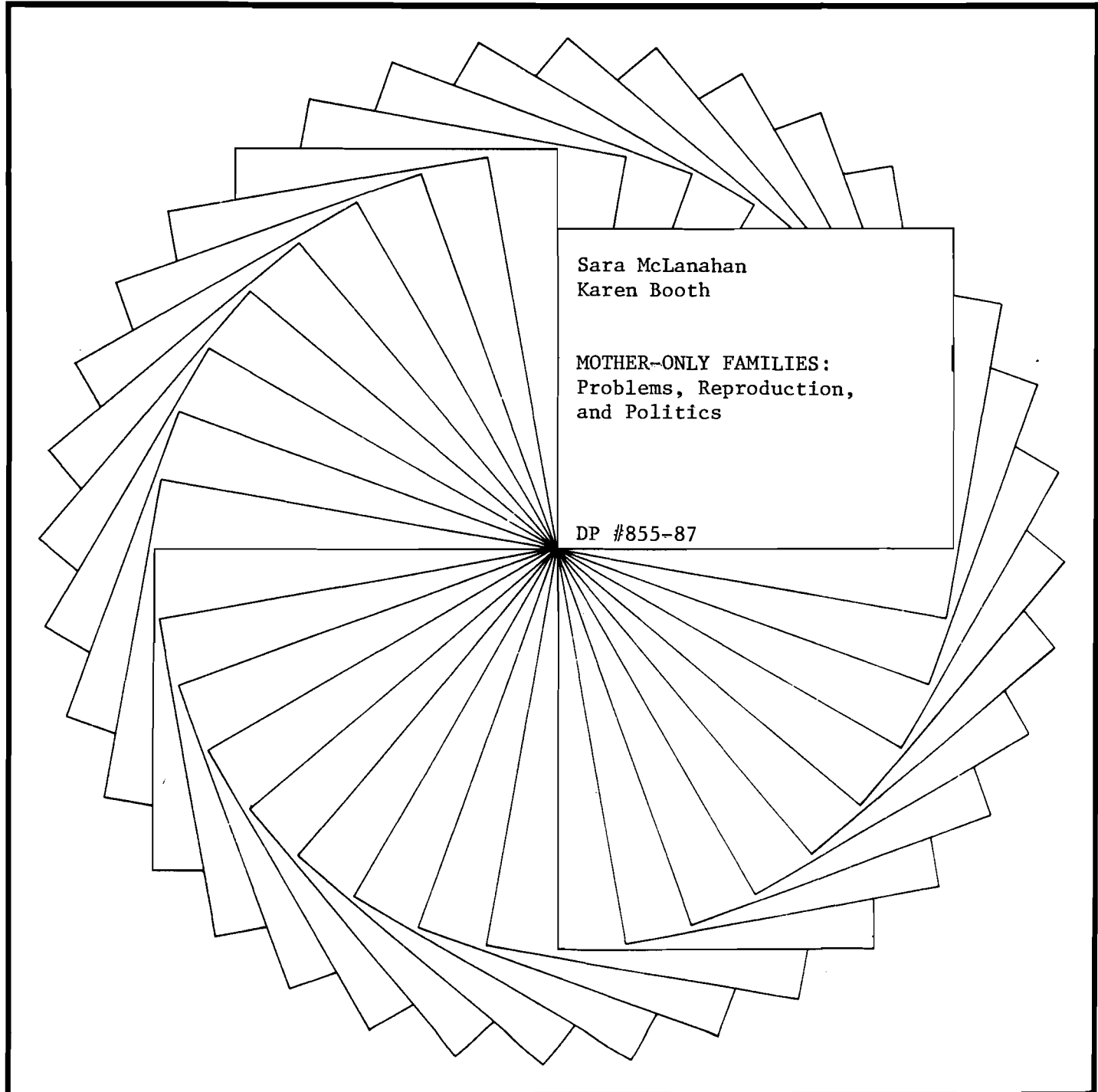




# Institute for Research on Poverty

## Discussion Papers



Sara McLanahan  
Karen Booth

MOTHER-ONLY FAMILIES:  
Problems, Reproduction,  
and Politics

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**Mother-Only Families: Problems, Reproduction, and Politics**

Sara McLanahan  
Department of Sociology and  
Institute for Research on Poverty  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Karen Booth  
Department of Sociology  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

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## Abstract

This paper examines three aspects of mother-only families: their economic and social well-being, their consequences for children, and their role in the politics of gender, race, and social class. We conclude that economic insecurity is due to the low earnings capacity of single mothers, the lack of child support from nonresidential parents, and meager public benefits. We also find that children in mother-only families are more likely to be poor in adulthood than children who live with both parents. Economic deprivation, parent-child relations, and neighborhood conditions all contribute to lower socioeconomic mobility. Finally, we argue that the mother-only family has become a touchstone for a much broader set of struggles around changes in women's roles, the relationship between the state and the family, and class and racial inequality.

## Mother-Only Families: Problems, Reproduction, and Politics

Mother-only families have become increasingly common during the past twenty-five years.<sup>1</sup> Whereas in 1960 only about 9 percent of families with children in the United States were headed by nonmarried women, by 1985 the number was over 20 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1960, 1961, 1988). If present trends continue, nearly half of all children born in the past decade will live in a mother-only family at some point before reaching age 18 (Bumpass, 1984). Given the importance of the family as a social institution, and given the high rates of poverty in families headed by single mothers, it is not surprising that researchers as well as policy makers have responded to recent changes in family structure with interest and concern. Some view the mother-only family as an indicator of social disorganization, signaling the "demise of the family." Others regard it as an alternative family form consistent with the emerging economic independence of women.<sup>2</sup> However one views the change, the mother-only family has become a common phenomenon that promises to alter the social and economic context of family life for future generations of Americans.<sup>3</sup>

This essay examines three aspects of mother-only families: their economic and social well-being, their long-term consequences for children, and their role in the politics of gender, race, and social class. In the first section we focus on poverty and economic insecurity and compare the status of mother-only families to that of other demographic groups. We also compare parent-child relationships in mother-only and two-parent families and the degree to which families are socially integrated into their communities.

Understanding the consequences of single motherhood for children is a central issue in evaluating the change in family structure. Whereas a decade ago the prevailing view was that single motherhood had no harmful effects on children, recent research is less optimistic with respect to the long-term outlook. In the second section we review studies on the intergenerational consequences of family disruption and discuss different theories of why children from disrupted or never-married families have lower socioeconomic attainment when they grow up than children from two-parent families.

The growth of mother-only families has stimulated much debate between liberals and conservatives, as well as among feminist activists, over the problems of these families and what should be done to reduce their poverty and economic insecurity. The debate is essentially political in that it involves arguments about the legitimacy of particular family forms and the redistribution of limited economic resources. In the last section we examine this debate and show how single motherhood has become a touchstone for a much broader set of struggles around changes in women's roles, the relationship between the state and the family, and class and racial inequality.

## **I. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING OF MOTHER-ONLY FAMILIES**

Mother-only families and two-parent families differ in a number of important respects, including economic well-being, levels of stress and social integration, and parent-child relations.

### Poverty and Economic Insecurity

Perhaps the most striking difference between the two family forms is disparity in economic well-being. Roughly one of two single mothers is living below the poverty line, as compared with one in ten married couples with children (Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986). See Figure 1.

Between 1967 and 1985, mother-only families were the poorest of three major demographic groups, and their relative position actually declined vis a vis the elderly.<sup>4</sup> Note that the poverty rate of mother-only families was about the same in 1985 as it was in 1967, having fallen during the seventies, risen sharply in the early eighties, and fallen again after 1983.

Although many single mothers who live below the poverty line were poor prior to becoming single mothers, a sizable majority became poor at the time of marital disruption.<sup>5</sup> Duncan and Hoffman (1985) estimate that the income of single mothers and their children one year after divorce is only 67 percent of their predivorce income, whereas the income of divorced men is about 90 percent of predivorce income. (See also David and Flory, 1988; Weitzman, 1985).<sup>6</sup>

Why are mother-only families more likely to be poor than two-parent families? In their analysis of different sources of income in mother-only and two-parent families in 1982, Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986) conclude that the proximate determinants of low income in mother-only families are (1) the low earnings capacity of the mother, (2) the lack of child support from the nonresidential father, and (3) the meager benefits provided by the state (see Table 1).

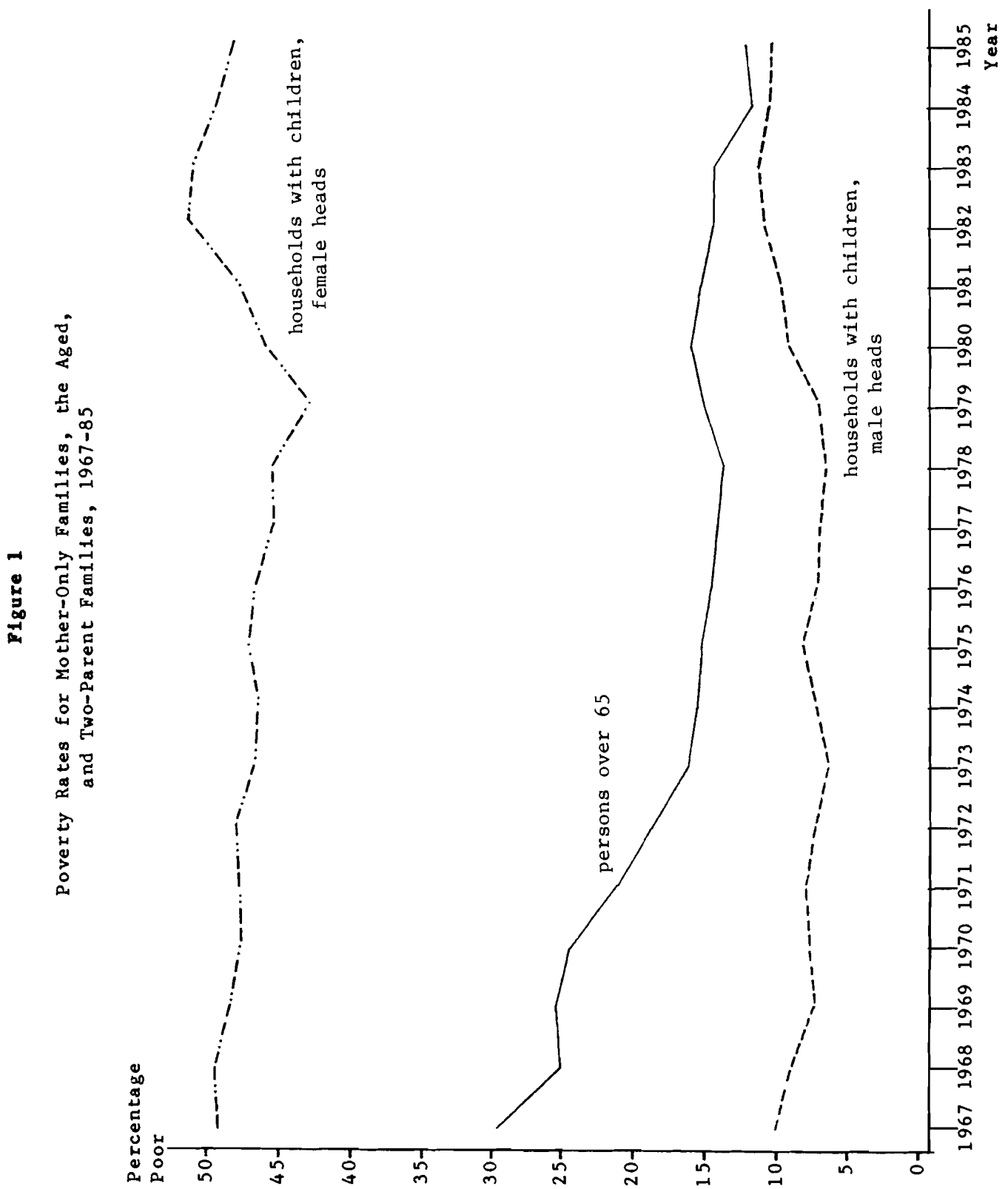


Table 1

Average Income Receipts (in dollars) of Two-Parent and Mother-Only Families by Race, 1982

Average Receipts	Whites		Blacks	
	Two-Parent Families	Mother-Only Families	Two-Parent Families	Mother-Only Families
<u>Total cash income<sup>a</sup></u>	30,814	12,628	23,915	9,128
Earned income of family head	21,932	7,666	13,508	5,365
Earnings of other family members	6,377	928	8,096	837
Alimony and child support	227	1,246	253	322
Social Security, pensions, and other unearned income	2,171	1,782	1,720	907
Public assistance and food stamps	174	1,399	1,838	2,573

Source: Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986: 18-21).

<sup>a</sup>Sum of all categories except food stamps.



Low earnings capacity. The earnings of the household head constitute the major source of income for mother-only families as well as two-parent families. Thus, a mother's earnings capacity is the single most important factor in determining her family's economic status. Unfortunately, single mothers earn, on average, only about one-third as much as married fathers, partly because they have a lower hourly wage and partly because they work fewer hours (Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986).

The low earnings capacity of single mothers is related to the more general problem of women's low wage rates. Women who work full time, year-round earn only about 60 percent as much as full-time male workers, and the wage gap has not changed very much during the past thirty years, despite women's increased participation in the labor force.<sup>7</sup> Inequality in wage rates is usually attributed to one of two factors: differences in human capital, i.e., women workers earn less because they have less education, training and job experience; or market discrimination, i.e., employers, workers and/or consumers prefer male workers over females and therefore the former are paid more. (For more detailed discussions of discrimination and the gender wage gap see Blau, 1984; Bergmann, 1986; Cain, 1986; Reskin, 1984; and Reskin and Hartmann, 1986.) Differences in human capital are clearly important in accounting for the earnings difference between women and men, but the most detailed empirical studies indicate that they account for less than half of the gender wage gap (Corcoran and Duncan, 1979). This suggests that a large portion of the gap is due to sex discrimination in the labor market.

Given their lower wage rates, single mothers would be expected to earn less than male heads of households even if they worked full time, all year. Most single mothers, however, do not work full time. Between 30 and 40 percent of single mothers report no earnings at all during any given year, and among those who do work outside the home, many work less than full time (Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986). Aside from low wages, a major barrier to employment for most mothers is child care. Whereas in two-parent families the second parent can provide child care or share its cost, the single mother has no such support. Thus she is doubly disadvantaged with respect to earnings capacity; her wage rate is lower than that of the highest earner in a two-parent family, and her child care costs are higher.

Lack of child support. A second source of income in the mother-only family is child support from the nonresidential father. According to Table 1, child support and alimony payments account for about 10 percent of the income of white single mothers and for about 3.5 percent of the income of black single mothers. While we would expect the contribution of nonresidential fathers to be lower than that of fathers in two-parent families, these figures suggest that the current contribution is grossly inadequate.

National data on child support awards indicate that in 1983 only about 58 percent of single mothers with children under 21 years old had a child support award. Of these, only 50 percent received full payment, 26 percent received partial payment, and 24 percent received no payment at all (Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986). Even when nonresidential fathers

pay support, the amount is generally low, and the value declines over time since awards are rarely indexed to the cost of living.

Determinations of what share of the cost of raising a child should be borne by the nonresidential parent depend on value judgments. Some argue that child support should depend on the "needs of the child" and the father's obligation should vary according to the mother's earnings. Others believe that child support should depend on the earnings of the nonresidential parent and that he (she) should share a proportion of his (her) income with the child regardless of absolute income level. (See Cassetty, 1983, for a discussion of different approaches to setting child support awards.) Still others argue that many nonresidential parents cannot afford to pay additional child support and requiring them to do so would push these parents and their new families into poverty (Brenner, 1987; Sarvasy and Van Allen, 1984). While the latter argument is undoubtedly true for some families at the bottom end of the income distribution, the evidence suggests that it does not hold for the majority of cases (David and Flory, 1988; Duncan and Hoffman, 1985; Garfinkel and Oellerich, 1989; Weitzman, 1985).

**Meager public benefits.** A final source of income for mother-only families is public transfers. The two major programs in this domain are Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Survivors Insurance (SI). In 1983, these two programs accounted for between 15 and 25 percent of the income of white and black mother-only families, respectively. Welfare, as AFDC is usually called, is available to poor single mothers and the average benefit is quite low. Survivors Insurance is provided

only to widowed mothers and is much more generous. Since only a small proportion of single mothers are widows, AFDC is the only government program that is potentially available to the majority of mother-only families.<sup>8</sup>

The AFDC program has many serious problems which contribute to its failure to reduce the economic insecurity of mother-only families. First and most important, AFDC is available only to poor families and does nothing to help families who experience economic hardship but do not meet the income test for welfare. Next, because the AFDC benefit is not indexed to inflation, its value falls in real terms every year if states fail to enact increases in benefits. Moreover, the fact that eligibility for AFDC also entitles mother-only families to Medicaid constitutes a serious disincentive to becoming independent of welfare because the kinds of jobs available to women receiving welfare do not usually carry health insurance. Finally, by drastically reducing benefits as earnings increase, welfare programs carry with them a high tax rate which discourages employment. The choice faced by poor single mothers is not an attractive one: become dependent on welfare or work full time to achieve, at best, a marginally better economic position and risk losing valuable in-kind benefits such as Medicaid and public housing.

### **Stress, Social Support, and Psychological Distress**

Poverty and economic instability are not the only sources of strain in mother-only families. In addition to income loss, divorced mothers and their children undergo many other changes, some of which involve the loss of social status as well as social support.<sup>9</sup> Changes in residence

are perhaps the most common form of instability in newly formed mother-only families. One study found that about 38 percent of divorced mothers experienced a residential move during the first year after a divorce. Subsequent household moves dropped off rapidly to about 20 percent a year on average, still about one-third higher than the residential mobility rates of two-parent families (McLanahan, 1983). Changes in residence not only require adjustment to new neighborhoods and living conditions, they also may mean the loss of important social networks. For children, a new residence often means starting a new school and making new friends.

Changes in employment are also common following marital disruption. In an effort to recoup some of their lost income, many divorced and separated mothers enter the labor force for the first time or increase their working hours. Duncan and Hoffman (1985) found that the proportion of mothers who worked 1,000 or more hours per year increased from 51 to 73 percent after divorce. When a mother makes a substantial change in her working habits, that in itself is stressful for her as well as for her children. If the children are young, child care arrangements must be made, and both mother and child are likely to experience anxiety about the new situation.

Income insecurity and changes in work patterns indicate that single mothers experience a good deal of stress in their daily lives, whereas residential mobility suggests they may experience a lack of social integration and support from neighbors and friends. Some also argue that single mothers, and especially young black mothers, are concentrated in disadvantaged neighborhoods that are characterized by high rates of crime and poverty, low rates of employment, and poor educational facilities

(Wilson, 1987). All of these factors make the job of being a single parent more difficult and may ultimately affect parenting practices and parent-child relationships.

Do single mothers lack social support and are they more likely to live in communities with limited resources? The social support literature indicates that these mothers, on average, are not isolated from their friends and kin, at least with respect to the amount of social contact they have (Alwin et al., 1985). Alwin and his colleagues do find, however, that never-married and divorced mothers have less contact with neighbors than married mothers, which may be related to their higher rates of residential mobility.

Researchers have also shown that single mothers are reasonably successful at building support networks for coping with material as well as emotional stress (Leslie and Grady, 1985; McLanahan et al., 1981; Tietjen, 1985). These studies are based on small convenience samples and therefore the results may not apply to the population in general. Nonetheless, the patterns are interesting and provide a number of useful hypotheses. In her well-known ethnographic study of social support among poor black families, Stack (1974) found that single mothers living in urban areas were integrated into complex and resilient networks of kin and friends and that such networks were governed by strong values of cooperation and economic reciprocity. Stack did not compare mother-only families with two-parent families, and therefore her findings do not tell us whether single mothers are more or less socially integrated than married mothers. Moreover, Stack's work, while highlighting the strength of poor families, does not indicate that network supports are sufficient

to overcome the problems of unstable employment and poverty. Rather, it documents how poor mothers struggle to survive in neighborhoods with relatively few resources and institutional supports.

Not all researchers are as optimistic about single mothers' access to social support. Several have noted the necessity of distinguishing between the quality of social contacts and the quantity, the former being significantly more important as a determinant of well-being than the latter (House and Kahn, 1985; Milardo, 1987). Interactions with kin may be especially problematic for single mothers (Belle, 1982; Milardo, 1987). Kin networks appear to be helpful in providing material support, but they are also more likely to interfere with mothers' parenting styles. Friendship networks appear to provide more emotional support, especially in instances where the mother is trying to change her predivorce identity and establish a new career (McLanahan et al., 1981; Tietjen, 1985). Overall, Milardo (1987) argues that support from friends tends to be outweighed by interference from kin, indicating that support for single mothers is negative, on net.

Are single mothers more likely to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods that are socially, and perhaps culturally, isolated from mainstream society? McLanahan and Garfinkel (1988) argue that most single mothers do not live in such communities, although their exposure is somewhat higher than that of married mothers. Using information from the 1970 and 1980 census tracts of the 100 largest central cities, they found that less than 5 percent of white mother-only families were living in urban areas in which over 20 percent of the population was poor, and less than 1 percent were living in areas where over 40 percent of the inhabitants

were poor. Not surprisingly, the estimates for blacks are much higher, though again, the majority of single mothers do not live in poverty neighborhoods. About 35 percent of black single mothers were living in areas where 20 percent of the inhabitants were poor and about 10 percent were living in areas where 40 percent were poor.

Whereas single mothers appear to have reasonable access to social support, they are notably disadvantaged with respect to psychological resources, as documented by studies of depression and psychological well-being. Single mothers report more worries and are less satisfied with their lives than married mothers and women without children (McLanahan and Adams, 1987). Single mothers also use more community mental health services than married mothers (Guttentag et al., 1981).

The higher levels of psychological distress among single mothers are due in part to their gender. On average, women report more anxiety and more depression than men, although the gender gap in mental health has been declining over the past several decades (Kessler and McRae, 1981; McLanahan and Glass, 1985). Higher levels of distress are also associated with parental status. Women with children at home, and especially employed women with young children, report higher levels of anxiety than childless women or mothers who are not working outside the home (McLanahan and Adams, 1987). Finally, marital status is a strong predictor of depression, with formerly married women reporting higher levels of depression than married women (Gove, 1972). In short, single mothers face a threefold disadvantage: they are women, they are mothers, and most are formerly married.



### The Socialization Process in Mother-Only Families

Given the economic and social conditions described above, one might expect the socialization process in mother-only families to differ in important ways from that in the typical two-parent family. Three factors seem crucial for understanding this process: parental values and expectations, children's attachment to parents, and parents' ability to influence their children's decisions and behavior.

Parental values and expectations. There are several reasons for expecting the values and expectations of single mothers to differ from those of mothers or parents in two-parent families. Because of income insecurity and limited resources, single mothers may have lower educational aspirations for their children than married mothers. Conversely, because of their own experience as breadwinners, they may place a greater emphasis on children's attainment or a higher value on independence and nontraditional gender roles.

The empirical research provides no strong evidence that single mothers have lower educational expectations for their children than married mothers. In fact, at least one national study indicates that daughters in mother-only families are more likely to report that their mothers want them to attend college than are daughters in two-parent families (McLanahan et al., 1988). With respect to independence and nontraditional roles, it appears that single mothers are more liberal than married mothers. Thornton et al. (1983) found employed mothers were more likely to believe that women should engage in work and other activities outside the home, contribute to family income, and participate in family decision-making than nonemployed mothers. Since divorced mothers

are more likely to work outside the home, these results suggest an indirect link between divorce and nontraditional values. Waite and Goldscheider (1986) also found that living independently of men leads women to have more "liberal" attitudes about women's work and family roles.

While single mothers differ from married mothers in their views about independence and gender roles, the long-term implications of these differences are not clear. Growing up in an environment where women's economic independence is valued should raise daughters' aspirations and enhance socioeconomic attainment. Valuing nontraditional gender roles, however, may increase the likelihood that daughters will become single mothers themselves, for two reasons: nontraditional roles may be associated with more permissive attitudes about sexuality, which would increase the risk of early pregnancy, or nontraditional roles may be associated with greater acceptance of single motherhood, given a pregnancy.<sup>10</sup>

At least two studies provide some evidence on this issue. Data from the High School and Beyond survey show that black adolescents from mother-only families and black, white, and Hispanic adolescents from remarried families are more likely to consider having a child out of wedlock than adolescents from two-parent families (McLanahan et al., 1988). In addition, Thornton and Camburn (1987) report that divorced mothers, especially those who have remarried, hold less restrictive attitudes about premarital sex than continuously married mothers. They also find that mothers' attitudes are associated with sons' and daughters' attitudes and behavior. Adolescents whose mothers remarry perceive their

mothers to be less opposed to premarital sex and less restrictive than other adolescents. Adolescent children of remarried mothers are also more sexually active. Thornton and Camburn argue that a mother's divorce and subsequent dating increases the visibility of her sexuality, which has a "disinhibiting" effect on children's attitudes and behavior. Both studies suggest that children in remarried families are even less traditional with regard to gender roles and attitudes toward sexuality than children in mother-only families.

Children's attachment to parents. Developmental theorists argue that divorce interrupts primary bonds between parents and children and may interfere with children's normal development and socialization (Hess and Camara, 1979; Rutter, 1980). The time fathers spend with their children, for example, is greatly reduced after divorce. In a study based on the National Survey of Children, Furstenberg et al. (1986) found that less than half of the children with divorced parents in their sample (ages 11 to 16) had seen their fathers during the past year (see also Furstenberg and Nord, 1985). The fact that contact with the father is reduced suggests that the affective bond between fathers and children may be weakened. Indeed, at least two large studies have found that children from divorced, mother-only families feel less close to their fathers than children from two-parent families. White et al. (1985) found that about 17 percent of college students from divorced families reported having close ties with their fathers as compared with 38 percent of children from two-parent families. Furstenberg et al. (1986) reached similar conclusions in their study.

Not all researchers agree about the value of a good relationship with the nonresidential father. While some studies have shown that a good

father-child relationship enhances the child's well-being after divorce (Hess and Camara, 1979), Furstenberg and his colleagues (1986) note that neither contact nor reports of closeness are related to children's well-being, as measured by an index of academic ability, problem or deviant behavior, and psychological distress. These results, which are based on a nationally representative sample of children, conflict with our basic ideas about the value of parent-child relations and suggest that more research is needed on the effects of the relationship between the child and the nonresidential parent.

The mother-child relationship is also altered by divorce, although in different ways. Whereas most studies report no difference in mother-attachment among children in mother-only and two-parent families (White et al. 1985), there is some evidence that the relationship with the mother becomes closer and/or less hierarchical after a divorce (Devall et al., 1986; Weiss, 1979). Again, there is disagreement over the value of a nonhierarchical relationship with the parent. Weiss (1979) speaks favorably about the greater equality in mother-only families, whereas others argue that such relationships may oversensitize children to the feelings of adults and interfere with psychological development (Hess and Camara, 1979). These results are based on small, nonrepresentative samples, and need to be replicated on larger samples where other factors are controlled.

Finally, parental conflict may also undermine children's attachment to parents. Indeed, there is a large literature which suggests that it is conflict rather than living in a mother-only family which leads to family disruption and long-term negative consequences for children. This issue is discussed in more detail in the next section.

**Parental involvement and supervision.** Two final questions of considerable importance in assessing parent-child relations are whether the single mother spends sufficient time with her children and whether she exercises adequate supervision and control over their activities. Hetherington et al. (1978) have shown that during the first year after divorce single mothers are much less consistent in their discipline patterns and household routines are more erratic. They attribute disorganization to the stress associated with divorce, as opposed to single parenting in general, and note that most of the problems subside by 18 months after divorce.

Others have simply looked at the association between single parenting and parent-child relations, without considering time since marital disruption as a factor. The latter indicate that parental involvement and supervision in mother-only families is somewhat lower than in two-parent families. McLanahan et al. (1988), for example, found that adolescents in mother-only families report receiving less help with homework and with planning their high school curriculum than adolescents living with both parents. They also found that parents are less likely to monitor adolescents' social activities (see also Abrahamse et al., 1987). In a similar vein, Dornbusch et al. (1985) and Steinberg (1987) found that single mothers have less input into children's decisions than married parents, and adolescents in mother-only families are more susceptible to peer pressure than children in two-parent families.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, in the Dornbusch study the presence of adult relatives, but not stepfathers, strengthened single mothers' influence relative to that of children's peers. It is not clear, however, whether such

adults provided "back-up" support for the mothers or whether they supervised the children directly. It makes sense that grandmothers would have a more positive influence on mother's parenting than stepfathers, since the former are usually in the household to help with the children whereas the latter may compete with children for the mother's time. (See Kellam et al., 1977, for additional information on the benefits of having grandmothers in the household.)

## II. THE REPRODUCTION OF POVERTY

Much of the present concern about mother-only families arises from the fear that such families may be harmful to children. In this section we present a brief overview of the empirical research on the consequences of growing up in a mother-only family and the changing orientations among researchers on this topic during the past three decades. Following the discussion of empirical research, we explore several different explanations for why children from mother-only families are less successful in school and more likely to become single parents themselves than children who grow up in two-parent families.

### A Brief Summary of Empirical Research

The literature on the intergenerational consequences of marital dissolution and nonmarriage has undergone several transformations during the past three decades. During the 1950s and 1960s, the prevailing view was that divorce and nonmarital births were indicative of pathology (individual pathology and/or couple pathology) and that children of such unions were likely to exhibit pathological behaviors as well.<sup>12</sup> Much of

the research at this time was based on highly selective samples, such as children in treatment for psychological disorders or wards of the criminal justice system. Thus it is not surprising that personal failure rather than social factors are used to explain the differences associated with family structure. In the early 1970s, the ideology began to change, as evidenced by Herzog and Sudia's (1973) review of the research on children in "fatherless families." These authors challenged earlier interpretations and showed that existing studies of mother-only families contained serious methodological flaws. In particular, they argued that many of the differences between mother-only and two-parent families could be explained by differences in family socioeconomic status.

The Herzog and Sudia review offered a new perspective on single motherhood and, together with a changed political climate in which black families and nonmarried mothers of all races were viewed more positively, stimulated new studies which focused on the "strengths" of mother-only families, i.e., the ways in which single mothers successfully cope with poverty and stress. Despite Herzog and Sudia's assertion that father absence did have some negative consequences for children, their methodological critique was taken by many as evidence that differences between one- and two-parent families were minimal or due entirely to income differences.

Since the late seventies researchers have moved beyond simplistic pathological and idealizing perspectives. More recent reviews of the literature have emphasized both that children in such families are disadvantaged and that these disadvantages are outcomes of interactions among a variety of factors. Moreover, reviewers have noted that while family

socioeconomic status is a major predictor of children's attainment, it cannot account for all of the problems associated with parental divorce and growing up in a mother-only family (Hetherington et al., 1983; Shinn, 1978).<sup>13</sup>

Both Shinn and Hetherington et al. focused their reviews on cognitive development in young and school-age children. They found that children from mother-only families did less well on standardized tests than children from two-parent families, but the differences were minimal. The greatest difference in academic achievement was found in teacher evaluations, such as grade point average and reports of behavioral problems in school and with peers, which tended to be more negative for boys from one-parent families than for boys from two-parent families. Absences from school were also higher for children in one-parent families and were related to teachers' perceptions and evaluations.<sup>14</sup>

Hetherington and her colleagues also found evidence of a gender difference in the effect of single motherhood on academic achievement, boys being slightly more disadvantaged than girls. Living with a same-sex parent was advantageous for academic achievement compared to living with an opposite-sex parent. While girls in mother-only families have fewer initial problems of adjustment in response to parents' divorce, they are more likely to become depressed during adolescence (Wallerstein, 1986). Moreover, mother's remarriage has a more negative effect on daughters than on sons, increasing both aggression and depression.

Since the early 1980s, new studies have appeared that are consistent with the conclusions reached by Shinn and Hetherington et al. and at the same time extend previous research in several ways. First, these studies



are based on large, nationally representative surveys, many of which have longitudinal designs. Second, they examine the long-term consequences of family disruption and single motherhood by following children from different family types through late adolescence and into adulthood. Finally, the results of these studies have been replicated by more than one data set, using similar measures of family structure and similar indicators of offspring behavior and attainment.<sup>15</sup>

The new research indicates that children who grow up in mother-only families are disadvantaged not only during childhood or immediately after parents' marital disruption, but during adolescence and young adulthood as well. Moreover, the negative consequences associated with family structure extend across a wide range of socioeconomic outcomes. Children from mother-only families obtain fewer years of education and are more likely to drop out of high school than offspring from two-parent families (Krein and Beller, 1988; McLanahan, 1985; McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; McLanahan et al., 1988; Shaw, 1982). They have lower earnings in young adulthood and are more likely to be poor (Corcoran et al., 1987; Hill et al., 1987). The daughters of single mothers are more likely to receive welfare when they become adults than daughters from two-parent families (Antel, 1988; Gottschalk, 1988; McLanahan, 1988).

Children from mother-only families are also disadvantaged with respect to family formation and deviant behavior. They are more likely to marry early and have children early, both in and out of wedlock (Abrahamse et al., 1987; Hogan and Kitagawa, 1985; McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; McLanahan et al., 1988; see Michael and Tuma, 1985, for different results). Those who marry are more likely to divorce (McLanahan and

Bumpass, 1988). In short, children who grow up in mother-only families are at greater risk of becoming single mothers themselves, either through divorce or nonmarital childbearing. Finally, offspring from mother-only families are more likely to commit delinquent acts and to engage in drug and alcohol use than offspring from two-parent families (Matsueda and Heimer, 1987; Mott and Haurin, 1987).

In addition to documenting a wide range of negative outcomes among children from mother-only families, these studies contain several other findings. First, income appears to account for some, but not all, of the lower attainment of offspring from mother-only families. Second, the effects of single motherhood are somewhat different across different types of mother-only families. Offspring of widowed mothers do better, on average, than offspring of divorced and separated mothers, at least in some surveys and on some indicators. Third, the effects of single motherhood are consistent across a large number of racial and ethnic groups, including blacks, whites, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, and Asians. Fourth, family disruptions occurring in adolescence are just as upsetting in terms of their consequences as disruptions occurring in early childhood. Finally, remarriage does not appear to mitigate the consequences of family disruption; if anything, it may increase the risk that a daughter will leave school early and become a teen mother.

### Theories of Intergenerational Consequences

Nearly all of the research on the effects of single motherhood is descriptive and there is no universally accepted theory to explain why

children from mother-only families have lower academic achievement or start their families earlier than children from two-parent families. Nevertheless, most researchers who study the phenomenon ultimately employ a particular perspective or theoretical orientation to make sense out of the relationships observed in the empirical studies. The literature on intergenerational consequences contains at least three such perspectives, which are not mutually exclusive but which reflect different disciplines and traditions. These include the "economic-deprivation argument," which attributes the disadvantage associated with the mother-only family to lack of parental investment; the "socialization argument," which claims that negative outcomes are due to dysfunctional parental values and parent-child relationships; and the "neighborhood argument," which posits that outcomes are due to structural or neighborhood characteristics such as social isolation and a lack of community resources. To some degree, these perspectives correspond to the areas described in the previous section on material and social conditions.

The economic-deprivation argument. Many researchers believe that the negative association between single motherhood and offspring attainment is due to low parental income. Single mothers have less time and less money to invest in their children, which affects both children's personal characteristics as well as how they view the parental household (Becker, 1981; Krein and Beller, 1986; Michael and Tuma, 1985). Family income is related to the quality of children's schools and to participation in extracurricular activities, including summer travel and camps, all of which are positively related to school achievement (Heyns, 1985).

Economic necessity may also promote the premature assumption of adult responsibilities by encouraging adolescents to leave school early in order to earn money for their families or to care for younger siblings (Elder, 1974). This does not mean that early departures from school are necessarily due to poor performance or negative behavior in general. On the contrary, children who leave school prematurely to fulfill adult roles may be highly responsible. Their responsibilities, however, are directed toward family survival rather than individual achievement. Finally, adolescents from low-income families have fewer economic opportunities and may see marriage and parenthood as a means of escaping hardship and establishing an adult identity (Rubin, 1976). Thus, because of their economic position, we would expect children of single mothers to leave school sooner and to marry and/or have children earlier than offspring from two-parent families.

The economic-deprivation argument, as presented above, does not distinguish between low income as a cause and as a consequence of divorce. As noted earlier, divorced mothers, on average, experience a 40 percent loss in income during the first year after divorce, which means that for many mother-only families, low income is a consequence of a change in family structure. It is also true, however, that a considerable proportion of single mothers, especially never-married black mothers, are poor prior to becoming household heads, in which case low income is exogenous to family structure.

To what extent does income account for the differences in education and family formation behavior that are observed between offspring from mother-only and two-parent families? With respect to high school

graduation McLanahan (1985) found that income accounted for about 40 to 50 percent of the difference in high school dropout rates of children from mother-only and two-parent families, but that family differences existed, even after controlling for income. These findings have been replicated with several longitudinal surveys, including the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, and the High School and Beyond Survey (Krein and Beller, 1988; McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; McLanahan et al., 1988).

Income is also important in explaining the association between family structure and family formation behavior of offspring, although again it does not account for all of the correlation (Abrahamse et al., 1987; Hogan, 1985; Hogan and Kitagawa, 1985; McLanahan, 1988; McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988). In their comparison of three longitudinal surveys, McLanahan and her colleagues (1988) found that family income accounted for between 13 and 50 percent of the intergenerational relationship between growing up in a mother-only family and becoming a single mother in adulthood, depending on which survey was used and whether one looked at whites, blacks or Hispanics.

**The socialization argument.** This argument emphasizes parental values and childrearing practices as the major factors accounting for differences in offspring behavior and attainment. Many of these family characteristics were discussed in the first section under the headings of stress, parental involvement, and parent-child relations. Socialization theorists argue variously that single mothers are more accepting of divorce and out-of-wedlock birth and therefore their offspring are more likely to become single parents themselves. They claim that single

mothers have less influence over their children's behavior because of a lack of parental attachment, parental involvement, and supervision. Finally, some argue that single mothers are under considerable stress, which affects parent-child relations and parental control, at least for the first 18 months after a divorce.

The research on intergenerational consequences provides some support for the socialization hypothesis, as was noted in the previous section. With respect to parental values, we know that single mothers and their daughters are more accepting of premarital sex and divorce (Thornton and Camburn, 1983) and that single motherhood is associated with less parental involvement in school work, less supervision, and less parental influence (Dornbusch et al., 1985; Hogan and Kitagawa, 1985; Matsueda and Heimer, 1987; McLanahan et al., 1988; Steinberg, 1987).

The critical question, however, is whether differences in socialization beliefs and practices account for differences in the attainment of children; here the answer is more complicated. If we ask whether socialization is related to child outcomes, the answer is clearly yes (Abrahamse et al., 1987; Hogan and Kitigawa, 1985; Matsueda and Heimer, 1987; McLanahan et al., 1988). If we ask whether differences in socialization "account for" differences in the family structure effect, the answer is less clear. McLanahan et al. (1988) found that although the socialization practices they measured are related to both family structure and child outcomes, they do not explain any of the additional difference in the attainment of children from mother-only and two-parent families once socioeconomic status is taken into account. This suggests that socialization factors are simply one of the mechanisms through which lower

socioeconomic status operates. Additional research is needed to determine the interrelationship between socialization practices and economic status and to assess the extent to which differences in socialization account for differences between children in mother-only and two-parent families.

As was the case with the economic-deprivation hypothesis, some analysts argue that differences in values and socialization practices are not endogenous to divorce. Rather, they claim that such differences exist prior to parents' divorce or mothers' out-of-wedlock births. The most impressive evidence to date in support of the selection hypothesis comes from studies that distinguish between happily and unhappily married couples or between low- and high-conflict families (Block et al., 1986; Chess et al., 1984; Emery, 1982; Peterson and Zill, 1986; Raschke and Raschke, 1979). These studies, which focus on outcomes for children still living at home, indicate that offspring from mother-only families are no different from offspring in unhappy or high-conflict families. This finding suggests that it is family conflict rather than divorce that is the determining factor in children's behavior. The conflict studies are based primarily on small, nonrepresentative samples and have not been replicated with larger data bases. Moreover, not all studies are consistent with this interpretation. Hetherington's work in particular shows that parental behavior and childrearing practices are less stable and consistent after divorce.

Although the selection argument is a sensible alternative, it is not an easy hypothesis to test. First, a well-designed study requires longitudinal data so that children and parents can be observed both before and

after divorce. The predivorce period must be early enough so as not to be contaminated by the anticipation of a divorce. Second, the data base must be rich enough to allow the researcher to control for the critical pre- and postdivorce measures. Finally, even if one were to determine that an event such as marital disruption was associated with a change in offspring's behavior, such as dropping out of school or becoming pregnant, it is always possible that the association is due to a third, unobserved variable that is correlated with both family change and offspring behavior as opposed to parents' marital disruption itself.

The neighborhood argument. The neighborhood argument states that mother-only families are more likely to live in economically and socially isolated neighborhoods which, in turn, lower the opportunity for economic mobility and raise the likelihood that offspring will quit school and/or become teen parents. This argument, best and most recently articulated by Wilson (1987), incorporates elements of both the economic-deprivation and socialization perspectives and raises the debate over family structure to a more macro level of analysis. Whereas those who adhere to the economic-deprivation argument generally emphasize supply-side factors, such as household resources and parental investment, neighborhood theorists stress the demand side of the labor market, especially the extent to which residential location is related to the availability of jobs. According to this view, children from mother-only families have less access to jobs and therefore less incentive to invest in education or other human capital activities. Similarly, whereas socialization theorists focus primarily on parent-child relations and communication and control within the family, neighborhood analysts stress the importance of



community attitudes, local networks, and peer-group activities. The latter argue that mother-only families are isolated in "underclass" neighborhoods with high levels of poverty and disorganization, which, in turn, reduce parental control and increase the likelihood that offspring will be exposed to antisocial activities.

The neighborhood hypothesis is distinct from previous arguments primarily in its emphasis on how social structure constrains family behavior. According to this view, economic incentives and social norms within ghettos discourage socioeconomic attainment and encourage early family formation. As was the case with the previous two hypotheses, the neighborhood effect can be viewed as a cause or a consequence of family disruption or nonmarital births. In the version set forth by Wilson, school dropout and single motherhood across generations are treated as consequences of the lack of jobs for men. Another version suggests that single mothers are less able than married parents to cope with life in ghetto neighborhoods, where community controls are weaker and peer activities more dangerous (Sampson, 1987). Sampson's study suggests the existence of an interaction effect between single motherhood and neighborhood conditions.

Several researchers have found some support for the neighborhood argument. In their Chicago study, Hogan and Kitagawa (1985) were able to classify respondents according to census tract characteristics such as medium income, percentage poor, juvenile crime rates, marriage and fertility rates. They found that neighborhood quality has a significant effect on early pregnancy and is strongly related to parental supervision. More recently, Corcoran and her colleagues (1987) have shown

that residential location is related to children's socioeconomic attainment.

As in the case of the socialization variables, the relative power of neighborhood characteristics versus family income and socialization practices in accounting for the differences between children from mother-only and two-parent families is not known. What is clear, however, is that neighborhood quality has an independent effect on children's attainment, even after controlling for family income. A major limitation of the neighborhood hypothesis is that it applies to a relatively small proportion of all mother-only families. Whereas neighborhoods may be important in explaining variation in the behavior and attainment of black adolescents, they cannot account for differences among most whites. As noted above, less than 1 percent of white mother-only families live in highly concentrated poverty areas (McLanahan and Garfinkel, 1988).

Finally, the availability of social support might also be viewed as a neighborhood characteristic in that it measures whether an individual or a family is socially isolated and whether they receive informal social support of some kind. As noted, single mothers do not appear to differ from married parents with respect to contact with friends and relatives, except in one instance: they are less likely to know their neighbors. It is also possible that the quality of social exchange may be lower in mother-only families, especially poor families, which may affect mothers' ability to monitor and influence their children's behavior. Thus far, no one has examined the association between mothers' informal support or contact with friends and neighbors on the one hand and offspring behavior on the other.

### III. THE POLITICS OF SINGLE MOTHERHOOD

The growth of mother-only families and the feminization of poverty have stimulated considerable discussion among researchers and policy makers during the past decade. Single motherhood is a highly politicized subject that involves conflicting values and competing interests in terms of gender, class, and race. First and foremost, single mothers are women, and therefore their prevalence and material condition have relevance for debates over inequality between men and women. The poverty of single mothers highlights the economic vulnerability that is inherent in women's role as mothers and calls attention to the relatively low earnings capacity and disproportionate responsibility for children that is shared by all women.

Single mothers are also disproportionately poor; hence their condition is relevant to debates over inequality across social classes. Although many of these women were poor prior to becoming heads of household and although a substantial number of poor women and children live in two-parent families, the plight of mother-only families has attracted the nation's attention and raised questions about the fairness and efficiency of our social programs and income transfer system. How can a society with such a high standard of living account for the fact that about 20 percent of its children are living below the poverty line (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987)? For policy makers and analysts who support greater equality across classes, the mother-only family has become a rallying point around which to push for income redistribution.

Finally, a large number of single mothers are black, which means that discussions of the trends in family disruption and nonmarriage are

inevitably linked to discussions of racial inequality and discrimination. The politics of single motherhood are perhaps nowhere more evident than in the debate over the black mother-only family, which dates back to the 1960s and the publication of the Moynihan Report (Moynihan, 1965). At that time single mothers were cited as evidence of a growing pathology in the black family and as a critical link in the intergenerational transmission of poverty. This characterization of the black family was widely criticized by many black scholars and liberal politicians for being implicitly racist and for "blaming the victim." (For a discussion of this debate, see Rainwater and Yancy, 1967.) More recently, some of these issues have reemerged in response to Wilson's research on the urban underclass (1987). Now, as then, the political and intellectual dilemma is how to develop an analysis that stresses the economic and social disadvantages faced by poor single mothers without reenforcing negative stereotypes about their lifestyles and values.

In sum, analyses of the growth and economic conditions of mother-only families are never totally objective but are fraught with the conflicting values and biases of the different interest groups that are affected by the phenomenon. To illustrate this point and help clarify the major political actors and their positions, the final section of the paper focuses on two questions that are central to the debate over single motherhood: (1) do mother-only families represent a "problem," and if so, what is the nature of the "problem"--is it prevalence or is it poverty? and (2) what kinds of social policies should be developed to deal with the poverty and income insecurity of mother-only families?

### Mother-only Families: Social Problem or Not?

A major question debated by academicians and activists is whether the growth of mother-only families is a sign of social progress or decline. The position taken by analysts on this issue is shaped by their values regarding women's traditional family roles and whether they view single motherhood as a cause or consequence of economic insecurity. Those who view the traditional two-parent family as a primary source of women's inequality and oppression tend to see the growth of mother-only families as a gain for women. Those who view single motherhood as a consequence of economic deprivation and male joblessness tend to see it as a sign of declining opportunity for poor minority families.

Most mainstream feminists argue that the growth of mother-only families is a sign of forward movement in the struggle for women's equality (Bergmann, 1986; Hartmann, 1985).<sup>16</sup> They note that the increase in the demand for women workers and rising wage rates after World War II drew an ever greater proportion of women into the paid labor force which, in turn, expanded women's roles and made it easier for them to support themselves outside of marriage. As a consequence, women today marry less often, divorce more, and form mother-only families at a faster rate than they did in the past.<sup>17</sup>

Wilson (1987) offers a very different perspective on the growth of mother-only families. He argues that the rise in nonmarriage and marital disruption is due to a decline in the ability of poor black men to support their families or at least to make a substantial economic contribution to the household. According to Wilson, the increase in male unemployment and joblessness between 1960 and 1980 was greatest in the

North Central and Northeast regions of the country, areas which also showed the greatest increase in the number of mother-only families. Declines in employment during the 1970s were due to a loss of low-skilled jobs in the central northern cities where blacks are highly concentrated. Jobs for unskilled workers in cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore declined by more than 30 percent during the 1970s, whereas jobs for skilled workers increased from 21 to 38 percent. The shift to higher-paying jobs in the central cities worked to the disadvantage of black men who were least likely to have a college education. Wilson's theory stresses the constraints on men associated with the growth of mother-only families--as opposed to the increased options for women--and therefore he sees the current trend as indicative of social dislocation rather than progress.

The disparity between Wilson's position and that of many feminists is noteworthy inasmuch as both groups are concerned with poverty and inequality and both are viewed as spokespersons for the interests of minorities and disadvantaged persons. And yet there is considerable disagreement and some animosity between the two camps, at least on the issue of single motherhood. On the one hand, Wilson has been accused of framing his analysis exclusively around the interests of poor minority men. For example, his emphasis on men's unemployment and his use of single motherhood as an indicator of social dislocation has angered many feminists and led them to accuse him of being antifeminist. On the other hand, the liberal-feminist position has been accused of being oriented exclusively around the interests of white middle-class women and of ignoring the problems that poor minority women share with poor minority men (Brenner, 1987; Malvaux, 1985).

To some extent the conflict between Wilson and the liberal-feminists is due to the fact that the two groups are looking at different parts of the gender earnings ratio (women's earnings to men's earnings) and at different ends of the income distribution. Liberal-feminists focus on increases in women's earnings (the numerator of the ratio) and at the middle to upper end of the income distribution, whereas Wilson and his colleagues are looking at declines in men's earnings (the denominator of the earnings ratio) at the bottom of the income distribution. Since Wilson is concerned primarily with poor black families living in urban ghettos, the more relevant factor for him is the decline in male earnings, which has occurred at the bottom end of the distribution. Conversely, the liberal-feminist argument is most convincing when applied to middle-class women who are economically independent. Although women's earnings and access to income have increased at both ends of the distribution, it is hard to argue that the "independence" of poor minority mothers is a sign of progress for women or their children. By the same token, male joblessness cannot fully account for the decline in marriage and rise in single motherhood among middle-class women.

The conflict between Wilson and the socialist-feminists is somewhat different, since both focus on the bottom end of the income distribution. Here the disagreement is over traditional gender roles and women's economic independence. In Wilson's view the solution to the poverty and economic insecurity of mother-only families is to increase employment opportunities for minority men so that they can marry and support their families. The socialist-feminist solution is to increase employment opportunities for poor minority women as well, and in doing so to provide

them with the ability to choose whether they will marry or live independently (Sarvasy and Van Allen, 1984).

Finally, conservative analysts such as Gilder (1981) and Murray (1984) offer a somewhat different interpretation of the recent trend in marital disruption and nonmarriage. They agree with liberal-feminists that the growth in mother-only families is related to the increase in women's earnings and income. But they disagree strongly with the claim that women's economic independence is a sign of social progress. Gilder sees obligations to the traditional two-parent family as the primary civilizing influence on men, and therefore he views women's employment and the subsequent decline in the nuclear family as disasters for society. Murray is equally pessimistic, although he blames the welfare system instead of women's employment for both the increase in mother-only families and joblessness among young black men. According to Murray, mother-only families have grown because it makes more "economic sense" for a young couple to establish separate households and live on welfare than to marry and support their family by working. Both authors blame women's economic independence for the increases in marital disruption and for increases in male irresponsibility toward family and children and both view a return to the traditional two-parent family form as the best solution to poverty.

While appealing to conservatives, Murray's argument is inconsistent with empirical research on the relationship between rising welfare benefits and increases in divorce and nonmarital births. Using information from the best studies on the topic, Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986) estimate that the increase in welfare benefits accounted for 9-14 percent of



the overall growth in mother-only families between 1960 and 1975, and for possibly 30 percent of the growth at the bottom of the income distribution. Gilder's assessment of women's employment as the key mechanism behind the increase in mother-only families is more scientifically accurate than Murray's, but his characterization of nonmarried men as "uncivilized" is highly ideological and his values regarding traditional gender roles are out of line with those of mainstream society.

### How Should We Deal with the Poverty and Income Insecurity of Single Mothers?

In our earlier discussion of poverty and income instability we pointed to three distinct sources of income available to mother-only families: mother's earnings, income support paid by noncustodial parents, and government subsidies. Changes in economic well-being can be achieved by changing any one of these sources, and not surprisingly, the current policy debate over how to aid mother-only families involves all three. Policies aimed at increasing women's earnings include affirmative action and job integration, equal pay for equal work, and comparable worth. Affirmative action and job integration are designed to redistribute jobs between men and women and between whites and blacks, and in particular, to increase the numbers of women and of blacks of both sexes in higher-paying jobs. Comparable worth is designed to increase wages and earnings in jobs held primarily by women, and pay equity is oriented toward equalizing wages of men and women in similar jobs. Child support policies include proposals to increase the proportion of single mothers with awards, to standardize the amount of the award, to improve collections, and to guarantee a minimum child support benefit. Policies that

increase government benefits to single mothers include child care subsidies and certain types of work-welfare programs. Although all of these proposals are designed to reduce the economic vulnerability of women in general, they are especially important for improving the status of single mothers.<sup>18</sup>

Programs designed to increase women's earnings and to increase the child support paid by nonresidential fathers are generally viewed as "private" solutions to the problem of income insecurity. Such solutions are not financed directly by the state and their primary goal is to redistribute income and economic opportunities between men and women, as opposed to across classes. These distinctions are not absolute. For example, the government is responsible for enforcing affirmative action and child support payments, and it may become involved in financing specific elements of different programs, such as guaranteeing a minimum child support benefit and implementing comparable worth in the public sector. Moreover, depending upon how private employers finance pay equity proposals, the latter may have redistributive consequences across households. Nevertheless, as compared with proposals that increase public benefits directly, this set of policies is relatively private and aimed at reducing gender inequality. (See Starr, 1988, for a more complete discussion of the public-private distinction.)

The proposals outlined above have been criticized from both the political left and right. Conservatives object to pay equity and child support on grounds that they promote women's economic independence and thereby threaten the traditional two-parent family (Gilder, 1981).

Socialists and some liberals argue, on the other hand, that such policies do not go far enough in reducing class and racial inequities and in changing the gender division of labor. With respect to employment opportunity proposals, Brenner (1987) argues that comparable worth does not help minority women, whose main problem is lack of education and a decent wage. Moreover, she notes that comparable worth, as currently proposed, is conservative because it does not challenge the use of market criteria for job evaluation. Several socialist-feminists point out that unless comparable worth is accompanied by enforcement of affirmative action policies, minority women will not necessarily benefit from a new wage structure (Malvaux, 1985; Sarvasy and Van Allen, 1984).<sup>19</sup>

With respect to child support, critics have complained that increasing child support payments may simply serve to redistribute income from poor families to the rich. They argue that collecting child support is an attempt by the state to reduce welfare costs and will have no net benefits on the economic well-being of poor single mothers on welfare (Glass, 1987). Glass's argument assumes that the income collected from nonresidential fathers will be used to save welfare dollars instead of increasing the total benefits of single mothers, but this remains to be seen. Current policy allows welfare mothers to disregard the first \$50 per month of child support in calculating their welfare benefit.

Several feminists also criticize proponents of child support reform for trying to privatize the costs of child care rather than increasing the state's role in reproducing the labor force (Sarvasy and Van Allen, 1984). Other critics note that child support reform ignores the problems of poor minority men and will simply push more of them and their new

families into poverty (Brenner, 1987; Brown, 1980; Malvaux, 1985). These analysts focus almost exclusively on the effect of child support at the bottom end of the income distribution and ignore the impact on single mothers who are not dependent on welfare.

Finally, some feminists object to child support on the grounds that it reinforces women's traditional dependence on men and increases fathers' control over children against mothers' wishes (Brush, 1988; Sarvasy and Van Allen, 1984). If required to pay support, nonresidential fathers will undoubtedly demand more time with and more control over their children. Hence, while child support redistributes income from fathers to mothers, parental power may go in the opposite direction.<sup>20</sup>

A second set of proposals for increasing the economic well-being of mother-only families can be characterized as "public" solutions, inasmuch as they are designed to shift a larger share of the cost of raising children onto government, which, in turn, pays for such programs through general revenues. Since higher-income families pay a greater share of the cost of public programs, the programs have the effect of redistributing economic resources across classes. Such programs include federally subsidized child care and certain types of work-welfare programs, such as education and training, employment placement, and wage subsidies. (See Gueron, 1986, for a description of work-welfare programs.)<sup>21</sup>

As was the case for "private solutions," public programs also have their critics. Not surprisingly, conservatives object to socializing child care for two reasons. First, it is expensive, second, it is viewed as encouraging employment among wives and mothers which, as noted above,

is believed to undermine the traditional two-parent family. Gilder argues that it is unfair to tax families in which the wife is a full-time homemaker to pay for the child care costs of families in which the wife works outside the home.

Critics from the left also have concerns about the consequences of greater public involvement in providing economic support to single mothers. A primary objection of many socialist-feminists is that public programs will merely shift women's economic dependency from husbands and fathers to the state, creating what they term a "state patriarchy" (Barrett, 1983; Brown, 1980; Eisenstein, 1983; McIntosh, 1978; Wilson, 1977). The current debate over the role of the state vis a vis single mothers is reminiscent of an earlier exchange involving the welfare state and the poor, which took place in the late sixties and early seventies. At that time, critics argued that the primary function of the capitalist state was one of social control and that welfare programs were designed to regulate labor rather than alleviate economic insecurity (Piven and Cloward, 1971). Today, many socialist-feminists make a similar argument with respect to the intentions and consequences of government. Not all agree, however. In her discussion of family violence, Gordon (1986) shows how the state can serve as a resource as well as a mechanism of control. Similarly, Piven states that "the main opportunities for women to exercise power today inhere precisely in their 'dependent' relationships with the state" (1985: 266).<sup>22</sup>

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The mother-only family has over the past three decades emerged as a major family form. This change has major implications not only for the women who are at risk of becoming single mothers, but also for the men who are at risk of becoming nonresidential fathers and whose sons and daughters may grow up in a mother-only family.

At present, we know a good deal about the economic aspects of these families. We know that single mothers have higher poverty rates than other families and that a substantial portion of their poverty is a consequence of marital disruption. We know that single mothers bear most of the economic costs of their children, even though their earnings capacity is limited by lack of work experience, sex discrimination in the labor market, and the high cost of child care. We know that, on average, children who grow up in mother-only families are less likely to complete high school and more likely to be poor as adults than children who grow up with both natural parents. Moreover, we know that a significant part of children's lower attainment is due to economic deprivation in the family of origin.

Answers to other important questions are less clear. For example, we need to know more about parenting practices and parent-child relationships in mother-only and two-parent families--whether they differ and whether differences are related to child outcomes. Do single mothers have different values and expectations for their children and are they less able to control adolescent offspring than married mothers? Does contact with the noncustodial parent and/or the presence of a grandmother in the household reduce the likelihood of dropping out of school? Does

social support from friends and relatives or being part of a well-integrated and economically stable community mitigate the negative outcomes associated with single motherhood? There are sound theoretical reasons for believing that each of these factors affects offspring's behavior, but the empirical evidence is inconclusive.

Most important, we need to know whether differences in parenting styles and parent-child relations are a consequence of marital disruption (or nonmarriage) or whether they reflect preexisting conditions among couples who divorce or never marry in the first place. A plausible explanation for why children from mother-only families do less well as adults than children from two-parent families is that "troubled couples" are more likely to break up and to have "troubled children" than "happy couples"; if this is true, children from such unions would have done poorly regardless of whether their parents stayed married or lived apart. A major challenge to researchers during the next decade is to try and sort out how much of the lower attainment among these offspring is due to family disruption and nonmarriage and how much is due to selectivity into the single-mother status.

Is single motherhood a problem in and of itself, or is it rather that single mothers have problems? This question has stimulated considerable debate during the past decade. The answer, however, is not simple, and depends on whose point of view is taken and what part of the income distribution is considered. On the one hand, the mother-only family is more economically viable and more socially acceptable in the 1980s than it was in the 1950s, which represents an increase in women's opportunities, both economically and socially. From many women's point of

view, single motherhood is not a problem in and of itself. On the other hand, if Wilson is correct, many single mothers, and especially young black mothers, no longer have the option to marry because the fathers of their children are unemployed and cannot support, or contribute to the support of, their families. For these women, most of whom depend on welfare and live below the poverty line, single motherhood is an indicator of a problem, although it is not the problem.

Single motherhood may also be a problem. The evidence on the intergenerational consequences of family disruption overwhelmingly suggests that children who grow up with both parents are better off as adults than children who live apart from one parent. The critical question is whether these children would have done better had their parents stayed together. If the answer is yes, then the increase in mother-only families is a problem from the point of view of children, and from the point of view of society which has an interest in the well-being of all children. If the answer is no, or if the children in these families would have been worse off, the increase in single motherhood is a neutral phenomenon, or a sign of progress for both women and children. As noted above, the answer to this question is unknown, and therefore the costs and benefits of single motherhood cannot be determined.

Finally, what should be done to reduce poverty and income insecurity in mother-only families? Should we move in the direction of private solutions, such as increased child support and employment opportunities? Or should the state provide support directly, in the form of children's allowances, subsidized child care, or a minimum child support benefit? It would appear that we need a mix of public and private programs. From



the point of view of political feasibility, it is unreasonable to expect taxpayers to increase public subsidies for single mothers unless parents themselves are contributing their fair share. Thus, the implementation of a publicly guaranteed child support minimum benefit is likely to be accompanied by a strengthening of the private child support system. Similarly, support for subsidized child care is most likely to be linked to programs that promote mothers' employment, especially mothers currently on welfare.

Will enforcing child support obligations reinforce women's traditional dependence on men and/or push low-income minority fathers (and their new families) into poverty? Will increasing public sector benefits create new dependencies on the state? The best way to protect poor fathers from economic hardship is to make child support obligations a percentage of current income. Then if the father is poor or if he is unemployed, his obligation will also be low. Another way is to designate a minimum income that is not subject to the child support tax. Both solutions are preferable to exempting all fathers from child support on the grounds that it may impoverish a few.

The best way to minimize single mothers' dependency is to (1) redistribute their sources of support across a broader array of institutions, e.g., the family, the market, and the state; and (2) extend support to a wider population. Dependency itself is not the problem, but rather the loss of power and the feeling of helplessness that often accompanies it. Distributing support across multiple institutions minimizes the degree of dependence on any one person or organization. It is one thing to depend on the ex-spouse or the state for 90 percent of one's

income; it is another to be 20 percent dependent on each of these institutions and to be 60 percent dependent on a paid job. Extending support to a broader population would mean making programs such as child support, child care, and pay equity available to all women (as opposed to those who are poor). Universal programs have the virtue of building a strong political constituency, which in turn makes them less vulnerable to cut-backs and discretionary practices. Public education is a case in point. Nearly all families are dependent on the state for primary and secondary education, and yet this form of dependency is not viewed as oppressive. Rather, state-supported schools are seen as a public entitlement.

Ultimately, a full solution to the problems faced by mother-only families will necessitate a reorganization of the sexual division of labor, which at present places a disproportionate share of child care responsibilities on women and in doing so restricts their earnings capacity and economic independence. In the meantime, achieving the goal of economic security for single mothers will require the coming together of different interest groups in support of multiple policies aimed at solving the problems of both middle-class and poor mother-only families.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup>In this paper, we use the term "mother-only family" to refer to families headed by nonmarried mothers with a least one child under age 18 living in the household. This includes families headed by formerly married mothers who are currently widowed, separated, or divorced as well as families headed by never-married mothers. We also use the term "single mother" to refer to all nonmarried mothers with dependent children, except when significant differences with regard to marital status are discussed. The latter violates the demographers' convention of reserving "single" for never-married persons. However, the broader usage is now common in the literature on family structure and provides a convenient way of talking about the aggregate category of nonmarried mothers.

<sup>2</sup>For people who adhere to the former perspective, the traditional two-parent family is the only valid family form; other forms are considered to be dysfunctional and aberrant.

<sup>3</sup>The present review focuses primarily on mother-only families as opposed to all one-parent families. Although interest in father-only families has been growing, the number of such families is still small--less than 10 percent of all one-parent families. Moreover, father-only families are a highly select group for whom most of our information is based on small convenience samples. For these reasons we decided to focus on mother-only families. Readers interested in father-only families are referred to Grief (1985a, 1985b), Pichitino (1983), Risman (1986), Santrock and Warshak (1979), and Smith and Smith (1981).

<sup>4</sup>Poverty rates are based on the official government definition of poverty. The rates presented in Figure 1 take into account the assistance provided by the major government income support programs, such as AFDC, Social Security, and Disability Insurance. They do not include the value of in-kind benefits such as food stamps and Medicaid. If the latter were included, poverty rates would be lower, but the overall pattern would remain the same.

<sup>5</sup>This differs considerably by race. Bane (1986) has shown that about 75 percent of poor white single mothers become poor at the time of becoming single parents, whereas only about 33 percent of poor black single mothers are cases of "new poverty."

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion of the debate over the relative income loss of divorced men and women, see Hoffman and Duncan (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup>There are, however, some indications that the wage gap has decreased since 1980 for women aged 25 to 34 (Bianchi and Spain, 1986).

<sup>8</sup>Kamerman and Kahn (1978, 1988) note that the United States is virtually unique in relying so heavily upon welfare to aid mother-only families. We also provide less child care and health care than most other industrialized countries.

<sup>9</sup>In the empirical literature, social support is defined as material assistance, advice, and emotional nurturance (Cobb, 1976; Weiss, 1969). It is measured variously as contact with friends and relatives, exchange of services and emotional support among friends and relatives, the potential for support, and satisfaction with support (House and Kahn 1985; House et al., 1988).

<sup>10</sup>Liberal attitudes toward sex roles may also reduce the likelihood of early parenthood by promoting use of effective contraception.

<sup>11</sup>With respect to the general issue of control, Morgan et al. (1979) found that white single mothers were more likely to value conformity in their children, as opposed to self-direction. Alwin (1988) has replicated these results in a study based on the Detroit Area Survey; he interprets the emphasis on conformity as indicating that single mothers experience less control over their children and therefore value it more highly.

<sup>12</sup>Herzog and Sudia (1973) briefly summarize this perspective.

<sup>13</sup>Other reviews of the literature on the intergenerational consequences of divorce include Blechman (1982), Cashion (1982), Chase-Lansdale and Hetherington (1988), Demo and Acock (1988), Emery (1982), Goetting (1981), Hetherington (1980), Hetherington and Camara (1988), Wallerstein and Kelly (1979), Zaslow (1987).

<sup>14</sup>Much of the literature on cognitive development and other outcomes among younger children either focused on the effects of parental divorce on children or combined all mother-only families into a single category. Consequently, there was very little treatment of never-married, widowed, or separated mothers or discussion of how the children of these women might differ from those in divorced families. Furthermore, researchers tended to include stepfamilies in comparison groups of nondivorced families. Several reviews (Chase-Lansdale and Hetherington, 1988; Hetherington and Camara, 1988; Hetherington et al., 1983; Zaslow, 1987) have criticized this tendency, citing evidence of differences in family processes between stepfamilies and traditional two-parent families.

<sup>15</sup>The major longitudinal data sets include the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), the National Longitudinal Surveys (NLS), and the High School and Beyond survey (HSB).

<sup>16</sup>Not all feminists adhere to this line of argument, which can be broadly characterized as a liberal-feminist perspective. For many socialist-feminists, the existence and growth of mother-only families is a more ambiguous sign. Sarvasy and Van Allen (1984), for example, note that unmarried mothers, especially those who were poor before becoming mothers, are not necessarily more autonomous than married women because they remain constrained by their role as unpaid domestic laborers and by sexual (and racial) stratification in the labor market, which assigns to them underpaid jobs. Only when these constraints are removed and the state takes a much larger responsibility for caretaking can single mothers be truly independent. For middle-class women, more likely to be able to earn a living wage and to be able to afford to pass on some of their domestic labor to poorer women--maids and daycare workers--heading a family alone may well be a move toward independence. These feminist theorists criticize liberal-feminists for failing to note class and racial differences among single mothers and for idealizing these women's apparent "independence." Other feminists argue that even middle-class women have lost rather than gained from their new independence. Hewlett (1986), for example, argues that, in the absence of social policies and institutions that support women's dual roles as child care providers and breadwinners, the struggle for independence and equality has been a disaster for a majority of women.

<sup>17</sup>These writers often ignore the potential costs to children of women's growing independence. Stacey (1986) notes in her review of "pro-family feminism" that the notion of a conflict of interest between mothers and children is a difficult issue for most feminists. And yet the potential for such a conflict is consistent with the general movement toward treating women as individuals distinct from their parental and spousal roles. See Degler (1982), Gordon (1986), Rossi (1977), and Thorne (1982), for additional discussions of the possible conflict between mothers and children.

<sup>18</sup>For a discussion of affirmative action and job integration policies, see Bergmann (1986) and O'Farrell and Harlan (1984). For a discussion of comparable worth, see Aldrich and Buchele (1986), Hartmann (1985), and Remick (1984). For a discussion of child support, see Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986). For a discussion of child care see Zigler and Gordon (1982).

<sup>19</sup>For a response to socialist-feminist criticisms of comparable worth, see Hartmann (1985).

<sup>20</sup>Sarvasy and Van Allen (1984) note that child support policies which force women to identify fathers do not promote women's autonomy and can result in increasing men's access not only to children but to women, many of whom may then be subject to abuse from their former partners.

<sup>21</sup>Recent proposals for welfare reform contain numerous elements that are designed to increase the earnings of single mothers and to reduce their dependence on welfare. Depending on how the new work-welfare programs are implemented, they may either increase or reduce the overall public subsidy to poor single mothers. If work-welfare programs are

simply used to replace welfare with work, as many critics fear, than the public subsidy will decline and single mothers will be worse off. If, however, government money is used to educate, train, and provide jobs to poor single mothers, and if welfare savings are used to finance child care, medical care, and a guaranteed child support benefit, then the public subsidy will increase and single mothers will be better off. For a discussion of work-welfare programs see Focus, newsletter of the Institute for Research on Poverty, "Special Issue on Welfare Reform," 11:2 (Spring 1988).

<sup>22</sup>Piven's argument represents a change in her earlier position; she was a leading proponent of the "welfare as social control" argument (see Piven and Cloward, 1971).



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