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Look Who's Redefining Marriage Now (Not Same-Sex Couples)

A funny thing happened while Michigan and other states were busy passing laws to make sure same-sex couples weren't allowed to "redefine the meaning of marriage":

Marriage got redefined anyway.

The culprits? Heterosexual women in their 20s, who increasingly choose to bear their first children before consecrating their first marriages, not after.

By 2011, according to U.S. Census estimates, 48% of U.S. mothers giving birth for the first time were unmarried.

Absent some sudden reversal of a trend that is already more than 20 years old, it will soon be more common for American women to bear their first children out of wedlock than with a married partner.

First comes love, then . . .

Opponents of gay marriage frequently cite the government's interest in promoting "responsible procreation" as the rationale for restricting marriage to partners of opposite sexes. But if smoothing the way for children was the point of allowing states to regulate marriage in the first place, legislators have been falling short of that objective for decades -- and same-sex couples have nothing to do with it.

The age at which heterosexual women typically marry and the age at which they typically bear their first children have been rising more or less in tandem for half a century.

But starting in 1991 -- five years before President Bill Clinton signed legislation barring federal recognition of same-sex marriages -- something significant happened: For the first time, the median age at which American women bore their first children dipped below the median age at which they first married.

By 2011, the median age at first marriage was 27 for women -- a year older than the median age at first birth.

"More and more, people see marriage as having very little to do with children," concludes Kay S. Hymowitz, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute and coauthor of "Not Yet: The Benefits and Costs of Delayed Marriage in America," which was published last year by the National Marriage

Project at the University of Virginia, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, and the RELATE Institute. "Family instability has become the arena in which most child-rearing occurs."

Better with two parents

You needn't be a home-schooling fundamentalist to recognize that this is, broadly speaking, bad news for children.

That's not to suggest that single mothers are bad parents; it's simply to recognize that women who bear children before marrying are less likely to earn a college degree, own their own homes, or pull down a middle-class salary than peers who marry before they carry.

Children born to unmarried parents are also three times as likely to see one of those parents leave the household before their fifth birthday as those born to married parents.

Indeed, if there is any point on which researchers across the political spectrum agree, it's that children who grow up in a household with two parents are likely to fare better -- emotionally, educationally and economically -- than their single-parent-household peers. (This seems to be the case, incidentally, whether the parents in question are two males, two females, or a mixed pair.)

It's probably a stretch to suggest a causal relationship between the campaign to ban same-sex marriage and the disruption of the love-marriage-baby carriage sequence that heterosexual couples observed until relatively recently. For one thing, the latter was well under way by the 1980s, long before the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act and constitutional bans like the one Michigan voters adopted in 2004.

But it's striking that heterosexual couples are increasingly disfavoring marriage before child-birth at precisely the same time that conservatives are working to delegitimize marriage between same-sex partners.

It's a fact, after all, that many gay people have borne or adopted children. Don't laws and constitutional amendments that prohibit same-sex couples from marrying or adopting each other's children reinforce the notion that marriage is an optional prerequisite to parenthood?

To put it another way: What if those who've worried that allowing same-sex couples to marry would erode the traditional purpose of marriage have it exactly backward?

What if excluding such couples has, as a practical matter, helped to normalize the practice of bearing children out of wedlock?

The new normal

But these are academic questions. The reality for policymakers in Lansing and Washington is that heterosexual adults already have decoupled the historically sequential acts of marrying and starting a family. In 2013, only women who've graduated from college are more likely to wed before bearing their first child.

We can congratulate unmarried parents or condemn them, but unless we are willing to condemn millions of their children to poverty and educational underachievement, we are going to have to accommodate them in our communities, schools and workplaces.

We will have to create institutions, employment practices and child-care options that permit single parents to finish their own educations while earning enough to feed and clothe their children. And we will either have to increase government or community support for single-parent families or bear increased costs for remedial education, rehabilitative health care and incarceration in the longer term.

None of that is inconsistent with long-term policies that encourage marriage and reward couples who make a legal commitment to each other before bearing or adopting children. As Hymowitz points out, government has a lousy record when it comes to compensating for the deficits associated with unstable families.

But incentivizing would-be parents to make a long-term commitment before starting a family is wildly inconsistent with laws that explicitly bar some of them from ever marrying. And if opponents of same-sex marriage ever believed that they were promoting "responsible procreation," they have no excuse for persisting in that delusion.