

# FATHERLESSNESS AND ITS EFFECTS ON AMERICAN SOCIETY

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## TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ Across America, 2022 data indicates there are approximately 18.3 million children who live without a father in the home, comprising about 1 in 4 US children
- ★ About 80% of single-parent homes are led by single mothers
- ★ Children from single-parent families are twice as likely to suffer from mental health and behavioral problems as those living with married parents.
- ★ In one study, 70% of youth in state operated facilities were from single-parent homes.
- ★ Children with an actively engaged father perform much better in school, some data shows that they are 33% percent less likely to repeat a class and 43% more likely to get As in school.
- ★ In a study of 56 school shootings, only 10 of the shooters (18%) were raised in a stable home with both biological parents. Eighty-two percent grew up in either an unstable family environment or grew up without both biological parents together.

At the America First Policy Institute (AFPI), we are motivated by a simple truth: American greatness relies on the strength of American families. A genuinely “America First” vision understands that families are at the very core of society—stable families form stable communities, and stable communities create a stable Nation.

Americans are united in the belief that strong families are a net positive for society. For example, according to a Rasmussen poll of 1,200 registered voters conducted on January 20–21, 2022, 84% of those polled believe a strong family is foundational to a strong America and that parents should bear the primary responsibility for raising children. Only 11% say raising children is a community responsibility. Of those polled, 67% believe that the decline of the family is harmful to American growth and prosperity, and 65% think that children who grow up fatherless are at a significant disadvantage in life.

Unfortunately, broken families, fatherlessness, and the government stepping in to take over traditional parenting duties—like instilling values—are an increasingly common fact of life in America. According to data from 2022, there are approximately 18.3 million children across America who live without a father in the home, comprising about 1 in 4 children ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2022](#)). This number is a major international outlier, with the U.S. having the highest rate globally of children living in single-parent households ([Kramer, 2021](#)). As of 2019, a staggering 23% of children lived with one parent and no other adults, which was

over *three times* the global average of 7%, according to Pew Research. In China and India, this number stands at 3% and 4%, respectively ([Kramer, 2021](#)). The statistics are even more staggering for black children, with nearly 50% living with a single mother (Livingston, 2018). Overall, single mothers head up 80% of single-parent households ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2022](#)). Sadly, fatherless families are four times more likely to raise children in poverty ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2020](#)), and research suggests that 84% of homeless families are headed by women ([ACOG, 2021](#)).

While divorce causes some single-parent households, approximately 40% of children are *born* to unwed mothers. For women under the age of 30 ([Bachu, 1998](#))—the demographic that bears two-thirds of children in general—the out-of-wedlock rate increases to 53% ([Livingston & Cohn, 2015](#)). While many unmarried women cohabitate with a partner at the time of giving birth, these relationships fail at twice the rate of marriages.

Merely being physically present at home is not enough, either. According to the founder of Mind Positive Parenting, David Walsh, data suggests that even for children with a father present in the home, the average school-age boy only spends about 30 minutes per week in one-on-one conversations with his father ([Coulombe, 2015](#)). For comparison, the same boy, on average, will spend more than 40 (potentially more than 60 for teenagers) hours per week watching television, playing video games, and surfing the internet ([American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2020](#)). Another study from the National Bureau of Economic Research found that on average fathers spend only 1.83 hours per weeks engaging in “recreational” child care and less than seven hours a week on all child care activities ([Guryan et al., 2008](#)). Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that fathers spend on average only one hour a day in total “caring for and helping household children,” which includes .05 hours a day reading to/with them ([U.S. Bureau of Labor, 2021](#)).

### **Fatherlessness and Mental Health Outcomes**

The effects of broken families have been staggering. Children from fatherless homes fare far worse in overall well-being and mental and behavioral health. These children are often burdened with lower self-esteem than other children, and they do not understand why their fathers abandoned them ([Brown](#)). This leads to a number of emotional problems like anxiety, social withdrawal, and depression, and it also leads to an increased risk of suicide and other forms of self-harm ([Brown](#)). Some data suggests that 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes, and 85% of children who exhibit behavioral disorders are from fatherless homes ([U.S. DOJ Office of Justice programs, 1998](#)).

Overall, data suggests that children from single-parent families are twice as likely to suffer from mental health and behavioral problems as those living with married parents ([Anderson, 2014](#)). Research also suggests that high-risk children in single-parent homes have nearly five times greater chance of developing mood disorders than those in dual-parent households, even when controlling for household income, age, and depression status of parents ([Teel, 2016](#)). Considering these statistics, it is no surprise that children in single-parent families also have a higher prevalence of suicide attempts ([Carnefski, Diekstra 1997](#)). This research suggests that fatherlessness is a significant contributor to mental health issues in children. Some data also suggest that children without fathers are also 10 times more likely to abuse chemical substances, and 71% of all children who abuse substances come from fatherless homes ([National Center for Fathering](#)). Another study found that 75% of adolescent patients in substance abuse centers are from fatherless homes ([U.S. DOJ Office of Justice programs, 1998](#)).

The unfortunate reality is that single parenthood does not only affect the health and well-being of the children—it affects the single parents as well. Both lone fathers and lone mothers have higher rates of mood disorders and substance use disorders than married parents, and single mothers fare about twice as poorly as single fathers in this regard. Both lone fathers and lone mothers are at far greater risk of psychiatric disorders than married couples ([Wade, 2011](#)).

### **Fatherlessness and Education Outcomes**

Unsurprisingly, those without a father in the home fare far worse in educational achievement than their two-parent counterparts. Some data shows that if fathers are not engaged, children are twice as likely to drop out of school than children with both parents at home ([National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse](#)). In a 2008 speech, President Barack Obama stated that the number could even be much higher, declaring that children who grow up without a father are nine times more likely to drop out of school ([Politico Staff, 2008](#)). Additional data has shown that 71% of high school dropouts are from fatherless homes ([U.S. DOJ Office of Justice programs, 1998](#)).

Children with an actively engaged father perform much better in school. Some data shows that they are 33% less likely to repeat a class and 43% more likely to get A's in school ([Nord & West, 2001](#)). A study by the National Center for Education Statistics concluded that “ten percent of students living with both their parents have ever repeated a grade compared to 20% living in stepfather families, 17% in stepmother families, 18% in mother-only families, 16% in father-only families, and 21% living with neither parent.” ([Nord & West, 2001](#)). Likewise, youth who are faced with an opportunity gap but have a mentor are 55% more likely to enroll in college than those without a mentor in their life activities ([Bruce, Bridgeland, 2014](#)).

### **Fatherlessness and Abortion Rates**

Fatherlessness also has a link to abortion rates. Perhaps counterintuitively, data shows that upon the legalization of abortion, the fatherlessness rate in a country rises dramatically. For example, within years after abortion was legalized in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, the percentage of children living with a single mother doubled ([Voice for the Voiceless](#)). In the same vein, one out of every three pregnancies in a fatherless home end in abortion. ([Beckwith, 2019](#)). Fatherlessness likewise has a link to teen pregnancy and sexual activity ([Schwarzwalder](#)). One study showed that girls whose fathers left home before they were five years old were eight times more likely to get pregnant as adolescents ([Anderson, 2014](#)).

### **Fatherlessness and Criminal Activity**

Criminal activity and fatherlessness are closely related as well. Most adolescents who enter the justice system have suffered from parental abandonment, substance abuse, or a dysfunctional household. In a study of 75 juvenile delinquents, 66% experienced fatherlessness, 20% had never lived with their father, and 25% had an alcoholic father ([Kofler-Westergren, Klopff, Bernhard, 2010](#)). Some data suggests that children without fathers in the home are 279% more likely to carry guns and deal drugs compared to peers

living with their fathers ([Allen, Lo, 2010](#)). In one study, 70% of youth in state-operated facilities were from single-parent homes ([Beck, Kline, Greenfeld, 1987](#)).

On the whole, some data suggests that fatherless kids are 20 times more likely to be incarcerated ([Seidel, 2022](#)). Other data suggests that children who are close to their fathers are 80% less likely to spend time in jail ([The Fatherhood Project](#)). Moreover, 71% of teachers and 90% of law enforcement officials state that the lack of parental supervision at home is a major factor that contributes to violence in schools ([Maginnis, 1997](#)). In a study of 56 school shootings, only 10 of the shooters (18%) were raised in a stable home with both biological parents. 82% grew up in either an unstable family environment or grew up without both biological parents together ([Langman, P. 2016](#)).

As it relates to the correlation between fatherlessness and delinquency, particularly in adolescent boys, one study concluded that “finally, the strong link between adolescent family structure and delinquent behavior is not accounted for by the income differentials associated with fathers' absence. Our results suggest that the presence of a father figure during adolescence is likely to have protective effects, particularly for males, in both adolescence and young adulthood.” ([Cobb-Clark & Tekin, 2011](#)).

Another unfortunate reality is that America's prisons are full of fathers separated from their children. Of America's roughly 2 million prisoners, over 800,000 are parents—and 92% of those are fathers. There are just about 2.7 million children that have a parent in prison ([Barnes-Proby et al., 2022](#)). In 2016, the average age of a minor child with parents in federal prison was 10 years old, and nine years old for minors with a parent in a state prison ([Department of Justice, 2021](#)).

## **Conclusion**

Of course, there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution to the fatherlessness crisis in America today. However, through targeted legislative priorities, progress can be made in reversing the disincentives currently endemic throughout national policy. There is a growing body of research that is discovering disincentives to marriage and family stability in federal tax and safety net policies, and AFPI will be a leading voice in providing a deeper understanding of these disincentives and reforms to address them.

While legislative and policy reforms are essential in addressing this crisis, Americans believe that it is the community's responsibility, more so than the government, to take care of fatherless children. Local churches and faith-based organizations can be of assistance in the entire fatherhood space. Churches are well situated to lead in this space, as they have the personnel and mentorship potential to guide fathers to their highest potential, provide community-based resources, and mentor those without fathers. In the same manner, mentorship programs, police athletic leagues, civic service and engagement opportunities, and family resource programs can help equip fathers and families to form stable families.

Policy officials and community leaders alike can support an all-out pro-fatherhood messaging campaign to amplify the importance of fatherhood across the Nation. Amplification from athletes, celebrities, musicians, actors, and national role models can push the importance of fatherhood to the forefront of public consciousness. In this way, fatherhood and its importance can become a unifying issue for all swaths of the country.

To address this crisis, we must first speak openly about the problem of fatherless children. Then, we must focus on fixing it by promoting strong families, confronting cultural malaise, and sharing the joys of fatherhood. It is a tall task but a worthwhile one.

AFPI believes it is time for a new vision for American families. The costs of broken homes and fatherlessness have plagued society, and today we are reaping the effects.

For America's families, the best is yet to come.

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