

New Reports Still Say Marriage Is Best

by Fr. John Flynn, LC

The increasing trend toward cohabitation as an alternative to marriage brings with it severe disadvantages for children. The latest confirmation of how children suffer when brought up outside a stable marriage between a man and a woman came in a lengthy article published Nov. 18 by the Associated Press. The article reviewed evidence from a variety of sources, and commented that many scholars and social workers "say the risk of child abuse is markedly higher in the nontraditional family structures."

Among the studies cited by the Associated Press was that published in the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2005. The journal reported that children living in households with unrelated adults are nearly 50 times as likely to die of inflicted injuries as children living with two biological parents. Children living in stepfamilies or with single parents are at higher risk of physical or sexual assault, according to several studies co-authored by David Finkelhor, director of the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center, the article continued. "The risk [of abuse] to children outside a two-parent household is greater," Susan Orr, a child-welfare specialist in the Department of Health and Human Services, told the Associated Press. The problem exists outside the United States also. On April 15 a British newspaper, the *Sunday Telegraph*, reported that seven children under age 16 had been murdered in London alone in the previous two months. Many crimes such as these are being committed by juveniles, the paper noted.

The news prompted politicians to promise more funding for disadvantaged communities, but the article commented that one of the main problems is that adolescents brought up in a single-parent family are more likely to end up in criminal activities. No fewer than 70% of young offenders are from single-parent families. In England there are now three times the number of children being brought up just by their mothers than there were 30 years ago, the *Telegraph* added, resulting in one in every four children being raised without a father. Divorce creates other difficulties, among them economic. A July 7 article from the *British Telegraph* newspaper reported that a study of more than 4,000 people found that on average, a man's income increases by 11% after divorce. By contrast, a woman suffers a drop of 17%.

Particularly at risk are the mothers of young children, who find it difficult to reconcile the demands of work and family responsibilities. "We found that many women don't work at all after their marriage breaks down or have to work only part-time because they can't afford the cost of child care," commented Mieke Jansen, one of the authors of the study carried out by academics from the University of Antwerp in Belgium. Similar problems were revealed in research carried out by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. According to a July 10 article from the newspaper *The Australian*, not only does divorce bring with it economic penalties but it also leads to unhappiness and harms both physical and mental health. The study, titled "Divorce and the Well-being of Older Australians," compared divorced women who remain single to those who are widowed and stay single. Both men and women report problems of unhappiness and health, but women are particularly affected.

Another Australian newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, reported Aug. 14 that marriage does indeed make people happier. During a visit to the country, Swiss economist Bruno Frey reported on the findings of a survey of 15,000 people over 17 years, examining the relationship between happiness and marriage. Frey said that one of the reasons people are happier in marriage is due to the greater level of commitment between the couple. From England, a recent report by the Office for National Statistics found that married couples live longer and enjoy better health, reported the *Times* on Oct. 5. As well, children who live with their married parents are also healthier, and will remain in full-time education for longer.

Failure on the Rise

In spite of ample evidence of the harm stemming from facilitating divorce, some countries continue to make it easier. The Spanish newspaper *El País* reported Nov. 16 that in 2006 the number of divorces increased by a stunning 74%. The rise occurred after the socialist government changed the divorce law in July 2005, allowing divorce proceedings to start without a period of one year's separation as previously required. Overall in Spain in 2006 there were 210,132 marriages, and 145,919 marriages that failed — between divorce, separations and marriages declared null. According to a recent study by the Spain-based Institute for Family Policies, Europe is seeing a decline in marriages and an increase in divorce. The report, titled the "*Evolution of the Family in Europe in*

2007," said that the number of marriages in Europe decreased by 22.3% from 1980 to 2005, while divorces increased by 55% in the same period.

The latest figures do show a decrease in divorce in England and Wales, but it could well be partially caused by lower marriage levels. According to an Aug. 30 article published by the *Guardian* newspaper, in 2006 some 132,562 couples divorced. This is the lowest since 1977. The data came from figures published by the Office for National Statistics. The fall in divorce, however, comes when in 2005 the marriage rate in England and Wales fell to its lowest level since records began in 1862. Moreover, on Sept. 12 the *Guardian* published an article noting that the cumulative total of divorces in past decades means that now more than 20 million people in the United Kingdom — a third of the population — are affected by divorce and separation, either through their own relationships or that of their parents. The figures come from a study published by the Center for Separated Families, a group that provides support for family members after separation.

Families are also under pressure in Canada, reported the *Globe and Mail* newspaper, Sept. 12. According to the latest figures, taken from the 2006 national census, married-couple families are still the majority, accounting for 68.8% of all census families. Nevertheless, the number of cohabiting couples has more than doubled from the 7.2% of two decades ago to the current level of 15.5% of all census families. The number of lone-parent families has also increased, by 7.8% in the period 2001-2006. Single-parent families are more important than the relatively low percentage would suggest. Lone-parent families account for 26% in the category of families with children. More than 2.1 million children are now living in a lone-parent family. And, as in other countries, they are poorer. In 2005, the median household income for two-parent families in Canada was 67,600 Canadian dollars (US \$68,861), according to the *Globe and Mail*. For lone-parent families it was only 30,000 Canadian dollars (US \$30,559). "Marriage is still the best framework in which to raise healthy, happy children," commented an editorial in the *Globe and Mail* the following day. The clock can't be turned back, the newspaper added. Even so, "Canadian families are unable to give their children the solidity that serves them best," the editorial concluded.

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