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2

Single-Parent Families

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What do the former First Lady Jackie Kennedy, Princess Diana, the movie star Susan Sarandon, and the TV character Murphy Brown have in common? They all are, or at one time were, single mothers—unmarried women caring for their minor children. This chapter concerns public policy and the single-parent family, a family type dominated by single mothers.

Because these four women are fitting subjects for *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, they are a far cry from what most people have in mind when the phrase “single mother” is used. Many picture, say, a nineteen-year-old high school dropout living on welfare in public housing. Hence, just mentioning these four prominent women vividly demonstrates the diversity of single mothers. These four also illustrate the major categories of single mothers—the widowed mother, the divorced or separated mother, and the single woman who bears her child outside of marriage. (Women in this last category are often misleadingly called “never married” even though approximately one-fourth of the women who are unmarried at the birth of their child had been married at an earlier time.¹)

One further distinction should also be made here. The usual picture of the single mother is of a woman living *alone* with her children—Jackie Kennedy, Princess Diana, and Murphy Brown. But those we call “cohabitants” are also single mothers as a legal matter, even though their children are living in two-adult households. Indeed, where the woman, like Susan Sarandon, is cohabiting with the father of her child (Tim Robbins), although the mother is single, from the child’s perspective it is an intact family.

As with single mothers generally, these four prominent women arouse a wide range of feelings, from support to dismay, in the public at large. Jackie Kennedy surely gained the maximum empathy of our foursome when her husband was murdered in her presence. Even those women who are widowed in less horrifying ways have long been viewed as victims of cruel fate and strongly deserving of community compassion.

Not too long ago, having been divorced was by itself thought to disqualify those seeking public office or other positions of public prominence. That no longer holds, as Ronald Reagan’s presidency made clear. As a result, once Prince Charles and Princess Diana split up, she probably appeared to most Americans as facing the challenging task confronting many divorced women of having to balance the pursuit of her career with raising children on her own. Yet, despite Diana’s wealth and fame, her marital breakup brought to the fore our society’s general uneasiness about how well children fare in these settings, as well as our uncertainty about the appropriate roles of divorced fathers as providers of both cash and care.

In Sweden today, Susan and Tim’s family structure is commonplace. There, a very large number of men and women live together and have children together, but do not go through the formalities of marriage—or at least have not done so at the time their first child is born. Lately, in America as well, the cohabitation category, long ignored by the census, is rapidly growing. This is not to say that most Americans, unlike the Swedes, accept cohabitation as though it were marriage. Indeed, American public policy, as we will see, treats cohabitation very differently from marriage.

Perhaps because Murphy Brown is a fictional character, this has allowed those who are on the rampage against unmarried women who bear children to be candid about their feelings without having to be so openly nasty to a “real” person. Yet Murphy Brown is an awkward icon. To be sure, she flouted the conventional morality of an earlier era. She had sex outside of marriage and then decided to keep and raise her child once she discovered she had unintentionally become pregnant. Although many people in our society still rail against sex other than between married couples, sex outside of marriage has become such a widespread phenomenon that it is generally no longer a stigma. And while it would be easy to chastise Murphy Brown for carelessly getting pregnant, as Jane Mauldon’s chapter explains, this also is so commonplace that it is barely remarkable any more. Indeed, Murphy Brown might have come in for more censure had she, as a single woman, deliberately become pregnant.

As for deciding to raise her child on her own, this *by itself* does not arouse great public outcry. After all, it is not as though widowed mothers who make that decision are castigated for choosing not to remarry. As for the unmarried birth mother, shotgun weddings are seen to be less promising than they once were; abortion, while still a right, is hardly thought to be a duty; and while giving a child up for adoption is often

commendable, today this is seen primarily as the route for women who do not want to, or cannot afford to, take care of their children themselves.

In short, the strongest objection by those who have assailed Murphy Brown is that she is a bad role model—in particular, that she is a bad role model for *poor* women who, unlike her, cannot provide for their children on their own, but go ahead and have them anyway, planning to turn to the state for financial and other assistance. In many quarters those single mothers are doubly condemned. First, they are seen to be prying money out of the rest of us by trading on our natural sympathy for their innocent children; yet this is said to leave taxpayers both unhappy because they have less money to spend on their own children and with the distasteful feeling that society is condoning, even promoting, the initial irresponsible and self-indulgent behavior by these poor single mothers. Then, these low-income women are rebuked as high-frequency failures as parents—for example, when their children disproportionately drop out of, or are disruptive at, school or turn to criminal behavior. Of course, not everyone disapproves of Murphy Brown or even those poor women who choose to have children on their own knowing that they will have to turn to the state for assistance. Many people believe that every American woman (at least if she is emotionally fit) ought to be able to be a mother if she wants to be.

These various types of single mothers are significant because they raise different issues, and, in turn, they have yielded very different policy solutions and proposals for reform. But before we turn to policy questions, some general demographic information is presented that, among other things, shows single-parent families to differ significantly from some common myths about them. The policy discussion that follows begins with a historical overview that demonstrates how American policies have changed sharply in the past century. Next the focus shifts to the conflicting ideological outlooks on single-parent families reflected in the thinking of conservatives and liberals today. This clash of views is then applied to some current policy initiatives most importantly, the bipartisan reform of welfare that occurred during the Clinton presidency. The chapter concludes with a call to refocus public attention on the needs of the children in single-parent families.

Single-Parent Family Demographics: Myths and Realities

Father-Headed Single-Parent Families

In the first place, not all single-parent families are headed by women. In 1970, three-quarters of a million children living in single-parent families lived with their father (about 10 percent of such families); by 2000, more than two million children lived in father-headed single-parent families (an increase to approximately 15 percent).²

These families are not the subject of much policy attention, however. First, most of them are headed by divorced (or separated) men; a few are widowers. It is rare, however, that the father of a child born outside of marriage will gain physical control of that child, and this takes custodial fathers largely outside the most controversial category of single-parents. Furthermore, single fathers caring for their children tend to be financially self-supporting and therefore generally beyond the purview of welfare reformers. Finally, they tend to remarry fairly quickly and hence remain heads of single-parent families for only a short time. In fact, the main public policy controversy involving these men today concerns divorce custody law—in what circumstances should fathers be able to become heads of single-parent families in the first place? This topic is discussed in the chapter by Judith Wallerstein.

Noncustodial fathers are quite another matter—whether divorced from or never married to the mothers of their children. As we will see, they are the subject of a great deal of public attention and concern.

Unmarried as Compared to Divorced and Widowed

Turning back to families headed by single mothers, one myth is that they are predominantly women who have never been married to the father of their child. Yet there are actually more divorced (and separated) single mothers. For example, in 2000, 55 percent of single mothers were divorced or separated, and another 4 percent were widowed.³ Moreover, because of the predominance of widowed and divorced mothers, large numbers of women become single mothers, not at their child's birth, but later on in their child's life, often not until the child is a teenager. Hence, among the children in single-parent families, living one's entire childhood apart from one's father is by no means the norm.

Cohabitants

Cohabitants with children in their household are a complicated category, and, in turn, they complicate the data.⁴ As noted earlier, although the women in these families are decidedly single mothers in a legal sense, in many respects these couples resemble married couples. So, many of these households are better described as two-parent, not single-parent, families. Some demographers have recently suggested that “cohabitation operates primarily as a precursor or a transitional stage to marriage among whites, but more as an alternative form of marriage among blacks.”⁵

In any case, these cohabiting households come in several varieties. One first thinks of two biological parents not married to each other but living with their child—as exemplified by Susan Saradon and Tim Robbins and the Swedish model. Cohabiting mothers in this situation still often show up in U.S. surveys as though they were never married mothers.

living on their own, because survey instruments tend to categorize respondents only as married or single.

A second variety of cohabiting households includes a single mother with her child who is now living with, but not married to, a man who is *not* the child's father. These women are drawn out of the ranks of the never married, the divorced, and the widowed; they, too, are frequently counted in surveys as living on their own. Moreover, in this second category especially, it is often quite unclear to outsiders whether the man is a de facto spouse and stepparent, a casual boyfriend, or something in between.

Yet a third category of cohabiting households contains a homosexual couple (more often two women) in which one of the partners is the legal (usually biological) parent and the other is formally a stranger (although some lesbian couples of late have successfully become dual mothers through adoption). These families are discussed in the chapter by Judith Stacey.

Working and Not

Although the myth is that single mothers (especially never-married welfare moms) spend their time lounging around the house, watching TV, doing drugs, and/or entertaining men, this is a wild exaggeration. A large proportion is in the paid labor force. Official data from 1999 show that more than two-thirds of *all* women with children are in the labor force. Married women's rates are about 62 percent where the youngest child is under six and about 77 percent where the youngest child is six or more. Within the ranks of single mothers, divorced women work *more* than married women, whereas never-married women are less likely to *report* working.⁶

Single mothers often feel compelled to work full time even when their children are very young, although the official data again show a difference between divorced and never-married women. According to 1999 figures, of those women with a child under age six, 60 percent of divorced women and 41 percent of never-married women worked *full time*; this was higher than the rate for married women, 39 percent of whom were working full time.⁷

A decade ago, fewer than 10 percent of single mothers who were receiving welfare officially acknowledged earning wages.⁸ Research by Kathryn Edin suggests that, in fact, a high proportion of them was actually employed at least part time.⁹ They tended to work for cash in the underground (and sometimes illegal) economy. According to Edin's findings, they did not typically do so to be able to buy drugs or booze, but rather in order to keep their households from utter destitution or to avoid having to live in intolerably dangerous public housing projects. They kept this work a secret from the welfare authorities because if the authorities knew they would so cut back those women's welfare benefits as to make

their wages from work nearly meaningless. Although these women would be viewed by the welfare system as "cheaters," they tended to remain living in fairly impoverished circumstances. As Edin puts it, they felt compelled to break the law by the skimpiness of the welfare benefits they received. As we will see later in this chapter, welfare reform of the 1990s has changed this picture somewhat.

Poor and Nonpoor

Even with the receipt of government assistance, more than a quarter of family households headed by single mothers officially live below the poverty level (as compared with less than 5 percent of families headed by a married couple).¹⁰ Although this is a distressingly high number, to the extent that the myth is that single mothers are poor and on welfare, the myth is false. A substantial share of single mothers provides a reasonable level of material goods for their children, and well more than half of all single mothers are not on welfare. In 1998, for example, about 30 percent of female-headed households with related children under age eighteen received means-tested cash assistance.¹¹

Those who escape poverty for their families have tended to do so primarily through earnings and secondarily through child support and government benefits (or through a combination of these sources)—although typically not by receiving welfare. In 1998, *nonpoor* single mothers received about 81 percent of their income from earnings, 6 percent from child support and alimony, and 7 percent from Social Security, pensions, unemployment compensation and the like, but only 5 percent from welfare, food stamps, and housing assistance.¹² It is not surprising, then, that, in 1998, the poverty rate for single-parent families with children under age eighteen was 43 percent before the receipt of means-tested cash transfers and 37 percent after their receipt, a relatively modest reduction indeed.¹³ A different, and often more promising, route out of poverty for single mothers and their children is through marriage and thereby into a new family structure. These stepfamilies are discussed in the chapter by Mary Ann Mason.

White and Nonwhite

The myth is that single mothers primarily come from racial and ethnic minorities. While it is true that these groups are disproportionately represented given their share of the population, in fact, these days more single mothers are white than any other group. For example, in 1999, 40 percent of nonmarital births were to whites, 33 percent to blacks, and 25 percent to Hispanics.¹⁴ On a cumulative basis, as of 2000 there were 6.2 million white, mother-headed family groups (including white Hispanics) as compared with three million black, mother-headed family groups (including black Hispanics)—even though 32 percent of all black family

groups were headed by mothers and only 10 percent of all white family groups were headed by mothers.¹⁵

Change over Time

The demography of single-parenting has changed a lot over the twentieth century. There are many more single parents today than there were several generations ago, both in absolute numbers and, more importantly, in terms of the percentage of all children (or all parents) affected.

In 1900, the typical single parent was a widow. Male deaths through industrial and railway accidents were very visible. By contrast, divorce was then scarce (although desertion was a problem). And becoming a single mother by becoming pregnant outside of marriage was not very common, especially because so many who got pregnant promptly married the father.¹⁶ Now, especially since the 1960s, all that is changed. Divorce is more frequent. "Illegitimacy" and cohabitation are also more prevalent than in earlier periods. For example, of women born between 1940 and 1944, only 3 percent had lived with a partner of the opposite sex by age twenty-five; of those born between 1960 and 1964, 37 percent had done so.¹⁷ Moreover, the stigma of bearing a child outside of marriage and/or what some still call "living in sin" is much reduced.

Nonetheless, along with these changing characteristics of the single-parent family has come a change in public empathy. Earlier there was very widespread compassion for single parents and their children when single parents were mainly widows and divorcees, especially in the pre-no-fault era, when divorce usually was triggered (formally at least) by the misbehavior of the husband. Today, at least in some quarters, single mothers are loathed—as those receiving welfare who have borne their children outside of marriage or who are suspected of bringing about the end of their marriages through their own selfishness. As of 1996, the last full year that AFDC ("welfare") was in effect, about 60 percent of those receiving welfare had children outside of marriage as compared with but a trivial share in the 1930s and less than 30 percent as late as 1969.¹⁸

Changing Policies toward Single Parents

Widows

In 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt convened a historic first White House Conference on Children, which identified the poverty of widowed mothers and their children as a central policy problem. Then, if states and localities provided any assistance at all, it was too often through the squalid conditions of the "poor house" into which single-parent families might move—something of a counterpart to today's shelters for homeless families. The poor house itself was the successor to an earlier system in which desperate mothers farmed their children out to others, in effect provid-

ing young servants to those people who took these semi-orphaned children into their homes, farms, and businesses. Reflecting the outlook of the social work profession that was then just getting underway, the White House Conference pushed instead for the adoption of Mothers' Pensions plans. Soon enacted, at least on paper, in most of the states, this new approach envisaged cash payments to single (primarily widowed) mothers who were certified by social workers as capable of providing decent parenting in their own homes if they only had a little more money in their pockets.¹⁹

Mothers' Pensions, the precursor to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), reflected both the psychological perspective that it was best for the children to be raised in their own homes and the sociological outlook that it was appropriate for the mothers to stay at home and raise them (perhaps taking in other families' laundry or sewing, but not leaving their children to join the regular paid labor force).²⁰ As we will see, this benign attitude toward the payment of public assistance to single parents, which was reinforced by the adoption of AFDC in 1935 at the urging of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and maintained at least through the 1960s, has substantially evaporated.

Divorcees

Much earlier in the 1900s, while widows were pitied, marital breakup was broadly frowned upon. Nonetheless, it was increasingly acknowledged that some spouses acted in intolerable ways and should be censured by allowing their spouses to divorce them. Adultery, spousal abuse, and desertion were the main categories of unacceptable marital conduct, and most of it seemed to be engaged in by husbands. As the decades rolled by, however, the divorce law requirement of severe wrongdoing by one spouse and innocence on the part of the complaining spouse soon ill-fit the attitudes of many couples themselves. Especially starting after World War II, and accelerating in the 1960s, many more couples came to realize that their marriages had simply broken down and they both wanted out. Until divorce law changed to reflect this new outlook, couples were prompted to engage in fraudulent charades (often involving the husband pretending to engage in adultery) so as to satisfy domestic relations law judges.

No-fault divorce law first emerged in California in 1970 and was rapidly followed by other states.²¹ As a practical matter, not only did this reform allow couples amicably to obtain a divorce without having either one of them adjudicated as the wrongdoer but also, in most states, it permitted any dissatisfied spouse to terminate the marriage unilaterally. Whether no-fault divorce actually caused an increase in the divorce rate or merely coincided with (indeed, grew out of) the spiraling demand for divorce is unclear.²² What is clear, however, is that divorce rates today are enormously greater than they were before 1970, thereby contribut-

ing to the great increase in single parenting.²³ As we will see, that state of affairs, in turn, has recently generated something of a backlash movement, one that seeks to reintroduce legal barriers to divorce in families with minor children.

Illegitimacy

Public policies toward illegitimacy (and, in turn, toward both abortion and teen pregnancy) have also changed significantly during the 1900s. At an earlier time, children born outside of marriage were pejoratively labeled "bastards" and denied inheritance and other rights connected to their fathers, although their biological fathers did generally have the legal duty to support them.²⁴ If a single woman became pregnant, a standard solution was to promptly marry the child's father, perhaps pretending that the pregnancy arose during marriage after all. Adoption was available to some, who would be encouraged to go away before their pregnancies began to "show," only to return childless afterwards as though nothing had happened. Pursuing an abortion instead then risked criminal punishment and subjected the woman to grave risks to her life and health.

Rather suddenly, a little more than two-thirds of the way through the twentieth century, policies in these areas turned around dramatically. For those who wanted it, abortion became legal. More important for our purposes, remaining unmarried and then keeping a child born out-of-wedlock became much more acceptable. For example, instead of expelling pregnant teens, schools adopted special programs for them. Fewer women gave up their newborns for adoption—for example, 19 percent of white, unmarried birth mothers did so in the 1960s, but only 3 percent did so in the 1980s.²⁵ The courts forced states to give many legal rights to illegitimates that had previously been enjoyed only by legitimates;²⁶ and many legislatures voluntarily expanded the inheritance rights and other entitlements of out-of-wedlock children. Soon, unmarried pregnant women far less often married the biological father during the course of the pregnancy—a drop of from 52 percent to 27 percent between 1960 and 1980.²⁷

Women who had children outside of marriage were no longer casually labeled unsuitable mothers and, as noted previously, soon became the largest category of single mothers receiving welfare. In terms of public acceptability, something of a high-water mark may have been reached in the early 1970s with the conversion of welfare into a "right" by the federal courts, the elimination of welfare's "suitable home" requirement, and the end to one-year waiting periods for newcomers seeking welfare.²⁸ This ignited an explosion of the welfare rolls,²⁹ and for the first time in many states, African-American women gained reasonably secure access to benefits. At that time Republican President Richard Nixon proposed turning AFDC from a complex state-federal program into a uniform national scheme.

At the end of the century, however, a policy backlash emerged. Between 1967 and 1997, the proportion of African-American children born outside of marriage skyrocketed from around 25 percent to nearly 70 percent; and the rate for white children was viewed by some as poised for a similar trajectory—and in any case has grown from 8 percent thirty years ago to around 22 percent today.³⁰ Now, curbing illegitimacy, or at least unmarried teen pregnancy, seems to be near the top of many politicians' lists.

Child Support

It has been long understood that fathers have a moral obligation to provide for the financial support of their minor children. In the absent parent context, this means paying "child support." For most of the twentieth century, however, a substantial proportion of men failed to pay the support they might have paid.³¹ The default rate by divorced fathers has long been very high, and in out-of-wedlock births the father's paternity often was not even legally determined. (Stepfathers with no legal duties were frequently a more reliable source of support.)³² Moreover, in many states, even if noncustodial fathers paid all they owed, this was judged to be a pittance when compared with the child's reasonable needs. Deceased fathers were no more reliable, frequently dying with estates of trivial value and without life insurance.

Through the 1930s, AFDC and its predecessors were the main public response to these failures—providing means-tested cash benefits to poor children (and their mothers) deprived of the support of a breadwinner. In 1939, however, special privileged treatment was afforded widows and their children. The Social Security system was expanded so that, upon the death of the working father, "survivor" benefits would be paid to the children and their caretaker mother based upon the father's past wages.³³ This, in effect, created publicly funded life insurance for most widows and their children, with the result that today hardly any widowed mothers find it necessary to apply for welfare.

No comparable "child support insurance" was provided, however, so that divorced and never-married poor mothers have had to continue to turn to the socially less favored means-tested welfare programs instead of Social Security. On behalf of these families, the effort, much enlarged since the mid-1970s, has been to increase the amount of child support an absent father owes and to beef up child support enforcement efforts.³⁴ Notwithstanding those reforms, it is still estimated that more than ten billion dollars of child support annually goes uncollected, and many custodial mothers are unable to collect any support for their children.³⁵

Cohabitation

It appears that American society generally is becoming more accepting of cohabitation, even if it remains frowned upon in many circles. (Clearly,

same-sex cohabitation continues to be highly controversial.) So far as public policy is concerned, however, marriage still makes a significant difference. For example, when children are involved and the cohabitants split up, the woman who keeps the children (as is typically the case) continues to be disadvantaged as compared with the woman who had married. Although she is entitled to support for her child, only in very special circumstances can she gain financial support for herself from her former partner. So, too, upon the death of her partner who was the father of her children, while her children can claim Social Security benefits, she does not qualify for the caretaker Social Security benefits that a legal widow would have obtained.³⁶

Conflicting Conservative and Liberal Perspectives

The conservative critique of single-parent families has partly been a financial one. The typical rhetorical question has been: Why have taxpayers who work hard for their money had to turn it over to single mothers who are not being forced to work and, in many cases, should not have had their children in the first place? This complaint was focused on poor single parents claiming welfare—and more particularly on those mothers rather than the men who impregnate them.

A second aspect of the conservative critique, however, is cast more generally. It asserts that single parent families are inferior families. These claims tend to fly under the heading “Dan Quayle was right,” a reference to the former vice president’s much publicized attack on Murphy Brown.³⁷ This “family values” claim has stirred up a hornets’ nest of controversy.³⁸

The underlying theory starts with the notion that when there is no father around, the child loses the parenting benefits that the father would have provided; indeed, some argue that “fatherlessness” is an inherently pathological condition that inevitably leads to deep psychological wounds.³⁹ In any event, with the mother now overburdened by having to raise the child on her own, the quality of her parenting is also thought to erode. Children in these families are seen as deprived of proper role models—no working father who embodies and imposes something of the work ethic; instead, all too often, a mother who is permitted to remain a long-term dependent on the state. A further inference is that the child often loses community support because the single mother moves more frequently. In addition, when single parenting arises from a marital breakup, it is surmised that the child suffers from the conflict surrounding the dissolution.

Indeed, when simple correlations are made, being a child in a single-parent family is associated with worse outcomes than being a child in a two-parent family.⁴⁰ Moreover, not only are these outcomes worse for the child (such as lower educational attainment, being more likely to become a teen parent, being more likely to be unemployed), they are also worse for society (such as, more likely to be on welfare as an adult).⁴¹

In the face of this evidence, what has infuriated many conservatives is that several public policies could be construed as actually encouraging single parenting. These include easy access to divorce and to welfare and the coddling of pregnant school girls, as well as the fact that, by contrast, poor two-parent families generally have not qualified for welfare.

A grave problem with resting the conservative case on simple correlations, however, is that single-parent families are simply not a random sample of all families. Therefore, just because children in single-parent families are in certain respects comparatively worse off, that in no way proves that they are worse off *because* they are part of single-parent families.

For example, poorer married couples break up at a greater rate than do richer couples. Hence to compare children of divorced families with children of all still-married families is the wrong comparison. At the least we would want to compare them with a subset of poorer still-married families in order to try to get at how they might be doing had their parents remained married. But, then, of course, when we start thinking like that it is easy to appreciate that even among couples who are in the same economic situation, those who break up are not just like those who stay married. So to compare even these two sets may misleadingly suggest how children of the divorced would have fared had their parents not divorced. It is simple to imagine, for example, that were their parents to have stayed together, the children would have suffered from severe spousal conflict, from abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), and so on. In other words, the actual children who are in single-parent families might have been worse off, or no better off, had their actual parents remained married—even if other children whose parents choose to stay married have real advantages.⁴² In the same vein, even before they have children there are many differences, on average, between those women who go on to bear children outside of marriage and those who bear children when married; so, for example, perhaps children of married women with similarly low education, income, and work experience also have worse outcomes than the average child.

Sorting through all of this is a very difficult task. Nevertheless, a few years ago Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur⁴³ carried out some highly sophisticated statistical analysis designed to get at these more difficult questions. They concluded that, even after adjusting for initial differences in race, parents’ education, family size, and residential location, there are indeed significantly worse outcomes for children in single-parent families of all sorts, as compared with those living with two biological parents. They also found that these outcome differences do not importantly vary as between single-parent families created by divorce and those created by a nonmarital birth (although outcomes are less bad for children of widows).

Notice that these comparisons do not yet take income differences into account. This is especially tricky to deal with because income differences exist among families before family disruption *and* income declines are caused by the creation of a single-parent family. McLanahan and Sande-

fur's analysis shows that about half of the lower outcome differences for children in single-parent families is accounted for by income differences, and that most of that is accounted for by the loss of income that occurs by becoming a single-parent family (and only a little because of preexisting income differences). Put differently, they find that the single most important factor accounting for the lower measured well-being of children in one-parent families is the loss of income suffered by the custodial parent upon becoming a single parent whether by divorce, death, or non-marital birth. While this is clearly not the same thing as saying that single parents are worse parents, for their children it is nonetheless a negative outcome.

A second important factor in explaining worse outcomes for children, according to McLanahan and Sandefur, is what they call residential mobility. Children living in single-parent families tend to move around more (and especially at the time the single family is created) and this, on balance, also appears to be harmful to children. This is probably so because it means the loss of what McLanahan and Sandefur call "community capital"—the community friendship and support networks that come along with living for a long period in the same place. Again, although the women who, for reasons of economic necessity, have to move their children to a new home following divorce can hardly be termed bad parents merely for making the move, their children may nonetheless suffer as a consequence.

Finally, although they could not fully adjust, for example, for the greater predivorce conflict among couples who do divorce and those who do not, McLanahan and Sandefur conclude that a significant share of the remaining difference in children's outcomes is accounted for by differences more closely intertwined with family structure itself—for example, less contact with the biological father and less intense supervision by the (relatively more burdened) custodial mother in single-parent families as compared with two-biological-parent families. It is not at all clear, however, whether this factor leads to a little loss in children's well-being in a large number of single-parent families or a large loss in only a few of them. The latter is more consistent with the conventional liberal outlook that many single parents can do as good a job of child rearing, and some do a better job, than do couples.

Moreover, liberals tend to see the focus on nontraditional family structure as starting at altogether the wrong end of things. When they look out across American families today, they are foremost struck by the staggeringly high rate of child poverty (especially in single-parent families)—probably the highest child poverty rate of all industrialized nations⁴⁴ in a country that prides itself on being the most powerful and in many respects the richest in the world.

When liberals start to look for explanations for this appalling situation, they first fasten, not on changing family structure, but on joblessness and pervasive racism. Therefore, instead of faulting our current policies as responsible for promoting the breakdown of the traditional family,

liberals see them as failing to address the actual needs of children and families and unfairly stigmatizing those victims who are not to blame for their circumstances. So, while conservatives might draw on McLanahan and Sandefur's findings to point to the desirability of men and women staying together for the sake of the kids, liberals are more likely to ask why more is not being done collectively to get more income into the hands of single-parent families. Given McLanahan and Sandefur's findings, more income could help reduce outcome differences for children not only directly but also indirectly by reducing the need for new single parents to move out of the neighborhood.

Furthermore, among many liberals, there is a celebration of diversity of family forms and hence a rejection of the conventional family structure (married couple, husband employed, wife at home) as the social ideal to which everyone should aspire. From this perspective, there is considerable long-term social benefit to be gained from dislodging what many see as the implicit patriarchy of the traditional nuclear family even if, during the transitional period, there might be some modest cost to children raised in the nonconventional manner (e.g., by single mothers or by lesbian couples). This outlook may also cause liberals to discount the significance of McLanahan and Sandefur's findings. For example, the 50 percent greater high school dropout rate they found for children in single-parent families as compared with children living with two biological parents may feel rather different when it is understood that we are talking about a 19 percent dropout rate as compared with a 13 percent rate. So while liberals are not likely to say that it is unimportant to have six more children graduate out of every one hundred who attend school, still when put this way they may conclude that the worse outcome for children in single-parent families is really rather modest.

The bottom line is, as explored in the following section, these very different outlooks on today's American families makes one expect that it would be extremely difficult for liberals and conservatives to reach any sort of genuine agreement on the direction of family policy toward children living with a single parent.

Recent Policy Reforms and Current Initiatives

Child Support

In the past few years, much policy reform has been directed toward getting noncustodial parents to put more money into the hands of single-parent families. Put more simply, the goal has been to force absent fathers (often termed "deadbeat dads") to transfer more of their income to their children and the children's mothers. One reason for these policy changes is that they are among the few solutions on which most liberals and conservatives can agree.

Congress has on several recent occasions prodded states to change their child support regimes in a number of ways. The size of the non-custodial parent's support obligation has been considerably increased in most states. At the same time, the calculation of the sum is now largely determined by formula, instead of being left to the discretion of a local judge in the course of adjudicating a divorce or paternity determination. On the collection side, most of the effort has been directed toward making the process routine, especially through the automatic withholding of support obligations from wages and the direct payment of such obligations over to the custodial parent (or to the welfare authorities if the mother is on welfare).

Nonetheless, child support enthusiasts are by no means satisfied. Although inflation of late has been very low, in the past even moderate inflation has quickly undermined the value of child support awards, necessitating difficult courtroom battles over modifications. Hence efforts are underway to establish a regime of automatic modification based upon changing costs of living. On another front, too many noncustodial fathers remain unidentified, at least formally. In response, some states have posted officials in hospital nurseries on the theory that when unmarried men come in to see their newborns they can be coaxed into admitting paternity on the spot.

An important part of the child support shortfall occurs in the welfare population. There, however, increased support collection generally will benefit the taxpayers, not children in single-parent families. This is because welfare recipients have had to assign their child support rights to the government and have been entitled to keep only fifty dollars a month from what is collected. This helps explain why fathers of children on welfare are not so eager to pay the child support as they might otherwise be. Indeed, a fair proportion of these absent fathers now secretly and informally pay support directly to the mothers of their children,⁴⁵ because, if the welfare department managed to capture those funds, the outcome would be the enrichment of the public fisc at the expense of poor children. While redirecting those funds from mothers to the welfare department would strike a blow against what now qualifies as fraud, the result would nonetheless be the further impoverishment of children.

Moreover, one has to be realistic about collecting increased child support from absent fathers. Many of them have new families and new children to support. While some people might find it irresponsible for them to have taken on these new obligations, the practical reality is that we are often talking about shifting money from one set of children to another. In other cases, the nonpaying father is unemployed. Should he be forced to find work, or be placed in a public service job, so that income could be siphoned off to satisfy his child support obligation? Some are urging this very solution.⁴⁶ Yet, what is to happen when the men fail to comply with their work obligations? Are we going to imprison thousands of these dads?⁴⁷

In any event, child support policy largely strikes at the single-parent family issue after the fact—even though some men arguably might be deterred from fathering children or abandoning their families if they knew they faced substantial, and nearly certain, collection of child support obligations. Other current policy initiatives are more openly “prevention” oriented.

Divorce Law

Among those who have concluded that it often would be better for the children for the parents to stay together, rather than split up, it is not surprising that no-fault divorce has become a target for reform. The picture these critics present is that some parents selfishly divorce even though they realize they are putting themselves ahead of their children and are likely to harm their children as a result—or else they blithely divorce unaware of the harm they will do to their children. The goal of the critics, they say, is to make divorce more difficult in hopes of helping the children.⁴⁸

The problem, however, arises in deciding exactly how to change divorce law. The most sweeping proposal is simply to bar divorce entirely to those with minor children. This solution, however, carries costs that most people would find unacceptable. Suppose one spouse (stereotypically the father) is guilty of domestic violence against the children and/or the other spouse. It seems unimaginable today that, in such circumstances, we would insist that the victim spouse remain married. To be sure, the divorce ban advocates might concede that she would be entitled to a legal separation and/or a protective order keeping him away from the children. But, at that point, to continue to prevent divorce seems gratuitously nasty. Since keeping the parents together for the sake of the children has been abandoned in this case, the only real consequence of the bar would be to prevent the victim spouse from remarrying—and perhaps giving the children a stable new family relationship. So, too, suppose one spouse abandons the family. What good is possibly served by denying the other spouse a divorce and thereby keeping her from remarrying—especially if the alternative is for the abandoned spouse to live with, but not marry, her new love?

These examples make clear that a complete ban on divorce by those with minor children is unsound and unlikely to be adopted. They also demonstrate that even to enact a strong presumption against divorce with special exceptions will inevitably embroil the spouses and the courts in wrangles over individual fault, a prospect that makes most of those familiar with the operation of pre-no-fault divorce law shudder. After all, if you made an exception for physical abandonment, wouldn't you have to make an exception for emotional abandonment, especially if it were combined with extramarital love affairs? And if you made an exception for physical abuse, why not for emotional abuse?

This prospect has caused some of those who want to make divorce law tougher to retreat to the seemingly simple idea that only unilateral divorce would be banned. If one spouse objected, the other could not force a divorce on the one who wanted to remain married. These critics claim that American law seems to have jumped directly from fault-based divorce to unilateral divorce, when it might have stopped in between by allowing divorce only by mutual consent.⁴⁹

Proponents argue that requiring both parents to agree will put an extra roadblock in front of indiscriminate sacrificing of the child's interest. They seem to have in mind the father who gets tired of marriage and family and selfishly wants out—perhaps because he has a new “girlfriend.” But, if so, how useful is it really to give his wife a veto? If, as a result, he resentfully stays in the marriage, will this actually be good for the children? Alternatively, what is to prevent him from simply moving out without obtaining a divorce, perhaps taking up housekeeping with another woman? Again the rule really only means that he cannot remarry. Furthermore, this regime is already the law now in the State of New York, and yet we certainly don't hear no-fault divorce critics arguing that everything would be so much better if only the more liberal states tightened up their rules to match New York's.

A final restrictive approach would impose a substantial waiting period (say, two or more years) before one parent could obtain a unilateral divorce and/or insist on marriage counseling before filing for divorce. Although some have argued that either of these measures would benefit the children, here again there is reason to be skeptical. A long waiting period could cause people to file for divorce even more quickly than they now do, or, in any event, simply to treat the rule as a time-hurdle to remarriage. Offering willing parents marriage counseling is probably a good idea, and legislatures might consider making this a mandatory benefit in all health insurance plans (as part of the coverage of mental health services generally). But coerced counseling is likely to have a low payoff.

This analysis suggests that legal change intended to make divorce more difficult to obtain would largely be a symbolic matter and is not a very promising way actually to help children avoid harms that may come from divorce. Perhaps more promising, then, are incentive approaches designed to help cooperative parents who are at risk of divorce to stabilize their marriage. These could include financial support provided through the tax law. For example, in the late 1990s, Republicans pushed through a universal child tax credit of \$500 a year, although many Democrats opposed this on the ground that it means spending too much money on families who do not need help. They would rather spend the money through an expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, which is better tailored to low-income families. Other reformers would prefer to direct the financial rewards to young families who are first-time home buyers. Yet other intervention strategies designed to help maintain marriages are

educationally and psychologically oriented. Some of them are discussed in the chapter by Carolyn and Philip Cowan.

Unmarried Childbearing

A different prevention strategy is to try to discourage women from becoming single unwed mothers at the outset. From the rhetoric one hears these days, this is widely understood to be a problem of “teenage pregnancy,” and liberals and conservatives do seem united in their determination to reduce its incidence. However, as the chapter by Jane Mauldon shows, it is important to keep in mind that minors (girls under age eighteen) actually account for a rather small share of mothers of children born out-of-wedlock. To be sure, hardly anyone would argue that it is desirable for a young woman (or for her child) to give birth when she is under age sixteen (although births to females that young remain, statistically, rather unusual events). Moreover, recent research shows that a very significant share of young teen pregnancies involve men who are by no means “age peers” of the pregnant girls. It is not simply a case of two fifteen-year-olds “fooling around” and the girl carelessly getting pregnant; rather, all too often, the father is an adult male.⁵⁰ Hence for a large proportion of these very young women, we are, candidly, talking about sexual abuse prevention. Yet given the staggering amount of child and spousal abuse generally in our society, it is, alas, not surprising that we also are not very effective at preventing the abuse that causes a young teen to get pregnant.

Some have pushed for a return to statutory rape prosecutions—in which the girl's youth makes her legally incapable of giving consent to sexual relations. In the 1970s and 1980s most district attorneys seem to have abandoned bringing these cases. There has been a renewed hope since the mid-1990s that threatening the predators with the criminal law could discourage their reckless procreation. To that end, Florida, for example, passed tougher statutory rape laws for cases where there is a substantial gap in the ages of the parties, and Georgia passed stronger minimum prison sentences for statutory rape. It is easy to be enthusiastic about this idea if you do not have to worry about funding it, or if you imagine that the mere threat of prosecution would alter the men's conduct dramatically. But once we picture the result as putting large numbers of inappropriate fathers in prison, the idea becomes much less attractive.

Again, therefore, it might be more productive to deal with the problem through positive measures rather than with threats. If these young men faced better job prospects, they would also be better candidates to marry adult women closer to their own age. With these two more desirable outlets for displaying their masculinity, perhaps many fewer of them would be drawn to the idea of preying on underage girls to demonstrate their virility.

Nonetheless, many policymakers will despair at the prospect of effectively controlling the conduct of men and so will return their focus to

young women. As Jane Mauldon's chapter emphasizes, one promising strategy is to provide young women with better access to sex education, contraception, and abortion. These ideas, however, begin to divide liberals and conservatives. Obviously, many conservatives find abortion (and sometimes contraception) immoral; and often they argue (even in the face of evidence to the contrary) that, in practice, this strategy will only increase premarital sex, something they also oppose on moral and/or pragmatic grounds. In any event, information alone is unlikely to affect the behavior of those young women who, however misguided, want to get pregnant to demonstrate their love for the guy—or for that matter the conduct of the guy who wants to give her a baby to prove he loves her.

One possible way to change young women's preferences is to bribe them not to get pregnant. Planned Parenthood, a private organization, has actually experimented with programs like this, and some say they work—not so much because of the financial reward given to teenage girls who do not get pregnant, but because of the peer pressures that arise from many teens being in the program together, say, through their school.⁵¹ But widespread implementation of such a scheme would be a very tricky business. If you were not extremely careful about whom you bribed, you would end up spending most of the money on those who were not really at risk of pregnancy in the first place. Moreover, conservative ideology generally resists the idea paying people to do what conservatives believe they have the moral duty to do anyway.

If it is not easy to gain consensus in favor of public policies of these sorts, what about solutions that take a harsher stance against pregnant young teens? Schools could return to their prior practices of threatening to expel pregnant teens. Poor teenagers could be told that if they got pregnant, they would under no circumstances be given money to move out of their home (as welfare traditionally allowed them to do). The state could make clear that very young women who had babies would be deemed unfit parents and have their children taken away and adopted or, if necessary, raised in orphanages. If a package of these provisions worked completely to stop young teens from getting pregnant, it might be a popular solution. But that is an implausible outcome. Even a 50 percent reduction in the pregnancy rate would be heralded by most policy analysts as a dazzling success. The upshot, however, is that the social costs of imposing the penalties on those who would remain undeterred would be very high. The teen mothers would be much worse off than today—less educated, perhaps abused at home, and poorer—and the children they bear would, in turn, also suffer. Or else the public would face huge new expenses for foster and institutional care of children removed from their mothers. Maybe we could distract teens from sex by offering to them other enjoyable activities during those parts of the day when they otherwise tend to go unsupervised. But exactly what those distractions should be is not altogether clear, and anyway conservative antipathy toward new spending as well as conservative sneering at analogously motivated “mid-

night basketball” programs suggest that this approach is also unlikely to win bipartisan support.

Welfare Reform

The traditional outlook from staunch liberals is that single parents should be entitled to the same recognition and largely the same treatment whether they became single parents through the death of their spouses, through divorce, or by having a child when unmarried.

Should that entitlement include an entitlement to cash so long as they have a child in their care? Although that had seemed to be the liberal view for many years, of late this commitment seems on the wane. Liberals (like conservatives) do seem generally pleased about increased efforts to get cash to single-parent families through the private child support system; and although almost no one talks about it, liberals (and conservatives) seem wholly pleased with Social Security's payment of cash to single widows with young children in their care (even though this benefit arguably deters widows from remarrying). Yet, during the Clinton presidency, Democrats joined with conservatives in calling for radical changes in our welfare system.

In the past, from the liberal side, the call for reform usually emphasized *increasing* cash benefit levels, reducing intrusion into the lives of single mothers who receive welfare, and ending the stigma (to the extent possible) attached to the program and its participants. But no longer. In the 1990s, Clinton and most Democratic national legislators began playing a new tune—although this led to criticism that they had abandoned liberal principles.

The upshot was that 1996 yielded a strongly bipartisan welfare reform law that President Clinton signed. During the debates, both sides said that long-term dependency on welfare is a bad thing for poor women and their children. While it has been repeated so often that it sounds almost self-evident, this principle is actually a bit puzzling. After all, long-term dependency on child support or on Social Security does not attract the same criticism.

Perhaps the real point is that it is now widely thought to be unacceptable for able-bodied women to be supported by taxpayers while remaining out of the paid labor force for so long. Although this is a complete reversal of the underlying basis for the original Mothers' Pensions scheme, the role of mothers in our society generally has changed radically during the course of this century. And mothers receiving AFDC appeared from official records to be working a great deal less than other mothers.

One has to be very cautious in making comparisons here, however, to say nothing of what policy changes should follow from the comparison. For example, it is much easier for single mothers receiving child support or Social Security to combine that income with wages than it had

been for AFDC recipients. Earnings just supplement child support, and for those widows on Social Security substantial part-time employment is possible before benefits are reduced. By contrast, as noted earlier, in AFDC most of one's wages had simply gone back to the government to reduce one's welfare check.

Without coercion, society might get many more single women voluntarily to enter the paid labor force if it were more advantageous to work. For example, if all regular jobs carried health insurance, and if the collective support we provide for public schools were extended to include preschools and day care for working parents, then not only would many of those single parents who always have worked be better off, but also many others would find work far more attractive. So, too, if the rules about combining welfare and wages were more like the rules for combining child support or Social Security and wages, more single mothers would probably choose to work at least part time. But all these reforms would also cost money at a time when all politicians, and especially conservatives, seem to be trying to reduce federal public spending.

It is also true that a significant share of women who have been receiving welfare are not able-bodied and available for work in the way that might be hoped. Some are mentally disabled, others have very low educational attainment and no work experience, still others are abusers of drugs and alcohol, and so on. This does not mean that most mothers who have been on welfare cannot work, but it does mean that if all welfare recipients were all cut free to seek work themselves, many would find it impossible to obtain jobs on their own.

What President Clinton's advisors discovered, therefore, is that if we are going to force single mothers to work, we are going to have to create a lot of jobs for them, often public service jobs. But any jobs strategy that true liberals are likely to endorse will involve much higher administrative costs, new child care costs, education and training costs, and substantial wage subsidies. That means lots more public spending than simply sending a monthly check to these mothers. But for conservatives, "ending welfare as we know it" was decidedly not meant to impose new financial burdens on the taxpayers. As a result, it looked as though it was not going to be easy to achieve a political consensus on getting most poor single mothers into the workforce.

Of course, simply cutting off all welfare would cause some women to take paid jobs (and make some welfare mothers now secretly working live on those wages and not the combination of earnings and welfare). But just as we saw with proposals for harsh treatment of teen parents, the anguish comes when we think about those who are not going to succeed in the private jobs market. As always, we need to be realistic, and not overly optimistic, about the behavioral responses we are likely to achieve through policy reforms.

To be sure, some of these women and their children could be taken care of by their extended families (frequently to the detriment of the other

children in those families). Perhaps a few would be deterred from having children in the first place, and a few others would wind up holding their marriages together. Private charity could make up some of the remaining gap, but hardly all of it. But what about the rest?

In the face of these difficulties, the 1996 welfare reform law eliminated the federal entitlement to welfare and kicked the problem back to the states. Under the compromise, no longer would the federal government match state welfare spending according to a formula. Instead, the states were given great freedom to design their own welfare programs. To finance them, they have been awarded an annual lump sum (a so-called block grant) from Washington to which they must, at least during the early years, add some of their own money. In principle, under the new welfare policy few recipients are supposed to be allowed to remain on cash assistance for more than two years at a time or five years in a lifetime.

Through 2001, the 1996 welfare reform scheme (renamed TANF, for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) was far more successful and far less harmful than its critics predicted.⁵² First, by the start of 2000 the welfare caseload nationwide had, astoundingly, declined by more than 50 percent. This sharp decline, combined with the block grant federal funding, was a financial bonanza for many governors. Overall, states wound up with much more money to support each family remaining on welfare, and most have used that increased cash to provide income supplements, child care, job search, and other services to assist those families. Second, more single mothers report being employed, both among those who remain on TANF and among those low-wage earners who have left (or never entered) welfare altogether; and these mothers are reporting higher earnings than in the past. Third, as of 1999, child poverty rates nationwide declined back to 1979 levels. Fourth, at least some child outcome studies have shown improvements in the well-being of children of the poor, although other study results are much less promising, and in any case, it is difficult to connect such changes to welfare reform *per se*.

On the other hand, there are some disturbing trends as well. Many of those mothers who have left welfare do not seem to be employed, or only hold jobs temporarily, and in other cases wind up financially no better off than they were before welfare reform. Moreover, the proportion of families living at one-half the poverty level or below (i.e., "deep poverty") has alarmingly increased. Furthermore, by the end of 2001, only a few families on TANF were beginning to reach their lifetime 5-year limits on federal support, and it remains uncertain how well individual states will support single mothers and their children after many hit that limit. Finally, of course, the years between 1996 and 2000 were economic boom times, and many analysts are extremely fearful about how poor families will fare as the nation moves toward or into recession at the end of 2001.

Of course, no one wants American cities and towns to look like those third world places that are filled with children begging in the streets. While this seems a highly unlikely prospect in the short run, the longer

run outcome is less clear. TANF comes up for reauthorization in 2002. Although there will be some sticky issues to work out, as of the end of 2001, it does not look as though this reauthorization will occasion further welfare reform as a high priority issue. But one should not blithely assume that there will be no welfare crisis later in the decade.

Refocusing the Policy Perspective

When it comes to single-parent families, much of our current policy focus is on parents: whether they divorce, whether they pay child support, whether they have children outside of marriage, whether they work, and so on. Suppose instead that policy attention were aimed at the *children* in single-parent families. For example, as we have seen, if a child's breadwinner parent dies, the government ordinarily assures that child far better financial security than it does if that child's breadwinner parent is simply absent from the home: Social Security steps in to satisfy the deceased parent's obligation to have provided life insurance but not the absent parent's duty to provide child support.

Comparable treatment for the latter group implies some sort of publicly funded "child support insurance" scheme. Plans of this sort (including those that would expand Social Security in exactly this way) have in fact been proposed, most notably by Irwin Garfinkel, although so far at least they have not won widespread endorsement.⁵³ This sort of scheme could assure all children living in single-parent families of equal financial support—say, up to the poverty level. Or, like Social Security and private child support obligations, the benefits could be related to the absent parent's past wages. In either case, earnings by the custodial parent could supplement, rather than replace, the child support benefit.

Such a plan could be financed by general revenues or Social Security payroll taxes. But it might also be funded, at least in substantial part, by absent parents, thereby making the plan one that guarantees that a suitable level of child support will actually be provided and makes up the shortfall when the collection effort fails. Were this second approach adopted, not only should it dramatically reduce our sense of the cost of the plan but also it should offset any tendency that the plan might otherwise have to increase divorce.

It is important to emphasize that a plan like this would much improve the lot of many children who in the past have been dependent on welfare and large numbers of children with working-class and even middle-class mothers whose absent fathers now default on their child support obligations. It must be conceded, however, that in view of the direction of recent welfare reform, the prospects at present are not favorable for any new initiative to provide cash for children in single-parent families.

A different child-centered approach, therefore, is to try to provide all children with essential goods by means other than providing cash. Ought

not all American youths live in decent housing, obtain a quality education, receive adequate food, have access to decent health care, and so on? This is not the place to detail the many alternative mechanisms by which these critical items might be delivered. What needs emphasizing, however, is that any program guaranteeing these sorts of things to all children would have vastly disproportionate benefits to children now living in single-parent families. Moreover, if we can keep the focus on the needy and innocent members of the next generation, perhaps we can escape ideological battles over the worthiness of these children's parents. This is perhaps a naive hope, but one that may be enhanced when the thing delivered to the child's family is other than money: witness the greater public and legislative popularity of the federal food stamps program and federal aid to elementary and secondary education as compared with the now-decimated federal welfare program.

The many policy reforms discussed here are unlikely to have large impacts on people like Jackie Kennedy, Princess Diana, Susan Sarandon, and Murphy Brown. But ordinary single mothers (and their children) who are in analogous situations have a great deal at stake.

Notes

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8. In 1992, for example, just over 2 percent of single mothers on AFDC reported working full time and another 4 percent reported working part time. Another 12 percent were said to be seeking work. 1994 Green Book, Table 10-28.
9. More specifically, Edin found that about 15 percent were working full time (typically under another name) and many others were working part time. Kathryn Edin and Christopher Jencks, "Reforming Welfare," in Christopher Jencks, (ed.), *Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty and the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 204-235.
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