

**NO. 86**

**JANUARY 13, 2010**

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage.



## **Strengthen the family, combat poverty**

*Long term plans to decrease poverty must address strengthening families*

By Peter Jon Mitchell, Researcher, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

Picture the weather reports showing blustery footage of the ravages of winter. Inevitably there is footage of some unfortunate Canadian whose car is stuck in the snow, tires spinning helplessly. The more the car accelerates, the faster the tires spin and deeper the ruts become. Now we learn from a December 2009 Senate subcommittee report that decades of social program spending and anti poverty programs have resulted in years of tire spinning, entrapping Canadians in poverty. The 74 recommendations found in the report encompass a diverse range of philosophies and fixes. The Senate should be commended for taking on this important issue. Yet the report has a significant weakness: It ignores the role of the family as one of the most important poverty fighting institutions.

*In from the margins: a call to action on poverty, housing and homelessness* offers two important conclusions. First, even when all available programs and benefits are accessed, many Canadians still find themselves in poverty. Second, many of the programs aimed at alleviating poverty result in entrapping people in poverty. The report offers diverse recommendations and perspectives. Some recommendations advocate greater redistribution, universal programs, income transfers and living wage proposals while other recommendations advocate for home ownership, tax reform, job training and encouraging local solutions to meet local needs.

Yet beyond identifying lone-parents as over represented among those in poverty, there is an absence in the report of any dialogue on the role of marriage and family structure in preventing poverty. The report treats families only as the recipients of social benefits rather than a resource for poverty reduction.

Families are an economic unit and a source of human capital. Much evidence over the past few decades indicates that marriage is a poverty fighter. Research suggests children fare better when raised in a married, two-parent home. Children from married parent families are more likely to do better at school and achieve

better financial well-being. They are less likely to become welfare dependent. In short, children from stable, married parent families are less likely to find themselves in poverty. [1] Conversely family breakdown and fatherlessness are concerning issues intertwined with poverty. A 2009 IMFC report conservatively estimated the cost of poverty related costs of family breakdown in Canada at just under \$7 billion annually. [2] As a result, long-term solutions for poverty reduction must address the health and role of families.

While public dialogue on the role of marriage in society continues in the U.S. and U.K., there is little public discussion in Canada. Perhaps Canadians view family as purely a private matter. However, family formation and breakdown greatly influence the health of society.

For example, family breakdown is prevalent among some of Canada's most impoverished people, the homeless. Studies have found that a disproportionate number of homeless individuals have spent time in foster care or institutionalized care compared to the general population. [3] A 2007 study by the IMFC found that many homeless shelter users had little contact with family. Researchers have suggested that family relationships offering financial and emotional support may prevent those at risk of experiencing homelessness from entering the streets or shorten the periods they spend on the street. American sociologist Timothy Pippert concluded after his study on family relationships among the homeless, "The most important and effective social institution at keeping its members from living on the street is the family. Family safety nets of financial and emotional support are what keep the ranks of the homeless from exploding on a daily basis." [4] If Canadians are intent on preventing poverty, then it is time to reengage the important social institution of family.

While *In from the margins* offers a wide range of recommendations, the IMFC presents the following family-centred poverty reduction recommendations.

- **Promote family and marriage education.** In particular, young people need the opportunity to interact with the best information on developing healthy family relationships and understand how healthy families and marriages contribute to a strong society
- **Promote family taxation.** This option allows families to keep more of their earnings by introducing a family taxation model rather than a system focused on individual taxpayers. Nine industrial countries incorporate family taxation models. [5] This reduces the tax burden, providing families with greater autonomy.

- **Remove the marriage penalty under the Working Income Tax Benefit.** The WITB was introduced in the 2007 tax year and compensates low income working families. However, the program does not recognize the increase expense of an additional adult in the home in two parent families as compared with a single-parent family. The Canadian system should recognize this through a marriage bonus similar to the Earned Income Tax Credit in the United States. [6]

- **Track marriage and family-related statistics more carefully.** The subcommittee report recommends continued support of statistics gathering and research. Adding to this we would recommend better and more accurate tracking of marriage statistics that recognize the difference between marriage and common-law arrangements, which have very different family outcomes

- **Address shortcomings in foster care.** By some estimates, only 8 per cent of available children in care are adopted each year in Canada. [7] Government must partner with stakeholders in the community to examine ways in which more children can find permanent homes.

The Senate report attempts to take a look at poverty in Canada. However, there is no long-term strategy for poverty eradication that can afford to give the role of families the short shift. To break free from the rut of poverty, Canadians must consider the role of strong, healthy families in strengthening society.

## Endnotes

---

[1] Rogusky, D., Penninga, M. (2005). Building a healthy nation: Policies to encourage strong marriages and stable families. *IMFC Review*. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, p. 22.

[2] Walberg, R., Mrozek, A. (2009). *Private choices, public costs: How failing families cost us all*. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada.

[3] Roman, N.P., Wolfe, P. (1995). *Web of failure: The relationship between foster care and homelessness*. Washington: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Susser, E.S., Struening, E.L., and Conovers, S. (1987). Childhood experiences of homeless men. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 144 (12), 1599-1601.

[4] Pippert, T.D. (2007). *Road dogs and loners: Family relationships among homeless men*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

[5] Mintz, J. (2008). Taxing families: Does the system need an overhaul? *IMFC Review*. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, p. 17.

[6] Taylor, P.S. (2007). Family poverty in Canada: Raising incomes and strengthening families. *Canadian Family Views*. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. pp. 14-18.

[7] Estimate calculated from data in the Adoption Council of Canada Media Kit (2009 First Edition), found online at <http://www.adoption.ca/ACC%20Media%20Kit%202009.pdf>