



Christie Brinkley's Not Only Victim of Divorce: Kevin Hassett

Commentary by Kevin Hassett

July 14 (Bloomberg) -- The news that the messy divorce trial of **Christie Brinkley** and Peter Cook ended with a settlement last week came a little too late for the two parties. The ugliness of the case was best-captured by the news alert posted by the Associated Press **announcing the settlement**:
``Christie Brinkley settles NY divorce with husband who had teen mistress, online porn habit."''

Having a publicly contested divorce clearly took its toll on the unfortunate couple, but the sad fact is that even quiet divorces can have terrible consequences both for the individuals involved and for society as a whole. Indeed, a growing body of economic literature has added up the cost of divorce and the related problem of single parenthood and found them to be astonishingly large.

The sheer enormity of these costs has policy makers scratching their heads and looking for solutions.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 48 percent of marriages in the U.S. will end in divorce if current marriage and divorce rates continue in the future. Marriage itself is less-common as well, so the traditional nuclear family -- father, mother and children -- now makes up fewer than 28 percent of all households.

There are more households, fully 32 percent, that are made up of single individuals or those cohabitating with non-family members.

The evidence suggests that divorce has a strongly negative effect on females, in particular. Researchers at **Ohio State University** found that while divorce reduces a person's wealth by an average of 77 percent, men typically have 2.5 times the wealth of women after a divorce.

Toll on Children

Living in a family that is not of the traditionally nuclear variety also takes a toll on children. A **thought-provoking review** of the literature by economists **Ron Haskins** of the Brookings Institution, **Sara McLanahan** of the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing at Princeton University, and Elisabeth Donohue of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, highlights the costs vividly.

Most compelling is their discussion of a 2005 study by **Paul Amato**: ``Amato reports that if the same share of children lived with their biological parents today as did in 1980, about 300,000 fewer children between the ages of 12 and 18 would repeat a grade, 485,000 fewer would be suspended from school, 250,000 fewer would need psychotherapy, 210,000 fewer would be involved in violence, and 30,000 fewer would attempt suicide every year."''

Understating the Cost

Since kids who have trouble in school are more likely to have trouble thereafter, these numbers understate the true cost to society of the decline of marriage.

Is there anything Washington can do to help revive the traditional environment that serves children so well? You can hardly say policy makers haven't tried. Over the past decade or so, a number of steps have been taken.

The **1996 welfare reform** set a national goal of encouraging the ``formation and maintenance of two-

parent families" and reducing the number of out-of-wedlock births. This translated into TANF -- **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families** -- block grants for states, designated for `` promoting healthy marriages.'

President **George W. Bush** expanded these efforts in 2002 with the **Healthy Marriage Initiative**. The program provides \$100 million per year in state grants designed to `` help couples, who have chosen marriage for themselves gain greater access to marriage-education services, where they can acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage."

Ad Campaigns

The funding is put toward advertising campaigns on the value of marriage, public school educational programs, and a research initiative on marriage, among other things.

In addition, Bush's 2001 tax cuts also tried to eliminate any marriage disincentives brought about through the tax code. The law relieved married couples in lower tax brackets from the `` marriage penalty" by increasing their standard deduction to twice that of singles.

These efforts, though, have hardly made a dent in the problem. That's evident both from the macroeconomic trends, which continue to worsen, and from the scientific literature. Summarizing what we know, Haskins, McLanahan and Donohue write that `` the evidence that pro-marriage programs will produce benefits is thin."

So what should we do? First, both political parties have to recognize that discussion of the **benefits of marriage** can't dissolve into intolerance. The benefits of higher marriage rates are great. An effective program would be a godsend for children. Crafted well, it should be uncontroversial.

Admit Failure

Second, we need to acknowledge that our efforts to address the problem so far have been inadequate. This may be because the problem is insurmountable; it also might be because programs in place, such as those that provide counseling, have yet to stumble upon a magic formula.

Even a devout libertarian would have to admit that the stakes are too high to ignore. Accordingly, Congress should follow the advice of Haskins, McLanahan and Donohue and commit to using the scientific method to discover innovative public programs that work. A good way to do this would be to provide ample research grants for pilot programs designed to encourage family formation, and to consider relying on faith-based initiatives in this area as well.

Even the best programs will provide little help to couples with conflicts as serious as those facing Brinkley and Cook, but even minor progress in this area could provide ample social benefits.

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