Looking back on extensive documentation on the decline of the family in America, it is apparent that by far the single most important factor in the many social problems presently confronting us is the failure of fathers, the fact that men have abandoned their role in the family.

This paper summarizes recent research primarily on the American family in such a way as to highlight the serious family decline of the last few decades. The research itself is not mine, nor is most of the interpretation. I owe a great deal to other scholars, and I will attempt to do justice to their work in my remarks. I am especially indebted to Dr. Allan C. Carlson and Dr. Bryce J. Christensen of the Howard Center (Rockford, IL; this Center was previously part of the Rockford Institute). The publication now produced by the Center — The Family in America — has been indispensable to me. Many of my references and research summaries are taken from the “New Research” section of this publication. In any event, I believe that when one puts the large picture together, the decline of the American family is obvious. It is important to keep in mind that the research that is cited is about averages. Obviously, there are many exceptions to such general findings. Still, we must not let these exceptions, whatever their personal meaning to us, keep us from seeing the basic implications. We will also conclude that the primary source of the problem is reasonably clear.

Rates of illegitimacy, divorce, unmarried couple households, etc.

To begin, in the United States there has been, in recent decades, a very large increase in the rate of illegitimacy. The birth rate of unmarried women has gone from 14.1 per thousand in 1950 to 43.8 per thousand in 1990: a 310% increase. The total has gone from about 150,000 illegitimate babies in 1950 to 1,150,000 in 1990: a stupendous rise, even considering population growth. The rate for unmarried teenagers 15 -19 has gone from 12.6 in 1950 to 42.5 in 1990: a rate change of 337%. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that almost 25% of the nation's unmarried women become mothers, and that just over the past decade there has been a 60% increase in births out of wedlock (De Parle, 1993). Some more recent estimates put the national illegitimacy rate at 30%.

Although the rate is much higher for black women and those who do not finish high school, nevertheless, among white women and college graduates the number increased more than 50% since 1983 (from 6.7% to 14.6% for white females and from 3.0% to 6.4% for college graduates). For women with professional or managerial skills, the rate nearly tripled in the same period.

Related to the illegitimacy “boom” is the high U.S. rate of sexually transmitted diseases — the highest in the developed world. Government officials view the problem as an epidemic. (See Leary, 1996.)

There has also been a large increase in the U.S. divorce rate, which accelerated in the 1960's and peaked in 1981; it has leveled off in the last decade and even slightly declined. In 1970, 4% of the total adult population was divorced, but by 1992 11% were divorced — a 266% increase in 22 years. (See A.F. Saluter, 1992.) Today it is commonly recognized that roughly 50% of marriages end in divorce. This high U.S. divorce rate has meant that for well over 20 years approximately one million American children per year have been involved in divorce.

The slight decline in the divorce rate in the last decade is somewhat encouraging, but many attribute this to the decline in the U.S. marriage rate, which has gone down steadily over the last 25 years. In 1970, 72% of the adult population was married; it was 61 in 1992. Among women in their late twenties and early thirties, the proportion who have never married tripled between 1970 and 1992, from 11% to 33% for ages 25 to 29, and from 6% to 19% for ages 30 to 34. Also the number of unmarried couple households was 3.3 million in 1992, twice the 1980 number. (For these statistics, see A.F. Saluter, 1992; also Christensen, 1990.) Today, when millions of unmarried American couples break up, there is no official record, even if children are involved. For example, the well-publicized and traumatic breakup of the Woody Allen-Mia Farrow “family” would not count in divorce statistics.

Equally significant is the evidence that couples who live together before marriage are much more likely to get divorced than couples who do not. This has been found for couples in Sweden (Bennett, et al. 1987), in the U.S. (Booth and Johnson, 1988; Bumpass and Sweet, 1989) and Canada (Balakrishnan, et al., 1987; Watson and DeMco, 1987; Hall, 1996; Wu and Penning, 1997). There is also evidence that cohabiting couples are less committed to marriage, more accepting of divorce, and more often from divorced families. (Southworth and Schwarz, 1987; Hobart and Grigel, 1992; Axinn and Thornton, 1992.) One study by Forste and Tanfer (1996) found that women who cohabited before getting married were more likely to “cheat” on their husband (that is, have a secondary sex partner) after marriage. In addition, Stets (1993) has found that previous cohabitation is linked with a lower quality in a current relationship; and that, in general, cohabiting couples have a lower-quality relationship than married couples. For example, “cohabiting women are almost five times as likely to suffer ‘severe violence' as married women” (Christensen, 1989b, p. 5). Huffman, et al. (1994) also report good evidence based on college students that “cohabiting women are at risk of physical violence,” in part because the male cohabiting student has a more accepting attitude toward rape. Because of the more than 3 million cohabiting couples, this evidence on vulnerability to violence needs to be much more widely known.
In any case, the present large number of cohabiting couples predicts a continued high divorce rate. It should also be kept in mind that the children of divorce and of single-parent families are less likely to get married and if married more likely to divorce than those from two-parent families (e.g., Glenn and Kramer, 1987; Catton, 1988; Mazur, 1993; Webster, Orbuch and House, 1995; Axinn and Thornton, 1996).

Many observers associate the dramatic increase in illegitimacy and divorce with the equally dramatic rise in pathology among the young. Specifically, since 1950, the suicide rate for young Americans has also climbed by about 300%; the homicide rate for Americans under 25 has done the same; drug use has dramatically increased, the arrest rate and the rate of violent criminal behavior among the young have also skyrocketed, especially since 1960.

Some would say that there is nothing wrong with divorce; they would argue that we need it and that most children survive it and appear okay. Besides, what is so good about old-fashioned families with a father? Women should have their independence. Who needs patriarchy? Let the state take care of the family. Increases in drug use, suicide and homicide are too bad — but what evidence is there that the breakup of the traditional family of a husband, wife and children has caused these things? These changes could have many causes. Perhaps television or new parental attitudes or economic changes are the real culprits behind the increases in troubled young people.

However, as we will see, it is the family's decline — in many cases, its collapse, that is the major factor beyond these unfortunate developments. For example, the growth in unmarried mothers and divorce has created a dramatic increase in single parent families. There is now extensive evidence that such families (despite many exceptions) are on the average a serious liability for society and for the family members.

Poverty

That single-parent families should be prone to poverty is surely not surprising. One parent alone faces difficult financial odds. Staying home to take care of children makes the family dependent upon government support, which virtually guarantees poverty. Going out to work may bring in more income — but day care or baby-sitting costs are often quite high, and good jobs are hard to find, especially if the parent — often the mother — is young and inexperienced in the workplace. The link between poverty and single-parent families is well-recognized in the U.S., and there are now about 3.4 million mother-only families. The recent trends, cited above, suggest that many more are coming.

From 1959 to 1991 — a period of increasing American prosperity — the number of children in one-parent families (including father-only families) living in poverty increased by 200%, from 4.3 to 8.6 million. In the same period, the number of children in two-parent families in poverty declined, by over 200%, to 5.1 million — this, even though there are still many more two-parent than one-parent families. These changes are due entirely to the increases in divorce and illegitimacy, since the number of widowed mothers has slightly declined over this period.

In the 1991 U.S. census report, married-couple families continued to have the lowest poverty rate (6%) among all family types. In the census, families with only a mother represented 12.7% of non-poor families, but 54% of poor families. (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Poverty in the U.S. 1991, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 181, August 1992-xiii, 6-9.)

That marriage is a good way for the poor to get out of their poverty is documented in a study by Cohen and Tyrell (1986). To begin with, they note that the poor are over four times as likely to have grown up in a broken family. They then report data showing that among people born into poor families, 63% of those who remained in the lowest income bracket (bottom 20%) were single. By contrast, 95% of those who made it to the upper income bracket (top 40%) were married. They concluded that marital status was the main determinant of economic well-being and social mobility for young adults. In short, getting married is a good way to get ahead.

A special group of the very poor — namely homeless children — reliably come from a fatherless family. In a recent study in Boston, Lewis and Myers (1989) report that 99% of over 200 homeless children came from a fatherless family. (For further support for this finding, see McChesney, 1995.)

Many of the single-parent families are the result of divorce, and in America it is now recognized that divorce often leads to poverty. The common situation is that the mother gets custody of the children and suffers a significant loss of income. Fathers often fail to provide much support, and many disappear completely. Lenore Weitzman (1985) has claimed that men have a 42% improvement in their post-divorce standard of living while women have a 73% decline. This is now understood as too extreme a claim, but the problem for women is certainly severe (e.g., Garvin, Kalter and Hansell, 1993). A recent U.S. Census Bureau study reported a 37% drop in income for the mother-headed family immediately after divorce, and showed that children are almost twice as likely to be living in poverty after a divorce than before. (See De Parle, 1991.)

Abraham (1989) has challenged Weitzman's statistical evidence of men's benefits and has provided evidence that in many cases the standard of living of men in fact declines after divorce. (He acknowledged, however, that divorce is often a serious economic trauma for women.) Commonly, divorce hurts both men and women because it breaks up an economically efficient family unit into two inefficient and competing halves. (See, for example, Duncan, 1994; Stroup and Pollock, 1994, for recent evidence to this effect.)

The well-established economic loss caused by divorce affects children all their lives. Cooney and Uhlenberg (1991) report that divorced parents are less likely to provide gifts and monetary assistance to their children even many years after the divorce, when the children are adults. The same pattern of less support for the children of divorce is reported by White (1992). There is, in a word, a great deal of evidence linking single-parent families, including those caused by divorce, to poverty.

Physical health and marriage

Family Decline: The Findings of Social Science
Many studies link marriage and membership in a two-parent family to good health, and inferior health to divorced and single-parent family status. For example, a systematic study by Ho and Goldman (1990) of the death rates for married and unmarried men and women in 16 industrialized countries found that in all countries the unmarried suffered higher death rates than the married. Divorced men were particularly vulnerable to higher death rates. The researchers noted that their results supported previous findings (e.g., Umberson, 1987) that marriage helps to maintain health and reduce the risk of death often found in both the single and the divorced. (One reason for the effect is that the married take much better care of themselves. See Joung, 1995.)

A study by Aanson (1988) of 20,000 American white women aged 18 to 55 found that single women were far more prone to physical illness. Indeed, this study showed that being married was more important to one's health than such factors as age, education or family income. Single women had more chronic diseases and spent more days in bed. However, as Larson, Larson and Gartner (1990) note: "Women who were living with persons unrelated to them also had poorer health than married women living with spouses, although their health was better than the health of single women living alone." (p. 137)

Married people also have less depression and anxiety (Pearlin and Johnson, 1977; Thoits, 1987) even though Thoits noted that married people reported experiencing more potentially stressful events than did the unmarried. The social support of marriage and family networks apparently counteract the effects of stress. (For the now considerable evidence on the positive effects of social support on health, see House, Landis and Umberson, 1988; also Hu, 1988; Wolf and Bruhn, 1993).

Columbia University researchers Litwak, et al. (1989) studied the cause of death for 2 million Americans. Their results revealed that for both men and women, blacks and whites, and for almost every age group, death visits the unmarried more often than the married.

This study showed that the protective effect of marriage was most pronounced for types of death that can be delayed or prevented chiefly through informal care: chronic diseases, such as diabetes, cirrhosis, asthma, and hypertensive heart disease. Here, the mortality rate for unmarried white males aged 35-54 ran an amazing 390% higher than that of married men. Among white females, the mortality rate for this type of death was 200% higher for the unmarried aged 35-54, and 120% higher for unmarried aged 45-54, as compared with married women of the same ages.

Surprisingly, however, mortality rates ran significantly higher among singles than among marrieds, even for types of death — such as those from cancer of the gallbladder or from hemorrhage of the subarachnoid artery — which require formal care and where informal care is largely irrelevant. Even here, mortality rates were significantly higher for the unmarried than for the married. Among white males, for instance, the unmarried, aged 35-54 suffered a death rate almost 100% higher than their married peers. The link between marriage and lower mortality rates seems to be broken only for types of death, such as those from cancer of the brain or pancreas, for which even formal care can do little.

Although not quite as stark, the same pattern prevails for accidental deaths and suicide, for which prevention depends almost entirely upon timely informal care. “Deaths caused by falling asleep in bed with a cigarette or driving when drunk,” explain the researchers, “can be prevented by a spouse, who can remove the cigarette or do the driving. Avoiding these hazards requires no technical training but does require... long-term commitment and face-to-face contact.” In a study of Swedish men (Rosengren, Wedel and Wilhelmsen, 1989), it was found that middle-aged married men had a mortality rate of 9% as compared to 20% for divorced men of the same age. (These findings hardly bode well for Sweden with its high divorce and low marriage rates.)

Lillard and Waite (1995) also report evidence that marriage prolongs life and “being currently unmarried significantly increases the hazard of dying for both men and women.” The reported effect is large and in this study equally significant for both males and females.

Kisker and Goldman (1987), two Princeton University researchers, report similar findings. They first surveyed a small number of developed countries representing a range of cultures (Japan, England and Wales, Sweden, and the United States) and found that in every case married persons have lower mortality rates than single, divorced, or widowed people. The researchers then branched out to study 26 developed countries, ranging from Austria to New Zealand to Singapore. Across all these cultures the results were similar, that is, in developed countries married persons of both sexes have a clear mortality advantage as compared to single individuals. Similarly, a recent study in Britain by Ebrahim, et al. (1995) shows the same results as does an important recent international study of the health effects of marriage by Masteakaas, 1994.

If we turn again to specific illnesses, the pattern is often the same. For example, a study by McQuillan (1989) reported that according to officials at the National Center for Health Statistics, the incidence of hepatitis B has increased steadily in recent years and is now regarded as “a disease of major public health significance” because of its “overall morbidity... economic consequences and demands on medical resources.” Hepatitis B does not strike all Americans alike, however. Single and divorced Americans have a markedly higher rate of infection than do the married. Only one married person in 100 has ever had hepatitis B. Among the divorced or separated, the rate stands at 2.4 per 100, while for the single, the figure is 4.3 per 100. The NCHS analysts cited previous research which suggested that differences in sexual activity may partly account for patterns of hepatitis infection. Other important recent studies showing the health advantage of marriage include Anson, 1988; Schoenborn and Wilson, 1988; Adelmann, 1990.

A married partner's mere presence is not reliably the factor which provides the health benefits. The quality of the marriage is extremely important and a troubled marriage can reduce or even reverse the usually positive effects of marriage. For example, Kessler and Essex (1982) found that marital intimacy was such
an important factor that its absence could entirely neutralize any differences in depression between marrieds and non-marrieds. Consequently, the level of intimacy in a marriage has a key modifying effect on the health of a married individual (Larson, 1985). Kiecolt-Glaser, et al. (1987) found that poor marital quality was also associated with a lower response on three qualitative immunological indexes. 

Physical health and divorce

Larson, Larson and Gartner (1990) ask: “Since marriage has bolstering effects on a person's health when the marriage is satisfactory and potential adverse effects when the relationship is abrasive or of poor quality, are divorce and separation healthier alternatives to disturbed marriages?” (p. 138) But research demonstrates that the break-up of a marriage is one of life's most stressful events (Bloom, et al., 1978; Verbrugge, 1979), and divorce is associated with high rates of physical and emotional disorders. As Larson, et al. note, marital disruption is one of the most powerful predictors of both physical and emotional illness. (Somers, 1979; see also Bloom, et al., 1978)

A recent study by Smith and Zick (1994) reports a substantially higher mortality for divorced wives than for their ex-husbands. This study, based on couples that divorced in the 1970s and 1980s was restricted to what had been long-term marriages, which may account for the special trauma and danger to the ex-wives.

Furthermore, in epidemiological studies, higher rates of both infectious disease and cancer were found among persons going through divorce (Ernster, et al., 1979; Lynch, 1977; Somers, 1979) as well as more days of sickness when compared to the married (Kiecolt-Glaser, et al. 1988). In a cross-sectional study designed to look at immunological function among separated or divorced women, those who had been separated for one year or less were found to have poorer immune function than their married counterparts. (See also Kennedy, et al., 1988.) Single mothers are even subject to physical abuse from their teenage children at a rate considerably higher than in married households (Wells, 1987).

From a health-maintenance perspective, research thus indicates that, if possible, attempting to improve a marriage is probably wiser than dissolving it. In a 5-year longitudinal study by Cookerly (1980), more than 50% of couples who had experienced conflict and obtained marital therapy were still married after 5 years. Of those who went through individual therapy, only 30% were still married. Similarly, Gurman, Knistern and Pinsof (1986), in a very extensive review of the impact of psychotherapy on marriage, found that when the primary conflict was marital, marriage counseling was much more beneficial than individual therapy or than no therapy at all.

Children also suffer poorer health when living with a single parent. To begin with, babies born out of wedlock are much more likely to have low birth weight (Pickery, 1987) and to die within the first year (Bennett, et al., 1990). They are more often victims of the Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (e.g., Nam, Eberstein and Deeb, 1989). They are also less often breastfed (Grossman, et al., 1990) — and breastfeeding is associated with many health and other benefits, e.g., high intellectual development in children (Bauer, et al., 1991); a lower rate of inner ear infections (Duncan, 1993); Illegitimate children are much more likely to be infected by sexually transmitted diseases (Hill, et al., 1988; Rivlin, 1992). Female divorce rates are also positively associated with childhood mortality. (Singh and Yu, 1996.) Early infant death has been reliably linked to the mothers' unmarried status, not just in the U.S. but in other countries as well, e.g., Finland (Olsen, et al., 1995; see also Lester, 1995).

Dawson (1990) found that health vulnerability scores were elevated by 20 to 40 percent among children living with never-married, divorced, and remarried mothers, as compared with children living with both biological parents. For example, the risk of asthma ran approximately 50% higher among children living in single-parent households than among children in two-parent families. An important and rather startling study has found that children who come from divorced families are likely to die sooner than their peers who grow up in intact families (Schwartz, et al., 1995), which suggests that the effects of divorce are truly lifelong.

Abuse and single-parent families

There are other physical problems as well for children in single-parent families, as reported by Gelles (1989), who found that “rates of severe and very severe violence toward children are substantially greater in single-parent households” than in two-parent households. Single mothers reported “a 71 percent greater rate of very severe violence toward their children than did mothers in two-parent homes.” Gelles discovered the highest risk of severe child abuse, however, in households of unmarried fathers with an annual income of less than $10,000. The Gelles study confirms, he says, “other survey findings, conventional wisdom, and clinical and official data which point to the high risk of abuse in single-parent homes.” He observes: “No matter what the economic situation of a single parent, being alone and having to fill both parental roles for their offspring can lead to stress and, eventually, violence and abuse.” Margolin (1992) documents that the mother's boyfriend commonly abuses her children.

Single mothers themselves are also more subject to physical abuse. A study of McKibben, De Vos, and Newberger (1989) found that when a live-in boyfriend abuses the child of an unmarried mother, he often abuses the mother as well. They also found that among abused children treated at Boston City Hospital, almost 60% of the mothers also displayed symptoms of having been abused. This link between child abuse and maternal abuse appeared especially strong among unmarried mothers. “Whereas 16.7 percent of married mothers were victims of violence,” the authors of the study observe, “68.0 percent of single mothers were victims, more than four times the risk.”

For comparisons, the researchers then looked at 32 mothers who had brought their children to the hospital for something other than abuse. In this group, the mothers who appeared to have suffered violence were unmarried; none of the married mothers had been abused.
A study by Stets and Straus (1988) provides additional evidence for the previously noted finding that the violence rate between members of a couple is much higher and more violent for those living together but not married, than for married couples. (See also Stets, 1991.) Nor should it be surprising that incest is more common in single-parent, divorced and step-families (Finkelthor, et al.; Erickson, 1993).

Advocates of liberal divorce law have often assumed that divorce protects women by allowing them to escape from abusive husbands. No doubt, this is sometimes true. But the huge growth of divorce cannot be said, in this respect, to have benefited American women: divorced women are more subject to physical abuse than married women, and in particular divorced or separated pregnant women are especially likely to suffer abuse (see Berenson, et al., 1991). A related finding is that adult women who grew up in broken homes are more likely to be abused sexually than those from normal families (Mullen, et al., 1993.) In addition, both divorced men and women are far more likely to be murdered than are those in any other marital status. (See Bloom, et al., 1978, p. 874).

Abuse and step-parents

Finally, in this review of grim statistics is a report by Gibbons (1993) summarizing the recent research by Martin Daly and Margo Wilson on the relationship of stepparents to stepchildren. Using Canadian data over the past 20 years, they report that children under 2 were 60 to 70 times more likely to be killed by their step-parents than by their birth parents! (The study used only children living in two-parent households.) The murder rate declined as the children got older, but at all ages, stepchildren were more often killed than were genetic children. To even things out a bit, step-parents are also more likely to be killed than are biological parents (Heide, 1993). Malkin and Lamb (1994) also report evidence that maltreatment of children is higher when they live with stepparents or other caretakers. As Daly and Wilson (1996) put it, “It seems that Cinderella was more than a fairy tale.” Daly and Wilson found similar disturbing results for stepchildren in England and Wales. (For a summary of these findings, see Daly and Wilson, 1996. See also Prueutt, et al., 1995.)

Of course, there are many committed and loving step-parents. The findings given here concern averages. One can propose that very fine stepparents are different from the statistically typical stepparent in various ways, e.g., they often make a conscious and strong commitment to the role of fathering (or mothering); they frequently offer to formally adopt their stepchildren and they often have a strong religious or moral motivation. Research needs to be done on the characteristics of the truly good — the beneficial — stepparent.

Psychological health and marriage

There is substantial evidence showing the psychological benefits of marriage and the two-parent family. A sampling of the relevant studies follows.

Ellison (1990) and Broman (1988) report that married black men and women express greater life satisfaction than divorced or separated blacks. Other research shows that marriage enhances the self-esteem of both husbands and wives (e.g., McDonald, 1987). A team of women researchers (Ward, Thodes and Whelan, 1989) reviewed all published studies reporting sex differences in well-being. In their meta-analysis, they found that for both men and women, the married state was associated with favorable well-being, and favorable outcomes were stronger for wives than for husbands. In addition, the gap between the married and the unmarried of both sexes was substantial.

One study demonstrated that being satisfied with marriage was a more powerful predictor of mental health than any of the following: age, race, education, or income (Gove, et al., 1983). But persons dissatisfied with their marriages were in poorer mental health than the unmarried. Similarly, Kiecolt-Glaser, et al., (1987) found that unhappy marriages were stronger predictors of distress and loneliness than were education, socioeconomic status and the total number of negative life events.

To rear a child alone is to cope with serious stress. In a study completed at North Carolina State University and Johns Hopkins University, Thompson and Ensminger (1989) examined the mental health of over 800 childrearing women in an urban black neighborhood in Chicago. The researchers found that “persistent single parenting increases the likelihood of experiencing psychological distress.” Indeed, the authors of the study report that being the only adult in the household over an extended period leads to distress, even when economic, educational, and other hardships were taken into account. “Remaining a single parent,” observed the researchers, “means foregoing personal needs including intimacy, companionship, or affirmation of one's identity.” Further evidence of greater maternal distress for divorced as compared to non-divorced mothers is reported by Simon, 1992.

On the other hand, this study found that “mothers who live with a spouse are less likely to report feeling sad or tense than mothers who live alone.” The researchers accordingly conclude that “being married has advantages for the mother’s psychological wellbeing.” The study did find that a mother’s stress may be alleviated by living with an adult (unspecified) other than her spouse or by attending church frequently. But all in all, this study raises grave concerns about the psychological burdens imposed by both divorce and illegitimacy.

Divorce and suicide

The correlation between divorce and suicide in the United States has long been recognized. For example, Lester (1988), looked for broad cultural patterns to explain suicide rates in the U.S. and discovered that they were “associated most strongly with the amount of interstate migration and the percent divorced.” Surprisingly, suicide rates did not appear to be affected by an area’s unemployment or by the average income of its inhabitants. The Lester study also corroborated previous work showing that suicide rates run low in areas in which a high percentage of people attend church regularly. Yang (1992) also found suicide linked to divorce for Americans.

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A recent report by Burnley (1995) on suicide among younger Australians found a surprisingly high rate of suicide among the never-married and the divorced under the age of 40; he concluded that even in this day of casual attitudes toward cohabitation married status clearly protects both spouses from suicide.

A study on Norway shows a similar pattern. Until recently, suicide was rare in that country. Some researchers even supposed that Norwegian culture in some way prevented or discouraged suicide. But as divorce has grown more common there, so too has suicide. Sociologist Stack (1989), a leading specialist on suicide in the United States, has studied recent trends: the divorce rate in Norway nearly tripled in the past few decades, going from .65 per 1000 Norwegians in 1951 to 1.62 in 1980. Stack found that “a 1 percent increase in divorce is associated with a 0.46 increase in suicide.” On the other hand, “no relationship was found between the rate of unemployment and the rate of suicide.” Apparently, the relation to an employer or firm does not carry the same life-and-death significance as the bond to a spouse. Stack concluded: “The findings clearly illustrate the importance of stable marriage and family institutions in suicide prevention.” Romelso, et al., (1992) also report still more evidence that divorce is related to suicide.

Stack (1990) and Gallagher and Sheehy (1994) found the same pattern of suicide and divorce in Denmark; a Spanish study (Asencio, et al., 1988) found suicide linked to divorce, especially for divorced men; the suicide rate was lowest for married women. Likewise, divorce in Scotland has been clearly linked to suicide (Kreitman and Casey, 1988).

In a study sponsored by the University of Missouri, researchers looked into the emotional and physical state of 1,543 adults across the United States. They found that married people scored higher on “positive affect” (that is, they felt “pleased, good, happy, joyful, and warm” about life). Singles, on the other hand, suffered from higher levels of anxiety, tension, fear, and depression. Singles also suffered from higher levels of “dysphoria” (hostility, depression, and anxiety).

**Children’s psychological health and family structure**

Children living in single-parent and stepparent families suffer more emotional distress and problems in school, according to a study by Dawson (1991) who documented the pronounced effects of family structure in her analysis of behavioral and emotional problems. She found that “children from single-parent and stepparent families were two to three times more likely than those living with biological parents to have received professional help for emotional or behavioral problems in the year preceding the interview.” Dawson noted that “the mean problem behavior score was 40 to 45 percent higher” among children living with only one biological parent. Coulton, et al. (1995) report that children are much more likely to be maltreated in “female-headed households” resulting from family disintegration. Kirby, et al. (1993) report that illegitimate birth is a high positive predictor of later developmental problems.

Related to this is the disturbing report by McLeod and Shanahan (1993) that mothers who have never married are less emotionally responsive to their children, and put them at greater risk of mental illness.

The interesting thing is that families with a mother and stepfather are associated with even more school problems than the families of divorced mothers who remained single. Stronger evidence for this same finding is reported by Zill (1988) and Zill and Schoenborn (1990). (Other studies showing the serious problems found in stepfamilies include Steinberg, 1987; Hobart, 1988; Mitchell, Wister and Burch, 1989; McKay, 1991; Bray, et al., 1992; Downey, 1995.)

Psychologists are seeing more teenagers than ever before, especially from single-parent and step families. In another analysis, researchers Zill and Rogers (1988) found that “the frequency with which young people are taken to see psychiatrists or psychologists for emotional, mental, or behavioral problems has increased since the 1960’s.” At that time, only 6% of adolescents aged 12 to 16 had ever received psychological help. But by 1981, the figure had risen to 9%. Not only had more young people received therapy, they had received such care more recently, and apparently, more frequently: “between the late 1960’s and 1981, the proportion of adolescents ages 12 to 16 who had received psychological help within the previous 12 months nearly doubled, going from 2 percent to almost 4 percent.”

But not all teenagers show this same pattern. During the period in question, adolescents in two-parent families slightly reduced their reliance on psychologists: where 6% of adolescents from these families had received psychological help in the late 1960’s, the figure was down to 5% in 1981. “By contrast,” observed Zill and Rogers, “among teens from mother-only families, the proportion of adolescents ever receiving counseling went from about 9 percent in the 1960’s to almost 15 percent in 1981. Among teens from mother-stepfather families, the proportion receiving help went from 7 percent to more than 14 percent. Adolescents from father-only and father-stepmother families showed similar increases over time.” In short, most of the young people receiving help in 1981 came from disrupted or reconstituted families.

Studies link children of divorce to many psychological pathologies, especially loneliness and depression (Page, 1988). Bruback and Beer (1992) note that lower self-esteem, more depression, and poorer grades were associated with children of divorce. Forehand, et al., (1987) found academic problems more common than divorced children, and Forehand (1989) found that the “class troublemaker” was also likely to come from a divorced family. Dropping out of high school is another consequence of divorce, even for those who subsequently live with stepparents (Sandefur, et al., 1992). Siblings fight with each other more in female-headed households than do children raised in the traditional two-parent household (Larson, 1995).

Achenbach, et al., (1995) report that aggressive behavior was the most predictable behavior associated with divorce. In their large sample of American children, they found that psychological, physical and social problems were all associated with divorce. In addition, young girls who see their parents divorce are much more likely as adults to suffer from depression and low self-
There is now an abundance of literature demonstrating the negative effects of divorce, especially on children. Important examples of this research include the work of Hetherington (1978, 1979, 1988), and Furstenberg & Cherlin (1991). See also Kurtz, 1994. However, the research of Judith Wallerstein (1980, 1989, 1991) has probably been the most influential. She and her associates followed 60 families after their divorce in the early 1970's. Her systematic follow-ups have now covered ten years and provide both qualitative descriptions and basic quantitative findings.

The Wallerstein studies: What divorce is like for children

Judith Wallerstein, from the University of California Berkeley, and Joan Berlin Kelly, a clinical psychologist, published their findings after following the families for five years (1980). Their study was the first to track systematically the effects of divorce on a fixed set of families for so long a time period. Families were not included in the study if a child had a previous history of psychological difficulty, was in psychotherapy, was retarded, or was significantly below developmentally appropriate norms. The 60 families in the study were predominantly middle class.

Wallerstein and Kelly conducted extensive interviews of all the members of the families at the time of the divorce. They intended to complete the study with another set of interviews one year later, in light of the conventional wisdom which suggested that the first year was the hardest, and that by the end of that time the families would have adjusted to the divorce. Instead, the researchers found that eighteen months after the breakup of their parents' marriage, many children were still experiencing great difficulties, and were indeed still on a downward course. Wallerstein and Kelly decided to extend their study to five years after the divorce.

The authors found that a significant number of the children suffered fear, worry, sadness, feelings of rejection, loneliness, anger and guilt — topics to which we will return in more detail below. The initial reaction to the divorce of over 90% of the children was one of strong fear and anxiety. The parental break-up brought "an acute sense of shock, intense fears, and grieving which the children found overwhelming." Fewer than 10% of the children felt relieved at the separation.

The children worried about who would provide for their needs. They feared being abandoned, "concluding that if the marital tie could dissolve, the parent-child relationship could dissolve also." Half of the children feared being abandoned forever by the parent who had left, and a third had the same fear with regard to the custodial parent. Many were obsessed with the fear of waking up to find both parents gone. Older children, between the ages of 13 and 18, worried about sex and marriage. Many of them began to fear marriage, and they had doubts about their competence as sexual partners.

The children worried not only about themselves, but also about their parents: about the ability of the absent parents to care for themselves, and about the custodial parent's suffering, depression, and physical health. Wallerstein and Kelly state:
Two-thirds of the children, especially the younger children, yearned for the absent parent, one-half of these with an intensity which we found profoundly moving. (p. 46)

It did not appear that yearning for the father was rooted necessarily in a good pre-divorce relationship, but rather in the developmental needs and the fantasies of the child. This yearning was illustrated in the children's play, observed as part of the evaluation. The children frequently played house with dolls, and they would reliably put the mother and father in the same house with the children, and often the parents were placed holding one another tightly.

Over one-half of the children in the study suffered intensely from feelings of rejection by one or both of the parents. Young children could not understand that their father (for example) had left their mother; they felt that the parent had left them. Many of the boys felt that criticism of the absent father by the mother was directed at them personally. The children felt lonely with the father gone and the mother working more. They felt both parents slipping out of their lives.

Over one-third of the children in the study, especially the boys, showed feelings of anger. There was a sense of aggression on the part of children of all ages. One-fourth of the children expressed this anger explosively toward one or both parents. The children saw divorce as an act of selfishness on the part of their parents and felt that the parents had given primary consideration to their own needs.

The authors found that one-third of the children took on themselves a significant amount of the blame for the breakup of the home, and that young children, up to age 8, were more likely to feel responsible for the separation of the parents than older children.

Wallerstein and Kelly expected to find in the children a sense of relief at the marital separation in direct proportion to the amount of previous marital discord. This was not the case. They found that only where the father had been violent, and this violence had frightened a younger child, was there a sense of relief. Otherwise, the reaction to the divorce was unrelated to the quality of the marriage. For a recent investigation of separation anxiety effects as related to early behavior problems in boys, see De Klyen, 1996.

We turn now to the situation five years after the divorce. The authors found that by that time about 34% of the children were coping quite well and had high self-esteem. For these children, the divorce may have been a sad event in their lives, but they did not continue to feel aggrieved or angry at either parent. These children were generally those who benefited from having stable, loving relationships with both parents after the divorce. Regular and frequent visitation with the non-custodial parent was found to be a key factor in the success of the children in this group — especially among the youngest children.

A second group of children — 29% — was classified in a middle range of psychological health, as doing “reasonably well.” But even these children “continued to show significant residues of their continuing anger in their persistent emotional neediness, unhappiness and somewhat diminished self-esteem.”

The most surprising and disturbing finding of the Wallerstein research was that five years after the divorce children within a third group — consisting of over one-third of the children — were “consciously and intensely unhappy and dissatisfied with their life in the post-divorce family.” That is, 37% of the children were described as “moderately to severely depressed.” And unhappiness was actually greater at five and at ten years after the divorce than it had been a year and a half after it. The following description of the way in which an eleven-year-old member of the group played is illustrative:

As Barbara entered the playroom, she busied herself with a dollhouse and began to construct a fantasy story which could have been a childish rendition of Waiting for Godot. She arranged the family dolls around the dinner table, which was set with careful attention to detail. The dolls in all their finery sat quietly awaiting the imminent arrival of the daddy doll who never appeared. It soon became clear that “waiting for daddy” was a central fantasy which was repeated endlessly as if frozen in time. (p. 210)

The 10-year follow-up study, by Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989), consists primarily of many detailed and moving narrative case histories of divorced families in the sample. These reports confirm the results of the 5-year study and extend them. For example,

Almost half of the children entered adulthood as worried, underachieving, self-deprecating, and sometimes angry young men and women... boys had a harder time over the years than girls, suffering... in school achievements, peer relationships and the handling of aggression, this disparity in overall adjustment eventually dissipated. As the young women stood at the developmental threshold of young adulthood, when it is time to seek commitment with a young man, many found themselves struggling with anxiety and guilt. This sudden shock... a sleeper effect, led to many maladaptive pathways, including multiple relationships and impulsive marriages that ended in early divorce. (p. 299)

The findings of the Wallerstein project are especially disturbing considering that the children studied were a:

... relatively sturdy group of youngsters in that they had not been referred for psychological treatment at any time in their lives and had achieved age-appropriate learning and behavior within the school, despite their experiences and unhappiness within the failing and conflicted marriages. They were, moreover, drawn from a predominantly white, middle-class population and had been relatively protected from economic and social privation.

**Separation anxiety: The work of John Bowlby**

The findings on divorce provide substantial support for the theories and extensive clinical observations of the English psychiatrist-psychoanalyst John Bowlby (1969, 1975, 1979), whose now classic works, powerfully document the damaging
effects on a young child of separation from the person (especially the mother, but often the father as well) to whom the child is strongly attached. Bowlby notes that Freud, late in his career, came to the conclusion that the primal anxiety in a child’s life is not related to sex but results from the loss of a loved one. Freud said that “missing someone who is loved and longed for is the key to an understanding of anxiety.”

Bowlby found that an often-documented response to separation is anxious attachment: a child will cling to another attachment figure, or to the departed person when he or she returns. Though frequently labeled “over-dependency,” Bowlby noted that this is the way in which the child copes with a lack of confidence that the attachment figure who is present will be accessible and responsive. Other factors contribute to this anxious attachment. The most influential are threats made by a parent to abandon the child, and parental quarrels. (For recent research support, see Cassidy and Berlin, 1994.)

Bowlby notes that anger is a frequent and very basic response to separation — a link which is found in many studies on divorce. This anger is sometimes directed against the person who has left, and is sometimes displaced onto other targets.

The combination of anxious attachment and anger that a child feels toward the missing parent causes painful conflicts within the child. Bowlby (1973) wrote:

[Anxious and angry behavior is] directed toward the attachment figure... anger is both a reproach at what has happened and a deterrent against its happening again. Thus, love, anxiety, and anger, and sometimes hatred, come to be aroused by one and the same person. (p. 253)

In contrast to the child who is anxious about the accessibility and responsiveness of his parent, the child who is confident on this score can build a stable and self-reliant personality. Jacobson (1978) studied the impact on children of inter-parent hostility after separation, using two tests. One test measured the occurrence of incidents of hostility between the parents; the other measured poor social adjustment behavior on the part of the children, including aggression, hyperactivity, social withdrawal, fear, and inhibition. The study found that conflict between parents after separation is destructive to children, and that “the greater the amount of interparent hostility, the greater the maladjustment of the child.” Thus, it is not surprising that children of divorce show much more distrust and fear of intimacy in their own later relations with the opposite sex. (See Johnston and Thomas, 1996.)

Children also suffer in various aspects of their social adjustment when they are not raised in what the anthropologist Margaret Mead (1949) called a “whole home,” that is, a home in which both father and mother are present. She said:

One of the most important learnings for every human child is how to be a full member of its own sex and at the same time fully relate to the opposite sex. This is not an easy learning, it requires the continuing presence of a father and a mother to give it reality... [A child] must... watch both parents discipline and mould their own impulses so that the child is protected and at adolescence be set free by both parents to go out into the world. (p. 359)

High-conflict marriages: Where separation makes sense

We turn now to evidence concerning the effects of conflict within families. Research has indicated that conflict between parents, both during marriage and after separation, is especially psychologically destructive to children. A study by Hetherington (1979) examined 72 children of divorce during the two years following separation, and 72 children of intact nuclear families. The behavior of the children was studied through extensive interviews of parents and teachers, at home and school, and at two months, one year, and two years following divorce. During these periods, the children from the intact nuclear families in which there was low or moderate conflict were doing the best. Only in such families where there was “intense continuing marital dissatisfaction and conflict” were the children's problems comparable to those from divorced single-parent families.

The study found that the children of divorced families in which there was high conflict after the divorce showed greater problems than any of the other children in the study. The only exception was that girls in high-conflict nuclear families experienced the same high level of difficulty as girls in high-conflict divorced families, two years after divorce. This research supports the claim that in high conflict marriages, separation very probably benefits the children. Wallerstein estimated that about 10% of divorces were of high conflict marriages; this figure may be low, but high-conflict marriages are certainly well under half of total divorces.

The importance of fathers

The great importance of the father in the development and education of his children — his sons and daughters — is one of the best-documented findings within the social sciences in the last twenty years. These studies give a clearer understanding of the pathologies found in children of divorce.

Researchers have found that the father makes major contributions to a child’s development, especially to its individual identity. (For examples of this research on fathers, see Hetherington, 1980; Cath, et al., 1989, Ross, 1984.) He helps the child to separate psychologically from the mother; teaches it to control impulses and to learn and respond to the laws, rules, and structures of the society; and serves as a buffer for the mother’s attention and emotions (both affection and anger) that may be heavily focused on the child. Thus, the father offers the child another reference point and a haven, and helps the mother to avoid over-emotionalizing her relationship with her children. For young children, the father also commonly facilitates intellectual and cognitive development, along with behavioral control. (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov, 1994). Related to this is evidence that fatherless children much more frequently drop out of school, e.g., McNeal, 1995.

Studies have indicated that the detrimental effects of a father’s absence on sons are somewhat different from those on daughters. Some of the regularly reported effects of father absence on sons are high aggressive behavior, strong preference
for immediate gratification, lack of social responsibility, intellectual deficits (among them, an IQ lower by an average of 7 points), low need for achievement, high delinquency potential, tendencies toward homosexuality, lack of trust in other males, and low self-esteem (Biller, 1971, 1993; Cortes, 1972; Same, 1993). Sons from divorced families are much less likely to follow a father’s economic good example. Specifically, Biblarz and Raftery, 1993, report that “family disruption during childhood substantially increases men’s odds of ending up in the lowest occupational stratum as opposed to the highest.” Powers (1996) in a similar vein reports that boys who grow up in fatherless homes drift about and have trouble making a commitment to any kind of work.

The regularly reported effects of father absence on girls are increased promiscuity (an increase often interpreted as a kind of search for the absent father, and a general anxiety about self-worth and male evaluation), lack of independence, lowered cognitive capacity, and lack of impulse control. (See Hetherington, 1972. More recently, Metzler et al. 1994.) Father absence is also a factor in daughter suicide (Warren and Tomlinson-Keasy, 1989). The absence of fathers due to divorce appears to have special long-lasting negative effects, especially on girls. (See Evans and Bloom, 1997; and the earlier citations on depression in daughters of divorce.) An interesting study by Baydar, Brooks-Gunn, and Furstenberg, 1993, found that among urban black poor children who learn to read, the best are those who have grown up with married mothers.

The economic importance of the father for both sons and daughters is underlined in a study by Furstenberg and Hughes (1995). They report that children who are born to teenage mothers and who grow up with the biological father in the home are almost four times more likely to find employment as young adults and more than twice as likely to achieve “stable economic status.” Interestingly, the presence of “long-term stepfathers did not show the same influence.” The importance of the father to children was recognized by Wallerstein and Kelly, who observed:

The children who felt rejected by the father were burdened in their psychological functioning despite the presence of a good mother... Good father-child relationships appeared linked to high self-esteem and the absence of depression in children of both sexes and at all ages. We were interested to find this significant link in both sexes up to and including those in the thirteen-to-twenty-four age group... (pp. 218-219)

Of course, the foundational importance of good mothering has long been known. Without it, a child is simply unable to function. The father’s contributions, which become especially significant when the child is older, are important in preparing the child for dealing with the outside world, have only recently been recognized in the social science literature.

**Fathers and juvenile criminal behavior**

The relation of single-parent families to delinquency connects divorce to criminality. For example, Wallerstein and Kelly mention that in their sample of the 37% of the children who were classified as seriously unhappy and depressed five years after divorce, they found many types of delinquency. Among them were drug abuse, petty theft, sexual promiscuity, breaking and entering, and alcoholism. Even a child selected in the Wallerstein study as representative of those functioning moderately well was also involved in shoplifting and “petty” stealing from her school. If the Wallerstein sample had contained more children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, violent crime would probably have been a greater part of the pattern.

Clear and substantial evidence that broken homes are a major cause of juvenile crime has been in the literature for many years. Glueck & Glueck (1950) some decades ago published a scale based on over 20 years of research that predicted delinquency in boys with extremely high accuracy — an accuracy rarely found in social science. Their scale, used in many subsequent studies, contains five dimensions, all evaluations of family life. These were: father’s discipline of the boy, father’s affection for the boy, mother’s supervision of the boy, mother’s affection for the boy, and the overall cohesiveness of the family. Divorce becomes a significant cause of low scores — and low scores on these dimensions, especially on all five, reliably predicted delinquency.

A thorough study by H. Wilson (1980) confirms the Gluecks’ conclusions in a contemporary British environment, and points to the role of the father in reducing the likelihood of criminal activity in his sons. The study examined boys growing up in both inner city and suburban areas. It correlated juvenile delinquency with parental strictness, social handicap (inner city vs. suburbs), and parental criminality. Parental strictness was measured by such factors as whether a child was required to be in at a certain time, and whether his mother could find him when he was not at home. Wilson summarizes her findings as follows:

[T]he delinquent rate in lax families is over seven times that in strict families; the rate in severely socially handicapped families is just under three times that in families with low social handicap; and the rate in families with a police record of parental criminality is just under twice that in families with no police record. One thus concludes that supervision is the most important single factor in determining juvenile delinquency (pp. 229-30; emphasis added).

More recently, Smith and Jarjoura (1988) conclude, in a similar vein, that their research shows that family structure exerts more influence than poverty on crime rate. (See also Burton, Evans, Kethineni, Dunaway, and Payne, [1995].) These findings link divorce and single-parent families to delinquency, since close supervision is very difficult for a single mother. As Hetherington (1979) notes:

The single mother may confront specific problems of authority in discipline. Children view fathers as more powerful and threatening than mothers, and when undesirable behavior occurs, the father can terminate it more readily than the mother can. (p. 72)

Young men who see their parents divorce during their teen years are especially likely to engage in criminal behavior, according to the research of Mednick, Baker and Carothers (1990). (See also Jenkins, 1995.) Evidence showing that intact families and church
affiliation greatly reduce the contributive effect of poverty on crime rate is found in a report by Chamlin and Cochran, 1995.

In the U.S. 90% of the major and violent crimes are committed by unmarried men (Gilder, 1986, p. 65). And many studies show that a high proportion of the incarcerated offenders come from single-parent or other dysfunctional family backgrounds. (See Chapman, 1986; Beck and Kline, 1988.) The growth in female delinquency has also been linked to female-headed homes. (See Rantakallio, Myloman, and Koiranen, 1995; Heimer, 1996.)

One of the major social issues raised by America's high crime rate is the strong association of crime with minority status, especially with blacks. The research on single-parent and divorced families puts this in perspective. For example, Sampson (1987) argues that black criminality is not rooted in black culture but that it results from the high rate of family disruption among American blacks. He cites statistics showing that the effect of family dissolution is the same on black and white crime rates.

A supporting case comes from Smith and Jarjoura (1988) who found that when differences in family structure are removed, crime rates run much the same in rich and poor neighborhoods, and among black, white and Hispanic populations. Smith and Jarjoura also criticize theories that link crime to poverty since the removal of family structure differences makes poverty an insignificant factor in burglary rates. Many observers have pointed out that America's black population was much poorer in the 1930's and '40's than today, but its crime rate was much lower — presumably because the black family was substantially more stable then.

In a study from South Africa, Pillay (1987) found that of children taken to a psychological clinic, 6 out of 10 came from non-intact families. Citing earlier findings, he noted that both male and female children in one-parent families are more likely to turn to drugs than those with both parents. But he found that problems were most serious among fatherless boys who “who exhibited less self-control, delay in gratification, and internalized standards of moral judgment than did boys whose families remained intact,” and were “more antisocial, impulsive and likely to belong to delinquent groups.” Pillay commented: “boys reared without their fathers appear to be substantially disadvantaged” by the “lack [of] a significant model for self-appropriate behavior.”

In families without a father, supervision of boys tends to become lax, and the tendency toward antisocial behavior increases substantially. It is important to emphasize that increased criminal activity is one of the costs of divorce — a cost paid by society as a whole. A representative study is that of Cornell, et al. (1987), who found that 75% of 72 adolescent murderers had parents who had divorced or never been married.

Drug use has long been a byproduct of broken or one-parent families (e.g., Bekir, et al., 1993; Velez and Ungemack, 1994; Gfellner, 1994; Beman, 1995). Examples of the many other studies linking broken homes and single parents to serious criminal behavior are: Gove and Crutchfield, 1982; Tolan, et al., 1986; Matsueda and Heimer, 1987; Marquis, 1992; Figueira-McDonough, 1993.

The effects of family dissolution on crime have now reached the point where major theoretical statements on the subject are starting to occur in the criminology literature. For example, Palermo and Simpson, 1994.

Conclusion: The family crisis is really a crisis of fatherhood

Looking back on the extensive documentation of American family decline, we can clearly see that by far the single most important factor has been the failure of fathers. The terms “single-parent family,” “broken family,” and the like, mean fatherless families. The well-known expression “the feminization of poverty” again reflects the absence of fathers in inner-city and welfare families. That men have abandoned their role as fathers and in the process brought about a social crisis has been powerfully demonstrated in David Blankenhorn's Fatherless America (1995). (For additional support for this point, see Popenoe, 1996.) Blankenhorn discusses many of the complex factors and reasons behind the loss of fathers but there is no doubt that he is right: that the loss of fathers is the central factor in family decline.

We will conclude by addressing the feminist rejection of fathers and patriarchy with a summary of an important article by Donald G. Dutton (1994) in which he addresses the feminist critique of patriarchy — and therefore implicitly of father-headed households. (Our discussion of Dutton is largely based on The Family in America, November 1994, edited by Bryce J. Christensen.)

According to standard feminist theory, wife abuse is fostered by a patriarchal culture. Indeed, some feminists assert that patriarchy is the major cause of wife abuse. But after carefully analyzing numerous studies of violence among married and cohabiting couples, psychologist Dutton has concluded that “no direct relationship exists between patriarchy and wife assault.”

Dutton noted, “if feminist analysis is correct, we should expect greater violence directed toward women in more patriarchal cultures.” Yet it turns out that the rate of wife assault among Mexican-born Hispanic couples runs “about half the rate” found among non-Hispanic whites, “despite Hispanic cultures being generally more patriarchal than American culture.” Furthermore, researchers in the United States have documented some of “the highest rates of severe wife assault” in “states where the status of women is highest.” Likewise difficult to explain within feminist theory is recent research which has found that “couples where only the female was violent were significantly more common (39.4 percent of dating couples, 26.9 percent of cohabiting couples, 28.6 percent of married couples) than couples where only the male was violent (10.5 percent of dating couples, 20.7 percent of cohabiting couples, 23.2 percent of married couples).”

It thus appears that “female violence may be serious and may not be in response to male violence.”

But it is in explaining the extraordinarily high incidence of violence among lesbian couples that patriarchy-as-the-root-of-violence theory fails most completely. In a 1991 survey of almost 1,100 lesbians, researchers found that “52 percent [said they] had been a victim of violence by their female partner, 52 percent said they had used violence against their female partners, and 30 percent said they had used violence against a nonviolent female...
partner.” These figures suggest a level of violence in lesbian relationships much higher than that found among heterosexual couples. Indeed, when 350 lesbians (three-quarters of whom had been in “a prior relationship with a man”) participated in a second 1991 survey of violence within relationships, they reported that “rates of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse were all significantly higher in their prior lesbian relationships than in their prior heterosexual relationships: 56.8 percent had been sexually victimized by a female, 45 percent had experienced physical aggression, and 64.5 percent experienced physical/emotional aggression.” Dutton concluded that such data are “difficult to accommodate from a feminist perspective.”

It is time to put the feminist critique of patriarchy behind us. We must move positively to reinforce and support fathers and families in our suffering, fatherless society.

Appendix

Popenoe (1988) notes, as have others, that the family has weakened in five major ways:

1. “Family groups are becoming internally deinstitutionalized, that is, their individual members are more autonomous and less bound by the group...” (p. 6) In short, the family is less cohesive, and it is generally understood that a strong group or organization is one where there is a high degree of internal coordination, and the group has a very powerful effect at directing the goals of its members. Popenoe notes that an example of this decline in cohesiveness is the decline in economic inter-dependence between husband and wife, and the weakening of parental authority over children.

2. “The family is weakening in carrying out many of its traditional social functions.” (p. 8) Popenoe mentions that with the birthrate slightly below replacement level in the U.S. and very much below replacement in many other Western countries, the family's procreative function is obviously weak. It also appears that the family has less and less control over the pre-marital and extra-marital sexual behavior of its members. In addition, the family is weakening in its function of socializing children and providing care for its members. For example, the modern state has taken over various forms of child care and care of the elderly.

3. “The family as an institution is losing power to other institutional groups in society.” (p. 9) This was implied in point 2, with respect to the state, but there has also been a decline in the family's strength and importance in political and economic life. In conflicts between family and state, the state increasingly wins.

4. “The family is weakening in the sense that individual family groups are decreasing in size and becoming more unstable, with a shorter lifespan, and people are members of such groups for a smaller percentage of their life course.” (p. 9) Popenoe is referring here to the increasing smallness of today's families, and the much higher probabilities of divorce and separation.

5. “Finally, family decline is occurring in the sense that familism as a cultural value is weakening in favor of such values as self-fulfillment and egalitarianism.” (p. 9) Here, Popenoe is acknowledging the rise of individual self-fulfillment as the purpose of life and of marriage; the decline of the belief that the fulfillment of duty can provide a source of satisfaction, as expressed in commitment to the marriage partner and children. We live in a time of rights, not duties.

Popenoe, I believe accurately, notes that such family weakening is occurring in almost all advanced societies. He points out that these changes may or may not be bad: for example, societies may conceivably need the family less than they once did. It is possible that other social institutions can quite adequately perform traditional family functions. Perhaps the state is a better institution for providing child care than the family. In this paper however, a strong case is made that today's family decline has been very harmful for society and individuals.