



Backgroundnder

No. 1535

April 10, 2002

MARRIAGE: THE SAFEST PLACE FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN

PATRICK F. FAGAN AND KIRK A. JOHNSON, PH.D.

The institution that most strongly protects mothers and children from domestic abuse and violent crime is marriage. Analysis of the 1999 findings of the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), which the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has conducted since 1973, demonstrates that mothers who are or ever have been married are far less likely to suffer from violent crime than are mothers who never marry.

Specifically, data from the NCVS survey show that:

- **Marriage dramatically reduces the risk that mothers will suffer from domestic abuse.** In fact, the incidence of spousal, boyfriend, or domestic partner abuse is twice as high among mothers who have never been married as it is among mothers who have ever married (including those separated or divorced).
- **Marriage dramatically reduces the prospects that mothers will suffer from violent crime in general or at the hands of intimate acquaintances or strangers.** Mothers who have never married—including those who are single and living either alone or with a boy-

friend and those who are cohabiting with their child's father—are nearly three times more likely to be victims of violent crime than are mothers who have ever married.

Other social science surveys demonstrate that marriage is the safest place for children as well. For example:

- **Children of divorced or never-married mothers are six to 30 times more likely to suffer from serious child abuse than are children raised by both biological parents in marriage.¹**

Without question, marriage is the safest place for a mother and her children to live, both at home and in the larger community.

Nevertheless, current government policy is either

Produced by the
Domestic Policy Studies
Department

Published by
The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Ave., NE
Washington, D.C.
20002-4999
(202) 546-4400
<http://www.heritage.org>



This paper, in its entirety, can be found at: www.heritage.org/library/backgroundnder/bg1535.html

1. See Patrick F. Fagan, "The Child Abuse Crisis: The Disintegration of Marriage, Family and the American Community," Heritage Foundation *Backgroundnder* No. 1115, June 3, 1997, at <http://www.heritage.org/library/categories/family/bg1115.html>.

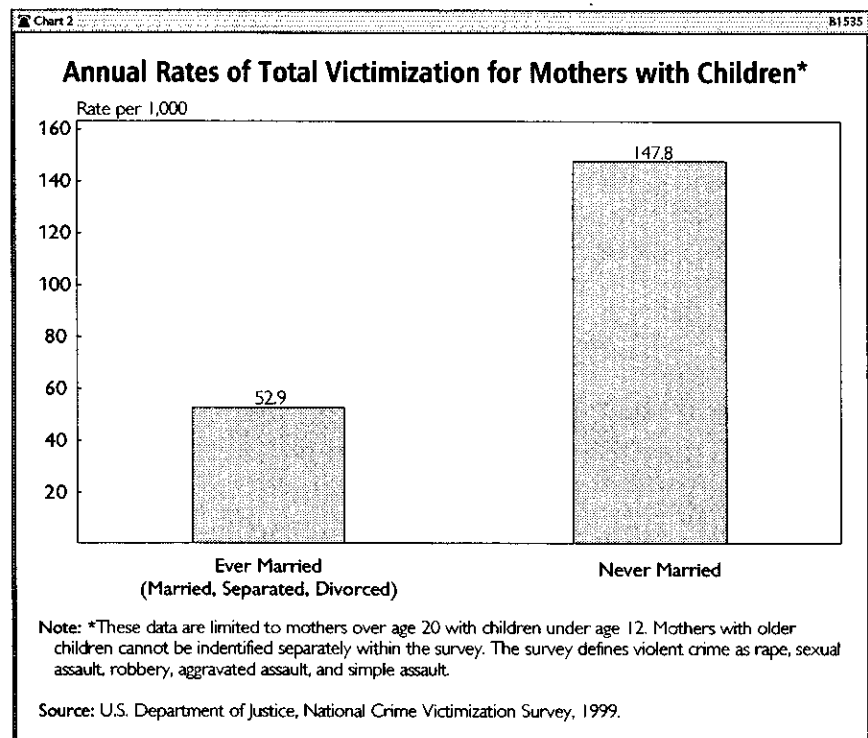
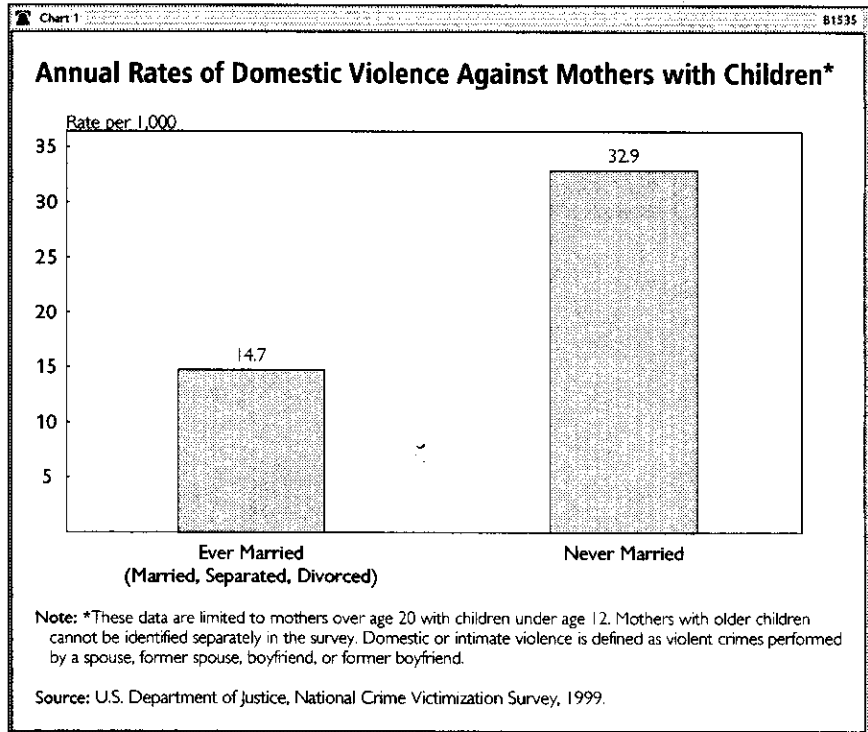
indifferent to or actively hostile to the institution of marriage. The welfare system, for example, can penalize low-income parents who decide to marry. Such hostility toward marriage is poor public policy; government instead should foster healthy and enduring marriages, which would have many benefits for mothers and children, including reducing domestic violence.

VIOLENCE AGAINST MOTHERS

The DOJ's National Crime Victimization Survey collects data on victimization through an ongoing survey of a nationally representative sample of Americans. The survey defines violent crime as rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault. Domestic or intimate abuse is defined as violent crimes performed by a spouse, former spouse, boyfriend, or former boyfriend.²

The NCVS data reveal interesting patterns among mothers (ages 20–50) with children under the age of 12.³ Specifically:

- Never-married mothers experience more domestic abuse. Among those who have ever married (those married, divorced, or separated), the annual rate of domestic violence is 14.7 per 1,000 mothers. Among mothers who have never married, the annual domestic violence rate is 32.9 per 1,000.



2. National Crime Victimization Resource Guide, at <http://www.icpse.unich.edu/NACJD/SDA/ncvsd.html>.
3. For purposes of this paper, the term "mothers with children" refers to women over age 20 with children under the age of 12 in their household. Limitations in the NCVS do not permit identification of mothers who have children ages 12 to 18 but no younger children. There is no reason to believe that the data on violence would be altered if younger mothers and mothers with older children were included in the survey. Most of the women in this analysis (nearly 97 percent) were between the ages of 20 and 50.

Thus, never-married mothers suffer domestic violence at more than twice the rate of mothers who have been or currently are married. (See Chart 1).

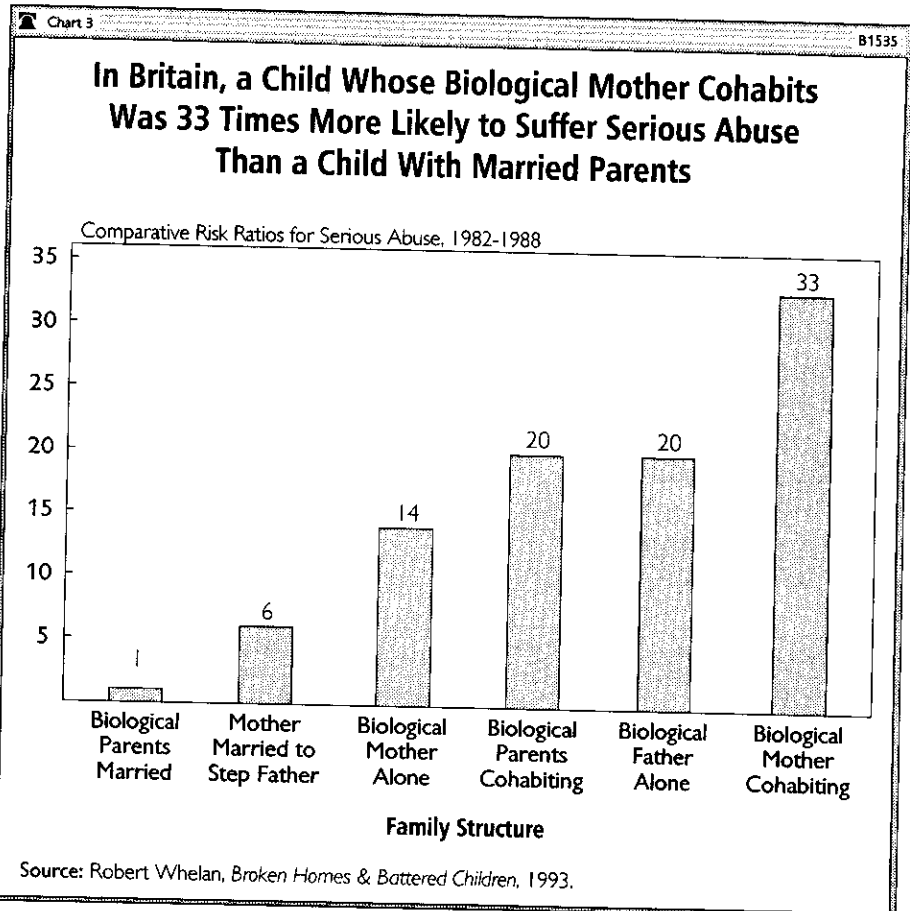
- Never-married mothers suffer more violent crime. The NCVS provides data on total violent crime against mothers with children under the age of 12. Total violent crime covers rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault committed against the mother by any party. Total violent crime covers violence against mothers by former and current spouses and boyfriends as well as by relatives, acquaintances, and strangers.

As Chart 2 shows, ever-married mothers with children suffer from overall violent crime at an annual rate of 52.9 crimes per 1,000 mothers. Never-married mothers with children, by contrast, suffer 147.8 violent crimes per 1,000 mothers.

Thus, never-married mothers experience violent crime at almost three times the rate of ever-married mothers. The institution of marriage, in general, shelters mothers from the specter of violence.

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Rates of victimization of children vary significantly by family structure, and the evidence shows that the married intact family is by far the safest place for children.⁴ (See Chart 3.) Although the United States has yet to develop the capacity to measure child abuse by family structure, British data on child abuse are available. These data show that rates of serious abuse of children are lowest in



the intact married family but six times higher in the step family, 14 times higher in the always-single-mother family, 20 times higher in cohabiting-biological parent families, and 33 times higher when the mother is cohabiting with a boyfriend who is not the father of her children.

When an abused child dies (see Chart 4), the relationship between family structure and abuse gets stronger: It is lowest in intact always-married families, three times higher in the step family, nine times higher in the always-single-mother family, 18 times higher in the cohabiting-biological parents family, and 73 times higher in families where the mother cohabits with a boyfriend.

WHAT POLICYMAKERS SHOULD DO

In legislation and social policy, the government should not penalize parents for marrying.⁵ Given the rising evidence that non-married mothers and their children are at greater risk of violent crime

4. See Fagan, "The Child Abuse Crisis: The Disintegration of Marriage, Family and the American Community."

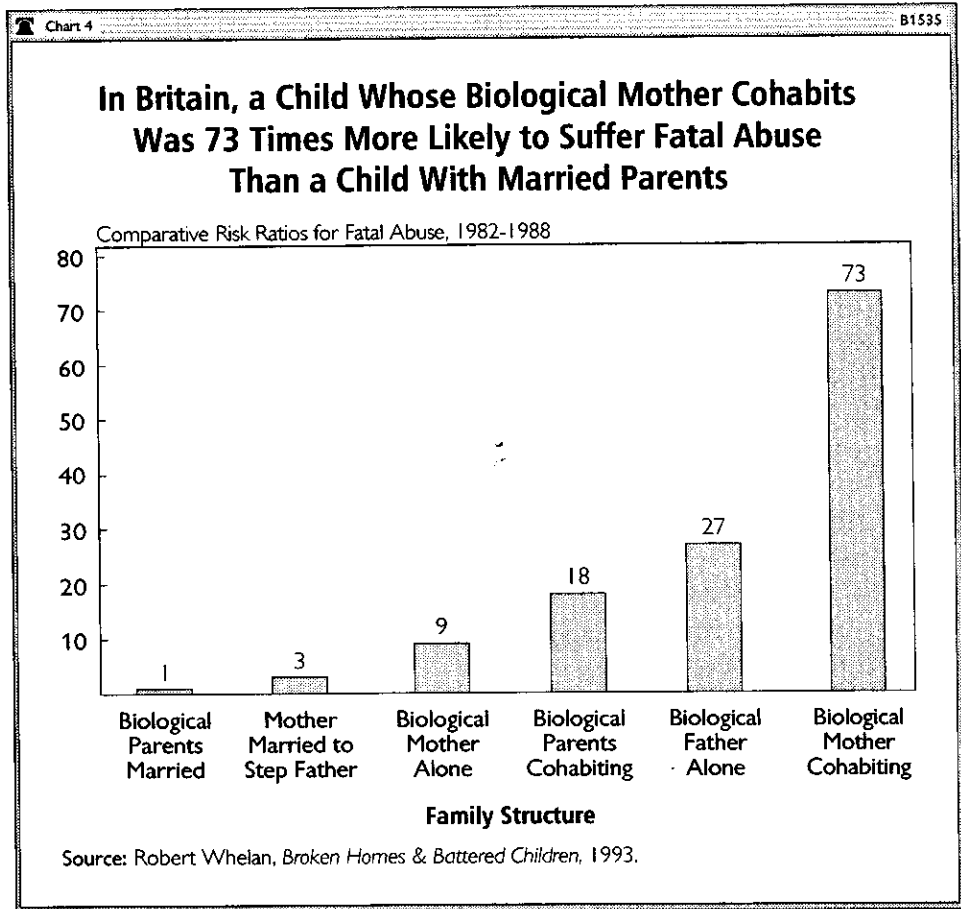
5. See Patrick F. Fagan, "Don't Penalize the Poor for Marrying," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder*, forthcoming.

and abuse, government policy should not encourage—either directly or in unintended ways—single motherhood and cohabitation.

Yet that is what is being done in many of America's means-tested welfare programs. Because mothers and children are safest from harm within a married family, policymakers should begin the work of implementing policies to reduce the bias against marriage in welfare programs and to strengthen marriage as the primary institution for raising children.

Members of Congress should support President Bush's proposal to spend \$300 million per year on efforts to rebuild marriage among the poor. It is the first serious proposal in this regard ever to come before Congress. His suggestions, if adopted into law, would begin the necessary work to reconstruct the institution of marriage, which failed welfare policies of the past have undermined. Now that the first stage of welfare reform—rebuilding an ethic of work—is well underway, Congress should support the President as he focuses on the second important stage: rebuilding a culture of marriage in American society.

Members of Congress should begin to reduce and eventually eliminate the penalty against marriage in most means-tested welfare programs. For example, they could issue a joint resolution indicating their intent to achieve this goal. Then they could request that the Department of Health and Human Services submit a list of options that would be good candidates for this reform.



CONCLUSION

In establishing programs to help those who need assistance, the question before Congress should not simply be whether or not to fund a program, but how much its policies would improve the well-being of adults and children. Social science data clearly show that mothers and children are safest and thrive best in a married family. It is time for the government to adopt policies that reflect this knowledge and rebuild, rather than undermine, the institution of marriage.

—Patrick F. Fagan is William H. G. FitzGerald Research Fellow in Family and Cultural Issues, and Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D., is a Senior Policy Analyst in the Center for Data Analysis, at The Heritage Foundation.