Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars
Briefing Report

Single Parenthood and Children's Well-Being

University of Wisconsin-Extension
Center for Excellence in Family Studies
School of Human Ecology
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Single Parenthood and Children's Well-Being

Second Edition

Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars
Briefing Report

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October 1993

University of Wisconsin-Extension
Center for Excellence in Family Studies
School of Human Ecology
University of Wisconsin-Madiso

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the:
Helen Bader Foundation, Inc.
The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation

Table of Contents

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"Single Parenthood and Children's Well-Being" is the 2nd seminar in a series designed to bring a family focus to policymaking. This seminar featured the following speakers:

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Family Impact Seminars have been well-received in Washington, D.C., by federal policymakers, and Wisconsin is one of the first states to sponsor the seminars for state policymakers. Family Impact Seminars provide state-of-the-art research on current family issues for state legislators and their aides, Governor's Office staff, state agency representatives, educators, and service providers. Based on a growing realization that one of the best ways to help individuals is by strengthening their families, Family Impact Seminars analyze the consequences an issue, policy, or program may have for families.

Each seminar is accompanied by an in-depth briefing report that summarizes the latest research on a topic and identifies policy options from across the political spectrum. Copies are available at Extension Publications, 630 West Mifflin Street, Room 170, Madison, WI 53703, (608) 262-3346 (voice and TDD); (608) 265-8052 (fax).

"Building Policies That Put Families First: A Wisconsin Perspective"	March 1993
"Single Parenthood and Children's Well-Being"	October 1993

Executive Summary
Single Parenthood and Children's Well-Being

About half of all children born today are expected to spend some time in a single parent family before reaching age 18. Recent evidence suggests that children from single parent families do less well, on average, than children who live with both of their parents. These findings do not mean that every child growing up in a single parent family will do worse than a similarly-situated child in a two-parent family. What these findings do mean is that single parenthood increases the odds or the risk that children's well-being will suffer.

Children growing up in a single parent household is a more common occurrence in Wisconsin today than thirty years ago. Of all family households with children, the percentage headed by a married couple declined from 94 percent to 78 percent between 1960 and 1990, while the percentage headed by a single woman rose from 5 percent to 18 percent; during the same time period, the percentage headed by a single man rose from 1 to 4 percent. Thus, the number of married couple families with children in Wisconsin declined by 4 percent from 1960 to 1990, while the number of female-headed families rose by 298 percent in that same period. Since these statistics represent only one point in time, they tend to underrepresent the kaleidoscope of family forms that many children experience single parenthood, cohabitation, marriage, divorce, remarriage, and a subsequent divorce.

Over the 1980s, an increasing percentage of Wisconsin single parents were never married, whereas the proportion of single parents who were separated, divorced, or widowed has declined. Since 1970, the percentage of births to unmarried mothers has grown substantially in Wisconsin, representing 25 percent of the live births in the state in 1991, compared with a national rate of 28 percent. Of the 12 Wisconsin counties that exceeded the statewide average of births to single mothers, almost all were in southeastern or northern Wisconsin. The likelihood that a birth to a teenager will be a nonmarital birth has increased almost continuously since 1960.

Children who live with only one of their parents do less well in school, obtain fewer years of education, and have trouble keeping a steady job as young adults. Children from single parent families are six times more likely to be poor. Daughters of single parents are more likely to bear a child out-of-wedlock, divorce, and receive welfare benefits as young adults. Psychological problems and behavior problems are more likely in offspring from single parent or remarried families. In the majority of families, single parenthood seriously disrupts the relationship between children and the noncustodial parent, usually the father.

With few exceptions, single parenthood appears to disadvantage children regardless of race, ethnicity, social class, or sex. Neither the age of the child nor the type of marital disruption appears to make a difference. While single parenthood

doubles or more than doubles the risk that children's well-being will suffer, it is not the major or the only cause of the problems facing children. Even though the rates of serious problems are more than two to three times greater for children in divorced or remarried homes compared to nondivorced homes, the majority of young people from disrupted families finish high school, do not display high levels of problem behaviors, and enjoy reasonable relationships with their mothers.

Understanding why family instability places some children at greater risk is essential in planning programs and policies to promote healthy children and families. As the growing body of research evidence indicates, there is no single cause for the declining well-being of children in single parent families, but rather many. When greater risks are found, the differences appear to result from economic hardship, loss of parental support and supervision, lack of community resources, parental conflict, and life stress and instability. No single explanation accounts for the differences, and some scientific support exists for each of these perspectives. Thus, programs and policies are most apt to be effective if they are comprehensive and multi-faceted, addressing multiple risk factors.

In the spirit of encouraging debate about the potential consequences of a range of policy strategies, the paper briefly summarizes policy proposals from seven different, sometimes contradictory, sources spanning the political spectrum: Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991); Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986); McLanahan and Sandefur (in press); the National Commission on America's Urban Families (1993); the National Commission on Children (1993a, 1993b); Whitehead (1993); and Zill (1983).

The policy options recommended by these authoritative sources are summarized in six categories: promoting strong stable two-parent families, improving the quality of marriage, providing education for parents, putting children first when parents divorce, increasing the economic security of children, and building community resources for children.

The paper concludes by identifying resources in Wisconsin for locating information on family structure; marriage and family counseling; and church/synagogue-based premarital counseling and marital enrichment programs.

Introduction

About half of all children born today are expected to spend some time in a single parent family before reaching age 18. For the first time in history, children are more apt to live in a single parent family for reasons other than the death of a spouse. About one-fourth of all children are born to an unmarried mother; half of the children born to teenagers are born outside of marriage (Cherlin, 1992), although some of these do marry later. Furthermore, it is estimated that about 40 percent of all children under 18 will experience the break-up of their parents' marriage, and 15 percent will witness divorce twice. Increasingly, children experience a kaleidoscope of family forms single parenthood, cohabitation, marriage, divorce, remarriage, and a subsequent divorce (Cherlin, 1992).

Today's children have been caught up in "a tidal wave of family change" (Cherlin, 1992). The main questions this paper will address are what consequences these changes have for children's well-being, and what are the policy implications. About a decade ago, the conventional wisdom was that single parenthood had no long-lasting disadvantages for children. The consequences of divorce, in particular, could be compared to that of a common cold an initial period of acute discomfort followed by a rapid recovery (Whitehead, 1993). In the year following divorce, preschoolers exhibited emotional distress, behavioral problems, and disrupted peer relations; two years after the divorce, however, boys had improved dramatically and girls were showing no more problems than girls in non-divorced families (Hetherington, 1989, 1991; Zill, 1983).

Recent evidence suggests, however, that children from single parent families do less well, on average, than children who grow up with both of their parents. Children who grow up with only one parent are more likely to drop out of school, bear a child out-of-wedlock, and have trouble keeping a steady job as young adults.

Findings such as these are often misinterpreted to mean that two parents are always good for children and that every child growing up with a single parent will be less successful. Statistically, significant findings do not mean that every child growing up in a single parent family will do worse than a similarly-situated child in a two-parent family. Quite to the contrary, some children who grow up in single parent families do better than children who grow up in two-parent families. What these findings do mean is that single parenthood increases the odds or the risk that children's well-being will suffer.

Single Parenthood Households in Wisconsin

Summary Statements

- As in the nation generally, Wisconsin households are less likely to contain children now than was the case thirty years ago.
- Among Wisconsin households that do contain children, proportionately more are headed by single parents today than thirty years ago.
- Judging in part from national data, it is likely that, over the 1980s, an increasing percentage of Wisconsin single parents were never married, whereas the proportion of single parents who were separated, divorced, or widowed declined.
- Since 1970, the percentage of births that are to unmarried mothers has grown substantially in Wisconsin and the nation, although the Wisconsin percentages remain somewhat under the national percentages.
- After a period (1960-1988) of decline in the birthrate among teenagers, the rate has recently started to climb in both Wisconsin and the nation. The likelihood that a birth to a teenager will be a nonmarital birth has increased almost continuously since 1960.

The Percentage of Households Containing Children

As Table 1 indicates, the percentage of households in Wisconsin containing children declined from 49% in 1960 to 36% in 1990. The Table also indicates that the percentage of all Wisconsin households containing a married couple with children has declined faster (from 46% in 1960 to 28% in 1990) than has the overall percentage of households with children.

The Increasing Frequency of Single-Parent Households

Table 2 suggests why the drop in married-couple families with children has exceeded the decline in all households with children: single-parent households have become more common. Of all family households with children, the percentage headed by a married couple declined from 94% to 78% between 1960 and 1990, the percentage headed by a single woman rose from 5% to 18%, and the percentage headed by a single man rose from 1% in 1960 to 4% in 1990.

Table 1

Households with Children Compared to All Households in Wisconsin 1960-1990

	1960	1970	1980	1990
All Households	1,146,040	1,332,907	1,652,261	1,822,118
Family Households with Children				
Number	562,645	607,093	648,344	650,628
Percentage of All Households	49.1	45.5	39.2	35.7
Married-Couple Family Households with Children				
Number	527,377	549,818	550,856	506,018
Percentage of All Households	46.0	41.2	33.3	27.8

Source: U.S. Census data, 1960-1990, reported in Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars, Briefing Report #1 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Center for Family Studies, March 1993).

Table 2

Types of Family Households with Children in Wisconsin 1960-1990

	1960	1970	1980	1990
All Family Households with Children				
Number	562,645	607,093	648,344	650,628
Married Couple with Children				
Number	527,377	549,818	550,856	506,018
Percentage	93.7	90.6	85.0	77.8
Female Headed with Children				
Number	29,681	47,125	84,427	118,004
Percentage	5.3	7.8	13.0	18.1
Male Headed with Children				
Number	5,587	10,150	13,061	26,606
Percentage	1.0	1.7	2.0	4.1

Source: U.S. Census data, 1960-1990, reported in Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars, Briefing Report #1.

Table 3 summarizes this information in a different way, showing the percentage change in various household types between 1960 and 1990. The number of married-couple families with children in Wisconsin declined by 4% from 1960 through 1990. The number of female-headed families rose by 298% in that period, and the number of male-headed families rose by 376%.

Numbers of Children in Single-Parent Households

The 1990 Census indicated that 18.1% of all Wisconsin children resided in households headed by single parents, compared to the 1980 level of 13.5% of children. As Table 4 indicates, the range by county of children in single-parent households extended in 1990 from a low of 9.6% in Taylor County to highs of 57.1% in Menominee County and 38.2% in Milwaukee County. The 1990 rates in thirteen Wisconsin counties exceeded the statewide rate. As Map 1 indicates, the thirteen were generally in northern or southeastern Wisconsin.

Table 3

Percentage Change among Family Household Types in Wisconsin 1960-1990

	1960-70	1970-80	1980-90	1960-1990
All Families with Children	+7.9	+6.8	+0.4	+15.6
Married Couple	+4.3	+0.2	-8.1	-4.1
Female Head	+58.8	+79.2	+39.8	+297.6
Male Head	+81.7	+28.7	+103.7	+376.2

Source: U.S. Census data, 1960-1990, reported in Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars, Briefing Report #1.

Table 4

Percentage of Children in Single-Parent Families in Wisconsin Counties, 1980-1990

County	1980	1990	Percentage Increase
Adams	13.0	20.3	7.3
Ashland	14.6	19.5	4.9
Barron	10.3	15.9	5.6
Bayfield	11.6	16.9	5.3
Brown	12.3	16.2	3.9
Buffalo	9.9	10.8	0.9
Burnett	11.3	18.7	7.4
Calumet	5.5	9.9	4.4
Chippewa	8.7	15.8	7.1
Clark	7.4	9.8	2.4
Columbia	9.9	12.6	2.7
Crawford	8.8	14.4	5.6
Dane	15.1	17.3	2.2
Dodge	8.4	11.9	3.5
Door	8.8	12.4	3.6
Douglas	17.0	25.6	8.6
Dunn	9.8	13.5	3.7
Eau Claire	13.7	17.9	4.2
Florence	8.8	13.2	4.4
Fond du Lac	9.0	13.8	4.8
Forest	11.4	22.5	11.1
Grant	7.5	10.2	2.7
Green	11.2	12.5	1.3
Green Lake	7.2	13.7	6.5
Iowa	7.4	12.2	4.8
Iron	14.9	16.8	1.9
Jackson	9.1	20.0	10.9
Jefferson	9.7	12.2	2.5
Juneau	10.7	11.7	1.0
Kenosha	16.9	20.5	3.6
Kewaunee	6.9	10.0	3.1
La Crosse	13.2	18.0	4.8
Lafayette	4.0	12.2	8.2
Langlade	10.0	13.5	3.5
Lincoln	8.0	15.5	7.5

County	1980	1990	Percentage Increase
Manitowoc	9.4	12.7	3.3
Marathon	9.4	11.4	2.0
Marinette	11.3	14.7	3.4
Marquette	8.8	13.8	5.0
Menominee	19.5	57.1	37.6
Milwaukee	26.5	38.2	11.7
Monroe	9.2	14.3	5.1
Oconto	8.9	13.2	4.3
Oneida	13.3	16.6	3.3
Outagamie	9.6	12.6	3.0
Ozaukee	8.2	10.0	1.8
Pepin	7.2	10.7	3.5
Pierce	8.4	10.7	2.3
Polk	10.2	13.6	3.4
Portage	8.6	13.5	4.9
Price	9.3	13.6	4.3
Racine	16.3	22.6	6.3
Richland	10.4	11.8	1.4
Rock	13.0	22.6	9.6
Rusk	12.4	16.0	3.6
St. Croix	7.2	11.1	3.9
Sauk	11.0	14.6	3.6
Sawyer	14.4	24.0	9.6
Shawano	9.0	11.4	2.4
Sheboygan	9.6	12.9	3.3
Taylor	5.5	9.6	4.1
Trempealeau	9.6	13.3	3.7
Vernon	7.1	12.7	5.6
Vilas	12.3	21.9	9.6
Walworth	13.3	15.3	2.0
Washburn	11.6	15.3	3.7
Washington	8.2	10.6	2.4
Waukesha	8.0	9.9	1.9
Waupaca	8.6	12.6	4.0
Waushara	10.2	14.3	4.1
Winnebago	13.2	16.6	3.4
Wood	11.0	14.4	3.4

Source: U.S. Census, 1980 and 1990

Wisconsin has a lower percentage of children in single-parent households than does the nation as a whole, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Percentages of U.S. and Wisconsin Children in Single-Parent Households 1980 and 1990

	1980	1990
Wisconsin	13.5%	18.1%
United States	17.0%	20.2%

Source: U.S. Census, 1980 and 1990.

Note: These percentages compare children (persons under age 18) in single-parent households to all children, including children residing with parents or relatives, children in institutions, children who are married themselves, and other children not living in a household headed by a parent.

Complexities in the Measurement of Single-Parent Households

Figures from the decennial census on the number of children in single-parent families are point-in-time counts taken in April of each decennial census year. The figures are sometimes thought to misrepresent the prevalence of the single-parenthood experience. At least two forms of undercounting are said to exist. First, many more children experience life in a single-parent family at some point before their 18th birthday than are captured in one point-in-time count. Second, some children counted in the decennial census as living in a married-couple household are not living with both biological parents, but rather with one biological parent and a stepparent.

Of all U.S. children living in married-couple families in 1990, about 16% (as Table 6 indicates) lived in a household with a stepparent.

Table 6

Types of Married-Couple Households with Children, United States 1980-1990

	1980	1985	1990
Biological Mother and Father	83.7%	82.1%	81.5%
Biological Parent and Stepparent	12.8%	14.9%	15.9%
Adoptive Mother and Father	2.9%	1.9%	2.1%
Unknown Mother or Father	0.6%	1.1%	0.4%

Source: U.S House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, 1993 Green Book (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1993), p. 1125; based on data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, P 23, no. 180, "Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the 1990s," 1992.

In another way, however, the decennial census may overstate the prevalence of single parenthood, because a child residing with two cohabiting but unmarried birth parents will be reported as living in a single-parent household. Data from two national surveys (the 1987 Current Population Survey and the National Survey of Families and Households), both of which characterize the United States as a whole but not any individual state, show that over 40% of households with unrelated, opposite-sex adults contained children. In an unknown number of these cases, the two adults would both be biological parents of the resident children.

The Marital Status of Single Parents

The Current Population Survey (CPS), a nationally representative survey conducted annually by the Census Bureau, also reports on the marital status (divorced, separated, widowed, or never married) of single parents. Because Wisconsin's overall rate of single parenthood is close enough to the national rate, CPS statistics may be used to provide a rough description of the Wisconsin situation. In the United States in 1990, as Table 7 indicates, about 39% of children living in a single-parent household resided with a divorced parent, compared to 42% in 1980. The percentage of children in single-parent households living with widowed and separated parents also declined during the 1980s. In contrast, the percentage of children in single-parent households who resided with a never-married parent rose from 15% in 1980 to 31% in 1990. Most of that increase occurred in the first half of the decade.

Table 7

U.S. Children Living with One Parent, by Marital Status of Parent
1980-1990

	1980	1985	1990
Never Married	14.6%	25.7%	30.6%
Married, Spouse Absent	31.3%	25.6%	23.7%
Widowed	11.8%	7.5%	7.1%
Divorced	42.4%	41.2%	38.6%

Source: U.S House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, 1993 Green Book (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1993), p. 1120; based on data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20.

Births to Single Mothers

One relevant figure available annually from state vital records agencies is the percentage of births to single mothers. In interpreting this data, it may be worth remembering that, in the United States as a whole, according to the CPS, 29% of births to unmarried white women and 18% of births to unmarried black women were to cohabiting women in the period from 1970 to 1984 (Source: U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, 1993 Green Book, p. 1128).

Over the last three years for which published records are available in Wisconsin, births to single parents have represented 23-25% of all live births in the state (23% in 1989, 24% in 1990, and 25% in 1991). This is slightly below the national rate of 28%. Table 8 summarizes recent state and national rates.

Table 8

Births to Unmarried Mothers as a Percentage of All Births

	1970	1980	1990
Wisconsin	8.6%	13.8%	24.0%
United States	10.7%	18.4%	28.0%

Sources: Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics 1988, p. 27; Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Center for Health Statistics, Maternal and Child Health Statistics, Wisconsin 1990, Table 2.7.2; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means 1993 Green Book, p. 1113.

Table 9 shows the percentage of births to single mothers by Wisconsin county in 1991.

Table 9

Percentages of Live Births to Single Mothers in Wisconsin Counties, 1991

Adams	28	Iowa	13	Polk	20
Ashland	25	Iron	22	Portage	16
Barron	20	Jackson	23	Price	18
Bayfield	21	Jefferson	18	Racine	33
Brown	19	Juneau	23	Richland	22
Buffalo	18	Kenosha	30	Rock	30
Burnett	36	Kewaunee	16	Rusk	19
Calumet	13	La Crosse	22	St. Croix	16
Chippewa	20	Lafayette	19	Sauk	17
Clark	17	Langlade	27	Sawyer	37
Columbia	16	Lincoln	20	Shawano	21
Crawford	22	Manitowoc	20	Sheboygan	15
Dane	18	Marathon	14	Taylor	16
Dodge	17	Marinette	17	Trempealeau	17
Door	18	Marquette	25	Vernon	13
Douglas	31	Menominee	74	Vilas	32
Dunn	18	Milwaukee	45	Walworth	19
Eau Claire	19	Monroe	22	Washburn	21
Florence	15	Oconto	19	Washington	12
Fond du Lac	19	Oneida	21	Waukesha	10
Forest	26	Outagamie	15	Waupaca	23
Grant	18	Ozaukee	7	Waushara	18
Green	14	Pepin	15	Winnebago	18
Green Lake	18	Pierce	15	Wood	18
				Wisconsin	25

Source: Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Center for Health Statistics, Maternal and Child Health Statistics, Wisconsin 1991, Table 2.7.2.

As is true with census statistics on children in single-parent families, Menominee and Milwaukee Counties show the highest rates of births to single parents. Map 2 indicates that, of the 12 Wisconsin counties that exceeded the statewide average of 25% of births to single mothers, almost all were in southeastern or northern Wisconsin. Many were the same counties that exceeded the statewide average in single-parent households.

Births to Teenage Mothers

Not all births to teenage mothers in Wisconsin are nonmarital births, but the likelihood that a birth to a Wisconsin teen will be nonmarital has increased significantly over the last thirty years, as Table 10 indicates.

During most of this thirty-year period, the teen birthrate (that is, the number of births per thousand teenage females) was declining, even as increasing percentages of those births were to single mothers. In the mid-1980s, however, in both Wisconsin and the nation as a whole, the long-term decline in the rate of births to teens ended. Over the last few years the rate has begun to rise, as Table 11 indicates.

Table 10

Nonmarital Births to Teenagers as a Percentage of All Births to Teenagers in Wisconsin

	1960	1970	1980	1990
15-17-Year-Old Mothers	18%	53%	71%	90%
18-19-Year-Old Mothers	7%	26%	41%	76%

Source: Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Center for Health Statistics, Health Data Review, Vol. 7, No. 5 (May 1993), p. 4.

Table 11

Teen Birthrates for Selected Years 1960-1991

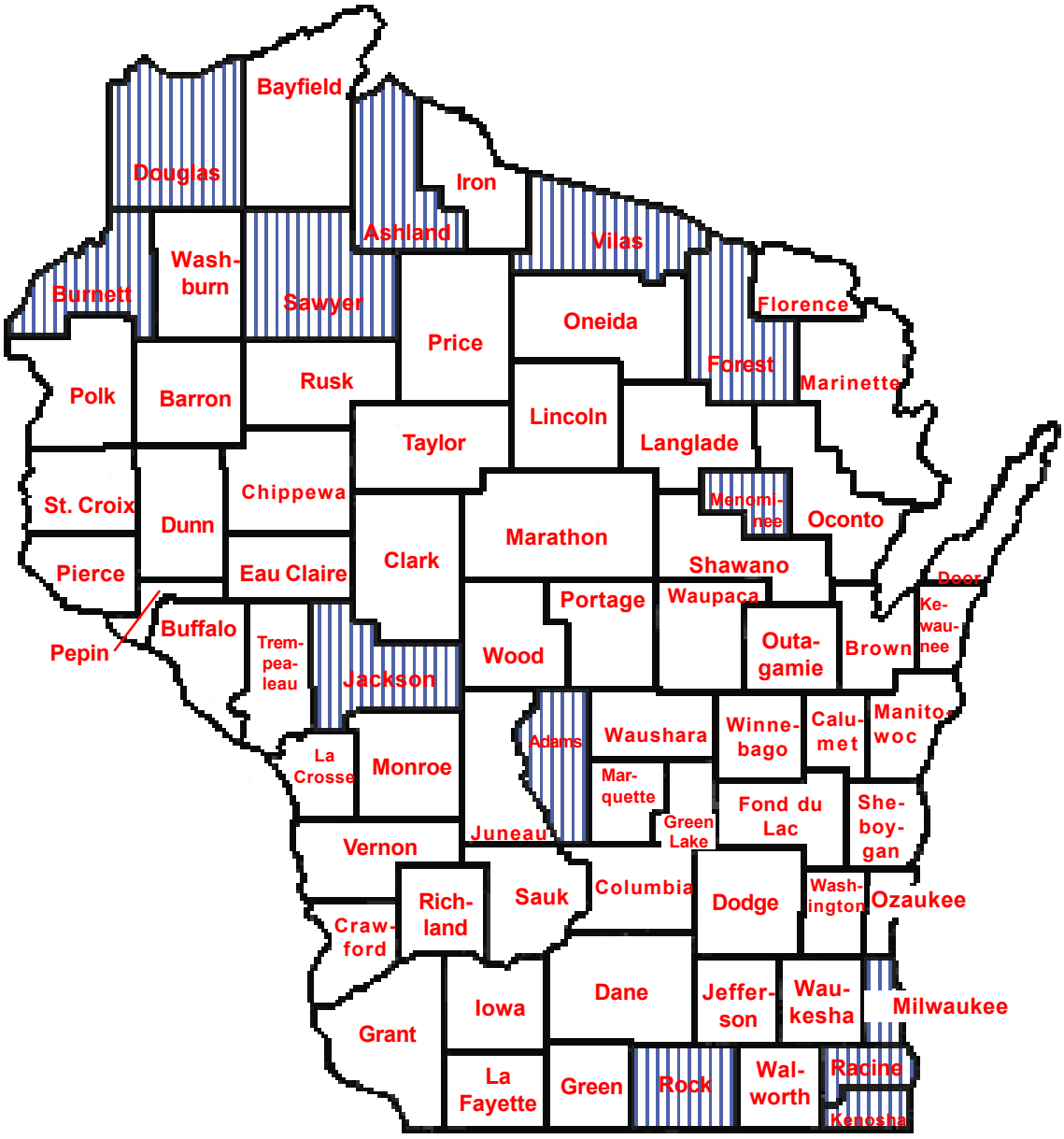
	1960	1970	1980	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991
15-17-Year-Olds										
Wisconsin	23	19	20	22	21	22	23	25	24	25
United States	--	39	32	31	30	32	34	36	38	--
18-19-Year-Olds										
Wisconsin	135	83	66	65	60	60	59	62	66	71
United States	--	115	82	80	80	78	80	84	89	--

Source: Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Center for Health Statistics, Health Data Review, Vol. 7, No. 5 (May 1993), p.2.

Note: Birthrates are calculated as the number of live births per thousand females in the age category. A dash indicates that the data are not available.

Map 1

Counties Exceeding the Statewide Percentage of Children in Single-Parent Households 1990

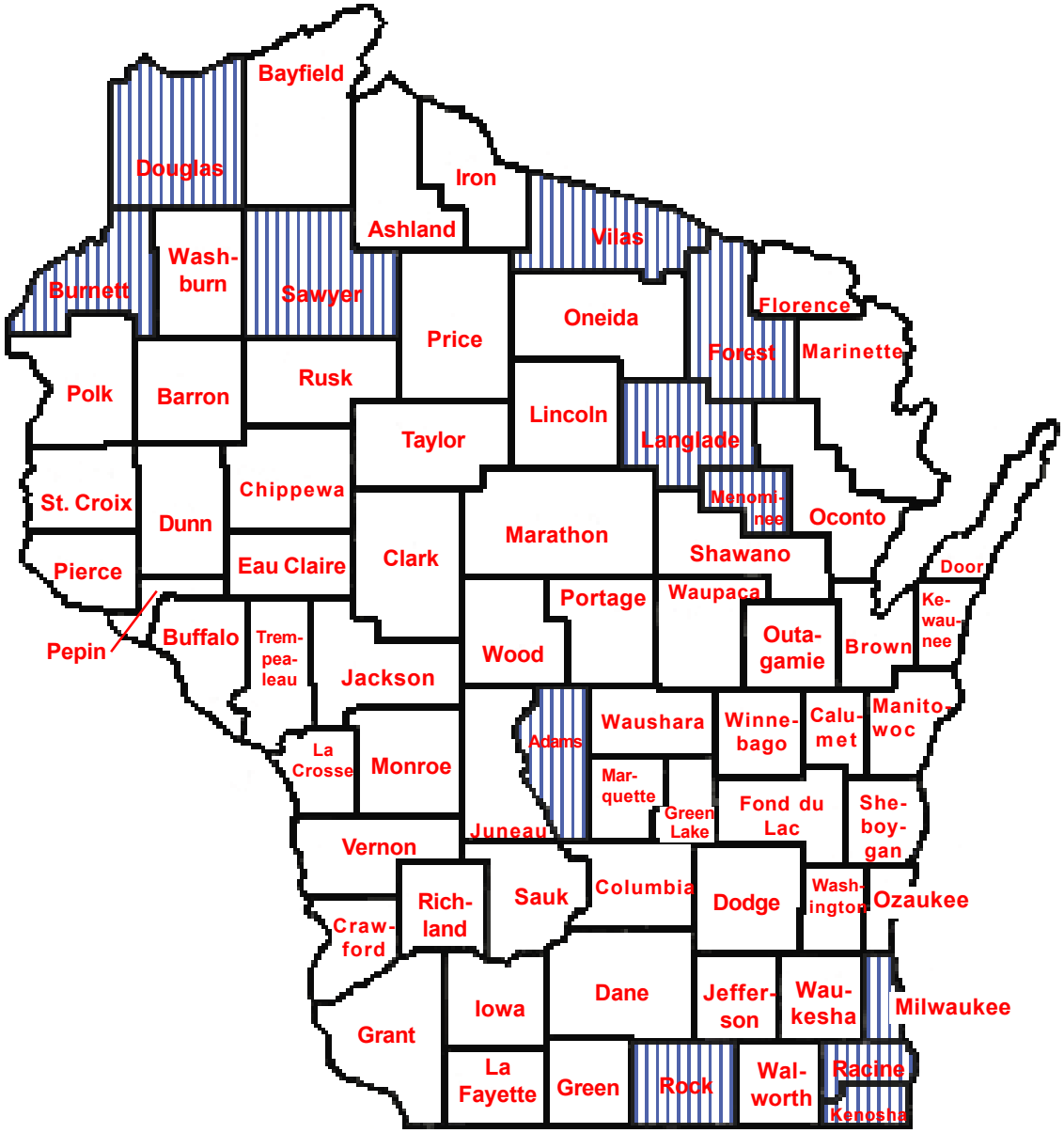


Source: U.S. Census.

Note: The lined counties exceeded the statewide average of 18.1%. See also the note to Table 5.

Map 2

Counties Exceeding the Statewide Average of Births to Single-Parents 1991



Source: Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Center for Health Statistics, Material and Child Health Statistics 1991, Table 2.7.2.

Note: The lined counties exceeded the statewide average of 24%.

What Are the Effects for Children?

A decade ago, the prevailing view was that single parenthood had no long-term effects on children; even though earlier studies suggested negative effects, many were based on small clinical samples and few considered the influence of social class. Even though some studies continue to show no effects, recent evidence from more representative samples suggests children who live with only one parent do less well than children who live with both parents on several measures of child well-being (Amato & Keith, 1991; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Chase-Lansdale, 1989; Hetherington, 1993; McLanahan & Booth, 1989; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). Similarly, a recent review of 92 studies of divorce involving 13,000 children, reported children of divorce experience lower levels of well-being than children from nondivorced families across several domains (Amato & Keith, 1991).

This section reviews how single parenthood affects such child outcomes as educational attainment; poverty status and welfare receipt; sexual activity, childbearing, and family formation; psychological adjustment; conduct problems; and relationships with parents. There are many, sometimes conflicting, studies on family structure and its consequences for children. We do not attempt to review all of the findings, but rather to summarize the areas of research where the findings are most consistent. Furthermore, we examine how widespread these effects are and whether they are large enough to warrant our concern.

When possible, we try to separate out the four different types of single-parent families widowed, divorced, separated, and never married. In 1990, of the children who lived with one parent, 39 percent had parents who were divorced, 31 percent had parents who were never married, 24 percent had parents who had separated, and 7 percent had one parent who had died. These different subgroups have different rates of employment, income, poverty, and welfare receipt. In general, never married mothers are the most likely to be poor, to receive welfare for long periods, and the least likely to work (Ooms, 1992).

At the outset, it is important to point out that these studies cannot rule out the possibility that single parents are different in important ways from those parents who choose to stay together; for example, parents who choose not to marry or to live apart may be less committed to the family, and this difference may be responsible for the negative consequences rather than family structure (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press). Some studies suggest that much of the effect of divorce on child well-being can be attributed to conditions that existed before the breakup occurred (Cherlin, Furstenberg, Chase-Lansdale, Kiernan, Robins, Morrison, & Teitler, 1991), while others contend the effects result from the disruption itself (Morrison & Cherlin, 1992).

Educational Attainment

Children living with only one of their parents do less well in school (Amato & Keith, 1991; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Chase-Lansdale, 1989), obtain fewer years of education, and are twice as likely to drop out of high school as children who live with both parents (McLanahan & Booth, 1989; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press; Zill, 1983; Zill, et al., 1993).

Poverty Status and Welfare Receipt

Children from single parent families are six times as likely to be poor (McLanahan & Booth, 1989) as children from two-parent families; poor families provide a less healthy, safe, and nourishing environment for their children (Ooms, 1992). Young adults from single parent families are also half as likely to find and keep a steady job as young adults from intact families (McLanahan & Booth; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press). Furthermore, the daughters of single mothers are more likely to receive welfare benefits as young adults than daughters from two-parent families (McLanahan & Booth, 1983). A majority of welfare families are initiated when a teen mother gives birth (Ooms, 1992).

Sexual Activity, Childbearing, and Family Formation

Daughters of single parents are three times as likely to bear a child out-of-wedlock (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press; McLanahan & Booth, 1989). As young adults, children from single parent families have a more difficult time achieving intimacy and forming a stable marriage (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Those who do marry are much more likely to divorce (McLanahan & Booth, 1989).

In divorced and remarried families, one recent study indicates that the absence of the father and the presence of a stepfather is related to earlier physical maturity (Hetherington, 1993). For example, girls in divorced families menstruated 4 months earlier than girls in nondivorced families, while girls in remarried families menstruated 8 months earlier than girls in nondivorced families. Furthermore, these early maturing girls were more apt to be sexually active if they lived in a divorced family (65 percent) than in a remarried (54 percent) or nondivorced family (40 percent); early maturation among girls has been linked to involvement in problem behaviors in several studies.

Psychological Adjustment

Psychological problems are two times more likely in children from single mother families and three times more likely in remarried families than in intact two-parent families (Moore, 1992). Approximately 30 percent of teens whose parents had separated or divorced by the time the child was 7 years of age had received

therapy by the time they were adolescents, compared with 10 percent of those in nondivorced families (Zill, 1983). Even young adults, 18 to 22 years olds, were more likely to show high levels of emotional distress if they had experienced family disruptions between birth and age 16 (Zill et al., 1993).

Conduct Problems

Some studies report that offspring from single mother families are more likely to use drugs and alcohol and engage in delinquent acts (Dornbusch, Carlsmith, Bushwall, Ritter, Leiderman, Hastorf, & Gross, 1985; McLanahan & Booth). Similarly, studies of children whose parents divorce report higher levels of involvement in such problem behaviors as frequent alcohol use, binge drinking, daily cigarette use, and illicit drug use (Zill et al, 1993, Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993). Some studies report higher levels of misbehavior, aggression, or delinquency among children from divorced families (Amato & Keith, 1991; Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993), while others do not (Zill et al., 1993).

Relationships with Parents

In a nationally representative sample, children who live with their mother and father report that they feel both their mother and father really care about them. Virtually all children who live in a single parent family believe that their mother cares about them, while just over half feel that their father cares about them (National Commission on Children, 1991). For children experiencing divorce, one of the most important predictors of healthy outcomes is the ability of the child to maintain a good relationship with both parents (Zill, 1983). Unfortunately, in studies of children of all ages, children from divorced families had less positive relations with their mothers and fathers than children from intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991).

For adolescents whose parents separate or divorce, only 1 in 5 are able to maintain a good relationship with one or both parents during adolescence, compared with almost 3 in 5 in nondivorced families. Over half 57 percent of children who experience divorce or separation, however, are able to maintain a good relationship with their mother, while only about one-third have a positive relationship with their father. In nondivorced families, 69 percent have a close relationship with their mother and 66 percent with their father (Zill, 1983). Similarly, youth, aged 18 to 22 years old, were twice as likely to have poor relationships with their mothers and fathers when the parents had divorced (Zill et al., 1993).

In the majority of families, divorce or separation seriously disrupts the relationship between children and the noncustodial parent, usually the father. Nearly half of all children have not seen their noncustodial parent in the past year (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Peterson & Zill, 1986). When children are asked who they include in their family, only half of children with nonresident fathers

included them on their list. Not only is the time fathers spend with their children greatly reduced, but the role of the father also changes. Nonresident parents tend to engage in leisure activities with the child, but rarely help with school work, get involved in decisions affecting the child's upbringing, or exercise control over the child's behavior (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985).

How Widespread Are the Effects?

Single parenthood appears to disadvantage children regardless of race, ethnicity, social class, or sex; single parenthood appears to be related to lower child well-being among Cubans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Puerto Ricans, but not Asians (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press). In the few instances where differences are found, white children and middle class children are more strongly affected than black children. Divorce and remarriage seem to increase risk levels for both males and females (Amato & Keith, 1991; Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993), although children living with the same sex parent seem to do better (Peterson & Zill, 1986).

Nor does the age of the child appear to make a difference (Hetherington, 1991, 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press; McLanahan & Booth, 1989; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Hetherington has followed white, middle class children involved in divorce from 4 years of age to 15. In her earlier studies with younger children, Hetherington (1993) reported that parents and children adjusted reasonably well by two years after the divorce. Yet, in her most recent study, as the children aged into adolescence, those children who were previously functioning well, started to show problem behaviors again. While some studies suggest that divorce may have more detrimental effects during early childhood (Zill et al., 1993) or middle childhood (Amato & Keith, 1991), others contend that the long-term consequences for adult functioning may prove more consequential (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Finally, the type of family disruption does not matter much. Whether children live with a divorced or never married mother, the consequences appear similar according to a recent study using four nationally representative data bases (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press).

Are These Differences in Well-Being Large Enough to Warrant Our Concern?

One researcher in this field argues that single parenthood doubles or more than doubles the risk that children's well-being will suffer. In the health field, a doubling of a risk is considered a substantial hazard. For example, many Americans have lowered their intake of cholesterol to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, even though cholesterol does not double the risk of heart disease (Zill et al., 1993).

Some might interpret the negative outcomes documented above as evidence that divorce and single parenthood are the primary cause of many of the country's most serious problems, including rising high school dropout rates, early childbearing, and juvenile crime. While single parenthood may increase the risk of many of these problems, it is not the major or the only cause (McLanahan and Sandefur, in press). For example, if all children grew up with both parents, births to unwed black teens would drop from 30 percent to 20 percent. If there was no marital instability, the high school dropout rate would decline from 12.5 to 10 percent. Clearly, family structure is an important factor in children's well-being, but not the only factor.

Another way to assess the size of these effects is to determine how many children in each family structure exhibit problems serious enough to score above standard cutoffs in clinical tests. One in ten children in two-parent families exhibit serious problems compared with one in four in divorced nonremarried families, and one in three in remarried families (Hetherington, 1991). Thus, rates of psychopathology are more than two to three times greater for children in divorced or remarried homes compared to nondivorced homes; yet, the behavior of two-thirds to three-fourths of children from disrupted families falls within the normal range. Thus, while the incidence of problem behaviors is higher, a minority exhibit such behaviors; the majority of young people from disrupted families finish high school, do not display high levels of problem behaviors, and enjoy reasonable relationships with their mothers (Whitehead, 1993).

Why Single Parenthood Affects Children

When greater risks are found, we are beginning to develop a better understanding of those factors that differentiate the children in single parent families who develop disturbances from those who do not. Understanding why family instability places some children at greater risk is essential in planning programs and policies to promote healthy children and families. In this section, we briefly summarize five perspectives on the possible pathways through which these effects are transmitted: economic hardship, loss of parental support and supervision, lack of community resources, parental conflict, and life stress and instability.

Economic Hardship

Poverty is the most profound and pervasive factor underlying developmental problems of the young. Roughly, one of two families headed by a single mother is living in poverty compared with one of ten married couples with children (McLanahan & Booth, 1989). Not surprisingly, single parents are twice as likely to report that they worry "all or most of the time" that their total income is not enough to meet family expenses. On average, poor children in mother-headed families are poor for seven years, more than a third of their childhood (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986).

The economic differences result, not only from lower income preceding divorce, but also from the decline in income that accompanies divorce (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press); the effect may differ somewhat for families who start out poor or become poor. Nevertheless, the income of single mothers and their children after divorce is only 67 percent of their income before divorce, while the income of divorced men is 90 percent of the pre-divorce income (McLanahan & Booth, 1989).

In one study using four nationally representative data bases, lack of income emerged as the single most important factor in accounting for the differences in children from single parent and intact families; differences in income are estimated to account for over half of the differences in the educational attainment and steady employment of young adults, and just under half of the differences in nonmarital childbearing (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press). Lack of income, however, does not appear to account for the differences in child well-being between intact and stepfamilies (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press) or in intact and divorced families (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Mother-only families are more likely to be poor because of the lower earning capacity of single mothers, the insufficient benefits provided by the state, and the lack of child support provided from the nonresidential father (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986). Nationally, only 50 percent of mothers were supposed to receive a child support award in 1989; of these, only half received full payment, and a fourth received no payment at all.

Loss of Parental Support and Supervision

Parents who support and supervise children enhance their well-being (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). In fact, poor parental monitoring has proven one of the most powerful predictors of youth involvement in problem behaviors (Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984). Single parents and stepparents monitor their children less closely and know less about where their children are, who they are with, and what they are doing than parents in intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington, 1989; Steinberg, 1986; McLanahan & Booth, 1989; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press).

Single parents are also less involved in their children's school activities and have lower educational goals for their children (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; McLanahan & Booth, 1989; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press), two factors known to jeopardize academic achievement (Steinberg, Brown, Casmarek, Cider, & Lazarro, 1988). Based on recent evidence, single parents who are more involved in school have children who are less apt to experience problems (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993).

These differences in parent support and supervision are estimated to account for 20 to 40 percent of the differences in child well-being between single-parent and two-parent households; stepparents, however, do not make up for a biological parent (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press; Steinberg, 1987).

Lack of Community Resources

Youth who overcome disadvantage are able to rely on a greater number of sources of social support than youth with serious coping problems, including teachers, ministers, older friends, family day-care providers, nursery school teachers, neighbors, or contacts at social agencies (Garmezy, 1983; Werner, 1990; Werner & Smith, 1982). Children from single parent families who do well are more apt to be enrolled in quality schools, extracurricular activities, and church or synagogue programs (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993).

Furthermore, the benefits of a supportive community appear to be strongest for children who are the most vulnerable to begin with (Steinberg, 1989). For example, the number of adult male relatives usually grandfathers and uncles who took a child on outings away from home was related to improved report card scores (Riley & Cochran, 1987); the benefits, however, were restricted to the subgroup with the lowest average grades, single parent boys.

Not only does social support benefit youth, it also benefits parents. Social isolation is well-documented as one of the best predictors of poor parenting. Regardless of culture and social class, a mother is warmer and more emotionally stable when there are more adults around to help (Crockenberg, 1981; Crnic, Greenberg, Ragozin, Robinson & Basham, 1983).

Not surprisingly, the children of single parents do better when the mother receives strong support from nearby relatives, friends, or neighbors; members of religious groups; and staff members of family support and child care programs (Bronfenbrenner, 1991).

Two-parent families tend to live in better neighborhoods and their children are more apt to attend better schools and associate with less deviant peers than single parent or remarried families (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press). Single parents are less likely to report that they consider their neighborhoods excellent or good places to raise children than two-parent families (National Commission on Children, 1991). Limited economic resources may force some families to move and live in neighborhoods with poorer schools and fewer community services (McLanahan & Booth, 1989).

A greater number of geographic moves and lower quality schools and peer groups are estimated to account for 20 to 100 percent of the differences in child well-being. These community resources appear particularly important in accounting for the differences between children living with stepparents and biological parents (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press).

Parental Conflict

This explanation is potentially more useful in explaining the differences in child well-being in divorced or remarried families than never married families. Considerable evidence exists that a conflict-ridden marriage jeopardizes the well-being of children (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Based on this, ending a conflict-ridden marriage may actually boost rather than undermine children's well-being. Recent evidence suggests that children in divorced single parent families do better than children in high conflict, intact families (Amato, 1993; Amato & Keith, 1991; Peterson, 1986; Peterson & Zill, 1986). In fact, a review of 92 studies documented strong and consistent support for the parental conflict explanation of the differences in child well-being between divorced and nondivorced families (Amato, 1993; Amato & Keith, 1991).

While some families are undoubtedly so conflict-ridden and pathological that they cannot adequately care for children, McLanahan and Sandefur (in press) contend that the proportion of families that fall into this category may be small; with half of all children experiencing family instability, it is hard to believe that half of all parents have such conflictual relationships that they are unable to do a reasonably good job of raising their children. In fact, only 1 of 10 children react to their parent's divorce with feelings of relief (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Obviously, this is a complex issue. Some disagreement in a family may be healthy, and a temporary period of conflict between parents is less detrimental to children than persistent conflict or divorce; yet too much conflict can be quite destructive. Furthermore, divorce does not necessarily stop the conflict and it may generate its own conflict; research suggests post-divorce conflict persists between many parents (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Life Stress and Instability

According to this explanation, one stressful life event is not as detrimental to children's well-being as many (Amato, 1993). Family disruptions often entail a number of changes which, taken together, can be more stressful than any one considered alone (i.e. moving, changing schools, loss of contact with the noncustodial parent, and a decline in one's standard of living).

McLanahan and Sandefur (in press) speculate that instability of resources may be as critical to children's well-being as the level of resources. In particular, they suspect that instability may explain why children in stepfamilies are as disadvantaged as children in single parent families despite their income advantage. Children in stepfamilies are exposed to a series of changes in location, income, and people living in the household (i.e. grandparents, partners, stepparents). The support provided by parents who are adjusting to a new marriage and new stepchildren may also be less consistent.

Conclusion

As the growing body of research evidence indicates, there is no single cause for the declining well-being of children in single parent families, but rather many. No single explanation accounts for the differences, and some scientific support exists for each of the five perspectives: economic hardship, loss of parental support and supervision, lack of community resources, parental conflict, and life stress and instability (Amato, 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press). Thus, programs and policies are most apt to be effective if they are comprehensive and multi-faceted, addressing multiple risk factors.

Policy Implications

In this section, we address two basic policy questions. What policy strategies are there to strengthen marriage and prevent divorce? What strategies might ameliorate negative consequences for those children growing up in single parent families? We do not deal specifically with how to prevent nonmarital births, since that is beyond the scope of this report, although some of the policy strategies would apply to this subgroup as well. Up until recently, policymakers and advocates alike have spent most of their time on preventing negative consequences for children who live with one parent. For the first time, however, some policy proposals have begun to address the option of strengthening marriage and preventing divorce (Ooms, 1992).

The intent of this briefing report is not to lobby for specific policies, but rather to encourage debate about the potential consequences of a range of policy strategies. We do not present an exhaustive review of policy options that address the needs of children in single parent families; instead, we briefly summarize policy proposals from seven different, sometimes contradictory, sources spanning the political spectrum: Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991); Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986); McLanahan and Sandefur (in press); the National Commission on America's Urban Families (1993); the National Commission on Children (1993a, 1993b); Whitehead (1993); and Zill (1983). (The background and affiliations of each of the policy sources is found in Appendix A).

The policy options recommended by these seven authoritative sources are summarized in six categories: promoting strong stable two-parent families, improving the quality of marriage, providing education for parents, putting children first when parents divorce, increasing the economic security of children, and building community resources for children.

1. Promoting Strong Stable Two-Parent Families

The National Commission on America's Urban Families (1993) and The National Commission on Children (1993b) urge:

> *".. the formation and maintenance of strong, stable two-parent families not in an effort to disparage single parents but as a way of highlighting the advantages to children of growing up with two parents" (National Commission on Children, 1993b, p. 21).*

Similarly, Zill (1983) contends that other family situations may not be as bad as sometimes portrayed, but none seem as good as a harmonious two-parent family.

Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991) argue that the high rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing are private choices that government policy alone cannot change; reversing the trend away from marriage would require an event of the magnitude of the Great Depression or a large scale grass roots religious revival, not a mere revision of the tax code.

In the past, Whitehead (1993) contends the issue of family structure has been too difficult and politically risky for debate. The core of the debate is not simply scientific evidence, but deeply held and often conflicting values:

> *"How do we uphold the freedom of adults to pursue individual happiness in their private relationships and, at the same time, respond to the needs of children for stability, security, and permanence in their family lives? What do we do when the interests of adults and children conflict?" (p. 48)*

Yet the National Commission on Children (1993b) cites several examples of how public education campaigns have successfully altered public attitudes and private behaviors around issues such as women's right, smoking, AIDS, and the environment.

2. Improving the Quality of Marriage

Some policy analysts suggest it is short-sighted to try to promote marriage without taking steps to improve the quality of marriage. Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991) are skeptical that public policy can have a substantial impact on the divorce rate, but others suggest specific policies to strengthen marriage. Some of these proposals occur at the federal level, others involve state and local initiatives, and some involve the private sector, specifically the church:

- Two recent national commissions suggest marriage enrichment should be provided during critical periods when couples may be most receptive to change at the start of a marriage, the birth of a child, and the illness or death of a family member (National Commission on Children, 1993b; National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993). While many marriage education programs are not well evaluated, one program has followed couples for 5 years. Couples who participated in the program, consisting of 6 sessions 2 to 2 1/2 hours in length, were less likely to separate or divorce and reported fewer instances of physical violence with their spouse than control couples. The program appears to be successful with moderately distressed couples as well as couples married many years before seeking help (Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992). Research suggests the most successful programs encourage a couple to conduct a self-assessment of their relationship and teach skills for strengthening the relationship (National Commission on Children, 1993b).

- Since the majority of marriage preparation courses are sponsored by churches or synagogues, two national commissions propose that seminaries, Bible colleges, and other institutions should give high priority to training in marriage preparation (National Commission on Children, 1993b; National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993).

- To make marriage support more accessible, both national commissions propose that health insurance could provide coverage for marriage and family therapy or accredited pastoral counseling; this coverage could be cost effective based on recent evidence that marital distress depresses the immune system and reduces resistance to disease (Doherty & Campbell, 1990). Employers could also include such services in employee assistance plans (National Commission on Children, 1993b; National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993). For those who complete marriage preparation, marriage license fees could be reduced or income tax deductions could be granted (National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993). Increases in marriage license fees could provide grants to train marriage educators, and to make marriage preparation and enrichment programs more readily available.

- Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991) argue that encouraging mothers and fathers to share childrearing might increase the cost of divorce, thereby promoting marital stability.

- Zill (1983) recommends providing resources and supports that prevent the formation of families that are at risk from the outset. In this same vein, the National Commission on Children (1993b) proposes that parents need to assume responsibility for planning their families and delaying pregnancy until they are financially and emotionally capable to assume the obligations of parenting; although family planning should continue to remain a private matter, public support for family planning services can provide access to all families regardless of income.

- Marriage and family life education should be incorporated into school curriculum and parents should be involved in determining the course content according to the National Commission on America's Urban Families (1993), and the National Commission on Children (1993b).

- Several sources suggest examining laws and regulations to see if they have the unintended consequence of discouraging or undermining marriage. For example, tax laws should be scrutinized to make sure that two parent families don't pay more than single parent families (National Commission on Children, 1993b; National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993; Whitehead, 1993).

3. Providing Education for Parents

Many of these policy sources believe that parents are the first and foremost influence on the development of young people, and that improved education of parents could enhance their ability to protect their children from negative consequences. Parent education was encouraged on several fronts:

- According to two policy sources, parents need to know that, on average, children who live with single parents have a greater likelihood of lower well-being than children who live with both their parents. This, in itself, may be enough to prevent a divorce (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press; National Commission on Children, 1993b).

- McLanahan and Sandefur (in press) propose that parents who choose to divorce need to understand as much as possible about the factors that may "immunize" their children against the negative consequences that sometimes occur. Parents need to know that failing to pay child support has a profound impact on a child's future. Single parents need to recognize that supporting and supervising their children, and staying involved in their schooling buffers children from risk. Remaining in the same home, neighborhood, or school provides a stable environment from which children draw strength and support. While remarriage may improve income, it may also disrupt other family and community resources.

- Three policy sources propose support programs for both parents and children undergoing divorce. States could consider requiring that parents in divorce proceedings attend a parenting class to learn the impact of divorce on children and how to minimize its consequences (National Commission on Children, 1993b; National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993). Support programs for parents also focus on easing adult's psychological adjustment to divorce, legal and financial issues, and finding employment. Sessions for children cover feelings of isolation and stigma, disengaging from parental conflict, and the expression and control of anger. Few have been evaluated rigorously but they appear to hold promise for cushioning the impact of divorce on adults and children (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991).

- Contrary to conventional wisdom, the evidence regarding the importance of maintaining contact between the children and their noncustodial parent, usually the father, is mixed. Despite this, most still recommend strengthening ties to fathers (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993; National Commission on Children, 1993b; Zill, 1983), although some place a lower priority on this than promoting the functioning of the custodial parent and reducing the amount of conflict children are exposed to (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991).

4. Putting Children First When Parents Divorce

While many of the policy sources assert that two-parent families are most desirable for children, they recognize that this will never be a full reality for all of America's children (National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993). Even if our society were to return to the divorce rates of the mid '60s, about one-fourth of all children would still experience the divorce of their parents (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991).

Changes in divorce laws and practices could help children:

- ❖ According to Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991), the custody innovation of the '80s joint legal custody has been less successful than hoped in encouraging fathers to pay more child support or to become more involved in childrearing. Many family law experts are urging legislation that would instruct judges to award custody to the parent who previously assumed a substantial majority of the caregiving. Some favor the primary caregiver standard based on the importance of the attachment of young children to their parents; others favor the standard because it could reduce uncertainty about the outcomes of a custody dispute, thereby lessening the likelihood of conflict between parents.

- ❖ Divorce mediation strives to help parents settle custody disputes in the best interests of the child outside the adversarial atmosphere of the courtroom. Mediation appears to help the majority of parents resolve issues of child custody, physical placement or visitation. Although evidence is limited, mediation may lessen the potential for conflict and it does reduce the likelihood that parents will return to the courts later. Furstenberg & Cherlin (1991) recommend that its use be encouraged, while recognizing that even the most skilled mediators will be unable to reduce animosity among some couples.

  In Wisconsin, couples who are unable to resolve issues on their own are referred by the family court commissioner or the court to the family court mediation program in the county. One legal change that might encourage more use of mediation is allowing couples to meet with the mediator directly without requiring review by the family court commissioner; in Minnesota, parents who are unable to resolve a dispute can voluntarily seek the services of an expediter without going through the court.

- ❖ In litigated divorce cases, two sources recommended that judges determine the best possible package of benefits, income, and services for children before turning to other issues, such as dividing marital assets (National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993; Whitehead, 1993). Many states, including Wisconsin, require child support until age 18, which eliminates the noncustodial parent's responsibility for college costs. According to Whitehead (1993), college costs remain one of the most contested areas of child support, especially for higher income parents.

- To provide more stability for children, McLanahan and Sandefur (in press) propose that custody decisions be based, in part, on the parent's willingness to provide a stable environment. For example, property settlements could be delayed until the child reaches maturity, the family home could be temporarily awarded to the custodial parent (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press), and judges could be given the right to prevent custodial parents from moving out of state if it is not in the best interests of the child.

- Two of the policy sources proposed a two-tier system of divorce, making it harder for adults with minor children to divorce than adults without children (National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993; Whitehead, 1993). Zill (1983) contends, however, that making divorce harder might reduce the number of marital disruptions, but questions whether forcing parents to stay together would actually benefit children.

5. Increasing the Economic Security of Children

According to Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991), the United States has made divorce quicker and easier than in any Western country except Sweden. Yet, compared to other countries, we offer the children of divorce less public support, and, until recently, little assistance in collecting or ensuring child support from noncustodial parents:

> *"The result is that American children face the worst of both worlds: more so than children anywhere else, they cannot rely on either their parents or their government to support them." (p. 97)*

Some fear that increasing the economic well-being of single parent families will increase their numbers. According to Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986), the size of government grants has some effect on prevalence, albeit a modest one. For example, the increase in government benefits between 1960 and 1975 accounted for 9 to 14 percent of the increase of all single mothers, and 30 percent of the increase of poor single mothers. Furthermore, countries like Sweden, Holland, Great Britain, and France do more to economically support single mothers than the United States, but the prevalence is not higher in these countries (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press).

Policy analysts have made several recommendations that would increase the economic security of children:

- **Child Support** - Wisconsin was one of the first states to require that standard child support awards be used, unless a judge objects in writing. Under the Wisconsin guidelines, the standard child support award is based on the following percentage of noncustodial parents' income: 17 percent for one child, 25 percent for two children, 29 percent for three, 31 percent for four, and 34 percent for five or more (Garfinkel, Meyer & Sandefur, 1992). The amount of child support is automatically deducted from noncustodial parents' wages.

  Many nonresident fathers can afford to pay more child support than they currently do (Garfinkel cited in McLanahan & Sandefur, in press). The Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988 took several important steps to establish a more efficient system of child support. For example, the act emphasizes paternity establishment as a prerequisite for obtaining child support, requires states to establish child support for all children and standard child support awards, and initiates automatic withholding of child support obligations.

  This law also requires courts to review child support awards in welfare cases every three years to make adjustments that reflect changes in the noncustodial parent's income. According to Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991), steps should be taken to ensure that this provision is extended to all families. To help ensure that child support continues when the noncustodial parent changes jobs, the National Commission on Children (1993a) proposes that employees be required to disclose whether their wages are subject to child support withholding on the W-4 form.

  The implementation of the 1988 Family Support Act (FSA) at the state and local level is critical, according to the National Commission on Children (1993a). Children Now, an advocacy group in California, provides a model for monitoring the act on issues such as paternity establishment, the number and amount of child support awards, the proportion of cases subject to wage withholding, and interstate enforcement.

- **Assured Child Support** - Collecting private child support will lift some children from poverty but not all, especially those whose noncustodial parent is unemployed or earns low wages. Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986) and others propose that the government should institute a minimum public child support benefit, which would supplement the child support paid by poor fathers (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press; National Commission on Children, 1993a; Whitehead, 1993). For example, if a father pays a certain amount and the amount is less than the minimum assured benefit, the government would make up the rest. In most scenarios, the minimum benefit is projected at $1000, $2000, or $3000 annually for the first child. Currently, Wisconsin and New York have federal waivers to experiment with assured child support, but only New York has begun to do so (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991).

- **Children's Allowances** - Low income families would benefit if the existing tax deduction for children were replaced with an annual children's allowance, a government payment for each child in a family. The existing $2100 tax deduction for each child is worth nothing to poor parents who earn too little to pay taxes, yet is worth $693 for parents in the 33 percent tax bracket (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986; Meyer, Phillips, & Maritato, 1991). Whitehead (1993) proposes raising the personal exemption for young children in lower and middle income families, while the two national commissions recommended enacting a $1000 refundable tax credit for all children through age 18 (National Commission on Children, 1993a; National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993).

- **Job Training** - The Family Support Act provides work and training programs for welfare mothers once their children reach age 3. Whether children are helped or hurt may depend on several factors, according to McLanahan & Sandefur (in press). If child care is good and the family income is higher than when the family was on welfare, then children are likely to be better off. If child care is poor, and the mother is overwhelmed by the demands of work and family, then the child may suffer.

  According to Zill (1983), job training for teenagers and young adults may provide options to early parenthood. Providing job training or work relief to all poor parents, not just single mothers, could help alleviate male unemployment, one of the causes of mother-headed families; furthermore, it could help many fathers contribute to child support for their children, according to several sources (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986; National Commission on Children, 1993a; Whitehead, 1993).

- **Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)** - Welfare reform is at the heart of many proposals to help poor single mothers (Ooms, 1992). Both national commissions contend that Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) may discourage marriage. Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) is available primarily to single mothers and seldom when the father is present and unemployed. Access to other federal assistance programs, such as Medicaid, is tied to AFDC eligibility, serving as a further deterrent to marriage (National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993; National Commission on Children, 1993b).

  In Wisconsin, one component of the new Parental and Family Responsibility Initiative pilot program is to promote marriage by extending AFDC benefits to teen couples with no previous work history (see additional provisions in Wiseman, 1993).

  Several sources propose time-limited welfare benefits with expanded support while women are on welfare for building their skills to become more self-sufficient. (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986; National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993; National Commission on Children, 1993a).

- Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) - The Earned Income Credit (EITC) is a state and federal tax credit for working families who earn too little to pay taxes (National Commission on Children, 1993a; Whitehead, 1993). The Wisconsin Earned Income Tax Credit is a percentage of the federal basic credit and varies according to the number of children in the family. Some have suggested extending the earned income tax credit to noncustodial parents to increase their ability to pay child support.

- Accessible, Affordable Child Care - Quality child care is important for all working parents, but the financial burden is greater for single mothers who spend 17 percent of their weekly family earnings on child care, compared with 9 percent among mothers with partners (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; National Commission on Children, 1993b). Child care assistance would allow single mothers to shop around for quality care.

6. Building Community Resources for Children

Efforts to improve the quality and accessibility of community services will benefit children who live in single parent families more than children who live with both parents. According to McLanahan and Sandefur (in press), children in single parents families will, on average, live in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods and have the least access to public services.

Several of the policy papers cited specific community resources that benefit children:

- **Education** - The greatest influence on reducing the prevalence of nonmarital births in the next generation is the educational attainment of the mother. If a mother completes high school, the probability that her daughter would experience a teen nonmarital birth is reduced by half (An, Haveman, & Wolfe, 1991).

- **Family Support Centers** - Community based family support centers can provide parents with the knowledge, skills, and support they need to raise their children, according to the recent national commissions. These centers can serve as the hub for a variety of efforts to demonstrate the value communities attach to childrearing such as establishing parent education and support groups; sponsoring workshops and speakers on parenting issues at local churches or community centers; or lending clothing, books, and toys to parents with young children (National Commission of Children, 1993b; National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993). According to Bronfenbrenner and Weiss (1983), the intent is to create formal systems of support that generate and strengthen informal systems of support, that, in turn, can reduce the need for formal systems.

- **Workplace Reforms** - According to several sources, workplace reforms that allow parents to balance the competing demands of work and family would be of great benefit to employed single parents; fully one in three single parents report regularly working more than 40 hours per week, compared with one in eight mothers in two-parent families. Family friendly workplace policies include flexible work schedules, parental leave, job sharing, flex-place, compressed work week, gradual reentry to work after childbirth, and lunchtime seminars on parenting and family issues (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993; National Commission on Children, 1993b). Tax credits could be granted to small businesses that offer up to 6 months of unpaid leave for newly born or newly adopted children (National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993).

- **Housing Allowances and Subsidies** - McLanahan and Sandefur (in press) recommend that government housing allowances and subsidies be structured in ways that encourage residential stability.

- **Media Messages** - Many parents contend their job would be easier if efforts were made to reduce the media's messages about sexuality, divorce, and nonmarital childbearing. One way to improve television programming would be to fully implement the 1990 Childrens' Television Act (National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993; Whitehead, 1993).

Wisconsin Resources on Single Parent Families
Data on Family Structure

Information regarding family structure (statistics, numbers, trends) in the state of Wisconsin can be obtained by contacting the following sources:

The Applied Population Laboratory

The Applied Population Laboratory provides all census data for the state of Wisconsin and the United States. They are also a source for mapping data and projections. Census data can be broken down by block through national level.

Department of Rural Sociology
Applied Population Laboratory
UW-Extension
316 Agriculture Hall
1450 Linden Drive
Madison WI 53706
(608) 262-1515

Center for Health Statistics

The vital statistics section provides information on birth; death, marriage, and divorce registration; and fetal death reports. Information is now available for the entire state, as well as by county.

Department of Health and Social Services
Division of Health Statistics
Center for Health Statistics
Vital Statistics Section
1 West Wilson
Madison WI 53701-0309
(608) 267-7818

University of Wisconsin Extension, Cooperative Extension

The UW-Cooperative Extension Family Demographics specialist can provide Wisconsin county census data such as living arrangements, structure, income/poverty, and employment status. Information on trends in the above areas is also available.

Bob Young, Family Demographics Specialist
University of Wisconsin Extension
430 Lowell Hall
610 Langdon Street
Madison WI 53703
(608) 262-7886

WISKIDS COUNT

WISKIDS COUNT is a statewide data project with a compilation of county level data regarding children's education, health, income, delinquency, and family structure. A report is expected in early 1994.

Tom Kaplan
Institute for Research on Poverty
6401 Social Sciences Building
Madison WI 53706
(608) 262-0345

Marriage and Family Counseling

Listings of state licensed psychologists, social workers, counselors, or marriage and family therapists within a geographic region (determined by zip code) can be purchased for $21.20 from:

State of Wisconsin Department of Regulation and Licensing
1400 East Washington Avenue
Madison WI 53703
(608) 266-2112

- Currently (September 1993) only the listing for psychologists is available due to changes in the state law regarding licensing of social workers, counselors, and marriage and family therapists; lists will be available as soon as the licensing process for these groups is complete.

Listings of Marriage and Family Therapists certified by the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) within a zip code area can be obtained by calling 1-800-374-AMFT (2638). In addition to the listing of certified Marriage and Family Therapists, individuals will be provided with The Consumers Guide to Marriage and Family Therapy, which is designed to assist individuals with selecting a marriage and family therapist. This service is provided free of charge.

Look in the "yellow pages" of the phone book under "Marriage, Family, Child, and Individual Counselors", "Psychologists", "Social Service Organizations", or "Mental Health Services".

Church/Synagogue-Based Premarital Counseling and Marital Enrichment

Consult local church, synagogue, or temple. Many churches either provide marital counseling and enrichment or can refer couples to community resources. The Catholic and Episcopal churches require premarital counseling; in other major churches and synagogues, the policies vary with individual churches.

CONCLUSION

About half of all children born today are expected to spend some time in asingle parent family before reaching age 18. Recent evidence suggests that children from single parent families do less well on a variety of measures of well-being than children who live with both parents. With few exceptions, single parenthood appears to disadvantage children regardless of race, ethnicity, social class, or sex.

Understanding why family instability places some children at greater risk is essential in planning programs and policies to promote healthy children and families. As the growing body of research evidence indicates, there is no single cause for the declining well-being of children in single parent families, but rather many. When greater risks are found, the differences appear to result from economic hardship, loss of parental support and supervision, lack of community resources, parental conflict, and life stress and instability. No single explanation accounts for the differences, and some scientific support exists for each of these perspectives. Thus, programs and policies are most apt to be effective if they are comprehensive and multi-faceted, addressing multiple risk factors.

A variety of policy proposals are summarized from seven sources spanning the political spectrum in the categories of promoting strong stable two-parent families, improving the quality of marriage, providing education for parents, putting children first when parents divorce, increasing the economic security of children, and building community resources for children. These strategies are summarized in the spirit of encouraging debate about ways that policy can support and strengthen families, and through families, their children.

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APPENDIX A
THE SEVEN POLICY PROPOSALS CITED IN THIS REPORT

- *"Dan Quayle Was Right"*, an article published in 1993 in **The Atlantic Monthly** by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead; Whitehead, a social historian, is a Research Associate at the Institute for American Values in New York City.
- **Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part**, a 1991 book written by Frank F. Furstenberg of the University of Pennsylvania and Andrew J. Cherlin of John Hopkins University.
- **Divorce, Marital Conflict, and Children's Mental Health: Research Findings and Policy Recommendations**, testimony prepared by Nicholas Zill of Child Trends, Washington, D.C. for the Subcommittee on Family and Human Services, of the U.S. Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, March 22, 1983.
- **Ensuring Income Security** and **Strengthening and Supporting Families**, two policy implementation guides produced in 1993 by The National Commission on Children, a bipartisan body with 24 members appointed by Democratic Congressional leaders and 12 by the Reagan White House. Members included politicians such as Bill Clinton, academics such as T. Berry Brazelton, advocates such as Marian Wright Edelman, the president of the AFL_CIO, teachers, doctors, agency heads, and volunteers.
- **Families First**, a report prepared by the National Commission on America's Urban Families in 1993; the 8_member commission was appointed by President Bush in response to the request of the nation's mayors to give special attention to changes in family structure.
- **Single Mothers and Their Children: A New American Dilemma**, a book published in 1986 by Irwin Garfinkel of Columbia University and Sara McLanahan of Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School.
- **Uncertain Children, Uncertain Future**, a new book to be released in 1994 by Sara McLanahan of Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School and Gary Sandefur, of the University of Wisconsin and the Institute for Research on Poverty.

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