

Reducing Divorce Through Community-Level Marriage Initiatives

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by [Alan J. Hawkins](#)

In a handful of previous IFS blogs, I have focused on the effectiveness of relationship education programs and their ability to decrease rates of family instability (see [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#)). Although research shows that relationship education (RE) programs can help couples strengthen their marriages,¹ only a few studies have shown a (modest but significant) impact on divorce rates.² Couples who are struggling in their marriage occupy a lot of chairs and love seats in RE programs.³ Helping a few strengthen their relationships and even avoid divorce is a laudable accomplishment.

But can we think in bigger terms? Can we scale up RE services to saturate a community? Could RE make a larger impact than for just a few couples? And, importantly, could it have a measurable impact on community divorce rates?

That's what a recent study,⁴ which was presented at the [2018 National Association for Relationship and Marriage Education](#) conference, set out to test. The study, which has not yet been published, tried to evaluate the impact of a [Culture of Freedom Initiative \(COFI\)](#) program in the Jacksonville, Florida, area, which aimed to saturate the area with RE services.

COFI worked mainly through churches in this Bible-belt community and had a strong coordinating organization leading the initiative ([Live the Life](#)). The organization helped churches build up and publicize their RE services, including premarital education, marriage enrichment programs, and an intensive program for couples thinking seriously about divorce called "Hope Weekend." It's important to note that COFI had substantial financial support from a philanthropic organization.

So, what did this study find?

- Over two years, COFI efforts helped to put 22,000 people through RE services in the Jacksonville area (Duval County). And publicity tried to target those at most risk for divorce.
- The divorce rates in Duval County and the rest of Florida were almost identical in 2015.
- But the divorce rate in the Jacksonville area fell by almost 30% in the first two years of the COFI project (2015-2017) to a record low. The divorce rate in the rest of Florida fell by just 8% in that same time period. (For various reasons, divorce rates nationwide have been going down slightly.)
- Thus, Jacksonville saw more than three times the decrease in divorce as the rest of Florida. This was the greatest decrease in any of the 31 Florida counties (with populations more than 150,000) for nearly 50 years of record keeping.

These are impressive findings, but are they real and reliable? Several noted researchers reviewed the study and, with appropriate scholarly qualifications, expressed confidence that the study was capturing a real phenomenon. For instance, sociologists IFS senior fellow W. Bradford Wilcox (University of Virginia) and Spencer James (Brigham Young University) said:

Our initial data analysis suggests that the COFI effort . . . has had an exceptional impact on marital stability in Duval County. . . . As family scholars, we have rarely seen changes of this size in family trends over such a short period of time. Although it is possible that some other factor besides COFI's intervention also helped, we think this is unlikely. In our professional opinion, given the available evidence, the efforts undertaken by COFI in Jacksonville appear to have had a marked effect on the divorce rate in Duval County.

Work is underway to try to replicate these results in more communities. If these results are replicated, I think they have some important implications for efforts to strengthen marriages and decrease family instability and its effects, including the following”

Utilize the Religious Sector. Many churches promote healthy marriages and often provide RE services. Some research suggests that religious providers can be just as effective as secular, university-based providers.⁵ We can do more when working with the religious sector. Churches also provide a network of individuals ready for RE and trusting of the services offered. It's easier to recruit and retain participants. It's even possible that group dynamics in these religious settings increase the effectiveness of these RE programs because participants may know other participants better and support each other's efforts outside of class. And relationship skills taught may be effectively supported by religious principles. (We can't say whether community-saturation initiatives like COFI would be successful working through secular providers. That is an important question that needs to be tested with more research. One quasi-experimental study of three mostly secular community initiatives did not show impacts.⁶

Think Community/Culture, Not Just Individual Couples. We need to think about service delivery differently. Rather than just finding couples to come to programs, make RE part of the community. Saturate the area with programs and awareness; create a culture of RE. This can help build an understanding that normal people seek out this kind of help and combat any stigma associated with attending RE classes.

Don't Be Afraid to Think Big. Taking on big demographic trends like divorce can seem like a fool's errand. But maybe impacting the divorce rate isn't so daunting. Jacksonville's experience suggests that we may be able to impact this trend one community at a time. And the COFI model can be straightforwardly replicated.

As I noted earlier, this study has not yet been published; it needs peer review and, most importantly, replication. But here is some good news about replication. Dennis Stoica, one of the primary figures behind the Jacksonville community marriage initiative, wants to assist other communities to replicate this model. And even better news: A fund has been set up to support further efforts to implement and test this model. The mission of the Community Marriage Initiatives Fund is to promote, encourage, and support a community-wide implementation of Marriage Ministries that deliver relationship education services as a way

to reduce county-wide divorce rates. The fund's target is to distribute up to 20 grants per year, of between \$10,000 to \$20,000 each, to non-profit organizations who are interested in attempting to implement the Jacksonville model with the goal of significantly reducing their own county's divorce rate.

Interested individuals and organizations should contact Dennis Stoica at: Dennis@MarriageInitiatives.org

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