Effects of Single Parenthood on Poverty

Despite government spending over $22 trillion\(^1\) on anti-poverty programs since the 1960s War on Poverty began, the child poverty rate has barely decreased: from 20.7 percent in 1965 to 19.2 percent in 2015.\(^2\) The War on Poverty largely failed because it ignored the role of marriage in reducing poverty. Poverty is most prevalent in non-intact families. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, single-parent families are significantly more likely to fall into poverty than are married-couple families.\(^3\)

Over 2 million children reside in single-parent families.\(^4\) Never married single mother families constitute the greatest portion of single parent families. While the share of divorced and separated single mothers has decreased in recent years (although the numbers are still high), the share of never married single mothers continues to rapidly rise.\(^5\) This trend is particularly alarming because, of all family structures, children of never married mothers are the most likely to experience poverty. In 2015, 49.8 percent of children under age 18 who lived with a never married mother were in poverty.\(^6\) It is also notable in the chart above that cohabitation seems to make little difference in lowering the poverty rate.
1. Government Dependence

According to the 2015 American Community Survey, single mother families have a median family income of $33,342—less than half the family income of married families ($82,078). Non-intact families are more likely to receive welfare than are married couples. According to the 2016 Annual and Social Economic Supplement, children raised by single mothers are almost six times more likely than children raised by married parents to receive public assistance. The same Census report shows that 10.4 percent of married-parent families receive food stamps, versus 44.9 percent of single mother families and 22.3 percent of single father families. Moreover, the anti-marriage bias in the welfare system penalizes single mothers who marry an employed husband, therefore perpetuating single parenthood and out of wedlock birth, and necessitating continued reliance on government benefits. Dependence on government welfare programs can have harmful effects on children. After controlling for relevant social and economic factors, Congressional Budget Office Director June O'Neill and Anne Hill of Queens College report that the more years a child spends on welfare, the lower the child’s IQ. A similar study found that welfare also has negative effects on the long-term employment and earnings capacity of young boys.

2. Long-Term Effects on Children

While many single mothers work wonders and raise their children well despite the obstacles they encounter, for many others the challenge is too great and their children suffer the consequences. Children raised in a single parent family tend to complete fewer years of schooling, exhibit behavior problems, commit acts of delinquency, and participate in increased sexual activity.

2) U.S. Census Bureau, “Historical Poverty Tables: People and Families 1959 to 2015,” Poverty Status of People, by Age, Race, and Hispanic Origin Table 3,


