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My week in the man desert: In some parts of Britain, 70% of children live without fathers. YASMIN ALIBHAI-BROWN visited one of them and discovered the devastating consequences

- Ladywood, Birmingham, is utterly dominated by single-parent families
- Relationships break down fast and frequently
- Children of single mothers often end up single mothers themselves
- Absent fathers are a common factor among criminals, drug addicts, and self-harmers

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Grim viewing: Yasmin was shocked by the living conditions she saw on the Ladywood Estate, Birmingham

A sparkling clean canteen in a community centre, where families talk quietly over their sandwiches. At the counter, a fight breaks out between five young men.

The cook tries to calm the men down and asks them to leave, but it gets nastier - chairs are thrown, a knife is produced.

'See them? How angry they be?' an older man sitting outside says to me. 'Not one of them ever knew their fathers.'

I am in Ladywood, Birmingham, one of several UK districts where 70 per cent of children are now raised in households without fathers - areas which have become known, rather depressingly, as 'men deserts'.

An astonishing one million children are growing up in these blighted circumstances, living without a father and rarely even meeting an adult man, according to a recent troubling study of family breakdown by the Centre for Social Justice.

Areas such as Ladywood, an inner-city corner of Birmingham, are utterly dominated by single-parent families. And the effects are devastating. On arriving here, the sense of a material and emotional poverty being passed down from generation to generation is palpable.

There were moments last week as I wandered through the council estates, terraces and high-rise flats when I wanted to cry for the children and adults who live here - people for whom I fear the future will be every bit as grim as the past.

Home to almost 30,000 people, nearly half of them from ethnic groups including Afro-Caribbeans, Indians and Pakistanis and poor white Britons, Ladywood's narrow streets see mosques, temples, churches and synagogues sitting side-by-side.



The norm: Nicole Coley with daughter Egypt is one of many single mothers in Ladywood

The area has the highest number of people claiming unemployment benefit in the country, and those who are in work are struggling to pay the bills: some 48 per cent of households here have an annual income of less than £15,000.

Most of those struggling to get by on a meagre wage are women with young children. Children from broken homes are more than twice as likely to live in poverty than two-parent families.

In Ladywood, relationships break down fast and frequently, leaving children to suffer the lifelong consequences of never knowing their fathers. Many of the single mothers I meet are keen to discuss their predicament. Most are clearly desperate to break the families-without-fathers cycle, but none of them seems to know how.

One woman is 30-year-old Bianca Marquis, who knows all about bringing up children alone. She has two daughters by different men, her two sisters and most of her friends are single mothers, and one of her brothers is an absent father.





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Mother's love: Bianca Marquis (left), 30, pictured with her daughter Lakiya, 6, said most women she knows conceive in the belief that they will bring up their child alone. Pictured right is Shelly Brown, 24, and her sons Jamarni, 4, (left) and Tyreke, 6

Bianca has more than 60 cousins, all raised by single mothers, and her own mother had five children by three men.

'If your mum, aunties and all your friends' mums are single mums, it's normal. My kids think it's normal,' she says. 'They think dads are people you don't know or see every other weekend.'

Bianca was 16 when she had her daughter Lamiah, now 13. The father, Ashley, was jailed for murder when Lamiah was only a few months old.



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Single mothers: While fatherlessness may be the norm in Ladywood, the impact of it should not be underestimated

Bianca, who didn't meet her own father until she was 13, says: 'Lamiah's not bothered that he's not around. She doesn't know him - he was never there.'

Bianca, who is on benefits while studying to be a mechanic, also has a six-year-old daughter, Lakiya, whose father, Michael, she describes as a 'bum'.

She says that most women she knows conceive in the belief that they will bring up their child alone.

'But I don't want my daughters to be single mums,' she says. 'I want them to go to college or university - not just have a baby and go on benefits.'

It is an admirable hope, yet one can't help wondering if it is also a vain one - as the children of single mothers often end up single mothers themselves. Sisters Marie Jukes, 39, and Sue Smith, 43, have a depressingly similar story.

Brought up by their mother after their father walked out when they were children, Marie and Sue are now both single mothers and have seven children between them.

While Marie - who recently split up with her partner of 18 years and is now raising her five children alone - admits she longed for a father figure when she was growing up, she believes children in Ladywood are now happy in single-parent households because it has become the norm.

Indeed, she claims it would be more unusual for her children - Jamie, 17, Jodie, 15, Jack, 12, Jordan, 11, and Jayden, eight - if they did live with their father. She now works 16 hours a week as a housekeeper and claims working tax credit, child tax credits and child benefit in order to support her children.



Families without fathers: Those living in Ladywood are keen to break the cycle of single parenthood but don't know how

While fatherlessness may be the norm in Ladywood, the impact of it should not be underestimated. American researchers have found that a girl's self-esteem is seriously undermined by not having a father in her life. Many abandoned boys engage in delinquent behaviour, incapable of managing their anger, and some studies reveal links between fatherless men and sex crimes.

It is inarguable that fathers bring positive benefits to children. Boys and girls prosper when family life includes the constant presence of a loving, providing father, while children from intact families do better at school, and are more independent and secure.

'It was only when I had children of my own that I started to feel the loss of my father. Maybe my life would have been different if my dad had been around'

It is something that some of the single mothers in Ladywood are painfully aware of. Kim Ellis, 31, whose boyfriend left her when she was pregnant with their third baby, says she has to work doubly hard to be mother and father to her children.

Kim, who came to England from Jamaica 15 years ago, has a ten-year-old son, Tyrese, and daughters Tiffany, five, and two-year-old Tati.

'He didn't want responsibility, so he left when he found out I was pregnant with Tati. I have to do the job of mum and dad, and it's really hard. There's no time for myself, I do everything for my kids. They speak to their dad on the phone, but he doesn't really support them.'

Kim says she wants to work but is currently claiming income support, child benefits and child tax credits. 'Most of my friends are single mums and we help each other out, but I don't want to live like this.'



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Families: Ruth Haile, 33, (pictured, left, with her daughter three-year-old daughter Lulia) has three children by two fathers. Yasmin believes it is inarguable that fathers bring positive benefits to children

Of course, there was a time in Britain's recent history when single mothers proliferated, but the context couldn't have been more different, and the children they raised grew up to be responsible, useful members of society.

During the two World Wars, millions of men died in conflict and it became the norm for children to be brought up by their widowed mothers.

One of the key differences then, however, was that extended families played a crucial role in raising a child: grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles united to help provide the stable family life missing for so many present-day children.



Naz, 24, a father-of-two who has served time in prison, believes his life may have been different if he'd had a father in his life

Growing up in Uganda, my own father failed me in most ways. He was at home sometimes but often disappeared from our lives, worked when he wanted, quit jobs when he wanted, and left his family feeling vulnerable.

But other important men in my life - neighbours, uncles, mosque leaders and family friends - provided me with love and care which, if not a substitute, were nonetheless precious.

Most children whose fathers have deserted them today don't have this supportive extended family network. And this is exacerbated by the fact there are woefully few male role models in schools now - a shocking one-in-four primary schools has no male teacher for example. As a result, generations of children are being raised with no men in their lives.

Abandoned young men grow up filled with rage, while young women grow up desperate to please men and seek out approval wherever they can find it. What chance do these youngsters have of forming lasting relationships when they reach adulthood?

Criminologist Martin Glynn, who was raised by a single mother, wrote a report called *Dad And Me*, which explores the effects of absent fathers. He has evidence which shows that children abandoned by their fathers are beset by self-loathing and drawn to inappropriate role models such as gang leaders, older lovers and worse.

There is no proven causal link, but absent fathers are a common factor among people imprisoned, girls groomed for sex, drug addicts, rioters, self-harmers and young suicides.

In a community centre in Ladywood, I meet Naz, a 24-year-old who was 11 when his father died. 'But my dad had never been around anyway,' Naz tells me.



Inner-city: Areas such as Ladywood, an inner-city corner of Birmingham, are utterly dominated by single-parent families

His mother had three jobs to provide for her family: Naz has three brothers, some of them in work and some of them not. Naz served time in prison for drug-related crimes and is now trying to go straight.

'It was only when I had children of my own that I started to feel the loss of my father. Maybe my life would have been different if my dad had been around.'

'These children have no good male role models. They're not parented properly'

He is probably right. Research consistently shows that children from broken homes do less well at school and are more likely to end up in prison than those from intact families.

Naz seems like a man struggling against the odds and against himself, too. He has two daughters, both aged four, who were born to different mothers. He doesn't live with either of them, but sees his children three or four times a week.

'I've done wrong, I admit it,' he says. 'One of my daughters is strong, the other is not, and her mum blames me. I know I have to be there for them though, and I will be.'

The local convenience store nearby is run by Asbhogal Singh, a married British Sikh and a reassuringly avuncular local figure. He says: 'These children have no good male role models. They're not parented properly. So, every day, I personally try to help them, talk to them, teach them manners and make things happen.'



© David Crump

Land of little opportunity: As Yasmin wandered through the council estates she wanted to cry for the children and adults who live here

'I brought my own children into the world - they're all grown up now - so I must be responsible for them, but many parents don't think like that because no one taught them a sense of accountability.'

The men on the estate certainly don't seem overburdened with a sense of responsibility for their offspring, which means young boys often end up acting as the men of the house.

'No-one is taught about a sense of responsibility'

Ruth Haile, 33, has three children by two fathers. With neither father around to help at home, her 14-year-old son, Naeb, has become a father figure to his younger siblings.

Ruth, who came to England from Eritrea in East Africa seven years ago, says she struggles to care for Naeb, Esrom, five, and three-year-old Lulia.

Like most people in Ladywood, she does not work and receives benefits. However, despite its problems, I found the area surprisingly neat and clean and free from graffiti.

'It is hard without their fathers,' Ruth says. 'Naeb takes his brother and sister to school and brings them home, and sometimes he looks after the children. He helps them with their English and their homework, and does the shopping. He has to be the man of the house.'



Man desert: Ladywood is one of several UK districts where 70 per cent of children are now raised in households without father

Ruth says: 'I was only 19 when I had Naeb, but that is normal in my country. Naeb talks about not seeing his dad, and Lulia misses out because she doesn't have her father to help her and spend time with her.'

This is the crux of the matter, of course. For while Right and Left-wing politicians fight each other on the issue of family breakdown, fathers disappear and beleaguered single mothers bemoan their lot in life, it is the children who are missing out as a result of this desperate situation.

And although we have many well-meaning projects and policies, there is no sense of a unified mission to save

British children from the terrible legacy of increasing family breakdown.

Back in Ladywood, a pretty, young white girl aged about 12, dressed in a red sweater, pink leggings and big earrings, is begging passers-by for money on the street. 'I'm hungry. My mum's at work. I don't have a dad. I can't get in at home,' she tells me.

I give her some cash and watch her run off into the far distance with it, wondering what the future holds for her and the mass of other children like her - children who have never known the stable, nurturing, consistent love of a father.

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown is a columnist for the Independent

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