

# Single-Parent Families

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With the increase in the number of single-parent families in recent years, the attention paid to this family form has grown considerably—in both the academic and the public media. This increased concern with single-parent families has, however, often manifested itself as a concern about a growing “problem,” a problem that may threaten the American family.

Many times, single-parent families are viewed as abnormal and broken. They are blamed for their inadequacies and problems in living, because the families are assumed to contain within themselves the causes of their own “pathology.” Other times, children growing up in single-parent families are credited with causing many of the major social problems in America, such as the rise in adolescent pregnancies, educational failure, and delinquency.

Many of these negative claims, however, have been inadequately investigated. When “pathology” assumptions guide research, bias in both focus and design becomes apparent. In addition to the deviance assumption, much of the existing research shows additional problems. Some of the investigations assume that all single-parent families are alike. Other studies tend to focus on an individual family member rather than on the family unit. Still other studies fail to examine the interplay between the family and the environment. Almost all investigations assume that the “missing parent” is indeed absent.

To begin to understand single-parent families, we need to reconsider these biases; replace them with a view of single-parent families as an existing family form; and design research to allow positive and neutral, as well as negative, aspects to emerge.

The purpose of this chapter is to help with the reconceptualization of the single-parent family as a family form and then to examine these families in the context of their environment, particularly at the macrolevel of analysis. Specifically, this chapter (1) provides a demographic profile of the single-parent family and briefly examines the

problems in estimating the numbers of single-parent families; (2) reconsiders whether the single-parent family is indeed a family by comparing one-parent and two-parent families along three dimensions of family organization—structural, psychological, and interactional; (3) examines the single-parent family in relation to the macroenvironment of major social institutions, particularly economics and employment; (4) examines the microenvironment that single parent-families inhabit; and (5) examines the relations occurring within single-parent families.

## Demographic Profile

During the 1970s, the single-parent family emerged as an increasingly significant family form. Before this period, single-parent families constituted a rather constant proportion of all American families, at least since the mid-nineteenth century. From that time until the 1970s, roughly 10% of American families were maintained by a single mother or a single father (Bane, 1976; Farley & Hermalin, 1971; Sennett, 1974; Seward, 1978).

This consistency ended, however, during the 1970s. By the 1980 U.S. Census, the proportion of single-parent families had doubled (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981a), so that they represented 21.4% of all families with dependent children at home.

Barring extraordinary changes, the *proportion* and *number* of single-parent families will become even greater. Outside the rapid increase in the number of cohabitating couples (Glick & Spanier, 1980; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981b, Table F), single-parent families are the fastest growing family lifestyle in America today, having grown at 21 times the rate of the traditional two-parent family during the 1970s (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981a). Over the course of the 1970s, the number of single-parent families increased by 107% to an unprecedented 6.7 million families, whereas the number of two-parent families actually decreased by 4%, to 24.8 million families. The net result has been a sharp increase in both the absolute and the relative number of families maintained by one parent. Moreover, these figures do not begin to estimate the number of people or the proportion of the population who, by 1980, had lived in a single-parent family at some time in their lives. Nor do these figures

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include the number of households where an unmarried adult assumed responsibility for an unrelated child.

By 1980, the paths through which single-parent families had evolved suggested that single parenting has become a more intentional and less transitional lifestyle choice for many. Separation and divorce have replaced the death of a parent as the most common pathway. Many Americans may be choosing single parenthood over unhappy marriages or immediate remarriage. In addition, during the 1970s, an increasing number of never-married women chose to create single-parent families by carrying unplanned pregnancies to term and keeping their children. As a result of both the sharp increase in numbers and the emergence of single parenting as a lifestyle option, it is estimated that a quarter of the mothers and fathers who have minor children at home will be single parents at some time in the 1980s, and that half of the children born in the 1980s will spend part of their childhood living with either their mothers or their fathers (cf. Norton & Glick, 1979; Weiss, 1979). If current trends continue, it is conceivable that a majority of Americans will, at some point in their lives, experience living for a period in a single-parent family.

Thus, far from being an aberration, the single-parent family is becoming a very common type of family, already representing over one fifth of the families in the white community and nearly half of the families in the black community (Staples, 1980; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981a).<sup>1</sup> Any expected reduction in the total number of single-parent families created by the slowdown in divorce (Glick, 1979a,b) is likely to be replaced by the upsurge of families maintained by never-married mothers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981b). Recent trends also suggest that proportionally fewer single-parent families will be maintained by the father, even though the absolute number of single-parent fathers will continue to rise (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980b, p. 3).<sup>2</sup> Single parents will be younger than in the past (Glick & Norton, 1977) and more likely to have responsibility for younger, yet fewer, children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1978); and single-parent families will very likely continue the trend of living alone as opposed to

moving in with relatives (Bianchi & Farley, 1979; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981a).

In devising these estimates of continued growth for single-parent families, it is important, when reviewing census figures, to be clear about the definition of a family in order not to overestimate or underestimate the numbers. As illustrated in Figure 1, a distinction must be made between *female-headed family households* (or male-headed family households) and *single-parent households*. The former category can include households where the children present are not the sons or daughters of the person who heads the household; for example, a grandmother raising a grandchild, or a parent who provides a residence for a two-parent subfamily of daughter, son-in-law, and grandchild. To ignore the distinction can result in an inflated estimate of the number of single-parent families. Mendes (1976b), Lewis (1978), and Katz (1979), for example, overestimated the number of single fathers by reporting the generic category male-headed families with children.

In this chapter, single-parent families are strictly defined as those *families*—and not family households—in which there is a single father or a single mother raising his or her own children (cf. Weiss, 1979). Although some single-parent families live with a relative or with a non-relative and may not be readily visible (see Figure 1), the vast majority of these families do not share their home with others.

### The Dimensions of Family Life

The need to reexamine and to understand the nature and functioning of single-parent families is prompted at least by their significant number and visibility. Initially, two critical and interrelated issues emerge: First, is the single parent family really a family? And second, how different are single-parent families from (the norm of) two-parent families? We will discuss each of these issues in turn.

#### *Is the Single-Parent Family a Family?*

The term *single-parent family* has become a generally accepted term for a particular kind of family structure, one in which only one parent lives with and has the major responsibility for the care of dependent children. The existence of the term, however, does not necessarily mean that single-parent families are viewed as desirable or even as real families. Indeed, the term conveys deviation from the ideal of the nuclear family, which consists of a wife and a husband and their children. From the well-known works of Anna Freud (Freud & Burlingham, 1944) and Talcott Parsons (1951; Parsons & Bales, 1955) onward, the two-parent nuclear unit (whether isolated or not) has been repeatedly identified as “the contemporary American family.”

At the heart of this definition is the assumption that a husband–wife bond defines the nucleus of a new family (see, e.g., Duvall, 1971; Leslie, 1979). Such an assump-

<sup>1</sup>Glick (1979a) presented a convincing argument that the proportion of black single-parent families in the United States is probably overestimated by underestimating the number of black husbands actually living at home: “probably one-fourth to one-third of the difference between the proportion of black families and white families reported as maintained by a [single-parent mother] could be explained by the much larger undercount of black men than that of white men” (p. 4).

<sup>2</sup>There is some disagreement about the accuracy of the official figures. The question is whether the official statistics underestimate the number of single-parent fathers in the United States as well as in Great Britain. Pleck (cited in Rapoport, Rapoport, & Strelitz, 1980, p. 97) estimated that the 10% figure for the share of father-headed single-parent families in America is much closer to 16%. In England, the Finer Report (cited in Rapoport, Rapoport, & Strelitz, 1980) reported an estimate of 20%.