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Families and marriage hold a country together

A review of Charles Murray's *Coming apart. The state of white America, 1960 – 2010*

Murray, C. (2012). *Coming apart. The state of white America, 1960 – 2010*. New York: Crown Forum.

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American libertarian political scientist Charles Murray has once again stirred up controversy, this time with his new book *Coming Apart; The state of white America, 1960-2010*. Murray caused previous controversy when he and coauthor Richard J. Herrnstein released their New York Times bestseller, *The Bell Curve* in 1994. In that book they explored how IQ influenced class structure in the United States.

In his new book, Murray argues that over the last fifty years the United States has witnessed a class divide along socioeconomic lines that is unique from previous class divisions in American history. He argues that there is a widening gap in values and how Americans organize their lives.

To illustrate his point, Murray examines white America as a way of highlighting the issues contributing to the divide beyond factors of race. He shows readers the extent of the divide between the new lower class that is a subset of the working class, and the new upper class that is part of the upper middle class.

Students of the family should be particularly interested in Murray's thesis because he believes that how Americans organize their family lives contributes to the growing class divide.

Belmont and Fishtown

To illustrate the growing gap in the U.S., Murray creates two fictional towns. Belmont represents the new upper class where everyone has a bachelor's or graduate degree and works in prestigious professions or management. Residents of Belmont benefit from the knowledge based economy that rewards higher education.

The people of Fishtown, on the other hand, have a high school diploma at best and work in service jobs, blue-collar employment or low-level white-collar jobs. Economic differences have always persisted, but Murray argues that common values are no longer shared as they once were.

Marriage and children

The success of limited self-government relies on the virtue of the people. Murray argues that the American founders esteemed the virtues of honesty and industriousness and that they recognized that the family was the institution that imparted morality and healthy values. He notes that over the last fifty years, these values are not held in the same regard as in previous generations.

The way Americans organize their families and how these units function is important because family formation is critical to the development and socialization of the next generation. The general decline of marriage is a concern for this reason. Murray demonstrates that the changes in marriage and family life over the last fifty years have not occurred to the same extent in Belmont as they have in Fishtown. He argues that this has led to more troubling consequences.

To be sure, Murray doesn't see family life as the only issue, but he is concerned that public discourse on the role of the family is constricted. Social science research has been clear that children raised by their married biological mom and dad in a low conflict home fare best across a range of outcomes compared to other family forms even when socioeconomic status is controlled for.

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

Murray concludes that the decline of marriage is "a change in a core social institution that has few precedents for magnitude and speed." The impact of this rapid change on society and the economy cannot be ignored.

In 1960, a strong majority of prime aged adults in Belmont and Fishtown were married. But a 10 percentage point difference between the two towns that persisted up to 1978 widened to a 35 percent gap by 2010. The number of married prime aged adults hit a plateau in Belmont while the percentage in Fishtown continued to decline.

Similarly, the percentage of divorced prime aged residents in Belmont began to plateau during the 1980s while it continued to increase among residents of Fishtown. The trends around marriage and family structure in Fishtown resulted in greater cohabitation and non-marital births. Murray draws correlations between non-marital births and mothers' lack of education. He argues that cohabiting mothers come disproportionately from the lower socioeconomic classes. The problem, as Murray sees it, is that less stable family forms result in the inability to develop strong social capital.

In her book, *Marriage and Caste in America*, public thinker and Manhattan Institute scholar Kay Hymowitz demonstrates that marriage is one of the fault lines between upper and lower class, creating "separate and unequal families." Non-marital childbearing is correlated with lower educational attainment among women, while women with higher education are much less likely to have a child outside of marriage. Hymowitz, who spoke at the [2009 IMFC conference](#), argues that in some neighbourhoods, non-marital childbearing and in particular teen pregnancy has become a badge of honour or a new value. Teen pregnancy has become the common life script in many struggling neighbourhoods.

Lessons for Canadians

Murray's analysis in *Coming Apart* extends well beyond the role of marriage and family in America, but his section on marriage highlights the importance of family structure in society. Murray strives to identify and analyze the growing divide in America but intentionally avoids speculating on public policy responses.

The lesson for Canadian policy makers is that the divide between social issues and fiscal realities is a false one. Social policy that influences how Canadians organize their lives will have fiscal implications. Canadians are reluctant to address the role of family structure in society as Murray has found, but the discussion is too important not to have. As marriage has been conceived in the public's mind as a personal right, we need to be reminded of the critical role the institution of marriage has played in the overall health of society.

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