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Marriage and Child Poverty

Collapse of Cultural Norms Regarding Marriage, Childbirth 'Has Been a Disaster'

By Father John Flynn, LC

ROME, SEPT. 14, 2012 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The economic problems caused by single parenthood were the topic of a report published last week by Heritage Foundation, a think tank based in Washington D.C..

In “Marriage: America’s Greatest Weapon Against Child Poverty,” author Robert Rector noted that the problem of child poverty is a matter of concern for the nation. Yet, in spite of government programs, it remains unsolved. One of the main reasons for this is the disappearance of fathers from homes, Rector argued.

“Marriage remains America’s strongest anti-poverty weapon, yet it continues to decline,” he observed.

Rector cited data from the U.S. Census that shows the poverty rate for single parents with children in the United States in 2009 was 37.1%. This compares to only 6.8% for married couples with children.

Some of the difference, he admitted, is due to the lower level of education among single parents. Nevertheless, when comparing singles and married couples with the same level of education, the married poverty rate is still around 75% lower. “In fact, being married has the same effect in reducing poverty that adding five to six years to a parent’s level of education has,” he commented.

Unfortunately, he continued, marriage has been on the decline for decades. When President Lyndon Johnson declared his famous “War on Poverty” in 1964, 93% of births in the United States were to married parents. By 2010 only 59% of all births in the nation occurred to married couples.

It is not mainly a problem of teens having children. In 2008 only 7.7% of births outside marriage were to girls under the age of 18. The majority, three-quarters, of single moms were aged between 19 and 29.

“The decline in marriage and growth in out-of-wedlock births is not a teenage issue; it is the result of a breakdown in relationships between young adult men and women,” Rector explained.

2-caste society

Out of the total of 1.72 million children born outside of marriage in 2008 nearly two-thirds were to women who had dropped out of high school. For women who had completed high school only half of their births were outside marriage. With a college degree only 8% of women had children as single mothers.

“The U.S. is steadily separating into a two-caste system with marriage and education as the dividing line,” Rector observed.

Single-parent families, he went on to explain, make up the overwhelming majority of all poor families with children in the U.S.. In fact, 71% of poor families with children are headed by single parents. Among married couples 73% of all non-poor families with children are headed by married couples.

Supporting poor families with children is a big cost to government, Rector pointed out. There are dozens of means-tested welfare programs providing a wide range of services. In the 2011 fiscal year the combined cost for the federal and state governments for these programs was over \$450 billion. Around \$330 billion of this total was spent on single-parent families. On average, he noted, the means-tested welfare costs for single parents with children is around \$30,000 per household per year.

Education is not the only factor related to the incidence of single parenthood. Rector explained that in 2008 the birth rate of single parenthood was 40.6% for the overall population. Nevertheless, it was only 28.6% among white non-Hispanic women. For Hispanics it was 52.5%, and among blacks, it was 72.3%.

Due to the fact that non-Hispanic whites are a larger numerical group in the overall population, they accounted for the greatest number of births outside marriage, at 38% of the total. In second place were Hispanic women, with 32% and black non-Hispanic women accounted for 26% of the total.

Marriage later

Rector cited other studies relating to marriage after parenthood. If single mothers marry the biological fathers of their children after their births, then five years after the birth only 18% remain poor. If the mothers remain single, however, 56% will still be poor.

Therefore, even after a birth outside marriage, a subsequent marriage can be very effective in reducing child poverty. Rector also noted that the positive effects of marriage are not only economic. “Children raised by married parents have substantially better life outcomes compared to similar children raised in single-parent homes,” he explained.

Going to the causes of single parenthood, Rector commented that the popular view is that it is mostly due to a lack of knowledge or access to birth control. By contrast, he cited research that shows, generally, single parenthood is not the result of “accidental” pregnancies.

“The overwhelming majority of lower-income women who have children out of wedlock strongly desire to have children,” he said. “In fact, having children is generally perceived as the most important and fulfilling thing in their lives, giving their lives purpose and meaning.”

What happens is that many of these women hope that marriage will follow childbirth, instead of first marrying then having children.

The collapse of cultural norms regarding marriage and having children has been a disaster, Rector argued. The results of this have led to tragedy for all involved. How to reverse this situation is a great challenge for society.

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