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Without Fathers, Without Rules, Without Consequences, Without Hope

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Modern societies seem absolutely determined to undermine their own foundations. This is especially true of intellectual elites who see the traditional structures of society as repressive rather than essential. Thus, overthrowing these structures becomes an exercise in self-defined liberation. Sadly, what inevitably results is disaster.

Steven Malanga of [The Manhattan Institute](#) and [City Journal](#) makes this point in a recent essay, "[City Without Fathers](#)," that looks at the collapse of order within Newark, New Jersey. Malanga points to one central factor behind the problems of urban youth in Newark and a crime wave that threatens civic order — the absence of fathers from urban households.

As Malanga explains:

The horrific, execution-style killing of three teens in Newark last weekend has sparked widespread outrage and promises of reform from politicians, religious leaders, and community activists, who are pledging a renewed campaign against the violence that plagues New Jersey's largest city. But much of the reaction, though well-intentioned, misses the point. Behind Newark's persistent violence and deep social dysfunction is a profound cultural shift that has left many of the city's children growing up outside the two-parent family—and in particular, growing up without fathers. Decades of research tell us that such children are far likelier to fail in school and work and to fall into violence than those raised in two-parent families. In Newark, we are seeing what happens to a community when the traditional family comes close to disappearing.

This is a frightening prospect, but the trend of disappearing fathers has been taking shape and gaining momentum for several decades now. When the bearing of children is divorced from the institution of marriage, disaster is immediately on the horizon. The only question is when the disastrous consequences will appear. In Newark, these consequences are there for all to see.

As Malanga explains:

According to 2005 figures from the U.S. Census Bureau, only 32 percent of Newark children are being raised by their parents in a two-adult household. The rest are distributed among families led by grandparents, foster parents, and single parents—mostly mothers. An astonishing 60 percent of the city's kids are growing up without fathers. It isn't that traditional families are breaking up; they aren't even getting started. The city has one of the highest out-of-wedlock birthrates in the country, with about 65 percent of its children born to unmarried women. And 70 percent of those births are to women who are already poor, meaning that their kids are born directly into poverty.

The statistics are both instructive and daunting. A child born to a single-parent family in Newark has more than a one in five chance of living in poverty. A child in a two-parent home has just a one in twelve chance.

Malanga also reminds us all that 70 percent of long-term prisoners in the U.S. penal system grew up without fathers.

Here he gets to the hardest questions:

The starkness of these statistics makes it astonishing that our politicians and policy makers ignore the subject of single parenthood, as if it were outside the realm of civic discourse. And our religious leaders, who once preached against such behavior, now also largely avoid the issue, even as they call for prayer vigils and organize stop-the-violence campaigns in Newark. Often, in this void, the only information that our teens and young adults get on the subject of marriage, children, and family life comes through media reports about the lifestyles of our celebrity entertainers and athletes, who have increasingly shunned matrimony and traditional families. Once, such news might have been considered scandalous; today, it is reported matter-of-factly, as if these pop icons' lives were the norm.

The most important among these observations is the fact that politicians and policy makers ignore the issue of single parenthood. The data are public and irrefutable. As long ago as the 1970s the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan (later a Democratic member of the U.S. Senate) famously pointed to this trend and warned of its consequences. As Moynihan explained, there is no way to deal with the poverty issue without dealing with family structure. His report was submerged in denials and ideological renunciations, but history has proved Moynihan to be right.

We should note that Malanga also indicts religious leaders, noting that even as they once preached against these behaviors (sex and childbearing outside of marriage), they now avoid the issue. This is a clear demonstration of failure in the pulpit. Calling for demonstrations makes no sense when the pulpit fails to demonstrate courage. The most direct focus of Malanga's concern here may be pastors of African-American churches in Newark, but this failure is by no means limited to that context or those pastors. Preachers in far too many elite and middle class pulpits practice the same evasions.

The crisis in Newark has been underlined by savage crimes. The same is true in Britain, where sensational crimes committed by teenagers have shocked the nation. In an [editorial column](#) published in today's edition of *The Telegraph* [London], Janet Daley blames the breakdown of social order there on a breakdown of moral order.

In her words:

A fascinating social study was done by John and Elizabeth Newson in the 1960s and 1970s of childhood experience in Nottingham, which illustrated this contrast in a way that is particularly relevant to our problems today, even if the Newsons' descriptions of life in poor communities seem heartbreakingly quaint by today's standards.

One of their key insights was into the consequences of working-class street play, which was dominated more by the need to conform to the group than by the direct instruction of adults.

The more heavily supervised middle-class child playing in his own home or garden with friends chosen by his parents was not just being instructed explicitly in the rules of civilised behaviour: he was also imbibing a belief in the power of authority figures to administer abstract justice.

When the watchful middle-class parent intervenes to insist that toys must be shared, that younger siblings must not be bullied, that visiting friends must be given a turn, he is effectively instructing his child in how a fair society operates and how those in charge may be trusted to administer it. He is, quite unconsciously, rearing a law-abiding citizen with respect for authority figures.

In other words, parents matter and so does the support system throughout the society that reinforces what parents teach. When parents fail and the society undermines their authority, the pathology soon becomes all too visible.

Daley continues:

What has happened to working-class parents, and to the communities they inhabit, is that they have had the concept of "respectability" itself - the notions of discipline, adult authority, and even the most basic principles of "right" and "wrong" - pulled out from under them.

When the great progressive movement for personal liberation took hold of our public institutions - when the concept of authority itself was trashed by the education system, the media and the mainstream culture, and the idea of individual

guilt was replaced by the assumption that all crime and bad behaviour had a socially determined "cause" - it was not the educated, affluent classes who were cut adrift.

In other words, these elites hurt poor families in the name of helping them. They denied individual responsibility and blamed great social forces for crime and wrongdoing. They turned the educational system into a feel-good system of therapy without the structures of discipline children desperately need.

Finally:

There was a time when parents who were not all that secure in their own ability to supervise the young - who themselves may not have been particularly rigorous in their moral standards, and perhaps did not have the psychological resources to maintain consistent order - could rely on the support of public institutions.

They could expect the schools to encourage outer discipline and the inner self-discipline of structured learning. They could expect the State to attempt to deter single girls from having babies on their own. They could expect the police and the courts to side unflinchingly with the law-abiding rather than offer excuses for the criminal.

They could, in other words, count on the idea that all of the forces of adult life were joined together to uphold the structure of civilised life: that we all had pretty much the same conception of right and wrong, and the will to enforce it.

The British elites persuaded themselves that their great crime was to impose bourgeois values on everyone. In fact, it is the undermining of those values that is destroying the lives of the poor.

Malanga and Daley offer keen insights and urgent warnings. Is anyone listening? There is little reason to believe that policymakers will all of a sudden see what they have been denying for decades.

What about the pastors? Why do so many preachers fail to confront these issues and fail to preach the truth about God's plan and expectation for the family, marriage, and the raising of children? Why so little confrontation on issues of divorce and both sex and childbearing outside of marriage? Why the silence?

