are married mothers. But even after controlling for age, race, and education, children born to unwed mothers generally have higher rates of infant mortality.[67] While unmarried mothers are also less likely to get early prenatal care, infant mortality rates in these instances are higher not only in the neonatal period, but through infancy[68] and even early childhood.[69]

Children born to unmarried mothers have an increased incidence of both intentional and unintentional fatal injuries.[70] Marital status remains a powerful predictor of infant mortality, even in countries with nationalized health care systems and strong supports for single mothers.[71]

12. Marriage is associated with reduced rates of alcohol and substance abuse for both adults and teens.

Married men and women have lower rates of alcohol consumption and abuse than do singles. Longitudinal research confirms that young adults who marry tend to reduce their rates of alcohol consumption and illegal drug use.[72] Children whose parents marry and stay married also have lower rates of substance abuse, even after controlling for family background.[73] Twice as many young teens in single-mother families and stepfamilies have tried marijuana (and young teens living with single fathers were three times as likely). Young teens whose parents stay married are also the least likely to experiment with tobacco or alcohol.[74] Data from the National Household

Survey on Drug Abuse shows that, even after controlling for age, race, gender, and family income, teens living with both biological parents are significantly less likely to use illicit drugs, alcohol, and tobacco.[75] How does family fragmentation relate to teen drug use? Many pathways are probably involved, including increased family stress, reduced parental monitoring and weakened attachment to parents, especially fathers.[76]

John Embling, from the Melbourne-based Families in Distress Foundation, is well aware of the harmful effects on children of parental breakup. He has spent 30 years working with such children. Says Embling, "The children are in diabolical need. I could take you into these households and show you what it's like for kids to try to cope when mum is on drugs or drink, there's no bloke around worth a cracker and primary school kids have to get themselves up and off to school."[77]

13. Married people, especially married men, have longer life expectancies than do otherwise similar singles.

Married people live longer than do otherwise similar people who are single or divorced. Husbands as well as wives live longer on average, even after controlling for race, income and family background.[78] In most developed countries, middle-aged single, divorced, or widowed men are about twice as likely to die as married men, and nonmarried women face risks about one and a half times as great as those faced by married women.[79]

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that the median age of death for non-married men in 1992 was 52.2 years, but the figure leaps to 72.5 years for married men. However, never-married Australian women live slightly longer than married women (74.2 years to 70.1 years).[80] Findings of the Australian National Health Strategy show that: "Both men and women who are married have much lower standardised death rates than those who are not. Compared with their married counterparts, never married men have a death rate which is 124% higher and divorced/widowed men have a death rate which is 102% higher; never-married women have a death rate which is 91% higher and divorced widowed women have a death rate which is 49% higher."[81] The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare study of 1994 found that never married and previously married people had mortality rates twice that of married people.[82] An Australian Bureau of Statistics study reported the following: "In 1996 married people overall experienced lower death rates than those who were divorced, widowed or never married. Males aged between 20 and 69 years who had never married experienced death rates two to four times higher than those who were married."[83]

And newer figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that marriage continues to make a huge difference in mortality rates. The figures show that married people live much longer than those who have never married, with single people almost twice as likely to die in any given year than their married counterparts.[84]

14. Marriage is associated with better health and lower rates of injury, illness, and disability for both men and women.

Both married men and women enjoy better health on average than do single or divorced individuals.[85] Selection effects regarding divorce or remarriage may account for part of this differential, although research has found no consistent pattern of such selection.[86] Married people appear to manage illness better, monitor each other's health, have higher incomes and wealth, and adopt healthier lifestyles than do otherwise similar singles.[87] A recent study of the health effects of marriage drawn from 9,333 respondents to the Health and Retirement Survey of Americans between the ages of 51 and 61 compared the incidence of major diseases, as well as functional disability, in married, cohabiting, divorced, widowed, and never-married individuals.

"Without exception," the authors report, "married persons have the lowest rates of morbidity for each of the diseases, impairments, functioning problems and disabilities." Marital status differences in disability remained "dramatic" even after controlling for age, sex, and race/ethnicity.[88]

A major study conducted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in 1994 found that married people have less insomnia and are less nervous than previously married or never-married people. It also found that married people have less ulcers than the previously married, although about the same amount as the never married. Married people also smoked less and used less alcohol than never married or previously married people.[89]

A National Health Survey of 19,000 Australians released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in October 1997 found that separated, divorced and widowed people think they are in poorer health than their married and de facto contemporaries.[90]

Finally, an Australian study found that cancer, diabetes and heart disease are all about 40 per cent higher among previously married men and women.[91]

"Divorce typically causes children considerable emotional distress and increases the risk of serious mental illness."

MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

15. Children whose parents divorce have higher rates of psychological distress and mental illness.

Divorce typically causes children considerable emotional distress and increases the risk of serious mental illness.[92] These mental health risks do not dissipate soon after the divorce. Instead, children of divorce remain at higher risk for depression and other mental illness, in part because of reduced education attainment, increased risk of divorce, marital problems, and economic hardship.[93] The psychological effects of divorce appear to differ, depending on the level of conflict between parents. When marital conflict is high and sustained, children benefit psychologically from divorce. While more research is needed, the majority of divorces appear to be taking place among low-conflict spouses.[94]

16. Divorce appears significantly to increase the risk of suicide.

High rates of family fragmentation are associated with an increased risk of suicide among both adults and adolescents.[95] Divorced men and women are more than twice as likely as their married counterparts to attempt suicide.[96] Although women have lower rates of suicide overall, married women were also substantially less likely to commit suicide than were divorced, widowed, or never-married women.[97] In the last half century, suicide rates among teens and young adults have tripled. The single "most important explanatory variable," according to one new study, "is the increased share of youths living in homes with a divorced parent". The effect, note the researchers, "is large," explaining "as much as two-thirds of the increase in youth suicides" over time.[98]

In Australia, a recent study found that "never-married men had [suicide] mortality levels 89-90% higher than the standard rates and married men 25-43% below the standard rates, while divorced and widowed men also had elevated [suicide] mortality levels." Similar trends were found among women as well.[99] Other research has found that suicide rates among men and women in Australia were three times higher than among married people.[100]

Figures from the ABS have shown that divorced males aged between 35 and 44 are the most likely to take their own life in Australia, while married people are the least likely to suicide,[101] and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare study of 1994 found that never married and previously married people had three times the suicide rates of married people.[102]

More recent ABS figures point in the same direction. In the 1995-1997 period, married people (9 per 100,000 persons) were less likely to die from suicide than those who were never married (22), widowed (13) or divorced (26 per 100,000 persons).[103]

A recent study recorded in the *Australian Medical Journal* by Dr Chris Cantor of Griffith University found that separated males are six times more likely to commit suicide than married men.[104] An even more recent study by the Institute of Health and Welfare found that divorced men are at least three times as likely to commit suicide as any other group.[105]

17. Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do single or cohabiting mothers.

The absence of marriage is a serious risk factor for maternal depression. Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do single or co-habiting mothers.[106] One study of 2,300 urban adults found that, among parents of preschoolers, the risk of depression was substantially greater for unmarried as compared to married mothers.[107] Marriage protects even older teen mothers from the risk of depression. In one nationally representative sample of 18- and 19-year-old mothers, 41 percent of single white mothers having their first child reported high levels of depressive symptoms, compared to 28 percent of married white teen mothers in this age group.[108]

Longitudinal studies following young adults as they marry, divorce, and remain single indicate that marriage boosts mental and emotional well-being for both men and women.[109] We have focused on maternal depression because it is both a serious mental health problem for women and a serious risk factor for children.[110] Not only are single mothers more likely to be depressed, the consequences of maternal depression for child wellbeing are greater in single-parent families, probably because single parents have less support and also because children in disrupted families have less access to their (nondepressed) other parent.[111]

Australian research shows that in terms of mental health, "never-married men suffer more from not being married than never-married women. But in all other categories women show a higher level of benefit from marriage than men. Separated, widowed, and divorced men were 55 percent above the male average in rates of mental illness while the separated, widowed and divorced category of women had rates 67 percent above the women's average."[112]

The 1994 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare study found that married people are three times happier than previously married people, and twice as happy as never married people.[113] More recent Australian data reveals the same findings. An Australian Unity Wellbeing Index released in July 2002 found that married people were those with the most happiness and greatest sense of wellbeing. Married people scored 77.7 per cent on the personal wellbeing test compared to 65.1 per cent for those who were separated.[114]

And a University of Melbourne study has found that the institution of marriage generates greater life satisfaction. Researchers found that marriage itself is responsible for at least 61 percent of the positive effect of marriage on the subjective well-being of married men and women.[115]

CRIME AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

"Overall, single and divorced women are four to five times more likely to be victims of violent crime."

18. Boys raised in single-parent families are more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal behaviour.

Even after controlling for factors such as race, mother's education, neighbourhood quality, and cognitive ability, boys raised in single-parent homes are about twice as likely (and boys raised in stepfamilies are three times as likely) to have committed a crime that leads to incarceration by the time they reach their early thirties.[116]

Teens in both one-parent and remarried homes display more deviant behaviour and commit more delinquent acts than do teens whose parents stayed married.[117] Teens in one-parent families are on average less attached to their parent's opinions and more attached to their peer groups. Combined with lower levels of parental supervision, these attitudes appear to set the stage for delinquent behavior.[118] The effects of marital status on delinquency may be stronger for whites than for African-Americans.[119]

In Australia, a recent book by Alan Tapper highlights this connection between broken families and crime. In a study of rising crime rates in Western Australia, Tapper suggests that "family breakdown in the form of divorce and separation is the main cause of the crime wave".[120]

A longitudinal study of 512 Australian children found that there are more offenders coming from families of cohabiting than married couples, and there are proportionally more offenders who become recidivists coming from families of cohabiting than married couples. The study concludes, "The relationship between cohabitation and delinquency is beyond contention: children of cohabiting couples are more likely to be found among offenders than children of married couples".[121]

Those who work with juvenile offenders in Australia confirm these findings. John Smith of Care and Communication Concern in Melbourne has spent nearly two decades working with homeless youth and young offenders. He says that "almost 100 per cent" of these kids are from "single parent families or blended families".[122] And a recent New Zealand study found that 64.6 per cent of juvenile offenders had no birth father present.[123]

Also in New Zealand, a study of nearly 1000 children observed over a period of 15 years found that children who have watched their parents separate were twice as likely to use illegal drugs than those whose parents stayed together.[124]

The Christchurch School of Medicine study also featured other interesting findings. Compared with children from functioning two-parent families, those who were less than 5 years old at the time of their parents' separation were twice as likely to become delinquent and over three times as likely to suffer from depression.[125]

19. Marriage appears to reduce the risk that adults will be either perpetrators or victims of crime.

Overall, single and divorced women are four to five times more likely to be victims of violent crime in any given year than are married women. Single and divorced women are almost ten times more likely than are wives to be raped, and about three times more likely to be the victims of aggravated assault. Similarly, compared to husbands, unmarried men are about four times as likely to become victims of violent crime.[126]

A study of 500 chronic juvenile offenders found that those who married and stayed married reduced their offense rate by two-thirds, compared to criminals who did not marry or who did not establish good marriages.[127] Married men spend more time with their wives, who discourage criminal behaviour, and less time with peers, who often do not.

As one leading family expert has summarised the findings: "Australian studies with adequate samples have shown parental divorce to be a risk factor for a wide range of social and psychological problems in adolescence and adulthood, including poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, psychological distress, delinquency and recidivism, substance use and abuse, sexual precocity, adult criminal offending, depression, and suicidal behaviour."[128] He concludes: "There is no scientific justification for disregarding the public health significance of marital dissolution in Australia, especially with respect to mental health".

20. Married women appear to have a lower risk of experiencing domestic violence than do cohabiting or dating women.

Domestic violence remains a serious problem both inside and outside of marriage.

While young women must recognize that marriage is not a good strategy for reforming violent men, a large body of research shows that being unmarried and especially living with a man outside of marriage, is associated with an increased risk of domestic abuse.[129] One analysis of the US National Survey of Families and Households found that cohabitors were over three times more likely than spouses to say that arguments became physical over the last year (13 percent of cohabitors versus 4 percent of spouses). Even after controlling for race, age and education, people who live together are still more likely than married people to report violent arguments.[130] Overall, as one scholar sums up the relevant research, "Regardless of methodology, the studies yielded similar results: Cohabitors engage in more violence than do spouses".[131]

Selection effects play a powerful role. Women are less likely to marry and more likely to divorce, violent men.[132] However, scholars suggest that the greater integration of married men into the community and the greater investment of spouses in each other, also play a role.[133] Married men, for example, are more responsive to policies such as mandatory arrest policies, designed to signal strong disapproval of domestic violence.[134]

21. A child who is not living with his or her own two married parents is at greater risk of child abuse.

Children living with single mothers, stepfathers, or mother's boyfriends are more likely to become victims of child abuse. Children living in single-mother homes have increased rates of death from intentional injuries.[135] As Martin Daly and Margo Wilson report, "Living with a stepparent has turned out to be the most powerful predictor of severe child abuse yet".[136] One study found that a preschooler living with a stepfather was 40 times more likely to be sexually abused than one living with both of his or her biological parents.[137] Another study found that, although boyfriends contribute less than 2 percent of nonparental childcare, they commit half of all reported child abuse by nonparents. The researcher concludes that "a young child left alone with a mother's boyfriend experiences elevated risk of physical abuse".[138]

In Australia, former Human Rights Commissioner Brian Burdekin stated that there was an alarming 500 to 600 per cent increase in sexual abuse of girls in families where the adult male was not the natural father.[139]

A 1994-95 study by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that more cases of child abuse involved children from single parent families (39%) than families with two natural parents (30%) or other two-parent families (such as families with a stepparent) (21%). Of neglect cases, 47% involved children from female single parent families compared with 26% from families with two natural parents.[140] More recent Australian research has found that the typical child murderer is a young man in a defacto relationship with the victim's mother.[141]

A recent study of 1998-1999 Victorian child abuse victims found that 45 per cent lived with single parents. The report, by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, found that children who lived in natural two-parent families had a relatively low risk of abuse.[142] A more recent report from the same Institute entitled *Child Protection Australia 1999-2000* reveals that children are most likely to be neglected or abused in single-parent families. It found that the ACT has the highest rate of maltreatment of children from female one-parent families (47 per cent), compared with 29 per cent in two-parent natural families and 18 per cent in step families or blended families.[143] Also a newer report from the same body found that "a relatively high proportion of substantiations [of child abuse] involved children living in female-headed one-parent families and in two-parent step or blended families".[144]

Finally, an Australian study of 900 coronial inquiries into child deaths found that children were far safer with their biological parents than with step-parents or no biological parents. Deakin University's Greg Tooley said children living with a step-parent were 17 to 77 times more likely to die from intentional violence or accident.[145]

CONCLUSION

Marriage is more than a private emotional relationship. It is also a social good. Not every person can or should marry, and not every child raised outside of marriage is damaged as a result. But communities where good-enough marriages are common have better outcomes for children, women, and men than do communities suffering from high rates of divorce, unmarried childbearing, and high-conflict or violent marriages. As policy makers concerned with social inequality and child wellbeing think about how to strengthen marriage, more funding is needed for research into both the causes of the marriage gap in child and social wellbeing and ways to close that gap. **Solid research is pointing the way toward new family and community interventions to help strengthen marriage.** Ongoing, basic scientific research on marriage and marital dynamics contributes to the development of strategies and programs for helping to strengthen marriages and reduce unnecessary divorce.[146]

Who benefits from marriage and why? How can we prevent both divorce and the damage caused by divorce? How can families, counselors, communities, and public policy help at-risk and disadvantaged parents build healthy marriages?

If marriage is not merely a private preference, but also a social good, then concerned members of our society, as well as academics, need and deserve answers to questions such as these.

"Marriage is more than a private emotional relationship. It is also a social good."

ENDNOTES

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National Marriage Coalition Australia is a collection of like-minded organisations and individuals who are passionate about encouraging and strengthening Australian marriages for the greater good of all, particularly our children. Their mission is to help children. **www.marriage.org.au**

Australian Family Association is a non-sectarian, non-partisan organisation devoted to research, information and public education on issues of family well being and civil society. AFA is a national body with branches in every state of Australia. **www.family.org.au**

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Life Ministries is a non-profit interdenominational Christian organisation dedicated to supporting marriage and family within the context of the Judeo Christian ethic on which Australia was built. They have a deep passion to support stronger marriages. **www.lifeministries.org.au**

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