

Fatherlessness

A Look at One of America's Most Pervasive Social Problems

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Literature Review

Literature on the issue of fatherlessness in the United can be broken down into two major categories. The first category is based heavily off of data analysis and research conducted primarily by organizations such as the National Center for Fathering and the Heritage Foundation. While the objectivity of data that these organizations analyze is hard to refute, it is important to note that both of these groups operate with the goal to influence political decisions through their findings. Moreover, the Heritage Foundation in particular has leaned into its political aspirations, functioning as one of the leading conservative think tanks in the United States. This political bend to the organization can be seen as concerning and leads to questions about the efficacy of their data analysis as well as the potential for bias to pervade their findings. However, the data analysis itself that the organizations perform do not in and of themselves include direct political statements. With that said, the political activism that the organizations employ will not be incorporated in this paper. Instead, only the data itself will be analyzed so that an unbiased approach may be promoted. Later in the paper, specifically in the analysis and ethics section of the paper, possible political actions that could be taken will be considered.

Within this first major category of literature on the issue of fatherlessness, the collection of data analysis conducted by various researchers and organizations can be broken into several specific areas of interest, ranging from research on the direct impact to the prolonged effects that fatherlessness has on children as well as research on the physical, mental, and financial health of families. In regard to the direct impact that fatherlessness has on children, several key statistics stand out. Chief among these figures is the number of children in the United States whose biological father is no longer present, which has skyrocketed to 24.7 million children. This number equates to roughly 1 in every 3 children and has continually risen over the past 40 years in the US. Demographically, almost half of the population of black children live with their mother only, while a quarter of Hispanic children do not live in a household with a father present. In and of themselves, these statistics would not be a huge cause for concern. That is, if the number of biological fathers absent from their children's lives in the United States did not negatively impact the children, the issue of fatherlessness wouldn't be an issue at all. However, this is simply not the case. Fatherless children suffer from a myriad of adversities, ranging from exponentially increased rates of poverty, less stable housing and family attention, poorer mental health, and substandard performance in school.

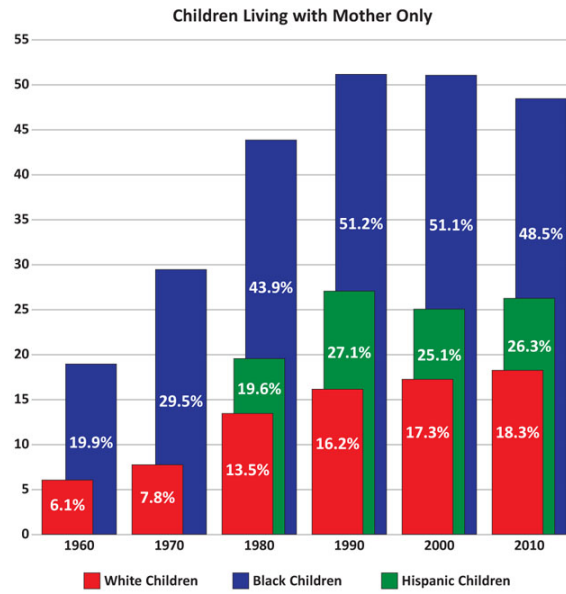


Figure 1: Demographic Composition of Children Living with Their Mother Only

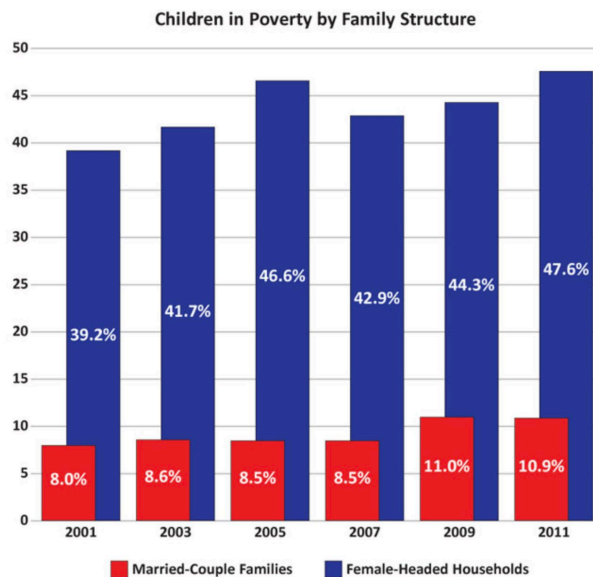


Figure 2: Poverty Rate Amongst Married-Couple Families and Female-Headed Households

Specifically, children living in female-headed households with no father present suffer from poverty rates almost five times higher than children that grow up in married households (Figure 1). Moreover, the median income for a single mother household sits at roughly \$35,800, while the median income for a two parent household is more than double that number at \$85,300. In addition, approximately one half of single mother households include more than one child, continuing to strain the already shrunken financial income that the single mother earns in

comparison to two parent households. These statistics also feed into other negative outcomes, such as increased rates of food and housing insecurity. Roughly 30% of fatherless children are considered food insecure, more than double the national average, and just over a quarter of single parent households spend more than 50% of their earnings on housing alone (USDA). In regard to mental health, fatherless children compose 63% of teen suicides, a startling percentage that again reflects the negative impacts that fatherlessness can inflict on a child. Lastly, in relation to educational achievement, fatherless children account for 71% of high school dropouts as well as 70% of juveniles in state institutions and 85% of youths in prison. The school to prison pipeline has been a widely studied and analyzed aspect of individual's lives in the United States, but its composition as a population that is dominated by fatherless children is rarely noted. Overall, these statistics and figures provide a holistic and data driven overview of fatherlessness in America as well as its negative impacts on children.

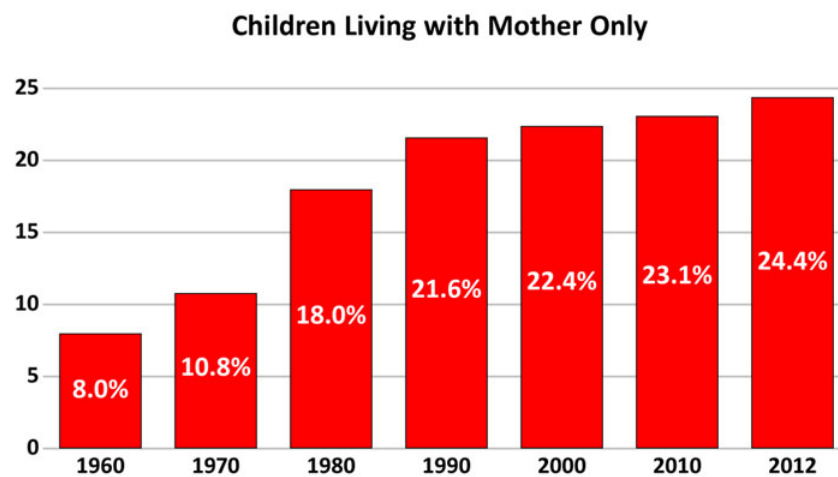


Figure 3: Percentage of Children Living with their Mother Only

The second major section of this literature review is focused primarily on the works of Gary Sandefur and Sara McLanahan. Sandefur and McLanahan's work "Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps," published in 1996, identifies the problems and trends in regard to fatherlessness that have only become more amplified in the years following its original publication. In the sociology based work, Sandefur and McLanahan argue that "growing up with only one biological parent frequently deprives children of important economic, parental, and community resources" (Sandefur, McLanahan 3). Economically speaking, the authors assert that the absence of one parent logically eliminates the potential for a more financially stable household. Logically, this argument is sound, as the combined income of two parents will, on

average, be higher than the income of one parent alone, which the above statistics bear out. Moreover, even if only one of the two parents works, and the income is the same amongst the two parent and single parent household, the “parental guidance and attention” paid to the child by the second parent is extremely valuable to the successful development of the child.

In regard to the “parental” and “community resources” that Sandefur and McLanahan identify in their thesis, this claim is based off what economic sociologist James Coleman deemed “social capital” (Sandefur, McLanahan 3). This social capital is described by the authors as “an asset that is created and maintained by relationships of commitment and trust,” and they argue that the absence of one parent, whether physically, emotionally, or totally, can erode or stunt the growth of the social capital that children so desperately need to succeed in the future (Sandefur, McLanahan 3). James Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu have established social capital through both an economic and a sociological lens. Social capital, as previously stated, is a concept built from relationships with other individuals. Coleman and Bourdieu theorize about the utilizations of social capital in much of their work, discussing the way in which individuals leverage their social capital to grow it. Coleman comes from an economics background, and much of his theory on social capital views it as a pure economic good. He contends that individuals engage in relationship with one another to utilize and grow their own social capital, making most relationships mutually beneficial as both members attempt to gain from the interaction. He views these relationships as purely good, noting that they create a population that leverages their social capital properly for economic prosperity. However, Coleman does not ruminate on the possible negative consequences of these relationships, specifically when as it applies to the choice of individuals to engage in relationship with one another. Pierre Bourdieu, as a sociologist, has theorized that social capital can actually reinforce inequality and promote exclusion amongst individuals who do not enjoy the same amount of social capital as others. He argues that individuals choose to engage in relationship with others, and many times those choices are calculated and decided on based on the potential for growth in social capital. With that said, individuals would logically decide not to engage in relationship with individuals lacking in social capital, such as individuals suffering from poverty, homelessness, drug addiction, or a myriad of other factors.

This sociological view of social capital can be easily applied to the hardships that fatherless children face, such as increased rates of poverty, homelessness, food insecurity, mental

health issues, etc. Sandefur and McLanahan note that the absence of a parent raises a myriad of questions for the child, not the least of which is distrust for his or her parent that is present and disdain towards their parent that isn't present. Parents, and by extension the family unit, is meant to be a place of trust, understanding, and relationship. Sandefur and McLanahan argue, though, that the absence of a parent quickly diminishes the potential for such an environment from forming for the child. Moreover, that lack of that environment contributes to many of the adverse effects that fatherlessness induces on a child, which in turns reduces their social capital. This development in turn creates a cycle of reinforced inequality and reduced social capital.

To close on the literature section of this paper, it is important to note a few nuances to the issue of fatherlessness. This paper does not attempt to neglect or diminish the incredible work done by single mothers in the United States. Single mothers take on immense responsibility both financially and parentally in order to raise children without the presence of a father. Moreover, it is also important to acknowledge that in some instances, the presence of a father in the household may do more harm than good. Abusive or disengaged fathers that are physically present in their children's lives can certainly harm the children who would be better off without their father. However, while these nuances are certainly present in the United States, they represent only a small fraction of instances in which the absence of a father and/or the positive parenting of a single mother benefits the child in question.

Methodology

Two major methodologies will be utilized to contextualize the relationships that fatherlessness has with other factors of social life: 1) Up River, Down River ideology, and 2) generational, cyclical poverty. Up River, Down River ideology centers on the work of Ronald Rolheiser, who developed the ideology as part of a discussion on charity and justice. However, this ideology can be easily applied to fatherlessness and, specifically, educational outcomes for children in the United States. Rolheiser discusses a parable in which a group people live in a village on a river, fishing for their food source. However, as the fishers go out one day, they notice what appears to be a baby floating down the river. The fishers quickly realize that they must save the child, swimming into the river and bringing the child out of the river to safety. The fishers are celebrated by the rest of the villagers, and they have done a great deed. However, a week later, as the fishers are once again out on the river, they once again notice a child floating down the river. They quickly take action once again, saving the child and bringing him back to

the village. Again, the fishers are celebrated and commended for saving yet another child. But then it happens again. And again. And again. Each week the fishers spot another baby floating down the river and save it, and each time they are commended for their acts. However, what the fishers and villagers fail to do is identify why the babies continue floating down the river. Instead of trying to solve the up river issue at hand, they simply save the babies that come to them and are immediately in danger. While saving the babies is a valiant deed and should be celebrated, Rolheiser argues that communities should instead focus on trying to find the up river issue to solve that will prevent the down river problem from occurring.

Applying this ideology to the relationship between fatherlessness and educational attainment allows for a juxtaposition between the two and also a nuanced discussion of which issue should be addressed first and most effectively. While fatherlessness is the central component of this paper, childhood education is a more pervasive and more widely discussed element of social life in the United States. Moreover, studies have shown that increased levels of education in the United States are strongly correlated with increased wages, higher levels of self-confidence, and the alleviation of many symptoms that poverty induces on an individual. In addition, fatherlessness compounds many of the issues currently facing students in classrooms, including reduced engagement with courses and lower rates of high school graduation. With that said, combatting the failures of the education system in America exists up the river from fatherlessness with respect to its pervasiveness and awareness within the American public. Finally, educational attainment is a gateway in the United States for increased social capital, which can combat and alleviate some of the consequences of fatherlessness.

Fatherlessness has profound effects on generational poverty in the United States, especially when analyzing fatherlessness through the lens of reduced social capital. While some individuals would implore those experiencing poverty, mental health problems, or other negatively perceived aspects of life to work harder and be better, this is simply not attainable for the vast majority of individuals in the United States. Specifically, fatherlessness contributes to a myriad of negative consequences on children, as discussed above, that lead to reduced social capital in comparison to others. The reduced social capital restricts that individual's ability to engage in beneficial relationships with others, pinning them into a position of less prosperity. As these individuals grow out of childhood and become adults and potentially parents, they are

unable to pass on social capital to their children, creating a brutal cycle that currently has minimal intervention from government or community resources.

Analysis

Despite the increasing prevalence and negative consequences associated with fatherlessness in America, very few policies or community resources have been effectively dispatched to combat this social issue. However, after collecting and reviewing data on fatherlessness and its impacts and also framing educational attainment as the up river issue at hand, several policy recommendations could be implemented that would reduce the rate of fatherlessness in the US while also promoting educational attainment. First, grants should be established so that sociologists, economists, and other scholars can have their research of fatherlessness sponsored in order to promote more studies on the subject. While there were studies published in the late 90's and early 2000's in the United States on fatherlessness, momentum has slowed in regard to research on the topic, which has led to decreased attention from media and governmental bodies. The publication and disbursement of these studies would also raise awareness in the general public, which could lead to better treatment of fatherless children by communities across the country.

Secondly, governmental bodies should divert more funding towards revamping the K-12 education system in the United States. While funding alone cannot "fix" education in the US, creating a more engaging and robust public school system requires more resources in order to attract better talent in administrators and teachers, to build better facilities for classrooms and other school facilities, and to establish counseling centers within schools. This increased funding and importance placed on education in the United States would produce better environment for students to engage in, leading to reduced high school dropout rates and better mental health amongst students. In addition, this environment could also be a safe haven for children (specifically fatherless ones) who need more support outside of their family unit alone.

Lastly, changes to the justice system that would incorporate a person's family status into their sentencing could radically alter the incarceration rates of fathers in the United States, who currently comprise 92% of incarcerated parents. While this change in and of itself is the most radical, it also has the most potential for change, as it coincides with increasing momentum to change sentencing regulations for non-violent crimes in the United States. For fathers who have committed non-violent crimes, sentencing that includes jail or prison time not only negatively

affects them, but also their children. By incorporating family status (and fatherhood status in particular) into sentencing, other punishments such as house arrest could be utilized more frequently, which would lessen the negative impact that losing a father due to jail or prison induces on a child.

Ethics

As previously stated in the analysis section of this paper, the three major recommendations that could drastically lower rates of fatherlessness and promote educational attainment in America are 1) an educational campaign on the impacts of fatherlessness, 2) increased funding and importance placed on childhood education, and 3) changes to the criminal justice system for non-violent offenders that would incorporate fatherhood into sentencing. The educational campaign would consist of information on not only the direct impacts that fatherlessness has on children, but would also include statistics that convey the magnitude of the issue. Moreover, the procurement of data and the spread of the educational campaign would be done in an apolitical format to promote the issue in the most objective way possible. From a utilitarian perspective, educating American citizens on the magnitude and impacts of fatherlessness would primarily benefit fatherless children, as the negative effects of their upbringing would be more widely known and the American public would be able to adjust their treatment of fatherless children in response to this new knowledge. Moreover, the general public would also benefit from the education campaign, as they would gain a deeper understand of one of the most prominent social issues in the country that is rarely discussed. When utilizing the lens of a contractualist, the educational campaign still has immense value, as the gained knowledge from the campaign would allow individuals to more effectively work for each other's best interests. As previously mentioned, fatherlessness is a rarely talked about social issue in the United States, which has prevented individuals from being able to work in the best interest of one another in regard to the impacts and consequences of fatherlessness. In addition, the educational campaign would also maintain promotion of the individual's well-being and equality with others. Education of the consequences of fatherlessness on children could promote better treatment of said children, promoting both the well-being of the children and their equality with other children who do not suffer from fatherlessness.

Increasing funding and further promoting childhood education (defined as education from pre-school to 12th grade) would not only allow fatherless children to benefit from the most

important indicator of future success in individuals, but would also prevent more children from being absent in their own children's lives. As discussed in the methodology section of this paper, childhood education and fatherlessness are intertwined, with many absent fathers suffering from a lack of completed childhood education. From the utilitarian perspective, promoting and properly funding childhood education has a myriad of positive possibilities both within the study of lowering rates of fatherlessness and outside the study. Moreover, from the contractualist approach, each individual owes it to their fellow citizens to act in their best interest. With that said, investing in childhood education serves as one of the most impactful ways in which individuals can act in the best interest of others, as education drives future success. In addition, properly investing in childhood education would effectively promote both the well-being and equality of children, as they would be given the opportunity to effectively learn and develop into productive members of society. Furthermore, better education for children promotes autonomy later in the life for the children, as they would have more choices after completing their more valuable education.

Lastly, changes in the criminal justice system that would incorporate the person's position as a father into the sentencing would dramatically reduce rates of fatherlessness in the United States, since 92% of parents in the prison system are fathers. This change to the criminal justice system could allow fathers to have sentences for non-violent, non-major crimes reduced or altered so that they could be present in their children's lives, as a prison sentence not only harms the father but also the child in profound ways. According to the utilitarian approach, this change would benefit both fathers and children (as well as the American tax-payer), since the father would be allowed to serve a reduced sentence or serve a sentence with their child. Alternatively, from the contractualist perspective, this change in the system would allow all parties to work in the best interest of one another, which is not the case in the current sentencing structure. Moreover, this change would promote the autonomy of the father by allowing him more freedom than is traditionally given in a prison cell. In addition, the well-being of both the father and child would be promoted, as they would be able to continue their relationship without the catastrophic separation that prison time imposes on the child and father. All three of these recommendations would reduce the issues and consequences of fatherlessness and are also ethically moral, promoting the well-being, autonomy, and equality of individuals regardless of which moral philosophy the individual subscribes to.

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