

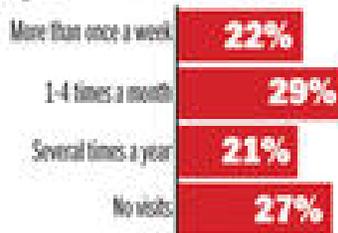
# The father factor: What happens when dad is nowhere to be found?

By Lois M. Collins and Marjorie Cortez  
Deseret News  
Published: Sunday, Feb. 23 2014

Twenty-four million American children — one in three — are growing up in homes without their biological fathers, the 2011 Census says. Children in father-absent homes, it notes, are almost four times more likely to be poor.

## When fathers and children live apart

### FREQUENCY OF VISITS



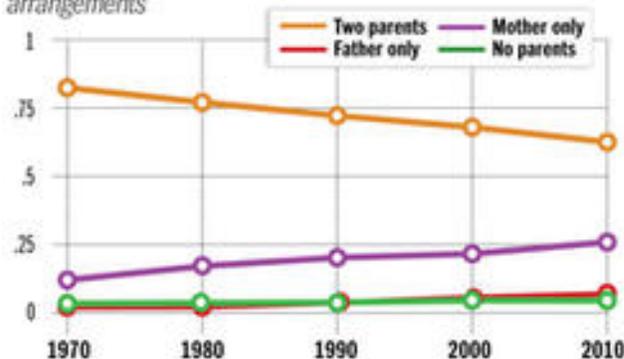
### FREQUENCY OF CALLS/EMAILS



SOURCE: Pew Research Center DESERET NEWS GRAPHIC

## Living arrangements

Fraction of children younger than 18 in different living arrangements



SOURCES: Census IPUMS 1 percent sample for year 1970, and Census IPUM 5 percent samples for years 1980, 1990 and 2000, and American Community Survey (ACS) 2010. DESERET NEWS GRAPHIC

MIDVALE, Utah — Jordan Ott was the third of his mother's six children, born over the course of four marriages.

By age 8, he'd had two stepfathers; his brothers and sisters had more or fewer, based on birth order. Each child also had different numbers of siblings, depending on whether their own dads fathered other children. Ott has one full sister, four half-siblings and at one point had three step-siblings "that I know of," he said. His own father has mostly lived far away.

His story is not uncommon today. More than half of babies of mothers under 30 are born out of wedlock. The divorce rate among those who do marry exceeds 40 percent, according to the [2012 State of Our Unions](#) report.

These statistics play out most often in the form of absent fathers — or the arrival and departure of serial father figures involved in romantic relationships with a child's mother. (Moms still usually retain custody in a breakup or divorce.) Twenty-four million American children — one in three — are growing up in homes without their biological fathers, the 2011 Census says.

Children in father-absent homes, it notes, are almost four times more likely to be poor.

Like Ott, now 25, children may grow up with lots of father figures but no real dad. Or they can be like Arvie Burgos, 17, and in foster care in Utah, who grew up in a virtually man-free zone.

Ott said he learned not to pay attention to stepfathers, even one he had for years. "If I did something wrong and needed discipline, he was all over it. Otherwise, we didn't have too much to do with each other."

Meanwhile, Burgos' sole significant male role model was a young man he saw a few hours each month courtesy of a Big Brothers program. His father had never been part of his life and his mother was a drug addict. He could count on his grandmother, but she died when he was 15, about the time his mentor moved away.

The dad factor

"I think there's consensus that cultural and family factors are causing children's family lives to be more unstable than in the past," said Andrew J. Cherlin, author of "[The Marriage-Go-Round](#)" and director of the Hopkins Population Center at Johns Hopkins University. Experts debate whether recent cultural shifts or economic changes most undermine family stability, but, said Cherlin, "most who I respect believe both are at play."

Most children weather family turmoil and wind up OK, said Cherlin, who coined the term "family churn" to describe what happens to families as couples split, often moving dad out of the home and a new man in. A [study](#) in the Journal of Marriage and Family said children in such homes experience an average of more than 5.25 partnership transitions. That's tough for kids who are used to having their own fathers within reach.

"Dad also helps with impulse control and memory and enhances a child's ability to respond effectively to new or ambiguous situations, for boys and girls," said Warren Farrell, author of "[Father and Child Reunion](#)." Children who are close to their fathers tend to achieve more academically, while kids with absent fathers are more likely to drop out. Fathers are the biggest factor in preventing drug use, Farrell said.

Burgos said one of his biggest challenges growing up without a father figure has been impulse control and anger management. He had no guide to teach him effective ways to handle frustrations — and he's had a lot of them in his young life.