

Economic Strategies of Single-Father Families

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Single-parent families have increased dramatically over the past several decades, with the greatest growth occurring in single-father families. In 2000, almost 9.5 million American families were single-parent families: 7.2 million were single-mother families and 2.1 million were single-father families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). These families included nearly 20 million children: 16.5 million in single-mother families and 3.3 million in single-father families. Although they make up less than 5 percent of American families, single-father families are the fastest growing family form in the United States (Simmons & O'Neill, 2001).

Single-father families increased by nearly 300 percent between 1959 and 1989, from 350,000 to 1.4 million (compared to a 160 percent increase for single-mother families), and another 50 percent between 1990 and 2000 (Meyer & Garasky, 1993; Simmons & O'Neill, 2001). The number of single parents has grown as a result of dramatic increases in unmarried childbearing, divorce, and the overall delay in marriage. The recent increase in single-father families has resulted from a combination of these factors as well as a shift in custody awards from sole maternal custody to both paternal and shared custody arrangements (Seltzer, 1994). The growth in this family type has sparked researchers and policy-makers to look closely at the social forces driving this increase and the dynamics and consequences involved.

The research to date on single-father families focuses primarily on demographic characteristics of single fathers (Demo & Acock, 1988; Eggebeen, Snyder, & Manning, 1996; Greif, 1985a; Lino, 1995; Meyer & Garasky, 1993) and custody arrangements (Amato, 1987; Cancian & Meyer, 1998; Demo & Acock, 1988; Fox & Kelly, 1995; Gersick, 1979; Greif, 1995; Greif, 1985b; Greif & DeMaris, 1990; Greif & Zuravin, 1989; Hamer & Marchioro, 2002; Nieto, 1990; Seltzer, 1994; Seltzer, 1990; Turner, 1984; Walters & Abshire, 1995). Much of this work is characterized by methodological limitations, including small, nonrandom, and regional samples (Gasser & Taylor, 1976; Gersick, 1979; Greif, 1985b, 1987; Mendes, 1976; Orthner, Brown, & Ferguson, 1976;

Risman, 1986, 1987; Santrock & Warshak, 1979; Seltzer, 1990). Results of these studies have been fairly consistent, but are of limited value as many are not nationally representative (Meyer & Garasky, 1993). Consequently, we know relatively little about the well-being of children in and the functioning of single-father families, and the dynamics characterizing this familial environment.

Recent research has begun to examine the outcomes of children living in single-parent families, including single-father families. The evidence so far is rather murky and inconsistent regarding the effects of living with single fathers versus single mothers on children's outcomes. Downey (1994) found that children living in single-father families fared worse in educational performance than children in two-parent intact families and similarly to those children in single-mother families. Downey explains this relationship for children living with single mothers by a lack of economic resources. However, children living with single fathers have low levels of interpersonal parental resources (i.e., time spent with children and involvement in children's schooling). Downey and Powell (1993) found that boys in single-mother families are significantly more likely to drop out of school than are boys in single-father families, and girls in single-mother families are more likely to have a teenage pregnancy than girls living with single fathers. Overall, there is little evidence suggesting that children living with single fathers are better (or worse) off than children living with single mothers (Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell & Dufur, 1998). Still, the functioning of single-father versus single-mother families is not well understood.

In contrast, single-mother families have been the subject of extensive research (Hogan, Eggebeen & Clogg, 1996; Hogan, Hao & Parish, 1990; McLanahan & Booth, 1989; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1996; Thompson, Hanson & McLanahan, 1994). Perhaps the most influential debate surrounding single motherhood is its association with poverty. Is single motherhood a cause or a consequence of poverty? Regardless, researchers have amassed ample evidence to document the precarious economic conditions faced by many single mothers. By comparison, few researchers have

considered the economic context of single-father families. Single-father families are better off economically than single-mother families, but are disadvantaged compared to married-couple families (Beller & Graham, 1985; Demo & Acock, 1988; Edin & Lein, 1997; Eggebeen et al., 1996; Fox & Kelly, 1995; Hao, 1996; Hogan, Hao & Parish, 1990; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1996; Lino, 1995). Notably, economic well-being appears to influence parenting. Studies show that single parents who reported financial problems also felt less competent as a parent and reported less satisfaction in their role as a parent (George & Wilding, 1972; Katz, 1979; O'Brien, 1982). Given the linkages between family economic resources, parenting, and child well-being, it is important to examine these processes in understanding family forms, such as single-father families.

This study is designed to advance our knowledge of children in single-father families and their relationships with both formal and informal economic assistance programs using current, nationally representative data. The focus of this study is on the economic well-being of children in single-father families and will attempt to highlight the strategies of economic security used by single-father families. Specifically, I assess the degree to which children in single-father families use public assistance. I use the 1999 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), a large-scale national survey of economic, health and social characteristics of children and non-elderly adults. I use children in single-mother families as the main comparison group to delineate the similarities and differences between these two key populations.

The central question for this research is: To what degree do children in single-father families use public assistance programs? The goal of this research is to advance our understanding of the economic strategies used by single-father families. Current public policy focuses on single mothers and their children, but overlooks the increasing population of single-father families. This research will attempt to focus our assistance agendas on the

increasing population of children in single-father families who may present unique characteristics relative to children in single-mother families.