

Parental Responsibility and the Future of the American Family

Karl Zinsmeister

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/clr>

 Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Karl Zinsmeister, *Parental Responsibility and the Future of the American Family*, 77 Cornell L. Rev. 1005 (1992)
Available at: <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/clr/vol77/iss5/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarship@Cornell Law: A Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cornell Law Review by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Cornell Law: A Digital Repository. For more information, please contact jmp8@cornell.edu.

PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY

Karl Zinsmeister †

I, like Bill Kristol and Jane Larson, would like to begin by saying I think it's terrific that within this conference on the importance of individual responsibility, the organizers included a panel on the family. Individual responsibility and family responsibility are not always the same thing. In fact I think most of us could agree that the family is one locale where non-individualist, and sometimes even anti-individualist, logic is most appropriate. Nevertheless, I want to argue that here, as in other sectors of American society, an ethic of private responsibility is the best way, and frequently the only way, of forging lasting solutions to our problems.

I believe in the power and value of spontaneously evolved social institutions—the kinds of institutions that spring up organically to fill a need without any social engineer having been involved. The traditional nuclear family is a classic example of such a spontaneously evolved institution. It sprang up to fill humanity's most urgent imperative of all: the need to produce competent offspring who can carry progressive society into the future.

Yet, after centuries of useful service, in just about every cultural and economic setting ever devised, the intact, two-parent family is now under stress. The statistics are familiar: 27% of all American children are currently born without benefit of married parents,¹ and 60% of all newly arriving youngsters will spend part of their childhood in a single parent household.² These are unprecedented developments and I suggest that they need to be interpreted not merely as neutral changes in form—as is conventionally done to—

† Mr. Zinsmeister is a writer and an Adjunct Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. He has written for many publications, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Commentary*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post* and is a Contributing Editor for *Reason* magazine. The author was educated at Yale University and Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. He has served as an assistant to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan; has been a member of several advisory boards, including one at the Department of Education; and has testified before Congress on demographic and family topics. He is writing a book on the effect of fraying family ties on American society.

¹ Telephone interview with U.S. National Center for Health Statistics (December 1991).

² See, e.g., Arthur J. Norton & Paul C. Glick, *One Parent Families: A Social and Economic Profile*, 35 FAM. REL. 9 (1986).

day—but as unambiguous social decay, to be vigorously resisted wherever possible.

That, of course, is not the current establishment view. The common political attitude and the premise of almost all public policies is that any preference for one family form over another is a kind of prejudice. The influential author, Toni Morrison, gave a typical articulation of this view when she said recently, "I don't think a female running a house is a problem, a broken family. The little nuclear family is a paradigm that just doesn't work. . . . Why we are hanging onto it, I don't know."³ So long as this prevails as our official view, we are going to have serious domestic problems in this country, because in addition to its many personal and psychic rewards, the two-parent family has enormous social utility. As I have said, the main function of families is to acculturate children, to produce a productive and well-adjusted successor generation. And while having two parents around instead of one or none is no guarantee that the child is going to turn out well, it is a very, very good place to start.

There is lots of evidence for that claim. Take psychological disorders, for instance: A recent investigation of more than 17,000 American children found that youths from single parent families or step-families were two to three times more likely to have had emotional or behavioral problems than those who had both of their biological parents present in the home.⁴ This, incidentally, can be placed against the backdrop of a tripling of the youth suicide rate over the past 30 years.⁵

Consider education. A major study by the National Association of Elementary School Principals found that children from single-parent families were half as likely to be high academic achievers, compared to two-parent counterparts, and more than half again as likely to be low achievers.⁶ Students from one-parent families more frequently require disciplinary action, they are 70% more likely to be suspended or expelled, and they are more than twice as likely to drop out of school altogether.⁷

Consider income. The income potential of two-parent families is far superior to that of single-parent families. Families headed by single mothers have a poverty rate of 34% after all government

³ Karl Zinsmeister, *Growing Up Scared*, THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY, June 1990, at 53.

⁴ See NATIONAL CENTER FOR HEALTH STATISTICS, U.S. DEP'T OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERV., PUB. NO. 178, *Family Structure and Children's Health: United States, 1988*, in VITAL AND HEALTH STATISTICS, June 1991, at 9 (figure 4) [hereinafter *Family Structure and Children's Health*].

⁵ See *supra* note 1.

⁶ See Zinsmeister, *supra* note 3, at 52.

⁷ *Id.* See also *Family Structure and Children's Health*, *supra* note 4, at 8 (figure 3).

transfers, while the comparable figure for married-couple families is 6%.⁸ As a determinant of economic standing, family status now overpowers other factors like race, education, and area of residence that used to be the primary influences on standard of living.

Consider delinquency and crime. Seventy percent of juveniles now in state reform institutions grew up in single-parent or no-parent families.⁹ A similar fraction of adolescent murderers share that background.¹⁰ The correlation between broken families and street gang membership is so close that one observer has referred to gangs as "the flower on the vine of single parent life."¹¹

The list goes on and on: in terms of the risk of welfare dependency, drug and alcohol abuse, early and promiscuous sexual activity, intra-family child abuse, or even the likelihood of serious childhood illness or injury, decayed or unformed families turn out to be substantially more dangerous places for children to grow up. In fact, it can be said that many of the social problems that plague us most darkly today—drugs, educational droop, street violence, and so forth—are not so much separate issues as shoots off a single root, namely the breakdown of intact traditional families.

We know that the intact traditional family is a culturally valuable institution, probably our single *most* valuable institution in truth. We also know that the alternatives are lousy: Efforts to provide substitute acculturation through various public or private agencies, though increasingly popular with policy makers, have a very poor track record. Whether you look at public school programs; juvenile reformatories; top university-run day care centers; collectivized child-rearing experiments in Israel, China, or the Soviet Union; the best experiences of evacuated children in war-time Britain; or anywhere else, the unfortunate fact is that other social institutions have had very little success in picking up the pieces when the natural family has failed or been dissolved.

No matter what the funding levels, the skills of the staff, or the motivation, the clear conclusion of child development clinicians—from Anna Freud to John Bowlby on up to the present—is literally that the most humdrum, average family typically does a far better job of rearing its young into well-adjusted and effective citizens than any enlightened group of professionals could in the family's breach.

⁸ BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, U.S. DEP'T OF COMMERCE, *Measuring the Effect of Benefits and Taxes on Income and Poverty: 1990*, in CURRENT POPULATION REPORTS: CONSUMER INCOME, No. 176-RD, at 41 (Table 2).

⁹ BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, DEP'T OF JUSTICE, *SURVEY OF YOUTH IN CUSTODY* (1987).

¹⁰ Dewey G. Cornell, et. al., *Characteristics of Adolescents Charged with Homicide: Review of 72 Cases*, in 5 BEHAV. SCI. & L. 14 (1987).

¹¹ Leon Bing, *When You're a Crip (or a Blood)*, HARPERS MAG., Mar. 1989, at 51.

It is interesting to note that not even the step-family, a form closely related to the nuclear family, is able to get consistently good results. In studies of health, emotional well-being, academic success and other factors, children growing up in step-families behave, on average, much more like children from the troubled single-parent families I have just described than like children from intact families.¹² Neither substitute families nor pseudo-families nor family supplements are able to do for society what traditional nuclear families have done as a matter of course for millennia.

While there is no substitute for family integrity, it is also much too important to take for granted. As time-tested and successful as two-parent child rearing has been, it is by no means an automatic process. Family-making is hard as well as rewarding, and it is possible, I fear, for people to just stop trying. Moreover, our hard-won store of experience and understanding as to what the young need to become successful adults—a vast and precious body of cultural intuition, transmitted through a chain of parent-child relations that stretches backwards into the beginnings of human history—is never more than one generation from being lost. One broken link and the chain is no longer a chain. And when that happens, things can go awry fast.

While the unhappy social effects of family decay are now being seen in all of the modern industrial nations, the extents differ widely. I have recently done some comparative research on the Japanese family, and while certain of its aspects appear quite foreign from our perspective (fathers, for example, are often pathetically marginalized from family life in Japan), nonetheless, the basic structure of family life in that country remains quite wholesome.¹³ Ninety-five percent of all Japanese children today live in married, two-parent households. Indeed, in nearly one-third of those households, there is the additional presence of a grandparent, so Japanese children are getting tremendous doses of intimate adult care-taking. Only 1% of Japanese births today are illegitimate¹⁴ and Japanese divorce rates are about one-fourth of U.S. levels.¹⁵

We read a great deal these days about Japanese economic and social successes, and credit is generally given to factors like social discipline, industrial cooperation, low tax-rates, or a superior educa-

¹² See, e.g., *Family Structures and Children's Health*, *supra* note 4, at 8-10 (figures 2, 3, 4, 5).

¹³ Karl Zinsmeister, *Raising Hiroko*, AM. ENTERPRISE, Mar.-Apr. 1990, at 54.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 54. I've already pointed out, in the United States 27% of all births are illegitimate. See *supra* note 1.

¹⁵ Zinsmeister, *supra* note 13, at 54. Even in most European nations the divorce rate is roughly half that of the United States. See, e.g., *Divorces and Crude Divorce Rates: 1985-89*, 1989 DEMOGRAPHIC Y.B. 513-16, U.N. Doc. ST/ESA/STAT/SER.R./19.

tional system. Clearly those are all important influences. But I personally have become convinced that an even more vital factor which is rarely mentioned is the family structure that I have just described. Japan's powerfully stable and nurturing families—where children can develop into good students and good workers with fewer strains—are the deepest sources of their national miracle.

In fact, if you could somehow transplant the human output of Japan's 95% intact, child-centered families into American schoolrooms, factories, and offices for a season, you might be surprised at how solid our social institutions suddenly looked. Thanks to the efforts of Japanese parents, the human resources flowing into their society are of a quality that would make a lot of industrial and cultural orders look good.

Now obviously it is not our fate, nor ought it be our aim, to mimic the Japanese on the home front. But I suggest we would do well to recognize this: the single most effective thing public policy in this country could do to improve the functioning of our various social systems (not to mention improving human happiness) would be to stop trying to improve pseudo-families or to manufacture ersatz families, and instead go about unambiguously and unabashedly bolstering the real thing—stable, two-parent homes.

There are lots of things that would help. A change in public rhetoric would be a good place to start. To put it simply, we need more shouts from the rooftops in support of traditional intact families. Tax policy could be a central, practical expression of this support. There is broad agreement today that our divorce laws need revision. In administering welfare, public housing, and other sorts of public aid, we would only have to return to the standard practices of about 25 years ago to make great improvement. People forget that, for instance, when most of our public housing was built, those projects did not admit unmarried parents. We have moved rapidly away from sound welfare policy without much thought of what it is we are abandoning.

A legal measure that would help is passage and enforcement of parental responsibility laws. These laws can take many forms and can be effective in all kinds of sectors, ranging from child support to gang control to education. Linking parents to their minor dependents in stronger webs of accountability could sharply improve the functioning of schools and neighborhoods.

Obviously, there will be howls from liberationists of the left and right against such a family-bolstering program. But enacted as it would be on behalf of what is currently our most aggrieved social group—children—there is justice on the side of those with the courage and conviction to press on.

There are reservations well worth considering as we examine these proposals. But in certain areas, like drug-dependent babies and the judicial removal of delinquent children from toxic home environments, I suggest we are just going to have to bite the bullet and see to it that the positive effects of collective action in support of the traditional family outweigh the negative aspects.

The logical and moral key to such cases is to think of a process under which we take seriously the social contracts that people enter into with each other,¹⁶ and when a contract is broken against the central interests of a vulnerable party—particularly when that vulnerable party is a minor child—we ought to be more willing to enforce a sanction. We have been much too interested of late in providing state *compensation* for private delinquencies, and too little interested in holding the original parties accountable on their own terms. In the future, our family policies should rigorously avoid replacing absent family members, thereby bailing them out, and concentrate instead on making irresponsible absence more unattractive.

I freely admit that, even on these social contract grounds, there will sometimes be tough cases in which a family-based social policy will require some constraints, I hope most of them voluntary, on popular adult liberties. I would justify such constraints by pointing out several things. One is that modern adults enter into family obligations in freedom, and with cognizance of the life changes that new responsibilities bring. Another is that this program is based on the expectation that parents can plan their own lives and will do the right thing. There should be no intrusion until we find otherwise—it is policing, not nannying, that would be provided. Third, early encouragements against family meltdown will almost always be less harsh and distasteful than trying to deal with the fallout later. Persons who don't like the idea of living in a land of world-high incarceration rates, record mental treatment, and policemen on every other street corner need to consider where today's real threats to individual autonomy lie. It is my belief that an exhortative effort at family bolstering will be far kinder to personal liberties than our current "liberal" regime, which disguises its intrusions, and exercises communal moral authority only when it is too late—to incapacitate the anti-social byproducts with which it must increasingly cope. Finally, I would point to the stakes involved. Families are literally the atomic particles of a society. The health of every culture directly reflects, or soon will, the health of its families. This is not, in short, an area where we can easily adjust to a looser standard of quality.

¹⁶ I mean social contracts in the general sense, not in Professor Larson's definition.

I bring you sobering news, but with hopeful possibilities. I would summarize it this way: Individual, individually responsible parents, in millions and millions of private retail choices, will be the decisionmakers who decide the wholesale fate of American society for this generation and far beyond. They deserve the whole-hearted support of our larger society, but the decisions, and the awesome authority, will ultimately be their own. Thank you.