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



Marriage: private event or public good?

By Rebecca Walberg and Andrea Mrozek

“What we know is that marriage is a very significant institution, not just for individuals, but for the social whole.” These are the words of Kay Hymowitz, the author of *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age*. She is expressing the consensus of a growing number of statisticians, policy analysts and academics. But Canadians, as a whole, are less inclined to view getting married as a public act with public consequences. We don’t tend to view marriage as the basis of strong communities, as a creator of economic and social capital, or as the original safety net protecting against poverty.

The research is absolutely clear. There is a strong link between married parents and stability for children. Children who start their lives with their own married parents tend to be healthier, do better at school, and have stronger relationships as adults themselves. There is a clear correlation between marriage and well being. And that translates into stronger extended families, healthier communities, and finally, a stronger economy. But even in these tough economic times, this isn’t an argument most Canadians are hearing.

The protection that marriage provides against child poverty is the major theme of a new study the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada is publishing tomorrow, on June 3, 2009. *“Private choices, public costs: How failing families cost us all”* is a quantitative assessment of the fiscal costs to government, and therefore taxpayers, of broken families. [The findings will be presented in a briefing on Parliament Hill.](#)

Historically, the main responsibility for providing children with the necessities of life, from food, clothing and shelter to education and spiritual guidance, lay with parents. Parents in turn were supported by their extended families and communities. As these social bonds grew weaker the number of parents unable to provide for their children has expanded, often as a result of family breakdown, whether that meant divorce, the break-up of cohabiting parents, or the absence of one parent from birth. When families fail, government begins to act as a quasi-replacement family, offering benefits through programs such as welfare, and child care and housing subsidies.

These are the costs we have quantified in our report: targeted benefits directed at broken families. The bill for the many poverty alleviation programs offered in each province, which disproportionately support single parent families, is several billion dollars annually. Were

family breakdown to decrease, child poverty would decrease and so would the demand for many of these programs. The potential savings also amount to billions of dollars. The exact price tag and savings amounts will be released tomorrow.

Certainly, family breakdown is not about dollars and cents. The most devastating damage of broken families involves children torn between warring parents, parents struggling to maintain relationships with their children, and the weakening of bonds within the extended family. But there are financial repercussions, and these can be more easily measured.

And in these tough economic times, we do hear calls to focus on the economy, over and above family and community. The reality is that a focus on the economy will mean taking a good look at how we “do family” in Canada today.

Therefore we are calling attention to the importance of stable families by attaching a price tag to those that fail. Through this, we hope to show every Canadian why families matter to us all. An honest discussion about marriage and family is a crucial first step, if Canadians are to understand the consequences, public and private, of the choices they make in their personal lives.

More and more Canadian families are failing. The recent census showed that fewer Canadian families with children are married than every before. In 1961, 92 per cent of families were headed by a married couple, while in 2006 that number had fallen to 69 per cent. One in seven households with children is headed by two cohabiting adults, a family form that is less stable than marriage. Another one in seven is headed by a single parent, most often a mother. These families are radically more likely to live in poverty.

Children fare best on many indicators – financially, educationally, psychologically, even in terms of physical health – when they grow up with their own married parents. Family breakdown is one pathway to poverty. If we are serious about finding a remedy for child poverty, or better yet preventing it, we can't afford to shrug our shoulders and avoid a discussion about why marriage matters, not only for husbands, wives and children, but for us all.

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