

The Tragedy of Divorce for Children

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In the United States over a million new children experience the divorce of their parents each year. This is roughly half of the annual number of children born into married households, leading to estimates from both liberal and conservative sources that half of all children born into married families today will undergo the divorce of their parents.¹ Half of these children of divorce, moreover, will go on to experience the remarriage of one or both of their parents. A fifth of them, or 10 percent of all children born into married households, will witness the divorce of their parents two or more times.

When the divorce rate skyrocketed in the 1960s—going from one in five of marriages in the 1950s to one in two of 1970s marriages—it was welcomed among cultural elites as a step toward the coming liberation of sexual relations from the repressive restrictions of bourgeois morality. The dramatic rise in divorces in the early 1970s was driven by the confluence of several social forces: growing economic independence for women, reduced stigma and more permissive laws regarding divorce, and growing numbers of children who had grown up in divorced households (more on this below). The primary cause underlying these trends, however, was the emerging ideal of marriage and sexual expression as sources of self-fulfillment.

The growing emphasis, since the 18th-century industrial revolution, on marriage as serving individual expression rather than interpersonal or communal goods had, by the 1970s, extended itself to legitimating divorce on the same basis. The social historian Barbara Dafoe Whitehead traced to this era the rise of the idea of “expressive divorce”, which “saw the legal dissolution of marriage as a matter of individual choice ... [and] “strongly argued for removing the social, legal and moral impediments to the free exercise of the individual ...”² The children involved would adapt, find new role models, and generally adjust to the new situation. What mattered was not the relationship structure, we were told, but the presence of positive and supportive, and most importantly economically affluent, adults in a child’s life. Allied with sexual revolution--premised on the separation of sex from the restrictions of pregnancy--the divorce revolution, which promised to separate sex from the restrictions of marriage, would, it was thought, introduce a New Man and a New Woman who could practice free love in a free marriage.

We now know that such utopianism was (to put it mildly) misplaced. The new wave of liberation expended itself on the hard realities of (among other things) deadly sexually transmitted diseases, a workplace more than willing to absorb the increased labor of workers unrestricted by family obligations, and the persistent human need for permanence and commitment; leaving in its wake a generation of individuals who work longer, live more of their lives alone and have fewer family connections than any preceding generation in American history. Sexual intimacy unbounded by the former social norms of courtship and sexual reserve led, not to liberation, but to reduced emotional intimacy and security, in a succession of transient

¹ Frank F. Furstenberg et al., “The Life Course of Children of Divorce: Marital Disruption and Parental Contact,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 5 (October 1, 1983): 660.

² Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The Divorce Culture*, 1st ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1997), 6.

relationships and incomplete institutions that imperfectly mimic marital functions and roles amid growing social and legal confusion about the nature of marriage itself.

The disappointment and pain of the rise in divorce for the men and women involved, however, pales in comparison to the damage it has done to their children. The loss of two parents, the trauma of family disruption, and the shift in family forms precipitated by divorce has resulted in widespread negative social, economic, and psychological consequences for the children of divorce. Just as the ideal of marriage as self-fulfillment meant the fulfillment of the adults involved, expressive divorce effectively attempted to relieve the suffering of parents at the expense of their children. Looking back over the four decades since divorce became common, it is possible today to identify not only extensive direct and immediate harm to children of parental divorce, but also extended and secondary effects in their own intimate relationships and throughout the lifespan, and the cultural consequences of maturing in a social context characterized by widespread divorce and remarriage. In this brief review I shall address each of these three classes of harm in turn.

I. Direct Harm of Parental Divorce

The direct consequences of divorce, conceived as those that affect a child's upbringing and growth to maturity while still in the care of his or her parents, stem mostly from the relational trauma and reduced social support that children experience following divorce. Two factors that are present in the vast majority of U.S. divorces render divorce especially traumatic for children: the children are very young when the family is disrupted, and the divorce almost always removes from them the active presence of their father.

Early loss of a father

About 80 percent of couples that will ever divorce do so in the first ten years of marriage, which means that children are typically very young when their parents divorce. For most these children, the divorce devastates their primary relational system just at the time when they are entering some of the most important and complex tasks necessary for their proper emotional and psychic development. While the parents can have a sense of release and renewed possibilities following a divorce, research emphatically finds that children are impeded in their development in important ways for decades to come, in essence, for the rest of their lives.

Custody of the children is awarded to the mother in about 85 percent of divorces, which means that the vast majority of children of divorce lose their relationship with their father. Most of the time this loss is quite literal; Furstenberg et al.³ found that frequent contact with the outside parent occurred in only 17 percent of disrupted families, as fathers gradually withdrew from the former relationship and often moved away. But even among the closest non-resident fathers there is still a substantial loss of relationship imposed by the nature of their post-divorce interactions with their children. On the 1996 *National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health* only one child in seventeen (6.3 percent) whose parents had divorced rated their father as "warm, loving and cared for them," compared to almost one in two (43 percent) children whose parents

³ Furstenberg et al., "The Life Course of Children of Divorce: Marital Disruption and Parental Contact," 656.

were in a first marriage. In a review of clinical issues facing children of divorce, Neil Kalter explains why:

Even when fathers stay substantially involved (i.e., seeing their children every other weekend), often there appears to be an unnatural, stilted quality to the interactions. Visiting arrangements need to be maintained regularly to accommodate the complex schedules of the various parties. Thus, visits tend to become more of a set piece, either to maximize the quality of precious little time together or to defend against mutual feelings of awkwardness and unease . . . Father becomes a peripheral player in the ebb and flow of daily experience. . . . Though many [children] continue to love their father . . . , there is nonetheless a sense of distance and loss that permeates the child's experience of father.⁴

The emotive loss of a father and of stability is implicated in the extended or cultural effects of divorce on children, about which more below, but it also results in reduced social and economic support that retard a child's optimum social development in more immediate ways. Three of the strongest and most well-attested harms of this type for children whose parents divorce are being plunged into poverty; attaining less education; and experiencing greater emotional or behavioral problems.

Poverty

Divorce strongly increases the risk of poverty for both mothers and children. Both divorcing partners suffer economic loss; lifetime income after divorce is reduced for both men and women, compared to their counterparts in intact marriages. But a typical divorced woman's income is reduced far more than that of a divorced man's, and in more than eight of ten divorces involving children, the woman has the added burden of custodial care of the child(ren). Figure One reports the pertinent data, based on the 2010 Census, showing the proportion of families below the federal poverty line, by parenting arrangement. Male single parent households, at 24.2 percent, are about three times, and female single parent households, at 40.2 percent, almost five times, as likely to be in poverty as are married households, at 8.8 percent. Whether custody is awarded to the father or the mother—and the vast majority of the time it is the mother—the children of divorce lose substantial economic support when their parents divorce.

Figure One About Here

Resources or structure?

The association of divorce with reduced income and poverty is so common that many family scholars argue that the negative outcomes of divorce for children are not due to the marital dissolution itself but to the corresponding loss of financial and emotional support children receive. The implication is that public and social policy can counteract the negative consequences of divorce while tolerating or even promoting the continued practice of divorce itself. Hetherington, for example, counters the “myth” that “children always lose out after a

⁴ N Kalter, “Long-term Effects of Divorce on Children: a Developmental Vulnerability Model.,” *The American Journal Of Orthopsychiatry* 57, no. 4 (October 1987): 595.

divorce” by pointing out that “the vast majority are adjusting reasonably well” (2002:159) and that a “minority of [children of divorce as young adults] emerged from divorce and postnuclear family life enhanced” (2002:159).⁵ A small industry of publications both scholarly and practical, exemplified by Ahron’s The Good Divorce, has risen to provide research and advice on how to minimize the traumatic sequelae of divorce, while pleading tolerance and acceptance of the fact of divorce itself.

On this view, the decline of actual marriages can be countered by providing the goods of marriage, primarily economic, to children by other means, effectively nullifying the harmful effects of divorce (and cohabitation and single-parenting). Furstenberg is one of the clearest advocates of this “resources-not-structure” approach to helping children. He writes:

“By directing more resources to low-income children regardless of the family form they live in, through such mechanisms as access to quality child care, health care, schooling and income in the form of tax credits, it may be possible to increase the level of human, social and psychological capital that children receive. And by increasing services, work support, and especially tuition aid for adolescents and young adults to attend higher education, Americans may be able to protect children from the limitations imposed by low parental resources.”⁶

This reasoning is like arguing that fatal automobile accident victims’ deaths are not due to the crash but to the corresponding trauma or loss of blood they suffer. After all, very few auto accidents are fatal; the vast majority of people recover from one with little lasting injury. A few persons may even find their lives enhanced by the experience of an accident; for example, it may awaken them to spiritual meaning or a resolve to live better. Certainly it is helpful to take protective measures—seat belts and air bags come to mind—to minimize the trauma of a collision. It is hard to imagine reasonable people, however, thereby concluding that auto accidents are not really the cause of accident fatalities. Police departments are not likely to give up efforts to reduce speeding and running red lights, which cause accidents, in favor of advising citizens on how to have “the good accident”. Most reasonable persons can recognize that while the trauma is the direct cause of death, it is the accident that causes the trauma, and even if most persons eventually recover, to reduce accidents will inevitably reduce trauma and death. So a reasonable person can recognize that while reduced income or emotional involvement with parents may be the direct cause of reduced flourishing for children of divorce, it is the divorce that causes these losses, and even if most children of divorce eventually adjust and overcome, to reduce divorce will inevitably reduce the life trauma it introduces.

Reduced education

Education research has persistently found that the support of parents and family is among the strongest influences on educational success. Divorce provides a kind of negative confirmation of this fact, because experiencing divorce undermines children’s education in almost every way measurable. Compared to children in intact marriages, the children of divorce are more likely to earn poorer grades in school (Figure Two) and about twice as likely to drop out or be expelled (Figure Three); they are less likely to attend college, and if they do go to college are less likely to

⁵ It turns out that this minority, the size of which is never stated, is comprised only of females.

⁶ Frank Furstenberg, “Can Marriage Be Saved?,” *Dissent Magazine* (Summer 2005): 80.

go to a highly-rated college and to complete their B.A. degree. If they complete a college degree, they are much less likely to continue to an advanced degree.

Figure Two About Here
Figure Three About Here

Wallerstein's 25-year follow-up study of children of divorce found, amazingly, that the children in her sample of upper-income divorced families were even less likely to have completed college or attained a graduate degree than were their parents. While "25 percent of the divorcing fathers had graduate degrees in medicine, law or business and an additional 47 percent had a B.A. degree[,] ... only 18 percent of their children had advanced degrees and only 39 percent had completed college. (In contrast, among the children of the intact families in the same neighborhoods, 37 percent earned advanced degrees and 57 percent had BAs.)"⁷

Much of the struggle of divorced children to succeed in school is related to the social and emotional effects of the family disruption itself, but the downward mobility in higher education, Wallerstein found, was "a direct result of the fathers' failure to contribute to their children's college expenses: only 29 percent of the divorced children received full or consistent partial support from their parents for college, compared to 88 percent of the children from intact families."⁸ Most of the fathers could have afforded to contribute, but "when questioned, [they] looked Wallerstein in the eye and told her without shame that they had fulfilled their obligations, by which they meant their legal obligations to provide for their children until the age of eighteen." In explanation Wallerstein suggests that "at least for some fathers, the tie to their biological children diminishes outside the original marital relationship."⁹

Behavioral/emotional problems

The experience and aftermath of divorce has a powerful effect on children's emotional well-being. Secure relationships with family, friends and neighbors are removed, often suddenly, and replaced with uncertainty or even fear. Children often feel they have been abandoned and are left to face the world alone; younger children, who tend to have an ego-centered view of the family, often feel responsible for the divorce. The trauma of the divorce experience, moreover, is often compounded by continued stress and relative dysfunction in the family forms to which divorce leads children. As Figure Four shows, reporting data a national-sample survey of child abuse, physical, sexual and emotional abuse of children are all from five to nine times more likely in a remarried stepparent family than in an intact married family.

Figure Four About Here

National health surveillance surveys have repeatedly found that children of divorce are subject to a wide range of emotional and behavioral problems at higher rates than children of intact marriages or with two biological parents. Although the great majority of children do not

⁷ Margaret Bутtenheim, "Women or Children First?," *The Women's Review of Books* 18, no. 6 (March 1, 2001): 10, doi:10.2307/4023565.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 12.

experience such problems, on most measures the children of divorce are about twice as likely to experience them as are children of an intact marriage or with two biological parents.

Recently (2010) Blackwell and a team of demographers from the Centers for Disease Control's National Center for Health Statistics reported findings from the 2001-2007 National Health Information Surveys comparing children in nuclear (intact married) families with those in post-divorce single mother, single father, or blended families (among others) on a wide range of indicators of physical and emotional health. *On every indicator examined, children being raised in single mother or blended families exhibited poorer health than those in nuclear families.* (The small minority of children in single father families had poorer health than those in nuclear families on almost, but not quite, every indicator.) In particular, the proportion of children in post-divorce single/blended families compared to the proportion in nuclear (intact married) families for a variety of emotional health measures was as follows:

- 5.0/5.1 percent (divorced single/step) to 2 percent (nuclear) for not being generally well-behaved or obeying adults. (See Figure 5)
- 7.4/8.4 percent (divorced single/step) to 3.0 percent (nuclear) for definite or severe emotional or behavioral difficulties. (See Figure 6)
- 7.3/8.5 percent (divorced single/step) to 4.1 percent (nuclear) for having many worries.
- 3.7/4.4 percent (divorced single/step) to 2.0 percent (nuclear) for being often unhappy, depressed or tearful.
- 14.9/16.1 percent (divorced single/step) to 8.1percent (nuclear) for having been diagnosed with a learning disability or ADHD.¹⁰

Figure Five About Here

Figure Six About Here

Their conclusion: “Children living in blended (i.e., stepparent), cohabiting, unmarried biological or adoptive, extended, and other families were generally disadvantaged relative to children in nuclear families, and were, for the most part, comparable to children living in single-parent families regarding most health status and access to care measures.”¹¹ These findings confirm and extend similar earlier reports since the 1980s. Using data from the 1988 National Health Information Survey, Dawson reported that children living with two biological parents were less likely to experience behavioral or emotional problems than children living in other family types. The magnitude of the differences Dawson reported—i.e., problems are about twice as prevalent in non-nuclear family forms—was similar to that reported more recently by Blackwell. Dawson also found that the incidence of professional treatment for behavioral and emotional problems was two to three times greater for children whose parents had divorced than for those who lived with both biological parents.¹² McLanahan and Sanderfur, in a 1994 report on four nationally representative datasets, found similar effects for behavioral problems, concluding that “adolescents who have lived apart from one of their parents during some period of childhood are

¹⁰ DL Blackwell, “Family Structure and Children’s Health in the United States: Findings from the National Health Interview Survey, 2001–2007,” *National Center for Health Statistics* no. 246, *Vital Health Stat* (2010): 20–34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹² Deborah A. Dawson, “Family Structure and Children’s Health and Well-Being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 53, no. 3 (1991): 579, doi:10.2307/352734.

twice as likely to drop out of high school, twice as likely to have a child by age twenty, and one and a half times more likely to be ‘idle’—out of school and out of work—in their late teens and early twenties.”¹³ More recently, Bramlett and Blumberg, using the 2003 National Survey of Children’s Health, reported that children living with their mother (but not their father) in single or step-families after divorce experienced twice the rate of both moderate and severe emotional problems as those living with two biological parents, a difference which persisted in the presence of sociodemographic and economic controls.¹⁴ The link between divorce and emotional or behavioral dysfunction is so strong that even Hetherington, attempting to build the case for a more positive view of divorce, conceded that in her data: “Twenty-five percent of youths from divorced families in comparison to 10 percent from non-divorced families did have serious social, emotional or psychological problems.”¹⁵

The remarriage question

Three-quarters of divorced women marry again within ten years;¹⁶ about half of all current marriages in America are second (or higher order) marriages.¹⁷ Women who remarry usually improve their economic circumstances, and that of their child(ren). Single mothers with lower income tend to remarry sooner than those who are more self-sufficient. “The popular assumption,” one reviewer observes, “is that remarriage will have a positive influence on the children, especially because of the increase in [socioeconomic status].”¹⁸ This popular view seems intuitive no matter what one’s view of marriage. If a married family structure is generally better for children, wouldn’t returning to a married state be better for the children than continued singleness? If it is parental resources that matter, wouldn’t two parents be better than one?

Yet it is clear from the data already presented that, as Hopkins family scholar Andrew Cherlin has recently acknowledged, “Children whose parents have remarried do not have higher levels of well-being than children in lone-parent families, despite the addition of a second parent.”¹⁹ Some researchers have even argued that remarriage after divorce introduces additional harm to that of the divorce.²⁰ Summarizing the results of over 60 studies, Jeynes concluded that “[c]hildren from remarried families also achieved somewhat lower levels [of academic achievement and psychological well-being] than children from corresponding single-parent

¹³ Sara McLanahan and Gary D. Sandefur, *Growing up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 2.

¹⁴ Matthew D Bramlett and Stephen J Blumberg, “Family Structure And Children’s Physical And Mental Health,” *Health Affairs* 26, no. 2 (March 1, 2007): 553, Exhibit 3, doi:10.1377/hlthaff.26.2.549.

¹⁵ E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly, *For Better or for Worse: Divorce Reconsidered* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 7.

¹⁶ MD Bramlett and WD Mosher, “Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States.” 23, no. 22, National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital Health Stat* (2002).

¹⁷ J Monahan, “The Prediction of Violent Behavior: Toward a Second Generation of Theory and Policy,” *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 141, no. 1 (January 1, 1984): 1269.

¹⁸ Mary Lou Wylie, “Review of Jeynes, “Divorce, Family Structure, and the Academic Success of Children,” *Teaching Sociology* 31, no. 2 (April 1, 2003): 255.

¹⁹ Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today* (Random House Digital, Inc., 2010), 6.

²⁰ For a review see William H. Jeynes, “Does Divorce or Remarriage Have the Greater Negative Impact on the Academic Achievement of Children?,” *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 29, no. 1/2 (February 1998): 79, doi:Article.

family structures.”²¹ In the present brief review, we have seen that in most cases positive outcomes for children in blended (step-parent) families are comparable to those single parenting arrangements; and, significantly, *in no case are positive outcomes for children in blended families comparable to those raised in unbroken original marriages*. Returning to a married state for one or both of the parents does not restore the benefits of intact marriage to their children.

The main reason for this is that the move from a single to a stepparent family is yet another major disruption for children. Cherlin explains: “new stepparents unavoidably disrupt the existing relationships between lone parents and their children and force family members to construct new relationships—a difficult and demanding task. . . . Stable households, whether headed by one or two parents, do not require that children adjust repeatedly to the loss of parents and parent figures and to the introduction of cohabiting partners and stepparents and the new children these partnerships sometimes bring.”²²

A second marriage not only does not “solve” the problems of divorce for children, it may well to a second divorce. Second (and subsequent) marriages are even more likely to end in divorce than first marriages; about a quarter of second marriages end within five years;²³ with the result that today about one in six American adults has experienced two or more divorces.²⁴ Far from restoring the stability and permanence that form a secure basis for child development, too often remarriage introduces yet another transition into a life course increasingly characterized by a series of short transitional relationships—a “marriage-go-round,” in Cherlin’s suggestive phrase.

In this scenario divorce, or more precisely the first divorce, brings harm to children not only in the particular trauma it entails, but also as a precursor to subsequent traumas. Divorce not only abruptly ends a child’s past stability, but destabilizes his or her indeterminate future. Recognizing that divorce typically involves not only a single transition but the beginning of a series of cohabitations, remarriages and divorces, a growing body of research in the past two decades has examined the number of transitions, and not merely the divorce, as the central variable that affects children’s well-being. Amato summarizes the results: “The number of family structure transitions during childhood has been shown to be associated with children’s behavior problems, drug use, externalizing problems and delinquent behavior, academic achievement, psychological well-being, having a nonmarital birth, and relationship instability in adulthood.”²⁵

Despite superficial resemblances, when there are children a second marriage involves a very different set of relationships and interests than does a first marriage. A blended family, with children having diverse biological relationships and histories with each parent and one another, is the most emotionally complex family form in America; a first marriage nuclear family, by contrast, is the most simple. The differing biological relationships; incongruent parenting styles

²¹ William H. Jaynes, “The Impact of Parental Remarriage on Children: A Meta-Analysis,” *Marriage & Family Review* 40, no. 4 (December 2006): 75, doi:Article.

²² Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 6.

²³ Bramlett and Mosher, “Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States.”

²⁴ Monahan, “The Prediction of Violent Behavior: Toward a Second Generation of Theory and Policy,” 1269.

²⁵ Paul R Amato, “Research on Divorce: Continuing Trends and New Developments,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 3 (June 2010): 657.

of the partners; co-parenting by outside ex-spouses; the intrusion of court-ordered requirements; and continued hostility with ex-spouses; all contribute to substantial stress and tension in a typical step-parenting family.

Ex-fathers, for example, often object to having their child support go to their ex's new stepchildren. As Cheney, in a recent family sociology textbook, notes, "This is a common problem for the remarried couple. ... Partitioning out the ex's child support in such a way that the stepsiblings are separated as belonging to "them and not us" can be very divisive."²⁶ Even when conflict is low, the complexity of relationships is high, as Cheney further illustrates:

"When a birthday comes up, the remarried couple may celebrate it and then the ex-spouse and their family may [also] celebrate it. Things do not always work out as planned, so both parties have to bend and flex as needed. Remarried couples with children from more than one intimate relationship experience all of the above plus added complexity and boundary demands. If Bill and Sue have a 14-year-old from Sue's first marriage, a 10-year-old from her second marriage, and a 4 year-old from their marriage, plus a 17-year-old from his cohabitation and a 14-year-old from his first marriage, then the complexities and need for stronger boundaries is even more intense."²⁷

The nature of the complex stress factors in step-families is significant for the issues of gay marriage and gay adoption. This is because, for the children involved, the relational system of a stepfamily is the most similar to the one possible in a gay marriage. In an intact marriage the child is the common biological offspring of both partners, sharing a straightforward and natural shared connection. In a stepfamily the child of divorce is biologically related to only one of the parents; his/her relation to the other parent is only social, or at best adoptive; and in this asymmetry of bonds lays the root source of most stepfamily stress. The same asymmetry is necessarily present when children are conceived in a gay relationship. Deborah Glazer, a lesbian psychoanalyst and editor of the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Research*, writes:

There is a repeated acknowledgement that the stresses faced by lesbian couples in childbearing are very different than those faced by heterosexual couples. Lesbian couples who conceive through donor insemination often experience conflict over the fact the resulting child is biologically related to only one of them. This cannot be an issue for heterosexual couples conceiving naturally, where their child bears the combined genotype of both mates. The two become one flesh, literally, in their mutual offspring, a condition that is never possible for homosexual couples. (Glazer and Drescher 2001)

Most children raised by gay couples who are not conceived within the relationship, moreover, are the product of a previous heterosexual relationship on the part of one of the gay partners, that is, children of divorce.

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

²⁶ Ron Hammond and Paul Cheney, *Sociology of the Family* (Smashwords, 2010), 174.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

The rising salience of homosexuality and debates over same-sex “marriage” suggest that a consideration of the effect of divorce on gender identity and sexual orientation may be in order. As discussed above, parental divorce typically results in the effective loss for children of their father. Kalter, writing from a developmental perspective, suggested that this absence tends to impede the development of a healthy gender identity for both boys and girls, though for different reasons. For boys, the “absence of an appropriate male model for . . . identification” leaves him without “the primary vehicle for the internalization of an appropriate sense of masculine identity.” Girls, on the other hand, tend to “experience the emotional loss of father egocentrically as a rejection of them.” Lohr et al. also observed that “the loss of a father through divorce has a significant effect on a young girl’s developing sense of femininity.”²⁸ A meta-analysis of 67 studies of father absence and gender development by Stevenson and Smith confirmed that “father-present males were more stereotypically sex-typed than father-absent males”²⁹ and identified more strongly as males. They did not find a similar effect for females, however they note that this “does not preclude differences in heterosexual adjustment”³⁰ for females since they had no measures of the children’s relationship with their mother.

Kalter stressed that the source of the hindered gender development was not traumatic but structural: “[T]hese threats to the development of a healthy sense of masculinity and femininity are *not* primarily the product of feelings, conflicts, misperceptions, and maladaptive defenses against painful affects aroused *at the time* of the parental separation. It appears that the ongoing absence of father and the structural and interactional features characteristic of single-mother, post-divorce households exert special pressures on the course of development of gender identity in children.” Even children who seemed to have adapted well to the disruption of divorce tended to evidence weakened gender identity, often decades after the divorce.

Although it is commonly thought, even among academics, that same-sex attraction is innate, substantial evidence exists that this tendency reflects family influences that correspond to the development of gender identity. If this is true, and gender development is impeded in post-divorce family arrangements as Kalter and others claim, then same-sex attraction should be more prevalent among children of divorce and should vary meaningfully by family form following divorce.

To test this claim, I examined data from the General Social Survey showing same-sex relations by childhood family structure for children whose parents had divorced. The GSS asks respondents whether their sex partners in the past five years were exclusively male, both male and female, or exclusively female. Because same-sex practice fluctuates widely, reflecting transient experimentation with same-sex relations, among younger persons, and to ensure that we are looking, as much as possible, with “completed” gender identity development, the data are restricted to respondents age 35 and over, reporting retrospectively on their sex partners beginning at age 30.

Figure Seven About Here

²⁸ R. Lohr et al., “Clinical Observations on Interferences of Early Father Absence in the Achievement of Femininity,” *Clinical Social Work Journal* 17, no. 4 (1989): 351.

²⁹ Michael R. Stevenson and Kathryn N. Black, “Paternal Absence and Sex-Role Development: a Meta-Analysis.,” *Child Development* 59, no. 3 (June 1988): 802, see Table 9, doi:Article.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 807.

Figure 7 reports the simple prevalence of exclusively same-sex partners in the past five years, comparing persons raised in an intact two-parent family with those raised in a non-intact family following divorce (and, for comparison, following the death of a parent). The percent of persons having only same-sex partners after age 30 is one-third higher among children of divorce, at 3.6 percent, than among children of an intact two-parent family, at 2.7 percent. By contrast, children who were thrown into a non-intact family due to the death of a parent are not more likely, in fact somewhat less likely, at 2.3 percent, than children of intact families to have only same-sex partners after age 30. It appears that increased same-sex activity is an effect of divorce itself, or something unique about the family arrangements following divorce, that is not true for those alternatively experiencing the loss of a parent.

Figure Eight About Here

Figure Nine About Here

Figure Eight and Figure Nine drill down into the post-divorce family structure further, showing the results for men and women respectively. The data reported in the figures as “gay/bisexual” includes persons who reported both male and female or exclusively same-sex partners in the past five years; in other words, any persons who departed from the heterosexual norm, capturing the widest range of variation from heterosexual gender identity (or sex attraction). The figures compare the population proportion of exclusively heterosexual and gay/bisexual participants with the proportions corresponding to each family structure.³¹ To facilitate comparison, the proportion heterosexual is indexed to 100, with gay/bisexual varying relative to the index; this kind of measure, widely used in epidemiological studies, is interpreted as the “relative risk” of a condition in terms that can be compared across varying categories, in this case family forms. In both figures, the leftmost pair of bars labeled “Father and Mother” report on adults raised by two biological parents, with no experience of divorce. The remaining four pairs of bars in each figure report on adults whose parents had divorced and who at age 16 were living in one of the respective family structures: Father only, Father and stepmother, Mother and stepfather, or Mother only.

The prevalence of same-sex relations shown in Figures Eight and Nine clearly varies in ways consistent with the model of interrupted or impeded gender identity development following divorce. For both men and women, both post-divorce family forms that include the biological father (Father Only, and Father and Stepmother) result in a substantially lower risk of subsequent same-sex relations than those that do not (Mother and Stepfather, and Mother only); and the family form with no father or father-figure present (Mother Only) resulted in the highest risk of later same-sex relations. Both of the father-present post-divorce family forms resulted in lower risk of same-sex relations than with two biological parents, while being raised by lone parent mothers resulted in a higher risk of same-sex relations than with two biological parents, for both boys and girls. The finding that the children of divorce, but not those of parental death, are more likely to engage in same-sex relations than are children raised by two biological parents is likely

³¹ Expanding the non-heterosexual category to include bisexuals increases sparse data size; the variation on “gay/bisexual” is similar that on “exclusively same-sex”. Overall (in GSS 1986-2010, among persons age 35 and over reporting on sex partners in the past five years) 2.8 percent of males and 1.9 percent of females report exclusively same-sex relations; an additional 1 percent of males and 0.8 percent of females report relations with both males and females; which constitute the reference amounts for the relative risks reported in Figures Eight and Nine.

due to the fact that the vast majority of children are in the custody of their mother after divorce while the non-intact family forms following the death of a parent are more evenly distributed.³²

This rather crude analysis is hardly definitive; we don't know whether the results would persist with more precise measures, multivariate analysis, or with statistical controls. Yet as a first glance, it is certainly suggestive. The family forms that follow from divorce appear to have a differential effect on later same-sex activity that is consistent with both the thesis that same-sex attraction can result from family conditions or structure, not innate biology, and the thesis that divorce, through the persistent effects of family dissolution, retards the development of a heterosexual masculine or feminine gender identity.

II. Long-term and Secondary Effects of Parental Divorce

Research has only recently begun to explore the effect of divorce on young adults, after they no longer live with their parents and are engaged in higher education or employment on their own, compared to the effects on children growing up in a post-divorce family. It is already clear, however, that parental divorce has a continuing effect on children throughout the life course. An early (1991) study of longitudinal data from the National Survey of Children found that, after controlling for demographic and socioeconomic differences, young adults from divorced families were twice as likely to exhibit a wide range of problems in adjustment and achievement compared to young adults from nondisrupted families. Among 18–22 year olds from divorced families, 65 percent had poor relationships with their fathers and 30 percent with their mothers, 25 percent had dropped out of high school, and 40 percent had received psychological help.³³ Cherlin et al., in a 1998 study of this question examining British data tracking individuals through age 33, concluded that “the life course of individuals whose parents divorce continues to diverge in adulthood from the life courses of those whose parents do not divorce.”³⁴ A more recent review of subsequent divorce research confirms that “findings indicate that, for at least some individuals, the effects of divorce persist well into adulthood.”³⁵ Multiple studies in the past decade have found that “adults with divorced parents tend to obtain less education, have lower levels of psychological well-being, report more problems in their own marriages, feel less close to their parents (especially fathers), and are at greater risk of seeing their own marriages end in divorce.”³⁶

To a large extent these persistent debilities reflect the long-term consequences of the direct effects of divorce on children already noted: increased poverty, lower educational attainment, greater likelihood of emotional problems, the loss of a father and multiple relational transitions. Children who do not finish secondary school or who experience an episode of depression as a result of their parents' divorce, for example, may experience ongoing consequences of these events into adulthood.

³² This could be tested by comparing post-divorce families with those following only the death of the father.

³³ Nicholas Zill, Donna R. Morrison, and Mary J. Coiro, “Long-term Effects of Parental Divorce on Parent-child Relationships, Adjustment, and Achievement in Young Adulthood,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 7, no. 1 (1993): 91–103, doi:10.1037/0893-3200.7.1.91.

³⁴ Andrew J. Cherlin, P. Lindsay Chase-Landsdale, and Christine McRae, “Effects of Parental Divorce on Mental Health Throughout the Life Course,” *American Sociological Review* 63, no. 2 (April 1998): 247.

³⁵ Amato, “Research on Divorce: Continuing Trends and New Developments,” 653.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

But adult children of divorce also experience emergent problems that are independent of those of minor children undergoing parental divorce. Several studies have documented the persistence of depression into middle and even late adulthood among children of divorce at higher rates and with different patterns than can be explained only by the lasting effects of childhood emotional trauma. Uphold-Carrier, for example, examining data for adults aged 35-84 from the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study, found that “[t]hose who experienced parental divorce exhibited a significantly higher risk for depression as well as lower levels of family solidarity during midlife and older ages, compared to those children whose parents’ marriage was intact through-out their childhood and adult lives.” The difference was substantial and persistent: older adults whose parents had divorced had more than a 75 percent higher risk of depression, with an average elapsed time since the parents’ divorce of 36 years. Significantly, the higher risk of depression was the same regardless of whether persons had experienced their parents’ divorce as children or as adults.³⁷ Likewise, Wauterickx and colleagues, in a panel study of Belgian households, found that “[p]arental divorce has a large impact on depression ... in adulthood”, which resulted “not only [from] a direct influence of parental divorce on depression, but also an indirect effect through specific relationship characteristics in adulthood.”³⁸

Wallerstein’s landmark 2000 study, which focused on the difficulty children of divorce have in forming their own stable love and family relationships as adults, emphasized that some of the greatest effects of divorce don’t appear until adulthood, and emerge despite the person’s ability to have coped with the aftermath of the divorce as a child.³⁹ Of all the harm that divorce brings to children, this disability in forming families of their own is probably the most consequential, since it not only brings extended struggle and suffering to them as adults, but also renders them prone to experience their own divorce.

The effect of divorce on divorce

“Divorce seems to run in families,” observed an influential mid-1980s study of marriage and divorce patterns.⁴⁰ Marriages involving a partner from a divorced family were four times more likely to end in divorce than marriages in which neither partner was a child of divorce.⁴¹ Thus, a measurable portion of the sharp rise in divorce during the 1970s could be attributed to the fact that that decade saw the maturing of the first generation of American children who had experienced the divorce of their parents at a substantially higher rate than formerly.

³⁷ Holly Uphold-Carrier and Rebecca Utz, “Parental Divorce Among Young and Adult Children: A Long-Term Quantitative Analysis of Mental Health and Family Solidarity,” *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 53, no. 4 (May 2012): 247.

³⁸ Naomi Wauterickx, Anneleen Gouwy, and Piet Bracke, “Parental Divorce and Depression: Long-Term Effects on Adult Children,” *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 45, no. 3/4 (November 2006): 43–68.

³⁹ Judith S. Wallerstein, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: a 25 Year Landmark Study*, 1st ed (New York: Hyperion, 2000).

⁴⁰ Norval D. Glenn and Kathryn B. Kramer, “The Marriages and Divorces of the Children of Divorce,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (1987): 811.

⁴¹ Nicholas H. Wolfinger, “More Evidence for Trends in the Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce: A Completed Cohort Approach Using Data From the General Social Survey,” *Demography* 48, no. 2 (May 1, 2011): 581–592, doi:10.1007/s13524-011-0025-4.

Why did the children of divorce opt so much more often for divorce themselves? Family scholars discovered two main causes. The most promising initial explanation seemed to lie in a deep-seated ambivalence about marriage among the children of divorce. Young adults from divorced homes, for example, expressed much more hesitation about whether they would ever marry, yet tended to marry earlier, and at the same rate, as children from stable homes. “Thus, they seem to be impelled toward marriage while at the same time feeling highly apprehensive about it. It seems likely, therefore, that when they marry they often hedge their bets against failure by withholding full commitment to the marriage.”⁴² Later more detailed examination unearthed a second, underlying cause: the much higher rate of failure of children of divorce to develop the interpersonal skills necessary for stable and secure marital partnerships. Amato, summarizing the consensus of research by the mid-1990s, stated bluntly: “[P]arental divorce elevates the risk of offspring divorce by increasing the likelihood that offspring exhibit behaviors that interfere with the maintenance of mutually rewarding intimate relationships.”⁴³ Wallerstein, reflecting the experience of several hundred children of divorce followed for 25 years, explained: “We learn our most important lessons about conflict at home, while growing up. Every day, children observe how differences and anger are resolved or not resolved in their own families. . . . Children of divorce have trouble with conflict because they grew up in homes where major arguments were not resolved . . . For them any conflict spells danger, a devil that threatens to tear the fabric of family life, destroy their marriage, and break their hearts.”⁴⁴

These two causes, of course, are not mutually exclusive, and may well be mutually supportive. The strategy of withholding full commitment to the marriage may both reflect and enable the inability to envision resolving conflicts. Marital love is likely to fail, Christians might interpret, without the corresponding theological virtues of marital faith and marital hope.

The rise of cohabitation

At the same time as the rise in divorce, cohabitation outside of marriage was also dramatically increasing. From the 1960 to the 2010 census, the number of cohabiting couples rose at least sixteen-fold, from 459,000 to 7.5 million; the proportion of heterosexual families who were cohabiting, relative to those who were married, rose similarly from 1 percent in 1960 to 12.4 percent in 2010. Today (2013) cohabitation outside of marriage has become the norm for younger Americans. The CDC reports that less than a quarter (23 percent) of women enter marriage without first cohabiting; by age 30, three-quarters (74 percent) of American women report that they have cohabited (or currently are cohabiting) with a non-marital partner.⁴⁵ “Cohabitation,” observes a highly regarded study from the University of Michigan’s Population Studies Center, “has become the [most common] path to marriage in the U.S. . . ., and is experienced widely whether or not marriage is the result.”⁴⁶

⁴² Glenn and Kramer, “The Marriages and Divorces of the Children of Divorce,” 824.

⁴³ Paul R. Amato, “Explaining the Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce,” *Journal of Marriage & Family* 58, no. 3 (August 1996): 628.

⁴⁴ Wallerstein, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, 55–56.

⁴⁵ Casey Copen, Kimberly Daniels, and William Mosher, *First Premarital Cohabitation in the United States: 2006–2010 National Survey of Family Growth*, National Health Statistics Report #64 (National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 4, 2013), 4; see Table 1.

⁴⁶ Pamela J. Smock et al., “Heterosexual Cohabitation in the United States: Motives for Living Together Among Young Men and Women,” *Ann Arbor* 1001 (2006): 2.

As with divorce itself, parental divorce also renders children more prone to later cohabitation. Wilcox, using data from the General Social Survey, reports that “adult children of divorce are 47% more likely to be currently cohabiting, compared to those who were raised in intact, married families.”⁴⁷ They are also 61 percent more likely to favor cohabitation as a preliminary to possible marriage. For children of divorce, the 1970s strategy of withholding commitment after marriage has led naturally to a 2000s strategy of withholding the commitment to marriage in the first place.

Recent studies of the motives of cohabiting partners has confirmed that many (not only children of divorce) are hedging their bets against marital failure. Wilcox, reporting interview findings from the PSC study cited above, recounts: “One young man told the researchers that living together allows you to ‘get to know the person and their habits before you get married. So that way, you won’t have to get divorced.’ Another said that an advantage of cohabitation is that you ‘don’t have to go through the divorce process if you do want to break up, you don’t have to pay lawyers and have to deal with splitting everything and all that jazz.’”⁴⁸

Cohabitation on these terms is a bit like a pre-emptive divorce; instead of a trial separation, there is a trial conjunction, to test the relationship. Ironically, as a strategy for avoiding divorce, trial cohabitation before marriage may have the opposite effect. Most studies of the effect of prior cohabitation on marital stability have found that those who cohabit before marriage are about 25 percent *more* likely to divorce, on average, than couples who married without cohabiting.⁴⁹ Even worse, increasing cohabitation is beginning to create its own cognate to the children of divorce. About a fifth (19 percent) of children today (2013) are born into cohabiting relationships, the majority of which end within two years. Although just fifteen years ago close to half (44 percent) of cohabitations moved to marriage after the birth of a child, today only a quarter (26 percent) do so.⁵⁰ The net result is that two-thirds (66 percent) of children born to cohabiting couples will see their parents break up by the time they are 10 (compared to only 28 percent of children born to married couples).⁵¹ Perversely, the result of the attempt to avoid divorce by trial cohabitation is that the children of cohabitation dissolution are beginning to take their place, experiencing similar pain and harm, alongside the children of divorce.

Ontological impairment

⁴⁷ W. Bradford Wilcox, “The Evolution of Divorce.,” *National Affairs* 1 (2009): 87.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*; reporting data from Smock et al., “Heterosexual Cohabitation in the United States.”

⁴⁹ Anita Jose, Daniel K. O’Leary, and Anne Moyer, “Does Premarital Cohabitation Predict Subsequent Marital Stability and Marital Quality? A Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 1 (2010): 105–116, doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2009.00686.x, Table 2. Collating 17 studies since the 1980s, this study found the average increased risk of marital dissolution for prior cohabitators to be 23 percent overall, and 26 percent with outliers excluded. The effect was much smaller, however, for partners who had only ever cohabited with their eventual marriage partner. It is possible that the cohabitation-divorce link is a product of selection, that is, those who are less likely to ever divorce are also less likely to choose to cohabit prior to marriage, rather than a result of the experience of cohabitation. See Lee A. Lillard, Michael J. Brien, and Linda J. Waite, “Premarital Cohabitation and Subsequent Marital,” *Demography* 32, no. 3 (August 1, 1995): 437–457, doi:10.2307/2061690.

⁵⁰ Copen, Daniels, and Mosher, *First Premarital Cohabitation in the United States: 2006–2010 National Survey of Family Growth*.

⁵¹ Pamela J. Smock and Fiona Rose Greenland, “Diversity in Pathways to Parenthood: Patterns, Implications, and Emerging Research Directions,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 3 (2010): 584, doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00719.x.

The widespread, albeit largely ineffective, attempts by young adults, and especially the children of divorce, to forestall the impending trauma of relationship dissolution by avoiding permanent relationships in the first place confirms the ancient truth that the desire for permanence is deeply ingrained in the human search for sexual intimacy. Even for those raised on a succession of temporary pairings and breakups, sexual transience is not trivial; love which is as strong as death recoils at the prospect of the death of love. The surprising finding that parental divorce strongly affects adult children who are long established in their own lives and careers also suggests that the experience of divorce does not simply inhibit a child's development, but touches something deeper in his or her person.

Andrew Root has suggested that, beyond constricting a child's social capital or even psychological resources, divorce undermines the ontological security that, following Anthony Giddens, forms the basis for a child's sense of self. "Ontological security is a deep awareness of reliability, for it is based in being, not simply in knowing. For instance, if the child believes the family is secure (not perfect, but secure), and then she is told the family as it is presently constituted will no longer exist, then the child is struck not at the level of social capital (not now, at least), but at the level of ontological security. Her world is no longer steady and dependable."⁵²

For such a child, any new family arrangement "will be forever tenuous for him, for his being is not the outgrowth of it. He is there only by "choice" (choice of his parent or his own choice). ... In these families and communities he is a stranger, and, as such, worries that his being will be forgotten."⁵³ The elemental trauma of divorce, then, leads to the loss of trust, not only in other persons, but in the "coherence, continuity and dependability" of social world. For the child of divorce, the "social world is no longer secure, and she is left with the perplexing question whether it ever was, or could ever be, truly secure."⁵⁴

On this understanding, the effect of divorce on a child is best described as a loss of being, an impairment in the possibility of meaningful existence, as the philosopher Martin Heidegger, whom Root follows, would use the term. Human being lies in openness to other beings and thus to Being itself. In a similar way, Catholic doctrine speaks of personhood, which expresses the image of God, as the fruit of community, not simply identity; and most fundamentally a creation of the family, the "vital cell of society" which is the original community of every person.⁵⁵ Whether being or personhood, both ideas affirm that the disruption of a child's original community not only strains his resources and relationships, but also impairs, at an elemental level, what makes him human.

III. A Culture of Divorce

⁵² Andrew Root, *Children of Divorce, The (Youth, Family, and Culture): The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being* (Baker Books, 2010), 47.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁵ Catholic Church, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Publication (USCCB Publishing) no. 5-692 (Città del Vaticano : Washington, D.C: Libreria Editrice Vaticana ; [Distributed by] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004), chap. 5.

In both their divorces and cohabitations, for the children of divorce the fear of relationship failure has led to greater failure in their intimate relationships. Like Job in his affliction, what they feared has come upon them.⁵⁶ But the fear of relationship failure, or lack of faith in enduring relationships, has also spread more generally. As the children of divorce have become in their turn the parents of divorce through their own divorces and cohabitations, the intergenerational transmission of family disruption has contributed to a culture of intimate relations predicated on the reality of widespread family instability. Wallerstein, distilling her 30-year career studying divorce, acknowledges this development with characteristic candor: “[I]t’s clear that we’ve created a new kind of society never before seen in human culture. Silently and unconsciously, we have created a culture of divorce.”⁵⁷

Unlike Whitehead, by “culture of divorce” Wallerstein does not mean the ideals of marriage as self-fulfillment or expressive divorce, both of which she affirms, but the disruptive effects of widespread divorce on the social structures that lead to stable and satisfying intimate relationships. When, as in America today, most children experience the dissolution of their parents’ relationship, the norms and institutions of mating and parenthood implicitly shift from the prospect of stability to the prospect of instability. Most marriages today are preceded by cohabitation, as already noted, and an increasing minority of young Americans is cohabiting without marriage in view. It has now been several generations since, for the majority of women, sexual onset has occurred within a permanent relationship; today less than 10 percent experience that stability. More than half of births to women under 30 occur outside marriage. The cultural result of such widespread transience and instability is that the life tasks or realms that once were integrated in the institution of marriage—sex, intimacy, shared residence and meals, childbirth, raising children, economic sharing, and career planning—have been decoupled from marriage, and now occur, for most Americans, by means of a still-shifting variety of other social forms and strategies. The pervasive experience of the disintegration of marriages has led to the cultural disintegration of the component parts of marriage itself—a culture of divorce. In this way the harm of divorce has come full circle, as in the disabling of marriage itself, we have all become children of divorce.

⁵⁶ Job 3:25.

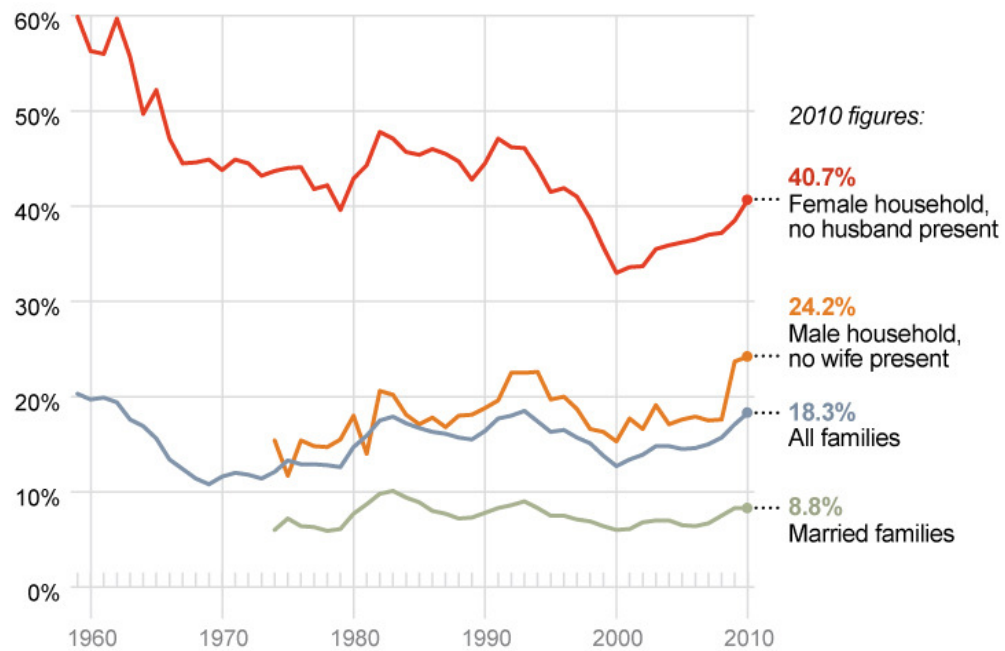
⁵⁷ Wallerstein, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, 295.

Figure One

Two in five single-mother families are poor

Single-mother families are more than four times more likely to be in poverty than married-couple families. Fewer than one in 10 married-couple families with children live at or below the federal poverty level.

POVERTY RATES FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN, BY MARITAL STATUS



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2011.

Figure Two

Grade Point Average

Source: *National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health Wave 1, 1995*

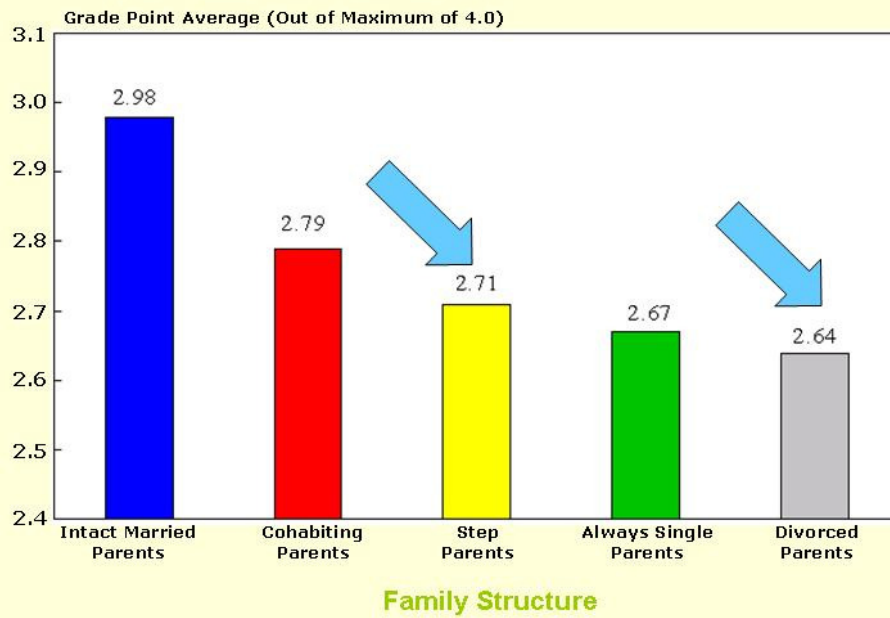


Figure Three

School Expulsion

Source Add Health Wave II 1996

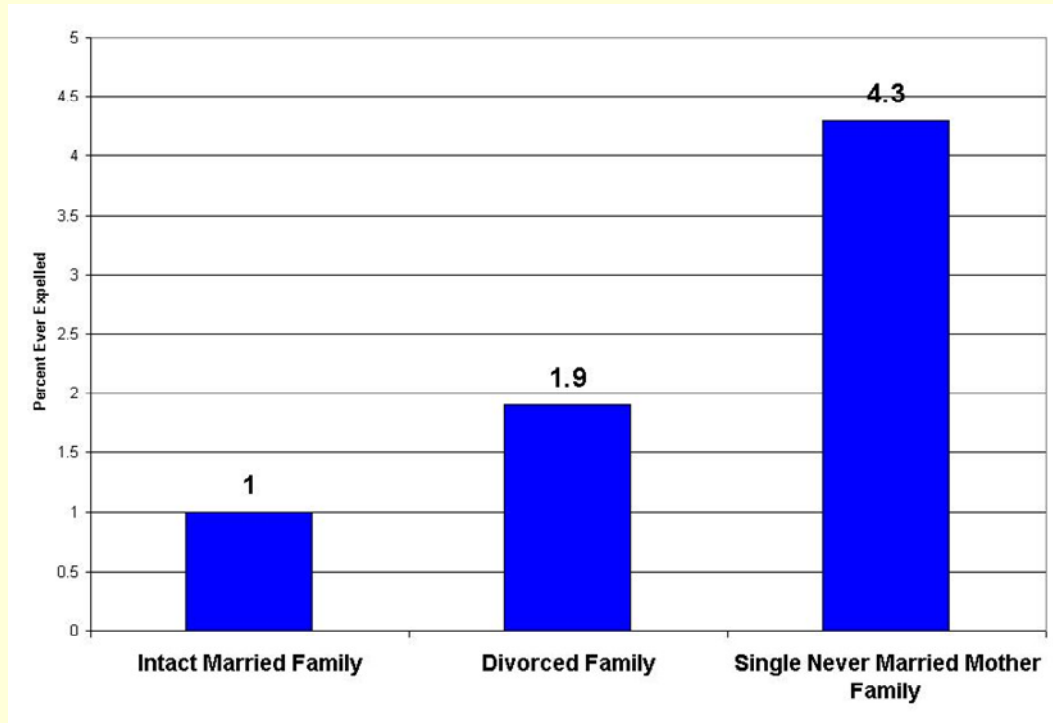


Figure Four

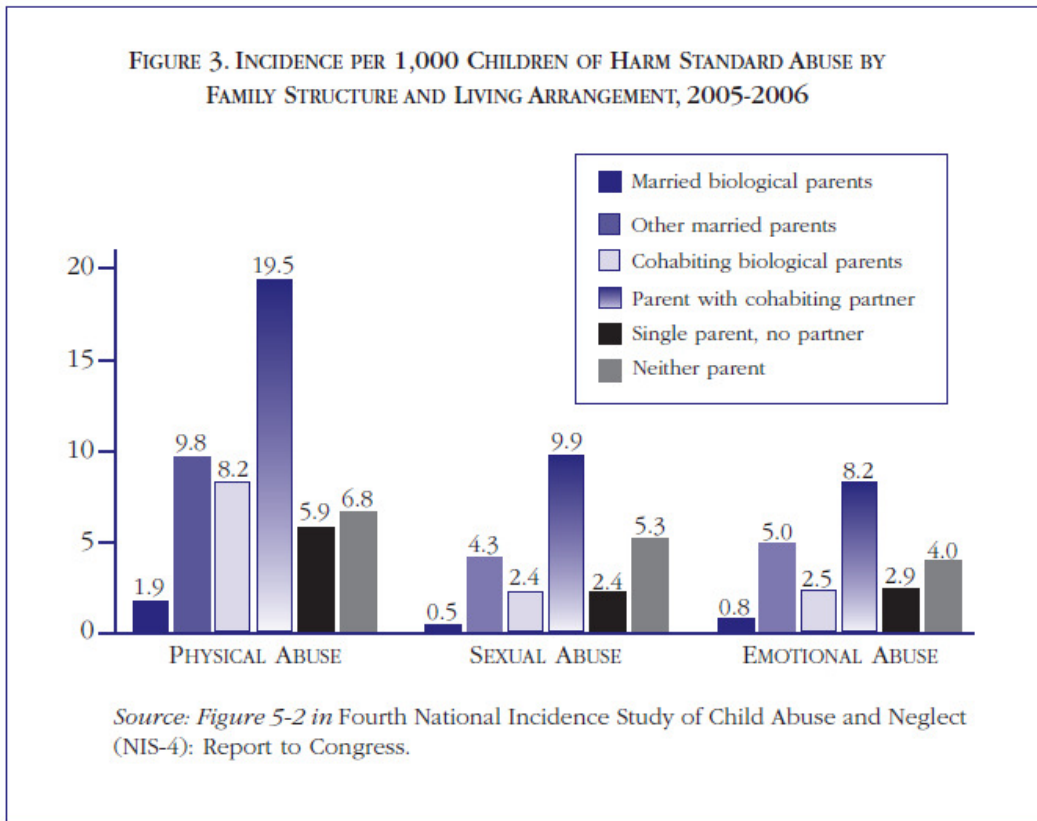


Figure Five

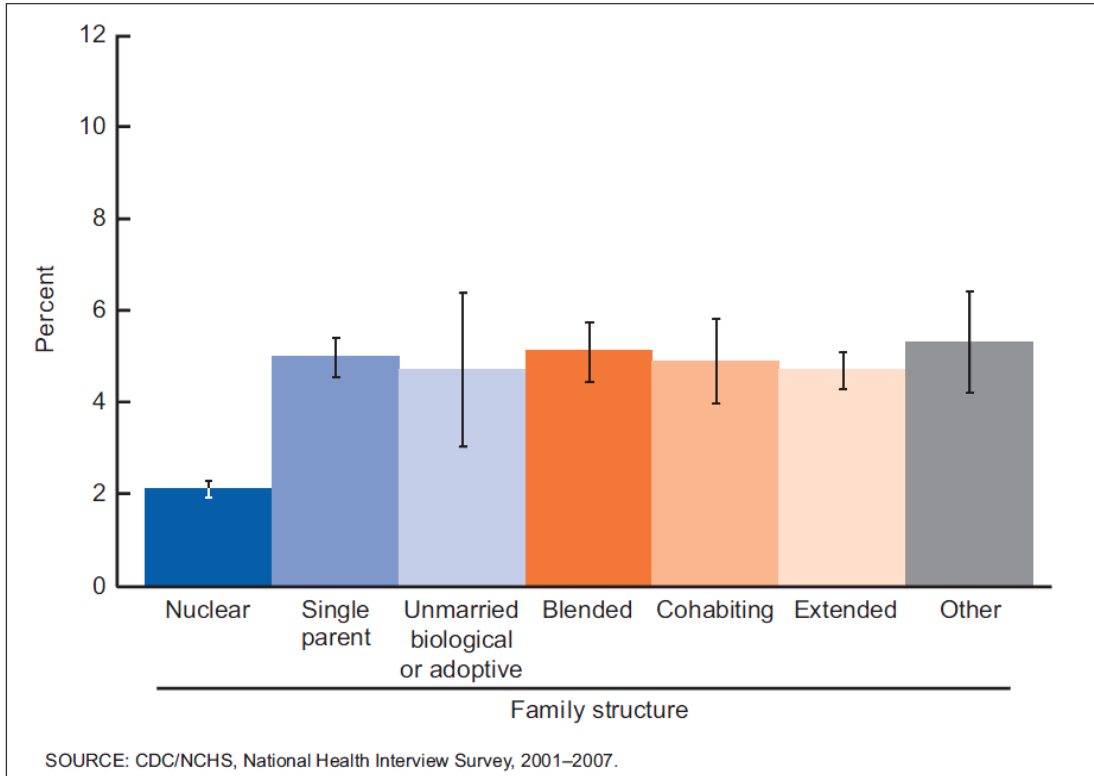


Figure 25. Percentages of children aged 4–17 who were generally not well behaved or did not usually do what adults requested in the past 6 months, by family structure: United States, 2001–2007

Figure Six

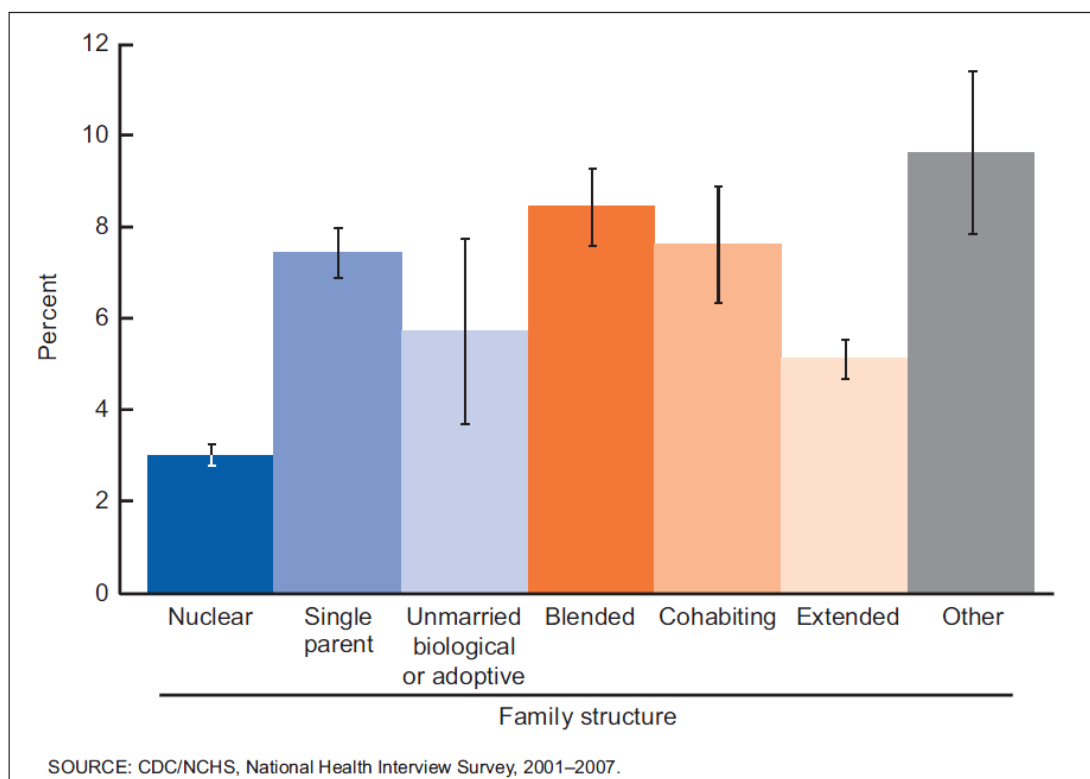
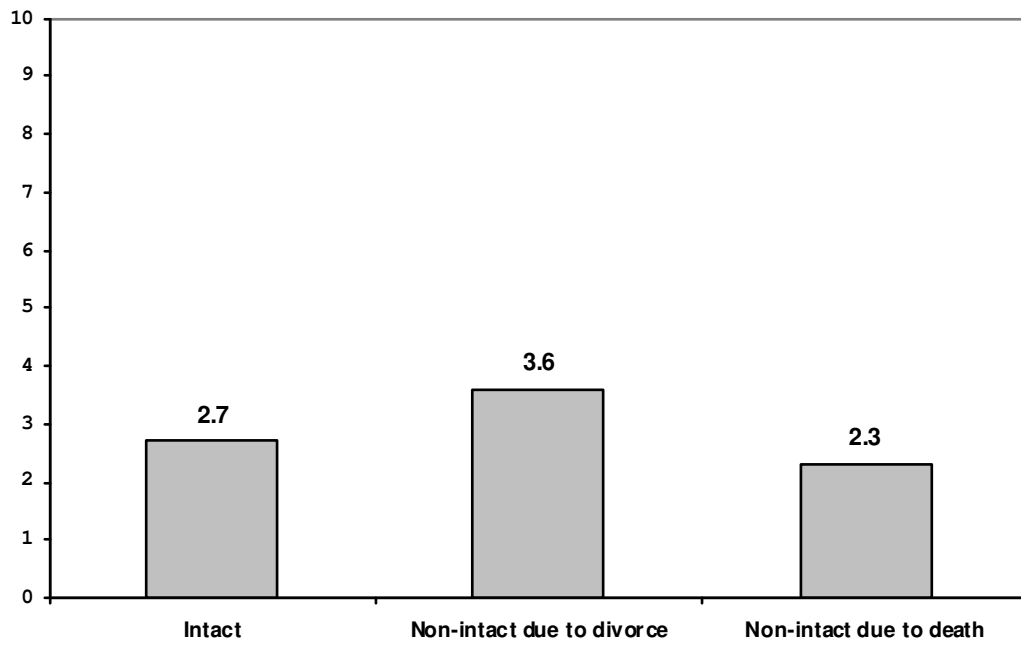


Figure 27. Percentages of children aged 4–17 who had definite or severe emotional or behavioral difficulties, by family structure: United States, 2001–2007

Figure 7

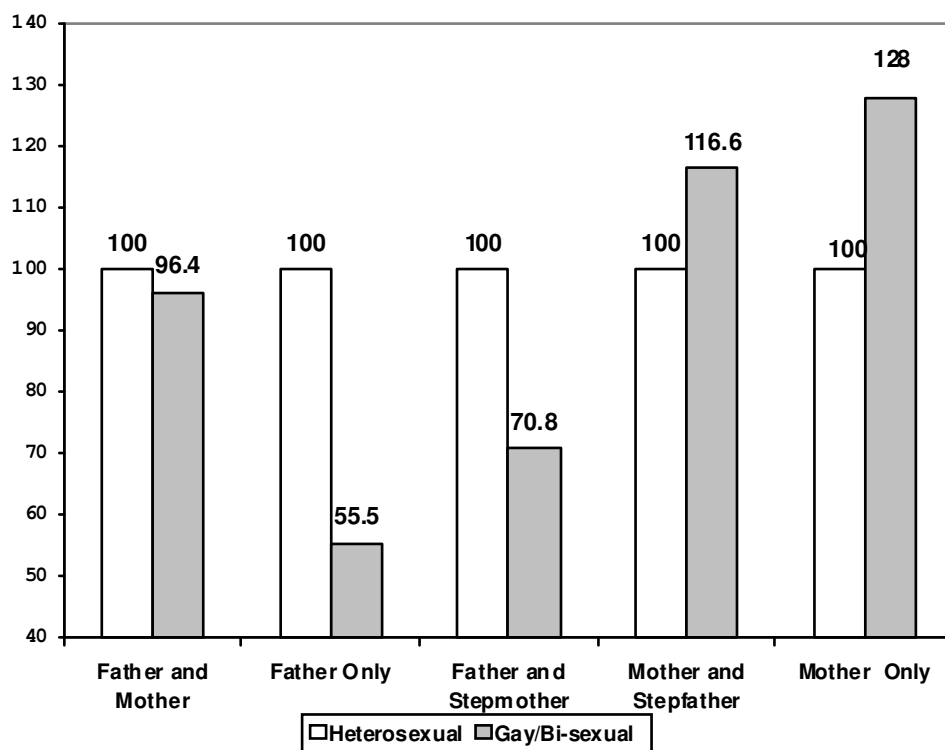
**U.S. Males Having Only Same-sex Sex Partners
by Childhood Family Structure
(In percent)**



Source: General Social Survey (NORC) 1991-2010. (N=5,353) Data are a probability sample of all U.S. adults age 35 and over.

Figure 8

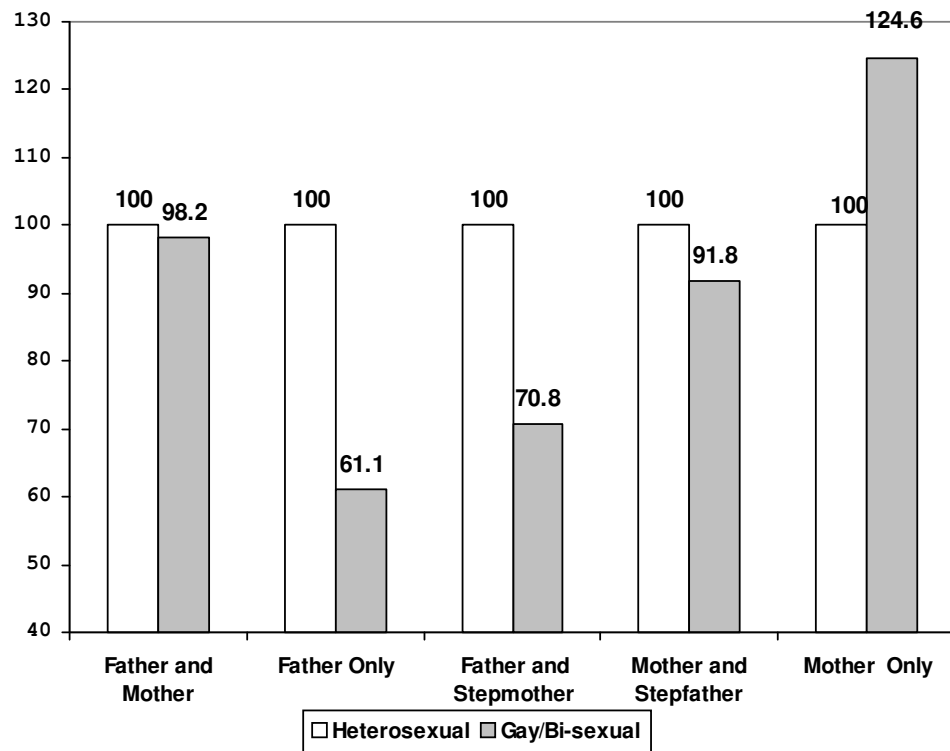
Risk of Nonheterosexual sex relations for U.S. Males by
Childhood Family Structure
(Heterosexual = 100)



Source: General Social Survey (NORC) 1991-2010. (N=6,664) Data are a probability sample of all U.S. adults.

Figure 9

**Risk of Nonheterosexual sex relations for U.S. Females by
Childhood Family Structure
(Heterosexual = 100)**



Source: General Social Survey (NORC) 1991-2010. (N=6,664) Data are a probability sample of all U.S. adults.