

State Of the State Survey

*Michigan Families:
Perceptions of the Causes of Divorce
and Single Parenthood*

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Briefing Paper No. 97-25

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OVERVIEW

In the early 1990s, 28% of Michigan's children were growing up in households with only one parent. The vast majority of these children (87%) were living with their mothers.¹ One reason to be concerned about these children is the strong correspondence between poverty and female headed households. More than half of children in Michigan's single parent families are poor, whereas less than 11% of those where both parents are present are officially poor. For female headed households with children under 5 years old, the rate of poverty in 1990 in Michigan reached 64.6%.²

How do Michigan residents explain the number of children who are growing up in single parent families? Are these households a result of easy divorce laws and parental irresponsibility toward children? Are single parent families seen to be a consequence of mothers' access to and dependence on welfare? Might single parent families result from broader social problems such as insufficient employment opportunities or high incarceration rates among marriageable men? Do men and women have different perceptions of the causes of single parent families? Do African Americans view the impact of family structure on children differently than do whites? Questions on the Spring 1996 State of the State Survey (SOSS) permit us to get some sense of what Michigan residents think are the causes of divorce and of single-parent families. They also permit us to see whether attitudes differ by sex, race, marital status and age.

THE SURVEY

Between April 30 and July 9, 1996, Michigan State University's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research conducted a telephone survey of adult residents of the State of Michigan. This seventh quarterly MSU State of the State Survey included a set of questions that focused on families, women and children.

The survey of 1,133 respondents was designed to be representative of the major regions of the state: Detroit City, Southeast Michigan (excluding Detroit), Southwest Michigan, East Central Michigan, West Central Michigan, Northern Lower Michigan and the Upper Peninsula. The data reported here are weighted to make the results representative of the adult population of Michigan. The data can be sorted by a number of population characteristics to see whether there are associations between such attributes as race, sex, age and views on particular issues.

KEY FINDINGS

Perceptions of the Impact of Single Parenting on Children

- **Over three-fourths of adults in Michigan believe that children living in single-parent households are at a disadvantage compared to children living in two-parent households.** When asked about the effects of household composition on children, 78% of residents agreed that

¹United States Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1996 (by state), internet: <http://www.census.gov/statab/www/states/mi.txt> (June 19, 1997).

²Michigan Kids Count 1997, internet: <http://www.aecf.org/kc1997/statepro/MI.htm> (June 19, 1997)

children are somewhat or much worse off in single-parent households. (See Figure 1; for exact wording, see Question 1.)

- **Views on single parenting vary significantly by marital status.** As Figure 1 shows, 83% of single adults and 78% of those who are married or widowed see children as disadvantaged by growing up in a single-parent home. In contrast, only a slight majority of divorced or separated adults (54%) view children in single-parent homes as worse off.
- **Race and sex make a moderate difference in how Michigan residents view single-parent households.** According to the data presented in Figure 1, whites (80%) are more likely than African Americans (62%) to see children in single-parent households as somewhat or much worse off. Men are slightly more likely (83%) than women (72%) to view children in divorced households as worse off than those in intact families. Age also makes a slight difference in perceptions. (For all the figures in this paper, “young” refers to residents aged 18-29 years; “middle” describes people aged 30-55; and “old” describes people aged 56 or older.)

Perceptions of the Causes of Single Parent Households

While the majority of Michigan residents believe that children are better off living with two parents, there is less consensus about explanations for the causes of single parent household formation.

- **Over half of Michigan residents (54%) believe that ease of divorce contributes substantially to the number of children being raised in single-parent households.** As Figure 2 indicates, these perceptions vary little by race or age, and not at all by sex. Marital status makes a slight difference: a minority (45%) of single residents see ease of divorce as a major explanation vs. a slight majority of divorced or separated (59%) and of married, remarried or widowed residents (56%). (See Question 2a; Figure 2 shows percentage who answered “a great deal” or “quite a bit.”)
- **A substantial minority (42%) blame the number of children in single-parent households on irresponsible choices of parents.** As Figure 3 shows, there is little variance by race or sex. Whites are only slightly more likely (43%) than African Americans (38%) to adopt this view. Men are slightly more likely than women. Views tend to vary significantly by age. Elderly Michigianians (60%) are much more likely than the middle aged (35%) and young (38%) to view children to be in single-parent homes as a result of irresponsible parental behaviors. There is also some variance by marital status: a slight majority of divorced and separated respondents (53%) see parental irresponsibility as contributing to family breakdowns, whereas 42% of those married, remarried or widowed and 39% of those who are single share this view. (See Figure 3 and Question 2.)
- **Over one-fourth (28%) of Michigan residents believe that inadequate earnings by men contribute to the numbers of single-parent households.** Figure 4 reveals that there is some difference along racial and along sex lines: 24% of whites vs. 33% of African Americans and 26% of women vs. 31% of men see low wages of men as substantial contributors to single parenting. Older residents (34%) are more likely than middle aged (23%) or young residents (21%) to see this as a factor. Similarly, divorced or separated people are more likely to adopt an economic explanation (36%) than those who are single (24%) or married/remarried or widowed (25%). (See Q. 2 for exact wording.)
- **Over one-third of Michigan residents (37%) think that families break up because mothers can secure welfare support for their children.** There is little difference along racial

or gender lines: slightly more blacks (39%) than whites (36%) view welfare as a contributor to single-parent families; women (36%) and men (37%) share similar views. As in other questions, age makes a real difference: nearly half of the elderly respondents (49%) in contrast to about one-third of the middle aged (31%) and young (34%) saw mothers' desire for welfare as a substantial cause of single parenting. (See Figure 5 and Q. 2.)

- **As Figure 6 shows, almost two of every five Michiganians (38%) believe imprisonment of men to be an important cause of single parenthood. Views vary significantly by race: 63% of black residents and 34% of white residents state that incarceration of men contributes a great deal or quite a bit to single-parent families.** Views also differ by age: older residents are more likely (59%) than middle aged (29%) or younger residents (32%) to see imprisonment as an important contribution to single parent families. There is little variance by sex (38% of women, 37% of men), but those who are divorced or separated are more likely (47%) than those who are single (34%) or married/widowed (38%) to see imprisonment of men as a significant cause of single parenthood.

DISCUSSION

Throughout the last decade, policy makers have expressed concern about the growth in the number of single-parent households. Debates about the causes (and effects) of single-parent households helped to shape the 1996 welfare reform legislation. Some scholars argue that structural changes in the economy have produced fewer job opportunities at high wages, at least for those without a college education. Where decent jobs are not available in central cities or particular rural areas, pockets of concentrated poverty have emerged, with associated crime and high rates of incarceration. From this perspective, at least one source of the increasing numbers of female-headed households is a declining pool of men, earning wages sufficient for exercising paternal responsibilities.³ Other scholars argue that a generous welfare state and divorce laws have made it easier for single-parent families to survive without two wage earners.⁴ This survey gives us an opportunity to see the perspectives of Michigan's citizens on this debate.

One thing is clear: the majority of adult residents in Michigan believe that children in this state who are growing up in single-parent families are less well off than those where both parents are present. Most respondents in the State of the State Survey believe that decisions made by adults (either because of ease of divorce or lack of responsibility toward their children) have contributed to family break-ups. These findings may indicate some support for changes in policies related to divorce and child custody, even among those who are separated or divorced. However, the survey did not ask specific questions about how children are disadvantaged by being raised in single-parent households or about various reform proposals.

When offered explanations for single-parent households that are more rooted in socially based problems, there is greater variance of opinion among Michigan residents. A minority of respondents share the view that low wage rates and persistent unemployment are important in such patterns. In contrast, more Michigan residents (across both sex and race lines) share the view that welfare benefits shape the patterns of household formation. It is worth noting that this view is more broadly shared by

³See, for example, William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and *When Jobs Disappear* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

⁴See for example, Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980* (New York, 1985).

divorced and separated individuals, perhaps because the presence of welfare benefits may have made it possible for some to leave unhappy marriages more readily.

How important is race in shaping views on family structure? Although African Americans are less likely to see children as disadvantaged by being raised in a single-parent household, there are not significant racial differences in most Michigan residents' views of the causes of single parenthood. Black and white residents seem to share views on the impact of divorce laws, parental responsibility, male unemployment and welfare benefits on household formation. However, there are very significant racial differences in views on the role of imprisonment in family structure. The dramatic racial differences on this question seem worthy of fuller study, as they may point to larger questions about perceptions of criminal justice in Michigan.

Figure 1. Michiganians Who Say Children of Single-Parent Homes Are Somewhat or Much Worse Off, by Race, Sex, Age and Marital Status

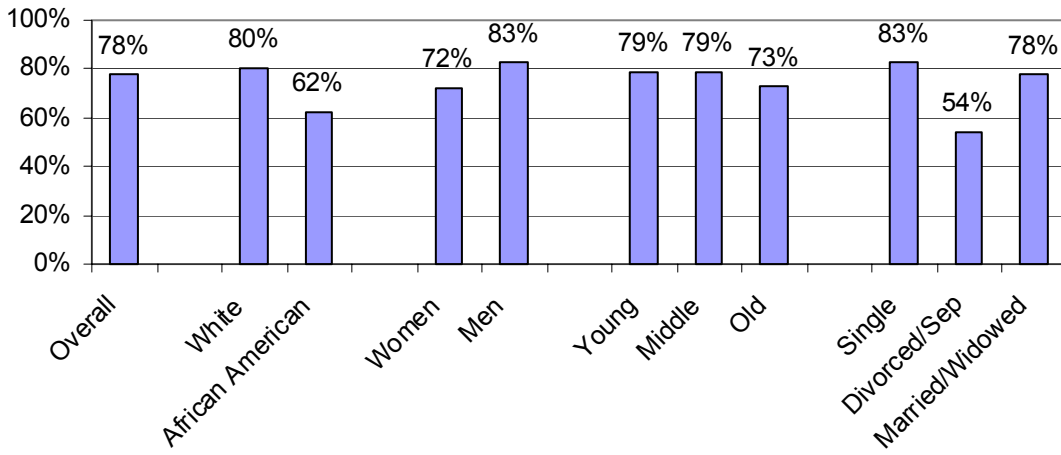


Figure 2. Michiganians Who Say that the "Ease" of Getting a Divorce Contributes a Great Deal or Quite a Bit to Children Being in Single-Parent Homes

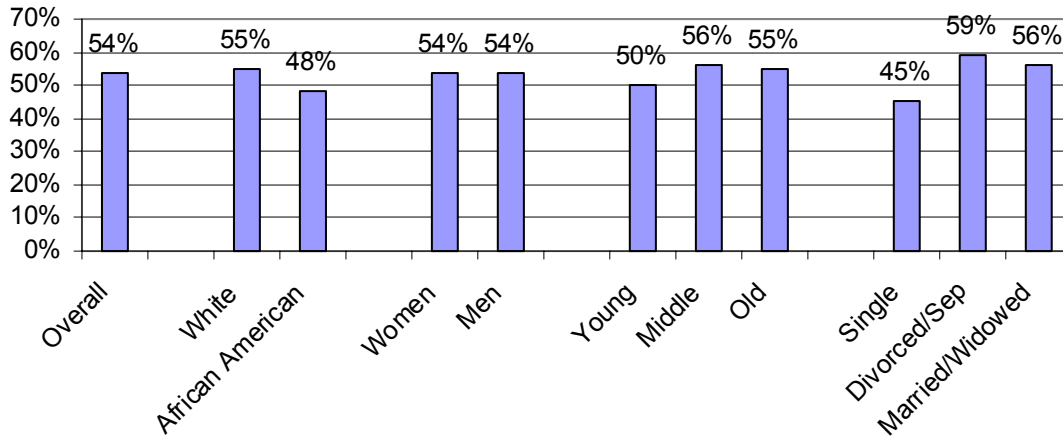


Figure 3. Michiganians Who Say that "Parents are Irresponsible" Contributes a Great Deal or Quite a Bit to Children Being in Single-Parent Homes

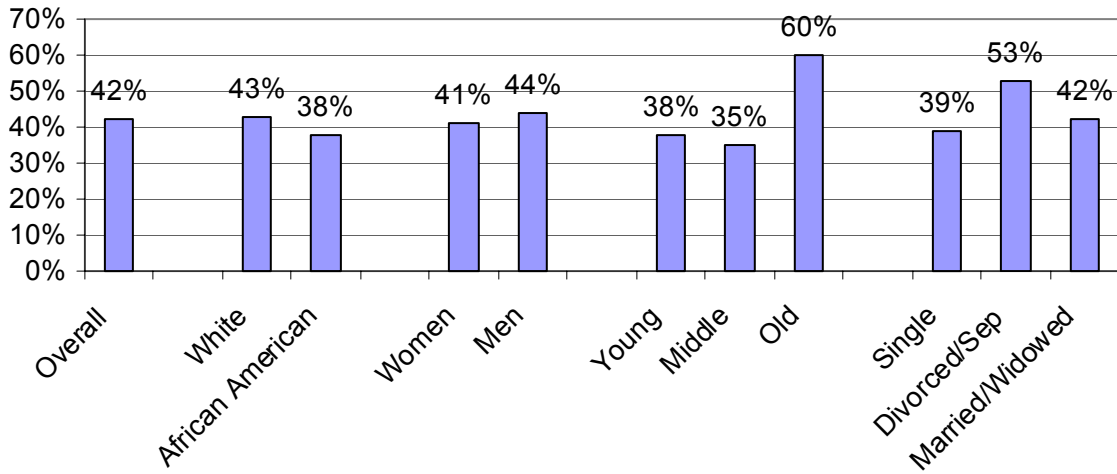


Figure 4. Michiganians Who Say that "Men Cannot Make Enough Money to Support Their Families" Contributes a Great Deal or Quite a Bit to Children Being in Single-Parent Homes

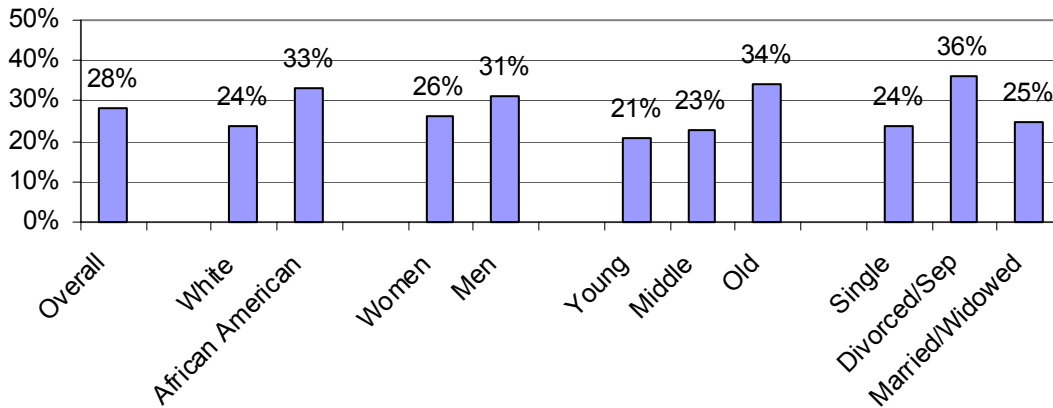


Figure 5. Michiganians Who Say that "Mothers Want Welfare Benefits" Contributes a Great Deal or Quite a Bit to Children Being in Single-Parent Homes

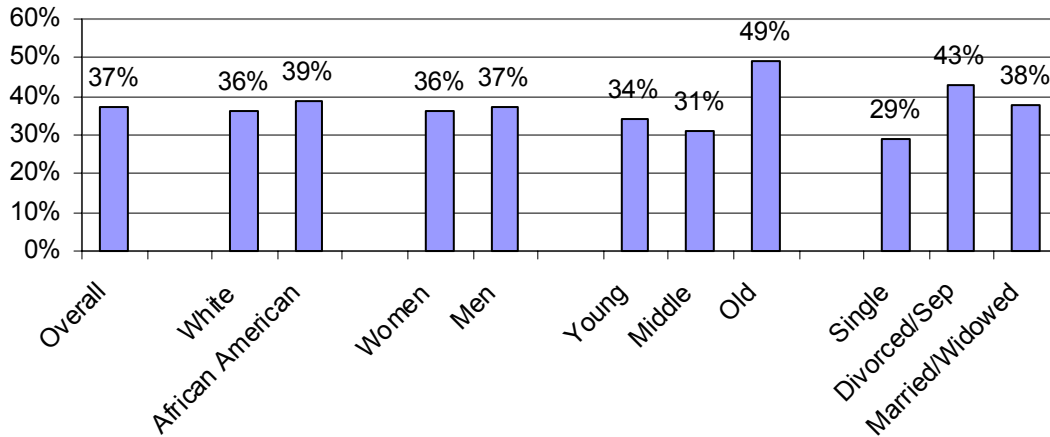
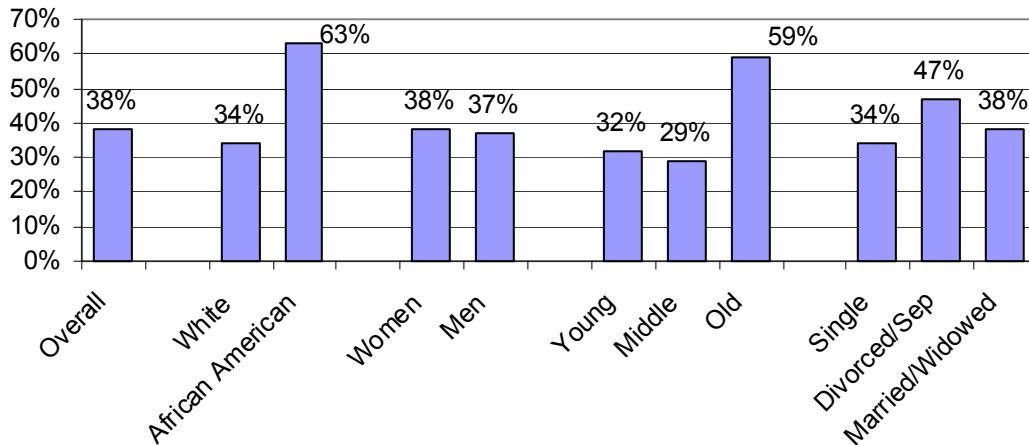


Figure 6. Michiganians Who Say that "Men are in Jail or Prison" Contributes a Great Deal or Quite a Bit to Children Being in Single-Parent Homes



MSU State of the State Survey, Spring 1996, N=1133, Sampling Error-2.9%, Michigan State University, IPPSR

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Note: The full wording of questions and the answer categories for the items discussed in this briefing paper is given below. The questions are listed in the order of the points in the briefing paper, not as presented in the survey. The actual question number for the survey instrument is shown in brackets after the question, for example [Cb0]. These questions consumed about two minutes of the interviews, which averaged about 26 minutes.

Q. 1. Generally speaking, do you think that children who grow up in a single parent home are much worse off, somewhat worse off, somewhat better off, or much better off than children who grow up in a two-parent home? [Cb0]

Q. 2. Next I would like to read you a list of possible reasons why children might be from single parent families and have you tell me if each reason contributes a great deal, quite a bit, somewhat, a little or not at all to why children might be from single parent families.

- a. It is easy to get a divorce. [Cb1a]
- b. Men cannot make enough money to support their families. [Cb1b]
- c. Parents are irresponsible when it comes to their children. [Cb1c]
- d. Mothers live apart from the children's father so they can get welfare benefits. [Cb1d]
- e. Men are in jail or in prison. [Cb1f]

REGIONAL CATEGORIES

NOTE: These regions are the ones used by the Michigan State University Extension Service, except that we treat Detroit City as a separate region.

Detroit:City of Detroit

Southeast: Genesee, Lapeer, Lenawee, Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair, Washtenaw, Wayne (excluding Detroit)

Southwest: Berrien, Branch, Calhoun, Cass, Eaton, Hillsdale, Ingham, Jackson, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph, Van Buren

West Central: Allegan, Barry, Ionia, Kent, Lake, Manistee, Mason, Mecosta, Montcalm, Muskegon, Newaygo, Oceana, Osceola, Ottawa

East Central: Arenac, Bay, Clare, Clinton, Gladwin, Gratiot, Huron, Isabella, Midland, Saginaw, Sanilac, Shiawassee, Tuscola

Northern L.P.: Alcona, Alpena, Antrim, Benzie, Charlevoix, Cheboygan, Crawford, Emmet, Grand Traverse, Iosco, Kalkaska, Leelanau, Missaukee, Montmorency, Ogemaw, Otsego, Oscoda, Presque Isle, Roscommon, Wexford

U.P.: Alger, Baraga, Chippewa, Delta, Dickinson, Gogebic, Houghton, Iron, Keweenaw, Luce, Mackinac, Marquette, Menominee, Ontonagon, Schoolcraft

Background Information

Michigan State University State of the State Survey [MSU SOSS]

What Is MSU SOSS?

The MSU State of the State Survey is a quarterly statewide survey of a random sample of the residents of Michigan. Although dozens of surveys are conducted in Michigan every year, no other one is designed to provide a regular systematic monitoring of the public mood in major regions of the state. Through SOSS, MSU aims to fill this information gap. SOSS has five main purposes: (1) to provide timely information about citizen opinions on critical issues; (2) to provide data for scientific and policy research by MSU faculty; (3) to provide information for programs and offices at MSU; (4) to develop survey research methodology; and (5) to provide opportunities for student training and research.

Each quarterly round or “wave” of SOSS has a different main theme: (a) Winter–quality of life, governmental reform, higher education; (b) Spring–family, women, and children; (c) Summer–ethnic and racial groups, Michigan communities; (d) Fall (even numbered years)–politics, the election, and political issues; Fall (odd-numbered years)–health and the environment.

Who Is Conducting SOSS?

The State of the State Survey is administered by the Survey Research Division (SRD) of the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR), using its computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) technology.

The design and overall planning of SOSS is the responsibility of a 17-person Steering Committee chaired by Dr. Brian D. Silver, Professor of Political Science. The Steering Committee consists of representatives from sponsoring units, which are primarily colleges and other administrative offices within MSU.

Subject to final approval by the Steering Committee, the questionnaire for each wave of SOSS is developed by a Working Group, most of whom also serve as principal investigators or analysts for that wave. The Working Group for the Spring 1996 survey was comprised of:

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