

>> Welcome, you are listening to Poverty Focus. A podcast series of the UC Davis Center for Poverty Research. I'm the Center's Director, Marianne Page. This series brings scholars and policy experts from around the country to discuss their work on poverty, and poverty research. Today it's my pleasure to host Melissa Kearney professor of economics at the University of Maryland.

Kearney's research focuses on issues of social policy, poverty and inequality. Many of her papers discuss the effect of government programs on economic conditions and the behaviors and outcomes of economically disadvantaged populations. Today we are going to talk about her recent work on the impact of economic conditions on marriage traits and family structure, with the focus on the implications for the poor.

Welcome, Melissa.

>> Thanks for having me.

>> So a key area of your research on poverty and inequality relates to family structure. Why is family structure relevant for the study of poverty in the United States? And how did you become interested in the area of study?

>> So I think it's hard to look at poverty statistics from the US and not immediately recognize how predictive family structure is, about whether a family or children live in poverty.

Children growing up in single parent homes are five times more likely to be growing up in poverty. So the rates for children in single mother homes living in poverty is close to half as compared to close to ten or 11% for children in married parent homes. And, this was actually first brought to my attention in an undergrad class.

I took a Sociology of Poverty class with Sara McLanahan, who has written a lot of books now on single motherhood. And I remember her introducing her book to us as undergrads saying, I was a single mother, and sort of wanted to set out and show that single motherhood wasn't disadvantageous for children and the data just didn't tell that story, and so I've been interested in this aspect of poverty now for a long time.

>> It's funny, I remember having the same experience, not with Sara, but hearing that story about how she thought she was gonna find one thing and she found the other.

>> Yeah.

>> So the term marriageable men is said to have been coined 30 years ago in relation to decreasing marriage rates in black communities.

But obviously a lot has changed since then. Can you tell me about what that term means today?

>> Yeah. So first let me say we put the words marriageable men in the title of our new paper in some sense knowing it might be jarring but also to relate to this long literature that really dates back to William Julius Wilson's seminal work in the 80s.

And this was his term marriageable men, and as he said, he used it to talk about sort of the decline in urban African American two parent families, and he used the term to refer to marriageable, pool of marriageable men meaning men who had economic stability and job security and all of that.

And so we use that term to link to that literature. And I suppose we're sort of presupposing that being a marriageable man in part implies or means having a steady job or economic security. But it is an interesting question as to how important that is now to couples today as opposed to generations ago.

You know I don't know so much about that but I think some interesting insight comes from Pew Research Center surveys. They do surveys of adults to get their attitudes on all sorts of things, marriage included. And some recent data coming out of recent survey they did does show that millennials are much less likely than older cohorts to say that having a good income is a key component of being a good husband.

So I think it was something like 40% of millennial women said having a good income was a key trait they were looking for in a husband. But interestingly, 67% of the men themselves said that they thought to be a good husband meant being able to financially provide for your family.

So that also rises an interesting question about marriageable, from whose perspective, right? We tend to talk about these things like women are looking for marriageable men, but you also need the men I guess, to be themselves as being marriageable.

>> Yeah, that's a good point. So your recent paper, which was published earlier this year, uses the fracking boom as a natural experiment to look at the impact of male earnings on marriage and child birth among those with low incomes.

Why is the fracking boom a compelling area to study?

>> So this is joint work with Riley Wilson who's a graduate student at Maryland, and we did put it out a couple months ago as an NBR working paper. It's still is yet to be published academically to be clear.

So what we were doing was, we were interested in this hypothesis that economic circumstances of men are in part responsible for the retreat away from marriage, in particular among non-college educated

populations. And, sort of, I've had this reverse hypothesis in mind which was, if we could only improve the economic situation of non-college educated men, we would see a reversal of this trend.

And, it's really hard to find circumstances in which non-college educated men have seen economic positive shocks for them. Most of the trends we've seen in the past 40 years have been going away from them, making their job prospects less financially stable or high-paying. And so the fracking context was this unique context where there was a positive shock, an increase in jobs and an increase in wage potential for none-college-educated men.

So for our purposes that was a good place to look at what happens when male's earnings potential increases. That being said, it's not perfect in the sense that these fracking booms did lead to some boom town type things. If I got to pick my perfect source of employment improvement, that wouldn't have been it.

One thing we do to address that is, for example, we don't look at North Dakota at all in our analysis, right? So North Dakota gets a lot of attention in fracking conversations, but the North Dakota experience is very unique in terms of the large amount of migration and sort of the tremendous population growth.

So in fact, we look at fracking in 17 other states throughout the country where there wasn't this sort of boom town, large influx of migrants, making it a bit more of a typical positive economic shock.

>> Thanks, yeah, it's really hard to find a good natural experiment, right?

It's just really hard to find the perfect thing. It seems like the fracking boom is about as good an experiment as we can come up with.

>> About as good, but we do have to work to make sure we're addressing things like migration, or changing in house prices, or any of these other confounding factors.

>> That come along with it. The conclusions of this research show that marriage rates did not increase in relation to increased male earnings, but child birth did. Do these results surprise you, and how do you interpret them?

>> So yes, the results surprise me. We went into the project expecting to see that as there was this improvement in male economic conditions, non-marital birthrates would go down.

What we found was that in fact there were more non-marital births, but there was also more marital births. Births, but the results are more marital births, so this is interesting in the sense that it looked like a positive income shock led to more births, this is more surprising to us, there's been previous papers showing that as economists would say kids are normal goods, when people have more money one of the things they do is quote unquote, consume.

Child-bearing, they have more kids. What was surprising was that there was sort of an equal measure in effect on non-marital births, and marital births. It struck me then that I guess I had never really seen a paper that took the same income shock and looked to see those separately.

And the other thing that surprised was that there was no increase in marriage at all. Right, so this suggests, all right, there was positive income and people wanna have kids when they feel like they have enough money to do so, but they didn't feel like they needed to be married to do that, so that was surprising.

>> And do you think of that as that's a change from 20 years ago, 30 years ago?

>> Yeah, so this, I think, actually wound up being the most interesting part of this research. Which was we decided, after we got that finding, which was surprising to us. We decided to revisit the coal boom context of the 70s and 80s.

And there is a paper by a different set of co-authors that had looked at this shock in a paper called, Are Kids Normal? And they restricted their sample to just married couples, and they found that when the coal boom happened in Appalachia, male earnings went up and people have more kids.

And so we reproduce their results but also look separately at the marriage margin and not marriage birth. Non-married births. In that context, in the 70s and 80s with the coal boom, indeed, we reproduced what they found. There was an increase in married births, there was no increase in non-married births and there was an increase in marriage.

So a very similar type shock. In very similar type sort of rural communities, but a very different family formation response. And so that contrast between what happened with a shock like this in the 70s and 80s and what we see with the fracking boom, I think it's potentially suggestive that social context matters.

>> Mm-hm.

>> Right, so in Kentucky and West Virginia in the 70s or 80s, non-marital child bearing was not the norm. It is increasingly the norm among less educated populations. I mean, 40% of all births now are outside of marriage. And so, you know, without pushing too much cuz this is a speculative line of interpretation.

But it, the sort of contrast and the patterns would be consistent with this idea that, now, in a social environment where non-marital child bearing is less stigmatized, where it's more common, people might respond to the increase in income differently than they used to.

>> And do you have thoughts about what some of the factors might be, that have contributed to decreasing marriage rates?

>> So I was always very partial to this marriageable men story, on the face of it, it fits patterns in the data. We've seen non-marital birth rates really rise among non-college educated folks, women with some high school, or women with some college, or women in their 20s, so we're not talking about teens, but we're talking about women who tend to pair with the men who've seen their economic position erode.

So just as a matter of time series data, it fits the patterns. There's a nice paper by that shows places that have been exposed to trade shocks of China, manufacturing jobs have been hit. Male employment rates have gone down. And in those same places, related to all this, you see an increase in the number of children being raised by a single parent and a reduction in marriage.

So they sort of have confirmed this downside. So I still think that the economic story is potentially very important to the decrease in marriage. Combined with that, there was a very paper that a UC Davis PhD student wrote a couple of years ago, showing that the increase in relative female wages associated with a number of these sort of economic shocks, have led to a decrease in marriage.

So it's not just that men have been, or some set of men, have been doing worse, but that the women have also been doing better. So their bargaining power increases. Their ability to support a family on their own has increased. So there's that whole line of thinking that is mostly about economics.

There's a whole separate line of thinking that that is mostly about culture. And that's a harder one for an economist to sort of really dig in to and have anything to say about. People will talk about the sexual revolution as being a part of that. There is some work from economists and others showing that access to the pill, legalization of abortion, has sort of separated sex from marriage.

So more people are feeling less compelled to get married. But sort of as an economist, I have less to say about those types of explanations.

>> And you've already sort of touched on this in some of the things you said a little bit ago, but are there ideas about implications for children who are being born to unmarried women in terms of poverty?

>> Yeah, so it's sort of, it's always been the case that kids born to unmarried mothers are more likely to live in poverty, and the arrow runs both ways there. Poor women are much more likely to be unmarried mothers, then there's the question of how much is it that marriage itself will prevent would prevent these sort of disadvantage circumstances.

You know, I have a couple of thoughts on that. One is, we talk about non-marital childbearing as if it's one thing, but, non-marital childbearing for a teen mom is very different than for let's say college educated 35 year old. Right and I think if we think about it from a resource perspective as economists would, we can think about well, what would the implications for children be.

Because implicit in the question of what are the implications for kids is the idea that well if there parents were married how things would be different, right.

>> Right.

>> And so and I sort of try to formalize this using an economic model and taking it to data.

And you can get some very intuitive predictions. Which is, if the mom is sort of low resource, both in terms of lower levels of education, lower levels of income. We tend to think or the social science literature, psychology literature tends to think younger mothers may have less parenting skills, that kind of thing.

If those teen moms, let's say, were likely to marry the fathers of their children, how much benefit would that bring to the household, okay? But where we've been seeing the rise in non-marital child bearing is among women in their 20s and women with high school degrees and some college.

Those women partner with men who sort of also have a moderate degree of education and some income. So I actually think we see in the data that's where the marriage gaps are largest for kids, which is not really that surprising because the dads probably have more to bring.

So with the parents pooled income, that's pretty protective of keeping kids out of poverty, giving them the resources they need to do things like go on and graduate high school. So the fact that that's where we see the largest gaps, and that's where we see the largest increases in non-marital. Make me worried about the implications that this has for kids.

So, the second thing I wanna say is over time this all relates to rising income inequality. Which we've seen rising wage inequality such that college educated workers, and even people with more than college education, their wages are really pulling away from everybody else. We also know that those people continue to have children almost exclusively within marriage.

And so we're really in a situation now where kids born to college educated mothers have the benefits of two high income parents who also, incidentally work has shown, spend more time with their kids. So these kids are just getting tons of advantages thrown at them and just sort of pulling away.

Their rates of college graduation are pulling away from kids born to non college educated parents. So I think we need to be honest and address or at least acknowledge these differences in family structure and how they're compounding inequality trends. And I think that's potentially gonna have very negative implications for social mobility in the rates that which kids born to more disadvantaged circumstances can catch up.

>> Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So given that increased male earnings to not seem to have the impact that we once thought and given the benefits for children of growing up in a dual parent family, what do you think we can do? And are there any policy responses that would be beneficial?

>> Yeah, so this is one that always stumps me and I wish I had a better answer. The Bush administration tried pro-marriage initiatives, the evidence was very disappointing, they didn't seem to work. If it's not economics, I don't know what we push on to try and increase rates of marriage or dual parent families.

So if we sort of come up at a loss of what to do to reverse the trend, then I think we can focus on well, are there policies and programs that we can push on to sort of mitigate the disadvantage? So one line of thought there says, well, we really need to help single moms and give them more welfare benefits, or more social support so they can raise kids successfully in that situation.

I'm a little uneasy about that, or less sanguine, in the sense that careful work has shown it's not just the income advantage. There's a lot of other advantages of having two committed parents in the household. So this is my personal opinion, I'm less willing to sort of write off the dads or the men here maybe than some other folks.

So another way we could push is to think about the dads and how to incentivize or even make it easier for dads stay engaged in children's lives. I know less about this than a lot of other scholars but there are things that states or policy makers can do increase dads' rights so that they have more access to the kids, or the kids would have more access to them.

That would keep them engaged. There are fatherhood initiatives. And then, again, I think there's a lot of experimentation and evaluation and learning to do here. But, how much of this is about skills, right? Being a couple is hard, negotiating is hard, parenting is hard, there are a lot of very thoughtful people working on parenting interventions.

I mean this is another area where we know high educated parents do a lot more developmentally appropriate things with kids. Are there ways to have successful parenting interventions so that both parents are productively involved in their kids lives? And I think there's still a lot for us to learn here.

>> I agree, so thank you Melissa it's been my pleasure to speak with you. Melissa Kearney is a Professor of Economics at the University Of Maryland. I'm Marianne Page, the Director of the Center for Poverty Research at UC Davis, and I want to thank you for listening. Our mission is to facilitate nonpartisan, academic research on domestic poverty, to disseminate the research and to train the next generation of poverty scholars.

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