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Beyond Murphy Brown: We're Ignoring the Fact That All Single Mothers Aren't Alike

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Just how valuable are the "traditional values" everyone is talking about in this campaign season? Well, for families with children, they are worth about \$ 25,000 a year. That's the difference in median income between families with both parents present and those headed by a single mother.

That bleak statistic hints at a serious flaw in the way the Murphy Brown-Dan Quayle debate over single motherhood has been framed. Choosing for or against that having-it-all-including-baby TV newswoman lulls us into forgetting that single mothers are not all alike. And these real moms' social and economic needs are as complex as the factors that lead them to single motherhood in the first place.

We all know individual mothers, such as those paraded on last Monday's season opener of "Murphy Brown," who have surmounted numerous obstacles to make relatively comfortable lives for themselves and their children. But they don't reflect the experience of the vast bulk of their counterparts. Moreover, even looking at groups of mothers—as designers of public policy must—one sees enormous differences. The likely future of households created by divorce or by the decision of a well-educated career woman to bear a child out of wedlock is vastly different from the prospects of single-parent families created by the birth of a child to an unwed teenager. Failure to make these distinctions has obscured the nature of the problem—and what to do about it.

There is good reason to be concerned about the condition of most female-headed families with children under 18. Almost half have incomes below the poverty line—almost five times the poverty rate of comparable two-parent families. In the last 30 years, the number of female-headed families nearly tripled, to 7.7 million in 1990. The median income for these families was about \$ 12,000, only one-third of that enjoyed by two-parent families. If family structure in 1990 was the same as in 1960, poverty among children would be reduced by almost one-third, according to calculations by Pennsylvania State demographer David Eggebeen. And family breakdown and ensuing poverty give every indication of worsening. If present trends continue, about 60 percent of all children born in 1980 will spend part of their childhood in a family headed by a mother who is divorced, separated, unwed or widowed.

But lumping together all single mothers—even all poor single mothers—is a misleading

rhetorical convenience. As Census and other data show, families headed by divorced mothers are, in general, doing much better than aggregate statistics suggest, and families headed by mothers who have never married are doing much worse.

In 1990, the median family income for never-married mothers with children under the age of 18 was \$ 8,337, compared to \$ 15,762 for divorced women with kids.

Marital status also explains much of the income disparity between white and black female-headed families. In 1990, the median income of black female-headed families was 32 percent less than white female-headed families, \$ 9,590 versus \$ 14,028. Controlling for marital status—whether the mother was ever married—narrows the gap to about 20 percent.

Never-married mothers are on average 10 years younger than divorced mothers, and the age spread for divorcees is lower than it might otherwise be because it includes many unwed mothers who marry, but only for a short time. When one considers that two-thirds of all out-of-wedlock births in 1988 occurred to young women between the ages of 15 and 24, and that many out-of-wedlock births to older women were second and third births to those who had been unwed teenagers, it is easier to see why their financial situation is so much worse than that of their divorced counterparts.

Never-married mothers also are, on average, much less educated. Only 57 percent of never-married mothers have a high school diploma compared to 82 percent of divorced mothers.

Age, lack of education and other demographic factors combine to give never-married women much poorer job prospects. In 1990, 63 percent of divorced mothers worked full time, and an additional 11 percent worked part time, but only 28 percent of never-married mothers worked full time, and 8 percent part time. And their lack of work experience is exacerbated by the fact that young single mothers have little chance of completing their education or acquiring job skills while having to care for a child.

These demographic differences between unmarried and divorced women translate into dramatically different rates of welfare utilization. In fact, children of never-married mothers are three times more likely to be on welfare than are children of divorced mothers.

Teens have the worst prospects of all. According to a Congressional Budget Office report, 77 percent of unmarried adolescent mothers were welfare recipients within five years of the birth of their first child. Sixty percent of AFDC mothers under the age of 30 had their first child as a teenager.

While divorced women typically use welfare as a temporary measure until they get back on their feet, unmarried mothers are far more likely to become trapped in long-term dependency. Forty percent of never-married mothers will receive AFDC for 10 years or more, compared to 14 percent of divorced mothers.

Levels of child support also vary markedly between the two groups. In 1987, 77 percent of divorced mothers received child support awards, but only 20 percent of never-married mothers did, and the annual payment to the latter group was only about half of the meager \$ 3,073 received by divorcees.

This dichotomy between the life prospects of divorced mothers and those of unwed mothers is no reason to bash unwed mothers, but neither can it be ignored. Nor is this to say that post-divorce poverty is not a serious problem; it is. But much more than a divorce, an out-of-wedlock birth to a young mother seems to be a direct path to long-term poverty.

[These differences are why even sharp critics of welfare sense a lesser "moral hazard" when assistance is given to divorced mothers. Divorce and its aftermath can be deeply traumatic, especially if there are children. And there is no doubt that many people enter and exit marriage for the wrong reasons. Nevertheless, it is one thing when two adults terminate a marriage that has not worked out, and quite another when two teenagers have a baby as a result of a casual union—with the only prospect being a career of welfare dependency.

A clearer understanding of the divergent values that underlie each behavior could lead to a major restructuring of welfare programs. For divorced mothers, welfare could be transformed into a form of social insurance, and for unwed teen mothers into a tool for guiding constructive changes in their behavior.

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