
All Our Families

New Policies for a New Century

A REPORT OF THE BERKELEY FAMILY FORUM

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I

Introduction

Mary Ann Mason, Arlene Skolnick,
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Teen pregnancy. Single mothers. Divorce. Child abuse and neglect. Most of us could add other items to the litany of problems said to be afflicting the American family. Indeed, in the 1990s, worry over the family has become a national obsession. Each day, the media serve up new stories and statistics documenting that marriage is going the way of the horse and buggy, that we are becoming a nation without fathers, and that, as a result, children are suffering and society is falling apart. The breakdown of the family is taken for granted as a simple social fact. The only question is who or what is to blame and how can we restore the family to the way we imagine it used to be.

The authors of this book think that something is seriously wrong with this approach to the American family. To be sure, family life has changed over the past few decades—in America and in every other Western society. Nor do we mean to minimize the stresses and troubles that beset all too many families—indeed, this book focuses on some of the most disturbing of them. But the facts about family life are far more complex than they seem. Indeed, to speak of “the family” often obscures more than it reveals. Families today do come in many varieties—two-parent, single-parent, stepfamilies, gay and lesbian families, foster families, and so on. More important, different families, located at different points in the American social structure, face different problems and pose different policy challenges.

In thinking about the family, a historical perspective can be revealing. Anxiety about the family is nothing new. Every generation of Amer-

icans, including the first European settlers to reach our shores, thought it was witnessing the decline of the institution. A major reason is that social change has been a constant in American life, and, as a result, families have constantly had to adapt to new realities.

Changes in family life are almost always regarded for the worse, at least initially. Thus the current debate starts from the idealized American family of the 1950s—middle class, two biological parents, a breadwinner husband and homemaker wife, and two or three biological children—and assumes that any departure from that pattern is negative. Since most contemporary families do depart in one way or another from that pattern, most commonly because the wife and mother is in the paid work force, the fifties norm implies by definition that the family is in decline or in trouble.

This way of looking at the family exaggerates the extent of change. For one thing, about 90 percent of Americans are still likely to marry at some point in their lifetime, and virtually all who do either have, or at least want to have, children. For another thing, even in the fifties very many families differed from *Ozzie and Harriet*. Worse, and paradoxically, insistence on single-mindedly contrasting today's families with a nostalgic view of the past leads us away from focusing on the actual problems experienced by the majority of families in America now. Being divorced, remarried, or a single parent, or even being a gay or lesbian parent, does not imply an alternative value system, or no values at all. The important question to ask about American families, therefore, is not how much they conform to a particular image of the family, but rather how well do they function—what kind of love, care, and nurturance do they provide?

In this book we focus on families who are in the midst of raising children, because we believe that they are carrying out the most important family task, and, at the same time, are the most vulnerable and in need of policy attention. Despite the continued predominance of marriage as an adult experience, more than half of all children born this year will not be raised to adulthood with their two biological parents. Teen mothers are much more rarely married than before, and nearly a third of all children are now born outside of marriage. Couples who do marry often divorce, so that about 40 percent of those born in a marriage will experience the breakup of that marriage. The high rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock birth mean that mothers are increasingly the head of the family—at least temporarily—and that family is all too likely to be reduced to a limited income that puts it below the poverty line. So, while many single-parent families fare well, many others need help.

Single parents often go on to marry again—about 70 percent of divorced mothers do so within six years—forming stepfamilies. Yet this second (or more) marriage is itself more likely to break up than the marriage of origin, funneling children once again into a single-parent family. Other family forms are evolving, including the new gay and lesbian families, and the not so new, but changing, foster families. All of these fam-

ily forms are viewed by some as problematical for children and, in any event, offer challenges to successful child raising. Even families with two biological parents face new difficulties which may require help. More mothers now work outside the home than before, and many of today's families strain under the dual career life.

It is this complexity that has not been sufficiently grasped by policymakers. Both on the left and on the right, policymakers and advocates tend to have a very limited vision of this shifting portrait, and their solutions reflect this limitation. Put very generally, the conservative position is that, as a result of hedonistic individualism, we are letting our "family values" slip away, and what is needed now is nothing short of a moral rearmament on behalf of parental responsibility. From this movement come proposals to make divorce more difficult and to discourage strongly, or even punish, giving birth outside of marriage.

Liberals have crossed swords with conservative "family values" advocates for their insistence that responsible parenting comes in only one form—the idealized nuclear family. But that does not mean that most liberals either understand or embrace the complexity of today's family, or have firm ideas about how to help children. Moreover, there is among liberals today something of a crisis of confidence in the ability of government to solve many of our society's problems, especially those of the family.

Each chapter in this book examines a part of this complex, shifting phenomenon we call the American family. We identify the particular strains and strengths of each part, seeking not to be distracted by the stereotypes and fears that surround some of these new family forms. Our focus is on promoting the welfare of the children, not assigning blame to their parents or to the society at large. What we have to offer are analyses based on scientifically derived evidence and specific intervention proposals.

Toward a More Child-Centered Family Policy

Let us begin with married couples and their children—the model accepted by many Americans as the ideal family form. However, as discussed in the chapters by Carolyn and Philip Cowan, Neil Gilbert, and Richard Barth, it would be a great mistake to assume that having children during marriage is by itself a recipe for successful child rearing, or that current public policy toward these families makes sense.

For one thing, the Cowans tell us, even among educated couples with good jobs, the transition to parenthood is very frequently highly stressful for the couple, and if early warning signs are not attended to, that stress can translate into both harm to the child (including the gamut from educational failure to physical abuse) and the breakdown of the marriage. As the Cowans explain, while expectant parents have many prenatal, health-oriented services accessible to them, there is little assistance avail-

able to help new parents. They must deal on their own with the novel and changed relationships that arise when a child first comes into the home.

Our new family arrangements have made today's parents pioneers of sorts. Many young couples now live further from their own parents than in the past, and in many more marriages both partners work before and expect to continue working after the child is born. Besides, today's young parents often do not have the knowledge or ready family guidance as to how to make the transition to successful parenthood. The consequence is that a startlingly high proportion of new parents, as many as one in six, suffers serious depression or similar burdens.

In order to try to forestall these problems, the Cowans offer guidelines, based on research, that can often predict which couples are most vulnerable to these negative consequences of first-time parenting. Moreover, they describe newly developed couples-based interventions that could work to alleviate this stress and to prevent family rupture. Government promotion of these interventions would be a start toward making our family policy more child-centered.

Assuming that the couple gets through the stress of the first year or so of parenting, Neil Gilbert's chapter tells us they are likely to find that our major social insurance arrangements are not well suited to the lives they hope to lead. As Gilbert points out, if, as in the typical case, the father has remained in the workforce and the mother returns to her job after several months of unpaid leave, they will already be aware that they have paid for Social Security and unemployment benefits that didn't help cover the wages she lost during her maternity leave. And later, on retirement, she will be offered dependent spouse retirement benefits that she won't need because she will by then have earned her own Social Security pension.

In the meantime, the couple faces costly child care burdens with no prospect of assistance when they need it most. Unlike many European countries that socialize the cost of child minding from an early age, in the United States universal schooling begins only at kindergarten. Policy, Gilbert suggests, has not kept up with needs of the new two-parent working family.

How to revise child care and Social Security benefits are complicated questions, in part because not all couples follow the same path. For example, should our society simply extend public schooling down to, say, age two and make this day care optionally available for any family who wants to use it until the child is five? Or, as Gilbert suggests, should all couples with young children be given financial assistance to be used by them as they wish? This latter solution identifies itself with a pluralistic view of parental roles, allowing couples themselves to decide how to deal with child care needs—to use the money to purchase public or privately offered day care, or simply to replace some of the income lost to the family's budget when one of the spouses remains at home to care full time

for the young child. Either way, a shift of public resources from Social Security to child care would be part of a more child-centered public policy.

Married couples, of course, are not the only ones having children. Indeed, as noted previously, in the past fifty years there has been a large increase in the proportion of children born outside of marriage. The common public perception of their mothers is that they are teenagers, but, in fact, most are not. Nonetheless, as related in the chapter by Jane Mauldon, unmarried teens do account for a significant share of births and they are a matter of great public concern. For the small proportion of these women who are under the age of sixteen, there is little doubt that they should be discouraged from having babies so young—for their child's sake and for their own. Serious public efforts should be made to reduce those births, a fair number of which now arise because of predatory behavior by men who are considerably older than the girls. Nonetheless, as both Mauldon and Stephen Sugarman in his chapter argue, it is rather more promising to improve knowledge about and availability of contraceptive and abortion services than it would be to cut off welfare payments to these young teens or seek to solve the problem by trying to enforce rape and statutory rape laws against the fathers.

Older teen parents are a more complicated matter; eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds are no longer minors and normally have finished high school (or whatever schooling they are going to complete) before getting pregnant. Sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds who become pregnant often do have their schooling interrupted or truncated. Nevertheless, according to Mauldon, so many of these young mothers now face such bleak job and schooling prospects that it is by no means clear that they would fare better by delaying childbirth. Furthermore, she argues, it is also not at all clear that a delay of merely a year or two makes a great difference to the babies, who are often at least partially raised by the young mothers' own mothers.

To be sure, many of these young women don't really wish to become pregnant, and, once again, more effective family planning services might help them avoid this condition. For most young mothers, however, Mauldon contends, in order to change their conduct we would need to make more dramatic and positive social change than is now being suggested in public policy debates. Mauldon maintains that instead of threatening pregnant high schoolers with poverty and disdain by the middle class, a more child-centered public policy would seek to improve the benefits of staying in school and trying to get into the job market.

Although birth by an unwed mother is one way to form a single-parent family, more children enter that state by way of divorce. While the divorce rate is now slightly down from its all time high, it still stands well above what it was fifty years ago. Researchers agree that divorce is a stressful event for children. But there is less consensus about the long-term effects of parental divorce, or whether the ending of a failed marriage hurts

a child more than its continuation would. Nevertheless, as Judy Wallerstein explains in her chapter, psychological problems of children with divorced parents can often continue into adulthood and impact negatively upon future family formation.

These outcomes have caused some conservatives to blame no-fault divorce and, as noted previously, to argue for policy changes that would make divorce much more difficult to obtain when minor children are involved. This, however, is probably a misguided idea, Sugarman argues. In the first place, the home lives of couples who divorce are very different before the divorce from the home lives of couples who do not divorce. Therefore, it is wrong to assume that merely deterring divorce would sharply improve the outcomes for children whose parents now divorce. Second, there is the practical reality that blocking divorce does not prevent couples from splitting up and may simply place a legal hurdle in the way of one of the spouses remarrying (and having subsequent children inside instead of outside of marriage).

Assuming that there will continue to be a considerable amount of marital breakup, Wallerstein insists that we need to be more child-centered in our approach to divorcing families. Past reforms such as mediation and joint custody arrangements may have been child-oriented in their motivation, but in a large number of cases the remedies have been insufficiently attentive to the needs of the actual children involved. This is true as well for permanent visitation arrangements established when the child is young, which often become highly ill suited to the lives of many teens.

Rather than cookie-cutter solutions, Wallerstein argues that the legal and social services systems must be acutely attuned to the children most at risk from divorce—often those whose families are characterized by high conflict—and must arrange for these children to have substantial assistance from mental health professionals qualified to help them deal with their stresses. Just as we now provide too little psychologically oriented assistance to couples at the time of their child's birth (as noted earlier), so too, as part of a child-centered family policy, we need to make these sorts of interventions available to the child at the time of, and often following, divorce.

After divorce, the child and his or her custodial parent (still overwhelmingly the mother) typically suffer financial distress as well as psychological distress. However shared, the couple's former income rarely supports two households at the standard of living the family enjoyed when it was a single unit. Moreover, because noncustodial support orders are not large, the custodial parent and child are often left with too little of their former income to maintain a reasonable lifestyle, often slipping below the poverty line. Many custodial mothers seek on their own to improve their financial situation by entering the workforce. But this is often a very poor time for them to be able to boost their income without neglecting their child's other needs. To make matters worse, all too many

noncustodial parents fail to pay the child support imposed on them. Indeed, the default rate is far greater for unwed fathers; and for a significant portion of these fathers, there aren't even formal paternity determinations or child support orders in place. Noncustodial parents in general often lose interest in their biological children, focusing their attention and their money on their new lives, frequently including new children.

While nearly everyone agrees that more effective child support enforcement is desirable, according to Sugarman it is not clear that we have the policy tools to do much better than we do now. What is very different about the United States as compared with many other nations is that our collective financial assistance around the time of becoming a single-parent family is stingier. Until recently, funds were guaranteed only to prevent the single mother and her children from falling deep into poverty. Even then, welfare (AFDC) rarely brought her family up to the poverty line. Now, even that federal guarantee has been eliminated by Congress.

Sugarman asserts that it is unfair and unwise for our society to be so miserly to children with an absent parent, especially when we are reasonably generous, by way of Social Security insurance, to children whose breadwinner parent has died. Hence, as part of a child-centered family policy, Sugarman recommends that Congress enact a child support assurance scheme for all children in single-parent families that parallels the Social Security benefit now provided only to children living in single-parent families owing to the death of a parent. Such a child support assurance plan could apply to the full range of children in single-parent families, including children of divorce and those born to unmarried mothers.

A different route to greater financial stability for single-parent families is marriage. For divorced custodial parents, this means remarriage. For unmarried birth mothers it most often means initial marriage. Although sometimes the marriage will be to the father of the child(ren), our focus here is on the creation of stepparent relationships. Indeed, as noted earlier, a majority of divorced single parents do later marry, although many of them subsequently divorce and at a higher rate than occurs among conventional couples. As the chapter by Mary Ann Mason puts it, at present residential stepparents (about 90 percent of whom are stepfathers) tend to exist in a legal and policy limbo in terms of their relationship to their stepchildren. As Mason explains, if the stepparent and the child's custodial parent then divorce, the child has no claim for ongoing support from the stepparent—even if the residential stepparent has in fact been the child's sole source of support since infancy. Furthermore, at divorce the stepparent's rights to custody or visitation are cut off. This means that, under current policy, it would be extraordinary for the stepfather to win even visitation rights with respect to his stepchildren even if he is their most important psychological parent. Instead, full child custody would go first to the mother and then to her former husband and/or to her biological kin. Indeed, if the child's biological mother dies, the stepparent will have no rights to the custody of the children.

If the stepparent dies during the marriage, Mason explains, the child will receive no automatic inheritance, nor will he or she have the right to bring a wrongful death action for money damages. The stepchild will usually qualify for Social Security benefits; but if the stepfather dies even days after a divorce from the child's mother, Social Security benefits will not be available.

For the stepparent to gain any rights and to have any obligations imposed on him, current policy dictates that he must adopt his stepchild. This, however, is impractical in many circumstances, and undesirable in others. Instead, Mason proposes a new, more child-centered solution by creating a policy category called the "de facto parent." As de facto parents, stepparents who primarily support their stepchildren would be granted legal duties and powers akin to adoptive parents, but without extinguishing the parental status of the noncustodial biological parent.

While stepparents may exist in a legal limbo, stepfamilies themselves are a familiar, ages-old variation on the family theme. The same cannot be said about gay and lesbian families. While for many people in American society, homosexuality is an abomination, and homosexual parenting and the homosexual family even worse, Judith Stacey makes clear in her chapter that the homosexual family is a growing phenomenon that seems very much here to stay. Indeed, with all the talk of "family values," it is ironic that stable, loving lesbian and gay couples are not entitled to the formal legal trappings of family open to heterosexual couples.

Indeed, in complete contrast to what Stacey recommends, Congress has just recently passed a law that seeks to enable states to refuse recognition to lesbian and gay marriage in the event that Hawaii, the most likely candidate, chooses to authorize such unions. Earlier in the history of gay and lesbian activism—in the 1970s especially—many in the homosexual community would have supported this antigay marriage sentiment because they opposed all marriage as an outmoded and oppressive institution. But now, especially in lesbian circles, nonradical middle-class women are taking up lifelong partners and are seeking both the social recognition and legal benefits that arise from formal marriage. Moreover, the few recent studies that have been conducted show that the outcomes for children in these families tend to be better than average.

Where children are involved, a fair number of the desired legal outcomes could be achieved if, as in the typical case, the nonbiological partner could adopt and become a coparent with the biological mother. But in most states this child-centered reform has been rejected, resulting, as Stacey argues, in frequent harm to children. For example, the child may not gain access to health insurance otherwise available from the job held by the nonbiological parent; the child may be denied death benefits if the nonbiological parent were to die; and the child may be denied desired and desirable contact with the nonbiological parent if the lesbian couple breaks up or the biological mother dies. There appears to be continuing fear in the public that the children raised by lesbians and gays will them-

selves all be homosexuals, although the research findings are very much to the contrary. Indeed, homosexual teens raised in heterosexual households are likely to be real beneficiaries of the legal acceptance of the idea of lesbian and gay marriage—since they would be better able to imagine a socially fitting future for themselves.

Sometimes marital disharmony is so severe that no stable arrangement for a child's custody can be worked out and one or both sides take the drastic step of "snatching" the child. As Paula Fass recounts in her chapter, parental kidnapping has gained more attention in recent years, even though it has a long history in the American family. In the past, however, parental kidnapping took place against a cultural backdrop in which the family was understood to be functioning well as an effective unit in socializing the next generation. Kidnapping by former spouses (or by separated spouses or by others on their behalf) was played up in the media as the behavior of eccentric dysfunctional celebrities. The kidnapers always claimed that they were acting in the child's best interest (although many were equally or more driven by selfish motivations). But, in any event, the family as an institution was never seen to be implicated.

Nowadays, parental kidnapping is depicted as a more commonplace event and has become symbolic of the pathology of the family. As explained by Fass, when mothers today steal their children and take them into hiding to prevent them from alleged risks of sexual or physical abuse by their fathers, this action is portrayed as one more indicator of the downfall of the American family and a reflection of its pathological quality. Fifteen years ago, public policy toward parental kidnapping shifted—broadly criminalizing this behavior so as to deter unjustified selfish parental acts and to force parents with genuine disputes to work out their differences in court rather than through self-help. But now many blame the courts for misguided custody awards that lead some allegedly desperate parents to take the law into their own hands.

Parental kidnapping involves only a modest portion of the alarmingly large number of American children subjected to serious abuse (both physical and sexual) or neglect. As Richard Barth explains, each year brings nearly three million formal reports of child abuse and more than a half million confirmed cases (plus many more instances that go unreported to, or undetected by, the badly understaffed child protective services agencies). Many of these abused and neglected children are living with both of their biological parents and are mistreated by one or both of them. Many others live with their mother and may be abused by her and/or a stepfather or their mother's boyfriend. In addition, some children are abused by more distant relations or unrelated people.

Twenty-five years ago, there was great concern that, by using an expansive notion of neglect, the courts and the child welfare system were taking children away from people who were better understood to be unconventional rather than bad parents. Moreover, once removed from their homes, these children all too often languished in foster care, frequently

being moved from one foster family to another every couple of years, never establishing anything like permanent new family ties. This arrangement brought calls to make removal more difficult, to work hard with the parents to allow the child to return home promptly where that was a good idea, and to move speedily to terminate parental rights and have the child adopted where reunification was unwise.

Barth argues that, in practice, the child welfare system has now become too attached to the idea that abused and neglected children need to stay connected to their parents, or failing that, to their near relatives and their community. Under the banner of "family preservation," too many children who have been badly abused are kept at home or too quickly returned home only to be abused again. Or they are placed with grandparents or other kin who serve as foster parents but often do not provide an effective upbringing for the child.

Emphasis on parental rights is partly a result of the politics of race and class that, Barth maintains, has put the interests of adults ahead of those of individual children. A new approach proposed by Barth would be more child-centered and would take more seriously the child's developmental needs. These would include considering who will assure the child better schooling, including higher education, and who will continue to be a family for the child when he or she becomes an adult. This developmentally oriented policy would free more abused and neglected children for permanent adoption, and they would more likely be adopted by parents who live outside the child's old neighborhood and who are of a different race and financial standing as compared with the child's biological parents.

As shown in the chapter by Arlene Skolnick, a common theme that runs throughout much of this book is the past overreliance in both law and policy on blood ties over psychological ties. This emphasis is most vivid in battles over child custody that arise in a wide variety of contexts. The traditional rule has been that the biological connection triumphs in disputes, for example, between a custodial stepfather and a long absent biological father (say, after the death of the mother), between the lesbian "coparent" and the biological parent after they split up, between adopting parents and a biological parent (say, a father who claims he was given no notice of the birth), and between foster parents and a biological parent who has seemingly abandoned the child and now wants it back. Judges imposed this outcome even when the child had been long-living with, and seemingly a healthy part of, the family of the loser of the dispute.

In reaction to this reliance on blood ties, many have urged a shift to a standard that looks to "the best interests of the child." This standard has also been especially attractive in conventional divorce custody disputes where contemporary notions of gender equality have made it unacceptable to continue the prior practice of automatically awarding the child to the mother. While, in principle, this is a child-centered move, applying the "best interests" concept in practice is fraught with difficulties. Does

this mean the child goes to the adult whose lifestyle most matches the judge's (or the social worker's) private preferences? Does this mean the child goes to the wealthier claimant? If not, exactly how do you decide what is in the child's best interest?

Into this gap has emerged the notion of the "psychological parent," a term developed by a prominent legal-psychological team based upon their good judgment and some clinical practice. Their claim was that children ordinarily have one parent to whom they are psychologically most connected and that, in general, that parent should win these difficult child custody disputes. Yet, as Skolnick explains, however intuitively appealing, the "psychological parent" is not a well-established notion in the psychology research literature. The closest thing to it is "attachment" theory. According to this theory, healthy children can form secure attachments to a key adult figure and that security enables them to function effectively in their lives generally. If that attachment is severed, the child suffers a substantial psychological loss.

The evidence is clear that, starting in infancy, children form intense emotional bonds to those who provide ongoing love and care. Further, it is clear that a child's attachment depends on something other than merely spending time with the adult, as in the case of a nanny. There is also no doubt that removing a child from the home or separating the child from a primary attachment figure is an act of major psychological significance to the child, and one which may pose developmental risks.

Unfortunately, the cases that come before the legal system do not always present clear-cut choices. While attachment theory can point the legal system in the right direction—giving heavy weight to the child's emotional well-being, especially the existing ties between the child and the contending adults—we should not assume that there is an easy template for determining the "psychological parent" in application of the "best interests" test. This does not mean, in Skolnick's view, that we should return to clearer bloodline-based legal rules. Rather, we need more research and more collaboration between researchers and the legal system, if we truly aim to resolve these custody disputes in the best interest of the child.

Achieving Greater Security for Children

Child and family insecurity is an overriding theme that runs throughout this book. All of today's family forms and the family issues addressed here can lead to an insecure situation for the child. This insecurity may be psychological, physical, financial, or legal. The child may not always be aware of it; nonetheless, too much insecurity for the family or the child puts too many children at risk. As the chapters ahead demonstrate in detail, some children are insecure because they are abused or neglected; others because their family is living in poverty. Some experience their parents' transition to parenthood or divorce as too stressful; others find their connection to their new stepparent difficult. Some children suffer from the

legal and social stigma attached to their mother's lesbian partner (their second mother). Other children are trapped in foster care. And a surprisingly large number have been snatched by one feuding parent from the other.

Family policy can help reduce a child's insecurity, but, we believe, too many of our existing policies actually promote insecurity, partly because current policy is too closely wedded to a biological conception of family, rather than relying on a conception based in the psychological, sociological, and cultural reality of contemporary American family life. Another part of the problem is that families are commonly expected to solve their own problems during those periods of greatest need.

Moreover, we believe, today's "family values" advocates aren't really helping. First of all, this debate casts family issues into unnecessarily extreme ideological conflicts. Second, there is an illusory quality to it: America has evolved away from the norm of the two-parent lifelong married couple in which the husband works in the paid labor force and the wife raises the children, and there is no reason to believe that we are going back.

We need, instead, to accept the reality that a large proportion of American children will experience one or more changes in their family structure during their growing up years, and we must refocus our policy attention on making those transitions more successful for parents and children. Granting recognition to evolving families and concentrating psychological, financial, and other services and resources around the transitional periods is a good place to start—and the place where most of the policy reforms proposed here are aimed. By embracing these new policies for our new families, our nation could move a long way toward assuring a more secure childhood for many more of our children.

2

Single-Parent Families

Stephen D. Sugarman

What do the former First Lady Jackie Kennedy, the chief prosecutor in the O. J. Simpson case, Marcia Clark, the pop star Madonna, and the TV character Murphy Brown have in common? They all are, or at one time were, single mothers—unmarried women caring for their minor children. This chapter concerns public policy and the single-parent family, a family type dominated by single mothers.

Because these four women are fitting subjects for *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, they are a far cry from what most people have in mind when the phrase "single mother" is used. Many picture, say, a nineteen-year-old high school dropout living on welfare in public housing. Hence, just mentioning these four prominent women vividly demonstrates the diversity of single mothers. These four also illustrate the major categories of single mothers—the widowed mother, the divorced or separated mother, and the single woman who bears her child outside of marriage. (Women in this last category are often misleadingly called "never married" even though approximately one-fourth of the women who are unmarried at the birth of their child had been married at an earlier time.¹)

One further distinction should also be made here. The usual picture of the single mother is of a woman living *alone* with her children—Jackie Kennedy, Marcia Clark, and Murphy Brown. But those we call "cohabitants" are also single mothers as a legal matter, even though their children are living in two-adult households. Indeed, where the woman is cohabiting with the father of her child—Madonna—while the mother is single, from the child's perspective it is an intact family.

As with single mothers generally, these four prominent women arouse a wide range of feelings, from support to dismay, in the public at large. Jackie Kennedy surely gained the maximum empathy of our foursome when her husband was murdered in her presence. Even those women who are widowed in less horrifying ways have long been viewed as victims of cruel fate and strongly deserving of community compassion.

Not too long ago, having been divorced was by itself thought to disqualify those seeking public office or other positions of public prominence. That no longer holds, as Ronald Reagan's presidency made clear. As a result, when the spotlight of fame first shined on Marcia Clark, she probably appeared to most Americans as one of many of today's divorced professional women who had the challenging task of having to balance the pursuit of her career with raising a child on her own. The grueling pressures of prosecuting her most notorious case and her subsequent, publicly revealed squabbles with her former husband did, however, bring to the fore our society's general uneasiness about how well children fare in these settings, as well as our uncertainty about the appropriate roles of divorced fathers as providers of both cash and care.

In Sweden today, Madonna's family structure is commonplace. There, a very large number of men and women live together and have children together, but do not go through the formalities of marriage. Lately, in America as well, the cohabitation category, long ignored by the census, is rapidly growing. This is not to say that most Americans, unlike the Swedes, accept cohabitation as though it were marriage. Indeed, American public policy, as we will see, treats cohabitation very differently from marriage.

Perhaps because Murphy Brown is a fictional character, this has allowed those who are on the rampage against unmarried women who bear children to be candid about their feelings without having to be so openly nasty to a "real" person. Yet Murphy Brown is an awkward icon. To be sure, she flouted the conventional morality of an earlier era. She had sex outside of marriage and then decided to keep and raise her child once she discovered she had unintentionally become pregnant. Although many people in our society still rail against sex other than between married couples, sex outside of marriage has become such a widespread phenomenon that it is generally no longer a stigma. And while it would be easy to chastise Murphy Brown for carelessly getting pregnant, as Jane Mauldon's chapter explains, this also is so commonplace that it is barely remarkable any more. Indeed, Murphy Brown might have come in for more censure had she, as a single woman, deliberately become pregnant.

As for deciding to raise her child on her own, this *by itself* no longer arouses great public outcry. After all, it is not as though widowed mothers who make that decision are castigated for choosing not to remarry. As for the unmarried birth mother, shotgun weddings are seen to be less promising than they once were; abortion, while still a right, is hardly thought to be a duty; and while giving a child up for adoption is often

commendable, today this is seen primarily as the route for women who do not want to, or cannot afford to, take care of their children themselves.

In short, the strongest objection by those who have assailed Murphy Brown is that she is a bad role model—in particular, that she is a bad role model for *poor* women who, unlike her, cannot provide for their children on their own, but go ahead and have them anyway, planning to turn to the state for financial and other assistance. In many quarters those single mothers are doubly condemned. First, they are seen to be prying money out of the rest of us by trading on our natural sympathy for their innocent children; yet this is said to leave taxpayers both unhappy because they have less money to spend on their own children and with the distasteful feeling that society is condoning, even promoting, the irresponsible and self-indulgent behavior by these poor single mothers. Then, these low-income women are rebuked as high-frequency failures as parents—for example, when their children disproportionately drop out of, or are disruptive at, school or turn to criminal behavior. Of course, not everyone disapproves of Murphy Brown or even those poor women who choose to have children on their own knowing that they will have to turn to the state for financial assistance. Many people believe that every American woman (at least if she is emotionally fit) ought to be able to be a mother if she wants to be.

These various types of single mothers are significant because they raise different issues, and, in turn, they have yielded very different policy solutions and proposals for reform. But before we turn to policy questions, some general demographic information is presented that, among other things, shows single-parent families to differ significantly from some common myths about them. The policy discussion that follows begins with a historical overview that demonstrates how American policies have changed sharply through the century. Next the focus shifts to the conflicting ideological outlooks on single-parent families reflected in the thinking of conservatives and liberals today. This clash of views is then applied to some current policy initiatives to demonstrate how little room there now seems to be for consensus reform. The chapter concludes with a call to refocus public attention on the needs of the children in single-parent families.

Single-Parent Family Demographics: Myths and Realities

Father-Headed Single-Parent Families

In the first place, not all single-parent families are headed by women. In 1970, three-quarters of a million children living in single-parent families lived with their father (10 percent of such families); by 1992, more than two million children lived in father-headed single-parent families (an increase to 14 percent).²

These families are not the subject of much policy attention, however. First, most of them are headed by divorced (or separated) men; a few are widowers. It is rare, however, that the father of a child born outside of marriage will gain physical control of that child, and this takes custodial fathers largely outside the most controversial category of single-parents. Furthermore, single fathers caring for their children tend to be financially self-supporting and therefore generally beyond the purview of welfare reformers. Finally, they tend to remarry fairly quickly and hence remain heads of single-parent families for only a short time. In fact, the main public policy controversy involving these men today concerns divorce custody law—in what circumstances should fathers be able to become heads of single-parent families in the first place? This topic is discussed in the chapter by Judith Wallerstein.

Noncustodial fathers are quite another matter—whether divorced from or never married to the mothers of their children. As we will see, they are the subject of a great deal of public attention and concern.

Unmarried as Compared to Divorced and Widowed

Turning back to families headed by single mothers, one myth is that they are predominantly women who have never been married to the father of their child. Yet there are actually more divorced (and separated) single mothers. For example, in 1992, 60 percent of single mothers were divorced or separated, and another 5 percent were widowed.³ Moreover, because of the predominance of widowed and divorced mothers, large numbers of women become single mothers, not at their child's birth, but later on in their child's life, often not until the child is a teenager. Hence, among the children in single-parent families, living one's entire childhood apart from one's father is by no means the norm.

Cohabitants

Cohabitants with children in their household are a complicated category, and, in turn, they complicate the data.⁴ As noted earlier, although the women in these families are decidedly single mothers in a legal sense, in many respects these couples resemble married couples. So, many of these households are better described as two-parent, not single-parent, families. Some demographers have recently suggested that "cohabitation operates primarily as a precursor or a transitional stage to marriage among whites, but more as an alternative form of marriage among blacks."⁵

In any case, these cohabiting households come in several varieties. One first thinks of two biological parents not married to each other but living with their child—as exemplified by Madonna and the father of her child and the Swedish model. Cohabiting mothers in this situation still often show up in U. S. surveys as though they were never married moth-

ers living on their own, because survey instruments tend to categorize respondents only as married or single.

A second variety of cohabiting households includes a single mother with her child who is now living with, but not married to, a man who is *not* the child's father. These women are drawn out of the ranks of the never married, the divorced, and the widowed; they, too, are frequently counted in surveys as living on their own. Moreover, in this second category especially, it is often quite unclear to outsiders whether the man is a de facto spouse and stepparent, a casual boyfriend, or something in between.

Yet a third category of cohabiting households contains a homosexual couple (more often two women) in which one of the partners is the legal (usually biological) parent and the other is formally a stranger (although some lesbian couples of late have successfully become dual mothers through adoption). These families are discussed in the chapter by Judith Stacey.

Working and Not

Although the myth is that single mothers (especially never-married welfare moms) spend their time lounging around the house, watching TV, doing drugs, and/or entertaining men, this is a wild exaggeration. A large proportion is in the paid labor force. Official data from 1993 show that about two-thirds of *all* women with children are in the labor force. Married women's rates are about 60 percent where the youngest child is under six and about 75 percent where the youngest child is six or more. Within the ranks of single mothers, divorced women work *more* than married women, whereas never-married women are *less* likely to *report* working.⁶

Single mothers often feel compelled to work full time even when their children are very young, although the official data again show a difference between divorced and never-married women. According to 1993 figures, of those women with a child under age six, 51 percent of divorced women and 26 percent of never-married women worked *full time*; on average this was slightly higher than the rate for married women, 38 percent of whom were working full time.⁷

Although fewer than 10 percent of single mothers who are receiving welfare officially acknowledge earning wages,⁸ recent research by Kathryn Edin suggests that, in fact, a high proportion of them is actually employed at least part time.⁹ They tend to work for cash in the underground (and sometimes illegal) economy. According to Edin's findings, they do not typically do so to be able to buy drugs or booze, but rather in order to keep their households from utter destitution or to avoid having to live in intolerably dangerous public housing projects. They keep this work a secret from the welfare authorities because if the authorities knew they would so cut back those women's welfare benefits as to make their wages

from work nearly meaningless. Although these women would be viewed by the welfare system as "cheaters," they tend to remain living in fairly impoverished circumstances. As Edin puts it, they feel compelled to break the law by the skimpiness of the welfare benefits they receive.

Poor and Nonpoor

Even with the receipt of government assistance, more than a third of family households headed by single mothers officially live below the poverty level (as compared with only 6.5 percent of families headed by a married couple).¹⁰ Although this is a distressingly high number, to the extent that the myth is that single mothers are poor and on welfare, the myth is false. A substantial share of single mothers provides a reasonable level of material goods for their children, and more than half of all single mothers are not on welfare. In 1992, for example, about 44 percent of female-headed households with related children under age eighteen received means-tested cash assistance.¹¹

Those who escape poverty for their families tend to do so primarily through earnings and secondarily through child support and government benefits (or through a combination of these sources)—although typically not by receiving welfare. In 1992, *nonpoor* single mothers received about 80 percent of their income from earnings, 8 percent from child support and alimony, and 7 percent from Social Security, pensions, unemployment compensation and the like, and only just over 3 percent from welfare, food stamps, and housing assistance.¹² This is because nowhere in America today does welfare alone bring a family even close to the poverty level, and, as noted already, the rules governing welfare tend to reduce the amount of the welfare payment by nearly all the money the mother obtains from other sources. It is not surprising, then, that, in 1992, the poverty rate for single-parent families with children under age eighteen was 48.2 percent before the receipt of means-tested cash transfers and 45.2 percent after their receipt, a relatively modest reduction indeed. (Noncash benefits have a greater impact, reducing the rate to less than 40 percent.)¹³ A different, and often more promising, route out of poverty for single mothers and their children is through marriage and thereby into a new family structure. These stepfamilies are discussed in the chapter by Mary Ann Mason.

White and Nonwhite

The myth is that single mothers primarily come from racial and ethnic minorities. While it is true that these groups are disproportionately represented given their share of the population, in fact, these days more single mothers are white than any other group. For example, in 1993, 60 percent of nonmarital births were to whites and 36 percent to blacks.¹⁴ On a cumulative basis, as of 1992 there were 5.8 million white, mother-

headed family groups (including white Hispanics) as compared with three million black, mother-headed family groups (including black Hispanics)—even though 58 percent of all black family groups were headed by mothers and only 26 percent of all white family groups were headed by mothers.¹⁵

Change over Time

The demography of single-parenting has changed a lot over the course of this century. There are many more single-parents today than there were several generations ago, both in absolute numbers and, more importantly, in terms of the percentage of all children (or all parents) affected.

In 1900, the typical single-parent was a widow. Male deaths through industrial and railway accidents were very visible. By contrast, divorce was then scarce (although desertion was a problem). And becoming a single mother by becoming pregnant outside of marriage was not very common, especially because so many who got pregnant promptly married the father.¹⁶ Now, especially since the 1960s, all that is changed. Divorce is more frequent. "Illegitimacy" and cohabitation are also more prevalent than in earlier periods. For example, of women born between 1940 and 1944, only 3 percent had lived with a partner of the opposite sex by age twenty-five; of those born between 1960 and 1964, 37 percent had done so.¹⁷ Moreover, the stigma of bearing a child outside of marriage and/or what some still call "living in sin" is much reduced.

Nonetheless, along with these changing characteristics of the single-parent family has come a change in public empathy. Earlier there was very widespread compassion for single-parents and their children when single-parents were mainly widows and divorcees, especially in the pre-no-fault era, when divorce usually was triggered (formally at least) by the misbehavior of the husband. Today, at least in some quarters, single mothers are loathed—those receiving welfare who have borne their children outside of marriage or who are suspected of bringing about the end of their marriages through their own selfishness. Currently, slightly more than half of those receiving welfare have had children outside of marriage as compared with but a trivial share in the 1930s and less than 30 percent as late as 1969.¹⁸

Changing Policies toward Single-Parents

Widows

In 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt convened a historic first White House Conference on Children, which identified the poverty of widowed mothers and their children as a central policy problem. Then, if states and localities provided any assistance at all, it was too often through the squalid conditions of the "poor house" into which single-parent families might

move—something of a counterpart to today's shelters for homeless families. The poor house itself was the successor to an earlier system in which desperate mothers farmed their children out to others, in effect providing young servants to those people who took these semi-orphaned children into their homes, farms, and businesses. Reflecting the outlook of the social work profession that was then just getting underway, the White House Conference pushed instead for the adoption of Mothers' Pensions plans. Soon enacted, at least on paper, in most of the states, this new approach envisaged cash payments to single (primarily widowed) mothers who were certified by social workers as capable of providing decent parenting in their own homes if they only had a little more money in their pockets.¹⁹

Mothers' Pensions, the precursor to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), reflected both the psychological perspective that it was best for the children to be raised in their own homes and the sociological outlook that it was appropriate for the mothers to stay at home and raise them (perhaps taking in other families' laundry or sewing, but not leaving their children to join the regular paid labor force).²⁰ As we will see, this benign attitude toward the payment of public assistance to single-parents, which was reinforced by the adoption of AFDC in 1935 at the urging of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and maintained at least through the 1960s, is now rapidly disappearing.

Divorcees

Much earlier in the century, while widows were pitied, marital breakup was broadly frowned upon. Nonetheless, it was increasingly acknowledged that some spouses acted in intolerable ways and should be censured by allowing their spouses to divorce them. Adultery, spousal abuse, and desertion were the main categories of unacceptable marital conduct, and most of it seemed to be engaged in by husbands. As the decades rolled by, however, the divorce law requirement of severe wrongdoing by one spouse and innocence on the part of the complaining spouse soon ill-fit the attitudes of many couples themselves. Especially starting after World War II, and accelerating in the 1960s, many more couples came to realize that their marriages had simply broken down and they both wanted out. Until divorce law changed to reflect this new outlook, couples were prompted to engage in fraudulent charades (often involving the husband pretending to engage in adultery) so as to satisfy domestic relations law judges.

No-fault divorce law first emerged in California in 1970 and was rapidly followed by other states.²¹ As a practical matter, not only did this reform allow couples amicably to obtain a divorce without having either one of them adjudicated as the wrongdoer but also, in most states, it permitted any dissatisfied spouse to terminate the marriage unilaterally. Whether no-fault divorce actually caused an increase in the divorce rate

or merely coincided with (indeed, grew out of) the spiraling demand for divorce is unclear.²² What is clear, however, is that divorce rates today are enormously greater than they were before 1970, thereby contributing to the great increase in single-parenting.²³ As we will see, that state of affairs, in turn, has recently generated something of a backlash movement, one that seeks to reintroduce legal barriers to divorce in families with minor children.

Illegitimacy

Public policies toward illegitimacy (and, in turn, toward both abortion and teen pregnancy) have also changed significantly during this century. At an earlier time, children born outside of marriage were pejoratively labeled "bastards" and denied inheritance and other rights connected to their fathers, although their biological fathers did generally have the legal duty to support them.²⁴ If a single woman became pregnant, a standard solution was to promptly marry the child's father, perhaps pretending that the pregnancy arose during marriage after all. Adoption was available to some, who would be encouraged to go away before their pregnancies began to "show," only to return childless afterwards as though nothing had happened. Pursuing an abortion instead then risked criminal punishment and subjected the woman to grave risks to her life and health.

Rather suddenly, a little more than two-thirds of the way through this century, policies in these areas turned around dramatically. For those who wanted it, abortion became legal. More important for our purposes, remaining unmarried and then keeping a child born out-of-wedlock became much more acceptable. For example, instead of expelling pregnant teens, schools adopted special programs for them. Fewer women gave up their newborns for adoption—for example, 19 percent of white, unmarried birth mothers did so in the 1960s, but only 3 percent did so in the 1980s.²⁵ The courts forced states to give many legal rights to illegitimates that had previously been enjoyed only by legitimates;²⁶ and many legislatures voluntarily expanded the inheritance rights and other entitlements of out-of-wedlock children. Soon, unmarried pregnant women far less often married the biological father during the course of the pregnancy—a drop of from 52 percent to 27 percent between 1960 and 1980.²⁷

Women who had children outside of marriage were no longer casually labeled unsuitable mothers and, as noted previously, soon became the largest category of single mothers receiving welfare. In terms of public acceptability, something of a high-water mark may have been reached in the early 1970s with the conversion of welfare into a "right" by the federal courts, the elimination of welfare's "suitable home" requirement, and the end to one year waiting periods for newcomers seeking welfare.²⁸ This ignited an explosion of the welfare rolls,²⁹ and for the first time in many states, African-American women gained reasonably secure access to benefits. At that time

Republican President Richard Nixon proposed turning AFDC from a complex state-federal program into a uniform national scheme.

As we near the end of the century, however, a policy backlash is emerging. Between 1967 and 1997, the proportion of African-American children born outside of marriage skyrocketed from around 25 percent to nearly 70 percent; and the rate for white children is conceivably poised for a similar trajectory—and in any case has grown from 8 percent thirty years ago to around 25 percent today.³⁰ Now, curbing illegitimacy, or at least unmarried teen pregnancy, seems to be near the top of many politicians' lists. An indicator of how fast things have changed was Democratic President Bill Clinton's call to "end welfare as we know it" during his 1992 election campaign.

Child Support

It has been long understood that fathers have a moral obligation to provide for the financial support of their minor children. In the absent parent context, this means paying "child support." For most of the century, however, a substantial proportion of men failed to pay the support they might have paid.³¹ The default rate by divorced fathers has long been very high, and in out-of-wedlock births the father's paternity often was not even legally determined.³² (Stepfathers with no legal duties were frequently a more reliable source of support.) Moreover, in many states, even if noncustodial fathers paid all they owed, this was judged to be a pittance when compared with the child's reasonable needs. Deceased fathers were no more reliable, frequently dying with estates of trivial value and without life insurance.

Through the 1930s, AFDC and its predecessors were the main public response to these failures—providing means-tested cash benefits to poor children (and their mothers) deprived of the support of a breadwinner. In 1939, however, special privileged treatment was afforded widows and their children. The Social Security system was expanded so that, upon the death of the working father, "survivor" benefits would be paid to the children and their caretaker mother based upon the father's past wages.³³ This, in effect, created publicly funded life insurance for most widows and their children, with the result that today hardly any widowed mothers find it necessary to apply for welfare.

No comparable "child support insurance" was provided, however, so that divorced and never-married poor mothers have had to continue to turn to the socially less favored means-tested welfare programs instead of Social Security. On behalf of these families, the effort, much enlarged since the mid-1970s, has been to increase the amount of child support an absent father owes and to beef up child support enforcement efforts.³⁴ Notwithstanding those reforms, it is still estimated that more than five billion dollars of child support annually goes uncollected, and many custodial mothers are unable to collect any support for their children.³⁵

Cohabitation

It appears that American society generally is becoming more accepting of cohabitation, even if it remains frowned upon in many circles. (Clearly, same-sex cohabitation continues to be highly controversial.) So far as public policy is concerned, however, marriage still makes a significant difference. For example, when children are involved and the cohabitants split up, the woman who keeps the children (as is typically the case) continues to be disadvantaged as compared with the woman who had married. Although she is entitled to support for her child, only in very special circumstances can she gain financial support for herself from her former partner. So, too, upon the death of her partner who was the father of her children, while her children can claim Social Security benefits, she does not qualify for the caretaker Social Security benefits that a legal widow would have obtained.³⁶ On the other hand, if she cohabits with a man who is not the father of her children, a mother and her children have been able to qualify for welfare; by contrast, were she married (or cohabiting with the father of her children), it has been extremely unlikely for them to obtain welfare.

Conflicting Conservative and Liberal Perspectives

Today's conservative critique of single-parent families is partly a financial one. The typical rhetorical question is: Why do taxpayers who work hard for their money have to turn it over to single mothers who are not being forced to work and, in many cases, should not have had their children in the first place? This complaint is focused on poor single-parents who claim welfare—and more particularly on those mothers rather than the men who impregnate them.

A second aspect of the conservative critique, however, is cast more generally. It asserts that single-parent families are inferior families. These claims tend to fly under the heading "Dan Quayle was right," a reference to the former vice president's much publicized attack on Murphy Brown.³⁷ This "family values" claim has stirred up a hornets' nest of controversy.³⁸

The underlying theory starts with the notion that when there is no father around, the child loses the parenting benefits that the father would have provided; indeed, some argue that "fatherlessness" is an inherently pathological condition that inevitably leads to deep psychological wounds.³⁹ In any event, with the mother now overburdened by having to raise the child on her own, the quality of her parenting is also thought to erode. Children in these families are seen as deprived of proper role models—no working father who embodies and imposes something of the work ethic; instead, all too often, a mother who is permitted to remain a long-term dependent on the state. A further inference is that the child often loses community support because the single mother moves more

frequently. In addition, when single-parenting arises from a marital breakup, it is surmised that the child suffers from the conflict surrounding the dissolution.

Indeed, when simple correlations are made, being a child in a single-parent family is associated with worse outcomes than being a child in a two-parent family.⁴⁰ Moreover, not only are these outcomes worse for the child (such as, lower educational attainment, more likely to become a teen parent, more likely to be unemployed), they are also worse for society (such as, more likely to be on welfare as an adult).⁴¹

In the face of this evidence, what is infuriating to many conservatives is that several existing public policies can be construed as actually encouraging single-parenting. These include easy access to divorce and to welfare and the coddling of pregnant school girls, as well as the fact that, by contrast, poor two-parent families generally have not qualified for AFDC.

A grave problem with resting the conservative case on simple correlations, however, is that single-parent families are simply not a random sample of all families. Therefore, just because children in single-parent families are in certain respects comparatively worse off, that in no way proves that they are worse off *because* they are part of single-parent families.

For example, poorer married couples break up at a greater rate than do richer couples. Hence to compare children of divorced families with children of all still-married families is the wrong comparison. At the least we would want to compare them with a subset of poorer still-married families in order to try to get at how they might be doing had their parents remained married. But, then, of course, when we start thinking like that it is easy to appreciate that even among couples who are in the same economic situation, those who break up are not just like those who stay married. So to compare even these two sets may misleadingly suggest how children of the divorced would have fared had their parents not divorced. It is simple to imagine, for example, that were their parents to have stayed together, the children would have suffered from severe spousal conflict, from abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), and so on. In other words, the actual children who are in single-parent families might have been worse off, or no better off, had their actual parents remained married—even if other children whose parents choose to stay married have real advantages.⁴² In the same vein, even before they have children there are many differences, on average, between those women who go on to bear children outside of marriage and those who bear children when married; so, for example, perhaps children of married women with similarly low education, income, and work experience also have worse outcomes than the average child.

Sorting through all of this is a very difficult task. Nevertheless, Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur⁴³ have recently carried out some highly sophisticated statistical analysis designed to get at these more difficult

questions. They concluded that, even after adjusting for initial differences in race, parents' education, family size, and residential location, there are indeed significantly worse outcomes for children in single-parent families of all sorts, as compared with those living with two biological parents. They also found that these outcome differences do not importantly vary as between single-parent families created by divorce and those created by a nonmarital birth (although outcomes are less bad for children of widows).

Notice that these comparisons do not yet take income differences into account. This is especially tricky to deal with because income differences exist among families before family disruption *and* income declines are caused by the creation of a single-parent family. McLanahan and Sandefur's analysis shows that about half of the lower outcome differences for children in single-parent families is accounted for by income differences, and that most of that is accounted for by the loss of income that occurs by becoming a single-parent family (and only a little because of preexisting income differences). Put differently, they find that the single most important factor accounting for the lower measured well-being of children in one-parent families is the loss of income suffered by the custodial parent upon becoming a single-parent whether by divorce, death, or nonmarital birth. While this is clearly not the same thing as saying that single-parents are worse parents, for their children it is nonetheless a negative outcome.

A second important factor in explaining worse outcomes for children, according to McLanahan and Sandefur, is what they call residential mobility. Children living in single-parent families tend to move around more (and especially at the time the single family is created) and this, on balance, also appears to be harmful to children. This is probably so because it means the loss of what McLanahan and Sandefur call "community capital"—the community friendship and support networks that come along with living for a long period in the same place. Again, although the women who, for reasons of economic necessity, have to move their children to a new home following divorce can hardly be termed bad parents merely for making the move, their children may nonetheless suffer as a consequence.

Finally, although they could not fully adjust, for example, for the greater predivorce conflict among couples who do divorce and those who do not, McLanahan and Sandefur conclude that a significant share of the remaining difference in children's outcomes is accounted for by differences more closely intertwined with family structure itself—for example, less contact with the biological father and less intense supervision by the (relatively more burdened) custodial mother in single-parent families as compared with two-biological-parent families. It is not at all clear, however, whether this factor leads to a little loss in children's well-being in a large number of single-parent families or a large loss in only a few of them. The latter is more consistent with the conventional liberal outlook

that many single-parents can do as good a job of child rearing, and some do a better job, than do couples.

Moreover, liberals tend to see the focus on nontraditional family structure as starting at altogether the wrong end of things. When they look out across American families today, they are foremost struck by the staggeringly high rate of child poverty (especially in single-parent families)—probably the highest child poverty rate of all industrialized nations⁴⁴ in a country that prides itself as being the most powerful and in many respects the richest in the world.

When liberals start to look for explanations for this appalling situation, they first fasten, not on changing family structure, but on joblessness and pervasive racism. Therefore, instead of faulting our current policies as responsible for promoting the breakdown of the traditional family, liberals see them as failing to address the actual needs of children and families and unfairly stigmatizing those victims who are not to blame for their circumstances. So, while conservatives might draw on McLanahan and Sandefur's findings to point to the desirability of men and women staying together for the sake of the kids, liberals are more likely to ask why more is not being done collectively to get more income into the hands of single-parent families. Given McLanahan and Sandefur's findings, more income could help reduce outcome differences for children not only directly but also indirectly by reducing the need for new single-parents to move out of the neighborhood.

Furthermore, among many liberals, there is a celebration of diversity of family forms and hence a rejection of the conventional family structure (married couple, husband employed, wife at home) as the social ideal to which everyone should aspire. From this perspective, there is considerable long-term social benefit to be gained from dislodging what many see as the implicit patriarchy of the traditional nuclear family even if, during the transitional period, there might be some modest cost to children raised in the nonconventional manner (e.g., by single mothers or by lesbian couples). This outlook may also cause liberals to discount the significance of McLanahan and Sandefur's findings. For example, the 50 percent greater high school dropout rate they found for children in single-parent families as compared with children living with two biological parents may feel rather different when it is understood that we are talking about a 19 percent dropout rate as compared with a 13 percent rate. So while liberals are not likely to say that it is unimportant to have six more children graduate out of every one hundred who attend school, still when put this way they may conclude that the worse outcome for children in single-parent families is really rather modest.

The bottom line is, as the following section shows, these very different outlooks on today's American families make it extremely difficult for liberals and conservatives to reach any sort of genuine agreement on the direction of family policy toward children living with single-parent.

Recent Policy Reforms and Current Initiatives

Child Support

In the past few years, much policy reform has been directed toward getting noncustodial parents to put more money into the hands of single-parent families. Put more simply, the goal has been to force absent fathers (often termed "deadbeat dads") to transfer more of their income to their children and the children's mothers. One reason for these policy changes is that they are among the few solutions on which most liberals and conservatives can agree.

Congress has on several recent occasions prodded states to change their child support regimes in a number of ways. The size of the noncustodial parent's support obligation has been considerably increased in most states. At the same time, the calculation of the sum is now largely determined by formula, instead of being left to the discretion of a local judge in the course of adjudicating a divorce or paternity determination. On the collection side, most of the effort has been directed toward making the process routine, especially through the automatic withholding of support obligations from wages and the direct payment of such obligations over to the custodial parent (or to the welfare authorities if the mother is on welfare).

Nonetheless, child support enthusiasts are by no means satisfied. Although inflation of late has been very low, in the past even moderate inflation has quickly undermined the value of child support awards, necessitating difficult courtroom battles over modifications. Hence efforts are now underway to establish a regime of automatic modification based upon changing costs of living. On another front, too many noncustodial fathers remain unidentified, at least formally. The latest idea is to post officials in hospital nurseries on the theory that when unmarried men come in to see their newborns they can be coaxed into admitting paternity on the spot.

An important part of the child support shortfall occurs in the welfare population. There, however, increased support collection generally will benefit the taxpayers, not children in single-parent families. This is because welfare recipients have had to assign their child support rights to the government and have been entitled to keep only fifty dollars a month from what is collected. This helps explain why fathers of children on welfare are not so eager to pay the child support as they might otherwise be. Indeed, a fair proportion of these absent fathers now secretly and informally pay support directly to the mothers of their children,⁴⁵ because, if the welfare department managed to capture those funds, the outcome would be the enrichment of the public fisc at the expense of poor children. While redirecting those funds from mothers to the welfare department would strike a blow against what now qualifies as illegal fraud, the result would nonetheless be the further impoverishment of children.

Moreover, one has to be realistic about collecting increased child support from absent fathers. Many of them have new families and new children to support. While some people might find it irresponsible for them to have taken on these new obligations, the practical reality is that we are often talking about shifting money from one set of children to another. In other cases, the nonpaying father is unemployed. Should he be forced to find work, or be placed in a public service job, so that income could be siphoned off to satisfy his child support obligation? Some are now suggesting this very solution.⁴⁶ Yet, what is to happen when the men fail to comply with their work obligations? Are we going to imprison thousands of these dads?⁴⁷

In any event, child support policy largely strikes at the single-parent family issue after the fact—even though some men arguably might be deterred from fathering children or abandoning their families if they knew they faced substantial, and nearly certain, collection of child support obligations. Other current policy initiatives are more openly “prevention” oriented.

Divorce Law

Among those who have concluded that it often would be better for the children for the parents to stay together, rather than split up, it is not surprising that no-fault divorce has become a target for reform. The picture these critics present is that some parents selfishly divorce even though they realize they are putting themselves ahead of their children and are likely to harm their children as a result—or else they blithely divorce unaware of the harm they will do to their children. The goal of the critics, they say, is to make divorce more difficult in hopes of helping the children.⁴⁸

The problem, however, arises in deciding exactly how to change divorce law. The most sweeping proposal is simply to bar divorce entirely to those with minor children. This solution, however, carries costs that most people would find unacceptable. Suppose one spouse (stereotypically the father) is guilty of domestic violence against the children and/or the other spouse. It seems unimaginable today that, in such circumstances, we would insist that the victim spouse remain married. To be sure, the divorce ban advocates might concede that she would be entitled to a legal separation and/or a protective order keeping him away from the children. But, at that point, to continue to prevent divorce seems gratuitously nasty. Since keeping the parents together for the sake of the children has been abandoned in this case, the only real consequence of the bar would be to prevent the victim spouse from remarrying—and perhaps giving the children a stable new family relationship. So, too, suppose one spouse abandons the family. What good is possibly served by denying the other spouse a divorce and thereby keeping her from remarrying—especially if the alternative is for the abandoned spouse to live with, but not marry, her new love?

These examples make clear that a complete ban on divorce by those with minor children is unsound and unlikely to be adopted. They also demonstrate that even to enact a strong presumption against divorce with special exceptions will inevitably embroil the spouses and the courts in wrangles over individual fault, a prospect that makes most of those familiar with the operation of pre-no-fault divorce law shudder. After all, if you made an exception for physical abandonment, wouldn't you have to make an exception for emotional abandonment especially if it were combined with extramarital love affairs? And if you made an exception for physical abuse, why not for emotional abuse?

This prospect has caused some of those who want to make divorce law tougher to retreat to the seemingly simple idea that only unilateral divorce would be banned. If one spouse objected, the other could not force a divorce on the one who wanted to remain married. These critics claim that American law seems to have jumped directly from fault-based divorce to unilateral divorce, when it might have stopped in between by allowing divorce only by mutual consent.⁴⁹

Proponents argue that requiring both parents to agree will put an extra roadblock in front of indiscriminate sacrificing of the child's interest. They seem to have in mind the father who gets tired of marriage and family and selfishly wants out—perhaps because he has a new “girlfriend.” But, if so, how useful really is it to give his wife a veto? If, as a result, he resentfully stays in the marriage, will this actually be good for the children? Alternatively, what is to prevent him from simply moving out without obtaining a divorce, perhaps taking up housekeeping with another woman? Again the rule really only means that he cannot remarry. Furthermore, this regime is already the law now in the State of New York, and yet we certainly don't hear no-fault divorce critics arguing that everything would be so much better if only the more liberal states tightened up their rules to match New York's.

A final restrictive approach would impose a substantial waiting period (say, two or more years) before one parent could obtain a unilateral divorce and/or insist on marriage counseling before filing for divorce. Although some have argued that either of these measures would benefit the children, here again there is reason to be skeptical. A long waiting period could cause people to file for divorce even more quickly than they now do, or, in any event, simply to treat the rule as a time-hurdle to remarriage. Offering willing parents marriage counseling is probably a good idea, and legislatures might consider making this a mandatory benefit in all health insurance plans (as part of the coverage of mental health services generally). But coerced counseling is likely to have a low payoff.

This analysis suggests that legal change intended to make divorce more difficult to obtain would largely be a symbolic matter and is not a very promising way actually to help children avoid harms that may come from divorce. Perhaps more promising, then, are incentive approaches designed to help cooperative parents who are at risk of divorce to stabilize

their marriage. These could include financial support provided through the tax law. For example, Republicans recently pushed through a universal child tax credit of \$500 a year, although many Democrats opposed this on the ground that it means spending too much money on families who do not need help. They would rather spend the money through an expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, which is better tailored to low-earner families. Other reformers would prefer to direct the financial rewards to young families who are first-time home buyers. Yet other intervention strategies designed to help maintain marriages are educational and psychological oriented. Some of them are discussed in the chapter by Carolyn and Philip Cowan.

Unmarried Childbearing

A different prevention strategy is to try to discourage women from becoming single unwed mothers at the outset. From the rhetoric one hears these days, this is widely understood to be a problem of "teenage pregnancy" and liberals and conservatives do seem united in their determination to reduce its incidence. However, as the chapter by Jane Mauldon shows, it is important to keep in mind that minors (girls under age eighteen) actually account for a rather small share of mothers of children born out-of-wedlock. To be sure, hardly anyone would argue that it is desirable for a young woman (or for her child) to give birth when she is under age sixteen (although births to females that young remain, statistically, rather unusual events). Moreover, recent research shows that a very significant share of young teen pregnancies involve men who are by no means "age peers" of the pregnant girls. It is not simply a case of two fifteen-year-olds "fooling around" and carelessly getting the girl pregnant; rather, all too often, the father is an adult male.⁵⁰ Hence for a large proportion of these very young women, we are, candidly, talking about sexual abuse prevention. Yet given the staggering amount of child and spousal abuse generally in our society, it is, alas, not surprising that we also are not very effective at preventing the abuse that causes a young teen to get pregnant.

Some have argued for a return to statutory rape prosecutions—in which the girl's youth makes her legally incapable of giving consent to sexual relations. Over the past two decades most district attorneys seem to have abandoned bringing these cases. The renewed hope is that threatening the predators with the criminal law could discourage their reckless procreation. To that end, Florida, for example, recently passed tougher statutory rape laws for cases where there is a substantial gap in the ages of the parties, and Georgia passed stronger minimum prison sentences for statutory rape. It is easy to be enthusiastic about this idea if you do not have to worry about funding it, or if you imagine that the mere threat of prosecution would alter the men's conduct dramatically. But once we picture the result as putting large numbers of inappropriate fathers in prison, the idea becomes much less attractive.

Again, therefore, it might be more productive to deal with the problem through positive measures rather than with threats. If these young men faced better job prospects, they would also be better candidates to marry adult women closer to their own age. With these two more desirable outlets for displaying their masculinity, perhaps many fewer of them would be drawn to the idea of preying on underage girls to demonstrate their virility.

Nonetheless, many policymakers will despair at the prospect of effectively controlling the conduct of men and so will return their focus to young women. As Jane Mauldon's chapter emphasizes, one promising strategy is to provide young women with better access to sex education, contraception, and abortion. These ideas, however, begin to divide liberals and conservatives. Obviously, many conservatives find abortion (and sometimes contraception) immoral; and often they argue (even in the face of evidence to the contrary) that, in practice, this strategy will only increase premarital sex, something they also oppose on moral and/or pragmatic grounds. In any event, information alone is unlikely to affect the behavior of those young women who, however misguided, want to get pregnant to demonstrate their love for the guy—or for that matter the conduct of the guy who wants to give her a baby to prove he loves her.

One possible way to change young women's preferences is to bribe them not to get pregnant. Planned Parenthood, a private organization, has actually experimented with programs like this, and some say they work—not so much because of the financial reward given to teenage girls who do not get pregnant, but because of the peer pressures that arise from many teens being in the program together, say, through their school.⁵¹ But widespread implementation of such a scheme would be a very tricky business. If you were not extremely careful about whom you bribed, you would end up spending most of the money on those who were not really at risk of pregnancy in the first place. Moreover, conservative ideology generally resists the idea paying people to do what conservatives believe they have the moral duty to do anyway.

If it is not easy to gain consensus in favor of public policies of these sorts, what about solutions that take a harsher stance against pregnant young teens? Schools could return to their prior practices of threatening to expel pregnant teens. Poor teenagers could be told that if they got pregnant, they would under no circumstances be given money to move out of their home (as AFDC has traditionally allowed them to do). The state could make clear that very young women who had babies would be deemed unfit parents and have their children taken away and adopted or, if necessary, raised in orphanages. If a package of these provisions worked completely to stop young teens from getting pregnant, it might be a popular solution. But that is an implausible outcome. Even a 50 percent reduction in the pregnancy rate would be heralded by most policy analysts as a dazzling success. The upshot, however, is that the social costs of imposing the penalties on those who would remain undeterred would be

very high. The teen mothers would be much worse off than today—less educated, perhaps abused at home, and poorer—and the children they bear would, in turn, also suffer. Or else the public would face huge new expenses for foster and institutional care of children removed from their mothers. Maybe we could distract teens from sex by offering to them other enjoyable activities during those parts of the day when they otherwise tend to go unsupervised. But exactly what those distractions should be is not altogether clear, and anyway conservative antipathy toward new spending as well as conservative sneering at analogously motivated “midnight basketball” programs suggest that this approach is also unlikely to win bipartisan support.

Welfare Reform

The traditional outlook from staunch liberals is that single-parents should be entitled to the same recognition and largely the same treatment whether they became single-parents through the death of their spouses, through divorce, or by having a child when unmarried.

Should that entitlement include an entitlement to cash so long as they have a child in their care? Although that had seemed to be the liberal view for many years, of late this is no longer so certain. Liberals (like conservatives) do seem generally pleased about increased efforts to get cash to single-parent families through the private child support system; and although almost no one talks about it, liberals (and conservatives) seem wholly pleased with Social Security’s payment of cash to single widows with young children in their care (even though this benefit arguably deters widows from remarrying). Yet, of late, Democrats have joined with conservatives in calling for radical changes in our welfare system.

In the past, from the liberal side, the call for reform usually emphasized *increasing* cash benefit levels, reducing intrusion into the lives of single mothers who receive AFDC, and ending the stigma (to the extent possible) attached to the program and its participants. But no longer. At least our current Democratic president and most of our Democratic national legislators have been playing a new tune—although this has led to criticism that they have abandoned liberal principles.

Is there then hope for a new liberal-conservative consensus on welfare policy? On paper it may appear that there is, because late 1996 yielded a strongly bipartisan welfare reform law that President Clinton signed, after earlier vetoing measures he said were too harsh. But what sort of reform is this?

During the debates, both sides said that long-term dependency on welfare is a bad thing for poor women and their children. While it has been repeated so often that it sounds almost self-evident, this principle is actually a bit puzzling. After all, long-term dependency on child support or on Social Security does not attract the same criticism.

Perhaps the real point is that it is now thought unacceptable for able-bodied women to be supported by taxpayers while remaining out of the paid labor force for so long. Although this is a complete reversal of the underlying basis for the original Mothers’ Pensions scheme, the role of mothers in our society generally has changed radically during the course of this century. And mothers receiving AFDC appear from official records to be working a great deal less than other mothers.

One has to be very cautious in making comparisons here, however, to say nothing of what policy changes should follow from the comparison. For example, it is much easier for single mothers receiving child support or Social Security to combine that income with wages than it has been for AFDC recipients. Earnings just supplement child support, and for those widows on Social Security substantial part-time employment is possible before benefits are reduced. By contrast, as noted earlier, in AFDC most of one’s wages has simply gone back to the government to reduce one’s welfare check.

Without coercion, society might get many more single women voluntarily to enter the paid labor force if it were more advantageous to work. For example, if all regular jobs carried health insurance, and if the collective support we provide for public schools were extended to include preschools and day care for working parents, then not only would many of those single-parents who now work be better off, but also many of those now living on welfare would find the alternative far more attractive. So, too, if the rules about combining welfare and wages were more like the rules for combining child support or Social Security and wages, more single mothers would probably choose to work at least part time. But all these reforms would also cost money at a time when all politicians, and especially conservatives, are trying to reduce federal public spending.

It is also true that a significant share of women who have been receiving welfare are not able-bodied and available for work in the way that might be hoped. Some are mentally disabled, others have very low educational attainment and no work experience, still others are abusers of drugs and alcohol, and so on. This does not mean that most mothers who have been on AFDC cannot work, but it does mean that if all welfare recipients were all cut free to seek work themselves, many would find it impossible to obtain jobs on their own.

What President Clinton’s advisors discovered, therefore, is that if we are going to force AFDC recipients to work, we are going to have to create a lot of jobs for them, often public service jobs. But any jobs strategy that true liberals are likely to endorse will involve much higher administrative costs, new child care costs, education and training costs, and substantial wage subsidies. That means lots more public spending than simply sending a monthly check to these mothers. But for conservatives, “ending welfare as we know it” was decidedly not meant to impose new

financial burdens on the taxpayers. As a result, it looked as though it was not going to be easy to achieve a political consensus on getting most poor single mothers into the workforce.

Of course, simply cutting off all welfare would cause some women to take paid jobs (and make some welfare mothers now secretly working live on those wages and not the combination of earnings and welfare). But just as we saw with proposals for harsh treatment of teen parents, the anguish comes when we think about those who are not going to succeed in the private jobs market. As always, we need to be realistic, and not overly optimistic, about the behavioral responses we are likely to achieve through policy reforms.

To be sure, some of these women and their children would be taken care of by their extended families (frequently to the detriment of the other children in those families). Perhaps a few would be deterred from having children in the first place, and a few others would wind up holding their marriages together. Private charity could make up some of the remaining gap, but hardly all of it. But what about the rest?

In the face of these difficulties, the Congress and the president decided to "punt." The 1996 welfare reform law eliminates the federal entitlement to welfare and kicks the problem back to the states. Under the compromise, no longer will the federal government match state welfare spending according to a formula. Instead, the states are to have great freedom to design their own welfare programs. To finance them, they are to receive a lump sum (a so-called block grant) from Washington to which they must, at least during the early years, add some of their own money. (In the short run, because AFDC rolls nationally have been declining along with the strong economy, the federal block grant is a monetary bonanza for many governors).

In principle, under the new policy few recipients are supposed to be allowed to remain on cash assistance for more than two years at a time or five years in a lifetime. The states have been given demanding, short-term targets as to the share of their welfare caseload that has to be put into the workforce—on pain of losing some of their block grant funding. Absent an unexpectedly huge growth in the number of jobs available in the private economy, however, it is fair to assume that before long the states will be in a pinch. With insufficient funds to create public service jobs to place poor people in, states are likely to face the hard choice of cutting benefit levels for everyone or else actually cutting off aid to destitute people who have no job and no job prospects.

No one wants American cities and towns to look like those third world places that are filled with children begging in the streets. Yet the 1996 welfare reform law risks just that outcome—which is why, although the president and most Democrats endorsed it, members of Congress who call themselves liberals generally opposed it. The upshot is that, while this reform may have taken "welfare" off the table as a political issue in the 1996 election, it may well be back on in 2000.

Refocusing the Policy Perspective

When it comes to single-parent families, much of our current policy focus is on parents: whether they divorce, whether they pay child support, whether they have children outside of marriage, whether they work, and so on. Suppose instead that policy attention were aimed at the *children* in single-parent families. For example, as we have seen, if a child's breadwinner parent dies, the government ordinarily assures that child far better financial security than it does if that child's breadwinner parent is simply absent from the home: Social Security steps in to satisfy the deceased parent's obligation to have provided life insurance but not the absent parent's duty to provide child support.

Comparable treatment for the latter group implies some sort of publicly funded "child support insurance" scheme. Plans of this sort (including those that would expand Social Security in exactly this way) have in fact been proposed in recent years, most notably by Irwin Garfinkel, although so far at least they have not won widespread endorsement.⁵² This sort of scheme could assure all children living in single-parent families with equal financial support—say, up to the poverty level. Or, like Social Security and private child support obligations, the benefits could be related to the absent parent's past wages. In either case, unlike the rules that have governed AFDC, earnings by the custodial parent could supplement rather than replace the child support benefit.

Such a plan could be financed by general revenues or Social Security payroll taxes. But it might also be funded, at least in substantial part, by absent parents, thereby making the plan one that guarantees that a suitable level of child support will actually be provided and makes up the shortfall when the collection effort fails. Were this second approach adopted, not only should it dramatically reduce our sense of the cost of the plan but also it should offset any tendency that the plan might otherwise have to increase divorce.

It is important to emphasize that a plan like this would much improve the lot of both many children who in the past have been dependent on AFDC and large numbers of children with working-class and even middle-class mothers whose absent fathers now default on their child support obligations. It must be conceded, however, that in view of the direction of recent welfare reform, the prospects at the moment are not favorable for any new initiative to provide cash for children in single-parent families.

A different child-centered approach, therefore, is to try to assure all children with essential goods by means other than providing cash. Ought not all American youths live in decent housing, obtain a quality education, receive adequate food, have access to decent health care, and so on? This is not the place to detail the many alternative mechanisms by which these critical items might be delivered. What needs emphasizing, however, is that any program guaranteeing these sorts of things to all chil-

dren would vastly disproportionately benefit children now living in single-parent families. Moreover, if we can keep the focus on the needy and innocent members of the next generation, perhaps we can escape ideological battles over the worthiness of these children's parents. This is possibly a naive hope, but one that may be enhanced when the thing delivered to the child's family is other than money: witness the greater public and legislative popularity of the federal food stamps program and federal aid to elementary and secondary education as compared with the now-decimated federal welfare program.

The many policy reforms discussed here are unlikely to have large impacts on people like Jackie Kennedy, Marcia Clark, Madonna, and Murphy Brown. But ordinary single mothers (and their children) who are in analogous situations have a great deal at stake.

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3

Families Started by Teenagers

Jane Mauldon

Introduction

Families in the United States are more diverse than they have ever been, and almost every type of family has its proponents—with the exception of families started by teenagers. In late-twentieth-century America, teenagers are not supposed to have children. "Adolescent parenthood"—the phrase only entered the lexicon of social problems in the early 1970s—is a problem almost by definition. Adolescents do not have the rights and responsibilities of adults; parenthood is quintessentially an adult role; ergo, adolescents should not be parents.

But many are. Nearly one million teenagers become pregnant each year in the United States and about a half million give birth. About 7 percent of women are parents before they turn eighteen, and 20 percent are before age twenty; about 13 percent of all births are to women under age twenty. The proportion of teens giving birth has fluctuated modestly over the past twenty-five years,¹ hovering around fifty or sixty births each year per one thousand teens aged fifteen to nineteen.² Despite the long-term stability of the teen birth rate, teenage parenthood has been elevated to the status of a "crisis" in the list of problems facing America today. In his 1995 State of the Union Address, President Clinton called it "our most serious social problem." Whether and in what ways the facts warrant such extreme concern is the subject of this chapter.

Teen parenting appears problematic for many reasons, but chiefly because it is, from a middle-class perspective, premature. Adolescents should