



Can Marriage Promotion Help Children Growing Up with Single Mothers?

Angela Bruns, Gonzaga University

It matters what kind of family children grow up in. Researchers have discovered that living in a household headed by a single mother can harm children's health, education, and economic futures. Although the reasons are not entirely clear, marriage confers benefits on mothers and children even when other factors are taken into consideration.

These findings lead many people to worry about the impact that the decline of marriage may be having on children – and some argue that the nation has a strong interest in promoting marriage, particularly among single mothers. Proponents of this approach claim that marriage provides a way to end poverty and welfare dependence for single mothers. They see marriage promotion as a way to enhance the well-being of children, ensuring them the benefits usually associated with living in a married-parent household.

But my research and other studies suggest that marriage promotion is not a magic wand. Many women want to marry, but cannot find the right partners; for them, raising children without husbands may be the most viable option. Race and educational disadvantage play a role in women's marriage prospects, and we must take such realities into account as public policies are fashioned.

Race, Education, and Mothers on Their Own

How do race and educational attainment affect women's chances of being a single mother – defined as an unmarried woman raising her own children and living in a household without a husband or co-habiting partner? What are the chances that single mothers from different racial and educational groups will eventually marry or enter into cohabiting unions? My research documents the basic answers.

- Compared to white women, Hispanic women are nearly twice as likely to be single mothers. And the chances of single motherhood are even higher for black women; they are more than three times as likely to be single mothers as white women.
- Single mothers tend to be educationally disadvantaged. Thirty-three percent of women who become single mothers at age 18 or older do not have a high school diploma (and nationally, only 13% of women 18 or older have no high school diploma or equivalent).

Most striking are the extremely low chances of marriage for black single mothers, particularly those with the least amount of education.

- Black women are not only more likely to be single mothers; they are also more likely to stay single mothers. Black single mothers are 47% less likely than white single mothers to marry, and they are 44% less likely to form cohabiting unions. Hispanic and white single mothers are equally likely to marry in due course, but Hispanics are 26% less likely to enter into cohabiting relationships.
- The black-white gap in the chances for marriage or cohabitation is most pronounced among single mothers with no high school diploma. Differences between black and white single mothers are smaller among those with high school diplomas.

For single mothers, cohabitation is more common than marriage – and cohabitation only leads to marriage some of the time.

- When single mothers form unions, 81% take part in cohabiting partnerships. But only just over a third of single moms who cohabit eventually marry their cohabiting partner.

- The chances that a black or Hispanic previously single mother will marry her cohabiting partner are nearly 50% lower than white single mothers.

The Appeal and Limits of Campaigns to Promote Marriage

The possible appeal of public programs to encourage marriage for actual or potential single mothers is not hard to understand. Because mothers from disadvantaged groups often do not marry – or remarry – these mothers and their children miss out on many of the benefits associated with marriages, such as generous health insurance, additional income, and legal protections. Some scholars and policy makers thus conclude that encouraging marriage could mitigate the disadvantages the children of single mothers often suffer – and, more generally, help to reduce inequalities between American children raised in homes headed by single mothers and children raised by married parents.

What kinds of programs are at issue? Marriage promotion programs in the United States often include media campaigns to play up the appeal of marriage in targeted communities, plus workshops that offer people chances to develop skills in sustaining healthy relationships. Such efforts aim to make people want and be able to marry and stay married.

Unfortunately, racial and educational gaps in marriage suggest that more than a lack of desire is at work. Less advantaged women often hope to marry and understand, at least intuitively, that their children could do better in a stable married household. But the options are not good for many such women or the men around them. For black women – particularly those with the least education – the possibilities for avoiding or moving out of single motherhood are slim.

Simply promoting marriage without altering the social and economic contexts in which marriages form and survive or fail will likely have no great effect on the marriage gaps scholars have documented. Even if disadvantaged single mothers work extra hard to take part in two-parent families, they may not find willing or suitable men. And the less-educated minority men in their lives will often continue to have incomes insufficient to raise the family out of poverty. Whether less-educated single mothers of color marry or not, the circumstances that produce the interpersonal and economic disadvantages they face are likely to remain impediments for their children. Marriage promotion campaigns alone cannot change this reality.

Read more in Angela Bruns, “Educational and Racial Variation in Women’s Transitions into and out of Single Motherhood,” Master of Arts thesis, University of Washington, June 2013.