

THE STATUS OF NON-RESIDENT FATHERS IN CHILD WELFARE

Father Absenteeism

Today more American children are growing up without their biological father in the home than at any other point in American history. Trends such as divorce and remarriage, as well as more children being born outside of marriage, result in a diminishing role of fathers in the daily lives of their children. Over twenty-five million American children (or 33.5 percent of children in the U.S.) live absent their biological father. (Krieder, 2005).

National changes in children's living arrangements have also caused a shift in the traditional paradigm of the mother, father, and child household. Of the 73.2 million children under 18 years old living in the United States in 2004, 67.7 percent (49.6 million) were living with two parents, 27.9 percent (20.4 million) were living with a single parent, and 4.3 percent (3.1 million) were living with neither parent. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

Father Facts: Fifth Edition, a publication from the National Fatherhood Initiative in 2007, discusses how these living situations may impact children:

- Compared to living with both parents, living in a single-parent home doubles the risk that a child will suffer physical, emotional, or educational neglect. (America's Children, 1997).
- Analyzing a group of 8th graders who initially resided with both biological parents, children in households that had experienced a change in family structure had school dropout rates two to three times higher than peers whose families did not change. (Pong, 2000).
- Children in father absent homes are five times more likely to be poor. In 2002, 7.8 percent of children in married-couple families were living in poverty, compared to 38.4 percent of children in female-only households. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

A number of studies also suggest that non-resident fathers present a unique population that requires special consideration:

- About half of all non-custodial fathers have ties to another set of kin and a quarter have three or more kids in their lives. These children include non-resident biological children of all other past/present mates, biological children and stepchildren who may reside with the father, and step children who live elsewhere. Eight percent of all non-resident fathers are living with biological children they fathered prior to their current residency and another 26 percent live with stepchildren. About 14 percent of non-resident fathers are living with

women who are also nonresident parents, and 42 percent have biological children with their current spouse or partner. (Manning, 2003).

- For post-divorce, non-resident fathers, lower levels of involvement with their children are related to ongoing conflict with the residential mother, greater geographical distance from the children, and a lack of clarity regarding the nature of the fathering role. (Leite, 2002).

The Urban Institute's *National Survey of America's Families* (NSAF) provides additional information, generally, on children's living arrangements. NSAF data from 2001 shows that half of children living in families whose income is below the federal poverty line live with their mothers, but not their fathers. However, NSAF data shows that minor gains were made in terms of the number of those children who received child support. Thirty-six percent of those children received support payments in 2001 compared to 31 percent in 1996. The Urban Institute notes that although these are statistically significant gains, over 60 percent of poor children do not receive child support from their fathers who live outside the home. (Sorenson, 2003).

Non-Resident Fathers and Child Welfare Systems

Father absence is also common in the child welfare system. When multiple children are system-involved, there is a high frequency of cases that involve multiple non-resident fathers. Sometimes fathers are unknown or legal paternity has not been established. Moreover, available statistics show that a large percentage of children in the foster system have non-resident fathers.

According to the *Adoption Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System* (AFCARS) data, on September 30, 2005, there were 513,000 children placed in foster care within the United States. Other data and research indicates that most foster children are not living with their fathers at the time they are removed from their homes. An incalculable number of children and youth also enter the child welfare system but are not removed from the home; many of them also have non-resident fathers who live outside the home.

Data collected by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for *Child Maltreatment 2005* shows that child abuse and/or neglect victims came from single parent, mother only households more often than any other living arrangement type. Moreover, of the 28 states reporting, 11.1 percent of child victims of abuse, neglect or abandonment were from married parent households, while 17.7 percent of victims came from mother only households and 1.9 percent of victims came from father only households.

A 2005 report assessing *National Child Abuse and Neglect System* (NCANDS) data from 2002, showed that females outnumbered male perpetrators among cases investigated by child welfare agencies by approximately 10 percent. The study also found that more than half of male perpetrators were biological fathers but almost one quarter were father

figures, such as stepfathers or mothers' boyfriends. These statistics regarding perpetrators also support data showing that child maltreatment victims frequently have fathers who live outside the home.

Moreover, although paternity is known for more than 80 percent of foster children with non-resident fathers and for other children served by child welfare agencies, once in foster care they have little contact with their fathers. In November 2003, the Urban Institute issued a brief on *Getting Noncustodial Dads Involved in the Lives of Foster Children*. (Malm, 2003). That brief noted:

- Only 54 percent of foster children had contact with their fathers in the past year;
- 66 percent of comparable children served by child welfare agencies had contact with their fathers in the past year; and
- 72 percent of children in the general population had contact with their fathers in the past year.

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