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Good Fathers, Flourishing Kids:

The Importance of Fatherhood in Virginia

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Table of Contents

3	<u>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</u>
5	<u>INTRODUCTION</u>
8	<u>ENGAGED FATHERS, FLOURISHING KIDS</u>
17	<u>FATHER PRESENCE AND CHILD WELL- BEING</u>
33	<u>THE STATE OF VIRGINIA FAMILIES: 1940 to the 2020s</u>
44	<u>A FATHER-FRIENDLY POLICY AGENDA</u>
53	<u>SPOTLIGHTING GOOD DADS AND HELPING ALL FATHERS BECOME THE FAMILY MEN THEY COULD BE</u>
58	<u>CONCLUSION</u>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children in Virginia are more likely to flourish when their fathers are engaged and/or present. This is one of the conclusions from *Good Fathers, Flourishing Kids: The Importance of Fatherhood in Virginia*, a new report from an intellectually diverse group of scholars at the University of Virginia, the American Enterprise Institute, the American Institute for Boys and Men, the Brookings Institution, the National Center for Black Family Life at Hampton University, the Institute for Family Studies, and the National Marriage Project. The report, which is sponsored by the National Marriage Project at UVA and the National Center for Black Family Life at Hampton University, conveys five sets of key findings and six recommendations to strengthen fatherhood and families in Virginia:

- 1 Boys and girls with involved dads in the Commonwealth get better grades, are less likely to have their parents contacted about behavioral or learning problems at school, and are less likely to be depressed.** For instance, children with less involved dads are about 2 times more likely to have parents contacted about school problems and 3.7 times more likely to be diagnosed with depression.
- 2 About 1 in 4 Virginia children live in a home without their biological fathers.** Boys and girls who live in a father-absent home are only about half as likely to get good grades in school, about twice as likely to be depressed, and nearly three times more likely to have their parents contacted about school problems, compared to boys and girls who live in an intact (married or cohabiting) family with their father.
- 3 There is no racial divide in academic performance or school problems between white and black children from intact families in the state.** More than 85% of these children get mostly A's and B's and less than 1 in 5 have parents contacted about school problems. By contrast, white and black children in father-absent families do markedly worse in school: fewer than two-thirds of black and white children from such families get good grades, and more than 1 in 3 have parents contacted for school problems.

- 4** **Approximately 100,000 children in Virginia have a parent, usually a father, incarcerated.** Children with a history of parental incarceration are about half as likely to get good grades in school, twice as likely to have their parents contacted for school problems, and five times as likely to be depressed, compared to children whose parents have never been incarcerated.

- 5** **We also spotlight some good news for Virginia when it comes to marriage and family life.** Although the share of Virginia children living in married families fell from 85% in 1970 to 67% in 2023, the share of children living in a married family, and with their father, has leveled off in recent years. What's also noteworthy is that the share of black children being raised in a married-parent family is ticking upwards, from 37% in 2015 to 40% in 2023.

- 6** **Given the importance of dads, we think that Virginia should follow other states, like Florida and Tennessee, that have or plan to launch major statewide efforts to strengthen fatherhood on a bipartisan basis.** We outline six sets of policy ideas to strengthen fatherhood across Virginia that focus especially on boys, fathers, and families. They range from efforts to make state schools more boy friendly, to running a public service announcement (PSA) in the state spotlighting the contributions that fathers make to their children's lives, to increasing the share of formerly incarcerated fathers who attend a parenting program before they are released, in conjunction with the state's *Stand Tall Initiative*.

INTRODUCTION

“Too many fathers... are...missing—missing from too many lives and too many homes,” said President Barack Obama in his Father’s Day speech in 2008. “And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it.”¹

President Obama’s powerful words underlined both the positive ways that fathers make a vital contribution to their children’s lives, as well as the challenges faced by those kids who miss out on the gift of an engaged and affectionate father. His message remains relevant today, as the latest social science research continues to spotlight the ways in which boys and girls are more likely to flourish when they have a good dad involved in their lives.



Today, too many fathers across the Commonwealth are disconnected or disengaged from their families.

Kids and communities are also more likely to suffer when dads are not engaged in their kids’ lives. As Richard Reeves observed in *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male is Struggling, Why it Matters, and What To Do About It*, “the separation of fathers from children... is bad for men, bad for women, and bad for children.”² What’s more: the consequences of these fatherhood and family trends are often more salient for children and adults “lower down the economic and social ladder,” as Reeves noted.³

Today, too many fathers across the Commonwealth are disconnected or disengaged from their families, patterns that are especially common for dads who are not married to the mothers of their children. More than 1 in 4 Virginia children live in a home without their

¹ “Text of Obama’s Fatherhood Speech,” *Politico*, June 15, 2008.

² Richard V. Reeves, *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It* (Brookings Institution Press, 2022), 41.

³ *Ibid.*, x.

father and many of these children do not see their dads on a regular basis.⁴ Even in homes in which both parents live together, there are plenty of dads who could engage more. Finally, fathers who are incarcerated or newly released from prison often have a difficult time connecting with their children.

All this matters because children are more likely to flourish—to do well in school, enjoy greater emotional and relational well-being, avoid poverty and avoid trouble with authorities—when they have active and engaged fathers. Good dads seem to matter especially for our boys in a cultural moment when so many of them are floundering. What’s more: men are more likely to thrive themselves when they have active relationships with their own children.⁵ This is also true for men re-entering society after being incarcerated.⁶ In our quest to strengthen the state of Virginia, then, we must strengthen the state of family and fatherhood across the Commonwealth.

The *Good Fathers, Flourishing Kids* report explores these matters by answering four important questions:

1 How is the engagement and presence of fathers linked to boys’ and girls’ outcomes in the state?

2 How are family and fatherhood trends playing out in Virginia?

3 What kinds of policies should the state pursue to strengthen fatherhood across the Commonwealth?

4 How can engaging formerly incarcerated men as fathers help them get a successful new start in society?

⁴ For children (ages 0-17) in Virginia, about 72% live in a home with their biological father, according to our analysis of IPUMS 2023 American Community Survey.

⁵ Rob Palkovitz, *Involved Fathering and Men’s Adult Development* (Mahwah: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, 2002).

⁶ Johanna B. Folk, Jeffrey Stuewig, Debra Mashek, June P. Tangney, and Jessica Grossmann. "Behind Bars But Connected to Family: Evidence for the Benefits of Family Contact During Incarceration." *Journal of Family Psychology* 33, no. 4 (2019): 453-464.

To answer these questions, Brad Wilcox—Melville Foundation Jefferson Scholars Foundation Distinguished University Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia (UVA)—convened an intellectually diverse group of scholars from the American Enterprise Institute, the American Institute for Boys and Men, the Brookings Institution, the National Center for Black Family Life at Hampton University, the Institute for Family Studies, the National Marriage Project, and UVA. This bipartisan group hails from a wide range of family circumstances, both in terms of our families of origin and our current family situations. Furthermore, we do not agree on everything, including some of the specific recommendations in this report. But we do agree that both father engagement and father presence matter for Virginia’s children, and the state can do more to increase the odds that boys and girls across the Commonwealth have the benefit of being raised by a good dad.



This report documents the value of engaged and present fathers, surveys the state of family and fatherhood in Virginia, and offers six sets of policy ideas to strengthen fatherhood in the Commonwealth. It also conveys some surprising and encouraging news about recent trends in Virginia families. And given the state’s commitment to helping formerly incarcerated fathers in the *Stand Tall Initiative*, this report pays particular attention to the families and fathers who have been touched by incarceration.

ENGAGED FATHERS, FLOURISHING KIDS

A large body of research indicates that children who have the benefit of an engaged father are more likely to flourish. “Greater positive father involvement with young children,” psychologist Rob Palkovitz noted, “tends to be associated with overall life satisfaction, happiness, and psychological well-being when offspring reach early adulthood and fewer behavioral problems for children and adolescents.”⁷

“The evidence is in, and it is clear that fathers do matter in the lives of their children,” wrote sociologist David Eggebeen, adding, “the quality of parenting exhibited by the father...predicts children’s behavior problems, depression, self-esteem, and life-satisfaction.”⁸

Part of the reason that engaged dads matter is that they are more likely to support their kids financially.⁹ But social scientists in recent decades have learned that the value of an engaged father extends well beyond his paycheck. Their value derives in part from the fact that fathers often parent in distinctive ways. To be sure, there are exceptions, and much of the care that dads provide parallels that of mothers, but social scientists have identified at least three ways that dads typically make a distinctive difference in their kids’ lives.¹⁰

Play. One distinctive contribution is play. As psychologist Ross Parke observed, “In infants and toddlers, fathers’ hallmark style of interaction is physical play that is characterized by arousal, excitement, and unpredictability,” adding that mothers take a “more modulated and less arousing” approach.¹¹ This distinctive approach to play extends throughout childhood and appears to help children learn how to control their

⁷ Rob Palkovitz, “Gendered Parenting’s Implications for Child’s Well-Being: Theory and Research in Applied Perspective,” in *Gender and Parenthood*, ed. W. Bradford Wilcox and Kathleen K. Kline (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 215-248.

⁸ David Eggebeen, “Do Fathers Uniquely Matter for Adolescent Well-Being?” in *Gender and Parenthood*, ed. W. Bradford Wilcox and Kathleen K. Kline (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 249-270.

⁹ Katherine Schaeffer, “[Key Facts About Dads in the U.S.](#),” Pew Research Center, June 15, 2023.

¹⁰ Brad Wilcox, “[The Distinct, Positive Impact of a Good Dad](#),” *The Atlantic*, June 14, 2013.

¹¹ Ross Parke, “Gender Differences and Similarities in Parenting,” in *Gender and Parenthood*, ed. W. Bradford Wilcox and Kathleen K. Kline (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 127.

bodies and emotions in ways that build confidence and social acumen. Parke reports, for instance, that children who play more with their father enjoy the “highest peer popularity ratings” in school.¹²

Risk-Taking. Another distinctive contribution from fathers is to encourage their children to embrace life’s challenges and opportunities. Whether it’s taking their children on an overnight camping trip, teaching them how to defy a schoolyard bully, or encouraging them to embrace a tough training regime for a high school sport, dads are more likely than mothers to push their sons *and* daughters. “[Fathers] play a particularly important role in the development of children’s openness to the world,” psychologist Daniel Paquette wrote, adding:

*They also tend to encourage children to take risks, while at the same time ensuring the latter’s safety and security, thus permitting children to learn to be braver in unfamiliar situations, as well as to stand up for themselves.*¹³

Anthropologist Anna Machin makes a similar point in her book *The Life of Dad*:

*Many dads in the West really step into their role during late childhood and adolescence, particularly when the time comes to teach their children. It’s that all-important role in preparing children to step into the big wide world.*¹⁴

Discipline. A third distinctive contribution is discipline. While mothers discipline their kids more often than fathers, a dad’s discipline is usually different.¹⁵ Dads tend to be firmer in enforcing family rules, and more likely to command the attention and compliance of their children, partly because of the distinctive size, strength, and tone of voice that fathers bring to disciplinary situations.¹⁶ With their approach to discipline, fathers play an important role in fostering order in the home and discouraging their children from misbehaving both in and outside the home.¹⁷

¹² Ibid., 132.

¹³ Daniel Paquette. “Theorizing the Father-Child Relationship: Mechanisms and Developmental Outcomes.” *Human Development* 47, no. 4 (2004): 193-219.

¹⁴ Anna Machin, *The Life of Dad: The Making of the Modern Father* (New York: Simon & Schuster Ltd, 2018), 111.

¹⁵ Brad Wilcox, “[The Distinct, Positive Impact of a Good Dad](#),” *The Atlantic*, June 14, 2013.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ David Popenoe, *Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage Are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).



Not surprisingly, in looking at a range of outcomes for children in Virginia, we see that children across the Commonwealth with more engaged dads are more likely to be flourishing. Drawing on Virginia data from more than 1,300 children in the 2022 and 2023 National Surveys of Children’s Health (NSCH) from intact, stepfamily, and single-father families with biological, adoptive, and stepfathers, we find that boys and girls are more likely to flourish when their fathers are active and engaged. For this NSCH analysis, a father is coded as highly involved if he reports handling the demands of raising children “very well,” and the family eats meals together at least 4 days per week. Fathers are coded as low in paternal engagement if he does not report handling the demands of raising children very well, or the family eats meals together less than 4 days per week. (Note: This section does not cover non-resident fathers because the NSCH did not ask about or interview them.)

Paternal Involvement and Child Outcomes

More students get high grades in school when their fathers are actively involved in school-related activities. Of all Virginia students whose schools give traditional letter grades of A through F, 36% receive mostly A grades. Among students with highly engaged fathers, 41% receive grades this high, whereas among students with less engaged fathers, only 32% do (see Figure 1).

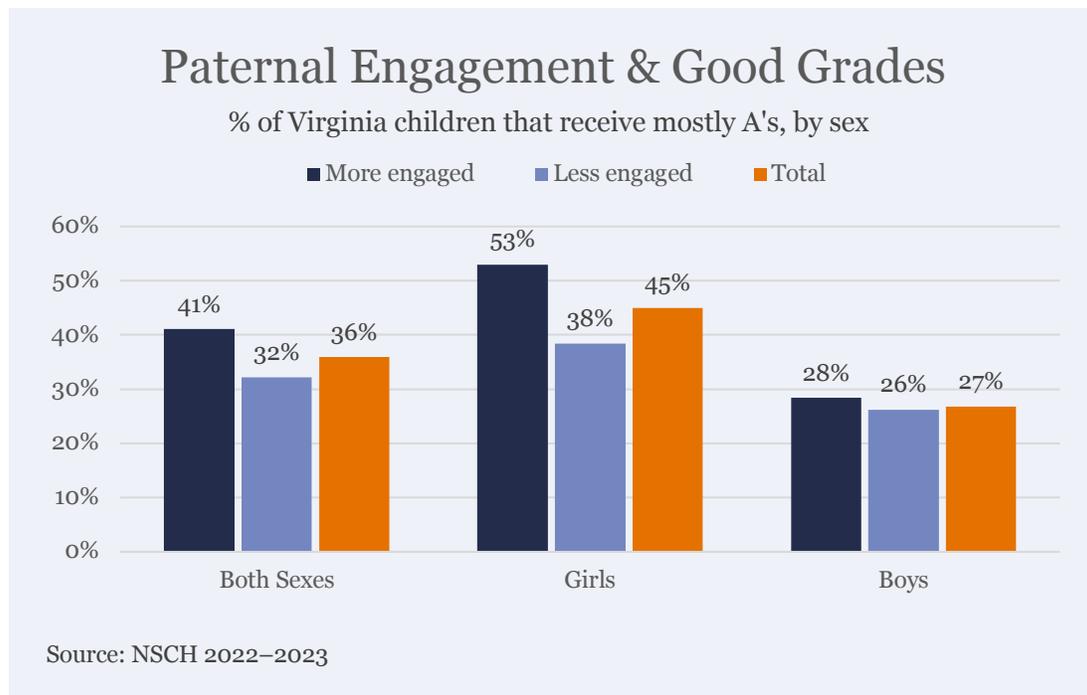


Figure 1: Paternal Engagement & Good Grades by Sex

Girls are more likely to receive mostly A's: 45% of girls get grades this high, compared with only 27% of boys. But girls with engaged fathers do even better: 53% get A's, compared with 38% of girls with less involved fathers. Differences for boys are less significant: 28% of boys with engaged fathers get A's, compared with 26% of boys with less involved fathers.

When the association between father involvement and student academic performance is controlled for using a range of demographic factors like parental education and race, the odds of students with less engaged fathers getting mostly A grades are 68% lower than the odds for students with more engaged fathers. And the odds of male students getting mostly A grades are 61% lower than the odds for female students.



Children across the Commonwealth
with more engaged dads are more likely to be flourishing.

Virginia parents are less likely to be contacted by their children's schools because of conduct or learning problems in the classroom when fathers are actively involved in children's upbringing. The parents of nearly a quarter of all Virginia students (24%) get notes home due to their child's conduct or learning problems at school. Among students with highly engaged fathers, the proportion being contacted by the school is 18%, compared to 28% for students with less involved fathers (see Figure 2).

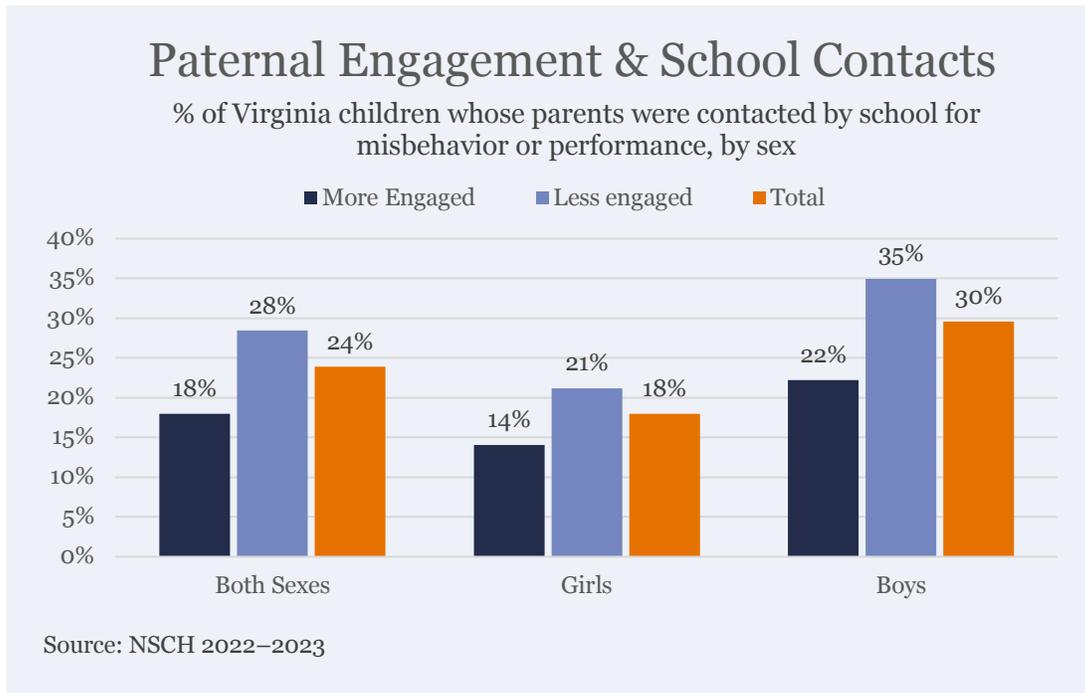


Figure 2: Paternal Engagement & School Contacts by Sex

Parents of male students are more likely to get notes home than are parents of female students (30% vs. 18%). But less than a quarter of boys with engaged fathers get such notes to their parents (22%), compared to more than a third of boys with less involved fathers (35%). Only 14% of girls with engaged fathers have notes sent to their parents, versus more than a fifth (21%) of girls with less involved fathers.

When the association between paternal engagement and parents being contacted by schools is controlled for family intactness and related demographic differences, the odds that parents are contacted by the school are twice as great (2.15) for students with less involved fathers than for those with more involved fathers. And the odds for parents of male students being contacted are twice as great (2.02) as the odds for female students.

Virginia youngsters are also less likely to experience childhood depression when fathers are actively involved in family life and childrearing. More than one Virginia child in 20 (6%) has been diagnosed as depressed by counselors at school or in private practice. Among children with highly involved fathers, the fraction with depression falls to 1 in 50

(2%). Among children with less involved fathers, the fraction rises to nearly 1 in 10 (9%). (See Figure 3).

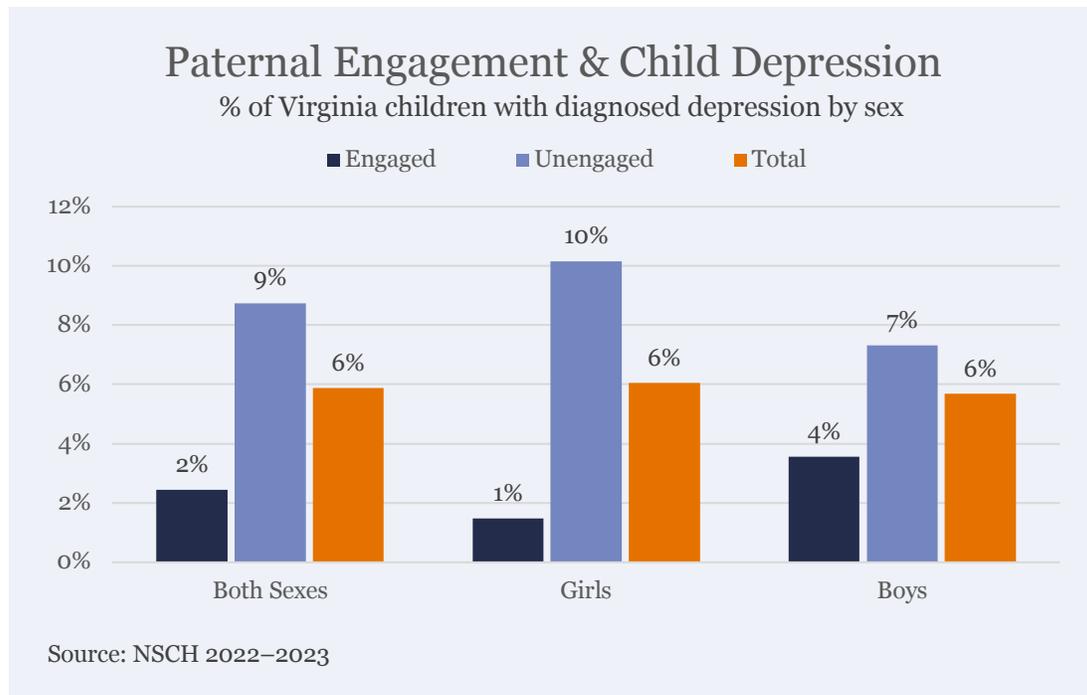


Figure 3: Paternal Engagement & Child Depression by Sex

Childhood depression is equally prevalent among girls and boys. But whereas one girl in 100 (1%) with a highly engaged father is depressed, 10 times as many girls (10%) are depressed when their father is unengaged. Differences are less dramatic but still substantial among boys: nearly twice as many boys with unengaged fathers have depression (7%), as do boys with highly engaged fathers (4%).

When the association between paternal engagement and childhood depression is controlled for family intactness and demographic factors like race and parental education, the odds of a child being depressed are nearly four (3.7) times greater for children with uninvolved fathers as for those with highly engaged fathers.

What is striking about these findings is that on the social outcomes we measured (school contacts), they are most evident for boys in families with disengaged dads, whereas for girls they are most visible for the emotional outcome (depression). The results here are

consistent with literature indicating that boys respond to family problems by acting out (“externalizing” in the literature), whereas girls turn inward (“internalizing” in the literature).¹⁸ In other words, the pain experienced by paternal disengagement is more likely to be manifested externally for boys and internally for girls. And that is what we see here in the state of Virginia.

How Does Paternal Involvement Vary with Family Background?

Virginia children of fathers who have only a high school diploma are just as likely to have a dad who is highly involved in their upbringing as Virginia children of college-graduate fathers. And Commonwealth children of black or Hispanic fathers who live with their kids are just as likely to benefit from their father’s love and attention as children of white or Asian fathers.



We find significant differences in paternal involvement related to the marital status of the father.

Virginia youngsters are more likely to have an active and engaged father if they live in an intact-married family than in an intact-cohabiting family. In fact, 51% of children with married parents have highly engaged fathers, compared to 15% of those with cohabiting parents. These percentages are adjusted for differences across groups in parent-education and family-income levels, racial and ethnic composition, immigrant status, and sex and age group of the children. The odds of a child in a cohabiting family having an active and engaged father are 83% lower than the odds for a child in an intact-married family. On the other hand, children living with their fathers only, or in a

¹⁸ Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization* (New York: Harper Collins, 2024), 68; Carolyn Zahn-Waxler, Elizabeth A. Shirtcliff, and Kristine Marceau. "Disorders of Childhood and Adolescence: Gender and Psychopathology." *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 4, no. 1 (2008): 275-303.

married-birth-parent and stepparent family, are as likely to have an engaged father as those living with married-birth or adoptive parents.



Across the Commonwealth, then, boys and girls are more likely to flourish when they have more engaged fathers. Although patterns of paternal engagement do not vary by race and ethnicity, family structure is linked to paternal engagement. In Virginia, married and single dads who live with their kids are markedly more engaged with their kids than are cohabiting dads.

FATHER PRESENCE AND CHILD WELL-BEING

When it comes to relationships, presence matters. It's easier to keep a strong relationship with a friend or family member when you see them on a regular basis. The same goes for fathers. Although fathers in a wide range of family situations can and do develop good relationships with their children, it's easier for fathers in intact families. Fathers who live with their children spend about 10 times more time with them than non-resident fathers.¹⁹ Here in Virginia, we also see that fathers in married families are more engaged with their sons and daughters than dads in cohabiting families. And though there are plenty of exceptions, the research also suggests that the quality of father-child relationships is generally higher in intact-married families compared to other family forms.²⁰ Finally, children are more likely to be flourishing financially when they live with their dads as part of an intact-married family, including here in the Commonwealth.²¹

The fact that intact families with fathers present tend to be advantaged in terms of relationship quality and money also translates into better outcomes for boys and girls. The research tells us that boys are more successful at school, less delinquent, and more likely to steer clear of law enforcement when raised in an intact family with their father.²² Girls raised in an intact-married family with their father are less likely to end

¹⁹ Wendy Wang, "[American Dads are More Involved Than Ever](#)," Institute for Family Studies, October 24, 2023.

²⁰ Daniel TL Shek, Qiuzhi Xie, and Li Lin. "The Impact of Family Intactness on Family Functioning, Parental Control, and Parent-Child Relational Qualities in a Chinese Context." *Frontiers in Pediatrics* 2 (2015): 149; Sandra L. Hofferth and Kermyt G. Anderson. "Are All Dads Equal? Biology Versus Marriage as a Basis for Paternal Investment." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65, no. 1 (2003): 213-232.

²¹ Paul R. Amato. "More than Money? Men's Contributions to Their Children's Lives," in *Men in Families* ed. Alan Booth and Ann C. Crouter (Psychology Press, 1998); Gretchen Livingston, "[The Rise of Single Fathers](#)," Pew Research Center, July 2, 2013; Sandra L. Hofferth and Kermyt G. Anderson, "Are All Dads Equal? Biology Versus Marriage as a Basis for Paternal Investment." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65, no. 1 (2004): 213-232; and Authors' analysis of American Community Survey (2023).

²² Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization* (New York: Harper Collins, 2024), 65-67. Rafael A. Mangual, Brad Wilcox, Seth Cannon, and Joseph E. Price. [Stronger Families, Safer Streets](#). (Charlottesville: Institute for Family Studies, December 2023).

up pregnant as teenagers.²³ And both boys and girls are more likely to go on to graduate from college, steer clear of depression, and avoid poverty when they are raised in an intact home with their father.²⁴ In general, then, children are more likely to flourish in an intact—usually married—home where dad is present. At the same time, it’s important to acknowledge there are plenty of exceptions to these patterns; indeed, most kids from single- and stepparent families turn out okay.

Many of these patterns are manifested here in Virginia. Across the state, children who grow up in a family that includes their birth or adoptive fathers in an intact family, both married and cohabiting, have advantages over those who are raised by their mothers only or by stepparents, grandmothers, other relatives, or in foster care. They receive care, attention, and affection from two adults who can share and cooperate in caring for them while also earning income outside the home. It is important to note that these families differ in many other ways from non-intact families, with implications for the outcomes of their children. They are more likely to live in safe and supportive neighborhoods, for example, and to attend higher quality public or private schools, and they are less likely to be poor.

These advantages are reflected in better grades in school, fewer behavior problems, less sadness, fewer experiences of neighborhood violence, and fewer parental contacts by school authorities due to conduct or learning problems of the child. Kids in the Commonwealth are especially better off in intact, *married* homes, according to the NSCH.²⁵

The following comparisons of child poverty, achievement, behavior, and well-being across three different father-related family structures are based on the analysis of more

²³ Brad Wilcox, “The Distinct, Positive Impact of a Good Dad,” *The Atlantic*, June 14, 2013; T. Stammers. “Teenage Pregnancies Are Influenced by Family Structure.” *BMJ* 324, no. 7328 (January 5, 2002): 51; Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

²⁴ Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); Melissa Kearney, *The Two-Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023); Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization* (New York: Harper Collins, 2024).

²⁵ Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health. “[Interactive Data Query: National Survey of Children’s Health \(2022-Present\)](#).” Accessed January 21, 2021. For instance, in Virginia, school contacts were 16% for children from intact, married homes with their father present, vs. 29% from intact, cohabiting homes with dad present in 2022.

than 1,500 Virginia children between the ages of birth and 17 from the 2022 and 2023 National Survey of Children’s Health, as well as data from the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS). We used the 2023 ACS to calculate the share of Virginia children in the following family structures:

- The “Intact” group is comprised of children who were living with both their biological or adoptive fathers and mothers (68% of Virginia children, whether the parents were married [63%] or cohabiting [5%]).
- The “Father-absent” families spotlighted in the NSCH analyses below are families headed by single mothers, a biological mother and a stepfather, grandparents, or foster parents (27% of Virginia children).
- The “Mother-only” group in the analyses below of the ACS 2023 focusing on poverty consists of children living with birth or adoptive mothers but *not* their biological or adoptive fathers (21% of Virginia children).



Father engagement means better student performance.

We did not focus on the remaining Virginian children living in single-father headed households with a present biological or adoptive father but not mother (5%) because we did not have enough cases to analyze these groups separately in the NSCH.²⁶

²⁶ Note that about 0.4% of Virginia children are in same-sex families: of those, approximately 80% in families with two mothers and 20% in families with two fathers (2023 American Community Survey).

Less Poverty in Intact-Father Families

More than a quarter of Virginia children in mother-only families live below the official poverty line, compared with 6% of those in intact, father-present families (see Figure 4). Note also that black children and Hispanic children in single-mother homes were, respectively, 5.7 times and 3.8 times more likely to be living in poverty, compared to their peers in intact, father-present families. After controlling for differences across race, parent education levels, immigrant status, and age and sex of children, the odds of children in mother-only families being poor were over three and a half (3.6) times greater than the odds for children in the intact family group.

Virginia children whose parents had less than a college education had elevated odds of living in poverty, as did black and Hispanic children and children living in non-intact families. Furthermore, only 5% of children in intact married families in the Commonwealth were poor, compared to 17% of children in cohabiting-intact families.

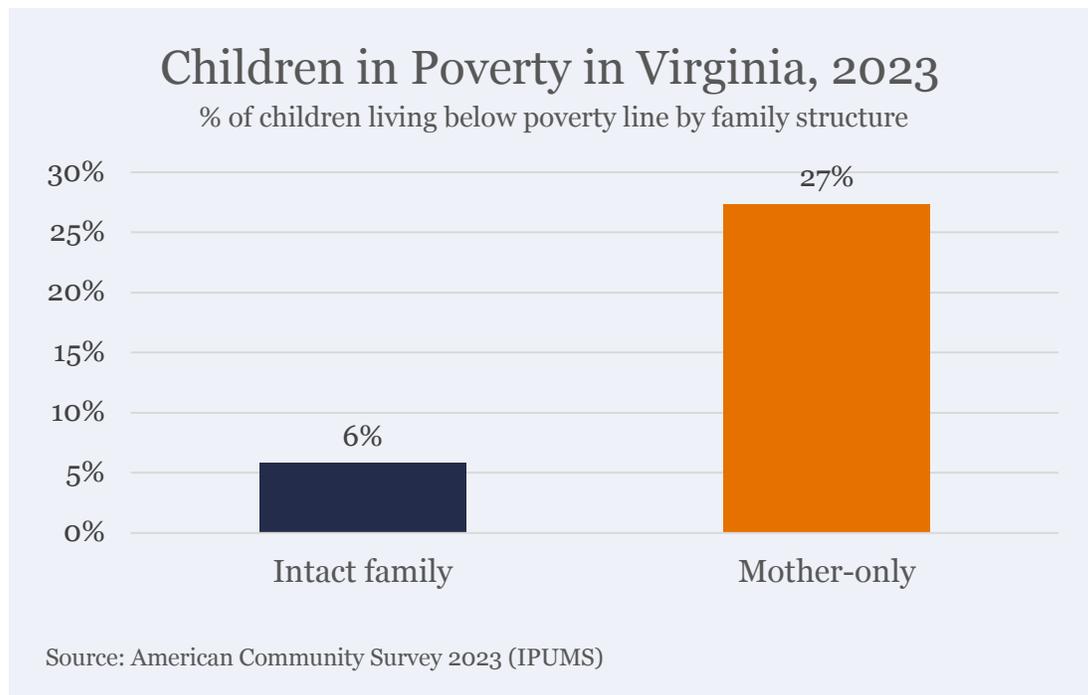


Figure 4: Children in Poverty in Virginia by Family Structure

Virginia Parents Less Likely to Be Contacted by Schools in Intact Families

About twice as many children ages 5–17 in father-absent families—families headed by single mothers, a biological mother and a stepfather, grandparents, or foster parents—had notes sent home to their parents due to learning problems or conduct in class, compared to students from intact families with their fathers present (36% to 17%), according to the NSCH. After controlling for parent education, family income, race of student, immigrant status, and age and sex of student, the odds of parent contact were nearly three times higher for father-absent students. Male students had over double the odds of getting notes sent home as female students.



Father engagement is linked to less child depression.

These patterns vary somewhat by gender and race. Boys living in homes without their fathers were most likely to get notes sent home about their behavior or learning performance. Among white, black, and Hispanic children, those in intact families with their fathers present are least likely to have schools contacting their families. In fact, black and Hispanic children from intact families were less likely to have their parents contacted by school officials than white children in intact families, although these differences were not statistically significant. This suggests that white, black and Hispanic children from intact families all have about equally low odds of being contacted by their schools for problems.



Figure 5: School Contacts for Misbehavior or Performance by Family Structure

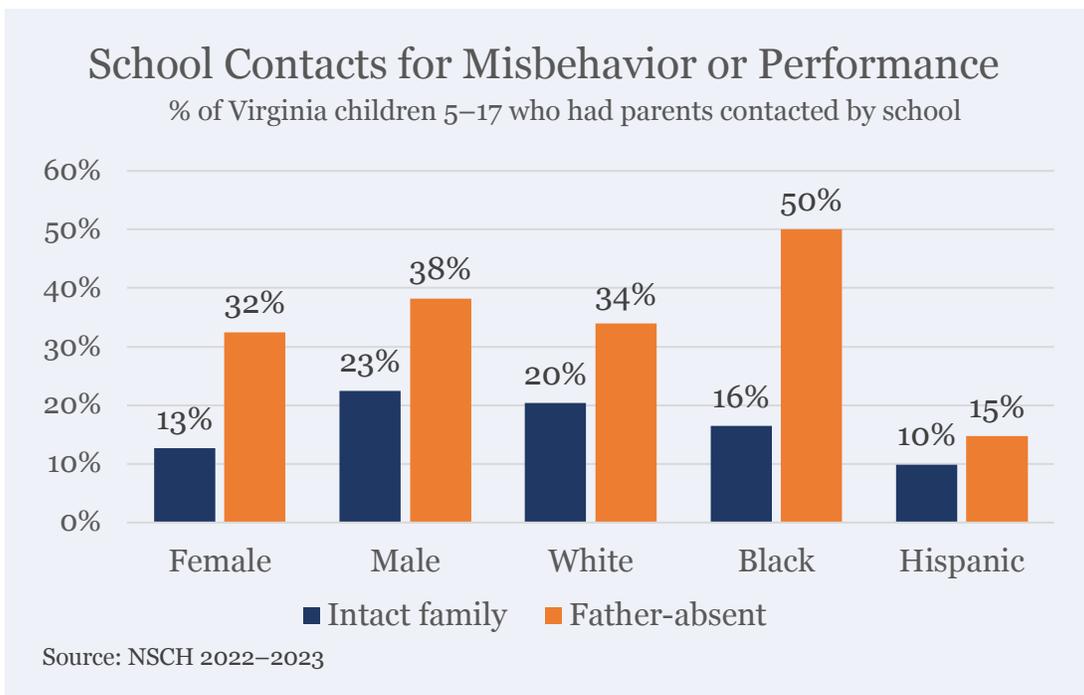


Figure 6: School Contacts by Sex, Race, Ethnicity, and Family Structure

Virginia Students Get Higher Grades When Fathers Are Present

There is a strong link between family structure and student performance in Virginia: 43% of school-aged children living with fathers and mothers got mostly A grades on their report cards, compared with 18% of students living in households without their fathers. At the other end of the achievement spectrum, only 3% of students with fathers and mothers got mostly C's, D's, or lower grades, whereas the same was true for 20% of students in father-absent homes (see Figure 7).

After controlling for parent education, family income, race, immigrant status and sex and age of students, children living without their fathers only had one-half the odds of getting mostly A's and B's or better. Male students had about 57% lower odds of getting mostly A's, compared to female students.

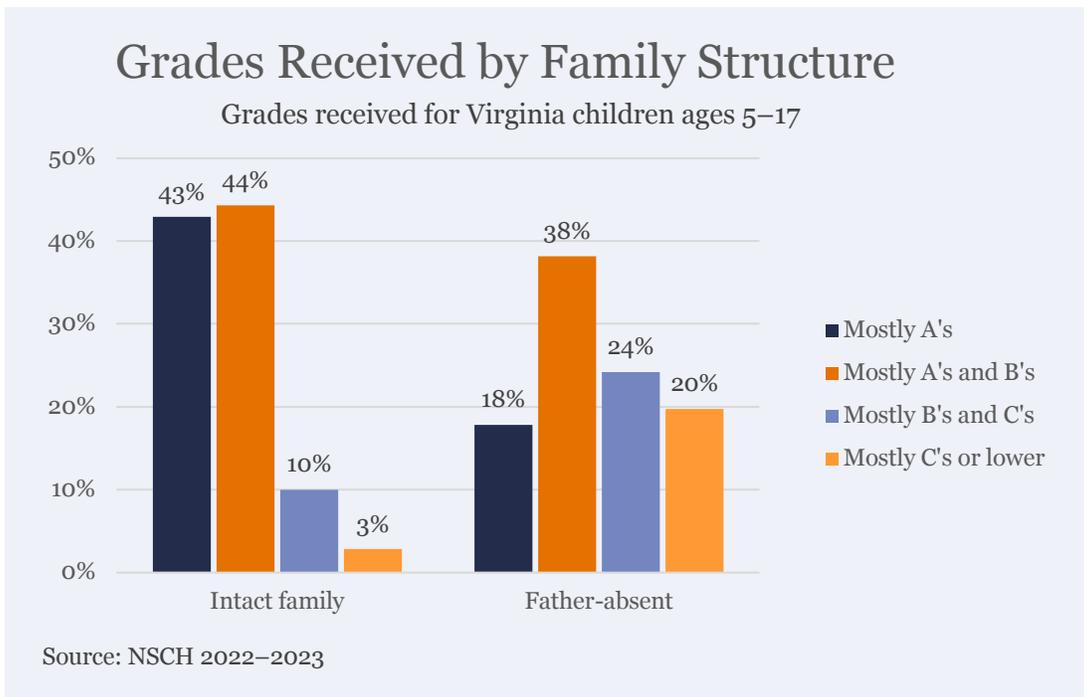


Figure 7: Grades by Family Structure

Both Boys and Girls Do Better in School in Intact Families

Both boys and girls in intact families get higher grades than their counterparts in father-absent families. A 51% majority of girls in intact families got mostly A grades, whereas only one-third of boys in such families did. Half of males in intact families got mostly A and B grades, however, as did 39% of girls. Only 4% of boys and 1% of girls in intact families earned C's or lower grades.

Only a quarter of girls in father-absent families and just 12% of boys in such families got mostly A grades. As Figure 8 indicates, boys and girls in homes without their fathers were markedly more likely to get C's or D's or lower grades, compared to their peers from intact families.

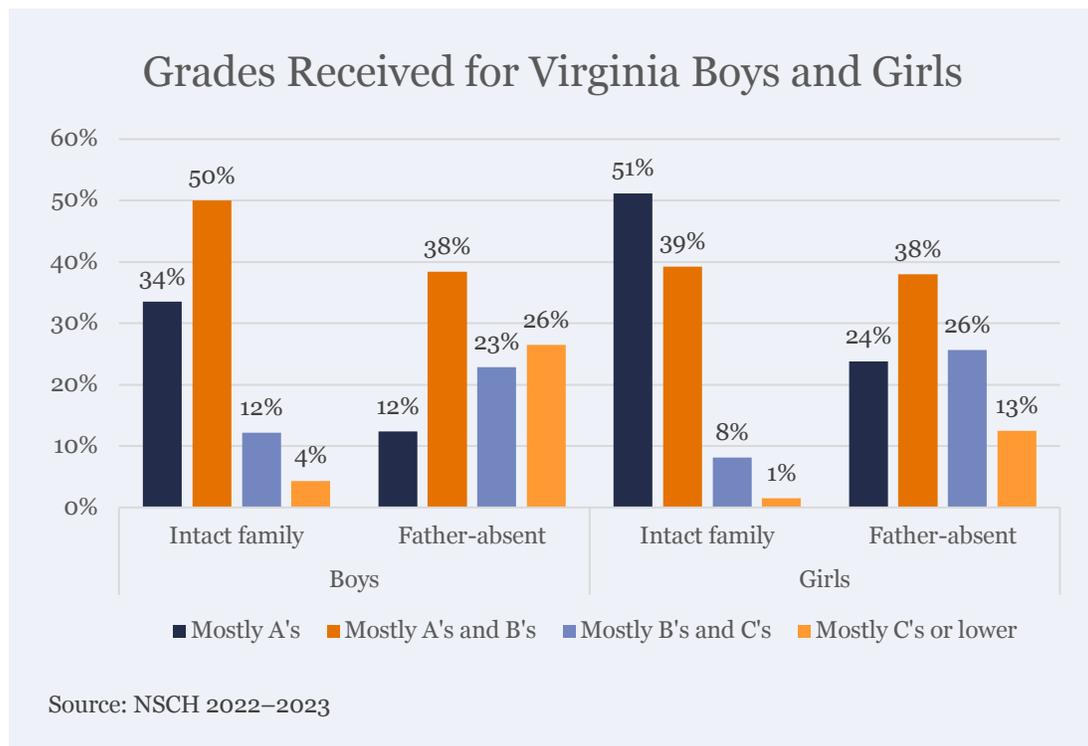


Figure 8: Grades by Sex and Family Structure

Black and Hispanic Students from Intact Families Get Better Grades

Among white students from intact families in Virginia, 44% got mostly A grades in 2022 and 2023. The second most frequent grade category was mostly A's and B's. Together, these two categories account for 85% of the grades received by white students from intact families (see Figure 9).

Black and Hispanic students from intact families in Virginia also do well in school: 50% of black students from intact families got mostly A's in the same years, and 90% got mostly A's or A's and B's. By contrast, only 41% of black students from father-absent families did this well.

Among Virginia's Hispanic students from intact families, 87% got mostly A's and B's or better. By comparison, only 54% of Hispanic students from father-absent families did this well. Poor grades are more common for white, black, and Hispanic children in father-absent families.

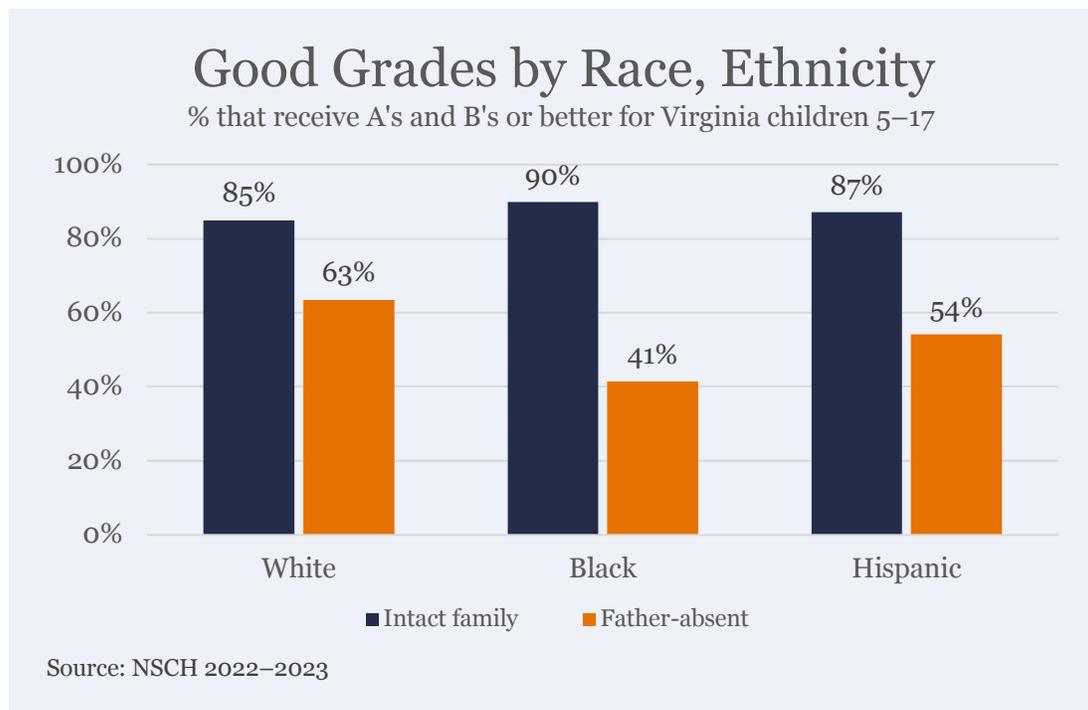


Figure 9: Good Grades by Race, Ethnicity, and Family Structure

Less Childhood Depression When Fathers Are Present

Across the Commonwealth, boys and especially girls are less likely to be diagnosed with depression when they are living in an intact family with their father. For example, 11% of children living in father-absent homes were said to be suffering from childhood depression, compared with 4% of those in intact homes (see Figure 10). After controlling for parent education, family income, race, immigrant status, and children’s sex and age, kids in father-absent homes had over twice the odds of being diagnosed as depressed.

Children living below the poverty level had the greatest odds of depression across income levels. While fewer boys than girls were diagnosed with depression in our sample, the difference was not statistically significant.

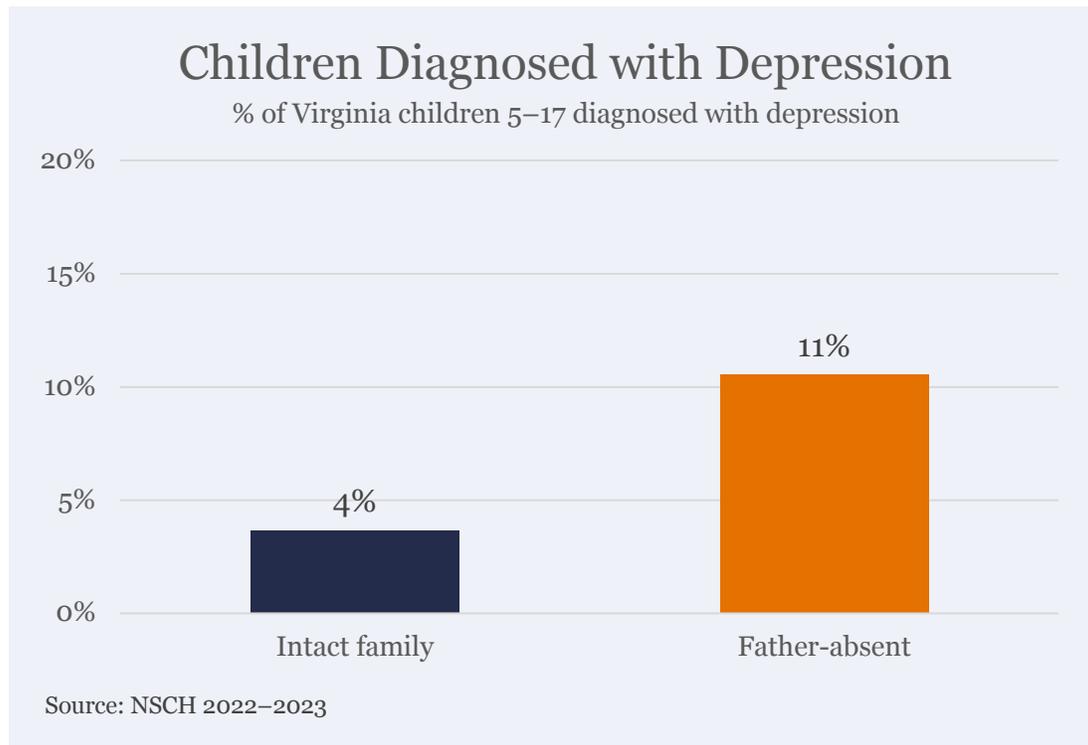


Figure 10: *Children Diagnosed with Depression by Family Structure*

Gender, Race, Family Structure, and Depression

Both boys and girls in Virginia are significantly more likely to be diagnosed as depressed in father-absent families than in mother-father families, as shown in Figure 11. Girls are particularly affected by a missing father, with 13% diagnosed with depression at the time of the survey, versus 4% among girls in intact families.

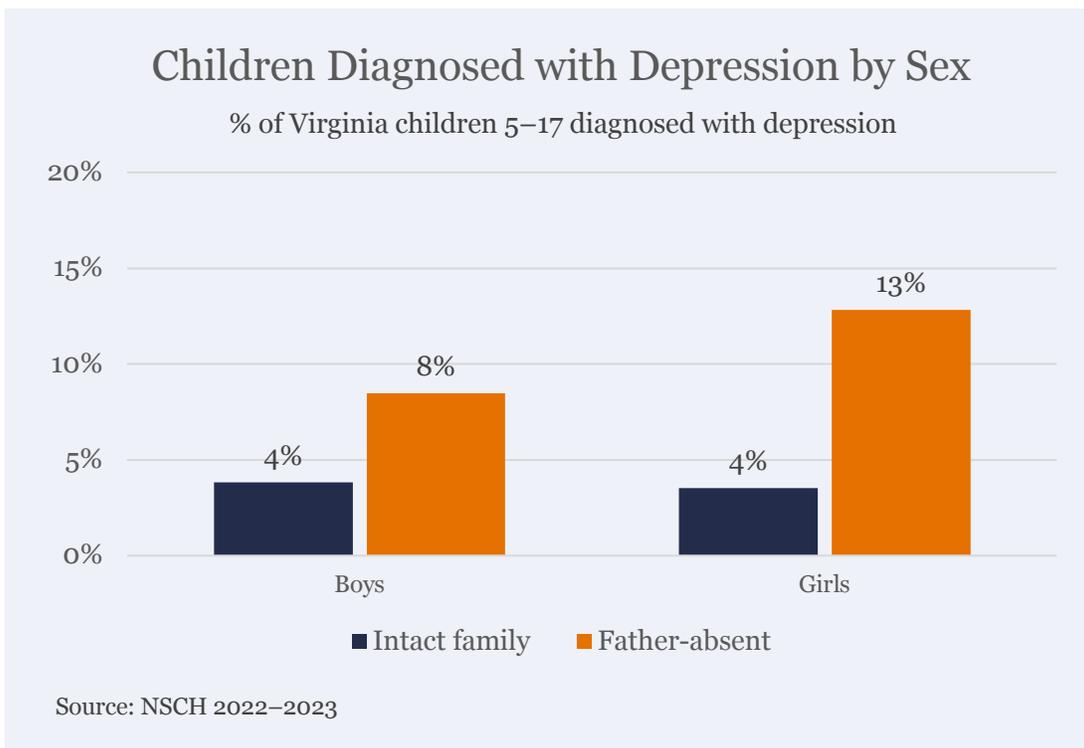


Figure 11: Children Diagnosed with Depression by Sex and Family Structure

Virginia children in father-absent families were at least two times more likely to experience depression than those in intact families. This holds true for white and black children but not Hispanic youngsters.

Less Exposure to Neighborhood Violence When Dads Are Present

Eight times as many children in father-absent families had witnessed or been victimized by neighborhood violence as children with fathers and mothers present in the home (8% versus 1%). Given that such families are more likely to live in neighborhoods marked by concentrated poverty where violence is more common, much of this story is about neighborhood effects.²⁷ Still, after controlling for parent education, family income, race of child, immigrant status, and sex and age of child, the odds of exposure to violence were 10 times higher for children in father-absent homes, than for children with both parents present in the home. In other words, boys and girls in Virginia growing up in homes without their fathers are markedly more likely to be exposed to violence in their communities.



Figure 12: Witnessed Neighborhood Violence by Family Structure

²⁷ Michael Friedson and Patrick Sharkey. "Violence and Neighborhood Disadvantage After the Crime Decline." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 660, no. 1 (2015): 341-358; Corina Graif, Andrew S. Gladfelter, and Stephen A. Matthews. "Urban Poverty and Neighborhood Effects on Crime: Incorporating Spatial and Network Perspectives." *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 9 (2014): 1140-1155.

One In Four Children in Father-absent Families Had a Parent Imprisoned

There is also a strong link between family structure and incarceration manifested in family structure in the Commonwealth. Among Virginia children in father-absent families, 21% have had a parent or guardian imprisoned at some point in time. By contrast, a negligible number of Virginia children with fathers and mothers present in the home experienced parental imprisonment (0.2%). (See Figure 13.) After controlling for parent education, family income, race of child, and sex and age of child, the odds of parental imprisonment were 27 times higher for children living apart from their fathers, than for children with fathers present in the home. Of course, parental incarceration is both a cause and consequence of family instability, insofar as young men raised in non-intact families in America are about twice as likely to end up incarcerated.²⁸

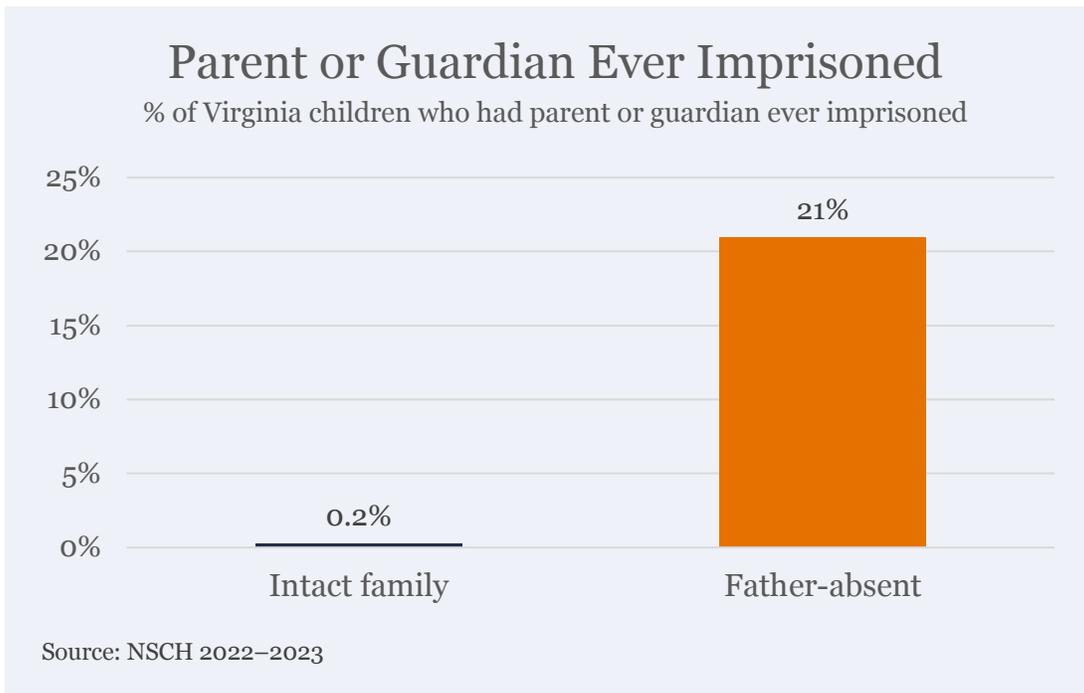


Figure 13: Parent or Guardian Ever Imprisoned by Family Structure

²⁸ Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization* (New York: Harper Collins, 2024), p. 67.

Parental Imprisonment and Child Well-Being

Virginia children who grow up in families in which a parent has been imprisoned are more likely to experience emotional, behavioral, and learning difficulties. They get lower grades in school. Their parents are contacted more often by the school the child attends because of misbehavior in class or academic deficiencies. They act in ways that lead counselors to describe them as depressed.

Is parental imprisonment the cause of these childhood disturbances? Or do they stem from underlying factors like poverty, low parent education, inadequate neighborhood resources, and racial discrimination? Alternatively, do parents who engage in criminal conduct pass on unfortunate personality characteristics to their offspring through heredity, bad parenting, or family turmoil? It is difficult to disentangle the intertwined variables and tell the cause from effect. What we can say with certainty is when parental incarceration is accompanied by family disruption—especially the loss of both parents—the child is likely to show ill effects.



Virginia children who grow up in families in which a parent has been imprisoned are more likely to experience emotional, behavioral, and learning difficulties.

In the 2022 and 2023 National Surveys of Children’s Health, Virginia students who had a parent imprisoned were markedly less likely to get A’s and B’s in school than students who had not had a parent incarcerated (45% versus 81%). Moreover, Virginia students with histories of parental imprisonment were twice as likely as students without such histories to have notes sent home by teachers because of the student’s misconduct in class or learning deficiencies (43% versus 22%). More than half of male students with parental imprisonment histories received notes home: 52%, versus 28% of boys with no parental incarceration history. More than a third of female students with histories of parental incarceration received notes home (35%), twice as many as girls without such histories (17%). (See Figure 14).

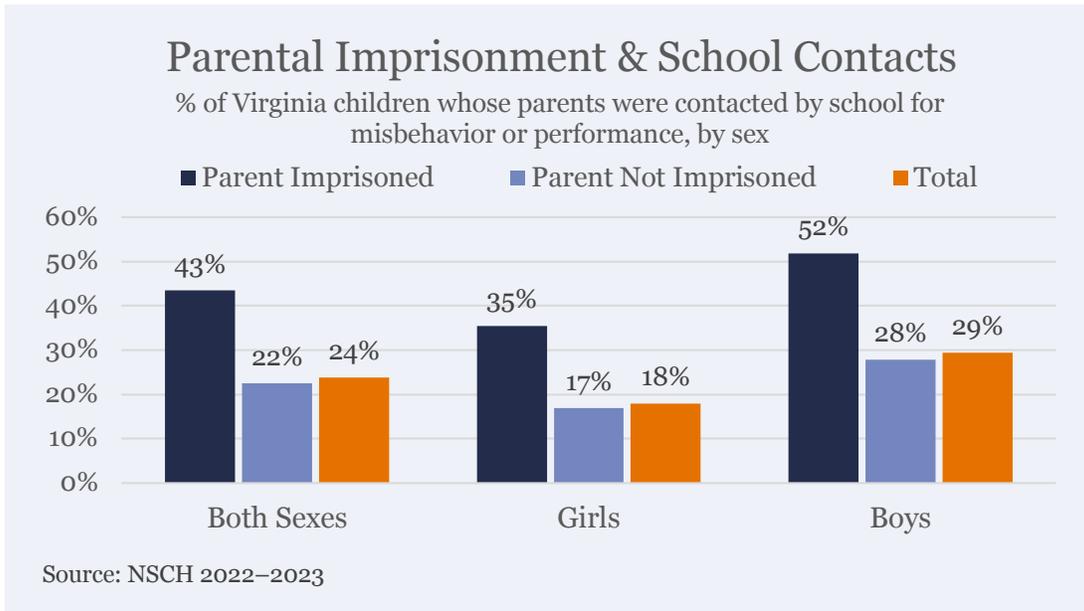


Figure 14: Parental Imprisonment & School Contacts by Sex

Nearly one quarter of children with histories of parental incarceration (23%) received diagnoses of childhood depression from counselors at school or in private practice. Less than 1 in 20 (4%) without such parental histories were diagnosed as depressed. Both boys and girls show similar patterns (see Figure 15).

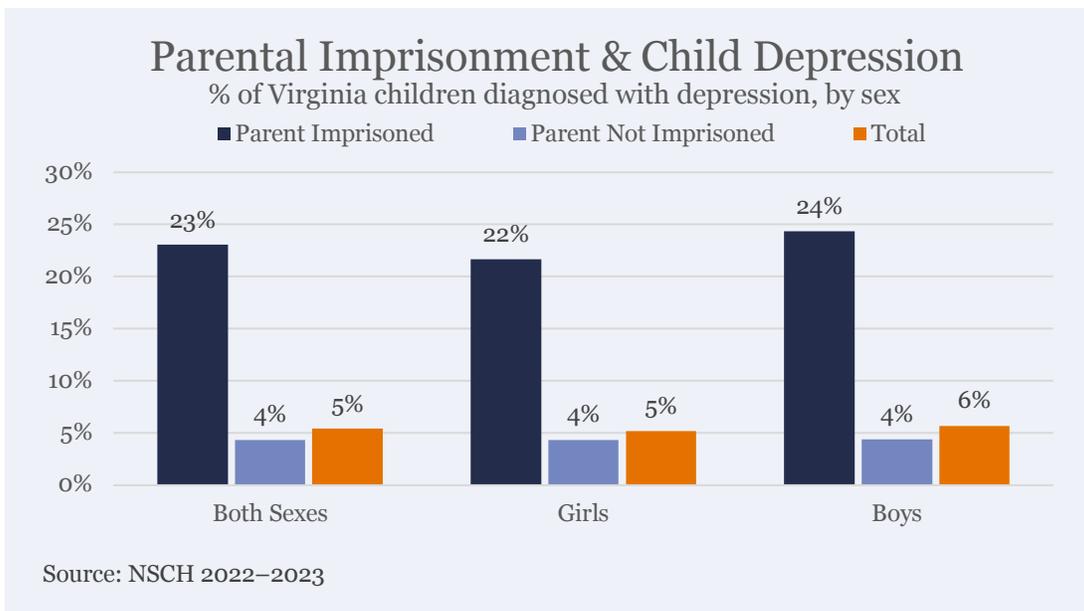


Figure 15: Parental Imprisonment & Child Depression by Sex

When we controlled for family background factors like family income, race and ethnicity, parent education, immigrant status of both parents, and sex and age of child, differences in child well-being indicators related to parental imprisonment remained substantial. When we added family intactness to the predictor mix, however, the predictive strength of parental imprisonment was greatly diminished.

For example, the odds of a student with a history of parental imprisonment getting mostly A's or A's and B's were 67% lower than the odds for students without histories of parental incarceration ($p = .01$). After adding family structure to the predictors, however, parental imprisonment was no longer a significant predictor for grades ($p = 0.86$), whereas family structure was predictive, with children from absent-father families being 28% less likely to get good grades ($p < .001$).

With a larger sample size at the national level, parental imprisonment is still significant in predicting grades. But the Virginia data shows that the impact of parental imprisonment on a child's well-being is closely connected to what incarceration implies for the stability of the child's family.

THE STATE OF VIRGINIA FAMILIES: 1940 to the 2020s

Children, men, and women are generally more likely to thrive when they live in communities where families are stable and fathers are engaged. We know, for instance, that the American Dream is stronger in communities where two-parent families are the norm, and fathers are plentiful.²⁹ By contrast, poor children are more likely to remain stuck in poverty, and young men are more likely to land in prison, where fathers are absent.³⁰ Accordingly, it is important to survey the state of family life in the Commonwealth by looking at trends in marriage, divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and father presence. Here is what we find.



The American Dream is stronger in communities where two-parent families are the norm, and fathers are plentiful.

Fewer Marriages

Fewer Virginians have been getting married in recent decades. The annual number of marriages per thousand residents of the Commonwealth fell by 50% during the 1940s and 1950s, from nearly 20 per thousand Virginians per year in 1940 to 10 per thousand per year in 1960. The rate levelled off in the wake of the 1960s, then started another decline in the 1990s. By 2020, the marriage rate had fallen another 50%, to just over 5 per thousand per year. However, since 2020, the marriage trend in Virginia has leveled off (see Figure 16).

²⁹ Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez “Where is the land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129, no. 4 (2014): 1553-1623; Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya R. Porter. “Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 135, no. 2 (2020): 711–783.

³⁰ Brad Wilcox, Joseph Price, and Jacob Van Leeuwen, “[The Family Geography of The American Dream: New Neighborhood Data on Single Parenthood, Prisons, And Poverty](#),” Institute for Family Studies, October 17, 2018.

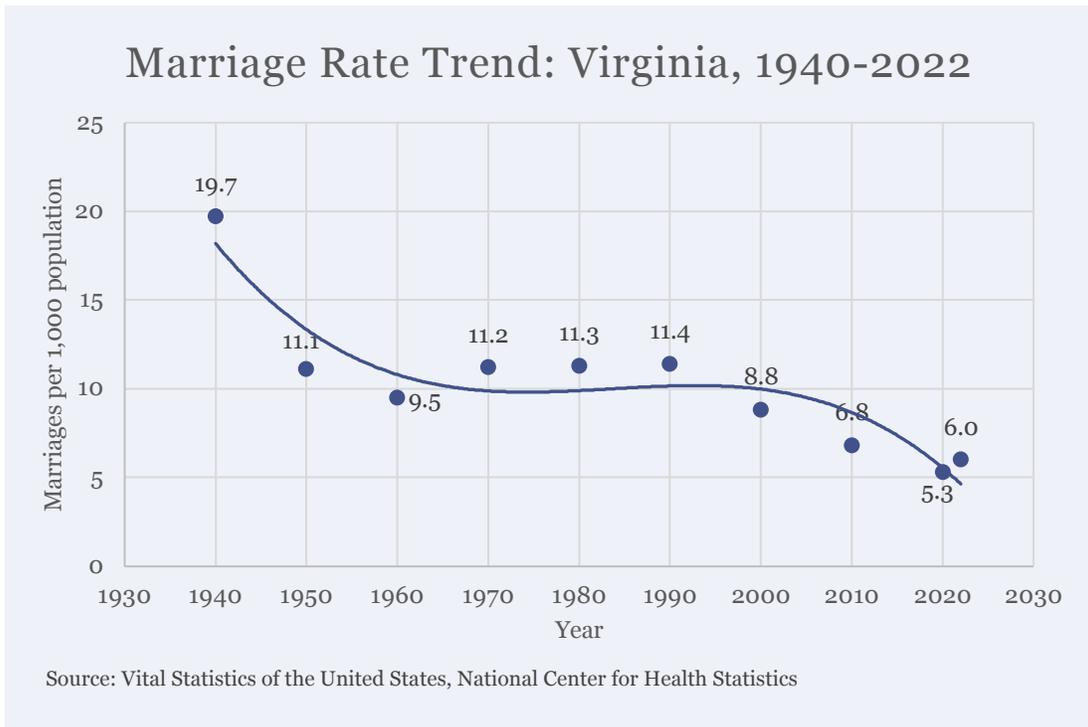


Figure 16: Marriage Rate Trend in Virginia, 1940-2022.

Divorce is Down

Although marriage is declining in the Commonwealth, divorce is also down since peaking in the 1980s. There were only about 2 divorces per year per thousand residents of the Old Dominion in the 1940s and 1950s. The annual divorce rate doubled over the 1960s and 1970s, then levelled off at nearly 4.5 divorces per year per thousand residents during the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, about 1 in 2 marriages ended in divorce across the country.³¹

But the divorce rate fell by 40% between 2000 and 2020, from 4.3 to 2.6 per thousand residents per year. Part of the reason for the decline is that there were fewer marriages during this period, which means that the marriages that were entered into were likely

³¹ Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization* (New York: Harper Collins, 2024), 10.

more selective for greater education, income, and religiosity, all of which are linked to greater marital stability.³² Still, the decline in divorce since 2000, which parallels trends across the nation, suggests that less than half of Old Dominion marriages now end in divorce³³ (see Figure 17).

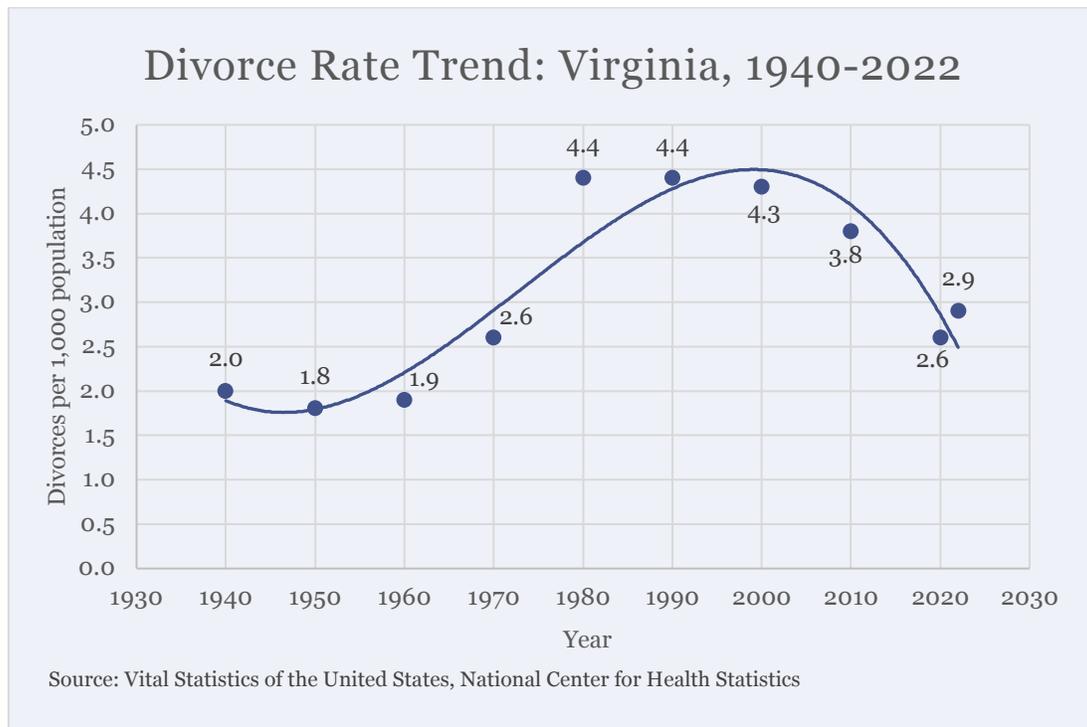


Figure 17: Divorce Rate Trend in Virginia, 1940-2022.

Only Half of Virginians Are Currently Married

These trends in marriage and divorce mean that, as of 2023, only half the population of the Old Dominion aged 15 and over is currently married (excluding those couples who were formally separated). This proportion was 58% in 1940, then rose during the 1940s to two-thirds, where it remained during the 1950s and 60s.³⁴ But in the wake of the

³² Ibid., 29-31.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Prior to 1980, the statistic tabulated by the Census Bureau was the percentage of persons aged 14 and over who were currently married.

nation’s half-century retreat from marriage, the proportion of married Virginians fell to 49% in 2015. But in recent years, the share of married men and women in the state has leveled off at around 50 percent.³⁵

The proportion of Virginians currently married shows substantial variation across racial and ethnic groups. As may be seen in Figure 18, 63% of Asian Americans in the Commonwealth were married in 2023. By contrast, only 35% of Black Virginians were married, as were 54% of White and 46% of Hispanic Virginians. Likewise, there is a substantial education gap in marriage. In 2023, 64% of college-educated adults in Virginia were married compared to 45% of less-educated adults.

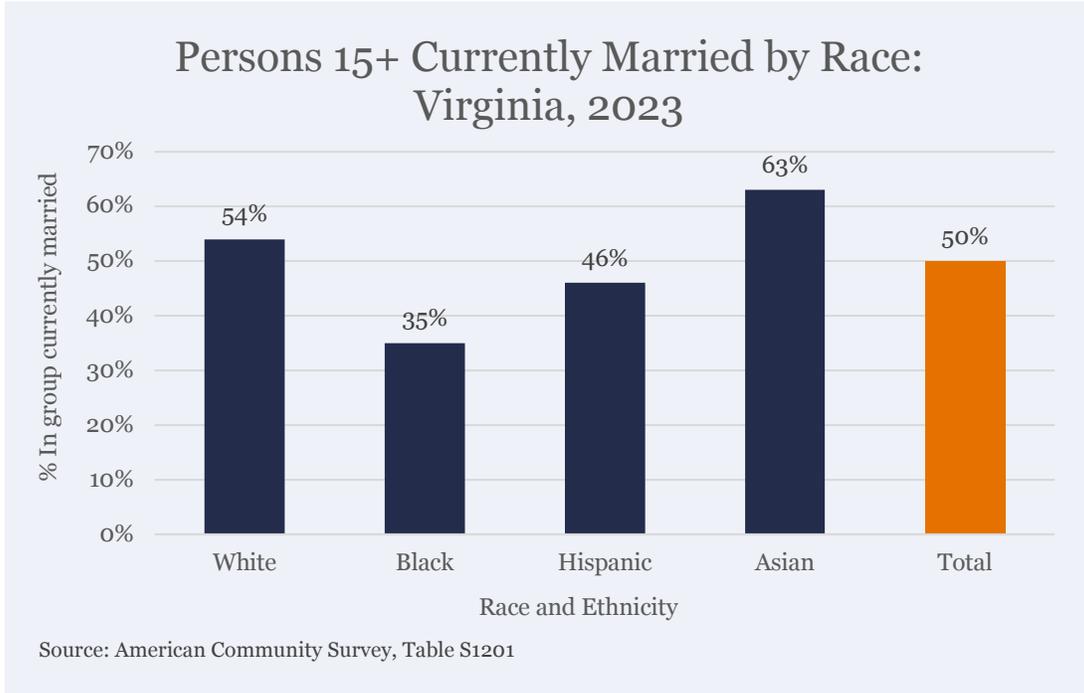


Figure 18: Persons 15+ Currently Married by Race in Virginia

³⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *Decennial Census & American Community Survey*, Annual Estimates.

Nonmarital Childbearing Levels Off

In the 1940s and 1950s, infants born to unmarried women made up between 7 and 8% of all Virginia births. Then, unmarried births rose steadily from the 1960s through the 1990s, reaching 30% in 2000. The rate of increase slowed during the 2000s and slowed further during the 2010s, and it has now dipped down to 35% of total births. In fact, it is noteworthy that a half-century rise in the share of babies born outside of wedlock has now come to a halt in the Commonwealth. In simple terms, as Figure 19 indicates, the share of children born outside of marriage has leveled off in the last decade-and-a-half.

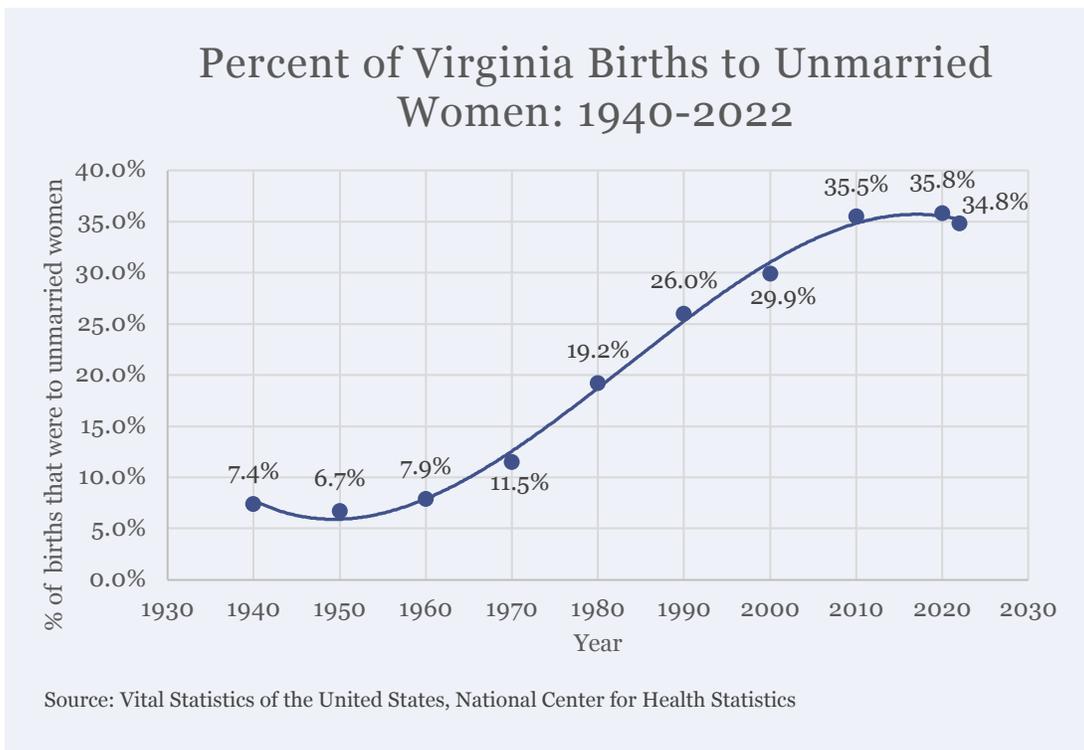


Figure 19: Births to Unmarried Women in Virginia, 1940-2022

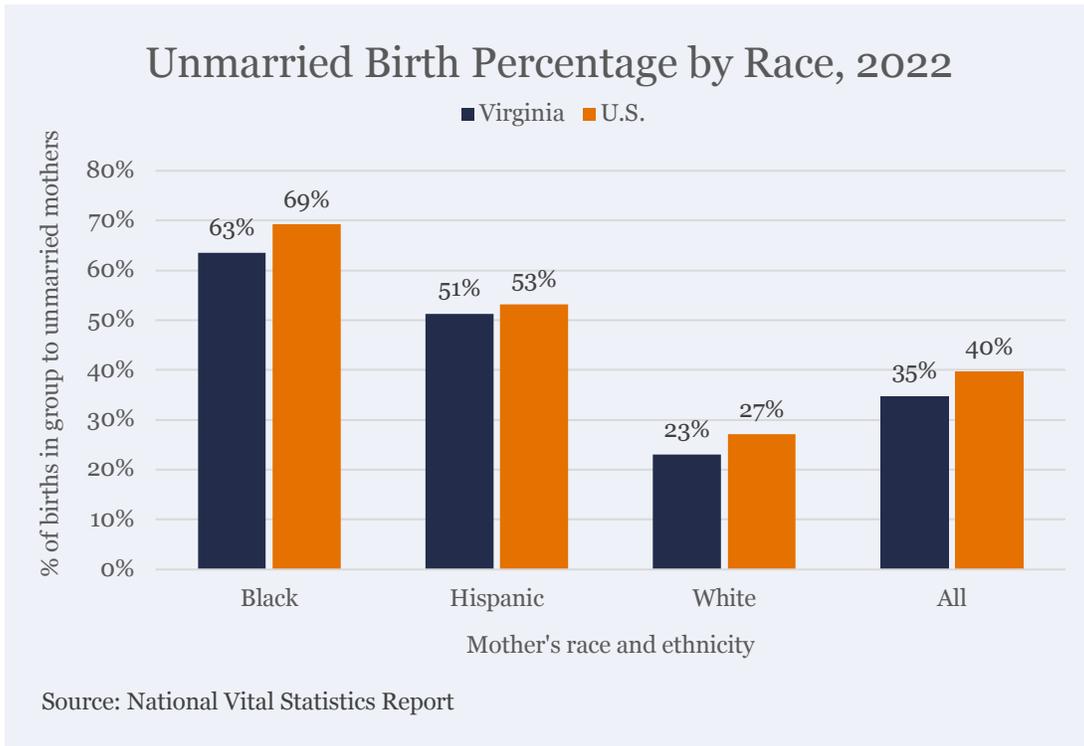


Figure 20: *Percentage of Births to Unmarried Women By Mother's Race and Ethnicity: Virginia & U.S.*

Nonmarital childbearing in the Commonwealth varies by race and ethnicity. In 2022, nearly two-thirds of births to black women, and just over half of births to Hispanic women, were to unmarried mothers in Virginia. Less than a quarter of births to white women were outside of marriage (see Figure 20). Moreover, the share of children born outside of marriage in Virginia also varied by education, with 10% of children born to college-educated mothers born to unmarried mothers, whereas 53% of children born to less-educated mothers were born outside of marriage.

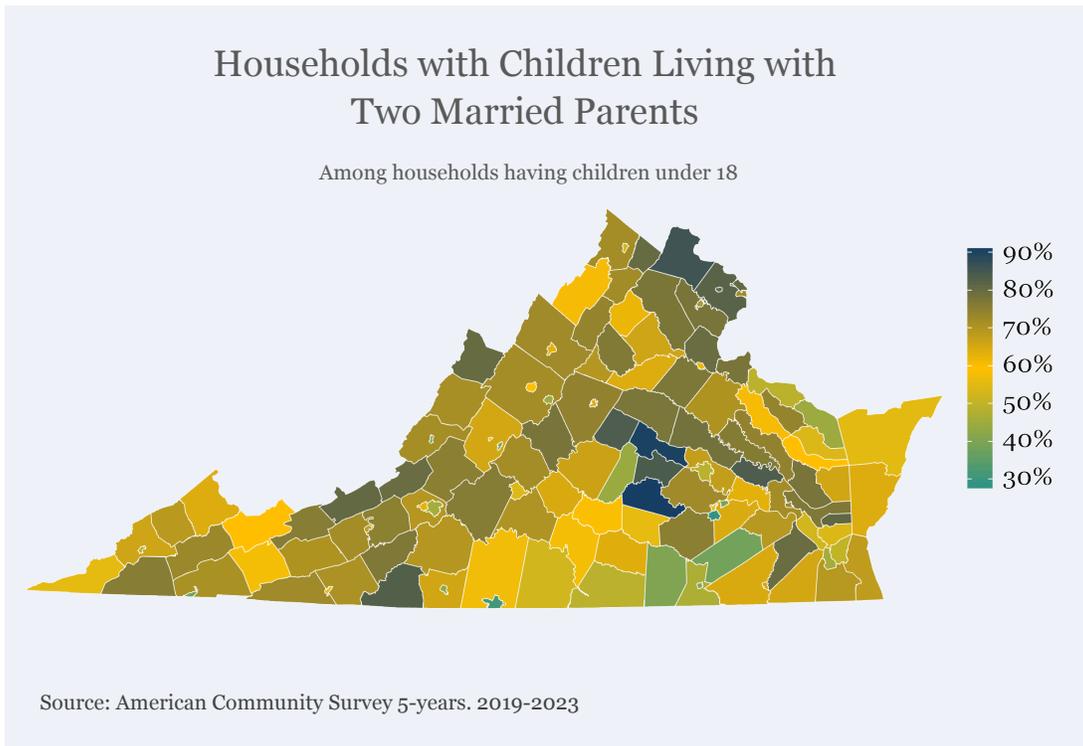


Figure 21: *Households With Children Led by Married-Couple Households*

Not only do trends in family structure vary by race, ethnicity, and education, but they also vary by region across the Commonwealth. As the map indicates, communities in Central and Northern Virginia, as well as west of Richmond, are generally marked by high levels of children living in married-parent families. Amelia, Goochland, and Loudoun counties lead the way in the share of children who live in a married-couple household, as Table 1 indicates. Indeed, these counties have some of the highest shares of married parents in the nation.³⁶ By contrast, single parenthood is more common in Southside Virginia, the Hampton Roads, and Richmond. Sussex County, Danville city, and Petersburg city have especially low levels of children living in married-couple households in the Commonwealth. These regional trends in family structure, in turn, are tied to differences in education, race, and poverty across these areas.

³⁶ Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization* (New York: Harper Collins, 2024), 25.

Table 1: Share of married-couple households, by county

County	Share Children in Married-Couple Households
Amelia County	91%
Goochland County	90%
Loudoun County	85%
Sussex County, Virginia	38%
Danville city, Virginia	32%
Petersburg city, Virginia	27%

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Proportion of Virginia Children in Fatherless Homes Levelled Off

What do these trends in Virginia families mean for the presence of fathers and children’s family structure in the state as a whole? Declines in marriage and increases in divorce and nonmarital childbearing help explain why the proportion of children living with an unmarried mother and no father nearly doubled between 1970 and 2010 (from 10% to 20%). During that time span, the fraction living within a married-parent household fell from 85% to 68 percent.³⁷ Since 2010, the share of children living in married-parent households has levelled off, now 67%, while those in single-mother households apart from their father has declined (18%). The decline for single-mother households is partially accounted for by slight increases in children living with cohabiting parents and single fathers.

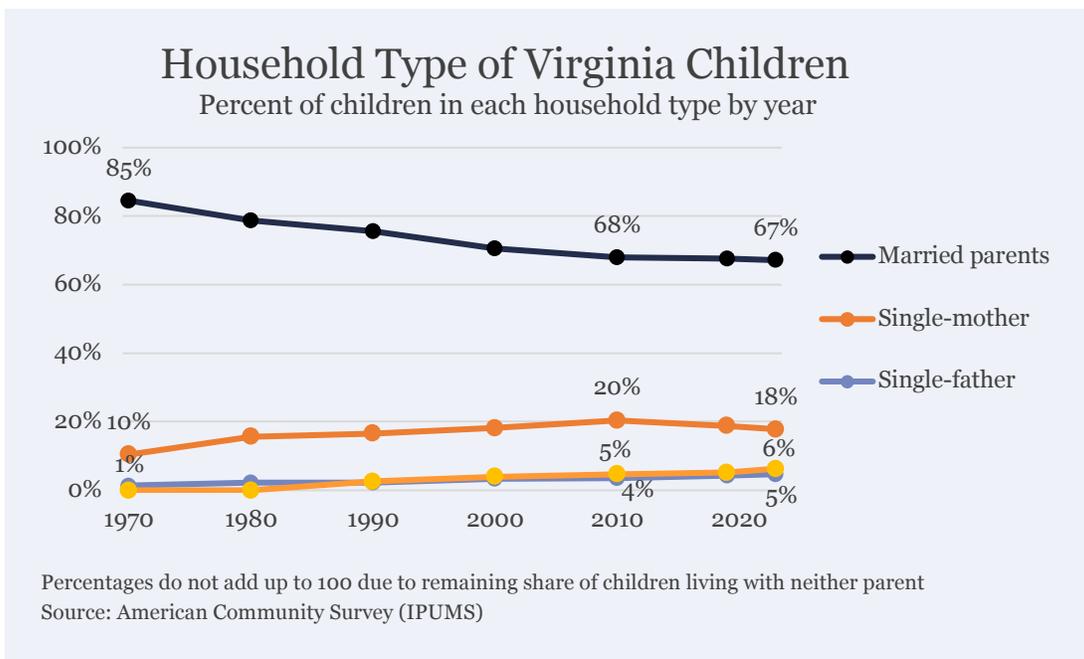


Figure 22: Household Type of Virginia Children 1970–2023

³⁷ This trend includes the presence of stepfathers.

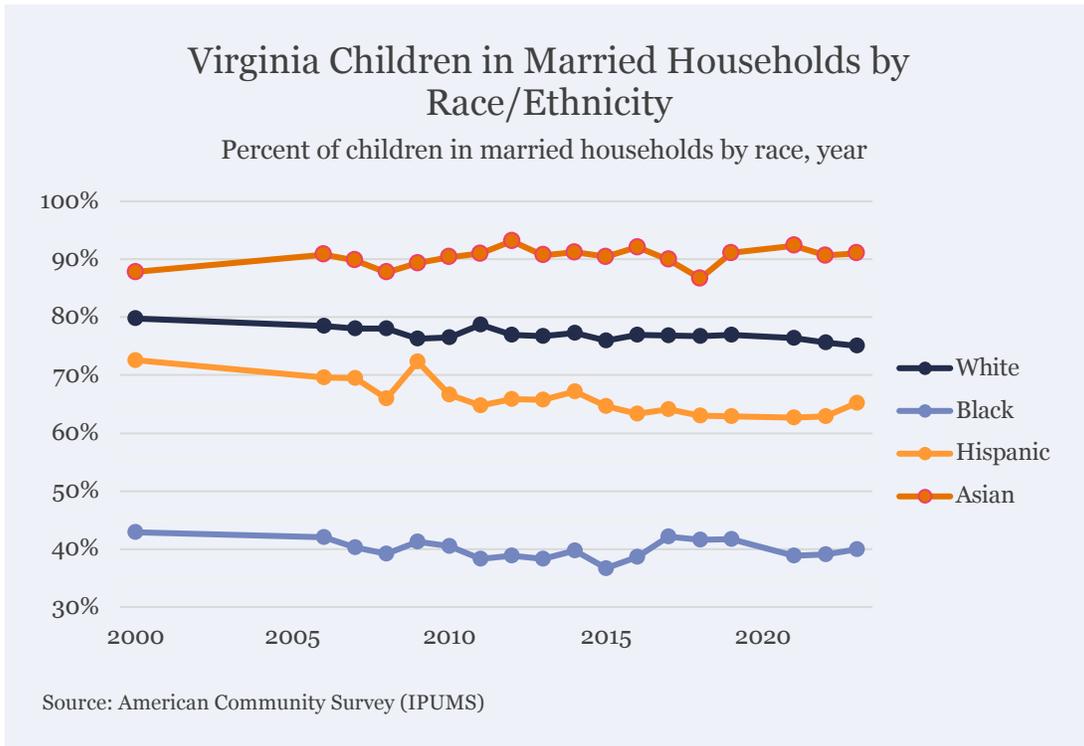


Figure 23: Household Type of Virginian Children by Race 2000–2023

These trends mean the share of children in the state living in a fatherless home has also levelled off in the last decade. What’s also noteworthy about recent family trends is that the share of black children in married-parent homes has ticked up in the last decade. In 2023, 40% of black children were being raised in a married-parent family in Virginia, up from 37% in 2015.

Majority of Virginia Children Growing Up in Intact Families

Almost 7 in 10 children live in married families in Virginia today at any one point in time. But how many kids in the state grow up living with their father in an intact-married family (birth or adoptive parents) *throughout their childhoods*? We can estimate that proportion by looking at the percentage of adolescents who are still living in intact families in the last years of high school, when most are 15- to 17-years-old.



Data from NSCH conducted in 2022 and 2023 indicate that 61% of 15-17-year-olds in the state are living in an intact-married family with their father. It is now 53% in the nation as a whole. So, Virginia comes in above the U.S. nationwide average in terms of family stability.

There is both good and bad news to report, then, when we survey the state of Virginia families and fatherhood. The bad news is that Virginia boys and girls are markedly less likely to live in a two-parent home with their father than they were in the middle of the last century. But the good news is that as divorce falls and marriage stabilizes in Virginia, most children in the Commonwealth are now being raised in an intact home with their father.

A FATHER-FRIENDLY POLICY AGENDA

There is no question that children across the Commonwealth of Virginia are more likely to flourish when their fathers are engaged in their lives. The quality of their relationship with their dad, regardless of family form, clearly matters. At the same time, boys and girls across the state are also more likely to excel in school, steer clear of depression, and enjoy a financially secure home when they grow up in an intact home with their father.

Given the importance of dads, we think that Virginia should follow other states, like Florida and Tennessee, that have or plan to launch major statewide efforts to strengthen fatherhood on a bipartisan basis. We outline six sets of policy ideas to strengthen fathers and families across Virginia that focus especially on boys, fathers, and families. These are broken down by policies targeting boys and young men in what we call the “deciding decade” and others focusing on men who have already become fathers.

Making the Best Use of the “Deciding Decade” for Boys on the Path to Becoming Family Men

The challenges facing men are now a well-documented phenomenon. Increased deaths of despair, declines in college attendance, and high rates of male disengagement from full-time work are just three indicators of the problems that men face today.³⁸ These challenges merit our concern not only because they hurt adult men but also because they make life difficult for the women and children in the lives of men. That’s because when men flounder, they are less likely to be the fathers and family men they could and should be.

³⁸ Richard V. Reeves, *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It* (Brookings Institution Press, 2022); Douglas Belkin, “A Generation of American Men Give Up on College,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 6, 2021; Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization* (New York: Harper Collins, 2024).

Thus, this section is geared to addressing the needs of boys and young men in the decade prior to turning 25 to increase the likelihood they make decisions that put them on a path to becoming responsible, engaged fathers. Specifically, we focus here on the “deciding decade”—from their mid-teens to their mid-twenties—a period in which a young man’s choices regarding education, work, relationships, and family formation have an outsized influence over the trajectory of the rest of his life.

1 Making Schools Boy-Friendly

Boys are falling behind girls in K-12 education across the Commonwealth. Right now, for instance, we find that 45% of girls get mostly A’s in Virginia schools versus 27% of boys, and that 30% of boys have their parents contacted regarding their behavior or performance at school compared to just 18% of girls. Beyond this gender gap, all Virginia children could do better in school. For example, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress results for 2024, only 66% of 8th graders in Virginia scored at or above the basic level in Reading. For Mathematics, only 63% scored at or above the basic level.³⁹

There are several steps lawmakers can take to reestablish educational excellence, particularly with an eye to boosting boys’ performance in school.

First, education leaders and policymakers should invest in the “hands-on” practical and vocational elements of education that appeal to boys’ imagination and interests.⁴⁰ For instance, the state should increase support for career and technical education (CTE). Right now, Virginia ranks 27th among all states for its spending on CTE education.⁴¹ The state could do better here, which is why legislators should follow Governor Youngkin’s recommendation to boost CTE spending

³⁹ “Virginia Overview,” The Nation’s Report Card, 2024.

⁴⁰ Richard V. Reeves, *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It* (Brookings Institution Press, 2022), 145-147.

⁴¹ Career Tech. “State Comparisons,” *Advance CTE: State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work*, 2023.

by \$35 million.⁴² Efforts like this are especially valuable insofar as research on vocationally-focused high schools like Career Academies indicates that male graduates of these schools see marked gains in their earnings and odds of marriage.⁴³

Second, policymakers at all levels should aim to hire more male teachers, given the research telling us boys tend to thrive more in school when they are taught by men.⁴⁴ Male teachers are also much more likely to be coaches and so provide positive male role models, not only in the classroom but also on the sports field. The share of K-12 teachers who are male has declined nationally from 33% in the early 1980s to 23% today. In Virginia, the male share of teachers in public schools is just 17 percent.⁴⁵ Working with Schools of Education and school leaders at all levels, the state should set a “30 by 30” goal, so that by 2030, 30% of new teachers are men.

Third, given the potential benefits of single-sex education when it comes to helping boys and girls focus and thrive at school,⁴⁶ Virginia should apply best practices from existing single-sex private schools throughout the Commonwealth to open a number of all-boy or all-girl charter schools. Boys’ Latin of Philadelphia⁴⁷ and Ivy Prep Academy in Metro Atlanta⁴⁸ provide two charter school models for consideration. At present, none of the seven charter schools in Virginia are single-sex schools.⁴⁹

⁴² Governor’s Office. “Governor Glenn Youngkin Unveils Budget Amendments to Keep Delivering for Students and Families, Bringing Direct Aid to Education Commitment to More than \$22 Billion Over the Biennium,” Governor of Virginia, December 13, 2024.

⁴³ James J. Kemple, “Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Work, Education, and Transitions to Adulthood.” (New York: MRDC, 2008).

⁴⁴ Richard V. Reeves, *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It* (Brookings Institution Press, 2022), 141.

⁴⁵ [2021 Virginia School Survey of Climate and Working Conditions](#) (Virginia Department of Education, October 2021).

⁴⁶ Hyunjoon Park, Jere R. Behrman, and Jaesung Choi. “Single-Sex Education: Positive Effects.” *Science* 335, no. 6065 (2012): 165-166.

⁴⁷ Boys’ Latin of Philadelphia, [BoysLatin.org](#).

⁴⁸ Ivy Prep Academy, [IvyPrepSchool.org](#).

⁴⁹ “[Charter Schools](#),” Virginia Department of Education, 2022.

Fourth, Virginia schools ought to dedicate more time to recess and physical education for kids in elementary and middle schools.⁵⁰ This would benefit all students but especially boys. At the same time, steps should be taken to address the declining participation of boys in school sports,⁵¹ partly to boost boys’ emotional and practical engagement in schools across the Commonwealth.

Fifth, schools should make sure their curricula and learning ethos appeal to the hearts and minds of boys. As discussed above, more male teachers help to create an environment that is more inclusive for boys. Additional ideas here include adding more contests to the mix, as well as more books and learning focused on war, sports, and science—all subjects that tend to have more appeal to boys.⁵²

Sixth, add instruction on the Success Sequence—which stresses the value of education, work, and marriage in young adults’ lives—to the Family Life Education program. At present, Virginia does include family planning and establishing life-long career goals within the Virginia Family Like Education (FLE) *Standards of Learning (SOL)*. We recommend that when the Virginia Department of Education begins the process of reviewing and updating the Family Life Education Standards in 2027, the Success Sequence be taught in middle school and high school when the existing Standards for “family planning,” “planning for the future,” and “life-long career goals” are taught. See below for more details on how and why this should be done.

This SOL should also require that students learn that children are more likely to flourish across the life course when they have active and engaged fathers.⁵³ They also ought to learn that mothers and fathers often (but not always) bring distinct talents to the

⁵⁰ Richard V. Reeves, *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It* (Brookings Institution Press, 2022), 141.

⁵¹ Matt Schulz, “More Students Are Playing High School Sports Than Last Year, But Numbers Remain Below Pre-Pandemic Highs,” *LendingTree*, October 30, 2023.

⁵² Tom Sarrouf, Jr., “What’s Wrong With Boys At School?” Institute for Family Studies, June 5, 2024.

⁵³ “A Father’s Impact on Child Development,” All For Kids, March 12, 2025; Ross D. Parke, *Fatherhood*, Vol. 33. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); David J. Eggebeen “Do Fathers Uniquely Matter for Adolescent Well-Being?” in *Gender and Parenthood: Biological and Social Scientific Perspectives*, ed. W. Bradford Wilcox and Kathleen Kovner Kline (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013): 249-270.

parenting enterprise.⁵⁴ Lastly, the SOL should underline the value of marriage and a stable family life when it comes to integrating fathers into kids' lives.⁵⁵ The point of this SOL, then, is to educate boys (and girls) about the valuable role that fathers can play in children's lives.

2 Creating A Positive Culture of Fatherhood

Supporting fathers is about culture at least as much as policy. But policy can help to create a more father-supportive culture. One important step is to increase the availability of paid leave for fathers, especially for those in lower-wage jobs. But there is a role for narrative change here, too. For example, policymakers should consider taking the following three steps.

First, to help young men make the best of the deciding decade, the state should sponsor a Public Service Announcement (PSA) campaign targeting teenage boys and young men online. This PSA should feature a diverse cast of young women talking about what they are looking for in a future husband and father—a “future family man.” These traits should encompass virtues like being hard working, emotionally engaged, protective, responsible, and committed, all traits known to be linked to the formation and sustenance of strong and stable families.⁵⁶ The PSAs should paint a picture of the path young men can walk towards forming a good life and a strong family for the future.

This PSA campaign should be designed and built around the evidence regarding what worked in previous campaigns targeting smoking through the Truth Initiative⁵⁷ and

⁵⁴ Ross D. Parke, *Fatherhood*, Vol. 33. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁵⁵ Popenoe, David. *Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society*. (Harvard University Press, 1996); Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization* (New York: Harper Collins, 2024).

⁵⁶ Wendy Wang, “[The Best and Worst Cities for Women Looking to Marry](#),” Pew Research Center, October 22, 2014. Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization* (New York: Harper Collins, 2024).

⁵⁷ [Truth Initiative](#), 2025.

drunk driving awareness for teens.⁵⁸ The campaign can also benefit from studying the launch of a first-of-a-kind PSA campaign in 2025 designed to address youth violence that engages the support of parents and seeks to influence youth choices.⁵⁹ At the same time, given the new power of social media, this campaign should focus its dissemination efforts on social media platforms. The goal here is to lift up the image of fatherhood as a noble calling for men to aspire to.

Second, make the Success Sequence part of the Virginia Family Life Education (FLE) Framework. The Virginia Department of Education is scheduled to begin the process of reviewing and updating the Family Life Education SOL's in 2027. As stated above, we recommend that during this update, the Success Sequence be added to the curriculum that is taught in middle school and high school.

This SOL should teach boys and girls the Success Sequence, which stresses the value to young adults of (1) getting at least a high school degree, (2) working full-time, and (3) marrying before having any children. This sort of education is grounded in what Alexis de Tocqueville coined “self-interest, rightly understood.”



⁵⁸ The Ad Council, Ad Campaigns: “[Buzzed Driving Prevention](#)”.

⁵⁹ “[First-of-its-Kind Gun Violence Prevention Initiative Convenes Health Care and Business Leaders to Curb Impact of Firearm Injuries and Deaths on America’s Youth.](#)” The Ad Council, February 27, 2025.

The Success Sequence provides a path towards financial security and away from poverty for today's young men (and women) insofar as young people who take these three steps have a 97% chance of avoiding poverty as they move into adulthood.⁶⁰ In addition, over 90% of black, Hispanic, and young adults from poor families avoid poverty as they head into their late twenties and follow this sequence.⁶¹ Finally, the Success Sequence is also tied to family stability, in that young men and women who followed all three steps are more than *twice as likely* to be still living in an intact family in their thirties compared to their peers who had a child before or outside marriage, even after controlling for a range of sociodemographic factors.⁶² Although this sort of education is gender neutral, given that both young women and men benefit from following the steps, it can be tailored to help young boys imagine how it sets them up to be more successful men and good family men as they move towards adulthood. Accordingly, the Department of Education, along with local Virginia school districts, could incorporate the Success Sequence into middle and high school classes related to financial literacy or family life education.

Third, Virginia should also sponsor a PSA campaign that spotlights the important things good dads do for their children. The academic, emotional, and social benefits of engaged and present fathers should be showcased in this PSA campaign targeting middle-aged men and women.⁶³ This PSA campaign is designed to motivate fathers to engage more with their kids, encourage moms to facilitate such engagement, and develop greater public appreciation for the role that dads play in the lives of their kids. In particular, this campaign would alert the general public, as well as mothers and fathers, to the valuable role that dads can and do play in their kids' lives. Fathers' financial contributions, value as playmates, capacity to challenge their children, and role in helping to establish orderly homes and neighborhoods could be featured in this campaign. This campaign would target local TV stations and social media platforms with the aim of attracting the attention of today's mothers and fathers.

⁶⁰ Brad Wilcox and Wendy Wang, *The Millennial Success Sequence: Marriage, Kids, and the Success Sequence Among Young Adults* (American Enterprise Institute and Institute for Family Studies, June 2017).

⁶¹ Brad Wilcox and Wendy Wang, *The Power of the Success Sequence for Disadvantaged Young Adults* (American Enterprise Institute and Institute for Family Studies, May 2022).

⁶² Wendy Wang and Samuel Wilkinson, *The Success Sequence and Millennial Mental Health* (Charlottesville: Institute for Family Studies, September 2024).

⁶³ David J. Eggebeen, "Do Fathers Uniquely Matter for Adolescent Well-Being?" in *Gender and Parenthood: Biological and Social Scientific Perspectives*, ed. W. Bradford Wilcox and Kathleen K. Kline (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 249-270; Ross D. Parke *Fatherhood*. Vol. 33. (Harvard University Press, 1996).

3 Limiting Access to Pornography

The near-universal availability of pornography has deformed countless boys' conception of healthy relationships. Through pornography, young men are trained to enjoy violence, domination, and the objectification of the opposite sex as part and parcel of relationships and a future marriage and family life. For decades, existing internet policy has allowed online pornography to malform the future family men of America. Restoring a healthy understanding of relationships and family life in the Commonwealth requires protecting young men and women from exposure to pornographic material.

Virginia recently passed an age verification law related to pornography, but independent analysis suggests the majority of major pornography websites “are not using age verification methods as mandated.”⁶⁴ Lawmakers should strengthen the law on the books by expanding the power of attorney general enforcement to more effectively address non-compliant international sites, including by granting the authority to seek the withdrawal of services of payment platforms, hosting companies, search engines, and advertising networks, which are all critical to the business model. To detect and curtail underage in-state traffic via VPN, a common workaround, the law should also be amended to require sites to use currently available geolocation technology to be reasonably sure that the user is out-of-state when an age verification check would otherwise be required.

The Commonwealth should also pursue device-level measures that would make it exceedingly difficult for children to access pornographic images on their smartphones, such as legislation that requires smartphones to switch “ON” their obscenity filters for minors, as well as age verification via the app store, as in-app browsers enable access to pornography for minors. Both legislative measures have been advanced by Utah to strengthen existing protections that require pornography sites to verify a user's age.

⁶⁴ Meghan McIntyre, “[Many Pornography Websites Aren't Complying with New Virginia Age Verification Law](#),” *Virginia Mercury*, August 23, 2023.

Above all, we strongly encourage the Commonwealth to pioneer a whole-stack approach to protecting minors from pornography, such as by adopting the interoperable age-verification platforms that are now being developed in the EU.

4 Reviving Civic Efforts to Promote Prosocial Masculinity

Civil society institutions have long played a role in ushering boys and young men into manhood. The Boy Scouts, American Legion, Rotary Club, and a host of other organizations helped form countless boys into good men, teaching them basic skills and broader moral teachings about what it means to be a man—to be a present father, caring husband, and patriotic citizen. Unfortunately, many of these institutions are now in decline, which is one reason so many of our young men are alone and adrift.

Manhood is embedded in social context—it cannot be separated from the civic institutions that give it substance and form. Existing civic institutions—from religious youth groups to Scout troops—across Virginia should be more intentional about cultivating a pro-social masculinity among boys and young men, one that prepares them to be responsible, respectful, and hard-working family men in the future. But we also need new organizations across the Commonwealth that approach this task in ways appropriate for this moment. The alternative to making moves in this direction is to leave the task of cultivating masculinity in the rising generation to antisocial figures on the internet. And none of us want that. As a first step, the state should commission research on the current health of the civic groups that currently serve boys and young men and assess options to strengthen them.

SPOTLIGHTING GOOD DADS AND HELPING ALL FATHERS BECOME THE FAMILY MEN THEY COULD BE

The state of Virginia can also take actions to help men who are already fathers be better fathers. Although today's residential dads are generally more involved with their kids than earlier generations, they can still benefit from cultural messaging that acknowledges and celebrates the role they play in their children's lives. Given the unique challenges that non-residential fathers face in staying engaged and connected to their children, the Commonwealth can also take steps to provide them with additional resources to connect them to their sons and daughters. These efforts are especially needed for fathers leaving jail and prison, in view of the findings in this report.

5 Helping All Dads Flourish

About 1 in 4 children across the Commonwealth live apart from their father. A father-friendly policy agenda for Virginia must help dads who are not living at home with their child, many of whom are less advantaged. The Commonwealth should support programs targeting parenting, mental health, co-parenting, and child development and psychology. Given the importance of work for fathers' emotional well-being and ability to financially support their children, the state should also fund programs designed to help low-income non-residential fathers find and keep full-time work and fulfill their child support obligations. There are a number of promising models from across the country including Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood initiatives funded by the federal Administration for Children and Families within Health and Human Services, as well as state programs such as the Fatherhood Foundation of Virginia, and local programs like My Brother's Keeper of Greater Richmond.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ "FY 2020 Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grantees (2020-2025)," U.S. Administration for Children and Families: Office of Family Assistance, November 2021; Fatherhood Foundation of Virginia, VADad.org; My Brother's Keeper of Greater Richmond, MBKGRVA.org, 2024.

A number of fatherhood programs targeting the relational skills and emotional well-being of disadvantaged dads have demonstrated success in these domains. For instance, Supporting Father Involvement (SFI), a state-funded program in California, engages fathers and co-parents on topics such as parenting strategies, emotional well-being, and relationship quality. Evaluations of SFI have shown significant reduction in psychological distress for both fathers and co-parents, along with decreased couple conflict and improvements in parenting practices, leading to better outcomes for children.⁶⁶ Likewise, research suggests TRUE Dads, a federally-funded initiative that provides a multifaceted relationship curriculum for low-income fathers, has improved fathers' mental health, reduced relationship conflicts, and increased fathers' employment; in turn, this program has led to less harsh parenting by fathers and improved behavior in their children.⁶⁷ A Virginia example is the Dad 2 Dads Program, which promotes positive child-parent relations by having dads support other dads living in Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk, or Virginia Beach.⁶⁸

The state should also partner with nonprofits dedicated to helping low-income non-resident fathers on the financial front. For instance, the Georgia Fatherhood Program (GFP), a state-funded initiative in Georgia, assists low-income, noncustodial fathers in fulfilling their child support obligations and improving their financial stability. The program offers life skills training, job placement assistance, and both short-term and long-term vocational training, including fields such as truck driving and technical trades. Evaluations of the GFP show significant increases in employment rates, with participant employment rising from 30% to 66%, though wage growth for already-employed fathers remained limited.⁶⁹

Virginia should follow in the footsteps of these other states by getting behind programs focusing directly on improving the quality of father-child ties and the financial position of non-residential fathers. Of course, it's imperative that any state-supported programs also track and evaluate the success of these programs to ensure that they are making a measurable difference in the lives of fathers across the Commonwealth.

⁶⁶ Philip A. Cowan, Carolyn Pape Cowan, and Peter F. Gillette. "TRUE Dads: The Impact of a Couples-Based Fatherhood intervention on Family Relationships, Child Outcomes, and Economic Self-Sufficiency." *Family Process* 61, no. 3 (2022): 1021-1044.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ "Dad 2 Dads," [The Up Center](#), February 24, 2025.

⁶⁹ Stacey R. Bloomer and Theresa A. Sipe. "The Impact of the Georgia Fatherhood Program on Employment and Wages." *Journal of Social Service Research* 29, no. 4 (2003): 53-65.

6

Helping Formerly Incarcerated Fathers Stand Tall

A staggering number of Virginia children, about 100,000, have a parent incarcerated—usually a father. We have seen in this report that children with incarcerated parents in the Commonwealth suffer from challenges ranging from school problems to depression at much higher rates than other boys and girls across the state.⁷⁰ To minimize their suffering, the state should do all it can to help incarcerated fathers be better fathers both behind bars and after they have been released from prison.

Currently, the Virginia Department of Corrections (DOC) has approximately 23,000 prisoners—the vast majority of whom are men and many of whom are also fathers—inside one of 26 state facilities; thousands of other fathers are incarcerated in local jails across the state, as well as in federal prisons around the country.⁷¹ State, local, and federal prisons should seek to have a majority of incarcerated fathers with children under 18 attend fatherhood programs, as well as programs designed to improve their employment prospects after release, especially as they come close to reentry. The state should also increase support for programs serving fathers who have recently been released from prison or jail.

The research on parenting programs targeting currently and formerly incarcerated adults indicates that such programs can work—with, for instance, demonstrated improvements in parenting skills.⁷² For instance, evidence from a randomized controlled trial of the Parenting Inside Out program in Oregon found the program led to improved parental relationships, and a decrease in the likelihood of drug use and rearrests by police.⁷³

⁷⁰ Eric Martin, “Hidden Consequences: The Impact of Incarceration on Dependent Children,” National Institute of Justice, March 1, 2017.

⁷¹ VADOC Research Forecast Unit, “Population Summary October 2024,” Virginia Department of Corrections, 2024; “State Oversight of Local and Regional Jails,” Joint Legislative Audit & Review Commission, September 16, 2019.

⁷² Eleanor Armstrong, Elizabeth Eggins, Natasha Reid, Paul Harnett, and Sharon Dawe. “Parenting Interventions for Incarcerated Parents to Improve Parenting Knowledge and Skills, Parent Well-Being, and Quality of the Parent–Child Relationship: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.” *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 14 (2018): 279-317.

⁷³ Mark J. Eddy, Charles R. Martinez Jr, Bert O. Burraston, Danita Herrera, and Rex M. Newton. “A Randomized Controlled Trial of a Parent Management Training Program for Incarcerated Parents: Post-Release Outcomes.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 8 (2022): 4605.

The DOC is well-positioned to increase its support for incarcerated fathers. Right now, the DOC offers more than 125 programs that cover everything from college classes to job training to parenting.⁷⁴ For parents in particular, DOC offers nine classes for Partners in Parenting, which is designed to build stronger communication skills between a parent and a child. DOC also offers Inside Out Dads, which provides 13 classes to connect fathers with families. But as valuable as these efforts are, they do not reach all eligible fathers.

It's for that reason, in part, that the state is working to augment programs serving fathers in prison and fathers who have recently left prison. During the past three years, several things have happened to put the Commonwealth in a unique position to become a national model for fatherhood programs in and outside prison.

First, the executive leadership to make reform happen is in place. Last year, Governor Glen Youngkin signed Executive Order 36 to open doors of opportunity to the approximately 10,000 adults and juveniles leaving incarceration to supervision each year.⁷⁵ The governor's *Stand Tall-Stay Strong-Succeed Together Initiative* is a first-in-the-nation effort to take a comprehensive, multi-agency approach to address recidivism by removing pre-release barriers through job placements, reentry programs, and public safety partnerships. Since the launch of a related state pilot program in 2023, over 3,000 formerly incarcerated people gained employment and more than 7,000 obtained health insurance.⁷⁶ The governor's initiative is also designed to specifically assist fathers.

Second, the DOC has programs in place to help prisoners transition into work, with numerous career and technical education programs,⁷⁷ as well as employment partners positioned to help prisoners once they reenter society. In Virginia, there are 17 community partners with membership in the Second Chance Business Coalition,⁷⁸ a group of Fortune 500 to smaller businesses that work to hire people with a criminal record.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ ["Incoming Inmates: Programs,"](#) Virginia Department of Corrections, accessed January 27, 2024.

⁷⁵ Executive Order No. 36, ["Establishing the Stand Tall - Stay Strong - Succeed Together Reentry Initiative,"](#) Office of the Governor of Virginia, 2024.

⁷⁶ Peter Finocchio, ["Governor Glenn Youngkin Announces Stand Tall - Stay Strong - Succeed Together Initiative to Improve Reentry Success, Prevent Recidivism,"](#) Office of the Governor, August 15, 2024.

⁷⁷ ["Operating Procedure 601.6: Career and Technical Education Programs,"](#) Virginia Department of Corrections, 2024.

⁷⁸ ["Community Partners Map,"](#) Second Chance Business Coalition, 2025.

⁷⁹ [Second Chance Business Coalition,](#) 2025.

There are also nonprofit partners connecting incarcerated fathers to their children across the state. A “Date with Dad” weekend event was started in 2008 by Sheriff C.T. Woody, Jr. of the City of Richmond inside a local jail and matured into a program used in other jails across the state. The program was made into a 2024 award-winning Netflix documentary.⁸⁰ A Better Day Than Yesterday is a Richmond-based nonprofit that unites incarcerated dads with their children.⁸¹ Prison Fellowship, the nation’s largest nonprofit Christian organization dedicated to changing the lives of men and women inside prison, has a Virginia chapter that works with fathers and the children they left behind.⁸²

But more work remains to be done. A father-friendly policy agenda for Virginia’s incarcerated men means the Department of Corrections (DOC) should seek to make sure that at least half of the incarcerated fathers who are scheduled for release in 2026 attend a parenting program focusing on parenting skills, co-parenting, and emotional self-regulation. The DOC could expand existing programs inside Virginia prisons or introduce an evidenced-based parent intervention model used in prisons in another state like Parenting Inside Out. Likewise, the DOC should make sure that half of fathers who are reentering society in 2026 are directly connected to potential employers. Once these programs are in place, DOC should compare fathers in treatment and control groups. RCTs and other evaluation models must be used to assess program effectiveness. Successful outcomes from program participants should include increased quality of father-child interactions, better behavioral child outcomes, more employment, and reduced recidivism.

The aim here is two-fold: to help formerly incarcerated fathers stand tall as parents and providers, and to improve the well-being of their sons and daughters.

⁸⁰ “C.T.,” *Richmond Justice*, August 12, 2016; “Date With Dad Weekend,” Girls For A Change, 2025.

⁸¹ “About Us,” *A Better Day Than Yesterday Initiative Program*, 2023.

⁸² “State Issues: Virginia,” Prison Fellowship, March 15, 2023.

CONCLUSION

Too many boys and men are falling behind in school, work, and the home in today's Virginia. This is both a cause and consequence of the fact that too many fathers in the Old Dominion are not present or sufficiently engaged in their sons and daughters' lives. We need to do more to help all boys and men, including men coming out of prison, have a shot at becoming good fathers. This clearly matters for their kids, but also for them. We hope the suggestions above help Virginia policymakers, civic leaders, educators, and parents make the Commonwealth a better place for all young people, preparing them to make life decisions that research shows lead to better outcomes.

But *Good Fathers, Flourishing Kids* also spotlights reasons for hope when it comes to fathers and family life in Virginia. A large share of fathers across the Old Dominion are actively engaged dads. And, in recent years, Virginia families have stabilized, including African American families, which are now more likely to be headed by married fathers than they were a few years ago. We hope the policies we articulated in this report will help augment these encouraging developments for Virginia fathers, families, and the next generation.

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