



The Facts on Fatherlessness

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Fatherlessness is a growing problem all over the Western world. Whether caused by divorce and broken families or by deliberate single parenting, more and more children grow up without fathers. Indeed, 85 per cent of single-parent families are fatherless families.

Writing about the situation in America in 1996, sociologist David Popenoe said this:

The decline of fatherhood is one of the most basic, unexpected, and extraordinary social trends of our time. Its dimensions can be captured in a single statistic: In just three decades, between 1960 and 1990, the percentage of U.S. children living apart from their biological fathers more than doubled, from 17 per cent to 36 per cent. By the turn of the century, nearly 50 per cent of American children may be going to sleep each evening without being able to say good night to their dads.¹

These trends have severe negative consequences. The father's absence from the family has been shown to be a major disadvantage to the children's well-being. The following is a summary of the evidence for the importance of fathers and the need for two-parent families.

The US-based National Fatherhood Initiative starkly puts it this way:

Children who live absent from their biological fathers are, on average, at least two to three times more likely to be poor, to use drugs, to experience educational, health, emotional and behavioural problems, to be victims of child abuse, and to engage in criminal behaviour than those who live with their married, biological (or adoptive) parents.²

One expert from Harvard Medical School who has studied over 40 years of research on the question of parental absence and children's well-being said this: "What has been shown over and over again to contribute most to the emotional development of the child is a close, warm, sustained and continuous relationship with both parents."³ As David Blankenhorn has stated in *Fatherless America*, "Fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation."⁴

Another expert puts it this way: "There exists today no greater single threat to the long-term well-being of children, our communities, or our nation, than the increasing number of children being raised without a committed, responsible, and loving father."⁵

Bryan Rodgers of the Australian National University has recently re-examined the Australian research. Rodgers says:

Australian studies with adequate samples have shown parental divorce to be a risk factor for a wide range of social and psychological problems in adolescence and adulthood, including poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, psychological distress, delinquency and recidivism, substance use and abuse, sexual precocity, adult criminal offending, depression, and suicidal behaviour.⁶

He concludes, "There is no scientific justification for disregarding the public health significance of marital dissolution in Australia, especially with respect to mental health."⁷

A New Zealand summary of the data based on national and international research conducted over the past two decades also found major positive outcomes for children when fathers are present, and negative outcomes when fathers are absent. The report states:

The weight of the evidence is that fathers can make unique, direct contributions to their children's well-being. These findings held true after controlling for a range of factors, including mothers' involvement, children's characteristics, children's early behavioural problems, family income, socio-economic status over time, stepfather involvement and family structure.⁸

It goes on to list the many specific ways in which fathers positively contribute to the well-being of children.⁹

The importance of fathers is neither a recent nor a merely Western truth. The need for and importance of fathers is a historical and universal given. As anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski put it,

The most important moral and legal rule concerning the physiological side of kinship is that no child should be brought into the world without a man – and one man at that... I think that this generalization amounts to a universal sociological law.

There may be cultural variations, yet,

... through all the variations there runs the rule that the father is indispensable for the full sociological status of the child as well of its mother, that the group consisting of a woman and her offspring is sociologically incomplete and illegitimate.¹⁰

There is now just so much social science data on the problems of fatherlessness. As a result, documenting this topic could easily blow out in size. To keep things brief, the following research will be presented in bullet-point form. They are only a small part of the overall data but provide clear witness to the importance of fathers and how children suffer when they are not raised by fathers. Here, then, is a sampling of the evidence.

Fatherlessness Increases Poverty

- In America, among families with dependent children, only 8.3% of married couples were living below the poverty line, compared to 47.1% of female-headed households.¹¹
- Also, in the US, a nationally representative sample found this: "In 2005, the median income for married couples was \$66,067, which was \$35,000 more than the median

income for single mothers, \$19,000 more than that of single fathers, \$43,000 more than that of single women, and \$24,000 more than that of single men. Married couples made up 79 per cent of the highest quintile income and 17.9 per cent of the lowest income quintile.”¹²

- In Australia, a recent study of 500 divorcees with children five to eight years after the separation found that four in five divorced mothers were dependent on social security after their marriages dissolved.¹³
- Figures from Monash University’s Centre for Population and Urban Research show that family break-up, rather than unemployment, is the main cause of the rise in poverty levels in Australia.¹⁴
- A joint report from AMP Life and Canberra University’s National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling says that divorce leaves both partners worse off economically, but women tend to experience the biggest fall in disposable income.¹⁵
- A recent US study “found that by far the ‘biggest factor’ associated with child poverty in a county is the proportion of households headed by unwed mothers with children under 18 years of age.” The researchers established that every 1 percentage-point increase in these households correlates with a 1.2 percentage-point increase in the county’s child poverty rate.¹⁶
- According to data collected from the United States Census Bureau, intact families have fewer children living in poverty than other household types. Specifically, in 2022, 32.0% of single-mother families were living in poverty, 16.3% of single-father families were, and 5.4% of married-couple families were.¹⁷

Fatherlessness Lowers Educational Performance

- American children from intact families have a 21% chance of dropping out of high school, whereas children from broken families have a 46% chance.¹⁸
- American schoolchildren who became father-absent early in life generally scored significantly lower on IQ and achievement tests.¹⁹
- A recent Concordia University found clear positive effects of a father’s influence on the behavioural and cognitive development of children. For example, “for both boys and girls, fathers’ positive parental control predicted higher Performance IQ and fewer internalizing problems over six years later.”²⁰
- A study of Australian primary school children from three family types (married heterosexual couples, cohabiting heterosexual couples and homosexual couples) found that in every area of educational endeavour (language; mathematics; social studies; sport; class work, sociability and popularity; and attitudes to learning), children from married heterosexual couples performed better than the other two groups. The study concludes with these words: “Married couples seem to offer the best environment for a child’s social and educational development”.²¹
- A Melbourne University study of 212 children found that fathers, even more than mothers, had a major beneficial influence on children in their first year of school. The study found that kids with regular father involvement were more cooperative and self-reliant in school than kids who did not have father involvement. The more regular involvement the father has with the child, the study’s author said, the better the child does in his or her first year of school.²²
- Researchers have found that children whose fathers were absent at the time of birth were at significantly greater risk of incurring various developmental problems (and more of them), such as attention/learning disorders and speech/language disorders.²³

- A recent Australian study found that there is a correlation between father presence and child educational performance. Specifically, it noted that the amount of father-child time in educational activities is associated with greater improvements for the student.²⁴

Fatherlessness Increases Crime

- A British study found a direct statistical link between single parenthood and virtually every major type of crime, including mugging, violence against strangers, car theft and burglary.²⁵
- Additional UK studies have shown that “children from broken homes are nine times more likely to commit crimes than those from stable families” and “seven out of 10 offenders come from broken homes”.²⁶
- One American study even arrived at this startling conclusion: the proportion of single-parent households in a community predicts its rates of violent crime and burglary, but the community's poverty level does not. Neither poverty nor race seems to account very much for the crime rate compared to the proportion of single-parent families.²⁷
- In Australia, a recent book noted the connection between broken families and crime. In a discussion of rising crime rates in Western Australia, the book reported that “family breakdown in the form of divorce and separation is the main cause of the crime wave”.²⁸
- Maryland researchers found that bullying and aggressive behaviour are associated with family breakdown. This is especially the cause of girls' aggressiveness: “The percentage of single men and mother-alone families rival neighbourhood violence as providing the most explanatory power” for aggressiveness among girls.²⁹
- Children's delinquent behaviour tends to rise with the father's absence. One study found that an absent dad (because of incarceration) resulted in a much greater chance of children being suspended or expelled.³⁰

Fatherlessness Increases Drug Abuse

- A UCLA study pointed out that inadequate family structure makes children more susceptible to drug use “as a coping mechanism to relieve depression and anxiety.”³¹
- Another US study found that among the homes with strict fathers, only 18% had children who used alcohol or drugs at all. In contrast, among mother-dominated homes, 35% had children who used drugs frequently.³²
- A National Institutes of Health study showed a clear connection between non-intact families and child drug abuse: “Our analyses indicated that children from intact families used significantly less inhalants, marijuana, and amphetamines than children from single-parent families.”³³
- A New Zealand study of nearly 1000 children observed over a period of 15 years found that children who have watched their parents separate are more likely to use illegal drugs than those whose parents stay together.³⁴
- A South African study found that teens from single-parent homes were more likely to consume alcohol and do so from an earlier age. Of those who ever drank, 81% of the teens aged 16–18 lived with parents who were divorced, compared to 51% of students whose parents were married and living together.³⁵
- A more recent study of 736 adolescents found that those living in nuclear families were less likely to engage in drug and alcohol use than those adolescents from any other family type.³⁶

Fatherlessness Increases Sexual Problems

- Studies from many different cultures have found that girls raised without fathers are more likely to be sexually active, and to start early sexual activity. Father-deprived girls “show precocious sexual interest, derogation of masculinity and males, and poor ability to maintain sexual and emotional adjustment with one male”.³⁷
- A US study found that girls who grow up without fathers were “53 per cent more likely to marry as teenagers, 111 per cent more likely to have children as teenagers, 164 per cent more likely to have a premarital birth, and 92 per cent more likely to dissolve their own marriages.”³⁸
- Another US study made this conclusion: “Youth who spend part of their childhood/youth living in a household that does not include their biological father are more likely to smoke regularly, become sexually active, and be convicted of a crime.”³⁹
- New Zealand research has found that the absence of a father is a major factor in the early onset of puberty and teenage pregnancy. Dr Bruce Ellis, Psychologist in Sexual Development at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch found that one of the most important factors in determining early menarche is the father: “There seems to be something special about the role of fathers in regulating daughters’ sexual development”.⁴⁰
- A British study found that girls brought up by lone parents were twice as likely to leave home by the age of 18 as the daughters of intact homes; were three times as likely to be cohabiting by the age of 20; and almost three times as likely to have a birth out of wedlock.⁴¹
- A study of nearly 400 adults found that young people have fewer casual sex partners when they spend a longer time growing up with their biological father.⁴²

Fatherlessness Increases Physical and Mental Health Problems

- From nations as diverse as Finland and South Africa, a number of studies have reported that anywhere from 50 to 80% of psychiatric patients come from broken homes.⁴³
- A Canadian study of teenagers discharged from psychiatric hospitals found that only 16% were living with both parents when they were admitted.⁴⁴
- A study of nearly 14,000 Dutch adolescents between the ages of 12 to 19 found that “In general, children from one parent and stepparent families reported lower self-esteem, more symptoms of anxiety and loneliness, more depressed mood and more suicidal thoughts than children from intact families.”⁴⁵
- A massive longitudinal study undertaken in Sweden involving over one million children found that children from single parents showed increased risks of psychiatric disease, suicide or suicide attempt, injury and addiction. The authors, writing in *The Lancet*, concluded that growing up in “a single-parent family has disadvantages to the health of the child”. Bear in mind that Sweden is one of the most highly advanced welfare states on earth. Thus, even with a comprehensive welfare net, children still suffer when not in two-parent families.⁴⁶
- A US study of 2,733 adolescents found this: “The greater the fathers’ involvement was, the lower the level of adolescents’ behavioural problems, both in terms of aggression and antisocial behaviour and negative feelings such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.”⁴⁷
- Researchers at the Children’s Hospital of Los Angeles have shown that fatherlessness is directly related to childhood obesity. Statistical analysis of the data established that “family structure was significantly associated with the obesity rate.” In each grade,

children from single-mother families had higher rates of obesity than children from two-parent families.⁴⁸

- A researcher from the University of South Australia's School of Health Sciences found that children from single families do less well than those from married families because they are less active and have fewer opportunities for physical activity.⁴⁹
- A more recent Australian study showed that obesity among girls in single-parent households continues to be a major problem. Deakin University health researchers studied nearly 9000 children aged between four and nine and found higher rates of overweight and obesity in girls from single-parent families than those in two-parent families.⁵⁰
- A recent study from Rhode Island found that while "the incidence of mental-health problems ran particularly high (33 per cent) among children living with parents reporting high levels of parental stress... the complete story involves not just parental stress. It involves family structure as well: the rate of mental-health problems came in significantly higher among children living with a single mother (25.7 per cent) or in a stepfamily (26.6 per cent) than it did among children living with two biological or adoptive parents (13.3 per cent; $p < .001$)."⁵¹
- An American study involving nearly 68,000 children under the age of 18 found that children have better health outcomes when they are living with their biological fathers.⁵²
- A US survey of adults found that those who lived with both biological parents as children had a lower prevalence of suicide ideation than those who did not live with both biological parents.⁵³

Fatherlessness and Family Breakdown Cost Australia 13 Billion Dollars Per Year

- In the UK, the costs of family breakdown are astronomical: "The 2012 total cost of family breakdown to the UK was £44 billion (£43.94 billion), up from £42 billion last year. The annual cost per taxpayer is now £1,470."⁵⁴
- An even newer UK study said this: "Family breakdown is costing taxpayers almost £50 billion a year and the bill is rising fast, a new analysis said yesterday. The costs generated by family breakdown – including subsidised housing, crime, health and social care and disrupted education – have gone up by nearly a quarter in just four years."⁵⁵
- Dr Bruce Robinson, University of Western Australia, and author of *Fathering from the Fast Lane*, has estimated the cost of fatherlessness in Australia to be over 13 billion dollars per year.⁵⁶
- In Australia, it has been estimated that marriage breakdown costs \$2.5 billion annually. Each separation is estimated to cost society some \$12,000.⁵⁷
- Also, the Australian industry is reported to lose more than \$1 billion in production annually due to family breakdown problems.⁵⁸
- Homelessness is also closely linked with family breakdown. A recent Australian study conducted at two Melbourne universities has found that children whose biological parents stay together are about three times less likely to become homeless than those from other family types.⁵⁹

Fatherlessness Increases Physical and Sexual Child Abuse

- A 1994 study of 52,000 children found that those who are most at risk of being abused are those who are not living with both parents.⁶⁰

- A recent American review of the studies found that “fathers, especially married fathers who live with their children, play an important role in protecting their children from abuse and neglect”. It found that 15.5 children out of 1000 children were mistreated in married-parent families, whereas 27.3 children per 1000 were mistreated in single-parent families.⁶¹
- A Finnish study of nearly 4,000 ninth-grade girls found that “stepfather-daughter incest was about 15 times as common as father-daughter incest”.⁶²
- A study examining 126 profiles of perpetrators of fatal assault in the United States found that non-biological parents were 17 times more likely to commit a fatal assault toward a child than biological parents.⁶³
- In Australia, former Human Rights Commissioner Mr Brian Burdekin has reported a 500 to 600% increase in sexual abuse of girls in families where the adult male was not the natural father.⁶⁴
- A recent study by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that “a relatively high proportion of substantiations [of child abuse] involved children living in female-headed one-parent families and in two-parent step or blended families.”⁶⁵
- More recent Australian research continues to bear this out: “The data shows that almost half of all proven cases of child abuse and neglect involved 'broken' families in 2010–11, even though (according to the ABS Family Characteristics Survey) only 26 per cent of all Australian children lived in sole-parent and step or blended families.”⁶⁶
- Children are at the most risk of neglect when not living in a two-parent family. Specifically, a US study found that kids with two biological parents had a neglect rate of 4.29% compared to other households, where the rates were 7.95% to 14.10%.⁶⁷

Fatherlessness and Family Breakdown are the Major Social Problems of Our Society

The evidence of the harmful effects of a father’s absence could fill many pages. The above is just a small sampling of a very large body of research findings on the issue. The social science research on the need for children to be raised by both a biological mother and father, preferably cemented by marriage, is vast and growing.

Indeed, the evidence is so overwhelming that the reader is advised to look at recent summaries of the data.⁶⁸ However, several recent academic studies can be mentioned here, which demonstrate the importance of children growing up with their married biological mother and father.

One American study of 19,000 young people conducted by Bowling Green State University (Ohio) found that teens fare best when living with two married biological parents:

Adolescents in married, two-biological-parent families generally fare better than children in any of the family types examined here, including single-mother, cohabiting stepfather, and married stepfather families. The advantage of marriage appears to exist primarily when the child is the biological offspring of both parents. Our findings are consistent with previous work, which demonstrates children in cohabiting stepparent families fare worse than children living with two married, biological parents.⁶⁹

Another large-scale American study found that there are “overall disadvantages” in not living with both biological parents.⁷⁰ The author concludes,

My analyses have clearly demonstrated some overall disadvantages of living with neither parent. Among adolescents from all six family types, those in non-biological-parent appear to rank the lowest in academic performance, educational aspiration, and locus of control. Further, they appear to fare less well in the remaining outcome areas (self-esteem, behavioural problems, and cigarette smoking).⁷¹

Cornell University Professor Urie Bronfenbrenner, a leading expert in developmental psychology, summarises the evidence in this fashion:

Controlling for associated factors such as low income, children growing up in [single-parent] households are at greater risk for experiencing a variety of behavioural and educational problems, including extremes of hyperactivity or withdrawal; lack of attentiveness in the classroom; difficulty in deferring gratification; impaired academic achievement; school misbehaviour; absenteeism; dropping out; involvement in socially alienated peer groups; and, especially, the so-called 'teenage syndrome' of behaviours that tend to hang together - smoking, drinking, early and frequent sexual experience, a cynical attitude to work, adolescent pregnancy, and in the more extreme cases, drugs, suicide, vandalism, violence, and criminal acts.⁷²

Similar comments can be made about the situation in Britain. After amassing a wealth of data on the negative effects of fatherlessness in the UK, Rebecca O'Neil makes this concluding remark:

The weight of evidence indicates that the traditional family based upon a married father and mother is still the best environment for raising children, and it forms the soundest basis for the wider society. For many mothers, fathers and children, the 'fatherless family' has meant poverty, emotional heartache, ill health, lost opportunities, and a lack of stability. The social fabric – once considered flexible enough to incorporate all types of lifestyles – has been stretched and strained. Although a good society should tolerate people's rights to live as they wish, it must also hold adults responsible for the consequences of their actions. To do this, society must not shrink from evaluation of the results of these actions. As J.S. Mill argued, a good society must share the lessons learnt from its experience and hold up ideals to which all can aspire.⁷³

An American family expert offers these summarising words as he introduces his 370-page book on the war against fathers, marriage and family:

No successful human society has ever been based on the mother-child dyad or on any other structure than the married, two-parent family. So much has been written in recent years about the destructive effects on both children and society of fatherlessness that it hardly needs to be laboured. Virtually every major social pathology of our time: violent crime, drug and alcohol abuse, truancy and scholastic failure, unwed pregnancy, suicide, and other psychological disorders – all these correlate more strongly to fatherlessness than to any other single factor.⁷⁴

Wade Horn, the head of the National Fatherhood Initiative in the USA offers this concluding word:

The news is not good when large numbers of children are growing up disconnected from their fathers. It's not that every child who grows up in a fatherless household is going to have these kinds of difficulties. But it is true that there's an increased risk of these negative outcomes when kids grow up without fathers.⁷⁵

Finally, the latest (9th) edition of *Father Facts* put out by the National Fatherhood Initiative restates what the research continues to show:

Decades of data and research proves that the involvement of fathers in the lives of children has numerous, positive benefits for children, fathers, mothers, and communities. The previous eight editions of *Father Facts* included examples of this data and research on how important fathers are for a healthy, vibrant culture in which everyone can thrive. Research on father involvement since the last edition continues to build on this solid foundation.⁷⁶

With the rise of fatherlessness, Australia and the Western world have also experienced a marked rise in social problems. The brunt of these problems has been borne by children. We owe it to our children to do better. We urgently need to address the twin problems of fatherlessness and family breakdown. Public policy must begin to address these crucial areas. Until we tackle these problems, our children and our societies will continue to suffer.

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