

The Philadelphia Inquirer

STATE OF FAMILY RISES AS PUBLIC CONCERN

The Philadelphia Inquirer

By David Boldt

What is the most important issue facing the nation in the new millennium?

A new organization called the Alliance for Marriage released some numbers in Washington last week suggesting that it might be the declining strength of the American family.

About 60 percent of the respondents to the Wirthlin Worldwide poll said the American family was either "not very strong" or "weak and losing ground." They also rated strengthening families as much more important than increasing job opportunities or creating a cleaner environment.

Perhaps the subtext of the current political campaign could be: *It's the family, stupid.*

Alliance organizer Matt Daniels acknowledges that there are plenty of groups devoted to the declining state of matrimony in the United States. But few, he says, are succeeding in getting the issue into the general political discussion.

Getting it there is a goal Daniels shares with former congressional delegate Walter Fauntroy of the National Black Leadership Roundtable, the top name on the alliance's exhilaratingly multicultural board of advisers.

"It should be apparent now to all those who seek to be elected that people want substantive public policy to help strengthen families," Fauntroy said in an interview. (The alliance board also includes leaders of several black Christian denominations, a black Muslim, an Orthodox Jew, a Hispanic, and leaders of Korean and Chinese religious organizations.)

But how, exactly, does the issue get put on the national political agenda? Certainly there's plenty of lip service paid to "family values" - enough that an essayist in the New York Times wondered where "all this talk about parents leaves unmarried, childless voters" such as himself.

The growth of the unmarried, childless vote is, in fact, at the heart of the problem. The percentage of adult Americans who are married has dropped from about 70 percent in 1960 to 58 percent in 1998, and the percentage of households with children has declined from about half in 1960 to roughly one-third at present.

Another cultural indicator pointing away from increased concern with the state of the family was the recent Time magazine cover story saluting women who, like the lead characters in the cable TV show *Sex and the City*, were unmarried - and proud of it. The headline, "Flying Solo," seemed to suggest that getting along without a husband was an achievement comparable to aviator Amelia Earhart's flying across the continent on her own in another era.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the talk about "helping families," while abundant, seems to lack substance. Candidates are clearly sensitive to the possibility of offending single parents, or of seeming to be pushing their values on others.

But some elected officials are trying to take direct action to strengthen marriages.

In his 1999 state of the state address, Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating set a goal of reducing the divorce rate in his state, currently one of the highest in the nation, by 30 percent by 2010. Keating then appointed a professor known for his research on family issues to be the state's "marriage ambassador" and convened a meeting of the state's clergymen on Valentine's Day to urge more counseling for couples planning to get married. There's \$10 million in the current state budget to promote the program and do research.

The governors of Arkansas and Utah have announced similar efforts.

Reversing the decline of marriage in this country involves solving complex puzzles, and it requires an understanding of social currents that run deeper than public policy can normally reach. To begin with, how does the government change a dating culture that - as David Popenoe of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers has put it - seeks "sex without strings, relationships without rings"?

The decline of marriage has been pushed along by the two strongest social trends of the last half century: narcissistic individualism and rampant materialism.

And some wonder whether the marriage problem is a societywide crisis, or a crisis among low-income black Americans that is only a minor irritant to other Americans. The racial disparities in marital statistics are very large. African-Americans are less likely to marry and twice as likely to divorce if they do.

The oft-cited figures on out-of-wedlock births actually understate the problem in some black neighborhoods. There are, for instance, districts in Philadelphia in which 90 percent of black babies are born to mothers who are unmarried, suggesting that the institution of marriage has more or less died out in those communities.

But white families, too, are in a state - long since below the levels at which Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan declared the black family to be "in crisis" a generation ago. And the percentage of white single-parent families is steadily rising.

Moreover, it is now clear that being brought up in a single-parent family carries dangerous risks regardless of social class. Affluent white children in single-parent homes may not drop out of school at the rate that poor black children in similar circumstances do, but their academic achievement suffers just the same. Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur summed it up this way in their book *Growing Up With a Single Parent*: "The advantages of growing up with educated parents evaporate when those parents separate."

A growing body of evidence, meanwhile, suggests that married people are better off than single people. That evidence is summed up in a book to be released next month by University of Chicago researcher Linda Waite and journalist Maggie Gallagher, titled *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially*.

People who are married, it turns out, live longer than single people, and they not only have more sex but also find it more physically and emotionally satisfying, the authors say. By carefully taking into account people's health histories and other factors, Waite and Gallagher show that these benefits don't occur just because stronger, more attractive people get married (which is not necessarily the case anyway). Many of the advantages enjoyed by married people, they show, accrue from the condition of being married.

Perhaps the most perplexing finding is that while marriage is demonstrably a "wealth-building" institution, in which both partners end up substantially better off than those who never married or divorced, many young people look on marriage as a state they should enter only after achieving some degree of financial security. The idea of forming a mutually beneficial partnership appears not to enter their minds.

Gallagher and Waite end with the ultimate question raised by their thesis: "If marriage is so great, why is it in so much trouble?"

One of their several answers to this question is particularly intriguing. Why should it be that as divorce has become "an easier, more common, and more acceptable outlet for marital unhappiness, marriages have become unhappier?" Perhaps, they suggest, making it easier to get out of marriage drains it of its most valuable aspect: the contentment people derive from being in a committed relationship.

David Boldt