



# **The Social History of the American Family: An Encyclopedia**

## **Single-Parent Families**

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A single parent, sometimes referred to as a solo parent, serves as a caregiver for children without the assistance of an in-home spouse or partner. Single-parent-family households include at least two people, a parent and a child or children, distinguishing them from single-person households, in which only one person resides.

Single-parent families can result from divorce or separation, death, childbirth that occurs either within or outside a romantic relationship, or single-parent adoption. Although single parents may receive support from coparents, family members, friends, or trusted others, this help may be less regular or dependable than help that would be provided by a live-in caregiver. In the absence of a spouse or cohabiting partner, single parents must negotiate child care and other caregiving responsibilities alongside personal work and leisure schedules, a task that requires physical, emotional, and financial capital. Single-parent families have become the fastest-growing family type in North America, thus understanding their histories, strengths, and unique challenges is increasingly important.

### **History of Single-Parent Families**

The death of one parent was the most typical cause of single-parent families in the past. By the 20th century, family demography in the United States had shifted, especially with the rise in single-parent households. Divorce rates did stabilize in the 1980s, but the number of children born to single mothers became a major contributor to single parenthood in the following decades.

*Parental death as a determinant of single parenthood.* Historically, single-parent families were most commonly formed as a result of the death of one parent. High parent mortality rates in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries were largely attributed to disease, war, and complications from maternal childbirth. Estimates for the U.S. colonial era suggest that nearly one-third of children lost a parent during childhood, and by age 20 approximately half of all children had experienced a parent's death. Single-parent families formed after divorce or separation were rare in early American centuries due to the legal, social, religious, and political stigma associated with divorce. Though single-parent families certainly existed in the earliest U.S. history, parents were not likely to stay single for long following the death of a spouse, as two parents were essential to the family's livelihood. Quick remarriages occurred out of necessity, so the time individuals spent in single-parent homes was likely to be short in duration.

*Divorce as a determinant of single parenthood.* The 20th century brought about many shifts in U.S. family demography, with the rise in single-parent households among the most pronounced of these changes. Contrary to earlier centuries, single-parent households were more likely than ever to result from divorce or nonmarital childbirth, as opposed to death. In 1960, the U.S. Census reported that 9 percent of children were dependent on a single parent, a number that increased to 27 percent in 2010. This dramatic spike in the number of single-parent-family households was a direct result of other demographic shifts, namely, upswings in rates of divorce and births to unmarried women.

Following the Civil War, divorce rates in the United States began to increase, an upward trend that continued for nearly a century. From the 1960s to the 1970s, the United States experienced its highest rate of divorce ever, as divorce rates for married

women nearly doubled during this time, (up from 10.6 per 1,000 people in 1965 to 22.8 per 1,000 in 1979). In later decades, divorce rates leveled off and actually decreased by approximately 10 percent in the 1980s. Nonetheless, other demographic shifts continued to influence the growth of single-parent families.

*Nonmarital childbirth as a determinant of single parenthood.* While divorce rates stabilized in the 1980s, the number of children born to single mothers emerged as a major contributor to single parenthood in the decades to follow. Given that most research, including population polls such as the census, failed to distinguish between marital status and residential status in their counts of nonmarital childbirth, it remains unclear how many mothers were living with the children's fathers at the time of the child's birth. Nonetheless, general trends indicated that nonmarital childbirth had become the most prominent determinant of single parenthood, compared to death and divorce, the trends witnessed in earlier centuries.

Women from the baby boom generation were notable for postponing marriage. As a result, the number of unmarried women increased more rapidly than the number of married women during this era, although rates of childbirth remained stable. During the 1990s, the United States witnessed a renewed rise in birthrates for married women, thus the rate of increase in the proportion of births to unmarried women slowed. This stabilization ceased, however, beginning in early 2000, as the proportion of births to unmarried women grew once again, particularly among women aged 20 and older.

Though some unmarried births are intentional, most—approximately 70 percent—are not. From 1980 to 2010, the rate of nonmarital births to women of all ages increased. The rate of births to unmarried adolescents rose from 62 percent to 95 percent of pregnant teens. These data suggest that 95 percent of teenagers giving birth in 2010 were not married, although teenage births account for less than 20 percent of all nonmarital births in the United States. The rate of births to unmarried women in their early 20s rose from 19 percent to 64 percent, the rate of births to unmarried women in their late 20s rose from 9 percent to 34 percent, and the rate of births among unmarried women in their 30s rose from 8 percent to 21 percent. The 2010 Census's composite estimates across all age groups indicated that approximately 40.7 percent of births were to unmarried mothers, with unmarried women between the ages of 20 and 29 most likely to give birth outside marriage (60 percent of births to this age group occur outside of marriage).

Although the proportion of children born to unmarried mothers has increased for women of all ages, these rates vary dramatically among women of different races. Following World War II, the rate of births to single black women increased more rapidly than for white women and that trend has continued. Although in recent decades the proportion of births to white, unmarried mothers has rapidly increased, minority women are still more likely to give birth outside marriage than their white cohorts. By 2014, Hispanic women were most likely to give birth outside marriage (92.2 births per every 1,000 occur outside marriage), followed by black women (66.3 births per every 1,000), and white women (28.6 births per every 1,000).

### **Single-Parent Adoption as a Determinant of Single Parenthood**

Adoptions by single parents have existed since the mid-19th century, although single-parent adoptions were extremely uncommon in early centuries. State welfare officials preferred adoptive parents to be in nuclear families consisting of a married man and

woman. In the rare event that single-parent adoptions were considered, women were the favored adopters, as men were considered unfit to parent children independently. In 1968, the Child Welfare League of America stated that although couples were preferred, single-parent adoptions were permissible under exceptional circumstances.

Today, single-parent adoption is legal in all 50 states and accounts for approximately 5 to 10 percent of all single-parent-household arrangements. Although single-parent adoption is more widely accepted, its strict adoption guidelines render it a controversial subject. For example, single-parent adoptions to never-married parties are preferred over adoptions by single parents who have been divorced; a parent's history of divorce is viewed as a liability to children's well-being. Additionally, in many jurisdictions men are allowed to adopt only male children. Outside of formal, legal limitations, single parents may also find adoption difficult due to financial constraints or a lack of support to assist with child rearing in the event of an illness or death.

### **Public Perception of Single Parenthood**

Throughout U.S. history, the general public has considered it necessary to have two parents in the home to meet the demands of family life (e.g., operate a family farm, prepare meals, tend to children's needs). Although the late 20th and 21st centuries brought about many changes in the day-to-day lives of families (e.g., increased urbanization, larger numbers of women in the workforce), debates about the necessity of two-parent homes and the ability of single parents to independently provide for children continued.

*Murphy Brown*, a TV sitcom that aired in the early 1990s, cast light on the public's response to the changing demographic makeup of the American family. The show's main character challenged the public's perception of single mothers, as Murphy Brown enjoyed a lucrative career as an investigative journalist while independently raising her son. Following the birth of Murphy's son in the 1991 to 1992 season, Vice President Dan Quayle criticized the Murphy Brown character for ignoring the importance of fathers in child rearing, a speech that became known around the United States as the "Murphy Brown Speech." Quayle's mention of Murphy Brown sparked a public debate about family diversity in the United States and the capability of single parents to independently provide for children. While many in the general public now view unmarried single parents as capable providers, others continue to hold negative views of single parents.

Some of these negative views may be due to misperceptions. A nationwide poll conducted in 2010 revealed that the general public significantly underestimates the number of single parents that have paid jobs. Consequently, the public tends to associate single parenthood with laziness and an unwillingness to work. The public also tends to overestimate the number of single parents who are teenagers, often predicting the number of single teenage parents to be 15 times the actual rate. Over-estimations of the number of single teenage parents is linked with public perceptions of single parents as irresponsible, resource poor, and ill prepared to raise children.

The prevalence of single-parent families makes the topic of family structure a focal point of political debate. In 1996, under the direction of President George H. W. Bush, the U.S. government implemented a Healthy Marriage Initiative in an attempt to encourage single parents, particularly poor single parents of color, to marry for the sake of their children. The \$1.5 billion initiative was considered a welfare reform act, as

marriage was considered to be a single parent's ticket out of poverty, although many scholars have suggested that this thinking is simplistic and highly flawed. Nonetheless, the initiative garnered support from government officials at all levels, including President Barack Obama. In its present-day form, the initiative focuses on promoting father responsibility and involvement in families.

### **The State of Single-Parent Families Today**

The 2010 U.S. census revealed that 27 percent of U.S. children under the age of 18 live in single-parent households, as compared to 16 percent of children worldwide. Children in Asia and the Middle East are least likely and children in the Americas, Europe, and Oceania are most likely to live in a single-parent-family household. Single-parent families are among the fastest-growing family type in the United States and comprise the second-largest share of U.S. family households, second only to nuclear-family households.

*Single mothers.* Census estimates suggest that nearly 75 percent of single-parent-family households are headed by mothers, the majority of whom are divorced or separated (54 percent), followed closely by a large percentage of single mothers who have never been married (44 percent). Only 1.7 percent of single mothers are widowed. Approximately 30 percent of single mothers have more than one child. The preference for mothers as the primary caregivers of children is linked to cultural and societal expectations that depict mothers as expressive, nurturing, and highly involved in the day-to-day lives of their children. Despite legal efforts to exclude sex as a determinant of custody in postdivorce litigation, mothers are often favored in physical and legal custody disputes, particularly when children are young.

Two-thirds of single mothers are white, one-third are black, and one-quarter are Hispanic. Proportionately, however, African American women are far more likely to be single mothers than white or Latino women. Sixty-four percent of African American households are headed by single parents, compared to 39 percent of Hispanic households and 29 percent of white households. African American children are also more likely to be raised in a single-parent household than any other racial group. In 2011, 67 percent of African American children resided in single-parent households, compared to 42 percent of Latino children and 25 percent of white children.

In addition to racial differences, single-mother-headed households are demographically distinct from other household types (e.g., two-parent and single-father-headed households) in terms of age, education, and income. Single mothers are younger, less educated, and poorer than mothers in two-parent homes and single fathers. Twenty-three percent of single mothers are under the age of 30, compared to 18 percent of single fathers and 10 percent of parents in two-parent homes. Single mothers are also less educated than their married women and single-father counterparts; less than three-quarters of single mothers have a college degree, and one-sixth of single mothers have not completed high school. Moreover, single mothers are five times more likely than married couples to live in poverty (40.9 percent compared to 8.8 percent) and have a median income of \$25,353, a meager one-third of the median income of married couples (\$78,699).

*Single fathers.* Though mothers head most single-parent homes, fathers are increasingly gaining legal access to children. Father-headed single-parent families make up approximately 25 percent of single-parent households, a ninefold increase

since 1960. Similar to single mothers, single-father households are most commonly the result of a divorce or separation, though a very small proportion of affluent men independently raise children born to surrogate mothers. In general, however, single fathers tend to be less educated, less affluent, and less likely to be white than their married counterparts, though they fare better than single mothers in terms of education and socioeconomic status.

Some scholars attribute fathers' increased access to children to the evolution of the father role. Though fathers were once seen primarily as the family breadwinner, in recent decades society has broadened the father role to include caregiving. Given that fathers are more actively involved in the lives of children and serve as providers of financial and emotional support, they are more likely to seek custody of children following a separation or divorce than in previous decades.

*Nonresidential single parents.* Though a single parent is often identified as the parent with whom the child lives following a divorce or separation, nonresidential parents may also be characterized as single parents when they live alone and assume at least partial child-rearing responsibility. Depending on the court's allocation of legal and physical custody following parental separation, nonresidential parent-child contact may vary dramatically. For example, some nonresidential parents may have minimal legal and physical access to children, while others may share custodial powers equally with the residential parent, an arrangement referred to as joint custody. Research is clear that children are generally better off if both parents remain involved in their lives, thus joint custody has emerged as the preferred custodial arrangement in postseparation litigation. The exception to this is when parents remain in conflict after divorce, especially when that conflict is about the children.

### **Challenges Faced by Single-Parent Families**

Numerous challenges face single-parent families today, such as poverty, child care and work-family conflicts, the need for social support networks, difficulty in relationships with children, and child outcomes.

*Poverty.* According to the 2010 census, approximately 14 million children reside in households whose incomes fall below the federal poverty line. Parents and children in single-parent-family households, particularly minority families, are more likely to experience poverty than any other social group. The poverty rate for single mothers in 2011 was 40.9 percent, compared to a rate of 8.8 percent for married families. Native American mother-headed homes have the highest rate of poverty, followed closely by African Americans and Latinos. Single fathers are far less likely to be living at or below the poverty level compared to single mothers (24 percent compared to 41 percent); however, they still fare considerably worse than their married peers on virtually all sociodemographic indicators (e.g., level of education, income). Given the stark poverty rate for single-parent families, children living in single-parent homes are almost five times more likely to be poor than children living with two married parents (47.6 percent as compared to 10.9 percent).

A large number of single-parent families experience food insecurity, or a lack of access to the amount of food needed to sustain an active, healthy lifestyle. For example, approximately two-fifths of single-mother families report food insecurity, with a small proportion (one-seventh) relying on food pantries to meet their family's nutritional needs.

A greater proportion, approximately two-fifths, rely on welfare and food stamps to survive. In 2010, however, benefits provided to families needing government assistance were less than 30 percent of the federal poverty line in all but eight states, meaning that even for those who received assistance, the amount provided represented far less than the minimum income needed to sustain their basic needs.

As a result of limited income and the inability to attain sufficient help, single-parent families are more vulnerable to homelessness than any other family type. In fact, eight out of 10 homeless families are headed by single mothers, 43 percent of whom are African Americans.

*Child care and work–family conflicts.* Access to affordable, reliable child care is often reported as a major concern of single parents, particularly when children are younger than school age. Given the financial hardship that often accompanies single parenthood, it is typically not an option for single parents to forgo employment; thus, child care must be negotiated around a parent's work schedule. Eighty percent of single mothers are employed (50 percent full-time and 30 percent part-time), indicating that a slightly larger percentage of single mothers, as compared to married mothers, are working outside the home. Only two-fifths of single mothers are employed full-time the entire year, with nearly a quarter remaining jobless year-round. Comparatively, 92 percent of single fathers are employed, 70 percent of whom maintain a full-time job year-round. Given that single parents tend to have lower levels of education than their partnered peers, coupled with the fact that their employment availability may be hindered due to full-time child rearing, single parents are often forced to take jobs that offer menial pay and irregular hours. Consequently, single parents are likely to be employed in shift work, seasonal, or temporary positions.

Unpredictable employment schedules mean that single parents must find child care that accommodates their unique schedules. Locating affordable daytime care for young children and after-school care for school-aged children are commonly reported priorities of single parents. Some parents may rely on family members, friends, or trusted others to watch over children while they are working, while others may turn to center-based care agencies such as Head Start or the YMCA. Additionally, parents may have to arrange nighttime care for children in the event that overnight shifts are unavoidable. Around-the-clock care may also be required if single parents work more than one job. In the event of a child-related emergency, parents must also have backup caregivers in place to ensure that care will continue to be provided if the parent is unable to leave work.

Given these complexities, affordable, flexible child care may be nearly impossible for single parents to access; thus they must often weigh the costs and benefits of seeking employment and paying for child care or forgoing employment and assuming all child care responsibilities.

*Social support networks.* In an attempt to buffer the hardships associated with single parenthood, single mothers and fathers may reach out to coparents, family members, friends, or trusted others to assist them with day-to-day demands. These allies can provide single parents with physical, emotional, or financial support in times of need, ultimately making the constant demands of single parenting seem more manageable. Minority families, particularly African American and Latino families, are known for their close kin networks, consisting of both biological and nonbiological members. African



American or Latino single parents may rely on designated kin networks to assist them with child-rearing or daily errands. Consequently, children from low-income, single-parent homes spend more time with extended family than their more affluent peers who live with both parents. When family interactions are healthy and occur in a safe environment, family scholars tend to view this as a strength of single-parent families, as close, intergenerational relationships are often highly valued by members from all generations.

*Single parent–child relationships.* Single parent–child relationships are likely to look different than parent–child relationships observed in nuclear households, where two parents are raising one or more children. Researchers have indicated that low socioeconomic status, a common demographic marker of single-parent families, is linked to parenting behaviors categorized by low levels of warmth, nurturance, and involvement; increased parenting stress; and inconsistent discipline. These negative parenting patterns often persist in the absence of parent education, a resource that is generally reserved for middle- or high-income, married groups. Single parents are also more likely to report internalizing problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, elevated stress) that may disrupt their ability to effectively parent children.

*Child outcomes.* Given the present-day prevalence of single-parent families, researchers, clinicians, and community aides alike have become increasingly concerned about the consequences of single-parent living for children. Researchers have continuously demonstrated that children from single-parent families are more vulnerable to physical, cognitive, and socioemotional delays than peers in homes with two stable caregivers, although these findings tend to be attributed to poverty rather than family structure.

Children born to unwed mothers have a higher risk of experiencing adverse birth outcomes, including low birth weight, cognitive delays, and, in extreme cases, infant mortality. Youth raised in single-parent homes are also more likely to exhibit internalizing and externalizing behaviors, including, but not limited to, poorer academic achievement, self-regulation, self-esteem, physical health, and behavioral problems in school and home settings. Moreover, youth from single-parent homes are more likely to be exposed to violent peer networks and are more likely to engage in criminal offense and antisocial behaviors.

It is important to note, however, that these outcomes describe only a small percentage of children raised in single-parent families. The majority of children raised in single-parent homes grow up to be healthy, well-adjusted adults. Individuals and families are increasingly more complex; thus, understanding the factors that contribute to their healthy development is essential to the future of family research.

- single parents
- single mothers
- family and parenting
- single-parent families
- parents
- parenting
- children

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**See Also:**

- [Cohabitation](#)
- [Divorce and Separation](#)
- [Remarriage](#)

**Further Readings**

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