

A Statement from the Morehouse Conference
on African American Fathers

Turning the Corner on Father Absence In Black America



**Morehouse Research Institute &
Institute for American Values**

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This Statement is dedicated to the memory of Obie Clayton, Sr. (1911 - 1999) and to the memory of all the good fathers who came before and on whose shoulders we stand.

On the cover: The Creation, 1935, by Aaron Douglas. The Howard University Gallery of Art, Permanent Collection, Washington, D.C.

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Turning The Corner on Father Absence in Black America

About the Morehouse Conference

THIS PROJECT largely stems from conversations that began in 1996 and 1997 involving Obie Clayton of the Morehouse Research Institute, Ron Mincy of the Ford Foundation, David Blankenhorn of the Institute for American Values, and others.

FROM THESE discussions, three questions emerged. First, what are the best ways to support the growing fatherhood movement in the African American community — a movement that is relatively ignored by the national media, but which is transforming the lives of many young, poorly educated fathers? Second, is it time for the nation's prominent African American scholars and leading experts on the African American family to come together to assist this movement? And finally, is it possible for this movement to make common cause — intellectually, morally, and organizationally — with a broad spectrum of other fatherhood and civic leaders?

THE RESULT of these deliberations was the Morehouse Conference on African American Fathers, held at Morehouse College in Atlanta on November 4 - 6, 1998, co-sponsored by the Morehouse Research Institute and the Institute for American Values and funded in part by the Ford Foundation.

IN THE eyes of the sponsors, and for many of the participants, the Morehouse Conference was an important moment. The group did not agree on everything, but it did agree unequivocally that African American children deserve strong and positive relationships with their fathers and that reversing the trend of father absence must rise to the top of the agenda for African Americans and for the nation. We agreed that both the economic structures, the cultural values, and the private and public sector policies that discourage many Black men from becoming active in their children's lives demand urgent attention.

THIS STATEMENT is an outgrowth of the Morehouse Conference. It includes among its signatories men and women who were a part of the Morehouse Conference and others who are part of the continuing conversation about how best to respond to the challenge of father absence in the African American community. ■

What Unites Us

Are Black fathers necessary? You know, I'm old and I'm tired, and there are some things that I just don't want to debate anymore. One of them is whether African American children need fathers. Another is whether marriage matters. Does marriage matter? You bet it does. Are Black fathers necessary? Damn straight we are.

WITH THESE words, the Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist William Raspberry struck the key note of a conference on African American fathers held in the fall of 1998 at historic Morehouse College. Mr. Raspberry's words reflect the resounding consensus of the diverse group of scholars, activists, and advocates who journeyed to Atlanta from cities across the United States to focus on the challenges facing African American fathers and their families on the eve of a new millennium.

WE GATHERED together because of our shared concern about the national trend of father absence that is affecting nearly all races and ethnic groups in the United States, and because of our particular concern about father absence in the African American community.

WE GATHERED together because we believe that among the most urgent problems facing the African American community, and the entire nation, is the reality that 70 percent of African American children are born to unmarried mothers, and that at least 80 percent of all African American children can now expect to spend at least a significant part of their childhood years living apart from their fathers.¹

WE GATHERED together because of evidence showing that children of all races and ethnic groups who grow up without their fathers in their lives face higher risks of problems that can keep them from leading healthy, caring, and productive lives.

WE GATHERED knowing in our hearts that the estrangement of fathers from their children is wrong, that children need both their fathers and their mothers, and that neither the African American community, nor the nation as a whole, can truly prosper unless and until we reverse the alarming trend of father absence.

WE GATHERED together inspired by the strength, courage, and determination of the countless African American men who are heroic models of responsible fatherhood. We acknowledge the many and varied barriers, including racial discrimination, economic and educational disadvantages, and negative cultural attitudes and influences, that undermine the possibility of responsible fatherhood for many African American men. We are committed to overcoming all of these barriers.

WE ARE men. Many of us are fathers. We are women. Many of us are mothers. We are sons and we are daughters. We are black and we are white. There are liberals, conservatives,

and independents among us. Some of us work daily on the front lines of the fatherhood movement. Others are a part of efforts aimed at strengthening the institution of marriage. Some of us represent communities of faith. Others come from academia. Some of us are advocates for children and families. Others are community activists.

WE DIFFER in approach and emphasis. But we are united in our belief that fathers are necessary, and that African American children, no less than other children, need and deserve the loving, nurturing, and sustained presence of their fathers in their lives.

WE GATHERED TOGETHER BECAUSE OF OUR COMMITMENT TO ONE OVERARCHING GOAL: WE SEEK TO PROMOTE THE WELL-BEING OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN BY LIFTING THE BURDEN OF FATHER ABSENCE FROM THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY, SO THAT AS MANY CHILDREN AS POSSIBLE WILL ENJOY THE LOVE, NURTURE, PROTECTION, GUIDANCE, AND SUPPORT OF THEIR FATHERS.

THIS IS WHAT UNITES US. THIS IS OUR SHARED MISSION.

A Shared Vision

WE AGREE on the vital importance of fathers as equal partners with mothers in the raising of children.

ALTHOUGH WE differ on the relative weight to be given to economic, cultural, and private and public policy factors in shaping the lives of African American fathers, we agree that each of these factors is at work, and that comprehensive strategies are needed to confront the crisis of father absence in the African American community.

ALTHOUGH WE differ on how to enhance marriage, we do agree that a key goal of the fatherhood movement must be to encourage both enhanced marriageability *and* healthy marriages.

WE AGREE that strategies to promote responsible fatherhood must address the diverse needs of families, including fragile families formed by out-of-wedlock births to disadvantaged parents.²

WE AGREE that there are profound spiritual dimensions to this crisis, and that in order to make the way for nurturing relationships between fathers and their children, much healing must be done between fathers and mothers, men and women.

WE AGREE that to address this crisis there is much to be done by the African American community, and much to be done by the larger society, including government.

WE AGREE that inaction by any segment of the larger society cannot excuse inaction by the African American community.

A Call To Action

WE CALL upon all African American fathers who are not actively and lovingly involved in their children's lives, to turn their hearts toward their little ones, and to work toward healing their relationships with their children and with the mothers of their children.

WE CALL upon the Black church to make the healing and restoration of African American families a major focus of its work, and to take a leadership role in re-uniting fathers and children, and mothers and fathers — wherever possible, through marriage.

WE CALL upon the leaders of all African American civil rights, fraternal, professional, philanthropic, social, and civic organizations to put the issue of re-uniting fathers with their children at the very top of their agendas for at least the next decade, and to forge creative partnerships with the many African American leaders now at the forefront of the fatherhood movement.

WE CALL upon all African American leaders to bring to this movement the same energy and dedication, the same passion and fearlessness, and the same creativity and courage that was summoned to wage the struggle for basic civil rights.

AND WE call upon our national, state, and municipal leaders to put the full weight of government resources at all levels, for at least the next decade, behind partnerships designed to re-unite fathers with their children and to strengthen families.

Why Fathers Matter

FATHER ABSENCE is not a uniquely African American problem. It is an American problem that crosses racial, ethnic, and class lines. All across the United States, fathers are quietly disappearing from the lives of children. For many years, this subtle and growing form of child neglect has been tolerated in communities throughout the country, among rich, poor, and middle class alike, and in nearly every ethnic group. Driven by growing rates of out-of-wedlock births, separation, and divorce, this trend is robbing millions of our nation's children of the spiritual, emotional, and material support of their fathers.

TONIGHT, about four of every ten children in the United States will go to sleep in homes where their fathers do not live. Before they reach the age of eighteen, more than half of America's children are likely to spend at least a significant portion of their childhoods living apart from their fathers.³

GROWING NUMBERS of children in our nation live in family and community environments that might be called "radically fatherless." For example, in 1990, nearly 3 million children — about one of every twenty children in our country — were living in father-absent homes in neighborhoods in which a majority of families with children were headed by single



At left: Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South (detail), 1934, by Aaron Douglas. Oil on canvas, 60 x 139". Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Arts & Artifacts Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

mothers. About 4.5 million U.S. children that year resided in predominantly fatherless neighborhoods, in which more than half of all families with children were headed by single mothers. Of these 4.5 million at-risk children, nearly 80 percent were African American.⁴

ALTHOUGH THE proportion of children with absent fathers is growing fastest among whites, the problem of father absence is especially acute in the African American community. Of all Black babies born in 1996, approximately 70 percent were born to unmarried mothers. On average, a Black child born in the early 1950s would eventually spend about four years (or about 22 percent of childhood) living in a one-parent home. But for Black children born in the early 1980s, that figure, according to one estimate, would nearly triple, to almost 11 years or about 60 percent of childhood.⁵

THESE TRENDS pose significant threats to African American children, to the African American community, and to our nation.

THERE IS compelling evidence that children raised by single parents generally do not fare as well as children raised by two married parents. After years of careful study, including analyses of four large national databases, and controlling for race, income, and education, Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur recently concluded that, “The evidence is quite clear: Children who grow up in a household with only one biological parent are worse off, on average, than children who grow up in a household with both of their biological parents, regardless of the parents’ race or educational background, regardless of whether the parents are married when the child is born, and regardless of whether the resident parent remarries.”⁶

CONTROLLING FOR parental education, occupation, family income, welfare receipt, parenting styles, time spent with children, children’s age, gender, and race, Lingxin Hao of Johns Hopkins University finds that “the net effects of non-intact family structure on child development outcomes are negative and strong.”⁷

AGAIN, controlling for race, neighborhood characteristics, and mother’s education and cognitive ability, boys raised in single parent homes are twice as likely (and boys raised in stepfamilies three times as likely) to commit a crime leading to incarceration.⁸ A child growing up without both parents also faces a greater risk that he or she will be a victim of a crime, especially child abuse.⁹

COMPARED TO children with both parents at home, children who live apart from their fathers are five times as likely to be poor.¹⁰ Children who live apart from their fathers are also much more likely to do poorly in school and twice as likely to drop out of school.¹¹

BEYOND THE statistics is the pain of real children — boys and girls, young men and young women, who bear, and often pass on to their own children, the pains of father hunger. There are the boys and young men who, without the protection and guidance of fathers, struggle each day to figure out what it means to be a man, improvising for themselves expedient, and too often violent and self-destructive, codes of manhood.¹² There are the little girls and young women who, facing life without the first men who should have loved

them and stayed with them, struggle to develop a sense of their own love-worthiness, often offering sex in exchange for what they hope will be love.¹³

WE CAN no longer afford to deny the vital importance of the father-child bond. Nor can we any longer deny the struggles of Black women raising children without the help of fathers, nor the suffering of Black men living at the margins of family life and society. When fathers are absent, children suffer — one child at a time, one family at a time. And that suffering reverberates throughout our society.

The Global Trend

AS SYLVIA ANN HEWLETT and Cornel West have put it, “Biologically speaking, the link between mother and child is incontrovertible. Fatherhood, in contrast, is inherently uncertain, which is why societies have tried so hard to connect children to their fathers.”¹⁴

YET, as many countries have progressed materially and technologically, their commitment to teaching and enforcing the norms that connect children to fathers, and keep the father-child bond intact, has weakened dramatically.¹⁵

THE NEARLY universal understanding of marriage as an indispensable social institution that binds men to their families is breaking down. Marriage has come to be seen less as a way of life meant to guide intimacy and define commitments, especially to children, and more as a vehicle for fulfilling the psychological needs of adults. And in the Western world, from the Scandinavian countries to Canada and the United States, rates of out-of-wedlock births and divorce have skyrocketed.

A DRAMATIC confluence of events, many of which promote individualism more than obligation, has led to an abandonment of the norms that once taught men a sense of responsibility to their children.

NOWADAYS, little stigma is attached to having a child out of wedlock. Divorces are common. With the easy availability of birth control and abortion, and the decline in the practice of “shotgun” marriages, sexual behavior is no longer inextricably linked with child-bearing and marriage. With the large scale entry of women into the workforce and women’s increasing independence, as well as economic changes that have meant stagnating wages and growing economic insecurity for many men, the male’s role as provider has become less significant. Perhaps most importantly, with these changes has come a devaluing of the role of fathers: a growing sense that fathers are not as important, not as necessary, as mothers.

FOR THESE REASONS, fatherhood as an institution is disintegrating in many modern societies. The set of social expectations, codes, and laws that once kept most fathers connected to their families are loosening, and fathers the world over, rich and poor alike, are increasingly disengaging from their children and from the mothers of their children.

Challenges To African American Fatherhood

ECONOMIC, cultural, and policy changes that have devalued fatherhood in the West in general and in the United States in particular, have hit the African American community especially hard. For example, as the Harvard sociologist (and participant in the Morehouse Conference) William Julius Wilson and others have pointed out, basic structural changes in the U.S. economy have increasingly disadvantaged lower-skilled workers, thus undermining the marriageability of many young African American men.

“FOR THE first time in the 20th century,” notes Wilson, “most adult males in many inner city-ghetto neighborhoods are not working in a typical week. The disappearance of work has adversely affected not only individuals, families, and neighborhoods, but the social life of the city at large as well.” Furthermore, “The problems of joblessness and social dislocation in the inner city are, in part, related to the processes in the global economy that have contributed to greater inequality and insecurity among American workers in general, and of the failure of U.S. social policies to adjust these processes.”¹⁶

FOR AFRICAN American men, moreover, the effects of these global trends are exacerbated by a series of racially specific historical events that began with slavery and include the legacies of slavery, as well as the racism and economic discrimination that are an intrinsic part of American society and the African American experience.

THE LEGACY of slavery is tragically relevant to the issue of Black fatherhood, for the conditions of slavery in the United States provided exactly the opposite of what is required in order to preserve the fragile bond between father and child. By law, the male slave could fulfill none of the duties of husband and father. The institution of slavery created a subculture where all the societal norms, mores, expectations, and laws, instead of helping to connect men to their offspring, forcibly severed the bonds between fathers and their children.

The Great Upheaval

THIS LEGACY makes all the more heroic the many Black men throughout American history who, with so many forces arrayed against them, stood tall to fulfill their responsibilities as fathers.

EVEN IN the face of concerted and persistent discrimination, including economic discrimination, and the harsh inequalities of Jim Crow, many Black families maintained two-parent households well into the 1960s, when rates of out-of-wedlock births began to escalate dramatically. In 1960, 22 percent of all Black babies were born to unmarried mothers. By 1996, that figure had jumped to 70 percent.



At left: Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers, 1934, by Aaron Douglas. Oil on canvas, 94 x 88". Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Art & Artifacts Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

MANY FACTORS contributed to this dramatic change. The 1960s ushered in great social, cultural, and economic upheavals that had a profound impact on fatherhood in the United States generally and among African Americans particularly. Shifting occupational structures (from manufacturing to services), stagnating real wages, and the declining relative demand for low-skilled labor undermined the economic status of many Black men. Welfare policies that focused on helping mothers and children, to the exclusion of fathers, had the practical effect of keeping or driving men out of the home and away from children. Housing discrimination that facilitated the movement of whites out of the cities while hampering the mobility of African Americans, the increasing suburbanization of employment, inadequate urban school systems, and the growing incarceration of Black men, fueled in large measure by the war on drugs, also played crucial roles in undercutting opportunities for many Black men.

IN 1960, there were 70 employed civilian Black men for every hundred Black women. But by 1990, the figure had dropped to 40.¹⁷ Between the 1960s and 1990s, the percent of Black female-headed households rose dramatically as Black male unemployment and underemployment also increased. In the absence of genuine opportunities, and in the face of persistent poverty, more and more young Black males dropped out of both the labor force *and* family life.¹⁸ All of these trends, moreover, occurred within the context of a growing societal belief that fathers, when all is said and done, are non-essential.

THE INSTITUTION of fatherhood is sensitive to social, economic, cultural and policy changes. African American fatherhood is especially sensitive to such changes because it never had the full support of American society. As the value of fatherhood has declined in the larger American culture, and social and economic conditions have grown more unfavorable for many fathers, the bonds holding many African American families together have frayed severely, separating more and more fathers from their children.

Culture, Economics, and Policy

WE BELIEVE that the fatherhood movement within the African American community must include *both* aggressive steps to improve public and private sector policies as they affect fathers and to open up greater economic opportunities for African American men, *and* equally aggressive steps to promote changes in norms and expectations that support marriage and strengthen the father-child bond.

SOME OF US see the principal cause of father absence among African Americans as the lack of adequate economic opportunities. We argue that the economic conditions affecting a great number of African American men make it nearly impossible for them to be adequate providers, and that this inability to provide is the root cause of father absence for African American children. We are encouraged by a recent study from the National Bureau of Economic Research showing a positive link between greater employment opportunities for young Black men and declining crime rates. These and similar findings support arguments

advanced by William Julius Wilson, John Sibley Butler of the University of Texas (a participant in the Morehouse Conference), and others suggesting that young African American men “would benefit especially from consistent and full employment.”¹⁹ We argue in favor of government and private sector action that creates jobs, provides social services and job training, and facilitates access to places of work, all of which would enhance the marriageability of Black men.

OTHERS OF us believe that the problem of father absence in the African American community cannot be explained solely or even primarily by reference to economic structures, especially given the high and growing rates of father absence outside of the ranks of the African American community and outside the ranks of the poor. We believe that father absence in the Black community is caused in large part by damaging and historically rooted cultural patterns that promote behaviors leading to high rates of out of wedlock births, low rates of marriage, and conflictual relationships between Black men and Black women. We argue for cultural changes within the community and in the larger society that would encourage personal responsibility and healthy marriages and discourage out-of-wedlock births and divorce.

DESPITE OUR differences, as a group we agree that it is difficult to disentangle cultural values from the effects of economics and policy. We agree that the forces driving father absence in the African American community are complex and mutually reinforcing, and that economics and cultural values, as well as public and private sector policies, play key roles in the crisis of father absence in the African American community.

AS WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON recently noted, “In the inner-city ghetto, not only have the norms in support of husband-wife families and against out-of-wedlock births become weaker as a result of the general trend in society, they have also gradually disintegrated because of the sharp rise in joblessness and declining real incomes in the inner city over the past several decades, especially from the mid 1970s to 1995. The weakening of social sanctions has had the greatest impact on the jobless, but it has also affected many who are employed, especially those whose jobs are not very secure or stable and/or those who are experiencing declining real incomes. The declining marriage rates among inner-city Black parents is a function not simply of increased economic marginality, or of changing attitudes toward sex and marriage, but of the interaction between the two.”²⁰ This point is also reinforced by Elijah Anderson of the University of Pennsylvania (a participant in the Morehouse Conference) and author of *Code of the Street*, who notes that very few young men in the inner city have the opportunity to see older men in their neighborhood going to work and building strong families. According to Anderson, when “a critical mass of jobless people are concentrated in the inner city community, various factors come together and conspire to produce an almost intractable result. In these circumstances alienation thrives and little that is conventional retains legitimacy.”²¹

CULTURAL VALUES, economics, and public policy are never entirely distinct realms. They are inextricably linked aspects of the human experience. Public and private policies can

At right: Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction, (detail) 1934, by Aaron Douglas. Oil on canvas, 60 x 139". The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Art & Artifacts Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.



encourage or discourage behavior. The economy is influenced by — and promotes — certain cultural values. People’s lives are partly shaped by the economic conditions and circumstances in which they find themselves. Economic conditions can uplift — or debase — people and the communities in which they live. But it is equally true that people’s values can help them respond to those conditions in ways that are either self-defeating or self-empowering.

WE BELIEVE that we must address, with equal force, *all* the factors that would keep fathers from building caring and nurturing relationships with their children.

STRATEGIES FOR action must address economic and private and public policy factors that particularly affect the Black community. They must also address cultural shifts affecting the United States in general, and the cultural and behavioral patterns that affect the African American community in particular.

Marriage *and* Marriageability

IN NEARLY every culture, marriage has been the main institution which binds men to their families. Through the institution of marriage, societies have legitimized the masculine role, connected men to women and to future generations, and held men accountable to their children and to their family responsibilities.

WHEN MARRIAGE fails or fails to form, when mothers and fathers do not commit to one another, nurturing fatherhood typically dwindles away. Over time, unmarried and divorced fathers tend to disengage from their children — both emotionally and financially. This is true for fathers of all races and classes. Although one study suggests that unmarried Black fathers are more likely to spend time with their children than are unwed white and Hispanic fathers, the evidence is quite strong that over time single fathers of all races tend to separate from their children and families, and that marriage significantly increases the likelihood that a child will grow up being nurtured by his or her father.²²

WE BELIEVE that a key goal of the fatherhood movement within the African American community must be strengthened relationships between mothers and fathers that lead, wherever possible, to strong, healthy marriages. We believe also that strategies to promote fatherhood must take into account the diverse conditions of contemporary father absence, strengthening the father-child bond at all stages of a relationship between a father and a mother. As a group, we believe that the fatherhood movement must promote both marriage *and* marriageability.

SOME OF us see father absence in the African American community as rooted mainly in norms and behavior patterns that devalue marriage, weaken the male-female bond, and tolerate high rates of out-of-wedlock births and divorce. We argue that we cannot rebuild fatherhood outside of marriage and that marriage must be the primary line of defense in

the struggle to re-unite fathers and children. We believe that efforts to reverse the trend of father absence in the African American community must focus on increasing dramatically the proportion of children living with their two parents, committed to one another in marriage.

FROM THIS perspective, moreover, marriage itself promotes economic achievement in men. Some studies suggest that marriage alone increases men's earnings. Husbands, in general, earn at least ten percent more than similar single men, and in some cases married men earn as much as 40 percent more. Accordingly, marriage should be promoted as a social institution that not only maximizes emotional benefits, but also one that by itself can have a substantial positive effect on the economic condition of fathers and families.²³

SOME OF US take the position that marriage cannot be the first line of defense for promoting responsible fatherhood in the African American community. We argue that poor employment prospects make Black men less marriageable and that low marriage rates are largely a consequence of limited economic opportunities. As William Julius Wilson has pointed out, employed single Black fathers ages 18-31 in Chicago's inner city neighborhoods are eight times more likely to marry eventually than their jobless counterparts.²⁴ Because Black men have lower employment rates and lower earnings than white men, they are less able to provide for a family and therefore less likely to be able to marry. In addition, educational differences between Black men and Black women, along with Black women's comparatively improved employment prospects and earnings, make Black women less dependent on the earnings of men, giving them more freedom in the choice of whether or not to marry.

FOR SOME of us, then, promotion of a "marriage first" strategy fails to take account of the decreased marriageability of Black men. It also discounts the suffering of many mothers and children who have lived through abusive marriages, and pays insufficient attention to other practical realities that make marriage the wrong answer for many couples. We do not condone childbirth outside of marriage. But we support strategies that take into account the current reality of high rates of non-marital births. We argue that families must be nurtured and strengthened as we find them. For example, until recently, it was assumed that in most cases children born outside of marriage are born to couples in which the father is essentially absent. But a recent study shows that nearly half of poor children born out of wedlock are born to cohabiting couples or to couples where the father visits the child weekly. Accordingly, many of these fathers are not absent from their children's lives, yet our national policies assume that they are absent and make few attempts to strengthen the attachment of these fathers to their children and to the mothers of their children.²⁵

DESPITE OUR different points of view, as a group we strongly favor efforts to strengthen relationships between parents in ways that help fathers connect to their children. One

important goal of these efforts is to help move as many unmarried couples as possible toward healthy, nurturing marriages. We are therefore in agreement that a loving marriage, founded on principles of equal regard between husband and wife, is the ideal way to raise children, and that African American children no less than other children deserve the care of their two married parents.

MARRIAGE IS already an important, though frequently unrealized, goal for many young, low-income African Americans. One recent study of fragile families — parents who are young, poor and unwed — finds that about half of these parents are living together at the time of the birth of their child. The great majority say they are romantically involved. More than half say that either it is “almost certain” that they will get married or that there is a “good chance” that they will get married.²⁶ We must build upon this foundation. We should not ignore or destroy this natural human desire for intimacy and a stable family life, but instead do everything we can to nourish and support it.

AS A GROUP, we support a “marriage matters” and “marriage wherever possible” set of strategies. We believe that marriage should be held up as the preferred way to raise children and that fatherhood programs, wherever possible, should promote the benefits of marriage and help fathers and mothers move toward stable, nurturing marriages. Strong marriages are connected to cultural values as well as economics and policy. For example, men’s sense of personal worth as well as their sense of value to their families are tied in powerful ways to their role as breadwinners — their ability to provide materially for their children. For this reason, increased economic opportunities for African American men must be a part of any movement that seeks to reunite fathers and children and promote marriage.

BUT MARRIAGE and marriageability are also deeply connected to the quality of the relationships between adult males and females.

MUCH HAS been written in popular fiction and non-fiction about the state of gender relations between Black men and Black women.²⁷ Recent demographic data and social survey data reveal wide gaps in the socio-economic conditions, and also in the basic attitudes and behavior patterns separating Black men from Black women.²⁸ Ethnographic data analyzed by William Julius Wilson reveal that “the relationships between inner-city black men and women, whether in a marital or non-marital situation, are often fractious and antagonistic.”²⁹ The conclusion is inescapable: there is a crisis in gender relations in the Black community. This is a painful reality. But acknowledging the crisis points to a vital strategy for reversing the trend of father absence. We believe that efforts to promote fatherhood and marriage in the African American community must include urgent and concerted work aimed at gender reconciliation: the healing of relationships between men and women.

The Spiritual Dimensions of Father Absence in Black America

THERE ARE profound spiritual aspects to the problem of father absence in the African American community. It is tied to a spiritual brokenness that is, in turn, linked to economic, political, cultural, and social patterns that are partly rooted in slavery and continuing adversities.

THE INSTITUTION of slavery stripped African American fatherhood of much of its sacred character. Continuing racism, economic discrimination, and public and private sector policies that have divided families have adversely affected relationships between Black men and Black women. These painful influences have adversely affected the raising of Black children. They have harmed marriages and thwarted the formation of families. It is time now to take the time to recover, as fully as possible, what has been lost.

IN THE words of the Reverend Frederick J. Streets, Chaplain of Yale University, “We need a kind of excavation of our spiritual and emotional troubles for the purpose of dealing with them creatively and releasing us from the power they have to influence our behavior, both on the conscious and the unconscious levels.”³⁰

DR. BERNARD FRANKLIN, Vice President of the National Fathering Center (and a participant in the Morehouse Conference) notes that, “Part of the untold story is that the brutal pain injected by slavery has gone unforgiven in the lives of many African American men . . . Carrying around bitterness and anger is like carrying a sack of cement. It weighs men down and makes their journey exasperating. They are left with no energy for parenting and for caring for their families . . . Thus the bitter root of judgment has become so ingrained in many families that men who are born into these families become alcoholic, lethargic, unable or unwilling to support their wives, violent, and, generally, men without hope. Far more descends through our physical inheritance than we suspect.”³¹

SINCE THE arrival of the first Africans on these shores, African Americans have been called upon in their time and place to make a way out of no way. The Black community has the highest measurable level of religiosity of any group in the United States.³² What has made the difference in every generation and what will make the difference now on the eve of the 21st century is the community’s faith in God.

THE CRISIS of father absence poses a profound challenge to the Black church. The church’s challenge is to rise to this most vital mission of helping the African American community to heal through ministries of forgiveness and reconciliation.

AND BECAUSE the church is affected by the same forces affecting all African Americans, it, too, must take time to heal, even as it goes forth to help heal others.

THE STRUGGLE for inward renewal within the African American community has been postponed for too long. It is time to enter a new century on a path to wholeness, for the sake of our children.



At left: Rise Shine for thy light has come, c. 1930, by Aaron Douglas. Gouache on paper, 12" x 9". The Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Ten Recommendations

REVERSING THE trend of father absence both nationally and among African Americans in particular will require long-term efforts aimed at all the political, economic, social and cultural forces that are separating fathers from their children.

1. WE URGE AFRICAN AMERICAN FATHERS AND MOTHERS TO RECOGNIZE THEIR OBLIGATIONS TO EACH OTHER AND TO WORK TO BUILD STRONGER PARENTING PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE BENEFIT OF THEIR CHILDREN. We applaud all fathers who play active and loving roles in the lives of their children, and we encourage them to serve as mentors to other fathers and to young men. To fathers who are not now actively involved in nurturing their children, we urge you to become a part of one of the growing number of programs focused on re-uniting fathers and children and on improving relationships between fathers and mothers. We especially hope that older African American fathers, who by virtue of their dedication can serve as models of responsible fatherhood, will call on and help younger African American men to reject what Elijah Anderson terms the “code of the street,” and to embrace responsibility to self, family, and community. As Anderson reminds us, “The old heads are the saving grace of the community . . . by telling people to be responsible, they are affirming that something can be done, that there is hope for the future.”³³

WE URGE MOTHERS TO BE OPEN TO BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS THAT ENABLE FATHERS TO ESTABLISH STRONG, LOVING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR CHILDREN. For too long, there has been a widespread assumption that if fathers do not provide financially for their children, there is little else that they can do. Children need their fathers as nurturers and protectors as well. Sometimes, mothers who are estranged from the fathers of their children will say or do things that, intentionally or not, alienate children from their fathers. This behavior can not only damage children’s relationships with their father, but also damage their emotional development and their abilities to form healthy relationships with others.

2. WE URGE THE BLACK CHURCH TO HELP BUILD A POWERFUL NEW MOVEMENT AIMED AT GENDER AND FAMILY HEALING. This movement should include the following aspects: initiatives designed to improve the quality of relationships between Black men and Black women; programs aimed at preparing men and women for marriage, including helping men and women to deal with their relationships with their own families of origin; programs aimed at improving relationships between parents and children; rites of passage programs that challenge the code of the street by preparing young men and young women for responsible manhood and womanhood, and responsible motherhood and fatherhood; and ministries aimed at helping incarcerated fathers reunite and establish healthy relationships with their children. We urge the Black church to work in partnership with other communities of faith and with organizations at the forefront of the fatherhood movement, and to collaborate with colleges, universities, public health agencies, and mental health agencies for the promotion of family health and well-being.

3. WE URGE CHURCHES AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS TO SUPPORT FAMILIES BY TAKING A MUCH MORE ACTIVE ROLE IN THE EDUCATION OF BLACK CHILDREN THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY-BASED AND VALUES-ORIENTED EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS. The larger society should encourage these initiatives by supporting charter school legislation, increasing scholarship fund assistance for alternative schools, and, where feasible, providing vouchers so that needy parents can send their children to any public school, regardless of location.

4. WE URGE CIVIL RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL, CIVIC, FRATERNAL AND PHILANTHROPIC GROUPS WITHIN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY TO MAKE THE ISSUE OF RE-UNITING FATHERS AND CHILDREN A TOP PRIORITY FOR AT LEAST THE NEXT DECADE THROUGH PROGRAMS OF ADVOCACY, FAMILY RECONCILIATION, AND COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION. We call upon these organizations to work in partnership with leaders of the fatherhood movement and the Black church to build a critical mass of community-based programs aimed at strengthening Black families, with special emphasis on improving relationships between men and women, and between parents and children.

5. WE URGE ALL MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS, ESPECIALLY BLACK MEDIA, TO USE THEIR POWER FOR AT LEAST THE NEXT DECADE TO PROMOTE POSITIVE IMAGES OF MEN AND FATHERHOOD IN BLACK AMERICA. The media does influence behavior, for better or for worse. We urge all media outlets, particularly those serving the Black community, to use their creative talents to develop programs and public service campaigns that promote the ideals of responsible fatherhood and motherhood, strong marriages, and healthy family life.

6. WE CALL UPON THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS TO PASS, AND THE PRESIDENT TO SIGN, LEGISLATION THIS FISCAL YEAR AUTHORIZING AT LEAST \$2 BILLION OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS TO SUPPORT COMMUNITY-BASED FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS AIMED AT REVERSING THE TREND OF FATHER ABSENCE IN OUR NATION. These programs should focus on three objectives. First, increasing the attachment of fathers to their children. Second, increasing the spiritual, educational, social, and economic contributions that fathers make to their children. And third, fostering both marriage and marriageability, especially for young, poorly educated, low-income men. We particularly urge support for programs that emphasize the development of the “whole man,” combining an intensive focus on economic and social opportunity, including access to social services, employment readiness skills, job training, and job placement, with an equally intensive focus on values and attitudes, including spiritual development, the importance of the marriage commitment, and the importance of good parenting habits and skills for both custodial and non-custodial fathers. Both the Clinton/Gore Administration and leading members of Congress from both parties have expressed initial support for this type of federal initiative. We urge them to act now.

7. WE CALL UPON THE FEDERAL-STATE CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT PROGRAM TO INSTITUTE BASIC REFORMS TO ENCOURAGE FATHERS’ ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN THE LIVES OF THEIR CHILDREN BY PROMOTING SELF-SUFFICIENCY FOR FATHERS, ENCOURAGING MARRIAGE, AND ENGAGING FAITH-BASED AND OTHER COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS IN PROMOTING RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD.

- We urge the federal-state Child Support Enforcement Program to reexamine its policies toward low-income non-custodial parents with respect to the size of initial orders, arrearage policies, and modification of orders when earnings of the non-custodial parent change. Most importantly, the program should seek to insure that child support payments primarily benefit the children, and are not solely used to reimburse government for welfare costs.

- We urge the federal-state Child Support Enforcement Program, operating under revised federal guidelines, to create a number of experimental or demonstration projects in which child support enforcement becomes an active partner with the fatherhood movement. Specifically, under this arrangement, child support enforcement agencies could choose, on a case by case basis, and drawing on lessons learned from programs such as Parents Fair Share and Children First, to permit delinquent fathers to participate in community-based fatherhood programs as an alternative to incarceration or other punitive measures. These pilot projects would help today's fatherhood movement to reach out to those fathers who are willing to commit themselves to straightening out their lives, paying child support, respecting and working with the mothers of their children, and their children. In this way, for the first time, the child support enforcement program could become an ally of the fatherhood movement.

8. WE URGE GOVERNMENT AT ALL LEVELS, THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY, AND THE ENTIRE CIVIL SOCIETY TO TAKE CONCERTED ACTION FOR AT LEAST THE NEXT DECADE TO REVERSE INEQUITIES IN THE TREATMENT OF FATHERS IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR POLICY AND TO IMPROVE THE ECONOMIC PROSPECTS AND MARRIAGEABILITY OF POOR MEN, INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, THE FOLLOWING INITIATIVES:

- Reforming the Earned Income Tax Credit to eliminate its substantial marriage penalty.
- Allowing more fathers, including unmarried fathers paying child support and spending time with their children, to receive the Earned Income Tax Credit, structuring any reforms so that they do not weaken incentives to marriage.
- Reforming federal laws to allow states to extend child care and medical benefits for transitions off welfare through marriage as well as through work.
- Reforming housing policies to promote family formation, for example, by developing pilot projects within public housing to allow fathers of welfare families to live in public housing with their families without a rental surcharge for up to 18 months.
- Increased public and private sector support to develop employment and entrepreneurship opportunities in urban areas.
- Increased public and private sector support for job training, job skills development, and transportation to jobs in suburban areas.
- Greater economic development opportunities in urban areas through private investment.

9. WE URGE THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AT ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT TO DEVELOP CREATIVE STRATEGIES AIMED AT RECONNECTING FATHERS AND CHILDREN WHERE THERE IS A DESIRE TO DO SO ON THE PART OF FAMILY MEMBERS. Although African Americans comprise 12 percent of the U. S. population, they account for nearly 30 percent of arrests and over half of all prisoners. Today, about 5 million men — a group of men who are “majority minority” — are at least partly under the control of the criminal justice system, either due to incarceration or as a result of being on parole. Many of these men are fathers. By definition, they are absent fathers. On any given day, there are in our nation approximately 1,300,000 minor sons and daughters of incarcerated men. These children are especially at risk.³⁴ To help stop what in too many cases becomes a generational cycle of involvement with the criminal justice system, special efforts should be made to reconnect these children to their fathers whenever possible.

10. WE URGE EVERY GOVERNMENTAL OR COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAM THAT HAS A RELATIONSHIP WITH UNWED PARENTS TO HELP CONNECT INTERESTED PARENTS WITH FAITH-BASED MARRIAGE EDUCATION AND MARRIAGE MENTORING PROGRAMS. Why? Because marriage matters and because we know that many young people want to marry but need support in order to build healthy marriages and families. ■

*At right: Building More
Stately Mansions, 1944,
by Aaron Douglas. Oil
on canvas, 54 x 42".
Collection of Fisk
University, Nashville,
Tennessee.*



Endnotes

1. "Report of Final Natality Statistics, 1996," *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* 46, no. 11, Supplement (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, June 30, 1998): 46; Sandra Hoffreth, "Updating Children's Life Course," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 47 (February 1985): 93-115; Written correspondence from Larry L. Bumpass, May 12, 1999. See also Teresa Castro Martin and Larry L. Bumpass, "Recent Trends in Marital Disruption," *Demography* 26, no. 1 (February 1989): 37-51.

2. For a definition of fragile families see, Ronald B. Mincy and Hillard Pouncy, "There Must Be 50 Ways to Start a Family," in Wade F. Horn, David Blankenhorn, and Mitchell B. Pearlstein, *The Fatherhood Movement: A Call to Action* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999): 83-104.

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4. *Kids Count Data Book: 1995* (Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995), p. 5. The figure on the proportion of these at-risk children who are African American was provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

5. Hofferth, *op. cit.*

6. McLanahan and Sandefur, p. 1. Until fairly recently, some scholars have argued that what appear in some studies to be the negative effects of father absence are in fact more likely to be the negative effects of other, presumably more potent variables, such as low income, racism, or neighborhood conditions. But today, a large and growing body of careful scholarly research — complete with "controls" for a wide variety of factors, including race, income, residential instability, urban location, parents' education, the child's cognitive ability, child support payments, and others — is showing as clearly as the social sciences can show anything that father absence itself is a leading cause of harmful outcomes for children in all dimensions of their lives. Urie Bronfenbrenner, one of the nation's most respected family scholars, briefly sums up the weight of scholarly evidence by stating that, "controlling for associated factors such as low income, children growing up in such [father-absent] households are at greater risk for experiencing a variety of behavioral and educational problems, including extremes of hyperactivity or withdrawal, lack of attentiveness in the classroom, difficulty in deferring gratification, impaired academic achievement, school misbehavior, absenteeism, dropping out, involvement in socially alienated peer groups, and, especially, the so-called 'teenage syndrome' of behaviors that tend to hang together — smoking, drinking, early and frequent sexual experience, a cynical attitude toward work, adolescent pregnancy, and, in the more extreme cases, drugs, suicide, vandalism, violence, and criminal acts." See Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Discovering What Families Do," in David Blankenhorn, Steven Bayme, and Jean Bethke Elshtain (eds.), *Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family* (Milwaukee: Family Service America, 1990), p. 34. For a similar overview, see Ronald J. Angel and Jacqueline L. Angel, *Painful Inheritance: Health and the New Generation of Fatherless Children* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), p. 118, *passim*.

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8. Cynthia C. Harper and Sara S. McLanahan, "Father Absence and Youth Incarceration," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association (San Francisco, August 1998). For similar findings, see William S. Comanor and Llad Phillips, "The Impact of Family Structure on Delinquency," Working Paper in Economics no. 7-95R, University of California at Santa Barbara Economics Department (February 1998); and Ross Matsueda and Karen Hemier, "Race, Family Structure and Delinquency: A Test of Differential Association and Social Control Theories," *American Sociological Review* 52, no. 6 (1987): 826-840.

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11. *Ibid.*, pps. 41, 44-46.

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15. See David Popenoe, "Challenging the Culture of Fatherlessness," in Wade Horn, David Blankenhorn, and Mitchell Pearlstein (eds.), *The Fatherhood Movement: A Call to Action*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999); David Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest: Family Change and Decline in Modern Societies* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1988); and William J. Goode, *World Changes in Divorce Patterns* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). See also Francis Fukuyama, "The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstruction of Social Order," *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1999, p. 72.

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About Aaron Douglas

THIS STATEMENT features the paintings and illustrations of Aaron Douglas (1899-1978), the visual artist most closely identified with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Douglas' illustrations appeared in *The Crisis* (published by the NAACP), *Opportunity* (published by the Urban League), *Harper's*, *Vanity Fair*, *Theater Arts Monthly*, and other publications. Probably his most important black-and-white work appeared in *God's Trombones*, James Weldon Johnson's 1925 book of poetry based on seven African American sermons. Douglas also illustrated the work of W.E.B. DuBois, Countee Cullen, Paul Morand, Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes. He served as the first president of the Harlem Artists Guild.

DOUGLAS' PAINTINGS are currently exhibited at The Howard University Gallery of Art, the Hampton University Art Museum, and the Museum of Art at Fisk University, where Douglas taught painting from 1937 until his retirement in 1966, as well as in several private collections and other locations. Murals by Douglas were commissioned by the Club Ebony in Harlem, the Harlem YMCA, and Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina. Probably his most celebrated achievement in painting is *Aspects of Negro Life*, a series of four murals completed in 1934 for the Countee Cullen Branch of the New York Public Library on 135th Street in Harlem, now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

MUCH OF Douglas' work fuses aspects of early 20th-century modernism, especially Cubism and the paintings of Matisse and the post-Impressionists, with the stark forms and restrained tones of African sculpture. Almost all of his work communicates a strong spirituality joined to a complete lack of sentimentality.



About Morehouse Research Institute

THE PRINCIPAL OBJECTIVES of the Morehouse Research Institute (MRI) are to increase the availability of scholarly work on issues concerning the status of African American men and boys, and increase the visibility of researchers and policy analysts who are working on solutions to the problems that currently threaten not only the vitality of the Black community, but also the social and economic health of the nation. Since 1990 MRI has served as a national clearinghouse of information about the more than 14 million African American males in the United States. The Institute operates four major programs: Research and Information Exchange, Publications, Curriculum, and Community Linkages. Through these four interrelated units, MRI brings together researchers, educators, and activists to work together on social policy issues affecting black males.

About the Institute for American Values

THE INSTITUTE FOR AMERICAN VALUES, founded in 1987, is a private, nonpartisan organization devoted to research, publication, and public education on major issues of family well being and civil society. By providing forums for scholarly inquiry and debate, the Institute seeks to bring fresh knowledge to bear on the challenges facing families and civil society. Through its publications and other educational activities, the Institute seeks to bridge the gap between scholarship and policy making, bringing new information to the attention of policy makers in the government, opinion makers in the media, and decision makers in the private sector, corporations, and individuals.

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