

Crisis of fatherhood: When dad is missing

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This article appears in the [August 25, 1999](#) issue.

Fatherhood is in trouble in the black community, and throughout American society. That is the message issued recently by the Morehouse Conference on African-American Fathers, which released a report titled "Turning the Corner on Father Absence in Black America." Preparation of the statement was cosponsored by the Morehouse Research Institute and the Institute for American Values, and supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

It was a breakthrough document on the issue because it recognizes both cultural and economic reasons for the collapse of fatherhood. Furthermore, it claims that solutions must entail both cultural (indeed, religiocultural) and economic initiatives. The statement argues that the most important response to absent fathers is the renewal of marriage. But this must go hand-in-hand with economic measures to help black men become employable and therefore marriageable.

In emphasizing culture and economics in both the diagnosis and the cure, the Morehouse statement has bridged the gulf that so often separates conservatives and liberals in churches, in politics and in the social sciences. The statement has broken the ideological logjam clogging many ongoing debates over family values.

The statement was signed by 50 leading scholars, ministers and public officials, black and white. The list includes such luminaries as sociologist William Julius Wilson, former surgeon general Louis Sullivan, sociologist Glenn Loury, legal scholar Stephen Carter, Robert Franklin of Atlanta's Interdenominational Theological Center and Lawrence Mead of New York University. These scholars have themselves been on both sides of the culture vs. economics debate. In signing this document, many hatchets were lowered, if not buried.

In short, the Morehouse statement gets us beyond the logic of either/or. Declining economic opportunities for inner-city black men have decreased their ability to marry and support their wives and children. Racial discrimination has been a significant factor behind economic disadvantage and has further damaged the self-esteem of black men in their pursuit of jobs and marriage. Government programs have also exacerbated the problem by linking welfare payments to the absence of a male provider.

On the other hand, the institution of marriage has been weakened in the black community—and in the rest of society—for reasons not always directly related to poverty. A new report titled "The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage" documents the decline of marriage throughout society. This report, released by the Rutgers University National Marriage Project, shows that the marriage rate of unmarried women 15 years and older has fallen from 73 per 1,000 in 1960 to 49 in 1996. Whereas in 1960 94 percent of women were married at least once by age 45, today only 85 percent will be married by mid-life. National surveys reveal that the satisfaction of married couples has gone down. Young women are less hopeful about marriage and more willing to entertain alternatives—single motherhood and cohabitation. Young people in general are more pessimistic about the possibility of a successful marriage.

So marriage is in decline throughout society. But poor people pay more dearly for the emerging culture of nonmarriage than do those in the middle and upper classes. And the black community has paid the heaviest price of all.

The cure for the problem of absent black fathers must entail new jobs and economic opportunities for black men. But it will also require a new culture of marriage, new gender relations between black men and women, and a new appreciation of the need for responsible involvement by fathers in the lives of their children in cases when marriage itself is not possible. A similar agenda is needed by the rest of society. Culture and economics interact. Bad economic conditions undercut strong cultural values. But deteriorating cultural values can also weaken economic viability, especially for those who are already struggling to survive.

The Morehouse statement starts out with the growing evidence about the reality and effects of fatherlessness. Fatherlessness is correlated with poorer well-being for children. Children (especially young boys) living away from their biological fathers on average have more difficulties in life: they go to jail more often, do more poorly in

school, have more babies out of wedlock, suffer mental and physical abuse more frequently, have more difficulties getting jobs, and have more problems successfully forming stable families in adulthood. There are important exceptions, of course; but the overall statistics, well accepted by social scientists, are sobering, even alarming.

If these claims seem dramatic, it may be because one never hears them discussed in most mainline churches. We have asked dozens of people from these churches, "Have you ever heard in your church a discussion about the crisis of fatherhood?" and have yet to hear one member say yes.

The fatherhood crisis is one of the most hotly discussed issues of our time. Governments—including the U.S., England, Australia, Germany and South Africa—are concerned about what it means to raise a generation of children who grow up without deep bonds to their fathers. Father absence correlates with, and some think causes, a host of major social ills—the growing poverty of children and their mothers, growing welfare costs, decreased mental and physical health among children, a more poorly equipped job force, higher taxes and larger jails. These may sound like exaggerations. If they do, we can only invite you to read the Morehouse statement.

It is not entirely clear why mainline churches have not addressed fatherhood. But "Turning the Corner on Father Absence in Black America" should put the issue on a front burner. Churches must ask what they are doing to celebrate fathers and to prepare men to be responsible husbands and fathers. What are they doing to prepare young women for marriage to responsible fathers-to-be-men who also will be committed to what the Morehouse statement calls a love ethic of "equal regard"? What are these churches doing to confront the powerful social and cultural forces pulling men away from their traditional social roles as fathers and husbands? And what are they doing to address the issues of work and family, gender relations and gender equality that face postmodern families? The Morehouse statement constitutes a challenge to black churches and to all churches.

Information on "Turning the Corner on Father Absence in Black America" can be found at www.morehouse.edu/mri.htm or www.americanvalues.org. Information on "The State of Our Unions" can be found at <http://marriage.rutgers.edu>.