

1 Knowing What a Father Is

“I don’t want him to grow up like I grew up. I want my son to have everything. I don’t want him to be a have-not,” explained Christopher.¹ Father to three-year-old Chris Jr., Christopher, a twenty-two-year-old Black man, was feeling unsteady but hopeful when we met. He was searching for a place to live, looking for a job, and planning how to get back together with Chris Jr.’s mother, Monique. “No matter how bad me and his mom disagree, or how bad other things get, I still try to be there for him because you’ve only got one dad. There are only two ways to keep me from being there for my son, if I’m in jail or dead.”

Christopher knew the heartache of the first and had come dangerously close to the second. A former gang member who left school after the eleventh grade, Christopher was raised by his paternal grandmother in one of the poorest neighborhoods in America. When he was born, his parents struggled with homelessness and addiction. With his mother in prison, Christopher’s father tried to care for him, but there was not enough money for both milk and diapers. He relinquished custody when Christopher was three months old, becoming less involved as his son grew older. With a sigh of resignation, Christopher praised his grandmother while expressing longing for a close relationship with his father:

She was an amazing parent, stuck it through no matter what. I got the clothes and food I needed. I might not have had the name brands, but I was never hungry. . . . I always said growing up that I will never be like my dad. I want [Chris Jr.] to know what a father is. I want him to be able to say, "My dad was there." I feel like I'm trying to make up for my dad's flaws in my relationship with my son, to make sure he doesn't grow up and question, "What happened to my dad?" I'm here because I want to do better, as a father and a man in general, to get it together, to be able to support my family like a man should. Because that's how I was raised. Grandma didn't teach me to be a slouch.

Incarcerated the year before for selling drugs, Christopher knew he had to find a safer way to make the money needed to support his family, one that did not involve always "looking over my shoulder" and fearing the ultimate separation from his son. He confided to me, "I'm not going to lie. The thought of doing it again has crossed my mind. But every time it does, I just push it back and think of when I had to talk to my son from across the glass on his birthday." Christopher still felt the sorrow of that isolation. "It broke my heart. I'm not an emotional person, but I cried. My son was crying, asking why he couldn't come to the other side. I couldn't answer. I knew right then, no more."

That decision led him to enroll in DADS, a government-funded "responsible fatherhood" program that provided high school completion classes, paid job training, and fathering and relationship skills education. Government promotion of responsible fatherhood, which began with the 1996 U.S. Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, also known as welfare reform, has targeted economically vulnerable men like Christopher whose social and financial struggles hinder their fathering aspirations. The U.S. government defines responsible fatherhood as "being present in a child's life, actively contributing to a child's healthy development, sharing economic responsibilities, and cooperating with a child's mother in addressing the full range of a child's and family's needs."² For fathers like Christopher—poor, homeless, unemployed, without a diploma, and bearing the stigma of a criminal record—this is a tall order. With no home and little money, Christopher could not keep Chris Jr. overnight, and he struggled to remain on good terms with Monique, who limited Christopher's contact with Chris when they fought. Still, Christopher made it a

priority to see his son every day and viewed DADS as an opportunity to “get back on [his] feet” after spending Chris Jr.’s third birthday in jail.

When I asked if DADS helped him do that, he was optimistic but ambivalent. The program offered a safe way to earn \$400 a month and an opportunity to finish his diploma, as well as peers and teachers who understood his struggles and treated him with respect. He wanted to prove to his grandmother and Monique that he was committed to being a better dad than his own had been and that he was a “real man” who, despite having little money to offer, could role-model hard work, perseverance, and integrity for his son. Christopher described his time in DADS as a way of ensuring that Chris Jr. would have more, especially a father he knew and admired:

They give you the right mind frame of being able to do things. I felt good about that [DADS] certificate at the end of the day. I might not have a job, but I got up every day, I went to this class, and I attempted to do something better, to be something better. . . . I was doing something with myself instead of just running the street trying to make a couple dollars. I was actually trying to be a productive part of society. . . . We went from being on this block every day to making it to class every day. It became a priority for us, to prove our parenting.

However, as our interview continued, Christopher admitted having doubts about how much his participation in DADS actually changed his life circumstances. “We got a certificate; now what? . . . How far is two hundred dollars going to go in two weeks when you’ve got to buy food and clothe yourself? Unless you just plan on going out and hustling with it, what do you expect us to do?” With his DADS certificates proudly hung on his son’s bedroom wall, Christopher was unsure about what he would do next.

Christopher’s experience points to why responsible fatherhood policy and ideas about family and poverty that motivate it are controversial. Many view fathers like Christopher as a social problem to be solved. According to this logic, without a dad’s consistent presence in the home—what many call “father absence” or “fatherlessness”—Christopher had failed to learn how to be a good father from a parent of the same gender who modeled responsible work and family behaviors. With goals to prevent poverty and to promote child well-being, programs like DADS aim to

teach men about the importance of fathers and how to meet their paternal obligations. Others criticize this logic as misrepresenting the social and economic factors that shaped Christopher's life chances. They argue that a missing paternal presence did not doom him to poverty and incarceration; rather, a society in which poor children of color face racism and other overwhelming obstacles to education and well-paid jobs did.

Nevertheless, echoing narratives of father absence, Christopher acutely felt the lack of a father in his life. Though he had received all the resources and care he needed from his grandmother, Christopher felt like a "have-not" due to not having had a father in his life. Ultimately, despite his appreciation for the "amazing" grandmother who raised him, he still believed that a father is essential. Christopher's deep desire for a close relationship with a man parent is a critical policy concern and the crux of the debate over the social role of fathers. What is at stake in this debate—and more importantly, in actual families like Christopher's—is how fathering both shapes and is shaped by class, race, and gender inequalities and how policy should intervene. Given that these same inequalities influence Chris Jr.'s chances of being a "have-not," these are high stakes.

Sociological research illuminates the aspirations and challenges of marginalized fathers who struggle to be present in their children's lives.³ Turning away from deficit understandings of fatherhood that emphasize what fathers lack and do not do for their children, this research highlights how social and economic constraints can undermine the best fathering intentions. Many poor men of color defy the stereotype of the "deadbeat dad" who deliberately neglects his parenting responsibilities. Instead, they embrace ideas of good fathering focused on time and care that seem more attainable in the context of their constraints. Responsible fatherhood policy accords with these changing meanings of men's parenting by officially emphasizing both the financial and relational aspects of fathering.⁴ Yet how it does so in practice, and especially how men like Christopher make sense of these messages, has fallen outside the purview of much of this research.⁵

Most studies of fatherhood programs have focused on whether they helped fathers meet federal policy goals, such as more frequent father-child contact and increased earnings.⁶ Although important, these variables miss the full sociological significance of responsible fatherhood policy and programming. While they address key policy metrics, they do

not fully capture why fathers who go through these programs believe they come out with a more nurturing attitude but no better able to provide for or see their children. To fill that gap, *Essential Dads* draws on the stories of Christopher and sixty-three of his fellow DADS participants. Rather than allowing for claims of causality or program impacts, attention to fathers' narratives captures the interpretive aspects of fathering as shaped by men's experiences in a fatherhood program. These stories powerfully illuminate how policy shapes marginalized men's parenting perspectives and experiences in the context of dire economic circumstances and shifting cultural expectations of fatherhood and manhood.

The ideas men brought to and learned from DADS reveal a great deal about U.S. political understandings of how fathering is implicated in inequality, the gendered dynamics of parenting, and the importance of men as parents. From this vantage point, "responsible" fatherhood is a much more complex issue than whether or not a man financially supports and interacts with his children. It requires careful consideration of the social and economic factors shaping men's abilities to be involved in their children's lives and the ideologies that rationalize the necessity of that involvement.

With that goal in mind, this book provides new insights into what many consider one of the most pressing social problems of our time: marginalized fathers' tenuous connections to their children. It does so by answering key questions about this understudied aspect of U.S. social policy. How do men's understandings of paternal responsibility shape their engagement with fatherhood program messages and services? Does responsible fatherhood programming challenge or reinforce gendered, racialized, and classist ideas of parenting? What does this reveal about the potential for policy to create more equitable conditions for fathering? Answering these questions first requires that we understand how "irresponsible" fathering came to be seen as a social problem.

THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF "FATHERLESSNESS"

Responsible fatherhood programs emerged in the United States in the 1970s as a response to a complex set of social, economic, and political

changes in family life and welfare policy.⁷ Panics over the “decline” of fathering, however, go back much further. Beginning with mothers’ pensions in the early twentieth century, U.S. welfare policy framed poverty as the result of family disruption, specifically the loss of a father and breadwinner. Drawing on this man-as-provider family model, cash assistance policies for poor families—consisting almost exclusively of impoverished mothers and their children—were conceptualized as a husband/father substitute.⁸

As the composition of welfare rolls changed throughout the first half of the twentieth century, race and class stereotypes converged to paint white widows as deserving of public support for doing the labor of raising children and Black single mothers as lazy, promiscuous dependents on the state. Prior to the 1940s, white widows were the majority of mothers who received welfare cash aid as compensation for deceased fathers’ wages. Those who advocated for mothers’ pensions argued that mothers without income because of the father’s death, desertion, or unemployment deserved financial assistance from the state in exchange for the valuable public service they provided as guardians and caretakers of children. As never-married and divorced mothers, especially those who were not white, began to comprise a greater share of welfare recipients, many child and welfare policy advocates criticized the state for encouraging father absence by replacing men’s expected contributions to their families with public aid.⁹ Much of this concern focused on Black unmarried mothers presumed to be raising the next generation of “juvenile delinquents” without fathers who were deemed necessary to teach children mainstream family values and keep them out of poverty.¹⁰

Many were also concerned about how increasing industrialization reshaped fathers’ family responsibilities to focus on breadwinning. Fearful that time spent away from children undermined men’s family authority and that home life had become too feminized, academics emphasized that fathers were essential for children’s proper gender socialization. Among the first was Sigmund Freud, whose psychoanalytic theory of gender development posited that boys needed to identify with fathers to adequately separate from mothers.¹¹ This idea that fathers were important as “sex role models” was dominant from the 1940s to the 1960s when experts warned that boys could become overly identified with mothers who had

become primarily responsible for childcare.¹² Assuming that insecure forms of masculinity result when boys spend too little time with fathers, these theories set the stage for a highly racialized discourse of “father absence” that attributed social problems to missing Black fathers during the mid-twentieth century.

Also during this midcentury period, American women, including mothers of young children, entered the labor market in record numbers. This challenged the dominant idea of the single-earner, man-headed household, which had never been a reality for most families of color.¹³ It also undercut many assumptions embedded in U.S. welfare policy. The 1965 publication of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then assistant secretary of the Department of Labor, ignited further controversy about the consequences of “family breakdown” and the “tangle of pathology” in African American communities.¹⁴ Attempting to draw attention to race-based job discrimination, the report blamed African American men’s economic subjugation on centuries of exploitation, fathers’ marginal position in Black families, and an emasculating “matriarchal structure” born of slavery.

This narrative linking father absence and welfare dependency and attributing disproportionately higher poverty, crime, and dropout rates among men of color to missing fathers has been part of U.S. political discourse ever since. Just as Moynihan’s point about racism in the labor market was lost in favor of a focus on the pathologies of Black parenting, so too has contemporary inequality been characterized primarily as a result of “broken families.” This narrow and oversimplified focus on family structure as the root cause of poverty has obscured how inequality stratifies access to opportunity across lines of race, class, and gender, despite family form.

Rising rates of divorce, cohabitation, and single parenthood in the 1960s accelerated in tandem with growing costs of public aid, prompting calls for greater enforcement of private child support. Congress instituted the first major federal child support policy with bipartisan backing in 1974. Lawmakers wanted to ensure that welfare cash aid was going only to “deserving” families and not children who could receive support from fathers who lived elsewhere.¹⁵ During the 1980s, legislators started to speak of “deadbeat dads” to describe neglectful noncustodial fathers.

“Deadbeat dad” is an example of what sociologist Patricia Hill Collins called a *controlling image*, a gendered depiction of people of color that makes poverty appear to be a result of bad personal choices.¹⁶ Controlling images are cultural shorthands for interpreting, constructing, and stigmatizing marginalized social groups, and they inform policies designed to address social problems presumably caused by those groups. Although rhetorically race neutral, characterizations of deadbeat parents were racialized in the popular imagination, reinforcing the belief that negligent Black fathers were promiscuous, predatory, and violent, and therefore to blame for the social ills of communities of color. Increasingly punitive child support policies, including those that criminalized unpaid support, reflected the growing belief that poor non-married families of color were undeserving of public aid and that fathers who did not pay were deliberately avoiding their paternal responsibilities.¹⁷

These policies presaged the passage of the responsible fatherhood provisions of welfare reform in 1996. Noting that the “promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is integral to successful child rearing and the well-being of children,” the law cited that less than half of fathers with a child support order fully comply and that the majority of children receiving welfare benefits “now live in homes in which no father is present.”¹⁸ It listed numerous negative effects of being born “out-of-wedlock” and growing up in a “father-absent” home, including lower educational aspirations and higher rates of poverty, abuse, neglect, and school expulsion. The policy also mandated that mothers receiving cash aid establish biological paternity and that states use this information to enforce child support obligations, in part to recoup government costs of cash aid to custodial parents.

The controlling image of the deadbeat dad also played a role in the gendered implications of welfare reform.¹⁹ A major reform goal was to counteract a perceived crisis of masculinity that prevented men from assuming their roles as family breadwinners.²⁰ One commentator on this purported crisis was sociologist David Popenoe, who argued that by the turn of the twentieth century, masculinity was less about self-control and family obligation—the “family protector-provider” model—and more about competition, assertiveness, and virility. Commitments to women and children, once thought to be “a central, natural, and unproblematic

aspect of being a man," must now be encouraged and institutionalized through law, Popenoe claimed.²¹ Many within the emergent responsible fatherhood movement advocated for programs that would harness qualities associated with troubled masculinities seen as threats to family stability.²²

As this movement gained momentum during the 1990s, political and academic discourses about the importance of fathering focused more intensely on masculine role modeling. David Blankenhorn, founder of the Institute of American Values, argued that many major social problems result from living in a society that views fatherhood as superfluous. Without a male parent in the home, he noted, boys look to less positive role models for the meaning of their maleness. When sons must prove their manliness without the help of fathers, they purportedly overcompensate by turning to hyper or protest forms of masculinity. Drawing a direct connection between crime, misogyny, and father absence, Blankenhorn explained: "If we want to learn the identity of the rapist, the hater of women, the occupant of jail cells, we do not look first to boys with traditionally masculine fathers. We look first to boys with no fathers."²³ Involved fathers are presumably necessary to prevent what Maggie Gallagher, president of the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, termed "father hunger." This refers to "longing for a man, not just a woman, who will care for you, protect you, and show you how to survive in the world . . . [and present] an image of maleness that is not at odds with love."²⁴ The importance of fathers, and by extension responsible fatherhood policies, these authors reasoned, is grounded in men's abilities to set limits, exercise masculine authority, and teach sons and daughters that they are worthy of male love.²⁵ Many child development experts have made similar arguments that fathers uniquely contribute to children's well-being through qualities such as masculine play styles and self-confidence.²⁶ Unstated in this discourse are the highly questionable assumptions that any father in the home is a positive influence, that all fathers demonstrate a similar masculine parenting style, and that children in homes without fathers lack positive role models of masculinity.

Around the time of 1990s welfare reform, sociologist Anna Gavanas found that two major wings had emerged within the responsible fatherhood movement: one focused on promoting marriage as the ideal context

for involved fathering and another concerned with marginalized fathers' unemployment as a barrier to marriage and paternal involvement. The "pro-marriage" wing has drawn more on essentialist ideas of gender, while the "fragile family" arm has emphasized the impacts of racism and poverty on men's marriageability and abilities to fulfill paternal responsibilities. Dominant messages in both have strong religious undercurrents, especially calls to promote married two-parent families that include both mothers and fathers.²⁷ Together the two wings have articulated a shared narrative of fathers' importance to families that highlights the unique and essential contributions of men as parents.²⁸ As sociologist Philip Cohen has argued, claims that mothers and fathers play distinct and complementary parenting roles and must raise their children to replicate them are at the heart of struggles to preserve the gender binary on which patriarchy fundamentally rests.²⁹ The ideology of gender complementarity in parenting is a strong common thread that connects many of the most controversial family policy issues over the past few decades, including opposition to marriage equality and parenting rights for same-sex couples, marriage promotion for low-income families, and calls for responsible fatherhood among poor men.

Despite a lack of direct evidence to support it, this political narrative about the importance of fathers *as men* grew to a crescendo by the turn of the twenty-first century when in 2005 Congress created a \$150 million annual federal funding stream to support the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Initiative. This funding has since supported hundreds of organizations that offer marriage and relationship education and activities related to fatherhood. Many recipients of government funding for responsible fatherhood programming have been explicitly religious or faith-based organizations with missions focused on reinstating "family values" grounded in the sanctity of married two-parent families.³⁰ While the George W. Bush administration emphasized marriage promotion, Barack Obama, motivated by a limited relationship with his own father, made fathering, fathers' economic self-sufficiency, and child support enforcement major parts of his presidential platform.³¹ Echoing earlier claims about the need for fathers, not the state, to support children, Obama described the "hole a man leaves when he abandons his responsibility to his children [as] one that no government can fill."³²

Through these various iterations, the political discourse of “fatherlessness” has served as a compelling explanation for poverty, crime, and welfare dependency. It also conveniently conceals how inequality and discrimination have fundamentally undermined “responsible” fathering among marginalized men like Christopher over the past half century, an issue of growing concern in the field of responsible fatherhood programming.

FATHERING FROM THE MARGINS

The empirical basis for public investment in fatherhood programs is the large and ever-growing number of studies linking fathers’ involvement and children’s academic, social, emotional, and economic outcomes.³³ Although research finds that children fare better in all these ways when they receive financial and emotional support from their fathers, many issues complicate the link between fathering and children’s well-being. This is a case where correlation does not always mean causation, especially given how many factors that predict if fathers are involved—including education, employment, and income—also predict which families do better socially and economically. Most of the research on fatherhood has focused on the parenting experiences of middle-class, white, and married or divorced men. Relatively little has highlighted the parenting perspectives of poor never-married fathers of color whose lives do not easily align with dominant cultural scripts of fatherhood embedded in policy. The stereotypical image of the “deadbeat dad” presumes absence, neglect, and deliberate disengagement without accounting for the numerous obstacles marginalized fathers face.

Many social and economic trends have converged in the past several decades to make sustained involvement harder for men like Christopher, including deteriorating work conditions and mass incarceration of men of color. Although middle-class fathers tend to experience parenting as part of a “package deal” of work, marriage, home, and children, fewer low-income fathers follow this script because well-paid work, homeownership, and marriage are markers of economic stability few poor fathers accomplish.³⁴ Men with little education especially have experienced declining

earnings, rising rates of unemployment, and poor prospects in both labor and marriage markets since the 1960s.³⁵ Poverty often comes with various kinds of instability—occupational, relational, and residential—that make it prohibitively difficult to be a father who can consistently provide money, time, and care.

Fathers who earn little struggle to support their children financially. They are also less likely to have a middle-class lifestyle, complete with a college degree, a job, and a house, that most people now associate with being marriageable; their romantic relationships also tend to have more tension related to unemployment, infidelity, and addiction. This means that poor men are less likely to marry their children's other parents and more likely to have children with new partners. Many low-income dads are therefore expected to be providers across many families, a situation ripe for ongoing conflict with mothers, who often need all the resources any one disadvantaged father can offer.³⁶

Fathers who get along with their children's mothers, regardless of whether they are coupled, are more likely to be involved with children, and contentious coparenting relationships are the main barrier to involvement for many.³⁷ For this reason, many experts advocate for a stronger focus on marriage and coparenting relationships in fatherhood programs. The problem with this approach is that many relationships between mothers and fathers are already over, troubled, or otherwise irreparably complicated by the time fathers enroll.³⁸ Fathers often feel that mothers "gatekeep" by blocking access to children in the aftermath of adversarial breakups. Yet research on women who share children with low-income men suggests that many mothers have good reasons to limit access, as they are protecting children from fathers who struggle with addiction and aggression.³⁹ Family complexity—when fathers share children with more than one partner—also complicates providing couple services. Promoting more involvement with one child can mean less money and time for other children, especially those who do not live with fathers.

Another concern with the focus on coupled coparenting between moms and dads in responsible fatherhood programs is the implication that all fathers parent children in heterosexual relationships. Political and cultural narratives of marriage and parenting, even those focused on marginalized families, are rarely inclusive of gay fathers, who are commonly

depicted as white and middle class if they are acknowledged at all.⁴⁰ The focus on marriage equality as a flagship issue for same-sex families has obscured how single economically vulnerable gay fathers deal with many challenges that access to marriage rights cannot address. Some government documents outlining responsible fatherhood initiatives mention families headed by same-sex couples and single gay parents, but do not reference the additional obstacles gay fathers often face.⁴¹ Children raised by gay and bisexual fathers of color are particularly vulnerable to poverty, with Black children raised by gay men having the highest poverty rates of any family type.⁴² Poor gay fathers of color are likely in even greater need of help with education, jobs, and parenting support given that they tend to face more discrimination at school and work and receive less help from extended families.⁴³ Gay dads are unlikely to see themselves and their families represented in fatherhood programs when services reflect the assumption that children have mothers and fathers, albeit with varying levels of involvement.

Once narrowly defined by scholars as how much time men spend with their children, “father involvement” has taken on a much broader meaning to include various coparenting dynamics, along with accessibility, affection, and financial support.⁴⁴ This reflects how men themselves understand fatherhood as multidimensional, context-specific, and influenced by the larger circumstances of their lives. That is, fathering is not just about direct interaction; it can include anything fathers do to develop a closer relationship with their children. Men parent within constantly shifting cultural norms and political and economic conditions of fathering. The cultural idea of the “new” or “involved” father—one who is nurturing, emotionally connected to his children, present in their lives, and responsible for some, if not an equal portion, of the childcare duties—has become dominant in recent decades as a contrast to the image of the “uninvolved father” who does not provide for or have ongoing contact with his children.⁴⁵

The growing diversity of fatherhood norms and expectations means that men often forge their own understandings of good parenting to account for obstacles they face. This can be particularly challenging for marginalized men who must contend with definitions of responsible fatherhood shaped by middle-class and heteronormative assumptions.

Providing financially, living with children, marriage, and caregiving all have monetary and practical costs that exceed the means of many poor fathers. This is one reason fathers with more education, stable jobs, and higher earnings are more involved with their kids, both financially and relationally.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, many low-income fathers strive to meet their own and others' fathering expectations. They emphasize broader meanings of good parenting that go beyond money, such as defining responsible fathering as "being there" with time and care.⁴⁷ Highlighting the emotional and relational components of parenting allows low-income fathers who lack the economic markers associated with being a successful breadwinner to claim a good-father identity in the context of disadvantage. Stressing presence and affection allows marginalized men to bridge the gap between middle-class idealized images of fatherhood and their own experiences limited by economic constraint. That unemployed men are more likely to emphasize time and care over money as key features of good fathering points to how inequality shapes definitions of responsible fatherhood.⁴⁸

Although marginalized fathers embrace these broader definitions, they still struggle to relinquish earning as central to their paternal identities and to develop a sense of themselves as parents with status and value. Part of this is because many policies, especially child support enforcement, still prioritize and mandate through punitive sanctions men's monetary contributions to children over other aspects of their parenting. This is where fatherhood programs intervene. By stressing the importance of fathers' presence and emotional involvement and helping men overcome financial barriers, responsible fatherhood policy is a distinct departure from how welfare policies have historically marginalized men as mere wage earners and support payers.⁴⁹ It officially recognizes men's commitments to provide care, not just money. This is crucial for men at the center of social scorn and panic over fathering, those like Christopher whom society dehumanizes by casting them as failed providers.

It is difficult to address the underlying issues that make it hard for fathers to be and stay involved, including little education, few job skills, criminal histories, and relationship conflict. It is therefore easy to dismiss these programs as a futile policy experiment. Yet they seek to capitalize