

Center for Marriage and Families

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Marriage and the Well-Being of African American Boys

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Introduction

ON AVERAGE, African American boys exhibit lower levels of well-being than the general population. As a group, they are less likely than others to excel and advance academically. They are also far more likely to get into trouble with the law. These problems are serious and set a significant number of African American boys on a difficult path.

Many significant historical and current societal factors have contributed to lower levels of well-being among African American boys. For example, discrimination has often deprived young African American men of quality education, health care, safe neighborhoods, and job opportunities. However, one factor that is sometimes overlooked and appears to have an especially important impact on the well-being of young Black men is family structure. Research indicates that African American boys do best when they live with two parents—especially their own two married parents.

The Roots of Well-Being: Economic Security and Effective Parenting

Economic Security

Money is an important ingredient of well-being. Greater income takes pressure off families, allowing them to function better. It also provides families with greater access to safe neighborhoods and good schools.

The evidence on this issue is clear: African American boys are far less likely to experience low income and poverty when they live with two parents. One study, for example, found that single Black mothers who form unions with men typically see an 81.2 percent increase in their household income within the first year. The income advantage is less after the third year, but still considerable at 42.9 percent. Importantly, the income increases are even greater among those unions that are stable and long-lasting.

African American boys experience the *highest* levels of income specifically when they live with their own two married parents. This marriage premium is explained in large part by the fact that marriage *itself* enhances fathers' incomes by stimulating productivity in the workplace. One important study found that Black men who marry typically see \$4,000 increases in their earnings. Similarly, a study of 2,107 Black adults found that marriage has a particularly strong impact on both male and family income—stronger, for example, than such important variables as education, occupation, or age.

Because of its relation to income, marriage often means the difference between living above or below the poverty line. One longitudinal study of 3,079 Black householders found that becoming married was strongly associated with moving out of poverty and being married strongly protected against moving into poverty. The impact of marriage on economic well-being was greater than that of education, number of children, neighborhood segregation and poverty, and *even changes in one's employment status and personal income*.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is another major influence on success and well-being. The more mothers and fathers attend to, teach, guide, and express love and support for a child, the more confident, capable, and disciplined that child is likely to become.

Studies on marriage and Black mothers' parenting are somewhat unclear. Some find a large marriage premium, others find a small premium or none at all. In general, however, the evidence points to the conclusion that marriage promotes more "authoritative" (affectionate, yet firm) parenting among Black mothers—perhaps because married fathers often participate in disciplining children.

Data on fathers are quite clear. African American fathers who are married and living with their children are much more financially and emotionally supportive, and spend more time socializing their children (setting limits, disciplining, helping the child with personal problems). African American boys living in intact homes are much more likely to report that their father is important to them. This marriage premium extends to at-risk populations. For example, one study of 254 Black male adolescents living in an inner-city found that those living in intact homes were considerably more likely to report that they could rely on their fathers for emotional support. They were also much more likely to report that their fathers served as their male role model. This finding is particularly significant because fathers were the primary male role model for all family types; boys in non-intact households were much more likely to report having no male role model at all.

Some scholars have argued that father involvement is relatively unimportant in the African American community because extended family members often step in and help raise children when fathers are absent. Our review of the data does not support this view. We found that extended households and kin support can provide some benefits to single mothers but typically do not compensate for father absence. Moreover, because household extendedness has been in decline for decades, it is unlikely that it could be offsetting the increase in single motherhood in Black America.

Outcomes: Family Structure and Well-Being

Infant Health

Good health begins early in life. On this subject the research is clear: The infants of married Black mothers—both baby boys and baby girls—are significantly healthier on average.

For example, a study of 1,656,044 African American mother-child pairs found that infant mortality rates are much lower among the married. The study controlled for other important variables such as mother's age, education, number of children, and whether or not the mother received prenatal care.

Higher birth weight is an important indicator of infant health. It has also been linked to a range of positive adult outcomes, including better mental and physical health. Here, too, the research suggests that there is a significant marriage premium. In fact, one study of 65,923 births to African American mothers found that marital status had a greater impact on birth weight than number of children, maternal education, cigarette use, and socioeconomic status. Only prenatal care had a greater impact on birth weight, according to the study.

Delinquency

Almost invariably, studies find that the two-parent household is a powerful—if not the most powerful—reducer of delinquency among African American boys.

Studies focusing on African American boys find that those living without a father in the home are much more likely to get into trouble with the law, get into fights, and have a school-related discipline problem. One study of 948 Black male adolescents found that father absence promotes delinquency independently of, and much more strongly than, low socioeconomic status and peer delinquency. It also found that the main reason father absence promotes delinquency has to do with parenting: Father-absent homes result in less parental supervision and often fail to effectively instill pro-social attitudes in young Black men.

Importantly, father presence seems to reduce delinquency much more for African American boys than for White boys. Several studies have found that higher rates of fatherlessness in the Black community are a major reason why African American boys are more likely than their White peers to engage in delinquent behavior.

Self-Esteem

Young African American boys living in two-parent homes have markedly higher confidence and self-esteem than those in single-mother households. One study found, after controlling for income, that both marriage and good family functioning promote many elements of self-esteem for African American boys. Specifically, boys with married parents and functional families were more likely to feel personally empowered, competent, likeable, loveable, and physically able. They also had greater self-control and overall self-esteem. On some aspects of self-esteem, marriage had a greater impact. On others, family functioning was more important. In several cases marriage and good family functioning worked together to promote self-esteem. Together, they explained about one-third of the variation in boys' self-esteem.

These findings suggest that marriage enhances self-esteem among young Black men in part by fostering better parenting.

School Performance

Father presence appears to have a moderate but significant positive effect on African American boys' school performance. For example, one study of 2,292 African American children found that boys from intact homes had somewhat higher grades, were more likely to come to school prepared, and had higher educational aspirations.

Why do African American boys from intact families have greater educational aspirations? A key reason is that they enjoy more parental support, higher expectations, and more encouragement to achieve. Again, better parenting seems to explain much of the link between father presence and better outcomes for young Black males.

Discussion: Making Sense of the Data

THE FINDINGS reported in this brief demonstrate that family structure matters for young African American males. When African American boys live with two parents—especially their own two married parents—they typically enjoy greater economic security and better parenting. They also tend to have better health early on in life, better academic performance, and greater self-esteem. They are markedly less likely to be delinquent.

An important question is: Why are marriage and father presence associated with better outcomes for young Black males? Some of this association is undoubtedly due to what scholars call “selection effects.” That is, parents who marry are more likely to be successful, capable adults already, and these characteristics benefit their children. But the studies we reviewed clearly indicate that there is a real marriage premium as well. Marriage creates its own benefits that are not explained by other factors.

Importantly, the academic research sheds light on just why marriage and father presence produce the benefits they do. First, marriage changes fathers’ behavior because marriage signifies a long-term commitment. It lends a sense of permanence to families. When a father feels connected to his wife and children, he is more likely to invest time and energy in their well-being—in part because he expects to be with them in the future. Second, marriage is a kind of social contract. Men who become husbands implicitly accept a set of socially-defined rules about how they are supposed to behave. They are expected by society to be good providers and raise their children well. But it’s not just about pressure: Men are able to gain prestige and recognition by fulfilling the obligations of marriage.

Our review of the data also found that fathers who are married to their children’s mothers are more involved in and supportive of their children—this in turn creates better outcomes for African American boys. The major reason for this benefit is that fathers bring a unique and important set of skills and behaviors to parenting. These skills and behaviors complement the more nurturing parenting style used by mothers, and create a balanced family environment that helps children thrive.

Here we will highlight several key ways in which fathers are important to sons:

- First, because fathers are men they are able to serve as effective role models for boys. They play a crucial role in teaching and showing their sons how to be good men, fathers, and husbands. Furthermore, when Black fathers are present in the home, they are able to provide a real life example of Black manhood that can counter many of the negative messages about Black men that are present in the media. This decreases the likelihood that African American boys will internalize stereotypes that might ultimately affect their self-esteem, attitudes, and behaviors in harmful ways. Black fathers who serve as primary role models for their sons can also help to immunize them against the negative influences of peers and street life. When fathers are absent boys are more likely to seek out inappropriate role models and father figures, including their peers and street gangs, leaving them vulnerable to delinquent behaviors.
- Second, fathers tend to have a unique style of disciplining their children. For example, while mothers tend to use a nurturing parenting style and tend to treat boys and girls similarly, studies have found that fathers are more likely to use strict and demanding parenting behaviors when dealing with boys. They are more likely to discipline sons than daughters. For these and other reasons, boys are more likely to respond to discipline from their fathers. Also, because fathers are generally more physically imposing

than mothers, they are uniquely able to enforce discipline as boys become older and bigger. These may be major reasons why father presence has such a dramatic effect on delinquency among African American boys.

- Third, fathers are more likely to roughhouse or engage in active, exciting play with their children. Although such play may seem trivial, it is not. It promotes social competence, self-control, and teaches kids how to recognize others' emotions. Several studies have even found that children who engage in active play with their fathers are more likely to be popular.
- Fourth, fathers often take a lead role in preparing children for public life. Black fathers in particular often play an important role in teaching their sons the specific attitudes and skills they need to negotiate the challenges of discrimination and take advantage of opportunities in life.

Of course, many African American single mothers do an exceptional job of successfully raising their children (including their boys). However, scholars have noted that African American mothers sometimes expect and require less of their sons than they do of their daughters. They are also less likely to teach their sons independence and responsibility. A key reason for these differences is thought to be African American mothers' awareness of the unique challenges and risks facing young Black men. In other words, some Black mothers overcompensate for the difficulties facing their sons by engaging in overprotective parenting.

Taken together, these findings bolster the case that public and private support for marriage must be part of an overall plan to address the social, academic, and economic difficulties felt by too many African American boys.

About This Research Brief

This research brief summarizes the findings of a comprehensive literature review by a team of researchers. The full review, including a bibliography, is published as: Lorraine Blackman, Obie Clayton, Norval Glenn, Linda Malone-Colon, and Alex Roberts, *The Consequences of Marriage for African Americans: A Comprehensive Literature Review* (New York: Institute for American Values, September 2005). The views in this brief regarding policy implications are those of the Center for Marriage and Families.

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