

Low-income black fathers want to be good dads. The system won't let them

Kirk E Harris

Working with low-income black fathers in Chicago, I have long seen how counterproductive policies punish them for trying

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Four years ago the state of Illinois suspended the driver's license of James (not his real name) for failing to fully meet his child support obligations, which he was not earning enough to pay. Now, unable to drive to work, he lost his full-time welding job. He found a lower-paid job he could reach using Chicago's patchy suburban public transport system, which makes commuting difficult for people in some of the city's economically isolated and racially segregated communities.

Today, James' wages are still insufficient to pay off his mounting arrears, so he remains barred from driving. Ironically, his lack of driving privileges makes it impossible for him to cast a net for a

better-paying job that would allow him to meet these payments. That paradox illustrates the regressive, counterproductive policies I have encountered during two decades of working with low-income black fathers in Chicago. The vast majority of these men desperately want to be good fathers, but the system seems to punish them for even trying.

In the US, a vexing confluence of historical, racial and economic inequalities prevents many such fathers from fulfilling their paternal roles. Yes, some men are unwilling to embrace their parental obligations. However, our social policies should not treat all low-income black fathers as deadbeat dads, nor suggest this is the norm or adopt this belief as the default position that should be assumed with respect to these fathers.

Despite the pernicious stereotype of the absent black father, black fathers actually spend more time providing care to their children than Latino and white fathers, according to a national study conducted by the Center for Disease Control (CDC). Although these men are working hard to support their families, their voices are often ignored in public debates about welfare reform and family policy - placing unnecessary strain on mothers and denying children equal parental involvement.

The children of these men need their fathers. Upwards of 70% of our nation's low-income black children reside in households where the mother was unmarried at the time of their birth. Research has established that father involvement improves a child's educational outcomes, confidence, minimizes counter-productive behavior and decreases early sexual activity and other dangerous risk-associated behaviors.

Although policy discussions of fatherhood often focus on the question of child support, our common policies and practices ignore equally important non-financial factors. For example, policies and practices marginalize the caregiving roles of non-custodial fathers care-giving roles by excluding them from key educational and health-related decisions about their children. These policies and practices reinforce the myth that black fathers are not present in their children's lives when CDC data show that they desire the exact opposite.

It is urgent that we reform public policies and social work practices so they better address black fathers' desire to parent, instead of punishing these fathers for their financial insecurity that is largely borne of acute racial and economic injustice.

Where do we start?

First, we must reform our outdated, New Deal-era welfare system. Rooted in the 1930s Social Security Act, the current system assumes fathers to be absent and, conversely, only values men's financial contributions. Governmental, as well as not-for-profit social service practitioners, need to better include fathers in discussions and decision-making related to their child's education, health, and development and make their involvement the norm. We should never let a father's inability to pay child support eclipse the other ways he can fulfill his nurturing role.

Second, on a local level, improving the self-sufficiency of low-income black fathers means we need to simplify access to employment programs and work more effectively with community-based not-for-profits, trade organizations, and local schools and colleges to improve access to these opportunities. In Chicago, this means eliminating the bureaucracy and lack of community outreach which place training programs out of reach of their target constituencies. We can also

better leverage local business networks to help historically disadvantaged people transition from training to employment.

Third, public policy needs to recognize that low-income black fathers are experiencing intergenerational economic instability and deprivation, and often need some sort of economic support as they work through training and education programs. Otherwise recruitment, retention, and completion of these educational and training programs will remain low and the self-sufficiency goals of low-income black fathers will continue to be undermined.

Fourth, we must be willing to engage with fathers who have a history of contact with the criminal justice system. Injustices in the criminal justice system have snatched far too many black fathers out of the lives of their children, and from their families and communities, leading to family and community instability and trauma.

Fifth, America needs to commit resources that provide family support at a community level. This is particularly relevant in neighborhoods where social cohesion is compromised by vicious cycles of economic and racial subordination. Canada's Family Resource Programs are a good example to follow. They provide federally-funded family support and resource programs and community centers across the country. These act as convening places where both mothers and fathers can receive help without stigma or judgment. Family support centers could also be venues where fathers could organize their own mutual support groups. Father mutual support groups have been proven to be effective vehicles for strengthening and empowering fathers.

Policies like these would be a modest start. If the experiences of low-income black fathers inform our policies and social work practices those policies and practices will be better at promoting the positive outcomes we say we seek for mothers and children. Men like James genuinely want to be good fathers and providers; let's take the steps that will make that possible.

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