CENTER ON HEALTH AND FAMILIES

FOR THE SAKE OF THE KIDS: STRENGTHENING FAMILIES IN THE LONE STAR STATE

WRITTEN BY
Brad Wilcox, Ph.D., Andrew C. Brown, J.D., Nicholas Zill, Ph.D., Nicholas Armstrong, Noah Torres, Caroline Welton, and Amylynn Smith
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KEY POINTS

- **Since 1990,** the annual number of marriages per thousand Texas residents has fallen by 45%, from 10.5 per 1,000 in 1990 to 5.8 per 1,000 in 2022.
- **The total fertility rate** for Texas currently stands at 1.84 births per woman, below the replacement rate of 2.1 births per woman.
- **Approximately 54% of Texas children** are being raised by married, biological parents.
- **Children raised in non-intact families** face numerous disadvantages, including higher poverty rates, poorer educational outcomes, and increased exposure to violence and substance abuse as compared to their peers with intact families.
- **The crisis of marriage and family formation** involves both economic and complex cultural and social factors that a family-first policy agenda can help address.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The family is the fundamental unit of society. As Pope Saint John Paul II so eloquently stated, "as the family goes, so goes the nation, and so goes the whole world in which we live." Unfortunately, rates of marriage and family formation have hit record lows across the nation in recent years. This report focuses on family dynamics in Texas, identifies barriers to marriage and family formation in the Lone Star State, and proposes a pro-family policy agenda for the state.

INTRODUCTION

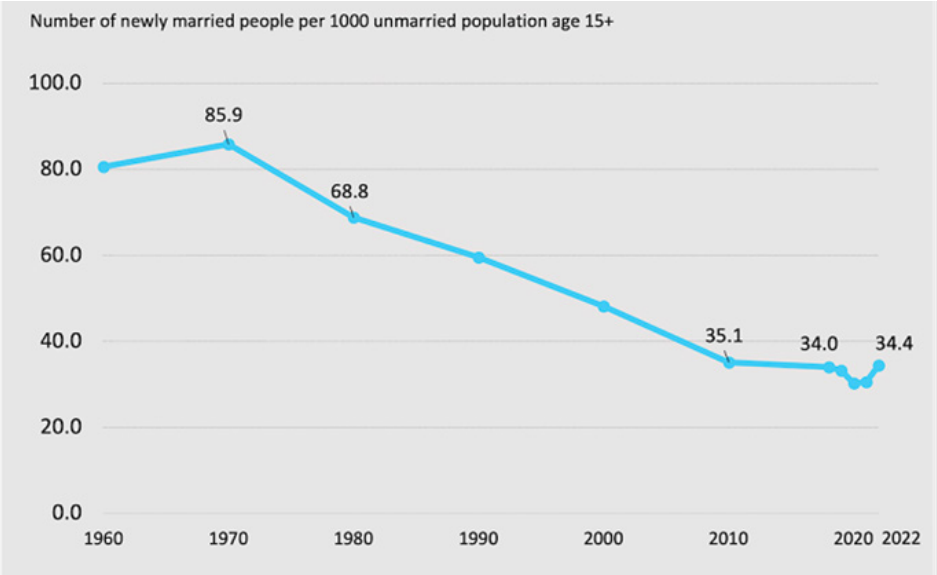
Texans are fond of saying, "as goes Texas, so goes the nation." This boast is more than just typical Texan bravado, though. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Texas led the nation in numeric population growth between 2022 and 2023, adding 473,453 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). People are relocating to Texas in droves with the hope of claiming their piece of the "Texas Miracle." New Texans are attracted by the state's thriving economy, comparatively low cost of living, ample job opportunities, and dynamic, family-friendly culture.

More than 11 million families call Texas home. Nearly 49% of these are married-couple households, which is about 2% higher than the national average (American Community Survey, 2022). Texas also outperforms the nation in terms of the percentage of its population that is under 18 years old (24.8% versus 21.7%) and average family size (3.25 versus 3.11). And Texas is the number one destination for families with children who are moving (Stone & Wilcox, 2024).

Despite this data, which indicates that Texas is one of the more family-friendly states in the nation, there is much more the state can do to strengthen and stabilize her families.

Figure 1

The U.S. Marriage Rate Rebounds to Pre-pandemic Level



Note: Data from CDC/NCHS, 2022 (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/marriage-divorce/state-divorce-rates-90-95-00-22.pdf), and author's calculations.

The Crisis of Marriage and Family Formation

Marriage and family formation are in retreat across the country. Since the 1970s, the marriage rate has fallen by more than 60%, as shown in **Figure 1** (Wang, 2023).

At the same time, however, the divorce rate has fallen by about 40%. This means that fewer Americans are marrying, but those who do have greater odds of marital success than was the case in the 1970s, at the height of the divorce revolution (Wilcox, 2024).

Likewise, **Figure 2** shows the U.S. fertility rate is at a historical low. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics, the U.S. fertility rate for women ages 15-44 was 54.4 births per 1,000 (Hamilton et al., 2024, p. 1). This translates to 1.6 births per woman, below the replacement level of 2.1 births per woman (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, n.d.). Fertility has fallen to this level from 2008, when it stood at replacement.

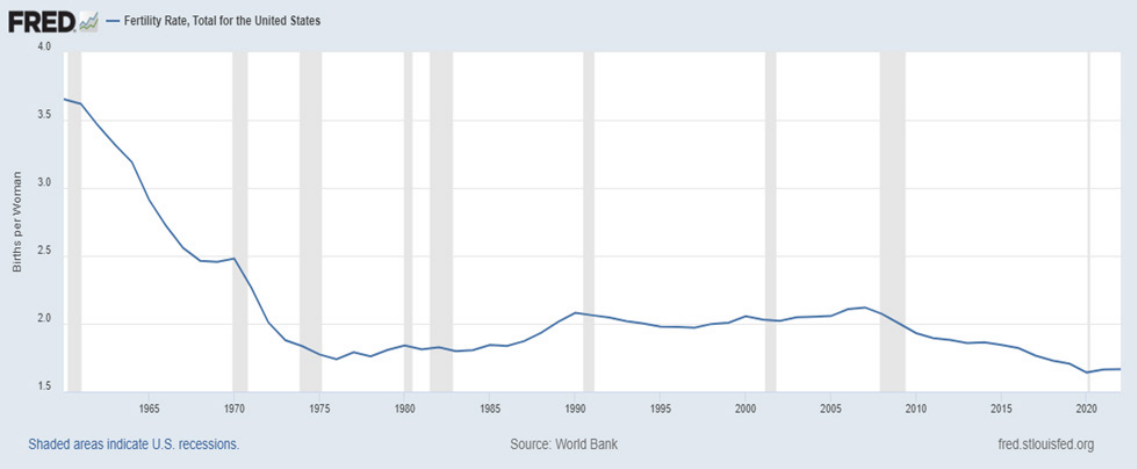
These trends tell us that marriage and family formation now sit at record lows in the country at large.

Reversing the Trends

Strong families are essential for a strong Texas. Declining marriage and family formation rates carry significant consequences for the nation, both economically and socially. The biggest challenges facing our nation—from child poverty to the loss of the American Dream, from increasing rates of substance use and deaths of despair to falling rates of happiness—are all impacted by the health of families (Wilcox, 2024). We know that the number one predictor of child poverty across states is marriage (Wilcox et al., 2015). The American Dream is much more within reach in communities with high numbers of two-parent households (Chetty et al., 2014), and one of the strongest predictors of that classic American pursuit—"the pursuit of happiness"—is the state of our marital unions (Wilcox, 2024).

Figure 2

U.S. Fertility Rate for Women ages 15-44



Note: Data from Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2024 (https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SPDYNTFRTINUSA).

Texas is in a unique position to lead the nation in reversing these family trends, but it will require the state to adopt an aggressive family-formation policy agenda. Such an agenda must recognize that the current crisis of declining marriage and family formation rates is multifaceted and involves both economic and complex cultural and social factors. Family-first policies should seek to reinforce the educational, economic, and cultural foundations of marriage. They should also enable parents to invest more money and time in their families—and honor their position as the primary educators of their children. And they should recognize that the point of family policy is not to delegate more functions of family life to the state, but rather to make it easier for families to take the lead in supporting, forming, and caring for their own.

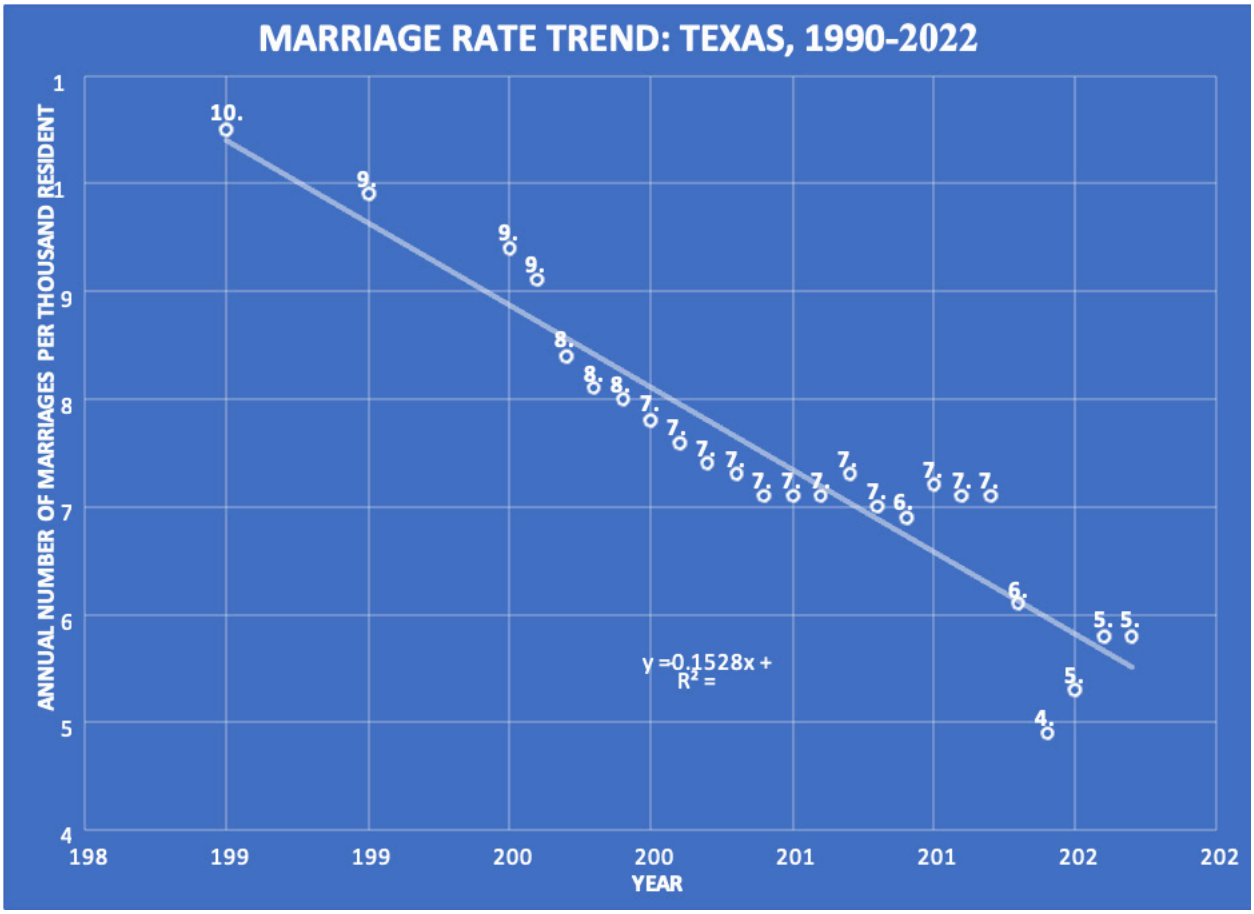
This report will present an analysis of the health of marriage and families in the Lone Star State and propose an initial policy agenda for the 89th Texas Legislature to begin the critical work of making Texas the best place on earth to raise a family. Specifically, a family-first policy agenda aims to:

- Strengthen and stabilize marriage—measured both in terms of the rate and stability of marriage;
- Make childbearing and childrearing more affordable for working families;
- Promote high-quality family relationships by increasing positive and reducing negative (e.g., domestic violence) interactions in families;
- Maximize time and authority parents have vis-à-vis their children; and
- Educate the rising generation about the value of marriage and parenthood. (Sutherland Institute, 2024)

The policies proposed in this report should not be viewed as a "silver bullet" that will immediately solve the challenge of marriage and family formation. However, these first steps will provide Texas lawmakers with a solid foundation from which to build a statewide culture that not only values, but actively promotes the goods of marriage and family in the Lone Star State.

Figure 3

Texas Marriage Rates



Note: Data from CDC/NCHS, National Vital Statistics System, 2024 (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/marriage-divorce/state-divorce-rates-90-95-00-22.pdf), and author's calculations.

THE CURRENT STATE OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY FORMATION IN TEXAS

Fewer Marriages

Fewer Texans are getting married. Since 1990, the annual number of marriages per thousand residents has fallen by 45%, from 10.5 per 1,000 in 1990 to 5.8 per 1,000 in 2022. Although there have been minor fluctuations, particularly during and after the Covid pandemic, the basic marriage trend has been downward. A best-fitting trend line captures 89% of the year-to-year variance in marriage rates (see **Figure 3**).

Just Over Half of Texas Children Grow Up with Married Birth Parents

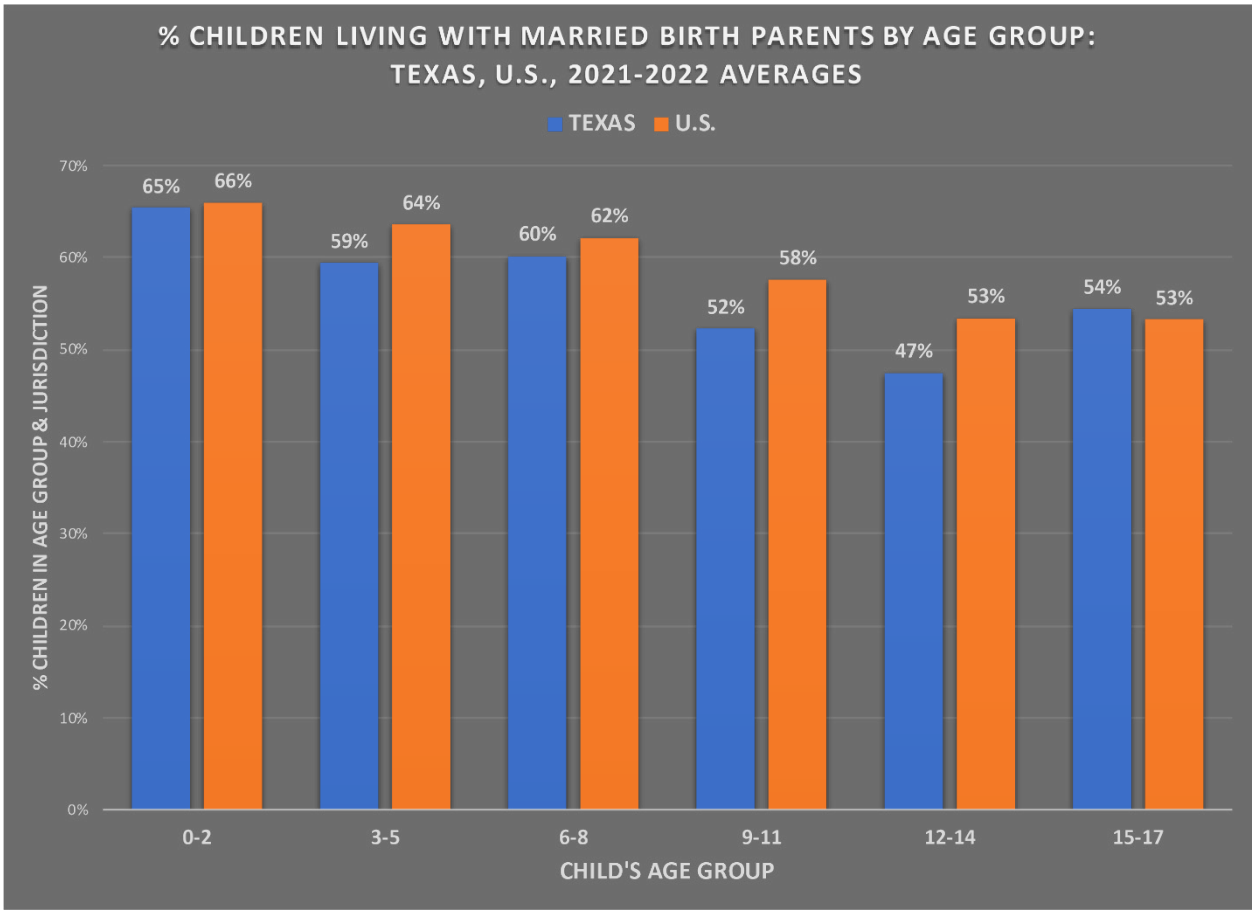
How many Texas kids grow up living with married birth parents throughout their childhoods? We can estimate that proportion by looking at the percentage of adolescents who are still living in intact families in the last years of high school, when most are 15- to 17-years-old. **Figure 4** shows data from surveys conducted in 2021 and 2022 on the percentage of children in Texas who lived with married birth parents in each of six three-year age groups, from birth to two years old to 15-17 years old.

Note: These are independent samples of children and not the same kids followed over time.

The proportion of children living with both parents falls as more couples separate or become divorced. It goes from 65% among the birth to 2-year-old group down to 54% among the 15-17-year-old group. The nationwide

Figure 4

Percentage of Children Living with Married Birth Parents by Age



Note: Data from CDC/NCHS, National Vital Statistics System, 2024 (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/marriage-divorce/state-divorce-rates-90-95-00-22.pdf), and author's calculations.

data, which are based on much larger samples, show a similar pattern. They go from 66% to 53%. So, in Texas, where about 54% of children are now being raised by their married, biological parents, our state comes in close to the U.S. nationwide average in terms of family stability.

Less Divorce

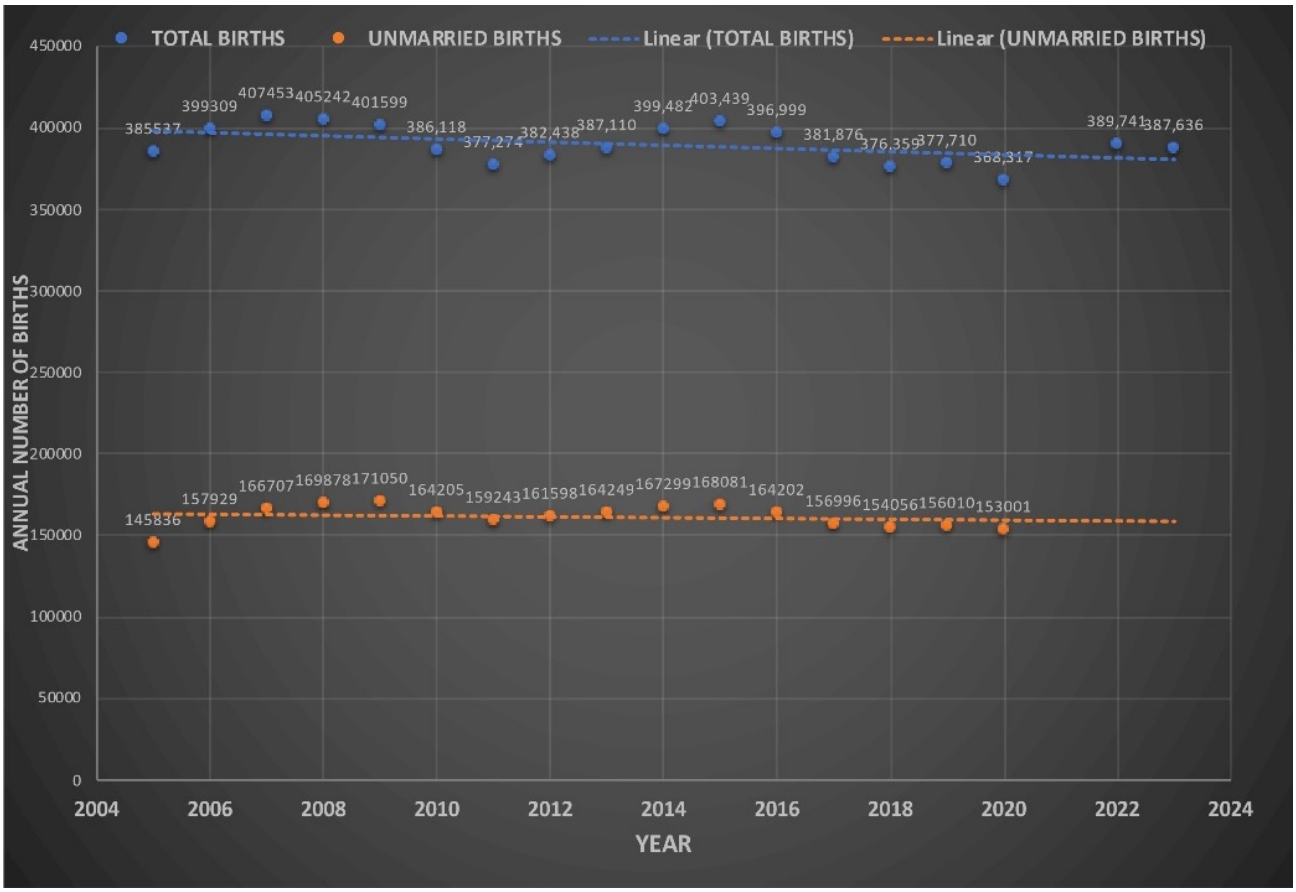
Although there are not as many marriages now in Texas, divorce is also down. Since 1990, the annual number of divorces per thousand residents has fallen by 65%, from 5.5 per 1,000 in 1990 to 1.9 per 1,000 in 2022 (CDC/NCHS, 2024). This means, as with the country more generally, that fewer marriages in Texas end in divorce.

Lower Birth Rate

A smaller number of Texas women are having children. The total number of births per year to Texas residents has not changed notably since 2005, when it was 385,537. In 2023, the total number of births increased to 387,636. However, the adult population of Texas has grown substantially during the same period, primarily due to in-migration from other states and countries. That said, **Figure 6** shows that the annual number of births per 1,000 women in the 15-44 age range, the Fertility Rate, has decreased by 15% from 72.5 per 1,000 in 2010 to 61.9 per 1,000 in 2022 (CDC/NCHS, 2024).

Figure 5

Number of Births to Texas Residents, 2005-2023



Note: Data from CDC/NCHS, National Vital Statistics System, 2024 (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/marriage-divorce/state-divorce-rates-90-95-00-22.pdf), and author's calculations.

The average number of lifetime births per Texas woman, or total fertility rate , has also decreased by 15%, from 2.18 births per woman in 2010 to 1.84 births per woman in 2022. Notably, the total fertility rate in Texas is now below the replacement rate of 2.1 births per woman. If birth rates continue at this level, the total population of Texas is expected to decline, net of in-migration from other states or countries. Of course, the latter sources of population growth have been considerable in recent years, as noted above.

Lower Birth Rates Among Teenagers

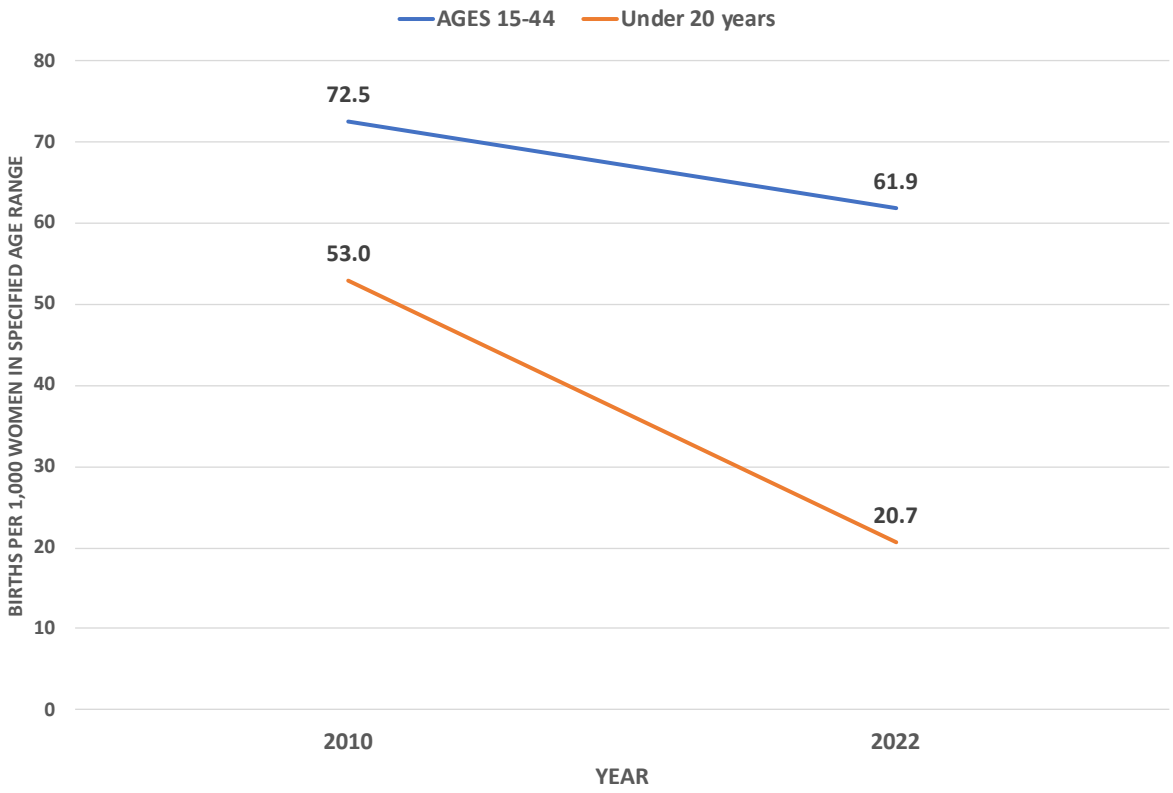
One positive aspect of the decline in Texas fertility rates is that birth rates among teenagers have dropped precipitously. Given that children born to teen mothers are known to be at greater risk of poverty and health and educational problems, this seems to be a favorable turn of events. The fertility rate among women under the age of 20 fell by 61%, from 53 births per thousand teenagers in 2010 to 21.7 in 2022. In 2005, 13.5% of all births were to teen mothers, whereas in 2020 the proportion was 6.2%.

Fewer Births to High School Dropout Mothers, More to College Graduates

Figure 7 suggests a positive aspect of Texas birth trends is that fewer infants are being born to women with less than a high school education, and more to women who are college graduates. In 2005, 32.3% of Texas

Figure 6

Declining Fertility Rates Among Texas Women: 2010-2022



Note: Data from CDC/NCHS, National Vital Statistics System, 2024 (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/marriage-divorce/state-divorce-rates-90-95-00-22.pdf), and author's calculations.

newborns were delivered by mothers with less than a high school education. By 2020, that proportion had fallen to 14.5%. Over the same period, 18.5% of Texas infants were born to college-graduate mothers in 2005. By 2020, that proportion had risen to 35.2%.

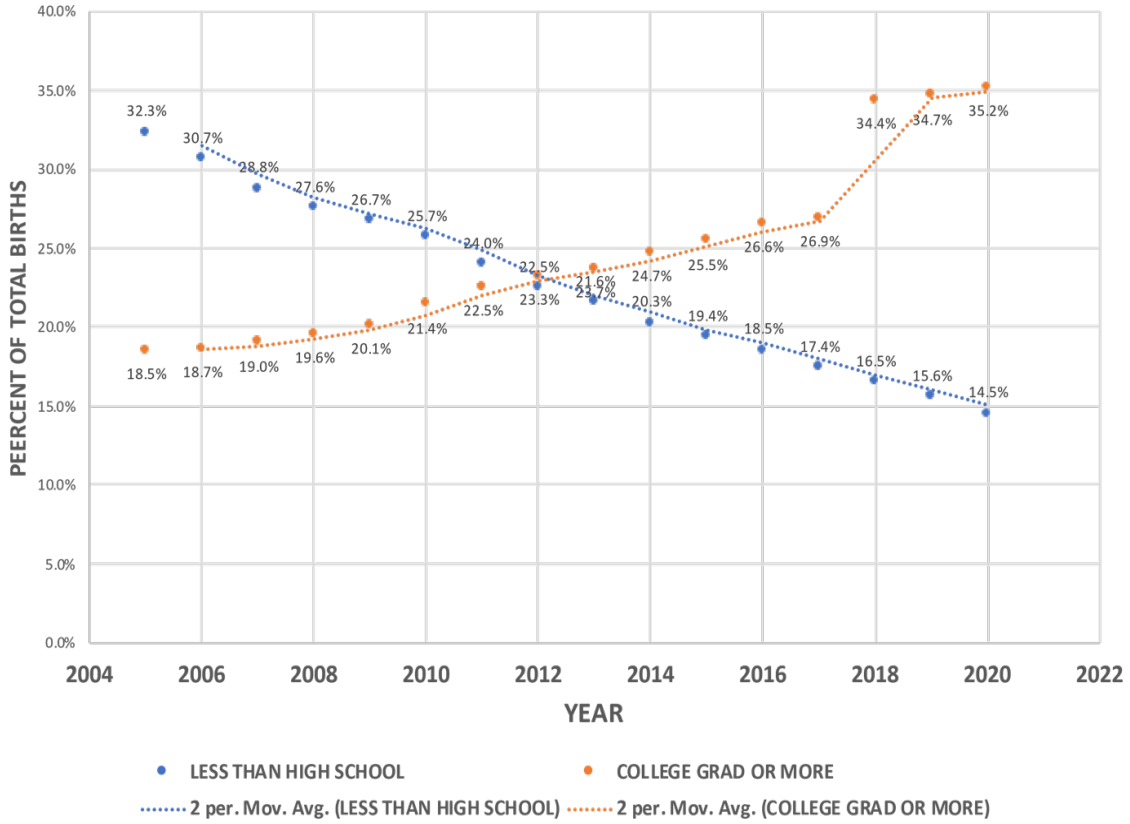
Persistently High Proportion of Texas Births are to Unmarried Mothers

Higher education levels among young women in Texas and fewer teen pregnancies should both be associated with higher proportions of births to married mothers in the state. Yet the proportion of babies born to unwed mothers has been stubbornly resistant to change yet continues to vary greatly across racial and ethnic groups. There were about 146,000 births to unwed mothers in 2005 (38% of all births in the state) and 153,000 such births in 2020 (42% of all births) (Texas Health and Human Services, 2020). In fact, of the 42% of all children in Texas born to unmarried mothers in 2022, 64% were to black mothers, 51% to Hispanic mothers, and 25% to white mothers (see **Figure 8**).

These findings buttress our recommendation, discussed below, to have Texas public schools do a better job of conveying to students the importance of marriage prior to childbearing. Texas students may be acquiring more diplomas, and they seem to have learned something about the perils of teen pregnancy. However, they do not seem to be sufficiently aware of the benefits of marriage when it comes to family formation.

Figure 7

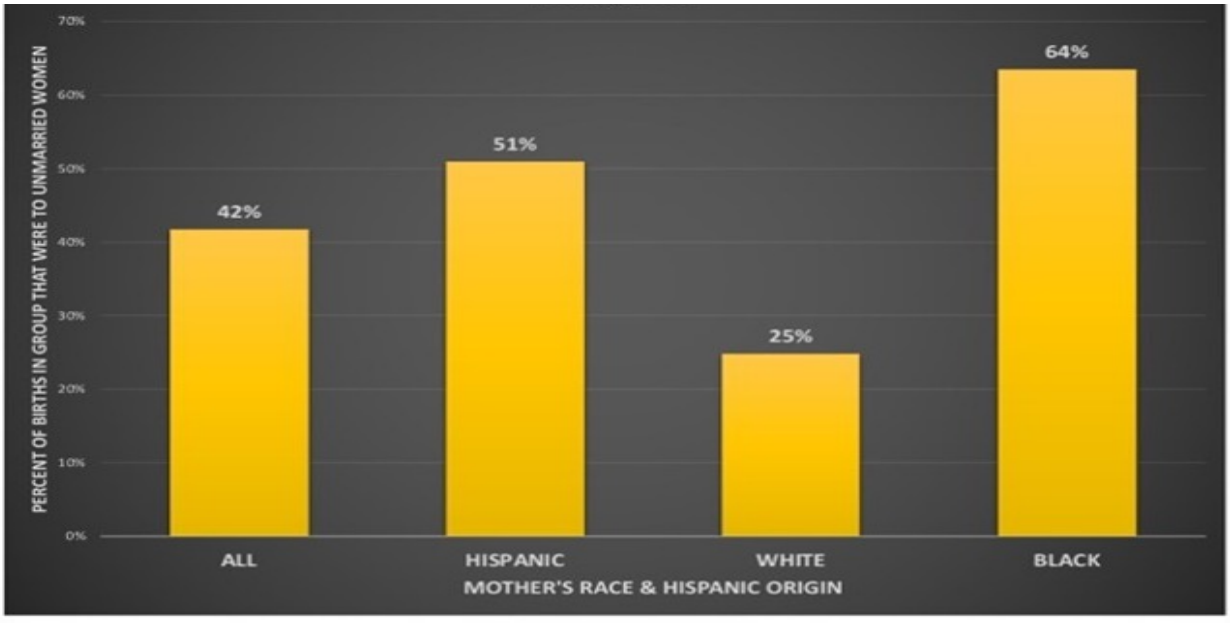
Percentage of Births by Mother's Education Attainment, 2005-2020



Note: Data from Texas Health and Human Services, 2020 (https://healthdata.dshs.texas.gov/dashboard/births-and-deaths/live-births), and author's calculations.

Figure 8

Percentage of Births to Unmarried Mothers by Race and Hispanic Origin, 2022



Note: Data from Texas Health and Human Services, 2020 (https://healthdata.dshs.texas.gov/dashboard/births-and-deaths/live-births), and author's calculations.

FAMILY STATUS IMPACT ON EDUCATION

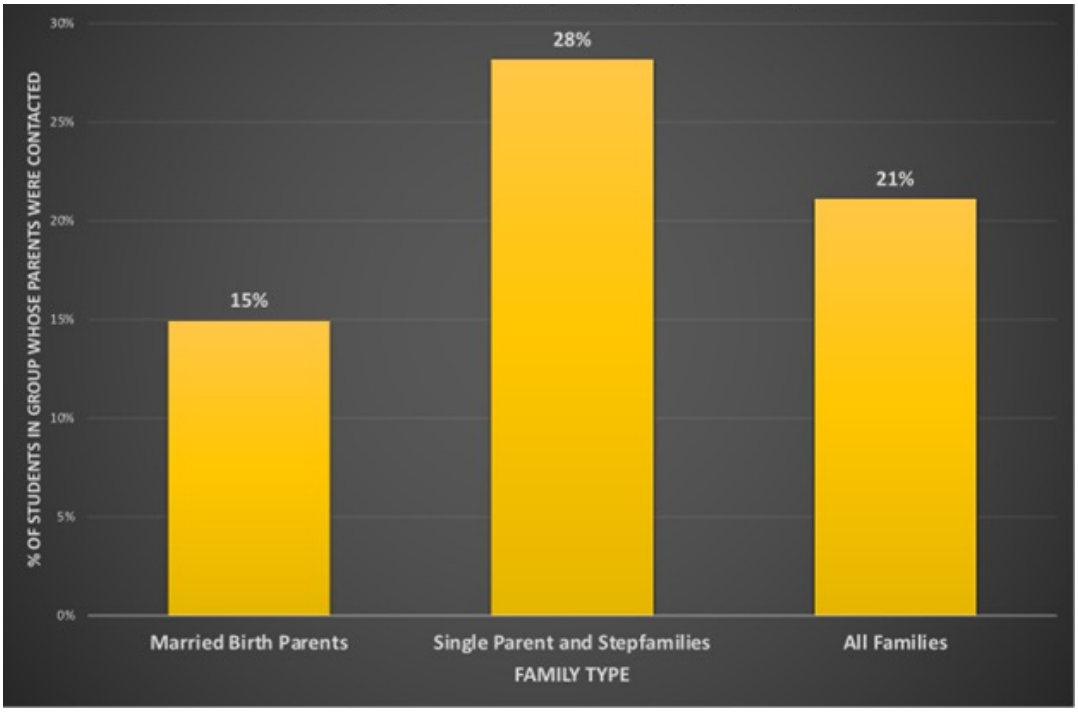
Learning and Conduct Problems

Texas students from single-parent and stepfamilies are more likely to encounter learning problems or engage in disruptive behavior in school than are students living with two married birth parents. In the 2021/2022 National Survey of Children's Health, 1,014 Texas parents were asked if they had been contacted by a teacher or principal from their child's school because of learning issues or the child's misconduct at school (U. S. Census Bureau, 2022) . Overall, 21% reported that they had been contacted by the school one or more times. Students from non-intact families were nearly twice as likely to have had such contact as students living with married birth parents: 28% versus 15% respectively (see **Figure 9**).

When the frequency of school contacts was adjusted for the student's age, sex, and race/ethnicity, as well as for parent education and family income levels, the odds of such a contact for students from non-intact families were 3.12 times higher than the odds for students living with married birth parents.

Figure 9

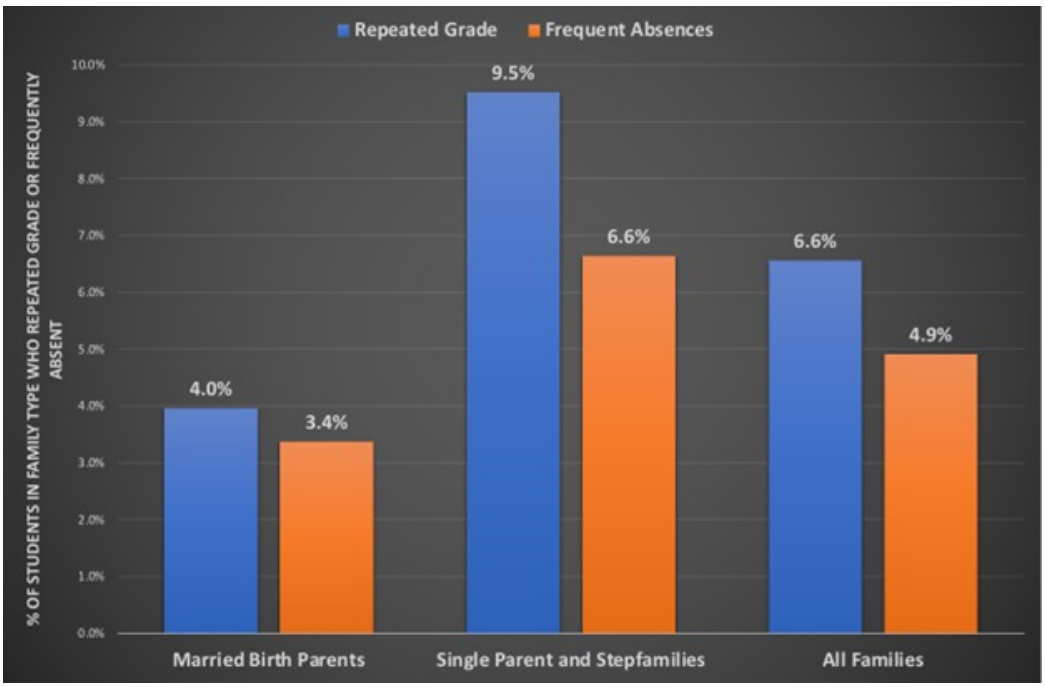
Percentage of Students Whose Parents Were Contacted by Schools for Behavior or Learning Problems, 2021-2022



Note: Data from *National Survey on Children's Health*, by U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 (https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/nsch/data/datasets.html), and author's calculations.

Figure 10

Percentage of Students Who Repeated A Grade or Were Frequently Absent from School, 2021-2022



Note: Data from *National Survey on Children's Health*, by U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 (https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/nsch/data/datasets.html), and author's calculations.

Grade Repetition

Texas students from single-parent and stepfamilies are more likely to have had to repeat a grade because of learning or behavioral difficulties. In the 2021/2022 National Survey of Children's Health, 6.6% of students were reported to have repeated one or more grades (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). For students from non-intact families, the grade repetition rate was 9.5%. For those from married birth parent families, the repetition rate was 4%.

When these differences in the frequency of being held back were adjusted for student age, sex, and race and ethnicity, as well as for parent education and family income levels, the odds of being held back were 1.62 times greater for students from non-intact families than those for students from intact families.

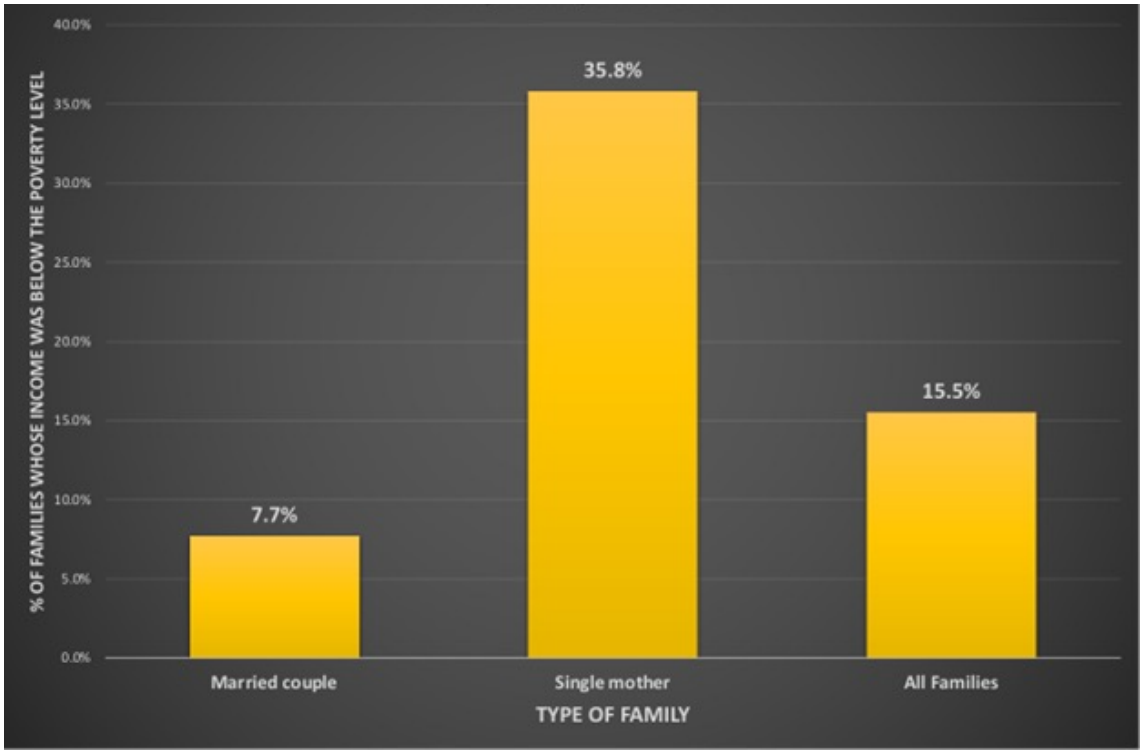
Frequent Absences

Texas students from single-parent and stepfamilies are more likely to miss school frequently than students from intact families. Texas parents in the 2021/2022 National Survey of Children's Health were asked how often their children were absent from school in the last term. In all, 4.9% of students were reported to have missed 11 or more days (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Of this, 6.6% of students from non-intact families had missed 11 or more days. By contrast, **Figure 10** shows only 3.4% of students from intact families had frequent absences.

When the differences in absence rates were adjusted for student age, sex, and race and ethnicity, as well as for parent education and family income levels, the odds of frequent absence for students from disrupted families was 2.94 times higher than the odds for students from intact families.

Figure 11

Poverty Rate of Families with Related Children Under 18, by Family Type, 2018-2022



Note: Data from *American Community Survey*, by U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 (https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html), and author's calculations.

FAMILY POVERTY

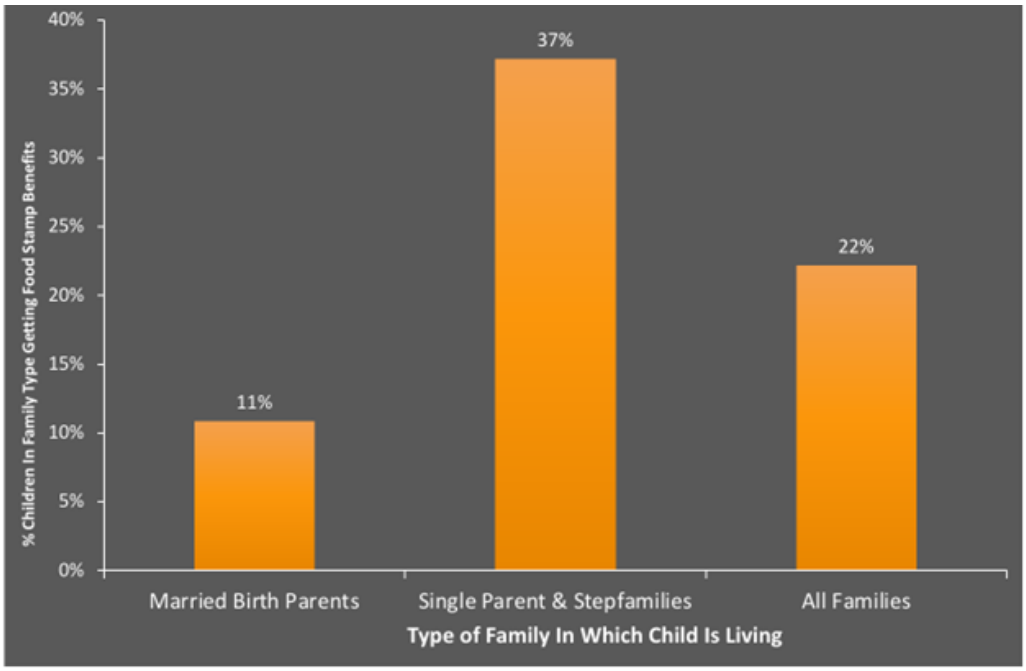
Children in single-parent families are more likely to be living below the poverty line than children in married, two-parent families. In the five-year period, from 2018 to 2022, the overall poverty rate for Texas families with related children was 15.5%. According to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, one in six Texas families was poor. For married-couple families, the poverty rate was half that, 7.7%. For single-parent families, it was far higher at 35.8% (see **Figure 11**).

There are several reasons for this disparity. Many non-resident parents (usually the children's biological fathers) provide little or no financial support for their offspring. Single mothers struggle to work outside the home while also caring for children, especially young ones. Government assistance programs, like food stamps, tend to phase out rapidly as family income rises, providing a disincentive to work. Without co-residence or a joint custody agreement, single mothers can't benefit from the division of child-care and work responsibilities that most married couples do.

In addition, single mothers tend to have lower levels of education and less work experience than married mothers, reducing their earnings potential. But even when parent educational attainment, child age, and race and ethnicity are controlled, children in Texas in non-intact families are 1.88 times more likely to be poor than those in married-couple families.

Figure 12

Percentage of Children in Families Receiving Food Stamp Benefits, by Family Type, 2021-2022



Note: Data from *American Community Survey,* by U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 (https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html), and author's calculations.

Food Stamp Dependence

Children in non-intact families are also more likely to be served by food stamps. According to the 2021/2022 National Survey of Children's Health, 22% of all Texas children lived in families that received food paid for by the SNAP program (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). **Figure 12** shows that 11% of children living with married birth parents received food stamp assistance, while 37% of children living in non-intact family structures participated in the SNAP program.

When the relationship between family structure and food stamp dependence was controlled for child age, sex, and race/ethnicity and parent education level, the odds of SNAP dependence were 2.24 times higher for children in non-intact families than for those living with married birth parents.

FAMILY STATUS AND EXPOSURE TO HARM

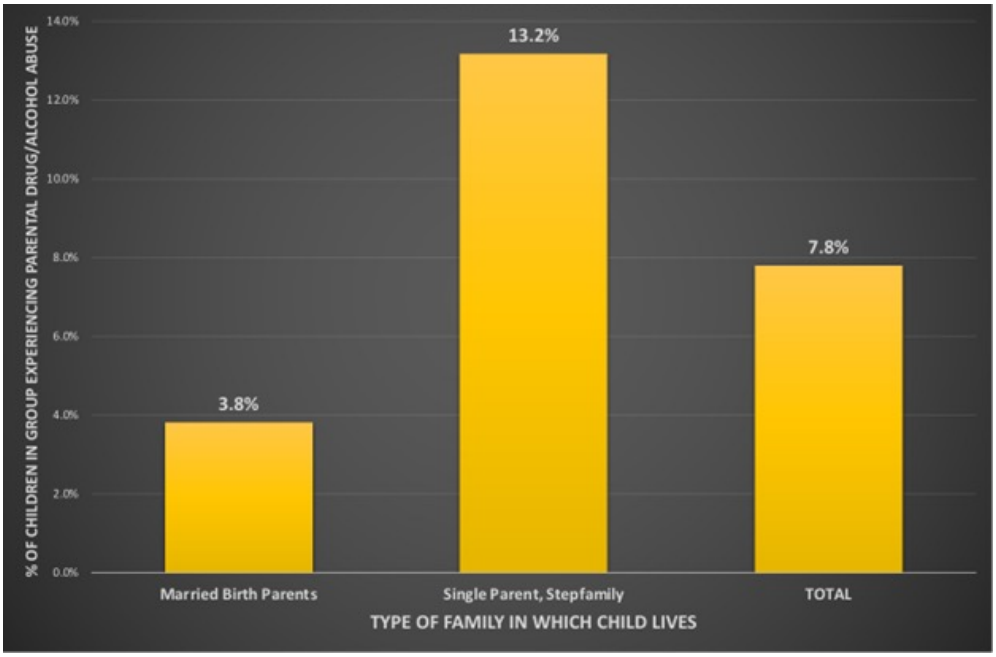
Family Drug and Alcohol Abuse

Texas children living in unmarried or non-intact families are more likely to be exposed to parental alcohol or drug abuse than are children living with married birth parents (see **Figure 13**). In the 2021/2022 National Survey of Children's Health, parents of 1,609 Texas children aged 17 and under were asked whether their child had ever lived with someone—a parent, sibling, or other family member—who "had a problem with alcohol or drugs" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Among children living with married birth parents, the rate of exposure to familial substance abuse was less than four percent. For children living in non-intact family structures, the rate was 13%, more than three times as high.

When this comparison was adjusted for differences across groups in the age, sex, and race/ethnicity of the child, family income and poverty status, and the parent's education level, the odds of children in non-intact

Figure 13

Percentage of Children Experiencing Parental Drug or Alcohol Abuse, by Family Type, 2021-2022



Note: Data from *National Survey on Children's Health*, by U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 (https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/nsch/data/datasets.html), and author's calculations.

families experiencing substance abuse by one or more family members were 3.6 times higher than the odds for children in married birth-parent families.

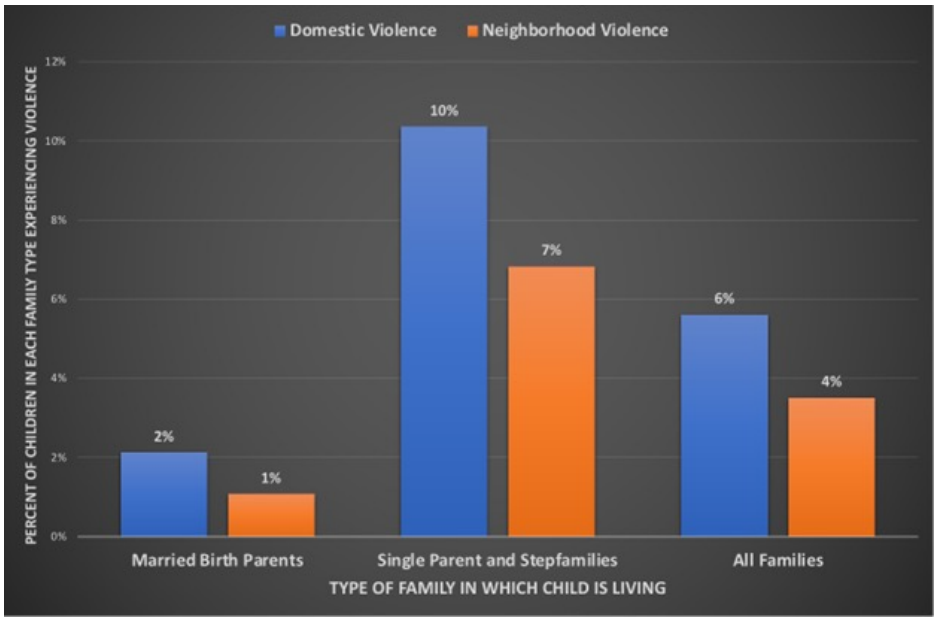
Adults who abuse drugs or alcohol are more likely than other adults to have turbulent romantic relationships and to have their marriages break up or never get started. They are also more likely to have unplanned pregnancies and children outside of marriage (Zill, 2015). Of course, a parent drinking heavily or using drugs may also be a reaction to the stress of domestic conflict and the strain of raising children as a single parent, often in trying financial circumstances. Whether a preexisting condition or the response to relationship turmoil, the combination of parental substance abuse and family disruption increases the risk of emotional or conduct disorder in the child beyond that from family disruption alone. It also increases the chances that the child will grow up to have drinking or drug problems himself or herself (Zill, 2015).

Exposure to Domestic Violence and Neighborhood Crime

Texas children of divorced and never-married parents are far more likely to have been exposed to domestic violence than children in married two-parent families (see **Figure 14**). In the 2021/2022 National Survey of Children's Health, conducted by the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, parents of 1,606 Texas children aged 17 and under were asked whether their child had ever seen or heard "any parents, guardians, or any other adults in the home slap, hit, kick, punch, or beat each other up." (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Among Texas children living with both married biological parents, the rate of exposure to family violence was relatively low: 2% had witnessed one or more violent struggles between parents or other household members. By comparison, among children living with single mothers or fathers, in stepfamilies, or in other unmarried or disrupted families, the rate of witnessing domestic violence was five times higher: 10% had had one or more such experience. Of course, for children from divorced homes who have witnessed violence, domestic

Figure 14

Percentage of Children Experiencing Domestic or Neighborhood Violence by Family Type, 2021-2022



Note: Data from *National Survey on Children's Health*, by U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 (https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/nsch/data/datasets.html), and author's calculations.

violence often precedes their parents' break up, which reminds us that marriage does not always protect children from exposure to violence.

When these comparisons were adjusted for differences across groups in the age, sex, and race/ethnicity of the child, family income and poverty status, and the parent's education level, the odds of children in disrupted families experiencing domestic violence were 7.4 times higher than the odds for children in married birth-parent families.

Experiencing family violence is stressful for children. It undercuts their respect and admiration for parents who engage in abusive behavior and is associated with increased rates of emotional and behavioral problems at home and in school. Why are children in disrupted families more likely to experience domestic violence? Physically aggressive behavior on the part of one partner sometimes leads to the couple divorcing or not getting married in the first place (Bowlus & Seitz, 2006; Kenney & McLanahan, 2006). At the same time, the dynamics of the divorce process can increase the probability of one or both partners becoming frustrated and angry. The "loser" in a custody dispute may be prevented by court order from seeing his or her children as often as he or she would like, or the child support judgment may impose onerous financial obligations. It is a well-established psychological principle that extreme frustration can lead to aggression. Jealousy may play a role as well, as one or both parents develop new intimate relationships. Such relationships are rarely symmetrical. There is more lingering hurt, resentment, and feelings of loneliness or abandonment on the part of one member of the original couple than the other.

In the case of parents who never marry, a new boyfriend or girlfriend frequently assumes a step-parental role, whether formally or informally. This can lead to conflict over the legitimacy of the substitute parent's

authority over the children, differences in parenting styles or willingness to tolerate disobedient behavior by the children, or the non-resident biological parent feeling that he or she is being displaced. Cases of child neglect and abuse often involve a boyfriend or girlfriend caregiver who does not have biological ties to the child victim (Zill, 2015). Similarly, young people are less likely to be victims of crime if they live in two-parent than in single-parent households. That has been a consistent finding of the National Crime Victimization Survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice (Tapp & Coen, 2024). The safety advantage stems from married couples living in less dangerous neighborhoods, on average, than unmarried parents, and from other differences in vulnerability across family types. Even in unsafe neighborhoods, kids are safer in married families, government data show (Zill, 2015). Children's rates of exposure to neighborhood violence depend not just on where they live, but with whom they live.

In the 2021/2022 National Survey of Children's Health, conducted by the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, parents of 1,614 Texas children aged 17 and under were asked whether their child was "ever the victim of violence or witnessed any violence in his or her neighborhood." (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022) Among Texas children living with their married biological parents, the overall rate of exposure to neighborhood violence was comparatively low: only 1% had witnessed or experienced neighborhood violence. By contrast, among Texas children living with single mothers or fathers, in stepfamilies, or in other unmarried or disrupted families, the rate of violent crime exposure was considerably higher: just under 7% (see **Figure 14**). When the victimization differences were adjusted for differences across family types in the average age, sex, and race/ethnicity of the child; family income and poverty status; and the parent's education level; the adjusted odds of a child in a non-intact family being exposed to violent crime were nine times higher than for children in intact families.

Why are children living in unmarried or disrupted families more susceptible to neighborhood violence? These families have a greater likelihood of having to live in unsafe neighborhoods and make more frequent residential moves because of family structure. Other factors that increase vulnerability are the stress of conflict between parents and the strain of raising children as a lone parent with fewer financial circumstances. As children become adolescents, the peers they become involved with in their less-than-ideal neighborhoods and schools are more likely to be troubled ones, who can lead them into hazardous situations and activities.

Of course, many single parents take pains and make personal sacrifices to ensure that their offspring do not become victims of crime. Most succeed in keeping their children safe. But the survey data show that kids are generally more safe and secure in a stable marriage (Zill, 2015).

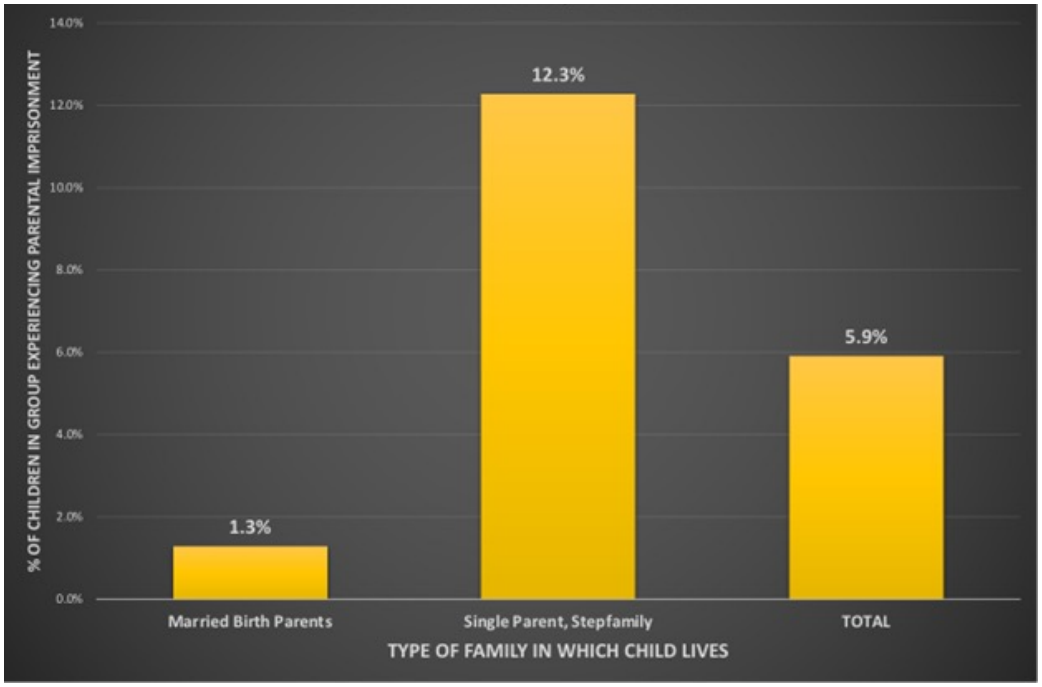
Parent or Guardian Incarceration

In the 2021/2022 National Survey of Children's Health, 12% of Texas children in single-parent and stepfamilies had "lived with a parent or guardian who served time in jail or prison" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The same was true of only 1% of Texas children living with married birth parents (see **Figure 15**). When this comparison was adjusted for differences across family groups in the age, sex, and race/ethnicity of the child, family income and poverty status, and the parent's education level, the odds of children in non-intact families experiencing parental imprisonment were 10 times higher than the odds for children in married birth-parent families. We are not making an argument here about the direction of causality, but just noting that children raised in stable married homes are less likely to be exposed to a parent who is or has been incarcerated.

Having parents or other relatives with criminal records increases the risk that young persons will engage in criminal conduct themselves. It is also the case that having a parent imprisoned can lead to the breakup of a two-parent family (Zill, 2015).

Figure 15

Percentage of Children Experiencing Parental Imprisonment, by Family Type, 2021-2022



Note: Data from *National Survey on Children's Health*, by U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 (https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/nsch/data/datasets.html), and author's calculations.

THE STATUS OF BOYS AND MEN

Clearly, family instability has many consequences, one of which is that helps to explain why so many boys and young men are struggling today in the United States (Reeves, 2022; Wilcox, 2024). When it comes to schools, college, and the workforce, too many males are not thriving. This is both a cause and consequence of shifts in American family life.

Family Instability

Part of the reason that so many boys and young men are struggling in school, college, and work today is that family instability has increased in recent decades for boys and young men. Today, as we have seen, almost half of children grow up outside of intact families, both in the United States and in Texas (Zill, 2024). In 1990, for instance, 28% of children were born to non-married parents. Today, about 40% of children are born outside of marriage (Wildsmith et al., 2018). Divorce is also markedly higher today than it was 60 years ago (Wilcox, 2024). One consequence of these family shifts is that 27% of fathers with children 18 years or younger live apart from their children, according to Pew Research (Livingston & Parker, 2011). Of these non-resident fathers, only 20% of them see their child once a week, while 27% of them have not seen their child in the past year (Livingston & Parker, 2011). This kind of family instability and father absence can be hard for children—especially for boys and young men when it comes to education, encounters with the criminal justice system, and labor force attachment.

Boys from non-intact homes are more likely to experience problems related to abandonment, attachment issues, substance abuse, and mental health issues like depression and anxiety (Brown, n.d.; Wilcox, 2024). These problems, in turn, undercut their capacity to thrive educationally, socially, and professionally. In fact, no group of young adults are less likely to graduate from college or more likely to be incarcerated than young

men from unstable families. For instance, about 20% of young men raised outside of a stably married home spend some time in jail or prison by their late twenties, compared to approximately 9% of young men from intact homes, 6% of young women from non-intact families, and 2% of young women from intact families (Wilcox, 2024, pp. 64-67). Research also indicates that young men are 36% less likely to hold down a full-time job by the time they hit their mid-twenties if they hail from a non-intact family compared to their male peers from intact families, while young women from an unstable home are only 30% less likely to be employed full-time than their peers from a stably married home (Wilcox, 2024, p. 73). The bottom line is that family instability and fatherlessness is one reason that so many young men are not thriving educationally, socially, and economically today.

Education

Education is vital for success in life, the workplace, and the public square. But today, boys are falling behind girls on almost every educational metric.

Researchers from Stanford University analyzed gender achievement gaps in U.S. school districts from the third grade to eighth grade. Their research found that girls surpass boys on reading and writing levels in almost every school district in the U.S. Starting in third grade, female students outperform boys by nearly half a grade level in reading and writing. By the time eighth grade ends, girls are almost a full grade ahead of boys in reading and writing (Reardon et. al., 2018, pp. 26-27). This trend can be seen in the discrepancy between boys and girls reading scores in Texas. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) offers different assessments to students in 4th and 8th grade. According to NAEP reading assessment, 8th grade male students in Texas had an average reading score that was lower than female students by five points in 2022 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). For 4th graders in Texas, boys did not score significantly different than female students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Texas' high school graduation rate is roughly 90%, where men graduate at a lower rate than their female counterparts—sometimes as much as six percentage points (TEA, 2020, p. xi; Thompson, 2023).

These gender gaps are partly related to the lack of a father in the home, as we have seen. But they also seem to be related to factors in schools themselves, such as the lack of male teachers in the classroom. Starting in Pre-K and kindergarten, men make up about 3% of the teaching population. When boys enter in elementary and middle school, 20% of the teachers are male, with the percentage of male teachers increasing to 43% in high school (Reeves, 2024). Research generally suggests such teachers are helpful for boys. A Yale University study suggests that male and female student achievement increases when a student has a teacher of the same gender in the front of the class (Dee, 2005). Another study found that boys performed similarly to girls in math class when it was taught by a male teacher (Sartain, 2023). However, there are studies that find student-teacher gender matching has no effect on boys' academic achievement (Krieg, 2005; Antecol et al., 2015). In the main, however, it looks like having a male teacher in the classroom can be beneficial for boys' academic achievement.

The trend of boys struggling with academic achievement is also visible in a range of GPA-related outcomes. Since 1990, women have consistently outperformed men by nearly 0.2 grade point average. In 2019, boys graduated high school with a 3.0 GPA, while girls gradated with a 3.23 GPA (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Girls made up 56% of the top 10% of their high school class and 54% of the second 10% of their high school class, whereas boys dominate the ranks of the worst performers in high school today (The College Board, 2016, p. 5).

Not surprisingly, the number of men attending college has been declining over the past decade. As of 2021, only 40% of college attendees are men (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Less than 858,000 men earned a bachelor's degree in 2018-2019, compared to over 1.1 million women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). While not everyone can or should go to college, college completion has a strong correlation with higher lifetime earnings and wealth accumulation (Social Security Administration, 2015). Accordingly, men's relative underperformance on the educational front often limits their ability to flourish professionally and, in turn, makes them less attractive as romantic partners and husbands.

Men Not at Work

Men's attachment to the labor force has also suffered in recent decades, also partly because of shifts in American family life. We've already seen that young men from non-intact families are less likely to work full-time than their peers from an intact, father-present home. More generally, across the nation, men's labor force participation rate (LFPR) dropped for prime-working age men from 97% in 1960 to the current level of 89.7%. "Prime working age" begins at 25 and ends at 54. This translates to roughly 7 million prime working age men not in the labor force (referred to as NILFs) (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis., n.d.).

Looking at Texas, the fact that these men are not included in the official unemployment statistics indicates that the unemployment rate is much higher than the current 4.0% unemployment in the Lone Star State (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Alternatively, a broader measure can be used to calculate unemployment. The U-6 unemployment rate, which is the broadest federal unemployment measure, can be a more revealing measurement of the state of employment and where labor is underutilized. The U-6 measurement does not differentiate between male and female, but rather the "type" of worker, which includes people who are unemployed; people who are "underemployed" (workers who are still employed but had their hours cut or a worker who takes a low-paying part time job to make ends meet); people who are "marginally employed" (workers not in the labor force who want and are available for work and who have looked for work in the past 12 months); and people who are "discouraged workers" (workers who are not looking for work because they do not think they have the skills to qualify or believe there are no jobs for them). With this differentiation, we see the unemployment rate in Texas jump to 7.4%. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

A number of factors explain why a growing share of young and prime-aged men are not working. One appears to be technology. Time surveys from men who are not in the labor force (NILFs) indicate they spend about 7.5 hours a day on electronic entertainment, such as gaming and watching television (Eberstadt & Abramsky, 2021). Another factor is that many men rely on means-tested programs, like Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), which supported 1.6 million working age men in the U.S. in 2022 (Social Security Administration, 2022). A third factor that nonworking men face when searching for employment is criminal records. One study found that a majority of unemployed men have been arrested, convicted, or incarcerated by age 35 (Bushway et. al., 2022). A fourth factor is wages falling for non-college educated workers. Non-college educated men's earnings as a share of the average earning for prime-age workers have fallen by 30% since 1980 (Wu, 2022). Finally, the retreat from marriage also seems to be implicated in men's declining attachment to the labor force, insofar as unmarried men are markedly less likely to work than their married peers (Eberstadt, 2022; Wilcox, 2024).

So, shifts in family life, technology, welfare policy, and exposure to the criminal justice system help to explain why a growing share of men—especially men without college degrees (Reeves, 2023; Wilcox, 2024)—are disconnected from work. The fact that an increasing number of men—including in Texas—are not at work matters in part because it means they are less attractive as romantic partners, husbands, and fathers. While

Texas' unemployment rate has increased from pre-pandemic level (3.5% to 4%), Texas has also hit new highs in LFPR among workers (Texas Workforce Commission, 2024). The rise in unemployment could be simply due to increasing numbers moving to Texas, but this would not negate the fact that too many boys and young men are not flourishing in education and the workplace.

AFFORDABILITY AS A BARRIER TO FAMILY FORMATION

Another challenge facing Texas families today is family affordability. Men and women are reluctant to enter into marriage or start a family if key goods associated with family life seem beyond their reach (Kahn, 2007). Homeownership is one of the most influential variables influencing couples in their decision to marry or have children.

Homeownership—as well as possessing the income and assets to buy a home—is associated with marriage and childbearing (Ronald & Arundel, 2023). Having sufficient wealth to own a home, marry, and bear children is correlated with actualizing transitions to homeownership, marriage, and parenthood (Bulman et al., 2022). However, homeownership is increasingly out-of-reach for many Texans due to rising housing costs, both for purchase and maintenance of a home. In fact, delays in homeownership correlate with delays in marriage and family formation (Goodman et al., 2015). Rising house costs and their accompanying burdens are also associated with delayed family formation by married homeowners, suggesting that swelling housing costs may consume income that could otherwise be used for childbearing and childrearing (Mulder, 2006). Furthermore, owner-occupied residences and their surrounding areas may be more suitable to raising a family than rented residences, which may be of inferior quality and not physically proximate to quality schools or childcare facilities (Mulder, 2006; Megbolugbe & Linneman, 1993). Homeownership, therefore, has several tangible benefits for family formation, encouraging married couples to bear children in environments marked by security and stability.

Unfortunately, homeownership is increasingly difficult for working- and middle-class Americans. According to a recent study from Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies, housing prices have jumped nearly 47% since 2020 and are 5.1 times the median household income in the United States, ultimately requiring at least $120,000 annual income to afford a median-priced home (JCHS, 2024).

This challenge is also affecting Texas, a state with one of the most vital housing markets in the country. Today, 90% of Texans express anxiety about housing affordability, with 38% indicating that housing costs are a source of significant financial strain on household asset management (Quintero, 2024). If these trends persist, growing numbers of Texans will be foreclosed from homeownership, with negative implications for marriage and family formation in the Lone Star State.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To further strengthen its families, Texas should aim to advance a family-friendly policy agenda. State laws, regulations, and policies should be evaluated by reference to how they strengthen and stabilize family life. Family-first policies should seek to reinforce the educational, economic, and cultural foundations of marriage. Such policies should also enable parents to invest more money and time in their families and honor their position as the primary educators of their children. And these policies should recognize that the point of family policy is not to delegate more functions of family life to the state but rather to make it easier for families to take the lead in supporting, forming, and caring for their own.

Specifically, a family-first policy agenda aims to:

- Strengthen and stabilize marriage—measured both in terms of the rate and stability of marriage;
- Make childbearing and childrearing more affordable for working families;
- Promote high-quality family relationships by increasing positive and reducing negative (e.g., domestic violence) interactions in families;
- Maximize the time and authority parents have vis-à-vis their children; and
- Educate the rising generation about the value of marriage and parenthood. (Sutherland Institute, 2024)

In the spirit of family-first policy, we offer four recommendations to strengthen family life in the Lone Star State.

State Agencies Should Report Family Structure

Good family policy depends on good metrics (Sutherland Institute, 2024). To understand how trends in family life affect state and local government, you must measure and report them. Reporting such metrics makes it possible for policymakers and various stakeholders in Texas—such as parents, schools, civic organizations, businesses, and the media—to understand the influence of families on critical aspects of life across the state.

For example, this report indicates that Texas counties with more married families have markedly higher rates of high school graduation and that, across the state, child poverty is dramatically lower in married parent families. In Texas, 35.8% of children in families headed by a single parent are poor, compared to 7.7% of children in families headed by married parents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

Findings like these indicate that strong and stable families across the Lone Star state advantage children. But currently, major state agencies—like the Texas Education Agency—do not report student outcomes by family structure. This must change.

We recommend that the Texas Legislature require state agencies—including the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Department of State Health Services, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, and the Texas Department of Juvenile Justice—to report out key family statistics that are connected to important dimensions of their work. They should report:

- How children's family structure is related to their performance in school, risk of poverty, physical and mental health, involvement with child protective services, and encounters with the criminal justice system;
- How adult family structure is related to men and women's involvement with the criminal justice system, poverty, physical and emotional health, and labor force attachment;
- How children's family structure growing up is linked to their risk of incarceration; and,
- How public spending on children, adults, and families is linked to their family structure.

Reporting this data would help state agencies better understand who they are serving and how to serve them, and this data would indicate to policymakers, journalists, parents, and citizens the ways in which strong and stable families are tied to the welfare of children, adults, and the state.

Teaching the "Success Sequence" in Texas Schools

Some paths into adulthood are more fortuitous than others for today's young men and women. The "Success Sequence," first popularized by Brookings Institution scholars Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill, is one such path (Haskins & Sawhill, 2009). It refers to a specific series of milestones in life associated with avoiding poverty and moving into the middle class or beyond. Specifically, the success sequence refers to young adults completing high school, getting a full-time job in their twenties, and marrying before having any children. A stunning 97% of young men and women who follow the sequence, in that order, avoid poverty in their late 20s and thirties (Wang & Wilcox, 2017). Moreover, more than 90% of black, Hispanic, and young adults from poor families avoid poverty as they themselves move into young adulthood (Wang & Wilcox, 2022). In addition, 94% of Millennials who grew up in low-income families, the bottom third of the income distribution, are not poor by their mid-30s. Finally, 86% of Millennials who followed the success reached the middle class as young adults (Wang & Wilcox, 2017).

The advantages associated with the success sequence are not just financial. New research by Wendy Wang at the Institute for Family Studies and Samuel Wilkinson at Yale University indicates the sequence is also associated with the emotional well-being and family stability of young adults (Wang & Wilkinson, 2024). Young men and women who have followed all three steps are in better mental health than those who have not. For instance, young adults who have taken all three steps in order are about 50% less likely to be emotionally distressed than their peers who have not, even net of factors like race, ethnicity, education, and income. They also have more stable families. Young women and men who followed all three steps were four times more likely to be still living in an intact family in their thirties compared to their peers who did not follow the sequence, even controlling for a range of sociodemographic factors (Wang & Wilkinson, 2024).

Young men and women deserve to know how education, work, and marriage are tied to greater financial security, emotional well-being, and family stability as they move into adulthood.

A range of curricula and programs convey the time-tested wisdom of the Success Sequence with young adults—from the Success Sequence Program at the A&M Partnership (2024), to the Real Essentials program from the Center for Relationship Education (2024), to the Love Notes program by the Dibble Institute (2024). Research on Love Notes, for instance, indicates that teens who participated in the program were 46% less likely to be become pregnant or experience a pregnancy, were significantly less likely to be sexually active, and less likely to have multiple partners, compared to similar teens who did not participate in the program (Barbee et al., 2022). It is also worth pointing out that polling indicates that 79% of Texas respondents support teaching the "Success Sequence" in public schools (Brown, 2024).

Accordingly, the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE), along with local Texas school districts, could incorporate the Success Sequence in two ways into schools across the Lone Star state. First, the SBOE could incorporate the Success Sequence into its family life instruction, or, it could add the sequence to its financial literacy instruction. Either way, the Success Sequence should be incorporated into middle and high school classes and teach the ways that:

1. A high school education, full-time work, and marriage before having children decrease young adults' odds of being poor and maximize their likelihood of moving into the middle class or higher;

2. Marriage is associated with less loneliness, more meaning, and greater happiness for men and women today;

3. A stable marriage increases the odds that children flourish educationally and socially, and minimizes the odds they have trouble in school and with the law; and,

4. Sequencing marriage before parenthood increases the odds that young men and women forge stable families. (Sutherland Institute, 2024)

To do this, the following are policy suggestions for the SBOE to consider when incorporating the Success Sequence into public schools across the state:

- Prior to high school graduation or receiving a general education degree, students must complete at least one course incorporating evidence using the best research methods available describing the positive financial, family, social, and emotional outcomes associated with the Success Sequence.

- Designate a committee that includes members of school boards and parents of children attending K-12 public schools in Texas to review the grade-level standards and expectations and instructional content that includes annual discussion of the Success Sequence.

- The state Commissioner of Education should solicit evaluations that measure how well students are learning the three steps of the Sequence and the outcomes associated with it. The Commissioner should also sponsor evaluations of success sequence-related curricula that measure how curricula influence adolescent relationships, teen pregnancy, and marriage and family attitudes.

Promoting and Incentivizing Marriage

Strong marriages convey substantial benefits to men, women, children, and society as a whole. Unfortunately, in recent decades fewer Texans have been marrying. The Texas Legislature should take action aimed at educating the public about the value of marriage and at reducing barriers that cause Texans to put off or forego marriage. Specifically, we recommend that the 89th Texas Legislature:

1. Assess the effectiveness of existing state-funded marriage programs, including the Healthy Marriage Program, at connecting Texans with premarital education courses. The state should also determine whether participants who complete these programs experience stronger, longer-lasting marriages.

2. Require that premarital education courses that receive state funding include financial literacy instruction as part of their curriculum.

3. Create a multifaceted public education and engagement campaign focused on increasing the Texas marriage rate and promoting healthy, successful marriages.

4. Address issues of affordability, particularly in housing, which serve as barriers to marriage and family formation.

Improve State-Funded Marriage Programs

Responding to rising divorce rates, the 76th Texas Legislature enacted House Bill 2442 (1999), which created Section 2.013 of the Texas Family Code This legislation seeks to encourage couples applying for a marriage license to complete a premarital education course, by waiving the marriage license fee for those who completed the course. Interestingly, the original filed version of the bill made completion of a premarital education course a *requirement* for obtaining a marriage license. This provision was negotiated out of the final, enrolled version of the bill. As originally enacted by HB 2442, Section 2.013 of the Texas Family Code also included language requiring that premarital counseling courses include instruction on "children and parenting responsibilities" and "financial responsibilities."

Eight years later, the 80th Texas Legislature passed House Bill 2685 (2007), which amended Section 2.013, Family Code, by striking the provisions requiring instruction on "children and parenting responsibilities" and "financial responsibilities" and replacing them with the more generalized "key components of a successful marriage." Although removing these requirements could be perceived as weakening the effectiveness of premarital education (due to the significant roles that financial literacy and parenting play in the health of families), a main concern of HB 2685 was addressing the lack of incentives for couples seeking marriage licenses to attend premarital education courses (HB 2685 Bill Analysis, 2007, p. 1). HB 2685 did this by amending Section 2.204(b), Family Code, to waive the 72-hour waiting period for a marriage license and Section 118.018, Local Government Code, to require county clerks to waive the marriage license fee for all couples who show proof of completion of an approved premarital education course.

The program created by HB 2442 and HB 2685, called the "Twogether in Texas Healthy Marriage Program," is administered by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission. It is primarily implemented through a website that helps couples find and connect with providers of premarital education in their local communities that provide the training required under Section 2.013, Family Code. According to HHSC's Legislative Appropriations Request for fiscal year 2024-2025, the baseline budget for the program totals $479,084 ($239,542 in each year) and is staffed by one full time equivalent position (Texas Health and Human Services Commission, 2022, p. 726). Public data on the number of Texans who successfully complete the program and take advantage of the waiver of the license waiting period and fee is not available at the time of this writing.

To improve the quality of the Texas Healthy Marriage program and increase the number of Texans who take advantage of it, the 89th Texas Legislature should amend Section 2.013, Family Code, to add back in provisions removed by HB 2685 requiring that all premarital education courses funded by the state include instruction on financial literacy and parenting responsibilities. In addition, the Legislature should commission a third-party assessment of the program to determine its effectiveness at promoting marriage among Texans and whether couples who complete the program experience higher quality and more stable marriages than those who do not. Finally, the state should publicize the value of premarital education for married couples and the marital license discount that couples get by taking premarital education as part of a multifaceted public education and engagement campaign focused on promoting marriage in Texas. In particular, the Legislature should fund the development and operation of a free, evidence-based, online marriage enrichment program to support ongoing marriage maintenance. Such a program could be managed by a nonprofit organization or public institution of higher education with relevant expertise.

Launch a Pro-Marriage Public Education and Engagement Campaign

Texas is the home of one of the most successful public education and engagement campaigns in history. The iconic slogan, "Don't mess with Texas," has become an expression of Texans' pride in their state, and is emblazoned on t-shirts, bumper stickers, coffee mugs, and other merchandise lining the shelves of souvenir stores throughout the state. But what the tourists purchasing these items to remember their visit may not realize is that the slogan was created in 1985 by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) as part of an anti-litter campaign (Texas Department of Transportation, n.d.). "Don't mess with Texas" sought to reduce litter on Texas roadways through commercials featuring Texas-born celebrities like Stevie Ray Vaughn, Willie Nelson, Earl Campbell, George Strait, and Matthew McConaughey. TxDOT also promoted educational programs and trash clean-up efforts. This campaign has proven to be wildly successful and is credited with helping reduce litter by 50% between 1995 and 2001, and by 33% between 2001 and 2003 (Texas Department of Transportation, n.d.).

If Texas can achieve this level of success at reducing litter, surely it should be able to replicate it for the much more important goal of increasing the number of successful, healthy marriages. The State of Utah provides a roadmap for developing a successful, focused initiative dedicated to promoting marriage through education and outreach. Launched in 1998 by then-Governor Mike Leavitt and his wife, First Lady Jacalyn Leavitt, the Utah Marriage Commission exists to "provide free, research-based relationship education to help Utahans form and sustain healthy relationships and stronger marriages" (Utah State University Extension, n.d.). An advisory board of experts and professionals guide the Commission. Through its website, Utahns can access free marriage assessments, self-guided marriage and relationship education lessons and courses, relationship assessments, links to organizations who offer marriage education services, monthly webinars, and a weekly podcast (Utah State University Extension, n.d.). Originally established by Executive Order, the Commission was formalized by statute in 2013 and placed under the authority of the Department of Human Services. In 2021, it was transferred to Utah State University Extension with its mission to "get the research to the people." (Utah State University Extension, n.d.) It is primarily supported by federal funds from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program and marriage license fees.

Although Utah is not unique in its desire to promote healthy marriages through public policy, this state has been the most successful by far. In addition to Utah, approximately nine other states have established some form of premarital education program: Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia (Hawkins & Clyde, 2019). Each of these states have enacted policies to encourage and incentivize couples to engage in premarital education and have been met with varying degrees of success. A study examining the effectiveness of these state programs found that oversight and implementation were the key factors influencing their success (Hawkins & Clyde, 2019). The study found that Texas's early efforts at providing formalized premarital education programs (which began in 2007) were successful and correlated with a 1.5% decrease in the divorce rate statewide. The authors of the study noted that while the decrease in the divorce rate may seem small, the measure focused on all marriages, including those that began before the state implemented its premarital education policies. Based on this, the authors conclude that the actual divorce rate reduction effect attributable to the Texas program is likely higher. This underscores the state's need to assess the effectiveness of its current premarital education program. Unfortunately, the Texas program analyzed by the study only lasted three years before being dramatically scaled back due to fiscal pressures related to the Great Recession in 2008-2009 (Hawkins & Clyde, 2019; Hawkins, 2024).

According to Hawkins & Clyde, Utah was able to build a program that has lasted for more than 25 years and succeeded where others had failed due to combination of proper oversight and implementation, as well as using a focused media campaign designed to raise awareness of the program (Hawkins & Clyde, 2019). The media campaign launched in 2008 and focused on "18- to 29-year-olds with a strong (but not exclusive) emphasis on promoting increased use of premarital education services" (Hawkins et al., 2016, p. 23). Based on data from market research, the firm contracted to run the campaign developed ads for television, radio, print, and Internet sites targeted at the key demographic. A study of the campaign's effectiveness found that over the course of five years, the campaign:

- Increased awareness of the program to nearly 38% from a baseline of 17% before the campaign launched, and
- Increased participation in the program to 39% from a baseline of 32%. (Hawkins et al, 2016, pp. 27-28)

A well-designed and implemented public education ad campaign can have a measurable effect on influencing the public to take a desired action. From littering to smoking, wearing a seatbelt or taking action to slow the spread of disease, public service advertisements have a long history of influencing individual behavior in positive ways. Texas should learn from the success of its "Don't mess with Texas" campaign and apply these same principles to multifaceted campaign that not only raises awareness about the value of marriage among diverse populations, but, like Utah, also directs the public to easily accessible, research-backed premarital education resources that enables them to engage with these resources.

Lower the Affordability Barrier

Financial considerations—particularly housing affordability—also play a significant role in influencing men and women's decisions about whether and when to marry and have children. Both men and women report that a sense of economic security is a prerequisite for marriage and family formation. Unfortunately, more and more Americans report that the American Dream is out of reach for them, in part because of the rising cost of housing and other necessities (Wolfe, 2024). According to America's Health Rankings of the United Health Foundation, 32.8% of Texas households (or roughly 3.6 million households) are "cost-burdened," meaning that 30% or more of their income is directed to housing costs (United Health Foundation, 2023).

To make family life more affordable, the Texas Legislature should tackle the housing issue first. With more affordable housing, Texans will not only have greater access to goods that increase household wealth, but would also feel more confident about moving forward with marriage and starting a family. If responsible reform is enacted, all Texans, especially those who are "cost-burdened," may no longer have to spend 30% or more of their income on housing costs, and instead may redirect the use of those funds getting married and having children.

Several avenues for tackling housing affordability can be found at local and state levels in Texas. One locus for change that would improve housing affordability is taxation. Currently, Texans are saddled with the sixth-highest effective property tax rate in the nation, significantly raising housing costs (Gilliland & Krebs, 2024; Bonura, 2024). To bring down property taxes, the Legislature can reduce the threshold necessary to initiate voter-approval tax rate elections (VATRE)—which currently sits at 3.5% for cities, counties, and special districts—to 2.5% or less (Bonura, 2024). Reductions in property taxes will render homeownership more affordable overall, thereby making it easier financially to start or expand a family in the state.

A second avenue to reduce housing costs involves reevaluating the current zoning ordinances throughout municipalities in Texas. As it stands, too much local zoning relies on labyrinthine rules that raise the price of homes by imposing unnecessary requirements on property developers and owners that raise development, construction, and maintenance costs (Bonura, 2024). Among zoning ordinances worthy of reform are minimum lot size requirements, which diminish density, stifle housing construction, and encourage sprawl, ultimately leading to higher house prices (Hamilton, 2024). For instance, according to Zabel & Dalton (2011), raising the minimum lot size by one acre yielded a nearly 10% increase in housing prices. If minimum lot sizes are reduced, however, research indicates that housing is rendered more affordable (Hamilton, 2024). Reduced minimum lot sizes and the loosening of zoning ordinances would not only lower housing costs for Texans, but it would also provide them with increased opportunity to purchase property more suitable to their tastes, considering that reduced minimum lot sizes will allow for both greater latitude in the permissible acreage of a residential lot and more dense residential neighborhoods. We also recommend zoning reforms that make it easier for homeowners to add "in-law apartments," either on their lots or in their homes. This would make it easier for families to house grandparents in ways that reduce the burden of parenting and make it practically easier to have and raise children.

Finally, to further reduce the financial obstacles facing families across the Lone Star State, we recommend that the Legislature pass targeted tax relief for young families. We recommend that parents of young children (under 18) receive an additional homestead exemption or a generous credit for their property tax. The credit should be given on a per parent basis, which would make it more generous for married parents and ensure that the credit does not penalize cohabiting couples who wish to marry.

In sum, the cost of housing is an acute concern for Texans with seemingly ever-increasing home prices and property tax bills that place a strain on household budgets (Quintero, 2024). The cost of housing also makes family formation less attainable to men and women across the state. A 2024 poll conducted by the University of Houston and Texas Southern University found that 90% of Texans believe housing affordability is a problem with 44% considering it to be a major problem (University of Houston Hobby School of Public Affairs, 2024, p. 1). Although the Texas Legislature has done admirable work at attempting to reduce this burden by utilizing the state's budget surplus to buy down property taxes, additional reforms remain. Accordingly, we recommend that the 89th Texas Legislature:

1. Continue property tax reform efforts with a focus on compressing school district maintenance and operations (M&O) tax rates with the goal of eliminating them within the next decade (Ginn & Sánchez-Piñol, 2023).

2. Consider targeted property tax relief with an additional homestead exemption or other credit for married couples and families with children under the age of 18 living in the household (or target parents with children under 18 and be twice as generous for married parents).

3. Reduce the threshold necessary to initiative voter-approved tax rate election (VATRE) from the current threshold of 3.5% to 2.5% or less.

4. Loosen zoning ordinances that stifle new home construction and place unnecessary restrictions on the ability of families to utilize their property in a manner that enhances family life. Recommended reforms include:

a) Adjusting zoning ordinances that arbitrarily restrict small-scale home businesses to make it easier for parents to work from home or operate a small business out of their home;

b) Promote multigenerational housing by easing regulations that prevent families from subdividing lots and erect multiple dwellings; and

c) Ease regulations on additions to homes to make it easier for families to add additional living space to their existing home or convert an attic into a bedroom.

Create a Time-Limited Commission on Men and Boys

States across America are beginning to address and tackle the falling fortunes of boys and young men. One way to do this is with state-level commissions charged with assessing the problem and recommending solutions. Currently, there are no commissions in Texas dedicated to men and boys. According to polling among Texans, 76% of respondents support creating a state commission to help men and boys (Brown, 2024, p. 7).

Housed in the Texas Governor's Office, there is a similar commission for women called the Governor's Commission for Women. Established in 1967, the Commission today is tasked with "promoting opportunities and supporting the successes of Texas women" (Commission for Women, n.d.). The Commission advises the Governor on ways the state can provide opportunities for women and promote female advancement in Texas. It is made up of 15 commissioners appointed by the Governor for a two-year term and who serve with no salary (Commission for Women, n.d.). Nationally, there are at least 36 states that have a statutory body focused on the issues that women face on the state level (Reeves, 2023). Texas should inaugurate a similar commission on men and boys to offer valuable insight to the Texas Legislature and the state more generally.

There are at least two models for creating a Commission on Men and Boys upon which Texas can build. In 2006, the State of Florida created the Council on the Social Status of Black Men and Boys to study conditions that negatively affected black men in the state. The board is appointed by the governor and recommends different policies to help black men in Florida (Council on the Social Status of Black Men and Boys, n.d.). The State of Washington is considering a bill that would create a Commission on Men and Boys to study the issues men and boys are facing at the state level (HB 1270, 2024). This effort was spurred on by troubling statistics regarding social, educational, and employment outcomes among men in that state. Washington found that only 35% of boys in its educational system had at least a 3.0 GPA, compared with 51% of girls. Boys were three times more likely to be suspended from school, and men accounted for 79% of all suicide deaths in the state (Reeves, 2023). The Washington commission plans to focus on these areas: education, fatherhood, family and relationships, jobs, careers and financial health, mental and physical health, and experiences of males in court systems (Washington State Commission on Men and Boys, 2024). The Washington State Commission on Men and Boys will be made up of nine nonlegislative members that will collect data and recommend policies to the Washington Legislature.

Increasing marriage and family formation rates requires Texans to get serious about improving the quality of our society's future spouses and parents. This is particularly true when it comes to our nation's husbands and fathers. As we have seen, young men are increasingly falling behind in academic achievement and workforce participation, among other domains. Family scientists have long theorized that a shrinking supply of "marriageable men" is contributing to a declining marriage rate. Under this theory, "declines in marriage are driven at least in part by reductions in employment prospects and earnings among men," especially young men who do not earn a college degree (Lichter et al., 2019, pp. 1-2). A 2019 study published in the

Journal of Marriage and Family attempted to test this theory by utilizing sociodemographic data covering two five-year periods from the U.S. Census Bureau's annual American Community Survey (Lichter et al., 2019, p. 4). Based on their analysis of this data, the authors found evidence of both an "excess supply of men with low income and education" and a shortage of "economically attractive unmarried men" with at least a bachelor's degree or higher income (Lichter et al., 2019, p. 10). These findings track with research showing that among never-married women, finding a partner with a steady job is a "very important" consideration when choosing a spouse (Wang & Parker, 2014). Specifically, a 2014 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 78% of never-married women expressed the desire that their spouse have a steady job, while only 46% of never-married men expressed that same preference (Wang & Parker, 2014).

While a potential partner's education and economic stability are just two factors among many that influence an individual's decision to marry, emerging research shows that a real or perceived lack of potential spouses who are "marriage material" is contributing to the growing hesitation to marry and have children—especially among women. Reversing this trend requires both the identification of the root causes that are contributing to the decline of educational attainment and workforce participation among young men and solutions for addressing these issues. The 89th Texas Legislature can do this by convening a Commission on Men and Boys tasked with undertaking this important work. Such a commission should be time-limited and tasked with delivering a report that analyzes the major forces causing boys and young men to fall behind their female counterparts in key educational, social, and labor force arenas, and propose policy solutions that will help boys and young men to thrive. This effort will likely make them more attractive partners, spouses, and fathers throughout their adult lives. In short, the commission should deliver recommendations for elevating the fortunes of boys and young men across Texas, which will have numerous benefits for them and the Lone Star State—including improving the state climate for relationships and family formation.

CONCLUSION

The future of Texas and the nation are inextricably tied to the health of our families. Although no simple solutions exist for solving the pressing problems we have highlighted, this report provides an essential first step for making Texas the best place to get married and raise a family in the country. We recognize that the decline in marriage and family formation is a broader cultural issue that cannot be solved by policy alone. However, lawmakers can play an active role in promoting a culture that values and promotes the goods of marriage and raising children through the decisions they make on behalf of the people of Texas. We hope that Texas lawmakers will not only choose to advance the policies proposed by this report, but also look at every decision they make during the 89th Legislature through the lens of encouraging Texans to embrace marriage and family life. Given the importance of strong and stable families for the economic, social, and emotional welfare of children, adults, and communities across Texas, advancing a family-friendly agenda is probably the single most important action the Texas Legislature can take to advance the American Dream and the pursuit of happiness in the Lone Star State. ■

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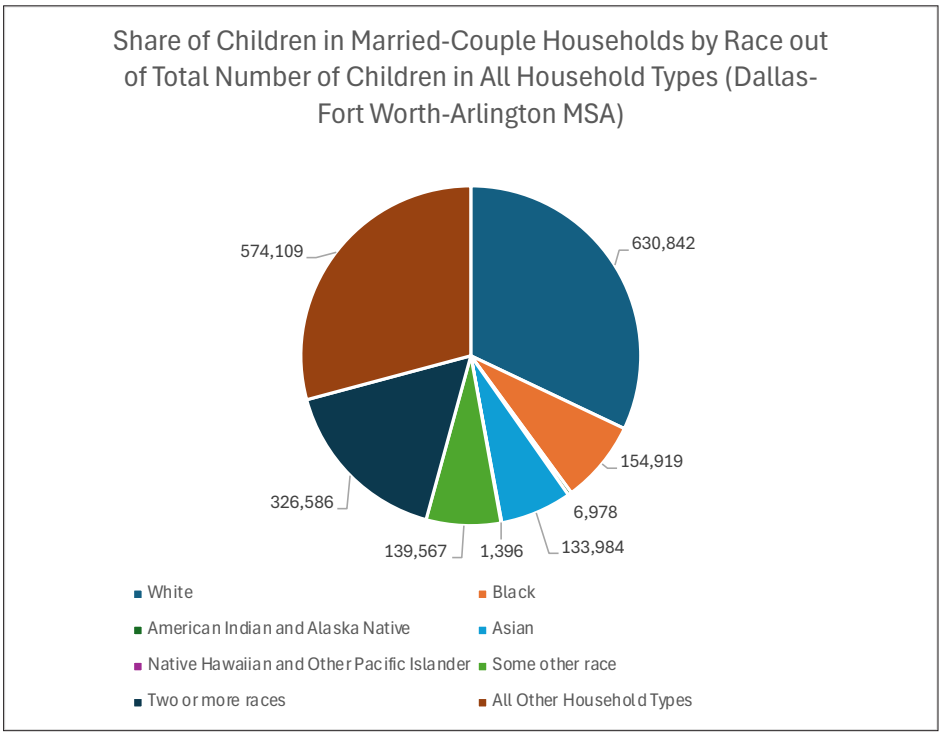
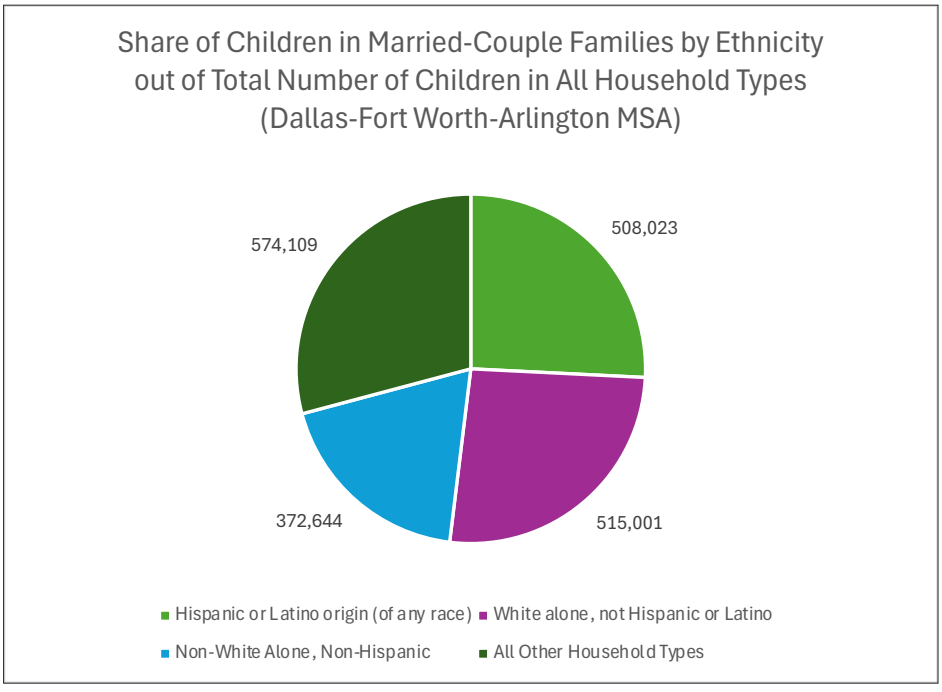
APPENDIX: MARRIAGE AND FAMILY DATA FOR MAJOR METROPOLITAN AREAS OF TEXAS

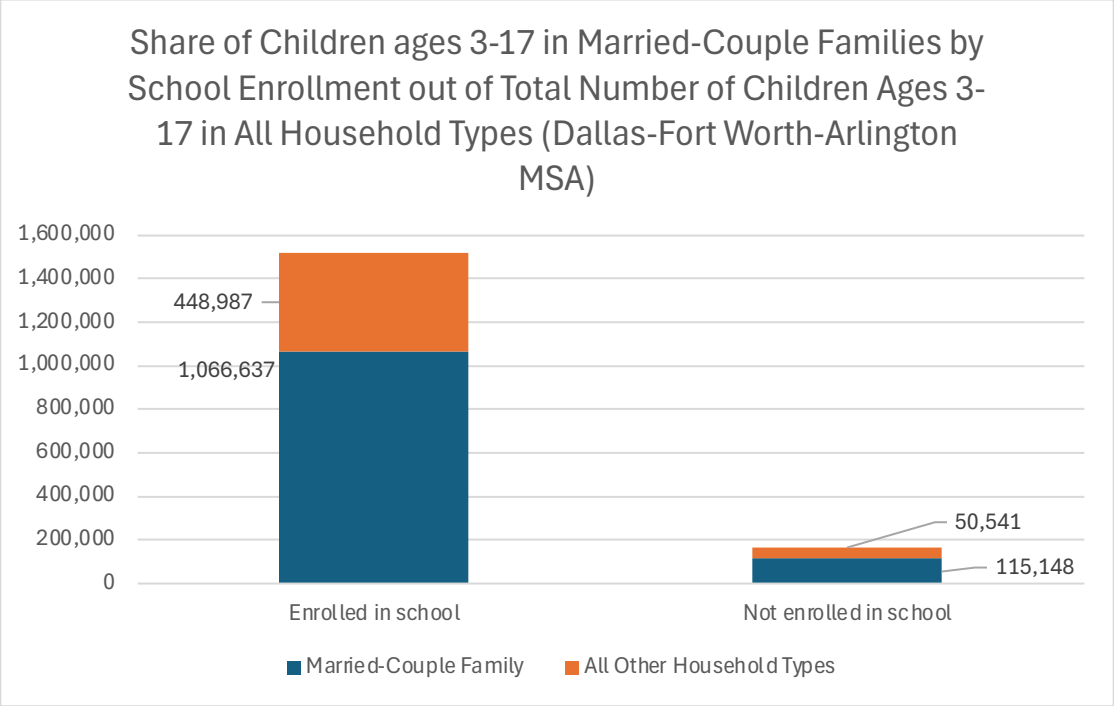
MAJOR METROPOLITAN AREAS

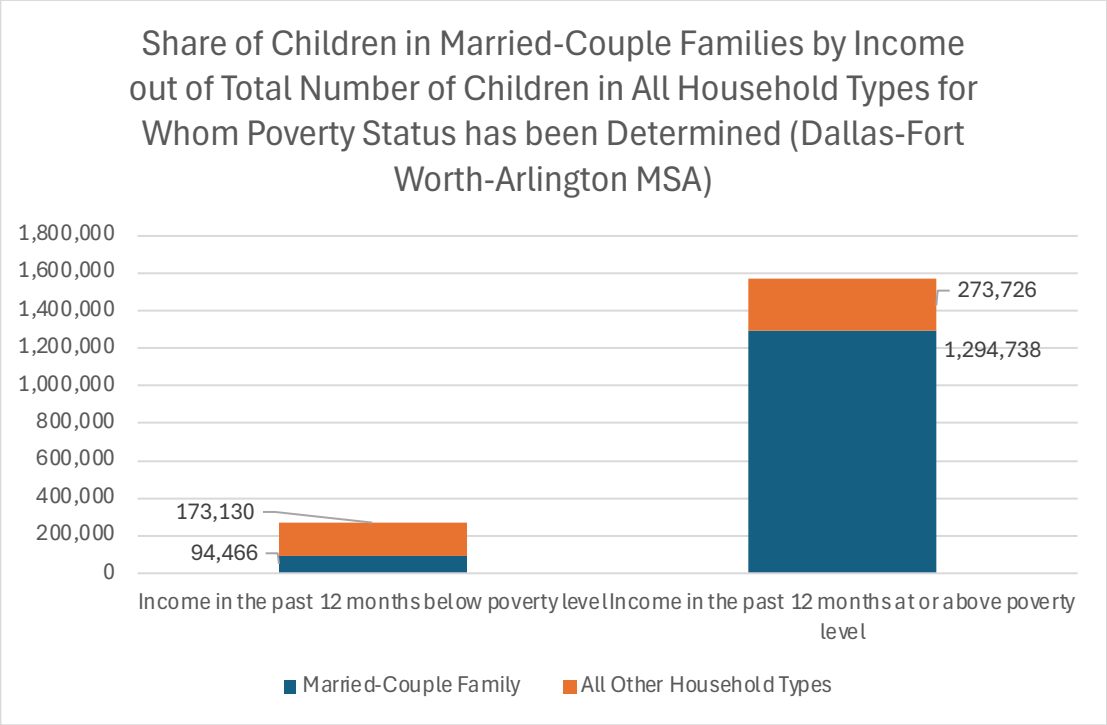
DALLAS-FORT WORTH-ARLINGTON METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (DFW MSA)

DFW MSA FACT SHEET	All Households	Married-Couple Households
Children Under 18	1,969,777	1,395,668
Children 3-17 Years Old	1,681,313	1,181,785
Children for Whom Poverty Status Has Been Determined	1,953,256	1,389,204



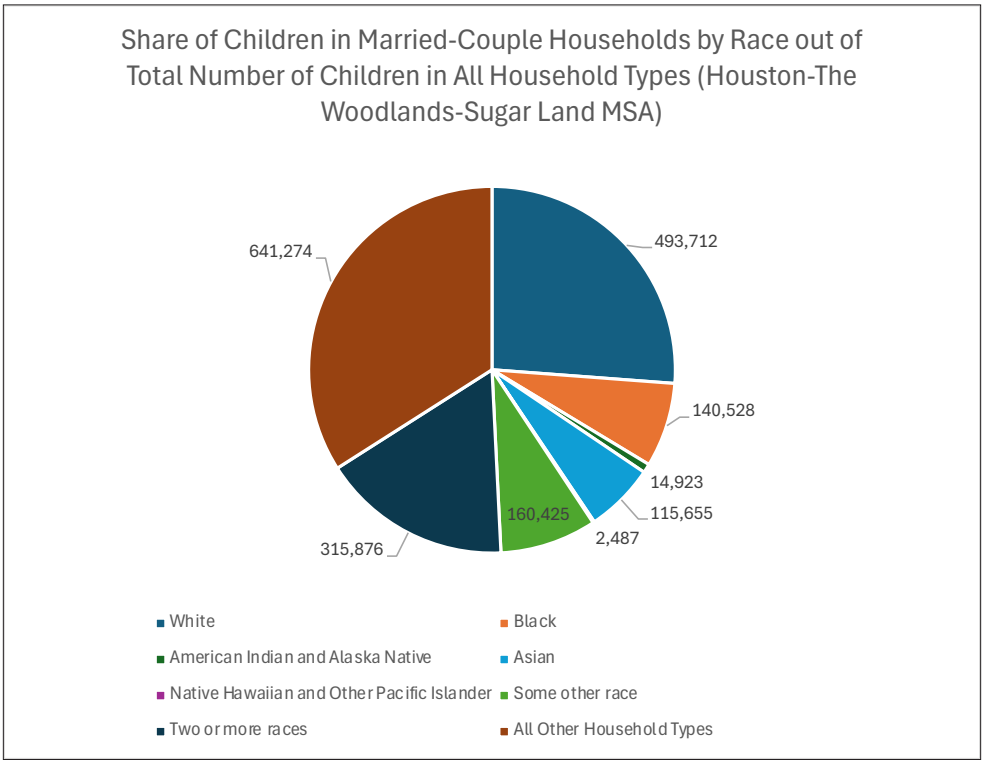


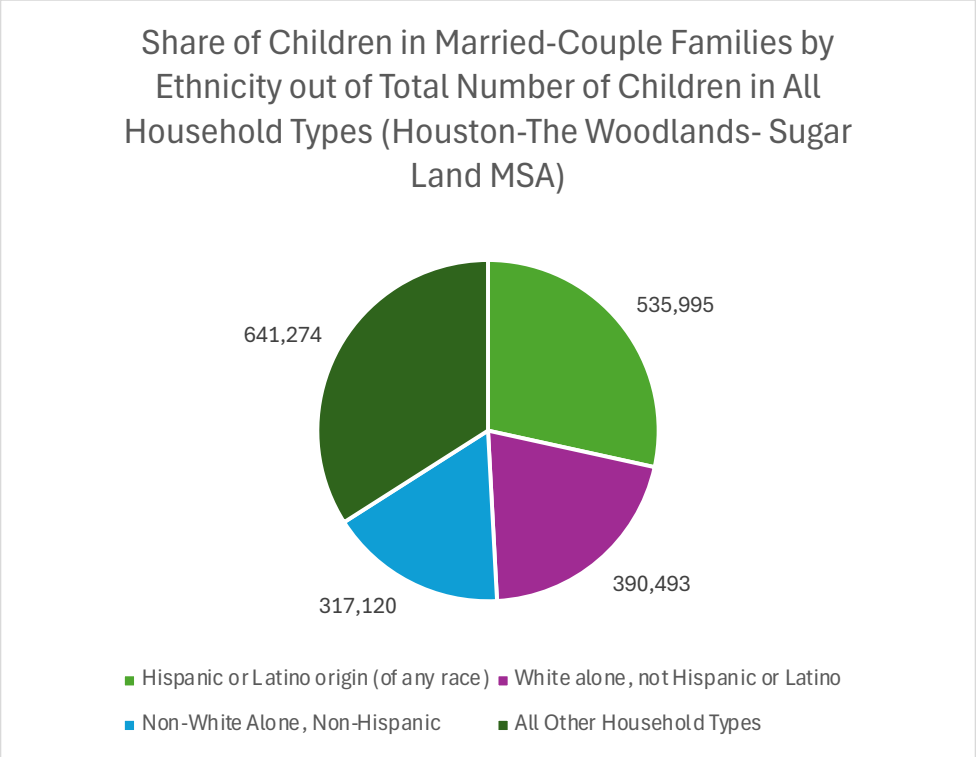

Share of Children ages 3-17 in Married-Couple Families by School Enrollment out of Total Number of Children Ages 3-17 in All Household Types (Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington MSA)
1,600,000
1,400,000
1,200,000
1,000,000
800,000
600,000
400,000
200,000
0
448,987
1,066,637
50,541
115,148
Enrolled in school
Not enrolled in school
Married-Couple Family
All Other Household Types

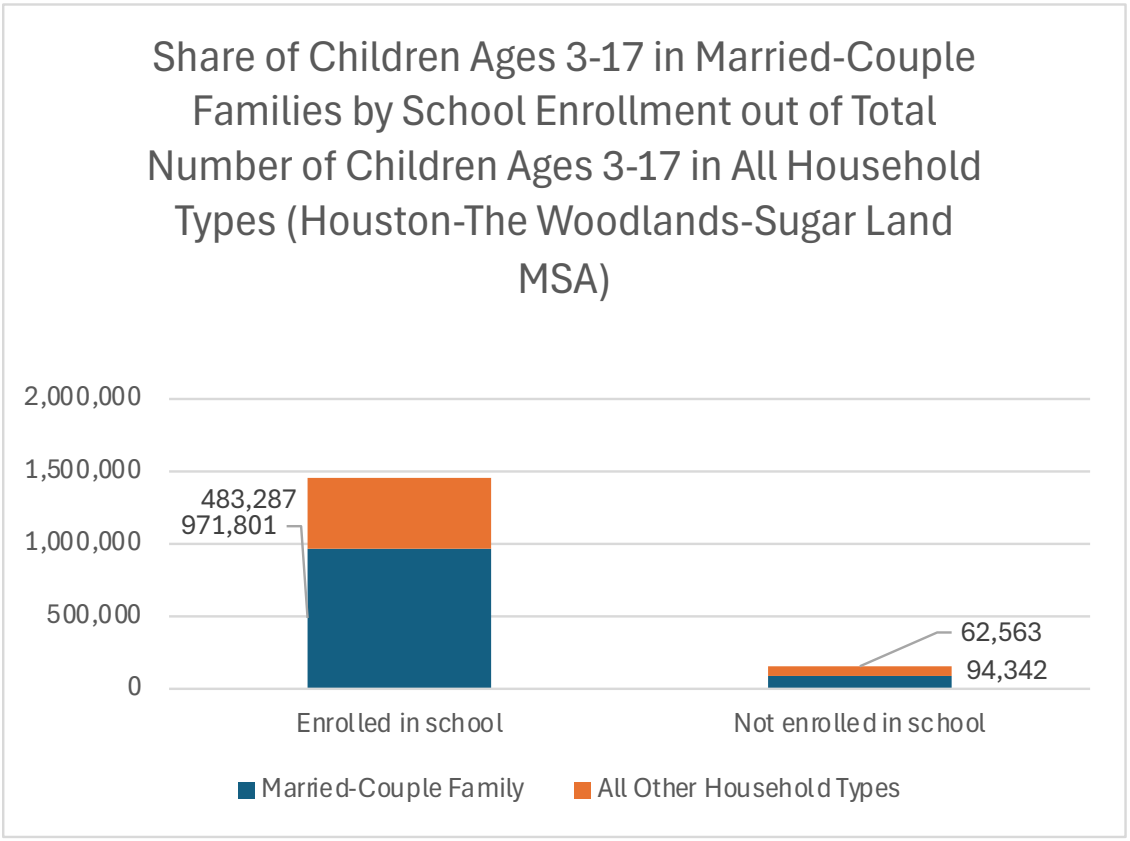

Share of Children in Married-Couple Families by Income out of Total Number of Children in All Household Types for Whom Poverty Status has been Determined (Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington MSA)
1,800,000
1,600,000
1,400,000
1,200,000
1,000,000
800,000
600,000
400,000
200,000
0
173,130
94,466
273,726
1,294,738
Income in the past 12 months below poverty level
Income in the past 12 months at or above poverty level
Married-Couple Family
All Other Household Types

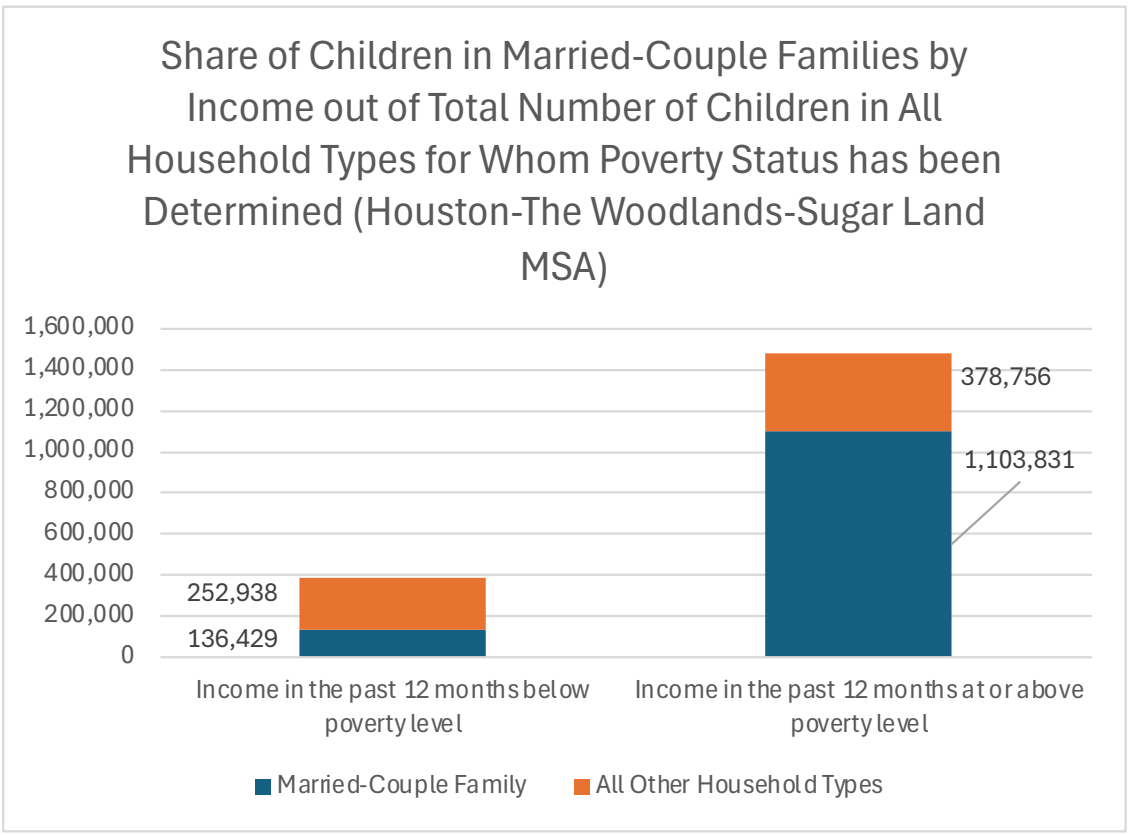
HOUSTON-THE WOODLANDS- SUGAR LAND METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (HOU MSA)

HOU MSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Households
Children under 18 Y/o	1,884,881	1,243,607
Children 3 to 17 Y/o	1,611,993	1,066,143
Children for Whom Poverty Status Has Been Determined	1,871,954	1,240,260



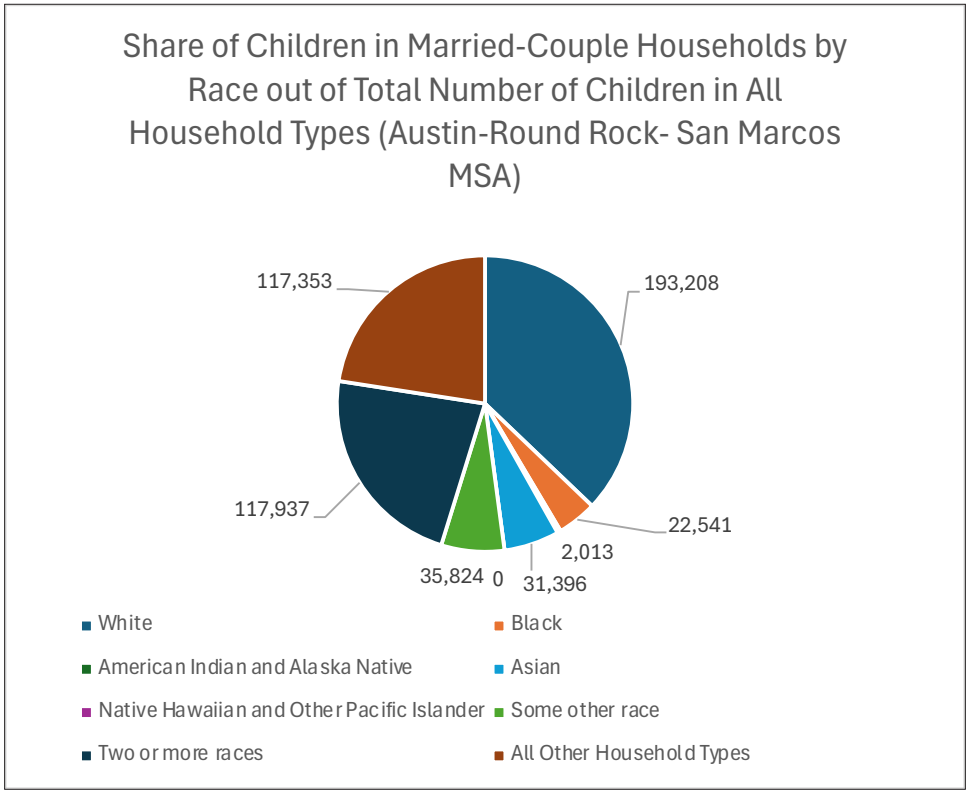


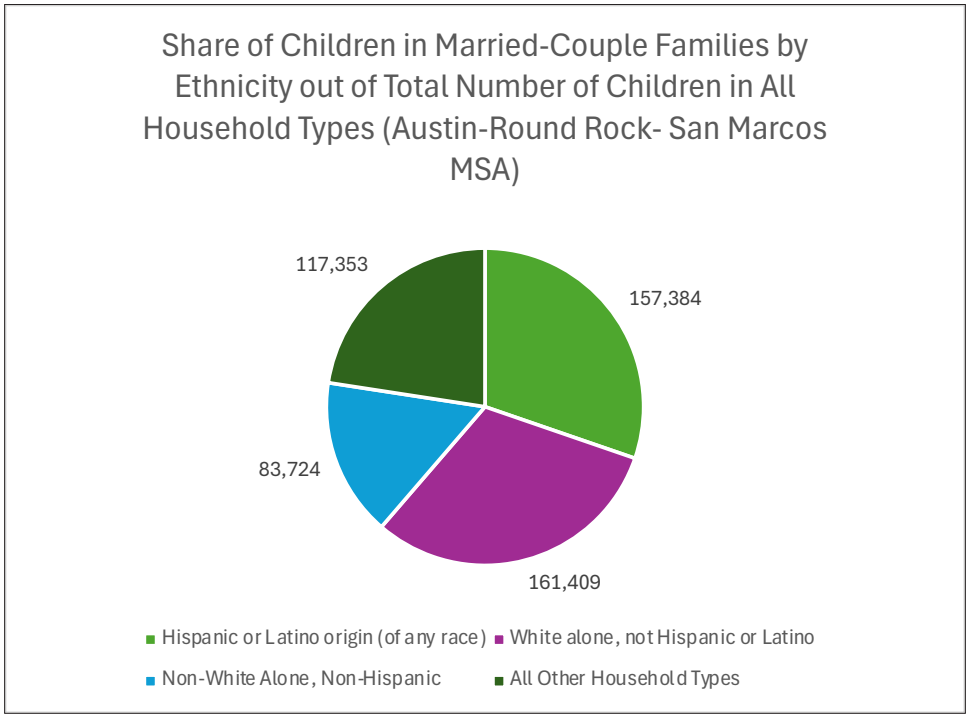

Share of Children Ages 3-17 in Married-Couple Families by School Enrollment out of Total Number of Children Ages 3-17 in All Household Types (Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land MSA)
2,000,000
1,500,000
1,000,000
500,000
0
483,287
971,801
62,563
94,342
Enrolled in school
Not enrolled in school
Married-Couple Family
All Other Household Types

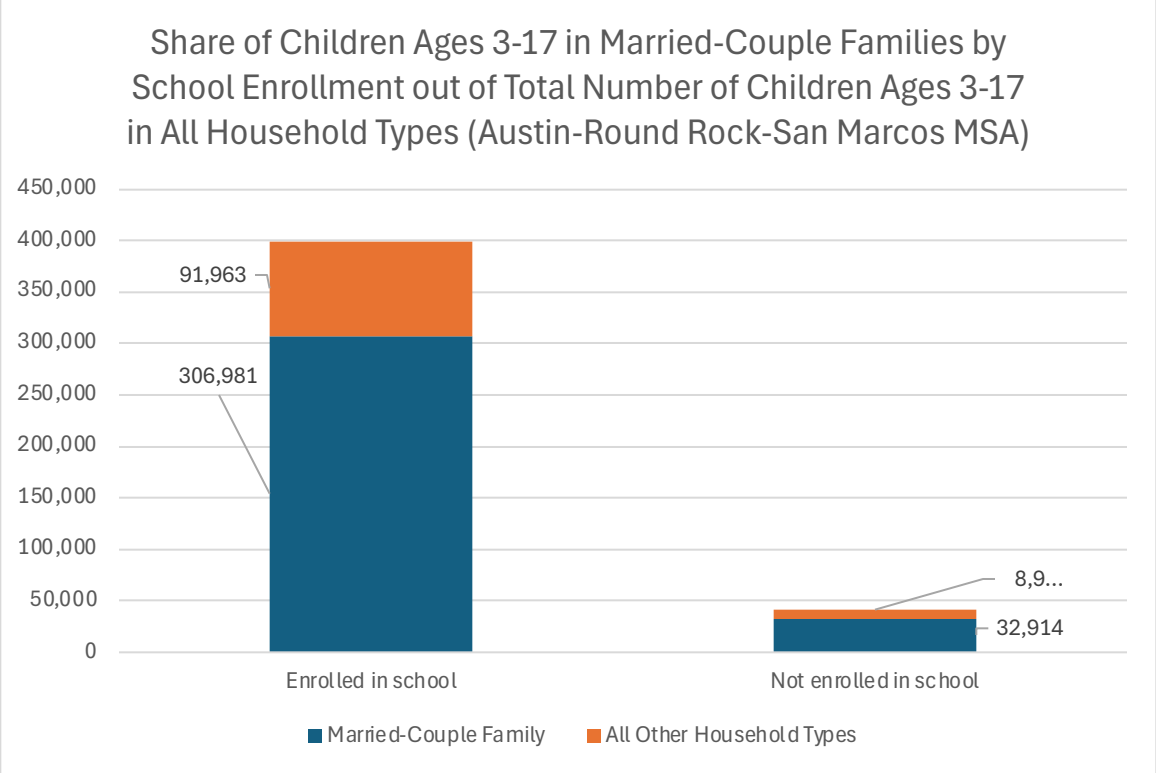

Share of Children in Married-Couple Families by Income out of Total Number of Children in All Household Types for Whom Poverty Status has been Determined (Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land MSA)
1,600,000
1,400,000
1,200,000
1,000,000
800,000
600,000
400,000
200,000
0
252,938
136,429
378,756
1,103,831
Income in the past 12 months below poverty level
Income in the past 12 months at or above poverty level
Married-Couple Family
All Other Household Types

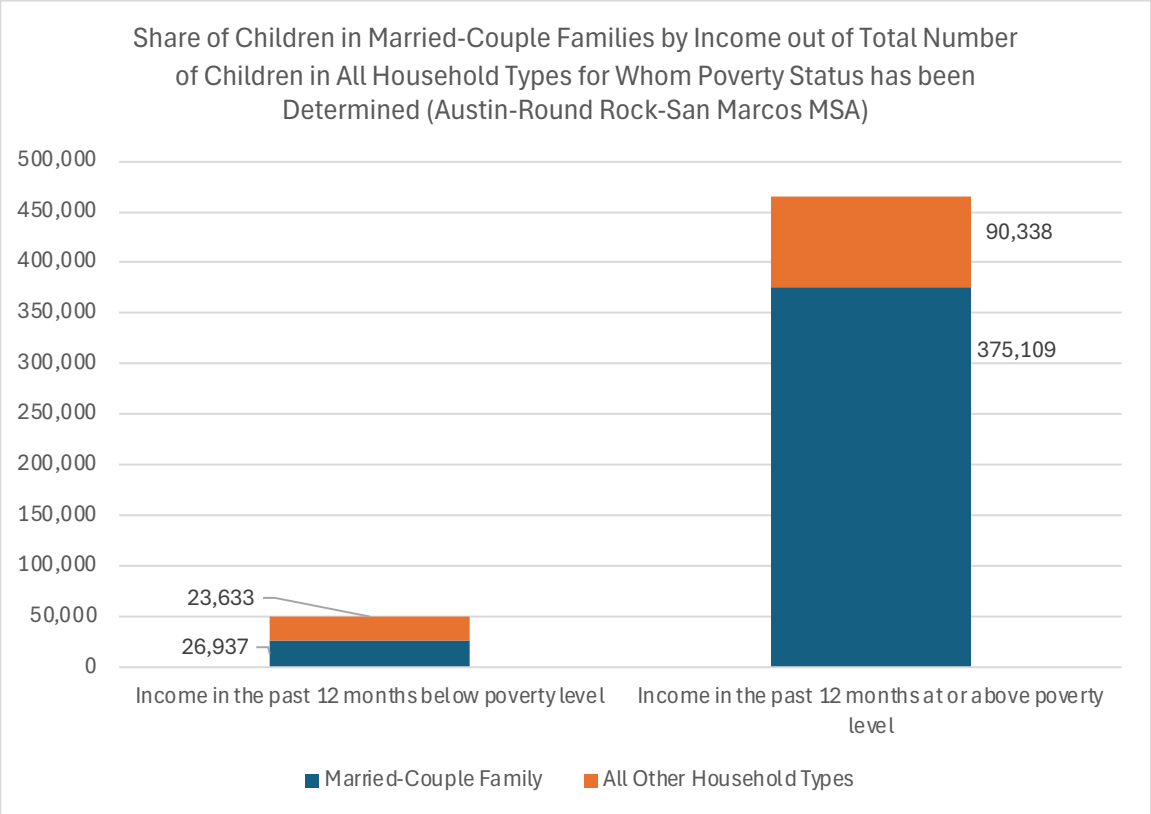
AUSTIN-ROUND ROCK- SAN MARCOS METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (AUS MSA)

AUS MSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Family
Children Under 18 Y/o	519,870	402,517
Children 3 to 17 Y/o	440,837	339,895
Children for Whom Poverty Status is Determined	516,017	402,046



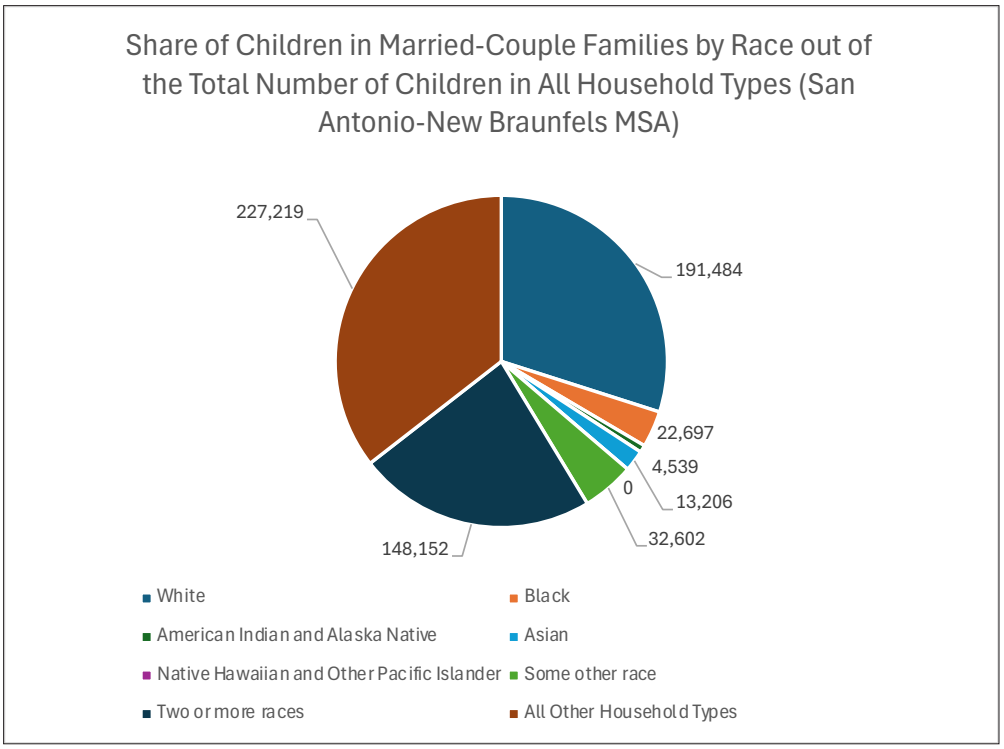


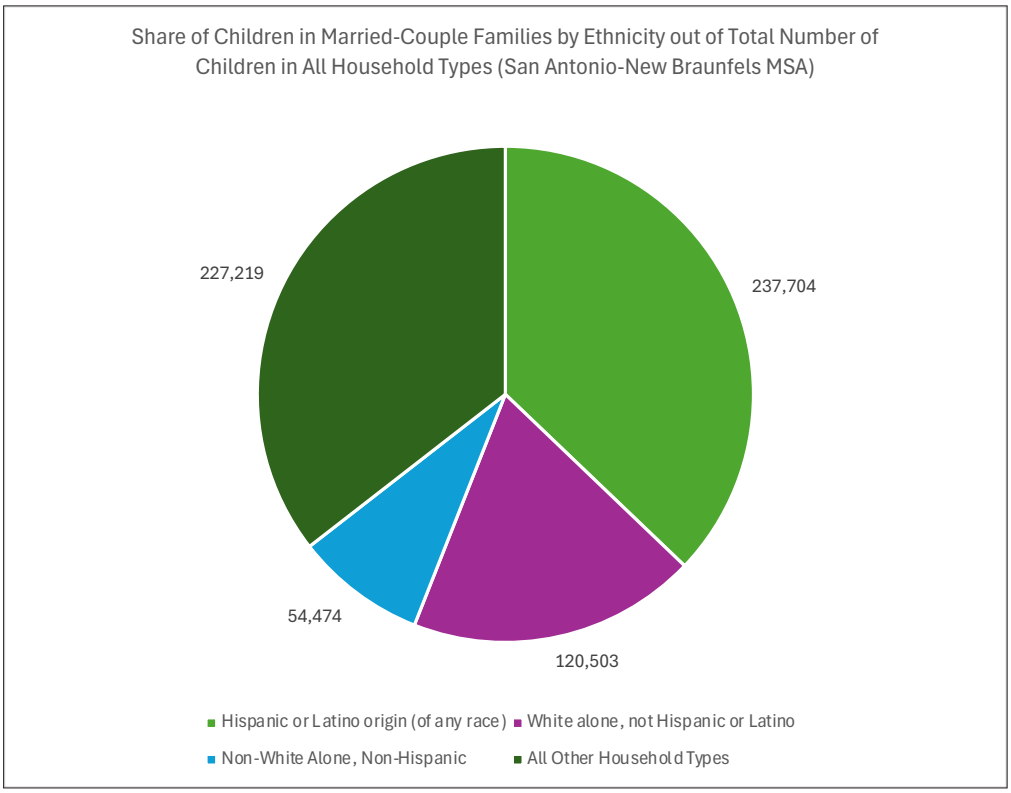

Share of Children Ages 3-17 in Married-Couple Families by School Enrollment out of Total Number of Children Ages 3-17 in All Household Types (Austin-Round Rock-San Marcos MSA)
450,000
400,000
350,000
300,000
250,000
200,000
150,000
100,000
50,000
0
91,963
306,981
8,9...
32,914
Enrolled in school
Not enrolled in school
Married-Couple Family
All Other Household Types

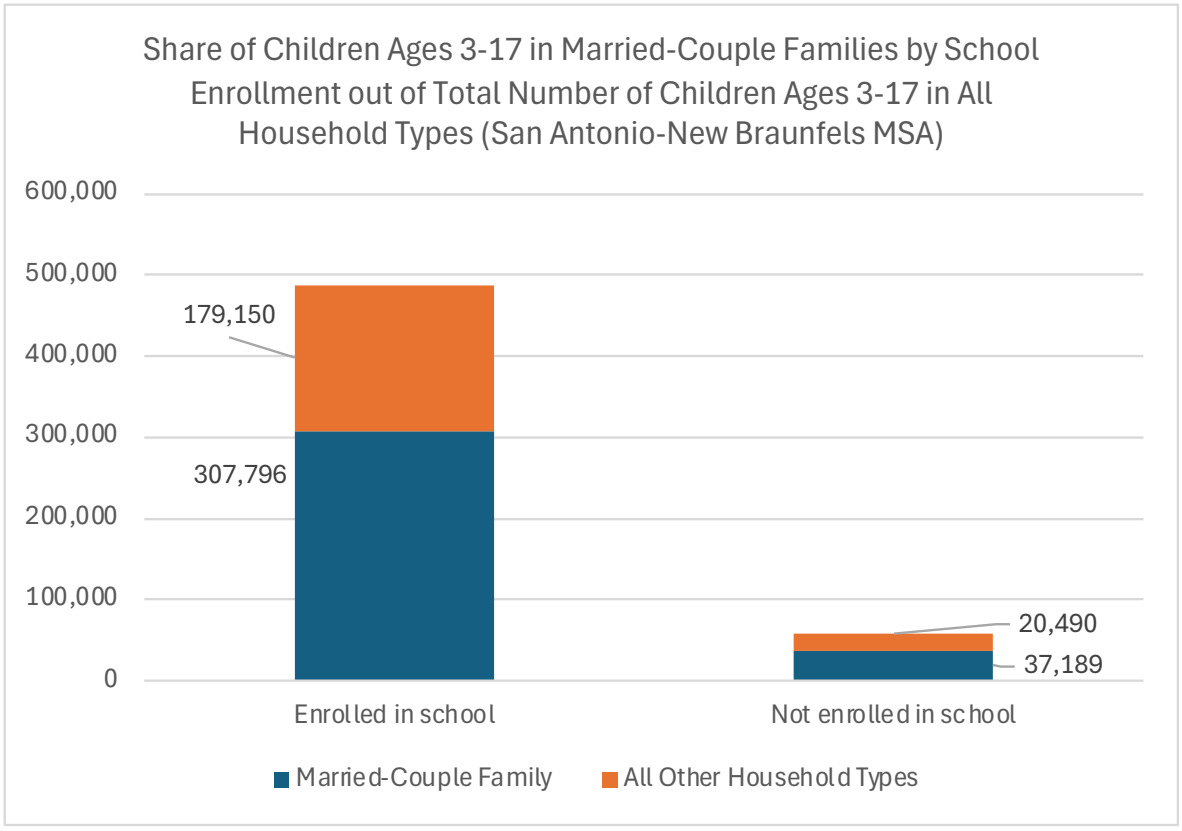

Share of Children in Married-Couple Families by Income out of Total Number of Children in All Household Types for Whom Poverty Status has been Determined (Austin-Round Rock-San Marcos MSA)
500,000
450,000
400,000
350,000
300,000
250,000
200,000
150,000
100,000
50,000
0
23,633
26,937
90,338
375,109
Income in the past 12 months below poverty level
Income in the past 12 months at or above poverty level
Married-Couple Family
All Other Household Types

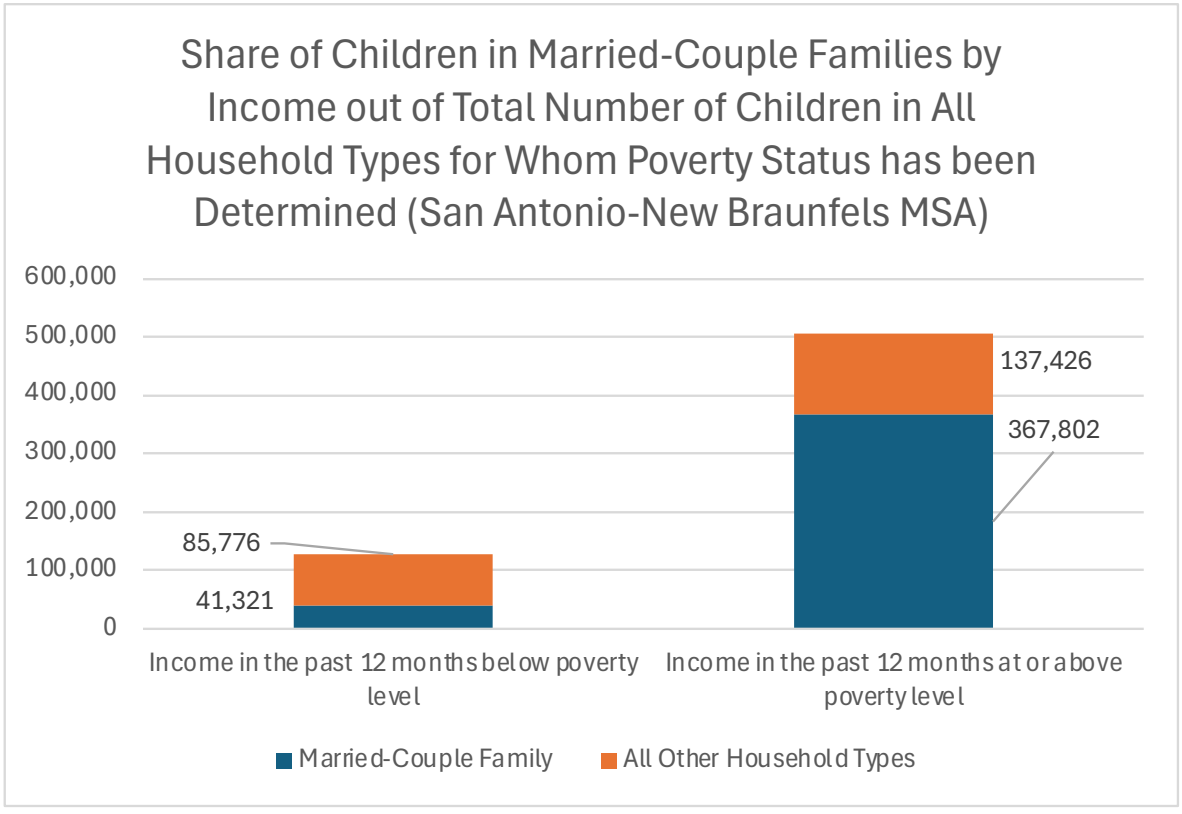
SAN ANTONIO–NEW BRAUNSFELS METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (SAN MSA)

SAN MSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Family
Children under 18 Y/o	639,899	412,680
Children 3-17 Y/o	544,625	344,985
Children for Whom Poverty Status is Determined	632,325	406,123



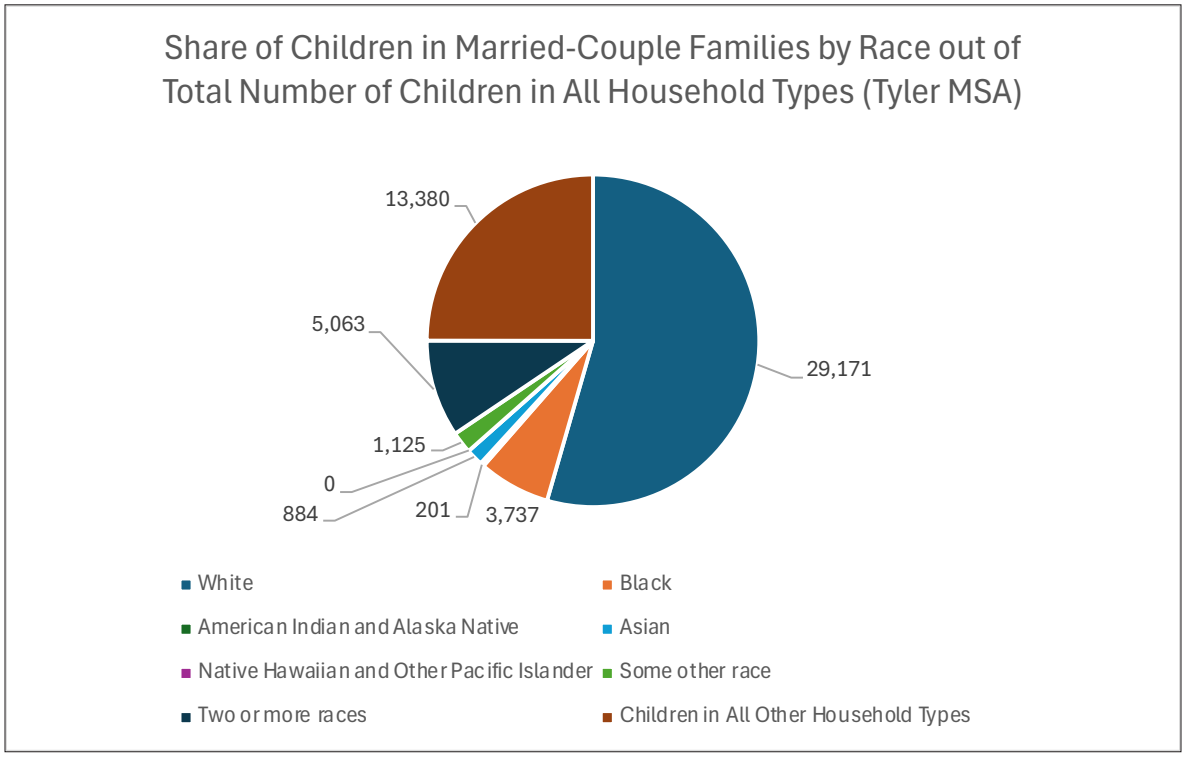


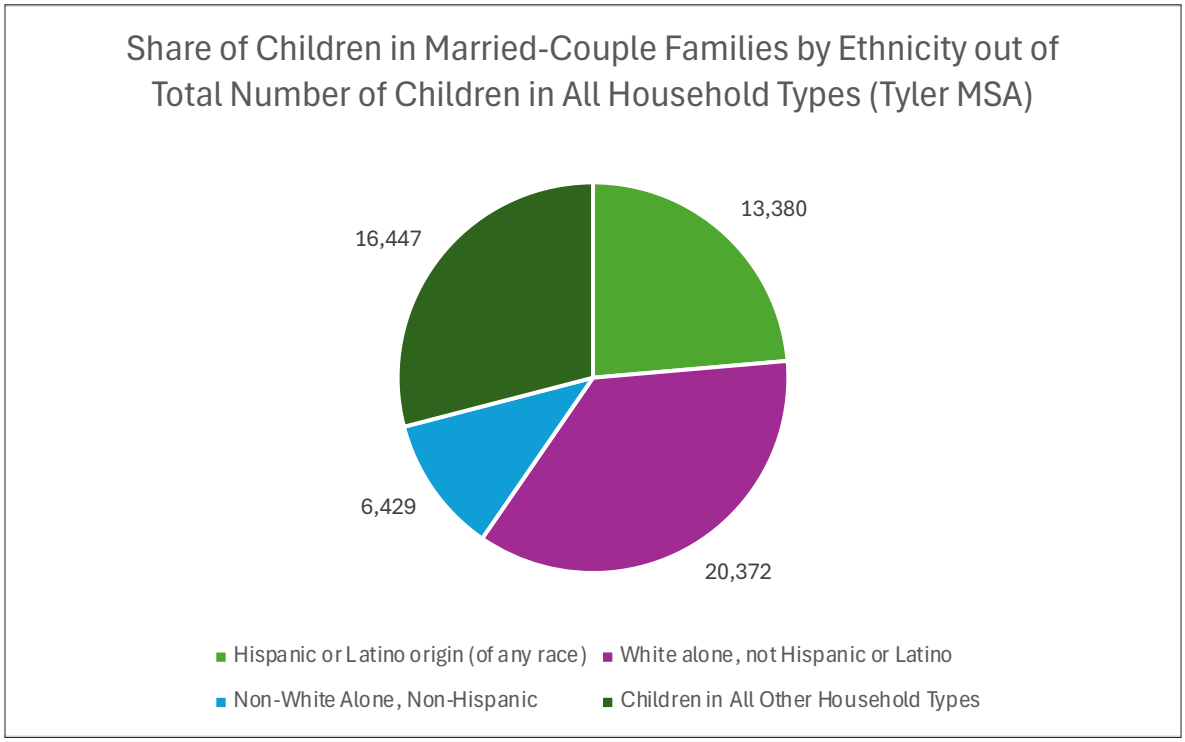

Share of Children Ages 3-17 in Married-Couple Families by School Enrollment out of Total Number of Children Ages 3-17 in All Household Types (San Antonio-New Braunfels MSA)
600,000
500,000
400,000
300,000
200,000
100,000
0
179,150
307,796
20,490
37,189
Enrolled in school
Not enrolled in school
Married-Couple Family
All Other Household Types

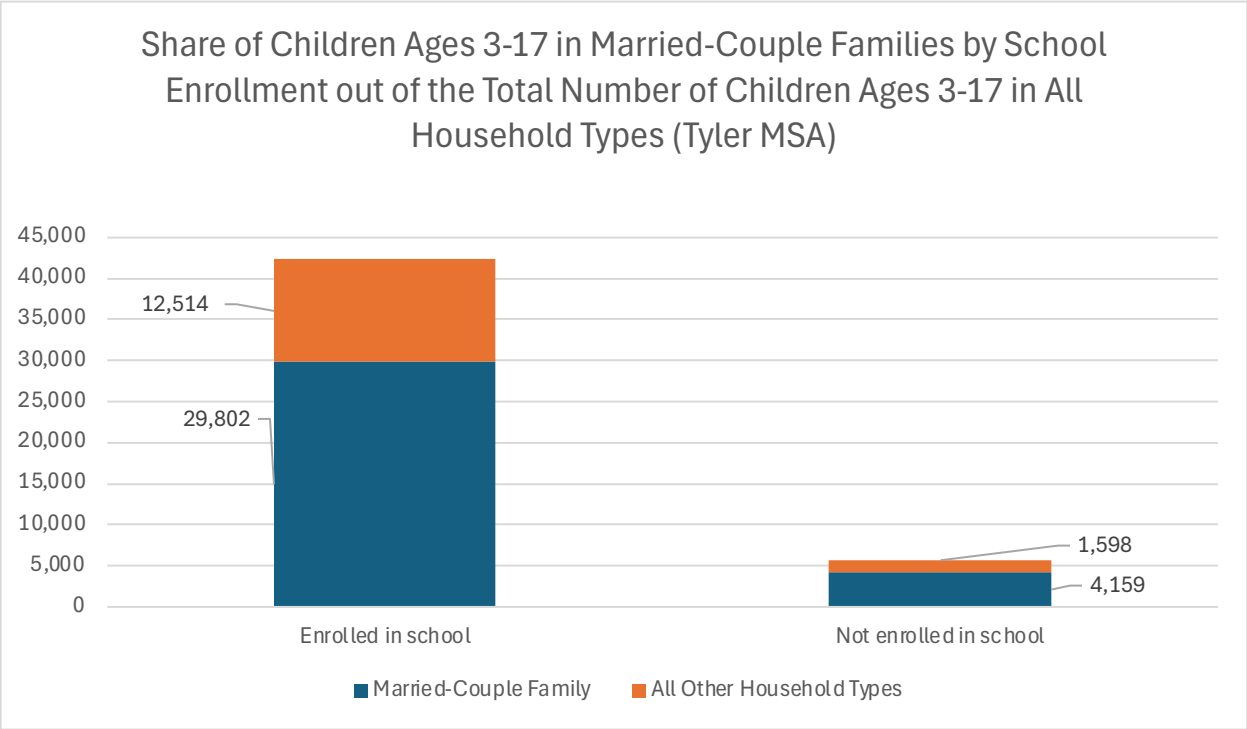

Share of Children in Married-Couple Families by Income out of Total Number of Children in All Household Types for Whom Poverty Status has been Determined (San Antonio-New Braunfels MSA)
600,000
500,000
400,000
300,000
200,000
100,000
0
85,776
41,321
137,426
367,802
Income in the past 12 months below poverty level
Income in the past 12 months at or above poverty level
Married-Couple Family
All Other Household Types

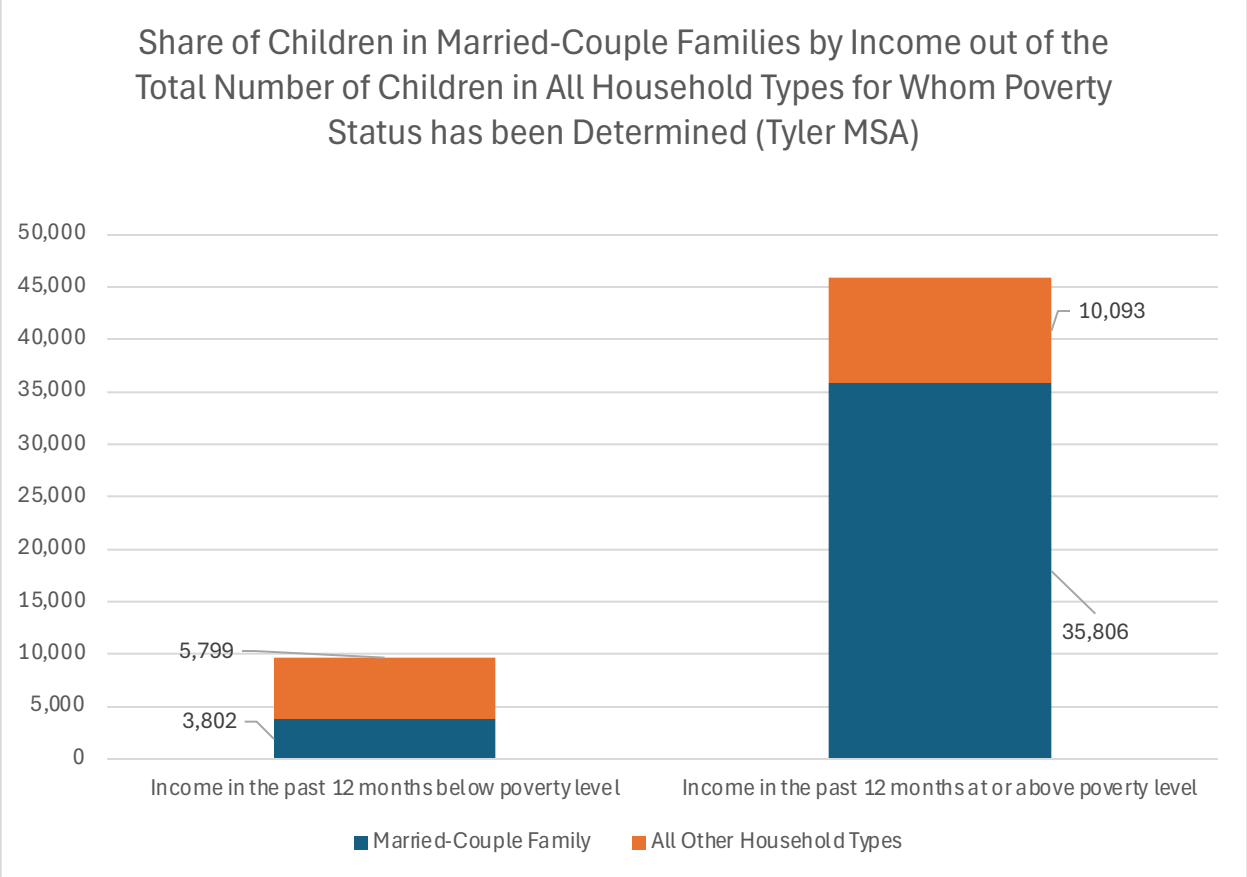
EAST TEXAS METROPOLITAN AREAS
TYLER METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (TYL MSA)

TYL MSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Family
Children Under 18 Y/o	56,628	40,181
Children 3-17 Y/o	48,073	33,961
Children for Whom Poverty Status Has Been Determined	55,500	39,608



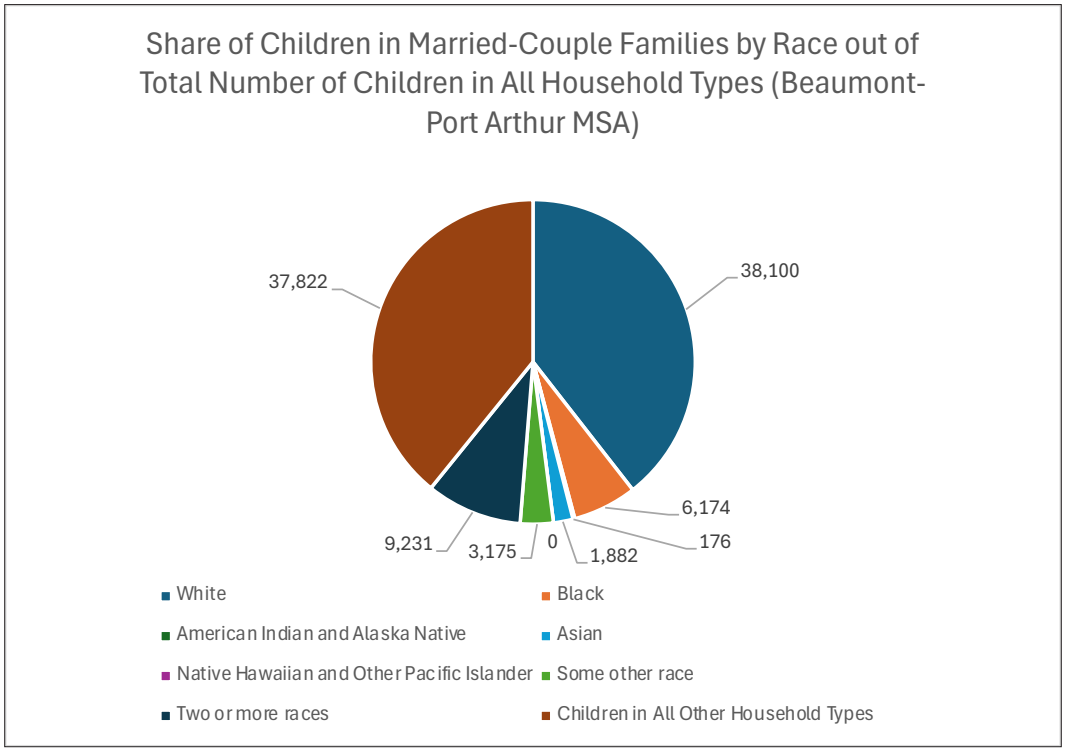


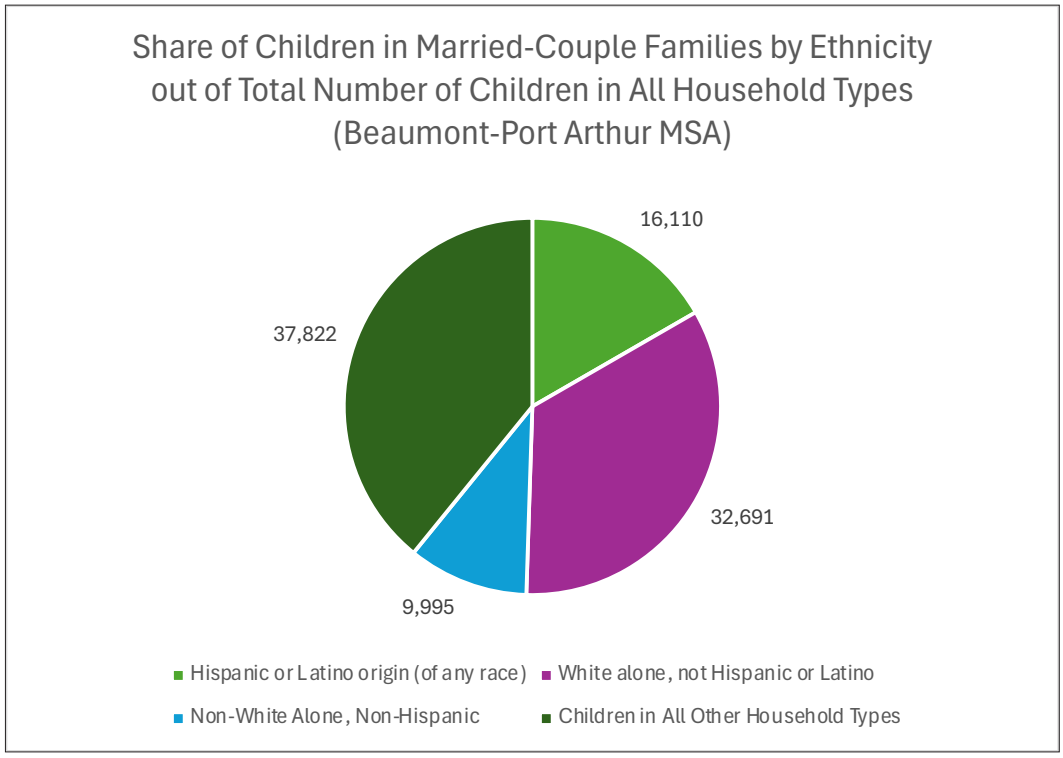

Share of Children Ages 3-17 in Married-Couple Families by School Enrollment out of the Total Number of Children Ages 3-17 in All Household Types (Tyler MSA)
45,000
40,000
35,000
30,000
25,000
20,000
15,000
10,000
5,000
0
12,514
29,802
1,598
4,159
Enrolled in school
Not enrolled in school
Married-Couple Family
All Other Household Types


Share of Children in Married-Couple Families by Income out of the Total Number of Children in All Household Types for Whom Poverty Status has been Determined (Tyler MSA)
50,000
45,000
40,000
35,000
30,000
25,000
20,000
15,000
10,000
5,000
0
5,799
3,802
10,093
35,806
Income in the past 12 months below poverty level
Income in the past 12 months at or above poverty level
Married-Couple Family
All Other Household Types

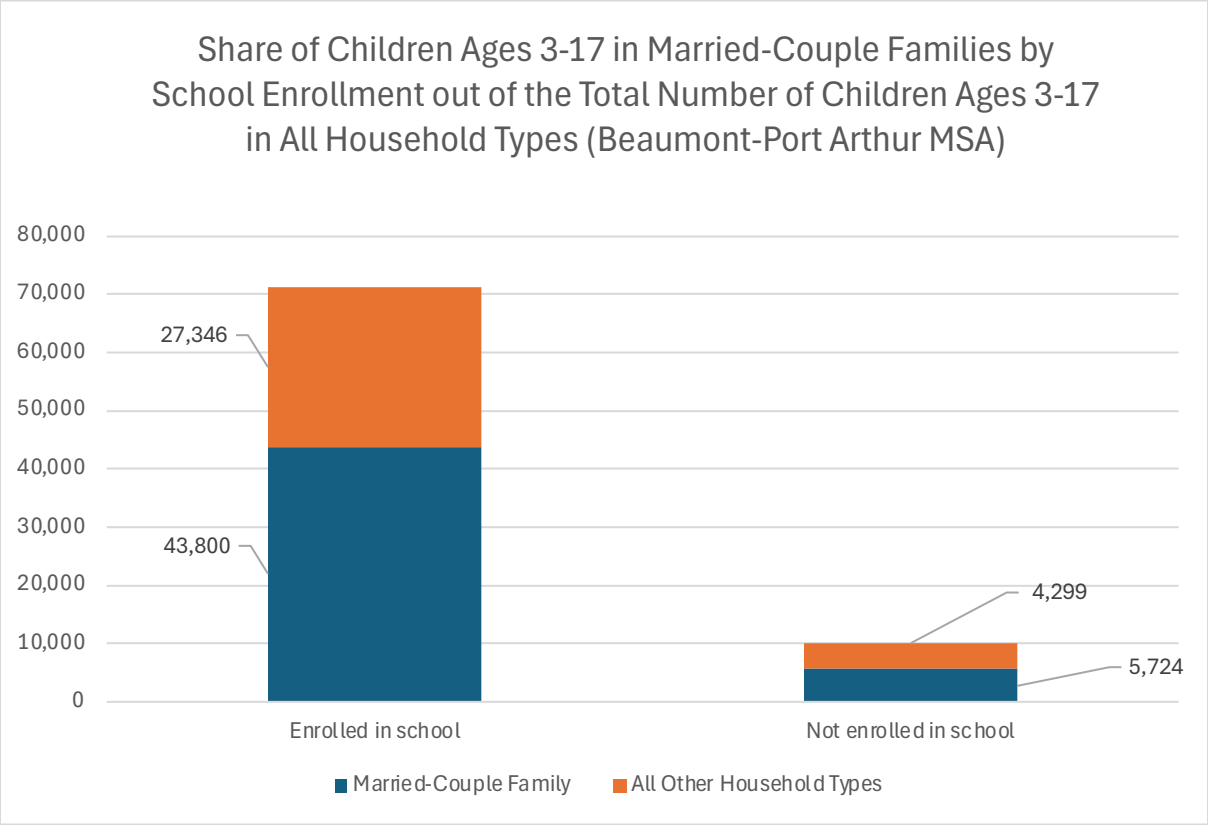
BEAUMONT-PORT ARTHUR METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (BPA MSA)

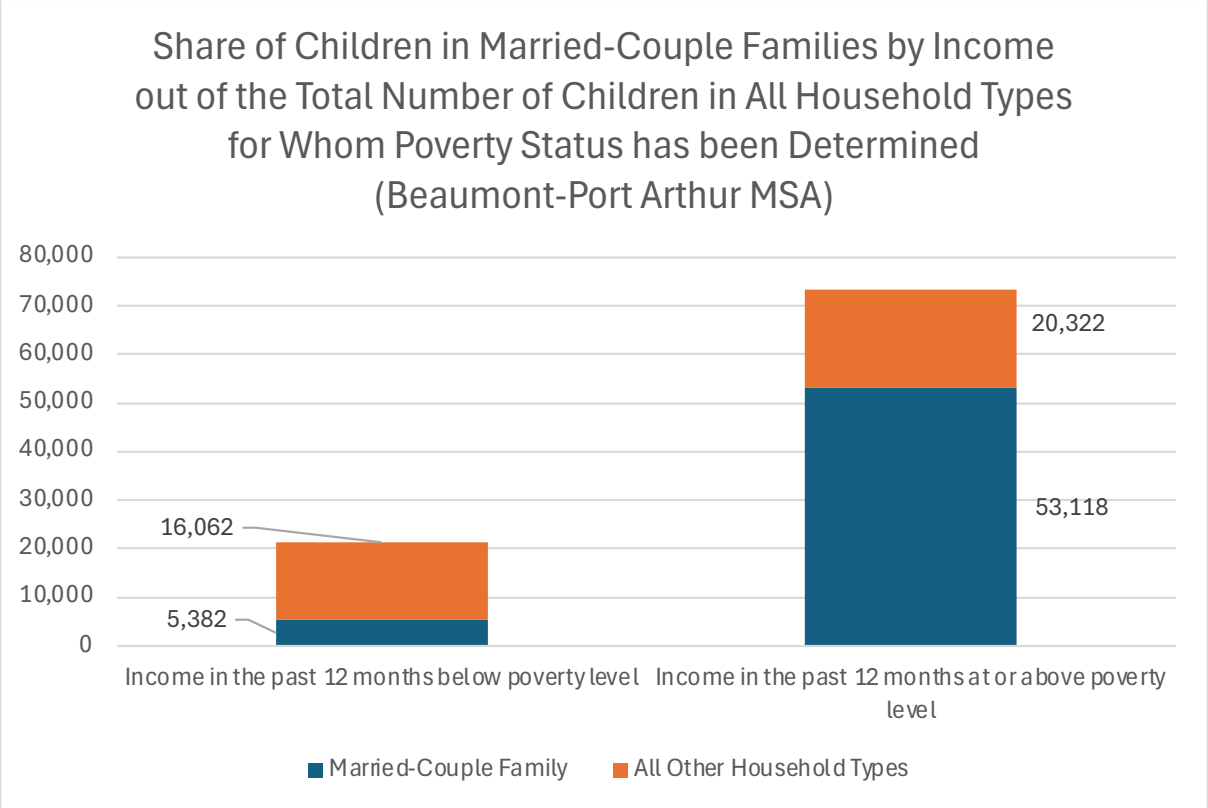
BPA MSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Family
Children under 18 Y/o	96,619	58,797
Children 3-17 Y/o	89,169	49,524
Children for Whom Poverty Status Has Been Determined	94,884	58,500





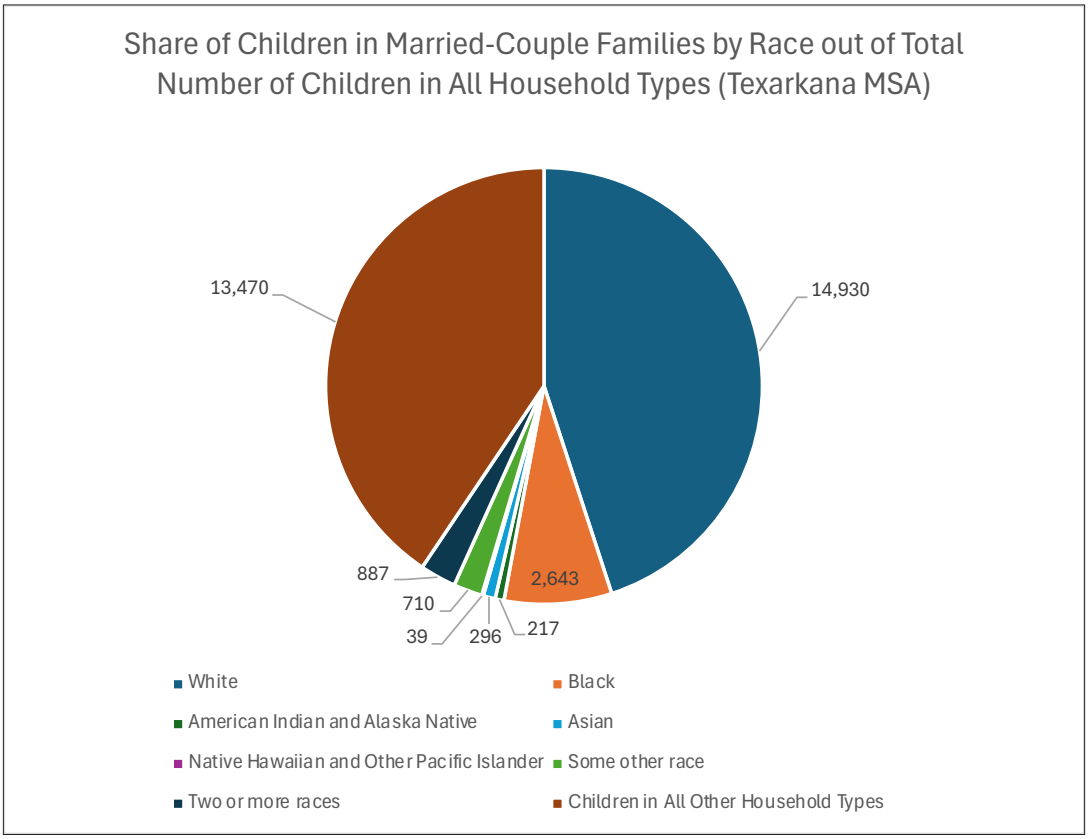
BEAUMONT-PORT ARTHUR METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (BPA MSA)

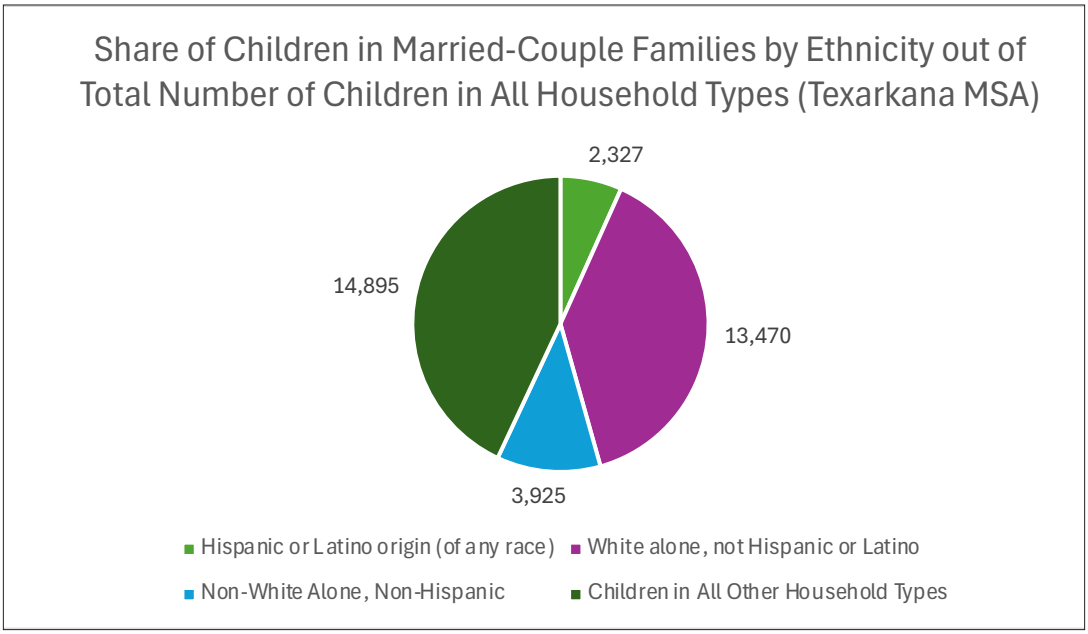




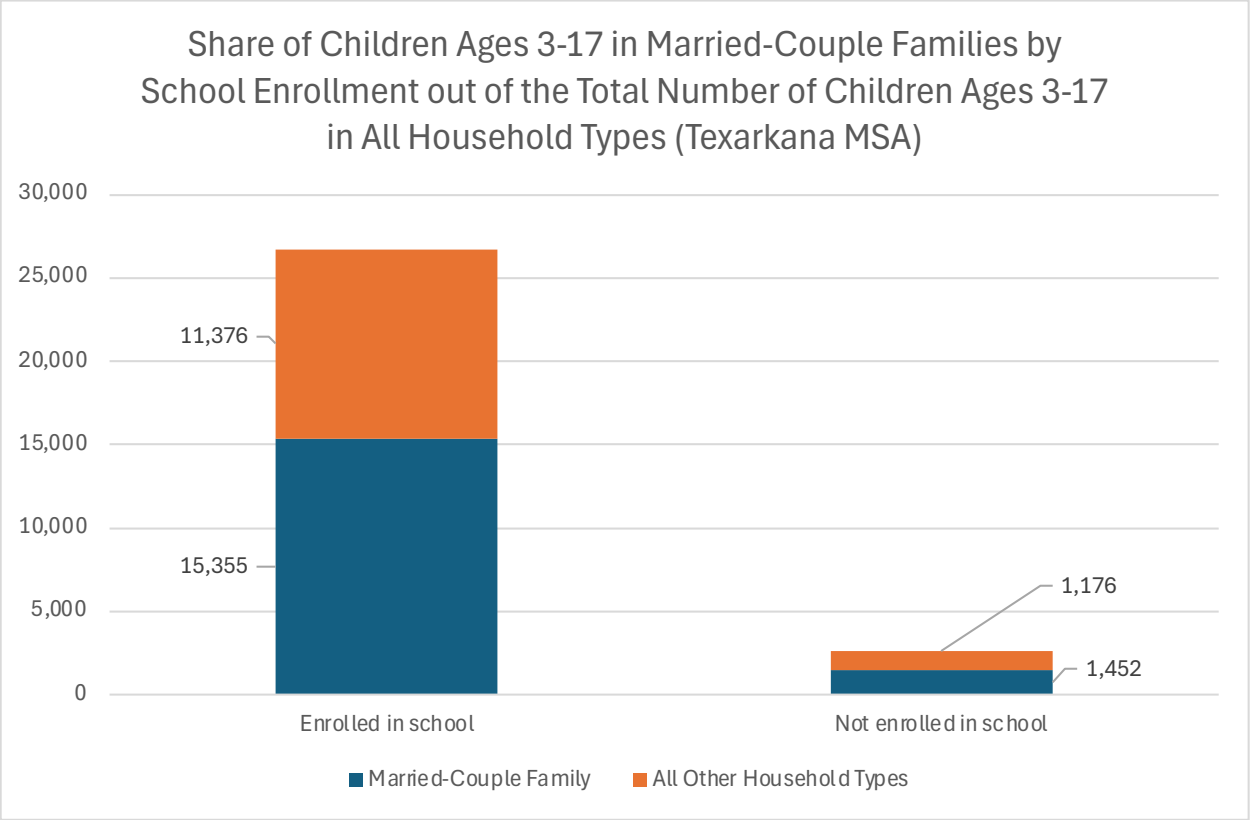
TEXARKANA METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (TXA MSA)

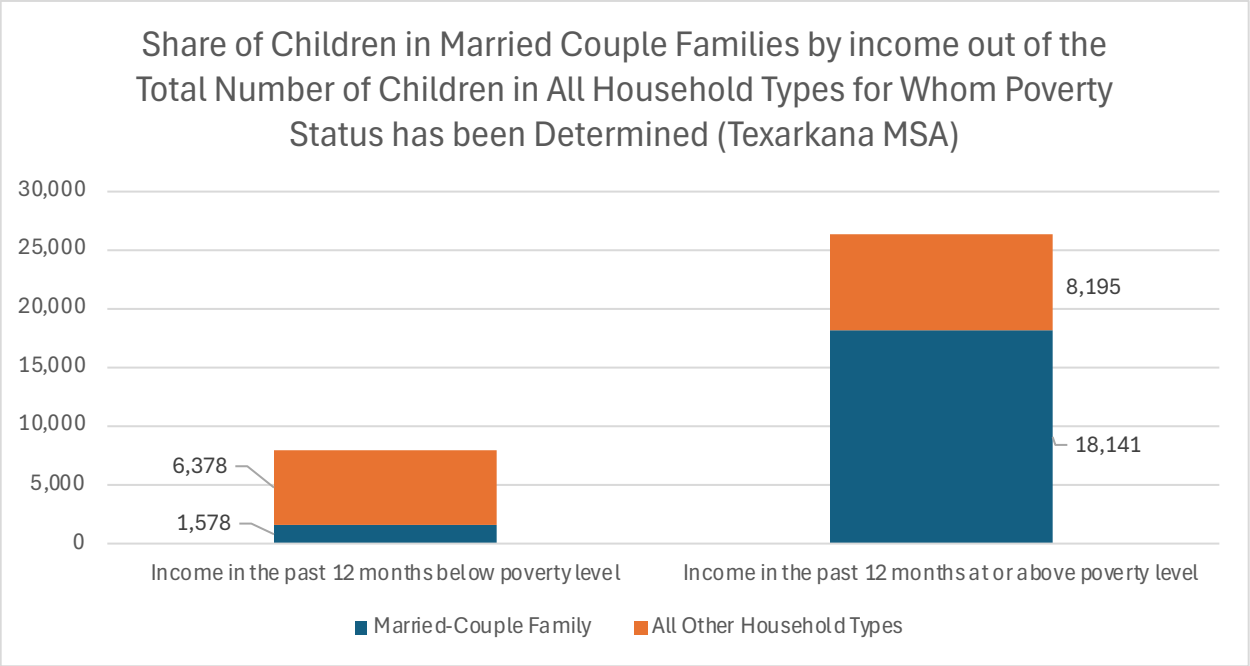
TXA MSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Family
Children Under 18 Y/o	34,617	19,722
Children 3-17 y/o	29,359	16,807
Children for Whom Poverty Status Has Been Determined	34,292	19,719





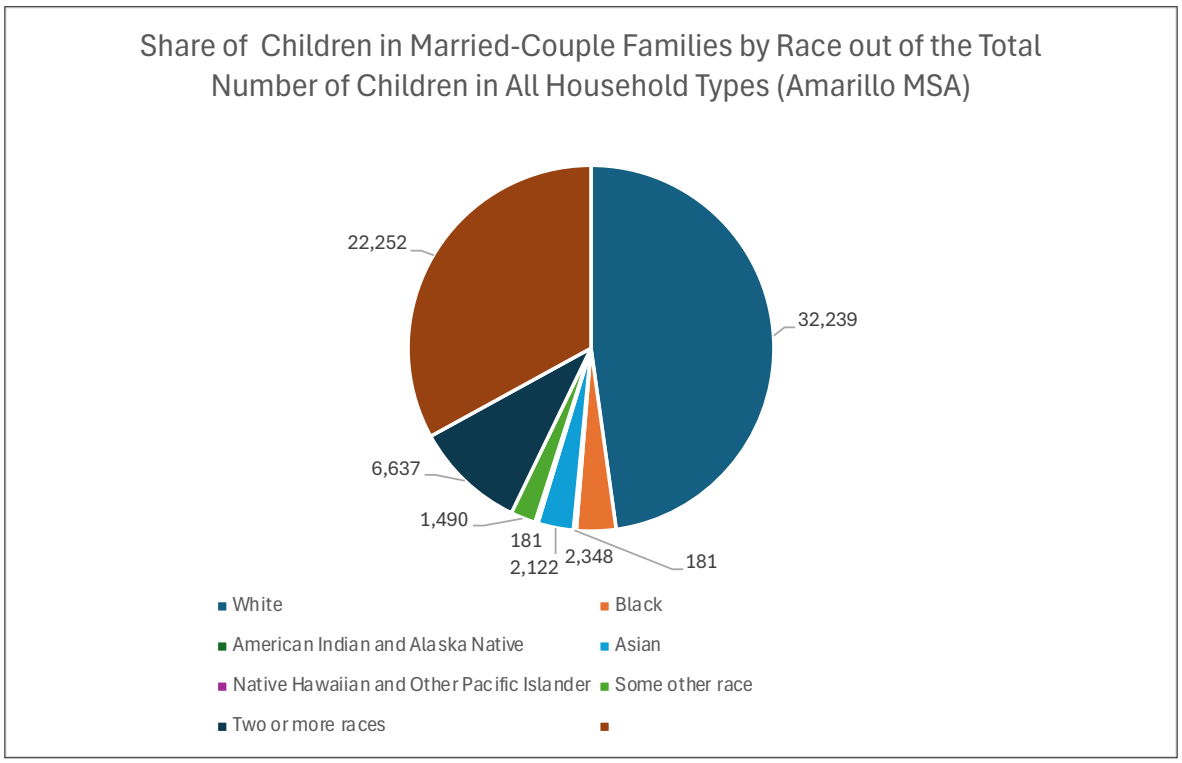
TEXARKANA METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (TXA MSA)

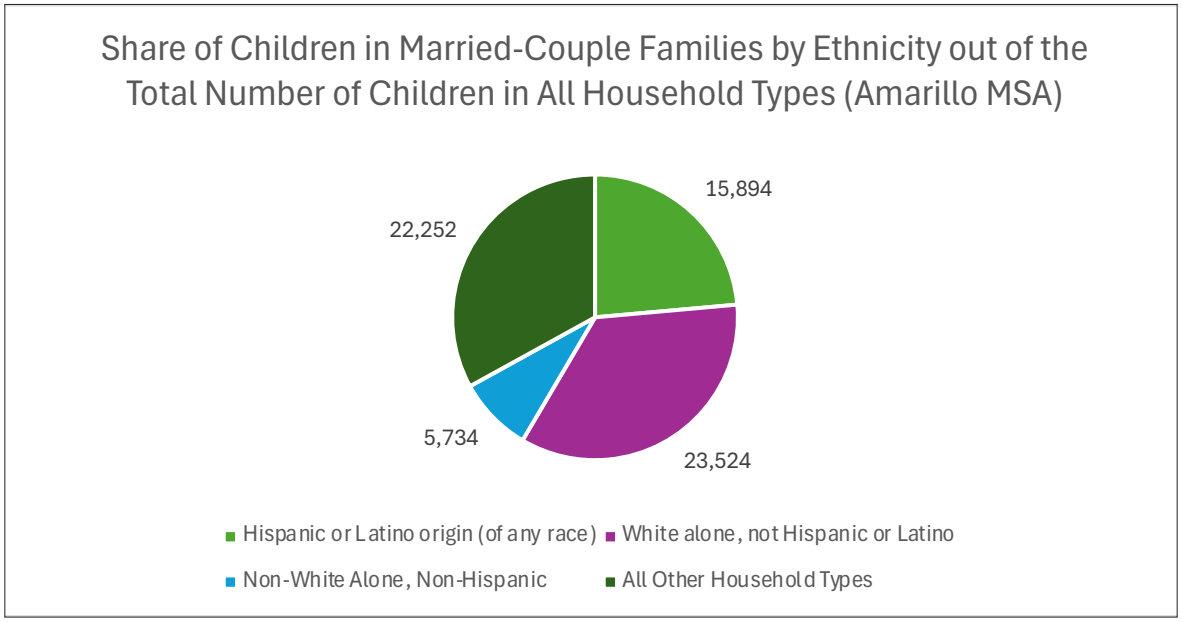




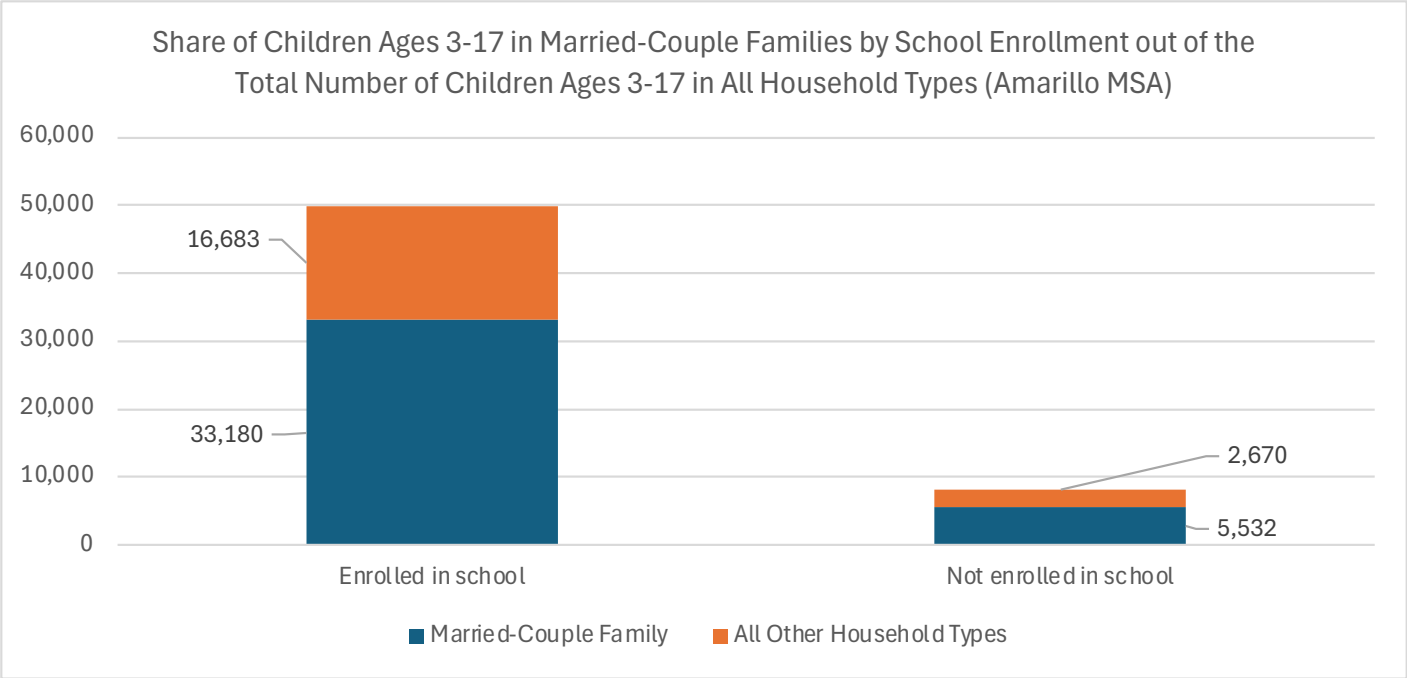
PANHANDLE METROPOLITAN AREAS
AMARILLO METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (AMA MSA)

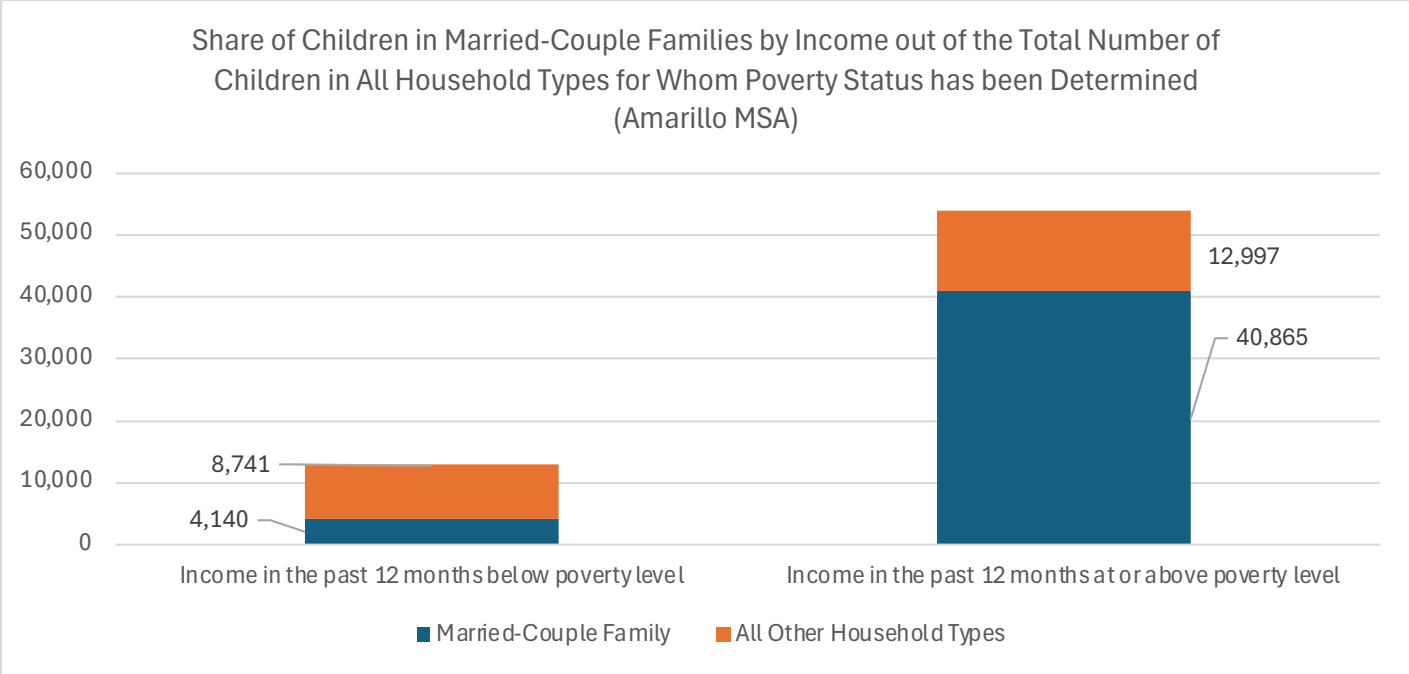
AMA MSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Family
Children under 18 y/o	67,404	45,152
Children 3-17 y/o	58,065	38,712
Children for Whom Poverty Status Has Been Determined	66,743	45,005





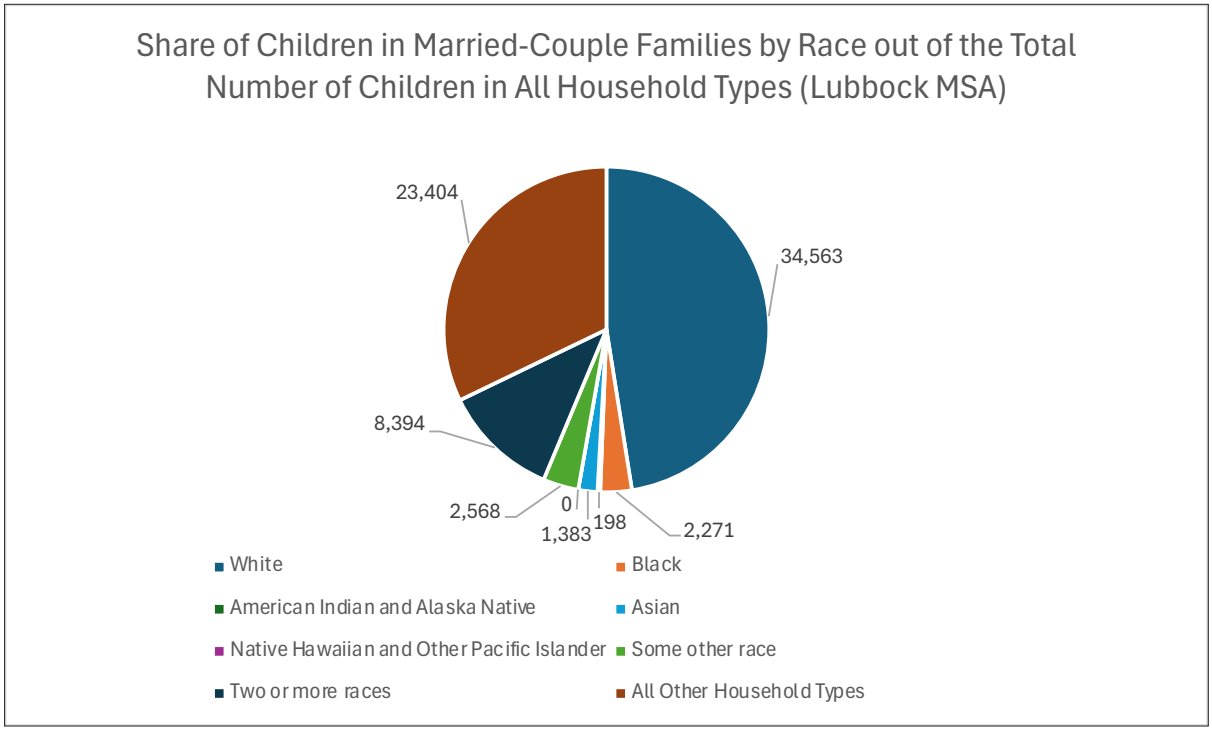
PANHANDLE METROPOLITAN AREAS
AMARILLO METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (AMA MSA)

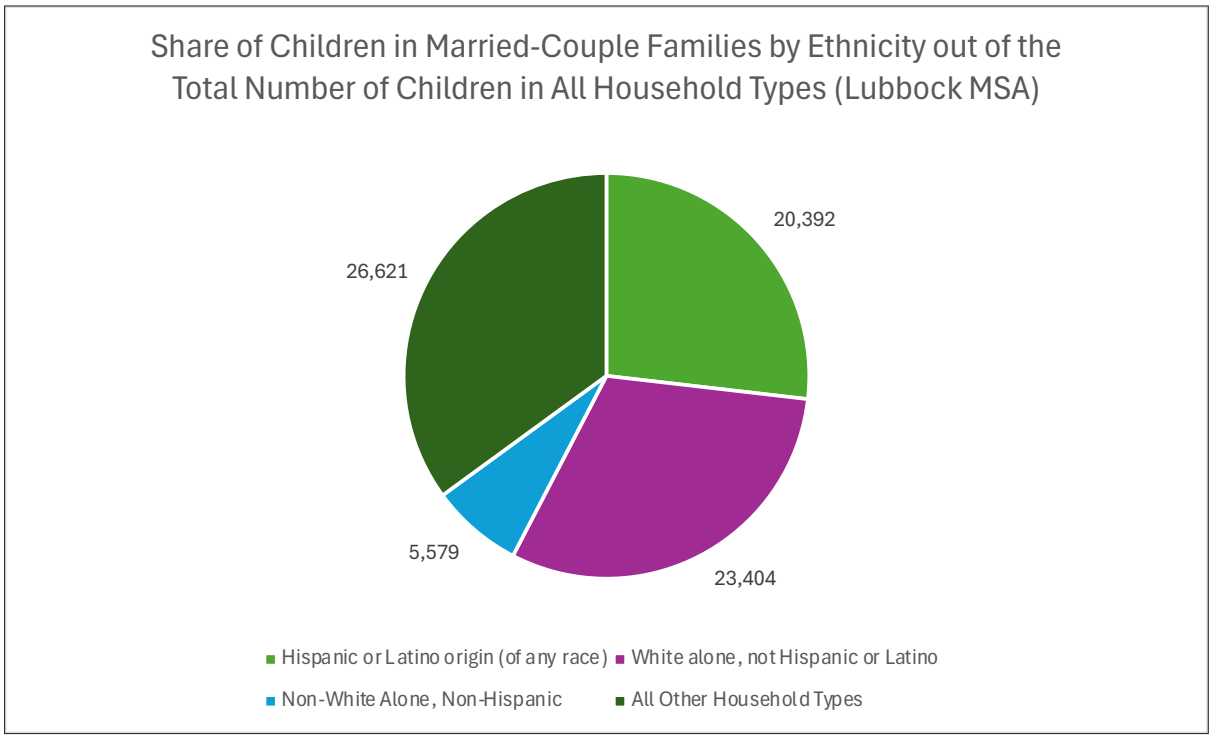




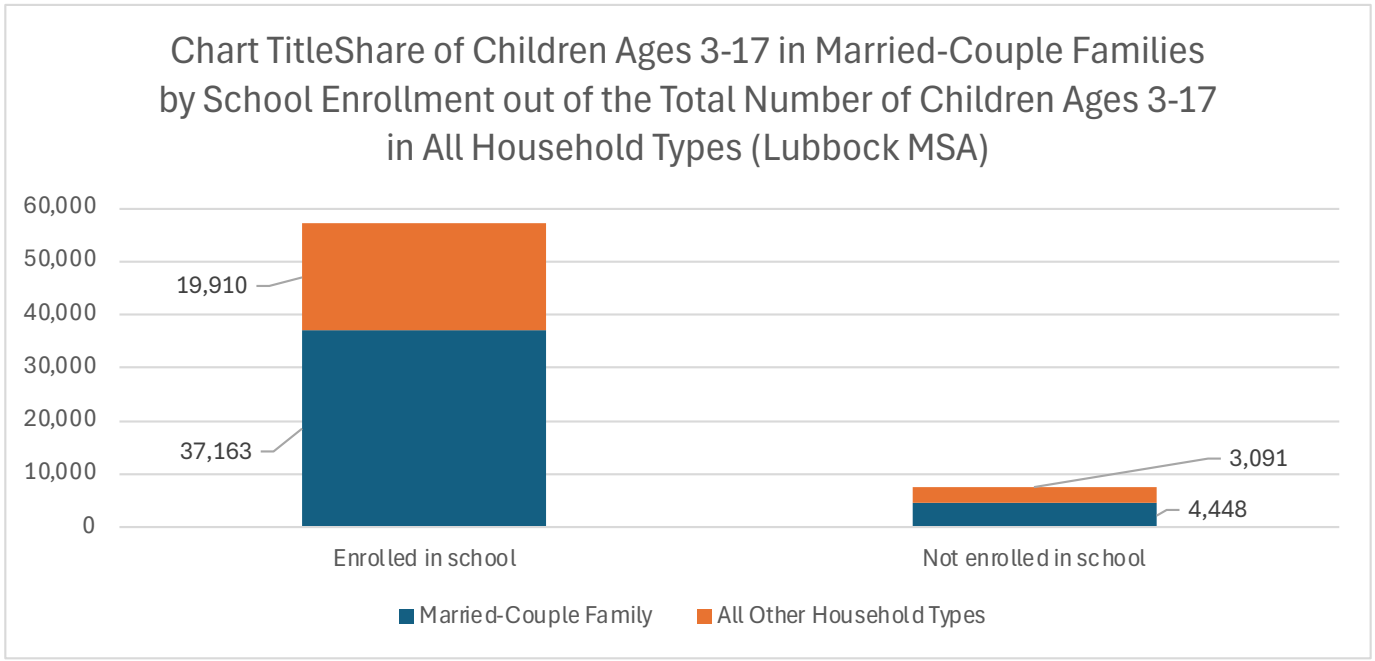
LUBBOCK METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (LUB MSA)

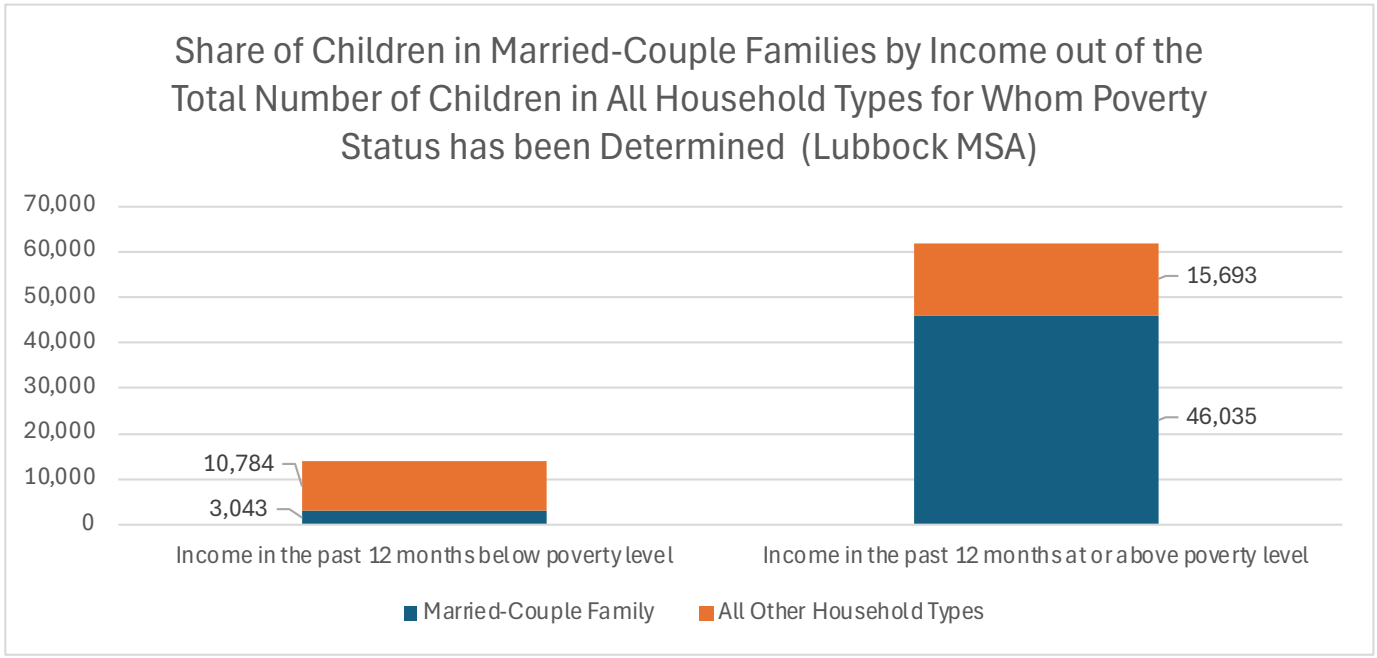
LUB MSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Family
Children under 18 y/o	75,996	49,375
Children 3-17 y/o	64,612	41,611
Children for Whom Poverty Status Has Been Determined	75,555	49,078





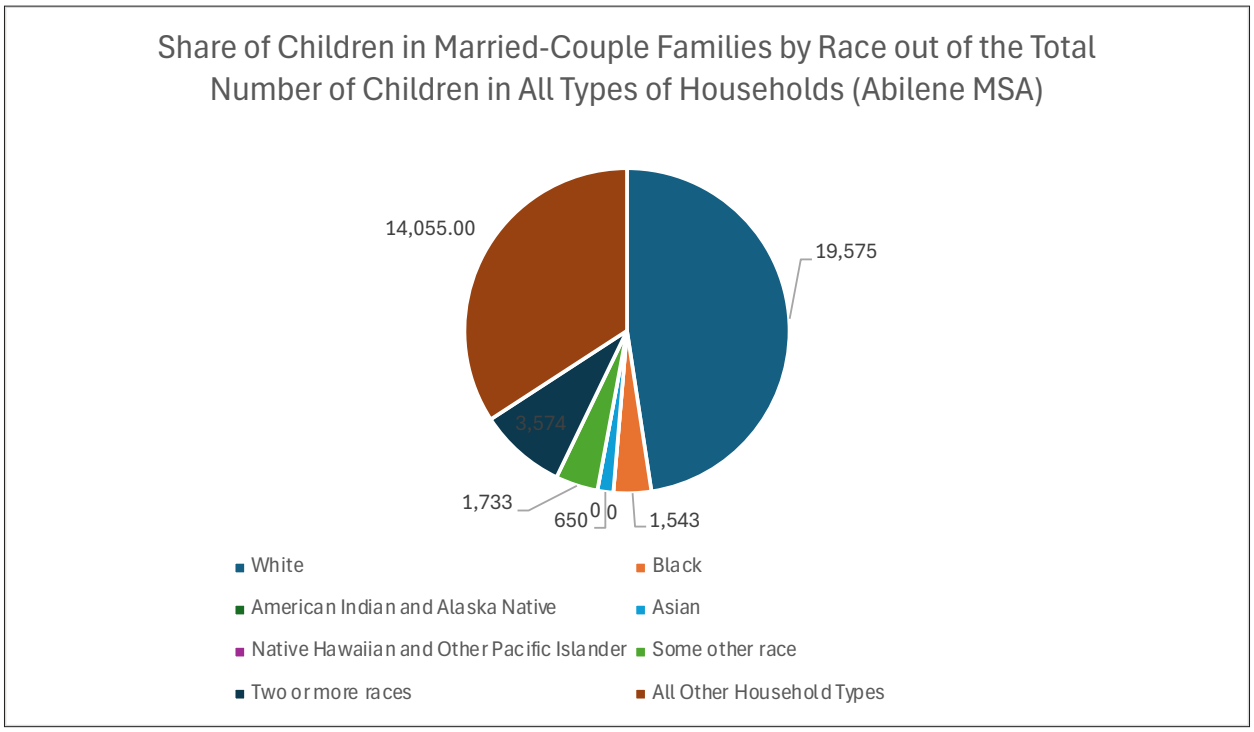
LUBBOCK METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (LUB MSA)

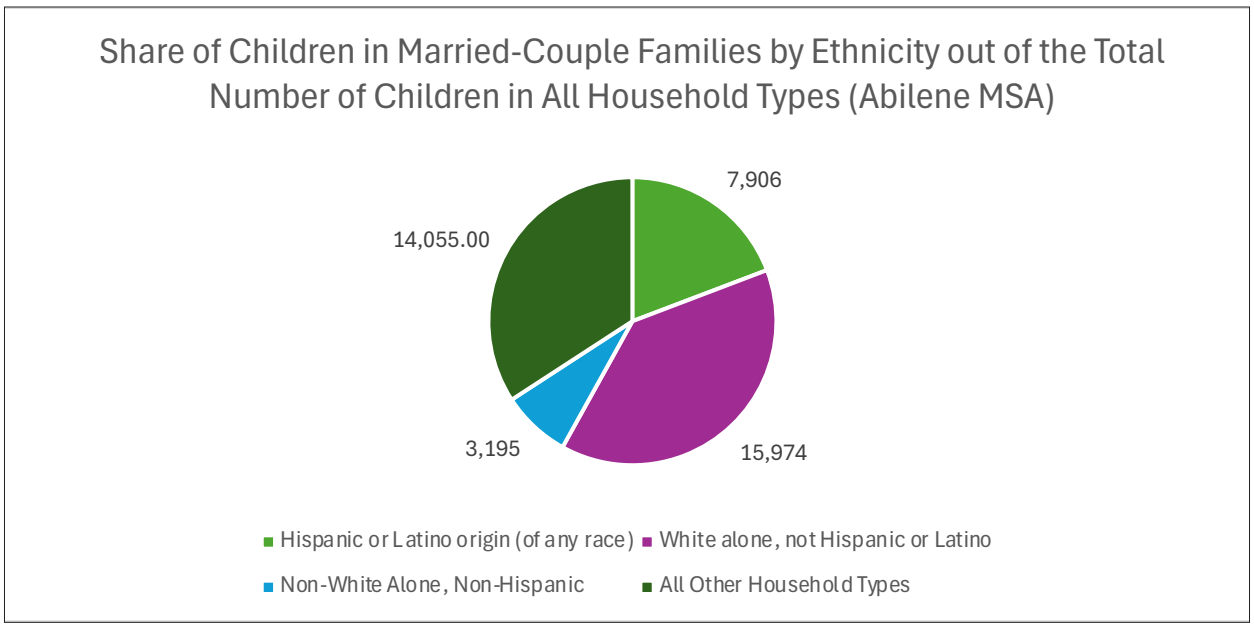


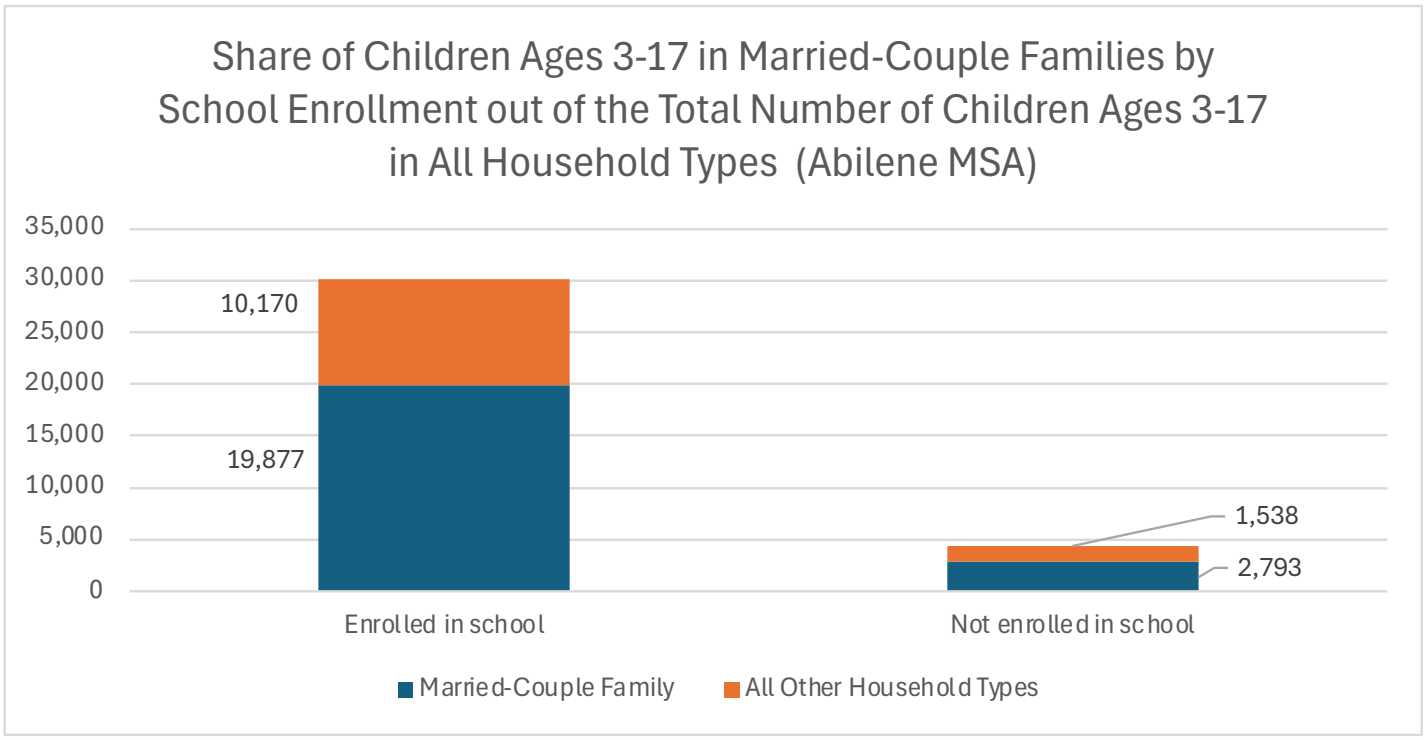


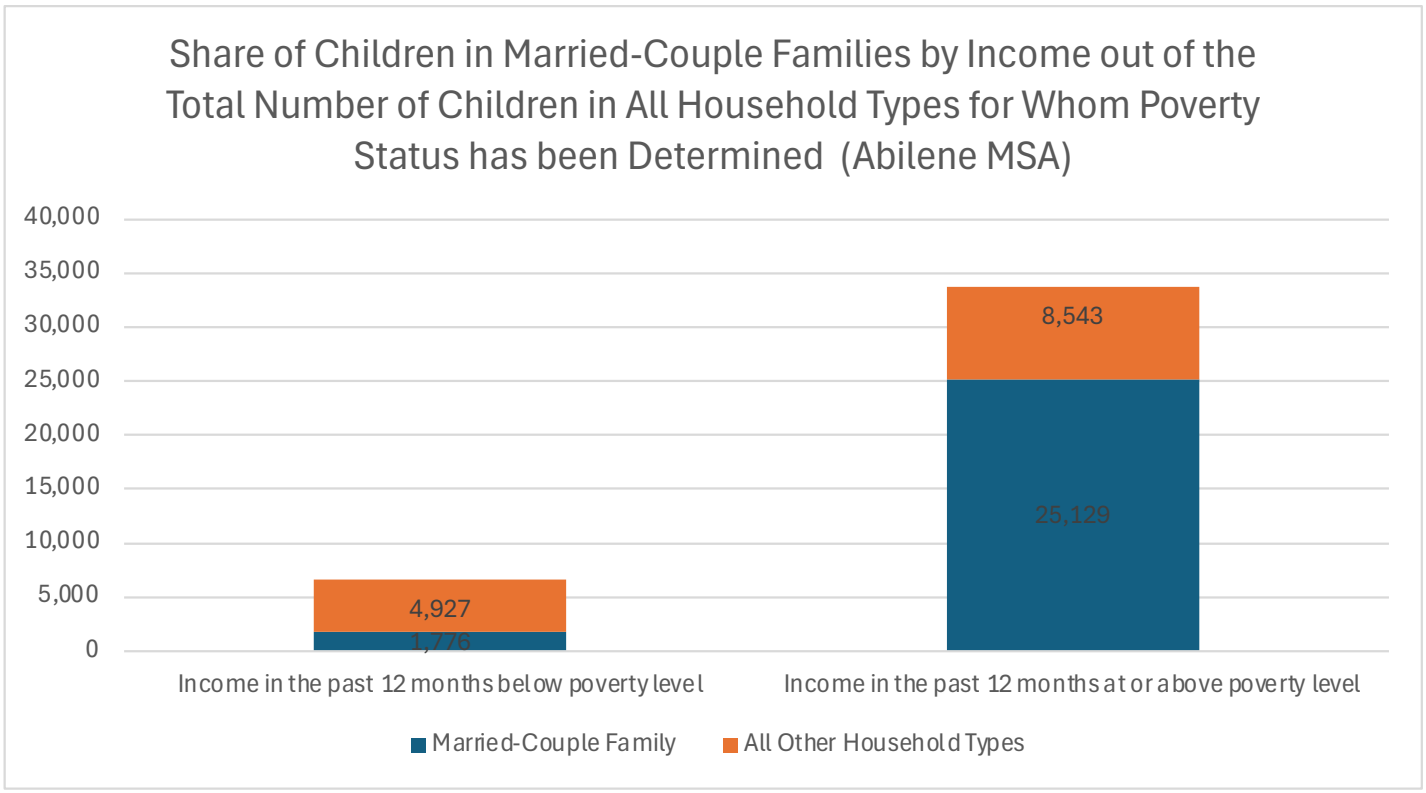
WEST TEXAS METROPOLITAN AREAS
ABILENE METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (ABL MSA)

ABL MSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Family
Children under 18 y/o	41,129	27,074
Children 3-17 y/o	34,378	22,670
Children for Whom Poverty Status Has Been Determined	40,375	26,905



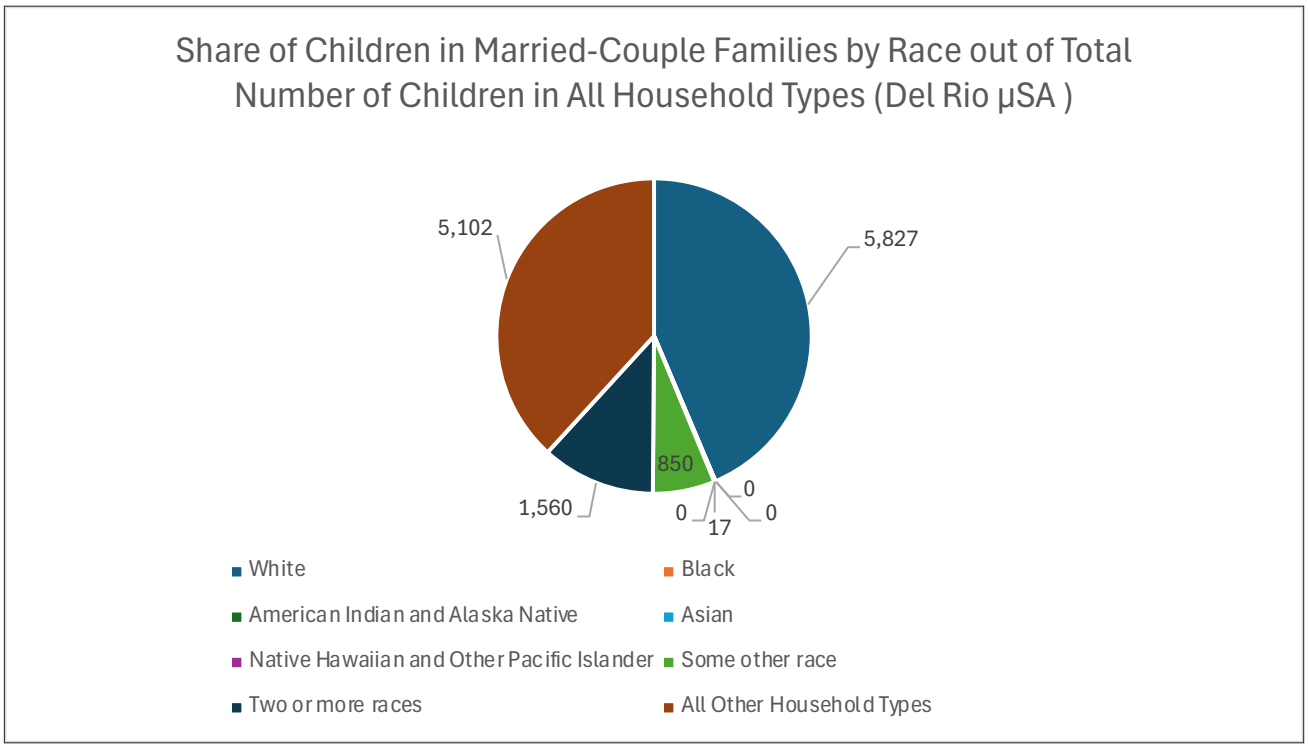


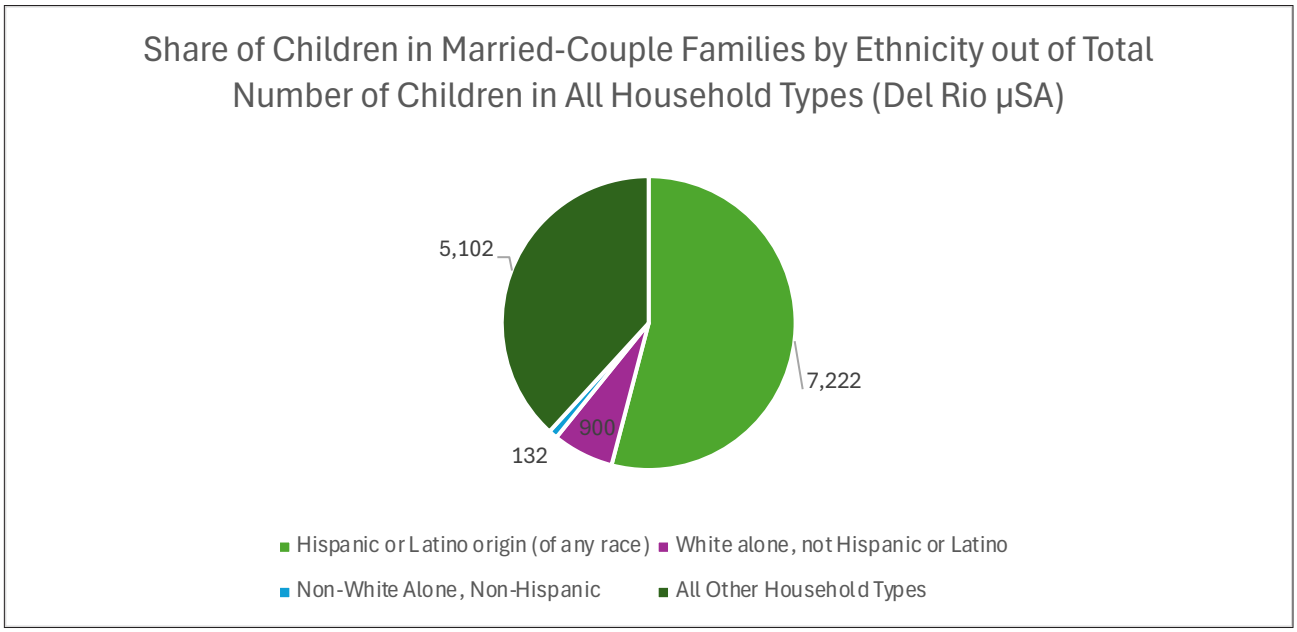

Share of Children Ages 3-17 in Married-Couple Families by School Enrollment out of the Total Number of Children Ages 3-17 in All Household Types (Abilene MSA)
35,000
30,000
25,000
20,000
15,000
10,000
5,000
0
10,170
19,877
1,538
2,793
Enrolled in school
Not enrolled in school
Married-Couple Family
All Other Household Types


Share of Children in Married-Couple Families by Income out of the Total Number of Children in All Household Types for Whom Poverty Status has been Determined (Abilene MSA)
40,000
35,000
30,000
25,000
20,000
15,000
10,000
5,000
0
4,927
1,776
8,543
25,129
Income in the past 12 months below poverty level
Income in the past 12 months at or above poverty level
Married-Couple Family
All Other Household Types

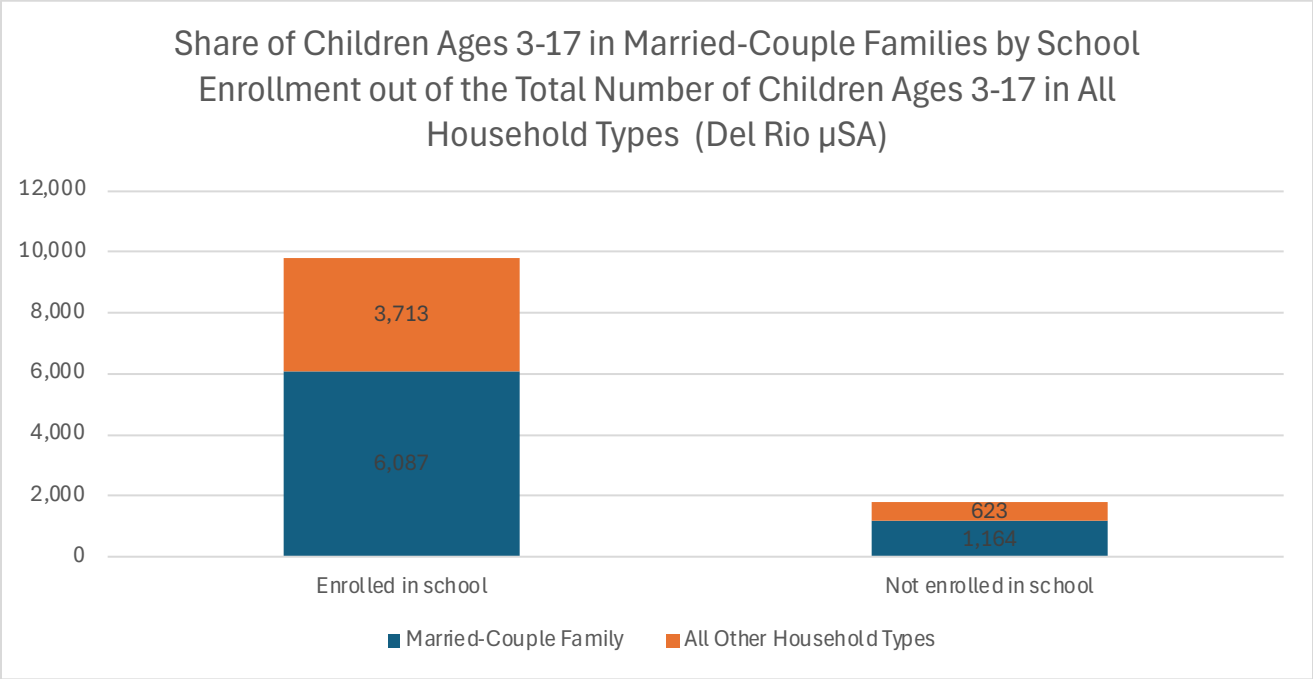
DEL RIO MICROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (DLR µSA)

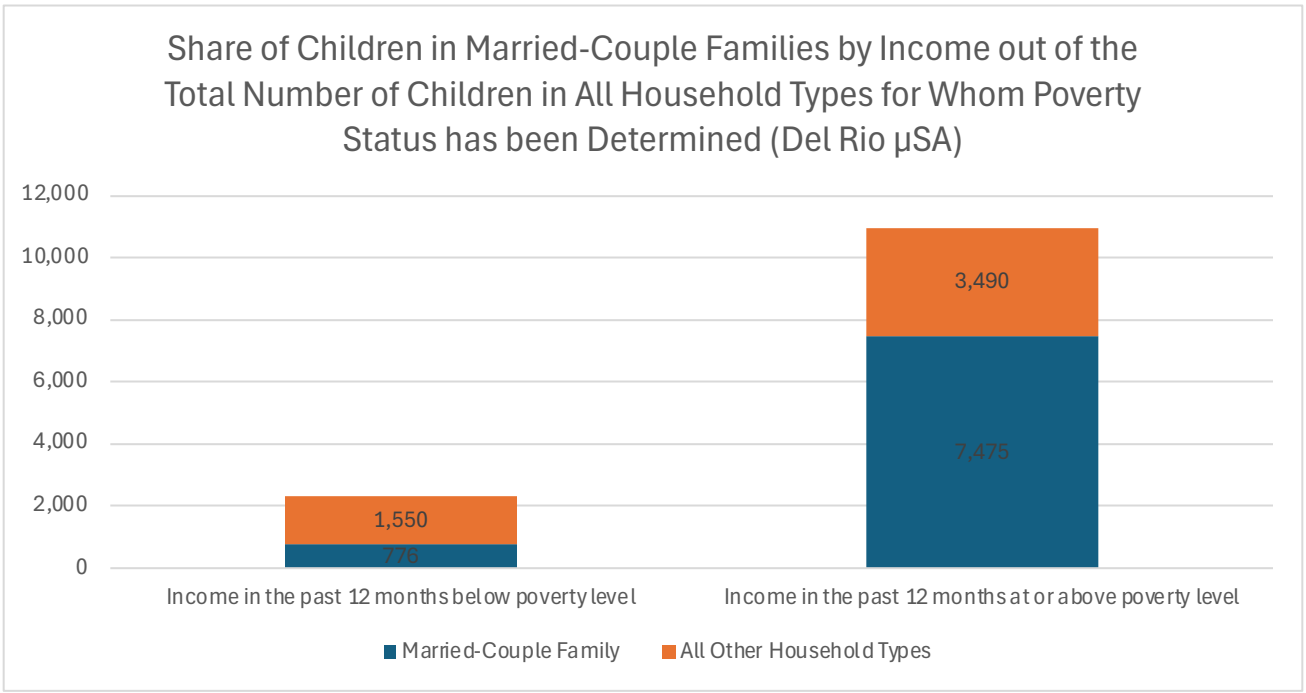
DLR µSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Family
Children under 18 y/o	13,356	8,254
Children 3-17 y/o	11,587	7,251
Children for Whom Poverty Status Has Been Determined	13,291	8,251





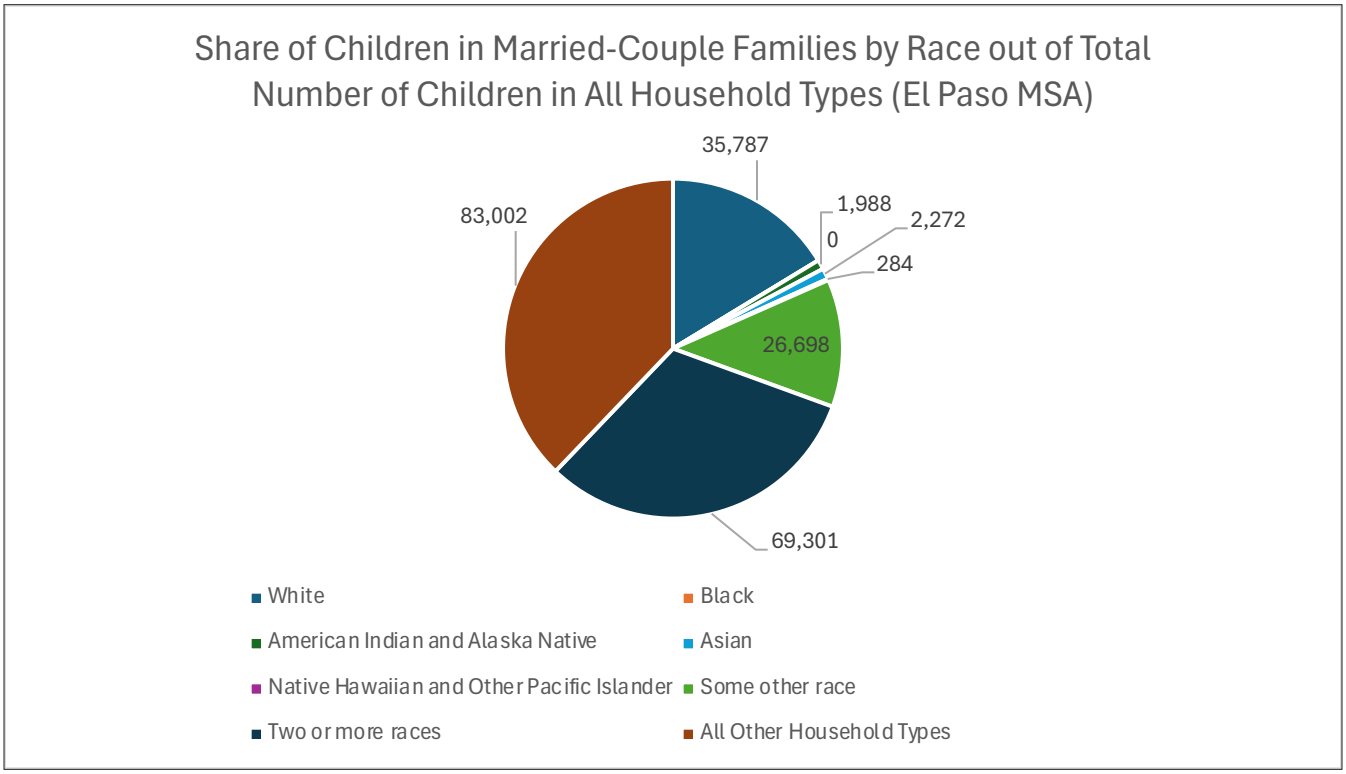
DEL RIO MICROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (DLR μSA)

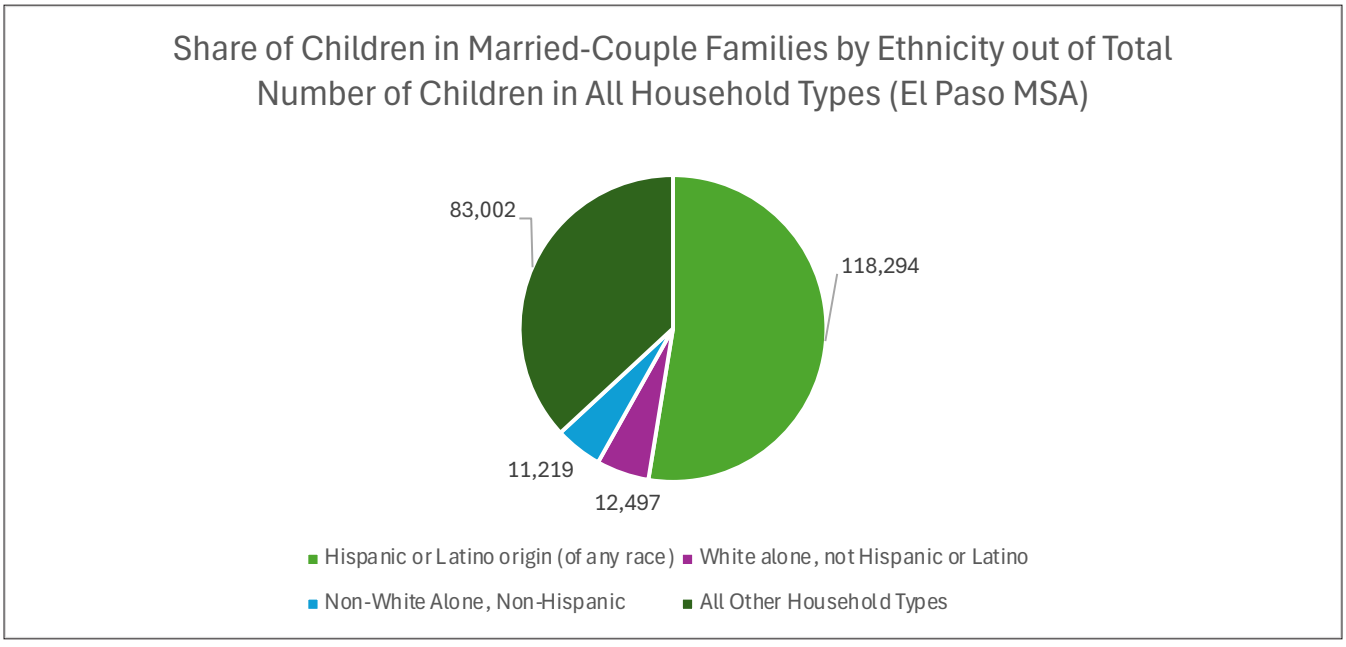




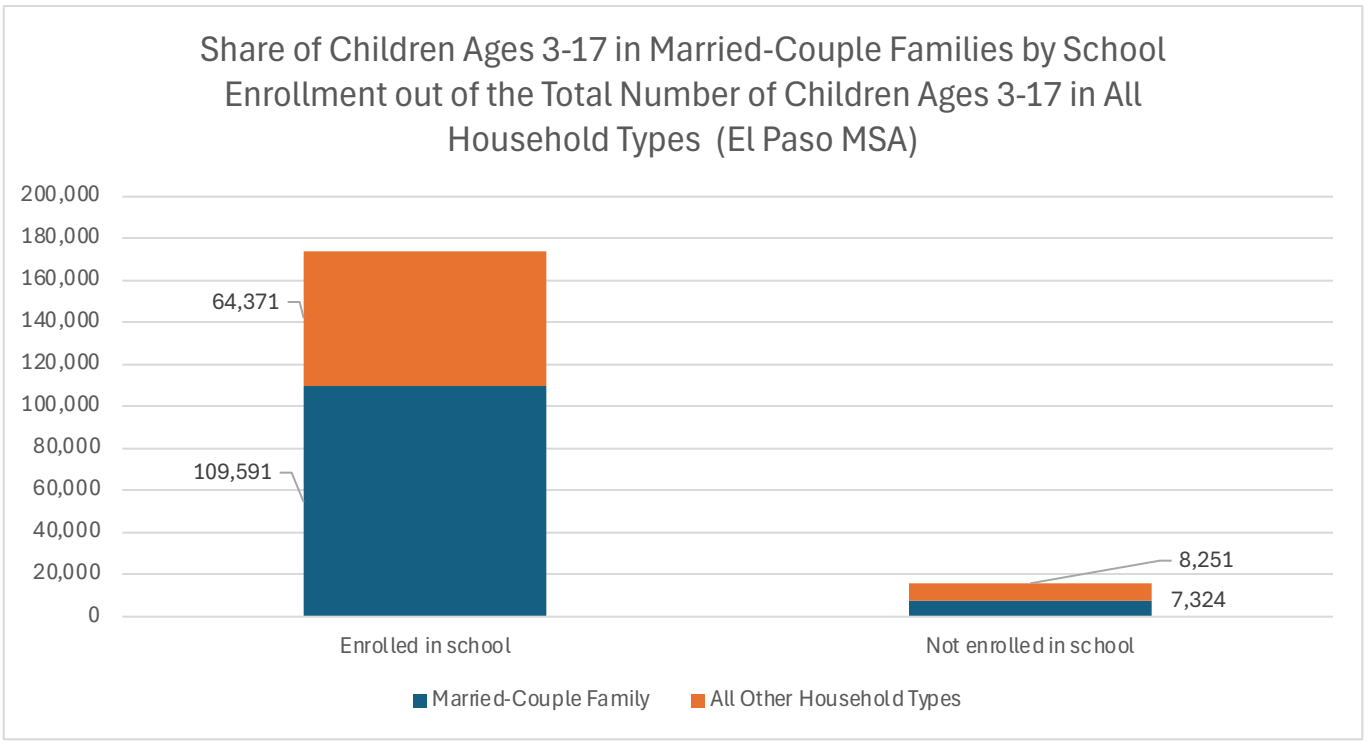
EL PASO METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (ELP MSA)

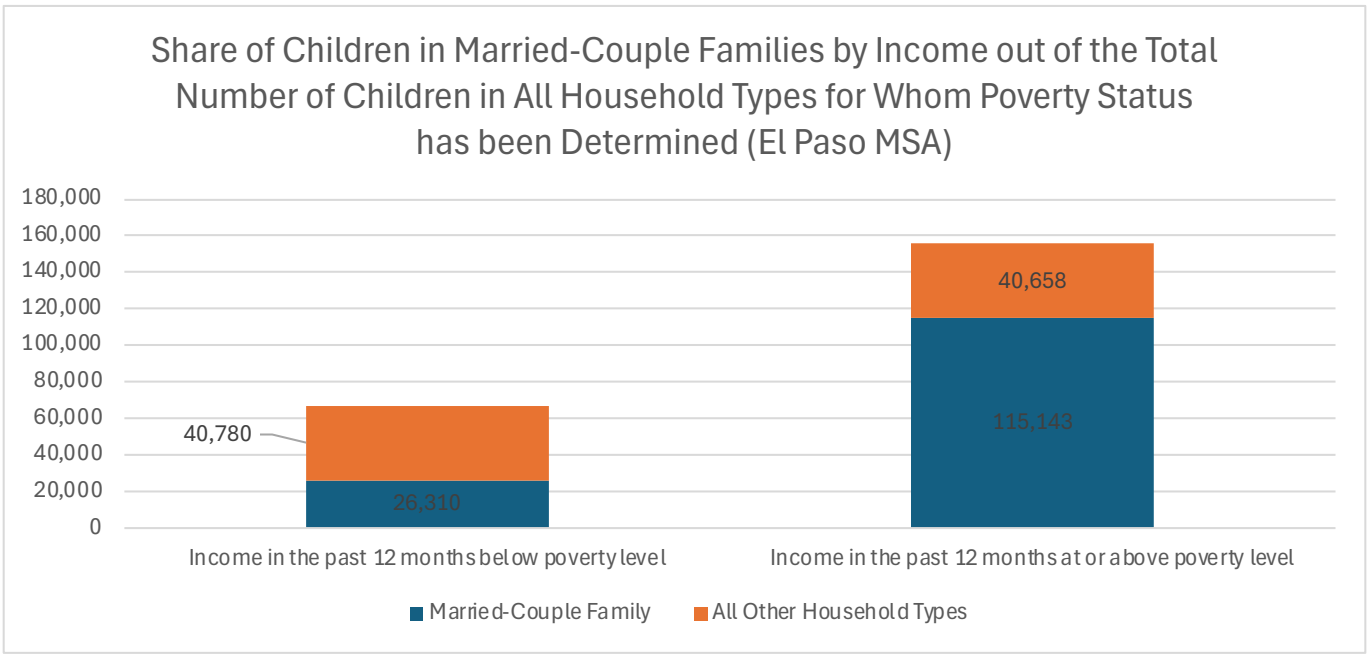
ELP MSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Family
Children under 18 y/o	225,012	142,010
Children 3-17 y/o	189,537	116,915
Children for Whom Poverty Status Has Been Determined	222,891	141,453





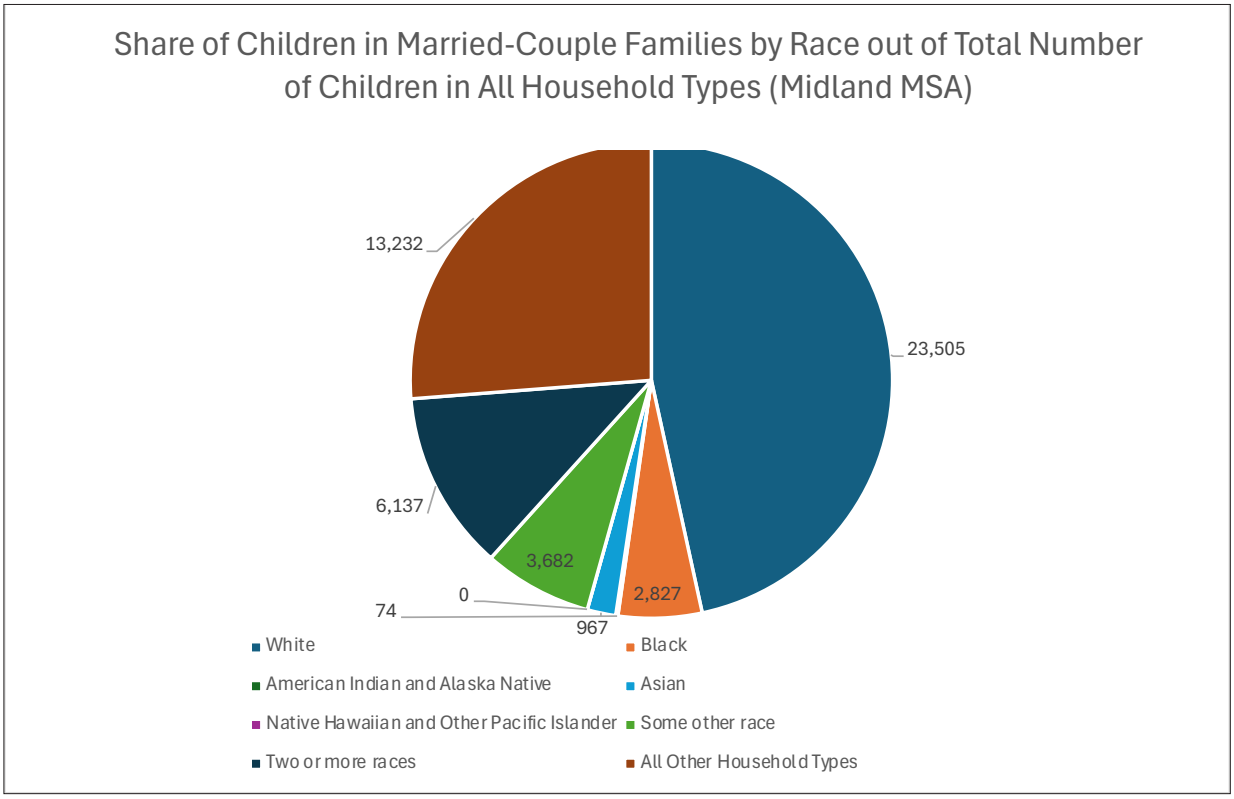
EL PASO METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (ELP MSA)

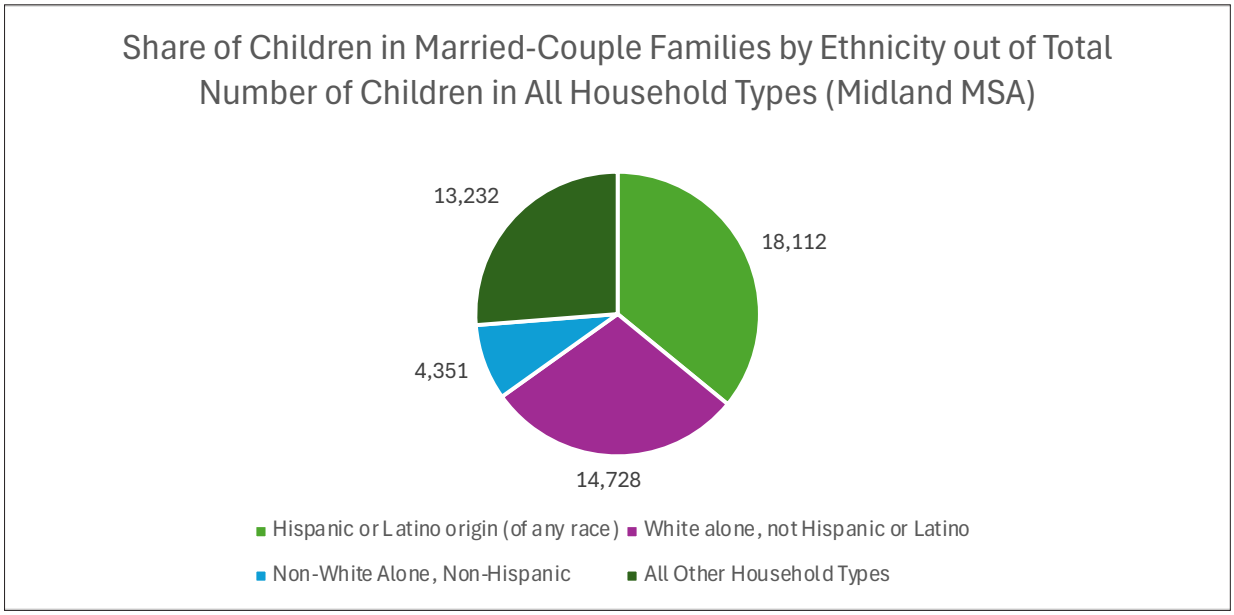




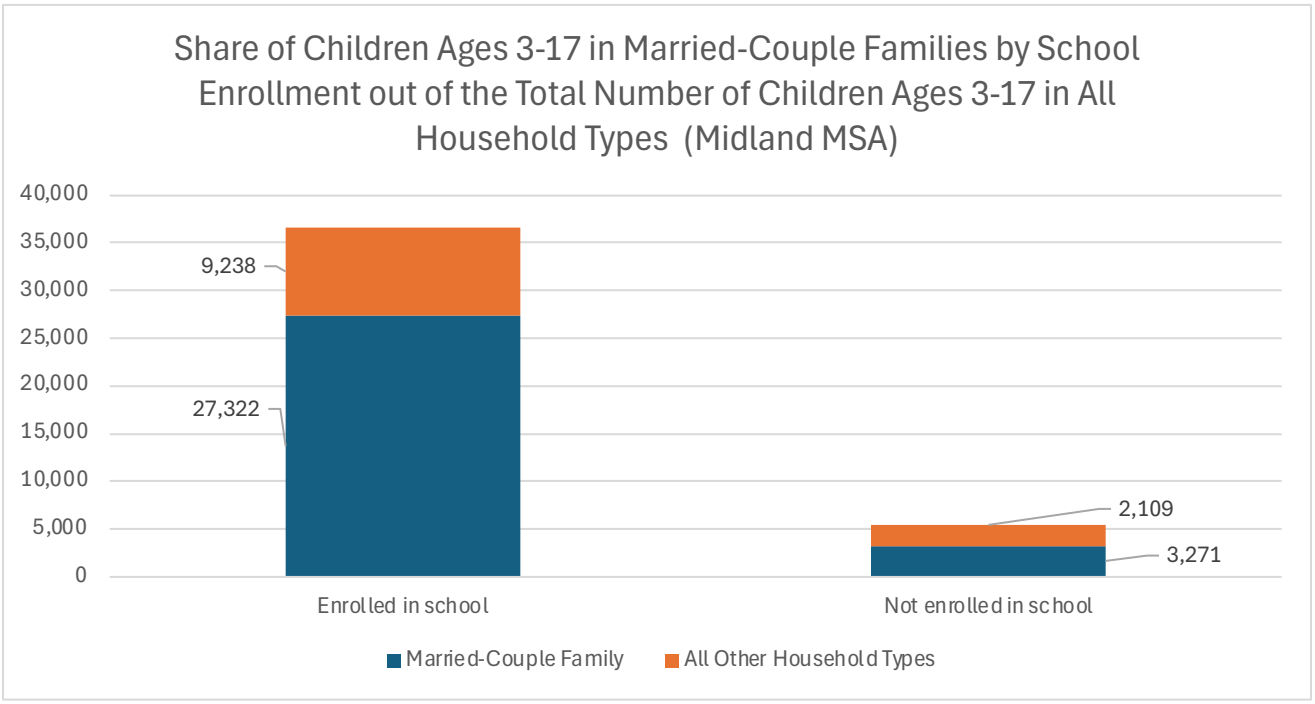
MIDLAND METROPOLITAN STATISTCAL AREA (MID MSA)

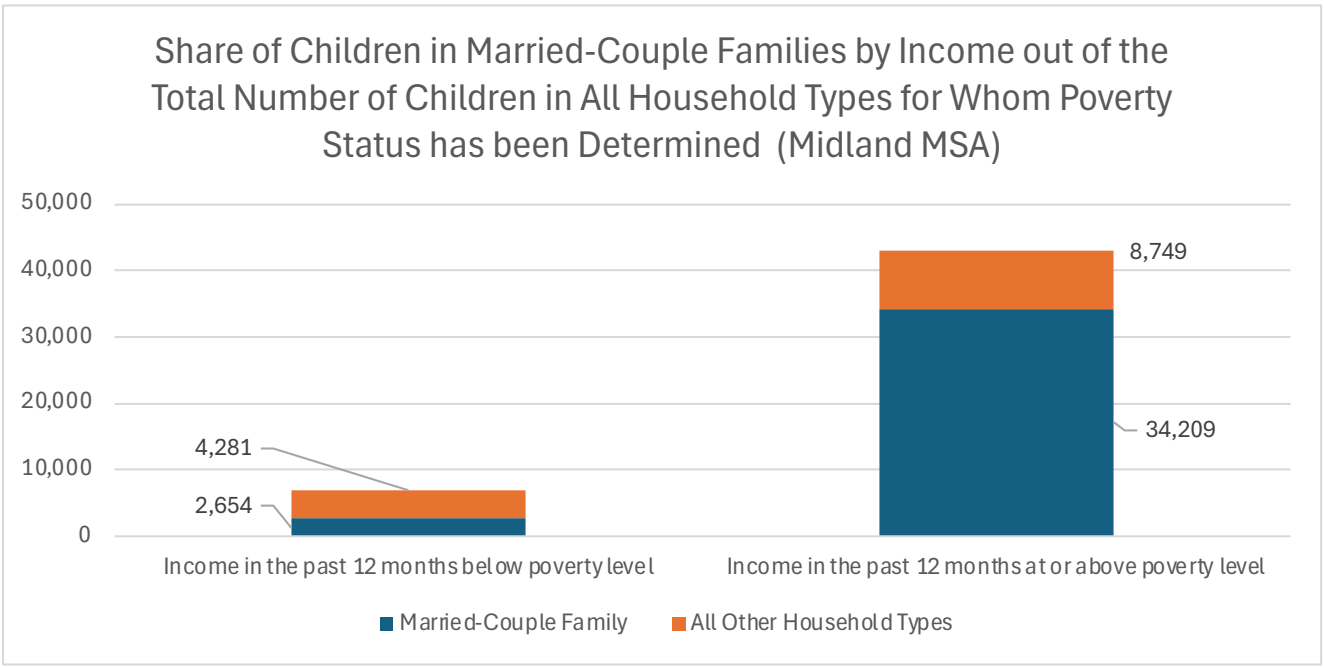
MID MSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Family
Children under 18 y/o	50,423	37,191
Children 3-17 y/o	41,940	30,593q
Children for Whom Poverty Status Has Been Determined	49,893	36,863





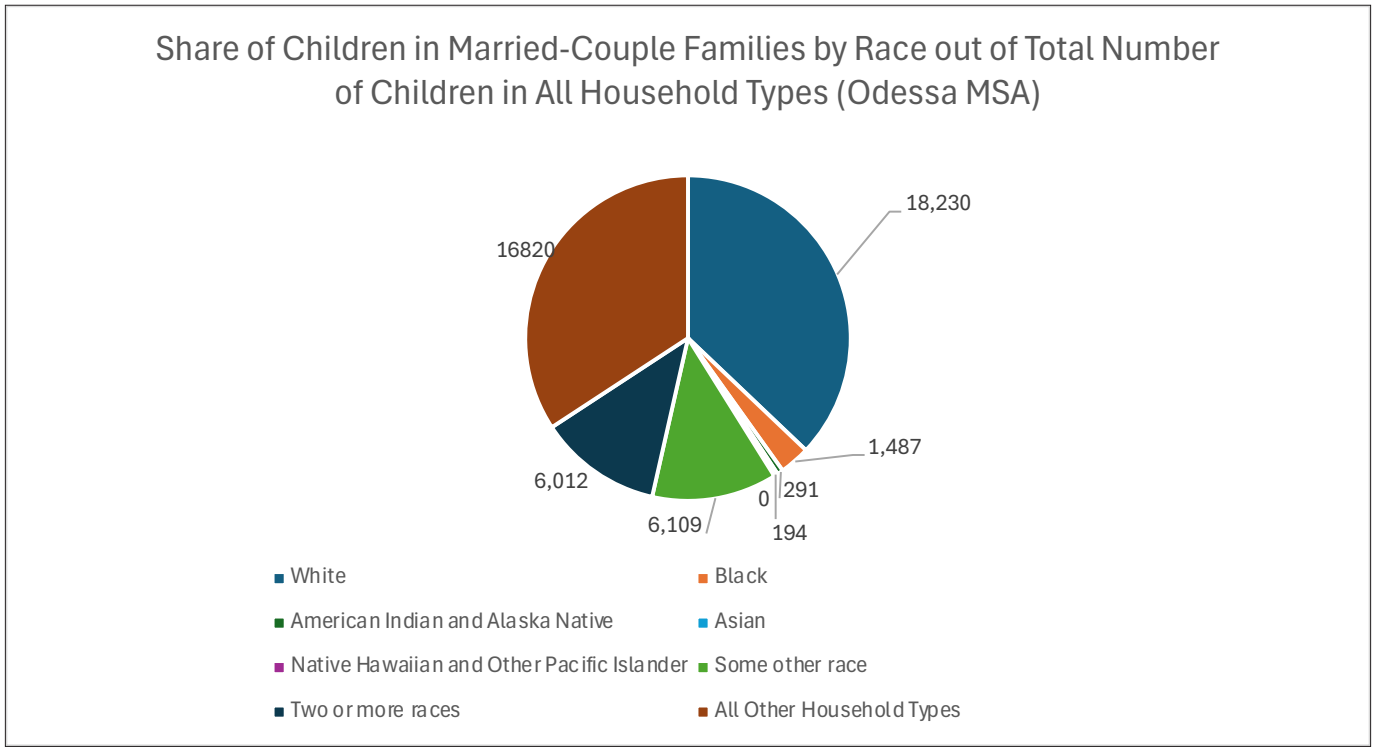
MIDLAND METROPOLITAN STATISTCAL AREA (MID MSA)

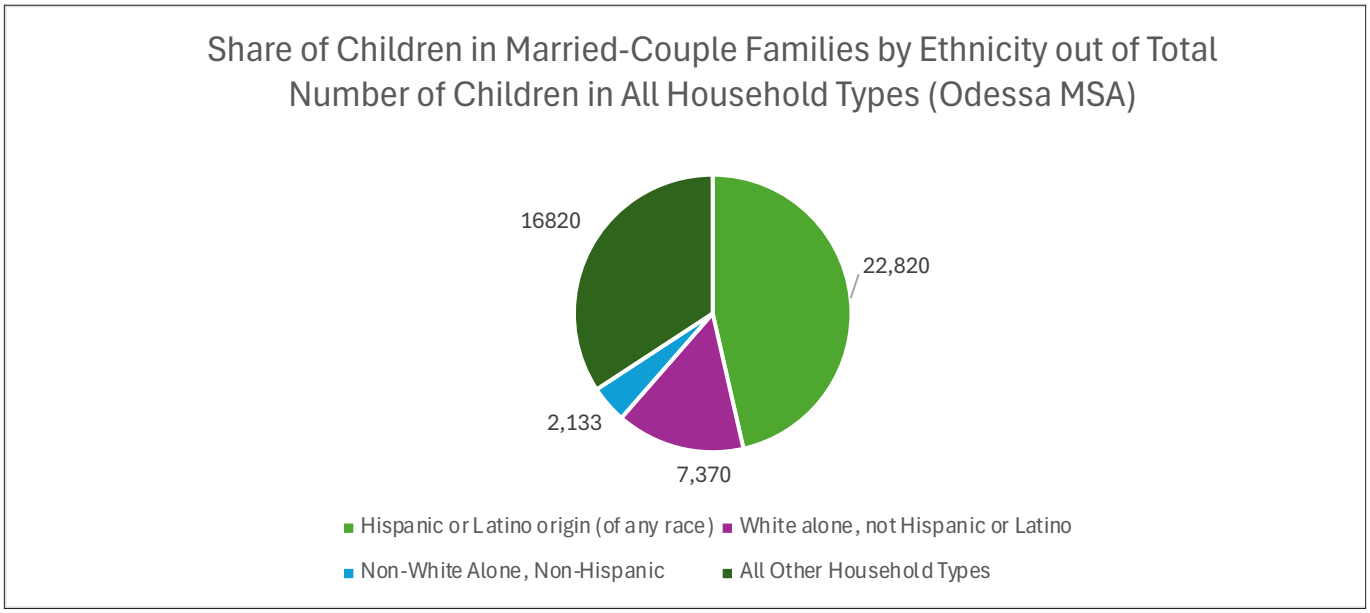




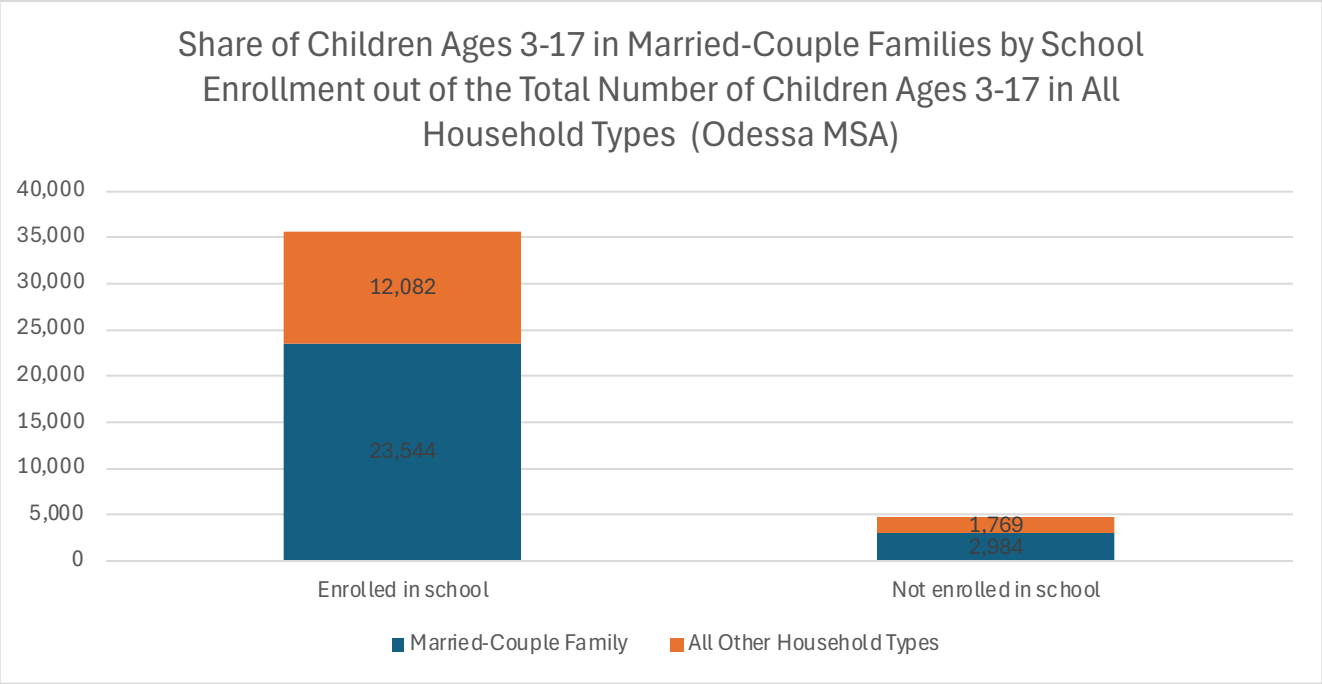
ODESSA METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (ODS MSA)

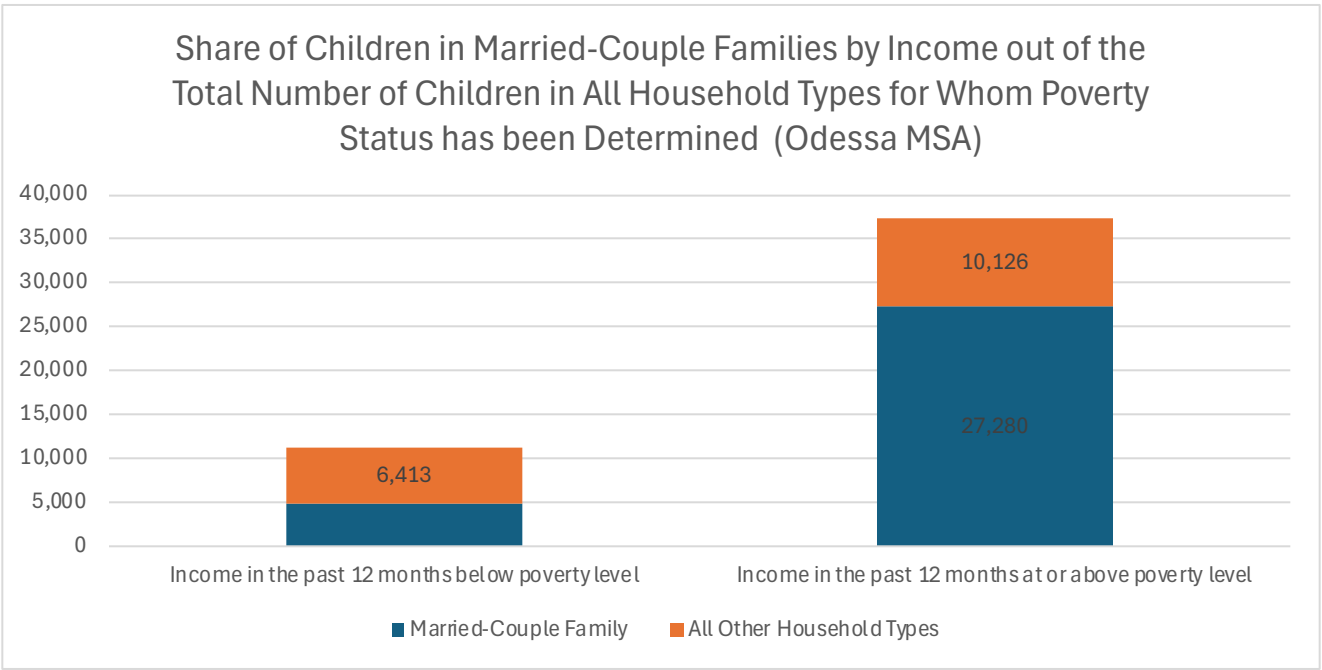
ODS MSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Family
Children under 18 y/o	49,143	32,323
Children 3-17 y/o	40,379	26,528
Children for Whom Poverty Status Has Been Determined	48,579	32,170





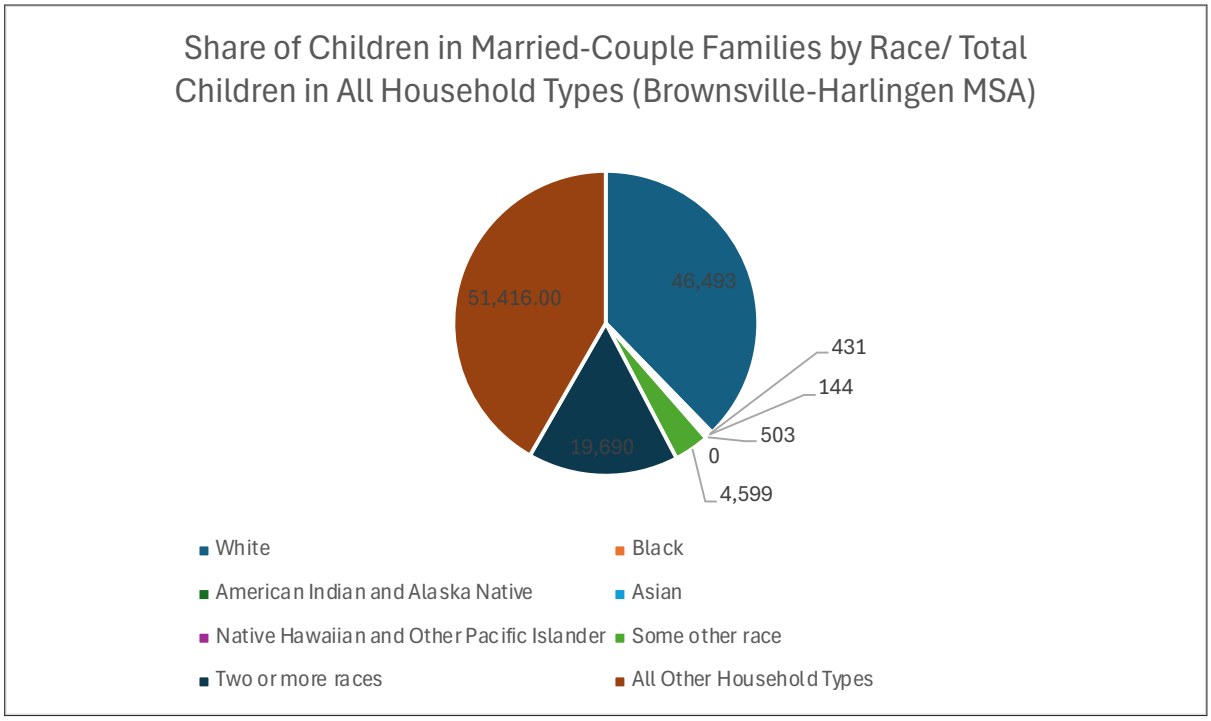
ODESSA METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (ODS MSA)

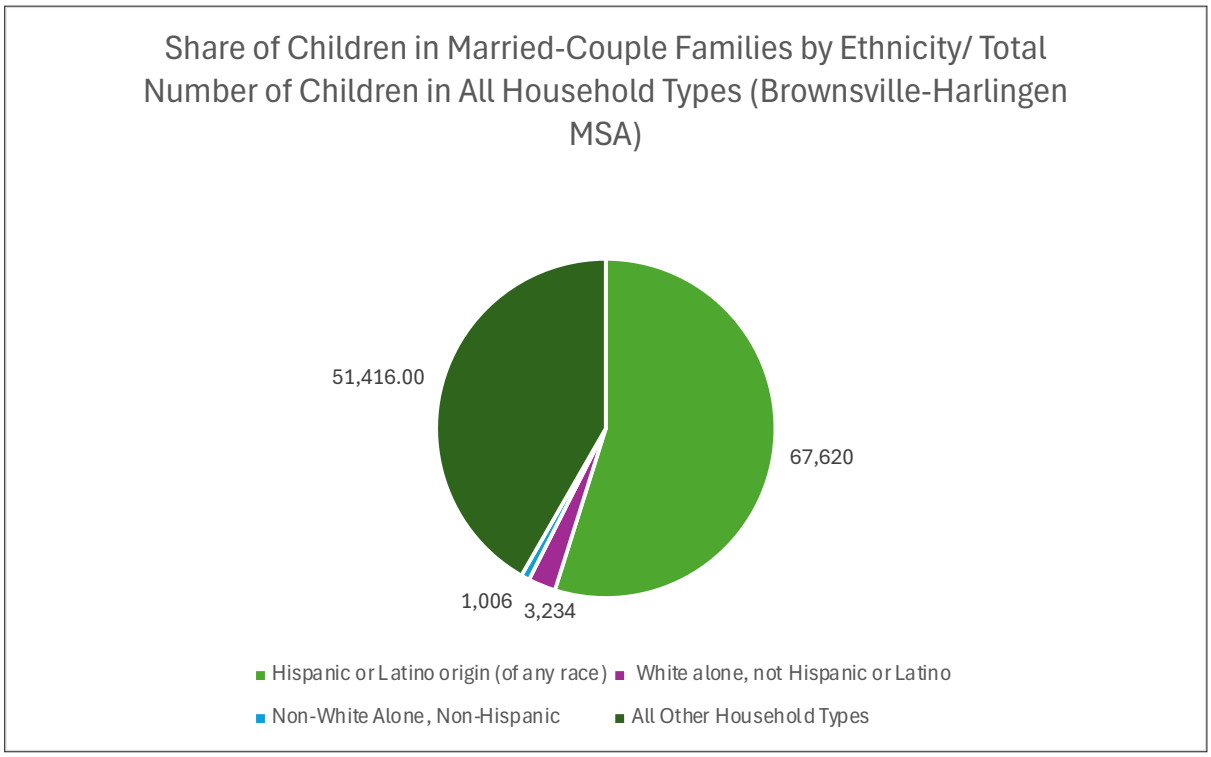


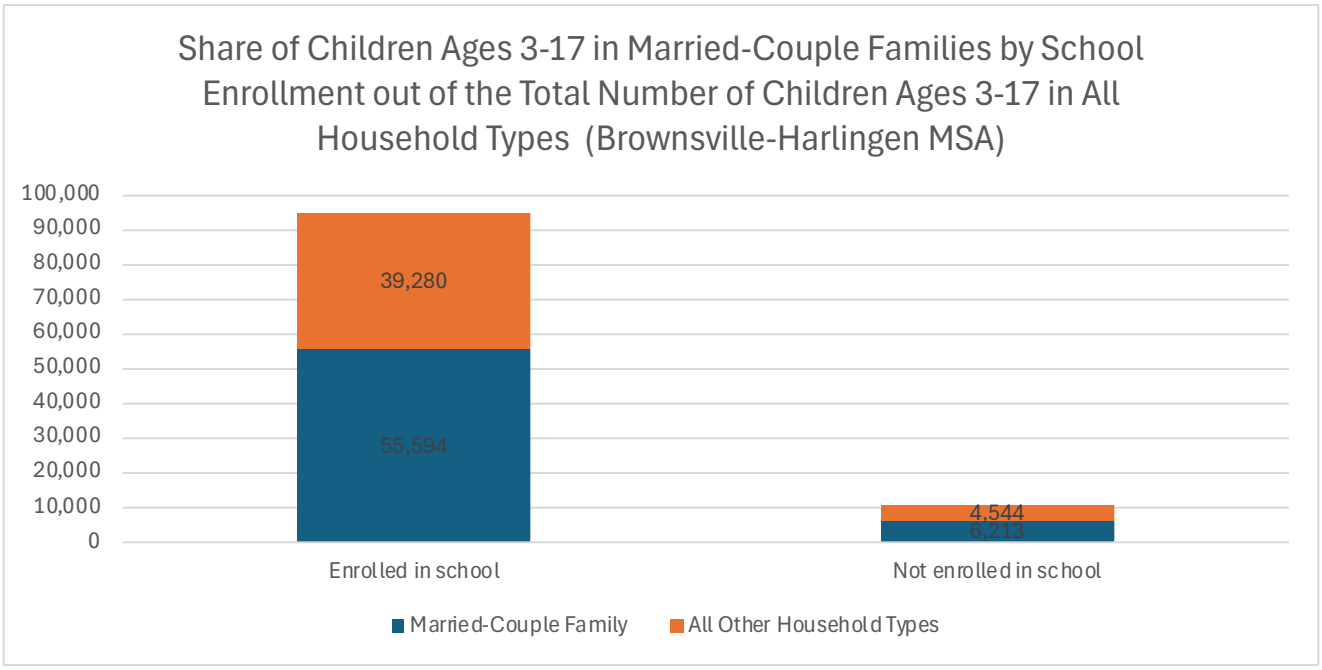


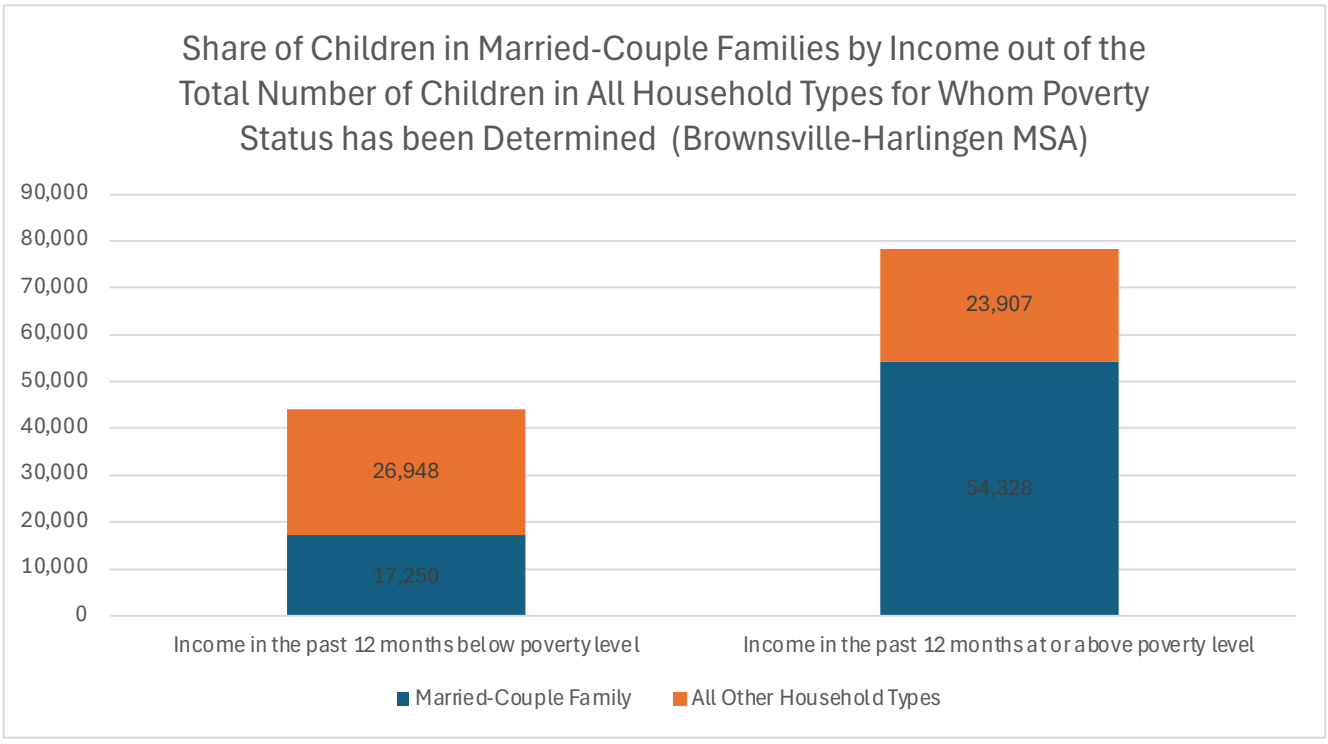
RIO GRANDE VALLEY METROPOLITAN AREAS
BROWNSVILLE-HARLINGEN METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (BRH MSA)

BRH MSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Family
Children under 18 y/o	123,276	71,860
Children 3-17 y/o	105,631	61,807
Children for Whom Poverty Status Has Been Determined	122,433	71,578



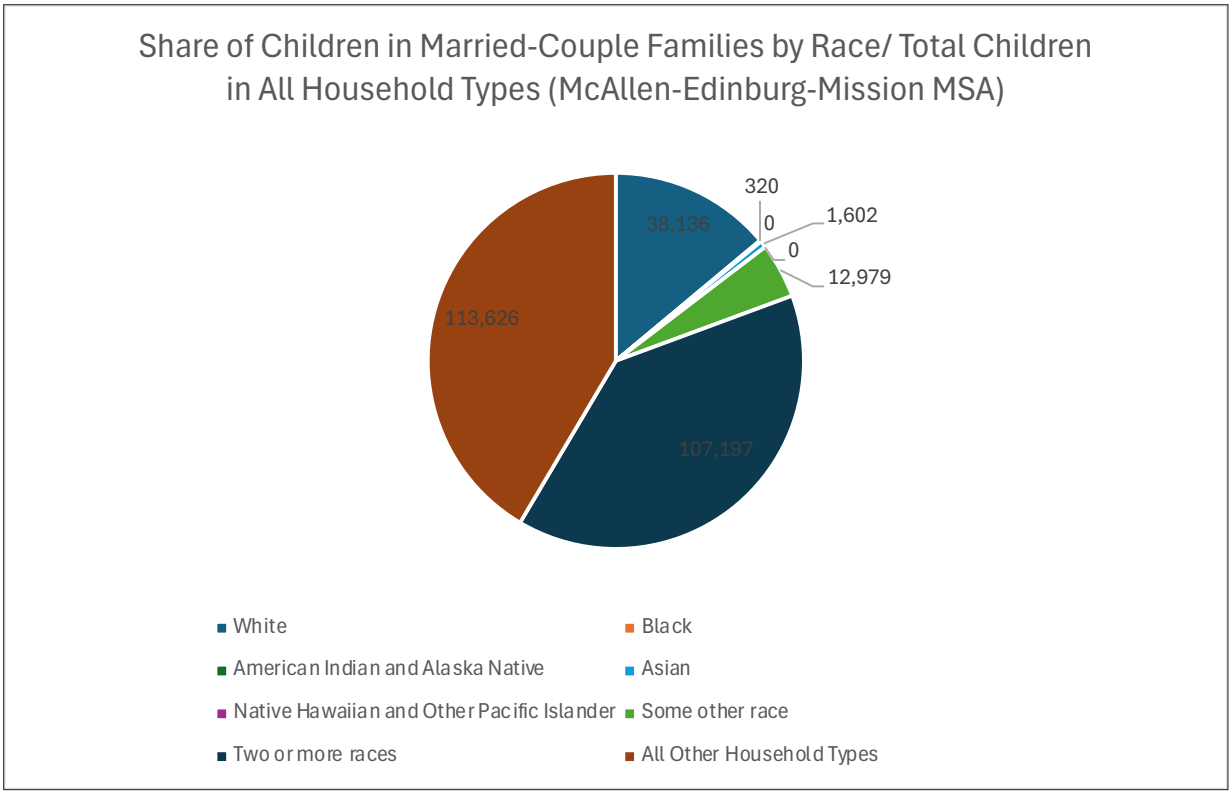


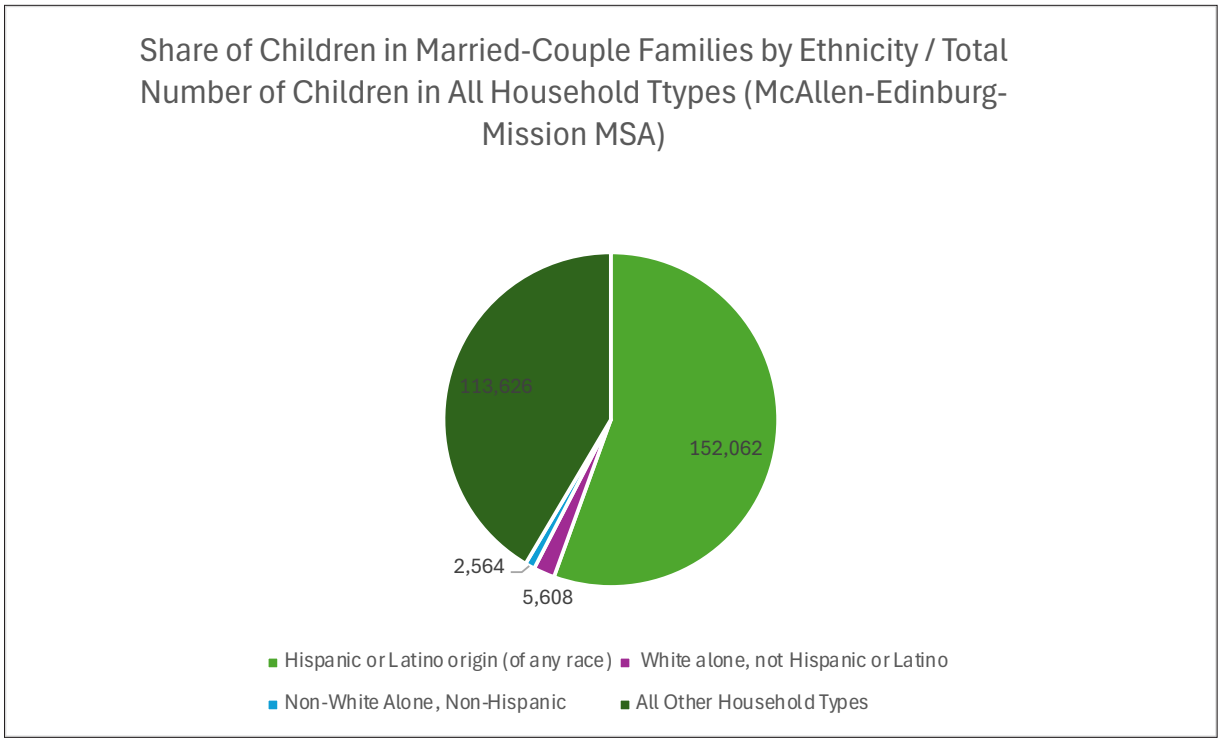

Share of Children Ages 3-17 in Married-Couple Families by School Enrollment out of the Total Number of Children Ages 3-17 in All Household Types (Brownsville-Harlingen MSA)
100,000
90,000
80,000
70,000
60,000
50,000
40,000
30,000
20,000
10,000
0
39,280
55,594
4,544
6,213
Enrolled in school
Not enrolled in school
Married-Couple Family
All Other Household Types


Share of Children in Married-Couple Families by Income out of the Total Number of Children in All Household Types for Whom Poverty Status has been Determined (Brownsville-Harlingen MSA)
90,000
80,000
70,000
60,000
50,000
40,000
30,000
20,000
10,000
0
26,948
17,250
23,907
54,328
Income in the past 12 months below poverty level
Income in the past 12 months at or above poverty level
Married-Couple Family
All Other Household Types

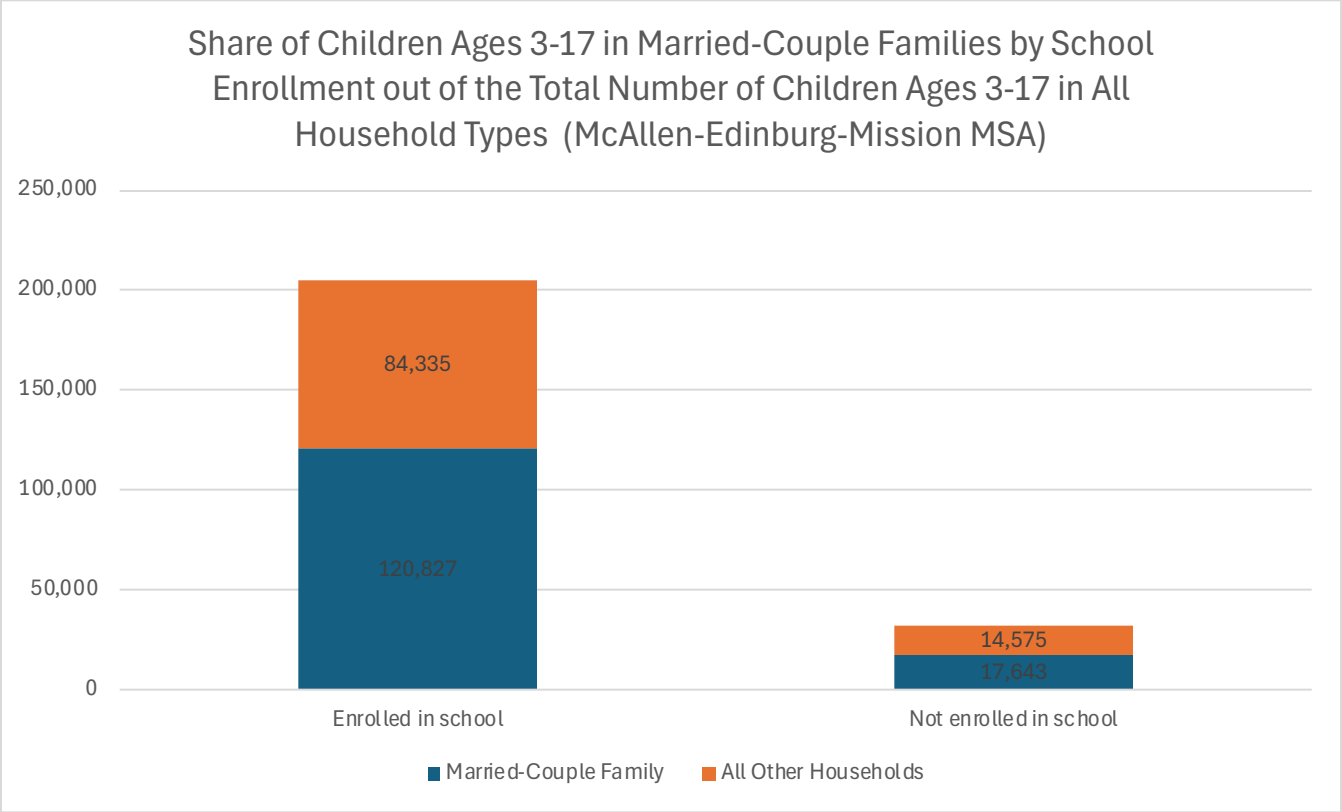
MCALLEN-EDINBURG-MISSION METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (MEM MSA)

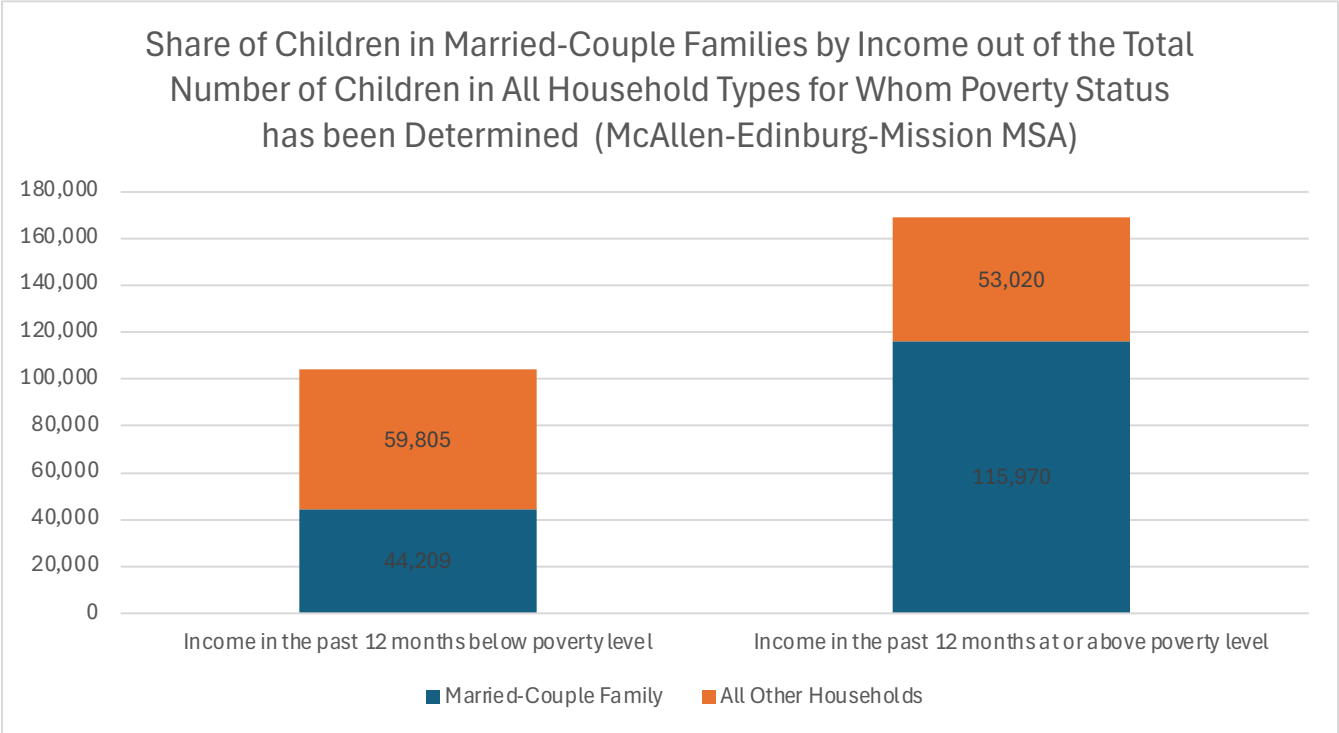
MEM MSA Fact Sheet	All Households	Married-Couple Family
Children under 18 y/o	273,860	160,234
Children 3-17 y/o	237,380	138,470
Children for Whom Poverty Status Has Been Determined	273,004	160,179





MCALLEN-EDINBURG-MISSION METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA (MEM MSA)





ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Nicholas Armstrong is a Policy Scholar for the Center on Health and Families with the Texas Public Policy Foundation. He graduated from the University of Southern Mississippi with a B.A. in History and a minor in Applied Economics.

Prior to joining TPPF, Nicholas served as an Appointments Analyst in Governor Ron DeSantis' Executive Office where he helped manage applicants and appointments to over 400 state boards across Florida. Before his time in the Governor's office, he interned at the Heritage Foundation in the Roe Institute where he solidified his passion for conservative policy.

A native Memphian, Nicholas enjoys cheering on Tiger basketball and football. A proud Eagle Scout, Nicholas enjoys backpacking, camping, and kayaking in remote areas. He has hiked two different 90+ miles treks at Philmont Scout Ranch, portions of the Appalachian Trial in the Smokies, and summited Pikes Peak in Colorado twice.

Andrew C. Brown, JD, is the Vice President of Policy at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. Brown has dedicated his career to serving vulnerable children and strengthening families through community-focused, liberty-minded solutions. As an attorney, he has represented children in the child welfare system, advocated for the rights of parents, and helped build families through domestic and international adoption.

Andrew earned his BA magna cum laude in political science from Baylor University and his JD from Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law. He is licensed to practice law in Texas and Virginia. His work on international adoption law and other child welfare issues has been published in leading legal journals and respected media outlets.

Noah Torres is a Policy Scholar for the Center for Health and Families at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, where he focuses on marriage and family formation policy and healthcare antitrust regulation and enforcement.

Born in Fort Worth, TX to a family actively involved in the local Hispanic, Catholic, and political circles, Noah was raised with an astute awareness of the value of civic virtue for securing the common good and flourishing of individuals in a community.

Noah later attended the University of Dallas, where he earned his B.A. ('21) in Politics and Theology and his M.A. ('23) in Political Theory.

As an undergraduate, Noah's studies centered both on the development of constitutional theory in late medieval Scholasticism and canon law in the works of Jean Gerson and Konrad Summenhart and on the interplay between early modern ecclesiology and political theory in the works of Robert Bellarmine. During this time, Noah interned for the Religious Freedom Institute (RFI), where he produced a study that aided the passage of legislation protecting patient conscience rights in South Dakota.

Caroline Welton is the campaign director for the Center on Health and Families initiative at the Foundation, which works to support policies which empower patients with price transparency and restore the physician-patient relationship.

She has previously contributed to several policy areas at the Foundation including local government and technology. She graduated from Hillsdale College with a B. A. in Politics.

Brad Wilcox is Professor of Sociology and Director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, the Future of Freedom Fellow at the Institute for Family Studies, and a nonresident senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. The author of *Get Married: Why Americans Should Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families and Save Civilization* (Harper Collins, 2024), Wilcox studies marital quality, marital stability, and the impact of strong and stable marriages upon men, women, and children. The author and editor of six books, Wilcox has written for scientific journals such as *The American Sociological Review* and *The Journal of Marriage and Family,* and *The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Atlantic,* and *National Review.* A Connecticut native, he now lives in Charlottesville, Virginia with his wife and family.

Dr. Nicholas Zill serves is a research psychologist who studies the effects of social and economic trends on the well-being of children and families. He was the director of the National Survey of Children for the Foundation for Child Development and the founding president of the non-profit organization Child Trends. Prior to his retirement, he was a Vice President at the research corporation Westat, where he directed landmark studies of the Head Start program. He developed the Behavior Problems Index and other widely used survey measures. A listing of his most frequently cited professional publications may be found here. His recent research briefs and blog posts may be found here.

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