
FREQUENCIES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF BROKEN HOMES AMONG ADOLESCENTS¹

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American young people of junior and senior high school ages, born during and just after World War II, are approaching an all-time peak in numbers. Quantitatively and qualitatively they comprise in our society a very important population for research inquiries. Often affecting their lives are the disruptions of families by divorce, which have *increased* in frequency from about 1 per 1000 existing marriages in the early 1860's to 9 per 1000 in the latter 1950's. During that same period the rate of families broken by the death of husband or wife has been *reduced* by an even greater proportion (Jacobson, 1959).

The United States, Jacobson reminds us, is the only major nation today that has no system for the centralized collection of marriage and divorce records. Neither the Census nor any other agency has compiled accurate, comprehensive, and comparable data which would provide the actual numbers or frequencies of American children or youth who experience the death of one or both parents, their separation or divorce, the remarriage of a parent, or of these events themselves. Nor, consequently, have there been quantitative, definitive studies to discern the effect of the long-term upward trend in divorce and downward curve

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in mortality upon children and their families. Thus, whenever relevant data become available from relatively large and representative research populations, their publication augments the meager reliable information now available. This research makes possible an indication of the frequency of occurrence of some of the less usual types of parent patterns and a few of their differing characteristics, for "broken homes" having teen-age children.

THE ADOLESCENT PROJECT

This paper deals specifically with some of the demographic features of broken homes with different parent patterns. The data are derived from a larger study which has as a primary concern the orientations of young people to their parents and peers regarding affections, associations, and norms and values.

Almost 25,000 young persons participated to provide the data. They were enrolled in junior and senior high schools of representative locales within two states. The involvement of all pupils enrolled in the 7th through 12th grades in selected areas and school systems in North Carolina and Ohio was attempted. Participating in Ohio were all the public junior and senior high schools in Morrow and Delaware counties and in the cities of Urbana and Hamilton. In addition, the Catholic parochial schools in the cities of Delaware, Mt. Vernon, and Hamilton took part. In Ohio, 10,954 respondents, or 93.2 percent of the total enrollment in the included classes, were involved. Only the white public junior and senior high schools in North Carolina participated, the sample being composed of 13,588 subjects, who constituted 87.9 percent of all the pupils in such classes in Chatham, Harnett, and Lee counties and in Lexington and Greensboro. Only 229 Catholic parochial students in North Carolina were omitted. The proportions of respondents by state are about 53:47, with the Carolina subjects being in the majority. The average age of the participants on their last birthday was 15.0 years in the southern state and 14.8 in the northern.

A questionnaire served as the research instrument and was administered to the students present that day by the teachers in their own classrooms. Precautions were taken to preserve the anonymity of the respondents. However, in one large community, those who were willing to do so were asked to sign their names, which most did, thus enabling the researchers to match questionnaires for 333 siblings and to conduct reliability checks for 30 items, including both "objective" identification and "subjective" opinion questions, producing 85 percent correspondence.

Altogether, 4,572 young people in the sample (4,376 white and 196 Negro) resided in broken homes, distributed among five specified types. They comprised 18.6 percent of the total number of adolescents that actually participated (derived from table 1). An additional 123 (0.5 percent) lived in broken homes of an unknown nature. However, editing requirements, deletions of the non-whites for most calculations, and the elimination of varying small numbers of respondents who failed to provide information on certain variables together reduced the research population generally used in the analyses to 4,262 subjects.

FREQUENCY OF BROKEN HOMES

Parent Pattern.—The data presented in table 1 indicate the numbers and proportions of respondents, separated by race, who reside in homes having different combinations of parents or surrogates. The absolute and relative frequencies shown in tables 1 and 2 have been derived from two magnitudes of the research population. In each array, the four columns on the left are designated as derivatives of an "optimum base," the set on the right from a "maximum base." The former "optimum" figures in each array constitute the more valid "working population" for subsequent analyses. They are the data remaining after the deletions referred to had been made. The latter "maximum" figures represent

TABLE 1
Distribution of respondents by parent pattern

Residing with:	Optimum base				Maximum base			
	Both states (white)		Ohio Negro		Both states (white)		Ohio Negro	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Both real parents	19,151	82.1	226	56.4	19,614	81.4	241	54.0
Mother-stepfather	1,211	5.2	40	10.0	1,260	5.2	44	9.9
Mother only	1,737	7.4	78	19.5	1,840	7.6	87	19.5
Father-stepmother	294	1.3	11	2.7	313	1.3	14	3.1
Father only	223	1.0	5	1.2	233	1.0	6	1.3
"Others"	659	2.8	41	10.2	730	3.0	45	10.1
Unknown	46	.2	—	—	114	.5	9	2.0
Totals	23,321	100.0	401*	100.0	24,104	100.0	446*	99.9

*"Orientals" are ignored in the breakdowns. There are 30 "Orientals" included with whites in optimum base and 56 of them incorporated in the maximum base.

TABLE 2
Frequency of "causes" of broken homes

"Cause" of break:	Optimum base				Maximum base			
	Both states (white)		Ohio Negro		Both states (white)		Ohio Negro	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
One parent died	1,625	7.0	46	11.5	1,703	7.1	55	12.3
Both parents died	58	.25	5	1.2	64	.27	6	1.4
Divorce	1,568	6.7	55	13.7	1,627	6.8	59	13.2
Parents separated	488	2.1	47	11.7	513	2.1	50	11.2
Subject left home	112	.5	4	1.0	136	.6	4	1.0
Anomalous replies*	67	.3	—	—	217	.9	—	—
Unknown	217	(.9)	18	(4.7)	303	(1.3)	27	(6.1)
Totals	4,135	16.9	175	39.1	4,563	17.8	201	39.1

*The respondents indicated that they lived with a parent and a stepparent yet also said the previous marriage was broken by "separation" rather than by divorce or death, which legally must precede re-marriage.

the total number of participants, without omissions, and therefore comprise the nearest approximations to the parameters of the populations from which these sample data were secured. IBM processing has resulted in slightly varying totals in some comparisons. However, the two sets of data are closely parallel in their relative frequency distributions.

In the two states combined, about 82 percent of the white respondents live with both natural parents. Of the 18 percent who come from broken homes, about 7.5 percent reside just with their mothers; slightly over 5 percent are in mother-stepfather families; somewhat over 1 percent have a father-stepmother parent pattern; and 1.0 percent live with their father only. About 3 percent reside with "others"—relatives, guardians, foster or adoptive parents, or in institutional settings. The Negroes, included only in Ohio, much less frequently reside in "normal" homes with both real parents. They live in broken homes 2.5 times as often and experience *each* of these parent patterns more commonly.

In 1958, an estimated 5.6 million of the 60 million American children under 18 years of age were not living with two parents. About 3 percent, or a quarter of a million, were living away from relatives as residents of institutions, foster children, or wards. Approximately 3 million children resided with one parent only, usually the mother (Bernert, 1960).

Our data likewise show the "mother only" home to be the most common broken home parent pattern. It is encountered 7.5 times as often as the "father only" form. This differential occurs principally because: (a) courts award the custody of children to the mother in over 90 percent of the divorce or separation cases; (b) divorced or widowed men remarry more often; (c) the mortality rates of men are higher; and men (d) more frequently desert their families than do women; (e) are institutionalized more often; and (f) may be away from their spouses and children while in the service or for educational or occupational reasons more commonly than wives and mothers.

Without specifying age limits or generation, Smith (1953) estimated that about 6 percent of the American population was involved in step-relationships. One million of the nine million stepchildren, he asserted, were in the 10 to 16 years age bracket. He summarized the findings of 17 independent studies of the number of stepchildren in various schools across the nation and found that 6.2 percent (853) of the 13,079 subjects involved were stepchildren.

However, the frequency that step-relationships are encountered varies greatly in relation to the mortality, divorce, and remarriage rates in different parts of the country. In a previous investigation, I secured 572 stepchildren out of 4,685 junior and senior high students within one county of Washington State, or 12.2 percent (Irish, 1957). The 6.5 percent (5.2 plus 1.3) of the present respondents who have stepparents, of either sex, closely parallel the "national" average Smith calculated. It is likely that Smith's estimates are now too low.

In a further computation, Smith determined that the ratio of stepfathers to stepmothers was about 2:1. A ratio of 3.2:1 was found in my previous study; and the data for this larger Ohio and North Carolina population provide a 4:1 proportion. The disparity in this and other populations between the number of stepfathers and stepmothers results mainly from the operation of the differentials in the custody, mortality, and remarriage factors alluded to above.

Factors in the "break".—The occurrences which brought about the disruption of the homes of these adolescents are indicated in table 2, separated by race. The frequencies again have been calculated for the two bases, previously explained, and the proportions differ but little. Overall, two types of event operate with about equal frequency: slightly more than 7 percent of all our subjects have lost one parent by death, and slightly less than 7 percent were "children of divorce." "Separation" of parents, encompassing legal separations, desertions, and many arrangements of an informal nature, was currently being experienced by over 2 percent of the respondents. Among those living in broken homes, 1 in 60 had suffered the death of both parents. Very few of these children still enrolled in school themselves had left home; but some were married and living with a spouse, for example, and others were living elsewhere under court order. The Negro respondents faced each of these events proportionately more often than their white classmates, the most significant increase being for "separations," which among them approached death and divorce in frequency.

Jacobson estimated that in mid-1955 there were about 3.3 million children under 18 (5.9 percent of the total child population) whose parents had been divorced. The slightly higher frequency of divorce among the families of our respondents (6.8 percent) is to be expected for these children of older ages.

Jacobson also estimated for the same year that 2.7 million American children were orphans, then constituting 4.8 percent of the child population. Contributing to this percentage were the 3.2 percent of the total child population who were

orphaned by the death of their father, the 1.5 percent whose mother had died, and the 0.1 percent who had lost both parents. Within our adolescent population (white only) 7.1 percent (1703) of the total number of respondents had suffered the death of one parent, and 0.27 percent (64) had experienced the death of both—a total of about 7.4 percent, nearly 2.7 points above the estimated national average indicated for all children. Whereas the mortality ratio for paternal:maternal deaths was only slightly over 2:1 for all children, according to Jacobson; the ratio among the Ohio adolescents was 4:1 (485:121) and 6:1 in North Carolina (742:124). North Carolina subjects also lost one parent by death slightly more often (0.6 percent) than those in Ohio.

Shudde (1954, 1955) contends that Negroes, nationally, have double their quota of partial orphans and three times their share of full orphans. In our sample, the Ohio Negro children had about 1.7 times the proportion of partial orphans, but 5 times the proportion of full orphans found among the white respondents.

STATE DIFFERENTIALS AMONG BROKEN HOME PARENT PATTERNS

Attention is now directed to the 3,465 white respondents who resided with a parent and stepparent or with one parent only. Unless otherwise indicated, both the non-white respondents and all of those who lived with persons other than parents are excluded in the subsequent statements.

TABLE 3
*Frequency and rank order of broken homes, and sex ratio
of respondents, by parent pattern and state
(Optimum Base; White Only)*

Residing with:	Rank Order	North Carolina			Ohio		
		Percent of respondents	Percent of broken homes	Sex ratio	Percent of respondents	Percent of broken homes	Sex ratio
Mother-stepfather	2	4.5	26.0	83.8	5.9	33.4	87.6
Mother only	1	8.3	48.3	91.6	6.1	34.7	94.0
Father-stepmother	4	0.9	5.4	149.0	1.6	8.8	115.0
Father only	5	0.9	5.3	98.3	1.0	5.5	146.5
Others	3	2.6	15.1	117.2	3.1	17.6	101.7
Over-all	—	17.2	100.0	95.7	17.7	100.0	97.0

Occurrence of patterns.—For these adolescent subjects, 17.2 percent in North Carolina and 17.6 percent in Ohio live under one of the five broken home parent patterns, as presented in table 3. Although the relative frequencies of broken home patterns differ somewhat by state, it will be noted that the rank order, by types, is identical. In the southern and northern state respectively, the percentage living with a mother and stepfather is 4.5 and 5.9; with mother only, 8.3 and 6.1; with a father and stepmother, 0.9 and 1.6; with a father only, 0.9 and 1.0; and with "others," 2.6 and 3.1.

The relative frequency of mother-only homes is proportionately larger in North Carolina, in part perhaps a reflection both of high death and desertion rates in that area. In contrast, the proportions of households involving a remarriage are substantially greater in Ohio, involving stepparents of both sexes, perhaps reflecting both a higher divorce rate and a greater frequency of remarriage. No

appreciable differences appear in the small proportions of children in the two states who live only with a father. Homes involving remarriages appeared with relatively less frequency in those Ohio communities which included considerable numbers of Catholics, with corresponding increases in the proportion of "mother-only" families.

Types of "breaks."—The major differences between the states in the events precipitating the "break" are in the "one parent dead," "divorced," and "separation" categories, as indicated in table 4. When they live in a home which is broken, the North Carolina young persons are more apt than the Ohio ones to have a parent deceased (7.2 to 6.3 percent). Whereas the Southern children are more likely to have their parents separated (2.9 to 1.5 percent), the Ohio youngsters are considerably more likely to have experienced divorce (5.3 to 8.2 percent). In the former state, 36.5 percent of those "*living with others*" were partial orphans, and an additional 15.2 percent were full orphans; whereas in Ohio, the same frequencies were 34.0 and 9.4.

TABLE 4
Frequency of broken homes by "cause" and by state
(White only)

"Cause" of break:	North Carolina		Ohio	
	Percent of broken homes	Percent of respondents	Percent of broken homes	Percent of respondents
One parent died	42.0	7.2	35.8	6.3
Both parents died	1.5	0.3	1.3	0.2
Divorce	31.0	5.3	46.7	8.2
Parents separated	17.0	2.9	8.7	1.5
Subject left home	2.6	—	2.6	—
Unknown	5.8	—	4.9	—
Totals	99.9		100.0	

CONTRASTING CHARACTERISTICS AMONG TYPES OF BROKEN HOMES

Nature of the previous break.—Of the four parent types, the proportion of families having experienced divorce is largest for the mother-stepfather homes in both states. The incidence of previous divorce declines in order as one shifts attention to the father-stepmother, mother only and father-only families. About two-thirds of the mother-stepfather homes in North Carolina, but almost three-fourths of them in Ohio, were broken by previous divorce. The father-stepmother homes 50 percent more often experienced an earlier parental death than did the other type of step-parent home in each state. *Within* each area, and contrasting only the one-parent homes, for each circumstance separately, there are but slight differences in the proportions of mother-only and father-only families experiencing separation, previous divorce, or death. Separation is slightly more common than divorce as an occurrence in the North Carolina one-parent homes, but less than half as common as divorce in the Ohio families with one parent.

Incidence of previous marriage.—The response categories used did not enable us to know *how many times* a parent may have been previously married but only if he or she had had at least one former spouse. Also, these cases do not include the full complement of previously married parents in the total research population, but only those related to the broken homes.

As would be anticipated, of the four parent patterns, *both* parents had been previously married most often in the step-relationship homes, the mother-stepfather type being highest in this regard in Ohio and the father-stepmother form being highest in North Carolina. It was 4 to 6 percent more often the case in the mother-only than in the father-only homes that *neither* had been previously married, and these proportions were greater by 10 to 12 percentage points in North Carolina. The principal differences in these replies are to be found in two categories of couples—*both* of whom, and *neither* of whom, were previously married. Ohio exceeded the North Carolina proportion for the former by 11 percentage points, and the southern state outdistanced the northern in the latter by 16 points.

Presence of other adults.—Those homes in which a remarriage had taken place, providing thereby the usual complement of two parents, in very high proportions had no other adults in the home: 87.4 and 89.1 percent for the mother-stepfather homes and 81.1 and 87.8 percent for the father-stepmother homes, in North Caro-

TABLE 5
Sibling combinations by stepparent pattern, states combined
(White only)

Sibling combination:	Mother-stepfather		Father-stepmother	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Only child(ren)	102	9.3	13	5.4
Natural siblings only	324	29.5	65	27.0
Real and step-siblings	139	12.6	51	21.2
Real and half-siblings	420	38.2	73	30.3
Real, step, and half	115	10.5	39	16.2
Unknown	(99)	—	(34)	—
Totals	1100	100.1	241	100.1

lina and Ohio, respectively. As would be expected, the mother-only and father-only families more often included other adults—in about one-fourth of the instances and slightly more often in the former setting, the frequencies differing little by state. The one-parent families not only included other adults in the home about twice as often as the step-homes, but they also had *more* than one adult 2 to 4 times as frequently. These proportions can be compared with the “normal” homes, 87 percent of which had no other adults residing with the family. It is interesting to note that even “abnormal” families so strongly adhere to the independent, neolocal, nuclear family pattern.

Sex ratios of the respondents.—The sex ratios of the respondents involved in each circumstance (see table 3) are what would be anticipated as a result of custody policies, with perhaps one exception. The remarried mothers average fewer sons than daughters (sex ratios of 83.8 and 87.6 in North Carolina and Ohio); whereas the remarried fathers reside with more sons than daughters (149.0 and 115.0). The sex ratios of the children living with mothers alone are intermediate between these extremes (91.6 and 94.0). Those children living with fathers only present less parallel ratios when the two states are compared (98.3 and 146.5), though in each place the ratio is higher than for the research population as a whole.

Religion.—Using just the respondents from Delaware and Hamilton, Ohio, the only two communities in which both parochial and public schools participated in the study, four-fifths of the Ohio Catholics in the sample were included for the

analysis. Only very slight differences in the proportions of Protestant, Catholic, and "other" adherents were revealed in the distributions by parent pattern, among those living in broken homes. There was a slight tendency for Catholics to have more mother-only and fewer mother-stepfather homes. Protestants and "others" had virtually identical proportions of these two types.

Education of parents.—In both states, the father-stepmother and father-only homes contained the largest proportions of fathers who had only a grade school education, exceeding the mother-stepfather homes and mother-only (father-absent) families in these frequencies by 10 to 15 percentage points. The fathers who most often had high school educations were those in the mother-stepfather and mother-only homes. In both states, the mother-only families tended to have a "flatter" curve for mothers' schooling, including the largest proportion of *poorly* educated mothers and also having larger (North Carolina) or highest (Ohio) proportions of the *best* trained women. On the average, the stepmothers appeared to be the best educated group, and the absented mothers of the father-only homes had the poorest educational qualifications. Mothers married to stepfathers were of intermediate educational backgrounds.

Working mothers.—Full-time employment, as might be expected, was most often pursued by the wives and mothers of one-parent homes, whether they were breadwinner and head endeavoring to support the family in which the respondent lived, or whether they had themselves, and perhaps some of the subject's siblings, to maintain while living elsewhere. The small proportion who held only part-time positions differed not appreciably within or between the two states, by family type. Among broken home families, the women who were most frequently the full-time homemakers and not employed for remuneration were in the homes of the remarried, the stepmothers manifesting this pattern in greatest degree.

Places of residence.—In North Carolina and Ohio, *both* parents were *most* often reared on a farm if they comprised a father-stepmother home and *least* often if they constituted a mother-stepfather pair, though the differential between the extremes was no larger than 10 percentage points in any comparison. With regard to *present* farm residence, the mother-only and mother-stepfather families were *least* likely to live on a farm (85 to 90 percent did not) in contrast with the proportions for father-stepmother and father-only homes (in which but 70 to 80 percent did not). The mother-only families were somewhat more often than the other broken home forms to be found in the locales of larger population; while the father-stepmother and father-only families were somewhat more likely to be residents in open country areas.

Sibling patterns.—The respondents from step-parent homes were separated into five sibling-pattern categories, as shown in table 5. (1) In the homes involving stepfathers, 9.3 percent of the subjects were the *only child* in the family. In addition, (2) 29.5 percent of the homes with this parent pattern included *exclusively* "natural" siblings. Thus, 38.8 percent involved only the natural parent's (mother's) children. In the father-stepmother homes, the parallel proportions of single and multiple children of the natural parent (father) were 5.4 and 27.0, totaling 32.4 percent. (3) In 12.6 percent of the mother-stepfather families, but in 21.2 percent of the father-stepmother homes, *both* parents brought offspring to the new home, but no children had been born of the remarriage. These homes, then, contained *both real and step-children* (siblings) from the perspective of each parent and their respective offspring. (4) In 38.2 percent of the former parent pattern, but in only 30.3 percent of the latter, the step-parent brought no children to the new marriage, but additional children had been born to the new pair. Thus, in these homes, *both real and half-siblings* resided together. (5) Finally, whereas but 10.5 percent of the homes with stepfathers included all three types of siblings—*real, step,* and *half*—16.2 percent of the stepmother homes did.

These patterns probably reflect mainly the differences in the custody provisions

for children; but also they may be affected by the length of marriages and relative ages of the new partners, differences in remarriage-ability of men and women, particularly those with children, and the motivations for having children by a new marriage. Stepfathers who are without children marry women who have children proportionately more often than fathers who have children find a new spouse without children. Also, as a corollary, when a respondent is not an only child, both parents have introduced their own children into the new home relatively more frequently when a stepmother than when a stepfather is involved.

SOME CONTRASTS WITH NORMAL HOMES

Extensive comparisons between demographic characteristics of broken homes and those which included both natural parents cannot be elaborated here. However, a few contrasts found through our data can be briefly stated. They correspond closely to the relationships found independently by others.

Those having abnormal parent patterns more often shared their homes with other adults in residence. The adolescents who designated their religious preferences as "other" than Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish, and those who professed no religious preference at all, were proportionately more often involved in truncated families. Parents of each sex who had been involved in marital disruption were usually somewhat less well educated than were those who still resided with their initial spouse. The fathers of unimpaired marriages were more often engaged in the more prestigious occupations. The mothers comprising the broken home group were more often employed full-time for remuneration than were those in "normal" marital circumstances. Also, there seemed to be a slight tendency for the broken home families to appear more frequently in the larger cities and towns than in the smaller communities and rural areas.

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