



OJJDP FACT SHEET

Shay Bilchik, Administrator

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Responsible Fatherhood

by Eileen M. Garry

Children who have an ongoing, positive connection to their fathers do better in school and get along better with their peers than children without such a relationship. Those children whose fathers play a positive role in their lives also tend to stay out of the juvenile justice system. Unfortunately, the latest figures show that 17 million children in this country have absent fathers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). In addition, each year 1 million children are born to unwed parents, and another million are newly affected by divorce. What is more, close to 3 million are being raised solely by their fathers.

Policymakers' interest in fatherhood has been fueled by these statistics and by three sets of realities:

- ◆ Father absence takes a toll on individual children, families, and communities—and is too often encouraged by the lack of family-supportive policies in the workplace.
- ◆ Some fathers face multiple barriers in connecting emotionally with their children.
- ◆ Some fathers are unable to provide economic support, often as a result of educational deficits.

These issues are the focus of a recent publication of the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP). *Map and Track: State Initiatives to Encourage Responsible Fatherhood (Map and Track Fathers)* examines the role of States in promoting responsible fatherhood. It looks at trends across the States, identifies and profiles State strategies to encourage fathers to be responsible, and summarizes fatherhood-related data on a State-by-State basis. The report also provides a statistical profile of fatherhood from a national perspective.

NCCP collaborated with the Council of Governors' Policy Advisors and the National Center on Fathers and Families, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, to develop *Map and Track Fathers*, which traces the demographic portrait of American fathers and features programs and policies that have been developed in all 50 States, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia to

promote responsible fatherhood. *Map and Track Fathers* provides two types of information:

- ◆ State-by-State social and economic indicators (fathers and their families, work, schooling, poverty, and child support) intended to create a profile of fathers and fatherhood in each State.
- ◆ State-by-State information about current policies and practices.

Map and Track Fathers also analyzes the economic and psychological roles of fathers and encourages community leadership to develop responsible fatherhood in the future.

Most fathers want to be caring, responsible parents, but for many, a number of barriers prevent them from effective parenting. Such fathers are a diverse group with varied needs. They include low-income custodial and noncustodial fathers who are too poor to adequately support their children or to pay child support, those in two-parent families who earn too little to bring their children out of poverty, and those raising children alone. Some of these men may not make "the transition from biological fatherhood to committed fatherhood," while poor relationships with the mother prevent some from being part of their children's lives. Increasing numbers are separated from their children because they are in institutional settings such as prisons. States are responding to this diversity of need, and NCCP has identified five strategies that States have developed to encourage fathers to be responsible and promote children's welfare. These strategies are intended to:

- ◆ Increase public awareness about responsible fatherhood.
- ◆ Prevent unwanted or too-early fatherhood.
- ◆ Promote fathers' economic responsibility as providers.
- ◆ Encourage fathers as nurturers and enhance family and other social relationships.
- ◆ Build leadership capacity around fatherhood issues at both the State and local levels.

As a result of the high level of interest, the 50 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico each reported at least one activity in support of promoting responsible fatherhood. Seven States (Arizona, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, and New Mexico) are executing activity in all 5 areas, closely followed by 32 other States reporting in 3 or 4 areas. Eleven states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico report activities in only one or two areas. Enhancing the capacity of fathers as economic providers is the strategy being implemented by the greatest number of States (44), and promoting leadership capacity is being undertaken by the fewest (18).

Some examples of specific State initiatives include making benefits available to two-parent families, establishing paternity in the hospital at the time of birth, and revoking or suspending driver's licenses of fathers who do not provide support. Several States use professional sports figures in media campaigns to promote responsible fatherhood, and many provide programs that address parenting, responsible sexuality, and mentoring.

Map and Track Fathers concludes by presenting a number of recommended strategies for enhancing the roles that fathers play in the lives of their children. It suggests specific approaches to building leadership that will encourage responsible fatherhood, expand fathers' roles as economic providers for their children, and increase fathers' ability to nurture and care for their children. In short, this report provides a framework of information that State policymakers and others interested in the welfare of children can use for developing a coherent agenda to encourage responsible fatherhood. NCCP expects to update this important report in 1999.

For Further Information

For a copy of *Map and Track Fathers* by Jane Knitzer and Stanley Bernard, send a check for \$19.95 to the National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia School of Public Health, 154 Haven Avenue, New York, NY 10032; telephone, 212-304-7129; fax, 212-544-4201; e-mail, snb13@columbia.edu; World Wide Web, <http://cpmcnet.columbia.edu/dept/nccp>. Checks should be made payable to Columbia University.

For additional information on related topics, such as strengthening families, early intervention to prevent delinquency, and a variety of juvenile justice issues, call the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse at 800-638-8736.

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The National Center for Children in Poverty 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 6 who are growing up poor.

Excerpts from *Map and Track Fathers* appear in this Fact Sheet with the permission of the authors and the National Center for Children in Poverty.

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