We offer this report to contribute to the ongoing public dialogue about the importance of marriage and family. This report summarizes some of the vast data that has been compiled about the marriage of men and women and its impact on adults, children, families and society. This report is in no way exhaustive; it’s simply a snapshot of a collective body of social research over time.

Our aim is to help policy makers, opinion leaders, community activists and concerned citizens gain a broader understanding of marriage and the role it plays in individual, family and community life.

Most of the data you’ll review casts a positive light on traditional marriage and a cautionary light on other family arrangements like divorce, single parenting or cohabitation. Please don’t misinterpret these findings to suggest that the Oregon Family Council is critical or unsympathetic to these other family arrangements. We believe every family needs support.

Furthermore, as encouraging as the following statistics are, we recognize that marriage is not a magical doorway to a better life. These are statistical findings and they don’t hold true in every individual case.

With those important caveats and disclaimers out of the way, this report will demonstrate the following:

- **When marriage works, it works very, very well.**
- **Virtually every sector of society benefits from healthy marriages, especially children.**
- **Non-married families levy a heavy social and economic cost to society.**
- **Many members of society, especially young adults, are poorly informed and therefore disenchanted with the idea of marriage, choosing statistically less desirable family arrangements.**
- **There are reasonable steps that policy makers, community leaders, educators and the faith community can take to strengthen marriage.**

Our hope is that this report will be a step toward building stronger and healthier Oregon families.

Sincerely,
Oregon Family Council
Section 1.

Trends in Marriage

Where have all the commitments gone?

Marriage in America

For our first two hundred years as a nation, marriage was the expected norm. Economic realities, cultural mores and public policy made marriage, family and community life into near synonymous terms. As a result, most adults got married and most marriages lasted a lifetime.

Times have changed. Rather than being the first option for sexual fulfillment and creating a family, marriage is just one choice among several. Many marriages today have amended the “until death do us part” portion of their wedding vows with an exit strategy called a prenuptial agreement.

Fewer people are entering into marriage and they are years older when they eventually do. And more than 40% of children are born to unmarried mothers. (See statistics on the opposite page.)

What does it all mean? As the pages that follow will demonstrate, society’s retreat from marriage carries with it a host of unintended consequences. And those consequences pose some serious challenges for our nation. The question that remains is, “can we restore the commitments of marriage as a cultural norm in our nation, and if we can, should we?”

Perspective

“Marriage plays a key role in fostering the social, economic and emotional bonds between husband and wife, parents and children, and the family and larger community. It prescribes a set of norms, responsibilities and binding obligations for its members. It shapes family identity, creates a context for intimacy and builds a sense of belonging among its members.”

Testimony of Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, PhD, co-director, National Marriage Project Rutgers University before the Subcommittee on Children and Families US Senate

As for the secret to staying married: “My wife tells me that if I ever decide to leave, she is coming with me.”

Jon Bon Jovi

Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey. Data compiled by Heritage Foundation, Marriage and Poverty in the US, Fall 2010

The Marriage Files:
The Shifting Trends of Marriage and Family

Who’s Getting Married?

| Percentage of adults who are married | 52% (2008) | 72% (1960) |
| Percentage of college graduates who are married | 64% (2008) | 76% (1960) |
| Percentage of adults with only a HS diploma who are married | 48% (2008) | 72% (1960) |
| Median age at which men marry | 27.7 (2008) | 22.8 (1960) |
| Median age at which women marry | 26.0 (2008) | 20.3 (1960) |
| Percentage of adults who have cohabited | 44% (2008) | 24% (1990) |
| Percentage of total births born to unmarried women | 41% (2008) | 5% (1960) |
| Percentage who believe marriage is becoming obsolete | 39% (2008) | 28% (1978) |

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO DIVORCE. [5]

- Early marriage. Those who marry before age 18 have a 48% likelihood of divorce within ten years. The likelihood of divorce drops to 24% for those who marry at or over age 25.
- Individuals who were raised in a single parent home or divorced home.
- Individuals who had a child prior to marriage.
- Couples who cohabited before marriage.
- Couples who have no religious affiliation.
- Couples who have no college education.
- Couples who have an annual household income below $25,000.

SECTION 2

One of the strongest criticisms about marriage is the high divorce rate and there’s good reason for this. Divorce is a painful and expensive experience and in most instances, leaves lifelong scars on couples, children and extended families. Divorce seldom has a winner.

Sadly, there are times when divorce is the only viable solution. But in many instances, maybe even most, the proper guidance and assistance can turn a less than fulfilling marriage into a relationship that is satisfying and meaningful. Like the decision to marry, the decision to divorce is one that is complex and deeply personal. But as a society, there must be more we can do to point struggling couples to the support and resources available to help them more thoughtfully weigh the decision to dismantle their family, especially when children are involved.

A survey of divorced Oregon men found that three out of four wished they’d worked harder to preserve their first marriage. This was true even in men who stated they were happily remarried.

The good news is that for the past 20 years, the divorce rate has been declining and the percentage of first time marriages remaining intact has been increasing. With coordinated efforts by the public and private sectors, it’s possible to fan the flame of these positive trends.

Trends in Divorce

The painful, expensive way to find regret fast.

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DIVORCE MYTHS

MYTH #1: 50% of marriages end in divorce.

REALITY: The divorce rate in recent years has been declining. The percentage of first time marriages that end in divorce is now well below 50%. For example, the overall 20-year divorce rate for couples married in the 1980s is 39% and trending less for couples married in the 1990s. While still disappointingly high, the fact that nearly six out of ten marriages do last offers hope that, with the right steps, more can avoid divorce.

MYTH #2: It’s better for the kids.

REALITY: It’s believed by many that children are better off if their parents divorce than remain unhappily married. Statistically, children of divorced parents suffer. Big time. Even into adulthood, children with divorced parents tend to obtain less education, less income, have more troubled marriages and report more symptoms of psychological distress. [3]

MYTH #3: Irreconcilable differences.

REALITY: Every close relationship encounters turmoil. Certainly parents and children can attest to this. Fortunately, it’s extremely difficult for parents to divorce their kids. Most marriages too experience seasons of relationship stress and turmoil. But the fact is that two out of every three divorces occur in what relationship experts classify as low-conflict marriages. Many of these marriages could be repaired with proper assistance. [4]
The pain of divorce in recent decades and the context of today’s financial uncertainties has caused many younger adults to approach marriage with a healthy dose of caution. No right-thinking person wants to enter a marriage that has a high likelihood to fail.

So the “trial-run” of living together first has become many couple’s investment in marriage insurance. What better, surer way to explore life together than to just do it before making the ceremonial final commitment? After all, if the in-home test works great for mattresses, the same approach should work for marriage right?

Curiously, the outcomes of cohabitation have been, for the most part, disappointing. Cohabitation neither results in a higher percentage of marriages, nor longer lasting marriages when compared to couples who didn’t live together before marriage. In fact, couples who follow the traditional (many would say antiquated) approach which “saves” something for marriage attain a markedly higher avoidance of divorce than couples who first lived together. In the end, what cohabitation does produce are children ... the vast majority of whom will not be raised in a home with both their mother and father.

Cohabitation also produces a lot of older single adults. Neither of these outcomes is statistically ideal.

The Marriage Files: The marriage files: How does living together differ from marriage?

Formal Commitment. Cohabiting partners tend to have a weaker sense of couple identity, less willingness to sacrifice for the other, and a lower desire to make the relationship last. [7]

Longevity. Cohabiting couples break up at a far higher rate than married couples. By one estimate in the US, the rate is five times higher.* [7]

Higher Divorce Risk. The risk of divorce is 50% higher for cohabiters than for non-cohabiters. The divorce rate is even higher for those who have had several cohabiting experiences. [8]

Less Satisfaction. Cohabiting couples report lower levels of happiness, lower levels of sexual exclusivity and sexual satisfaction, and poorer relationships with their parents than their married counterparts. [7]

Wealth Accumulation. Married parents are significantly less likely to be poor. For example, according to a study by economist Robert Lerman, the poverty rate for married couples is half that of cohabiting couple parents and one third that of non-cohabiting single parents in households with other adults. [9]

Child Rearing. A massive British study reports that nearly one in two cohabiting couples with children split up before their child’s fifth birthday, compared to one in twelve married parents. [7]

Child Well-Being. Fully three-quarters of children born to cohabiting parents will see their parents split up before they reach age 16. Only one-third of children born to married parents face a similar fate. [7]

The institution of marriage has taken quite a beating over the past few decades. A recent Pew Research opinion study featured marriage’s fall from grace with its revelation that 39% of surveyed Americans feel marriage is becoming obsolete.

But just because people are uncertain about the future of marriage doesn’t mean people don’t desire marriage. Among younger adults (aged 18-29) eight in ten expect to marry someday. And while most people are aware of marriage’s shortcomings, few know the great benefits enjoyed by the typically married couple. Research shows married people are happier, healthier and wealthier than non-married people.

It’s not unreasonable to conclude that if the unmarried were more aware of the benefits that accompany marriage and steps that contribute to a lasting marriage, not only would attitudes toward marriage change, but that more men and women would confidently enter into marriage. And as the research below conveys, these marriages would greatly enhance the lives of these couples and their children.

Benefits of Marriage for Couples

“Marriage is not a noun; it’s a verb. It isn’t something you get. It is something you do. It’s the way you love your partner every day.”
Barbara DeAngelis

THE MARRIAGE FILES:

MARRIAGE WITH BENEFITS

Greater Happiness. Married Americans were more than twice as likely as divorced or separated Americans to say they were very happy with life in general. The reported happiness of cohabiting, never-married and widowed individuals resembled that of divorced and separated people. [11]

Economic Benefits. Continuously married households had about double the income and four times the net worth of the continuously divorced and never-married, on average. Additionally, married men earn between 10 percent and 40 percent more than singles with similar educational and job histories. [12]

Improved Health. Marriage is associated with better health and lower rates of injury, illness and disability for both men and women. Married people enjoy better health on average than single or divorced individuals. [13]

Longevity. Married people, especially married men, have longer life expectancies than single singles. Married people live longer on average, even after controlling for race, income, and family background. [13]

Improved Mental Health. Married people report fewer symptoms of mental illness and psychological distress than similar individuals who are not married. Longitudinal research shows it isn’t merely that mentally healthy people are more likely to get or stay married, instead, marriage itself appears to boost mental health. [11]

Improved Lifestyle Choices. Married people have lower rates of alcohol consumption and abuse than singles. Children whose parents marry and stay married also have lower rates of substance abuse, even after controlling for family background. [13]

Supported Motherhood. Compared to cohabiting or single mothers, married mothers are more likely to receive cooperation, help, emotional support, and positive involvement from their child’s father and his kin. [14]

Connected Fathers. Marriage increases the likelihood fathers will have good relationships with their children. 65% of young adults whose parents divorced had poor relationships with their fathers, compared to 29% from non-divorced families. [13]
**Benefits of Marriage for Children**

Children do best when raised by their married mother and father. No brainier, right? Certainly in generations past this statement would have been easily accepted. But today with four out of ten children born apart from marriage, it bodes the question, “Does having married parents make a difference to children, and if so, how much?”

According to virtually every sociological study, children raised with married parents do best in every measurable dimension including academic achievement, physical and mental well-being, economic stability, lower incidences of criminal behavior, substance abuse and themselves having a child out-of-wedlock. Because children from non-married households are at a statistical disadvantage, society should take steps to help these kids. But the same data suggests the best investment we can make into the lives of the next generation is a resurgence of committed, healthy marriages.

According to some researchers, growing up with both married parents in a low-conflict marriage is so important to child wellbeing that it is replacing race, class and neighborhood as the greatest source of difference in child outcomes. [36] Over the past few decades, we have experimented with various alternatives to marriage, and the evidence is now clear: Children raised in married, intact families generally experience upward social mobility, significantly lower incidences of crime, far fewer instances of mental illness, and the work place, to acquire a home of their own, and to experience upward mobility. The research from marriage in Middle America means that all too many Americans will not be able to realize the American Dream.”

**THE IRRREPLACEABLE ROLE OF FATHERS**

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STRENGTHEN MARRIAGE

POlycy Considerations to Strengthen Marriage

School Education. School districts could be encouraged to consider some of the available marriage education curriculum designed for school use. It’s a disservice to the coming generation to provide twelve years of public education without including some instruction on the benefits of marriage, especially for those who hope to have children.

Pre-marriage Education. It’s been demonstrated that couples who complete marriage education courses prior to marriage have better outcomes. Engaged couples could be encouraged to complete such courses through information, vouchers or discounted marriage license fees.

Economic Advantages. Where possible, public programs such as economic assistance, tax benefits, and inheritance policies show little distinction between the married and unmarried. Marriage is unique in its obligations and benefits. As a result some policies should recognize marriage as unique and distinct.

Divorce Reform. Studies show that divorce is seldom mutual and more than half occur in low conflict marriages. Offering counseling or educational options to struggling couples in a lower conflict marriage prior to proceeding with divorce could result in reconciliation of some relationships.

Marriage and Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs. Simply warning teens not to get pregnant until they are older doesn’t address the concerns of unmarried parenting. These programs could include a marriage message for teens who desire to have children.

State Marriage Initiative. Several states have marriage initiatives. These Initiatives can include providing a “Marriage Handbook,” online resources, regional marriage seminars and workshops and incentives to encourage healthy marriage and parenting.

Keep a Marriage Distinction. Generally, domestic partnership policies and tax codes show little distinction between the married and unmarried. Marriage is unique in its obligations which include sexual fidelity, permanence, mutual care and support of each other and children of their union. It also offers clear benefits. As a result some policies should recognize marriage as unique and distinct.

THE MARRIAGE FILES:

SECTION 6

Unmarriage and Society

The social and economic effects are staggering.

It doesn’t take a university study to understand that divorce and non-married child bearing levies a huge cost on society. Court costs, increased poverty and accompanying welfare costs, tracking deadbeat parents, loss of productivity and more. One study compiled by the Institute for American Values put the annual cost of divorce and non-married parenting at $122 billion dollars.

These figures become even more sobering when we consider current trends regarding marriage and parenting. Today, more children are born outside of marriage than at any other time in our nation’s history. Concurrently the percentage of adults marrying has leveled off at historically low rates. When we play these trends out over time, the consequences for government, education, criminal justice, healthcare and the rest of society is sobering. This should sound an alarm to take steps to shift these trends. If we don’t, the eventual burden on society could be catastrophic.

The risks of unmarriage, especially when children are involved, surpass the risks associated with obesity, smoking or riding bikes without a helmet. Law makers have taken steps to help individuals and society with these. It seems reasonable, therefore, that we make similar policy efforts where possible to strengthen marriage. (Please see Policy Considerations on the left side.)

THE IMPACT OF UNMARRIAGE

Unmarriage Puts Children at Risk. Children in single parent families, children born to unmarried mothers, and children in stepfamilies or cohabiting relationships face higher risks of poor outcomes. Some of the social problems linked to divorce and unwed childbearing include higher rates of crime, drug abuse, education failure, illness, child abuse, domestic violence, and poverty. These social woes levy a significant cost on governments and society. [25]
Churches and faith leaders play an influential role when it comes to marriage. The majority of couples entering marriage still seek the involvement of a minister and many marry in a house of worship. Social research indicates that couples who involve themselves in a faith network have happier, longer-lasting marriages. (Some of the reasons church involvement helps marriages are listed below.)

When faith leaders work with the intention to strengthen marriages and help struggling marriages find solutions apart from divorce, the impact is measurable. One notable example can be found in Oregon’s Clackamas County. Beginning in 2001, some 170 Clackamas County churches agreed to a set of principles to help marriages that was detailed in a document called the Community Marriage Policy. Participating churches now require thorough pre-marriage counseling before performing a marriage ceremony, offer counseling and mentoring for troubled marriages and several have hosted marriage enhancement activities that are open to the community. According to ABC’s World News, “The plan seems to be working. The divorce rate in Clackamas County dropped by 15 percent in the first five years under the policy.”[26]

While the declining divorce rate cannot be directly linked to these church activities, religious leaders feel the community marriage policy is saving marriages and protecting children from the pain of divorce.

**WAYS CHURCH INVOLVEMENT HELPS MARRIAGES**

**Supportive Culture.** Helping and encouraging marriages and family is a core value of virtually every church. The teachings, staff and congregation members share this value. Couples who connect to a church surround themselves in this supportive environment.

**Pre-Marriage Counseling.** Most churches require couples to complete several marriage preparation sessions with a seasoned advisor before saying “I do.” Pre-marriage counseling has been demonstrated to help couples succeed in marriage.

**Crisis Counseling.** In a supportive faith environment, marriage problems are usually recognized earlier and skilled advisors are available to provide guidance in forgiveness, understanding and relationship skills.

**Couple Friends.** Relationship success and fulfillment is closely linked to meaningful friendships. Churches provide a variety of ways for married couples to connect with and enjoy friendships with other couples.

**Children and Youth Ministries.** The programs and ministries that churches provide for children and teenagers can be a tremendous help for parents. Here children learn values, life skills and develop friendships that complement the guidance they receive at home.

**Spiritual Support.** Often the challenges of life and marriage require resources beyond our natural strength and abilities. The primary mission of a house of worship is to deepen people’s relationship with God. It’s this spiritual connectedness that often enables couples to endure life’s difficulties.

*The word “church” is used in the broadest sense.*
This report is not intended to suggest that marriage is a miracle cure for society’s ills. Nor should it be interpreted that marriage comes with the transmuted promise of health, wealth and happiness. We’ve simply presented credible data demonstrating that married men and women report being healthier, happier and better off financially than adults who are unmarried. And an even greater statistical advantage exists for children raised by their married moms and dads.

But establishing convincing statistical data does not ensure that these advantages hold true in every individual case. We all know single mothers who have reared healthy, high achieving children and married couples who’ve failed miserably in their finances or parenting. Still we can’t ignore the dramatic shift in the past five decades when it comes to marriage and family. More than 40% of children are now born outside a married family, and while the divorce rate has fallen in recent years, it still leaves far too many families fractured.

There is no single solution to our fragile family condition. But we are a strong, compassionate and industrious society. Together, we can see more marriages last a lifetime and more children enjoy their birthright of living in a home with their own mom and dad.

Marriage and Public Policy
For the past number of years the currents of family law and policy have buffeted the institution of marriage. No-fault divorce, domestic partnerships, tax policies and public welfare have equalized family arrangements and in some instances provided incentives not to marry.

A number of states have begun to recognize the value of marriage in society and have taken steps to strengthen marriage through marriage initiatives, divorce reform and policy adjustments. To date, Oregon would be among the states that have done little in this regard. We would encourage our policy-making community to consider the work of other states and take positive steps to help fortify this important institution.

Adoption and Foster Families
For space purposes, this report does not specifically research or unique challenges associated with adoption and foster families. God bless those who serve this vital role in caring for children.

Same-Sex Families
Nothing in this report is intended to disparage same-sex households. It’s no secret that Oregon Family Council has resisted the move toward same-sex marriage. We will continue to do so. But we’ve offered little resistance to extending family benefits to same-sex families. The reason for this is that often a child in a same-sex household is still living with either their own mother or father.

With that said, the goal of this report is to strengthen marriage. And while we acknowledge that marriage is not perfect, it is the only family arrangement with the unique potential to permanently unite children with their natural parents for a lifetime. This is a condition that is simply not possible in a same-sex family.

Marriage and Churches
Religious leaders recognize that marriage is much more than a civil contract. And regardless of how the law and public policy defines marriage, the faith community honors a definition that transcends the winds of culture.

We therefore encourage each house of worship to prayerfully consider how they can better educate and strengthen their own congregation regarding the obligations, rewards and roles of marriage. And beyond that, we ask that churches consider how those same resources can be openly extended to the communities they are called to serve. As a faith-centred organization, Oregon Family Council is committed to do the same.

11. W. Bradford Wilcox, “Marriage and Mental Health in Adults and Children” (February 2007).