

'The percentage of single parent families has increased in the last decade as a result of an increasing divorce rate and changing social attitudes'

### ***Investigate the social and economic consequences of this development***

#### **Introduction**

The dictionary definition<sup>1</sup> of 'family' is

1. Group of parents and their children
2. One's spouse and children
3. One's children
4. Group descended from a common ancestor
5. Group of related objects or beings

The 'ideal' type of family for a modern society is the nuclear family comprising a breadwinner husband and dependent wife and children.<sup>2</sup>

All families are subject to constant change and fluidity, "Family members grow older and move in and out of different households, though death, birth, marriage, divorce or simply leaving home."<sup>3</sup>

#### **Argument – Social**

There are an estimated 1.75million one -parent families in Britain<sup>4</sup>, which is nearly a quarter of all families. Ninety per cent of lone parents are women and more than half of one-parent families live below the poverty line.

The responsibility of any family is for the children. On average one -parent families are smaller than 2 parent families<sup>5</sup> mainly due to breakdown of relationships. Single mothers have smaller families with an average of 1.56 children. Figures published recently estimate that almost 2.9million (26%) of children under 19 live in a one -parent family<sup>6</sup>

Controversy surrounds the issue of how children are affected by breakdowns of their parents' relationships. Poorer education, health, behavioural problems, including criminal behaviour, and teenage marriage have all been highlighted by sociologists. However, in general, only a minority of children in separated families have poorer outcomes. Factors such as conflict, low income and poor school results often exist prior to separation and continue afterwards. Divorcees are more likely to be poor, unemployed and on benefits<sup>7</sup>. Lone parents on benefit who have lived in poverty for some time cannot afford to eat healthily. Many experience severe hardship, poor housing, health problems, lack of access to financial services, and debt. Exposure to severe hardship has an adverse effect on

---

<sup>1</sup> Collins Dictionary

<sup>2</sup> Investigating Families and Households, Nik Jorgensen

<sup>3</sup> Sociology Review, 2002

<sup>4</sup> Richard Ford, The Times 10/02

<sup>5</sup> Marsh, McKay, Smith & Stevenson – Low-income families in Britain: work, welfare and social security in 1999 (2001)

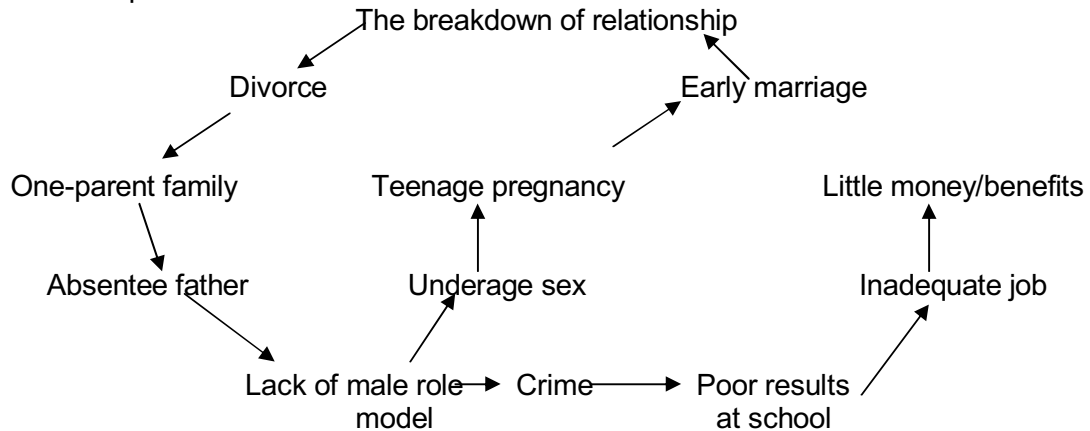
<sup>6</sup> Richard Ford, The Times 10/02

<sup>7</sup> Kiernan & Mueller, "The Divorced and Who Divorces?" Case paper 7, London School of Economics (1998)

employment. In one study, one-parent families in hardship in 1991 were found to be less likely to have jobs even four years later.

A review of the evidence has drawn attention to the complex sequence of experiences before, during and after parental separation, concluding that poorer outcomes are by no means inevitable<sup>8</sup>. Conflict, parental distress, loss of contact with a parent and disruption all seem significant particularly for boys who, allegedly, suffer due to the lack of a male role model. Sociologists believe that this can lead to criminal behaviour. This is a result of a theory known as 'The Multiplier Effect' that depicts multiple deprivation as a cycle.

For example:



The absence of a male role model has been associated with anti-social behaviour such as teenage pregnancy and marriage. It is argued that teenagers are not mature enough to marry and, therefore, many teenage spouses end up in the divorce court during their twenties. Also, the major reason why so many teenage marriages occur is pregnancy<sup>9</sup>. Figures show that those who married in their teens do appear in the divorce courts more frequently than most<sup>10</sup>.

On becoming lone parents, 58% move to local authority accommodation. Only one third of one-parent families are homeowners compared to ¾ of couples<sup>11</sup>. As a result of living in council areas, the level of schooling is lower. This is a phase in the cycle of multiple deprivation. The underprivileged education can be due to the school itself. The lower education can lead to a low paid job, leading to the need for benefits. Sociologists believe that people on Income Support are looked down on by their peers.

### Economic

Over half of British one-parent families were receiving Income Support in February 2001. Over a third were claiming Working Families' Tax Credit (WFTC)<sup>12</sup>. These are both means-tested payments, which are withdrawn as income increases and therefore have the risk of unemployment and poverty. Benefits increase but still fall short of meeting the needs of children on one-parent families by as much as

<sup>8</sup> Rodgers & Pryor, "Divorce & Separation: The Outcomes for Children" (1998)

<sup>9</sup> Tony Lewison, Sociology for A-level

<sup>10</sup> Sociology Review, 2002

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk/>

<sup>12</sup> Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, Feb 2001  
Inland Revenue WFTC Quarterly Enquiry, Feb 2001

£5.95 a week<sup>13</sup>. Single parents under the age of 18 receive a lower rate of benefit and therefore are in a worse situation. Also, there is no help with mortgage costs for parents working more than 16 hours a week.

Recent government policies have emphasised paid work as the route out of poverty for lone parents. The incidence of poverty is closely associated with having no paid work. The London School of Economics claims that a fifth of the increase in child poverty is linked to parents having no paid work (30% in 1968 to 58% in 1995/6)<sup>14</sup>. Occasionally, one-parent families exist with no wage earner at all and this is true of 1999/00 when 95% of children were living in poverty.

Nine out of ten lone parents are women and, according to the New Earnings Survey, the hourly rate of pay for women is 82% of that for men if they work full-time, 61% if they work part-time. For many working lone parents, having a job is no guarantee of being free from poverty<sup>15</sup>.

Many lone parents find that there are barriers preventing them from working. The barriers to paid work include<sup>16</sup>:

- The attitudes of employers and the organisation of work;
- Lack of transport;
- Existing financial hardship and the constraints it imposes;
- Lack of access to childcare, both formal and informal;
- Lack of skills, confidence and work experience;
- Low pay and scarce and insecure jobs
- Concern about meeting housing costs;
- The complexity of the benefit system.

Lone mothers also differ on their views on parenting; some are committed to being full time mother, while others often see paid work as the best way to provide for their families<sup>17</sup>. Such diversity indicates that any “one size fits all” approach to employment is unlikely to succeed<sup>18</sup>.

Today, 51% of all lone parents are in paid work. However, lone mothers with children under the age of five are the least likely to be in paid work<sup>19</sup>. Even relatively well-paid and professional lone parents experience problems in combining work and lone parenthood as many find it difficult to find family-friendly employment and often have to reduce their hours, take lower status jobs or even leave<sup>20</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup> New Economy, June 2001, Volume 8, Issue 2

<sup>14</sup> Gregg, Harkness, Machin, “Child Development & Family Income” (1999)

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk/>

<sup>16</sup> Marsh, McKay, Smith & Stevenson – Low-income families in Britain: work, welfare and social security in 1999 (2001)

<sup>17</sup> Gregg, Harkness, Machin, “Child Development & Family Income” (1999)

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk/>

<sup>19</sup> Richard Ford, The Times 10/02

<sup>20</sup> Richard Ford, The Times 10/02

## Conclusion

The information in my investigation is mainly of a subjective knowledge. Generally, my enquiry consists of subjective knowledge, the opinions of my sources and myself. This is because of the nature of the investigation; there are many angles from which to view the topic of one-parent families. The figures and graphs are use of an objective knowledge as they are facts upon which everyone would agree regardless of their feelings. With the help of help of the knowledge I can deduce a conclusion.

Within the last decade, the number of single or lone parent families has increased. Social consequences of this finding are many. Boys suffering due to lack of a male role model, teenage pregnancy and marriage, benefits or Income Support all can be results of being part of a one-parent family. This is all possibly due to lack of stability, as employment is difficult for single mothers with young children therefore they can afford only to live in underprivileged areas of towns and cities. Such areas can only provide a lower standard of education, which can lead to a lower paid job. All of these aspects just become a cycle as less and less can be done to support one-parent families. However, more recently, one-parent families have formed out of choice. More women have chosen to become lone parents, as have men.

So there may be an increase in one-parent families but not all are disadvantaged. Divorce rate may have increased but marriage rates have decreased which must mean that there must be a gain in respect for the sanctity of marriage. As a result, we could see a decrease in one-parent families or if not, more better off one-parent families.

## Bibliography

### Books

- Collins Dictionary, "family"
- "Sociology in Action: Investigating Families and Households" By Nik Jorgensen, chapter 2
- "Divorce & Separation: The Outcomes for Children" By B Rodgers & J Pryor (1998)
- "Child Development and Family income", By P Gregg, S Harkness, S Machin (1999)
- "Sociology for A-Level" By Tony Lewison

### Case Papers

- "Low-income Families in Britain" By M Marsh, S McKay, A Smith, A Stephenson (2001)
- "The Divorced and Who Divorces?" By K Kiernan & G Mueller (1998) Case Paper 7, London School of Economics

### Websites

- <http://www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk/>
- <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/>
- <http://www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/>

### Newspapers & Periodicals

- 'The Times' October 2002, "Quarter of all families are headed by single parents" By Richard Ford
- 'New Economy' June 2001, Volume 8, Issue 2
- 'Sociology Review' 2002

### Specialist Terms

- Nuclear family – a family consisting only of parents and their offspring
- Multiple deprivation – people deprived as a result of the multiplier effect
- Multiplier effect – cycle of negative aspects of deprivation

## Coursework Plan

### Contents

#### Introduction

- Dictionary definition of “family”
- What is the “ideal” family?

#### Argument:

##### Social

- Lack of male role model
- How children are affected
- The Multiplier Effect

##### Economic

- Income Support
- Employment

#### Conclusion

#### Specialist Terms

#### Bibliography

#### Completed Coursework Diary