



# The Single-Parent Household

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## Abstract

Multiple aspects comprise single parent households. Some social impacts include diminished social capital for children, education, socioeconomic factors, potential health and psychological concerns, the criminalization of fathers, and abuse of mothers. This article provides an overview of these multiple impacts through a sociological lens. Applications will be presented that describe impacts of single parent households on general society. Issues will be offered that present an overview of the benefits of the single parent household. A conclusion will be offered that

supports the need for future research into each of the variables comprising the single parent household.

## Overview

According to Cunningham and Knoester (2007) the number of single parent families has increased significantly in the last three decades. Moreover, the fastest growing family type in the United States is the single parent family, which now constitutes at least 31 percent of all families. Single mother households now represent 10 million households or approximately 85 percent of single parent families. In addition,

The number of single father households has more than tripled in the last three decades. In 1970, single father families comprised roughly only 1 percent of all families, with less than 400,000 households. By 2000, the number of single father households had reached 2 million (p. 264).

These numbers are astounding and are continuing to grow.

Children are incapable of choosing the circumstances of their childhood and adolescence. Weitoft, Hiem, Haglund and Rosen (2003) argued that “childhood family background still seems to be an important predictor of a person’s life-chances as an adult. Moreover, in the second half of the 20th century, growing up with one parent is increasingly common” for children in the post-industrial world (p. 289). In researching the multiple impacts of the single parent family, researchers have assessed the implications of “parental achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, social competence, and health” (p. 289). Weitoft et al. (2003) further concluded that children and adolescents from single parent households demonstrated higher propensity toward “psychiatric disease, suicide or suicide attempt, injury and addiction” contrasted with those in two parent households. Specifically, “boys in single parent families had higher risks than girls for psychiatric disease and drug-related disease, and they also had a raised risk of all-cause mortality” (p. 294). Additional research indicates that the multiple impacts of single parent households on children are numerous and complex.

### Effect on Social Capital

Before Weitoft et al.’s (2003) findings were reported, Coleman (1988) argued that the most prominent element of “structural

## Keywords

**Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

**No Fault Divorce**

**Occult Injuries**

**Single Parent Households**

**Social Capital**

**Social Disorganization Theory**

deficiency in modern families" is the single parent family (p. 111). In his research, Coleman (1987) identified the ideal situations in which social capital is accumulated in relation to family situation. He suggested that "a number of influences linked to the industrialization and modernization of societies meant that the family in its modern form is low in social capital when compared with formations in earlier times" (Seaman & Sweeting, 2004, p. 175). To initiate further understanding, social capital has been described as "a characteristic of the relations between people" (Seaman & Sweeting, 2004, p. 174). Social capital advantages occur when trust and reciprocity allow for access to resources such as human and cultural capital that already exist within the community or social network (Coleman, 1988). Bourdieu described social capital as both a quality and quantity of relationships; "first, the social relationship itself that allows individuals to claim access to resources possessed by their associates, and second, the amount and quality of these resources" (Portes, 1998, p. 3-4). In this understanding, "social capital is something possessed by individuals that gains its strength in the aggregate of social networks" (Seaman & Sweeting, 2004, p. 174). Research into social capital and young people's outcomes also focuses on education. Coleman (1988) presented data showing "higher school drop-out rates for pupils with a single parent, several siblings and no maternal college expectations" (Seaman & Sweeting, 2004, p. 176).

Aquilino (1996) (cited in Moore, Vandivere, & Redd, 2006, p. 51) indicated that "among children who were born to unmarried mothers, and those who grew up with a single parent or in a step-family were less likely to complete high school than those who were adopted or who transitioned to living with two biological parents." Another study indicated that, for white youths only, a larger portion of childhood spent in a two-parent family was associated with lower probabilities of high school dropout, marijuana use, and teen parenthood (Hauren, 1992). Cleveland (2003) reported that "adolescence may be the most important time to consider the effects of neighborhoods on risk behaviors, such as aggression and delinquency" (p. 212). Social disorganization theory explains that the higher levels of delinquency, crime, and other behavioral problems in structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods are due to lower levels of informal social controls caused by these disadvantages (Case & Katz, 1991; Sampson, 1997; Sampson & Groves, 1989).

## The Two-Parent Family Advantage

Adolescents who receive parenting that simultaneously protects them from neighborhood dangers and cultivates opportunities outside the neighborhood can avoid negative outcomes (Furstenberg, 1993). By providing adolescents with consistent emotional support and discipline, effective supervision, and close emotional ties, cohesive families can often overcome neighborhood disadvantages (Sampson & Laub, 1994). Among black youths, the time living with a two-parent family has been associated with a decreased likelihood of serious illegal activity (Hauren, 1992). Moreover, Saylor, Boyce, and Price (2003) indicated that "family variables in the first months of a child's life including low income, single parent household, and high parenting stress were significantly correlated with behavior problems appearing at 7.5 years of age" (p. 175, Abstract). They concluded that, "it appears that being in households which are financially secure and have two parents may minimize the likelihood of later behavior problems, even in low birth weight youngsters with known neurological insults" (p. 188).

## Applications

Primary applications of the impact of single parent households include:

- Education,
- Socioeconomic factors,
- Potential health and psychological concerns,
- The criminalization of fathers, and
- Abuse of mothers

## Education

Studies in the United States and Britain found that educational attainment is related to family structure (Zimiles & Lee, 1991; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Teachman et al, 1996; Sweeting et al, 1998). Marriage is positively associated with education and employment. Education, employment status, race, age, marital status, and number of children are also associated with psychological well-being (Cunningham & Knoester, 2007). Children who were born to unmarried mothers, those who grew up with a single parent or in a step-family were less likely to complete high school than those who were adopted or who transitioned to living with two biological parents (Aquilino, 1996).

In addition, low parental educational attainment is a risk factor for poor cognitive development (Jackson, 2003; Roberts et al., 1998), and for not completing high school (Haveman et al., 1991). Mothers' educational attainment has also been negatively associated with aggressive behaviors among adolescents (Kowalski-Jones, 2000) and teen childbearing (Afxentiou & Hawley, 1997; Manlove et al., 2000). According to each of these studies, education can directly be impacted by living in single parent households.

## Socioeconomic Factors

According to Weitoft, Hiem, Haglund, and Rosen (2003),

The socioeconomic situation of children in families with only one adult was different from that of children in families with two adults. More single parents than couples were unskilled manual workers, low-grade non-manual workers, and people without an occupation, whereas couples were more likely than single parents to be high-grade or medium-grade non-manual workers (p. 291).

Additionally, women with low educational status, which was reported to be highly correlated with socioeconomic status, have a higher risk of becoming a single mother than do mothers with high education. Weitoft et al (2003) also believe that the “style of living in a large city moves toward an increase in the number of single parents, rather than the idea that becoming a single parent leads to urban migration” (p. 291). In addition, twice as many single parents as couples received unemployment benefits.

According to Laasko (2004), in terms of custodial and non-custodial parental responsibilities, financial contributions have often been seen as

a key factor in explaining both mothers’ and fathers’ behaviors and the frequency of visits with their children. As stated by Lin and McLanahan (2001), fathers are likely to demand more time with their child in exchange for financial remunerations. Teitler (2001) pointed out that academic and public interest in contributions of fathers, until recently, has been limited to their role as breadwinners. As a result, there has been an increase in child support payments and concomitantly a larger number of parenting plans established (Grail, 2002) (p. 134).

Moreover, Primus (2006) indicated that “an examination of trends since 1979 suggests that periods of economic recession and expansion affect child living arrangements. In general, economic slowdowns tend to lead to a reduction in the proportion of children living with married parents, an increase in cohabitation, and an increase in single parent households” (p. 716). All of these factors are indicative of socio-economic efficacy and corresponding impacts on single parent households.

## Health & Psychological Concerns

### Head Injuries

Rubin, Christian, Bilaniuk, Zazyczny, and Durbin (2003) statistically reported that among children with head injuries, 72% came from single parent households, 37% had mothers whose age was less than 21 years, and 26% had a history of prior child welfare involvement in their families (Abstract). Reportedly, “head injury is the leading cause of death in abused children under 2 years of age, and early detection of head injuries can limit significant morbidity and mortality” attributed to the injury. “Multiple investigators have shown that most children with inflicted head injury have evidence of other occult (hidden) injuries, including fractures, at the time they present for medical care” (p. 1382). Rubin, et al. further wrote: “Given the importance of confirming

child abuse and influencing safety recommendations before medical discharge, we believe the finding of such a high prevalence of occult head injury in this study should influence guidelines regarding screening of this population” (p. 1383). Based on this study, researchers stated: “Our finding of a relatively high prevalence of occult head injury in this cohort suggests the need for universal screening of similar high-risk abused children” (p. 1386). Additional health issues also exist for targeted groups, such as higher propensities of obesity and psychological issues.

### Obesity

Epidemiological studies have indicated that the “prevalence of obesity in the United States is on the rise” (Mokad et al, 1999; Trojano & Flegal, 1998 as cited in Gable & Lutz, 2000, p. 293). “According to the third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, rates of adult obesity has increased from 25% in the 1970s to 33% in the 1980s” (FASEB, 1995; Kuczmarski, Flegal, Campbell & Johnson, 1994, as cited in Gable & Lutz, 2000, p. 293). Obesity is associated with chronic disease and harmful health conditions; the growing incidence of obesity is a serious public health issue. Research indicates that demographic characteristics of the family also show associations with food consumption, food preparation, and food availability. Household income, dual worker, or single parent households directly impacts these three contributing factors to obesity in children (Gable & Lutz, 2000; Crockett & Sims, 1999; Anderson et al., 1998; Mei et al., 1998).

In considering the issue of childhood obesity, a look at Maslow’s hierarchy of needs sheds some insight. Maslow’s original theory (1968) “emphasized the basic physiological needs of humans as fundamental to meeting higher-order socio-emotional needs and self-actualization” (Gable & Lutz, 2000). According to researchers, few can deny the interference of early childhood obesity in meeting the need for physical health and safety, acceptance, and self-esteem. Wolf and Colditz (1996) further indicated that “diabetes and heart disease were direct impacts of obesity, and indirect impacts included missed work, lost health, and quality of life” (p. 296). Few could dispute the interplay of issues such as these and their impacts on American families. Aside from the impact on children of parents in single parent households and dangers of childhood obesity, single adults are also impacted by these issues further marginalizing these adults and cycling them into subsequent demoralization and family decentralization.

### Psychological Factors

According to Cunningham and Knoester (2007), raising children is “negatively associated with parents’ psychological well-being and this relationship is exacerbated for single parents . . . mothers are more likely to be affected by the burdens of childrearing than fathers” (p. 264). Their research has suggested that “single parents are less likely to have their parenting burdens alleviated by a committed co-parent.” In contrast, married individuals are less depressed and anxious, and report being happier than non-married people. According to these findings, part of this is directly linked to support that a spouse may offer in performing parenting tasks, contributing to financial stability of the household, and providing

support to reduce burdens on a parent's psychological well-being. Additional research needs to explore the ways parenthood influences parental psychological well-being.

### **Criminalization of Fathers**

Baskerville (2004) wrote that approximately 1.5 million divorces are granted each year in the United States alone. Gallagher (1996) indicated that "no fault" divorce, or what is called "unilateral" divorce, which allows one spouse to sue the other for divorce with no incurred liability for the consequences is partially responsible for this phenomenon (pp. 143 – 152). Researchers have reported that at least 80 percent of divorces are "unilateral," and all told, "more than a million children become victims of divorce each year" (Baskerville, 2004, p. 487; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991, p. 22; Gallagher, 1996, pp. 5, 9, 22, 84 – 86; Martin & Bumpass, 1989). Brinig and Allen (2000) determined that in 70 percent of divorce cases, women file for divorce more often than men and instigate the separation (pp. 126 – 127).

In his Presidential Acceptance Speech, Bill Clinton (1992) claimed that fathers "have chosen to abandon their children." Brinig and Allen (2000) disagreed and stated, "We have found that who gets the children is by far the most important component in deciding who files for divorce" (pp. 126 – 127). Baskerville reported, "What we are seeing today is nothing less than the criminalization of parents, most often the fathers. A father who is legally unimpeachable can be turned into a criminal by the regime of involuntary divorce" (Baskerville, 2004, p. 487). From this standpoint, Baskerville (2004) further wrote, "No allegations of wrongdoing, either civil or criminal, are required. And no agreement to a divorce or separation is necessary . . . Yet from this point, if he [a father] tries to see his children outside the authorized times or fails to pay the child support, . . . he will be subject to arrest" (p. 489). Clearly, more research is needed to determine the extent of this alleged criminalization and socio-logical impacts – both on fathers and children.

### **Abuse of Mothers**

From another perspective, McInnes (2004) wrote, "The formation of single mother households is strongly connected with domestic violence, yet the implications of this connection, especially for children have remained largely unexplored" (p. 357). Recent research from Australia explored reasons for divorce in their culture and determined that after communication breaks down, violence and addictions of the partner were the most common reasons women gave for ending the relationship (Wolcott & Hughes, 1999, as cited in Laing, 2000). Indicatively, Laing (2000) determined that domestic violence towards mothers impacts children. She indicates that children may be affected as direct targets or secondary victims. Just witnessing the violence can impair children.

McInnes (2004) indicated that "mothers fleeing violence were often forced to leave their housing and possessions to effect separation" (p. 360). Additionally,

Without housing or the resources and opportunity to

retrieve property, mothers and children were often forced to seek help from women's shelters and family support services. . . Mothers who fled violence had to deal with a range of legal issues potentially encompassing the civil courts, the criminal court and the Family Court . . . In cases of continuing contact between children and abusive fathers, both mothers and children were unable to work on recovery from their trauma, remaining hostage to the potential and actuality of ongoing violence (p. 361, 363).

Research findings from McInnes' study indicate that schools and children's services should ensure that "counseling staff have training in supporting children and parents recovering from trauma or coping with continuing violence, as well as building links with agencies and services providing professional assistance to adults and children recovering from violence" (p. 367).

### **Issues**

According to Acs and Nelson (2004), "Children living outside of married-parent households are at a greater risk of living in poverty, experiencing food and housing insecurity, and exhibiting behavioral problems compared to children living with married parents" (cited in Primus, 2006, p. 713). Primus (2006), while acting as Senior Policy Advisor to the House Democratic Leader, indicated that economic trends may impact single parent and two parent households. He examined trends since 1979, and suggested that such economic trends affect child living arrangements. He further indicated that the decline in the number of children living with married parents briefly stabilized during the 1990s. Notably, in general, "economic slowdowns tend to lead to a reduction in the proportion of children living with married parents, an increase in cohabitation, and an increase in single-parent households" (p. 716). From 2000 to 2003, Primus (2006) indicated that "among the poorest children, the proportion living in lone-mother-headed households increased by 1.5 percentage points over the most recent recessionary period" (p. 719). Although, Primus (2006) argued that possibly, economic reform could affect child living arrangements, and it is impossible to ignore the impact of welfare reform from within its broader economic, policy, and demographic contexts. Therefore, policymakers should "focus on examining what went right in the 1990s to determine how those gains can be repeated" in successive years.

### **Conclusion**

Reported issues of single parent households tend to indicate that not only are children and parents negatively impacted, and especially those from impoverished backgrounds, but so are parents in various ways. Additional research into the long-term, longitudinal impacts of single parent households is recommended in order to better understand the impact of this phenomenon.

Moreover, while the research regarding single parent households is aimed at reporting negative impacts, very little research has been done regarding potential benefits or non-effects. For

sociologists entering this field, this is a body of research that should be conducted.

## Terms & Concepts

**Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:** Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs emphasized the basic physiological needs of humans as fundamental to meeting higher-order socio-emotional needs and self-actualization (Gable & Lutz, 2000).

**"No Fault" Divorce:** The "no fault" divorce, or what is called "unilateral" divorce allows one spouse to sue the other for divorce with no incurred liability for the consequences.

**Occult Injuries:** Occult injuries can best be described as "hidden" injuries that go undetected without specifically examining a patient to look for them.

**Single Parent Households:** Single parent households are the fastest growing family type in the United States and now constitutes at least 31 percent of all families. Single-mother households now represent 10 million households or approximately 85 percent of single-parent families. The number of single-father households has more than tripled in the last three decades (Cunningham & Knoester, 2007).

**Social Capital:** "A characteristic of the relations between people" (Seaman & Sweeting, 2004, p. 174). Social capital advantages occur when trust and reciprocity allow for access to resources such as human and cultural capital that already exist within the community or social network.

**Social Disorganization Theory:** Social disorganization theory explains that the higher levels of delinquency, crime, and other behavioral problems in structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods are due to lower levels of informal social controls caused by these disadvantages.

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