THE MYTH OF THE MISSING BLACK FATHER

EDITED BY
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The number of single-parent families has increased dramatically over the past several decades, with the greatest growth occurring in single-father families. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated in 2003 that almost 12.5 million American families were single-parent families: approximately 10 million were single-mother families and just over 2 million were single-father families [Fields 2003]. Between 1970 and 2003, the proportion of single-father families grew from 1 percent to 6 percent of American families. Although they also make up less than one-quarter of single-parent families, single-father families are the fastest growing family form in the United States [Simmons and O'Neill 2001]. The dramatic increase in single-father families is clear evidence that increasing numbers of fathers are assuming responsibility for their dependent children.

The overall number of single parents has grown as a result of dramatic increases in unmarried childbearing, divorce, and delay in marriage. The recent increase in single-father families has resulted from a combination of these factors as well as a shift in custody awards from sole maternal custody to both paternal and shared custody arrangements [Seltzer 1994]. The growth in this family type has sparked researchers and policymakers to look closely at the social forces driving this increase and the dynamics and consequences involved.

While single fathers and single-father families have received some attention in both popular media and academics, black single-father
families have been largely ignored in this conversation. The black single father is often viewed as unattached or uninvolved with his biological children, and much of the academic research has focused on the governmental push for “responsible fatherhood” (Johnson and Sum 1987; Savage 1987; Pirog-Good 1993) and nonresidential fatherhood (e.g., Marsiglio 1987, 1991). This research will focus on custodial black single fathers in an effort to rectify this omission.

Looking at the research on single fatherhood, one might conclude that black single fathers are nonexistent. However, data suggest that there is a higher rate of black single fatherhood than white single fatherhood. In fact, by the mid-1990s, black custodial fathers made up 12 percent of all custodial fathers and 6 percent of all custodial parents within the black community (National Urban League 1998). This impression may be related to the complexity of the black single-father family. For example, research uses countless terms to identify single fathers: “unmarried father,” “father only,” “residential single father,” “male-headed families” (Coles 2002). This confusion blurs our understanding of the prevalence and implications of the black single-father family.

Recent U.S. Census data suggest that by 2002, 4 percent of all white children and 5 percent of all black children were living with a single father (Fields 2003). Estimates for 2004 suggest that just over 2 million children were living with single fathers: 1.7 million white children and 359,000 black children (Kreider 2008). Because there has not been much representative research, we know relatively little about the functioning of single-father families, the well-being of children in them, and the dynamics characterizing this familial environment, and even less about the diversity within this emerging family form.

Recent research has only just begun to examine the outcomes of children living in single-parent families, including single-father families. Current research has focused almost exclusively on single-mother families and child outcomes in these family types. Such limitations are often the result of poor data collection on fathers as the primary respondent or, importantly, as primary caregivers. Little research has focused exclusively on single-father families, and even less on black single-father families (Coles 2002; Hamer and Marchioro 2002). In contrast, single-mother families have been the subject of extensive research (McLanahan and Booth 1989; Hogan, Hao, and Parish 1990; Thompson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994; Hogan, Eggebeen, and Clogg 1996; McLanahan and Sandefur 1996). Perhaps the most influ-
Approximately 22 percent of all single-father families are near poor, and 16 percent are living below the official federal poverty line [Fields and Casper 2001]. National estimates suggest that among white single fathers, 10 percent live below the poverty line, compared to 25 percent of black single fathers. However, recent research shows that only 7 percent of all single-father families use means-tested cash-assistance programs [U.S. Bureau of the Census 2002]. Research has not addressed the racial differences in assistance receipt among single fathers, but given their disadvantaged economic standing compared to white single fathers, a higher rate of benefit receipt among black single-fathers would be logical.

Research on single-mother families has consistently shown that support networks and public assistance enhance parenting and child well-being [Stack 1974; Edin and Lein 1997; Sudarkasa 1997]. Single mothers often rely on several sources for economic assistance, including child support, public assistance (Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), in-kind programs (food stamps, Medicaid), kin support, and community resources. Single fathers also rely on these networks and programs for assistance [Rosenthal and Kersh et 1981], although few researchers have focused on these families and their receipt. Out of necessity, the focus of the review that follows will be on single-mother families and their use of assistance. Information on single fathers will be included as available.

Strong support networks provide single parents with relief from the stress related to solo parenting [Gersick 1979]; however, current research suggests that fathers are disadvantaged by a lack of sufficient access to public assistance programs (for example, advertisements for services and programs are typically not directed to fathers) as well as a lack of informal support [Hamer and Marchioro 2002], such as parenting support groups, same-sex friends with sole custody, or supportive educators. Specifically, low-income men and men of color are less likely than their white middle-class counterparts to use such support and are less likely to have opportunity to relax their work schedules and other work commitments [Hamer and Marchioro 2002]. Similarly, middle-class fathers and low-income, working-class fathers use different types of support networks. Middle-class, white fathers are more likely to date and have intimate relationships, creating additional support, and are more likely to marry than low-income fathers [Hamer and Marchioro 2002]. Black single parents are more likely to rely on
on single mothers and their children but overlooks the increasing popu-
lation of single-father families. Research on single-mother families
has consistently shown that support networks and public assistance
enhance parenting and child well-being [Edin and Lein 1997]. Further
research suggests that single mothers are more likely than single fa-
thers to use formal assistance programs, such as cash assistance or
in-kind assistance [Osgood 2003]. In a national sample of single par-
ents, Osgood (2003) found that among single parents earning less than
200 percent of the federal poverty line, single-father families are signif-
ically less likely to receive formal cash and formal in-kind assistance
than single-mother families. This research will attempt to focus our
assistance agendas on the increasing population of single-father fami-
lies, who may present unique characteristics relative to single-mother
families.

Basic descriptive information on black and white single-father fam-
ilies will be presented in this research, as well as a portrait of the eco-
nomic circumstances of black and white single-father families. Using
survey data from the National Survey of America’s Families [NSAF],
this research will address the extent of use of public assistance pro-
grams (cash and in-kind) among single-father families, focusing on the
differences between black and white single-father families.

Economic Challenges and Strategies of the Single-Parent Family

Research suggests that fathers with custody face considerable eco-
nomic hardship, compared to married fathers (George and Wilding
1972; Hipgrave 1981), mostly because of an increase in familial re-
sponsibility and the resulting career and social changes: shifts to less-
demanding career, loss of overtime, a decrease in social networks with
professional associates, and an overall increase in the time spent at
home with children. These shifts in roles and responsibilities may
cause some anxiety among single fathers. Single fathers, however,
are more prepared economically for the parenting role than are single
mothers. On average, single fathers have better paying, more stable
jobs than single mothers and are less likely to have to quit. This added
buffer allows single fathers more flexibility in their schedules as well
as more aid from childcare providers, housekeepers, and other domes-
tic assistants.
relatives and kin for support and resources including childcare, emergency shelter, and economic assistance (Stack 1974; Edin and Lein 1997). Even within poor and near-poor single-parent families, single fathers are less likely to receive public assistance than single mothers (Meyer and Garasky 1996), creating further strain on themselves and their children. Low-income single fathers, according to Hamer and Marchioro (2002) often do not realize that they qualify for public assistance such as cash assistance and food stamps. When these fathers do apply for assistance, they are often met with negative responses and general distrust [Hamer and Marchioro 2002]. In our research, we explore the differential economic strategies employed by single fathers of different racial backgrounds.

**Formal Cash Assistance**

Many single mothers rely on some type of economic assistance following a separation or divorce. However, only 22 percent of single mothers receive cash assistance (AFDC or TANF) a year after a separation, and welfare payments are generally low (Seltzer 1994). In 1995, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that single-mother households were five times as likely to participate in major means-tested programs as married-couple households (Tin and Castro 2001). In addition, more women than men receive benefits (23 million women versus 16 million men) (Tin and Castro 2001). Hispanics are three times as likely as white non-Hispanics to receive benefits for at least one month and have participation rates more than three times that of white non-Hispanics (Tin and Castro 2001). Literature on single fathers’ use of public assistance, however, remains unavailable.

**Formal In-Kind Assistance**

In-kind benefits (for example, food stamps and Medicaid) have grown in importance over the past thirty years as instruments of transfer in the United States (Slesnick 1996). In-kind transfers have roughly the same impact on the poverty rate as cash assistance. The limitation of these programs seems to be the manner in which benefits are distributed to recipients. Individuals were more likely to participate in Medicaid
than any other program, but they were more likely to participate in housing-subsidy programs for longer durations. In-kind programs, such as food stamps and Medicaid, do not, however, bring children in single-mother families into parity with children from intact, two-parent families (Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986; Seltzer 1994). Again, literature on single fathers' use of in-kind support programs is unavailable.

Importantly, these formal and in-kind assistance programs have been cited as racist by both academics and politicians (Gordon 1994; Quadagno 1994; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). These critics have suggested that the welfare system has systematically excluded blacks from its programs. For example, through the New Deal era, domestic servants and agricultural workers were denied entitlement, disproportionately denying blacks assistance (Gordon 1994). Blacks therefore may come to the welfare system with this historical discrimination in mind, viewing its use as a handout or pity rather than entitlement or as being need-based. Kenneth Neuback and Noel Cazenave (2001) remind us that at the same time black mothers were being blamed for many of society’s problems—from rampant drug use to the decline of the American family—“race” and “welfare” became synonymous for politicians and scholars alike. Further, public-opinion surveys (Neuback and Cazenave 2001) suggest that white welfare recipients are viewed with compassion and black recipients with contempt. Early assistance programs—from Mothers Pension to Aid to Dependent Children—have discriminated against black mothers or were implemented in a discriminatory manner, typically by providing states with the power to execute policies based on their own agendas (Neuback and Cazenave 2001). Given this historical mistreatment, we believe that although black single fathers are in a more disadvantaged economic position in our society than white single fathers, their odds of receipt of formal in-kind assistance will not be significantly higher than white single fathers.

Data and Methodology

This study is designed to advance our knowledge of the well-being and functioning of black single-father families and their relationships with formal economic-assistance programs using current, nationally representative data. The focus of this study is on the economic well-being
of black single-father families and will attempt to highlight the strategies of economic security used by these single fathers. Specifically, we provide a descriptive portrait of black single-father families, and we assess the degree to which children in black single-father families use public assistance programs, as compared to white single-father families. We use the 2002 National Survey of America’s Families (NSAF), a large-scale national survey of economic, health, and social characteristics of children and nonelderly adults. We use white single-father families as the main comparison group to delineate the similarities and differences between these two key populations.

Unlike much of the previous research, the current study will contribute to the growing base of knowledge about families’ economic well-being and structure by using a large, nationally representative data set to focus on the economic well-being of black single-father families, in terms of their use of public assistance programs. Previous studies of economic-assistance strategies have focused primarily on single-mother families, while single-father families have remained at the margins. In addition to redirecting the focus to single-father families, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of formal assistance receipt, opening the door for future research to look at the relationship between formal assistance receipt and dimensions of family well-being in single-father families.

The National Survey of America’s Families

We use data from the National Survey of America’s Families (NSAF), a nationally representative survey of the economic, health, and social characteristics of children, adults under the age of sixty-five, and their families (Converse et al. 1999). The NSAF is particularly useful because it includes several measures of economic security, program participation, and informal assistance networks. Three rounds of these cross-sectional data were collected: the first in 1997, the second in 1999, and the third in 2002. We use the third round of data because of its substantial changes to the earlier program-participation section and the recent collection of data. Information on more than 100,000 individuals (and nearly 40,000 households with approximately 35,000 children) was collected for the 2002 round. The NSAF gathered information from several respondents in each household. For households
with children, different interviews were completed for children under the age of six and between six and seventeen. Interviews were conducted with the most knowledgeable adult [MKA]. In most cases, the MKA is the child’s biological parent. Results from the NSAF are representative of the civilian, noninstitutionalized population under the age of sixty-five in the United States.

As this study is looking at the difference between black and white single-father families, children in other living arrangements are excluded. Both extended and cohabiting family structures differ from single-parent families [Lerman 2003; Manning and Brown 2003], and thus these children are excluded, even though they may be living with a single parent. Since non-biological-parent families make up a small proportion of overall families, they are also excluded for the purpose of this study. These exclusions limited the restricted sample to 964 families. Because we are mainly interested in black and white single-father-headed households, we further restrict the sample to include only black and white families [N = 868]. The sample was further limited to families headed by adults sixty-five years of age and younger [N = 849] to reduce the possibility of grandparent-grandchild households, and was limited to U.S. citizens [N = 831]. Finally, we eliminated all families with missing values on the receipt of cash or in-kind benefit variables, as well as those families with missing information on the marital history variable. The final sample size for this analysis is 823 families: 694 (84 percent) of which are headed by white single fathers, and 129 (16 percent) are headed by black single fathers. Missing values on the independent variables were rare (generally less than 2 percent of all cases) and were recoded with the mean value for each variable.

**Dependent Variables**

Two individual measures of formal assistance are included. The first consists of major cash programs: TANF (sometimes asked as “AFDC”). A dummy variable is included as to whether (1) the family is receiving TANF currently or (0) the family is not receiving TANF. A second measure of formal assistance is designed to assess the use of food stamps, which is a formal in-kind assistance program. This variable is coded (1) for receipt of in-kind assistance through the food stamp program or (0) for no receipt.
Primary Independent Variable

For the purpose of the logistic regression, race will serve as the primary independent variable, as this study serves as an investigation into possible differences in assistance participation between (1) black single-father and (0) white single-father families.

Independent Variables

For the analyses, control variables will be included that have been previously shown to have an effect on participation in assistance programs among black single-father and white single-father families. These variables include characteristics of the single father and the number and general age range of children in the household. Parent characteristics include age, marital history, employment status, and education history. Age is coded in years. Marital history is dummy coded to indicate whether the respondent is (1) ever married or (0) never married. Employment status is coded as a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was at any point in the past year working (2), looking for work (1), or not working (0). Education is dummy coded to indicate whether the parent has completed less than twelve years (0), a high school education (1), or more than twelve years of education (2). The number of children in the household is grouped into two different variables indicating the number of children in the household less than five years old and the number of children in the household ages six to seventeen.

Analytic Strategy

First, a table of means and standard errors is produced for both black and white single-father families to provide a descriptive portrait of the two groups. Second, logistic regression analyses are completed for each of the two measures of formal assistance to assess the differences in odds of receiving cash or in-kind benefits by race. For each of the two dependent variables, two logistic models are estimated. The first model includes only race to establish the bivariate relationship between the racial classifications of the single-father families and receipt of financial assistance. The second model controls for the effects of relevant
family (number of children in the two age groups) and individual father characteristics (age, educational history, marital history, and employment status). Because the dependent variables (receipt of cash and in-kind assistance) are coded as binary variables (1 = receipt, 0 = no receipt), logistic regression is used to analyze the odds of receipt.

As standard errors generally assume a simple random sample, additional steps were taken to correct for the complex sampling design of the NSAF. Using replicate weights to correct for oversampling, subsampling, and clustering design, corrected standard errors are reported in all analyses. Results of this analysis are generalizable to American single fathers.

Results

The weighted means and standard errors of the variables included in this study are shown in table 6.1. Of the final sample size of 823 single-father families, approximately 16 percent are black single-father families and 84 percent are white. For the total sample, approximately 8 percent of the single-father families receive formal cash assistance, and 13 percent receive assistance from the food-stamps program. While black single-father families receive these benefits at a slightly higher rate than white single-father families (17 percent versus 11 percent), the difference in the proportion of these households receiving cash or in-kind benefits is not statistically significant.

In addition, black and white single fathers significantly differed in their marital status (64 percent of black single fathers are ever married, 87 percent of white single fathers are ever married) and age (black single fathers are, on average, thirty-eight years old; white single fathers are, on average, forty-one years old).

While both black and white single-father families enjoy familial incomes appreciably above the federal poverty level, with an overall average income of approximately 290 percent of the 2002 federal poverty line, black and white single fathers significantly differ on poverty status. As measured, black single fathers had incomes, on average, at 246 percent of the federal poverty level, and white single fathers have, on average, incomes at 302 percent of the federal poverty level. Specifically, black and white single fathers significantly differ in their likelihood of living below the federal poverty line: 10 percent of white
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Std. error</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving cash (TANF) assistance</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>0.112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving in-kind (food stamps)</td>
<td>0.131</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assistance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s marital history(^2)</td>
<td>0.822</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.638</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s age</td>
<td>40.435</td>
<td>0.475</td>
<td>38.355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children age 5 and under</td>
<td>0.291</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>0.492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children age 6–17</td>
<td>1.290</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>1.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of the federal poverty level</td>
<td>2.908</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>2.461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent living below 100% federal</td>
<td>0.116</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poverty level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample N = 823, Weighted N = 1,288.053
Sample N = 129, Weighted N = 253,962
Sample N = 624, Weighted N = 1,034.091

\(†\) \(p < .10\), \(*p < .05\), \(**p < .01\), \(***p < .001\) indicates significant differences between black and white single-father-headed households.

\(^1\) Standard errors presented are adjusted using jackknife procedures to represent true population parameters.

\(^2\) Marital history is coded \(1\) for ever-married (including divorced, widowed, separated) and \(0\) for never married.

single fathers and 18 percent of black single fathers are living below the poverty line.

Furthermore, black single-father families have significantly more children under age five living in their homes, but white single-father families include significantly more children between the ages of six
and seventeen. So, even though the average number of children in black and white single-father-headed households are very similar (1.58 for black single-father families, 1.57 for white single-father families), black single fathers have substantially younger children in their custody, in addition to lower familial incomes.

Table 6.2 provides a distribution of black and white single fathers’ employment and education statuses. As expected, white single fathers are more likely to have completed a bachelor’s degree (22 percent, compared to 11 percent for black single fathers). White single fathers are also less likely to have not finished high school (12 percent, compared to 14 percent for black single fathers). White single fathers are also more likely to be currently working (81 percent, compared to 70 percent for black single fathers).

In sum, black single fathers are significantly younger, less educated, less likely to have ever been married than white single fathers, and more likely to be in poverty. Although black single-father families appear to be in situations of greater need to receive cash and in-kind benefits to support their families than white single fathers, the bivariate data show that black single fathers are not pursuing this option at any greater rate than white single fathers.

The logistic regressions predicting the odds of receiving cash and in-kind benefits are shown in table 6.3. The baseline model estimating the odds of receiving cash benefits by race of the single-father family confirms the findings of the bivariate results reported above, as race does not significantly influence the odds of receiving cash benefits. The multivariate model predicting receipt of cash assistance further shows that race is not a determinant factor in using cash benefits as an

| Table 6.2 |
| Sample Distribution for Education and Employment Status |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Status</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No high school diploma or GED</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma or GED, but no college degree</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>66.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than a bachelor's degree</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not in the labor force</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently looking for work</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently employed</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>81.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
economic strategy. In fact, none of the variables included in the multivariate model influence the use of cash assistance programs except employment status, with the families where the single father is employed being significantly less likely to receive cash benefits. It must be noted, however, that this effect is marginally significant and should be interpreted cautiously.

The baseline model for estimating the odds of receiving in-kind benefits by race show a slightly different pattern than the bivariate relationship. Black single-father families are significantly more likely to receive in-kind benefits, in the form of food stamps, than white single-father families in this model, but again this relationship is marginally significant ($p < .10$) and should be interpreted with caution. The effect of race, however, diminishes to insignificance once the other relevant family and individual father characteristics are controlled (such as father's economic characteristics). Employment status again emerges as a significant factor influencing the odds of receiving in-kind benefits, as does familial income as a percentage of the federal poverty line. Whatever small effect that race exerts in the odds of using in-kind benefits as an economic strategy is accounted for by the lower economic and employment standing of black single-father families.

Overall, the data indicate that black single-father families use economic strategies similar to those of white single-father families, despite the greater economic challenges faced by black single-father families.

### Table 6.3
Logistic Regressions Predicting Receipt of Cash and In-Kind Assistance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Cash Assistance</th>
<th>In-Kind Assistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial classification</td>
<td>0.504</td>
<td>0.079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty level</td>
<td>-0.535</td>
<td>-1.230***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Children age 5 and under</td>
<td>0.358</td>
<td>0.342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Children age 6–17</td>
<td>-0.074</td>
<td>0.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's age</td>
<td>-0.021</td>
<td>-0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's level of education</td>
<td>-1.038</td>
<td>-0.157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's employment status</td>
<td>-0.982*</td>
<td>-0.782***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's marital history</td>
<td>0.444</td>
<td>0.080</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model $X^2 = 0.654 \quad 4.454^{***} \quad 2.841^* \quad 10.336^{***}$

*$p < .10$, $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$
Discussion

This study contributes to the growing body of research in the area of economic well-being among single fathers and their families. In this study, the economic strategies of black and white single-father families were compared, using the 2002 round of the National Survey of America's Families. The purpose of this study is to explore the possible racial differences in receipt of formal cash and in-kind assistance among custodial single fathers.

Although black and white single fathers differ substantially in terms of income, age, age of children, marital history, educational attainment, and employment status, black and white single fathers do not significantly differ in their limited use of formal assistance programs. This suggests that black and white single fathers are using similar strategies to maintain economic well-being for their families. Specifically, the data show that the majority of black and white single fathers are employed and earn incomes above the federal poverty line. Perhaps this combination of employment and income allows single fathers of all racial backgrounds to avoid formal assistance through lack of necessity. However, it must be reiterated that racial discrimination in the welfare system is widely cited and that this lack of assistance use among black single fathers may also be a direct or indirect result of discrimination or discouragement from within the system itself.

While national data suggest that only 22 percent of eligible single mothers are receiving formal cash assistance (Seltzer 1994), it remains interesting to note that less than 8 percent of our nationally representative sample of single fathers receive such support, even after controlling for eligibility (poverty status). While research tells us that single fathers are earning higher incomes, we speculate that single fathers are also seeking less supplemental support for themselves or their children (specifically in the form of formal cash assistance and food stamps, as this study suggests). It remains interesting that we continue to see general differences in receipt between blacks and whites (and between single mothers and single fathers). Loveless and Tin (2006) report that in 2003, 13 percent of whites and 41 percent of blacks were participating in means-tested programs, and 36 percent of male-headed households and 48 percent of female-headed households were participating in such programs. Perhaps these racial differences in receipt reflect the higher percentage of single mothers among blacks and their higher poverty rates. Future research would benefit from an extensive study
of the racial difference not only for single fathers but for single mothers and single parents more generally.

The goal of this study is largely descriptive, aiming to better understand the economic differences between black and white single-father families. As such, we are unable to explain why black and white single fathers differ in some areas or how these differences might play out for children in such families. However, this study does advance our understanding of economic strategies of single fathers and suggests that while many black single fathers are eligible to receive assistance, few are receiving it.

We must note, however, some of the limitations to both our data and to the possible conclusions that can be drawn from such a study. First, our data only examine the usage of formal cash assistance and in-kind programs rather than focusing on all possible sources of support (financial or otherwise). It would be wise for future research to address informal strategies (religious organizations, community assistance programs, private charities, and family support) that single fathers might use to maintain their economic well-being. Second, because of additional data limitations, lifetime economic well-being cannot be measured. Rather, this study uses a point-in-time estimate of economic well-being. Using a measure of duration of poverty spells and of parental employment may better estimate economic well-being. It may also be beneficial to understand a family's full history of assistance receipt. For instance, Hipgrave (1981) found that while single-father families are less likely to use public assistance than single-mother families in general, single-father families are more likely to receive public assistance earlier rather than later in their single-parenthood experience.

Furthermore, this study is limited in its inability to control for selection into single-father families. Earlier research suggests that single-father families are unique in their composition and in their development (Seltzer 1994). For instance, single-father families may have resulted from a difficult custody battle, causing additional strain on the economic stability of the family. Also, single-father families may be formed after a court decision concludes that a child's mother is unfit to parent or that a child's mother declines responsibility to parent. Fathers may also be chosen as the primary custodial parent because of relative financial stability of the family.

This research suggests the need for additional research to focus on single-parent families and their economic well-being. A key direction...
of future research should be to expand the current analyses to include more complex family structures and additional economic strategies. Specifically, future research should conduct separate analyses for in-kind assistance programs and expand analyses to include additional types of single-parent families (such as lone parent, cohabiting, extended, or those preceded by divorce, widowhood, or never-married status). Future research would also benefit from discussions of single fathers’ receipt of formal cash and in-kind assistance in the context of welfare-reform policies, specifically those encouraging employment and discouraging long-term program use. Additionally, future research should expand the current study by focusing on informal and kin support among single-father families, focusing on differences between single mothers and single fathers in assistance receipt, and adding controls for poverty spell duration and duration of family structure.

Notes

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1. In a separate analysis, we found that among black single-father families living below 100 percent of the federal poverty level (18 percent), 50 percent received cash assistance and 60 percent received food stamps. Among white single-father families living below 100 percent of the federal poverty level (10 percent), 23 percent received cash assistance, and 52 percent received food stamps. This equated to 31 percent of the total sample receiving cash assistance and 54 percent receiving food stamps, among those below 100 percent of the federal poverty level (12 percent).

References

