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THE STATE OF THE FAMILY AND THE FAMILY POLICY DEBATE

David Blankenhorn*

Let me address three issues: first, the current state of the family as a social institution; second, the current state of the family debate, or the state of our public discourse about the family; and finally, the future of the family debate. I believe that these questions will, or at least ought to, occupy us in the next few years as we continue our evaluation of child and family well-being.

What is the current state of the American family? In the United States, the trend is clearly toward a post-nuclear family system — a society in which the mother-father, married couple childraising unit is no longer the dominant social form for raising children, either as an empirical reality or as a cultural norm. Some scholars describe this trend as a movement toward a post-marriage society — a society that is experiencing the steady de-institutionalization and de-juridication of marriage, and where, as a result, marriage is no longer the dominant social institution regarding the raising of children.

Of course, Americans remain a marrying people. Most of us get married, and this will continue. By calling us a post-marriage society, however, I mean to describe a society in the midst of a deep and continuing collapse of confidence in, and adherence to, marriage as a social institution. Clearly, we are rapidly losing our belief in the ideal of marital permanence. In addition, the belief that marriage has, or should have, a monopoly on the bearing and raising of children is steadily losing its privileged cultural and legal status in our society. For these reasons, our society is moving in the direction of a post-marriage or post-nuclear family system, where the married couple, mother-father unit will no longer be held

* David Blankenhorn is the president of the New York-based Institute for American Values, a nonpartisan group studying family issues, and the author of *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* published in 1995. He is also chairman of the National Fatherhood Initiative.

up as a dominant cultural ideal and will no longer reflect the empirical reality for all, or even most, children.

The data to justify this conclusion are dramatic and relatively unambiguous. First, the percentage of births occurring outside of marriage is now more than thirty percent. Roughly speaking, one of every three babies born today is born outside of marriage, which is up from only about five percent in 1960. Second, the United States has the highest divorce rate in the world. There has been more than a five-fold increase in the number of divorced persons per thousand married persons since 1960.

Having children no longer serves as the inhibitor to divorce that it once did. Moreover, since second and third marriages are even more likely to end in divorce than first marriages, a surprisingly high proportion of American children will watch their mothers divorce not once, but two or even three or more times. Studies show that about fifteen percent of all American children will experience at least two parental divorces prior to the age of eighteen.

Third, the percentage of children not living with their biological fathers is now approaching forty percent, up from seventeen percent in 1960. More than half of all the children in this country will spend at least a significant part of their childhood living apart from their father. This level of fatherlessness is historically unprecedented in our society or, indeed, in any society. In my view, fatherlessness is clearly the family trend of our generation that will bear the most social consequences.

What are the societal consequences of this post-nuclear family trend — more births outside of marriage, a high divorce rate, and millions of children growing up apart from their fathers? The two primary consequences are a continuing decline in child well-being and a continuing rise in male violence.

Almost all of the evidence suggests that child well-being is continuing to decline in this society. With each passing year, it is becoming harder to be a child in the United States. Many scholars believe that this generation of children is the first generation in American history to be less well-off economically, socially, psychologically, and morally than their parents were at the same age. This is almost certainly the first time in American history that our society has exper-

experienced generational regression regarding the well-being of children.

The evidence is also quite convincing regarding the rise of male violence. When there are more young males growing up without a father in the home, and when there are more males in our society who are not being socialized into the fatherhood role, one clear result is a steady increase in male violence.

Apart from education, the principle social spending program for young males in the United States today is prison construction. Why are we producing so many young males whom we are sending to prison? The social science evidence clearly suggests that the absence of a father is a much more important and more accurate predictor of a young male getting into trouble with the juvenile justice system, and ultimately ending up in a prison cell, than any of the other factors, such as educational attainment of the mother, family income, race, religion, quality of the neighborhood, and so on. Consequently, a society that has fewer and fewer boys growing up with fathers will be a society that has more and more prison cells, since that society will be generating male violence faster than it can incarcerate.

Moreover, we are also witnessing a rise in domestic violence and other forms of male violence against women. Reports suggest that the incidence of these crimes is increasing steadily. Studies of the risk factors associated with such violent behavior show that it is not the presence of a married, biological father in a home that produces the likelihood of such violence, but rather the opposite: the growing absence of the married father and his replacement by either no man at all or by unrelated males, such as boyfriends and stepfathers.

Married fatherhood is a socializing role for men. The continuing decline in the number of men in our society who fill this role, and their replacement in so many homes by unrelated males, is clearly driving up the rate of male violence against women and children.

These trends raise a larger, more fundamental question: Does our society expect males to nurture their offspring? A society such as ours that no longer cares whether or not males nurture their offspring, or at least no longer enforces any expectations of paternal nurture, will be a society in

which child well-being declines and male violence rises. This is the current trend in our society.

It is within the context of this trend toward the post-nuclear, post-marriage family and its consequences that the state of the American family is being debated. Clearly, over the last twenty years, the dimensions and consequences of contemporary family change have been the subject of intense national debate. This debate has often been incoherent and even silly, and still more often, highly partisan and politically divisive. Despite these handicaps, a genuine debate has indeed occurred.

Until recently, this family debate has primarily been between those who have argued that the family is *declining*, or getting weaker, and those who have argued that the family is not declining, but instead is merely *changing*. This debate, however, is now largely over because one side has won.

In terms of both social science evidence and public opinion, the family debate of the past two decades has largely been settled in favor of those who argue that the family is declining. More specifically, it is now increasingly believed by scholars from across the human sciences and the political spectrum that child well-being is declining, and that the leading cause of this is family fragmentation, and the steady break-up of the mother-father childraising unit.

Consider this summation from Urie Bronfenbrenner of Cornell, one of the nation's most respected family scholars:

[C]ontrolling for associated factors such as low income, children growing up in such households are at greater risk for experiencing a variety of behavioral and educational problems, including extremes of hyperactivity or withdrawal, lack of attentiveness in the classroom, difficulty in deferring gratification, impaired academic achievement, school misbehavior, absenteeism, dropping out, involvement in socially alienated peer groups, and, especially, the so-called "teenage syndrome" of behaviors that tend to hang together — smoking, drinking, early and frequent sexual experience, a cynical attitude toward work, adolescent pregnancy, and, in the more extreme cases, drugs, suicide, vandalism, violence, and criminal acts.¹

1. Urie Bronfenbrenner, *Discovering What Families Do, in* REBUILDING THE NEST: A NEW COMMITMENT TO THE AMERICAN FAMILY 34 (David Blankenhorn et al. eds., 1990).

Or consider this summary of the current scholarly evidence as analyzed by Ronald J. and Jacqueline L. Angel of the University of Texas:

[T]he preponderance of evidence suggests that father absence results in fairly serious emotional and behavioral problems in children. Children in single-parent families suffer more psychiatric illness and are at a developmental disadvantage in comparison to children in two-parent families. These children have more problems at school, have less self-control, and engage in more delinquent acts than children who live with both parents. Children in father-absent families are more vulnerable to peer pressure and more easily led to commit delinquent acts than children with a father present. A mother with no husband may often be a poor disciplinarian, and her children may seek moral authority from others. Often that source is their peers, and children who grow up in the streets are unlikely to be exposed to the best role models. The evidence also indicates that fathers are important for a girl's sexual development and her ability to form relationships with men. Taken as a whole, then, the research we reviewed indicates that father absence places both girls and boys at elevated risks of emotional, educational, and developmental problems.²

Finally, consider this recent conclusion from a two year investigation of marriage in America prepared by Council on Families in America, a nonpartisan, multidisciplinary group of eighteen leading family scholars and analysts:

The evidence continues to mount, and it points to one striking conclusion: the weakening of marriage has had devastating consequences for the well-being of children. To be sure, television, the movies, and popular music contribute to declining child well-being. So do poor teaching, the loss of skilled jobs, inefficient government bureaucracies, meagre [sic] or demeaning welfare programs, and the availability of guns and drugs. But by far the most important causal factor is the remarkable collapse of marriage, leading to growing family instability and decreasing parental investment in children.³

2. RONALD J. ANGEL & JACQUELINE L. ANGEL, *PAINFUL INHERITANCE: HEALTH AND THE NEW GENERATION OF FATHERLESS CHILDREN* 118 (David L. Featherman & David I. Kertzer eds., 1993).

3. COUNCIL ON FAMILIES IN AMERICA, *MARRIAGE IN AMERICA: A REPORT TO THE NATION* 6-7 (1995).

What is society going to do about this state of affairs? Given the increasing recognition of the trend toward the post-marriage, post-nuclear family and the obviously negative consequences of this trend, especially for children, a new family debate is now emerging. The new debate focuses less on whether or not we have a problem — that question has largely been settled — but instead on what society is prepared to do about it. In short, the coming debate will be less about describing the problem and more about proposing the solution.

There are two fault lines that I believe will characterize this new debate in the coming months and years. On one side of the first fault line will be those who argue that we cannot reverse the trend — that is, that we cannot reinstitutionalize marriage. Therefore, we must instead deal with the consequences of the weakening of marriage, especially the economic consequences, recognizing the reality that more and more of our children are simply not going to be growing up with their two married parents. Conservatives may urge the construction of more prisons and urban boarding schools and orphanages to deal with the consequences, and liberals may urge a system of family allowances, a reform of the divorce process, or the creation of more jobs. But many liberals and conservatives will be agreeing that we must deal primarily with the consequences of the trend rather than the trend itself.

Those on the other side of this fault line will insist that we must seek to reverse the trend. They will direct their efforts to strengthening the institution of marriage and seeking to create cultural change in favor of the idea that unwed childbearing is wrong, that our divorce rate is far too high, and that every child deserves a father.

I personally am on the “reverse the trend” side of this argument, although I believe that the “remediate the consequences” side currently has the most support among policy-makers and other opinion leaders.

The second fault line is between those who take a welfare state approach and those who take a laissez-faire approach. The former will hold that society ought to use the instruments of government to meet humans’ needs, primarily through marketplace regulations and other public policies

aimed at reducing economic inequality and improving economic security.

In contrast, those taking a laissez-faire approach will hold that government and the welfare state is not the solution, but rather the problem, and that the welfare state should be dismantled so that families can form and thrive on their own and in local communities, unharmed by the policies of the welfare state. Those favoring this latter approach are increasingly in the majority in Washington and in many state capitols.

In sum, the priority of dealing with the consequences of the post-nuclear family trend (rather than the trend itself), combined with an economic, laissez-faire, anti-welfare state philosophy, is clearly steering the current debate in Washington and elsewhere.

My own view differs somewhat from this prevailing approach. I believe that it is utopian and impractical to believe that any set of public policies will reverse the deterioration of child well-being in our society unless our society also reverses the core trend that is causing the deterioration. To me, if we want to make things better for children, there is simply no alternative other than trying to reverse the trend of family fragmentation.

Society needs to use the tools of government and other tools at its disposal to strengthen the basic institutions of the civil society, especially the institution of marriage, and to promote a cultural shift and attitudinal changes toward the view that every child deserves a father and that more children ought to be growing up with their two married parents. Such a fundamental cultural shift is not likely to result simply from dismantling the welfare state, nor will it result from expanding the welfare state, although government obviously does play a role at times in either making things better or worse.

But the change we need most is primarily a cultural change. The most important challenge that our society faces is to shift our culture in such a way as to strengthen the civil society and reverse the trend of family fragmentation.

