



Published in *Washington Examiner* (<http://washingtonexaminer.com>)

Tuesday, April 26, 2011

It's the demographics, not the deficit

Robert W. Patterson

First of a three-part series

With his daring deficit reduction plan, House Budget Chairman Paul Ryan of Wisconsin deserves credit for courageous fiscal leadership. But he is painting Republicans into a corner if he thinks exploding federal outlays can be reduced without addressing underlying family demographics.

As Hoover Institution scholar William Voegeli maintains in "Never Enough," the welfare state is the primary driver of rising federal spending. Even as Americans have enjoyed increased prosperity, rising living standards, and higher levels of education, the proportion of social spending relative to GDP has not declined one iota since 1980.

One might think that such "progress" and "economic growth" would have translated into lower levels of government dependency and less federal spending to guarantee well-being, "fairness" and income security. But that goal has never materialized, even under Republican presidents.

The unacknowledged reality that drives this insatiable demand for government is family breakdown all across America -- in "blue states" as well as "red states," within both parties, and among adherents to our key faith traditions.

Indeed, if the phenomenon Charles Murray calls the "unraveling" of the American way of life continues, family decline will only frustrate any attempt to control federal spending.

The meltdown of the married-based family started in the 1970s, but lies at the root of everything that troubles the United States in 2011. Although

underreported by the media, the economic, health, educational and social disparities between Americans that increase government services are consequences of the disregard for marriage as the social ideal over the past 40 years.

No matter how you slice it, being raised in a broken home, living outside the protective bonds of marriage, or bearing children out of wedlock generate a plethora of moral hazards that threatens America's fiscal and economic future.

The disadvantages start with economic well-being. Relative to children living with their married parents, risks of poverty are massively higher for children born to and reared by single, divorced, or cohabiting parents.

Unemployment is higher among unmarried than married men, while married couples with dependent children enjoy the highest median-household income. Likewise, intact families generate more social capital, including volunteering, charitable giving, voting and church attendance.

Family disintegration also lurks behind the health-care crisis. Access to health care and insurance is greater -- and health-care costs lower -- for married-parent families, who enjoy greater physical and emotional health.

Rates of so-called unintended pregnancies, elective abortion and sexually transmitted infections are dramatically higher among the unmarried, as well as their teenagers.

The opposite problem, infertility, is associated with the rising age at first marriage and delayed childbearing. And lower birthrates -- meaning fewer taxpayers -- are at the heart of the entitlement crisis that drives our fiscal woes.

That's not all. Justice Department statistics indicate the risks of domestic violence are highest for single, divorced and cohabiting women. Moreover, the most common cases of child physical or sexual abuse occur in homes where the parents are not married, often perpetrated by a mother's boyfriend who is not the child's father.

And divorce, according to the National Institute for Healthcare Research, is the strongest independent predictor of adult suicide and a big factor in teen suicide. Troubled schools? Also explained by family breakdown.

Parental-marital status significantly accounts for disparities in educational achievement, from elementary school to college -- more so than family income, mother's education and race.

The bottom line: Family breakdown drives demand for Big Government while eroding the tax base to pay for it. The solution: return the married-parent family that once accounted for American exceptionalism to the centerpiece of American life. The next two pieces in this series will map out how to do so.

Robert W. Patterson is editor of *The Family in America: A Journal of Public Policy*.

Source URL: <http://washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/op-eds/2011/04/its-demographics-not-deficit>