
Executive Summary

Single Parenthood and Children's Well-Being

About half of all children born today are expected to spend some time in a single parent family before reaching age 18. Recent evidence suggests that children from single parent families do less well, on average, than children who live with both of their parents. These findings do not mean that every child growing up in a single parent family will do worse than a similarly-situated child in a two-parent family. What these findings do mean is that single parenthood increases the odds or the risk that children's well-being will suffer.

Children growing up in a single parent household is a more common occurrence in Wisconsin today than thirty years ago. Of all family households with children, the percentage headed by a married couple declined from 94 percent to 78 percent between 1960 and 1990, while the percentage headed by a single woman rose from 5 percent to 18 percent; during the same time period, the percentage headed by a single man rose from 1 to 4 percent. Thus, the number of married couple families with children in Wisconsin declined by 4 percent from 1960 to 1990, while the number of female-headed families rose by 298 percent in that same period. Since these statistics represent only one point in time, they tend to underrepresent the kaleidoscope of family forms that many children experience single parenthood, cohabitation, marriage, divorce, remarriage, and a subsequent divorce.

Over the 1980s, an increasing percentage of Wisconsin single parents were never married, whereas the proportion of single parents who were separated, divorced, or widowed has declined. Since 1970, the percentage of births to unmarried mothers has grown substantially in Wisconsin, representing 25 percent of the live births in the state in 1991, compared with a national rate of 28 percent. Of the 12 Wisconsin counties that exceeded the statewide average of births to single mothers, almost all were in southeastern or northern Wisconsin. The likelihood that a birth to a teenager will be a nonmarital birth has increased almost continuously since 1960.

Children who live with only one of their parents do less well in school, obtain fewer years of education, and have trouble keeping a steady job as young adults. Children from single parent families are six times more likely to be poor. Daughters of single parents are more likely to bear a child out-of-wedlock, divorce, and receive welfare benefits as young adults. Psychological problems and behavior problems are more likely in offspring from single parent or remarried families. In the majority of families, single parenthood seriously disrupts the relationship between children and the noncustodial parent, usually the father.

With few exceptions, single parenthood appears to disadvantage children regardless of race, ethnicity, social class, or sex. Neither the age of the child nor the type of marital disruption appears to make a difference. While single parenthood

doubles or more than doubles the risk that children's well-being will suffer, it is not the major or the only cause of the problems facing children. Even though the rates of serious problems are more than two to three times greater for children in divorced or remarried homes compared to nondivorced homes, the majority of young people from disrupted families finish high school, do not display high levels of problem behaviors, and enjoy reasonable relationships with their mothers.

Understanding why family instability places some children at greater risk is essential in planning programs and policies to promote healthy children and families. As the growing body of research evidence indicates, there is no single cause for the declining well-being of children in single parent families, but rather many. When greater risks are found, the differences appear to result from economic hardship, loss of parental support and supervision, lack of community resources, parental conflict, and life stress and instability. No single explanation accounts for the differences, and some scientific support exists for each of these perspectives. Thus, programs and policies are most apt to be effective if they are comprehensive and multi-faceted, addressing multiple risk factors.

In the spirit of encouraging debate about the potential consequences of a range of policy strategies, the paper briefly summarizes policy proposals from seven different, sometimes contradictory, sources spanning the political spectrum: Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991); Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986); McLanahan and Sandefur (in press); the National Commission on America's Urban Families (1993); the National Commission on Children (1993a, 1993b); Whitehead (1993); and Zill (1983).

The policy options recommended by these authoritative sources are summarized in six categories: promoting strong stable two-parent families, improving the quality of marriage, providing education for parents, putting children first when parents divorce, increasing the economic security of children, and building community resources for children.

The paper concludes by identifying resources in Wisconsin for locating information on family structure; marriage and family counseling; and church/synagogue-based premarital counseling and marital enrichment programs.