



# Are Federally Supported Relationship Education Programs for Lower-Income Individuals and Couples Working?

A REVIEW OF EVALUATION RESEARCH

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# Executive Summary

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We are 15 years into a federal policy initiative to help disadvantaged individuals and couples form and sustain healthy relationships and stable marriages. Family instability contributes to a host of poorer outcomes for children (and adults), and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) budget picks up a sizable portion of the price tag to try to ameliorate associated problems. To address this problem, ACF has funded hundreds of community-based organizations to provide relationship education services to youth, young adults, cohabiting parents, and married couples to help them gain the knowledge and skills that strengthen romantic relationships. Collectively, these programs are known as the Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education (HMRE) initiative.

From the start, ACF launched a rigorous evaluation agenda. And over the past decade, more than 50 evaluation studies have examined these programs' effectiveness, including three ACF-funded, large-scale, multisite, random-assignment evaluations.

What have we learned? If you have been listening to policy pundits and scholarly observers, you would be convinced that this policy initiative was a resounding failure. Many pundits have panned the HMRE initiative, and most scholarly observers have been critical. Serious scientific organizations also have been pessimistic. For instance, a recent report from the prestigious National Academy of Sciences concluded that "an ambitious attempt [by the federal government] to develop programs that would improve couple relationship skills, promote marriage, and improve child well-being failed to achieve its goals."<sup>1</sup>

I disagree with the critics' conclusions, which, in my view, are based on an early and limited range of evaluation work. I have been closely observing this policy initiative from the beginning, nearly 20 years now. A careful examination of the ongoing, developing work on ACF's HMRE policy initiative

contradicts the death sentence many have prematurely pronounced. Instead, it reveals large, serious, and rigorous evaluation work that shows promising successes, disappointing failures, and nuanced findings. Certainly, in comparison to other social policy initiatives with greater public funding, much less early evaluation work, and even less evidence of success, ACF's HMRE policy initiative is promising and merits continued policy development and empirical research.

Overall, evaluation research has shown that low-income individuals and couples are interested in these programs. More than two million individuals have completed the programs. Despite startup challenges that affect every new federal social policy initiative, participants report enjoying the programs and say they help.

But is this positive reaction from participants confirmed by rigorous impact evaluation studies? So far, evidence is mixed on whether these programs enhance relationship stability. Some studies show they have a small effect on helping distressed, low-income married couples increase their commitment and remain married. There is no evidence yet that these programs increase the chances that unmarried couples will marry (but may help some stay together longer). Growing evidence shows that couples can learn to reduce destructive conflict and experience less physical and emotional abuse. In addition, growing evidence demonstrates that these programs can improve couples' positive communication skills, understanding, warmth, support, and co-parenting.

Some studies show positive benefits on individual mental health. Also encouraging is evidence from many studies that the most disadvantaged and distressed couples that come to these programs are the ones that benefit the most. Importantly, emerging evidence shows that children of parents who participate

in these programs exhibit fewer behavioral problems, likely a benefit of reduced parental stress.

Holes in the evaluation research remain, especially the longer-term effects of relationship literacy education programs for youth and young adults. And there is plenty of room for programs to increase the magnitude of their effects. Going forward, ACF needs to support innovative approaches and strategies to

increase the reach of relationship education services and improve their effectiveness. The initiative needs to move beyond a focus on program success to population impact. This may mean adopting a public health mindset as much as a helping professional or human service approach. Moving the needle on relationship quality and family stability will be the ultimate measure of success for ACF's HMRE policy initiative.

# Are Federally Supported Relationship Education Programs for Lower-Income Individuals and Couples Working?

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## A REVIEW OF EVALUATION RESEARCH

**Alan J. Hawkins**

In the early years of the George W. Bush administration, then-Assistant Secretary for Children and Families Wade F. Horn helped launch a controversial policy initiative to provide relationship education services to lower-income individuals and couples. The services were aimed at helping them form and sustain healthy relationships and stable marriages. A clinical child psychologist by training, Horn wanted federal policy to attend to the reality that far too many children were deprived of their birthright of a stable, two-parent family. Family instability contributes to a host of negative outcomes for children (and adults), and Horn's Administration for Children and Families (ACF) budget was picking up a sizable portion of the price tag to try to ameliorate the associated problems.<sup>2</sup>

As the newest element of a thick federal policy portfolio to help lower-income families, the federal Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) initiative, as it became labeled, funded hundreds of community organizations to provide classes and support services to help individuals and couples gain the knowledge and skills that can strengthen their relationships.<sup>3</sup> At first, the initiative's critics called it government "marriage promotion," a dog whistle that is still commonly used today. They argued that classes would encourage couples in unhealthy relationships to marry and subject women to greater risk of domestic violence. They also argued that the government

should not tell people what to do in their most personal and intimate decisions, stigmatizing one family form over others.

In the initiative's first few years, Horn was a roving public relations specialist, clarifying what the initiative was and was not. He explained that the initiative stressed healthy *relationships*, though he did not back down on asserting the optimal benefits of stable marriages for children and adults. (He joked that he was a one-man desensitization crew in the federal government, getting policymakers comfortable with using the "m-word.") These ACF-supported programs were required to show how they were dealing with the risk of domestic violence; many built formal partnerships with domestic violence experts in their communities. Horn stressed that participation was voluntary and that no one was forced to take classes.

Classes focused on a wide variety of ages and circumstances. They targeted more disadvantaged, at-risk populations, although they did not require a means test to participate. Some classes taught basic relationship literacy to single youth and young adults. Many programs focused on unmarried parents who wanted to strengthen their relationships for the sake of the children in their union. Most classes had messages about the value of commitment and marriage for children—thus the often-used pejorative label that the HMRE was government "marriage promotion."

But the programs have focused mostly on building healthy relationships, regardless of relationship status, and do not push unmarried couples to marry. (They even embraced the reality that classes would cause some couples in unhealthy relationships to break up sooner rather than later.)<sup>4</sup> Some classes targeted married couples, many of which were struggling. Some programs specialized in reaching remarried couples that are at higher risk for divorce.

During the initiative's early years, classes did not target same-sex couples, which was controversial. This softened during the Barack Obama administration, and some same-sex couples did participate in these programs. ACF funded a project that developed a framework for developing programs for same-sex couples.<sup>5</sup> The Obama administration also encouraged these funded relationship education services to partner with other social services that could be helpful, especially employment training.

Where are we after 15 years? Is this policy initiative working or at least showing promise? In this report, I briefly review criticism of the federal HMRE initiative and the early death vigils associated with that criticism. Then, in some depth, I review the impressive evaluation research on the effectiveness of these ACF-funded relationship education programs for lower-income individuals and couples. While I give special attention to three large-scale, rigorous experimental studies, I also review wider evaluation research that is often overlooked by those judging the policy initiative. Then, I conclude with some brief thoughts about promising paths going forward.

### Criticism of the Federal HMRE Initiative

If you have been paying attention to pundits and scholars, you would be convinced that the HMRE initiative has been a resounding failure. The verdict is in, said prominent University of California, Los Angeles, social psychology professor Benjamin Karney, a vocal critic of the initiative, quoted in a lengthy 2014 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article. Karney said, "I don't believe our field and our science is served well by

clinging to ideas that don't look promising. It makes us look like bad scientists."<sup>6</sup>

Karney's judgment seems to be a commonly held opinion. To quote just two, Richard Reeves wrote for the Brookings Institution: "Bush-inspired policies to promote marriages have had little success."<sup>7</sup> And Ann O'Leary of the Center for American Progress is quoted in the *Nation* saying that "rigorous evaluations of the funded programs have found them to [be] unsuccessful."<sup>8</sup>

These verdicts were rendered in 2014 when two early studies showed no or only small impacts. However, as I argued back then:

Now is not the time to toss in the towel. We are learning a lot more these days. In the next few years, a treasure-trove of evaluation findings will put us in a much better position to judge the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of educational programs to help disadvantaged individuals and couples strengthen their relationships and achieve their dreams of a stable, healthy family in which to raise their children.<sup>9</sup>

It is not just the policy pundits, though. Serious scientific institutions have weighed in on this new policy initiative and declared it a failed experiment. For instance, a recent report from the prestigious National Academy of Sciences, *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*, concluded that "an ambitious attempt [by the federal government] to develop programs that would improve couple relationship skills, promote marriage, and improve child well-being failed to achieve its goals."<sup>10</sup> Putting aside that the report does not accurately characterize the HMRE initiative's results so far (which I will get to soon), it is odd that such a prestigious body would affix the label "failure" to an innovative policy initiative barely a decade old that was taking on a complex and entrenched social problem.

In a social services research field dominated by evaluations showing little impacts, including revered programs such as Head Start that have had decades to develop, why would HMRE be singled out for early elimination?<sup>11</sup> If the same standard used to judge the success of the HMRE policy initiative were applied to

all social policy experiments designed to reduce poverty and increase child well-being, especially in the first decade of the policies' lives, few would avoid the quick label of failure.

The National Academy of Sciences report did not sufficiently investigate the HMRE policy initiative's impact. But what about dedicated scholars who have done a deeper dive into the initiative? You will not find many ivory-tower observers who believe this experimental policy initiative is working and deserves continued support.

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## You will not find many ivory-tower observers who believe this experimental policy initiative is working and deserves continued support.

For example, Jennifer Randles probably has done the most thorough analysis of early HMRE initiative critics, including inspecting the programs firsthand. While acknowledging the policymakers' good intentions to address a serious social problem (which most scholarly critics do not), she concludes, as do many other scholars, that policies supporting relationship education are the wrong approach to increasing family stability because relationships and marriages are merely a product of their social and economic circumstances. When those external circumstances provide a fertile environment, then relationships of all forms and structures flourish; when the circumstances create stress, relationships flounder. She asserts an economic threshold, below which romantic relationship aspirations are almost hopeless; learned

relationship skills are no match for the stresses of poverty that corrode relationships.<sup>12</sup>

Many pundits have panned the HMRE initiative, and most scholars have been critical, though for many, these have been hit-and-run critiques. I have been closely observing this policy initiative from the beginning, nearly 20 years. I think the ongoing evaluation research documents that these programs are helping some build healthier relationships and are even beginning to show that they can create more committed and stable relationships. And this is especially so for more distressed and disadvantaged individuals.

Importantly, these programs also are showing some indirect, positive impact on children's well-being. A thorough and fair examination of what we know about ACF's HMRE policy after 15 years paints a mixed but more hopeful portrait of the initiative. In this report, then, I briefly summarize that work and suggest important directions for the initiative going forward.

### What Have We Learned from HMRE Program Evaluations?

Early critics of the HMRE initiative doubted that such programs would be of much interest or at least relevant to the stressed lives of lower-income individuals and couples. A crucial element of policy success is simply reach. How many are participating? Although this information has not been easily accessible from ACF, a Freedom of Information Act request enabled me to inspect the grantee reports for the first eight years of the HMRE initiative to get specific numbers.

Overall, I calculated that HMRE grantees reached 1,497,603 participants with their programming over the first eight years of the initiative. (Note that participation means individuals completed the programs, which involved at least eight hours of direct contact time. More attended but did not finish the programs.) These programs reached a median of 4.6 participants per 1,000 population.<sup>13</sup> Although I do not have 2015–18 participation numbers, using the average number of participants per year through the first

eight years (187,200), I estimate that about 2.2 million people have participated fully in HMRE programs.

Funding for these HMRE programs averaged \$68,168,415 a year. The median funding per capita (not including 12 states without HMRE grant funding) was \$2.26. The median cost per program participant over all programs was \$384.61.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, there was tremendous variation across states. Washington, DC, and Oklahoma ranked first and second in program reach through the first eight years of the initiative, with about 60 participants per 1,000 average population, more than double the next state (New Mexico). However, Oklahoma's cost-per-participant ratio was the lowest among states with significant grant funding (\$141.55), while DC's ratio was substantially higher (\$314.91, ranked 12th). (The correlation between funding and participation across states was a modest  $r = 0.382$ .) California actually reached the most participants (nearly 235,000), but due to its large population, it only reached a modest 7.9 citizens per 1,000 population (ranked 15th).

During the first eight years of the initiative, 12 states did not have HMRE grantees.<sup>15</sup> In the top 10 states with total number of participants per 1,000 average population, there was a diverse mix of red, blue, and purple states. Similarly, the bottom 10 states for this category also showed a diverse mix of red, blue, and purple states.

Beyond sheer numbers, another important question is: Are HMRE programs reaching the intended target of more disadvantaged populations? Demographically, a little more than a third (36 percent) were white, 29 percent were African American, and 28 percent were Hispanic. More than half (56 percent) of participants had incomes below the federal poverty line, with another third (30 percent) near poor (below twice the poverty level). Roughly equal numbers of males (47 percent) and females (53 percent) participated. These programs were especially successful at reaching high school-age youth and young adults; 75 percent of HMRE program participants were in this age category.

Finally, many participants report fairly high levels of relationship distress. A summary of this research suggested that about half of participating couples

were distressed, and about 10 percent had experienced relationship violence in the past few years (though not necessarily with their current partner).<sup>16</sup>

Reaching substantial numbers of participants is important to program success. But then program administrators must show they can implement programs effectively. Along with large-scale, impact evaluation studies, there have been a handful of thorough implementation studies. Generally, these studies have found that lower-income individuals and couples are significantly interested in the programs; they also value the instruction they receive and believe it is helpful to them.<sup>17</sup>

There was a learning curve in how best to recruit and retain participants. Some early studies documented low participation rates, essentially meaning that participants received little to no dosage of the intended educational intervention. Later studies, however, indicate much higher retention and engagement rates. One study found that more than 80 percent of participants reported that the program improved their relationships (about half said by a great deal).<sup>18</sup>

In addition to these program-specific implementation studies, New York University Press and Columbia University Press have published a trilogy of in-depth ethnographic studies of HMRE programs. Each study documents that participants reported enjoying and getting value from the programs. Regardless, the authors of two of these studies ultimately concluded that the initiative is misguided.

Melanie Heath observed some early HMRE work in Oklahoma and was critical of the initiative.<sup>19</sup> She employed a sociological framework to distance herself from the perspective of program participants she interviewed who were positive about the program and how it helped them.

Jennifer Randles' study was much more thorough.<sup>20</sup> She documented that participants in the relationship education program she studied in-depth (Sacramento, California) overwhelmingly enjoyed and appreciated the program for the message of hope it delivered, despite their difficult circumstances. They valued the knowledge and skills that gave them agency or control to achieve their relationship aspirations, even knowing the obstacles they faced due to their poor

circumstances. Randles worries that such hope is false, insensitive, and potentially harmful because participants' efforts to strengthen their relationships will be overwhelmed by their stressful circumstances. But she acknowledges that most participants believed they benefited from the program.<sup>21</sup>

The third in-depth study, by Sarah Halpern-Meekin, employed a lens that sees both economic and social poverty (with the latter not just a derivative of the former) and finds more promise in these relationship education programs to address fundamental human needs.<sup>22</sup> Her observations and in-depth interviews with new-parent, unmarried couples going through the Family Expectations program in Oklahoma City revealed why disadvantaged couples eagerly sought these programs, valued the instruction they received, and thought programs helped strengthen their relationships. A stable, healthy romantic relationship is a crucial human need for these individuals—as much as food, housing, childcare, and a job—and couples valued the help they received to meet this human need. Accordingly, these in-depth studies using different theoretical perspectives to view couples' experiences in HMRE programs documented participants' positive reactions, even though they come out in different places on the merits of the policy initiative that supported them.

In summary, these HMRE programs delivered through community-based organizations are reaching nontrivial numbers of distressed, diverse, lower-income individuals and couples at a moderate per capita and per participant cost. The participants report valuing what they learn and say it helps. Admittedly, however, the programs are reaching only a fraction of the potential targeted population. And effective implementation still does not guarantee that rigorous evaluation studies will find positive program impacts.

### **Large-Scale, Rigorous Federal Evaluation Studies**

Implementation studies suggest that programs are functioning in ways that could produce positive outcomes for participants. But what do the rigorous

outcome studies actually say? Hundreds of relationship education evaluation studies have been conducted over the past four decades. A handful of meta-analytic studies have reported moderate, positive effects.<sup>23</sup> Most of these studies involved samples of well-educated, white couples.

Over the past decade or so, however, evaluation work in this area has been dominated by studies with samples of diverse, lower-income individuals and couples. And most of these studies evaluated programs supported by the HMRE policy initiative. A 2015 meta-analysis of early work in this area found that these programs overall have produced small but statistically significant effects on relationship outcomes, with somewhat stronger effects for programs targeting married couples.<sup>24</sup>

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## **It is unusual to begin extensive and rigorous evaluation studies of a new social policy's effectiveness from its inception.**

This body of work is headlined by a handful of federally funded, large-scale, multisite randomized controlled trials (RCTs). Because these rigorous studies have garnered the lion's share of attention and publicity, I give them special attention here.

It is unusual to begin extensive and rigorous evaluation studies of a new social policy's effectiveness from its inception. A learning curve is associated with effective policy work; programs learn and make improvements over time to be more effective. As a comparison, ACF's parallel Responsible Fatherhood initiative was not evaluated until more than a decade had passed.<sup>25</sup> A large-scale, RCT evaluation of the popular Head Start program came decades after its inception.<sup>26</sup>

But with the HMRE policy initiative, Wade Horn decided to do extensive and rigorous evaluation from the beginning. When I interviewed him about this in 2012, he explained his rationale. He knew that the policy initiative would be controversial, and he wanted policy wonks and scholars to take it seriously. He felt that the question of whether the federal government had a direct role to play in promoting family stability for the benefit of children was a serious policy issue.

One of the best ways to get people to take the initiative seriously was to conduct rigorous (and expensive) evaluation research. He was aware that this was a high-stakes strategy because rigorous policy evaluation research often shows minimal impacts early on. But he judged the risk to be necessary. And his decision was consistent with a growing push in federal circles to demand evidence-based policy.<sup>27</sup>

#### **Building Strong Families Evaluation Study.**

The Building Strong Families (BSF) study was ACF's first large-scale, rigorous evaluation study to be launched and completed. It evaluated the effects of 30–40 hours of relationship education and support services for about 5,100 lower-income, unmarried couples that had a child together in eight sites across the United States using diverse curricula.<sup>28</sup> This strategy to help unmarried couples strengthen their relationships was based on important research showing that most unmarried parents are together at their child's birth and have aspirations for marriage but struggle to stay together for more than a few years.<sup>29</sup>

Three years after volunteers enrolled in the BSF program, researchers found few positive outcomes of the interventions on couple relationships and stability or the co-parenting relationship and even a small negative effect on fathers' involvement. There was no effect on children's economic well-being, but there was a small, statistically significant positive effect on children's social-emotional well-being. (Fewer reported behavior problems.) These effects were observed in the four program sites that also provided parenting education in home visits to the couples and not in the other four sites, suggesting that the parenting education component was responsible for the effects, not the relationship education.

A reanalysis of the short-term (15 months) effects of BSF program participation found a range of small but statistically significant positive effects for the most disadvantaged couples in the study.<sup>30</sup> The study, however, did not look at longer-term (36 months) outcomes.

Participant engagement in the BSF programs, however, was low; only 60 percent of couples attended even one educational session, and only 10 percent received a strong dosage of the curriculum.<sup>31</sup> The site with the highest level of participant engagement (Oklahoma City) did show an important positive effect on couple relationship stability; treatment-group couples were 20 percent more likely at the 36-month follow-up to have been together continuously for three years (though not more likely to be married) compared to control-group couples.

Overall, the findings of this first large-scale, rigorous evaluation study were disappointing. But it has been hard to interpret what the (mostly) “no-effect” results meant because the most salient finding was that most program sites struggled to retain participants to give them a strong dosage of the intervention. Despite this ambiguity, the published results fueled criticism questioning the wisdom of this policy strategy for helping lower-income families. Subsequent findings from later evaluation studies, however, would chip away at the early criticism of ACF's HMRE initiative.

#### **Supporting Healthy Marriage Evaluation Study.**

Research shows that low-income married couples face longer odds for stable marriages, especially if they have had nonmarital births, and they face even greater rates of poverty if they divorce.<sup>32</sup> As such, ACF funded a second large-scale evaluation study focused on strengthening married couples' relationships. This study involved about 6,300 racially and ethnically diverse couples with at least one child in eight large cities across the United States, collectively referred to as the Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) evaluation.<sup>33</sup>

About half the couples reported that their marriage had been in trouble over the past year. Treatment-group couples received 24–30 hours of various relationship education curricula and support services.

Program engagement was much higher for SHM than for BSF; 90 percent of couples attended at least one program session, and about 75 percent got a strong dosage of educational intervention. At 30 months post-enrollment (about 20 months after the program's end), evaluators found no difference in the proportion of couples still together.

However, evaluators did find that treatment-group couples were 12 percent less likely than control-group couples to say their marriage was in trouble (42 versus 47 percent). Moreover, there was a general pattern of small but statistically significant positive effects on couples' marital relationship (e.g., happiness, warmth, support, communication, and fidelity).<sup>34</sup> Also, there was less psychological abuse among treatment-group couples (but no difference in low rates of physical assault). Mothers in the treatment group reported slightly less psychological distress (e.g., depression and anxiety). Fathers in the treatment group reported slightly higher rates of cooperative co-parenting (but mothers did not).

Although no differences in parenting behavior were observed, children of the parents in the treatment group were slightly higher on scores of self-regulation and lower on parents' reports of behavior problems. With most of these findings, the researchers found that effects were stronger for couples that entered the study with higher levels of marital distress.

In a sub-analysis of SHM data using only the three sites that employed the PREP-based Within Our Reach program ( $n = 3,609$ ), treatment-group couples had better outcomes on most measures at the 30-month follow-up assessment, including higher relationship happiness, higher scores on relationship stability, more warmth and support, more positive communication, less negative behavior and emotion, less psychological abuse, less physical assault (for men), lower psychological distress (for women), and less infidelity. The magnitude of these effects was still small but a little stronger than for the other SHM sites.<sup>35</sup>

The pattern of findings in SHM were a little more encouraging. Although differences between treatment and control groups were small, they were statistically significant and similar to the magnitude of effects found in many other social policy initiatives.<sup>36</sup>

The more positive effects could be partly attributed to the greater success in keeping couples engaged in the intervention program. Also, compared to unmarried couples in the BSF study, these couples were more committed; that is, they were married and had been together longer. These couples also may have been more motivated to work on their relationship, as about half reported their marriage was distressed when they enrolled in the program.

**Parents and Children Together Evaluation Study.** For BSF and SHM, researchers evaluated programs that, for the most part, were just learning to provide relationship education services to couples. A third evaluation effort, Parents and Children Together (PACT), started several years later and worked with community agencies at two sites that had gained considerable experience in offering these services.

The PACT evaluation study enrolled about 1,600 couples. The programs included married (60 percent) and unmarried couples. More than 75 percent were Latino, with 10 percent African American. Again, program engagement was good; nearly all couples attended at least one session, and the average intervention dosage was 15 hours.

About one year after the educational program, treatment-group couples reported greater relationship commitment compared to control-group couples.<sup>37</sup> This was driven mostly by improvements in commitment among those who were not married when they began the program. Also, treatment-group couples reported slightly more relationship warmth, support, affection, and friendship. These differences were driven primarily by couples that were married at the beginning of the program.

In addition, treatment-group couples reported slightly less (but statistically significantly) destructive conflict behavior. Again, this difference was driven primarily by couples that were married at the beginning of the program. Perhaps related to less destructive conflict behavior, treatment-group women reported significantly less physical assault (e.g., punching, choking, and kicking) from their partner (5 versus 8 percent).

Importantly, the largest treatment effect in the study was that more treatment-group couples were married one year after the program (63 versus 59 percent). This difference, however, was driven by married couples staying married, rather than unmarried couples getting married. Treatment-group women reported somewhat lower levels of depressive symptoms. (The difference was not significant for men.) Finally, treatment-group couples reported somewhat higher levels of effective co-parenting behavior one year after the program. The researchers found modest evidence that programs were a little more effective for married versus unmarried couples.

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## The effects on unmarried couples' commitment and married couples' relationship stability were the largest effects seen in the three large evaluation studies reviewed so far and two of the most promising findings.

The pattern of positive effects for PACT provided more optimism that ACF policy to promote relationship education for disadvantaged couples could help improve couple relationships and increase family stability. The differences between treatment- and control-group couples were still small, but on average, they were a little larger than in the SHM study.<sup>38</sup> The effects on unmarried couples' commitment and married couples' relationship stability were the

largest effects seen in the three large evaluation studies reviewed so far and two of the most promising findings. Note, however, that couples in this study were not followed as long as in the other two studies, and effects could diminish over time.

**Community-Wide Healthy Marriage Initiative Evaluation Study.** A fourth study took a different tack. It tried to evaluate the impact of a community-wide healthy marriage initiative (CHMI) rather than a particular program. A CHMI attempts to inundate a geographic area with various healthy relationship education programming and messaging to reach a critical mass so that program participants and nonparticipants benefit.

A 2004 study tried to evaluate the impact of CHMI efforts on county divorce rates, finding that divorce rates in counties with CHMIs decreased at a greater rate than in comparison counties, a difference of about 2 percent.<sup>39</sup> Most CHMIs had a strong faith-based element to them and were not funded by ACF. However, using a somewhat different methodology, ACF funded a quasi-experimental study of three fledgling CHMIs (in Dallas, Texas; St. Louis, Missouri; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin), matching them to three comparison communities (Fort Worth, Texas; Kansas City, Missouri; and Cleveland, Ohio). The researchers surveyed residents in these communities in 2007, before CHMI efforts began, and again in 2009, after two years of efforts in target communities to develop relationship education services with various organizational partners and media campaigns focused on building healthy marriages and relationships.

Unfortunately, this complex study encountered a number of significant challenges common to community-level, quasi-experimental evaluation studies. As a result, these programs and messages did not penetrate the target communities sufficiently. Survey respondents in target communities were no more likely than those in their comparison communities to have participated in a relationship-strengthening program or even to be exposed to media campaign messages.

Not surprisingly, then, there were no differences between the CHMI and comparison communities on

a range of attitudinal and relationship behavior measures. But because of methodological issues with this study, the researchers acknowledge that a straightforward interpretation of the findings is impossible. Perhaps this explains why limited attention has been given to this study.

The CHMI evaluation study has not doused interest in community-wide approaches to providing relationship education services. A number of communities have been quite successful in providing extensive relationship education programming to their residents. First Things First in Chattanooga, Tennessee, is an excellent example.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, there have been few rigorous evaluation studies of these efforts—although, one intriguing, quasi-experimental study of a faith-based CHMI effort in Jacksonville, Florida, seems to have shown a significant decrease in the county divorce rate.<sup>41</sup>

**Other Recent Evaluation Studies.** Since 2015, ACF has funded more HMRE grantees to evaluate ongoing, innovative programs. Some of these studies are already providing interim results. I illustrate this work with one study.

Brian Doss at the University of Miami is leading a team of researchers evaluating the Our Relationship program. This is the only currently funded ACF program that is delivered online. Results so far have been encouraging. Over 150 heterosexual couples from around the United States that reported some relationship distress have participated in the study to date. An additional 149 couples were randomized to a waitlist control group (and offered services later).

Of the couples, 81 percent were married, together for an average of almost 10 years. The couples completed about seven hours of online instruction. The online activities were supplemented by four, 15-minute support calls from trained coaches. When assessed three months after the program, Our Relationship participants fared significantly better than the control-group couples.<sup>42</sup>

A second study looked at whether Our Relationship participants maintained their early gains one year

after the program.<sup>43</sup> The positive effects of the online program seen at the three-month follow-up were maintained 12 months after participants completed the program. These benefits included increased relationship satisfaction, relationship confidence, perceived physical health, and quality of life. The study also found decreased levels of depression and anxiety at the 12-month assessment.

The study found no evidence that disadvantaged or underserved groups (i.e., racial and ethnic minorities, lower-income couples, or rural couples) experienced smaller effects. In fact, Hispanic couples reported continued improvement in relationship confidence and further decreases in negative relationship quality at the 12-month assessment.

The effect sizes in these studies were substantially higher than those in most other random-assignment studies. The researchers took some educated guesses as to why Our Relationship has been working well. To begin with, it reaches distressed couples earlier. Couples seeking relationship help online may do so in a moment of need rather than wait until the end of a prolonged period of distress. The earlier couples seek help, the more effective the help is likely to be.

Also, change may be more sustainable because the program occurs in the couple's home rather than in an unfamiliar (and less comfortable) environment. This also allows for more flexibility. By completing the program at a time and location controlled by the couple, it is easier to accommodate work, childcare, and other demands. As a result, their engagement in the program may be higher and logistical headaches lower. Finally, Our Relationship has a strong focus on developing more accepting thoughts about relationship problems (rather than learning communication skills to resolve problems).

ACF is supporting five additional rigorous, random-assignment evaluation studies, organized under the label of "Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services."<sup>44</sup> These studies will be completed in 2020 and represent ACF's ongoing commitment to rigorous evaluation of HMRE-supported programs.

## Other HMRE Evaluation Studies

In addition to these rigorous evaluation studies funded by ACF, some former HMRE grant holders have been applied researchers who conducted their own evaluation studies. Because they have not received funding to do evaluation work, however, most studies do not involve randomized assignment to treatment and control groups. Accordingly, these studies cannot make strong claims about program effectiveness. Instead, this work has provided many valuable process studies, exploring for whom relationship education works best and what program factors strengthen effects, important areas for research in the field.<sup>45</sup>

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## More-distressed couples saw larger effects and greater changes after participating in relationship education compared to less-distressed couples.

**Who Benefits Most?** Many evaluation studies of relationship education programs—most of which were studying HMRE-supported programs—explored the important question of who benefits most from these interventions. Some scholars argued that programs offered to lower-income couples would not be effective because they would not be sensitive to their unique stresses and challenges.<sup>46</sup> However, the most consistent finding in this work is that more-distressed couples saw larger effects and greater changes after participating in relationship education compared to less-distressed couples.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, many studies found that more-disadvantaged couples showed greater increases in relationship quality, communication, and

relationship satisfaction after participating in these programs than those with less risk.

A handful of studies compared effects among racial and ethnic minority groups. Participants who belonged to racial or ethnic minority groups benefited more from relationship education than nonminority participants. Several studies pointed to Hispanic participants as benefiting most.

The moderation findings for gender were inconsistent, with some studies finding no gender differences, some studies finding greater impacts for men, other studies finding greater impacts for women, and still others showing greater benefits for one gender depending on the particular outcome studied. While many studies indeed found gender differences, there was not a distinguishable and reliable pattern.

**Do Children Benefit?** One of the most important justifications for the HMRE policy initiative is that improved couple relationships will benefit disadvantaged children. Strong research documents how the quality of parental relationships affects parenting and children's well-being.<sup>48</sup> About a dozen relationship education evaluation studies have explicitly tested whether these programs have improved children's well-being.

Some were already mentioned here. The three large-scale RCT studies funded by ACF (BSF, SHM, and PACT) each looked for outcomes on parenting and children's well-being. BSF found small reductions in children's behavioral problems (most likely due to parenting education in some sites). SHM found small reductions in children's behavioral problems and increases in cooperative co-parenting. PACT also found increases in cooperative co-parenting.

Other studies conducted by Carolyn and Phil Cowan (not funded by ACF) provided consistent evidence of positive effects of couple relationship education on father engagement, parental stress, positive parenting strategies, and children's behavioral problems.<sup>49</sup> One study explicitly tested the pathways of effects, showing how improvements in the parental relationship were associated with later reductions in harsh parenting, which was associated with fewer behavioral problems for children and reductions in

depressive behavior.<sup>50</sup> Overall, these studies have shown how couple relationship education has potential for improving children's well-being.

**What Program Factors Strengthen Effects?** In addition, a growing number of studies have explored what program factors strengthen relationship education's effects, again, usually in pre-post studies with only a treatment group. This work is harder to summarize, usually with just one or two studies examining a specific mechanism (e.g., program hours or format, curriculum fidelity, participant-facilitator alliance, etc.). I have briefly summarized this work elsewhere.<sup>51</sup>

### Evaluation Work Not Funded by ACF

Thus far, I have focused almost exclusively on evaluation studies of relationship education programs funded by ACF. But a few other national and state offices have funded rigorous evaluation studies.

For instance, the US military is a major provider of relationship education services to military personnel and their partners. They funded a rigorous random-assignment study of the effectiveness of the Strong Bonds program (PREP for military families) with 662 married couples. Researchers found a significant effect at the two-year follow-up on divorce rates; treatment-group couples divorced at a lower rate (8 percent) than control-group couples (15 percent), despite few differences between groups in measures of relationship quality.

In addition, in seven clinical trials (including three random-assignment studies) in three countries funded by different government entities, researchers studied the effectiveness of programs that included couple relationship curriculum with co-parenting and fathering education to help families transition to parenthood. This work found that the program stabilizes couple relationships (versus declining satisfaction in control-group couples), increases father involvement, and decreases parenting stress.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, a number of studies have tested the effectiveness of brief (two-session) relationship

check-up interventions. A meta-analytic review of 12 random-assignment studies found overall moderate positive effects on relationship quality.<sup>53</sup>

### Policy-Level Analysis Studies

The studies reviewed so far analyzed the effects of relationship education programs on participants. However, a few studies have attempted to estimate the impact of marriage- and relationship-strengthening policies in a different way. They have tried to calculate the impact on family demographic outcomes (e.g., marriage rates, divorce rates, family structure, and child poverty) by looking at variation in pro-marriage legislation or the amount of HMRE-supported programming in each state year by year.<sup>54</sup>

The most relevant study for our purposes was an examination of federal and (limited) state government policies to support relationship education efforts between 2000 and 2010 (for which I was the lead author).<sup>55</sup> Very few government-supported efforts occurred before 2005. But funding of these programs between 2005 and 2010 was associated with small changes in the percentage of married adults in the population and children living with two parents, and it was negatively associated with non-marital births and child poverty. These results were diminished, however, when an influential outlier—Washington, DC—was removed from analyses. And the study only had information on variation in funding; it did not have information on actual numbers of program participants to estimate effects on demographic outcomes. The study has been criticized by other scholars.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, a recent study of nine state policies (not federal ACF policies) to promote premarital education for engaged couples (by reducing marriage license fees) found no strong evidence that they affected divorce rates.<sup>57</sup> But the study also documented that policies were poorly implemented in nearly all nine states. (One statistical model found a small positive effect on divorce rates in states with better implementation.)<sup>58</sup>

## What Can We Conclude?

What can we conclude from this review of evaluation studies? First, the most straightforward takeaway is simply the impressive volume of serious evaluation work. I have identified 55 studies over the past decade that have evaluated relationship education programs supported by ACF's initiative.<sup>59</sup> This body includes a substantial number of gold-standard, random-assignment studies. The quantity and quality of this work—right from the beginning—is impressive for a new policy initiative and demonstrates how seriously federal policymakers and applied scholars have taken this initiative. ACF's policy initiative cannot be criticized for dodging the harsh spotlight of empirical investigation.

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## It is bad science to assert a definitive conclusion looking only at early studies and a limited spectrum of relevant work.

But is it working? Many policy pundits and scholars have declared that the initiative failed to achieve its goals. Karney, whose criticism I presented in the introduction, argued that “clinging to ideas that don't look promising . . . makes us look like bad scientists.”<sup>60</sup> He and others, however, viewed research through too early and narrow a lens. If we had pulled the plug five years ago, we would have forfeited the chance to learn from a broader and deeper research base that we have acquired now. It is bad science to assert a definitive conclusion looking only at early

studies and a limited spectrum of relevant work, especially in social policy research.

A careful examination of the ongoing, developing, and full work on ACF's HMRE policy initiative contradicts the death sentence that many prematurely pronounced. Instead, it reveals large and serious rigorous evaluation work that shows promising successes, disappointing failures, and nuanced findings. Certainly, compared to other social policy initiatives with greater public funding and much less early evaluation, ACF's HMRE policy initiative meets the standard of showing potential and promise and calls for continued policy development and empirical research.

Overall, evaluation research has shown that low-income individuals and couples are interested in these programs, enjoy them, and say they help. The evidence is mixed on whether they enhance relationship stability. Some studies show that these programs can have a small effect on helping distressed, low-income married couples remain married. There is no evidence yet that these programs increase the chances that unmarried couples will marry (but they may help some stay together longer). Early concerns from critics argued that these programs would push couples in unhealthy relationships to marry, but researchers have not uncovered such an effect; there is some evidence that the programs are causing earlier breakups of unhealthy relationships.

Growing evidence shows that couples can learn to reduce destructive conflict and experience less physical and emotional abuse. In addition, growing evidence demonstrates that these programs can improve couples' positive communication skills, understanding, warmth, support, and co-parenting. And a number of studies are showing positive benefits on individual mental health. Also encouraging is the evidence from many studies that the most disadvantaged and distressed couples are the ones that benefit the most. Importantly, emerging evidence attests that the children of parents who participate in these programs are benefiting—although more research is still needed.

## Where Do We Go from Here?

Despite impressive research to date, there are still significant holes. First, we do not have enough evaluation research yet on whether relationship education efforts for youth and young adults can have long-term effects that help them form and maintain healthy romantic relationships. Youth and young adults, not couples, are the majority of participants in these HMRE programs. And it appears that most couples that come to these programs are already experiencing serious relationship problems. Prevention efforts should yield greater cost-benefit savings. We need to invest more evaluation research in the long-term impact of relationship literacy programs for youth and young adults.

Moreover, the positive effects of relationship education programs tend to be small. How can we improve effectiveness? While a number of applied researchers are examining elements that strengthen program effects, more work is needed in this area.

Likely, improving effectiveness will require us to explore creative, outside-the-box approaches to helping people form and sustain healthy relationships. Uniformity in these programs may inhibit our ability to learn more effective approaches. One innovative strategy to explore is following up more intensive “loading-dose” programs with booster micro-interventions. This approach sees the work of strengthening relationships more realistically by helping with a chronic challenge rather than intervening one time to permanently fix an acute problem.<sup>61</sup>

And even if we can make these interventions more potent, how can we increase their reach? Although ACF-supported relationship education efforts have reached more than two million participants so far, that is just a sliver of the population that could potentially benefit from services. We need to explore innovative approaches that reach more with less and evaluate their effectiveness.

For instance, more research on programs delivered digitally is needed, given the potential they hold for reaching more distressed individuals and couples at more efficient costs. We need to show the capacity to scale interventions to make a real dent in the

social problems they aim to address; that is, we need to move beyond a focus on program success to population impact.<sup>62</sup> This may mean adopting more of a public health strategy in addition to a helping professional or human service approach. Moving the needle on relationship quality and family stability will be the ultimate measure of success for ACF’s HMRE policy initiative.

Finally, state policymakers should invest more in supporting relationship education efforts in their states. ACF has carried this new social policy initiative almost alone. A handful of states started initiatives, but few survived for more than a couple of years.<sup>63</sup>

Utah has provided policy support for relationship education for 20 years. Early on, Utah policymakers set aside 1 percent of federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funds to support relationship education efforts to improve family stability for lower-income children. But when TANF funds became scarcer, it was hard to sustain this level of support. To supplement limited TANF funds, the state recently passed legislation that will allocate \$20 of each marriage license fee from couples that do not participate in premarital education to support relationship education.<sup>64</sup>

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## We need to move beyond a focus on program success to population impact.

ACF could consider innovative ways to incentivize states to share the burden of supporting relationship education, similar to the way the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration provides block-grant support to behavioral health services in every state (that meets statutory and regulatory requirements) to support prevention efforts.<sup>65</sup>

Regardless of what policy tweaks ACF may make, this review of research makes a solid case that further policy experimentation is merited. The investment

over the past 15 years in serious evaluation of the HMRE initiative supports continuing efforts to determine if government can have a positive, direct role in decreasing family instability.

### **About the Author**

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# Notes

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