

A Report for the National Alliance for Relationship and Marriage Education

THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION

**Evidence of Economic Benefits &
Policy Recommendations**

**Jocelyn S. Wikle, Anya Christensen,
& Alan J. Hawkins**

Brigham Young University, School of Family Life



Executive Summary

Relationship education (RE) is any type of course, program, or brief intervention that seeks to strengthen the couple relationship and help them achieve their goals for a happy and loving partnership (Markman et al., 2022). It also includes relationship literacy education for individuals, including youth and young adults, to help them envision and prepare for healthy romantic relationships. RE is not therapy. It emphasizes education to prevent problems or reduce them when they begin to emerge. RE courses teach concepts such as communication skills, setting realistic expectations, and deepening commitment to and understanding of a partner (Hawkins & Boyd, 2018). RE is available to all types of people in all different kinds of situations – married or unmarried, gay or straight, young or old, stable or struggling.

Relationship education is also an effective tool for improving outcomes in a variety of settings related to families. Because many of the issues that public policy seeks to address are affected by family instability and parental conflict, RE can act as a preventative measure that diminishes risk factors that originate in the home. Also, it is generally more expensive to fix a problem in the future, after it has taken hold, than to stop it from happening in the present. This report shows how RE can be beneficial in diminishing serious and costly issues of divorce, children's mental health and academic outcomes, foster care, teen pregnancy, incarceration, and domestic violence. The goal of this report is to help a wide range of federal and state policymakers see the economic - and human - value of supporting preventative relationship education programs in order to reduce future public costs and to improve the lives of people across the nation.

In each section of this report, the economic costs of these problems will be documented. Additional effects that create non-financial costs are also illustrated. Then, we will summarize the research showing that RE can both prevent and reduce the prevalence of these problems. The benefits of relationship education are evident not only in adults but also, and more importantly, in the lives of their children. When parents or prospective parents engage in RE, they learn skills that strengthen their relationship and improve the home environment, and children reap the greatest rewards because they experience the impact during the most critical years of their development. Because the benefits of RE compound with time, the best time to implement these programs is today.

This report advocates for relationship education as a tool to strengthen families and reduce costs to taxpayers of problems associated with family instability. Most public policy support for RE to date has come from federal funding streams. But states also have an important role to support RE. After all, the U.S. Constitution allocates law-making related to marriages and families to the several states, not the federal government. Implementing RE on a broad scale, supported both by federal and state dollars, has the potential to prevent many social problems and the costs associated with them.

Background

For the last 20 years, the federal government has become more involved in policies and programs that focus on the growth and development of strong families, including couple relationships. Many family scholars have become concerned by the lack of stability in American homes. Increasing numbers of children experience instability and inconsistency in their home environment and family structure. The prominent sociologist Andrew Cherlin (Cherlin, 2010, pp. 3-12) employed the analogy of a merry-go-round to describe many children's early family experiences, getting dizzy with the number of family structure changes in their early lives. The noted economist Isabel Sawhill (2014) labeled recent cohorts as "generation unbound" because of their weakening family connections. Research consistently supports that children growing up with two parents in a stable relationship remain advantaged through childhood, adolescence, and beyond (Kearney, 2023). Researchers and policymakers alike recognize that public policies targeting family well-being and stability provide widespread social value.

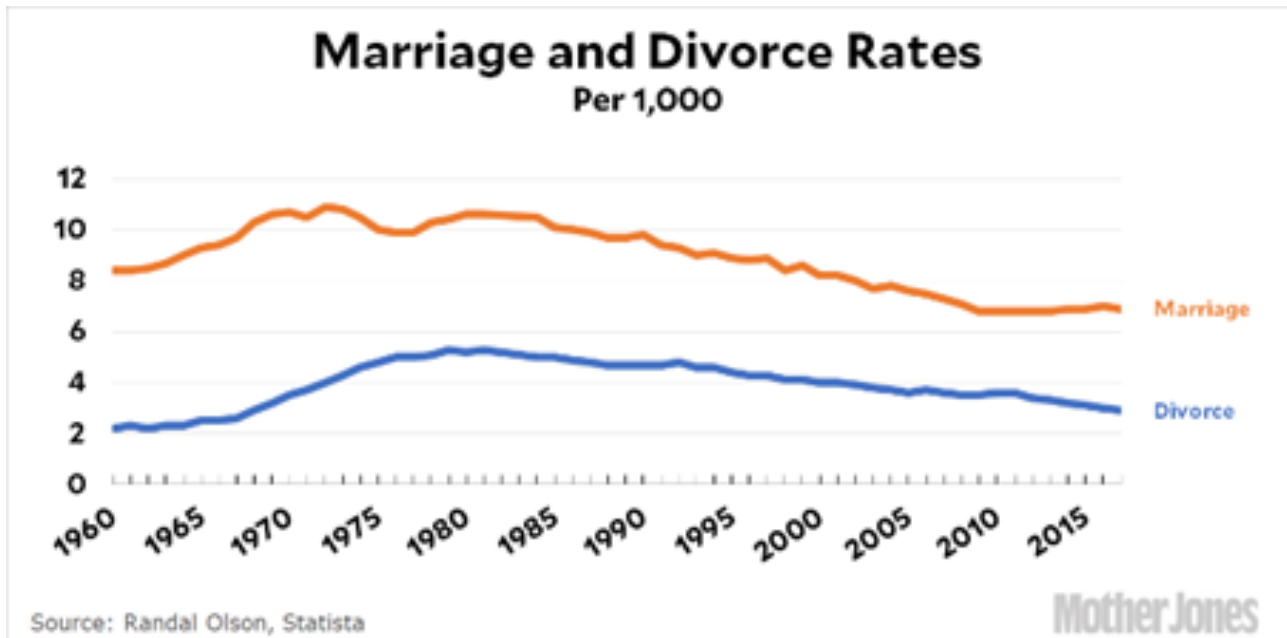
For the past 20 years, the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has supported relationship education programs, which seek to improve the relationships of both married and unmarried couples and increase family stability. These programs have been targeted especially to more disadvantaged families. The programs are funded with competitive grants to community organizations. Some studies suggest that RE is most effective for low-income or otherwise vulnerable couples because they have more room for growth and they benefit from the additional social support and decreased stress levels (Hawkins, 2019a; Hawkins & VanDenBerghe, 2014). A few states have developed additional public policy initiatives to support RE, although only 1-2 of these initiatives are currently active (Hawkins, 2019a).

Healthy and stable marriages, and other committed relationships, are important for a number of reasons. One is that ending a marriage or relationship in separation or divorce tends to weaken children's relationships with their parents, and having a secure connection to both parents is important for children's well-being (Hawkins & Boyd, 2018). The absence of a father increases a child's likelihood of incarceration, unemployment, and poverty (Reeves, 2022; Wineburgh, 2000). But the well-studied benefits of healthy, stable parental relationships are not just limited to decreasing these negative outcomes. Strong marriages are also connected to better economic outcomes, such as increased wages, greater economic mobility, better health, longer life, and more life satisfaction (Anderson, 2014; Chetty et al., 2014; Kearney, 2023; Maasoumi et al., 2009). All of this demonstrates that marriage is an institution deserving of public support.

Family instability increases the need for public assistance. Governments enact programs and policies that support citizens and encourage self-sufficiency, either directly through welfare benefits or indirectly through addressing the root cause of problems.

Could policies that support relationship education with the goal of increasing family stability and individual well-being be cost-effective? An expected value-return on investment (EV-ROI) analysis was recently done on a few different RE programs with intriguing results. An EV-ROI is essentially a methodology that seeks to determine the return on each dollar invested in a program, with special attention paid to who spends the money and who receives the benefits. In the case of programs funded and implemented by governments, it is often the taxpayers who are both investing and receiving the benefits. This study found that even RE programs with a modest success rate would return \$8,457,512 on a \$2,000,000 investment or earn \$4.23 for each \$1.00 invested in the program (Shamblen et al., 2018). Programs with higher success rates have the potential for even greater return values. Accordingly, supporting relationship education may be effective public policy.

In this report, we bring research to bear on the question of *how* relationship education could be cost-effective policy, as suggested by the Shamblen et al. (2018) study. Specifically, we examine how RE may reduce the costly problems associated with divorce, children's mental health and academic performance, foster care, teen pregnancy, incarceration, and domestic violence. Each of these issues creates a significant cost to society, and one way of reducing them is to improve the quality and stability of family life through relationship education programs targeted especially to higher risk families.



Divorce

When it comes to family policies, divorce is often one of the first issues to be discussed because of its widespread impact. Research has provided a plethora of evidence showing the potential detrimental effects that divorce has on children (Amato & Anthony, 2014). Not all children experience serious problems and many who do recover after a few years. However,

problems often reemerge in young adult years as they begin to form and sustain their own romantic relationships (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Marks & Dollahite, 2016). Divorce shapes a child's understandings and beliefs about relationships and can lead some to avoid marriage for fear of pain and disappointment. This creates a less stable environment for potential future children and denies the individual the potential benefits of marriage. And children who experience a divorce growing up are significantly more likely to divorce themselves (Wolfinger, 2005).

Divorce also has an impact on the adult couple involved. Both the process and the aftermath of divorce have been associated with high levels of stress and decreased quality of life (Sander et al., 2020; Strizzi et al., 2021). Divorcees also report increased depression and anxiety, especially when the divorce was high in conflict (Hald et al., 2023; Sander et al., 2020).

There are also financial costs associated with divorce on both personal and public levels. Individuals often spend thousands of dollars on attorney and legal fees and may lose earnings due to work absences from emotional distress or court proceedings. Homes go from two incomes to one, creating additional financial strain on families. Divorce often leads to a greater reliance on public assistance, and estimates place the cost of public assistance due to divorce at more than \$33.3 billion dollars each year (Schramm, 2006). This number does not include assistance due to mental health issues, the physical health problems caused by stress, or the immeasurable impact on children.

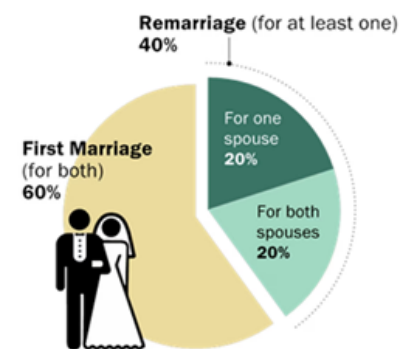
Many studies have demonstrated the benefits of relationship education for couples both before and during their marriage (Markman et al., 2022). And a few studies have shown that RE can reduce divorce rates (Engl et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2018; Stanley et al., 2014). RE can teach couples how to maintain their relationship or help them stay together through crises that may have otherwise ended the relationship. There is some evidence that participation in premarital RE can reduce the divorce rate by preventing marriage for couples who would be at high risk for divorce in the future (Stanley, 2001).

Many people are aware that almost half of marriages end in divorce, but they are sometimes unaware of how this figure varies and why. For example, remarriages are more likely to end in divorce than first marriages. In fact, a study published by the Pew Research Center found that approximately 40% of all married couples in the U.S. are remarried (Livingston, 2014). Of these remarriages, 60% are likely to end in another divorce. If remarriages are more likely to fail than first marriages, then there should be a concerted effort to help remarriages succeed as well as first marriages.

However, the average RE course seems to be less effective for remarried couples (Lucier-Greer et al., 2012). These couples gain more from classes that specifically address issues pertaining to a remarriage

Four-in-Ten New Marriages Involve Remarriage

% of new marriages in 2013



Note: "New marriages" are marriages that began in the past 12 months. A first marriage is one in which neither spouse has been previously married. A remarriage includes at least one spouse who has been married before. Based on couples, not individuals, where at least one spouse is age 18 or older.

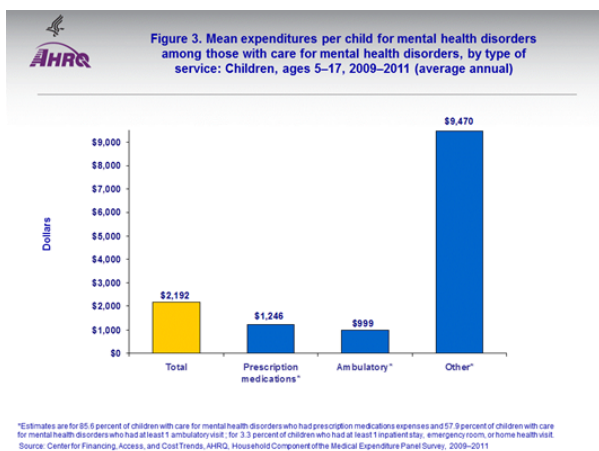
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2013 American Community Survey (1% IPUMS)

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(Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2012; Lucier-Greer et al., 2012). RE designed for remarriage yielded more positive results in co-parenting, relationship satisfaction, and communication (Lucier-Greer et al., 2012; Garneau & Adler-Baeder, 2015). The knowledge that can come from RE programs focused on remarriage relationships can provide these families with greater potential for growth and development and help them avoid becoming a divorce statistic (Lucier-Greer et al., 2014).

RE programs can reduce divorce and the personal and public costs associated with divorce and family instability.

Children's Mental Health



The pervasive effects of poor mental health have become a well-documented social issue, and finding ways to promote better mental health has become a priority to many. With this growing body of research has come a special emphasis on children's mental health, due to their status as a vulnerable group and the importance of supporting their developing brains. When children experience mental health issues, it can leave an impact that continues to affect the rest of their lives.

In addition to the emotional and personal effects on children and adults, there are also financial costs. It is estimated that the average cost of treating a child's mental illness is between \$1800-\$2300 per year (Davis, 2014). According to a report from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), the estimated indirect cost of mental illness in the United States is over \$300 billion per year in lost earnings, which includes things such as productivity and medical expenses (2017). In total, the U.S. loses over \$315 billion annually to the mental health epidemic, and untreated mental illness may add to that number immeasurably. Clearly, this is a pressing issue in many ways.

The development and well-being of children are significantly influenced by the stability of their environment and the quality of the relationship between their parents (Gattis et al., 2008). When children are raised in stable and nurturing environments, they are more likely to thrive and reach their full potential. Conversely, instability, such as divorce, parental conflict, or other disruptions in family life, can have negative effects on children's emotional and mental health (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019; Brown, 2010). Unfortunately, recent studies have suggested that an increasing number of children around the world experience family instability due to family separation, non-marital childbearing, and/or cohabitation (Brown, 2010). Parental conflict can result in self-blame and impaired emotional regulation in children, as well as an increased risk of perpetuating conflict in future relationships and dropping out of high school (Sterrett-Hong et al., 2018; Doss et al., 2020).

Because parental instability and conflict can directly influence and increase the risk of poor mental health, this is one area that can be addressed to improve children's lives. When children have supportive and healthy relationships with their parents, it teaches them coping strategies and develops emotional regulation skills that equip them to deal with challenges and adapt to their surroundings (Goldberg & Carlson, 2014; Sterrett-Hong et al., 2018). Maintaining marital satisfaction can lead to long-term changes in a family (Zemp et al., 2016). This may be because improving the relationship creates a strong foundation on which a couple can first learn to work as a team and then apply those skills to their parenting relationships and better rely on one another. One study noted that supportiveness from parents resulted in decreased behavioral problems in children, largely due to communication skills that were taught in their relationship education classes (Goldberg & Carlson, 2014). As parents learned how to better communicate their needs to one another, they had their needs met and had more emotional resources to use to support their children.

Reducing interparental conflict through RE is one way to reduce mental health symptoms that are observed in children (Sterrett-Hong et al., 2018) and potentially prevent the onset of some mental illnesses. By addressing mental health early in life, future costs can be mitigated, and rates of mental illness will decrease. Focusing on parental relationships may seem indirect, but the effect that it has on children is noticeable and can be an effective method of prevention.

Academic Outcomes

One of the key predictors of success in life is the level of education that an individual receives. A good education can cultivate individual development and promote a person's ability to contribute to society because educated citizens are less likely to live in poverty and are better equipped to contribute to the economy (Roudi-Fahimi & Moghadam, 2006). When one group receives increased education, their children typically receive similar or higher levels of education, and these benefits ripple out for generations (Gayle et al., 2018). Education is an important factor in reducing poverty, crime, and homelessness, while simultaneously increasing health, economic improvements, and stable families (Boessen et al., 2023; Dhaliwal et al., 2021; Gayle et al., 2018). In addition, those with low levels of educational achievement are often at risk for unemployment in adult life, substance abuse issues, and criminal behavior, all of which are costly to the communities in which they live and personally devastating (Losier et al., 2022). Clearly, education is important and all should be supported in receiving it.

In fact, the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) recently reported that those who attend college make about \$1.2 million more in lifetime earnings than those with high school diplomas (2022). In an individual's life, this amount of money can make a significant difference, but that number also represents more that can be paid in taxes or be put back into the economy. Research indicates that children from stable, two-parent homes

are more likely to receive a college education than children who experience instability (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2015; Wu et al., 2015).

Many people may not consider academic achievement to be strongly impacted by relationship education, but there is a surprising and important connection between the health of parental relationships and the academic outcomes of their children. Studies have shown that there is an important relationship between emotional health and academic outcomes for children, and a timely intervention of children's negative emotions



can help improve their ability to study (Blair, 2002). Parents are the primary source by which children learn to regulate their emotions, and parents are better able to teach these skills to their children when the couple themselves have a strong relationship. A healthy marital relationship has effective communication and employs emotional regulation skills (Vazhappilly & Reyes, 2018). RE courses often emphasize the skill of communication and can teach couples how to build it into their relationship and into their interactions with their children (Hawkins & Boyd, 2018). When parents model this kind of behavior, they teach children how to manage their own emotions and cope with stress, including academic-based stress. Too much stress, especially at young ages, can lead to poor academic performance, an inability to focus, and a lack of interest or passion.

Education of all kinds can benefit the lives of those who receive it and create notable benefits for the people around them as well. It reduces many of the costly issues concerning public health and safety by lifting people out of poverty and increasing family stability. It also improves the overall health of societies in physical, economic, and emotional ways by equipping people with the tools they need to achieve their goals. Relationship education indirectly influences these changes by improving the educational outcomes of children by fostering a better environment for their growth and learning.

Foster Care

One of the main areas of child welfare in the United States is foster care. Because there are nearly 400,000 children in foster care at any given time, it is a costly system (National Foster Care Month, 2023). The Congressional Research Service estimates that states spend about \$31.4 billion annually to maintain the foster care system (Stoltzfus, 2023), which means that it costs about \$78,500 to support each child every year. These numbers account for all that is spent on child welfare agencies while the individual is in foster care but may not account for potential future services such as adult mental health services and public assistance programs for those in poverty.

Relationship education can be used in two ways and with two different groups to address this issue. Providing RE to parents with children in the foster care system can improve relationships and increase reunification rates. Even when the parents choose to separate, RE can still be beneficial because it influences the quality of their co-parenting and their relationships with their children (D'Andrade, 2017). When RE programs are offered to parents involved with the child welfare system and those parents use the service to its full extent, increases in reunification have been observed (D'Andrade & Nguyen, 2014). Increasing reunification means decreasing the number of children who are currently in foster care, which saves \$78,500 per child each year.

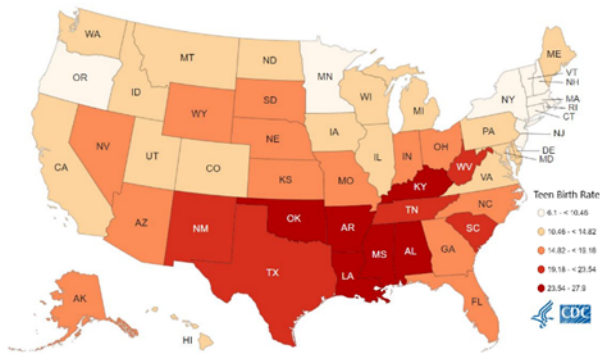
RE can also be provided as a preventative measure for youth in foster care. Many foster youth are born to young or teenage parents, and this increases their likelihood of repeating those patterns and perpetuating cycles of poverty, involvement with the child welfare system, and traumatic childhood experiences (Domenico & Jones, 2007; King et al., 2014; PettyJohn et al., 2021). Because foster youth tend to be more sexually active than other youth, with 20% reporting sexual experiences by the age of 13, it is especially important to educate them about relationships from both a sexual and emotional standpoint, and to provide specific classes that address the unique circumstances that set them apart from their peers (Futris et al., 2019). RE can be used to teach about safe sex as well as healthy relationship practices, which are useful to many of these youth who grew up with parents in struggling relationships. In fact, foster youth who receive RE have reported that it changed their intentions for future behavior in their relationships, demonstrating that it is an effective tool for this population (Futris et al., 2019).



Making RE more accessible to the youth and parents involved with foster care can help promote the well-being of many people and reduce the system costs. Helping parents stay together or remain on good terms and giving them the skills they need to create stable homes can help reduce the number of children who enter/reenter the system, which cuts down on government spending. Educating youth can break cycles and lay the groundwork for better choices and better environments for future families.

Teen Pregnancy

Teen pregnancy has declined over the last 30 years, but it remains a pressing issue with a significant impact. Studies estimate that it costs taxpayers about \$11 billion each year, mostly in increased health care costs and loss of revenue due to lower educational attainment in teen mothers (youth.gov, n. d.). The pregnancy and first year after birth costs the government \$16,000 per birth (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018).



Also, raising a child as a teen is difficult, and most teen mothers aren't equipped to care for young children. Raising a child as a teen also decreases the chances for the teen mother to be successful later in life, like reducing the likelihood of graduation and increasing the likelihood of dependence on public assistance (Mollborn, 2007; Beltz et al., 2015). One of the best ways to reduce costs is to continue preventing teen pregnancy altogether, and relationship education has been shown to be

effective as a prevention tool.

Relationship education is effective because it teaches teens about more than just the biological processes of sex. Although it is important to teach about the physical aspects of relationships, it is incomplete without education on healthy relationships as well. When teens are ignorant of how to form healthy relationships, including ones that involve sex, they are more vulnerable to risky sexual behavior and unhealthy relationships.

Relationship education has proven to help decrease the teen pregnancy rate and increase teens' communication skills, especially for teens of minority backgrounds. This is because minority teens are at higher risk for pregnancy as adolescents than their non-minority peers. There could also be cultural factors in some minority groups that would be better addressed through a relationship-based intervention than a strictly biological perspective. In a study of Latina teens, researchers found that better communication skills taught through RE were needed to address the teen pregnancy rates in a cultural context (Alzate et al., 2018). The relational intervention helped the teens communicate better with their parents, which gave them greater support in avoiding risky sexual activities. According to the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (2017), relationship education can also help teens communicate better with romantic partners about avoiding risky sex.

RE has been shown to be more effective than other common approaches to teaching teens about sexuality and pregnancy prevention, such as programs that are fear-based or focus solely on negative consequences of teen pregnancy. In fact, in one study, teens enrolled in a healthy relationships RE curriculum had only a 3.5% rate of pregnancy after one year compared to a traditional biologically-oriented teen pregnancy prevention program (6.1%) and a control group (6.5%) (Barbee, et al., 2022). The authors suggested that this could be because RE encourages youth to consider their goals and aspirations for the future and equips them with the skills to determine how to plan their family formation accordingly. Providing more comprehensive sex education in the form of relationship education to high schoolers has the potential to be the least costly and most effective method of prevention for high financial and social costs associated with teen pregnancy.

Incarceration

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with over 2.1 million people currently incarcerated (Gramlich, 2021). Just operating the prison system costs \$81 billion per year, and the emotional and monetary cost in the lives of families and those affected is beyond the scope of measurement (Jensen, 2021). Among those affected are the 1.25 million children coping with an absent and incarcerated mother or father (Wang, 2022). Children of incarcerated parents are often sent to live with other family members or foster parents, encountering a variety of negative experiences and stressors that can have profound effects on their developmental trajectories.

Common effects include economic hardship, emotional distress, various behavioral problems, stigmatization by peers, and an increased risk of crime involvement themselves (Wang, 2022). Issues like

crime involvement often lead to future reliance on public assistance systems, commonly during the rehabilitation process, which creates an additional social cost. Those with an incarcerated spouse or partner are also negatively impacted emotionally and financially and can experience adverse health outcomes (Mbamba et al., 2022; Schlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). In addition to negatively impacting families, mass incarceration affects community health both economically and physically by removing members from the workforce while simultaneously creating a strain on public resources (Gifford, 2019). By disrupting families, incarceration can undermine public safety, contributing to the cycles of poverty, crime, and recidivism in America.

Research shows that healthy relationships can contribute to a reduction in crime and incarceration rates by providing a stable and supportive environment where individuals are less likely to feel isolated and disconnected (Cobbina et al., 2012, King et al., 2007). Romantic relationships act as a protective factor against criminal behavior by providing emotional support, motivation for desistance, and promoting prosocial behavior, especially for men (Capaldi et al., 2008; Cobbina et al., 2012; Wyse et al., 2014). For both men and women, being married decreases the chances of a criminal lifestyle and future incarceration by 35% (Sampson et al., 2006). Although there is much complexity regarding the root causes of incarceration, there is evidence that relationship education can aid in reducing crime, incarceration, and recidivism. This in turn will benefit children, families, and society.



RE is one way to help individuals learn the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in their romantic relationships. RE is effective in increasing couple functioning, communication skills, ability to listen, and marital satisfaction and quality (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Individuals learn how to manage conflicts in constructive ways, communicate effectively, listen actively, and solve problems collaboratively.



Participants who complete RE programs also report improved parenting skills, increased involvement in their children's lives, and decreased conflict with their spouse or partner (Accordino & Gurney, 1993; Einhorn et al., 2008; Harcourt et al., 2017). In addition, a healthy parent relationship can provide a protective factor against a child's involvement in crime (Wildeman & Wang, 2017). This is especially true for low-income families, as they are more likely to experience higher levels of family conflict, parental stress, and instability, which can increase the risk of criminal behavior (Chavira et al., 2018; Cox & Shirer, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2013). Reducing levels of crime involvement through this

type of prevention work can significantly reduce the number of people who are incarcerated and therefore reduce the cost of maintaining prisons and jails.

In addition to helping diminish criminal behavior, RE has been employed as secondary prevention in prison settings. Multiple RE programs have shown positive results (Accordino & Guerny, 1998; Cox & Shirer, 2009; Einhorn et al., 2008; Harcourt et al., 2017; Tadros et al., 2021). Offenders show increases in empathy and decreases in rates of depression and physical and emotional abuse. Studies show the benefits of RE also reduce recidivism by providing incarcerated individuals with the tools they need to build healthier relationships and make prosocial life choices once released from prison (Accordino & Gurney, 1993; Einhorn et al., 2008; Harcourt et al., 2017).

Domestic Violence

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a serious issue in the United States, resulting in nearly 1,300 deaths and 5.3 million incidents each year and touching the lives of 1 out of every 3 women over a lifetime (Emory Department of Psychiatry, 2023). Its impact on society and the cycles of violence that it perpetuates has escalated the issue into a national public health crisis that must be addressed (CDC, 2021). The demand for services often exceeds the resources available, and it is estimated that domestic violence (DV) has a national economic cost of \$12 billion dollars every year (Huecker et al., 2022). There may be an additional cost of \$3-5 billion for absenteeism due to violence, court dates, and stalking, and \$10 billion for healthcare costs (Brown, 2008).

Even when the violence is only perpetuated between adults, children still face negative outcomes, and families suffer the consequences. Just witnessing IPV has been correlated

with poor sleeping habits, aggressive behavior, substance abuse, delinquency, and early sexual behavior among children (Stiles, 2002). Children who grow up in environments of abuse and violence are more likely to grow up and choose the same types of situations for themselves, creating cycles that can last for generations. When left unchecked, these outcomes compound with time. Without intervention, these rates and numbers will continue to increase and leave their mark on an even greater number of individuals.

Because of the potential for continuous future effects, it is important to research and implement methods that have been shown to reduce or prevent IPV. Research on preventing IPV shows that RE can be particularly effective in reducing the number of couples who are involved in IPV, which in turn reduces the number of future relationships that engage in IPV.

Extensive research on the relationship between relationship education and IPV has shown that RE tends to be especially effective for couples who are engaging in low-level, reciprocal IPV and/or low-income couples, who often need additional support in dealing with stress (Halford et al., 2011; Heyman et al., 2020; Hurless & Cottone, 2018; Karantzas et al., 2023; Stith et al., 2022). Many of these couples have a desire to improve their relationship and remain together, but they need to be taught the skills that will enable them to achieve their goals. Many may be surprised to learn that the couples who fit this criteria are already showing up for RE. In fact, up to 45% of participants may report struggling with IPV in their relationship. However, many of these programs could address IPV more effectively (Bradford et al., 2015; Bradford et al., 2011; Halford et al., 2011; Stith et al., 2022).



RE can also be implemented to educate youth about the warning signs of DV (Heard et al., 2019; Rogers et al., 2019), which can further prevent the costs associated with domestic violence. Youth who have previously been exposed to DV are more likely to perpetuate it in their adult lives or to see violence as acceptable. Relationship education programs aimed at teaching youth about DV have been found to change teens' attitudes about violence and increase awareness (Antle et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2019).

Policy Recommendations

Relationship education is a valuable and, as of yet, underutilized resource. It can be used for couples and individuals in diverse situations and has been shown to be effective for strengthening relationships, producing many benefits in the lives of those who participate in RE courses and their children. (For a research summary of the effectiveness of RE, see: Hawkins et al., 2022, Markman et al., 2022, Stanley et al., 2020.)

In each of the sections above, we reported on how RE was able to - or showed clear potential to - reduce the costs of common, expensive social problems. In light of this information, we believe that relationship education should be implemented on a broader scale. Currently, the primary public support for these programs comes from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the form of the Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) initiative (Hawkins, 2019b). This initiative should continue to be funded and supported. However, more can be done. Broadening funding for RE to other federal agencies that address the social problems outlined above has the potential to reach vulnerable populations and make a greater impact. For instance, within the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) are other agencies and programs, such as the Children's Bureau, Office of Child Support, and Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative. Including support for RE through these kinds of funding streams, perhaps with programs tailored to specific populations with unique needs, would expand the reach of RE. The Department of Justice could promote RE programs for offenders of domestic violence and to prepare parents for their return to civilian life. And the Department of Education could prioritize RE preventative programs in high schools, perhaps in conjunction with efforts to improve teen mental health. Broadening funding for RE creates the potential for more targeted and effective efforts to reduce the prevalence of expensive social problems.

State governments should join the federal agencies in promoting and funding RE courses. Approximately 90% of funding comes from the federal government in the form of grants (Hawkins, 2011). Because states set laws that directly address marriage and divorce, they should also play an active role in the development and implementation of policies that promote RE. Federal TANF dollars that come to states each year to help poor families can and should be used to strengthen two-parent families and marriage and other state funding streams may be available to support RE.

Focusing on increased funding and including all levels of government has the potential to create relationship education programs that have greater reach and reduce the public costs associated with a variety of problems. The benefits that have been observed by participants of current RE programs could become more widespread and have an even greater effect. Prioritizing the health of family relationships and the quality of home environments should be a top priority for lawmakers, and this is a cost-effective way of doing so.

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