

Responsible Government:

*Investing in the Well-being of Black Fathers, Families and Communities*¹

October, 2009

Executive Summary

Our nation's well-being depends on tapping the potential of each new generation. In an increasingly diverse nation, where communities of color are projected to become the majority of the U.S. population by 2050,² we must ensure that ALL children have the opportunity to succeed. Yet, "two worlds of childhood" exist, where Black, Latino, and Native American children experience significantly higher poverty rates than most White and Asian children³ as well as the array of vulnerabilities and challenges that accompany poverty. This statistic is in large measure a reflection of the differential barriers some fathers face to fulfilling crucial financial and social/emotional roles for their children.⁴

These troubling disparities call for **mutual and interlocking responsibility** – the need for government to address the bigger picture of embedded racial inequities that produce accumulated barriers for African American men, families and communities, and the need for disconnected African American men to embrace familial and civic responsibilities and opportunities, thereby strengthening their communities and younger generations. Fathers' positive involvement in their children's lives and men's positive involvement in their communities are irreplaceable contributions to the strength of African American communities, and thus the strength of our nation.

This report documents the progress that can be made when the commitment to mutual responsibility flourishes. Because of recent changes in social policy with regard to fathers -- changes that have received bipartisan support -- measureable strides have been made in the last fifteen years in terms of men's involvement with their children and fulfillment of their financial obligations. To be sure, investing in fathers pays off for families. Today, more fathers declare paternity, more live with their children, and more non-custodial men pay child support⁵ than they did in the mid-1990s. As a result, over a ten year period child support collections doubled from less than \$11 billion in 1995 to about \$22 billion in 2004. Yet, the report also documents how much there is left to do -- measures which can take direction from the successes already demonstrated.

The report details that throughout U.S. history, public policy and private sector practices -- intentionally and not -- have produced the enduring persistence of poverty *disproportionately* for African Americans and the communities in which many live.⁶ Lower-income African American men encounter tough odds as they consider preparing for and entering into marriage and family responsibilities. Family policy has not always been on their side, and jobs policy has not been sufficient to address the magnitude of the challenges they face.

Historically, family policy has been focused primarily on mothers and children and often ignored or discouraged men's direct participation with their families.⁷ Public views about welfare *programs* generally have been formed by public views about welfare *recipients*, and the language around welfare recipients has been race-coded,

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² Shrestha, *The Changing Demographic Profile of the United States*. Congressional Research Service, May 2006.

³ Kids Count Data Center, Children in Poverty by Race—2008 <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/acrossstates/Rankings.aspx?ind=44>

⁴ Mothers, of course, make equally essential contributions to families. Although this document focuses on fathers specifically, nothing in it should be interpreted to downplay the essential contributions of women and mothers.

⁵ Center for Law and Social Policy, *Child Support 101* (Data from 1998 and 2007, respectively).

⁶ The fact that this document focuses specifically on African Americans does not suggest that other groups of color are not subjected to similar social forces. See, e.g., M. Simms et.al., "Racial and Ethnic Disparities Among Low Income Families," The Urban Institute, August 2009..

⁷ Marsiglio & Day. *Social fatherhood and paternal involvement: Conceptual, Data and Policymaking Issues*, 1998.

simultaneously demonizing African Americans and undermining public support for welfare programs for *all* low-income families.⁸ The Responsible Fatherhood movement, most recently, has been instrumental in shifting the policy climate by demonstrating that most fathers want to do well for their children but have significant barriers standing in the way of fulfilling this aspiration. In addition, most mothers want the father to be involved in raising the child. Recent family policy, with bipartisan support, has sought to engage fathers and support them in their roles.

The nation's jobs policy is a critical companion to its family policy when mapping the supports needed for family well-being. Low-income non-custodial fathers face significant employment barriers: limited educations and employment histories, low wages from work, and histories of incarceration.⁹ The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) -- the primary legislation through which Congress now funds labor market supports, including job training -- has experienced declines in funding almost every year since its inception in 1998. As a result, it is underfunded, overstretched, and provides a fragmented experience for users.¹⁰ Furthermore, key public workforce programs have a decidedly mixed record of success in assisting *minority* workers.¹¹ Noncustodial fathers' financial well-being is also compromised by EITC provisions that regard them as childless for tax purposes, even when they pay child support, and by child support enforcement policies that confront fathers with insurmountable arrearages upon release from prison.

What research and demonstration projects have taught policymakers is that **punitive policies and regulations do not work**. They are premised on the belief that men do not want to do their part. The accumulating evidence is that men will do their part when they see pathways to role fulfillment and that mothers want fathers involved in their children's lives. Further, the investments government has made in responsible fatherhood, healthy marriage, and domestic violence prevention programs has provided young men the opportunity to develop critical fathering, co-parenting, and relationship skills. Investing in strategies that promote fathers' presence are more cost effective over two generations than those that step in as a result of fathers' absence.

Discussion of **H.R.2979: The Julia Carson Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act of 2009**¹² can be informed by what has been learned from the last decades of government supports for working families, the impact of welfare reform, and the growth of the Responsible Fatherhood movement. These issues are situated within a context in which African American families have been--and are still--differentially affected by social policy and practice.

As the nation embarks upon an era of hope and change, we must not lose sight of the current economic state of all struggling families. Policies and programs for fathers and their families, then, must be race-informed and should be assessed for their equitable impact with consideration to the following:

- Because schools have too often under-served young men (and young women) of color, attention must be given to ensuring the **workforce preparation** needed for fathers to become reliable wage-earners.
- Because **good jobs** are typically located outside their neighborhoods or communities, attention must be given both to transportation and non-discriminatory access to available jobs.
- Because men of color are disproportionately caught up in the criminal justice system, attention must be given to providing opportunities for active fathering from prison, and offering skills development that will enable the successful **reintegration** of men to their families and communities upon re-entry.
- If men's circumstances have led them to conclude that they cannot be — or need not be — responsible fathers, attention must be given to setting realistic expectations for fulfilling parental obligations, combined with programs and supports that enable fathers to contribute productively to their families and communities in ways that reinforce **mutual responsibility**.

⁸ Gilens. *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Anti-Poverty Policy*. University of Chicago Press, 1999.

⁹ Martinson & Smith Nightingale. *Ten Key Findings from Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives*. Urban Institute, February, 2008.

¹⁰ Holzer, 2008 .

¹¹ Smith Nightingale & Sorensen, 2006; Edelman, Holzer and Offner, 2006.

¹² The provisions of H.R. 2979, of course, encompass all fathers and families. This paper is intended to describe its features in relation to the context of Black communities.