

HOPE AND A FUTURE

FORGING STRONG AND STABLE FAMILIES IN OHIO | 2025

Center FOR
Christian
Virtue



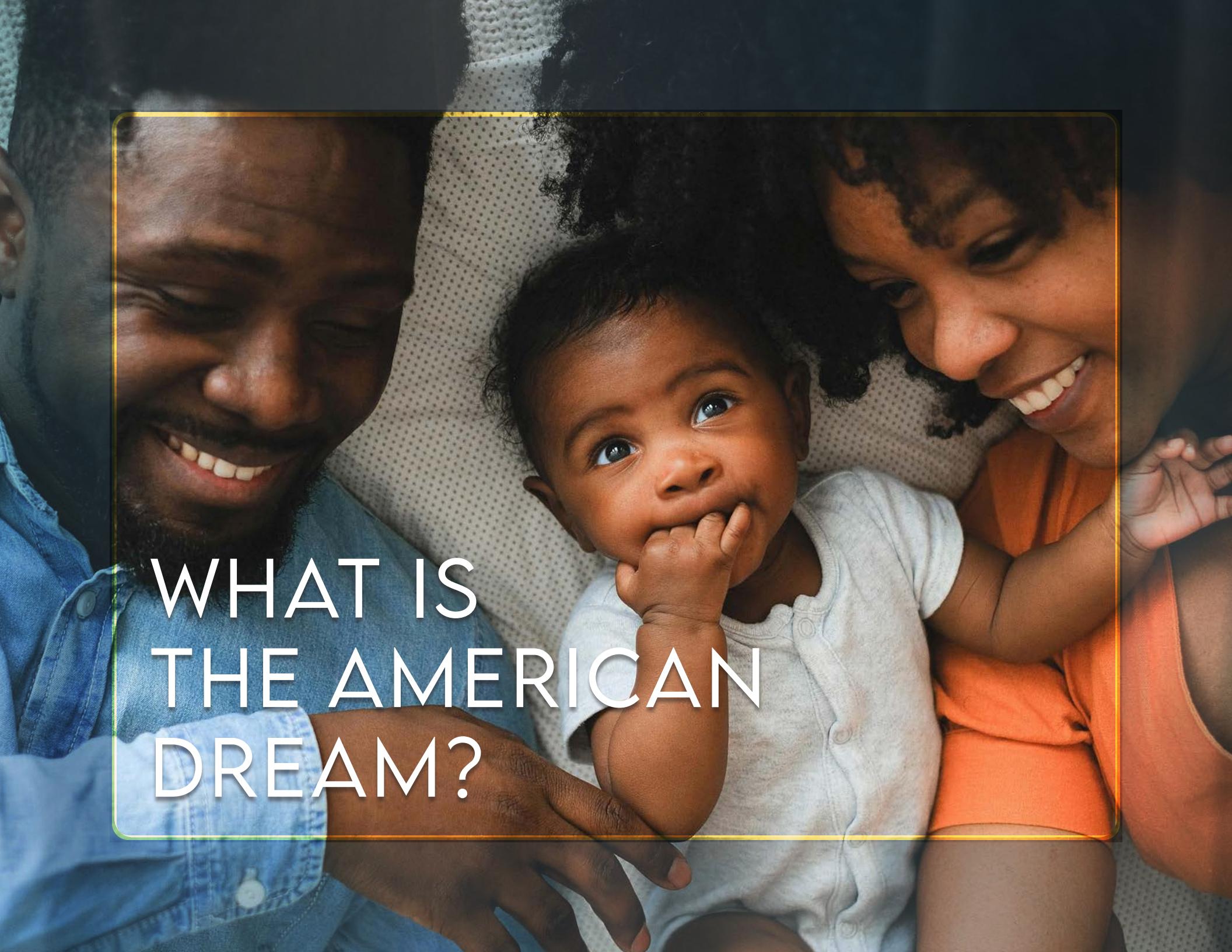
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WHAT IS THE AMERICAN DREAM?

A MESSAGE FROM BRAD WILCOX

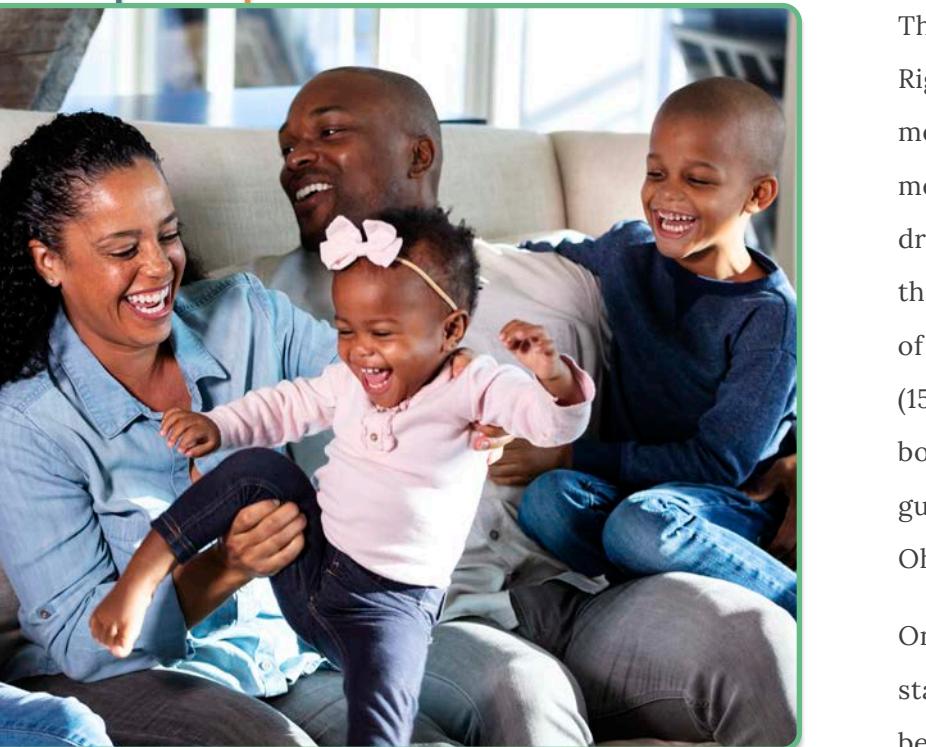
What is the American dream? It is a “*better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank*,” in the words of James Truslow Adams, the historian who coined the term just over a century ago. Adams knew it would be hard to sustain the dream. That is why every generation must strive, he wrote, to “*save the dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming and dispelling it.*”¹

In our day, we know that ordinary citizens’ faith in the American dream is diminished. A recent Wall Street Journal poll found only one in three of U.S. adults feels the American dream still “holds true” compared to half of those polled in 2012.² There are good reasons for this. For many Americans, life is not “better, richer, and happier.” In this century, “deaths of despair”—with ordinary Americans dying because of suicide, drug overdoses, or alcohol poisoning—have surged, even as reports of hope and happiness among the American people have fallen.³



Brad Wilcox
Professor of Sociology
and Director of the
National Marriage Project,
University of Virginia

A RECENT WALL STREET JOURNAL POLL FOUND ONLY ONE IN THREE U.S. ADULTS FEELS THE AMERICAN DREAM STILL “HOLDS TRUE” COMPARED TO HALF OF THOSE POLLED IN 2012.



Although the precarious state of the dream can be attributed in part to changes in the nation's economy, one of the biggest, unheralded forces "dispelling" the American dream is the falling fortunes of the American family. Recent research from Gallup and the University of Chicago, for instance, suggests that the nation's retreat from marriage is one of the most important factors driving deaths of despair up and happiness down across America.⁴

search could not be more relevant for the state of Ohio. Now, the American dream is out of reach for too many women, and children across Ohio. Tens of thousands of women in the state have lost their lives to suicide, and alcohol in the last decade, such that the state ranks deaths of despair.⁵ As **Figure 1 (page IV)** indicates, 17% of children are poor, putting the state in the top third of states for child poverty. And the state ranks in the quintile when it comes to hope.⁶ So, when it comes to seeing a “better, richer, and happier life” for all families, Ohio has a ways to go.

y to saving the dream in Ohio is to strengthen and
e family life across the state. This is especially important
e Ohio ranks 29th on the new Family Structure Index
enter for Christian Virtue (CCV) and the Institute for
Studies (IFS). The index, which is based on trends in
re, family stability, and fertility and is introduced for
t time in this report, indicates that the state falls below
on key indicators of family strength.

below-average standing on the Family Structure Index because this report will show how closely the fortunes of families are tied to educational success, poverty,

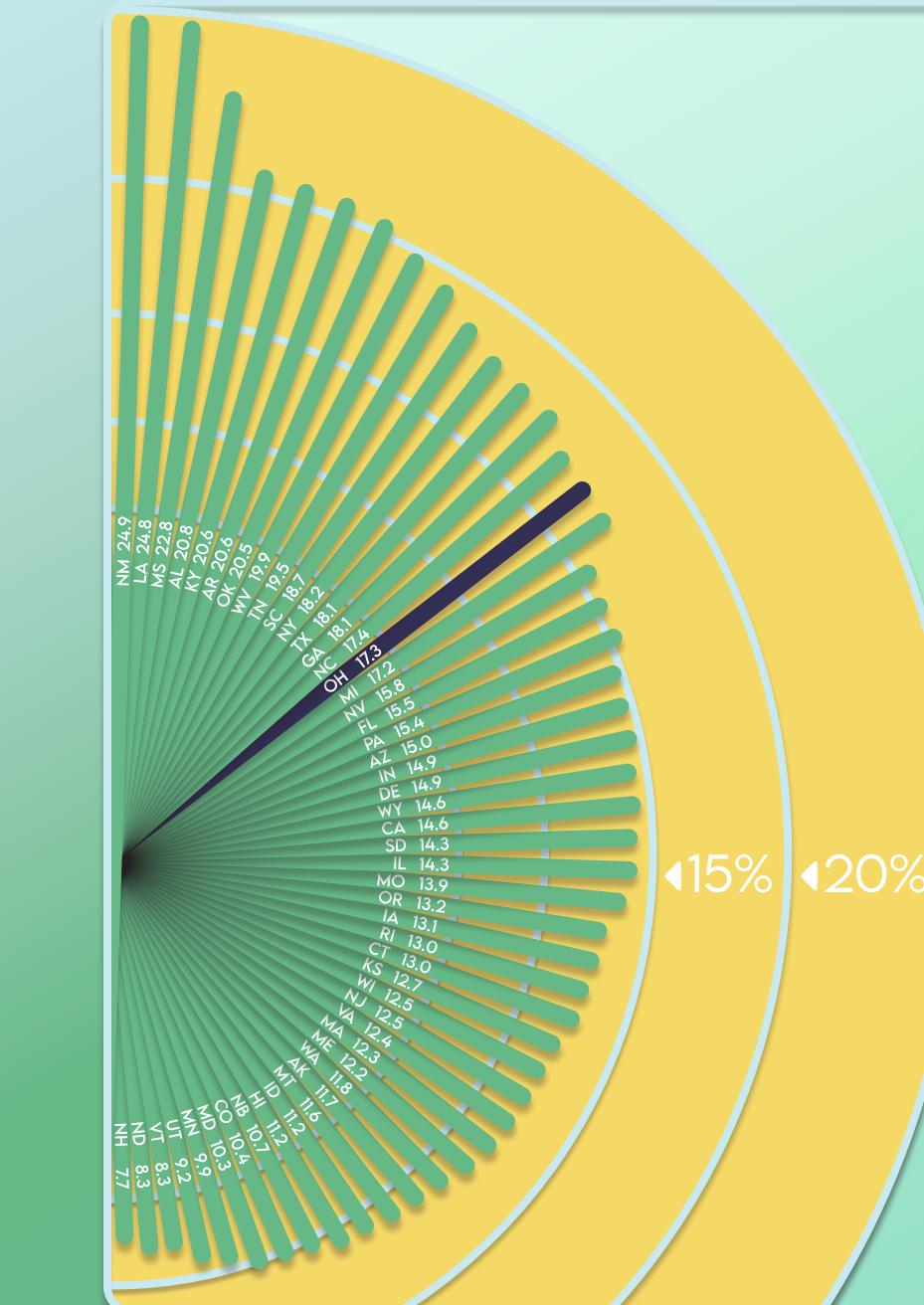
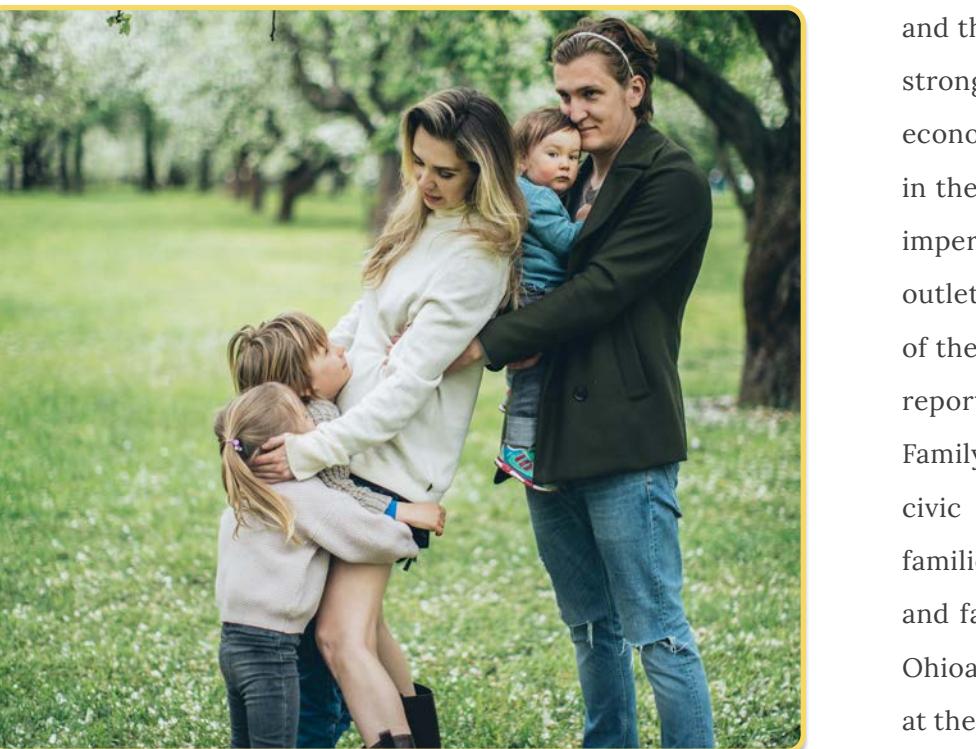


FIGURE 1:
STATE RANKED BY CHILD
POVERTY RATE
PERCENT OF CHILDREN BELOW POVER

Source: U.S. Census
2023 American Community Survey
Table R1702



and the emotional well-being of children across the state, how strong families are tied to safer streets, how closely connected economic mobility for poor children is to the state of the unions in their communities across the state, and how falling fertility imperils the demographic future of the state, as Ohio media outlets have recently noted.⁷ Moreover, given the importance of the family for children, adults, and the state as a whole, this report from Center for Christian Virtue and the Institute for Family Studies also spells out a series of public policies and civic measures the legislature, businesses, churches, and families can advance to renew the foundations of marriage and family across the state. We do so because we want every Ohioan—men, women, and especially children—to have a shot at the “better, richer, and happier life” that the American dream offers.

1. David Leonhardt, *Ours Was the Shining Future: The Story of the American Dream*. (Random House, 2023): xii.
2. Rachel Wolfe, “The American Dream Feels Out of Reach for Most.” *Wall Street Journal*. (August 2024).
3. Carol Graham, “America’s crisis of despair.” *Brookings Institution*. (January 2021).
4. Peltzman, “The Socio-Political Demography of Happiness.” U Chicago Stigler Center. (October 2023).
5. Susan Hayes, David Radley, et al., “States of Despair.” *The Commonwealth Fund*. (August 2018).

6. “The Geography of Hope and Desperation in America: An Interactive Vulnerability Indicator.” *Brookings Institution*. January 2023.
7. Mark Williams, “Ohio’s population projections are dire. Why are so many counties left behind?” *Columbus Dispatch*. October 2024. <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/local/2024/10/13/ohio-projections-show-most-counties-will-lose-population-by-2050/74710065007/>; Samantha Hendrickson, “Ohio’s baby bust: Why young Buckeyes are having kids at the lowest rate in history.” *Columbus Dispatch*. October 2024. <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/local/2024/10/20/ohios-birth-rate-is-low-why-arent-buckeyes-having-kids/75071740007/>



FOR I KNOW THE
PLANS I HAVE FOR YOU,
DECLARES THE LORD,
PLANS FOR WELFARE
AND NOT FOR EVIL, TO
GIVE YOU A FUTURE
AND A HOPE.

JEREMIAH 29:11

A MESSAGE FROM AARON BAER

The first time I came across Professor Brad Wilcox's work, I was incredibly inspired.

It wasn't that Brad's writings were exposing encouraging realities about America. In fact, as you see in this report, Brad brings to light some hard truths about our nation today.

But Brad and the Institute for Family Studies were forcing the nation to confront the challenges in our communities in a deeper way. All too often when we talk about poverty, crime, drug use, or poor educational outcomes, the national conversation focuses on addressing the symptoms of these problems. But we rarely, if ever, discuss the root cause: namely, the instability in our homes, and the increasing number of children who do not know the blessing of being raised by their married mom and dad.

Brad's work especially hit home for me since I'm from Warren, Ohio. The Steel Valley is still haunted by the ghosts of "Black Monday," the Monday in 1977 when Campbell Works



Aaron Baer
President
Center for Christian Virtue

in Youngstown suddenly closed its doors and 5,000 Northeast Ohioans were put out of work.

Growing up in the 90s in Warren, there was a parade of academics, commentators, and political leaders bringing new ideas forward for "economic development" to restore the region. Yet nothing ever really seemed to change and my hometown, like many other communities in Ohio, continues to struggle to this day.

Center for Christian Virtue commissioned Brad and his team to conduct this study because we believe Ohio and America are ready for a new type of discussion. The bad news of this report is that changing the trajectory of our communities, state, and nation will not happen overnight and cannot be fixed by only enacting one more law.

But the good news is that restoring a Hope and a Future for every child and community can be done by changing the way we talk about, educate about, and actively support and encourage healthy family formation. This is something everyone can do: from politicians to church leaders to you and your neighbors.

This conversation holds the secret to every American—no matter their race, religion, or economic background—succeeding and thriving today. The family makes the American dream possible again. This doesn't just mean economic success, but personal fulfillment and joy.

As Middletown, Ohio's own Vice President JD Vance said, "The American Dream that always counted most was not starting a business or becoming a senator...it was becoming a good husband and a good dad, and of giving my family the things I never had as a kid."

This report will show how you can join Center for Christian Virtue on the long road to making the American Dream that counts most accessible to every child, and to giving them a true Hope and a Future.

For our families.

Aaron Baer
President
Center for Christian Virtue



HOPE AND A FUTURE

FORGING STRONG AND STABLE FAMILIES IN OHIO | 2025

BRAD WILCOX NICHOLAS ZILL

CONNIE HUBER AMYLYNN SMITH



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THE STATE OF OHIO UNIONS



"Of all the rocks upon which we build our lives, we are reminded today that family is the most important," said President Barack Obama in a Father's Day speech he gave in 2008. In that speech, the 44th President underlined the individual and collective consequences of family instability not only for children but for the common good. In Obama's words, *"Children who grow up without a father... are more likely to have behavioral problems, or run away from home, or become teenage parents themselves. And the foundations of our community are weaker because of it."*⁸

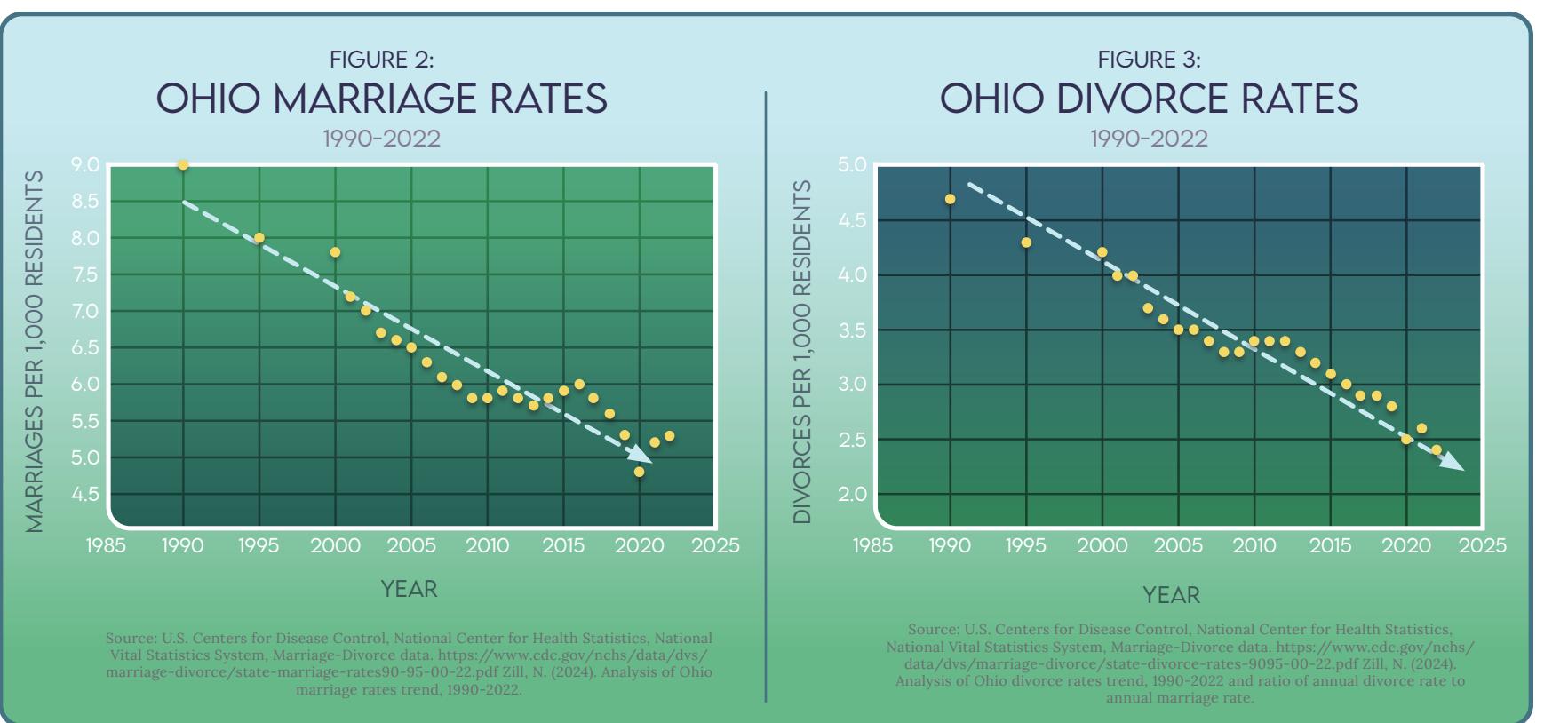
Many of the Founders had a similar perspective on the dual importance of strong families, understanding their value both for individual citizens and the common good. John Adams, our second President, believed that *"the foundations of national Morality must be laid in private Families"* and that the virtues lived out in marriage—for instance, fidelity—were crucial to the welfare of children.⁹ Social science confirms the contemporary value of marriage and family for men, women, children, and society as a whole.¹⁰ Given this, what is the state of Ohio unions? We have both sobering and heartening news to report.

**"THE FOUNDATIONS
OF NATIONAL MORALITY
MUST BE LAID
IN PRIVATE FAMILIES."**

— JOHN ADAMS

FEWER MARRIAGES

When it comes to marriage, the data reveals the institution is in retreat in Ohio, as it is across America more generally. Since 1990, the annual number of marriages per thousand Ohio residents has fallen by 41%, from 9 per thousand residents in 1990 to 5.3 per thousand in 2022, as **Figure 2 (below)** indicates. Although there have been minor fluctuations, particularly during and



heartening news is that **Figure 2 (page 3)** also suggests that the drop in the marriage rate may have bottomed out at around 5.3 marriages per thousand residents in recent years.

LESS DIVORCE

Although there are not as many marriages now in Ohio, **Figure 3 (page 3)** suggests there are also fewer divorces. Since 1990, the annual number of divorces per thousand Ohio residents has fallen by 49%, from 4.7 per thousand residents in 1990 to 2.4 per thousand in 2022. The downward trajectory of divorce in Ohio is consistent with national trends¹³ and suggests married couples in the state have slightly lower odds of seeing their marriages break up today than a few decades ago, at the height of the divorce revolution. In other words, as marriage becomes more selective in Ohio, it's also becoming more stable. That is good news for couples getting married today across the state.

FEWER BIRTHS

Family formation is also down in Ohio, as fertility falls in the state. The total number of births per year to Ohio residents has declined since 2005, when it was 148,388. In 2023, the total number of births was 126,785, lower by nearly 22,000. In the last decade, the annual number of births per 1,000 women in the 15

to 44 age range has gone down by 8 percent, from 62.2 in 2010 to 57.3 in 2022, as **Figure 4 (below)** indicates.

The average number of lifetime births per Ohio woman (the Total Fertility Rate) has declined by 11%, from 1.9 births per woman in 2010 to 1.7 births per woman in 2022. Notably, the Total Fertility Rate is below the replacement level of 2.1 births per woman. This is the level at which the population of a state

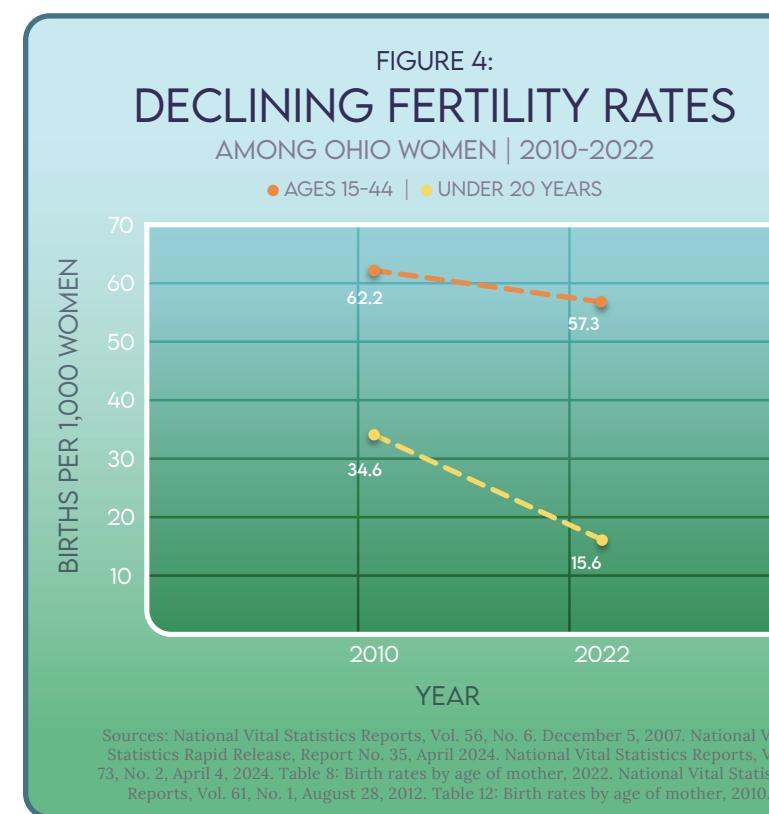
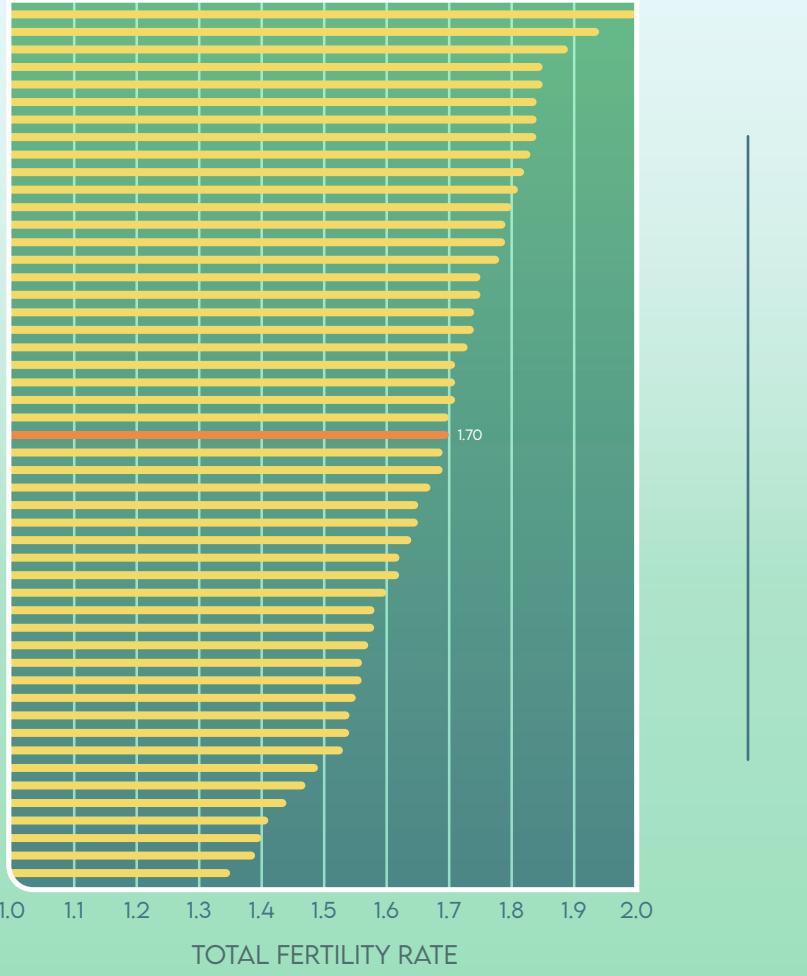


FIGURE 5:

EXPECTED LIFETIME BIRTHS

RANKED BY STATES | 2022

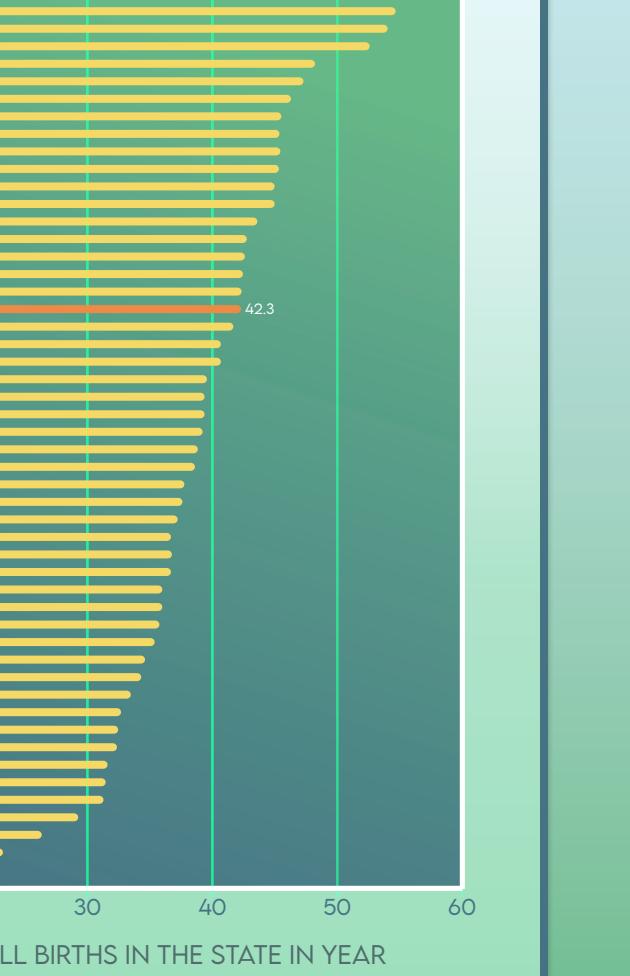


Source: National Vital Statistics Reports, Vol. 73, No. 2, April 4, 2024. Table 8. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

FIGURE 6:

BIRTHS TO UNMARRIED WOMEN

RANKED BY STATES | 2022



Source: National Vital Statistics Reports. Births, Final 2022. Volume 73, No. 2, April 4, 2024. Table I-7. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

or country replenishes itself and remains constant through reproduction alone. Still, as **Figure 5 (page 5)** shows, Ohio's fertility rate is slightly higher than the national average, and the state ranks 25th when it comes to fertility.

Nevertheless, declining childbearing is influencing Ohio demography. In fact, about two-thirds of Ohio counties lost population in the last decade, in part because of falling fertility. A recent report from the Ohio Department of Development noted that the **"state of Ohio is in the initial stage of gradual, sustained population loss because of an aging population, declining fertility, and stagnant migration patterns."**¹⁴ By mid-century, the negative implications of this projected demographic decline are likely to be large for schools, colleges and universities, social life, and Ohio's economy unless the state can turn around its family formation trends.

TEEN AND UNMARRIED BIRTH TRENDS

One positive aspect of the decline in Ohio fertility rates is that birth rates among teenagers have also dropped precipitously. Given that children born to teen mothers are known to be at greater risk of poverty and social problems, this is a favorable turn of events. As seen in **Figure 4 (page 4)**, the fertility rate among women under the age of 20 fell by 55%, from 34.6 births

per thousand teenagers in 2010 to 15.6 per thousand in 2022.

Declining teen births are often associated with parallel declines in non-marital childbearing. Nevertheless, the proportion of babies born to unwed mothers across the state has been stubbornly resistant to change. The proportion of all Ohio births that were to unmarried women was 39% in 2005 and 42% in 2023. In fact, the state has a higher share of children born out of wedlock than the national average, ranking number 18 for non-marital births (**Figure 6, page 5**). This comparatively high rate of non-marital childbearing fuels family instability, insofar as children born outside of marriage are markedly more likely to see adults move in and out of their homes, provided their parents do not marry.¹⁵

LESS THAN HALF OF KIDS IN OHIO GROW UP WITH INTACT, MARRIED PARENTS

One of the most important markers of family health is the status of married families in a state. How does marriage ground and guide Ohio families? We look at this in two ways.

First, we estimate the percentage of children who are still living in intact, married families in the last years of high school, when most are 15- to 17-years-old. **Figure 7 (page 7)** shows data from

FIGURE 7:
CHILDREN LIVING WITH MARRIED PARENTS
15-17 YEAR OLDS | RANKED BY STATE | 2021-2022

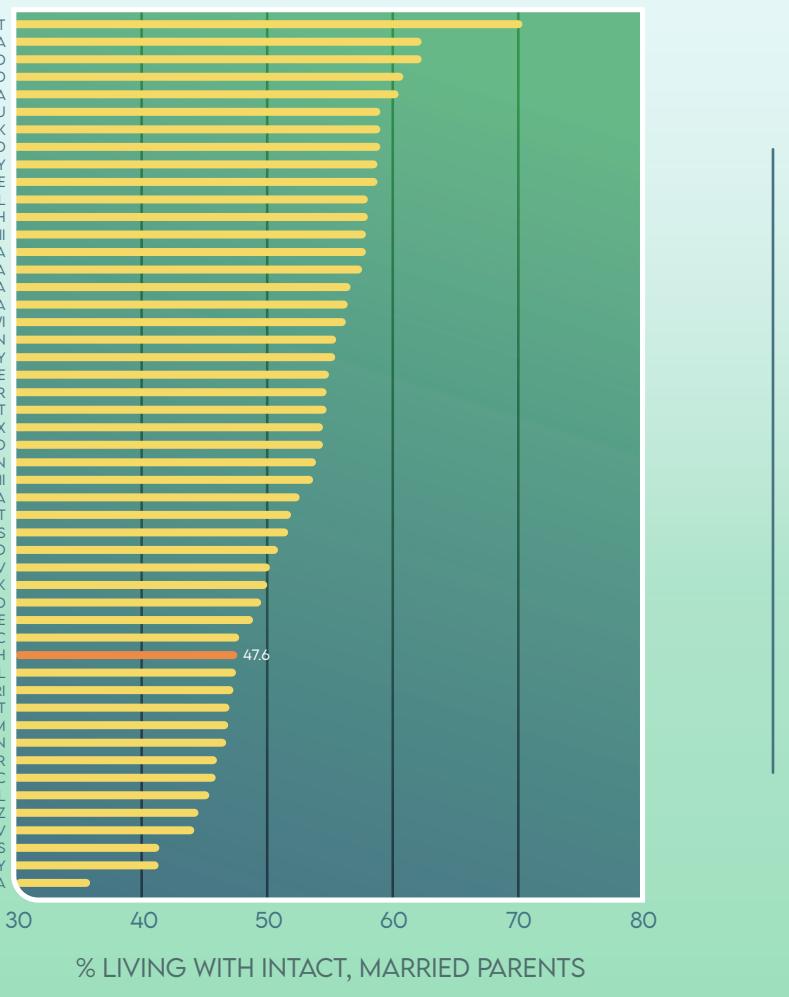
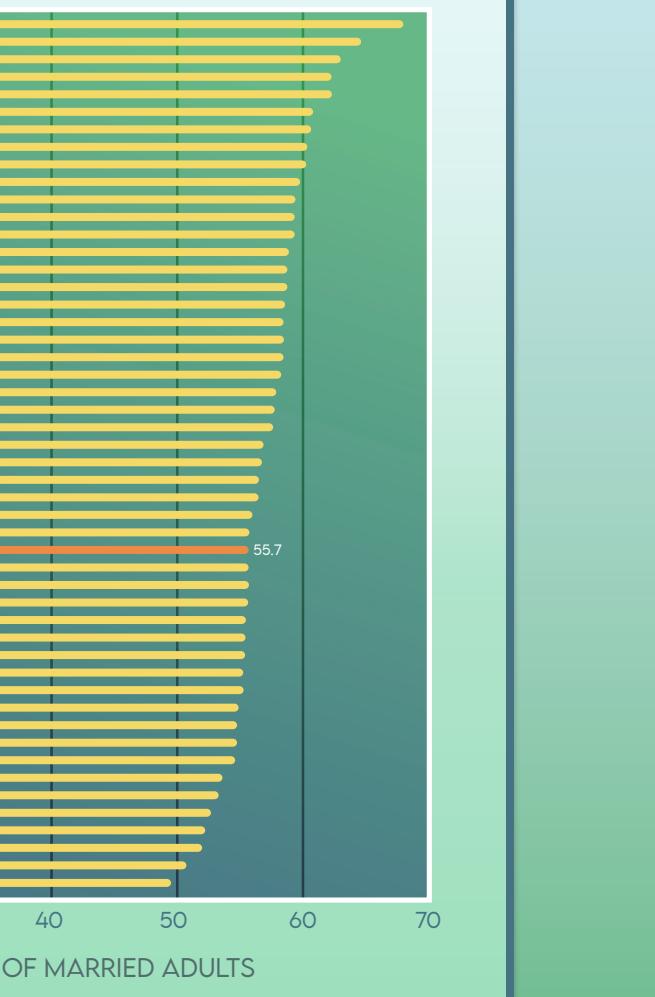


FIGURE 8:
PERCENT OF MARRIED ADULTS
RANKED BY STATE | 2022



National Surveys of Child Health (NSCH) conducted in 2021 and 2022 on the percentage of children in Ohio and states across the nation who lived with married birth or adoptive parents at ages 15 to 17 years old.¹⁶

The proportion of kids living with both parents among 15- to 17-year-olds in Ohio is 48%, compared to the national average of 53%, placing the state below the U.S. nationwide average in terms of family stability. Ohio is ranked 37th on this indicator of family stability, meaning that boys and girls in the Buckeye State are less likely to be raised by their own married parents, compared to children across America.

Another way to look at family structure in Ohio is to explore where Ohio stands in relation to other states in terms of the share of its prime-aged adults (ages 25 to 54) who are married. Data from the American Community Survey in **Figure 8 (page 7)** indicate that Ohio ranks 31st on this indicator with 56% of prime-aged adults married. This means the state has comparatively fewer married men and women than most states across America.

We highlight the most important family structure trends in states across the nation, including Ohio, in our new “**Family Structure Index**” (page 10). The **Family Structure Index** is



designed to tap the extent to which states have strong, stable, and sustainable families. It does so by focusing on the share of adult residents of a state who are married, have children, and raise those children together through the child’s high-school years. The index is specifically made up of three components:

- 1) the percentage of adults aged 25 to 54 in the state who are married;
- 2) the average number of lifetime births per woman in the state (the Total Fertility Rate); and
- 3) the percentage of children in the state who are living with their married birth or adoptive parents at ages 15 to 17.

THE STATE OF OHIO UNIONS

Each of these component measures was transformed into a *z-score* by comparing it to the mean value and standard deviation across all 50 states. The *z-scores* were converted to standard scores with the mean equal to 20 and standard deviation equal to 5. The three standard scores were added together with equal weighting to form an index score with a mean of 60 and a theoretical standard deviation of 15. The obtained standard deviation was somewhat lower, 12.82, because of intercorrelation among the three component measures.

Index scores higher than 60 indicate that a state has at least one of the following attributes: an above-national-average proportion of married adults, a higher number of births per woman, or higher-than-national-average proportion of teenagers living with intact, married parents. Index scores lower than 60

mean one, two, or all three of the component standard scores are below national average levels.

The highest index score was 94, achieved by Utah; the lowest, 32, obtained by Rhode Island. Ohio had a Family Structure Index score of 55, placing it 5 points, or about a third of a standard deviation, below the national mean. Right now, Ohio is ranked 29 on the Family Structure Index.

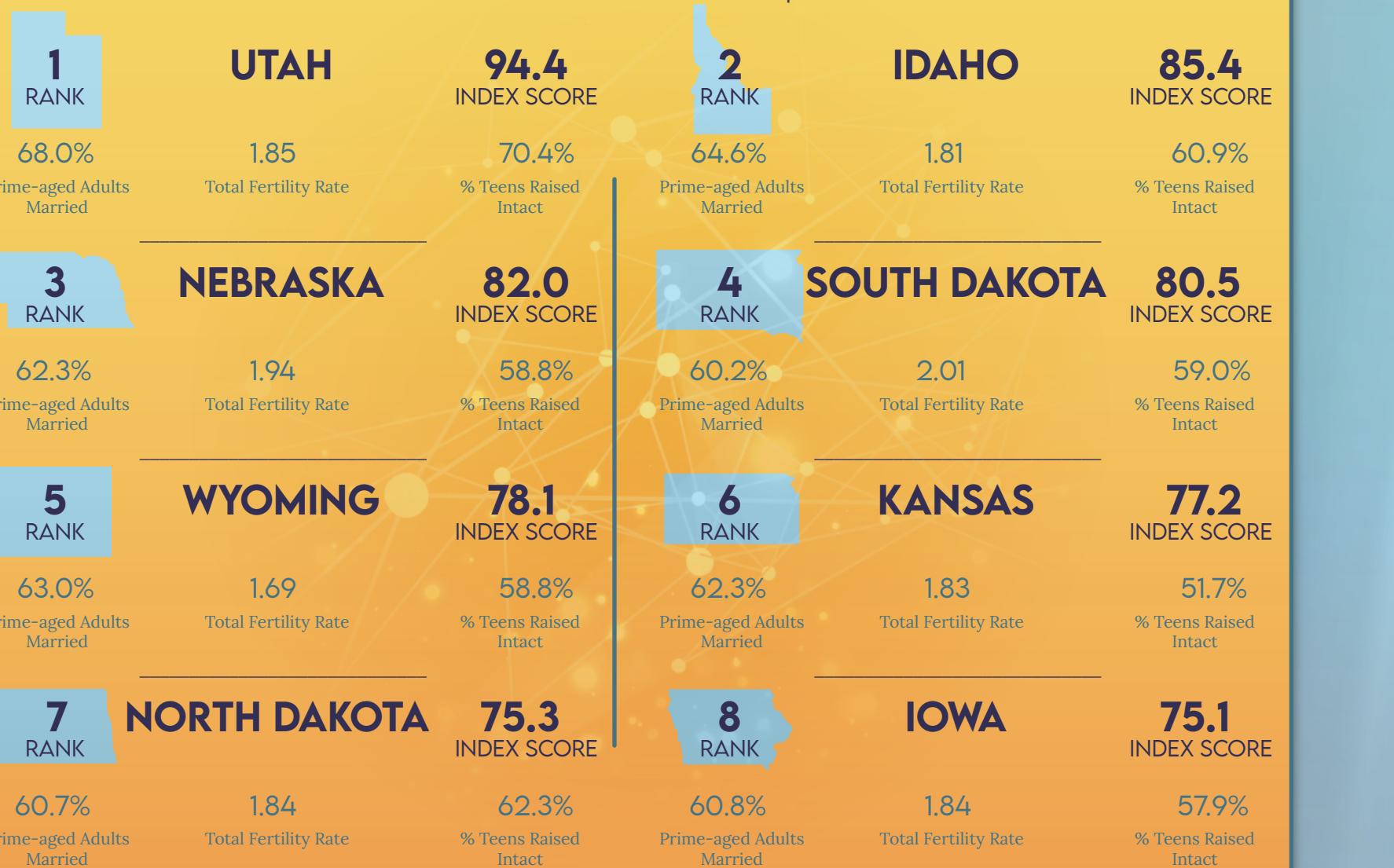
The Family Structure Index underlines the fact that the state of Ohio unions could and should be stronger. While divorce has come down and Ohio marriages are likely more stable than they used to be, the state ranks below the national average when it comes to marriage and family stability.

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8. Barack Obama, "Father's Day Speech." Apostolic Church of God, Chicago. June 15, 2008.
 9. "Founders Online." National Archives and Records Administration. (June 1778).
 10. Brad Wilcox, Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization. (New York City: HarperCollins, 2024). Sara McLanahan and Isabel Sawhill, "Marriage and Child Wellbeing Revisited: Introducing the Issue." *Future of Children* 25, no 2 (2015). Michael R. Strain, et al, "Rebalancing: Children First." American Enterprise Institute, Brookings. (February 8, 2022).
 11. "Marriage Rates by State." Center for Disease Control. (2022).
 12. Brad Wilcox, et al, "For Richer, For Poorer: How Family Structures Economics Success in America." Institute for Family Studies, American Enterprise Institute. (October 2014).

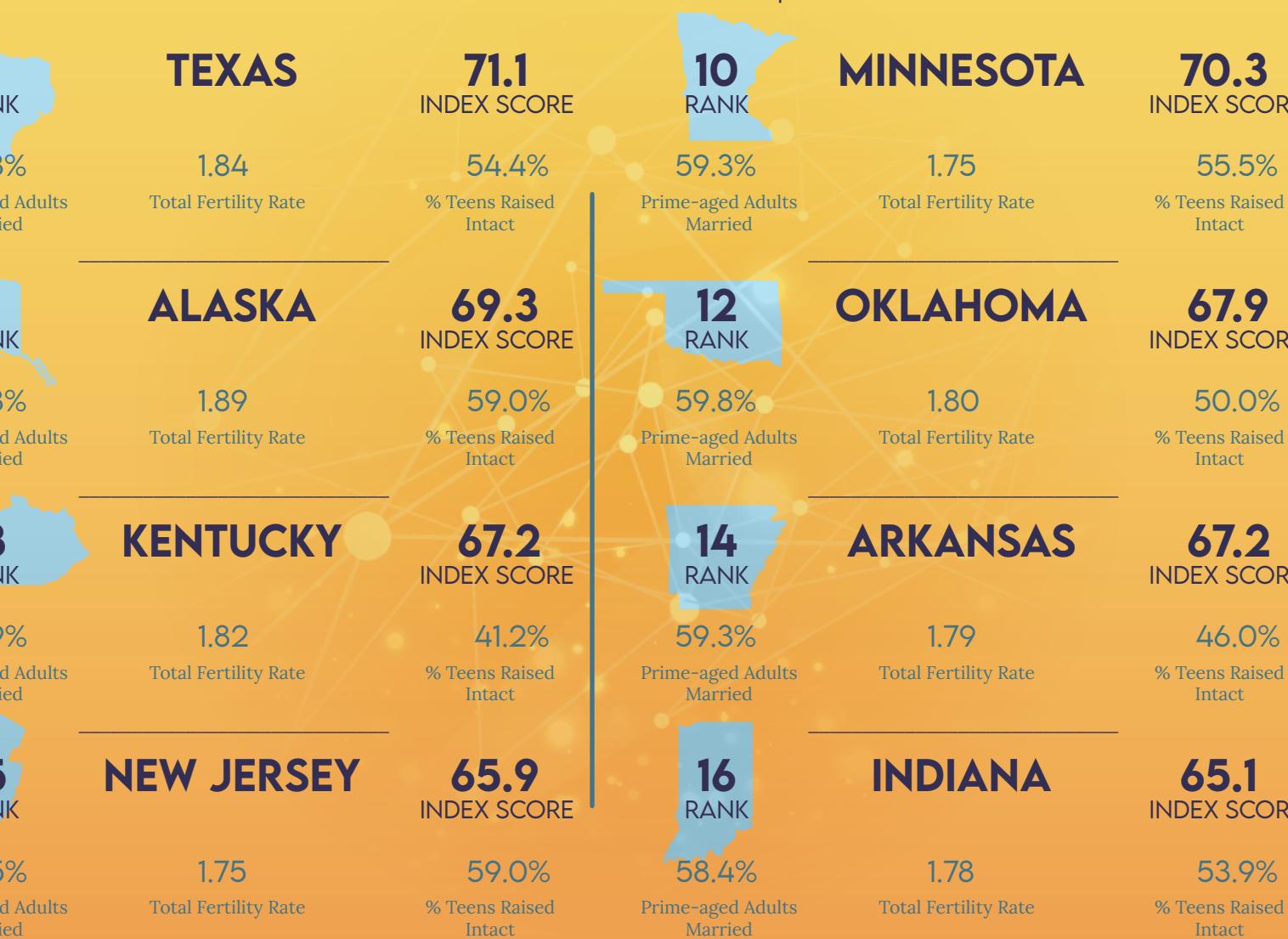
13. Wilcox, Get Married.
14. State of Ohio. Population Projections Report 2023.-chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnibpcapcglclefindmkaj/
<https://dam.assets.Ohio.gov/image/upload/development.Ohio.gov/research/pop1/State-of-OH-Population-Projections-Report-2023.pdf>
15. Kelly Musick and Katherine Michelmore, "Cross-National Comparisons of Union Stability in Cohabiting and Married Families With Children." *Demography* 55 (June 2018): 1389-1421.
16. Note that these are independent samples of children and not the same kids followed over time in the NSCH.



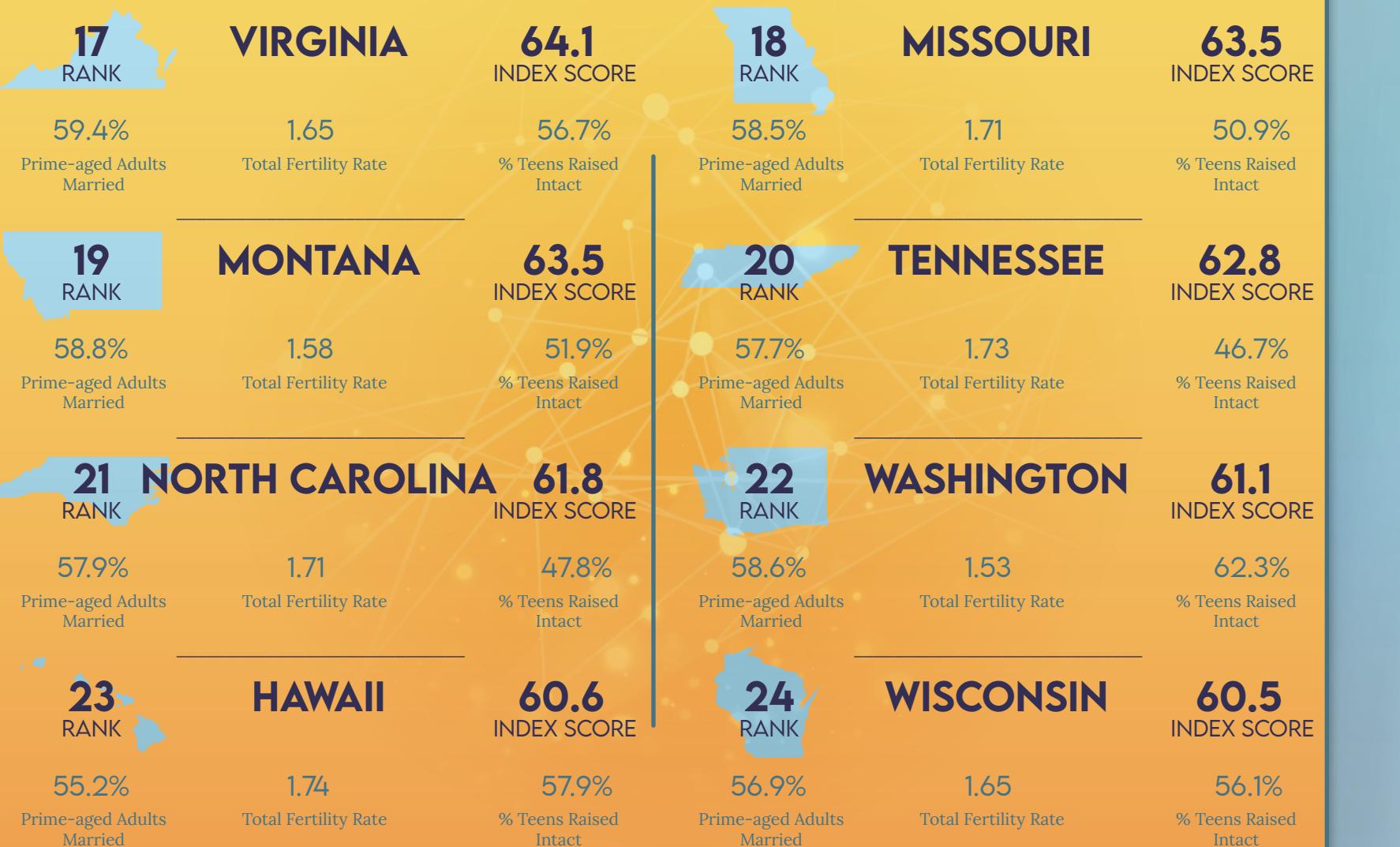
FAMILY STRUCTURE INDEX | 2025



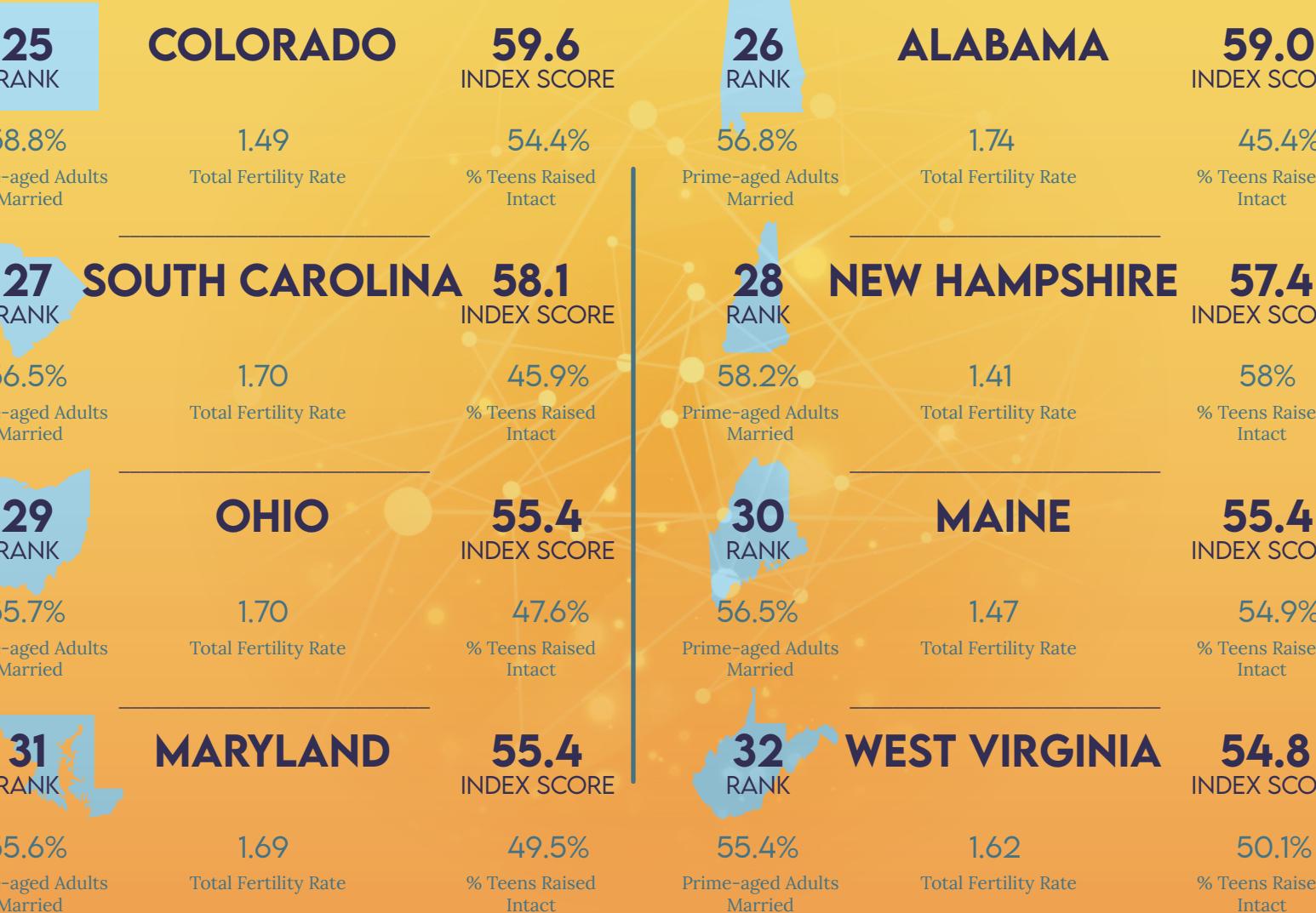
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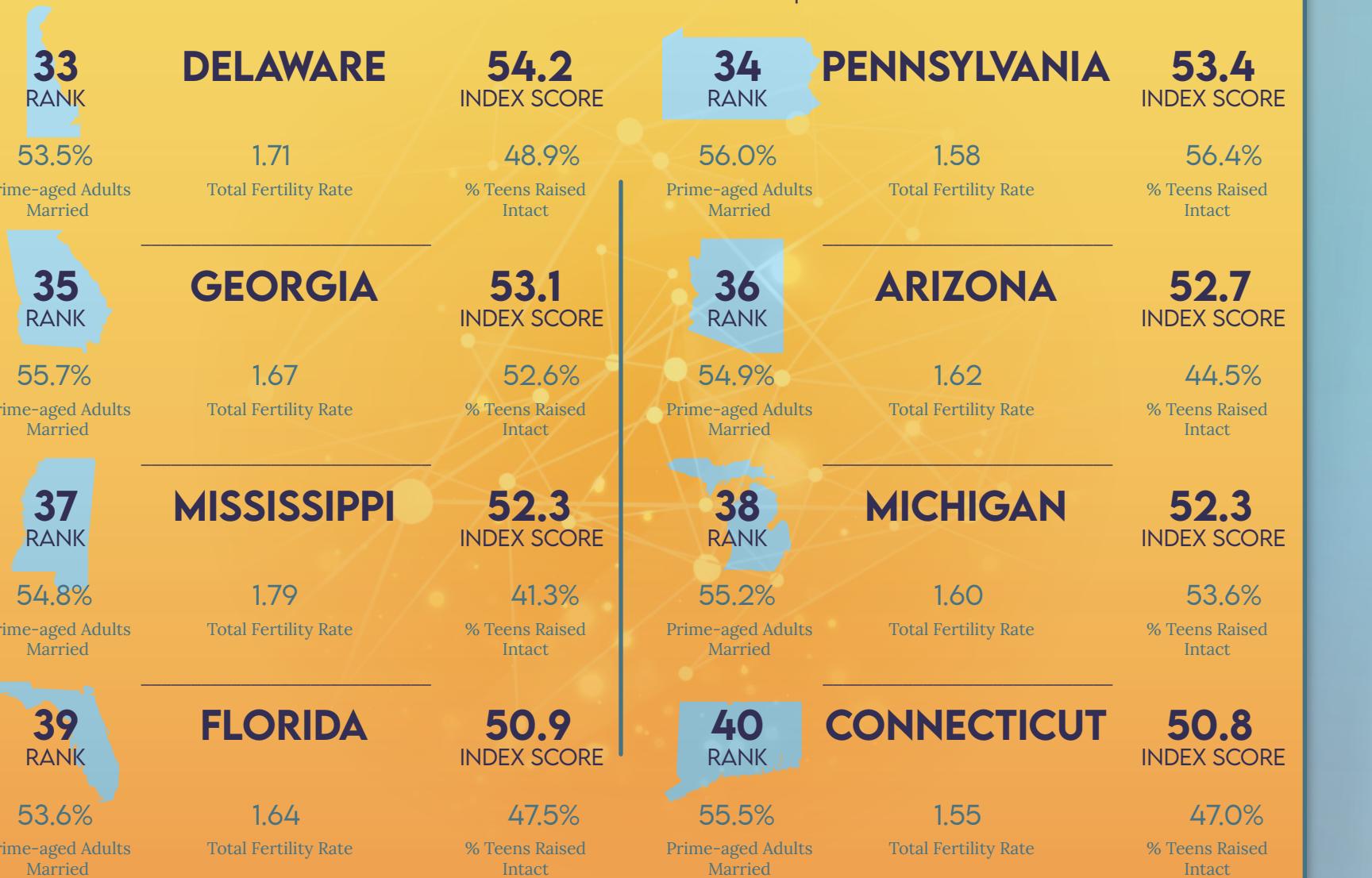
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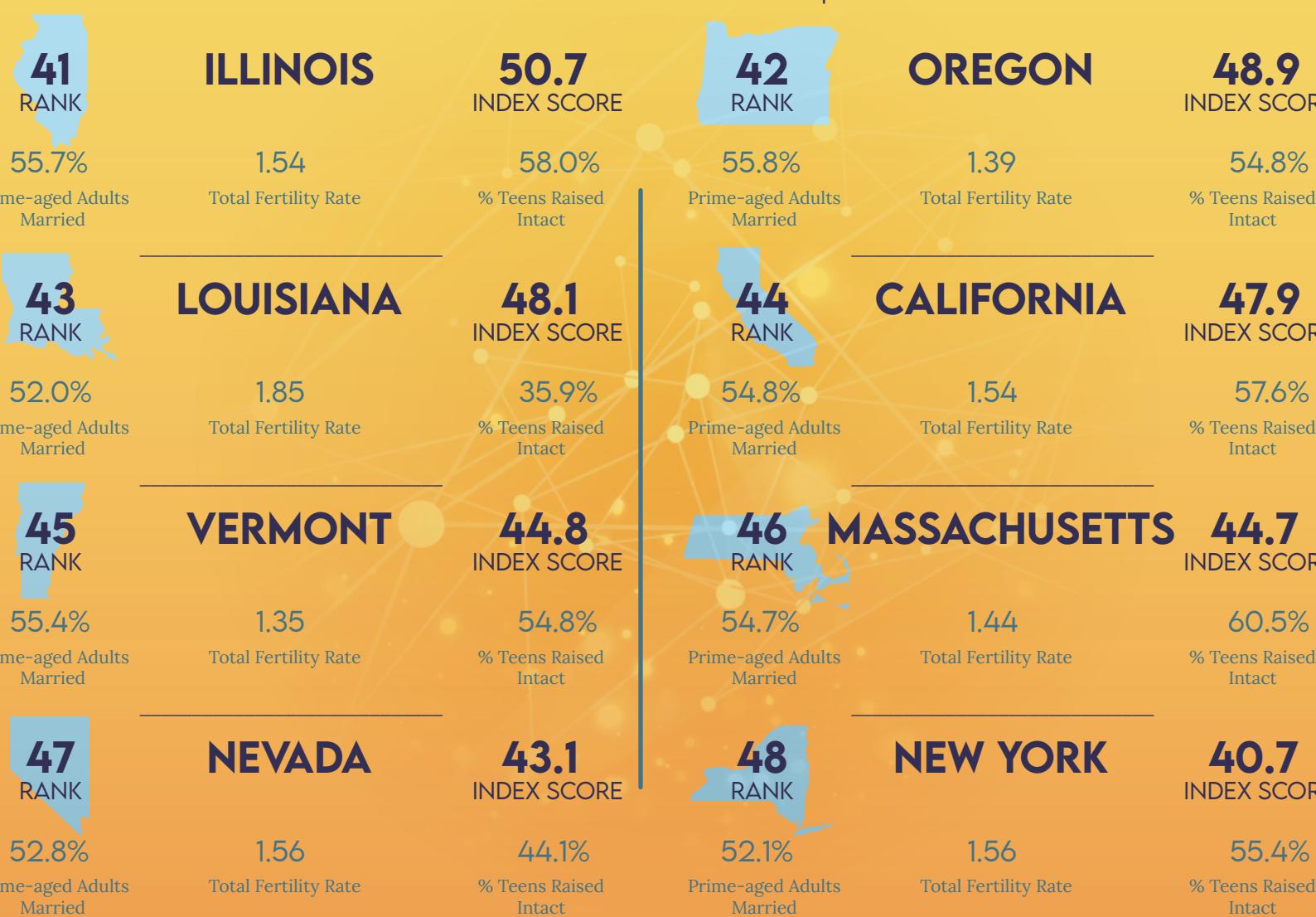
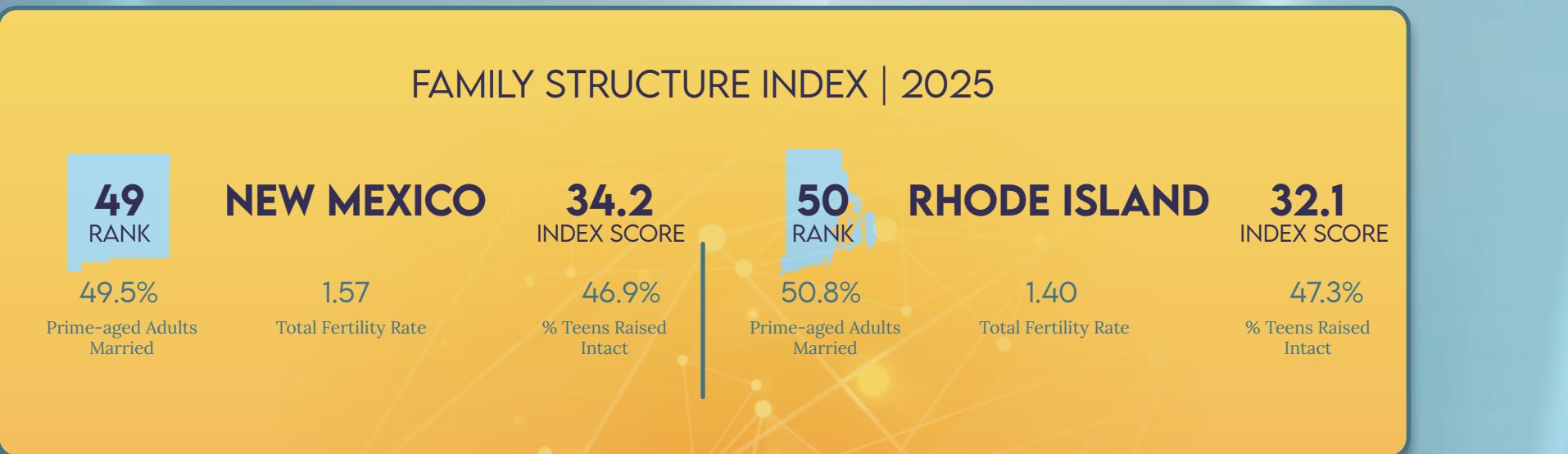
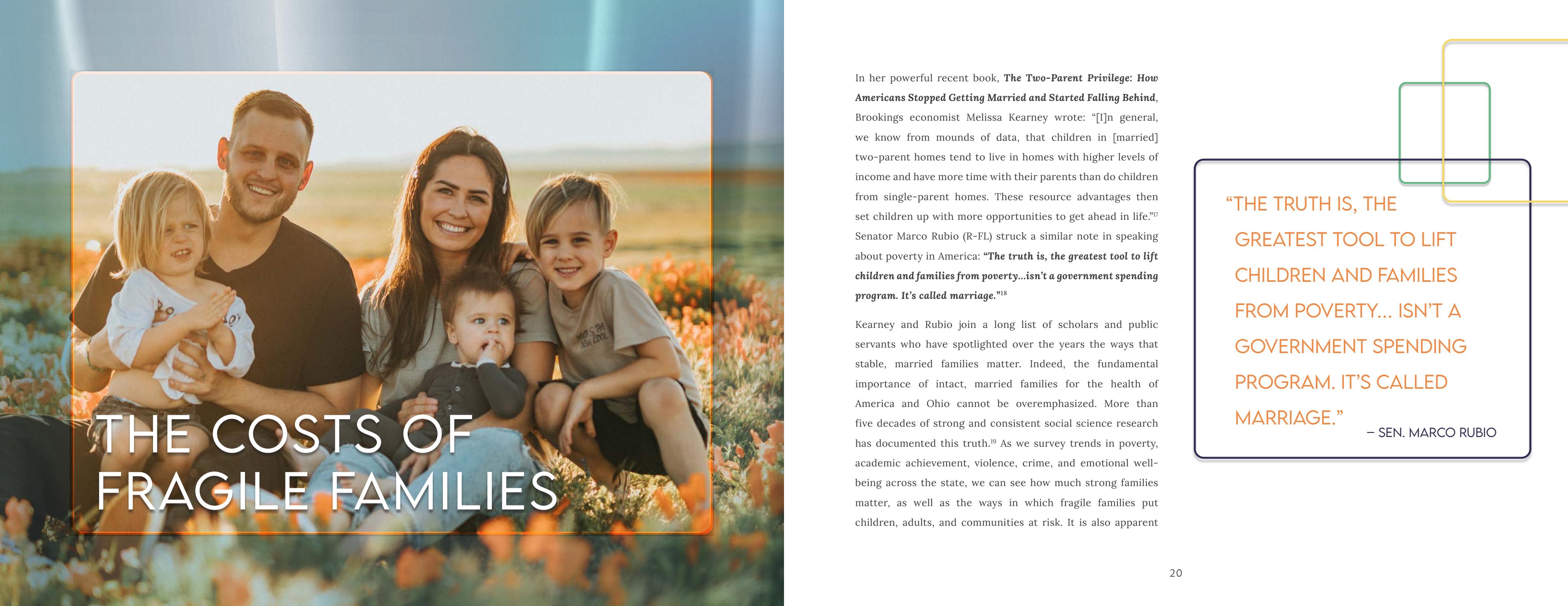


TABLE 1:
FAMILY STRUCTURE INDEX | 2025



STATE	RANK	INDEX	% PRIME-AGED ADULTS MARRIED	TOTAL FERTILITY RATE	% TEENS RAISED INTACT
Utah	1	94.4	68.0%	1.85	70.4%
Idaho	2	85.4	64.6%	1.81	60.9%
Nebraska	3	82.0	62.3%	1.94	58.8%
South Dakota	4	80.5	60.2%	2.01	59.0%
Wyoming	5	78.1	63.0%	1.69	58.8%
Kansas	6	77.2	62.3%	1.83	51.7%
North Dakota	7	75.3	60.7%	1.84	62.3%
Iowa	8	75.1	60.8%	1.84	57.9%
Texas	9	71.1	60.3%	1.84	54.4%
Minnesota	10	70.3	59.3%	1.75	55.5%
Alaska	11	69.3	57.8%	1.89	59.0%
Oklahoma	12	67.9	59.8%	1.80	50.0%
Kentucky	13	67.2	58.9%	1.82	41.2%
Arkansas	14	67.2	59.3%	1.79	46.0%
New Jersey	15	65.9	58.5%	1.75	59.0%
Indiana	16	65.1	58.4%	1.78	53.9%
Virginia	17	64.1	59.4%	1.65	56.7%
Missouri	18	63.5	58.5%	1.71	50.9%
Montana	19	63.5	58.8%	1.58	51.9%
Tennessee	20	62.8	57.7%	1.73	46.7%
North Carolina	21	61.8	57.9%	1.71	47.8%
Washington	22	61.1	58.6%	1.53	62.3%
Hawaii	23	60.6	55.2%	1.74	57.9%
Wisconsin	24	60.5	56.9%	1.65	56.1%
Colorado	25	59.6	58.8%	1.49	54.4%
Alabama	26	59.0	56.8%	1.74	45.4%
South Carolina	27	58.1	56.5%	1.70	45.9%
New Hampshire	28	57.4	58.2%	1.41	58.0%
Ohio	29	55.4	55.7%	1.70	47.6%
Maine	30	55.4	56.5%	1.47	54.9%
Maryland	31	55.4	55.6%	1.69	49.5%
West Virginia	32	54.8	55.4%	1.62	50.1%
Delaware	33	54.2	53.3%	1.71	48.9%
Pennsylvania	34	53.4	56.0%	1.58	56.4%
Georgia	35	53.1	55.7%	1.67	52.6%
Arizona	36	52.7	54.9%	1.62	44.5%
Mississippi	37	52.3	54.8%	1.79	41.3%
Michigan	38	52.3	55.2%	1.60	53.6%
Florida	39	50.9	53.6%	1.64	47.5%
Connecticut	40	50.8	55.5%	1.55	47.0%
Illinois	41	50.7	55.7%	1.54	58.0%
Oregon	42	48.9	55.8%	1.39	54.8%
Louisiana	43	48.1	52.0%	1.85	35.9%
California	44	47.9	54.8%	1.54	57.6%
Vermont	45	44.8	55.4%	1.35	54.8%
Massachusetts	46	44.7	54.7%	1.44	60.5%
Nevada	47	43.1	52.8%	1.56	44.1%
New York	48	40.7	52.1%	1.56	55.4%
New Mexico	49	34.2	49.5%	1.57	46.9%
Rhode Island	50	32.1	50.8%	1.40	47.3%



THE COSTS OF FRAGILE FAMILIES

In her powerful recent book, *The Two-Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind*, Brookings economist Melissa Kearney wrote: “[I]n general, we know from mounds of data, that children in [married] two-parent homes tend to live in homes with higher levels of income and have more time with their parents than do children from single-parent homes. These resource advantages then set children up with more opportunities to get ahead in life.”¹⁷ Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) struck a similar note in speaking about poverty in America: “*The truth is, the greatest tool to lift children and families from poverty...isn’t a government spending program. It’s called marriage.*”¹⁸

Kearney and Rubio join a long list of scholars and public servants who have spotlighted over the years the ways that stable, married families matter. Indeed, the fundamental importance of intact, married families for the health of America and Ohio cannot be overemphasized. More than five decades of strong and consistent social science research has documented this truth.¹⁹ As we survey trends in poverty, academic achievement, violence, crime, and emotional well-being across the state, we can see how much strong families matter, as well as the ways in which fragile families put children, adults, and communities at risk. It is also apparent

“THE TRUTH IS, THE GREATEST TOOL TO LIFT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FROM POVERTY... ISN’T A GOVERNMENT SPENDING PROGRAM. IT’S CALLED MARRIAGE.”

– SEN. MARCO RUBIO

that the American dream is in strongest shape in cities and counties across the state where the family is strong and stable.

To be clear, the outcomes related to poverty, crime, student success, emotional well-being, and violence are not causally determined by family structure. Rather, the following sections reveal strong associations between family structure and outcomes that demonstrate the fortunes of Ohioans rise and fall with the strength and stability of families. Still, it is important to acknowledge that other factors—from race to financial disadvantage to trade policy—also likely play a role in helping to account for the associations we find between family structure and a range of child, adult, and regional outcomes in Ohio.²⁰ Future research will have to explore these relationships in greater detail.

POVERTY

CHILD POVERTY

In Ohio, children in single-parent families are more likely to be living below the poverty level than children in married, two-parent families. In the five-year period from 2018 to 2022, the overall poverty rate for children in Ohio was 18%. Nearly one in five Ohio children lived below the poverty line, according to the Census Bureau's American Community

Survey. For married-couple families, the child poverty rate was less than one-half that, 7%, or one in 14. For children in single-mother families, it was far higher, 45%, or nearly half, as **Figure 9 (page 21)** indicates. **Figure 9** also shows that Black and White children in married families are less likely to be poor than their peers in single-mother households. Overall, controlling for race, parental education, age, and child sex, children in single-mother homes are four times more likely to be poor in Ohio than children in married families.

There are several reasons for this disparity. Non-resident parents (usually the children's biological fathers) are more likely to provide little or no financial support for their offspring. Single mothers often struggle to work full-time outside the home while also caring for children, especially young ones. Government assistance programs, such as food stamps, tend to phase out rapidly as family income rises, disincentivizing work. Without co-residence or a joint custody agreement, single mothers cannot benefit from the division of childcare and work responsibilities that most married couples practice.

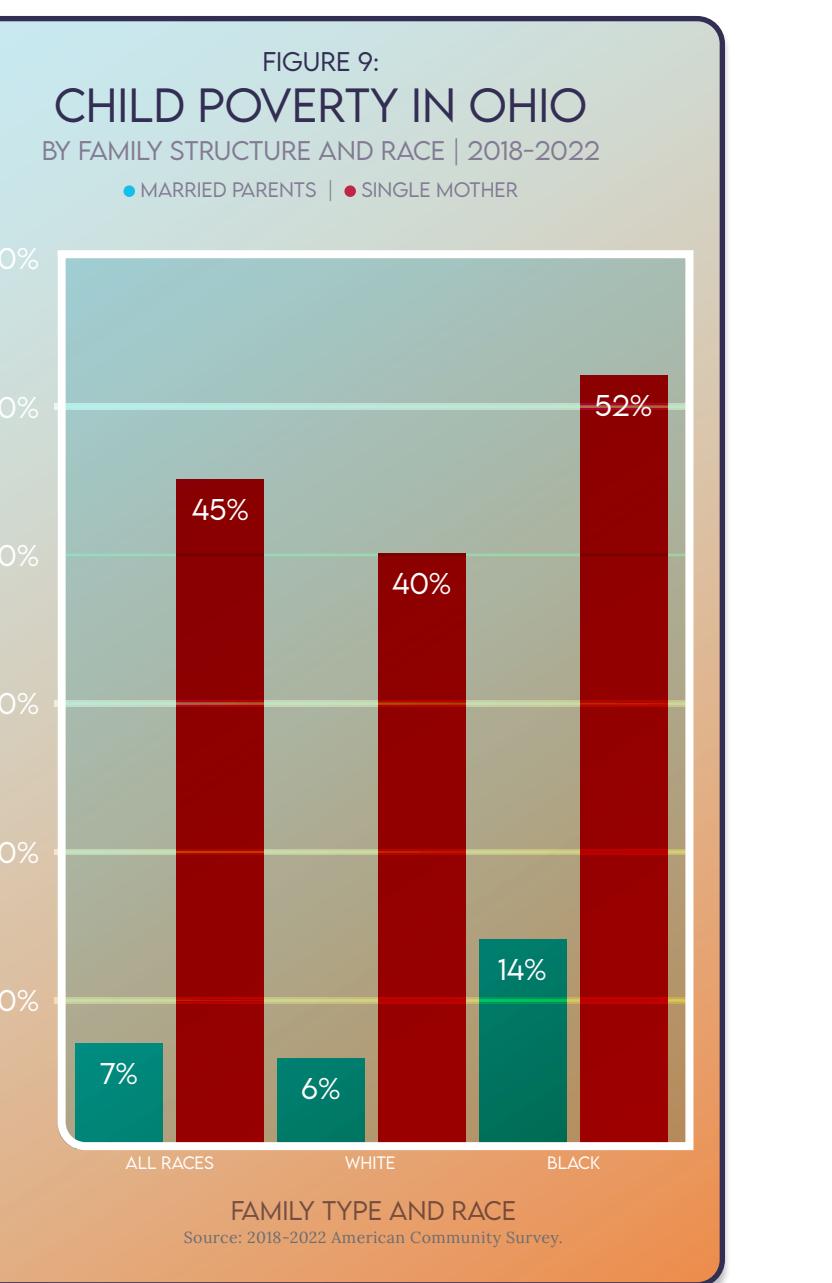
In addition, single mothers tend to have lower levels of education and less work experience than married mothers, reducing their earning potential. But even when parent educational

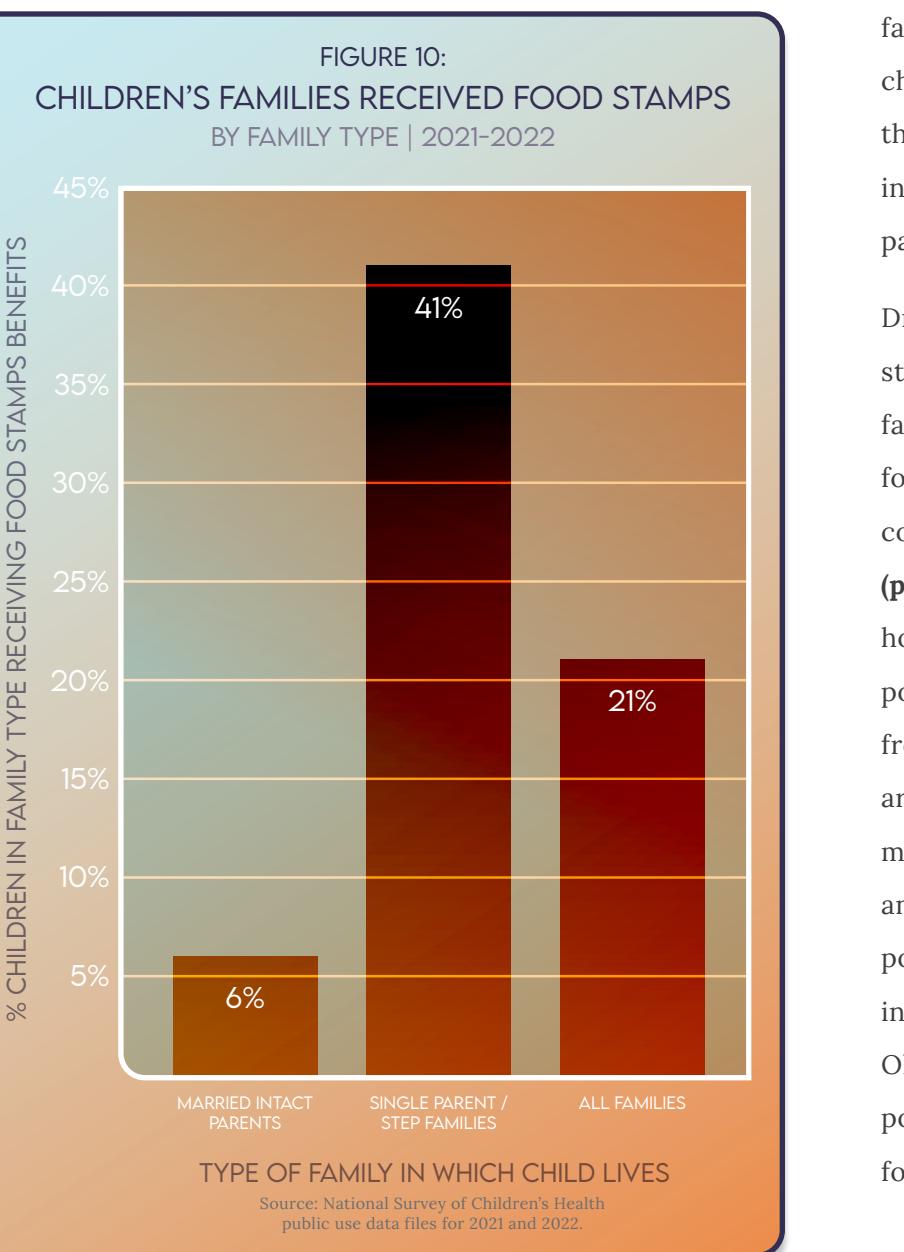
attainment, child age, and race and ethnicity are considered, children in single-parent families are significantly more likely to be poor than those in married-couple families.²¹

RECEIPT OF FOOD STAMPS

In 2022, 20% of all U.S. children under the age of 18 were in families that received food stamp benefits. They made up 14.4 million out of the total child population of 73.3 million. The type of family in which children were living had a great deal to do with their likelihood of needing and receiving such aid. Children in single-parent families made up a 53% majority of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients. Children born to and raised by never-married mothers were the family group most likely to be getting government-subsidized food, while kids raised by married couples were least likely.²²

A similar pattern is visible in Ohio. According to the 2021 and 2022 National Survey of Children's Health, 21% of all Ohio children lived in families that received food paid for by the SNAP program. Whereas 6% of children living with intact, married parents received food stamp assistance in the state, the same was true of nearly seven times as many—41%—of children living with single parents, in step families, or in other family arrangements (**Figure 10, page 23**). When the relationship between





family structure and food stamp dependence was controlled for child age, sex, and race/ethnicity and parent education level, the odds of SNAP receipt were 7.77 times higher for children in disrupted families than for those living with intact, married parents.

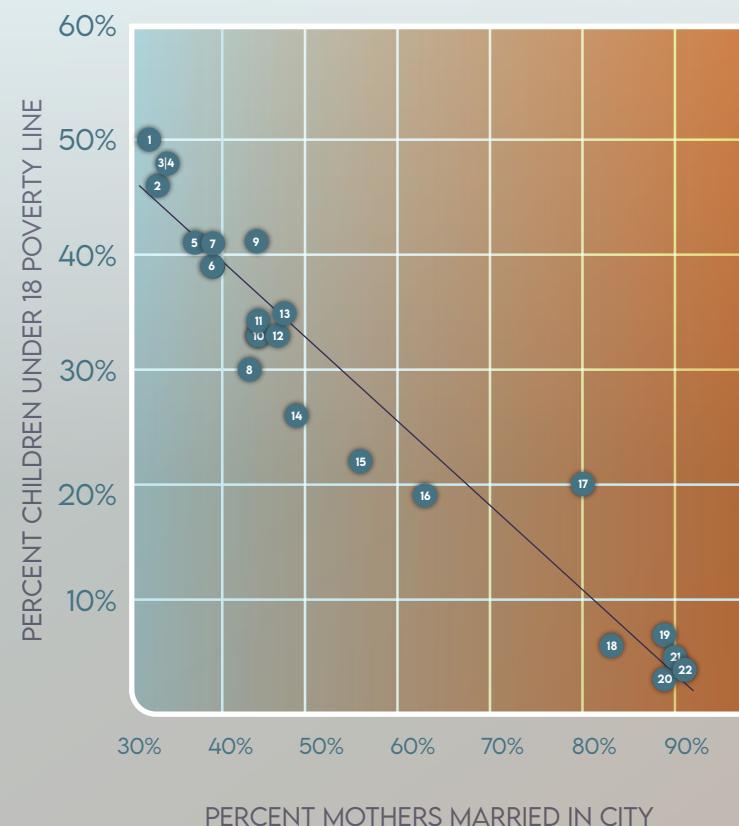
Dramatic differences in financial circumstances by family structure are reflected not just in the fortunes of individual families and children across Ohio, but also in the economic fortunes of entire communities across the state. When it comes to child poverty, for instance, **Table 2** and **Figure 11** (page 24) dramatically illustrate how the presence of married homes across leading Ohio cities are powerfully related to child poverty rates in those cities. For instance, child poverty ranges from a high of 50% in Youngstown, where only 32% of mothers are married, to a low of 4% in New Albany, where 91% are married. Clearly, the nation's marriage divide—where educated and affluent Americans generally get and stay married, and poor and working-class Americans are more likely to struggle in forging stable families²³—is also reflected in these regional Ohio patterns. It is our view that family instability both drives poverty in the Buckeye State, and that poverty makes the formation of strong and stable families less common.

TABLE 2:
PERCENT OF MOTHERS MARRIED
AND CHILD POVERTY
IN OHIO CITIES | 2018-2022

CITY	% MOTHER MARRIED	CHILD POVERTY RATE
1. Youngstown	32%	50%
2. Cleveland	33%	46%
3. Warren	34%	48%
4. Canton	34%	48%
5. Dayton	37%	41%
6. Lima	39%	39%
7. Toledo	41%	39%
8. Zanesville	43%	30%
9. Mansfield	44%	41%
10. Springfield	44%	33%
11. Akron	44%	35%
12. Cincinnati	46%	33%
13. Columbus	48%	35%
14. Middletown	49%	26%
15. Chillicothe	56%	22%
16. Cleveland Heights-University Heights	63%	19%
17. Jackson	80%	20%
18. Beachwood	83%	6%
19. Dublin	86%	7%
20. Upper Arlington	89%	3%
21. Mason	90%	5%
22. New Albany	91%	4%

Based on city school districts. Source: National Center for Education Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau. NCES EDGE Tables from American Community Survey (ACES-ED) 2018-2022. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Demographic/ACS>.

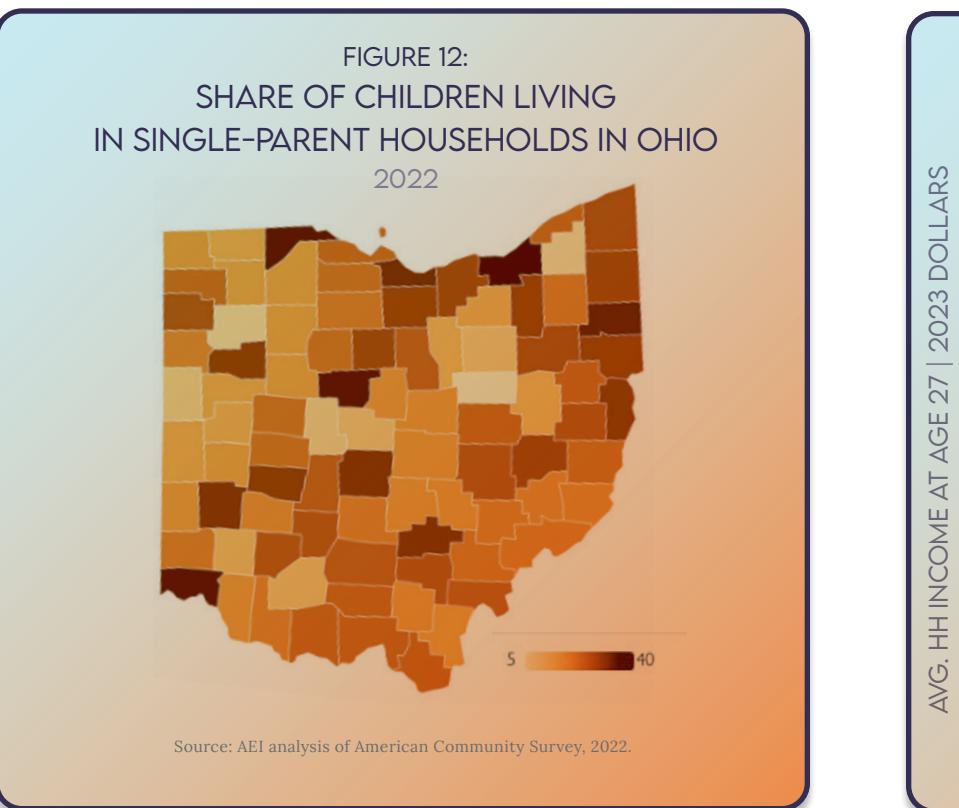
FIGURE 11:
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILD POVERTY
AND SHARE OF MOTHERS MARRIED IN OHIO CITIES
2018-2022



Sources: National Center for Education Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau. NCES EDGE Tables from American Community Survey (ACES-ED) 2018-2022. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Demographic/ACS>.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

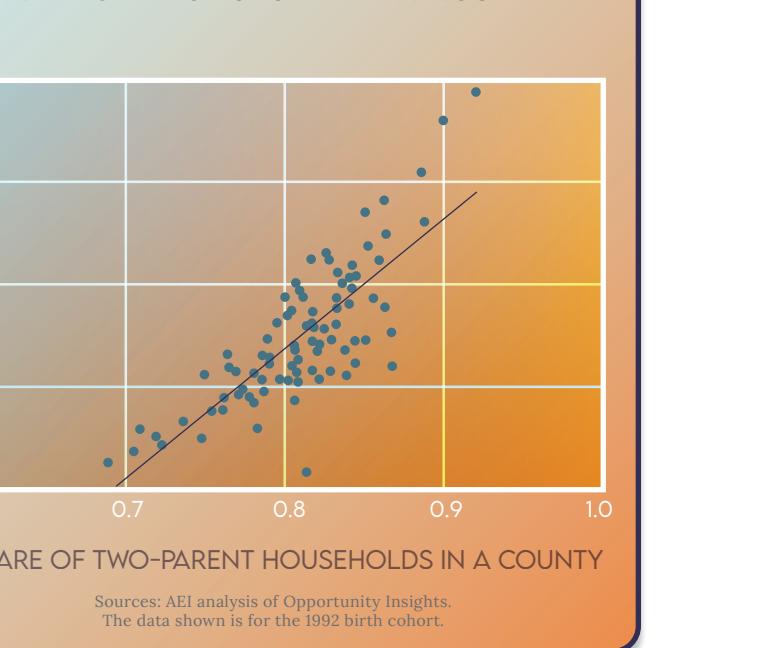
Harvard University economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues are famous for underlining the connection between economic mobility and family structure. In their 2014 study of the subject, they found that the strongest community-level predictor of mobility for poor kids was the share of two-parent families in a community.²⁴ In other words, poor children have a markedly



higher chance of achieving the American dream if they grow up in places with a higher share of two-parent families.

Chetty's work holds true across Ohio. As **Figure 12 (below)** indicates, the share of children living in a single-parent home varies a great deal across the state. It ranges from 5% in Holmes County and 8% in Geauga County to 34% in Lucas County and 38% in Cuyahoga County.

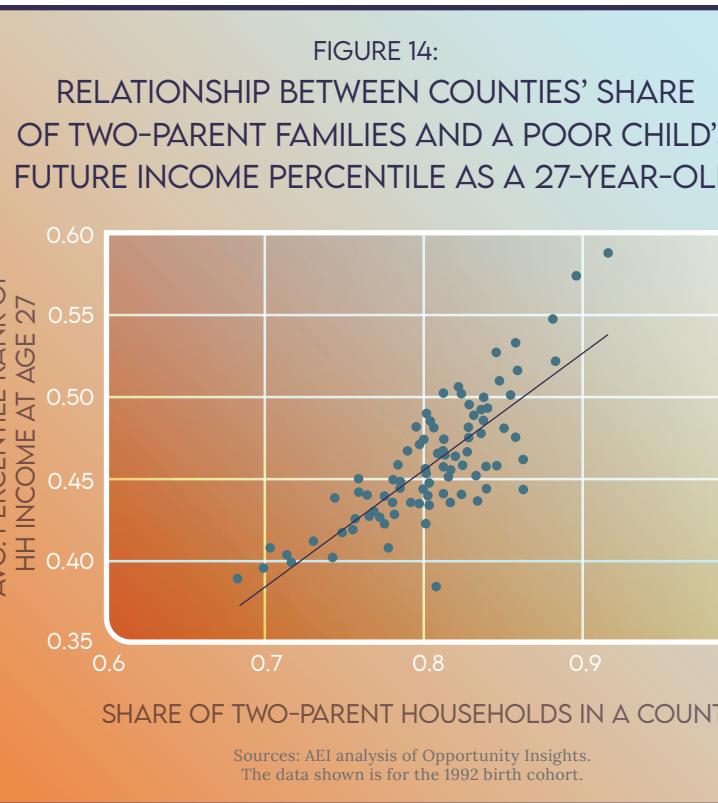
FIGURE 13:
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TWO-PARENT FAMILIES
AND A CHILD'S FUTURE EARNINGS



As Michael Pugh and Brad Wilcox found in research for the American Enterprise Institute analyzing Chetty's Opportunity Insights data, these regional trends are related to the average adult household income of children raised in poor households (whose parental income was below the 25th percentile) across the Buckeye State. For children in the 1992 birth cohort, **Figure 13 (page 25)** indicates that as the share of two-parent households within a county increased, the average household income for children at age 27 who grew up poor also increases.

For example, in Holmes County, a county with over 90% of two-parent families, the average household income of children born poor was over \$44,000 (in 2023 dollars) at age 27. Likewise, in Putnam County, another county where close to 90% of households are two-parent families, the average household income of children born poor was over \$43,000 (in 2023 dollars) at age 27. In Cuyahoga and Hamilton County, where two-parent households are less common, average household incomes for poor children at age 27 were just over \$26,000 (in 2023 dollars).

In terms of economic mobility (**Figure 14, right**), poor children who grew up in Ohio counties with comparatively fewer two-parent families only reached about the 40th percentile in household income as 27-year-old adults. However, poor children who grew up in communities where 85% or more of



the households were two-parent families typically reached above the 50th percentile. For example, poor children raised in Holmes and Putnam County, marked by high numbers of two-parent families, reached close to the 60th percentile as 27-year-olds, compared to poor children raised in Cuyahoga and Hamilton County, which have more single-parent families, who reached just under the 40th percentile at the same age. In other words, children born poor in Holmes or Putnam County

had above-average household incomes as adults. These figures suggest the American dream is much more alive in communities across Ohio where strong and stable families are the clear norm.

ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT

"Beginning with the 1966 Coleman Report, a long line of studies have found that students from intact, married families do better in school than those from disrupted or unmarried families," as psychologist Nicholas Zill has observed.²⁵ Similarly, Brookings' Kearney reminds us that "study after study suggests that a married-parent family tends to confer benefits to children in the form of greater resources during childhood, and that these increased resources then translate into better opportunities and greater educational attainment, among other outcomes."²⁶ In looking at data from Ohio, a similar picture emerges.

LEARNING OR BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

Consider the role of family structure in predicting a key outcome of student behavior. In Ohio, 17% of students aged 7 to 17 years old who hailed from an intact, married family have parents who have been contacted by their school due to learning or behavior problems of the student. By contrast, 29% of students in this same age group from non-intact families have had parents

contacted for these two reasons (Figure 15, page 28).

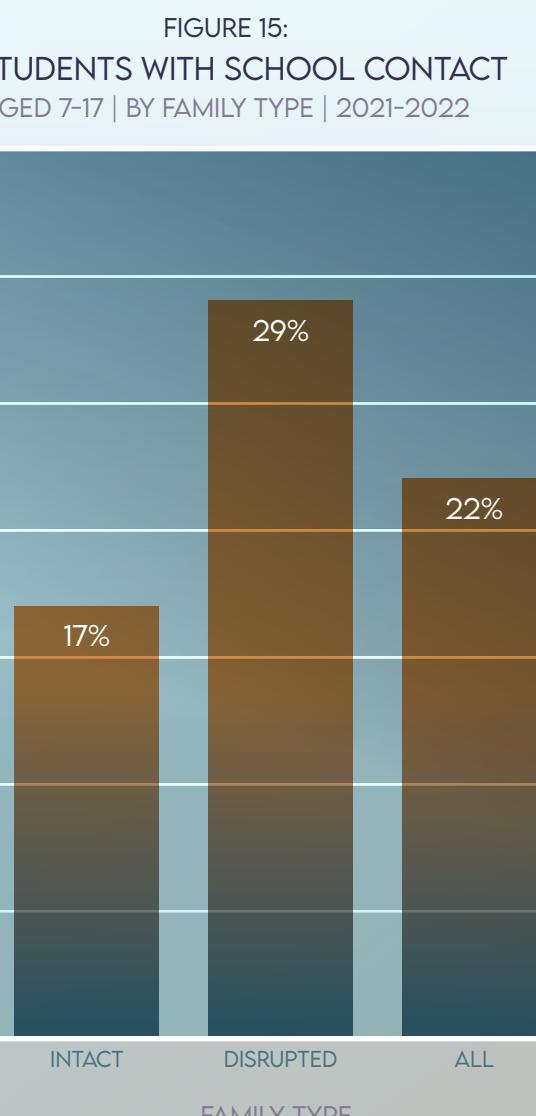
When the relationship between family type and school contact was controlled for child's age, sex, race, parent education level, and family income level, the odds for students living in disrupted families having parental contact were 1.72 times greater than for students living with intact, married parents.

GRADE REPETITION

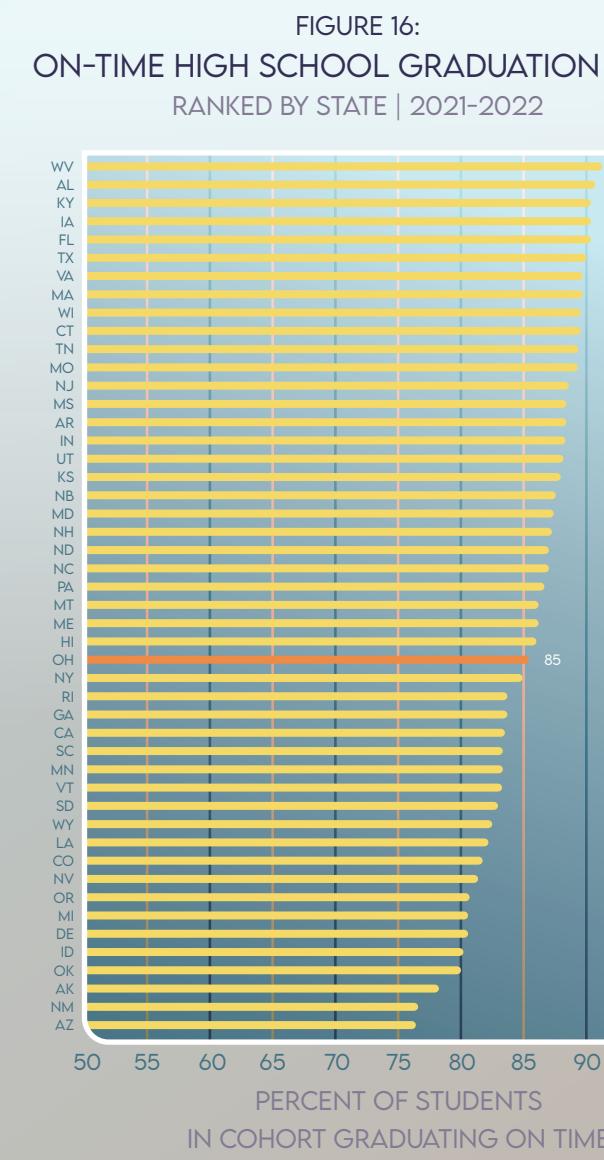
In Ohio, 4% of students aged 7 to 17 years old who hail from an intact, married family repeated a grade. By contrast, 19% of students in this same age group from non-intact families repeated a grade. Net of standard socioeconomic controls, kids from non-intact families are 1.52 times more likely to repeat a grade in the state. Clearly, as with the nation as a whole, children in Ohio who come from non-intact families are more likely to struggle in school.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

Indeed, comparatively high family instability across the state is undoubtedly one reason Ohio ranked 28th in on-time high school graduation. In general, we know that "states with a greater share of married parents have substantially higher graduation rates, even after controlling for states' median



Source: 2022 National Survey of Children's Health. U.S. Census Bureau and Department of Health and Human Services.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, Table 219.46. January 2024.

income, race/ethnicity, education level, and age composition, as well as a time trend.²⁷ In the case of Ohio, its on-time high school graduation rate in the 2021-2022 academic year was 85%, below the average rate for the nation as a whole of 87% (Figure 16, page 28).

For Ohio students from economically disadvantaged families, the graduation rate was only 77%. This was substantially lower than the average rate for disadvantaged students across the U.S., which was 81%. Students from single-parent families are more likely to be economically disadvantaged than those in married two-parent families.

Black students in Ohio had an on-time graduation rate of only 75% in 2021-2022, while for Hispanic students, the rate was 76%. Both of these rates were significantly lower than the on-time graduation rate for Ohio's White students, which was 90% in the same year. They were also lower than the graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students in the nation as a whole, which were 81% and 83%, respectively, in the same year. Both Black and Hispanic students are more likely to be growing up in single-parent families than White or Asian students.

CRIME AND VIOLENCE

Strong families make for safer streets and more peaceful homes. That's the typical story we see in the research, though—of course—there are always exceptions to these patterns. As I (Wilcox) recently observed, “**Family structure... is a better predictor than family income of which boys end up behind bars. ...violent crime and homicide are much more common in communities where marriage is weak and fathers are largely absent.**”²⁸ This is in part because young adult males are more likely to be properly socialized, supervised, and supported in homes where they have the benefit of receiving the care and discipline of two loving parents. But it is also because stable, two-parent families are less likely to engender and experience family discord.

EXPOSURE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

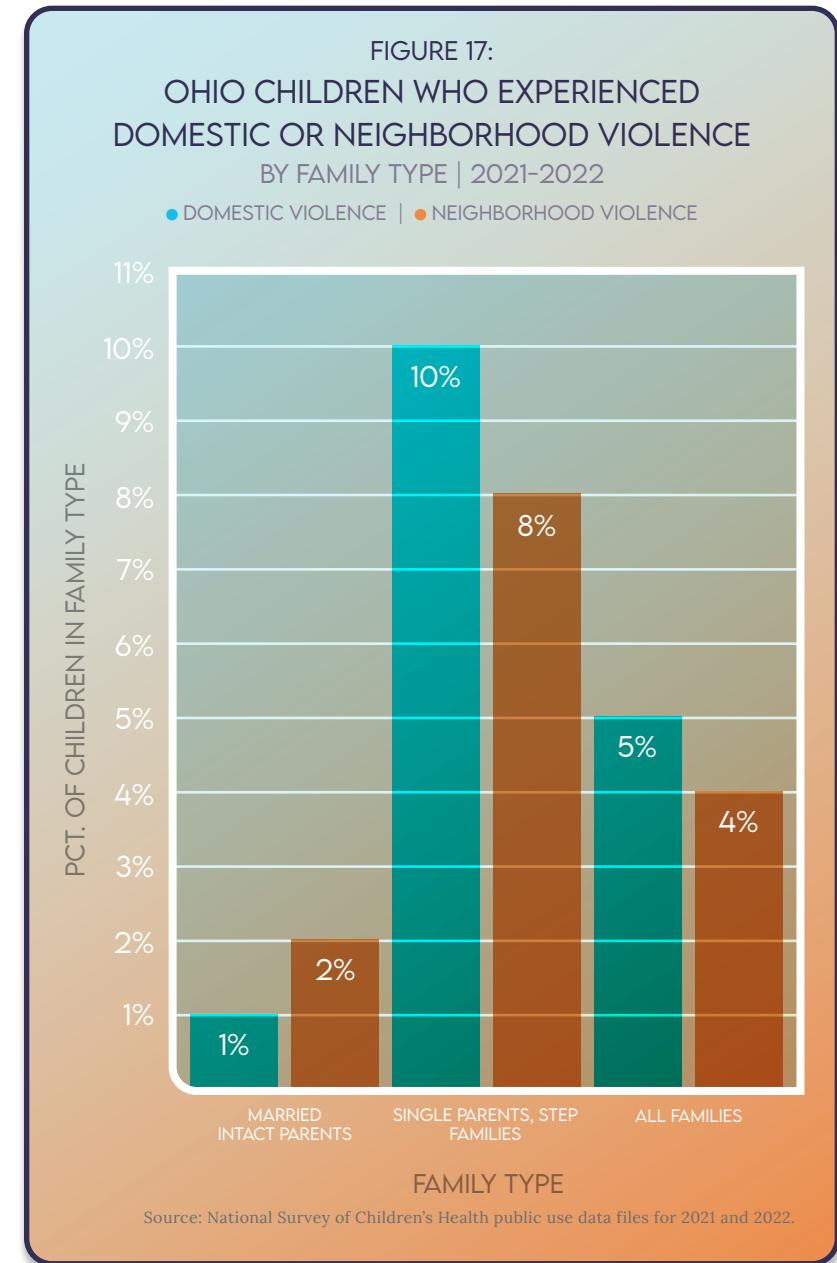
When it comes to domestic violence, Ohio children of divorced and never-married parents are far more likely to have been exposed to such violence than children in married two-parent families. In the 2021 and 2022 National Survey of Children's Health, conducted by the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 2,857 parents of Ohio children aged 17 and under were asked whether their child had ever seen or heard “**any parents,**

guardians, or any other adults in the home slap, hit, punch, or beat each other up.”

Among Ohio children living in an intact, married home, the rate of exposure to family violence was relatively low: 1% had witnessed one or more violent struggles between parents or other household members. By comparison, among children living with single mothers or fathers, in step families, or in other unmarried or disrupted families, the rate of witnessing domestic violence was ten times higher: 10% had one or more such experiences (Figure 17, left).

When these comparisons were adjusted for differences across groups in the age, sex, and race/ethnicity of the child, family income and poverty status, and the parent's education level, the odds of children in disrupted families experiencing domestic violence were 9.2 times higher than the odds for children in intact families.

Why are children in disrupted families more likely to experience domestic violence? Physically aggressive behavior on the part of one partner sometimes leads to the couple divorcing or not getting married in the first place. But the dynamics of the divorce process can also increase the probability of one or both partners becoming frustrated and angry. The legal system can



encourage combat rather than cooperation between litigants, for instance. Sexual jealousy may play a role as well, as one or both parents develop new intimate relationships. And in the case of parents who never marry, a new boyfriend or girlfriend frequently assumes a step-parental role, whether formally or informally. This can lead to conflict over the legitimacy of the substitute parent's authority over the children, differences in parenting styles or willingness to tolerate disobedient behavior by the children, or the non-resident biological parent feeling that he or she is being displaced. Cases of child neglect and abuse often involve a boyfriend or girlfriend caregiver who does not have biological ties to the child victim.²⁹

CHILDREN VICTIMIZED BY NEIGHBORHOOD CRIME

Young people are less likely to be victims of crime if they live in two-parent rather than single-parent households. That has been a consistent finding of the National Crime Victimization Survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice. The safety advantage stems in part from married couples living in less dangerous neighborhoods, on average, than unmarried parents, and from other differences in vulnerability across family types. Even in unsafe neighborhoods, kids are safer in married families, government data show. Children's rates of

exposure to neighborhood violence depend not just on where they live, but with whom they live.

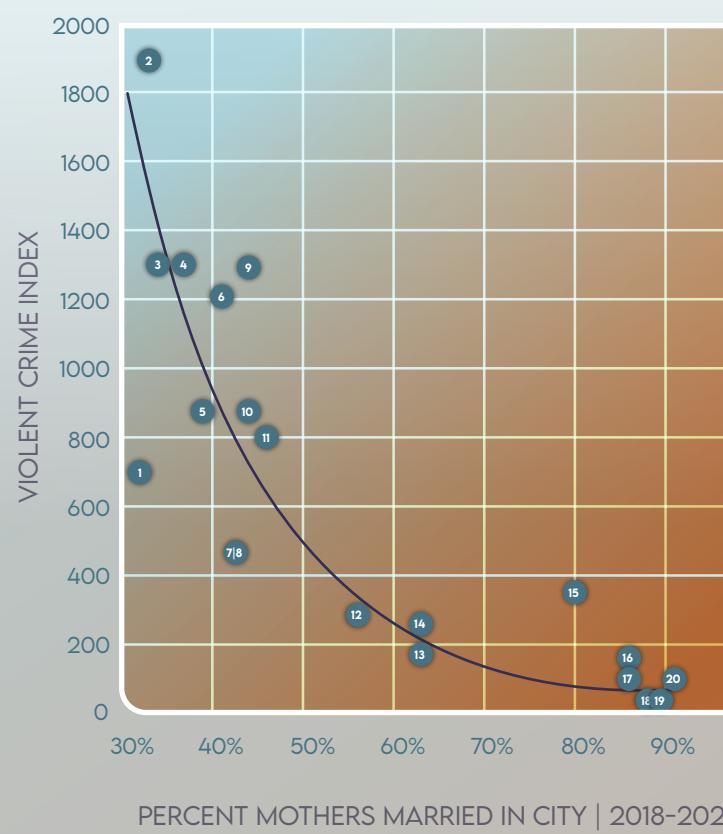
In the 2021 and 2022 National Survey of Children's Health, conducted by the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, parents of Ohio children aged 17 and under were asked whether their child was "ever the victim of violence or witnessed any violence in his or her neighborhood." Among Ohio children living with their intact, married parents, the overall rate of exposure to neighborhood violence was comparatively low: under 2% had witnessed or experienced neighborhood violence. By contrast, among Ohio children living with single mothers or fathers, in step families, or in other unmarried or disrupted families, the rate of violent crime exposure was considerably higher: 8%. (Figure 17, page 30). When the victimization differences were adjusted for differences across family types in the average age, sex, and race/ethnicity of the child; family income and poverty status; and the parent's education level; the adjusted odds of a child in a disrupted family being victimized were 9 times higher than for children in intact families.

Why are children living in unmarried or disrupted families more susceptible to neighborhood violence? These families have a greater likelihood of having to live in unsafe neighborhoods

TABLE 3:
MOTHERS MARRIED
AND VIOLENT CRIME
IN OHIO CITIES | 2023

CITY	% MOTHER MARRIED	VIOLENT CRIME RATE/100,000
1. Youngstown	32%	699
2. Cleveland	33%	1,895
3. Canton	34%	1,256
4. Dayton	37%	1,353
5. Lima	39%	870
6. Toledo	41%	1,210
7. Zanesville	43%	465
8. Mansfield	44%	480
9. Springfield	44%	1,298
10. Akron	44%	875
11. Cincinnati	46%	800
12. Chillicothe	56%	288
13. University Heights	63%	176
14. Cleveland Heights	63%	267
15. Jackson	80%	355
16. Beachwood	83%	160
17. Dublin	86%	104
18. Upper Arlington	89%	17
19. Mason	90%	43
20. New Albany	91%	99

FIGURE 18:
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VIOLENT CRIME
AND PERCENT MOTHERS MARRIED
IN OHIO CITIES | 2023



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau and National Center for Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Demographic/ACS, 2018-2022 ACS data. OIBRS. Crimes reported by city, township, village police departments for 2023. https://ocjs.Ohio.gov/law-enforcement-services/ohio-incidentbased-reporting-system>.

Sources: Zill, N. (2024). Analysis of data from U.S. Census Bureau and National Center for Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Demographic/ACS, 2018-2022 ACS data. OIBRS. Crimes reported by city, township, village police departments for 2023. https://ocjs.Ohio.gov/law-enforcement-services/ohio-incidentbased-reporting-system>.

and make more frequent residential moves as a consequence of family disruption. Another factor that increases vulnerability is the strain of raising children as a lone parent in reduced financial circumstances, which limit parents' housing options and makes it more difficult to monitor their children. As children become adolescents, their peers in less-than-ideal neighborhoods and schools are often troubled ones, who can lead them into hazardous situations and activities.

Of course, many single mothers take pains and make personal sacrifices to ensure that their offspring do not become victims of crime, and most succeed in keeping their children safe. But the survey data show that one form of home security is a stable marriage.³⁰

Regional trends in marriage and violent crime tell a similar story. Cities like Youngstown, Canton, and Cleveland have comparatively low shares of mothers married—just about one-third of the moms are married in these cities, as **Table 3 (page 32)** indicates. They also have comparatively high rates of violent crime: at least 699 incidents of violent crime per 100,000 per year. By contrast, cities with at least 85% of mothers married—like Dublin, Mason, New Albany, and Upper Arlington—are comparatively safe, with violent crime rates below 105 violent crimes per 100,000.

Figure 18 (page 32) illustrates the strong association between family structure and safe streets across Ohio cities. This is just one more indication of the ways in which the social welfare of Ohio communities rises and falls with the fortunes of the family across the state.

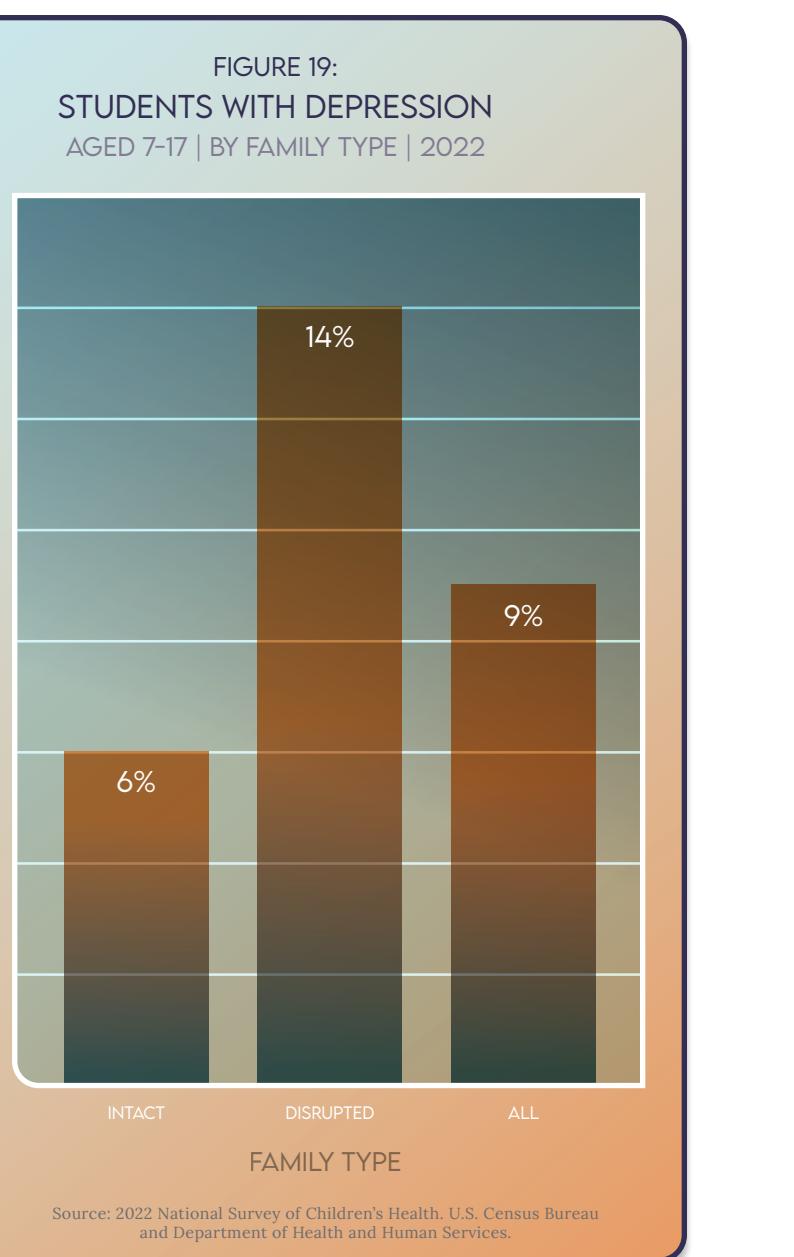
THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

We do not have access to data that allows us to directly test whether family stability maximizes the odds that Ohio residents realize “the pursuit of happiness,” a key feature of the American dream. But we have a measure of its opposite: depression.

Data from the 2022 National Survey of Children’s Health tell us that children aged 7 to 17 are more likely to have a parent

report that their child has been diagnosed with depression by a therapist or counselor at school or in private practice if they hail from a non-intact family. **Figure 19 (page 33)** indicates that 6% of children in intact families are reported as depressed, compared to 14% of children from disrupted families.

When the relationship between family type and child depression were controlled for child’s age, sex, race, parent education level, and family income, the odds for students living in disrupted families being depressed were 1.93 times greater than for students living with intact, married parents. This finding suggests that in Ohio, for kids at least, family instability is an obstacle to them realizing one key aspect of the American dream: the pursuit of happiness.



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ADVANCING A FAMILY-FIRST POLICY AGENDA IN OHIO

To further strengthen Ohio families—as well as the communities in which they reside—the state must develop and advance a strategically informed and comprehensive family-friendly policy agenda, centered around strong and stable families.

To this end, state laws, regulations, and policies should be evaluated for their efficacy in strengthening and stabilizing family life. This “family-first policy agenda” should seek among other things to reinforce the educational, economic, and cultural foundations of marriage.³¹ This is because marriage is a “keystone institution” in most civilizations, as Harvard anthropologist Joseph Henrich has noted, playing a key role in stabilizing family life, protecting the welfare of children, and advancing the common good.³²

Such policies should also support parents to invest more financial resources and time in their families—while also respecting their position as the primary educators of their children. They must also establish that sensible family policy is not about delegating yet more functions of family life to the state. They should rather make it easier for families to take the lead in supporting, forming, and caring for their own children and extended family.

THIS “FAMILY-FIRST POLICY AGENDA” SHOULD SEEK AMONG OTHER THINGS TO REINFORCE THE EDUCATIONAL, ECONOMIC, AND CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF MARRIAGE.



Specifically, an Ohio family-first policy agenda must aim to:

- Strengthen the number, quality, and stability of marital unions;
- Make it more affordable for men and women to have the children they would like to have;
- Increase positive (e.g. involved family time, meals shared together) and reduce negative (e.g., domestic violence) aspects of family life;
- Maximize the time and authority parents have with their children; and
- Educate the rising generation about the value of marriage and parenthood by adopting education standards for family life skills courses.³³

We offer five recommendations for how family-first policy can strengthen family life in Ohio.

1) STATE AGENCIES SHOULD TRACK AND REPORT FAMILY STRUCTURE

Good family policy is built upon and sustained by good metrics.³⁴ To understand the effect on state and local government, trends in family life must be measured, analyzed, and reported. This data must be reliable and accessible to citizens and community stakeholders. Reporting such metrics makes it possible for policymakers and other key constituents in Ohio—such as parents, schools, civic organizations, businesses, scholars, and journalists—to understand the influence of families on the economy, life, and character of the state.

For example, this report indicates that Ohio cities with more married families have markedly lower rates of crime and child poverty. Across the state, 45% of children raised by single mothers are poor, compared to only 7% of children in families headed by married parents.

Clearly, strong and stable families in the Buckeye State advantage children and adults in powerful and unique ways. Currently, major state agencies—like the Ohio Department of

Education and Workforce (DEW)—do not collect and report on student outcomes by family structure, but they should so that key stakeholders across the state can properly evaluate the role that families play regarding key domains of life, from education to public safety.

We recommend that the Ohio Legislature require state agencies—including the DEW, the Department of Higher Education, the Ohio Department of Children and Youth, the Ohio Department of Health (ODH), the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, the Ohio Department of Youth Services, and the Department of Public Safety—report out key family statistics that are, utilizing consistent definitions, connected to important dimensions of their work.

For instance, each agency should report:

- How children's family structure is linked to children's academic performance and behavior in school, risk of poverty and abuse, physical and mental health, risky behavior, involvement with child protective services, and encounters with the criminal justice system;

- How adult family structure is tied to men and women's involvement with the criminal justice system, poverty, physical and emotional health, drug and alcohol use and addiction, and labor force attachment; and,
- How public expenditures on children, adults, and families are associated with family structure.



Reporting and disseminating such data would help state agencies better understand the communities they are serving and how to serve them better. It would also indicate to policymakers, parents, nonprofits, journalists, academics, law enforcement, and average citizens the vital and diverse ways stable families are tied to the welfare of children, adults, and communities across the state.



There are few social factors that matter more for the welfare of all citizens than marriage and family. Wise state government should carefully and consistently measure its vitality and impact.

2) EMPOWER YOUTH WITH THE “SUCCESS SEQUENCE” IN OHIO SCHOOLS

The social sciences have discovered that particular paths are protective for today’s young men and women. One path, called the “Success Sequence”—first popularized by Brookings Institution scholars Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill—is especially valuable for young adults.³⁵

The Success Sequence is a specific series of milestones in life associated with avoiding poverty and moving into the middle class or beyond. It encourages three basic life choices and disciplines that can be accomplished by most people:

- 1) Complete and graduate from high school
- 2) Get and maintain a full-time job in one’s 20s
- 3) Marry before having any children

Young adults who complete these three steps are much more likely to realize the American dream. A stunning 97% of young men and women who follow this relatively simple sequence

succeed in avoiding poverty in their late 20s and 30s.³⁶

The Success Sequence is also protective for young adults from a range of backgrounds when it comes to poverty. Specifically, over 90% of Black, Hispanic, and young adults from poor families avoid poverty as they move into young adulthood and follow this sequence.³⁷ Finally, 86% of Millennials who followed the Success Sequence reached the middle class or higher as young adults.³⁸

This makes the Success Sequence something that every young Ohioan should learn many times over throughout their developing years. They should learn it from their parents and extended family, from their schools, from their pediatricians, from their communities of faith, and from their coaches. The power of education, work, and marriage to lift people out of poverty is not widely known. That must end in Ohio.

This is especially true because the benefits from the Success Sequence extend beyond the financial arena. New research by Wendy Wang at the Institute for Family Studies and Samuel Wilkinson at Yale University demonstrates the Sequence is also associated with the emotional well-being and family stability of young adults.³⁹ Young men and women who have followed all three steps are significantly less likely to be emotionally

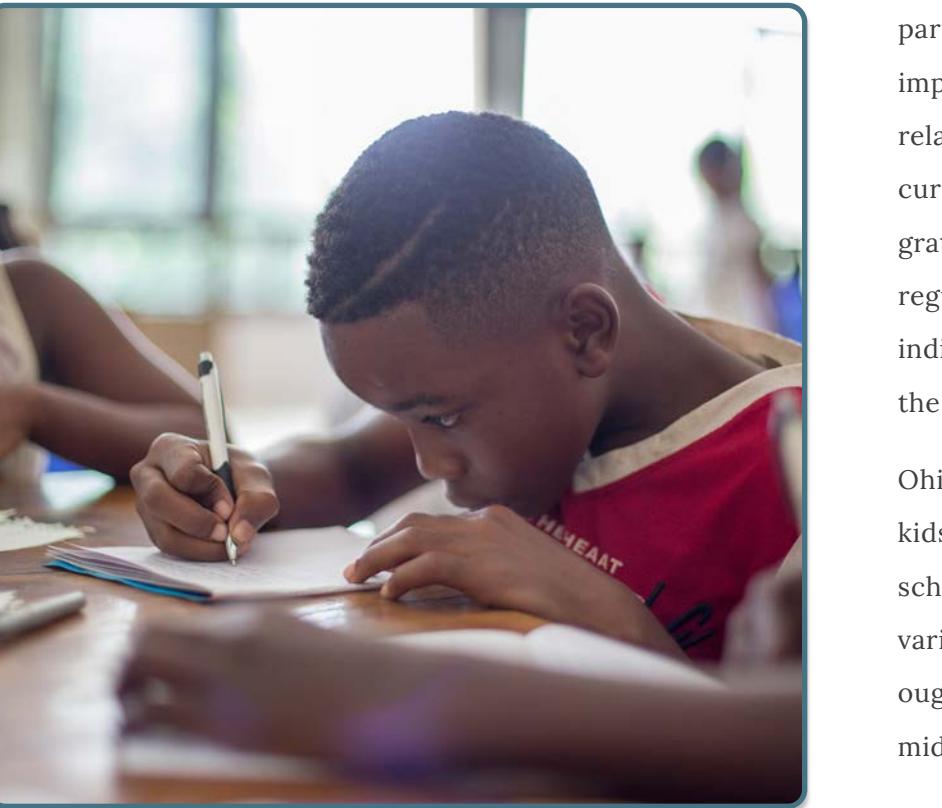
distressed and are substantially happier than those who have not.

Specifically, young adults who follow each of the three steps are about 50% less likely to be emotionally distressed than their peers who have not, even after factors like race, ethnicity, education, and income are taken into account. They also enjoy more stable family lives. Young women and men who followed all three steps were more than twice as likely to be still living in an intact family in their 30s compared to their peers who had a child before or outside marriage, even after controlling for a range of sociodemographic factors.⁴⁰

All of Ohio’s young people and emerging adults deserve a boost toward a happy and successful life. We have the resources to do just that. In fact, the DEW and ODH approved and funded several curricula authored and developed by Ohio-based programs. These programs teach youth that education, work, and marriage are tied to greater financial security, emotional well-being, and family stability as they move into adulthood. In fact, some of the schools fortunate enough to receive funding for this kind of programming report higher numbers of married mothers, increased economic advantage, and graduation rates.

One example is Mason Schools, served by two different programs

teaching the Success Sequence, where the graduation rate swelled to 98% over the last five school years.⁴¹ In fact, many of the cities listed in **Table 2 (page 24)**, with similar outcomes to the city of Mason, are served by programs teaching the benefits of the Success Sequence. A wide range of curricula and programs across four regions of the state have taught the Success Sequence with federal Title V funds managed by ODH. Recent cuts and DEW defunding have left these programs



struggling, leaving Ohio's most vulnerable youth hopelessly trapped in the cycle of poverty without the benefit of learning the life-changing Sequence.

Ohio programs cannot count on fickle federal funding that has left many Ohio counties without this valuable programming that includes the Success Sequence. For instance, outcome research by Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) on Ohio Adolescent Health Centers indicates that teens who participated in a number of these Ohio programs experienced improved beliefs, decision-making and outcome expectations related to sexual activity, and less pornography viewing. The curriculum also changed students' attitudes about delayed gratification, enhancing their exercise of self-control, self-regulation, and discipline.⁴² What is more, opinion polling indicates a clear majority of American parents support teaching the Success Sequence in public schools.⁴³

Ohio should not rely on federal funds for shaping the future of kids in the state. Accordingly, the DEW, along with local Ohio school districts, should incorporate the Success Sequence in various ways into schools across the state. First, the Sequence ought to be included in existing family life instruction in middle and high school. If family life instruction does not

exist, it should be incorporated into the education standards. We should also add the Sequence to public school's financial literacy instruction. Schools should specifically explain how:

- 1) A high school education, full-time work, and marriage before having any children substantially decrease young adults' odds of being poor and maximize their likelihood of moving into the middle class or higher;
- 2) Marriage is associated with less loneliness, more meaning, and greater happiness for men and women;
- 3) A stable marriage increases the odds that children flourish educationally and socially, minimizing the odds they have trouble in school and with the law; and,
- 4) Sequencing marriage before parenthood increases the odds that young men and women forge stable families and enjoy greater financial stability.⁴⁴

To do this, the following are policy suggestions for the DEW to consider as it incorporates the Success Sequence into public schools across the state:

- Prior to high school graduation or receiving any general education degree, students must complete at least one course fully explaining the Success Sequence. This could be a course covering family life or financial literacy, for instance. They should also demonstrate an understanding of the social science research on its links to poverty, economic success, happiness, and family stability;⁴⁵ and,
- The Ohio Superintendent of Public Education should solicit evaluations that measure how well students are learning the three steps of the Sequence and tracking the outcomes associated with it. The Superintendent should also sponsor evaluations of



Success Sequence-related curricula that measure how curricula influence adolescent relationships, teen pregnancy, and marriage and family attitudes.

Young Ohioans deserve every step up that we can offer them to realize the American dream. The Success Sequence is one of the most powerful, fiscally responsible, and well-calibrated tools that we can give them.

3) STRENGTHENING MARRIAGE IN OHIO

One of the strongest and most consistent findings of the social sciences over the last six decades is this: Marriage is associated with essential and substantial benefits for both men and women, children, and the common good.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, in recent decades dramatically fewer Ohioans are choosing or are able to marry. The reasons for this retreat from marriage are complex, encompassing culture, policy, and economic factors.

In response to this retreat, the Ohio Legislature should act to strengthen marriage in a variety of ways. It should educate the public about the value of marriage for child well-being and human thriving, take action to reduce the barriers that cause Ohioans to delay or forego marriage, and partner with nonprofits that are doing relationship education for youth, as well as nonprofits that are counseling engaged and married

couples. These efforts could be funded by allocating 10% of the state's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) budget to these activities, given that TANF is charged in part with promoting marriage and two-parent families.⁴⁷

Specifically, we recommend that the General Assembly of the 136th Ohio Legislature:

1. Create a \$20 million public education and media campaign focused on increasing the Ohio marriage rate and promoting strong and stable marriages. This campaign should focus on young people, helping them to learn how good marriages not only improve their lives, but any children they have, and the community at large. It should particularly spotlight the emotional, financial, and social benefits of marriage for adults, but also spell out the ways that good marriages benefit children and communities.
2. Address marriage penalties that discourage lower-income Ohio couples with children from marrying.⁴⁸ The legislature should direct state government agencies to detail any marriage penalties associated with taxes, transfers, and programs run by the state, including the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Medicaid, and TANF. Then, where the state has authority to adjust program eligibility, it should minimize marriage

penalties by doubling thresholds for married couples with children under the age of 5 (compared to single parents with comparably sized families).

Where the state does not have authority to adjust program eligibility, it should seek a waiver from the federal government to allow Ohio to make changes to programs like Medicaid to minimize their marriage penalties for lower-income families in the state.

Finally, the state should use TANF funds to rebate \$1,000 to any married families with children under 5 with household incomes under \$70,000 who can document a net marriage penalty (based on lost childcare subsidies, food stamps, housing, and Medicaid) using a platform like the Tax Policy Center calculator at the Urban Institute and Brookings Institution. Churches, nonprofits, and civic organizations would publicize the platform and encourage working- and middle-class married families to apply for their marriage penalty rebate.

3. To forge stronger marriages, Ohio should create new and spotlight existing programs that help couples create strong, thriving marriages, from the start. This can be done by improving premarital education across the state.

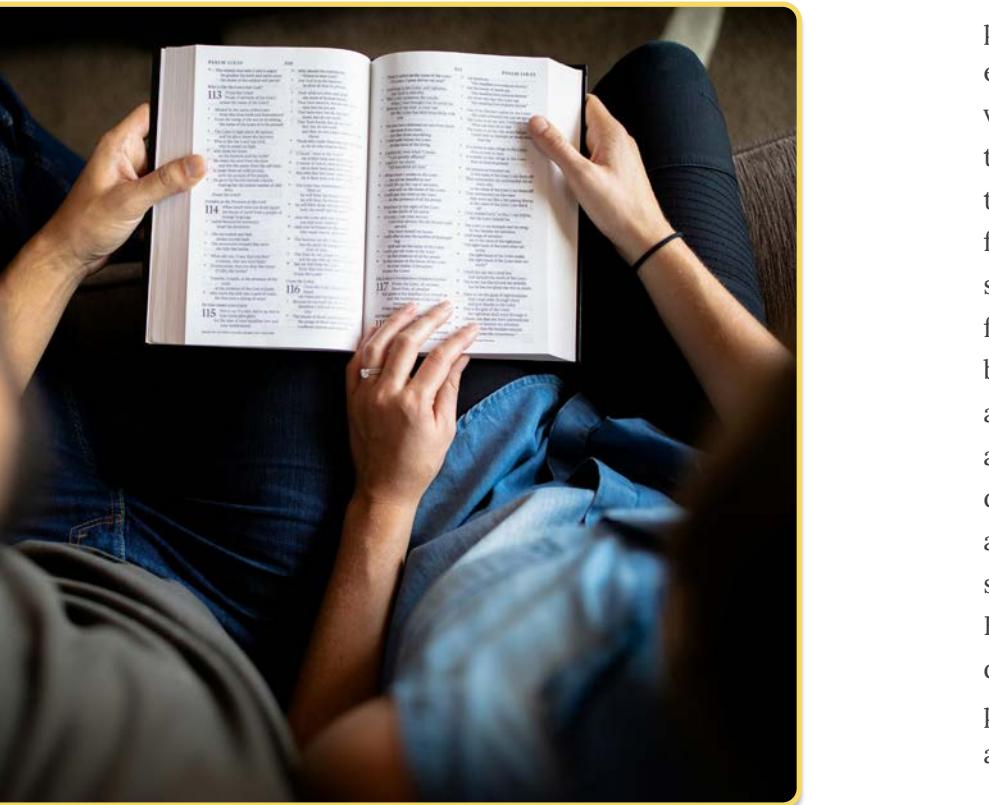
First, the Ohio Legislature should pass a law waiving all marriage license fees for couples who show proof of completion of an approved premarital

education course. This can be implemented through a website that helps Ohio couples find and connect with religious and secular providers of premarital education in their local communities, or an online version provided by the state. Integrating individual couples in with others in their communities who can serve as teachers, champions, and cheerleaders for their marital success would help build a marriage culture that succeeds. Indeed, the research tells



us that couples who have premarital education are more likely to forge successful marriages.⁴⁹

Second, Ohio should publicize the value of premarital education and the marital license discount that couples get by taking premarital education in churches, community nonprofits, and other venues for married couples. This can be part of a multifaceted public education and engagement campaign focused on promoting marriage in Ohio.



The state should also provide free online premarital education to couples preparing for marriage. To give an example, the extension programs at universities across the state could develop and operate a free, research- and evidence-based, online premarital enrichment program that couples could also use to qualify for the license discount.

In boosting premarital counseling, Ohio should look to the experience of states like Utah, Florida, Oklahoma, and Texas. These states have enacted policies to encourage and incentivize couples to engage in premarital education. Each has met with varying degrees of success. A study examining the effectiveness of these state programs found that oversight and implementation were the key factors influencing their success. For instance, the study found that Texas' early efforts at providing formalized premarital education programs, which began in 2007, were successful and correlated with a 1.5% decrease in the divorce rate statewide. The authors of the study noted that while the decrease in divorce rate may seem small, the measure focused on all marriages, including those that began before the state implemented its premarital education policies. Based on this, the authors conclude that the actual divorce-rate reduction effect attributable to the Texas program is likely higher. Ohio has the benefit of being able to learn from both the successes and failures

of states that have already worked in this space.⁵⁰

One lesson from this research is that Ohio should inaugurate a public campaign to publicize the benefits of premarital counseling and places where such counseling can be accessed. Utah launched such a campaign in 2008 and focused on “18- to 29-year-olds with a strong (but not exclusive) emphasis on promoting increased use of premarital education services”.⁵¹ Based on data from market research, the firm contracted to run the campaign developed ads for television, radio, print, and internet sites targeted at the key demographic. A study of the campaign’s effectiveness published in the *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy* discovered that over the course of five years, the effort:

- Increased awareness of the program from a baseline of 17% at its inception to 38% at its apex. Young couples became two to three times more likely to be aware of the program and the services it provided through this media campaign.
- The percentage of persons who participated in premarital education increased from 32% to 39% over a five-year period.⁵²

Clearly, a well-designed and implemented public education ad campaign can have a measurable effect on influencing the public to take a desired action. Ohio should launch an effort to

do just this when it comes to premarital education.

The Buckeye State can help its young people take flight from poverty and soar into middle class life with creative thinking and a strong drive that not only raises awareness about the value of marriage and healthy family life among diverse populations but, like Utah, also directs the public to accessible, research-backed premarital education resources that increase their odds of marital success.

4) BRIDGING OHIO’S GENDER GAP

One of the reasons marriage and family life are in retreat across America today is the falling fortunes of males. As the Brookings Institution’s Richard Reeves documented in his important new book, *Of Boys and Men*, too many males in our country are floundering in school, work, and life. Males are earning markedly worse grades and lower rates of college enrollment than females; we are also witnessing rising rates of idleness and underemployment among young men.⁵³ These trends matter not only for young men but also because they make them less “marriageable” in the eyes of young women.⁵⁴ Today’s growing gender gap—where young women are doing comparatively better at school, work, and life and their male peers are doing worse—is a recipe for disaster when it comes

to family formation and human happiness.

This gender gap is also playing out in Ohio. We see, for instance, that 55% of full-time college students are female, whereas only 45% are male,⁵⁵ and that 25% of boys in schools have their parents contacted for behavioral/learning issues versus just 18% of girls.⁵⁶ To bridge this gap and lift the fortunes of adolescent and young adult males, the state legislature, Ohio DEW, and Ohio schools should take three steps:

1. Make schools more boy friendly. Schools should prioritize hiring more male teachers, extend recess time for children in elementary school, and revisit their pedagogy and curricula with an eye to creating an educational context where boys are about as likely to do well as girls.⁵⁷ The state legislature should also pass legislation increasing the number of single-sex charter (or “Community”) schools serving boys and girls across the state.⁵⁸ All of these measures would give boys in K-12 schools a shot at seeing their performance and attachment to education rise.
2. The legislature should also double the funding for Career and Technical Education (CTE) and apprenticeship training. Right now, the state devotes markedly more money to conventional four-year colleges and universities than it does to CTE and apprenticeship training for high school students and

young adults. But the evidence suggests that high-quality CTE can boost the employability, wages, and marriageability of young men.⁵⁹ Moreover, most Ohio young adults, especially young men, will not earn a four-year degree. Accordingly, the DEW should double the funding it spends on CTE and apprenticeship training and, if need be, take that money out of the budget it devotes to conventional higher education in the state.

3. Finally, the legislature should seek to free boys and young men from the grip of the gaming industry. As Jonathan Haidt notes in his new book, *The Anxious Generation*, we have growing evidence that gaming plays a major role in undercutting teenage boys’ success at school and social skills, as well as young men’s attachment to work.⁶⁰ Given this, Ohio should tack a 20% tax on gaming platforms, gaming software, gaming apps, and in-game purchases. This money could then be spent on a public campaign both to educate teenage boys and young men about the costs of excessive gaming and motivate them to turn their time and attention to real activities in the real world. Hopefully, the added costs of gaming and this public campaign would discourage adolescents and young adult males from wasting too much of their time on gaming.⁶¹

Young women on both the left and the right have expressed

frustration with the ways in which too few of their male peers measure up to their expectations for a romantic partner and spouse regarding education, employment, and maturity.⁶² Taking steps like these would help Ohio men flourish, which would be good for them, the women in their lives, and the fortunes of dating, marriage, and family formation in the state.

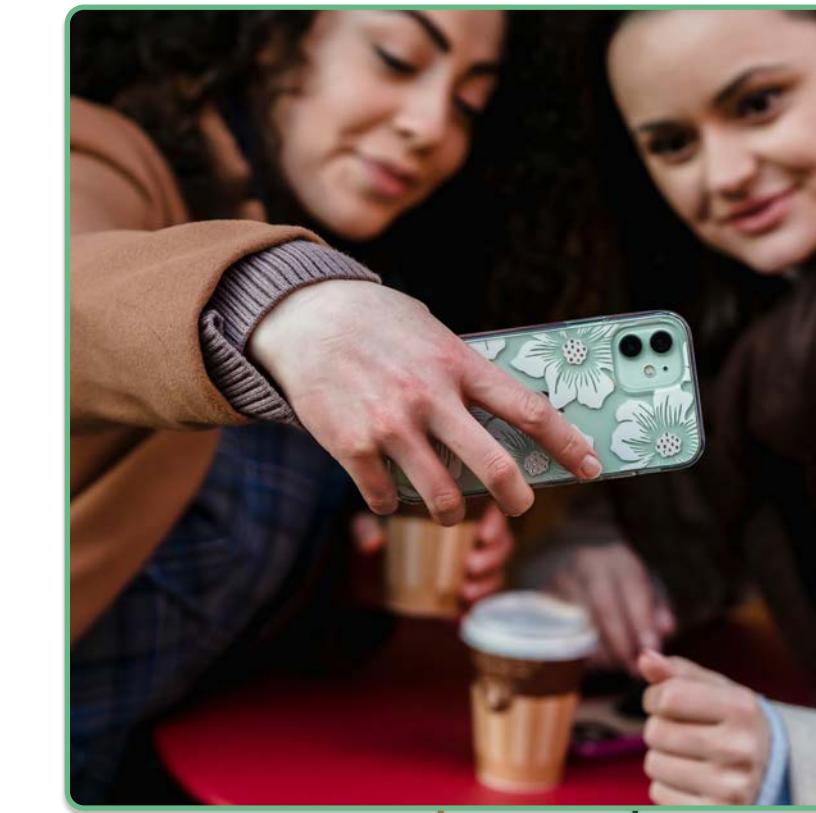
5) PROTECTING TEENS FROM BIG TECH

The last decade-and-a-half has witnessed the rise of “electronic opiates”—social media, video shorts, gaming, pornography, and now, AI companions—that are degrading our children’s capacity to concentrate, read, and learn, inhibiting the development of their social skills and polarizing them ideologically by sex. These developments have had profoundly negative consequences for the quantity and quality of parent-child relations, dating, and marriage.⁶³ In response to these challenges, Ohio had already led out with the Ohio’s Social Media Parental Notification Act, designed to protect children under 16 from social media, along with a new policy to minimize smartphone use in schools. But there are other steps Ohio can take to protect children from the malign effects of Big Tech.

Until now, most legislation has focused on protecting children from social media, but children are also exposed to a range

of inappropriate apps on their smartphones. Smartphone manufacturers often fail to adequately protect minors from harmful content and exploitative contracts with corporations related to the apps they host on their hardware. Accordingly, the Ohio Legislature should empower parents to protect their children from harmful apps.

A recent report from the Institute for Family Studies (IFS) and



the Ethics and Public Policy Center (EPPC) details legislative ideas aimed at making app stores and devices safer for children.⁶⁴ Their proposed regulations focus on four essential components: age verification, parental consent, transparency, and industry oversight. These measures are fundamental to creating a safer digital environment for young users, ensuring that they are better protected from inappropriate content and interactions related to apps.

1. The cornerstone of the proposed legislation is the requirement for age verification when establishing an app store ID. Like existing laws for age-restricted purchases related to alcohol and tobacco, app stores would need to verify users' ages for app access. Fortunately, this is technically feasible since companies like Apple and Google already collect user birth dates during sign-up.⁶⁵
2. Devices used by minors would need to be linked to a parent or guardian's account, extending the current requirements for users under 13 to include those under 18. For users under 18, Ohio would mandate parental consent for every app download and in-app purchase. This approach aligns with existing laws that restrict minors from entering binding contracts without parental approval.
3. However, the effectiveness of this consent is compromised by the current app rating system,

which is often vague and inconsistently applied. Many parents struggle to navigate misleading app ratings, which can expose children to inappropriate content. The proposed policy from IFS and EPPC seeks to address these flaws by requiring clearer age ratings and oversight to assist parents in making informed decisions about app downloads.

By implementing these measures, Ohio could help pave the way to a safer digital landscape, one which both fosters effective parental involvement and protects young users. This would redound not only to the benefit of the children, but also to the benefit of their parents and any future spouse and family they have later in life.

FAMILY AFFORDABILITY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Strengthening Ohio family life is not only a state-level responsibility, but also a local-level responsibility. Local governments can do more to encourage their school districts, for instance, to stress the value of marriage and the Success Sequence. But they can also take steps to make family life more affordable at the local level. We recommend three steps that would both make family life more affordable and might help lift the birthrate in counties across the state:

1. Streamline existing housing regulations to reduce the cost of building housing, especially single-family housing. Discount real-estate taxes on a per-child-in-the-home basis, as well. These home-related measures matter because housing is one of the biggest costs families with children face.
2. Offer discounts to preschools, after-school programs, and summer camps that make it easier for families to juggle work and family.
3. Discount the cost of water, garbage, and electricity on a per-child basis. This would make family

formation more affordable across the state.

Measures like these have been adapted in places like the Alto Adige-South Tyrol area in Italy with apparent success.⁶⁶ Local governments across Ohio should follow in the footsteps of innovative local governments in Europe that are seeking new ways to revive the fortunes of families in their own communities.

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CIVIL SOCIETY, MARRIAGE, AND FAMILIES

The government has an important role to play, but not a singular one, when it comes to strengthening families across Ohio. The work of strengthening and stabilizing families in the Buckeye State also depends on civil society, business, and families themselves. Each of these three sectors can take steps to advance the cause of family in Ohio.

FAITH AND FAMILY

Government can do a better job of getting the financial incentives right for families and teaching the truth about marriage and family in public schools but the work of shaping a healthy family culture and standing alongside couples struggling to make it is more likely to be done by civic institutions, including churches. We have evidence that civic initiatives—like the Culture of Freedom Initiative in Jacksonville, Florida⁶⁷—and local churches can help marriages and families across the nation.⁶⁸

At the same time, most civic and religious organizations can and should do more to strengthen families in their local communities. Too many churches and nonprofits rarely or never talk about the value of marriage for men, women, and children. Based in part on the research and work of Communio, a new ministry working with Catholic and Protestant churches across America, here are five key moves

...THERE IS NO QUESTION THAT MOST CIVIC AND RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS CAN AND SHOULD DO MORE TO STRENGTHEN FAMILIES IN THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITIES.

churches should make to strengthen family life in their own communities.⁶⁹

- Churches must destigmatize relationship and marriage ministry to make it normal for everyone to participate. It should not be seen as a ministry for those who struggle. It should be seen as a fun ministry where all can grow in embracing the virtues and values needed to form healthy marriages and sustain strong families. This means practical ministry for singles or couples aspiring to marry, for couples currently married, and for parent-child relationships alike.
- Pastors and lay leaders must lead by example. Every member of the church's leadership should participate in the relationship or marriage ministry appropriate for their state of life.
- Going beyond preaching, each church should teach the spiritual virtues and human skills that sustain good relationships—from forgiveness to healthy conflict. In our increasingly tech dependent culture, there is a greater and greater need to teach these virtues and skills to youth, young adults, and, indeed, the whole Church.
- While marriage is not for everyone, and many men and women cannot find a spouse today, it is still clear that marriage is the most common pathway for the faithful to grow in holiness and

happiness. Some have noted that marriage talk and any encouragement around marriage is awkwardly avoided around singles.⁷⁰ This may be contributing to delayed marriage. Accordingly, churches must routinely proclaim an inspiring vision of marriage where the beauty, goodness, power, and difficulties of marriage and family life can be shared in age-appropriate ways to the entire congregation.

- Churches in Ohio should also be very clear about underlining the value of a faith-based marriage and family life. To wit, couples who attend religious services together are significantly more likely to be happily and stably married. Moreover, and perhaps surprisingly, today's couples who are regular churchgoers also report markedly more sex and greater sexual satisfaction than their fellow Americans who have no connection to a religious congregation.⁷¹ Churches and other religious organizations across Ohio should share this news with their congregations and communities.

BUSINESS

The fabric of family life is affected not only by government and civil society, but also by business. Stable work, good benefits, and steady income all make for stronger families. Businesses also play an important role in shaping the family culture of their local communities. Businesses across Ohio can take three

steps to meet their family responsibilities in the state:

1. Businesses, especially in the service sector (e.g., food and retail), must do a better job of giving employees who desire a regular, full-time schedule just that. We know that workers who are kept for long periods of time just below the full-time mark are less likely to have the income and benefits they need to support their families.⁷² The research also indicates that non-standard scheduling puts a strain on relationships and the ability of parents to find adequate care for their children.⁷³ Full-time work among men is also strongly tied to more stable marriages.⁷⁴ In light of all this, businesses in Ohio should aim to provide schedule stability and full-time work for all of their long-term employees who desire them.
2. Businesses in the medical, mental health, and other people-related sectors should work to communicate the value of strong and stable marriages to their patients and customers. For instance, pediatricians and OBGYNs working with parents and families should communicate the value of good marriages for children and, where appropriate, point parents to resources to strengthen their relationships. Counselors helping couples and spouses in distress ought to underline the value of trying to keep their marriage together, absent serious problems like abuse, neglect, serial infidelity, or drug and alcohol problems. More generally, when it comes
3. Businesses should give “baby bonuses” to employees who adopt or have infants. Bonuses would be set at a level that is feasible for each business. One company gives its employees \$5,000 for each child.⁷⁵ Many companies will not be able to be that generous. Still, companies that take steps to acknowledge the financial challenges posed by having a child and act to help their employees meet that challenge are not only going to advance the family-friendly cause in Ohio but also likely to engender high levels of loyalty from their workers.





FAMILY MESSAGING

Today, a growing number of Americans are privileging a kind of “Midas Mindset”—a mindset that prioritizes education, work, and self-development—rather than a kind of “Marriage Mindset”—a mindset that prioritizes love, marriage, and family life.⁷⁶ One recent Pew poll found, for instance, that about 70% of Americans think that work is very or extremely important to “live a fulfilling life,” compared to about one-quarter who believed that being married and having children were that important for fulfillment.⁷⁷ The rise of the Midas Mindset is

undoubtedly one of the factors that explains the nation’s retreat from marriage.

What is striking about this mindset is that it is also shaping parents’ priorities for their own children. Another Pew poll discovered that the clear “majority of parents prioritized financial independence and an enjoyable career for their children’s future over” marriage and parenthood. Specifically, 88% of parents said it was either “very” or “extremely” important that their children have an enjoyable career as an adult and 41% said it was very or extremely important that their child earn a college degree.⁷⁸ But only about one-fifth of parents told Pew it was that important for their children to get married and have kids.⁷⁹

Kids who get this work-oriented messaging from their parents are not likely to prioritize love and marriage as they move into their 20s—and perhaps even 30s.⁸⁰ There are two problems with this. One is that we know that marriage is a better predictor of men and women’s happiness than money, education, and employment. Nothing compares to a good marriage when it comes to building a happy life.⁸¹ Too many of our kids are not being told the truth about the ways in which marriage and family life are often key to forging a meaningful and happy life.

The second problem with this is that young adults who buy into the Midas Mindset may miss out on an opportunity to get married or have the kids they had hoped to have. Demographers predict that a record share of young adults—about one-third—will never marry, and that another record share will never have children—about one-fourth.⁸² Parents who stress education and career to the exclusion of marriage and family to their children may be surprised to find themselves without grandchildren as they move into their 60s and 70s. More importantly, their children may miss out on the opportunity to marry and start a family, as well.

Accordingly, Ohio parents and families who wish to maximize their children’s odds of forging meaningful and happy lives

should be careful to balance an understandable emphasis on their children’s educational and career prospects with a parallel emphasis on a Marriage Mindset. Specifically, parents should stress the value of marriage and family life with their children. More importantly, they should also aim to be good spouses to one another and to equip their children with the values and virtues that will make them good friends and spouses later in life. And finally, given the costs of family life today, where possible, parents should provide practical and material assistance to their 20- and 30-something children who have married and started having children.

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RENEWING FAMILIES AND THE AMERICAN DREAM IN OHIO

Ohio has been a world leader in groundbreaking innovation. Human flight started in a humble bike shop with two brothers in Dayton. The cash register was invented in the state. And professional baseball began in Cincinnati. The state's days of groundbreaking innovation are far from over. The Buckeye State can lead again on marriage and family promotion.

This will require that key actors in Ohio—from the state government to leading businesses, from family foundations to Catholic and Protestant churches—recognize that they have an opportunity and a duty to renew the fortunes of the family across the state. Doing so, we have seen, is integral to reviving the American dream in Ohio, the idea that a “better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank” is still possible.⁸³ After all, we have seen that poverty and crime are lower, students are more successful, economic mobility is higher, children are less depressed, and the streets are safer when families are stronger in the state. Furthermore, one likely reason that Ohio lags most other states when it comes to child poverty, economic mobility, and deaths of despair is that it also falls behind a majority of states on the Family Structure Index.⁸⁴

REVIVING THE AMERICAN DREAM IN OHIO, THE IDEA THAT A “BETTER, RICHER, AND HAPPIER LIFE FOR ALL OUR CITIZENS OF EVERY RANK,” IS STILL POSSIBLE.

Finally, unless the state makes having children more appealing and affordable, it is poised to see its population decline by mid-century.⁸⁵ This is why it is time for this generation of leaders to step up and “save the dream” in the Buckeye State by advancing public policies and private initiatives that will strengthen and stabilize marriage and family life in Ohio.

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