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## **Family Scholars Propose National Agenda to Reverse Decline of Marriage in Middle America**

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va., Dec. 16, 2012 — A team of family scholars today released “[The President’s Marriage Agenda for the Forgotten Sixty Percent](#)” to tackle the striking yet little-discussed decline in marriage among “Middle America” – the nearly 60 percent of Americans who have completed high school, but do not have a four-year college degree.

Among that group, 44 percent of children are now born outside of marriage, up sharply from 13 percent in the 1980s.

The agenda is the centerpiece of the latest “[State of Our Unions](#)” report, an annual, joint publication of the [National Marriage Project](#) at the University of Virginia and the [Institute for American Values](#) in New York City.

According to numerous studies, children born or raised outside of marriage are more likely to suffer from a range of emotional and social problems – including drug use, depression, attempted suicide and dropping out of high school – compared to children in intact, married families, as summarized in past reports such as “[Why Marriage Matters](#)” from the same team.

While debates over same-sex marriage have filled the headlines, the rapid hollowing out of marriage in Middle America – more than half of births among women under 30 now occur outside of marriage – has received scant attention from national leaders, the report notes.

“Marriage in Middle America is at a tipping point, with unwed childbearing threatening to become a new norm,” said report co-author W. Bradford Wilcox, director of the National Marriage Project and a professor of [sociology](#) in U.Va.’s [College of Arts & Sciences](#).

“The children of Middle America, already vulnerable to economic challenges in their communities, are exposed to even greater risks when their parents are unable to form and sustain a healthy marriage,” said report lead author Elizabeth Marquardt, director of the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values.

To reverse that prospect, the report’s recommendations include:

- Eliminate marriage penalties and disincentives for the poor, for unwed mothers, and for older Americans, including lesser-known disincentives present in current Medicaid and Social Security policies.

- Triple the child tax credit to shore up the economic foundations of family life in Middle America.
- Help young men to become more marriageable and better husbands and fathers with job apprenticeship programs [championed by report co-author Robert I. Lerman](#) of the Urban Institute, military programs like the Strong Bonds Program, and prison programs like Within My Reach.
- Enact the [Second Chances Act](#), legislation to provide married couples who are thinking about divorce the time and educational resources necessary to make reconciliation a viable option.
- Provide marriage education for newly forming stepfamilies.
- Invest in and evaluate marriage and relationship education programs, especially those that target at-risk individuals and couples, such as Virginia’s Strengthening Families Initiative, the Family Expectations program in Oklahoma City, and First Things First in Chattanooga, Tenn. Fund such programs by devoting 1 percent to 2 percent of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families block grants.
- Engage Hollywood, much as the anti-smoking movement did, to help shape positive American attitudes toward marriage and parenting.
- Launch social media campaigns about the benefits of marriage, perhaps led by the U.S. Surgeon General.
- Model how to talk about shared marriage values from a variety of perspectives.

“These recommendations would do a lot to signal that we value families,” said report co-author Linda Malone-Colon, founder of the [National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting](#).

Even modest improvements in the health of marriage in America will reduce suffering and yield savings for taxpayers, the report argues. One study calculated that reducing family fragmentation by just 1 percent would save \$1.1 billion annually as fewer children repeat grades, are suspended from school, require counseling or attempt suicide.

Noting that the disappearance of marriage in Middle America is tracking with the disappearance of the middle class in the same communities, the authors argue that strengthening marriage is a vital pathway to opening social opportunity and reducing inequality.

“The retreat from marriage is both a cause and a consequence of increasing inequality in America,” said report co-author David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Values.

Marquardt said, “The president and all our nation’s leaders must confront the marriage challenge in Middle America with the urgency and compassion it deserves.”

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS:**

The authors of “The President’s Marriage Agenda for the Forgotten Sixty Percent” are Elizabeth Marquardt, director of the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values; David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Values; Robert I. Lerman, fellow in labor and social policy at the Urban Institute; Linda Malone-Colon, founder of the National Center for African American Marriages and Parenting based at Hampton University; and W. Bradford Wilcox, director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia.

Also appearing in the latest issue of “State of Our Unions” is a new evaluation of publicly funded marriage initiatives, “Marriage and Relationship Education: A Promising Strategy for Strengthening Low-income, Vulnerable Families,” written by Theodora Ooms, senior policy analyst at the Center for Law and Social Policy, and Alan Hawkins, director of the Center for Studies of the Family at Brigham Young University.

The [National Marriage Project](#), founded in 1997 at Rutgers University, is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian and interdisciplinary initiative now located at the University of Virginia. The project’s mission is to provide research and analysis on the health of marriage in America, to analyze the social and cultural forces shaping contemporary marriage, and to identify strategies to increase marital quality and stability.

The [Center For Marriage And Families](#) is located at the Institute for American Values, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening families and civil society in the U.S. and the world. Directed by Elizabeth Marquardt, the center’s mission is to increase the proportion of U.S. children growing up with their two married parents. At the center’s website, [FamilyScholars.org](#), bloggers include emerging voices and senior scholars with distinctive expertise and points of view tackling today’s key debates on the family.

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