



Why Family Matters: Just Look at Our High Schools

This year's U.S. presidential campaign transfixed the public with unparalleled amounts of mudslinging against both major candidates. Meanwhile, American families are sliding downward in their own mire. Progressives like to talk about social inequity and racism in America, while avoiding discussion of the social consequences of the breakdown of the traditional family. Meanwhile, social scientists have reported repeatedly on how children raised in single-parent families experience high rates of drug and alcohol addiction, unemployment and incarceration. These studies should have awakened the American public about the social destruction being caused by the breakdown of traditional American families in our society. Perhaps the issue of family structure is too abstract for many people because it affects mostly lower-income groups. If this is the case, new studies showing how strong families make for better schools, and the direct effects family breakdown is having on our kids, should drive home the point: Family matters.

Family Chaos

In 1964, when President Lyndon Johnson declared a war on poverty, promising to end poverty in the United States within a generation, only 30 percent of poor families with children were single mothers.¹ By the end of the 1970s this figure had risen to 60 percent. Out-of-wedlock births have dropped slightly in recent years, especially among teenagers, but continue to be extraordinarily high in inner cities, where the rates of children being raised by single mothers reach 70+ percent for African Americans. Out-of-wedlock birth rates have continued to rise among Hispanics and lower-income whites as well. Although there has been a slight decline in the rate of out-of-wedlock births among teenagers, the out-of-wedlock birth rate has risen for women in the 25- to 34-year-old age bracket. Even more shocking is the fact that teens in the United States are more likely to have out-of-wedlock births than in any other nation in the industrialized world.

The social consequences for children raised in single-parent homes have been well documented. These consequences boil down to three kinds of worries for Americans—economic, developmental and moral. Progressive policymakers tend to focus on the economic causes and consequences of out-of-wedlock births, while only occasionally giving lip service to the developmental and moral consequences of single-parent families. Poor and low-income women have more out-of-wedlock births, and their children usually remain in poverty. Thus, progressive policymakers prescribe income redistribution, subsidized education and housing, and greater access to “family planning” services to help single mothers and their children.

No doubt economic status matters in out-of-wedlock births. Yet any discussion of out-of-wedlock births needs to begin with a precise understanding of the population being discussed and the cultural and social consequences of out-of-wedlock birth and fatherless families. Divorce, separation, death and imprisonment account for nearly half of all fatherless families, and nearly half of out-of-wedlock births are to cohabiting fathers and mothers.² Without marriage, however, the latter relationships tend to be unstable. Most cohabiting parents split up.³

As J. D. Vance describes in his powerful book, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016), his drug-addicted mother had a series of male partners who served as transient stepfathers to him growing up in an Appalachian family in southern Ohio. The result is that the young J.D. did not have a strong father figure to serve as a role model in his life. He did have a grandfather, a factory worker, whose Appalachian cultural roots led him to violence. His grandmother, a hard-crusted, foul-mouthed, strong presence in his life, imparted a relative stability that allowed him to escape his lower-income status. He graduated from high school and enlisted in the U.S. Marines. Afterwards he graduated from college at Ohio State University and then earned a law degree from Yale. He is an

exception to most young men raised in fatherless families.

Vance was fortunate that he had a grandfather and grandmother who were devoted to him. Most young boys growing up with single-parent families, even those with cohabiting males in the house, are relegated to poverty, unemployment or jail.⁴

The biggest problem with out-of-wedlock births—the lack of a male role model—is cultural and goes against the liberal feminist narrative that males do not matter. This is especially destructive for young boys. Fathers provide discipline and control over adolescent boys in a way that mothers often cannot. Study after study show that boys growing up with both biological parents perform better in school, graduate at higher rates, attend college more and are more likely to be employed as young men than boys who have grown up with a single parent or a single parent with a step-parent. Boys with stepfathers, it should be noted, do better in life than boys without any fathers at all.

Progressives tend to see everything in terms of either economics or a woman's choice. Social conservatives are denounced by progressives as being uncaring about the economic plight of out-of-wedlock mothers, while trying to impose “patriarchal” white and antiquated values and morality on these women, who should have the right and power to control their bodies through abortion and the Pill. Progressives attribute the slight decline of out-of-wedlock births to access to oral contraceptives and abortion.

Yet as Harvard University sociologist Robert D. Putnam shows in *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (2016), access to contraception and abortion has nothing to do with out-of-wedlock births. Women having children out of wedlock have access to these services. Putnam's argument is supported by an array of other studies, including one by Melissa S. Kearney and Phillip B. Levine, who after studying teen birth rates in the United States conclude that “no silver bullet such as expanding access to contraception or abstinence education will solve this particular social problem.”⁵

The Culture of Sexual Liberation

What progressives, including Putnam, miss is the culture of abortion and the Pill. As noted by social scientists George Akerlof, Janet Yellen and Michael Katz, the introduction of new contraceptive technologies and legalized abortion dramatically changed sexual relations between unmarried couples.⁶ Prior to the 1960s, premarital sexual relations between a couple implied a commitment to marry if the woman became pregnant, backed by strong social pressure (hence the

shorthand phrase “shotgun wedding”). The introduction of the Pill and legalized abortion encouraged women and men to participate in premarital sex on the assumption that pregnancy need not discourage them in their behavior.

The sexual revolution that came with new contraceptive technologies and legalized abortion meant that women could no longer hold males to the standards of the previous age. In this new sexually liberated culture, women who insist on marriage before sexual relations or any resulting pregnancy are considered old-fashioned and find it more difficult to compete successfully for boyfriends. As a result, the link between marriage and childbearing is profoundly weakened by a sexually liberated culture. Couples engaged in premarital sex in this new culture assume that they have greater control over pregnancy, an assumption that often proves false. These changing sexual mores encourage sexual activity and cohabitation, while demeaning the importance of marriage and commitment.

Higher-Income Parents Likelier to be Married

Within this new culture of sexual liberation, a greater emphasis is placed on individual fulfillment without regard to responsibility toward children. One of the great ironies of this sexual liberation is that college-educated and upper-class men and women have higher rates of marriage, albeit delayed, and far lower rates of out-of-wedlock births. The higher one goes in income levels, the lower the rate of out-of-wedlock births. For all the talk of sexual liberation and the denigration of marriage as enforced patriarchal values, more highly educated and higher-income groups maintain the values of previous generations—the “old-fashioned” generation—while lower-income, less-educated people suffer the consequences of a sexually liberated culture. Poor and uneducated women who bear out-of-wedlock children are often relegated to a cycle of poverty for themselves and their children.

What new studies show is that the crisis within the modern American family has profound effects on schools. There is nearly universal agreement that U.S. public schools are failing. Progressives call for more money to be spent on education. Serious educational reform should begin with school choice, which would allow married and unmarried parents, the middle class and the poor, white, black and brown to send their children to schools of their choice. But even more critical to genuine educational reform is the restoration of stable, married families.

Stronger Families=Better Schools

In a recent report, *Stronger Families, Better Schools*, W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas Zill, sociologists at the Institute for Family Studies at the University of Virginia, show that family structure and educational attainment are directly related.⁷ School performance of students is directly related to family structure. Children being raised in two-parent families perform better in school, have higher graduation rates and are more likely to enter college than children in single-parent families. “Indeed,” they write, **“the share of families headed by married couples is a more powerful predictor of high school graduation rates than are child poverty rates, race, and ethnicity”** (p. 3). They conclude what other studies have shown: “policymakers, educators, and civic leaders should work to strengthen families as well as schools” (p. 8).

Being raised in a stable two-parent family matters more for a child’s educational attainment than the race or ethnicity of a child, family income, or per capita expenditure in a school district. The Wilcox and Zill study follows a long line of studies going back to the James Coleman report in 1966, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, which showed that family structure has much to do with educational outcomes.⁸ The Coleman report and more recent studies reveal that better-educated and involved parents within traditional two-parent families are more likely to read to their children, spend more time with their kids and participate in youth-related activities.

Furthermore, recent research conducted by David Autor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology shows that boys benefit especially in educational attainment if raised in two-parent families.⁹ Autor shows that boys growing up in two-parent families experience higher high school graduation rates, fewer suspensions and fewer school absences than boys in single-parent households.

Stronger Families, Better Schools confirms previous studies about the importance of family structure and educational outcomes. *Stronger Families* examines 100 Arizona school districts, and families within these districts, controlling for race, ethnicity, family income, per-capita school expenditure and family structure. The investigators conclude that public school districts with better-educated parents and more married families enjoy much greater rates of high school graduation and more gender parity in graduation. On average, Arizona school districts with a higher proportion of married families—no matter the racial, ethnic, childhood poverty, or income levels—perform remarkably better than districts with a higher

proportion of single-parent families. “Of the ten districts with the highest graduation rates,” the authors conclude, “all were above average with respect to their proportion of married-couple families.”⁹ They add that “five of these districts with higher graduation rates were in the top tenth of the distribution of married couple families, four were in the top quarter, and one in the top half of distribution.”

Districts with lower high school graduation rates have a higher proportion of single-parent households. The ten districts with the lowest high school graduation rates had a much higher percentage of single-parent families. Eight of those districts with the lowest graduation rates fell below average in their proportion of married-couple families. One of the districts was in the bottom tenth of the proportion of married couples, while two more were in the bottom quarter.

Even more remarkable was the weak relationship between child poverty and graduation rates. Nine of the ten school districts with the highest graduation rates fell below the official poverty level. In short, income mattered less than intact families.

Fathers Matter

Stronger Families, Better Schools also shows that boys raised in two-parent families graduate at higher rates than boys in districts with a higher proportion of single-parent households. Boys are graduating a lower rate than girls, but this gap is narrowed when boys are raised in two-parent households. The issue is more than just lower graduation rates for boys raised in single-parent households. Boys, especially those raised in single-parent households, experience higher rates of suspension, dropping out and behavioral problems in schools, including drug use.¹¹ Violence and drug use have escalated to epidemic levels in many U.S. high schools.

Obviously, boys coming from two-parent families are not immune from drug use. Nevertheless, having a father and a stable family matters for a young male who finds himself under pressure by his peers to experiment with drugs—first marijuana, then some stolen prescribed opioids and then heroin. Growing up with a father who presents a strong male model is a counterweight to peer pressure in high school. Having a father to whom a young son can talk concerning what his pals are doing, a father who spends time taking his family to a baseball game or movie or talks about his own experiences in high school, affects how a boy behaves. Having a father who attends church regularly with his family and who leads prayer at family dinners sets a model for

sons and daughters alike. A father who enforces family rules fairly reinforces proper school behavior. If a child does not respect his mother or father, he will not usually respect teachers.

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- 1 See David T. Ellwood and Christopher Jencks, "The Spread of Single-Parent Families in the United States since 1960," *Faculty Research Papers* (February, 2004), p. 1.
 - 2 Ibid.
 - 3 Ibid., p. 8.
 - 4 Although somewhat dated because the problems have grown worse, see David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (1996); and David Popenoe, *Families without Fathers: Fathers, Marriage and Children in America* (1996).
 - 5 Melissa S. Kearney and Phillip B. Levine, "Why is the Teen Birth Rate in the United States So High and Why Does It Matter?" *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* (Spring 2012), p. 142.
 - 6 George A. Akerlof, Janet L. Yellen and Michael L. Katz, "An Analysis of Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing in the United States," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* (May 1996), and David T. Ellwood and Christopher Jencks, "The Spread of Single-Parent Families in the United States since 1960," Faculty Research Working Paper Series (February 2004).
 - 7 W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas Zill, *Stronger Families, Better Schools: Families and High School Graduation Across Arizona* (released October 2016).
 - 8 James Coleman et al., *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington, DC, National Center for Educational Statistics, 1966).
 - 9 David Autor et al., "Family Disadvantage and the Gender Gap in Behavioral and Educational Outcomes," working paper (Northwestern University Institute in Policy Research, Evanston, Ill., 2015, cited in W. Bradford, *Stronger Families, Better Schools*, p. 5.
 - 10 Wilcox et al., *Stronger Families, Better Schools*, p. 6.
 - 11 See, e.g., Christopher B. Swanson, *Cities in Crisis: A Special Analytic Report on High School Graduation* Education Research Center (April 1, 2008); Anne Gregory et al., "The Achievement Gap and the Discipline Gap: Two Sides of the Same Coin?" *Educational Research* (January/February 2010); and Jay P. Greene, "Leaving Boys Behind: Public High School Graduation Rates, Civic Report (April 2006).
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There is a crisis in our schools today. Progressives think the solution can be found in pouring more money into schools, revising curricula and introducing the latest teaching techniques into the classroom. Genuine education reform, however, needs to begin with restoring the family, encouraging couples to marry, and having males take responsibility for their families. This is exactly the message taught by our churches and synagogues. Tell progressives this as they persist in their attacks on organized religion and call for a "Catholic Spring" as a way of undermining a thousand years of tradition.

Correction: The October issue of the *Mindszenty Report* inadvertently referred to protests in Ferguson, Mo. in 2015. The main protests occurred in 2014.

Thanksgiving Proclamation

Today we give our thanks, most of all for the ideals of honor and faith we inherit from our forefathers – for the decency of purpose, steadfastness of resolve and strength of will, for the courage and humility which they possessed and which we must seek every day to emulate.... Let us gather in sanctuaries dedicated to worship and in homes blessed by family affection to express our gratitude for the glorious gifts of God; and let us earnestly and humbly pray that He will continue to guide and sustain us in the great unfinished tasks of achieving peace, justice and understanding among all men.

John F. Kennedy

1963 Thanksgiving Proclamation

Mindszenty Report Reprints

GEORGE SOROS AND WORLD DISORDER. One of the world's richest men has chosen to use his wealth to fund a vast network of left-wing groups hostile to law enforcement, capitalism, immigration controls, counterterrorism and the right to be born. Ask for 10/16

BLACK LIVES MATTER: REVOLUTIONARIES, NOT REFORMERS. The BLM movement started as a response to alleged (and often disproved) police brutality toward blacks, and has morphed into a well-funded radical group whose founders draw inspiration from a notorious 1970s revolutionary and murderer. Ask for 9/16