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Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight

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Single Father Custodial Families

The percentage of families headed by single fathers increased from 1.1 percent in 1970 to 3.2 percent in 2004. Existing research suggests that fathers and children in single-father families interact differently than do fathers and children in other family arrangements, and these unique interactions are likely to matter for children's and fathers' well-being.

Definition

Single-father custodial families are families in which children live with their fathers but not with their mothers. Single fathers include men who are separated, divorced, widowed, or never married.ⁱ A related term, *custodial-father families*, usually refers to families in which fathers have gained custody of children after a divorce or legal separation.ⁱⁱ

Importance and Implications of Single Fatherhood

Implications for Fathers

- Custodial fathers exhibit lower levels of anxiety and depression than do noncustodial fathers and have similar levels of adjustment as married fathers.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Men who choose the role of single father have better adjustment than do single fathers who do not choose the role (fathers who feel forced into the role).^{iv}
- However, custodial fathers are more hostile towards their ex-spouses than are custodial mothers or fathers with shared custody.^v

Implications for Fathers' Involvement with Children

- In general, single fathers provide healthy and supportive environments for their children and try to meet their children's emotional needs.^{vi}
- Research has shown that single fathers spend more time with their children than do fathers in any other family structure, including fathers in families headed by two married parents.^{vii}
 - Single fathers spend significantly more time than do married fathers interacting with their children in activities such as reading, going on outings, eating breakfast together, and helping with homework.^{viii}
 - Single fathers are more likely than are married fathers to participate in traditionally mother-led activities, such as shopping with children and talking about children's problems.^{ix}
 - Single fathers also use more positive parenting practices than do married fathers.^x
 - Compared with fathers in two-parent families, single fathers are more likely to be highly involved in their children's schooling.^{xi}
 - Single fathers report having less strict rules for their children than do fathers in two-parent families.^{xii}
- Single fathers also have different patterns of involvement than do single mothers.
 - Single fathers are generally less involved in their children's lives than are single mothers, and single fathers report lower levels of supervision, monitoring, and closeness to their children than do single mothers.^{xiii}

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- However, other findings show that single fathers are less permissive than are single mothers.^{xiv}
- Single fathers are involved in their children's schooling at about the same level as are single mothers.^{xv}

Implications for Children

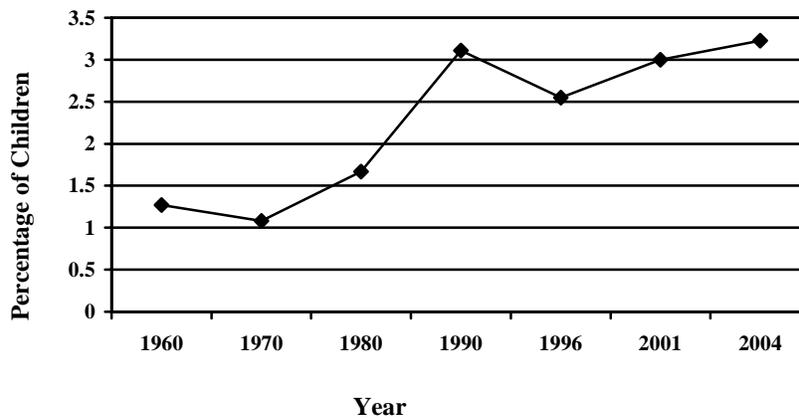
- Compared with children in all other family structures, those in single-father households are at the highest risk of alcohol consumption, marijuana use, illicit drug use, problematic drug use,^{xvi} and delinquent behavior.^{xvii}
- Children raised in single-father households generally have poorer outcomes than do children raised in two-parent households.
 - Children who grow up in single-father households are less likely to graduate from high school^{xviii} and are more likely to have lower test scores than are children who grow up in two-parent households.^{xix} These children are also less likely than are children in two-parent households to get mostly A's and are more likely to have ever repeated a grade or been expelled or suspended.^{xx}
 - However, a high level of father involvement in the child's school increases the likelihood that the child gets mostly A's and reduces the likelihood that the child has been suspended or expelled.^{xxi}
 - Children in single-father households are more likely than are children in two-parent families to have smoked marijuana or to have engaged in sexual intercourse.^{xxii} These children have higher levels of externalizing behaviors (such as acting jealous, lying, cheating, and destroying things)^{xxiii} and a higher risk of substance abuse.^{xxiv}
 - Some of these associations, though, may disappear when involvement and positive parenting practices are considered.^{xxv}
 - However, children living in single-father households have similar mental health and better physical health than do children living in two-parent households.^{xxvi}
- Overall, single-father households appear to be just as positive for children as single-mother households.^{xxvii}
 - On some outcomes, children in single-father families resemble or outperform children in single-mother families.
 - For example, custodial fathers report similar or better child behavior than do custodial mothers.^{xxviii}
 - Children in single-father and single-mother households perform similarly in school^{xxix} and do not differ on measures of self-perception, such as attitudes about their self-worth, athletic ability, and popularity.^{xxx}
 - Additionally, youth from single-father and single-mother households have similar likelihoods of having a premarital birth, a teenage marriage, a teenage birth, and experiencing the breakup of a marriage.^{xxxi}
 - On other outcomes, children in single-father families perform more poorly than do children in single-mother families.
 - Compared with adolescents in custodial-mother households, those in custodial-father households have poorer adjustment after divorce, engage in more deviant behavior, and are less close to their resident parent.^{xxxii}
 - Adolescents in single-father households also put less effort into their schoolwork,^{xxxiii} are at greater risk of substance abuse,^{xxxiv} and are more likely to have recently used alcohol^{xxxv} than are those in single-mother households.
- Effects of living in a single-father household sometimes vary by gender and race.
 - Adolescent sons living in custodial-father households have lower rates of delinquency than do those living in custodial-mother households, but adolescent daughters show the reverse pattern.^{xxxvi}
 - Girls raised in single-father households show higher levels of anxiety^{xxxvii} and a higher likelihood of delinquent behavior^{xxxviii} than are those raised in single-mother households.

- Latinos in single-father households are more likely to use marijuana than are Latinos in single-mother households.^{xxxix}

Overall Trends in Single Fatherhood

Figure 1 shows that the number of children living only with their fathers has risen over the past several decades. In 2004, 2.4 million children under the age of 18, or about 3.2 percent of all American children, were living with single fathers. In 1960, that proportion was 1.3 percent, representing approximately 850 thousand children.

Figure 1: Children Living in Single-Father Families



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007

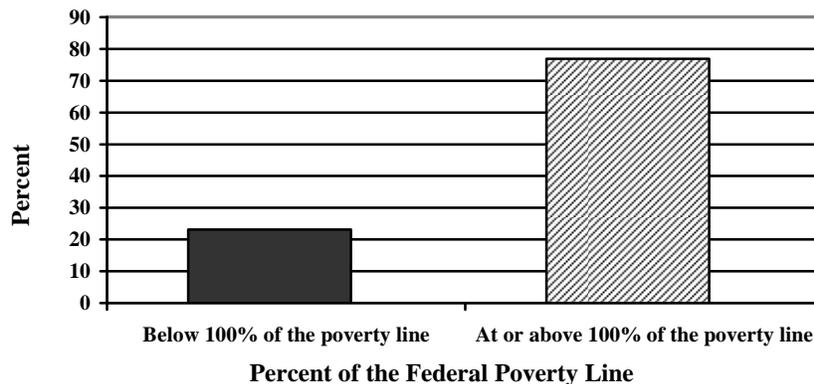
Differences in Single Fatherhood by Subgroup

The following estimates are for adolescents who lived with single custodial fathers in 2001.

Single Fatherhood by Socioeconomic Status

Figure 2 shows that nearly one-quarter (23.1 percent) of single-father families lived below the federal poverty line in 2001. **Table 1** shows that this percentage was significantly higher than the percentage of two-parent households below the poverty line (15.8 percent), but was significantly lower than the percentage of other types of families (38.1 percent) living below the federal poverty line.

Figure 2: Socioeconomic Status of Single-Father Families



Source: Child Trends' analysis of NLSY97 data

Table 1: Socioeconomic Status of Single-Father Families and Other Family Structures

Poverty Status	Single-Father Family	Biological Two-Parent Family	Single-Mother Family	Other Family Structure
Below the federal poverty line	23.1%	15.8% ^a	50.2%	38.1% ^a
At or above the federal poverty line	76.9%	84.2% ^a	49.8%	62.9% ^a

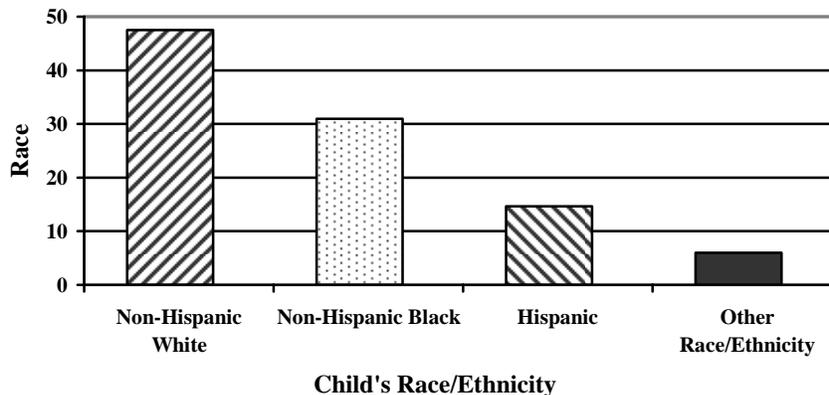
Source: Child Trends' analysis of NLSY97 data
 a=significantly different from single-father family

Single Fatherhood by Race

As shown in **Figure 3**, in 2001, approximately one-half of children in single-father households (47.5 percent) were non-Hispanic White and nearly one-third (31 percent) of children in single-father households were non-Hispanic Black. Almost 14 percent (14.6 percent) were Hispanic, and 6 percent were of another race/ethnicity.

Table 2 shows that children in single-father families were significantly more likely to be non-Hispanic Black than were children in two-parent families.

Figure 3: Race/Ethnicity of Children in Single-Father Families



Source: Child Trends' analysis of NLSY97 data

Table 2: Race/Ethnicity of Children in Single-Father Families and Other Family Structures

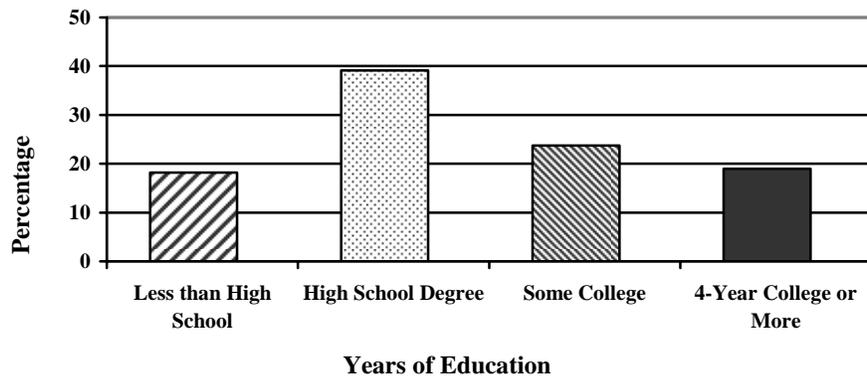
Child's Race/Ethnicity	Single-Father Family	Biological Two-Parent Family	Single-Mother Family	Other Family Structure
Non-Hispanic White	47.5%	52.1%	23.9%	37.3% ^a
Non-Hispanic Black	31.0%	18.8% ^a	52.7%	35.9% ^a
Hispanic	14.6%	26.3%	22.1%	24.4%
Other Race/Ethnicity	6.0%	2.6%	1.2%	2.2%

Source: Child Trends' analysis of NLSY97 data
 a=significantly different from single-father family

Single Fatherhood by Parents' Education

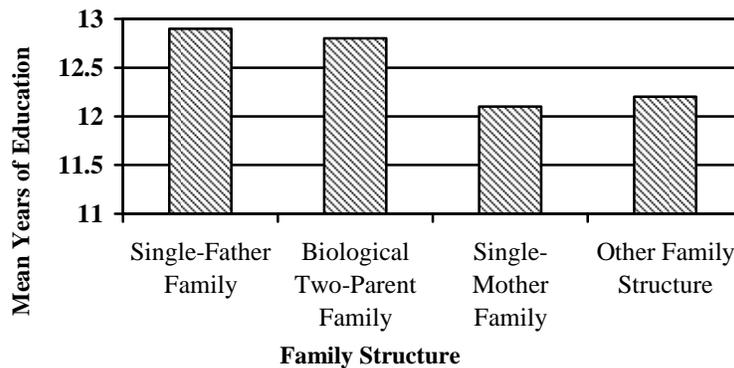
Figure 4 shows that in 2001, 18.2 percent of fathers in single-father families had less than a high school education, 39.1 percent had completed high school, 23.7 percent had completed at least some college, and 19 percent had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. **Figure 5** shows that fathers in single-father families report significantly higher educational attainment than did parents in single-mother families or in other family structures.

Figure 4: Educational Attainment of Fathers in Single-Father Families



Source: Child Trends' analysis of NLSY97 data

Figure 5: Educational Attainment of Fathers in Single-Father Families and Other Family Structures



Source: Child Trends' analysis of NLSY97 data

Definitions and Measurement

For data gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau, single-father families consist of all family groups in which children under the age of 18 live with their father but not with their mother. For the NLSY97, single-father families are those families for which respondents consistently reported living only with their father in waves 3, 4, and 5 (1999-2001).

Data Sources

Data documenting overall trends in single fatherhood were collected and reported by U.S. Census Bureau through the Survey of Program Participation. Additional data on single-father families were gathered from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 cohort (NLSY97). The NLSY97 is a longitudinal survey designed to document the transition from school to work and into adulthood.^{x1} The NLSY97 originally

surveyed approximately 9,000 youths who were 12-16 years old in 1997, and participants are re-interviewed annually.

Data Limitations

Detailed information about fathers' age and race is not collected in the NLSY97; these data are only collected on the children themselves. Therefore, we cannot present analyses showing the prevalence of single fatherhood by these categories. Additionally, because the measure of educational attainment used in our analyses is that of the *resident father*, and because there is no resident father in single-mother households, we use mother's educational attainment as a comparison for this family structure only.

Resources

- **The Single Father Family: Recent Trends in Demographic, Economic, and Public Transfer Use Characteristics** provides information on the characteristics of single-father families: http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-1996_01_01_SP_SingleFatherFamily.pdf
- **Fathers' and Mothers' Involvement in their Children's Schools by Family Type and Resident Status** compares involvement of mothers and fathers in different family structures, including single-father families: <http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001032.pdf>
- **The National Center for Fathering** includes information and tips for fathers and includes a section devoted specifically to single fathers: <http://fathers.com/>

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