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Study: Divorce, Unwed Births Costly

By AP/DAVID CRARY

(NEW YORK) — Divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$112 billion a year, according to a study commissioned by four groups advocating more government action to bolster marriages.

Sponsors say the study is the first of its kind and hope it will prompt lawmakers to invest more money in programs aimed at strengthening marriages. Two experts not connected to the study said such programs are of dubious merit and suggested that other investments — notably job creation — would be more effective in aiding all types of needy families.

There have been previous attempts to calculate the cost of divorce in America. But the sponsors of the new study, being released Tuesday, said theirs is the first to gauge the broader cost of "family fragmentation" — both divorce and unwed childbearing.

The study was conducted by Georgia State University economist Ben Scafidi. His work was sponsored by four groups who consider themselves part of a nationwide "marriage movement" — the New York-based Institute for American Values, the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, Families Northwest of Redmond, Wash., and the Georgia Family Council, an ally of the conservative ministry Focus on the Family. "The study documents for the first time that divorce and unwed childbearing — besides being bad for children — are costing taxpayers a ton of money," said David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Values.

"We keep hearing this from state legislators, 'Explain to me why this is any of my business? Aren't these private matters?'" Blankenhorn said. "Take a look at these numbers and tell us if you still have any doubt."

Scafidi's calculations were based on the assumption that households headed by a single female have relatively high poverty rates, leading to higher spending on welfare, health care, criminal justice and education for those raised in the disadvantaged homes. The \$112 billion estimate includes the cost of federal, state and local government programs, and lost tax revenue at all levels of government.

Reducing these costs, Scafidi said, "is a legitimate concern of government, policymakers and legislators."

While the study doesn't offer formal recommendations, it does suggest that state and federal lawmakers consider investing more money in programs intended to bolster marriages. Such a program has been in place in Oklahoma since 2001; Texas last year earmarked about \$15 million in federal funds for marriage education.

"Because of the very large taxpayer costs associated with high rates of divorce and unwed childbearing, and the modest price tags associated with most marriage-strengthening initiatives ... programs even with very modest success rates will be cost-effective," the study says.

But Tim Smeeding, an economics professor at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University, who was not involved in the study, said he's seen no convincing evidence that the marriage-strengthening programs work. "I have nothing against marriage — relationship-building is great," he said. "But alone it's not going to do the job. A full-employment economy would probably be the best thing — decent, stable jobs."

He also noted the distinctive problems arising in black urban areas where the rate of single-mother households is highest.

"A high number of African-American men have been in prison — that limits their future earning potential and makes them bad marriage partners, regardless of what kind of person they are," Smeeding said. "A marriage program doesn't address that problem at all."

Another expert not connected to the study, University of Michigan sociologist Pamela Smock, suggested that bigger investments in education would pay long-term dividends — improving economic prospects even for children from fragmented, disadvantaged families. "Providing a global number doesn't give us anything to go on," said Smock, who was skeptical of the study's \$112 billion estimate. "We're now nearing 40 percent of kids in America born out of wedlock," she said. "I can't fathom that those marriage programs, even with increased investment, are going to reduce that."

Blankenhorn said it was "fair criticism" to note that the study made multiple references to marriage-strengthening programs while not proposing other strategies for reducing the cost of family fragmentation.

"Maybe we should have been more ecumenical," he said. "Let everybody have their say. Let's try things out. ... Nobody knows exactly the strategies which are going to work."

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