

NCCP National Center for
Children in Poverty

Columbia University

MAILMAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

MAP AND TRACK
STATE INITIATIVES TO ENCOURAGE
RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD

1999 Edition

STANLEY N. BERNARD
JANE KNITZER

Introduction by
DAVID COHEN

The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) was established in 1989 at the School of Public Health, Columbia University, with core support from the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The Center's mission is to identify and promote strategies that reduce the number of young children living in poverty in the United States, and that improve the life chances of the millions of children under age six who are growing up poor.

The Center:

- Alerts the public to demographic statistics about child poverty and to the scientific research on the serious impact of poverty on young children, their families, and their communities.
- Designs and conducts field-based studies to identify programs, policies, and practices that work best for young children and their families living in poverty.
- Disseminates information about early childhood care and education, child health, and family and community support to government officials, private organizations, and child advocates, and provides a state and local perspective on relevant national issues.
- Brings together public and private groups to assess the efficacy of current and potential strategies to lower the young child poverty rate and to improve the well-being of young children in poverty, their families, and their communities.
- Challenges policymakers and opinion leaders to help ameliorate the adverse consequences of poverty on young children.

NCCP Marks Decade of Achievement: 1989–1999

In 1999, NCCP celebrates ten years of committed effort to identify and promote strategies to reduce the young child poverty rate and to improve the life chances of the millions of young children still living in poverty. "We can take pride in the accomplishments of the Center in raising the profile of poor young children and putting them on the agenda of urgent social issues facing this country," says the Center's director, Dr. J. Lawrence Aber. "But we cannot be satisfied until America has made far greater progress in combating young child poverty," Aber added. He notes the inspiration and hard work of the Center's founding director, Judith E. Jones, in this achievement, and thanks the Center's funders and Council of Advisors for sharing the vision of the Center and supporting its work.

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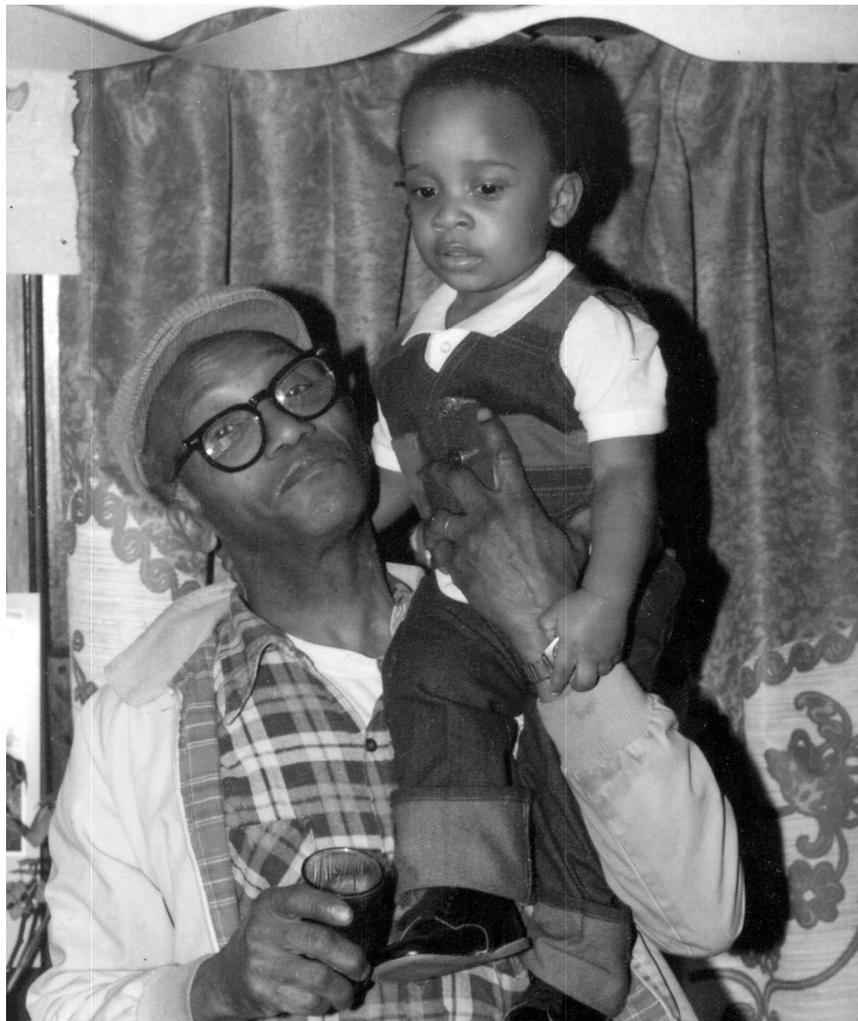
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We recognize that even though a father's financial support is critically necessary, it is not sufficient for a child's well-being.

Governor Paul Celluci, 1999
State of Massachusetts

Fathers are much more than breadwinners. They lay an important foundation for the emotional, psychological, and physical development of their children. A father's presence and positive interaction in a child's life promotes healthy families as well as safe and stable communities.

Governor Parris Glendening, 1999
State of Maryland



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The Changing View of Fatherhood

“What makes an absent, uninvolved father change his behavior and take on his paternal responsibilities—physically, emotionally, and financially?” This question, asked by David Cohen in the introduction to this report, is a complex one. His analysis, drawing on social science “tipping point theory,” which is used to explain the spread of epidemics as well as social ideas, suggests that peer pressure, religious leaders, community programs, and corporate culture all play a role. So, too, do larger social norms. And so, too, do state policies and practices. Through them, states have the opportunity to help define social expectations about fatherhood and develop policies and strategies that can benefit not just fathers, but most importantly, their children.

Recognizing this, in 1997, the National Center for Children in Poverty, with funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, produced *Map and Track: State Initiatives to Encourage Responsible Fatherhood*. At that time, every state, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico had at least one policy or program initiative to promote and encourage responsible fatherhood. It is now two years later. Evidence from the larger society suggests that there is a cultural change in the way fathers are viewed and view themselves. The people expressing the new view vary widely, from rappers who sing about the joys and responsibilities of fatherhood to employees of corporations who admit to struggling to balance work and family life. Given these larger social changes, this edition of *Map and Track Fathers* explores how the states are responding.

The 1999 edition of *Map and Track Fathers* addresses four questions that are central to developing an understanding of state strategies to promote responsible fatherhood:

- To what extent are state policies and practices responsive to the complex demographic picture of fatherhood that is emerging?
- What specific strategies are states developing to promote responsible fatherhood, and how do these strategies vary from state to state and from those used two years ago?
- To what extent are states providing leadership in developing policies and practices that promote responsible fatherhood, from an economic, social, and psychological perspective?
- What are the lessons from the current status of state efforts to promote responsible fatherhood for future state efforts?

The *Map and Track Fathers* Framework and Methodology

To answer the questions, this report provides two sets of information:

- National and state-by-state indicators that give a profile of fathers and fatherhood in each state, examining such indicators as family structure, employment, educational attainment, poverty status, and state activity in collecting child support; and
- Aggregate and state-by-state information on the policies and practices regarding responsible fatherhood, using the *Map and Track Fathers* framework. For each state, five specific strategies are tracked:
 1. Promoting public awareness about responsible fatherhood;
 2. Preventing unwanted or too-early fatherhood;
 3. Enhancing fathers as economic providers;
 4. Strengthening fathers as nurturers; and
 5. Promoting leadership capacity.

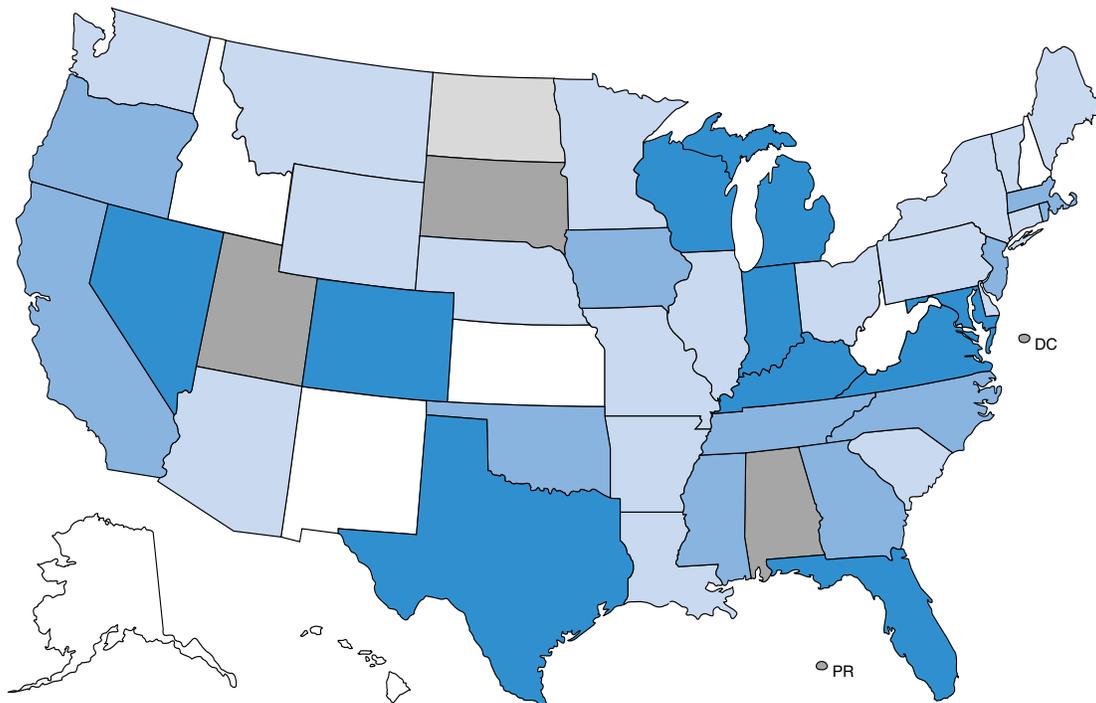
The five sets of strategies are based on research on state and local programs and policy as well as research on the importance of responsible fathering in child development. For consistency of tracking, the clusters are the same as those used in the first edition. (See Map 1 for a summary of state efforts to encourage responsible fatherhood.)

The research methodology for *Map and Track Fathers* builds on previous editions in the series. Two questionnaires on state fatherhood initiatives were sent to all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. (See Appendix A.) The first questionnaire was general, asking states to update information from the 1997 edition and to describe in detail any new programs. A second questionnaire was sent specifically to administrators of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) to determine the links between fatherhood and welfare programs and whether states are planning to use Welfare-to-Work (WtW) funds to provide education and job training to nonresident fathers of children receiving welfare. Demographic data were analyzed by NCCP's Demography Unit, utilizing information from the March Current Population Surveys collected annually by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (see Appendices C and D). Site visits were also made to three states to profile their efforts to address fatherhood issues. These, along with examples of city and county leadership, reflect the multiple pathways that policymakers and program designers can take to promote responsible fatherhood.

The analysis is based on responses from 45 states.* (Seven states—Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Kansas, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and West Virginia—did not respond). The response rate for this edition was somewhat less than in 1997, when 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico responded to either a questionnaire sent out by NCCP (47 states) or one sent by the Council of Governors' Policy Advisors (five states).

* The term 'states' in this report includes the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico unless otherwise noted.

MAP 1: LEVEL OF REPORTED STATE EFFORT* TO PROMOTE RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD



- State reports implementing one of the five strategies—1 state
- State reports implementing two of the five strategies—5 states
- State reports implementing three of the five strategies—18 states
- State reports implementing four of the five strategies—11 states
- State reports implementing five of the five strategies—10 states
- States not responding to the 1999 NCCP Fatherhood Survey—7 states

Note: The map does not include pilot or planned initiatives. See Appendix B for a table of all state-reported initiatives, including pilot and planned initiatives. (State refers to all 50 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.)

*Level of reported state effort is defined as implementing strategies intended to:

- Promote Public Awareness About Responsible Fatherhood
- Prevent Unwanted or Too-Early Fatherhood
- Enhance Fathers as Economic Providers
- Strengthen Fathers as Nurturers
- Promote Leadership Capacity

| Level of Reported State Effort to Promote Responsible Fatherhood | | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|---|-----------------------|
| State reports implementing one of the five strategies—1 state | North Dakota | | | | |
| State reports implementing two of the five strategies—5 states | Alabama District of Columbia | Puerto Rico South Dakota | Utah | | |
| State reports implementing three of the five strategies—18 states | Arizona Arkansas Connecticut Delaware | Illinois Louisiana Maine Minnesota | Missouri Montana Nebraska New York | Ohio Pennsylvania South Carolina Vermont | Washington Wyoming |
| State reports implementing four of the five strategies—11 states | California Georgia Iowa | Massachusetts Mississippi New Jersey | North Carolina Oklahoma Oregon | Rhode Island Tennessee | |
| State reports implementing five of the five strategies—10 states | Colorado Florida | Indiana Kentucky | Maryland Michigan | Nevada Texas | Virginia Wisconsin |
| States not responding to the 1999 NCCP Fatherhood Survey—7 states | Alaska Hawaii | Idaho Kansas | New Hampshire New Mexico | West Virginia | |

How *Map and Track Fathers* Is Organized

The 1999 edition of *Map and Track Fathers* is organized into five chapters. To set a larger social context, the introduction, “The State Dads Are In,” gives a societal view of fatherhood and describes the process by which public perception can change regarding responsible fatherhood. The introduction was written by David Cohen, an award-winning journalist from the United Kingdom who is spending two years studying fatherhood issues in the United States.

Chapter 1, “About *Map and Track Fathers*,” provides an overview of the framework and the methods used to collect the data for the report. Chapter 2, “The Faces of Fatherhood,” provides demographic findings and offers a qualitative look at the changing face of fatherhood nationally, highlighting particular subgroups of fathers. Chapter 3, “Dads in the States,” summarizes the program and policy information gathered from the states and explores a set of emerging issues not so clearly reflected in the findings. Chapter 4, “State Leadership in Action,” focuses on profiles of three states, one county, and one city providing leadership with fatherhood initiatives that reflect attention to a range of fathers and both the economic and nurturing aspects of fatherhood. Chapter 5 provides profiles of the individual states and gives a state-by-state overview of policies and initiatives reported by them. The key findings are highlighted below.

A National Profile of Fathers

Fathers, Children, and Families

There has been little change in the demographic profile of fathers since the previous edition of *Map and Track Fathers*.

- The proportion of children living in families where only the mother is present has remained around 24 percent from 1996 to 1998, accounting for about 17 million children in those years.
- The proportion of father-only families among all single-parent families rose slightly from 14 percent in 1996 to 16 percent in 1998, but remains 4 percent of all family types.
- Over the past decade, however, there has been a 76 percent increase in the percentage of children being raised in father-only families.
- Among mothers in mother-only families, 42 percent had never married and half (50 percent) were divorced or separated. Fathers in father-only families were more likely to be divorced or separated (57 percent) than never-married (34 percent).
- Within the states, the proportion of children living in mother-headed families was highest in the District of Columbia, with 56 percent. The percentage of children living in father-headed families was highest in Alaska, with 6 percent.

Fathers, Children, and Work

Common sense and research data both suggest that economic security for children is key to promoting their well-being.

- In 1997, most children under age 18 with working fathers had fathers who worked full-time (86 percent). About 28 percent of children had mothers who did not work.

Fathers, Children, and Schooling

Parental education is important to children, because there are direct links between schooling, employment, and family economic well-being.

- Between 1994 and 1998, 31 percent of U.S. children had fathers with only a high school education, and almost 54 percent had fathers who had gone beyond high school. Thirty-four percent of children had mothers with only a high school education, while 49 percent had mothers with more than a high school education.
- Of the states, California had the highest proportion of children whose fathers had less than a high school education (28 percent).

Fathers, Children, and Poverty

Growing up in poverty is a major risk factor for the well-being of children.

- From 1993 to 1997, an average of 9 percent of children with working fathers lived in poverty. That average jumps to 26 percent when children with working fathers living in or near poverty (that is, in families with incomes up to 185 percent of the poverty level) are included.
- Having both parents present helped reduce poverty levels: the poverty rate among children in single-parent families was 46 percent, while among those in two-parent families, it was about 10 percent. The poverty rate among children in two-parent families where the father worked full-time and the mother was not employed was 12 percent in 1997.
- The poverty rate among children with working fathers was highest in New Mexico, with 18 percent, and lowest in Maryland, below 3 percent. The poverty rate among children in two-parent families with a father working full-time was lowest in Rhode Island, with less than 1 percent, and highest in New Mexico, with 12 percent.

Fathers, Children, and Child Support

Given the numbers of children being raised by their mothers alone, having nonresidential fathers pay child support is often crucial to the economic well-being of the children.

- Although states were more active in child support enforcement (CSE) from 1995 to 1996 than they had been earlier, there was only a small increase in the collection of child support nationwide during that time. In 1995, the national collection rate among child support cases was 19 percent; in 1996, the rate was 21 percent.

- A recent report analyzing 1995 data estimated that only 63 percent of the \$28.3 billion owed to custodial parents was actually paid. (This excludes informal payments without court agreements and/or CSE involvement.)
- State child support collection levels by case varied in 1996 from 10 percent in the District of Columbia to 42 percent in Vermont.

The Changing Face of Fatherhood

While the aggregate statistical data tell an important story about fathers, they do not tell the entire story. To date, the main focus of the responsible fatherhood movement has been poor noncustodial fathers and so-called deadbeat dads—nonresident fathers who have the ability to pay child support but do not do so. Recognition that different groups of fathers have different needs, and hence will benefit from different kinds of interventions, is important for those who wish to design and develop programs and policies for fathers. Understanding the needs of the various subgroups may increase states' success in providing appropriate services for these fathers and subsequently help their children. The 1997 edition of *Map and Track Fathers* elaborated on some of the different subgroups of fathers, including teens, single-parents, and incarcerated fathers. While there is overlap among subgroups of fathers, other subgroups can be identified, including working fathers trying to be more involved with their families, noncustodial fathers, African American and other minority fathers, and gay fathers.

An Overview of State Findings

As in 1997, all of the states responding to the NCCP questionnaire had at least one activity to encourage responsible fatherhood. In fact, based on the number of states that responded, there was proportionally little change from 1997 to 1999 in the number and types of responses. See Figure 1.

Figure 1
Changes in the Number and Percentage of Types of Initiatives Reported by the States, 1997–1999

| Type of Initiative | 1997 (N=52)* | | 1999 (N=45)* | |
|--|-------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|--|
| | Number of states reporting activity | Percentage of states responding with initiatives | Number of states reporting activity | Percentage of states responding with initiatives |
| Promote public awareness | 39 | 75% | 38 | 84% |
| Prevent unwanted or too-early fatherhood | 40 | 77% | 37 | 82% |
| Promote fathers as economic providers | 46 | 89% | 43 | 96% |
| Promote fathers as nurturers | 40 | 77% | 36 | 80% |
| Build leadership capacity | 20 | 39% | 22 | 49% |

* Includes the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

Promoting Public Awareness

According to tipping point theory, broadened public awareness can be an important tool to build support for the emerging public perception of fathers as economically and emotionally responsible.

In 1999, 38 of the 45 responding states reported current activities using public awareness to promote responsible fatherhood. Two of the 38 states had only planned or piloted initiatives. Twenty-one states are implementing two or more public awareness initiatives to encourage responsible fatherhood. There was an increase in the proportion of states that have public awareness initiatives compared to 1997. These strategies include:

- Sponsoring conferences, forums, or summits on responsible fatherhood (11 states).
- Using sports teams to bring the message of responsible fatherhood to the public (10 states).
- Using public service announcements on posters, radio, television, or the Internet (22 states).
- Using special publications on fatherhood (9 states).
- Other strategies include the governor's declaring a special day to recognize the importance of parent involvement; the state reaching out to local programs to encourage their involvement in promoting responsible fatherhood; and the establishment of a public awareness committee with a mandate to develop new public awareness methods (11 states).

Preventing Unwanted or Too-Early Fatherhood

Young fathers and young mothers are especially vulnerable to poor outcomes for them and their children. Programs to prevent unwanted or too-early fatherhood mark a key early intervention strategy.

In 1999, 37 states indicated that they sponsor one or more initiatives to help prevent unwanted or too-early fatherhood. Of these states, 31 report that their initiatives have already been implemented, while six report having initiatives that are only in the pilot or planning stages. The nature of the initiatives varies greatly, from having a school curriculum to enforcing statutory rape laws to working with incarcerated youth. These strategies include:

- A school-linked strategy, usually a curriculum to help young men prevent unwanted fatherhood (12 states).
- Community-based programs funded or entirely run by the state (15 states).
- Federally-funded abstinence programs (8 states).
- Specialized direct-service programs that teach father responsibility through either case management, mentoring, or peer education (8 states).
- Pursuit and prosecution of older men who prey on younger women as statutory rape offenders (8 states).

- Other means, such as working with incarcerated youth, developing a task force on unintended pregnancies, developing plans for interagency collaboration around preventing unwanted or too-early fatherhood, encouraging state service agency staff to speak with and help young fathers, and working with businesses to promote positive youth development (10 states).

Enhancing Fathers as Economic Providers

Given the low national child support collection rates (nationally, CSE agencies collect from about 21 percent of the cases) and the large numbers of low-income fathers, strategies to promote economic family sufficiency among fathers is crucial.

A total of 43 states reported strategies to help fathers be better economic providers for their children, either by assisting low-income fathers with employment and training or by improving child support enforcement. Two of these states indicated their initiatives are either being planned or in the pilot phase. These strategies include:

- An employment and training program for low-income and unemployed fathers, often funded by TANF or Welfare-to-Work funds (29 states).
- Enhanced paternity establishment methods (18 states).
- Improving CSE procedures, including revoking driver and other state-issued licenses and using the Internet to post a top 10 “deadbeat dads” list, or enhancing methods of establishing paternity (22 states).
- Training staff at state and local service agencies, including Head Start, in CSE procedures (6 states).
- Continuing child-support pass-through (19 states).
- A state earned income tax credit (EITC) to low-income families (10 states).
- Other strategies, such as memoranda of agreement between state agencies and privately and publicly funded initiatives (14 states).

Strengthening Fathers as Nurturers

There are two reasons for states to develop strategies to promote fathers as nurturers. The first is that research on children suggests that in general (albeit with some exceptions), children with involved fathers do better. The second reason is that it is in the states’ interest to promote economically responsible fathers. Increasing evidence suggests that fathers who are engaged with their children—whether they see them informally or through planned access and visitation—are more likely to pay child support, either in dollars or, for low-income fathers who lack fiscal resources, in in-kind contributions.

In 1999, 36 states indicated they were implementing one or more initiatives to promote fathers as nurturers. This contrasts with 40 of 50 states and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico reporting such efforts two years ago, although, proportionally, the difference is not significant. Seven of the 36 reporting in 1999 indicated that most of their nurturing fatherhood programs are in the pilot or planning stage. Strategies include:

- Using access and visitation projects supported with federal funds from the welfare law (17 states).
- Sponsoring divorce and conflict mediation or counseling for divorcing or never-married couples (10 states).
- Providing programs for incarcerated fathers (9 states).
- Promoting father-friendly workplace policies (4 states).
- Other methods include establishing a putative father registry for men to volunteer paternity, and providing public assistance to mothers who marry the father of their child and outreach and parenting classes to new fathers (19 states).

Building State and Local Leadership Around a Fatherhood Agenda

A focus on leadership is key to promoting a policy agenda in the context of multiple state and local priorities. There are three clear ways of indicating leadership around a fatherhood agenda: (1) creating a state-level focus for engaging a broad group of stakeholders; (2) developing fiscal strategies to promote local program development and leadership; and (3) keeping track of funding levels.

In 1999, 22 states indicated that they have initiatives to build leadership capacity around responsible fatherhood. Two of them are in the pilot or planning stage. Strategies include:

- A designated individual or coordinating body to oversee fatherhood initiatives statewide (12 states).
- Keeping track of some or all fatherhood expenditures (11 states).
- Sponsoring community mobilization strategies to create coalitions or networks of community-based organizations or leaders (7 states).
- Using mini-grants to encourage innovative programs on fatherhood (8 states).
- Other strategies include using savings from TANF to sponsor fatherhood programs in state agencies; having state- and county-level staff receive training from the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families on how to engage fathers and develop responsible fatherhood programs; setting up local networks to help divorcing parents; and developing regional fatherhood coalitions for planning initiatives (4 states).

Beyond the Findings: Pending Issues for States and the Field

Bubbling up in the fatherhood literature, among practitioners, and indeed among fathers, are a series of emerging issues that will no doubt become more central in the coming years in response to the popular media, new policy directions, and fatherhood advocates. While a handful of states are addressing one or more of these issues, most do not. The issues include:

- Helping fathers in families trying to balance family and work responsibilities;
- Integrating strategies to encourage fathers as economic providers and as nurturers;
- Understanding the gender issues (including marriage) confronting the field;
- Connecting fatherhood to the broader child and family agenda;
- Keeping the momentum of the movement going despite changes in state leadership; and
- Building the knowledge base about fatherhood through research and improved statistics.

All of these issues have the potential to impact state policy decisions about responsible fatherhood and, depending upon how they are addressed, to “tip” the norms about fatherhood to encompass more active positive involvement with children from resident as well as nonresident fathers.

Reflections and Action Steps

Reflections on the Findings

Overall, the pattern of state findings suggests little change in state efforts to promote responsible fatherhood. States that seemed to be building momentum in 1997 continue to do so. But beyond this, much of the impetus for initiatives is driven by the availability of federal dollars through welfare reform and child support enforcement legislation. States continue to focus their initiatives on a limited number of subgroups of fathers. Further, only a handful of states are developing focused strategies to promote a view of fatherhood that encompasses both nurturing and economic responsibility. This is a loss not only for fathers, but even more importantly, for their children. It is also of concern that only a few states are addressing the issues and controversies that are emerging from the field. Below are highlighted themes emerging from the findings and suggested actions that states can take.

- Many states still focus on obtaining child support payments from absent fathers as their main method of ensuring responsible fatherhood. Although this has led to a slight increase in child support collections nationally, it ignores fathers in a family context and the nurturing role of fathers as well as research that shows a link between fathers as nurturers and fathers as economic providers.
- Where increased attention to fatherhood is visible, it appears that the catalysts are either the federal government or foundation initiatives. Thus, all reporting states indicate activities related to low-income fathers, particularly in response to welfare policy changes.
- There is evidence in a few states that the fatherhood agenda is spreading to other policy areas and is being integrated into a broader family agenda. This is evident particularly among those who work with young children (e.g., in Head Start), and in the areas of welfare reform, or domestic

violence prevention.

- States seem to be paying more attention to helping low-income fathers become better economic providers through fostering education and employment initiatives rather than focusing solely on traditional CSE strategies. This is due, in part, to increased federal funding from Welfare-to-Work grants but may also be due to the compelling body of research that suggests that low-income fathers who do not pay child support would pay if they had adequate employment.
- States, for the most part, continue to focus on a small subset of fathers, primarily noncustodial low-income fathers, teenagers, and, in a few states, incarcerated fathers. Very little attention is being directed to two-parent families or to parents in the context of their work. Only four states expressly stated that they were looking at father-friendly work policies. No state reported special initiatives to help custodial single-parent fathers.
- Although a number of states are beginning to deepen leadership strategies, only four states have developed leadership by implementing a combination of initiatives that show their commitment in philosophy and action to encouraging both financial and nurturing responsibility in fathering.

Action Steps for States to Take

This suggests nine key action steps that states might take to promote the well-being of fathers, and consequently their children:

1. Analyze and build on state fatherhood demographics.
 - Carefully analyze the demographics of fatherhood in each state.
 - Assess the fit between the demographics of fatherhood in the state and the actual support strategies to promote responsible fatherhood.
2. Strengthen state leadership and visibility around fatherhood issues.
 - Meet with fathers and their advocates from different subgroups to ascertain their needs and determine whether new state policies and practices might be developed in partnerships with them and other stakeholders from both the public and the private sectors.
 - Work with community and state leaders to create coalitions, commissions, or advisory boards around responsible fatherhood.
 - Designate governor's advisory staff to be responsible for overseeing fatherhood programming in the state.
 - Ensure that the state fatherhood agenda addresses both the economic and nurturing aspects of fatherhood.
 - Ensure that a broad fatherhood agenda is infused into all other aspects of the state's child and family policy agenda.
 - Allocate resources and build state-level and community-based collaborations to expand the fatherhood agenda.

3. Develop and expand strategies that allow fathers to be involved with their children as part of the state's overall policy.
 - Provide parent training and support in job-linked strategies to promote fathers as economic providers, using the emerging models that have been tested in settings ranging from community-based programs to welfare sites to prisons.
 - Review and revise child support enforcement policies to include promoting fathers as nurturers.
4. Build collaborations with child welfare and domestic violence advocates to ensure that there are mechanisms for protecting children in families that are having disputes over parental access, are in domestic violence situations, or whose safety may be otherwise jeopardized by fathers' behavior.
5. Take full advantage of federal opportunities to promote a fatherhood agenda that addresses the economic and parenting security of families. For example:
 - Use federal Welfare-to-Work funds to help noncustodial fathers find employment and become cooperative and contributing parents, or
 - Develop access and visitation programs that include never-married parents as well as children of divorcing or separated parents.
6. Create a mix of economic supports, in addition to improving child support collection and distribution methods, to help lift and keep children out of poverty. Some of these can be developed through state discretion, such as a state earned income tax credit, others by fully using federal benefits.
7. Promote father-friendly work policies by improving the state's own work policies and joining with the business and corporate community to foster family-friendly policies in private sector work settings.
8. Take deliberate steps to link the fatherhood agenda with other aspects of the state's child and family agenda, including early childhood initiatives, welfare reform, domestic violence, and income supplements.
9. Build the capacity to evaluate fatherhood programs, including assessing impacts on the well-being of children as well as their economic security, and monitor state spending on fatherhood.

Conclusions

The shift to responsible fatherhood seen through a societal lens appears to be approaching the tipping point where involved and nurturing fatherhood becomes the socially accepted norm. *Map and Track Fathers* adds information to the debate on how close the U.S. is to that tipping point as a nation and how actively the states are promoting responsible fatherhood. States, through their own actions and federal incentives, have opportunities before them that can help them better respond to the needs of individual fathers and encourage a social norm of fatherhood that is responsive both economically and psychologically. The states that are out front have modeled the ways other states can move. The task now is to spread the agenda so more fathers, children, and families can benefit.

INTRODUCTION

The State Dads Are In

by David Cohen

“It has helped that being an involved father has become socially acceptable on the street. I see many more young men taking care of their children than there used to be. I feel part of a norm.”

Ben, a 45-year-old father who was largely absent in the early years of his son’s life (now aged 11), but is now physically, emotionally, and financially committed as a father¹

Understanding the Critical Role of States in Promoting Responsible Fatherhood

What makes an absent, uninvolved father change his behavior and take on his paternal responsibilities—physically, emotionally, and financially? This is a complex question to answer. It is the American way to admire a man’s ability to rise above his demons as an extraordinary act of will, a triumph for the individual. But how and why individual fathers change their behavior is rarely that simple. The path from uninvolved to involved father is seldom a straight line from A to B along which a father travels, propelled by his own individual willpower. Peer pressure plays an enormously powerful role, as do religious leaders, community programs, and corporate culture. But so, too, do larger social norms.

This larger social picture is complicated by the fact that the two most prominent trends in fatherhood in the 1990s appear to contradict each other. There is the trend towards father absence on the one hand and father involvement on the other. The father involvement, moreover, is qualitatively different—more emotionally connected and integrated—from the kind of father involvement associated with previous generations of fathers in this century, who were typically involved with their children as dispensers of discipline, career advisors, and economic providers. So, while there are a significant number of fathers doing less than prior generations—not even being economic providers—a significant number of them are doing, and wanting to do, much more—being nurturers as well.

In the past, these two contradictory trends have been reconciled by dismissing greater father involvement as a worthwhile but limited middle-class phenomenon and father absence as a rampant characteristic of low-income neighborhoods.

But a growing body of national research and small-scale studies suggests that bifurcation by socioeconomic group is no longer valid and that there is a rising tide of father involvement across classes, with significant numbers of low- and middle-income fathers becoming, or wanting to become, more involved in the active upbringing of their children.²

For example, a 1997 U.S. Census Bureau report notes that poor fathers were almost twice as likely as nonpoor ones to care for their preschoolers while their wives worked, 43 percent versus 24 percent, respectively.³ Moreover, blue-collar fathers and fathers in service occupations, such as maintenance, police, fire fighting, and security, were more than twice as likely as managerial or professional fathers to look after their children while their wives worked, 42 percent versus 18 percent.⁴

In 1995, a joint small-scale study by the Erikson Institute and the University of Chicago of 100 low-income African American families with children under age three living in the Robert Taylor Homes, in Chicago, Illinois—the largest public high-rise accommodation in the country—yielded even more surprising results.⁵ The authors found that 56 percent of the fathers were described by the mothers as intimately involved in the daily care of their toddlers—things like braiding hair, reading, bedtime routine, dressing, and taking children to doctors; an additional 20 percent were involved in regular, though not as intimate, care of their child; and 66 percent of the fathers were described by the mothers as reliable providers of financial and material support. Fully 94 percent of these couples were not married, however, and would show up on the census as single-mother households with nonresident fathers. What's more, according to the authors of the report, their results are not inconsistent with those of other small-scale studies of low-income fathers with young children carried out elsewhere in the United States.

In addition to the results of published research, the emerging opinion of many hands-on practitioners working with fathers and of social scientists in the fatherhood field is that we are witnessing a significant shift towards responsible fathering up and down the income spectrum. They observe a new sensibility in low-income neighborhoods in which men who shun their responsibilities as fathers are disrespected on the street. Up until recently, many young urban American males considered it “cool” to dodge responsibility as a father—the line of the man on the street was, “A player plays but never pays.” Today, that attitude is considered “uncool.” According to many fatherhood experts, men are developing a new sense of understanding of the consequences of that attitude for children, which is resonating across ethnic groups, at every income level, throughout the country.⁶

The code of the street is changing. Increasingly, fatherhood practitioners say, fathers are showing up at schools, day-care centers, health centers, and parenting classes, in both middle- and low-income neighborhoods. Increasingly, practitioners are hearing spontaneous conversations among low-income men about their role as fathers. For the first time, too, they are seeing men visiting their friends and taking along their babies, spending quality time as groups of fathers and children together, just as mothers have always done. This is new, they say, and it suggests that social relationships between men and children

are changing to include nurturing as well as providing. Men, especially poor men, they say, never used to talk about being fathers in this way.⁷

In the midst of such a sea change, it is prudent to admit that much of the subject remains uncharted territory and that more research is needed. We need more hard data on what percentage of fathers are actually reengaging with their children, how that figure is changing over time, and exactly which critical interventions cause an absent father to return to his family. Nevertheless, social scientists have begun to suggest that what we are witnessing is nothing short of a social revolution—a revolution still in its infancy, one that could easily be set back—but a revolution, nonetheless, that is changing the code of what it means to be a man and which could have profoundly positive results for society.

Against this backdrop, the states have a window of opportunity in which to play a unique and critical role in promoting responsible fatherhood—both in setting the conditions to alter individual behavior (the microprocess) and in impacting the broader social code of fatherhood (the macroprocess). State policies and initiatives affect individual willpower directly through state interpretation and implementation of federal and state laws that create incentives to ease, or obstacles to block, opportunities for fathers to become more involved in a positive way with their children. State policies and initiatives also influence larger social expectations and norms through their effect on peer pressure, corporate culture, and community and religious support networks. Even more importantly, they set a framework for defining the parameters of responsible fatherhood: they can promote a view that encompasses both economic and nurturing dimensions or one that focuses more narrowly on only the economic dimension.

Applying a Public Health Model to Fatherhood Trends

A public health model, which does surprisingly well at plotting the path of social change, may help explain how state policies, programs, and initiatives fit into, and impact, the overall fatherhood picture. Epidemiologists explain that every medical epidemic has its “tipping point:” the point at which a low-level outbreak of a disease, such as influenza, changes from a stable phenomenon into a public health crisis. To contain an epidemic, one need not expunge the disease entirely, one need only keep the spread of the disease below the tipping point. But if it breaches that point, even huge amounts of effort can come to naught as the disease spreads with frightening momentum. Social scientists have long used this model to explain the spread of medical epidemics, but it has also successfully been applied to plot the trajectory of social problems like “white flight” in the 1970s and crime reduction in the 1990s.⁸

Applied to fatherhood, tipping point theory can illustrate, for example:

- why states should embrace those changes in welfare laws that give them new latitude to make fatherhood part of their welfare reform agendas;

- why it is important for states to see fathers as nurturers as well as economic providers;
- why a seemingly superficial state strategy like public service announcements, which use public personalities to promote responsible fatherhood, can have a sustained and powerful impact on male behavior;⁹ and
- why small changes in state policy, programs, and funding can make a disproportionately large difference as society approaches the tipping point.

The key lesson of tipping point theory is that the spread of infectious agents does not follow a linear pattern. It is exponential. Malcolm Gladwell, a staff writer for the *New Yorker* who has written about tipping points as they relate to crime reduction, explains its nonlinearity concisely using a rhyme his father used to say to him: “Tomato ketchup in a bottle/None will come and then the lot’ll.”¹⁰

This assumption of nonlinearity may seem intuitive to us when we think about epidemics, but what if it described the curve of social change too? And what if it allowed us to think anew about what social programs promoting responsible fatherhood work? In the application of public policy and programs to social problems such as the renewal of blighted neighborhoods and the turning of absent fathers into responsible fathers, we tend to carry the expectation that every extra unit of resources employed should produce a corresponding result. In doing so, we are making a linear assumption. But tipping point theory suggests that the path of social change is not a straight line, but rather a curve that has flat and steep parts to it. When we are far from the tipping point, in the flat part of the curve, large amounts of resources have only incremental effects. Politicians need patience at this stage of the process as policies and programs result in seemingly little change. As we approach the tipping point, the steep part of the curve, well-targeted policies and programs produce results that are disproportionately large in relation to the effort put in. Once the tipping point is reached, the path of social change takes off with an exhilarating momentum of its own, and a new paradigm is developed where something that was marginal becomes mainstream.

Before we apply this analytical tool to thinking about responsible fatherhood, a key difference between medical epidemics and social shifts must be borne in mind. With a medical epidemic, the infectious agents of change are germs. With a social shift, the infectious agent of change is word of mouth, usually augmented by mass media. It is this that leads to the spread of the idea and then to critical changes not just in attitude, but in behavior. Social scientists believe this typically happens through a five-step process:¹¹

1. A small group of risk-taking innovators launch the new idea into society or recognize and label an emerging trend.
2. The early adopters of the idea are usually opinion leaders or role models within their communities who have evaluated the idea and decided to adopt it; they are significant beyond their 10–20 percent of society because of their high public profile, their greater connection to social and interpersonal networks, and their exposure to the mass media.

3. The early majority, who make up approximately one-third of society, deliberate for a long time before taking on an innovation. They are the residents of mainstream, Main Street, U.S.A.
4. The late majority, also about one-third of society, accept an innovation out of economic need or sustained peer pressure. They tend, by nature or circumstance, to be more conservative and risk-averse than the early majority.
5. The laggards are traditionalists who resist an innovation even when it is in their own best interests not to do so.

The tipping point usually lies between the early adopters and the early majority. The early majority are therefore regarded as the critical link in the diffusion process. If an innovation is to succeed, they are the people who have to be won over, whose behavior has to change. But once they are won over and the tipping point is reached, the innovation achieves what is known as takeoff and rapidly becomes mainstream.

Applying Theory to Real Life

In applying this theory to the social shift to responsible fatherhood, two distinct stages can be identified.

In the 1980s, the very existence of the responsible father—one who willingly took on his paternal responsibilities, physically, emotionally, and financially—was parodied and ridiculed, first as the fanciful invention of advertisers, second as a man of doubtful masculinity. These fathers, often dubbed “new men,” were few in number in proportion to the total population of fathers, but they introduced the new father into society. They were the risk-taking innovators.

In the mid-1990s, however, it became more difficult to doubt the existence of the economically responsible and nurturing father. He showed up in serious demographic research findings, as seen in the following phenomena:

- Fathers raising their children alone—who, according to the March 1998 Current Population Survey (CPS) number 2.1 million, making up one-in-six single-parent families—are the fastest growing family type today.
- The arrival of the househusband, whose day is spent looking after the children and doing the housework while his partner earns the living. These are men who, by choice or circumstance, have role-swapped and who, despite being initially marginalized, have become considerably less so as their numbers have swollen to over 300,000.¹²
- The rise of the working father who, like the working mother, juggles work and family commitments. A burgeoning number of fathers—an aggregate of 20 percent according to U.S. Census Bureau Reports, rising to 42 percent among certain segments of fathers (such as blue-collar fathers and fathers in service occupations)—provide physical child care for their children while their partners work.¹³ The culture in the work-

place is shifting too. More men are “coming out of the closet” about being fathers, sectioning off time for important school days and helping out at home when children are ill.¹⁴

- The rise of the father who spends more time with his children, and in a qualitatively different way, than previous generations—whether he is married, never-married, or divorced, custodial or noncustodial. For example, a study by the Families and Work Institute found that working men in dual-income families are spending 2.3 hours a day with their children, up 28 percent from 1.8 hours in 1977, whereas for working women, the corresponding figure is 3.0 hours a day, down from 3.3 hours.¹⁵ They also found that for the first time, fathers are spending more time with their children than on their hobbies, which perhaps says more about the reordering of male priorities than any other measure.¹⁶

In addition, a significant number of high-profile American personalities in fields as diverse as entertainment, sports, politics, and the civil service have embraced responsible fatherhood in a highly visible way. Actor/rapper Will Smith, and prominent athletes such as Wayne Gretzky, John Ellway, and Mark McGwire all cut public images as involved dads.¹⁷ Vice President Al Gore promotes responsible fatherhood both as a politician and in person.

But the public embrace of responsible fatherhood has also come from the most unexpected quarters. Rap artists (such as LL Cool J, Snoop Doggy Dogg, and Common), the traditional antiheroes of the music industry, whose influence on young African American males is especially important, have taken it upon themselves to tackle fatherhood issues in their personal and public lives as well as in their lyrics.¹⁸ Even that bastion of male machismo, the police force, has borne witness to the recent announcement by the nation’s top cop, FBI director Louis Freeh, who publicly declared that he was taking paid paternity leave, an announcement immediately interpreted in the media as a sign that working fathers in the police force, the civil service, and society do not have to hide. All these men are among the early adopters.

Today we appear to be in the critical zone between the early adopters and the early majority. In 1998, approximately 70 percent of working fathers said they would like to spend less time at work and more time with their families, compared to 12 percent two decades earlier, in 1977.¹⁹ Research by the Kaiser Family Foundation reported in the *Washington Post* in 1998 reveals that success in work and success in family life—and resolving the tension between them—are the foremost concerns of married men.²⁰ Social scientists are uncovering a sea change in the aspirations, if not always the behavior, of working fathers.²¹ Cynics might argue that many fathers are only saying what is socially acceptable, but the fact that responsible fatherhood has become politically correct is itself significant, especially the new sensibility beginning to emerge in low-income neighborhoods in which men who shun their responsibilities as fathers are shown disrespect on the street.

The large gap that has opened up between aspirations and behavior, on top of an already significant number of fathers modeling responsible fatherhood behavior, should signal a clear political opportunity for policymakers. This is

the zone where the tipping point lies—once in the zone, opportunity for change is especially magnified. To borrow a baseball term, the bases are loaded. In this part of the curve, small shifts in social policy and judicious allocation of resources can leverage disproportionately dramatic results.

We cannot know exactly when the tipping point will be reached—optimists may see it as imminently achievable within 5–10 years; pessimists may believe it will take longer than that; cynics will doubt that men can ever get there. But we do know that there are many tipping points—there is the tipping point in society as a whole, but each state, each county, each city, each neighborhood all have their own tipping points as well. And more importantly, although we cannot know exactly where the threshold is, we are not bystanders in this process of change: public policy and wise use of resources can help lower the tipping point. This is why a document such as *Map and Track: State Initiatives to Encourage Responsible Fatherhood* is so important. It holds a mirror up to the states, identifying those most active in promoting a vision of economically responsible and nurturing fatherhood while at the same time documenting the concrete strategies states can and are using to reach the tipping point. It is a testament to where the states are for dads and a call to action to policymakers across the country on behalf of fathers.

It was not that long ago that society stood on the cusp of another tipping point in social affairs. A special issue of *Time* magazine on March 20, 1972, headlined “The New Woman, 1972,” ran a lead article that noted: “The New Feminism ... is a state of mind that has raised serious questions about the way people live—about their families, home, child rearing, jobs, governments, and the nature of the sexes themselves. Or so it seems now. Some of those who have weathered the torrential fads of the last decade wonder if the New Woman’s movement may not be merely another sociological entertainment that will subside presently, like student riots....” In addition, they wrote: “The women’s issue *could* involve an epic change in the way we see ourselves, not only sexually but historically, sociologically, psychologically, and in the deeper, almost inaccessible closets of daily habit. Its appearance has startled men and women into self-perception. It has outraged some, freed others, left some sarcastically indifferent. Men and women have shared equally in all three reactions (emphasis added).”²²

Three decades ago, “the new feminism” was in the wedge between marginal (early adopters) and mainstream (early majority), and it, too, had its doubters and devotees. This is the zone where “the new fatherhood” is today. The shift to responsible fatherhood is approaching the tipping point. It could easily be set back. It certainly will not get there without a push. But in the zone of the tipping point, huge social shifts are possible. For policymakers, it is the zone of maximum leverage.

This second edition of *Map and Track: State Initiatives to Encourage Responsible Fatherhood* will document how states are approaching the tipping point through policy and programs and paints a portrait of fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives.

Endnotes

1. Based on personal interviews conducted by David Cohen with low-income fathers in 1997 and 1998.
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 5. Hans, S.; Ray, A.; Bernstein, V.; & Halpern, R. (1995). *Care giving in the inner city*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago and The Erikson Institute.
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 7. *Ibid.*
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 11. Rogers, E. M. (1995). *Diffusion of innovations, 4th ed.* New York, NY: Free Press.
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 19. See Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg in endnote 15.
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