

Generational impact of single-parent scholarships

Educational achievement of children in single-parent families

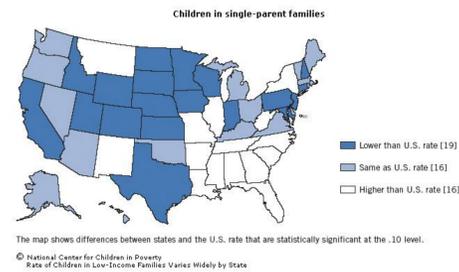
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Background

In 2010, 15% of the population in the United States was estimated to live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Also, compared with married-couple headed households, the risks of poverty are greater for single-parent headed households, especially for female-headed households. While the poverty rate was only 8% in 2010 for married-couple headed households with related children, it was 36% for single-parent households with related children (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). This is particularly troubling considering that 34% of children in the United States were reported to live in single-parent headed households.

Recognizing the significant impact of single-parent households on poverty, the Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Fund (ASPSF) was established in 1990 after its initial implementation in two counties in Arkansas. The mission of the ASPSF is to improve the lives of single parents and their children, assisting single parents to complete postsecondary education, obtain skilled employment, and subsequently promote self-sufficiency and empowerment, in recognition of the significant impact of education on individuals' income (Gregorio & Lee, 2002; Rodriguez-Pose & Tselios, 2009).



While it is reported that the ASPSF has helped single parents with their educational and economic achievements (Holyfield, 2008), it is unknown how such parental educational and economic achievements affect their children. While existing literature supports significant relationships between educational and economic status of parents and their children (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Teese & Polesel, 2003), little is known in regard to whether such relationships hold specifically for single-parent households. Furthermore, existing literature is limited in presenting the perspectives of children in these single parent households, especially in relation to the impact of parental educational attainment and thus improved economic status. To fill such a gap in current knowledge, this study explored the experiences of 35 children of former ASPSF awardees through qualitative interviews.

Children in Single-Parent Households

Existing literature indicates that children from single-parent households have a lower level of educational achievement (Boggess, 1998; Downey, 1994; Krein & Beller, 1988; Manning & Lamb, 2003). However, they also note that there are variations in the level of impact the single-parent households have on children's educational achievement (Krein & Beller, 1988). Furthermore, previous studies noted that the lower level of educational achievement reported for children in single-parent households is largely attributable to the lower socioeconomic status of the family, including the lower level of household income (Boggess, 1998; Manning & Lamb, 2003).

In addition to educational attainment, children in single-parent households are reported to experience difficulties or challenges in other areas. For example, children from single-parent households are likely to have poorer behavioral and cognitive outcomes (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Manning & Lamb, 2003). However, these difficulties or challenges children in single-parent households experience were largely attributed to family income and other factors, including quality of home, a parent' education and mental health, and a child's gender and race, rather than family structure of itself, especially single-parent households (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001).

Research Question

Funded by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, the current study attempts to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of 35 adult children of former ASPSF awardees. Particularly, the study addressed the following research questions:

- How do children of former ASPSF awardees describe their experiences in single-parent households before, during, and after their parents pursued a degree in higher education?
- How do children of former ASPSF awardees describe the impact of the scholarships on their parents and their families, including its impact on their educational attainment, at the time of the interview?

Study Methods

Study Participants: 35 adult children of 29 former Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Fund awardees

Data Collection & Analysis

- Qualitative semi-structured Interviews via phone: Interviews were recorded and transcribed
- Five researchers independently coded transcripts
- Multiple team meetings and discussions regarding emergent themes



Study Findings

In the study, the qualitative interviews explored three time periods: before, during, and after the participants' parents pursued higher education with the receipt of scholarships from the ASPSF. Emerging themes and subthemes were identified for each time period.

Prior to College Years: Hardships of Single-Parent Households

- All of the participants reported that their families were under a lot of stress, particularly financial hardships, and many of them attributed this to the parents' low level of education and income. *"We were poor. I remember living in little shanty shacks and doing whatever. I remember a lot of mice. It was tough. Right before she went back to school we were actually in a women's shelter."*
- Many participants commented that while their parents understood the importance of higher education, it was a great challenge for them to pursue it without additional support, because of the hardships the parents were experiencing as a single parent.
- Many participants also noted that their parents were not able to engage with them and their siblings due to time and financial restraints.
- The majority of the participants consistently perceived that the parents had a low level of confidence and self-esteem during this time period.



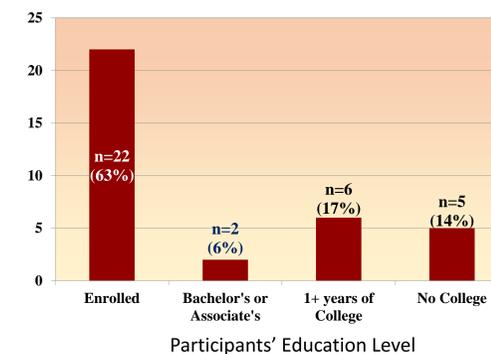
During College Years: Challenges and Possibilities of Single Parents' Higher Educations

- The participants consistently reported that their parents experienced a lot of stress during this time period, often more stress, because they had to take on additional academic demands while continuing their jobs and household duties. While the parents had increased work demands, many of the participants acknowledged that because of the scholarships, their parents were finally able to pursue a college degree. *"It made me help out a lot more around the house. Watching my little sister, and stuff like that."*
- The participants reported changes in their parents, including the parents' increased self-esteem and confidence, the parents becoming happier and more focused, and the parent's expansion of social networks.
- Most participants reported that their parents' expectation of them changed during the parents' college years, with more emphasis on the attainment of good grades and college education. *"She got very good grades, and she started expecting very good grades out of me."*



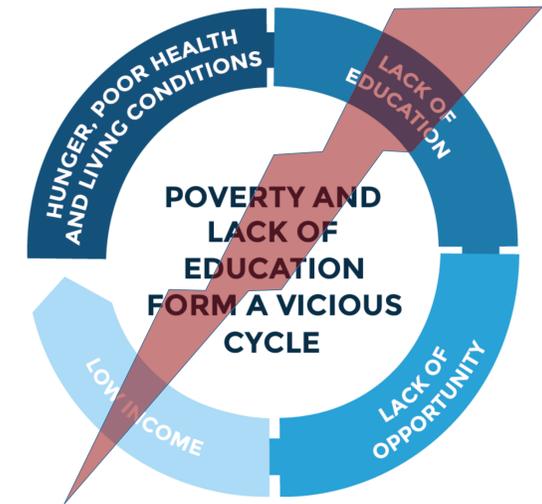
After College Years: Generational Impact of Scholarships and Parents' Higher Education

- With the parents' higher education, the participants experienced increased financial security and extra resources as well as an understanding of the steps and resources needed for college education.
- Witnessing their parents successfully earn a degree in higher education was an instrumental element in the participants' own desire to succeed in and continue on with their own education. *"I wasn't a straight A student so I never thought it was an option. Seeing her going to school and actually seeing her stick with it and completing it, I think it really motivated me"*
- The participants consistently recognized the significance of a college degree in a person's life after witnessing their parents' hardships, especially as a single parent.



Implications

- Hardships the participants had experienced in single-parent household discontinued on their parents' graduation from a college. One of the most prominent changes the participants noted was the family's financial stability, which also affected them and their family in other areas. The study also shows that the parents' educational attainment the participants' educational outcomes.
- The study reiterates the significant role of higher education in determining an individual or a family's socioeconomic status.
- Programs as the ASPSF should be expanded to address the economic disadvantage of many single-parent families, majority of which are headed by females.



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