

TANF/ PRWORA Welfare Reform Discussion Questions

Quiz #5 (Monday November 22nd) covers mainly WRAB briefs 9,13,16-18 & 20 and the starred readings under Topics 8 and 9. Ellwood pp. 98-127 and 159-85 is helpful but not essential if you have reviewed the class notes. The CEA Report (2001) Chapter 5 pp. *199-205 and (2000) *165-72 are also helpful for quiz review. Use the following review questions to target your reading.

TANF/PRWORA Review Questions

1. The PRWORA/TANF legislation uses a combination of carrots and sticks to draw welfare mothers into the workforce (the EITC is technically not part of TANF, but it was expanded greatly during the same period and some states such as Wisconsin have expanded on the EIC as part of their TANF work support system). Identify the 2-3 important penalties for not-working and rewards for working. In what sense has this welfare reform worked? How do we know it has worked? What programs need further reform or improvements?
2. (WRAB brief 16 + slides) the share of births to non-married women increased from about 5% in 1960 to over 30% in 2000. What key trends contributed to the rise in this ratio? What happened to share of all children living with two parents in the 1990s? How does PRWORA seek to discourage unmarried women from having children? Have “family caps” sanctions or abstinence education worked? Which states won “bonuses” for reducing their non-marital birth rates most rapidly? Among which groups is the birth rate falling most rapidly? What happened to increase the “Agency” of these women during the 1990s? Draw some parallels between these trends and birth rates in India, China and Indonesia.
3. (WRAB brief 17 and “It Takes a wedding”– see below) What is a fragile family? What percent of unwed fathers are in close contact with their children and their mother at birth? What percentage put their name on the birth certificate and say they intend to get married? What makes these “fragile families” so vulnerable to dissolution? What programs have successfully stabilized “fragile families?” (hint: upstate NY) Should government policy encourage “shotgun weddings” or seek to improve the “marriageability” of unwed parents? Explain and give an example of each sort of policy reform. What are the dangers of promoting early marriage, as opposed to delayed child birth?
4. (WRAB Chapter 18) While just 30% of non-marital births are to teenagers, Isabel Sawhill argues it reducing teen pregnancy should be a top priority of TANF. Why? What is the trend in teen pregnancy and birthrates over the past 25 years? Rebecca Maynard argues each teen pregnancy costs the government about \$3,200. How much should the government spend per teen girl on pregnancy prevention programs (realizing that 40% of teen girls get pregnant, 20% give birth and 90% ignore the advice of people who know better). Why, in your view, have teen pregnancy rates been falling over the past 10 years? Did welfare policy contribute to this decline, or to the rise in teen pregnancy rates? Charles Murray argues teen mothers under 18 should be forced to live with their parents. Is this a good idea? What does TANF force teen mothers to do?
5. Ellwood and others identify medical insurance as a key issue for working poor families. Why would universal or broader Medicaid coverage improve work incentives? What was done in the 1990s to improve the situation of families with young children? Why did Medicaid enrollment drop (WRAB 20) despite broader eligibility? Compare Wolfe’s work-reward diagrams before and after universal health insurance in California and Wisconsin. Why do work incentives change so dramatically?
6. Assuming the whole TANF package is implemented and enforced, why is the marriage penalty reduced if a mother marries the father of her children? What happens if she marries someone else? Why does Ellwood and others consider child-support such an important element of welfare reform? Given the “fragile families” arguments of WRAB Brief 17, why is it important not to “over do” child support and penalties on low income fathers? What computing child support payments and generally dealing with unemployed or underemployed fathers?

It Takes a Wedding

Alex Kotlowitz, New York Times OpEd page November 13th, 2002.

CHICAGO — With the Republican victory last week, Congress now appears likely to set aside funding for programs that promote marriage among the poor. A friend who provides services for inner-city children declared this marriage push "nuts." That had been my initial reaction, as well. But now I wonder if the conservatives who are driving this effort might be on to something. There's a shift in the winds in our inner cities. On the heels of a fatherhood movement (which, incidentally, also had conservative roots), more and more young couples are considering marriage.

A long-term study of 5,000 low-income couples has found that eight of 10 who have a child together have plans to marry. "I was out in the field all of the time, interviewing low-income single mothers," Kathy Edin, a sociologist at Northwestern University, told me. "And what really struck me in those interviews was how many people talked about the desire to get married. And I would go back, you know, and talk to my friends in academia and they would say, 'Oh, they can't mean that.' But I would hear it again and again."

Might marriage be making a comeback in communities where the vast majority of children are born to single parents? A minister on Chicago's West Side told me that when he began preaching there 10 years ago, his congregation scoffed at his efforts to foster matrimony. But this year his church co-sponsored an event called "Celebrating Contentment," in which long-married couples testified to their happiness together. Last summer, there was such demand for the minister's weekly marriage enrichment workshops that he had to put some parishioners on a waiting list. In Baltimore, Joe Jones, who runs a program to promote fatherhood, is adding marriage classes to his curriculum. And the Nation of Islam, which organized the Million Man March, has now taken up the mantle of marriage, declaring it "a social institution in need of restoration."

Marriage can be treacherous terrain. In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then a young official in the Department of Labor, issued a report titled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." It suggested that the breakdown of the black family — one-third of all black children at the time lived with only one parent — was keeping African-Americans from finding their way into the middle class. Mr. Moynihan was pilloried by progressives; he was accused of blaming the victim. Liberals essentially abdicated the discussion about family to the conservatives, and have had a tough time finding their way back since.

But there is now growing consensus among social scientists that, all things being equal, two parents are best for children. It would seem to follow that two-parent families are also best for a community. It may take a village to raise a child, but it takes families to build a village. While liberals haven't done enough to emphasize the importance of marriage in reinforcing the bonds that hold society together, conservatives have put too much faith in the power of marriage alone to lift people out of poverty.

In 1988, Vince Lane, director of the Chicago Housing Authority, conducted top-to-bottom searches of public housing high-rises, looking for guns and drugs. But the discovery that most dismayed him was the large number of men living with their girlfriends illegally. They weren't on the lease. In the raids, Mr. Lane found them hiding in closets and in bathtubs and in laundry baskets. At one high-rise, Mr. Lane got fed up. He told the men they could stay — if they got married. So the city hosted an all-expenses-paid (honeymoon included) eight-couple shotgun wedding.

What's happened to the couples since? Most have split up, which should come as no surprise. The stress of not having money, of living in decrepit housing, of sending children to poorly funded schools would take its toll on even the most committed relationship. So how then might we help get couples to the altar? By pushing marriage? Or by helping ease the strains in people's lives? It would be wrongheaded to encourage marriage by stigmatizing single parenthood, a process that has already begun with the reintroduction of the word "illegitimacy" into the lexicon. After all, that's the very constituency government is trying to reach.

Wade Horn, the Bush administration official who oversees the welfare program, has assured critics that the administration, by supporting demonstration projects that promote marriage, doesn't intend to coerce people to the altar. And, indeed, what tools government has available — like the relationship training seminars Oklahoma has begun to offer — seem benign enough, if unproven. When it comes to social engineering, government has turned out to be a clumsy catalyst. Mr. Moynihan, whose report was in many ways prescient — the numbers he cited for black families in 1965 now apply to all families, regardless of race — has said, "If you expect government to change families, you know more about government than I do."

Even if conservatives don't know how to get there, at least they recognize that marriage, this very private institution, has very public consequences. Liberals, who have a much firmer understanding of the obstacles poor people face, need to enter that conversation. [\[Alex Kotlowitz, author of "There Are No Children Here," is correspondent for the forthcoming "Frontline" program, "Let's Get Married."\]](#)