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## Data Show Benefits of Families

### But Some Governments Still Work Against Marriage

By Father John Flynn, LC

ROME, MARCH 10, 2008 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- Research into the family continues to confirm the importance of two parents as the best basis for bringing up children. One common problem in the last few decades is the absence of fathers, and the corresponding rise of families headed by single mothers.

A recent report confirmed that the role of the father is, indeed, necessary for children. The February issue of the journal *Acta Paediatrica* published an article titled: "Fathers' Involvement and Children's Developmental Outcomes: A Systematic Review of Longitudinal Studies."

The article was authored by four academics: Anna Sarkadi, Robert Kristiansson, Frank Oberklaid and Sven Bremberg. They reviewed the conclusions from 24 studies. Of these, fewer than 22 provided evidence of the positive effects of involvement by fathers.

An active fatherhood role not only reduced the frequency of behavioral problems in boys and psychological problems in young women, but it also had a positive effect on cognitive development, along with decreasing delinquency and economic disadvantage in low-income families.

In spite of the convincing amount of evidence, the study observed: "Unfortunately, current institutional policies in most countries do not support the increased involvement of fathers in child rearing."

Some of the studies distinguished between biological fathers and father figures who cohabit with the children, but the authors commented that more study is needed on the role of a biological bond between the father figure and the child. Some results indicate that non-biological father figures can play an important role for children in their households. There is evidence, as well, that biological fathers may be salient in a specific way, they noted.

Overall, however, they concluded, "[T]here is evidence to indicate that father engagement positively affects the social, behavioral, psychological and cognitive outcomes of children."

#### Effects on children

Another study, published last week by the Institute for American Values' Center for Marriage and Families, confirms that academic research is now favoring the family. In "The Shift and the Denial: Scholarly Attitudes Toward Family Change, 1977-2002," authors Norval Glenn and Thomas Sylvester with Alex Roberts, document how scholarly opinion has evolved.

They studied the 266 articles published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* from 1977-2002 related to how family structure affects children. "Overall, we found strong evidence that scholars have become more

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concerned about the effects of family change on children,” they concluded.

As the years have gone by scholars have become more aware of the possible negative effects of divorce and unwed childbearing on children, the study observed. This was particularly the case, the authors noted, when the studies were empirical, as opposed to an opinion-style article.

Glenn and Sylvester also affirmed: “[T]here now is widespread agreement that there have been negative effects from recent family changes that are strong enough and pervasive enough to be important.”

In spite of research demonstrating the importance of two-parent families tax systems in many countries discriminate against married couples. A couple of recent research reports by a British charity demonstrate the extent of this fiscal penalty

### Fiscal discrimination

CARE -- Christian Action Research and Education -- published a study Jan. 22 titled: “Taxation of Married Families: How the UK Compares Internationally.” According to CARE, in 2006 a married couple with one working spouse and two children on average earnings of 30,800 pounds (\$62,174) a year paid 40% more tax in the UK than in comparable countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Compared with European Union states, one-earner married families are paying 25% the report accused. The study took into account the amount families gain from tax credits and child benefits.

According to CARE other countries with a similar tax system that discriminates against married couples include Finland, Sweden and New Zealand. Nevertheless, many other countries do make some allowance for family circumstances.

A second CARE report, published in February, looked at the situation of low-income families, finding that the penalty for living together, rather than apart, has increased. In the study titled “Second Annual Review of the Couple Penalty,” they found that in 75 of the 98 family cases considered, the couples fared better living apart after housing costs were taken into account, compared with 71 last year. On average, these couples were better off by 69 pounds (\$139) per week, compared with 63 pounds (\$127) last year.

“The presence of a clear and growing fiscal incentive for couples with children on low to modest incomes to live apart is profoundly concerning,” declared Nola Leach, chief executive of CARE in the report’s foreword. “There is no doubt that it is in the best interests of children to grow up with both their mother and father living with them at the same address.”

The report cited data from the U.K. Office of National Statistics, which notes there are 1.2 million couples who are engaged in “non-residential cohabitation.” The couples are together, and have children in common, but live apart. There is anecdotal evidence, the report added, that such couples are making this choice for reasons related to tax credits and welfare benefits.

As well, the latest Office of National Statistics estimates for the number of lone parents with dependent children is 1.8 million, CARE added.

Urging a change to the current fiscal system the report commented: “Breaking the cycle of poverty by encouraging the formation and maintenance of stable families would make a major contribution to reducing long-term poverty and, of equal importance, improve outcomes for children.”

## European concerns

Discrimination against families in Britain may be worse than in many other countries, but there is reason to be concerned about the situation in Europe as a whole, according to a recent document published by the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE).

Last November they released a report titled "Proposal for a Strategy of the European Union for the Support of Couples and Marriage."

COMECE argued that the breakdown of family life results in high social and economic costs for society and governments. The break-up of marriages is, in many cases, "a psychological and moral disaster for the partners involved, and the children involved often suffer traumatic experiences," the report adverted.

From 1980-2005 the number of divorces has increased by more than 50%, according to the document. Just in the last 15 years there have been more than 13,5 million divorces, affecting over 21 million children.

Children who live with a father or a mother alone run a much higher risk of poverty, the report observed. Therefore, reducing the number of divorces would help to reduce the poverty risk for children.

"It is in Europe's general interest to support and strengthen that stable and responsible relationship between a man and a woman, of which marriage is the ideal expression," the European bishops argued.

The report listed a wide variety of measures governments could take to help married couples. The proposals ranged from better preparation before marriage, to greater support from educational institutions and businesses for couples. As well, economic support to find housing for young married couples is an area where governments could do more, the report urged.

The European bishops also asked that steps should be taken to ensure that in economic terms there should be no discrimination against those couples who decide that one of them stays at home while the other is engaged in paid employment.

The report concluded by citing an address by Benedict XVI to public authorities and the diplomatic corps during his visit to Austria last September.

"Encourage young married couple to establish new families and to become mothers and fathers! You will not only assist them, but you will benefit society as a whole," the Pontiff exhorted. A recommendation valid for governments around the world.

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