

Broken house to big house?

Single-parent families receiving unfair stereotyping

By Paula Lavigne
Senior Reporter

Nine years ago, in the middle of the night, 5-year-old Karrie Carmen became part of the growing population of children from single-parent families.

Karrie said she didn't remember many happy moments from her childhood.

"I remember three things — when I had surgery on my knee, when I had my tonsils out and the night my dad left."

After her father left, Karrie, her mother, her brother and her two sisters started a new life in Las Vegas.

They eventually moved back to Lincoln, and now 14-year old Karrie is a freshman in high school with dreams of attending the University of Nevada-Las Vegas with a major in interior design.

Because her dad doesn't pay child support, her mom works days and nights at the local Wal-Mart to support the family. To keep the family going, Karrie's days are filled with chores. She cooks, cleans and takes care of her younger sister.

"My friends will say 'come up and party with us this weekend.' I used to be able to do that. But now, I have to come home and make my little sister dinner, because my mom doesn't have a regular 9-to-5 job."

In the early days, Karrie said she would do anything to bring her parents back together. She said she thought if she got into trouble, her parents would have to talk to each other to discipline her.

"I didn't get enough attention. I'd go out and get totally wasted some nights. I skipped school. I left and didn't come back for a few days."

As the years went by, and she realized she couldn't bring her parents back together, Karrie said she didn't even have time to get into trouble anymore. She's too busy being responsible.

That is why she was upset when she heard an FBI statistic stating an estimated 70 percent of juvenile offenders came from single-parent families.

Although Karrie's brother has been in and out of jail for several years, she said it had nothing to do with coming from a single-parent family.

"He's just one of those people who likes to fight. My brother did it because he wanted to fit in with his friends."

"I know a lot of people whose parents are still married, and they still break the law."

She said singling out single-parent families was unfair.

Several professional child-welfare experts agreed with Karrie.

They said the initial statistic cast a dark shadow on single-parent families — one they didn't deserve.

Paul Amato, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, specializes in extensive research on children from single-parent families. He said statistics like those that came from the FBI could be misleading.

"It's difficult to generalize so many different factors involved on the average if you compare children in single-parent families with children in a more intact two-parent family," he said.

Problems that occur among children dealing with behavior, health, physical development and delinquency can appear in any type of family, Amato said.

He cited a recent study of children with physical problems. In the study, 10 percent of the children in two-parent families exhibited signs of physical problems, compared to 20 percent of children from single-parent families. To make a conclusion based on that evidence was inaccurate, he said.

"Children from single parents are disproportionately misrepresented," he said. "Children from single-parent families don't grow up to be delinquent."

Often the case is reversed. Because of their situations, children from single-parent families often learn more responsibility and mature more quickly than their counterparts, Amato said.

That fact still fails to account for the statistic presented in the FBI statement. Amato said there were a variety of circumstances accounting for that statistic.

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— Karrie Carmen

Child from a single-parent family

In a single-parent family, there isn't the financial support that exists in a two-parent family, Amato said. He said with so many single-parent families headed by divorced women, delinquent child support payments from the father might also drive the families into poverty.

"Single mothers have a very high risk of being in poverty," Amato said.

He said low income might force mothers into poverty-stricken areas which are more conducive to crime and violence.

Another factor that may lead to a high crime rate among children from single-parent families is the supervision one parent can provide.

"What tends to be the problem is that children and adolescents

have less supervision," Amato said. "Single-parent families are more limited."

He said that, combined with living in a low-income neighborhood, was an invitation to violence.

"Children are found associating with adolescent subcultures," he said. "They live in areas of high crime."

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"I think we do have a low opinion of single-parent families, and that's unfortunate," he said. "We have a lot of single-parent families in our society, and that's just the way things are."

He said society's negative image of single-parent families must cease.

"(Single-parent families) are becoming pretty mainstream now," he said. "If we do hold a negative attitude, we make it harder for the kids and the parents who are doing the best they can."

Dave Shanahan, director of home campus programs at the Boys Town facility in Omaha, agreed that the negative image and misleading statistics were unfair to single-parent families. He said calling single-parent families "broken homes" also was an unfair stereotype.

"I don't think there is such a thing as a broken home," he said. "There are many wonderful single-parent families that are much healed."

"I see so many people trying very hard, and the label 'broken home' is one of the most unfair societal labels we use," he said.

He said supposing that a single-parent family was broken meant that a two-parent family was "fixed."

"There are just as many families with both parents that are more broken in terms of how they're working with their children," Shanahan said.

He said pure statistics, such as those generated by the government, should pay more attention to race, age, sex, demographic location and geographic location.

"What you currently have to look at is misleading," he said, "to say that single-parent families are the cause. They are not a cause."

He said single-parent families should be outraged by the image they were receiving.

"They should be just wild with anger and resentment for that kind of image," he said. "Don't give in. It's a struggle."

Shanahan said a whole list of factors contributed to the bad image single-parent families had. Because of socioeconomic status, education and location, a percentage of children from single-parent families receives a negative image.

"Being a single parent changes a lot of things," he said, "especially the time you can devote to each child."

The absence of a father figure, in many cases, may lead to the child finding another alternative, he said. Often this alternative can take the shape of a gang — which is synonymous with crime.

"Gang membership alone fills a need, a vacancy," he said. "If they don't have a teacher role model, they will turn to a gang or club."

He said turning to a club instead of a gang would be a positive move.

"If it's a productive club, we say all right," Shanahan said. "If it's a nonproductive club, society says no."

He said this gang haven had led to the increase in violence.

"Kids aren't angrier now, one-on-one," he said. "Gangs just have a more violent nature than they used to."

Even with these opportunities to be involved with crime and violence, an amazing number of children from single-parent families remain crime-free. Shanahan said the parents were the prevention and solution for any possible problems.

He said the simple answer was for parents to spend more time with their children and teach them to respect discipline.

"Learning how to say no to a child is about as great a skill a parent can learn," Shanahan said. "You have to be able to teach your children to accept criticism."

He said these standards applied to all types of families.

"If parents can teach their children how to accept no, we would have one-tenth the amount of crime we have today."

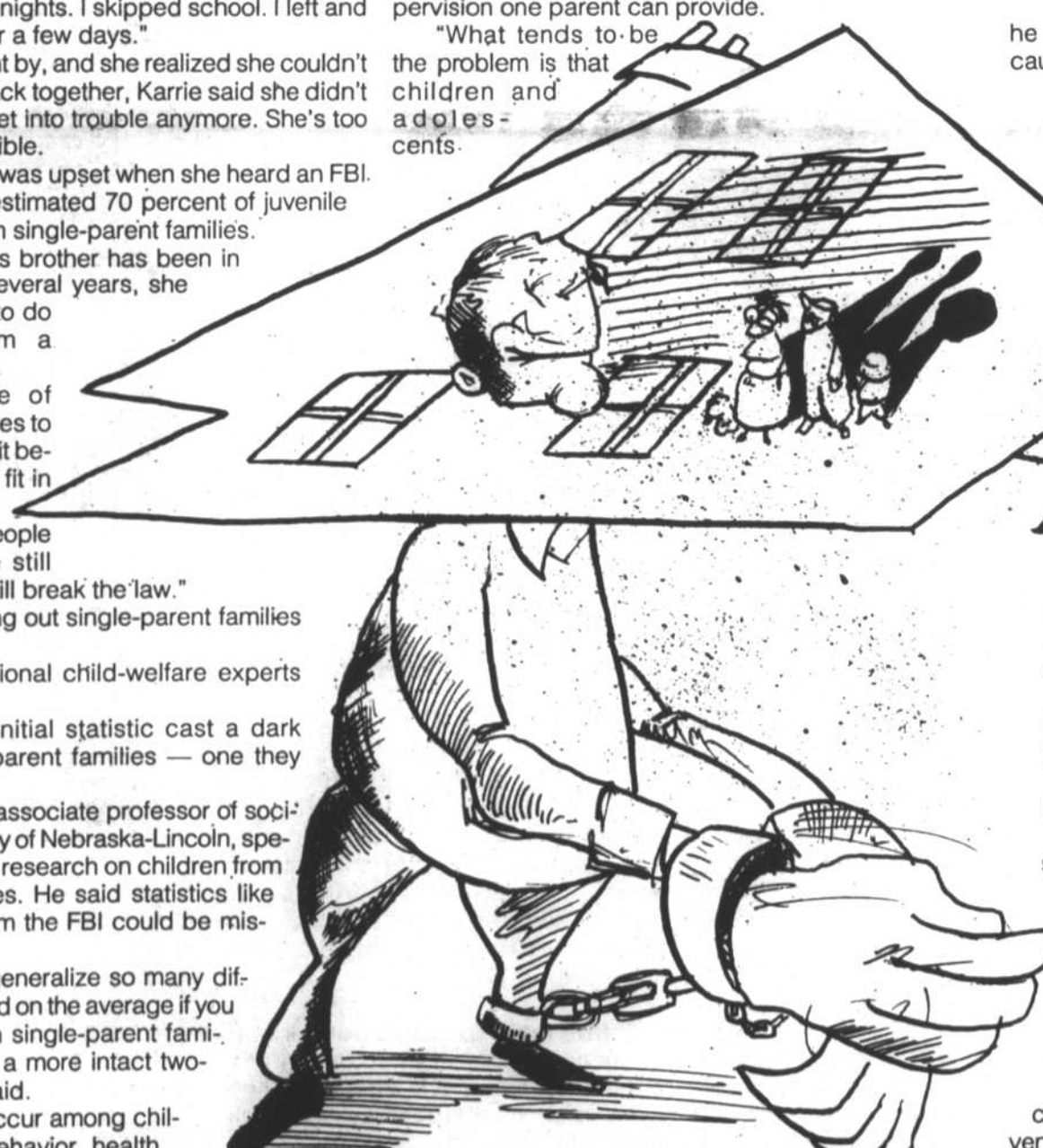


Illustration by James Mehling