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**IN CITIES WHERE SINGLE PARENTING IS THE  
NORM, CHILD POVERTY AND VIOLENT CRIME  
ARE HIGH**

Nicholas Zill



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nicholas Zill** is a research psychologist and senior fellow of the Institute for Family Studies. He formerly directed the National Survey of Children.

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR FAMILY STUDIES

The Institute for Family Studies is an independent, non-partisan organization whose mission is to strengthen marriage and family life and advance the well-being of children through research and public education.

## Introduction

The city of Springfield, Ohio, gained unwanted notoriety recently, but Springfield and other Ohio cities have genuine problems that have nothing to do with dubious claims of barbecued pets. In these cities, the majority of children under age 18 are being raised by single mothers (either never married or divorced/separated) who do not live with their children's fathers or stepfathers.

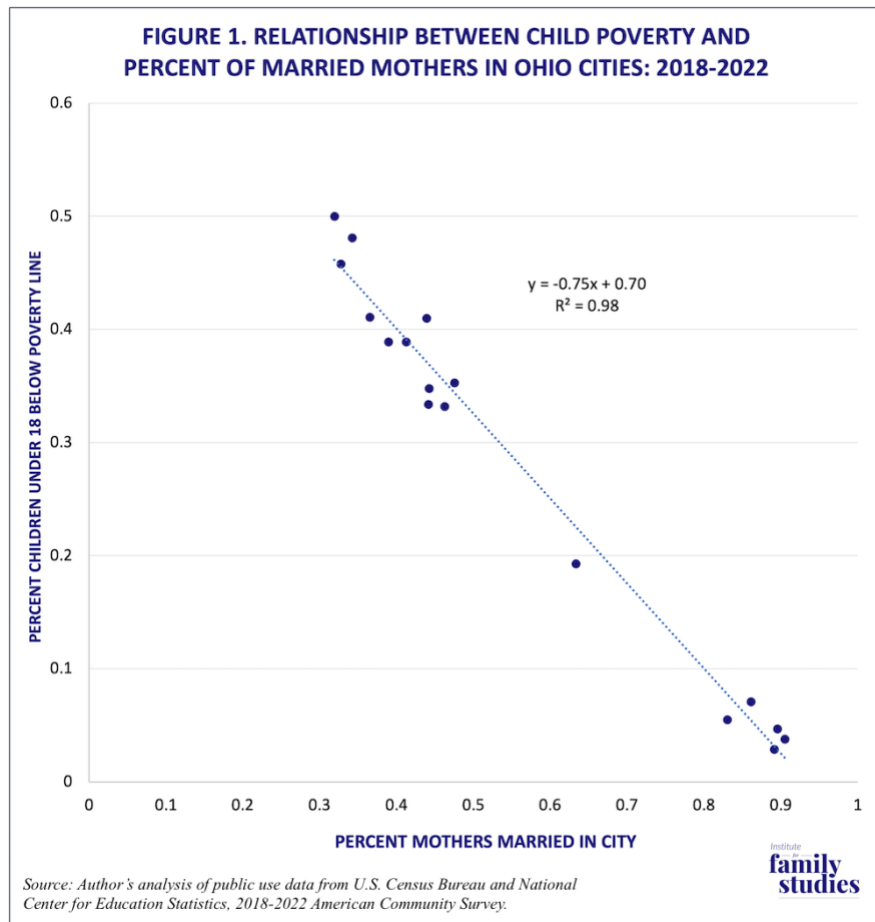
In Springfield, for example, only 44% of mothers were married and living with their husbands and children during the five-year period from 2018-2022. In Cleveland, only 33% were. In Youngstown, 32%; while in Cincinnati, 46%. By contrast, in the suburban community of Cleveland Heights, 63% of mothers were married, while in New Albany, Ohio, 91% were. In Ohio as a whole, 68% of mothers were married and lived with their husbands and children.<sup>1</sup>

## Absent Fathers and Child Poverty

In Ohio cities where single motherhood is the norm rather than the exception, rates of child poverty are high. In Springfield, one-third of all children lived in families below the official poverty level during the 2018-2022 time period. In Youngstown, it was half; in Cleveland, 46%; while in Cincinnati, a third. On the other hand, the child poverty rate in Cleveland Heights, where married parenthood is more common, was 19% and in New Albany, 4%. For Ohio as a whole, the child poverty rate was 18% (*see Table 1 in Appendix for child poverty rates and percent married mothers for 17 Ohio cities*).

Figure 1 below shows the inverse relationship between the percentage of married mothers and the child poverty rate across 17 Ohio cities. For each 10-point decline in the percentage of married mothers, there is a 7.5-point increase in the percentage of children in poverty in the city. As shown on the graph, a straight-line relationship between the two variables accounts for 98% of the variation in child poverty across these jurisdictions.

There are several reasons for higher child poverty rates in Ohio cities with large numbers of unmarried mothers. Many non-resident parents (usually the children’s biological fathers) provide little to no financial support for their offspring. Single mothers struggle to work outside the home while also caring for children, especially young ones. Government assistance programs, like Food Stamps, [tend to phase out rapidly](#) as family income rises, providing a disincentive to work. Without co-residence or a joint custody agreement, single mothers are unable to benefit from the division of child care and work responsibilities that most married couples practice.

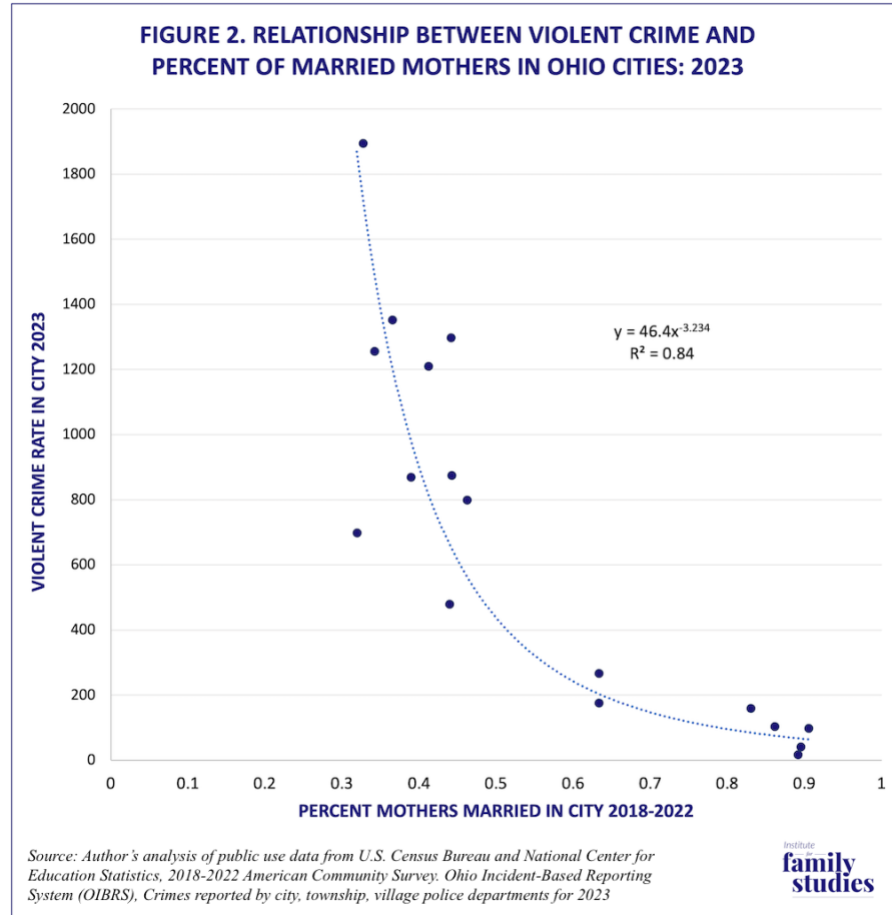


In addition, single mothers tend to have lower levels of education and less work experience than married mothers,<sup>2</sup> reducing their earnings potential.<sup>3</sup> But even when parent educational attainment, child age, and race and ethnicity are controlled, children in disrupted families are more likely to be poor than those in married-couple families.<sup>4</sup>

## Absent Fathers and Violent Crime

Ohio cities where single parenthood is the norm are also characterized by high rates of violent crime. In Springfield, for example, there were 1,298 incidents of violent crime reported to the police per 100,000 residents in 2023. In Cleveland, 1,895 incidents; in Cincinnati, 800; while in Youngstown, 699. By contrast, in Cleveland Heights, again where married parenthood is more common, the violent crime rate was 267 in 2023, and in New Albany, 99. The violent crime rate for Ohio as a whole was 294 in 2022 (see Table 2 in the Appendix for violent crime rates and percent married mothers for 17 Ohio cities).

Figure 2 shows the inverse relationship between the percentage of married mothers and the violent crime rate in 17 Ohio cities in 2023. As the percentage of married mothers declines, violent crime rates rise exponentially. As shown on the graph, a curvilinear relationship between the two variables accounts for 84% of the variation in violent crime rates across these jurisdictions.



Why are violent crime rates so high in Ohio cities where unmarried mothers are in the majority? There are several reasons. Single-parent families with children are apt to make frequent residential moves and to live in unsafe neighborhoods as a result of family disruption.<sup>5</sup> That makes them more vulnerable to becoming victims of both property and violent crime.

Having broken up with their child's other parent, a single parent will usually begin dating and trying to find a new partner. This process often involves being out of the house at night, sometimes leaving children with inadequate supervision, and exposes their children to strange ([and sometimes dangerous](#)) men. As children become adolescents, the peers they become involved with in their [less-than-ideal neighborhoods](#) and schools are often troubled ones, who can lead them into hazardous situations and activities. And children in single-parent families are more likely than those in two-parent families to have a father or [sibling with a criminal record](#).

Many single mothers take pains and make personal sacrifices to ensure that their offspring do not become victims or perpetrators of violent crime, and most succeed in keeping their children safe and non-delinquent. But the survey data show that the best form of home security and [delinquency prevention](#) is a stable [marriage](#) with a father in the home.

## Policy Prescriptions That May Make Matters Worse

Ohio is certainly not the only state with cities where single parenthood is common and where rates of child poverty and [violent crime are high](#). Unfortunately, popular policy prescriptions for aiding families with children and reducing child poverty may, if implemented, make matters worse rather than better. Most of these prescriptions involve giving money to new parents or even all parents of young children, without regard to whether the parents are married, have completed high school, or have a history of substance abuse, child abuse or neglect, mental illness or criminal behavior. While the intention is to reduce child poverty, the unintended consequence could be to reduce motivation for careful, responsible parenthood.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of handing out cash to new parents, it would seem wiser to initiate efforts to have public schools in Ohio and other states do a better job of instructing students about the [importance of marriage prior to childbearing for the success](#) of a parental relationship and the future well-being of children. More students today may acquire diplomas and learn something about the perils of teen pregnancy. But they do not seem to be sufficiently aware of the benefits of marriage, especially for children.

*Nicholas Zill is a research psychologist and a senior fellow of the Institute for Family Studies. He directed the National Survey of Children, a longitudinal study that produced widely cited findings on children's life experiences and adjustment following parental divorce.*

## Appendix

**TABLE 1. PERCENT MOTHERS MARRIED AND CHILD POVERTY IN OHIO  
CITIES: 2018-2022**

<b>NAME OF CITY</b>	<b>% MOTHERS MARRIED</b>	<b>CHILD POVERTY RATE</b>
YOUNGSTOWN	32%	50%
CLEVELAND	33%	46%
CANTON	34%	48%
DAYTON	37%	41%
LIMA	39%	39%
TOLEDO	41%	39%
MANSFIELD	44%	41%
SPRINGFIELD	44%	33%
AKRON	44%	35%
CINCINNATI	46%	33%
COLUMBUS	48%	35%
CLEVELAND HEIGHTS	63%	19%
BEACHWOOD	83%	6%
DUBLIN	86%	7%
UPPER ARLINGTON	89%	3%
MASON	90%	5%
NEW ALBANY	91%	4%

SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau and National Center for Education Statistics, [2018-2022 ACS data](#).

**TABLE 2. PERCENT MOTHERS MARRIED AND VIOLENT CRIME IN OHIO CITIES: 2023**

<b>NAME OF CITY</b>	<b>% MOTHERS MARRIED</b>	<b>VIOLENT CRIME RATE</b>
YOUNGSTOWN	32%	699
CLEVELAND	33%	1895
CANTON	34%	1256
DAYTON	37%	1353
LIMA	39%	870
TOLEDO	41%	1210
MANSFIELD	44%	480
SPRINGFIELD	44%	1298
AKRON	44%	875
CINCINNATI	46%	800
CLEVELAND HEIGHTS	63%	267
UNIVERSITY HEIGHTS	63%	176
BEACHWOOD	83%	160
DUBLIN	86%	104
UPPER ARLINGTON	89%	17
MASON	90%	42
NEW ALBANY	91%	99

SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau and National Center for Education Statistics, [2018-2022 ACS data](#). Ohio Incident-Based Reporting System (OIBRS). [Crimes reported by city, township, village police departments for 2023](#)



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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau and National Center for Education Statistics, 2018-2022 American Community Survey

<sup>2</sup> In the 2022 National Survey of Children's Health, 68% of children with married birth parents had parent with college degree or more, versus 29% of children living with single mothers. 16% of children with married birth parents had high school education or less, versus 45% of children with single mothers ( $p < .0001$ ).

<sup>3</sup> In the 2022 National Survey of Children's Health, only 1.3% of children with married birth parents had neither parent employed, versus 24.7% of children living with single mothers whose mothers were not employed.

<sup>4</sup> In the 2022 National Survey of Children's Health, children in disrupted families had 2.53 higher odds of being in poverty than children living with married birth parents, after controlling for child's race and Hispanic origin, age, sex, and parental education level. ( $p < .0001$ ).

<sup>5</sup> **More frequent moves:** In the 2022 National Survey of Children's Health, the mean number of times a child living with married birth parents moved since birth was 1.25, whereas the mean number of times moved since birth for children living with single mothers was 2.12. Forty-one percent of children with married-birth parents had zero moves since birth, versus 26% of children living with single birth mothers. Six percent of children with married birth parents had moved 5 or more times since birth, versus 17% of children with single mothers who had moved that often ( $p < .0001$ ).

**Unsafe neighborhoods:** In the 2022 National Survey of Children's Health, 69% of children living with married birth parents lived in neighborhoods that the parent described as "definitely safe," versus 56% of children living with single mothers whose mothers said the same about their neighborhoods. 3% of children with married birth parents lived in neighborhoods described as "somewhat" or "definitely unsafe," versus 9% of children with single mothers ( $p < .0001$ ).

<sup>6</sup> For example, in 2022, Medicaid paid for 73% of births to white teenagers; 85% of births to Black teenagers; and 73% of births to Hispanic teenagers (National Vital Statistics Reports, Vol. 73, No. 2, April 4, 2024. Table 19).