The Cost to Taxpayers of Missing Fathers

by Phyllis Schlafly June 17, 2011

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With Father's Day coming up, we should ponder the sad plight of the 20 million American children who are growing up without their fathers in the home. In 1993 Charles Murray identified "illegitimacy as the single most important social problem of our time . . . because it drives everything else."

Murray was whistling in the wind. Last year, the U.S. illegitimacy rate had grown to 41 percent, and among whites it was 29 percent.

Prior to Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, husbands and fathers provided for their families. The 1.7 million out-of-wedlock babies born last year and their unmarried moms now look to Big Brother as their financial provider.

The left is content to let this problem persist because 70 percent of unmarried women voted for Barack Obama for president. They vote for the party that offers the richer subsidies.

Means-tested welfare handouts cost federal taxpayers $700 billion last year (not counting programs into which people pay, such as Social Security and Medicare). Spending by the states raises the annual total to nearly $900 billion, more than we are spending on national defense, and most of these programs subsidize non-marriage.

The 77 means-tested programs include Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, housing subsidies, Medicaid, daycare, WIC, EITC (which can be as much as $5,657 a year to low-income families), School Lunch, School Breakfast, Summer Food, SSI, Headstart, and S-CHIP. The Heritage Foundation estimates that these benefits amount to $16,800 per person in poverty.

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Ronald Reagan's advice is still on target. If we subsidize something, we'll get more of it; if we tax it, we'll get less.

The financial subsidies that encourage non-marriage are the biggest reason why federal spending is out of control. There is no way to make significant cuts in the federal deficit unless we address the marriage-absence problem.

Poverty is massively greater for children living with a single, divorced, or cohabiting parent than with parents who are married to each other. The poverty rate for single parents with children is 37 percent, but only 6 percent for married couples with children.

Marriage breakdown is a double-edged sword. At the same time that it forces government to become the financial provider for millions of children and their caregivers, it also reduces the government's tax receipts to pay for the handouts.

Income tax day now divides us into two almost equal classes: those who pay for government services and freeloaders. In 2009, 47 percent paid no federal income taxes, and the bottom 40 percent receive cash or benefits financed by the 53 percent who do pay income taxes.

Among other unfortunate effects, the trends toward non-marriage and toward same-sex marriage are a direct attack on fathers. The bond between a child and his mother is an obvious fact of nature, but marriage is the relationship that establishes the link between a child and his father.

There are many causes for the dramatic reduction in marriage, starting with unilateral divorce, which spread across the United States in the 1960s and '70s, putting government on the side of marriage breakup. Then came the legalizing of abortion, diminishing the custom of shotgun marriages, which in earlier years was often the response to surprise pregnancies.

The feminist notion that women should be independent of men, followed by affirmative-action/female quotas in employment, tended to carry out the goal stated by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg that the concept of husband-breadwinner and wife-homemaker "must be eliminated." These feminist ideas and practices demean marriage by discriminating against men and also against fulltime homemakers.

Since the federal government created the child-support bureaucracy, the majority of divorces have been initiated by women. They confidently expect that pro-feminist family courts will award them a steady income for which they will never be held accountable.

The more child support that divorced fathers are ordered to pay, the more federal funds flow through the hands of the states, which compete for federal bonuses given to states that collect the most child support. It is profitable to state bureaucrats to make sure that fathers are permitted to see their own children only a few days per month so support payments can be set at the highest possible level.

Women have discovered they can use a request for an Order of Protection against their husband as "the gamesmanship of divorce" (in the words of the Illinois Bar Journal) in order to get sole child custody plus generous so-called child support. It's easy to get such Orders without any evidence of abuse or even a threat, without notice to the husband, and with no danger of prosecution for perjury.

Federal and state laws and subsidies that undermine marriage are the biggest fiscal as well as cultural issue of our times.