

Commentary

JOHN LEO

News about marriage is not what you think

Newsweek's cover story for May 28 announced that marriage and the nuclear family are on their deathbed ("The new single mom — why the traditional family is fading fast"). In the next week or two, there's a good chance that Time magazine will run a cover story saying almost the opposite, something like "I do, I do — Are marriage and the nuclear family making a comeback?"

This process is known as journalism. Newsweek's story was triggered by a misleading Census Bureau statistic (two-parent families now account for only a quarter of American households). Newsweek's interpretation was the dominant one in the news media. No surprise. The newsroom has been tapping out death-of-marriage stories for 25 years. They are a hardy staple of the journalistic world. Almost every one starts with the mandatory derisive mention of either Ozzie and Harriet or the Beaver's TV parents, June and Ward Cleaver. This time out Newsweek gave the nod to June and Ward.

Last week this traditional "fading fast" version of the two-parent family took a major hit. The liberal Center on Budget and Policy Priorities analyzed 1995 to 2000 data and concluded that the move away from marriage "really seems to have come to a halt," in the words of Wendell Primus, a poverty expert at the center. The proportion of children under 18 living with a single mother declined by 8 percent in five years, according to a report written by Mr. Primus and Allen Dupree. Working with an early copy of the report, Jonathan Peterson of the Los Angeles Times wrote: "Some of the newest evidence suggests that the tidal flow away from two-parent families peaked years ago and may even be starting to change course."

The change is strongest among blacks. The proportion of black children living with two parents rose 11.8 percent, up from 34.8 to 38.9 percent. That's an impressive improvement in only five years. (Let's hear some applause for the black organizations that worked hard on this, particularly the black fathers' groups.) Latino families followed the same trend, up from 64.2 percent to 66.2. The proportion of white children in two-parent families remained steady — no rise, but the long downhill slide is apparently over.

Nobody knows for sure what's going on. The economic boom played a role, opening up more jobs and reducing stress on couples who wanted to stay together. But a lot of credit probably should go to welfare reform. The more optimistic reformers hoped the welfare changes would improve chances that children would grow up with two parents. Apparently that is starting to happen.

The center found that the two-parent trend is concentrated largely among the poor. The Urban Institute reported roughly similar news last fall: The proportion of children living in single-parent families decreased from 1997 to 1999, particularly among the poor. And a year ago, a large-scale evaluation of wel-

fare reform in Minnesota found a broad array of positive effects, including an increase in marriage rates and marital stability.

Can a reform passed in August 1996 be credited with social change noticed as early as 1997? Yes, says Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation — in 1996 everyone affected by welfare heard the message of time limits and work requirements, and many began to re-evaluate their options even before the changes were implemented.

Mr. Primus, who quit the Clinton administration in 1996 to protest the president's decision to sign the welfare legislation, now says that "in some ways, it is working better than I thought." Former Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan once predicted that by 2004 half of American babies could be born out of wedlock. Apparently not. The trend, though still a modest one, is headed the other way.

"Why isn't the press all over this story?" asked Mickey Kaus, the Internet commentator. "Isn't it because it's not PC on the left to admit marriage is good? Is it because acknowledging the shift requires cynical reporters to admit that a public policy initiative (welfare reform) actually worked?" (Correct answers: Yes, and yes.)

If the newsroom is so reluctant to risk any fresh reporting on the family, why is it likely that Time, or some other newsy magazine, will run a pro-marriage cover? Because

The newsroom has been tapping out death-of-marriage stories for 25 years.

a big magazine cover story on a trend needs supporting examples from the pop culture, and those examples are all around us. "Let's Get married" by Jagged Edge hit No. 1 on the R&B chart last summer. A new Gallup survey of women in their 20s found great yearning for a lifelong "soul mate." Some famously unmarried women gave up the single life, including Gloria Steinem ("A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle"), who acquired her first bicycle, hubby David Bale. Hip publications like the New York Observer are running long pieces on the pro-marriage trend ("Matrimonial mania takes Manhattan.")

This is the way topics make their way up the journalistic food chain. But beneath the pop stuff, a real story is taking shape: Starting around 1990, many statistics on sex and relationships started to change. Since the early 1990s, the abortion rate fell almost a third, and teen pregnancies by 19 percent. The new stats on out-of-wedlock births appear to be part of this slowly building retrenchment. Whatever it is, reporters are going to have to pay attention.

John Leo is a nationally syndicated columnist.