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A REVIEW OF LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY FINDINGS ON ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT IN LOW-INCOME SINGLE-PARENT HOUSEHOLDS

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ABSTRACT

It is generally understood that healthy adolescent development is influenced by a variety of factors. Current research on the effects of family structure on adolescent development have largely grown from data collected in the late twentieth century showing that when children grew up in a two-parent household they experienced significant advantages. According to Amato (2005), these advantages included experiencing a higher standard of living, more effective parenting, more cooperative co-parenting, and closer emotional relationships with both parents. Those who grew up in two-parent households demonstrated superior academic performance (Amato et al., 2015; Amato 2005), suggesting that children from single-parent environments may have faced comparative disadvantage. Data show that the number of single-parent households increased from 9% in the 1960s to 28% by 2012 (Amato et al., 2015). This paper discusses findings in the late twentieth century on the effects of growing up in a single-parent household on adolescent development and education and the overall impact of family structure on children's lives.

INTRODUCTION

Research in the late twentieth century suggested that growing up in a two-parent household benefitted children (Amato, 2005), yet countless children growing up in the United States do not have this experience. Over 27.5% of American children currently live in single-parent homes, and over 80% of single-parent homes are headed by mothers (Richter & Lemola, 2017). Little research has examined the lives of children growing up in single-father homes. According to a study conducted by Biblarz and Stacey (2010), a child's development is affected, whether the household is led by a single mother, single father, or two parents, so it is important

Shannon K. Hawkins, Jr.

to understand the differences resulting from family structure. Children need a number of resources in order to experience social, mental, and educational stability. The parenting dynamic affects children in all three of these areas, and it is vitally important to understand the role of family structure in child development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Single-Parent Households

Single-mother households. A study conducted by Richter and Lemola (2017) indicated that there are three main pathways that growing up in a single-mother household can impact adolescents' well-being as they grow into adulthood. The first is that children raised in single-mother households often experienced less effective guardianship, along with higher chances of emotional distress and conflict within the family. The familial environment played an important role in a child's transition to adulthood (Benson & Johnson, 2009); a child growing up in an environment lacking structure and challenged by ongoing conflict was likely to experience stress (Amato, 2005). According to Amato, children living with high levels of stress at a younger age appeared to experience long-term effects that in some cases required assessment and treatment.

Single-mother households generally struggled with fewer economic resources and experienced a higher risk of economic deprivation (Richter & Lemola, 2017). This directly correlated to the higher standard of living in families with two parents and sources of income. Single mothers from lower socio-economic groups were more likely to experience economic challenges due to fewer opportunities for well-paid employment, placing their children at a higher risk of living in challenging home environments and neighborhoods. This not only impacted home life; it also had a high impact on children's physical and emotional health (Richter & Lemola, 2017). Children growing up with few economic resources were likely to experience sub-par nutrition, resulting in poor long-term physical health. Richter and Lemola (2017) found that such deprivation also increased the likelihood that the children would end up in careers with low socio-economic outcomes, and showed that they might experience poor social integration as they moved into adulthood. It is entirely possible that these conditions continue in subsequent generations, leading to inter-generational poverty.

*A Review of Late Twentieth-Century Findings on Adolescent Development in
Low-Income Single-Parent Households*

A third major challenge can be described as the “missing father hypothesis.” Richter and Lemola (2017) argued that at least two-parent households are optimal for child development, and that fathers play an important role:

[F]athering involves distinct and necessary qualities which are particularly important for gender identity formation in boys. There is also evidence that the absence of a father is associated with an increase in antisocial behaviors in boys, including violence, criminality, and substance abuse and a decrease in social adjustment in general. (p. 2)

Paternal absenteeism has an effect on all children, not just male children. According to East et al. (2006), adolescents whose fathers are absent from the home had lower self-esteem, were sexually active at an earlier age, and had lower academic achievements in comparison to adolescents living in intact two-parent homes.

Single-father households. While single mothers make up the majority of the single parents in America, the number of children being raised in single-father homes in the United States has increased since the 1960s (Coles, 2015). Literature concerning single-father households is minimal, and the effects on children have not been widely studied. Typically, single-father households resulted from parental custody complications, sometimes occurring when the mother lost custody due to neglect, or when she surrendered custody to the father (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Studies showed that at the end of the twentieth century single-parent homes led by fathers generally experienced more financial security than single-mother households (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). While children in single-father homes experienced a higher standard of living, research indicated that they were more likely to internalize emotional problems. According to a study conducted by Camp (2012), single fathers were less likely to provide parental warmth or support to their children. This puts children at a social disadvantage in managing daily challenges.

Single-Parent Homes: Education

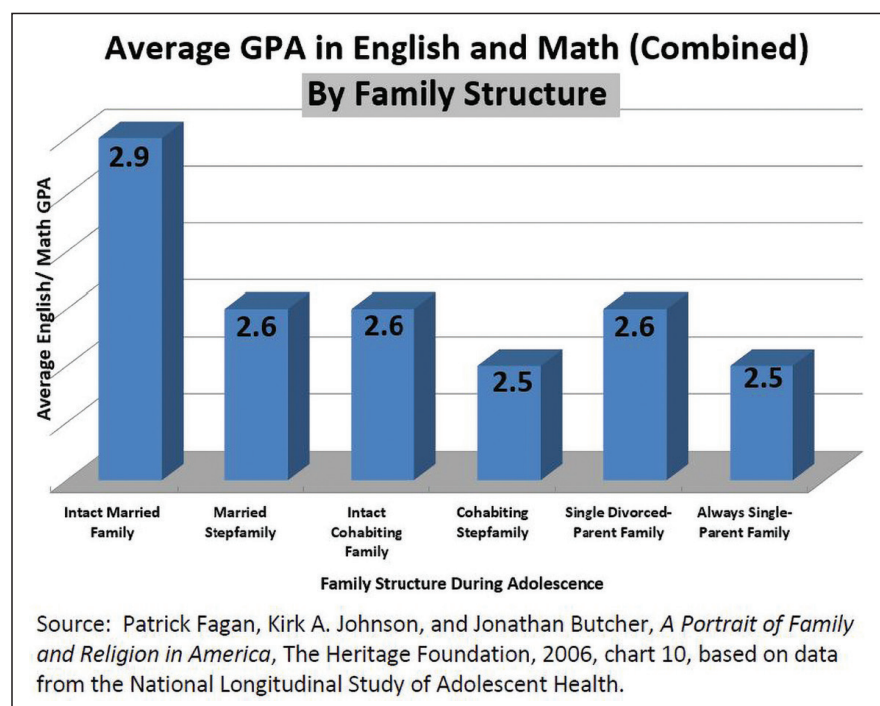
Single fathers’ and mothers’ impact on education. Research indicated that single-mother households were more likely to experience increased levels of hardship than single-father and two-parent homes (Richter & Lemola, 2017). According to a study conducted by Downey (1994), children who came from single-parent homes experienced similar hardships, regardless of the parent’s sex, and demonstrated lower

Shannon K. Hawkins, Jr.

academic performance, including test scores and overall grades, when compared to children from two-parent households. Downey suggested that a lack of interpersonal parental resources, such as parents spending time with children talking about school or being involved in the children's school activities, played a role in overall academic performance. Downey's study found that while single mothers typically had greater levels of interpersonal parental resources than single fathers, children from single-parent homes still lagged behind those from two-parent households.

Overall impact on education. The 2006 National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Harris et al., 2006) showed a correlation between family structure and children's grade point average (GPA) in English and Math courses (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Average Grade Point Average in English and Math (Combined) by Family Structure, 2006 (Hadford & Leaser, 2017c)



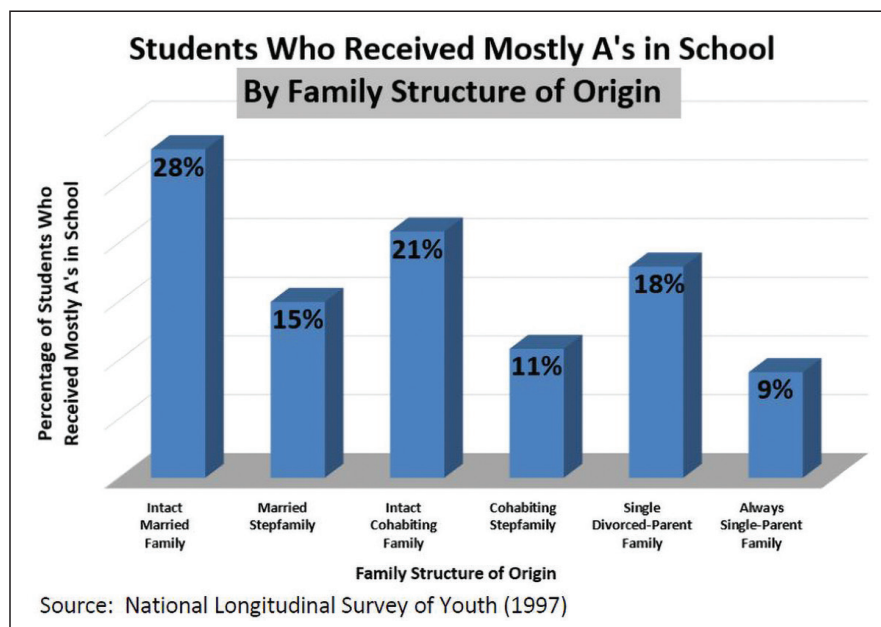
GPA's were shown to be significantly higher during this period in children from Intact Married Families, while the lowest GPA's, in contrast, were found in those from Cohabiting Stepfamilies and Always Single-Parent Families. The study's findings suggested that family structure played a role in academic achievement, indicating that education was impacted when a child grew up in a single-parent home. Amato's earlier

*A Review of Late Twentieth-Century Findings on Adolescent Development in
Low-Income Single-Parent Households*

work (2005) supported these findings, reporting that children born into single-parent homes were more likely to experience poorer education and economic hardships, thus affecting their future prospects in life.

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997) also showed that students from Intact Married Families exhibited markedly superior academic outcomes to their peers living in other types of households (Figure 2) (as cited in Hadford & Leaser, 2017d). Data showed that 28% of students from two-parent homes earned “mostly As” in their classes, while only 9% of students from Always Single-Parent homes achieved the same distinction (Hadford & Leaser, 2017d). Children from Cohabiting Stepfamily households scored only slightly higher than those from single-parent homes, suggesting that the lack of permanence in these groups might also be a factor in lower student achievement.

Figure 2. *Students Who Received Mostly A's in School by Family Structure of Origin, 1997 (Hadford & Leaser, 2017d)*



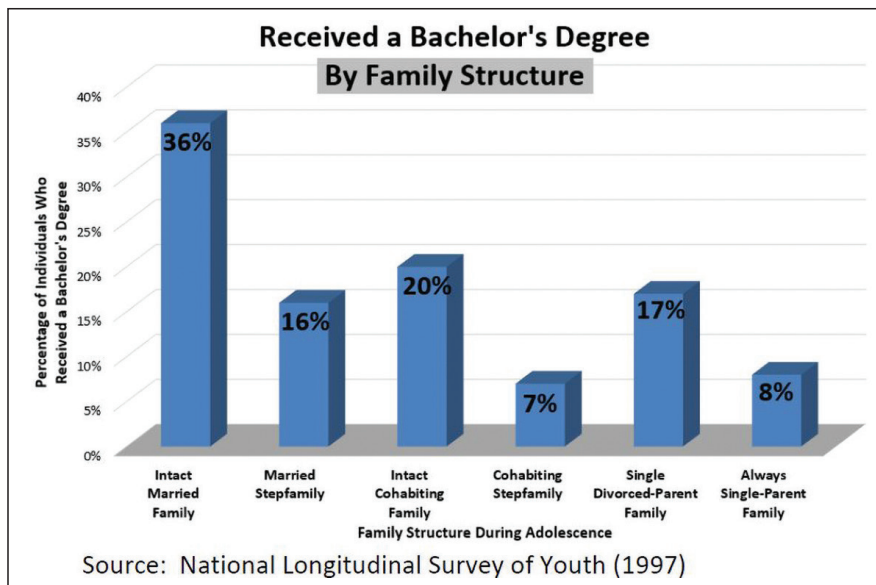
As Richter and Lemola (2017) reported, the economic stress due to lower wages, challenging neighborhoods, and poor access to healthy food and healthcare may have led to the result that children from Always Single-Parent Families demonstrated lower achievement in the classroom. The generally higher standard of living in two-parent households, or the possibility of support with homework and other school assignments, might have played a role in these results.

Shannon K. Hawkins, Jr.

Amato (2005) suggested that single parents in low-income communities were not necessarily confident in their parenting styles and may not have recognized their deficiencies in effective parenting. Developing children normally experienced some conflict with their parents, but those in homes in which the parents themselves had little support might have experienced less emotional support and harsher discipline. This might have negatively impacted their ability to become academically successful.

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997) similarly found that bachelor degree attainment was considerably higher in students from Intact Married Families (Hadford & Leaser, 2017d). At 36%, the disparity between those students and those from Intact Cohabiting Stepfamilies (7%), and the slightly higher Always Single-Parent Families (8%), was striking (Figure 3) (as cited in Hadford & Leaser, 2017b).

Figure 3. Bachelor's Degree Recipients by Family Structure 1997 (Hadford & Leaser, 2017b)



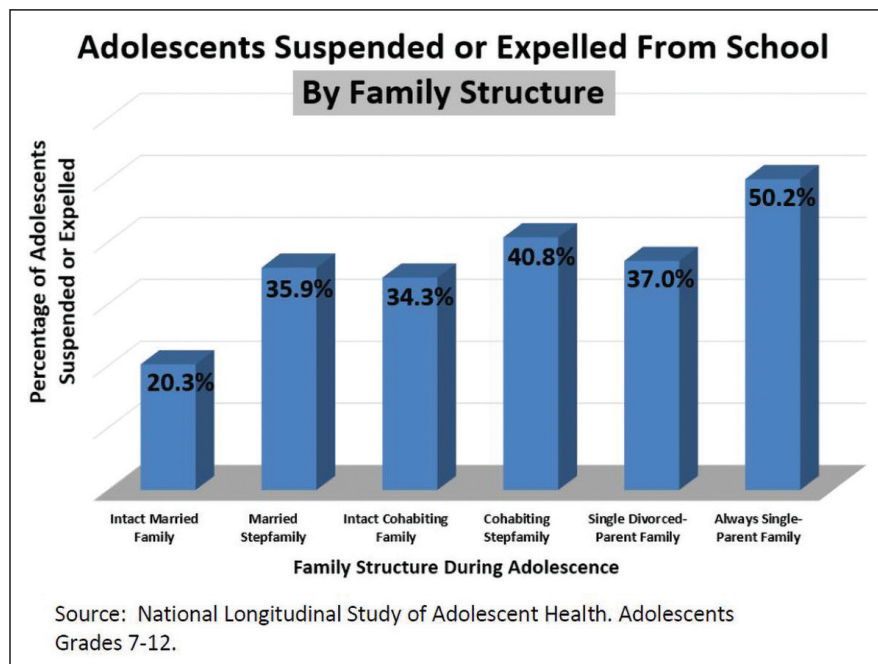
Data from Figure 3 showed that higher education attainment was severely impacted for children who grew up with one parent, regardless of the parent's sex. The disparity in bachelor's degree attainment, 36% for students from Intact Married Families compared to 8% in households with an Always Single Parent, illustrated a sharp division in the way that family structure impacted children in the United States.

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (n.d.) provided data on student behavior and family structure (Hadford & Leaser,

*A Review of Late Twentieth-Century Findings on Adolescent Development in
Low-Income Single-Parent Households*

2017a). The chart “Adolescents Suspended or Expelled from School By Family Structure” illustrated the differences in student exclusion from school between grades 7 and 12 (Figure 4) (as cited in Hadford & Leaser, 2017a).

Figure 4. *Adolescents Suspended or Expelled from School by Family Structure* (Hadford & Leaser, 2017a)



The data in Figure 4 showed that over 50% of students from always single-parent families experienced removal from the education setting, in stark contrast to those from Intact Married Families (20.3%). Children living in most types of two-parent households fared better than those from single-parent families, with the exception of those from Cohabiting Stepfamilies, who experienced removal from school at a rate of 40.8%. A school suspension or expulsion may often serve as the first step in overall academic and professional challenges in an individual’s life.

Importance of Family Structure

Amato (2005) found that children from single-parent families in the late twentieth century experienced greater risks of cognitive, social, and emotional disadvantage. Lansford et al. (2001) conducted a study to measure the impact of different family structures as reported by women. Respondents who were single mothers reported more instances of de-

Shannon K. Hawkins, Jr.

pression, lower self-esteem, and decreased efficacy in their relationships with their child than women in two-parent relationships. Single mothers also reported that their children had problems with internalizing their emotions, or externalized their emotions through problematic behavior. Two-parent biological parents reported fewer problems with their children and greater overall family cohesion (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Family Structure on Constructs Reported by Mothers (Lansford et al., 2001)

TABLE 1. MANCOVAS BY FAMILY STRUCTURE ON CONSTRUCTS REPORTED BY MOTHER							
Construct	Adoptive M (SD)	Two-Parent Biological M (SD)	Single-Mother Biological M (SD)	Stepfather M (SD)	Stepmother M (SD)	Univariate F	η^2
Mother well-being							
Depressed affect	1.36 (1.34) ^a	.96 (1.02) ^{b,c}	1.68 (1.52) ^d	1.14 (1.17) ^{e,f}	1.29 (1.22)	4.84***	.03
Self-esteem and efficacy	3.82 (.52)	3.87 (.49)	3.69 (.70) ^g	3.92 (.54) ^h	3.89 (.53)	2.50**	.02
Life satisfaction	5.18 (1.25)	5.46 (1.12) ⁱ	4.95 (1.40) ^j	5.51 (1.18) ^k	5.47 (1.27) ^l	3.82***	.03
Child well-being							
Internalizing	1.49 (.33) ^m	1.28 (.28) ⁿ	1.34 (.35)	1.31 (.31) ^o	1.49 (.42) ^{p,q}	3.19**	.04
Externalizing	1.65 (.38) ^r	1.44 (.32) ^s	1.58 (.41)	1.50 (.36) ^t	1.62 (.40)	2.26**	.03
Problem behaviors	.21 (.41) ^u	.07 (.26) ^v	.26 (.44) ^{w,x}	.21 (.41) ^y	.19 (.40) ^z	2.38**	.03
School grades	5.33 (1.63)	6.05 (1.61)	5.34 (1.93)	5.41 (1.88)	5.13 (2.05)	1.10	.02
Child's friendships							
How often friends over	3.57 (1.66)	3.82 (1.63)	3.77 (1.80)	3.75 (1.62)	3.45 (1.72)	.35	.00
How many parent knows	4.51 (.87) ^{aa}	4.45 (.76) ^{ab,ac}	4.19 (.96) ^{ad,ae}	4.31 (.96) ^{af}	3.72 (1.25) ^{ag,ah}	7.42****	.08
Relationship with spouse							
Overall quality	5.73 (1.46)	5.94 (1.26)	—	5.98 (1.32)	6.07 (1.10)	.71	.00
Satisfaction	5.22 (1.13)	5.34 (1.22)	—	5.51 (1.22)	5.63 (.99)	1.42	.01
Disagreements	2.21 (.88)	2.18 (.84)	—	2.07 (.78)	2.13 (.91)	1.01	.01
Child's family relationships							
Parent-child	.06 (.61) ^{ba}	.12 (.51) ^{bb}	.00 (.79) ^{bc}	.04 (.55) ^{bd}	-.49 (.97) ^{be}	3.65***	.04
Disagreements	2.47 (.80) ^{ca}	2.06 (.74) ^{cb}	2.28 (.89) ^{cc}	1.99 (.70) ^{cd}	1.90 (.68) ^{ce}	4.94***	.05
Grandparents	-.12 (.72)	.04 (.79)	.04 (.93) ^{ca}	.09 (.75) ^{cb}	-.35 (.76) ^{cc}	2.83**	.03
Child's sibling relationship	2.45 (.82)	2.46 (.81)	2.49 (.88)	2.51 (.82)	2.47 (.80)	.09	.00
Family life							
Satisfaction	5.47 (1.43)	5.98 (1.09)	5.49 (1.52)	5.74 (1.26)	5.72 (1.32)	1.95	.02
Time with children	.00 (.59) ^{ca}	.16 (.58) ^{cb}	-.09 (.75) ^{cc}	-.06 (.57) ^{cd}	-.23 (.71) ^{ce,cf}	5.49****	.04
Family cohesion	3.99 (.65) ^{ca}	4.08 (.56) ^{cb}	3.97 (.77) ^{cc}	3.95 (.65) ^{cd}	3.75 (.66) ^{ce}	3.12**	.02

Note: Superscripts of a and b indicate pairs of means that significantly differ from each other, as do c and d, e and f, g and h, and i and j. n = 696 for reports of mother well-being, spouse, family life, and sibling relationships. n = 402 for reports of child well-being, school grades, child's family relationships, and friendships.
p < .05. *p < .01. ****p < .001.

Data from this study suggested that two-parent households were optimal, both in child-parent relationships and in the way that children are prepared to function in the family and in the larger community.

Non-Parental Adult Support Figures

Non-familial support systems are also critical in providing support to children and young adults. Most adolescents during the period of this study identified the presence of a significant non-parental adult as important in their lives, including teachers, natural mentors, and extended family members, among others (Sterrett et al., 2011). Non-parental adults were able to offer advice, a place to stay, or other forms of support (Sterrett et al., 2011). Studies on children's resiliency showed that non-parental adults had positive effects on adolescents at high-risk, including those experiencing poverty or living with a parent experiencing mental illness (Beam et al., 2002).

*A Review of Late Twentieth-Century Findings on Adolescent Development in
Low-Income Single-Parent Households*

DISCUSSION

The findings discussed in this paper laid the foundation for further research into how the increasing numbers of single-parent households may influence the wellbeing of children. With millions of children now growing up in the United States in a single-parent household, we must do more to ensure that they receive the best opportunities possible. More studies are needed to assess the challenges faced by single parents and their families, including how schools may do a better job of assessing behavioral problems as signs of externalizing behavior. More awareness of the kinds of hardships faced by these families, and the resources they need to be as successful as possible, is needed.

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Shannon K. Hawkins, Jr.

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