

Why marriage matters

Friday, June 5, 2009

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This just in: marriage is better than family breakup. No, really. A new study from the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada demonstrates the cost to governments of "non-traditional families." But it's no chilly venture into bean-counting or mean-spirited exercise in moralizing. It's about the kids.

Let me declare right away that my wife helped edit this report and I have done work for the IMFC in the past. I even spoke at their opening and predicted a bright future for them in a Citizen column on Feb. 24, 2006. So I'm now praising a friend, not announcing a discovery.

The report, *Private Choices, Public Costs*, available at www.imfcanada.org, has three cardinal virtues. First, authors Rebecca Walberg and Andrea Mrozek say something important about an important topic. Second, they use statistics without worshipping them. Third, they make policy recommendations without putting excessive faith in political action.

It might be controversial today to say marriage is important. But this April a major study found that nine in 10 Canadian teens expect to marry, for life, and have children. So we need to tell them how and why intact marriages matter to their future kids.

Bluntly, children from other kinds of homes are more likely to flunk out of school, go to jail, get hooked on alcohol or drugs and have other things go wrong with their lives. Including, the key statistical fact behind this report's analytic work, that single parenthood roughly doubles the chance of living in poverty.

The authors logically conclude that cutting family breakup in half would keep half of the affected families off public assistance and thus reduce the cost of federal and provincial anti-poverty programs for single-parent families by a quarter. Which cost, they estimate roughly, is now nearly \$7 billion a year.

True, if we saved Canadian governments \$1.7 billion a year they'd probably do something stupid with the money like buy a car company. But we can't fixate on politicians' ability to turn a silk purse into a sow's ear or we'd never get anywhere on any issue. Besides, this cynical retort risks obscuring the authors' most important methodological insight: Family breakdown isn't bad because it hurts public finances; it hurts public finances because it's bad.

These authors use public dollar costs the way doctors use thermometers: they treat the fever as a rough measure of how ill someone is, but do not mistake the temperature for the illness. They note frankly various limits to their methodology.

For starters, children from single-parent homes are disproportionately involved in crime. So a large part of the cost of policing, courts and jails should be included in a global figure of the cost to government of family breakdown, but it's not in their study.

More profoundly, a large share of the material and psychological losses suffered by victims of crime would have to be included in a measure of the true social cost of failed marriages. And the blighted lives of those who drift into crime because of a troubled upbringing would have to be counted in the true personal cost. Likewise the pain of drug abuse, promiscuity, and the misery of family disintegration.

Of course, these things are hard or impossible to quantify. But the authors avoid the trap of thinking that what cannot be precisely measured does not matter much.

They also avoid the temptation to say that since family breakdown is bad for society and public finances, governments should aggressively try to promote traditional marriage. True, they recommend changing the tax code to let married couples file jointly, and getting schools to teach young people that marriage is hard work worth doing. But they do not equate government action with social action.

They merely note that where the state is doing things wrong, like penalizing marriage on tax day, it should stop. And since it has taken control of education, whatever needs to be done by schools must, primarily, be done by state schools.

It would be difficult to read this report and accuse the authors of lacking compassion. Some people may still try ...

if they read it at all. The rest of us should keep our focus on this key passage: "The point of debate should not be whether a lack of two married parents matters for children but rather what to do with the reality that it does."

It leaves a lot to discuss, from program design to tax fairness to private versus state action to celebrating those who succeed in single-parent settings without deceiving ourselves, and the next generation, about how much harder this "lifestyle choice" usually makes things for children.

It's a conversation well worth having. Think anyone in Ottawa will want to?