In most of the human societies we know about, both past and present, the male parent has been an important personage in the life of his children. Typically, he has lived with them and made substantial contributions toward the expense of raising them. Over the last half-century, we have been witnessing what appears to be a loosening of the economic and social bonds between men and their children. In the United States almost 20 million children—approaching 1 in 4 children—are being raised by mothers who do not have a husband living with them. Some of these husbandless mothers have another adult (who may or may not be the father of one or more of the children, and who may or may not be a sexual partner) as part of their household, but a large majority does not.

A majority of the children living apart from their fathers in the United States get little or no economic contribution from them. The estrangement of so many men from their children results from a breakdown in the social arrangements—marriage and the extended family—which served in the past to funnel economic resources from male adults to children. The result of this breakdown is inadequate provision for an increasingly large proportion of children. Many “economically fatherless” children, together with their mothers, live in a state of extreme deprivation. Today in the United States, families consisting of these currently single mothers and their children constitute an increasing share of all poor families.

Women who rear children without the financial help of a man face a difficult task in an unfriendly economic environment. For some, the best they can do is to get along for a while on a below-poverty-level welfare grant while living in a decrepit apartment in a dangerous neighborhood. Others wring what they can out of a labor market in which many of the jobs that pay a “family wage,” particularly those that do not require a college education, continue to be reserved for men. Poverty is epidemic among single mothers and their children. But even those with cash income above the official poverty line are unlikely to be comfortably off. In our society, the two-earner couple now sets the standard of emulation. A family with only a
man’s paycheck is likely to feel financially pinched. A family with only a
woman’s earnings is going to be pinched much harder.

A shortage of money is not the single mother’s only problem, however. She also has an acute and painful shortage of time. A single parent must take on all of the time-consuming tasks that can be shared between parents in a two-parent family—shopping, errands, paying bills, dealing with school affairs, keeping medical appointments, and so on. Single parenthood is also an acutely lonely state. The single mother lacks another adult’s company to share both the worries and the joys of parenthood.

Single parenthood presents a difficult problem for society at large. Because the traditional system of providing for children has eroded, leaving an increasing share of children out in the cold, new means of making adequate provision for these children have to be set up. The first stab at such a policy—encouraging mothers who lack husbands to stay home full time with their children on a below-poverty-level stipend called “welfare”—has been declared a failure. But the “welfare reform,” which removed the entitlement to the stipend, leaves many single mothers and their children dependent on earnings that are insufficient to buy child care and provide a decent level of consumption.

Changing American policies and institutions so that children such as these may have a mainstream living standard is one of the most important tasks of public policy facing us today. It will involve the provision by government of child care, medical insurance, and other services, a radically reformed system of awarding and enforcing child support payments, and improved access for single mothers to jobs that pay a “family wage.”

The Growth of the Problem

In 1960, 8 percent of American children were living with a mother without a husband. By 1980, 18 percent of all children were in this situation, and by 2002, the incidence had grown further to 23 percent. An increasing proportion of fathers are absent from the homes of their children in all population groups, but this is most advanced among blacks. Of all black children in 2003, 48 percent were living with single mothers. Among white non-Hispanics, 16 percent of children were living with single mothers.¹

The 12.6 million children living with husbandless mothers account for only a portion of the youngsters living apart from their biological father. About a quarter of the mothers of children with absent fathers are married to other men. In all, about 30 percent of all children in the United States are currently living apart from their biological fathers.²

The events that create economically fatherless children—out-of-wedlock births, divorces, separations—all have increased in frequency over the last half-century. Births to unmarried women were 4 percent of all births in 1970, 23 percent in 1986, and 34 percent in 2002. The proportion of births to unmarried women differs considerably by race: 29 percent for whites and 66 percent for blacks. Black women have now almost the same fertility rates