

## The New Silence: Family Breakdown and Child Sexual Abuse

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Decades of social science research has shown that children, on average, do better in life on measures of health, education and social outcomes when raised in two-parent married families. The risks to children associated with family breakdown disprove the fashionable idea that marriage, divorce and sole parenting don't matter for children.

### Children in non-traditional families are at greater risk of sexual abuse

The importance of marriage to children's wellbeing is especially relevant to one of the most important child welfare issues facing the nation – child sexual abuse.

Numerous studies have found that children who do not live with both biological parents, irrespective of socioeconomic status, are far more likely to be sexually abused than their peers in intact families. In particular, girls living in non-traditional families are found to have been sexually abused by their 'stepfathers,' by the married, cohabiting or casual partner of a divorced or single mother, at many times the rate girls are sexually abused by their natural fathers in intact families.

The 2010 US Fourth National Incidence Study of Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) found that compared to peers in two biological parent married families:

- children who lived with a single parent with no cohabiting partner were five times more likely to be sexually abused
- children who lived in a step-family (with married biological and non-biological parents) were eight to nine times more likely to be sexually abused
- children who lived with a single parent with a partner in the home were 20 times more likely to be sexually abused.

**Table 1: Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) by family type in the United States**

Family type*#	Number of children	Percentage of children	Number experiencing CSA per 1,000	Percentage experiencing CSA
(1) Married biological parents	44,799,000	61%	0.5	18%
(2) Other married parents	5,152,000	7%	4.3	17.8%
(3) Unmarried parents	2,192,000	3%	2.4	4.2%
(4) Single parent w/partner	2,081,000	3%	9.9	16.6%
(5) Single parent, no partner	16,962,000	23%	2.4	32.8%
(6) Neither parent	2,449,000	3%	5.3	10.4%

Source: NIS-4.

Step- and single-parent families accounted for only one-third (33%) of all children in the United States but accounted for more than two-thirds (66.8%) of all children who were sexually abused.

## Breaking the silence

Despite family breakdown exposing children to greater risk of sexual abuse, the issue receives scant attention in Australia. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has been widely applauded for breaking the silences that in earlier times kept child sexual abuse in the churches and other organisations a hidden problem. Yet a comparable silence exists today.

Greater community awareness is needed of the impact the relationship and reproductive choices of adults have on child welfare. This could be achieved by a government-commissioned public information campaign.

The campaign should emphasise that the two-biological parent married family is a protective factor that prevents child sexual abuse. It should also publicise how divorce and single-motherhood endangers children by increasing the risk of sexual abuse for the more than one in four Australian children who currently do not live with both natural parents.

This is not as radical as it sounds. In New York and Chicago, public information campaigns are encouraging marriage before having children and discouraging teen pregnancy. President Obama has also endorsed the need for 'strong stable families' to reduce poverty in America.

Figure 1: New York's anti-teen pregnancy campaign



Australian governments already conduct advertising campaigns—such as anti-smoking and anti-drink driving campaigns—to educate citizens, promote certain values, and change attitudes and behaviours. A public information campaign that advertised the risks to children posed by family breakdown would end the new silence that hides the culturally unfashionable truth about the family.

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Thanks to Bettina Arndt and Barry Maley for reading this report and providing helpful feedback. Thanks also to Professor Peter Saunders for commenting on an earlier draft. My colleague Peter Kurti also provided support and encouragement at crucial stages of this project. All errors are the author's responsibility.