The consequences of single parenthood for subsequent generations

by Sara McLanahan

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Until the 1960s it was generally assumed that broken homes had dire consequences for the children raised in them, consequences that extended throughout their lives. Ironically, it was Daniel Patrick Moynihan's confirmation of this assumption in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*[1] that sent the pendulum swinging temporarily in the other direction. In his 1965 report, Moynihan suggested that the deterioration of the black family—the increasing numbers of single-parent black families on welfare—could prevent the next generation from taking advantage of the greater opportunities being made available through the War on Poverty and Great Society programs. The report created such a furor in a society newly sensitized to racism that academic researchers responded by emphasizing the strengths of single-parent families and particularly the strength of black women, who, lacking male support, often raised large families while working long hours at menial jobs. Thus many studies in the late 1960s and 1970s suggested that family disruption had few, and relatively small, persistent negative effects on the lives of offspring.

Much has changed in the past two decades. The mother-only family has become even more prevalent. Between 1960 and 1983 the percentage of children living in a family headed by a woman increased from about 8 percent to more than 20 percent,[2] and it has remained at this high level. In 1986 23.4 percent of children lived with one parent.[3] In the 1960s single motherhood typically lasted only three to five years and ended in remarriage. Today the time during which children live with one parent averages longer: about five years for whites and seven for blacks. Furthermore a large and growing minority of black children are born to never-married women and can expect to spend their entire childhood in a mother-only family. Single-mother families have had substantially higher poverty rates than other groups for the past fifteen years, and the gap between them and the next poorest groups (the disabled and the aged) has increased.[4]

Not only have circumstances changed, research on the consequences of single parenthood has improved. Many of the earlier studies had such methodological problems as selective samples, crude measures of family structure and family economic status, and incomplete information on intergenerational outcomes, which made it difficult to assess the full extent of family effects. New data containing more detailed information on parents' marital history and economic background have recently become available, chief among them a number of longitudinal studies that follow children throughout their adolescent years and into adulthood.[5]

A further change has taken place in the climate of opinion. The single-parent family is no longer seen as a uniquely black phenomenon, but as a problem of national proportions shared by all social and racial groups. Black family disruption in the 1950s and 1960s was not a trend running counter to the rest of society; blacks were merely the vanguard. Indeed the rate of out-of-wedlock births to white teenagers is still mounting, whereas in the black community it is declining. It is no longer considered a form of veiled racism, therefore, to explore the intergenerational consequences of single parenthood. And the evidence indicates that public opinion and not researchers were right the first time: children from single-parent families are disadvantaged in a number of ways that impair their future and the futures of their own children.

The evidence for intergenerational effects

On education

Low educational levels, especially failure to graduate from high school, result in unemployment and poverty. My research has demonstrated that adults who grow up in one-parent families complete fewer years of school than those who spend most of their formative lives in two-parent households.

In "Family Structure and the Reproduction of Poverty,"[6] I examined high school graduation using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), a representative survey of households that has followed 5,000 American families since 1968.

Information for this study was based on a sample of respondents who were between the ages of 24 and 27 in 1978 and

who had been dependent children of panel families at age 17. High school completion was measured by whether the respondent had graduated from high school by age 24. I found that PSID offspring who are living with single mothers at age 17 are less likely to complete high school than offspring who are living in two-parent households. Living in a mother-only family decreases the incidence of high school completion by 4 percentage points for the average child. The proportion of children who complete high school drops from 89 percent to 85 percent for whites and from 83 percent to 79 percent for blacks, controlling for place of residence and parent's education and income. The numbers are even higher for those with a greater risk of dropping out. For children with a 50–50 chance of finishing school—those living in poverty areas of large northern central cities, for example—living in a mother-only family decreases high school completion by 7–11 percentage points.

In another study, Larry Bumpass and I used the public use sample data tapes from the 1980 census[7] to examine the correlations between family structure and dropping out of school for different American racial/ethnic groups. We found that living in a mother-only family decreases high school completion by 8 percentage points for whites and Native Americans, and by 4, 6, and 8 percentage points for blacks, Mexican-Americans, and Puerto Ricans, respectively. An even greater effect on a child's propensity to leave school is the level of education of his or her mother. A mother who has not graduated from high school increases the incidence of her children dropping out by about 10 percentage points for whites, 8 percentage points for blacks, and 11 percentage points for Mexican-Americans and Native Americans. Such results bode ill for future generations born to teenage single mothers, who often leave school in order to care for their children.[8]

In a third study, Nan Astone, Nadine Marks, and I used the High School and Beyond survey (HSB) to examine the relationship between family structure and high school graduation.[9] Our sample consisted of about 12,000 boys and girls from the sophomore cohort, interviewed first in 1980 and reinterviewed in 1982 and 1984. The results from this study were similar to those from the PSID and the census. For the average child, living in a mother-only family increases the incidence of school dropout by 5 percentage points for all three groups, controlling for parent's education and income.

Table 1 provides a summary of results obtained from the PSID, the 1980 census, and the HSB, showing the relationship between a disrupted family and children's disrupted education.

Table 1

Increase in the Incidence of High School Dropout Associated with Living in a Mother-Only Family (in percentage points)

	Data Sets		
	PSID	1980 Census	HSB
Whites	4	8*	5*
Blacks	4	4*	5*
Hispanics	n.a.	6*	5*
Native Americans	n.a.	8*	n.a.

Note: Results control for parent's education and income. Estimates are calculated from a logistic regression model. Percentages are calculated for the population mean.
n.a. = not available.
* significant at the 0.05 level.

On female headship and AFDC dependence

I also used the PSID to explore the question, Are the children of single parents more likely than others to become single parents themselves and become dependent on welfare?[10] The sample for this study consisted of daughters who were between the ages of 17 and 26 in 1982 and were living in panel families at age 16. Because the PSID contains information on the marital and parental status of offspring only if they leave their parental family and establish independent households, the study was confined to women who became heads of households rather than all of those who became single mothers.

Table 2 shows the risk of becoming a female household head for daughters who lived in a single-parent family at any time during adolescence. According to these data, exposure to single parenthood increases the rate of becoming a single mother by about 150 percent for whites and by about 90

Table 2

Percentage Increase in the Rate of Becoming a Single Household Head Associated with Living in a Single-Parent Family

	Whites	Blacks
Family structure during adolescence		
Single-father family	153†	93†
Single-mother family	137*	87*

Notes: Estimated from a proportional hazard model. Family structure during adolescence refers to living with a single parent at any time during ages 12–16.
*Significant at the 0.05 level.
†Significant at the 0.10 level.

percent for blacks. Note that living with a single father has the same consequences as living with a single mother.

When welfare receipt rather than female headship is the outcome variable, the results are similar. Living with a single mother increases the likelihood of becoming a welfare mother by 10 percentage points for whites and by 22 percentage points for blacks. Parent's receipt of welfare is also a significant determining factor for the next generation to become welfare recipients.

Larry Bumpass and I also examined the effects of family disruption on adult family experience using data from the 1982 National Survey of Family Growth, a representative survey of almost 8,000 women between the ages of 15 and 44.[11] The data provide retrospective information on the marital and fertility histories of the women as well as information on the marital histories of their families of origin. This includes not only when the respondent last lived with both parents (i.e., time of family disruption) or whether the mother was unmarried at the birth of her daughter, but also the cause of disruption—widowhood, divorce, or separation—and whether the parent had remarried by the time the respondent was 14.

We examined four outcomes: (1) teen marriage, defined as marriage before age 20; (2) teen birth; (3) premarital birth; and (4) marital disruption (for respondents who marry).

Table 3 shows the increased risk of these outcomes for women who grow up in disrupted homes, compared to those who grow up in two-parent homes. Three models were tested. The first model distinguishes only the two types of families: two-parent and single parent. The second model

Table 3

Percentage Increase in the Rate of Teenage Marriage, Teenage Birth, Premarital Birth, and Marital Disruption Associated with Living with a Single Parent

	Teenage Marriage	Teenage Birth	Premarital Birth	Marital Disruption
		Whites		
Nonadjusted model				
Widowed parent	30*	75*	175*	40*
Other parent absence[a]	53*	111*	164*	92*
Model adjusted for background[b]				
Widowed parent	17	57*	161*	35*
Other parent absence	43*	98*	160*	87*
Model adjusted for background and respondent's education[c]				
Widowed parent	5	34*	124*	28
Other parent absence	28*	58*	118*	77*
		Blacks		
Nonadjusted model				
Widowed parent	−10	21*	34*	21
Other parent absence[a]	6	50*	60*	44*
Model adjusted for background[b]				
Widowed parent	−12	18	31*	22
Other parent absence	6	51*	61*	36*
Model adjusted for background and respondent's education[c]				
Widowed parent	−15	12	28	21
Other parent absence	− 1	36*	52*	32*

Note: Estimated from a proportional hazard model.
[a]Includes parents never married, divorced, or separated, and respondents living with neither parent.
[b]Background variables are region of country, parent's education, and religion.
[c]Background variables are same as above plus respondent's high school completion.
*Significant at the 0.05 level.

shows the effects of living with a single parent when one controls for the education of the parent (an estimate of socioeconomic status) and respondent's religion and current region of residence. Comparing models 1 and 2 enables us to determine whether the observed relationship between parent's marital behavior and offspring's behavior is due to differences between disrupted families and other families in regard to these characteristics. The third model controls as well for the education of the respondent. In all three models the effects of widowhood are treated separately, since it is assumed that widowhood will not have as pronounced an effect on the next generation as will other types of disruptions.

The results are striking. When no background factors are taken into account, white respondents who spend time in a single-parent family are more likely to marry while teenagers. (The rate increases by between 30 and 53 percent.) They are more likely to give birth while teenagers (a rate increase of between 75 and 111 percent). They are also more likely to have babies out of wedlock and more likely to experience marital disruptions than are daughters who grow up in two-parent families.[12] These effects are moderated only slightly when education of parent, religion, and region of residence are controlled. Note that the effects are smaller for daughters who live with widowed mothers, except in the case of premarital births among whites. Including the respondent's own educational attainment has the greatest consequence for the likelihood of a teenage birth: graduation from high school reduces that likelihood by about 40 percent for whites (not shown in table). As in the examination of education, this result emphasizes the tie between parental marital disruptions and teenagers both dropping out of high school and giving birth.

The pattern for black women is quite similar to that for whites, with one exception: there is no association between disrupted family and early marriage.[13] It is also true that the effects of family structure on both early childbearing and divorce are substantially smaller for blacks than for whites. Controlling for background factors has almost no effect on the relationship between a disrupted home and family outcomes for blacks.

We also looked at several other questions regarding parents' marital disruption, including age of respondent when disruption occurred, sex of custodial parent, and whether a remarriage had occurred by the time the respondent was 14. We found that disruptions during early childhood (ages 1–4) and adolescence (11–14) have more negative effects than disruptions in the middle years (5–10). Even though single-father families are a relatively rare and highly selective group, we found no difference in outcomes among whites when the daughters lived with their fathers rather than their mothers. The absence of a mother appears to be just as harmful as the absence of a father in its implications for future family experience. The results among blacks were substantially the same, except that black daughters who did not live with their mothers were more likely than those who did to marry early. Perhaps living with their mothers enables pregnant teenagers to manage more readily without marriage. Finally, we found that remarriage did not reduce the impact of an earlier disruption, nor did it have additional negative consequences on daughters' behavior.

Publications by McLanahan on Intergenerational Effects of Family Disruption

"Family Structure and the Reproduction of Poverty," *American Journal of Sociology* 90 (January 1985), 873–901.

"Family Structure and Dependency: Early Transitions to Female Household Headship," *Demography* 25 (February 1988), 1–16. Available as IRP Reprint no. 575.

with Nan Astone and Nadine Marks, "The Role of Mother-Only Families in Reproducing Poverty." Paper presented at Conference on Children and Poverty, Lawrence, Kansas, June 20–22, 1988.

with Larry Bumpass, "Intergenerational Consequences of Family Disruption," *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (July 1988), 130–152. (Also available as IRP Discussion Paper no. 805–86.)

with Larry Bumpass, "Comment: A Note on the Effect of Family Structure on School Enrollment," in Gary D. Sandefur and Marta Tienda, eds., *Divided Opportunities: Minorities, Poverty, and Social Policy* (New York: Plenum, 1988).

with Irwin Garfinkel, "Single Mothers, the Underclass, and Social Policy." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Forthcoming. Available as IRP Discussion Paper no. 868–88.

Looking for causes

A number of hypotheses have been put forward to explain why the effects of disrupted homes should carry over to the next generation. Among these are theories of economic deprivation, parent-child relations, selectivity, and structural factors in the economy and society that limit the opportunities of the offspring in the same ways that the opportunities of their parents were limited.

Economic deprivation

As mentioned earlier, a large proportion of single parents and their children are poor. In 1986 persons living in female-headed families made up over half of the poverty population, amounting to about 17 million people. Over 46 percent of all

female-headed households with children were poor, compared to 8.5 percent for two-parent families with children.[14] And the effects of poverty upon economic attainment in the next generation are readily demonstrable. Poor families have less money to spend on educational activities. The parents have less time available to help their children with schoolwork, and the children themselves often must take jobs or do work in the house, such as babysitting, that takes time away from their studies. If it can be shown that all of the effects of single parenthood are caused by the economic circumstances of single mothers, that is another way of saying that single parenthood in and of itself has no effect on the next generation.

Obviously the best way to test this hypothesis is to compare children from single-parent families with children from two-parent families while controlling for economic status. Such comparisons, however, pose many problems. Most data sets do not have adequate information on income (much less assets) of families when their daughters are in their teens, and it is difficult to quantify the resources brought by the second spouse to the marriage.

My own studies suggest that income can account for about half of the difference in high school graduation between children from one- and two-parent families.[15] In the PSID and census studies, we attempted to control for economic circumstances by taking account of family income, family need (determined by number of children), and mother's education. In the HSB study, we used a composite measure of socioeconomic class that was based on family income, parents' education and occupation, and material resources in the household. With respect to daughters' future family behavior, family economic status appears to account for as much as 25 percent of the difference between offspring from one- and two-parent families in the proportion of daughters who become household heads.[16] It does not, however, account for differences between stepfamilies and intact families, since the income difference between these two types of households is quite small on average.

These results suggest that while economic deprivation plays an important role in the transmission of problems from single-parent families to the next generation, it does not provide a complete explanation.

Parent-child relations

A second major explanation of the failure of offspring from one-parent families to do as well as others when adults concerns how children are socialized and how marital disruption may interfere with the transmission of appropriate norms and values. Some socialization theorists claim that parental conflict as well as the absence of one parent interferes with the child's attachment to the parents, making it more difficult to transmit values. Others argue that the absence of one parent alters the family's methods of making decisions and weakens parental control over the behavior of the children. It has been reported, for example, that single mothers exercise less supervision over their daughters' dating, which in turn leads to earlier sexual activity and premarital births.[17] (This thesis blends into the argument for economic deprivation. If a single mother can stay home to watch her teenaged children or see that they are involved in group activities, there need be no lack of supervision.) It has been suggested as well that single mothers are less effective disciplinarians—less authoritative and sure of themselves than are parents in two-parent families. Whatever their capabilities for managing their children, a couple can gang up on a teenager; a single parent cannot.

Innate ability

Losers beget losers. Or so it is argued by those who believe that some sort of selectivity determines the relationship between the generations. Less able people may have less stable marriages and their children may be less successful as adults. Perhaps a pathology is transmitted across generations, or differences exist in some psychological factor that influences self-preservation and self-enhancement. Selectivity is a plausible alternative to theories that blame family disruption or absence of a parent for the lower achievement of children. It is difficult to test such a hypothesis, however, since we do not have information on all the relevant variables, and someone can always claim that an "unobserved" variable is responsible for the intergenerational link. To date the evidence is mixed on the selectivity argument. On the one hand, research has shown that children from "high conflict" families have more problems in school regardless of whether their parents divorce (evidence in favor of selectivity).[18] On the other hand, the fact that daughters of widowed mothers are more likely to have a premarital birth suggests that selectivity is not the whole story.

Social and economic structure

A final explanation focuses on structural factors. Lack of opportunity experienced by succeeding generations perpetuates an underclass. Poor women in the ghetto who bear children by men who are unemployed and cannot therefore afford marriage and a family raise their children in circumstances that will cause the pattern to be repeated. As pointed out by William Julius Wilson,[19] middle-class blacks have moved away from the inner cities, thereby increasing the isolation of poor black families (increasingly female-headed) and reducing the opportunities of their offspring. It is hypothesized that, lacking access to jobs or networks that facilitate job search, inner-city youth become discouraged and drop out of school. For young black women, hopelessness translates into early pregnancy and single motherhood.

This suggests that both economic deprivation and parent-child relations must be viewed in a larger context. Not just the income and assets of the family, or the role models or parenting styles of the parents, but the opportunities and behavior patterns in the community in which a family lives may determine the futures of children in disrupted homes.

Information on structural characteristics is hard to come by. Most surveys do not ask respondents about their neighbor-

hoods, although some researchers have begun to link census tract or county information to individual records in order to test the neighborhood hypothesis. These studies suggest that such characteristics as community poverty rates, unemployment rates, and quality of housing are related to early pregnancies and lower wages among adolescents and young adults.[20] Since single mothers, and especially black single mothers, are somewhat more likely to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods than two-parent families, structural variables may account for some of the difference between one- and two-parent families. Most single mothers, however, do not live in such neighborhoods, and therefore it is unlikely that structural variables can account for all of the difference.[21]

Conclusion

Many people assume that the task of parenting is more difficult for the single parent than for two parents together. This seems to be a reasonable assumption, given the economic and psychological resources that go into raising a child. But the final verdict is not in. The challenge for researchers is to determine whether or not this is true, and if so, what can be done to compensate for the absence of a parent in the household. This recent research suggests that the problem is more serious than the conventional academic wisdom has deemed it to be. ■

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[1]Reproduced in Lee Rainwater and William C. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967).

[2]U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Household and Family Characteristics, March 1983*, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 388 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1984).

[3]U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, *Background Material and Data on Programs within the Jurisdiction of the Committee on Ways and Means* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1988), p. 633.

[4]Irwin Garfinkel and Sara S. McLanahan, *Single Mothers and Their Children: A New American Dilemma* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1986), p. 13.

[5]These include the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 1968–1985, the High School and Beyond survey, 1980–1986, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979–1986, the National Survey of Family Growth, 1982, and the National Survey of Families and Households, 1987. The last two surveys are cross-sectional, but they contain detailed retrospective histories on childhood family experience as well as adult marital and fertility history.

[6]See box, p. 19.

[7]McLanahan and Larry Bumpass, "Comment: A Note on the Effect of Family Structure on School Enrollment"; see box.

[8]C. D. Hayes (ed.), *Risking The Future: Adolescent Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Childbearing* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1987).

[9]"The Role of Mother-Only Families in Reproducing Poverty"; see box.

[10]"Family Structure and Dependency"; see box.

[11]McLanahan and Larry Bumpass, "Intergenerational Consequences of Family Disruption"; see box.

[12]On average 39 percent of white women marry as teenagers, 20 percent give birth while teenagers, 6 percent have an out-of-wedlock birth, and 16 percent experience marital disruption.

[13]On average black women have lower rates of teenage marriage than do whites, but they have much higher rates of teenage birth (45 percent), premarital birth (44 percent), and marital disruption (25 percent).

[14]U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, *Background Materials*, pp. 713 and 718.

[15]Sara S. McLanahan, "Family Structure and the Reproduction of Poverty"; McLanahan and Larry Bumpass, "Comment: A Note on the Effect of Family Structure on School Enrollment"; McLanahan, Astone, and Marks, "The Role of Mother-Only Families in Reproducing Poverty." All are listed in box.

[16]"Family Structure and Dependency"; "The Role of Mother-Only Families in Reproducing Poverty."

[17]D. P. Hogan and E. M. Kitagawa, "The Impact of Social Status, Family Structure, and Neighborhood on Fertility of Black Adolescents," *American Journal of Sociology* 90 (1985), 825–855.

[18]R. E. Emery, "Interparental Conflict and the Children of Discord and Divorce," *Psychological Bulletin* 92 (1982), 310–330.

[19]See, for example, "Cycles of Deprivation and the Underclass Debate," *Social Service Review* 59 (1985), 541–559, available as IRP Reprint no. 535; and *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[20] Hogan and Kitagawa, "The Impact of Social Status"; M. Corcoran, R. Gordon, D. Laren, and G. Solon, "Intergenerational Transmission of Education, Income and Earnings," working paper, Institute of Public Policy Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1987.

[21]McLanahan and Irwin Garfinkel, "Single Mothers, the Underclass, and Social Policy"; see box.