A new study by the Heritage Foundation reveals that U.S. children in married-parent families are more than 80 percent less likely to live in poverty than kids in single-parent homes. The Heritage study finds that nearly three out of four poor families in America are headed by a single parent — usually a mother — but when a child's father is married to his mother, and is a presence in the home, the poverty level tends to plummet.

“Policymakers on the state and national levels recognize that education reduces poverty,” said the study's author, Robert Rector, who serves as senior research fellow in domestic policy at Heritage. “But they're largely unaware that marriage is an equally strong anti-poverty weapon.”

The study notes that in Florida, as just one example, white families headed by single parents are five times more likely to live in poverty than those headed by married couples. And in Illinois, the poverty rate for a single mother with only a high school education stands at nearly 40 percent, compared with just eight percent for a similarly educated married couple.

Rector writes that “being married has the same effect in reducing poverty that adding five to six years to a parent's level of education has.”

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The study, entitled Marriage: America's Greatest Weapon Against Child Poverty, notes that in

2010 nearly 60 percent of all births in the U.S. were to single mothers. While many people may think that the majority of out-of-wedlock births happen to teenage mothers, the truth is that 75 percent of such births were to women between the ages of 19 and 29. “The decline in marriage and growth in out-of-wedlock births is not a teenage issue,” writes Rector in the report. “It is the result of a breakdown in relationships between young adult men and women.”

Last year state and federal government shelled out more than $450 billion in welfare for low-income families with children, three-quarters of that to single-parent families. “Most non-marital births are currently paid for by the taxpayers through the Medicaid system,” Rector writes, “and a wide variety of welfare assistance will continue to be given to the mother and child for nearly two decades after the child is born. On average, the means-tested welfare costs for single parents with children amount to around $30,000 per household per year.”

Rector observes that most unmarried parents look favorably on marriage and should be encouraged in that direction. Sadly, however, his recommendations for making that happen rely on government — the institution most responsible for cultivating the welfare state and single-parent families in the first place. Rector's solution would have government coming up with new policies that would somehow capitalize on these positive attitudes toward marriage, such as:

• Launching “marriage education” programs in high schools, especially among at-risk youth.

• Encouraging ad campaigns designed to promote marriage.

• Strengthening federal abstinence education programs that provide critical information on the value of marriage to adults, children, and society.

• Offering marriage education materials at federal Title X birth control clinics.

• Reducing the penalties against marriage in the welfare system.

Alan Scholl, executive director of the pro-family FreedomProject Education, the major project of the American Opinion Foundation, noted that while the Heritage study offers some valuable insights into the problems of marriage, single-parent families, and poverty, the solutions Rector suggests would exacerbate the problem not fix it, since they would not end the reliance on government.

“Government welfare is not the answer,” said Scholl, “it's at the root of the problem. Families of all types need to be weaned off of government subsidies. In the case of single-parent families struggling with poverty, the best solutions will be found in the private sector, particularly churches.”

He added that “churches provide both compassion that helps people in need, as well as the Christian teaching and mentoring to help families get on the right track. And those are elements that government was never meant to provide.”

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