

Moynihan Redux

Sadly, still more single-parent families

Shortchanging Student Achievement: The Educational, Economic, and Social Costs of Family Fragmentation

by Mitch Pearlstein

Rowman & Littlefield, 2011, \$24.95;

165 pages.

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

This book comes to us with a remarkable range of recommenders: Glenn Loury, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, Eric Hanushek, Ron Haskins, Heather MacDonald, David Blankenhorn, Chester Finn, and others. It is published as part of a series edited by *Education Next's* own Frederick M. Hess. To my mind it is being recommended largely for the worthy cause in which its writer has been engaged for 20 years or more—deploring the breakdown of the traditional family. It is somewhat disorderly in presenting evidence for its central argument, and the author has an odd style in which almost every statement is hedged. This is not done as a matter of scholarly caution, but rather to preempt the charge that he is making too much of his thesis and thereby discounting other explanations for the educational, and subsequent occupational and economic, failure of so many American children.

But the central thesis, however presented, is hardly contestable: the fragmentation of the American family, in which the norm of two parents raising children in a marriage has been radically reduced by the increase of children born and raised out of wedlock, engenders grave problems for many American children and American society. As the first chapter puts it, we have moved “From Moynihan to ‘My Goodness.’” The “Moynihan” is, of course,

Daniel P. Moynihan, author of the famous, or infamous, 1965 report on the black family. The “My Goodness” is our response to the enormous increase in the proportion of babies who are born out of wedlock or are illegitimate, terms one uses with embarrassment now but which may still have had some currency in 1965. The figures that so alarmed Moynihan—24 percent for blacks versus 3 percent for whites—have since ballooned to more than 70 percent for blacks and 30 percent for whites, figures that would have been unimaginable in 1965.

Pearlstein quotes a Swedish demographer: “The USA stands out as an extreme case with its very high proportion of children born to a lone mother, with a higher probability that children experience a union disruption than anywhere else...”

Mitch Pearlstein is director of a think tank in Minneapolis, the Center of the American Experiment, which he founded after a career working for University of Minnesota president C. Peter Magrath, for Minnesota governor Albert H. Quie, as an editorial writer for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, and at the U.S. Department of Education with Chester Finn. Despite his solid Minnesota credentials, Pearlstein comes out of Far Rockaway High School in Queens, New York, whose decline from a nurturer of future Nobel prizewinners, furnishes much of the background to his distress over American education (as the decline of so many other once-great New York City high schools serves so many others, including this reviewer).

Pearlstein is more an advocate than an analyst. He is well aware of the expansive literature on the fragmentation of the American family, its causes and consequences, scholarly as well as popular. But he often mixes together childhood trauma and distress, family

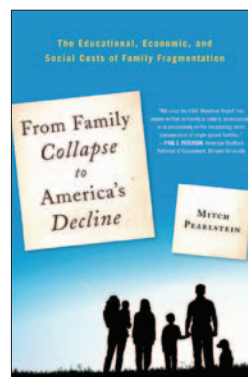
disruption, poverty, troubled neighborhoods, and still more, as possible causes. All are undoubtedly linked, but social scientists do try to pry these various forces apart using statistical techniques. Nevertheless, his main point holds: it stands to reason that being raised by a single mother is more difficult for a child than being raised by two parents.

Pearlstein is clearly more comfortable presenting the facts from whatever source than in advocating any solution:

No proposed solution in this book is equal to the central problem it aims to solve. There is no tax break, no welfare reform, no marriage education program, no public service campaign...that can reduce out-of-wedlock birth rates and divorce rates to what they were as recently as when the Everly Brothers beseeched “Little Suzy” to wake up lest their reputations get shot.

What is to be done? Pearlstein can reel off pages of programs that have attempted to raise educational achievement. He reminds us, if we have forgotten or never knew, that under the George W. Bush administrations more than 200 programs were instituted to aid marital stability. But he is no great advocate of any specific programs or approaches, whether to improve educational achievement or deal with the underlying problem of family fragmentation that makes life for children more difficult. He is of sociologist Peter Rossi’s persuasion, made popular by Moynihan, on the effect of social programs. As Rossi phrased the “iron law of evaluation,” “the expected value of any net impact assessment of any large-scale social program is zero.” Educational reform after reform, many that

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appear to have good effects, crumble under close evaluation, and with the passage of time. And those that manage to keep up a record of improvement with children who are expected to do poorly in school, such as KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), cannot be brought to scale, owing to the talents and energy they require.

All this is commonly known, and Pearlstein well reports what we have learned, which is not encouraging. In his chapter on “Strengthening Learning,” he has nothing new to propose. But he does like the emphasis on exercised authority—in loco parentis, schools in place of absent parents—that Gerald Grant and others have emphasized as making for an effective school. And he has a good word for the differentiated digital education that Clayton Christensen and his colleagues pressed for in *Disrupting Class* (see “Something’s Better Than Nothing,” *book reviews*, Fall 2008).

Nor is he more optimistic about most programs to strengthen marriage. When the first of “three sophisticated experiments” designed to test the effectiveness of marriage programs aimed at low-income couples was evaluated and reported on by Mathematica, the Rossi dictum again prevailed: “[Building strong families] did not make couples more likely to stay together or get married...it did not improve couple’s relationships.”

Pearlstein does strike a new note, not commonly seen among advocates of strong and stable families, when he raises the issue of the high incarceration rate in the United States generally, and the exceptionally high rates for blacks, which take so many black men out of the marriage market. Here he does have something new to propose: not anything that will reduce the incarceration rate, but some

effort to reduce the extensive “collateral sanctions” that come with a prison sentence and make getting a job and rehabilitation so hard. Ohio may well be correct in forbidding ex-convicts to be auctioneers, but why should it forbid them a commercial driver’s license? He makes a surprising but reasonable point when he asks what has happened to “forgiveness.” When a prison sentence has been completed, should it not be easier to have a conviction vacated, after a spell or period of good behavior, so it is not a lifelong ball and chain?

On occasion Pearlstein argues that among the bad effects of the fragmented family is the increasing division in the United States between those who can make a good life on the basis of stable backgrounds and effective education, and those who cannot. He is speaking about increasing inequality, but not in

the way it is usually addressed, in relation to tax policy. He pays no attention to how the effects of single parent-

hood might be moderated for children to some degree by economic measures, such as child benefits, as in Europe. He appreciates it when those on the left give attention to the problem of family fragmentation that so concern him. Might he not pay more attention to the economic and social policies they advocate that could moderate the harsh effects of single parenthood or the economic consequences of divorce? Even if less frequent in Europe, their effects, owing to social measures, are not so harsh and divisive there, and that could have been given more attention.

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