

Culture Clash: Surprising Truths about How Families are Formed in the United States

By Lauren Moore

A recent forum hosted by the Woodrow Wilson School revealed that red and blue states vary significantly in terms of how families are formed. Perhaps surprisingly, despite their plea for “family values,” red states have both higher numbers of unwed parents and higher divorce rates. The event, held October 28th at the Princeton Club of New York, examined the incredible increase in the past 40 years in the number of children born to unmarried parents and the increase in divorce – particularly for less educated couples. The forum was part of the Thoman lecture series, sponsored by the Leon Lowenstein Foundation.

Speakers included Irwin Garfinkel, editor of *The Future of Children: Fragile Families* volume, Mitchell I. Ginsberg Professor of Contemporary Urban Problems, and co-director of the Columbia Population Research Center at Columbia University; and *Red Families v. Blue Families* co-authors Naomi Cahn ’79, John Theodore Fey Research Professor of Law, George Washington University Law School, and June Carbone ’75 Edward A. Smith-Missouri Professor of Law, the Constitution and Society University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Garfinkel began the presentation by outlining critical findings from the most recent volume of *The Future of Children* journal that focuses on fragile families – families in which couples are unmarried at the time of their children’s birth and who face greater risks than traditional families that can compromise child wellbeing. Garfinkel then outlined a series of policy recommendations including supports for unmarried parents, strategies for the prevention of non-marital births, and changes to the penal system which incarcerates large numbers of unmarried fathers.

Garfinkel noted that one of the most surprising findings from the *Fragile Families* study was that, contrary to popular wisdom, most unwed parents have close and loving relationships at the time of their children’s birth. While the majority of these relationships dissolve within the first five years of the child’s life, research suggests that a focus on building co-parenting and relationship skills at the moment of birth could have positive impacts on relationship stability and parental involvement. For a more detailed presentation of the findings, see *The Future of Children’s* [full report](#).

Naomi Cahn and June Carbone followed Garfinkel’s presentation with a discussion of the geographic distribution of fragile families in the United States, which overlap with states’ political leanings. Their surprising finding is that states that voted Democratic in the last two presidential elections – blue states – had the *lowest* rates of divorce and teen pregnancies, while states that leaned Republican – red states – had the *highest*.

Cahn and Carbone explained the reasons for this correlation in terms of cultural norms associated with marriage and childbearing age. Blue states tend to support policies that reward postponing marriage and childbearing – including comprehensive sex education and access to birth control and abortion – so couples often wait later to marry and are more financially secure when they do. The red states’ approach promotes avoidance of premarital sex, which is linked to earlier marriage and childbearing; marriages at younger ages carry a higher risk for divorce. The discussion also included considerations of financial and economic shifts, which make it more difficult for more traditional families with one wage earner to successfully support themselves.

The presentation ended with an engaged conversation with the audience. Audience members responded to the research and thoughtfully considered the question of “where we go from here.” The discussion was less about politics and more about the best ways to support families so that they can appropriately care for their children. While hard and fast conclusions were difficult to come by, audience consensus was that it is in the country’s interest to find better ways to support families and children, particularly as the recession continues.