

## **You Might Be Right - America's Youth - Transcript**

**Marianne Wanamaker:** Welcome to "You Might Be Right," a place for civil conversations about tough topics, brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee, with funding support from members of our producer circle. To learn more about how you can support our work, visit [youmightberight.org](http://youmightberight.org).

In this episode, former Tennessee Governors Phil Bredesen and Bill Haslam and their guests discuss the challenges facing America's youth. In the face of low academic performance, mental health challenges, and a decline in college going especially among men, public policy for America's youth is a priority across the country. But is it really within the government's power to affect what truly ails youth and their families?

Welcome to the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs. I'm Marianne Wanamaker and it's a real pleasure to welcome you to a live episode of "You Might Be Right." We have some wonderful guests who flew in today just for the occasion and of course our two illustrious former governors of the state of Tennessee. So I'm going to turn it over to them to get us going.

**Bill Haslam:** Thank you, Marianne. It's great to have you and this is going to be a really fun and interesting and important conversation. There's a lot of things that concern us in the world and in our country and the topics we're going to talk about I think should be near the top of the list. So really pleased to have Melissa Kearney with us. Melissa is a professor of econ at the University of Maryland. But she's also – this is how I know her – she's the executive director of the Aspen Economic Strategy Group, which has done a lot of forward-thinking on a lot of hard issues. She's a research associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research and a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institute. And beyond that, as we talk about that, she has three kids of her own, so she brings some firsthand– And just now she was talking about, "Okay, who's picking up who at soccer practice?" So these are real-live issues.

**Phil Bredesen:** And I, too, agree this is going to be, this very interesting and I really like this idea of doing a podcast with some real people here.

**Bill Haslam:** Wait, are most of our guests not real?

**Phil Bredesen:** Yeah. Well, they're electronic on both the giving and receiving end. But we also have as a guest here, Richard Reeves, who is sitting next to me. He's a non-resident senior fellow with the Brookings Institute, and I think most importantly, president of the American Institute for Boys and Men, which is really the first and only think tank focused on that particular subject. His research focuses on the roles of boys and men in the world, inequality, social mobility. He's a well-known writer and author. His most recent book is *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It*. He's also the author of *Dream Hoarders*, which was named Book of the Year by the Economist and Political Book of the Year by the Observer.

Reeves is originally from the United Kingdom, as you'll discover shortly when he begins speaking, served as director of strategy for the Prime Minister for a couple of years, 2010 to 2012. And we're really grateful to have him and actually both of you here. Thank you for being here.

**Bill Haslam:** Melissa also just published a book called *The Two Parent Privilege*. It's been released recently to a lot of acclaim and some criticism, so we'll have a fun time talking about that. Let me just start. What are the data points? Why do we think we have a problem with children, with boys specifically? Give us a little background on the data behind why we have a problem.

**Melissa Kearney:** Richard, can I go first?

**Richard Reeves:** Yeah.

**Melissa Kearney:** Okay. All right. So let me just start with some basics, which is more than 12% of kids in this country live in poverty year after year. And so that's just a baseline thing that we should really not be okay with as Americans, the richest country in the world in history, that we have so many kids living with poverty. We have one in six kids who are food insecure. We have millions of kids who are housing insecure and we have mounds of evidence showing that poverty and the associated burdens really keeps them from thriving and flourishing. It affects their brain development, their healthy development, their ability to be successful in school. And so this is just something we shouldn't be okay with. The kids are struggling.

The point of my book really, and the reason why I wrote it, is because for decades we've been talking about ways to shore up the safety net, to improve schools, to do all these things to improve economic well-being of kids in this country and also to address income inequality. And I came to realize that really one of the greatest threats to kids' well-being today is the decline in the two-parent family. And so now 30% of kids-

**Bill Haslam:** Did you start there or did you end up there?

**Melissa Kearney:** No, I ended up there. I ended up there because for years I was looking at all of the other things that were affecting kids and all of the economic policies that we could do to try to help kids. And what I kept coming up against is we have now 30% of kids in the U.S. are being raised outside a two parent home. And also family structure is very divergent, so college educated parents are continuing to get married and raise their kids in two parent households in similar rates they did in the past. So 86% of kids born to college-educated moms are living with married parents. That share has fallen to 60% among everybody else.

Single parenthood is not just associated with the most disadvantaged groups now. It's really spread across the population and kids are suffering as a result. And so this is just something that I kept coming back to. We need to improve schools, we need to have a stronger safety net. But really I think fundamentally improving the well-being of kids in this country and addressing

income inequality is going to take strengthening families. And boys in particular. I'm going to pass this over to Richard in a second. We have millions of boys growing up without dads in their home and it's perpetuating this problem of boys not doing as well as they otherwise, I think, would. And then men not being well suited to be husbands and dads.

**Richard Reeves:** Well, there's going to be some stuff that we're going to disagree about, I think, Melissa, but let's start with that very strong agreement that male disadvantage is more intergenerational, actually, in its nature than other kinds of disadvantage because as men struggle, their families struggle. And when families struggle, boys suffer the most. So boys seem to suffer more from poverty and from family instability and from poor neighborhoods than girls do.

I just want to add on a bit of a personal note here, you mentioned, Governor, that I was from the U.K., but I do now live in East Tennessee in case that—

**Phil Bredeesen:** I was going to let you say that. Take credit for it.

**Richard Reeves:** Yeah. So now I'm a Tennessean, and actually I have to say that obviously people can hear this, but my youngest son is actually in the audience and is a student here at the University of Tennessee. And so it's a rare opportunity for me to say how burstingly proud I am of him and how he's done. And so nothing I'm going to say about the struggles of boys should necessarily be read as being— And in particular because we're having dinner after this so that he can fix my new phone for me.

But yeah, so look, if you look at what's happening to boys in particular, very high and rising rates of suicide among men and boys, just to put a very tragic opening note on it. Huge gaps in education. If you look at GPA, two thirds of those with the highest high school GPA are girls. There's a bigger gap on college campuses today, approaching 60/40, than there was in 1972 when we passed Title IX. It's just the other way round. And in education you're seeing growing gaps between boys and girls, especially when you look at working class and black communities where you see very, very big gender gaps.

And so one data point that was one of those ones that you have to triple check and then get someone else to check is that among K12 aged boys in the U.S., 23% have been diagnosed with a developmental disability. That's almost one in four. And at that point you have to start wondering is it really the boys or is it the system? And I think there are various ways in which we're failing. We fail to address the problem of men in the labor market, of fathers in the family, and that's having downstream consequences for the boys in all of our lives. And that's bad news for the future, including for women and for children.

**Phil Bredeesen:** I'd like to ask this question. You've talked about the idea that two parent families have a number of benefits and in particular you've talked about having a man in the house as being advantageous. I mean, my personal experience is growing up in a single-parent family without my father being there. And I don't look back on that as a tough or hard time and

life has turned out fine, but maybe the difference is that in my case, I lived with my grandmother who had 10 children who lived around so there was this huge additional support system. So I guess the question I'm really asking you is is it really about two parents or is it about having that extended family support system that can help a child grow up?

**Melissa Kearney:** Yeah. And your wonderful success in life leads me to a critical caveat, which is, of course, we all know children who were raised by single mothers and have done phenomenally well. And we all know children who are raised by two parents who have not done phenomenally well. But on average, what we know is that raising a child in a home by oneself is harder on the mom than if there's two parents in the household. There tend to be fewer resources in that household. And again, on average, children who grow up in a household with the resources of two parents – and here's another caveat, let me emphasize – two parents who are in a healthy relationship. So nothing I say should be misconstrued to suggest that parents or children should stay in situations of abuse or violence. On average, the extra resources that come with having two parents is very beneficial to kids.

So what do we know? We know that single-mother households are five times more likely to be poor. We know that on average the income in a two-parent household is about twice as much than a one-parent household. Why? Because now most mothers work. We know that income gives parents a lot of flexibility to provide their child with safe housing in safe neighborhoods, good nutrition, access to all sorts of enriching activities. And then we see that it matters for kids' outcomes. They're more likely to graduate high school, more likely to graduate college, more likely to have higher earnings themselves.

Now, your question about grandparents and extended family is super important. There are lots of ways that single parents, the majority of whom are moms in this country, make up for the absence of a second parent. But as a practical matter, we see these large gaps in childhood resources, and ultimately outcomes, because as a practical matter, they're not able to fully make up for what a second parent in the household does. Not just income, but also time investment in the kids. Supervision, emotionally nurturing. And so to the extent that people can make up for that gap with relatives, with family members, with other members in their village that helps them raise the children, the children are more likely to thrive. But in practice, we just see that kids in two-parent households have many more resources thrown at them.

**Phil Bredesen:** And one more question. Richard, you talked about boys and men. If we'd had this conversation 40 years ago, we could have had the same conversation about women who were marginalized, who had many avenues closed to them. What has changed and why has it flipped in that way?

**Richard Reeves:** Well, one of the things that's changed is that we've just made dramatic progress in terms of the opportunities that are available to women. And we needed to for sure. And we have. And in many cases, particularly on college campuses, for example, we've seen a massive overtaking now. We've also seen the emergence of new issues around deaths of despair. So deaths from opioid overdoses or suicides or alcohol. That's been a huge issue and

men are at three times higher risk of a death of despair. We've seen a rise in suicide rate. Men are at four times higher risk of taking their lives from suicide. And so we've also just become aware of new issues. And these have hit working class communities especially hard. And so working class men in particular, I think they've faced a triple whammy in many ways of economic changes, social changes, as well as cultural changes.

**Bill Haslam:** I feel like you brought up two separate things there. I mean, you're not suggesting that because women are doing better, that men are doing worse, are you?

**Richard Reeves:** No.

**Bill Haslam:** Okay.

**Richard Reeves:** Well, on a relative basis, it's just important to care about— So there's a question. Do we care about gender gaps? Yes or no? In say, the pay gap, do we care about gender? Do we care about the gender gap on college campuses? Do we care about gaps in health outcomes? I think if those gaps are big enough, we should care about them. I just think we should care about them in both directions. They matter in both directions.

**Bill Haslam:** Let me ask you this. I want to get to what we do about this, and I know you all have a little different views on that, but let me start. What happened? I mean, that's a long answer, I'm sure. But what happened? How did we get here?

**Melissa Kearney:** I'll give my very, very succinct version.

**Richard Reeves:** A history of the world by Melissa Kearney.

**Melissa Kearney:** No, I'm only going to go back— I'm going to touch on the '60s and '70s. In the '60s and '70s, we obviously had massive social cultural changes, changes in expectations about gender norms and this is relevant to what both of us are talking about in our books. And during those decades, what you see is a decrease in marriage proportional across the education distribution. Everybody got married a little bit less. You saw opportunities increased for women. All of that's fine. That's good.

Then what happens is we enter the '80s with a new set of social cultural norms, gender expectations, and a whole bunch of economic, global, secular shocks hit that are particularly disadvantaged men without a college degree. And then in the '80s and '90s, what you see is a divergence in family structure. So college-educated adults continue to get married. Their marriages stopped falling the way they did during the '70s, but among people with a high school degree or a less than high school degree, marriage continued to decline.

**Bill Haslam:** Why? Why the difference?

**Melissa Kearney:** Here, Richard started alluding to the fact that men started losing their economic position. And this is true in both an absolute and relative sense. So let's be very specific. A few shocks that we know mattered. The loss of well-paying, manufacturing jobs for men. That eroded a lot of middle-class, family-sustaining job opportunities for men. In communities that were hit by those shocks, we saw a decrease in marriage, an increase in the share of kids being raised in single-parent homes. Similarly, over those same decades where we saw communities that their employment was heavily invested in industries that adopted robots, those industrial robots, replaced a lot of non-college educated men. They were pushed out of the workforce into lower paying jobs. And what do we see? We see a reduction in marriage and an increase in children being raised in single-parent homes.

**Bill Haslam:** Sorry. But for us historians instead of economists, economic stability in itself drives lower marriage rates.

**Melissa Kearney:** So here's the issue. And this is where you said is female empowerment and economic opportunity part of the story. To some extent, yes. Over these same periods, men lost their edge economically. And so you have women now able to bring in as much or more money on their own. You have men who are struggling in the workforce with all associated struggles that Richard alluded to. Higher rates of substance abuse, maybe depression, things that make them less attractive as marriage partners. And again, we just have evidence that there is a causal link here. Now, I will not lament the fact that women now have economic opportunities and freedom such that they don't have to stay with a crappy partner, but part of that is driving down the rates of marriage and the increase in kids in single-parent homes. But let me be very clear, you have both this interaction of economic shocks and social norms and they perpetuate themselves.

So in places where the economic attractiveness of marriage decreased, you have more people raising their kids in one-parent homes. That becomes more of a convention. And so these things amplify each other. And this is why it's really important to realize this has happened almost primarily, almost entirely, outside the college-educated class. The college-educated class experienced the same changing social norms in the '60s and '70s, but the economic changes were very different. Men continue to do very well among college-educated adults, and the marriage proposition is held and those couples are still getting married and the social convention among the college-educated class is still very much towards a two parent norm. And so we really have this wide class gap now, in economic realities, and in the realities of how kids are being raised.

**Richard Reeves:** We're tiptoeing up to the point where Melissa and I strongly disagree about something, although we do agree strongly about other things, which is whether or not the marriage ship has effectively sailed. I think that it has. And the reason for that alludes to the question of what happened. The short version of what happened is that Gloria Steinem got her way. So for those who aren't historians or perhaps aren't over the age of 40, 60. I don't know. Whatever it has to be. Gloria Steinem, one of the best known feminists in the 1970s, said main point of the women's movement is to make marriage a choice rather than a necessity. And the

way to get that is to increase women's economic independence and autonomy. That was the driving force of it. And today, 40% of women earn more than the median man. More than the average men.

Now, that's not 50%. That's not complete equality. But in 1979, which wasn't very long ago, it was only 13%. We have seen a massive transformation in the economic position of women in relation to men, which I personally think is a wonderful thing, and we agree about this. I think it's arguably the greatest economic liberation in human history, and I'm here for it. However, it has downstream consequences and one of those is women who don't have to get married, even if they're parents are choosing not to get married. And so the question is, what would make them choose to get married? My view is the only thing that will make people get married is if they want to raise their kids together, which is probably where we agree, but I don't think when 40% of kids are born outside marriage and some communities, so among black kids it's 70% of kids, maybe I wish it were otherwise, I don't know, but I don't think banging the drum for marriage is going to reverse any of these trends. I think banging the drum for responsible and engaged fatherhood as well as motherhood is because I think that ship has sailed. And I think – I don't want to speak – but I think you think that ship hasn't quite sailed and we should try and keep it.

**Melissa Kearney:** I'm really uncomfortable with just saying the most economically successful women, not only in this country, but in the history of the world, which is college educated American women today, we still have access to partners. We still have the benefit of raising our kids in home with spouses. And for everybody else, the ship has sailed. Let's let it sail and let's expand the child tax credit and give 2,000 more dollars to families. I am all for giving families 2,000 more dollars.

**Richard Reeves:** You do want to do that, don't you?

**Melissa Kearney:** Yeah, I do. But at the end of the day, when I come home, and I'm tired, and I'm stressed out, having another person there to say, "You take over. You help with the kids." There's no government check that's going to do that. And so I think it's just far too defeatist to accept that now the luxury or the privilege, as I allude to in my title, of having married-parent homes, both for parents and for kids – I don't think we should resign ourselves or accept a position where that's just a luxury good now. That's just yet another advantage of the college-educated class. We get higher earnings. Oh, and by the way, we're also more likely to raise our kids in two-parent homes. Lucky us. We are never going to close class gaps if we just accept that as a reality that's going to continue to perpetuate advantage and disadvantage and wealth accumulation and all these things people profess to care about across generations. If we really want to close those gaps, we cannot resign ourselves to this family gap.

**Phil Bredezen:** Richard, just to follow up on that notion, when I listen to this conversation, I suspect the same for you, Bill, these are very personal. In a sense, it lies closer to things we each care about than the average conversations that we have.

**Richard Reeves:** That's why it's so difficult to talk about.

**Phil Bredeesen:** And I wonder how much of what you're describing is really economic at heart. I mean, for me, I don't know whether it's cultural or genetic, but it's really important for me to have something to do that I am proud of and that I can take care of people with and family and all that kind of stuff. That family I told you I grew up in with 10 aunts and uncles, all of them had literally lifetime jobs in factories. And so something that doesn't even remotely exist today, even in the same community. So to what extent is the changing nature of the workforce driving a lot of this that you're describing?

**Richard Reeves:** Well, I mean here I think I'm going to sound very much more like I'm in Melissa's camp on this, but I think we're trying to figure out. You might be right.

**Bill Haslam:** We're done here.

**Richard Reeves:** Look, I just—

**Phil Bredeesen:** Did you prompt that?

**Richard Reeves:** I'll take the check later, Marianne.

I do think it's the human universal need to be needed. To have purpose, to have a role and in particular to feel like your role is important in other people's lives. And I think that that is more obviously true for mothers in relation to their children. And this might change, but right now it is. Whereas fathers, their role in relation to their families and communities is somewhat more fragile. It takes more work. And we've done a terrible job of it in the last few decades, of making fathers feel like they count as dads. And I agree with Melissa, the ideal world, definitely within a stable two-parent household, but we have to be super careful that in emphasizing that message we don't make the dads who aren't in that kind of household feel like they don't matter anymore.

We call them deadbeat dads, but sometimes we almost turn them into deadbeat dads through either our policy or our rhetoric around that. And so fatherhood is actually an institution that exists overlapping with but separate to marriage. And I mentioned suicide earlier. I read one study that I couldn't quite get past, it actually really upset me, which was of men who'd taken their own lives and the last words they used to describe themselves before taking their own lives were useless and worthless. And I do feel like we have made too many of the men in our society feel socially and culturally and economically like they are surplus to requirements and that is literally fatal.

**Melissa Kearney:** And I think your question about the changing nature of the workforce is spot on and it took you 30 seconds to get there. Richard and I have been studying this for over a decade. But the truth of the matter is, as men's economic – again, this is all really happening outside of the college-educated class – but as men's economic position has been eroded, as they've been pushed out of the workforce or— 15% of prime-age men in the U.S. right now are not working. I mean, that's just shocking number more than in any other high-



**Bill Haslam:** That's 25 to 54 year olds.

**Melissa Kearney:** Yeah. Yeah, exactly. I mean, that's a large number. It's not as large as the 40% of kids' parents are unmarried, but it's part of the story here.

**Bill Haslam:** Can I stop you? Because I think that's an important fact. I know it's a long answer, but as an economist, why are those folks not working?

**Melissa Kearney:** Okay. Can I come back?

**Richard Reeves:** Melissa has a whole paper on that.

**Melissa Kearney:** I do. Can I come back for another podcast?

**Richard Reeves:** A very good paper.

**Melissa Kearney:** But the short version is I've studied this extensively. I think a lot of it is demand side factors. The demand for men without a college degree, the demand for workers without a college-educated degree has gone down. And then there are other things on the supply side that have also pushed against men working. More generous disability insurance, incarceration. So both sides. But I do think demand factors of the global, modern, labor market is what's pushing a lot of those men out of work.

But as Richard was describing, it's spilled over into the social sphere and it's spilled over into these deaths of despair and drug and alcohol. And this is another reason why it feels to me so urgent to address these challenges is because men are now being pushed aside in the workforce, pushed into lower-paying jobs, pushed out of their family home because they're no longer so necessary, pushed to the margins of society. This is terrible. This is terrible for men, it's terrible for women, it's terrible for children. And so everything we've talked about in terms of expanding access to community college, improving trade schools, increasing skills, takes on heightened urgency when we realize that those workforce challenges have spilled over to families and society.

**Phil Bredezen:** As I've listened to this conversation, I mean several decades ago, I remember reading that seminal paper that Pat Moynihan wrote about black families and it almost seems like we're just reprising what happened to African-Americans in a broader society here today.

**Melissa Kearney:** Yeah. When Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote this very famous Department of Labor memo in 1968, he was calling attention to the fact that 30% of black children were born to unmarried mothers. At the time, 5% of white children were, the numbers now are 70% of black children and 30% of white children. So he called attention to an issue, and by the way, he related it all very much to the economic struggles of black men at the time and the high rates of unemployment. So now we're basically having that conversation on a wider scale.

**Phil Bredeesen:** As I remember, it was the same combination that you've both just talked about of more empowerment of black women through things like more extensive benefits and so on, and the simultaneous problems that African-American men were having in terms of earning a living.

**Richard Reeves:** That's right. But what's interesting is that he also said, specifically talking about black families, of course, he said, "We need black men to do better, so we have to prioritize them, even if that means holding black women down." Now, that's where, with all respect to Senator Moynihan and his report, that's where he went fatally wrong because he framed this as zero sum and said, "Look, of course we have less marriage because the women are catching up with and overtaking the men. So the solution is let's stop those women from doing so well. Let's hold them back and count on that."

**Phil Bredeesen:** Well, that was 1968 and this is now.

**Richard Reeves:** It was 1968, but there's a version of that argument even playing out now, and it's incredibly important. I think that Melissa's work in avoiding that whilst talking about the issue of two-parent families is just an extraordinary exposition because it's very hard to do. Which is to say she like I, we want women to continue to do better, including relative to men. I think where we disagree is whether or not that means that marriage in the old form is on or off the table. Because I think that the change in the relative economic position of women and men has, at the very least, massively changed marriage. And I think the reason why it's still flourishing among the college-educated is because of this commitment to co-parenting. We joked about this earlier, but I think that upper middle class marriage is a time-limited, joint venture for the human capital accumulation of their children.

**Bill Haslam:** This all sounds so romantic.

**Richard Reeves:** Which is so romantic. I suggest anyone dating puts it on their Tinder profile right now.

**Bill Haslam:** I checked to see if you had a wedding ring on.

**Richard Reeves:** But if that's true, if marriage has become more about co-parenting, which I think it has, and less about economic dependency of women on men, then the way to get more marriage is to have more fathers, in particular, committed to parenting. So I think promoting fatherhood will end up promoting marriage. You think promoting marriage will promote fatherhood, Melissa. So almost what we're disagreeing about is the direction of the causal arrow.

**Melissa Kearney:** The other thing this reminds me of, I can't remember if it was an angry email or an angry tweet directed at me, but someone said, "Hey, have you smashed the patriarchy yet? Because until you do that, we're not going to solve this problem." I was like, okay, well if

that's what it's going to take, then that's what it's going to take. So I don't know. What I keep coming back to is how come college-educated adults has made this work? Is the patriarchy not alive and well among the college-educated class? I'm not sure. I feel like I encounter it sometimes. But is that something that the new mode of this is what marriage needs to look like in an era where women also are economically successful? Are college-educated couples more able to achieve that for whatever reasons? If so, then that's part of the lesson we have to take.

**Phil Bredezen:** The agenda for this podcast I think involved the idea of is there a role for government in some way in addressing these issues? Are there any things the two of you would agree on that ought to happen in government to address these problems?

**Melissa Kearney:** Here's one thing I feel very strongly about. Well, let me just say, granting Richard the point that what I'm doing here is sort of really reaching for something that feels hard to achieve, the first thing government needs to do is a whole separate conversation that I'm sure you all have had, we've had many times in this country of how do you improve the economic position of workers without a college degree. Fine. I think that's a necessary thing. The other is I really do think we need to reaffirm a norm and an expectation of two-parent homes for kids. I think the government has much less to do there. And so here's where I have great humility as somebody who likes to play in the economic policy sphere. This is not really something that we have economic policy levers to pull, though there are obvious things like let's remove all of the marriage disincentives in our tax and transfer program. Having said all that—

**Bill Haslam:** Sorry, I want you to continue, but are those significant? Are the tax disincentives a real factor?

**Melissa Kearney:** This is very good question. Let me put it this way. They are present. There are clear marriage disincentives. In the way we design our tax code and in the way our transfer programs work. My read of the evidence is if we remove them, maybe we'll get a little bit more of marriage on the margin, but that's not going to dramatically turn things around.

But I do think the government funds a lot of programs, like early childhood programs, like Headstart, which I actually think is massively underfunded, but the government spends very, very little money on programs aimed at strengthening healthy families. Only 1% of the Administration for Children and Families budget is on programs that in their budget are called promoting safe and stable families as compared to 15% for foster care. So let's think about that a moment. We spend way more money taking kids out of families than we do on strengthening families.

And why? Because there's been a political hangup of the government being involved in the business of promoting families. And I think that is misplaced and part of what I'm trying to accomplish with this book is saying, "Hey, all the things we want to do, we want to fight child poverty. We want to address income inequality, we want to promote social mobility, we need to strengthen families." That doesn't mean the government is in families lives, but the government could be funding programs on the ground in the community that work with vulnerable families.

There are a lot of couples who have kids together who want to stay together and they're literally looking for relationship education classes and they can't afford high-priced counseling. These are the kinds of programs the government could be funding.

**Richard Reeves:** I agree with that. I think one thing government can do is help on the money side of the question. And Melissa and I have both done a lot of work on economic inequality and there are just way too many families of all shapes and sizes that don't have the economic resources that they should have to raise their kids well, and I completely agree with Melissa about that. They're good at money. I also think government could be supporting family programs of one kind or another. Where government typically really sucks is morality. And there is this line from conservatives sometimes riffing off the fact that upper middle class people are getting married, which is that you know what, the upper middle class should preach what they practice. We should be willing to say, "Look, we are getting married and raising our kids together, and so we're going to start telling everyone else they should do the same thing."

I have no evidence at all that that's effective, and I'm not a political scientist, but also my sense at the moment is that the American working class are not in an amazingly good mood right now about being preached to by the elite about how they should live. And that's the challenge, I think, with this work is that it's just I don't see the evidence, the elite people basically saying to other people, whatever the social science is, "Why aren't you more like us? Why don't you do what we are doing?" I worry that it almost could be counterproductive because it does feel it is preaching and right now that doesn't feel like a very effective strategy.

**Melissa Kearney:** I don't know. If you read Obama's 2008 Father's Day speech, it was amazing.

**Richard Reeves:** It was.

**Melissa Kearney:** And he was very, very explicit that the absence of dads from the homes is a problem.

**Richard Reeves:** And he never talked about it again. He never talked about it again.

**Melissa Kearney:** No, this is exactly my point. I don't think Biden would give that speech today.

**Richard Reeves:** No. Oh, god, no.

**Melissa Kearney:** I don't think the progressives would allow a Democratic president to give that.

**Richard Reeves:** Obama didn't give it again either. Obama didn't speak about it again his entire two terms in office.

**Melissa Kearney:** But you know what? We know what celebrities say matters. We know what media influences are. They matter. And so to the extent that there are people in leadership position who have an audience whose voice matters— And again, we have a lot of social science evidence that these messages matter. I think the reluctance to promote this message is counterproductive. If you read what President Clinton said with the 1996 welfare reform about the importance of marriage for kids, I mean it's shocking to read that now. Again, a democratic president.

**Phil Bredezen:** I don't know, Bill, if we're depending on celebrities to be the models of stable, two-parent families we may—

**Bill Haslam:** Well, if you remember I'm talking how long ago Dan Quail got on Candace Bergen saying Hollywood's setting the wrong model. So I want to come back and we talked about this a little bit before, and you were going there, but I want to follow up. My experience after being a mayor and governor is in government, we do certain things well. The easy line is we're a lot better at fixing potholes than we are at fixing hearts. So you talked about if it's an economic issue versus a morality issue and I think that's a good distinction. I guess, any other feedback? If you were in elected office right now, if you were a governor of a state, what would you be trying to do on this?

**Richard Reeves:** Well, if it's specifically about the challenges in families and boys and men, I think there's a middle ground between if you like complete moral neutrality. In other words, we don't have a view about this. And then the kind of top-down that we've just been talking about. And that's role models. I think people believe their eyes much more than they believe their ears. And so if they see people in their own communities behaving in a certain way, I think they're more likely to model them. And so that's why I worry a lot, for example, that a lot of churches are really struggling to keep men. Schools have just emptied out. So when Ronald Reagan came to office, 33% of K12 teachers were male, 33%, now it's 23% and falling. One consequence of that is very few coaches in lots of middle schools to coach sports. The Boy Scouts are really struggling to hire male leaders, partly because they've gone co-ed and rebranded themselves BSA in the hope that people forget what the B once stood for, like IBM or whatever.

I would very strongly urge governors to think hard about where are the men. I agree with Melissa about the fathers, although we might disagree a little bit about the emphasis on marriage. It's a relatively small disagreement. But where are the male teachers? Where are the male social workers? Where are the male psychologists? Where are the dads in the community? Just dads and men being in boys' lives I think is very important and actually more powerful kind of messaging than perhaps anything that any government campaign can do.

**Melissa Kearney:** Just on the importance of dads, one of the most important studies that's come out of this Opportunity Insights Lab run out of Harvard using the millions of IRS records tracking kids in every community and how they do in life, what they found is the single biggest predictor of a smaller gap in adult earnings between black boys and white boys when they grow

up— Okay, so basically think of this as what is the neighborhood trait that looks like it's most predictive of black boys doing well? It's the share of black dads in the neighborhood. And this is beyond the importance of dads in one's own home. It's black dads in the neighborhood. Now, the problem is, as they show, a very small share of black boys in the U.S. grow up in neighborhoods that both have low poverty rates and high fatherhood presence rates. But these kind of neighborhood effects do matter.

So look, there are lots of community programs that we know really help kids, and the first thing that we need to be doing is meeting kids where they are. So summer jobs programs for kids, reduced rates of juvenile crime. There's all sorts of programs. Mentorship programs are extraordinarily cheap because they're staffed by volunteers and they are effective. People have shown that mentorship programs are effective. So scaling up and promoting these kinds of programs at a community level that are cost-effective is the first thing to do. But I think, again, where have I come after studying these issues for two decades? It's not just about the federal government having a more progressive tax code and sending some more money to families. It really is about strengthening families and communities and neighborhoods.

**Phil Bredesen:** Richard, you live in East Tennessee now, but you have an international background and I presume observe what's going on around the world. Is the set of phenomena that you're describing, actually both of you're describing in various ways, is it limited to the U.S. or is it prevalent in economically developed countries?

**Richard Reeves:** Well, I'd love to hear Melissa describe the ways in which the U.S. is different in some of these family dynamics, but specifically on what's happening to men and boys in education and mental health. Those are basically common across advanced economies. So I know the U.K. where I'm from pretty well. I'm next week going to spend some time in Norway. Norway has created a commission on boys and men, which is interesting because there are huge education gaps in Scandinavia. And also, I honestly think this is also a politically fraught conversation about boys and men. One reason the Norwegians can have a commission on boys and men is because nobody thinks that the Norwegians hate women. They are so egalitarian that there isn't this immediate like, "Oh wait, are you doing that? Do you secretly hate women? Do you want to go back to the '50s or whatever?" And so those education patterns and those labor market patterns are very similar and mental health patterns are very similar for boys and men in advanced economies. But the family patterns do differ quite significantly, right?

**Melissa Kearney:** Yeah. Well, interestingly, cohabitation is more of a long-term institution in European countries in particular. And so Pew Research Center did an amazing survey of 130 countries. U.S. children are exceptional in that they are the most likely to live in a one parent household in all countries in the world. And I say that facetiously. Obviously this is not an exceptionalism we should be proud of. And so even people often in the U.S. think like, oh, we're just becoming more like Europe. People live together. But actually parents in the U.S. don't cohabit in large numbers. Our kids are the most likely to live in a one-parent household, but other European countries are starting to catch up. There's huge increases in non-marital births in other— And again, I'm comparing to Europe and I think Canada because I'm looking at other

high-income countries. Non-marital childbearing is up, single-parent households are up.

And the other thing that you could see across high-income countries is this divergence across education group. So the increase in non-marital births and one-parent households is again happening much more outside the most highly educated in all of these countries. I was presenting some of the work before my book came out at a conference of demographers in Europe last year, and I mean people had their jaw on the floor and they came up to me, they're like, "I can't believe you're saying this. This is so anti-feminist. We would never lament the rise in single-parent households." And I was like, "Have you looked at the outcomes for kids? Take the U.S. case as a warning. This is not a feminist success story."

**Richard Reeves:** But it's also, I thought you were saying I can't believe it. Are you sure those numbers are right? But what's interesting is that no, no, I know that those are the facts. I just can't believe that you're stating them.

**Melissa Kearney:** As if it's a bad thing.

**Richard Reeves:** This is where I think we do strongly agree. And, actually, I think Melissa's very clear about the fact that there are no clear paths to bringing back marriage, but you think it's important to state facts. And I think that that's an incredibly important shared value here, which is even if the facts are uncomfortable, even if they make us feel, ooh, that's a bit, we should absolutely be sharing them. And that is absolutely a responsibility. And that includes the evidence that Melissa assembles around what happens to kids from single-parent households. It includes the evidence I assemble about what's really happening to boys and men, et cetera. And even if we don't have a neat policy solution to those problems, that there is never an excuse for looking away from facts just because they make us uncomfortable. And there's too much of that going on right now.

**Bill Haslam:** I'm struck, and one of the points of this is to try to decrease the polarization. And as I'm struck by listening to both of you, if I'm more on the progressive side, I have some things to nod my head. If I'm more conservative, I have some things to nod in my head. Are you all encouraged that there's a path to answer this that threads the incredible partisanship that we're in the middle of because there's something for everybody to love and something for everybody not to like?

**Melissa Kearney:** That's exactly right. I think everybody across the political spectrum should want to improve kids' lives. And so we should be doing much more in this country to protect kids, to help kids flourish. I am appalled at how little we do. We spend six times as much per elderly in this country as per kid. I think our country's response to the COVID pandemic couldn't have made it more obvious and clear how we deprioritize children. So the forever optimist in me says we should all agree that we should do more for kids. And then yet I continually am exasperated by nobody seems to be doing more for kids. But having said that, I think there's something for everyone to agree with and disagree with. Where do I end up? I think social conservatives who have lamented the decline in the two-parent family, ultimately were right. I

think those on the left who have lamented that we didn't do enough to help men who were hit by economic shocks, who lament that we don't do enough to support the resources of families, I think they are right. And so, basically, my position on this is we need to take both of those arguments and put them together.

**Richard Reeves:** One of my previous hobbies was the philosophy of John Stewart Mill, and he had a lovely line where he said, "All of us are walking around with false opinions or false facts. We just don't know which ones they are yet." And the purpose of engagement is to find out and to change your mind. I'm relatively encouraged. I mean, Melissa's right in the thick of it. Her book's just come out and so she's getting quite a lot of attention. But I'm encouraged in my own work, and I think you'll probably find this, too. There's probably two or 3% on each end of the spectrum who will just hate whatever you say, depending on what. So it doesn't matter how you say it, doesn't matter what the facts are. It doesn't matter what tone you adopt. It just doesn't matter. It just never going to get those people. And those people are all on Twitter 24 hours a day or on their email. There's like that cartoon—

**Bill Haslam:** Run for office. You'll feel that.

**Richard Reeves:** Yeah, the "someone's wrong on the internet people." But I just know there's 3% of social conservatives are going to hate everything I do because I'm in favor of increasing the economic position of women, and there's 3% of progressive activists are going to hate what I'm doing because I'm talking about the problems of boys and men and saying we need to pay attention to them. Well, guess what? Let's say it's between two and 3%. That still leaves us everybody else and everybody else recognizes that these are issues that we should address, and most people are able to presume the best of their intellectual opponent and not to assume that the reason Melissa's raising this issue is because secretly she wants to shame single parents or make people feel bad about themselves or whatever, rather than she's just a social scientist calling it as she sees it. So if we start with the presumption, that person's goodwill, they may have something to teach me, actually what turns out, the vast majority of people are in that camp, so we just ignore the two or 3% of the tails.

**Phil Bredesen:** Yeah, I think that it's been— As we're coming toward the end of our time here, would like to ask each of you a question. This podcast series is called "You Might Be Right." It's styled after Howard Baker's statement of the same thing. That you need to have an open mind because the other person might be right. Can you think either of you, or both of you, in a time in your professional careers when you had the experience of listening to someone and deciding that your position was entirely incorrect and that person really was right about the subject at hand?

**Melissa Kearney:** I have lots of examples, but this actually goes back to the Governor's first question, which was, or one of the first questions. Did I lead with this explanation? Did I come to it? In some sense, this book all comes from moments when I realized I was wrong over the past 20 years where I really was focused on economic policy levers. I kept arguing for we needed more transfer programs, we needed more job training, and all of that would address income



inequality. And I kept bumping up against this, and then I was even on a panel 10 years ago, where someone asked what would it take to turn around? I was like, "Better jobs for men." And I've since gone to that person and said, "You were right and I was wrong because then I did research and it turned out even when male employment increases, now we're in a new social paradigm and marriage doesn't increase and the non-marital pressure doesn't fall." And so I've had to sort of admit social conservatives were right in suggesting that a lot of this is cultural and social, and it's not about economic policy entirely.

**Richard Reeves:** Well, I'm worried right now that I may well be wrong about this question of the relationship between marriage and fatherhood and that Melissa and others may be right, and I think they have more of the recent evidence on their side, frankly. I just don't know what's going to happen going forward. But I wonder, and I think it's perfectly possible that I'll change my mind about this over the next few years, but I had a specific thing, which again speaks to Melissa's conversation about cohabitation. When I came to the US and I was doing some work at Brookings, I was doing some work on parenting, and you've got these cohabiting couples, and I told my research assistant there weren't very many cohabiting couples, just for the analysis to put the cohabiting couples in with the married couples. And she said, "No, we put them with the single parents."

I was like, "How dare you? What are you talking about? Are you saying cohabiting couples aren't as good as married couples?" Because in Europe, our standard social science would be to put the cohabiting couples with the married couples, because the key thing is there's two of them, not whether they've got a ring on their finger. And then you've got the single parents. And she said, "No, no, no, no. In the US, we—" I said, "Well, I want you to run it both ways, because I think you'll find the cohabiting couples come out much closer to the married couples." And she ran it and she was completely right. And it totally changed my mind about what cohabitation is like in the U.S. In the U.S., cohabitation is like single parenthood, or it's about to become single parenthood very quickly. Completely different. I was completely wrong about the status of cohabitation in the U.S.

**Phil Bredeesen:** I have to say, I'm astonished at that. I mean, what you just said, I would've easily said it's a no-brainer.

**Bill Haslam:** I'm sorry. We've literally hit a wall that we need to stop at, but this has been incredibly helpful and factual, and I think all of us appreciate the research and the boldness that you've taken to say things that aren't necessarily the things that people want to say out loud all the time. So thank you very much for joining us.

**Phil Bredeesen:** Thank you.

**Marianne Wanamaker:** Thanks for listening to "You Might Be Right." Be sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows. And please help spread the word by sharing, rating and reviewing the show.

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