

Marriage: America's No. 1 Weapon Against Childhood Poverty

How the Collapse of Marriage Hurts the Nation
and 7 Steps to Reverse the Damage

A Heritage Foundation Book of Charts

Richard and Helen DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society • Fall 2010



Growth of Unwed Childbearing in the U.S., 1929–2008

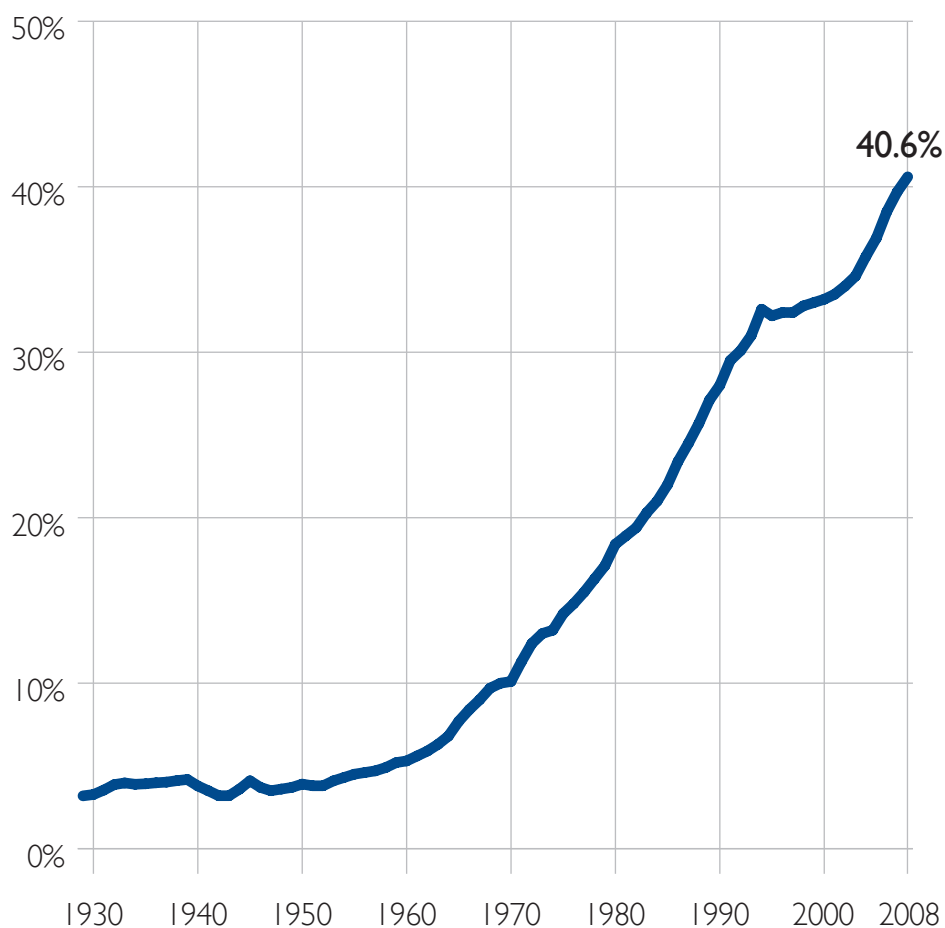
Throughout most of U.S. history, unwed childbearing was rare.

When the federal government's War on Poverty began in 1964, only 6.3 percent of children in the U.S. were born out of wedlock. However, over the next four decades, the number rose rapidly. By 2008, four out of 10 births occurred outside of marriage.

Note: Initiated by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964, the War on Poverty led to the creation of more than three dozen welfare programs to aid poor persons. The government has spent \$16.7 trillion on means-tested aid to the poor since 1963.

Source: U.S. Government, U.S. Census Bureau, and National Center for Health Statistics.

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN BORN OUT OF WEDLOCK



Death of Marriage in the U.S., 1929–2008

The marital birth rate—the percentage of all births that occur to married parents—is the flip side of the out-of-wedlock birth rate.

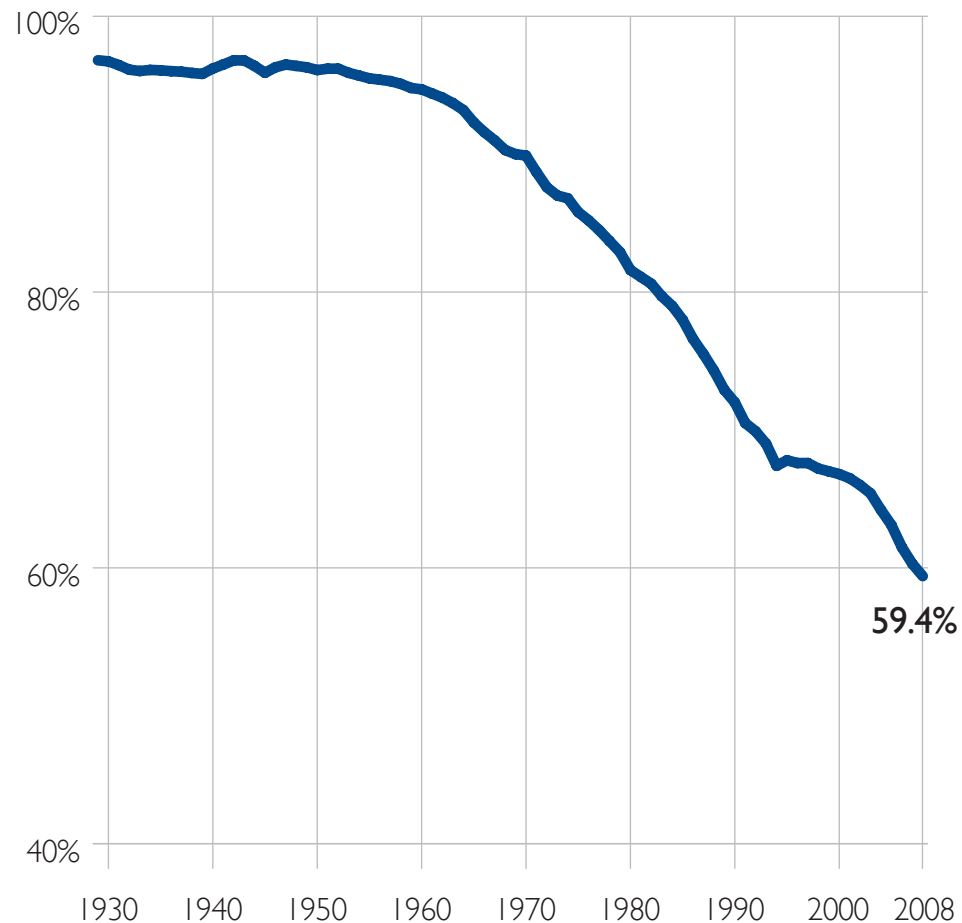
Through most of the 20th century, marital births were the norm in the U.S. In 1963, more than 93 percent of births occurred to married couples.

However, in the mid-1960s, the marital birth rate began to fall steadily. By 2008, only 59 percent of births in the U.S. occurred to married couples.

Note: In any given year, the sum of the out-of-wedlock birth rate (Chart 1) and the marital birth rate (Chart 2) equals 100 percent of all births.

Source: U.S. Government, U.S. Census Bureau, and National Center for Health Statistics.

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN BORN OUT OF WEDLOCK



Marriage Drops the Probability of Child Poverty by 82 Percent

The steady rise in out-of-wedlock child bearing is a major cause of high levels of child poverty in the U.S.

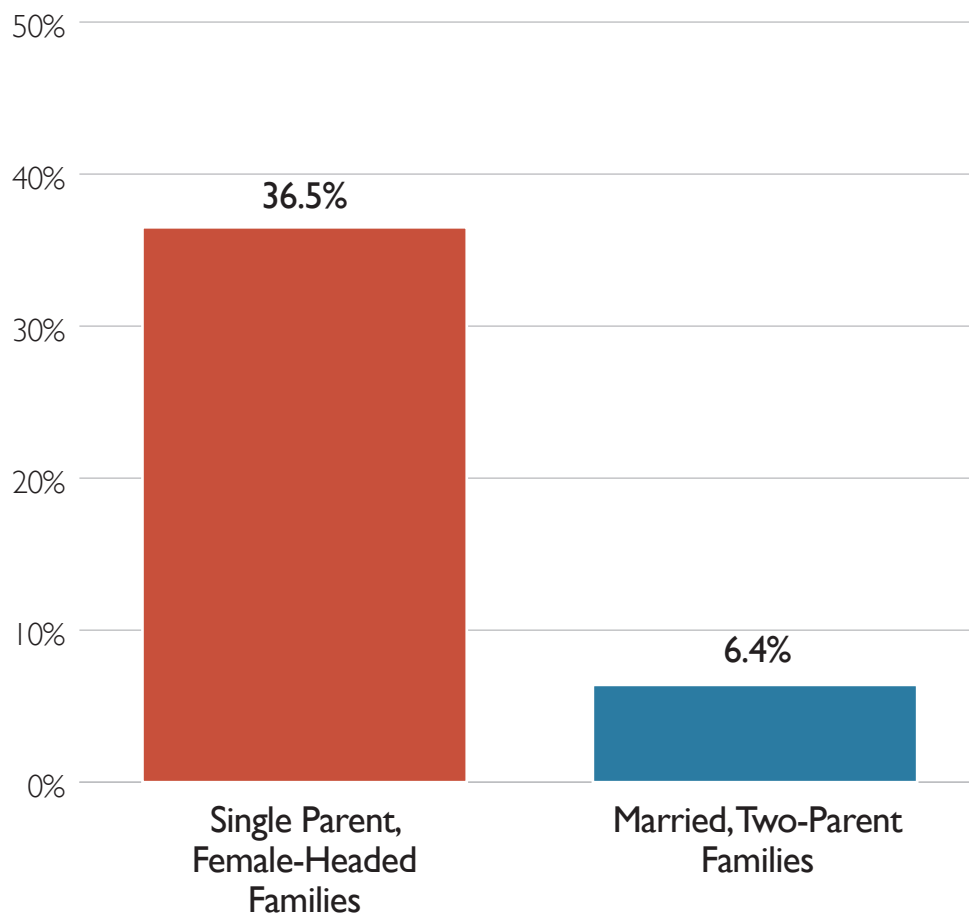
In 2008, more than a third (36.5 percent) of single mothers with children were poor, compared to only 6.4 percent of married couples with children.

Single-parent families with children are almost six times more likely to be poor than are married couples.

The higher poverty rate among single-mother families is due both to the lower education levels of the mothers and the lower income because of the absence of the fathers.

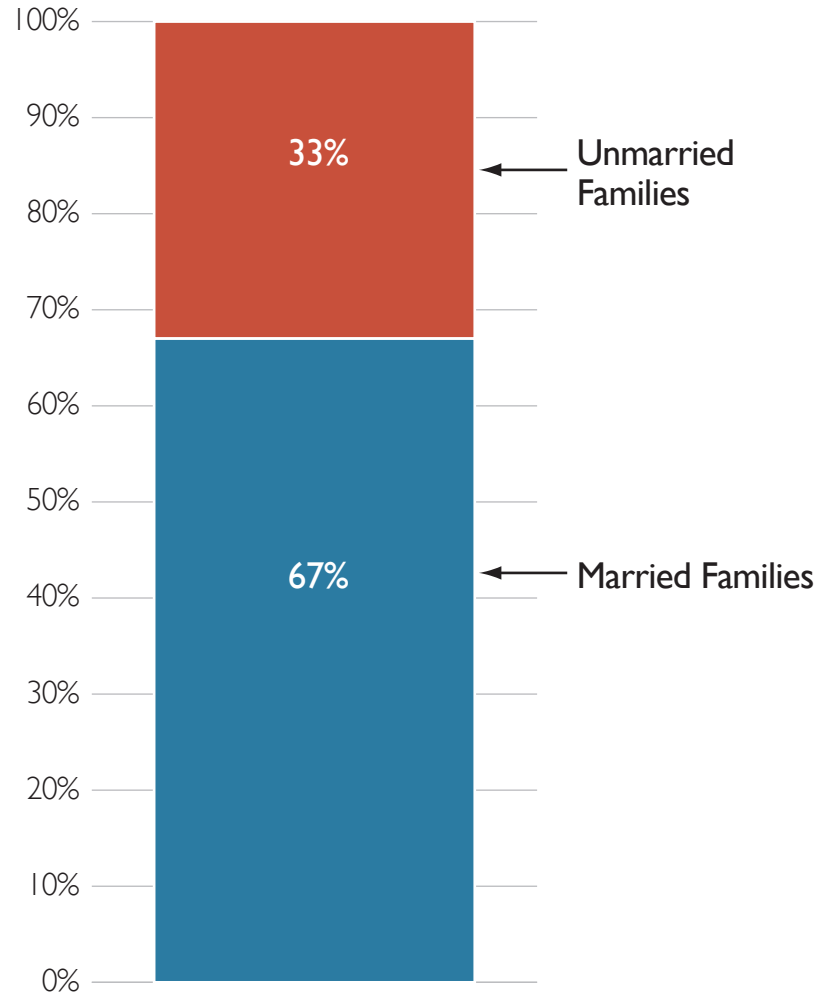
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2006–2008 data.

PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN THAT ARE POOR



One-Third of All Families with Children Are Not Married

Overall, married couples head roughly two-thirds of families with children in the U.S. The other third are single-parent families.

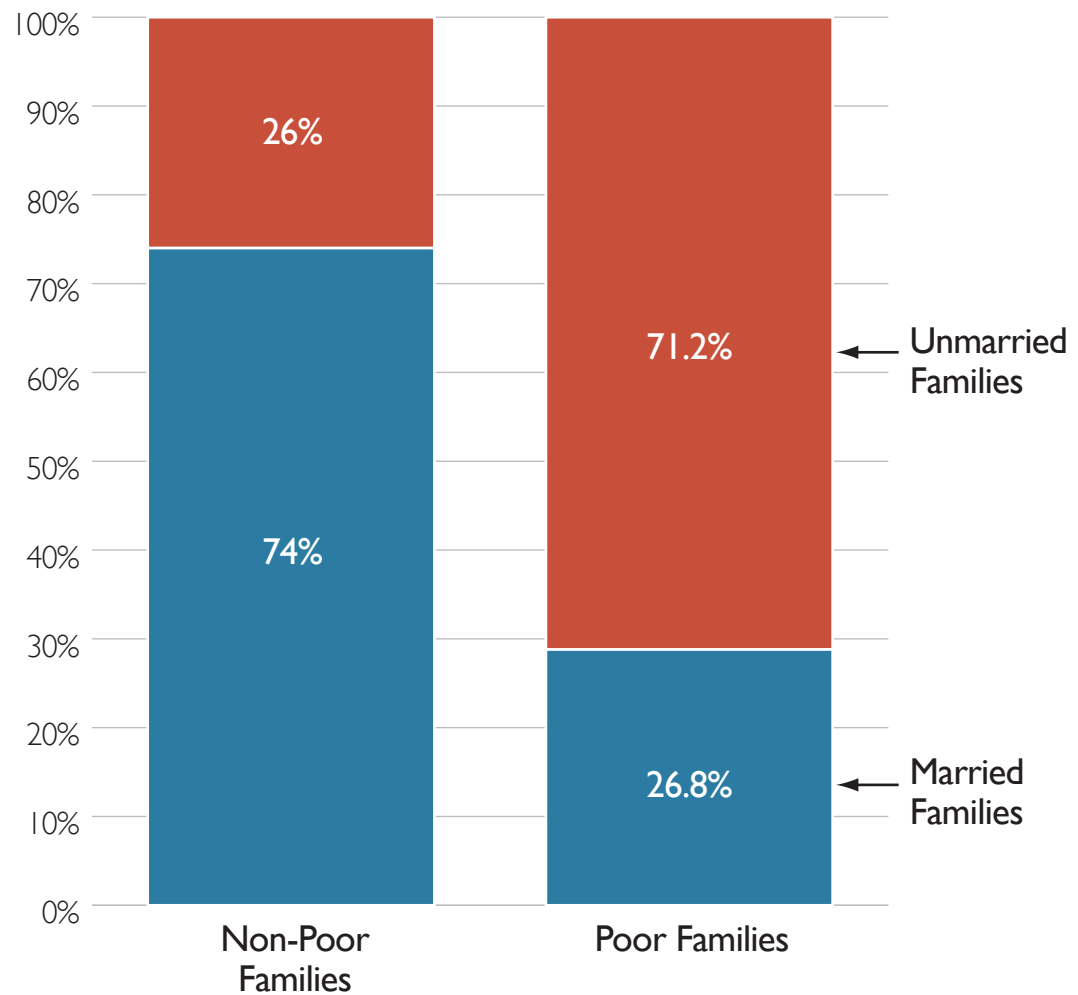


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2006–2008 data.

71 Percent of Poor Families with Children Are Not Married

Nearly three-quarters of families with children in the U.S. that are not poor are married couples.

By contrast, 71 percent of all poor families with children are headed by single parents.



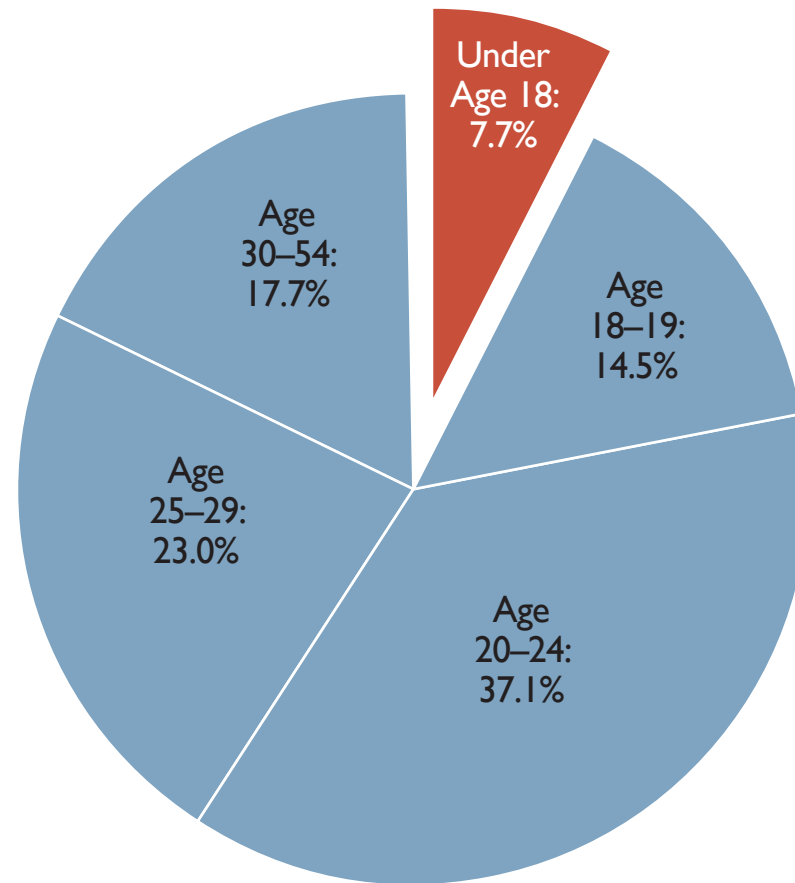
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2006–2008 data.

Few Unwed Births Occur to Teenagers

Out-of-wedlock births are often confused erroneously with teen births, but only 8 percent of out-of-wedlock births in the U.S. occur to girls under age 18.

By contrast, some three out of four unwed births occur to young adult women between the ages of 18 and 29.

PERCENTAGE OF OUT-OF-WEDLOCK BIRTHS BY AGE OF MOTHER



Note: Figures have been rounded.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006 NHS data.

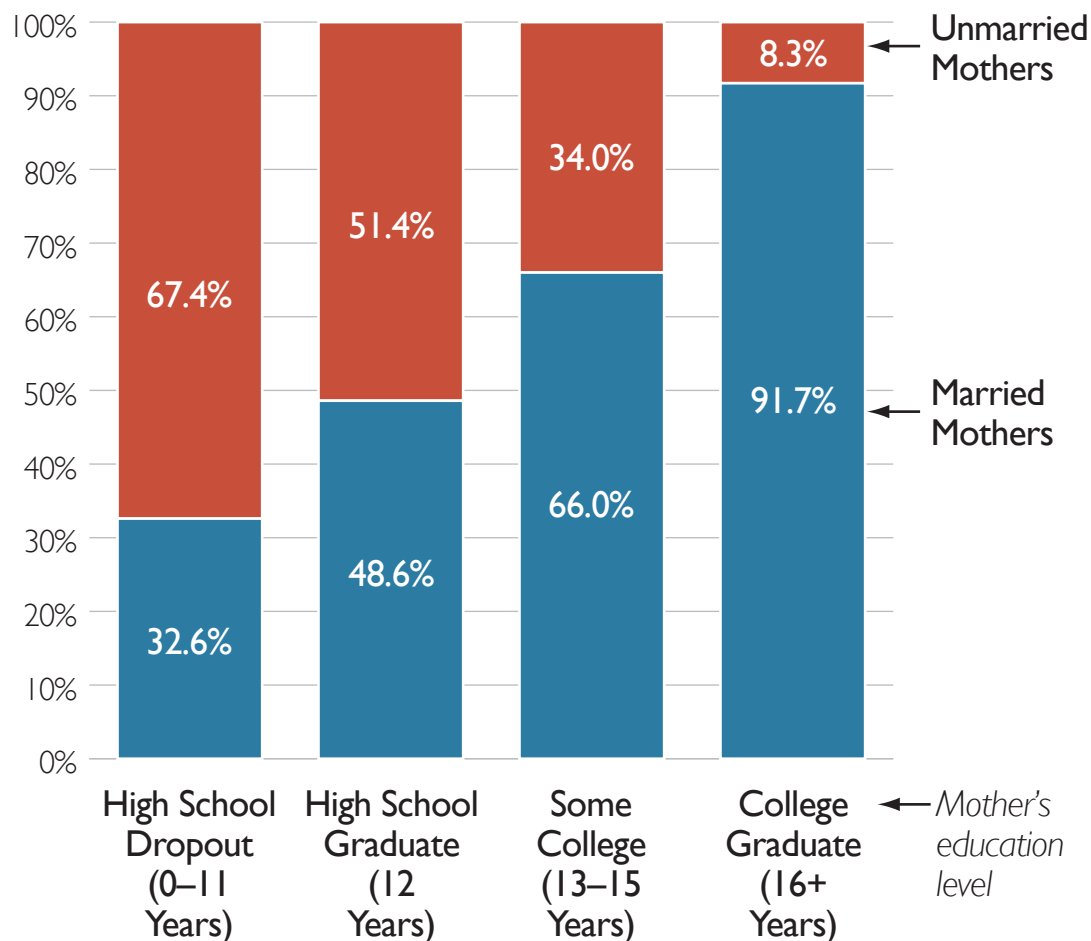
Less-Educated Women Are More Likely to Give Birth Outside Marriage

Unwed childbearing occurs most frequently among the women who will have the greatest difficulty supporting children by themselves: those with low levels of education.

Among women who are high school dropouts, more than two-thirds of all births occur outside marriage. Among women who have only a high school diploma, slightly more than half of all births occur outside marriage. By contrast, among women with at least a college degree, only 8 percent of births are out-of-wedlock.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006 NHS data.

PERCENTAGE OF BIRTHS THAT ARE MARITAL OR OUT OF WEDLOCK



Both Marriage and Education Are Highly Effective in Reducing Child Poverty in the United States

The poverty rate for married couples is dramatically lower than the rate for households headed by single parents. This is true even when the married couple is compared to single parents with the same education level.

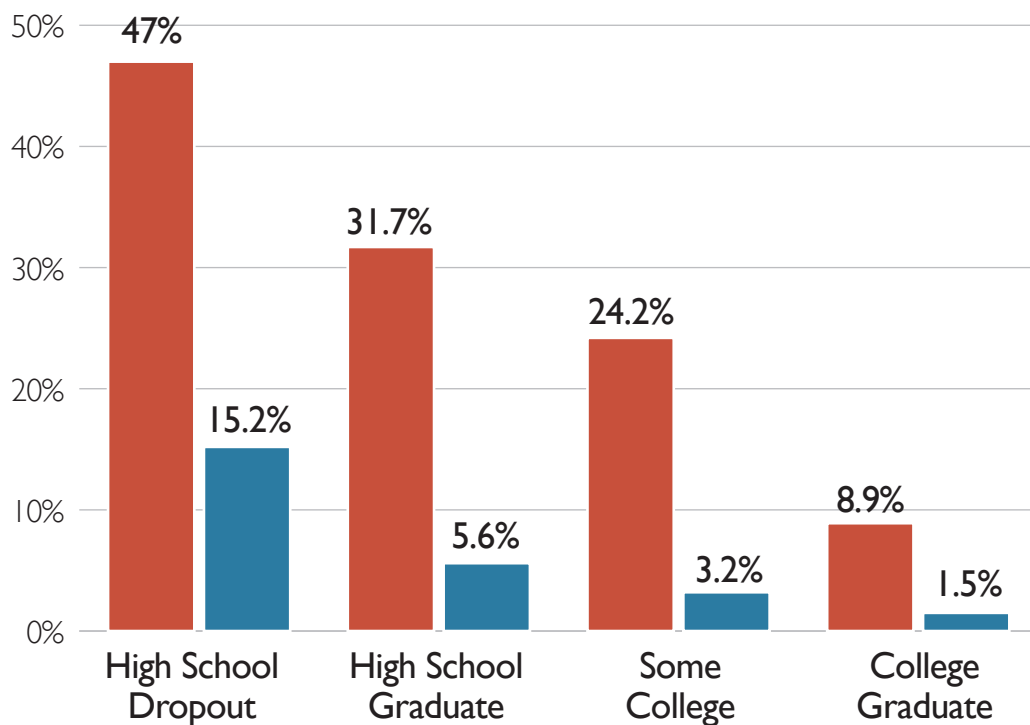
For example, in the U.S., the poverty rate for a single mother who has only a high school diploma is 31.7 percent, but the poverty rate for a married couple family headed by an individual who, similarly, has only a high school degree is far lower at 5.6 percent.

On average, marriage drops the poverty rate by around 80 percent among families with the same education level.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2006-2008 data.

PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES THAT ARE POOR

Poverty Rate of Families by Education and Marital Status of the Head of Household



Note: Virtually none of the heads of families in the chart who are high school dropouts are minor teenagers.

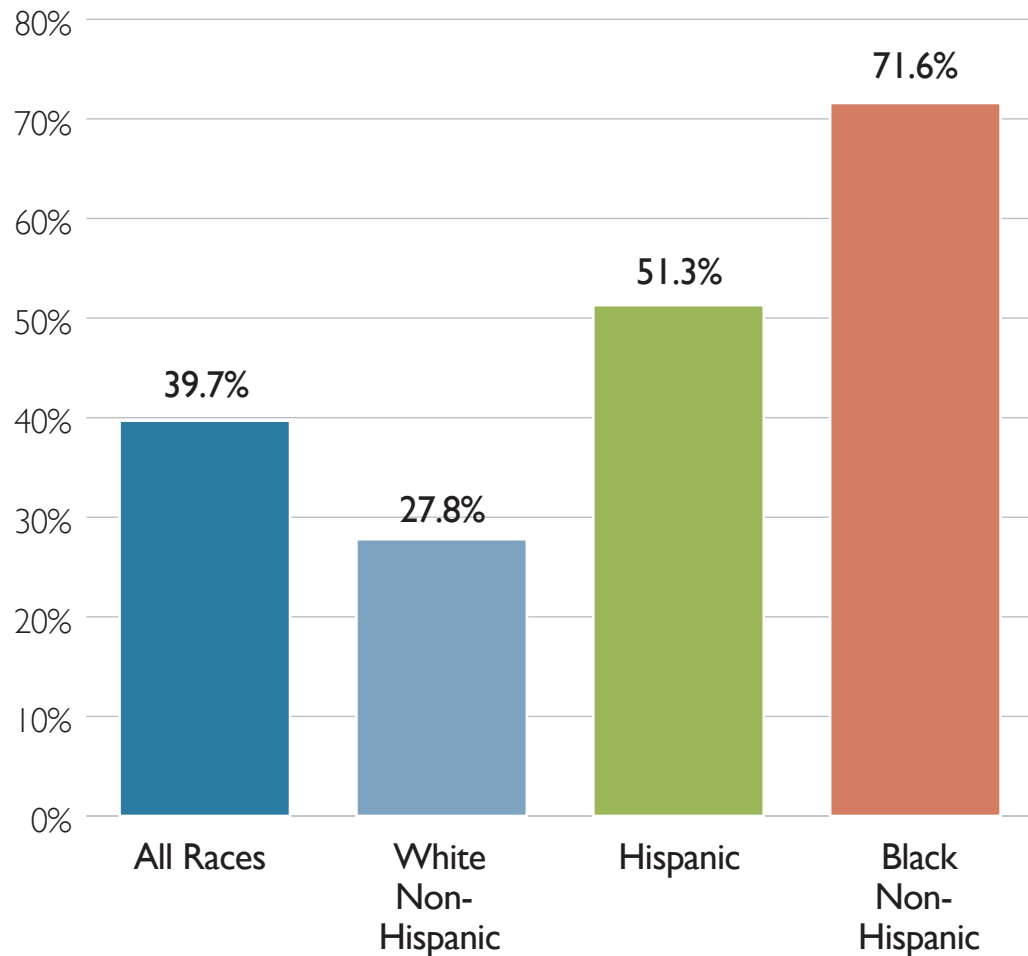
Unwed Birth Rates Vary Strongly by Race

Out-of-wedlock childbearing varies considerably by race.

In 2006 (the most recent year for which racial breakdown is available), nearly four in 10 births (39.7 percent) in the U.S. occurred outside marriage. The unwed birth rate was lowest among non-Hispanic whites, at just over one in four births (27.8 percent). Among Hispanics, more than half of births were out-of-wedlock. Among blacks, seven out of 10 births were to unmarried women (71.6 percent).

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006 NHS data.

PERCENT OF BIRTHS THAT ARE OUT OF WEDLOCK



Growth of Unwed Childbearing by Race, 1929–2008

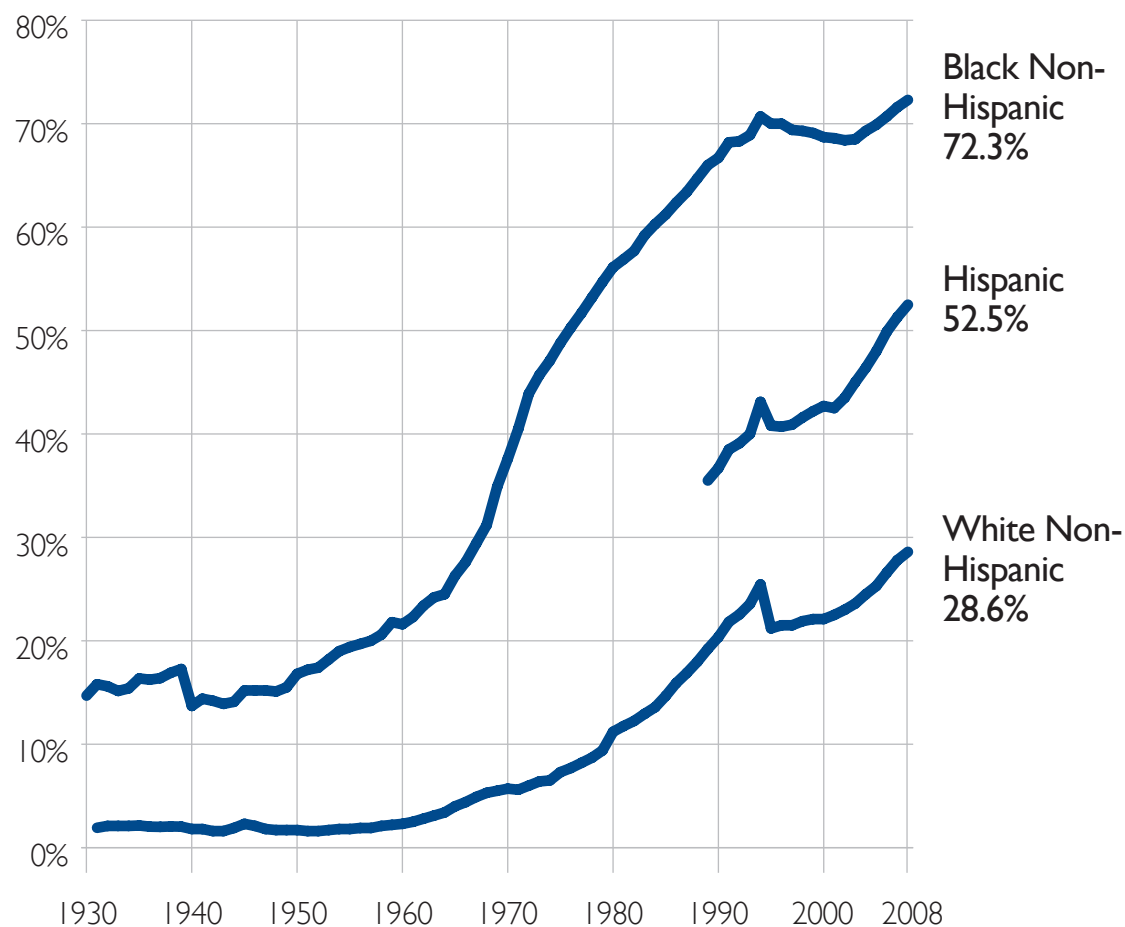
Historically, out-of-wedlock childbearing has been somewhat more frequent among blacks than among whites. However, before the onset of the federal government's War on Poverty in 1964, the rates for both whites and blacks were comparatively low.

In 1963, not even one in 10 (3.1 percent) white children was born outside marriage. By 2008, the number had risen to more than one in four (28.6 percent).

In 1963, about one in four black children (24.2 percent) was born outside marriage. By 2008, the number had risen to nearly three in every four (72.3 percent).

Source: U.S. Government, U.S. Census Bureau, and National Center for Health Statistics.

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN BORN OUT OF WEDLOCK



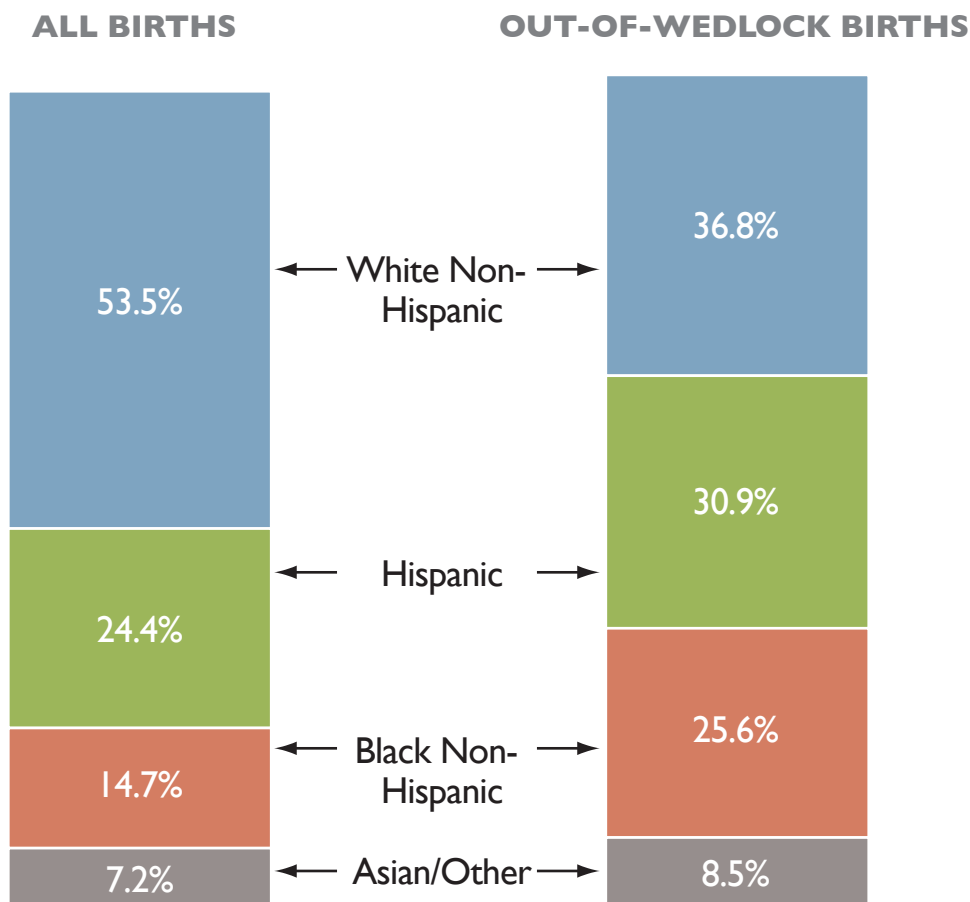
Racial Composition of All Births and Out-of-Wedlock Births in the U.S.

In the U.S. in 2006, some 53.5 percent of all births occurred to non-Hispanic whites; 24.4 percent occurred to Hispanics, and 14.7 percent occurred to non-Hispanic blacks.

Because blacks and Hispanics are more likely to have children without being married, they account for a disproportionately large share of all out-of-wedlock births. Even so, the largest number of unwed births are to white non-Hispanic women.

In the U.S. in 2006, 37 percent of all non-marital births were to non-Hispanic whites; 31 percent were to Hispanics, and 26 percent were to black non-Hispanic women.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006 NHS data.



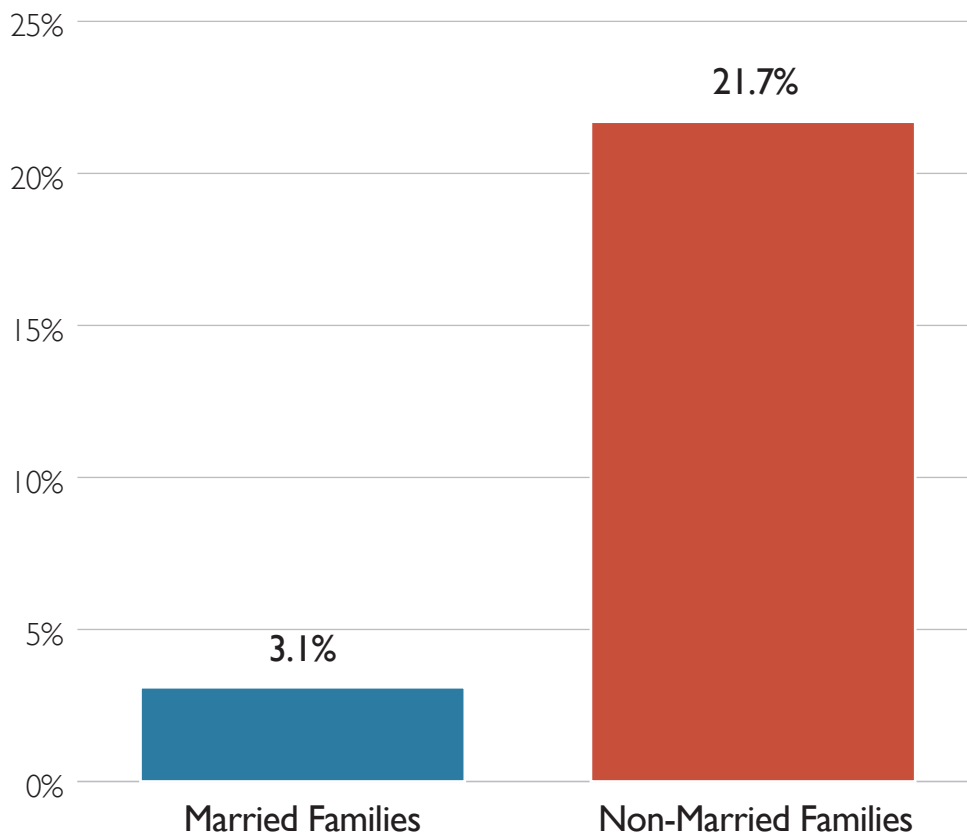
Note: Figures have been rounded.

Non-Married White Families Are Seven Times More Likely to Be Poor

Marriage leads to lower poverty rates for whites, blacks, and Hispanics.

For example, in 2006, the poverty rate for married white families was 3.1 percent. But the poverty rate for non-married white families was seven times higher at 21.7 percent.

PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES THAT ARE POOR

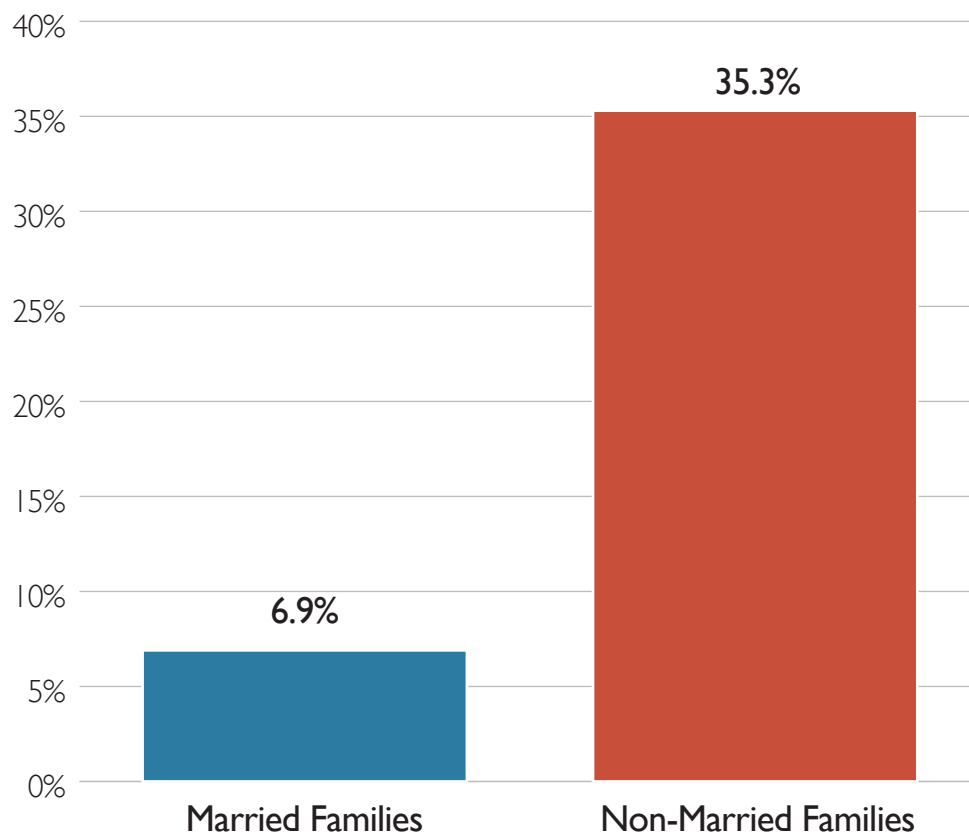


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2006–2008 data.

Non-Married Black Families Are Five Times More Likely to Be Poor

In 2006, the poverty rate for black married black couples was 6.9 percent, while the poverty rate for non-married black families was more than five times higher at 35.3 percent.

PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES THAT ARE POOR

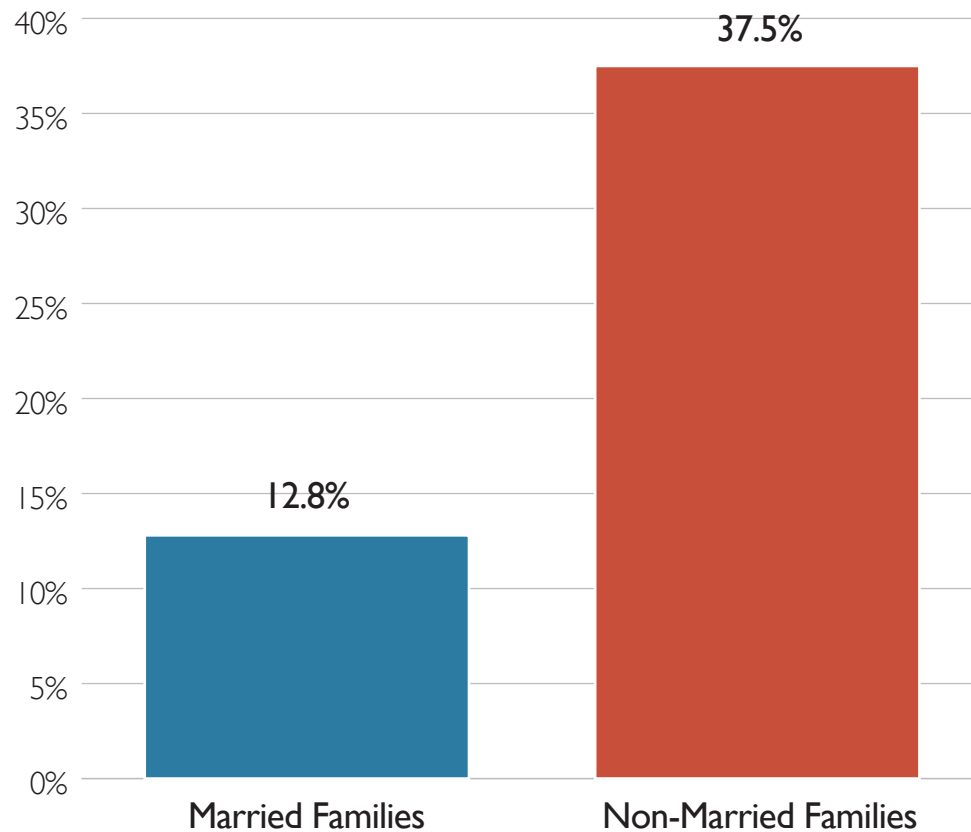


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2006–2008 data.

Non-Married Hispanic Families Are Nearly Three Times More Likely to Be Poor

In 2006, the poverty rate for Hispanic married families was 12.8 percent, while the poverty rate among non-married families was nearly three times higher at 37.5 percent.

PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES THAT ARE POOR



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2006–2008 data.

7 Steps to Reduce Child Poverty through Marriage

Given the importance of marriage in reducing child poverty, the following steps should be undertaken to strengthen marriage in low income communities.

- 1) Reduce anti-marriage penalties in welfare programs.
- 2) Create public education campaigns in low-income communities on the benefits of marriage.
- 3) Require welfare offices to provide factual information on the value of marriage in reducing poverty and welfare dependence.
- 4) Explain the benefits of marriage in middle and high schools with a high proportion of at-risk youth.
- 5) Require federally funded birth control clinics to provide information on the benefits of marriage and the skills needed to develop stable families to interested low-income clients.
- 6) Require federally funded birth control clinics to offer voluntary referrals to life planning and marriage skills education to all interested low-income clients.
- 7) Make voluntary marriage education widely available to interested couples in low-income communities.

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