Not All Single Mothers Are Created Equal
By Douglas J. Besharov

In the national debate over the consequences of family breakdown all single mothers are being lumped together as if they were a homogeneous group. Much of the commentary after Vice President Dan Quayle’s remarks about Murphy Brown giving birth out of wedlock reflected this simplistic perspective. But single mothers are not all alike, and the failure to make distinctions between female-headed households created by divorce and those created by the birth of a child out of wedlock has obscured the nature of the problem.

There is good reason to be concerned about the condition of female-headed families. Almost half of all female-headed families with children under 18 have incomes below the poverty line. This is almost five times the poverty rate of two-parent families with children. Three-fourths of all time periods spent on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) begin with the creation of a female-headed family.

This new form of poverty is not caused directly by racial discrimination or by structural deficiencies in the economy, but, rather, by a major and troubling change in the behavior of American parents—the creation of single-parent households.

Over the past 25 years, the number of female-headed families almost tripled. In 1965, there were 2.9 million female-headed families with children, compared to 7.7 million in 1990 (see Figure 1 page 15). If the nation had had the same proportion of female-headed households in 1985 as it had in 1959, there would have been about 5.2 million fewer persons in poverty. According to a special Census Bureau report, the poverty rate for black families would have been 20 percent in 1980, rather than the actual 29 percent, if black family composition had remained what it was in 1970.

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The trend data for out-of-wedlock births and divorces can be seen in Figure 2. These events impoverish hundreds of thousands of American families. The median income for female-headed families is about one-third that of intact families. In 1990, the median income for two-parent families with children living with both parents was $39,076. For children living with their mothers only, however, median family income was $12,005.

Lumping all poor female-headed families together is a deeply misleading rhetorical convenience. Hidden by aggregate statistics about their poverty and social dysfunction are substantial differences among female-headed families. As the following Census Bureau statistics establish, families headed by divorced mothers are, in general, doing much better than aggregate statistics suggest, and families headed by never-married mothers are doing much worse.

- In 1990, the median family income for never-married mothers with children under the age of 18 was $8,337, compared to $15,762 for divorced women with children (see Figure 3).
- Marital status also explains the income disparity between white and black female-headed
Some social scientists predict that, in the next generation, half of all children will be born out of wedlock. The trend data for out-of-wedlock births and divorces can be seen in Figure 2.

In 1990, the median income of black female-headed families was only 68 percent of white female-headed families, $9,590 versus $14,028. But controlling for marital status, the gap narrows to about 20 percent. The relevant figures (see Figure 3 again) are $13,348 for divorced black mothers and $16,334 for their white counterparts, compared to $7,411 for never-married black mothers and $9,816 for whites.

When one considers that 66 percent of all out-of-wedlock births in 1988 occurred among young women between the ages of 15 and 24, it becomes easier to see why their financial situation is so much worse than their divorced counterparts. Never-married mothers are on the average ten years younger than divorced mothers. The average age range of never-married mothers is 20 to 29; for divorced mothers, it is 30 to 39. The age spread for this second group is lower than it might otherwise be because it includes many unwed mothers who later marry but only for a short time.

Never-married mothers are also, on the average, much less educated. Only 57 percent of never-married mothers have a high school diploma, compared to 82 percent of divorced mothers (see Figure 4). This latter figure, too, is pulled down by the number of formerly unwed mothers who subsequently marry.

Thus, age, lack of education, and other demographic factors combine to
give never-married women much poorer job prospects. In 1990, 61 percent of divorced mothers worked full time, and an additional 11 percent worked part time, but only 29 percent of never-married mothers worked full time, and 8 percent part time. And their lack of work experience is only exacerbated by the fact that young single mothers have little chance of completing their education or acquiring job skills while having to care for a child.

**Is This “Murphy Brown”?**

These demographic differences between unmarried and divorced women translate into dramatically different rates of AFDC utilization. A much higher proportion of unwed mothers go on welfare than do divorced mothers. According to AEI’s Nick Eberstadt, almost three-fifths of children born out-of-wedlock in the United States were on AFDC in 1982, compared to just under a third of children of divorced mothers. In fact, children of never-married mothers are three times more likely to be on welfare than are children of divorced mothers.

Teens have the worst prospects of all unmarried mothers. In 1988, 65 percent of teen mothers were unmarried at the time of their first child’s birth, compared to 15 percent in 1950 (see Figure 5). According to a Congressional Budget Office report, 77 percent of unmarried adolescent mothers were welfare recipients within five years of the birth of their first child. Sixty percent of AFDC mothers under the age of 30 had their first child as a teenager.

Never-married mothers not only go on welfare in greater numbers than divorced women but they also stay on longer. While divorced women typically use welfare as a temporary measure until they get back on their feet, unmarried mothers become trapped in long-term welfare dependency. In a study of welfare mothers, Nicholas Zill of Child Trends, Inc., and his colleagues found that 43 percent of long-term AFDC recipients were 17 years old or younger at the time of their first birth, compared to 25 percent of children born to two-parent families.

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**FIGURE 3**

Median family income of households with children under age 18, by race and marital status, 1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>In Thousands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All races</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>28</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Type</th>
<th>In Thousands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All families</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two parents present</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced mother, female-headed family</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never-married mother, female-headed family</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Annual Demographic Reports.
More than any other single factor, marital status determines whether a woman entering AFDC will become a long-term recipient.

Forty percent of never-married mothers will receive AFDC for 10 years or more, compared to 14 percent of divorced mothers.