

For comments or questions, contact: Stan Weed
Institute for Research and Evaluation
(801) 966-5644.

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Assessing the Impact of Community Marriage Policies on U.S. County Divorce Rates
Paul James Birch, Stan E. Weed, and Joseph A. Olsen

Executive Summary

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Family disintegration has long been known to produce negative effects on children, adults, communities and societies. Communities and societies are healthier and more productive when the proportion of intact families is higher (Doherty et al. 2002). Numerous private, professional, religious, and government agencies have tackled this problem with more vigor in recent years. Coalitions of such agencies, referred to as Community Marriage Initiatives, have emerged as one of the major thrusts. This report summarizes a study being published in the *Family Relations* journal.

One of the earliest of such endeavors was the Marriage Savers program (see Parke & Ooms, 2002), launched in 1986 by founder Mike McMannus with a group of concerned faith community leaders in Modesto, California. The premise was that a large majority of marriages occur in church settings (83% according to Hart, 2003), and that religious leaders should be more involved in strengthening marriage in their congregations. By January, 2004, the clergy of 183 cities and towns in 40 states had adopted a Community Marriage Policy® (CMP) with the laudable goal of reducing divorce rates among those married in area churches. Most of these were created after 1996 when McMannus formed the non-profit organization, Marriage Savers, which helps clergy organize CMPs. The question for researcher Stan E. Weed and his colleagues at the Institute for Research and Evaluation was whether or not this strategy really made any difference. And how could one develop a credible answer to that question? With funding support from the Department of Justice, through the National Fatherhood Initiative, the researchers set out to address those questions.

The Program

What is a Community Marriage Policy, what does it do, and how does it operate at the local level? Most Community Marriage Policies involve local clergy developing a community marriage policy in which they pledge, publicly and in writing, to take five steps to revitalize marriage:

- **Require rigorous marriage preparation** of at least four months during which couples take a premarital inventory and talk through the relational issues it surfaces with trained mentor couples, who also teach couple communication skills.
- **Renew existing marriages** with an annual enrichment retreat.
- **Restore troubled marriages** by training couples whose marriages once nearly failed, to mentor couples currently in crisis
- **Reconcile the separated** with a course conducted with a same gender support partner
- **Revive step families** by creating Step Family Support Groups for parents in remarriages with children.

As implied in the above components, couples in healthy marriages are enlisted to be a “mentor couple” to help others at critical stages of marriage. To date, about 3,000 mentor couples have been personally trained by Mike and Harriet McMannus. Numerous others have become involved through local congregational efforts.

Evaluation Challenges

Several challenges faced the researchers as they sought to address the questions of program impact. First, and surprisingly, the Federal Government discontinued collecting divorce data at the county level in the mid 1990s and stopped paying states to do so. As a result, the researcher had to contact most states and individual counties directly in order to create a data base for U.S. counties from 1989 to the present. In a few cases, the county data was not available or not reliable, which meant that some CMP counties had to be excluded from the analysis. For example, some states record filed divorces rather than finalized divorces. Second, information about program implementation was not available from all CMP counties. We are sure, however, that the level of implementation is wide ranging – from those counties who did little beyond the original signing to those who followed the signing with a serious and lasting effort. Furthermore, since national divorce rates are already declining in most U.S. counties, additional research had to be done to assess the effect of community Marriage Policies in the context of that overall decline, and program effects need to be assessed in the context of that existing decline.

In reality, the deck is stacked against finding a positive program effect. The effort depends on local volunteers with a high turnover. Local pastors also change frequently. Impact on county level data would require a fairly large proportions of congregations in that county signing on, and program implementation varies widely in its quality. Training of mentor couples did not begin in earnest until 1998. In 1999 when the 100th CMP was signed, Marriage Savers introduced its’ *Manual to Create a Marriage Savers Congregation*, an indication that the program was still evolving and is relatively new. Recorded divorce rates lag considerably behind the intervention, making divorce rate changes harder to detect in a relatively new program. And, CMPs were adopted mostly at the city level but the data were only available at the county level, embedding the effect in a larger population than that which would be affected by the policy. Finding a significant program effect under these conditions would be surprising.

The Research Questions & Results

The first, simplest, and most direct question was whether the divorce rate decline was greater after the CMP was signed than the existing decline before the signing. The researchers examined divorce rates for five years before clergy signed Community Marriage Policies and up to seven years after signing – in 114 communities in 122 counties. We measured the “slope” or the annual decrease in the divorce rate over five years before the CMP was signed and found the divorce rate was falling by .084 divorce rate point per year (that is, for example, from 5 divorces per 1,000 people to 4.916.) Our first hypothesis was that the slope should accelerate after clergy signed the CMP. In fact, that proved to be the case. The annual decline of the divorce rate accelerated from .084 to .144, with the divorce decline slope dropping almost twice as fast on average as before the Community Marriage Policies were signed.

A more rigorous test involved a comparison between counties having Community Marriage Policies with matched counties in the same state who do not have such policies. The Institute wanted to identify counties whose pre-CMP slope was most similar to that of CMP counties. To do so, it was necessary to look at data from all 3,141 U.S. counties and select comparison counties in each state whose divorce rate was at the same level and declining at

virtually the same rate as the CMP counties prior to CMP signing. The divorce rate decline of comparison counties in the pre-CMP years, on average, was .095 divorce points per year (vs. .084 in CMP counties). Our second hypothesis was that the decline after the CMP was signed would have accelerated more in counties which adopted a Community Marriage Policy than in the comparison counties without the intervention. This hypothesis was also supported by the data. As noted above, in CMP counties the divorce rate fell .084 before the CMP and .144 afterward. But in the matched counties, the slope of the divorce rate decline actually fell from .095 per year to .06 per year. This is a statistically significant difference ($b = -.095$, $p = .007$, $df = 1852$). We concluded from this that the CMP counties were experiencing a greater decline in the divorce rate than the comparison counties.

In more familiar terms, counties with a Community Marriage Policy® had an 8.6% decline in their divorce rates over four years, while the comparison counties registered a 5.6% decline. If those rates are projected for seven years, CMP communities enjoy a 17.5% decline in the divorce rate vs. 9.4% in comparison counties. Thus, Community Marriage Policies counties have a decline in the divorce rate that is nearly double that of control communities. The levels of impact would likely be greater if more communities had higher levels of participation and implementation – that is, if more churches and synagogues signed on and more mentor couples trained.

The Institute estimates that 31,000 divorces are being avoided in 114 cities/counties with a Community Marriage Policy. Since clergy and community leaders have now created 183 Community Marriage Policies, that number could be perhaps 40,000 to 50,000 marriages being saved.

The contrast between the CMP cities/counties and matched counties can be seen in graph below.

(Insert Figure 3 on page 40)

Alternative Explanations

We examined other possible explanations for this data, none of which discredited the basic conclusion that CMP counties showed a greater decline in the divorce rate than the matched comparison counties. For example, we looked at factors which often predict divorce rates to some degree, such as the percentage of the population which is Catholic (who tend to experience lower divorce rates), percent urban, percent poverty, percent who cohabit, etc. Controlling for these factors did not change the results. We also examined whether the marriage rates were different in CMP counties compared to paired or control cities. No evidence could be found that the observed differences in divorce were attributable to differentially changing marriage rates. As Institute President Stan Weed told a reporter from his local paper, the Salt Lake Tribune,

“We’ve looked at this data 100 different ways and the bottom line for us is that a Community Marriage Policy signing and the related activities associated with it bring down the divorce rate and creates a stronger culture for marriage.”

Conclusion

The overall effect is modest but statistically significant and promising. This effect is the result of several (36 policies) doing quite well, another 29 showing weaker but positive results, and the rest not doing better than their comparison counties. But on average, the policy counties did better than the matched comparison counties. The simple explanation of the results is that Community Marriage Policies are successful and lead to reductions in divorce rates. This

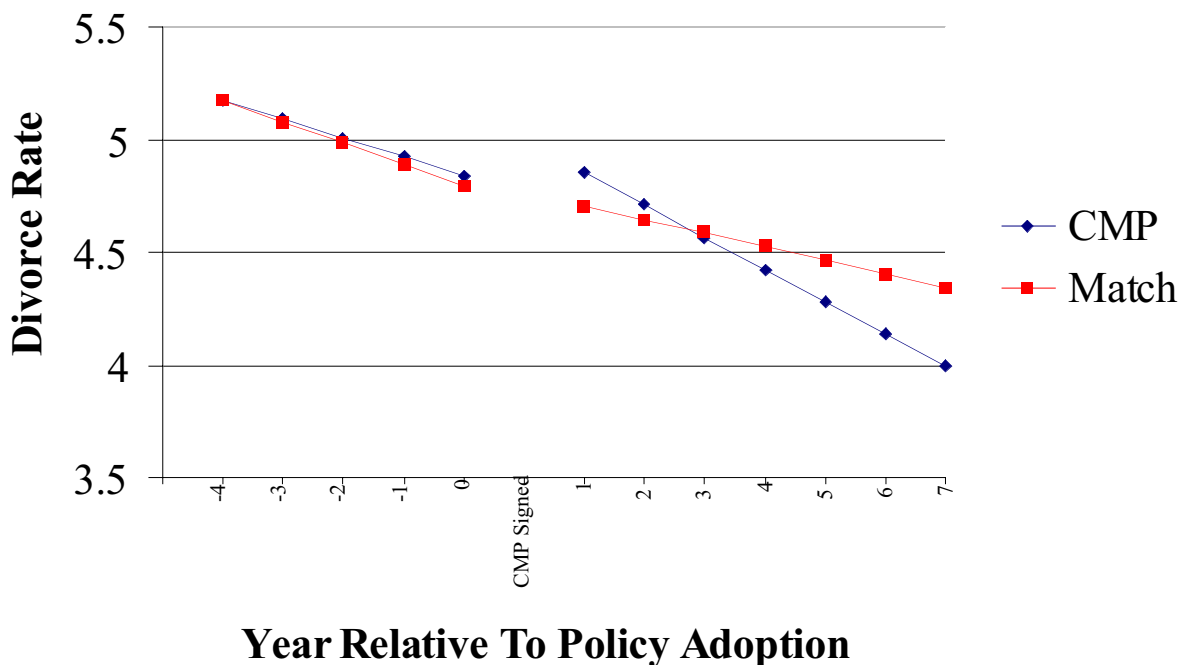
conclusion is further strengthened by the fact that numerous communities have adopted the Policy at different points in time (from 1986 through 2000), and in geographically dispersed areas of the country.

Lacking complete and accurate data on level and quality of implementation, we cannot determine how much of the effect can be attributed to the Community Marriage Policies. What we can say is that something is happening as a result of local community effort and initiative, the approach looks promising, and further research is warranted to establish more specifically which program components over what time period best account for reducing divorce rates. Local communities with reasonable effort and good programs can make a difference in divorce rates.

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Parke, M. & Ooms, T. (2002). *More than a dating service? State activities designed to strengthen and promote marriage*. Center for Law and Social Policy. Washington, D.C.

CMP and Comparison County Divorce Rates



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