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Ain't No Fathers in the Hood: Constraint and Confinement of Black Fatherhood in the Contemporary United States

by

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Introduction

My home church, City of Faith Church of God in Bronx, NY, always has a special Sunday service for Father's Day. As the service begins, all fathers are invited to the foyer to receive red boutonnières pinned on them by some of the women in the church, marking them as our honorees for the day. A father-child team, or a father who is a member of the church, usually leads the worship service. The service itself features selections from the male chorus, a poem or two read by a young person extolling the virtues of a father, and a song by a male soloist. Special tokens of appreciation are given to men in the categories of "Father with the most children in church," "Newest Father," "Oldest Father" and, at the end, an award is given to the pastor, my own father, as "Spiritual Father of the church."

For me, one of the most interesting and thought provoking aspects of the service is when the church secretary stands to give a welcome to all of the fathers. She begins, "This is the day the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it. Welcome to City of Faith Church of God for this very special Father's Day Service. I would like all the fathers in the house to please stand." A thunderous applause follows as men of all ages, from the pulpit to the pew, begin to stand. Much of the excitement is because there are so many men in church on this day, a rare event in most Christian churches. Some of these men do not usually attend service but are persuaded to do so by their children or spouses because this is a service honoring them. In the midst of the plethora of men with red boutonnieres standing throughout the sanctuary, a few mothers confidently and

proudly stand. A few of us in the congregation -- including the mothers themselves -- usually laugh and smile, not to mock them, but to acknowledge the fact that at this moment they are demanding public recognition for something we often do not speak about or label but know to be true. These women serve as both mother and father to a child, or to several children.

As the women stand the applause gets louder. There are a few spirited "Amens" of support for these mothers and occasionally another woman will slap one of the mothers a high-five in appreciation for her parenting. These women's gesture of standing forward as fathers goes unremarked upon by the secretary as she continues with the announcements. "Thank you all," she says graciously; "you may be seated. After service we will be having a special dinner for you, so please stay." After a number of other items in the service and a final selection from the male chorus, the pastor, my father, takes the podium. There is a prayer for the congregation and he then begins a sermon that recognizes the men and women who stood up.

Beginning with the men, he says, "We thank God for the fathers in church today. It is a good thing for the whole family to be in church together." Addressing the women, he continues: "I also want to recognize the women who play both the father and mother role and congratulate them for taking up the responsibility for their family." He cites a book entitled <u>My Mother Who Fathered Me</u> in an attempt to legitimize the idea of a mother serving as a father for those in the congregation who may not necessarily understand or agree with

this concept.[1] Moreover, it serves as a way of keeping these women's fathering in context. It is out of necessity that they are performing this role; it is not necessarily in their "God-given" nature. Furthermore, while the sermon's topic and scripture vary every year, there is always a special prayer offered at the end of service for fathers, fathers-to be (i.e. all the adolescent males and older), and families.

The fluidity of the categories expressed in the service I have just described points to the fact that there is anxiety and uncertainty in the possible answers to the question "who is a father and what does he do?" The ambiguity surrounding how individuals father, the measures of "good" and "bad" fathering and what a father looks like reflect the ways in which these ideas are context-specific and are often produced in relation to an individual's religious affiliation, racial identity, class position, and sexual orientation. Indeed, in the contemporary United States there is intense media and policy focus on men's relationships with their children, a focus that promotes a more involved nurturing father as an ideal model. This is best illustrated in the worlds of sports and politics. Athletes often pose with their children after a victory and politicians advertise their families on television commercials to show that not only are they prominent public figures but they are good fathers as well. It is important to note, however, that these men also have the economic means with which to provide for their children, often many times over.

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[1] Clarke, Edith. My Mother Who Fathered Me: A Study of the Families in Three Selected Communities (Kingston: The Press University of the West Indies, 1999).

How the ability to find work and provide money affects fathering is a critical theme of this thesis. In contrast to what I have described above, the most influential representations of black fathering are seen on shows such as *Maury Povich*, which usually portray black men as anxious not to be caught up with the burden of an unplanned child, and unwilling or unable to undertake the financial responsibilities that come with taking care of a family. In a way, the privilege of being socially recognized as a nurturing, visible father and not just an economic provider is only conveyed when men can afford it. As I argue in the following chapters, the primacy of money to responsible parenting poses one of the most difficult challenges to recognizing the vast majority of black men as good fathers.

In her book Redefining Fatherhood, the legal scholar Nancy Dowd argues that men's identities as fathers do not exist in isolation from their gender identities as men.[2] As long as masculinity identifies nurture and care as feminine and unmanly, and is distinguished from a masculinized role of economic provider, men's socialization will work against their ability to be recognized as good fathers. Dowd argues that a central component of this masculine identity, particularly in North America, is the essentialism of masculine economic independence, a model she calls "economic fatherhood." The work of Dowd and of sociologist Dorothy Smith on the way money governs the ways we even understand what "family" means are central to understanding the idea of economic fatherhood and why it comes to dominate particular social

[2] Dowd, Nancy Redefining Fatherhood (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), p. 134-156.

formations.[3] Economic fatherhood teaches men that their primary responsibility to society and their children is to provide for them financially. Their children's happiness and their masculine identity depend on this. Furthermore, the father who is defined by his ability to provide lives at home with his children. No one at home is independent from him or from his labor. In summary, good fatherhood is evaluated primarily as a man's ability to provide financially for his children and household through formal employment.

U.S. social policy discourse often relies on hegemonic definitions of concepts such as family and fatherhood and unsubstantiated assumptions about American culture and its core values. However, these values are not always transparent. Such assumptions, in addition to lacking empirical foundation, have become part of a powerful narrative that equates liberalism with moral dissolution and laissez-faire economics with equality and fairness.[4] Legislators and others who participate in the policy formation process must grapple with such ideologies, even when they do not match the reality of many men's lives, in order to participate in discussions about social policy. As a result, structural issues that are specifically related to the experiences of low-income African American families, such as inadequate child support payments, lower wages, and racist social policies, frequently fall outside the framework of discussion.

Since the relationship between structural factors such as institutional

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[3] Smith, Dorothy "The Standard North American Family: SNAF as an Ideological Code," *Journal of Family Issues*, 14, 50-65. (March 1993).

[4] Block, Fred and Margaret R. Somers. "From Poverty to Perversity: Ideas, Markets, and Institutions over 200 years of Welfare Debate." *American Sociological Review* 70.2 (2005).

racism, underemployment, and unemployment are not central to these discussions, poverty among African American families is often reinterpreted through individualistic and behavioral lenses. African American poverty and welfare dependence in America are constructed as the direct consequence of individual behavior such as out-of-wedlock births, the reluctance or inability of black women to enter the paid labor market, and the unwillingness of black men to support their children financially. African American poverty, when explained through these frames, is articulated by policy makers to be a consequence of black men's personal choices not to support their families economically. This interpretation implies that black women transmit dependence on public assistance to their children. As a result, within contemporary social welfare discourse, fatherlessness, not poverty or unemployment, is viewed as the social ill appropriate to target through state action.[5]

Social regulation as a central component of welfare reform becomes more visible when we examine the ways in which the goal of producing "responsible fatherhood," particularly helping men become married and economically reliable fathers, is influenced by ideas about the ways in which race and/or culture influence family identities. Racially specific or cultural understandings of family remain the subtext of the distinction between the deserving and undeserving

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[5] Schram, Sanford F. Welfare Discipline: Discourse, Governance, and Globalization. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).
Noble, Charles. *Welfare As We Knew It: A Political History of the Welfare State*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

poor, and it underlies claims that the welfare system has been too permissive. [6] Discourses of economic fatherhood are also referenced in praiseworthy accounts of American individualism, responsibility, hard work, and fairness that characterize debates on poverty and family when successful black families are presented as the exception to the rule.

By comparing the poor to higher income families, many studies have adopted a hypothesis of "deviance" when making policy that concerns the overwhelming majority of black families and low-income black fathers. This approach has led to the stereotypical portrayal of low-income males as unconcerned with and uninvolved in their children's lives. Rather than examining whether black fathers adopt negative values that contrast with those in the rest of society, my analysis attempts to show that these ideas, justifications and practices regarding fatherhood are influenced by a number of factors, including a father's relationship with his child's mother and where he lives.

Perhaps the most central factor is the high incidence of incarceration among black men. In 2008, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that nearly 2.4 million people were held in state and federal prisons, and in local jails.[7] The Bureau also reported that one in every thirty-one adults is under some form of "correctional supervision" which expands the group of those who are actually incarcerated to include people on probation or parole. One out of every three

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[6] Piven, Frances Fox and Richard A. Cloward, Regulating the Poor. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

[7] United States. Dept. of Justice. 2008. Bureau of Justice Statistics: Prison Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Justice.

young black men between the ages of 20-29 in the United States is in prison or jail, or on probation or parole. It also reported that 32% percent of black men could expect to serve time in prison during their lifetime. In July 2007, the Bureau estimated that 1.7 million children have at least one parent in prison, and in 94 percent of these cases, that prisoner is their father.

As this thesis will illustrate, each of these black men is an individual with intimate ties, social roles, commitments and expectations. Many are partners, friends, mentors, husbands and fathers. Imprisonment has the potential to damage an inmate's perception of himself as a father by interrupting the social, emotional and economic relationship to every person who hopes he will fulfill that role. The extent of the impact of the loss of this man will largely depend on whether he has fulfilled that role prior to incarceration: was he viewed as an asset or a liability to his family? Paradoxically, if he was perceived as a good father prior to incarceration, his loss to the family will be experienced as an even greater disruption. His disconnection can result in both psychological and financial distress. During imprisonment, a man's familial relationships and identities are constrained and must be renegotiated, depending heavily on a mother's willingness to make that connection.

The goal of my thesis is to make an intervention in the contemporary United States policy debate that defines good fatherhood by taking into account the historical and present-day complexities of African American fathering that occurs in a context of mass incarceration and underemployment. I recognize that there is not one standard of fatherhood, but that the varied performances of and

standards for fatherhood are functions of structural and social constraints, as well as men's interpretations, expectations, and actions regarding the idea of fatherhood. As a result, my thesis focuses on the varied meanings of fatherhood as put forth by the federal government and by black males, with an emphasis on the potential divergences between them. I question the assumptions influencing the operative definitions of fatherhood and the ways in which African American fathers have engaged them.

In Chapter 1, I analyze United States Senate and Congressional Hearings on fatherhood and family policy to identify the operative model of fatherhood that is dominant within U.S. policy discussions. This model reveals to us the measures by which all fathers and families are measured. My analysis, however, reveals the extent to which gendered and racialized conceptions of family and work have influenced the state's definitions of what family and fatherhood are. The framework limits what is considered a legitimate field for state action, and privileges individualistic solutions over structural ones. These social policy debates, rather than dealing explicitly with questions about how to specify what men do within families, embrace a vague definition of what fatherhood is, and single-mindedly promote marriage as a way to cement fathers' connections to their children.

In Chapter 2, I introduce each of my five interviewees through their individual narratives of being a father and a prison inmate. Each man brings to light the complexities of prison fathering while sharing the uniqueness of his own family dynamics, paternal behaviors and attitudes, and prison experiences.

Through my qualitative approach, I attempt to highlight these fathers' self-conceptions, including a sense of their own limitations and beliefs about their responsibilities towards their families. These men, although incarcerated, define themselves in opposition to the "deadbeat dads" that are targeted by governmental programs aimed at enforcing child support mandates. Most importantly, they discuss how incarceration has prevented them from fathering and what they have tried to do about it. They focus on the importance of a father figure in the home, and all believe that their children were missing a source of guidance structure and discipline while they were in prison. Without such a qualitative approach, we would miss important dimensions of the choices these men make.

Black fathering also has a history. In Chapter 3, I attempt to historicize efforts to "reform" African American fathers. The idea of the African American father was forged in the burdens of slave marriages, and black families that were reconstituted and made official following Emancipation. It was shaped by the ways in which politicians in the post-Civil War United States attempted to maintain authority over the lives of freed people by requiring all married couples to register with the State and then forcefully prosecuting those blacks who did not do so as a means of ensuring compliance with marriage laws. I then look at the work of the Freedmen's Bureau, particularly between 1865 and 1872, to identify how the Bureau saw its work as gendered, transforming black men into the economic heads of their homes. The Freedmen's Bureau explicitly defined African American fathers as potential, yet reluctant and indifferent,

fathers and workers. Under this formulation, the state's role was to regulate these fathers' entry into the paid labor market by focusing on them as able-bodied workers who, along with their families, were undeserving of state support. I also examine how free black men struggled with this form of fatherhood because of the informal rules, formal policies and laws that were enacted during Reconstruction that constrained, and often incarcerated, them as whites attempted to reassert control over their labor.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the ways in which my interviewees are a part of this history, and how they have engaged the operative model of fathering established in Chapter 1. I argue that there are important points of agreement and divergence between policymakers and incarcerated black fathers' conceptions of what fatherhood and family mean. In their discussion about the functioning of fathers within the family structure, the men often spoke of issues relating to how they enact their roles, how they challenge the dominant model used to construct notions of fatherhood, and the ways they have had to work against the negative stereotype of the black criminal.

In Chapter 5, I provide a brief history of *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families* (TANF) and other federal social welfare initiatives that have emerged since 1996, which shape contemporary discussions on federal aid to the poor, family and fatherhood. Before the 1996 law was enacted, no federal program expressly sought to promote marriage. However, since then, issues surrounding family formation have gained increased public attention as attention to children living in divorced, never-married, and teen parent households has grown. I

frame these initiatives surrounding proper family life and fatherhood as an attempt to re-inscribe patriarchal family relations that justify the federal government's withdrawal of its support for social welfare programs in an attempt to discipline supposedly "deviant" families. I argue that the family values rhetoric used in these policies that valorizes fatherhood must be viewed alongside the strategic shift of funds away from the social needs of a growing class of poor people. Since Congress is charged with the responsibility for approving legislation that reallocates federal spending, legislative hearings offer a significant vantage point from which to view this process of placing the responsibility of family survival on fathers. This context is essential if we are to make sense of the political energy and rhetorical excess that often propel contemporary discussions of family and fatherhood policy.

Finally, the appendix explains my qualitative research methodology and my engagement with my interviewees. The reader may want to read this chapter first in order to understand my approach to the interview process.

City of Faith's Father's Day service shows us a unique and very conscientious way to both honor family and fathering while not stigmatizing families where a father is not present – for whatever reason. With this project I intend to show that the complexity of African American family life is one that public discourse and policy has not been able appropriately grapple with, to the detriment of African American families themselves.

In fact, the narrow vision of family perpetrated by the federal government only serves to marginalize further and punish the increasing number of families

that do not fit this idealized form. The socio-economic and cultural realities faced by black men, as fathers and prospective husbands, must be incorporated into our definitions and measures of "good" fatherhood. The world of these parents needs to be understood from their own points of view lest we continue to stigmatize the forms of fatherhood they have worked so hard to attain.

Chapter 1
Debating and Defining "Good" Fatherhood

On Father's Day of 2008, at the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago, Senator Barack Obama publicly lamented the meteoric rise in the numbers of fatherless black families. In his speech he discussed his own absent father, the struggles his abandoned mother endured, and the emotional distress he and many "fatherless" black children experience. He exclaimed:

> Too many fathers are M.I.A., too many fathers are AWOL, missing from too many lives and too many homes…they have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it.[8]

Fathers, he emphasized, "need to realize that responsibility does not end at conception."[9] His statement suggested that a father's absence – regardless of the reasons for that absence -- communicates indifference to his child's well being. Moreover, Obama's comments reflect a fundamental political belief that two-parent households represent the most effective route out of poverty for poor African Americans. In other words, family structure matters for black families, perhaps even more than the larger political, social or economic conditions that those families must navigate.

At a 2010 Father's Day event in Washington, D.C., the President once again linked a father not being in the home to a failure of responsibility. Obama suggested that, "when fathers abandon their responsibilities, there's harm done

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[8] Obama, Barack. "Father's Day Speech." Apostolic Church of God. Chicago, Illinois. 27 June 2008.

[9] *Ibid*.,

to those kids."[10] This harm results from children not having a positive male role model constantly and physically present. Fathers, Obama argued, are "our mentors, our role models. They show us by the example they set, the kind of people they want us to become."[11]

The President's comments express a far more pervasive belief among policymakers that a father plays a pivotal and unique role in shaping the ways children develop and how successful children become. This statement also posits that a father's absence communicates negative intentions towards children. For Obama, a cycle of negativity and deviance is triggered by a father's absence:

> We know that children who grow up without a father are more likely to live in poverty. They're more likely to drop out of school. They're more likely to wind up in prison. They're more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol. They're more likely to run away from home. They're more likely to become teenage parents themselves.[12]

If children engage in these behaviors or activities, the logic goes, it is a result of their father's deleterious behaviors. Regardless of other parenting that a mother or other relatives might provide, a father's absence "leaves a hole in a child's life that no government can fill."[13]

For Obama, fathers play a politically symbolic role too, expressing a set of neoliberal beliefs about government intervention in families but also a set of beliefs that resonate with the real work of parenting. The government's work on issues of "education and health care and crime" is in fact separate from healthy

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[10] Obama, Barack. "Father's Day Speech." Town Hall Education Arts and Recreation Campus. Anacostia, Washington D.C. 20 June 2010.

[11] *Ibid*.,

[12] *Ibid*.,

[13] *Ibid*.,

family development. It is individual parents who do the "real" work of making children "pick up a book or make sure that the homework gets done" and by "be[ing] there day in, day out to provide discipline and guidance and the love that it takes to raise a child."[14] Hence as President, Obama argues, he "can't legislate fatherhood. I can't force anybody to love a child. But what we can do is send a clear message to our fathers that there is no excuse for failing to meet their obligations."[15] It is important to note that here, government support for black families with non-residential fathers assumes a deficiency in the man's parenting that must be corrected and/or punished. In concluding this speech, Obama stated that children "do need us to be present. They need us to show up and give it our best shot, no matter what else is going on in our lives."[16] But what if what is "going on" is that a father is unemployed or incarcerated?

While very few will disagree with Obama's charge for black fathers to be more engaged with their children, personal responsibility is a crucial, but only partial, answer to what ails poor black families. Huge unemployment rates, racist mortgage lending and hiring practices, policing and criminal justice policies, weakened child-care support, poor educational opportunities, and the destruction of early-childhood learning programs are all forces that must be combated through government intervention.[17] What is most striking about Obama's speech, however, is the way his own image as *the* respectable and

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[14] *Ibid*.,
[15] *Ibid*.,
[16] *Ibid*.,
[17] Hall, Ronald E., Glenn Fisher, Valerie Henderson, Rebekah Hines, and Jonathan Livingston. "Post-Modern Perspective on the Economics of African American Fatherhood" *The Journal of African American Studies* 10 (2007): 117.

responsible black male simultaneously calls out those black men who engage in what are understood by policy makers as destructive social practices.

In fact, the poor have also been cut out of a larger discussion about Obama's inspirational effect on black men. The June 22nd – 29th 2009 cover story of *Jet*, a black weekly magazine, featured Obama as "America's Favorite Family Man."[18] It celebrated how Obama's symbolism as president is allegedly reforming black males and "producing tangible results in [their] relations, education and personal responsibility."[19] Former NBA-All Star Allen Iverson, who had recently cut off his trademark cornrows, cited Obama's presidency as influencing his decision to change to a more "clean" buzz cut. A young black attorney claimed that after reading the story of President and Mrs. Obama's relationship he decided to propose to his longtime girlfriend. Obama gives black men a good name, the article continued, but more importantly, *proves* to black men that they can do better. The article proudly states:

> Whether it's attending his daughters' soccer games, shooting hoops with the boy or jet-setting to New York City to take his wife, Michelle, on a date to see a Broadway play, *Obama is a living example that a Black man can be it all*. [20]

The call for black men to be "it all" like Obama, is entrenched in an American rhetoric of self-help and the concomitant belief that all that prevents citizens from doing "better" is a lack of ambition.

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[18] "Role Model For A Nation." *Jet* 22-29 June 2009: 38.
[19] *Ibid.,*
[20] *Ibid.,*

Moreover, for Obama to employ this same rhetoric perpetuates the ignoring of social and economic problems that have an impact on African Americans and poor people. The legal scholar Derrick Bell writes:

> For white people who both deny racism and see a heavy dose of Horatio Alger myth as the answer to blacks' problems, how sweet it must be when a black person stands in a public place and condemns as slothful and unambitious those blacks who are not making it. Whites eagerly embrace black conservatives' homilies to self-help, however grossly unrealistic such messages are in an economy where millions, white as well as black, are unemployed and, more important, in one where racial discrimination in the workplace is as vicious (if less obvious) than it was when employers posted signs "no negras need apply." [21]

Bell suggests that before we discuss uplift, we must understand the context in which black people actually exist. This approach extends to the ideas of fatherhood that I will discuss in this thesis.

Today, the ways fathers are "present" and the ways they are being their "best" are narrowly defined and discursively constructed in social-welfare discussions. By focusing on the rhetoric and symbolism used by policymakers, I identify the specific ideologies and assumptions reinforcing their understanding of the problems of fatherhood and solutions to the "fatherhood crisis." My objective is to reveal the powerful ideals and ideas that continue to shape the place of fatherhood in contemporary welfare policy and the assumptions that limit what can be discussed or heard in a political context. To obtain these accounts, I analyze testimony from Congressional and Senate hearings of legislation on family policy and fatherhood that have taken place since the 1996 welfare reform act.

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[21] Bell, Derrick. Faces At The Bottom of The Well: The Permanence of Racism. (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 5.

In many anti-poverty and social welfare proposals, a father's economic and social position is often central to discussions of child and family welfare. A father's presence is considered particularly crucial to what are termed "fragile families:" low-income, unmarried couples with children. Such families are fragile because they have a higher risk of poverty, economic insecurity, and family dissolution.[22] The emphasis on having fathers present in these families is based on the belief that as the father goes, so go the fortunes of the whole family.

More importantly, a building block of neoliberal social policy is the notion that the strength of the family determines the strength of the nation. In July 2000, Senator Domenici warned Congress, "We cannot live as a society and continue to flourish, in my opinion, with the statistics on the lack of fatherhood continuing to grow enormously."[23] Similarly, in a Congressional hearing on fatherhood initiatives Dr. Jeffery Johnson, president of the National Center For Strategic Non-Profit Planning and Community Leadership, testified, "I believe that these hearings are a demonstration of your insight into what I believe is one of the root causes of many of our sociological dysfunctions today: the rampant epidemic of fatherlessness across our Nation."[24] Hence, the search for public policies to reduce the problem or minimize the consequences of fatherless families and the concurrent encouragement of male dominance within households has become a national priority.

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[22] McLanahan, Sara., Irwin Garfinkel., and Ronald B. Mincy. "Fragile Families, Welfare Reform, and Marriage. *Policy Brief No 10.* Ed. The Brookings Institution. Washington, D.C., 2001. 3.

[23] Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy of the Senate Committee on Finance. *Fatherhood Initiatives*, 106th Cong., 2nd sess., 25 July 2000.

[24] *Ibid*.,

While family life is a private and personal concern, part of the justification for government influence in these affairs is that many fathers do not understand how "necessary" they are to the public good. Senator John Breaux of Louisiana suggests that fathers are more than males who help produce children. To Breaux, fathers' connection to children's lives represents something more mystical. Breaux remarked:

> Fatherhood is about more than just having a child. Fatherhood is really about responsibility, raising a family, and participating as a symbol to that child. Unfortunately, more and more we have situations where there are less and less fathers around to help raise a child in a responsible manner.[25]

Similarly, Senator Evan Bayh testified that when a father joins his wife in the home, "children are more likely to learn about personal responsibility, respect, honor, duty and the other values that make our communities strong."[26]

Ideas about "culture" play a strong role in contemporary rhetoric about family. Senator Domenici attributes men's bad performances of fathering to counter-productive television images of fatherhood. Without mentioning specific shows or images, Domenici commented:

> I think anything we can do in that area [television images on fatherhood] is a very, very exciting effort to at least begin to match the rhetoric that it does not matter, or even growing sentiment out there that is kind of nice to not be responsible for your child, it is kind of cute to have children on a man's side and then just leave. We want to try in some way to put some roadblocks in front of that, in the face of that.[27]

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[25] *Ibid*.,

[26] Subcommittee on Human Resources of the House of Representatives Committee on Way and Means. *Fatherhood Legislation* 106th Cong., 1st sess., 5 October 1999, 8.

[27] Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, *Fatherhood Initiatives*, 4.

Domenici suggests that there is a sub-culture which teaches men that it is "cute" and "nice" to abandon their children and it is therefore the government's responsibility to put "road blocks" to stop the breakdown of fatherly affection and the resulting father irresponsibility. Ron Haskins of the Brookings Institution expressed similar concerns about the "moral crisis" in contemporary American culture. In his 2004 testimony before the Senate Finance Committee on "The Benefits of a Healthy Marriage," Haskins stated, "we are here today because our culture is denying far too many children the benefits of life in a two-parent, married couple family and we are making very little progress."[28]

How men do, or do not, reproduce manhood is central. Congressman Clay Shaw of Florida argued before Congress that these "misunderstandings" about manhood are a result of poor men's insecurities about themselves. He states that fatherhood initiatives have to try, "to get self-esteem in the person that you are dealing with. If someone has no respect for themselves, as many of these people don't, they are not going to be able to succeed."[29] These men are worthy of being rehabilitated only because they are needed as fathers and, even better, as husbands who will teach their children (and presumably their sons) values.

Joseph T. Jones, the President of the Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development in Maryland, testified to the Senate that the government should be supporting the re-training of fathers who have "nontraditional family values" and "have a strong desire to be good fathers and

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[28] Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy of the U.S. Committee on Finance, *The Benefits of A Healthy Marriage* 108th Cong., 2nd sess., 5 May 2004, 20.

[29] Subcommittee on Human Resources, *Fatherhood Legislation*, 20.

good partners, but simply don't know how."[30] Responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage initiatives must counteract the beliefs of men who "have essentially learned to be men and fathers on their own." Jones suggests that for these men, "involvement in drugs, alcohol, violence, incarceration and fathering children out of wedlock determine manhood."[31] What Jones understands as a pathological conception of fatherhood is believed to influence these men's values, attitudes towards work and family and patterns of behavior. However, his assessment lacks the depth and precision of such matters as demographic trends, and the impact of public policies on work and family structure.

Another rationale for government attempts to regulate family life is that citizens' private lives can incur significant public expense. Congressman Shaw commented that in discussing fatherhood legislation, "we are going after the roots of poverty, the reason for poverty."[32] The most effective strategies, he claims, should take:

> These guys off the street corner have them bond with their kids and they can then be the role model for their kids and that is the way it should be. I think that is exactly what is absolutely needed… We hear the expression so much that it takes a village to raise a child. Well, that is fine to say, but primarily and first of all, it takes a mom and a father to raise a child, and that is where that responsibility lies.[33]

Here it is assumed that men who are not at home with their families are out on the street, adopting "street" ways of thinking. They are thus in need of reform and must be forced to bond with their kids.

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[30] Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, *The Benefits of A Healthy Marriage*, 7.

[31] *Ibid.,* 6.

[32] Subcommittee on Human Resources, *Fatherhood Legislation*, 13.

[33] *Ibid.,* 13.

Furthermore, the "cost" of "fatherless families" is a theme consistently used in social welfare discussions. This discourse highlights the financial and moral costs associated with "broken" homes and tells a story about the price of illegitimacy and single parenting that is often borne by others in society. These "others" are usually constructed as good citizens, in the sense that they are taxpayers and represent the American ethos of individualism and self-sufficiency. In his testimony before Congress on Fatherhood Initiatives in July 2000, Senator Evan Bayh stated:

> I hope this serves as a call to action, by encouraging more men to fulfill their obligations as parents, action to help taxpayers, because it is not right when some individuals bring children into the world and then abandon their mothers to raise them and expect the taxpayers to pick up a significant part of the burden.[34]

For Bayh, a father's individual choice to abandon his child and his child's mother forces the rest of society to take up "part of the burden" of these children. This burden is financial but the social effects of these "fatherless homes" manifest themselves through school attrition, poverty and what Bayh calls "family breakdown." He stated:

> Family breakdown itself can be traced to the problem of father absence and too many men being unwilling to fulfill their profound and important responsibilities… The costs to taxpayers are equally dire. The Federal Government spends $8 billion a year on drop-out prevention alone. Last year alone, we spent more than $105 billion on poverty relief programs for families and children.[35]

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[34] Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, *Fatherhood Initiatives*, 4.

[35] Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, *Fatherhood Initiatives*, 5.

Bayh also attributes this breakdown of the family to a growing sub-culture that celebrates father irresponsibility. He said:

> There is almost a sense on the part of some today that it is somehow or other an indication of virility or manhood to bring a child into the world and then just walk away, not caring about the welfare and well-being of that child. But we have not focused on men yet. What about the men who bring children into the world and then just walk away, leaving the women to deal with consequences of that and the tax-payers to deal with the costs of that as well.[36]

These men are portrayed as suffering from skewed understandings about the appropriate measures of "manhood." Bayh argues that family stability and security are the true markers of "virility or manhood."

In these policy discussions, the presence of a father in the home is synonymous with the stability of the family itself, while father absence causes mothers and taxpayers to suffer the consequences. In a sense, absent fathers do a greater injustice to the public and the government because these entities literally have to pay for the decision of a father not to support and live with his children. It is also important to note ease with which these fathers are believed to detach from their families. Having no emotional connection to their families, these men "just walk away." The problems that follow these abandoned children are believed to be unnatural problems. Such children experience situations and behave in ways that children born into "healthy" families do not. Bayh continued:

> While all of us know too well the negative impact of father absence, we know that when these circumstances exist, children not only experience higher levels of poverty but are indeed more likely to become juvenile

[36] Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, *Fatherhood Initiatives*, 6.

> delinquents, have higher rates of teen pregnancy, drop out of school more often, suffer from emotional difficulty and other forms of trauma, to the extent that they often become liabilities, as opposed to being the assets that we know they have the potential of being.[37]

In other words, fatherlessness determines how productive children will be as citizens. A father can influence whether his children will contribute to or hinder the nation's progress through the "unnecessary" use of funds for disciplining or supporting them.

It is important to note, issues such a student's low achievement in school or their likelihood of dropping out, critical factors to future employability, has been usefully discussed outside the context of family life. In their 1970 text Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron propose that the low performance of working class children cannot be accounted for by lower ability, but by institutional biases.[38] They argue that schools evaluate all children on the basis of their familiarity with the culture of the dominant class, and penalize outsiders to that class. For example, extensive vocabulary and wide-ranging cultural references are valued by the school system and student from higher social backgrounds are exposed to their class culture at home. They conclude that student frustration with this "high culture" educational system leads to students blaming themselves for their failure and to them to drop out or to sort themselves in lower educational tracks. Despite arguments such as these, father absence continues to be discussed by

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[37] Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, *Fatherhood Initiatives*, 5.

[38] Bourdieu, Pierre and Jean Claude Passeron. Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture. (London: Sage Publications, 1977[1970]).

policy makers as a central source of the educational disparities between blacks and whites, the rich and the poor. Not only are the primary consequences of fatherhood understood in economic terms, but fatherhood itself is primarily interpreted in economic terms – a discussion that fails to link economic opportunities to educational ones.

This is, in part, illuminates the use of language such as "self-sufficiency" and "dependence" in discussions about the lack of necessity for government assistance to families. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon assert "dependence is the single most crucial term in the current U.S. debate about welfare reform."[39] This discourse of dependency identifies reliance on public assistance (as opposed to lack of access to good jobs) as an important social problem and defines transitions from welfare to low-wage work as steps towards self-sufficiency. Within this paradigm, champions of welfare reform point to the numbers of people leaving welfare as clear evidence of policy success. For example, in 2003, Tommy G. Thompson the Secretary for Department of Health and Human Services, stated that *The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* (PRWORA)[40] and its increase in the number of child support

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[39] Fraser, N., and L. Gordon. "Dependency Demystified: Inscriptions of Power in a Keyword of the Welfare State." *Social Politics* 1.1 (1994), 4.

[40] Public Law 104-193, August 22, 1996, 110 STAT. 2105. PRWORA was a key domestic policy achievement for the Clinton administration and the 104th Congress. PRWORA required work as a condition of assistance, limited lifetime welfare receipt to five years, and expanded state discretion over welfare program administration.

enforcement measures was showing results: "Millions of families have been able to end their dependency on welfare and achieve self-sufficiency."[41]

Within this framework, a father's economic contribution is believed to be essential to family sufficiency. As Senator Herb Kohl of Wisconsin put it, "There is no stronger indication that we are facing a fatherhood crisis than the overwhelming evidence that we are facing a child support crisis."[42] As a result, policymakers define successful fatherhood programs as those which best connect men to work and simultaneously, familial economic contribution.

In a 2010 House of Representatives hearing to "evaluate the effectiveness of responsible fatherhood programs," Judge Milton C. Lee, Jr. of the Superior Court of D.C. commented that because of the responsible fatherhood initiatives, more men are now working and can be made to pay child support. Judge Lee stated:

> But because of these partnerships, we are able to get employment and they work. I can see they are not the most high paying jobs. I can see they are not glamorous jobs. But it is a start for these gentlemen. It gives them a foothold in doing something that they have not been able to accomplish in the past. And once we get the employment in place, we get wage withholding, so the child support is taken care of. The child support comes out right out front… Because once we address the issue of child support, we are in a position where we can focus on what I would humbly suggest to you is really the more difficult and perhaps more important issue: how do we get the men to reconnect to their children, to their families, so they're not just a financial piece of support, but they're dads in every sense of the word?[43]

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[41] U.S. Senate Committee on Finance, *Welfare Reform: Building on Success*, 108th Cong., 1st sess., 12 March 2003, 7.

[42] Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, *Fatherhood Initiatives*, 6.

[43] Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, *Hearing to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Responsible Fatherhood Programs*, 111th Cong., 2nd sess., 17

Evidently, before men can prove themselves worthy to be "dads" and establish any other connections with their children, they must first demonstrate their commitment in a more material way to both their children and the government. As Lee clearly stated, financial provision is "right out front" and is the most basic requirement or the prerequisite for recognition as a father, as opposed to a "deadbeat dad."

David Hansell, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Administration for Children and Families testified that the government's primary objective in helping fathers is to make them into financially providers, while any other fathering behaviors or actions are secondary. Hansell stated:

> States also are using the TANF Emergency Fund to provide subsidized employment to out of work families across the country, including custodial and non-custodial fathers. [44] To date, 32 states and seven tribes have received nearly $611 million in Emergency Funds for their subsidized employment programs and more states are on the way….These subsidized programs can play a vital role in helping parents

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June 2010, 17.

[44] Public Law 104-193, August 22, 1996, 110 STAT. 2105 SEC401(a) Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is a block grant created by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. The TANF block grant replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, which had provided cash welfare to poor families with children since 1935. Under the TANF structure, the federal government provides a block grant to the states,which use these funds to operate their own programs. States can use TANF dollars in ways designed to meet any of the four purposes set out in federal law, which are to: "(1) provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives; (2) end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; (3) prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and (4) encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families."

> provide for their families, which can also help connect fathers to their children.[45]

In her 2003 testimony in a Senate hearing on child support enforcement legislation, Marilyn Ray Smith, the Deputy Commissioner and Director Child Support Enforcement Division of Massachusetts Department of Revenue, emphasized the link between "good" fathers and financial provision when she stressed that the government has to force "bad" fathers to pay. Smith notes:

> Since 1994, states have helped more than 10 million children make a binding legal connection with their fathers. While the overall statistics are impressive, the real impact is in the difference that these collections have made for individual families, when a child support check appears out of the blue in the mailbox of a custodial parent who has not received a payment in years.[46]

The success of child support enforcement legislation is based on the increase in the number of men establishing paternity and on state governments "setting a child support order, and enforcing it."[47]

The previously uncommitted and "unattached" fathers of these 10 million children are now legally responsible for providing financially. In her testimony, Smith also provides a few anecdotes to "vividly illustrate the effectiveness of these enforcement remedies." She continues:

> A Massachusetts multi-state financial institution data match yielded more than $120,000 from an Alabama bank account belonging to a father serving a twenty year sentence in a Texas prison. Three custodial parents – all former welfare recipients – received $20,200, $30,000, and $17,500, and Massachusetts received the balance of $52,300. Massachusetts expects to collect more than $7 million this year from levying bank

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[45] *Ibid.,* 8.
[46] U.S. Senate Committee on Finance, *Welfare Reform*, 30.
[47] *Ibid.,* 30.

> accounts, bringing total collections from this remedy to $46 million since 1993.[48]

This father has children with three different women and all of these mothers and children were on welfare. In addition, the father is in prison and a wealthy man, appearing to be carelessly and voluntarily absent from his family, and engaging in selfish criminal behavior while his children live in poverty. However, for Smith, even this bad father's financial contribution is useful as it is the difference between his family's welfare dependency and self-sufficiency.

In another example, Smith demonstrates how a father's lack of financial support is, at times, not as a result of his poverty but out of his indifference to his family's needs:

> A Massachusetts father whose own father had left him an inheritance to pay off his child support debt of $37,000 failed to clear up the debt even though he now had the funds to do so – until he found out that his driver's license was about to be suspended.[49]

Smith shows that a bad father has the funds to take care of his children but cares nothing for their well-being. In this example, this man's own "good" father knows the value of his son's financial contribution to his grandchildren and leaves him the money to pay the child support he owes. In spite of the opportunity to be a good father and pay his debt, this man selfishly refuses to acknowledge his responsibility as a father and only supports his family when his ability to travel (in other words, leave them) is threatened. Smith concludes:

> In each of these cases, the new automated enforcement remedies enacted

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[48] *Ibid.,* 31.
[49] *Ibid.,* 31.

> in 1996 found assets and brought in money for families that we never would have collected with wage assignments, tax refund offsets and contempt actions. And the dramatic collections in public assistance cases show that noncustodial parents of TANF families are not always without resources.[50]

For Smith and most policymakers the primary responsibility of fathers is to provide financially but bad fathers especially need to be forced to give to their children.

This leaves the pervasive impression that some families are welfare dependent because fathers are stingy, not poor. Therefore, "improved child support enforcement for these families can be almost as important as participating in work requirements for making a permanent transition to self-sufficiency."[51] In other words, making sure fathers pay is the best way to ensure that the government will not have to. Getting people off of welfare requires getting fathers to accept or forcing them to perform the role of economic provider, making families live off of each other and not the government. Citing studies on child support Smith stated:

> Research also suggests that fathers who regularly pay child support are more likely to make an emotional commitment to their children – in other words, the heart follows the money. Effective child support enforcement is therefore one way to promote responsible father involvement.[52]

The logic behind responsible fatherhood presented here is that the process of making men into full fathers is first to get them to give financially to their children. If they are contributing financially to these children, they will ideally follow through with their investments and be more involved in children's lives.

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[50] *Ibid.,* 31.
[51] *Ibid.,* 31.
[52] *Ibid.,* 31.

By defining the state's obligation to families as getting men to provide for their "dependents", the larger inequitable context in which men are providing is rendered invisible. For example, by viewing the provision of child support as solely stemming from a man's individual choices, structural problems such as race discrimination and race stereotyping of job training and hiring could not be incorporated as legitimate problems that the state must solve as part of its obligation to families. However, some policymakers argue that the emphasis on child support enforcement ignores the central role that marriage plays in creating healthy and stable families.

In 1999, Robert Rector, Senior Researcher at the Heritage Foundation testified that while child support legislation provides some significant contributions to a children's well being, it has a "nugatory effect on all of these crucial life outcomes."[53] He continues:

> I would simply like to ask the question, what do we expect the effect of collecting child support to be on child outcome? Do we expect that if we collect child support today, it will reduce juvenile crime in the future? Do we expect it will reduce future out-of-wedlock births as girls become teenagers? Do we expect it will reduce the rate of school failure? Do we expect it will increase the rate of psychological health or reduce the rate of child abuse? No... But on the other hand, marriage does, marriage affects them profoundly and positively and marriage is key to the well being of children.[54]

Rector suggests that by choosing to push marriage initiatives over child support initiatives the government can choose, "disaster prevention over disaster relief."[55] Simply teaching the importance of and encouraging marriages can

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[53] Subcommittee on Human Resources, *Fatherhood Legislation*, 50.
[54] *Ibid.,* 50.
[55] *Ibid.,* 51.

hinder the "disaster" of unwed motherhood, poor families and absentee fathers.

However, the extent to which marriage improves child wellbeing more than child support payments is a point of contention among policymakers and scholars. A lack of clear relationship between marriage and family income has led some researchers to consider the role of the labor market as a factor influencing marriage break-ups and unwed parenting. William Julius Wilson argues that the labor force participation rate of black males has decreased in comparison to white males since the 1930s. The effect is compounded by high rates of incarceration and relatively high mortality rates for young black males, creating a declining pool of "marriageable" men.[56] Marriage, however, still seems to have a special place as *the* responsible decision for men because it produces "responsible" fathers. Consequently, according to Joseph T. Jones, "the field of responsible fatherhood recognizes that the institution of marriage is an important and central component to promoting the well-being of children"[57]

Poor women also have a role in producing responsible, married fathers by not agreeing to motherhood prior to gaining a commitment from a man. For Rector, the importance of marriage must be taught to "young at-risk women in high school" and it must be made clear to them that, "if you love the child that you are going to have…wait…find the right man, develop marital commitment and then have that child."[58] According to Rector, true love leads to responsibility,

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[56] Wilson, W.J. The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, Underclass and Public Policy. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[57] Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, *The Benefits of A Healthy Marriage*, 68.

[58] Subcommittee on Human Resources, *Fatherhood Legislation*, 64.

and the most responsible way to have and raise a child is with in the context of marriage. More importantly, only a bad mother would not seek to marry a man. Hence, the problem of fatherless families seems to also be the problem of mothers as well as absent fathers. Children born out of wedlock are perceived to have been born because a woman decides that providing a child with a good father is not that important. The irresponsibility lies not only among these young men, but also with the young women who decide to have sex with them, intending or assuming that society, rather than her husband, should bear the costs of her pregnancy and motherhood.

The distinction Rector makes between "bad" parents and married parents is also clearly articulated in the testimony of Dwyane Grimes, a client of the Center for Father, Families and Workforce Development in Baltimore, Maryland. Grimes was a heroin and cocaine addict before he and his wife were married. Grimes described himself as irresponsible while on drugs. He recounts, "I really did not want the thing called life…I really did not understand that thing called responsibility, or being a responsible man."[59] As a result, "drug use was the main challenge to us getting married." Here, drug use is a marker of immaturity and childishness and it was not until he quit that he was able to make responsible decisions. Grimes stated, "When I got clean I started seeing things as they really were… I came to my senses." For Grimes, marriage is the sober choice, a responsible choice for responsible men. Grimes continued, "Today, I am a man. I can say that. I am taking care of, a wife, kids, everything." Irresponsible men are

[59] Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, *The Benefits of A Healthy Marriage*, 7.

unattached, giving in to vices and simple pleasures, but real men care for their dependent families. In concluding his testimony, Grimes reminisces that, "being married, being with those seven kids in my household without anyone telling me I have got to get out, I cannot be there, is a wonderful feeling. Today, no once can tell me that those kids are not mine"[60] Marriage legitimates his love for his family, his relationship to them and most importantly, his legal paternity.

Rector suggests that in the same way the government supports essential public services, it should support marriage. He states, "If the government can help young mothers afford food, transportation and child care, I see no reason why the government shouldn't reach out and help couples who are struggling to stay together."[61] Much like child-care, marriage is a public good that can secure childrens' well-being, acting as an insurance or a safety net for families, especially if we "promote marriages that are made up of this kind of good stuff. Then men will get married and care for their families until death."[62] The idealized permanency of marriage promotes a life of government independence for families. For Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa, however, even if these marriages are not permanent they work as an insurance policy. He stated that, "while a marriage license won't guarantee a child's success in life, it does give parents an insurance policy of sorts to provide stability and opportunity for their

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[60] Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, *The Benefits of A Healthy Marriage*, 8.

[61] *Ibid.,* 51.

[62] Subcommittee on Human Resource, *Fatherhood Legislation*, 64.

children."[63] Marriage will not only pay off for the child but it will have significant effects on the nation as a whole. In the words of Robert Rector, if people can internalize the importance of marriage and get married "the poverty rate will drop by 80 percent, [and the] crime rate drop."[64]

Race is rarely ever mentioned in debates on welfare reform, but its influence on perceptions of the welfare system is overpowering. Although the rhetoric is race neutral on the surface, the conduct it addresses and seeks to modify is associated with poor blacks in impoverished communities. For much of the public, discussions of welfare reform invoke the image of a single black woman with several children, and proposed solutions to social problems share a common underlying message—that laws must be adopted to "civilize" these welfare mothers with uncontrollably large families. Rector was clear that most important group in need of re-socialization is black people. He testified:

> If you are a young black person, you want to understand why there is black poverty, the main reason is that you are not married, and this is the way you can fix it and set that goal log before pregnancy occurs.[65]

In other words, black people can fix their unwanted pregnancies, poverty and poverty related social deficiencies on their own, by consciously choosing marriage. Ron Haskins echoed a similar sentiment discussing the importance of marriage initiatives to people of color. Haskins testified that, "it is reasonable to project from these studies that if marital rates could be increased, especially

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[63] U.S. Senate Committee on Finance, *Welfare Reform: What Have Learned? Requiring and Supporting Work, Building Stronger Families* 107th Cong., 2nd sess., 16 May 2002, 81.

[64] Subcommittee on Human Resource, *Fatherhood Legislation*, 64.

[65] *Ibid.,* 64.

among poor and minority Americans, many of the social problems that are the target of social programs under the jurisdiction of the Finance Committee would be reduced."[66]

Reducing non-marital births and increasing marriages are two of the ways in which policymakers attempt to reduce poverty and ensure that fathers are involved in their children's lives, and these seem on the surface to be things that anyone might choose to do regardless of their economic circumstances. If single parenthood increases poverty and produces risks for children, then it follows, policy makers believe, that the government should provide incentives for single parents to get married. As a result, the lives of children will improve. Secretary Thompson stated, "Congress recognized the fact that two-parent, married families represent the ideal environment for raising children when it enacted TANF, incorporating a variety of family formation provisions."[67] Marriage is believed to be pivotal in helping families, "end their dependency on welfare and achieve self-sufficiency" ultimately, "improving the well-being of children."[68]

The government's commitment to reconstructing families by turning men into breadwinners who could take both economic and psychological control of their families has not been accepted uncritically. Max Baucus, chairman of the

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[66] Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, *The Benefits of A Healthy Marriage*, 55.

[67] U.S. Senate Committee on Finance, *Welfare Reform: Building on Success*, 93.

[68] *Ibid.*, 93.

U.S. Senate Committee on Finance, warned that in the field of family policy, the government,

> Need[s] to be cautious here…marriage is a personal and private choice. It's not something the government should interfere with…We need to be careful that policies intended to promote marriage do not result in more women and children become victims of batterers."[69]

Baucus suggests that being a biological father does not make a man necessary to his family or naturally qualify him for family life.

In fact, some fathers can live with and simultaneously destroy their families. In May 2002, Kate Kahan, Executive Director of Working for Equality and Economic Liberation testified before Senate Finance Committee on "Issues in TANF Reauthorization: Building Stronger Families." In her statement, Kahan uses a personal anecdote about her experience as a welfare mother to critique men and marriage as a solution to poverty and family "instability."

> When I first applied for welfare at 6 months pregnant, with little to no job experience, I was denied assistance due to the fact that I had $7 too much in my bank account. I married the father of my child and even married, with two incomes we were poor. My family qualified for food stamps and Medicaid. After a year of being belittled, manipulated, harassed, physically assaulted and verbally abused, I fled a violent home. The day my ex-husband hit me and shoved me across the room while holding our son, I left and never went back. I wanted my son to grow up in a healthy and safe home so he could thrive, I didn't want him to witness violence and despair every day of his life. I began receiving welfare and going to college. While in college I had a work-study in a field that I knew I wanted to pursue employment in after completing my degree. The education and experience I gained ultimately helped me move out of poverty. Marriage was not the solution to my poverty or my son's poverty. If I had not left that violent home, I can assure you I would not be here today.[70]

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[69] *Ibid.,* 3.
[70] *Ibid.,* 262.

Contrasting the romanticism and idealism about the two parent, married family, Kahan portrays her marriage as a relationship fraught with poverty, negativity and ,mostly strikingly violence, the exact qualities that marriage initiatives imagine having a father in the home should save children from. The terror climaxes at the point when the father, who is supposed to bring peace and economic stability to his family, is holding his son as he beats his wife. While marriage ideally prevents the absence of a role model, Kahan's marriage secured the presence of a bad role model. As a result, she would rather have her son living "healthy" and "safe" away from his father rather than in a "stable" two-parent home "witness[ing] violence and despair every day of his life." For Kahan, marriage promotion is an "oversimplified, band aid approach to welfare reform." Subsequently,

> Policies must ensure families have options and protection when leaving violent homes and approach family strengthening through actual poverty reduction measure that have been proved to work, rather than involving government in our private lives through economically coerced marriage.[71]

For Kahan, the strength of family or "good" fatherhood is not based on whether a man is married to his child mother or living in the same home with them.

The NOW Legal Defense put forth a similar critique to the Senate Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy in July 2000:

> While NOW Legal Defense supports initiatives that help families provide for their children's basic needs and that help low-income families move out of poverty, we question whether these proposals for federally funded "fatherhood initiatives" are the solution to- or even a band-aid for—the persistent problem of child poverty in America. These proposals, which rely on gender stereotypes and perpetuate specific gender roles with

[71] *Ibid.,* 112.

> respect to support and care for children, pose significant barriers to gender equality. Under these stereotypical gender roles, women are expected to be the primary caregiver for children and to be economically dependent on men.[72]

NOW proposed that the government should provide low-income mothers and fathers with the social service assistance they need in order to provide the best possible care for their children and to "respect personal privacy and decision-making, especially with respect to decisions about intimate relationship and reproductive choices."[73] The government must respect that "marriage may be the best choice for some individuals, but it is not the best choice for all."[74]

Despite the arguments put forth by organizations such as NOW, arguments that challenge narrow solutions to citizen's social and economic problems, the state of the nuclear family remains the standard by which policymakers assess the state of nation. As a result, the fact that in some families a father is not an option is not a concession that can be made. Defenders of this "traditional family" and "traditional fatherhood" present a clear picture of what they think men should do in and for families. The dominant ideology is that of all the consequences of family dissolution that are harmful to children, but none is more important than the effect of lone parenting on their development.

Thus, without increasing the number of black children, especially males reared in married families, all other interventions will at best be only partially successful in reducing social problems among the poor black families.

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[72] Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, *Fatherhood Initiatives*, 76.

[73] *Ibid.*,79.

[74] *Ibid.*,80.

Policymakers focusing on black female-headed households tend to assume that women want and/or require any kind of man in the house to give their homes "stability." Thus, a father must be married for his family to thrive. For policymakers, any missing component of the wife, kids, and job triad in a man's life is the postponement of full responsibility and manhood. Moreover, this is the marker of true love for his family. The alleged absence of a man's desire to love his family necessitates this phase of government intervention, which is committed to creating stable male breadwinner families.

On June 21, 2010 in Washington, D.C., during his speech on responsible fatherhood, President Obama stated,

> So over the course of my life, I have been an attorney, I've been a professor, I've been a State senator, I've been a U.S. Senator, and I currently am serving as President of the United States. But I can say without hesitation that the most challenging, most fulfilling, most important job I will have during my time on this Earth is to be Sasha and Malia's dad.[75]

For Obama, more important than leading the United States, passing important legislation, and more fulfilling than becoming the first African American president is the opportunity he embraces every day to be a father. In this statement, Obama communicates how difficult fatherhood can be, but, more importantly, how honorable and distinguished fatherhood is. The esteem Obama gives to his individual, private parenting in contrast to the prestige and glory of his presidency is an admirable example of a father's commitment to his family. Since the passage of the 1996 welfare reform act, the Personal Responsibility

[75] Obama, Barack. "Father's Day Speech." Town Hall Education Arts and Recreation Campus. Anacostia, Washington D.C. 20 June 2010.

and Work Opportunities and Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), federal, state and local governments have been explicit in attempting to cultivate and support the same degree of respect and commitment to family in black and low-income men. The *Healthy Family and Responsible Fatherhood* initiatives that have developed out of this nationwide campaign to reduce "fatherlessness" in the African-American and poor communities are designed to ensure that men function and behave in such a way as to enhance child well-being and consequently cure many of the ills plaguing fatherless communities.

The notion that "responsible" fathers can remedy family poverty, child drug abuse and delinquency, and teen pregnancy has been embraced by people across ideological lines, political parties, religions, and races. Leaders championing the cause of promoting fatherhood include the evangelical conservative leader James Dobson, the Democratic representative Jesse Jackson, Jr. and President Barack Obama. However, part of what is missing from our fatherhood and family policy discussions are the voices of the group targeted by these policies. In fact, sociological research informs us that many fatherhood programs are progressing with limited information as to what programs and initiatives would work among men.[76]

Contributing to this absence in the research is the marginalization of black men in the policymaking process. Unlike military fathers, who are lauded for their sacrifices, whose families are the "most patriotic, some of the most

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[76] Dion, M. R. "Healthy Marriage Programs: Learning What Works." *The Future of Children: Marriage and Child Wellbeing*, 15.2 (2005), 145.

dedicated, the most service-oriented Americans"[77] and to whom the nation has a "moral obligation," African-American fathers, particularly non-residential fathers, are believed to be failing themselves and their families and are doing a disservice to the nation. Consequently, in social-welfare discussions, black fathers are often talked about, but rarely included unless they are already professionally successful. African American fathers defined through welfare policy do not exist as a factual entity with clearly identifiable needs and desires but operates chiefly as a bureaucratic target for social policy. They are constructed as objects of inquiries and targets of state power rather than "as members of social groups or participants in political movements."[78] As Fraser explains, as a result of the "procedures for translating politicized needs into administratable needs" or "social service," "the people whose needs are in question are… rendered passive, positioned as potential recipients of predefined services rather than as agents involved in interpreting their needs and shaping their life conditions."[79]

The logic behind ignoring black men is that theirs is an uncomplicated existence; "we" already know "them." As Robin Kelly writes,

> By conceiving black urban culture carriers in the singular, interpreters unwittingly reduce their subjects to cardboard typologies who fit neatly

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[77] Obama, Michelle. "Remarks by the First Lady at National Military Family Association Summit." Georgetown University Conference Center. Washington, D.C. 12 May 2010.

[78] Fraser, Nancy. Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 74.

[79] *Ibid.,* 174.

> into their own definition of the underclass and render invisible a wide array of complex cultural forms and practices.[80]

In other words, assumptions are constantly being made about black men as absent fathers and about their relationship to their children. These ideas are often influenced by racial stereotypes of the African American family and normative understandings of what should be 'good' (enough) fatherhood. As a result, the popular image of black fatherhood is one of a willfully missing father avoiding his responsibilities to his children. The justification for this view is the number of black children growing up in homes without fathers and the idea that if a man honestly wants to do right by his children he will ensure that he is "there" for them by marrying their mother and living with them. However, any discussion of African American men as fathers must consider how these men understand fatherhood and marriage and also how they respond to the factors influencing their parental identities.

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[80] Kelley, Robin D.G. Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 17.

Chapter 2
Bridging the Gaps: A Conversation With Five Black Formerly Incarcerated Fathers

An important aspect of this project is to provide an intervention in the ways much of public policy and popular discourse imagines and discusses black fathers. The aim of my study is to describe and analyze the lived experiences of black men, who are often the primary targets of fatherhood and marriage-promotion programs. I want to give voice to those who are often silenced and rendered invisible in the policymaking process. Compounding my research is the fact that all the interviewees share the experience of being incarcerated.

Over one half of black men ages 18 to 35 are "under some type of correctional supervision" and one out of ten are currently behind bars in contrast to two percent of white men. [81] On the whole, an African-American man is five to seven times more likely to serve time than a white man.[82]

> Incarceration is highly concentrated... Nine out of ten prison inmates are male, most are under the age of forty, African Americans are seven times more likely than whites to be in prison, and nearly all prisoners lack any education beyond high school... 30 percent of black non-college men will go to prison at some time in their lives.[83]

Furthermore, many incarcerated men are fathers, including about three quarters

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[81] Comfort, Megan. Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008).

[82] *Ibid*., 45.

[83] Pattillo, Mary, David Weinman and Bruce Western. "Introduction." in *Imprisoning America: The Social Effects of Mass Incarceration*, ed. Bruce Western, David Weiman, and Mary Pattillo (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), 1.

of incarcerated men of color.[84] The incarceration of parents has devastating mental, social, and financial effects on the rest of the family, and these effects spread to neighborhoods and communities. Moreover, the punitive logic of the American criminal justice system relies on the dichotomous and totalizing categories of "innocent" and "guilty," "good" and "bad." The guilty and dangerous are securely confined away for the good of all Americans. This reasoning only holds true if the prisoner is seen as an isolated individual, without ties to kin or community groups. As David Braman points out,

> By conceptually stripping offenders of all their social relations, we are able to affix blame and mete out punishment. The isolated offender is a useful fiction in that regard, but a fiction that has come to so thoroughly dominate our analysis of what our criminal laws should and can do that we are blind to its limitations.[85]

The "isolated offender" is not only a "useful fiction," but also a necessary one for upholding the logic of the American imprisonment system. This, however, is a falsehood. Convicts are not isolated individuals; rather their lives are deeply and significantly intertwined – emotionally, financially, and communally – with many others.

I employ in-depth interviews to help us better understand these men's lived experiences with fatherhood, the tensions in and limitations on the functioning of fathers, and how black men view the role of the father. I want to discover what obstacles might prohibit these individuals from maintaining relationships with their children, and whether the promotion of formal paternal

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[84] Clear, Todd R. "The Effects of High Imprisonment Rates on Communities." Crime and Justice: A Review of Research. Vol. 37 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008), 105.

[85] Braman, Doing Time on the Outside, 63.

ties over the actual substance of these relationships provides stability for these families. This study helps identify how these men understand fatherhood and marriage and respond to the policies and structures influencing their parenting. If we center the voices of these fathers, our theoretical understandings and our policies will be enhanced. To explore incarcerated black men's lived experiences as fathers, I study the narratives collected through in-depth interviews with five men. The selection of interviewees was primarily opportunistic as I relied heavily on intermediaries. Four of the respondents were contacted through a colleague and one is the family member of a friend.[86] I spent an average of an hour and a half of conversation time with each interviewee either in person or over the phone. I make no claim that this sample is representative in any statistical sense. The small sample does not allow for generalization beyond the sample population. The individuals are representative more of the issue of "fatherlessness" than of the general population of African-American fathers. Not all incarcerated black fathers have established and intend to maintain an active, positive role in the lives of their children but I am interested in the experiences and understandings of the ones who do. The goal of my research is not necessarily to make generalizations drawn from these cases, but to add to our overall understanding of black men's experiences as fathers and partners. My goal is to provide a rich and detailed qualitative account of the complexities of African-American fathers who have experienced incarceration.

[86] To ensure anonymity, the names of the participants of the study and any reference to co-parents and children have been changed.

Kyle

While at eighteen fatherhood was not something he had given much thought, when Kyle found out his girlfriend was pregnant, he gladly accepted his responsibilities. "I felt that I *wanted* to be a father," he said. This desire to be a parent was only strengthened by his belief that not having a father present could have potentially negative effects on a child. While they were living in Jamaica, Kyle's father would see his son only on some birthdays. After moving to the U.S. at age 10, his father visited once every few years. According to Kyle, this type of fathering,

> makes you model the behavior that you were given, or that you saw growing up, meaning that you are not present and you're not conscious of what's going on with your children. Or you kind of look at it and say that I don't want to be anything like that.

Kyle chose the latter and knew he "want[ed] to be everything [his father] wasn't" and as active in his child's life as possible.

In describing his fatherly activities before his incarceration, Kyle mentioned going to doctor visits with his girlfriend, making sure she took her pre-natal vitamins, and buying baby clothes and a crib. His biggest concern, however, was not having enough money to provide for the child's needs and secure its future. He told me,

> There's always that fear in the back of your mind, am I covering all grounds? Is there something my child is going to want for? I mean, you start thinking long-term. Is my child going to go to college?"

Unfortunately, Kyle's opportunity to "cover all grounds" were cut short on July 20, 1994 when he was arrested, tried, and sentenced to prison. Three months later, his daughter was born.

From the moment of his arrest to his incarceration, Kyle was disappointed in himself for not being there for his family. In describing his feelings once arrested he said, "I'm very disappointed in the fact that I have a child, and I'm not *present*…I'm sure it's traumatic for my family. It's traumatic for my uh, my daughter's mom." While Kyle might have been a more active parent than his own father was in his life, when he was arrested, he felt as if he had begun repeating his father's mistakes. Kyle laments that during that period, "I'm doing maybe not so consciously as my father did, but in the same sense, I'm the same thing that he was," i.e., absent. A key difference, however, is that most traumatic for Kyle was that "whatever happened or whatever could have happened, there was nothing that I could do to be there and to provide." Reflecting on his nine years inside, Kyle said the hardest part of his incarceration was "not going to be there." He would never hear his daughter's first word, he would not take her to her first day of school or be able to take her to the hospital if she became sick. He also laments that he could not "feed her or to talk to her at night."

During his incarceration, Kyle was moved to facilities in different parts of New York State, from as close as two hours away from New York City to as far as nine hours away. He said, "The thing is, they don't just send you to one place. It's kind of, you start here and you end up there." As the spatial distance between

Kyle and his family increased, it proved more and more taxing for them to visit him. In discussing some of the things that can contribute to the frequency or scarcity of contact between an incarcerated parent and a child, he commented:

> Yeah. I think you know, the things that prevent [contact], of course, is like the distance. It's – I mean, it's very hard. Like for instance, um, when I was up by Attica, to visit they would have to get on a bus at Times Square at 8:00 at night, you know, on a Friday to get here Saturday, which is hardcore. Imagine, you know, taking your two-year-old child for a twelve-hour bus ride at 8:00 at night. You know, where they won't get somewhere until 7:00 in the morning. It's hardcore. So I think the distance, you know, is very prohibitive.

Fortunately, Kyle's girlfriend was supportive of his fathering, even while he was in prison, and nurtured his relationship with his daughter. As a result, his daughter,

> Visited frequently. I spoke to her on the phone a lot. We wrote letters. Communicated. Um, you know, I constantly got pictures, updates. So her mother did a really great job of making sure that under the circumstances I was *present* as could be.
>
> Her mom was really just good at keeping me – like any decisions that were made, she tried to involve me as much as possible. She wanted her to do dance lessons. She, you know – we spoke about, you know, what it would be on the weekends. You know, she wanted her to do swimming. We spoke about it. And it's really a testament to her. And you know, because it takes two.
>
> And she was very much – she you know, went out of her way to keep me involved, and to let me know what was going on. And whereas, you know, it could have been totally opposite.

For Kyle, visitation proved crucial in sustaining his relationship with his daughter and it allowed for an easier transition back home. He believes that "if there's no visitation, then it's kind of like the family structure is being destroyed even more." But Kyle describes the family visits as "bittersweet" experiences:

> It sustains you that, you know, your family has come to see you.

> It's like even if it's for four or five hours, it's maintaining a connection to what was once normative for you. At the end of the visit, to see your family get up and leave, and you can't leave, and to see your child crying. To see [my] mother crying. To see – you know, it's – it's bittersweet.

To counteract the potentially negative impact of prison on his daughter, Kyle tried to communicate with her as he would if they were both home.

> You just want to make sure you're talking about the things that you would talk about if you where there. You know. What's going on in school? Uh, you want to know, uh, what movies she's interested in right now. Like what clothes she likes. You know, you want to talk about things that you don't necessarily want to try to, uh, create something that's not there, so to speak. You want to make sure that you're just talking about things that are there. The things that's going on in her life. Uh, areas that she is doing well in school. Areas that she needs help with in school. Uh, just the things that you would – you try to normalize it as much as possible.

Evidently, Kyle saw part of his fatherly responsibility as supporting his girlfriend and daughter from in prison as much as they were supporting him from outside in an attempt to "minimize whatever potential damage was done by the fact that I was away from her the first nine years of her life." The best way he could help them was, "providing emotional support, because chances are you can't contribute much financially, so it's really providing emotional support. And just, you know, demonstrating love as much as possible." This was essential in making sure his daughter understood his incarceration was punishment for "some mistakes, which I had to pay for and this wasn't reflective of the fact that I didn't want to be with her." His absence because of incarceration might have led to his daughter feeling abandoned. He suggests, "she may have felt that I didn't love her as much," and as a result, his job now was to make "[his] presence felt even though [he] wasn't there, through visits, through phone calls," to make sure "that under the circumstances I was as present as could be." While in prison,

through his involvement in her life, Kyle attempted to communicate his love for her:

> And I think just – you know, acknowledging her when she did really well. And like when she did really well on exams. When she did really well in whatever project she did. Letting her see that even though I'm not there, it's like I see.

Kyle's physical absence from his daughter did not mean he did not love her. At the same time, he recognized that physical proximity to his child would not necessarily mean he was a good father. In describing his thoughts on what a bad father is, Kyle said "Um, someone who isn't present. Someone who doesn't listen. Um, someone who's uninvolved." As a result, as the time came closer for Kyle to come home, he said he was not making any large-scale plans to compensate for the time lost in prison. In fact, his prison stay helped him appreciate "the little things in life," and he knew he just wanted to be as involved as possible with his daughter:

> I just wanted to be present, and I just wanted to make sure that, you know, I think for me, one of the things that I definitely wanted to do like was to take her to school. You know, it's like you – when you're away, you don't think about like the big things. You think about the little things. You know? It's like the little things like being there to read her a book before she goes to bed. Uh, you know, taking her to her first day of classes, or – you know, just being able to have a conversation with her. To go for a walk. So you don't really think about like any big grandiose plans.

Kyle believes his flexibility and his desire to stay connected with his child was what helped him through his nine years in prison, because "you have to look within yourself sometimes to make things happen when there's nothing there." This is particularly true because almost everything about prison was discouraging his involvement with his daughter:

> I cannot tell you one program when I was inside that actually promoted uh, fostering a relationship with my child. And uh, I can't – you know, just – I can't tell you of a program that even comes to mind.
>
> I think there's a lot of things that maybe consciously or unconsciously work to kind of uh, interrupt family, you know, relations. I mean, the phone calls are very expensive. Uh, I think that was something that's been addressed over the last few years, but I mean it's real expensive. Like a thirty-minute phone call ends up being like $15 or something like that. You know. You know, it was just really – they were really exploiting it. Um, I think you know, that the distance made it really hard to maintain family ties, and you know, the uh, the restrictions on communications. Restrictions on just a lot of different things.

An important part of making the transition back into his daughter's life was to reevaluating his role as a father in his child's life. Kyle gave a very interesting analogy to explain the process of reintegration:

> It's kind of like you're the – you're the star on your basketball team, or you're the star on your football team, and I played football in high school. And you get hurt, and the team goes on to win the national title, or the team goes on to win the state championship, but you were the star. And then the next year you're healthy and you come back, and the coach says, you know what? We're going to fit you in gradually because the team's been doing really well. And it's like you now have to like look at yourself and say how do I make this adjustment? I mean, there's some people can do it and other people don't. You know. It's like you – if you look at yourself as I'm a star and like, no, I need to star and I need to you know, do my thing. Then it's like you're going to disrupt team chemistry. But then if you look at yourself and say that, you know what? It's about the betterment of the team. It's all about like us winning. Then you're going to reevaluate your role and you're going to play a position that's going to be better for your team.
>
> So for me coming home, obviously things have been going really well. You know, my uh, daughter's mother done a tremendous job up to that point, and it was now like, you know, trying to find, what's my role?
>
> Because you know, I didn't want to kind of create this disruptive force so to speak, even though I was her father. You know. It's like you want to kind of respect what had been going on in the past and the fact that it had been working. Uh, but yet you also want to be a presence. So it's like it's very much a challenge

For Kyle, this tension between being *the* father and figuring out his role often manifested itself when he and his daughter's mother disagreed over their child. When this occurred he said he had to "concede" to her because his daughter's mom had been the "primary parent." Furthermore, Kyle had to struggle with his desire to come home and "fix" or "solve" his family's trouble.

> Um, I think on the outside, after your release, it's like again, as I said, it's a challenge initially like integrating or reintegrating into family situations. Because it's more than likely, you know, the child has been doing well. You know, they've been providing for the child. The child is going to school. The child is, you know, um, doing the things that he or she is supposed to do. So it's really the toughest part then is the internal struggle within yourself as what's my role as a parent, and then making sure that you know, it's like you're not trying to force it.

The issue Kyle raises here is very important. In the absence of a clear crisis because of the father's absence, when the child has what she needs financially and is developing well, what is it a father is supposed to do? For Kyle, his desire to be a solution to a crisis was abated when "you realize that there's nothing you can do to make up that time. And then you get to a point where you just try to make sure that you're supportive and you're as present as possible." This is especially important for him because he was a non-residential father. His incarceration made him more sensitive to his daughter's needs. He told me that "you're hypervisual and you're hyperconscious…you're constantly on the ball about the things that you care about." His new concern was spending enough time with his daughter and being supportive of her. It is vital for him to prove to her that he is aware of what she is doing: "I recognize and acknowledge [her]."

Michael

Michael never considered himself as the type of black man who goes to prison. He was raised in what he called a "nucleus type" family in which he had an open relationship with his parents and "wasn't deprived of anything." Unlike many of the "typical" black male prisoners, he had a good example of manhood and fatherhood from his own father:

> It's very difficult for you – a lot of our young black brothers, because they've never had a dad, so it's difficult for them to know how to be a dad. It's, um, you know, it's what they see from the street, then they take what they see from the street and mirror it into what they would want, and then, the next thing you know, they're doing something that's not necessarily what a dad should be doing.

Furthermore, Michael had a college degree. "I went to school, college, and I was well liked and well respected as a fraternity man, as a, you know, as a guy that went to school, as a black man, as – you know, I was part of the black student union." Finally, Michael was gainfully employed before his incarceration. After graduating, Michael landed a job working with the Board of Education and also worked as a counselor for the mentally retarded. At the same time, however, Michael was a drug dealer.

> *Teacher Went Bad* was the title of my article when they wrote, when they wrote it up in the newspaper, and it was like, you know, they listed all the good things that I did, and then listed all the bad things, that drug dealer _____, you know, moving this amount of cocaine, crack cocaine and heroin a week, and it was just crazy how – they was like, "How?"

Michael recounted to me that his mother often told him that he was "too intelligent to be doing what you do," selling drugs. However, for Michael, "it's not about intelligence. It's about sustaining what it is that I want in life."

Another important aspect of Michael's life, but something that he deems separate from his drug dealing, was his identity as a father. Before he was incarcerated, Michael had two children and one on the way. He had a five year-old stepdaughter with his live-in girlfriend and they were expecting their first child together. He also had a three year- old daughter with his ex-girlfriend. After custody disputes with his ex-girlfriend, he was granted joint custody of their child. She stayed with him every other weekend and three days a week. As a parent, Michael told me he tried to do exactly what his parents did with him, including teaching his children life skills and taking them to recreational activities:

> I tried to teach them, you know, how to brush their teeth. I mean we just would go through the, you know, the whole thing, like my mom and my dad did with me, you know? It was, um, the sandwiches, the bologna sandwiches with the soup, with the meatballs and spaghetti, you know, the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches; to the parks, to the zoo, to the pet shops, to Disney, you know, uh, Major Magic.

Interestingly enough, his parenting also influenced his drug-dealing practices:

> One of my rules was I'd never shit where I ate, meaning I never did drugs or sold the drugs – not did, because I never did drugs to that level – but I never sold the drugs where I lived or where it could possibly hurt my babies, and, you know, I, you know, to keep them safe was paramount to me because of what I was, what I was doing to other people, you know?

In describing his seemingly conflicting identities as father and drug-dealer, Michael says that his life was a "duality," with each identity (father, drug-dealer, teacher) being kept separate. When he was arrested and went through the trial process, he realized how intertwined his two roles were.

When he went to prison, Michael's biggest fear was that his children's mothers would cut him off from his children by telling them that he was not

their father. In part because of his dealing and subsequent incarceration, this became a reality. When I asked him how his incarceration influenced the ways his children felt about him as a father, he told me it did not have as much of an impact as the children's mothers did:

> So, you know, I kind of developed this, um, this, uh, reputation as a real bad boy, so to speak, and my son's mother, she kind of, she played on it, like, "Oh, yeah, but that's not my son's dad." My daughter's mother, she ran from it, like, "I don't want to have nothing to do with that." You know, "He's not a part of my daughter's life."

While his biggest concern as a father was ensuring that his daughters had enough money to survive, his plans to do so were thwarted because his children's mothers were trying to cut him off:

> I was just trying to figure on maybe ten years of trying to set aside funds or make it accessible so that they would do, would be okay. So, what I tried to do is I tried to, um, purchase another home and have the rent from that home sustain that home, and the second rent – because it was two-family – uh, put money in my, um, my girl's pocket, at which time she would know to make sure that the kids was taken care of. But that didn't work out, either. Funny how money and places change people.

While Michael had to assert his father identity more against his child's mothers than against the prison environment, he noted that prison only added to the problems he was experiencing with them. Imprisonment strained Michael's already tenuous family relationship and allowed the 'opportunity' for it to breakup:

> It was very painful for me doing my time, but I had to, um, I had to, I had to come to grips with that. I had to come to grips with that. I remember OG [mentor] telling me, um – what did he say? He said a very a very profound statement. He said, um, "Women don't, aren't built to do a lot of time with a man."

One resource he had that supported his fathering while he was in prison was his girlfriend's mother. He attributes her support to her ability to recognize what he called his "duality."

> Her mom saw a lot of good in me when it came to the, when it came to her daughter, how I treated her daughter, and how I treated her granddaughter, and how I treated our son. And, um, regardless of what I was doing to make income, she always looked at me and respected me.

His own mother also supported his fathering, but his desire to be a father could not overcome his children's mothers' desires to keep him away:

> But my mother was the reason that – she was the catalyst. She made, she tried to keep my kids in my life, but their mothers weren't receptive to that, and, as a result, the distance grew and grew and grew to the point where my mother just said, "You know what? When God sees fit for them to come back in your life, they will."

There were few times, however, when his daughter and son were able to visit. He recounted the first time his daughter visited and how excited he was that she was there:

> I'll never forget when I was sitting there and my daughter walked in the visiting room. It was like, it was like, uh, how do you call it? Um, what's a blast from the sun? Um, what's that called? It's on the tip of my tongue. When the sun explodes? Incredible joy.
>
> It was just an incredible amount of joy, and then, to have my daughter sit there and interview me, you know, ask me questions, and then, the most incredible thing happened. She said, "I knew he wasn't my dad," and I said, "What did you say?" And me and my mom looked at each other, and my dad, and she was like, "Well, I knew Terry wasn't my dad. I mean, we have nothing in common, and me and you, we have everything in common," and she just hugged me, and I just started crying.

For Michael, while his formal ties to his children were mostly severed by their mothers, "real" fatherhood involves a deeper connection, maintained irrespective of physical proximity, that could not be replaced by another man. In

spite of this connection, he recognized that part of his responsibility in coming home would be developing a new relationship with his kids as their father. "First things first. I gotta develop a relationship as a parent, with my, um, with my children as their friend and as their parent." To help with this process, Michael went to parenting and communication classes while in prison which he described as "transitional" courses that helped him get acclimated to the outside world. He recognized that an important part of his training was in learning how to deal with women:

> Um, you know, even dealing with, um, women and how you would react with women, because when you do anything over a decade, life is completely different for you when you come back home, and, um, you know, it really helped me.

This would prove critical in his attempts to reach out to his children's mothers when he returned home. In describing his plans for coming home, Michael said that because his ex-girlfriend had been telling his son that Michael was not his father, Michael wanted to first legitimize his legal and paternal connection with the boy. After that, he just wanted to be consistent in the child's life. He recalled,

> First and foremost, find out if my son is my son; secondly, develop a relationship with my daughter; and, just thirdly, just, like, um, remain in their life, and then have the, have the, um, the means to make sure that whatever they needed I would be able to provide for.

When I asked him how incarceration shaped the way he was fathering today, he told me that the example his parents gave him while he was incarcerated was probably his strongest influence.

> My parents were very good, very supportive. Even through my incarceration, they were very good, very supportive, and, um, that's all I, that's how I, I can't see it no other way for my kids. I can't, I can't be nothing but that, for them and my nieces. I have to be supportive, understanding, communicative, a friend, a disciplinarian. You know, I have to be all of that, you know, because that's what my mother and father was for me.

Part of what helped him reintegrate into his children's lives was a journal he was writing for them while he was in prison, which he gave them when he came home. Every few days he would write an entry to them about how he was feeling and what he was thinking about them on that day. He said this is something every parent in prison should do.

> So, every night or every other – whenever I felt the need to just express myself, you know, I would just write, I would just share, just, "Hey, what you doing? I wonder what you're doing. Daddy's wondering what you're doing," or, "Damn, I'm thinking about you and missing you, wishing I could take you to the park. You know, I know it's hot outside, you know, share a lemonade or some icy or something." You know, and I would just write, and just express, and when I gave it to them, they lit up. I didn't see them for a little while. They was just sitting in their room reading, and stuff. So, it made it a lot easier to transition, because it was estranged at first.

Michael's situation speaks more to the importance of solid mother-father relations in fathering than the influence of incarceration on fathering practices. However, in his narrative, prison seems to be *the* factor, which his children's mothers, in his estimation, took advantage of to make him literally disappear from his children's lives.

Marian

Before his incarceration Marian lived with his girlfriend and his two boys, ages five and two. He also had a seven year-old daughter with his high school girlfriend whom he saw often. Sometimes when Marian would head out of the house, his five-year old son would come running behind him. When Marian got dressed, his son got dressed. Whenever the boy could not follow his dad out the door because he could not find his shoes, he would cry. Marian would then come back, help him finish getting dressed, and they would leave together. It was memories like these that came back to Marian when he was sentenced to twenty-five-to-life on drug charges. Part of what hurt him the most about his sentencing was that he had been "hands-on" as a father. "I was – you know, everything from changing the diaper to the feeding, to the – to the spending time with them. I was really – I was on it." Now his boys would have to live in a single-parent home, something he had always wanted to avoid.

> When I was sentenced, I cried, but I didn't cry for me. I cried for my – the fact that I knew I wasn't going to be there with my – my kids…. I'm thinking about oh, these two boys being raised by a single parent. I know the struggles. And I know where it could lead in my absence.
>
> I'm thinking about her having to raise these boys, and it's hard. It's hard even when you're together, so imagine a woman – the mother trying to raise a boy. You can't do it.

For Marian the process of raising and helping children develop is best achieved by both parents, when both parents are active in parenting. Because of his engagement with his children, Marian saw his incarceration as resulting in the removal of a "good father" from the home. Even though his activities led to that

happening, "nonetheless, it's still painful," because his plans to " always be there" for his children are now ruined.

> I'm like, you know, because my thing, *I had it all figured out*. Oh yeah, you know, they were going to go to college. *I'm going to be there from the beginning to the end.* You know. To support you. You know, and uh, in making the *transformation from boy to man*, you know. And that was – that was shattered.

Marian saw his role as helping bring his boys into full maturity and responsibility, getting them into college, and he never imagined that there would be a time when he would not be around.

While his sentence was indeterminate, Marian felt positive about the relationship he was going to have with his children because before his incarceration, he "was actually a dad. " For him, this meant he was more than just living with his children; he had a connection with them and this connection was maintained even while he was inside. He recounted, "I was blessed enough to, even over time between the visits, writing, to have a real connection, to have an impact on my kids. Plant seeds in them." Part of Marian's optimism stemmed from the fact that for him fatherhood meant more that just "being there" especially because there are men who are live-in parents but have a "bad presence."

> We have a lot of men that's in the household, but it's like you'd be better off being away from the child. You know, depending on what you're bringing to the family. You know, what values and things you're bringing.

Particularly because his boys were so young, he and his girlfriend did not initially explain to them why he was in prison. They would tell the boys that he was in college or away, and as they got older Marian would tell them the truth.

For him it was most important to use his situation as what he called a "learning experience."

> I'll give you an example. I went to visit – you know during the visit, they have what they have to count – they have to do a prison count, right? So what they would do is they would come around and have the prisoners stand up so they – you know they can take they count. So I stand up and my son stands up, also. And I'm like, you know, livid but in a calm, balanced way. So I'm tellin' – uh – I told him and he goes – I said, "Sit down." Right? I said, "This is not a joke. Listen," I said, "this is it." I said, "I'm the sacrificial lamb." "This is – this it. This is where it ends, right here." All right? I said, "I'm like Jesus right now." "I'm the sacrificial lamb." "This is it, all right, you ain't never gonna be on anybody's count."

For Marian, this experience reflected his concern and the concern of all these fathers, for the potentially negative impact of his absence on his children most drastically manifesting itself in their children's going to prison. As a result, even from in prison, he tried to be as involved with his children as possible. This included taking responsibility for his children's behavior and well-being.

In discussing the factors that influenced his ability and opportunity to father his children from inside, Marian told me "it's mostly distance and it's also relationship."

> I'm – I'm speaking of my situation, which you also have guys who don't get visits from they kids, it depends on the relationship they had with their children's mother or their contract. Now see what was – what happened with me is that I was actually in my kids' life, it was a family. you know, and, um, and then in my absence, you know, it's like – and you know it's – it's actually, you know, I was telling you the devastation on my behalf but you can only multiply by like a 100,000 times over how it affected them.

Again, Marian makes the point that the one of the most negative impacts of incarceration is on the men with good relations with their children. "I was actually in my kids' life, it was a family." As a result, for Marian, there is a clear

difference between a father's absence from the child's life and his lack of physical proximity to his children. Visitation was important for him because he wanted to counteract whatever harmful effects his lack of physical proximity was having on his children but he noted that visitation could not sustain a relationship that never existed before. Fatherhood is not something a man can suddenly do; it is special and paramount to a child's development, therefore a father has a responsibility to be a father even from a distance:

> It's not like someone who, you were never in your child's life and then all of sudden you get locked up and you wanna play daddy. That don't work, you know what I'm sayin'?
>
> [Fatherhood and motherhood] those two dynamics, those two gifts that's from God, that's what separates us, you know?

When I asked him some of things that discouraged his relationship with his children, he said that there are some things that are discouraging but do not necessarily have to influence your relationships. Some of these things are not even a result of prison. For example, an individual's own impatience may be discouraging:

> Um, just – sometimes it's discouragin' – it's – it's – I can't – I can't label it as discouragin' but it might be discouragin' to you – it's never discouragin', it's just the reality of things where you might not understand what's goin' on out there, like, if you don't get offended, uh, whatever the case may be, you don't get a letter back, a response, you got some extra time where you could write. And you know what I'm sayin'? Then you don't get a response the following week, like you think you should, not realizin' listen people tryin' to pull that – you know, you doin' time but people are tryin' to figure out ways to pay for -- you know what I 'm sayin', to pay for bills and -- for clothes and keep a roof over they children head and themselves, you know? So that's where the problem comes in, that's where the disconnect is where you – you – you – you expectin' somethin' from a individual but not understanding the reality of their lives! Selfishness.

Marian often spoke to his children about their behavior and taking responsibility for their own actions and he always tried to boost their self-esteem. He also wanted to reinforce the values he and their mother had taught the boys. He told me some of the things he would say to his children:

> "Listen, you know, I'm not there but that's not gonna be an excuse for you to be like you know, to act out or whatever the case." "Don't give up on yourself because, oh, you know, you use that as an excuse because, oh, my dad wasn't here…Because I'm not here but you know I am here and I instill certain things in you, you know, through our forms of communication."

Marian told me that he learned to appreciate the small things when he was in prison. Everything his children did was amazing to him and he appreciated every trip his family made to see him. This would also influence the way he thought about what his children actually wanted from a father:

> You know if a person never experience that it's hard to explain but you can understand or appreciate taking things for granted, so it – it – it's major because, you know, you – you're – you – it's the little things that you – since it was just like you didn't think about it then you think about now like the laugh of a child, um, you know, how fast they grow, you know, and the reality – the real – the real – the realizing that what really matters in life, you know – we so materialistic – oh, I gotta get this tight job, or I gotta get this title, or I gotta get this money – But at the end of the day what really matters in life is the relationships, man.

To sustain these relationships, however, takes much sensitivity on the father's part. Marion told me that men have to understand they cannot make up for lost time or simply pick up where they left off in their children's lives. Reintegration could "turn into a calamity… it could be a disaster" if not done right. This is particularly because regardless of why the father has left the home, whether by incarceration or divorce, Marian said "there's a lot of scars, there could be alotta scars."

> So you start from where you at and you start establishin' bonds and, you know, and that – and that takes a lot of understanding and it takes a lot of vulnerability because you gotta understand all those – your kids, now, they older now. They're not the little kid you left; you know what I'm sayin'?

Marian now believes that a significant part of his success as a father is that none his kids are in prison:

> Now, with that said, none of 'em have never been – no, none of 'em have a um, a criminal background. All right, none of 'em have kids, I'm not a grandfather, you know, none of 'em are on drugs. You know what I'm sayin'? If, um – um, they both workin', you know? I mean, you know, what more can I ask?

Both of his children counteract the stereotypical image of the young black male; they are both drug-free, gainfully employed, single men in their twenties without children. Marian suggests that the cycle he was concerned could develop because of his absence has not been able to trap his family.

Al

Al joked that he and his brother, "were born with the ghetto spoons in [their] mouths." Al lived with both his parents, growing up in an area where some other children did not have their fathers around and were poor. He and his brother "had all the toys at Christmas… [and] had everything growing up that someone would want." While their material needs were being provided for, Al told me he was not satisfied with the relationship he had with his father. He recalled, "my mother would constantly uh, you know, be the person that I could confide in and talk with but I always wanted that relationship with my father… I never received like the appreciation from my father vocally."

In describing him, Al recounted that his father believed that, "all he had to do was provide for the family, so his engagement as a father wasn't really there." Al's father was good at "being there" for Al, his mother and his brother, but not actively involved in their everyday lives. He remarked, "[my father's] engaging in certain activities, that was distant." Al spent much of the interview relating how his father's lack of involvement in his life affected him. Al stated, "I was always trying to do things to make him aware of – you know, I wanted that father-son type of strong relationship." As he recalled,

> Growing up I had scholarships to play basketball, so I was like high school, you know, all-American this, and doing that. So I would come home with trophies and put them on my kitchen table. Be like look – waiting for my pop to be like son, yo – but I never got that.

For Al, it is not enough for a father to physically "be there" for his family. Nor is it enough to provide financially while not providing the recognition and validation his children need from him. Al feels it was his desire for recognition that got him involved in the "street life." He stated,

> In the daytime I was that kid that went to school, played ball. Was good at it. Everybody knew me. They called me – you know, I had the nickname, they called me the magic man. So you know, I was really good. I was that cat. But at nighttime when I'm not at school, I'm running the streets. I've got a gun in my hand. And I wanted that reputation in the streets. I want you to respect me in the streets**...**for me I guess it was the rush, the attention that I got in the streets of being a bad boy, and then when I'd go to school, I got the attention of being the superstar.

Al described himself as a "letdown" when he was sentenced to prison for 14 ½ years because he feels that with the support he had from his family and his community he should have never gone to prison. He recounts, "I was a kid growing up in the projects that was destined to go on to play college basketball

and be the savior within my projects."

As a result, Al sought to redeem himself and his reputation by proving himself to be a worthwhile man to both his girlfriend and the members of his community whom he has left behind. For Al, being a member of a family while in prison involved using his time to better himself for his family. He stated,

> You was a kid coming into prison, so now it's imperative that you educate yourself. Uh, you show your girlfriend at the time that she wasn't just dealing with someone that uh, didn't have no morals or principles. She would be waiting for you and it would be in vain, so I had to – I felt that I – it was – it was a must that I mature, I educate myself, and come back out into society, and not be someone that's spoke upon as oh, he was a – you know, a fantastic basketball player, but however, look at him now. He's still on the corner just doing this instead of – he's a has-been. He didn't do anything with his life. So my whole process, my mental process when I was incarcerated was to educate myself, uhm, learn as much as I could. Uh, continue to show my wife at that time that uhm, her being there for me would eventually pay off in the long run because she has someone that will be a responsible adult coming out of prison.

He felt he needed to prove to those on the outside waiting for him that he was worth the wait and that high expectations for his life are not over over because of incarceration. In describing some of his concerns while he was incarcerated, he also stated, that "I didn't want to let [my mother] down. I wanted her to see that the principles and morals that she instilled in me as a kid would just – I just had to uh, get in tune with myself and show her that, you know, you didn't raise a bad kid."

For Al, being a part of a family and community does not stop due to incarceration, so he existed in a state of preparation for the future. While he saw himself as representing his family and trying to better himself, he noted, "prison

[is] a whole other culture… going into that type of environment, it's strictly about surviving in the – in that particular environment." He continued,

> I knew that it was – it wasn't guaranteed that I was going to make it out of there alive, so I went in there and about six years of my incarceration I got into numerous fights. I got stabbed. I did stabbings. Uh, and that was my greatest fear. That someone might kill me in here."

However, the isolation and violence that characterized Al's prison experience forced him to think about his legacy. This included him being concerned about whether or not he and his wife would be able to have children and the way he would be remembered by the community he had left behind. He recalled,

> After I got married to my wife, we found out that she had something called polycystic ovaries where they have a cyst on their ovaries. So she was told that she wouldn't have babies. So as a young kid going to prison, someone that wanted children, my thoughts were I'm not going to have children. I'm not going to be able to have children, because I can't leave this woman because she's a good woman.

If he were to die in prison he would never have the opportunity to settle these affairs.

Unfortunately for Al, surviving in prison required often violent confrontations which could have killed him. He stated,

> I knew I had to survive in there, so my whole purpose was listen, this is my life. This is where I'm at. For 14½ years this is where I'm going to be. I'm going to do whatever I need to do to make sure that I survive. So uh, having that fear for knowing this is my environment, uh, is like a double-edge sword. It's a double-edge sword. So uh, I feared that I might get killed in there. I feared that I may have to kill somebody. And I feared that I would never be able to see my family.

For Al, attempting to survive in prison worked against planning for the future because part of the struggle to survive is violently dealing with other inmates in the present, which could potentially keep him in prison.

In describing the ways in which prison works against family connections, Al recounted,

> There comes times where [my family] don't hear from me on the phone for a year, or six, seven months go by because I'm an SA2. So now I have to explain to them. SA2 is for solitary confinement. So that's – that's when you do something within a prison, and they lock you up twenty-three hours because you get an infraction. So you go into another cell and you're locked up for twenty-three hours. No contact. No phones. Stuff like that. So if your family members are used to receiving a phone call from you every week, now I didn't hear from you for six months, seven months. What's going on? And they come up and find out that listen, you're locked up in SA2, so I have to explain it to them that it's going to be times where you might not hear from me for six months. There's going to be times when you might not hear from me for a year. Because of the fact that I may do something and they may lock me up.

A consequence of his "survival tactics" was that Al was moved to 9 different prisons in his 14 ½ years of incarceration. He remarked, "the majority of the time they transfer you a lot to different facilities for disciplinary reasons." He recalled,

> I started off in Attica correctional facility. Uh, from Attica correctional facility I went to Green Haven correctional facility. From Green Haven correctional facility I went to Auburn correctional facility. From Auburn correctional facility I went to Sing Sing correctional facility. From Sing Sing correctional facility I went to Fishkill correctional facility. From Fishkill correctional facility I went to Mid-Orange correctional facility. From Mid-Orange correctional facility I went to Otisville correctional facility. From there I went to Wallkill correctional facility, and from Wallkill correctional facility I went to Queensboro and I made my transition outside.

These were the real contradictions in Al's prison experience, which he tried share with his family but that they could not understand. For him, he and his family were living in two distinct and separate worlds. Al stated,

> Taking that time to try to help them understand my environment was hard, because they was always looking at just pray and do what you have to do and you'll make it out of there. So they were – their reality

> wasn't the same reality that I was living in. So that was kind of hard to try to mesh the two together.

For Al, visitation is potentially one of the most nurturing aspects of prison and can help secure a man's identity as a family member. Al recounted,

> When you get – you call your wife or your mother, or your family, you say listen, you're coming up next week, and they tell you "I'll be there." So now you're in your cell grooming yourself like you're going on – you're going out on a prom date…Uh, those things have a major impact, because at that moment you know that, you know what? I'm not doing this by myself.

Al stated that visitation can also provide a temporary escape from prison life,

> I'm on a visit, I'm not in prison. You know? I'm here with my mother. You know, I'm looking at my mother smile. I'm holding her. We're laughing. I'm there with my wife. You know, you're holding each other. You get a little kiss here and there. Uh, you guys are talking about your future plans.

The temporary nature of this visit and the uncertainty of the visits due to factors outside of the prison can serve as a stressor for prisoners. He continued,

> Then the visit ends. So now's it's bittersweet because now I can't leave with you. And then the whole flipside is that when you are expecting a visit, and for some reason they can't make it. So your name is never called. And now you're worried one, is my family alright? I know they said they was going to make it. Did they get hurt in the van coming up here? Did something happen? So you're concerned. You're worried. You know, damn, did they just me off? So it's a lot of mixed emotions that some people may go through.

While he was incarcerated, Al's mother and his wife made great efforts to visit. His mother would visit once every two months and his wife would come every week or every two weeks depending on his distance from home. He was very appreciative to have, "a young woman, because I'm nineteen and she's at that time eighteen, in college. Making her way, making it her business to come see me wherever I was at." However, his father remained distant. He said, "from

the onset my father was the type of individual,[who said] I will be there. If you need money I will send it to you. I'm not coming to visit you. So that was his, and I understood that."

Despite the negativity of prison, Al believes a father can still be a father in prison because he has a responsibility to use his life to teach his children lessons. A father's bad situation can be used to correct children or at least prevent them from making similar decisions. Al stated,

> Uh, if you explain to the child that as a parent, as a father, I'm here because I did something wrong. So this is what happens when you do something wrong. You come to prison. You see prison guards. You're locked up. So the child understands this is not something I want go. You don't want to see daddy in an environment like this. So I think it's uh, a learning tool. You can use it as a learning tool to say okay, you know what? You come in here, and this is where I'm at. Why am I here? Because daddy did A, B, C and D. Which is not good. So now the child sees that and automatically, yeah, the child sees that as a gloomy place. So now I don't want to be where daddy was at. So I don't – I'm not going to do certain things bad. So it depends on how you express it to the child. So whoever's presenting it, and drawing the picture for the child, it could be used as a tool.

While not all incarcerated men are good fathers, Al thinks that prison can, at least potentially, raise a father's consciousness of his responsibilities and his importance as a father. He commented,

> You know, because if you love your child, or children so much and want them to be active in your life so much, why would you do something that's going to take you away from them? So yeah, you shouldn't see them so this will give you – hopefully this will give you the opportunity to reflect and in the future when you're out there with your family, you appreciate them more.

When I asked Al how his family structure had changed while he was in prison, he responded that he made a concerted effort to develop a more intimate relationship with his father. He said,

> I think what did shift for me was I was determined – as I grew up in prison, I was determined to make my relationship with my father somewhat more communicative. You know, I said, you know what? This is my father. This is the man that raised me, but I want to make it my business to communicate with him. Talk with him, and open him up. So it was like I know he was there, but I was determined. Say listen, dad, we've got to have this relationship.

Fatherhood became increasingly important to Al as he realized, "a lot of times young brothers go to prison and they don't have that male role model, that male figure in their life, and it affects them."

In discussing the qualities of a good father and the ways in which his incarceration influenced his understanding of "good" fatherhood, Al noted that, more than anything his own father influenced his own parenting. To the question of what the qualities of a good father are, Al responded,

> Being attentive. I think that was one of the keys that were lacking in my upbringing that my father didn't display. Showing some type of emotional or just acknowledgement that, you know, son, I'm proud of you. Uh, sitting down and talking to me and saying listen, son, these are the things you need to do as you uh, mature into manhood. You know, so I didn't have that from my father. Uh, so that was something – that's something I think is very important.

Al suggests that his understanding of fatherhood is in large part based on his own father's ability and/or inability to fulfill his needs. Al made this connection himself saying,

> [My father's parenting] affected me, and I said to myself once I have my children, that I will also make sure that you know what? I have to be attentive to my children. I have to tell them that constantly I love you…You know, he never said I'm proud of you, son. And I think that affected me. If your father is not active in your development then it's like he's dead. And I felt – and I was a victim of that in a sense. So uh, being a victim of that and seeing it, and then experiencing other guys in prison not having a father figure, it helps me – it makes me more aware that, you know what?

For Al, "being there" is not just being present but being emotionally available to his children who are "vulnerable [and] don't know what's going on in this world." As a father, he believes he must have an impact on their development, especially at a young age. Al said,

> My biggest success. Uh, biggest success. Uh, you know, this – this – I mean, I'm not successful. I can't – my biggest success right now is just being here right now. You know, just being in their life. You know what I mean? Just working, man. And just doing other things, and understanding my prerogatives are right now. Like you know, no matter what's going on in my life, that I'm always going to be there for them. And I understand that uh, I'm conscious, I have this awareness of how important it is because they are vulnerable. Kids are vulnerable. So they're depending on me. They. They're just depending on me…I have to be more aware and conscious at all times that my children are around, and they're receptive to whatever I say.

Daryl

Prior to his incarceration, Daryl was living with his ex-wife and three children; a daughter age 13, and two sons ages 11 and 9. He and his wife had been working on reconnecting and strengthening their family unit. He recounted, "at the time we was stayin' together but me and my wife was divorced at the time but we got back together because trying to reconcile our marriage and so forth." For him, it was important to provide a harmonious parental unit for his children but more importantly he had to be an active participant in their lives. In describing his parenting before his incarceration Daryl said,

> I was more into the mentor-type things, you know, introducing them to various things about sports -- I coached all of their teams when they was younger – Little League, baseball, softball, basket -- basketball, whatever - And, uhm, and just participate with them even when they got up on Saturday mornings and watch cartoons, we always had a ritual where

> we'd get up and we'd make pancakes and stuff we'd watch cartoons together.

For Daryl, active and engaged parenting is the best way to be a father. In defining "good" fathering Daryl stated,

> [It is] just participatin' with your kids. I think that's crucial in being a good father, the parenting. If you don't know how to play basketball you can always get the basketball and throw it back to the kid while the kid shoot. And then basketball is just one of many things that you can do with your kids. I don't care if it's horseshoeing, or riding your bike, whatever, or just walking to the store, spending that time, talking to him, sittin' down and finding out how they doin' with their homework and if they need some help and even letting them show you how they do their homework, oftentimes, is a great motivator because kids, oftentimes, wanna impress their parents.

Daryl suggests that children want to do things with their parents and for their parents' approval. Fathers must therefore be available for their children and show interest in their children's activities. In contrast, Daryl stated that bad fathers are, "overworking [and] not spending quality time with [their children]."

For Daryl, prison demands that a man often take violent but necessary actions against abuse in order to maintain his masculine identity and self-respect:

> You don't have to be mean but you have to be mentally tough. So I had to have that attitude and so that attitude don't just drop from the get-go. So I was quick and certain things you say to me probably was more offensive to me than it would be a guy callin' me a bitch. I would just knock that guy out. I'm serious. Because if he can get away with calling you that, next thing you know, he'll be walking and slap you and takes your canteen.
>
> I figured there, I figured it was either I stand as a man and maintain myself, or if I break down now, before you know, motherfucker had me breaking down even further. What am I gonna say when he want me to suck his dick? You know what I'm saying? I'm being as open and honest with you as I possibly can. You know, there's a lot of different things, but you know what? No matter where you at, there's just some

> things a man just don't do. Not a real man. So, I don't regret it. I don't regret it because, again, every morning I get up, I get in the mirror and I have to shave, so I have to look at that guy in the mirror and if I don't respect that guy in the mirror I'm in trouble.

Daryl suggests that these types of actions are not a part of, if not contradictory to, family identities but equally important maintaining his pride. Daryl described his roles as an inmate, father and brother as distinct "hats" he had to wear:

> Yes, when you go in and if you get passed search and not go through that door, I pause for a minute, I take the inmate hat off and I put dad's hat on, you know? If my sister's coming to see me, you know, I put the brother hat on. And when I talk to them, like that, when I go back out and they pat search me again, or strip search me, I put the inmate hat back on.

There are times, however, when there is a clash between family life and the prison world. For Daryl, prison denies fathers the opportunity to be fathers all the time:

> Because I don't care how happy you are and I got into a fight with my roommate because I came back happy from a visitation and then he felt like I was better than him because he wasn't getting' no visitation -- and he called me a New Jack and, you know, after some exchanges of words it was exchanges of blows but that was because he wasn't gettin' no visitation and I was getting' visitation and it's a jealousy and you know and anything you do, no matter what you see in life, jealousy is the ugliest emotion known to man. And in there, you got a lot of jealousy. You know, I just went a visitation and I got cologne, I got decent tennis shoes, I had a little bit of canteen, nothing like major, it don't take much. People essentially like that, so as a result, the same level on the street as it is in the system because we all got the same people.

While incarcerated, Daryl and his ex-wife separated for the second time, effectively cutting back significantly on the communication he had with his children. In fact, other members of his family similarly severed their ties with he and his children. He remarked that some of his family, "[on] one end they say,

you know, "I don't care," they got the typical society view, you know, let him rot in hell." Daryl was quick to note however, the role his sister played in being his new emotional support, connecting him with his children, and being a presence in their lives. When I asked him about the resources he had either in or out of prison that supported his fathering he responded, "I had sisters, fortunately, that come often, they visit me, they make sure if there's anything they can do for me they do it for me." He continued,

> The point of it is I had wonderful sisters who brought my kids to see me you know, as best as they could. I at least saw my kids once a month sometimes it was twice a month and I had a friend who would bring my kids up whenever they would get a chance.
>
> I talked to [my kids] and my sister's a very nice Christian woman, very well-educated and so she would help my daughters and with some of the adjustments they made, some of the things that they wanted to do, she would participate in some of the activities that they would go. My brother had a kid in the same grade as – he even had two kids – both of them the same age -- So he did a lot of that, too. He would just go to the games just knowing that my brother was there and help my son and help my daughter and that he would give 'em a ride home.

For a father who was as attached to his children as Daryl was, having his brother and sisters helping with his children was important in allowing his children to see that he, through his family, still cared for them. Visitation was also central to sustaining his identity as a father and maintaining his relationship with his children. He stated,

> The excitement of knowing that your – you know your family is coming to see you is really quite priceless because that's an opportunity to sit down for two hours with your loved ones. Most of the times [it would] be my kids and my sister and her husband who I've considered to be my brother, in many respects, because he spent more time up there with me than my own brothers. It's just a fantastic emotional high.

Through visitation Daryl was able to be an active listener for his children to talk with about problems in their lives as opposed to making the visits all of about his experiences. For Daryl, this is an important aspect of being a good father while incarcerated. He stated,

> It's important – it's important for me to listen at Shauna's, and Jesse's and Ladonna's struggles, what they was goin' through, out in the streets. I didn't want to make them think, you know, you out in the streets, you ain't got nothin' to worry about. Actually, I would say the life in the system is so controlled it's easy because you don't have to think, okay, about what you have to do. You know but – and so I made myself available to sit down and talk to them and listen to them about what was going on and how was school work, I learned to ask specific questions to prop up a certain area of conversation and I stayed in touch with that, throughout that, I wanted to know how was their social life.

Daryl made concerted efforts to maximize the time he spent with his kids by reading and studying on child development and women's issues. He said,

> I read *Psychology Today* to stay abreast on what's going on. I bought *Metropolitan*; I wanted to know that when I got out, I wanted to try to at least get a little bit better grip on women and how to treat a woman, what kinda relationship I wanted so that that failure would not extend into my life any further. I wanted to know how to deal with modern teens because I didn't get that hands-on experience but when I saw my kids, as of over the ten-year period, I watched my kids, my daughter, at 13; all of a sudden she's 23.

Daryl sought to understand how best to relate to his children by understanding the changes socially and emotionally they are going through and what their interests were. As a father, Daryl saw it as his responsibility to put the best face on bad situations for his family. For example, Daryl spent much time in the legal library, using his free time to educate himself. He said,

> The better off you are in terms of understanding the rules and regulations and guidelines. The easier it is to manipulate through – to function in the system and not manipulate as in the negative sense of manipulating systems but to negotiate yourself through the system.

> I stayed active trying to improve my mind. One of the things I did was – because I had no economic base – an attorney, I learned to be an attorney myself. I became my own biggest advocate for the simple fact that I had no money so I had no help, so I learned the law…I worked and studied. I saved my little money, I tried to become independent, take care, so I wouldn't be a burden to my family.

He also attempted to encourage his family when the prison environment began to frustrate them. He recounted, "I oftentimes [told] them, I say, "Listen, I know this is not the greatest place to come see me, but at the same time would you rather go visit my tombstone?" His children's frustration with the prison system added another level of complexity to his parenting. He stated,

> Well, I – I think in – in some ways they feel like, you know, the system really did their dad wrong. I – I – I don't think things just happen random. There's a reason, there's something more above us that's in more control than what we think it is fixin' to put it – but anyway – and it's not a religious topic. I try to tell them that this can be turned around and worked for the best. If we look it from the positive standpoint and stop moping in the sorrow of it because that not gonna change nothin'.

While Daryl recognized his children were becoming increasingly frustrated and disillusioned with the criminal justice system, he refused to allow their feelings towards the system to absolve him of the responsibility of being taken away from them. He told me,

> This is what's important…when I talked to my kids about [my incarceration] – it's about owning up to what you done, standing up as a man and not telling them, "Well, they did me wrong! I hate this system and woo-woo-woo-woo-woo." No, I'm overly impacting my kids in a situation like this.

Daryl continued, "even though I was doing what I could do, I, ultimately, affected them and hold a tremendous amount of guilt for it because I wasn't there. Had I been there, things would not have went the way it did, in some cases." He told

me that even today, he is still concerned for his incarceration's impact on his children. His children were ostracized family and other member of their community because of his incarceration and as a result, his children have completely shut out some of these people out of their lives. In discussing making his transition back into his children's lives, he stated an important aspect of his fathering is help his children recover from their emotional wounds:

> To get my kids to forgive the scars that they obtained during that period of time, which would be some of their adolescence, you know, 10 or 11 years old… to forgive the people that they feel as though they scar, got scarred as a result of – and I'm not talking not necessarily just my family. I'm talking about all of the people. What I want my kids to start to work on, you know, and forgive people for what they did or didn't do, because we talked about not doing nothing is a decision in and of itself…to do nothing when kids are in distress, uh, kids hate you for that. So, I want my kids, now that they're all 27 to 30 years of age, to look back on that and re-think it now that they are adults because their original decision was when they was still children and they made those feelings and analyses while they was still a child. Sometimes, when you go back as an adult and revisit a situation, you see it somewhat different now.

As a father, Daryl is trying to help with his children's emotional and social lives. For him forgiveness is important for his children healthy development. Daryl remarked, " [if] you forgive a person, that takes a tremendous amount of stress and anxiety off of you, yourself, and forgiveness is your best medicine for you and your best well being." While in prison this type of responsibility and investment in his children's lives, sometimes became a heavy burden for him.

Incarceration took away most of Daryl's fathering opportunities and roles. When asked about his biggest concern while in inside, he responded,

> It would be for my kids. Without a doubt. Most of the men realize that, you know, that I can handle this but what happens to my kids. They bein' left, first of all, with their mother – who ain't calm, at best – in a situation.

> It – it – it – it – it – you know, you worry about what's gonna happen to your kids, who gonna be over your kids, their safety, their housing and everything? And so you end up in a helpless position because there's no economic availability for most guys, they ain't got nothin' by the time they get there. So it definitely would be for your kids, your kids' safety, makin' sure that they are properly taken care of, hoping family would pitch in to assist your kids and everything like this

For Daryl, good fathers serve a stabilizing role in their families. They are also leaders, protectors and providers. He recognizes that for the poor men, who make up the majority of the prison population, they feel "helpless" while incarcerated because prior to and during incarceration they lack the funds to ensure child safety and security. Even while in prison, financial provision seems to maintain a primary role in a fathers understand of quality fathering. For Daryl, the hardest part of his incarceration was being away from his family and not being aware of their well-beings. He recounted,

> I prayed to God every night for my kids, and please let me get out in enough time before my parents die. Because – excuse me for getting emotional, because that's personal I couldn't handle it if I couldn't go to see my mother on her dying bed. I could handle the punishment for me, but I couldn't handle it, what it would do to my family.

Here Daryl shares that there was a level of co-dependency between himself and his family. While his children relied on him for advice and emotional support, he simultaneously relied on their security for his physiological well-being. The inability to help with or be present during changes in family members lives such as sickness and the isolation of prison was a significant source of the stress while he was incarcerated. Daryl continued,

> Definitely being away from your family, your friends, your loved ones and things like holidays are very depressing because we have Thanksgiving dinner at each other's house, the family reunion was just last week, that's a normal first week of August every year. I missed ten

> Christmases, I missed my mother's birthday, my father's birthday… so you start to realize the value of these things. I didn't get to go to my daughter's graduation, or my son, I never watched him play football, these kinda things, always play into how you're making your adjustments and you have to not – it's how you – you – you have to remember them and love them but you can't wear 'em every day, -- because that kinda pressure would ultimately drive you Insane, -- because you got 365 days where you settin' in the same spot.

For Daryl, prison simultaneously helped develop a deeper appreciation for family life and engagement while curtailing his ability to participate actively in it. Daryl suggests that knowing when and when not to "wear" his family identity was important for his survival while in prison.

Today Daryl is dealing with the challenge of fathering after being incarcerated. In describing transitioning back home Daryl stated,

> When they take your freedom away, there ain't no adjustment for that. There ain't nothing. It sounds like something out of a comic book, but that's the one thing you can't duplicate. That's the one thing that you once you get it back, it's like having a big old, the biggest diamond in the world around your neck. You don't want to relinquish it anymore. You don't.

To fully enjoy his freedom Daryl said he, "want[s] to be known for what [he] is now not what [he] was." He uses as his motto for reintergration, a saying his father used to say. He recalled,

> One of the old sayings that my dad always said is, "Everybody goes through turns incurred." Life is not a straightaway shot, everybody goes through curves and turns in their life. It's how you negotiate those turns is how you go through life.

For him, this involves him moving past and getting other people to move past his old identities as a prisoner, "absent" father for 10 years, convicted felon and drug user and being an example for his children. He stated,

> Um, I used to have a drug problem. My kids saw me come out and fight, not physically but within myself, and within the framework of our society to get myself back on my feet, and then to maintain myself on my feet. And they viewed that as a sense of strength – and it's very easy to say, "Well, you know what? I'm my daddy's son. If dad can do it at 48, then I'm not even 30 yet. Why can't I get my shit together?"

For Daryl, a significant part of fathering after incarceration is about the example a father can give to his children about recovery and resiliency. Furthermore, Al told me post-prison fathering allows him to teach his children some of the lesson he learned while incarcerated, one of which is not to time chasing money. He recalled talking to one of his sons about the young man's frustration with his current salary. He described the conversation saying,

> "It's gonna work out, it's gonna be for better." I said, "Listen," I said, "If I can make $0.33 an hour, surely I can work for $7.00 or $10.00 an hour and make a go of it." Because I learned money management. It ain't how much money you make, it's what you do with your money, how you utilize it. And you always try to save 10 percent of whatever you make.

If fathering does not stop when a father is incarcerated, according to Daryl, fathering after incarceration presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities for fathers to leave examples to their children.

The search for public policies to reduce the incidence or minimize the consequences of absence of fathers such as these, by the federal and state governments has gone hand in hand with a commitment to creating 'stable' male-breadwinner married families. Ideally, this change will impose personal responsibility on fathers, thereby eliminating the "culture of poverty". What African Americans need, according to this logic, is not government programs but a good dose of sexual restraint, martial commitment and parental discipline. However, these solutions which all propose fatherhood as a solution to African

American poverty and poverty related ills are not new concepts and this discussion about black families and poverty is hardly original. The historian Stephanie Coontz writes, "in almost every decade, for 200 years, someone has 'discovered' that the black family is falling apart."[87] In fact, these proposals are similar to post-bellum efforts by the federal government and the Freedman's Bureau to encourage blacks to marry and fathers to take economic charge of their homes, "civilizing" the poor African Americans who depend on public assistance.

[87] Coontz, Stephanie. The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap. (Basic Books, 1992), 235.

Chapter 3
Reconstructing the Family:
The Historical Constraints on Black Fathers

The African American family occupies a strange position in the history of America's social policy agenda. Yet throughout the years there have been a number of common themes binding political concerns over the black family together. For example, the black family has been constructed as deviant, pathological and in need of fixing. This interpretation of and concern over the black family dates back to slavery when the enslaved were frequently denied the right to form and sustain intact family structures. To fully understand the ways in which family and fatherhood initiatives today engage black families, it is important to consider the federal and state governments' responses to what E. Franklin Frazier called, "the manner in which Negro slaves were collected in Africa and disposed of after their arrival in this country."[88] Furthermore, we must interrogate the ways in which these responses were based upon assumptions made about black families that potentially diverged from their understandings of their own familial identities.

Prior to the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, slaves had no ability to make contracts and thus were not allowed to legally marry.[89] It was established that,

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[88] Frazier, E. Franklin. "The Negro Slave Family." *The Journal of Negro History* 15.2 (1930): 203.

[89] Cott, Nancy. Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 11.

> A slave cannot even contract matrimony, the association which takes place among slaves, and is *called* marriage, being properly designated by the word *contubernium,* a relation which has no sanctity, and to which no civil rights are attached.[90]

Instead, during the antebellum period, white slavemasters were deemed the head of each household and bore the financial responsibility of caring for each of their dependents, including their slaves. Slave marriages were viewed as a threat to slave owners' power and control because, if recognized, such marriages would grant black men claims to black women and children as property based on the marital contract.

Additionally, plantation owners worried that slave husbands would become violent in defending their wives and children, especially against those slave owners who sexually assaulted and abused slave women.[91] Nevertheless, many slaves married by engaging in marriage rituals such as jumping over broomsticks, considering themselves married before the eyes of God, the community, and in some cases, their owners. But of course, they were not married in the eyes of the law. Slave marriages were permitted mostly when slave owners stood to benefit from slave marriages because they made abandoning loved ones for escape to the North emotionally difficult.[92] In fact, according to Frazier, "it was often, it appears, a command to marry according to

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[90] Stroud, George A. Sketch of the Laws Relating to Slavery in the Several States of the United States of America. (Philadelphia: Kimber and Sharpless, 1827) 61.

[91] Genovese, Eugene D. Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slave Made (New York: Vintage Books), 415.

[92] Will, Thomas E. "Weddings on Contested Grounds: Slave Marriage in the Antebellum South," *The Historian* 62.1 (1999): 105.

the wishes of the master."[93] In these situations, however, slaveholders maintained complete control over the marriages and could end marriages and separate families by sale.[94]

One study of marriages between slaves in Tennessee, Louisiana, and Mississippi found that from 1864 to 1866, almost one-third of these unions had been broken up by plantation masters.[95] Historian Herbert Gutman estimates that prior to the Civil War, only one in six or seven marriages was dissolved, suggesting that as freedom approached masters became more concerned about controlling the labor force that would remain to them. Beyond the will of the master however, were the "contingencies of family formation" such as changes in the economic status and death of a master, which affected the stability of slave families.[96] The division of property upon the death of slave masters broke up families because the kin networks of the slaves were ignored when economic considerations were involved.[97] Furthermore, these slave owners were dealing with what was labeled property and commodities, not human beings. Consequently, in slavery, the control of children by parents on the plantation was not of long duration and never a natural right. On some plantations the care of children was assigned to an old woman and when there was none to serve in

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[93] Frazier, "The Negro Slave Family," 219.

[94] Gutman, Herbert. The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925 (New York: Vintage Books), 23.

[95] Coontz, Stephanie. The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap (New York: Basic Books), 238.

[96] Frazier, "The Negro Slave Family," 222.

[97] *Ibid.*, 224.

this capacity, the children were left alone. The system of slavery forced children to become orphans who had little to no knowledge of their parents. [98]

With emancipation, many African Americans sought to reunite families that had been separated under slavery and to legitimize relationships that had developed between men and women. This is evidenced by the fact that black traveled great distances, enduring enormous hardships, in order to reconnect with their families; and the intensity with which newly freed men and women sought to legalize their slave unions. According to literary scholar Ann duCille,

> Marriage is necessarily a historically complex and contradictory concept in African American history and literature. While modern minds are inclined to view marriage as an oppressive, self-limiting institution, for nineteenth-century African Americans, recently released from slavery and its dramatic disruption of marital and family life, marriage rites were a long-denied basic human right- signs of liberation and entitlement to both democracy and desire.[99]

As a result, some at the time believed that one glorious quality of the right to marry was that the slave master no longer functioned as the head of the black household. In the immediate post-bellum period, the right to marry signaled acceptance into the moral community of civil society for blacks. It also signaled independence, to the extent that social and economic benefits flowed from being legally married.

While these privileges were real, African Americans were simultaneously committing themselves to the "gender codes of American patriarchal society including the acceptance of monogamous, male-dominant marriage as a symbol

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[98] *Ibid.,* 240.

[99] duCille, Ann. The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction. (New York: Vintage Books), 14.

of civility—as a sign, ironically, of man's liberation from the paternal incursions of slavery."[100] Consequently, the African American husband became legally responsible for the care and support of his wife and children, thereby relieving the state of any obligation. As Nancy Cott observes of African American husbands during this period, "having and supporting dependents was evidence of independence."[101] However, the right to marry was not merely an unconstrained liberty enjoyed by blacks independent of state interest or control.

Post-emancipation marriage did not mean that black men and women enjoyed the kind of matrimonial autonomy often portrayed in romanticized accounts of this period. duCille suggests that,

> For black men and women in America, the acting out of traditional male-female marital roles, as defined by hegemonic ideologies at given historical moments, has been dramatically disrupted by the same social structures that both prescribe and proscribe those roles.[102]

The historian Herbert Gutman notes that much of the rhetoric relating to African Americans by whites in the post-emancipation period related the need to civilize the freedmen and women. Because the status of "citizen" had both legal and moral content for 19th century Americans, the transition of black people from slave to citizen was not something whites regarded as self-evident upon emancipation. Citizenship was something that had to be cultivated in black people. Gutman summarized these beliefs as follows, "As slaves, after all, their marriages had not been sanctioned by the civil law and therefore 'the sexual

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[100] *Ibid.,* 50.

[101] Cott, Nancy F. "Marriage and Women's Citizenship in the United States, 1830-1934," *The American Historical Review* 103.5 (1998): 1452.

[102] duCille, The Coupling Convention, 144.

passion' went unrestrained."[103] Consequently, rather than allowing for black family life to go on unmolested after slavery, the state stepped in to regulate the form and structure of black intimate relationships. State and federal officials played an active role in impressing upon black people the responsibilities rather than the rights that marriage imposed.

Professor Katherine Franke argues that federal and state governments utilized law to "civilize" newly freed blacks as they transitioned from slavery to freedom. The ultimate goal of these governmental efforts was not only to provide cheap labor for southern industries by creating a supply of convicts and child apprentices who could be forced to work with little or no pay, but also to compel freed black people to comply with the heteronormative ideal of the nation's perceived national family—the self-sufficient American family with a working husband and a dependent wife and children—and to therefore absolve the government of responsibility for financially supporting needy black women and children.[104]Franke states that marriage laws during the post-bellum period were strictly enforced as a means of controlling freed blacks "more base urges… [and] prepar[ing them] for the responsibilities of citizenship"[105] One method for accomplishing the integration of former slaves into free society without burdening whites with related economic costs was to insist that newly freed

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[103] Gutman, Herbert, The Black Family, 295.

[104] Franke, Katherine, "Becoming a Citizen: Reconstruction Era Regulation of African American Marriages" *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 11 (1999), 287.

[105] *Ibid.,* 295.

blacks adopt and comply with the standard legal institution of marriage.[106] By allowing and encouraging former slaves to marry, states maintained their power over the lives of freed people by requiring all married couples to register with the state and then forcefully prosecuting those blacks who did not do so as a means of ensuring compliance with marriage laws. It also required black men to support women and children, and became an additional means to force them out of independent landholding and into wage labor.

Indeed, without any regard for the ways in which slavery and the slave market had made it difficult for the husband-wife structure to remain intact in slave families, newly freed blacks and their families were punished for stepping out of this mold, even when violations of marriage laws resulted from previously enforced compliance with the slave system. Furthermore, as formerly enslaved people struggled to reunite relationships shattered by slavery some newly freed blacks found themselves with more than one spouse upon their emancipation. Gutman describes how in some cases how a formerly enslaved woman's first husband might reappear and expect his wife to live with him as his wife. Women in this situation would choose a legal husband based upon a number of different factors, such as the man's wealth or his willingness to provide for all of her children, even those fathered by other men.[107] The consequences of this policy was quite devastating for many black people, however, as these newly freed people could also be prosecuted for bigamy in such situations, forcing them to

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[106] *Ibid.,* 257.
[107] Gutman, Herbert, The Black Family, 417.

comply with the free white model for normal familial relationships after decades during which blacks had no choice but to develop alternative structures.

Marriage was less part of recognizing blacks as truly free citizens of the nation than it was a means of regulating their behaviors because policymakers believed that they would drain states' economic resources, and diminish their labor pools, without such regulation. The prohibition against interracial marriages reveals the limitations on freedom conveyed by a new right to contract marriages. Powerful whites had always permitted blacks to marry only if the marriages did not disrupt social hierarchies; but clearly interracial marriage would challenge white supremacy by allowing blacks and whites to integrate in the most intimate of societal units, the family.[108] Monoracial marriage was a key "civilizing" tool because, by establishing economic roles within black families, it shifted enormous financial responsibility from the government to individual, newly freed black men, who were charged with providing for their households' economic needs.

Upon emancipation, many former slaves, especially women and children, found themselves in the worst of conditions, newly impoverished and often homeless. In essence, the question looming over the heads of many white policymakers upon the emancipation of blacks was exactly what to do with all these black women and children in need. Concerned that the inability of newly freed blacks to support themselves would make large numbers of them become public charges, white policymakers and leaders stressed the notion that "[n]o

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[108] Moran, Rachel F. Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race and Romance, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 19.

really respectable person wishes to be supported by others." It was now time for former slaves, upon whose labor the economic foundation of the South had been built, to support themselves.

Despite these hardships, newly freed blacks welcomed marriage precisely because, as I have argued, families had frequently been torn apart during slavery.[109] Additionally, newly emancipated blacks wished to make their marriages right in the eyes of God and desired recognition of the validity of their marriages by the laws of free society, because they believed that compliance with religious and legal requirements would prove their eligibility for the rights associated with citizenship and freedom.

In sum, the government used marriage to financially and socially domesticate newly freed blacks to ensure that the white public faced minimal responsibility for former slaves' economic security. Marriage was viewed as a vehicle through which the government could promote industriousness among blacks, gradually eliminating blacks' dependence on any form of public assistance. In essence, enforcing marriage laws privatized the dependency of newly freed blacks. Marriage allowed states to deflect their responsibility for supporting newly emancipated blacks to impoverished black men, who were forced to assume the financial caretaking role equal to that of their former slave owners, even though they had no resources or access to political and economic power. By forcing newly freed black families to fit within the economic structure of the husband-wife dyad with males as the primary breadwinners for their

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[109] Franke, "Becoming a Citizen," 277.

wives and children, white policymakers gave freed black men the financial burdens traditionally held by heads of white slave owning households, and thus eliminated an ethic of public responsibility for newly freed black women and children. In the end, marriage for blacks signified domestic obligations with very few corresponding social and political rights and no acknowledgment by the government of how treatment of blacks and black families during slavery made it difficult for newly freed blacks to model their households in this manner.[110] Furthermore, these responsibilities were conveyed with little corresponding authority over their own children, who they could not protect their children from apprenticeship laws. Such laws often bound children over to labor for white men without their parents' consent.

Nevertheless, as blacks were gaining formal rights, and whites continued to bemoan how quickly the restraints of slavery dissipated. Furthermore, after emancipation, white and black southerners possessed fundamentally contrary expectations as to how the Southern economic system of labor and social order would look. For newly freed blacks, this was an opportunity to redesign their lives and interact with whites as equals. Blacks shared a definition of freedom as their right not simply to survive, but to work and thrive without white intervention on the land they had worked as slaves and where generations of their ancestors had lived, worked, and died. They also sought control of community institutions such as schools and churches, and rights under the changing laws of Reconstruction. White southerners, on the other hand, desired

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[110] Gutman, Herbert. The Black Family, 3-44.

something far different. For many whites, bargaining with their former slaves was unthinkable and they expected their workforce to continue to labor the same number of hours each day and under many of the same restrictions as in slavery and at the very least, insisted that their former bondspersons treat them with the deference of antebellum times.

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands more commonly known as the Freedmen's Bureau was established in March 1865 and given the task of reconciling these different aims. According to Congress, the main objective of the Bureau was, "the supervision and management of all abandoned lands, and the control of all subjects relating to refugees and freedmen from rebel states."[111] As a result, the bureau's activities were myriad and implicated in the reuniting and new status of slave families. It assisted in uniting former slave families separated during slavery or as a result of war, supervised labor agreements between blacks and their former masters, monitored state and local treatment of freed people, established informal tribunals to settle disputes between whites and blacks and among blacks themselves, instituted clinics and hospitals for former slaves, aided efforts to provide freed people education and temporarily provided clothing to refugees, freedmen and their wives and children in the Civil War's aftermath.[112] However, even as the bureau provided a number of services to help blacks successfully

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[111] "An Act to establish a Bureau for the Relief of Freedmen and Refugees" March 3rd 1865 in U.S., Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamations of the United States of America, vol. 13 (Boston, 1866), 507–9.

[112] Paul Cimbala, Under the Guardianship of the Nation: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Reconstruction of Georgia, 1865-1870. (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press).

transition from slavery to freedom, there was much concern by both Northern reformers and white southerners that blacks did not understand how to be free.

Blacks' refusals to work under similar conditions as in slavery often manifested itself in resistance to making contracts to labor for whites. This was often interpreted as a threat to the immediate peace and good order of a region still recovering from war, posing an obstacle to the government's efforts to reconstruct the South. In a letter to another bureau commissioner, the bureau director of Memphis complained:

> There is an abundant demand for labor in this District, for which the highest wages are offered. I regret to say that in spite of this inducement many freed people prefer a life of precarious subsistence and comparative idleness in the suburbs of the city, to a more comfortable home and honest labor in the country.[113]

Equally frustrated by black people's use of their freedom, a planter from Tennessee writing to the Freedman's Bureau Superintendent of Memphis wrote:

> A large number of Negroes have procured arms and are making such threats and demonstrations as are calculated to disturb the peace and tranquility of the community and which may lead to serious results if not speedily checked.[114]

To resolve this he suggested:

> The calling of meetings of the freedmen…let them [blacks] be addressed by Government officials & made clearly (& thus authoritatively) to understand their true status- the relation they sustain to their former owners in point of property and the penalties annexed to any violation

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[113] "Freedmen's Bureau Superintendent of the Subdistrict of Memphis to the Headquarters of the Freedmen's Bureau Assistant Commissioner for Kentucky, Tennessee, and Northern Alabama" in Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867 Series 3: Volume 1 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 266.

[114] "White Tennessean to the Freedmen's Bureau, Superintendent of the Subdistrict of Memphis, Tennessee" October 30th 1865 in Freedom. 833.

> of the laws- especially in regard to demonstration of an insurrectionary character.[115]

For the Bureau, however, black people's "true status" as freed people primarily meant independence from government aid and this could be most immediately accomplished by making black men financially, legally and morally responsible for their children and wives.

In the bureau's estimation there was nothing more damaging to social reconstruction that an able-bodied black man, particularly a man with a wife and children who did not work for wages. Black men's desire to be independent of such labor indicated to reformers a lack of knowledge of their primary responsibilities as the heads of households at best, and at worst, lack of concern for their families. As a result, the Freedmen's Bureau saw an important part of its mission as teaching black men what it meant to be free and to make them into responsible citizens who would work to enjoy the fruits of their labor, provide for their families, and—when the bureau was no longer around—protect their own interests. In discussing his arrival in Lynchburg Virginia, a Bureau Commander reported:

> I found it swarming with Negroes wandering restlessly about from place to place, without aim and possessed of but one idea that they were now free. This state of affairs was alarming and required immediate correction. Some summary measures were adopted which had the desired effect of settling the labor—all of my efforts were directed to impressing upon the freedmen's mind their duties and responsibilities as free men & as husbands and fathers.[116]

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[115] *Ibid*., 833.

[116] "Commander of the Military District of Lynchburg to the Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner, Enclosing Seven Orders by the District Commander," July 1865 in Freedom. 245.

Here we see a direct link between the establishing of a workforce, "settling the labor," and the enforcement of black men's roles as fathers and husbands. By emphasizing black men's responsibilities as heads of households, and primarily the economic responsibilities for those households, the bureau hoped to persuade men to be more willing to work in order to provide for their families. Historian Thomas Holt writes that the bureau, "was not merely to make ex-slaves work, but to make them into a working-class, that is, a class that would submit to the market because it adhered to the values of a bourgeois society: regularity, punctuality, sobriety, frugality, and economic rationality."[117] This process would only be successful, however, if black men were taught to see economic provision and control as central to what it meant to be a father and husband.

In his General Orders, so that, "freed people may more fully comprehend their position, and more clearly understand their duties and responsibilities,"[118] the Military Commander of Lynchburg wrote:

> The freed man must recognize his responsibility to live with and support his family; he must provide them with a house, food, clothing, and all in his power for their comfort; he must be responsible for their conduct; must receive their wages and obliged to provide for their support.[119]

Evidently, this man's would be primarily economic, and his secondary role to socialize his children, particularly his sons, future fathers, into this world of

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[117] Thomas, Holt. "'An Empire over the Mind': Emancipation, Race, Ideology in the British West Indies and the American South." In Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C.Vann Woodward, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James McPherson, 283-313. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

[118] "Commander of Military District" in Freedom. 248.

[119] *Ibid.,* 248.

work. In order to ensure black men's compliance, he ordered that, "able bodied men will be prevented as far as it is possible, from deserting women, children, and aged persons; and where there is no good cause shown why they left, they will be sent back."[120]

In 1865, General Clinton B. Fisk wrote a book called Plain Counsels for Freedmen, a series of lectures advising emancipated blacks on how to "begin life anew on a pure foundation."[121] For Fisk, marriage was an essential part of this new life because "this will give you the civil rights of married persons and will make your children the legal heirs to your property."[122] The twofold purpose of marriage was to confer on a man an independent right to govern his house but more importantly, the obligation to work to provide for the dependent members within it, in return for reducing the government's material aid to freedwomen and children. Emphasizing how essential money was to domestic bliss, Fisk writes "Your wives will not love you if you do not provide bread and clothes for them…Your children will not run to meet you, dance before you and climb upon your knees, and call you papa, if you make beggars of them."[123]

But even as emancipation readily granted men the responsibility of economic fatherhood, the opportunities for fair employment and hence, economic stability for black families, were far more difficult to secure. Many obstacles, both legal and extralegal, stood in the way of black men fulfilling the

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[120] *Ibid.,* 250.

[121] Brevet Major General C.B. Fisk, Plain Counsels For Freedmen: In sixteen brief lectures (American Tract Society: Boston, 1866), 31.

[122] *Ibid.,* 31.

[123] *Ibid.,* 32.

role of economic fatherhood, particularly the resistance from white planters who, although they accepted the demise of slavery, rejected the concept of free labor by which laborers freely sold their labor and worked without coercion. In a letter, requesting the establishment of Freedman's Bureau in Texas an Army General wrote that blacks need "that special attention" because "many planters expect and hope to reestablish slavery, flattering themselves that the Supreme Court will sometimes revoke the Proclamation."[124]

Formally, these attempts to deny black freedom could clearly be seen in the Blacks Codes, the purpose of which was to reduce free blacks to a new kind of legal servitude. These laws ensured that any black person who left an employer for any reason without permission could be arrested as a vagrant, effectively limiting black people's mobility and economic opportunities. The Ordinance of Opelousas, Louisiana published on July 1865 in the *New Orleans Tribune* clearly shows how any actions that could be interpreted as actions of self-determination by blacks were criminal offenses. According to these laws, "no Negro or freedman shall be permitted or keep a house within the limits of the town under any circumstances" or "sell, barter or exchange any articles of merchandise or traffic within the limits of Opelousas."[125] It is also significant that all former slave states enacted similar codes after 1865. This proves that white

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[124] "Letter from Texas Army General," February 17, 1865 in Freedom.458.

[125] "Ordinance: Relative to the Police of Recently Emancipated Negroes or Freedmen, within the corporate limits of the Town of Opelousas," July 15,1865 in Freedom. 237.

policymakers made significant efforts to restrict blacks to their former slave status and were determined to dominate their ex-slaves almost as completely as they had dominated them under the institution of slavery itself.

Informally, according to a letter of a bureau agent in Virginia in 1865,

> There is a kind of secret combination among the planters to refuse to hire the freedmen, unless they will work under precisely the same rules and for the same compensation as when they were slaves. The alternative is 'work thus or leave' and if they leave other are pledged not to employ them. [126]

Furthermore, many blacks complained to the bureau of being exploited by employers. Some reported being beaten or threatened with violence and forced off of plantations often without pay for services rendered. In the list of cases adjudicated by the bureau in Virginia, blacks reported "being threatened with being killed," being "struck by a stone thrown by his employer," being "shot at [by whites who wanted to] let the government authorities know that they ruled on their plantations."[127]

For the Freedmen's Bureau, in spite of these social and economic injustices, freedom and citizenship required freedmen to embrace economic fatherhood, enter contracts and provide financially for their families. Their philosophy was to place blacks on the road to self-sufficiency and become self-reliant wage laborers instead of being forever protected and provided for by a benevolent federal government. Once the former slaves had been "taught" to be

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[126] "Letter from a Bureau Agent in Virginia to the Assistant Commissioner of the Bureau," July 1865 in Freedom.333.

[127] "Cases Adjudicated by the Freedmen's Bureau Superintendent at Gordonsville, Virginia" Gordonsville, Va., August 16-September 13, 1865. In Freedom. 523.

responsible, self-supporting individuals who could protect and provide for themselves and their families, those who created, led, and served the bureau agreed the need for this extraordinary agency would no longer exist. But while black men ideally wanted to support their families without help from the government and were given the legal rights such as custody and right of contract over other family members, their power was less than the law implied. To freed people, the ability of white southern employers to dictate labor terms and by extension, the structure of the family, was a prominent feature of the post emancipation economy. Consequently, the lack of fair economic opportunities, the emphasis on black male economic responsibilities in the home and the criminalization of black unemployment ensured that freedmen remained laborers for whites while simultaneously excluding them from the dominant definitions of what it meant to be a good father or a good husband.

This did not, however, prevent black men from being fathers in their own ways, even prior to emancipation. In April 1859, the *Douglass Monthly* reported that Emanuel Mason, a free black man was arrested for harboring one of his own children.[128] Mason's wife and children were all slaves to his former owner and they lived with their master "at the other end of town." Even though Mason's family was owned by their master, Mason contributed financially to them: "Mason has been in the habit of hiring his wife from time to time and of supporting his children until they were old enough to be of service to their

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[128] "A Father Incarcerated for Harboring his own Child," *Douglass Monthly* April, 1859.

master." However, his economic contributions were not primary to his role but were a function of keeping the family connected. The hiring of his wife was so she would spend less time working far away in the master's fields and more time safe at home with Mason. When Mason's youngest child, who had been living with him turned ten, "the master demanded him…to be taken he [Mason] knew not where." Thus, Mason hid his son. A warrant was issued for his arrest, and he was put in jail and because he "refused to disclose the whereabouts of his boy, [he] was remanded to prison." The *Douglass Monthly* lamented the cruel irony that the taking of Mason's son to "sell it off to the far South" was legal while Mason's desire to keep his son safe was criminalized. In August 1859, another free father, Tom Snowden, was arrested for attempting to run away with his enslaved family.[129] As he was leaving with them, citizens of Rochester, New York held them at gunpoint and demanded that they stop. The paper reported that Snowden "fought desperately and was several times knocked down before he would yield."[130] The paper reported he and his family were all incarcerated pending trial.

To some black men, economic fatherhood meant re-establishing family bonds by buying their wives and children when possible. In September 1864, after being denied the opportunity to buy his daughter's freedom, Spotswood Rice explained to her: "Your Miss Kaitty [the mistress] said I tried to steal you but I'll let her know that God never intended for man to steal his own flesh and

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[129] "A Father Running off with His Family," *Douglass Monthly* August 1859.

[130] *Ibid.,* 1.

blood."[131] And even though she has prevented their father and daughter reunion, he assured his daughter, "I have not forgot you and that I want to see you as bad as ever…be assured that I will have you if it cost me my life."[132] In a letter to his Miss Kaitty, Rice wrote, "now I want you to understand that Mary is my child and she is my God given rite of my own" and because Kaitty has stood in the way of this right, "where ever you and I meets we are enemays to each orthere."[133] Clearly for free black men still living under slavery, being present and protective fathers, as well as communicating a desire to protect and be with their children were essential roles. These were some of the most important roles denied to them during slavery. They enacted these roles even when it was risky, criminal or not in "their place" to do so.

Hence, it stands to reason that emancipated black men would view the protection of their families as a civil right. When some of these fathers were not around to physically protect or provide for their families, they demanded the government protect their families' rights. In a letter to the Freedman's Bureau Commissioner listing grievances perpetrated against their families on Roanoke Island, black soldiers from North Carolina lamented:

> Our families have no protection the white soldiers break into our houses act as they please steal our chickens rob our gardens and if any one defends their-selves against them they are taken to the guard house for it. So our families have no protection when Mr. Streeter is here to protect

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[131] "Missouri Black Soldier to His Daughters, and to the Owner of One of the Daughters," St. Louis, Mo. September 3, 1864 in Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of African American Kinship in the Civil War Era ed. Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland p. 195-197.

[132] *Ibid.,* 197.

[133] *Ibid.,* 197.

them and will not do it.[134]

Economic provision was important for these men since many of them and their families were poor. The security of the family and the security of their rights to live without white interference constituted what little property they had.. Tennessee Freedmen made this point extremely clear in a letter to their district Commissioner:

> We now, simply ask that we may be secured as others, in the just fruits of our toil: protected from unjust, and illegal punishments, and we are sure we will keep our families from want, and do our part as good citizens of the United States to add to the wealth and glory of the Country.[135]

Clearly, as economic fatherhood became the epitome of black manhood during the post-emancipation period, with the encouragement of marriage, African American fathers were seen as deficient heads of household. The economic opportunities and resources by which many white men could be the primary breadwinners in their homes were very limited for black men. Neither could many black fathers protect their families from racist, vindictive landlords, as white landowners used the law to enforce discipline and to strike fear into the hearts of poor landless blacks. The ability to even have a place to call home and to have his family together in it could not be taken for granted by black fathers.

These factors, however, did not stop men from being fathers. These men sought greater roles as protectors of the security and sanctity of the family and

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[134] "North Carolina Black Soldiers to the Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner" June 1865 in The Black Military Experience ed. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, 125.

[135] "Black Residents of Nashville to the Union Convention" January 9, 1865 in The Black Military Experience ed. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, 811-816.

attempted to take responsibility for their children's care and welfare while not necessarily essentializing the dominant ideology of economic fatherhood.

Chapter 4
"Who is a Father and what does he do?" Operative Models for Fatherhood

Part of the aim of Congressional and Senate hearings of legislation on family policy and fatherhood is to come up with the solution to break men, particularly black men, out of a "culture" that prevents them from realizing the ideal of fatherhood. Yet real government assistance of any kind is generally defined as the opposite of self-help, the American way. In emphasizing father-led families, it is assumed that men will bring a natural authority to their parenting and will control aggressive behavior, especially in sons. Consequently, the solution to youth violence, childhood poverty, and most other social problems is seen as very simple: if more people would marry and not divorce, children would be lifted out of poverty, adolescent boys would model respectable masculine behavior, teenage girls would avoid sex and pregnancy, family authority would be restored, and America would regain its global prominence. As I argued in Chapter 1, biological fathers are believed to come pre-programmed to control the violent aggressiveness of young males. In addition, it is assumed that by securing married two-parent families, the profits derived from fathers will trickle down to the children and the children will begin to gain wealth.

These hearings around fatherhood and family policy have given much attention to non-residential fathers but have not given attention to the factors making them absent, such as incarceration. Little if anything is known about the

concerns or interests of the men before they are incarcerated, and once they are incarcerated no one seems to care. It has been assumed that because incarcerated men have been involved in illegal behavior, they have not been good fathers and do not care about their children and their families. Consequently when policymakers and administrators plan programs for the incarcerated, they often completely overlook the possibility that incarcerated men should or would care to be a part of the development of their children. As Obama stated, "we can't legislate fatherhood, I can't force anybody to love a child."[136] However, it is important to consider how the measures of a good father for a group of men whose situation does not allow them to be "good" may influence the ways in which they understand and enact their roles as fathers from inside prison.

I suggest that there are points of agreement and divergence between policymakers and incarcerated black fathers' conceptions of fatherhood and family. This understanding should influence and may change the ways in which we engage with those men who care about their families and children. In their discussion on the functioning of fathers, the men I interviewed often spoke of issues relating to how they enact their roles, their challenges to the dominant model used to construct notions of fatherhood and the ways they have had to work against the negative stereotype of the black criminal. I start by presenting these men's views on the stigma of incarcerated fatherhood and the importance of fathers in children's lives. After this, I discuss their perspectives on good

[136] Obama, Barack. "Father's Day Speech." Town Hall Education Arts and Recreation Campus. Anacostia, Washington D.C. 20 June 2010.

fathers, family structure and the various ways and challenges of parenting inside.

For policymakers, the best fathers live at home with their children. As a result, it is believed that incarcerated fathers do the ultimate disservice to their children by committing a crime and going to prison, indicating they do not care for them. Their love for their kids clearly was not strong enough to prevent them from wrongdoings. Marking a father who commits crimes as an uncaring father is a complex idea that the men I interviewed have had to deal with ever since they were incarcerated. For these fathers, this idea is in fact partially true. For Michael, when a father commits a crime, "for the most part, it is a selfish act…the bigger picture is if you do get caught, you're gonna lose that relationship with your children and their mother, and your family." Michael recognized that it was greed that made him sell drugs and get arrested. "I was working two jobs and I didn't, I didn't really have to be selling no drugs. I just wanted things not now but, like, right now, you know, and I wanted to be able to take care of bills expeditiously." For Michael, a father has to put his concern for his own personal profit or pleasure in line with his family's good. According to Al,

> If you love your child, or children so much and want them to be active in your life so much, why would you do something that's going to take you away from them?...I can't be a father and out there selling drugs and say I've got to raise and feed my family, because there may come a time where I might not be there for them."

For Al, a good father recognizes that the certainty of his presence is more important than how much money he can contribute. Furthermore, an important

aspect of fatherly responsibility is "understanding what I'm able to do and what I'm not able to do, and instilling those principles and values within your child."

An important divergence between these fathers and policymakers is that with the former, there is an open recognition that not every incarcerated father is a bad father. Marian made this clear when he stated, "none of us [are] perfect. We make – you know, we go through things and we make out what other people call mistakes, what I call learning experiences. And, uhm, and everybody's redeemable." In his challenge to the interpretation of incarcerated men as the worst absentee fathers, Al stated that,

> Every man that goes to prison and is taken away from his family doesn't constitute him as being a bad father or a bad person. People make bad decisions, and it's – and everyone should be given – afforded the opportunity to prove themselves. You know, I think we shouldn't be judged or uh, ostracized before we have the opportunity to show and prove our growth and development. Sometimes we label automatically based on uh, the ethnicity.

For Al, while people make bad choices, the ease with which black fathers are labeled insufficient fathers because of these decisions is undeserved and based on racist assumptions. Marian posed a similar critique:

> You can always tell the negative but tell the good, tell them the redemption song. Tell 'em that. You know what I'm sayin' – always when somethin' goes wrong always wanna put us front page on the front – front cover, especially the *New York Post*, put us on the front cover -- and in cuffs and show our faces and when we do bad and make it look like all black people are this menace to society when actually we the least of the menace. The menace is some of these policies that we have, man.

When I asked Marian if there ever was a time he felt like a bad father in prison, he told me that he only felt that way once and that was when he was first sentenced. He recounted:

> The only time I thought about being a bad father was thinking about I put myself in this situation, man, and I could be with my kids, that's the only time. You know? Yeah, man, I never, you know, I never – and so only time that I felt bad was when I was – it was bad but I didn't feel bad because I understood the circumstances and I knew it was bad but I didn't feel bad because I understood the circumstances and I knew it wasn't my intention. You know? And I knew I couldn't change it by feeling bad -- but I recognize that I shouldn't have been there, I belong with them, man…But now inside any activities or behavior or things, never, man, nothin' but love, man, ain't nothin' but – you know, for my children, man.

While Marian's intentions do not negate the fact that he had committed a crime, it made an important distinction for him in understanding that he did a "bad" thing but was not a "bad" father. Therefore, the punishment of incarceration is for his act, which is separate from the type of father he is. He would prove this by showing love for his children while he was incarcerated. While these men seem to recognize that a father's familial responsibility should direct his individual choices, there is also an emphasis on acknowledging the context of the crime a father may commit and the questioning of the punishment used for the crime.

For Michael, it is important to consider the factors influencing the type of crimes men commit. He stated, "most acts that most of us do, we have this thought that we're doing it for our families. You're looking at it like, "I gotta have the means to provide for my children, and so I'm gonna do this." Daryl made a similar point, remarking, "A lot of guys have committed crimes as a result of their kids, trying to put food on the table [but] I'm not agreeing with the method they used." Evidently, the primacy given to the economic responsibilities of fatherhood can convince men of their need to provide financially for their

families at any cost. For Al, another challenge to the conflation of a criminal and a bad father is if the man,

> Went to jail because someone tried to do something to my family [and] the end result is why I'm in prison, but now you tell me I can't see my children. But I went there trying to protect them. So it depends on the circumstances.

Clearly, this man's illegal actions, which could potentially separate him from his family, were for the security of his family.

For these fathers, the logic of "the bad criminal makes a bad father," is used to keep men away as unfit parents. However, Kyle stated that, "sadly prison has become normative in a lot of these communities, and by trying to act like they don't exist, is that really doing justice?" Furthermore as Marian stated,

> They got a lotta labels and stigmas and stereotypes out here about guys not standing up, sperm donors -- and that's true to the extent because you do have these individuals but they never talkin' about the dudes that stand up, bein' fathers, bein' – representin', you don't hear those stories.

For Marian, it is important to consider that children do not ascribe to this same logic. He emphatically stated,

> That's a bunch of BS, yeah, that's a bunch of BS, [laughter] I mean, that's so laughable because they being exposed to what? They not even care about them you know that comin' into the institution and all that. They don't even see that. All they know is they see -- once they see they father or their mother, or the person they love, all that's included. All right? That's not gonna make them more likely to wind up in prison, or homicides or anything more than playin' some of these videogames they have out here. All right? There's so many movies that they have being exposed to some of these ignorant-ass videos that are our people they not even producin' but they – they're – they're playin'.

All of these men believe in the importance of fathers in children's lives and see incarceration as working against their parenting. Yet, why do these men's stories

matter? Why does recognizing the complexities of black incarcerated fathers matter? Kyle declared,

> You have to understand like the background of a majority of people that are in prison. They're usually from poor, low socioeconomic backgrounds. Uh, broken families to begin with, so essentially for you to say that, you're kind of like just perpetuating the cycle. And you're kind of creating a new generation of kids from broken homes, and essentially which could lead to prison, which could leads to just other traps of you know, being from a poor socioeconomic background.

By ignoring these men, Michael suggests we are ignoring a great support system because,

> The best mentors are those who experience something and can be able to articulate it, and give it to a group or an audience that they actually feel the, the, um, the pain or the, um, the real, the realness of what it is that person is expressing. So, why would you deny that?

Answering his own question, Michael suggests that criminal justice policies are working against black families because,

> They don't want you to be that bridge-builder. They don't want you to teach your sons and, not to make the mistakes that you made. They don't want you to give them the knowledge to prevent them from becoming, uh, a number for rights to passage, and that's our, that's our new rights to passage – you know, becoming a felon, or, you know, like, it's insane.

Policymakers argue that all children need and deserve active, involved fathers throughout their childhood and adolescence for healthy development. For the men I interviewed, fathers are necessary to teach and instruct their children for the stability and safety of the family. Daryl stated,

> The goal of a parent is to raise your kids in a manner by which they're able to go out and face the world and – and be successfully, legally, on their own and that calls for – that's a calling that comes out of The Bible. It's not quoted like that but essentially I wanted my kids to get the education they needed to be able to obtain the employment they need so that they can stabilize their own.

Speaking to the centrality of healthy family life to community progress, Michael declared,

> Family is the building block of the civilization, so if the family is off, the civilization is off, and that's just the reality of it. That's why our black community, blacks and Latinos are going through what they go through, because our family, our family situation is twisted.

For Daryl part of the problem of black families is that black parents are not teaching their children the rules of American society. He stated,

> What we don't do is educate our kids in the law so when our kids get caught up in the – and 15, 16 year old kids all the time are getting' caught up, they don't understand what their legal rights are, no one's gonna give them that right, they're gonna encourage them to waive it and they wind up getting a lot of time. So they waive some rights that they didn't even really know that they waived.

However, these men argue that despite the importance of fathers in their families' lives, prison denies them the opportunities to establish, re-establish or maintain a substantive relationship with their families. This can lead to a significant number of fathers missing from their children's lives and more people going to prison. Daryl lamented that while he was incarcerated his children had no family support. He told me his children's lives, "warranted [fatherly] attention and the kind of discipline they needed was lacking. Had I been there, things would not have went the way it did, in some cases." Al stated, "a lot of times young brothers go to prison and they don't have that male role model, that male figure in their life, and it affects them." Consequently, as a father he wants to make sure "whatever decisions my children make, that they reflect back on some of the sound advice I gave them." Marian felt that even from inside he could

enact one of his most important roles as a father. Marian believed that as a father, only he could teach his boys how to be men. He said,

> You know, so it's – it's that understanding and it's so, like, back to where I Used to hear my mother say all the time, like, "I was the man and the woman." No, sister, you did the best you could as a woman but you was not the man and woman, it's impossible.

In speaking on the importance of fathering, Michael said, "if more people were parents, a lot of people wouldn't be incarcerated, but I can't even say that because my parents were good parents, and so it's not, it's the choices you make." However, the choices children make can be informed by the wisdom of their fathers. Al recognized that in fathering, even from in prison, "Whatever I do, I have to be hands-on. I have to uh, constantly sit down there and not allow society to raise them, but put my – put my stamp on it." For him, this was influenced by the fact that he was the "victim" of a present but inactive father: "Being a victim of that and seeing it, and then experiencing other guys in prison not having a father figure, it helps me – it makes me more aware that." For these parents, incarceration seems to be a concerted effort to get black men in an unfortunate cycle of poor fathering and incarceration. They also recognize how this argument could be read as a clichéd complaint about racist structures targeting African American males. Michael stated,

> It's, but it's the society. I think it's the overall society made it this way, you know? And I'm not one to make excuses because I thoroughly believe they're tools of the incompetent and build monuments of nothing, and those that specialize in their uses are seldom good for nothing. I learnt that in my fraternity, but the point of the matter is, it's like, um, you know, there are reasons why we're placed in the situations that we're in as black men. There are reasons.

However, these men believe, given the opportunities, this cycle can end with their intervention. For them, being connected to their children or to children in their communities will allow them to positively influence these young people. Marian stated:

> You know, where we at today? What we need to do to become better mentors, better fathers, in our communities…So whether you have a child of your own, if you are living a righteous life, then it's imperative whenever you see a young brother and he needs some type of mentor in his life, man. That's important, man.

For Marian, by bringing the families together these men can persuade their children to avoid the activities that would result in incarceration. In other words, there should be an expectation that incarcerated men can participate in the breaking of the cycle of young people entering the criminal justice system.

For policymakers, a father's financial contributions have a greater impact on children than any other aspect of a father's involvement. Much attention is given to the issue of a father's failure to pay child support, and in many cases payment of child support has surfaced as the true indicator of how responsible and concerned fathers are with respect to their children's welfare. However, my interviewees critique the position that a father's breadwinner role is his paramount contribution to his children's lives or that the most important activity fathers can do for their children's well-being is to support them financially. They suggest that are any number of reasons fathers do not make support payments and they are not related to concern for or love of their children—incarceration being an important one.

Marian suggested that one of the reasons some fathers leave their kids is because they cannot financially provide and they do not understand, "how important it is for us to be in our kids' lives." He thinks when men leave because of money,

> That's just an excuse, that's a poor excuse, man; you know what I'm sayin'? When are going away -- you might have never get on your feet. You know what I'm sayin'? So what, the kid's gonna be asking of you? How you gonna explain that once they get 18? You wanna be father when they turn 13, 14, 15, that's hard. Them kids ain't tryin' to hear it. They hurt! It's too much pain! There's too many wounds.

Marion suggests that the privileging of money over any other aspect of fatherly involvement allows for men to emotionally separate themselves from their children. In his challenge to this dominant economic model Michael said the primacy of a father's financial contribution is misplaced because, "you can't buy a child." In defining a bad father Michael said this man, "lacks responsibility. He doesn't spend time with his kids… You have to spend time with a child. You have to talk to your child. You have to share with your child. You have to let your child talk to you."

While it is clear that incarcerated men are quite limited in their ability to provide much in this area, some of these men do value and try to support their families financially while inside. Marion explained that, "we need money because that's a form of exchange -- that we have established in our society but at the end of the day if we can't provide for our five with work, clothes, shelter, all that matters beyond that is the relationships we have." When I asked Marian to give me an example of a time when he thought he was being a good father, he told me

that he had been working while he was inside and that during his fifteen years he had sent home about $5,000. He was quick to note though that,

> It's not the money but it's – it's the fact that you was tryin' to help! I'm not sayin', you know, what's the easy way, uhm, I'm in here locked up, I'm in jail, what you wanna expect from me, you know? Nah, I didn't take that route. Any way I could help or provide or whatever but, you know, might send me money I'm sendin' home, you know?

For Marian, financial provision was just another way of being an active father in prison, but a failure to provide money does not mean a lack of concern, interest, or love. For these fathers, the nurturing and emotional support of children through telephone communication, written communication, and regular family visits is just as crucial.

For these men, their nonresidential status does not, by itself, harm their children but the unique nature of incarceration creates additional and, considering how important fathers are, unnecessary difficulties to them being a presence in their children's lives. This allows them to have a more fluid definition of what is means to "be there," father a child and be a good father. This leads to the questions, "What do incarcerated fathers do?" and "How are they being fathers?" For these men, fatherhood is also about making responsible, selfless, family-oriented decisions. They recognize that the ways in which they behave inside affects their access to their families. For example, Al realized that by getting in trouble inside, he was negatively impacting his family:

> Doing a disservice to my family by constantly getting shipped way upstate. Now my family has got to travel nine, ten hours, you know, every other week, two weeks to come see me…I started realizing that I had to mature, I have to start surrounding myself around people that were educating themselves so that I wouldn't keep putting this burden on my family.

According to Al, no father should weigh down his family but should serve as an asset to them. Furthermore, by attempting to improve his prospects while in prison and making plans for his release, Al wanted to ensure that he would not be a financial burden when he returned home. For these fathers, good fathers plan for the future. Michael told me he went to parenting and communication classes to help him "acclimate [him]self from the incarcerated setting into the, um, you know, into the, you know, back into the world." Al made similar preparations. He told me he tried to,

> Obtain some type of vocational trade to make myself marketable upon my return back to society. So uh, when I came home this time, it was somewhat the same type of fears about becoming employed and being stigmatized about African-American male going to prison. Uh, not your first felony, but your second felony. Having uh, a large gap in between your résumé. So how does someone take a chance at hiring you? So that was my greatest fear."

According to these men, fathers' lives do not stop in prison but they have an obligation to make the most out of their time and improve themselves. Al recounted that he knew he could not have his wife,

> Educating herself going to school, and she's got this goof. So I said let me upgrade this. Let me show her – that listen, I'm reading. Let me show her that I'm going to school so that she can say well, you know what? Okay, I've got somebody who's got some potential.

Daryl believed that prison would not be the end of his life as man and as a father and encouraged his children that his incarceration, " can be turned around and worked for the best" because "moping in the sorrow of it… that's not gonna change nothin'. Cryin', pissin' and moanin' ain't gonna change nothing." As a

result, he used his time to study the law in attempt to correct "the system's bad judgment on me." He recounted:

> The only way I could change that is go in the law library and become a lawyer… And you know I bought coffee for guys and cigarettes. Those guys had more experience with me, helped me, trained me to give me the idea of – the principle of how to operate and, after that, I went on my own. but like everything else, you know, you need someone to kinda show you some of the ropes on what you're doin', how to look for it and how to use a law library and I got that and once I got that I started rollin' on my own and like – like I said I had all day. I wasn't goin' nowhere already, so I knew that, so every moment I had, if I could get a special library pass, I took that, too. I skipped dinner to go to the library.

For these fathers, being a part of a child's life involves using their absence to teach their children morals and life lessons. Al stated that this involves,

> Explain[ing] to the child that as a parent, as a father, I'm here because I did something wrong. So this is what happens when you do something wrong. You come to prison. You see prison guards. You're locked up. So the child understands this is not something I want go... So I think it's uh, a learning tool.

In addition, effective fathering involves these men serving as counselors to their children. The goal of this advice is ultimately that their children would make better everyday decisions. Al stated:

> So you know, that's all I can do, is let them see the side of both fences. Say this is where your father was at. This is what your father did. These are the people you've got to watch out for. So when you're faced with that, you'll be able to recognize it. Okay, here comes the gang. My father prepared me for this, so I know what I'm about to be faced with.

For these fathers, providing emotional support for their families is central to their fathering. This is particularly important because in many ways prison operates against familial relationships.

The sociologist Erving Goffman in his 1961 text *Asylums* wrote that "total institutions [e.g. mental hospitals, prisons, etc.] are incompatible with [a] crucial element of our society, the family."[137] Daryl commented:

> [Prisons] do the split of the family so that they can get more control, they isolate you. Once you get isolated, it's very easy to have a systematic subdual of all of your resistance. And that's the thing – that's totally independent of the military. The military breaks down and builds you up. The system breaks you down and leaves you there because you're easier to control.

Al described the prison environment, "like walking on a landmine. I don't know what's going to happen. What's going to blow up. And I might not ever make it home." For Al, the threat of violence and instability characterized his prison term. His family, however, thought, "all you have to do is a program and you're going to get out of there." Clearly, for him, there is a contradiction between his prison life and family life that requires him to "help [his family] understand where I was really at [and] be optimistic with them and keep hope alive." His role as a father is to provide emotional support to his family and protect his family from the realities of prison life while communicating the potential dangers he experiences daily. Kyle also saw himself as an emotional resource for his family. He told me, "I think uh, when you're inside, me personally, the thing that I tried to do is just try to be as supportive as possible, and try to offer uh, you know, just different perspectives as needed. Because in a sense, I was on the outside looking in."

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[137] Goffman, Erving. Asylums. (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 11.

Furthermore, these men challenge another seemingly inherent assumption of policymakers, which suggests that men need to live with their children to be effective parents. For Marian, being incarcerated did not make him a bad father because the qualities of a bad father have little to do with where he lives and more to do with the amount of responsibility he takes for his child. He explained:

> Now, you start – she tell you, "Oh, I think I'm pregnant, uhh, I expect that I'm pregnant because my period didn't come." "I am pregnant, I just found out today" and the first thing outta your mouth is, "It's not mine." You better find yourself, you know stuff like that? It's stuff that we be hearin' on Maury and all of that. That right there goes – speakin' of that, so I'm sayin' that's one of the – that's a bad father, right there that denies his children.

Here we see that a man's denial of the opportunity for his children to call him father is the worst act a father can do. These fathers, because of their forced distance from their children are very sensitive to the fact that simply living with your child cannot make you a good parent. For Al, good fathers should be measured by their engagement with their children and the example they set. In describing "bad" fathering Al stated:

> I try to be humble in regards to saying how I judge someone…but based on what I see, you know, if I see an individual not attentive to his child. Uh, I see a person that's not consistent in his child's life. I see a person that's a contradiction in regards to uh, walking around with his pants hanging off his butt. Using drugs in front of his children. Uh, those are characteristics that aren't good for a child, and put a bad light on – on a father.

Moreover, based on the ways they have tried to be good parents, these fathers recognize that some men just do not put in the work necessary to be good

parents when they live with their children. In other words, the same way all "absent" fathers are not bad, all "present" fathers are not good.

This idea of a live-in but undeserving father was rarely discussed in my readings of the public policy hearings. While a two-parent home can support children's needs for biological, physical, emotional, psychological, and social well-being, for these father there needs to be recognition that these needs can also be met within the full range of fathers' involvement, from no involvement to fathers raising children on their own. For them, "live-in" or "live-away" are not deciding factors because there are variations in both. Daryl noted:

> [Fathers are] supposed to spend time with [their] kids. I'm not sayin' there's something wrong with providing a living for them because that's essential but if the father's gone all the time even though he's providing a comfortable place to live is oftentimes an absentee father and it makes for a poor relationship.

Marian stated:

> [Kids] want time, that's all they want is your presence, man. Your presence is all the money in the world. They feel bad when you don't visit them, or you don't call them, or you're not comin' around. That makes them feel bad. That's what makes kids, you know, changes their psychology that leads to them doin' certain things and acting out because it's like they start thinking, "I'm the bad person."
>
> I got the feeling, man, if you ain't doin' right, you know, if you a bad influence, you better off not bein' there. Yeah and being a bad influence, man, you know? You know you represent – you don't even represent what a man supposed to be, you know?

Marian explained the differences between men who are "better off being away" and good fathers, as the difference between fathers and dads:

> So visits were very frequent. And even when I went up, you know, at least once a month or whatever. So uh, you know, and actually that's when – you know, there are fathers – you know, you have fathers and you have dads. You know, anybody can be a father. It takes a special, real man

> to be a dad. So I was actually a dad. You know what I'm saying? Uh, and it's this thing about presence, men being present. We need more than the men just to be present.

For Marian, dads like himself do not allow distance to prevent their involvement in their children's lives.

According to some policymakers, the proper place for a father is in the home with his children. As a result, we see the promotion of married fatherhood as the ideal. Marriage is seen as the pathway to committed fatherhood. However, the men I interviewed indicated that they were still an important part of their family despite their incarceration and while good relationships with mothers are pivotal, marriage is not always an answer. Michael's narrative of fathering from in prison shows just how much a poor mother-father relationship can influence father involvement. When I asked him about fathering from inside, he lamented, "while I was away, I couldn't be a good dad. I couldn't be a good father because they [his children's mothers] wasn't allowing me – they weren't allowing me in my children's lives." Kyle knew men inside who had similar difficulties with co-parenting. He told me, "in a lot of cases, from what I've seen, there are people that don't see their children. Don't hear from their children. Uh, they write letters. The letters go unreturned. So it can be very challenging." When I asked Michael what changes took place in his family situation which allow him to have what he has termed a "good" and "open" relationship with his children today, he told me it was less about his release from prison and more about the relationship he developed with his children's mothers upon release. He recounted, "I learned a lot of different ways to deal with her, and, eventually, she

saw change in me and now we have a good relationship. We're friends. She's expressed a lot of her pain. But, um, I have the open door with my children, you know?" For these fathers, if a man's goal is to develop a relationship with his child, his relationship with the child's mother must be amicable.

Kyle had a good relationship with his daughter's mother when he was first incarcerated. In fact, they remained together for a time while he was incarcerated before eventually dissolving their romantic involvement. In spite of this, they remained friends and she, "was always very supportive of and nurtured [his father-daughter] relationship, you know, as much as she could in that type of situation." Because of his daughter's mother, his contact with his daughter was good. He explained:

> [She] visited frequently…I spoke to her on the phone a lot. We wrote letters. Communicated. Uhm, you know, I constantly got pictures, updates. So her mother did a really great job of making sure that under the circumstances I was present as could be… making my presence felt even though I wasn't there through visits, through phone calls. Through uh, filling me in on events at school. Filling me in on events in her personal life.

His positive relations with his daughter's mother allowed for Kyle to be actively engaged in his daughter's life. He gave her a lot of praise because he knew, "it could have been totally opposite."

Marian said that for a father to sustain good relations with his child's mother he needs show appreciation for the sacrifices the mother makes in supporting a father-child relationship. Marian told me that sometimes men become very selfish in prison and unfortunately, "[when] we [are] behind that -- those walls for that long period of time and it's like, you know, we don't get to

appreciate, you know, a person comin' up this – it's somethin' they gotta endure to make that trip!" For Marian, fathers should always communicate their gratitude because some family members will dismiss you when you are inside: "You know a lot of our peoples, man, say listen, if you go to prison I tell you somethin', "I ain't visitin' you." Thank God they [even] send you the mail."

For these men, the best fathers have good relationships with their children/s mother/s who can either help sustain or work against father involvement. Good parental relations allow for the child to have an active two-parent unit that can support their development. These fathers suggest that marriage is not necessary to "produce" good fathers nor is it the solution to bad fathering. Marian stated:

> [Bad fathers] don't protect their children, and – and – and don't get me wrong, that don't mean you and the mother have to get married! That don't mean you and I have to be together because you could meet someone today and we know all about novelty, oh yeah, she look good – and nice and, you know, then this special feeling came over me -- and then you get to know this person, you be like, "Oh my God, I wish I didn't walk down that street that day--let alone slept with her." "I wish I didn't walk down that street that day." "If I didn't walk down that street that day I wouldn't have met her!" You dig? But you did walk down that street that day, you did sleep with her and now you brought this life into the world that didn't have to be here.

Marian raises the point that sometimes a romantic relationship is never an option between the parents and marriage cannot develop a love that does not exist. Furthermore, a lack of a sustained romantic interest between parents is not indicative of a fleeting interest in parenting their child. Al, who married his girlfriend while in prison, believes that the life he and his wife were able to

sustain did not necessarily make him a better father but he thinks it gave him the opportunity to set a good example for his children. He stated:

> It's important that children see both parents. It's very important and uh, it's – a marriage is always a struggle, so I think my – my – me being – me being able to understand that you know, me and my wife are going to go through our ups and downs, but we have a bigger objective. And we're focused on maintaining our marriage and I think that part of it has been successful. I think that trickles down to our children.

Not only do these fathers see themselves as necessary and having a lot to offer their families, they also believe familial relationships can help sustain them while they are inside. Kyle told me that the opportunity to father helps combat the potentially depressing prison environment. He commented:

> [Prison is a] situation that's totally – you know, uhm, disruptive…eating your soul alive so to speak." However, being a parent is, "something that is nurturing to you. This is something that's giving you hope. This is something that's uh, you want to maintain and be steadfast for. You know, so that you can get back to society.

For Al, having his family visit was always an uplifting experience especially because he always felt isolated in prison. Al stated:

> In the back of your mind you might not say it, but other people and other guys from within the area are saying that. Damn, yeah, somebody done love him. Uh, and then hearing your cell door crack open. Uh, those things have a major impact, because at that moment you know that, you know what? I'm not doing this by myself.

These fathers indicate that there are incarcerated men who want to nurture their children and believe that even from prison, men can be a positive influence on their sons and daughters. When these fathers talk about their love for their children, they are very aware that they are publicly thought of as men whose love is not legitimate or credible. Yet for these men, their fatherhood, they say, transcends the stigmatizing title of "criminal." Their identities as

fathers transcend totalizing labels that obscure the complexity of the labels "prisoner" and "inmate." While there is a convergence in terms of patriarchal norms between policymakers and these fathers—the man as disciplinarian; the father as providing an important intervention in children's lives; a cycle of deviance developing in fatherly absence—there is also a significant divergence in how the men understand what is good fathering. These men place less emphasis on financial provision, marriage and physical proximity to a child in defining what it means to a good parent. In discussing their relationship with their child/children, the respondents conveyed that they did not simply walk away from their children and expressed, with a deep level of frustration, their inability to be there. Men also expressed frustration with the dominant economic model used to determine quality fathering. The men challenge the underlying assumption that the central role of the father is to provide financially.

Despite the disjuncture between policymakers and some fathers as to what it means to be a parent, policymakers continue to push for legislation that will promote marriage initiatives and staunch child support legislation as the solution to unwed motherhood, child poverty and welfare dependency. While I am not suggesting that policy be made solely on the lived experience of these five men, centering their voices gives us a chance to advance our understanding of what it means to be a good father in the opinion of these men. Furthermore, I will not argue that categorical descriptions of families in terms of structure or demographics are irrelevant to discussion of family policy. Indeed there are often important differences in outcomes for children depending on whether

their parents are married, divorced or single and these facts can help us fashion appropriate policies or interventions. I do take issue, however, with the ways in which these differences are often uncritically interpreted as communicating levels of fatherly commitment, love, and responsibility. Assumptions such as these have influenced and are codified in the social policy legislation, which continue to shape these hearings. It is important to consider the assumptions and images that influence the very language used in public policy discussion. The most concrete manifestation of the prevailing assumptions can be seen in the legislations and policymakers define what fathers can and should do, the qualities of a "good" family, and how best to cultivate correct behavior in the poor and people of color.

Chapter 5
"Saving" Family and Fatherhood in Post-1996 Social Welfare Initiatives

Increasingly in the post-1996 welfare reform efforts, the ultimate goal of liberal social policy has been the transformation of black families into self-sufficient economic units akin to the idealized nuclear-family model with traditional male and female role expectations. These role expectations defined men as the sole breadwinners and assigned women to an affective role, with their primary responsibilities being domestic. These policies have focused more on encouraging marriage and promoting fatherhood among what is termed "fragile families." It is important to note, however, that welfare has been continually restructured over the two-hundred-year history of industrial capitalism in the U.S.[138] To understand welfare's restructuring in the late 1990s, we must engage the contested but fundamental interconnections among race, poverty, and social policy. This context is essential if we are to make sense of the political energy and rhetorical excess that often propel public discussions of the poor. I present a brief history of changes in laws governing federal aid to the poor, paying particular attention to family formation and financial support policies and the racialized and gendered images and assumption influencing them.

The assault on the U.S. welfare state that climaxed in 1996 with the passing of the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act*

[138] Noble, Charles. Welfare As We Knew It: A Political History of the Welfare State. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

(PRWORA)[139] began in earnest with President Reagan in 1980. The ascendency of Reaganism set in motion a discursive assault on the social policies and programs developed since President Johnson's Great Society. The Reagan administration's social philosophy which called for a shift from federal to state and local governments, a greater reliance on the private sector, and a narrower targeting of benefits to individuals—was such that concern for society's historically dispossessed, regardless of race and ethnicity, appeared to be somewhere near the bottom of the agenda. A dramatic shift in public policy ensued as the "Reagan Revolution" sought to contract public spending, especially for social programs; slash taxes, especially on businesses and investment income; and challenge key policies enacted in the previous decade that involved the federal government in supporting anti-discrimination and equity policies.[140] Political and social conservatives legitimized cuts in social program budget by claiming that Johnson's War on Poverty had been lost. Yet, this claim had less to do with an objective assessment of War on Poverty programs than with the growing dominance of conservative and neoliberal ideologies and policies.[141]

Conservatives took aim at the liberal equity agenda, challenging the underlying social analysis that defined race and gender discrimination and economic inequality as major causes of both poverty and the continuing disadvantages experienced by people of color. The Johnson administration had

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[139] Public Law 104-193, August 22, 1996, 110 STAT. 2105.

[140] Hayes III, Floyd W. "Governmental Retreat and the Politics of African American Self Reliant Development: Public Discourse and Social Policy" *Journal of Black Studies,* 2.3 (1992), 333.

[141] Quadagno, Jill. The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

attributed the persistent poverty affecting a disproportionate number of black families to slavery, de jure and de facto discrimination, and on-going institutional racial discrimination and had assumed that the government that had supported these various forms of oppression had a responsibility to provide remedies to poverty and its concomitant effects, including the existing exclusion of blacks from societal institutions. The Reagan policy, however, focused on rebuilding declining U.S. economic and political power, supporting traditional morality and family values, and cutting big government. The outspoken leaders of the Republican wing argued that a free market rid of excessive regulation and a heavy tax burden would unleash prosperity, allowing America to regain its global position as an economic and political leader.

Aid to the poor was vilified for allegedly having failed the poor and the nation by promoting dependency and enabling promiscuity, teen pregnancy, single parenthood, matriarchal black families, and the growth of an urban underclass.[142] The main targets in the anti-welfare ideology were the poor, especially the inner-city black poor, whose poverty was allegedly the fault of individual pathologies, familial deficiencies and the misguided and expansive government social programs that had failed because they perpetuated dependency and poverty. Conservatives argued that the nation could not afford to support those who refused to support themselves, especially when those needing support were sexually promiscuous, lacked work discipline, lived in

[142] Hayes III, "Governmental Retreat," 332.

broken families, and failed to value marriage and self-sufficiency.[143] A racialized discourse about welfare queens,[144] an inner-city underclass, and cross-generational welfare dependency took root and was fertilized by vehement right-wing media and poverty research.[145] The conservative argument is largely the culture-of- poverty thesis, which liberals had sought to discredit in the late 1960s and 1970s, resurrected and applied to the urban dispossessed.[146] Focusing basically on the interrelationship among cultural traditions, family history, and individual character and behavior, conservatives argue that the underclass predicament is self-perpetuating. That is, an impoverished family, historically dependent on welfare and unemployed, tends to produce uninspired delinquent children. The combination of racist imagery and assumptions about poverty and welfare with an anti-tax political rhetoric that blamed social

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[143] Galbraith, John Kenneth "How We get the Poor Off Our Conscience," *The Humanist,* September/October 1985: 2.

[144] As Patricia Collins argues in her 1990 text Black Feminist Thought, the "welfare queen" is, "essentially an updated version of the breeder woman image of slavery" as distinct from the pure white woman with a more genteel disposition. This framework sees welfare mothers as breeding animals who have no desire to work, but are more than happy to live off the state. It also positions the poor black woman as "a costly threat to political and economic stability" and heterosexual marriage because she is portrayed as a woman living alone with her children. This image of the welfare queen places the blame and responsibility of poverty on the shoulders of the black mother and "shifts the angle of vision away from structural sources of poverty and blames the victims themselves."

[145] Koons, Judith E. "Motherhood, Marriage, and Morality: The Pro-Marriage Moral Discourse of American Welfare Policy," *Wisconsin Women's Law Journal*, 22 (2004).

[146] Peterson, Paul E. "The Urban Underclass and the Poverty Paradox," *Political Science Quarterly*, 106.4 (1992).

programs for soaking up "hard-earned" tax dollars reinvigorated old arguments about the deserving and undeserving poor.[147]

According to the historian Rickie Solinger,

> After World War II, politicians, policymakers, service providers, and various community authorities routinely used a *language of value* that distinguished white unmarried mothers and their newly commodified babies from their "valueless" African American counterparts. Experts and the media devised, promulgated, normalized, and institutionalized a set of public idioms to describe and justify racially specific degradation of women and children.[148]

The deserving poor, who included the blind, the infirm elderly, and white widows or abandoned wives, were largely exempt from the assumption that immortality or sloth caused their financial woes. In fact, ninety-six percent of the widows receiving aid during this period were white.[149] But the able-bodied poor including mothers of color and white women who were neither widows nor abandoned wives, were judged responsible for their own property and undeserving of charitable aid. As the image of the welfare mother shifted from that of a deserving white widow to a black single mother, the assumption that only a bad single mother would want to stay at home with her children, rather than work outside the home, became entrenched. More importantly, the belief that only a bad mother would not marry or remain married to a man—an assumption based on yet another assumption, that plenty of potential husbands

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[147] Hayes III, "Governmental Retreat," 335.

[148] Solinger, Rickie. Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe v. Wade. (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 234.

[149] Abramovitz, Mimi. Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present. (Boston: South End, 1988).

for welfare mothers not only exist but also have the means to support these women and their children financially—grew stronger. The images of black welfare mothers in the media combined with widespread assumptions about blacks resulted in the perception that unlike good white mothers, black welfare mothers were burdens to society, taking the public's money and giving nothing back. In the U.S. these distinctions encoded a variety of racist and sexist assumptions about the morals, human worth, and proper place of men and women, whites and people of color.

Under the banner of cutting government spending, the Reagan administration quickly slashed the budgets of the Medicaid, Medicare, and food stamp programs and terminated the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. In its second term, the administration promoted a variety of changes in social welfare policy, including tightening Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC) eligibility[150], increasing work requirements, and giving states more flexibility as to how they met federal program mandates.[151] For example, in 1988, Congress passed the *Family Support Act* (FSA).[152] The act instituted mandatory welfare to work provisions and strengthened paternity establishment provisions and child support enforcement, all of which were

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[150] Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program had provided cash welfare to poor families with children since 1935. AFDC had operated as an entitlement program that gave states little control over welfare program administration or eligibility, other than to set monthly cash assistance benefit levels.

[151] Hayes III, "Governmental Retreat," 335.

[152] Public Law 100-485, October 13, 1988, 102 STAT. 2343.

discussed within the context of promoting "personal responsibility" and "reducing dependency" on the government.

This legislation began the process of transforming AFDC from a program that helped single mothers stay home with their children into a mandatory work program focusing both on employment for single mothers and the financial responsibility of absent fathers. The stated purpose of the act was,

> To revise the AFDC program to emphasize work, child support, and family benefits, to amend title IV of the Social Security Act to encourage and assist needy children and parents under the new program to obtain the education, training, and employment needed to avoid long-term welfare dependence, and to make other necessary improvements to assure that the new program will be more effective in achieving its objectives.[153]

The reasoning behind these changes was that child well-being might be enhanced if needy mothers worked rather than stayed at home with their children, provided that adequate child care was available. The FSA created unprecedented opportunities for states to encourage or require welfare recipients to participate in employment, job training, or education. Yet, the FSA simultaneously reinforced the view that poverty was an individual problem, resulting not from capitalism, racial or gender discrimination, or failure of the market but from the poor choices, values, and behaviors of individuals and families and the alleged dependency-producing impact of intergenerational poverty and welfare.[154]

According to the scholar Judith Stacey, many of the alleged faulty

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[153] *Ibid.*,

[154] Naples, Nancy. "The "New Consensus" on the Gendered "Social Contract": The 1987-1988 U.S. Congressional Hearings on Welfare Reform," *Signs*, 22.4 (1997).

decisions and skewed priorities that keep the poor impoverished, are cited as resulting from the collapse of the family. As a result, politicians pushed for and passed welfare legislation designed to strengthen marriage, as if it were obvious that marriage would cure child poverty, intergenerational poverty, and emotional and behavioral problems among poor children. Stacey suggests:

> Moralistic rhetoric deployed in the name of the Family has been fueling politics that harm rather than help actual families and that impair the social fabric upon which all families depend. Backlash sentiment against the dramatic family transformations of the past four decades has played an increasingly pivotal role in national politics in the United States since the late 1970s.[155]

For example, in 1995 Illinois Governor Jim Edgar lamented: "As governor, I can tell you that about 80 percent of the problems that hit my desk you can trace back to the breakdown of the family structure in our society, and I think anyone who doesn't want to admit that is kidding themselves."[156] Yet according to the historian Linda Gordon, this discourse of family crisis is not a new development but has historically followed particular periods of social and economic difficulty. Gordon suggests:

> For at least 150 years, there have been periods of fear that 'the family'—meaning a popular image of what families were supposed to be like, by no means a correct recollection of any actual 'traditional' family—was in decline; and these fears have tended to escalate in periods of social stress.[157]

This family, defined as an intact nuclear unit inhabited by a male breadwinner, his full-time homemaker wife, and their dependent children is presented as the

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[155] Stacey, Judith. In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 3

[156] *Ibid.,* 1

[157] Gordon, Linda. Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence. (Boston: Viking, 1988), 3

nation's oldest and now-endangered safeguard. As a result, politicians, religious leaders and social scientists alike are "consciously waging a cultural crusade … to restore the privileged status of lifelong, heterosexual marriage."[158] This context explains the increasing concern over family values and the sexual regulation of poor, welfare-reliant women.

The Clinton administration took a punitive and rigid stance regarding welfare recipiency, with the goal of rescinding or at best significantly reducing government responsibility for providing for the basic necessities of families with children who were economically disadvantaged. This role was to be played by husbands. In 1996, with pressure from a Republican Congress and a public exasperated by what it perceived as a lack of self-sufficiency on the part of black "welfare queens," Democratic President Bill Clinton attempted to follow through on his campaign promise to "end welfare as we know it" by signing PRWORA into law. The Clinton administration thus informed welfare recipients that they should look not to the state but to their own communities for solutions to their problems.

The major assertion of this act was that families who were welfare recipients were avoiding work knowing that welfare would provide their basic necessities. The legislation also gained support from the presumption that poor families developed a lifestyle and culture centered on poverty and welfare recipiency. It was believed that teen pregnancy resulted from adolescent females' beliefs that if they had children they could receive welfare benefits,

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[158] Stacey, In the Name of the Family, 55.

including in-kind services such as subsidized housing, that would enable them to move away from their parent's homes and obtain food stamps, Medicaid, and nutritional goods and services provided by the Women, Infants, and Children program (WIC). PRWORA implemented a new system of benefits through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which provided block grants to states to assist mothers in need, required welfare mothers to enter into work programs, and limited the receipt of benefits to five years for an entire lifetime.[159]

The new welfare policy also pays particular attention to paternal roles, emphasizing the responsibility of fathers for the lives of their children. Financial incentives were given to states if they could achieve substantial decreases in out-of-wedlock births and abortions. In fact, three of the four purposes of TANF refer to family formation: promoting marriage, reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.[160] Apart from putting welfare recipients to work, two of the act's primary stated goals were to "prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies" and to "encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families."[161] To provide incentives for states to pursue these legislative goals, the Clinton administration dispersed $100 million annually to the five states with the largest reductions in non-marital birth. In addition, this

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[159] Public Law 104-193, August 22, 1996, 110 STAT. 2105 SEC 401(a).
[160] *Ibid.*,
[161] *Ibid.*,

legislation contained federal guidelines the states were required to follow or risk losing federal funds. States had to establish paternity for children born out of wedlock. The new law also compelled states to seek to vigorously collect child support from a nonresidential parent, which overwhelmingly was an absent father. For example, TANF denies a mother government assistance if she fails to identify the father of her child.

The various fatherhood and marriage promotion initiatives that emerged since 1996 have continued this trend. In the early versions, such as the *Fathers Count Act* of 1999, much emphasis was placed on encouraging the payment and collection of child support. Eventually this gave way to the suggestion that the father was important for the well-being of the child beyond his simple financial contribution. Men, as fathers and even better as husbands, are necessary to teach children values, according to the current argument that dominates many of the later initiatives, such as the *Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act* of 2007. In the first five years following welfare reform, however, the federal and state governments made little progress toward either goal adopted under the Clinton administration.

Wade Horn, the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families under President Bush, found that both the national rate of marriage and the percentage of births occurring outside of marriage remained unchanged in the years immediately following passage of PRWORA.[162] The lack of state governments' interest in designing programs to reduce non-marital births and increase rates

[162] Horn, Wade F. "Wedding Bell Blues: Marriage and Welfare Reform," *Brookings Review* 19.3 (2001), 39.

of marriage reflects the conflict and controversy over governmental involvement in those private decisions of individuals.[163] TANF provided relatively modest incentives and resources for states to pursue programs promoting marriage, and even when states took an interest in marriage promotion, there were few proven program models to adopt. Moreover, much of the emphasis on reducing non-marital births prior to 2001 came from the performance bonuses that rewarded five states annually with the largest reductions in the percentage of births occurring outside of marriage without increases in the abortion rate.[164] These performance bonuses were not connected to explicit state programs designed to reduce non-marital births or support the formation of two-parent households. The bonus programs simply rewarded states for fortuitous demographic change.[165]

As the TANF block grant was set to expire in 2002, the Bush administration announced its plan for TANF reauthorization shortly after its first year in office. The emergence of budget deficits and economic recession in 2001 placed greater pressure on the Bush administration to limit growth in or reduce welfare program expenditures. As a result, many elements of the 1996 reform would remain unchanged in the Bush reauthorization proposal. For instance, TANF would still emphasize recipients to work as a condition of aid. States would retain discretion over program eligibility and administration. The block grant amount would stay fixed at $16.5 billion from 2003 to 2007. Federal

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[163] Allard, S. W. "The Changing Face of Welfare during the Bush Administration," *The Journal of Federalism* 37.3 (2007), 318.

[164] *Ibid.,* 320.

[165] Horn, "Wedding Bell Blues," 41.

lifetime limits on receipt of TANF assistance remained at five years and still permitted states to set lower lifetime limits. However, several important shifts in welfare policy occurred under the Bush administration.

The Bush proposal for TANF reauthorization sought to change the character of work requirements for states and welfare recipients. Part of taking reform to the next level involved reforming work ethics and patterns. Bush stated:

> We've got to pay for--we've got to work on additional poor welfare reforms to help people find a job, help them have the skills necessary to work, so they realize the dignity that comes from being independent from government, and at the same time, strengthen marriage and the family as part of welfare reforms.[166]

According to Bush, poor people just did not know the value of hard work and did not have the self-respect and self-worth to be independent. Providing them with jobs was not just about getting them employed, it was about building their character. Consequently, under Bush, mandated state work participation rates would increase from 50 percent of all TANF recipients to 70 percent of recipients. Bush's welfare policy also required TANF families to work or engage in work-related activities for 40 hours a week instead of the previous 30 hours. The definition of acceptable work activity, however, would be narrowed to increase incentives for states to put recipients to work. Work in a job, supervised work experience, or on-the-job training were to make up at least 24 of the mandated 40 hours of work activity.[167]

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[166] Bush, George W. "The Compassionate Conservative Agenda," Dallas, Texas. 3 August 2004.

[167] Allard. "The Changing Face of Welfare," 17.

While the 1996 law included language asserting the superiority of marriage and two-parent families, the Bush administration was more aggressive in its pursuit of TANF's goals of reducing out of wedlock births and promoting marriage. While reducing welfare benefits, implementing disincentives for welfare recipients to have children, and imposing a five-year lifetime limit on for welfare, the Bush administration pushed money on untested and unproven fatherhood and marriage-promotion experiments. Bush stated that his administration,

> Stand[s] for a culture of responsibility. The culture of this country is changing from one that has said, if it feels good, do it, and if you've got a problem, blame somebody else—to culture in which each of us understands we're responsible for the decisions we make in life.[168]

His goal was to make America move from a culture that allows for dependency to an independent and moral state by pushing, "welfare reforms that require work and strengthen marriage … the foundations of society which have helped millions of Americans find independence and dignity in their lives."[169] For Bush, marriage and the dignity of work are the indispensible building blocks of American society.

Invoking the spirit of Daniel Patrick Moynihan as the, "exceptional public servant" who gave the fatherhood movement its "intellectual roots, " Bush articulated the reasoning for the emphasis on fatherhood. He noted that poor and misguided performances of fatherhood are a national crisis and need to be corrected. He stated that while, "every man who has a child wants to be a good

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[168] Bush, George W. "American Values" Waukesha, Wisconsin, 14 July 2004.

[169] *Ibid.,*

father … this longing must find concrete expression."[170] For Bush, there were right, legitimate, quantifiable ways of "doing" fatherhood that could be objectively measured. For example, fathers, "provide their sons and daughters with an example of what it means to be a good man. And many of us believe a father's love, like a mother's love, even imperfectly, mirrors divine love."[171] If this is true, when the government puts forth fatherhood initiatives or punitive child-support measures, it is not attempting to punish or reform the fathers themselves, only the bad examples they represent. In this light, a father's absence is seen as the refusal to present a possible example to a child. Such behavior is interpreted as something malicious, as evidenced by Bush's statement that, "the absence of a father can shatter a child's world."[172] Only the most evil person would destroy a child's life. Incarcerated fathers thus qualify as bad fathers.

Bush stated:

> We're moving forward on another initiative which is mentoring for the children of prisoners. I mean, if the job of government is to try to set priorities, a priority is to help children of prisoners find love. Imagine what a tough life it is for a young boy or girl to go see his or her mom or dad behind prison bars. These are children who need help. They're vulnerable to gangs and crime and despair. They're desperate for responsible adults in their life who can give them what many of them long for, which is love and tenderness.[173]

The children of these fathers are believed not to be experiencing parental love because it cannot or is not being communicated through prison bars. Bush

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[170] Bush, George W. "Remarks to the Fourth National Summit on Fatherhood," Washington, D.C. 7 June 2001.

[171] *Ibid.,*

[172] *Ibid.,*

[173] *Ibid.,*

suggests that the compassionate citizens of the U.S. can help these kids not by giving them access to their parents, who are assumed to be bad parents, but by replacing those parents with people who can give them "what many of them long for."[174]

Arguing that state efforts under PRWORA to promote healthy marriages were inadequate in part because of the ''lack of knowledge about how to implement successful marriage and family formation programs,'' President Bush also proposed to replace the existing TANF performance bonus grant system with a competitive grants process that would provide $200 million per year for programs aimed at strengthening relationships and marriage. [175] One set of grants would offer $100 million to ''conduct research and demonstration projects, and provide technical assistance primarily focusing on family formation and healthy marriage activities.''[176] Another $100 million would support a matching grant program funding state programs ''to develop innovative approaches to promoting healthy marriage and reducing out-of-wedlock births.''[177] To underscore the importance of marriage, the Bush administration proposed spending $300 million to assist couples in resolving their problems before and during marriage. The rationale for continuing to promote marriage was based on the belief that strong marriages and stable families were in the best interest of children. Bush stated:

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[174] Bush, "The Compassionate Conservative Agenda," 2.

[175] *Ibid.*,

[176] White House. February 2002. "Working Toward Independence." http://georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/02/welfare-reform-announcement-book-all.html.

[177] *Ibid.*,

> A child's greatest source of security today is not only knowing my mom loves me and my dad loves me, but also that Mom and Dad love each other. If we are serious about renewing fatherhood, we must be serious about renewing marriage.[178]

From the start of his first term, President Bush emphasized the need for government and communities to promote responsible fatherhood and healthy marriages. In its initial budget to Congress, the Bush administration argued:

> The presence of two committed, involved parents contributes directly to better school performance, reduced substance abuse, less crime and delinquency, fewer emotional and other behavioral problems, less risk of abuse or neglect, and lower risk of teen suicide . . . there is simply no substitute for the love, involvement, and commitment of a responsible father.[179]

In particular, the Bush administration created the *Healthy Marriage Initiative* (HMI) within the Department of Health and Human Services to promote research into program models that would effectively support formation of two-parent families.[180] The Bush administration and HMI subtly shifted the focus of TANF away from illegitimacy to promoting marriages. The Bush administration indicated it was not interested in creating a ''federal dating service,'' abandoning single parents, or simply looking to increase marriage rates. Instead, the goal was to provide married couples and couples interested in getting married with counseling, education, and skills to strengthen their relationships. In making this shift, the administration sought to identify, evaluate, and improve innovative

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[178] Bush, "The Conservative Agenda," 2.

[179] White House. 2001. A Blueprint for New Beginnings. http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/usbudget/blueprint/budtoc.html

[180] Public Law 109-171. Feburary 8, 2006. 120 STAT 137. SEC. 7103. Section 403(a)(2) (42 U.S.C. 603(a)(2)).

programs that could be adopted successfully nationwide.[181]

In February 2006 President Bush signed the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 reauthorizing the TANF program with $100 million allocated annually for marriage promotion programs and $50 million for fatherhood programs for fiscal years 2006-2010 or a total of $750 million.[182] However, the Bush administration offered no meaningful policies to address the systematic racially discriminatory practices that affect the stability of black families. A central question to pose here is what type of assumptions are made and what raced and gendered images and symbols are employed in the policy-making process that allow for the passage of ineffective legislation and the persistence of inequality vis-à-vis the state?

The imposition of family caps, marriage, work requirements, and time limits on recipients of TANF resulted from a particular construction that posits black women as oversexed, irresponsible, and lazy. Encouraging marriage and reinvigorating the black male through fatherhood initiatives is an effort to reinforce a patriarchal form of family life. These state-sanctioned policies are geared at "unemasculating" the black man by attempting to address the alleged gender role confusion caused by single mother families. The solution proposed for the welfare crisis or rather for welfare mothers' dependence on the government, has increasingly become the private remedy of marriage, which

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[181] Horn, Wade F. "Marriage, the Family, and the Welfare of the Children: A Call for Action." in *The Future of the Family*, ed. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Timothy M. Smeeding, and Lee Rainwater (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), 184.

[182] Public Law 109-171. Feburary 8, 2006. 120 STAT 137. SEC. 7103. Section 403(a)(2) (42 U.S.C. 603(a)(2)).

reformers insist is needed to contain the problems that stem from the deviant behavior of single black mothers.

Welfare reformers believed that these changes would not only discourage welfare mothers from having additional babies but, more importantly, encourage them to marry the fathers of their children, thereby shifting the burden of supporting their children from the government to individual men. Efforts to control the "degenerate" reproduction and procreation choices of poor women, and to "unemasculate" the black man, led to the creation of measures such as determining paternity, enforcing child support, and teaching men how to be men by offering job training. Such measures invoke the image of the black man as lacking moral integrity and behaving like a child in relation to women. Reformers maintained that their changes to the welfare system would put an end to what they viewed as the pathological behavior of mothers who passed down dependence on public resources to their children.

Efforts to encourage marriage among welfare recipients attempt to make them more like the middle class. Policy makers argue that marriage would lift these women and their children above the poverty level and escape from the black female-headed households, considered somewhat pathological. Many of these women are perceived as having a misplaced sense of independence, violating gender and race norms. In fact, according the historian Rickie Solinger, in social welfare reformer discourse, the relationship between black mothers and their children "was described as less important than the nineteen or twenty-

six dollars the mother received per month in welfare payments for having conceived the child."[183]

Thus, there is a quest to impose the dominant expectation of a male breadwinner without stopping to ask why these black women and men are poor and jobless in the first place. While striving to change these misplaced roles, the framers of policy fail to address issues of resource differentials, including but not limited to job discrimination, excessive incarceration, and poverty.[184] There seems to be an assumption underlying the policy: that black men are able to earn a family wage. As a consequence of racism, black men historically have found it difficult to secure work in the primary and even secondary sectors of the labor market. The reform approach, however, does achieve one goal. It relieves the government of the responsibility of protecting poor African-American families. Marriage is offered an alternative to ensuring that welfare recipients are prepared for jobs that will provide a living wage—if women find men to provide for them, they do not need to be provided for by the state. Framing the issue of welfare use in terms of "parental responsibility" and "child-support enforcement" ignores the high poverty rates among these individuals. Their inability to contribute is interpreted as an unwillingness, which is then used as evidence of their indifference to positive family development.

Similar to the ways in which the Freedmen's Bureau took a strong position relative to the marriage of newly freed slaves to shift the costs of

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[183] Solinger, Wake Up Little Susie, 57.

[184] Pager, Devah. Marked: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

support of indigents from the state to private parties, in the post 1996 welfare reform era, the state is actively involved in creating social and legal statuses for both men and women in highly raced and gendered terms. Thus, for the state, an institution like marriage accomplishes a kind of colonialism by domesticating more primitive sexuality and ensuring that men play the traditional, often iconic, role as breadwinners and disciplinarians. Ideally when men assume these traditional roles in the family, many of the ills plaguing poor black communities such as relatively higher rates of crime, teenage pregnancy, and poverty, will at minimum be reduced and eventually reversed.

Evidently, nearly 150 years after the U.S. government shirked its responsibility to assist former slaves in transitioning into free society, the government continues to assume that encouraging blacks to marry and black women to depend on men as economic caretakers is the appropriate method for making poor blacks become economically self-sufficient. The contemporary fatherhood and marriage cures to poverty in the United States are nearly identical in form to the post-bellum efforts to marry off disadvantaged black women with children. Both initiatives are based upon the idea that blacks either do not understand, value, or cannot perform the appropriate ways of "doing" family, of being parents and providers. In the same way that marriage was used during the post-bellum period to "civilize" and to control newly freed blacks, it is often proposed today as a solution to the welfare crisis—specifically, the public problem of poor households headed by single mothers who are consistently blamed for widespread social problems such as drug use, illiteracy and crime.

These initiatives suggest that all societal problems would be resolved if blacks would simply conform to traditional white American culture by getting married and accepting their proper roles as breadwinning husbands and economically dependent wives. However, if the same "problem" has existed for nearly 150 years and the same solutions continue to be given, we must either reexamine the nature of the problem or the nature of the solution.

Conclusion

Research across the academic disciplines has shown that, while the role of American fathers has been confined traditionally to that of economic provider and patriarch, the majority of African American men are not able to fulfill these roles due to structural barriers.[185] As the sociologist Clyde Franklin wrote,

> Our society today undoubtedly remains structured in such a manner that the vast majority of black men encounter insurmountable barriers to the attainment of a "masculine" status as defined by most Americans (black and white Americans). Black men still largely are locked within the Black culture (which has relatively limited resources), unable to compete successfully for societal rewards, the attainment of which defines American males as "men".[186]

Similarly, the sociologist Michael Messner wrote that men of color "have often faced a lifetime of influences that call their basic sense of manhood into question."[187] Consequently, such research has taken the question of what happens when the enactment of socially approved expressions of masculinity, including fathering, cannot be performed by a significant number of African American men.

This inquiry must be accompanied by the question of how socially approved expressions of fatherhood can be affirmed and defined by African American men themselves. As I have shown, African American fatherhood was

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[185] Staples, R. "Changes in Black Family Structure: The Conflict Between Family Ideology and Structural Conditions." *Journal of Marriage and Family,* 47.4 (1985): 1005.

[186] Franklin, C. "Black Male- Black Female Conflict: Individually Caused and Culturally Nurtured." *Journal of Black Studies*, 14.2 (1984): 150.

[187] Messner, M.A. Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997) 68.

and is defined from a deficient perspective, and judged according to its distance from the "normal" and ideal state of parenthood. This ideal only includes individuals who are of the "right" class and who parent under the "right" circumstances, which usually includes marriage or some form of institutionalized companionship.

Since emancipation, African American fathers have had a unique position in social policy as both the problem and savior of the black family. Becoming a concern of the state since their freedom from the plantation patriarchy, African American men have been primarily challenged to become the primary providers for their families in a society where the economic opportunities for both black men and women are diminished by racism. From the early initiatives of Freedmen's Bureau agents, to more contemporary fatherhood movements such as the Million Man March, African American fathers continue to be indentified as a potentially redemptive force for their families. The idea underlying this ideology has been that the solution to black families dependency on the federal government is to have black men resume leadership and responsibility over women and children. As this paper has shown, the absence of black fathers from their children's lives is thought by some to be a contributing factor in the "moral decline" of our nation's values. Over forty years after Daniel Patrick Moynihan stated in his 1965 report to President Lyndon Johnson that black matriarchal families constitute a problem or crisis, in society, the sentiment still resonates in current politics and social policies.

As I argue in Chapter 3, the process by which previously enslaved black men and women became free husbands and wives reveals a great deal about the manner in which these hegemonic ideas about family are policed and maintained by a bureaucratic juridical apparatus, even as those notions of family are asserted as a means of liberation. This idea also speaks to contemporary fatherhood initiatives in which marriage is held out as one of the markers of the "good" father. The enjoyment of marriage rights is regarded uncritically as focal to family independence and the attainment of full manhood. The Freedmen's Bureau took a strong position relative to the marriage of newly freed slaves in order to shift the costs of supporting indigents from the state to private parties. Similarly, as I show in Chapters 1 and 5, in the post 1996 welfare reform era, the state is actively involved in creating social and legal statuses for both men and women in highly raced and gendered terms. These forms of legislation are often based on raced and gendered assumptions, producing a specialized language about personal responsibility, family and love and that is geared towards reforming allegedly defective African American fathers who are believed to pass on these defects to their families.

Part of my aim in this thesis is to assert that family difference does not necessarily connote family deficiency. Using the experiences of black fathers being socialized into economic fatherhood by the Freedmen's Bureau during Reconstruction, I have shown how black men have engaged this model of fatherhood articulated in public policy, but have also privileged and enacted equally important aspects of fathering such as being physically present for their

children and protecting them. This narrative suggests that race and class positions produce different understandings of what fathers are supposed to do, and that effective ideas about parenting can be produced by fathers themselves, even when they are in a socially subordinate position.

The stories of my interviewees are central to my argument that policymakers and society in general must complicate understandings of who black fathers are and what is it that they do. It is not my intent, however, to provide explanations or descriptions of the entire population of African American incarcerated fathers, although the information provided in this project might aid in understanding and intervening in such larger studies. The purpose was to obtain from black formerly incarcerated fathers their interpretation of fatherhood in their own voices and to position these stories in a broader social context. While the thoughts of my interviewees were central to my argument that there are significant points of disjuncture between policymakers and incarcerated fathers, there are several limitations in regards to the ethnographic approach to this material that I do recognize.

First, I was aware of my role and position as an interviewer and researcher, as well as the impact of these roles on the project as a whole and the respondents in particular. My personal experiences, theoretical perspectives, political views, and personal biases and assumptions have influenced the entire research process, since discourses of black fatherhood cannot help but affect how all African American men are perceived – whether as fathers, future fathers, or even sons. This awareness influenced the topic I chose to study, the research

questions I asked, and inevitably geared my analysis and interpretation of the data towards understanding fathers, not the state or the logic of incarceration. Furthermore, I recognize that the fathers in this study might possibly have disclosed different information to another interviewer depending on the interviewer's gender, race, age and so on.

Nevertheless, these stories point to promising new directions for research. For these formerly incarcerated fathers, the idea that "you cannot be a father in there [prison]," is true to the extent that fathering is defined in primarily economic terms, and the vast majority of black men are denied a place in the legitimate economy. And yet, despite their inability to be the economic providers who give instrumental help and link the family to the public sphere through wage labor, my interviewees contend that they can still be good providers. Providers were not necessarily breadwinners for these men, although they believed fathers should provide some economic support. Emotional presence was also a standard for good fathering, and a form of capital. For these men, being incarcerated has deleterious effects on their families, which they tried to address by focusing on meeting the socio-emotional needs of their children and family members. In a sense, these fathers see themselves as having the potential to be family problem solvers, providing emotional support and engaging in care giving activities with their children. The most important characteristic of their fathering was spending time with the child or children; this includes serving as a child confidant and counselor, as well as utilizing visitation, phone calls and letter writing to deliver advice and love.

This modified, adapted version of the provider role which involves re-ordering the hierarchy of fathering activities suggests that the significance of fatherhood remains important even for those men who are not able to express it in ways that the state or the larger society can perceive. Thus, fatherhood does not disappear among black men simply because they are not able to fully enact it; instead, traditional forms of parenting are partially enacted and other forms are emphasized more dramatically. Many black fathers were able to reconcile the seemingly contradictory nature of their identities as fathers and as prisoners, in their conceptualization of fatherhood and their enactment of it, by rationalizing their actions within and after prison as attempts to negate the effects of their incarceration on their children. Evidently, their conceptualization and practice of fatherhood is redefined to be consistent with the oppression, alienation and challenges they experience. Understanding this concept may help in understanding the behaviors of black fathers, especially in their relationships with others, as alternative rather than deviant parenting.

The sociological research on alternative factors influencing the public definition of fatherhood is crucial for understanding the complexities of fatherhood and family identity. In their article entitled, "Fathering in the 20th Century," sociologists Maxine P. Atkinson and Stephen P. Blackwelder suggest that there is a strong relationship between fertility rates and the social emphasis on asking fathers to perform the role of economic provider. When fertility rates are high, fathers are more likely to be defined and measured on how well they

provider rather than on how they function as nurturers.[188] However, Atkinson and Blackwelder also note that the relationship between fertility and the definition of fatherhood is closely tied to economic conditions more generally. Under economic conditions when fathers are able to meet the provider ideal, fertility increases and the father's provider role is emphasized. When economic conditions do not allow the achievement of the provider role, fertility decreases and an alternative definition of fathers as nurturers is adopted.

Atkinson and Blackwelder's thesis will prove particularly interesting as the Census Bureau projects that U.S. racial and ethnic minorities will be the majority of the U.S. population by 2042. [189] According to the *NY Times*, "the main reason for the accelerating change is significantly higher birthrates among immigrants."[190] The pronounced inevitability of a population explosion among non-whites and the accompanying theories concerning unrestrained sexuality will provide a unique opportunity to identify how the federal government with define and police "good" fatherhood.

Furthermore, currently there is no database of incarcerated parents through which quantitative researchers can interpret their experiences. This is an enormous challenge for researchers, but also a statement about how few policymakers have connected ideas about black parenting to the fact of mass

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[188] Atkinson, Maxine P. and Stephen P. Blackwelder. "Fathering in the 20th Century" *Journal of Marriage and Family,* 55.4 (1993), 984.

[189] Minorities as defined by the Census Bureau include Hispanic, black, Asian, American Indian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander identities.

[190] Sam Roberts, "In a Generation, Minorities May Be the U.S. Majority," NY Times 13 Aug. 2008.

incarceration. My thesis points to the need for a historical view of the family that goes well beyond what can be accomplished through the anecdotal evidence that is framing current policies. Increased understanding of the historical culture of the family, as I have shown here, can place our knowledge of behavior in a socio-historical context and thereby inform our theoretical model of family.

Appendix: Methodology

Working with human subjects is nerve racking. You go into your interview hoping your interviewee will be amiable and conversant, that all your questions will be answered and that you will not say something problematic or offensive that triggers a negative reaction. This concern was heightened for me because I was working with subjects who are deemed by society as the worst of the worst—black men. Not only are they black men but they are formerly incarcerated people, "ex-cons." My familiarity with the criminal justice system through academic research, volunteering in a prison, and having friends in prison could never compare to these men's experiences of actually being incarcerated. Furthermore, I was also very concerned not to come across as a naïve student inadvertently pathologizing their experiences, asking them if their fathers were in their lives as children or if they had issues with school and self-esteem. I just wanted their help in answering the questions that have propelled much of this project and contemporary U.S. family policy, "Who is a father?" and "What does he do?" For me, listening to the stories of these men, as black fathers and former prisoners, who have historically been objects of inquiry but rarely heard in policy discussion, is central to understanding how real people are enacting fatherhood.

Professor Jane Gilgun argues that qualitative research adds knowledge and understanding about a particular social phenomenon and helps reveal social

process and events.[191] Thus, conducting interviews was important to this study because it allowed fathers who had been incarcerated to describe their views and experiences in their own words. These fathers provided me with first-hand accounts of living the complexities of African American fathering. Having them speak for themselves not only provided important evidence, but also kept me from imposing moralizing frameworks of "good versus bad" in discussing their parenting.

I had limited models to draw on as I chose my methods. Most of the available research on incarcerated black parenthood focuses on mothers or incarcerated father's wives, girlfriends and children. For example, Lori Girshick's Soledad Women is an ethnography on the female partners of male prisoners.[192] Her work covers a number of issues concerning the experiences of wives, partners and girlfriends of prisoners, such as the social stigma women endure from the larger society and specifically from prison staff because of their connection with prisoners. She addresses the impact of a father 's incarceration on children and how women maintain the family while men are in prison. However, there are a limited number of studies about black father's roles as parents. Few sociological studies exist that attempt to give voice to these men.

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[191] Gilgun, J.F. "Methodological Pluralism and Qualitative Family Research." *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* ed. M.B. Sussman, S.K. Steinmetz and G.W. Peterson. (New York: Plenum Press).

[192] Girshick, Lori B. Soledad Women: Wives of Prisoners Speak Out. (Connecticut and London: Praeger, 1996).

One of the first texts I read that was highly influential in shaping my methodology and interview questions was Anne Nurse's Fatherhood Arrested.[193] Nurse's extensive study of juvenile fathers in the California Youth Authority argues that the failure of the juvenile justice system to recognize the overlap between prisons and fatherhood has serious consequences for families especially as fathers deal with what experts in the field call "prisonization" both during and after incarceration.[194] Her data is based on participant observation in parenting classes, surveys and in-depth interviews of parolees, and observations during institutional family-visiting hours. In addition, Creaise Hairston's article, "Fathers in Prison," is one of the first studies to argue that U.S. social policy and American society must begin to think of imprisoned fathers as significant, positive figures in their children's lives even as the state attempts to address the many negative social and economic costs of fatherlessness. [195] In this paper, Hairston reveals some of the ways in which father's parenting roles and behaviors are also shaped by the realities of the social environment of prisons.

The questions that I asked were designed to elicit the experience of incarcerated fatherhood in a way that can perhaps be generalized to men but are specific to the lives that black men lead. They were designed to understand how

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[193] Nurse, Anne. Fatherhood Arrested: Parenting from Within the Juvenile Justice System. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002).

[194] According to criminologist Wayne Gillespe, prisonization is, "the formation of an informal inmate code and develops from both the individual characteristics of inmates and from institutional features of the prison." Gillespe, Wayne. Prisonization: Individual and Institution Factor Affecting Inmate Conduct. (Portland: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2002).

[195] Hairston, Creasie Finney. "Fathers in Prison: Responsible Fatherhood and Responsible Public Policies." *Marriage & Family Review*, 32, (2001).

the fathers perceived or experienced the meaning of fatherhood, the relationships they had with their children's guardians and the challenges they encountered as incarcerated fathers. These questions included, "What are the qualities of a good/bad father," "How did you talk to your children about your incarceration," and "What resources did you have both inside and outside of prison which supported your fathering?"

After being approved by the Institutional Research Board at Wesleyan University, I began looking for fathers to interview. My recruitment effort was effective because I was able to involve third parties who themselves were involved with prison activism. Kathy Boudin and Cheryl Wilkins of the Criminal Justice Initiative, a post-incarceration college educational program hosted by the Columbia University School of Social Work helped me make contact with a group of potential interviewees from whom I chose four. They also provided me with opportunities to meet with some of the men to tell them about my work and ask for their help. Ms. Wilkins gave me personal introductions for four of the fathers I interviewed. Another interviewee was referred through a former professor.

Having these third parties involved in introducing me to potential interviewees served to legitimate my genuine interest in these fathers' experiences. After I concluded an interview with Daryl, thanking him for his time, he said,

> Well, you're more than welcome, and, uh, you come very highly recommended by [your professor]. She has – you must have put a very good impression on her, because she's one of them kind of people that take everything with a grain of salt, so apparently you must be a pretty tight guy. So what you're doing, and, uh, if you stay true to yourself, you'll be true to everybody else.

The other interviewees would welcome me with variations of the phrase, "Any friend of Ms. Wilkins is a friend of mine." My being a black man talking to black men about black fatherhood also seemed to allow for more open conversation. In discussing my own experiences of having loved ones who are incarcerated, Al shared: "Yeah, that made me feel emotional about that, man. That's good, though. You know? You know, [your mentor] planted a seed and you got it." In another instance, after sharing my goal of writing a thesis based on these interviews, Daryl encouraged me, "So, put your fears in there. Put your heart in it." Being a college student and an unknown researcher, I was also careful to convey my sympathy for their difficulties and desire to understand their situation.

Each potential interviewee was informed of the purpose of the study and was given the interview questions beforehand. The fathers were told that participation in the study was voluntary and that the information they provided in the interviews would be kept confidential. In accordance with the policies of Wesleyan's IRB, written consent of the participants was obtained. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. I assured each participant that during the transcribing process his actual name or the names of those mentioned in the interviews would not be used. Therefore, each participant was assigned a pseudonym, as were the individuals they mentioned or discussed in the interviews. After the transcriptions were completed, I sent each father the transcript to read and removed any information they did not want used in my thesis.

It was my goal to make the men feel as comfortable as possible with the interview process and to communicate the importance of their contribution to the study. Before beginning the interview, I briefly discussed with each father how the interview would be structured. I pointed out that I was interested in their views and perceptions and that I would not make any judgments about the comments they made. It was explained to the fathers that they did not have to answer questions they felt uncomfortable with and that they could stop the interview at any time. Although I tried to ensure that these central topics were covered in each interview, the manner in which these questions unfolded varied from participant to participant as the men often were led into reflections that I did not ask them about. Thus, each interview was different in length and content. Furthermore, some of the differences between interviews was due to my inexperience conducting them. For instance, in some of the earlier interviews I sometimes asked leading questions and failed to ask follow up questions. The more interviews I conducted, the better I became in the process and as a result some of the interviews and narratives are longer and more revealing than others.

All of the interviews were conducted during the summer of 2010 and lasted from one to two hours. Some of the interviews were completed in multiple sessions because of the men's schedules and their willingness to continue our conversations. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and over the phone, wherever was most convenient for the men. I did not ask these fathers to tell me why they had been incarcerated or what crimes they had committed. While

some of the men did share this information voluntarily as a part of their personal histories, I did not want make assumptions, speculate or inadvertently draw unfounded connections between a man's crime and his efforts to fulfill his responsibilities as a father.

When data is gathered from voluntary participants, selection bias may play a role. For example, bias raises the question as to whether the fathers in this project held different views on fatherhood than those who choose not to participate. Men who valued fatherhood were more likely to be involved in this study because they had already thought much about their own fathering. The perceptions and experiences of fathers that I was unable to reach may have been different from those that were interviewed. Furthermore, my research is primarily descriptive and anecdotal, as my limited sample size does not adequately allow for the generalization beyond the sample population. However, the goal of the research is not necessarily to make such generalizations, but instead to expand our general theoretical understanding of black men's experiences as fathers in prison.

Police do not routinely ask at the time of arrest whether their prisoners have children, nor do sentencing judges or correctional institutions regularly raise this question. Since no agency collects data about these fathers and families it is unclear how many men are affected, who they are, or where they live. A database of incarcerated parents would great enhance our understanding of the relationship between prison and family identities. Including the perspectives of these men's children and partners would also help corroborate what the men

have said, or offer a different perspective on what they have tried to do as parents. This would include legitimating their statements about the amount of contact they had with their children and the quantity and quality of their parenting. In addition, having these types of resources would also complicate the ways in which we understand the consequences of parental absence. More specifically, we could identify what fatherly actions children find helpful in coping with an incarcerated parent. A related, although distinct, issue would be to understand how the stresses of release and re-entering the family and community influence a man's fathering and child behavior.

Despite its limitations, this project functions to call attention to the lives of a significant number of African American men whose fathering and understandings of fatherhood are, at the very least, altered because of incarceration. Fathering matters to many of these men and their families and should be explored and considered in discussions of American family life and policy.

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