

Opposing view:
Sound public policies respect diversity in family structures.

By Thomas Coleman

Today's debate: Today's families

Trend to live together, not marry, puts kids at risk

Our view:
New efforts teach couples that marital status affects kids.

USA TODAY research this month showing that civil marriages are increasing while church weddings are declining raises questions about which type of marriage is better. The answer from family researchers: Whether couples tie the knot in a courthouse or a church is less important than that they are married while raising children.

What worries researchers who study family structures is the growing trend of couples choosing to live together outside of marriage while raising children. Divorce and out-of-wedlock birth rates leveled off years ago, but families in which parents cohabit are on a steady climb. More than 40% of all live-in households in 2000 included a child under 18, up from 21% in 1987, according to the latest U.S. Census figures.

While an unmarried mom and dad living together might look like the married couple down the block, unions lacking formal long-term commitments have been found more likely to create problems for kids. Sociologists cite evidence that children raised by live-in parents have a greater likelihood of emotional troubles and poor school performance. A major reason is that unmarried couples are more likely to break up.

Certainly, adults have every right to choose their living arrangements and expect social tolerance of their choices. But when the choices have a negative impact on dependents in their care, the government and other institutions have sound reasons to promote marriage as a social good.

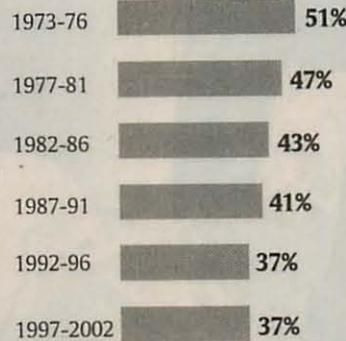
Last week, the White House stressed the point by marking Marriage Protection Week. Though easy to deride as more a rebuttal to calls for gay civil unions than a defense of marriage, the effort at least highlights a problem that gets too little attention.

The negative effects of cohabitation documented by numerous studies include:

► **Single parents.** Three out of four children born to unmarried couples see them split up before age 16, according to the National Marriage Project, a research group based at Rutgers University. The impact of

Traditional families decline

Percentage of children living with parents in "very happy" marriages:



Source: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.

By Keith Simmons, USA TODAY

growing up with a single parent is well documented by research: Children are more likely to repeat a grade, drop out of school, become sexually active and exhibit anxiety.

► **Dysfunctional behavior.** Live-in households tend to be less stable. A cohabiting partner is three times as likely to suffer depression as a married person and twice as likely to exhibit aggressive behavior.

Some states are experimenting with ways to spread pro-marriage messages. Oklahoma and Florida, for example, are offering discounts on marriage licenses if couples take classes designed to build skills needed to make their unions work. At the same time, churches and other groups are offering workshops on building relationship skills.

The White House, for its part, has included a \$300 million annual pro-marriage plank in a welfare bill before Congress. Some of the money would pay for counseling that encourages unwed mothers to marry and gives them skills needed to stay married.

Some critics of these policies say lifestyle decisions are none of the government's business. Others say too much emphasis is placed on married couples with children when their share of the population has dwindled to 25% of U.S. households.

Still, when the welfare of children is at risk, reminding adults that their lifestyle decisions do matter is a worthwhile effort.

The editors of USA TODAY should know that good public policies and responsible corporate practices honor freedom of choice and respect family diversity. Pushing people into marriage "for the sake of the children" is an inappropriate approach in a society as complex as ours.

Political leaders and corporate executives should be mindful of demographic realities as they shape new policies and programs. Unmarried adults head up nearly half of the nation's households and will soon constitute a new "unmarried majority." About 65% of U.S. homes do not contain minor children. Some 42% of the workforce are unmarried.

Yes, married-with-kids families — about 25% of American homes — should be treated fairly. But so should the soon-to-be "unmarried majority." The promise of equality should apply to everyone regardless of marital status or family structure.

Yet this constitutional promise is an illusion for many of the 86 million unmarried Americans. The group I lead, Unmarried America, aims to change that. We are working hard on an agenda of fairness: ending discrimination in taxes, employee benefits, insurance rates, housing and pension plans.

We cannot succeed unless more unmarried Americans speak out. We want marriage penalties eliminated, but we want marriage bonuses eliminated, too. Giving financial rewards to people simply because they are married is not fair, especially considering that millions are in their third or fourth marriages. Pouring hundreds of millions of tax dollars into "marriage promotion" programs or "marriage bonus" incentives may actually harm many children.

Pushing a pregnant teenage girl into marrying her drug-addicted boyfriend will not help their child. Using guilt to force a middle-aged woman raising teenagers to stay with her abusive husband will not help either.

Gross generalizations and snappy slogans might make great "sound bites" for political candidates and newspaper editorials, but good public policy requires more depth.

While Republicans keep shouting "save the children" and Democrats continue chanting "working families," there are 86 million unmarried Americans waiting for real leadership. Perhaps one of the presidential candidates will surprise us and reach out to the emerging "unmarried majority."

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