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SINGLE PARENTHOOD

*Marsha Weinraub and Rebecca Kaufman***Introduction**

What does it mean to be a single parent? Single parents are parents raising their children alone. They can be unmarried and living alone, or separated, divorced, or widowed. They can be male or female, young or old, educated or uneducated. Often, single parents are classified as single because they are unmarried, but the “single parent” is actually living in a home with a partner who is sharing the parenting responsibility. In this chapter, we explore what it means to be a single parent in the United States today. We describe the changing incidence of single parenthood over the last half century, and we explore the many types of single parenting situations. We address the question of whether there are unique features of single-parent families that put these families at risk, or whether the circumstances that have contributed to the increasing formation of single-parent families in recent decades are responsible for many of the risk factors that have been observed. Finally, we acknowledge that not all children of single-parent families are at risk; some children of single-parent families emerge strong and grateful for being the children of dedicated, hard-working parents who model strength and courage.

Rising Incidence of Single Parenthood

The proportion of children living in single-parent families has increased markedly around the world since 1970, and this increase has been especially significant in the United States (Burns, 1992; Cherlin, 2004; Cherlin, 2010; Hobbs and Lippman, 1990). The United States has a higher proportion of single-parent households than nearly any other developed country. In 1970, the vast majority of American families with children under 18 years of age were married-couple families, and single-parent families made up less than 12% of all families. By 2016, this situation had changed dramatically. Currently, what are commonly called single-parent families make up nearly a third of all families (Cherlin, 2014). Now, with 35.2 million American families with children under 18, only 24.5 million (69%) families are married-couple families; 8.4 million families (24%) are considered mother-only families, and 2.2 million (6%) are considered father-only families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Figure 8.1 shows this dramatic change over time in the numbers and percentages of married, mother-only, and father-only families with children under 18 living in the home. Although most single-parent families are headed by a mother, nearly one in six of all single-parent families are headed by a father (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

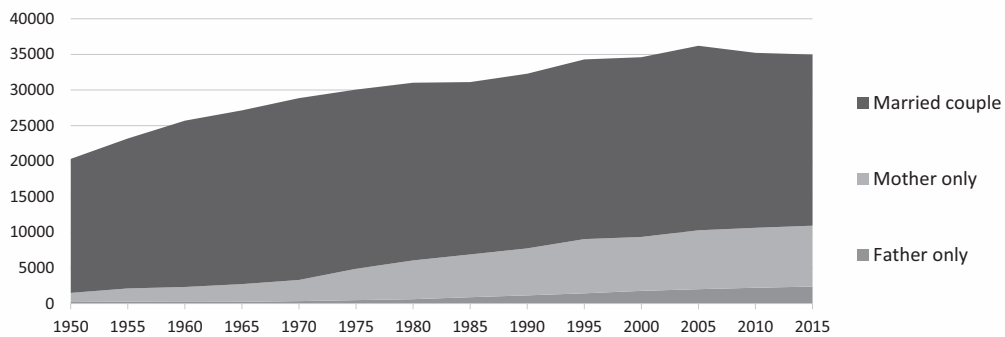


Figure 8.1 Families With Children Under 18 (Number of Families in Thousands)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017. Historical Living Arrangements of Children [Data file]

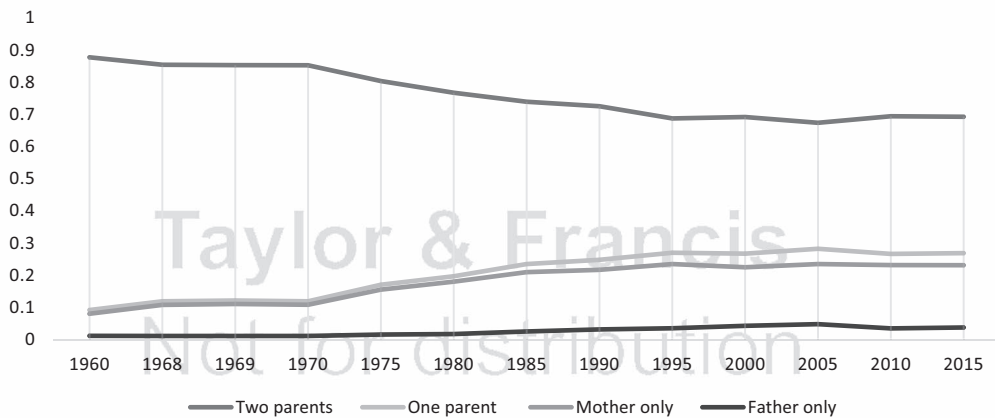


Figure 8.2 Living Arrangements of Children: 1960 to Present

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2016. Living Arrangements for Children. Available: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/files/graphics/CH-1.pdf>

Another way to look at these changes is in terms of children's living arrangements. The U.S. Census Bureau data presented in Figure 8.2 show how the proportion of children in the United States living with one parent increased since 1970, whereas the percentage of children who reside with two parents decreased. As the figure shows, nearly 90% of all children resided with two parents in 1960, and the percentage of children living in a single-parent family was only 9.1%. Around 1970, the proportion of all children living with one parent began a steady increase such that by 2005, the percentage of children living in single-parent families had tripled to 27.4%. This is a 200% increase in the number of children living in a single-parent family. Since 2005, however, on average, the number of and percentages of children living in single-parent families have remained stable. Today, nearly 1 in 3 children are living, for at least some part of their lives, in what the Census Bureau calls a single-parent home (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2016).

Not unique to the United States, these changes are part of an international trend. According to a 2016 report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016), the proportion of children under 18 years of age living in a single-parent household is about 20% in

most OECD countries. Latvia is the country with the highest rate of single-parent households, and the United States is close behind. Turkey and Greece, with about 10% of single-parent households, are among the countries with the lowest percentage of single-parent households (Eurostat, 2015). Belgium, Denmark, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States all have at least 1 in 5 five children living with a sole parent.

Single parenthood occurs in all groups across the United States. In 2017, slightly more than 27% of all children under 18 years old lived with a single parent. About 4% of all children lived with their father only, whereas nearly 23% of all children lived with their mother only (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). There are differences in the prevalence of married, single-mother, and single-father families across ethnic groups. According to 2015 Census Department figures (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2015), many African American children are living in mother-only (49%) or father-only (4%) families. While about half of all African American children are living in two-parent families, the majority of Asian American (83%), White (74%), and Hispanic children (60%) are living in two-parent families. Premarital births among African American women have been more common than in any other group, but the increase in the number of and percentage of premarital births has been shared across ethnic groups. In fact, the largest percentage of *decreases* in births outside of marriages has been for African American and Latina women.

Attitudes Toward Single-Parent Families

Wide-scale public alarm concerning single parenthood was raised in 1965 with Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." As U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor in President Johnson's War on Poverty, Moynihan hoped that his report would serve to stimulate more successful federal programs designed to create economic and social equality for African American families living in poverty. However, by singling out family structure as an important intervening variable in the "tangle of pathology" (Moynihan, 1965) among African Americans, Moynihan's report focused concerns on single-parent families themselves rather than on the complex socioeconomic conditions that he argued were responsible for the growing number of African American female-headed families (Chafe, 2015). By not addressing the economic and social inequalities that Moynihan identified as contributing both to poverty and to the formation of single-parent families, inequalities worsened. The incidence of single-parent families in the United States not only increased in the decade of the 1960s, but also accelerated over more than four decades.

Concerns about the rise in single-parent families increased as single parenthood appeared to spread beyond the African American family. In the 1990s, some observers saw single parents as a prime symptom of the erosion of American culture, blaming single-parent families for society's declining values and the breakdown of the social fabric. Indeed, the term "single parent" became a euphemism for family breakdown, a kind of social pathology, and a major contributor to all that is wrong with our society (Kamerman and Kahn, 1988).

These concerns were further supported by additional research from sociologists and psychologists (Amato, 1988; Amato and Keith, 1991; Astone and McLanahan, 1991; Cashion, 1982; Dawson, 1991; Herzog and Sudia, 1973; McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994) showing that children of single-parent families were more likely to have unfavorable outcomes compared with children from married-parent families. Specifically, children from single-mother families were shown to be more likely to have behavioral problems, lower educational attainment, later marriage, and earlier childbearing compared with children of two-parent families (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan, 2002). Because children of single parents appeared more vulnerable than children of two-parent families to a wide variety of societal problems, children of single-parent families became routinely referred to as "at risk" for developmental difficulties.

Alarms concerning single-parent families appear to be diminishing somewhat in recent decades. Since the 1990s, the public has become more accustomed to seeing single-parent families on the national scene. For example, popular television shows now feature single-parent families of varying types (Baftijari, 2016), and two of the last three U.S. presidents—William Clinton and Barack Obama—and the well-known television comedian/commentator Trevor Noah have described their experiences growing up in single-parent families (Clinton, 2005; Noah, 2016; Obama, 2004). Pew researchers documented attitudinal changes toward single parenting from 2005 to 2013. In 2007, 71% of Americans saw the growing trend of single mothers as a “big problem”; in 2013, this figure was down to 64%. Young adults (42%) were less concerned than older adults (65%) about this trend, and non-White people (56%) were less likely than Whites to view it as a big problem (67%). Men and women do not differ (Wang, Parker, and Taylor, 2013). Even the television show *Murphy Brown* famously maligned by Vice President Dan Quayle in a speech during the 1992 presidential campaign for having a single mother as star of the series, is making a comeback on a major television network in 2018 (<http://deadline.com/2018/01/murphy-brown-revival-candice-bergen-creator-diane-english-cbs-2018-2019-season-1202267897/>).

Research on “Fragile Families”

Researchers have provided detailed information about the effects of *being born into* a family with a nonmarried parent. In the late 1990s, researchers at Columbia and Princeton Universities designed and implemented a large and ongoing national study—the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS; Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, and McLanahan, 2001). They interviewed the married and nonmarried mothers and fathers of nearly 5,000 children born in hospitals located in 20 large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000. They tracked families when the children were 1, 3, 5, 9, and 15 years old with interviews as well as assessment of the home environment and the child’s cognitive and emotional development. (As of this writing, data have just been released for children up to 15 years of age; soon, findings from analyses of these more recent data will be available.) Three quarters of the families selected for the nonrandomized study were termed “fragile families”—individuals or couples who were not married when their children were born. The researchers compared these fragile families with married families in the study whose children were born during the same time period in the same hospitals. Their research was directed to understanding the conditions of fragile families, the nature of the relationships between biological mothers and fathers in fragile families, the long-term effects on children of living in fragile families, and the effects of different policies and environmental conditions on the stability of fragile families.

Today, the bulk of empirical research on fragile families confirms that children who grow up with only one biological parent in the home are likely to have lower academic success and more behavior problems than children living in families with married two biological parents (Waldfoegel, Craigie, and Brooks-Gunn, 2010). When measured at age 5, children born to single-parent households have higher rates of asthma and obesity, lower cognitive scores, and higher levels of behaviors associated with social problems.

The effects of living in a single-parent family are not restricted to children. McLanahan and Percheski (2008) reported that unmarried mothers are poorer and less educated than married mothers. In addition, Waldfoegel et al. (2010) reported that compared with married mothers, unmarried mothers receive less financial and instrumental support from their children’s biological fathers, have a lower quality coparenting relationship with the child’s father, and are more likely to be stressed and depressed. Fewer than 3% of unmarried parents have a college degree compared with a third of the married parents. Parental incarceration rates are also higher in fragile families. By the time the children were age 5, half the fathers in the fragile families study had been incarcerated at some point in their child’s lives. Although nonmarried mothers were more disadvantaged than married

mothers before their pregnancies, preexisting disadvantages did not account fully for deficits in family income and maternal mental health mothers experience later in life (Lichter, Graefe, and Brown, 2003; McLanahan, 2004, as cited in Martin and Brooks-Gunn, 2015). Even after statistically adjusting for income and selection effects (Ryan, 2012), fragile family effects on children's behavioral problems remained. Additional research shows that some of the observed effects may have been moderated by involvement of the biological father and presence of other figures in the child's life (Waldfoegel et al., 2010).

Single-Parent Families at Risk?

These studies show that children growing up in single-parent families have more problems than other children, but the *majority* of children growing up in single-parent families are *not* more harmed than children growing up in two-parent families under similar conditions. Most children who grow up in mother-only families or stepparent families become well-adjusted, productive adults (Solomon-Fears, 2014), and some are truly exceptional (Ford, 2017). Research shows that growing up in a single-parent family has more positive effects than growing up in a conflict-ridden married family (Musick and Meier, 2010). At the same time, there is widespread agreement that because children growing up in single-parent families have statistically higher average scores on problematic child and parent measures than children in stable two-parent families, they are considered *at risk* for subsequent developmental problems.

What is "risk"? To say that a child is "at risk" is a statistical statement, indicating that probabilistically speaking, children in single-parent families are more likely to have unfavorable outcomes or lower scores in comparison to other children. One factor that puts children from single-parent families at risk is that single-parent families, particularly those composed of single mothers, are disproportionately poor compared with other families (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2016). Data from the 2016 census indicate that among children living in a single-parent household, about 38% were living below the poverty line in 2016 compared with only 11.7% of children living in two-parent families. As a consequence of poverty alone, many children grow up in deteriorated and dangerous neighborhoods, often with inferior housing and educational systems. Although the majority of children of single-parent families are not living in poverty, the group as a whole is considered at risk because its poverty rate is higher than those of children living in two-parent families. Similarly, contrary to stereotypical views, only about half of single mothers draw funds from government assistance programs (Grall, 2016; Irving and Loveless, 2015). Among children living with a single-parent father, about 22% live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Thus, children living with a single father are at lower risk than children living with a single mother, but all children living with single parents are considered "at risk" because their poverty rates are nevertheless higher than children growing up in two-parent families.

How much of the single-parent risk status is related to poverty and how much of the single-parent risk status is due to other factors also associated with single-parent families are questions with important psychological and social policy implications. Researchers continue to examine other factors in addition to poverty that provide risk or resilience to children growing up in single-parent families (Murray and Farrington, 2010; Ryan, 2012; Taylor and Conger, 2014; Waldfoegel et al., 2010).

Variations Among Single-Parent Families

To unravel the multiple factors that may be related to our understanding of whether children of single-parent families are at risk, we need to understand the unifying and divergent characteristics among different kinds of single-parent families. One of the most important characteristics of single-parent families and their children is their heterogeneity. The phenomenological experience of

growing up in a single-parent family varies depending on the nature of the family, the experiences of the parent, and the family context. Single parents may be divorced, widowed, or unmarried; they may be teenage or older; they may have been previously married or not married. Not surprisingly, single mothers with the lowest poverty rates are women with full-time year-round employment or a college degree or higher. Single fathers have been less likely than single mothers to receive public assistance. Although most single parents are women, the number of male single parents is modestly increasing. Of the 11 million single-parent families with children under 18 years old, nearly 2.5 million are single-father headed households (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2016).

Differences in how the parents came to be single parents affect the parents' employment, their financial circumstances, their relationships with other adults, their involvement with their child, and their competence as parents. The etiology of the parent's single parenthood also may have implications for the child's perceptions and experiences growing up. For example, imagine that 10 children from different types of single-parent families are brought together to discuss their experiences. They would describe many common experiences, such as not having enough money, missing their mothers or fathers, and problems getting along with their mothers and their fathers. These concerns, however, do not differ substantively from those of children living in all families. Those issues that are *unique* to single-parent families are issues for which there are large individual differences across single-parent families. Depending on their age, children with nonmarried, cohabiting parents may not notice any differences between their families and other families in their neighborhood, but they may wonder why their parents are not married and they may worry that their parents may not stay together. Children of recently divorced single-parent families might talk of anger at their parents' separation, of fights between mother and father over custody and child support, and about what happens on dad's day for visitation (Ganong, Coleman, and McCalle, 2012). Some single-family children of divorce may wonder why their parents are no longer living together; others may be relieved to be free finally from the marital discord. Children of adolescent single mothers may have difficulty with mothers' inexperienced and immature ways and wonder when she will ever finish going to school, whereas children of widowed single parents may be mourning their parent's loss. Children of some nonmarried mothers may wonder about their father, who he is, what he is like, and where he is. Some children may be confused about who their fathers are, and why they are not around, whereas other children, albeit a minority, may be learning to live without a mother. Some children may feel isolated and alone, whereas others are living in cramped households, with not too much in the way of material goods but with plenty of people to be with and love. Some children may not see their single-parent family as unusual at all, because many children in their neighborhood live in a family with only one parent present. Researchers need to unravel these various psychological experiences to understand what it is about the single-parent family that might contribute to the at-risk status of these children and what variables might serve as protective factors.

These issues are our foci in this chapter: To describe similarities and differences across parenting situations in single-parent families and to explore some of the parenting factors that might or might not place children growing up in single families at risk. In the first section, we consider the changing demographics of single-parent families over the past several decades. We show that not only is the number of single-parent families increasing, but also the circumstances that are responsible for the *formation* of single-parent families—divorce and separation, widowhood, and out-of-marriage births—are changing, too. In the next section, we summarize the literature on parenting in common types of single-parent families—adolescent parents, not-married single mothers, single-parent fathers, and divorced custodial mothers and divorced fathers. Our intent is to identify parenting features both unique to these specific single-parent family types and common to single parents as a group. We suggest that single-parent families that arise from different circumstances differ in a number of important ways, and these differences need to be considered before any understanding of the more general effects of rearing children in a single-parent family is attained. In the third section, on

the basis of these findings, we advance a model of single parenting that offers suggestions for public policy and intervention. In the fourth section, we consider research directions that appear to be especially promising. In the final section, we consider with a broad brush directions for public policy.

Demographic Changes in Single-Parent Family Formation

The distribution of the types of single-parent families has changed dramatically from that of previous decades (Amato, 2000; Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård, 2015; Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008). Whereas in the 1970s, most single-parent families were created by divorce or separation, census data indicate the proportion of single-parent children living in a family created by divorce or separation has continually declined—from 86% of all single-parent families in 1970, to 73% in 1990, to 58% in 1997, to only 45% in 2015. Also declining, from 5% in 1997 to 3.9% in 2015, is the proportion of children living in single-parent families created by the death of a parent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The most significant change is the increase in single-parent families headed by a never-married parent (Mather, 2010). This group increased from approximately 6% of all single-mother families in 1970, to 26% in 1990, to 37% in 1997, and to 46% in 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). This increase in the proportion of children living in a home with a never-married mother is partly a function of the decrease in the proportion of single-parent families created by divorce, separation, or the death of a parent and largely due to the decrease in the birthrate among married women.

In 2015, 41% of single parents (both single mothers and single fathers) were never married, 22% of single parents were separated, 27.5% of single parents were divorced, 8% of single parents were widowed, and nearly 5% of single parents had a married spouse who was absent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2017). Figure 8.3 showed the information for children living alone with their mother, and Figure 8.4 shows the corresponding information for children living alone with their father. About half the children in single-mother families had a mother who was never married (49%), and 42% of children who lived in a single-parent household had parents who are divorced or separated. About 4.8 million children (28%) lived with a divorced single mother, and about 2.3 million children (14%) lived with a separated single mother. Among children living with a single father, 1.2 million lived with a divorced single father (46%), 842,000 lived with a nonmarried, single father (31%), and 351,000 lived with a separated, single father (13%).

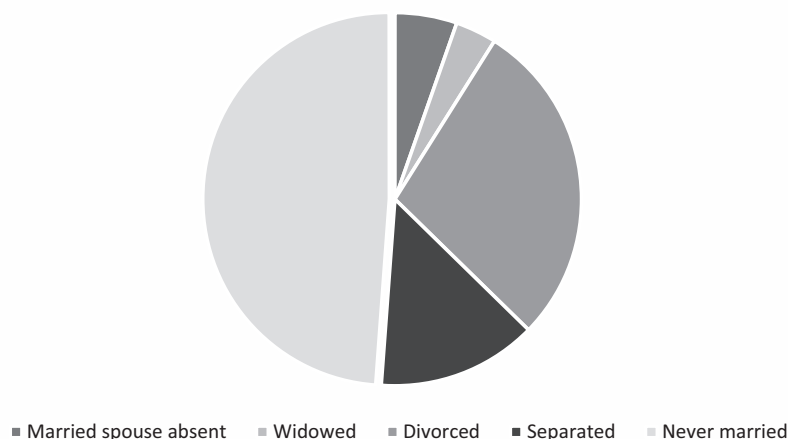


Figure 8.3 Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years Living With Mother Only, 2015

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015

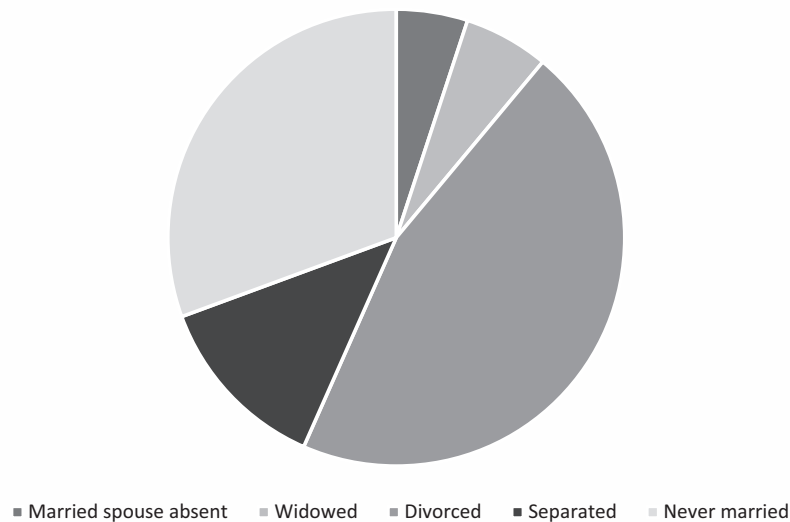


Figure 8.4 Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years Living With Father Only, 2015

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015

Yet children born to never-married mothers are not technically living in “single-parent families”; all these children have two biological parents, and many of them see both parents and have both parents in their lives, just often not at the same time. Even more important, many children categorized as living in single-parent families are living with both their biological parents; it is just that these parents are not married. Many of what are considered single-parent families are really two-parent, cohabiting, nonmarried parent families. In 2015, 40.3% of births to unmarried women were to cohabiting parents (National Survey of Family Growth, 2015). (We describe the special circumstances of cohabiting parents later in this chapter.)

Increasing Percentage of Births to Unmarried Mothers

The increase in the number of single-parent families headed by unmarried mothers is a result of dramatic fluctuations in the numbers of births and birthrates both to nonmarried and married women. In the 1960s, nonmarital births averaged 285,600 per year. This number quadrupled over the next two decades to approximately 1.1 million by 1990 and peaked in 1994 at nearly 1.3 million. Nonmarital births have leveled off since peaking in 2007 and 2008; since then, the nonmarital birthrate has been relatively stable.

Although nonmarital birthrates have fallen or leveled off, the percentage of nonmarital births as a proportion of all births continues to increase. That is, the proportion of unmarried women’s births to births to all women (both married and nonmarried) has been increasing. In 2015, the percentage of unmarried women’s births as a percentage of all births was 40.3%. For a number of reasons—increased employment, delayed marriage, reduced likelihood of marriage, and delayed childbearing, single motherhood has increased most dramatically among affluent and well-educated women. A 2016 Child Trends report (Child Trends, 2016) attributes the rising percentages of nonmarital births to two important changes. First, there has been a large increase in the number of unmarried women in the childbearing years, and, second, there has been a 40% decrease in birthrates for married women since 1940. These factors combine to show a dramatic rise in the percentage of births to unmarried women over all births. In addition, the marriage rates have also steadily decreased. In the

span of 14 years, the rate fell from 8.2 marriages in 2000 to 6.9 marriages in 2014 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2017).

Ethnic differences in premarital births persist, but the changes over time differ for different groups. Premarital births have been more common among African American women than among women from other ethnic groups since at least the early 1960s. In 2013, 71% of all African American births were to unmarried women while 66% of all American Indians or Alaskan Native were to unmarried women, 53% of all births to Latinas were to unmarried women, 29.3% of all White American births were to nonmarried women, and 17% of all Asian American births were to unmarried women. While responsibility for the *increase* in the number of and percentage of premarital births has been shared across groups, African American and Latina women have had the largest decrease in the percentages of births outside of marriages over the last few years. In 2002, Latinas had their highest nonmarital birthrate (87 per 1,000); this rate increased 4 years later in 2007 (102 per 1,000), but later decreased 28% by 2012 (73 per 1,000) (Curtin, Ventura, and Martinez, 2014).

The rising incidence of births outside of marriage has been particularly dramatic among White American, more educated, older, and mothers in managerial and professional occupations. In 2007, births to unmarried mothers with at least a bachelor's degree accounted for 2.2% of all births; by 2015, births to unmarried mothers with at least a bachelor's degree accounted for 7.2% of births (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). For professional or managerial mothers, the percentages more than doubled from 3.1% in 1980 to 8.2% in 1990. According to Bachu (1998), the "propensity to marry," that is the tendency to avoid a nonmarital birth with a forced marriage, decreased most dramatically for White American women by over 30% from the 1930s to the 1990s. The desire to marry to avoid birth before marriage has historically been lower for African American women than for White American women, but this propensity to marry has also decreased for African American women over time (Bachu, 1998; Cherlin, 1998). The statistics of the declining propensity to marry partially reflect the abating stigma associated with a nonmarital birth, the concurrent financial gains women have made, and the declining popular interest in marriage. For low-income women in general, that there are fewer eligible or appealing men to marry has also fueled the declining marriage rate (Cherlin, 1998; Edin and Kefalas, 2006).

Perhaps the most dramatic change in the nature of single-parent births has been changes in the proportion of births as a function of mothers' age and changes in the birthrates of women at different ages. As Figure 8.5 shows, the distribution of births to unmarried women have differentially increased by age group. In 1970, unmarried women who were under 20 years old accounted for approximately 50% of all births to unmarried women, unmarried women ages 20–24 accounted for 32% of all births to unmarried women, unmarried women ages 25–29 accounted for 10% of all births to unmarried women, unmarried women ages 30–34 accounted for 5% of all births to unmarried women, and unmarried women over 35 years accounted for 3% of all births to unmarried women. In 2015, unmarried women who were under 20 years old accounted for only 13% of all births to unmarried women, unmarried women ages 20–24 accounted for 35% of all births to unmarried women, unmarried women ages 25–29 accounted for 27% of all births to unmarried women, unmarried women ages 30–34 accounted for 16% of all births to unmarried women, unmarried women over 35 years accounted for 9% of all births to unmarried women. Thus, the percentage of births to adolescent women went from 50% in 1970 to only 13% in 2015, whereas the percentage of births to women over age 30 went from 8% to 25%.

Figure 8.5 shows the changes in the birthrates to unmarried women at different ages. The nonmarital birthrate is the number of nonmarital births per 1,000 unmarried women. Although teen birthrates have fallen for all population groups, the drop in teen birthrates has been sharpest for African American women and Latinas (Hamilton, Martin, Osterman, Curtin, and Mathews, 2015). Between 2006 and 2014, births to all American teenagers dropped more than 40%, and declines in births among Latina American and African American teens declined 51% and 44%, respectively.

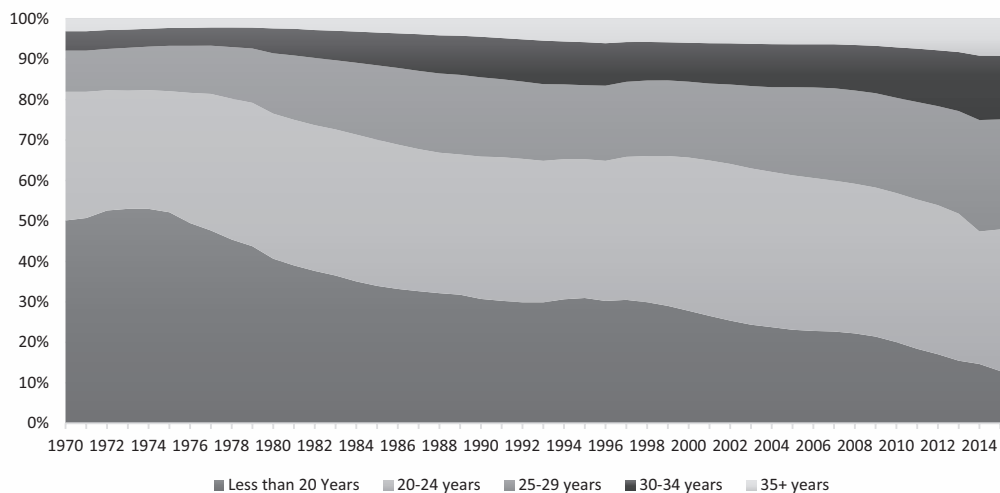


Figure 8.5 Percent Distribution of Births to Unmarried Women by Age Group: United States 1970–2015

However, birthrates among African American and Latina American teens remain twice as high as the rates for White American teens. The percentage of women over 30 having children out of marriage is growing (Curtin et al., 2014). Rates rose for all age groups over age 30, reaching a historic peak for women ages 30–34 in 2016 (Martin, Ryan, Riina, and Brooks-Gunn, 2017). Overall, the age of single mothers has increased over the last several decades. In 2014, nearly 40% of single mothers were over 40 years old (Grall, 2016).

Clear differences in birthrates exist as a function of education, income, and parity (Shattuck and Kreider, 2013). Women with less education are much more likely to have a nonmarital birth than women with college degrees. For example, in 2011, 57% of the nonmarital births were to women who had not yet completed high school, and only 9% were to women who had completed college. Nearly half of the never-married mothers in 2012 had incomes below the poverty level, and only 19.8% had incomes above \$50,000 (Solomon Fears, 2014). Most people think births to single mothers are first and only births, but Child Trends (2011) reported that more than half of nonmarital births were to mothers who already have one previous child.

Single-Parent Families Created by Adoption

The number of single parents, both male and female, who adopted children increased in the 1980s (Groze, 1991), but these percentages have remained small ever since (National Survey of Family Growth, 2015). In 2002, 1.1% of all females ages 18–44 had ever adopted a child. In 2006, slightly less than 1% had ever adopted a child; in 2015, about .7% or 400,000 women between the ages of 18 and 44 had ever adopted a child. It appears that the number of single parents who adopt children is still low compared with the number of single-parent households in the general population (Groza, 1996). Shireman (1995, 1996) and others (Feigelman and Silverman, 1977; Shireman and Johnson, 1976) have suggested that most single-parent adoptions are to women, and when single parents adopt, they tend to adopt children of the same gender as themselves. Adoptions by single fathers are still uncommon. Perhaps as a consequence of the fact that most single adoptive parents are women, single-parent adoptive families tend to have lower incomes than dual-parent adoptive families (Groze, 1991; Shireman, 1996; Shireman and Johnson, 1976).

African American Families

Although the dramatic increase in the percentage of single-parent families pervades all social strata and ethnic groups, the preponderance of single-parent families in African American homes requires special attention (McLoyd, 1990). Overall, there are more White American children reared in single-parent homes than there are African American children reared in single-parent homes. However, an African American child has a higher probability of growing up in a single-parent home than a White American child because there is a higher incidence of single parenthood among African American households than among White households.

That a higher proportion of African American children are born to unmarried mothers than is the case for other American families reflects historical trends concerning marriage and childbearing (Dixon, 2009). Over the last few decades, the marriage rate among African Americans has declined significantly. In 1970, 64% of African American women were married; by 2004, only 32% were married. In 1970, nearly 95% of African Americans had ever been married at ages 40–44; by 2012, that figure was closer to 60% (Raley, Sweeney, and Wondra, 2015). Increasingly, African American women are less likely to marry or remarry than are African American men or women from other ethnic groups (Hurt, McElroy, Sheats, Landor, and Bryant, 2014). Also, African Americans are more likely to get divorced or separated than White Americans. The declining marriage rate among African Americans, according to Cherlin (1998, p. 56) could be accounted for by the “inseparable web of society-wide cultural change, the African American cultural heritage, and worsening economic constraints.” More recently, Coates (2015) attributed the declining marriage rate to increasing incarceration rates and complications related to incarceration (see Dallaire, 2019). Additional, and often related, reasons include economic instabilities of men and women, concerns about trust, pain from past relationships, and feelings of not being ready for marriage (Edin and Kefalas, 2006; Levine, 2013). Some observers report that many women are happy *not* to be married, mainly as a result of conflicting messages from their elders and their communities about the untrustworthiness of partners and the importance in the African American community for women to be self-reliant and independent (Boyd-Franklin and Franklin, 1998). Chronic and increasing male unemployment and the low ratio of male to female wages have made African American women less likely to marry and less tolerant of unsatisfactory relationships.

Long-standing cultural traditions stemming from African styles of family life, specifically the greater emphasis on ties to a network of kin that extend across households (Garcia-Coll, Meyer, and Brillon, 1995), have also contributed to a reduced emphasis on marriage as the foundation of family life. The influence of the history of slavery as contributing to the higher incidence of African American single-parent families has been refuted (Chafe, 2015). Contrary to stereotypes, the dramatic increase in the number of African American single-parent families appears to be largely a response to the nature of the U.S. economy rather than a contributor to social or economic problems. Although economic problems contribute to higher rates of single-parent families in the African American community, the processes by which these economic factors influence parenting behavior within single-parent African American (McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, and Borquez, 1994) and two-parent White American (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, and Simons, 1994) families appear to be similar.

For those women and men who wish to marry, there are significant barriers to marriage, including structural inequalities in education and employment as well as unfavorable sex-ratios (Harknett and McLanahan, 2004) in the marriage market. This is particularly true in families of color, largely but not exclusively due to the large number of incarcerated minority men (Clayton and Moore, 2003; Coates, 2015; Dallaire, 2019; Lane, 2004) and the high rates of mortality and morbidity among African American males (as cited in Hurt et al., 2014). According to Western and McLanahan (2000), “the expansion of the penal system over the last two decades emerges as a key suspect in

explaining the growing number of single-parent families in disadvantaged communities” (p. 2). At the same time, the incarceration rate for women and mothers has increased (Dallaire, 2019). Incarceration has direct effects on reducing individuals’ availability to live with their families, and indirect effects by reducing parents’ employment prospects, earning capacity, and relationship skills.

Growing since the 1970s has been the trend for women’s reduced reliance on men for economic support. With increasing economic equality and opportunities in the workforce, women find themselves less likely to marry for financial stability than ever before (Hertz, 2006). This seems to be especially true in the African American community, as Hurt et al. (2014) illustrated from their in-depth interviews with a sample of African American married men who completed the Program for Strong African American Marriages. There are also micro-level factors and difficulties with interpersonal trust that impact African American marital rates, some of which have been traced back to gender relationships, communication difficulties, and confusion about gender roles between African American men and women, issues that relate back to conditions of discrimination generations ago (Pinderhughes, 2002). Consequently, it is not surprising that in two early samples of married and unmarried parents from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Western and McClanahan, 2000), half the unmarried mothers were African American compared with just 16% of the married mothers. Among fathers, African Americans constituted half the unmarried sample (48%) and only 14.9% of the married sample.

Cohabiting Families

Single parents have been defined as parents who are not married. However, not all single parents are “single.” In fact, most children classified on their birth certificates as being born to single parents are really born to cohabiting couples, a man and a woman who are living together but not married and often are the child’s biological parents. Because the birth certificate lists the mother as not married, the child is listed in Census Bureau statistics as single. The FFCWS project found that 82% of the unmarried mothers in their study were romantically involved at the time of the child’s birth and optimistic about their future together with the child’s biological father. Mothers reported relatively high levels of relationship quality, and about half were living together and had hopes of getting married. More than 80% of unmarried fathers provided support to the mother during pregnancy, and more than 70% of the fathers visited the mother and the baby in the hospital. The majority of fathers said they wanted to help rear their child (Edin, Kefalas, and Reed, 2004).

These findings raise important questions about what it means to talk about being a “single-parent” or “growing up in a single-parent family.” The rising rates of single parenthood are not about an increasing number of single parents rearing children *alone*; they are about having and rearing a child outside of marriage. The FFCWS uses the term “fragile families” to identify these families. Child Trends (2015) reported that between 2006 and 2010, 58% of unmarried births were to cohabiting parents. Thus, the majority of children born to single mothers live especially during infancy with both of their biological parents who are not married to each other. Of those children who are born to single mothers who are not married and also not cohabiting, many mothers arrange for non-cohabiting biological dads or for “social dads” (fathers not biologically related to the child) to coparent the child to ensure the child’s optimal development (Hertz, 2006).

In the FFCWS study, using data collected in 1998–2000, 72% of the unmarried mothers and 90% of the unmarried fathers at the time of the child’s birth said that they had a 50/50 chance of getting married. The majority (65% of mothers and 78% of fathers) said that they believed that marriage is better for children than growing up in a single-parent home. Many studies show that support for marriage is high within all ethnic groups; both cohabiting parents and unmarried parents seem to be as “enthusiastic” for marriage as other members of the general population.

So why don't parents get married? First, it is important to note that the United States is not unique in this regard. According to Garrison (2007), marriage is in decline all over the industrialized world. A 2016 report from the OECD noted that living with two cohabiting parents is becoming increasingly common across all countries (Eurostat, 2015). The share of children living with two married parents decreased between 2005 and 2014, from 72.3% to 67.1%, whereas the share of children living in households with sole parents stayed relatively stable, and the proportion of children living with cohabiting parents increased from 10.3% in 2005 to 15.2% in 2014. In other words, the average share of children living with two cohabiting parents increased by almost 50% in the years between 2005 and 2014. Compared to all other OECD countries, the United States was among the lowest, with 5% of all children living with two cohabiting parents, and the U.S. increase from 2005 was about a third smaller increase than that of most other countries. In the United States, marriage rates declined more in African Americans than White Americans (Garrison, 2007). Another contributing factor to the increase in the *percentage* of cohabiting couples is the decrease in the rate of childbearing of married couples (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004).

Observers have offered a number of explanations for why children's biological parents do not marry. First among these reasons for not marrying before or after the birth of a child are financial reasons. Economic researchers have shown that higher male earnings and possibilities for future wages are positively associated with marriage; marriage rates decline during periods of low employment and earnings (Garrison, 2007). Interviews with new parents corroborate these economic concerns. According to Cherlin (2004), many adults believe that it is important to be "economically set before you get married" (p. 856).

Some observers and researchers have suggested that parents' over-idealization of marriage is partially responsible for delaying marriage until after childbirth. Parents interviewed for the FFCWS project reported that they wanted to postpone marriage until they could afford a nice wedding a house or a good job (McLanahan, Garfinkel, Reichman, and Teitler, 2001; Waldfogel et al., 2010). In a Pew Research Center report of survey data collected in the summer of 2017, many never-married adults (59%) said that they were not married because they had not found the right person, but many also cited financial reasons (41%) for not marrying. Never-married adults of color (48%) were more likely than White American (33%) to say a major reason they were not married is that they were not financially stable (Parker and Stepler, 2017).

In her book *Ain't No Trust*, sociologist Judith Levine (2013) describes yet another perspective on low-income mothers' unwillingness to marry. Levine's in-depth interviews show how mothers' experiences with partners' failures as economic contributors, as emotional supports, as fathers, and as sexually loyal partners contributed to a pervasive distrust of men and unwillingness to form lasting unions with the fathers of their children.

Public opinion and attitudes toward marriage, cohabitation, and childbearing are shifting (Garrison, 2004) as cohabitation for many people, even those who are not yet parents, becomes more common. According to the 2006–2010 National Survey of Family Growth (Copen, Daniels, and Mosher, 2013), by age 30, 74% of women had lived with a male partner without being married to him. Trends have changed from marrying before pregnancy, to marrying as a result of pregnancy, to becoming pregnant and not marrying (Wildsmith, Steward-Streng, Manlove, 2011). "Shotgun marriages" (marriages which are triggered by pregnancy), which were common in the 1950s, are less common today (Bachu, 1998). What has occurred is "de-linking of marriage and having children" (Roberts, 2007, as cited in Solomon Fears, 2014).

Although some have attributed the rise in births to nonmarried women to increased sexual activity outside of marriage, participation in risky behaviors that often lead to sex, and improper use of contraceptive methods, many observers have pointed to the lack of a marriageable partner. This is especially true for African American women who have highest rate of nonmarital births. Some

researchers have attributed the high rate of births in unmarried African American women to a shortage of marriageable African American men. Demographically speaking, there are wider differences in the numbers of unmarried males for each unmarried African American female compared with other groups (Carlson, McLanahan, and England, 2004). For example, in 2012 (Solomon Fears, 2014), for every 100 African American females, there were only 75 unmarried males; for every 100 White American women, there were 88 White American men. If the number of desirable partners—men with steady jobs, men without a criminal record, and heterosexual men, for example, is included, the ratio of marriageable men to women is further reduced, and differences among ethnic groups increased

Single-Father Families

A small group of single-parent families that has shown increases, especially in the past decades, is single-father families. Approximately 17% of all single-parent families in 2012 were headed by fathers, up one-third since 1990, and three times the number of single-father families in 1970 (Livingston, 2013a). Compared with single-parent families headed by mothers, single-parent families headed by fathers are more often created by circumstances of divorce, and the fathers are more likely to be employed and less likely to be economically disadvantaged. Single-parent fathers are more likely to have custody of older children, more likely to be older, more likely to be living with a cohabiting partner, and more likely to be of White American background than single-parent mothers (Livingston, 2013b). Reasons for fathers becoming single parents have also changed. Instead of becoming single parents from widowhood, as was common around the turn of the twentieth century, most fathers, and most single parents in general, are becoming single parents because of divorce or separation or are assuming responsibility for the child from a nonmarital birth (Amato, 2000). More important, the gap between single fathers who are divorced and single-parent fathers who have never been married is narrowing. The fastest growing group of single-parent fathers living with their children includes single-parent fathers who have never been married. About half of these fathers are living without a cohabiting partner, whereas about 40% are living with a nonmarital partner and about 10% are married but living apart from their spouse (Livingston, 2013b).

Summary

There is great heterogeneity across single-parent families with regard to the conditions that lead to their formation. Unlike 50 years ago, when the preponderance of single-parent families had been created from situations of divorce and widowhood, today nearly one half of the single parents were not married when they became parents. Nonmarried mothers today are more likely to be older and better educated than previous single-parent mothers. Increasingly, single fathers are becoming primary custodial parents. In the next section, we examine the unique features of each of these single-parent family types to better understand why it may be misleading to generalize across all single-parent families in describing parenting circumstances and parenting behaviors.

Similarities and Differences Across Different Types of Single-Parent Families

We begin this section by examining the circumstances common across single-parent families, and then we examine the special cases of single parents in different situations. We start with single parents who are considered single parents because they are not married at the time of their child's birth. These parents include most teen parents, single parents living in a cohabiting situation, and single-parent fathers. Then we address the issue of older unmarried parents and mothers who are identified

as “single-parent by choice,” lone parents, or solo parents. In the final section, we describe the special circumstances of divorced single-parent families. Because of the small percentages of single-mother families created by widowhood, and the dearth of new findings in this area, we do not discuss single mothers by widowhood.

Overview of Families With Single Parents

Compared with married parent families, families with a single-parent are more likely to experience poverty (U.S. Census, 2016), stress (Taylor and Conger, 2014) and lower levels of social support (Taylor and Conger, 2017). Single mothers are also more likely to be younger and less educated than married mothers (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, and Racine, 2003). Single mothers are more socially isolated than other parents. They work longer hours, receive fewer emotional and tangible supports, and have less stable social networks (Harknett and Harknett, 2011). Single mothers are more likely to report that their own parents had alcohol, drug, and depression problems, and they also report higher rates of childhood abuse than married mothers (Lipman, MacMillan, and Boyle, 2001). These problems may contribute to difficulties in developing and maintaining a committed, long-term relationship with a parenting partner, especially because available marriage partners are subject to the same poverty, low education, and mental health problems (Lahey, Hartdagen, Frick, McBurnett, Connor, and Hynd, 1988). More educated, emotionally stable, and financially able women also become single mothers, often planning to address romantic needs later after parenthood.

Special Cases: Parents Who Are Single at the Birth of Their Child

Teen Mothers

In the 1940s and 1950s, teen birthrates were much higher than they are today, but they were mostly in the context of marriage (Razza, Martin, and Brooks-Gunn, 2015). Births to teen mothers were not recognized as a national problem until the 1980s, when births to unmarried teens began to rise and researchers began to report on poor academic and behavioral outcomes in children growing up in single-parent families (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Since 1991, birthrates for women in their adolescent years have been declining. Birthrates to teens have fallen by more than half since 1995, and they continue to drop. Birthrates declined 9% from 2014 to 2015 for teenagers ages 15–19 (to 20.2 per 1,000 in 2015; Martin et al., 2017). These reductions have been attributed to decreased levels of sexual activity, increased use of contraception among teens, increased availability of abortions (Schneider, 2017), and increases in educational attainment (Erdmans and Black, 2015). As a result, researchers are paying less attention to teenage births today and more attention to unmarried births in general.

Despite the downturn in teen birthrates, a 2004 national poll showed that 79% of adults judged teenage pregnancy a very serious or important problem for the United States (Erdmans and Black, 2015). This public concern is warranted because, as Martin and Brooks-Gunn (2015, p. 734) noted, teen mothers “face more difficulties than unmarried adult mothers due to their developmental status, education, living arrangements, and long-term prospects for work.”

Unmarried teen mothers come from more disadvantaged segments of the population in terms of social class, ethnicity, and geographic location. Demographic research reviewed by Erdmans and Black (2015) shows that teenage pregnancy is especially affected by chronic exposure to neighborhood poverty, especially in adolescence. Data from the 2001 to 2002 ECLS-B shows that about half of all teenage mothers lived below the federal poverty line compared with one fifth of older mothers, and more than half (56%) of the infants in poverty lived with a mother who had been a teen mother (Halle et al., 2009). In the United States, teenage birthrates are highest for states in the South and

Southwest and lowest for states in the Northeast and Midwest. Teen birthrates are highest for Latina and African American teens, nearly double those for White American teens. Native Americans fall between African Americans and White Americans; Asian American teen births have the lowest teen birthrates.

Higher religiosity and limited access to family planning are associated with higher rates of teenage pregnancy.

With data aggregated at the state level, conservative religious beliefs strongly predict U.S. teen birth rates, in a relationship that does not appear to be the result of confounding by income or abortion rates. One possible explanation for this relationship is that teens in more religious communities may be less likely to use contraception.

(Strayhorn and Strayhorn, 2009, p. 6)

The effects of teen mother parenting on the child depend on whether the pregnancy was intended or wanted (East, Chien, and Barber, 2012, as cited in Erdmans and Black, 2015). Martin and Brooks-Gunn (2015) quoted findings from Mosher, Jones, and Abma (2012) that a greater proportion of teenagers' births than older women's births are unintended, and teenage mothers are less likely than older mothers to get prenatal care. Teenage parenting is often less than optimal. Razza et al. (2015) cite research showing that adolescent mothers are more punitive, less sensitive, and less stimulating as parents with their young children than older mothers. However, for those mothers in neighborhood cultures where teenage pregnancy is more accepted, the effects of teenage parenting can sometimes be positive (Ford, 2017). At the same time, grandparent circumstances and the relationships between the mother, the biological and social father, and the grandparent can either ameliorate or complicate teenage parenting effects (Muzik et al., 2016; Scannapieco and Connell-Carrick, 2016).

Previous research had suggested that teenage pregnancy was associated with lower educational outcomes for the teenage mothers, but more recent research shows that it is educational disengagement prior to pregnancy that contributes to teenage pregnancy. Teenage motherhood, in general, may be more of an outcome than a contributor to poverty and the chaos that accompanies it. According to interviews with teenage mothers (Erdmans and Black, 2015), limited economic and social options along with the "life worlds of chaos"—including violence, abuse, risky neighborhood and inequalities—contribute to teenage motherhood and other kinds of risks. As Erdmans and Black (2015) explained, motherhood can motivate a young woman to become a good mother, increase her education, and get a good job, but the limited resources and unreliable social supports available to many teenage mothers make motherhood very difficult. That some young women succeed under these difficult circumstances shows the complexity and importance of understanding teenage motherhood and its effects.

In *Telling Our Stories, Culturally Different Adults Reflect On Growing Up In Single-Parent Families* (Ford, 2017), successful African American professionals who grew up in single-parent families share their personal stories to counter the prevailing stories of failure and defeat they heard growing up. Mostly university professors and administrators, high school counselors and teachers, these individuals talk about how it felt to be seen by society as "inferior" for having come from single-parent homes, and they describe how they had to consciously defy these expectations. Some felt different because friends and neighbors came from middle class, two-parent families, but most reported feeling normal—others around them had similar family and economic situations. In contrast to the instability and uncertainty they experienced as a result of poverty, they describe hardworking mothers and tight kinship communities who were there to support them when they needed help, creating in them a sense of hope and an expectation that obstacles posed by poverty could be overcome. For their professional success, they credit their mothers' model of hard work, provision of unconditional love, and high academic expectations. For their personal success, they cite their mothers' strong spiritual

and moral guidance and her expectation that they take responsibility for themselves and other family members at an early age.

Research using propensity score matching has shown that most of the consequences of teenage single parenthood are not as negative as previously thought (Erdmans and Black, 2015). Using data from the FFCWS, Waldfogel et al. (2010) found that the association between teenage parenthood, lower academic scores, and increased behavior problems was moderated by father involvement. They also found that most of the negative outcomes of being a single-parent or growing up in single-parent families derive from the social disadvantages experienced before the teenagers became mothers. Difficulties in accessing education and job training, already challenging for low-income women, pose even greater challenges for teenagers, and even greater challenges for teenagers who find themselves caring for an infant or young child.

One factor that several authors have noted that amplifies the problems of teenage parenthood is having multiple partners. Partly as a function of their longer reproductive lives after their first baby, and partly as a function of their youth and immaturity, having multiple partners is more likely for single mothers who have their first baby as teens. Thus, it is no surprise that teenage parents are more likely than any other group of single mothers to have multiple pregnancies over the course of their lives with other partners after their first (Carlson and Furstenberg, 2006).

Single Parents in Cohabiting Relationships

Most births to single mothers are not to families with a single mother, but to cohabiting parental partners—biological mothers and fathers who are often living together but not married. Women included in the statistical reports of women unmarried at childbirth include those who are unmarried but living with a partner in an extralegal relationship. Although many of these couples are composed of a man and woman, some are also same-gender pairs (Patterson, 1992).

Cohabiting parent families can be of two types. One type is a household in which both parents are the child's biological parents not married to each other, and the second type is one in which only one parent is the child's biological parent. The number and percentage of births to biological parents not married to each other increased between the early 1980s when the percentage was about 6%, and the early 2000s, when the percentage increased to about 25%. This type of cohabiting families, characteristic of the families studied in the Eiduson and Weisner (1978) and FFCWS studies described ahead, is estimated to be about 43% of all cohabiting families, and the rate has remained stable (Manning, Brown, and Stykes, 2016).

Early research on cohabiting couples, conducted by Eiduson and Weisner (1978) and Weisner and Garnier (1992), focused on “social contract” or “unmarried couples by choice” in their study of nonconventional family lifestyles of the 1970s. Generally, these were women and men who were experimenting with living together. Eiduson (1983) reported that the circumstances of unmarried mothers living with male partners were similar to those of married women except that their partnerships tended to be more unstable and the values and beliefs about childrearing authority relationships and morality were less traditional. Compared with married couples and their children, these mothers and their children experienced relatively more frequent changes in their household composition, lived on lower and more unpredictable incomes, and often faced various social stigmas, such as lower teacher expectations (Weisner and Garnier, 1992). Regardless of these potential risks, Weisner and Garnier noted that when parents from nonconventional lifestyles had a strong commitment to their chosen family style, their children did not differ from children living in more traditional families on measures of adjustment and school performance.

More recent data comes from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (<https://fragile-families.princeton.edu/>), a study that followed a large sample of unmarried mothers, married mothers, and cohabiting families from the time of childbirth. At the time of their child's birth, about half

of the non-cohabiting mothers, a third of unmarried cohabiting mothers and fathers, 13% of the married men, and 14% of the married women were poor. Compared with married partner families in the FFCWS study, cohabiting parents were more likely to have started parenting in their teens and to have had children with other partners, more likely to be depressed and substance abusing, and more likely to have spent time in jail than parents from married couples. Fewer than 3% of cohabiting parents had a college degree, compared with a third of the married parents. Parents in cohabiting families went on to have higher rates of incarceration than parents in married families. By the time the children were age 5, half the fathers in these fragile families had been incarcerated at some point in their child's lives. Compared with married mothers, cohabiting mothers were less likely to engage their children in literacy activities and more likely to use harsh discipline and have less stable home routines, such as regular mealtimes and bedtimes (Geller, Jaeger, and Pace, 2018).

Most single parents in the FFCWS had high hopes of eventually marrying their child's biological parent, but they were not successful in either marrying or establishing long-term coparenting relationships (McLanahan and Sawhill, 2015). Despite the romantic inclinations of many of the unmarried parents, these relationships were less than ideal. At the interview in the hospital after the child's birth, "9% of the unmarried mothers reported being 'hit, slapped, or seriously hurt' by the father, compared to three percent of married mothers" (RWJF Program Results Report, 2014). Nearly half the cohabiting others and almost 80% of the non-cohabiting unmarried mothers had ended their relationship with their child's father by the time their children were 3 years old (McLanahan, 2004). Five years after the birth of their child, only 35% of the unmarried FFCWS couples were still living together, and fewer than half were married.

In the general population also, the longevity of cohabiting unions is lower than that of traditional marriages. Solomon Fears (2014) reported several sources showing that the median duration of the first premarital cohabitation among women ages 15–44 was about 22 months; the median length of marriage before divorce was 8 years. Bumpass and Lu (2000) estimated that the median length of time children spent living with a cohabiting parent (1.5 years) is considerably less than the 11.5 years living with married parents (including stepparents).

A second type of cohabiting parent family is one in which children live with one biological parent, mother or father, and the parent's partner who is not the child's biological parent. Manning and Brown (2013) report that 56% of children live in this second type of cohabiting parent family. These families are often more complex than other families, because they often include half or stepsiblings and the children are often older than in married parent families. The effects on the child of living in a stepparent cohabiting family depend on the child's age, with more negative effects for younger children.

Observers concur that across all cohabiting families, the biggest problem with cohabitation is family instability. It is family instability that is associated with poorer child outcomes and poorer parenting behaviors (Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, and Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Meadows, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2015). Evidence suggests that both coresidential and dating transitions are associated with higher levels of maternal stress and harsh parenting (Beck, Cooper, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn, 2010). Stable cohabiting families with two biological parents do not appear to differ from married biological parent families in the benefits that they provide to their children (Manning et al., 2016), but evidence suggests that married mothers report better mental and physical health than unmarried cohabiting mothers the year after children's birth (Meadows et al., 2008).

Not surprisingly, predictors of relationship instability include poverty, multiple parent fertility, depression, and substance abuse (McLanahan and Carlson, 2004). Men with multiple partner fertility or depression are likely to become absent fathers. Families separate when the mother and father report different levels of stress, if the mother has had children with other fathers prior to this child, if the mother had been receiving public assistance before the child's birth, and if the mother but not the father regularly attends religious services. Separation is more likely if the family is African American

than if the family is White American, and least likely if the parents are Latina. Families are more likely to be stable if the father has higher income or is abusing drugs, and families are more likely to be stable if father attends religious services and mother does not or if neither parent attends services. Family stability does not appear to be related to child gender, but if the child has a disability, it is less likely that the parents will be together 3 years later.

Most of what we know about cohabiting parents applies to different-sex parent families. Increasingly, with marriage rights, same-sex parent families are marrying, and their children are being reared in two-parent married families. Among families with LGBT parents, the vast majority—two thirds—were either married or cohabiting couples (Gates, 2015).

Single-Parent Families Headed by Fathers

Until the 1980s, most single-father families were created by divorce and secondarily by widowhood. Today, that situation has changed. Single-father families are still most likely to be created by divorce (43.8%); the second most frequent cause (30.6%) of single-father families is as a result of births to never-married single fathers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2015). Like never-married mothers, never-married fathers are more likely to be from minority and less educated backgrounds (Mincy and Nepomnyaschy, 2005; National Survey of Family Growth, 2015).

The circumstances of single-parent fathers and single-parent mothers differ. Single-parent fathers are more likely to be employed and less likely to be as economically disadvantaged as single-parent mothers (Livingston, 2013b). In addition, single-parent fathers are more likely to have custody of older children, to be older, to be living with a cohabiting partner, and White American than single-parent mothers (Livingston, 2013b). One large difference between never-married fathers and never-married mothers is that never-married fathers are more likely to be cohabiting with another adult who is not the child's parent than are mothers (22.4% versus 10.5%). Thus, for fathers as for single mothers, there are questions about whether a large portion—25%—of single-father households are in a truly “single” parenting situation.

The FFCWS provides useful information concerning the formation of single-parent families headed by fathers. Cohabiting fathers were more likely to become single fathers after cohabitation if the mother had had children with different fathers before this child and if the mother had been receiving public assistance before the child was born. Single-parent fathers were also more likely to be younger than fathers who did not become single-parent fathers. According to Schneider et al. (2016), 3-year-old children were more likely to be living with their fathers than their mothers if the child's mother had emotional or mental health problems, more drug or alcohol abuse than the father, or mental health problems such as depression. Children were less likely to be living with the custodial mother or father if that parent had children from previous partners. There are no ethnic differences in which parent becomes a single-parent after separation from coresidential status.

With the increasing prevalence of single-parent fathers, research on custodial single fathers has gone from a heavy reliance on qualitative research to more quantitative research findings. Summarizing research, Coles (2015) reported that single fathers are less likely than single mothers to engage in private talks with their children and in housework, and single fathers are more likely than single mothers to be involved in play and be employed for longer hours. Coles also noted that “single mothers tend to provide more closeness, monitoring and supervision than do fathers, who appear more lenient, allowing children to experiment a bit more” (p. 159). Reviewing the findings concerning child outcomes in single father and single-mother homes, Coles reported few differences between children in internalizing behavior and academic performance, but children from single-father families participate more in externalizing behaviors and substance use (though not abuse). Coles noted that it is difficult to rule out selection effects such that older and more troublesome children might be more likely to live with their fathers than their mothers.

Older Single-Mother Families

The fastest growing group of single parents is nonmarried women over 25 years of age. Many of these mothers may be living in cohabiting relationships, although the exact number is not known. Observers have noted several cultural changes that have contributed to this international trend for women to have and rear children outside of traditional marital relationships. These include later age of marriage for men and women, increased infertility and childlessness of later marrying women, increasing divorce rates, and changing social attitudes (Burns and Scott, 1994; Edin and Kefalas, 2006; Hertz, 2006; Kamerman and Kahn, 1988). The social stigma attached to having a child out of marriage has been declining since the 1960s, as witnessed by the increasing acceptance of unmarried mothers as characters in popular films and television programs. Even the politicized labels that have been used to describe unmarried mothers and their children—"out-of-wedlock mothers" and "illegitimate children"—have been replaced in the popular literature with more morally neutral terms like "single mothers" or "unmarried mothers." Within the group of unmarried mothers, there is great diversity, and this diversity has important implications for understanding parents, parents' circumstances, and the effects of these differences on parenting and subsequent child outcomes. In this subsection, two groups of single parents are considered "single mothers by choice" and a more inclusive group, whom we call "solo mothers." Each is described in turn.

Single Mothers by Choice

One group of women with nonmarital births has been described as single mothers by choice (SMCs). Single Mothers by Choice (SMC) is a national support and informational group founded in New York City in 1981 by Jane Mattes. SMC defines a single mother by choice as a woman who starts out rearing her child without a partner. A single mother may have decided to have or adopt a child, knowing she will be her child's sole parent at least at the outset (Mattes, 1994). Mothers who identify with SMC align with other single mothers in their struggle to assert their legitimacy as competent parents. Information concerning the incidence of single mothers by choice, their living circumstances, their parenting experiences, and effects on children growing up in these homes is available on the SMC website www.singlemothersbychoice.org/. Most research in this area is in the form of in-depth interviews, many with women identified as members of SMC. Generally, there are no comparison groups, and the sample sizes are not large.

As a participant-observer in a SMC support group for 2 years, Bock (2000) interviewed 26 single mothers by choice. She found that they decided to have or adopt a child only after serious thought and consideration of the child's ultimate well-being. They often sought guidance from various sources including their SMC support group, members of their spiritual community, parents, and friends. Bock noted that women were often discouraged from having or adopting children if they failed to meet the criteria SMC recommend before embarking on becoming SMCs: being older, responsible, emotionally mature, and financially capable. Many of the single mothers by choice Bock interviewed made serious lifestyle changes before having or adopting a child. Some of these changes included buying a new home in a more child-friendly community, saving money for the child, and changing jobs or careers to be better prepared to be both a mother and a solo provider.

Hertz (2006) provided detailed qualitative information from interviews with 65 mothers whom she described as "single by chance and mothers by choice," asking them about motherhood, men, and how they managed their lives and families as single-parent mothers. These were not randomly selected mothers, but mostly well-educated mothers who had taken a range of different paths to motherhood, from buying anonymous sperm from sperm banks over the internet, to within-country or international adoptions, to sometimes planned and sometimes not-so-consciously planned pregnancies. Hertz found these women to be quite conventional in their careers and life decisions, with

one exception—they chose to become a mother and rear their children before becoming part of a committed relationship. Their one shared feature was that they were eager to be a mother and to nurture a child, but for varied reasons, they did not have a partner. These women were not willing to get married just to have a child, nor were they willing to wait until they found the “right” partner. Hertz described the varied paths these women took to motherhood and their sometimes highly creative approaches to combining motherhood and employment. These mothers formed creative alliances with their roommates, friends, relatives, and in some cases, childcare providers to help them care for their hard-won children. Many of these mothers deliberately sought out men to be male figures in their children’s lives. A number of them were not parenting alone—they had friends, relatives and, in some cases, romantic partners who sometimes also served as parenting figures to their children. What distinguished these women was their eagerness to show that despite their unconventional choices, they were rearing their children without government support to be healthy, happy, and independently functioning.

Observers of single parents by choice report that these parents have a high level of emotional maturity, have a high capacity for frustration tolerance, and are not overly influenced by others’ opinions (Branham, 1970; Groze, 1991; Hertz, 2006). Single mothers by choice appear to be in their middle to upper 30s, mostly but not exclusively White American, and of middle to upper-middle socioeconomic status. They tend to be more financially secure, well educated, and more likely to be employed in well-paying professional jobs than many married mothers (Bock, 2000; Hertz, 2006; Kamerman and Kahn, 1988; Mannis, 1999; Mattes, 1994). The majority of these mothers gave very serious attention to either becoming pregnant or adopting a child. Some single mothers by choice became pregnant accidentally and found themselves delighted at the possibility of having children even though they were not married. Although the single mothers studied by Eiduson and Weisner (1978) chose their lifestyle as a result of feminist concerns and the desire to live independently of traditional family styles, the single mothers by choice of the 1980s and the 1990s appear to be motivated by a “ticking biological clock” (Bock, 2000; Kamerman and Kahn, 1988) and the desire to follow one’s dream of motherhood (Hertz, 2006). For many women, the decision to become a single parent was a long and difficult one, but one that brought a great deal of joy and fulfillment (Hertz, 2006).

Some single people who decide to become parents choose to adopt, most single-parent adoptions are to women, and many single parents adopt children of the same gender (Shireman, 1995, 1996). Often a high level of maturity is necessary because, as Shireman (1995) reported, many of the children single parents are eligible to adopt are children with special needs. Adoptive single parents are often oriented toward children and derive great personal fulfillment from their interactions with them (Jordan and Little, 1966; Shireman and Johnson, 1976). The single adoptive parents that Groze (1991, p. 326) observed “had an ability to give of themselves, were not possessive of their children, and were capable of developing a healthy relationship with their children.” In recent decades, international adoptions have become more common for both singles and married couples (Hertz, 2006). Because of the expense, upper-middle socioeconomic single parents are more likely than other parents to pursue international adoptions (V. Groza, personal communication, August 24, 2000) (Hertz, 2006). Different countries have different rules about who is allowed to adopt, but overall, single women are permitted to adopt in more countries than are single men.

Single parents by choice, whether they birth or adopt a child, face similar difficulties other single parents face in meeting the demands of single parenthood. Like other single and married parents, they have difficulty procuring quality childcare, balancing parenthood and career plans, and obtaining emotional support for themselves (Hertz, 2006; Kamerman and Kahn, 1988). The extent to which single parents by choice have recognized and prepared for these difficulties may help them better adapt to these circumstances than other single parents.

Some observers have questioned whether this classification of mothers as single by choice is useful from a scientific, descriptive point of view. Adopting the label “single mother by choice” serves

to differentiate these mothers from other single mothers, making it clear that for these mothers, becoming a single mother is a carefully chosen identity. Yet, this nomenclature is often viewed as discriminating against other single mothers (Bock, 2000). The words “by choice” imply that other single mothers did not choose to be single parents, or at least did not come to choose this way of life as conscientiously and responsibly as these single mothers by choice did. However, just how different SMC are from other single mothers who choose to remain single may be open to some question. Clearly these mothers do not have to contend with the effects of divorce and separation or contested custody or child support payments, and they are older than adolescent mothers. To what extent is this SMC category a socioeconomic, sociopolitical distinction, based solely on a mother’s access to resources? To what extent is the SMC category an attempt on the part of some women to distance themselves from stereotypes of poor and adolescent mothers? Bock (2000) reported that the single mothers she interviewed see themselves as at the top of the single parenthood hierarchy. Hertz (2006) described these mothers as women trying to show that they are much like other mothers, and certainly, as successful in rearing their children as these other mothers.

Edin and Kefalas (2006) interviewed 292 White American and African American low-income mothers in three U.S. cities. Almost all single mothers reported that they preferred to live separately or to cohabit with the fathers of their children rather than marry. Cohabitation allowed these mothers to enforce a “pay and stay” rule. If the father contributed to the household and followed the agreed-on rules, he could stay. If not, the mother had the power to evict him, because his name was generally not on the rental lease or mortgage. Are not these women single mothers by choice?

There is reason to believe that many more women are single mothers by choice than commonly believed. Census data indicate that women are not only less likely than ever before to marry, but also women are less likely to marry to avoid a nonmarital birth (Cherlin, 2004). With contraception, adoption, and affordable abortion as options, women who have babies can all be considered to have become mothers by choice. Many women—rich and poor alike—think hard before continuing a pregnancy and entering the institution of marriage. In their interviews with less privileged single mothers in Chicago, Illinois, Charleston, South Carolina, and Camden, New Jersey, Edin and Kefalas (2006) learned that poor mothers held clear reasons for avoiding marriage, with economic factors most important. Poor mothers were reluctant to take in a husband who did not contribute in a predictable manner to the family’s economic welfare. Men with illegal earnings and unstable employment were viewed as poor economic risks. The women Edin and Kefalas interviewed held marriage in high esteem, and they wanted to be sure to find worthy partners who would treat them fairly. They worried that a man who was frequently out of work or engaged in criminal activity would not only be a poor economic risk, but also, he would neither enhance their status nor be a parental role model. Noting the possibly stalled gender-role revolution among the lower socioeconomic groups, Edin and Kefalas reported that women were also unwilling to enter relationships in which they perceived would have a subservient role in bargaining and decision-making. They were also fearful of being joined legally to a man whom they might not fully trust emotionally to support them or their children. Finally, approximately half of the White American women and approximately a fifth of the African American women Edin and Kefalas interviewed reported concerns about domestic violence. The women Edin and Kefalas interviewed chose to have their children outside of marriage, not because they did not value marriage as an institution, but because they preferred to forego marriage until a partner could be found. Edin and Kefalas’ findings suggest that low-income women have high ideals for marriage and resist unions that promise trouble.

Thus, many rich and poor single mothers can be said to be “single mothers by choice,” remaining single for a number of clear and easily understood reasons. Like the single women in Bock’s study and those interviewed by Hertz, the women in Edin and Kefalas’s study were not opposed to the idea of marriage; they simply wanted to wait until the right man came along. A major difference between these two groups of mothers may have to do with legal regulations concerning child

support. Because they are dependent on federal or state subsidies to rear their children, the poor women in Edin and Kefalas's study are required to identify the children's fathers for child support. Another difference may be related to the amount of preparation that went into deciding to become a single-parent before pregnancy or adoption that was reported by the women in Bock's study. Certainly, the women in Bock's and Hertz's studies were better educated, and they may have been more career oriented. No doubt, because they had more money, they were perceived to be better able to provide for their children. But the similarities between these women raise questions about the unique denomination of "single mothers by choice" selected by some women over others.

Solo Mothers

In this subsection, we discuss the findings from several studies with a focus on mothers who appear to be rearing their children outside a partnered union without regard to the reasons for their single-parent status. One is a small study that relied primarily on interviews with parents and observations of them with their children. The other two studies used large-scale national data sets and utilized mainly questionnaire-type measures.

In a series of reports, Weinraub and Wolf (1983, 1987), Gringlas and Weinraub (1995), and Wolf (1987) focused on a group of women they called solo mothers: adult women rearing their children from birth without a male partner. This group of mothers included single mothers by choice as well as other mothers who may not have deliberately chosen to be single when they became pregnant. As a result of circumstances not always under their control, these mothers had been rearing their children from birth or shortly thereafter without a male father figure in the home. Children of these solo mothers were those who had, at least in their memory, no experience living with a father figure in the home and, more important, no experience of family dissolution, marital discord, or family realignment since early in life, or at least before the onset of language.

Weinraub and Wolf (1983) compared the solo mothers and their children with mothers and children of two-parent families matched on characteristics, including maternal age, education, ethnicity, per capita income, neighborhood, child age, and child gender. The solo mothers were a varied group. Some mothers were not married or had already been divorced when they unintentionally conceived; some were married and then separated from their husbands soon after conception or pregnancy; and some mothers deliberately became pregnant with full understanding that there would be no father in their young child's life. Some of these mothers could be classified as solo mothers by choice, some could be seen as divorced mothers. Most mothers were college educated and professionally employed.

Observational measures of maternal and child behavior were taken in the laboratory when the children were between 27 and 55 months of age, and parents completed questionnaires and in-depth interviews in their homes. Of the families, 70% returned for observation and interviews when the children were between 8 and 13 years of age (Gringlas and Weinraub, 1995). For the older children, child measures included a self-perception profile and maternal and teacher reports of behavior problems, social competence, and academic performance. Maternal measures included maternal and child reports of parenting practices, social supports, and stress.

Comparisons between solo-parent mothers and comparable married mothers highlight some of the important ways in which even the most stable of solo-parent families differed from married-parent families. First, despite careful attempts to match solo- and two-parent mothers on employment status, solo parents worked longer hours both when their children were in preschool and at preadolescence. When their children were in preschool, solo parents reported more difficulties coping with finances, more daily hassles, and slightly more stresses relating to employment. Solo mothers of sons reported more stressful life events relating to interpersonal areas of their lives. The largest difference between the mothers concerned social supports. During the preschool period, solo parents

received fewer emotional and parenting supports. During the preadolescent period, solo mothers of sons reported lower satisfaction with their emotional supports. Their friends and relatives either did not understand or did not address their emotional and parenting needs as well as those of solo mothers of daughters or two-parent mothers.

Observations of parents administering a teaching task to their preschool-age children revealed differences in solo mothers' parenting as a function of the child's gender. Although no differences in maternal communications and degrees of maternal nurturance were observed, solo mothers had difficulties exercising control over and setting appropriate maternal demands on their sons. Preschool boys from solo-parent homes were less compliant with their mothers' requests than boys from two-parent homes. By preadolescence, teachers reported that children of solo mothers had more behavior problems, lower social competence, and poorer school performance than children of married mothers.

Within each group, maternal social support and stress predicted parenting and child outcomes. During the preschool period, maternal social supports contributed to more optimal parent-child interaction for both solo- and two-parent families. The more mothers received support in their role as parents, the more optimal was their behavior in interaction with their preschool child. During preadolescence, only for solo parents did social support predict children's academic performance.

At both assessment periods, more stressful maternal life events predicted less optimal child outcomes but, again, only for solo-parent families. During the preschool period, solo mothers with frequent stressful life events had less optimal interactions with their children in a teaching task, and their children were perceived as moodier and had lower intelligence and readiness-to-learn scores. More frequent stressful life events were associated with reduced parental effectiveness, poorer communication, and less nurturance in solo-parent families.

The effects of maternal stress not only indirectly affected child outcome by means of maternal parenting behavior, but also had direct effects on child outcome independently of the solo mother's parenting behavior. During preadolescence, children from solo-parent families with high levels of maternal stress were described by teachers and mothers as having the most behavior problems. Children from low-stress solo-parent families were indistinguishable from children from two-parent families.

These results are similar to other findings documenting the psychological vulnerability of women rearing their children alone (Burden, 1986; Compas and Williams, 1990; Elder, Eccles, Ardel, and Lord, 1995; Hastings-Storer, 1991; McLanahan, 1983). This vulnerability seems to affect children of single-parent families not only indirectly through parenting behavior, but also possibly directly as well. These findings suggest that reduced social supports and increased stresses may be more common for solo parents, even when there are no separation, divorce, and custody difficulties and even when mothers are mature, well educated, and from secure financial circumstances. Differences in social support and stress can affect parent behavior and child outcomes, especially in solo-parent families. Most important, stress may be the main factor placing solo-parent children at risk; children from solo-parent families with low stress do not appear to be at any increased risk. In fact, a study examining the effect of neighborhood stress among low-income single mothers' psychological distress on positive parenting practices found that social support influenced positive parenting particularly among mothers who reported low levels of support (Kotchick, Dorsey, and Heller, 2005).

In Great Britain, single mothers have been referred to as "lone mothers." In a number of studies, lone mothers were identified as having poorer physical as well as mental health (Benzeval, 1998; Hope, Power, and Rodgers, 1999; Macran, Clarke, and Joshi, 1996; Whitehead, Burstrom, and Diderichsen, 2000). Various researchers have examined why lone mothers and particularly never-married lone mothers have poorer health compared with that of their cohabiting or married counterparts. According to these studies, the poorer health of lone mothers appears to stem from the higher levels of psychological distress they experience. The higher levels of psychological distress that characterize

lone mothers are related to financial hardship and lack of support both from the community, friends, and family (Benzeval, 1998; Hope et al., 1999). Surprisingly, employment status did not appear to affect psychological or physical health (Baker, North, and ALSPAC Study Team, 1999).

Using a large American data set, Amato (2000) examined data from the 1987–1988 National Survey of Households and Families (NSHF). Focusing on 1,515 single parents who were not cohabitating, Amato examined how different groups of single parents varied along such measures such as income, psychological well-being, and relationships with children. With regard to income, Amato (2000, pp. 161–162) found that the poorest single parents “were mothers, high school dropouts, separated or never married, aged 24 or younger and living with kin.” With regards to psychological well-being, Amato found no differences between men and women or never-married and other women on indices of happiness, depression, and health. However, single parents who reported being separated from their spouse reported being the least happy and most depressed of the single parents who were widowed, divorced, or never married. Married mothers were more authoritative than single-parent mothers, and more educated single parents were more authoritative than other single parents.

In the NSHF survey, Amato found no single social address variable that most effectively predicted parenting, but he identified a complex, intertwined combination of factors that affected the parents’ situation and ability to effectively parent. Having a child outside of marriage did not necessarily put a mother at risk for being stressed, depressed, unemployed, or inadequate. However, having an out-of-marriage birth in combination with little education put a mother and her child at risk for poverty. Poverty placed families and children at developmental risk, introducing a myriad of stresses and strains, including hunger, lack of material necessities, poor educational resources, and unsafe, crime ridden neighborhoods (Amato, 2000; Magnuson and Duncan, 2016).

Divorced Custodial Parents

Custodial parents are single parents who are responsible for their children on a regular, daily basis. Their custodial situation may be the result of divorce, separation, or widowhood, unmarried birth, or separation from a cohabiting relationship. According to Grall (2016), in 2014, five times more women (82% versus 17.5%) are custodial parents than men. However, men are more likely than women to become custodial parents as a result of divorce, and women are more likely to become custodial parents never having been married. Few parents become single parents (less than 2%) as a result of widowhood. Custodial fathers are more likely than custodial mothers to be White American (59%) and less likely to be African American (17%) than other custodial fathers. Although many custodial parents are not formally divorced, in this section, we focus on the unique situations of divorced custodial parents because it is a more defined situation.

When marriages end in divorce, newly single parents have to come to terms with the loss of their marriage and often, too, with the failure of their marital hopes and expectations. The single parent’s partner may have served as an attachment figure or a best friend, and these emotional losses can be devastating (Weiss, 1979). Resolving these emotional experiences can take months or years. During this time, these emotional experiences may affect the parent’s adjustment, well-being, and relationships with other adults, and the parent’s interactions with the children. Soon after separation and divorce, divorced mothers have higher stress (Hope et al., 1999) and more depression and anxiety than never-married mothers (Afifi, Cox, and Enns, 2006).

During the time of separation and divorce, household routines become reorganized, and children often become more angry, aggressive, and resentful (Bolton and MacEachron, 1986). These conditions pose significant challenges for competent parenting. Many families experience dramatic changes in financial status (Morrison and Cherlin, 1995). Mothers seem to suffer more financial setbacks postdivorce than fathers, but fathers too are affected. Even though almost half of all custodial parents have child support awards (52% for mothers and 31% for fathers) and 74% of custodial

parents awarded these awards receive full or partial payment, 31% of custodial mothers and 17% of custodial fathers are still considered poor (Grall, 2016). About 62% of custodial parents receive non-cash support from noncustodial parents.

As further stress, some families experience employment and housing changes, creating adjustment difficulties for parents as well as for children (Jones, 1984; Richard, 1982). Parental responses to divorce and the subsequent life-altering events include anger, anxiety, and depression, with possible impulsive and antisocial behavior and excessive swings of mood and self-confidence (Hetherington, 1993). Recurring health problems and difficulties with the immune system are not uncommon (Richard, 1982). Given what is known about how economic and psychosocial stress may affect parents (McLoyd, 1990; McLoyd et al., 1994), it is not surprising that during the first months and years after divorce, divorced parents are more irritable and unresponsive in their interactions with their children (Thiriout and Buckner, 1991). They show poor supervision and erratic and sometimes punitive discipline (Camara and Resnick, 1988; Hetherington, Cox, and Cox, 1982; Wallerstein, Corbin, and Lewis, 1988). Many of these symptoms subside as families attain a new homeostasis, usually within 2 years (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1995) provided they are not faced with sustained or new adversities.

Loneliness, task overload, and increased childrearing stress are common experiences of divorced custodial parents. However, financial security, employment stability and satisfaction, at least neutral relationships with their ex-spouses, confidence in their parenting skills, and the formation of a new intimate support relationship are factors that can increase the well-being and parenting skills of the custodial parent (Richard, 1982; Thiriout and Buckner, 1991). Within 2 years, three fourths of divorced women report that they are happier in their new situation than in the last year of their marriage, and most, in spite of the stresses, find rearing children alone easier than with a disengaged, undermining, or acrimonious spouse. Furthermore, in addition to perceiving themselves as more able parents than mothers in conflictual, unsatisfying marriages, divorced women on the average are less depressed, show less state anxiety, drink less, and have fewer health problems than those in unhappy, acrimonious, or emotionally disengaged marriages (Amato, 2000). Investigating 626 divorced single mothers and 100 divorced single fathers with custody, Hill and Hilton (2000) reported that satisfaction with the new role was the strongest predictor of adjustment in both groups.

The custodial situations of fathers and mothers differ. Generally, mothers have to adjust to a new role as a financial supporter, and fathers have to adjust to a new role as a homemaker (Hill and Hilton, 2000). Divorced custodial mothers and fathers both face new challenges in trying to balance family and career goals. New challenges for custodial fathers in the primary caregiver role include cutting back on hours at the office or work and conflicts in scheduling business trips. For mothers, adding the primary provider role may be especially frustrating. According to Hill and Hilton (2000), it may be easier for fathers to incorporate the primary parenting role than it is for mothers to add the primary provider role. Compared with mothers who were previously homemakers and returned to work upon divorce (Jones, 1984), newly divorced fathers rarely needed to find new employment, most continued in their same jobs, and income levels rarely plummeted as they did for newly divorced mothers. Many fathers cut back on employment so that they could devote more time to household and childrearing duties. Fathers were often surprised at how unsympathetic employers are to their situation of having to combine childrearing and employment, and many working-class fathers find these changes a huge challenge, if not impossible in their work.

Divorced fathers generally receive more offers of support from their relatives and community, but they are less likely to take them. Sometimes, their lack of experience with housekeeping, household chores, childrearing, and arranging childcare and activity schedules make the transition difficult, but most fathers adjust quickly, soliciting help from their children, particularly older children, most particularly daughters (Greif, 1985; Kissman and Allen, 1993).

As time goes on, both divorced fathers and mothers develop a household and social routine adequate to their family needs. DeFrain and Eirick (1981) questioned 33 divorced single-parent

fathers and 38 comparable single-parent mothers on a wide variety of topics and found substantial similarities between fathers and mothers. Both reported that their marriages before the divorce were “more bad than good,” with lack of communication, extramarital affairs, sexual problems, and loss of interest given as reasons for the breakup. Both mothers and fathers rated divorce as a medium—high to highly stressful event. Both men and women reported that their moods had improved since the divorce and many of their initial fears had subsided, with the majority of both groups feeling that they were doing “reasonably well.” The minority of parents who reported yelling at and/or hitting their children after the divorce said that those behaviors had decreased over time, and they found it much easier to control their children since the divorce. Both men and women reported they did not get to spend as much time with their children as they would prefer. Nevertheless, fathers reported feeling quite satisfied with themselves for coping as well as they did in their new role as a single parent.

Divorced fathers and mothers both report having an easier time with younger than with older children (Greif, 1985). They report more difficulties with sons than daughters, but single-parent fathers experience more childrearing problems with daughters than do single-parent mothers (Greif, 1985; Santrock, Warshak, and Elliott, 1982). Compared with their age mates, boys in single-parent father homes appear equally sociable and mature; daughters in single-parent father families are less sociable, less independent, and more demanding (Santrock et al., 1982). Many fathers in Greif’s study reported difficulties understanding and meeting their daughters’ emotional needs, and they sometimes called on their daughters to shoulder childcare and household chores disproportionately. Puberty seems especially difficult for fathers and their daughters, with fathers uncomfortable talking about maturation and sexual matters (Greif, 1985).

One of the greatest stresses reported by divorced custodial fathers is combining work and childrearing (Greif, 1985; Kissman and Allen, 1993); with nearly 4 out of 5 fathers in Greif’s sample reporting that this was difficult. Men reported that compared with their experiences before divorce, after divorce they had more interruptions in their daily work schedules and fewer opportunities to take on additional hours and projects, inhibiting their hope for career progress and higher incomes. Of the 1,136 fathers Greif interviewed, 66 men had to quit their job because of conflicts with childrearing responsibilities, and 43 men reported being fired. They also experienced problems with having to arrive at work late or leave early, missing workdays, or not being able to engage in work-related travel. Only 27% of the men interviewed reported that no work-related changes were necessary.

As stressful as childrearing-employment conflicts are for single-parent fathers, they are often more stressful for single-parent mothers. In Greif’s (1985) comparison of single divorced mothers who were asked the same questions as men, women reported greater employment—childrearing conflicts than men. Only 10% of the women said that work had not been difficult, and more mothers than fathers were fired from or had to quit their jobs.

In summary, the situations of divorced single parents, both men and women, are different from the situation of nonmarried single parents. Divorced fathers and mothers face more adjustment and role changes than other single custodial parents. Although the first months and years after separation or divorce are filled with multiple changes, often including relocation, changing roles and changing family schedule, many of these stresses subside within 2 years, and parents report great satisfaction with their lives postdivorce than during marriage. Divorced single parents are the most prosperous of all single parents, and divorced fathers are more financially stable than divorced mothers, with better jobs and incomes than unmarried mothers and fathers.

Summary

The group of parents identified as single parents is varied and diverse. Current statistics show that approximately one third of families are headed by single parents. Of these, 41% of single-parent

families were families in which the mother was never married. Some of these single parents may not be truly “single” parents. Although not married, 51% of these mothers are living in homes—cohabiting—with a partner who is often the child’s biological father. Although parents in these single parent cohabiting families are more likely to be poor and less educated than parents in two-parent families, a major problem with these families is that they are “fragile”—more likely to come apart than families with married parents. As the early research of Eiduson and Weisner (1978) and Patterson (1995) showed and the Fragile Families Study has confirmed, when nonmarried parents are stable—committed to each other and their chosen lifestyle, their children do not differ from children of more traditional household unions on measures of psychological adjustment and school performance.

Family circumstances vary widely among single-parent homes. For adolescent mothers, negotiating the multiple challenges of personal identity, preparation for adulthood, and parenthood poses significant risks for the adolescent and her child, especially because the adolescent is often coming from a situation of economic and educational disadvantage. Older unmarried parents, sometimes cohabiting and sometimes single mothers by choice, often face life circumstances revolving around issues of financial, social conventions, and relationship stability. Now replicated by large-scale studies, the early observational research of Weinraub and her colleagues showed that variations in these stressful life events and social supports, even when taking into consideration family income, influenced the quality of mothers’ interactions with their children, especially sons. These social context differences and the differential effects they may have on single parents may ultimately be the most important factors separating single-parent from two-parent families. For divorced families, disruption of the family members’ lives and their household present major challenges; how the parent negotiates these challenges has important implications for the child’s temporary coping and long-term adjustment. Because the common factor influencing parenting across all of these different single-parent families is the degree of economic, interpersonal, and emotional stress along with the degree of social support in the family and community, these variables hold the keys for predicting whether single parenthood will affect children’s development.

Single Parenthood and Child Outcomes: A Conceptual Model

Understanding single parenthood is challenging because single parents are not all alike. There are different types of single-parent families, each created by complex and interacting antecedent conditions, and these conditions pose different challenges and have different consequences. Of course, this process is neither linear nor direct; there are many influences that reverberate throughout the system, and these challenges are differentially experienced as a result of moderating factors, such as culture, income, education, and the child’s experiences. Many researchers have provided complex models to show how different influences unite and co-act to influence child outcomes.

In the conceptual model we present in Figure 8.6, we list the factors in each category that need to be considered in understanding how single parenthood can affect family circumstances, parenting and, ultimately, child development. Antecedent factors (those factors that contribute to individuals becoming single parents) include variables that have been shown to or are hypothesized to predict single parenthood—poverty, low education, low wage jobs, undesirable or unavailable marriage partners, and mental health problems. These factors often continue throughout the child’s and parents’ lives, affecting each component of the model. Possible family consequences of single parenthood include reduced amounts of parenting input, parents’ low wage and unstable jobs, unfavorable living conditions, low-quality schools and dangerous neighborhoods, family instability, and stress for both parents and children. Potential parenting behaviors affected by these circumstances can include reduced stimulation in the home, fewer learning opportunities for the child, and inattentive, harsh, or unresponsive parenting. All of these variables, along with the continuing effects of poverty, low

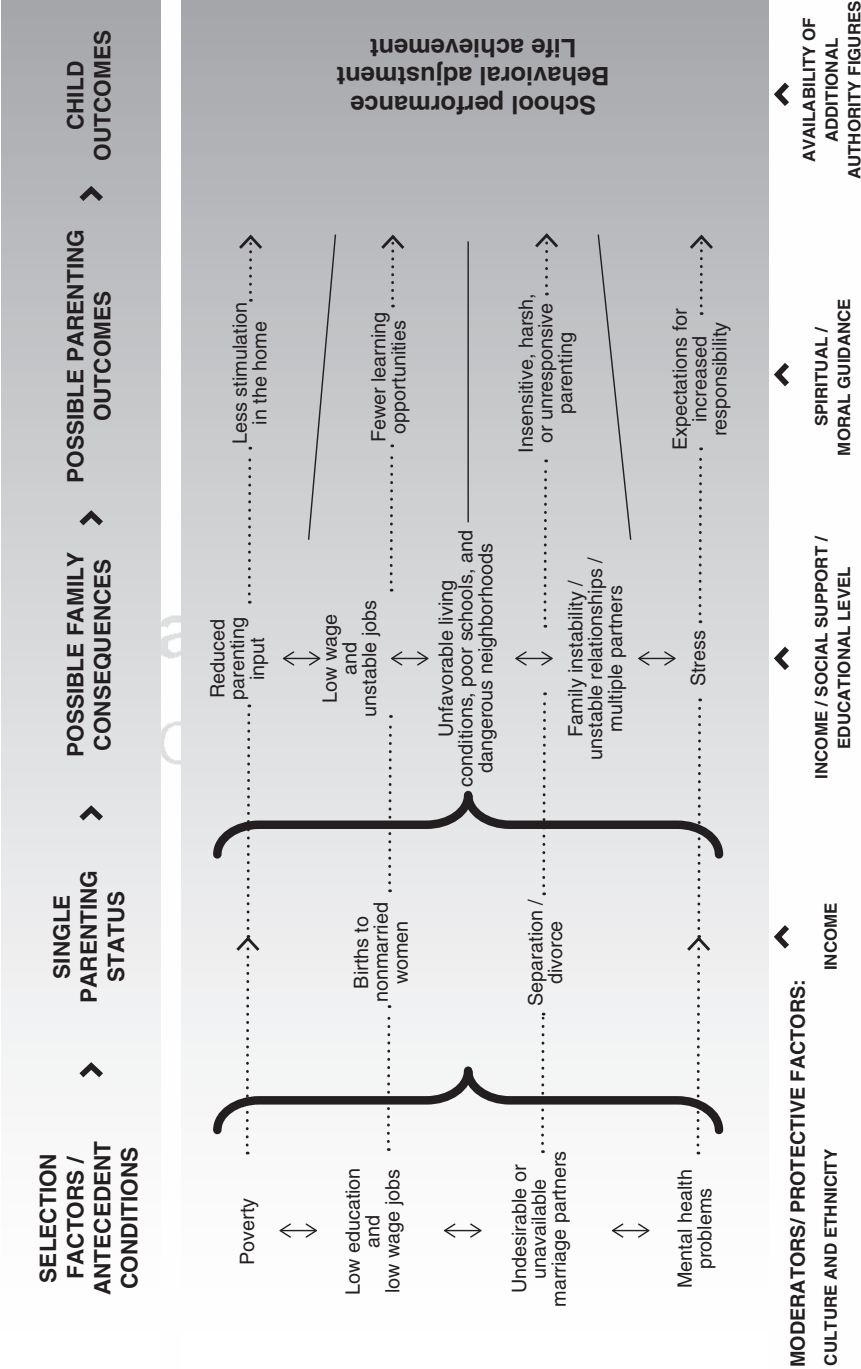


Figure 8.6 A Conceptual Model of Single Parenting

education, and mental health problems cumulate and interact to affect child outcomes across a variety of areas—school performance, behavioral adjustment, and children’s life achievements.

Also included in the model are variables—culture and ethnicity, family income, social support, and parental educational level—that moderate the effects of each of these component, often serving as protective factors.¹ Less studied, but probably critically important as a protective factor for children of single-parent families, is the spiritual and moral guidance provided by the single parent and community members and the availability of additional authority figures outside the home, such as teachers, coaches, and religious or community leaders.

Father Absence

Notably absent from the model and from this entire chapter so far is the term “father absence.” There are three reasons for this. First, not all single-parent families are absent father families, and nearly one fifth of all single-parent families today are father-only families. Second, even in single-mother custodial families, there is often a biological father or social “dad” who contributes to the family. Third, the research on father absence has been long criticized for its reliance on cross-sectional research and for the confounding of father absence with separation and loss as well as family conflict that precedes father absence in the case of divorce, and the selection bias, stress, and financial difficulties that generally accompany father absence in nearly all cases (Weinraub, 1978). Some studies in the 1990s and 2000s tried to adjust for these effects, but most left questions of causal inference.

McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider (2013) investigated the status of father absence effects by reviewing studies published in peer-reviewed journals using innovative research designs to identify the causal effect of father absence. The studies that McLanahan and her colleagues included in their review used a variety of statistical techniques to examine the causal contributions of father absence on development in educational attainment, mental health, relationship formation and stability, and labor force success. (See McLanahan et al., 2013, for a description of difficulties in drawing causal inferences from studies of father absence. Their article also provides a table of findings from father absence studies from 1992 to 2010 included in their review.) Although they found that the effects of father absence were not completely consistent and smaller in size than had been previously assumed, there remained persuasive evidence that father absence influenced high school graduation rates in the United States children’s socioemotional adjustment, and adult mental health. Father absence increased externalizing behavior, with stronger effects for boys and stronger effects when father absence occurred during early childhood than later. In adolescence, McLanahan et al. reported consistent findings that father absence increased risky behavior, such as cigarette smoking, drug use, or alcohol use. Finding mixed or weak effects of father absence on cognitive ability, McLanahan and her colleagues speculated that educational attainment differences may emerge from increasing problem behaviors over time rather than any impaired cognitive ability. Although there was some evidence that children who grew up in divorced families had lower levels of adult employment, there was little consistent evidence in the literature that father absence affected adult children’s subsequent marriage or divorce rates, income or earnings, early childbearing, or the attainment of a college degree. They found little evidence that father absence was differentially affected by ethnicity or social class.

However, McLanahan and her colleagues note that their analysis of the effects of growing up in a single-parent family do not fully take into consideration the effects of parental self-selection. Their finding that divorce seems to have negative effects although widowhood does not can be taken as evidence of parental selection into different types of family situations, a factor that is difficult to account for even in the most sophisticated types of analysis.

Analyses such as these are valuable in pinpointing associations, but they do not tell the full story of the process by which fathers, and their absence, might affect child outcomes. Studies comparing

different types of single-parent families have yielded some useful information about the role of fathers in child development (Parke and Cookston, 2019). Research on children of remarried single-parent families (Acock and Demo, 1994; Amato and Keith, 1991; Vuchinich, Hetherington, Vuchinich, and Clingempeel, 1991; Zimiles and Lee, 1991) showing that children whose mothers have remarried do not necessarily show better psychological adjustment than children whose mothers have not remarried, suggests that the presence of a male figure in the home may not be the critical variable responsible for the at-risk status of single-parent families. Similarly, studies of two-adult households in which one parent is not a father figure (Kellam, Ensminger, and Turner, 1977; Patterson, 1992) indicate that children reared in these households may not differ substantially from those in households in which there is a father, suggesting further that it may not be the father's "genderedness" that is responsible for his important contribution to the family so much as it is his role as a "second," although not second-class, parent. The importance of father's contributions may derive more from his serving as one of two involved, accepting, warm, nurturing caregivers who support each other emotionally and financially more than it derives from the uniqueness of the father's male gender (Weinraub, 1978). Indeed, father absence and father involvement can be a double-edged sword. Taylor and Conger (2014) reported studies that show that under some circumstances and for children of different ages and in different cultures, father involvement can be negative.

Another key to understanding the effects of fathers and their absence comes from a study examining the effects of father absence on child telomere length. Telomeres are the protective nucleoprotein ends of chromosomes thought to reflect cell-functioning and overall health. Shorter end telomeres are associated with cardiovascular disease and cancer in adults and appear to be related to increased stress and reduced immunological functioning. Mitchell et al. (2017) measured telomere length in the nearly 5,000 children in the FFCWS to see whether father loss as a result of incarceration, death, separation, or divorce affected telomere length. Overall, children who had lost their father before 9 years of age had 14% shorter telomeres than children who had not. More specifically, children who lost their father due to death (16% shorter) had the largest association with telomere length, followed by incarceration (10%) and separation and/or divorce (6%). Changes in income partially mediated these effects, and the effects were stronger for boys than girls. There were no differences as a function of ethnicity, but some suggestion that the effects of father absence differed with measures of the child's genotype.

Certainly, biological effects are to be expected when behavioral effects are known to exist. These behavioral changes need to be "housed" in the individual someplace. Nevertheless, finding the specific location of these effects helps us understand the nature of the effects of father absence. These findings—that father absence affects telomere length, a particular biological indicator of health associated with stress and disease outcomes—suggest that father absence affects children, and possibly their mothers, through its association with increasing stress in the child's life. This information suggests that interventions to reduce family stress may serve to counteract concerns regarding the negative effects of the rising number of single-mother families.

Promising Research Directions in Single Parenthood

Research into understanding single parenthood has made great leaps since the last edition of this *Handbook*. Researchers have documented the diversity between and within different types of single-parent families, and they have begun to untangle the complex, dynamic processes—both systemic, psychological, and now biological—associated with different types of single-parent families. Using large and representative samples and sophisticated statistical methods, researchers have begun to tease out the effects of a wide variety of co-occurring variables associated with single parenthood—variables such as poverty, family instability, employment, low-quality childcare—on child outcomes.

Qualitative in-depth interviews and observational studies have helped to flesh out the psychological processes that lay beneath the theoretical and statistical analyses. Now, more research is needed to and identify supports that can help single parents be more effective in raising healthy children and that can help policy makers understand how to best support different types of single parents.

In the hopes of reducing the incidence of single parenthood, researchers from multiple disciplines have examined factors that encourage and maintain marriage. Economists have explored how tax and transfer policies can affect marriage rates in low-income families; educators and sociologists have examined how educational interventions might hold promise for improving the quality and stability of low-income parents' relationship. So far interventions inspired by these research approaches have not proven effective in reducing the incidence of single parenthood. Most observers agree that reducing the incidence of single parenthood will require a range of public policy, and cultural and civic strategies (Haskins, 2015; Wilcox, Wolfinger, and Stokes, 2015); further research into these factors influencing the occurrence and consequences of single parenthood might prove helpful. Efforts directed at reducing the antecedent conditions that lead to single parenthood, such as poverty, low education, and mental health problems and ameliorating the correlates of single parenting, such as stress and reduced social supports may hold the most promise for intervention. In addition, efforts to support parents once they are single parents—with quality infant childcare, pre-K, and after school programs; access to education and training; improved mental health services; and access to public transportation—are likely to provide direct benefits to single parents and their children, enabling parents to provide less stressed parenting and for single parents and their children to have increased educational opportunities.

Conclusion

Understanding the diverse etiology and nature of single-parent families requires consideration of the specific contextual issues and factors confronting these families. These issues and factors may pose significant risks as well as potential benefits to the successful socialization and parenting of children. Single-parent families are a heterogeneous group, and knowing that a parent is single may not be as helpful as knowing the factors that contributed to the parent becoming a single-parent and challenges she or he faces given the parent's specific life circumstances.

Parenting is a difficult process. Parents who face the challenges of parenting without the supportive assistance of, or collaboration with, other concerned and involved adults may find their parenting abilities strained beyond limit. In particular, economic disadvantage, employment, minimal social supports, and physical exhaustion can exact a toll on a single parent's parenting abilities and resources. Poor parental psychological well-being hinders parents' ability to develop and maintain child-directed energy, optimism, and achievement. Primary risks to the development of children living in single-parent homes can derive from an ongoing pattern of stress, exhaustion, depression, and isolation experienced by family members. Economic difficulties, incarceration, chronic illness, and intellectual, academic, or emotional child difficulties place increased stress and demands on single-parent families. If a single-parent is frequently unavailable because she or he is overly stressed, exhausted, or depressed, younger children may be at risk for social withdrawal and depression, and the discipline of older children may be erratic and inconsistently enforced.

Given this myriad of potential difficulties, it is critical to remember that many single parents can and often do rear their children successfully. Decades ago, in a chapter on family variations, Sargent (1992) described what he believed to be central features that led to effective childrearing in single-parent families. He cited emotional support from a social network, secure financial status, quality alternative sources of childcare, capacity to maintain appropriate discipline, capacity to parent when exhausted or overwhelmed, abilities to develop one's own rewarding social life and relationships, and capacity to collaborate effectively in childrearing with other involved adults. These are also the

parenting variables that researchers in the twenty first century have found to be critical in understanding and predicting successful child outcomes.

Single parents are a strikingly diverse group, yet single parents have the same hopes and dreams for their children as their married counterparts do. Despite concerns that the increasing incidence of single-parent families reflects growing disaffection with marriage and two-parent childrearing, there is reason to believe that the rising incidence of single-parent families reflects the high esteem that many parents still hold for the institution of marriage. It may be precisely because of this high regard for the institution of marriage that parents are reluctant to commit to a relationship that does not promise continuity, trust, intimacy, safety, and love. As women see themselves growing more competent and powerful in the workplace, they are less inclined to commit themselves to a marriage in which they are challenged economically and subjugated personally.

The United States and many other Western countries have seen enormous cultural change in how families are created and maintained. No longer does marriage precede childbirth for the majority of families; in some cases, marriage does not happen at all. Policy initiatives to encourage relationship skills and marriage (Hymowitz, Carroll, Wilcox, and Kaye, 2013) have largely failed. Instead, researchers and policy makers are learning that what it takes to rear healthy children may not be a two-parent family, but a community in which parents can earn a decent living wage, provide quality childcare and education, and stable living arrangements in safe neighborhoods for their children. Moynihan was right in pointing out that what families need is access to economic and social equality to ensure that all children have an opportunity to become successful, contributing citizens. The question for researchers and policy makers is whether the community—not simply the marital relationship—can now provide the necessary social, emotional, and economic supports to promote health parenting and child outcomes for all children.

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Note

1. This model builds on the Family Stress Model (FSM; Conger et al., 2010), which describes how economic pressures create parental hardship-related emotions, behaviors, and conflicts that influence parenting and child outcomes and the Family Investment Model (FIM, Conger and Donnellan, 2007), which describes how families with higher socioeconomic status have greater access to money, education, and skills, and social capital (connections to and the status and power of other individuals). For a more specific and detailed description of these models, how factors within the models may interact, and how these models may affect individual differences in risk and resilience within single-mother families, see Taylor and Conger (2014). For research that demonstrates the contribution of each of these components and more information about how they are affected by moderating factors, see Acock and Demo (1994); Conger, Conger, and Martin (2010); Cooper, Osborne, Beck, and McLanahan (2011); Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1994); Kalil and Ryan (2010); Kotchick et al., 2005; Larson and Gillman (1999); Lee and McLanahan (2015); Ryan, Claessens, and Markowitz (2015); Sandstrom and Huerta (2013) and Taylor and Conger (2014, 2017).



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