



Low-Income Fathers Need to Get Connected

Helping Children and Families by Addressing Low-Income Fathers' Disconnections from Employment, Society, and Housing

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Introduction and summary

Many poverty programs serve families by trying to improve children's lives, and helping children often translates into "family" policy. After all, children don't stand on their own—families provide for their needs including housing, food, and clothing. But far too often, the notion of "family" translates into a focus on mothers and children. This needs to change.

Low-income fathers should definitely be a part of the family policy equation. Men are able to financially contribute to their children's well-being and help lift them out of poverty in the short term. They also provide care and emotional supports that can improve children's life outcomes and help break the cycle of poverty in the long term.

Unfortunately, far too many low-income men, and especially men of color, face barriers to playing these roles in their children's lives. They are disproportionately disconnected from some extremely vital domains, and that harms them, their children, and families more generally.

These domains are examined in this paper and include:

- **Employment.** Shifts in the economy have decreased low-skilled workers' job opportunities and wages over the last couple of decades. This impairs some men's ability to financially support their children and families. The related financial stress drives wedges between family members.
- **Society.** More than 2 million people are in the nation's prisons, and these are mostly low-income men. Their absence deprives children and families of income and emotional connections. And even after fathers are released, families continue to experience such negative consequences as income-impairing employment barriers linked to criminal records and reconnecting emotionally after a long period apart. Fathers are more likely to recidivate if family disconnections persist.

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- **Housing.** Housing is unaffordable to the lowest-income workers throughout the United States. Spending a disproportionate amount of income on housing depletes resources families have available for other needs associated with childrearing. Low-income families are also at risk of housing instability, which often physically divides families and harms their relationships with one another.

It's clear that low-income children can't afford it when their fathers experience these disconnections. Their mothers, who are low-income women, are the poorest of the poor and earn less than their male counterparts. Low-skilled African-American women and Latinas are at the absolute bottom of the economic ladder, with incomes that are less than similarly situated white females.

This means policies should seek to maximize the level of financial help fathers provide in addition to increasing women's earnings and available work supports. Additional income from husbands, cohabiting fathers, or nonresident fathers via child support payments financially benefits children. And repairing men's disconnections that impair their ability to provide care, love, and attention also benefits their children.

The United States ought to be concerned about the status of its low-income men. It is undesirable and unacceptable for an entire segment of the population to be disconnected from one or more basic domains that most people in this country enjoy—freedom, income-producing work, and a stable roof over one's head. When these disconnections contribute to depriving men of stable connections to intimate partners, children, and families more generally, the realities that some face appear even more bleak. Not only do these factors dramatically depreciate men's quality of life, but they deprive the nation of these men's productivity, ingenuity, and other contributions. Policies at all levels should recognize that the lives of these men have value.

These concerns about fathers and families were brought up in debates about the Responsible Fatherhood Program and the Healthy Marriage Initiative that occurred in 2005 when the legislation creating the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program was last reauthorized. It is now time for Congress to both reauthorize that legislation and make relevant funding decisions for the next fiscal year. The legislation has encompassed cash assistance, funding for employment services, and work supports such as child care, child support enforcement, and marriage and fatherhood programs.

As this process moves forward, it is clear that TANF must be a viable safety net that provides income support to low-income families when necessary. But it must also aim to ensure that more and more families will not require public assistance programs in the first place, which means it should strive to reduce poverty. Job training and work supports must be strengthened, for example. For some families, such services are all they need to overcome poverty.

We should pay far more attention, however, to parents who face the greatest challenges—mothers and fathers who experience continued barriers to employment and effective parenting. That is the role the administration’s proposed Fatherhood, Marriage, and Families Innovation Fund should play. The fund, which could be connected to TANF’s reauthorization, would provide two equal streams of funding for custodial parents, who are largely mothers, and fathers. Future CAP products will discuss how the fund should benefit mothers who are facing the most significant challenges, but this paper focuses on the fatherhood side of the equation.

The paper offers the following recommendations for how the fund should be used to help low-income families based on the areas of need explored in the paper:

- Further include men within the notion of “family” for policy purposes
- Reduce poverty by addressing the known disconnections and challenges of fathers
- Offer comprehensive solutions that address the complexities arising from men’s various disconnections
- Relieve stressors that divide families, which would provide them with greater freedom to make personal choices about family formation and maintenance based on reasons other than those associated with poverty

The best results will require more than the \$500 million the administration recommends for the Fatherhood, Marriage, and Families Innovation Fund. And while increasing the amount of the appropriation is important, greater resources can also be garnered by better coordinating existing programs, including other comprehensive service models that are reaching families facing similar challenges in such systems as homeless services, child welfare, and reentry/crime prevention.

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