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# Statistical Brief

## The Economics of Family Disruption

When parents separate, their children are placed at a real economic disadvantage. This brief examines the effects of parental separation on children's economic well-being. The data were collected in the 1984 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). Sample households were visited eight times, at 4-month intervals, between October 1983 - January 1984 and February - May 1986. The information on children and their families thus covers a 32-month period.

The data cover children under the age of 15 at the time of the first interview, for whom 32 months of data on household income and family composition exist. The term "parent" includes step- and adoptive, as well as biological, parents.

### Many children don't live continuously with two parents.

Between October 1983 - January 1984 and February - May 1986, 29 percent of the estimated 51.8 million children under age 15 didn't live continuously with two parents: in all, about 15 million children. Sixteen percent of all children lived only with their mother; 6 percent saw their father

leave at some point. An additional 3 percent saw their mother either reconcile or remarry. Another 5 percent lived either only with their father or with neither parent the entire period or for at least some portion of the period. The remaining 71 percent did live continuously with both parents.

### Economic stress predates parental separation.

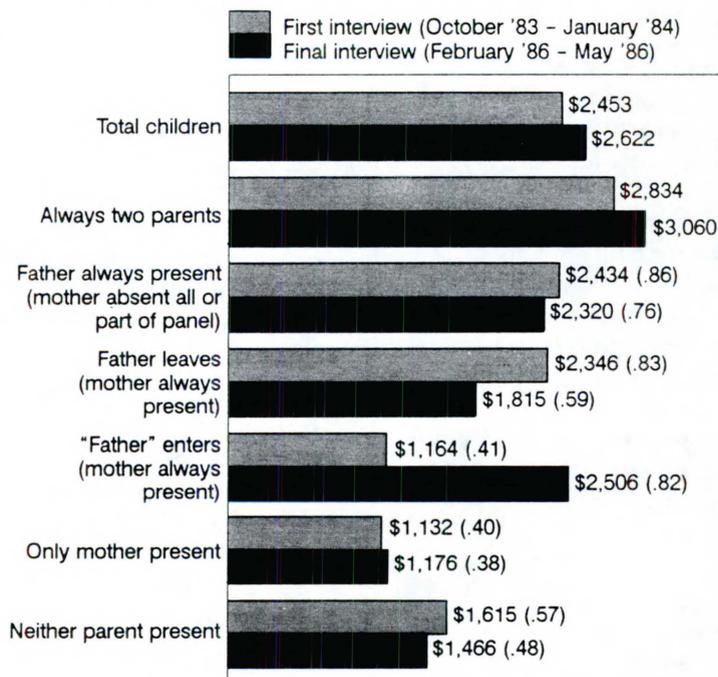
Even before the split, children whose father later left were worse

off than those in more stable, two-parent families. At the first interview, these children had a mean family income only 83 percent that of those who would stay in two-parent families throughout (\$2,346 versus \$2,834). Children whose father would leave were more apt to be in poor families than children who stayed in stable, two-parent families (21 versus 12 percent).

There is a connection between employment status and family

### Children living with two parents are economically better off than other children.

(Average monthly family income in 1986 constant dollars)



Note: Figures in parentheses represent ratio of income for children in one- or neither-parent situations to income for children who lived with two parents throughout the panel.



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disruption, too. Fathers who later left were less likely to be employed full-time than those who stayed: 67 percent versus 81 percent. A higher percentage of children whose father ended up leaving had a mother employed full-time than those who stayed in stable, two-parent families: 32 versus 25 percent.

**Parental separation is financially devastating to children.**

Children whose father would leave saw their mean monthly family income fall from \$2,435 four months before he left to \$1,543 four months after he left, a 37 percent drop. Mean family income for these children fell to only 59 percent of those in two-parent families (\$1,815 versus \$3,060) over the course of the 28 months after the first interview. While mean monthly family income rose an average of \$226 for two-parent families over this period, it dropped \$531 for those with a departing father.

**More recently separated mothers seek employment.**

Once the father left, more mothers became employed – at least temporarily. Four months before the father left, 43 percent of the mothers were not employed. This figure fell to 31 percent 4 months after his departure, but rose again to its original level a year later. It appears that many mothers who don't work outside the home before a marital split seek employment in response to the split, but do not maintain their employment over the next year or so.

**Mothers who eventually reconcile with their spouse or remarry were more likely to have received child support and less likely to rely on public assistance.**

Children whose mothers were separated, but would later recon-

cile or remarry were more likely to receive child support payments than those whose mothers remained separated (35 versus 22 percent, at first interview). But they were less likely to receive AFDC (29 percent versus 40 percent) and food stamps (36 versus 50 percent).

Many in the latter group were never married and couldn't find the absent father to collect child support. They were also fairly young and lacked education and employment experience, increasing the likelihood they relied on public assistance income.

**For more information on these findings:**

**See:**  
*Family Disruption and Economic Hardship: The Short-Run Picture for Children*, Current Population Reports, Series P-70, No. 23. For sale by U.S. Government Printing Office. Stock No. 803-044-00011-2, \$2.25

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*This brief is one of a series that presents information of current policy interest. It may include data from businesses, households, or other sources. All statistics are subject to sampling variability as well as survey design flaws, respondent classification and reporting errors, and data processing mistakes. The Census Bureau has taken steps to minimize errors, and analytical statements have been tested and meet statistical standards. However, because of methodological differences, caution should be used when comparing these data with data from other sources.*

**When parents separate, children feel the effects.**

Economic status of children under 15 years old, 4 months before and 4 months after parental separation

Measurement of well-being	Before	After
Average monthly per capita income	\$549	\$436
Average monthly family income*	\$2,435	\$1,543
Average monthly household income*	\$2,461	\$1,546
Income/needs ratio*	2.4	1.8
Percent whose mother worked full-time, all weeks	33	41
Percent whose mother did not work at all	43	31
Percent reporting weekly hours worked	60	72
Average weekly hours of those with hours	34	37
Percent in poverty	19	36
Percent receiving child support	16	44
Percent receiving AFDC	9	18
Percent receiving food stamps	10	27

\* The income/needs ratio is a ratio of family income to the poverty threshold. An income/needs ratio below 1.0 denotes a standard of living below the poverty level. Household income aggregates income of all persons residing with the child in a given month. Family income excludes income from persons unrelated to the child.