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The Fatherhood Movement and Domestic Violence

During the 1990s, and particularly since the inception of the federal government's Fatherhood Initiative in 1995, much national attention has been devoted to the subject of fatherhood in the United States. Many publications have addressed the topics of contemporary U.S. family structure and fatherhood (see, for example, Blankenhorn 1996, McLanahan and Sandefur 1994, Popenoe 1996, Stacey 1996); much recent legislation has been directed at promoting father involvement and penalizing noninvolvement (most notably, enforcing child support); and government agencies have been mandated to promote policies and initiatives that support father involvement (for example, including low-income noncustodial fathers in welfare-to-work programs).

While the expansion of efforts to support father involvement is often met with broad public and political support, several concerns have been raised over the direction and potential impact of these initiatives. These concerns include the re-stigmatization of single mothers and their children, the diversion of resources from custodial mothers and children to noncustodial fathers (e.g., welfare-to-work funds), the erosion of the legal status of custodial mothers as they face new conditions (e.g., changing custody laws in state courts), and additional requirements for low-income mothers receiving public assistance (e.g., cooperating in establishing paternity or facing reduced public assistance).

These issues are of particular concern in situations involving domestic violence. Some have argued that the prevalence of domestic violence has been exaggerated and that the proportion of people affected is very small compared to those who will be affected by legislative and policy changes overall. But recent research indicates the opposite, in particular for women who are receiving public assistance and whose own and whose children's livelihoods are directly affected by legislative and policy changes.

Recent research documents that domestic violence is common among women receiving public assistance (e.g., Raphael 1995, Allard, Colten, Albelda & Cosenza 1997, Kenney & Brown 1997) and that past and continued

abuse makes it extremely difficult for them to forego such assistance. The studies also show that public assistance represents a critical means for many women to escape such abuse (e.g., Brandwein 1999). For example, in 3,147 reported incidents of domestic violence in Salt Lake City between January 1993 and February 1996, 24% to 31% of the women reporting the violence had sought public assistance, and 22% of the women received such support within a year of the incident (Brandwein 1999:49).

Not only does the research document the prevalence of domestic violence; it also points to its continued underreporting. A recent study by the Institute for Wisconsin's Future and other organizations makes this apparent (Moore and Selkove 1999a). In 1998, researchers conducted surveys of 274 women victims of domestic violence in Wisconsin. More than 90% had received AFDC at some time and 61% were or had been enrolled in W-2 (the state's current public assistance program) (Moore and Selkove 1999b). While all of the women surveyed were or had been victims of domestic violence, only 30% indicated that they had disclosed this information to W-2 agencies (the only mechanism available under W-2 for identifying victims of domestic violence). As the report states, "Disclosure rates in this study are consistent with previous data, indicating that few welfare recipients voluntarily disclose information about domestic violence to caseworkers and that their reasons for not disclosing are varied" (Moore and Selkove 1999a: 9).

At the same time that the vast majority of cases were unrecognized, the abuse had significant repercussions for women's abilities to comply with many of the requirements of the W-2 program. As noted in the report, "Nearly one-third (29.8 percent) report that they have been fired or lost a job because of domestic abuse, and 34.7 percent report that their education and training efforts have been hurt by the abuse" (Moore and Selkove 1999a: 5). Over half (57.8%) of the women surveyed noted that they were threatened to the point that they feared going to school or work (Moore and Selkove 1999a: 6).

Even when women did disclose the abuse, they were not necessarily provided with information or services they needed. Approximately 75% of those who disclosed "were not informed of available counseling, housing funds, or information on the use of W-2 work hours to seek help. Only 4.9% of those who disclosed that they had been victims of domestic abuse were told that they might have good cause for non-cooperation with child support enforcement rules if it would put themselves or their children at risk of violence" (Moore and Selkove 1999b). The last point is striking given that the survey also found that 26.8% of the respondents were afraid their former partner would return and harass them if the state attempted to collect child support from him. Thus, while 26.8% of the respondents were concerned about cooperating with child support enforcement requirements, only 1.47% were informed that they might seek a good cause exemption.

Some father-focused policy organizations and fatherhood programs that serve low-income fathers are beginning to acknowledge the fact that domestic violence needs to be addressed, particularly in light of state and federal policies that place increasing pressures on low-income custodial and noncustodial parents and force interaction between them (e.g., through cooperation requirements). While some fatherhood programs are beginning to incorporate domestic violence intervention services (e.g., the Los Angeles County Parents Fair Share program), several initiatives have also been undertaken at a policy level with these concerns in mind.

On a national level, the Ford Foundation has supported the creation of several forums under the rubric *Reaching Common Ground*, through which advocates for various constituents address mutual legislative and policy concerns. One of these -- a joint project of the National Women's Law Center and the Center on Fathers, Families, and Public Policy -- brings together practitioners, researchers, and policy analysts who advocate on behalf of both men and women to consider legislation and policy related to paternity establishment and child support in light of welfare reform. Many of the same participants attend a more general discussion of welfare reform policies, domestic violence, and fatherhood issues in another series of *Common Ground* meetings that are now held on a biannual basis. In addition, the *Common Ground* initiative includes a cross-training project between the Taylor Institute and the National Center for Strategic Nonprofit Planning and Community Leadership. Domestic violence experts work with fatherhood programs to address the issue of domestic violence within the program, and practitioners from programs for low-income fathers work with batterer programs to inform them of the issues they confront.

In addition to the *Common Ground* projects, domestic violence experts working on addressing national-level

policy issues relating to welfare reform, poverty, and domestic violence are considering the issue of father involvement, and a number of organizations (the Family Violence Prevention Fund, the Center on Fathers, Families, and Public Policy, and the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community) are planning a joint conference on the fatherhood movement and domestic violence.

These initiatives and projects speak to the recognition by practitioners and policy analysts that domestic violence must be addressed within the fatherhood movement if policies and practices are to be developed that support rather than harm families.

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