



## Divorce and Children: What Do We Know?

[Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers](#) • January 27, 2008 •

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Our job as social scientists is to help disentangle causation from correlation. This can be a very difficult, and sometimes impossible, job. Sometimes it is a matter of the chicken and the egg. For instance, we know that divorced people are more likely to drink, use drugs, have lower income, and be less happy. But did divorce cause these bad things or did these bad things in fact cause the divorce? The latter phenomena — what social scientists call reverse causation — is easy to understand. For example, most people would understand if someone dealing with a spouse with a chronic drug or alcohol problem was more likely to seek a divorce or that depression could spill over into marital difficulties. In fact, research has impli-

cated some of the negative outcomes observed among the divorced in the divorce itself. For example, when a man is laid-off the couple is more likely to divorce in subsequent years. Other research has shown that the happiest people are the most likely to get married, while those divorcing are less happy than the average married person. Moreover, people who divorce are actually happier a few years after the divorce compared with their happiness in the years prior to the divorce.

Disentangling causation from correlation is not only about accounting for reverse causation. The second difficulty is the possibility of a third factor that is influencing both the likelihood of divorce and other outcomes about which society cares. The most obvious example here is to talk about children and divorce. It is clear that children from divorced households fare worse along a range of outcomes than those from intact households. However, this does not imply that these children would be better off if the divorce had never occurred. Children of divorced families may have worse outcomes because the type of parents and households that end up divorced are different from those that do not. As just discussed, drug or alcohol abuse, depression, and financial difficulties might both lead to worse outcomes for children and increase the probability of divorce. Even if the divorce is simply the result of the selfish, narcissistic preferences of the parents, it is likely that kids being raised by such adults will have worse outcomes compared with kids raised by a devoted altruist. Accordingly, even if policy forced the parents to remain married, we might not see better outcomes for these children.

The reason it can be so difficult to disentangle causation from correlation is because divorce does not happen randomly in the population. Rather divorce occurs in couples who are typically worse off than the average married couple before the divorce occurs. We would all like to believe that we can be safeguarded against disease, death, poverty, unhappiness, and insanity by finding someone to love and holding on tight. But the data suggests that while love may conquer some adversities, it flourishes without them.

This brings us to an even harder question: What are the differences between married and separated life for those whom policy can affect? It is clear that children do better in a loving marriage than a messy divorce. But few families face this choice. When asking whether the children of divorced parents would have been better off if their parents had not divorced, we are usually asking whether conflict or separation is in the kids' best interests. Thus far, the empirical research provides little evidence that stopping these divorces would benefit the children. Research by Mark Hoekstra at the University of Pittsburgh followed families on the brink of divorce comparing those who filed and then reconciled with those who filed and then divorced. He found little difference in the academic and behavioral outcomes of the kids in each of these types of families. While this may not be the perfect test — after all these marriages were pretty far along the process before they reconciled — it does indicate that at least for some couples reconciling is not very likely to help the kids.

While advocates hide behind correlations, the evidence that preventing divorce would benefit children is weak at best. Given that there is little evidence that the government can do a better job determining which marriages will be best for the children, a reasonable default rule might be to leave Mom and Dad to make the best decisions for their kids. As others in this forum have noted, altruism is an important part of families and parents who love their children just might make the right decision.

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## ALSO FROM THIS ISSUE

### Lead Essay

- [The Future of Marriage](#) by [Stephanie Coontz](#)

In this month's lead essay, historian Stephanie Coontz, author of *Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, briefly lays out the history of marriage to understand its present and future. "Today, when a marriage works," Coontz argues, "it delivers more benefits to its members — adults and children — than ever before." However, "the same things that have made so many modern marriages more intimate, fair, and

protective have simultaneously made marriage itself more optional and more contingent on successful negotiation.” Instead of trying to resurrect a bygone ideal of marriage, those of us interested in encouraging healthy families now need to focus on what makes unmarried co-parents, single parents, cohabiting couples, as well as contemporary marriages successful on their own terms.

## Response Essays

- **The Marriage Gap** by **Kay S. Hymowitz**

Kay S. Hymowitz, the William E. Simon fellow at the Manhattan Institute, argues that Stephanie Coontz’s sketch of the state of marriage is badly incomplete, failing to acknowledge the class divide in marriage and childrearing. “This marriage gap,” she writes, “has profound implications for our political, social and economic prospects for one simple reason: overall, children do better in life if they are raised by their own married parents.” According to Hymowitz, “The de-linking of marriage and childrearing is a particular dilemma in the United States ... [W]hat you have is a recipe for entrenched, trans-generational poverty, inequality, racial disparities ..., reduced social and economic mobility, and — libertarians take note! — demands for government taxes to fund programs to correct the mess.”

- **Marriage and the Market** by **Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers**

Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, economists at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, “re-frame Coontz’s careful history of the family in the language of economics,” exploring the economic forces underlying changes in marriage. Modern marriage, Stevenson and Wolfers argue, is marked by “a shift from the family as a forum for shared production, to shared consumption.” Modern marriage, which they call “hedonic marriage,” is more centered on love and companionship. Marriage as such isn’t doomed, they claim, but “marriage in which one person specializes in the home while the other person specializes in the market is indeed doomed,” especially as women’s educational levels begin to surpass men’s. Attempts to “re-regulate” the family to fit a classic ideal, they argue “may actually be a force undermining the dynamic institution that is the modern U.S. family.”

- **Against Family Fatalism** by **Norval D. Glenn**

In his reply, University of Texas sociologist Norval D. Glenn, identifies Stephanie Coontz as a member of the “family-change-is-irreversible school of thought,” which he says “includes the view that attempts to retard, stop, or reverse any major aspect of

recent family change are futile and thus are at best a waste of effort and at worst downright harmful...” But, Glenn asks, don’t liberals generally think policy can mitigate the consequences of economic change? Moreover, is anyone really asking to return to some Golden Age of marriage? There is evidence, Glenn submits, that marriage trends will further improve and that policy interventions, like marriage education, can help.

## The Conversation

- [Minding the Marriage Gap](#) by [Stephanie Coontz](#)
- [Toward More Rational Discourse about Marriage](#) by [Norval D. Glenn](#)
- [The Possibility for Fruitful Collaboration](#) by [Stephanie Coontz](#)
- [Marriage Has Changed, but Is That Good for Children?](#) by [Kay S. Hymowitz](#)
- [Divorce and Children: What Do We Know?](#) by [Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers](#)
- [\(De-\)Regulating the Family](#) by [Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers](#)
- [Reply to Stevenson and Wolfers](#) by [Norval D. Glenn](#)
- [The Next Question: How Can We Improve the Lives of America’s Children?](#) by [Stephanie Coontz](#)

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