

Sticking with it

Canadian research on how marriage benefits children and adults

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every marriage hits rough patches. And it's understandable that couples in this state wonder whether persevering is worth it.

Rarely advertised, the research shows that marriage benefits men, women and children, as well as the broader society. Acknowledging this research may contribute to building a culture in which couples seek help more readily and in which marriages thrive.

The Institute of Marriage and Family Canada examines the aggregate statistics and research pertaining to marriage and family in a public policy context. That said, the personal pain many divorcing Canadians experience is deeply concerning to us.

Therefore, a couple of caveats are in order: A person's destiny is not controlled or determined solely by the kind of family they grew up in. Children from all types of families can and do thrive. Parents and children can, thankfully, recover from divorce or other forms of family breakdown. Neither do we presume everyone ought to be married.

This paper's scope is limited to presenting solid Canadian research showing economic, social and health benefits for adults and children. It is hard to deny that the family we're raised in influences who we become. And it is hard to deny the pain of family breakdown, thereby making avoiding it an undeniable private and public good.

Quality research should not be confined to academic towers. It is our hope that research showing the benefits of marriage might encourage those Canadians who are in non-abusive, low-conflict, but troubled marriages, to persevere.

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THE FINDINGS FOR ADULTS

Marriage remains the most stable family form

Marriage, in and of itself, is no guarantee of stability. But if you want to have the best chance of a lifetime love, getting married without living together beforehand is the way to get it.

Research suggests that on average, marriage is more stable than cohabitation.¹ Social scientists continue to debate

whether this is because of the nature of cohabitation itself or the nature of people who cohabit.

A 2004 study published in *the Journal of Marriage and Family* found that married Canadian couples outside Quebec who lived together before marriage were about 1.5 times more likely to separate after the birth of their first child than couples who married without living together beforehand.²

Children born to cohabiting parents who didn't eventually go on to marry were roughly three times more likely to

1. Ménard, F. (2011). What makes it fall apart? The determinants of the dissolution of marriages and common-law unions in Canada. *McGill Sociological Review*, Vol. 2, pp. 59-60. Retrieved from <http://www.mcgill.ca/msr/volume2/article4>

2. Le Bourdais, C. and Lapierre-Adamcyk, É. (2004). Changes in conjugal life in Canada: is cohabitation progressively replacing marriage? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 66, No. 4, p. 937.

experience family breakdown compared to children born to married parents who didn't cohabit before marriage according to a 1998 Statistics Canada study.³

The same study examined which children experienced family breakdown by age 10. The percentages of children were:

- » 13.6 percent of children born to married parents who didn't cohabit before marrying
- » 25.4 percent of children born to cohabiting parents who later married
- » 28.4 percent of children born to married parents who previously cohabited
- » 63 percent of children born to cohabiting parents who didn't marry⁴

A 2000 Statistics Canada study revealed that, contrary to prevailing public opinion, treating cohabitation as trial marriage actually increases the risk of subsequent divorce.⁵

A 2002 Statistics Canada study examined the stability of first unions of women aged 30 to 59. Women in cohabiting first unions were twice as likely to separate compared to women in married first unions.⁶

A 2005 paper published in *Canadian Studies in Population* found that the risk of divorce within the first ten years of marriage is twice as high for couples who cohabited before marriage compared to those who did not cohabit before marriage.⁷

Marriage is an economic good

Marriage is connected with economic health and contributes to the building of wealth. At the same time, money can influence people's choices about whether or not to get married.

The potential for two incomes certainly partially explains why married families are less likely to experience low income compared to lone-parent families, but this is not the full story.

Statistics Canada examined the ratio between family income and basic economic need. The study found that between 1981 and 1997, the ratio improved for two-parent families but worsened for female lone-parent families.⁸

Divorce can have a devastating impact on personal finances, especially for women. A 2009 study found that the median income for women decreases 29 percent in the year after a divorce and takes four years post-divorce to recover to about eighty percent of pre-divorce income.⁹ The decrease in median income for men within a year of divorce is seven percent, with men recovering about 95 percent of their pre-divorce income four years after divorce.¹⁰

A 2013 study published in the *Population Change and Lifecourse Discussion Papers Series* examined low income in Canada in 2011. It found that about 21 percent of female lone-parent families experience low income compared to about five percent of two-parent families with children.¹¹

3. Marciel-Gratton, N. (1998). Growing up with mom and dad? The intricate family life courses of Canadian children. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. p. 16. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-566-x/89-566-x1995001-eng.pdf>

4. *Ibid.*

5. Le Bourdais, C., Neill, G., and Turcotte, P. (2000). The changing face of conjugal relationships. *Canadian Social Trends*, no. 56, p. 15. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/11-008-x1999004-eng.pdf>

6. Statistics Canada. (2002, July). Changing conjugal life in Canada. General Social Survey-Cycle 15. Ottawa: Minister of Industry. Chart 5, p. 6. Retrieved from <http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection/Statcan/89-576-X/89-576-XIE2001001.pdf>

7. Budinskip, R.A. and Trovato, F. (2005). The effect of premarital cohabitation on marital stability over the duration of marriage. *Canadian Studies in Population*, Vol. 32, No. 1, p. 84. Retrieved from <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/csp/article/view/15943/12748>

8. Kerr, D. and Bélanger. (2000). Family and demographic changes and the economic well-being of preschool-age children in Canada, 1981-1997, p. 159.

9. Gadalla, T.M., (2009). Impact of marital dissolution on men's and women's incomes: a longitudinal study. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 50, p. 60.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Roderic, B., Liu, J. and Ravanera, Z. R. (2013). Family diversity and inequality: The Canadian case. *Population Change and Lifecourse Strategic Knowledge Cluster Discussion Paper Series*, Vol. 1, Iss. 1, Article 7, table 7, p. 12. Retrieved from <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/pclc/vol1/iss1/7>

Some scholars suggest that the post-divorce financial prospects for men have become more difficult because of increased paternal and joint custody arrangements. More women are engaged in the workforce than in the past and legal changes to child support in Canada may have lessened the negative financial impact for women, though a post-divorce gender income disparity remains.¹²

Marriage is safer than other family forms

Violence between partners is generally less common among married partners than it is among those who live in common-law relationships. Of course, any level of violence is unacceptable.

A 2004 study examining a five-year period found that women living in common-law relationships were more than twice as likely to experience violence as women in married relationships.¹³

Another study by the same author determined that the risk of violence against women in 2004 was 1.5 times greater in cohabiting partnerships than in married relationships. Previously, the risk for cohabiting women had been 2.5 times greater than for married women in 1993. The reduction in the gap appears to be due to a decline in the risk of violence against women in cohabiting relationships as the rate of violence in marriages held steady during this time.¹⁴

THE FINDINGS FOR CHILDREN

There is hardly a tougher job on earth than raising children. While children from all family types can thrive, the research shows definitive differences by family structure.

Children from married, biological parent homes have fewer negative behavioural outcomes

A 1998 Statistics Canada study found that family status is a stronger predictor than low-income status of the likelihood of hyper-activity, conduct disorder, and emotional disorder among children.¹⁵

A 1999 Statistics Canada study measured aggressive behaviour in children including physical and indirect aggression and anti-social behaviour. The study found that about 33 percent of 8 to 11 year-old children in lone-parent homes displayed aggressive behaviour compared to less than 20 percent of their peers from two-parent families.¹⁶

Children of lone-parents were twice as likely to be involved in delinquent behaviour compared to children in two-parent families.¹⁷

Children who experience family change are at a higher risk of emotional and behaviour problems. According to a 2003 longitudinal study published in *Policy Studies Journal*, these behaviours include hyperactivity, fighting, hurting others and damaging property. Also included are emotional disorders like depression and anxiety.¹⁸

12. Gadalla, 2009, p. 56.

13. Brownridge, D.A. (2004). Understanding women's heightened risk of violence in common-law unions. *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 10, No. 6, p. 635.

14. Brownridge, D.A. (2008). The elevated risk for violence against cohabiting women: A comparison of three nationally representative surveys of Canada. *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 14, No. 7, p. 815.

15. Dooley, M.D., Curtis, L., Lipman, E.L., and Feeny, D.H. (1998). Child psychiatric disorder, poor school performance and social problems: the roles of family structure and low-income. In M. Corak (ed), *Labour Markets, Social Institutions, and the Future of Canada's Children*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. p. 109. Retrieved from <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/olc-cel/olc.action?ObjId=89-553-X19980014023&ObjType=47&lang=en&limit=0>

16. Stevenson, K. (1999). Family characteristics of problem kids. *Canadian Social Trends*, Statistics Canada catalogue num. 11-008, p. 3, 5.

17. Stevenson, 1999, p. 5.

18. Ram, B. and Hou, F. (2003). Changes in family structure and child outcomes: Roles of economic and familial resources. *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 3, pp. 313-314.

Children in families with two original parents were least likely to experience issues. Children in families that transitioned from a two-parent to lone-parent family and/or from a lone-parent family into a stepfamily were at greatest risk of experiencing emotional and behavioural problems.¹⁹

A 2014 study published in the *International Journal of Behavioral Development* stated that children living with cohabiting biological parents before turning one had much higher levels of hyperactivity and lack of impulse control four to five years later than those living with married, biological parents.²⁰

Children from married parent families have fewer mental health complications

A healthy marriage may have positive implications for children's mental health.

A 2005 paper published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* compared mental health outcomes of children whose parents stay married and those whose parents divorce. It reported that children of divorce displayed more mental health problems, including anxiety, depression and antisocial behaviour, than children whose parents stay married. The increased mental health problems appeared to be present pre-divorce and increased post-divorce.²¹

This study shows that parental conflict leading to divorce is a factor in childhood difficulties in addition to the divorce itself.

A paper published in the *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*

found that children in step and lone-parent families are slightly more likely to experience difficulties such as emotional distress, anxiety and hyperactivity than their counterparts in two parent families.²² The authors note that parental life experience and educational attainment may also be correlated with family structure, contributing to child outcomes.

Children from married, biological parent families have better educational outcomes

An unstable home life can impact a child's school experience.

A 2009 study published in the *Canadian Journal of Sociology* found that over 75 percent of children from stable homes graduated from high school, compared to 40 percent of children who experienced three or more changes in family structure.²³

A 2012 study concluded that "marriage and biological parentage is the crucial distinction between families" in terms of the educational attainment of children.²⁴ Children from married, biological parent families are more likely to pursue post-secondary education than children from cohabiting and step-parent families.²⁵

A 2010 study found that children who experience the dissolution of their parents' cohabiting relationship have a greater negative outlook on their academic ability. Children of divorce also had an increased negative outlook on their academic ability, but to a lesser degree.²⁶

19. Ram & Hou, 2003, pp. 317-319.

20. Gosselin, J., Romano, E., Bell, T., Babchishin, L., Hudon-ven der Buhs, I., Gagné, A. and Gosselin, N. (2014). Canadian portrait of changes in family structure and preschool children's behavioral outcomes. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, Vol. 38, Iss. 6, p. 523.

21. Strohschein, L. (2005). Parental divorce and child mental health trajectories. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 67, No. 5, p. 1297.

22. Kerr, D. (2004). Family transformations and the well-being of children: Recent evidence from Canadian longitudinal data. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 84.

23. Strohschein, L., Roos, N. and Brownell, M. (2009). Family structure histories and high school completion: evidence from a population-based registry. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 34, Iss. 1, pp. 92-93

24. Wu, Z., Schimmele, C.M., Hou, F., and Oulette, N. (2012). Family structure and university enrollment and completion. Presented at 2012 Population Association of America Annual Meeting. p. 19 Retrieved from <http://paa2012.princeton.edu/papers/120858>

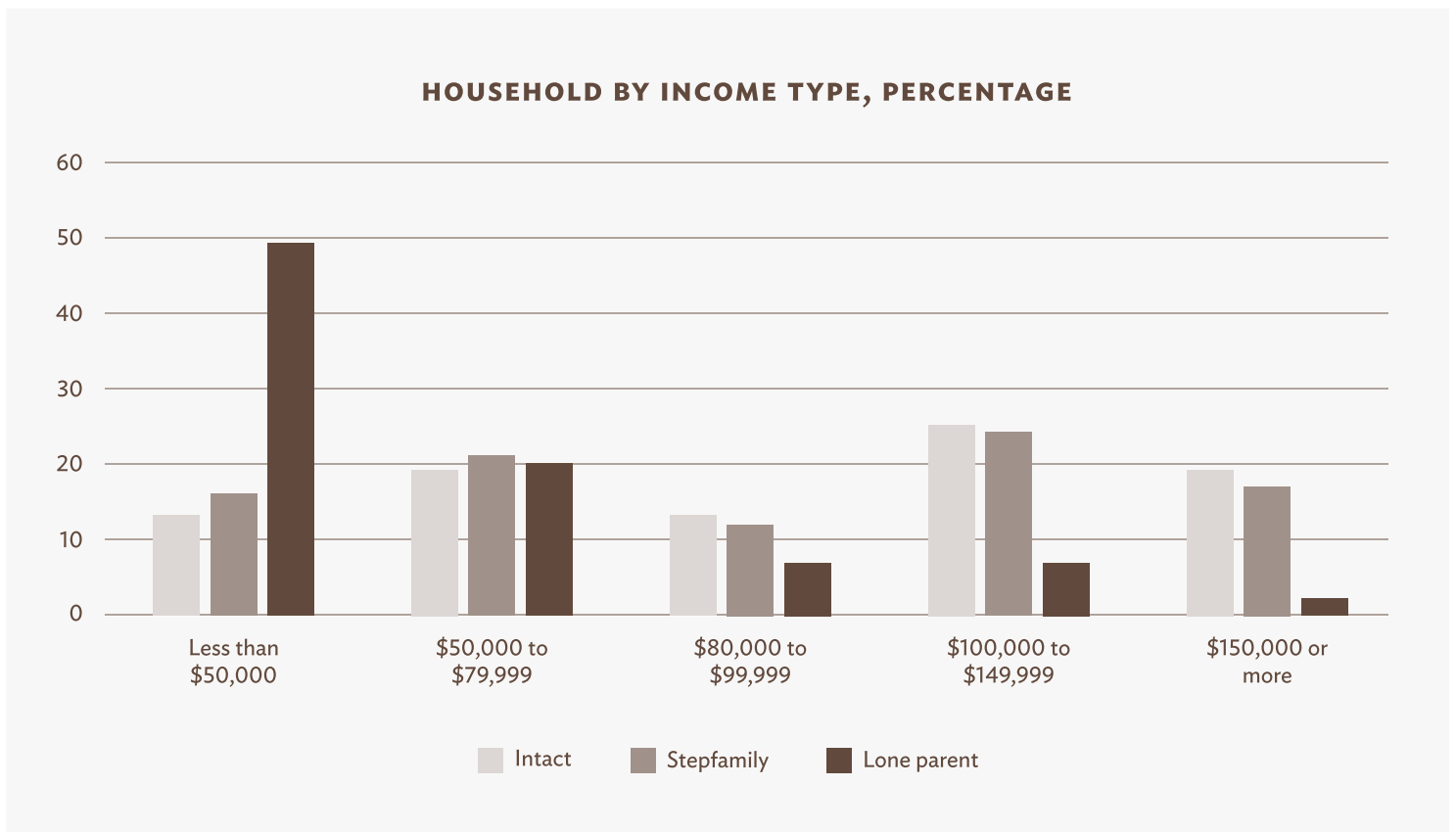
25. *Ibid.*

26. Wu, Z., Costigan, C., Hou, F., Kampen, R. and Schimmele, C.M. (2010). Change and stability in cohabitation and children's educational adjustment. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 4, p. 575.

Married, biological parent families are less likely to live in poverty

Generally speaking, children in lone-parent families are more likely to be living in poverty than children in intact two-parent families.

The impact of low-income on childhood difficulties is less severe for intact families than lone-parent and stepfamily homes.²⁷

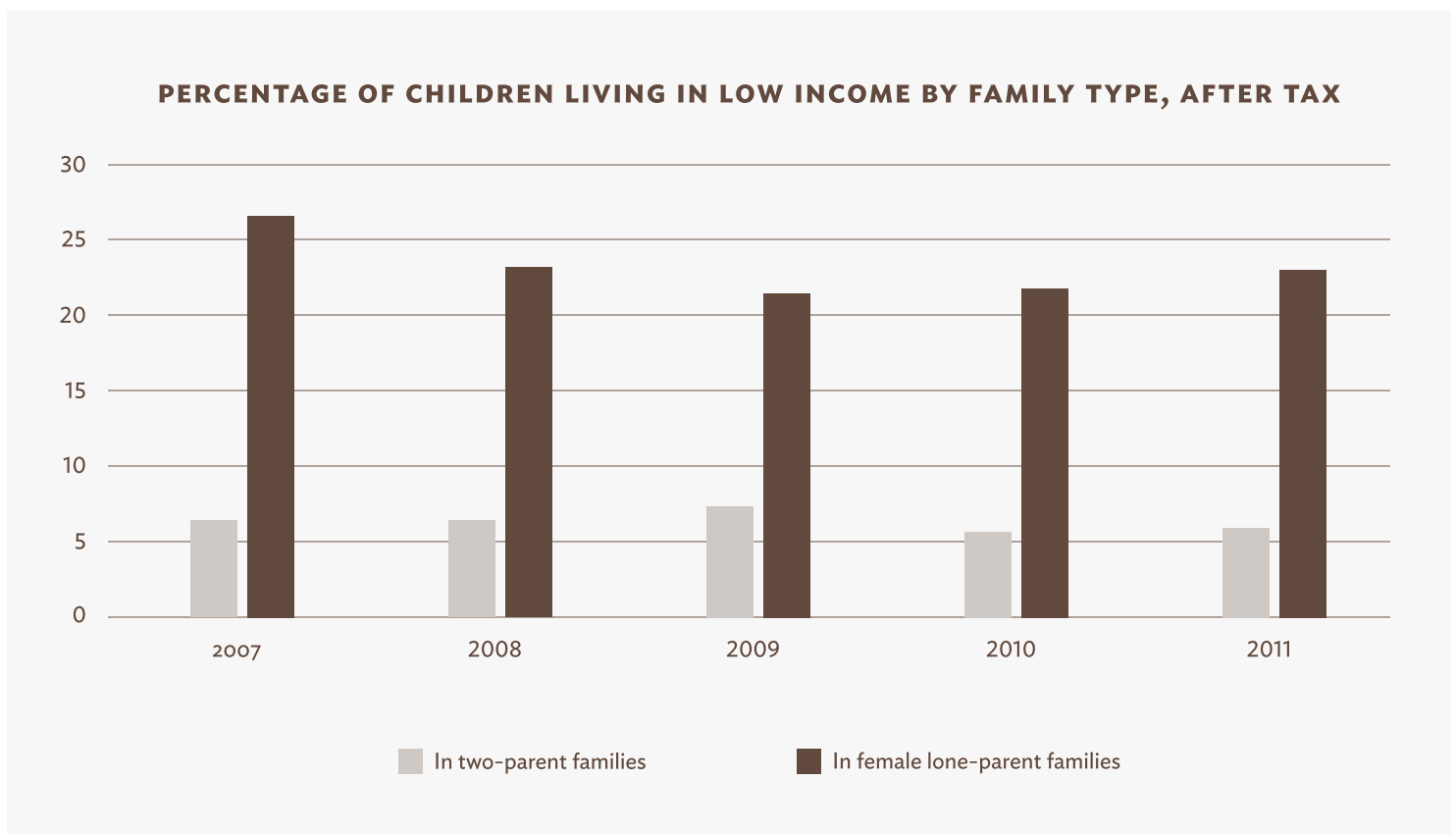


Source: Vézina, M. (2012). Being a parent in a stepfamily: A profile, Table 3.

27. Kerr, D. and Beaujot, R. (2002). Family relations, low income, and child outcomes: A comparison of Canadian children in intact-, step-, and lone-parent families. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, Vol. 43, No. 2, p. 144. The difficulties include hyperactivity, anxiety and depression, physical aggression, verbal aggression and cruelty to others and vandalism, theft.

A 2012 Statistics Canada study of the economic status of Canadian parents found that stepfamilies were not significantly different from intact families in terms of their income.²⁸

A 2013 Statistics Canada report shows that 5.9 percent of children under age 18 who live in two-parent families experience low income.²⁹



Source: Statistics Canada. (2013). Persons in low income after tax

28. Vézina, M. (2012). Being a parent in a stepfamily: A profile. See Table 3. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-650-x/89-650-x2012002-eng.pdf>

29. Statistics Canada. (2013). Persons in low income after tax. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/famil19a-eng.htm>

CONCLUSION

Marriage often isn't easy, but it provides many benefits for adults and children which then benefit society. Marriages dissolve for a variety of reasons and certainly not all marriages are safe and healthy. Yet a 2001 Justice report estimated that the majority of divorces in Canada were low conflict.³⁰ So the question is, could more marriages in Canada be restored before divorce?

A 2002 study examining personal unhappiness and divorce found that two-thirds of unhappy married adults who choose to remain in a marriage reported being happy in their marriage five years later.³¹ There is hope for many unhappy marriages.

What can be done to help marriages survive and thrive in Canada? An earlier IMFC release explored an emerging program called Marital First Responders that equips people to respond to a developing relationship crisis within their own social circle.³² The program shows early signs of success.

American sociologists Andrew Cherlin and Brad Wilcox have suggested that public education campaigns highlighting the benefits of family stability could have a similar influence as anti-smoking campaigns.³³

The role of government in promoting marriage is an obvious point of contention. The U.S. federal government has funded the Healthy Marriage Initiative which has had fairly modest returns.³⁴ It's a program Canadians may want to continue to observe.

Annual national marriage and divorce rates are no longer collected in Canada. Ensuring good data on marriage and divorce will be important going forward to better understand the relational health of families in Canada. Good data has implications for understanding social trends and the development of effective public policy.

Marriage is not a silver bullet for social and relational issues. But marriage does provide benefits for children and adults, and Canadians should be aware of these benefits as they make decisions about their own family lives. 🍁

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31. Waite, L., Browning, D., Doherty, W., Gallagher, M., Luo, Y. and Stanley, S. (2002). Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages. New York: Institute for American Values, p. 5. Retrieved from http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/does_divorce_make_people_happy.pdf
32. Wynia, K. (2014) Marital first responders. eReview, Vol. 14, No. 22. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Retrieved from http://www.imfcanada.org/sites/default/files/eReview_Dec_17_14.pdf
33. Cherlin, A. & Wilcox, W. B. (2011). The marginalization of marriage in Middle America. CCF Brief #46. Washington D.C: Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution, p. 5. Retrieved from http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2011/8/10-strengthen-marriage-wilcox-cherlin/0810_strengthen_marriage_wilcox_cherlin.pdf
34. Hawkins, A. (2013). The forever initiative: a feasible public policy agenda to help couples form and sustain healthy marriages and relationships. A presentation to the Heritage Foundation, November 22, 2013, Washington, D.C