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Cover Page Footnote

We acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of our sponsors or advisors. The authors wish to acknowledge the thoughtful guidance and counsel of David Sikkink. We would also like to thank Kathleen Wolf for her editorial assistance.

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The School to Family Pipeline: What Do Religious, Private, and Public Schooling Have to Do with Family Formation?

Patrick J. Wolf¹, Albert Cheng¹, Wendy Wang² and W. Bradford Wilcox³

Abstract: Private religious schools are widely seen as value-laden communities that mold the character of their students. Thus, we expect adults who attended religious schools as children to demonstrate more favorable family outcomes related to stable marriages and childbearing. We further expect Protestant schooling to have a more powerful effect on marital outcomes than Catholic schooling, given the heavier focus of Protestantism on marriage. Finally, we expect stronger positive associations between religious schooling and marital outcomes for adults who grew up in difficult circumstances compared to adults who grew up in advantaged circumstances. We test these hypotheses using survey data from the Understanding America Study. Our three outcome variables are ever marrying and never divorcing, ever divorcing, and conceiving a child out-of-wedlock. Most of the results confirm our hypotheses. Protestant schooling is associated with more positive marital outcomes across all three measures. Catholic schooling is significantly correlated with a lower likelihood of having a child outside of marriage. The associations between religious schooling and desirable marriage outcomes are strongest for adults who grew up poor and for those raised in intact families.

Keywords: private schools, religious schools, Catholic schools, Protestant schools, marriage, divorce, out-of-wedlock births

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Public debate and scholarly research regarding the effect of private schooling has focused primarily on its influence on students' human capital. Private schooling's effects, however, extend to other important domains of life (Casagrande et al., 2019b; Pennings et al., 2014). Indeed, many parents who select private schooling for their children do so for reasons that go beyond their children's academic success (Catt & Rhinesmith, 2016; Erickson, 2017). In selecting a private school, parents may wish to increase their family's social status, to shape their children's character in particular ways, or to deepen their religious faith (Yang & Kayaardi, 2004). By constituting a particular moral community (Hertzke, 1998; Hunter & Olson, 2018) and situating children in specific types of peer networks (Sacerdote, 2011), different kinds of schools may influence children's life outcomes in ways that extend well beyond their accumulation of human capital and their success in the labor force.

Different types of schooling influence a variety of character-related outcomes, from the odds that students get enmeshed in the criminal justice system (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2019; McEachin et al., 2020) to their level of participation in the democratic process (Campbell, 2006; Cheng & Sikkink, 2019). We know little, however, about how different types of schooling are linked to students' family life as adults. Insofar as different kinds of schools expose students to different values, norms, and social networks, they place young people on distinctive paths toward family formation and marital stability. The limited research that exists in this area indicates that religious schooling is associated with higher rates of marriage among young adults (Uecker & Hill, 2014; Uecker & Stokes, 2008), but we know little about how different forms of private schooling are related to the risk of divorce in adulthood or non-marital childbearing throughout one's life.

We examine how enrollment in Catholic, Protestant, or secular private schools, compared to public schools, is associated with different marital outcomes later in life. We analyze data from the Understanding America Study (UAS) to explore the links between adults' prior schooling and their odds of marrying, divorcing, and having a child outside of marriage. We examine four questions: (1) Is private religious schooling linked to more marriage, more stable marriages, and less non-marital childbearing? (2) Do some types of religious schools have stronger positive effects on marital outcomes than others? (3) Are the effects of religious schools on marital outcomes stronger for adults who grew up amidst conditions of financial insecurity compared to those who grew up financially secure? (4) Are the effects of religious schools on marital outcomes stronger for people who grew up in a household without their biological mother or father compared to those who grew up in an intact family? In answering these questions, we address a more fundamental question: do particular forms of schooling appear more likely to put students on a path toward forming and maintaining a stable, married family?

We proceed as follows. In section 2, we review the literature on the effects of private schools on student cognitive and character outcomes with special attention to how Catholic and Protestant schools represent values-rich moral communities. In section 3, we present our research hypotheses, derived from social science theory and the empirical literature. We describe our data and research methods in section 4. In section 5, we present the results of our analysis. Finally, in section 6, we discuss the implications of our findings for parents, students, schools, society, and education policy.

Literature Review

Human Capital Formation in Private Schools

Scholarly inquiry into the effectiveness of private schools came into prominence in the 1980s. These early works focus on human capital formation in the form of academic achievement and educational attainment. The studies often use nationally representative datasets of U.S. students to compare Catholic and public school students on test score and graduation outcomes. Though much of this body of research employs methods that cannot rule out sources of selection bias, many of these studies demonstrate a Catholic school advantage (Coleman et al., 1983; Bryk et al., 1993; Coleman, 1988; Evans & Schwab, 1995; Hoffer et al., 1985; Neal, 1997; Sander & Krautmann, 1995). Yet some studies report no Catholic schooling effects (Goldhaber, 1996; Noell, 1982). Other studies find Catholic schooling achievement and educational attainment gains only for certain subgroups of students, such as urban ethnic minorities (Altonji et al., 2005; Figlio & Stone, 1999; Murnane et al., 1985). These initial findings of a positive Catholic schooling effect have been confirmed in more recent work (Freeman & Berends, 2016).

Current scholarship primarily examines the effects of all types of private schools on children's human capital by virtue of their participation in private school choice programs. Catholic schools enroll most students in such programs (Lee et al., 2019; McShane et al., 2012; Waddington & Berends, 2018; Wolf et al., 2007), so private school choice effects are largely driven by the effects that Catholic schools have on participants. Many of these evaluations rely on randomized control trials to study the effect of being awarded a financial subsidy by lottery to enroll in a private school. The earliest programs generally demonstrate positive effects, especially for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Cheng & Peterson, 2020; Wolf & Egalite, 2018). More recent private school choice programs have zero to small positive effects on attainment and initial negative achievement effects that tend to fade out over time (Chingos, 2018; Chingos et al., 2019; Webber et al., 2019; Witte et al., 2014; Wolf et al., 2013, 2019). Exceptions to this pattern include the experimental evaluation of the Louisiana Scholarship Program, which reports no overall attainment effects but persistent negative achievement effects after four years (Erickson et al., 2021), and non-experimental studies of the Ohio and Indiana school voucher programs, which only examine achievement effects and report generally negative outcomes (Figlio & Karbownik, 2016;

Waddington & Berends, 2018). In sum, the research on private schooling suggests mixed effects on students' educational attainment and achievement.

Faith and Moral Formation in Private Schools

Although human capital formation is a shared educational aim among most schools, it is not the only aim. Schools focus on academic outcomes to different degrees both across and within the public and private education sectors. Many secular private schools primarily emphasize the goal of human capital formation, giving much attention to academic achievement and preparation for postsecondary education (Casagrande et al., 2019b; Wiens, 2018). Religious private schools, meanwhile, place greater emphasis on faith and moral formation than do their secular private counterparts. Within the general category of religious schools, Catholic and Evangelical Protestant schools differ in their emphasis on religious and moral formation (Casagrande et al., 2019a; MacGregor, 2018; Sikkink, 2012). These differences in private school “brands” are clear to parents who have ever faced the decision to enroll their child in a religious private school (Cheng et al., 2016; Erickson, 2017; Trivitt & Wolf, 2011). The contrast between Catholic and Evangelical Protestant schools largely derives from their respective institutional histories in the U.S. These histories influence the distinctive educational philosophies and practices of teaching and learning in each type of school.

Significant demographic shifts occurred in urban centers in the 1950s. Many white and wealthier families began moving to the suburbs; immigrants, people of color, and individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds became the predominant population of urban centers. Instead of closing or relocating, most Catholic parishes and their schools decided to serve their new neighbors (Brinig & Garnett, 2014). Drawing upon Catholic Social Teaching's emphasis on social justice and preferential treatment of the poor, Catholic schools reoriented themselves. They prioritized not only religious instruction in the Catholic faith but also academic excellence, postsecondary preparation, and civic education — educational goods that are crucial for promoting socioeconomic mobility (Cheng et al., 2016; Fenzel & Wyttenbach, 2019; Scanlan, 2013; Trivitt & Wolf, 2011).

The dual emphasis of academic excellence and faith-formation in Catholic schools is noticeably different from Evangelical Protestant schools, which tend to focus more on the latter than the former (Casagrande et al., 2019a; Cheng et al., 2016; Sikkink, 2012). Many Evangelical Protestant schools were established in the latter half of the 20th century in response to the perceived secularization of society. Social trends exemplified by key Supreme Court decisions — *Engel v. Vitale*, which banned prayer in public schools, and *Roe v. Wade*, which declared abortion to be a legal right — moved Protestant communities to start their own schools to provide an education more faithful to their tradition and values (Carper, 1983). Evangelical Protestant schools seek to inculcate

a “familistic” set of values that emphasizes the importance of stable marriage as the foundation of family life (Regnerus, 2003; Wilcox, 2004).

Moral Communities and Moral Ecologies

Schools are products of their respective histories and traditions. Their educational ends as well as their practical means toward those ends are grounded in particular ideals and normative views about human nature and a life worth living. In addition to the academic content, schools convey social mores, habits, and conceptions of a good life to their charges. Put differently, schools do not merely provide information; they play a crucial role in character *formation*. Schools are moral communities. They have a moral ecology, a concept Hunter and Olsen (2018) describe:

When social institutions—whether the family, peer relationships, youth organizations, the internet, religious congregations, entertainment of popular culture—cluster together, they form a larger ecosystem of powerful cultural influences. None of these is morally neutral. Indeed, all social institutions rest upon distinctive ideals, beliefs, obligations, prohibitions, and commitments—many implicit and some explicit—and these are rooted in, and reinforced by, well-established social practices. Taken together, these form a moral ecology.

(p. 11)

This ecosystem comprises a web of factors that fundamentally shape students who are situated in it. “Societal mores, families, churches, mediating institutions, businesses, and the state constitute the soil, air, water, flora, and fauna of the moral ecosystem,” writes Hertzke (1998, p. 652). The effect that schools and other communities have on individuals has been called the moral communities thesis and is supported by some empirical evidence (Stark, 1996). Several studies demonstrate the formative influence of religious communities, suggesting that broader moral ecosystem has a crucial pedagogical influence on religiosity, sexual behavior, theft, and other delinquent behavior (Finke & Adamczyk, 2008; Longest & Uecker, 2017; Regnerus, 2003).

Education economists typically attribute this formative influence of religious schools to peer effects, or the externalities that spill over from one student to another (Sacerdote, 2011). The breadth and depth of a school’s formative influence, however, is much greater than the sum of the ways individual students affect each other. Critical theorists argue that schools shape students in ways beyond the explicit curriculum and course offerings, including the hidden curriculum, which is “the unstated norms, values and beliefs that are transmitted to students through the underlying structure of meaning in both the formal content as well as the social relations of school and classroom life” (Giroux & Penna, 1979, p. 22). School communities transmit ways of viewing the world, character-forming practices, and beliefs about what is metaphysically plausible (Bourdieu, 1977; Weininger & Lareau, 2018).

Different types of schools draw upon diverse moral visions and embody them variously in practices. Religious private schools—whether Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Muslim, or Jewish—have a different ethos not only from nonreligious private schools but also from one another (Sikkink, 2018; MacGregor, 2018; Hunter & Olson, 2018; Wertheimer, 2018). Even among public schools, there are distinctions between rural and urban schools, not to mention charter school (Guhin, 2018; Fournier, 2018; Maloney, 2018). Undoubtedly, the shared understandings of marriage, family, and sexuality vary across schools. This variation can be observed in different approaches to sex education; official policies on sexual behavior for students and staff; norms and practices regarding dating, romance, and sex; and the family backgrounds of members of the school community (Hunter & Olson, 2018; MacGregor, 2018; Sikkink, 2018; Wertheimer, 2018; Zimmerman, 2015). Schools function as moral communities and represent the important formative components in the broader moral ecosystem.

The Influence of Catholic and Protestant School Ethos on Moral Formation

The theory of moral communities and moral ecosystems is consistent with a large body of empirical research on the life trajectories of students who attended religious private schools. Postsecondary education research suggests that attending religious private colleges and universities strengthens ties to religious communities, reinforces religious practices, cultivates unique conceptions about vocation, and instills a particular sexual ethic (Cheng & Sikkink, 2020; Davignon & Thomson, 2015; Hill, 2009; Schreiner, 2018; Vanderwoerd & Cheng, 2017). Nationally representative surveys of U.S. adults like the Cardus Education Survey, National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, and the National Study of Youth and Religion indicate that religious faith plays a more salient role in the lives of individuals who were educated in Catholic and Evangelical Protestant schools than in the lives of individuals who were educated in public schools. Religious service attendance and practice of private religious activities such as prayer are more common among graduates of religious private schools compared to individuals educated in public schools. Religious school graduates also exhibit higher rates of charitable donations, volunteering, and selection into health, education, and other occupational fields that focus directly on serving others. Religiosity levels are highest among attendees of Evangelical Protestant schools, likely due to the stronger emphasis on faith formation in these schools relative to Catholic schools (Casagrande et al., 2019a; Cheng & Sikkink, 2019; Hill, 2011; Pennings et al., 2014; Uecker & Stokes, 2008).

On the other hand, Catholic school graduates complete more years of education, are more likely to major in a STEM field, have higher employment incomes, and are more likely to hold a high-level managerial or executive job compared to Protestant school graduates (Casagrande et al., 2019a; Pennings et al., 2014). These patterns provide additional evidence to corroborate the dual emphasis of Catholic schools on both faith formation and academic excellence and the heavier emphasis of Evangelical Protestant schools on faith formation and eschewing worldly values.

The religious influence of Catholic and Evangelical Protestant schools is also reflected by trends in marriage and childbirth — the phenomena that are the focus of our study. The aforementioned surveys indicate that marriage rates are higher among individuals who attended religious schools for the majority of their primary and secondary education. Teenage birth rates and sexual activity are lower among religious school students. Graduates of Evangelical Protestant schools, however, marry and have children at younger ages than graduates of Catholic schools, once again suggesting the greater emphasis on faith formation as it pertains to views of the centrality of the family in Evangelical Protestant schools (Figlio & Ludwig, 2012; Uecker & Hill, 2014). We add to this body of literature by using another nationally representative sample of U.S. adults to examine a larger breadth of marital outcomes than researchers have studied previously, including divorce and out-of-wedlock births.

We also are interested in determining whether private school effects persist after controlling for family effects and sociodemographic factors. That's because family research has documented the intergenerational reproduction of marital outcomes. Children are more likely to form stable marriages of their own if they were raised in an intact, married family (Wolfinger, 2005). They also are more likely to bear their children in the context of marriage (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Family formation and family stability are tied to a variety of socioeconomic factors growing up including income and educational background (Cherlin, 2009; Wilcox, 2010). Other research has documented marked differences in marital outcomes by ethnic background (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016).

These non-schooling factors may explain or interact with any potential influence that schools have on their students' patterns of family formation and maintenance. Although some sociological theories of education are skeptical about the capacity of schools to overcome demographic factors (Bourdieu, 1979), others are more optimistic. Some scholars suggest that the school community provides sufficient forms of human, social, cultural, and other forms of capital to affect students in nontrivial ways (Brinig & Garnett, 2010; 2014; Cheng & Sikkink, 2019; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Coleman, 1988; Stewart & Wolf, 2014; Teachman et al., 1996).

Finally, we examine whether there are potential effect heterogeneities. Private schools may affect students with dissimilar demographic backgrounds in different ways. Some research on private school voucher programs, for instance, finds large effects for students from moderately disadvantaged backgrounds but no effects for the severely impoverished (Cheng & Peterson, 2020). Such a finding is consistent with the moral communities thesis and theory of moral ecologies. Schools occupy one place in the nexus of numerous formative influences. Insofar as the ideals embodied in the family, popular culture, peers, and other sources of influence are both salient and inconsistent with those found in school, the potential school effects may be mitigated. In their well-known study of Catholic schools, Bryk et al. (1993) note that

Catholic school faculty go to great lengths to help students and work with parents, but reciprocity is also expected. Students who seriously or chronically violate the community's norms must leave. Indeed, students are more likely to exit for this reason than for poor academic performance.

(p. 313)

The extent to which schools can accomplish this bridging of differences in cultural capital across families has been questioned by critical theorists (Bourdieu, 1979; Weininger & Lareau, 2018).

Research Hypotheses

We propose the following four specific research hypotheses about private schooling and student outcomes pertaining to marriage and family formation.

H1: Adults who attended religious private schools will have higher marriage rates, lower divorce rates, and a lower incidence of non-marital childbirths compared to adults who attended public schools.

H2: Adults who attended Protestant schools will have higher marriage rates, lower divorce rates, and a lower incidence of non-marital childbirths compared to adults who attended Catholic schools.

H3: The effects that religious private schools have on marriage, divorce, and non-marital childbirths will be larger for adults who grew up in households with lower financial security.

H4: The effects of religious schools on marital outcomes will be larger for adults who grew up without an intact family, that is, without both biological parents in the home.

Data and Methods

The Understanding America Study

We use the Understanding America Study (UAS) survey data to test our hypotheses. The UAS is a nationally representative internet panel of U.S. individuals over the age of 18. The data are maintained by the Center for Economic and Social Research at the University of Southern California. Respondents are selected through address-based sampling, and respondents without internet access are provided the necessary hardware to participate. The UAS currently has about 8,500 respondents who respond to approximately one survey each month. Each survey lasts around half an hour, and respondents are compensated financially for each survey they complete. The first wave (UAS1) was administered in 2014. Although there have been over 200 waves of UAS, not all respondents complete every wave. For our study, we rely on UAS20 and UAS37, completed by about 5,000 respondents at the time of our analysis. To ensure that our particular sample is nationally representative, we employ sampling weights in all of our analyses.

Independent Variables

The primary and secondary schooling background of each respondent is our main independent variable of interest. In UAS37, respondents reported whether they attended a public, Catholic, non-Catholic but religious, or non-religious private school for every year of their schooling from kindergarten through twelfth grade. We substitute the term “secular private” for the label “non-religious private.” We use this information to create a vector of binary variables that indicate the school sector in which each respondent primarily received her education. Following Sikkink (2012) and Pennings et al. (2014), respondents are classified as primarily educated in a given sector if they either spent the majority of their 13 years of schooling or a majority of their four years of high school in that sector.¹

The “non-Catholic religious” category poses a labeling challenge. Protestant schools compose about 90 percent of enrollments at non-Catholic but religious private schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). We were able to identify only six respondents in our sample that spent their primary and secondary education primarily in a religious private school that was neither Catholic nor Protestant. We leave those six observations in our analysis in order to maintain the representativeness of the sample, meaning that the category technically is “non-Catholic religious,” even as we assign it the more elegant and largely accurate descriptive title of “Protestant.” The Protestant label itself, of course, represents a polyglot of non-Catholic Christian denominations comprising fundamentalist, evangelical, and mainline varieties. If anything, this variability among the single category we call “Protestant” will make it less likely that we will observe consistent associations between the Protestant indicator variable and our marriage dependent variables.

Although our primary interest is in the effects of Catholic and Protestant schools on marital outcomes, we include secular private schools in the analysis. We do not have clear expectations regarding the effects of secular private schools on our dependent variables, given the absence of strong theory on the question, but include the results from that type of school for informational purposes.

¹ Incidences of respondents who spent the majority of their total schooling in a sector different from the sector in which they spent a majority of their high school years were rare. Such cases were resolved in the way that supported our ability to draw conclusions regarding the effects of religious schools on outcomes. Specifically, the Protestant category was favored in any such conflict, because it was the least common religious school type. Secular schooling was favored second, Catholic schooling third, and public schooling lost out in any conflict, because it was the most common school type. We implemented this practice to reduce the threat of Type II (false negative) errors in our analysis due to low analytic power stemming from the small size of some of our school type subsamples, especially those involving religious schools. This procedure resulted in 8, 20, and 35 additional Protestant, Secular, and Catholic schoolers.

Dependent Variables

We constructed our dependent variables based on information provided in UAS20. In that wave of the survey, respondents completed a variety of questions related to family life. They indicated their history of marriages and divorces. Respondents also disclosed a variety of details about their children including their ages. Using this information, we constructed the three dependent variables for our study.

First, we created a binary variable indicating whether the respondent was ever married and never divorced. We set the value of this variable equal to one for such respondents. The value of this variable was set equal to zero for respondents who were never married or married at some point but ever divorced.

Second, we created a binary variable to identify respondents who ever divorced. This variable was set equal to one for respondents who ever divorced and to zero if the respondent ever married but never divorced. For respondents who never married, this variable was set to missing, excluding them from the analysis on divorce.

Our third dependent variable is an indicator for whether the respondent ever had any non-marital births. By combining information from UAS20 about when each respondent was married and the ages of their biological children, we identified male and female respondents who ever claimed a biological child born outside of marriage. This variable was set equal to one for those respondents and zero for all other respondents.

Summary Statistics

The first panel of Table 1 provides summary statistics for our dependent variables for the full sample. Consistent with other data sources on family formation, 43 percent of respondents had ever been married but never divorced. Of respondents who had ever married, 42 percent had ever been divorced. Twenty-four percent of respondents had out-of-wedlock births, a pattern that parallels other research in this area (Wilcox, 2010).

The remaining panels provide descriptive information about marital outcomes by school type, financial security status, family structure, and ethnicity. Based on raw means, marriage rates were higher while divorce as well as non-marital birth rates were lower in Protestant and secular private schools than public schools. Differences in these outcomes between Catholic schools and public schools were less pronounced. Consistent with prior literature, marriage rates were lower while rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock births were higher for adults who faced financial insecurity as children (Wilcox, 2010). Adults who grew up in intact families tended to have better marital outcomes than those who did not grow up in such families (Wolfinger, 2005). Asian adults tended to have better marital outcomes than members of other ethnic groups while Black adults tended to have comparatively worse marital outcomes. These averages, however, did not adjust for

Table 1*Marital Outcomes by Sector*

	Number of Observations for Sample	Ever Married, Never Divorced	Ever Divorced	Had Non-Marital Birth
Full Sample	4,942	0.43	0.42	0.24
<i>By School Sector</i>				
Public School	4,366	0.41	0.43	0.26
Catholic School	410	0.49	0.40	0.16
Protestant School	91	0.63	0.20	0.10
Secular Private School	75	0.53	0.16	0.11
<i>By Childhood Financial Security</i>				
Financially Insecure Childhood Financially	2,724	0.43	0.44	0.26
Secure Childhood	2,218	0.43	0.39	0.22
<i>By Family Structure</i>				
Not from Intact Family	1,225	0.34	0.46	0.34
From Intact Family	3,717	0.47	0.41	0.20
<i>By Ethnic Background</i>				
White	3,670	0.46	0.42	0.20
Black	356	0.25	0.53	0.46
Hispanic	448	0.45	0.36	0.31
Asian	165	0.54	0.25	0.09

Note: Sampling weights included. The analytic sample predicting divorce is restricted to respondents who have ever been married.

demographic background variables. In the next section, we describe our regression framework that accounts for these factors.

Methods

Analysis for full sample.

To compare rates of marriage, divorce, and non-marital births for respondents across school types, we estimated a variety of logistic regression models. We used our set of school-type indicators to predict our three respective dependent variables of interest. Our models always controlled for a variety of background demographic characteristics to account for the ways these factors confound any potential school effect on marital outcomes. Specifically, we included controls for the respondent's gender, age, and ethnicity, along with their mother's highest level of education. We also controlled for whether respondents grew up in an intact family. We emphasize, however, that

our intent is not to estimate a completely unbiased school effect; our regression analysis does not provide that level of internal validity. Our study is correlational, not necessarily causal.

Although we do not have data on household income during childhood, we have information about respondents' financial security as children. We incorporated this information into our set of control variables. In UAS37, respondents were asked to select one of four descriptors for their financial situation while they grew up. The four options were: (a) We sometimes didn't have enough money to pay for basic food, clothing, and housing; (b) Money was tight but we had what we needed; (c) We had enough money to buy what we needed and other things we enjoyed; and (d) We didn't really have to worry about money. We included a set of dichotomous variables to indicate which of the four responses respondents selected, with the first response option as the omitted category.

Moderator analyses. After estimating results for the full sample, we conducted a series of moderator analyses to estimate school-type differences in marital outcomes for the two subgroups of the U.S. population in the last two hypotheses listed earlier (H3 and H4). We estimated the same logistic regression model described above but restricted the analytic sample to members of specific subgroups in order to learn if certain types of private schools have different marital effects on different subgroups of people.

We first considered respondents from financially secure and insecure households, that is, respondents who described their childhood financial situation as "Money was tight but we had what we needed" or "We sometimes didn't have enough money to pay for basic food, clothing, and housing" compared to other respondents who did not face such hardship. We then considered respondents who did and did not grow up with intact families.

Results

In this section, we present our findings in the form of marginal effects from logit estimations, thereby signaling the change in the probability of the given marriage outcome associated with each variable for the typical individual, adjusting for the influence of other important background factors. Our variables of greatest interest are specific types of private schools. By omitting the indicator variable for attending a public school, the marginal effect coefficients represent the adjusted differences in marriage, divorce, and out-of-wedlock birth rates of respondents who primarily attended Catholic, Protestant, or secular private schools compared to respondents who attended public schools.

Main Findings

Our primary findings focus on the effects of specific types of private schools – especially Catholic and Protestant schools – on the key marital outcomes of ever being married and never divorced,

ever being divorced, and ever being the cause of a birth outside of marriage (Table 2). Hypothesis 1 is mostly confirmed, as both types of religious private schools are associated with at least one statistically significant improvement in a marriage outcome. A student who received most of his K-12 education in a Catholic school is almost 6 percentage points less likely to have been a party to a non-marital birth than a descriptively similar student who received a majority of his K-12 education in a public school. The effect of Catholic schooling here on out-of-wedlock births is only statistically significant at a marginal level, however. Catholic schooling is positively associated with ever having been married but never divorced and negatively associated with ever having been divorced, but neither of those relationships is statistically significant.

Protestant religious schooling, a category dominated by Evangelical Christian schools, demonstrates a stronger and more consistent influence on desirable marital outcomes than does Catholic schooling. That finding confirms our Hypothesis 2. A student who received most of her K-12 education in a Protestant school is almost 20 percentage points more likely to have been ever married and never divorced than a comparable public-school student, a finding that is highly statistically significant. Protestant schooling also is associated with lower probabilities of ever having been divorced (20 percentage points) and ever causing a non-marital birth (14 percentage points). Both of those associations are statistically significant at the standard confidence level.

Like Catholic schooling, secular private schooling is associated with better marital outcomes across the board, but only one of those relationships is statistically significant. A student who was mostly educated in a secular private school is almost 28 percentage points more likely to have never been divorced than a similar public-school student, a finding that is highly statistically significant and the largest overall correlation of any type of private schooling with a marital outcome.

All these significant associations between the various types of private schooling and marital outcomes are drawn from regression models that simultaneously control for the effects of key background factors. Women are somewhat more committed to desirable marital outcomes than are men. Being female is associated with a more than six percentage point increased probability of the ever-married-never-divorced outcome, as well as a nine percentage point decrease in the ever-divorced condition and a more than three percentage point reduction in the non-marital birth outcome. Older individuals have a higher probability of both the ever-married-never-divorced outcome and the ever-divorced outcome, as we might expect, but also a lower probability of having caused a non-marital birth. Each decade of age is predictive of a three percentage point increase in the probability of ever having been married but never divorced, a seven percentage point increase in the probability of ever having been divorced, and a one percentage point decrease in the probability of ever being a party to a non-marital birth. Marital norms have changed over the past decades and individuals raised in earlier eras are less likely to have, or at least claim, a biological child born out of wedlock.

There are ethnic patterns to marital outcomes in our data. Compared to adults who identify as White, those who identify as Black are 17 percentage points less likely to ever have been married but never divorced, nearly 11 percentage points more likely ever to have been divorced, and 21 percentage points more likely to have been a party to a non-marital birth. Adults who identify as Hispanic are similar to Whites in their probabilities of ever having been married but not divorced and ever having been divorced but are nearly eight percentage points more likely to have had a non-marital birth. Those who self-identify as Asian are nearly 12 percentage points less likely to have ever been divorced and also almost 11 percentage points less likely to have caused an out-of-wedlock birth than otherwise similar White adults. Adults who identify with more than one race are about 15 percentage points less likely ever to have been married but never divorced though their rates of other marital outcomes are similar to their White peers.

If a respondent's mother completed college, he or she was more likely to have desirable marital outcomes. Those whose mothers attained college degrees were nearly seven percentage points more likely ever to have married but never divorced, eight percentage points less likely ever to have divorced, and 11 percentage points less likely to have caused a non-marital birth. Our variables measuring the levels of economic deprivation that respondents experienced as children generally are not significantly associated with marriage outcomes. The one exception is that respondents who said "We didn't really have to worry about money" while growing up are almost eight percentage points less likely to have caused a non-marital birth than are respondents who did worry about finances as children.

The marital norm modeled to respondents when they were children substantially influences their own marriage outcomes. All else being equal, adults who grew up in an intact family are eight percentage points more likely ever to have married but never divorced, nearly nine points less likely ever to have divorced, and over seven percentage points less likely to have been a party to a non-marital birth. These associations between growing up with both your mother and father together in the home and desirable marital outcomes for yourself are highly statistically significant.

The associations between these non-schooling background characteristics and the marital outcomes of our survey respondents are interesting and largely validate the data in our analysis. Their main role, however, is to minimize the bias in our estimates of the schooling effects on marriage outcomes by separating selection factors regarding the kinds of people who enroll in private schools from the independent effects of those schools on subsequent outcomes. As such, although we retain these crucial respondent background variables in our remaining regression estimates of private schooling effects, we only discuss the schooling effect results from this point on.

Table 2
Main Results

	Ever Married, Never Divorced	Ever Divorced	Non-Marital Birth
Catholic School	0.022 (0.035)	-0.053 (0.041)	-0.057* (0.034)
Protestant School	0.198*** (0.074)	-0.204** (0.088)	-0.138** (0.067)
Secular Private School	0.086 (0.076)	-0.278*** (0.104)	-0.140 (0.095)
Female	0.064*** (0.020)	-0.089*** (0.024)	-0.033* (0.018)
Age (in years)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.007*** (0.001)	-0.001** (0.001)
Black	-0.168*** (0.034)	0.105** (0.047)	0.212*** (0.037)
Hispanic	0.032 (0.036)	0.000 (0.041)	0.076** (0.031)
Asian	0.070 (0.058)	-0.117* (0.068)	-0.105*** (0.035)
More than one Race	-0.148*** (0.043)	0.086 (0.059)	0.046 (0.040)
Mother Completed High School	-0.002 (0.027)	0.026 (0.030)	-0.026 (0.024)
Mother Completed College	0.067** (0.033)	-0.080** (0.036)	-0.110*** (0.027)
Money was tight but we had what we needed	-0.013 (0.039)	-0.016 (0.043)	-0.030 (0.034)
We had enough money to buy what we needed and other things we enjoyed	-0.020 (0.040)	-0.028 (0.044)	-0.032 (0.035)
We didn't really have to worry about money	-0.011 (0.054)	-0.041 (0.061)	-0.075* (0.044)
Grew Up with Intact Family	0.081*** (0.025)	-0.085*** (0.029)	-0.072*** (0.020)
N	4,942	3,875	4,942

Notes: Sampling weights included. The analytic sample predicting divorce is restricted to respondents who have ever been married.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Results by Childhood Financial Security

Religious schools generally and Catholic schools particularly are known for benefiting income-disadvantaged students. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, the statistically significant effects of religious schools on desirable marriage outcomes are limited to the half of our sample who grew up with lower financial security (Table 3). The effects of Catholic schooling on marriage outcomes all are in the expected direction for adults who experienced financial insecurity as children, although only the nearly 12 percentage point decrease in the probability of ever having been divorced is statistically significant. The effects of Catholic schooling on marriage outcomes for adults who grew up with higher financial security all are non-significant and, in the case of ever being divorced, even point in an unexpected direction.

Consistent with Hypotheses 2 and 3, Protestant schools demonstrate strong and consistent effects on advancing all three of our desirable marriage outcomes but only for respondents who grew up with lower financial security. For that disadvantaged subgroup, attending a Protestant school for a majority of one's K-12 education is associated with a 32 percentage point increase in ever having been married but never divorced, a 24 percentage point decrease in ever being divorced, and a 36 percentage point decrease in having a child out of wedlock. Both the ever-married-never-divorced and non-marital birth effects are highly statistically significant while the ever-divorced finding is significant at the standard level. These are large effects on life-changing outcomes. Protestant schooling has no significant effects on marriage outcomes for adults who were raised in financially secure homes.

Unlike religious private schooling, the effects of secular private schooling on desirable marital outcomes are limited to adults who grew up amidst higher financial security. Secular private schools demonstrate no significant effects on any marital outcome for adults raised amidst lower financial security. For the subgroup of adults raised in households with higher financial security, secular private schooling has no significant effect on the ever-married-never-divorced outcome but large desirable effects on ever having been divorced (a 34 percentage point decrease) and ever causing a non-marital birth (a 20 percentage point decrease). For the economically elite students who secular private schools regularly serve, the schools appear to deliver large benefits regarding avoiding undesirable marriage and childbearing outcomes.

Results by Family Structure

Children raised in households absent either their biological mother or father are more susceptible to a host of adverse life outcomes, including undesirable marriage conditions. That reality is confirmed by the strong association of our intact family control variable with positive marriage outcomes in our main findings. Our Hypothesis 4 is informed by the claims of prior scholars that private schools fill the breach left by the absence of a biological parent in a child's

Table 3
Results by Childhood Financial Security

	Lower Security			Higher Security		
	Ever Married, Never Divorced	Ever Divorced	Non-Marital Birth	Ever Married, Never Divorced	Ever Divorced	Non-Marital Birth
Catholic School	0.064 (0.050)	-0.115** (0.056)	-0.085 (0.053)	-0.031 (0.048)	0.032 (0.058)	-0.030 (0.042)
Protestant School	0.319*** (0.097)	-0.244** (0.122)	-0.359*** (0.107)	0.102 (0.108)	-0.163 (0.128)	-0.021 (0.073)
Secular Private School	0.102 (0.125)	-0.201 (0.164)	-0.063 (0.139)	0.056 (0.097)	-0.343*** (0.120)	-0.198* (0.106)
Female	0.072*** (0.028)	-0.091*** (0.032)	-0.026 (0.025)	0.052* (0.030)	-0.089*** (0.034)	-0.043* (0.024)
Age	0.003*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.009*** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Black	-0.163*** (0.045)	0.120** (0.061)	0.190*** (0.049)	-0.165*** (0.051)	0.076 (0.077)	0.244*** (0.055)
Asian	0.034 (0.074)	-0.057 (0.095)	-0.099* (0.054)	0.123 (0.085)	-0.249*** (0.058)	-0.122*** (0.028)
More than one Race	-0.071 (0.061)	0.007 (0.068)	0.092 (0.058)	-0.244*** (0.053)	0.203** (0.095)	-0.010 (0.045)
Hispanic	0.065 (0.047)	-0.030 (0.054)	0.066 (0.041)	0.002 (0.054)	0.017 (0.061)	0.074 (0.046)
Mother Completed High School	0.012 (0.032)	0.022 (0.037)	-0.035 (0.030)	-0.017 (0.047)	0.004 (0.052)	-0.026 (0.040)
Mother Completed College	-0.009 (0.044)	-0.014 (0.050)	-0.094** (0.038)	0.120** (0.052)	-0.139*** (0.053)	-0.122*** (0.041)
Grew up in Two-Parent Home	0.058* (0.032)	-0.064* (0.036)	-0.049* (0.027)	0.117*** (0.040)	-0.119*** (0.045)	-0.102*** (0.029)
N	2,724	2,178	2,724	2,218	1,697	2,218

Notes: Sampling weights included. Analytic samples predicting divorce are restricted to respondents who have ever been married. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

home. Are they correct, according to our survey data?

Our findings fail to support the hypothesis that religious schooling most benefits adults who grew up without an intact family (Table 4). Five of the six effects of Catholic and Protestant private schooling on our three marital outcomes are not statistically significant for adults who grew up without an intact family. Several of the relationships point in the unexpected direction. Protestant schooling does have a large, positive, highly statistically significant association with the ever-married-never-divorced outcome for adults who grew up without an intact family, boosting its likelihood by almost 41 percentage points. Secular private schooling is associated with a reduced probability of respondents who grew up without an intact family ever having been divorced by almost 35 percentage points, though the relationship is only marginally statistically significant.

All three types of private schooling demonstrate more consistent effects on desirable marital outcomes for the subgroup of respondents who grew up with their biological mother and father in the home. Catholic schooling reduces the probability of non-marital births for such adults by seven percentage points. Protestant schooling increases the probability of ever having been married but never divorced by almost 14 percentage points, decreases the likelihood of ever having been divorced by 20 percentage points, and decreases the probability of causing a non-marital birth by over 11 percentage points for adults who grew up with an intact family. Secular private schooling, like Protestant private schooling, positively effects all three marital outcomes for respondents who grew up with intact families. There are many documented benefits of growing up in a stable intact family, from greater educational attainment to less delinquency (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Lerman & Wilcox, 2014). Our data indicate that the reinforcement of positive marriage norms in private schools and home is yet another one.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has several limitations. The adults in our sample self-selected into the types of schools they attended as children. Thus, we cannot rule out selection bias as a factor in producing the results we see here. We can only be confident that different types of private schooling are associated with better or worse marital outcomes, not that the schooling itself necessarily caused those outcomes.

We are unable to identify the specific mechanisms that drive the associations we observe between religious private schooling and positive marriage outcomes. Theory suggests that the moral ecology of religious private schools, and the character formation of students that stems from it, is the likely mechanism behind our findings, but peer effects, improved career and life trajectories, or the increased likelihood of marriage within one's religious faith each and all could play a role. We can establish that most types of religious private schools are associated with many positive marriage

Table 4
Results by Family Structure

	Grew Up Without Intact Family				Grew Up With Intact Family			
	Ever Married, Never Divorced	Ever Divorced	Non-Marital Birth		Ever Married, Never Divorced	Ever Divorced	Non-Marital Birth	
Catholic School	0.030 (0.075)	-0.040 (0.101)	0.021 (0.097)		0.019 (0.039)	-0.054 (0.044)	-0.072** (0.034)	
Protestant School	0.407*** (0.152)	-0.236 (0.202)	-0.208 (0.175)		0.137* (0.082)	-0.202** (0.095)	-0.114* (0.066)	
Secular Private School	-0.092 (0.128)	-0.345* (0.208)	-0.039 (0.198)		0.166* (0.097)	-0.283** (0.122)	-0.256*** (0.080)	
Female	0.123*** (0.038)	-0.191*** (0.051)	-0.120*** (0.040)		0.041* (0.024)	-0.058** (0.027)	0.001 (0.019)	
Age	0.003** (0.001)	0.010*** (0.002)	-0.001 (0.001)		0.003*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)	-0.002*** (0.001)	
Black	-0.103** (0.048)	0.020 (0.075)	0.239*** (0.054)		-0.221*** (0.045)	0.175*** (0.061)	0.199*** (0.051)	
Asian	0.026 (0.116)	-0.043 (0.195)	-0.203*** (0.044)		0.062 (0.066)	-0.129* (0.071)	-0.077* (0.040)	
More than one Race	-0.120* (0.062)	0.047 (0.092)	0.166** (0.077)		-0.153*** (0.059)	0.112 (0.076)	-0.047 (0.032)	
Hispanic	-0.025 (0.062)	-0.007 (0.082)	0.078 (0.064)		0.057 (0.042)	-0.001 (0.046)	0.074** (0.035)	
Mother Completed High School	0.053 (0.045)	-0.050 (0.064)	-0.014 (0.050)		-0.024 (0.032)	0.049 (0.034)	-0.030 (0.027)	
Mother Completed College	0.088 (0.057)	-0.158** (0.074)	-0.123** (0.057)		0.054 (0.039)	-0.057 (0.041)	-0.102*** (0.030)	
Money was tight but we had what we needed	-0.005 (0.054)	-0.024 (0.064)	-0.040 (0.054)		-0.012 (0.052)	-0.016 (0.057)	-0.024 (0.045)	
We had enough money to buy what we needed and other things we enjoyed	-0.057 (0.058)	-0.015 (0.071)	-0.016 (0.061)		-0.006 (0.052)	-0.035 (0.058)	-0.034 (0.045)	
We didn't really have to worry about money	-0.035 (0.100)	0.030 (0.133)	-0.090 (0.083)		0.003 (0.066)	-0.058 (0.072)	-0.065 (0.054)	
N	1,225	859	1,225		3,717	3,016	3,717	

Notes: Sampling weights included. Analytic samples predicting divorce are restricted to respondents who have ever been married. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

outcomes for most types of students, but further research is needed to identify why religious schools have these positive relationships with stable family lives.

We rely on the adults' responses to be accurate regarding their K-12 educational history, key conditions of their childhood, and their own marital outcomes. The one marital outcome most likely to be under-reported by respondents, due to social desirability bias, is non-marital child births. We calculate that key variable ourselves, using information each respondent provided regarding the dates of their marriages and the ages of their children, neither of which is likely to be remembered inaccurately. Still, respondents must claim a child born out of wedlock as their biological offspring in order for us to classify that respondent correctly as having caused a non-marital birth. It is possible that we are missing some cases of out-of-wedlock births in our data. Some of the subsamples in our moderator analysis rely on small samples that may be generating false negative findings due to a relatively low signal-to-noise ratio.

With these limitations in mind, our empirical study is the first one we know of focused on the long-run effects of different types of private schools, especially religious ones, on the three vital marital outcomes of a stable marriage, eschewing divorce, and avoiding an out-of-wedlock birth. In theory, religious schooling holds the promise of improving the future marital outcomes of students by forming their character in ways that are consistent with religious values and virtuous behavior. Protestant schools, specifically, strongly emphasize the moral formation of their students with regards to marriage and sexuality. Adults who faced unique challenges as children, due to finances or family instability, might have the most to gain from private religious schooling when it comes to improving their future family outcomes. Drawing from the responses of a representative sample of nearly 5,000 American adults in the Understanding America Study, we tested these expectations empirically.

Our findings are a mix of validation and surprise. Religious schooling is associated with higher rates of stable marriage, lower rates of divorce, and lower rates of births outside of marriage. The positive relationships between religious schooling and marital outcomes are larger and more consistent for Protestant schools than for Catholic ones. The distinctively strong family effects associated with Protestant schooling are consistent with the idea that these schools are part of "moral communities" that focus much of their normative message on strong and stable marriages (Wilcox, 2004). The smaller and less consistent positive associations between Catholic schooling and marital outcomes likely are due to the dual emphasis of Catholic schools on academic excellence and character formation.

Another reason why Protestant schooling is associated with better marital outcomes than Catholic schooling could be due to Catholic schools enrolling a more diverse student population than Protestant schools, including many non-Catholics. To explore that possibility, we conducted a follow-up analysis of the extent to which Protestant and Catholic schooling was associated with

better marital outcomes for co-religionists compared to non-co-religionists.² The association between Protestant schooling and better marital outcomes was stronger for Protestants and weaker for non-Protestants. The results for Catholic schools differed. The association between Catholic schooling and better marital outcomes was stronger for *non-Catholics* than for Catholics, although the difference fell short of statistical significance in this underpowered analysis. Still, the evidence suggests that at least some of the outperformance of Protestant schools compared to Catholic schools in boosting marital outcomes is due to Protestant schools largely reinforcing the moral messages that their co-religionists are receiving at home, whereas the moral guidance of Catholic schools regarding marriage and sexuality appears to bear its greatest fruit for the many non-Catholics those schools educate.

Only adults who grew up amidst lower financial security clearly and consistently experience better marital outcomes if they attended religious, especially Protestant, schools. Conversely, only the adults who grew up amidst higher financial security clearly and consistently experience better marital outcomes if they attended secular private schools. This pattern of results is consistent with a compensatory vision of religious schooling, whereby religious private schools compensate for resource deficiencies in a student's background and thereby provide their largest positive effects on their most disadvantaged subgroups of students. While this issue remains underexplored, early research on private schooling effects on student achievement (Howell et al., 2002) and educational attainment (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Neal, 1997) report stronger and more consistent effects on low-income African American students. A recent study of Milwaukee's private school voucher program finds that access to private, overwhelmingly religious schools has its clearest positive effect on reducing criminal behavior for students from non-religious families (Rhames & Wolf, 2021). The moral lessons delivered in religious private schools seem to achieve their greatest sway for students lacking key resources.

In a surprising deviation from that pattern, all types of private schools demonstrate their clearest positive associations with the marital outcomes of adults who grew up in intact families. Such results suggest that children in homes that lack one or both of their biological parents face special challenges in achieving positive marriage outcomes that even religious schools have difficulty addressing. More research on the interaction among student backgrounds, marital outcomes, and private schooling is desperately needed. Overall, the results we have uncovered here suggest that private schools create value beyond the mere accumulation of human capital, specifically by promoting the formation and sustenance of stable families.

² Results available by request.

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