

THE FATHERLESS CRISIS

It has been well-documented that a father's presence matters in the family, community and, specifically, with his children. A father's presence matters not just in terms of economic well-being, but also in terms of social support and child development. Many studies have shown that there is a link between a father's absence and a host of problems: juvenile delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, violent crimes, promiscuity, teenage pregnancy, failure in school, mental health challenges, difficulty establishing friendships as children, and failed relationships later in life. These studies further show that children who grew up with fathers were happier, excelled in school skills, and had better problem-solving skills. They were also more likely to succeed as adults, both in their personal lives and in the workforce (Brenner E. & Horn, W., 96; Blankenhorn, D., 95; Levin, J. A. & Pitt, E., 96).

Today, there are a significant number of children who are growing up without a father or significant male figure in their homes. Father absence continues to be a deep-rooted concern for families, communities, and society at large. This absence has a major negative impact on children, families, and communities. Although there has been an increase in programs across the

country that focus on promoting responsible fatherhood, there continues to be a need to significantly expand and enhance these efforts. Of all of the programs across the nation that have focused on fatherhood development, (Charles Ballard's Institute for Responsible Fatherhood, Dads Make A Difference in Minnesota and the Young Fathers/Responsible Fathers Program in the State of Maryland),

The Clinton Administration focused on issues related to fathers and made attempts to have fathers involved in the lives of their children and in programs for children and families. In June 1995, an Executive Order was issued from President Clinton to the Heads of all Executive departments and agencies. This Order directed them to review every program, policy, and initiative that pertains to families to ensure they seek to engage and meaningfully include fathers. The Order also required agencies to modify their programs to include fathers and strengthen their involvement with their children.

The major social problems that are occurring in our communities today are closely related to "fatherlessness", and the fact that some fathers do not know how to be an effective father because they did not have an effective father role model while growing up. Addressing the needs of fathers will ultimately assist fathers in meeting the needs of their families, especially their children. I acknowledge that a number of fathers are fulfilling their financial, moral, and social responsibilities to their children

and families; however, there continues to be a need to identify and eliminate barriers that prevent other fathers from fulfilling their God-ordained responsibility of fatherhood. I also acknowledge that a number of young and not-so-young fathers, who are faced with the many responsibilities of fatherhood, lack the needed skills to handle the responsibilities of fatherhood.

Although many states across this nation have developed effective programs to address the needs of this frequently underserved population, it is generally acknowledged that there continues to be a desperate need to help fathers understand the significant roles they play in the lives of their children. It is also recognized that fathers need to be equipped with the necessary skills and resources to enable them to become, or continue to be, responsible and accountable fathers. This is a desperate time for men to step up to the plate and become the most responsible fathers they can be for the benefit of their children, families and this nation.

Studies like Doherry, W.; Kouneski, E. F.; & Erickson, M. F. (1996); Blankenhorn, D. (1995); Gadsden, V. (1994). noted that three out of four teenage suicides occur in households where a parent has been absent, and 90% of homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes. It is well-documented that fatherlessness is currently the most significant

family and social problem facing America, as well as other countries. This crisis is also having a devastating impact on the African American community. If something is not implemented immediately, we are headed for continued destruction of the African American community and possibly a culture.

This National Fatherhood Institute Fact sheet is instructive:

Top Ten Father Facts

- 24 million children (34 percent) live absent of their biological fathers.
- Nearly 20 million children (27 percent) live in single-parent homes.
- 1.35 million births (33 percent of all births) in 2000 occurred out of wedlock.
- 43 percent of first marriages dissolve within fifteen years; about 60 percent of divorcing couples have children; and approximately one million children each year experience the divorce of their parents.
- Over 3.3 million children live with an unmarried parent and the parent's cohabiting partner. The number of cohabiting couples with children has nearly doubled since 1990, from 891,000 to 1.7 million today.
- Fathers who live with their children are more likely to have a close, enduring relationship with their children than those who do not. The best predictor of father presence is marital status. Compared to children born within marriage, children born to cohabiting parents are three times as likely to experience father absence, and children born to unmarried, non-cohabiting parents are four times as likely to live in a father-absent home.

- About 40 percent of children in father-absent homes have not seen their father at all during the past year; 26 percent of absent fathers live in a different state than their children; and 50 percent of children living absent of their father have never set foot in their father's home.
- Children who live absent of their biological fathers are, on average, at least two to three times more likely to be poor; to use drugs; to experience educational, health, emotional and behavioral problems; to be victims of child abuse; and to engage in criminal behavior than their peers who live with their married, biological (or adoptive) parents.
- From 1960 to 1995, the proportion of children living in single-parent homes tripled, from 9 percent to 27 percent, and the proportion of children living with married parents declined; however, from 1995 to 2000, the proportion of children living in single-parent homes slightly declined, while the proportion of children living with two married parents remained stable.
- Children with involved, loving fathers are significantly more likely to do well in school, have healthy self-esteem, exhibit empathy and pro-social behavior, and avoid high-risk behaviors like drug use, truancy, and criminal activity compared to children who have uninvolved fathers.

I do not want to downplay or negate the major contributions and significant impact single mothers have had on the successful rearing of children without a positive male's involvement. Single mothers are responsible for rearing many of our nation's most successful men and fathers. This is not an attack on single mothers, but an emergency call for men to fulfill their inherent roles and responsibilities as effective men and fathers. Any program that provides services to men must incorporate a component of their outreach services to the mother and other family

members. We must treat the family holistically and not isolate any one member for intervention.