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Family Value

Divorce, illegitimacy have high costs.

By David Freddoso

In 1970, the U.S. Census reported that more than 85 percent of American children were being raised in two-parent families. By 1998, that number had declined to 68 percent, where it still hovers today.

Such an enormous change comes with great costs — not just the deep, intangible kind, but real dollars-and-cents costs as well. It goes without saying that the loss of family stability has taken a terrible toll on the nation's social health and left millions with broken hearts. But family fragmentation is the second leading cause of poverty in the United States, after lack of full-time work.

A [study](#) released this week by the [Institute for American Values](#) attempts, for the first time, to measure one part of the economic cost of family fragmentation — specifically, the cost to government. By its estimate, it turns out to be greater than the annual cost of the Iraq war.

The study, conducted by Benjamin Scafidi of Georgia College and State University's business school, estimates that bottom line at \$112 billion in annual, recurring costs to governments at the federal, state, and local levels. It's a numbers job, cut and dry. It merely points out that illegitimacy and divorce are costly social phenomena.

In order to reach his \$112 billion number, Scafidi relied on some 20 studies and made incredibly conservative assumptions. For example, he completely excluded any benefit from marriage to single fathers, who account for 22 percent of single parents. He assumed that children from broken homes do not, on aggregate, create any extra costs for public schools in the form of remedial education programs. He excluded all Earned Income Tax Credit payments to fragmented families in poverty. Despite studies that show marriage lifts poor single mothers out of poverty at a rate of 65 to 80 percent, he assumed a rate of 60 percent. And although more than half of all prison inmates come from broken homes, he assumed that family breakdown increases the prison system's costs by only 9 percent. "I wanted to make sure I was underestimating the cost of family breakdown," Scafidi said on Tuesday.

Scafidi, a former education adviser to Republican Georgia governor Sonny Perdue, also treated family breakdown and its effects as the complex phenomena they are. The studies he used reflect such complexities as the fact that not all intact families are beneficial to children. In high-conflict marriages, for example, some children benefit from their parents' breakup. And on aggregate, children living with step-parents benefit less than children living with their own two parents.

Having constructed formulae from these studies and his conservative estimates, Scafidi does a

simple math problem. Between the added costs to the justice system (\$19 billion), health and welfare programs (\$65 billion), Head Start and school lunches (\$6 billion), and tax revenues lost to federal, state, and local governments (\$22 billion), an economic look at family fragmentation emerges. Although it is an imperfect way of looking at the problem, the very cautious assumptions behind the study ensure that the final result underestimates the cost to taxpayers.

The study mentions that, based on the economics of the equation, state programs to strengthen marriage could induce great savings to the taxpayer even if they are relatively unsuccessful. Of Texas's program, it notes that if it "succeeded in increasing stably married families by just three-tenths of one percent, it would still save Texas taxpayers almost \$9 million per year."

The study demonstrates the continuing importance and relevance of the traditional institutions of marriage and family. Societies and their governments have privileged the traditional marital relationship for millennia in part because it is a tool of societal survival. Marital stability does not just avert great public expense, as Scafidi shows, but it also defends communities from much broader economic ills — to say nothing of its social, moral, or religious significance.

— *David Freddoso is an NRO staff reporter.*