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THE FIRST FATHER: PERSPECTIVES ON THE PRESIDENT'S FATHERHOOD INITIATIVE*

Jessica Dixon Weaver

This article presents an analysis of the thirteen-year-old President's Fatherhood Initiative utilized by the executive branch to tackle the problem of absent fathers in America. It argues that this social policy attempts to recapture the economic incentives central to the controversial Moynihan Report of 1965, emphasizing patriarchal and classist solutions to America's family crisis. The programs instituted through the Fatherhood Initiative stigmatize black and brown fathers and fail to address underlying government policy issues that impact their ability to be present and financially supportive in their children's lives. The programs still emphasize the marriage dyad as a cure-all rather than seeking to support the various family forms that exist today, calling into question whether the Fatherhood Initiative has contributed to the improvement of children's well-being.

Key Points for Family Court Community:

- President's Fatherhood Initiative is a national family policy that recycles the Moynihan Report of 1965, turning the focus from African-American matriarchal-run families to absentee fathers.
- Almost half of over \$1.5 billion dedicated to the President's Fatherhood Initiative has been used to promote marriage to low-income, minority fathers, while research shows that investment in increasing the level of education of biological fathers would have a greater effect on their commitment to the mothers of their children and financial ability to care for their children.
- Many of the missing fathers are in prison, and focus on eliminating the mass incarceration of African-American men would go a long way towards improving the number of fathers who are present with their families.
- After sixteen years, there is still no comprehensive evaluation that gauges how successful the Fatherhood Initiative has been in improving children's well-being.
- Fatherhood and Marriage are not synonymous, and the executive branch should concentrate more on supporting the networked families and home environment of poor children in order to improve their well-being.

Keywords: *Fatherhood Initiative; responsible fatherhood; President; child well-being; marriage; family; Moynihan Report; incarcerated parents; Clinton; Bush; Obama*

I. INTRODUCTION

The President's Fatherhood Initiative has been in place for three generations. Presidents William J. Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack H. Obama have utilized their bully pulpit position as First Father to emphasize the necessity for men to take seriously their parental roles in the upbringing of children in America. Though various poor outcomes for children are attributed to the absentee father, other arguably more substantial environmental factors affecting children receive significantly less government and monetary attention. This article takes issue with Presidential Fatherhood Initiatives—past and present—because they are poor attempts to recapture the social and economic incentives central to the Moynihan Report of 1965. They re-emphasize patriarchal, classist solutions to 'America's family crisis,' and ignore how underlying racist criminal policy and systemic employment discrimination impacts minority fathers. While the programs instituted address the financial and parental relationship aspects of responsible fatherhood, the majority of them also include a Healthy Marriage or couple component.¹ The focus of the Fatherhood Initiative on the marriage dyad promotes marriage as a cure-all without accounting for other types of family forms that work for children. Finally, the Fatherhood Initiative begs the question of whether the ultimate issue that the executive branch is addressing is really child-centered poverty, inequality, or family values.

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II. PRESIDENTIAL INFLUENCE

The position of President of the United States has also been a role as First Father. Almost all U.S. Presidents have had children during their lifetimes, and although many of the children reached adulthood by the time of their father's presidency, many Presidents raised their children in the White House.² Historically, the First Father has been part of a normative, white, upper-middle class family consisting of a wife and children, with the wife assuming the gendered role of homemaker of the White House and caretaker of the children. Though this cultural standard is still the primary example of what constitutes an American family, frequent marriage, divorce, and short-term cohabitating relationships have become more characteristic of family life in the United States.³ The end result has been an increase in the number of father-absent homes, or homes where the father does not reside with the child and/or visits with the child infrequently.

There are several reasons why households have seen a declining presence of men. Divorce is at an all-time high, for instance, and large numbers of black and Latino men spend a considerable amount of their young adulthood in jail. But these factors don't tell the whole story. I am convinced that the role of fatherhood is a learned one . . . In homes where there are no fathers, many boys never learn at first hand [sic] what fatherhood means; instead they learn what others think it means to be a man. And all too often these two roles are at odds with one another.⁴

The traditional role of the father in the idealized white American family stems from a patriarchal standard whereby fathers hold tremendous power over their families and are responsible for raising their children with an appropriate set of moral values.⁵ Historically, the primary focus of fatherhood was economic support of the family. The role of breadwinner aligns with the hegemonic masculinities theory, which characterizes manhood in American culture as being synonymous with power, aggression, activity, competitiveness, stoicism, and lack of feminine characteristics.⁶ Childcare contrasts with one of the core principles of masculinity—"[d]on't be a girl."⁷ Much of what men and women associate with fatherhood is a social construct, one that the government and private sector reinforce with laws and policies, such as state child support laws, the Family Leave Medical Act and the Presidential Fatherhood Initiative.

The President's National Fatherhood Initiative is an executive domestic policy instituted by executive order that focuses on the issue of absent fathers. It essentially allows the President to fund a social initiative that is parallel to his platform.⁸ Beginning with President William ("Bill") Clinton and continuing for 16 years through Presidents George W. Bush and Barack H. Obama, fatherlessness has received significant government attention and funding. According to the nation's leaders, the crisis of the American family has been the breakdown of the institution of marriage, which has subsequently led to an increase in nonmarital childbearing. The decision to continue this long-running social engine speaks volumes about the President's view of family, and how important the perception of the present father is to the goal of improving various facets of American society.

The data on the consequences of father absence is stark. The National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI), a non-profit research organization founded in 1994, has become one of the leading producers of research on the causes and consequences of father absence, public opinion on family issues, and trends in family structure and marriage. According to the NFI's "Father Facts," 33% of children in America live apart from their biological fathers, which is double the amount from 1960.⁹ This number increases to 64%¹⁰ for African-American children and 34% for Hispanic children. "Children who live absent their biological fathers are, on average, at least 2-3 times more likely to be poor, to use drugs, to experience educational, health, emotional and behavioral problems, to be victims of child abuse, and to engage in criminal behavior than their peers who live with their married, biological (or adoptive) parents."¹¹ While 1 in 5 fathers who live apart from their children say they visit with them more than once a week, 29% see their children at least once a month, and 27% do not visit their children at all.¹² The federal government has relied on much of this research to support the continued funding of the Presidential Fatherhood Initiative.

In 1995, President Bill Clinton launched the first federal Fatherhood Initiative with Vice-President Al Gore. Clinton and the 104th Congress actually proposed fatherhood legislation, but it never passed.¹³ The Fatherhood Counts Act of 1999 and the Responsible Fatherhood Act of 1999 proposed funding for programming and media campaigns to promote marriage, successful parenting, and fiscal responsibility for children by their fathers. The primary source of funding for this legislation was from private donors, and by the end of 1990s and the beginning of the millennium, these sources were no longer available. Gore quietly took the lead on fatherhood, insisting that Clinton issue an executive memorandum requiring all executive departments and agencies to renew or establish programs, policies, and initiatives to engage and include fathers.¹⁴ In January 2000, during Clinton's second term, he unveiled a new Responsible Fatherhood Initiative to promote work and boost child support payments.

George W. Bush continued the push for responsible fatherhood in his 2000 campaign literature, pledging to provide \$200 million in competitive grants over five years to community and faith-based organizations for initiatives that both worked to deal with the crisis of father absence and to conduct marriage education courses.¹⁵ He set forth the Texas Fatherhood Initiative as an example of how he had made responsible fatherhood a top state priority, asserting that Texas was the leader of the bipartisan movement because it was one of only 10 states that had enacted all five fatherhood strategies identified by the National Center for Children in Poverty as important to child development.¹⁶ Bush's efforts eventually drifted to greater support for the institution of marriage as a precursor for responsible fatherhood.¹⁷

When Bush took office in 2001, he launched the Healthy Marriage Initiative and proclaimed Marriage Protection Week in 2003.¹⁸ "By supporting responsible childrearing and strong families, my Administration is seeking to ensure that every child can grow up in a safe and loving home."¹⁹ In Bush's second term, he more than tripled the country's spending to support marriages and promote responsible fatherhood. "In 2006, Congress approved spending \$500 million over the next five years to promote healthy marriages through programs including anger and stress management, premarital assessments, conflict resolution, and communication skills."²⁰ In addition, Congress authorized \$250 million to promote responsible fatherhood.²¹ The Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives was tasked with developing resource materials to guide urban congregations and other community groups in finding role models for young men who have been raised without fathers. President Bush also dedicated funds towards Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America to provide mentors for children with incarcerated parents.

President Barack Obama became America's first African-American president in 2009. His Fatherhood Initiative has similar focuses as the previous two initiatives, but the President has more than doubled the investment by seeking a \$500 million budget. Through his own upbringing, President Obama recognizes that the traditional family is not the only way the government can support responsible fatherhood.²² "Nurturing families comes in many forms, and children may be raised by a father and mother, a single father, two fathers, a stepfather, a grandfather, or caring guardian."²³ Obama's initiative continues the heavy support of providing mentors, but his focus is on the mentoring of fathers rather than children without fathers. He has paid special attention to the cultural differences and issues regarding father absence among African-Americans, Native-Americans, and Hispanics.

President Obama, similar to Clinton, has engaged other government departments to bolster the Fatherhood Initiative. The Department of Justice and the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships have focused on the intersection of fatherhood and criminal justice issues, including the connection between fatherhood and reentry programs, supporting families of incarcerated parents, child support and family courts, coordination between law enforcement and fatherhood programs, and the intersection of fatherhood and domestic violence.²⁴ The Department of Commerce has focused on strengthening the economic position of dads in the marketplace and empowering communities to actively engage issues impacting father participation.²⁵ The Department of Veteran Affairs has focused on how various entities can support military and veteran dads, particularly those who are absent from their children and spouses because of service to their country.²⁶

The goals of the President's Fatherhood Initiative are worthy and are supported by consistent statistics regarding the social ills that may likely befall children without fathers in their lives. In analyzing the merits of the Initiative, it is important to ask several questions. Where are the absent fathers? Are there other reasons that fathers are absent besides unemployment, underemployment, and lack of commitment to marriage and family? Are there other vital reasons why some children without fathers present in the home fare so much worse than other children in the same situation? After thirteen years, has the well-being of children improved as a result of the Initiative? Should the focus of advancing American family stability for the sake of children still be on men as the traditional father? This article will explore these questions.

III. ABSENT FATHERS—RECYCLING THE MOYNIHAN REPORT

From a historical perspective, President Lyndon Johnson planted the seeds for the Presidential Fatherhood Initiative in 1965 at a Howard University commencement speech:

The family is the cornerstone of our society. More than any other force it shapes the attitudes, the hopes, the ambitions, and the values of the child. When the family collapses it is the children that are usually damaged. When it happens on a massive scale the community itself is crippled . . . [s]o, unless we work to strengthen the family, to create conditions under which most parents will stay together—all the rest: schools and playgrounds, public assistance and private concern, will never be enough to cut completely the circle of despair and deprivation.²⁷

He sought to put into place a national family policy to combat the problem of high unemployment, specifically among black males. President Johnson recognized that unemployment affected more than just the individual man, but his entire family.²⁸ Without a means to support himself or his family, the African-American male was absent financially, and assumedly physically too. Data supported by the Moynihan Report illustrated how absentee fathers cost the government money in the form of welfare payments to women and heavy investment in Project Head Start, a program focused on the war on poverty which paid women “up to \$9.20 an hour to look after children of men who can’t make \$1.50.”²⁹ President Johnson’s focus on civil rights issues changed after he signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He clearly thought that employment of the black male would promote stability and improved well-being of the American family. The Howard University speech signaled the public shift of government support from the legal protection of rights for blacks to the obtainment of resources for them.³⁰ The goal was to enable blacks to achieve equality in the social and economic spheres of life in the United States.

Much of what President Johnson set forth in his speech was the result of a confidential report, entitled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” from the Office of Policy Planning and Research of the Department of Labor.³¹ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the Assistant Secretary of Labor in 1965, wrote the controversial report which eventually became known as “The Moynihan Report.”³² This report focused on the “deterioration of the Negro family” as a result of the legacy of slavery and the persistence of discrimination and segregation throughout the U.S. “The purpose of the report was to make an impassioned moral case for a massive federal intervention to break the cycle of black poverty and put African Americans on the road to socio-economic achievement and integration into American society.”³³

Moynihan asserted that a large and growing number of single-headed female families in the black community created a “tangle of pathology” that perpetrated black poverty over time and across generations. This matriarchal family organization prevented black males from fulfilling their roles as men. His hypothesis was that whenever males in any population subgroup lack widespread access to reliable jobs, decent earnings, and key forms of socially rewarded status, single parenthood will increase, negatively impacting women and children.³⁴ Moynihan argued that the key to establishing greater family stability within the black community was a “dedicated effort to provide jobs for black men.”³⁵

Initially the response to the Moynihan Report was favorable from African-American leaders,³⁶ but this soon changed after the report became public. Moynihan was criticized heavily because he was a white man who spoke negatively about black family life, black women and black men. Though he diagnosed the realities of life for northern, urban black families, his blunt language was offensive to many and dubbed racist by others. Civil rights leader Whitney Young stated that the title *The Negro Family* was “tragic in that as a result it has stigmatized an entire group of people when the majority of that group of people d[id] not fall into the category of the Negro family that Moynihan describe[d].”³⁷ Because the Moynihan Report suffered a major backlash from liberals, feminist, and minority communities, there never was a federal initiative to generate employment for low-income, minority men. As a result of the Report’s effect on Moynihan’s status as a social scientist, very few attempted to further research the causes of racial disadvantage and urban poverty during the 1970s and 1980s.³⁸ The number of single-headed female households in the black community grew from 25% percent to 65%, and the problem has spread to poor, working-class whites, increasing the number of single-headed female households from 6% to 25%.³⁹

It must be acknowledged that children raised by single parents do face greater risks in all areas of well-being, mostly because they are more likely to be poor.⁴⁰ Because they are indigent, they are likely to grow up in poor housing located in unsafe neighborhoods, with low-achieving schools and few community supports. In addition to these tangible negative factors, the emotional or psychological effect of having no relationship with one parent can lead to early experimentation with drugs, alcohol and sex, as well as dropping out of school and subsequent criminal behavior. Once children enter the juvenile justice system, they are much more likely to go to prison once they reach adulthood. In contrast, children in two-parent homes tend not to be as poverty-stricken as those in single-mother homes, and can therefore afford to live in better housing, located in safer neighborhoods, with higher-ranked schools and a number of community supports.

While the focus of the Presidential Fatherhood Initiative has varied from Clinton to Bush to Obama, the crux of the proposal remains the same: helping fathers gain access to decent employment will help them to provide financially for their children, and in turn, become more socially involved with their children. The ‘responsible fatherhood’ theme is more politically palatable than the negative pathology Moynihan associated with single-headed female households, and it has been neutrally packaged to apply to all fathers—even though the largest majority of children who face fatherlessness in the U.S. are African-American. Ensuring that deadbeat dads meet their family financial responsibilities as well as encouraging dead-broke fathers to become responsible parents in their children’s lives has been at the forefront of the fatherhood movement of the federal government.

Early studies from the Clinton Administration reveal that the impetus for the Fatherhood Initiative was derived from the data generated for the Moynihan Report. In 1997, a report on the family was conducted that specifically provided modern counterparts to the statistics presented in the Moynihan Report, except that the updated data was not specific to the black family.⁴¹ The report focused on the increase in the number of children born to unmarried females, and how this large increase, along with other demographic trends, contributes to the economic inequality between families headed by married couples and those headed by single females.⁴² In fact, Senator Daniel Moynihan was part of a bipartisan group that introduced the Child Support Distribution Act (CSDA), which proposed to ensure greater child support for low-income women and to promote responsible fatherhood. The CSDA was similar to the President’s Responsible Fatherhood Initiative in many ways. Clinton expanded the ways in which child support could be collected, including denying passports, booting of cars, intercepting gambling winnings, and prohibiting Medicare participation by providers owing child support.⁴³ Clinton’s primary goal was to institute welfare reform, which he eventually did through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA or the Act).

The PRWORA focused on welfare-to-work principles for both mothers and fathers. With regard to mothers, the Act established time-limited benefits and sought to move those mothers from the welfare rolls to work. For the fathers, PRWORA aggressively focused on paternity establishment, child support payment enforcement, and work. As the Fatherhood Initiative progressed alongside the Act,

important information was revealed regarding the status of unmarried, low-income fathers. While low-income fathers were not any different than low-income mothers from a socio-economic perspective, a big distinction was that fathers were not, for the most part, recipients of social welfare supports and services. Further, low-income fathers typically did not have the ability to navigate the often complex and punitive child support system that demanded them to be economically responsible for their children, but did not help them realize their financial, social, emotional and nurturing responsibilities. Additionally, the punitive nature of child support enforcement created disincentives for men to engage the system and often drove fathers underground, thus lessening the likelihood of their physical, emotional, and nurturing connection with their children. Finally, limited skills, education, and job availability inhibited low-income fathers in their efforts to successfully carry out their financial/which ultimately prevented them from responsibilities, realizing their full capacity as “responsible fathers.”

Today, tackling high unemployment is at the center of President Obama’s domestic policy. Similar to the 1960s, unemployment among black men is double that among white men, particularly in urban cities.⁴⁴ One of the reasons that the reiteration of the Moynihan Report fails is because of the emphasis within the responsible fatherhood programs on marriage and the maintenance of a relationship with the mother of the children. While this tracks the best means to establish paternity and custody through the legal system,⁴⁵ there is a loose connection between black male employment and black male commitment to marriage or serious relationships. In fact, recent studies show that there are many other factors that influence whether or not a black man will enter into a monogamous, committed relationship with a woman, much less a black woman.⁴⁶

The Pew Research Center found that a biological father’s level of education is closely linked with the likelihood that he will be married to the mother of his children.⁴⁷ If this is the case, perhaps it would be better to focus on ensuring that every black male graduates from high school AND college. Geoffrey Canada points out quite candidly in the documentary, “Waiting for Superman,” that we know what it takes to produce a successful student who comes from less than desirable home circumstances—the question remains *why* the U.S. has not implemented a school system that will reach that result.

IV. THE STIGMA OF THE MINORITY ABSENT FATHER AND WELFARE MOTHER

There is an unstated bigotry in the calculation of costs of father absence. Most of the programming offered to fathers is geared toward men in urban, low socio-economic areas and men who are incarcerated. This essentially means that the targeted audience of the President’s Fatherhood Initiative over the years has been the poor black male. Though the Moynihan Report does at least acknowledge the integral role that racism played in the creation of an unequal society for blacks, there is very little recognition of the role that the government played in creating the multi-generational economic and societal situation of many black and brown fathers.⁴⁸ Professor Michelle Alexander points out in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, that missing black fathers are in prison. “The public discourse regarding ‘missing black fathers’ closely parallels the debate about the lack of eligible black men for marriage . . . [a]lthough a million black men can be found in prisons and jails, public acknowledgment of the role of the criminal justice system in ‘disappearing’ black men is surprisingly rare.”⁴⁹ After incarcerated black men are released, it is extremely difficult for them to find employment, especially if they have a felony on their record. Legal discrimination in the workplace, in addition to being banned from applying for educational loans, public housing and welfare benefits, and voting, effectively result in “the new Jim Crow”—a systemic denial of full citizenship.⁵⁰

The connection of fatherhood absence with poverty and race assumes that children in homes where the father is in fact present and the parents are married do not require any government ‘fix.’ Maggie Gallagher, president for the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, asserts that marriage is the “only reliable vehicle” there is to turn men into fathers and to tie fathers to their children.⁵¹ This idea, along with the increasingly prevalent notion that ‘marriage is for white people,’⁵² supports programming

aimed at wandering black men. In 'racing' the Fatherhood Initiative, the message sent to the public is similar to that of the controversial Moynihan Report.

Curiously, there are few to no statistics provided about the number of children who are raised in single-parent female-headed households who are productive citizens of the United States. Much of the data that exists compares the ratios of risks in a child's life—showing that children raised by a single parent are more at risk than children raised in a two-parent home for a variety of negative outcomes.⁵³ Statistics related to children's well-being show a correlation between family composition and the likelihood of children being raised in poverty, residing in unsafe neighborhoods, attending low-performing public schools, developing mental health issues, and having contact with the juvenile justice system.⁵⁴ As a product of a single-parent female-headed household, President Obama can certainly vouch for the ability of women with a solid support network to raise successful children. His mother, however, was white (as well as her primary support network—Obama's maternal grandparents). It seems that poor black single mothers in need of government assistance are depicted as the problem, rather than white single mothers. The Fatherhood Initiative flips this stereotype of welfare queens associated with the Moynihan Report and turns the focus on men.

The statistics that are known provide that almost 67% of children are living with two parents, while 33% are living with a single parent.⁵⁵ The majority of U.S. children are living with fathers, but there remains a percentage of fathers who are also absent from their children's lives.⁵⁶ While these married fathers who do not spend enough quality time with their children are not the focus of the Fatherhood Initiative, their actions (or lack thereof) certainly have some influence on their children. Vice President Gore briefly mentioned this type of father in his speech at the Second National Summit on Fatherhood in 1998, referring to the Columbine tragedy where two white teens shot and killed 30 classmates. He noted that one of the shooters wrote that no one had ever truly loved or cared about him. Though Gore alludes to the fact that the teens who perpetrated these horrible crimes were abandoned by their fathers, the truth is that these teens came from two-parent homes where the father was present in the home.⁵⁷

There has been little written about the influence of the father on persons who commit white-collared crimes, which arguably have a greater effect on a wider population of people. Most crimes of this nature involve financial deception and are attributed to the person's bad moral choice rather than the influence of peers, family, or environment. For example, the men responsible for the mortgage crisis of 2007 and 2008 have yet to be criminally prosecuted; it would be interesting to know whether their fathers were actually present or absent in their lives and, if so, the type influence their fathers had on their upbringing. Moreover, there are many married fathers who are essentially absent from their children's lives due to long work hours, such as bankers, lawyers, doctors, and business executives. The President's Fatherhood Initiative is not geared toward this type of father because he typically provides very well, economically, for his children, and does not usually fall within the targeted race and class. The traditional notion of husband and father being primarily a provider for the family persists—research shows that both men and women in the current generation believe it is very important for a man to have the ability to financially support a family if he wants to be married.⁵⁸

Much of the criticism of the Fatherhood Initiative from father's rights advocates stems from the government's focus on fathers in a one-dimensional role of economic provider.⁵⁹ The child support enforcement system focuses on four core duties: 1) locating absent parents; 2) establishing paternity; 3) setting orders and awards; and 4) enforcing the orders.⁶⁰ Research has shown that a significant percentage of men are not "deadbeat dads" but rather dead-broke fathers, struggling to survive economically.⁶¹ In many instances the fact that the father is dead broke does not necessarily correlate to him being absent from the child's life.⁶² In fact, a review of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study conducted by Timothy Nelson and Kathryn Edin showed the following: 1) for all racial and ethnic groups, there were relatively high rates of ongoing father involvement for urban children born outside of marriage; 2) it is far less likely for black nonmarital children to have parents living in co-residential unions, though "somewhat more likely to have parents in an ongoing, romantic partnership that is not co-residential."⁶³ These studies, along with the revelations from Clinton's fatherhood era, likely prompted the changed focus in Obama's Fatherhood Initiative.

Research shows that many citizens believe that one parent can raise a child as well as two parents together.⁶⁴ Most of these Americans are women—42% of all women agree with the statement that one parent is as good as two.⁶⁵ When broken down by race, a majority of all minority women fall within this category.⁶⁶ Perhaps an oversight by the Presidential Fatherhood Initiative is the exclusion of mothers as independent primary caretakers. While 57% of the Responsible Fatherhood programs in 41 states do have a couple-related component to the types of programs that can be funded through government grants, most of these programs focus on healthy marriages and make some attempt to encourage mothers and fathers to legitimize their relationship (and in turn, their children).⁶⁷ Thus, the inclusion of mothers occurs via their potential role as wife *and* mother, rather than just dealing with the single status of each parent and focusing on the best means for co-parenting. It seems the most successful programs include sessions that focus on communication between the two parents as a means of improving relationships within the family as a whole.⁶⁸

One of the criticisms of Bush's Fatherhood Initiative was the focus on marriage as the means to lift women out of poverty.⁶⁹ Bush's welfare incentives included formal language in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families ("TANF") such as, "to end dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work and marriage," and "to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families."⁷⁰ Prominent legal scholar Angela Ouwachi-Willig notes in her research how Bush's policy promoted marriage as the cure to poverty for minority women, ignoring the choices of women to decline entering into legal bondage with abusive men and/or men who were economically unstable.⁷¹

Indeed, marriage is not a cure-all, and many families find themselves in situations where several adults work together in order to raise children. Grandparents have become primary caretakers for grandchildren for a variety of reasons, including parental incarceration, drug addiction, or death of a parent.⁷² Oftentimes grandparents and other relatives such as aunts and uncles provide supplemental care for children raised by single parents. Professor Melissa Murray notes in her research that the government should do more to support the 'networked family' which has become more prevalent in America due to the pressures on the normative family and its deterioration.⁷³ The executive branch could do more with a different type of initiative that is designed to improve child well-being by recognizing the variety of home environments in which children grow and developing programs that support these children and families.

V. WHAT IS THE ULTIMATE ISSUE?

*Promoting responsible fatherhood is the critical next phase of welfare reform and one of the most important things we can do to reduce child poverty.*⁷⁴

*Children need a father's love and attention, and they also need a loving family. To paraphrase my friend Josh McDowell, a child's greatest source of security today is not only knowing my mom loves me and my dad loves me, but also that Mom and Dad love each other. If we are serious about renewing fatherhood, we must be serious about renewing marriage.*⁷⁵

*We can do everything possible to provide good jobs and good schools and safe streets for our kids, but it will never be enough to fully make up the difference. That is why we need fathers to step up, to realize that their job does not end at conception; that what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child but the courage to raise one. . . .⁷⁶ [o]ur children don't need us to be superheroes. They don't need us to be perfect. They do need us to be present. They need us to show up and give it our best shot, no matter what else is going on in our lives. They need us to show them—not just with words, but with deeds—that they, those kids, are always our first priority.*⁷⁷

Each of the above quotes illustrates the crux of the President's Fatherhood Initiative during the terms of Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama, respectively. President Clinton emphasized welfare reform as a means to improve child poverty. President Bush focused on legal, two-parent families as a means to stabilize children's homes. President Obama concentrated on developing the traditional

values of men—hard work, consistency and commitment to family. At the heart of the President's Fatherhood Initiative is supposed to be the improvement of child well-being. So, has child well-being improved over the last thirteen years? If so, has the Fatherhood Initiative been central to these improvements?

A comprehensive evaluation of how successful the Fatherhood Initiative has been over the last decade is limited.⁷⁸ In order to be evaluated, the fatherhood programs have to meet certain research criteria, and some of the programs are less well-designed than others. With regard to the 20 programs serving fathers involved in the criminal justice system that were reviewed for effectiveness, only four of them met the research criteria, and therefore only a handful of the fatherhood programs serving fathers in the greater community could be properly evaluated. Without measures for success, it is difficult to show how the heavy investment of the President in fatherhood absence has paid off. Moreover, the majority of the evaluations conducted did not measure the effects of the programs on children, but rather on the participating fathers.⁷⁹

The primary goal of almost all fatherhood programs is to improve the well-being of children.⁸⁰ Out of 39 programs evaluated, the majority of them included programs for the father and partner/spouse or father and family.⁸¹ Research shows that programs that include a supportive component to re-establish or improve the relationship with the child's mother fare better results than those that just focus on the father and the child. The one thing that has remained the same throughout the Presidents' Fatherhood Initiative is the amount of equal funding for healthy marriages and responsible fatherhood.

The institution of marriage coupled with parenthood has a long history in the United States, undergirded by U.S. Supreme Court rulings and federal and state legislation.⁸² The existence of the normative family has persisted, even in the face of new formations of families. The Forum on Child and Family Statistics uses 40 key indicators to determine the state of children's well-being in the U.S., with family and social environment being one of the seven domains of these indicators.⁸³ In 2009, 70% of children ages 0-17 lived with two parents, 26% with one parent, and 4% with no parents.⁸⁴ Among children living with one parent, 79% lived with their single mother.⁸⁵ The percentage of all births that were to unmarried women more than doubled between 1980 and 2008.⁸⁶ Though family composition is important to a child's well-being, father absence is not the principal cause of high school failure, poverty, and delinquency.⁸⁷ Because of this emphasis on marriage, the President has missed opportunities to focus on other critical factors that affect a child's well-being, such as physical environment and safety.⁸⁸ Research shows that marriage remains an ideal for most unmarried adults; however, younger adults attach far less moral stigma than their elders to out-of-wedlock births and cohabitation without marriage.⁸⁹ Nearly half of adults in their 30's and 40's have spent a portion of their lives in a cohabiting relationship.⁹⁰ The tide has turned on marriage as the centerpiece of parenthood, and thus it would make more sense to invest in other environmental factors that the government can more directly influence, or at least, more effectively track.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Fatherhood Initiative has passed through three generations of Presidents, with each President making his mark on the promotion of responsible fatherhood in the U.S. Sparked by the passion of Vice President Gore, President Clinton established the initiative to address the social and economic ills faced by families where the father is absent from the home in which the child lives. The evolution of the Fatherhood Initiative reveals a questionable balance between acceptance of the unstable state of families today and the promotion of marriage among low-income parents. It should be noted, however, that the promotion of stable families does not have to focus on marriage as the sole form of stabilization for children.

Harkening back to the Moynihan Report from 1965, there are many other facets of a parent and child's life that contribute to generational poverty that are not based on family structure. While emphasizing the importance of being present in a child's life is worthy of government support, the Fatherhood Initiative should take a backseat to much more heavily funded initiatives in the private and

public sectors to improve public education and the quality of child care, equalize pay and treatment of women who have children in the workplace, and eliminate discrimination of minority men in employment. Moreover, the largest segment of men that fall into the category of being absent are either imprisoned or on parole. Rather than focus on programs that assist a limited segment of men in the U.S., the President should focus efforts on eliminating the industrial prison complex and finding new ways to handle minor drug crimes, drug use/addiction, mental health issues, and child abuse and neglect—which are all significant factors or underlying reasons why U.S. prisons are so full.

President Clinton did more to remove African-American fathers from their communities and homes by instituting crime bills and policies that ensured a disproportionately negative impact on black men.⁹¹ President Bush continued this conservative stance on crime while eliminating many of the social policies that helped families and children live decent lives above the poverty line. Though President Obama has had a number of higher priority issues to deal with throughout his presidency, he has failed to capitalize on opportunities to improve the extraordinary high unemployment rate of black men or address the mass imprisonment of African-American men in the U.S.

The Presidents failed to recognize that child well-being can be improved by not only concentrating on the primary people that directly impact children but also the basic services and resources that those people need to thrive. The reason why family composition is so critical to children is because of the value of the support network that surrounds them. Grandparents, other relatives, and affordable, qualified caregivers help parents balance the responsibility of raising children. Secure employment with a livable wage for both women and men with low education, reliable health care, safe schools and neighborhoods, decent housing, and solid public education are also vital components for parents and children. Fundamental changes in criminal, employment, and welfare laws and policies are required in order to change the landscape in which these families live. A more integrated approach is needed to help fathers be more present in their children's lives.

Though President Obama is an exceptional example, he is proof that a single mother can raise a productive child with the right type of support system. His passage of universal health care legislation, the Lilly Ledbetter Act, and increase in funding to Head Start and community colleges are notable steps in the right direction. However, more must be done by the executive branch to undergird the support system of single parents and construct laws and policies that do not foster the prison industrial complex. It may take demands by voters to change the social initiative of the President. As 2012 approaches, the question remains whether U.S. citizens will accept the same platform of the President or voice concern over an expensive domestic policy with very little proof of efficacy. This is not to say that the Fatherhood Initiative should be abandoned all together. However, after almost a decade and a half, the President should be able to assess the success of the programs across the nation before investing more millions into the Initiative. If this is not possible, the executive branch should be bold in transforming and expanding its platform to reach the framework that supports families in America.

NOTES

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1. *See generally* OPRE REPORT 2011-20, CATALOG OF RESEARCH: PROGRAMS FOR LOW-INCOME FATHERS 9 (June 2011) (“The Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRP) grant program authorized by the Claims Resolution Act of 2010, authorizes the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to provide \$75 million in grant funds for demonstrations that promote responsible fatherhood through three types of activities: healthy marriage, responsible parenting, and economic stability. A similar amount is designated for grants for healthy marriage and relationship skills education.”).

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11. *Id.*
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14. Richard Louv, *Bush's Fatherhood Team Scrutinized*, *SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIB.*, June 10, 2001, at A3.
15. *George W. Bush 2000 On the Issues: Child Welfare/Family Policy*, 4PRESIDENT.ORG, <http://www.4president.org/issues/bush2000/bushcheney2000childwelfare.htm> (last visited Oct. 28, 2011).
16. *Id.*; Mary Leonard, *Bush Pledges Funds For Fatherhood*, *BOS. GLOBE*, June 8, 2001, at A2.
17. *Responsible Fatherhood Programs*, *supra* note 13.
18. JOHN KENNETH WHITE, *BARACK OBAMA'S AMERICA: HOW NEW CONCEPTIONS OF RACE, FAMILY, AND RELIGION ENDED THE REAGAN ERA* 102 (2009).
19. Press Release, President George W. Bush, *Marriage Protection Week*, 2003 (Oct. 3, 2003) (available at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/pubs/2003/press/marriage_proclamation.html).
20. John Kenneth White, *supra* note 18, at 103.
21. *Id.*
22. *See generally* BARACK OBAMA, *DREAMS FROM MY FATHER: A STORY OF RACE AND INHERITANCE* (1995). President Obama is the product of a biracial marriage, and his family is a blended one of various national backgrounds. He was raised by a divorced, white single mother and his maternal working-class grandparents, and grew up without his father, who was a native of Kenya, Africa. His parents both remarried and had other children. His stepfather was Indonesian, and in addition to the sister that he shared with his mother and step-father, he has eight half-siblings from his father's subsequent marriages and relationships.
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24. *Id.*
25. *Id.*
26. Rev. E. Terri LeVelle, *White House and Veteran Affairs Host Fatherhood Forum on Military and Veteran Fathers and Families*, *WHITEHOUSE.GOV* (March 29, 2010, 11:17 AM), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/03/29/white-house-and-veterans-affairs-host-fatherhood-forum-military-and-veteran-fathers->.
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28. *Id.* at 2–3.
29. *Id.* at 392.
30. *Id.* at 3.
31. *Id.* at 3–4.
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33. Douglass S. Massey & Robert J. Sampson, *Moynihan Redux: Legacies and Lessons*, 621 *ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI.*, 6 (2009).
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36. JAMES T. PATTERSON, *FREEDOM IS NOT ENOUGH: THE MOYNIHAN REPORT AND AMERICA'S STRUGGLE OVER BLACK FAMILY LIFE—FROM LBJ TO OBAMA* xi (2010) (noting positive responses from A. Philip Randolph, Whitney Young, and Martin Luther King, Jr.)
37. *Id.* at 77.
38. Massey & Sampson, *supra* note 33, at 9–12. Moynihan was vilified as racist and sexist because of the media's depiction of his report, and he “left the administration scarred and somewhat bitter. . . .”
39. National Father Initiative, *supra* note 9.
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46. Kathryn Edin et al., *Claiming Fatherhood: Race and the Dynamics of Paternal Involvement among Unmarried Men*, *ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI.* 621 (2009); Massey & Sampson, *supra* note 33.

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52. Joy Jones, *Marriage is for White People*, *THE WASHINGTON POST*, March 26, 2006, at B01 (recalling how a group of 12-year-old African-American males expressed interest in learning how to be good fathers, but disinterest in the idea of marriage, stating, “Marriage is for white people.”); RALPH RICHARD BANKS, *IS MARRIAGE FOR WHITE PEOPLE? HOW THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MARRIAGE DECLINE AFFECTS EVERYONE* 1–28 (2011) (describing the decline of marriage in America, especially amongst African-Americans and exploring the reasons why African-Americans are the most unmarried people in the U.S.).

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60. *Id.* at 44.

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62. Solangel, *supra* note 61, at 1004–05.

63. National Father Initiative, *supra* note 9, at 162.

64. CHARTING PARENTHOOD: A STATISTICAL PORTRAIT OF FATHERS AND MOTHERS IN AMERICA, *produced by CHILD TRENDS* 11–12 (2002).

65. *Id.*

66. *Id.* (Noting that 64% of black women, 61% of Hispanic women, and 58% of American Indian/Alaskan Native women agree with this statement).

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72. Esme Fuller-Thomson and Meredith Minkler, *America's Grandparent Caregivers: Who Are They?* in GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN: THEORETICAL, EMPIRICAL, AND CLINICAL PERSPECTIVES 9–10 (Bert Hayslip Jr. Robin Goldberg-Glen, eds. 2000).
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78. JACINTA BRONTE-TINKEW, ET AL., *supra* note 67, at 2–12 (stating “[t]he missions of fatherhood interventions are varied and programs have been designed to influence varied outcomes”); JACINTA BRONTE-TINKEW, ET AL., ELEMENTS OF PROMISING PRACTICE IN PROGRAMS SERVING FATHERS INVOLVED IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM 3–14 (2008).
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80. *Id.*
81. *Id.* at 8–9.
82. *See generally* Meyer v. Nebraska, 262 U.S. 390 (1923); Pierce v. Society of Sisters, 268 U.S. 510 (1925); Loving v. Virginia, 388 U.S. 1 (1967); Wisconsin v. Yoder, 406 U.S. 205 (1972); Turner v. Safley, 482 U.S. 78 (1987); Michael H. v. Gerald D., 491 U.S. 110 (1989); Defense of Marriage Act, 28 U.S.C. § 1738C (1996).
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84. *Id.* at 4.
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86. *Id.*
87. Sara McLanahan, *Growing Up Without A Father in* LOST FATHERS: THE POLITICS OF FATHERLESSNESS IN AMERICA 87 (CYNTHIA R. DANIELS, ed. 1998).
88. Lisa Dodson, “*The River Runs Deep*”: *Father Myths and Single Mothers in* POOR AMERICA IN LOST FATHERS: THE POLITICS OF FATHERLESSNESS IN AMERICA 114–115 (CYNTHIA R. DANIELS, ed. 1998) (noting that single poor mothers of all races needed safe homes for their children); David R. Williams, *Poverty, Racism, and Migration—The Health of the African American Population in* RACE, POVERTY, AND DOMESTIC POLICY 319–324 (C. MICHAEL HENRY, ED. 2004) (noting that residential segregation and discrimination involving the actions and inactions of local and federal government, financial institutions, and real estate companies resulted in entrapment of blacks in inner-city ghettos; poor inner-city environments create high-stress neighborhoods which can lead to illness, such as high blood pressure, or death from community violence; blacks experience disproportionate exposure to environmental toxins because of both city and rural residential locations).
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90. *Id.*
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