

A Road Map for Conservative, Pro-Family Welfare Reform

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Policymakers should not respond to the *Dobbs* decision by seeking to restore aspects of the pre-reform welfare system that heavily subsidized single parenthood.

Instead, reforms should follow the 1996 welfare reform, which halted the decline of marriage, decreased abortions, increased work, and reduced child poverty.

Programs intended to support mothers, children, and families should eliminate marriage penalties, improve work incentives, reduce fraud, and pay for real outcomes.

The Supreme Court's landmark *Dobbs* decision¹ has renewed interest in policies intended to support mothers, children, and families. This development opens the door for conservatives to advance a pro-family safety net that builds on the success of the 1996 reform. Not since then have conservatives had a better opportunity to promote marriage, reward work, and ultimately support the long-term well-being of lower-income families.²

Before the 1996 welfare reform, single parents and their children faced long-term poverty.³ Families remained welfare dependent for years, and nearly nine in 10 families on welfare were not employed.⁴ The longer they remained dependent on government welfare, the worse were the educational outcomes their children faced.⁵

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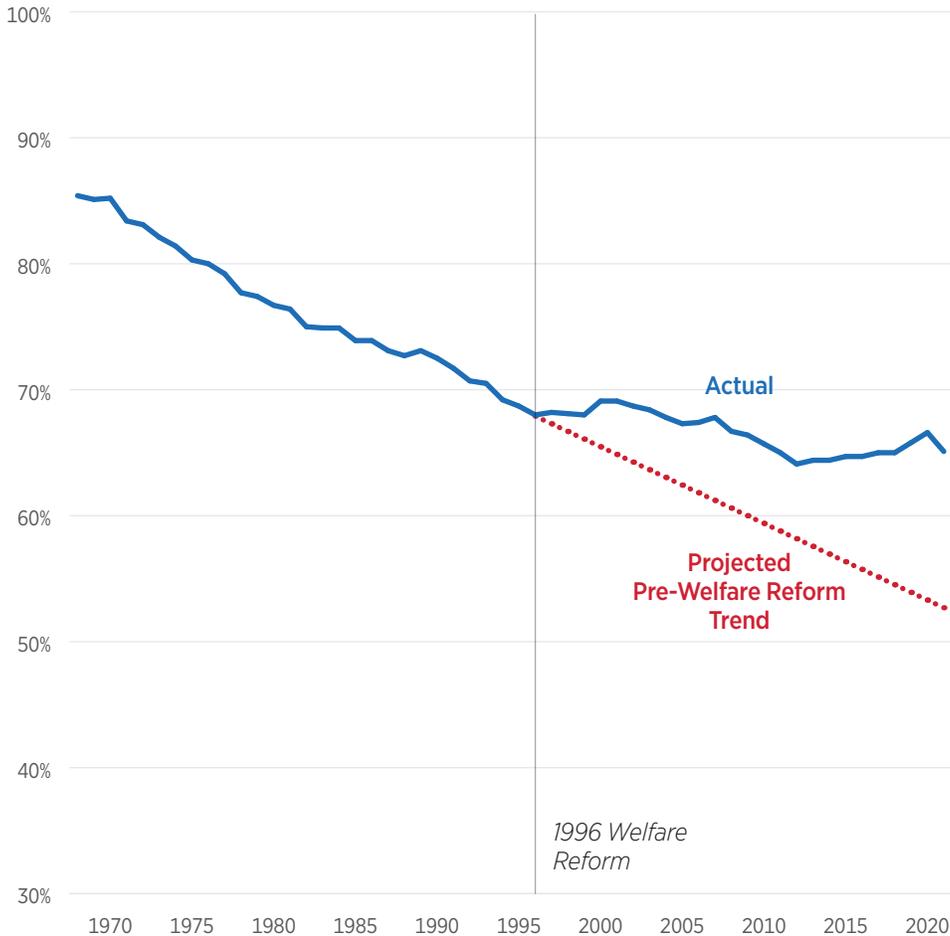
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CHART 1

Welfare Reform Halted the Rapid Decline of Married Two-Parent Families

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN IN TWO-PARENT FAMILIES



SOURCE: Heritage Foundation calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau data.

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Welfare Reform Halted the Collapse of Two-Parent Families

Before welfare reform, family structure was rapidly disintegrating. In 1970, 85 percent of children resided in married two-parent families; by 1996, the number had fallen to 68 percent.⁶ However, as Chart 1 shows, the enactment of welfare reform in 1996 abruptly halted the relentless collapse of two-parent families. The long-term trend line kinked sharply, and for a quarter-century, family structure has been largely stable.

The dotted line on the chart shows the percentage of children who would have lived in married two-parent families if the alarming trend in family deterioration before welfare reform had persisted. If family structure had continued to collapse at the pre-reform rate, only 53 percent of children would currently reside in married two-parent families; an additional 9 million children would now reside in single-parent homes. Thus, if the negative trend had not sharply shifted with welfare reform, more than one-fifth of the children now living in two-parent homes would instead live in single-parent or no-parent families.

Understanding the Link between Abortion and Welfare

The 1996 welfare reform, with its emphasis on personal responsibility and reducing unnecessary dependence, not only halted the decline of marriage, increased work, and reduced child poverty; it also substantially reduced the number of abortions.

Some 85 percent of abortions are performed on non-married women. Following *Roe v. Wade*,⁷ pregnancies among non-married women skyrocketed from 947,000 in 1973 to 2.44 million in 1991. Non-marital abortions more than doubled from 541,000 to 1.2 million.⁸

But with the onset of welfare reform in the early 1990s, this rapid increase in non-marital pregnancy came to an abrupt halt, and the number of abortions to non-married women declined steadily.

In contrast to the pre-reform era, the number of non-marital pregnancies since welfare reform has remained almost completely flat for nearly three decades and is slightly lower today than at the onset of reform. Since between 30 percent and 50 percent of non-marital pregnancies are terminated by abortion, the long-term halt in the dramatic rise of non-marital pregnancy has almost certainly resulted in millions fewer abortions.

Roe v. Wade did not realize its promise of reducing child poverty, including among African Americans. Instead, it was welfare reform that was dramatically successful in reducing child poverty—which has been cut in half—and strengthening marriage.⁹

A Pro-Family Safety-Net Agenda

Policymakers should not respond to the *Dobbs* decision by seeking to restore aspects of the pre-reform welfare system that heavily subsidized and therefore promoted single parenthood. This approach would not only devastate families, but also would likely increase abortion in the long term through its negative effects on non-marital pregnancy and family formation.

Today, policymakers have the opportunity to pick up where the 1996 reforms left off. A pro-family policy agenda should be guided by the following policies to improve the well-being of families through marriage, work, and accountability in the safety net.

- **Strengthen marriage by eliminating marriage penalties within the welfare state.** A healthy marriage is fundamental to the well-being of the family; couples should be rewarded—not penalized—when they commit to raise their children together. But nearly all welfare programs have significant marriage penalties.

The anti-marriage bias of the welfare state has played a large role in undermining the married family. When the War on Poverty started in 1964, only 7 percent of children were born to single mothers. That's now 40 percent.¹⁰

This is a social tragedy. Children raised in the context of marriage have substantially better life outcomes, including higher education attainment levels and better emotional health.¹¹ When fathers are absent, the consequences are dire: During their teen years, boys are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior, and girls are seven to eight times more likely to experience a teenage pregnancy.¹²

The 1996 welfare reforms greatly slowed the steady collapse of two-parent families (which had been ongoing for several decades), and teen pregnancy and abortion rates fell sharply.¹³ Policymakers who want to support healthy marriage should take the next step and eliminate the marriage penalties across the welfare system.

Policymakers should also recognize that one in four children today is born to parents who are cohabiting but not married.¹⁴ Steps should be taken to strengthen these nascent families. In addition to removing the significant marriage penalties facing these low-income parents, sound information should be provided to them on the value of marriage for adults and children and the techniques needed to build durable relationships.

- **Reward work by strengthening work requirements and improving work incentives.** Before the 1996 welfare reform, the federal government distributed cash aid without conditions to support vulnerable

mothers and their children. When the landmark 1996 welfare reform bill connected welfare to work, overall well-being improved. Government dependence declined for the first time in a half-century.¹⁵ Employment of never-married mothers with a high school degree or less rose from 51 percent in 1992 to 76 percent within eight years.¹⁶ Child poverty, which had been static for decades, fell sharply by almost 10 percentage points, and the poverty rate among single-parent families dropped by nearly 60 percent.¹⁷ We should build on this success by extending requirements for work-capable adults to work or prepare for work as a condition of receiving aid across the welfare system.

Policymakers should recognize that in addition to raising income, work fulfills a basic human need. A strong sense of competence, industry, or mastery—usually achieved through work—is essential to human well-being. This need is identified by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt as “effectance” and classified as a higher order need in Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.¹⁸

This understanding is rooted in Aristotle’s *Ethics*: “[I]n his activity the maker is, in a sense, the work produced. He therefore loves his work, because he loves existence.”¹⁹ Founding Father Benjamin Franklin summarized this basic need succinctly: “It is the working man who is the happy man. It is the idle man who is the miserable man.”

This need is also a common religious theme, as seen in the Bible: “[B]ut if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”²⁰ As John Paul II wrote, “Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes ‘more a human being.’”²¹

When families have at least one working parent, the positive impacts go beyond economic outcomes. When unemployment lasts more than six months, it is also associated with decreased well-being, even measurably affecting mortality, reducing life expectancy by as much as a year and a half.²² When mothers who were formerly dependent on welfare find employment, we see increased physical health as well as emotional and psychological well-being.²³ The health and behavioral outcomes for their children are even better.²⁴

- **Reduce fraud.** Without real accountability in our safety net, there is no way to ensure that the \$1.2 trillion spent on means-tested welfare each year will meet the needs of the poor efficiently and effectively. In 2019—before COVID policies weakened oversight even more—at least one-quarter of the \$59 billion in annual Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) spending was improperly paid.²⁵ Other programs such as food stamps have similar high error and fraud rates but lack the rigorous audits performed on the EITC to measure them. Fraud should be dramatically reduced, and this can be done by removing program loopholes and verifying eligibility information with better data.
- **Pay for outcomes.** Many federal social programs spend billions to reduce negative behaviors and empower the vulnerable. But with rare exceptions, these programs fail to prove that they make a difference for at-risk Americans. It is time to change how these programs are funded. Currently, these programs simply pay third-party providers for services. For instance, there are 43 employment and training programs that spent \$18.9 billion in 2019 intending to help beneficiaries build skills and identify and obtain employment.²⁶ However, these programs have not demonstrated successful outcomes for recipients.²⁷ Instead of using ineffective payment models, federal social programs should reward providers for achieving verifiable outcomes that change lives for the better. To improve the lives of the poor, programs should be restructured to fund positive outcomes achieved rather than merely to fund services provided.²⁸

Commonsense program integrity measures, including reducing fraud and paying providers for achieving verified outcomes such as reducing drug abuse or prison recidivism among program participants, are necessary to ensure that current funding truly helps the poor.²⁹

Conclusion

The *Dobbs* case reinforces the importance of a sound and effective safety net. Proposals intended to support mothers, children, and families should not return to the pre-reform welfare model. Instead, policymakers should seize the opportunity to fix the distortions in the safety net that remain. The reforms listed above would both convert the current failed system into a helpful support for mothers, fathers, and children and significantly reduce abortion rates by strengthening marriage.

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Endnotes

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