

A LINE ON LIFE

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Single Mothers *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

In a previous era, parents typically got married first and had children later. Currently, this sequence is not as likely to occur. Single parents have more than doubled between 1970 and 1990, jumping from 12% to 26%. With women 18-19 years of age in the United States, over half of their children are born out of wedlock. Almost one-quarter (24%) of never-married women become mothers. This is up from 15% in 1982.

The proportion of single mothers varies with ethnic backgrounds. The greatest increase has occurred with white women, from 6.7% to 14.6%. This doubling is also seen among college graduates (3.0% to 6.4%). It has nearly tripled for women in professional and managerial jobs, from 3.1% to 8.3%. Similar, but less drastic, rises have been found among Hispanic American and African American women. In 1991, 23.3% of all births in the U.S. were to single mothers. This breaks down to 17.2% for Whites, 23.2% for Hispanics, and 56.7% for African Americans.

Researchers have several suggested reasons for these changes. First, less stigma is attached to having children out of wedlock. Women are less likely to be forced into marriage to keep their children from being branded as "*illegitimate*." Second, more women are postponing marriage, so they can pursue life goals at school and work. With the recent bad economic times, people did not want to make the commitment to marriage. With postponed marriages, regardless of the reason, more single women are likely to become pregnant accidentally. In addition, with more day care available, single women find it easier to raise children.

Both the increased earning power of women and the increased acceptance of single motherhood seemed to have contributed to the increased out-of-wedlock births among well-educated, professional women. Women's earnings still lag behind those of men with similar qualifications. However, more women are no longer economically dependent on men. They don't need to rely on a man's financial support. According to one researcher, "*Witnessing the high divorce rates around them, many women no longer trust the institution of marriage.*" With their relentless "*biological clock*" ticking, these women may choose single motherhood.

In contrast to the above, most single mothers are neither well-educated nor professionals. Most are unemployed or underemployed with little education. They struggle each day just to survive. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, almost 50% of single mothers have not finished high school. Record numbers of single mothers rely on welfare payments for their survival. Their children have more problems – educational, financial and emotional – than children from two-parent homes.

Among African American women, out-of-wedlock births have increased greatly since the 1960s. Of first births, two-thirds of children are born to unmarried African American women. A majority of African American children (58%) now live in one-parent households. This compares to 20% of White children. However, about one-quarter of new parents are cohabiting (living together), so some children may still have both parents present.

With African Americans, the increased prevalence of unmarried mothers is found at both extremes of the economic scale. It's not that they don't want to get married. (A 1993 *Newsweek* poll indicated that 88% of African Americans wanted to get married.) However, in the last quarter century, there has been a large discrepancy between a dream marriage and reality. In the 70s and 80s, our economy shifted from an industrial to a service base. African American men, who migrated to find well-paying manufacturing work, were devastated by the lack of jobs. Without jobs, they are unable to support a family.

With the exception of Japan, single motherhood has sharply increased in other industrialized countries too. In Japan, only 1% of children are born to single mothers. At the other extreme, in Sweden – where cohabitation is common – about half of all children are born out of wedlock.

Even with dwindling dollars, there are still programs available to help single mothers.

For those at the lower end of the economic scale, there is another problem. Welfare payments are currently being severely restricted. Even so, here in Yuma County, there are sources of help available. If help is needed under *emergency* conditions, there are several sources for food – for example, **County Food Bank**, **Salvation Army**, and **Saint Vincent de Paul**. If food is needed for children, you can call **WIC** (Women, Infants & Children, 1-800-252-5942).

For more extensive help, a source under Arizona **DES** (Department of Economic Security) is the **FAA** (Family Assistance of Arizona). They can be reached by dialing 1-800-352-8401 between 8 A.M. and 5 P.M., Monday through Friday.

If you meet agency requirements, further help with food, finances and housing may be available through FAA. Education and job training are available through several sources. Some of these are — **JTPA** (Job Training Program of Arizona), **CETA** (Center for Employment Training of Arizona), and **JOBS** (Job Opportunity and Basic Skills). (There are similar agencies in other states.) If accepted into one of these programs, while you are in training or working, DES can arrange for child care.

For most single parents, if they need help, it is available. However, there is no "*magic wand*." Obtaining help will require time and effort from the people who seek it. These agencies are designed to give help when it is needed. Beyond that, they will train single mothers to become more capable of helping themselves.

* Adapted from Spencer Rathus, et al., *Human Sexuality in a World of Diversity*, Allyn and Bacon, 1997, pages 412-413.