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The Dad Deficit:

A Study on the Absence of Fathers

Introduction

On February 14, 2018, 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz walked into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida and opened fire on former classmates and teachers. Cruz killed 17 people and injured 17 others—the deadliest high school shooting in United States history. Similarly to other mass shooters, Cruz’s social environment reveals challenging circumstances that may have contributed to his horrific act. One of the nation’s leading authorities on mass shootings, Dr. Peter Langman (2016), identifies numerous mass shooters who have a range of family dysfunction, most of which involves family instability, marital discord and a dysfunctional father-child relationship.ⁱ

It’s difficult to link Cruz’s actions to a particular circumstance, but it’s evident that he lacked a stable environment for much of his childhood. W. Bradford Wilcox, the director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, writes,

“...as the nation seeks to make sense of these senseless shootings, we must also face the uncomfortable truth that turmoil at home all too often accounts for the turmoil we end up seeing spill onto our streets and schools.”ⁱⁱ

He observes that many recent school shootings have one common denominator: the child grew up in a dysfunctional home. Family instability is not a prerequisite for violent behavior, but trends suggest that the roots of serious social problems are established early in a child’s life. Dr. Langman (2016) argues that this instability or dysfunction in the home may include various issues such as parental absence, separation and divorce, parental alcoholism and addiction, along with domestic and child abuse.ⁱⁱⁱ He observes that many recent school shootings have one common denominator: the child grew up in a dysfunctional home. Family instability is not a prerequisite for violent behavior, but trends suggest that the roots of serious social problems are established early in a child’s life. Dr. Langman (2016) argues that this instability or dysfunction in the home may include various issues such as parental absence, separation and divorce, parental alcoholism and addiction, along with domestic and child abuse.^{iv}

Although a mother and father are both important to a child’s development, father absence is far more common than motherlessness. More than 18 million children (25%) in the United States live in a home without the presence of their biological father. This report focuses on the educational impacts of fatherlessness, offering evidence that the absence of a residential father is correlated with poor academic and social outcomes. More specifically, this study examines if there are different educational outcomes for children with residential fathers as compared to nonresidential fathers. We take a closer look at this trend in the state of Florida and offer recommendations for fathers, mentors and nonprofit and public entities to mitigate the effects of fatherlessness.

Fatherlessness

It is important to understand the difference between physically absent and emotionally uninvolved fathers. Of course, a father can both be physically and emotionally absent from his child. For example, a father who has little or no contact with his child and offers very little financial support would certainly fit that role. This lack of father-child relationship is often detrimental to children's healthy development. Because a father's parenting style often differs from a mother's, children with uninvolved fathers do not experience the unique parenting style that fathers provide.^v

Children whose fathers are physically present but emotionally detached can still be considered fatherless. Men who fail to engage with their children, are not emotionally connected and do not spend quality time focused on their children are not far removed from being absent fathers. This might occur in scenarios where fathers financially provide for their child and may even reside with them. However, children fail to reap the benefits of fathers if dad is emotionally uninvolved. Children can still feel the impact of fatherlessness if they have an uninvolved residential father. Although a child's basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter are met, these do not substitute for positive interactions with fathers. It's the interactions with fathers that produce the outcomes we often see from a father's presence.

This presence can be defined as being emotionally and physically engaged with a child.^{vi} Being emotionally involved and present presents itself in various ways depending on the age of the child. Consistent caretaking and feeding of young infants, spending time in cognitive and physical play with toddlers, having a meal and taking the young child on errands, assisting with homework, coaching teams, playing or participating in activities they enjoy all can be examples of fathers being present. Much of the research on fathers' impacts on children uses this model of a father's presence as the determinant of father involvement. These are some examples of a father's being intentionally involved and present in the lives of his children. Father presence can play out in numerous ways and should be considered an ideal standard of father involvement.



Studies of Fatherlessness

Although there are numerous studies that highlight the importance of fathers and their impact on children, it is equally important to examine fatherlessness in families.^{vii} In the late 1990s, an increased focus on fathers came with an increased discussion regarding fatherlessness. The definition of fatherlessness has changed over the last few years and is broader than its original definition. This has caused some misinformation and misunderstanding of father involvement and is attributed to how researchers, policy makers and supporters of traditional families often use the term fatherlessness in very different ways.

From a purely biological perspective, we must begin with the assumption that no child is truly fatherless. Once this fact has been established, we must define the various father-child relationships along a continuum of levels of positive involvement. However, this continuum of involvement can be difficult to pinpoint, which forces us to view fathering in a much more segmented way. But a segmented view of fathering may not be a true indicator of the father-child relationship.

Early definitions of fatherlessness were often associated with a father's absence from the home.^{viii} These studies of fatherlessness were focused on issues of poverty in single parent homes. Many early research studies, policy reports and governmental reports defined fatherlessness as an absent father, i.e., a father being nonresidential. From a data gathering aspect, this measure of fatherlessness is much easier to examine. Does the father reside with the child? Is there a father in the home? How many times a day do you have a meal with your father? These lines of inquiry by researchers and data collectors easily can gauge if a child has a residential father.

Although these early definitions of fatherlessness were informative, we have come to understand that this simplistic definition is not adequate to truly understand a father's presence and ultimately his influence on children's development.^{ix} To further complicate this issue, there is a historical view that a father's main role is that of a provider (Dick, 2011). Although one could call children "fatherless" whose fathers may be physically absent and not residing with them, society probably would not label a child "fatherless" if his or her father consistently pays child support. Given the lack of clarity of the definition of the term fatherlessness, it is important to understand the different types of father involvement and fatherlessness.

It is difficult to determine who belongs in the control group because some children whose grandfathers or stepfathers are present are technically "fatherless" but are also not fatherless because an involved father-figure is present. We must control for a father-figure in the child's life i.e. grandfather or stepfather, that can potentially protect the child from many of the impacts of fatherlessness.^x These relational dynamics are lost when data are used that may be too simplistic in measuring father involvement.

Fatherlessness refers to the experience of growing up from infancy (before the age of three years) without a father, stepfather, or father substitute. Although the person may be aware of a father in the world, and may even have met his or her father, there was no consistent and significant interaction between the father and child throughout childhood and adolescence. Researchers have begun to study the impacts of father-attachment on children. Fatherhood researcher J.H. Pleck (2007) suggests that secure attachment relationships provide a child with a secure base from which to explore the world and a positive model of self in relation to others.^{xi} This becomes the foundation for relationships with adults and peers.

Secure attachment is most likely if there is proximity and lively social interaction between the child and the attachment figure, i.e., the father. Children may attach to fathers differently from and independently of mothers.^{xii} Despite how this occurs, most agree that links exist between the quality of attachment during infancy and socio-emotional development during preschool and school years. Children who feel secure during infancy are more likely to become socially competent than a child who feels insecure and is less likely to have internalizing or externalizing behavior problems.^{xiii}

Residential vs. Nonresidential Fathers

There has been historical research to examine the differences in fathering activities and involvement based on whether or not the father lives with the child.^{xiv} Nonresidential fathers tend to be less involved with their children and this involvement tends to further decline as the child ages.^{xv} Conversely, residential fathers have greater physical access to their children and greater opportunity for direct engagement. As family dynamics change over time, a father's residential status as a predictor to his involvement with his child changes. Some studies (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2019) suggest that early co-parenting at 1 to 3 years of age predicted a nonresidential father's engagement when the child was older.^{xvi} One weakness in the fathering literature is there are no longitudinal studies that examine a father's residential impact on children. Most studies on this topic tend to take a snapshot approach and identify current father residential status without considering if and how long fathers resided with their child in the past. A longitudinal approach would allow us to tease out how much a father's history of cohabitating with his child might impact his children's development.

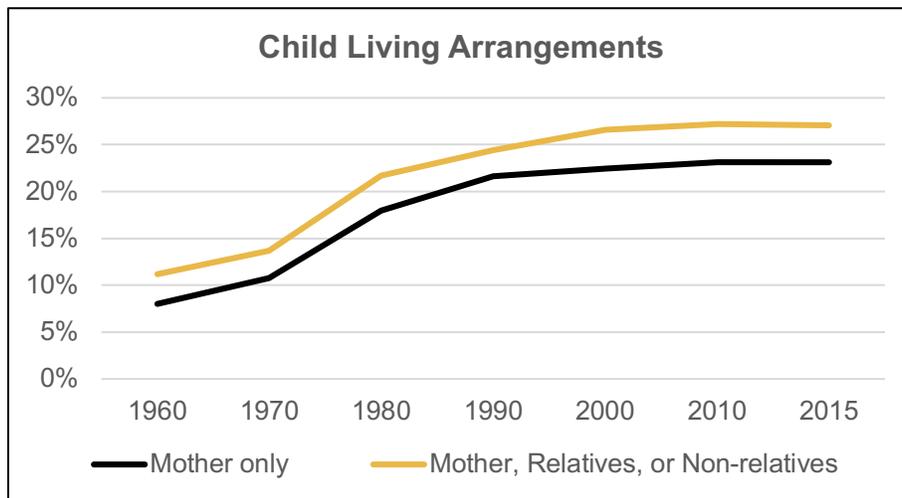
The Role of Fathers

It's generally recognized that two-parent households are more stable than single-parent households. Though the father's role in child-rearing has traditionally been understood in terms of financial support, research shows that a father's social and emotional involvement is vital to healthy development. We can understand the role of fathers in three areas: emotional development, social development and family stability.

Emotional development is the ability to regulate one’s own emotions and manage successful interactions with other people. Fathers contribute to the emotional development of their children by providing a safe environment to experience and learn from emotions, modeling positive behavior and correcting inappropriate responses. Mothers play a similar role, but the presence of a father provides another example of emotional regulation and reinforces the expected behaviors.

Social development is the ability to manage successful interactions with other people. Fathers contribute to their children’s sense of worth and identity through the attention they give their children. Those who receive a father’s love learn that their value is found in their personhood, not in their behavior or achievements. For sons, fathers model the behavior and identity they want to embody themselves. For daughters, fathers model traits they may seek in a partner.

Family stability refers to the physical, social, and emotional environment that children inhabit. Children with a mother and father present in their lives are more likely to have access to financial resources that enable a stable physical environment and time with one or both parents, which improve the social and emotional environments. An engaged father shares the burden of day-to-day care of children, whether directly by spending time with them or indirectly by taking responsibility for arranging childcare, planning activities, or staying in touch with educators, for example.



Source: US Census Bureau

There are many reasons for father absence—divorce, non-marital childbearing, incarceration, substance abuse and cultural attitudes, among other factors. Each of these issues deserves attention, but the larger observation is that fatherlessness is more prevalent today than in previous generations. Fatherlessness therefore has greater potential to impact our society. Educators have a particular interest in this question given that their aim is to facilitate the social, emotional and cognitive development of students.

Fatherlessness and School Success

Anecdotally, teachers can tell you that children's success in the classroom is often reflective of their home environments. A healthy school environment can mitigate the effects of an unstable home, but engagement from one or more parents remains an important indicator of academic achievement. In this section, we review what research says about the relationship between fatherlessness and three measures of school success: educational attainment, test scores and social behavior.

Educational attainment is the level of education completed, such as graduation from high school or obtaining a college degree. Educational attainment is one of the strongest predictors of well-being and economic success. Each additional year of schooling correlates with increased wages and a decreased chance of experiencing poverty or unemployment.^{xvii} Children born into poverty who do not complete a K-12 education are likely to remain in poverty and pass that status on to their children.

For the National Child Development Study, a group of researchers determined that father involvement is a significant factor in a child's educational attainment. A child with an involved father experiences greater academic motivation into high school and college years. A father's contribution is so significant that it can overcome other barriers to educational attainment, such as emotional or behavior issues. Father involvement also appears to lessen the educational gap between white and black students.^{xviii}

Test scores are measurements of cognitive ability, including tests of verbal, math and general ability. The use of standardized tests as a measure of student success in school goes back decades. More recently, however, policy scholars have begun to question whether test scores are a metric we should really care about, pointing out that test score gains are not always associated with changes in other schooling outcomes. On the other hand, many of the students who do well on tests are the same students who wake up in the morning, go to work on time and work hard because their families have modeled this behavior.

Conclusions about the impact of father involvement on test scores are mixed, with some studies showing significant effects and others finding no effect.^{xix} This suggests that overall educational attainment has more to do with navigating the social, emotional and behavioral environment of school than strict intelligence. A child's behavior and emotional health tend to be more malleable than his or her cognitive ability, so a change in a child's family environment most likely has a bigger impact on a child's overall educational attainment.^{xx} Research also suggests that children facing challenges at home are more likely to be absent from school.^{xxi} It's understandable that a lack of class time could lead to poor test scores.

Social behavior is not a measure of educational success in itself, but it has bearing on educational outcomes and the overall learning environment for students and teachers. Research indicates that children of broken families are more likely to exhibit poor behavior

at school, both outwardly and inwardly.^{xxii} Negative external behavior is characterized by aggression, hyperactivity and negative interpersonal relationships. Negative internal behavior is characterized by isolation, anxiety and depression.

Several factors can contribute to a child's propensity toward delinquency, but fragile relationships with parents are among the most influential.^{xxiii} Children ages 9 to 18 from single-parent families were found to be more likely to display aggression and involve themselves in physical altercations.^{xxiv} Among children with nonresidential fathers, those feeling angry toward and alienated from their fathers have higher delinquency rates. Conversely, those who maintain active communication with and place trust in their fathers are less likely to exhibit delinquent activity.^{xxv}

“Fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation. It is the leading cause of declining child well-being in our society. It is also the engine driving our most urgent social problems, from crime to adolescent pregnancy to child sexual abuse to domestic violence against women.”

- David Blankenhorn, Author of *Fatherless America*

The psychosocial strain rising from lack of healthy attachments can produce extreme antisocial behavior. Harvard sociologist Robert Sampson purported family structure to be one of the great predictors, if not the greatest, of urban violence in the United States.^{xxvi} Psychologist Peter Langman keeps a database about school shootings and contends there is a distinct connection between unstable homes and extreme school violence. By Langman's count, about 82 percent of school shooters were raised in broken families.^{xxvii}

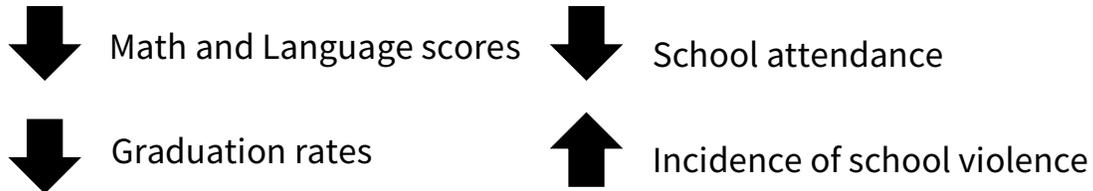
Fatherlessness is also associated with conditions that may draw students away from school. For instance, girls without present fathers are incredibly more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior, become pregnant and give birth during their teenage years.^{xxviii} According to one measure, adolescent girls without a present father are three times more likely to become pregnant than those with present, engaging fathers.^{xxix} Having a child during high school significantly harms a student's attendance and graduation rates, as their attention shifts to the immediate needs of the child.^{xxx}

Measuring Success in Florida

Florida is one of the highest-ranked states in the nation for public education.^{xxxi} Recent data from the Florida Department of Education suggests more good news: Graduation rates in Florida are at an all-time high and school violence is trending down.^{xxxii} This is particularly encouraging given that the improvements include gains for minority and low-income populations. But how are children in single-parent households faring? The Florida

Department of Education does not make this information available, but an analysis of school outcomes from 2012-2017 suggests a correlation between single parent households and poor educational outcomes for children.

In Florida, children from single-parent households are more likely to experience:



As an example, consider outcomes in the Tampa Bay area, one of the more populated regions of Florida. Data from Hernando, Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas counties from 2012-2017 shows that dropout rates increase, arrest rates increase and language scores decrease with statistical significance among students from single-parent households. There is not a strong correlation between single-parent households and lower math scores. This is not surprising, given that language and reading ability is often more dependent than math performance on parental involvement. The latter is more commonly associated with the quality of education. The findings for the Tampa area largely confirm other conclusions in this report, but it's important to note that five years of data is a small sample size when analyzing county-level outcomes. We could improve confidence in the results by testing outcomes over multiple decades.

National data gives meaningful insight into the impact of fatherlessness on a broad scale. It's valuable to look at education data specific to states because education funding is typically managed by state and local governments. An examination of single-parent households in Florida reveals similar outcomes to those described from national data.

A detailed description of the data, methodology and findings is in the appendix.



Best Practices and Recommendations

Father absence is a complex cultural and social issue. Just as we can't point to family instability as the single reason for Nikolas Cruz's actions at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, we can't apply a single fix to father absence. However, the correlation between fatherlessness and poor education outcomes demands a response. This is not a problem educators or single mothers can solve alone. For both groups, and the children experiencing fatherlessness, government and nonprofit entities play an important role. These institutions need to work upstream to support intact family units and downstream to meet the needs of children with absent fathers.

Preventive Strategies

There are many national, state and local resources for fathers who want to get more involved in their children's lives. Some of those resources are shared in the Best Practices and Recommendations section of this study. Specific to Florida, the Florida Department of Children and Families and Florida Department of Education offer resources focused on increasing family engagement in schools.

These are all great tools, but fathers who seek them out are likely to be those who are already engaged in their children's lives. How do you reach fathers who don't recognize their lack of involvement as a problem, or who lack the stability in their own lives to be engaged? Government and nonprofit programs can be more effective by reaching out to

fathers in their local communities and engaging with fathers through their personal interests.

Family First is a Tampa-based nonprofit that is doing meaningful work in both categories. A leading Family First strategy for strengthening relationships between fathers and their children is the All Pro Dad (APD) Chapter program. The All Pro Dad Chapter is a monthly program where dads enjoy breakfast with their kids and engage in meaningful conversations and activities centered on a character-based curriculum. The program operates in hundreds of elementary and middle schools across the country, including over 200 schools in Florida. All Pro Dad Chapters offers ways for fathers to connect with their children, and each chapter builds a support network for fathers dedicated to investing in their children. Some teachers choose to get involved with their schools' chapters, facilitating better parent-teacher relationships. A number of schools with All Pro Dad chapters have reported an immediate and lasting improvement in fathers' involvement with their children's education.

An evaluation of APD suggests that participating fathers reported receiving new ideas and obtaining resources for being a better father. Participating fathers also reported receiving ideas and strategies such as teaching interactive and fun reading strategies that can be used to improve reading with their child. These strategies were impactful as fathers incorporated these activities into their parenting practices. Survey results suggest that almost 31% of fathers reported reading to their child several times a week with over 94% reporting participating in this activity at least once a month. As might be expected, fathers engaging with their children through reading might lead to children enjoying books and reading more.^{xxxiii} Fathers who reported reading with their child also reported their children reading books by themselves and most importantly reported that their child talks with them about books or stories they are reading. Fathers who are engaged with their children report seeing positive changes in their children's academic performance. Programs such as APD are impactful in many ways as they provide some structure to father-child interaction while promoting academic achievement. An added benefit of APD is that it allows fathers to participate in relationships with other men and see positive fathering behavior modeled. These types of programs work well, as they allow men to learn how to father by viewing positive fathering by other dads. This concept of "social learning theory" (Bandura, 1977) is very influential to men learning new and better ways of fathering.^{xxxiv}

Former NFL coach Tony Dungy is a powerful advocate for Family First and its All Pro Dad program. His "Dungy Diaries" provide an online resource for men to become better fathers and his campaign to promote adoption and foster care is conducted via dynamic public service announcements, public appearances and the inspiring role model he offers along with his wife, Lauren. For example, the Florida media took note of Tony taking time before the AFC championship game to tape a PSA to promote foster and adoption. Tony and his wife Lauren also read books to children at Title 1 schools every few weeks. This promotes the importance of reading and education. Campaigns that leverage celebrities, particularly in the sports and entertainment industry, will have a higher likelihood of reaching the target audience where they are already spending time.

Bonding over an activity that is of interest to the father and children is also a valuable strategy for nonprofit organizations. Because fathers from low-income backgrounds are more likely to be absent fathers, it's important for organizations to reduce the financial obstacle of participating in programs. Many bonding activities also center on outdoor activities such as fishing or archery, which may not be available in urban areas. Organizations can overcome this hurdle by providing transportation to activities or tailoring the programs to an urban setting.

Organizations seeking to address father absence must recognize that the issue cannot be solved in a silo. There are many reasons why fathers become unengaged in their children's lives, so organizations need to approach solutions from multiple angles. Service providers should seek to benefit the whole family unit, not just the fathers, and integrate family support into other responses, such as drug and alcohol abuse and unemployment support. The education system can also support fathers and family units by inviting fathers to participate in their children's activities. For example, the Florida Department of Education observes a "Take Your Child to School Day" to help schools foster the connection between children and fathers or father figures. The program includes a toolkit for schools, activities for families and contests to encourage participation. More efforts like this are needed on the state and national levels, and from individual schools, to encourage father participation in educational outcomes.

Breaking the Cycle of Fatherlessness

Mentoring programs for young men can serve an important role in introducing them to positive roles of masculinity in addition to providing young men with meaningful mentoring relationships. For example, Shears, Miller, McGee, Farinde & Lewis (2014) found that self-concept in young African American boys was strongly influenced by their male teacher when there was not a residential father or father figure.^{xxxv} As one might imagine, young African American fatherless boys' self-concept was vastly impacted when they had a male teacher. These types of mentoring relationships might prove impactful to young boys. Mentoring programs with young men should not only focus on activities and the male-child bond but also should emulate positive fathering roles.

One way to impact fatherlessness in the next generation is to instill an understanding of fatherhood and a value for fathers in young men before they become fathers. There is a lack of value of fathers in communities and families where there is a history of generational fatherlessness. Because much of the message sent to children regarding the role of fathers is transferred in family situations, fatherlessness as the norm can also be transferred within communities and through families.

One way to increase future father involvement is to address the issue in young men before they become fathers. The research outlines several predictors of father involvement. These predictors serve as the foundation for increased father presence in the lives of children. These factors include higher levels of education.^{xxxvi} Other factors include being in a positive relationship with the child's mother.^{xxxvii} Additionally, when men have a more

positive self-identity and identify as a father, this can lead to higher levels of involvement with his child.^{xxxviii}

One of the stronger predictors of father involvement focuses on how a father's experiences with his own father impacts his parenting attitudes and parental activities.^{xxxix} Given that research suggests that patterns of parenting are reproduced across generations, it's important to attempt to address these patterns of fatherlessness in young men before they become fathers. Intergenerational transmission of fathering is supported by social learning theory^{xl} and psychodynamic theory.^{xli} Social learning theory posits that behaviors originate from those whose behavior we have observed throughout life. Thus, children learn parenting behaviors by observing their own parents and apply those behaviors with their children. From another perspective, children observe parenting practices and then incorporate or embed models as representations of parenting styles.

Much of the research pertaining to the continuity of parenting behaviors derives from longitudinal studies using both prospective and retrospective self-report measures with a first (G1), second (G2), and sometimes third generation (G3). Many studies have shown that harsh parenting in G1 is directly related to harsh parenting used by G2.^{xlii} Hyoun, Capaldi, Pears, Kerr, & Owen (2009) found that G2 parents who had experienced neglect during childhood were 2.6 times as likely to report their own neglectful parenting behavior and twice as likely to report physically abusive parenting behavior. Likewise, G2 parents who were physically abused were 5 times as likely to report physically abusive parenting behavior and 1.4 times as likely to report neglectful parenting with their own children.

Intergenerational transmission of parenting helps explain if and how fathers are involved with their children.^{xliii} Men's relationships with their own fathers during childhood are related to their perceptions of themselves as fathers and their attachment to their own children.^{xliv} Pleck (1997) posits that men either compensate for their father's lack of involvement or model their father's behavior, endorsing the strong influence of a father's relationship with his own father on his parenting behaviors.^{xlv} When men report a positive relationship with their own father, they are more likely to rate themselves as better fathers.^{xlvi} Mentoring programs need to be intentional in modeling positive fathering behaviors to assist young people in changing their perception of fatherhood.

Responsive Strategies

Supporting fathers is a valuable strategy for keeping family units intact, but the public and nonprofit sectors must take a two-pronged approach that supports children already experiencing fatherlessness. This can be accomplished by supporting role models who are already in children's lives, such as moms and teachers, and expanding avenues for support through mentorship programs.

When a father leaves the family, the mother-child relationship becomes even more critical for a child's wellbeing. Unfortunately, the difficulties that arise from becoming a single mother can strain that relationship. By offering support services for mothers, nonprofit and government entities can reduce stress and improve the mother-child relationship. It's also important for children that the mother has a positive relationship with their teachers and other educational supports so they can openly communicate about the children's behavior and performance. In this regard, it's valuable for teachers to recognize the challenges that single mothers face. School districts can improve parent-teacher relationships by offering training for educators on single-parent households and involving counselors or other professionals to provide additional support for these families.

Teachers and coaches are great examples of existing social supports that can support children experiencing fatherlessness. School systems are increasingly incorporating social and emotional learning (SEL), a strategy that intends to develop emotional regulation, empathy and self-knowledge.^{xlvii} While the origins of this strategy are rooted in developing job-ready soft skills, SEL develops traits and habits especially crucial for fatherless children. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) identifies five competencies of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

SEL leadership in the Florida education system can happen on both the state and county levels. Frameworks, a nonprofit in Tampa, provides social and emotional learning by partnering with schools and youth organizations. They teach children how to effectively manage their emotions and develop healthy coping mechanisms. All of this leads to an increase self-awareness and better decision-making skills. Broward County began studying SEL in their schools in academic year 2014-15 and published a three-year SEL plan in 2016.^{xlviii} The study found students receiving SEL improved academic achievement, improved their attitudes and behaviors related to school and had fewer negative behaviors and healthier emotional states. Other Florida counties can learn from Broward County's progress. On a state level, Florida can learn from state education departments that have already established SEL goals and expectations. The Florida Department of Education can develop and implement its own strategy.

Mentoring relationships have a profound impact on fatherless children and other at-risk youth. Programs offering mentors to these youth have demonstrated the capacity to improve self-esteem and reduce delinquency and risky behavior.^{xlix} Numerous studies find at-risk youth gain holistic improvements from mentoring, including better educational attainment and performance, positive self-esteem, improved family and peer relationships and decreases in drug and alcohol use and violence.¹ This translates to better academic performance, graduation rates and college attendance. Notably, the effects are sustained so long as the mentoring relationships continue and the positive effects are stronger and last longer when mentors receive ongoing training and support.¹¹

The National Fatherhood Initiative identifies three traits of a successful mentor, which model the traits of an engaged father. A mentor must be *involved*, giving time and energy to the child; *responsible*, being a good role model and keeping the child safe from physical and emotional danger; and *committed*, being reliable and keeping promises to the child and the child's family. Many organizations facilitate mentoring relationships. A successful model in Florida is Elevate Orlando, which serves Orange County Public Schools. Elevate has a partnership with the school district, whereby mentors teach accredited curriculum on leadership and life skills. These teacher-mentors come from similar backgrounds as the students, providing avenues for connection that would be difficult for outsiders to obtain. In addition to classroom engagement, Elevate offers out-of-school activities, post-secondary support and career services. Graduates of the Elevate program have remarkable achievement rates, with 97 percent graduating from high school and 95 percent finding successful placement in college, vocational training or the military.

*"Truth be told, I've never had a father figure, and that has affected me in more ways than one. I believe it has contributed to some of the bad decisions I used to make. The only people I had to look up to were my brothers, but they were in bad situations. One was facing a murder charge and the other was murdered. Now I have ...
Teacher/Mentors from Elevate Orlando to look up to."*

- Elevate Orlando participant

Children fortunate to have positive role models in their everyday lives are proven to have lasting emotional and economic advantages. According to one study, fatherless children with at least one mentor in their lives have \$190,000 more in lifetime earnings than fatherless children without such relationships. This effect was even more pronounced among fatherless African-American children, whose lifetime earnings were \$458,000 higher than those without mentors.^{lii}

Conclusion

It is difficult to overstate the social and economic consequences of low academic achievement. The correlation between low education levels and poor earning potential will continue as we restructure toward an information economy. In 1973, just over a quarter of jobs in the United States required education or training beyond a high school degree. Now two-thirds of jobs will require some form of postsecondary education.^{liii}

Study after study confirms that a student's level of educational achievement, especially education attainment, is one of the best predictors of lifetime happiness and financial success. There is a direct correlation between a father's involvement in a child's life and

that child's educational attainment. The data illustrates that when a father is involved in a child's life that child tends to experience less truancy, behavioral problems, and ultimately goes further in school. As we have discussed, the implications aren't just for that child, but for generations of people. This is why breaking the cycle of fatherlessness is so critical.

The good news is that research also shows the positive effects of engaged fathers and father figures. Government, education and nonprofit institutions should always seek to keep biological fathers engaged in their children's lives, but circumstances inevitably will prevent that reality for many students. In these situations, individuals and organizations can come together to provide the support that students and their families need to achieve their potential.

APPENDIX

Analysis of Educational Outcomes in Florida as Related to Single-Parent Households

This section offers data analysis for each of Florida’s counties, examining the relationship between single-parent families and poor educational outcomes. The data is unable to prove that fatherlessness causes poor education outcomes, but we see a correlation with single-parent households, which are largely led by mothers.

Data

Our goal is to find data that appropriately represents the potential educational symptoms of fatherlessness discussed in the preceding report. Our dependent variable is the broken family, which we operationalize by measuring Floridian households with children who are in single-parent households, as provided by the United States Census and the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.^{liv} Measuring only female-headed households with children would be a more precise variable for the questions contained in this report. Unfortunately, the American Community Survey does not have this data for all Florida counties. Because women head the vast majority of single-parent households, we expect our data to be sufficiently representative for our purposes.^{lv}

To measure academic success, we use variables encompassing both educational attainment and academic ability. Educational attainment is represented by each county’s cohort high school graduation rate, as provided by the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE).^{lvi} We also collect county-level, cohort-based dropout rates.^{lvii} Note that in academic year 2016-17, any students who transferred out of Florida public schools to private or charter schools were considered dropouts on the district’s record.

Children’s performance in school is measured in language and mathematics. For every year and for each county, we note the percentage of students in a given grade who meet competency requirements for the subject or higher. We then average the competency rates among the different available grade levels (grades 3-8 for math and grades 3-10 for language) to produce a single competency rate for each county in a given year. County-level data for both of these subjects are found on FLDOE’s EdStats database.^{lviii} Truancy is operationalized by taking the average daily attendance in each county.^{lix} We look at standardized test scores for math and language at the available grade levels (grades 3-8 and 3-10, respectively).^{lx}

Finally, to get a sense of education-related externalizing behavior, we examine the school-related arrest rate per 100 students, taken from the Juvenile Justice Information System.^{lxi} It should be noted that the arrest rate is more or less a proxy for delinquent behavior, as various local law enforcement agencies may have different propensities to arrest misbehaving students. The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice notes that three of the largest school districts in the state aggressively pursue alternatives to arresting students, resulting in lower school-related arrest rates.^{lxii} Descriptive statistics are offered below in

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| Single Parent Household rate | 33 5 | 0.1632 | 0.5544 | 0.3617 | 0.0570 |
| HS Graduation Rates | 33 5 | 0.3510 | 0.9770 | 0.7707 | 0.0898 |
| School related arrest rate | 33 5 | 0.0000 | 0.0466 | 0.0084 | 0.0057 |
| Math scores | 33 5 | 0.2490 | 0.8040 | 0.5547 | 0.0891 |
| Language Scores | 33 5 | 0.2313 | 0.7633 | 0.5233 | 0.0921 |
| Attendance rates | 33 4 | 0.8706 | 0.9840 | 0.9355 | 0.0155 |
| Dropout rates | 33 5 | 0.0000 | 0.1860 | 0.0509 | 0.0355 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 33 4 | | | | |

Source. U.S. Census, Florida Department of Education, Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

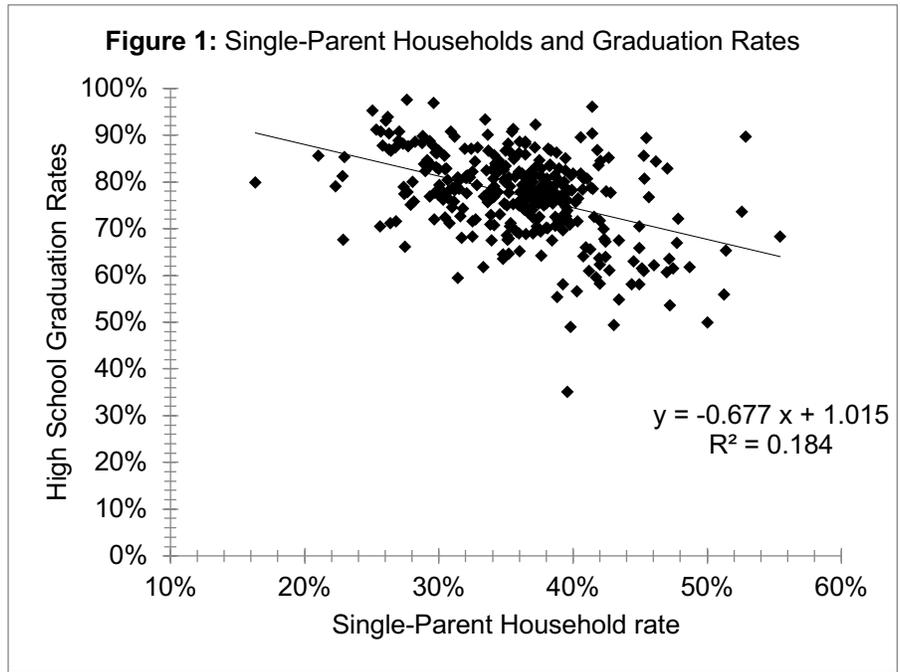
Methodology

We analyze correlations between our dependent variable (single-parent families) and our independent variables (high school graduation rates, dropout rates, math and reading competency, truancy and school-related arrests) by using a fixed effects regression model. Our fixed effects model is similar to a basic ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, but our model includes dummy variables for each year. By doing so, we better avoid bias in our results from any factors unique to one or more years. For example, adding dummy variables for each year prevents the aforementioned changed definition of “dropouts” from distorting our results, as might happen if we ran a simple OLS regression.

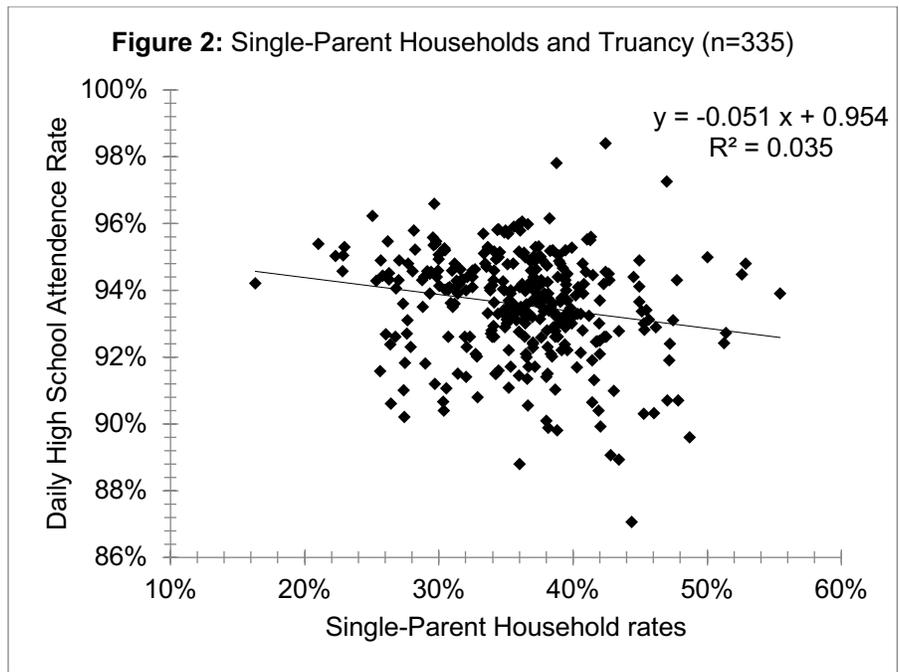
Findings and Discussion

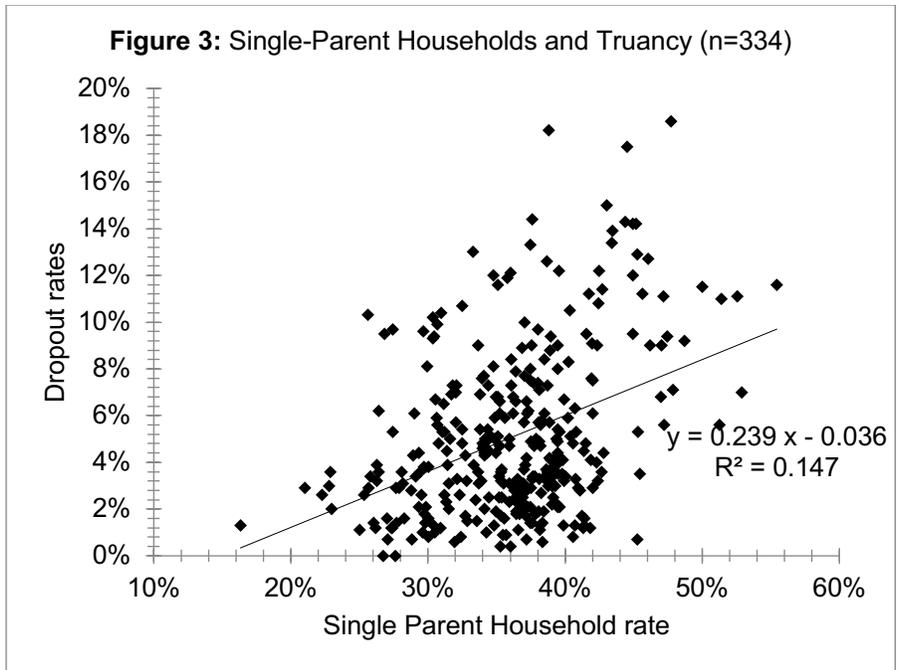
In isolation, all of our independent variables have a statistically significant correlation with the share of single-parent families in Florida, and the directions of the coefficients all match

our expectations. Graduation rates are lower in counties with high percentages of families headed by single parents, as we see in the figure below.

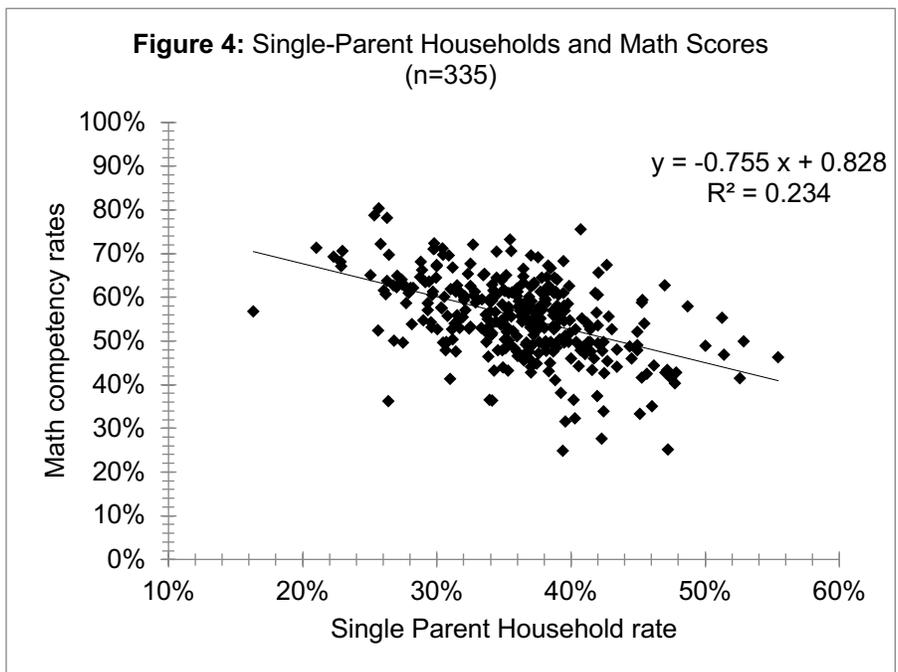


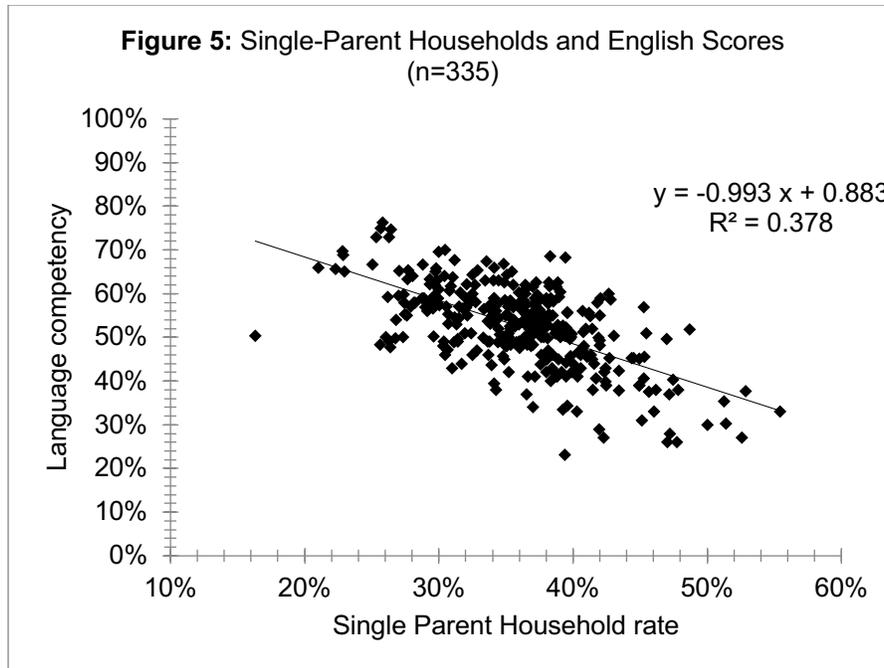
Likewise, truancy and dropout rates are lower when fewer students are in single-parent households.



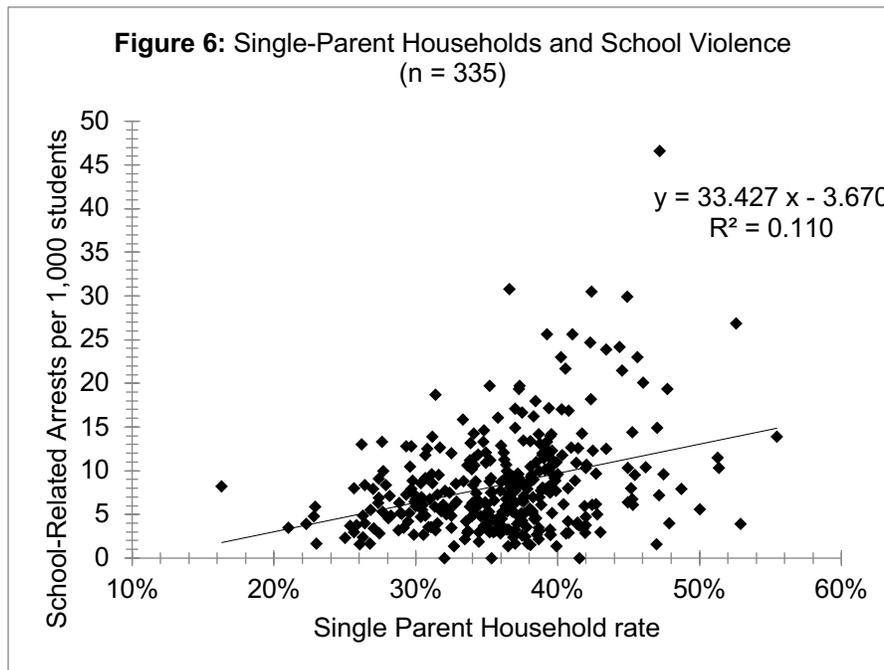


Math and reading competency are also lower, while children are more likely to miss class and drop out of high school.





Furthermore, the school arrest records indicate that children in communities with higher shares of unstable or broken families are more likely to exhibit delinquent behavior.



A more complex story emerges as we look deeper into the regression results. While fatherlessness has the significant negative correlation with graduation rates as expected, test scores have less consistent results. When simply comparing the relationship between test scores and single-parent households, there is a strong negative correlation between single parent households and both language and math scores, as we expected. Taking our

other variables into account, however, reveals a mildly positive relationship with single-parent households. A number of studies exploring the relationship between family structure and academic success have often had trouble finding consistent results, especially depending on the statistical technique used, so we are not especially concerned about our results.^{lxiii}

We can theorize a few takeaways from our test score results. Because non-cognitive functions are more malleable than cognitive functions, tests designed only to measure certain mental skills may have less scoring variation among children from different family backgrounds. Language grades may have a clearer inverse relationship with single-parent families due to family reading habits. Given the aforementioned evidence that unstable or broken families often have less time and money to invest in their children's education, it is possible children from such backgrounds did not grow up with books or did not have books read to them, which could put them at a long-term disadvantage relative to their peers.

Regardless, despite its statistical significance, the language score result should be read with caution given its poor collinearity tolerance. Further research is needed before making substantive claims about causal links between family structure, math and language scores, and reading habits. A child's reading ability perhaps could be better measured by examining literacy rates in each school district, but state and local data on child literacy rates have not been collected since 2003. Data would need to be collected before the relationship between fatherlessness and literacy could be empirically analyzed.

If the data are representative, dropout rates do tend to be marginally higher in communities with relatively more single-parent families. The attendance rate, our variable for truancy, has far too low a confidence level and too broad a standard error to infer anything. This inconclusiveness likely is a result of spurious variables related to the schools, perhaps through different attendance policies or the students themselves. Additionally, stronger Florida-based research could be conducted if data on the composition of households were made available in every county.

Because we are interested in the relationships between our individual independent variables and single-parent families more than we are interested in our model's explanatory power, the bivariate correlations, found in Table 2 below, are valuable to consider. In isolation, all our independent variables have a statistically significant correlation with the share of single-parent families in Florida, and the directions of the coefficients all match our expectations. Graduation rates are lower in counties with high percentages of families headed by single parents. Math and reading competency are also lower, while children are more likely to miss class and drop out of high school. Furthermore, the school arrest records indicate that children in communities with higher shares of unstable or broken families are more likely to exhibit delinquent behavior.

Turning to our regression coefficients, we see a more complex story as the variables interrelate, as Tables 3 and 4 indicate.

Table 2: Bivariate Pearson Correlations

| | | Single Parent |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Single Parent Household rate | Correlation | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 |
| | N | 335 |
| HS Graduation Rates | Correlation | -.429** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 |
| | N | 335 |
| School related arrests | Correlation | .332** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 |
| | N | 335 |
| Math scores | Correlation | -.483** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 |
| | N | 335 |
| Language Scores | Correlation | -.615** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 |
| | N | 335 |
| Attendance rates | Correlation | -.190** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 |
| | N | 334 |
| Dropout rates | Correlation | .384** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 |
| | N | 335 |
| YearDum2016 | Correlation | .041 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.459 |
| | N | 335 |
| YearDum2015 | Correlation | .025 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.646 |
| | N | 335 |
| YearDum2014 | Correlation | -.068 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.217 |
| | N | 335 |
| YearDum2013 | Pearson | -.045 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.411 |
| | N | 335 |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: Model Summary

| R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| .642 | .412 | .401 | 0.0441857 |

Table 4: Regression results

| Variable | Unstd. Coefficient | Std. Error | Std. Coefficient | t | Sig. | Tolerance |
|----------------------------|--------------------|------------|------------------|--------|-------|-----------|
| (Constant) | 0.589 | 0.152 | | 3.863 | 0.000 | |
| HS Graduation Rates | -0.071 | 0.041 | -0.111 | -1.710 | 0.088 | 0.424 |
| School related arrest rate | 1.051 | 0.504 | 0.106 | 2.087 | 0.038 | 0.700 |
| Math scores | 0.143 | 0.059 | 0.224 | 2.420 | 0.016 | 0.210 |
| Language Scores | -0.429 | 0.064 | -0.692 | -6.659 | 0.000 | 0.167 |
| Attendance rates | -0.044 | 0.163 | -0.012 | -0.268 | 0.789 | 0.917 |
| Dropout rates | 0.094 | 0.090 | 0.059 | 1.049 | 0.295 | 0.579 |
| YearDum2016 | -0.005 | 0.008 | -0.034 | -0.635 | 0.526 | 0.622 |
| YearDum2015 | -0.009 | 0.008 | -0.063 | -1.144 | 0.254 | 0.592 |
| YearDum2014 | 0.005 | 0.009 | 0.032 | 0.487 | 0.627 | 0.414 |
| YearDum2013 | 0.005 | 0.010 | 0.038 | 0.563 | 0.574 | 0.397 |

Source. U.S. Census, Florida Department of Education, Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

Starting with graduation rates, we see there remains an inverse relationship between single-parent families and high school graduation rates at $P < 0.1$. School arrests remain statistically significant and positively correlated with single-parent families, although standardizing its coefficient reveals it actually does not have the strongest relationship with single-parent families.

Math and language competencies, though both statistically significant, now appear to tell contrasting stories. Language scores remain negatively associated with single-parent

families, consistent with our expectations and the bivariate correlation. Math scores, on the other hand, are now somewhat positively associated with single-parent families. Although the math score result is unexpected, it is not surprising. As mentioned before, a number of studies exploring the relationship between family structure and academic success have found conflicting results within the same study.

Although far from being conclusive, the overall impression from our fixed effects regression indicates that there is a pattern within family structure and educational outcomes. Poorer academic success and higher rates of delinquency are found in the same school districts with higher shares of families with weak parental ties. Given the vast sociological literature on the impacts of father absence, it seems probable that family instability is inseparable from educational problems in Florida.

ENDNOTES

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FAMILY FIRST

iMOM

ALL PRO DAD

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