

ABSTRACT

Two Americas: The Effects of Single Motherhood on the Racial Disparity in American Life Expectancy

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Throughout American history, a significant gap in longevity has existed between the black and white populations of the United States, creating the potential for “two Americas” to arise. For decades, the average white individual has been projected to live significantly longer than the average black individual. In that time, single motherhood has increased nearly 8 times in its prevalence since the 1960s. This increase has had a particularly profound impact on the American black family—today nearly 3 of every 4 black babies are born to an unmarried mother. Over the past few decades, females headed a vast majority of black households, while females historically headed only a slim minority of white households. Because of this stark contrast in family structure between the black and white populations, this thesis proposes that single motherhood—through a variety of socioeconomic factors affecting a person’s life—is at least partially a contributor to the persistent racial gap in American life expectancy today. By decreasing the amount of non-marital births in America, more opportunities arise for children to climb in social status, potentially enabling them to close the racial gap in life expectancy that has plagued Americans for decades.

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TWO AMERICAS:
THE EFFECTS OF SINGLE MOTHERHOOD
ON THE RACIAL DISPARITY IN AMERICAN LIFE EXPECTANCY

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PREFACE

In this discussion of single motherhood and the effects it has on the racial disparity in American life expectancy, it is important to note the proper definition of a single mother as defined in this thesis. In most studies presented or referenced in this thesis, the term ‘unmarried’ or ‘single’ mother is applied to mothers who had never been married at the time of their child’s birth. In these studies, mothers who specified ‘divorced’ and/or ‘widowed’ were excluded from the group ‘single mothers.’ Until around the 1990s, the United States government did not recognize ‘cohabiting’ as a relationship status different from ‘unmarried.’ Prior to the 1990s, government forms provided women only the option for ‘unmarried’ or ‘married’ statuses with no specification if the mother was living with a partner. However, all the studies used in this thesis mentioning ‘cohabiting’ mothers were conducted so that the term ‘unmarried, single’ was differentiated from the term ‘unmarried and cohabiting.’

Throughout the following discussion, the terms ‘black’ and ‘white’ Americans are used. According to the Associated Press stylebook editor, the term ‘black’ should be used primarily and appropriately because it reflects a common language found in newspapers and magazines instead of African-American or Afro-American.¹²⁵ In addition, someone who is termed ‘white’ refers to any American of the Caucasian race, or someone who identifies with lighter complexion. The life expectancies of individuals of Hispanic origin are, for the most part, excluded from this discussion. This exclusion is primarily due to the fact that Hispanics in America do not have the same degree of disparities in life

expectancy, education, poverty, fertility, marriage rates, or cultural tensions that have all existed between black and white Americans for decades. By including only black and white individuals, this discussion becomes easier to identify socioeconomic predictors of life expectancy. Furthermore, there are far more studies over the past century documenting differences between the black and white populations in America than between Hispanics, whites, *and* blacks.

Finally, the intentions of this thesis must be addressed directly. Because of the controversial nature of this subject and the relevance single parenthood has in present-day American culture, it is important to note that it is not the intention of this author to besmirch or reprimand alternative families, including those headed by unmarried mothers. It *is* the intention of this author, however, to investigate and observe the different socioeconomic and behavioral variables involved in American culture that may affect life expectancy. One of the variables that most distinguishes American black communities from American white communities is the prevalence of single motherhood. The numbers presented in this thesis are purely objective and are relayed here to present the argument that single motherhood transcends racial divisions and puts children at more of a disadvantage than children from married parents. All children should be valued equally, and because of this, it is the hope of this author that parents will strive to do their very best to place their children in the best possible circumstances to help them grow, prosper, and lead long, healthy lives.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, a life expectancy gap has existed between the white and black populations of the United States. Since the 1960s, reports comparing the mortality rates of the two races have shown that although the gap is narrowing, a gap still persists despite significant pieces of legislation and shifts in cultural norms.¹ Not only is this racial disparity in mortality important to the individuals affected, but a nation cannot very well coalesce or survive while roughly ten percent of its total population is predicted to die earlier than its ethnic majority.¹

The United States has evolved socially in several significant ways over the last few decades. In any serious demographical conversation about America, it is important to note landmark pieces of legislation and Supreme Court decisions affecting the evolution of American society. In this particular discussion about race and its relationship to American longevity, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is especially pertinent. This piece of legislation at a controversial time in history marked the end and beginning of two eras in which marginalized groups, particularly racial and ethnic minorities, were given long-deprived equality. Although racial tensions persisted after 1964, tensions have become steadily less potent both in the workplace and in personal relationships,² partly as a result of increased media attention to the rights of ethnic minorities. This 1964 law allowed the once disparaged black population equal opportunities in the eyes of employers, schools, and the law. The educational consequences were astounding, producing significant increases in the numbers of black persons graduating high schools and attending higher

educational institutions.^{3,4} As one can imagine, by increasing the levels of education in a population, the doors of opportunity for individuals open for escaping poverty and crime—two very real problems that unfortunately still plague many in the American black community today.^{5,6,7}

In consideration of 1960s racial inequalities, the average white American enjoyed a life expectancy of 71.7 years in 1960, while the average black American still struggled with a life expectancy of just 64.1 years—a stunning difference of 7.6 years of life.⁸ By contrast, in 2010 that gap decreased to a nearly 4-year difference between the two races.⁸ Even more striking was the same 2010 projection of black men to live 71.8 years while white females were projected to live 9.5 years longer (81.3 years), nearly a decade more.⁸

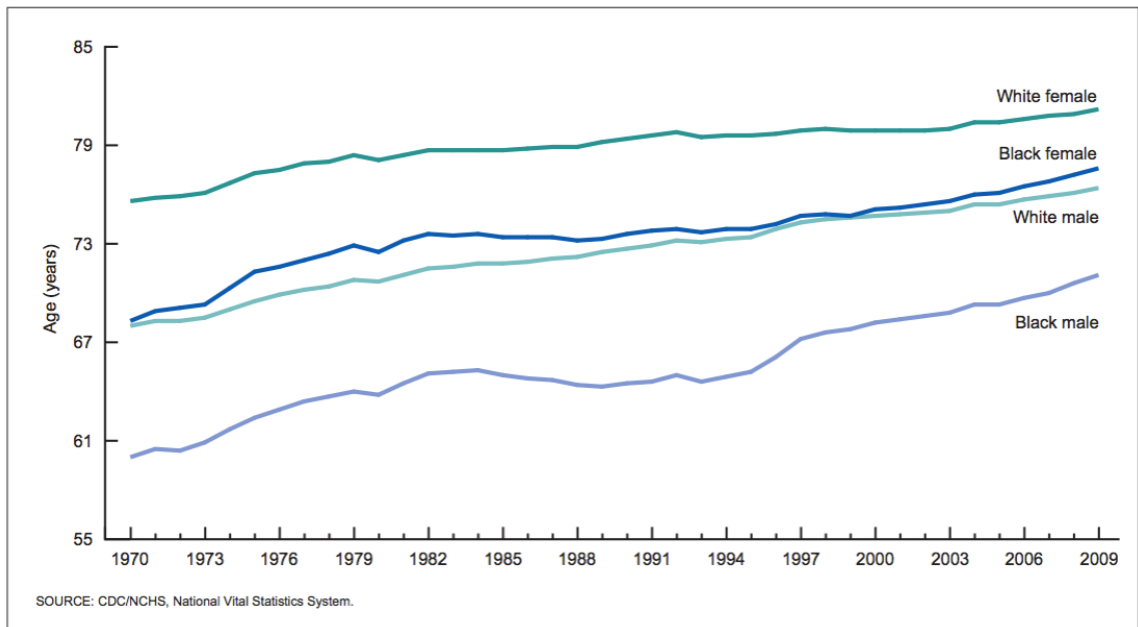


Figure I. “Life expectancy at birth, by race and sex: United States, 1970-2009.”⁹
Source: National Vital Statistics System.

Although the difference between male and female longevity is well known, it is still difficult to comprehend a nearly decade-long gap in life expectancy predicted at birth merely because of skin color and sex. Not only are these statistics disturbing, but they also present America with a unique problem not faced in more racially homogenous democracies in other parts of the world.¹⁰

Fifty years ago, racial tensions were relatively high in the United States. While racial inequalities in American society were rapidly being solved, women were also finding certain rights becoming available. In 1972, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that oral contraceptives used as birth control were legal to use by all women, regardless of marital status.¹¹ With the risk of pregnancy no longer plaguing the minds of American women, pre-marital sex and levels of unplanned pregnancies subsequently increased.^{12,13} As a result, single motherhood has increased at an astounding rate.

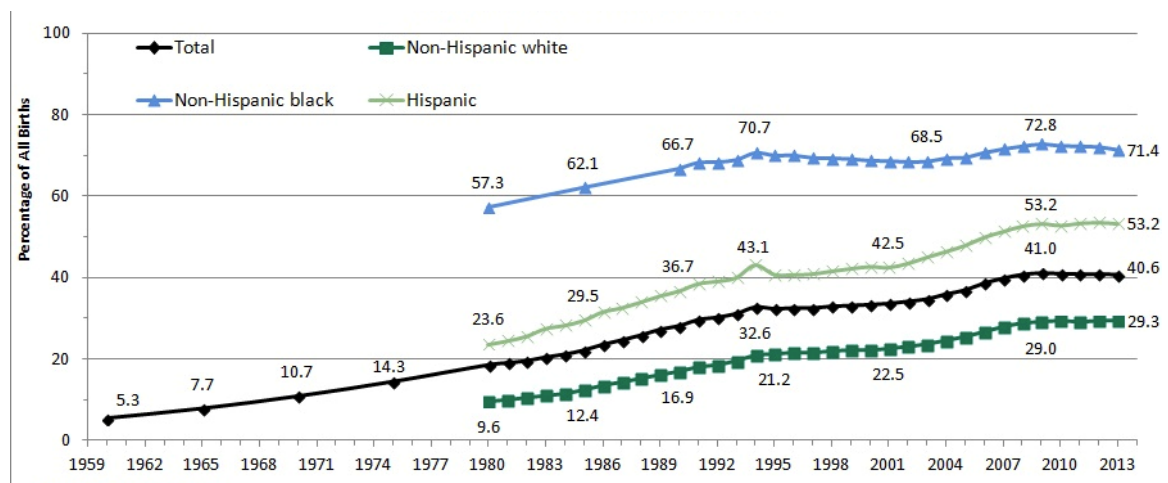


Figure II. Percentage of All Births to Unmarried Women, by Race and Hispanic Origin, Selected Years, 1960 – 2013, United States. *Source:* National Vital Statistics System.^{12,13}

As seen in Figure II, roughly 5 percent of all births in the United States in the year 1960 were to unmarried women.¹³ Today, approximately 41 percent of all births in the U.S. are to unmarried women.^{12,13} In 2011, approximately 72 percent of all black children were born to an unmarried mother, whereas in 1980 that percentage was still an enormous 57 percent.¹³ Meanwhile, the number of white children born to an unmarried mother today is about 29 percent and is increasing, as it has since 1960 when it was only 2.3 percent.^{12,13}

Despite the rise of single motherhood across all racial boundaries, the average American life expectancy has increased from 69.77 years in 1960 to 78.64 years in 2011.¹⁴ Due to both advances in medical technology and a decrease in the prevalence of smoking, Americans have gained nearly nine years in life expectancy.¹⁵ On the other hand, while the United States was 1.5 years *above* the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)’s average life expectancy in 1960, as of 2011 the U.S. was 1.5 years *below* the OECD’s average of 80.1 years.¹⁶ Although medical advances have increased life for the average American, single motherhood has also increased during this time, especially within the American black population. As it will be presented later in this discussion, perhaps the slowing of longevity extension can—at least in part—be attributed to single motherhood’s increasing role in American life.

While it has been known for decades that there is a life expectancy gap between the white and black populations in the United States, a recent *Health Affairs* article states that “current disparities in life expectancy by race, sex, and education are complicated by the fact that the attributes of people that influence their health and longevity do not operate in isolation from each other.”¹ In short, one’s life expectancy cannot be improved by simply changing one facet of life. Instead, a multitude of factors, including

surrounding oneself with people of high character, must be changed in order to achieve the best possible outcome in terms of longevity. However, three important contributing socioeconomic factors should be investigated that significantly distinguish the longevity disparity between the black and white populations: poverty, homicide, and education. Poverty has long been attributed to higher mortality in adults and children primarily because of health risks, including inadequate medical insurance, care, and access. Delinquent behavior and crime presumably share links with homicidal behavior, and consequently with the lowering of a population's life expectancy. Education has been determined to be an actual predictor for raising or lowering one's life expectancy.¹ Educational attainment has the "unusual advantage of appearing on death certificates, thus permitting the links between life expectancy and education, along with its related socioeconomic status correlates, to be quantified."¹

Poverty, as an enormous correlate of mortality, is intricately intertwined with homicide rates and educational attainment. Although against the usual American mantra of equal opportunity for all, unfortunately poverty is a pervasive force. It makes sense that for someone born and raised in poverty, there are less resources available to improve one's socioeconomic status and health, thereby lowering one's projected longevity. This is not to say that poverty necessarily begets death or even more poverty. However, a child born into a family making only \$22,000 a year probably faces more rudimentary obstacles than a family making perhaps \$100,000 a year, and thus is at a greater risk for decreasing life expectancy.

Although there are many varying factors that affect one's mortality and perhaps even the gap between white and black life expectancy, some may attempt to discredit any

of these correlations made between mortality and education, poverty, or crime with genetics. Some may assert, perhaps, that black individuals are simply genetically prone to a shorter lifespan. However, a study published in the *International Journal of Epidemiology* found that black immigrants entering the United States actually have roughly the same life expectancy as *white* U.S.-born individuals, while native-born black Americans exhibited a lower life expectancy than both immigrants and native-born whites.¹⁷ In fact, male black immigrants were projected to live 8.1 years longer than their U.S.-born black counterparts, while female black immigrants were projected to live 6.4 years longer than their U.S.-born black counterparts.¹⁷ This data implies that a socioeconomic or cultural aspect of American lifestyle has somehow caused an increased predisposition for mortality in American black infants. It was found that black immigrants, although three times more likely to smoke than American-born black individuals, were “far less likely to be obese” and tended to “drink less and exercise more.”¹⁸ Indeed, there must be some socioeconomic factor causing nearly a decade-long subtraction of life expectancy from the U.S.-born black population as compared abroad.

In mentioning socioeconomic factors contributing to mortality, a recent Harvard study found (among many factors including income inequality, education, etc.) that the single most determining factor of a child’s ability to be economically mobile and obtain higher socioeconomic status was *single motherhood*, and not income inequality as previously thought.¹⁹ Single motherhood’s increasing and possibly damaging role in the American household may be linked to the racial disparity of longevity between white and black Americans, particularly because of how many births exist to unmarried women in the American black community today.

This thesis therefore attempts to link single motherhood with the negative consequences of a child's disability to become more educated, on a child's propensity to be involved in delinquent activity, and on a child's poverty status. Because these three main factors tend to either predict or are associated with mortality, and because single motherhood tends to heavily influence these elements, it becomes logical to investigate the link between all of these factors. Associations can be made between the prevalence of single mothers in populations and the projected mortality of their children, and thus the effects of single motherhood on the racial disparity in American life expectancy today can be examined.

PART ONE

Single Motherhood & Poverty

Poverty can be devastating. Those in low-paying jobs are often put in positions of little, if any, power or influence, making it extremely difficult for them to voice an opinion. In turn, poverty presumably silences those struggling to get ahead, even in the United States. In a recent U.S. Census Report (May 2014), it was found that in 2012, 15.0 percent of Americans lived in poverty (47.1 million people).²⁰ In fact, since 1966, the official percentage of Americans in poverty has fluctuated between 11 and 15 percent.²⁰ As of August 2014, to live in poverty as a family of four (two adults, two children), the official federal poverty threshold is only \$23,850 per year.²¹ With this small budget and an increasing price for goods and services in America,²² a family in poverty presumably struggles to meet basic needs of food, adequate shelter, and clothing.

The official poverty rate of the United States has fluctuated with no clear trend since the 1960s, making the number of individuals living in “near poverty” a better indicator of income changes over recent decades.²⁰ “Near poverty” is defined as 100-125% of the official federal poverty income level, which is where an additional 4.7 percent of the American population resides.²⁰ Combining these numbers, it can be deduced that approximately 20 percent of all Americans live at, near, or below the federal poverty line. Fortunately, the rate of near poverty has decreased steadily for all individuals from roughly 6.1 percent in 1966 to approximately 4.7 percent in 2012.²⁰ Although poverty has decreased substantially since the Sixties for certain groups

(particularly the elderly), the current effects of poverty are still powerful for those in low-income tax brackets and can be damaging for individuals both physically and psychologically.

In this discussion regarding the racial longevity gap in America, race and poverty become highly relevant and intertwined. Although statistics regarding race and poverty in America can be discouraging, some data presents a positive message. A 2014 U.S. Census report found that since 1966, the number of black individuals living at the near poverty level decreased from 11.1 percent to 6.3 percent in 2012.²⁰ This reduction in poverty marked one of the largest decreases for a group of individuals, most likely due to key pieces of legislation, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which has subsequently proven helpful in the reduction in inequalities between black and white Americans.²³ To put this statistic in perspective, white Americans enjoyed a smaller decrease in their near poverty rates between 1966 and 2012 (only a roughly 0.6 percentage-point drop).²⁰

Overall, the percentage of Americans in poverty or at the near poverty level has fortunately not increased, and has only fluctuated around similar numbers or has decreased. For many groups, including black individuals and married couples, the number of people at the near poverty level has decreased since 1966 remarkably.²⁰ However, the number of individuals at the near poverty line classified as “single, never married” increased from 1966 to 2012,²⁰ while married couples saw a 2.3 percent drop in near poverty levels, “the largest decrease in near poverty” for a relationship during the same time period.²⁰

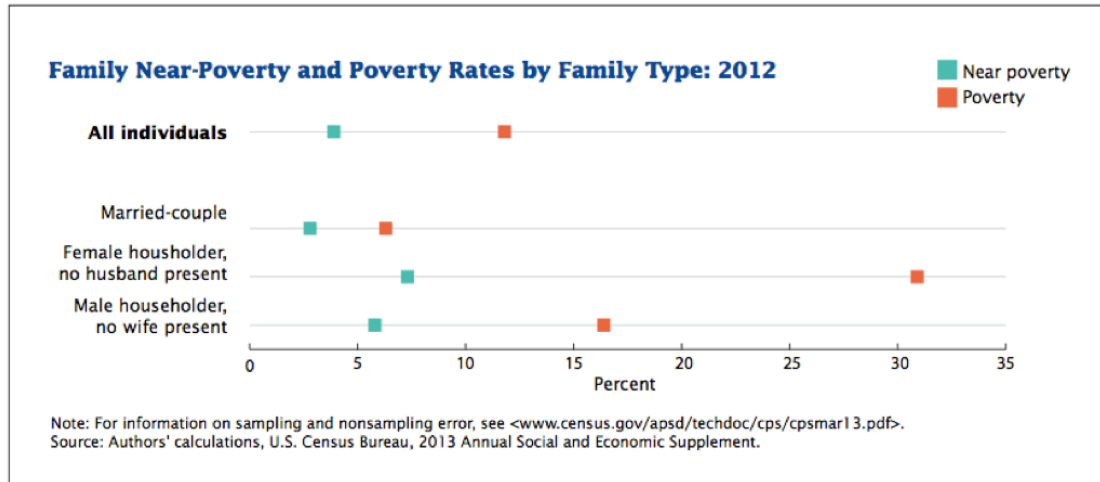


Figure I. Family near-poverty and poverty rates by family type, United States, 2012.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013 Annual Social and Economic Supplement²⁰

In the decades before the 1960s, “it was generally assumed that broken homes had dire consequences for the children raised in them, consequences that extended throughout [these children’s] lives.”²⁴ In his 1965 assessment *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Daniel Patrick Moynihan suggested that should the black family continue to deteriorate with its increasing number of single mothers, it could “prevent the next generation from taking advantage of the greater opportunities being made available through the War on Poverty and Great Society programs.”^{24,25} His warnings inadvertently caused a national movement emphasizing the particular strength both of single mothers and, in particular, black women.²⁴ Thus many subsequent studies in the late 1960s and 1970s suggested that the effects of family disruption have relatively little and insignificant consequences on the lives of children.²⁴

Much has changed in the past few decades. Yet the striking number of single-mother families living in poverty still persists. In 1966, roughly 35 percent of female-headed families were in poverty.²⁶ As displayed in Tables 1 and 2, in 2012,

approximately 34 percent of female-headed families were below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL)⁵ and—even more striking—roughly 60 percent of all female-headed families were below 200% of FPL.²⁷

The number of single-mother families in poverty seems to be fairly consistent throughout the past five decades, despite lowering poverty levels for married-couple families.²⁰ Although perhaps the percentage of single-mother families in poverty has not shifted all too drastically over the past few decades, the number of single-mother families has increased, casting more and more children in the overall American population below 100% of FPL. Studies have shown “that single mothers are disproportionately more likely to be poor,” even across the globe in many affluent democracies.²⁸ While married-couple families enjoy a poverty rate of only 6.9 percent in America, roughly 1 out of every 3 single-mother families suffer from poverty today.^{6,7} Table 1 shows as of 2012, married-couple families of all races enjoyed a poverty rate of less than 8 percent; meanwhile, families of all races consisting of only a female householder held the highest rate of poverty by family type at a blistering 33.9 percent,^{20,27} a difference of nearly 24 percentage points. The percentage of black children below 100% FPL is roughly 9 percentage points above white children below 100% FPL. Because the differences in poverty rates between the white and black populations is not nearly as staggering as the differences between the poverty rates of married-couple families and single-mother families, race alone is not justifiable as the lone contributor to these families’ poverty levels. Instead, single motherhood seems to be a strong predictor for family poverty, particularly childhood poverty.

Below 100% Poverty

	People in families (total)			People in married-couple families			People in families with a female householder, no husband present		
All Races Below 100%	All income levels	Below 100% of poverty	Percentage below 100% of poverty	All income levels	Below 100% of poverty	Percentage below 100% of poverty	All income levels	Below 100% of poverty	Percentage below 100% of poverty
People in families total	252,863	33,198	13.1	188,209	14,177	7.5	47,085	15,957	33.9
Householder	80,944	9,520	11.8	59,224	3,705	6.3	15,489	4,793	30.9
Spouse (in married-couple family)	59,224	3,705	6.3	59,224	3,705	6.3	0	0	(X)
Related children under 18 years	72,545	15,437	21.3	49,061	5,460	11.1	18,368	8,664	47.2
Related children under 6 years	23,604	5,769	24.4	16,055	2,009	12.5	5,756	3,226	56.0
Related children 6 to 17 years	48,942	9,668	19.8	33,005	3,452	10.5	12,612	5,438	43.1
Own children 18 years and over (15)	26,648	2,795	10.5	16,623	996	6.0	8,041	1,599	19.9
Black Alone Below 100%	All income levels	Below 100% of poverty	Percentage below 100% of poverty	All income levels	Below 100% of poverty	Percentage below 100% of poverty	All income levels	Below 100% of poverty	Percentage below 100% of poverty
People in families total	32,122	8,251	25.7	15,257	1,752	11.5	13,931	5,735	41.2
Related children under 18 years	10,931	4,097	37.5	4,125	619	15.0	5,935	3,165	53.3
White Alone Below 100%	All income levels	Below 100% of poverty	Percentage below 100% of poverty	All income levels	Below 100% of poverty	Percentage below 100% of poverty	All income levels	Below 100% of poverty	Percentage below 100% of poverty
People in families total	196,378	21,328	10.9	155,103	10,729	6.9	28,707	8,691	30.3
Related children under 18 years	53,201	9,547	17.9	39,185	4,120	10.5	10,411	4,598	44.2

Table 1. People in Families by Relationship to Householder and Family Structure below 100% of Poverty—All Races: 2012. (Numbers in thousands) *Source:* U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2013 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.^{5,6,7}

All Races (Below 200% Poverty)

	People in families (total)			People in married-couple families			People in families with a female householder, no husband present		
All Races Below 200%	All income levels	Below 200% of poverty	Percentage below 200% of poverty	All income levels	Below 200% of poverty	Percentage below 200% of poverty	All income levels	Below 200% of poverty	Percentage below 200% of poverty
People in families total	252,863	78,808	31.2	188,209	42,723	22.7	47,085	28,440	60.4
Householder	80,944	23,235	28.7	59,224	11,753	19.8	15,489	8,861	57.2
Spouse (in married-couple family)	59,224	11,753	19.8	59,224	11,753	19.8	0	0	(X)
Related children under 18 years	72,545	31,382	43.3	49,061	14,797	30.2	18,368	13,689	74.5
Related children under 6 years	23,604	11,014	46.7	16,055	5,204	32.4	5,756	4,694	81.5
Related children 6 to 17 years	48,942	20,368	41.6	33,005	9,593	29.1	12,612	8,995	71.3
Own children 18 years and over	26,648	7,495	28.1	16,623	3,239	19.5	8,041	3,611	44.9

Table 2. “People in Families by Relationship to Householder and Family Structure below 200% Poverty—All Races: 2012. (Numbers in thousands) Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2013 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.²⁷

Indeed, the American family has changed since the 1950s.²⁹ Although women have enjoyed a greater presence in the work force in the past few decades,³⁰ there have also been a greater number of women having children out of wedlock, almost surely forcing them to look for work. During the recent recovery from the U.S. economic recession, low-wage jobs in America were among the fastest growing occupations, particularly in the service and retail sectors.³¹ While work for unmarried mothers was available, many of these single mothers still continue to need additional finances to match the resources available to married-couple families.

Unfortunately, many single mothers cannot obtain middle-class-wage jobs due to the majority of working, single mothers lacking a college degree.³¹ Due to the vastness of single mothers' particular needs for their families—such as childcare transportation, cooking, maintaining household work, and spending time with their children—a full-time work schedule becomes a difficult undertaking. Because of the part-time work schedule and/or lower educational requirements, low-wage jobs are thus more commonly held by single mothers.³¹ Presumably, their lack of a substantial income limits single mothers' opportunities to rise out of poverty as evidenced by the growth of single motherhood and the continued rate of poverty among single mothers for the past fifty years.^{5,20,27,31}

Top 16 Occupations of Single, Female Household Heads in Working Families Below 200% of Poverty, 2012. ¹⁵	
Occupation	Percent
Health Aides	7.4
Cashiers	5.3
Maids and Housekeepers	5.0
Waiters and Waitresses	3.5
Customer Service Representatives	3.5
Personal Care Aides	3.3
Administrative Assistants	3.3
Cooks	2.8
Child Care Workers	2.7
Supervisors-Retail Sales	2.4
Retail Salespersons	2.2
Janitors	2.1
Receptionists	1.9
Hairdressers	1.7
Teacher Assistants	1.5
Office Clerks	1.2
TOTAL	49.8

Table 3. The Top 16 Occupations of Single, Female Household Heads in Working Families Below 200% Poverty in 2012, as analyzed by the Working Poor Families Project and Population Reference Bureau from the American Community Survey, 2012.³¹

At least in part because of time constraints placed on them, 58 percent of single working mothers now work low-paying jobs.³¹ As seen in Table 3, in 2012, the top four occupations of single working mothers were health aides, cashiers, maids/housekeepers, and waitresses.³¹ Together, these four occupations by themselves made up a whopping 21.2 percent of all occupations held by single working mothers.³¹ Furthermore, only 16 occupations make up an entire 49.8 percent of all low-income jobs held by single, female householders. Thus, it makes sense that “single mothers are nearly 2.7 times more likely to be poor than the typical person.”²⁸

Many low-paying jobs require workers to work nonstandard hours (i.e. night shifts, part-time shifts, holidays, etc.), making it more difficult to balance family and work responsibilities. Because of these more difficult work schedules and the high costs of child care, “many working mothers rely on informal networks of friends and relatives to watch their children.”³¹ Although this perhaps makes work possible for the mother, formal child care centers have been proven to elicit better cognitive results from children than informal care.³⁴ Thus, a mother’s work schedule may negatively affect a child’s “opportunities for educational and economic success.”^{31,32}

In addition to work schedules, the location of an unmarried mother’s family plays a particularly interesting role as well. Due to America’s new welfare climate produced by the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), rural families consequently face more obstacles than do more urban families.³³ With regard to government assistance, single mothers in rural areas are less likely than urban single mothers to receive welfare. It would appear that in rural areas, the “dollar value of assistance is often too low to lift [single mothers] out of poverty.”³³ Furthermore, poorer people in rural areas often face a greater animosity toward their single parenthood, often find transportation difficult, and can receive false information about welfare eligibility.³³ Although rural mothers are not as likely to receive government assistance due to perhaps a greater cultural stigma against welfare, they do find alternative means of meeting the needs for their children through cohabitation.³³ Seen by some as an alternative to marriage, cohabitation is more popular in rural areas than in urban ones.³³ In more rural areas, two parents contribute financially, thus alleviating the need for government assistance. Unfortunately for many single mothers in rural poverty who wish to marry,

the men available usually “lack stable jobs that pay a family wage,”³³ and in these areas, a man’s “marriageability” often reflects his personal financial status. Consequently, this lack of a financially competent spouse prevents more rural single mothers from escaping their low-income status.

Although the extent to which government assistance can and should impact a nation is beyond the scope of this discussion, welfare is irremovable from both issues of single motherhood and poverty. Welfare reform debates have plagued the West, particularly the United States, for decades. And “whether welfare reform has hurt or helped [rural] single mothers is [still] unclear.”^{33,34} However, it was found that single working mothers are “14 percentage points more likely to work at standard jobs than [nonstandard jobs] when offered a childcare subsidy,”³⁵ which helps alleviate single working mothers from certain time constraints brought about by their circumstances.

On the other hand, some have opined that welfare actually incentivizes illegitimacy, and promotes a people’s dependence on their government aid instead of on their marriages. Others have rejected this claim and counter that welfare is merely a safety net into which people may fall should an emergency arise. A recent study posed the question, “does the welfare state destroy the family?”³⁶ It was found that because the welfare state provides “insurance against unforeseen events, and thus competes with risk sharing provided within families,” the role of marriage becomes less and less important in a family.³⁶ Divorce is made easier in a welfare state, traditional families are more easily dissolved, and the formation of alternative and unconventional families is thus promoted.³⁶ In short, while single motherhood may not be intentionally promoted by the

welfare state, marriage is essentially “crowded-out” and unconventional families are subsidized.³⁶

Because the prevalence of single motherhood varies among racial groups in the United States, marriage’s role within these racial groups should be further examined.³⁷ Marriage has seen a decline across all races in the United States, dropping the most among those in the black community. In 1960, a majority (61 percent) of black individuals were married compared to in 2010 where only 31 percent were married, a thirty percentage-point drop.³⁸ In the same time period, the white population saw only a nineteen percentage-point decline from 74 percent married in 1960 to 55 percent in 2010.³⁸ Because of marriage’s historically crucial role in the American family, the impact of alternative families, including families headed by unwed mothers, on the health of American children should be investigated.

As an alternative to marriage, many Americans over the years have chosen cohabitation. The number of non-marital cohabiting families has increased 1900%, up from 0.4 million in the year 1960 to 7.6 million in 2011.³⁹ Cohabiting is also viewed differently within different racial groups in America. Among the white community, cohabiting is generally seen as more of a trial to marriage and, therefore, possesses a similar dynamic to dating.³⁹ Thus economic, social, and psychological resources are shared at lower levels than they would be in marriage.³⁹ Because of this lower level of commitment, white cohabiting partners tend to partake in riskier health behaviors than married partners, thus increasing their mortality risk past those of white married couples, who tend to be safer with regard to their health and finances.³⁹

In the black community, cohabitation is more prevalent than marriage and actually tends to be viewed as an “alternative to marriage.”³⁹ Because cohabitation tends to be viewed as “marriage-like” in the black community, black cohabiting partners tend to invest the same level of economic and psychological resources in cohabiting relationships as whites do in marriage.³⁹ It would therefore *seem* logical that cohabitation for blacks would confer the same benefits as marriage does for whites.

However, because “the earning premium of married men relative to unmarried men is greater for whites than for blacks,”³⁹ a black male and female—whose combined economic resources tend to not place them in the same high income brackets as whites—tend to not benefit as much financially as a white couple does from cohabitation or marriage. Although the benefits of marriage have been well documented, cohabitation, depending on race, may still provide some of the same economic benefits that marriage provides, especially for those in poverty.³⁹ In 2001, the percentage of cohabiting mothers living in poverty was less than mothers living alone in poverty across all racial groups,³⁹ indicating cohabitation is at least somewhat financially beneficial as opposed to singlehood. Cohabitation is even more effective in combatting poverty among black mothers, where cohabiting saw a roughly 12 percentage-point reduction in poverty from living alone.⁴⁰

But while cohabitation modestly improves a mother’s economic status, marriage drastically improves it for any race. Black mothers’ families in particular see a nearly 30 percent-point reduction in poverty by having a child while married,⁶ while married white mothers’ families see a 23 percentage-point drop in poverty.⁷ Curiously, although black individuals increase their financial status from cohabitation and marriage, their mortality

rate neither increases nor decreases as opposed to singlehood; meanwhile white individuals benefit financially *and* in their longevity.³⁹ It was found that particularly in the black community, certain psychological and marital strains—along with riskier health behaviors—offset any potential life expectancy gains marriage provides through finances, making marriage no better for a black *mother's* longevity.^{39,41} This insight is incredibly important when considering the reason as to why there is such a stark difference in the percentage of black unmarried mothers and white unmarried mothers. While both white and black mothers benefit financially from being married or cohabiting, albeit to varying degrees,³⁹ whites do not see the same marital and cohabiting strains as blacks do. Thus, these differences widen the life expectancy divide between the two racial groups already present from a previously mentioned racial income disparity.

While white individuals tend to increase their longevity by cohabiting (and even more so by marrying), black individuals neither increase nor decrease their mortality from cohabiting.³⁹ It must be noted again that all racial groups tend to increase their *financial* status from relationship unions. But black parents neither increase nor decrease their *mortality* rate because of the financial benefits of cohabitation.³⁹

As the future of any population, children and their well-being must be considered, particularly those of alternative families. Although cohabitation and marriage may not benefit all races equally, it cannot be overstated that cohabitation and marriage have both been proven to be financially beneficial for the children of all races. In 2010, for a family of four persons, the income amount determined by the federal government to be considered “in poverty” was \$22,050 per year.⁴² The number of children living in poverty (broken down by racial group) is well documented.^{5,6,27} In a study published by the U.S.

Department of Education, “the poverty rate for children living with a female parent with no spouse present was higher for... black children (49 percent) than for white children (31 percent).”⁴³

Unfortunately, the racial disparity in America’s life expectancy is stark, and single motherhood seems to be closely associated with this gap. Births outside of marriage have historically been “associated with disadvantage for both children and their parents.”⁴⁴ On average, children born out of wedlock are “more likely to live in poverty and to have poor developmental outcomes.”⁴⁴ Indeed, a recent study published in 2013 found that in children, poverty (and the “stressful life events” that presumably accompany it) is “associated with smaller white and cortical gray matter and hippocampal and amygdala volumes.”⁴⁵ These effects were said to be “mediated by caregiving support/hostility,”⁴⁸ which in turn, can be associated with a lack of time spent with a child during development. Due to their high turn-over nature and unconventional work schedules, many low-paying jobs are accompanied with high levels of stress for parents struggling to balance work and time with their children.³¹ Thus, it becomes logical to think of single parenthood as a form of “family instability” which may contribute to developmental and behavioral problems.⁴⁶ With such a disproportionate number of single mothers in poverty, the children of these mothers no doubt face countless more obstacles than children of married parents.

Though it has decreased in America, poverty is still potent for those affected. It can have massive repercussions on an individual and on families: one being a less healthy lifestyle. Presumably, financial resources are slimmer for those who are poor. Priorities must therefore be considered and tough decisions must be made. Americans have the

choice to pursue healthy or unhealthy diets. Unfortunately, this choice is made less freely for those who are poor since consuming a healthy diet, on average, costs approximately \$1.50 more a day than an unhealthy diet.⁴⁷ This cost of a healthier diet totals to approximately \$550 more a year. For a wealthier family, this cost might be considered trivial, and the choice to consume unhealthier food is purely a matter of taste, not necessity; but for poorer families, \$550 more a year can seem an unnecessary cost that could be applied to other more pressing needs, such as a mortgage payment, insurance, or formal child care.³¹

The statistics are startling. In a recent data report from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), it was found that those residing below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level were significantly more likely to consume more calories from fast food than from those in a higher income bracket.⁴⁸ This fact carries some weight in the discussion of single motherhood's impact on longevity, particularly in the black community. In comparing life expectancies of black and white Americans, a one-year life expectancy disadvantage was held by the black community in the category of cardiovascular disease alone,⁸ a frequent result of obesity.

Furthermore, considering that certain groups, particularly single parents, often are employed in low-wage jobs that tend to have unconventional work schedules,³¹ time becomes an issue for meal preparation for families.³¹ Fast food temporarily solves this problem for many working, single parents. In many cases, the drive-thru "dollar menu" option is also cheaper than healthy food one would first have to purchase at a grocery store, then prepare at home, and thus waste valuable time otherwise spent with one's children. Unfortunately, although convenient, fast food options are particularly

unhealthy, as published in the *Lancet* in 2005.⁵⁰ In accord with an unhealthier diet's lower cost, the study found that over a 15-year period, subjects increased in both weight and resistance to insulin.⁵⁰ The results suggest fast food increases one's risk for both obesity and diabetes, two obvious health concerns especially present among those with non-standard working hours (i.e. single working mothers).

Since single mothers in the black community are more likely to be poor, it may follow that they are more likely to consume fast food because of time restraints, stress, and lack of financial capital.³¹ This increased intake of fast food may contribute to an increase in likelihood of obesity and diabetes, presumably increasing mortality risk. Incidentally, obesity-induced illnesses, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and perhaps even cancer, together contribute to a 1.97-year "disadvantage" for blacks in their longevity.⁸ This discovery leads one to believe that the black population experiences a nearly two-year life expectancy deficiency that can be attributed to unhealthy dieting, perhaps brought about by a lack of financial and/or time resources.⁸ Though this can be said for all Americans consuming fast food, unmarried black mothers are more at risk than their unmarried white counterparts simply because of differences in cohabiting poverty rates and racial income inequality.^{5,6,8}

The racial difference between white and black child poverty rates is striking. However, the presence of both parents seems to be a stronger predictor for poverty than race. As seen in Tables 1 and 2 earlier, of all white families, 21.3 percent of children live below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL),⁵ while 37.5 percent of all black children live below this same line (a 16.2 percentage-point difference).⁶ When the presence of parents is introduced, only 11.1 percent of all children living with both parents were

below 100% of FPL.⁵ A staggering 47.2 percent of children living with only their mother were below 100% of FPL.⁵ The presence of both parents in a home produces a 36.1 percentage-point reduction in poverty.

Meanwhile, the gap between white and black child poverty from married-parent households is only 4.5 percentage points.^{6,7} The clear association between single motherhood and a child's poverty is dumbfounding. Of black children living with married parents only 15.0 percent are below 100% of FPL, while 53.3 percent of black children living with only their mother are below that same line.⁶ For white children, those in married-couple homes experienced a rate of merely 10.5 percent below 100% FPL, while a staggering 44.2 percent were in poverty who live with only their mother.⁷

Even more bothersome, an astounding 74.5 percent of children living below 200% of the FPL lived with only their mother.²⁷ Although some may blame divorce for at least part of this poverty, more than half (51.4 percent) of children living in poverty in 2013 live with a mother who has never been married.⁵¹ In total, the poverty rate for children in single-parent families (47.2 percent) is more than quadruple the rate of children in poverty in two-parent families (11.1 percent).⁵

Between the years 2006 and 2010, about 68 percent of all white non-marital births resulted from a cohabiting union, while only 35 percent of black non-marital births were to cohabiting unions.¹² White cohabiting couples are more likely to marry than their black cohabiting counterparts; and despite cohabitation being viewed as “marriage-like” in the black community,³⁹ and thus being more popular than marriage, 71.5 percent of all births from black mothers were to single, unmarried black women.⁵² Although single motherhood is rising across all racial groups, the particularly high rate of single

motherhood within the black community seems particularly worrisome considering the crippling effects of poverty and its particular association with single parenthood in general. Cohabitation and marriage may not provide the same benefits for black women as they do for white women, but being in a caring relationship while raising a child tends to be more beneficial than remaining single with children.

Since white cohabiting couples are more likely to marry,³⁹ and since whites tend to benefit economically from marriage more so than blacks, a white cohabiting union that produces a child would likely not see the same financial woes as a black cohabiting union that produces a child, even though cohabitation is seen as “marriage-like” within the black community. The probability of a child resulting from a black cohabiting union is only 35 percent of all cohabiting unions.¹² However, since roughly 72 percent of all black children are born to unmarried women, the black community harbors many fatherless children, 79.2 percent of whom live below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level.^{6,53} Because families headed by a single mother tend to be more likely to live in a higher-risk neighborhood,⁵⁴ and because these communities tend to have fewer resources than others,⁵⁴ it can understandably be difficult to escape poverty when the social norm surrounding these children is a fatherless upbringing coupled with poverty.

Although it can be mistaken as a chicken-and-the-egg scenario, single motherhood’s relationship to poverty must be properly understood. Some may conclude from the particular presence of single motherhood in the black community that income inequality is to blame for a child’s inability to escape poverty. However, in a recent study published by Harvard University, it was found that “the strongest and most robust predictor [of social mobility]”¹⁹ was single motherhood, not income inequality as was

previously suggested.⁵⁵ This means that single motherhood is the best predictive factor of a child's ability to either rise out of poverty or to fall socioeconomically. Furthermore, it has been stated, "single mothers are particularly vulnerable because of their typically lower wages, lack of spousal support, and the burdens of raising children."²⁸ "In turn, single motherhood is regarded as a key mechanism in the reproduction of poverty and inequality."^{28,56,57,58,59,60} If an unmarried woman were to remain childless, her economic needs would not be nearly as vast. Neither would her time be stretched by, for example, necessities like child care, transportation, or the need for her to pay special attention to a child. Costs would thus not be as high for the unmarried, childless woman; and it follows that the chances to rise out of poverty theoretically become greater for her.

In earlier times, rural America fostered large families with a higher presence of marriage. It was thought that increased childbearing would provide a free workforce to maintain farmland. But because of America's increased urbanization and modern child labor laws, the philosophy to have more children for increased income support has largely decreased in popularity. Theoretically, being poor does not necessarily prescribe one to have a child, since there are many in the United States who are both poor and childless. Therefore, from previous data presented, it can be concluded that single motherhood itself is to blame for a large portion of the poverty exhibited by so many children in America today, especially those in the black community. As described before, race and income inequality between the white and black populations do not seem to be nearly as influential in a child's ability to rise from poverty as single motherhood. And since a child of a single-mother home has a greater risk of being raised in poverty, his or her health risks necessarily increase due to purely a lack of financial stability, healthy

behavior, and health insurance. Because health risks are a strong indicator of one's mortality outlook,⁶¹ it follows that poverty may predict longevity. Therefore, single motherhood—having a strong correlation with poverty—may also predict the longevity of children as well.

PART TWO

Single Motherhood & Delinquency

Prior to the 1960s, attitudes toward single parenthood were negative. It was thought that the pressures of raising a child on one's own were particularly difficult both on the mother and on the child, so much so that it disadvantaged children in their educational, financial, and emotional stability.²⁴ However, shortly after this time, social scientists actively produced study after study to combat any potential societal stigma against single motherhood,²⁴ emphasizing the strength of the unmarried mother "doing it on her own." Ironically in doing so, single motherhood not only has become acceptable, but has also become a social norm in certain racial communities across the United States.²⁴

The prevalence of single motherhood in America has thus been well documented. As of 2013, approximately 41 percent of all births in the United States were to unmarried women.⁶² In 2013, 71 percent of all black children were born to an unmarried mother, while only 29 percent of all white children were born to unmarried women.⁶² This fact alone suggests the black community to be either more accepting of single motherhood or more likely to allow it.

The drastically increased risk of bringing a child into poverty as a single mother, as detailed previously, should by itself be a deterrent from trying to raise a child on one's own. Because of Great Society programs of the Lyndon B. Johnson era, many single mothers have taken advantage of expanded welfare programs, and have embraced single

motherhood as an alternative to dual-parenthood.⁶⁷ However, the percentage of single mothers in poverty is essentially unchanged from the 1960s. But single motherhood also brings an increased risk for childhood exposure to violence and participation in delinquent activity.^{63,64,65,66} A study produced by the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy in 2005 found that “of the 23 studies reviewed, all but three found that family structure had an effect on crime or delinquency. In 19 of these 20 studies where a family structure effect was found, children from non-intact or single-parent families had higher rates of crime or delinquency.”⁶³

Upon first glance, delinquency and crime might seem only slightly relevant to the discussion of single motherhood. However, delinquency becomes extremely relevant in the discussion about the disparity in mortality rates among the American white and black populations in general. Jessica Ho at the University of Pennsylvania recently published a study in *Health Affairs* citing that the mortality of Americans under the age of 50 accounts for “two-thirds of the gap in life expectancy at birth between American males and their counterparts in sixteen comparison countries.”⁶⁸ In her study, Ho found that the largest contribution to the difference in years of life lost below the age of 50 between the U.S. and the mean of other developed countries was homicide, which accounted for 19 percent of all deaths in males, while the commonly misconceived leading category of cardiovascular disease only accounted for 8 percent of deaths.⁶⁸ Because homicide accounts for nearly a fifth of America’s difference in longevity compared to other OECD nations,⁶⁸ and because of the racial disparities in life expectancy in the United States are evident, the racial composition of homicide incidents becomes relevant.

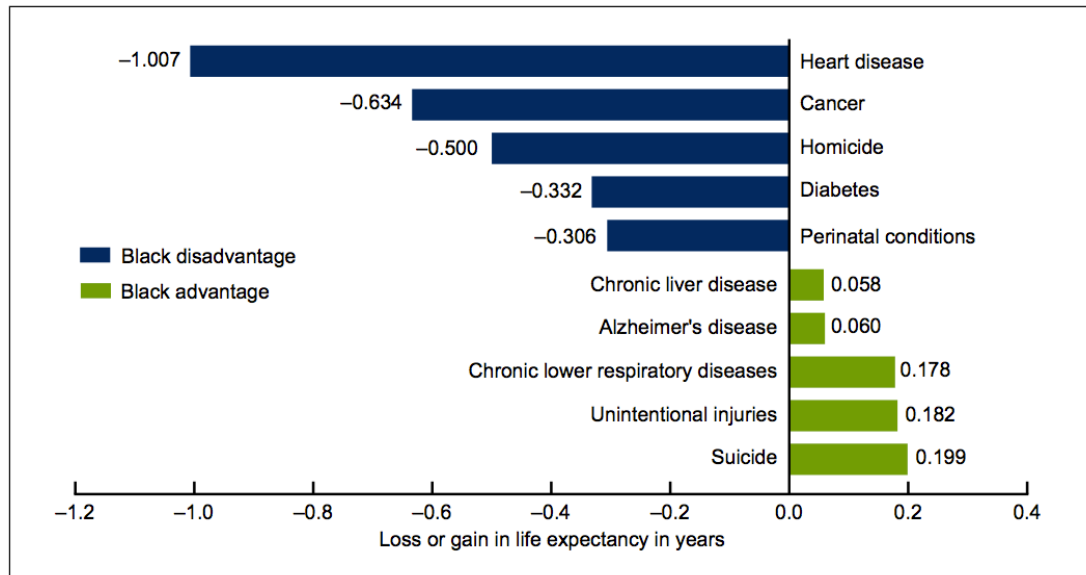


Figure I. “Contribution of the leading causes of death to the difference in life expectancy between black and white persons: United States, 2010.”⁷⁰ *Source:* 2013 NCHS Data Brief.

It was found by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that in 2010, 57.3 percent of all homicidal deaths of people ages 10-24 were non-Hispanic black individuals (51.5 percent of whom were male, as seen in Figure II).⁶⁹ Meanwhile, white males accounted for only 2.9 percent of all homicidal deaths in 2010 of Americans between the ages of 10 and 24.⁶⁹ Should this staggering number of black male deaths decrease, the longevity of the United States as a whole would consequently improve, perhaps even narrowing the gap between white and black American life expectancies in the future. In fact, a 2013 National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) Data Brief reported that homicide accounted for a 0.5-year loss of life expectancy in the black population relative to their white counterparts, and a 0.87-year loss for black males alone.⁷⁰

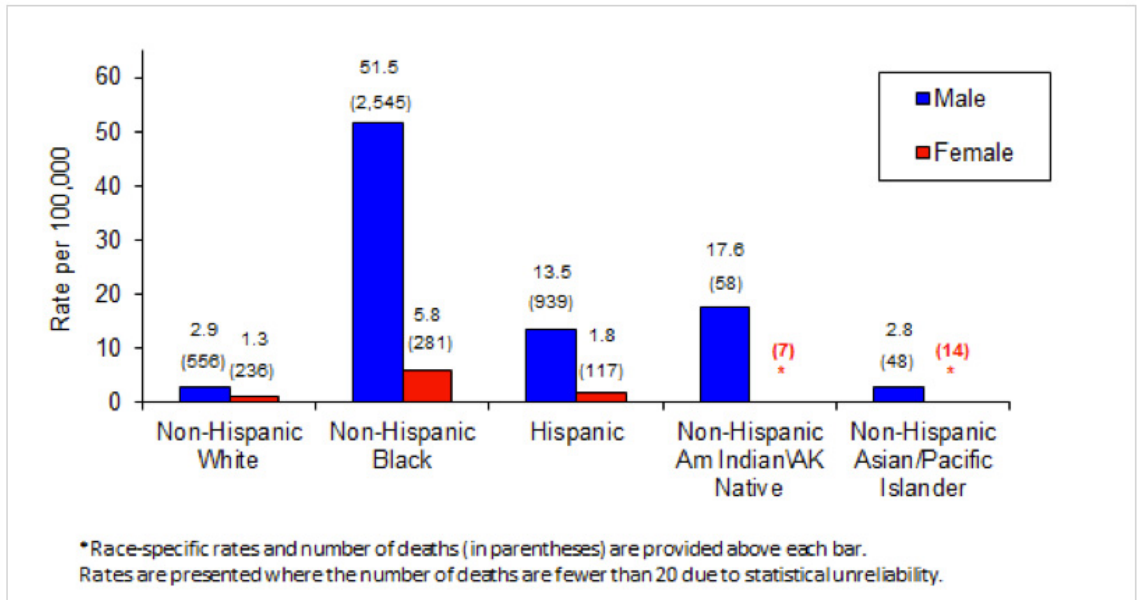


Figure II. “American Homicide Rates Among Persons Ages 10-24 Years, by Race/Ethnicity and Sex, United States, 2010.”⁶⁹ *Source:* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

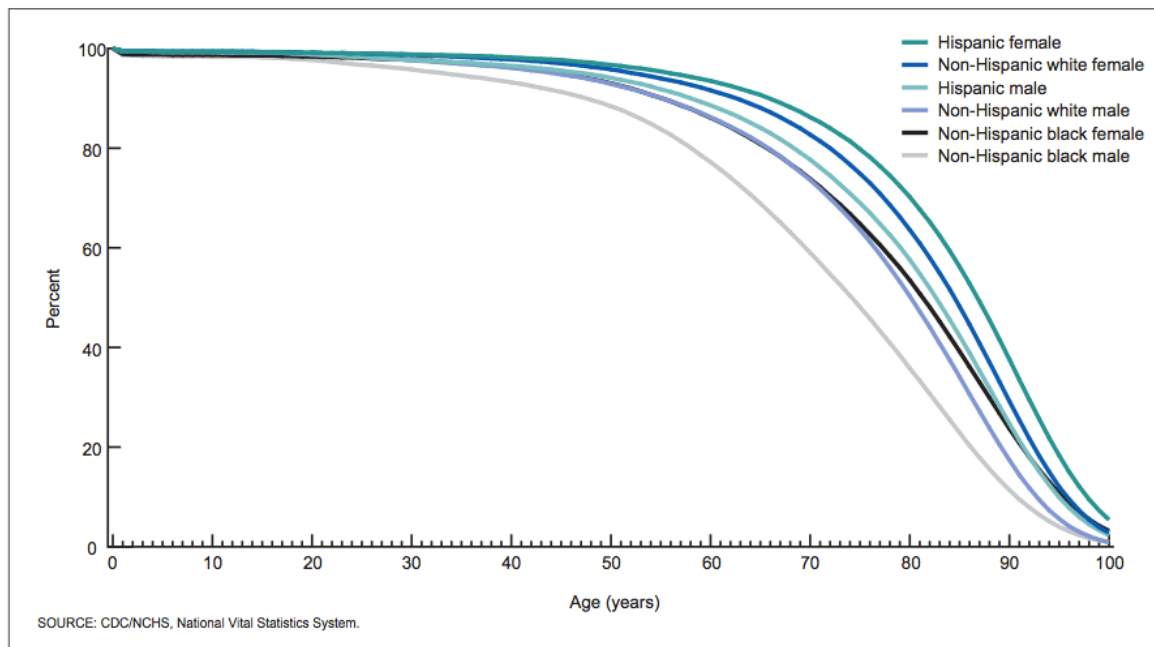


Figure III. Percentage surviving, by Hispanic origin, race, age, and sex: United States, 2009.⁷¹ *Source:* CDC/NCHS, National Vital Statistics System.

In a case study conducted in Los Angeles County, it was determined that homicide is one of the “leading causes of death...and is known to be elevated in low-income urban neighborhoods and in black males.”⁷² In this study, it was found—similar to the NCHS Data Brief’s findings—that homicide reduced “life expectancy by 0.4 years for L.A. county residents and by 2.1 years for black males.”^{70,72} In addition, as the percentage of the adult population in Los Angeles below the Federal Poverty Level increased, so did the expected years of life lost to homicide. Indeed, as poverty rates reached approximately 35 percent, this correlated with an expected 1-year loss in life expectancy for all residents.⁷² The effects of poverty are seen yet again to affect neighborhoods and the wellbeing of their inhabitants.

The correlation between single motherhood and homicide would seem trivial were 1 in every 3 single mothers not in poverty; but unfortunately this is not the case. The poverty rate of single motherhood has persisted for decades, and the number of unwed mothers is increasing particularly in a community in which poverty and homicide have taken a historically hefty toll. Across all income levels, the percentage of black American youth witnessing violence was higher than other racial groups and remained relatively stable, while white American youth levels of violence exposure decreased as income level rose.⁴⁴

Studies show that “high homicide rates are often correlated with low levels of social cohesion in [a] community, and multiple factors in [a] social environment have been described as antecedents to homicide and violent crime.”⁷² In the case of raising a child, resources (i.e. adequate housing and income, clothing, and social and familial support) are more readily accessible to those from more privileged backgrounds. These

expanded resources provide an unwed mother with a more comfortable blueprint to adapting to life's challenges.⁷³ Meanwhile, the mothers from more disadvantaged backgrounds may seek alternative means to deal with situational stress or anxiety, or may inadvertently transfer their stress to their children.⁷³

The many burdens placed on a single-mother family can be unimaginably harsh. Unconventional work schedules leave many children of single mothers alone once school is over for the day. Basic child care and public educational institutions may run on a different time schedule than the work schedule of a working single mother. A child may subsequently have to choose between either spending time with his or her mother—who can only devote perhaps late nights with her children—or an adequate sleep schedule. As time progresses and the circadian rhythm of a child becomes less and less in-tune with that of the mother, a child may consequently lose sleep because of their single-parent home situation.⁷⁴ It has been suggested that “adolescents from single-parent households may be at greater risk for sleep problems due to decreased parental supervision or inconsistent family routines.”⁷⁴ In reality, of children from single-parent homes, black adolescents have a lower sleep efficiency on the weekends than white adolescents, thereby depriving black adolescents of sleep otherwise attainable by their white counterparts.⁷⁴ Because “sleep problems can be both a cause and a correlate of depressive symptoms,”⁷⁴ single motherhood and the atypical schedule that most likely accompanies it may be partially to blame for the weakened emotional stability of a single-parent child, particularly in the black community. With high levels of stress, unconventional work schedules, few economic resources, and a lack of sleep, the risk for damaging the

psychological and physical health of a child from a single-parent home theoretically increases.

Presumably, with the lack of routine or adult supervision during early childhood and adolescence, teens may be led to either witness or participate in violent and/or delinquent behavior. In a recent study published in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, results confirmed earlier studies on the influence of parental monitoring on child development.^{75,76,77} It was found that early parental monitoring in a child's life and ongoing parental support were associated with lower criminal offenses.⁷⁵ Therefore, it can be reasonably suggested that a single parent—whose time is most likely strained from an unconventional work schedule—would be less likely to spend an adequate amount of time with his/her child. Meanwhile, the effects of having another parental figure in the house are, as expected, positive. Merely an additional five years with the biological father present in the household decreases the probability of marijuana use, drinking, and criminal conviction by approximately 2.2, 1.2, and 0.3 percentage points, respectively.⁷⁸ Although no parent wants their child to participate in criminal activity, it has been proven that children from single-parent homes are more at risk than children from married-parent homes to commit a crime.^{63,64,65,66,79}

Prior research has focused primarily on the effects of parenthood on childhood development; yet it appears that the relationship between adults and their parents later in life is a strong predictor of criminal activity as well.⁸⁰ For example, as a child grows into adulthood with a good relationship with his/her parents, the stability of said relationship is a strong predictor of criminal abstinence.⁸⁰ Should this relationship between an adult offspring and his/her parents be poor, there seems to be a lack of parental guidance and

wisdom carried through a life course, consequently placing the adult offspring at a higher risk for criminal activity. Furthermore, the impact of adult child-parent bonds was found to be important when considering high-rate offenders of the law.⁸⁰ A more positive relationship with one's parents in adulthood strongly predicted the efforts of criminal desistance on the part of previously high-rate criminal offenders.⁸¹

Single-mother families are “nearly twice as likely to live in a neighborhood that is described as never or only sometimes safe as are children living with two biological parents (21 versus 11% in 2011).”⁸² This is perhaps because single-parent homes are more likely to live in low-income neighborhoods inhabited by other single-parent families primarily due to similar resources, or lack thereof. The *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* pointed out:

“of all the objective neighborhood characteristics examined, poverty and single-parent family structure stood out as most consequential to psychological well-being. With adjustment for individual disadvantage, only poverty and mother-only households had significant effects on depression; race and ethnic composition, stability, education, and home ownership did not.”⁸³

It must also be noted, “poverty *alone* did not lead to the breakdown of public order when poor families were two-parent families with employed fathers.”⁸³ It is suggested that “one-parent homes [suggest] less control over teenage children, and one-parent neighborhoods imply that neighbors are less able to watch other people's teenagers.”⁸³ Thus, neighborhood vigilance against crime is often takes second-tier to spending time with one's children.

One must wonder how homogeneous neighborhoods are in terms of race, particularly because of the racial disparity in American life expectancy. There is a trend in America in which neighborhoods are segregated by race, black neighborhoods being the “most segregated” in the nation, in addition to being the most “separate and unequal.”⁸⁴ This segregation leads many to believe in a divide creating two Americas.⁸⁵ This separation occurs not because of unequal income levels between whites and any other race, but because of the income inequality achieved by *other blacks* in the *same* community. Curiously, “even when [blacks] achieve higher incomes, they are unable to translate these [gains] into residential mobility.”⁸⁴ These black individuals are thus kept in close proximity with individuals of lower incomes. And if a black family becomes able to move into a more affluent neighborhood, it is thought that new stressors seem to follow them, such as “less community support” and “increased personal exposure to prejudice,” leading to additional albeit different psychological strains.⁴⁴

The “greater overall inequality *within* [racial/ethnic groups] was associated with higher crime rates, particularly *violent* types of crime.”⁸⁶ A testament to this fact can be observed again when comparing income increases with violence exposure in youth. The “prevalence of violence exposure among minority youth” across all racial gaps does not significantly decrease as income is increased, though violence exposure does decrease among whites.⁴⁴ In other words, as income increases among white neighborhoods, exposure to violence decreases, yet in black neighborhoods exposure to violence remains relatively stable, which helps to explain why homogeneous white neighborhoods tend to not see as much violence.⁴⁴ As a white individual increases their income, their “residential mobility” increases, thus relieving a poorer neighborhood of an income

inequality otherwise seen in minority neighborhoods. Income inequality *within* racial groups coupled with black individuals tending to live more homogeneously together in close proximity are possible explanations for why there are drastically more “black-on-black” homicides than “black-on-white” or “white-on-black” homicides in America.⁸⁴ Furthermore, “consistent with theoretical expectation,” it was found that “since the 1960s, the racial gap in homicide arrests declined more substantially in cities that had greater reductions in the ratio of black to white single-parent families...”⁸⁷ However, this reduction in the *ratio* of homicide arrests between the two races can largely be attributed to the large increase in single parenthood in the white community.

The neighborhoods in which children are brought up have a distinct effect on their inhabitants’ health.⁸⁸ Generally shared levels of education, finances, and emotional support/ambivalence all contribute to basic childhood learning, exposure, and solutions to proper health practices. Indeed, neighborhood poverty has an especially impactful effect on mortality. Once a neighborhood (regardless of racial composition) reaches a threshold of 20 percent in poverty, “each 10 percentage point increase in...neighborhood poverty was found to increase the odds for mortality by 89 percent.”⁸⁸ And because of an income inequality found *within* racial groups, increasing poverty increases the risk of violence for minority youth, while decreasing poverty does nothing in the minority populations.⁴⁴ Unsurprisingly, here a divide is again drawn between white and black Americans—a seemingly stagnant issue facing the racial gap in life expectancy.

The presence of homeowners in a neighborhood significantly reduces the crime levels of a neighborhood. Furthermore, residential stability (the amount of time between moving residences) was seen to carry no influence on crime rates. Instead, the presence

of homeowners and their high investment in “crime-fighting behaviors” is strongly predictive of lower crime rates.⁸⁶ Considering single mothers are less likely to purchase a home due to generally a lower income, it would be reasonable to see a lack of homeowners in a neighborhood populated by many single mothers.⁸⁶ Therefore, as previously found in other studies, children from single-mother homes are significantly more at risk to commit or to be the victim of a more “serious property [or] violent offense.”⁷⁹ Presumably, being more prone to experience such violence also increases one’s risk to compromise one’s health, thus jeopardizing one’s longevity.

As mentioned earlier, the family unit is a major predictor of a child’s risk of committing a crime or delinquent behavior.^{63,64,65,66} From a financial and criminological perspective, marriage seems to be the best option for raising a child. Marriage’s popularity has declined in the twenty-first century, and instead cohabitation is becoming more popular. However, cohabitation—as it relates to the discussion on criminology and single parenthood—is a strong predictor of delinquent behavior in children.⁸⁹ It is possible that due to an increased exposure to “frequent moves, harsh punishment, and problem drinking within the family,” more children from cohabiting parents engage in delinquent and violent activities.⁸⁹ Although one’s cohabiting parents may be one’s biological parents, it appears that it is not enough for them to only be living together, but they must also be married.⁸⁹ In terms of longevity for a child, cohabitation in the white community seems to still increase a child’s longevity, while neither increasing nor decreasing it for those in the black community. Perhaps this is a testament to how violence exposure and its negative effect on longevity in the black community cannot be thwarted by cohabitation like it can perhaps in the white community.

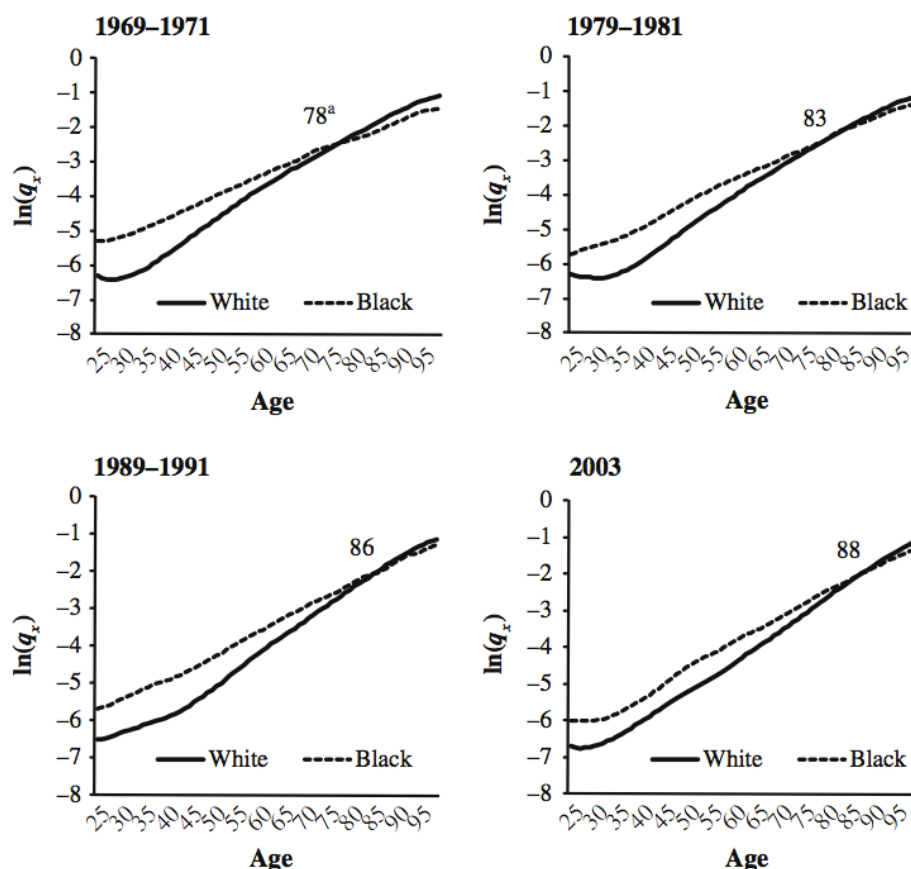


Figure IV. Logged age-specific mortality risk of U.S. black and white male populations across time. Data are from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS).⁹⁰

The racial gap in life expectancy between white and black Americans has persisted in America for decades. However, when investigated further, a crossover in life expectancy between the two races occurs. Around the age of 88, black individuals overtake white individuals in terms of “life left to be lived.”⁹⁰ After a black individual reaches a certain age, homicide (a significant factor in black mortality) is no longer a threat. It is theorized that early stressors in a black individual’s life (childhood prejudices, adult psychological distress, financial woes, exposure to violence, etc.), produce a more robust individual; or it means a genetically more robust individual is left after genetically “weaker” individuals have died.⁹⁰ Continuing with this theory, a white individual—who has benefitted from generally less prejudice, financial woes, or exposure to violence—has

not had to develop robustness to survive.⁹⁰ Therefore, of those surviving, black individuals tend to be stronger and more “durable” later in life, while white individuals are “weaker.” Thus, black individuals who reach such an age live longer than their white counterparts.⁹⁰

Should an individual survive a childhood exposed to more violence and raised in a home where only one parent could provide nurturing and support, perhaps they might experience a longevity seen in other populations. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to believe that children from single-parent homes are more at risk to commit a crime or to be the victim of one than children from married-parent homes. Stress from financial woes, crime rates, and perhaps even a lack of adequate sleep tend to put unnecessary strain on children in their most impressionable years. Psychologically, it may even be perceived that one might not live as long as perhaps another individual with better means of living. Interestingly, a study found that a “one-year increase in estimated [perceived] life expectancy leads to a 15.2 percent drop in the observed violent crime rate.”⁹¹ In short, perceiving oneself to live longer reduces violent criminal activity. Indeed, the psychological toll of living in a “bad” neighborhood with a negative outlook for one’s mortality is incredibly influential, and is perhaps partially to blame for the racial divide in American life expectancy.

Single-mother families’ lack of financial capital logically leads many to reside in impoverished neighborhoods. As reported earlier, an increase in poverty level leads to a significantly greater risk for mortality. Homicide’s negative effect on life expectancy in the black community is strikingly unique.⁶⁹ Because single motherhood is especially prevalent in the black community, and because the lack of a marriage in raising children

seems to generate delinquency and crime,^{63,64,65,66} perhaps single motherhood is at least partially to blame for a reduction in the American black individual's life expectancy.

PART THREE

Single Motherhood & Education

Having observed the financial, psychological, and health risks single motherhood imposes on a child, it begs the question of what precedes some of these socioeconomic woes. It has been seen for the last few decades that education has played a particularly influential role in predicting the health outcomes as well as the marital and poverty rates of Americans. It makes sense then that education in America—particularly that of single mothers—should be examined as it relates to the racial disparity in American life expectancy.

Recently published in the August 2012 issue of *Health Affairs* was an article suggesting that the differences in life expectancy and education of racial groups in America is widening. Although for the past century America and other developed countries have enjoyed an overall increase in longevity,¹ in the United States “disparities persist among racial groups and between the well-educated and those with less education.”¹ Education has been seen to be an extremely impactful force “known to influence health inequalities,” while also being a “principal component of socioeconomic status.”¹ Although there are many factors which have the potential to drive individuals into a particular socioeconomic stratum, education has the “unusual advantage of appearing on death certificates,” allowing links to be made between life expectancy and educational attainment.¹ In 2011, the *American Journal of Public Health* referenced McGinnis as having asserted a “new conceptualization of cause-of-death classification,”

one that described behavioral contributions to mortality rather than pathological ones.^{113,114} Education, which happens to be a significant—if not the only consistent—factor in determining a person’s longevity, will be explained in the context of single motherhood.

Education’s influence on an individual’s life should be thoroughly examined. As educational attainments improve for a parent, childhood poverty rates plummet. Nowhere is this more evident than in a 2013 US Census report.⁶⁷ In this report, as seen in Table 1, it was found that 58% of children living below the federal poverty level (FPL) lived in homes where the parent with the highest education was without a high school diploma. Thirty-five percent (35%) of children below the FPL lived in homes where the parent with the highest education level was a high school degree, while only 6 percent of children living below the FPL lived in homes where the parent with the highest level of education was a Bachelor’s degree. Furthermore, as many as 68 percent of children living below 200% FPL (which is still less than \$50,000 a year) live in a home where a high school diploma is the highest level of education by either parent.⁶⁷ It seems that as the amount of education increases for at least one parent in a household, the poverty rates of their children decline significantly. The percentage of children living in a household making less than \$50,000 a year sharply declined from 68 percent, whose parent(s) obtained only a high school diploma, to only 18 percent, whose parent(s) obtained a Bachelor’s degree. If the parent obtained a professional or graduate degree, their child would have only a 9 percent chance of living below 200% FPL.⁶⁷

Table 1. Poverty Status of U.S. Children Under 18 Years by Selected Characteristics: 2013.⁶⁷

		Poverty Status of Children				
		Below 100% of poverty	100% to 199% of poverty	200% of poverty and above	% of children below 100% of poverty	% of children below 200% of poverty
TOTAL	73,910	16,428	16,131	41,350	22.23	44.05
RACE						
White alone	54,227	10,256	11,561	32,410	18.91	40.23
Black alone	11,086	4,239	2,714	4,133	38.24	62.72
PRESENCE OF PARENTS						
Living with both parents	50,646	6,696	9,724	34,225	13.22	32.42
Living with mother only	17,532	7,819	4,917	4,796	44.60	72.64
Living with father only	2,999	636	844	1,519	21.21	49.35
Living with both parents						
Married	47,611	5,249	8,896	33,466	11.02	29.71
Unmarried	3,034	1,447	829	759	47.69	75.02
Living with mother only						
Married spouse absent	898	471	195	233	52.45	74.16
Widowed	516	183	147	186	35.47	63.95
Divorced	5,250	1,492	1,580	2,178	28.42	58.51
Separated	2,479	1,238	703	538	49.94	78.30
Never married	8,389	4,436	2,293	1,661	52.88	80.21
HIGHEST EDUCATION OF EITHER PARENT						
No parents present	2,733	1,277	645	811	46.73	70.33
Less than 9th grade	2,329	1,296	778	255	55.65	89.05
9th to 12th grade, no diploma	4,917	2,838	1,367	712	57.72	85.52
High school graduate	15,535	5,477	5,023	5,035	35.26	67.59
Some college or AA degree	20,761	4,260	5,575	10,927	20.52	47.37
Bachelor's degree	15,719	950	2,003	12,766	6.04	18.79
Prof. or graduate degree	11,916	330	740	10,845	2.77	8.98
HEALTH INSURE. COVERAGE						
Covered by health insurance	67,360	14,297	14,045	39,018	21.22	42.08
Not covered by health insurance	6,550	2,131	2,086	2,332	32.53	64.38

1/ Excludes children in group quarters, and those who are a family reference person or spouse

2/ Hispanics may be of any race.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2013 Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement. Released: November 2013.⁶⁷

Having been well documented in previous pages, poverty is not particularly good for children. A decreased household income puts children more at risk for disadvantages such as diabetes, inadequate to no health insurance coverage, and exposure to violence. Because of education's fundamental role in an individual's socioeconomic status,⁹² the role of education must clearly be examined in regard to an individual's mortality. Over the course of the past few decades, "studies have established [a] strong inverse relationship between [education and mortality]."⁹² Although the trends imply purely an association between education and life expectancy, not necessarily causation, the correlation is strong; and with additional data (i.e. poverty rates, lower-wage jobs, etc.) that also correlate with education and longevity, an even stronger case should be made for education being named a cause for an individual's increased or decreased life expectancy. Indeed, some have ventured so far as to assert that one of the leading causes of death in the United States is a low education.^{113,116} In a 2007 study, it was found that "medical advances averted a maximum of 178,193 deaths" from 1997 to 2002, while a college degree would have saved approximately 1,369,335 deaths from occurring, "a ratio of 8:1."^{113,116} There is no doubt as to education's influence over longevity.¹¹⁶

Continuing in this discussion, a study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that "educational failure is linked to law-violating behavior," due to employment being named, in part, a source of deterrence from delinquent behavior.⁹³ This makes sense because should an individual be employed and have a stable source of income, that individual would not want to risk his or her own financial security, health benefits, and perhaps even luxuries otherwise attained. In order to obtain a stable and high-paying job, typically more—rather than less—education is

required. Thus, if an individual lacks educational achievement, the likelihood of a stable, high-paying employment declines, and the likelihood of a lower-paying employment rises, perhaps even increasing the risk for delinquent behavior. Presumably, an incarcerated life is not ideal for one's longevity. This is not to say that a majority of low-education individuals are criminals; but quite the reverse. It seems that many criminals lack an education, hence the risk of "law-violating behavior" for the population in general is greater for those who lack educational credentials.

Overall, since 1980, the general American public has increasingly become more educated. In 1980, only 17.0 percent of the population held at least a Bachelor's degree.⁹⁴ Ten years later, that figure rose to 20.3 percent, and in 2003, 27.2 percent of the US-born population held at least a college degree.⁹⁴ In 2012, 39.4 percent of Americans between ages 25 and 64 possessed a college degree.⁹⁴ This increase of approximately twenty-two percentage points (over double that of 1980) should be lauded as a great success, both for standards of living and for the increased longevity it has given Americans.¹⁵

However, a racial divide in educational attainment still persists in the United States, especially between white and black Americans. According to a study performed by the Lumina Foundation using U.S. Census data between 2010 and 2012, 43.87 percent of all white adults (ages 25-64) have a college degree, while only 27.6 percent of black adults and 19.8 percent of Hispanics possess a college degree.⁹⁴ The demographics of America are also changing significantly, namely the rapid growth of the Hispanic population. In the same study, it is predicted that should the "attainment rates for different racial and ethnic groups" not change, in 2025 only about 38 percent of all Americans will have a college degree, leaving tens of millions of Americans

undereducated.⁹⁴ If underrepresented populations continue to not attend college, the results have the potential to be disastrous when considering the positive trend in life expectancy Americans have shown over the past century.

Continuing with the analysis of race, education, and mortality, it was found from the American Community Survey that the “largest disparity in life expectancy at birth in the United States” involves “differences between the highest educated whites (16+ years of education by age 25) and the lowest educated blacks (less than 12 years of education by age 25).”¹ Within racial groups in 2008, “the difference in life expectancy at birth between those with the most and those with the least education was 10.4 years for white females, 6.5 years for black females, 12.9 years for white males, and 9.7 years for black males.”¹ Due to these findings, including the longevity gradients present within each racial group, it can be said that education and its consequential socioeconomic status are strongly associated with lifelong health outcomes that “transcend the independent effects of race—a finding that is consistent with a large body of scientific literature dating back more than eighty years.”^{1,95}

Life Expectancy At Birth, By Years Of Education At Age 25 For White Females, 1990-2008

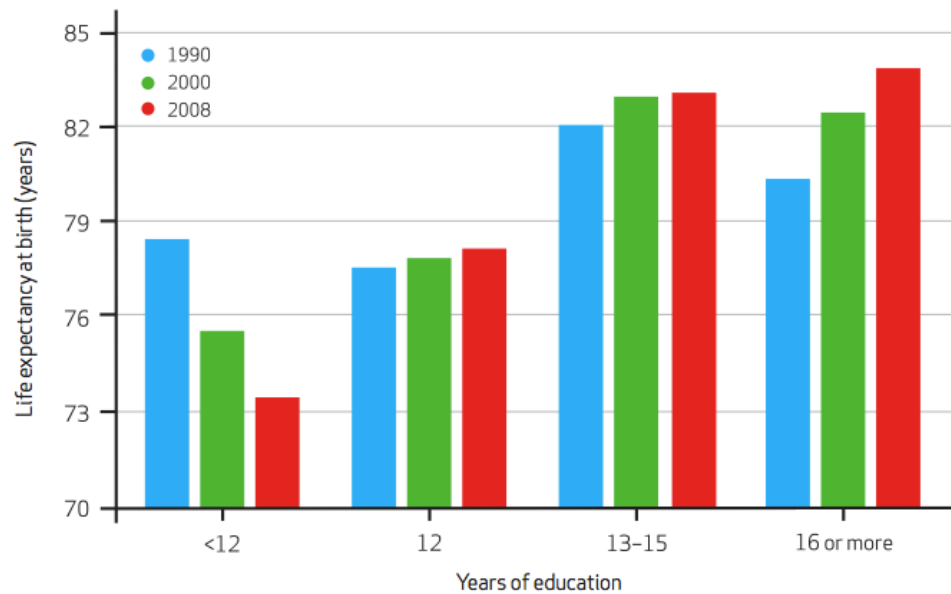


Figure I. Life Expectancy at Birth, by Years of Education at Age 25 for White Females, 1990-2008. (An Analysis from the National Vital Statistics System and the Census Bureau.)^{1,97,98}

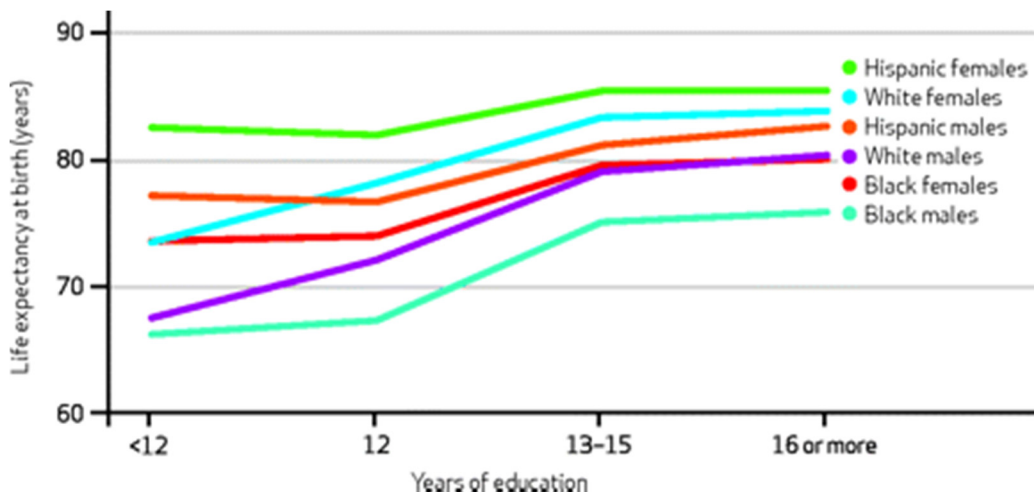


Figure II. Life Expectancy at Birth, by Years of Education at Age 25, by Race and Sex, 2008. Data taken from the National Vital Statistics System and U.S. Census Bureau.^{1,97,98}

Although the factors that affect an individual's health and overall longevity typically operate independently from one another, it cannot be overstated how much influence education has on one's life expectancy. For decades there has been a gap between the mortalities of black and white Americans, as mentioned in previous pages—a gap, between some groups, of 7 to 9 years of life. Keeping this in mind, it was found in a recent study that “on average, blacks...with sixteen or more years of education lived 7.5 years longer...than whites with less than twelve years of education,”¹ essentially closing a longevity gap between the two races that has been present for decades. Needless to say, it can be seen that the consequences of education profoundly impact the future of the American society, perhaps even solving the many social issues not covered in this discussion.

Unfortunately, today the racial gap in longevity still exists, along with an educational attainment gap between both the sexes and races. Earlier in this discussion, it was proposed that single motherhood—due to its large presence within the black community and rising presence in the white community—is at least partially to blame for the persistent gap in longevity between the white and black populations in America. Despite advances in social policy, public health, public education, and medicine, the gap still lingers.¹ Considering the economic impact single motherhood has on a family, as seen in previous chapters, education and single motherhood should be examined as well, for the “rise among unmarried women in their 20s and 30s has occurred mainly among women without college degrees.”¹⁰¹

It is no doubt difficult for a woman who becomes pregnant to pursue a college degree, which is perhaps one of the reasons why so many single mothers are

undereducated as compared with their married-mother peers. The time constraint single parents are placed under due to unconventional work schedules may place children at a disadvantage when it comes to time spent at home. While unmarried mothers are at work, their children may have difficulty developing study skills, being disciplined, and developing time management skills. In fact, in a study performed in 1994, the educational success of children could be predicted by the presence of merely eleven items: a place to study, a daily newspaper, regular magazine, encyclopedia, atlas, dictionary, typewriter, computer, more than 50 books, calculator, one's own room.^{99,100} Parental expectations, number of books in the home, and income were all found to be particularly important in predicting the academic achievement of children from single-parent homes. Many of these things, unfortunately for single mothers, are only possible with increased income levels. However, income alone—as found in the same study—does not affect educational achievement as much as quality time spent between parent and child. Over the past few decades, there has been an increase in the number of women (and mothers) in the workforce, and the amount earned by women has substantially increased. However, as pointed out by Sara McLanahan, economic gains made by children from their mother's employment do not offset the loss of their mother's time.⁷⁶ It must be noted that generally “although [unemployed] mothers spend about twice as much time at home as employed mothers, most of the additional time is spent cooking and doing housework, rather than playing and engaging in educational activities with their children.”⁷⁶

Low education can especially harm children from single-mother homes today as society becomes more and more advanced and educated.¹⁵ According to Cherlin, as a

woman becomes college educated, childbearing outside of wedlock remains uncommon, while “childbearing outside of marriage has become much more common among less-educated women in their 20s and 30s. In the period from 1997 to 2001, 93 percent of women with a college degree who gave birth were married compared to 71 percent of women with some college, 57 percent of women with a high school degree, and 39 percent of women without a high school degree.”^{101,112} This trend may be partially explained by it being difficult for a woman to educate herself once she becomes a parent. In addition, a woman attending college may be more inclined to focus on a lucrative career first *before* becoming pregnant, something a woman with less education could not necessarily do. The overall advancement in education for women leaves single mothers—whose educational achievements blended better with those of their peers of the 1960s—toward the bottom of the socioeconomic totem pole today. In the year 1960, approximately “14% of mothers in the bottom (economic) quartile” were single “versus 4.5% of mothers in the top quartile were single.”⁷⁶ However, by the year 2000, the percentage of single mothers in the bottom quartile tripled to 43 percent while the percentage of single mothers in the top quartile only grew to 7 percent. This can easily be seen in Figure III by the amount of education attained by the mother and the corresponding employment gains made by each of the educational attainment groupings.

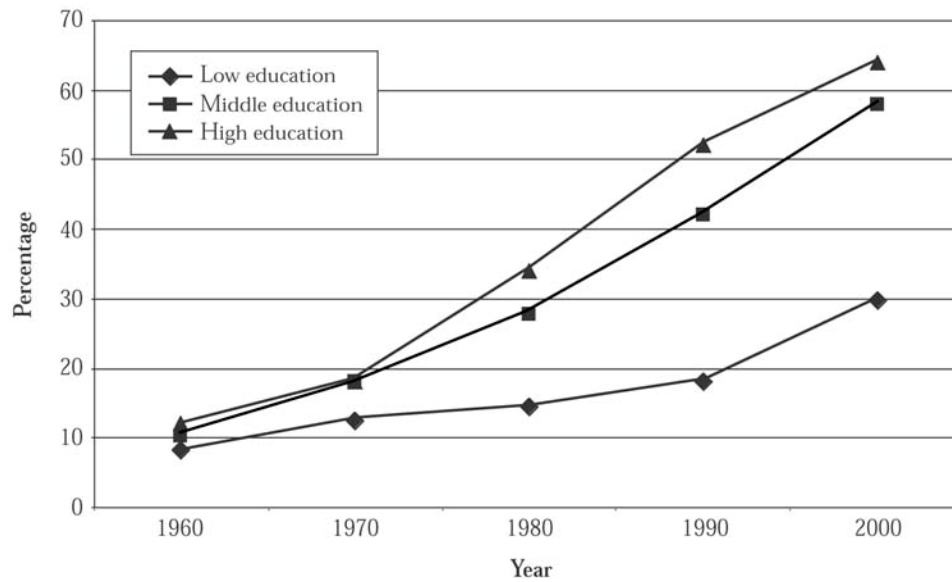


Figure III. Percentage of Mothers Employed; Trends in Mothers' Employment, 1960 to 2000. Employment is defined as working at least 27 weeks per year for 15 hours per week.⁷⁶

From Figure III it can be seen that in the year 1960, low education, middle education, and high education all saw mothers' employment statuses around 8 to 13 percent.⁷⁶ However, as society began to adopt women into the workforce more readily and higher education became more popular, the more highly educated mothers' employment status was more than double that of low education mothers, even *with* society's increased demand for women in the workforce. This trend is indicative of the value American employers place on education, and how much education can determine one's livelihood,¹ especially as a single mother.

The education of women has played a particularly interesting role in single mother poverty. As it was stated in the first chapter of this discussion, married-couple families are more likely to be above the poverty line than single-parent families.⁶⁷ In other words, single mothers are more likely to be in poverty. It was found that college-educated women are more likely to marry than other women and are also less likely to divorce.⁷⁶

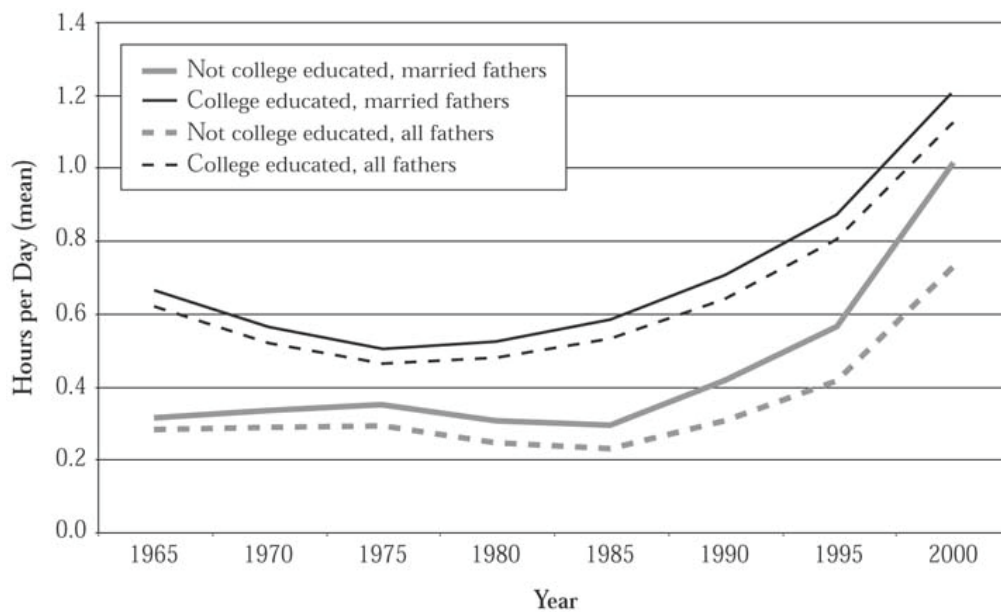


Figure IV. Trends in Fathers' Involvement (Hours per Day, mean) with their Children from 1965 to 1998, by Education and Married Status. ^{76,77}

Not only mothers are affected by this educational phenomenon. Relevant to the discussion of single motherhood's impact on the longevity of a child, a father's presence plays an essential role in the development of a child; education also has its influence in this category. As a father becomes more educated, he then has better employment opportunities, better work hours, and thus more time resources to give his children. In Figure IV, the difference between the time college-educated fathers and non-college

educated fathers spent with their children is remarkable. Across three and a half decades, college-educated fathers spent more time with their children than did non-college educated fathers.⁷⁶ Married fathers tended to spend more time with their children than non-married fathers, and the recent upward spike in the time spent by married, non-college educated fathers with their children is indicative of marriage's role in a family's overall development.^{76,102} Overall, college-educated, married fathers tended to spend the most time with their children, while non-educated fathers tended to spend less time.⁷⁶ To possibly explain this data, it would make sense for a non-educated father to spend less time with his children due to the constraints of perhaps unconventional work hours during which his child is either in school or asleep.

Children of these alternative families in which there is only one parent (usually the mother) are more likely to have a parent whose education is relatively lacking. In fact, the “rise among unmarried women in their 20s and 30s has occurred mainly among women without college degrees”.¹⁰¹ Having a child out of wedlock is still uncommon among women with a college degree. To give a snapshot of this trend, it has been noted that from 1997 to 2001, 93 percent of college-educated women who had a child were married, 71 percent of mothers with some college were married, 57 percent of mothers with only a high school degree were married, and only 39 percent of mothers without a high school diploma were married.¹⁰¹ This presumably means that about 61 percent of mothers without a high school degree were not married at the time of their child's birth. Thus, the least educated women in society—who also most likely have lower incomes and more unconventional work schedules—are having children prior to marriage.¹⁰¹

Furthermore, in a recent study conducted in 2006, Mandara and Murray found that a significant risk factor for drug use among American black males was due to father absence from the home.¹⁰² It has also been suggested that through the theory of “social dominance,” single mother homes typically possess a lower social status, have “fewer economic resources,” and “face greater personal and institutional discrimination compared to two-parent homes.”¹⁰³ There has been large amounts of research detailing “lower graduation rates, lower GPAs, and greater risk for drug abuse” associated with coming from a single-mother home.^{99,102} Despite the statistics, there are children from single-parent homes who *do* graduate from high school, who *do* attend college, and who *do* elevate themselves to higher social statuses.⁹⁹ But unfortunately, on average a child growing up in a single-mother home has a statistical projected outcome that, by most standards, is undesirable.

Since the 1960s, the American family structure has shifted from the classical married-parents household to a more diverse, alternative family structure, including single parents, cohabiting couples, and stepparents. Although these changes can be seen across all races and ethnic subgroups, it is notable that increases in single motherhood were “most pronounced among the most disadvantaged groups.”⁵⁹ Indeed, 44.2 percent of black single mothers reported as having less than a high school degree, while 37.4 percent of white single mothers lacked a high school diploma.⁴⁰ This can be compared to 13.9 percent of married black mothers lacking a high school diploma, and 8.1 percent of married white mothers lacking a high school degree.⁴⁰ From these data, it can be seen that an individual with less education tends to have a child out of wedlock, and is thereby more likely to place one’s family in disadvantageous circumstances.

To continue with the impact of single motherhood on children, it has been reported that children of single-mother homes perform less well in school than children from married-parent homes. A large majority of studies conducted from the mid-1980s through the 2000s indicates “even when controlling for economic and racial differences of the family, children from two-parent households outperform children from one-person households across a variety of measures.”^{99,40,104,105,106,107} It was best summarized by the research of McLanahan and Sandefur when they wrote in 1994:

“Children who grow up in a household with only one biological parent are worse off, on average, than children who grow up in a household with both of their biological parents, regardless of the parents’ race or educational background, regardless of whether the parents are married when the child is born, and regardless of whether the resident parent remarries.”^{99,108}

It was found by Pong et al. (2003) that when compared to children from other developed countries, children from single parent homes in the United States had the “largest gap between the academic achievement of children from single-[mother homes] versus two-parent [homes].”^{99,109}

As discussed in previous pages, the role of single motherhood in a child’s development—particularly in a child’s education—is incredibly impactful. In a recent article, education was said to be:

“the only measure of socioeconomic status that remains reasonably consistent across much of the life span and for which everyone can be classified. It is an indicator that precedes chronologically most...health events of [one’s life] and influences many of the more downstream mechanisms by which socioeconomic

status affects health.”¹¹⁰

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the *American Journal of Public Health* published an article detailing education’s impact on longevity in the United States, revealing that in the year 2000, “approximately 245,000 deaths in the United States were attributable to low education” alone.¹¹³ Furthermore, these estimated attributes to mortality are shockingly “comparable to deaths from the leading pathophysiological causes,” such as acute myocardial infarction (192,898), “which was the leading cause of death in the U.S. in 2000.”^{113,115} These findings are extremely telling of education’s impact on the longevity of Americans. Should one’s education in the U.S. be somehow jeopardized by an enormous lifestyle change (such as single motherhood), it is no wonder as to why one’s life expectancy might plummet.

Over the past few decades, Americans have seen a racial gap in longevity and educational attainment persist, creating the potential for two Americas to emerge:¹ one in which marriage rates, educational attainment, and life expectancy are high; and another in which low educational attainment, poverty, and single parenthood are common themes, and where mortality is consequently high. Olshansky said:

“Differences in longevity between subgroups of the U.S. population are so pernicious and systemic that it is now reasonable to conclude that at least two Americas have formed with notably different longevity prospects. The two are demarcated by level of education and its socioeconomic status correlates, and related to race or ethnicity.”^{1,111}

But the racial disparities in educational attainment and life expectancy take root in a more hidden cause than simply race, and that is single motherhood. Because the American

black population has such a high prevalence of unmarried mothers, and because of education's unique influence on a person's life, it therefore becomes reasonable to assert that single motherhood (and its effects on education) in the black community can at least partially explain the racial gap in present-day American longevity.

CONCLUSION

In any serious discussion about American life expectancy, there is no denying the countless factors that play a role. The powers of economics, cultural tendencies, public policy, developmental psychology, and ethics all contribute to a person's environment during their upbringing. Thus, the task is daunting, to say the least, when attempting to pinpoint exact contributors to mortality in America. It is also unavoidable to discuss the racial disparities in American longevity, particularly between those of the black and white populations. As discussed in previous pages, the gap between the life expectancies of the white and black populations in America is stunning to the point at which some, including myself, have mentioned the emergence of "two Americas."¹

In forecasting the progression of these two Americas, what exactly was contributing to the development of this racial gap in longevity? The United States passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 roughly fifty years ago and subsequently passed additional laws protecting civil liberties dealing with race. Why does a racial gap in longevity still persist? One key difference, it was hypothesized in developing this thesis, is that the percentage of unmarried births in the black population significantly outnumbers the percentage of unmarried births in the white population, and that perhaps this factor contributed to the longevity gap over time. Throughout this thesis, it has been well documented that single motherhood is a particularly strong correlate, and perhaps predictor, of mortality in the United States. Because of the many factors that contribute to socioeconomic conditions, as well as to the development of a person throughout his or

her lifetime, three main factors contributing to mortality were examined: poverty, homicide and delinquency, and education. Through the lenses of these three main factors, single motherhood was determined to be a fairly strong predictor of disadvantage and even perhaps mortality.

There exists a large difference between racial poverty levels in America. In 2012, the total percentage of families of all races in poverty was 13.1 percent.⁵ Nearly 26 percent of all black families lived below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level, while nearly 11 percent of all white families lived within the same means, a roughly 15 percentage-point difference.^{4,5,6} From a casual glance, this statistic indicates correctly some degree of racial disparity in income levels in America.³⁹ However, upon further examination, within these two racial groups there exists an even more stark difference in poverty rates. The percentage of families below 100% FPL who were white with a female-headed household (no husband present) was 30.3 percent, while only 6.9 percent of white, married-couple families were in poverty.⁷ Furthermore, the percentage of families below 100% FPL who were black with a female-headed household (no husband present) was 41.2 percent, while black, married-couple families enjoyed only an 11.5 percent poverty.⁶ Here, it is clear that marriage seems to play an especially impactful role in determining poverty levels for a population, trumping race as the sole determinant for low income. Because of poverty's negative effects on the family and a child's development, it can be assumed that poverty has a negative effect on life expectancy by means of presenting a person with many disadvantages (i.e. lower opportunities in education, lower incomes, jeopardized neighborhood safety, lesser child brain development, inadequate health insurance, etc.).^{76,117,118} Single motherhood, as a strong correlate of poverty, must be

addressed in the discussion for healing the racial gap in American longevity since it seems to be a partial cause of this gap.

The second main factor judged to contribute to life expectancy is delinquency and homicide. It is known that single-mother families are at an increased risk for exposure to violence and their children have an increased chance to participate in delinquency.^{63,64,65,66} Both exposure and participation in delinquency no doubt can have a negative effect on a child's development. Participation in crime presumably risks one's socioeconomic resources and status, consequently risking one's longevity with it. Furthermore, homicide is disproportionately more common among black males.⁶⁹ In 2010, black males committed over 50 percent of all homicides committed by 10-24 year olds in the United States, while white males committed only 2.9 percent of all homicides in the same age bracket.⁶⁹ Between the years 1980 and 2008, black individuals committed homicides at a rate of 34.4 per 100,000 people, while white individuals committed homicides at a rate of 4.5 per 100,000 people.¹²⁶ Blacks were also disproportionately the victims of homicides (27.8 per 100,000) while whites were only the victims of 4.5 per 100,000.¹²⁶ Because black individuals are more likely than any other race in America to come from a single-parent home,^{12,13} black individuals also have the highest likelihood to be raised in poverty and thus in unsafe neighborhoods.^{72,82} Single motherhood therefore puts black children at a further disadvantage by exposing them to stresses not seen as much in white communities (i.e. unsafe, poor neighborhoods).³⁹

The third main factor judged to contribute to the life expectancy gap between black and white Americans is education. The influence single motherhood has on the education of a child is remarkable. In general, children from single-parent homes on

average have historically done more poorly in school.^{99,102} In addition, the most births in the United States to unmarried mothers were to women without a college degree.¹⁰¹ Single motherhood is thus reproduced to the next generation, as the least educated in society have the most children out of wedlock.¹⁰¹ Because education is one of the most—if not *the* most—influential aspect of socioeconomic status,¹¹⁰ single motherhood’s negative influence on children is highly relevant to the discussion of life expectancy. Indeed, it was found that those with the most education in society were the ones with the highest life expectancies.^{1,97,98} Therefore, since single motherhood has such a high influence on one’s education, it has a high potential of influencing one’s life expectancy.

As well documented in this discussion, married-couple families tend to be less poor than single-parent families, even across racial lines. Though the number of teen pregnancies is universally known to have declined, children born out of wedlock is still prevalent among slightly older women. An obvious solution to solving the growing number of single mothers is for women to remain sexually abstinent until marriage. Alternatively, women in America also have the option to choose contraception, adoption, or abortion in order to prevent non-marital births. Although “shotgun marriages” should not be encouraged because of the negative environment in which this may place a child, marriage nevertheless seems to be the best option for a child according to the previously relayed data on poverty, homicide, and education.⁷⁶ In all cases, it seems marriage should be encouraged for women *and* men seeking unprotected sexual partners to ensure financial stability of their children, if for no other reason. Alternative means for preventing unwanted pregnancies (i.e. abortion, contraception, adoption) have generally increased the sexual freedom of women in these past decades; however, women have also

lost some of the bargaining power of marriage. In other words, it is thought that a male is less pressured to pursue marriage if his sexual partner is free to use contraceptives. Birth control methods have inherently helped curb the potential number of non-marital births and thus the potential number of children in poverty. Ironically, without contraceptives—which gave women the capacity to be more sexually indulgent—the number of non-marital births may also still be at pre-1960s levels. The morality of these alternative contraceptive methods, however, is beyond the scope of this discussion.

Because roughly 72 percent of all children are born to unmarried mothers in the black community today, a cultural shift seems to be necessary in order to discourage men from leaving their sexual partners and to discourage women from having unprotected sex outside of marriage in order to prevent more children from being born into poverty. The U.S. government has taken many steps in order to help ease the financial burden a child may give a single mother. For example, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC) have shown to be beneficial in promoting work among single mothers, as well as “[reducing] the number of female-headed households receiving cash welfare assistance.”¹²⁷ Unfortunately, the number of non-marital births continues to climb. Although cohabitation seems to be a growing trend in American society, marriage seems to still benefit all races financially and, therefore, a child’s future development.⁷⁶

In addition to encouraging marriage among mothers, education should also be promoted in American culture as well. Along with marriage having a strong correlation in the lowering of poverty rates, education has been proven to be a strong predictor of one’s economic well-being and life expectancy. It was mentioned earlier that women with the least amount of education have the most children out of wedlock.¹⁰¹ It has been

shown that by increasing a woman's education, she is more likely to marry, less likely to divorce, and more likely to have children while married.^{119,121} By increasing one's education by completing high school and perhaps going to college, an individual acquires a vast amount of knowledge, reasoning skills, diverse social interactions, and more opportunities to reach careers in higher income brackets. The United States government has even seen improvement in delaying teenage sexual activity and teenage pregnancy by providing comprehensive sexual education programs.¹²⁸ In addition, in a Russian study on education, marriage, and homicide, it was found that both marriage and education provide social skills and coping mechanisms that protect against being victimized by homicidal behavior.¹²⁰ This makes sense: a person who is less educated and is unmarried will more likely engage in riskier health behaviors than a person who has more to lose (i.e. a marriage, a career, etc.). Because of education's positive effect on one's socioeconomic status, safer neighborhoods and more financial resources usually accompany a more educated person, thus lowering the potential for homicidal victimization.¹²⁰

McLanahan makes a compelling argument, with which I agree, for certain reforms that must be made in order to enable children the best possible scenario in their development. In an article entitled "Diverging Destinies," McLanahan implores public policy makers to counter the trends of wage inequality between the top and bottom income strata. She invites policy makers to attempt to "increase the returns to work and make it possible for men and women in the bottom strata to achieve the living standards they associate with *marriage*."⁷⁶ By subsidizing good child care and preschools, work for a low-income family becomes more rewarding, and a child's resources presumably

increase as well, something European countries have been promoting for some time.⁷⁶

Marriage is key to this plan, for if a couple is not married, the benefits of subsidized child care (and the like) would not be available. In addition to policies such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and tax incentives for married couples, as McLanahan mentions, fathers need to be held more accountable for their children. Over the past few decades, the United States has considerably improved in this aspect of public policy, and child support is now enforced more heavily.^{76,124} In fact, it was found that a strong enforcement of child support payment reduces extra-marital fertility.^{76,122,123,124}

In conclusion, the negative contributions of single motherhood seem to subtract longevity from both the American black and white populations. Poverty can disable families from eating healthy, getting access to adequate medical care, living in safer neighborhoods, while disabling children in their cognitive development.⁴⁵ Single parenthood can lead to childhood delinquency and put populations at risk for homicidal behavior. And, finally, a lack of a good education can hinder both the mother's life as well as her child's, from lower economic resources to proven lower GPAs. Bearing this in mind, however, since nearly 3 of every 4 births in the black population are to unmarried mothers (far more than in the white population), single motherhood has a perhaps greater degree of impact on longevity for the black population in America than for the white population. Therefore, special attention should be paid to non-marital fertility, particularly in the black population, in order to combat the rising trend of single motherhood and, thus, a potentially damaging hindrance on longevity in America.

This is not to say that *all* single mothers are putting their children at a disadvantage or that *all* children from single parents will have a life expectancy shorter

than that of their peers from married-couple families. However, on average, it seems that single motherhood has a direct correlation with many socioeconomic disadvantages placed on children today. Meanwhile, a racial gap in American longevity has now persisted for at least the past 60 years, and non-marital fertility has simultaneously skyrocketed. Although life expectancy in general has increased for Americans over the years, this thesis concludes that single motherhood's steadily increasing prevalence has hindered further longevity growth, preventing black individuals from reaching the life expectancy of their white counterparts despite decades of improvement in American race relations. Thus, without interference, the gap in American life expectancy could still linger, and the potential for the emergence of two Americas lingers with it. But *with* interference, perhaps the racial gap in life expectancy can eventually disappear.

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