

A Report from Family Scholars

Why Marriage Matters

Twenty-One Conclusions from the Social Sciences



**Center of the American Experiment
Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education
Institute for American Values**

THIS STATEMENT comes from a team of family scholars chaired by Norval Glenn of the University of Texas, Steven Nock of the University of Virginia, and Linda Waite of the University of Chicago. The project is sponsored by Center of the American Experiment; the Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education; and the Institute for American Values. The sponsors are grateful to Maggie Gallagher for her research and editorial assistance, to Arthur E. Rasmussen for helping to initiate the project, and to their respective financial contributors for their generous support.

On the cover: Woman Writing List That Binds Two Hearts, by Bonnie Timmons. © Bonnie Timmons/Getty Images/The Image Bank.

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Institute for American Values

1841 Broadway, Suite 211

New York, NY 10023

Tel: (212) 246-3942

Fax: (212) 541-6665

Website: www.americanvalues.org

Email: info@americanvalues.org

About the Authors

William J. Doherty is a professor of family social science and the director of the marriage and family therapy program at the University of Minnesota.

William A. Galston is a professor at the School of Public Affairs at the University of Maryland, and the director of the university's Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy.

Norval D. Glenn is a professor of sociology and American studies at the University of Texas in Austin.

John Gottman is a professor of psychology at the University of Washington and the co-founder of the Gottman Institute.

Barbara Markey is the associate director of the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University, and the director of the Catholic Archdiocese of Omaha's Family Life Office.

Howard J. Markman is a professor of psychology at the University of Denver and the co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver.

Steven Nock is a professor of sociology at the University of Virginia.

David Popenoe is a professor of sociology and the co-director of The National Marriage Project at Rutgers University.

Gloria G. Rodriguez is the founder and president of AVANCE, Inc., in San Antonio, Texas.

Isabel V. Sawhill is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., and the president of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

Scott M. Stanley is the co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver.

Linda J. Waite is a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago.

Judith Wallerstein is a child psychoanalyst and a marriage and divorce researcher in Belvedere, California.

Why Marriage Matters

Twenty-One Conclusions from the Social Sciences

Introduction

WHAT DO we know about the importance of marriage for children, for adults and for society? There has been a sharp increase over the last two generations in the proportion of American children who do not live with their own two married parents, spurred first largely by increases in divorce, and more recently by large jumps in unmarried or cohabiting childbearing. A vigorous public debate sparked by these changes in family structure has generated a growing body of social science literature on the consequences of family fragmentation.

This report is an attempt to summarize this large body of scientific research into a succinct form useful to Americans on all sides of ongoing family debates — to report what we know about the importance of marriage in our family and social system.

Marriage in America has changed a great deal over the past two generations, including increased incidence and social acceptance of divorce, cohabitation, premarital sex, and unwed childbearing. Other important changes include dramatic increases in the proportion of working wives, reduced tolerance for domestic violence, and a change in gender roles. Over the past 40 years, both men and women have become increasingly likely to support greater participation by men in the household and women in the labor force, and less sharp differentiation between women's and men's roles. Yet when it comes to the benefits of marriage, research shows more impressive evidence of continuity than change or decline.

Social science is better equipped to document whether certain social facts *are* true than to say *why* they are true. We can assert more definitively that marriage is associated with powerful social goods than that marriage is the sole or main cause of these goods.

Good research seeks to tease out what scholars call “selection effects,” or the pre-existing differences between individuals who decide to divorce, marry, or become unwed parents. Does divorce cause poverty, for example, or is it simply that poor people are more likely to divorce? Good social science attempts to distinguish between causal relationships and mere correlations in a variety of ways. The studies cited here are for the most part based on large, nationally representative samples that control for race, family background, and other confounding factors. In many, but not all cases, social scientists have been able to use longitudinal data to track individuals as they marry, divorce or stay single, increasing our confidence that marriage itself matters. Where the evidence is, in our view, overwhelming that marriage *causes* increases in well-being, we say so. Where marriage probably does so but the causal pathways are not as well understood, we are more cautious.

We recognize that, absent random assignment to marriage, divorce or single parenting, social scientists must always acknowledge the possibility that other factors are influencing outcomes. (For example, relatively few family-structure studies attempt to assess the role of genetics.) Reasonable scholars may and do disagree on the existence and extent of such selection effects and the extent to which marriage is causally related to the better social outcomes reported here.

And of course individual circumstances vary.¹ While divorce is associated with serious increased psychological risks for children, for example, the majority of children of divorce are not mentally ill.² While marriage is a social good, not all marriages are equal. Research does not generally support the idea that remarriage is better for children than living with a single mother.³ Marriages that are unhappy do not have the same benefits as the average marriage.⁴ Divorce or separation provides an important escape hatch for children and adults in violent or high-conflict marriages. Families, communities, and policy makers interested in distributing the benefits of marriage more equally must do more than merely discourage legal divorce.

Social science is typically better equipped to answer general questions (Are high rates of divorce and unwed childbearing likely to reduce overall child well-being?) than to answer questions facing individual parents

(Will my particular children in my particular circumstances be harmed or helped by divorce?).

But we believe good social science, despite its inherent limitations, is a better guide to social policy than uninformed opinion or prejudice. The public and policy makers deserve to hear what research suggests about the consequences of marriage and its absence for children and adults. This report represents our best judgment of what the current social science evidence reveals about the importance of marriage in our social system.

Here is our fundamental conclusion: *Marriage is an important social good, associated with an impressively broad array of positive outcomes for children and adults alike.*

Family structure and processes are of course only one factor contributing to child and social well-being. Our discussion here is not meant to minimize the importance of other social and economic factors, such as poverty, child support, unemployment, neighborhood safety, or the quality of education for both parents and children.

But whether American society succeeds or fails in building a healthy marriage culture is clearly a matter of legitimate public concern.

Family

1. Marriage increases the likelihood that fathers have good relationships with their children.

Mothers as well as fathers are affected by the absence of marriage. Single mothers on average report more conflict with and less monitoring of their children than do married mothers.⁵ As adults, children from intact marriages report being closer to their mothers on average than do children of divorce.⁶ In one nationally representative study, 30 percent of young adults whose parents divorced reported poor relationships with their mothers, compared to 16 percent of children whose parents stayed married.⁷

But children's relationships with their fathers are at even greater risk. Sixty-five percent of young adults whose parents divorced had poor relationships with their fathers (compared to 29 percent from nondivorced families).⁸ On average, children whose parents divorce or never marry see their fathers less frequently⁹ and have less affectionate relationships with their fathers¹⁰ than do children whose parents got and stayed married. Divorce appears to have an even greater negative effect on relationships between fathers and their children than remaining in an unhappy marriage.¹¹

2. Cohabitation is not the functional equivalent of marriage.

As a group, cohabitators in the United States more closely resemble singles than married people.¹² Children with cohabiting parents have outcomes more similar to the children living with single (or remarried) parents than children from intact marriages.¹³ Adults who live together are more similar to singles than to married couples in terms of physical health¹⁴ and emotional well-being and mental health,¹⁵ as well as in assets and earnings.¹⁶

Selection effects account for a large portion of the difference between married people and cohabitators. As a group, cohabitators (who are not engaged) have lower incomes and less education.¹⁷ Couples who live together also, on average, report relationships of lower quality than do married couples — with cohabitators reporting more conflict, more violence, and lower levels of satisfaction and commitment.¹⁸ Even biological parents who cohabit have poorer quality relationships and are more likely to part than parents who marry.¹⁹ Cohabitation differs from marriage in part because Americans who choose merely to live together are less committed to a lifelong relationship.²⁰

3. Growing up outside an intact marriage increases the likelihood that children will themselves divorce or become unwed parents.

Children whose parents divorce or fail to marry are more likely to become young unwed parents, to divorce themselves, and to have unhappy marriages and/or relationships.²¹ Daughters raised outside of intact marriages are approximately three times more likely to end up young, unwed mothers than are children whose parents married and stayed married.²² Parental divorce approximately doubles the odds that adult children will also divorce. Divorce is apparently most likely to be transmitted across the generations when parents in relatively low-conflict marriages divorced.²³

4. Marriage is a virtually universal human institution.

Marriage exists in virtually every known human society.²⁴ Exactly what family forms existed in prehistoric society is not known, and the shape of human marriage varies considerably in different cultural contexts. But at least since the beginning of recorded history, in all the flourishing varieties of human cultures documented by anthropologists, marriage has been a universal human institution. As a virtually universal human idea, marriage is about regulating the reproduction of children, families, and society. While marriage systems differ (and not every person or class within a society marries), marriage across societies is a publicly

acknowledged and supported sexual union which creates kinship obligations and sharing of resources between men, women, and the children that their sexual union may produce.

Economics

5. Divorce and unmarried childbearing increase poverty for both children and mothers.

Research has consistently shown that both divorce²⁵ and unmarried childbearing²⁶ increase the economic vulnerability of both children and mothers. The effects of family structure on poverty remain powerful, even after controlling for race and family background. Changes in family structure are an important cause of new entries into poverty (although a decline in the earnings of the household head is the single most important cause). Child poverty rates are very high primarily because of the growth of single-parent families.²⁷ When parents fail to marry and stay married, children are more likely to experience deep and persistent poverty, even after controlling for race and family background. The majority of children who grow up outside of intact married families experience at least one year of dire poverty (family incomes less than half the official poverty threshold).²⁸ Divorce as well as unmarried childbearing plays a role: Between one-fifth and one-third of divorcing women end up in poverty following the divorce.²⁹

6. Married couples seem to build more wealth on average than singles or cohabiting couples.

Marriage seems to be a wealth-creating institution. Married couples build more wealth on average than do otherwise similar singles or cohabiting couples, even after controlling for income.³⁰ The economic advantages of marriage stem from more than just access to two incomes. Marriage partners appear to build more wealth for some of the same reasons that partnerships in general are economically efficient, including economies of scale and specialization and exchange. Marital social norms that en-

courage healthy, productive behavior and wealth accumulation (such as buying a home) also appear to play a role. Married parents also more often receive wealth transfers from both sets of grandparents than do cohabiting couples; single mothers almost never receive financial help from fathers' kin.³¹

7. Married men earn more money than do single men with similar education and job histories.

A large body of research, both in the United States and other developed countries, finds that married men earn between 10 and 40 percent more than do single men with similar education and job histories.³² While selection effects may account for part of the marriage premium,³³ the most sophisticated, recent research appears to confirm that marriage itself increases the earning power of men, on the order of 15 percent.³⁴

Why do married men earn more? The causes are not entirely understood, but married men appear to have greater work commitment, lower quit rates, and healthier and more stable personal routines (including sleep, diet and alcohol consumption). Husbands also benefit from both the work effort and emotional support that they receive from wives.³⁵

8. Parental divorce (or failure to marry) appears to increase children's risk of school failure.

Parental divorce or nonmarriage has a significant, long-term negative impact on children's educational attainment. Children of divorced or unwed parents have lower grades and other measures of academic achievement, are more likely to be held back, and are more likely to drop out of high school.³⁶ The effects of parental divorce or nonmarriage on children's educational attainment remain significant even after controlling for race and family background. Children whose parents divorce end up with significantly lower levels of education than do children in single-mother families created by the death of the father.³⁷ Children whose parents remarry do no better, on average, than do children who live with single mothers.³⁸

9. Parental divorce reduces the likelihood that children will graduate from college and achieve high-status jobs.

Parental divorce appears to have long-term consequences on children's socioeconomic attainment. While most children of divorce do not drop out of high school or become unemployed, as adults, children of divorced parents have lower occupational status and earnings and have increased rates of unemployment and economic hardship.³⁹ They are less likely to attend and graduate from college and also less likely to attend and graduate from four-year and highly selective colleges, even after controlling for family background and academic and extracurricular achievements.⁴⁰

Physical Health and Longevity

10. Children who live with their own two married parents enjoy better physical health, on average, than do children in other family forms.

Divorce and unmarried childbearing appear to have negative effects on children's physical health and life expectancy.⁴¹ Longitudinal research suggests that parental divorce increases the incidence of health problems in children.⁴² The health advantages of married homes remain, even after taking socioeconomic status into account.

The health disadvantages associated with being raised outside of intact marriages persist long into adulthood. Even in Sweden, a country with extensive supports for single mothers and a nationalized health care system, adults raised in single-parent homes were more likely to report that their health was poor and/or to die (during the study period) than were those from intact homes; this finding remained after controlling for economic hardship.⁴³

One study which followed a sample of academically gifted, middle-class children for 70 years found that parental divorce reduced a child's life expectancy by four years, even after controlling for childhood health status and family background, as well as personality characteristics such

as impulsiveness and emotional instability.⁴⁴ Another analysis found that 40-year-old men whose parents had divorced were three times more likely to die than were 40-year-old men whose parents stayed married: “[I]t does appear,” the researchers conclude, “that parental divorce sets off a negative chain of events, which contribute to a higher mortality risk among individuals from divorced homes. . . .”⁴⁵

11. Parental marriage is associated with a sharply lower risk of infant mortality.

Babies born to married parents have lower rates of infant mortality. On average, having an unmarried mother is associated with an approximately 50 percent increase in the risk of infant mortality.⁴⁶ While parental marital status predicts infant mortality in both blacks and whites, the increased risk due to the mother’s marital status is greatest among the most advantaged: white mothers over the age of 20.⁴⁷

The cause of this relationship between marital status and infant mortality is not well known. There are many selection effects involved: Unmarried mothers are more likely to be young, black, less educated and poor than are married mothers. But even after controlling for age, race, and education, children born to unwed mothers generally have higher rates of infant mortality.⁴⁸ While unmarried mothers are also less likely to get early prenatal care, infant mortality rates in these instances are higher not only in the neonatal period, but through infancy⁴⁹ and even early childhood.⁵⁰ Children born to unmarried mothers have an increased incidence of both intentional and unintentional fatal injuries.⁵¹ Marital status remains a powerful predictor of infant mortality, even in countries with nationalized health care systems and strong supports for single mothers.⁵²

12. Marriage is associated with reduced rates of alcohol and substance abuse for both adults and teens.

Married men and women have lower rates of alcohol consumption and abuse than do singles. Longitudinal research confirms that young adults

who marry tend to reduce their rates of alcohol consumption and illegal drug use.⁵³ Children whose parents marry and stay married also have lower rates of substance abuse, even after controlling for family background.⁵⁴ Twice as many young teens in single-mother families and stepfamilies have tried marijuana (and young teens living with single fathers were three times as likely). Young teens whose parents stay married are also the least likely to experiment with tobacco or alcohol.⁵⁵ Data from the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse show that, even after controlling for age, race, gender, and family income, teens living with both biological parents are significantly less likely to use illicit drugs, alcohol, and tobacco.⁵⁶

How does family fragmentation relate to teen drug use? Many pathways are probably involved, including increased family stress, reduced parental monitoring and weakened attachment to parents, especially fathers.⁵⁷

13. Married people, especially married men, have longer life expectancies than do otherwise similar singles.

Married people live longer than do otherwise similar people who are single or divorced. Husbands as well as wives live longer on average, even after controlling for race, income and family background.⁵⁸ In most developed countries, middle-aged single, divorced, or widowed men are about twice as likely to die as married men, and nonmarried women face risks about one and a half times as great as those faced by married women.⁵⁹

14. Marriage is associated with better health and lower rates of injury, illness, and disability for both men and women.

Both married men and women enjoy better health on average than do single or divorced individuals.⁶⁰ Selection effects regarding divorce or remarriage may account for part of this differential, although research has found no consistent pattern of such selection.⁶¹ Married people appear to manage illness better, monitor each other's health, have higher incomes and wealth, and adopt healthier lifestyles than do otherwise similar singles.⁶²

A recent study of the health effects of marriage drawn from 9,333 respondents to the Health and Retirement Survey of Americans between the ages of 51 and 61 compared the incidence of major diseases, as well as functional disability, in married, cohabiting, divorced, widowed, and never-married individuals. “Without exception,” the authors report, “married persons have the lowest rates of morbidity for each of the diseases, impairments, functioning problems and disabilities.” Marital status differences in disability remained “dramatic” even after controlling for age, sex, and race/ethnicity.⁶³

Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being

15. Children whose parents divorce have higher rates of psychological distress and mental illness.

Divorce typically causes children considerable emotional distress and increases the risk of serious mental illness.⁶⁴ These mental health risks do not dissipate soon after the divorce. Instead, children of divorce remain at higher risk for depression and other mental illness, in part because of reduced education attainment, increased risk of divorce, marital problems, and economic hardship.⁶⁵ The psychological effects of divorce appear to differ, depending on the level of conflict between parents. When marital conflict is high and sustained, children benefit psychologically from divorce. While more research is needed, the majority of divorces appear to be taking place among low-conflict spouses.⁶⁶

16. Divorce appears significantly to increase the risk of suicide.

High rates of family fragmentation are associated with an increased risk of suicide among both adults and adolescents.⁶⁷ Divorced men and women are more than twice as likely as their married counterparts to attempt suicide.⁶⁸ Although women have lower rates of suicide overall, married women were also substantially less likely to commit suicide than were divorced, widowed, or never-married women.⁶⁹ In the last half-century, suicide rates among teens and young adults have tripled. The single “most important explanatory variable,” according to one new

study, “is the increased share of youths living in homes with a divorced parent.” The effect, note the researchers, “is large,” explaining “as much as two-thirds of the increase in youth suicides” over time.⁷⁰

17. Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do single or cohabiting mothers.

The absence of marriage is a serious risk factor for maternal depression. Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do single or cohabiting mothers.⁷¹ One study of 2,300 urban adults found that, among parents of preschoolers, the risk of depression was substantially greater for unmarried as compared to married mothers.⁷² Marriage protects even older teen mothers from the risk of depression. In one nationally representative sample of 18- and 19-year-old mothers, 41 percent of single white mothers having their first child reported high levels of depressive symptoms, compared to 28 percent of married white teen mothers in this age group.⁷³

Longitudinal studies following young adults as they marry, divorce, and remain single indicate that marriage boosts mental and emotional well-being for both men and women.⁷⁴ We focus on maternal depression because it is both a serious mental health problem for women and a serious risk factor for children.⁷⁵ Not only are single mothers more likely to be depressed, the consequences of maternal depression for child well-being are greater in single-parent families, probably because single parents have less support and because children in disrupted families have less access to their (nondepressed) other parent.⁷⁶

Crime and Domestic Violence

18. Boys raised in single-parent families are more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal behavior.

Even after controlling for factors such as race, mother’s education, neighborhood quality, and cognitive ability, boys raised in single-parent homes are about twice as likely (and boys raised in stepfamilies are

three times as likely) to have committed a crime that leads to incarceration by the time they reach their early thirties.⁷⁷

Teens in both one-parent and remarried homes display more deviant behavior and commit more delinquent acts than do teens whose parents stayed married.⁷⁸ Teens in one-parent families are on average less attached to their parent's opinions and more attached to their peer groups. Combined with lower levels of parental supervision, these attitudes appear to set the stage for delinquent behavior.⁷⁹ The effects of marital status on delinquency may be stronger for whites than for African-Americans.⁸⁰

19. Marriage appears to reduce the risk that adults will be either perpetrators or victims of crime.

Overall, single and divorced women are four to five times more likely to be victims of violent crime in any given year than are married women. Single and divorced women are almost ten times more likely than are wives to be raped, and about three times more likely to be the victims of aggravated assault. Similarly, compared to husbands, unmarried men are about four times as likely to become victims of violent crime.⁸¹

A study of 500 chronic juvenile offenders found that those who married and stayed married reduced their offense rate by two-thirds, compared to criminals who did not marry or who did not establish good marriages.⁸² Married men spend more time with their wives, who discourage criminal behavior, and less time with peers, who often do not.

20. Married women appear to have a lower risk of experiencing domestic violence than do cohabiting or dating women.

Domestic violence remains a serious problem both inside and outside of marriage.

While young women must recognize that marriage is not a good strategy for reforming violent men, a large body of research shows that be-

ing unmarried, and especially living with a man outside of marriage, is associated with an increased risk of domestic abuse.⁸³ One analysis of the National Survey of Families and Households found that cohabitators were over three times more likely than spouses to say that arguments became physical over the last year (13 percent of cohabitators versus 4 percent of spouses). Even after controlling for race, age, and education, people who live together are still more likely than married people to report violent arguments.⁸⁴ Overall, as one scholar sums up the relevant research, “Regardless of methodology, the studies yielded similar results: Cohabitators engage in more violence than do spouses.”⁸⁵

Selection effects play a powerful role. Women are less likely to marry, and more likely to divorce, violent men.⁸⁶ However, scholars suggest that the greater integration of married men into the community, and the greater investment of spouses in each other, also play a role.⁸⁷ Married men, for example, are more responsive to policies such as mandatory arrest policies, designed to signal strong disapproval of domestic violence.⁸⁸

21. A child who is not living with his or her own two married parents is at greater risk of child abuse.

Children living with single mothers, stepfathers, or mother’s boyfriends are more likely to become victims of child abuse. Children living in single-mother homes have increased rates of death from intentional injuries.⁸⁹ As Martin Daly and Margo Wilson report, “Living with a step-parent has turned out to be the most powerful predictor of severe child abuse yet.”⁹⁰ One study found that a preschooler living with a stepfather was 40 times more likely to be sexually abused than one living with both of his or her biological parents.⁹¹ Another study found that, although boyfriends contribute less than 2 percent of nonparental child-care, they commit half of all reported child abuse by nonparents. The researcher concludes that “a young child left alone with a mother’s boyfriend experiences elevated risk of physical abuse.”⁹²

Conclusion

MARRIAGE IS more than a private emotional relationship. It is also a social good. Not every person can or should marry. And not every child raised outside of marriage is damaged as a result. But communities where good-enough marriages are common have better outcomes for children, women, and men than do communities suffering from high rates of divorce, unmarried childbearing, and high-conflict or violent marriages. As policy makers concerned about social inequality and child well-being think about how to strengthen marriage, more funding is needed for research into both the causes of the marriage gap in child and social well-being and ways to close that gap. Solid research is pointing the way toward new family and community interventions to help strengthen marriage. Ongoing, basic scientific research on marriage and marital dynamics contributes to the development of strategies and programs for helping to strengthen marriages and reduce unnecessary divorce.⁹³

Who benefits from marriage and why? How can we prevent both divorce and the damage from divorce? How can families, counselors, communities, and public policy help at-risk and disadvantaged parents build healthy marriages?

If marriage is not merely a private preference, but also a social good, concerned citizens, as well as scholars, need and deserve answers to questions like these. ■

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Center of the American Experiment is a nonpartisan, tax-exempt public policy and educational institution. Founded in 1990 and based in Minneapolis, the Center focuses on a wide range of issues, but none more frequently than those of families and their importance. From an early emphasis on the problem of fatherlessness, American Experiment has grown increasingly interested in strengthening marriage more generally, as evidenced in the special Summer 2001 issue of its flagship publication, *American Experiment Quarterly*, focusing on "Marriage and Children: A Symposium on Making Marriage More Child Centered," guest edited by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe.

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The Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education (CMFCE), founded in 1996, is an independent, nonpartisan, nonsectarian organization focused on strengthening marriage and reducing family breakdown through couple-empowering education and information. CMFCE provides consultation at the national, state and community level; sponsors a website, e-newsletter, forum, directory, and the Smart Marriages Conference — an annual summit of researchers, educators, clinicians, clergy, policy makers, journalists, and the public. The conference also trains and certifies marriage and family educators.

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**Coalition for Marriage,
Family and Couples
Education, LLC**
5310 Belt Road, NW
Washington, DC 20015-1961
Tel: (202) 362-3332
cmfce@smartmarriages.com
www.smartmarriages.com

**Center of the
American Experiment**
1024 Plymouth Building
12 South 6th Street
Minneapolis, MN 55402
Tel: (612) 338-3605
Fax: (612) 338-3621
amexp@amexp.org
www.amexp.org

**Institute for
American Values**
1841 Broadway
Suite 211
New York, NY 10023
Tel: (212) 246-3942
Fax: (212) 541-6665
info@americanvalues.org
www.americanvalues.org