



Federal and State Policy Initiatives to Strengthen Fatherhood: Issues and Implications for Practitioners

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Federal and State Policy Initiatives to Strengthen Fatherhood: Issues and Implications for Practitioners

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Introduction: A Conceptual and Historical Perspective on Fatherhood Policies

Fatherhood is on the public agenda. From presidential executive orders to state commissions to bills before the United States Congress, efforts are under way across the nation to target the promotion of responsible fatherhood as a key element in public policy initiatives to assist children and families. Why fatherhood? Perhaps, as one leading researcher has noted:

Increasingly more children do not live with their fathers, relate to their fathers on a regular basis, or enjoy the economic support of their fathers. In my view, this situation is a rending of the moral fabric of family life and thus of society as a whole; as a generation of men fail to engage in responsible generativity toward the next generation. (Doherty, 1997, p. 221)

The spectrum of public debate on fatherhood is wide-ranging and too often polarizing. Yet as this quote suggests, there is a building consensus that at its core, fatherhood involves the issues of children's needs, men's responsibilities, and the moral dimensions of family and community life.

Current initiatives reflect the surging academic, governmental, and grassroots interest in finding ways to effectuate more positive outcomes for children and families faced with a range of problems and concerns. Much of the focus on promoting responsible fatherhood stems from a combination of increasing societal concern over trends in family life (divorce, out-of-wedlock childbirth, etc.), greater knowledge of fathers' importance in family life, and a resurgence of interest in governmental efforts to prompt healthy and effective family relationships (Horn, Blankenhorn, & Pearlstein, 1999).

Both federal and state governments in the United States have become increasingly active in

promoting responsible fatherhood in the last decade. National and state-level executives have issued challenges to government agencies to intensify efforts to support father involvement in family life. Federal and state agencies have focused new attention on developing programs to effectively address the needs of fathers. Such initiatives have important implications for practitioners working with a variety of family-related concerns including teen pregnancy, marriage education, welfare assistance, mental health, separation and divorce, domestic violence, incarceration, and other matters related to fathers' involvement in family life.

Whether the challenges in contemporary society related to fatherhood are located in fathers' individual behavior, the erosion of social norms, or deficiencies in governmental or workplace policies, the fact remains that fathers' influence and involvement in family life is a pervasive societal concern (Booth & Crouter, 1998; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Levine & Pitt, 1995; Popenoe, 1996). It is such a concern, in fact, that it led former President William J. Clinton to issue an executive order in 1995 directing all federal departments and agencies to review all programs "that pertain[s] to families to ensure" those programs would "seek to engage and meaningfully include fathers" (Clinton, 1995). The seriousness of this issue in the last two decades prompted fatherhood scholars Levine and Pitt (1995) to suggest that "an unprecedented consensus is emerging across political lines and academic disciplines that a key to any national strategy to strengthen families and improve the lives of children is the increased responsibility of fathers" (p. 4).

A Conceptual Approach to Fatherhood Policies

Father- and male-oriented governmental policies tend to occur on a continuum, from local programs

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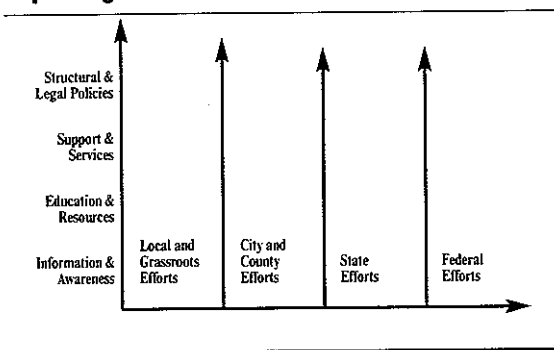
to state and federal initiatives, and across varying contexts and circumstances. As a result, no "one-size-fits-all" approach to public policy can match the needs and conditions of fathers and children. However, it may be useful to conceptually map such policy efforts using a "levels of policy" approach, combined with the contextual perspective of the domains of policy development.

Approaches to promoting family well-being range from low-level informational brochures on the benefits of father involvement to macro-level initiatives, such as state fatherhood commissions. Figure 1 illustrates a four-tiered approach to levels of policy targeting fatherhood that includes: (1) Information and Awareness - Public service announcements, informational brochures, resource guides, etc.; (2) Education and Resources - Educational programs, resource libraries, hot-lines, etc.; (3) Support and Services - Human resources, support programs, economic or training assistance, etc.; and (4) Structural and Legal Policies - Organizational priorities, legislation and policies, advisory committees, etc. These different levels of policy action may be nested within successive domains of policy development. Included in the conceptual outline for heuristic purposes are local and grassroots efforts (i.e., hospital-based mental health program), city and county efforts (i.e., mayoral task force), state efforts (i.e., state legislation),

and federal efforts (i.e., federally mandated programs such as Head Start). It is important to recognize that policies originating from different domains will have differing impacts on fathers, and that there is generally significant overlap between levels of policy action.

Another consideration in understanding policy initiatives addressing father involvement is the target population itself. Most successful initiatives do not broadly target all fathers across all contexts, but specify the population of fathers and father figures that is intended to be the focus of a specific policy approach. Levine and Pitt (1995) argue for the development and replication of large numbers of "micro experiments," referring to "changes that are within the experience and sphere of responsibility of most people working with families," and to many initiatives which are already "on their way to changing the culture of fatherhood for their target audiences" (pp. 35-36). Fathers are connected with, and relate to, their children across a range of familial contexts. A policy initiative that targets paternity establishment of young, unmarried fathers, presumes a much different target audience than an educational program to foster married fathers' involvement with special needs children. Thus, it is critical to identify the target population to be assisted by a specific policy initiative, and to consider approaches that will be sensitive to the context and circumstances of those targeted fathers.

Figure 1: Family Policy Levels and Domains Impacting Fatherhood



A Historical Perspective on Fatherhood Policies

If reading the presidential rhetoric on fatherhood can be likened to reading the tea leaves, consider the following statement from President George W. Bush: *[I am] determined to make committed, responsible fatherhood a national priority... [T]he presence of two committed, involved parents contributes directly to better school performance, reduced substance abuse, less crime and delinquency, fewer emotional and behavioral problems, and less risk of abuse or neglect... The research is clear: fathers factor signifi-*

cantly in the lives of their children. There is simply no substitute for the love, involvement, and commitment of a responsible father. (White House, 2001, p. 75)

This statement suggests that fatherhood is a “national priority” and that public policy ought to focus on the formation of the “responsible” father — the father who is loving, involved, and committed to his children. When the priorities for President Bush’s federal budget plan for the Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families were released in early 2002, responsible fatherhood topped the agenda among funding and programming priorities. Historically, this is probably the most high-profile initiative targeted at responsible fatherhood.

For ease of consideration, a brief overview of governmental policies targeting fatherhood issues during the last four decades will be presented.

1960–1969. Public concern about fatherhood issues first emerged during the 1960’s. The issue of fatherlessness among black families was thrust into the national spotlight when Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) of the U.S. Department of Labor issued a government report suggesting that the rise of fatherless African American families was a national crisis. He pointed to lower employment rates and lower earnings among this population as a critical factor contributing to the high rate of fatherlessness. The 1960s also saw an increase in family trends associated with father-absent homes, in particular increased incidence of divorce and the rise of unwed motherhood. These trends coincided with a marked expansion in federal-level social and economic welfare programs under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, including the food stamp program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), job training programs, economic opportunity programs, and more (Zimmerman, 1995). Though not targeting fatherhood specifically, these programs provided a governmental response to family concerns often associated with fathers’ absence or employment challenges.

1970–1979. Although the 1970s did not represent a time of significant policy formation related to fatherhood issues, it was a time when family trends associated with fatherhood concerns reached an all-time high. Divorce rates rose steadily and peaked at the end of this period, with about twenty-three divorces per one thousand married couples in 1980, up from just nine divorces per one thousand married couples in 1960—an increase of over 300 percent in two decades (Popence, 1996). One important policy development that affected this realm of family life was the widespread initiation of “no-fault” divorce laws throughout the United States, making divorce a more readily available alternative than it had been before. Rates of out-of-wedlock childbirth also increased substantially in this period, prompting concern about the number of children being raised without a father’s influence. In 1973, Title XX of the federal Social Security Act was enacted, providing federal block grants to all states for a wide variety of social services, including child protection services, adoption services, family planning services, and others that had implications for fathers’ involvement in family life (Zimmerman, 1995). Some male involvement programs targeted typically at low-income, African-American men emerged during this time at the community level and pioneered program efforts with fathers (Gadsden, Pitt, & Tift, 2001).

1980–1989. The 1980s were a tumultuous political period in the United States. Governmental policies impacting fatherhood became more common and explicit. For example, the Carter Administration held the 1980 White House Conference on Families which focused attention on family issues and governmental responses. Child welfare programs in many states adopted family preservation models of service (in-home, family-based services) to work on prevention of out-of-home placements of abused children. Other developments included a focus on fathers’ economic support of children. The 1988 Family Support Act passed by the U.S. Congress, emphasized the states’ need to conduct

child support enforcement (Zimmerman, 1995). Gadsden et al. (2001) suggest, this "represented a significant turning point, addressing for the first time major issues associated with financial child support, father absence, and the relationship of these issues to child welfare and family efficacy" (p. 259). Although the Family Support Act focused attention primarily on divorced fathers and payment of child support, it also initiated much discussion on the needs of low-income fathers, and prompted the establishment of major demonstration projects focused on low-income fathers (Gadsden et al., 2001). Other important policy concerns included visitation and child custody guidelines for fathers who divorced or were never married, as some fathers individually and collectively began to challenge what they perceived to be unfair treatment in legal and policy settings (Popenoe, 1996).

1990–Present. The period covering the 1990s to the present might be characterized as the "heyday" of policy formation and initiation related to fatherhood issues. In 1994, Vice President Al Gore convened a national meeting on fatherhood as part of his annual Family Reunion gatherings that focused on family issues. This early initiative in a new Democratic administration marked a turning point in national discussion on fatherhood issues (Horn, Blankenhorn, & Pearlstein, 1999). President Clinton's groundbreaking executive order on fatherhood, issued in 1995, directed federal agencies to meaningfully ensure fathers' involvement in programs. From that point forward, federal agencies, ranging from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to the Department of Health and Human Services, launched program reviews and departmental initiatives on fatherhood that affected dozens of federal programs. Implementation of such efforts is continuing today in many federal agencies.

The demonstration projects focused on low-income fathers that began in the late 1980s, specifically the Young Unwed Fathers Project and the Parents' Fair Share Demonstration, had, by the

early 1990s, raised greater attention to the issues facing fathers and low-income families. Policy makers soon recognized that programs for this population needed to encompass employment, training, and other issues (Gadsden et al., 2001). The passage of revised welfare reform legislation (the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act) in 1996 introduced a new era of economic assistance, as it set specific goals for family formation, father involvement, and the reduction of out-of-wedlock childbirth. Currently, the Republican administration under George W. Bush has continued to emphasize responsible fatherhood, designating tens of millions of dollars in the federal budget for responsible fatherhood promotion.

In addition to federal emphasis on fatherhood issues, numerous states have taken the lead on passing legislation, appointing commissions, and/or coordinating bodies to improve services to, and involvement of, fathers in programs for women, children, and families. For example, in 1996, the Florida state legislature set up a state commission on responsible fatherhood to raise awareness of fatherhood issues and promote healthy relationships among fathers and children in that state. A recent review showed that in the year 2000, there were fifteen states that appropriated TANF funds for fatherhood initiatives ranging from Arizona to Illinois to Maryland (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2000). These developments point to a continuing focus on specific fatherhood-related policy initiatives, at both the state and federal levels, that is unlikely to fade in the near future.

This summary provides only a limited snapshot of the issues and policies affecting fatherhood that have been part of public debate and action over the last four decades in the United States. It does furnish a picture, however, of growing concern related to family trends, such as increased divorce and non-marital childbirth rates, and the increasingly explicit attempts to fashion governmental responses to father involvement in American family life.

Federal and State Initiatives to Strengthen Fatherhood

Policy initiatives to strengthen fatherhood have been introduced by statehouses, legislatures, and courts throughout the United States. While the impact of such efforts is just beginning to be studied, it is clear that this emphasis is shifting the debate on family support activities for both practitioners and policymakers. Referring to such efforts, child welfare researchers have noted, "While much work lies ahead, the broad framework for the responsible fatherhood movement has already been developed" (Mincy & Pouncy, 1999, p. 93). This framework seems to involve a combination of broadly focused cultural messages on the value of involved fathers, modifications of existing policies and programs to be more father-inclusive, and the proliferation of programs and resources intended to specifically engage the needs of fathers in a variety of contexts. It is the initiatives targeted at specific fathering audiences that are perhaps the most consequential in their implications for practitioners who work with individuals and families. Key groups being targeted in efforts to promote responsible fatherhood include low-income fathers, teenage fathers, incarcerated fathers, and divorced fathers.

Low-Income Fathers and Fatherhood Policies

Much of the focus on fatherhood in policy settings targets a particular group of men — low-income fathers. In any policy context, it is vital to tailor approaches so that they meet the needs of persons across varying circumstances, and this is especially true when working with low-income fathers. A majority of fathers in this category fit the term "fragile family," which refers to a family unit formed by out-of-wedlock births to disadvantaged parents (Mincy & Pouncy, 1999). In looking at communities where such families are common, researchers suggest that most of the children are born outside of marriage, and those on public assistance often have not had a father legally identified (Mincy & Pouncy, 1999). Thus, absence of mar-

riage and even legal paternity must be recognized as common issues to address in facilitating father-child connections. Scholars have noted, "fatherlessness manifests itself differently at different income levels" (Mincy & Pouncy, 1999, p. 83). Families in these circumstances tend to be dependent upon, and therefore already engaged with, governmental programs providing family support and economic assistance. The promotion of responsible fatherhood in this population is thus seen in acts of legislation targeting families in economic need, as well as in existing programs, such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) (economic assistance) or Head Start and Early Head Start (early childhood education and welfare).

Legislation introduced in the U.S. Congress in the last several years has specifically targeted fathers in low-income situations. Most recently, this legislation includes the Responsible Fatherhood Act of 2001 (Senate Bill 653, House Bill 1300) and the Promotion and Support of Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Marriage Act of 2001 (House Bill 2893). These bills have generally been bipartisan efforts and have attempted to fund programs addressing key goals of responsible fatherhood, including to "help fathers to support their families and avoid welfare by helping them to take advantage of employment-related programs and support regular payment of child support" (see H.R. 2893). It seems likely that some form of this legislation will soon pass at the national level, providing additional millions of dollars for responsible fatherhood efforts.

The federal government's primary program of economic assistance to needy families, TANF, underwent significant reform in 1996 with new time limits being placed on receiving assistance, work requirements, and an emphasis on family formation. However, some concern has been expressed that too little attention has been given to fathers in this process. Reichert (2000) argues that "recent reforms in welfare and child support have focused almost exclusively on helping mothers move off welfare, without assistance given to helping their

male counterparts become contributors to their children's emotional and financial well-being" (p. 1). In the policy arena, organizations like the National Conference of State Legislatures (2000) have begun to focus exclusively on reforming policies and providing services to low-income fathers. Some basic steps to guide concerned policy makers include developing a statewide strategy, facilitating support for attention to low-income fathers in program efforts, and identifying areas for systemic change in how fathers and families are served.

Two examples of innovative policy approaches are the Parents' Fair Share (PFS) and the Partners for Fragile Families (PFF) demonstration research projects. Funded with support from the Department of Health and Human Services, the PFS project was implemented at seven demonstration sites, integrating services between child support enforcement and local providers serving low-income fathers (employment-related training, parent education, etc.) (Doolittle, Knox, Miller, & Rouser, 1998). Funded through HHS support and private foundations, the PFF project had demonstration sites in ten states, and focused on helping fathers work with the mothers of their children in sharing legal, financial, and emotional responsibilities as parents (MacLanahan & Garfinkel, 1999). Such projects are at the forefront of unique policy approaches addressing the needs of low-income fathers and families.

For low-income fathers who live in rural areas, fatherhood programs and resources are often scant or even non-existent. In fact, the only fatherhood policy that generally reaches rural low-income fathers is that which originates from federal-level legislation mandated through various programs serving low-income populations. For example, Head Start and Early Head Start tend to be fairly popular programs in rural America and on many Native American reservations. Current federal regulations require all Head Start and Early Head Start programs to provide opportunities for male involvement beyond the "parent" groups that typically

consist of females. Recently, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2000a) funded twenty-three, three-year fatherhood demonstration projects within Early Head Start sites around the country. The primary objective of these projects was to help Early Head Start grantees increase their capacity to involve fathers in the lives of their children through collaboration with child support offices and other resources within the community.

In general, the Head Start Bureau has been extremely supportive of father involvement in the past few years, admonishing local centers to find ways to include and engage fathers. One of the challenges in rural centers is that budgeting for father involvement programs tends to be extremely limited. Efforts to engage fathers may be supported for brief periods of time, only to be cut off and then re-established during new funding cycles.

Several administrative components are necessary to develop engaged father involvement programs in low-income urban and rural areas, which are applicable to a variety of human service settings. First, adequate funding needs to be allocated and sustained throughout the year. Such programs should not follow a start-stop, start-stop approach. This fragmented trend sends a profound message, not only to fathers, but to the mothers and the primarily female-based staff: Fathers are an afterthought, whose role in healthy child development is de-valued.

Second, human service staff need to be trained and offered a new paradigm that articulates the need to include fathers and/or significant males in their clients' lives. Efforts to identify males who can play a significant role in a child's life should begin at intake, with adjustments as needed for exceptional situations (i.e., domestic violence). New regulations should require a mother to identify at least two potential male role models in a child's life (extended family, male friends, clergy), especially in cases involving single mothers. If mothers are not encouraged to identify the biological father or, at a minimum, some alternative males who can play a significant role, then it becomes much more difficult to

establish such relationships at a later point.

Third, mothers of children involved in human service programs can be encouraged to support and facilitate a father's or other significant male's involvement in their child's life. Human service staff has a tremendous opportunity to influence a mother's perspective of male involvement in these settings.

Finally, male Father Involvement Coordinators, whose function would be similar to that of case-workers and family advocates, need to be hired. In addition to developing father involvement programs and activities, they will personally visit fathers and develop a rapport that will encourage participation in fathering groups and activities that support, train, and encourage responsible fathering and increased involvement (Fagan, 2000).

Teenage Fathers and Fatherhood Policies

In many cases, it is hard to distinguish between policy that targets teen parents from policy focused on low-income parents. On an international scale, America exceeds other countries in the number of adolescents who get pregnant and have children outside of marriage. Annually, about 200,000 teens under the age of 18 have babies, often with low birth weights and exceptionally high mortality rates. A variety of social and personal problems emanate from this situation. As a result, the federal government has developed a new agenda for teen pregnancy prevention. This agenda is based on five principles that underscore the importance of parents and mentors, abstinence and personal responsibility, pathways to college or jobs, public and private sector partnerships, and sustained commitment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1997).

Short of prevention, however, numerous programs have been developed that specifically target teen parents. These programs typically provide critical services, ranging from child development to child care training to increased access to social service programs, each primarily targeting females (Aber, Brooks-Gunn, & Maynard, 1995; Roditti, 1997). While it is vital to provide such services to

teen mothers, they should not come at the expense of needed programs for teen fathers. It has been suggested that while "males as well as females are at risk in teenage pregnancy, males and their families have been grossly overlooked in service delivery practices" (Rhoden & Robinson, 1997, p. 113). A mutually beneficial situation is needed that ensures both groups get their basic needs met without disenfranchising the other. Given the importance of developing a vision for fatherhood policies that includes teen fathers, we provide a brief overview of the antecedents to common risk factors and the experiences and needs of teen fathers that should be considered in the process of this evolving agenda.

Common antecedents or risk factors associated with teen fatherhood include social class, educational performance, precocious sexual activity, and drug use (Thornberry, Smith, & Howard, 1997). Others have identified low academic competence, popularity, and family socioeconomic status, along with high levels of aggression, as significant predictors (Xie, Cairns, & Cairns, 2001). A longitudinal study conducted in Great Britain suggests, compared with males who were not fathers or who waited until their twenties to have children, teen fathers were more likely to: (1) Display aggressive, truant, and law-breaking behaviors (Dearden, Hale, & Woolley, 1995); (2) Have problems at home and school (as much as a decade prior to becoming a teen father); (3) Have parents who were not involved in their education; and (4) Have teachers who gave them negative academic assessments (Dearden, Hale, & Alvarez, 1992). A large national study found that youth who became fathers tended to come from poor, working class, minority, and unstable households with little education (Pirog-Good, 1995) and with attitudes not conducive to completing an education (Pirog-Good, 1996). Perhaps the most damaging effect these risk factors have on teen fathers and their own development occurs when the factors accumulate (Thornberry et al., 1997). These factors combine to often make it more challenging for teen fathers to be fully capa-

ble of providing the emotional and financial support their children require.

A critical policy issue for teen fathers is establishing a legal relationship with their children. Doherty et al. (1998) have suggested, "Declaring legal paternity is the sine qua non of responsible fathering" (p. 279). Children whose fathers establish legal paternity accrue numerous benefits, such as health care (if he is employed), child support, and other advantages. However, legal paternity can be difficult to establish for children of teen parents who are usually not married. In the United States, only about a quarter of children of unwed parents have had paternity established, which is necessary for a child support order to be issued (Roberts, 1996). Reasons for avoiding paternity establishment among teen parents include lack of information, concern about legal issues, opposition from mothers or parents, cultural factors, and social policy barriers (Wattenberg, 1993).

Emphasis upon paternity establishment began in 1975 when Title IV-D became part of the Social Security Act, and created the Child Support Enforcement program. States have led the way in developing policy tools and mechanisms to foster paternity establishment, including voluntary acknowledgment and hospital-based programs. The 1996 welfare reform legislation increased this emphasis in several ways. First, it required states to take specific steps in promoting and facilitating the voluntary acknowledgment of paternity by unwed parents. Second, it required states to pass laws that make paternity establishment easier in contested situations. Third, it provided sanctions for public assistance recipients who did not cooperate in establishing paternity and collecting child support (Roberts, 1996). These measures have substantially enhanced paternity establishment among unwed parents, as rates have increased from 676,000 in 1994, to 1,576,000 in 1999 (Brookings Institute, 2000). Paternity establishment will continue to be an important policy focus due to the large number of male teens who become parents outside of marriage.

The involvement of fathers in pregnancy, childbirth, and early parenting has increased dramatically in recent years (Shapiro, Diamond, & Greenberg, 1995). These trends have likely influenced teen fathers' expectations of involvement. However, many questions remain. For instance, how involved are these young fathers in prenatal care and the delivery, or in the day-to-day feeding, nurturing, and financial support of their children? There is general pessimism about a teen father's actual ability to provide financial support, although some suggest they are just as capable of providing for their child(ren) as teens who were not fathers (Pirog-Good, 1995; 1996).

In addition to physical care and financial support, teen fathers experience a wide range of emotions in the process of becoming a father, from bewilderment and worry to engrossment (Bader, 1995). Depending on their level of cognitive development, emotional experiences may vary from extreme insecurity to feelings of competence. Understanding and responding appropriately to these feelings and emotions can be greatly hampered by inappropriate behavioral choices. The influence of antisocial behavior prior to and during their partner's pregnancy predicted problems during the transition to parenthood for both middle class and working class teen fathers (Florsheim, Moore, Zollinger, MacDonald, & Sumida, 1999). Thus, those working with teen fathers need to consider their developmental level, emotional readiness for parenthood, ability to provide financial support, behavioral choices, and other contextual issues.

Regardless of their level of physical involvement and cognitive support, approaches are needed that give young fathers the benefit of the doubt from the outset, let fathers know that they are important in the life of their child, and provide services to help them meet the needs of their child. A wealth of anecdotal evidence suggests teen fathers sincerely want to be involved in their child's life (Levine & Pitt, 1995). They may simply need a gentle hand or kind nudging to help them find their way. While

parents and grandparents can be an important support network for young fathers (Christmon, 1996), teen fathers frequently report that lack of involvement with their children is often attributable to resistance from mothers and maternal grandmothers (Rhein et al., 1997). Mothers, on the other hand, may attribute lack of involvement to paternal disinterest and lack of time. Maternal gatekeeping in general can have a serious negative effect on a father's experience as a parent (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Helping teen fathers manage the relationship with their child's mother is critical to any policy approach to these young fathers (Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson, 1998).

Many teen fathers are at tremendous risk and have substantial needs. Some of these needs can be addressed through counseling approaches adapted to work effectively with teen fathers. Counseling programs should emphasize establishing rapport and creating a male-friendly setting. Other suggestions include: (1) Changing the rigid 50-minute session format; (2) Using informal activities and alternative time schedules and settings; (3) Employing humor, self-disclosure, and other rapport-building tactics; and (4) Group counseling (Kiselica, 2001).

Policies and programs are needed that move beyond the "one-size-fits-all" approach, and that have a broader vision of providing a variety of services and approaches to a diverse population of teen fathers (McAadoo, 1990; Palm, 1997). Blanket efforts will likely continue to fall short of expected outcomes, because they are not tailored to the specific needs of those they are intended to serve (Dudley & Stone, 2001; Florsheim et al., 1999; Mauldon, 1998). For example, culturally specific approaches should be developed to address the needs of unwed teen fathers (Kiselica, 1995). Also, early efforts that help establish a bond between father and neonate may be critical if we hope to keep the young father involved, especially with those who may otherwise feel disconnected or disenfranchised.

Rigid stereotypes devalue a teen father's role in parenting, a process that comes at high social costs (e.g., low levels of paternity establishment and child support payments) (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Kiselica, Stroud, Stroud, & Rotzien, 1992). To help overcome the limiting effect of such views, policies and programs should be introduced that adopt a strengths-based or capabilities-based approach — one that gives fathers the benefit of the doubt and begins with the assumption that teen fathers want to be involved. Teens also need to have the skills necessary to be competent parents (or the ability to learn them), and they will benefit personally from sharing their paternal experiences — thus giving them a greater incentive to remain involved (Dollahite, Hawkins, & Brotherson, 1997; Dudley & Stone, 2001; Rhoden & Robinson, 1997; Palm, 1997).

Incarcerated Fathers and Fatherhood Policies

Men who commit crimes and end up in the correctional system often face the difficulties associated with prison life and the loneliness of time behind bars. A majority of them face an even greater sentence — physical and emotional separation from their children. It is estimated that in the United States, over 1.6 million children under the age of 18 have a father who is incarcerated (Seymour, 1998). In fact, 55 percent of state prisoners and 63 percent of federal prisoners who are male report having a child under the age of 18, and many of them have two or more children (Mumola, 2000). Fathers far outnumber mothers in the correctional system, with state and federal prisons holding an estimated 667,900 fathers and 53,600 mothers of minor children in 1999 (Mumola, 2000).

The challenges these fathers face in the prison system are very substantial. Davis (2000) notes, "Upon entering correctional facilities, these fathers are young and lack education, employment and financial resources... and more than half of them are men of color. Many are not married to the mother of their children... They are less likely to

pay formal child support, and may accumulate massive arrearages while incarcerated — making it difficult to pay back once they are released” (p. 1). Among the issues of concern for incarcerated fathers are emotional support and physical contact with children, economic support of children, and availability of transitional or assistance programs.

The impact of separation due to the father’s incarceration can be traumatic, and tends to frustrate the continuing and healthy development of the father-child relationship. Prison life also shifts men’s behavior and relationship patterns in new directions. Brooks and Bahna (1994) note, “inmates are de-socialized from the life with their families and socialized to the life of an inmate,” and the resulting behavior patterns may not encourage men “to live fruitfully in society as a whole” (p. 277). Indeed, one of the major concerns is that children without fatherly care and supervision may repeat parental mistakes and end up as inmates themselves (Holt, 2000).

Incarcerated fathers must often try to relate to their children in family situations that are already difficult. Upon entering prison, only 44 percent of fathers in state prison lived with their children prior to admission, and about 90 percent of them say that the children now live with the mother. While 62 percent of male state inmates report some type of monthly contact with their children, the majority of such contact is by phone or mail, and only 40 percent of such fathers report weekly contact with their children. Fifty-five percent of fathers in state prison report never having had a personal visit with their children since being admitted to prison (Mumola, 2000).

These sobering statistics highlight the significant difficulties for incarcerated fathers, who often have minimal contact with their children and may never see their children at all. Davis (2000) identified significant barriers to involvement for incarcerated fathers:

- Fathers may feel that they have little or nothing to contribute and children don’t need them.
- Incarcerated fathers did not develop relation-

ships with children before admission and do not know how to start a relationship from prison.

- Rooms or spaces for visitation in prison are not friendly to family relationships, often being noisy or crowded and having little for children to do.
- Security at prisons can be threatening and scary to children.
- Prison facilities are often in remote locations that are hard to reach using public transportation.
- Children who depend on caregivers to arrange or assist with visits may have difficulty due to time demands or perceived lack of safety by caregivers.
- The father’s relationship with the child’s mother may be strained, and therefore children are shielded from the father’s access or influence.

To overcome these challenges, some state corrections systems are now partnering with private or faith-based groups to provide services and assistance to incarcerated fathers. In Florida, the Tomoka Correctional Facility has partnered with Kairos, a faith-based group, and the Florida Commission on Responsible Fatherhood to sponsor the Horizons program, which engages participants in a separate facility to focus on building family relationships and reinforcing responsible behavior. Illinois offers a Life Skills program in its correctional facilities, a curriculum that focuses on parenting, consumer education, and financial management. In Vermont, the Department of Corrections has teamed with a local community action agency to host a weekly two-hour playgroup for incarcerated fathers and their children (Davis, 2000).

Fathers in prison are likely to have significant child support responsibilities. Among state inmates, 48 percent of parents have never been married and 28 percent are divorced or separated (Mumola, 2000). Men who owe child support normally do not make enough to satisfy their support order, and most never petition for a reduction in their order. Therefore, notes Davis (2000), “Once released these fathers often face a child support debt that is

so high they may never realistically be able to repay it" (p. 1-2). Some states, like Colorado and North Carolina, have begun the simple step of notifying inmates who enter the system of their right to ask for a modification of child support orders upon entry into prison, or even automatically modifying the order to avoid impossible debt loads.

Other factors make it difficult for fathers in prison to meet the economic support needs of their children. Limited job skills and low education levels, combined with a criminal record, makes finding family-sustaining employment upon release more difficult. For inmates anticipating release, policies and programs that link employment assistance and training, child support, and support of community entities provide some promise of helping these men become fathers who are economically responsible.

The issue of incarcerated fathers and their needs has begun to gain more attention in the policy arena in the last several years. Legislation introduced in the U.S. Congress and encouraged by the Bush Administration, the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001 (H.R. 2873 and S. 1503), contained provisions to provide \$67 million in grant monies in 2002 to local governments for mentoring services to children of incarcerated parents through local community groups. This legislation recognizes the need for children of incarcerated parents to receive adult guidance and support, and encourages the development of local programs to assist incarcerated fathers and family members in maintaining contact. In 2000, the Family and Corrections Network partnered with the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families to sponsor a national conference, "The North American Conference on Fathers Behind Bars and on the Street." This conference showcased researchers, corrections workers, and program practitioners working with fathers in correctional settings and was the first of its kind. Such efforts are beginning to create an environment that recognizes inmates as family members and fathers, and that

helping men develop and/or maintain meaningful family linkages is an important dimension of reducing recidivism and preventing the cyclical perpetuation of criminal activity from one generation to the next.

Divorced Fathers and Fatherhood Policies

Divorced fathers represent perhaps the largest group of men in America who face challenges in maintaining strong and caring relationships with their children. One scholar has noted that divorce is not only the dissolution but "literally and substantially an undoing of marriage" (Hopper, 2001, p. 433). In too many situations, divorce unravels the ties that link fathers to their children. Today, demographers estimate that between forty and sixty percent of first marriages in the United States will end in divorce, often with negative resultant consequences for children and the parents themselves (Amato & Booth, 1997; Bumpass, 1990; Emery, 1999; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2000).

Far too often, the primary casualty of divorce is the deterioration of men's relationships with their children. It has been asserted that "for many men, marriage and parenthood are a 'package deal,'" and their parental involvement is seriously fractured when the marriage dissolves (Doherty et al., 1998, p. 286). Fundamental policies affecting divorced men stem from legislative guidelines and the decisions of courtroom judges, and consist of three key elements: child support, child access and visitation, and child custody arrangements.

Fathers who do not fulfill child support responsibilities are often termed "deadbeat dads," a term that "symbolizes the fugitive from justice who has not lived up to the social ideal of responsible fatherhood embodied in the law itself" (Brotherson & Teichert, 2001, p. 29). Data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1995) show that only 48 percent of mothers awarded child support receive the full amount from their children's fathers, with the remainder being split about equally between those receiving some payment and those receiving none at all.

The Child Support Enforcement Program was created in 1975 with the addition of Title IV-D to the Social Security Act. Each state's Child Support Enforcement program fulfills the functions of finding non-custodial parents, establishing paternity, issuing child support orders, and collecting support obligations. In 1996, provisions of the welfare reform legislation (PRWORA) focused on child support in an attempt to increase the number of child support orders and overall collection rates. The legislation established a new national directory to track new hires and identify parents obligated to pay child support; created uniform child support forms across states; computerized the collection system; and established strong new penalties, including wage withholding, asset seizure, and revocation of professional licenses. These reforms have led to a sixty-five percent increase in child support collections, approximately \$17.9 billion 2000 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002).

For many divorced fathers who struggle to maintain relationships with their children, the emphasis on child support enforcement at the expense of their other contributions as parents makes them feel like "sperm donors with checkbooks" (Christensen, 2000). A divorced father's provision of child support payments is often influenced by his feelings about other policies that impact his life, particularly custody and visitation arrangements. Seventy-nine percent of fathers who perceive themselves as having fair arrangements in these areas pay all or part of child support, as compared to 56 percent who do not have or perceive themselves as having fair custody and visitation circumstances (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). Child support enforcement policies need to adopt a holistic approach that values emotional contributions and consistent contact from divorced fathers, not just the payment of economic obligations. Doherty et al. (1998) suggest that "the solutions should reflect the possibility that there are inherent difficulties in paying money to an ex-spouse or to an ex-partner when a parent does not live with, and thus does not have daily

contact with, his or her children" (pp. 282-83). Policy approaches that value responsible fatherhood from a holistic perspective have a much greater chance of succeeding in the encouragement of child support compliance.

A second dimension of policy affecting divorced fathers is the arrangement of custody and "visitation" rights of minor children (though increasingly, it is recognized that a term such as visitation makes fathers feel like "visitors," marginalizing their role as parents to their children). About 6.5 to 7 million children in the United States live with a single parent after divorce, and about 90 percent of these live with mothers (Doherty et al., 1998). Thus, fathers typically become the parent who does not reside with minor children following a divorce. Tragically, many of these fathers see their children only on a limited basis following divorce and some not at all (Amato & Rezac, 1994). A father's post-divorce contact with his children is influenced by numerous intervening factors, such as residential separation, geographic distance, and the quality of the relationship with the child's mother.

Public policies regarding custody arrangements and visitation also figure significantly. For example, Nord and Zill (1996) found that divorced fathers with joint custody and voluntary visitation agreements maintained better contact and children fared better emotionally, than fathers who had arrangements of sole custody and court-ordered agreements. Policy innovations, including divorce mediation and shared parenting agreements, have been introduced on a national level to promote more satisfactory ways of sustaining both parents' involvement following divorce. Continued research, program development, and policy innovation in this arena is among the most critical needs related to fatherhood policy development in the United States.

A Culture of Responsible Fatherhood

Fatherhood policy in the United States has tended to embrace a specific value-advocacy approach by using terms such as "responsible" or "commit-

ted" fathering in describing desired goals for fathers. Researchers have commented that this emphasis on "responsible" fatherhood suggests "a set of desired norms for evaluating fathers' behavior" and an interest in "promoting more committed and nurturing involvement by men in children's lives" (Doherty et al., 1998, pp. 278-79). In fashioning public policies that respond to the gap between societal expectations of fathers and the actual conduct that fathers sometimes exhibit, more effort is now being targeted at defining specific goals for fathers' behavior and how to encourage fathers toward such behavior. Levine and Pitt (1995) have fashioned a useful starting point for consideration, in their definition of responsible fathering, which suggests that responsible fathers:

- Wait to make a baby until they are prepared emotionally and financially to support a child.
- Establish their legal paternity if, and when, they do have a child.
- Actively share, with the child's mother, in the continuing emotional and physical care of their child, from pregnancy onwards.
- Actively share, with the child's mother, in the continuing financial support of their child, from pregnancy onwards. (pp. 5-6)

These guidelines provide a framework for thinking about concrete behavior goals for fathers that make fashioning policies more explicit and practical. Such definitions serve a useful purpose in creating a common foundation for policy makers and practitioners, who want to focus on fatherhood, but need a point of departure for their planning and discussion.

On a broader level, the need to encourage a culture that values responsible fatherhood is an additional point of focus in fatherhood policy. Blankenhorn (1996) argues that our culture has "fully incorporated into its prevailing family narrative the idea that fatherhood, as a distinctive social role for men, is either unnecessary or undesirable" (p. 67). The developing mass of policies targeted at responsible fatherhood may be seen as a critical

response to the cultural erosion of fatherhood in American family life. Although such policies in and of themselves cannot wholly refashion cultural attitudes about fatherhood, they do send an important cultural message about how fathers can and ought to be viewed in their familial responsibilities (Brotherson & Teichert, 2001). The high-profile Fatherhood Initiative undertaken by the U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services is the most visible symbol of public policy designed to enhance responsible fatherhood. Some states that have focused on responsible fatherhood, such as Virginia, have specifically utilized media campaigns and other approaches to send the cultural message that fathers matter. The National Fatherhood Initiative, a national grassroots organization, uses well-designed radio and television spots to promote its message of father involvement. These efforts represent a wider understanding — attempts to further strengthen fatherhood must involve a shared cultural understanding that values fathers and their involvement in the lives of children and families.

Implications for Practitioners and Policy Makers

For practitioners and policy makers intent on serving children and families, the multiplicity of policy initiatives targeting fatherhood deserve careful consideration. Finding ways to understand and utilize such initiatives may lead those working with families or administering programs to pursue staff training in related areas, modify existing programs, or launch new efforts aimed at fatherhood issues. Among the most important things to consider are developing "father-friendly" attitudes when working with families, becoming aware of available resources on fatherhood issues, and learning effective approaches or "best practices" in working with fathers.

Development of Father-Friendly Attitudes

Attempts to promote fathers' involvement with their families will differ depending on the attitudes that a practitioner or policy maker brings to their

work with fathers and families. It is not uncommon for educators, counselors, or service providers to complain that they have difficulty in reaching men and encouraging their involvement. This difficulty is often attributed to the failure of men to be fully committed to family life. For example, Hochschild (1989) suggested that the problem is not that men "have an elaborate idea of fatherhood and then don't live up to it; their idea of fatherhood is embryonic to begin with" (p. 229). Such attitudes reflect a challenge for those involved in work with children and families. They must consider their own assumptions about men as fathers, and how such assumptions shape their attitudes toward policies and programs that ought to meaningfully include fathers.

Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) developed the concept of the "role-inadequacy perspective" to identify what they perceive to be a prevailing cultural mindset among service providers toward families about fathers' inadequacies as parents. Some of the assumptions highlighted in this perspective include a focus on fathers' shortcomings and deficiencies as parents, the idea that men lack desire to be committed and caring parents, and the notion that fathers are not as competent in parenting as mothers. The authors suggest, "An intervention strategy that consists mainly of holding up a mirror to men's faces so they can see their paternal warts more clearly is neither visionary nor empowering" (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997, p. 12).

Practitioners who work with men and families should scrutinize their own attitudes and the systemic atmosphere within their own programs related to how fathers are thought about and approached. The following questions should be considered: (1) Do program efforts proceed from a focus to correct men's deficiencies and behavior problems, or from a focus to encourage and add to fathers' motivation and strengths; and (2) Do program efforts potentially create barriers to change and inclusion, or do they lower barriers to change and inclusion? These and other questions can help

practitioners begin to adopt "father-friendly" attitudes and transform the institutional environments they work in to become more welcoming and responsive to fathers and their involvement in family life.

Awareness of Fatherhood Resources

The development of father-specific policies and programs at the governmental level has assisted in the proliferation of resources available to those interested in working with men and fathers. An awareness of such resources is a valuable aid to understanding current policy and program developments in this area. A brief listing of some key resources is provided below.

Organizations

1. The National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) (<http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu/>) was established in 1994 at the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, with core support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. An interdisciplinary policy research center, NCOFF is dedicated to research and practice that expands the knowledge base on father involvement and family development, and that informs policy designed to improve the well-being of children.
2. The National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) (<http://www.fatherhood.org/>) was founded in 1994 to stimulate a nationwide movement to confront the growing problem of father absence. The website has many valuable resources for working with fathers through policy and educational approaches.
3. The International Fatherhood Conference (<http://www.internationalfathers.org/>) is sponsored by The National Center for Strategic Nonprofit Planning and Community Leadership (NPCL), another organization that has focused on fatherhood issues. The group also offers extensive training, research, and policy guidance.

4. The Fatherhood Project

(<http://www.fatherhoodproject.org/>) is a national research and education project that examines the future of fatherhood and offers ways to support men's involvement in child rearing. Founded in New York City in 1981 by Dr. James A. Levine, the Fatherhood Project is the longest running national initiative on fatherhood. The project offers books, films, consultation, seminars, and training that illustrates practical strategies to support fathers and mothers in their parenting roles.

5. The Fatherwork project

(<http://fatherwork.byu.edu/>) is an Internet site built around the generative fathering framework by Hawkins and Dollahite (1997). The site provides a wealth of resources and ideas for fathers to personally connect with and care for their children in myriad ways and in varying circumstances.

Policy Resources

1. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

(<http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/>) has developed a special initiative to support and strengthen the roles of fathers in families. This initiative permeates many of their programs, and is based on several important priorities. These principles suggest that all fathers can play an important role in their child's well-being, that both parents should be involved regardless of residence, that fathers play diverse roles related to cultural and community norms, that men should be prepared for responsible fathering through education and support, and that government can and should promote father involvement through its programs and workforce policies.

2. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL)

(<http://www.ncsl.org/statefed/welfare/fatherhood.htm>) has developed a responsible fatherhood initiative and a series of publications on policies for working with fathers and families.

3. The National Head Start Association

(<http://www.nhsa.org/parents/>) has provided a vision and agenda for male involvement.

4. National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP)

(<http://cpmcnet.columbia.edu/dept/nccp/>) at Columbia University tracks state efforts to promote responsible fatherhood. The state initiatives are reported on in Map and Track: State Initiatives to Encourage Responsible Fatherhood.

Publications

1. A new professional journal called *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice*

About Men as Fathers, is targeted for teachers, students, and professionals who work with men as parents. Publications focus, in part, on father-child issues; fathers in dual-earner, divorced, and step families; and the influences of father presence/absence. *Men in Families* is a similar journal devoted to fathering and male issues.

2. The online "Fathering Magazine"

(<http://www.fathermag.com/>) has many resources for fathers. Featured sections include: a beginners' tour, true stories, information on the male body and the joy of fathering, importance of fathers; and sections on fathers and sons, fathers and daughters, custody and divorce, child support, and single fathers.

The resources identified here represent only a small sampling of the increasing range and depth of information that is available on issues related to working with fathers.

Recommendations for Working with Fathers

Practitioners and policymakers interested in working with fathers must be willing to engage in serious dialogue about the best practices available for encouraging responsible and positive involvement of fathers in family life. This section briefly summarizes some suggestions for working effectively with fathers in the policy and programming arenas.

General Ideas

Individuals and organizations seeking to

enhance the responsible and positive involvement of fathers in family life should:

- Develop a holistic view of fathers' involvement in family life that encompasses social, economic, educational, and moral dimensions of a father's influence.
- Invest in human resources and allocate funding and personnel to the promotion of father involvement through planning, prioritization, and implementation of specific objectives and/or programs.
- Focus a substantive proportion of programming efforts on the prevention of family circumstances that diminish father involvement, including teen pregnancy prevention, marriage and relationship education, divorce reduction, domestic violence, and incarceration.
- Establish integrated and comprehensive approaches to father involvement that combine the resources and abilities of multiple personnel and programs.
- Provide professional development that encourages the formation of father-friendly attitudes, knowledge of father-related issues, and adoption of meaningful efforts in each program setting.
- Adapt program efforts to meet the specific needs of fathers, families, and children across diverse circumstances and settings.
- Build upon and replicate best practices based on the findings of available empirical research studies and the proven program and policy efforts that support responsible fatherhood.

Recommendations for Serving Low-Income Fathers

Individuals and organizations seeking to enhance the responsible and positive involvement of low-income fathers in family life should:

- Identify the benefits of legal paternity for fathers and children and encourage voluntary acknowledgment of paternity by fathers.
- Facilitate processes that lead toward father involvement, family formation and stable fami-

ly commitments, including employment and education, relationship support, and the inclusion of fathers in family life.

- Examine existing paradigms and policies in all current program efforts, and assess the level of father-friendliness among personnel and in program outreach.
- Furnish opportunities for job training, employment, retention, and/or education to facilitate the self-sufficiency of fathers and families.
- Research programs targeting low-income fathers and families that show evidence of innovative practices and promising approaches.
- Designate responsibility for enhancing father involvement efforts as an expectation of all personnel, with support from a specific coordinating individual or group, as needed.

Recommendations for Serving Teen Fathers

Individuals and organizations seeking to enhance the responsible and positive involvement of teenage fathers in family life should:

- As possible, prevent too-early and unwanted pregnancy among teenagers through delaying sexual activity and providing opportunities for positive youth development.
- Identify youth at risk of becoming teen fathers and provide needed services to those who have become fathers, including education and employment training.
- As possible, involve teenage fathers early in the physical, emotional, and financial support of their child and the child's mother, both during and after pregnancy.
- Adapt programs and services to the needs and circumstances of teenage fathers through community-wide planning and collaboration.

Recommendations for Serving Incarcerated Fathers

Individuals and organizations seeking to enhance the responsible and positive involvement of incarcerated fathers in family life should:

- As possible, facilitate regular and meaningful contact between incarcerated fathers and their

children, through provision of materials for communication, safe and positive visitation locations, and other necessary guidance and support.

- Counsel incarcerated fathers upon entrance into the system on their economic obligations and, as possible, provide means to reduce or eliminate the accumulation of massive child support obligations, while supporting the father's economic assistance to the family.
- Prior to release from prison, provide fathers with transitional assistance programs to help incarcerated fathers prepare for returning to regular life.
- As possible, continue available support services to formerly incarcerated fathers that focus on responsible fatherhood and avoidance of recidivism.

Recommendations for Serving Divorced Fathers

Individuals and organizations seeking to enhance the responsible and positive involvement of divorced fathers in family life should:

- Assist divorced fathers and mothers in making the transition from ex-spouses to successful co-parents of their children to reduce relationship hostility.
- Provide education on post-divorce transitions and shared responsibilities for continued economic and emotional support of children.
- Emphasize the importance of child support obligations and create positive incentives for fathers who willingly pay child support.
- Encourage divorced fathers and mothers to work out shared parenting arrangements in the best interests of their children that allow for

flexibility and consistent contact between fathers and children.

- Provide support services to divorced fathers who experience continuing and/or unreasonable difficulty in maintaining consistent and positive contact with their children.

These suggestions are not all encompassing, and are provided as starting points to begin thinking about how to work more effectively in meeting the needs of fathers and families.

Conclusion

Within America's political landscape, policy agendas are fleeting. Yet the needs of children remain, and the challenges confronting family life are an ongoing part of a constant theme. In this context, federal and state policy initiatives to strengthen fatherhood have an increasingly complex and important place on the domestic policy front. Indeed, it now appears that the promotion of responsible fatherhood has become a lasting political and social movement (Horn, 1999). The issues are complex and the variety of policy responses will need to be adapted to the needs and circumstances of fathers and the families to which they belong. Policies and programs targeting fathers, of course, cannot be expected to resolve the deeper challenges that underlie the development of father absence as a major concern in American family life. Popenoe (1995) has noted that "paternal disinvestment cannot be offset by either maternal investment or public investment" (p. 48). Yet there should be a response to this crisis, for no voice cries out in the wilderness of family life quite like the cry of the fatherless, especially those who are fatherless not by chance, but by someone else's choice.

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