

FATHERHOOD AND FAMILIES



The story of Black fathers is rarely accurately told. Media and society paint a picture that depicts Black fathers, particularly poor fathers, as irresponsible and uncaring. They are characterized as having a large number of children with multiple women, and providing adequate care for none of them. Such egregious examples are most often seen in the media but stories of strong fathers who maintain stable two-parent families; fathers who are financially and emotionally “present” for their children, although not in the home; or men like John and the other half million single-parent Black fathers in America⁵⁴ rarely receive public attention. The vast majority of Black fathers are not deadbeats who don’t love their children. To the contrary, research has shown that Black fathers who don’t reside in the home are more likely to sustain regular contact with their children than fathers of any other racial group.⁵⁵

“...my kids are my life... you know for a parent, a man to be involved with his kids is one of the greatest things a kid can experience... I can train ‘em right, put ‘em out in the world...”
-John, single father of three daughters⁵³

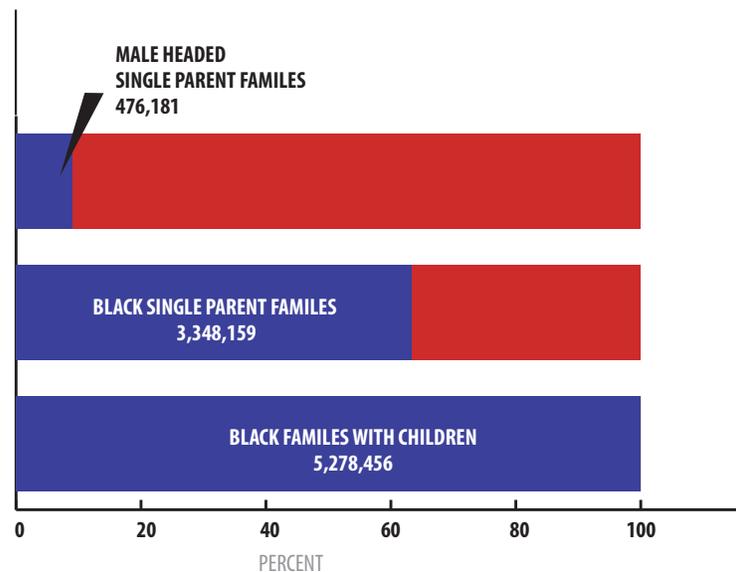
Black men do, however, face significant obstacles in trying to support themselves and their children. These obstacles – such as unemployment, low wages, incarceration/criminal history, child welfare issues, or lack of parenting skills – can sometimes be so daunting that they compel men to make poor choices. Failing to address systemic causes for some Black men’s absence, however, is “like telling a starving child that he needs to stop losing weight but keeping a lock on the refrigerator.”⁵⁶ Addressing these obstacles through systemic

policy reforms will remove barriers that stymie so many otherwise well-intentioned men. When Black men fail to actively participate in their children’s lives, there is the potential for long-term and far-reaching effects for both parents and children. Fathers’ absence places children at risk for negative life outcomes. While many Black boys raised in low-income, single-mother household grow up successfully and become thriving, productive citizens, these boys are vulnerable. Research has shown that children who are raised solely by one biological parent are more likely to drop out of school, to be disconnected (not in school and not working), to be involved in criminal activity, and to become teenage parents.⁵⁷ Further, adolescents who have active parental relationships with fathers, even when their fathers don’t reside in their homes, engage in fewer delinquent behaviors.⁵⁸ The absence of fathers has a definite financial impact, particularly for lower income children. Children in single parent homes are far more likely to be raised in impoverished conditions, which is a major risk factor for appropriate youth development and academic success. Additionally, for Black boys in particular, identifying the biological father as a positive role model has significant impact on their self esteem. Mentoring programs and relationship building with positive Black male role models are quite helpful in Black boys developing positive self-image and putting them on a path to success. These programs, however, are really only a necessary solution to meet a need that is unfulfilled by the biological father. Tackling the issues plaguing fathers will put them back in their appropriate roles as role models, leaders, and guiders of their children’s development.

High unemployment and low wages affect Black family formation and father involvement. Economic insecurity drives fathers out of consistent and active relationships with their children.⁵⁹ This is often self-inflicted when fathers feel they are not fulfilling their first and most important role as financial providers. Some Black men reduce their overall involvement until they can regain financial footing. For many Black fathers, being able to financially contribute the major support in the home often determines whether they remain in the home. Society’s definition of manhood places the expectation of primary financial provider squarely on men’s shoulders. By virtue of this definition, Black men’s chronic levels of unemployment and underemployment condemn many to bear the label of failures as men and fathers.

Incarceration and criminal history has a far-reaching effect on Black men as fathers. Black men are several times more likely to be incarcerated, and they receive harsher sentences than their White counterparts for similar crimes. Too many receive prolonged jail sentences for nonviolent and other property offenses, most notably drug-related crimes. This has a marked effect on family formation. Rising incarceration rates for Black males have caused the aptly named “depletion effect” in communities in which Black males are noticeably absent.⁶⁰ Further, Black men with criminal records have significantly reduced employment prospects, making it more difficult to provide financially even after serving time. An additional consideration is the many restrictions on benefits for convicted felons, including education assistance and subsidized housing. These restrictions prevent formerly incarcerated men from improving their life prospects after release, thus making it more difficult to reunite with their families.

**FIGURE 21:
BLACK SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES (2008)**



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2008.

**FIGURE 22:
RACIAL & ETHNIC CHARACTERISTICS OF MINOR CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS (2008)**

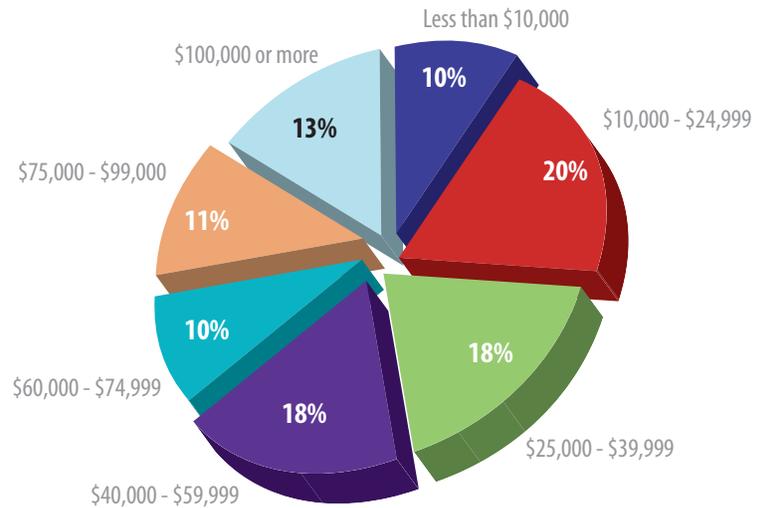
Race	Number of Children	Rate: One in
White	484,100	111
Black	767,400	15
Hispanic	362,800	42

Source: The Sentencing Project, Uneven Justice: State Rates of Incarceration by Race and Ethnicity, 2007.

The regulations of the welfare system negatively affect parental relationships and family structure. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program provides support to low-income parents with children, but its stipulations can create a systemic barrier to fathers' involvement and two-parent family formation. These rules disproportionately affect Black fathers and families, as a far larger percentage of Black families live in poverty. Participating in TANF requires the custodial parent (most often the mother) to identify the father for the purposes of obtaining a formal child support order. In most states, the child support payments are used to repay the TANF system and the federal government for the aid that was provided to the mother and children, and families receive little or no direct benefit. Fathers often feel as though their resources do not directly benefit their child, while mothers feel they aren't receiving the help they need to raise the children.⁶¹ In addition, income thresholds often preclude low-income two-parent households from receiving benefits. Low-income families sometimes have to dissolve to enable the mother to qualify for benefits to support the family. Finally, although TANF funds may be used to support family strengthening activities, these activities are often not robust and put limited focus on the support needs of non-custodial fathers.

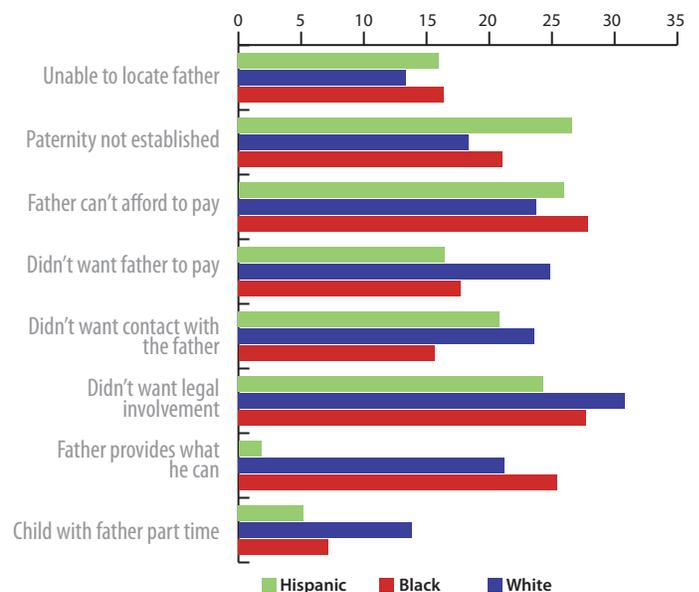
Low-income Black fathers struggle to become self-sufficient and support their children. The issue of child support calculation and enforcement is tenuous and complicated. While everyone believes that both biological parents should contribute financially to their children, there is intense debate over how to determine a fair contribution or assure that contribution occurs.

FIGURE 23:
INCOME LEVELS FOR BLACK FAMILIES IN THE UNITED STATES (2008)



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2008.

FIGURE 24:
REASONS CITED BY MOTHERS FOR NOT HAVING CHILD SUPPORT ORDER

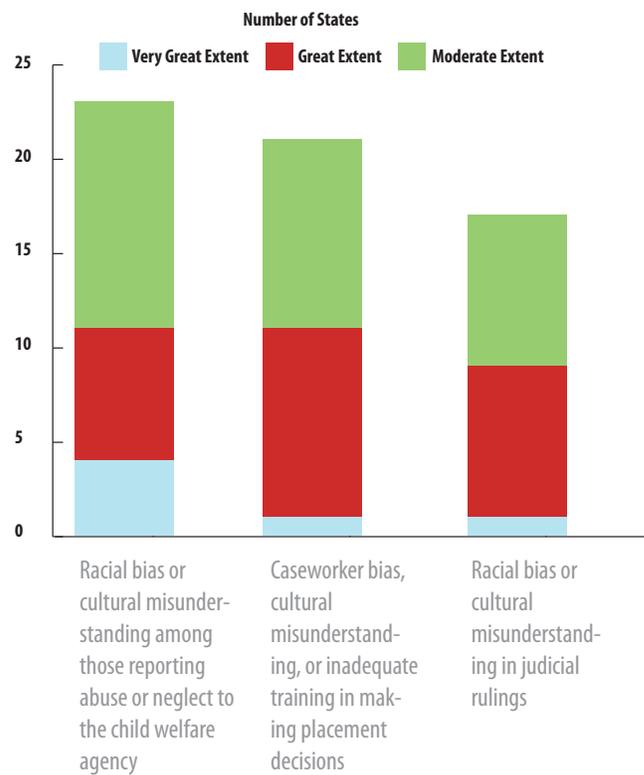


Source: US Department of Health and Human Services – Office of Child Support Enforcement, Minority Families and Child Support – Data Analysis, 2007.

Current policies often make it more difficult for fathers to support their children financially. Child support laws assume fathers are working full-time, yet the reality is that many low-income fathers do not have consistent employment. This generally leaves low-income fathers in the difficult situation of accumulating arrearages during periods of unemployment, from which they are rarely able to recover. Often, high arrearages lead to punitive measures such as wage garnishment that leave fathers

Black biological fathers receive little consideration in child welfare cases. Black children are disproportionately represented in child welfare populations. Nationally, data show that while Black children represent about 14 percent of the child population, they represent 32 percent of children in foster care.⁶² This is due to several factors. First, research shows bias in the way child welfare cases for Black families are handled. Second, low-income, non-custodial fathers are often not regarded as viable caregivers. Instead, they are stereotyped as apathetic and irresponsible.⁶³ More than half of children and youth involved in the child welfare system come from single-parent, female-headed households. Often, the assumption is that fathers are uninvolved and, by extension, their families are as well. Little effort is generally made to find the father. In many cases, particularly in low-income families, fathers are very involved in informal ways above and beyond what is mandated in child support or parental visitation orders. “Quicker and more informed permanency outcomes are likely for children and youth in the foster care system if fathers are more consistently identified and located.”⁶⁴

**FIGURE 25:
STATE VIEWS ON HOW BIAS OR CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDING AFFECT BLACK CHILDREN'S ENTRY TO FOSTER CARE**



Source: US Government Accountability Office, African American Children in Foster Care: Additional HHS Assistance Needed to Help States Reduce the Proportion in Care, 2007.



We envision for 2025 is an America where all Black fathers or male care-givers are knowledgeable, informed, and prepared to make positive choices about fathering. All Black boys have relationships with either their biological fathers or a positive Black male at every stage of their development. The systemic hindrances to supportive parental relationships are mitigated. Black fathers will be capable of leading their children and families, which will be a vital step in keeping the next generation of Black children on the path to positive futures.

If we are to achieve the 2025 dream, Black males need:

- Work support programs for unemployed or under-employed fathers
- Parental support services aimed at aiding Black fathers and their families
- More equitable child support and welfare policies
- Social services workers who do not have racial or cultural biases toward Black men and their families
- Greater consideration as potential custodial parents if their children are in crisis
- Social services workers who do not have racial or cultural biases toward Black men and their families

We can fulfill the 2025 vision. With timely action and cooperative effort, we can create significant change. On the following pages are potential actions that policy makers, states, service providers, and advocates can take to create positive change in the area of fatherhood and families for Black males.

Scale Up Work Support Programs That Work

- Provide funding to expand and replicate effective community-based program models that have a proven track record of working successfully with Black low-income fathers to develop job skills and find and maintain employment.

Make Child Support and TANF More Supportive of Fathers and Fatherhood Involvement

- Make child support a true family support program by eliminating requirements for custodial parents to cooperate with child support enforcement to receive state benefits.
- Pass through and distribute child support payments directly to TANF families.
- Fund states to improve child support policies and services for vulnerable families, such as connection to employment services for non-custodial parents, management of arrears, and better processes for modifying orders.
- Encourage states to offer programs through TANF that support fathers and mothers to enhance parental relationships and supports toward economic self-sufficiency.
- Coordinate multiple family child support cases to ensure fathers have realistic orders that do not exceed a certain percentage of their income.

Open Doors for Black Men to Be Custodial Parents

- Increase access to parenting support services that enable Black males to become custodial parents and/or maintain visitation if their children become involved in the child welfare system.
- Train and prepare all levels of staff in child welfare and social service agencies to support of Black fathers and Black family structure.

Increase Parent Support Services Targeted to Black Fathers and Their Families

- Support school-based family development & training courses that foster family.
- Provide funding to expand and replicate effective program models that work well with Black fathers and support them in developing strong parenting and communication skills.
- Increase access to parental training to equip Black men to parent their children with developmentally appropriate expectations.

Provide Specific Supports to Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Fathers and Their Families

- Assess parental status at prison intake and use this information to inform planning for inmate programming and the plan for post-release.
- Create procedures to support parent-child engagement during incarceration.
- Provide parenting education courses to prepare inmates for eventual re-unification.

Turning Ideas into Action

- **Prohibit states from categorizing incarceration as “voluntary unemployment,” which enables states to allow child support debt to continue to accrue while an individual serves time.**
- **Establish incentives and adjustments to aid formerly incarcerated fathers with the management their child support debt.**
- **Provide post-prison child support services such as assistance to resolve child access disputes and legal services.**

Remove Racial or Cultural Bias from the Practices of Social Service Workers

- **Train and prepare all levels of staff in family and social service agencies to support of Black fathers and Black family structure.**
- **Work with state social service agencies to develop culturally sensitive approaches to engaging and sustaining father involvement with children.**

Training Black Men to Be Fathers

More than 400 Black men have completed the Concerned Black Men Fatherhood Initiative program in the past four years. The fathers, ranging in age from 18 to 62, participated in a 14-session curriculum that helps improve parenting and relationship competencies, as well as job readiness and self-sufficiency skills. Funded by the Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children, Youth and Families, post-survey analysis reveals that the majority of the participants demonstrate improved parenting skills, better relationships with their children and an increased level of involvement with their children. These improvements are significant given that more than 50 percent of the fathers in the Concerned Black Men program are formerly incarcerated and restricted by law from residing in many of the public housing communities in which their children live.

When asked why they attend, many of the younger men say they want to be better fathers, but also enjoy the collegiality and mentorship of the older men who are close to the age of their “missing” fathers; the older men appreciate the role of “mentor” and also seek an opportunity to reconnect with their adult children and grandchildren.

The Dream Manifested

