

What's Wrong With The Work Of The National Marriage Project?

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Based at Rutgers University, the National Marriage Project was founded in 1997 and has taken a leading role in attracting attention for its marriage-only agenda. Though the Project describes itself as a "nonpartisan, nonsectarian, and interdisciplinary initiative," its reports misrepresent social science research in a politicized attempt to argue that marriage is the only acceptable way to form a relationship or a family.

As part of its strategy to reduce acceptance and support for diverse family structures, the National Marriage Project regularly releases reports. Below, we consider one recent report, "Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need To Know About Cohabitation Before Marriage."

Released in February 1999, the report's authors described it as "a comprehensive review of recent research," but our analysis reveals it to be seriously flawed. To download a copy of the report (28 pages), go to <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/publicat.htm>.

Although we strongly critique this report, the Alternatives to Marriage Project is not anti-marriage. In fact, many of our supporters are married people. We recognize that different types of relationships work best for different people, and marriage may be a good choice for some people. But we also need an expanded definition of relationships and families that is inclusive of those who are unable to marry (like people in same-sex relationships) and those who decide, for whatever reason, that marriage is not for them.

Unmarried people may experience pressure to marry from their family, friends, and communities, and they may face discrimination on the basis of their marital status. This pressure and discrimination can be fueled by reports like "Should We Live Together?" that push marriage as the only acceptable option.

Our other work critiquing the marriage-only movement includes a press release issued in response to the National Marriage Project's report issued on June 7, 2000, an article about the National Marriage Project which appeared in *Sojourner: The Women's Forum*; an op-ed piece in the *Arizona Daily Star*, and a press release issued in response to the National Marriage Project's Cohabitation Report.

Ten Problems (Plus One Bonus Problem) With The
National Marriage Project's Cohabitation Report

1. The cohabitation report says:

"Living together before marriage increases the risk of breaking up after marriage" (page 4).

Yet the research the report cites on this isn't nearly as straightforward as its authors represent it to be. For instance, one study they cite (DeMaris and MacDonald, 1993) found that the only situation in which cohabitation is associated with a higher divorce rate is among "serial cohabitators" -- people who have cohabited with more than one partner. That's a small portion of all cohabitators. The study actually concluded that for first-time cohabitators who then marry their partners, there's no increased risk of divorce. Most of the fuss about this link is bogus.

Also, the National Marriage Project misrepresents the research by saying that cohabitation increases the risk of divorce (implying a causal relationship). Some research has found an "association" between the two, but association is not the same as causation. Maybe a higher divorce risk makes one more likely to cohabit. Or perhaps there's some outside factor that causes both.

2. The cohabitation report says:

"Cohabiting couples report ... lower levels of happiness" (page 11).

A 1998 Roper poll of 1,200 affluent Americans found that the rich are happier than Americans overall. Rich people are happier than other people. Married people are more likely to be rich. Isn't it likely that the increased "happiness" we hear so much about is actually because people are wealthy, not because they're married?

The same poll found that the affluent are more likely to have a happy marriage than average Americans: 77% vs. 47%.

Source: "Money Does Buy Happiness Proves New Poll." Roper Starch Worldwide, January 22, 1998.

Cohabitators and unmarried people include many people who have good reason to be unhappy. The poor are much less likely to marry than middle or upper-class Americans. Many disabled people can't marry because they would lose benefits. The same is true for senior citizens who depend on pensions. The "unmarried" category includes many people whose situations prevent them from getting married. The National Marriage Project's report doesn't consider the very reasonable possibility that it's not their marital status that keeps them unhappy, but rather their underlying situations.

According to the 1987 National Survey of Families and Households, 83% of cohabitators say they are 5s, 6s, or 7s (out of a happiness scale of 1 to 7) -- heavily on the happy end. Only 7% put themselves on the "unhappy" side of the scale (1s, 2s, or 3s). Pro-marriage-only groups like to talk about how much happier married people are, implying that cohabitators are unhappy. In reality, the difference between the two is quite minimal, with both groups saying they are quite happy.

For more on the subject of cohabitor happiness, see our [Frequently Asked Questions About Cohabitation](#) page.

3. The cohabitation report says:

"Cohabiting unions tend to weaken the institution of marriage" (page 4).

This is only a problem when you've started with the pre-conceived "truth" that marriage must be "revitalized" -- one of the National Marriage Project's stated key missions. If your first goal is to help people have happy, healthy families and relationships, and you're open to learning about how that can best happen, marriage may be much less important.

One of the studies they cite (Schoen and Owens, 1992), seems to disagree with them. It says, "Because marriage has declined more than cohabitation has increased, there is little reason to think that the rise in cohabitation has caused the decline in marriage. What is much more likely is that the same set of factors are responsible for both the rise in cohabitation and the fall in marriage" (116).

4. The cohabitation report says:

"Some research has shown that aggression is at least twice as common among cohabitators as it is among married partners" (page 12).

They've misrepresented this research. The study they cite here, by Jan Stats, actually found that the probable cause for the "aggression" is the demographic profile of the average cohabitor (young, black, and more likely to have depression and alcohol problems). Although the National Marriage Project would like the reader to believe that the aggression is because they're not married, it's more likely because of these other factors, which are all linked more with poverty than with marital status. Again, correlation is not the same as causation.

5. The cohabitation report says:

"One of the greatest problems for children living with a cohabiting couple is the high risk that the couple will break up" (page 13).

Contrary to what marriage-only groups would have you think, the research does not show that divorce/breakup is generally catastrophic for children. Kids from amicably divorced couples actually do better than kids from high-conflict married couples (who stayed together "for the kids").

As the National Marriage Project admits in footnote 25, research shows that cohabitators who have kids are more likely to stay together. Why, then, does the marriage movement want to make unmarried couples ineligible

for domestic partner health benefits, re-create a climate of stigma, and shut unmarried people out of the circle of what they consider "families"? Their policy recommendations hurt the National Marriage Project's so-called "fragile families" instead of helping them.

6. The cohabitation report says:

"[Many children living with cohabiting couples are from a previous relationship of one of the parents.] This means that they [the children] are living with an unmarried stepfather or mother's boyfriend.... These children have no claim to child support should the couple separate" (pages 13-14).

This implies that children born "out of wedlock" have no claim to child support. But all children have the right to child support from their father (their biological father or the man married to their mother). The percentage of babies who have identified fathers is very high, so this is not an issue for the vast majority of children. As we have seen, marriage is not a very strong guarantee of paternal support during the marriage or after it ends.

7. The cohabitation report says:

"By all of the empirical evidence at our disposal, not to mention the wisdom of the ages, the institution of marriage remains a cornerstone of a successful society" (page 23).

This sweeping generalization begs to be disproved -- and the report itself provides several counterexamples. Just a few pages earlier, the report calls Sweden and Denmark "the world's cohabitation leaders" (21) (in many Scandinavian countries, the majority of babies are born to unmarried parents). This seems to be the perfect contradiction to the report's own claim that nations need marriage to succeed: these countries exceed the United States and other more "married" countries on many scales of well-being. Anthropologist Leanna Wolfe discusses other successful societies where marriage is less than a "cornerstone" in her book *Women Who May Never Marry*.

8. The cohabitation report says:

Married couples are better connected than cohabitators "to the larger community. This includes other individuals and groups (such as in-laws)" (12).

This theory was disproved by a researcher who set out to test it in an article called "Cohabiting and Marital Aggression: The Role of Social Isolation (*Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 1991)" The researcher found that cohabiting couples are actually more likely to be tied to informal networks of family and friends than married couples.

In its "comprehensive review of recent research," the National Marriage Project "coincidentally" missed any study that weakens its hypothesis.

9. For instance, one study threw out the traditional marital status categories and instead divided people into 4 categories: married, living

with a partner, having a partner you don't live with, and people without partners. It found that people living with a partner had the highest levels of emotional support (higher than married couples) and the same low distress levels as married couples.

Ross, Catherine (1995). "Reconceptualizing Marital Status as a Continuum of Social Attachment." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 57:1, 129-40.

10. Another piece of information they neglected to mention:

This study found that 76% of cohabitators plan to get married to their partner (another study the cohabitation report cites, Brown and Bumpass, found that 80% of young adults plan to marry their partner). It also found that among cohabitators who plan to marry, there is no difference in terms of relationship quality when compared to married people. Therefore most of the concerns the National Marriage Project expresses about relationship quality only apply to a small minority of cohabitators.

Susan L. Brown and Alan Booth. 1996. "Cohabitation Versus Marriage: A Comparison of Relationship Quality." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 58:668-678.

Plus one bonus:

The cohabitation report says:

"If a woman truly wants a man to marry her, wisdom dictates a measure of playing hard to get" (page 23).

We'd hoped that we had moved beyond this kind of dishonest game-playing.