

How the decline of marriage and religious belief hurts children

BY COLLETTE CAPRARA, Thu Nov 21, 2013

November 15, 2013 (**Heritage**) - Analysts at a recent forum on the downward trends in marriage and religion in the United States agree that the two are not isolated phenomena but, in fact, influence and exacerbate one another.

Brad Wilcox, director of the National Marriage Project, has shown that family dissolution is linked to a further erosion of civil society in which American men are increasingly disconnected from core cultural institutions, including a religious congregation. Likewise, Mary Eberstadt, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, has found that marriage and family life often engender an impulse for religious engagement and that, as more couples cohabit, divorce, or never marry, religious participation has decreased.

The impact of the downturns in family formation and religious practice have real-world and long-term implications for the lives of Americans—particularly the rising generation.

Children raised by two married, biological parents tend to fare better than peers in other households. Those who grow up in married-parent families are 82 percent less likely to live in poverty, and intact families tend to fare better in a wide range of economic measures. Youth who are raised in an intact family tend to fare better on a range of emotional and psychological outcomes, have higher levels

of academic achievement and educational attainment, and are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as sexual activity or substance abuse and less likely to exhibit anti-social behavior.

Like family structure, religious affiliation and participation is linked to the well-being of individuals, families, and society. Children whose mothers more frequently participated

in religious activities are less likely to exhibit aggressive and delinquent behavior. Religious practice is associated with higher levels of economic well-being and academic performance as well reductions in



the incidence of crime, delinquency, drug and alcohol addiction, and problems related to physical and emotional health. Coupled with the association between religiosity, empathy, charity, and volunteerism, the improved prospects of more religious and intact families can have positive ripple effects throughout society.

Given the wide-ranging and mutually supporting benefits of religion and family, it is critical for the public interest to bolster both—and a starting point would be to support policies that promote marriage and strengthen families.

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