

Swedish Study Indicates Single  
Parenting Has a Significant Adverse Impact on Children  
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A study published January 25, 2003 in the authoritative British medical journal, The Lancet,<sup>1</sup> indicates children raised by single parents in Sweden suffer wide-ranging negative consequences regardless of socio-economic and medical criteria.

The findings are dramatic. They appear particularly significant for family lawyers in the United States because of the quality of the study, the substantial numbers of children followed – 65,000 with single parents and 921,000 with two parents -- over eight years, and the fact that Sweden is a Western country similar to the United States.

After adjusting for socio-economic status, parental addiction and mental illness, the researchers found that children raised by single parents had higher risks of psychiatric, alcohol and narcotics related disease, as well as suicide.

Specific conclusions drawn from the data include the following:

- Boys in single-parent families have a greater likelihood of developing psychiatric and narcotics-related disease than girls.
- Lack of household financial resources is a major component of increased risk.
- Single parents are more likely to be unskilled manual workers, low-grade non-manual workers, and people without occupation. Twice as many single parents as couples receive unemployment compensation.
- Mothers with low economic status as measured by occupation have a greater risk of being single mothers than mothers with high education.
- Sixty percent more single parents than parents with partners are admitted to hospitals for psychiatric disease or alcohol addiction.
- Children of single parents have a higher risk of death, especially between the ages of 13 and 17.
- Boys have a 50% higher risk of death in a single parent family than in a two-parent family. They are five times as likely to die from drugs or alcohol, three times as likely to die from a fall or poisoning, and four times as likely to die from

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<sup>1</sup> "Mortality, severe morbidity, and injury in children living with single parents in Sweden: a population-based study," by Gunilla Ringbäck Weitoft, Anders Hjern, Bengt Haglund, and Måns Rosén. The Lancet, v. 361, no. 9354, January 25, 2003.

external violence.

- Girls with a single parent are twice as likely to commit suicide and three times as likely to die from an overdose of drugs or alcohol than girls with two parents.
- Statistics are indistinguishable based on whether the single parent is a mother or a father.
- The most important risk factor for children, other than single parenting, is the lack of household resources as indicated by welfare payments and housing situation.

The longitudinal study also cites three studies supporting the proposition that children are better off in a single parent family with low conflict than in a two-parent family with high conflict.

None of these findings is particularly surprising, even though they apply to a Swedish population. Their importance for family law practitioners in the United States is that life after divorce or separation carries many more dangers for children than just a change in standard of living.