

INTRODUCTION

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In November of 1998, Morehouse College and the Institute for American values convened a conference on the state of African American fathers. Presenters at that conference included William Julius Wilson, Steven Nock, Glenn Loury, Elijah Anderson, and Ron Mincy, to name but a few. All of these scholars have done research in the area of the African American family and their work is highly respected both within the academy and among the general public. One statement that stood out particularly strongly was made by William Raspberry, the Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist, when he pondered aloud the question we had asked him to address himself to: "Are black fathers necessary?" His answer:

Are black fathers necessary? You know, I'm old and I'm tired, and there are some things 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. (Raspberry 1998)

Raspberry's statement forced those in attendance to think about the problems facing the family in contemporary society and, perhaps more important, raised the question: What is the role of the father in the lives of their children? For anyone concerned about the well-being of our nation's children, is any demographic fact more disturbing, more demanding of our collective attention, than the fact that the great majority of African American children do not live with their fathers? Similarly, is any demographic fact more hopeful, or more demanding of our collective encouragement, than the fact the proportion of African American children living with both their biological, married parents, although still quite low, has risen significantly since 1995?

In some respects, this entire volume is about those two facts. What do they mean for black children? For all children? For the possibility

of improved relationships between black men and black women? For U.S. public policy? For the possibility of racial justice, healing, and reconciliation? For our society as a whole? These are questions of great importance, and to their credit, the diverse contributors to this volume—blacks and whites, women and men, conservatives and liberals, and scholars from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds—treat them with the intellectual and moral seriousness that such questions deserve, but generally have not received in academic and public discussions.

Many of the chapters in this volume address the two major changes in family formation identified above. Recent positive changes are not large or definitive, but they are certainly suggestive. And if they continue, they will change the lives of millions of U.S. children and families for the better. Already these changes, particularly with respect to the black family, have demonstrated quite clearly that scholars and other leaders who have long insisted that nothing can be done to change trends in family structure are wrong. In 1997, Donna L. Franklin echoed a widely held view when she stated: “Policy makers will have more of an impact on the lives of poor and African American children when they accept the irreversibility of high levels of non-marriage of their mothers as a starting point for thinking about changes in public policy” (Franklin 1997, 219). Yet recent positive demographic trends in black (and, more broadly, U.S.) family structure suggest that there is nothing “irreversible” about the trends of father absence and family fragmentation.

The reintegration of nurturing black fathers into the lives of their children is the primary focus of the chapters that follow, but the reader will also quickly see several other themes in these papers: more paternity identification, more child support payments from nonresidential fathers, and noncustodial fathers who have better parenting and job skills and are visiting their children more often. If and when these current trends continue and becomes more firmly established in the years ahead, many other good results—including reductions in child poverty, greater asset accumulation for black families, reduced levels of crime, and reductions in domestic violence—are likely to follow.

This book is organized in three major parts. Part I (chapters 1 and 2) offers explanations for the declines in marriage within the African American family from several theoretical perspectives. In chapter 1, William Julius Wilson provides the necessary context for us to understand many of the problems facing inner-city families and fathers. Wilson asserts that marriage among many inner-city males is not felt by them to be an option: “[B]ecause of their experiences with extreme

economic marginality, they tend to doubt that they can achieve approved societal goals." Wilson views declines in marriage rates among blacks as a direct function of restricted opportunities. In essence, he sees structural conditions in the inner city as the primary cause for declines in the marriage rates.

Chapter 2, by Steven Nock, looks at the benefits of marriage and suggests that men who marry and have children are better off economically and socially and have longer life expectancies than their unmarried counterparts.

Each of the chapters in part II (chapters 3, 4, and 5) looks at a different aspect of marriage from an economic perspective. All emphasize the significance of marriage as in part a wealth-building institution. Married people earn, invest, and save more than unmarried people. In chapter 3, Ronald Mincy and Hillard Pouncy articulate a thesis that is unique in the literature; from their data they infer that the inability of many black males to achieve economic parity may lie in the fact that welfare supports goes disproportionately to black mothers and ignores black fathers. This may in turn discourage marriage among young unwed parents.

Chapter 4, by Maggie Gallagher, looks at marriage as a marker for social and economic well-being. Gallagher points out that when marriage rates are low in a community, it is the children who suffer the most. Her major point here is that marriage is in large part an economic partnership in which two people pool their resources, support one another's lives and careers, draw upon one another's social and family networks, compensate for one another's weaknesses, share tasks in an efficient way, and work cooperatively toward the goal of financial success. Moreover, she points out that marriage itself changes behavior in ways that tend to make people financially better off.

In chapter 5, Obie Clayton and Joan Moore examine the effects of the incarceration of great numbers of black men on family formation. Currently, about a third of the African American male population is under the control of the correctional system. The authors state that efforts must be directed at preventing prison, ex-offenders, and illicit cultural icons from gaining cultural hegemony if the black family is to thrive in the future.

Part III (chapters 6 through 9) deals with contemporary issues of fatherhood within the black community. The trend of black family fragmentation that countless analysts had assumed to be all but unstoppable—signaled by yearly increases in unwed childbearing and divorce and resulting in ever greater proportions of African American children living apart from their fathers—galvanized one

state, South Carolina, to take action. In chapter 6, Barbara Morrison-Rodriguez explains in detail how South Carolina dealt with the issue of father absence by bringing together representatives of the academic and faith-based communities and of the government to come up with a holistic approach to solving this problem.

In chapter 7, Wornie Reed shows how the public health intervention and prevention framework can be used to address the causes of fatherlessness. Reed points out that there is no one explanation for the decline in marriage rates but, rather, that one must look at the problem from different perspectives and identify the risk factors present at the local level.

Chapters 8 and 9 should be read together. Wade Horn (chapter 8) points out lessons learned from fatherhood programs and concludes that many programs do succeed in promoting positive fatherhood. He points out that fathers matter and that successful programs are those that intervene early in a male's life to teach responsibility. However, he also warns against perceiving any one model as a cure-all.

Enola Aird, in chapter 9, discusses the importance of marriage. From 1995 to 2000 the proportion of African American children living in two-parent, married-couple homes rose from 34.8 to 38.9 percent (Dupree and Primus 2001). Though the number remains distressingly low, more important is that it represents a significant increase in just five years and the clear cessation and even reversal of the long-term shift toward black family fragmentation. Aird posits that continuing progress on this issue may be possible.

As you read, you will quickly realize that many of the authors have varying opinions concerning marriage but that all agree that children need their fathers. It will also be readily apparent that the question of marriage and marriageability are deeply connected to the quality of the relationship between adult males and females. None of the authors in this volume discounts the suffering of many mothers and children who have lived through abusive marriages and relationships, but their focus here is on the males. Any strategy to promote black fatherhood must also stress the bonds between male and female as well as between parent and child.

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