



“Sisters Are Doin’ It for Themselves,” But Could Use Some Help

Fatherhood Policy and the Well-Being of Low-Income Mothers
and Children

Joy Moses , Jacquelyn Boggess, and Jill Groblewski October 2010



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Introduction and summary

One of the challenges in thinking about the relationship between women and the fatherhood movement is two seemingly contradictory notions held by women who consider themselves to be modern and progressive. Put in easily digestible terms, the first notion is embodied in the 1985 hit song “Sisters Are Doin’ It for Themselves” by the Eurythmics and Aretha Franklin. The tune reflects feminist notions about women standing on their own two feet.

This spirit of strength and independence may seem at odds with the second notion of “It Takes a Village to Raise a Child,” a purported African proverb that inspired the title of a 1996 book authored by then-First Lady Hillary Clinton. Although resulting in its own controversy about the relative importance of family versus community, at a minimum the proverb and the book seem to suggest that successfully raising a child is not a mother’s only proposition.

Yet these two progressive views can coexist—that women, including mothers, can make it on their own, and that mothers need a community, including fathers, to raise their kids—because the realities of child rearing suggest that one person (whether female or male) would find it extremely difficult to do it alone. Many mothers rely on the help of their parents, other relatives, and friends. And, as this paper argues, co-parenting relationships can figure significantly into that equation without limiting women’s choices about career and family.

The tension between progressive notions about strong independent women and the benefits they get from help with child rearing is just one philosophical question underlying the debate about the relationship between women and fatherhood policy. Others include:

- Do policies that promote responsible fatherhood fail to recognize that women also face significant financial hardships and structural barriers on the road to self-sufficiency?

- Do all women and families have the same stake in fatherhood responsibility policy without regard to differences associated with socio-economic status and race?
- Do discussions about fatherhood amount to attacks on single mothers?

Although the authors understand the underlying concerns giving rise to these questions, we would answer all of them with a “No.” First, we contend that it’s not necessary to pit fatherhood responsibility policies against the interests of women, especially low-income single mothers who rely on federal social services programs. Rather, fatherhood policy is family policy that benefits all family members, including mothers. Suggesting the need for social services programs that encourage and facilitate fathers’ economic and emotional support for their families need not equate to a lack of recognition of the challenges faced by these women or an indictment against single mothers.

Second, we argue that concerns about male-female family dynamics must become more nuanced, taking into consideration differences based on the socio-economic status, race and ethnic background, and faith traditions. Specifically, the Center for Family Policy and Practice’s work with low-income African American women suggests that they are concerned about the men in their lives. Because many of these fathers are unable (as opposed to unwilling) to support their children or even themselves, these women thought it essential that more low-income men benefit from social services related to employment, housing, and health.

Undoubtedly, the history of this issue is complex, at times including dialogue and legislative proposals that were rightfully of concern to those focused on women’s rights and gender equality. For instance, some conservatives are singularly focused on men assuming traditional roles and responsibilities within families, limiting women’s autonomy and choices about their relationships. These individuals sometimes overlap with other conservatives who use debates about marriage and fatherhood as an excuse to minimize funding for other social services programs that benefit mothers and families, suggesting that all women need is a wedding ring instead of key social programs.

The authors of this paper, and many others who are supportive of fatherhood programs, do not align ourselves with such groups. Rather, we believe in the importance of serving low-income men not only because it helps men and children to achieve better outcomes but also due to the benefits that can be attained by

women. We do not believe that these services should, or necessarily must, equate to limiting choices and life decisions. Nor should they be used as means to limit the funding attached to programs serving women and families more generally.

Finally, we do not believe discussing responsible fatherhood programs amounts to an attack on single mothers—notwithstanding concerted conservative efforts to do just that by associating these women with negative stereotypes such as that of the “welfare queen,” which are not rooted in the realities of poverty or family life. Progressives understand the complexities of the challenges faced by low-income mothers and fathers and are not afraid to promote genuine solutions that address the underlying causes of family disruptions rather than simply finger-pointing, which is why we seek solutions aimed at fathers that will actually help all of these family members.

In our paper, we argue that supporting responsible fatherhood and related programs and services helps low-income mothers (single, married, or cohabitating alike) with the following:

- **Economic stability.** Fathers with more access to effective employment assistance have an increased ability to help mothers with the costs of child rearing. Those fathers involved in the lives of their children are more likely to directly contribute to household income, pay child support, and provide noncash support, minimizing financial burdens on families.
- **Child care.** Low-income mothers struggle to ensure safe and stable child care arrangements for their children. Fathers can help in providing care.
- **Work-life balance.** As mothers struggle to balance the demands of work and family, the contributions of fathers can determine the degree to which family obligations result in some available “me time” for mothers to rest and also to get ahead.
- **Domestic violence.** Programs can help identify and serve mothers and fathers involved in violent situations.
- **Reproductive health.** It is unfair for all the responsibilities associated with family planning and preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases to fall on the shoulders of women. Fatherhood programs can work with men on doing their part.

- **Providing more relationship and family choices.** Poverty often limits women’s and men’s choices about forming and maintaining relationships and families. Properly designed government family support programs can provide women with more choices regarding the future of their families.
- **Positive childhood outcomes.** Research suggests that fathers can have a positive impact on the academic achievement and behavior of children. Mothers who want to do what they can to ensure positive outcomes for their children may be supportive of fatherhood programs, even participating in some of the services.

Many important federal policies that authorize and fund fatherhood programs are now under debate. President Obama is actively engaged in advancing his proposals around fatherhood and marriage policy, and Congress is pursuing its efforts to reauthorize the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, anti-poverty legislation that also includes the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Child Support Enforcement programs.

We support the reauthorization of these programs and their continued funding, but we also argue in this report that sufficient emphasis must be placed on responsible fatherhood programs that benefit entire families, including mothers. The great potential of many of these services suggests Congress should expand available funding while making important reforms.

Continued vigilance in protecting low-income mothers from domestic violence is clearly necessary, but we must do more to support fathering and provide fatherhood service providers with more training and education related to domestic violence.

The bottom line is this: Increased federal support for fatherhood responsibility programs that help men help their families would alleviate some of the stress and feelings of hopelessness that low-income men of color experience, and by reducing this pressure, social services for men would benefit women and even possibly increase women’s safety.

In the interest of listening to, supporting, and advocating on behalf of low-income women, this paper directly investigates the following question: Can expanding social services through fatherhood responsibility policies benefit women?

In pursuit of an answer, this paper first reviews the history of incorporating fathers into social services policy. We then step back to examine the policy debates

about how to best fashion responsible fatherhood programs to meet the needs of today's low-income mothers. We conclude by examining ways in which including men in social services could benefit low-income women, with specific policy recommendations.

This paper focuses on services for men, but we stress throughout that the needs of women must remain vitally important, such that fatherhood programs shouldn't work to the disadvantage of women. Rather, these policies must strive to increase their economic stability, their physical security, and real-life options for families. Our aim is to identify policies and practices that will achieve greater economic and social justice for all members of low-income communities.

How We Got Here

The history of responsible fatherhood policy and programs

Aid to Families with Dependent Children, which preceded today's Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program, provided cash benefits to low-income households with children. The structure of the AFDC program, combined with traditional societal gender roles that expected mothers to provide direct child care, meant that most "custodial" parents, or those with legal custody of a child, receiving AFDC benefits were women. Consequently, most social services policy conversations focused on children and their mothers—to the exclusion of low-income noncustodial fathers.

In the mid-1990s, this began to change. Debate about how to help low-income men gain the opportunities they needed to get ahead mirrored a larger social movement that was gaining currency at the time, which linked support for low-income men to men's support of their families. "Men in Children's Lives" was the theme of the third "Family Reunion" conference in 1994, moderated by then-Vice President Al Gore. That same year also saw the debut of the National Fatherhood Initiative, a nonprofit organization that continues to focus on promoting men's traditional role as father figure.

The mid-'90s also was the era of the first Million Man March in Washington, D.C., a gathering of African American men on the Mall designed to address a variety of ills faced by their community, as well as the Promise Keepers' "Stand in the Gap: A Sacred Assembly of Men," which was a similar gathering of Christian men. The publication of David Blankenhorn's *Fatherless America* took an academic look at the same issue—men's position in their families and society. Throughout the 1990s, then, a number of people both within and outside of government began arguing that men, particularly low-income men, take more responsibilities as fathers.

With this conversation about men as the backdrop, President Clinton in 1996 signed the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program into law to “end welfare as we know it.” TANF stressed that work and child support payments would provide sufficient income to female-headed families to move women off welfare—financial support from so called noncustodial fathers (a term that describes those who don’t have legal custody of their children) was central to welfare reform. The law placed new emphasis on identifying the fathers of children receiving public assistance, establishing their legal paternity and, perhaps most critically, establishing and enforcing the payment of child support orders.

During the Clinton administration the House passed the Fathers Count Act. The purpose was to “prevent the unfortunate cycle of children being reared in fatherless families.” Its aims were to promote marriage, help poor fathers establish positive relationships with their children and the children’s mothers, and to promote responsible parenting. To the extent that low-income fathers were included in social welfare policy in the 1990s, then, a central theme was to get extremely poor fathers to pay child support and come as close as possible to fulfilling their established child support obligations, minimizing the number of men making no payments or only partial payments to mothers.

The next administration, under President George W. Bush, moved the focus decidedly away from child support toward the encouragement of marriage and the improvement of family relationships. The Bush administration passed the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, which, among other things, reauthorized TANF legislation and fatherhood-related programs that maintained efforts to increase child support payments and marriage promotion programs. DRA allocated a total of \$750 million of TANF funds over five years to promote marriage, with \$50 million per year available to support responsible fatherhood programs.

Overall, then, the past 15 years of welfare policy focused on “personal responsibility” for mothers and “responsible fatherhood” for men. Resources and energy were dedicated to teaching and demanding responsibility from low-income parents.

Low-income parents are no different than others of higher socio-economic status in that they love their children and accept responsibility for them. Government resources, then, would be better spent supporting parents’ determination to pursue opportunities that may benefit themselves and their children.

Indeed, even as federal and state legislators and policymakers focused more readily on men's financial contribution to their children as a key component of social services policy, the economic situations of many low-income fathers deteriorated. A 2006 Urban Institute publication devoted to examining the situations of African American men reports that nearly half (46.2 percent) of less-educated young black men (ages 16 to 24) reported no earnings in 2001, compared to 27.7 percent of less-educated young men overall.¹ In 2009, the last full year for which data are available, the unemployment rate for black men was 16.3 percent, the highest unemployment rate for any other adult demographic.²

Additionally, there is growing consensus among scholars who study declining employment trends among young African American men that the child support enforcement system itself has critical implications for the economic situations and prospects of these men. A significant proportion of low-income African American men are noncustodial fathers who face barriers that are not typically recognized or understood by most social service providers.

One case in point: Although the Child Support Enforcement program provides a valuable service to many women and children, it sometimes creates barriers for those experiencing extreme barriers to economic self-sufficiency. When the children of low-income fathers receive public assistance, the fathers typically owe substantial amounts of money to repay state and federal governments for those services. These charges are included in their child support bills and are coordinated and enforced through the child support enforcement system and local child support agencies. It is not uncommon for extremely low-income men to owe tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars to the government as reimbursement for benefits their children have received. Nonpayment can lead to harsh enforcement measures, including incarceration, which only compounds their future challenges to securing employment.³

Similarly, for noncustodial and/or nonresident fathers, child support enforcement measures pose barriers that can prohibit them from developing personal and familial economic stability and security. These men face substantial barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment, including low levels of educational attainment, high rates of incarceration, and extreme debt burdens. Policies related to child support enforcement, and others such as those related to education, access to job training, criminal justice, and reentry, create burdens that negatively impact men's self-esteem and self-efficacy as fathers and financial providers, leading them to stay away or run away from their families.

The Obama administration is signaling its support for legislation that would address many of the issues that impede low-income men from being able to make their full contributions to their families and communities. In addition to taking leadership in reforming services such as Child Support Enforcement, it has promoted a national focus on fatherhood more generally. Sen. Evan Bayh (D-IN) and Rep. Danny Davis (D-IL) introduced companion pieces of fatherhood legislation⁴ that would provide employment and fatherhood program services to low-income men and reduce some of the challenges created by current child support laws.

This legislation dovetails nicely with President Obama’s “Fatherhood, Marriage and Families Innovation Fund,” which was included in his 2011 budget proposal. The Innovation Fund would allow states to prioritize the urgent needs of employment and economic security for both parents. In doing so, it would create two co-equal streams of funding—one for fatherhood programs and services and the other for custodial parents (largely mothers) facing serious barriers to self-sufficiency. It would encourage and support state agencies and community-based organizations in providing interconnected services to mothers and fathers, funding programs that provide employment services and help with child support, parenting support, mental health and substance abuse concerns, and other needs.

If approved by Congress, the fund would move policy away from pointing the finger at fathers and punishing them, and by extension their children, for being poor and toward addressing the underlying problems preventing them from earning an income and effectively parenting their children.

Ultimately, this funding stream could lead to a fundamental change in national policy that would provide for the delivery of more responsive TANF and non-TANF services for men and women so that they can better provide for their children and make positive contributions to their families and communities. But first, passage of the legislation, including adoption of the Fatherhood, Marriage and Families Innovation Fund, is required. And that will take our nation back into a conversation about how to encourage responsible fatherhood. To that current debate we now turn.

Fatherhood program policy biases

Current U.S. policies and programs that address poverty predominantly assist very low-income families and are specifically targeted to support children and, by extension, their parents or custodial caregivers. Few services exist that expressly attend to the needs of poor adults (regardless of whether they are women or men, with or without children). The growing number of child-only cases makes clear that the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program (like most other family support programs) is meant to provide for the support and sustenance of children and only incidentally assists women or men who belong to a child's family group.

More emphasis must be placed on the needs of mothers and fathers because they impact children's well-being. Yet, for some, the notion of aiding fathers is more controversial than providing supports to mothers. This paper challenges that viewpoint, suggesting that new federal responsible fatherhood programs that help fathers help themselves and also their families are vitally important and not at odds with needs of mothers. To the contrary, they bring tremendous benefits to mothers and entire families.

Addressing philosophical concerns about fatherhood investments

But let's review this debate in some detail. Previous debates around fatherhood programs raised some important philosophical questions about the relationship between such programs and women and children. With the pending reauthorization of the federal responsible fatherhood program and social services programs aimed mostly at low-income women, now is an opportune time to review and reconsider those questions. Specifically, we need to come to agreement on the following fatherhood policy biases:

- Helping fathers fails to recognize that women face great financial hardships and structural barriers
- All women and families are the same
- Fatherhood policy is relatively unimportant
- Helping fathers is an attack on single mothers

Let's consider each of these biases in turn.

Helping fathers fails to recognize that women face greater financial hardships and structural barriers

Overwhelmingly, low-income families with children are headed by single-parent mothers. As the parent more likely to have legally recognized custody, mothers are also more likely to head households that receive income support services such as TANF, Medicaid, and rent assistance. Still, too many women do not receive adequate support for their families, which is why poverty (chronic economic deprivation) remains a critical issue, particularly in communities of color.

The Census Bureau recently released 2009 poverty and income data. The data reveal that last year 3.7 million additional people fell into poverty, for a total of 43.6 million, the largest number since the bureau began publishing the data in 1959.⁵ The consequences of the Great Recession are clear for those who live in poverty, but it could have been worse. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 was a bold step, saving or creating 1.4 million to 3.3 million jobs, according to analysis by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office.⁶

The Recovery Act also focused on combating poverty: An analysis examining just seven targeted provisions of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act found that they kept more than 6 million additional people from falling into poverty last year.⁷ And initiatives President Barack Obama championed, such as health care reform and the recently passed consumer financial protection agency, will ultimately help millions more families achieve economic security and expand the middle class.

But we can't exactly pat ourselves on the back when more than one in five (20.7 percent) of America's children lived in poverty last year, and racial and ethnic disparities widened at an alarming rate.⁸ There is still significant work to do, and we need our elected leaders to enact measures that will put us on track to reverse these troubling statistics.

The demographics of poverty in the United States reveal that women are much more likely to be poor than men, and that African American and Latino families are shockingly overrepresented among the poor. Among these families, most non-resident fathers are also poor themselves. Across the entire U.S. population:

- Children and women are significantly more likely than men to be poor⁹
- Women are more likely than men to be the head of single-parent households¹⁰
- When women are employed, they are on the losing end of a gender wage gap¹¹

Add to this the fact that women and their children living in poverty are not adequately supported by the current social services system and it becomes readily apparent why the topic of creating policy to respond to the needs of poor men can be a contentious issue.

Women who are single parents continue to face societal and systemic barriers based on poverty and gender. Proposing and instituting social services for men who are (mostly) noncustodial parents while women continue to struggle to take care of themselves and their families can understandably be alarming for these women. Moreover, the idea of responding to overburdened single-mother households by providing education and employment services to low-income men can appear counterintuitive and unjust, particularly given the inadequacy of services provided to women.

But this is looking at the issue backward. Current fatherhood policy recommendations offered by the Obama administration are not proposing that men be provided services women do not receive. Rather, the suggestion is to increase service provisions to both parents so that they can do better for themselves and their kids.

Regardless of intent or objective, any policy or proposal with the possible consequence of diverting resources from low-income women to men should be rejected. But currently proposed fatherhood policies are not intended and are not likely to result in a diversion of social service resources from women to men because this is simply not a popular option among politicians and advocates. Instead, the policy issue at hand is whether fatherhood programs might provide a benefit to women who co-parent with low-income men. As advocates for both women and men, we believe it is essential that the economic security of low-income mothers is protected and that any new responsible fatherhood proposals be analyzed for possible unintended consequences.

In order to fully protect the interests and serve the needs of women, any evaluation of policies or programs directed at low-income communities (including programs for fathers) must take into account a broad array of factors. Proposals must be examined through a lens of race, class, and gender. Simply stated, a straightforward gender analysis that does not simultaneously take into account the realities of race and class will fall short of accurately assessing the potential positive and/or negative impacts of policy on low-income women (regardless of whether that policy concerns men, fatherhood, or any other issues).

All women and families are the same

The argument against spending federal resources on fatherhood programs when women are in desperate straits is stronger with regard to more economically stable and resourced families and communities. People of color, both women and men, are more likely to be members of families and communities living in economic uncertainty and insecurity. Many women who struggle to take care of themselves and their children are co-parenting with men who lack good educations, have few social connections outside of their immediate neighborhoods, and cannot or do not turn to government social service resources to overcome these challenges.

Men in low-income African American and Latino communities are not more likely than women to have access to jobs or to the kind of influence or social capital that men in more middle-class majority communities possess to land good jobs with good wages. Social and systemic bias, based on both gender and race, result in (and complicate the solution to) the overrepresentation of African American and Latino men among the very poor. And it is critical to acknowledge that these same women (grandmothers, mothers, wives, and intimate partners) who are struggling to make ends meet frequently stretch their limited resources even further to also house, feed, and care for the unemployed men in their communities. They often desire not to have to play this role of caretaker over adult men and would be financially better off if they didn't.

Fatherhood policy is relatively unimportant

Many women stand to benefit from financial help. Families headed by single mothers are disproportionately poor—44 percent of children in these households are poor, compared to 11 percent of those in married-couple families.¹² The income levels of African American women and Latinas are also bad. Vast numbers of these women find it difficult to maintain a household on their own. Certainly this points to the need for earnest efforts to address concerns around education, training, and the wage gap between male and female workers and workers of color and the majority population. But given the dire circumstances facing poor women and their children, those solutions cannot be the whole story.

These American families can use all the help that is available, including from the fathers of these families who have special obligations and connections to children. Excluding these fathers from the equation makes little sense, especially since one

of the most significant goals of our social policies is to promote self-sufficiency. Given their current status in the workforce, largely focusing on low-income mothers will mean that for many, there will be a need to supplement their meager incomes with government services and financial support. Giving fathers the tools they need in order to be able to financially and otherwise contribute to working mothers' efforts (whether within the home or outside of it) should bring mothers several steps forward in reducing their reliance on government assistance.

Goals focused on poverty reduction and family self-sufficiency indicate a need to dramatically elevate fatherhood programs and services as a national priority, even during this era of concern about the national deficit. Doing so should lead to future returns in the form of reduced spending on public benefits. It would also reduce the costs of child poverty to the economy. In 2007, this estimated tab was \$500 billion in lost productivity, health care costs, and criminal justice expenditures.¹³

Helping fathers attacks single mothers

Another important argument that is often raised against fatherhood policy is that these programs might help revitalize and sustain the societal bias against single women and mothers. Historically, single mothers in our country were legally discriminated against, treated as social outcasts, and officially reprimanded for their unmarried or unpartnered status. Conservatives argued that financial support for single mothers under the old AFDC program encouraged the creation of households headed up by single mothers and absent fathers. The implementation of the subsequent TANF program proves this theory wrong. Removing significant numbers of women from financial assistance, and even providing families with marriage programs, did not result in dramatic decreases in single-mother households.¹⁴

But there is some concern among some antipoverty and women's advocates that new fatherhood policies are intended to further advance marriage-policy objectives that do little on their own to help low-income women overcome poverty. There is good reason to voice concern about any policy that could encourage or constrains women and men to assume the gender-based roles of child caretaker and economic provider, respectively. Turning back the clock on the well-fought-for progress earned by the women's movement is undesirable. Also, dual-income earners with flexible working hours are almost mandatory for low-income families striving to join the middle class.¹⁵

Certainly, parents who are not married couples should not be forced or incentivized into idealized traditional nuclear families. Policymakers and advocates for both parents are well advised to work to keep personal relationship directives and objectives out of social services policy, including fatherhood policy proposals.

With regard to intimate relationships, it is also important to acknowledge that for some women, official status as a single non-cohabitating parent may not indicate the status of her relationship with her child's father. In more middle-class communities, co-parents who live in separate spaces typically experienced a divorce, separation, or estrangement. In contrast, in low-income communities of color (particularly African American communities) that may not be the case. Program rules for subsidized, public, and homeless housing may discourage or prevent men from living with their families.

In families where eligibility for social services is essential to combat poverty and program rules therefore govern, single-parent households are not necessarily the result of parents who are divorced, separated, or estranged. Women in these partnerships are likely to benefit from the man's receipt of social services. But even women who are no longer intimately involved with their partners often benefit as well via such means as their ability to pay child support.

What women want

Over the past several years, the Center for Family Policy and Practice held listening sessions with low-income African American and Latina women, some of whom were victims and survivors of domestic violence. In these sessions, women expressed their need for greater economic security, social welfare services, physical safety, and social justice. Many wanted to move past the romantic relationship with their former partners, but at the same time, these women shared the view that the men in their communities are in dire need of social services.

They expressed many reasons for their belief that social service provision for men in low-income communities is essential, among them the need for their communities to have stable employed adults, for children to see their fathers and other men as self-sufficient and secure. But perhaps the most important reasons they gave was that under current social welfare policy, men cannot do their part to support their families through these programs. They cannot make their equal contribution to their families because they cannot support themselves or their children.

Of course, when men are not in a position to provide this support, the burden on women becomes even greater.

The women we heard from acknowledged that personal responsibility is one important factor in this regard, but they said that the issue goes deeper and touches on the discrimination and stereotyping that black and Latino men experience in American society. Women across these listening sessions felt that men must be held accountable when they use violence but simultaneously they favor community-based social services that would help *all* men in their communities with education, employment, housing, and health services. The next section of our paper examines how this can be done effectively and efficiently.

Where we're going

How greater investments in fatherhood programs can benefit mothers and children

Future policies targeting fathers and mothers could be of greater benefit to one another if they are considered in tandem. For this reason and many others related to the well-being of low-income men and children, fatherhood programs are worthy of significant policy attention designed to ensure that they reach their full potential in serving each member of a family, including the men. When it comes to mothers, there are important concerns related to:

- Economic support
- Domestic violence
- Relationship choices
- Child care
- Reproductive health
- Childhood success
- Work-life balance

Let's look at each of these situations in turn.

Economic support

Fathers can help mothers with valuable economic support as mothers struggle to maintain a household with a limited income. Those who are married or otherwise sharing a home with the mothers of their children can contribute to household income. Nonresident fathers can make child support payments and or otherwise help provide for a child's needs. But these financial arrangements need to be promoted in a different way than currently done under existing social welfare policy.

As currently configured, the federal fatherhood program is partially designed to provide, and facilitate, connections to employment services such as subsidized employment, job training, and job search help.¹⁶ Strengthening these programs through additional funding, expanded capacity, and strategic collaborations with employment, housing, education, medical support programs that target

overlapping populations (reentry and child support enforcement programs), and others would help fathers produce more income that could be used to help support their children.

Existing fatherhood programs also help men understand and manage their child support obligations while encouraging payments. Models for doing this work effectively should be encouraged and best practices replicated. This can be particularly relevant to families in which men have fallen behind on their child-support payments. Faced with collection demands that can be overwhelming alongside wage garnishment at work, these men may disconnect from the child support system and the world of legal employment. Appropriate fatherhood support programs should help men budget their income accounting for child support obligations, make necessary adjustments to their obligations based on any changes in their income, and take advantages of opportunities to develop repayment plans for past-due sums.

Other functions provided by the fatherhood support programs also could help families financially in a more indirect way. By encouraging fathers' involvement with their children by helping parents plan visitation times and in other ways help manage the task of co-parenting, they can facilitate increased income for mothers and children. Studies clearly demonstrate that fathers who are involved in their children's lives are more likely to pay child support.¹⁷ And fathers involved in their children's upbringing also improves the earning capabilities of the mothers because it enables the women to find more steady work with more opportunities for advancement. With federally funded child support enforcement agencies collecting 62 percent of the amounts owed by noncustodial parents, there is clearly room for improvement, even as these agencies have steadily increased their payment rates over the years.¹⁸

In addition to (or in lieu of) formal child support payments, fathers often provide noncash support. These dads purchase diapers, formula, groceries, school supplies, clothing, or toys for Christmas and provide them to directly to their children. Such purchases help mothers by relieving some of the financial pressures placed on their shoulders—they become one less item that the mother must purchase for her children. As with formal child support payments, these in-kind supports are much more likely to occur if fathers are an active part of their children's lives.¹⁹ So in this way, too, fatherhood programs that support active engagement by men in their children's lives can also influence the degree to which mothers benefit from noncash support.

The upshot: By helping men address their employment challenges, fulfill child support obligations, and maintain relationships (or visitation times) with their children, fatherhood programming helps to increase the amount of economic resources available to mothers, helping to relieve some of the financial stressors and pressures they experience.

Child care

For low-income mothers who need to work, safe and affordable child care is essential. Yet 11.4 percent of preschool children living in poverty with a working mother do not have regular child care arrangements.²⁰ Federally funded child care assistance only addresses some of the actual need—19 states currently have a waiting list for services.²¹

For working mothers, this can lead to some challenging circumstances. Most of them at least partially rely on family members and friends to watch their children as well as help piece together other child care arrangements that can be unreliable.²² Research demonstrates that a lack of consistent child care is a significant contributor to job instability among poor working mothers.²³

Imagine a mother who has a child staying with Grandma Mondays and Tuesdays, then with a sister on Wednesdays, in a preschool program on Thursday and Friday mornings, and with a friend on Thursday and Friday afternoons. If Grandma gets sick, the mother may have to scramble to find another caretaker. If she's unsuccessful, she may have to miss out on work hours and accompanying pay, or worse, risk losing her job because she is unable to show up.²⁴

Although there can be no substitute for significantly expanding access to child care and pre-school services, involved and connected fathers can be helpful in these circumstances. A significant number of fathers already help out—among children living in poverty, 27 percent of preschoolers and 20.9 percent of those who are grade-school aged had a father providing care in 2005, the last year for which complete data are available.²⁵ Fathers tend to be even more helpful to mothers who work nontraditional hours (non-day shift jobs), which is not uncommon for low-income workers. For children of all income levels who have a mother working nontraditional hours, 38.5 percent of preschoolers and 30.8 percent of those who are grade-school aged had a father providing care in 2005.²⁶

Fatherhood programs work with men to foster connections to their children and help to resolve access and visitation issues, which helps ensure that there is at least one other person available who can help the mother with her child care needs. Most mothers need all the help they can get to ensure that their children are safe and that the income they earn from work remains secure.

Work-life balance

For working mothers, achieving good work-life balance is a significant challenge. They must fulfill everything that is required of them at work while also ensuring that they are doing the best possible job as a mother. It is hard enough for those who have a partner, but for single mothers the demands and stresses can be significant. Many moms successfully master these challenges with style and grace, raising children who are happy, well-adjusted, and successful. But that does not mean they don't benefit from getting as much help as possible as well as some relief from the daily pressures they face.

Encouraging and supporting father involvement helps mothers to address certain challenges related to work-life balance. The demands of parenting can sometimes conflict with the demands of work. For instance, sometimes parents must pick up a sick child from school or go to the school to discuss academic or behavioral problems. These activities may require taking time off from work. Too much time away from work could lead to job loss. Fatherhood programming resulting in greater father involvement mean that these responsibilities can be divided, reducing impacts on women's work.

Further, having an additional person to share parental responsibilities relieves some of the stress on working mothers, hopefully freeing up some time for personal needs not related to child rearing. With other caretakers in the picture, moms can have greater opportunities to enjoy needed time with adult friends or time alone. This can only help them to maintain balance and well-being in their lives.

Domestic violence

There is no doubt that domestic violence remains a serious concern to women and society as a whole. Threats to a woman's safety, and especially within the vicinity of children, are not to be tolerated. With an estimated 1.3 million women experi-

encing physical violence each year,²⁷ fatherhood programs can play a unique role in addressing the problem.

As currently configured, the federal fatherhood legislation includes provisions that:

- Require fatherhood-program grantees (community-based organizations, government agencies, and others) to provide the federal government with information about how they will address domestic violence issues
- Require fatherhood-program grantees to consult with experts in domestic violence and domestic violence coalitions
- Require that women’s participation in any responsible fatherhood programs and services be voluntary
- Allow federal funds to be used for disseminating information about the causes of domestic violence
- Allow funds to be used on educating men about how to control aggressive behavior
- Allow funds to be used on relationships skills and mentoring²⁸

These provisions help to protect women’s safety and support men in preventing future physical harm by developing nonviolent approaches to handling relationship conflict.

Great inroads have been made in building bridges between domestic violence advocates, social services providers, and those providing fatherhood services. But there is still more work to do. Certain problems must continue to be addressed, such as how to prevent rules focused on addressing domestic violence from preventing participation in fatherhood programs—men prone to violence should not be excluded from services that aim to prevent men from participating in violence. Also, interviews conducted with fatherhood programs in a sampling of five states caused CFFPP to conclude the following:

While programs did appear to have methods in place to address domestic violence in accordance with ACF [Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services] requirements, there was little consistency across programs. Moreover, many of the fatherhood program staff who CFFPP interviewed had little or no input on how domestic violence would be addressed in their programs, and showed limited awareness of its ultimate implications for programs and families.²⁹

These are important challenges around program rules and further educating fatherhood service providers must be addressed.

Yet the role that fatherhood programs can play in addressing domestic violence and increasing women's safety should not be ignored. There is certainly value attached to continuing to build relationships among service providers from both the domestic violence and fatherhood communities. The following points are important about the work of the latter:

- Any venue can be used to engage men around the issue of domestic violence
- Men talking to other men about why violence against women is wrong, modeling good behavior and sharing similar perspectives. Many fatherhood service providers are men, and group settings and mentoring efforts can also help to facilitate these interactions
- Adding a new set of service providers who are engaging with men and couples about their relationships. These individuals may not otherwise engage with any other professionals, allowing for the identification of problems with domestic violence that may have otherwise gone unnoticed, and the provision of helpful services.

Ultimately, it is clear that, if implemented appropriately, these services can work toward prevention of, and education about, intimate partner violence.

Reproductive health

Women would further benefit from fatherhood programs that work with men on reproductive health concerns. Although current legislation does not urge programs to engage in these activities, it should. Too often, the responsibility for birth control falls on women.

Fatherhood programs provide a unique opportunity to provide men with information about family planning while urging them to assume some responsibility in such decisions. This may be particularly relevant for those fathers who are not in committed relationships and who may already have multiple children (possibly with more than one mother). In addition, working with men on their financial

responsibilities and child support obligations could easily lead men to conclude that they aren't ready to have more children, providing an opportunity to discuss information about family planning.

Fatherhood programs could also play a role in preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Notably, HIV is a public health crisis among people living in poverty—this group is at greater risk than those at higher income levels.³⁰ Given this, every avenue for educating communities should be explored. Responsible fatherhood programs, being one of a few government programs reaching low-income men and falling within an even smaller subset that reach them in comfortable community-based settings, are uniquely situated to inform them about ways to protect not only their health, but that of their female sexual partners. Men should see themselves as critical partners in planning for families and protecting sexual health, and fatherhood programs are an excellent way to reach them.

Providing more choices

Poverty can limit women's and men's choices about family formation and maintenance. The inability to find work and earn an adequate income adds pressure to intimate partner relationships, with arguments and worries about money sometimes leading to separations.³¹ In fact, low-income couples are less likely to stay together and are more likely to cite financial problems as the cause of their divorces.³² Thus, for those women who want to maintain a relationship with the fathers of their children, poverty limits their ability to make that choice. Improving employment opportunities and the incomes of both mothers and fathers expands parents' ability to stay together if that's what they want to do, suggesting an additional value for fatherhood programs that help men with their employment barriers.

Further, when intimate partner relationships go bad, low-income families are less likely to be able to afford marriage and family counseling services that could help mothers maintain family relationships that they may desire to keep. There is much to be learned about how to successfully provide such services to low-income families. A recent evaluation of the federal healthy marriage services revealed general failures to help parents maintain their romantic relationships.³³

But if successful models can be developed and delivered via fatherhood programs or other providers, then this could be beneficial to mothers who desire continued partnerships with the fathers of their children and healthy family relationships.

Importantly, these models must be built around taking cues from couples—program patterns or practices that put pressure on parents to marry would deprive couples of the ability to make choices about the most personal and intimate of decisions. Such decisions are vitally important to adults who have limited amounts of choice in multiple other fields due to their limited income and social status.

Finally, low-income couples regularly face limitations related to co-parenting post-separation. They are less likely to get help from the courts and/or to benefit from alternative dispute resolution methods (such as mediation and parent education) that can help resolve questions about custody, visitation, and child support in a manner that aims to minimize conflict and foster effective co-parenting relationships.³⁴ Thus, a mother may be locked into post-separation parenting relationships laden with unnecessary stress and conflict that she does not want. Without clearly outlined responsibilities, she may get into frequent arguments with the father about whether or how often he should see the children and whether he is giving her enough money or providing enough noncash support for the child.

The mother may want to maintain the family relationship between the father and child and maintain a co-parenting relationship that is as healthy as possible, but be limited in her ability to do so due to a lack of supports that are commonly accessible to families that have greater financial means. Thus, fatherhood programs that help parents resolve these issues can be of tremendous benefit to mothers.

In short, poverty limits mothers' choices about maintaining intimate partnership relations and developing successful post-separation family relationships. Fatherhood program services that foster positive employment outcomes for men, provide relationship supports, and help couples with defining post-separation obligations to one another, offer women opportunities and choices about their family relationships that wouldn't otherwise exist.

Childhood success

Mothers want their children to grow up to fulfill their full potential and lead successful lives. Research suggests that children who live with their fathers or otherwise benefit from a relationship with a noncustodial father are more likely to achieve positive outcomes related to academic success and reduced behavioral problems.³⁵

To the extent that fatherhood programs foster and encourage father-child relationships, mothers may appreciate the possibility that this may help their children become better-adjusted children and more successful adults. Federal fatherhood policies should encourage these father-child relationships as much as possible while also ensuring that the mothers are not forced to participate in programs that threaten their own (and their children's) well-being.

Limiting the negative consequences of fatherhood programs experienced by women

For mothers, fatherhood programs can help address concerns that they have about household income, child care, work-life balance, domestic violence, reproductive health, family relationship choices, and life outcomes for their children. But to the greatest extent possible, services should not lead to negative consequences in women's lives. Thus, precautions should be taken to ensure that fatherhood programming is not about:

- Pressuring mothers to get married or make specific relationship choices
- Jeopardizing their safety by forcing contact with an abusive man
- Depriving programs that serve mothers' needs of resources in order to give them to men
- Discriminating against their families based on issues related to sexual orientation or religious affiliation

To the extent that such problems exist, they must be identified and stamped out via efforts by HHS to identify potential grantees who are appropriately responsive to these concerns, effective rulemaking, and vigorous monitoring and enforcement. How these objectives can be achieved through reforms to fatherhood responsibility programs is the subject of the next section.

Implications for policy discussions and reforms

Congress recently began debate on reauthorizing and funding fatherhood policy programs, which means it is imperative that the debate refrains from pitting the interests of women against those of men. Instead, policymakers must focus on what's best for children and families.

In reality, the lines between fatherhood and low-income women policies are not so clear. Fatherhood policy programs can be of great benefits to mothers. To pretend otherwise does a great disservice to efforts to reconsider and reform fatherhood policy. Although this paper has put great focus on framing the debate, it also suggests important policy reforms.

Strengthen fatherhood programs and innovations

The CAP paper *Low-Income Fathers Need to Get Connected: Helping Children and Families by Addressing Low-Income Fathers' Disconnections from Employment, Society and Housing* outlines a series of important reforms for the next generation of fatherhood policy. These reforms include expanding available resources for these programs, developing comprehensive service models that focus on the broad range of the challenges faced by fathers, and always including considerations about fathers within services and programs that are focused on “families.”³⁶

Support the capacity of fatherhood programs to facilitate child-support payments

The Department of Health and Human Services should continuously work to identify best practices in this area and others, making that information available to relevant programs, including those not benefiting from federal funding. This could be accomplished through Web-based materials, guidance documents, and Web-based or in-person trainings. These efforts should place an emphasis on leveraging

partnerships with other relevant entities, such as child support enforcement agencies and legal services providers.

Expand access and visitation services

Fathers' access and visitation rights with their children is critically important, given that fatherhood programs aim to support father involvement and that such involvement is associated with increased financial support via formal child support and noncash help. Through alternative dispute resolution and co-parenting support services such as mediation, supervised visitation, and parent education visitation arrangements are developed and implemented, effective co-parenting relationships are supported, and father-child connections are more likely to be maintained. In the CAP paper *Parenting with a Plan*, several access and visitation reforms are suggested, including expanding the role of community-based organizations and legal services providers.³⁷

Encourage help with child care and work-life balance

Legislative changes and administration leadership can work to encourage fatherhood programs to help with the child care and work-life balance concerns of mothers. Specifically, in counseling couples in relationships and in developing parenting plans for those who are not, fatherhood programs can work with couples to identify ways that they can share the responsibilities of parenting and care.

Continue to improve the connections between domestic violence and responsible fatherhood programs

It is most helpful to think of fatherhood services as a prevention tool rather than just a set of services that women should be protected from. Fatherhood programs should not exclude men involved in domestic violence situations, but work with them on preventing future violence while mothers and children are sufficiently protected from harm. Finally, administrative agency leadership should continuously seek to identify and promote best practices.

Encouraging fatherhood programs to engage men around issues of reproductive and sexual health

Current legislation doesn't specifically list such activities as a permissible use of funds. That should change. The legislation should include reproductive and sexual health education as a possible use of funds, and encourage other programs to engage in these activities. This should coincide with leadership from HHS in the form of instructive guidance and the distribution of best practices information.

Conclusion

Fatherhood policy is about men, but also about families. As co-parenting partners, mothers stand to benefit greatly from the services provided by fatherhood programs. Although the topic of fatherhood raises some tough philosophical questions about women, financial and social inequalities, and differences that exist among families of differing socio-economic statuses and races, those questions do not invalidate work in this area.

There are several good reasons for further developing the federal fatherhood program. These include the benefits that accrue to women in the areas of economic stability, child care, work-life balance, domestic violence, reproductive health, relationship choices, and the success of their children and ultimately their children's children.

Certainly, there remains a continued need to improve and expand social welfare services that historically benefited mothers. The value of programs such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant, which offers child care assistance to low-income families, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cannot be denied. But securing a sufficient and secure place for fatherhood programs within this universe of federal programs should not be considered a conflicting priority but an opportunity to provide additional necessary services for families.

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