

Experiments in Living:

The Fatherless Family



Rebecca O'Neill SEPTEMBER 2002

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John Stuart Mill famously called for ‘experiments in living’ so that we might learn from one another. For about 30 years we have been conducting such an experiment with the family. The time has now come to appraise the results.

As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so is it that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when any one thinks fit to try them.’

In this passage from *On Liberty* (1859) the nineteenth-century champion of freedom, J.S. Mill, argued that there could be a public benefit in permitting lifestyle experimentation. His reasoning was that, just as we distinguish truth from falsehood by the clash of opinion, so we might learn how to improve human lives by permitting a contest in lifestyles. However, Mill did not expect such experiments to go on forever. ‘It would be absurd,’ he said:

‘to pretend that people ought to live as if nothing whatever had been known in the world before they came into it; as if experience had as yet done nothing towards showing that one mode of existence, or of conduct, is preferable to another.’

In the 1970s and 1980s many people argued that the traditional family – based upon a married biological father and mother and their children – was outdated. Under the guise of ‘freedom of choice’, ‘self-fulfilment’, and ‘equal respect for all kinds of families’, feminists and social rebels led a campaign to experiment with different family structures. Sometimes it was claimed that women and children did not need men, and were, in fact, often better off without them. On occasion it was said that families were not breaking down, they were just changing; that the most important thing for children was their parents’ happiness and self-fulfilment; and that children were resilient and would suffer few negative effects of divorce and family disruption. The idea of ‘staying together for the children’s sake’ was often derided. Some parents embraced the new thinking, but

not all of those who took part in the ‘fatherless family experiment’ were willing subjects. As the idea that mothers and children did not need fathers took hold, many social and legal supports for marriage weakened. Some mothers and children were simply abandoned. Some fathers were pushed away.

Mill’s argument formed part of his wider case for avoiding social control unless the interests of other people were harmed. People were entitled to act on their own opinions ‘without hindrance, either physical or moral, from their fellow-men’ so long as it was ‘at their own risk and peril’. This last proviso, he said, was ‘of course indispensable’. He insisted that:

‘When ... a person is led to violate a distinct and assignable obligation to any other person or persons, the case is taken out of the self-regarding class, and becomes amenable to moral disapprobation in the proper sense of the term.’

He specifically mentions the responsibility of a father for his children:

‘If, for example, a man, through intemperance or extravagance, becomes unable to pay his debts, or, having undertaken the moral responsibility of a family, becomes from the same cause incapable of supporting or educating them, he is deservedly reprobated, and might be justly punished; but it is for the breach of duty to his family or creditors, not for the extravagance.’

After three decades of experimenting with the fatherless family, we are now in a position to evaluate the results.

The Experiment

Fewer children live with both their mother and their father

The proportion of all households comprising a mother and father with dependent children fell from 38% in 1961 to 23% in 2001, while the percentage of lone-parent households tripled over the same period, from 2% to 6%.¹

- From the child's viewpoint: 80% of dependent children live in two-parent families (including 6% who live in step-families). Another 18% live with lone mothers, and 2% with lone fathers. In 1972, 92% of children lived in two-parent families.²
- According to analysis of British Household Panel Survey data, 40% of all mothers will spend some time as a lone parent.³
- More people are living alone. Between 1961 and 2001, the proportion of one-person households doubled from 14% to 30%. This figure is estimated to increase to 35% by 2021.⁴

Routes into the fatherless family

The increase in the number and proportion of lone-parent households occurred in part due to increased divorce. At the same time, other social changes were occurring. Fewer people married, and more chose to cohabit before or instead of marrying. More children were born outside marriage. These changes created several routes into fatherless households.

Divorce

The Divorce Reform Act of 1969 was followed by a spike of divorces, representing a backlog of several thousand couples who possibly had already decided to divorce. However, from 1974, the number of divorces began a gradual increase and peaked in 1993 at 180,000 in the UK. Although the actual number of divorces annually has dropped to 142,000 in 2000, this is mainly due to decreasing marriage. The annual rate of divorce has hovered around 13 per thousand married population throughout the 1990s.⁵

From the child's viewpoint: Throughout the 1990s, about 55% of divorces involved a child under age 16.⁶ Twenty-five percent of children whose parents divorced in 2000 were under age five. Seventy percent were ten years old or younger.⁷ Overall, 36% of children born to married parents are likely to experience their parents' divorce by the time they reach age 16.⁸

Births outside marriage

For most of the twentieth century, the percentage of births outside marriage hovered around 5%. Starting in the 1960s, the proportion began to increase gradually, reaching 10% in 1975, after which it began to increase more quickly. By 2000, the proportion of births outside marriage had quadrupled to 40%.⁹

Changes in Marriage and Cohabitation

Numbers and rates of first marriages have fallen drastically. The number of first marriages fell from 300,000 in 1961 to 180,000 in 2000. The rate of first marriages has fallen from 83 per thousand single

Figure 1: Marriages and Divorces, United Kingdom, 1961–1999

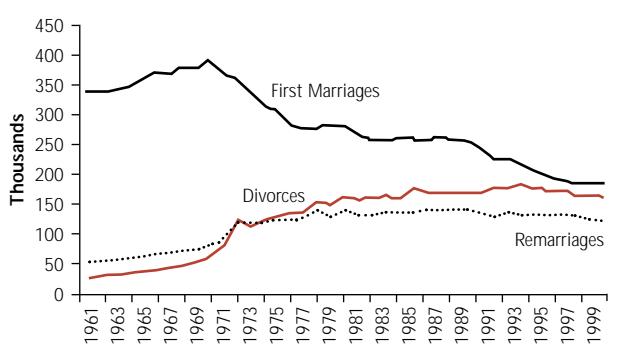
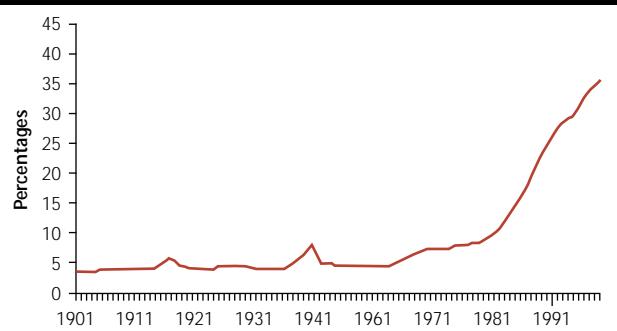


Figure 2: Births outside of marriage as a percentage of all births, United Kingdom, 1901–2000



women in 1961 to 33 per thousand in 2000. For men, the rate has fallen from 75 per thousand in 1961 to 26 per thousand in 2000.

Although the number of re-marriages has increased from 19,000 for men in 1961 to 75,000 in 2000 and from 18,000 to 36,000 for women, the rates have fallen sharply over the same period from 163 per thousand divorced population to 42 per thousand for men and from 97 per thousand to 36 per thousand for women.¹⁰

Marriage and re-marriage are increasingly being preceded or replaced by cohabiting unions. The proportion of single women in cohabiting relationships doubled from 13% in 1986 to 25% in 1999.¹¹ Cohabiting unions currently make up 70% of first partnerships.¹² Although cohabiting recently has become more socially acceptable, these types of unions tend to be fragile. Cohabitations last an average of two years before dissolving or being converted to marriage. Of cohabiting couples who do not marry, only about 18% survive at least ten years (compared to 75% of couples who marry).¹³

It is true that the percentage of children born to unpartnered mothers has remained about the same. In 2001, 7.3% of all births were registered solely to the mother (this represents 19% of all non-marital births). Another 7.3% of all births were jointly registered by the mother and the father, but the parents did not share the same address (this represents 19% of all non-marital births). Finally, 25.3% of all births were jointly registered with the mother and the father sharing the same address (these births to cohabiting couples represent 63% of all non-marital births)¹⁴ [see Figure 3]. So, many non-marital births actually occur within cohabiting partnerships. However, cohabiting unions are at much greater risk of dissolution, especially if they produce children.

Figure 3: Births in England and Wales, 2001

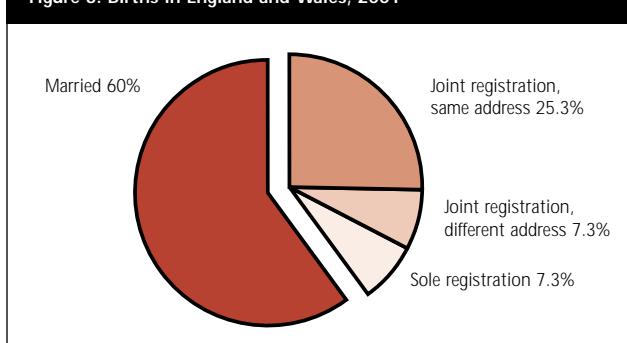
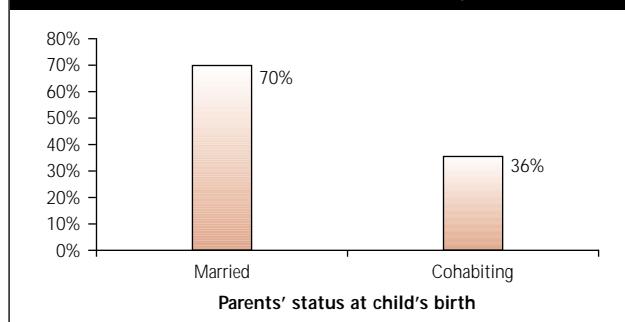


Figure 4: Percentage of children born in 1997 likely to live their entire childhood with both natural parents



So, when talking about cohabiting parents, the two important statistics to keep in mind are the following:

- Cohabitation is one of the main routes into lone parenthood. Between 15% and 25% of all lone-parent families are created through the break-up of cohabitating unions.¹⁵
- Children born into married unions are estimated to be twice as likely as those born into cohabiting unions to spend their entire childhood with both natural parents (70% versus 36%). [see Figure 4]¹⁶

Cohabiting step-families are also on the increase. One in fourteen children is likely to live in an informal step-family at some time before their seventeenth birthday. The cohabiting man in these cases has neither a biological nor a legal tie to the lone mother's child.¹⁷

Is the married two-parent family a thing of the past?

Most people still believe in the ideal of marriage and do, in fact, get married

- Over 50% of the adult population are married currently.¹⁸
- According to the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), nearly 75% of childless cohabiting couples under the age of 35 expect to marry each other at some point in the future.¹⁹
- It is estimated that nearly 90% of women born in the 1960s will marry by the time they reach the age of 45.²⁰
- Nine out of ten teenagers under age 16 want to get married. In a survey of over 2,000 students aged 13–15, only 4% agreed with the statement that 'marriage is old-fashioned and no longer relevant'.²¹ Adults throughout Europe share this view. Surveys by the Economic Commission for Europe found that 85%–90% of adults rejected the notion that marriage is old-fashioned.²²

The Results: How does the Fatherless Family Affect Adults, Children and Society?

NB: Indirect Effects, Selection Effects and Policy Implications

It has long been recognised that children growing up in lone-mother households are more likely to have emotional, academic, and financial problems and are more likely to engage in behaviour associated with social exclusion, such as offending, teenage pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse or worklessness.

It can be difficult to disentangle the many factors and processes that contribute to these increased risks. For example, children from lone-mother households tend to experience more poverty than children from two-parent families. Observers might therefore ask whether poor outcomes are more the result of living in lone-mother households per se, or whether they are more the result of other factors, such as living in poverty, which may have been caused or worsened by living in a lone-mother family. In this case, some of the effects of lone-parenthood operate indirectly through a kind of chain reaction causing poverty, which in turn causes other problems. These factors contribute to what are known as *indirect effects*.

It has also been pointed out that some of the factors which tend to coincide with living in a lone-mother household, such as poverty, may have existed prior to the break up of the parents' marriage or cohabiting union or, in the case of unpartnered mothers, prior to the birth of the child. In other words, some of the negative outcomes experienced by children and adults who live in lone-mother households might have occurred even if the parents had maintained an intact family household. It also has been argued that lone-mother households might have been formed due to negative situations such as domestic violence or other forms of conflict.

In these cases, some of the poor outcomes experienced by those who live in lone-parent households might be the result of having lived with conflict before the family dissolution. Families with existing problems and disadvantages might be 'selected into' lone-parent families. On the other hand, people who have had many advantages such as a stable and loving family background, economic security, and good education may be more likely to marry and maintain a parental partnership than those who had fewer advantages. Observers might ask whether positive outcomes in these cases are due more to the pre-existing advantages which were selected into stable two-parent families or more to benefits conferred by marriage itself. These factors contribute to what are known as *selection effects*.

Social scientists use special study designs and statistical methods to measure indirect and selection effects. Both types of effect are real, and they do play important roles in many outcomes. However, in most cases, they do not explain all of the increased risks associated with living in lone-mother households. This has important policy implications, because, even if all lone-mother households were brought above the poverty line, they would still have increased risks of some problems.

So, comparing the proportion of people from different family structures who experience various problems does provide a good picture of how people are really living. By exploring and controlling for the role of indirect effects and selection effects, social scientists can help explain how problems occur and perhaps help to devise solutions to problems. In this factsheet, we have tried to include both types of data, whenever they are available.

Lone mothers

Are poorer

- Lone mothers are twice as likely as two-parent families to live in poverty at any one time (69% of lone mothers are in the bottom 40% of household income versus 34% of couples with children).²³
- Lone parents have twice as much risk of experiencing persistent low income (spending three out of four years in the bottom 30% of household income) as couples with children – 50% versus 22%.²⁴
- Lone parents are more than twice as likely as couples with children to have no savings (68% versus 28%).²⁵
- Lone parents are eight times as likely to live in a workless household as couples with children (45% versus 5.4%).²⁶
- Lone parent households are over twelve times as likely to be receiving income support as couples with dependent children (51% versus 4%). They are 2.5 times as likely to be receiving working families tax credit (24% versus 9%).²⁷

Are more likely to suffer from stress, depression, and other emotional and psychological problems

- At the age of 33, divorced and never-married mothers were 2.5 times more likely than married mothers to experience high levels of psychological distress. Even after accounting for financial hardship, prior psychological distress, and other demographic factors, lone mothers were still 1.4 times more likely to have psychological distress.²⁸
- Lone mothers are seven times as likely to report problems with their 'nerves', even after controlling for other demographic factors.²⁹

Have more health problems

- Results from the British General Household Survey show that, even after controlling for demographic and socioeconomic circumstances, lone mothers still have significantly poorer health than partnered mothers for four out of five health variables.³⁰
- Divorced women have death rates which are 21% higher on average than those of married women. Death rates for divorced women aged 25 and older range from 35%-58% higher than those of married women of the same age.³¹

May have more problems interacting with their children

- Young people in lone-parent families were 30% more likely than those in two-parent families to report that their parents rarely or never knew where they were.³²
- After controlling for other demographic factors, lone parents were
 - 2.25 times more likely to report their child's behaviour was upsetting to them.
 - 30% more likely to report significant arguments with their children.
 - 60% more likely to expect too much or have too high expectations of their child.³³

Non-resident biological fathers

Are at risk of losing contact with their children

- Twenty to thirty percent of non-resident fathers have not seen their children in the last year. Another 20%-40% see their children less than once per week.³⁴

Are more likely to have health problems and engage in high-risk behaviour

- Divorced men aged 20 to 60 have 70%-100% higher rates of death than married men.³⁵
- In a population of young adults, divorced men and women were twice as likely to increase their drinking compared to those who remained married. In this case, there was virtually no selection effect. In other words, heavy drinking did not lead to divorce. Rather, divorce led to heavy drinking.³⁶
- Divorced non-residential fathers were significantly more likely to smoke marijuana and to drive a car after drinking alcohol.³⁷
- Divorced men reported the highest rates of unsafe sex, with 15.7% reporting both multiple partners and lack of condom use in the previous year, compared with 3% of married men, 10.4% of cohabiting men, and 9.6% of single men.³⁸

Children living without their biological fathers

Are more likely to live in poverty and deprivation

- Children living in lone-parent households are twice as likely to be in the bottom 40% of household income distribution compared with children living in two-parent households (75% versus 40%).³⁹

- Even after controlling for low incomes, children growing up with never-married lone mothers are especially disadvantaged according to standard scales of deprivation.⁴⁰
- After controlling for other demographic factors, children in lone-parent households are still 2.8 times as likely to forego family outings.⁴¹

Are more likely to have emotional or mental problems

- After controlling for other demographic factors, children in lone-parent households are 2.5 times as likely to be sometimes or often unhappy. They are 3.3 times as likely to score poorly on measures of self-esteem.⁴²
- Among children aged five to fifteen years in Great Britain, those from lone-parent families were twice as likely to have a mental health problem as those from intact two-parent families (16% versus 8%).⁴³
- A major longitudinal study of 1,400 American families found that 20%-25% of children of divorce showed lasting signs of depression, impulsivity (risk-taking), irresponsibility, or antisocial behaviour compared with 10% of children in intact two-parent families.⁴⁴

Have more trouble in school

- Children from lone-parent families are more likely to score poorly on tests of reading, mathematics, and thinking skills.⁴⁵
- After controlling for other demographic factors, children from lone-parent households were
 - 3.3 times more likely to report problems with their academic work, and
 - 50% more likely to report difficulties with teachers.⁴⁶

Tend to have more trouble getting along with others

- After controlling for other demographic factors, children from lone-parent households are three times as likely to report problems with friendships.⁴⁷
- Children from lone-parent households are more likely to have behaviour problems or engage in antisocial behaviour.⁴⁸

- Boys from lone-parent households are more likely to show hostility to adults and other children, and be destructive of belongings.⁴⁹

Have higher risk of health problems

- It has been estimated that parental divorce increases children's risk of developing health problems by 50%.⁵⁰
- In England and Wales during 2000, the sudden infant death rate for babies jointly registered by unmarried parents living at different addresses was over three times greater than for babies born to a married mother and father (0.66 per 1,000 live births as compared with 0.18). Where the birth was registered in the sole name of the mother, the rate of sudden infant death was seven times greater than for those born within marriage (1.27 per 1,000 live births as compared with 0.18).⁵¹
- After controlling for other demographic factors, children living in lone-parent households were 1.8 times as likely to have psychosomatic health symptoms and illness such as pains, headaches, stomach aches, and feeling sick.⁵²

Are at greater risk of suffering physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.

- According to data from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), young people are five times more likely to have experienced physical abuse and emotional maltreatment if they grew up in a lone-parent family, compared with children in two-birth-parent families.⁵³
- All studies of child-abuse victims which look at family type identify the step-family as representing the highest risk to children⁵⁴ – with the risk of fatal abuse being 100 times higher than in two-biological-parent families according to international experts Daly and Wilson, drawing on US data from 1976.⁵⁵ However, the use of the term step-father has become problematic, as, whilst it used to refer to men who were married to women with children by other men, it is now used to describe any man in the household, whether married to the mother or not. An NSPCC study of 1988 which separated married step-fathers from unmarried cohabiting men found that married step-fathers were less likely to abuse: 'for *natural* fathers marriage appears to be associated with a greater commitment to the father role'.⁵⁶

- Analysis of 35 cases of fatal abuse which were the subject of public inquiries between 1968 and 1987 showed a risk for children living with their mother and an unrelated man which was over 70 times higher than it would have been for a child with two married biological parents.⁵⁷

Are more likely to run away from home

- Children from lone-parent families are twice as likely to run away from home as those from two-birth-parent families (14% compared to 7%).⁵⁸

Teenagers living without their biological fathers

Are more likely to experience problems with sexual health

- According to the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, children from lone-parent households were more likely to have had intercourse before the age of 16 when compared with children from two-natural-parent households. Boys were 1.8 times as likely (42.3% versus 23%) and girls were 1.5 times as likely (36.5% versus 23.6%). After controlling for socio-economic status, level of communication with parents, educational levels and age at menarche for girls, the comparative odds of under-age sex actually increased to 2.29 for boys and 1.65 for girls.
- Compared to young adults from two-natural-parent households, young men from lone-parent households were 1.8 times as likely to have foregone contraception at first intercourse (13.6% versus 7.5%) and young women were 1.75 times as likely (16.1% versus 9.2%). After controlling for other factors, these comparative odds were reduced to 1.11 for men and 1.23 for women.
- Girls from lone-parent households were 1.6 times as likely to become mothers before the age of 18 (11% versus 6.8%). Controlling for other factors did not reduce the comparative odds.⁵⁹

Are more likely to become teenage parents

- Analysis of data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS) indicated that women whose parents had divorced were twice as likely to become teenage mothers as those from intact families (25% versus 14%). Men from divorced families were 1.8 times more likely to become

fathers by the age of 22 than men from intact families (23% versus 13%). After controlling for childhood poverty and behavioural and educational problems, the odds for teenage motherhood and early fatherhood were reduced to 1.4. This means that children of divorce were still 40% more likely to become parents early, even after considering other family background factors.⁶⁰

Are more likely to offend

- Children aged 11 to 16 years were 25% more likely to have offended in the last year if they lived in lone-parent families.⁶¹
- Young men from lone-parent families were 1.6 times as likely to be persistent offenders as those from two-natural-parent families. The effects of living in lone-parent families seem to operate indirectly, through reduced levels of parental supervision.⁶²
- In focus group discussions, young people in prisons spoke frequently about disruption in their family lives and about their fathers' absence. One discussion went as follows:

Interviewer: 'I've just realised we've spent the whole time and nobody's talked about dads.'

Teenager 1: 'That's because there's no dads to talk about!'

Teenager 2: 'We don't need dads, at the end of the day a child needs its mum.'⁶³

Another young woman said:

'...where I used to live...it's like a rough, nasty area and you just see mums with six children, three kids, their boyfriend, not a dad. Kids grow up and they grudge other families...' ⁶⁴

Are more likely to smoke

- In a sample of teenagers living in the West of Scotland, 15-year-olds from lone-parent households were twice as likely to be smokers as those from two-birth-parent homes (29% compared to 15%). After controlling for poverty, they were still 50% more likely to smoke.⁶⁵
- In a sample of British 16-year-olds, those living in lone-parent households were 1.5 times as likely to smoke. Controlling for sex, household income, time spent with family, and relationship with parents, actually increased the odds that a teenager from a lone-parent family would smoke (to 1.8 times as likely).⁶⁶

Are more likely to drink alcohol

- In the West of Scotland, 18-year-old girls from lone-parent households were twice as likely to drink heavily as those from intact two-birth-parent homes (17.6% compared to 9.2%). This finding holds even after controlling for poverty.⁶⁷
- British 16-year-olds from lone-parent households are no more likely to drink than those from intact households. This is mainly because higher levels of teenage drinking actually are associated with higher family incomes. After controlling for household income and sex, teenagers from lone-parent families were 40% more likely to drink.⁶⁸

Are more likely to take drugs

- At age 15, boys from lone-parent households were twice as likely as those from intact two-birth-parent households to have taken any drugs (22.4% compared with 10.8%). Girls from lone-parent homes were 25% more likely to have taken drugs by the age of 15 (8.2% compared with 6.5%) and 70% more likely to have taken drugs by age 18 (33.3% compared with 19.6%). After controlling for poverty, teenagers from lone-parent homes were still 50% more likely to take drugs.⁶⁹

Are more likely to play truant from school

- After controlling for social class, level of parental supervision, attachment to family, whether peers and siblings were in trouble with the police and standard of work at school, boys in lone-parent households were still 2.7 times more likely to truant than those from two-natural-parent households.⁷⁰

Are more likely to be excluded from school

- Children living with a lone mother are three times more likely than those in two-parent families to be excluded from school (15.6% versus 4.8%).⁷¹

Are more likely to leave school at 16

- Sixteen-year-olds from lone-parent households are twice as likely to leave school with no qualifications as those from intact families. Most studies have found that most or all of this increased risk occurs because lone-parent families generally are poorer, which in itself has a strong association with poor educational outcomes.⁷²

Are more likely to have adjustment problems

- In one American study, adolescents whose parents divorced tended to have increased levels of externalising problems (aggressive and delinquent behaviour) and internalising problems (emotional distress, such as depression). In most cases, this was due to a reduction in the quality of the mother's parenting. In addition, reductions in the level of father's involvement were associated with increases in boys' aggression and delinquent behaviour. Girls' increased anti-social behaviour was explained in large part by post-divorce conflict between parents. For boys, parental divorce was associated with an increase in likelihood of depression, even accounting for other factors. The authors conclude that it might be that 'parental divorce tends to be inherently depressing for boys.'⁷³

Young adults who grew up not living with their biological fathers

Are less likely to attain qualifications

- Analysis of the National Child Development Study (NCDS) found that children from disrupted families were twice as likely to have no qualifications by the time they were 33 years old (20% versus 11% from intact families). Some of the differences in these results are due to the strong association of divorce with higher levels of poverty and behavioural problems for children. However, parental divorce during childhood also seems to have an impact in some areas which is not fully explained by those types of childhood problems. For example, after controlling for financial hardship, behaviour problems, social class and educational tests during childhood, women whose parents divorced were still 11% more likely to have no qualifications. For men, controlling for the effects of childhood problems had little effect on their reduced chances of attaining high levels of qualifications. The interactions of parental divorce and other childhood problems and how they affect the education of young adults are quite complicated. The author of this study summarised the results this way: 'poverty and behavioural problems are important factors in reducing educational success and parental divorce can amplify both.'⁷⁴ Analyses of other studies have shown that most or all of the differences in educational attainment are significantly associated with poverty.⁷⁵

Are more likely to experience unemployment

■ At age 33, men from disrupted family backgrounds were twice as likely to be unemployed (14% compared with 7%), and 1.6 times as likely to have experienced more than one bout of unemployment since leaving school (23% compared with 14%). Again, the reasons for the differences in these risk levels are complicated. Some of the difference seems to be due to poverty and behaviour problems that existed before the divorce and persisted or deepened afterward. However, even after controlling for these factors, men whose parents divorced were still 1.4 times as likely to be unemployed and 1.3 times as likely to have experienced more than one bout of unemployment during adulthood.⁷⁶

Are more likely to have low incomes

■ For women, the effects of parental divorce on income are complicated by the fact that parental divorce tends to increase the odds of early childbearing, which in turn reduces the likelihood that women will be employed. Women from disrupted families had median incomes that were 20% lower than those who grew up in two-parent families (£86 per week compared with £104). They were 30% more likely to be in the lowest quartile of net family incomes (32% compared with 25%). After controlling for early childbearing (which itself seems to be linked to parental divorce), women from disrupted families were still 13% less likely to be in the upper quartile of individual earnings and 20% more likely to be in the lowest quartile of family incomes.⁷⁷

Are more likely be on income support

■ Women from disrupted families were 1.3 times as likely to be on income support at age 33 (11% compared with 8%).⁷⁸

Are more likely to experience homelessness

■ Young adults from disrupted families are 1.7 times more likely to have experienced homelessness (6.2% compared with 3.6%). For women, all of this effect is due to the fact that children from divorced households have a higher likelihood of experiencing poverty in childhood, which is also related to homelessness in adulthood. However, for men, all the difference in level of risk may be attributable to the divorce during early childhood, rather than poverty or other problems experienced in childhood.⁷⁹

Are more likely to be caught offending and go to jail

■ Although 20% of all dependent children live in lone-parent families, 70% of young offenders identified by Youth Offending Teams come from lone-parent families.⁸⁰

■ American studies have shown that boys from one-parent homes were twice as likely as those from two-birth-parent families to be incarcerated by the time they reached their early 30s.⁸¹

Are more likely to suffer from long term emotional and psychological problems.

■ In one American study, 20%-25% of children of divorce experienced long-term emotional or behavioural problems compared to 10% of children whose parents remained married.⁸²

■ Another study found that 11% of young adults whose parents had divorced had seven or more symptoms of emotional distress; only 8% who grew up in intact two-parent families did.⁸³

■ One study, which followed 100 children of divorce through 25 years, found that, while the divorced parents may have felt liberated, many of their children suffered emotionally.⁸⁴

Are more likely to develop health problems

■ A Swedish study found that children of single-parent families were 30% more likely to die over the 16-year study period. After controlling for poverty, children from single-parent families were: 70% more likely to have circulatory problems, 56% more likely to show signs of mental illness, 27% more likely to report chronic aches and pains, and 26% more likely to rate their health as poor.⁸⁵

■ NCDS data indicate that parental divorce during childhood increased the odds of young adults engaging in heavy and/or problem drinking. The link was weak when measured at age 23, but was strong by age 33. Controlling for possible mediating factors such as marital status or socio-economic circumstances did not substantially reduce the effects.⁸⁶

■ In a sample of young women who had had intercourse before age 18, those from lone-parent households were 1.4 times as likely to have had a sexually transmitted infection by age 24 (14.3% versus 10.2%). Controlling for other factors slightly increased the comparative odds to 1.53.⁸⁷

- Children of divorce lived an average of four years less in one sample of white middle-class Americans.⁸⁸

Tend to enter partnerships earlier and more often as a cohabitation

- NCDS data indicate that men from disrupted families were 1.7 times as likely and women 2.2 times as likely to enter their first union (marriage or cohabitation) as teenagers. Controlling for poverty and other problems in childhood reduced these odds to 1.6 and 1.66 respectively. For women, it is likely that the influence of parental divorce on early partnering operates mainly through increased risks of earlier sexual activity.⁸⁹
- Women were 1.7 times as likely to cohabit before or instead of marrying in their first partnership if they came from a disrupted family. Men were 1.7 times as likely to cohabit before marrying and twice as likely to cohabit instead of marrying. Controlling for poverty and other childhood problems did not reduce the effects that parental divorce had on children's preference for cohabiting.⁹⁰

Are more likely to divorce or dissolve their cohabiting unions

- The risk of partnership dissolution (including break-up of cohabiting unions as well as divorce)

for men from disrupted families was 1.9 times higher and for women was 1.5 times higher than for those who had intact family backgrounds. These effects did not seem to operate through the experiences of childhood problems, but rather through the propensity of adults – especially women – who experienced parental divorce in childhood to enter partnerships earlier, which in turn increased the likelihood of partnership dissolution. However, even after controlling for early age at first partnership, men from disrupted families were still 30% more likely to have dissolved their first partnership.⁹¹

Are more likely to have children outside marriage or outside any partnership

- Men and women from disrupted families were twice as likely to have their first child outside marriage or a cohabiting union than those who grew up in intact two-parent families (12.6% versus 6.6% for women and 7.1% versus 4% for men). The increased risk of having children outside any union operates in large part because children from disrupted families are more likely to have their first child at an earlier age, which in turn increases the risk of having children outside a partnership. Some of the risk also occurs through the increased risk of childhood problems, especially for women.⁹²

Effects on the Social Fabric

Disruptions in family life certainly have had an impact upon the men, women and children directly involved. However, it is increasingly the case that changes in patterns of family structure also have an effect on the larger society. It is difficult to disentangle which are causes and which are effects, but it is possible to explore some of the social changes associated with changes in family life that have occurred over recent decades.

Increased crime and violence

Over the past several decades, rates of crime have increased at the same time as rates of divorce, non-marital childbearing, and lone parenthood have increased. The relationship between crime and family

environment is complicated, especially when the role of poverty is also considered. To say that one has caused the others would be too simplistic. However, many scholars and policy makers who study crime have identified family breakdown as one among a cluster of disadvantages which are associated with criminal activity and with chronic reoffending.⁹³

- An American study found that juvenile offending was affected not just by whether a particular child's parents were married, but also by the prevalent family structures in his neighbourhood. It has been suggested that this might be the case because two-parent families are better able to monitor anti-social behaviour which often leads to more serious crime.⁹⁴

- A review of 17 developed nations indicated that nations with higher rates of births outside marriage, teenage parenthood, and divorce also had higher rates of child homicide.⁹⁵
- Many prisoners lack strong family ties, which makes rehabilitation and re-integration into the community more difficult. For example, prisoners have twice the proportion of divorce as the general population (9% versus 4%). And, although only 9% of all women in the general population are lone mothers, more than twice that proportion of women prisoners were lone mothers when they were imprisoned.⁹⁶

Decreased community ties

Recent research has identified community involvement as a good measure of social capital, a term which encompasses the many resources available to people through their social networks.

- Analysis of General Household Survey data shows that two-parent families are more likely to be involved with their local communities than lone-parent families. Even after controlling for education, socio-economic group and employment status, two-parent families are 25% more likely to be neighbours, and 50% more likely to have people willing to help them if they are ill, need a lift or need to borrow money compared with lone-parent families. This relative lack of reciprocal care in lone-parent households occurs despite the finding that they actually are likely to have more friends and relatives living close by compared to two-parent families.⁹⁷

A growing divorce culture

There is disagreement as to whether liberalisation of divorce laws caused increased rates of divorce, or whether legal reform was a response to increased demand for divorce. The truth probably is some combination of these hypotheses. However, the fact that divorce has been firmly established as an option for married couples can actually have an impact on people's behaviour.

- American studies have indicated that married couples who adopt favourable attitudes toward divorce end up experiencing reductions in the

quality of their marriage (which can then lead to divorce). This means that, more often, the acceptance of divorce as an option precedes erosion of marital quality, rather than following it as a response.⁹⁸

- The increase in rates of cohabitation, both for first-time partnerships and for re-partnerships, has been linked in part to a desire to avoid divorce by having a 'trial' marriage or by avoiding legal ties altogether.⁹⁹

Cycle of fatherlessness

There have been many historical periods in which children lived part or all of their lives without their fathers. These fathers were absent due to work or military obligations or died before their children reached adulthood.

A more recent trend involves more fathers deserting or being pushed out of their families, or their influence being reduced due to non-residence. In some families, this pattern has reproduced itself over several generations and has become the norm. Often, these families also live in areas of economic deprivation, high crime rates and low expectations. Within this environment, it has become easier and more acceptable to avoid integrating fathers into family life. These families have been described by some as 'the underclass' and by others as the 'socially excluded'.¹⁰⁰

Dependence on state welfare

The trend toward increasing numbers of lone-parent families has co-existed with increasing levels of dependence on state welfare. Several analysts of these two trends have argued that the changes in family structure have driven the increases in welfare dependence. Others have argued that they are mutually reinforcing.¹⁰¹

In 1971, 7% of the adult population of Great Britain was dependent upon welfare. That percentage increased gradually to peak at 13% in 1992. Since 1996, the percentage has dropped off slightly and is now at 10%. These changes occurred as the proportion of lone-parent households increased from 3% in 1971 to 6% in 2001.¹⁰²

Why all these Effects?

Poverty

Many of the poor outcomes associated with disrupted family backgrounds can be explained in part by the poverty or reduced income levels that occur around divorce, separation, and lone parenthood. In some cases, up to 50% of the observed differences between children from different backgrounds can be thus explained. Poverty tends to explain more of the risks associated with educational and employment outcomes than those related to partnering and parenting behaviour.

Poverty generally is defined by household income level, but there usually is much more involved than just low income. Low income can be a proxy for a number of other factors that cluster together such as poor health, high levels of unemployment, high crime rates, unsafe neighbourhoods, low quality schools and other community resources, and low expectations. Moreover, many studies that measure and control for poverty do not measure other important factors such as the quality of parenting or the level of conflict in the home. Poverty is a serious problem, but it does not explain everything. Recent research has shown that, for many outcomes, except in cases of severe poverty, the amount of money parents have is less important than how they spend it.¹⁰³

Reduced parental and paternal attention

Many of the problems associated with fatherlessness seem to be related to reduced parental attention and social resources.¹⁰⁴ Certainly, a child living without his or her father will receive less attention than a child living with both parents. This difference in amount of attention is key, but differences in the type of parental attention are also important.

Recent scholarship has emphasised the important role played by fathers.

- Social psychologists have found that fathers influence their children's short and long-term development through several routes:
 - financial capital (using income to provide food, clothing, and shelter as well as resources that contribute to learning),
 - human capital (sharing the benefits of and providing a model of their education, skills, and work ethic), and
 - social capital (sharing the benefits of relationships).¹⁰⁵

More specifically,

- The co-parental relationship of mother and father provides children with a model of adults working together, communicating, negotiating, and compromising. This dyadic resource also helps parents present a united authority, which appears much less arbitrary to children than one authority figure.
- The parent/child relationship: Studies indicate that a father can contribute *uniquely* to the development of his children *independently* of the mother's contribution. In other words, in areas such as emotional intelligence, self-esteem, competence, and confidence, the father's influence cannot be duplicated or replaced easily by the mother, no matter how good a mother she is (note that mothers wield similar unique and independent influence in other areas, such as some behaviour problems).¹⁰⁶ Other studies indicate that fathers can be especially important in cases where families are experiencing difficulties, such as poverty, frequent moving, or where children have learning disorders.¹⁰⁷

Conditions before, during and after divorce

Parental divorce or separation can be thought of in terms of an 'event', important in its own right and because it leads to many changes. Separation can also be thought of as part of a 'process' which begins before separation and should be considered within that

context. A consensus is developing that all of these aspects are important.¹⁰⁸ However, divorce and separation are experienced differently by adults and children. What can seem like a ‘good divorce’ to adults can feel very different for children. In the absence of high levels of conflict, children are often not aware that their parents are experiencing difficulties. For these children, the divorce or separation itself can be problematic. It is even possible that children will be more affected by conflict created by the separation and continuing afterwards than they were when their parents were together.¹⁰⁹

There are two categories of children most at risk for future psychological problems:

- (1) those who grow up with parents who stay married, but remain conflicted and hostile, and
- (2) those whose parents are in a low conflict marriage and divorce anyway.¹¹⁰

■ More than half of divorces occur in low-conflict marriages – what can be called ‘good enough’ marriages – which have a high potential for being salvaged (in one study, 64% of the couples who said they were unhappy, but stayed together and worked on their relationship, reported being happy five years later).¹¹¹ Divorces in these low-conflict marriages can be very damaging to children.¹¹²

Evaluating the Results

The weight of evidence indicates that the traditional family based upon a married father and mother is still the best environment for raising children, and it forms the soundest basis for the wider society.

For many mothers, fathers and children, the ‘fatherless family’ has meant poverty, emotional heartache, ill health, lost opportunities, and a lack of stability. The social fabric – once considered flexible

enough to incorporate all types of lifestyles – has been stretched and strained. Although a good society should tolerate people’s right to live as they wish, it must also hold adults responsible for the consequences of their actions. To do this, society must not shrink from evaluating the results of these actions. As J.S. Mill argued, a good society must share the lessons learnt from its experience and hold up ideals to which all can aspire.

‘Human beings owe to each other help to distinguish the better from the worse, and encouragement to choose the former and avoid the latter. They should be forever stimulating each other to increased exercise of their higher faculties and increased direction of their feelings and aims towards wise instead of foolish, elevating instead of degrading, objects and contemplations.’

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859

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Summary

The Experiment

- Fewer children live with both their mother and their father
- Routes into the fatherless family
 - Divorce
 - Births outside marriage
 - Changes in marriage and cohabitation
- Is the married two-parent family a thing of the past?
 - Most people still believe in the ideal of marriage and do, in fact, get married

The Results: How does the Fatherless Family Affect Adults, Children and Society?

- Lone mothers
 - Are poorer
 - Are more likely to suffer from stress, depression, and other emotional and psychological problems
 - Have more health problems
 - May have more problems interacting with their children
- Non-resident biological fathers
 - Are at risk of losing contact with their children
 - Are more likely to have health problems and engage in high-risk behaviour
- Children living without their biological fathers
 - Are more likely to live in poverty and deprivation
 - Have more trouble in school
 - Tend to have more trouble getting along with others
 - Have higher risk of health problems
 - Are at greater risk of suffering physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.
 - Are more likely to run away from home
- Teenagers living without their biological fathers
 - Are more likely to experience problems with sexual health
 - Are more likely to become teenage parents
 - Are more likely to offend
 - Are more likely to smoke
 - Are more likely to drink alcohol

- Are more likely to take drugs
- Are more likely to play truant from school
- Are more likely to be excluded from school
- Are more likely to leave school at 16
- Are more likely to have adjustment problems
- Young adults who grew up not living with their biological fathers
 - Are less likely to attain qualifications
 - Are more likely to experience unemployment
 - Are more likely to have low incomes
 - Are more likely be on income support
 - Are more likely to experience homelessness
 - Are more likely to be caught offending and go to jail
 - Are more likely to suffer from long term emotional and psychological problems.
 - Are more likely to develop health problems
 - Tend to enter partnerships earlier and more often as a cohabitation
 - Are more likely to divorce or dissolve their cohabiting unions
 - Are more likely to have children outside marriage or outside any partnership

Effects on the Social Fabric

- Increased crime and violence
- Decreased community ties
- A growing 'divorce culture'
- Cycle of fatherlessness
- Dependence on state welfare

Why all these Effects?

- Poverty
- Reduced parental and paternal attention
- Conditions before, during and after divorce

Evaluating the Results

The weight of evidence indicates that the traditional family based upon a married father and mother is still the best environment for raising children, and it forms the soundest basis for the wider society.