

# Sociology Expert Says Pro-Marriage Culture Reduces Inequality

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NEW ORLEANS — Church support for marriage among poor and middle-class Americans can play a key role in combating income inequality and providing a good environment for children, a sociologist told the U.S. bishops. "If you care about bridging the marriage divide, you should care about economic justice, cultural change and the renewal of civil society," W. Bradford Wilcox, a University of Virginia sociology professor, told the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' general assembly in New Orleans on June 12. "If you care about poverty, if you care about income inequality; if you care about opportunity in America, you should care about marriage," he added.

Wilcox, who directs the University of Virginia's National Marriage Project, cited numerous studies about the state of the family and the benefits a stable marriage provides. He explained that a stable family where both parents are married provides the "human capital" to help spouses and their children succeed. Married parents' children are more likely to succeed in education and in life. Children of married parents are more likely to avoid poverty, abuse, neglect, incarceration and teen pregnancy.

However, Wilcox said that cultural, economic and societal shifts have "coalesced to undercut marriage." Marriage rates and behaviors increasingly reflect and worsen a class divide. Research suggests that the shift in family structure away from marriage accounts for 41% of the increase in economic inequality since 1975, the sociology professor said. Poor children from married two-parent families have greater economic opportunities than those raised without both parents or whose parents cohabit. Rates of divorce and non-marital childbearing have declined among the affluent and the college educated, where a marriage-minded culture is re-emerging. "In the nation's poorest communities, by contrast, marriage is in full retreat and has been declining since the 1970s," Wilcox told the bishops' conference.

## Eroding Family Stability

While the behaviors of the working class and lower middle class in the early 1980s resembled the marriage-minded behaviors of the upper class, these classes now suffer an erosion in family stability. Their behavior patterns now more closely resemble those among the poor, he said. About 20% of children are now born to cohabitating relationships, which are more unstable than marriages and suffer from less commitment and trust, according to studies. Children whose parents have remarried after divorce also suffer many of the problems of children raised in single-parent families.

Most Americans still "aspire for marriage" and want "a happy and stable married life," Wilcox noted. However, they have grown "more accommodating of departures from the ideal." While the affluent and highly educated have acquired stricter attitudes against divorce and premarital sex, less educated Americans have become more permissive.

Wilcox agreed with both liberal and conservative assessments of the decline in marriage. Conservatives focus on cultural and policy changes that have "deliberately or unintentionally" undercut social norms related to marriage. Liberals focus on economic shifts away from an industrial economy, which harm the prospects of working class or poor men. A fall in male wages and increasing male unemployment means men are less likely to get married or stay married.

Wilcox suggested that both liberal and conservative analysts have ignored how the decline of civil-society institutions has affected marriage. Middle Americans, especially men, are "increasingly disengaged" from work and civil-society institutions, including churches, which have traditionally supplied "money, moral direction and social support" for marriage. "We've seen a dramatic decline in Church attendance among middle Americans and among the least educated Americans," Wilcox said. "That has obvious implications for their capacity to hear messages related to family and to experience the spiritual and social support that churches have traditionally afforded marriage and family life."

## What Can Be Done

Wilcox suggested to the bishops that churches should be "a voice for economic justice" and should help direct economic resources towards families. They should seek to eliminate public policies that discourage or penalize marriage. Religious and lay leaders should speak about the benefits of intact marriages for children, while also supporting couples in "crisis." Churches with employment ministries can help families harmed by job loss, while marriage-preparation ministries can improve the quality of marriages. Church ministries should target men, particularly working class and poor men, who are "the most distanced" from religious communities in America.

Wilcox said that religious faith "can be an asset" for marriage in America, especially for couples who share the same faith and worship and pray together. Those with a common faith, who "have a sense that God is present in their marriage," are more likely to report a high-quality marriage, he noted. He added that such efforts will help halt the emergence of an America that is "increasingly separate and unequal" when it comes to marriage.

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