

# Family Life



The family is the single most influential component social unit in life. Every country in the world shares the concept of family in its societal definition. Of course, the differences across national lines contribute to the uniqueness of each society. Yet the family is the primary venue where beliefs and behaviors are learned and expressed to shape the fundamental thinking and values of an individual.

In America, the traditional definition of family is parents and children residing together in the same household. While this remains the case, fewer families than ever have both parents in the home. In 1970, 85% of our nation's children lived with both parents, but that percentage decreased substantially over the years until 1996, when it stabilized near 68%. Since 1960, the percentage of births to unmarried women has increased from 5% to 37%. These national trends have been found to have a correlation with the number of children who experience significant financial challenges, have lower educational levels, and rely on public assistance.

The child's opportunities that exist for society are closely tied to the family unit being intact and providing a nurturing and productive environment for children.

The challenges for families nationwide are not any different for the households of Memphis. Memphis is the largest city in Tennessee, with an estimated 158,455 families, 250,721 households, and 2,327.4 people per square mile.<sup>1</sup> The health and stability (or lack thereof) of these families is no doubt a contributor to many of Memphis's greater problems and an indicator of the overall health of our community. The Shalom Family Life committee sought to examine the state of our city's families, determine what factors are influencing their health and development, and define the challenges faced as a result.

## Challenges:

After examining various factors that impact families, the Shalom Family Life committee identified poverty as the greatest challenge facing family life in Memphis. By-products of this fact can be seen in family structure and education.

## Poverty

The most recent census report (2000) stated the poverty level for families in Memphis was at 17.1% overall;<sup>2</sup> at 24.4% for families with children under the age of 18; and 31.0% for families with children younger than 5. The numbers were greater in single-parent households, at 33.5% for families headed by a single mother. In single-parent families with children 18 and younger the poverty level rises to 40.4%; it rises more dramatically in this demographic, to 52.5%, if the children are younger than 5. The percentage is at least 3% higher in each category if the family is African American.

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More recent data gathered from the 2003 American Community Survey (ACS) showed in the three years since the 2000 census, percentages increased in each of the aforementioned areas by at least 4%.<sup>3</sup> As of 2007 the poverty rate (based again on ACS findings) was 18.8% overall.

A recent article in *Smart City Memphis*, entitled "Statistics Paint a Portrait of a City in Crisis," reported that between 2000 and 2006 the poverty rate in Memphis climbed 27%.<sup>4</sup> It also stated that large sections of Memphis, including most of North Memphis, South Memphis and Orange Mound have household incomes of less than \$22,500 and some less than \$8,000. Many of the zip codes in these areas have unemployment rates above 30%. Statistics reflect Memphis's infant mortality rate to be higher than some third-world countries, due in large part to poverty. In Memphis, 40% of children under the age of 18 live below the poverty level.

### Structure

Poverty notwithstanding, no other single indicator is more correlated to the success or failure of a family than the family structure, specifically, the marital status of the parents.

National studies from researchers such as Paul Amato, Isabell Sawhill, and Sarah McLanahan have produced definitive national surveys studying the effects of family structure on success, particularly as it relates to the children. Their work has concluded that parents have the best ability to provide financially for their families when they are educated, beyond their early twenties in age, and married.

Unfortunately, the number of children born to single parents has been increasing. In 2007, single-parent births accounted for almost 60% of the total births in Shelby County.<sup>5</sup> These families are significantly more likely to be poor or low-income and vulnerable to disruption. Children in these families begin school at a developmental disadvantage and lag behind their middle-income peers. The increasing number of births to single parents presents a difficult choice for today's society. Decisions have to be made regarding the efforts to educate young men and women on the significance of the two-parent home. The Shalom Family Life Committee believes in the effectiveness of promoting "marriage-first" education to prevent single-parent births as well as in launching mechanisms to support single parents by helping them provide the best possible environments for their families.

From an economic standpoint alone, marital status can greatly impact the resources available to a family. According to census data, single mothers in Memphis typically earn approximately 25% of what a typical married family earns per year. These differences stem mainly from barriers to employment—particularly a lack of education. According to one researcher, no other single event ends the educational attainment of a woman more than childbirth. As a general rule, the level of education achieved at childbirth is as far as the mother will get. Given that more education translates into not only more income but also better preparation for children in the household, young parents are often unable to achieve an educational level that can maximize household earnings and other resources for the family.

Again, according to census data for Shelby County, 45% of children raised by single mothers live in poverty. By comparison, only 6% of children raised by married parents are living in poverty. The effects also appear to limit the future potential to marry. Nationally, unmarried mothers are 40% less likely to ever marry than women who have not had a child. And when these mothers do marry, the situations are difficult at best. The unwed mothers who eventually do marry are more likely to marry men who are high school dropouts or unemployed than women with similar backgrounds and no children.

### Education

The family is the basic institution where children learn who they are and what type of future they might expect. Within each ethnic group, values and priorities are also influenced by the family's social status. It is clear that among oppressed minorities in poor urban communities such as Memphis, families face great problems in their efforts to shape their children's futures so that they will experience reasonable success in school and in adult life. Poor urban African-American families differ substantially in the quality of family life they are able to provide, and these differences are reflected in their children's school achievement.

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A family's ability to provide a home environment that prepares children for success in the future develops out of respective family members' past experiences. The phrase "breaking the cycle" is often used when it comes to changing negative outcomes in poor and underserved communities. These "cycles" are the past experiences that have repeated from generation to generation and promise to continue. The values developed from, and relative emphasis of, these past experiences can either be reinforced or altered by current experiences. A long history of survey research shows that low-income African-American families have high educational aspirations for their children. The experiences of African Americans in American society have convinced the majority of parents that their children's chances for occupational success and a comfortable lifestyle will be extremely limited if they remain unable to attain considerably more education than their parents.



Research has also shown that by looking at a family's socialization process and not just its compositional properties, we can gain a better understanding of how "family life" is a part of the hidden curriculum of the home that results in children being successful in school. Some examples of family activities providing a supportive environment for children are reading, writing, topical dialogue, playing word games, and other brain-stimulating hobbies. The excerpts below are from studies that verify the importance of the family unit in the lives of children:

- Across the nation, just under half of children between birth and five years (47.8%) are read to every day by their parents or other family members.  
*(Russ S, Perez V, Garro N, Klass P, Kuo AA, Gershun M, Halfon N, Zuckerman B. Reading Across the Nation: A Chartbook (2007): Reach Out and Read National Center, Boston, MA.)*
- By the age of 2, children who are read to regularly display greater language comprehension, larger vocabularies, and higher cognitive skills than their peers.  
*(Raikes, H., Pan, B.A., Luze, G.J., Tamis-LeMonda, C.S., Brooks-Gunn, J., Constantine, J., Tarullo, L.B., Raikes, H.A., Rodriguez, E. (2006). "Mother-child book reading in low-income families: Correlates and outcomes during the first three years of life." Child Development, 77(4).)*
- The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study found that in the spring of 2000, the children who were read to at least three times a week by a family member were almost twice as likely to score in the top 25% in reading compared to children who were read to less than 3 times a week.  
*(Denton, Kristen and Gerry West, Children's Reading and Mathematics Achievement in Kindergarten and First Grade (PDF file), U.S. Department of Education, NCES, Washington, DC, 2002.)*

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Other important characteristics of supportive family environments include communication styles that provide opportunities for direct instruction, feedback, and reinforcement. Also, discipline characterized as "firm but not harsh" is another key component.

Qualities of family life that lead to school success can be found in low-income African American families whether or not the family includes both parents. Much has been written about the possible emergence of a permanent underclass comprised largely of single-parent families dependent upon public assistance, typical of many families in Memphis. If the educational capacities of these families can be strengthened and they are helped to perceive actual opportunities for improving their way of life, the cycle of intergenerational poverty may be broken. It is not class position that determines a family's educational competence but rather the quality of family life within the home that makes a difference.

#### Recommendations:

The Family Life committee was made aware of the devastating issues many families in our city face everyday. In gathering information, we became overwhelmed by the mental, emotional, and physical suffering so many endure. The vision of The Shalom Project suggests the church is needed to help change the atrocity of unequal access to increased quality of life in our city. In the city of Memphis as it is right now, we seek a God who promises His ways are not the ways of this world. Only such a God of true justice can put people back together and breathe new life into existing systems, destroy old regimes and faulty beliefs, and use The Shalom Project as a new means of restoration. With such a vision in mind, we believe these recommendations become viable:

#### **Develop family-life ministries and family referral networks.**

A comprehensive family-life ministry should address family needs, education, workshops, counseling, and other issues directly related to the health of the family structure. Churches in the same area (10 blocks or so) should consider developing family referral networks. One person in each church can be identified to be aware of available resources throughout the city. This person should probably dedicate at least one hour a week to being sure information is kept current.

**Seek opportunities to partner with resource churches to address the needs of their respective areas.**

Identify what is needed in the community. Through relationship with the resource church, develop strategic ways to address the community’s needs.

**Develop a “Church Families Exchange” Ministry**

Coordinate a family services communication board. Identify churches, CDC, neighborhood stores, and other institutions and organizations where families can post needs, requests, and concerns for community churches and others to follow up and respond.

parental participation every 2 to 3 weeks. This continues until the child either enters a structured childcare or pre-K program. The program then transitions to afterschool tutoring, clubs, and other social activities for children. Parents continue to meet in a group setting 6 to 10 times per year to continue parenting education and support. Facilitators and counselors in this phase are equipped to deal with crisis-level parenting issues, or they will direct the parents to an existing resource depending on the issue’s severity.

**Conclusions:**

Effective models to ensure the health of the family unit is rarely made up of only one or two programs and many curriculums have proven to be effective. The observations of this report focus primarily on structure as opposed to curriculum. Programs that have proven the most effective generally are comprised of several smaller programs set up in a sort of linear-support model that begins prior to or at the beginning of the initial family formation.

Two examples are the Harlem Children’s Zone and Operation Smart Child at the Neighborhood Christian Center (Memphis). Both programs are comprehensive, with main differences during the elementary school years.

One is a marriage-enrichment program for newly or about-to-be married couples, instructing in what a healthy marriage looks like and strategies to build and repair marriages. The other program (or goal) is parenting training and strategies. This program includes support for the mother and encouraging healthy prenatal practices, along with screenings and arrangements for medical care during pregnancy. This programs ends with the birth of the child.

The next step is continued parenting classes for the parent(s) that begins to lay the foundation for parents as teachers. Work is done with the parent(s) alone as well as with parent(s) and child. This curriculum progresses to the point where mothers and/or fathers are equipped to provide a stimulating environment for the child(ren) in the home.

The next step is a less-intensive parental program but one of increased intensity with the child. A weekly session is held with a group of children working on specific activities, with

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- 1 The Urban Child Institute (TUCI) Data Book 2008 & 2009
  - 2 United States Census 2000
  - 3 2003 American Community Survey
  - 4 Smart City Memphis article, Statistics Paint Portrait of a City in Crisis 2007
  - 5 Shelby County Health Department