



4 Progressive Policies that Make Families Stronger

By Katherine Gallagher Robbins and Shawn Fremstad October 25, 2016

Conservatives have long claimed the mantle of family values. Meanwhile, many of the same individuals who tout the importance of marriage and family oppose policies such as increasing the minimum wage, strengthening collective bargaining, expanding Medicaid, and supporting reproductive rights. This might make sense if such policies were negatively associated with family stability and well-being. But new Center for American Progress analysis shows that if conservatives want to support strong, stable, and healthy families, these are precisely the kinds of policies they should embrace.

In fact, states that hew to a conservative line on these four policies—a low minimum wage, anti-union legislation, restrictive Medicaid eligibility for low-income parents and other adults, and limited reproductive rights—fare substantially worse on four family stability indicators than states that take a progressive approach. On average, the divorce rate is 28 percent higher,¹ the infant mortality rate is 32 percent higher, the birth rate among women ages 15 to 19 is 50 percent higher, and the share of children who live with neither parent is 17 percent higher in states with conservative stances on all four policies compared with states with progressive stances on all four policies.² These indicators are not always associated with negative outcomes, but these situations are often accompanied by emotional and financial challenges that affect family well-being.

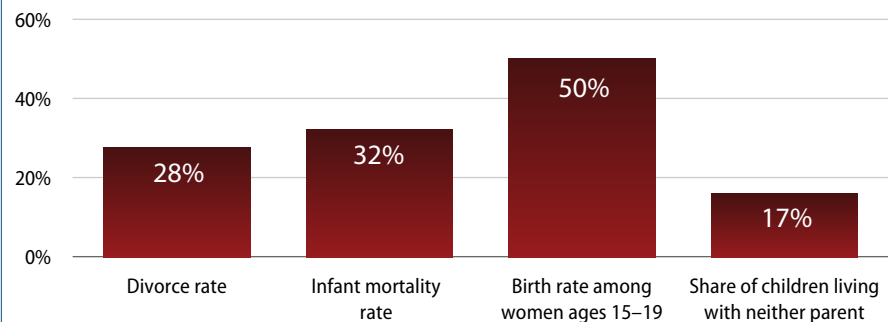
Policies that increase resources and financial security strengthen families

A large body of research underscores how inadequate resources and financial stress contribute to family conflict and instability.³ In their book, *Alone Together: How Marriage in America Is Changing*, Paul Amato and his colleagues found that “lower levels of income, educational attainment, and occupational prestige were associated with higher rates of marital problems, less marital happiness, and greater instability.”⁴ And while children can thrive in a variety of family situations,⁵ both insufficient income and family instability have been linked to worse behavioral and academic outcomes for children.⁶

FIGURE 1

States with conservative policies fare worse on family-related indicators than states with progressive policies

How much higher rates on family-related indicators are in states with conservative vs. progressive policies



Note: States are categorized as pursuing conservative or progressive policy agendas based on four major policy areas: Medicaid expansion; right-to-work laws that limit the effectiveness and viability of unions; statewide minimum wage; and reproductive rights. All indicators are for 2014. See "Methodology" for additional details.

Note: This source lists Delaware as having a minimum wage of \$7.75 per hour in 2014, but on January 1, 2014, the minimum wage was \$7.25 per hour. The rate was raised on June 1, 2014. See State of Delaware, "Governor Signs Legislation to Raise Minimum Wage," Press release, January 30, 2014, available at <http://news.delaware.gov/2014/01/30/governor-signs-legislation-to-raise-minimum-wage/>.

Sources: Medicaid expansion: Kaiser Family Foundation, "Status of State Action on the Medicaid Expansion Decision," available at <http://kff.org/health-reform/state-indicator/state-activity-around-expanding-medicaid-under-the-affordable-care-act/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D> (last accessed October 2016); right-to-work legislation: National Conference of State Legislatures, "Right-to-Work Resources," available at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/right-to-work-laws-and-bills.aspx> (last accessed October 2016); minimum wage: U.S. Department of Labor, "Changes in Basic Minimum Wages in Non-Farm Employment Under State Law: Selected Years 1968 to 2016," available at <https://www.dol.gov/whd/state/stateMinWageHis.htm> (last accessed October 2016); reproductive rights: Cynthia Hess and others, "Status of Women in the States: 2015" (Washington: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2015), available at <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/-pubs/the-status-of-women-in-the-states-2015-full-report>; divorce rate: authors' calculations based on 2014 American Community Survey one-year estimates. All other indicators from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Kids Count Data Center," available at <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/> (last accessed October 2016).

Here are four progressive policies that can improve financial security and make families stronger.

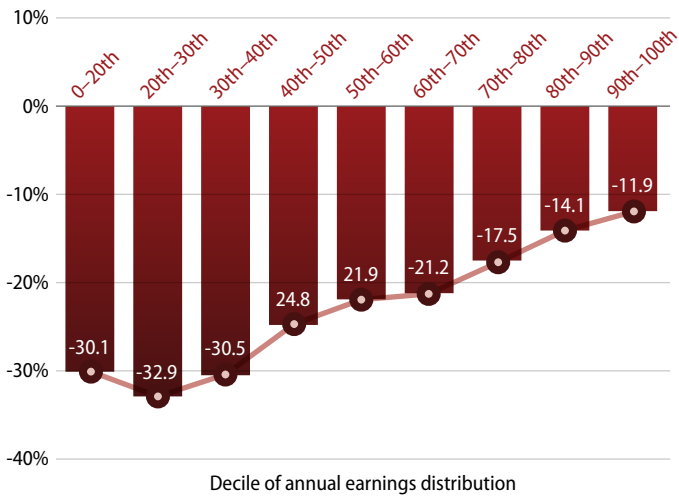
1. Increasing the minimum wage

Stable, fairly compensated work provides a solid foundation for the creation and maintenance of strong and healthy family relationships. Over the past several decades, most working-class men have seen their earnings and wages decline in real terms, despite increases in their educational attainment and living through a period of unsurpassed productivity. Working-class women have fared better in relative terms, but they started far behind their male counterparts and still earn substantially less than them. Marriage trends have tracked these wage trends. The greatest declines in marriage rates since 1970 are for working-class men, who have experienced the greatest declines in real wages, and for working-class women, who have seen little wage growth.⁷

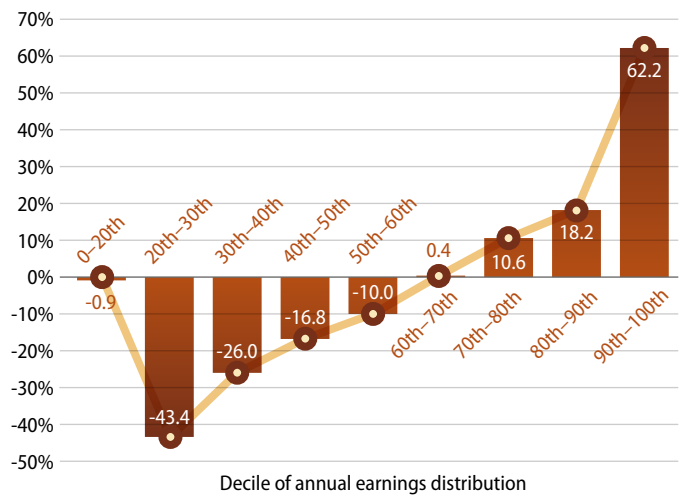
FIGURE 2

Decline in the share of married adults has been strongest among lowest-earning men

Percentage-point change in share of married men, by earnings decile: 2013 compared with 1970



Percent change in men's real earnings, by earnings decile: 2013 compared with 1970



Note: Includes all noninstitutionalized men ages 30 to 50. The first earnings category includes all men with no earnings in 1970.

Source: Updated analysis by Rachel West of the Center for American Progress using 1971 and 2014 Integrated Public Use Microdata Series CPS data and based on Adam Looney and Michael Greenstone, "The Marriage Gap: The Impact of Economic and Technological Change on Marriage Rates" (Washington: The Hamilton Project, 2012), available at http://www.hamiltonproject.org/papers/the_marriage_gap_the_impact_of_economic_and_technological_change_on_ma/.

Raising the minimum wage to \$12 per hour would increase wages for 35 million workers. This policy would increase financial resources for millions of young, unmarried workers who might be contemplating family commitments, as well as nearly 10 million working parents who are struggling to raise a family on very low wages.⁸

2. Strengthening collective bargaining

Recent research finds that “controlling for many factors, union membership is positively and significantly associated with marriage,”⁹ and sociologist Andrew Cherlin and his co-authors show that the existence of more middle-skill jobs—which are associated with unions¹⁰—increases the likelihood that parents marry before having a child.¹¹ Researchers find that the connection between unions and marriage is “largely explained by the increased income, regularity and stability of employment, and fringe benefits that come with union membership.”¹² Unionization rates are higher in states without so-called right-to-work laws,¹³ and, on average, workers have lower wages and fewer benefits in states with these laws, compared with similar workers in states without them.¹⁴ Importantly, wages and benefits are better for both union and non-union workers alike, demonstrating that unions have the ability to improve wages and benefits even for nonmembers.¹⁵

3. Expanding Medicaid

States' commitment to ensuring access to affordable health care is also part of a secure foundation on which family relationships can be created and maintained. When a family member lacks health insurance, it can lead to financial burdens, elevated stress levels, poor health outcomes, and family instability.¹⁶ Unfortunately, while the nation's uninsurance rate is at an all-time low,¹⁷ nearly 3 million adults still lack health insurance because 19 states have yet to expand Medicaid to eligible low-income adults¹⁸—those with incomes under 138 percent of the federal poverty level—despite the availability of federal funds that would cover nearly all of the cost. Millions of low-income married adults, as well as single adults and adults in unmarried couples, are denied Medicaid based solely on the state in which they reside.

4. Supporting reproductive rights

The failure to expand Medicaid, combined with overly restrictive abortion legislation and other barriers to reproductive care, harms families' economic security by reducing their ability to plan their childbearing.¹⁹ Policies that support reproductive rights increase people's ability to decide when and if to have children and are linked to higher levels of educational attainment and lifetime earnings for women.²⁰ For all of these reasons, progressive proposals to expand Medicaid coverage in all states and to increase access to birth control and other reproductive health services would strengthen families.

Other factors for family stability

Of course, the four policies highlighted in this basic analysis do not fully explain differences between states on family outcomes.²¹ The states that share a progressive stance on these four policies also tend to have higher levels of educational attainment²² and lower levels of incarceration,²³ both of which play an important role in family stability and strength.²⁴ And other state policies—particularly ones more commonly included in the family policy realm such as paid family leave; pre-K; and affordable, high-quality child care—likely play a role. All of these policies, in conjunction with other key income and work supports such as tax credits for working families and a strong safety net, work together to provide families the support they need to thrive.²⁵

To be sure, not all states with these four policies in place do well on all of these indicators.²⁶ Similarly, a handful of states do relatively well on these family indicators despite having conservative family-policy structures. W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas Zill have argued that these states have a distinct model that stresses education and religious commitment to marriage.²⁷ But the small number of states that arguably fit within this model—including Utah, Nebraska, and Idaho—are all sparsely populated, have largely

white populations, and are unique in other ways.²⁸ It is unclear how a low-performing state with a conservative family-policy structure would even adopt the so-called Utah model. On the other hand, there are clear and specific progressive policies that these states could implement that would increase family stability and well-being. Moreover, it seems likely that families in states such as Utah and Idaho would do even better if they were able to benefit from progressive family policies.

Conclusion: A progressive agenda strengthens families

Many conservatives say they want to support families, but they oppose policies that would make a real difference when it comes to the stability and strength of working-class families. This analysis shows that states with progressive policy agendas fare better on a range of family stability indicators, averaging substantially lower divorce rates, infant mortality rates, birth rates for women ages 15 to 19, and the share of children living with neither parent. Implementing the four policies highlighted in this issue brief—policies that are already on the ground and delivering tangible benefits for families—should be a no-brainer.

Methodology

The authors categorized states as pursuing conservative or progressive policy agendas based on four major policy areas that are prominent in debates at both the state and national levels:

1. The minimum wage
2. So-called right-to-work laws that limit the effectiveness and viability of unions²⁹
3. Medicaid expansion
4. Reproductive rights³⁰

A state is categorized as having a conservative policy agenda if the following four criteria are true:

1. It has not increased its state minimum wage above \$7.25 per hour.
2. It has adopted right-to-work legislation.
3. It has not expanded Medicaid.
4. It is conservative on four or more of the following reproductive health policies: insurance coverage of infertility treatments; marriage equality or second-parent adoption for individuals in a same-sex relationship; mandatory sex education; mandatory parental consent or notification laws for minors receiving abortions; waiting periods for abortions; and restrictions on public funding for abortions.

A state is categorized as having a progressive policy agenda if all four of these criteria are not true.

The authors examined differences in four family-related indicators:

1. Divorce³¹
2. Infant mortality³²
3. Birth rates among women ages 15 to 19³³
4. Children living with neither parent³⁴

The usage of these indicators should not imply that they always lead to or are associated with negative outcomes. Divorce, particularly in high-conflict or violent circumstances,³⁵ can be the best choice for a family, and many divorced couples and their children thrive in co-parenting situations. Most young parents do their best to provide loving, healthy family situations for their children, despite frequently lacking adequate financial and emotional support.³⁶ And for some children, living apart from their parents is the safest, healthiest circumstance. But all of these situations can be difficult for families and are often accompanied by emotional and financial challenges that affect the well-being of both adults and children.³⁷

Katherine Gallagher Robbins is the Director of Family Policy for the Poverty to Prosperity Program at the Center for American Progress. Shawn Fremstad is a Senior Fellow at the Center.

Endnotes

- 1 See the Methodology section for additional information regarding these indicators. Marriage rates are also higher in states with conservative policies but not enough to explain the increased divorce rates. Compared with states with progressive stances on all four policies, the marriage rate in states with conservative policies is 19 percent higher, on average. Marriage rates are from authors' calculations using American Community Survey data. See American FactFinder, "B12501. Marriages in the Last Year by Sex by Marital Status for the Population 15 Years and Over: Universe: Population 15 years and over: 2014 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates," available at http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_14_1YR_B12501&prodType=table (last accessed October 2016).
- 2 Authors' calculations based on sources listed in Figure 1. States with progressive stances on all four policies were: California; Connecticut; the District of Columbia; Illinois; Massachusetts; New Jersey; New Mexico; New York; Oregon; Rhode Island; Vermont; and Washington. States with conservative stances on all four policies were: Alabama; Georgia; Idaho; Indiana; Kansas; Louisiana; Mississippi; Nebraska; North Carolina; Oklahoma; South Carolina; South Dakota; Tennessee; Texas; Utah; Virginia; and Wyoming.
- 3 Jeffrey Dew and Joseph Price, "Beyond Employment and Income: The Association Between Young Adults' Finances and Marital Timing," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 32 (3) (2011): 424–436; Jeffrey Dew, "The Association between Consumer Debt and the Likelihood of Divorce," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 32 (4) (2011): 554–565; Joe Valenti and Eliza Schultz, "How Predatory Debt Traps Threaten Vulnerable Families" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2016), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/report/2016/10/06/145629/how-predatory-debt-traps-threaten-vulnerable-families/>.
- 4 Paul R. Amato and others, *Alone Together: How Marriage in America Is Changing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 5 Harry Benson, "The Marriage Gap in Europe," *Family Studies*, August 11, 2016, available at http://family-studies.org/the-marriage-gap-in-europe/?utm_source=IFS+Main+List&utm_campaign=d18720bfed-IFS_Newsletter_8_18_16&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c06b05f1ff-d18720bfed-158008665.
- 6 Heather Sandstrom and Sandra Huerta, "The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development: A Research Synthesis" (Washington: Urban Institute, 2013), available at <http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/412899-The-Negative-Effects-of-Instability-on-Child-Development-A-Research-Synthesis.PDF>.
- 7 Shawn Fremstad and Melissa Boteach, "Valuing All Our Families" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/report/2015/01/12/104149/valuing-all-our-families/>.
- 8 David Cooper, "Raising the Minimum Wage to \$12 by 2020 Would Lift Wages for 35 Million American Workers" (Washington: Economic Policy Institute, 2015), available at <http://www.epi.org/publication/raising-the-minimum-wage-to-12-by-2020-would-lift-wages-for-35-million-american-workers/#epi-toc-18>.
- 9 Daniel Schneider and Adam Reich, "Marrying Ain't Hard When You Got A Union Card? Labor Union Membership and First Marriage," *Social Problems* 61 (4) (2014): 625–643, available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/sp.2014.12316?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.
- 10 Thomas A. Kochan, David Finegold, and Paul Osterman, "Who Can Fix the 'Middle-Skills' Gap?," *Harvard Business Review*, December 2012, available at <https://hbr.org/2012/12/who-can-fix-the-middle-skills-gap>.
- 11 Andrew J. Cherlin, David C. Ribar, and Suzumi Yasutake, "Nonmarital First Births, Marriage, and Income Inequality," *American Sociological Review* (2016), available at <http://asr.sagepub.com/content/early/2016/06/28/0003122416653112.abstract>.
- 12 Schneider and Reich, "Marrying Ain't Hard When You Got A Union Card?"
- 13 Ross Eisenbrey, "New Study Confirms that Right-to-Work Laws Are Associated with Significantly Lower Wages," *Working Economics Blog*, April 22, 2015, available at <http://www.epi.org/blog/new-study-confirms-that-right-to-work-laws-are-associated-with-significantly-lower-wages/>.
- 14 Elise Gould and Will Kimball, "Right-to-Work' States Still Have Lower Wages" (Washington: Economic Policy Institute, 2015), available at <http://www.epi.org/publication/right-to-work-states-have-lower-wages/>.
- 15 Elise Gould and Heidi Shierholz, "The Compensation Penalty of 'Right-to-Work' Laws" (Washington: Economic Policy Institute, 2011), available at <http://www.epi.org/files/page/-/old/briefingpapers/BriefingPaper299.pdf>.
- 16 The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, "Consequences of Uninsurance," available at <http://www.nationalacademies.org/hmd/Activities/Health-Services/InsuranceStatus.aspx> (last accessed October 2016); Committee on the Consequences of Uninsurance, Board of Health Care Services, and Institute of Medicine, *Health Insurance is a Family Matter* (Washington: National Academies Press, 2002), Chapter 5, available at <https://www.nap.edu/read/10503/chapter/7?term=stability#104>.
- 17 The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, "Key Facts about the Uninsured Population" (2016), available at <http://kff.org/uninsured/fact-sheet/key-facts-about-the-uninsured-population/>.
- 18 Rachel Garfield and Anthony Damico, "The Coverage Gap: Uninsured Poor Adults in States that Do Not Expand Medicaid – An Update" (Menlo Park, CA: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2016), available at <http://kff.org/health-reform/issue-brief/the-coverage-gap-uninsured-poor-adults-in-states-that-do-not-expand-medicaid-an-update/>.
- 19 National Women's Law Center, "Reproductive Health Is Part of the Economic Health of Women and Their Families" (2016), available at <https://nwlc.org/resources/reproductive-health-part-economic-health-women-and-their-families/>.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 For an insightful discussion of families by state, see Naomi Cahn and June Carbone, *Red Families v. Blue Families: Legal Polarization and the Creation of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 22 Authors' calculations using American Community Survey data. See American FactFinder, "S1501. Educational Attainment: 2014 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates," available at http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_14_1YR_S1501&prodType=table (last accessed October 2016). Six of the 10 states with the highest share of individuals with a bachelor's degree or more were also states that were progressive on all four items, while only one—Virginia—was conservative on these four policies. Among the 10 states with the lowest share of individuals with a bachelor's degree or more, six were states that were conservative on all four items.
- 23 Six of the 10 states with the highest state imprisonment rates were also states that were conservative on all four items. Among the 10 states with the lowest state imprisonment rates, five were states that were progressive on all four items, while one—Utah—was conservative on all four items. See The Sentencing Project, "State-by-State Data," available at <http://www.sentencingproject.org/the-facts/#rankings?dataset-option=SIR> (last accessed October 2016).

- 24 On the impact of education on family stability, see Stephanie Coontz, ed., "New Inequalities: How Education, Income, and Aging Affect Divorce and Family Stability" (Austin, TX: Council on Contemporary Families, 2014), available at https://contemporaryfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2014_S_N_1.pdf. On the impact of incarceration on family stability, see Jeremy Travis and others, *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences* (Washington: National Academies Press, 2014), Chapter 9, available at <https://www.nap.edu/read/18613/chapter/11#269>. On the impact on families of having a parent with a criminal record, see Rebecca Vallas and others, "Removing Barriers to Opportunity for Parents with Criminal Records and Their Children: A Two-Generation Approach" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/criminal-justice/report/2015/12/10/126902/removing-barriers-to-opportunity-for-parents-with-criminal-records-and-their-children/>.
- 25 For a broad agenda to support families, see Fremstad and Boteach, "Valuing All Our Families."
- 26 For example, New Mexico has relatively high rates of births among women ages 15 to 19 and children living with neither parent—it falls in the bottom quarter of states on each of these measures.
- 27 W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas Zill, "Red State Families: Better Than We Knew," *Family Studies*, June 11, 2015, available at <http://family-studies.org/red-state-families-better-than-we-knew/>.
- 28 Across all four indicators, Utah, Nebraska, and Idaho are among the half of states with the lowest rates of infant mortality, birth rates among women ages 15 to 19, and children living with neither parent. Utah and Idaho are among the 10 states with the highest divorce rates, while Nebraska falls in the middle.
- 29 Gould and Shierholz, "The Compensation Penalty of 'Right-to-Work' Laws."
- 30 Policy data refer to policies in effect January 1, 2014. The exception is for reproductive rights, which are based on data from Cynthia Hess and others, "The Status of Women in the States: 2015" (Washington: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2015), available at <http://statusofwomensdata.org/app/uploads/2015/02/Status-of-Women-in-the-States-2015-Full-National-Report.pdf>.
- 31 Divorce rates are from authors' calculations using American Community Survey data. See American FactFinder, "B12503. Divorces in the Last Year by Sex by Marital Status for the Population 15 Years and Over: Universe: Population 15 Years and Over: 2014 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates," available at http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_14_1YR_B12503&prodType=table (last accessed October 2016).
- 32 Kids Count Data Center, "Infant Mortality," available at <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/6051-infant-mortality#detailed/2/2-52/false/869,36,868,867,133/any/12718,12719> (last accessed October 2016). Data are for 2014.
- 33 Kids Count Data Center, "Total Teen Births," available at <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/6053-total-teen-births?loc=1&loct=2#detailed/2/2-52/false/869,36,868,867,133/any/12721,12722> (last accessed October 2016). Data are for 2014.
- 34 Kids Count Data Center, "Children Living with Neither Parent," available at <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/1111-children-living-with-neither-parent?loc=1&loct=2#detailed/2/2-52/false/869,36,868,867,133/any/439,440> (last accessed October 2016). Data are for 2014.
- 35 Stephanie Holt, Helen Buckley, and Sadhbh Whelan, "The Impact of Exposure to Domestic Violence on Children and Young People: A Review of the Literature," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 32 (8) (2008): 797–810, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/23219462_The_Impact_of_Exposure_to_Domestic_Violence_on_Children_and_Young_People_A_Review_of_the_Literature.
- 36 National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, "The Young Parents' Dignity Agenda" (2015), available at <http://www.latinainstitute.org/sites/default/files/YoungParents-DignityAgenda.pdf>.
- 37 Regarding birth rates for women ages 15 to 19, see Alison Stewart Ng and Kelleen Kaye, "Why It Matters: Teen Childbearing, Education, and Economic Wellbeing" (Washington: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2012), available at <http://thenationalcampaign.org/resource/why-it-matters-teen-childbearing-education-and-economic-wellbeing>; Kelleen Kaye, "Why It Matters: Teen Childbearing and Infant Health" (Washington: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2012), available at <http://thenationalcampaign.org/resource/why-it-matters>. Regarding divorce, see Paul R. Amato, "The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62 (4) (2000): 1269–1287, available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01269.x/full>.