



Mitch Pearlstein, Founder, Center of the American Experiment

Family breakdown leads to disastrous social problems

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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Summary

Family fragmentation is the overwhelming social disaster of our time in this country and the root cause of society's problems, according to Center of the American Experiment (CAE) Founder and Senior Fellow Mitch Pearlstein. He notes that nationally, 30 percent of white babies, 50 percent of Hispanic babies and 70 percent of African American babies are born out of wedlock. In Minneapolis and St. Paul and Ramsey and Hennepin Counties, the out-of-wedlock percentage for African American babies is in the mid-80s. He argues that as long as that trend continues, the achievement gap between whites and African Americans will, in most cases, never be resolved.

Pearlstein is an advocate of private-school choice, believing that private-school education, especially religious-school education, would work best for many at-risk kids. He is optimistic about the chances in upcoming Minnesota legislative sessions for education savings accounts, scholarships or tax credits that could be used for private schools.

He asserts that Minnesota's civic infrastructure leans to the left and that most civic institutions here don't take up the cultural and moral questions he considers vital. He says a number of people on the left agree with some of the issues he raises, but they don't want to say so publicly. He argues that our political and civic system, including the party caucus system, is structured in a way that doesn't work.

Making more men, particularly minority men, marriageable could help attack the problem of family fragmentation, Pearlstein believes. He notes the importance of a decent education and believes apprenticeships could lead to opportunities for young people to learn a skill and earn an income. That, in turn, could lead to more marriage and more kids growing up in two-parent families.

Biography

Mitch Pearlstein is founder and, and at the time of this interview, president of Center of the American Experiment (CAE), a Minnesota-based, nonpartisan, tax-exempt, public policy and education

institution founded in 1990. CAE brings conservative and free-market ideas to bear on the hardest problems facing Minnesota and the nation. After 25 years as president, Pearlstein recently stepped down and was named "Founder and American Experiment Senior Fellow," a post in which he will continue writing and speaking full-time about education, family and other issues.

Before his 1990 return to the Twin Cities, Pearlstein served for two years during the Reagan and first Bush administrations in the U.S. Department of Education. He held three positions there, including director of outreach for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Just prior to his federal service in Washington, Pearlstein spent four years as an editorial writer and columnist for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, where he focused on foreign and national affairs.

He also has served as special assistant for policy and communications to Minnesota Gov. Al Quie, assistant to University of Minnesota President C. Peter Magrath, research fellow at the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs, director of public information at Binghamton University (New York), reporter for Binghamton's *The Sun Bulletin*, and a columnist for *CityBusiness* and *Twin Cities Business Monthly*.

A former adjunct professor of public administration at Hamline University in St. Paul, Pearlstein earned his Ph.D. in educational administration, with an emphasis on higher education policy, at the University of Minnesota. He did his undergraduate work in political science at Binghamton University.

Background

The Civic Caucus is currently undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major public problems. The Caucus interviewed Center of the American Experiment's (CAE's) Mitch Pearlstein to learn more about CAE's role in the state's policy process and to get his assessment of how well Minnesota's policy process is working today.

Discussion

Both conference-table and kitchen-table conversations are essential. According to Mitch Pearlstein of Center of the American Experiment (CAE), a conference-table conversation might include public officials, business people, foundations and community leaders. It would likely consist of talk about budgets and rules, policies and laws, and, perhaps, racism. He said those are "fine conversations," but they don't deal with some of the issues people routinely talk about in "kitchen-table" conversations, which can take place in kitchens, restaurants or other places. "There," he said, "you also talk about religion, motivation and family fragmentation. I would argue that those are closer to the mark than the conference-table conversations, though both are essential." He asserted that conference-table conversations simply don't touch the kinds of issues he finds quite important.

The focus of civic infrastructure in this community is almost entirely on policy, not on culture. "Policy is essential; it is not sufficient," Pearlstein said. CAE focuses on both, he said.

Family fragmentation is the overwhelming social disaster of our time in this country. Pearlstein continued by saying the breakdown of the family is a root cause of society's problems. "I'm struck, not

surprised, by how reluctant people are to discuss family breakdown or family fragmentation," Pearlstein said. "People don't want to be judgmental."

He offered statistics on the percentage of babies born out of wedlock nationally: 30 percent of white babies, 50 percent of Hispanic babies and 70 percent of African American babies. Overall, nationally, 40 percent of all babies and 50 percent of babies born to young people are born outside of marriage. And he noted that in Minneapolis and St. Paul and Ramsey and Hennepin Counties, the out-of-wedlock percentage for African American babies is in the mid-80s.

"Whatever issue we're talking about, be it poverty, inequality, education, or crime, it's impossible to understand and deal adequately with those issues unless we recognize issues of family fragmentation," he said. "How in the world do we expect to close or narrow achievement gaps with numbers like that? Except in rare instances, it's impossible, not just difficult, to have black kids catch up with white kids."

Many people are stuck socio-economically or at least feel stuck. Pearlstein said this will cause more demands to be put on government here and across the country, which is not good news for a conservative. "The degree to which we ignore family breakdown in that equation is stunning," he said.

When the employer-led [Itasca Project](#) was examining income disparities around the Twin Cities region, Pearlstein said, it looked at household income. White households have more working adults than African American or Hispanic households, he said, which alone will lead to a fair amount of inequality.

Private-school education, especially religious-school education, would work best for many kids "with holes in their hearts." Pearlstein described kids "with holes in their hearts" as children living without their fathers or without their mothers. He believes, and has for many years, that many of these children would do best in private, especially religious, schools.

He said the late John Brandl, Humphrey School professor and Minnesota legislator, shared that belief and worked on behalf of vouchers that would allow families to choose private school options for their children. Pearlstein is optimistic about the chances in upcoming Minnesota legislative sessions for education savings accounts, scholarships or tax credits that could be used for private schools. He said House Speaker Kurt Daudt supports proposals like these.

Pearlstein said he doesn't know of any professors in the schools of education in the Twin Cities who have publicly supported private-school choice. But, he said, polls show that a majority of Americans support private-school choice, with African Americans being the most supportive group.

He noted that many education policy nonprofits in Minnesota, like [Generation Next](#) or [MinnCAN](#) , "don't support the kind of choice I believe would work best for many, many kids."

"Many of the things I write," he said, "people on the left agree with. They just don't want to say so publicly."

Besides CAE, only one other organization in the Twin Cities focuses on questions of family fragmentation: the Minnesota Family Council. But, Pearlstein said, because the Family Council takes positions on issues like abortion and same-sex marriage, people in the middle and on the left

don't want to listen to it. By default, then, CAE has been the one putting the issues of family fragmentation on many tables. CAE has never taken a position on abortion.

Many of the people having great problems aren't steeped in Minnesota's civic culture and process. Pearlstein pointed out that today Minnesota is more diverse and multicultural than before. Many newcomers and people suffering from economic and social problems don't know about our history and salutary culture and how to participate in the civic and political process.

In Minnesota's civic infrastructure, everything leans left. Pearlstein indicated he's talking about policy groups, universities and other groups. "I think that is unfortunate," he said. CAE tries to work through coalitions. He called the Citizens League a "magnificent operation," saying that it tries not to be ideological. But CAE's job *is* to be ideological, he said. Overall, he asserted, most civic institutions here don't take up some of the questions that are vital.

Why is it that achievement gaps and income gaps between whites and blacks are greater here than elsewhere? "I don't think we're any more bigoted here than other places," Pearlstein said.

He noted that in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, the Twin Cities had a small black community. Over the last 25 years-plus, he said, many blacks came here trying to escape Detroit, Chicago and other places where life was more difficult and more dangerous. And some people came here to commit crime and to receive welfare benefits.

He argued that has left the Twin Cities with a disproportionately high number of relatively new arrivals in the African American community and a disproportionately small number of solidly middle-class African Americans compared to other places.

"I've never had this argument refuted," he said. "But we don't want to deal with this. The institutions in town don't want to acknowledge this."

Conservative views of the importance of family breakdown get stuck in the policy cycle in this community. An interviewer commented that Pearlstein's arguing that the data on family breakdown is compelling, but the interviewer said somehow the data don't translate into definition of the problem or into policy proposals. He asked Pearlstein whether the problem was with the policy process or with an inability to come up with proposals. Pearlstein responded that there is definitely a problem in coming up with specific proposals, but the policy process is also problematic.

People who are successful refuse to preach what they practice. Pearlstein said successful people know what it takes to have a solid family and career, but they don't tell kids to finish high school *and* get married before they have babies. "We don't have institutions saying that," he said. An interviewer commented that ever since the 1960s, it's been illegitimate to tell other people what to do. Pearlstein agreed.

Making more men marriageable could help attack the problem of family fragmentation. An interviewer asked what small step the Legislature could take to attack the problem of family fragmentation. Pearlstein responded that he's seeking to make more men marriageable. He said a lot of men who used to be able to support a family can't do so anymore because of the departure of good-paying jobs for low-skilled people out of urban areas and, in some cases, out of the country.

"How do we make more men, particularly minority men, urban people, more marriageable?" he asked. "I go back to education. They are closely tied together. We have to make sure kids have a decent education, so they have a chance to earn a living and be marriageable. A lot of women don't want anything to do with these guys, not just because they don't have skills and good jobs. They can be abusive in disproportionate numbers, as well as alcoholics and drug addicts."

He said one of his emphases is on apprenticeships as a way of better tying together questions of education and family. "If young people have opportunities to learn a skill and to earn an income, presumably that would lead to more marriage and more kids growing up in two-parent families," he said.

Do we need a body that's confronting the organizations of Minnesota's civic infrastructure, challenging them to come up with specific proposals that are helpful? In response to an interviewer asking that question, Pearlstein said he didn't think he'd listen to an organization like that telling him what to do. "I listen to my board and to a good idea," he said, noting that it would be helpful if the *Star Tribune*'s editorial page raised more forcefully some of the issues he's raising. "I'm not suggesting that everyone in town agrees with me," he said, "but it'd be nice if those who do would speak up."

He recalled an interview he once had with then-U.S. Department of Education Secretary William Bennett. In his final question, Pearlstein asked Bennett how one can change the very culture of society. He said Bennett responded, "Say what you believe in your heart to be true and say it over and over again."

Should voluntary year-round schooling for at-risk kids be considered? An interviewer recalled the Oct. 30, 2015, [Civic Caucus interview with Growth & Justice President Dane Smith](#). Smith had discussed the number of young men who are growing up deficient in so many ways in terms of dealing with life. The interviewer said Smith did not disagree with the interviewer's assertion that voluntary year-round schooling, all day, six days a week, would be beneficial for at-risk kids. The interviewer said this would be a way of doing what needs to be done for these kids that's not being done elsewhere. He asked Pearlstein for his thoughts about the proposal.

Pearlstein responded that he's for any number of options. He noted that he is chair of the board of OAK (Opportunity for All Kids), an organization promoting school choice. "We all support chartered schools," he said. "But charter supporters don't support us. I'm willing to try just about anything."

The interviewer asked what stands in the way of trying, of experimenting. Pearlstein said in some instances, it is Education Minnesota, the state teachers union, and in some instances, it's money.

He noted that Richard McKenzie, a now-retired economist at the University of California, Irvine, who grew up in an orphanage in North Carolina, has studied the graduates of his orphanage. Pearlstein said McKenzie found that people who had been at the orphanage, "The Home," were doing better by every measure than the rest of the population: education, income, marriage stability, etc. McKenzie wrote a book asserting that orphanages are a good idea in some instances.

"A lot of people beat up on that idea," Pearlstein said. Orphanages were different back then, he asserted, when many kids were there because their parents had no money or a parent had died. Now

the kids who might go to an orphanage are kids who've gone through foster-care situations, who might be emotionally damaged.

"We talk all the time about how we don't invest in our kids, but that's not true," he said. "We spend more money on education than just about any place."

Our political and civic system is structured in a way that doesn't work. Several interviewers had questions and comments about how the political system lacks financial integrity, responds only to special interests and prevents public officials from speaking publicly about proposed policies or projects. "We're structured in such a way that it doesn't seem to work," Pearlstein responded. "We have a caucus system in which the only people who can fully participate are graduate students who don't have to get up in morning." He noted that nothing is stopping people from writing opinion pieces in the newspaper and said we need people running for office who will speak the truth as they truly see it.

An interviewer commented that we need a way to get an issue on the table and then get the broader society to take ownership of doing something about that issue.

Another interviewer remarked that knowledge precedes ownership and that it's astounding what 18-, 19- and 20-year-olds don't know. He said their lack of knowledge is worse now than it was 30 years ago. In response, Pearlstein noted that CAE has just started the Young Leadership Council for conservatively inclined professionals under the age of 40.

He concluded by saying that the cultural and moral issues people talk about in private need to be raised in conference-table conversations that include public officials, business and community leaders, and other policymakers.