

“WHERE THE BOYS ARE”

The Unacknowledged Worlds of Nonmarital Fathers

RHONDA KRUSE NORDIN
SENIOR FELLOW CENTER OF THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT

MAY 2016

Center of the American Experiment's mission is to build a culture of prosperity for Minnesota and the nation. Our daily pursuit is a free and thriving Minnesota whose cultural and intellectual center of gravity is grounded in free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, and other time-tested American virtues. As a 501(c)(3) educational organization, contributions to American Experiment are tax deductible.

Bulk orders of this publication are available.
Please contact Peter Zeller at 612-338-3605,
or peter.zeller@americanexperiment.org.



“WHERE THE BOYS ARE”

The Unacknowledged Worlds of Nonmarital Fathers

RHONDA KRUSE NORDIN

SENIOR FELLOW CENTER OF THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT

Foreword

Mitch Pearlstein, Ph.D.

**Founder & American Experiment
Senior Fellow**

This superb essay by Rhonda Kruse Nordin – “Where the Boys Are: The Unacknowledged Worlds of Nonmarital Fathers” – is the latest in an ongoing series of American Experiment publications on massive family fragmentation, a domestic problem which I’ve long viewed as our nation’s largest and most dangerous. In addition to a continuous flow of columns, op-eds, blogs, and speeches over the

years, we also have published a growing number of detailed and comprehensive – sometimes, one might immodestly say, path-breaking – studies. Over the last five years alone these include two books of mine:

- *From Family Collapse to America’s Decline: The Educational, Economic, and Social Costs of Family Fragmentation.* (2011)
- *Broken Bonds: What Family Fragmentation Means for America’s Future.* (2014)

Two symposia:

- *Fragmented Families and Splintered Classes: Why So Much Churning? What Can be Done? What Will America Come to Look Like?* (2012)
- *Fragmented Families and Silence of the Faithful: How Religious Leaders and Institutions Must Speak Up and Reach Out.* (2015)

Another symposium to be released shortly:

- *Specifically, What Can We Do to Change America's Culture of Massive Family Fragmentation?* (The emphases here are “specifically” and “culture.”)

And a report based on five intellectually rich roundtable discussions:

- *Can America's Religious Traditions Strengthen Marriage? Minnesota Leaders Say “Yes” and Propose How.* (2016)

A great number of very smart, routinely worried people have been involved in these publications. A total of nineteen men and women, for example, participated in one of the five different roundtables. Thirty-six writers contributed to the symposium on *Fragmented Families and Silence of the Faithful*. And *Broken Bonds* is based on face-to-face interviews with 40 distinguished men and women in Minnesota and across the country.

One other key publication, released by American Experiment, in 2013, drew on more than 130 interviews, conversations, and other interactions, this time with teenage girls and young women: *MTV's “Teen Mom” Franchise: How Do Young Eyes – and Much Older Eyes – Really See Teenage Parenthood?* That essay, also by Rhonda Nordin,

came to serve as the inspiration and spur for the one currently in your hands and/or screen. As she now writes:

I had spent nearly a year corralling teenage girls from a variety of walks of life to watch episodes of this wildly popular cable offering and had conducted focus groups and collected randomly administered surveys from additional young women – all in my quest to learn as much as I could about their views on single motherhood and the messages viewers took away from the *Teen Mom* franchise. . . .

We talked about birth control, risk-taking choices, parental responsibilities, and public assistance – and why they would or would not have a baby. Only once did marriage come up. And other than yearning for the romantic relationships they considered “constants” to the MTV stars, fathers (for the most part) were considered “silent bystanders” to their stories. In fact, fathers were so often altogether absent from the equation or from our discussions about parenthood that I didn't realize I had shamefully neglected to include the voices of young men, teen fathers, and 20-something fathers in my research until long after my focus groups had ended.

This new paper makes invaluable amends for that not hard to imagine omission. As when, for instance, Rhonda relays this evocative burst of recognition by a father who hadn't lived with his children while they were growing up.

I was giving my twins a bath. They were probably four years old at the time. They lived with their mother down the street,

but they were at my house taking a bath, splashing in the tub. I said, “Don’t splash.” They laughed and kept splashing, so I told them again, “Don’t splash.” They said, “Mom lets us splash.” To which I responded, “Mom may let you splash at her house, but there’s no splashing at my house. If I would have splashed like that growing up, my mom would have spanked me!” Well, that did it; they stopped splashing.

Then a few minutes later, like he’d been sitting there thinking quietly about this, one of the boys asked, “But could you splash at your dad’s house?” Geez, it hit me then; my sons thought I also had two houses growing up! They had a mom’s house and a dad’s house – they thought this was the norm! Made me sad, because this isn’t what I would have wanted for my kids and it certainly wasn’t how I’d grown up.

Methodologically, this was exceptionally hard research to pursue. While the number of single fathers out there (as Rhonda puts it) is “staggering,” identifying men to interview was difficult. “It was awkward approaching men casually at the mall or at the park (as I had for my article on single mothers) and asking their views on the intimate subjects that had been so freely discussed by women.” Somehow, though, by an assortment of means, she managed to interview about 20 single fathers and get Survey Monkey® responses from about 50 others. She also did a lot of online research, which used to be called library work.

There also were definitional complexities, as Rhonda’s research focuses on men who are both unmarried at the time their babies are born and (here’s the key qualification) do not live with *either* their children *or* their mother. These are single fathers, she writes, more than one-third of new

and unmarried fathers each year, “who are ignored in real life and also by the Census, as well as by a substantial number of research organizations that track family and social trends.” Such men, she says, “provide a glimpse into the not-so-glamorous lives of single fathers everywhere.”

My gratitude was great three years ago for Rhonda’s distinctive take on single mothers. It’s large once again for her distinctive take on unmarried fathers. Then, again, I’m usually impressed by people with distinctive and uncommonly insightful voices and takes on society, perhaps particularly when they immerse themselves in hard family issues. Rhonda Nordin is a Twin Cities author, speaker, and family advocate as well as an American Experiment Senior Fellow. She is perhaps best known for her very well received and helpful book, *After the Baby: Making Sense of Marriage After Childbirth*.

My thanks as well to generous funders who make publications and projects like this one possible, especially the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the LML & FTL Lanners Foundation, the Chiaroscuro Foundation, Karen and Mahlon Schneider, and Susan and Richard Goldman. And taking a proper long view, my equally robust thanks to thousands of Center members who have made the work of American Experiment possible in the first place over the last quarter century-plus.

A final thought. For those of you thinking a next project should be some kind of volume about strengthening families that draws broadly – liberally, if you will – on all eight American Experiment publications cited above, I’m increasingly thinking the same.

Golden Valley, MN
April 2016



**“WHERE THE BOYS ARE”
The Unacknowledged Worlds
of Nonmarital Fathers**

**Rhonda Kruse Nordin
Senior Fellow
Center of the American Experiment**

Connie Francis might not conjure up an image to today’s young men and women, and it’s not often that I hear her name, yet when I was growing up in the sixties, the name Connie Francis was parcel to everyday conversation and, for many, produced awe. She was one of the stars of the MGM film *Where the Boys Are*, which depicted four high school coeds who journeyed from the Midwest to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in pursuit of fun, fancy and romance. Connie Francis, already a singing sensation, recorded the movie’s title song by the same name, which quickly earned a spot at the top of the Billboards and was #1 in fifteen countries. *Where the Boys Are* was an era-defining film: it

Where the Boys Are was an era-defining film: it was about what “good girls would or would not do.”

was about what “good girls would or would not do.” It explored adolescent sexuality and the changing sexual morals and attitudes among America’s youth. My parents considered it racy.

I wouldn’t reference this movie now save for the quizzical comment posed to me roughly one year ago when Mitch Pearlstein and I reflected

on an earlier piece I had written for the Center about MTV’s *Teen Mom* Franchise.

I had spent nearly a year corralling teenage girls from a variety of walks of life to watch episodes of this wildly popular cable offering and had conducted focus groups and collected randomly administered surveys from additional young women – all in my quest to learn as much as I could about their views on single motherhood and the messages viewers took away from the *Teen Mom* franchise. They shared willingly and enthusiastically about the shows and the characters that express a current pop cultural take on the topics that raised eyebrows in *Where the Boys Are* several decades earlier.

We talked about birth control, risk-taking choices, parental responsibilities, and public assistance – and why they would or would not have a baby. Only once did marriage come up. And other than yearning for the romantic relationships they considered “constants” to the MTV stars, fathers (for the most part) were considered “silent bystanders” to their stories. In fact, fathers were so often altogether absent from the equation or from our discussions about parenthood that I didn’t realize I had shamefully neglected to include the voices of young men, teen fathers, and 20-something fathers in my research until long after my focus groups had ended.

Enter Mitch months later to the tune *Where The Boys Are* and his challenge to revisit the topic of teen and unplanned pregnancy and to capture the hearts and minds of the men involved as fathers as well as those who someday may become parents. I readily set out to learn as much as I could about the world of single fathers – or what might be more precisely termed, in my opinion, “nonmarital” fathers.

Where to start?

Logic told me that if the U.S. Census reports 1.6 million babies are born each year to 1.6 million women outside marriage, nearly this same number of men would be entering the throes of single-fatherhood at the same time and therefore would be available to tell their stories.¹

Cumulatively, Pew Research cites roughly 14 million single-parent households in the United States, where 24 million children who have not yet turned 18 are raised; thus, additionally, this lot should produce fodder for plenty more single father escapades.²

I quickly learned, however, that despite the seemingly staggering number of single fathers, identifying men to interview was not easy. It was awkward approaching men casually at the mall or at the park (as I had for my article on single mothers) and asking their views on the intimate subjects that had been so freely discussed by women. Fathers pushing swings or strollers were also less plentiful. Several focus groups arranged through nonprofits or at churches were cancelled due to no-shows.

Disheartened, I picked up the phone and called Jennifer, one of the single mothers I had interviewed for my previous MTV article. She had shared vividly about the difficulties of single motherhood and had stepped me through the process of securing public assistance. I explained that I was now hoping to visit with men about their views on single fatherhood. She paused. “Single *fathers*?” she asked, as though puzzled by this term. “Gee, I don’t know any single fathers,” she responded flatly, then added, “I know a ton of single moms, but I don’t know any single dads.”

Now I was puzzled. “How about Jake?” I asked

hungrily. Jake was the father of her baby; I knew they were on good terms. “Or all the fathers associated with the single moms you mention?”

“Oh!” she laughed heartily, as though a light bulb had gone off, “I never think of Jake as a single father. He isn’t around much. But I guess he is a single father and the others too!” And with that, I gained access to a host, or as Jennifer would say, a “ton” of single fathers, willing to tell their stories.

Was it an “accounting problem” or a “definition problem”?

I next learned that my quandary finding single fathers to interview had as much to do with my definition as it did a perceived accounting problem: Just *who* are “single fathers?”

Like Jennifer, who did not readily consider the father of her baby a “single father,” the U.S. Census

“Oh!” she laughed heartily, as though a light bulb had gone off, “I never think of Jake as a single father. He isn’t around much.”

does not count him either – nor does it count most of the men who become fathers each year outside marriage – unless the unmarried father is over 18 years of age, is the head of his household and lives and provides primary care for his own biological, adoptive or step-children. These qualifiers used for the majority of social science research on single fathers, narrow the pool of so-called “single fathers” to roughly 2.6 million men – less than a quarter of the U.S. households headed by single parents.³



It is a number representative of men who are not only unmarried fathers who meet the above criteria but who may also be separated, divorced or widowed and may or may not be living with a cohabitating partner. Whether that cohabitating partner is the mother of his children is uncertain.⁴

In other words, the “single fathers” millions of viewers know via MTV – Ryan, Gary, Tyler and Derek (now deceased) – much like Jake – who were unintentionally cast into fatherhood at a young age and who participate in their children’s care in various but limited capacities, are largely excluded from the documented mix. As are approximately another 500,000 fathers who are the unmarried and non-cohabitating biological counterparts to the 1.6 million women who give birth outside marriage each year and, according to Census, count as “single mothers.”⁵

Third, I learned there is a difference between “single fathers” and “single-father households.” I suspected for purposes of this article, that all fathers not married are considered “single fathers.” However, for tracking purposes exercised by a host of research organizations, only fathers over 18 years of age and who live with and care for their own, step or adopted children are considered single father households and therefore “single fathers.” In other words, of the MTV fathers cited above, only Gary who lives with and cares for his baby full time, is counted as a single-father household as well as a “single father.”⁶

To those who provide the bulk of reputable and authoritative research on fathers in the United States, the definition of “single father” includes a variety of circumstances.⁷

- 52 percent (an estimated 1.6 million single fathers) are separated, divorced, widowed

or never married and are living without a partner.

- Another seven percent are married fathers living separately from their spouses.
- 41 percent (approximately 1.1 million single fathers, including MTV’s Gary) are living with non-marital partners who may or may not be the mothers of their children.

So, yes, you understand it correctly: While single moms Maci, Catelynn, Amber and Farrah star each week on the MTV franchise, the four young men we know as fathers of their babies – Ryan, Tyler, Gary and Derek – not only fail to make the vital statistics line-up alongside the mothers but in ensuing years do not even earn a “supporting role” as a single father within the context of most social science reports.

My research focuses on these men who are unmarried at the time of their babies’ births, not the primary caretakers of their children, and who do not live with their children or the mothers. They, indeed, fall into the roles of “silent bystander” (so clearly portrayed on MTV) and, unfortunately, I fear, “invisible father” – single fathers who stand half-a-million strong and represent over one-third of new, unmarried fathers each year, who are ignored in real life and also by the Census as well as by a substantial number of research organizations that track family and social trends. These men provide a glimpse into the not-so-glamorous lives of single fathers everywhere and a somewhat valid assessment of “where the boys are.”

What We Do Know About Single Fathers

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Vital Statistics documents information about births based on maternal characteristics supplied by the mother for the baby’s birth

certificate. Registering the birth of a baby and collecting information about its parents has been done for more than 170 years; it is believed that 99 percent of all births in the United States are registered.⁸

My research focuses on these men who are unmarried at the time of their babies' births, not the primary caretakers of their children, and who do not live with their children or the mothers. They, indeed, fall into the role of "silent bystander"

We can toss around a pretty accurate count for the total number of babies born each year and can paint a somewhat accurate portrait of birth mothers by age, race and birth type; however, we know much less about the corresponding birth fathers, especially when the parents are not married.⁹

The father's age was not reported on 13 percent of nearly 4 million birth certificates generated in 2013 (roughly 520,000 births) or on 32 percent of the birth certificates for babies born to women under the age of twenty.¹⁰

Marital status is determined by simply checking the "yes" or "no" box adjacent to the question, "Mother married?" Some states infer the mother is *not* married when the father's name is absent from the birth certificate, as it is 25 percent of the time. Even less information about the birth

father is documented on birth certificates for the 1.6 million babies who are born outside marriage each year. Actually,

- 16 percent of birth certificates (256,000) report no educational attainment for the birth father;
- 37 percent lack the father's age;
- 27 percent (432,000) fail to establish paternity at all.¹¹

The premier authority on "single fathers," according to representatives at Pew Research, is the National Survey of Family Growth. This ongoing initiative of the U.S. Center for Disease Control & Prevention provides the most comprehensive data on fertility patterns of men in the United States, but it too professes limitations: Information about fathers is under-reported for 20 percent of births, and, again, especially for those born to unmarried mothers.¹²

Per Pew Research, two other well-regarded resources track births: the American Community Survey and the Current Population Survey. However, they track only birth mothers and allow no analysis of fathers who live apart from their children.¹³

Nonetheless, the portrait of single fathers envisioned by many is similar to that of single mothers: They are typically younger, less educated and less well-off than their married counterparts, and they are much less likely to be white.¹⁴ The net is, we don't know as much about birth fathers as we do about birth mothers; when the parents aren't married, we know even less. So having an accurate count that leads to an accurate assessment of single fathers and their needs and obligations continues to be sketchy; what I write attempts to shed light on this relatively recent and widespread phenomenon.¹⁵



Meet My Single Fathers (Real names are changed to protect the privacy of my interviewees.)

Larry

The first father I interviewed was Larry. “I am a big guy, semi-bald,” he explained in his email. I found him easily at the coffee shop where he had arrived earlier to secure a table removed from ears that might limit our conversation. I estimated Larry at 60 years old. Initially, I was uncertain his story fit into the message I hoped to convey about single fathers and unplanned fatherhood, but a friend familiar with my efforts suggested I meet with Larry who was, I’ll admit, the first father out of many I had asked to say “Yes” to a meeting! I wasn’t about to turn him down.

Still, Larry fit my description of a “single father:” He was not married at the time his girlfriend gave birth, did not live with his children and would not

The net is, we don’t know as much about birth fathers as we do about birth mothers; when the parents aren’t married, we know even less.

have been counted by the Census or any other organization, even 30 years earlier when his twins were born.

“My girlfriend and I moved in together within a year of dating.” (He chuckled that this arrangement, so common today, had then been unusual and definitely “unconventional.”) “I suspected that she wanted to marry me, but I was 29 years old and

slow to make a marriage decision – which was good, because within a year I saw red flags in our relationship and determined we had too many differences to marry.

“Nevertheless we lived together for another year. I went away for a weekend and was going to break up with her when I returned, but when I got home she told me she was pregnant. And guess what? Twins! Although she knew I did not want children, she had secretly gone to a fertility clinic and had taken fertility drugs. She was 32 and wanted a baby; so in my mind, I got snookered into being a father.

“We split during her pregnancy. I did go with her to the clinic a few times. I had not wanted to be a father under those circumstances, but once a father, I ‘bucked up’ and took responsibility for my sons. Their mother remained the primary care provider and had physical custody of the boys. I was adjudicated as the father in a court filing, which wasn’t a big deal to me, as I knew I was the father and planned to be involved. I got an apartment five minutes from their house, went there most mornings to take them to daycare and some days picked them up after work and stayed there to put the boys to bed.”

Larry went on to explain that he “always had a relationship with his kids”; he couldn’t hide his pride in that. And that his “good relationship with them” continues to this day, 29 years later.

Larry had fit neither the stereotypical portrait of the single father I expected to interview nor the image that media today paint of the oft-times one-dimensional single father who is either black or Hispanic, struggling to make ends meet, employed in a low-wage dead-end job, if working at all, and who knocked up some girl who may or may not be his girlfriend and who will probably not be in his

life – nor the baby, either – within a short period of time.

Whether this stereotypical single father makes a contribution to his family, as Larry did responsibly for three decades, is beside the point. This isn't a picture that is necessarily inaccurate when we refer to mounds of data that isolate single fatherhood among certain populations. And this portrait

“I went away for a weekend and was going to break up with her when I returned, but when I got home she told me she was pregnant. And guess what? Twins!”

isn't necessarily inaccurate, if we refer to Kathryn Edin's collection of single fathers from Camden, New Jersey, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, whose stories she chronicles in her 2013 depiction, *Doing the Best I Can*.¹⁶ Their stories more closely parallel scenarios behind the statistics offered by the U.S. Census. Yet these numbers tell us little about the individuals behind them, just as pure numbers fail to portray the wide array of single fathers I sought to interview, whose lives I believe more closely align with the demographic rendered by MTV's *Teen Mom* franchise.

Contrary to presumptions outlined above, the epidemic of single parenthood reaches across a wide swath of socio-economic dimensions: We see this on MTV, and it was equally evident in my research.

Larry stepped me through a lifetime of what it meant to him to be a single father. “Welcome to my world!” he bellowed good-naturedly reflecting on nearly thirty years fathering his sons from mostly outside their mother's home. This was not only Larry's world, I learned: It was the world of many single fathers, or at least it was the world most single fathers would experience at some point. However, many I interviewed had not realized that yet.

Jake

Case in point: Jake. Jennifer delivered on her word, and, within days of my phone call, I sat face to face with a handsome, bearded young man, 40 years my junior, the father of Jennifer's baby. Clearly, meeting me was not on his “top ten” list, but out of respect (or I think, love) for Jennifer, he agreed to visit with me. Not specifically a chatty fellow, after some prodding, Jake told his story that, while separate from Larry's by a generation, seemed strikingly similar.

“Jennifer and I lived together; then we broke up. I didn't want anything to do with her and was off leading my life when she told me she was pregnant. I flipped out. I wanted her to get an abortion, and I think she was considering it, so I tried to be nice to her and went with her to a doctor's appointment, and there we saw the ultrasound. It was a real baby, so we just couldn't do it. I didn't pressure her to end the pregnancy; she had made it clear that I didn't have a say in that decision.”

Jennifer gave birth to a son. “I was an involved father for the first two weeks after our baby was born.” (He seemed pretty proud of this contribution; I didn't tell him I thought it meager.) “I went to her apartment every day and helped out. I loved my son right away. And then I did something that I'm not proud of: I dropped out of their lives. I had signed the ROP (Recognition



of Paternity), so had taken some ownership of the baby, but being a dad at that time wasn't what I wanted or expected – nor was I ready to be a father. I was 23.”

“I didn't have an education [beyond high school], and I didn't have much of a job, but I did pay child support when it was court-ordered. I didn't see much of my son for more than a year, but Jennifer didn't fuss because my mother stepped in and took the baby to her house, which gave Jennifer a break.

Jennifer gave birth to a son. “I was an involved father for the first two weeks after our baby was born.” (He seemed pretty proud of this contribution; I didn't tell him I thought it meager.)

My mother was a committed grandmother; she did not want to jeopardize her relationship with her grandchild. I give my mother credit that today Jennifer and I are on good terms and that I am involved regularly with my son. My mother was the bridge that kept us connected when I had been off doing my thing.”

Next, I discovered Brad, who was representative of a small subset of single fathers who are white, college-educated and highly employable.

Brad

Brad was a self-described “big man on campus” – a star athlete and an “A” student. He strolled into our interview tall, erect, clean cut and

well dressed. He was very much the confident businessman he appeared to be as well as the competent single father of a daughter soon to enter her teen years. “I had just completed a sought-after internship and was rolling into my final year at this prestigious university with a job offer to start at the same big-bulge banking firm when I graduated the following spring. I thought I had life in the bag. I'll admit I was pretty cocky; I was at a good school – a great business school – and I expected to graduate with honors, which I did. I saw this great future ahead of me and thought I was going to make a lot of money.

“Of course I had a girlfriend,” he was quick to add (as if to say, “Why wouldn't I, a guy like me?”). “We'd dated for about five months; then one night she told me she was pregnant. Neither of us was happy about it. She was a serious student, too. I thought we could ‘make this go away’ without consequence – just go on with our lives. Hey, that's what kids ‘like us’ do, right? We were over 21. We could afford an abortion; no one had to know. But in the end, she couldn't go through with it. We had never expected to have a baby. I don't think most kids do. We hadn't talked about what would happen if we were to get pregnant. And we never talked about marriage. I considered it a given that we were not going to end up together. She was a great girl, or I would not have dated her, but I wasn't thinking marriage at that stage of my life, and not even a baby was going to make me think about marriage with a big career ahead of me.

“I don't believe she tried to trick me into marriage by getting pregnant, but after the pregnancy, it occurred to her that if we didn't marry, we would break up, so rather than break up, she pushed to marry me. That caused all types of bad feelings between us. I was very distant during her pregnancy; I stuck around the best I could, but it

was awkward. We went to classes, and I went with her to the health center. Most of our friends were kind to us; my guy friends felt sorry for me.

“I did graduate with honors, walked for my diploma, and then walked directly across campus to a hospital where I was present for the birth of our daughter. I wish I could say that I had an immediate connection to the baby – or to both of them, really, for deep down inside I thought marriage was the right thing to do for the baby, but that would have really screwed up my career. I didn’t love the mother, and I believe you marry only if you love someone. Too bad I hadn’t been one to say that you don’t have sex, either, unless you love someone! Would have made our lives easier.”

“Deep down, I was ashamed of myself, and I didn’t like myself for a long time. I was young, immature and selfish. My girlfriend dropped out of school without graduating and quickly became my ex-girlfriend. I wasn’t able to take that big-time job, but I did pretty quickly get another decent job that landed me in the same city as they were living – which is interesting that I moved to the same city and gave up the other job to live where they lived, because in reality I so badly wanted to get away from them and the responsibility or any thoughts whatsoever about being a father.

“I lived with my parents to save money (they were very supportive), and I paid child support. My ex-girlfriend and the baby lived with her mother. I seldom saw them. I withdrew from friends; I suspected they talked behind my back about ‘poor Brad.’ It took quite a few years to grow into being a father. Today, almost 14 years later, I believe I have a good relationship with my daughter. I see her every week, and we are together for school and special events. We are connected in most

areas of our lives, and I am very thankful for her.

“What I feel badly about, though, is the ‘outcome:’ my daughter has grown up without a father in the home. There is still a stigma associated with this; I do believe this, even with its prevalence today in our society. Maybe someday I will get married and things will be better for her. I know this is not what I wanted for me, to be a single father, and certainly not what I want for my daughter.”

“I didn’t love the mother,
and I believe you marry only if you
love someone. Too bad I hadn’t been
one to say that you don’t have sex,
either, unless you love someone!
Would have made our lives easier.”

Rico

Finally, I’ll introduce Rico. Rico was the youngest of my interviewees when he became a father and was probably the closest demographically to the fathers on MTV’s *Teen Mom* franchise. Not yet able to drive when his girlfriend became pregnant, he fell on the younger side of the 700,000 teenagers who experience unplanned pregnancy each year. This number has decreased dramatically, down 61 percent since 1991, and has continued to decline a percentage point or two each year, to reach an historic low in 2013. Nevertheless, teen and unplanned pregnancy continues to be a concern due to the risks associated with early parenthood for both babies and their young parents.¹⁷

Rico also needed prodding before warming to the idea of talking about his fatherhood experience, and we also had to overcome a slight language barrier. Rico had been an average student and, typical of high school sophomores, was involved in a few activities but mostly hung out after school at his girlfriend's house. "Her mom wasn't married and didn't get home from work until six, so we'd go over there and watch TV, have a bite to eat, and then we'd end up messing around. ("Sex," he explained to me.)

"Holly was younger than me, about 14. I didn't expect her to get pregnant, that's for sure. She said she was on birth control, but she wasn't. We used a condom, too, most of the time. So I guess two things: One, she wasn't on birth control, taking the pill like I thought, and, two, we must not have

"I know this is not what I wanted for me, to be a single father, and certainly not what I want for my daughter."

timed it right, or we didn't use a condom that time. I don't know. I was mad that she would get pregnant. I wanted her to have an abortion, and my dad even offered to pay for it, but she told me that I didn't have an opinion. Her mom would not let her have an abortion and had agreed to take care of the baby. That was pretty much it for making the decision.

"We weren't popular kids, but I felt that everybody soon knew our names and that we were having a baby. They would 'look' at me and it would embarrass me. I haven't seen the baby much since it was born. Holly moved to a different school, and

I moved away to live with my birth dad. I haven't been a good dad. It has been almost 15 years now, and I rarely see or hear anything about my daughter."

Rico explained that Holly went on to give birth to another four babies, which he thought were fathered by four different men. "This made me think that most of this wasn't my fault. None of the dads are around – just Holly and her babies."

Rico's account may have differed from those I heard from the other men I interviewed, but it wasn't unique to his demographic or age group of teen fathers.

Almost all teen fathers do not "plan" the pregnancy and for the most part, like Rico, are surprised and mad when they learn that their girlfriend, who is generally a few years younger, is pregnant. Most said they were knowledgeable about birth control and "usually used it;" some even used two types of birth control some times.

Seldom does pregnancy lead to marriage for these young teens (fewer than 10 percent tie the knot) and by the time the baby turns one, fewer than half of the fathers are actively involved with the mother or her baby.¹⁸

Summarizing Interviews

I interviewed another twenty-some single fathers whose storylines more or less fall along the lines of the four I've chosen to highlight and collected more than 50 surveys via SurveyMonkey® from a wide variety of men to capture a multitude of thoughts on single fatherhood. Whether it was Larry the engineer, Jake the construction worker, Brad the investment banker, or Rico the student. Whether reflecting from the vista of age 60 or 16, I observed common themes and attitudes despite differences

in age, occupation, race or educational attainment. So while contemporary literature declares we know a lot about single mothers and laments the scarcity of detail about single fathers, I actually believe I learned enough, while not at all conclusive, to allow me to describe common observations about single and unplanned fatherhood that can make a difference to parents, professionals, policyholders and other interested parties and, indeed, shed light on where the boys are and what they might be thinking about single fatherhood.

Let's Talk Similarities

First off, "This isn't what I planned!"

None of the men I interviewed expected to become a father "at this point." Not one. All professed to being "surprised" by the pregnancy. For the most

"I haven't been a good dad.
It has been almost 15 years now,
and I rarely see or hear anything
about my daughter."

part, none of the men "expected" or desired his girlfriend to get pregnant, and all were "shocked" by the news, if not "blindsided." I heard, "I wasn't planning on this." "This isn't what I expected." Each father expressed some variation along this theme, not unlike the reported reactions of single fathers captured by recent research for *Child Trends*.²² Clearly, being a father at that time or with this woman wasn't on their short-term (nor possibly long-term) horizon.

My mind shot to data measuring teen and

unplanned pregnancies, the fathers I interviewed most often falling to the latter, meaning unplanned pregnancies. According to the National Center to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies, teen birth rates dropped 42 percent between 2007 and 2014, both for younger fathers like Rico and BMOC (Big Men On Campus) like Brad.¹⁹ Their stories, depicted by the likes of our teen stars on MTV, were a factor driving teen birth rates to all-time lows that appear to coincide and decrease throughout each ensuing season of the cable franchise.

Much less encouraging, however, is progress addressing "unplanned pregnancy" for those in their early twenties and thirties, a challenge equal if not more alarming in scope than teen pregnancy. The proportion of births fathers term "unintended" is four out of ten nationally and varies by age, education, race and ethnicity as well as union status. Overall, women self-report that more than half (51 percent) of all pregnancies are "unplanned" - approximately 2 million "oops babies" each year! And among unmarried women in their twenties - a category in which births have grown significantly in the past decade and now account for a quarter of all births and 62 percent of all nonmarital births - seven of ten pregnancies are self-described as "unplanned."²⁰

Furthermore, a tenth of single fathers indicate knowing nothing about the baby before its birth, and among the "fathers-unaware," 75 percent report the birth unintended.²¹

Birth control "covered" - Not!

Unintended pregnancies are defined as "mistimed, unplanned or unwanted" and usually occur due to slip-ups with contraception; either the couple didn't use it or used it incorrectly. Not one of my interviewees claimed to lack knowledge



about birth control. On the contrary, women I interviewed for my earlier paper scoffed when questioned about the need for more education and men, too, felt fully informed – or “fully-covered” (no pun intended) – when it came to contraception.

“Well, what happened, then?” I asked. Each admitted he thought his girlfriend “had it covered.”

“It took time to own up to the negative feelings I had about the baby, because I knew it wasn’t all my girlfriend’s fault,” Brad admitted. “I had a stake in this too. I was smarter than to have this happen. I could hear my parents’ admonishment to ‘keep it in my pants.’ I thought my girlfriend was using adequate birth control. When we first dated, I confirmed that she was protected. I got lazy. I didn’t think I had to ask her each time we had sex. I truly believed she did not want to get pregnant, either.”

Rico too shook his head in disbelief: “We used two forms of birth control. Two! Holly was on the pill, and I used a condom.”

“Birth control wasn’t just her responsibility,” another young father offered soberly. And according to the fifty-some men who responded to my survey when asked whose responsibility it was to secure birth control, again, all said birth control should be a “joint decision” and acknowledged that “getting lazy” or “swept up in the heat of the moment” too often led to “undesirable consequences.”

Clearly, too many put too little thought into one of life’s most important events: starting a family. I started to wonder if the bulk of those I interviewed lived in a vacuum void of any thought or understanding whatsoever of potential consequences to the choices they made.

One such choice (a key one, it turns out): “to live together”

Cohabitation was common to more than half the fathers I interviewed. James came into my research late in the game, after discovering his live-in girlfriend was pregnant. This pregnancy, too, was a surprise; being a father “again” wasn’t on James’s to-do list. “I was clear from the beginning that I had my family (two toddlers with an ex-wife) and that going down that road again wasn’t in the cards. She also knew I wasn’t going to marry her. After she told me she was pregnant, I decided to give it a go, which I guess isn’t putting a lot of thought into fatherhood, like you said! My girlfriend doted on the baby; the baby obviously meant more to her

“It took time to own up to the negative feelings I had about the baby, because I knew it wasn’t all my girlfriend’s fault,” Brad admitted. “I had a stake in this too. I was smarter than to have this happen.”

than I did, which I resented. I also resented that I was supporting them. And there I was, knee-deep into something I hadn’t wanted to do in the first place! My freedom went out the window. Eventually we grew apart and went our separate ways. I still support the baby, but I don’t see either of them anymore. I wish I’d thought through the possibility of this type of outcome.”

James might not have been surprised by his conception had he been aware of the number

of births attributed to couples who cohabitate. According to Vital Statistics reports, nearly 1 million babies are born each year to couples living together; 58 percent of the 1.6 million babies born to men and women outside marriage.²³ For the most part, cohabitation increases the likelihood of pregnancy (statistically doubling the prospect), and the recent rise in cohabitation, which has risen dramatically in the last two decades alone, is considered the number-one reason non-marital birth rates have soared.²⁴

It seems prudent, therefore, to remind James, as well as other men who are cohabitating, that if they do not want to have a baby “at this point” and with “this woman,” it’s up to them to prevent pregnancy. Seventy-seven percent of births conceived within cohabitating unions are not planned.²⁵ And one can’t fully rely on the woman, who may have given her assurance she uses birth control or does not want to conceive. Too many anecdotes prove this point. The Knot, Internet’s authority on all-things-bridal, surveyed women about pregnancy. Half responded that it was important to avoid pregnancy outside marriage, yet fully one-third admitted they would “actually be happy” should they become pregnant.²⁶ Furthermore, when living with a woman who’s given birth before (with another man), the likelihood of her conceiving again outside marriage goes up even more.

Fragile relationships are common

Living together not only doubles the chances of single fatherhood, it diminishes the probability of sharing a lifetime with the woman who’s conceived. We might think conception would bring couples closer together, as perhaps it did forty or fifty years ago when men and women married as a result of pregnancy, but today, pregnancy outside marriage seldom leads to marriage. In fact, for most of the men I interviewed, as well as for the young fathers

we watch on MTV and for a host of documented cases across America, pregnancy alters the relationship between unmarried parents for the worse and, in many cases, ends it altogether.²⁷

Census data might not be able to assess the condition of the relationship between Brad and his girlfriend at the time of birth, nor the relationship of any of the other parents it records, as the Census gathers little information about the health of their

“My girlfriend doted on the baby; the baby obviously meant more to her than I did, which I resented. I also resented that I was supporting them.”

actual day-to-day interactions. Only marital status is known, reflected by the simple “yes-no” response to the birth certificate question “Mother married?” However, data do track the marital status of parents at the time a child turns one, which allows us to weigh, to a certain extent, the stability – or in more cases, the instability – that prevails in the homes of unmarried new parents.

It appears only 6 percent of the unmarried parents who lived together at the time of their child’s birth (presumably in a romantic relationship), married within a year.²⁸ On the contrary, within one year of birth:

- 48 percent of fathers lived apart from their children;
- 56 percent lived apart within 3 years;
- Within five years of birth, 63 percent of the unmarried fathers lived apart both from the



mother and their baby.²⁹

Thus, while cohabitation may be an increasingly common family context in which couples have a child (one in five children is born to cohabitating parents, a number that's doubled over 20 years) and nearly three of four women voice "strong support" for cohabitation as a context in which to raise children, it seriously lessens the prospects that couples will raise their child together.³⁰

In the earliest stages of parenthood, like James (the single father surprised by his live-in girlfriend's pregnancy), 40 percent of unmarried cohabitating parents living together in romantic contexts attempt to share the responsibility of caring for the baby. Over time, however, the likelihood of these

**Living together not only doubles
the chances of single fatherhood,
it diminishes the probability of
sharing a lifetime with the woman
who's conceived.**

couples splitting apart is higher (approximately double) than for their married counterparts.³¹ It's documented that a larger share of single-parent homes result from unmarried parents ending their cohabitating arrangement than in married couples breaking apart. This may be why the actual number of single fathers cohabiting is hard to track: It's simply too fluid.

The good news may be that cohabitation significantly decreases the "hazard" of a second

non-marital birth to a cohabitating couple as, more often than not, their relationship becomes fraught with instability, the demise of their union thus delaying additional babies.³²

Another lesson I might like to tell my sons about cohabitation is this: If you don't want to have a baby with "this person" at "this time," but you think you do want to marry "this person" someday, do not live with her. Statistically, your chances of being together for five or ten years or even fifty years increase (roughly two-fold)³³ if you marry, or even if you just continue dating and increase your knowledge and understanding of each other as well as when and if you want to have a baby!

Who, then, cares for the children?

Larry cared for his twin sons on a daily basis over an extended period, and Brad established a regular routine for seeing his daughter and paid child support consistently, resulting in close parent-child ties into adulthood for each of them; theirs were the exceptions. Jake participated with his daughter when he "felt like it" or when his mother "insisted he go spend time with her," and Rico, like a multitude of teen fathers, simply did not see his child for years at a time. These four examples represent the gamut of parenting involvement that Pew assigns to single fathers: There's a wide range in real involvement, real nurturing and real protection, direction and love.

According to the Fragile Families Study of men and women who were not married at the time of childbirth, only half of fathers are involved with the baby by the child's first birthday. Father involvement fluctuates and tends to fall off over time as the parents' relationship declines in quality. Many fathers stick around when things are good with the mother, but once that connection with the mother is severed or threatened, the relationship

with the baby weakens, too.³⁴

Bravo for 43 percent of single dads who say they are in contact with their children several times a week.³⁵ It can't be easy to overcome obstacles in time, space and relationships that often challenge these interactions. Fatherhood involvement across America, however, offers this bleaker perspective:

It appears only 6 percent of the unmarried parents who lived together at the time of their child's birth (presumably in a romantic relationship), married within a year.²⁸

Only one of five single fathers claims to visit their non-resident children as often as Larry (or even once a week). Only a third report staying in touch via emails and phone calls about monthly.³⁶ Even as long ago as 1979, studies found 60 percent of single fathers lived away from their non-resident children, and only half had seen their children within the prior month.³⁷ Sadly, more than a fourth of single fathers, like Rico, admit they have not seen their children in over a year.³⁸

Furthermore, few contributed financially in ways desired or legally required. Only 67 percent of single fathers paid the full amount of child support due, leaving a balance of \$14 billion in unpaid child support each year. Interestingly, a near-equal percentage of single fathers were also able to cite a shortfall of child support payments due from "deadbeat moms," though a lesser amount.³⁹

It's important to consider the actual time fathers

spend with their children when they don't live with them. The sheer lack of interactions is alarming, as is the sheer number of children (and their mothers) who are affected. While I use "alarming," researchers use the word "disquieting" to describe what their fact-finding missions revealed about the fathering habits of nonresidential single dads.⁴⁰

They report that contact between non-resident fathers and their children falls off over time due to a variety of reasons: Sometimes it's geography, time or employment distractions, and sometimes the temperament of the child reduces fatherhood involvement,⁴¹ but more often it is the relationship shared between parents that impedes a father's ability to parent outside an unshared household. And, of course, if one or the other parent "re-partners,"⁴² the proverbial parenthood deck is reshuffled to accommodate the "secondary individual," a term coined for the Current Population Survey to describe the partner who resides in the household, unrelated to the householder.⁴³

Having a baby outside marriage has different implications for men's and women's subsequent family formation and childbearing. Most of our MTV stars went on fairly quickly to establish romantic partnerships that led to additional conceptions. Contrary to the patterns on TV, only Jake, of the twenty-some fathers I interviewed, married or had another baby with a different woman following the first baby he'd fathered outside marriage. This pattern of conception involving more than one partner is termed "multiple partner fertility" and is common to one of every three single fathers. What often evolves is a mix-match of partners and parenting efforts that leads to the question of who's responsible.

Overall, I was intrigued by the variation of responsibility fathers took for the care of their



children. Some passionately sought involvement from the get-go and willingly contributed practically, emotionally and financially throughout their children's lives – no questions asked. Others needed arm-twisting. None of the fathers I interviewed, however, denied that contributing “in some fashion” was his responsibility, and all readily admitted to fatherhood and recognized that “being a father” came with inherent rights and responsibilities (“whether we wanted them or not!”), but not without first establishing paternity.

And Few Questioned Paternity

“Establishing paternity was just the first of many legal proceedings as a single father,” Brad explained. “We were lucky that people on campus guided us through the legalities. If we had been married, I would have automatically been the

**While I use “alarming,”
researchers use the word
“disquieting” to describe what their
fact-finding missions revealed
about the fathering habits of
nonresidential single dads.⁴⁰**

father, but because we weren't married, I needed to “establish paternity,” or I would not have rights to see my baby or be involved in decisions pertaining to her life. There were times that I thought that wouldn't have been so bad, since I hadn't wanted any part of being a father at the beginning!” he laughed in honest reflection. “But the fact is, it was my responsibility: I was the father – I am the father.

Establishing paternity was for the good of my daughter and for me, too. She had a right to know who her father was.”

According to men I interviewed, ample information is available for women who give birth outside marriage; they seem to know where to turn for advice when facing a mistimed or unplanned pregnancy. Brad's girlfriend went to the Women's Center on campus, and Jennifer had done her research long before the baby was born. She told Jake exactly what to do. “I resented this at first,” he said. “But I went along with her because I thought she knew what she was talking about. She had single neighbors and friends that had had babies.”

“The first thing I had to do was sign the ‘Recognition of Parentage’ [ROP].⁴⁴ This is a pretty common term in the world of single parents, but I hadn't heard of it. Both the mother and father sign the document and send it to the registrar's office. It means that I am legally recognized as the father and that I have rights and responsibilities as a father. I signed it because I knew I was the father, but it scared me because I wasn't ready to be a father, and I didn't have any money. We put my name on the birth certificate as the biological dad; the ROP made me the ‘legal dad’ too. This was just the beginning. Read the document – it would scare you, too!”

I never doubted that I was the father [Jake went on]. I didn't think my girlfriend had been with anyone else. And when the baby was born, he looked just like me. Two months later, however, my parents urged me to have a paternity test. They are the type of people who cover all bases, and they thought this was something I needed to do. I think they were better able to look out over my life – to look into my future and project the meaning of having

this baby; they thought I needed to know for sure if I was the dad, and a DNA test would tell me. They had obviously put more thought into this than I had! By that time, I had stopped seeing Jennifer and the baby. I felt bad telling Jennifer that I wanted a paternity test. I think she was shocked and mad, too, but she went along with it. She knew what I would find.

I had to wait several days for the DNA test results, and it wasn't until that wait that I thought, "What if I'm not the father?!" I got really excited. I felt huge relief thinking that maybe I wasn't the father – and if I wasn't the father, my life could go on as I once had planned: no baby! I started to dream again – to think about different possibilities and get really excited – then I realized I had stopped dreaming about my life in the months since Jennifer told me she was pregnant. I felt ashamed that I was having these thoughts, because I had seen the baby, and what was I going to do? Just abandon it if I wasn't the dad?

My life seemed to stop that week. I didn't go see the baby or Jennifer. I told myself that if the test came back negative, it gave me permission to never see either of them again, and that thought brought relief. This whole fatherhood thing was too overwhelming. Within the week, though, the test results came back and, yep, I was the father. Jennifer just shook her head. She was disgusted that I would have doubted her. My parents never said another word about it and have been good grandparents ever since. I have been a better dad, too. I guess I needed to see that test.

Testing for paternity gave Jake the assurance that he was the biological father, which, in turn, encouraged his involvement with both the baby and its mother.

Some passionately sought involvement from the get-go and willingly contributed practically, emotionally and financially throughout their children's lives – no questions asked. Others needed arm-twisting.

Paternity can be voluntarily acknowledged, as it was initially by Jake when he signed the ROP, or contested, as he chose to do later when he decided to have a paternity test. A paternity test might also be requested by a mother, as it was by Jenelle in Season 3 of MTV's *Teen Mom*, when she sought the identity of her baby's father, weighing two separate and closely-timed sexual encounters that may have conceived her baby. Paternity can also be resolved by a court order.⁴⁵

Establishing paternity is the prerequisite for securing ongoing economic support from the noncustodial parent, which is usually the father in cases where the parents are unmarried. Once paternity is established, a child gains legal rights and privileges, such as the right to inheritance, as well as the right to a father's medical insurance, life insurance, social security or veteran's benefits. This legal connection also provides the link to a father's health history and family identity, and, with luck, constructs the family tie that leads to an ongoing relationship between the child and its father, as it



did with Jake. According to the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), paternity has been established for 88 percent of children born outside marriage. It is a means for promoting financial responsibilities of parenthood as well as for prompting responsibility for one's actions as a parent.⁴⁶

Larry, conversely, did not test for paternity 29 years ago. "Didn't enter my mind," he laughed. "I knew their mother needed help with twins, so I cooperated with the legalities and committed ensuing decades to raising our two sons."

"Knowing for sure was worth it," concluded Brad. "There's a lot at stake. Lots of decisions are made based on whether or not you are the father. I don't think anyone should feel badly asking for a DNA test – asking for proof. Yes, it may say, 'I don't trust you,' or 'hey, were you with someone else?' But on the other hand, when you say you are the legal father, you are signing up for a lifetime. The child has the right to know who its father is; it was my right, too, to know I was the father. This is really an important point, because not all 'alleged fathers' are the true biological fathers!" This last point inciting Brad.

According to the American Association of Blood Banks (AABB), Brad is correct, not all alleged fathers are the true biological dads. "Misappropriated paternity" or "non-paternity" occurs often and varies by socio-economic group.⁴⁷

"You can find out if you are the father by blood-type matching or DNA testing," Jake told me, "We did the DNA test. Blood type would have been cheaper; if blood types didn't match, there would have been no way I was the father. DNA tests are more conclusive; they are 99.9 percent accurate when DNA comes from the mom and the baby, too, so that's what we did."⁴⁸

I further learned that there is no legal requirement for genetic testing before courts make a judgment about paternity. It's an option. The courts can even decide the legal status based on a mother's testimony alone. "Establishing paternity is really serious business," Brad went on, clearly intent on warning others that it can be difficult, timely and costly to change rights and responsibilities once a man is named as the legal father. In general, if a man is listed as the legal father and the courts order him to pay child support – and DNA disproves his paternity – his child support payments nevertheless continue despite disavowal of fatherhood. Laws vary by state; some allow fathers to file suit and retrieve child support payments after non-paternity, but not always.^{49, 50}

"I told myself that if the test came back negative, it gave me permission to never see either of them again, and that thought brought relief. This whole fatherhood thing was too overwhelming."

Charles Corry, president of the Equal Justice Foundation, asserts that as many as 30 percent of DNA tests, or one in three, disproves a father's paternity. Industry professionals cite an "exclusion rate" closer to 20 percent.⁵¹ And the AABB, the primary source for DNA testing since 1947, puts the exclusion rate at 25 percent, which means, from a practical standpoint, approximately 80,500 of the 322,000 men tested for paternity by the AABB in 2010 were proved not to be the fathers!⁵²

Not all misattributed paternities are deliberate, of course; some are unintentional and involve women who may have had sex with a variety of men and simply can't figure out the father except by DNA testing. Other cases involve welfare and paternity fraud: A father's name, whether he is the real father or not, must be provided as a prerequisite to receive public assistance.

Whatever the case, what I would tell my sons if faced with an unplanned or ill-timed pregnancy (that involves any question whatsoever of paternity): Go for the test!

Forms, Forms & More Forms

"The test was just the beginning," lamented Jake, referring to a "dizzying array" of legal terms and legal wranglings that followed. And certainly, acknowledged Brad, consumed an "unimaginable portion" of their young lives. "There were more forms to fill out. We had forms for visitation ("parenting time"), and we had forms for custody. Child support was another issue altogether – forms for that too."

"And over the years," Larry attested, "child support and parenting time could be renegotiated on a fairly frequent basis, which was exhausting to all parties involved."

None of these legalities, of course, would have been necessary had these men (or the estimated 1.6 million men who become fathers outside marriage each year), been married at the time of childbirth, a choice few made afterwards, either, even if romantically involved at conception.

Seldom did pregnancy lead to marriage

Having a baby may not lead mothers and fathers to the altar, but it doesn't necessarily preclude them

from forming romantic relationships or families with others.

Family research scholars hypothesize unmarried mothers and fathers to be largely similar in terms of educational attainment, race, ethnicity, and family background. But due to their high rate of union dissolution, they often follow very different paths after the birth of a baby, when it comes to family formation.^{53, 54}

Mothers are generally assigned physical custody and, consequently, the role of primary caretaker, as was the case for most of the men I interviewed and those we see on MTV; mothers simply bear the brunt of childcare responsibility, which greatly cuts time and energy available for fun, fancy and romance.⁵⁵

"Jake's life pretty much went on as it was before our baby was born," Jennifer explained. "It didn't take long for him to find another girlfriend, and they eventually had a baby, too. For me, it was hard to even get out of the house, and it was harder, still, to get away from the baby long enough to feel like a woman and to meet a guy that might be interested in me. And I had a baby, too – so I needed to find somebody that wanted our 'package deal.'"

Statistically, Jennifer faces reduced odds of romance, cohabitation and, certainly, marriage – prospects that would be less bleak should she be a single father rather than a single mother.⁵⁶ Having a baby signals "this woman has a past," which even in this day of sexual freedoms may make her a less desirable partner.⁵⁷

"Not every man jumps at the chance to raise another man's baby," explained Brad. "I totally get that. And if the parents share childcare responsibilities, competitions and jealousy often result if another guy or woman is around."⁵⁸



Nonetheless, about a quarter of single mothers and fathers go on to conceive subsequent children within two years of their first birth, most often outside marriage and with a different partner. Only one-third of subsequent reported births are with the same partner.⁵⁹

Single mothers like Jennifer are more likely to have a second and all subsequent babies outside marriage.^{60,61} In fact, Jennifer is three times more likely to have another baby outside the confines of cohabitation or marriage than to have no additional births at all.⁶²

Prospects for single fathers, however, are less harsh. They are less likely than single mothers to have a second baby outside marriage. However, when and if they do have another baby, it is most often within

Prospects for single fathers, however, are less harsh. They are less likely than single mothers to have a second baby outside marriage.

a cohabitating union and twice as likely to be with a different partner. Surprisingly, none of the men I interviewed, save Jake, went on to form a serious or long-term romantic relationship with another woman. None of the fathers married – not even Larry or Brad, whose children were long past the time-consuming infant stage and into their teen or twenty-something years. Consequently, I had little opportunity to observe or discuss patterns of family formation outside the ones these men had earlier conveyed. Few referenced a sequence of family formation different than the one they'd taken.⁶³

Complex family arrangements

Having babies with a variety of partners in a variety of living arrangements is part of today's complex pattern of family formation.⁶⁴ "Why wouldn't our kids be confused?" questioned Larry.

"What type of legacy are we passing along?" he pondered before recounting the following story that had haunted him for years.

"I was giving my twins a bath. They were probably four years old at the time. They lived with their mother down the street, but they were at my house taking a bath, splashing in the tub. I said, 'Don't splash.' They laughed and kept splashing, so I told them again, 'Don't splash.' They said, 'Mom lets us splash.' To which I responded, 'Mom may let you splash at her house, but there's no splashing at my house. If I would have splashed like that growing up, my mom would have spanked me!' Well, that did it; they stopped splashing.

"Then a few minutes later, like he'd been sitting there thinking quietly about this, one of the boys asked, 'But could you splash at your dad's house?' Geez, it hit me then; my sons thought I'd also had two houses growing up! They had a mom's house and a dad's house – they thought this was the norm! Made me sad, because this isn't what I would have wanted for my kids and certainly wasn't how I'd grown up."

Larry had known a different pattern: a mom and a dad who "all lived under one roof. It wasn't perfect, you know, but I had a really good upbringing. It's what I expected for my kids and why I made the effort to be involved in their lives. They didn't choose to enter this world – which has turned out to be a pretty complex one."

Complex family arrangements are increasingly

common: Complex in that a “single father” lives with his children (who counts by the Census as a “single father”). Or a “single father” lives down the street, as did Larry (who the Census does not count as a “single father”), often joined by a cohabitating partner (an arrangement that further precludes the Census label of “single father”). Or a “single father” lives with the children of his cohabitating partner, and his own children live across town with their mother and perhaps her cohabitating partner (additional living arrangements that do not award “single father” status by the Census). And, if a couple is not married and does not live together, the tie between parents and children is often weakened, resulting in a further erosion of family connectedness and wellbeing.⁶⁵

What to do?

The pattern of family formation once accepted as “the norm” – that of meeting, dating, falling in love, then getting married and then having a baby, has evolved to a complex pattern that is loose, often loveless and laced with legalities.

How do we craft happy endings for mothers, fathers and their children when the patterns of family formation chosen by many seem fraught with frustration?

MTV attempts to help as it scripts, edits and produces narratives each week for Season 6 of the *Teen Mom* Franchise, now renamed *Teen Mom OG (Original Girls)*. While acknowledging that each episode has its share of “baby daddy drama,” the cable network kicked off another season to highlight the four wildly popular original teen moms whose children are now into elementary school and whose lives have gone on to include new adventures, new beaus and even more “single parent” challenges. Viewers can’t get enough of the storylines that have become nuttier and

crazier each season. The goal, MTV says, is to emphasize the strained family and romantic relationships of the young mothers and fathers and thus de-glamorize and therefore reduce teen and unplanned pregnancies.

MTV continues to boast that the show has “done wonders” toward meeting these objectives, yet many viewers instead express “comfort” and “approval” about pregnancies outside marriage, which is more likely the norm for teenage women and those under the age of thirty who are having a baby.

How do we craft happy endings for mothers, fathers and their children when the patterns of family formation chosen by many seem fraught with frustration?

I was stretched to find a single father who had tuned in even a few times to the *Teen Mom* franchise. Only Jake admitted to watching “occasionally,” and this was when he was with Jennifer, “who seldom if ever missed an episode.” Eight of 10 men report “never” watching the shows, and the few who do watch report increasingly unrealistic views of teen and unplanned pregnancy.⁶⁶

The network makes raising a child as a single mother or father seem easier than most single parents report in real life, and the shows do little, if anything at all, to guide viewers into healthier patterns of family formation, or overcome



problematic relationships. Yet, rates of teen and unplanned parenthood have decreased dramatically since the shows' inception, and MTV producers might possibly claim their due.

The bottom-line, from season to season, life isn't rosy for most of the single mothers and fathers we see on MTV. *Most* are not involved with each other nor are the dads involved with their children. Their co-parenting relationships are in shambles; their interactions with new beaus are increasingly problematic; and unquestionably the teen moms who viewers know and love simply struggle day to day to get their lives together. We see few traces of the deep distress each star faces in reality; and seldom is there reference to the real-world, overwhelmingly documented risks associated with single parenthood. If MTV doesn't show this on their reality show, viewers won't grasp it as reality.

Nor did the men I interviewed grasp that the choices they made individually were somehow woven into the larger fabric of our society.

In Closing

Flash back: Larry (the first father I interviewed) and I were ending our conversation at the coffee shop when he paused, "Why are you writing this story?" We had talked for two hours and Larry had shared freely and answered all the questions with which he'd been peppered. I was convinced his story fit into my single-father fact-finding mission. Now Larry had but one question for me: "Why are you writing this story?" He looked perplexed, unable to comprehend a motive for our exchange. Sensitive, I posed three more questions to Larry:

- What percent of babies are born outside marriage today?
- What percent of single fathers are involved with their babies at the baby's first birthday?

(And at year 3 and year 5?)

- What percent of single mothers are on public assistance within one year of birth? (And at five years?)

Larry furled his brow, his response measured. His guesstimates, however, fell far short of the real-world numbers that reflect the U.S. nonmarital birthrate and its impact on individual families and on our nation.^{67,68} My references to actual numbers outlined in the following paragraph sobered Larry.

His lack of awareness regarding the single-father world in which he'd raised his sons led me to question if others, too, fail to understand the far reaches of nonmarital births and their impact on all of us – when it's not just one or two babies in our own backyard that we're talking about, but 1.6 million babies annually spread state to state. And it's not just an average outlay of \$30,000 in public

His lack of awareness regarding the single-father world in which he'd raised his sons led me to question if others, too, fail to understand the far reaches of nonmarital births and their impact on all of us

assistance going to one single mother each year, but an estimated half of the 1.6 million single mothers and fathers who receive \$112 billion in welfare payments within one year of birth and another 25 percent who receive funds within five years, many of whom will continue to receive public

assistance in some fashion until their children turn 18. This is a remarkable government expenditure that surprisingly raises the eyebrows of few taxpayers. It's also a very conservative number, compiled in 2008 by economist Benjamin Scafidi and colleagues, who recognize that it grossly underestimates the financial significance of family fragmentation.

Their analysis included such widely recognized government programs as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP); Women, Infants & Children's Assistance (WIC); Head Start; and certain aspects of Medicaid and they concentrated on only female-headed households. Once again, researchers neglected to consider the plight of male-headed households or the socioeconomic fallout associated with the lack of a father in the home and its eventual costs in human capital. So as Mitch Pearlstein eloquently states in *From Family Collapse to America's Decline*, "\$112 billion annually is clearly but a fraction of the true financial and economic costs of family fragmentation. Think of it more as a starting point."^{69, 70}

I quickly, via SurveyMonkey®, collected 50-some questionnaires from men I considered "educated, intelligent and socially aware and who were fairly knowledgeable" about my focus on family issues. Surely these men would be more accurate in their assessment concerning the above three questions. Their responses, however, were as startling as Larry's: Three out of four underestimated by half the rate of babies born outside marriage in the United States each year, and they were equally as shortsighted when estimating the lack of father involvement or the financial impact to taxpayers.

But none of the dynamics seemed to rile my survey respondents or Larry, for that fact. Few appeared

moved by the increased risks for children growing up without a father in the home, and when it came to taxpayer dollars, only one wrote, "ouch!"

The evidence is overwhelming though: The issue of babies born outside marriage – the absence of a father in the home – is associated, on average, with increased rates of poverty, unemployment, welfare, health concerns, delinquency, crime,

Three out of four underestimated by half the rate of babies born outside marriage in the United States each year, and they were equally as shortsighted when estimating the lack of father involvement or the financial impact to taxpayers.

illness, despair, school problems and dropout rates. Some will argue till blue in the face that most kids growing up without a father in the home become well-adjusted productive adults. This is a disclaimer that is not altogether untrue, yet scholars document (and pretty emphatically because it is so well documented) that in almost all family situations where biological parents are not living together (regardless of whether the mother is separated, divorced, widowed or never married), children are simply prone to less favorable outcomes.

MTV can't take total credit for the reduction in teen and unplanned pregnancies until, on a consistent basis, each episode somehow



conveys that the relationship shared between parents provides the foundation that influences child wellbeing throughout childhood and into adulthood and, some will argue, a lifetime. The family is also the economic engine that manages resources to meet a child's basic needs and plays a huge role in the growth and development of that child. Even when attempts are made to level the playing field financially through public assistance, kids who grow up in homes absent their fathers are, on average, worse off cognitively, socially and emotionally than kids who grow up with two biological parents under the same roof. Their parents are not well-served by fragmented families either.

MGM's film *Where the Boys Are* may have invited judgment on the morals of the young coeds who journeyed south over spring break for fun, fancy and romance, but their antics were fun to watch and seemed to end okay. That was my take as a teenager, despite my parents' dismay. Many of the stars, much like the mothers we've followed on the current *Teen Mom* franchise, launched careers and gained a vast audience, yet none of their stories convinced me that loose sexuality or single parenthood was a choice I wanted to make.

Mitch Pearlstein singing *Where The Boys Are* evoked happiness. We both snickered. Yet later, as I dissected the lyrics, a certain melancholy overcame me as I realized that these young coeds, so willing to travel to where the boys were in the 1960s, longed for more than just the presence of the boys; *they longed for love*. They envisioned "smiling faces, warm embraces and arms to hold them tightly." They trusted that somewhere "in a million people, they'd find their valentine," and until that time, those coeds were willing to do something today's teens and young adults seem unwilling to do: *wait*, even if impatiently.

What I learned from my fact-finding mission about single fathers is that this new, loose and legally laced pattern of family formation outside marriage that symbolizes where our boys are today doesn't necessarily provide the sought-after love, either, and maybe none of them will find it until they are willing to wait patiently and intelligently apply time-tested rules of family formation: One meets, dates, falls in love, marries and *then* has a baby.⁷¹

Endnotes

1. Martin JA, Hamilton BE, Osterman JK, Curtin SC, Mathews TJ. National Vital Statistics Report Births: Final Data 2013. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, Vol. 64, No. 1. January 15, 2015.
2. Pew Research: American Community Survey, 2014.
3. Belkin, Lisa. "Single Fathers: Pew Research Reports Number of Single Dads Has Jumped in USA" *Huffington Post*, 7/2/2013.
4. Livingston, Gretchen. "The Rise of Single Fathers: Nine-fold Increases Since 1960". Pew Research Center: "Decennial Census & American Community Survey Data. *Social Trends*, July 7, 2013
5. Martinez G, Daniels K, Chandra A. "Fertility of Men and Women Aged 15-44 Years in the United States". National Survey of Family Growth 2006-2010; Division of Vital Health, National Health Statistic Reports, No. 51, Table 11, April 2012.
6. Livingston, 2013.
7. Livingston, 2013.
8. National Vital Statistics Reports, Volume 64 (1), January 2015. Per US Census Bureau 2013 Births: Final data 2013
9. Landry, DJ & JD Forrest (1995) "How Old Are US Fathers?" *Family Planning Perspectives*, 27 (4): 159, 161-165.
10. National Vital Stats (see #1).
11. Minnesota Fathers & Families Network, 5/28/2014.
12. National Survey of Family Growth, cycle 6. (Lerman, 1993; Bachu, 1996; Rendell, 1999; Martinez, Chandra, Abma, Jones & Mosher, 2006).
13. Pew Research, personal communication from senior researcher Gretchen M. Livingston, expert on fertility and family demographics (Summer 2015).
14. Livingston, Gretchen & Kim Parker, Pew Research Center Report: "*A Tale of Two Fathers: More are Active But More are Absent*"; June 15, 2011 (reflects analysis of NSFG from USCDC Prevention Cycle 7).
15. Guzzo, Karen & Sarah Hayford. "Single Mothers: Single Fathers Gender Differences in Fertility After a Nonmarital Birth" *Journal of Family Issues*, July 11, 2010; 31 (7):906-933.
16. Ibid.
17. Scott M, Steward-Strong N, Manlove J & K Moore. Research Brief "The Characteristics and Circumstances of Teen Fathers: At the Birth of their First Child and Beyond" *Child Trends*, June 2012.
18. Ibid.
19. Website: National Center to Prevent Teen & Unplanned Pregnancies.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Child Trends Analysis of National Survey of Family Growth 2006-2010.
23. CDC National Survey of Family Growth.
24. Guzzo & Hayford, 2010
25. National Survey of Family Growth
26. Hymowitz K, Carrol J, Wilcox B, Kelleen, K. "*KNOT YET: The Benefits and Costs of Delayed Marriage in America*," 2013.
27. Hollander, Dore, "Nonmarital Childbirth in the US: A Government Report," *Family Planning Perspectives*, 28 (1): Jan-Feb 1996, 31.
28. Solomon-Fears, Carmen. "Nonmarital Births: An Overview. July 30, 2014. Congressional Research Service 7-5700 (www.crs.gov).
29. Ibid.



30. Stykes, Bart. *“Generation X & Millennials’ Attitude About Having and Raising Children in Cohabiting Unions”* Bowling Green University, 2015.
31. Solomon-Fears, 2014.
32. Guzzo & Hayford, 2010.
33. Solomon-Fears, 2014.
34. Edin, Kathryn and Timothy Nelson. *Doing the Best I Can: Fatherhood in the Inner City*, University of California Press, 2013.
35. Carlson MJ, McLanahan SS, & J Brooks-Gunn. “Coparenting & Nonresident Fathers’ Involvement with Young Children After a Nonmarital Birth” *Demography*, 2008, 45(2): 461-488.
36. Argys LJ, Peters E, Cook S, Garasky S, Nepomnyaschy L, Sorenson E. “Measuring Contact Between Children and Nonresident Fathers.” In: Hofferth SL, Casper LM, editors. *Handbook of Measurement Issues in Family Research* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum; 207.
37. Lerman, R, Sorenson, E. “Father Involvement With Their Nonmarital Children: Patterns, Determinants, and Effects on Their Earnings” *Marriage and Family Review*, 2000; (39) 127-156.
38. Carlson, McLanahan & Brooks-Gunn, 2008.
39. Stuart, Elizabeth “Should Welfare Programs Pay More Attention to Dads?” *Deseret News*, Feb 25, 2014.
40. Carlson, McLanahan & Brooks-Gunn, 2008.
41. Simons RL, Whitbeck LB, Conger RD, Melby JN. “Husband and Wife Differences In Determinants of Parenting: A Social Learning & Exchange Model of Parental Behavior” *Journal of Marriage & Family*. 1990: 52; 375-92.
42. Mott, FL. “When Is a Father Really Gone? Paternal-Child Contact in Father-Absent Homes” *Demography*. 1990: 27: 49
43. Current Population Survey (CPS) Fertility & Family Branch, Families and Living Arrangements, 2014.
44. “The Top 5 Legal Things for Practitioners to Know When Working With Unmarried Fathers,” MN Fathers & Families Network, 2008.
45. Children’s Law Center, MN “Unmarried Fathers’ Guide to Paternity, Custody, Parenting Time and Child Support in MN,” Central MN Legal Service, 3rd Ed. 2011 & 2015.
46. Parkin, Susan. “Emerging Issues in Paternity Establishment: Symposium Summary. Center for the Support of Families, 2007.
47. Website: American Association of Blood Banks, 8101 Glenbrook Road #2, Bethesda, MD 301-907-6977.
48. Children’s Law Center, MN “Unmarried Fathers’ Guide to Paternity, Custody, Parenting Time and Child Support in MN, Central MN Legal Service, 3rd Ed. 2011 & 2015.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Corry, Charles. “1.6 Million Men Pay Child Support for Kids That Aren’t Theirs.” (DNA) 4-3-4 Internet article on www.ejif.org (Equal Justice Foundation, Charles Corry, President)
52. AABB [What is this?]
53. Guzzo & Hayford, 2010.
54. Green & Biddlecom, 2000.
55. Furstenberg FF, Mullan Harris K. “The disappearing American father? Divorce and the waning significance of biological parenthood. In: South SJ, Tolnay SC, Editors. *The Changing American Family: Sociological and Demographic Perspectives*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press; 1992.
56. Upchurch DM, Lillard LL, Panis CWA. Nonmarital childbearing: influences of education, marriage, and fertility. *Demography*. 2002;39:311–329.[PubMed].
57. Kathryn Edin and Maria Kafalis, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005), p. 2.

-
58. Cherlin AJ. *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1992.
 59. McLanahan & Beck, 2010.
 60. Hoffman S, Foster EM. Nonmarital births and single mothers: cohort trends in the dynamics of nonmarital childbearing. *The History of the Family*. 1997;2:255–275.
 61. Wu LL, Bumpass LL, Musick K. Historical and life course trajectories of nonmarital childbearing. In: Wu LL, Wolfe B, editors. *Out of wedlock: causes and consequences of nonmarital fertility*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; 2001. pp. 3–4.
 62. Guzzo & Hayford, 2010.
 63. Logan, Manlove, Ikramulah, Gottingham, “Men Who Father Children With More Than One Woman: A Contemporary Portrait of Multiple Partner Fertility, *Child Trends*, Research Brief, 2006-2010.
 64. Stuart, 2014.
 65. Ibid.
 66. Martins, Nicole & Robin Jensen, “Heavy Viewers of Teen Mom and 16 & Pregnant Have Unrealistic View of Teen Pregnancy,” University of Indiana, Bloomington Newsroom, 1/9/2014.
 67. Pearlstein, Mitch. *Broken Bonds: What Family Fragmentation Means for America's Future*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2014.
 68. Murray, Charles. *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*. Crown Forum Publishing, New York, 2012 & 2013.
 69. Benjamin Scafidi, The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing: First-Ever Estimates for the Nation and All Fifty States, Institute for American Values et al., 2008. For a thematically and bottom-line similar study, see *The One Hundred Billion Dollar Man: The Annual Public Costs of Father Absence*, by Steven L. Nock and Christopher J. Einoff, The National Fatherhood Initiative, 2008.
 70. Heritage Foundation estimates total welfare spending in 2010 reached \$890 billion; a large part of this is tied to family breakdown and family formation. Federal Spending Chart 10, 2011. Heritage Foundation Budget Chart Book.
 71. Edin & Nelson, 2013.

8441 Wayzata Boulevard ★ Suite 350
Golden Valley, MN 55426

AmericanExperiment.org

Center of the American Experiment's Minnesota Policy Blueprint delivers a wide-ranging set of policy recommendations aimed at enabling all Minnesotans to thrive in their personal and financial pursuits. These recommendations are grounded in the firm belief that broad prosperity depends on free enterprise, personal initiative and a limited, frugal government. The Blueprint represents American Experiment's most strategic, comprehensive, and ambitious effort to shape and shift public policy in Minnesota. The full set of recommendations can be found at the Center's website, AmericanExperiment.org.

