

Defining, Burdening, & Criminalizing Fathers Through Child Support



Medical Humanities Fair

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Critical Background

Over half of all African American children live without their biological fathers. Statistically, the significance of **engaging non-custodial fathers** in their children's lives can be underscored by the association of fatherless homes with an **increased likeliness** for the child to be poor, engage in **substance abuse**, drop out of school, and experience **health and emotional ramifications** (fathers.com).

Here, the **child support system** mandates that the father must provide financial compensation. However, studies reveal that the child support system historically **disproportionately punishes low-income men**, leading to **incarceration, intergenerational debt, and discouragement** (Threlfall et al.). Coupled with structural and racial inequalities, **African American men** characterized as “**deadbeat dads**” for their inability to provide financially are also **pitted against their children's mother**, viewed antagonistically by men as **weaponizing the system to their advantage**.

Research Questions

Having discussed the **importance of family** as the site where **social ills** are addressed, I seek to investigate what occurs when **social, institutional and political forces** lead to the very **breakdown of the family**.

- Specifically, how does the American **child support system** burden and **foster the disintegration** of African-American families seeking to **healthily raise their children**?
- How has the child support system perpetuated the **intergenerational, cyclic nature of poverty** for fathers and defined the **role of fathers**?

Field Site

Ultimately driven by a commitment to **empowering fathers** and **promoting presence** in their children's lives, UIH Family Partners takes measures to help men **recuperate where the federal child support system has failed them**. Serving primarily **low-income African-American men** in the Trenton area, UIH:

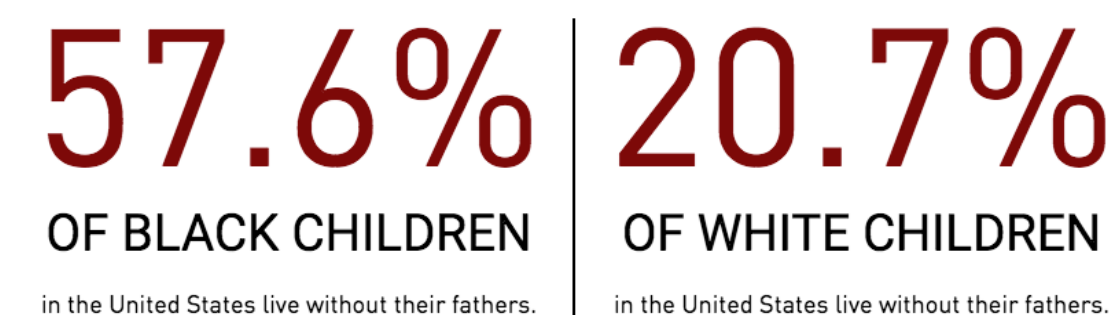
- helps these men learn **responsible parenting** and **anger management**
- provides **moral support** in court
- increases their **economic stability** by equipping them with **job training** and resources through programs like **Dress2Impress** and **Operation Fatherhood**

Importantly, UIH provides a second chance to fathers who have been **incarcerated** or affected by **intergenerational trauma** - burdens that are often exacerbated by excessive **financial obligations to child support**. This program emphasizes values of **self-sufficiency, engagement in family life, and community** (uihfamilypartners.org).

“**Father absence is to blame for many of our most intractable social ills affecting children.**”

Fatherhood.org

BY THE NUMBERS



Children raised in a **fatherless home** are:

- more likely to suffer from abuse and neglect**
- more likely to go to jail or commit a crime**
- 7x more likely to experience teenage pregnancy**
- 2x more likely to experience obesity**
- 2x more likely to drop out of high school**

Insights and Discussion

Research reveals that the main perceptions shared by fathers of the child support system were that it: “**imposes unrealistic financial demands, criminalizes low-income men, discounts paternal viewpoints, and evidences responsible parenting**” (Threlfall et al.). Chiefly, the system penalizes low-income men by requiring a higher percentage of their wages for child support compared to wealthier fathers; punishment for so-called “**non-compliance**” is **incarceration**. On the other hand, there is **little to no documentation** required on how **child support funds are spent** by mothers. Coupled with tendencies of **negative gate-keeping behaviors by mothers**, the child support system is viewed to favor mothers and cultivates **adversarial relationships** between parents seeking the best for their children.

Ultimately, the child support system disregards **structural inequalities**, such as intergenerational trauma or discrimination in the workplace that **inhibits economic mobility**, when demanding financial compensation from fathers. Instead, it **criminalizes and discourages** well-intentioned fathers unable to provide financially, **reducing the father's role to financial provision** and perpetuating an **endless, inescapable cycle of debt and poverty** that in turn, **contributes to the trauma**. It also incentivizes **family division**. Future research should target how child support can be more effectively managed through strategies that involve **both parents**, in order to **encourage the unity and importance of family**.

Acknowledgments

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References

- Threlfall, J. M. and Kohl, P. L. (2015), “Addressing Child Support in Fatherhood Programs: Perspectives of Fathers and Service Providers.” *Family Relations*, 64: 291-304. doi:10.1111/fare.12119
- **Statistics:** fatherhood.org, fathers.com, United States Census Bureau's “Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2015”
- **Graphics:** created using piktochart.com

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