

[Transcript] The Realignment / 419 | Melissa Kearney: Two-Parent Privilege - The Decline of Marriage and the Fracturing of America

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Realignment.

Quick note, before I dive in, Sagar and I are going to post our next discussion and ask me anything episode. This upcoming Sunday, we'll spend a lot of time on Israel and Gaza, but we'll also answer questions as well. To listen to the full episode, go to realignment.supercast.com or click the link in the show notes. You can also email us questions and comments to realignmentpod@gmail.com. On to today's episode, my guest is Professor Melissa Carney. She's recently released a new book, *The Two-Parent Privilege: How Americans Stop Getting Married and Started Falling Behind*. In her telling, declining marriage rates are driving many of the country's biggest economic problems. She also notes that there is an increasing divide between who gets married and who doesn't. If you attend some sort of higher education, you are much more likely to get married than someone who does not. A increasing deployment divide that we could feel across so many different issues. Her book has kicked off a lot of controversy with positive and critical coverage across most of the country's biggest publications. Agree or disagree, Melissa's kicked off an important debate about the role of rapidly shifting family structures and social arrangements in our biggest economic challenges. A huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation for supporting the work of this podcast. And I just want to emphasize again, I really recommend this book. It's not often that you see an econ academic focused book that is so readable, compelling, and just really kicks up a debate amongst everyone interested in this deeply important topic. Hope you enjoy the conversation. Melissa Carney, welcome to the realignment. Thanks so much for having me. Yeah, it's great to chat with you. This book is A, fascinating, but B, kind of personal for me on two levels. So level one is the obvious one. I got married in September, which is around when your book came out. So I was just thinking when I saw this when I saw this book in the news, I was like, okay, at a very literal level, I should read and engage with this book. I want to have children, but on a deeper level, as anyone who knows my last name, Kozloff, will know that's obviously not like an African American name. I am adopted. I was born to a deeply underage teenage mother in the early 1990s. And something you do, but it's interesting in the book is you kind of separate marriage discourse into three different phases. So we could say phase one is the 1970s. You're seeing the explosion of divorce. You're seeing the Overton window expand. A lot of debates about feminism in the 1990s, discourses around teenage mothers, which is like literally my experience. And the conversation we're having today is centered around how this is no longer an issue purely of teenage mothers. It's actually across our entire society, the institution of marriage, across class educational levels of attainment has just totally diverged and bifurcated. So given that setup, I'd love for you just to like introduce where you feel we are in terms of marriage discourse in this current era. Sure. But now that you've given me a little bit about your background, I would prefer to spend the next 45 minutes asking you questions. That's really a fascinating and rich experience you have. So where we are and why I came to write the book is because in the past 40 years, we've seen a tremendous decline in the share of U.S. kids being raised in married parent homes. And as you said, I felt like the conversation we needed to be having now is different than the conversation that people tried to have in the 80s or even tried to have in the late 60s. And why do I say tried to? I mean, both of those moments in time were before I was a social

scientist, but I learned about these issues close enough to those eras to know that they were really fraught conversations. And in a lot of ways, the conversations went sideways such that they were basically shut down for a couple decades each time. You know, there was unfortunate language and characterizations of the family structure or marriage discourse in those eras or in those moments that really felt like or at least the way people heard them or felt like people were blaming the victim, meaning blaming the single moms, blaming the families who found themselves in these vulnerable positions. And so social scientists, policymakers, liberals in particular, I think became uncomfortable with the topic. So now I come at this topic as not someone who studies marriage, not someone like a moral or value laden proposition to push, but as an economist who's been studying inequality, social mobility, child well-being, the economics of families for over two decades now. And most of my research, frankly, has focused on thinking about things that the government could do to improve people's lives, how people make decisions in response to their economic opportunities, government programs. And I just kept coming back to the fact that it looks like this decline in marriage. And as you mentioned, the real bifurcation of marriage in our society and the way kids are being raised in terms of specifically whether they're being raised in a married parent to parent home or not is so important as a matter of social science, as a matter of economic cause and effect, as a matter of policy, that we have to have that conversation now. And I didn't walk into this naively, but it took a certain amount of optimism to try and engage in this discourse, because I think we should be able to have this conversation without it sounding like we're blaming the victim or without it sounding like people don't care about the families. I very much come to this topic because I care deeply about the millions of kids and parents who are growing up in or trying to parent in under-resourced disadvantaged settings. And so I'm hoping that's where the discourse can be today. And I'll actually start with the blaming discourse, because in the book, you say something very interesting, which once again, this is personal for me, so I think about it. You say, obviously, everything you just said about not wanting to shame women and victims, and there's clear access that anyone with the basic ability to read a book about social discourse in the 80s can just find. But you specifically talk about not wanting to use terms like deadbeat dad. And I guess my question is why shouldn't we use terms like deadbeat dad in the sense that why am I adopted? Well, because my mother got pregnant and the father of the child left. You point out that there's billions and billions of dollars in unclaimed, in an unpaid child support, et cetera, et cetera. It seems like maybe we could quibble with the term deadbeat dad, but some amount of social shame on the person who oftentimes leaves or isn't present or isn't up to their own standards would maybe seem to be ideal. I'm curious how you think about that. Yeah. I mean, let's just say too, again, knowing nothing about your situation or your birth mom's situation, what an amazing thing she did for you. I mean, she gave you to a family who hopefully loved you, but it looks like you did great in life. So there's a lot there to unpack. And that's why too, blaming the single moms, who knows what circumstances, sorry about that, led her to be in that situation or led your dad to be in that situation. And so the reason I'm uncomfortable, oh, sorry, the reason I'm uncomfortable trying to say that anyone is at fault is because I think like the more I learn, the more I read, especially when I delve into like qualitative research and ethnographic studies or talk to people in the communities,

you realize that there's no one characterization of unmarried parents or non-resident or even absent parents. And I think the right way to think about it, because now frankly, it's a really, really large population, right? Like now 40% of kids in the US are born to unmarried parents. So again, it's not just the most disadvantaged, the teen parents who find themselves unable to take care of a kid. It's a really broad swath of the population now. So I suspect there are some situations that you and I could go find and say, you know what, that guy is a deadbeat. He just completely abandoned the woman he was in a relationship with, had a child with, he's not taking responsibility. He should be shamed. His friends, his moms, his pastors, like people should tell him he owes that child and that woman some support. But I think there are also, I don't just think this, you know, like you know this from the data and the interviews and the studies, there are also dads who are absent from the home who would very much like to be part of the child's life. And the mother doesn't, doesn't let them near the child. Why? Because the mother got tired of them and took up a new boyfriend and decided she'd rather try to collect a child or check for him. Or he's unstably employed. And so she doesn't want him around. He's not worth it. He has, he's oppressed. He maybe struggles with substance abuse. He'd like to be a great dad. He didn't grow up with a dad. And so the more like, the more I learn about the topic, you realize a lot of these parents really want to be good parents. They have a lot of barriers. And it's the same way there was, that I felt very angry about a campaign that was run in the New York subway system where, you know, can't remember the years. Let's say it was the 90s. It was a, you know, number of years ago, where they put ads around New York, basically shaming single moms.

It was like babies crying, telling their, their, their teen moms what a bad decision she made. And if teen moms found themselves in that position because an overabundance of confidence, right? And I was like, the last thing we need to be doing for young women who find themselves teen moms is making them feel worse about themselves in their lives. And so I just think it's not, again, there might be situations where you and I would both look at a specific situation and decide that either the mom or dad is really shirking their responsibilities to the child they brought into this world. I think there's a whole lot of other situations where we realize these people need support and help. And even if they have the best intentions, don't really know how to follow through and be good parents or don't have the access to the child to do that. That is so well taken. Because what I'm realizing I did there, and once again, I'm glad I brought my personal biases out because it shapes how I interpret your work and your writing. But I basically gave the audience the image of when you think of an unmarried family unit, think of early 90s teenager skips town. But to your point, if 40% of households in the first place aren't getting married, then the image I just gave folks of how we should think of an unmarried father is a kind of trying to do a welfare debate around a welfare queen in the 1980s. Like it's actually taking a trope in an image which may be accurate in the personal, but actually doesn't reflect the actual public policy challenge. So I'd love for you to speak about how should we understand, without reducing 40% of the population to something easy, how should we understand the nature of unmarried families today then? So a really big piece of all of this that I think is critical to understand is that the rise in the share of kids living outside a married parent home has happened predominantly among kids born to parents who don't have a college degree. And the reason why that is so important is because this change in family structure is not happening evenly across the

population, but the most advantaged groups in society, the most economically advantaged groups, the men and women who are completing a four-year college degree, bringing in high earnings, they're still finding marriage a valuable, feasible institution. In large numbers, they're getting married, then having their children, raising their children in these stable, highly resourced homes. Meanwhile, outside that very advantaged or privileged class, if you will, adults are increasingly likely to have kids without being married, which means that their kids almost never wind up having their two parents in their home for their childhood. Okay, so marriage is really in practice in this country, very, very highly predictive of whether a child actually lives with their two parents. And so this change in family structure is happening primarily among the less economically advantaged groups in society, and that's why it's undermining economic security of these households. It's leaving a lot of kids growing up in situations that are less resourced than they would be if the parents were in the household together, and it's driving a lot of the class gaps we see in kids' opportunities and ultimately outcomes. And so that's why this is so important to realize. It both reflects and accentuates class gaps, inequality, threats to social mobility in our society, and that's why I think it's so critical to ask the question, why are so many of these adults outside the college-educated class having kids without being married and then raising their kids in one-parent homes? Let me just put one specific number on this. In 1980, the share of kids born to college-educated, four-year college-educated moms who were living in a married-parent household was 90%. Many more moms are college-educated now. It's a much larger share of the population, but that share has only fallen to 84%, okay? Not that big of a drop. Six percentage point dropped. Among kids born to moms with a high school degree or some college, but not a four-year degree, and not the high school dropouts, right? So not the teen moms, not the most disadvantaged, the groups of moms that we might have considered sort of in the middle class. They are a majority of moms today. The share of their kids living in a married-parent home has fallen from 83% to 60%. That's massive, a 23 percentage point drop. So that is massive. And then just mechanically, when you look at what that's done to household earnings coming into the household, even though that group of adults has seen their earnings over 40 years, basically stagnate or go up by my calculations 8% as compared to the major growth for college-educated workers, the fact that those adults now are substantially more likely to set up a one-parent household means that overall, their household earnings have decreased. And this is also contributing, this demographic trend is contributing to why the middle class feels like they're less economically secure than they might have been. If you only have one adult bringing in earnings and contributing to doing all the stuff in the household, it's not surprising that it's a more vulnerable situation, and it's contributing to these class gaps. So all of that is, I mean, I think that unequal element of it is really, really critical for people to understand. And both that it's increased the divergence, but the divergence is no longer the most disadvantaged teen moms being in single-mother households and everybody else having two-parent households. Now the group that really stands apart is the college-educated. This is like yet another way that that highly educated group in society is pulling away from everyone else and solidifying advantages for

their kids relative to everybody else that perpetuate through the generations. So one of the things that like sort of mystifies me, even though if I'm being honest, I sort of expected this, progressives should be all over this as an equity issue. It should bother progressives that the kids born to the most advantaged groups in society have the additional major advantage, which is two parents showering resources of them. And it should bother progressives as an equity matter that millions of less educated adults, moms in particular, are finding themselves unable to access or achieve this more advantaged family structure. Well, I'm not, I would never describe this as progressive. My politics are more center left to center. What I would say a progressive would probably say to you, and this gets into my next question is, okay, Melissa, fair, there are material and equity-related disadvantages that accrue in these households without marriage, but which is more likely to happen? Ways to society increase the child tax credit as we did in the wake of COVID, we pass universal pre-care, we pass universal college, etc., etc., etc., those means of addressing equity are quicker than trying to take mothers and throw them into a broken institution. I'd say that's probably a fair articulation of what a progressive would say to what you just said. What is your response to that? Yeah, that's a very good articulation of a, in some sense, a reasonable critique, which is, you could grapple with all of the data I'm showing you, agree with it, and then decide, I don't see a way to bring back to parent families, so let's just keep trying to make up those deficits. Here's my bottom line reaction, which is, I am all for doing those other things, and I am on record being all for doing those other things. We should expand the child tax credit. We should have more of a child allowance. We should have Head Start and early childhood education as an entitlement available to all low-income kids or kids from low-income families in this country. We should have more public provision and funding for child care. We should do all of these things to alleviate material deprivation and burdens that low-income families experience in this country. I am all for that. On the other hand, we have been talking about doing those things for 20 years without acknowledging that, in large part, what we're trying to do by promoting all of those kinds of policies is to make up for increasingly large gaps in household structures. Let's be honest that we could keep talking about improving schools and expanding early childhood access, but a lot of the reason why that feels so urgent and imperative is because kids now get to school at age five with huge gaps already in their preparedness to learn their behavioral challenges. Why? Because a lot of those kids are coming from one parent homes and they are not as ready for school as the kids who are coming from highly resourced, more highly resourced, more supervised, more parental time investment coming from two parent homes. We could keep trying to make up for those gaps and what I'm trying to do with this book is say we also need to put strengthening families on the policy agenda. These two things, I don't see them as either or. We should be doing more to support kids and families and that, in some sense, is a planned B because you're taking this decline in stable, resource-rich family life as a given and saying how to make up for it and we should do that. But at the same time, we should challenge ourselves to saying looking ahead, how do we ensure that more kids come from stable, two-parent, resource-rich homes so that when they get to school, they're not already so far behind their peers who have access to two parents in a home investing in them. So it might be quicker to do all the other stuff, though it doesn't seem like Congress is really getting its act together to do any of this. So I'm not sure how much political appetite there is, not just from

Congress, frankly, but from taxpayers in the US to actually throw more public resources at families and kids. Again, I wish we would. We absolutely should. We massively under-invest in kids in this country. By the way, we spend six times more per capita on the elderly than on kids. That's not just a moral family, but totally backwards from investing in our country's future.

Anyways, I'm all for doing that, but we need to make sure kids are coming from stronger families. The pitting the two against each other, I think, is really counterproductive.

And this actually gets at my actual politics on this, which is you use, and I'll ask you to find it in a second, but you consistently in the book and in this conversation have used the term resources when discussing the benefits of growing up in a two-parent household. And I think for me, the problem of purely treating the disadvantages one experiences as a child and a single parent under-resourced household, you can't just reduce those disadvantages to like, well, if we only had \$400 a month increase resources, it's accommodated for because it's actually a mix of factors. So I'd love for you to like talk about the broad range of what resources actually constitute beyond just the understanding that obviously, if you're deeply poor, \$400 a month would obviously be a game changer in many respects, but I think it actually misses a more of a decent percentage of the disadvantage at a structural level. I completely agree. And this is probably just reflective of me being an economist where we do things like, I'm going to define resources very broadly inclusive of income, but not limited to income. And you're probably right that the modal listener hears resources and thinks income. I'm very clear in the book that I think of income, and I look at the data as income being one critical resource, but not the only resource.

And to your point, this matters crucially because if it were just income, in theory, the government can make up for it by saying, okay, this household is missing a second parent who would be bringing in \$40,000. Let's send them a check for \$40,000 a year for 18 years. Part of the reason I say that is because that is political pie in the sky. We're fighting over sending these households an additional \$1,600 or \$1,000 a year. And we can't even agree on that. So even if it were just income, where in theory, it would be easier to make up for it with a government check, the amount of the income differences between one and two parent homes that we're talking about is a bit out of reach, I think, from political reality or even funding reality. But more to the heart of this, a second parent, and let me just say dads because 80% of one parent households are single-mother households, dads do more than just bring in earnings in the house. They spend time with their kid. They also spend time on other things that the household needs so the mom could spend more time with the kid. So we very clearly see in the data that kids who are living in two-parent households have more parental time investment in them. And that's not something an extra \$400 a month can make up for. Having someone else there

to either drive you to your baseball game, talk to you about your day, supervise you, discipline you, shower you with the love and affection that helps you build confidence and helps you avoid sort of behavioral challenges. All of those things that a second parent and we should say this explicitly, a loving, nurturing second parent brings into the households, all of those things really can't be made up for with a government program.

The other major bucket of what I call resources that I focus on in the book, I put under the umbrella term bandwidth, emotional bandwidth. And what I'm sort of trying to encapsulate with this idea is things that people have written about, scholars have written about, psychologists,

sociologists.

We know that kids and moms in single-parent situations are more likely to be burdened with toxic stress, high levels of maternal stress. Why? Because it's really freaking hard to parent alone, right? You're the only one paying the bills in their house, mowing the yard, cleaning the kitchen, trying to supervise your kid, your kid is crying, you need to talk to them. That's really hard and that's really hard and stressful to do by yourself. And so, I think it's intuitive to any of us who have parented that this idea that there's more stress and there winds up being less of the kind of nurturing patient parenting that developing psychologists say parents should engage in in one parent versus two parent homes. Now, the people who are really averse to accepting this idea that two parent households are better for kids than one, their reaction or response or critique when they hear me say something like this is, no, no, no, it's not the fact of having married parents. It's that the kind of people who are married are more patient, better communicators, and that's why their kids do better. As if somehow, I mean, that to me sounds like blaming the mom. It's like, well, of course, single parents can't deliver benefits to their kids because they are innately less able to parent well in ways that you research or can't see in the data.

And I just, one, I see no evidence for that. But two, that is, I don't think that's doing what people want it to do, which is basically saying, even if those single moms had a second person in the house alleviating their financial burdens, giving them a bit of a break sometimes, allowing them to go take a walk to clear their head so they could come back and talk patiently to their kid, even if they had a second person in the house, their kids would still be at a deficit. I just see no real reason to think that that's true. And I think that's really defeatist.

The interesting question that comes to mind here is, who shouldn't be getting married? Because one could kind of half listen to this conversation and think, okay, Melissa in Marshall's position is that if we just snapped our fingers and instantly had those 40% of Americans who aren't married with their kids get married, that would just create, they're claiming that to create a hunky dory society. That can't possibly be true. So where's the nuance within what I'm saying here? So, so, so important. Nothing I say or write should be misconstrued as suggesting that when there's an abusive or violent parent, the kid would still be better off with two parents, 100%. We also, I mean, this gets to the real point of when is the second parent actually beneficial for the kid? And so this is where you might say, well, the married, the couples who are married are married for a reason, both of them find those partners to be helpful to the exercise of running a household and raising children. And that's why they're married. And that might very well be true. And I can't look at the 40% of parents who aren't married and go one by one in the census and say, no, no, no, you should be married, your kids would be better off. Now, you can see that plenty of those second parents are not incarcerated and are employed and have sort of these observable

things that look like in a very basic resource framework, just in terms of income, let's say, that the household would have more resources if those two parents combined to make their resource.

What I can't, of course, see is how many of those second parents have violent tendencies, have depressive tendencies or struggling with substance abuse, have issues that might bring strife or conflict into a household. What I'm not willing to do is give up on 40% of parents and say, no matter what kind of support they received, their child would be better off without

them in the house, maybe with us for the larger government check. And so this is why, you know, when I think of what's the right policy program response, it's not just to tell everyone, you should get married. Now, to one of your earlier questions, there probably are some of these adults that were pretty cavalier about whether or not they give this a go and try to make this a one household with two parents investing in their kids. And so I do think there's a role here for reestablishing a social convention. Again, the social convention seems pretty darn tight, for the college educated, but reestablishing a social convention saying, hey, you guys had a kid together, give it a try as a family, right? But then for the, for the situations where there are real barriers, why are we not willing as a country to support programs aimed at strengthening safe and stable families that help these couples who are struggling with things like substance abuse, or, you know, a criminal background that makes employment harder, or, or mental health challenges. When we realize the downstream effects of allowing those struggles to just like live on in these less advantaged populations, it has downstream effects because it makes it harder for people to achieve healthy relationships, stable homes, and ultimately the kids are really, really disadvantaged. And so, yeah, I'm really glad you brought this up, because they're not, of course, we're not just saying everyone should get married and that works, but we need to, as a society, be willing to say, two parent healthy families are beneficial for kids. What do we do as a society to promote that? And then you look under the hood and you say, what are these individual couples? What barriers are they facing? And then what kind of programmatic

support can we give them? Let me just say one very specific thing that will feel immediately obvious to your listeners. We all have, well, those of us who live in DC, in this, you know, professional circle where people seem very committed to making two parent families work for kids, I suspect most of us know couples who have spent a lot of money on high priced couples therapy to make their marriage work. And I think that's important because it reveals that marriage is often difficult. So I don't think that, again, in this like unobserved selection sense, college educated people are innately more likely to fall in love and have easier times at marriage, right? But people work at it, and they can pay for help when they need it. But at the same time, the idea of putting public funds towards community groups that provide relationship counseling or education or assistance to low income couples is something that it seems like a lot of people are resistant to. And let's get back to, again, why this should be an equity issue. When you have two adults who want to make it work for their kid, for their family, of course, they would like to have a healthy relationship. It's lonely and hard parenting alone, right? Or it's lonely and hard trying to visit your kid one day a week. Why wouldn't we want have programs and community programs that are accessible and affordable for those couples? And by the way, when you read interviews and the ethnographic studies, a lot of these unmarried couples do want to co-parent, do want to be in healthy relationships, but they have barriers. They didn't grow up in married parent homes. They're not surrounded by friends and relatives who are raising their kids in married parent homes. Figuring out what kinds of programs and resources would be helpful should be a policy and research priority. You know, that's actually the perfect pivot to the most surprising and fascinating thing I learned in your book, which is the study that you ran about the impact of the fracking boom when it came to marriage rates. The reason why this is interesting is I think the conventional, if you're in the circles that are interested in

these topics, the narrative you're going to hear is obviously there's going to be a gap between college educated and working class high school only or high school below folks because these men are less marriageable, very less successful. They're actually not even bringing the resources to the table because earlier you said, you know, if you bring \$40,000 or if you're not bringing \$40,000, therefore that would suggest that this is purely about the resources question, but I think the study you showed provides an interesting wrinkle. So I'd love for you to kind of introduce and explain the context. Yeah, if we were having this conversation 10 years ago, what I would have said was what we really need to do is increase the economic position of non-college educated men because in a very straightforward economic model of why people choose to marry or not, the fact that non-college educated men over the past 40 years have really seen their earnings sort of stagnate or decline, their employment rates decline at the same time as non-college educated women did better, that eroded the value proposition of marriage from an economic standpoint. Okay, so we needed to make these men more reliable and attractive as financial providers and then we'd see an increase in marriage and two-parent households. I actually did say that on panels 10 years ago. So then I ran this study with Riley Wilson, who was a PhD student at Maryland at the time, where we realized there was this opportunity to study the reverse marriageable man hypothesis, which was, oh my gosh, this fracking boom localized throughout communities in the country led to an increase in earnings and income for non-college educated men in these communities that just happened to be sitting on the right kind of geological formations when this technology hit. Okay, so let's, we eliminate North Dakota and South Dakota because that was a whole big migrant story, but in thousands of counties throughout the country actually you had these local economic booms. And so we get all the data together and we run the regression and I'm expecting to see the non-marital birth share decline and there's a big fat well precisely estimated zero on the non-marital birth share. Okay, what happened? So these college educated men did do better and they did bring in additional earnings and birth rates went up and economists have already previously shown that when people get this exogenous increase in income, one of the things they do is they have kids because kids are expensive and this allows them to have kids, but there wasn't an increase in marriage and birth rates went up in equal proportion for both married and unmarried adults. No change in the non-marital birth share. And so that suggested that it wasn't just economics and maybe there was a role for social norms we think, right? And so social norms are sort of the residual when we can't explain things with economic factors. So we looked across the counties and sure enough in the counties that had higher rates of non-marital childbearing at baseline, when the additional income came into those communities, you saw a larger increase in non-marital births. And so to pursue that line of thinking even further of what was the role of sort of the prevailing social paradigm and affecting the family formation response, we looked at the co-bloom and bust of the 70s and 80s. There, when sort of in these very similar rural communities, when there was an increase in coal prices and the co-producing regions saw an increase in male wages and earnings, you saw an increase in marriage, an increase in married births and a reduction in the non-marital birth share. So what's the punchline here? You have very, very similar economic shocks in similar communities in the 1980s and the early 2000s, very different family formation responses. I think that is consistent with and suggestive of the fact that social paradigms dictate how people respond to economics.

And so now when you, if you ask me, what do we have to do to sort of change things and increase the share of kids outside the marriage-educated class being raised in two-parent households, increase marriage rates outside the college-educated class where it's declined, I think we need to both improve the economic position of men in an absolute and relative sense and also work to restore a social convention that ties having and raising kids to staying together as either married or long-term cohabiting adults. And maybe you studied this, but a request from a reader, such an interviewer would be, I would love for you to do a follow-up study that looked at the outcomes of the children in those fracking communities. Because as we said earlier, I think the good faith critics that you have are basically saying, look, they're always beneficial, but like resources matter, money matters. This actually seems like this would be the test case. Is it this institution that matters or is it the economic position and resources? So do you have a response to that? There are studies, not by me, but by other economists that looked at the reduction in sort of the economic marriage of other men, like what happened in these communities where they were hit by increased import competition from China, such that these well-paying middle-class, family-sustaining jobs and manufacturing went away for men, for non-college educated men. What do you see happen? You see a reduction in marriage. You see an increase in the share of kids living with single parents, single moms, and you see an increase in child poverty. And another study by a different researcher also looks at what happened across the U.S. from 1960 to like 2010 with the decline in manufacturing jobs in a bunch of communities. And the same kind of thing. You see it increases rates of child poverty because it increased rates of single mother household. And in this research, I'm thinking of an economist, Eric Gould, shows that actually this widened black-white gaps because those manufacturing jobs were very good jobs for black men in particular. And so this has hit kids of both white and black dads and in some sense has been actually particularly bad for the stability, the economic stability of black families and increased rates of child poverty for those affected kids. So for the last section, this isn't my theory, but I think it is reflected in your book. It seems like the more and more you look at sociological challenges in the country, everything seems to skew back to college, debates about college, debates about the future of higher education. My question for you would be, what is special about college as a differentiator in this bifurcation? Because on the one hand, something I always think about when I have low self-esteem over having gone to a mid-tier state school and spending most of my time with people who went to IVs is like, we all know the studies. It matters that I was the person who had ambitions to go there, not whether I actually went. So that example makes me think, in this case, okay, is there something about college or higher education that is imparting values, shaping people, this, this or that, that's actually helping them? Because like another reaction, because I actually, as someone who's deeply skeptical about college for all, it's like a model of our society would be like, okay, so then we're going to keep going and sending as many people as possible to college. But I also don't think that would fix it either. So I'd love to hear what your reflection on that. Yeah, this is actually, this is a very, this is a very good

question. What is it about college? And I'll be, let's be clear, I don't grapple with this. I just use college as like a proxy. As a professor, I will hold you account on thinking about this. Yeah, no, I mean, look, when I hear that question, I have all sorts of existential angst about what are we doing in higher ed. You know, why, why a college degree has such an impact on labor market outcomes is a big question. I think a fair read of the evidence is a lot of that actually is skills, and people are more prepared for the labor market. They are more, there's more, they're more productive in the labor market. And so they really do command higher wages. But to your point, I think, you know, when we get to like, how, what do we do about this economic divide between the college educated and everyone else, I am, I mean, I'm very bullish on, you should not be self conscious about having gone to one of these state schools, that was probably a very smart decision. And when we think about, you know, people paying for debt, I'm all for people making smart decisions. And I'm a big proponent of these state schools having been a, you know, I am a professor at one of these state schools. And by the way, the non selective colleges serve the majority of kids in this country. So I'm all for more resources to those schools to make sure that they are giving real skills and important, you know, meaningful education to the students who pursue them. But at the same time, we need to be removing bottlenecks, like these unnecessary requirements that someone has a BA to get a job that doesn't actually require a BA level skills. We 100% need to be doing more to invest in career and technical education and bolstering the economic security and productivity of people who don't get a four year degree. So, you know, I think there's a lot there. And ideally, there wouldn't be such a divide by the people with a four year college degree and not. Can I say, I actually the way I think about this college issue is very similar to the way I think we should think about the family structure issue. This is different than your question, but something that I really think about, which is, you know, in another line of my research, I write a lot about the causes and effects of this divide in, you know, labor markets by college educated and I work on how to increase college completion among kids from low income families. I think, you know, knowing how much of a divide there is in the labor market and economic outcomes, we talk a lot about how do we get more kids through college, how do we get more kids those skills or young adults those skills. But then we also think about, okay, not everyone's going to go to a four year degree, not everyone really needs to go get a four year degree. So how do we increase the earnings capacity and the economic security of people without a four year degree training, career and technical education, wage subsidies, stronger labor market institutions. Similarly, we should have that framework about thinking of families. We know that kids do better when they're from two parent married parent homes. What do we have to do to increase the share of kids living in two parent homes? What do we have to do to make marriage a more feasible institution for more people to achieve? At the same time, how do we increase the economic security? How do we improve the co-parenting of parents who aren't going to be married for a variety of reasons? And so I think of those two challenges in very analogous ways. So something that's really coming to mind here as we're thinking about this is we spend a lot of time implicitly and explicitly kind of dunking on the left, but a reaction I had to your book as someone who spends time in conservative spaces

is another response that you get to this dynamic are, you know, we need to end no fault divorce or we need to, and the thing that I'm really realizing here is that we should start from the position of like, how do you make marriage a more attractive institution to that 40% and hearing everything I'm hearing here, I'm thinking, oh my God, like on a baseline level, instituting fault divorce would actually probably not make the institution itself particularly attractive. That's like a useful like base. So I guess my question for you would be, and this is also where this, we don't have to just do this foofy conversation about whether they're these amorphous norms and vibes, maybe we could shape them like marriage is a government

centric institution, like what are things maybe that could be done to make it a more attractive institution or that over time, maybe could make a difference. I'm curious if you've thought about that at all. Yeah, so okay, very, very low hanging fruit. Let's remove the marriage disincentives that are all over our tax code and our design of transfer programs, right? So if you get married and you're both working, basically you lose the urgent income tax credit. So I had put together a policy proposal in 2014 that proposed a secondary earner tax deduction, because right now, if you're a full time single worker at 25,000 and you marry somebody who's also a full time worker at 25,000, you lose a whole host of benefits, your taxes increase. We make it really hard for somebody to sort of work their way into the middle class or marry their way into the middle class. So that's some low hanging fruit. And by the way, why do we have that? It's really not a marriage penalty, it's a two earner penalty, because you do well in the marriage, you do well in the tax code if you have a stay at home spouse. But that's reflective of the fact that a lot of our tax code was written before a majority of wives were working. Okay, so scrub the tax code of those things, fix transfer programs so that you don't worry that if you get married, you lose Medicaid. These are all low hanging fruit. I think this will affect some people on the margin. It's not going to dramatically turn things around, but all of these little incremental changes add up, right? Okay. I very deliberately refrain from making, from suggesting changes to child support enforcement and divorce law, in part because I don't know what the right answer is. I do hope that one of the things that comes from my book is that people think long and hard about these kinds of things with this idea that we should be honest about a married parent home being beneficial for kids. It becomes very complicated very quickly when you realize all the unintended consequences. So of course, we never want to go back to the situation where somebody was stuck in an abusive marriage because it was too hard to get out. So I really hesitate to start talking about, I'm not sure what to do about divorce law. Also, there's this unfortunate, again, unintended consequence. If it's easier for someone to get out of divorce, which is good for the reason that we want people to escape really harmful marriages, then entering marriage becomes less attractive. So anecdotally, I'm hearing from a lot of men who are like, why would I marry this woman? She could get tired of me next year, kick me to the curb, demand alimony and child support for me, and basically make it harder for me to see my kids. So I don't know how true that is in how many states, but the issue of how to design these optimally is very, very complicated. Really similarly with child support, it's sort of insane that only a quarter of unmarried moms get or a quarter of kids living with unpartnered mothers have child support coming into their house. And so let's go back to one of the early questions you posed, which is, why aren't we shaming the deadbeat dads? A lot of those

relationships

never establish a child support arrangement to begin with because they were never married, the dad's not even named. So child support seems like an obvious place where we need to do much more

to enforce child support. But then it becomes very complicated because there are studies showing that when it's easier to get child support or enforcement's harder, you actually see a reduction in marriage. Why? Because a lot of moms view the child support as an alternative to having to deal with the dead in the house. Again, for better or worse, right? I don't know. It's going to vary individual by individual. When you study the issue of, gosh, these low income, less educated men, how do we help them improve their education, improve their earnings? And then you realize, oh, if he goes to work, he basically doesn't keep his wages because they all go to child support. Right? So again, it becomes very complicated. We're probably not at the optimal arrangement, either with child support or divorce laws. I just don't know what the right answer is. And I'm hoping there are really smart, knowledgeable people who grapple with these questions.

So we'll close with this. I'm really just curious what you've learned from the discourse following the release of your book. This is a popular book, but it's academic. This is University of Chicago Press. I was at a Bloomberg Future Work Conference a few weeks back, and I was sitting next to a professor friend, and he just said, hey, what did you think of Melissa Carney's book? That is not the norm in these spaces. That is just not the norm. Normally, this isn't a relevant question for academic books, but I think it's relevant here. So close there. What have you learned?

Okay. I will stay. I'm a bit surprised. I was hoping to start a conversation. I was a bit surprised. You did. He launched 1,000 op-eds. Yes, I did. I think I was surprised by how quickly and the conversation happened and how widespread. On the one hand, I was not surprised by the immediate knee jerk critiques. I anticipate I think almost all of them in my preface. I knew these were coming from people who didn't grapple with the book, but I was surprised by how much this spread right away beyond people in the social science think tank sphere. I've been inundated with emails from just people who have listened to podcasts or saw an op-ed and are immediately interested in the issue. So that has been really interesting to me and validating, and it suggests to me that, gosh, this is a conversation that a lot of people wanted to have and we need to have.

I wondered about why? Why does this seem to be resonating? Not that everyone's accepting my thesis.

Let's be clear, but why is the topic so resonant? I have to purely speculate.

I think for a lot of people, society feels broken right now. That's even what I'm hearing from just a lot of reader, listener emails is, I've been working in schools for 25 years. I've been a child therapist for 25 years. This is exactly what I'm seeing. The teens in my neighborhood are out there stealing cars. This is what I'm seeing. So I think at a very personal neighborhood level, people who don't generally live in the world of social science sort of get the sense that something is breaking in our society. The role of family and how kids are raised is pretty darn critical to all of that. I'm bolstered by the response in the sense of, I think a lot of us agree that there's an issue here that we need to grapple with. I'm hopeful and optimistic that it can lead us to really be more open and committed to helping families and children in this country. That is an excellent place to end. Melissa, thank you so much for joining me on

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you