

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

A STUDY OF DESERTED FAMILIES IN RECEIPT OF  
PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

Based on a Study of Desertion Cases  
Known to Social Agencies in  
October, 1957.

Being the Report of a Research Project  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Social Work.

by

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## CHAPTER I

In this era of modern day living, the stability of family life is threatened by strains and stresses which are taking their toll in family breakdown, divorces, and desertions. Social agencies are requested to give casework help and public assistance in many of these cases and the financial cost of services provided for these families becomes the responsibility of the community. In order to appreciate the extent of the burden of desertion on the community, the main topic of this report will be an analysis of deserted families in receipt of public assistance in October, 1957.

The size of the problem these desertion cases present in the community would depend on the number of deserted families requiring public assistance in comparison to the number of families in the community which should be indicated by the sample in which this study is based. In comparing those families on assistance at the time of desertion with those on assistance after desertion a question of interest to those concerned could be which group tends to present the greatest economic dependency.

One of our greatest concerns is the health and welfare of the children of these deserted families. Their emotional adjustment to the trauma of desertion by either parent depends on their ability



to accept this loss and the consequent deprivation of normal family life. If their emotional adjustment is not equal to the strain imposed by the desertion, personality problems may develop that require treatment, the cost of which in time and services will contribute still further to the economic burden on the community.

This study is part of a project concerned with a study of deserted families receiving services from five agencies in October, 1957, and living in Winnipeg proper. These agencies are, the Department of Health and Welfare of the Province of Manitoba, the Juvenile and Family Court of the Province of Manitoba, the Family Bureau of Greater Winnipeg, the Public Welfare Department of the City of Winnipeg, and the Children's Aid Society of Greater Winnipeg.

The definition of desertion used for the purpose of this study is as follows:

Couples living apart at any time during October, 1957, except when they are living apart by divorce or separation agreement. This will include:

- a. when the partner has wilfully left and is not supporting his family,
- b. where the partner has wilfully left but there is a Court Order for support,
- c. where a wife leaves with or without the children and of her own choice and does not follow it up with a Court Hearing for support,
- d. where a wife leaves with or without the children and takes legal action but this fails,

This will exclude:

- a. Mutual agreement to separate or divorce,
- b. Separation by Court Order.



The data on which this study was based is limited entirely to the information recorded in the agencies' case records, and as such is accepted as reliable according to the agency standards without further verification.

A schedule was drafted by ten second year students in the School of Social Work. The schedule contained information needed for each individual aspect within the main study which would provide an over-all picture of desertion. The data required was obtained from the case records in the sample and recorded on the schedules.

The method of random sampling was used so that the total sample of 110 cases falling within the above definition was selected as being a reliable representative sample of the larger group, and therefore the basis on which this study would be made.

The author's interest in this particular topic of the larger research project arose from two years experience in the Juvenile and Family Court. As a family counsellor in this setting, the author was working with parents who had been deserted and were in need of financial assistance until they could take legal action for maintenance or find some other means of support for themselves and their families. The author's concern over the difficulties encountered by these deserted families in obtaining economic support prompted the selection of this topic for study.



Desertion is an important problem that cannot be considered apart from the family unit. It is recognized by those who have worked with these deserted families that this particular kind of marriage breakdown creates hardship and suffering for those who are left behind. In addition, an economic and social burden is created for the community which undertakes to accept the responsibility for the maintenance of these families who cannot maintain themselves.

It is not easy to know what motivates an actual desertion because when the majority of these cases come to the social agencies what is obvious is only the end result. What is apparent is that one or the other partner has chosen his or her way of withdrawing from the marriage, and escaping responsibility without legal or financial provision for the family that is left behind. Even though the economic problem of many of these deserted families is relieved by public assistance, many hidden burdens have been created through emotional conflict and inner tensions, which reveal themselves in many forms and in many cases may require casework or psychiatric treatment. These additional services though provided through community resources, can contribute heavily to the economic burden already carried by the service agencies.

The author would have liked to study the real economic burden to society of these deserted families and show this in



dollars and cents. This would have involved the actual cost in family maintenance, foster home placements, special services required for problems arising out of desertion for both children and adults, institutional placements and psychiatric services. There are also the costs of legal services provided such as court costs, legal fees, and even the cost of maintaining deserters who are found guilty of neglect and non-support and thereby imprisoned. In considering the extensive range of services available to these deserted families and the work involved in order to estimate the financial cost to the community, it was realized that this could not be done within the time allowed for this project.

Also, as the burden to the community of deserted families in receipt of public assistance cannot be measured in dollars and cents because the actual figures on public assistance expenditures could not be obtained from the public assistance agencies, in the time allowed and the length of time on assistance is not known, this study will therefore be limited to measuring the burden created by these families by numbers of families on public assistance. Another limitation is that it is impossible to know from the information in some of the case records whether these families went on public assistance because of the desertion or for some other reason, and no attempt was made to record it, even if stated. It will therefore be necessary to accept the fact that after the desertion they applied for public assistance, regardless of whether or not the



desertion was the cause of their financial dependency.

The term "Public Assistance" as used in this research project means financial assistance from tax-supported funds for those families who qualify under a means test as having either insufficient or no means of support. All deserted families, whether in receipt of partial or total assistance, will be considered under the one heading of Public Assistance.

The hypothesis of this study therefore is that there is an increased use of public assistance associated with desertion. In order to test this hypothesis a comparison will be made of the families who were in receipt of public assistance at the time of desertion and those families who went on public assistance after desertion in order to find out whether the desertion meant an increase in desertion cases on public assistance. A study of the deserted children in the cases in receipt of public assistance will reveal the total number of children involved and the number deserted by each parent. A comparison of the number of children who were receiving public assistance prior to the desertion with the number of children receiving public assistance after desertion will show which group poses the heaviest burden. Finally, by analyzing the distribution of children in the total number of desertion cases, some pattern may be noted about the size of the deserted family on public assistance. In the study of the total sample all children under eighteen years of age were listed as



dependents and therefore, for the purpose of this study, this age limit is being used.

The subject matter in the second chapter will be around studies made of desertion as well as a review of literature pertaining to this topic, and some consideration of the effect of desertion on the families involved, as well as on the community. The third chapter will describe the collection of data and the method of proposed presentation of findings. It will contain an account of the method of determining and assessing the calculations for the various groups. The fourth chapter will contain a presentation by tables and an analysis of the findings about the families on public assistance in October, 1957, and the children involved in these families. The concluding section of this study will include a summary of the material presented, any significant trends, and the area of applicability for the results.



## CHAPTER II

The broad term of family desertion has been a topic of interest to sociologists, social workers, welfare agencies, clergymen and many lay people in the United States and to a somewhat lesser degree in Canada. Very little scientific study has been made of the subject although considerable material has been written about it to date.

Back in the depression of the 1930's a survey of desertion cases in Manitoba was made by the Welfare Supervision Board at the request of the Manitoba Minister of Health and Public Welfare. The results of this study were included in their 1931 Report.<sup>1</sup>

In studying the extent of the burden of these desertion cases to the community, it was noted that the number of deserted families in Winnipeg receiving public assistance from the Social Welfare Commission totalled eighty-two cases. The average number of desertion cases based on the four years from 1927 to 1931 showed the figures to be approximately ten percent of the Social Welfare case load, which in the opinion of the Social Welfare Commission was relatively large.

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<sup>1</sup>Province of Manitoba, The Problem of Family Desertion in Manitoba, A Report Prepared by the Welfare Supervision Board of Manitoba in April, 1931 (Report No. 7 of the Department of Health and Public Welfare), pp. 1-9.



There were 1148 desertion cases in the Province of Manitoba (including those already stated in Winnipeg) which involved approximately 800 persons. The rate of desertion was estimated to be slightly more than one per thousand of the total population.

In this Provincial Report of 1931 reference was made to a survey of desertion in the United States made by the National Desertion Bureau, in 1912. At that time there were known to be 561 desertion cases but it was not revealed whether these cases were also in receipt of public assistance.

As a comparison to these 561 desertion cases in 1912, the Family Location Service, which was known as the National Desertion Bureau, describes the extent of family desertion in the United States in September, 1956, as follows:

There were 606,717 families receiving Aid to Dependent Children. Of these, 54% or 350,000 families were those in which the father was absent from the home and not supporting the children. In these cases there were some 924,000 children and 330,000 mothers involved, or a total of 1,254,000 people receiving approximately \$369,000,000 from state and nation. Since we know that only 22% of deserted mothers and children apply for public assistance, it is safe to estimate a figure of over 5,500,000 mothers and children not being fully supported by estranged fathers.<sup>1</sup>

Joseph Steigman also writes about deserted families in 1957

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<sup>1</sup>Jacob T. Zukerman, "A Socio-Legal Approach to Family Desertion", Social Casework, (Reprinted from Marriage and Family Living) Vol. XII; No. 3, (August, 1950), p. 84.



and provides another contribution to the general pictures as he states:

It is estimated that there are in this country about  $5\frac{1}{2}$  million women and children who lack adequate support because of the estrangement of husbands and fathers from their families. It is also estimated that more than one million men are involved in these desertions, making a total of more than one million people throughout the United States who are facing one aspect or another of a desertion problem. Also, it is estimated that an additional 100,000 men desert their families each year.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately no recent figures on the extent of desertion in Canada have been found. Increased interest in this problem has been shown in the last two years by the Canadian Welfare Council with the result that a study of the cost of desertion and the economic burden on public agencies of these deserted families is at present being made by the Council.

The above statistics reveal approximately the extent of the problem of desertion which the United States of America are faced with. The economic burden to the community involves not only the maintenance of these families but also the hidden aspects of the desertion which are reflected by the use of community resources and treatment services required for the rehabilitation of these families.

In considering the deserted families on public assistance, some of the consequences of the desertion in relation to the deserted marriage partners and the children will be mentioned.

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<sup>2</sup>Joseph E. Steigman, "The Deserted Family", Social Casework, Vol. XXXVIII; No. 4, (April, 1957), pp. 167-171



Deserted fathers fall into two categories, those that are economically independent, and those who are unemployed and for this reason in receipt of public assistance. In the case of those who are economically independent, these fathers are faced with the problem of care for the children while they themselves are at work. When private arrangements can not be worked out, the request is made to the community resources for housekeeper services, or child placement service, and sometimes supplementary assistance. Sometimes these fathers try to manage without any arrangements, and problems are created by these unsupervised children, some of who eventually come to the attention of child-care agencies or the Juvenile Court.

Regardless of whether these fathers are employed or unemployed and in receipt of public assistance the effect of the mother's desertion on the children's emotional development can create untold difficulties and retardation in emotional development. Besides the economic burden of maintaining these families on public assistance, or supplementing the cost of caring for these children, the community is faced with the additional cost of treating personality disorders, mental illness, and services necessary to rehabilitate these children who have been forced into physical and emotional dependency.

In those cases where the mother and children have been deserted, the absence of the father means absence of income. This means that the mother must find some way of obtaining maintenance for the



family. She is faced with the practical choice of obtaining employment and perhaps depending on relatives or friends to care for the children during her absence. The expenses incurred by payment for the children's care, necessary clothing to keep up appearances while working, reduces the income earned so that the needs of the family may not be properly met. The other choice open to her is to apply for Public Assistance.

Besides these practical issues the mother must face, there usually are hidden results of the marriage breakdown. Often her resentment and bitterness add to the already complicated burden she has to carry. She has the problem of dealing with the very strong and confusing emotions that accompany the traumatic experience of being deserted. She may feel shame, guilt, humiliation or anger. She may feel responsible for the failure of the marriage, feel that friends and neighbors will think that her husband deserted because she was not a good wife.<sup>1</sup> Her feelings of rejection may be projected on to the children, or her hostility towards her husband may be displaced onto the other family members, or the community.

Some of these mothers may have the inner strength to re-organize themselves and meet the new demands.<sup>2</sup> Some however, are overwhelmed by the enormity of the task and are able to assume the

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<sup>1</sup>Steigman, op. cit. pp. 167-171.

<sup>2</sup>F. L. Feldman, "The Family in a Money World", Family Service Association of America, (New York: Copyright 1957), pp. 66-67



new responsibilities only gradually, sometimes at a great cost to themselves, to their children, and to the community. Others may become so immobilized that they cease to function normally and might desert their children either physically or emotionally.

In many of these fatherless families, problems that were in existence prior to the break-up of the marriage, may become intensified by the father's desertion. Children may be torn between conflicting loyalties. There may be serious psychological consequences involved for the child who does not have a father to love, imitate, and be loved by.<sup>1</sup>

The concern about desertion and future treatment of this problem was suggested in one study which was made of the social problems in these deserted families. An American sociologist states:

Desertion, like divorce, is an expression of the instability of modern family life, and it can be more successfully attacked by efforts to reinforce the family and to procure social conditions that will minister to its health than by regarding desertion as a crime that deserves just punishment. The statistics of family desertion seem to demonstrate that the family agencies at present are making little headway against it, and there is no hope of substantial progress in dealing with this particular product of family instability until greater and more practical effort is made to conserve family life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Steigman, op. cit. pp. 167-171

<sup>2</sup>E.R. Groves, Social Problems of the Family, (Lippincott's Family Life Series) Edited by B.R. Andrews, Ph.D., Columbia University, p. 160



It would seem however, that while we are faced with this serious problem, the place to start in rehabilitating the deserted family is by relieving the immediate financial need, providing case-work service and utilizing community resources where necessary. The objective would be prevention of further maladjustment by evaluating and treating the problems presented, and being ready to cope with other effects of the desertion as these are observed.

In the author's opinion, the burden on the community of these deserted families is a reflection of the many social problems arising out of this transitional age which contribute to the instability of modern family life. Until more preventative work can be done to decrease hasty and unplanned marriages, and more effort made to reinforce the marriage and help these people deal more adequately with their family responsibilities, the best that can be hoped for is that the community will be prepared to deal with the economic cost of providing these services as they are requested. By rehabilitating these deserted families, the eventual gain to the community will be hopefully, a gradual decrease in emotional dependency, an increase in family stability, and thus an earlier desire to become economically independent.



### CHAPTER III

The material for this study was obtained from the five interested social agencies referred to in the first chapter, who had sufficient active desertion cases to be able to assist in this research project. The Deer Lodge Hospital and the Child Guidance Clinic did not participate because of the limited number of applicable cases. The Juvenile Court, where it might be supposed there would be a considerable number, could not participate due to staff changes and did not have records containing necessary information to classify by the definition. The cooperating agencies were requested to keep lists of cases active during the month of October, 1957, according to the following general definition of desertion:

Where there are couples in Winnipeg living apart at any time during the month of October, 1957, except where they are living apart because of divorce or a separation agreement, except that we would include them if that separation agreement breaks down.

By separation agreement we mean an agreement entered into by two people wherein the agreement is a legal document but not a separation order.

The five agencies submitted 773 cases which appeared to fall within the definition.

The method of random sampling was used because the results obtained would have in their relative proportion  $s$ , all the significant characteristics of the larger group. Thus it could be reasonably



assumed that what was found true of the agencies sample would hold true of the whole group from which it was chosen. This would therefore be a reliable representative sample to be used as a basis for comparing and computing.

The month of October was selected as a specific period of time in which all agencies could list the cases active during this month which fell within the definition.

The schedule consisted of questions for obtaining the information needed for each individual topic within the general study. It was used for the purpose of obtaining the necessary data from each case record in as uniform a way as possible.

The schedule was tested by the group reading a limited number of cases from the agencies sample of 773 cases. The results indicated several changes to be necessary.

As the total number of these cases was too large to be able to complete the schedules in the time allowed for this purpose, 1/3 of the cases submitted by each agency was selected at random, leaving a balance of 260 cases. The duplicates were recorded and returned to each agency sample and another case was then selected at random to replace the duplicate.

It was found that some of these cases did not fall within the definition of desertion and therefore a clearer definition was



needed. The question of "intent to desert" was clarified and the definition refined to read as follows:

Couples living apart at any time during October, 1957, except when they are living apart by divorce or separation agreement. This will include:

- a. when the partner has wilfully left and is not supporting his family,
- b. where the partner has wilfully left but there is a Court Order for support,
- c. where a wife leaves with or without the children and of her own choice and does not follow it up with a Court Hearing for support,
- d. where a wife leaves with or without the children and takes legal action but this fails,

This will exclude:

- a. Mutual agreement to separate or divorce,
- b. Separation by Court Order.

As some of the information required in the schedule was not recorded in many of these cases, the questions on the schedule were revised. The cases that did not fall within the definition were discarded, leaving a final sample of 110 cases.

The schedules were all coded and photostated onto 110 cards which were used for calculation in this research study.

Out of the total sample, the group selected for this Study will be all the deserted families in receipt of public assistance in October, 1957. No differentiation will be made between those cases on partial and total assistance. All cases will be considered under the one heading of public assistance cases and will include all the desertion cases from the City of Winnipeg Welfare Department, the



Department of Health and Welfare of the Province of Manitoba and a few from the Family Court of the Province of Manitoba and the Children's Aid Society of Greater Winnipeg. Cases falling in this group will be obtained from question 42 on the schedule, relating to whether or not the family was in receipt of public assistance at the time of desertion. There were 68 families that form this group.

In order to measure the effect of desertion on the community by each deserting parent, the number of persons dependent on agency resources will be totalled within the group of 68 families in receipt of public assistance. The identity of the deserting parents can be learned from question 11 on the schedule. The number of deserted children will be obtained from question 54.

In considering public assistance, it would seem likely that there would be an increased use of public assistance associated with desertion. In order to determine whether this is so, the total selected group of 68 cases will be subdivided into the number of families on public assistance at the time of the desertion and those families who went on public assistance after desertion and the similarities and differences in the groups compared.

The children in the deserted families under consideration will be studied as a separate group, with regard to the number of children deserted by the father, the mother, or both parents.

The total number of 219 children being studied will then be



subdivided into two groups, those on public assistance prior to the desertion and those who went on public assistance following the desertion in order to measure the burden of children imposed on the community.

An analysis of the distribution of deserted children in the families under consideration in this study will be made in order to see whether any pattern may be noted in the size of the deserted family receiving public assistance.

The following chapter will analyze the data as described and will illustrate by tables, the findings about the families in the study group.



### CHAPTER IV

From a study of the 110 desertion cases, it was found that there were sixty-eight cases in this group including 286 persons who were in receipt of partial or total assistance. This group of sixty-eight cases representing 61.8% of the total sample was selected for further analysis.

TABLE 1

Composition of Sixty-eight Public Assistance Cases by  
Parent Deserting

Deserting Parents	Number of Cases	Per Cent of Total	Number of Persons	Per Cent of Total
Total...	68	100.0	286	100.0
Father	59	86.8	233	81.5
Mother	8	11.7	50	17.5
Both	1	1.5	3	1.0

It may be noted that in 86.8% of this group it is the father who has deserted. The effect of his desertion has been to increase the economic burden on the community by 233 persons, (deserted wives and children) who have required either partial or total assistance in order to maintain a minimum standard of living.

A further interesting comparison here is that for each father who deserts the average number of persons who go on assistance



is approximately four, while for each mother who deserts, approximately six persons go on assistance. It would be interesting to make a further study of these cases to see why there is this difference, but time does not permit this.

The average number of persons in the deserted families in receipt of public assistance in October, 1957, is 4.2 . The Dominion Bureau of Statistics in 1956 found the average number of persons in a family in Winnipeg proper to be 3.2 . This would indicate that the size of the deserted family in the group being studied tends to be larger by approximately 2. than the average Winnipeg family since in this study one parent is always out of the home.

In order to further indicate the effect of desertion on the burden to the community, the total number of sixty-eight desertion cases will be separated into those cases receiving public assistance at the time the desertion occurred and compared with those cases which went on public assistance after the desertion occurred.

TABLE 2

Number of Persons in Deserted Families Prior and After Desertion

<u>Time of Desertion</u>	<u>Total Number of Families</u>	<u>Per Cent of Total</u>	<u>Total Number of Persons</u>	<u>Per Cent of Total</u>
Prior	14	20.6	58	20.3
After	54	79.4	228	79.7
Total...	68	100.0	286	100.0



It is noted from the above that fourteen families, which represent 20.6% of the sixty-eight families being studied, were in receipt of public assistance at the time desertion took place. This group consisting of fifty-eight persons were therefore already financially dependent on tax supported public agencies prior to desertion. In comparison to this group, fifty-four families, which represent 79.4% of the sixty-eight deserted families on public assistance applied for, and were accepted for public assistance after the desertion took place. It is therefore observed that out of the total number of 286 persons receiving public assistance, 228 became a financial burden on the community following desertion. This would therefore indicate that nearly four times as many persons become dependent on public assistance after desertion in comparison with those persons already in receipt of public assistance before desertion took place.

By comparing the desertion cases who received public assistance prior and after desertion with the total number of 110 cases in the sample, it was found that only fourteen families representing 13% of the total sample were already in receipt of public assistance when the desertion occurred, whereas fifty-four families, representing almost 50% of the total sample, required public assistance after the desertion.

The remainder of this chapter will be directed towards a



study of the children of these deserted families.

TABLE 3

Number of Children by Parents Deserting

Deserting Parents		Number of Children	Per Cent of Total
Total...	68	219	100.0
Father		174	79.5
Mother		42	19.2
Both		3	1.3

In the total number of 286 persons on public assistance, there were 219 children representing almost 88% of the total number requiring public assistance. It may also be noted that 79.5% are fatherless and 19.2% motherless.

TABLE 4

A Comparison of the Total Number of Children in Deserted Families  
Prior and After Desertion

Time of Desertion	Total Number of Children	Per Cent of Total
Prior	45	20.5
After	174	79.5
Total...	219	100.0

This analysis indicates that out of the 219 children requiring public assistance there were 174 children representing 79.5% of the total, who required public assistance after desertion had taken place. This compares with 20.5% who were on public assistance



at the time of the desertion. This then tends to show that after desertion occurs, the burden of children on the public assistance caseload may become nearly four times as great as the burden of children being carried by public assistance prior to desertion.

TABLE 5

Analysis of the Size of Sixty-eight Families				
Number of Children Per Family	Total Number of Families	Per Cent of Families	Total Number of Children	Per Cent of Children
0	2	3.0	-	-
1	9	13.2	9	4.1
2	19	27.9	38	17.4
3	13	19.1	39	17.8
4	11	16.2	44	20.1
5	6	8.8	30	13.7
6	3	4.4	18	8.2
7	2	3.0	14	6.4
8	-	-	-	-
9	3	4.4	27	12.3
10	-	-	-	-
Total...	68	100.0	219	100.0

An analysis of the distribution of deserted children in the families under consideration in this study shows that the majority of the deserted families on public assistance consisted of from two to four children. It is also noted that childless families show the lowest percentage of desertion, and the families with the largest number of children, (seven to nine), show the second lowest percentage. It may be pointed out that although there are only three families with nine children each, there is a burden of twenty-seven children on the public assistance case load,



which constitutes 12.3% of the total group being studied.

The following chapter will present a summary of the presented findings and any observations made by the author.



### CHAPTER V

The data presented in the preceding chapter indicated a number of factors concerning the deserted families in receipt of public assistance. Although the sample is likely representative of the total agencies' desertion cases in Winnipeg proper, it is doubtful whether the same results would apply in other centres without further research.

The most significant observation made of the deserted family is that public assistance would appear to be required in more than 60% of the sample of 110 desertion cases reviewed in this study.

The conditions created by desertion are further accentuated by the disclosure that almost 80% of these families required public assistance after the desertion occurred, as evidenced by the fact that nearly four times as many families became dependent on public assistance following desertion as were on assistance previously.

From this observation it may be concluded that almost 50% of the total sample required public assistance after the desertion occurred.

These factors would therefore tend to support the assumption that there is an increased use of public assistance associated with desertion.



It was furthermore noted that the father deserted in 86.8% of the sixty-eight cases.

A separate analysis of the children of the sixty-eight deserted families in receipt of public assistance indicated that the burden to the community of these children became four times greater following the desertion.

The size of the deserted family in which public assistance appears most likely to be needed, according to this study, is where there are from two to four children. It would therefore appear that either deserters do not tend to leave the largest families, or they do not require public assistance. An analysis of the size of family in the total sample would indicate which.

It might be suggested however, that the burden of children in these larger families is relatively heavy in proportion to the other families under consideration, and could present a serious problem to the publicly supported assistance agencies if desertion in these larger families were to increase in any substantial degree.

Another study might show more clearly the economic burden on the community created by these deserted families if a survey were made of the actual amount of maintenance paid to these families as well as the hidden burdens laid on the community by the desertion which would be reflected by the use of child placement services,



institutional care and psychiatric services, legal services and costs thereof, as well as many others, for the purpose of assisting these families to stabilize themselves.



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