



Why Marriage Matters: A View from the Social Sciences

W. Bradford Wilcox
National Marriage Project
University of Virginia

Is Marriage a Public Institution?



- Jesse Ventura says “No”
 - Emblematic of libertarian view
- But marriage is a public institution that serves public purposes
 - Governed by legal norms
 - Founding Fathers argued marriage was bulwark of social order and “seedbed of virtue”
 - Contemporary social science vindicates their wisdom about marriage

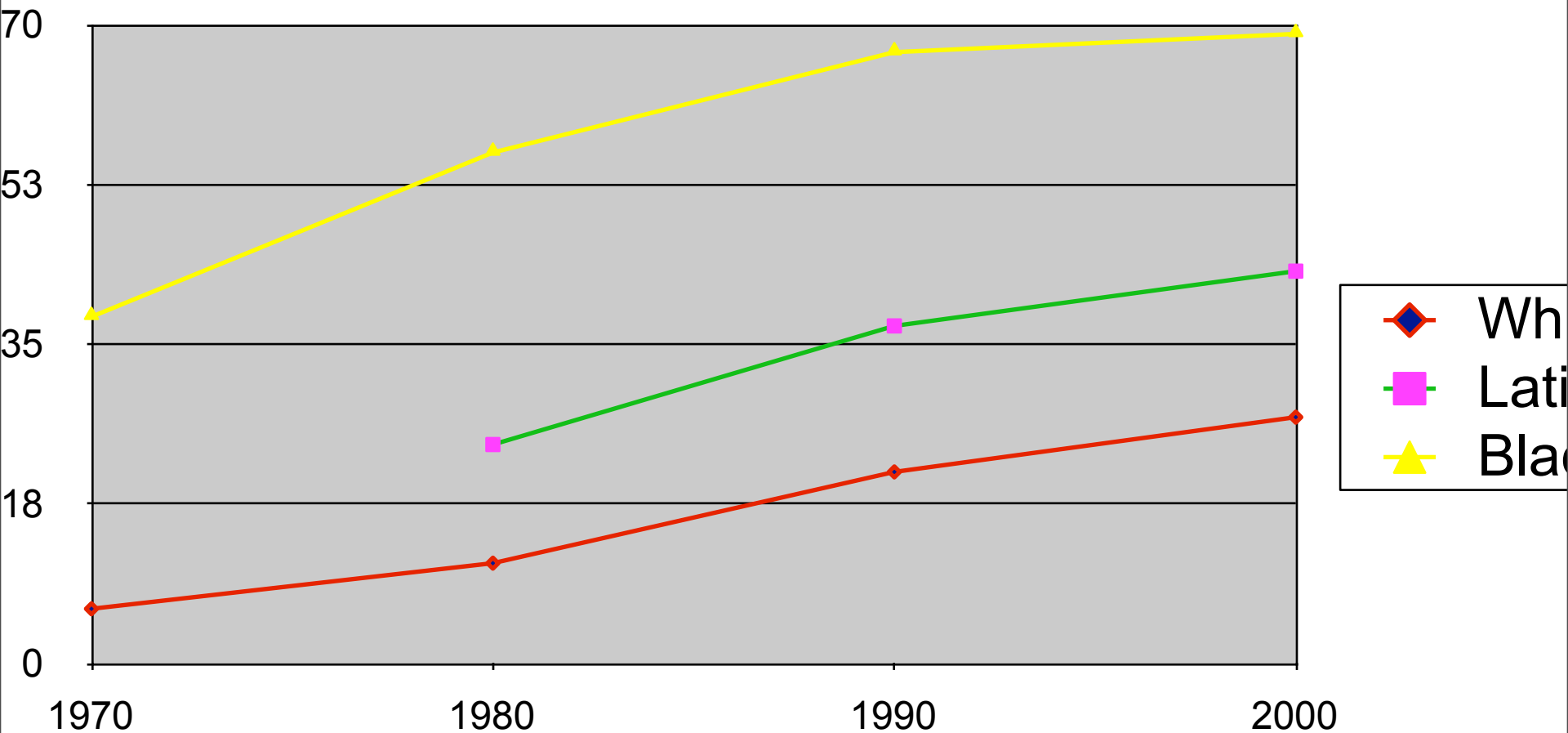
Family Change in America



- Last 40 years, U.S. has witnessed dramatic retreat from marriage
 - Marked increases in divorce, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing
- This retreat has been particularly consequential for minorities & poor/working class
 - Especially African Americans and (native-born) Latinos

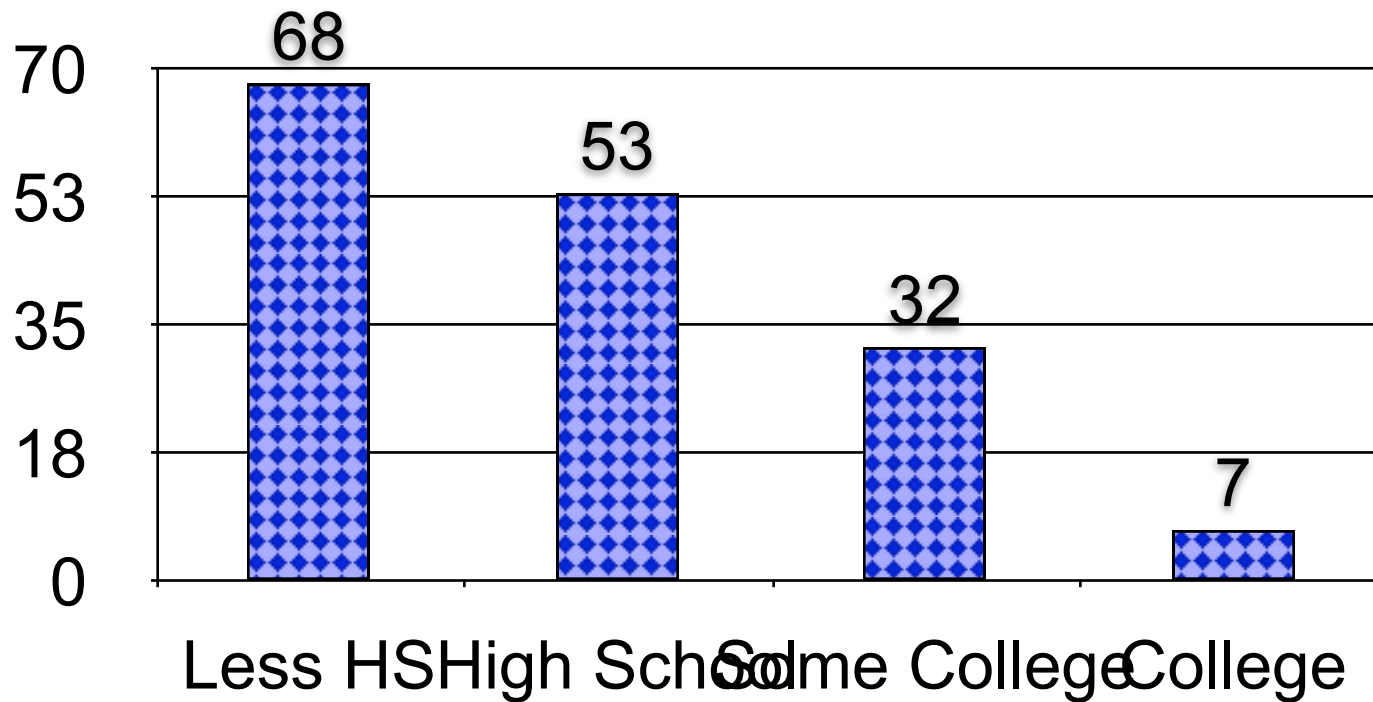
Growth in Nonmarital Childbearing: 1970–2000

Nonmarital Childbearing



Breakdown of Family Concentrated among Poor & Working Class

Nonmarital Childbearing by Mother's Education



The Impact on Children

- One consequence of the retreat from marriage is that children are more likely to end up in a single parent family



Children Living Outside Marriage

- Lifetime risk of living outside intact family
 - 1960: 80% of children spent entire childhood with both parents
 - Now: Only 50% of children will spend entire childhood with both parents
- Percent of children living outside married homes in 1996 (at any one time):
 - 65% of African American children
 - 36% of Latino children
 - 23% of white children

Why Should We Care?

- Why should we care that more children are spending time in single-parent homes?
 - Aren't families just changing with the times?



Two Married Parents are Better than One: Outcomes



Children reared in single-parent homes are two to three times more likely to experience serious negative outcomes

- About 10% of children in biological married-parent homes experience such outcomes
- About 25% of children in biological single-parent homes experience such outcomes

Findings from the U.S.

- The consequences of single parenthood for children:
 - Psychological:
 - Suicide, drug abuse, & depression
 - Social:
 - Delinquency, crime, teenage pregnancy, & educational failure
 - Economic:
 - Poverty, & material hardship

Young Men in Prison

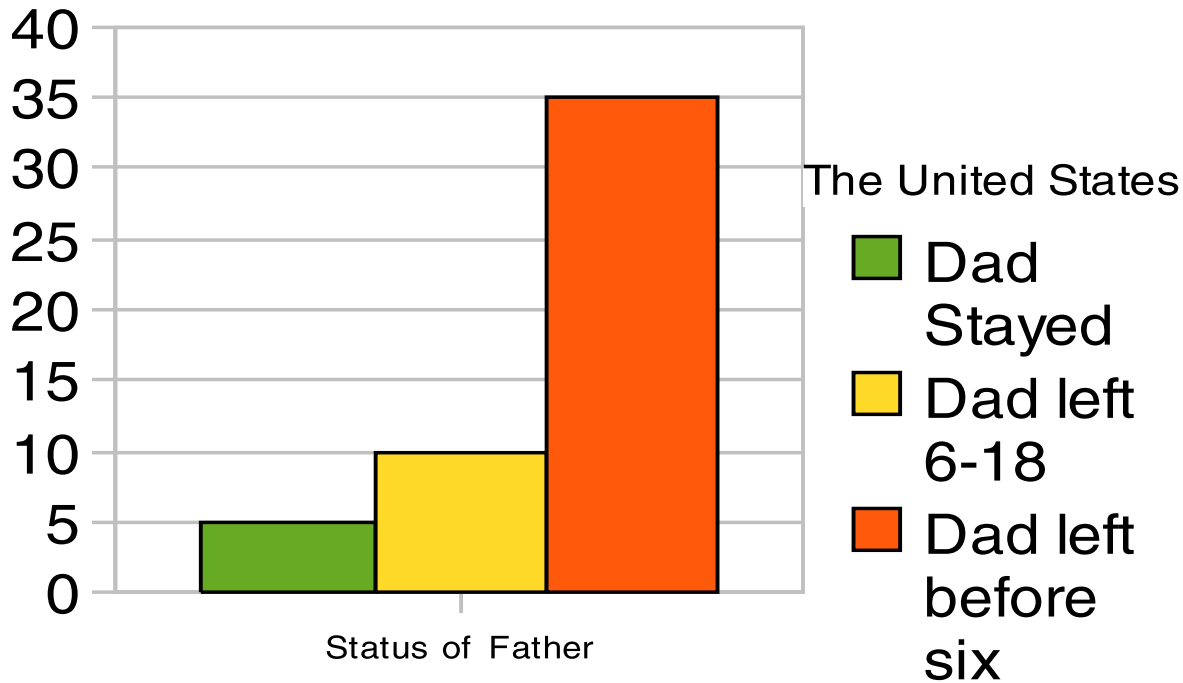


Source: Harper and McLanahan 2004

Teenage Girls Pregnant



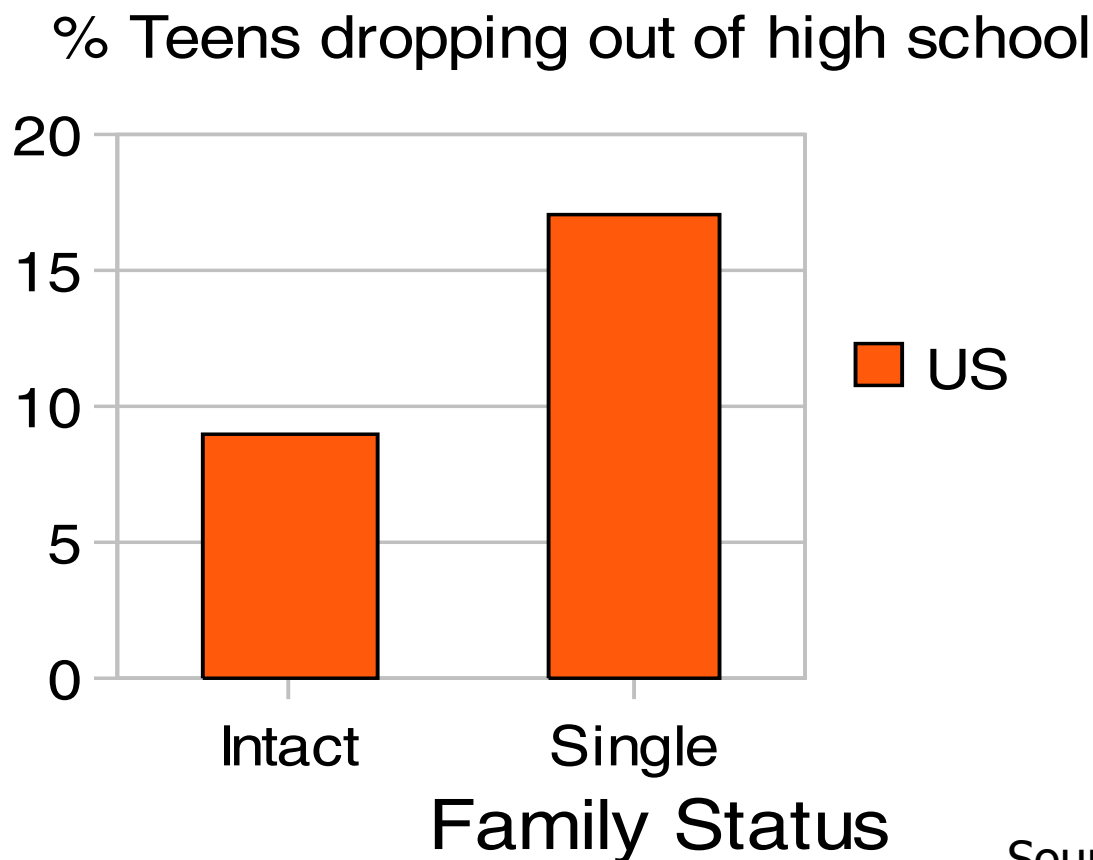
% Teenage girl pregnancy



Family Status

Source: Ellis et al., 2003

Dropping Out of High School



Source: McLanahan
and Sandefur 1994

Other Consequences of the Breakdown of Marriage

- The primary reason that the state accords a special legal status to marriage is that marriage is the cross-cultural institution that best ensures children are supported—financially, socially, and emotionally—by their parents.
- But marriage also has clear benefits for adults, communities, and the state.

Effects on Adults

- Health
 - Married men live 10 years longer than unmarried peers
 - Marriage as powerful for men's health as not smoking!
- Economic
 - Men work harder, smarter, and earn about 20% more after marrying
 - Median net worth of U.S. adults:
 - \$66,000 for married (\$120,000 for couple)
 - \$35,000 for divorced & never-married
- Personal safety
 - Married women significantly less likely to be raped, robbed, or murdered (according to DOJ):
 - Violent victimization rate: 17 per 1,000 married women
 - Violent victimization rate: 60 per 1,000 unmarried women

Effects on Communities



- Child Poverty
 - Brookings study:
Virtually all of the growth in child poverty in the United States since 1970 can be attributed to the retreat from marriage
- Crime
 - Harvard Sociologist Robert Sampson:
“Family structure is one of the strongest, if not the strongest, predictors of... urban violence across cities in the United States.”

Effects on Community



- If we turned back the family clock to 1960 level of stability, we would see:
 - 1.2 million fewer school suspensions
 - 750,000 fewer children repeating a grade
 - 500,000 fewer acts of delinquency
 - 600,000 fewer teens in therapy
 - 70,000 fewer suicides
- Source: Amato 2005

Effects on Government

- The federal government incurs a host of welfare, educational, criminal, and medical costs when the family breaks down
- New Georgia State University study estimates that the U.S. federal government spends an extra \$112 billion every year because of the retreat from marriage
- So, the state becomes
 - The “provider” for women and children in single-parent

Four Conclusions

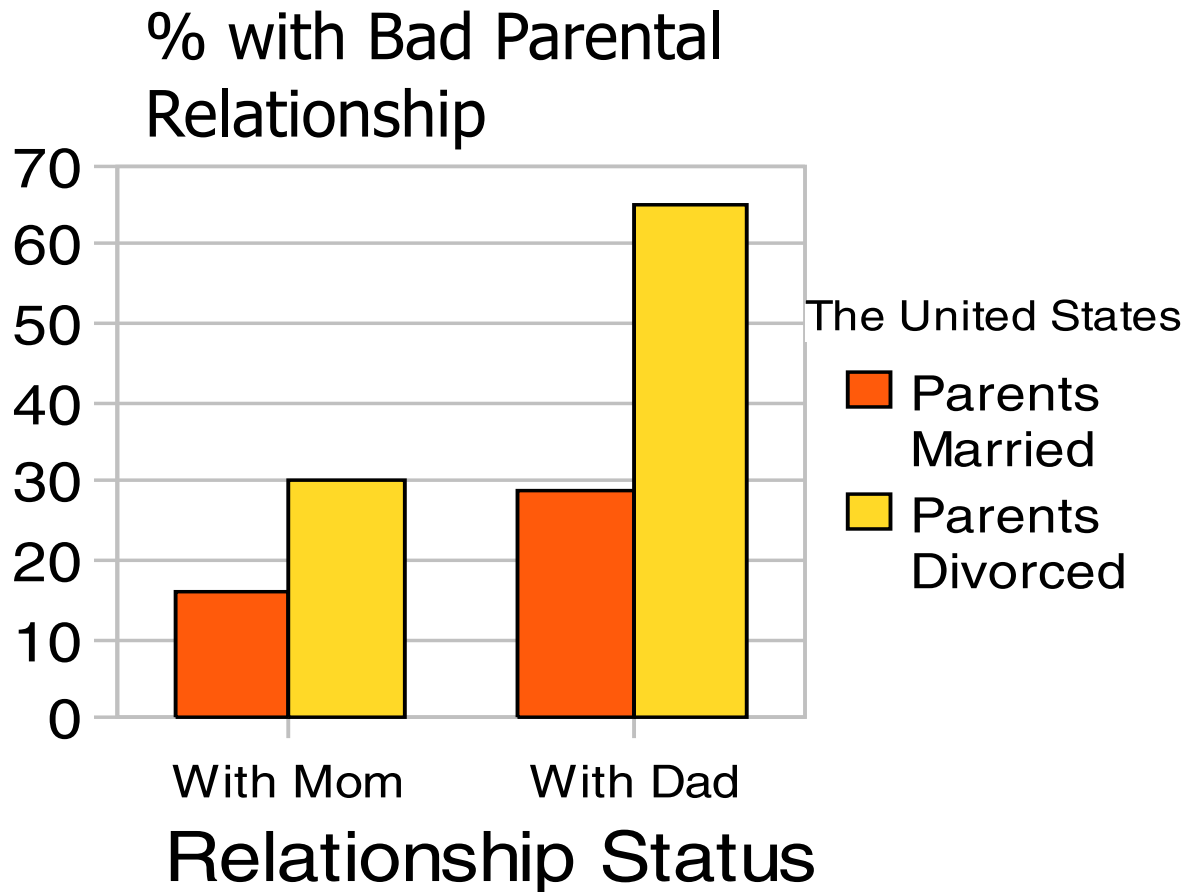
- Marriage matters for the welfare of
 - Children
 - Adults
 - Communities
 - Government



Explaining the Marriage Advantage

- Family structure influences quality of parenting
 - Two sets of family and friends
 - Spouses provide mutual support and monitoring of one another
 - Parents experience less economic stress
 - Marital commitment ensures stability of emotional ties with and economic investments in children
 - All these factors associated with →
 - More affection, consistent discipline, and monitoring
 - Children report higher quality relationships with father and mother

Marriage & Quality of Parenting



Source: Zill et al. 1993

What about Cohabitation?

- Cohabitation is becoming more common
 - Especially among poor and working class
 - 40% of children will spend some time in a cohabiting union
- Are children doing ok in cohabiting households?

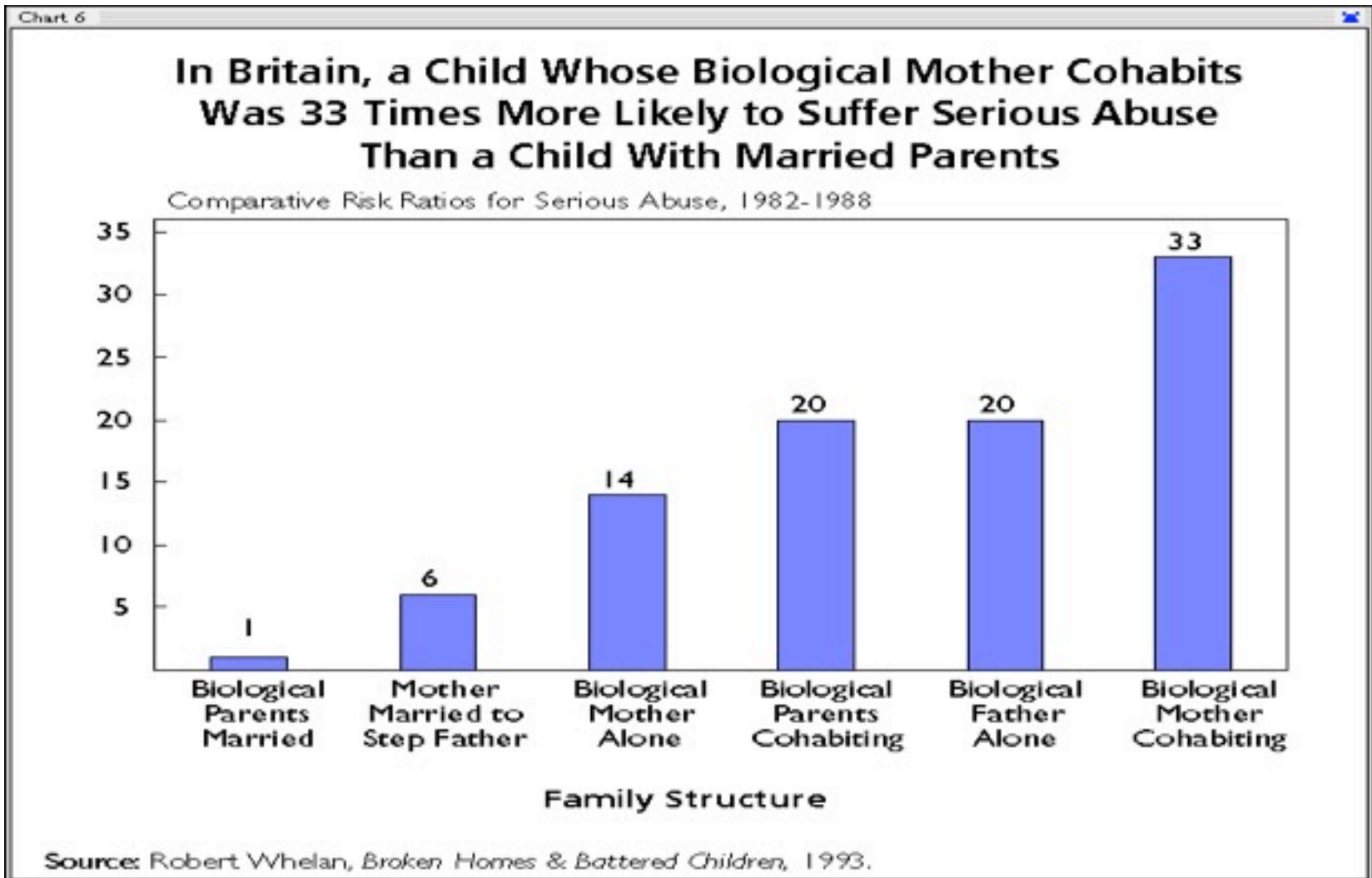
Are Two Unmarried Parents Better than One?

- It is true that cohabitation outcomes for children more positive in economic domain
 - Lower levels of economic deprivation
- But cohabitation outcomes as negative as single parent outcomes
 - Psychological problems
 - Educational failure

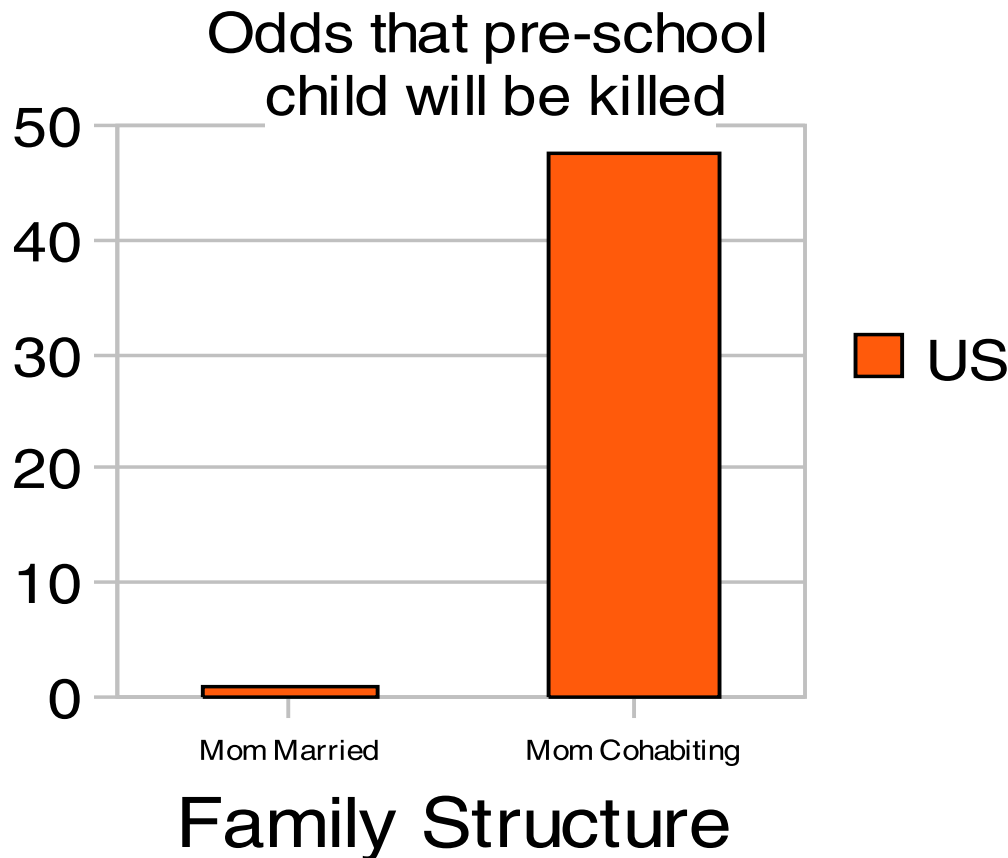
Cohabiting Families Worse than Single Parent Families

- On some outcomes, children in cohabiting households do worse than children in single parent homes
 - Delinquency/behavior problems
 - Sexual and physical abuse of children

British Child Abuse Rates



Preschool Children's Odds of Dying at Hands of Adult in U.S.

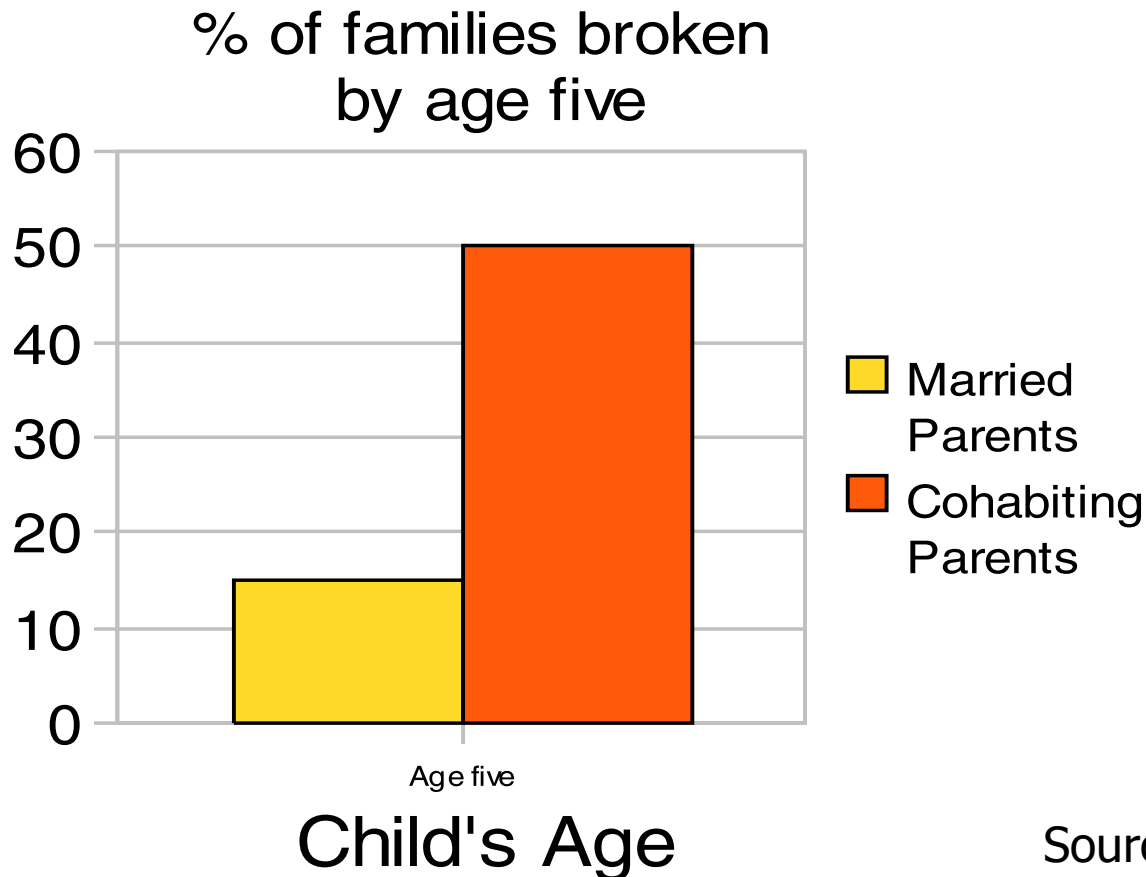


Source: Schnitzer and Ewigman 2006

Why are Cohabiting Unions Risky for Kids?

- Cohabiting unions tend to have less commitment, trust, sexual fidelity, and more violence than married unions
- They are also much less stable, even when biological kids are involved
 - Instability is linked to numerous problems for children—from delinquency to sexual abuse—and helps to explain why cohabiting unions are arguably more risky for children than a stable, single parent home

Stability for Children: Married vs. Cohabiting



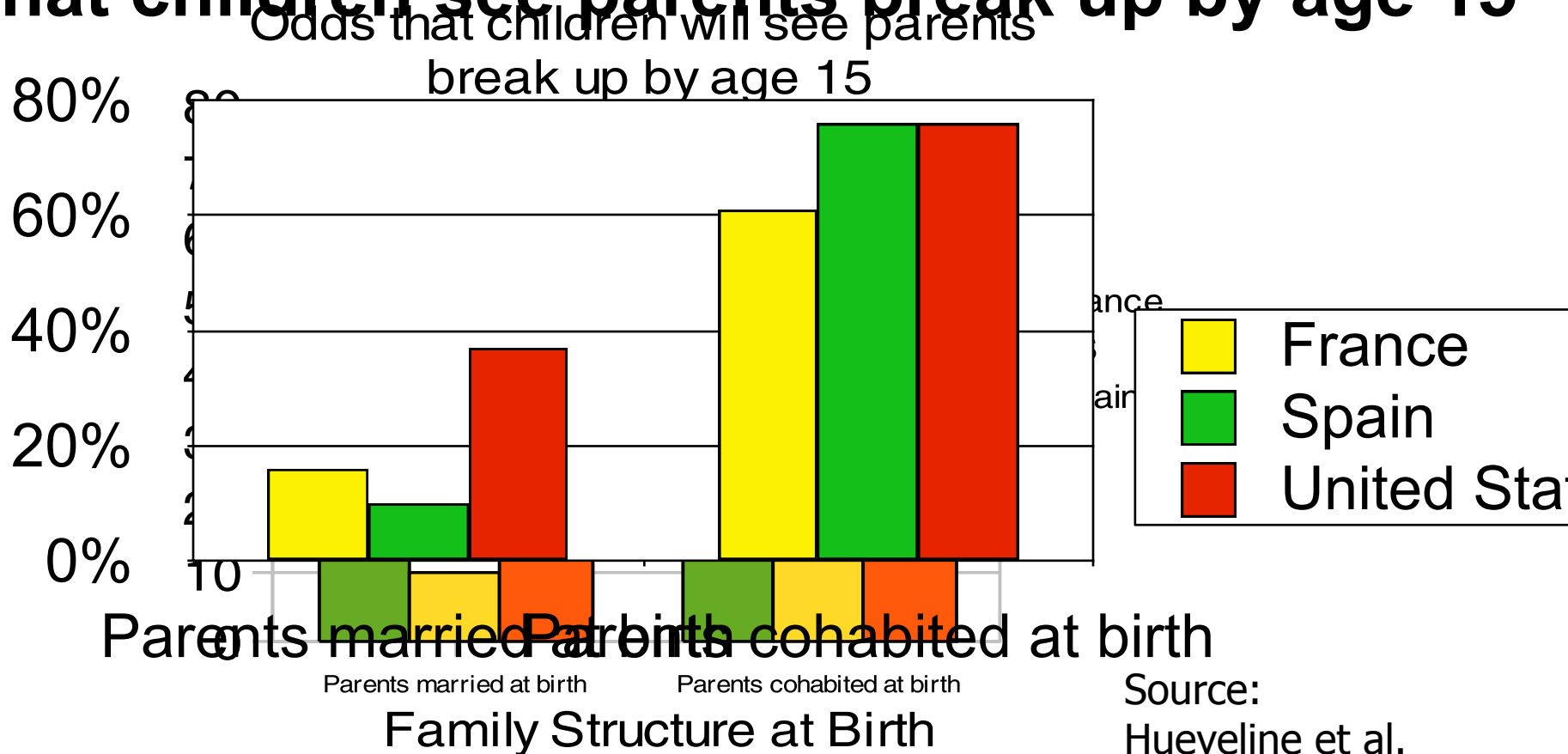
Source: Smock and Manning 2004

Findings from Europe

- But cohabitation is much more common & institutionalized in Europe. Might cohabitation be ok in Europe?
- No
 - UCLA Demographer Patrick Heuveline: “in most [European] countries children born to cohabiting families are two to four times more likely to see their parents separate than are children in married households.”

Odds of Parents Breaking Up

Odds that children see parents break up by age 15



Source:
Hueveline et al.
2003

Growth of Cohabitation → Growth of Single Parenthood

- In virtually every country where cohabitation has increased so too has single parenthood
 - Heuveline: “Perhaps the only universal Western trend is that childrearing is being shifted from married parents to single mothers more than to cohabiting parents, stepfamilies, or single fathers.”

Signs of Hope



- Since 1990s, marriage trends have largely stabilized:
 - Divorce is down
 - Marital happiness has stopped falling
 - Teenage sex is down
- Scholarly and policy consensus emerging across the ideological spectrum
 - That marriage matters
 - We need to strengthen marriage

Social Scientists on Marriage



- “If we were asked to design a system for making sure that children’s basic needs were met, we would probably come up with something quite similar to the two–parent ideal. Such a design, in theory, would not only ensure that children had access to the time and money of two adults, it also would provide a system of checks and balances that promoted quality parenting. The fact that both parents have a biological connection to the child would increase the likelihood that the parents would identify with the child and be willing to sacrifice for that child, and it would reduce the likelihood that either parent would abuse the child.”
- – Sara McLanahan & Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up With A Single Parent* (Harvard University Press)

Conclusions

- The future welfare of our children and our nation depends in no small part on the renewal of marriage.
 - The welfare of poor and working-class communities is particularly dependent on the renewal of marriage.
- Public, private, and religious efforts to strengthen marriage need to be redoubled.



Source:

- W. Bradford Wilcox et al. Why Marriage Matters: 26 Conclusions from the Social Sciences. New York: Institute for American Values.
(www.americanvalues.org)