

# Effects of Fatherless Families on Crime Rates

*Synthesis Paper: The Real Root Causes of Violent Crime: The Breakdown of Marriage, Family, and Community*

## 1. The Root of Crime

According to the professional literature, the absence of the father is the single most important cause of poverty.<sup>1)</sup> The same is true for crime. According to Kevin and Karen Wright,

Research into the idea that single-parent homes may produce more delinquents dates back to the early 19th century.... [O]fficials at New York State's Auburn Penitentiary, in an attempt to discern the causes of crime, studied the biographies of incarcerated men. Reports to the legislature in 1829 and 1830 suggested that family disintegration resulting from the death, desertion, or divorce of parents led to undisciplined children who eventually became criminals. Now well over a century later, researchers continue to examine the family background of unique populations and reach similar conclusions.<sup>2)</sup>

The growth of the poverty-ridden family today is linked directly with the growth of the family headed by the always-single mother. And this modern form of family disintegration – or more accurately non-formation – has its consequences for criminal behavior. The growth in crime is paralleled by the growth in families abandoned by fathers.<sup>3)</sup>

As the chart on the following page shows, the rate of juvenile crime within each state is closely linked to the percentage of children raised in single-parent families. States with a lower percentage of single-parent families, on average, will have lower rates of juvenile crime. State-by-state analysis indicates that, in general, a 10 percent increase in the number of children living in single-parent homes (including divorces) accompanies a 17 percent increase in juvenile crime.<sup>4)</sup>

Along with the increased probability of family poverty and heightened risk of delinquency, a father's absence is associated with a host of other social problems. The three most prominent effects are lower intellectual development, higher levels of illegitimate parenting in the teenage years, and higher levels of welfare dependency.<sup>5)</sup> According to a 1990 report from the Department of Justice, more often than not, missing and “throwaway” children come from single-parent families, families with step parents, and cohabiting-adult families.

## 2. Abandoned Mothers

In normal families a father gives support to his wife, particularly during the period surrounding birth and in the early childhood years when children make heavy demands on her.<sup>6)</sup> In popular parlance, he is her “burn-out” prevention. But a single mother does not have this support, and the added emotional and physical stress may result in fatigue and less parent availability to the child, increasing the risk of a relationship with the child that is emotionally more distant. The single mother generally is less able to attend to all of her child's needs as quickly or as fully as she could if she were well taken care of by a husband. These factors tend to affect the mother's emotional attachment to her child and

in turn reduce the child's lifelong capacity for emotional attachment to others and empathy for others. Such empathy helps restrain a person from acting against others' well-being. Violent criminals obviously lack this. At the extreme, and a more common situation in America's inner cities, the distant relationship between a mother and child can become an abusing and neglectful relationship.<sup>7)</sup> Under such conditions the child is at risk of becoming a psychopath.<sup>8)</sup>

These observations have disturbing implications for society. If the conditions in which psychopathy is bred continue to increase, then America will have proportionately more psychopaths, and society is at an increased risk of suffering in unpredictable ways.

### 3. Abandoned Sons

A father's attention to his son has enormous positive effects on a boy's emotional and social development.<sup>9)</sup> But a boy abandoned by his father is deprived of a deep sense of personal security.<sup>10)</sup> According to Rolf Loeber, Professor of Psychiatry, Psychology and Epidemiology at the Western Psychiatric Institute in the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, "A close and intense relationship between a boy and his father prevents hostility and inappropriate aggressiveness." This inappropriate aggressiveness is an early indication of potential delinquency later on, particularly in boys.<sup>11)</sup> Furthermore, such bad behavior is a barrier to the child's finding a place among his more normal peers,<sup>12)</sup> and aggressiveness usually is the precursor of a hostile and violent "street" attitude. Elijah Anderson, Professor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, observes that these young men, very sensitive in their demands for "respect," display a demeanor which communicates "deterrent aggression" not unlike the behavior that causes normal peers to reject and isolate aggressive boys in grade school.<sup>13)</sup> The message of this body language, of course, triggers rejection by the normal adult community.

### 4. Absence of a Father's Discipline

The dominant role of fathers in preventing delinquency is well-established. Over forty years ago, this phenomenon was highlighted in the classic studies of the causes of delinquency by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck of Harvard University. They described in academic terms what many children hear their mothers so often say: "Wait till your father gets home!" In a well-functioning family, the very presence of the father embodies authority, an authority conveyed through his daily involvement in family life. This paternal authority is critical to the prevention of psychopathology and delinquency.

The benefits a child receives from his relationship with his father are notably different from those derived from his relationship with his mother. The father contributes a sense of paternal authority and discipline which is conveyed through his involved presence. The additional benefits of his affection and attachment add to this primary benefit. Albert Bandura, professor of psychology at Stanford University, observed as early as 1959 that delinquents suffer from an absence of the father's affection.

<sup>1)</sup> M. Anne Hill and June O'Neill, *Underclass Behaviors in the United States: Measurement and Analysis of Determinants* (New York: City University of New York, Baruch College, 1990).

<sup>2)</sup> Wright and Wright, "Family Life and Delinquency and Crime: A Policymaker's Guide to the Literature." See reference to Ann Goetting, "Patterns of Homicide Among Children," *Criminal Justice*

and Behavior, Vol. 35. No. 1 (1989), pp. 31-44.

<sup>3)</sup> Rolf Loeber, Magda Stouthamer-Loeber, Welmont Van Kammen, and David P. Farrington, "Initiation, Escalation, and Desistance in Juvenile Offending and their Correlates," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Vol. 82 (1991), pp. 36-82. See also Wright and Wright, "Family Life and Delinquency and Crimes: A Policymaker's Guide to the Literature," for a comprehensive listing of the following researchers who year by year in the last decade report similar conclusions: H. B. Gibson (1969); Michael Rutter (1971); Karen Wilkinson (1980); R.J. Canter (1982); Joseph H. Rankin (1983); Ross L. Matsueda and Karen Heimer (1987); and Larry LeFlore (1988).

<sup>4)</sup> Analysis of the fifty states and the District of Columbia shows a correlation of .69 between juvenile violent crime arrest rates and the percentage of children residing in single-parent homes within the states or District. Using statewide figures for the states and the District of Columbia, Heritage staff used multiple regression analysis to estimate the effect of family structure on juvenile crime, holding constant the degree of urbanization. The juvenile violent crime arrest rate served as the dependent variable. Two independent variables were used in the regression: the percentage of children residing in single-parent families and the percentage of the population within the state or District residing within standard metropolitan areas. These data indicate that a 10 percent increase in single-parent variable leads to a 17 percent increase in juvenile crime. Both the family structure variable and the urbanization variable were found to have a statistically significant effect on juvenile crime, with over a 99 percent level of significance. Detailed results are available from the author.

<sup>5)</sup> For a more comprehensive overview of the professional literature on the relationship between illegitimacy and these negative social phenomena, see Fagan, "Rising Illegitimacy, America's Social Catastrophe."

<sup>6)</sup> Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached* (New York: Time Warner Books, 1994), chapter 14, "The Mother, the Father and the Outside World."

<sup>7)</sup> See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Study of the national incidences of and prevalence of child abuse and neglect," 1988, pp. 5-29.

<sup>8)</sup> , <sup>9)</sup> Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached* (New York: Time Warner Books, 1994), chapter 14, "The Mother, the Father and the Outside World."

<sup>10)</sup> Boys whose fathers die, leaving their mothers widowed, typically do not have this emotional deficit. See Paul L. Adams, Judith R. Milner, and Nancy A. Schrepf, *Fatherless Children* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1984). There is a difference between death and abandonment. One condition is a fact of life to be accepted by everybody; the other is a grave moral condition to avoided if at all possible.

<sup>11)</sup> Rolf Loeber, "Development and Risk Factors of Juvenile Antisocial Behavior and Delinquency," *Clinical Psychology Review*, Vol. 10 (1990), pp. 1-41.

<sup>12)</sup> Patricia Van Voorhis et al., "The Impact of Family Structure and Quality on Delinquency: A Comparative Assessment of Structural and Functional Factors," *Criminology*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1988), pp. 235-261.

<sup>13)</sup> Elijah Anderson, "The Code of the Street," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1994. See also "Stage Two: Juvenile Delinquency," *infra*.

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Last update: **2015/06/12 09:09**

