

# The Protestant Family Ethic:

*What Do Protestant, Catholic,  
Private, and Public Schooling  
Have to Do with Marriage,  
Divorce, and Non-marital  
Childbearing?*

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## I. Introduction

The public debate surrounding the efficacy of private versus public schools tends to revolve around their relative success in boosting test scores, graduation rates, and college admissions.<sup>1</sup> For instance, are private or public schools more successful in giving children a head start when it comes to getting the human capital they need to thrive in today's economy? This is the kind of question that drives contemporary debates about the value of private versus public education.<sup>2</sup> But there is more to life than excelling at school and work.

For instance, there is the opportunity to be formed into a woman or man of good character, a good citizen, or a good partner and parent. The effects of schooling extend to these other important domains of life. Civic and character formation are key educational priorities, not only for parents who send their children to religious private schools but also for the majority of Americans.<sup>3</sup> According to the 2019 PDK Poll of the American public's views on schools, nearly three-quarters of adults asserted that civics courses should be required for all students. The 2015 Education Next Poll found that an overwhelming majority of the American public agreed that character education should be emphasized "a lot" in schools.<sup>4</sup> We suspect that parents are also concerned about how well schools form their sons and daughters for a future family life. That is, parents hope that schools maximize their children's chances of forming a strong family later in life and minimize their chances of forming their own family before they are married or ready to be a parent.

All schools do their part to put kids on one kind of civic and family path or another, insofar as they constitute moral communities, whether they intend to do so or not. They inculcate students to abide by specific values, norms, practices, and habits as well as situate them within specific peer influences and social networks.<sup>5</sup> In the end, schools form each of their students into a particular kind of person—with one kind of character or another. Different types of schooling influence a variety of character-related outcomes, including the odds that students become enmeshed in the criminal justice system, their level of civic engagement, and the moral obligations they feel towards their neighbors.<sup>6</sup>

Family is no different, with different types of schools putting young people on distinctive paths towards family formation and marital stability. Until now, however, we have known little about how different types of schools are linked to students' family life as adults. The limited research that exists in this area indicates that religious schooling is associated with higher rates of marriage among young adults, but we know less about how different forms of schooling

<sup>1</sup> Patrick J. Wolf et al., "School Vouchers and Student Outcomes: Experimental Evidence from Washington, DC," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 32, no. 2 (2013); John F. Witte, et al., "High Stakes Choice: Achievement and Accountability in the Nation's Oldest Urban Voucher Program," *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 36, no. 4 (December 2014); Matthew M. Chingos et al., "The Effects of Means-Tested Private School Choice Programs on College Enrollment and Graduation" Urban Institute, July, 2019; and Christopher A. Lubienski and Sarah T. Lubienski, *The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Vishal Kamat and Samuel Norris, "Estimating the Welfare Effects of School Vouchers," Working Paper, Cornell University, January 31, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916); and Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Phi Delta Kappan, "Frustration in the schools: Teachers speak out on pay, funding, and feeling valued," *Phi Delta Kappan* 101, no. 1 (2017): NP1–NP24; and Michael B. Henderson, Paul E. Peterson, and Martin R. West, "The 2015 EdNext Poll on School Reform," *Education Next* 16, no. 1 (2016): 8–20.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, and Peter B. Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); and James D. Hunter and Ryan S. Olsen, "Introduction," In *The Content of Their Character: Inquiries into the Varieties of Moral Formation*, Ed. James D. Hunter and Ryan S. Olsen, (New York: Finstock & Tew, 2019), 1–20.

<sup>6</sup> Marisa Casagrande, Ray Pennings, and David Sikkink, "2018 US Cardus Education Survey: Spiritual strength, faithful formation," Cardus, 2019; Albert Cheng and David Sikkink, "A Longitudinal Analysis of Volunteerism Activities for Individuals Educated in Public and Private Schools," *Youth & Society* 52, no. 7 (2020): 1193–1219; and Corey A. DeAngelis and Patrick J. Wolf, "Private school choice and crime: Evidence from Milwaukee," *Social Science Quarterly* 100, no. 6 (2019): 2302–2315.

are related to the risk of divorce in adulthood or to non-marital childbearing throughout one's life.<sup>7</sup>

In this report, we examine how enrollment in American Catholic, Protestant, secular private, and public schools is associated with different family outcomes later in life.<sup>8</sup> We analyze nationally representative data from the Understanding America Study (UAS) and the National Longitudinal Survey 1997 (NLSY97) to explore the links between adults' prior schooling and their odds of marrying, divorcing, and having a child outside of marriage.

Men and women who have been educated in a private school tend to be more likely to be married, less likely to have ever divorced, and less likely to have had a child outside of wedlock. [Figure 1](#) displays the proportion of US adults from each school sector who are in intact marriages, have ever divorced, and have ever had a non-marital birth. All other figures in this report, like [Figure 1](#), do not adjust for background demographic characteristics like race, ethnicity, parental education, age, and gender. Nonetheless, these patterns remain unchanged even when results are adjusted using a regression framework for demographic characteristics. Specifically,

- Adults who attended Protestant schools are more than twice as likely to be in an intact marriage as those who attended public schools. They are also about 50% less likely than public-school attendees to have a child out of wedlock.
- Among those who have ever married, Protestant-school attendees are about 60% less likely than public-school attendees to have ever divorced.
- Compared with public-school attendees, ever-married adults who attended a secular private school are about 60% less likely to have ever divorced.
- Catholic-school attendees are about 30% less likely to have had a child out of wedlock than those who attended public schools.

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy E. Uecker and Jonathan P. Hill, "Religious schools, home schools, and the timing of first marriage and first birth," *Review of Religious Research* 56, no. 2 (June 2014): 189–218; Corey DeAngelis and Patrick J. Wolf, "Private School Choice and Character: More Evidence from Milwaukee," EDRE working paper, no. 2019-03, February 26, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Protestant schools compose about 90% of enrollments at non-Catholic but religious private schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Indeed, only 6 respondents in our sample primarily spent their primary and secondary education in a religious private school that was neither Catholic nor Protestant. We leave those 6 observations in our analysis in order to maintain the representativeness of the sample, meaning that the category technically is "non-Catholic religious," even as we assign it the more elegant and largely accurate descriptive title of "Protestant."

## Figure 1. Family outcomes by school type

% of adults ...

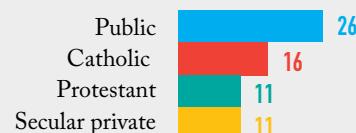
### In an intact marriage



### Ever been divorced\*



### Ever had a child out of wedlock



Notes: \*Based on adults who are married or have been married before.

Source: AEI/IFS analysis of Understanding America Study (UAS), UAS20 and UAS37, conducted May 20, 2015 and Feb 5, 2016, respectively.

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The results detailed in this report suggest that boys and girls who attend private schools are more likely to avoid a nonmarital birth and to get and stay married. This pattern is especially pronounced among Protestant-school attendees, which suggests that these schools are more likely to foster a kind of “Protestant Family Ethic” among their students. This is an ethic that seems especially conducive to strong and stable families.

## ABOUT THE DATA & METHODOLOGY

Findings in this report are mainly based on data from the Understanding America Study (UAS), a survey panel administered by the Center for Economic and Social Research at the University of Southern California. The additional data on the Millennial cohort is from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 cohort (NLSY97).

The UAS is a nationally representative Internet panel of U.S. adults ages 18+. Respondents are randomly selected through address-based sampling, and respondents without Internet access are provided the necessary hardware to participate. There are currently about 8,500 respondents who complete, on average, one survey per month that lasts approximately 30 minutes. The first wave (UAS1) was administered in 2014. Not all respondents participated in each wave.

Our analysis was based on the 5,000 respondents who completed wave UAS20 and UAS37, conducted beginning May 20, 2015 and Feb 5, 2016, respectively. We identify the school sector during which each respondent spent the majority of their total K-12 or high school education. The sample includes 4,366 adults who went to public schools, 410 Catholic-school attendees, 91 Protestant-school attendees, and 75 adults who attended secular private schools. To ensure that our sample is nationally representative, we employ sampling weights in all calculations.

NLSY97 follows the lives of a nationally representative sample of American youth (with black and Hispanic youth oversampled) born between 1980 and 1984. This cohort belongs to the Millennial generation (born between 1980 and 1994) and is the oldest group of Millennials. The survey started in 1997, when the respondents (about 9,000) were ages 12 to 17. The latest wave (Round 18) was in 2017 and 2018, when the cohort were ages 32 to 38. Respondents who stayed in Round 18 (N= 6,734) are the young adults spotlighted in this report. The vast majority of young adults in the NLSY97 sample attended public schools (n=6,143), 228 attended Catholic schools, 123 attended Protestant schools, and 57 attended secular private schools. The findings are weighted to reflect the characteristics of the overall population of this cohort.

The three family outcomes used in this report are measured as follows:

1. **In an intact marriage:** Currently in their first marriage (have never been divorced).
2. **Ever been divorced:** Currently divorced or currently married but have been divorced in the past. Divorced adults include those who are separated.
3. **Ever had a child out of wedlock:** This measures the incidence of having a child out of wedlock, regardless of current marital status. It includes adults who are currently married but had a child before marriage.

## II. Schooling and Family Formation

Many schools devote most of their attention to academic achievement and preparation for postsecondary education, especially if they lack a religious affiliation.<sup>9</sup> By virtue of their focus on educational attainment, schools perhaps indirectly influence family formation. After all, it is well documented that college-educated Americans are much more likely to marry, avoid divorce, and avoid having children out of wedlock.<sup>10</sup>

Schools likely play a more direct role in family formation as well. Every school community, for example, possesses its own views of marriage, family, and sexuality. One can easily observe the family backgrounds of members of the school community, as well as different approaches to sex education, official policies on sexual behavior for students and staff, and norms regarding dating, romance, and sex.<sup>11</sup> Not only do the faith traditions of religious private schools explicitly speak to sexual ethics and conceptions of marriage or family but nonreligious schools have their own value propositions and take moral stances on these issues as well. Whatever the views of schools are, they likely impact family formation for their students after they graduate.

More generally, foundational differences in ideals and normative views about human nature, good versus evil, and what a life worth living entails all engender different educational aims and practices of teaching and learning across all types of schools. No school is neutral to such issues. As James Hunter and Ryan Olsen of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture describe, schools constitute moral ecologies:

When social institutions—whether the family, peer relationships, youth organizations, the internet, religious congregations, entertainment of popular culture—cluster together, they form a larger ecosystem of powerful cultural influences. None of these is morally neutral. Indeed, all social institutions rest upon distinctive ideals, beliefs, obligations, prohibitions, and commitments —many implicit and some explicit—and these are rooted in, and reinforced by, well-established social practices. Taken together, these form a moral ecology.<sup>12</sup>

Schools are embedded in a larger web of factors that fundamentally shape students. No aspect of the students' lives—including their views of marriage, sexuality, and family—are untouched.

When it comes to family life, public schools stress the importance of being tolerant and accepting of family diversity or just avoid talking about loaded matters touching on marriage, divorce, and non-marital childbearing. Catholic schools often address church teaching regarding human sexuality and marriage, but some schools do not focus on these controversial teachings

**Schools are embedded in a larger web of factors that fundamentally shape students. No aspect of the students' lives—including their views of marriage, sexuality, and family—are untouched.**

<sup>9</sup> Kathryn L. Wiens, "Between honor and excellence," in *The Content of Their Character: Inquiries into the Varieties of Moral Formation*, James D. Hunter and Ryan S. Olson (New York: Finstock and Tew, 2018), 183–196.

<sup>10</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox and Wendy Wang, "The marriage divide: How and why working-class families are more fragile today," American Enterprise Institute, September 2017; and Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and Family in America Today* (New York: Random house, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Zimmerman, *Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> James D. Hunter and Ryan S. Olsen, "Introduction," In *The Content of Their Character: Inquiries into the Varieties of Moral Formation*, Ed. James D. Hunter and Ryan S. Olsen, (New York: Finstock & Tew, 2019), 1–20.

so much as on less controversial virtues and values, like charity, forgiveness, and the Golden Rule. Especially more recently, many Catholic schools have sought to be more “catholic” in the sense of being open to those of various religious and moral perspectives, including beliefs about sexual morality and marriage.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, Protestant schools are more likely to stress the importance of marriage as a good in and of itself—and of having and raising children in marriage. The different messages they send may play some role in providing a normative context for their graduates’ future family lives.<sup>14</sup>

## The Power of Peers

But formal messages only matter so much. Peers are often more important. Each of these different types of schools have distinctive moral ecosystems, as exemplified by the peer environment within these school communities. Following the lives of American adolescents who were born between 1980 and 1984—the group of oldest Millennials—the NLSY97 provides glimpses of the public, Catholic, Protestant, and secular private school communities these young adults attended when they were ages 12 through 17.

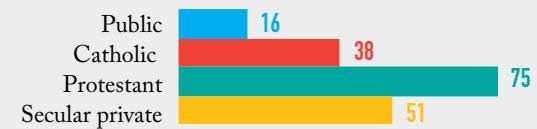
There are stark differences in the peer environment of various school communities. When asked about the percentage of kids in their grade who ever had sexual intercourse, 75% of students in Protestant schools said almost none of their school peers had ever had sex. By contrast, only 16% of students in public schools reported the same. Students in Catholic schools were also more likely than those in public schools to report that almost none of their peers had ever had sex (38% vs. 16%), but they were less likely than those in secular private schools and far less likely than students in Protestant schools to say that sex among their peers is rare (see Figure 2).

These results are consistent with other studies that document lower teenage birth rates and sexual

**Figure 2. Peer environment by type of school Millennials attended**

% who reported that in their grade ...

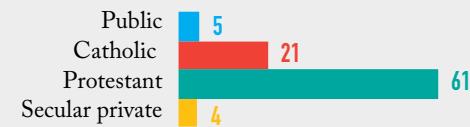
### Almost NO kids ever had sex\*



### Almost NO kids use illegal drugs



### Almost ALL kids go to church or religious services regularly



### Almost ALL kids plan to go to college



Notes: \*Asked of young adults ages 15-17. Analysis based on young adults surveyed in 1997, at ages 12-17.

Source: AEI/IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97)

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<sup>13</sup> Albert Cheng, Julie R. Trivitt, and Patrick J. Wolf, “School Choice and the Branding of Milwaukee Private Schools,” *Social Science Quarterly* 97, no. 2 (2016): 362-375; and Julie R. Trivitt and Patrick J. Wolf, “School Choice and the Branding of Catholic Schools,” *Education Finance and Policy* 6, no. 2 (2011): 202-245.

<sup>14</sup> Mark D. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Gerald Grace, *Catholic Schools: Mission, Markets, and Morality* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2002); Paul F. Parsons, *Inside America’s Christian Schools* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987); David N. Figlio and Jens Ludwig, “Sex, Drugs, and Catholic Schools: Private Schooling and Non-Market Adolescent Behaviors,” *German Economic Review* 13, no. 4 (2012): 385-415; and Carol R. Freedman-Doan, “Faith-Based Sex Education Programs: What They Look Like and Who Uses Them,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 52 (2013): 247-262.

<sup>15</sup> Figlio and Ludwig, “Sex, Drugs, and Catholic Schools: Private Schooling and Non-Market Adolescent Behaviors.”

activity among private school students.<sup>15</sup> According to the NLSY97, there are similar patterns regarding illegal drug use by school type, though, across all school sectors, the percentage of peers who never used illegal drugs is higher than the percentage of peers who never had sex.

These differences in behavior underscore different moral ecosystems within these school sectors. Indeed, as shown in [Figure 2](#), the proportion of students who attend religious services regularly or plan to attend college differs significantly across school sectors.

About 6 in 10 students in Protestant schools report that almost all of their peers attend church or religious services regularly. Just over 1 in 5 Catholic school students (21%) report the same, while only about 5% of students in private secular or public schools do so. Meanwhile, about 60% of students from all types of private schools report that almost all of their peers plan to go to college. Twenty percent of public school students have the same assessment of their peers. Although there are a variety of reasons for these compositional differences, they unfold into different lived experiences and types of moral communities for all students.

## The Long-Run Influence of Schools' Moral Ecologies

Do these different schooling environments have any bearing on the formation of students after they leave school? Do the moral communities and peers that students are exposed to at school translate into different life trajectories in adulthood, especially when it comes to marriage and family formation?

Some prior research suggests so. National surveys like the Cardus Education Survey, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, and the National Study of Youth and Religion all report higher marriage rates among adults who attended religious schools.<sup>16</sup> We add to this evidence by presenting the results of similar analyses of two prominent survey databases: the Understanding America Study (UAS) and the NLSY97. The UAS comprises a large, nationally representative sample of U.S. adults (*see more details in the “About the Data” box on pg. 5*).

Most of the analyses in this report are based on the UAS, given that it provides a broader picture of schooling and family outcomes that include all adults ages 18 and older. The peer environment data discussed above was collected for the cohort in the NLSY97 when respondents were in their teenage years. We also present data about marriage, divorce, and out-of-wedlock births for this cohort, who are 32 to 38 years old in the most recent wave of the NLSY97 (2017–2018). These results from the NLSY97 are designed to complement the UAS results, which are the focus of this report.

We also examined whether potential school effects persist after adjusting for family effects and sociodemographic factors. Specifically, we adjust for the respondent's gender, age, ethnicity, mother's educational attainment, financial situation during childhood, and whether the respondent grew up with both parents.<sup>17</sup> Family formation and family stability are tied to a variety of demographic factors from childhood, including family income and educational background.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Casagrande, Pennings, and Sikkink, “2018 US Cardus Education Survey: Spiritual strength, faithful formation;” Figlio and Ludwig, “Sex, drugs, and Catholic schools;” and Uecker and Hill, “Religious schools, home schools, and the timing of first marriage and first birth.”

<sup>17</sup> Biological parents and stepparents were not separated in the UAS. In the NLSY97, growing up with two parents refers to growing up with both biological parents.

<sup>18</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt, “State of Our Unions 2010: When Marriage Disappears: The New Middle America,” National Marriage Project, 2010; and W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas H. Wolfinger, *Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Love and Marriage among African Americans and Latinos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Family research has documented the intergenerational reproduction of marital outcomes. Children are more likely to form stable marriages of their own if they were raised in an intact, married family. They also are more likely to bear their own children in the context of marriage if their parents remained married.

In the figures that follow, we discuss outcomes of respondents who spent most of their formative years in one of the four major schooling sectors—public, Catholic, Protestant, and secular private schools.<sup>20</sup>

We report the percentage of respondents from each school sector who: (1) married but never divorced, (2) ever divorced, and (3) ever had a child out of wedlock. In our figures, we present the response frequencies from each schooling group without any statistical adjustments for differences in backgrounds. We then describe the results from multivariable regression models and whether the differences remain statistically significant after adjusting for demographic factors, including childhood family income and growing up with both parents.

Descriptive findings from the UAS are shown in **Figure 3**. About 40% of adults who attended public school are in their first marriage and have never been divorced. Approximately half of Catholic schoolers and secular private schoolers are also in their first marriage and have never been divorced. In contrast, almost two-thirds of Protestant schoolers are likewise.

Among the former public school students who have been married before (including those who are currently married), 43% have experienced a divorce. The rate for Catholic-school attendees is similar. However, the divorce rate for Protestant and secular private school attendees is nearly half that of public and Catholic-school attendees, at 21%.

**Figure 3. Family outcomes by school type**

% of adults ...

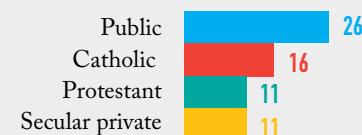
**In an intact marriage**



**Ever been divorced\***



**Ever had a child out of wedlock**



Notes: \*Based on adults who are married or have been married before.

Source: AEI/IFS analysis of Understanding America Study (UAS), UAS20 and UAS37, conducted May 20, 2015 and Feb 5, 2016, respectively.

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<sup>19</sup> Paul R. Amato and Jacob E. Cheadle, "The long reach of divorce: Divorce and child well-being across three generations," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67, no. 1 (2005):191–206; and Nicholas H. Wolfinger, *Understanding the Divorce Cycle: The Children of Divorce in Their Own Marriages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Following prior research, respondents are classified as primarily educated in a given sector if they either spent the majority of their 13 years of schooling or a majority of their four years of high school in that sector. See for example, David Sikkink, "Religious School Differences in School Climate and Academic Mission: A Descriptive Overview of School Organization and Student Outcomes," *Journal of School Choice* 6, no. 1 (2012): 20–39.

About one-quarter of adults who attended public school (26%) have at least one child who was born out of wedlock, the highest share of all the school types in our study. Some 16% of adults who attended Catholic schools also have experienced a non-marital birth. The rates of having a child out of wedlock are lower among attendees of Protestant and secular private schools (11%).

After controlling for childhood background variables as well as other demographic factors, we find that many differences between public-school attendees and those who went to various private schools are statistically significant. **Table 1** indicates that adults who attended Protestant schools are more than twice as likely to be in an intact marriage than public-school attendees, after controlling for factors such as the family's financial situation while growing up, whether they lived with both parents, and mother's education. Likewise, men and women educated in Protestant schools are about 60% less likely to have ever divorced, compared to their peers from public schools,

**Table 1. Logistic regression models predicting the odds of three family outcomes**

	In intact marriage		Ever divorced		Ever had a child out of wedlock	
	Odds ratio	s.e.	Odds ratio	s.e.	Odds ratio	s.e.
<b>K-12 schooling respondents were primarily in (vs. public school)</b>						
Catholic	1.09	.16	.80	.14	.71	*
Protestant	2.24	***	.67	.45	.48	**
Secular private	1.43	.44	.42	**	.43	.23
<b>Growing up in financially stable families</b>	.97	.08	.94	.09	.92	.10
<b>Growing up with both parents</b>	1.39	***	.14	.69	***	.08
<b>Race (vs. white)</b>						
Black	.48	***	.08	1.60	**	.31
Hispanic	1.14	.16	1.00	.17	1.58	***
Asian	1.32	.31	.58	*	.41	**
Other	.53	***	.11	1.37	.32	.29
<b>Mothers' education</b>						
(vs. less than high school)	.99	.11	1.09	.13	.84	.11
HS or GED						
Any Postsecondary Degree	1.31	**	.17	.69	**	.11
<b>Male</b>	1.30	***	.11	.69	***	.07
<b>Age</b> (effect of an additional year)	1.01	***	.00	1.03	***	.00
<b>N</b>	4942		3876		4942	

Notes: \*\*\* p<0.01 \*\*p<0.05 \*p<0.1. Model for ever divorced is based on those who have ever been married.

Source: AEI/IFS analysis of Understanding America Study (UAS), UAS20 and UAS37, conducted May 20, 2015 and Feb 5, 2016, respectively.

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controlling for differences in their backgrounds. At the same time, adults who attended secular private schools are also less likely to have experienced a divorce than those who went to public schools. Finally, adults who attended either Catholic or Protestant schools are less likely to have a child outside of marriage than public-school attendees, even after controlling for an array of background factors: for example, Protestant-school attendees are 52% less likely than their peers who were educated in public schools to have a child out of wedlock.

## School Attendance and Family Outcomes Among Millennials

The Millennials who attended religious schools during their teenage years seem to have an advantage when it comes to family formation. By their mid-30s, close to 6 in 10 Millennials (57%) who attended Protestant schools are in their first marriage, according to our analysis from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97). About half of Millennials who attended Catholic schools are in the same situation. In contrast, Millennials who attended public schools or secular private schools are less likely than their peers who attended religious schools to be in an intact marriage: fewer than half (43%) are in their first marriage.

When it comes to divorce and having a child out of wedlock, Millennials with religious-school backgrounds also do relatively better than their public-school peers. For example, only 18% of ever-married Millennials who attended Catholic schools have ever been divorced, compared with 31% of those who attended public schools. And Millennials who attended Protestant schools are much less likely than public-school attendees to have a child out of wedlock (14% vs. 36%).

Even though Millennials who attended secular private schools are less likely than their peers who attended religious schools to be in an intact marriage, their chance of divorce (if ever married) is about the same as those who attended religious private schools. Part of the reason may be that Millennials who attended secular private schools are less likely than others to get married in the first place. At ages 32 to 38, 58% of Millennials who attended secular private schools have been married at least once, compared with 73% of Millennials who attended Protestant schools, and 63% of both Catholic-school and public-school attendees.

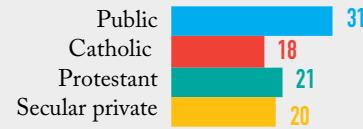
**Figure 4. Millennials who attended religious schools are more likely to be in an intact marriage**

% of young adults ...

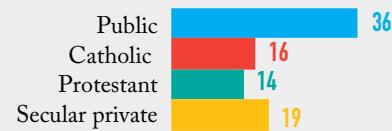
### In intact marriage



### Ever divorced\*



### Ever had a child out of wedlock



Notes: \*Based those who are married or have been married before.  
Analysis based on adults surveyed in 2017-2018, at ages 32-38.

Source: AEI/IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97)

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Many factors could be related to family outcomes that young adults experience, such as their parents' marital status, and their financial status while growing up. Family finance is also linked to what type of schools they attended, given the expenses associated with attending a non-public school. Does the school experience still matter after controlling for all these factors in our NYLS97 data?

In regression models that include young adults' childhood family income, whether they lived with both parents while growing up, as well as other background variables, we find that Millennials' religious school experience is significantly linked with their family outcomes, but the results vary by the specific school type as well as by family outcome.

Our analysis in [Table 2](#) suggests that young adults who attended Protestant schools are about 70% more likely than their peers who attended public schools to be in an intact marriage. But with these controls, the difference in intact marriage rates between young adults who attended Catholic school and those who attended public schools is no

**Table 2. Logistic regression models predicting the odds of three family outcomes at ages 32 to 38**

	In intact marriage		Ever divorced		Ever had a child out of wedlock	
	Odds ratio	s.e.	Odds ratio	s.e.	Odds ratio	s.e.
<b>School attended as teenagers</b> (vs. public school)						
Catholic	1.09	0.15	0.69	0.24	0.59	*** 0.20
Protestant	1.71 **	0.21	0.63	0.30	0.34 ***	0.32
Secular private	0.77	0.28	0.71	0.46	0.57	0.39
Other	0.94	0.19	0.94	0.25	1.00	0.20
<b>Growing up in families with at least median family income</b>	1.22 ***	0.07	0.83 **	0.09	0.72 ***	0.07
<b>Growing up with both parents</b>	1.52 ***	0.06	0.64 ***	0.08	0.58 ***	0.07
<b>Race</b> (vs. white)						
Black	0.48 ***	0.09	0.97	0.13	2.96 ***	0.09
Hispanic	0.79 **	0.09	0.96	0.13	1.36 **	0.10
Asian	0.75	0.23	0.35 **	0.48	0.49 **	0.33
Other	0.56 ***	0.20	1.49	0.26	1.52 **	0.20
<b>Mothers' education</b> (vs. less than high school)						
HS or GED	1.28 ***	0.08	0.73 ***	0.11	0.76 ***	0.08
Associate degree	1.20 **	0.09	0.74 **	0.12	0.63 ***	0.09
Bachelor's or higher	1.61 ***	0.10	0.41 ***	0.14	0.32 ***	0.11
<b>N</b>	5,006		2,944		5,006	

Notes: \*\*\* p<0.01 \*\*p<0.05 \*p<0.1. Based on young adults surveyed in 2017-2018. All models control for age and gender. Model for ever divorced is based on those who have ever been married.

Source: AEI/IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97).

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longer significant. Among young adults who have ever been married (59% of the sample), the difference in divorce rates between those who attended Catholic schools and those who attended public schools is not significant, either. This is partly due to the small sample sizes in Catholic schools and other private schools. In a separate regression where all private schools are combined, we see that young adults who attended public schools are about 30% more likely to divorce than those who attended private schools ( $p=0.04$ ). Both young adults who attended Catholic schools and those who attended Protestant schools are significantly less likely than public-school attendees to have ever had a non-marital birth.

There are some differences in results between the UAS and the NLSY97, but they are to be expected given that the latter is restricted to adults between the ages of 32 and 38, while the former covers adults of all ages, spanning a wider range of generations. However, overall patterns are quite similar across the two data sets. Similar to the UAS data, about 40 and 50 % of adults who attended public and Catholic schools, respectively, in the NLSY97 ever marry and never divorce. The marriage-but-never-divorced rate among adults who attended Protestant school is 57% in the NLSY97, only slightly lower than the estimate according to the UAS data (63%). In contrast, only 43% of adults who attended secular private schools in the NLSY97 marry but never divorce.

The overall divorce rate in the NLSY97 is lower than in the UAS. This is expected given that NLSY97 respondents are much younger. About 30% of public-school attendees in NLSY97 who have ever married undergo divorce. The divorce rate is much lower for Catholic and secular private school attendees (18% and 20%, respectively). In the UAS sample, the divorce rates among Catholic and public-school attendees are close (40% vs. 43%); this is about twice as much as the rate among those who went to Protestant or secular private schools.

Finally, the pattern of non-marital births by school type is similar between the two data sets. More than 1 in 3 adults who attended public schools and less than 20% of private-school attendees in the NLSY97 experienced out-of-wedlock births. In contrast, close to 30% of public-school attendees and under 20% of private-school attendees have a non-marital birth, according to the UAS data.

### III. Schooling Effects by Background: Financial Stability, Family Structure, and Race

Some research suggests that private schools may affect students with dissimilar demographic backgrounds in different ways. One study of a private school voucher program, for instance, finds large effects for students from moderately disadvantaged backgrounds but no effects for the severely impoverished.<sup>21</sup> Such a finding is consistent with the theory of moral ecologies. Schools occupy one place in the network of numerous formative influences. Insofar as the ideals embodied in the family, popular culture, peers, and other sources of influence are salient yet inconsistent with those found in school, the potential school effects on marital outcomes may be mitigated.

To explore this possibility, we analyze the same set of three outcomes across school sectors but additionally compare them across respondents from different incomes, family structures, and ethnic backgrounds. In particular, we compare the schooling effects for respondents who grew up in financially stable situations with those who did not. We then compare the effects for respondents who grew up in two-parent families with those who did not. In a third set of results, we compare the effects for white and non-white respondents. These simplified race categories are due to sample size limitations.

Once again, the figures that follow do not adjust outcomes for demographic background characteristics. Regression results that adjust for background characteristics are available in the [online appendix](#).

#### Results by Financial Stability

**Figure 5** displays the percentage of respondents from each school sector who are in an intact marriage, have ever divorced, and have ever had a non-marital birth. It presents these numbers separately by those who grew up in a financially stable family and those who did not.<sup>22</sup> Findings for subgroups with small sample sizes are not shown.

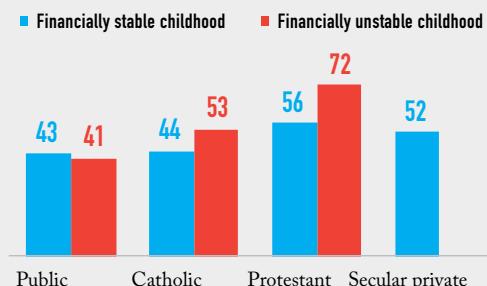
<sup>21</sup> Albert Cheng and Paul E. Peterson, "Experimentally Estimated Impacts of School Vouchers on Educational Attainments of Moderately and Severely Disadvantaged Students," PEPG Working Paper, No. 20-01, Harvard Kennedy School, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> This was based on the survey question: "When you were 13, how would you describe the financial situation of your family?" Financially unstable refers to respondents who answered, "We sometimes didn't have enough money to pay for basic food, clothing, and housing," or "Money was tight, but we had what we needed." Financially stable refers to respondents who answered, "We had enough money to buy what we needed and other things we enjoyed, such as toys and entertainment" or "We didn't really have to worry about money."

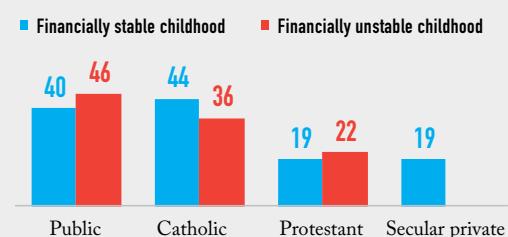
**Figure 5. Family outcomes by school type and family finance**

% of adults ...

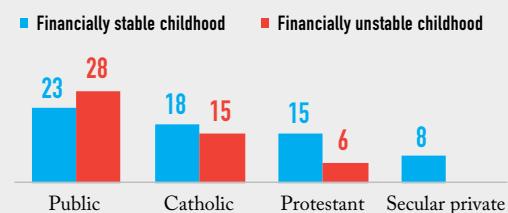
##### In an intact marriage



##### Ever been divorced\*



##### Ever had a child out of wedlock



Notes: \*Based on adults who are married or have been married before. Findings involving small sample sizes ( $n < 30$ ) are not shown.

Source: AEI/IFS analysis of Understanding America Study (UAS), UAS20 and UAS37, conducted May 20, 2015 and Feb 5, 2016, respectively.

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About 40% of public-school attendees who grew up in financially unstable households eventually marry and never divorce. The rate is higher for Catholic-school attendees who grew up in the same unstable financial situation (53%). Meanwhile, Protestant-school attendees who grew up in financial hardship are the most likely to marry and never divorce; 72% are still in their first marriage.

Growing up in financially challenging homes does not seem to make a difference in the chances of being in an intact marriage for public-school attendees. A similar share (43%) from financially stable homes are still in their first marriage as is the case for public school students from financially unstable homes (41%).

And among religious-school attendees, those who are from financially stable homes actually have a lower rate of intact marriage than respondents who grew up with financial difficulties. For example, at 56%, the married-and-never-divorced rate for Protestant-school attendees who did not grow up in financial hardship is much lower than the rate for Protestant-school attendees who grew up in financial hardship.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, among respondents who did not grow up in financially difficult circumstances, Protestant schoolers appear most likely to marry and never divorce, though their secular private school counterparts are close behind.

Of the public-school attendees who faced financial challenges during childhood and ever marry, 46% have been divorced. The ever-divorced rate for Catholic-school respondents who come from similar backgrounds is about 10 percentage points lower. For Protestant-school respondents who grew up under financial hardship, the divorce rate is even lower (22%).

Among ever-married public-school attendees, those from financially stable homes are less likely than their counterparts who faced financial hardship as children to have ever divorced. The opposite is true among adults who went to Catholic school: those who grew up in financially stable families have higher rates of divorce than those who did not (44% vs. 36%). The divorce rate among Protestant-school attendees is similar for those who are from financially stable homes and those who are not.

Public-school attendees who grew up in financially unstable circumstances have the highest non-marital birth rate, as 28% of these adults have had a child out of wedlock. The rate among their public school peers who did not face financial challenges is lower (23%) but still higher than among others who went to non-public schools. However, among Protestant-school attendees, the link between family financial background and non-marital birth goes in the opposite direction. Those who faced financial challenges during childhood are less likely than those who did not to have had a child out of wedlock (6% vs. 15%).

In summary, it seems that religious schools, both Catholic and Protestant, have comparatively more positive influences on family stability for students who grew up in financially difficult circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

**It seems that religious schools, both Catholic and Protestant, have comparatively more positive influences on family stability for students who grew up in financially difficult circumstances.**

<sup>23</sup> The sample size for Protestant-school attendees who grew up in financial unstable homes was small (n=44).

<sup>24</sup> Similar analyses were done among NLSY97, but the results are somewhat different. Among adults ages 32 to 38 who attended Protestant schools, 61% of those who grew up in higher-income families are in an intact marriage, compared with 58% who are from lower-income families. The gap is much larger among those who went to Catholic schools (56% vs. 36%) or public schools (50% vs. 37%), where adults from higher-income families are more likely to be in intact families than their peers who are from lower-income families. The sample N was too small (< 30) for analyses among secular private-school attendees who grew up in lower-income families.

## Results by Family Structure

We now turn to describing results for respondents who grew up in two-parent families and those who did not.<sup>25</sup> The data are shown in [Figure 6](#). Rates of intact marriage are about 50% for public- and Catholic-school attendees who grew up with both parents in their household. For Protestant and secular private school attendees who grew up with the same family structure, the rate is over 10 percentage points higher at about 60 percent.

Consistent with prior research on marriage rates and family structure, respondents who grew up without an intact family are much less likely to be in an intact marriage themselves. Only one-third of public-school attendees and 42% of Catholic-school attendees from these backgrounds are in intact marriages.

Some 42% of ever-married public-school respondents who grew up in two-parent families have experienced divorce. The divorce rate for Catholic-school attendees from similar family backgrounds is slightly lower (38%). The divorce rates for their Protestant and secular private school counterparts are even lower, at 21 and 14%, respectively.

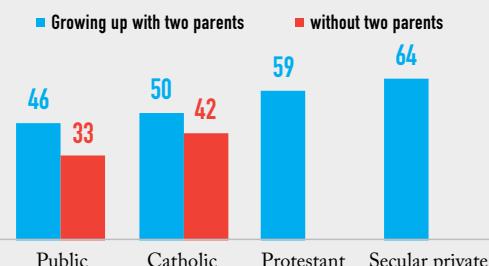
Compared to their peers who grew up in two-parent families, public- and Catholic-school attendees who did not have two parents in their household experience slightly higher divorce rates: close to half of them have divorced (47%).

About 22% of public-school attendees who grew up with both parents have had a non-marital birth. The percentage of Catholic- and Protestant-school attendees from similar family backgrounds who experienced a non-marital birth is lower at 13 and 10%, respectively. At only 4%, secular private school attendees who grew up in two-parent families are the least likely to have a child out of wedlock.

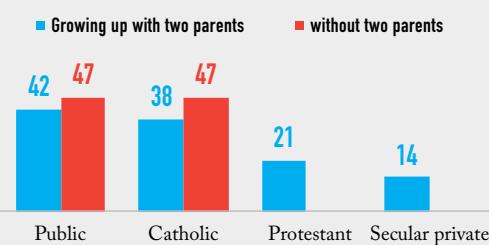
**Figure 6. Family outcomes by school type and family structure**

% of adults ...

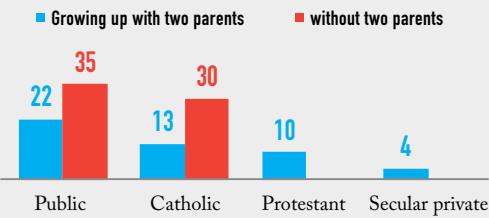
### In an intact marriage



### Ever been divorced\*



### Ever had a child out of wedlock



Notes: \*Based on adults who are married or have been married before. Findings involving small sample sizes ( $n < 30$ ) are not shown.

Source: AEI/IFS analysis of Understanding America Study (UAS), UAS20 and UAS37, conducted May 20, 2015 and Feb 5, 2016, respectively.

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<sup>25</sup> In UAS37, respondents reported the number of adults living in their household when they were 13 years old. The adults included mother, father, grandparents, parents' unmarried partner, and other relatives. Respondents who lived with both mother and father were defined as living in two-parent families.

In contrast, non-marital birth rates are much higher among respondents who did not grow up with both parents. Around one-third of public- and Catholic-school attendees from such a family background have had at least one child outside of marriage.<sup>26</sup>

## Results by Race

This final subsection describes results for respondents from different ethnic backgrounds. (Due to sample size limitations for non-white adults when splitting the sample simultaneously by ethnicity and schooling sector, we are unable to present separate results for black, Hispanic, and Asian adults. Therefore, we only present findings for whites and non-whites).

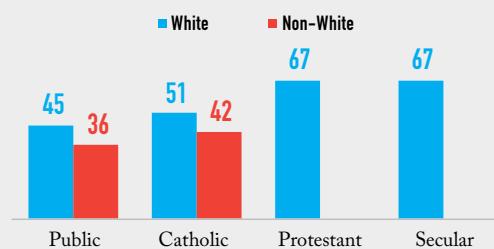
Among white respondents, 45% of public-school attendees are in their first marriage (Figure 7). The share is higher for private-school attendees. Close to 70% of whites who attended Protestant schools or secular private schools are in their first marriage, as are about half of white Catholic-school attendees (51%). Only 1 in 5 ever-married whites who attended either Protestant or secular schools have experienced a divorce, a rate much lower than among whites who attended public schools (44%). Divorce rates are slightly lower among whites who attended Catholic schools than among those who went to public schools (39% versus 44%). Similarly, non-marital birth rates are much lower among whites who attended Protestant schools (10%) or secular private schools (5%) instead of public schools (21%). White Catholic-school attendees also have relatively lower non-marital birth rates when compared to white public-school attendees, but the gap is smaller (16% vs. 21%).

We only looked at family outcomes of non-whites who went to public schools and Catholic schools, given the small sizes for non-white Protestant and

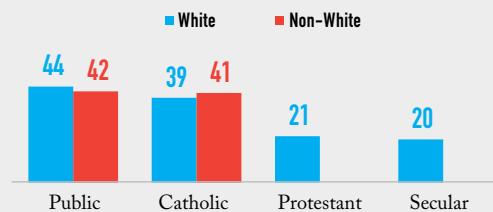
**Figure 7. Family outcomes by school type and race**

% of adults ...

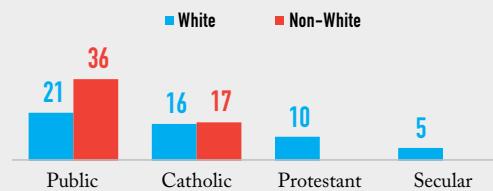
### In an intact marriage



### Ever been divorced\*



### Ever had a child out of wedlock



Notes: \*Based on adults who are married or have been married before. Findings involving small sample sizes (n<30) are not shown.

Source: AEI/IFS analysis of Understanding America Study (UAS), UAS20 and UAS37, conducted May 20, 2015 and Feb 5, 2016, respectively.

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<sup>26</sup> Results from the NLSY97 are similar to what we see in the UAS data, with additional findings related to adults who attended Protestant schools. According to the NLSY97, among adults ages 32 to 38 who went to Protestant schools, 67% who grew up with both (biological) parents are in an intact marriage, compared with 39% of those who did not live with both parents while growing up. Growing up in an intact family also is linked to a much lower rate of non-marital birth among Protestant-school attendees (7%), compared with those who did not (26%). The N was too small for divorce rate comparison among Protestant-school attendees by family background.

secular school attendees. The differences between public-school and Catholic-school attendees among non-whites are very small when it comes to being in an intact marriage or ever having been divorced. However, non-white adults who attended Catholic schools are much less likely to have had a non-marital birth than their non-white counterparts who attended public school (17% vs. 36%).

Compared with white attendees, non-white attendees of public schools have a somewhat lower rate of being in an intact marriage. The gap is similar among Catholic-school attendees: 51% of whites are in an intact marriage, compared with 42% of non-white attendees. The differences in divorce rates between whites and non-whites are small among attendees of these two types of schools. Finally, we see a bigger gap in the chance of non-marital births between white and non-white attendees of public schools. Only 21% of whites who attended public schools have had a child out of wedlock, while the share almost doubles among non-whites (36%). Among Catholic-school attendees, the non-marital birth gap between white and non-white adults is almost nonexistent.<sup>27</sup>

## IV. Conclusion

Men and women who forge strong and stable marriages are typically happier, healthier, and more prosperous. Any children they have are also more likely to be in better shape emotionally, economically, and educationally. And the communities dominated by successfully married men and women are more prosperous, economically mobile, and safer.<sup>28</sup>

It is for these reasons that we sought to determine which types of schools are more likely to foster better family outcomes among today's men and women. To that end, this report examined three signal family outcomes: stable marriage, divorce, and out-of-wedlock births for individuals who attended various types of schools. Public, secular private, Catholic, and Protestant schools all convey messages about particular conceptions of marriage, family, and sexuality. They also expose children to dramatically different peer contexts. For example, religious schools, especially Protestant ones, stress the importance of marriage and are much less likely to expose children to peers who are sexually active. Public and secular private schools, likewise, have their own distinctive moral communities that convey values, norms, ideals, and expectations about family life to their students. How do the moral communities of each type of school influence family formation once their attendees leave?

Our findings on this question were mixed, with some results validating previous research and other results that came as a surprise. Religious schooling—and particularly Protestant schooling—is associated with higher rates of stable marriage, lower rates of divorce, and lower rates of out-of-wedlock births, even after controlling for key aspects of respondents' backgrounds. Furthermore, adults who grew up in financially insecure households and who

<sup>27</sup> Patterns from the NLSY97 are similar to what we observed in the UAS, except for a couple of differences. First, among adults ages 32 to 38 who attended Catholic schools, the divorce rate of non-whites is much higher than it is among whites (28% vs. 16%). And non-white attendees of Catholic schools are also much more likely than their white counterparts to have had a child out of wedlock (32% vs. 12%). Second, the intact marriage rate among white adults in the NLSY97 cohort is not higher for those who attended secular private schools. Among whites ages 32 to 38, 41% of secular private school attendees are in an intact marriage, which is lower than the share among white public-school attendees (48%) as well as whites who attended Catholic schools (57%) or Protestant schools (61%). At the same time, 18% of whites who attended secular private schools have had a child out of wedlock, which is lower than the share among whites who attended public schools (29%), but slightly higher than the shares among whites who went to Catholic schools (12%) or Protestant schools (13%).

<sup>28</sup> Robert I. Lerman and W. Bradford Wilcox, "For Richer, For Poorer: How Family Structures Economic Success in America," American Enterprise Institute and Institute for Family Studies, 2014; W. Bradford Wilcox, Joseph Price, and Jacob V. Leeuwen, "The Family Geography of the American Dream: New Neighborhood Data on Single Parenthood, Prisons, and Poverty," Institute for Family Studies, October 17, 2018; and Robert J. Sampson, "Neighborhood Family Structure and the Risk of Personal Victimization," *The Social Ecology of Crime*, ed. James Michael Byrne and Robert J. Sampson (New York: Springer, 1986).

attended Protestant schools seem to experience better marital outcomes. The ideals that students encountered in Protestant schools appear to compensate for a lack of economic resources when it comes to their own marital and child-bearing decisions.

Compared with public-school attendees, adults who attended Catholic schools have a lower chance of having a non-marital birth. This is especially true for non-whites. Only 17% of non-white Catholic-school attendees had a non-marital birth, while the share doubles among their counterparts who went to public schools (36%). As with Protestant schools, having attended a Catholic school is associated with especially beneficial marriage outcomes for adults who grew up amidst financial insecurity. This surprising finding calls for some reflection.

Our analysis is descriptive and merely shows marriage outcomes that are associated with attending public, Catholic, Protestant, and secular private schools. We are not able to establish that the different school sectors attended by the survey respondents independently caused any differences in outcomes. It is possible that children with unmeasured proclivities towards positive marriage outcomes are more likely to have parents who choose to send them to Protestant, Catholic or secular private schools. We cannot untangle such “selection effects” from actual schooling effects. We did, however, control for an extensive set of background factors in much of our analysis. Key measurable background characteristics, at least, do not explain most of the advantages of attending various types of private schools over public schools in experiencing beneficial marriage outcomes.

Due to sample size restrictions, we were not able to report findings related to subgroups such as non-whites who went to Protestant schools or secular private school attendees who grew up in financially unstable homes. Overall, the sample size for private-school attendees was small in comparison to the much larger sample of respondents who went to public schools in both the UAS and NLSY97. More research on the topic using bigger sample sizes is needed.

In general, then, this report suggests that private schools serve the public good more by fostering stronger and more stable marriages among American men and women compared to public schools. We were particularly struck by the ways in which a “Protestant Family Ethic” marked by more marriage, less divorce, and less non-marital childbearing appears to be a consequence of attending a Protestant school. The bottom line: students who attend private schools are more likely to forge successful families as adult men and women.

**Students who attend private schools are more likely to forge successful families as adult men and women.**

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