

The Cold Culture Of Silence (Part One)

by Charles Whitaker

Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch," May 2006

"Prison is a pathetic substitute for genuine parents." — J.R. Morse

Just the facts, ma'am:

- » Living in a step- or single-parent household more than doubles the risk of delinquency by age 14.
- » The likelihood that a young male will engage in criminal activity increases substantially if he is raised without a father.
- » Boys who grow up outside of intact marriages are, on average, more likely than other boys to end up in jail.
- » Youngsters who are actually in the juvenile justice system disproportionately come from disrupted families. In Wisconsin, 13 percent of inmates in juvenile correctional facilities came from families in which the biological mother and father were married to each other. By contrast, 33 percent had parents who were either divorced or separated, and 55 percent had parents who had never married.
- » Seventy percent of youth in state reform institutions across America have grown up in single- or no-parent situations.
- » Swedish adolescents in single-parent households were twice as likely to abuse drugs or alcohol, twice as likely to attempt suicide, and about one and a half times as likely to suffer from a psychiatric illness. Parental history of mental illness accounts for very little of the variation in these various adolescent problems.
- » There is a link between living in a single-parent household and some kinds of emotional problems over the individual's *entire* lifetime. Children growing up in broken homes are more likely to suffer from a wide range of problems, including depression, anxiety, phobias, and obsessions, over their entire lifetime. In addition, as children, they are more likely to be aggressive and disobedient during childhood.

That is how Jennifer R. Morse ("Parents or Prisons," *Policy Review*, August/September 2003, p. 49) encapsulates the findings of a number of recent studies on youthful crime. In most cases, these studies tried to "correct" statistically for poverty and other "confounding factors that might be correlated with living in a single-parent household." Together, the studies indicate that the state of a youngster's family is a primary determinate of his risk of displaying anti-social behavior or suffering mental illnesses as a child and as an adult. No wonder Morse concludes:

Without parents—two of them, married to each other, working together as a team—a child is more likely to end up in the criminal justice system at some point in his life. Without parents, prison becomes a greater probability in the child's life.

Strictly speaking, then, the peril that children raised in fractured families face does not have its roots in economics. That peril, therefore, cannot be alleviated or eliminated by pouring money into a welfare system, either public or "faith-based." Nor is it fair to say that the heightened risk these children confront has racial or ethnic causes. Many immigrant families, after all, display a traditional family solidarity not seen in the homes of Americans who have lived on these shores for generations.

Rather, the dangers and risks these children will face throughout their lives have their foundation in *wrong* parental choices. By that measure, then, *parental* cannot mean "private." For, there is no victimless crime, no victimless sin. Wrong-headed parental decisions hurt all of us.

Care, Conscience, and Causes

There are certainly a number of reasons why a broken home is a stepping-stone to prison or psychosis for many. Morse focuses on two.

The first is fairly obvious. Two parents can detect a child's behavior problems, and work to correct them, better than one. It is a matter of task-sharing. For instance, two parents, sharing the important charge of educating the child, can better ensure that the job is done right. Scholastic achievement often suffers in children in single-parent families because the only parent is also the breadwinner, and hence lacks the time and energy to answer questions and to ensure that homework gets done properly.

Poor achievement in school, in turn, cascades into a number of other problems. The child comes to hate school because he fails there. It is not surprising then that youngsters in single-parent homes exhibit a notably greater proclivity to drop out of school. Finally, dropouts have a greater chance of entering the justice system than youngsters who complete high school. It is like one domino knocking over another.

Morse admits that the second reason, while it seems plausible, displays "a weaker causal connection." That may be due to the lack of definitive studies to date. Briefly, Morse holds that children who grow up in single-parent homes are more likely to suffer from what psychiatrists term "attachment disorder." She explains that a child in a "fractured" family situation may not

form strong human attachments during infancy. A child obviously cannot attach to an absent parent. If the one remaining parent is overwhelmed or exhausted or preoccupied, the child may not form a proper attachment even to that parent. Full-fledged attachment disorder is often found among children who have spent a substantial fraction of their infancy in institutions or in foster care. An attachment-disordered child is the truly dangerous sociopath, the child who doesn't care what anyone thinks, who does whatever he can get away with.

An infant's attachment to mother is vital in the formation of his conscience. Mothers and infants generally attach by simply "being together." The child comes to understand that human relationships are good because they guarantee his continued survival. In time, the child learns to trust and care about his mother. *He comes to care about what she thinks of him.*

As the child internalizes her values and standards, he begins to develop a conscience. Growing older, a word from mother, or just her facial expression or body language seen from a distance, can indicate to the child her approval or disapproval of his conduct. Since he cares about her, he modifies his conduct to conform to her standards. Eventually, she does not even need to be present. "Mother

would disapprove," the older child reasons, "so I won't do it." Conscience has formed. It usually lasts a lifetime.

Emphatically, we in God's church understand that it may not be a conscience founded on God's law—ultimately in accord with God's standards. Mother's standards may not be—and usually are not—God's standards. Yet, a conscience it is, nevertheless. It is so powerful that it constrains, indeed controls, the actions of a child, an adolescent, an adult, a senior. That is, it continues to function long after mother has died.

An infant in a single-parent home, often cared for (but not loved!) by a paid stranger while the mother is working, stands a good chance of never making this all-important attachment to his biological mother. Such an infant stands a good chance of never developing that check on hurtful impulses that a conscience affords. He grows to become a child—and then an adult—without a properly developed conscience.

Subsequently, he does not care about what his mother or father thinks of him—he does not care what anyone thinks of him. Unmoored to any standard of conduct except the one dictated by his own selfish impulses, he will do what he wants to do, which is anything he thinks he can get away with. Such a person has one foot in a prison yard and the other on a banana peel.

Costs on Top of Costs

Morse cites just one of many theories concerning conscience development. Child behaviorists differ in their approach to the subject. However, there is one thing that none can debate: The costs of disrupted families are high to the child, to his family, and to society at large.

First, there is the cost to the child's family. These are hidden costs, but they can take their toll, financially and emotionally. Parents (or a single parent), reacting to a "problem" child, will seek help from grandparents, uncles, aunts—anyone who can provide extra guidance for and supervision of the child. Often, placement of the child in a private school whose staff specializes in behavior-disordered children becomes necessary. If the family has the money, this is often a boarding facility. Alternatively, the family may engage the services of a child therapist.

However the family chooses to deal with the child's problem, it, rather than the public, "bears the brunt of the child's behavior." The emotional and financial stress can tear what may already be a fraying fabric of family life. Frequently, it has injurious effects on siblings, as time and money showered on a "black sheep" invariably mean fewer resources devoted to the more "normal" children in the family.

If the behavior becomes disruptive enough, the authorities become involved. The problem, that is, goes public. Now, *everyone* pays for the judges, police, probation officers, social workers, prison staff, psychiatrists, and parole officers. The list goes on and on. How much does it cost? Consider these figures, all based on California costs:

- » The prison budget was six percent of state budget in 2003.
- » Adult prison costs average about \$26,700 per person per year. While in prison, many prisoners are not contributing to the larger economy by consuming or by paying taxes. They add little to the state's GDP.

» The annual cost of caring for a juvenile in the California Youth Authority averages \$49,200 to tax payers. If the child were in school, the cost to taxpayers would average only \$8,568 per year. If the young person were in a community college environment, the average cost to taxpayers would be still less: only \$4,376 per year. If the young adult had entered one of the institutions in the University of California system, the cost to taxpayers would be \$17,392 per year. Ergo, it costs about \$9,000 *less* per year to educate a young person at UCLA than to incarcerate him in an adult institution.

Consider this: More likely than not, the college graduate will return the costs of his education to the economy many times over during his lifetime, as he becomes a productive worker, a taxpayer, and a consumer. However, money spent on prison, writes Morse, "has little prospect of turning the individual into a more productive citizen. These expenditures merely neutralize the negative impact on society of an individual who can't or won't control himself."

Criminologists do not bet on rehabilitation any more. Prisons are built to *separate* people who can control themselves from those who cannot. While schools are an investment in the future, prisons are merely a necessary means of controlling damage inflicted by a failed family in the past.

These damage-control costs have risen exponentially during the last half century. This is largely because, according to Bradford Wilcox ("Children at Risk," *First Things*, February 2004, p. 12), "in the 1950s, almost 80 percent of children spent their entire lives in an intact family, whereas in the 1990s only about 50 percent of children spent their entire childhood with their biological mother and father." Divorce hurts.

There are other, more subtle, costs to consider. Expenditures in the juvenile justice system have negative ramifications for *other* government services. After all, there is only so much money to go around! Funds dedicated to maintaining correctional institutions and systems crowd out funds that could be allocated to more useful services such as road construction, preventative health care, education, sanitation, and the arts.

An individual who opts for divorce, Morse concludes, or a teenager who determines to rear a child without his father, is making a risky decision. "The choices regarding family structure have significant spillover effects on other people. We can no longer deny that such admittedly very personal decisions have an impact on people other than the individuals who chose."

Well, these are the facts. Next month, we will look at the course of action Morse recommends to brighten the bleak picture they paint. Her answer does not mimic the liberal mantra of pouring good money after bad into an already failed welfare system. God's people may find her solution as intriguing as it is challenging. It calls for breaking silence and courageously speaking out.