

## Research on single-parenthood was correct: It costs a bundle

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As the principal investigator of the study on the taxpayer costs of divorce and unwed childbearing, I feel compelled to respond to the April 24 opinion piece by Elizabeth Ananat ("Some richer, some poorer," @issue).

In our report, we estimate that family fragmentation costs U.S. taxpayers about \$112 billion every year. Ananat incorrectly believes that our estimate is too high based on her own study of a related, but different, issue.

It is clear that comparing our study to Ananat's research is comparing apples to oranges. Quoting from our study, we sought to answer the following question: "If all currently unmarried adult women were instead married (which would also mean all children now living with a single mother were instead living with two married parents), how much would taxpayers save?"

Ananat studies a subset of this issue — after a divorce, what happens to the incomes of white women? She finds that virtually all white women would have been lifted out of poverty if they were married. We agree. Here's where we differ. She looked at financial impact on divorced women, many of whom remarry over time. We look at impact on taxpayers when couples divorce or don't marry before having children.

We chose a cautious approach to the effect of marriage on taxpayer costs, basing our approach not on Ananat's study but on one by two Brookings Institution scholars, one of whom was an economic advisor to President Clinton. This latter study estimates that 65.4 percent of female-headed households would be lifted out of poverty via marriage — the lowest estimate in the literature. To be even more cautious, we assumed that only 60 percent of female-headed households would be lifted out of poverty via marriage.

We estimate that about \$70 billion of "welfare" spending —out of a total of over \$456 billion — is attributable to family fragmentation. Thus, we estimate that about 15.4 percent of these costs for welfare programs would disappear if all female-headed households were instead married couple households. Ananat suggests this figure is actually zero. It's hard to believe that if many single-adult households in poverty were instead married households that none of them would be lifted out of eligibility for welfare and other programs.

Does our estimate pass the smell test? As reported in the AJC on Oct. 17, 2007, virtually all recipients of housing assistance live in single-adult households. This pattern is similar for other welfare programs. About 70 percent of Americans in poverty live in single-mother or single-father households. But we exclude single-father households from our analysis because researchers unfortunately have not studied them in a way that provides us with needed information. We suspect that single-dad costs are more than \$0, but we've chosen an estimate of \$0 for them to remain cautious in our estimate.

We exclude other expensive programs from our analysis because we did not feel comfortable making an estimate of the costs given available evidence.

We also cautiously estimate taxpayer costs to the \$222 billion U.S. justice system. We estimate that 8.7 percent of these costs can be attributed to family fragmentation, even though more than 56 percent of jail inmates grew up in fragmented families for most of their childhood. Perhaps readers should judge for themselves whether our estimate is cautious and read our study available at [www.georgiafamily.org](http://www.georgiafamily.org).

One point upon which we do agree with Ananat and many others in the literature, however, is that marriage lifts lots of female-headed households out of poverty.

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