

Single Parents and Their Children

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Introduction and Background

The substantial increase in single-parent situations is one of the most important recent changes in family composition. Divorce rates began to move upward during the late 1950's (Glick and Norton, 1973); this and other factors contributed to the initial moderate rise in single-parent families. But, it was not until the 1970's, when the number of single-parent families increased so dramatically, that the Census Bureau began documenting the phenomenon in Current Population Reports (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1974 and 1975).

This major shift in family composition soon captured the attention of a wide audience. In an early and influential study, researchers Ross and Sawhill saw the increase in single-parent families, particularly "female-headed families," as a manifestation of changes in the economic basis of marriage (Ross and Sawhill, 1975). Over the years, additional research has continued to investigate the rising incidence of one-parent families, and the possible long-term impact that these living arrangements may have on the parents and the children involved (Bane and Ellwood, 1984; McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; Demo and Acock, 1988).

The socioeconomic profile of lone parents and their children may be significantly different from that of their counterparts in two-parent situations (Norton and Glick, 1986). Knowledge of these differences is important when making public policy so that resources can be allocated to those areas of greatest need. Recent Census Bureau reports have highlighted changes in these one-parent families (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987). This paper provides an in-depth analysis of current differences between one-parent and two-parent families, and is based on an examination of the most up-to-date information.

Table A. Family Groups with Children Under 18, by Type and Race and Hispanic Origin of Householder or Reference Person: 1988

(Numbers in thousands)

Race and group	All family groups		Family households		Related subfamilies		Unrelated subfamilies	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
ALL RACES								
Family groups with children	34,345	100.0	31,920	100.0	1,998	100.0	427	100.0
Two-parent	24,977	72.7	24,600	77.1	366	18.3	11	2.6
One-parent	9,368	27.3	7,320	22.9	1,632	81.7	416	97.4
Mother only	8,146	23.7	6,273	19.7	1,480	74.1	393	92.0
Father only	1,222	3.6	1,047	3.3	152	7.6	23	5.4
WHITE								
Family groups with children	28,104	100.0	26,618	100.0	1,167	100.0	319	100.0
Two-parent	22,013	78.3	21,699	81.5	304	26.0	10	3.1
One-parent	6,090	21.7	4,918	18.5	863	74.0	309	96.9
Mother only	5,100	18.1	4,066	15.3	743	63.7	291	91.2
Father only	990	3.5	852	3.2	120	10.3	18	5.6
BLACK								
Family groups with children	5,057	100.0	4,195	100.0	766	100.0	96	100.0
Two-parent	2,055	40.6	2,016	48.1	39	5.1	-	-
One-parent	3,003	59.4	2,180	52.0	727	94.9	96	100.0
Mother only	2,812	55.6	2,020	48.2	701	91.5	91	94.8
Father only	191	3.8	160	3.8	26	3.4	5	5.2
HISPANIC¹								
Family groups with children	3,321	100.0	2,991	100.0	291	100.0	39	(B)
Two-parent	2,205	66.4	2,123	71.0	77	26.5	5	(B)
One-parent	1,116	33.6	868	29.0	214	73.5	34	(B)
Mother only	977	29.4	754	25.2	193	66.3	30	(B)
Father only	139	4.2	114	3.8	21	7.2	4	(B)

- Represents zero.

B Base less than 75,000.

¹May be of any race.

Note: Family groups comprise family households, related subfamilies, and unrelated subfamilies.

Source of Data

The data in this paper are based primarily on estimates obtained from the Current Population Survey (CPS) for March 1988 and earlier years. In addition to the basic monthly CPS questions, additional questions are asked in the March supplements to gather more detailed information on households, families, marital status and living arrangements. Although this analysis pri-

marily utilizes CPS data, there are also some data from the 1970 decennial census.

Types of Single-Parent Family Situations

Most single parents maintain their own household; i.e., they are householders who own or rent the living quarters in which they and their children reside.

However, not all one-parent situations involve a distinct and separate family household: about 22 percent of single parents live either in a relative's home, or in some unrelated person's household. In order to encompass all of these types of situations, the Census Bureau uses a "family group" concept which includes not only those single parents who are householders, but also those who are not.

A family group may be any one of three types: a family household (a "family"), a related subfamily, or an unrelated subfamily (table A). For example, a mother and her child would be considered a "family household" if they owned or rented their own home, a "related subfamily" if they resided in a home owned or rented by one or both of the mother's parents (or some other relative), or an "unrelated subfamily" if they lived in a household belonging to the mother's unrelated friend. Any particular household may contain none of these family groups, one such group, or more than one family group.

Increase in Single Parents Since 1970

Between 1970 and 1988, the number of single-parent situations (i.e., one-parent family groups) more than doubled from 3.8 million (3.2 million of these were one-parent family households) to 9.4 million (7.3 million were one-parent family households). The dramatic rise in one-parent situations is also shown by their increase as a proportion of all family groups with children; this proportion has more than doubled from 13 percent in 1970 to 27 percent in 1988 (table B).

Race and Hispanic Origin of Parents

Although almost two-thirds (65 percent) of all single parents are classified as White, one-parent family situations are more prevalent among Blacks than Whites. In 1988, about 59 percent of

Table B. Family Groups with Children Under 18, by Race and Hispanic Origin of Householder or Reference Person: 1988, 1980, and 1970

(Numbers in thousands)

Race and group	1988		1980		1970		Net change, 1980-88		Net change, 1970-80	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Average per year	Number	Average per year
ALL RACES										
Family groups with children.....	34,345	100.0	32,150	100.0	29,631	100.0	2,195	314	2,519	252
Two-parent.....	24,977	72.7	25,231	78.5	25,823	87.1	-254	-36	-592	-59
One-parent.....	9,368	27.3	6,920	21.5	3,808	12.9	2,448	350	3,112	311
Mother only.....	8,146	23.7	6,230	19.4	3,415	11.5	1,916	274	2,815	282
Father only.....	1,222	3.6	690	2.1	393	1.3	532	76	297	30
WHITE										
Family groups with children.....	28,104	100.0	27,294	100.0	26,115	100.0	810	116	1,179	118
Two-parent.....	22,013	78.3	22,628	82.9	23,477	89.9	-615	-88	-849	-85
One-parent.....	6,090	21.7	4,664	17.1	2,638	10.1	1,426	204	2,026	203
Mother only.....	5,100	18.1	4,122	15.1	2,330	8.9	978	140	1,792	179
Father only.....	990	3.5	542	2.0	307	1.2	448	64	235	24
BLACK										
Family groups with children.....	5,057	100.0	4,074	100.0	3,219	100.0	983	140	855	86
Two-parent.....	2,055	40.6	1,961	48.1	2,071	64.3	94	13	-110	-11
One-parent.....	3,003	59.4	2,114	51.9	1,148	35.7	889	127	966	97
Mother only.....	2,812	55.6	1,984	48.7	1,063	33.0	828	118	921	92
Father only.....	191	3.8	129	3.2	85	2.6	62	9	44	4
HISPANIC¹										
Family groups with children.....	3,321	100.0	2,194	100.0	(NA)	(NA)	1,127	161	(NA)	(NA)
Two-parent.....	2,205	66.4	1,626	74.1	(NA)	(NA)	579	83	(NA)	(NA)
One-parent.....	1,116	33.6	568	25.9	(NA)	(NA)	548	78	(NA)	(NA)
Mother only.....	977	29.4	526	24.0	(NA)	(NA)	451	64	(NA)	(NA)
Father only.....	139	4.2	42	1.9	(NA)	(NA)	97	14	(NA)	(NA)

NA Not available.

¹ May be of any race.

Note: Family groups comprise family households, related subfamilies and unrelated subfamilies.

all Black family groups with children under age 18 present were single-parent situations, compared with 22 percent for Whites. The corresponding proportions in 1970 were 36 percent for Blacks and 10 percent for Whites.

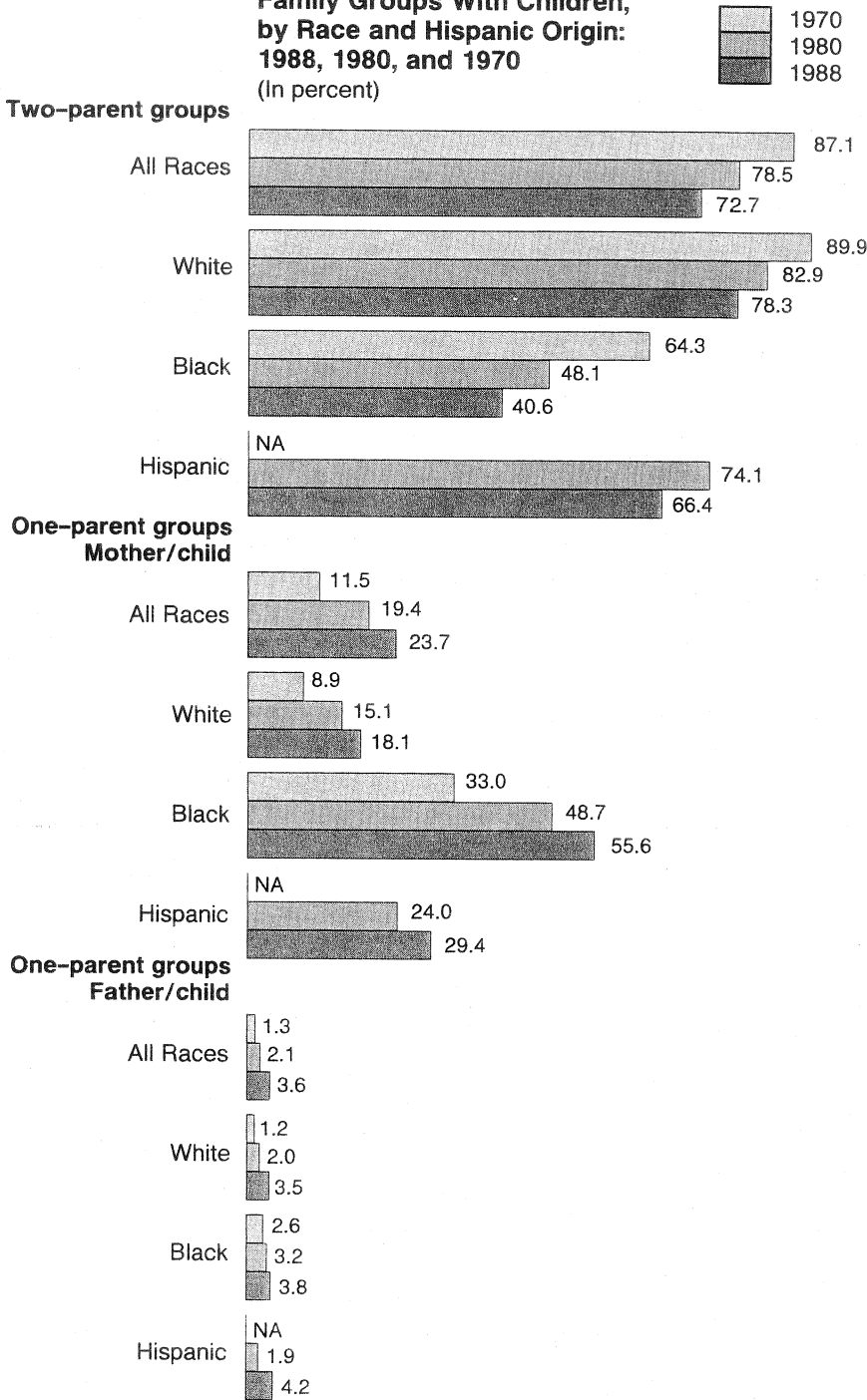
Among Hispanics (who may be of any race), single parents represented about 34 percent of all family groups in which children under 18 were present in 1988. This proportion was higher than that for comparable White family

groups overall, but lower than that for Black family groups (figure 1). Comparable 1970 data for Hispanics are not available.

Sex and Marital Status of Parents

The vast majority of one-parent family groups are maintained by the mother. There were an estimated 8.1 million mother-child families in 1988. These

Figure 1.
**Change in Composition of
 Family Groups With Children,
 by Race and Hispanic Origin:
 1988, 1980, and 1970**
 (In percent)



single mothers accounted for about 87 percent of all single parents, slightly below their 90-percent share in both 1980 and 1970 (table C).

The incidence of single fathers was higher among Whites than Blacks. The percentage of one-parent situations maintained by White single fathers has increased from 12 percent of all White single parents in 1980 to 16 percent in 1988; but the corresponding proportion among Blacks was about 6 percent in both 1980 and 1988. Of the estimated 1.2 million one-parent family groups maintained by lone fathers in 1988, about 81 percent of them were White.

Persons may become a single parent by several different paths, but virtually all one-parent situations are created in one of four ways: 1) births out of wedlock (usually, but not always, these births involve women who have never been married), 2) a separation of short or long duration, 3) divorce, or 4) widowhood. Mothers who either had never been married or were divorced accounted for 62 percent of all single parents in 1988. Widowhood is a less traveled path to single parenthood than in the past: the proportion of one-parent situations maintained by widowed women dropped from 18 percent in 1970 to 6 percent in 1988. The proportion of single parents who were currently married women with absent husbands has also declined since 1970. By contrast, the proportion of single parents represented by divorced mothers has increased from 29 percent in 1970 to 33 percent in 1988 and never-married mothers increased from 7 percent in 1980 to 29 percent of lone parents in 1988.

Some of the measured change in the marital status composition of single parents is due to technical refinements in the processing of Current Population Survey results. These modifications, introduced in 1982 and 1983, permitted more complete identification of never-married and other persons maintaining subfamily groups (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1985).

Table C. One-Parent Family Groups, by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Marital Status of Householder or Reference Person: 1988, 1980, and 1970

(Numbers in thousands)

Race and marital status	1988		1980		1970		Net change, 1980-88		Net change, 1970-80	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Average per year	Number	Average per year
ALL RACES										
One-parent family groups.....	9,368	100.0	6,920	100.0	3,808	100.0	2,448	306	3,112	311
Maintained by mother.....	8,146	87.0	6,230	90.0	3,415	89.7	1,916	240	2,815	282
Never married.....	2,707	28.9	1,063	15.4	248	6.5	1,644	206	815	82
Spouse absent.....	1,776	19.0	1,743	25.2	1,377	36.2	33	4	366	37
Separated.....	1,500	16.0	1,483	21.4	962	25.3	17	2	521	52
Divorced.....	3,120	33.3	2,721	39.3	1,109	29.1	399	50	1,612	161
Widowed.....	544	5.8	703	10.2	682	17.9	-159	-20	21	2
Maintained by father.....	1,222	13.0	690	10.0	393	10.3	532	67	297	30
Never married.....	251	2.7	63	0.9	22	0.6	188	24	41	4
Spouse absent*.....	283	3.0	181	2.6	247	6.5	102	13	-66	-7
Divorced.....	597	6.4	340	4.9	(NA)	(NA)	257	32	(NA)	(NA)
Widowed.....	88	0.9	107	1.5	124	3.3	-19	-2	-17	-2
WHITE										
One-parent family groups.....	6,091	100.0	4,664	100.0	2,638	100.0	1,427	178	2,026	203
Maintained by mother.....	5,100	83.7	4,122	88.4	2,330	88.3	978	122	1,792	179
Never married.....	1,049	17.2	379	8.1	73	2.8	670	84	306	31
Spouse absent.....	1,127	18.5	1,033	22.1	796	30.2	94	12	237	24
Separated.....	941	15.4	840	18.0	477	18.1	101	13	363	36
Divorced.....	2,568	42.2	2,201	47.2	930	35.3	367	46	1,271	127
Widowed.....	356	5.8	511	11.0	531	20.1	-155	-19	-20	-2
Maintained by father.....	990	16.3	542	11.6	307	11.6	448	56	235	24
Never married.....	173	2.8	32	0.7	18	0.7	141	18	14	1
Spouse absent*.....	219	3.6	141	3.0	196	7.4	78	10	-55	-6
Divorced.....	519	8.5	288	6.2	(NA)	(NA)	231	29	(NA)	(NA)
Widowed.....	78	1.3	82	1.8	93	3.5	-4	-1	-11	-1
BLACK										
One-parent family groups.....	3,002	100.0	2,114	100.0	1,148	100.0	888	111	966	97
Maintained by mother.....	2,812	93.7	1,984	93.9	1,063	92.6	828	104	921	92
Never married.....	1,605	53.5	665	31.5	173	15.1	940	118	492	49
Spouse absent.....	584	19.5	667	31.6	570	49.7	-83	-10	97	10
Separated.....	514	17.1	616	29.1	479	41.7	-102	-13	137	14
Divorced.....	471	15.7	477	22.6	172	15.0	-6	-1	305	31
Widowed.....	149	5.0	174	8.2	148	12.9	-25	-3	26	3
Maintained by father.....	191	6.4	129	6.1	85	7.4	62	8	44	4
Never married.....	70	2.3	30	1.4	4	0.3	40	5	26	3
Spouse absent*.....	51	1.7	37	1.8	50	4.4	14	2	-13	-1
Divorced.....	63	2.1	43	2.0	(NA)	(NA)	20	3	(NA)	(NA)
Widowed.....	7	0.2	19	0.9	30	2.6	-12	-2	-11	-1
HISPANIC¹										
One-parent family groups.....	1,116	100.0	568	100.0	(NA)	(NA)	548	69	(NA)	(NA)
Maintained by mother.....	977	87.5	526	92.6	(NA)	(NA)	451	56	(NA)	(NA)
Never married.....	351	31.5	120	21.1	(NA)	(NA)	231	29	(NA)	(NA)
Spouse absent.....	282	25.3	199	35.0	(NA)	(NA)	83	10	(NA)	(NA)
Separated.....	234	21.0	170	29.9	(NA)	(NA)	64	8	(NA)	(NA)
Divorced.....	287	25.7	162	28.5	(NA)	(NA)	125	16	(NA)	(NA)
Widowed.....	58	5.2	46	8.1	(NA)	(NA)	12	2	(NA)	(NA)
Maintained by father.....	139	12.5	42	7.4	(NA)	(NA)	97	12	(NA)	(NA)
Never married.....	52	4.7	7	1.2	(NA)	(NA)	45	6	(NA)	(NA)
Spouse absent*.....	31	2.8	13	2.3	(NA)	(NA)	18	2	(NA)	(NA)
Divorced.....	49	4.4	13	2.3	(NA)	(NA)	36	5	(NA)	(NA)
Widowed.....	5	0.4	8	1.4	(NA)	(NA)	-3	-	(NA)	(NA)

- Rounds to zero. NA Not available. * Data for 1970 include divorced fathers.

¹ May be of any race.

Note: Family groups comprise family households, related subfamilies and unrelated subfamilies.

Table D. Family Groups with Children Under 18, by Age of Parent: 1988

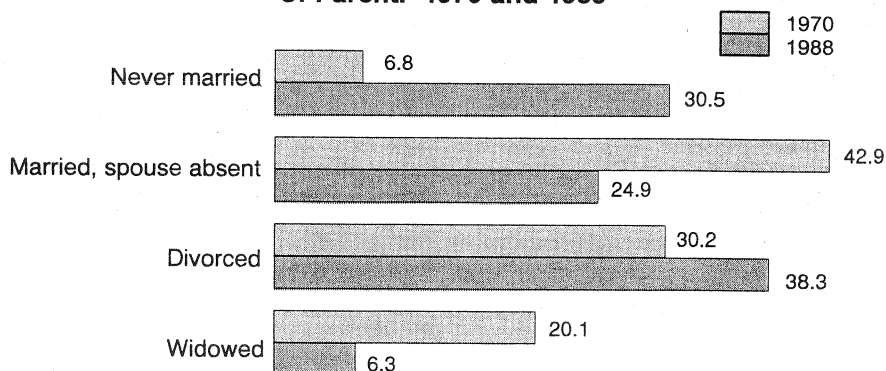
(Numbers in thousands)

Group and type	All family groups	Age of parent ¹				Median
		15 to 24 years	25 to 34 years	35 to 44 years	45 years and over	
ALL RACES						
Total	34,345	2,712	12,546	13,183	5,902	36.3
Both parents	24,977	1,013	8,850	10,203	4,910	37.4
One parent	9,368	1,699	3,696	2,980	992	33.2
Mother only	8,146	1,560	3,300	2,531	756	32.7
Father only	1,222	139	396	449	236	36.5
WHITE						
Total	28,104	1,807	10,161	11,244	4,890	36.7
Both parents	22,013	884	7,810	9,083	4,233	37.3
One parent	6,090	923	2,351	2,161	657	34.1
Mother only	5,100	819	2,023	1,785	473	33.6
Father only	990	104	328	376	184	36.5
BLACK						
Total	5,057	838	2,025	1,498	696	33.4
Both parents	2,055	100	773	755	426	36.9
One parent	3,003	738	1,252	743	270	31.1
Mother only	2,812	703	1,197	680	231	30.8
Father only	191	35	55	63	39	35.6
HISPANIC²						
Total	3,321	405	1,316	1,082	521	34.5
Both parents	2,205	167	887	760	394	35.6
One parent	1,116	238	429	322	127	32.3
Mother only	977	216	377	284	103	32.0
Father only	139	22	52	38	24	34.2

¹Householder or reference person in two-parent situations.

²May be of any race.

Figure 2.
Percent Distribution of Children Under 18 Living With One Parent, by Marital Status of Parent: 1970 and 1988



Ages of Parents

Single parents tend to be a bit younger than their counterparts in two-parent situations. In 1988, for example, the median age of persons maintaining one-parent family groups was 33.2 years, compared with a median age of 37.4 years for parents (i.e., householders or reference persons) maintaining two-parent family groups (table D).

Single mothers are likely to be younger than single fathers. The median age of lone mothers in 1988 was almost 4 years younger than that for lone fathers—32.7 years versus 36.5 years.

The proportion under 25 years of age in 1988 was 19 percent of single mothers versus 11 percent of single fathers. In contrast, 37 percent of single fathers were middle aged (35 to 44 years old) as compared with 31 percent of single mothers.

The age at which a person becomes a single parent has implications for both the stability of their living arrangement and the economic viability of their family unit. For example, a young teenage mother who has not been married may require shelter and considerable other assistance from her parents, other family members, or available public resources. However, although a 35-year-old divorced mother with child support, an established career, and her own home would face difficulties in her role as a single parent, the amount of assistance needed might be relatively minimal as compared with that required by the teenage mother.

Characteristics of Children Living With One Parent

Much of the interest in one-parent situations focuses on the number and characteristics of these family groups. It is also important, however, to examine the data using children as the unit of analysis, because the child, as well as the parent, experiences one-parent life and tries to cope with the often difficult socioeconomic circumstances.

There were about 63.2 million children under 18 years of age in 1988, and 15.3 million of these children were living with only one parent: 13.5 million with the mother alone and 1.8 million with the father alone (table E). The overall percentage of children living with one parent has risen dramatically from 12 percent of all children under 18 in 1970 to 24 percent, or almost one of every four children, in 1988.

About 63 percent of all children under age 18 living with one parent in 1988 were White, but the incidence of children living with single parents was much higher among all Black children (54 percent) than among all White children (19 percent). The corresponding percentages were considerably lower in 1970: 32 percent and 9 percent, respectively.

Among Hispanic children, regardless of race, about 30 percent were living with just one parent in 1988. This was lower than the overall figure for Black children, but higher than that for White children. Comparable 1970 data for Hispanics are not available.

All of these estimates refer only to the living arrangements of children at the time when the survey data were collected. About 24 percent of children under 18 were living with one parent at the time of our 1988 survey, but various estimates indicate that at some point during their childhood (i.e., prior to age 18) 60 percent, or more, of today's children will spend a significant amount of time living with only one parent (Norton and Glick, 1986; Hernandez, 1986; Hofferth, 1985). Additional research indicates that once a child enters a single-parent situation, the living arrangement will have a duration of about 6 years, on average (Bumpass, 1987; Sweet and Bumpass, 1988).

Some children live in a single-parent arrangement because they were born out-of-wedlock, others because their parents separated or one parent died. Ultimately, however, it is divorce that accounts for the largest proportion of

Table E. Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years, by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1988, 1980, and 1970

(Excludes persons under 18 years old who were maintaining households or family groups. Numbers in thousands)

Race and arrangement	1988	1980	1970	Percent distribution		
				1988	1980	1970
ALL RACES						
Children under 18 years	63,179	63,427	69,162	100.0	100.0	100.0
Living with --						
Both parents	45,942	48,624	58,939	72.7	76.7	85.2
One parent	15,329	12,466	8,199	24.3	19.7	11.9
Mother only	13,521	11,406	7,452	21.4	18.0	10.8
Father only	1,808	1,060	748	2.9	1.7	1.1
Other relatives	1,483	1,949	1,547	2.3	3.1	2.2
Nonrelatives only	425	388	477	0.7	0.6	0.7
WHITE						
Children under 18 years	51,030	52,242	58,790	100.0	100.0	100.0
Living with --						
Both parents	40,287	43,200	52,624	78.9	82.7	89.5
One parent	9,624	7,901	5,109	18.9	15.1	8.7
Mother only	8,160	7,059	4,581	16.0	13.5	7.8
Father only	1,464	842	528	2.9	1.6	0.9
Other relatives	818	887	696	1.6	1.7	1.2
Nonrelatives only	301	254	362	0.6	0.5	0.6
BLACK						
Children under 18 years	9,699	9,375	9,422	100.0	100.0	100.0
Living with --						
Both parents	3,739	3,956	5,508	38.6	42.2	58.5
One parent	5,247	4,297	2,996	54.1	45.8	31.8
Mother only	4,959	4,117	2,783	51.1	43.9	29.5
Father only	288	180	213	3.0	1.9	2.3
Other relatives	620	999	820	6.4	10.7	8.7
Nonrelatives only	94	123	97	1.0	1.3	1.0
HISPANIC¹						
Children under 18 years	6,786	5,459	² 4,006	100.0	100.0	100.0
Living with --						
Both parents	4,497	4,116	3,111	66.3	75.4	77.7
One parent	2,047	1,152	(NA)	30.2	21.1	(NA)
Mother only	1,845	1,069	(NA)	27.2	19.6	(NA)
Father only	202	83	(NA)	3.0	1.5	(NA)
Other relatives	180	183	(NA)	2.7	3.4	(NA)
Nonrelatives only	62	8	(NA)	0.9	0.1	(NA)

NA Not available.

¹May be of any race.

²Persons under 18 years.

Source of 1970 Hispanic origin data: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970 Census of Population, PC(2)-1C, *Persons of Spanish Origin*.

children in single-parent families (figure 2). The experience of living in a one-parent family may not be limited to any one cause, or even to just one episode, for any particular child during their childhood years. For example, a child born out of wedlock may later lose a parent through separation or divorce.

In 1988, 50 percent of the White children living with one parent were living with a divorced parent, 25 percent were with a parent who, although married, was living apart from their spouse, 18 percent were with a parent who had never been married, and about 7 percent were with a widowed parent

Table F. Children Under 18 Years Living With One Parent, by Marital Status of Parent, by Race and Hispanic Origin of Child: 1988, 1980, and 1970

(Numbers in thousands)

Race of child and marital status of parent	1988	1980	1970	Percent distribution		
				1988	1980	1970
All children	15,329	12,466	8,199	100.0	100.0	100.0
Marital status of parent:						
Divorced	5,871	5,281	2,473	38.3	42.4	30.2
Married, spouse absent	3,814	3,898	3,521	24.9	31.3	42.9
Separated	3,242	3,327	2,484	21.1	26.7	30.3
Other	472	571	1,037	3.1	4.6	12.6
Widowed	970	1,469	1,649	6.3	11.8	20.1
Never married	4,673	1,820	557	30.5	14.6	6.8
White children	9,624	7,901	5,110	100.0	100.0	100.0
Marital status of parent:						
Divorced	4,829	4,106	1,997	50.2	52.0	39.1
Married, spouse absent	2,401	2,243	1,822	24.9	28.4	35.7
Separated	2,047	1,817	1,111	21.3	23.0	21.7
Other	287	426	711	3.0	5.4	13.9
Widowed	659	1,000	1,160	6.8	12.7	22.7
Never married	1,734	552	131	18.0	7.0	2.6
Black children	5,247	4,297	2,995	100.0	100.0	100.0
Marital status of parent:						
Divorced	897	1,078	438	17.1	25.1	14.6
Married, spouse absent	1,253	1,573	1,651	23.9	36.6	55.1
Separated	1,100	1,463	1,343	21.0	34.0	44.8
Other	132	110	308	2.5	2.6	10.3
Widowed	254	411	482	4.8	9.6	16.1
Never married	2,843	1,235	423	54.2	28.7	14.1
Hispanic children ¹	2,048	1,152	(NA)	100.0	100.0	(NA)
Marital status of parent:						
Divorced	615	353	(NA)	30.0	30.6	(NA)
Married, spouse absent	642	468	(NA)	31.3	40.6	(NA)
Separated	531	400	(NA)	25.9	34.7	(NA)
Other	105	68	(NA)	5.1	5.9	(NA)
Widowed	118	103	(NA)	5.8	8.9	(NA)
Never married	672	228	(NA)	32.8	19.8	(NA)

NA Not available.

¹May be of any race.

(table F). The proportions of White children living with a divorced or never-married parent have risen substantially from their 1970 levels, while the percentages living with a parent who was widowed or living separately from their spouse have declined. As mentioned previously, part of these measured changes may be explained by improvements in survey procedures (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1985).

Among Black children in 1988, over half (54 percent) of the 5.2 million living with one parent were living with a parent who had never been married. This proportion was three times higher than that for White children. Conversely, only about 17 percent of Black children in one-parent situations were with a divorced parent, the marital status category accounting for half of White children living with single parents.

The 2.0 million Hispanic children (of any race) living with one parent in 1988 were less likely than White children, overall, to be living with a divorced parent, and less likely than Black children, overall, to be living with a never-married parent. Comparable data on children of Hispanic origin were not available for 1970.

According to figures from the National Center for Health Statistics, birth rates among unmarried women have increased substantially since the mid-1970's. Divorce rates have stopped their dramatic increase, and have remained relatively stable for the past 10 years or so (National Center for Health Statistics, 1988). Although divorce rates are no longer rising steeply, the level at which they have stabilized is very high. In the absence of any sizeable decline in either birth rates for unmarried women or divorce rates, it is certain that, for many years to come, a large number of youngsters will spend some time in a single-parent setting.

Ages of Children Living With One Parent

Children of any age may already have lived for a period with just one parent, or may experience such an arrangement at some future point during their childhood. In 1988, an estimated 5.1 million of the children living with one parent were under 6 years of age, 5.2 million were 6 to 11 years old, and 5.1 million were 12 to 17 years of age (table G). Thus, when considering the needs of these children and their families, a program or service targeted primarily at pre-school-age children might reach less than one-third of those children actually in one-parent situations.

Among Blacks, about 6 of every 10 (61 percent) children under 6 years of age were living with one parent in 1988, compared with less than 2 of every 10 (17 percent) of White children under 6. The proportion living with one parent

was also more than half for those Black children aged 6 to 11 (58 percent) or 12 to 17 (57 percent). Thus, older Black children are about as likely as younger ones to live with only one of their parents.

About 1.5 million (81 percent) of all children living with the father only in 1988 were White. Only about 28 percent of these children were under 6 years of age, 32 percent were 6 to 11 (which is not significantly more than the percentage for those under 6), and 39 percent were 12 to 17 years old. White children living with the father alone were more likely to be 12 to 17 years old than were White children living with the mother alone (table G).

The age at which a child first lives in a one-parent situation is an important factor in determining the impact of that experience on the child's later years. For example, some studies suggest that the effects of divorce on the emotional well-being of children are more traumatic for adolescents than the very young (Demo and Acock, 1988). Young children with unmarried teenage mothers are at greatest risk of being in poverty, and suffering its consequences (Bane and Ellwood, 1983). Recent analysis further indicates that the tendency to form one-parent families may be, to some extent, dependent on one's early childhood experiences. One study suggests that "children of divorce" may, in later life, have a lower commitment to marriage (Glenn and Kramer, 1987). Others contend that women who experienced their parents' marital instability were more likely than other women to "inherit" a tendency to eventually form single-parent families themselves (McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988). It should be mentioned that research on the effects of divorce on children is often contradictory and remains inconclusive in many areas.

Table G. Living Arrangements of Children Under 18, by Age of Child, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1988

(Numbers in thousands)

Race and arrangement	Children under 18	Children under age 6			Children 6 to 11	Children 12 to 17
		Total	Under 3	3 to 5		
ALL RACES						
Total	61,271	21,526	10,855	10,670	20,359	19,386
Both parents	45,942	16,460	8,365	8,094	15,193	14,290
One parent	15,329	5,066	2,490	2,576	5,166	5,096
Mother only	13,521	4,531	2,206	2,325	4,588	4,402
Father only	1,808	535	284	251	578	694
WHITE						
Total	49,911	17,538	8,824	8,714	16,561	15,813
Both parents	40,287	14,514	7,388	7,127	13,276	12,497
One parent	9,624	3,023	1,436	1,587	3,285	3,316
Mother only	8,160	2,610	1,232	1,378	2,810	2,741
Father only	1,464	413	204	209	475	575
BLACK						
Total	8,986	3,121	1,580	1,540	3,025	2,840
Both parents	3,739	1,230	604	626	1,283	1,226
One parent	5,247	1,891	976	914	1,742	1,614
Mother only	4,959	1,785	911	873	1,653	1,521
Father only	288	106	65	41	89	93
HISPANIC¹						
Total	6,544	2,443	1,215	1,228	2,239	1,863
Both parents	4,497	1,671	838	833	1,564	1,261
One parent	2,047	771	377	395	675	601
Mother only	1,845	686	331	356	602	557
Father only	202	85	46	39	73	44

¹May be of any race.

Concentration in Metropolitan Areas

The stresses of metropolitan living do not necessarily cause the formation of one-parent situations. Indeed, it could be argued that the people and families in nonmetropolitan areas have problems that are just as likely to create situations involving single parents and their children. The largest metropolitan areas, however, have a slightly higher concentration of children living with one parent as compared with those living with two parents. For example, in

1988, about 46 percent of children living with one parent resided in metropolitan areas with 1 million or more people as compared with 41 percent of children living with both parents (table H). This difference could be affected by the racial composition of the area, however.

About 41 percent of White children living with single parents were in metropolitan areas with at least a million people—not much higher than the percentage for those living with two parents (39 percent). Among Black children with only one parent present, 55 per-

Table H. Living Arrangements of Children Under 18, by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Residence: 1988

(Numbers in thousands)

Race and arrangement	Children under 18	In metropolitan areas			Outside metropolitan areas
		Total	1 million or more	Under 1 million	
ALL RACES					
Total	61,271	46,910	25,852	21,058	14,361
Both parents	45,942	34,770	18,771	15,999	11,172
One parent	15,329	12,139	7,081	5,058	3,190
Mother only	13,521	10,732	6,339	4,393	2,789
Father only	1,808	1,407	742	665	401
WHITE					
Total	49,911	37,547	19,686	17,861	12,364
Both parents	40,287	30,034	15,708	14,327	10,253
One parent	9,624	7,513	3,978	3,534	2,111
Mother only	8,160	6,392	3,410	2,981	1,768
Father only	1,464	1,121	568	553	343
BLACK					
Total	8,986	7,336	4,751	2,586	1,649
Both parents	3,739	3,058	1,878	1,181	681
One parent	5,247	4,279	2,873	1,405	968
Mother only	4,959	4,036	2,725	1,311	923
Father only	288	243	148	94	45
HISPANIC¹					
Total	6,544	6,014	3,988	2,026	531
Both parents	4,497	4,099	2,680	1,419	398
One parent	2,047	1,915	1,308	607	132
Mother only	1,845	1,727	1,188	539	118
Father only	202	188	120	68	14

¹May be of any race.

cent lived in these large metropolitan areas, compared with 50 percent of those with both parents present.

In sum, children in one-parent families live in all sorts of residential settings, from the most rural farming areas to densely populated cities containing several million people. However, a child in a one-parent situation is more likely than a child in a two-parent situation to live in a place with at least 1 million inhabitants.

Educational Level of Parents

The parent's educational level is an important aspect of the socioeconomic profile of children and their families.

Children in single-parent families are much more likely to live with a parent who has not completed high school than are children in two-parent situations. In 1988, for example, the proportion of children living with a parent (i.e., householder or reference person) who had not completed high school was 32 percent among those in single-parent family groups versus only 17 percent of children in two-parent situations (table I).

At the opposite end of the educational spectrum, children living with two parents have a greater likelihood having a parent (the householder or reference person) who is a college graduate than do children with an absent parent. In 1988, about 26 percent of children with

both parents present were in families maintained by a parent who had completed 4 or more years of college, but the corresponding proportion for children who lived with single mothers was only 7 percent. If the single parent was the child's father, the college-educated proportion was 14 percent, still well below the proportion for children living with both parents. Clearly, to the extent that the parent's educational level is an important determinant of a child's general well-being, children in one-parent situations are at a disadvantage.

Among White children, 29 percent of those with just one parent present in 1988 had parents who had not completed high school, compared with 39 percent of Black children, and 60 percent of Hispanic children (of any race). Previous studies have cited substantial improvements since 1970 in the educational level of single parents (Norton and Glick, 1986). The 1988 data indicate that further gains remain to be made before single-parent families achieve educational parity with two-parent families.

Labor Force Status of Parents

Single parents with low educational levels, particularly those who have not completed high school, are at a great disadvantage in competing for, and holding, good jobs. The disparity between children in two-parent versus mother-child situations in terms of the labor force status of the parents is striking. In 1988, about 84 percent of children living with both parents had a parent (i.e., the householder or reference person) who was employed full-time, compared with only 42 percent of children living with the mother alone (table J). However, only 12 percent of children living with both parents were in a setting where the householder or reference person was unemployed or not in the labor force, but the proportion

among children with single mothers was about four times higher (48 percent). Once again, the child is the unit of analysis in these comparisons.

The circumstances of White children essentially mirror those of children overall, but the labor force participation of the parents of Black children is quite different. Blacks living with both parents are less likely than their White counterparts to have a parent (i.e., the householder or reference person) who is employed full-time, and more likely to be in a family group maintained by a parent who is unemployed or not in the labor force. Among Black children living with single mothers, only 34 percent had a mother who was employed full time, while the majority (58 percent) lived with a mother who was either unemployed or not in the labor force.

Among Hispanic children (of any race) with single mothers, 29 percent had a mother working full-time, an even lower percentage than those for Whites or Blacks, overall. As was the case among Blacks, most Hispanic children with single mothers lived with mothers who were either unemployed or not in the labor force.

Although many of these single parents may live in areas where jobs are scarce, their lack of work skills and experience, along with their often limited education, compounds the employment difficulties faced by these parents, particularly the mothers. Problems securing adequate child care may further complicate the single parent's ability to seek a job. All working parents face obstacles in finding acceptable child care arrangements, but the single parent has no spouse or second parent present in the home who can help out or fill in on a regular, or even an occasional, basis. In these cases, adequate child care arrangements are a vital prerequisite to the parent's holding a steady job.

Table I. Children Under 18, by Race and Hispanic Origin of Child and Education of Parent: 1988

(Numbers in thousands)

Race of child and education of parent	Children under 18	Years of school completed by parent ¹			
		Less than 12 years	High school, 4 years	Some college, 1 to 3 years	College, 4 or more years
ALL RACES					
Total	61,271	12,765	23,899	11,356	13,250
Both parents	45,942	7,788	17,256	8,898	12,000
One parent	15,329	4,976	6,644	2,459	1,249
Mother only	13,521	4,508	5,881	2,138	993
Father only	1,808	468	763	321	256
WHITE					
Total	49,911	9,384	19,351	9,478	11,697
Both parents	40,287	6,603	15,131	7,756	10,797
One parent	9,624	2,781	4,221	1,722	900
Mother only	8,160	2,404	3,607	1,461	689
Father only	1,464	377	614	261	211
BLACK					
Total	8,986	2,863	3,926	1,441	757
Both parents	3,739	818	1,661	792	468
One parent	5,247	2,044	2,265	649	288
Mother only	4,959	1,957	2,138	605	258
Father only	288	87	127	44	30
HISPANIC²					
Total	6,544	3,586	1,839	692	428
Both parents	4,497	2,365	1,238	501	392
One parent	2,047	1,221	601	191	36
Mother only	1,845	1,123	527	167	30
Father only	202	98	74	24	6

¹Householder or reference person in two-parent situations.

²May be of any race.

Family Income

Children in one-parent families are very likely to be living with a parent who is trying to "make ends meet" on a very low income. About 13.5 million or 88 percent of the 15.3 million children in single-parent families in 1988 were living with the mother; their average (mean) family income was \$11,989, compared with \$23,919 for those in single-father situations and \$40,067 for children in households where both parents were present (table K). These disparities reflect both the greater earning

power of single fathers, and the fact that many two-parent families can rely on the incomes of two working parents.

Recent research has shown that women maintaining families alone face serious handicaps in their battle to avoid, or escape from, poverty. One study suggests that those mother-child situations resulting from an out-of-wedlock birth are the ones most likely to be poor and in need of public support (Bane and Ellwood, 1983). Nevertheless, divorce can also exact large economic penalties. Some research,

Table J. Living Arrangements of Children Under 18, by Race and Hispanic Origin of Child and Labor Force Status of Parent: 1988

(Numbers in thousands)

Race and arrangement	Children under 18	Parent ¹ in labor force				Parent ¹ not in labor force
		Total	Employed		Unemployed	
			Full time	Part time		
ALL RACES						
Total	61,271	51,862	45,454	3,388	3,020	9,409
Both parents	45,942	42,146	38,454	1,932	1,760	3,796
One parent	15,329	9,715	7,000	1,455	1,260	5,614
Mother only	13,521	8,157	5,737	1,337	1,083	5,364
Father only	1,808	1,558	1,263	118	177	250
WHITE						
Total	49,911	43,984	39,317	2,641	2,026	5,927
Both parents	40,287	37,453	34,388	1,617	1,448	2,834
One parent	9,624	6,531	4,929	1,024	578	3,094
Mother only	8,160	5,248	3,881	923	444	2,913
Father only	1,464	1,283	1,048	101	134	181
BLACK						
Total	8,986	6,110	4,610	614	886	2,876
Both parents	3,739	3,156	2,737	200	219	583
One parent	5,247	2,953	1,873	414	667	2,294
Mother only	4,959	2,728	1,702	402	625	2,231
Father only	288	225	171	12	42	63
HISPANIC²						
Total	6,544	4,919	3,967	494	458	1,625
Both parents	4,497	3,982	3,298	317	367	514
One parent	2,047	937	669	177	91	1,111
Mother only	1,845	773	535	164	73	1,073
Father only	202	164	134	13	18	38

¹Householder or reference person in two-parent situations.

²May be of any race.

based on data from California, had originally suggested that women experienced a tremendous decline in their standard of living in the first year after divorce, while their former husband's economic well-being actually improved after the divorce (Weitzman, 1985). Other more recent research argues that the California study overstates the magnitude of the drop in women's living standards, and that the actual decline in the economic status of women after divorce is about 33 percent (Hoffman and Duncan, 1988).

About 47 percent of the children living with single mothers were in families with income levels below \$7,500, compared with only 20 percent of those

with single fathers and a mere 4 percent of those residing with both parents. Thus, the proportion of children in mother-child families in this very low income bracket was 12 times higher than the comparable proportion for children living with both parents. In contrast, 70 percent of children living with both parents were in families with incomes of \$25,000 or more per year, but only 12 percent of children living with lone mothers were in this middle-to-affluent income level.

Among Black children, the average (mean) family income for those with single mothers (\$8,929) was only 28 percent of the average income level enjoyed by Black children living with

two parents (\$31,423). Both of these income levels for Black children, however, were significantly lower than those for White children living in comparable family situations (\$13,754 and \$40,833, respectively).

Among Hispanic children (of any race) the average family income for those with lone mothers (\$9,507) was 35 percent as large as that for those with both parents (\$27,159). These income levels were below the levels for White children in comparable family settings.

Conclusion

There has been speculation in the popular media and elsewhere concerning how pervasive the single-parent phenomenon is likely to become. Is the day near when half of all families involving children will be maintained by just one parent? Probably not, under any foreseeable set of circumstances. However, even if one-parent situations never become as dominant a feature of American family life as two-parent situations, today's single parents and their children already constitute a large and often socioeconomically impaired segment of our society.

The term "single parent" has come to be a sort of shorthand phrase that actually refers to a wide variety of complex living arrangements and circumstances. The "single-parent family" may generally be thought of as the stereotypical never-married or divorced mother who is poorly educated, and whose family is impoverished because of her inability to find a job at an income level that is adequate to sustain a decent standard of living. As we have shown, however, single-parent situations encompass a wide spectrum of possibilities. Just as single-parent families differ among themselves, so they also have characteristics that distinguish them as a group from two-parent families. The current data clearly indicate that many single-parent families continue to be seriously disadvan-

taged in a number of ways when compared to two-parent families.

The single parent and his or her children face many problems and needs, not all of them economic, and their difficulties are not diminished just because their numbers are not increasing as rapidly as they were in the early 1970's. These difficulties will continue to pose challenges for many years to come, not only for researchers trying to provide information and understanding, but also to policy makers seeking long-term and workable solutions.

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Table K. **Children Under 18, by Family Income: 1988**

(Numbers in thousands)

Race and arrangement	Children under 18	Family income in 1987				Mean income
		Under \$7,500	\$7,500 to 14,999	\$15,000 to 24,999	\$25,000 and over	
ALL RACES						
Total	61,271	8,529	7,923	10,188	34,631	\$33,394
Both parents	45,942	1,762	4,191	7,630	32,360	40,067
One parent	15,329	6,768	3,732	2,560	2,271	(NA)
Mother only	13,521	6,410	3,385	2,160	1,568	11,989
Father only	1,808	358	347	400	703	23,919
WHITE						
Total	49,911	5,057	5,689	8,285	30,879	35,953
Both parents	40,287	1,447	3,366	6,424	29,051	40,833
One parent	9,624	3,612	2,325	1,861	1,827	(NA)
Mother only	8,160	3,340	2,074	1,536	1,211	13,754
Father only	1,464	272	251	325	616	25,418
BLACK						
Total	8,986	3,172	1,834	1,570	2,412	18,500
Both parents	3,739	183	559	931	2,065	31,423
One parent	5,247	2,988	1,275	638	345	(NA)
Mother only	4,959	2,907	1,186	582	284	8,929
Father only	288	81	89	56	61	15,525
HISPANIC¹						
Total	6,544	1,454	1,613	1,327	2,151	21,921
Both parents	4,497	391	1,048	1,060	1,998	27,159
One parent	2,047	1,063	564	266	153	(NA)
Mother only	1,845	1,016	514	219	96	9,507
Father only	202	47	50	47	57	18,750

NA Not available.

¹May be of any race.

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