

Fragmented Families in Poverty: Looking Back and Stepping Forward

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Fatherhood is a hot topic in the United States today. In June 1995, President Clinton asked each agency of the federal government to review its programs and policies “with the purpose of strengthening the role of fathers in families” (DHHS 1).

Specifically, Clinton’s initiative defines five broad criteria of fatherhood:

1. All fathers can be important contributors to the well-being of their children.
2. Parents are partners in raising their children, even when they do not live in the same household.
3. The roles fathers play in families are diverse and related to cultural and community norms.
4. Men should receive the education and support necessary to prepare them for the responsibility of parenthood.
5. Government can encourage and promote father involvement through its programs and through its own workforce policies. (DHHS 1)

These five criteria are an important start for the federal government’s initiative to promote issues of fatherhood in America. Throughout this essay, we will examine these criteria, asking whether Clinton pinpointed the right guidelines, whether the government is earnest about tackling them, and finally, whether the government should be the agent to tackle problems of fatherhood.

This paper further focuses on a segment of the father population: *poor*, *noncustodial*, and *unmarried* fathers. While the second and third distinctions may seem similar, they are distinguishable. A noncustodial father (a term used interchangeably with nonresident and absent father throughout this paper) does not reside with his children, regardless of whether he is or has ever been married to the mother. An unmarried father, has never been married to the mother.

This distinction separates this paper from the vast divorce literature focusing on noncustodial fathers. Some poor parents divorce (often causing economic problems for the mother), and research has undoubtedly shown that divorce has adverse effects on all children, poor or non-poor. However, I am interested in focusing on poor parents who never marry, as well as the reasons why they do not. One final note: by focusing, I neither imply that harm is associated for non-poor children with noncustodial or unmarried fathers nor that poor children whose fathers live at home are free from the harmful effects of poverty. Rather, I limit the paper to *poor, unmarried, noncustodial* fathers because of space constraints, and more importantly, because I believe the risks that poor, unmarried, noncustodial fathers incur upon themselves, their children, and the mothers of their children are more numerous and cause more harm.

The paper begins with a theoretical overview of the history, scope, causes, and effects of nonresident fatherhood. We will then explore three roles a father plays in a family: economic, social, and psychological. Finally, we will consider beneficial child support policies and fatherhood programs.

We will examine Clinton's five criteria for fatherhood throughout, evaluating the accuracy and validity of his assertions for poor, unmarried, noncustodial fathers. Should the guidelines that Clinton presents as universal norms of fatherhood apply to poor, unmarried, noncustodial fathers? Does this group of men embrace the values these criteria entail for fathers? I assert that although they are often marginalized from mainstream society by structural unemployment, unfair policies, and racial discrimination, poor fathers still value mainstream ideals of fatherhood. Thus, poor, unmarried, noncustodial fathers must learn to take responsibility for their children, given

they have the means to do so. The ultimate goal is to prevent family breakups and promote marriage among low-income families, as well as to support those mothers, fathers, and children who will nonetheless remain in fragmented families. Throughout the paper, we will measure how Clinton's assertions measure up to this goal for poor noncustodial fathers.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF NONCUSTODIAL FATHERHOOD

History

As many point out, father absence is by no means new. Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn, tracing the history of poor children in America, note that father absence and social welfare programs designed to deal with father absence existed throughout the colonial period, during the Civil War, and in the first half of the 20th century (14-15). Nevertheless, in the last four decades, there has undoubtedly been a marked cultural change in regard to fatherhood. During the 1950s, only one in five children lived apart from their fathers before reaching adulthood. Today, "over 50 percent of children will live apart from at least one of their parents, usually the father, before reaching adulthood" (Garfinkel et al. 1). Undoubtedly, a cultural trend has emerged. In addition to this change in culture, society has also become more permissive of one-parent families, a combination that has created a serious problem of father absence today.

This cultural trend is even more widespread in poor families without residential fathers. In 1997, 68% of all African American children were born out of wedlock (Hamer, Families in Society 565). African Americans, who are more likely than any other ethnic group to be poor (Hamer 565), are having more babies than ever outside of

marriage. Poor fathers are also more likely than non-poor fathers to be nonresident fathers. Stated from a different angle: “half of all children living in mother-only households have incomes below the poverty line, and another quarter have incomes between the poverty threshold and 200 percent of the poverty line” (Garfinkel et al. 2). Poor families are affected even more than non-poor families by the blight of absent fathers.

Conversely, unmarried fathers seem to be especially harmful for families in poverty. In When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor, William Julius Wilson states: “. . . children living in one-parent families in the United States, especially those in families where the parent has never married, suffer from many more disadvantages than those in married-parent families” (91). This argument rests upon the notion that fathers provide economic security to their children, although later we will discuss other non-economic paternal roles.

Also contrary to the past, today there is a controversy about one-parent families. In large part, this comes from the fact that there is an element of choice¹ by most single parents today, while in the past most parents became single parents because the spouse had died. In their influential book, Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps, McLanahan and Sandefleur explain this controversy:

The explanation lies in the fact that single motherhood is an *achieved* status rather than an *ascribed* status. An ascribed status is something a person is born with, like race or sex. An achieved status is something a person earns for himself or herself, like years of schooling or occupation. People choose whether or not to have a child, and therefore they bear some responsibility to their decisions. (7-8)

¹ However, it is necessary to qualify this notion of choice. I refer to choice as the decisions that one makes according to the environment in which he is residing. Throughout the paper I will qualify choice in this way.

The place of choice is important to remember when discussing the issue of nonresident fathers. The authors of Fathers Under Fire state, “Today’s absent fathers live apart from their children by choice—their own choice, or the mother’s, or both” (1). The demographic change in the structure of families did not evolve by some instant miracle. It emerged from an actual cultural change, established when people began to make certain choices in their lives, influenced by the economic and social environments in which they were living. When Clinton asserts that parents are partners in child-rearing, his statement seems sound for every socioeconomic level. Poor parents who choose to live apart should realize the consequences behind their decision. If the father does not reside with his children, he should understand that he is still morally and socially responsible for his children’s livelihood. Furthermore, despite the permissiveness of today’s culture in its views of fatherhood, I will note evidence that poor noncustodial fathers believe in Clinton’s criterion—they still aim to be responsible for their children.

Scope

Nonresident fatherhood is not an issue that the poor alone grapple with. It is a cultural trend that has reached both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. In fact, it is imperative that we understand the diversity of the noncustodial father population. Sorensen and Mincy’s article, “Deadbeats and Turnips in Child Support Reform” makes a distinction between two types of noncustodial fathers: “deadbeat dads,” and “turnips.” According to Mincy and Sorensen, a “noncustodial father is considered to be a turnip if he does not pay child support and is not able to do so without impoverishing himself or

his current family” (46). On the other hand, a true deadbeat dad “is able to pay child support but does not” (46).

Mincy and Sorensen contend that the noncustodial father population is quite diverse—somewhere from 16-33% of all noncustodial fathers fall into the category of “turnips” rather than that of the traditional “deadbeat dad” classification. “Turnips,” which the authors classify as any noncustodial father earning less than \$6800 in annual income (the individual poverty line in 1990), earned an average income of between \$3359 and \$3836 in 1990 (48). Two-thirds of “turnips” are African-American or Hispanic, only one-third are presently married, half have not completed high school, 89% were unemployed or only worked intermittently, and the average age was 26 (48). Conversely, Mincy and Sorensen’s “deadbeat dads” earned \$20,000 a year on the average. Their average age is 29, more than half are white, 70% were working the entire year, and three-fourths had graduated from high school (48).

This data reveals why poor nonresident fathers confront completely separate problems and needs than non-poor nonresident fathers. In addition, President Clinton’s call for fathers to be contributors to their children’s well-being must be examined in light of the economic differences among fathers. While Clinton’s assertion sounds good, we quickly realize that non-poor fathers are able contribute to the well-being of their children much more easily than poor fathers. Although full father contribution is a worthy goal, until we can ensure a minimum economic standard, Clinton’s statement discriminates against poor, unmarried, noncustodial fathers.

Causes

Experts offer radically different theories for the recent trend towards nonresidential fatherhood and single motherhood. William Julius Wilson targets the economy. He asserts: “the labor market conditions which sustained the ‘male breadwinner’ family have all but vanished. This has gradually led to the creation of a new set of orientations that places less value on marriage and rejects the dominance of men as a standard for a successful husband-wife family” (105). The labor market conditions that Wilson speaks of are primarily limited to low-income fathers, especially since unemployment in recent times has been concentrated among low-skilled men (25). Hence, Wilson equates unemployment with the rise in single-parent families. He also mentions the special problems of poor fathers who reside in inner-city ghettos: “. . .since jobless rates are highest in the inner-city ghetto, rates of single parenthood are also highest there” (95). Wilson cites a structural problem, the chronic unemployment of underclass men, as a principal cause of nonresidential fatherhood in poor families.

In her article, “Growing up Without a Father,” Sara McLanahan sees things somewhat differently. First, she refutes the argument of conservatives such as Charles Murray who state that “welfare benefits in the United States have reduced the costs of single motherhood and discouraged young men and women from marrying” (Lost Fathers 94). By tracing the trends of welfare and father absence in the last forty years, she notes that after 1974, welfare entitlements declined while father absence increased, thus disproving Murray’s claim. She cites the rise in father absence among non-welfare families as additional negating evidence.

Instead, McLanahan outlines three causes of father absence/single motherhood: women's relatively recent increased economic independence, the decline in men's earnings relative to women, and a "shift in social norms and values during the 1960s that reduced the stigma associated with divorce and nonmarital childbearing" (98). Here, McLanahan blames structural economics (reasons one and two, which coincide with Wilson's theory), but also cultural changes in American society for the increase in father absence. I agree with McLanahan. While Wilson's unemployment argument cannot be refuted, I think he omits the general idea that a cultural revolution in family structure towards has occurred in the second half of the twentieth century.

Effects

McLanahan and Sandefleur have thoroughly researched the effects of father absence upon children, studying sociological research, government reports, and national surveys that compare single parents families to two-parent families. Although they do not focus specifically on low-income children, the results are nonetheless telling. In Growing Up With a Single Parent, they state:

Children who grow up in a household with only one biological parent are worse off, on average, than children who grow up in a household with both of their biological parents, regardless of parents' race or educational background, regardless of whether the parents are married when the child is born, and regardless of whether the resident parent remarries. (1)

The authors view low income as both a cause and an effect of father absence. As an effect, McLanahan and Sandefleur claim that "low-income. . . is the most important factor in children's lower achievement in single-parent homes, accounting for about half

of the lack of the disadvantage” (3). The other half, they explain, can be defined as social capital:

Social capital is an asset that is created and maintained by relationships of commitment and trust. . . The decision of parents to live apart—whether as a result of divorce or an initial decision not to marry—damages and sometimes destroys the social capital that might have been available to the child had the parents lived together. (3)

While their decision to divide the disadvantage of a one-parent family in half seems rather arbitrary, conceptually, McLanahan and Sandefleur make sense. Certainly, they begin to help us understand why fatherlessness and poverty is a double-risk for any child.

On a different note, David Blankenhorn’s Fatherless America: Confronting our Most Urgent Social Problem, suggests titularly that the issue of father absence has effects not just on children, but on the whole of America. Blankenhorn does not engage in the kind of scholarly research that McLanahan and Sandefleur perform. Rather, he presents the issue of fatherlessness in an alarmist, pop culture fashion. Fatherlessness, he states, “is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation. It is the leading cause of declining child well-being in our society. It is also the engine driving our most urgent social problems from crime to adolescent pregnancy to child sexual abuse to domestic violence against women” (1). By encouraging fathers to “take back” their lost families, Blankenhorn promotes a return to ‘lost family values’ in America. However, Blankenhorn fails to grasp the notion of socioeconomic diversity among fathers, never once mentioning poverty as an extenuating variable of fatherhood. While simply encouraging upper-class fathers to return to their broken homes may do the job, low-income fathers need economic aid and training even to consider becoming a full-time father.

Not all scholars view single motherhood and fatherlessness as having negative outcomes. Feminist Judith Stacey, in her essay, “Dada-ism in the 1990’s: Getting Past Baby Talk About Fatherlessness,” attacks a diverse group of men—including Blankenhorn, David Popenoe, Dan Quayle, the Promise Keepers, and Louis Farrakhan—in her classification of “dada-ists.” According to Stacey, “Dada-ism functions as proxy rhetoric for anti-feminist, anti-gay, xenophobic, and anti-welfare sentiments” (Lost Fathers 73). Stacy believes that “rather than ‘fatherlessness’ being the ‘social engine’ driving most of our social problems. . . the incompatibility of paid work and parenting in the United States is likely the single most crucial source of our ‘fatherless America’” (79).

But Stacey cannot deny that “the predominant . . . view prevailing among family scholars is that . . . two parent families generally are preferable to one-parent families” (66). Therefore, when she later states that the particular number of parents is irrelevant (66), I beg to differ. Two-parent families are better for almost all children, and the reality is that one out of two children do not enjoy this perquisite. Since the trend does not seem to be reversing itself, the question is how to deal with and correct the problems that stem from nonresidential fatherhood.

Mainstream vs. unconventional values

Many researchers assume that fathers, especially those who are unmarried and living away from their children, espouse a different set of cultural values regarding fatherhood. Even Clinton’s third criterion of fatherhood, which states that fathers’ roles are “diverse and related to cultural and community norms” (DHHS 1) insinuates this

view. Jennifer Hamer's research on "The Fathers of 'Fatherless' Black Children" is a good place for us to begin to examine this theory. She suggests that race has a part in defining the lifestyles of nonresidential fathers, and that "our notion of fatherhood or 'the good father' must be broadened to include the characteristics and experiences of minority groups" (Families in Society 576). In two similar studies, she interviewed 25 and 38 never-married African American mothers and fathers about their relationships with their children as well as their expectations of parenthood. She stresses the fact that the parents she interviewed have never been married—because it makes them demographically different from divorced couples, especially divorced white couples.

When she asked the parents in the study what they perceived the role of the father to be, she received widely different answers according to the respondent's sex. For instance, the fathers tended to use phrases like "a guide they [his children] can call on," "strong shoulder for them to lean on," "keeps the family safe and together," "a source of strength" (Journal of Sociology 88-89) to define their paternal role. Mothers, on the other hand, characterized the father as one who should provide "food to eat and a roof over their heads," "someone that the mother can count on to help with children's medical, food, school, discipline," and who "makes enough money to take care of his child and himself is educationally prepared to handle that" (Journal of Sociology 88-89). In both articles, Hamer states that African American never-married mothers tend to define a good father in economic terms, while African American never-married fathers "tended to define fatherhood primarily in terms of their expressive roles" (Journal of Sociology 100). She concludes that the mothers espoused more traditionally mainstream (ie: middle

class) views about fatherhood, while the fathers developed their own separate set of values.

Hamer also contends that all of the African American parents in this study maintained different values about the government and the child support system. As one mother explained, “Black people, we handle things on our own. We don’t need lawyers or judges. The first thing they’re going to do is throw the man in jail. Then what? I still don’t have money coming in. And worse, now baby ain’t really got a daddy” (Journal of Sociology 99). About this non-compliance, Hamer states:

American society expects Black [parents] to assimilate and adopt mainstream conceptualizations of proper attitudes and behavior. Yet many researchers have argued that the social structure continuously denies them the means by which to live such a lifestyle. Furthermore, Black [parents] are expected to assimilate into the dominant society and accept mainstream values. . . as if these ideals correctly reflected their own reality.

In her interviews with African American mothers and fathers, Hamer concludes that society “must recognize the primary elements of Black noncustodial fatherhood as a legitimate alternative to the traditional patriarchal fatherhood paradigm of the West” (Families in Society 576), a point on which I strongly disagree. While the *actions* of Hamer’s parents varied from mainstream views about fatherhood and child support, I believe that they still internally maintain the “Western” view of the two-parent family as the ideal family. However, because of impoverishment and lack of social networks, many poor families residing in the inner-city have lost faith that they can ever attain this ideal.

Wilson helps to solidify this observation. Concentrating on the neighborhood as an integral sociological mechanism for community and support, he asserts that the “social deterioration of ghetto neighborhoods” (4) in which many minorities live is the real

culprit of fatherlessness. In the last thirty years, metropolitan areas have been segregated as whites have moved to the suburbs and poor blacks and other minorities have concentrated in inner-city ghettos (Gephart 2). As the poor minorities infiltrated the urban ghettos, businesses left, the quality of public services fell, social networks fell apart, and the poor became isolated. In When Work Disappears, Wilson explains this sociological phenomenon:

In short, social isolation deprives inner-city residents not only of conventional role models, whose strong presence once buffered the effects of neighborhood joblessness, but also of the social resources (including social contacts) provided by mainstream social networks that facilitate social and economic advancement in a modern industrial society. This form of social isolation also contributes to the formation and crystallization of ghetto-related cultural traits and behaviors. . . (66)

Certainly, Wilson would agree that a major component of these traits and behaviors is the trend of father absence, which occurs in so many ghetto families today. But Wilson feels that the social isolation of the ghetto *forms* divergent behavior like noncustodial fatherhood, while Hamer contends that the residents simply choose to live an alternate lifestyle. Clinton's third criteria of fatherhood also misses the point by claiming that diverse forms of families are acceptable.

Because communities characterized by single parent families (such as urban ghettos) are also characterized by high rates of infant death, low birth weight, crime, public housing, and substandard market housing (Gephart 27), we can conclude that living in an urban ghetto poverty tract should be considered a factor that further enhances the possibility of harm for the fragmented poor family. This assertion is consistent with McLanahan and Sandefleur's notion of the two-fold harm of father absence as stemming half from economic disadvantage and half from the loss of paternal presence. However,

living in a ghetto poverty tract does not necessitate the formation of an unconventional value system regarding fatherhood. If that were the case, then unmarried, noncustodial fatherhood would be a problem only in the inner-city ghetto. It certainly is not.

FATHERHOOD ROLES: ECONOMIC, PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL

Experts dispute whether fathers are mainly monetary sources or if they provide developmental support and social resources for children as well. As previously stated, McLanahan asserts that low-income counts for about half of the disadvantage that results from father absence, while loss of social capital counts for the rest (99). Others focus solely on fathers as economic sources. As Andrew Cherlin told the U.S. House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, "the major problem that children have in a single-parent family is not the lack of a male image, but the lack of a male income" (Blankenhorn 72). Indeed, most experts (including McLanahan and Sandefleur, Wilson, and Mincy) concede that economic support is probably the most important function that a father fulfills for his children and his children's mother. In this section, we will examine the economic, psychological, and social roles of fatherhood, in accord with Clinton's statement that fatherhood roles are diverse. We will also attempt to consider which role is the most essential.

Economic Roles of Fatherhood

In Growing Up With a Single Parent, McLanahan and Sandefleur give a straightforward argument for focusing on the father as primarily an economic provider:

In a market economy such as the United States', economic well-being is fundamental to all other forms of well-being. Thus, in our study we focus on

economic success. . . We believe that psychological success—self esteem or a sense of control over one’s life—is more difficult to achieve and maintain when a person is totally dependent on other people or the government for basic needs. We also believe that social success, defined as respect from peers and stability in one’s family and community relationships, is compromised by economic insecurity and dependence. (19)

Thus, while McLanahan and Sandefleur consider income and social capital as equal halves of the detriment of fatherlessness, it is apparent that they perceive income as the more important of the two.

Economist Rebecca Blank’s book, It Takes a Nation, also focuses primarily on the economic consequences of father absence. Although she does mention that “many fathers feel ongoing responsibility and love for their children” (46), she clearly concentrates on the father’s ability to provide monetary support for their children. She reiterates Wilson’s point that times are especially tough for low-skilled minority men in the workforce. But she still insists that “one of the key problems facing single parents is lack of financial support from absent fathers” (121). By proposing improved child support efforts, Blank affirms her belief that a father’s economic role is of primary importance.

Lawrence Mead has brought a new approach to anti-poverty programs: paternalism. In his edited volume, The New Paternalism, he defines paternalism as “the close supervision of the dependent” (1). In other words, paternalism focuses on ways to oversee and engage the poor in programs, thus making them responsible for their own well-being. In regards to fatherhood, one would assume that a paternalist program would value the economic role of fatherhood in order to promote child well-being. Mincy and Pouncy, in their chapter entitled “Paternalism, Child Support Enforcement, and Fragile Families,” affirm that “paternalism, like the earlier regimes, takes meeting children’s

monetary needs as the primary concern. What counts is whether the father pays his child support obligation” (152). But later, they amend this statement by pledging that paternalist fatherhood programs will also focus on family issues: “Family life among the seriously poor has deteriorated so badly that mending it must become a priority as great as finding economic support for families” (152). Hence, a paternalist approach to fatherlessness need not be focused solely on the economic roles of fatherhood. In section three, we will focus more closely on Mincy and Pouncy’s paternalist programs for poor, noncustodial, unmarried fathers.

Psychological Roles of Fatherhood

Much research indicates that the presence of a father in the household, not just his income, is beneficial to his children’s development. Psychologists have persistently asserted that fathers are integral players in their children’s social, cognitive, and sexual development.

Psychosexual/psychosocial theories

Freud argued that children face the challenge of identifying with their same-sexed parent, and that during this process, the child consciously and subconsciously internalizes “the same-sex parent’s behavior” as well as the “parent’s attitudes, values, and moral code” (Curtner-Smith 342). In Freud’s mind, then, boys growing up in a household with only a mother would face extreme difficulty in the sexual maturation process. Today, psychosexual theory still affects scholarly research. For instance, girls without fathers have been found to be more promiscuous and to have difficulty forming romantic relations later in life (Heatherington 317).

Erikson's psychosocial development theory also includes a strong role for the father. According to Erikson, "fathers play an important and unique role in their children's development of initiative and industry by encouraging children to explore, build, plan, and solve problems" (Curtner-Smith 342). While Erikson disagreed with Freud that child development was a sexual process, both psychologists recognized the importance of father presence in a child's maturation.

Attachment theory

Ainsworth developed the theory of attachment to propose that "human infants have an innate ability to form enduring emotional bonds (attachment) with primary caregivers" (Curtner-Smith 342). Generally, the first attachment a child makes is with the maternal figure, because the mother typically feeds, clothes, and cares for the infant the most. But the father also becomes an attachment figure, usually sometime during the infant's first year. Michael Lamb states: "increased paternal involvement. . . does seem to strengthen infant-father attachment although as long as mothers assume primary responsibility for child care, they appear to be preferred attachment figures. Most infants, however, clearly form attachments to their fathers" (111).

A psychological test called the Strange Situation is often used to identify attachment relationships. The experimenter places the infant and the supposed attachment figure in a waiting room-like situation. After a while, the experimenter will signal for the mother (or father) to leave. If the infant shows certain signs, such as "seeking proximity, becoming anxious upon separation, feeling joy upon reunion, [or] experiencing grief at loss" (Curtner-Smith 342), the infant is probably attached to the parent. If the infant does not exhibit these signs, it might signal an insecure attachment.

Lamb cites that “father-infant attachments are more likely to be insecure when fathers report high levels of stress” (116). For a poor, noncustodial, unmarried father, many factors, such as lack of income, a poor relationship with the mother, or living far away from the child might negatively influence father-infant attachment.

Social learning theory

According to Curtner-Smith, “social learning theorists propose that children learn by observing and imitating the behaviors of important role models” (342). To observe children in a non-lab setting, Caldwell and Bradley created the *Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment* (HOME) method of assessment, which measures “aspects of the home environment that predict positive cognitive development” (Cutrona et. al. 373). Generally, the HOME is given when the experimenter can observe the child awake and in interaction with her primary caregivers. Two-thirds of the HOME are based on the actual observation, and one-third on parental self-report. The HOME assessment aids social learning theorists in studying children’s role models.

Certainly, the father is a major role model for children, especially boys, since children often imitate same-sexed behavior (Curtner-Smith 342). Specifically, fathers serve as role models in the realms of “appropriate gender-typed behaviors, cognitive and problem-solving behaviors, academic achievement behaviors, and socially competent behaviors” (342). Boys that live with only a mother, then, will suffer disproportionately, according to social learning theory. Johnson finds that boys may suffer the most from lack of paternal contact, experiencing detriment in “masculine identity development, school success, and . . . successful integration into adult American life and the fulfillment

of the male provider role” (6). Thus, social learning theory provides another argument for increased contact between poor, noncustodial, unmarried fathers and their children.

Psychopathology

In addition, there is some evidence that illustrates a correlation between fathers and certain mental illnesses. According to Paul Amato, both boys and girls are likely to experience emotional disorders, such as depression, as a result of father absence (550). Lamb finds that among children whose fathers are incarcerated, the rate of conduct disorder (CD) and antisocial personal disorder (APD) is much higher than average (267). Alcoholism is a mental illness that many poor fathers seem to suffer from, especially African-American fathers. Hawkins discovered that “paternal alcohol abuse, perceived parental permissiveness toward alcohol and drug abuse, and extreme poverty in association with antisocial behavior were all predictive of alcohol problems in adolescents and young adults” (Lamb 271). While more research on this topic is needed, these mental illnesses seem to occur disproportionately among the children whose fathers do not reside with them. Poverty, too, increases the chance of developing a mental illness.

In sum, Robert Moradi provides a good insight about the effects of father absence on child development, stating: “children who come from families with psychologically involved fathers are cognitively more competent, have higher degrees of compassion for others, manifest fewer sex-stereotypes and have a more solid internal locus of control” (1). Clearly, policies must take into consideration the psychological effects upon poor children in the absence of a father figure.

Social Roles of Fatherhood

Finally, many theorists claim that fathers have an important social function in their children's lives. McLanahan and Sandefleur provide inconsistent support for their views of a father's social role. In their introduction, they claim that economic success is the most important provision that a father can give his children. But in chapter six, entitled "The Role of Parenting," the authors maintain that in addition to monetary support, "children need parents who are willing to spend time with them reading, helping with homework, or just listening to how their day went at school" (95). From these assertions, we can assume that McLanahan and Sandefleur view a father's social role as significant, but not primary, for the well-being of his children.

In order to examine the social role further, we need to explore the various social capacities a father can fulfill. First and foremost, the presence of a father is one more person to love, support, discipline, encourage, and supervise a child. McLanahan and Sandefleur explain the social disadvantage associated with having only one parent:

In one sense, this disadvantage is simply a matter of numbers: one parent has less time and less authority than two parents who can share the responsibility and cooperate with each other. In another sense, however, it is due to the fact that single-parent families. . . are less stable in terms of personnel (grandmothers, mother's boyfriends. . . are more likely to move in and out), which creates uncertainty about household rules and parental responsibility. (95-96)

In comparison to having only one parent, having two parents, then, is a definite social benefit to a child. In addition, a father can provide social networks for the child; for example, another set of grandparents and extended family for mentoring and supervising.

Wilson claims that the trend towards noncustodial fatherhood and non-marriage in inner-city ghettos has "reduced the family's effectiveness in socializing children and preparing them for future participation in society" (106). In other words, "Weak families do not prepare youngsters for the labor market" (106). While he still focuses on

the economic conditions the poor face, here Wilson admits that fatherlessness has played a large role in jeopardizing future social successes of poor children.

The question is not which role most affects children and their mothers. Instead, it is how we integrate these three roles. If by diverse, Clinton means that fathers living in nontraditional households can still contribute to their families, I agree. Certainly, Clinton is right to note that all fathers can make contributions. Indeed, I have already diversified the father roles into three categories, so it is evident there is some variance in the kind of contributions that a father can give to his children. But do we really want to say, as Clinton seems to, that fatherhood roles are completely diverse, and in effect, that anything goes? I think not. Rather, in this section, I have aimed to present three standard areas in which father presence and participation benefits children and their mothers. Instead of ranking them in order of importance, we must insist that all three are necessary for fathers to adequately provide for their children.

FUTURE POLICIES: CHILD SUPPORT AND FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS

We are now prepared to examine the current child support system, fatherhood programs, and experts' proposals for supporting the economic, psychological, and social roles of fatherhood. I will analyze which programs (and which elements of certain programs) have worked, and which have not. Finally, I will formulate a proposal of where to go next.

Child Support Enforcement (CSE) System

There is much evidence to suggest that the current child support system is an unsatisfactory means to solve the problem of fatherlessness. In August 1998, the federal government published a report entitled, “Welfare Reform: Child Support an Uncertain Income Supplement for Families Leaving Welfare.” The report’s premise, that “many TANF families may not be able to count on child support as a steady source of income when their time-limited welfare benefits expire” (17) seems elementary, but it was a big step to report this to the House of Representatives, who voted on welfare reform three years ago. The report admits that:

. . .the child support collections potential is often limited by the lack of job skills and low educational attainment of the fathers associated with welfare and former welfare families. We discuss in our report how these factors make some noncustodial parents less likely to be regularly employed and more difficult to locate, and we cite studies suggesting that lack of income may be a barrier to collecting child support. (18)

Not only does the CSE system completely omit psychological and social contributions of fathers to their children; it does not even do an effective job of collecting financial support from fathers. The good news is that the government recognizes the drawbacks of the CSE system and is attempting to create a program that both enforces child support obligations and provides support for low-income noncustodial fathers.

In It Takes a Nation, Rebecca Blank submits a proposal to enrich the current CSE system. She advises that child support payments should be more strictly enforced, but that the federal government should also ensure that mothers receive aid by guaranteeing a child support payment even if the father does not pay. Blank focuses on fathers’ economic support, ignoring their social and psychological roles. While a government child support guarantee would help mothers and children in poverty, Blank neglects to

consider the programs that consider the bigger picture of healing fragmented families in poverty with programs that target all three fatherhood roles.

Paternalist Programs

Another answer to the CSE system has been the formation of paternalist fatherhood programs, especially for poor nonpaying fathers. By closely monitoring these fathers, the programs are more personal than the child support enforcement agencies. Mincy and Pouncy explain the definition of a paternalist fatherhood program: “the attempt to link benefits to participation is one of the things that makes. . . programs paternalist. The other is the supervision they entail” (143). Mincy and Pouncy favor paternalist programs for nonpaying fathers. They state that “the chief merit of the paternalist regime is that it provides some of the nonmonetary support the men need to [succeed]” (150). Fathers, in order to receive the benefits of the program, must fully participate. Essentially, these programs aim to supervise their clients, but also to demand certain requirements of them.

Currently, several paternalist approaches to encourage poor fathers to support their children have already been attempted, at least for trial periods. Out of all of the programs, Parents’ Fair Share (PFS) is the largest and most publicized. The Parents’ Fair Share Demonstration was created in response to the 1988 Family Support Act, which required the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) Program to provide services to poor noncustodial fathers unable to make child support payments. The non-profit Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) designed the project, which was piloted in seven urban counties: Jacksonville, Florida; Springfield,

Massachusetts; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Los Angeles, California; Trenton, New Jersey; Dayton, Ohio; and Memphis, Tennessee.

PFS has three main goals: to raise the noncustodial father's earnings, to increase child support payments, and to strengthen father/child interactions (DeParle 1). In order to reach these goals, MDRC devised four components: employment/training, enhanced child support enforcement, peer support groups, and mediation services for fathers and mothers. Parent's Fair Share has the unique quality of being funded by federal dollars and organized by both non-profit community agencies and child support enforcement (CSE) offices. Thus, when a client is referred to the program by a judge or other authority, upon agreeing to enter the program, the client's monthly child support obligation is waived or lowered to \$50. If clients choose not to enter the program, they are subject the regular laws of child support enforcement. This system of interconnectedness between non-profit services (job training, support groups, mediation) and CSE office services (enhanced child support enforcement) stresses both clients' obligations and assistance for the clients.

In 1987, Wisconsin introduced a program called Children First, upon which PFS was partially formulated. It is one of the most successful programs in the nation for distinguishing "who among the young and unwed can pay their child support and who cannot" (Mincy and Pouncey 143). Children First identifies unemployed or underemployed fathers who do not pay their child support obligations and whose children receive AFDC (now TANF) payments. When the poor father was called into family court, the judge enrolled him in the Children First program. Supposedly, the program attracts the father because he will not be incarcerated for his inability to pay child

support. If the father does not want to be enrolled in the program, he can only avoid it by paying his child support obligation for three consecutive months (Mincy and Pouncy 144). Hence, the Children's First program maintains the "power to expose denied income," because "only 23 percent [of fathers] entered the program" (Mincy and Pouncy 144). Once a father is admitted, the program runs much like Parent's Fair Share, although on a more informal basis. The one main difference is that throughout the sixteen week-long program, the father's child support is not waived. His child support arrears continue to build, but the program is supposed to provide the father with a job with wages high enough to pay off his balance. However, Mincy and Pouncy note that "in practice, relatively few men have gone into such jobs; the majority have gone into job search, education, or training" (144).

The PFS pilot project ended in 1997, and results from the project are in their initial stages. So far, they seem contradictory. In their July 1998 article, "Welfare Reform and Low-Income Noncustodial Fathers," Sorensen and Lerman report on PFS, stating that "preliminary results from two sites—Los Angeles and Grand Rapids—are promising. At these sites child support payments were substantially higher among those who received services than among those who didn't" (111)

But Jason DeParle, a reporter for the New York Times, asserts that "the Parents' Fair Share failed to increase the earnings or employment of noncustodial fathers it served" (1). He cites quantitative differences between the CSE agencies, which stress collection, and non-profits, which stress services, as one roadblock in working together toward three goals of the program. Of the three goals of the program, DeParle offers evidence that only the third goal was achieved. He notes that "counseling sessions with

‘peer support groups’ led fathers to become more involved with their children” (1).

Otherwise, DeParle seems to claim that the seven-city wide project has failed, noting that child support payments actually fell in three cities: Memphis, Trenton, and Springfield.

These conflicting analyses make it difficult to determine the actual results behind the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation’s Parents’ Fair Share Project.

However, we can still evaluate Parent’s Fair Share on the three levels of fatherhood roles discussed in the last section: economic, psychological, and social. Since two of its four components—employment/job training and enhanced child support—target monetary support, we can assume that PFS focuses on the father as an economic provider. The other two components, peer support groups and mediation services, satisfy some psychological and social requirements. Similar to McLanahan and Sandefleur’s observations, PFS lumps the psychological and social realms of fatherhood together. Maybe it is impossible to devise a program that can separate the two. Peer support groups provide the noncustodial fathers with a social network of peers that are similar in age and socioeconomic status. In addition to mutual support, peer groups can affirm positive psychological father roles as well. Mediation for noncustodial fathers and custodial mothers could optimally provide closer parental cooperation, leading to social and psychological benefits for the children. Parent’s Fair Share, at least on the surface, seems to incorporate the three roles of fatherhood as important goals for poor noncustodial fathers.

Wisconsin’s Children First accounts for the three fatherhood roles similarly to PFS, with one major difference. Its refusal to waive client’s child support probably results in lower enrollment, but more fathers that genuinely cannot afford to pay their

child support obligations without entering into poverty themselves. Thus, while both programs consider the economic role of fatherhood, Children First is better able to distinguish between fathers who can pay and fathers who are genuinely poor and will really benefit from the services provided.

President Clinton's fourth criterion for fatherhood, that men should be given adequate education and support in order to be good fathers, is relevant here. These two paternalist programs, PFS and Children First, have succeeded in providing men with education and support to prepare them for parenthood, especially in comparison to the support systems poor fathers had before, which were very few. Certainly, even though the results of the two programs are somewhat ambiguous, it is evident that fathers have benefited from support and education in the long run. Thus, Clinton's statement seems valid. All fathers, but especially those who are poor and lack access to traditional social networks and acceptable educational facilities, deserve support and education about parenting.

In addition, we can also examine Clinton's last criterion, that governments are responsible for encouraging and promoting father involvement. After examining CSE, PFS, and Children First, all sponsored by federal or state governments, we expect the state to promote fatherhood. But in his statement, does Clinton imply that governments are solely responsible for this duty, or that they share the responsibility with other entities of society? I believe that the government must encourage and promote responsible fatherhood, but other elements of society, such as schools, churches, businesses, and non-profits share the responsibility. As we discussed earlier, the element of choice is present every time a father decides not to reside with or to support his children. Society as a

whole must embrace the two parent family, not as simply a far-off ideal, but as a realistic and preferred parenting style. At the same time, it must provide and support those who cannot manage to attain this goal.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we have discussed the theoretical background of father absence, the economic, psychological, and social roles of fatherhood, and programs designed to aid poor absent fathers and their families, all in terms of Clinton's five guidelines. Although Clinton's criteria for fatherhood seem intentionally vague, and not always mindful of the diverse population of fathers, we can for the most part agree with them. At the very least, we should applaud President Clinton for beginning to consider the federal government's role in supporting fatherhood. Furthermore, the guidelines should apply to poor, unmarried, noncustodial fathers, because this group of men embraces mainstream values about fatherhood. Fathers are integral to children and to families, and the government must support fatherhood and education for fathers.

However, the government and the rest of society clearly have more to do. Absent fatherhood, especially among the poor, is a looming problem. Where should we turn now? Mincy and Pouncy offer a suggestion. They state: “. . . the only real solution of the child support problem is rebuilding the family. Only then do a mother and her children get secure support. . . and only then does a father get the emotional support that he needs to work steadily” (151). If we agree that fathers serve at least three roles in a family—economic, psychological, and social—then we cannot simply insist upon an improved child support program to track down more “deadbeat dads.” Nor can we accept

that all families—one or two parents—are equal in terms of raising children. The fact is that fathers are integral to families, and families are integral to successful children. Poor fathers believe in the ideal of a two-parent family, but a permissive culture has allowed to them live lives apart from their children. For the good of fathers, mothers, and children, we must insist that all fathers, especially those suffering from the effects of poverty, take responsibility for their families. We must also provide them with the means to do so.

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