


Opinions

Don't deny the link between poverty and single parenthood



By Robert J. Samuelson



Robert J. Samuelson
Columnist focusing on economics
Bio 
Columnist
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Anyone who has raised children knows that it's a messy, trial-and-error process, with an emphasis on "error." It's hard enough to do well with two parents, a reasonably stable and sane marriage and a reliable income. When there's only one parent with a meager income, the burdens mount and feed on themselves. That's one reason the growth of single-parent households is rightly regarded as a cause of poverty.

Or so I thought.

I was, therefore, surprised recently to read in the New York Times — with all the Times' authority — an opinion essay headlined

Stories from The Lily

The Lily, a publication of The Washington Post, elevates stories about women.

Perspective

What would you do if you found a knife on the ground? The answer is a reflection of privilege.



Perspective

These clinics used to provide abortions. Now they are owned by antiabortion activists.



These shows objectify women. Yet we still press play.



“[Single Mothers Are Not the Problem](#).” In a country of more than 320 million people, the essay argued, there just aren’t that many households headed by a single mother — about 9 percent — to explain poverty.

“Even if they all married or never had children,” the essay continued, “poverty would not be substantially lower.”

Could this possibly be so? Could many poverty experts, who believe there’s a connection between single-parent families and poverty, be wrong? Well, not by the government’s own figures, as I will show in a moment.

But, first, let’s put the Times essay in context. Its policy agenda is candid. “We should stop obsessing over how many single mothers there are and stop shaming them,” write sociologists David Brady of the University of California at Riverside, Ryan M. Finnigan of the University of California at Davis and Sabine Hübgen of WBZ Berlin Social Science Center.

Instead, they contend, we should raise benefits for all the poor, including single parents, to alleviate their poverty. This, they say, is what many European countries have done.

Of course, this is a worthy subject of debate. But it must be admitted that the odds of securing more money for the poor aren’t good. The intense competition for government funds — for huge budget deficits, defense spending, health care and payments for the elderly — fosters an unfriendly political climate.

What’s less worthy is basing any debate on misleading analysis. That’s my complaint against the Times essay. Its hypothetical and admittedly unrealistic thought experiment that eliminating poverty

among single mothers wouldn't have much effect on overall poverty is wrong, according to the government's own figures from the Census Bureau.

Let's look at the census figures.

In 2016, 40.6 million Americans had incomes below the government's official poverty line, which was \$24,339 for a family of four, including two children. Of those below the poverty line — 12.7 percent of the population — nearly 5 million were moms or dads heading single-parent families; 8.7 million were children under 18 in these single-parent homes.

Do the arithmetic. Together, single-parent families and their children totaled almost 14 million people, which is roughly a third of all people in poverty. If, magically, a third of America's poor escaped poverty, the change would (justifiably) be hailed as a triumph of social policy. If we included the children in poverty in two-parent families, that would add more than 7 million to the total (3 million parents and 4 million children). The total of 21 million would equal about half of all people in poverty.

To read the Times essay, the effect of all of this on poverty would be negligible. Poverty would still be roughly the same. This is preposterous. But that's the impression that the Times leaves its readers.

How could this be? I called sociologist Brady, with whom I had several acrimonious exchanges. The answer seems to be that the sociologists' calculations were based on a different database of incomes and a different definition of poverty — and that these changes inflated the total number of designated poor.

Fair enough. Still, if you're making this case, you need to describe openly the differences between the official figures and yours, and why your choice is superior. This the Times essay did not do, because (it seems) one purpose was to exonerate single parenting from any role in explaining poverty. Somehow poverty and single parenthood are disconnected.

Not so.

Single-parent households have less money and less time for children. To be sure, many single parents are heroic, but it's a struggle. Studies tell us "that children raised by single parents are significantly more likely to have children young, to drop out of high school, and to work less as young adults," [write sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox](#) of the University of Virginia and Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution.

It cannot be good news that births to unmarried women have risen. In 2010, 72 percent of black births were to unmarried women, up from 38 percent in 1970; for Hispanics, that rate was 53 percent in 2010, up from 37 percent in 1990; for whites, 36 percent in 2010 and 6 percent in 1970.

We are condemning more of our children to a precarious upbringing — and that is a problem.

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Robert J. Samuelson

Robert J. Samuelson writes a twice-weekly column on economics.