

**MCYS-CSC Social Strategy Lectures on
“Reviving the Family – The United States’ Experience”**

by Dr Ron Haskins, Senior Fellow and Co-Director of the Center on Children and Families, Brookings Institution

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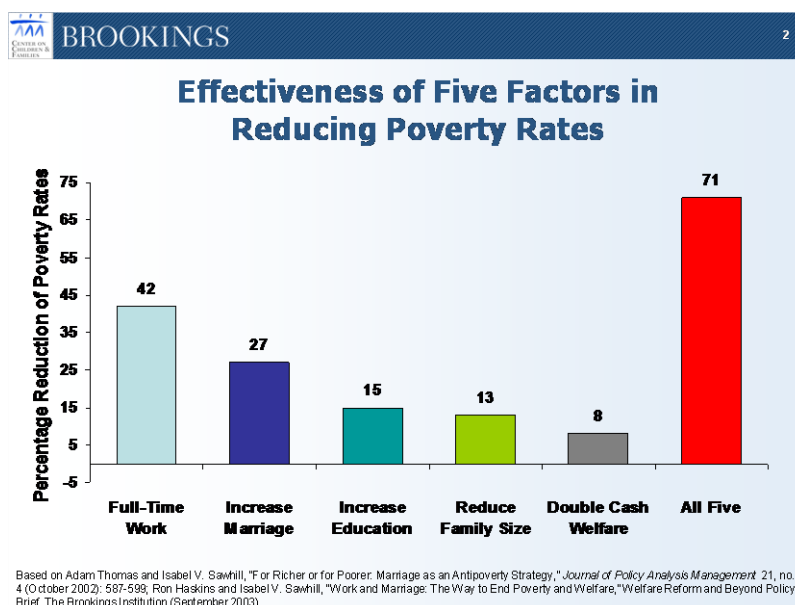
In this lecture, Dr. Ron Haskins, a Senior Fellow in the Economic Studies Program and Co-director of the Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution and a former White House and congressional advisor on welfare issues, shared the strategies adopted by the United States government to revive the family as an institution. Dr. Haskins provided insights from the efforts of the United States government and the federal and state initiatives implemented to promote family well-being. Dr. Haskins also highlighted the importance of family well-being for the overall development of the child.

Introduction

Dr Haskins began his lecture by stating that marriage was a hot topic in the United States. This was because the family situation in the United States was experiencing rapid and radical changes, and these changes had tremendous implications on children. Dr Haskins elaborated this point saying that family composition, i.e. married or single-parent families, greatly determined the economic well-being, achievement and development of a child. He also indicated that research showed that the best environment for a child to grow up was in a married family.

Rising Single Parenthood: A Worrying Trend in the United States

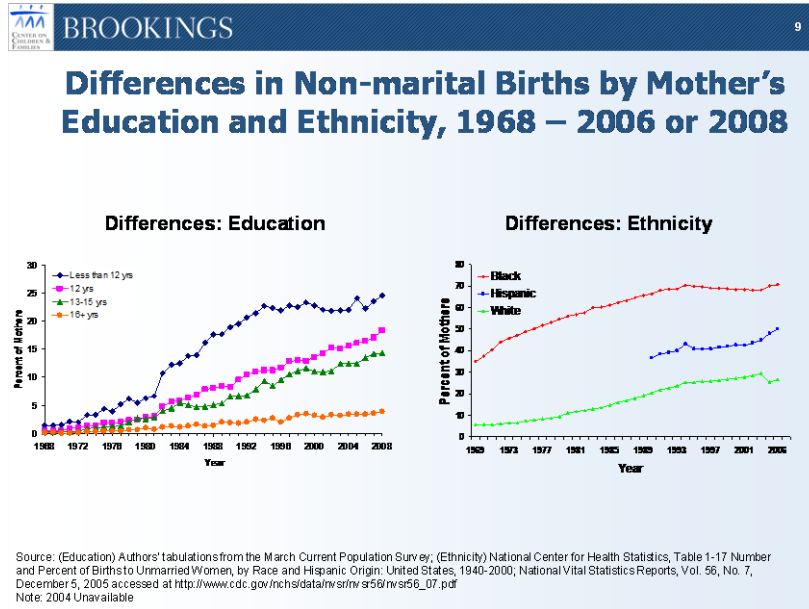
Before discussing that the United States was experiencing a rise in single parenthood, Dr Haskins shared with the audience a simple analysis on the importance of marriage by showing how marriage could act as an antipoverty tool.



Referring to the chart on the left, Dr Haskins noted that getting and staying married was the second most effective strategy after having a full-time job to fight poverty. The reason was simply because married families were able to avoid complete unemployment as there were two income sources.

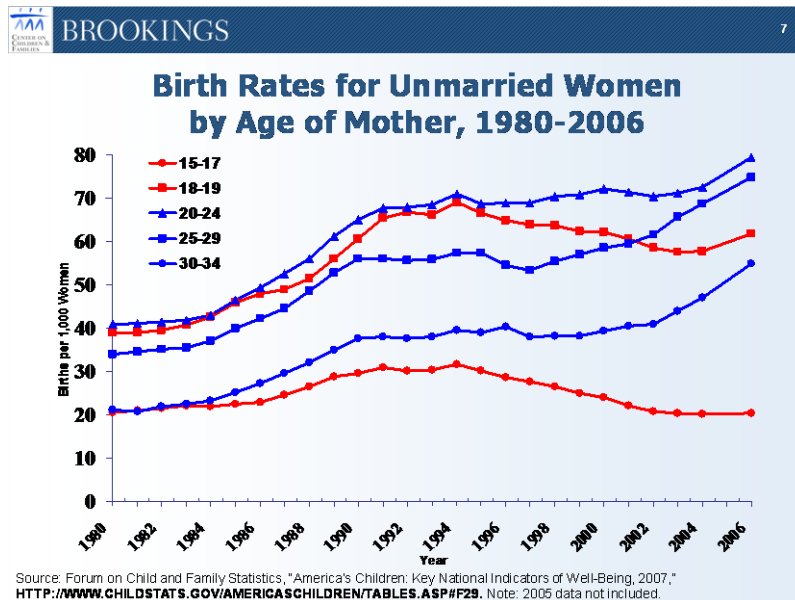
Moving on, Dr Haskins delved into the discussion on the rising trend in single parenthood in the United States. To illustrate this trend, he told the audience that the number of births to unmarried

women in the United States experienced a sharp increase from about five percent in 1940 to over 41 percent in 2007. What could be the cause of this rising trend? Dr Haskins believed education could be a crucial factor.



Using the chart on the left, he noted that there was a correlation between education level and having non-marriage births. He said that women who were higher educated were more cautious about having non-marriage births because their future (e.g. career or reputation) was at stake. Based on this observation, Dr Haskins shared that one of the strategies of programmes to reduce non-marriage births was to get women into universities so

that they would have a future to look forward to. For women who did not have the opportunity to enter universities, these programmes would help them to plan a future constructively.

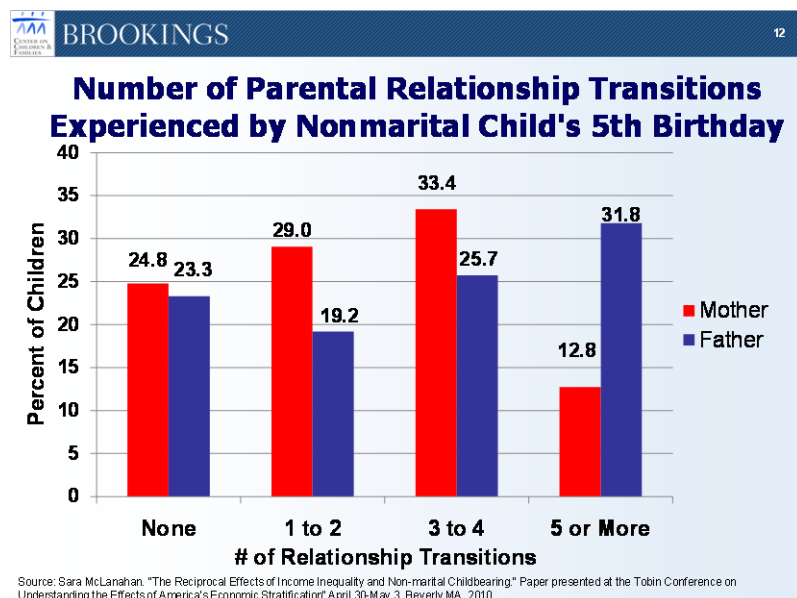


Another thrust of the various programmes in the United States to reduce non-marriage births was to reduce teen pregnancy. Dr Haskins noted that this was relatively successful as there was a marked reduction of pregnancy per 1,000 girls (age 15-19). From 1992 through 2007, this dropped to over 100 to around 80. However, there was still a long way to go as the United States' teen pregnancy rate was the highest compared to other developed economies.

Furthermore, as the chart above revealed, the progress made by the teen pregnancy programme was marred by the rising number of births by unmarried mothers over the age of 20.

One reason to explain why there was a rise in single mothers after age 20 in the United States could be the huge decline in marriage rate. Indeed, as Dr Haskins pointed out, from 1970 to 2000, the number of married women at age 25 for both Whites and Blacks decreased sharply

from 81 percent to 47 percent and from 64 percent to 24 percent respectively. Dr Haskins believed that the drop in marriage rates could be related to the higher preference for couples to cohabit. Since 1953, the number of women at age 20 who cohabited once prior to marriage jumped from 10 percent to over 65 percent at the end of 1994. Dr Haskins also pointed out that this rising trend was also accompanied by a rise in the number of births to cohabiting couples. In fact, the number of births to cohabiting couples as percentage of births to unmarried women was more than half between 1997 through 2001.



Dr Haskins was concerned about this development, particularly its effect on the development of a child. He believed that parents who cohabit would produce an unstable and complex environment for the child as there was a higher tendency for the parents to change partners by entering new relationship. Dr Haskins pointed out this development was not a myth. Statistics showed that the percentage of children living in single-parent families had grown

from 11.9 percent to 26.3 percent from 1970 to 2008. Furthermore, using the chart to the left, he noted that single parents experienced high relationship transitions in the first five years after their child was born.

Lone Parenting: Consequences

For a long time, scholars actually believed that single-parenthood had no effect on the development of a child. Dr Haskins highlighted that the change in perception or "breakthrough" came in 1994 when Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur were able to show that single-parenthood had a negative impact on a child's development in their book, *Growing Up with a Single Parent* (1994). Thereafter, scholars began to show a higher degree of concern over this issue by conducting more studies on the impact of divorce and unwed births on a child's well-being. Dr Haskins noted that these studies were important as it helped deepened the understanding on this topic.

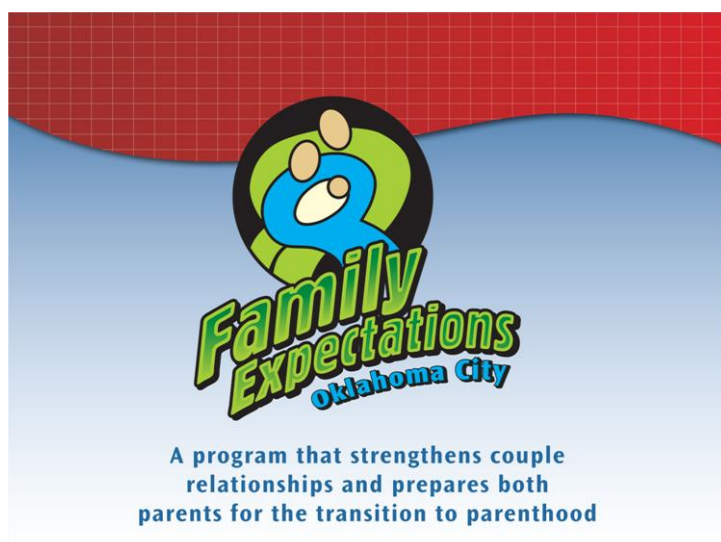
For instance, the studies revealed that single-parent households were more likely to fall into poverty because there was only one income source. In fact, the US Census Bureau showed that the percentage of female-headed households in poverty was not only increasing since 1974 but was much higher than married-couple households.

In addition, new studies also revealed that single-parenthood had a negative effect on the well-being of adolescents. Adolescents in such households were more likely to drop out from schools or were more violent. This was because these households lacked an authority figure like the father who had a higher capacity to deal with adolescents.

What to Do?

To deal with the problem of rising single parenthood, Dr Haskins said that the US government adopted a two-pronged strategy: 1) to reduce non-marital births and 2) to increase marriage rates. Spearheading the thrust to reduce non-marital births was the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programme. To make the programme effective, Dr Haskins noted that it should possess the following characteristics:

- Focus on one or more sexual behaviours that lead to unintended pregnancy
- Employ behavioural goals, methods, and materials appropriate for the age, sexual experience, and culture of the students
- Theory-based programs with evidence of impacts on risky behaviours
- Sufficient length of programme
- Consistent emphasis on messages about abstaining from sex or using condoms
- Multiple teaching methods (not just lecture)
- Provide accurate information about risks of pregnancy and methods of avoiding
- Address social pressures to have sex
- Teach and practice refusal skills
- Teachers believe in the programme



To increase marriage rates, the Bush administration had introduced many educational programmes. Some of these programmes were new initiatives while some of them were included in existing social programmes such as child protection. Dr Haskins also noted that the marriage initiatives also took ethnicity into consideration as there were separate ones for Hispanic and Black marriages. To expand the effectiveness of these programmes, research was carried to find methods for building strong

families, supporting healthy marriage and to include the help of the community to improve marriage rates. Dr Haskins cited the Family Expectations Programme from Oklahoma City (see inserted image above) as an example of the government's initiative to promote marriage and to strengthen families.

Some of the key takeaways from the programme include:

- The programme was open to both married and unmarried couples, where the mother was currently pregnant
- Both mom and dad separately consented to participate in the programme and they had to assert that they intended to stay together, and were available, to participate in a year-long programme
- Workshops include those that helped improve skills to:
 - Strengthen their relationships
 - Get information about the baby's first months of life

- Connect with other couples
- Build Their Family Tool Box (e.g. parenting, finances, early childhood education)

Summary

Dr Haskins summed up his lecture by stating that if more children in the United States were able to live with their married parents, they were less likely to end up in poverty and would have a better environment for the development. But the country was facing a decline in its marriage rates while an increase in non-marital births especially to women over 20 years old. The growing preference for couples to cohabit was also not encouraging as it would create a complex and unstable environment for the child. In other words, more children in the United States were living in single-parent families than ever before. This was a huge problem. Although the government rolled out programmes to reduce non-marital births and to increase marriage rates, there was still a long way to go.

Question and Answer Segment

(Moderated by Ms Ng Mie Ling, Coordinating Director of Family Development, MCYS)

Question 1: Ms Ng began the Q&A segment by asking the first question. She wanted to know whether would there be any differences in Singapore's and the United States' approach to raise marriage rates given that Singapore's effort was driven by the need to raise fertility rate while United States was to reduce poverty.

Dr Haskins replied by saying that the United States' effort to raise marriage rates was not solely driven by the need to reduce poverty. There was rather a more important motivation, i.e. to give children a better environment to develop. He then added that it was fortunate for the United States to enjoy high fertility rate. Although it was declining somewhat, fertility rate in the United States was higher than most countries. One important factor was because of the country's liberal immigration policy. Dr Haskins summed up his reply by stating that Singapore's approach to raise marriage and fertility rate was heading the right way. Financial incentives such as the Baby Bonus would definitely encourage Singapore parents to have baby. But Singapore should not stop there. It should continue to find ways to make the process of raising children as easy as possible. This included providing the facilities and reducing the cost to raise children. Existing programmes should also include segments that would strengthen family such as getting the father to be involved in households and increasing the contact between married families.

Question 2: A participant noted that increasing the role of fathers in households could potentially strengthen families and increase fertility rate, and wanted to know how family programmes could be designed to cultivate this.

Dr Haskins answered the question by sharing with the audience that the United States had this National Fatherhood Leadership programme to encourage fathers to be more involved in households. This programme was even endorsed by President Obama and started as a grassroots movement. Although this programme had attracted more than 150 million fathers into its rank, there was no evidence that such programme would have an impact on the fathers. There was still a need to gather such data to prove that it worked.

Question 3: One participant asked the following two questions. First, why marriage was so unattractive in the United States? Second, was the movement to raise marriage rates a top-down or a bottom-up approach?

Dr Haskins explained that there were many factors to explain why there was a drop in marriage in the United States. Contrary to Singapore's experience, the drop in marriage was not contributed by an educated population but the lack of education. Studies showed that better educated women in the United States had a higher preference to get married and have children. This was because they had better options (e.g. income) and made better choices (e.g. creating a good environment for their children to develop). As a result, one of the methods these marriage programmes in the United States was adopting to encourage marriage was to increase education opportunity for women. Another factor that was contributing to the decline in marriage in the United States was due to the profound changes brought by the sexual revolution in the country. Instead of becoming a family-oriented culture, the United States was now having a culture that promoted sex. This had damaged the population's perception on getting married, staying married and building a strong and responsible family for children to grow up in.

On the second question, Dr Haskins noted that although President Bush was actively leading the marriage movement, much of the effort was from the grassroots. Dr Haskins the bottom-up approach was more effective as it did not force individuals to make decisions.

Question 4: Another participant presented two questions for Dr Haskins. First, the participant would like to know whether the marriage education programmes in the United States was based on measures to create behavioural changes. Second, did religious organisations front some of these programmes?

Dr Haskins noted that many studies were conducted over the years to show how we could change human behaviour. Some of them include ways to help smokers to quit smoking or to encourage people to put on seat belts. The approaches to increase marriage and to reduce non-marital births were also based on these behavioural changing scientific findings.

As for the second question, Dr Haskins noted that while the government adopted these scientific approaches, it did not discourage the participation of religious groups. However, these groups had to adhere to certain rules such as they should not practice discrimination to the participants or use these programmes as means to spread their religious beliefs.

Question 5: One of the participants asked why there was a drop in marriage in Singapore even though the population had higher income and education level.

Dr Haskins responded to this question with surprise. He said that his research showed that the reason why marriage was falling in the United States was because of low education level and low income. To him, what Singapore was facing was indeed unique. He added that women in the United States were more motivated to get married after reaching certain age bracket. In fact, marriage rates were the highest after they hit 30 years old.

Ms Ng ended the Q&A segment by stating that Singapore was also experiencing a change in its social patterns. It was experiencing a drop in marriage, a sharp decline in fertility rate and an increase in divorce rate. On this note, she asked Dr Haskins whether he could give Singapore any advice.

Dr Haskins noted that the biggest mistake that the United States made in tackling its falling marriage rates was it acted too late. Although social scientists were to blame because they were arguing that single-parent would not affect the development of a child, the government should have picked up the issue earlier and take pre-emptive measures. Furthermore, it was important for a country to uphold its moral values and not let it degenerate if it were to encourage more couples to get married and had children.