



Why Strong Families Still Matter

by the Family Policy Institute of Oklahoma¹

Despite Oklahoma's reputation as a family-friendly, faith-based state, Oklahoma's social indicators show that its children and families are in distress. Oklahoma's rates of child abuse and neglect, childhood poverty, educational success, teen births and youth substance abuse paint a sobering picture of the challenging climate Oklahoma's children face. Fortunately, one positive common denominator signals an advantage for children: children raised by their biological, married father and mother exhibit the greatest opportunity for success, safety and well-being than children in all other family structures. Bearing this positive common denominator in mind, faith, community and policy leaders focused on strengthening communities should consider how efforts to improve marital stability factor into their community development efforts.

Using research from numerous sources, the FPIO's Policy Memorandum found:

- Children living with their married biological parents universally had the lowest rate of maltreatment, whereas those living with a single parent who had a cohabiting partner in the household had the highest rate in all maltreatment categories, including child abuse and neglect.
- Children in a married family are considerably more likely to avoid poverty than if they are in a single-parent family or other family structures.

- Children living with their married parents are significantly more likely to stay in school, have higher levels of academic achievement, and graduate than those from any other kind of family structure.
- Teens living with their biological father and mother had the lowest rate of sexual activity than their peers in other family settings.
- The lowest prevalence of being drunk, use of marijuana and other illicit drugs is reported by adolescents who live in mother-father families.

Future publications will explore more risk factors that reveal the consistent trend that demonstrates that a child's optimal opportunity for success, safety and well-being comes if the child's married, biological parents stay together for the long-term.

It should be understood that FPIO is under no illusion that putting a ring on someone's finger is a panacea for the various social issues addressed above. However, the data presented in this Policy Memo warrants the attention of faith, community, and policy leaders because even marginal improvement in strengthening Oklahoma's families will put children on a better path to be safe, stable and to succeed.

Although not discussed at length in this report, there is an abundance of data that shows that couples can learn how to improve their positive communication skills, their support and helping roles, and the overall

quality and satisfaction of their marriage. Such marriage education efforts should be utilized and expanded to help reduce the incidence of unnecessary divorce and family breakdown in communities across the state.

The Oklahoma Legislature can do its part to assist by seriously considering policies that slow down the fast-pace of unilateral divorce, encourage more premarital education, financially encourage long-term marriage, and increase the opportunity for reconciliation. Additionally, faith and community leaders should consider how best to expand efforts to encourage young people as to the benefits of marriage, to take advantage of opportunities to participate in premarital assessments and training, to not rush to the altar before being

ready, and to then keep their marriage vows for the long run.

Oklahoma policy makers and community leaders should take special note of the data presented here that demonstrates that *cohabitation has the most detrimental impact* on a child's opportunity for success and consider what solutions can be developed to lower the incidence of cohabitation and increase the prevalence of stable marriages.

If Oklahoma's faith, community and policy leaders come together to redouble their efforts to strengthen marriage in Oklahoma, we will be setting the stage for Oklahoma's greatest natural resource, our children, to thrive. 🍀

Endnotes

¹ The Family Policy Institute of Oklahoma is a non-profit, non-partisan research and education organization dedicated to protecting families and strengthening communities by advancing positive cultural and societal initiatives that will improve the well-being of Oklahoma's children and families. To learn more visit: www.okfamily.org