



The New Silence: Family Breakdown and Child Sexual Abuse

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The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has been heralded a new epoch in Australian life that will finally ‘break the silence’ surrounding child sexual abuse.

Sceptical commentators, however, have questioned how the royal commission will ensure children are better protected in the future when its restrictive terms of reference (which only authorise an inquiry into how *institutions* such as churches, schools and sporting bodies respond to child sexual abuse) ignores the 70% to 80% of cases of child sexual abuse in which the perpetrator has a ‘familial relationship’ with the abused child.

The limited scope of the royal commission is symptomatic of the wider gaps and silences in the national conversation about child sexual abuse.

That the vast majority of child sexual abuse occurs within the family setting obscures a larger and more significant truth.

Numerous studies have found that children who do not live with both biological parents, irrespective of socioeconomic status, are far more likely to be sexually abused than their peers in intact families. In particular, girls living in non-traditional families are found to have been sexually abused by their ‘stepfathers,’ either the married, cohabiting or casual partner of a divorced or single mother, at many times the rate girls are sexually abused by their natural fathers in intact families.

The 2010 US Fourth National Incidence Study of Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) found that compared to peers in two biological parent married families, children who lived with a single parent with no cohabiting partner were five times more likely to be sexually abused; children who lived in a step-family (with married biological and non-biological parents) were eight to nine times more likely to be sexually abused; and children who lived with a single parent with a partner in the home were 20 times more likely to be sexually abused.

Step- and single-parent families accounted for only one-third (33%) of all children in the United States but accounted for more than two-thirds (66.8%) of all children who were sexually abused. The over-representation of ‘broken’ families implies that if all children in the United States lived with both married biological parents, the rate of child sexual abuse could be halved at least.

Child sexual abuse statistics publicly available in the United States are far more comprehensive and meaningful than in Australia. Despite the scholarly interest in the relationship between non-traditional families and child sexual abuse, and regardless of the good evidence that family breakdown is a major risk factor, data published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) do not provide specific information about

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family structure, the identity of the perpetrators, and their relationship with the abused child. The silence of the statistics regarding this crucial information should be corrected by the agencies responsible in the interests of transparency and informed discussion of child sexual abuse.

Despite family breakdown exposing children to greater risk of sexual abuse, the issue receives scant attention in this country. When the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) released a major report on child welfare in 2011 that detailed the studies and statistics demonstrating the links between family structure and child sexual abuse, the evidence was neither disputed nor acknowledged in the little public discussion that ensued; the report simply washed in and out of the public domain and left little trace on community attitudes.

Child sexual abuse is not fully and frankly discussed because the public discourse is self-censored by politicians, academics, social service organisations, and the media in compliance with politically correct attitudes towards ‘family diversity’—the socially ‘progressive’ and ‘non-judgmental’ fiction that says the traditional family is just one among many, and equally worthy, family forms.

In hindsight, we are justifiably critical of the silences that in earlier times kept child sexual abuse a hidden problem. Yet a comparable silence exists today. To avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, we need to speak openly and honestly about the well-established but under-publicised links between family breakdown and child maltreatment—especially given the strong association between childhood sexual abuse and major mental health problems, particularly among women.

Greater community awareness is needed of the impact the relationship and reproductive choices of adults have on child welfare. This could be achieved by a government-commissioned, anti-child sexual abuse public information campaign, modelled on pro-marriage campaigns in the United States.

The campaign should emphasise that the two-biological parent married family is a protective factor that prevents child sexual abuse. It should also publicise how divorce and single-motherhood endangers children by increasing the risk of sexual abuse for the more than one in four Australian children who currently do not live with both natural parents.

Governments already conduct advertising campaigns—such as anti-smoking and anti-drink driving campaigns—to educate citizens, promote certain values, and change attitudes and behaviours. A public information campaign that advertises the risks associated with family breakdown, and promotes the array of benefits marriage bestows on children, would end the new silence that hides the culturally inconvenient truth about the modern family.

Introduction: The Royal Commission and its limitations

On 12 November 2012, the Gillard government established a Royal Commission to inquire into the mishandling of allegations and instances of child sexual abuse by institutions, including churches, schools, sporting bodies, and other government and non-government organisations. Mounting community concern, along with pressure from victims groups and members of parliament, had already led the Victorian and NSW state governments to order separate inquiries following widespread media coverage of the systemic cover-up and protection of 'paedophile priests' by the Catholic church.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is set to run for four years at an initial estimated cost of \$434.1 million. The commission's three main objectives are: (1) provide a forum for victims to tell their stories and have their experiences acknowledged; (2) investigate where organisations have gone wrong in failing to deal appropriately with abuse; and (3) recommend ways to improve laws, practices and policies to better protect children in the future.[†] The six commissioners, led by NSW Supreme Court Judge Peter McClellan, face a huge and complex task, given that more than 5,000 victims are expected to give evidence. The first public hearings began in September.

The political sponsors of the royal commission have heightened expectations by proclaiming the significance of the 'unprecedented' national inquiry. The former Prime Minister Julia Gillard declared that the decision to call the royal commission was prompted by 'too many revelations of adults who have averted their eyes from this evil.'¹ She subsequently described the inquiry as an important 'moral moment' for the nation, which would require 'our country to stare some very uncomfortable truths in the face.'² The federal government had acted not only because 'every child has the right to grow up safe,'³ but also because 'we've let children down in the past as a country,' and 'we need to learn what we can do as a nation to better protect our children in the future.'⁴ The commission, Gillard told Parliament in her valedictory speech in August, will 'change the nation' so long as we 'grasp the opportunity, not turn away but face what has occurred ... Only that will prevent the abhorrent injustices of the past from being revisited on Australian children present and future.'⁵

The conviction expressed by Gillard and commonly presented in media coverage is that the commission marks a new epoch in Australian life that will finally 'break the silence' surrounding child sexual abuse. By justly condemning the mishandling of sexual abuse of children by faith-based and other organisations, honest and open modern Australia is purported to have learned from the mistakes of deceitful and repressed old Australia, which for so long had turned a blind eye to a 'shameful' issue.⁶ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, in an editorial in April 2013, welcomed the commission for offering the 'hope of catharsis to calmly explore how society can better fulfil in future its duty to protect the most vulnerable.'⁷

The belief that the royal commission will end the silence about child sexual abuse overlooks the key question some sceptical commentators are asking. The commission's restrictive terms of reference (which only authorise an inquiry into how *institutions* respond to child sexual abuse) ignores the circumstances in which the vast majority of child sexual abuse occurs.⁸ According to leading Australian researcher Professor

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[†] The commission's recommendations for new safeguards and best practice will almost certainly focus on ensuring that all abusers, regardless of their positions, and all organisations, regardless of their status, are held accountable for their actions under the law by ensuring that (1) all claims of child sexual abuse are treated seriously; (2) reporting of all allegations to the proper civil authorities for investigation is mandatory and takes precedence over internal procedures; and (3) concealment of any allegation is criminalised.

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Stephen Smallbone of Griffith University, in an estimated 70% to 80% of cases of child sexual abuse, ‘There is a familial relationship between the child victim and the offender.’⁹ That the bulk of child sexual abuse will be beyond the purview of the commission draws attention to the apparent mismatch between the expectations that have built up around the inquiry and its likely outcomes. How can the worthy goal of better protecting children be achieved when the commission is only required to examine child sexual abuse inside institutions while ignoring the much greater risk of abuse within families?¹⁰

The limited scope of the royal commission is symptomatic of the wider gaps and silences in the national conversation about the multifaceted scourge of child sexual abuse. Delving deeper than institutional abuse reveals a problem with the way the issue of child abuse is framed and analysed in this country. The well-established but under-publicised impact of the social changes of the last 40 years (rising rates of divorce and single motherhood) on the traditional family and child welfare is insufficiently acknowledged. In Australia, child abuse occurs disproportionately in non-traditional families. However, the over-representation of ‘broken’ families, and the subject of family breakdown in general, does not receive the political, media and academic attention this major social issue warrants. Rather, the silence on the links between family structure and child sexual abuse is deafening. That the vast majority of child sexual abuse occurs within family settings obscures a larger and more significant truth: Children living in non-traditional families are far more likely to be sexually abused.

Child sexual abuse and family structure

Child sexual abuse occurs in many kinds of families and is perpetrated by a multiplicity of mostly male offenders, including family friends, relatives, neighbours and fathers. However, numerous studies show that children who do not live with both biological parents are at significantly greater risk of being sexually abused, especially by men living in their homes who are not their father. Girls living in non-traditional families have been found to be sexually abused by their ‘stepfathers,’ either the married, cohabiting or casual partner of a divorced or single mother, at six to seven times the rate girls are sexually abused by their natural fathers in intact families.¹¹

The founding study that identified this problem was Diane Russell’s 1984 random survey of 930 adult women in San Francisco. This study found that:

... 17% or one of approximately every six women who had a stepfather as a principal figure in her childhood years, was sexually abused by him. The comparable figures for biological fathers were 2% or one out of approximately 40 women.¹²

Subsequent scholarship has confirmed elevated levels of stepfather/stepchild sexual abuse. As Jeffrey Rosenberg and W. Bradford Wilcox observed in a 2006 report on family structure and child development for the United States Children’s Bureau:

A 1997 study of more than 600 families in upstate New York found that children living with stepfathers were more than three times more likely to be sexually abused than children living in intact families. Another study found that the presence of a stepfather doubles the risk of sexual abuse for girls—either from the stepfather or another male figure.¹³

Some studies have even suggested that the rate of sexual abuse of girls by ‘stepfathers’ could be 40 times higher.¹⁴

Based on her 2000 review of the ‘overwhelming empirical evidence,’ the American legal academic Robin F. Wilson identified ‘more than seventy social studies’ that established the link between child sexual abuse and family breakdown:

Virtually all studies of child sexual abuse report that girls living with stepfathers are at high risk, leading one sociologist to conclude that the presence of a stepfather is ‘[t]he family feature whose risk has been most dramatically demonstrated.’ This dim appraisal reflects an emerging consensus that disagrees about details but not essentials ... [T]he evidence is legion that stepfathers represent a greater portion of abusers than their incidence in the general population, suggesting they are more likely to abuse their daughters than biological fathers.¹⁵

These findings do not say that all stepfathers and boyfriends are abusers. As Rosenberg and Wilcox say:

There are, of course, countless stepfathers who step into the role of dad with both competence and caring. And many live-in boyfriends provide both love and structure for the children in the household.¹⁶

Nor is this to say that most child sexual abuse is perpetrated by ‘stepfathers.’ Unlike other forms of child abuse, most sexual abuse is not perpetrated by those occupying a ‘parental’ role.¹⁷ Studies examining the prevalence of child sexual abuse in different types of families have also found the overall number of children sexually abused by biological fathers to be greater because a minority of children grow up with stepfathers. But retrospective studies clearly find that proportionately more ‘stepfathers’ abuse their divorced or never-married partner’s children.¹⁸

The explanation for the higher rates of all forms abuse and neglect in non-traditional families offered by evolutionary biology is that children tend to be safer with their biological fathers because the natural protective instinct is stronger than for non-biological stepfathers and other male figures.¹⁹ Biological fathers are less likely to sexually abuse their own children because the ‘incest taboo’ is stronger compared to non-biological ‘fathers.’²⁰ Children living in non-traditional families, particularly girls, seem particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse by unrelated men who live in their home because their divorced or single-mother’s new relationships allow predatory men to have unmonitored contact with minors. Similarly, the likely explanation for the higher rates of sexual abuse by ‘other’ perpetrators of children living in single-parent families compared to their peers in intact families is the relatively lower level of parental supervision provided in lone-parent households.²¹

More likely to experience

According to the Personal Safety Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 2005, 12% of Australian women and 4.5% of Australian men were sexually abused before the age of 15. Of those who had experienced sexual abuse as a child, 30.2% reported being abused by a male relative, 16.3% by a family friend, and 15.6% by an acquaintance/neighbour. Sexual abuse by ‘father or stepfather’ was reported by 13.5% of all victims.²² That the ABS data fails to distinguish the two groups of biological fathers and non-biological ‘fathers’ is both unhelpful and surprising, given the scholarly interests in the relationship between non-traditional families and child sexual abuse, and the good international evidence that family breakdown is a major risk factor (‘more than seventy social studies’). This is indicative of how opaque child sexual abuse statistics are in Australia.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare’s (AIHW) annual report on child protection provides more but still incomplete insight into the relationship between family structure and child maltreatment. In 2009–10, 17% of families with

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dependent children were single-mother families, according to the ABS' Family Characteristic Survey.²³ In 2011–12, 'female single parent families' accounted for 29% of all substantiated cases of all forms of child abuse and neglect (including physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse).²⁴ The 7% of step- and blended families accounted for the third-highest proportion (13.7%) after two-parent intact families (36%). Non-traditional families were substantially over-represented, with the 24% of step-, blended and single-mother families accounting for over 42% of all proven child abuse cases.²⁵

While the number of substantiated cases of child sexual abuse is published annually by the AIHW (there were more than 5,800 cases Australia-wide in 2011–12), the official statistics are not transparent.²⁶ The AIHW does not provide a breakdown for different kinds of abuse according to perpetrator or even family type.²⁷ The ABS' 'Recorded Crime—Victims, Australia, 2011' reports that more than 6,500 children aged 0–14 were sexually assaulted in 2011—almost 40% of all sexual assaults recorded.²⁸ The vast majority of children were assaulted by an offender 'known to victim'—a broad category—and very few by 'strangers.'²⁹ However, like the AIHW figures, no specific information is given about family structure, the identity of perpetrators, and their relationship with the abused child. The silence of the statistics regarding this crucial information should be corrected by the agencies responsible in the interests of transparency and informed discussion on child sexual abuse.

The child protection data publicly available in the United States is far more comprehensive and meaningful than in Australia. The 2010 US Fourth National Incidence Study of Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) established that:

Children living with their married biological parents had the lowest rate of abuse and neglect, whereas those living with a single parent who had a partner living in the household had the highest rate. Compared to children living with married biological parents, those whose single parent had a live-in partner were at least 8 times more likely to be maltreated in one way or another. They were 10 times more likely to experience abuse and 8 times more likely to experience neglect.³⁰

This confirms the findings of studies that show that while biological parents perpetrate the majority of all forms of child maltreatment,³¹ the incidence is far higher in non-traditional families.³² Child sexual abuse, however, has a different profile. NIS-4 reported that biological parents were the perpetrator of 72% of physical abuse compared to 19% for non-biological parent or partners, and 9% for other people. By contrast, biological parents were the perpetrators of 37% of sexual abuse (80% male), compared to 23% for non-biological parents or partners (97% male), and 40% for other offenders.³³ The incidence of child sexual abuse was much higher in non-traditional families. NIS-4 found that children living with two biological parents were assaulted at significantly lower rates, with only 0.5 children per 1,000 population experiencing child sexual abuse. This compares to 4.3 children per 1,000 population for step-families; 2.4 children per 1,000 population for single parent (no cohabiting partner) families; and 9.9 children per 1,000 population for single parent (cohabiting partner) families. Compared to children living in married two biological parent families, children who lived with a single parent with no cohabiting partner were five times more likely to experience sexual abuse; children who lived with one biological and one non-biological step-parent were eight to nine times more likely to experience sexual abuse; and children who lived with a single parent with a partner in the home were an astonishing 20 times more likely to experience sexual abuse.³⁴

The links between family type and child sexual abuse appear even stronger when the proportion of child sexual abuse is examined by family type. During the period covered by NIS-4 (2005–2006), 61% of children lived with both married biological parents, and these traditional families accounted for around one-fifth (18%) of the 135,300 cases of child sexual abuse (see Table 1). By comparison, the 7% of children who lived in a step-family (with married biological and non-biological parents) accounted for almost the same proportion (17.8%) of cases. Only 3% of children lived with a single parent with a live-in partner. However, these families accounted for 16.6% of all child sexual abuse. Single parents with no partners were not over-represented to the same degree, but were still significantly over-represented. The 23% of single parent no partner families accounted for almost one-third of all child sexual abuse.

Step- and single-parent families accounted for one-third of all children in the United States (33%) but accounted for more than two-thirds (66.8%) of all children who experienced child sexual abuse. The over-representation of ‘broken’ families implies that if all children in the United States lived with both married biological parents, the rate of child sexual abuse could be halved at least.

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Table 1: Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) by family type in the United States

Family type*#	Number of children	Percentage of children	Number experiencing CSA per 1,000	Percentage experiencing CSA
(1) Married biological parents	44,799,000	61%	0.5	18%
(2) Other married parents	5,152,000	7%	4.3	17.8%
(3) Unmarried parents	2,192,000	3%	2.4	4.2%
(4) Single parent w/partner	2,081,000	3%	9.9	16.6%
(5) Single parent, no partner	16,962,000	23%	2.4	32.8%
(6) Neither parent	2,449,000	3%	5.3	10.4%

Source: NIS-4.

* (1) Living with two married biological parents; (2) Living with other married parents (not both biological but both having a legal parental relationship to the child); (3) Living with two unmarried parents (biological or other); (4) Living with one parent who had an unmarried parent (not the child’s parent) in the household; (5) Living with one parent who had no partner in the household; (6) Living with no parent.

Note that the relevance of these statistics to other jurisdictions needs to be adjusted to account for racial differences in incidence of child sexual abuse in the United States. An estimated 2.6 black children per 1,000 population were sexually abused, at a rate of nearly double that of white children (1.4 per 1,000 population) and at a rate of more than one-third higher than Hispanic children. The higher incidence among black children was found to be ‘statistically marginal (.10≥p>.0.5).’ However, there were no racial differences detected in the perpetrators of sexual abuse. It would be useful to compare the US data with the United Kingdom’s, but the British authorities do not publish statistics on the number of substantiated child abuse cases.

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Realities and euphemisms

Despite the evidence being ‘legion’ and social scientists ‘disagree[ing] about details but not essentials,’ when the facts about family structure and child sexual abuse are highlighted, the issue receives scant attention in Australia.

In September 2011, Professor Patrick Parkinson of the University of Sydney, one of Australia’s leading experts on family law, entered the debate about family policy advocating traditional social values. In a major report for the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) on child welfare, he reported the links between the breakdown of the family and increased risk of harm to children. Among a range of measures demonstrating the adverse impact of family breakdown on children, he cited the studies and statistics showing higher rates of child sexual abuse in non-traditional families.³⁵ In an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Parkinson drew attention to the ‘harsh reality ... that children are much more at risk of sexual abuse from men who are not biologically related to them than from their own dads.’³⁶

Some of the reactions to the ACL report were predictable. Proponents of the traditional family, such as federal Liberal MP Kevin Andrews applauded the fearless, evidence-based discussion of family breakdown and adverse outcomes for children.³⁷ Critics, such as Jane Stanley from the Council of Single Mothers and their Children, found the analysis to be simplistic because many separated and single-parent families produce well-adjusted children.³⁸ Advocates of ‘marriage equality,’ such as gay rights activist Rodney Croome, even cited the findings to call for legalising homosexual and lesbian marriage to ensure that children of same-sex couples are raised by married parents.³⁹

Yet one would think that this dose of harsh reality delivered by an academic of Parkinson’s stature would provoke stronger reactions. Child welfare advocates, along with select politicians and media outlets, might have been expected to call for ‘something’ to be done to protect children at significantly greater risk of violation. In response, defenders of sole parenting in the welfare lobby and academia might have mounted the metaphorical barricades, given the authoritative connection between family structure and the risk of sexual victimisation.

However, Parkinson’s article (and report) prompted neither outrage nor denial. The response to his sober and scholarly directing of attention to ‘how often’ children are sexually abused in non-traditional families was silence. The facts were neither disputed nor acknowledged in the little public discussion that ensued; the report simply washed in and out of the public domain and left little trace on community attitudes.

The lack of traction can partly be attributed to the way those who should be making the prevention of the child sexual abuse in non-traditional families a prominent issue choose instead to stay silent.

In 2009, federal and state governments jointly released the first National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children. The section of the framework on prevention of child sexual abuse listed a range of risk factors—‘family violence, other types of abuse and neglect, pornography’—including ‘inadequate supervision.’⁴⁰ This euphemism for divorce/single motherhood is typical of what those ostensibly responsible for promoting child welfare in Australia are not prepared to think, say and reveal about child sexual abuse and family breakdown.

The Australian social services sector should be leading the debate and advocating child protection. Instead, the state government community service departments in charge of child protection services, together with non-government charitable organisations that provide family and child welfare services, practises the non-judgmental attitudes that characterise the modern social work profession. ‘Progressive’ social attitudes and anti-traditional family values are endorsed by promoting the fiction that says all families, however constituted, are of equal worth. Endorsing ‘family diversity’ chiefly entails downplaying the links between family

type and child abuse—such as the over-representation of single mother and other non-traditional families in child protection caseloads—so as to avoid ‘judgemental discrimination of certain types of families.’⁴¹ A 2012 report on family structure and child abuse published by the taxpayer-funded Child Family Community Australia (CFCA) information exchange, exemplifies the studied non-judgmentalism which is the norm among social workers and the organisations they work for. Authors Cathryn Hunter and Rhys Price-Robertson protested against stigmatising non-traditional families on the grounds that ‘much of the perceived relationship between family structure and child maltreatment can be explained by factors such as poverty, substance misuse and domestic violence.’⁴²

Most of the families, regardless of type, that come to the attention of child protection authorities constitute an underclass of families suffering a range of complex dysfunctions.⁴³ There is also great diversity among non-traditional families, and many single-mothers, for example, overcome the difficulties of sole parenting and raise safe and well-adjusted children. However, the ‘welfare paradigm’ the social services sector employs to explain child abuse as a product of poverty, drugs and family dysfunction does not explain the prevalence of child sexual abuse. While low socioeconomic status is a powerful determinant of physical abuse and neglect, this does not apply to sexual abuse. (The National Framework also misleads on this point.) Child sexual abuse occurs across all socioeconomic groups and ‘community survey studies find almost no socio-economic effects.’⁴⁴ The lack of association between class, dysfunction and child sexual abuse proves that family structure is a risk factor that cannot be ignored. This is consistent with the wealth of evidence showing that children raised outside two biological parent married families are at much greater risk of experiencing sexual abuse.

Resolutely ignored

The ‘new silence’ about family breakdown and child sexual abuse is a troubling insight into contemporary social mores. The lack of attention paid to this issue means the public discourse is self-censored, in effect, in compliance with politically correct attitudes towards family diversity, because of strong cultural resistance to a message that contradicts ‘progressive’ social values.

The silence stems from the lasting influence on mainstream culture of the social revolution of the 1960s, which fundamentally altered the social conventions governing marriage and the raising of children.

The most significant social changes since the 1960s are the introduction of ‘no fault’ divorce and escalating rates of marriage breakdown; the collapse of the social stigmas forbidding sexual relations and cohabitation outside marriage; and increasing numbers of children born out of wedlock and living in single-parent households, mostly with mothers and often relying on government benefits.⁴⁵ Accompanying these social changes has been a shift in moral sentiment, which has seen ‘progressive’ Western societies such as Australia cease to make collective moral judgments about good and bad behaviour.⁴⁶ As a result, the negative social consequences of the social revolution are rarely criticised, and key social issues are insufficiently scrutinised, including the potentially harmful impact on children of adult behaviours such as divorce and having children out of wedlock that were previously judged immoral and irresponsible but now socially accepted.⁴⁷

Yet a large volume of evidence shows that the key non-judgmental idea the social revolution has popularised and elevated into an alleged marker of social progress and greater tolerance—that the traditional family is just one among many and equally valid and worthwhile family forms—is plainly wrong. Decades of studies examining family structure and child outcomes have found that children who live in an intact family in which the biological mother and father are married derive, on average, modest but consistent educational, social, cognitive and

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behavioural benefits.⁴⁸ Conversely, family breakdown and family non-formation have been found to be significantly associated, on average, with a range of adverse outcomes that persist into adulthood.⁴⁹ Marriage, as the foundation of family life, seems to be in a child's best interests while the alternative—raising children outside of intact two-parent married families—appears to compromise their care and socialisation.⁵⁰

A recent summary of the evidence compiled by the US political scientist Charles Murray outlined the array of benefits for children associated with marriage:

No matter what the outcome being examined—the quality of the mother-infant relationship, externalizing behaviour in childhood (aggression, delinquency, and hyperactivity), delinquency in adolescence, criminality as adults, illness and injury in childhood, early mortality, sexual decision making in adolescence, school problems and dropping out, emotional health, and any other measure of how well or poorly children do in life—the family structure that produces the best outcomes for children, on average, are two biological parents who remain married. Divorced parents produced the next-best outcomes. Whether the parents remarry or remain single while the children are growing up makes little difference. Never married women produce the worst outcomes. All of these statements apply after controlling for the family's socio-economic status.⁵¹

The social sciences have repeatedly and consistently demonstrated that marriage makes a real difference, on average, to the welfare of children irrespective of class. Nevertheless, mainstream cultural gatekeepers prefer to avert their eyes. Murray writes:

I know of no other set of important findings that are as broadly accepted by social scientists who follow the technical literature, liberal as well as conservative, and yet are so resolutely ignored by network news programs, editorial writers for the major newspapers, and politicians of both major parties.⁵²

Murray's description of the wilful blindness among cultural elites equally applies to Australian public life—especially to the way the demonstrable risk that family breakdown poses to the sexual safety of children is resolutely ignored. Child sexual abuse is not fully and frankly discussed by the Australian community, and attempts to flag the issue, such as the 2011 Australian Christian Lobby report, end up disappearing into the ether, due to the gatekeeping role cultural elites play in policing debates on contentious social issues. The terrible and widespread mishandling of child sexual abuse by the Catholic and other churches has provided apparent proof that all traditional institutions and sources of moral authority are corrupt and hypocritical; these scandals have thus fitted neatly with the default countercultural values embraced since the social revolution of the 1960s by the majority of university-educated elites with culture-shaping positions in key institutions in politics, journalism and academia.⁵³ However, many politicians, journalists and academics who rightly criticise the failings of the churches have their own blind spot, and would prefer to discuss child sexual abuse in a context that supports rather than challenges the post-1960s 'progressive' consensus. Criticism of the behaviour of culturally unfashionable religious organisations is thus combined with a reluctance to give prominence to culturally unfashionable, socially conservative issues.⁵⁴

Public discussion of family matters is inhibited by acts of omission—facts not reported in the media 'do not exist' in terms of public debate and policy.

For instance, Lixia Qu and Ruth Weston's 2012 longitudinal data study for the Australian government on marital status and child wellbeing was not reported by the media, despite its challenging and important finding that Australian children 'living with sole mothers appeared to fare less well in terms of social-emotional, learning, and physical development' compared to children living with married parents.⁵⁵ This is an example of what the social commentator and author Bettina Arndt describes as the chronic failure by agenda-setting media organisations, especially the highly-influential Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), to discuss family-related social issues and trends that challenge the pro-family diversity orthodoxy.⁵⁶ Hence, despite the importance of child wellbeing to national wellbeing, the subject of family breakdown receives negligible attention and generates little debate compared to other subjects, such as the environment, population and preventive health, which feature prominently in the public discourse about the nation's future.

Advertising the risks

In her ground-breaking 1984 paper on child sexual abuse in non-traditional families, Diane Russell offered advice that is still relevant. Having shown that divorced and single mothers needed 'to be more careful in their evaluation of prospective men friends, lovers, or marriage partners because of the tremendous risk of stepfathers sexually abusing their stepdaughters',⁵⁷ Russell called for a public health information campaign to raise awareness. Yet almost 30 years later, no action (in Australia at least) has been taken to translate this advice into action.

Russell's advice remains relevant because greater community awareness of how important marriage is to child welfare can be fostered if Australian governments (either state and/or federal) commissioned an anti-child sexual abuse public information campaign—especially given the strong association between childhood sexual abuse and major mental health problems, particularly among women.⁵⁸ Governments already conduct advertising campaigns to educate citizens and promote certain values that are in the public interest—such as anti-smoking and anti-drink driving—to change attitudes and behaviours. A pro-marriage public information campaign should acknowledge family breakdown and family non-formation for what they often are—risky for children. The campaign should encourage marriage and discourage single-motherhood and divorce (except in the minority of high conflict marriages where children benefit from parental separation⁵⁹). The fact that among the myriad benefits for children, the two biological parent married family is a protective factor that prevents child sexual abuse, as well as other forms of abuse and neglect, should be publicised. Conversely, the campaign should also acknowledge that divorce and single motherhood put children at much greater risk of sexual abuse by creating opportunities for abusive men to gain access to children. It should also be made plain that ultimate responsibility for offences against children lies with the perpetrators. But to promote greater personal responsibility for child welfare, the link between child abuse and the relationship and reproductive choices of adults should be stressed.

This is not as radical as it sounds, at least compared to countries where the debate on family structure and child welfare is far more sophisticated and advanced.

In the United States, a new consensus is emerging on marriage and the best way to improve the welfare of children. Encouraging parents to commit to marriage before having children is increasingly acknowledged by experts and policymakers as an effective way to reduce poverty and social disadvantage. Cynics will say that this kind of 'old-fashioned' moralising on social issues is to be expected in a country that clings to traditional religious morality. But it isn't Bible Belt zealots who are promoting marriage; the 'marriage movement' is being driven from inside the beltway by social scientists working at the most prestigious Washington think tanks,

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which are transcending the standard Left-Right cultural divide in ardent agreement about the benefits of marriage.

Secular think tank organisations are articulating the secular, evidence-based case for marriage by informing the community about the risks to child welfare associated with divorce and single-parenting, and the positive impact on children of parents getting wed, staying hitched, and providing their families with superior economic and emotional security.⁶⁰ The views of Murray of the right-of-centre American Enterprise Institute are matched by Isabel Sawhill of the left-of-centre Brookings Institution, who argues that child poverty would significantly reduce if single mothers were married and these families enjoyed the same financial resources as socially similar married households.⁶¹ Robert Rector, the architect of the Clinton welfare reforms of the 1990s and senior research fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, argues that government should discourage child birth out of wedlock as an anti-poverty strategy, and ‘provide information that will help people form and maintain healthy marriages and delay childbearing until they are married and economically stable.’⁶²

The weight of expert opinion in favour of marriage is starting to help shape policy—even in the most ‘progressive’ states in the union. In March 2012, then city of New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg initiated a citywide public information campaign against teen pregnancy, featuring 4,000 subway and bus shelter ads, plus a range of online and mobile platforms (Figure 1). This attempt to ‘send the right message’ and ‘encourage responsibility’ highlighted, among other things, the negative consequences of having a child before marriage, including the financial costs to parents and poor child developmental and life outcomes.⁶³ Putting aside politically correct concerns about ‘stigmatising’ unmarried mothers and being ‘judgmental,’ the campaign set out the ‘incontrovertible facts that social science has known for decades but that professors and politicians have not dared inject into the public sphere.’⁶⁴

Figure 1: New York’s anti-teen pregnancy campaign



The New York campaign is modelled on a similar initiative in Milwaukee. A 2006 report on the social costs of teen pregnancy found that each child born to a teenage mother cost the state of Wisconsin \$80,000 over its lifetime. The report also found that 71% of babies born to teenage mothers were fathered by males over 20 years old. The anti-teen pregnancy advertising campaign subsequently launched also targeted predatory sex with underage girls (Figure 2), and has contributed to a 36% drop in teenage pregnancy in Milwaukee, compared to a 16% drop in the rest of the Wisconsin.⁶⁵

Figure 2: Milwaukee's anti-teen pregnancy campaign



President Barack Obama has stressed the need to reduce rates of single motherhood in America, particularly in the black community, to address poverty and violence.

Other jurisdictions have also realised that having children outside of marriage 'isn't just something that preachers worry about' and is 'something that policymakers need to worry about.'⁶⁶ Chicago too has introduced a campaign to raise awareness of teen pregnancy, emphasising the 'clear message that it doesn't only affect young women' (Figure 3).⁶⁷ This is a theme taken up by Chicago's favourite son, President Barack Obama, who (though being raised by a single mother) has stressed the need to reduce rates of single motherhood in America, particularly in the black community, to address poverty and violence. Obama's politically savvy strategy has been to avoid singling out unmarried mothers, and to instead focus on the need for fathers to fulfil their responsibility to their children. In a widely reported speech in Chicago in February 2013, the president said that individual opportunity and community safety requires 'strong, stable families, which means we should do more to promote marriage and encourage fatherhood.'⁶⁸

Figure 3: Chicago's anti-teen pregnancy campaign

Approximately 27% (more than one in four) Australian children do not currently live with both natural parents.



Conclusion

Approximately 27% (more than one in four) Australian children do not currently live with both natural parents.⁶⁹ This compares to around 90% of children who lived with both natural parents in 1960.⁷⁰ Rising rates of divorce and ex-nuptial births have led to substantial growth in the number of step-, blended and single-parent

families. Only 7.1% of families with dependent children were single-parent families in the late 1960s compared to 17% today, and the proportion of step- and blended families has approximately doubled.⁷¹ The social changes of the recent decades have transformed the character of Australian families and placed larger numbers of children in non-traditional families at greater risk of maltreatment, including sexual abuse. Despite this, there is little community debate and discussion about the risk that family breakdown poses to the welfare of children. Even when the subject is raised, usually by Christian family groups like the ACL, it remains on the political fringe and does not become the mainstream issue central to the nation's future that it ought to be.

In hindsight, we are justifiably critical of the silences that in earlier times kept child sexual abuse a hidden problem. However, the belief—which has underpinned much of the response to the royal commission into institutional abuse—that the community has moved on from repressive attitudes of earlier times that kept child sexual abuse a hidden problem, and that no subject is now off limits, is an overstatement. A comparable silence surrounding family breakdown and child welfare confronts us today, because cultural politics intervene and render us mute.

Admitting that a major threat to the welfare of children stems from the breakdown of the traditional family demands a re-evaluation of the progressive social values in which cultural elites have invested much political and intellectual capital. The unwillingness to challenge the conventional, socially progressive attitudes that now constitute the established order is similar to the veil of silence that helped hide the crimes of paedophile priests. Many paedophiles deliberately infiltrated the clergy to gain access to children and exploit the deferential attitudes towards traditional institutions like churches and authority figures like priests that were once the norm. Many got away with their crimes, and children who disclosed abuse were not believed because people struggled to accept that 'dear father,' that pillar of the established order, would interfere with little children. Today we still pay due deference to deeply held but erroneous values and do not deal with society the way it is but the way we would prefer it to be: The mirage of moral tolerance, personal liberation, and family diversity is preferred to the reality of child harm. Inconvenient truths about the family and child welfare thus have little cultural salience, and the burden of our cultural angst is once again left to rest on abused children.

If we are to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, it is essential that cultural politics is set aside and that we speak openly and honestly about issues such as the known risk of 'boyfriend abuse.' Speaking honestly requires ditching the anti-stigmatisation sophistry that says we shouldn't make people feel bad about their relationship and reproductive choices, no matter how bad some choices are for children. Informed individuals should be expected to make responsible choices in the best interests of their children. A public information campaign promoting a pro-responsibility, pro-marriage and pro-child message, and which draws attention to the facts about family structure and child wellbeing, would end the new silence that hides the culturally inconvenient truth about the family.

To avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, it is essential that cultural politics is set aside and that we speak openly and honestly about issues such as the known risk of 'boyfriend abuse.'

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