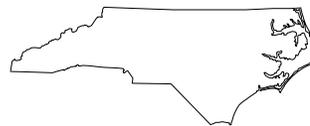


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# Statistical Brief

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State Center for Health Statistics

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## Children in Single-Parent Families in North Carolina: A Growing Problem

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Family structure is an important determinant of health for children and adults, particularly due to the relationship with economic and other resources that support health and well-being. The risk of poor child development is much higher for children in single-parent families than for those in two-parent families.

Most single parents do raise children who become successful adults. However, children growing up in single-parent households have twice the risk of repeating a grade in school, having behavioral problems, dropping out of high school, and being out of work; and girls raised in single-parent households have twice the risk of becoming teenage mothers.<sup>1</sup> Over 85 percent of single-parent families are headed by mothers.<sup>1</sup> About half of the children and mothers in families headed by women live in poverty.<sup>2</sup> However, even when income is taken into account, children from single-parent families fare worse than those from two-parent families.<sup>1</sup>

Most single parents are in their 20s and 30s, not in their teens.<sup>1</sup> In North Carolina, single-parent families represent more than one-fourth of all families with children. Families (single-parent and two-parent) with related children under age 18 comprise about one-third of all North Carolina households. Contrary to popular perceptions that

depict the typical household as a married couple and their children, such households represent less than one-fourth of all households in North Carolina.

Table 1 shows that the percentage of North Carolina children under age 18 living in single-parent households has nearly tripled between 1960 and 1995, from 9.4 percent to 26.0 percent. The percentage of minority children under age 18 living in single-parent households in 1995 was 55.4, compared to 16.1 percent for white children. These percentages for North Carolina are very similar to those for the United States as a whole.

Table 1 also shows that, while the percentage of minority children in North Carolina living in single-parent households is much larger than that for white children, the **number** of children living in single-parent households is only slightly larger for minorities. Among whites, most of the recent growth in single-parent families has resulted from increased separation and divorce; among minorities, the growth has been due primarily to a decline in marriage.<sup>2</sup> Children who had experienced the disruption of their parents' marriage were more likely to have health and behavioral problems than children living with a never-married mother, according to the National Health Interview Survey.<sup>3</sup>

There is much debate about public policies to reduce the growing number of single-parent families, and to reduce the problems associated with the increase in children in single-parent families.



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**Table 1**  
**Number and Percentage of Children Under Age 18 Living in a Single-Parent Household, by Race; North Carolina, 1960-1995**

Year	Total		White		Minority	
	Number	Percent of Total Children	Number	Percent of Total Children	Number	Percent of Total Children
1960	148,023	9.4	72,174	6.3	75,849	17.8
1970	207,581	13.2	98,286	8.4	109,295	26.9
1980	277,791	18.8	130,288	12.1	147,503	36.8
1990	335,423	23.4	151,214	14.7	184,209	45.7
1995	373,074	26.0	172,064	16.1	201,010	55.4

Source: Decennial U.S. Censuses and 1995 Current Population Survey

Note: The data in this table represents only “own children” under age 18. An “own child” is a never-married child who is a son or daughter by birth, a stepchild, or an adopted child of the household head. Similar statistics for all children are not available from the Census. In 1995, “own children” under age 18 represented 82 percent of all children under age 18 in North Carolina.

Past policies have not been adequate. Government can reduce the immediate economic problems of single-parent families by supplementing their incomes, but income supports alone may not enhance long-term self-sufficiency. Work requirements and other efforts to secure jobs for single parents should include provisions for adequate health insurance coverage and child care. Availability and accessibility of family planning services is important, since unintended pregnancies increase the number of out-of-wedlock births, contribute to the breakup of families, and are associated with an increased risk of poverty. The negative attitudes that society often adopts toward single-parent families may further isolate them and add to the difficulties that they already face. Clearly, innovative and compassionate public policies are needed.

**References**

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2. I. Garfinkel and S. McLanahan. *Single mothers and their children: a new American dilemma.* The Urban Institute Press, Washington DC, 1986.
3. D. Dawson. Family structure and children’s health: United States, 1988. *Vital and Health Statistics*, Series 10, No. 178, National Center for Health Statistics, 1991.

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Enough detail was presented on each topic .....  Yes  No

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