



Low-Income Fathers Need to Get Connected

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

Joy Moses June 2010



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Introduction and summary

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

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

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

These domains are examined in this paper and include:

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

Low-income fathers should definitely be a part of the family policy equation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Low-income men's well-being

Far too many low-income men, and especially men of color, are experiencing severe disconnections from employment, society, and housing that are all impairing their ability to reach their full potential while also preventing them from financially and emotionally caring for their children. Policy must do a better job of helping those that have fallen through the cracks while making more progress on prevention through such means as education reform. These reforms benefit these men, and they should be a part of any comprehensive agenda to assist low-income children and families.

Disconnections from employment

Many low-income men have fragile connections to the job market, and these problems are typically tied to their lack of education or skills. Other factors, however, do come into play. Ultimately, these disconnections from work and adequate income harm children and families.

Employment and wage problems

The job market is weighted against those with the least amount of education and skills, and indeed this group has the lowest employment rates (see Figure 1).¹ They are also more likely to drop out of the job market than their more educated counterparts by neither working nor looking for work, perhaps economically relying on others (intimate partners and family members), or participating in the underground economy. Even when they participate in the job market they are more likely to be unemployed and looking for work.

Unfortunately, men possessing the lowest levels of education have exhibited particularly problematic job patterns over the last couple of decades. Employment rates for men with a high school diploma or less dropped 20-plus

percentage points between 1970 and 2000, and the rates have not substantially increased since that time.²

Further, these men gain limited rewards from their job market participation. The relationship between education and earnings has been well established—those with the least education have the lowest earnings. Finally, although low-skilled men still earn more than their female counterparts, wages in general have largely stagnated or declined since the 1970s.³ Data from the last 10 years illustrate recent wage patterns amongst men based on the level of education attained (see Figure 2).⁴

In short, men with the least amount of education and skills are less likely to be employed and more likely to have severely depressed wages compared to other populations. Men of color (African American, Native American, Hispanic/Latino) in particular are likely to find themselves in this category, and if they are also young and inexperienced that certainly doesn't help. If these men are fathers or soon-to-be fathers they will face further challenges and so will their children and families.

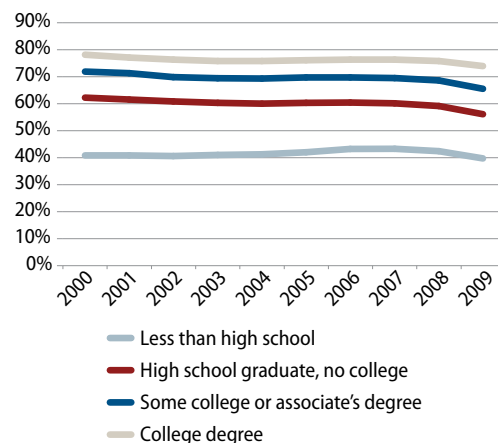
Factors that contribute to employment and wage problems

Many experts attribute the challenges low-skilled workers face to pronounced changes in the economy. For instance, over the last couple of decades manufacturing and other blue-collar jobs that tend to employ significant numbers of men have declined. This has coincided with an increased demand for workers possessing advanced levels of education and skills. Meanwhile, low-skilled workers have seen their wages decline or stagnate due to such factors as declines in unionization, longtime failures to increase the minimum wage, and the exploitation of immigrant workers.⁵

It is likely that the lack of available employment and the low wages attached to jobs that are available have effectively discouraged many low-skilled men and caused them to disengage from the job market. This may explain the population's low employment rates.

FIGURE 1
Workers with low levels of education struggle with employment

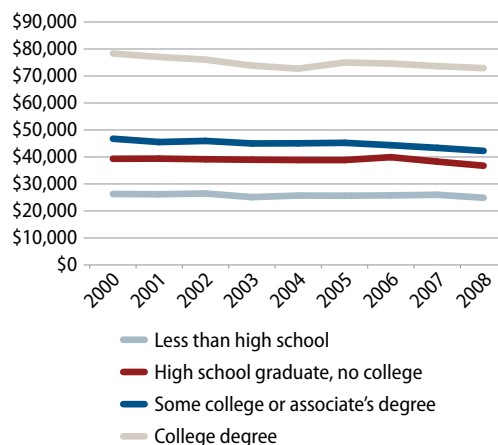
Employment rates for all workers based on educational attainment



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey" (2010).

FIGURE 2
Men see their wages flatline

Mean wages for male workers based on level of education, 2000-2008, 2008 dollars



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Table A-3. Mean Earnings of Workers 18 Years and Over, by Educational Attainment, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Sex: 1975 to 2008," *Current Population Survey* (2010).

The Great Recession has only made matters worse. Male workers bore the brunt of the recession's job losses and were more likely than women to be employed in the hard-hit construction and manufacturing industries.⁶ The job market has yet to fully rebound, including in these sectors. Unfortunately, the construction and manufacturing industries are also more likely than other sectors—such as retail and service—to hire ex-offenders,⁷ a category of low-income men who typically find it hard to obtain work even during good times.

As discussed in another section of this paper, far too many low-skilled men have criminal records that make employers less likely to hire them. Racial discrimination can also affect hiring decisions, especially for African-American men who often encounter negative employer attitudes based on assumptions that African-American men are involved in the criminal justice system, prone to conflict, and have poor attitudes toward work and authority.⁸

Further, overly strict child support enforcement policies can discourage men from seeking work. Some men, for example, have obligations that are too high given their income. Others face barriers adjusting their orders once their incomes drop due to unemployment or incarceration. But regardless of the situation, poor men are disproportionately represented among those not fully meeting their child support obligations, and they account for half of the debtors and owe 70 percent of all arrears.⁹

Arrears and wage garnishments can be severe—a father's income could be decreased by 60 percent to 80 percent when combined with government taxes and phase-out ranges for food stamp benefits. Those behind on child support could have as much as 65 percent of their take-home pay garnished.¹⁰ These factors may even cause some men to participate in the underground economy—finding an employer who is willing to pay them under the table, self-employment without declaring wages, or criminal activity—which is not a desirable outcome even if these men still give children and mothers what they can. Severing ties with the formal market could limit current income and future work opportunities.

Finally, many men simply make poor decisions with the hand they're dealt. Sometimes they don't take advantage of opportunities that could improve their circumstances. Or they may make choices that dramatically decrease their chances of making a better life for themselves such as pursuing criminal activity or accumulating child support orders by having multiple children out of wedlock. Policymakers and society sometimes react to these poor decisions by punishing men in ways that ultimately make it harder for them to find a job such as minimizing access to train-

ing and education, implementing strict child support enforcement policies, and erecting barriers to effective reentry after incarceration.

These actions are counterproductive to the end goal of having men financially support their children.

Financial harm

Children and families suffer financially when men have inadequate employment opportunities and wages. It also doesn't help if a subset of men respond to disincentives to work. Fathers may not be contributing enough income to provide for children's basic needs, but they also may not be providing enough for educational-learning opportunities and other quality of life factors that help prevent children from continuing the cycle of poverty for themselves and their future families.

Relationship harm

Family connections are disrupted by low-income men's unstable employment. Men who lack job security may be viewed as undesirable relationship partners, and financial stressors may lead to the demise of intimate partner relationships while hindering father involvement. In short, a lack of employment options may limit men's choices about family formation and maintenance while also impairing children's relationships with their fathers.

Evidence suggests that many low-income parents want their relationships to last. Mothers and fathers were asked in a 2003 national study about the status of their relationships—74 percent of mothers and 90 percent of fathers indicated that there was at least a 50-50 chance that they would marry the mother or father of their child, which implies that this group has an inclination toward long-lasting relationships.¹¹

But this intention frequently fails to meet reality. Income could be a key factor in relationship outcomes since the likelihood of staying together decreases with income. Some studies, for example, find that financial problems are a strong predictor of divorce. For low-income couples the impact is even more pronounced—they are more likely to list financial problems as the cause of their divorces.¹²

Children and families suffer financially when men have inadequate employment opportunities and wages.

Perhaps such data is to be expected. Constant worries about how to pay the rent, keep food on the table, and provide for the basic needs of children cannot be good for individuals or their relationships. Indeed, those experiencing financial problems have indicated greater levels of stress and hostility toward their spouses, decreased levels of marital satisfaction, and an increased sense of marital instability.¹³

This has clear implications for low-income individuals' ability to maintain relationships and connections to their families. As noted above, far too many men lack stable and consistent employment, which is sometimes due to their connections to the criminal justice system. Job loss increases a couple's risk of divorce, especially for African Americans who experience two to three times greater risk of divorce in such circumstances than white couples.¹⁴

It is certainly possible that many men's employment woes are helping perpetuate the other types of disconnections described in this paper. Men may become so discouraged trying to find work that they may give up altogether and remain unemployed. Or they may become so desperate for income that they resort to criminal activity and end up in jail or prison. And fathers may feel so embarrassed by their inability to find work that they would rather walk away from their children and the mother of their children than face them. Unfortunately, there are even those who resort to drugs, alcohol, or violence to deal with the pain of their perceived failures.

All of the above circumstances obviously affect a father's involvement with his children. It is very likely that fathers will spend less time with their children if they separate from their mothers, go to prison, abandon them out of shame, develop substance abuse problems, or engage in acts of family violence. Thus, not only are parents potentially deprived of a loving relationship with one another, but their children are deprived a parent's love and care.

Efforts to serve families must be cognizant of these factors and address them—both by helping men find jobs and by helping families and communities find more constructive ways to deal with these internal and relationship factors during periods of struggle. This is a service model that is more challenging and nuanced than offering a series of job listings, but it is worth pursuing and perfecting to the greatest extent possible because it can help families and programs achieve their objectives. It also prepares families for future setbacks—just providing a man with a job won't help prevent future problems should he experience another job loss, eviction, or other significant challenges.

To be sure, other factors could end intimate partner relationships and affect father involvement. Men could struggle with maturity levels, fidelity, and jealousy, for example. And as noted above, the push toward mass incarceration has had a negative effect on relationships between couples and parents and children. Shifting cultural norms related to relationships and commitment are part of the story, too. Finally, low-income families have minimal access to supports aimed at helping them maintain their relationships.

But those factors aside, the bottom line is that troubles with employment and income often drive a wedge between families and unnecessarily sever their connections.

Disconnections from society

Policies designed to get tough on crime have devastated low-income fathers and families over the last three decades. Within a recent 25-year period (1982-2007) the number of prison and jail inmates grew by 274 percent and now totals 2.3 million people.¹⁵ This trend has seen more African-American and Latino men put in prison, many of whom are lacking in education and skills. This incarceration removes them from society, their communities, and their families.¹⁶ Many of these men are also fathers—51.2 percent of male inmates in state prisons and 63.4 percent of those in federal prisons were fathers in 2009, accounting for an estimated 1.7 million children.¹⁷

When these fathers are disconnected from society it harms their children financially and destroys family relationships.

Financial harm

Men in prison or jail cannot work and provide income to their families and children. Fifty-four percent of fathers in state prison and 67 percent in federal report that they provided primary financial support for a minor child before entering prison, with most drawing on legal wages as a part of their income.¹⁸ This means that when these men are incarcerated children and families are deprived of financial support—placing a greater strain on mothers and other caretakers.

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What's more, the day that fathers walk out of prison they bare the scarlet letter of having served time. Their lives become much more complicated in numerous ways, including a more difficult time finding work. This could represent a complete reversal of fortune for the 77 percent of fathers in state prison and 73 percent of those in federal prison who indicate that wages or salary were a part of their income before entering prison.¹⁹

As job seekers, ex-prisoners must overcome criminal background checks and the need to check the box on applications indicating that they have been convicted of a crime. These activities hurt their chances of being hired. One study proved this point by utilizing testers, or experimental applicants who had similar backgrounds on paper but who differed in whether they had a criminal record. Those who had served time were much less likely to get past the first step in the employment process.²⁰ Ex-prisoners of color saw even less success. White applicants with criminal records had their chances of receiving a call back after an initial employer contact reduced by 50 percent compared to those who did not indicate a criminal record.²¹ Black applicants had their chances for a call back reduced by more than 60 percent.²²

In sum, when fathers are incarcerated it prevents them from financially supporting their children, and their situation does not improve much when they get out of prison. Release is associated with further difficulties that hinder their ability to provide financial support. None of this advances the goal of lifting children out of poverty.

Relationship harm

Children with incarcerated fathers are deprived of time with a parent, and their emotional bonds with their fathers are likely affected. Forty-two percent of state prisoners and 51 percent of federal prisoners lived with their children before prison.²³ Even those who lived apart from their children may have been a regular part of their children's lives prior to incarceration. One study found that 79 percent of fathers either shared or provided most of the daily care for their children prior to entering prison.²⁴ These relationships are disrupted by incarceration.

Visitation behind bars, which is certainly no substitute for parenting on the outside, often proves challenging due to:²⁵

- Fathers being incarcerated in locations far away from families
- Excessive fees attached to collect calls and restrictions placed by prisons on phone use
- Overly restrictive visitation policies related to timing, physical contact, and the individuals who must accompany a child for visit
- Unwelcoming visitation environments that may be dirty, overcrowded, or generally lacking in accommodations for young visitors
- A caregivers' unwillingness to allow visits or calls due to a variety of factors, including concerns about visiting environments and deteriorations in intimate relationships

Given these restraints, 59 percent of parents in state prison and 45 percent of those in federal prison report not seeing their children since being incarcerated, with fewer than 15 percent indicating that they are able to visit their kids at least monthly.²⁶ Therefore, these young people often do not see their dads for long periods of time—for months, maybe years, or only on a limited basis.

Barriers to father-child relationships persist even upon release. Parents who were married or otherwise intimately involved prior to incarceration may not want to resume their relationships when fathers rejoin the community. Time apart, the financial and emotional stresses caused by arrests and incarceration, personal changes and evolutions, and possibly new romantic interests test the bonds between couples. And when parents separate this may have a significant effect on the amount of time fathers and children spend with one another.

The relationships between fathers who were in prison and their children are further harmed by the time spent apart, growth and change, and lingering scars caused by initial separations. Comfort and familiarity may be a particular problem for children who were young at the beginning of a prison term—they may not remember their fathers well, and now perceive them as virtual strangers whom they must take time to get to know.

Parental incarceration's effect on children is not very well understood. Still, experts on parental attachment, separation anxiety, and post-traumatic stress generally agree that children can experience great harm from parental separations for any reason. Related stress and anxiety could lead to children developing symptoms such as nightmares, depression, aggression, and loss of self-esteem.²⁷ Studies specifically focused on children affected by parental incarceration find other

risk factors that include higher likelihoods of being poor, experiencing multiple residential and caregiver changes, and having caregivers who abuse drugs, have mental health problems, or are inadequately educated.²⁸

In short, incarceration hinders relationships between fathers and children. It can also potentially divide intimate partners in a way that can further limit the time fathers and children spend with one another. Family cohesiveness is undoubtedly tested.

Disconnections from stable housing

Low-income men also face housing challenges. Low-income workers in general face increasing difficulty affording a place to live, and there are currently 5.47 million households that spend 50 percent or more of their income on rent.²⁹ Annual research conducted by the National Low Income Housing Coalition indicates there is no state or county in the United States where a full-time minimum wage earner could afford a two-bedroom apartment for his or her family. Rents for zero- to four-bedroom apartments have gone up 45 percent to 46 percent since 2000,³⁰ and though the foreclosure crisis has placed great focus on homeowners, renters have also clearly suffered. Rental housing affordability remains a deep concern—demand has grown as more people enter the market after leaving foreclosed properties or not becoming buyers, and many foreclosed properties remain vacant for extended periods of time.³¹

So what does all this mean for fathers? It means that those living with a partner must have a combined income of at least \$18.44 an hour to afford a two-bedroom apartment, which is the equivalent of 2.5 full-time minimum wage jobs.³² Since this is the national average, it also doesn't reflect the hardships of couples living in high-priced areas. For instance, the necessary affordable housing wage in New York state is \$23.87 (or 3.3 minimum wage jobs) and in San Francisco it's \$33.85 (or 4.7 minimum wage jobs).³³

Thus, even if both adults are working full time they still may find it hard to afford rent. Remember, too, that many low-income men face employment challenges. If fathers are having a hard time obtaining and maintaining jobs—perhaps experiencing layoffs or reductions in hours or only working part of the year—their families will be even further away from the required housing wage, which puts them at risk for eviction and housing instability.

Working multiple jobs or long hours limits time available to spend with children, and downgrading to a smaller, less child-friendly space may still be unaffordable.

If a father lives on his own he faces even greater challenges. Maintaining a two-bedroom apartment on one income may be impossible, making it difficult to have sufficient and comfortable space for children to come and stay in a shared custody arrangement or for overnight visitation. The alternatives to being able to actually afford a two-bedroom apartment come with their own problems and limitations. Working multiple jobs or long hours limits time available to spend with children, and downgrading to a smaller, less child-friendly space may still be unaffordable. On average, the required full-time wage for a one-bedroom apartment is \$15.48 an hour and for zero bedrooms its \$13.70 an hour while the minimum wage is \$7.25 hour.³⁴

Again, high-priced states and communities require even greater income than these national averages. And maintaining any size apartment is challenging for fathers who have trouble finding work or don't work consistently throughout the year.

Making matters worse, low-income fathers living apart from their children are unable to seek help from major federal programs—they typically do not qualify for public housing or housing choice vouchers (Section 8). This is because federal programs largely target custodial parents, the disabled, and the elderly. Thus an able-bodied noncustodial parent is often unable to access most forms of housing assistance.

Low-income men often experience a significant amount of housing instability as a result of these circumstances, and this makes parenting all the more difficult for them.

These men may rely on others to provide a roof over their heads—parents, other relatives, new intimate partners, or friends. But wearing out one's welcome in one location requires moving on to another. A fight with a girlfriend, overcrowding in a parent's house, or a friend who is just tired of him sleeping on his couch could send a man packing. This is sometimes considered a form of homelessness, but systems generally don't track this population, which makes it difficult to fully assess how much these men are struggling with housing.

Those who completely run out of options find themselves on the streets, at which point they are counted for statistical purposes and are able to qualify for homeless services. Men make up a majority of this group and are 69 percent of the single adult homeless population.³⁵ While many men in this group face significant personal challenges (mental health issues or substance abuse) that contribute to their homelessness, it is evident that their problems with housing affordability and access to quality work opportunities are a part of the equation.

Research also has demonstrated that many homeless adults work and earn income but are still not housed. Research completed in 1999 indicated that 44 percent of the homeless population worked at some point in the 30 days prior to being surveyed.³⁶ More recently, a 2009 survey from the U.S. Conference of Mayors indicates that 20 percent of the urban homeless are employed with great variation among cities—Boston and Denver had high numbers of employed homeless people at 40 and 32 percent respectively while cities like Sacramento had as little as 7 percent of its homeless working.³⁷

In short, many men go through financial hardships that can lead to temporary bouts of homelessness even if they are working and trying to hold their heads above water.

Financial harm

Couples with children or fathers living away from their children may be spending an unusually high percentage of their incomes on rent. This means that fewer financial resources are available for all the other costs associated with family needs and child rearing. Parents may sacrifice having enough food, keeping their heat on during the winter, or buying school clothes in order to pay the rent. Dads living away from their children may find it more difficult to pay child support if they are also trying to keep a roof over their heads. When fathers living with families or on their own can't afford rent, it hurts families and children economically.

Relationship harm

Parents living together or otherwise seeking to maintain relationships may find that stress over paying the rent only contributes to the financial pressures that can divide couples. If couples are unable to maintain their own housing they may also be physically divided. Coupled families relying on doubled-up situations often encounter family members or friends who are willing to take in children, or mothers and children, but perhaps not fathers. Host families also may only have space for a certain number of people, which could lead family members to temporarily living in different locations. Further, many family shelters only accept mothers and children, which separates fathers from their families. Sometimes they refuse to take teenage boys, which then separates mothers from children.

Fathers who are not intimately involved with the mothers of their children face a slightly different set of challenges. If they are unable to afford their own homes, they may be staying with intimate partners, parents, or friends who do not allow or have room for children to stay for extended visits. The new woman in his life may not want some other woman's children around, and the father has limited ground in that argument if he is not significantly helping with the rent.

Similarly, when it comes to relatives or friends, a father may have a hard enough time convincing the host to let him stay—it likely strains the bounds of charity to suggest that he also wants his two small children to spend every weekend in the home. Men definitely can't take their children to men's shelters or to live with them out on the streets in those worst-case scenarios.

There are still further challenges. A father who has to take whatever he can get as far as housing may end up in a location that is far away from his children and makes visits difficult. He may also be moving frequently, making it difficult for him to tell mothers and children where he will be the next day or the next week because he doesn't know.

In sum, a lack of stable housing may limit the amount of time a noncustodial father is able to spend with intimate partners and children while putting a stress on their bonds with one another.

Other important concerns

This paper has so far made clear that low-income men disproportionately experience disconnections from employment, society, and housing. These disconnections take their toll on families and children. But when considering family strengthening policies there are some other serious concerns that should be considered.

Family violence and abuse

Family-oriented policies must include precautions and procedures that ensure the safety of all family members. Domestic violence and child abuse, for example, are significant national concerns. An estimated 1.3 million women are survivors of physical violence each year.³⁸ In 2008, 772,000 children were determined to be victims of abuse or neglect.³⁹ These phenomenon touch families of all income levels and can be attributable to multiple factors, one of which is economic stress.

Hotlines and government agencies serving domestic violence and child abuse survivors have reported increased requests for assistance as a result of the Great Recession, and they express concerns that financial stress is leading to greater incidences of maltreatment.⁴⁰ Research also indicates that couples that experience high levels of financial strain are more likely to report domestic violence than those experiencing low levels of such strain (9.5 percent as opposed to 2.7 percent).⁴¹

Substance abuse and mental health

Some low-income parents struggle with substance abuse and mental health issues, and their poverty status can certainly contribute to these conditions.⁴² Unemployed adults, for example, have higher rates of illicit drug use than those who are working full time (19.6 percent versus 8 percent).⁴³

Family-oriented policies must include precautions and procedures that ensure the safety of all family members.

One's ability to parent can be affected by these conditions, and men with substance abuse and mental health issues may find it more difficult to find and maintain employment, threatening their ability to pay child support or otherwise contribute to their families' income.

Relationship supports

Low-income families frequently lack access to important relationship supports. Services could either help parents stay together or help them make more healthy separations that foster continued relationships between children and noncustodial parents.

Middle- and upper-income families often benefit from such supports as marriage-relationship classes and books, couples' retreats, or marriage and family counseling. Historically, such services have not been targeted or available to low-income families.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, parents who decide to divorce or otherwise separate typically go to a court of law to obtain a child visitation order and resolve other disputes associated with the end of their relationships. Many low-income couples are left out of this process or experience significant delays in getting results.

Low-income parents' legal issues around child visitation are often unresolved due to their inability to afford legal counsel. Free legal assistance is often unavailable, and providers report that family law has the largest number of unmet legal needs. More than 390,000 people each year are turned away when they ask for such assistance.⁴⁴

Legal services organizations do not have the resources to serve all those who need help, and they often prioritize emergency cases, for example domestic violence or eviction. Parents who are unable to obtain a lawyer have the option of representing themselves, but depending on the jurisdiction this process can be overly complicated, difficult to navigate with a limited education background or literacy skills, unaffordable if there are required filing fees or a need to take time off work, and/or intimidating or otherwise unpleasant.

Father-child relationships may be hurt when separated low-income parents are unable to resolve their disputes. Ideally couples would continue to parent together even when they are no longer intimately involved. But if parents frequently argue or disagree over visitation and decisions about their child, they may avoid contact

with each other, which can translate into reduced contact between father and child. Children are also harmed by witnessing such tensions.

Appropriate interventions should tackle these family conflicts. Certainly some families will not be helped by these steps, but for some, establishing parenting plans and/or formal custody or visitation orders that clearly outline boundaries and responsibilities could make the difference, reducing parental conflict and ensuring father-child contact.

The federal Access and Visitation program has been doing just that. The program funds alternative dispute resolution methods such as mediation and parent education to ensure that parents develop plans that resolve such questions as the length and timing of father visitation and how child-rearing decisions will be made. Another service is supervised visitation, which allows for continued parent-child contact when child safety is a concern or in question.

The program has demonstrated positive results. An evaluation of participants demonstrated double-digit percentage increases in the share of parenting relationships that were characterized as “cooperative,” even if strained.⁴⁵ Most parents denoted increases or maintenance of the status quo in father visitation time with 32 percent to 45 percent indicating that they were able to see their children more often.⁴⁶

But despite these successes with reducing conflict and maintaining family connections, the program has a history of being woefully underfunded.

Data collection

We know far too little about noncustodial parents. The university-run Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study is currently addressing some questions that had previously gone unanswered, but government agencies are generally failing to collect data about noncustodial fathers (and mothers) that could help us understand child well-being and shape improved interventions.

The way forward

Far too many low-income men are severely disconnected from society, employment, and housing, and their disengagement hurts children and parents. If the nation does not make a concerted effort to address low-income fathers' challenges (as well as those experienced by mothers who are not the subject of the current paper), an unnecessary number of families will remain dependent on public assistance and find it difficult to escape poverty.

Improving these men's condition will require rethinking policies that address the areas identified here—criminal justice and reentry, employment, and housing—as well as some others. That task is admittedly overwhelming and would extend beyond this short paper's scope. But we can start by thinking about how a Fatherhood, Marriage, and Families Innovation Fund can play a role in developing solutions.

The wrong way

President George W. Bush and some other conservatives emphasized marriage promotion and fatherhood as the means for ending poverty during the last reauthorization of legislation creating the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF program. The result was that the legislation made significant investments in relationship skills and conflict resolutions skills for couples (among other activities) within both the Healthy Marriage Initiative and the Responsible Fatherhood Program. Maintaining the status quo in this area would be the wrong way to go. The one-note solution of marriage sounds hollow in light of the complex web of challenges highlighted in this paper.

Notably, great debate continues over whether marriage is the answer to poverty, whether the framing and philosophical underpinnings of that effort are appropriate, whether the government can actually influence marriage decisions, or even if this is an appropriate role for government to play. Setting aside those weighty

philosophical questions, it is reasonable to suggest that relationship skills and counseling programs could be useful to low-income families as long as they are implemented appropriately, are not conditioned on being married or having an intent to marry, and do not discriminate based on sexual orientation.

But there is still much to learn about how to tailor these services to low-income families' needs. Also, solely providing relationships skills and counseling will not fully address the needs of families. The complex web of challenges outlined in this paper suggest the need for additional supports that target the root causes of family disconnections, including those between fathers and children.

Imagine two parents enter a relationship class and say they frequently fight due to the father's inability to find a job—which is tied to his criminal record—and that their relationship is suffering because they can't afford housing that would allow them to live together. The mother and two children live in a one-bedroom apartment with the maternal grandmother and the father sleeps on his cousin's couch. Learning how to manage the stress in their relationship could be helpful to the family. But the best outcome and sharpest reduction in stress and conflict would likely come from comprehensive services that include employment services for the father and housing assistance for the family.

In short, the narrowly focused solution of trying to address the couple's relationship difficulties falls short of both addressing the root of their problems and actually helping lift the family out of poverty. Fathers and families need a more comprehensive approach.

To be sure, some marriage programs put effort into case managing their participants' other needs. Unless their programs are experiencing a significant amount of mission creep, however, their activities are largely directed toward working with couples on their relationships.

The right way

A family-oriented approach to services that includes fathers will ultimately benefit children and families economically and emotionally. Fathers that receive a helping hand with their criminal justice system involvement, employment, and housing while strengthening connections to their families will be better able and in some cases more inclined to financially contribute to childrearing. This is true of husbands, live-in partners, or noncustodial fathers who fulfill child support commitments.

Policymakers concerned about reducing poverty may be tempted to look at more immediate economic outcomes of fatherhood and family policies, but the social and emotional connections that could result from more comprehensive efforts matter. Not only would a family's quality of life improve, but the policies could enhance childhood outcomes—via father involvement, less exposure to parental conflict, and greater household income—and reduce the likelihood that the children grow up to be low-income adults.

The Fatherhood, Marriage, and Families Innovation Fund should play an important role in future poverty policy. Services under the fund should have the following components:

- **Comprehensive service models.** Innovation funds should be directed toward providers that offer assistance with multiple needs, including those mentioned in this paper: employment (directly providing job training, teaching interviewing, and job maintenance skills); housing (making housing referrals, budgeting, and overcoming barriers related to credit history); criminal justice system involvement (barriers to employment, housing, and reconnecting to families); managing child support debt (budgeting, modifying orders, and arranging for the pay down of debt); parenting skills (understanding developmental needs and the impact of parental conflict on children); couples and family relationship supports (conflict resolution classes and counseling services); and substance abuse and mental health services (referrals or direct services).
- **Use an all-encompassing definition of “family.”** Services should be premised on a notion of “family” that includes fathers who can and do play a role in ensuring positive outcomes for their children and families. Since fathers have often been neglected in family policy, a minimum percentage of funds should be dedicated toward programming that addresses their needs.
- **Healthy respect for family connections.** Programs and services should seek to relieve stressors that divide families, strengthening connections and allowing members to have greater freedom to make very personal choices about family formation and maintenance based on factors other than those related to their poverty status—for example, the employment, criminal justice, and housing challenges discussed in this paper. Part of this work should also include relationship supports for couples that want to remain together as well as those who must continue to co-parent after a separation. These efforts have the potential to expand low-income families' access to resources that are commonly enjoyed by others.

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- **Reduce poverty.** Supports and services should be developed and designed to reduce poverty and be rooted in an understanding of the actual challenges facing low-income fathers and families.
- **Protect against domestic violence.** Family policies must include protections and supports for survivors that are aimed at ensuring safety and not coercing individuals to remain in unhealthy relationships. The potential of fatherhood, access and visitation, and other programs to help address these problems must be recognized and highlighted. They bring families into contact with professionals who are able to identify problems and ensure appropriate interventions. Well-designed efforts to teach parenting skills and intimate-partner conflict resolution skills could help to reduce abuse as both men and women become more conscience of problematic responses and behaviors and think about alternative approaches. Supervised visitation services funded locally or through the federal government can play a role in ensuring continued parent-child contact where appropriate.

The providers for such services could include:

- Community centers that provide comprehensive services (some existing fatherhood programs, for example)
- In-depth case management by an appropriate government agency (child support enforcement that is conveniently in regular contact with both fathers and mothers, for example)
- Effective collaborations among various government agencies, foundations, nonprofits, and other interests.

The federal government will need to collect data on fathers and noncustodial parents to fully evaluate the effectiveness of these efforts. Such a shift involves moving the nation's data collection efforts beyond their focus on traditional nuclear families. Modern families no longer fit within those molds but still must be accounted for and understood.

Finally, we need to make adequate investments in this area. The suggested price tag for the Fatherhood, Marriage, and Families Innovation Fund is \$500 million. This initial figure is low given the need and the number of families requiring assistance, and it should be increased. The number of available resources, however, could also multiply if existing funding streams are used wisely.

Other government and nongovernment programs address the various needs of fathers and families—and we should capitalize on some of those resources to advance the goals of the innovation fund. Of particular interest are the other government programs that provide comprehensive services to the same families that would likely qualify for innovation fund services—the child welfare system, homeless services that include transitional and supportive housing, and reentry services. Ideally, effective coordination should occur, but at the very least steps should be taken to ensure that the same family is not involved in multiple systems and receiving duplicative services.

Conclusion

Far too many low-income fathers are facing serious challenges with employment, housing, criminal justice system involvement, and other issues. These problems are undoubtedly hurting their children and families.

Congress created the Responsible Fatherhood Program and the Healthy Marriage Initiative during the last reauthorization of legislation encompassing TANF, but the results suggest the need for further reforms. The next generation of such services should be a Fatherhood, Marriage, and Families Innovation fund that puts emphasis where it counts: on comprehensive services that best address the complex needs of low-income fathers and families while not coercing their personal decisions.

Taking this road forward will lead to better childhood outcomes, greatly advance poverty reduction goals as well as reduce reliance on TANF and other government benefits programs, and improve men's connections to their children.

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