

The Family as a Resource for Society

A Report on the Family in America

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Summary

Although Americans marry and value marriage highly, in the United States conjugal marriage is in long-term decline, being displaced by alternate forms of family association such as post-divorce singleness or remarriage, cohabitation and always single parenting, resulting in fewer children.

Under the headings of the general tasks of the family in modern society presented in *Familiaris Consortio*, this study examines evidence for three resource claims for the conjugal family, as superior to alternative forms of association: First, the conjugal family best renews social life by bringing new persons into the world and socializing them for participation in society. Second, the conjugal family best fosters generative, pro-social attitudes and activities that directly promote the common good. Third, the conjugal family also benefits society indirectly but powerfully by best fostering the well-being, fulfillment and productivity of family participants.

With regard to children and socialization (the first resource), the research results show that non-conjugal couples are much more likely to be childless and have fewer children. U.S. government studies show that children with married biological parents are less than about half as likely to suffer emotional or behavioral difficulties, to be unhappy, depressed or tearful, or to have a learning disability or ADHD. They are also far less likely to suffer harm standard physical, sexual or emotional abuse. The strongest predictor for child poverty in American is whether the child's parents are married. Our data confirm this, showing that lack of financial security and use of public assistance rises with increasing children, but is much lower with married than with unmarried parents. Parent-child solidarity, shown by choosing family as a priority over work and by participating in the child(ren)'s school activities, is higher among married families, and highest in intact first marriages, that most closely conform to the conjugal ideal. Married parents are much less likely to be in poverty, an effect which increases the more children they have. But contrary to secular claims, increased resources, absent marriage, do not substantially increase parent-child solidarity. Persons in intact first marriages are also most likely to agree that raising children is the task of parents rather than society as a whole; that the purpose of a family with children is to raise the children, not the mutual fulfillment of the adults involved; and that two wage-earners are not as good as when one partner works and the other takes care of the family.

On the family and labor, paid employment is lower, but self-employment is higher, among persons with four or more children, as larger families operate more often on one wage-earner. The myth of separation leads to workplace demands that make family life difficult, but

employers that implement family friendly policies, such as flexible work schedules or telecommuting, find increased per-employee earnings gains of about 20%.

Pro-social attitudes and behavior (the second resource) are strongly fostered by the conjugal family and by the presence of children. Persons in intact first marriages and/or with more children rather than fewer are most likely to say that the family is a social institution with public value rather than only a matter of private choice; that most people can be trusted; that one's personal integrity, honesty and character should never be compromised; and that forming a family requires a man and a woman rather than a couple of the same sex. Marriage and children interact in their effect on community service and volunteer activity. Those with more children tend to contribute more to the community, such as by donating blood or volunteering to assist in civic affairs or youth programs, but only if they are married.

The conjugal family also increases adult social capital (the third resource). In the NFSS data, marriage dramatically increases financial security and reduces use of public assistance, thus contributing in a measurable material way to public resources through taxation and reduced government expenditures. The absence of conjugal married parents for children is associated with long-term disabilities throughout the life course, underlining the powerful benefits of the intergenerational solidarity conferred by the conjugal family. In the NFSS data, adults who grew up with continually married parents are much less likely to currently experience financial distress and to be receiving public assistance. They are also three times more likely to have graduated from college, and are most likely to be married today. Similar effects are shown by persons who report that they had a warm, close relationship with both of their parents growing up, but only if their parents had been married; with unmarried parents, parental warmth is associated with higher current poverty.

Whether the United States, with a highly democratic political system and active civil society, will continue to tolerate the decline of family ideals and attendant social goods, or will re-assert stronger norms regarding family and sexual relationships, only time will tell.