An Analysis of Policy Regarding Non-Resident Fathers

Desiree Sanii, Cleopatra H. Caldwell, PhD; Michael Muhammad, PhD

ABSTRACT

Non-resident Black fathers (NRF) often need assistance to be successful in their parenting efforts because they do not live with their children. However, there is a great disparity in available research on fathers and mothers, as fathers are rarely the focus of research studies on parenting (Caldwell, Rogers & Sands, 2011). Black families face many disadvantages based on environmental influences such as higher unemployment and incarceration rates (United States Department of Labor, 2014 and PPI). Based on previous research with the Fathers and Sons Project (Caldwell et al., 2010, 2014), we are aware of the importance of fathers in a child’s life regardless of income or family structure. Despite the difficulty of finding work, U.S policies increase the father's responsibility for financial assistance in families (Anderlik & Rothstein 2002; Murphy, 2005). Coupled with the historical implications of increased susceptibility to stress due to discrimination experiences (Xanthos, 2009), the lives of NRFs are made even more difficult. However, the government does not provide adequate assistance for those in greatest need, preventing fathers from progressing economically, psychologically and socially (Zachary, 2008). This literature review analyzed this issue from a Public Health Critical Race (PHCR) framework because it helps give a critical investigation of the social contextual factors faced by Black NRFs that is needed to better understand the challenges they face in the father role. We hope to show that new fatherhood policies are necessary based on the many disparities present in contemporary family life. Considering the evidence and information gathered through this study, we suggest recommendations for enhancing the ability of NRFs to provide emotional and financial support to their children.

OBJECTIVES

1) To analyze the impact of the Welfare Reform Act, specifically Child Support Enforcement and TANF on Black NRFs by examining the policy implications of results from the Fathers and Sons studies and other research on NRFs. 2) To examine how policy decisions may influence health outcomes of NRFs. Because we use the PHCR conceptual framework, we hope to show the usefulness of this methodology in policy analysis. 3) Based on our findings, we discuss policy and support recommendations for NRFs.

METHODS

Through literature reviews, we analyzed results from research articles, including Fathers and Sons and other studies focused on policies like Child Support Enforcement and TANF and race issues that affect the well-being of NRFs. We looked for structural barriers fathers faced through the PHCR framework. Within this methodology there were four focuses: 1) contemporary race relations, 2) knowledge production, 3) conceptualization, and 4) measurement and action. Following these focuses helped us understand how the selected policies affect NRFs from a critical race theory perspective, thus not limiting our understanding of the lived-experiences of low-income families of color

RESULTS

A father’s involvement is important for the well being of his children. Due to the inequities NRFs face socioeconomically, socially, and healthily, policies that are meant to assist both father and family, hurt them. Policymakers need to consider the disadvantages NRFs face since they expect them to pay child support at the same level or at an increased level as other fathers that do not face structural barriers. To help stabilize fathers, programs need to be created to help them remain in their children’s lives.

CONCLUSIONS/FUTURE RESEARCH

We concluded that Black NRFs can improve their parenting skills and are interested in playing a role in their child’s life. However there is more assistance needed when it comes to the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act. Thus it is important to socialize fathers through programs that have a greater focus on fatherhood involvement and service needs. Due to structural barriers they face, fatherhood policies cannot ignore their circumstances due to racism. Black NRFs have high rates of depression, thus when one’s health is worse and mental health assistance is not provided, inequities will continue. With more research focusing on these punitive policies and creating effective programs, children will have the role model they deserve.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Remain aware of the financial and social well-being of both parents
- Form work-oriented programs that help NRFs become more financially stable
- Assign child support payments that fathers can realistically pay
- Foster more fatherhood initiatives by increasing TANF’s funds
- Allow NRFs that pay child support to be eligible for TANF
- Change the requirements for birth certificates to allow for more available paternal information
- Increase financial assistance for low-income families to decrease the number of low-income children facing poverty
- Create public policies that take a holistic approach and consider fathers as more than just a financial supporter