

RESURGANCE OF AMERICAN PATERNALISM

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S FATHERHOOD INITIATIVES AND OTHER EFFORTS TO REBUILD THE TRADITIONAL AMERICAN FAMILY

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ABSTRACT

The common notion of the American family focuses on the ideal of two parents, 2.5 children, and a suburban home with a white picket fence. However, since the 1980s, data collected by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Census Bureau has found the rising prevalence of single parent families and the reduced influence of fathers in their child's life. This data conflicts with numerous studies that have concluded that the influence of a responsible father can have a profoundly positive impact on the development of a child. This essay seeks to examine the Federal government's response to this evolution of the American family and public and private sector endeavors to reconcile these issues.

First, this research provides evidence to support the need for a response by the Federal government to the reduced level of American paternalism. Second, it considers the priority given to these programs in the halls of Congress and in the Bush Administration as the 109th session of Congress begins in January 2005. Finally, this essay contends that the rise in fatherless children is an issue that should be a top priority of the Federal government.

Introduction

The advancement of American society during the 20th Century has not only seen the transformation of the nation's domestic economy and tactics of foreign diplomacy, but the United States has also encountered the evolution of the American family. While the United States has traditionally been a diverse society, comprised of varied religious and ethnic traditions, the American family was historically composed of a father, mother, and children. However, this ideal of the traditional American family degenerated as the 20th Century progressed.

Recent sociological trends support this observation, as the proportion of children under the age of 18 who lived apart from their biological fathers has grown steadily since 1980. In this period, children who live only with their biological mothers have increased from 18 percent of the United States child population to 23 percent in 1999.¹ These trends are even more discouraging among minority populations. Among Hispanic children, the percentage of the U.S. child population who do not live with their biological fathers has risen from 20 to 27 percent.² This proportion is even higher among African-American families, where the percentage of children who do not live with their fathers has climbed to 52 percent, in comparison to 44 percent in 1980.³

Not only has the percentage of U.S. children who do not live with their biological fathers increased in the past two decades, but the percentage of children who are designated as living in "two parent families" has also decreased. Twenty years ago, nearly 80 percent of children lived in two parent families.⁴ However, according to a 1996 study by J. Fields, this figure has decreased to just 68 percent of all American children.⁵ Furthermore, nearly 10 percent of children who are living in two parent families are projected to live without at least one of their biological parents.⁶

The effects of these trends on not just the traditional American family, but the nation's society as a whole, can be tremendous. Numerous studies have found that the influence of a biological father can be advantageous. Among the advantages can include the promotion of healthier child development, higher participation in extracurricular activities, and increased socialization.⁷

The influence of biological fathers is not simply limited to the criteria of parental custody, but non-custodial fathers have also been found to have a positive influence on their children. Possibly foremost among the benefits include the involvement of non-custodial fathers through child support payments and other financial support has been associated with constructive effects such as increased academic achievement.⁸ In addition, studies have also suggested that the influence of non-custodial fathers can have a positive impact on their children through fewer observed behavior problems in comparison to those children who do not have paternal influences.⁹

Sociological studies have confirmed these findings. According to the National Fatherhood Initiative, when variables such as differentiation of income are controlled, children who are born out of wedlock and either remain in a single-parent family or whose mother subsequently marries have notably lower standardized math and reading

scores.¹⁰ Furthermore, if the effects of gender, age, race, ethnicity, family income, and residential mobility are controlled, the National Fatherhood Initiative found that teens in single-parent families are twice as likely to use drugs compared to those children who are raised in two-parent families.¹¹

The statistics surrounding the different life experiences of children who are raised in single- and two-parent households are striking. Nearly 70 percent of juveniles in state reform institutions were raised in single-parent or no-parent households.¹² In 1998 alone, nearly 72 percent of children living in household receiving TANF benefits lived in single-parent homes while only 7.4 percent lived with two parents.¹³ Even more distressing is the fact that more than three quarters of all unmarried teen mothers enter the welfare system within five years of the birth of their first child, a result that may be changed through the influence of an income-earning father figure.¹⁴

Similar studies have also found encouraging conclusions when studying the effects of two-parent households on the lives of children. Not only do children who have a father involved in their lives do better in school, but those children also exhibit healthier levels of self-esteem and positive social behavior than those children who live in single-parent households.¹⁵ Though in no way denigrating the lives of children who are raised in single-parent homes, research such as this illustrate the need for both a father and a mother because of the varying style of parenting exhibited by the each circumstance. While a mother tends to be more nurturing, a father is more apt to push his children to achieve. This dichotomy creates a parenting team that gives a child the best possible chance to achieve the greatest possible success.

In light of such findings, the Federal government and private organizations have taken action to address the rising social dilemma of diminishing paternal influence on American children. First, this essay provides an overview of programs that foster the increased involvement of fathers in the lives of their children. Secondly, it examines the prioritization of these initiatives in the 109th Congress and what effect partisan political influences may have on the enactment of these social policies. Finally, this essay argues the need for increased public and private involvement in the restoration of positive paternal influence on American youth.

Birth of the Modern Fatherhood Movement

The nationwide movement towards responsible fatherhood programs dates back to 1994 when the National Fatherhood Initiative convened the first summit on fatherhood. This convention brought together nearly 250 leaders from the private sector, non-profit sector, faith-based organizations, and government to examine the problem of absent fathers. These individuals instituted a national goal to increase the number of children growing up with "an involved, committed, and responsible father."¹⁶

These community leaders set changing societal viewpoints regarding the role of fathers as their first goal. According studies presented at the first National Fatherhood Initiative summit, American society had come to view fathers as simply helpful individuals, not necessary components for the nurturing and development of children.¹⁷

However, by the end of the decade, the National Fatherhood Initiative's actions were validated by a Gallup Organization report that found 72 percent of those polled in a national survey believed that the "physical absence of the father from the home is the most significant problem facing America."¹⁸

Those who initially participated in 1994 National Fatherhood Initiative Summit did not stop at bringing national attention to the problem of absent fathers, they branched out to multiple private organizations to reach individual communities and increase paternal participation. Through the interaction of local groups like the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Philadelphia, Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization in New York City, and the National Partnership for Community Leadership in Washington, D.C.; workgroups have been formed to work hand-in-hand with the National Fatherhood Initiative to address the issue of absentee fathers.

Background of Federal Fatherhood Initiatives

Although most federal programs to address this surfacing social problem are characterized under the heading of "fatherhood initiatives," the majority of programs are gender-neutral. The fundamental principles of each of these initiatives are to increase the participation of non-custodial parents in the lives of their children.

It must be noted that the formulation of fatherhood enhancement programs is not a new phenomenon. In fact, Congress began seriously considering federal Child Support Enforcement (CSE) programs as a means of placing financial responsibility on non-custodial parents in 1975.¹⁹ This focus has transformed into a belief that CSE programs are a catalyst that may enable single parents who are classified in the low/subsistence income bracket to become self-sufficient.²⁰

The majority of government initiatives to support and promote responsible fatherhood were concentrated in the 1996 welfare reform legislation that created the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. The overall purpose of the TANF program was clearly stated in the 1996 welfare reform law itself: "Promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is integral to successful child rearing and the well-being of children."²¹ In fact, three of the four goals – ending welfare dependence by employment and marriage, reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and encouraging the formation of two parent families – of the TANF program are consistent with most fatherhood enhancement programs.²²

More specifically, the 1996 welfare reform law saw Congress agree that many non-custodial parents were facing the same financial difficulties as those parents who were legally maintaining custody of their children. To address this issue, non-custodial parents who were unable to pay child support payments for a child receiving TANF benefits to participate in TANF work activities.²³ In addition, states were also provided with Federal funding to develop programs to support a non-custodial parent's visitation rights so they could have a greater influence on their child's life.²⁴

"Fatherhood initiatives" have not been limited to the 1996 welfare reform legislation. While Congress has not specifically earmarked Federal funding for

fatherhood enhancement programs, numerous states and local governments, private and nonprofit agencies have enacted fatherhood programs. Most notable among these programs is the National Fatherhood Initiative. This program, like similar initiatives across the nation, focuses on national education programs to bring attention to this problem through television ad campaigns and earned media exposure.²⁵

Other fatherhood programs, in addition to those prescribed by the National Fatherhood Initiative, have addressed this issue through a variety of programs to educate, inform, and provide for those who are characterized as fatherless. To address many of the barriers to paternal involvement, these groups have primarily began a course of educating parents about the need to provide a good example of respect to a child's mother, responsible sexual and financial decision-making, and recognition of appropriate behavior. In addition, support is provided to those who are financially indigent through job training and job search opportunities.

Bureaucratic Fatherhood Initiatives

Though the Bush Administration and Congress have yet to reauthorize the TANF program and corresponding marriage promotion programs, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has initiated several programs to promote fatherhood. The Department of Health and Human Services has begun awarding competitive grants to faith-based and community organizations for marriage and parenting education, as well as job training and other forms of support to assist fathers become positive influences in their child's life.²⁶ Because incarceration causes the division of children from their fathers, in addition to traumatic separation, the Department of Health and Human Services has promoted a new effort to mentor and provide other support to children of incarcerated parents during the time of their parent's imprisonment.²⁷

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has gone further to promote existing programs such as the "Partners for Fragile Families" program. Through the enhancement of this program, the Department of Health and Human Services approved demonstration programs in nine states to study ways for child support enforcement programs and faith-based groups to work together to assist young, unmarried fathers improve their financial circumstances.²⁸ This program, accomplished in correlation with numerous other fatherhood promotion programs that involve Early Head Start programs and Responsible Fatherhood projects, are aimed at supporting family centered, comprehensive approaches to endorsing the benefits of paternal influences.

Through the "Partners for Fragile Families" program, the Department of Health and Human Services and private sector partners have conducted Fatherhood Development Workshops examining effective parenting and employment practices for unemployed and underemployed fathers.²⁹ This program has also spawned the publication of a manual for workers to use in assisting low-income fathers learn how to better interact with the child support enforcement system.³⁰ Through the use of these programs, the Department of Health and Human Services hopes that substantial barriers

to the entry of low-income fathers into the lives of their children can be identified and eroded.

The multi-year study of "fragile families" also studied the impact and importance of fathers on the lives of their children. This 20-city study found that only 44 percent of never-before married fathers lived with their partners when their child was born.³¹ Even in light of such a discouraging finding, there were positive findings discovered by the study. Perhaps the most positive of the statistics uncovered by this study was that over 90 percent of mothers wanted the father of their children to be involved in the child's life.³²

To assist those parents who do not have custodial rights to their children, the Department of Health and Human Services has awarded over \$50 million in block grants to states for the promotion of access and visitation programs.³³ These grants can be used to provide mediation and counseling services, as well as for the development of parenting plans and visitation programs.³⁴ These services have provided over 50,000 parents with greater access to visitation and influence on their children's life each year.³⁵

Perhaps the Federal bureaucracy's greatest asset in the implementation of these programs was the appointment of Dr. Wade Horn as the Department of Health and Human Service's Assistant Secretary of Children, Youth, and Families. Dr. Horn had previously served as President of the National Fatherhood Initiative. Horn brought his private sector experience to the Department of Health and Human Services, as well as the prioritization of fatherhood programs to the federal government.

Failed Welfare Reform Reauthorization of the 107th & 108th Congress

The original funding mandate for the block grant portion of the TANF program, mandatory child care funds, and abstinence education programs expired on September 30, 2002.³⁶ Neither the Bush Administration nor Congress could come to an agreement during the 107th or 108th Congresses to reauthorize these programs. Therefore, the current versions of these programs have been reauthorized for each respective fiscal year through concurrent resolutions. The latest of these resolutions expires on March 31, 2005.³⁷

Among the initiatives outlined in the latest versions of welfare reform reauthorization, as well as in the Bush Administration's yearly budgets, have been requests for the funding of marriage promotion programs. The Bush Administration, as well as numerous congressional allies such as Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, believes that marriage is a means of improving the financial stability of families and psychological development of children. According to the proponents of marriage promotion, children who live in a home with both biological parents score higher on academic achievement tests, have a lower rate of teenage pregnancy, and experience lower levels of delinquency than children who live in single parent families.³⁸

Detractors of this policy point to incidents of domestic violence as a reason to proceed cautiously. Under this theory, not all families should be brought together because of the threat of domestic violence in some form against another member of the

family. In addition, because correlation does not necessarily signal causality, detractors also question whether other circumstances play a role in effecting the positive repercussions of marriage lauded by individuals like Bush and Santorum.

The most recent welfare reauthorization proposals have also included financial incentives to individual states that send more child support collected on behalf of families on welfare to the family itself.³⁹ Under the proposals submitted during the 107th and 108th Congresses, the Federal government would pay for a portion of support passed through welfare recipients as long as the support did not reduce the family's benefit.⁴⁰ In addition, the reauthorization proposals (S. 880 and H.R. 4) would have also given states financing incentives to former welfare recipients a greater portion of the child support payments collected for them.⁴¹

Perhaps most controversial of the recent reauthorization proposal by the Bush Administration is an increased emphasis on abstinence education. According to Administration studies, out-of-wedlock births are more highly correlated with elevated levels of poverty and lower rates of personal achievement for both children and parents.⁴² Though originally created through the 1996 welfare reform, the Bush Administration has proposed to increase the level of funding to promote abstinence education to \$50 million.⁴³ This funding is in addition to substantial increases for community-based abstinence education grants in successive Administration budget proposals.

Detractors of these funding proposals believe that greater emphasis should be placed on birth control rather than abstinence education because of the perceived inevitability of sexual relations. These lawmakers believe teens and low-income individuals should be provided with access to birth control. However, with no birth control being absolutely preventative, proponents argue that abstinence education is providing those individuals unable to provide a solid familial structure to a child with the only true form of birth control.

Welfare Reauthorization During the 109th Congress

As the 109th Congress began its first session, both the House of Representatives and Senate introduced legislations that would reauthorize and expand upon the 1996 Welfare Reform bill. In the House of Representatives, Representative Deborah Pryce of Ohio introduced H.R. 240 that would reauthorize TANF and other corresponding government program that assist low-income individuals. Though this legislation would do a great deal to bring fathers together with their children, the more comprehensive bill introduced in the 109th Congress is S. 6, the (M.O.R.E.) Act.

The M.O.R.E. Act combines the C.A.R.E. Act, T.A.N.F., and the Earned Income Tax Credit (E.I.T.C.) into one single poverty package. Sponsored by Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, this bill would provide all-inclusive government relief to those who are less fortunate. Through the M.O.R.E. Act, the federal government would commit to conduct demonstration programs in up to 10 states to promote responsible fatherhood through marriage.⁴⁴ To accomplish this charge, S. 6 calls for increased federal involvement through activities such as marriage counseling, marriage education,

financial planning seminars, and mentoring on matters related to household management.⁴⁵

This measure would also promote responsible fatherhood through parenting promoting programs. This endeavor would also use counseling and mentoring program to educate fathers about good parenting practices through skills-based instruction.⁴⁶ Responsible fatherhood promotion programs would also encourage existing fathers to provide their child's mother with mandated child support payments to assist their children through financial means.⁴⁷

The M.O.R.E. Act would also promote responsible fatherhood through the fostering of a father's economic condition. Fathers would be provided with job search, job training, and subsidized employment to encourage increased employment and financial stability.⁴⁸ These programs would be instituted in addition to and in coordination with many existing employment services provided through welfare-to-work programs and local employment training initiatives such as referral systems.⁴⁹

If this legislation were to be signed into law, the M.O.R.E. Act would be authorized to appropriate \$20 million for each of the fiscal years 2006 through 2010.⁵⁰ To be eligible for federal funding, an entity must be a local government, local public entity, non-profit organization, or charitable organization that qualifies through a stringent application process overseen by the Department of Health and Human Services.⁵¹ Each state that has eligible recipients would receive up to \$1 million to conduct programs that promote responsible fatherhood.⁵²

The M.O.R.E. Act would also create a National Clearinghouse for Responsible Fatherhood Programs. Through this initiative, media campaigns and nationally recognized non-profit fatherhood promotion organizations such as the National Fatherhood Initiative would be brought to bear in coordination with domestic violence programs to insure that safe family relations emerge.⁵³ To accomplish this mission, the Clearinghouse would be authorized at the \$5 million level for each of the fiscal years 2006 through 2010.⁵⁴

Introduced on January 24, 2005, S. 6 was referred to the Senate Committee on Finance. Sponsored by Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania and cosponsored by Senators Bill Frist, Mitch McConnell, and Kay Bailey Hutchison; the M.O.R.E. Act currently stands as one of the Senate Republican leadership's top ten priorities for the 109th Congress.

Successes and Future of Fatherhood Initiatives

Most prominent social movements share a distinct group of characteristics. Just as the American Revolution had the goal of emancipating the 13 original colonies from the oppression of an English king, the modern fatherhood movement strives to accomplish the clear objective of uniting children with a responsible and committed father. Furthermore, just as the American Revolution and Civil Rights Movement needed to change public opinion to achieve their end successes, the fatherhood movement has had to break through the wall of public apathy and create a discourse that now finds over

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70 percent of participants in a Gallup Survey citing the "physical absence of the father from the home [as] the most significant problem facing America."⁵⁵

The modern fatherhood movement has also created a foundation that provides a strong base to build upon. Since the 1994 fatherhood conference, national and state officials have taken note of the mission and accomplishment of fatherhood initiatives. As a part of the most recent congressional attempt to reauthorize and reform the American welfare state, fatherhood initiatives have earned a prominent position in the dialogue of means to strengthen the American family.

Over the past decade, groups like the National Fatherhood Initiative and the results of federal welfare reform have impacted the family dynamic through increased public awareness and public programs aimed at uniting families. The fatherhood movement continues to be dedicated to converting attitudinal change. Out of this transformation has been the creation of a societal behavioral change through the increased commitment and involvement of responsible fathers. As a result of this social revolution, the traditional form of the American family has now reemerged on the tongues of the public at large and, with it, the fostering of healthier families for the development of the next generation.

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³ Ibid.

⁴ J. Fields. *Living Arrangements of Children: Fall 1996*. Current Population Reports. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau. 2001. pp 70 - 74.

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⁶ Ibid.

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⁹ A. Jackson. "The Effects of Nonresident Father Involvement on Single Black Mothers and Their Young Children." *Social Work*. 44(2): 156 - 166. 1999.

¹⁰ Fatherhood & Welfare Reform: Helping Families Reach Their American Dream. "Why Kids Need A Mom & Dad: The Price of Father Absence." The National Fatherhood Initiative Roundtable. National Press Club - January 26, 2005.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Fatherhood & Welfare Reform: Helping Families Reach Their American Dream. "The State of Fatherhood and the Fatherhood Movement Today." The National Fatherhood Initiative Roundtable. National Press Club - January 26, 2005.

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