



# Humanum

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BOOK REVIEW

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## Without Fathers

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**David Popenoe**, *Families Without Fathers: Fathers, Marriage and Children in American Society* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009, 287 pages).

**David Blankenhorn**, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1996, 336 pages).

Blankenhorn's work was published back in 1996 and it has rightly become a much discussed classic. He demonstrates that America has, in good measure, lost the very idea of fatherhood. The home has become feminized and the role of the father as provider has been gradually eroded. The author shows how the fragmentation of fatherhood has contributed fundamentally to the ills of contemporary society: increasing youth violence, domestic violence against women, child abuse, and economic poverty.

Blakenhorn is quite clear that the belief that fatherhood is not necessary has been detrimental to the upbringing of children. A myth has been created of the "old father" who is depicted as a wife-beater and stern disciplinarian. In contrast, there is the "new father" who is nurturing and caring and motherly. The author shows that children need neither the old nor the new father. What they need is the father who is "the good family man" who provides for and protects his family. He loves his spouse and children and puts their needs above his own. The father and mother are of equal importance and they complement each other.

It is important to note that although the author (who is non-religious and believes homosexual love to be of equal dignity to heterosexual love) is now a supporter of same-sex "marriage," he has not retracted the major findings in this highly readable and relevant work.

Popenoe's work was published more recently and, like Blankenhorn, he argues that fathers play a crucial role in child development. Children develop best when they are given the opportunity to have warm, enduring relationships with both their fathers and mothers. The research evidence suggests that surrogate fathers are poor substitutes for natural fathers.

Fatherless children are more likely to drop out of school, give birth as teenagers and become juvenile delinquents. The author suggests that if current trends continue without redress, "our society could be on the verge of committing social suicide."

The author argues that the main reason for this trend towards fatherlessness is the growth of radical individualism. In the past, self-development was for the sake of a greater good such as caring for the family; now, self-interest has emerged as an acceptable and even desirable good in the pursuit of self-development.

The author argues that it is best to relax the moral prohibition against premarital sex so as to permit limited non-marital cohabitation. However, several studies have shown that this compromise does not work: those who marry after cohabitation are more likely to divorce than those who do not.

With some reservations, this work is commended for its wealth of information.

