

Healthily Ever After?

Is marriage indeed the silver bullet that supporters of marriage promotion policies claim? The long-standing argument here is that mothers are better off when they marry: better off financially, better off in terms of their mental and physical health, and better off in terms of their children's well-being. New research by Kristi Williams, Sharon Sassler, and Lisa M. Nicholson indicates that, when it comes to the mothers' physical and mental health, what really matters isn't just getting married but finding a *high-quality* and *enduring* marriage.

Using data from the National Survey of Families and Households, Williams and colleagues examine changes in health following marriage for childless women and single mothers. For both groups of women, they find declines in psychological distress following marriage, but only if that marriage endures. Moreover, single mothers do not enjoy improved physical health after marriage, as their marriages tend to be of lower quality. In some cases, the mental and physical health of single mothers actually deteriorates when they enter and then exit marriages, leaving them worse off than if they had remained unpartnered all along.

The simple, unadorned marriage promotion initiative can therefore backfire. For marriage to help single mothers, what's needed is a high quality and enduring union. If we promote marriage at all costs and without regard for quality or endurance, we may end up with poor marital choices, low-quality unions, and a perverse deterioration in well-being.

Kristi Williams, Sharon Sassler, Lisa M. Nicholson. 2008. "For Better or For Worse? The Consequences of Marriage and Cohabitation for Single Mothers." *Social Forces*, 86(4), 1481–1511.

“The Poor Will Always Be with You” (Matthew 26:11)

Is poverty intractable? Have all advanced, industrial countries failed to reduce poverty? We can learn more about the presumed intractability of poverty by comparing advanced industrial countries to learn whether any of them have experienced recent, substantial declines in child poverty.

This is just the tack taken by Wen-Hao Chen and Miles Corak in their analysis of changes in child poverty rates in 12 countries. Using the Luxembourg Income Study, they find that during the 1990s only three countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, and Norway—experienced substantial declines in child poverty. The decline in these countries is not attributable, moreover, to simple demographic changes, like average parental age or number of children per household. Although compositional changes in the labor market, such as rising female labor force participation, did contribute to a reduction in child poverty, an even more important source of this reduction, especially in Norway and the United Kingdom, was growing income transfers to families with children. The simple conclusion: Much headway against child poverty can be made by combining full employment policy with aggressive income transfers.

Wen-Hao Chen and Miles Corak. (2008). "Child Poverty and Changes in Child Poverty." *Demography*, 45(3), 537–53.

Choosing to Choose

In many school districts, parents now have the opportunity to choose among several public schools to which they might send their children, with the options often including schools with a distinctive curricular focus or test scores that are higher than what prevails in their neighborhood school. These “public-choice” plans, which are intended to help close achievement gaps and help disadvantaged youth escape struggling schools, have not always delivered well on that objective. The main problem is that a surprising number of parents choose to remain in their neighborhood school or find the choice process so daunting they don't even engage in it. If public-choice plans are to work better, it is therefore important to find ways to make it easier to exercise choice.

This was precisely what Justine S. Hastings and Jeffrey M. Weinstein examined using a unique set of experiments in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C. In the past, parents in this district were asked to enter an online system and search for schools to which they might send their children, an approach that might well deter some parents. Over the course of several years, the district shifted the way in which choice could be exercised, abandoning reliance on the online system and instead sending parents a simplified three-page fact sheet on the available choices. In a separately conducted field experiment, an even more simplified one-page fact sheet was sent to parents. The results were striking in two ways. First, by offering simplified information to parents, there were large increases in the number of parents choosing schools with higher test scores. And, secondly, the children who attended these schools performed substantially better on the tests. The public-choice model can work well for struggling students, but parents need a little help in becoming savvy, “choosy” consumers.

Justine S. Hastings and Jeffrey M. Weinstein. 2008. "Information, School Choice, and Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two Experiments." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 123(4): 1373–1414.

THE NEW REPUBLICAN POPULISM?

The conventional wisdom in U.S. politics has been that the Republicans are the party of business while the Democrats are the party of labor. But will this old formula give way as both parties reposition themselves in response to new economic and social conditions?

According to new research by Gary Miller and Norman Schofield, a fundamental shift is occurring in today's Republican party, with the ascendant socially conservative wing of the party driving many pro-business (but socially moderate or liberal) members into the arms of the Democratic party. This dynamic plays out, for example, in recent high-profile Republican defections, such as Vermont's James Jeffords or Kansas' Mark Parkinson. But it is also playing out among rank-and-file members. If the defections continue, Miller and Schofield suggest that the Democrats could become the party representing the interests of business, leaving the Republicans to increasingly court the economic as well as social concerns of their now more blue-collar constituents. In the short run, such defections will blur the differences between the two parties, perhaps making both parties more moderate on business and labor issues. But in the long run this realignment could produce a new Republican party in the William Jennings Bryan populist mold—a Republican party that is socially conservative and anti-business.

Gary Miller and Norman Schofield. 2008. "The Transformation of the Republican and Democratic Party Coalitions in the U.S." *Perspectives on Politics*, 6(3): 433–450.

The Tightening Vise

The current financial crisis has, of course, led to a substantial tightening of credit markets. Much of the journalistic focus has been on middle class families and how they can't access equity in their houses or secure credit card debt. This begs the question: To what extent are the poorest and most disadvantaged able to use credit to smooth earnings shortfalls caused by shocks like unemployment? Although having too much credit and debt can of course harm disadvantaged households, having access to some credit can help those who lack financial assets and need to get by during what they hope will be temporary hard times.

Using data from two long-term surveys of income and consumption (the Survey of Income and Program Participation and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics), James X. Sullivan provides some concrete answers to this question. He finds that those with moderately low levels of assets are able to borrow during difficult times at the rate of approximately 11 cents in unsecured debt per dollar of earnings lost. Although the moderately poor can therefore buffer shortfalls to some extent, Sullivan also finds that those at the very bottom of the assets distribution do not increase their borrowing at all in the face of earnings losses. This means that our most disadvantaged households are not countering the effects of adverse shocks to their income. It follows that, unless proactive steps are taken, the very poor will become exceedingly vulnerable as credit markets continue to tighten and unemployment rates continue to grow.

Sullivan, X. James 2008. "Borrowing During Unemployment: Unsecured Debt as a Safety Net." *Journal of Human Resources*, 43(2): 383–412.

(More Than) a Few Good Men

It is well known that high-poverty neighborhoods often have too much crime, too much violence, and too many youth with extensive criminal records. But why is there so much crime in high-poverty neighborhoods? We simply don't know enough to fully answer this question. There are, of course, many hypotheses about the sources of crime, including the "role model" hypothesis that has juveniles succumbing to the temptations of crime and delinquency because they lack stable male role models and aren't exposed to viable alternatives to crime. Rigorous evidence on the role model hypothesis has to date been sparse.

In a recent study, Karen F. Parker and Amy Reckdenwald address this gap by examining whether cities with more male role models—older, employed, married men—had lower rates of juvenile crime and violence. Their results suggest that male role models do in fact lead to lower rates of crime and violence. And this effect is substantial in size: It turns out that disadvantaged neighborhoods have so much crime in large part because such neighborhoods haven't many male role models.

It follows that pro-employment policies are triply advantageous for workers, children, and victims. Although they are obviously great for the workers who get the jobs, they are also great for the children who are now protected from the lure of crime and for neighborhood residents who, by virtue of this protection, are now less frequently victimized.

Karen F. Parker, Amy Reckdenwald. 2008. "Concentrated Disadvantage, Traditional Male Role Models, and African-American Juvenile Violence." *Criminology*, 46(3), 711–735.

Be Cool, (Don't) Stay in School

Some scholars describe the path to upward mobility for the poor as straightforward: Go to school, stay in school, work hard, and eventually such investments will pay off. There is little disagreement with the standard prescription that the working poor get ahead by acquiring educational credentials. Indeed, the 1996 welfare reform was supposed to move low-income women off welfare caseloads and into education, training opportunities, and the workforce.

Is welfare reform working in this classic way? New research suggests that, quite perversely, welfare reform may have *decreased* the likelihood that low-income women complete high school or attend post-secondary schooling. Using data from the Current Population Survey, Dhaval Dave, Nancy Reichman, and Hope Corman report that welfare reform surely succeeded in moving women off welfare rolls, but it was also associated with a 20 to 25 percent falloff in the likelihood that they attended high school or college. These large effects were mitigated in states that supported education as an alternative to work. Moreover, they were reversed among teenage girls, for whom welfare rules required education as a precondition for receiving benefits.

What are the implications for assisting the working poor? As the current recession atrophies the low-wage labor market, there is an opportunity to resist tendencies to push untrained and uncredentialed workers immediately into the labor force. A second round of welfare policy might follow the lead of those states that emphasized education and training, thereby building an infrastructure of better-skilled labor.

Dhaval Dave, Nancy Reichman, and Hope Corman. 2008. "Effects of Welfare Reform on Educational Acquisition of Young Adult Women." NBER Working Paper #14466.

Divergent Desistance

In the 1980s, cocaine was considered a drug for the moneyed elite, and indeed it was a prominent symbol of the elite's excesses during that period. However, cocaine eventually lost its position as an elite drug in the 1990s, when it seemingly became increasingly popular among the poor and less educated. Why did this new socioeconomic disparity in the opposite direction open up so suddenly? The standard answer: Falling cocaine prices and the emergence of crack cocaine exposed the drug to a new pool of low-income users.

Is such conventional wisdom on the mark? Using nationally representative data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Richard Miech finds no evidence for the conventional "recruitment hypothesis" that, because cocaine suddenly became cheap enough for poor people to buy, the socioeconomic disparity reversed in direction. Rather, what happened suggests an alternative hypothesis: Upper-income and more educated

users responded to new information on the drug's health risks and used their greater resources to more adeptly desist from cocaine usage. In fact, Miech finds that poor people did not expand usage after 1990, but rather the well-off went from a high probability of using prior to 1990 to a near-zero probability thereafter. At least for cocaine use, the socioeconomic disparity reversed because more advantaged users found ways to stop a costly habit, not because of a massive influx of less-advantaged users discovering the drug. The clear policy implication is that we would do well to develop among less-advantaged users the same resources to desist that now exist among more-advantaged ex-users.

Richard Miech. 2008. "The Formation of a Socioeconomic Health Disparity: The Case of Cocaine Use during the 1980s and 1990s." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 49, 352-366.

"Girl Power" and Mathematics Achievement

Larry Summers, President Obama's pick for head of the White House's National Economic Council, was famously ousted as the president of Harvard University after suggesting that the gender gap in mathematics achievement might have a partly genetic foundation. Although his comments were clearly impolitic, many have suggested that we ought mainly to ask whether there is any science behind them.

A new study by Andrew M. Penner tackles just that question by marshaling an impressive array of data. Using data from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, the World Bank, the United Nations, the International Labour Organization, the World Values Survey, and the International Social Survey Programme, Penner shows that there are wide cross-national variations in the size of the gender gap in math achievement. These differences take on, moreover, a fascinating pattern. The gender differences at the top of the math distribution are smallest in those countries with the greatest labor market equality between men and women (e.g., more gender-balanced professional and managerial sectors) and with the greatest status equality between men and women (e.g., greater representation of women in politics and leadership positions). It seems that girls perform at very high levels in math in those societies in which they can expect a full and equal shot at succeeding.

Andrew M. Penner. 2008. "Gender differences in extreme mathematical achievement: An international perspective on biological and social factors." *American Journal of Sociology*, 114, S138-S170.

Performance-Based Inequality?

The dramatic increase in income inequality since the 1970s is one of the most spectacular developments of our time. This increase is typically linked to technological change and a corresponding growth in the demand for highly skilled labor, to globalization and the disappearance of manufacturing jobs, to declines in the strength of unions, and to the influx of low-skill immigrants into the labor market. These conventional narratives ignore, however, the possibility that changes in *how* we pay workers are partly responsible for the spectacular growth in inequality. While many commentators point to changes in CEO and executive pay, there has also been a widespread trend in recent years toward performance-based pay for salaried workers of all types. This trend takes the form of more commissions, bonus pay, and piece-rate contracts. Is it possible that such pay changes have contributed to wider trends in income inequality?

According to Thomas Lemieux, W. Bentley MacLeod, and Daniel Parent, the answer to this question is a definitive yes. By examining national data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, these researchers find that (1) performance pay increased substantially since the late 1970s, and (2) wages in performance-pay jobs are markedly more unequal than in jobs with other types of pay mechanisms. The rise of performance pay turns out to account for approximately a quarter of the total increase in wage inequality between the late 1970s and early 1990s (and for a much larger fraction of the increase in wage inequality above the 80th percentile). It follows that income inequality increased partly because of meritocratic changes in the labor market that allowed firms to reward the productivity of their best workers.

Thomas Lemieux, W. Bentley MacLeod, and Daniel Parent. Forthcoming (2009). "Performance Pay and Wage Inequality." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 124.

Poisons, Place, and Race

The problem with residential segregation, conventional thinking goes, is that those living in less privileged neighborhoods have fewer opportunities to make money and get ahead. In other words, racial or ethnic minorities consigned to high-poverty neighborhoods are cut off from job opportunities, valuable social networks, positive role models, and a host of related mobility-producing resources. Although these economic costs of segregation are clearly important, segregation may also have direct effects on *health* because of differential exposure to environmental risks (e.g., poisonous air pollutants).

Liam Downey and Brian Hawkins consider this possibility in a new article linking national census data to an Environmental Protection Agency database on toxic air pollutants. Two striking findings emerged. First, black Americans were substantially more likely to live in areas with greater exposure to toxic environmental pollutants, thereby exposing them to greater health risks than whites or Hispanics. Second, blacks with high incomes were quite successful in escaping this exposure to toxic pollutants, as differences in exposure between high-income blacks and other high-income workers were sharply reduced. It follows that poor blacks were most at risk of being exposed to dangerous air pollutants.

There are not just economic costs to living in less desirable neighborhoods; there are health costs as well. Although high-income blacks can relocate to environmentally safe areas, low-income blacks often remain stuck, and hence bear both the economic and environmental health burdens of living in bad neighborhoods.

Liam Downey, and Brian Hawkins. 2008. "Race, Income, and Environmental Inequality in the United States." *Sociological Perspectives*, 51, 759–781.

Undocumented Attainment

There has been much debate about the fairness of offering state aid and services to undocumented immigrants. Is it fair, for example, to offer in-state tuition rates to undocumented state residents while charging out-of-state tuition to others (including documented immigrants) who happen to reside out of state?

The question of fairness should not be ignored, but it is best addressed after considering the concrete effects of altering state tuition policies. It is particularly important to know the consequences of offering in-state tuition rates to the undocumented. Do undocumented state residents attend college at much higher rates when they are offered in-state tuition? Does attendance simultaneously decrease for other groups?

In a new study using the Current Population Survey, Neeraj Kaushal attempts to provide these baseline facts. The results reveal that providing in-state tuition rates to undocumented Mexican youth is associated with substantial increases in their educational attainment (e.g., a 31 percent increase in college enrollment and a 33 percent increase in the proportion of Mexican young adults with a college degree). Moreover, and even more strikingly, this policy is not associated with any decreases in attainment for other groups. If anything, rates for other groups actually went up (given that many colleges, such as community colleges, simply expand to meet higher levels of demand).

How can in-state tuition rates be such an unmitigated good? Because many Mexican neighborhoods and families encompass a mix of different citizenship statuses (e.g., citizens, documented, undocumented), Kaushal suggests that pro-education policies for undocumented workers can raise awareness and educational attendance across wider networks and citizenship categories. It seems that benefits to one group may "trickle out" through such cross-cutting networks and ultimately benefit all.

Neeraj Kaushal. 2008. "In-state Tuition for the Undocumented: Education Effects on Mexican Young Adults." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 27, 771–792.