

D.C. FAMILY POLICY SEMINAR

**"FAMILY FRIENDLY" WELFARE REFORM:
USING WELFARE POLICIES TO STRENGTHEN THE FAMILY**

Background Briefing Report

By

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This report provides a brief introduction to the issues addressed by the D.C. Family Policy Seminar on November 9, 1994. The author wishes to thank the numerous individuals in the government of the District of Columbia and in local and national organizations for contributing their time and efforts to this seminar. Special thanks are also given to the staff of the National Center for Education in Child and Maternal Health and to Tobi Printz, Amy Scott, Shelley Stark, and Kerry Whitacre for their invaluable assistance in hosting this seminar.

THE D.C. FAMILY POLICY SEMINAR
"FAMILY FRIENDLY" WELFARE REFORM:
USING WELFARE POLICIES TO STRENGTHEN THE FAMILY

This seminar, "Family Friendly Welfare Reform," is the fourth in a series designed to bring a family focus to policymaking. The panel features four speakers:

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Maurice Roberts, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Strengthening the Family, Mayor's Welfare Reform Task Force, and Director of M.R. & Associates, 1368 Euclid Street, N.W., #502, Washington, DC 20009; (202) 588-5895.

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The seminar focuses most directly on the role of the father in the welfare family, and considers such issues as paternity establishment, child support, training and work programs, and barriers to marriage. This background report summarizes the essentials on several topics. First, it provides an introduction to the topic of family friendly welfare reform. The following sections briefly describe the key issues involving welfare and marriage, paternity establishment, and economic support. A directory of some programs within the District that focus on family welfare concludes the report.

INTRODUCTION

The Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program was established in 1935 to assist needy children without fathers by providing their families cash grants. Originally designed primarily to help poor children whose fathers had died, it has expanded to cover poor families in which the father (or mother) is incapacitated, absent, or unemployed. While there are a variety of other programs that provide income support to those in poverty, the term "welfare" is usually applied to AFDC.

The composition of the welfare rolls has changed dramatically since AFDC was created. In its early years, almost all families receiving AFDC did so due to the death of the father. This is no longer true. Table 1 tells the story. In the District, just over 2 percent of families receiving AFDC had suffered the death of a spouse. In more than 80 percent of the cases, the absent parent had never been married to the legal guardian. In almost two-thirds of the cases in the District, paternity had not even been established: that is, one parent was not just absent but (legally) unidentified. Families receiving welfare in the District were much less likely to have had two married parents, or even to have paternity established, than families around the remainder of the United States. Note, however, that the vast majority of welfare recipients in **all** states live in families that have only a single parent.

Reason	Percent of AFDC Children	
	District of Columbia	United States
One Parent is Absent	93.5	89.4
No Marriage Tie	81.3	56.3
Paternity Established	17.0	23.6
Paternity Not Established	64.3	32.7
Divorce or Separation	5.6	27.2
Death	2.3	1.3
Other	1.5	1.5
Unknown	2.8	3.1
Both Parents Present	6.5	10.6
Incapacitated	1.3	3.6
Unemployed	5.2	7.0

Source: Ways and Means, 1994 Green Book, p. 418

There is little empirical support for the idea that welfare has **caused** the increase in children born out of wedlock or families with single parents (although there is much political debate about this issue). But there is little doubt that welfare has **not** successfully **encouraged** parents to marry and remain together.¹

The rise in non-marital child-bearing and in single-parent families has had clear social costs. Children born to unwed parents or raised in single-parent families are much more likely to be poor than children raised in two-parent homes. Children born and raised in single-parent families also appear more likely to drop out of high school, to get pregnant as teenagers, and to get in trouble with the law than children born and reared in two-parent homes.² Of course, individuals have many reasons for bearing and raising children outside a marital union, and children born to single-parent families are hardly destined to have personal difficulties. One need not make a judgment regarding either the morality or the wisdom of such individual choices to argue that our public policies should do more to encourage both men and women to fulfill their responsibilities for raising children.

One need not fix blame solely on either men or women for the rise in children born out of wedlock and in single-parent families. While it may be tempting politically to make blanket statements about the irresponsibility of men who "conceive then leave" or women who favor "the carriage more than marriage," the situation is actually far more complicated. It is true that too many men are willing to enjoy the act of becoming a father but not the commitment of being one; too many women also undoubtedly want to be mothers but not to raise children. But the available evidence indicates that these stereotypes are severely limited. Most out-of-wedlock births result from ongoing relationships rather than casual encounters. Large majorities of these out-of-wedlock fathers apparently maintain at least some contact with their children and provide them some support; many fathers also regret that their own economic situations leave them unable to provide more support. Low paternity establishment rates, furthermore, are not due solely to the actions of the fathers. Many mothers also avoid seeking to establish paternity either because they want nothing more to do with the fathers or because they want to protect them from a legal system perceived as punitive.³

"Family friendly" welfare reform would help bring families -- fathers, mothers, children, and grandparents -- together rather than drive them apart. Truly comprehensive reform might attempt to strengthen the rights and responsibilities of each of these parties simultaneously. This briefing report, however, will focus primarily on existing barriers to paternal involvement in families receiving welfare and potential ways to lower these barriers.

Some of the major goals of welfare reform designed to strengthen families include:

- * **Improving the economic situation of families;**
- * **Encouraging the formation of two-parent families;**

¹For a detailed review of the literature, see Mary Jo Bane and David T. Ellwood, Welfare Realities: From Rhetoric to Reform, Harvard University Press, 1994.

²Barbara Dafoe Whitehead discusses this issue in "Dan Quayle Was Right," Atlantic, 1993. For a more scholarly discussion, see Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Kathleen Mullan Harris, "When and Why Fathers Matter: Impacts of Father Involvement on the Children of Adolescent Mothers," in Robert I. Lerman and Theodora J. Ooms, Young Unwed Fathers, pp. 117-140, 1994.

³For a discussion of these issues, see "Encouraging Unwed Fathers to Be Responsible: Paternity Establishment, Child Support, and JOBS Strategies," Background Briefing Report, Family Impact Seminar, 1990.

- * **Reducing the incidence of out-of-wedlock births;**
- * **Increasing the self-sufficiency (social and moral as well as economic) of families so that the government will bear a smaller burden in supporting them;**
- * **Strengthening the sense of mutual rights and responsibilities among family members.**

But what should be the rights and responsibilities of the father and mother toward their family? There is broad agreement that both parents have a responsibility to assist the family financially, personally, and morally. There is also a consensus that those who fulfill these obligations should have the right to participate in the family's financial, personal, and moral decisions. While it is difficult to specify exactly what these responsibilities and rights entail, it seems clear that at a minimum:

- * **Paternity should be legally established**, so that children have definite claims on both parents;
- * **Economic relations should be clarified**, so that both parents understand that they must provide economic support to their children;
- * **Personal contacts should be strengthened**, so that fathers, mothers, and children may develop a sense of mutual affection.

In fulfilling these responsibilities, parents will reasonably expect certain rights. For example, any parent committed to providing economic and personal support to his or her family will understandably expect to play a central role in that family's economic or personal decisions.

It will be difficult to balance responsibilities and rights. Fathers, mothers, and children may well differ regarding the importance of their responsibilities or rights; rights and responsibilities will inevitably come into conflict. For example, if punitive measures to enforce paternal responsibilities are adopted, paternal rights are likely to be neglected. Yet as the purpose of genuine welfare reform is to strengthen the family, neither responsibilities nor rights can be neglected.

To understand how our welfare programs help or hinder parental rights and responsibilities, we need to examine four questions:

1. What barriers or incentives does welfare create regarding the decision to marry or enter into a committed relationship?
2. What difficulties or opportunities does welfare provide for establishing paternity?
3. How does welfare help or hinder the ability of parents, particularly fathers, to provide economic support for their children?
4. What other effects does welfare have on the ability of fathers to provide support to their families and receive support from them?

Each of these questions will be considered briefly in turn.

MARRIAGE AND COMMITMENT

AFDC was originally established to provide assistance for poor families with an absent parent. As a result, one parent **had** to be absent for the other parent and the children to qualify for benefits. This meant that couples -- married or not -- were ineligible for assistance. In order for the family to obtain benefits, one of the parents had to leave home (if separation had not already occurred). Rules were established to ensure that the remaining parent truly was alone. These eligibility requirements and "man in the house" rules were heavily criticized as discouraging marriage and commitment.

Responding to these criticisms, Congress created the AFDC-Unemployed Parents (AFDC-UP) program.¹ In contrast to AFDC, the AFDC-UP program provides benefits for two-parent families if both parents live with the children and one or both of the parents are incapacitated, or the principal earner is currently employed and meets the program's work experience requirements. The work experience requirements are substantial. To qualify for the program, the family must have low income, and the principal earner must be employed for fewer than 100 hours a month, must have been unemployed for at least 30 days prior to receiving benefits, and yet must have worked for at least 6 of the last 13 quarters. In other words, the principal earner must have a substantial work history but must now have been unemployed for at least a month.

These eligibility requirements have made it difficult for many poor families to qualify for the program. For example, in 1993, about 25,000 families received AFDC in the District in a typical month, but only 173 families received AFDC-UP.² While many families were not eligible for AFDC-UP because only a single parent was in the home, the AFDC-UP's employment criteria also kept many poor two-parent families in the District from receiving benefits.

Welfare thus still creates unfortunate incentives regarding family unity. It is relatively easy for a poor single-parent family to qualify for AFDC; it is difficult for a two-parent family to qualify. Welfare's eligibility requirements discriminate against two-parent families.

One policy solution for this problem is simple but expensive: the work-related eligibility requirements for AFDC-UP could be eliminated. Principal earners would no longer have to work less than 100 hours per month **and** have substantial employment histories to qualify for benefits. By making **all** poor families (i.e., families with income and wealth less than specific levels) eligible for welfare benefits, AFDC would no longer create incentives for one parent to leave the home or raise barriers to two-parent families seeking assistance. Yet the benefits of this proposal for strengthening families do not come cheap. Every additional 110 families added to the District's AFDC-UP program would cost the city about **\$1 million per year**.³ Given the District's financial difficulties, this option is not attractive. One way to hold welfare costs down while expanding eligibility is to reduce the average benefits per family receiving AFDC. Given the poverty already experienced by welfare recipients, this option is not appealing.

Councilmember Linda Cropp has introduced legislation (Bill 10-479) to eliminate the 100 hour requirement. This proposed measure would apply only to those individuals receiving AFDC benefits when the legislation is enacted. As a result, it would not assist two-parent families currently ineligible for welfare.

¹Since enactment of the Family Support Act in 1988 the states and the District are required to offer AFDC-UP.

²Ways and Means, The 1994 Green Book, pp. 391, 393.

³In 1993, average year benefits per family in the District for the AFDC-UP program were about \$7000; yearly administrative costs per AFDC family in the District were \$1,125. Ways and Means, The 1994 Green Book, pp. 391, 393.

PATERNITY ESTABLISHMENT

It is not possible for the father to play a central role in a family's development if he is unknown. The father can become known in a couple of ways. One way might involve a simple declaration to the mother and child: "I am the father." While such a personal statement might be good enough for the family, it does not create the permanent, legal link required for participation in social programs. Once paternity is legally established, the child has a right to numerous benefits that may be available to the father, including social security, health insurance, military dependent benefits, and worker's compensation.

Paternity establishment is indeed a prerequisite for obtaining child support orders and is attempted for those receiving benefits through the AFDC program. As a result, the federal government has placed various requirements on the states (including the District), offering funds to promote paternity establishment.¹

Still, paternity establishment rates are low in the District. The problem is especially severe among families receiving AFDC. For example, in 1992, paternity was established in only 20 percent of the families in the District that were receiving AFDC yet had no marriage ties. In contrast, paternity was established in almost 70 percent of the unmarried families receiving AFDC in Maryland.²

Why are paternity establishment rates so low in D.C.? One reason might be that one or both parents are unwilling to establish paternity. The father might want to avoid his responsibilities or not know how to fulfill them; the mother might want the father out of her life. Welfare reform may change these views by educating mothers and fathers about the benefits of paternity establishment and by increasing the incentives for both mothers and fathers to voluntarily participate in paternity establishment.

A second reason is that the paternity establishment system itself discourages participation. In particular, systems that start late, go slowly, appear punitive, and involve the courts appear to be less successful at establishing paternity than systems that begin early, move quickly, seem non-threatening, and are less legalistic. It may be easiest to establish paternity before the child is born (or in the hospital at the time of birth) by encouraging the father to sign a simple "declaration of parentage" form. Several states are now experimenting with programs to make paternity establishment easier.³ The programs that appear most promising appear to have adopted several strategies.⁴ These include:

- * **Reaching out to young unwed fathers and marketing messages.** The programs develop a community strategy to provide information through various networks on the benefit of paternity establishment. They "woo" fathers into the social service system so that they may be helped to receive education, training, and job opportunities.

¹For a summary of these funds, see Ways and Means, The 1994 Greenbook, p. 471.

²Author's calculations from Ways and Means, The 1994 Greenbook, p. 418.

³Several state efforts are reviewed in Sandra Danziger, Carolyn K. Kastner, and Terri J. Nickel, "The Problems and Promise of Child Support Policies," in Robert I. Lerman and Theodora J. Ooms, Young Unwed Fathers: Changing Roles and Emerging Policies, 235-250.

⁴See, for example, Esther Wattenberg, "Paternity Actions and Young Fathers," in Lerman and Ooms, Young Unwed Fathers, pp. 231-232.

- * **Simplifying and decriminalizing paternity establishment.** They attempt to establish paternity at the time of birth and separate it from the child support system.
- * **Increasing funding.** They provide additional resources to assist in paternity establishment.

It is worth noting that several European countries require paternity establishment at birth for all children born out of wedlock. The state of Wisconsin also has such a law.

ECONOMIC SUPPORT

Families receive welfare because they lack economic resources. But how much economic support do fathers typically provide their families? Why do they not provide more? Does welfare help or hinder fathers in providing their families economic support? To answer these questions, it might be helpful to consider the reasons why the father might not be able to offer sufficient economic support to his family.

First, the father may not have the necessary economic resources to help his family even if he wants to. When this is the case, governmental policies might need to address the father's education, training, and employment skills. Current federal law does not provide such assistance to unwed fathers who live outside the home. The Family Support Act of 1988 did contain a provision allowing five states to experiment with programs that could assist non-custodial fathers in their employment efforts. These five states are now conducting their experiments.¹

In the District of Columbia, Councilmember Cropp has submitted a legislative proposal to require non-custodial parents of children receiving AFDC to participate in the JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills) program. Implementation would be subject to the availability of job training funds, and participants could not participate in or perform work activities that would displace a paid public or private employer. This proposal appears to be similar to those offered in other states; if adopted, federal approval would be required for it to be implemented.

Second, the father might be willing and able to provide support, but both father and mother want to avoid the formal, legal channels of child support. Given current policies, there are good reasons for parents to do this.

The size of a family's AFDC benefits in the District depends on the family's size and its "countable" income.² In general, a family receiving AFDC loses \$1 in benefits for each additional \$1 in countable income it receives.³ While this 100 percent marginal tax on countable income would seem to discourage recipients from working, the available research shows that its impact on work effort has been modest.⁴ Still, if a father (present or absent) brings income to the family, its AFDC benefits will be cut. This fact must increase the willingness of both parents not to report income brought in by the father. Current policy encourages fathers to give whatever income they bring to the mother "off the books."

¹For some background, see Robert Lerman, "Employment Patterns of Unwed Fathers and Public Policy," in Lerman and Ooms, *Young Unwed Fathers*, pp. 316-334.

²Countable income includes earnings and cash benefits from other social welfare programs.

³The first \$30 per month in earned income is not counted in determining benefit levels.

⁴Bane and Ellwood, *Welfare Realities*, 103-104.

The situation is somewhat different for AFDC families in which paternity has been established and the father has to pay court-ordered child support. In this case, the first \$50 of the child support payment each month goes to the family, while the District keeps the remainder of the payment (to help offset its AFDC costs). In 1993, about 8 percent of District families receiving AFDC had child support that was affected by this \$50 "pass-through."¹ Thirty percent of the District's AFDC families for whom paternity had been established were receiving less than \$50 per month in child support from the father.

The main justification for the \$50 pass-through is that it allows states (and the District) to obtain funds from absent parents to help fund the welfare programs. Still, the District recovered less than 5 percent of its AFDC payments last year through collecting child support.²

The \$50 pass-through creates some unhappy motivations for the family on welfare. The mother, for her part, may not be interested in devoting too much energy to obtaining child support if it brings the family, at most, only \$50 a month. The father, for his part, may question the wisdom of paying child support if the state takes all but \$50 each month. Fathers and mothers may understandably want to avoid the formal child support system if the family is on welfare.

Increasing (or removing) the pass-through would increase the incentives for the mother receiving AFDC to seek child support and for the father to actually pay it. In this sense, lifting the pass-through would be a step towards strengthening the economic bonds of the family.

Finally, fathers might be unwilling to provide support and mothers unwilling to receive it. In this case, the effectiveness of the child support system becomes paramount.

So how much income do fathers provide families who are receiving welfare? We have no solid idea. It is certain that most fathers of welfare families are not **required** to provide for them. As table 1 showed, paternity had not been established for almost two-thirds of the families receiving welfare in the District. These families have no legal rights to the fathers' income. It is also certain that many fathers give their families money off the books or not at all. Finally, given the high rates of unemployment and incarceration for African American men in the District, it is clear that many fathers are unable, whatever their willingness, to provide full economic support to their families.

OTHER FACTORS

This briefing has focused on policy barriers to and opportunities for strengthening families. It is important to note that the administration of the programs may be even more important than the policies themselves. Numerous participants in the Mayor's Welfare Reform Task Force, and some of the scholarly literature, emphasized the importance of the human aspects of the welfare system. To obtain benefits, a family faces a maze of rules and regulations; caseworkers, overloaded and undertrained, may not be in a position to give the family sympathetic advice. According to critics, welfare caseworkers and administrators thus do little to encourage the father to participate more in the life of the family and often seem to actually work against the fathers.

¹Ways and Means, The 1994 Greenbook, p. 503.

²Maryland and Virginia each recovered about 17 percent of their AFDC payments through child support. Ways and Means, The 1994 Greenbook, p. 512.

The culture of the welfare agencies will need to be changed if they are to be more responsive to the idea of bringing the father back into the family. Several changes may be necessary.¹ First, the top administrators must be fully committed to working with fathers as well as mothers. These administrators must send a clear, consistent signal to their agencies about this commitment. Second, the staff will need additional training regarding the responsibilities and rights of fathers within the welfare system. Third, the staff will need additional resources so that they will actually have opportunities to work more systematically with families. Commitment, training, and resources could help the caseworkers become more effective in helping strengthen families.

¹See Joelle Sander, "Service Programs for Unwed Fathers," in Lerman and Ooms, Young Unwed Fathers, pp. 297-315.

FAMILY-ORIENTED WELFARE ORGANIZATIONS

D.C. Projects

Brother to Brother Initiative

The Brother to Brother Initiative is a male support group to bring fathers, sons, and male adults together to discuss male issues. Male role models are also provided for those children without fathers in the area.

Contact:
Brenda Lee Richardson
Anacostia/Congress Heights Partnership
(202) 889-2102

Caring for Our Youth

The Washington DC Chapter of Concerned Black Men, Inc. consists of male volunteers who provide positive male role models for youth in the D.C. metropolitan area. Activities include recognition awards, efficacy projects, and youth offender outreach projects.

Contact:
Concerned Black Men, Inc.
(202) 783-5414

Committee on Strategies to Reduce Chronic Poverty

The Committee on Strategies to Reduce Chronic Poverty is a community planning and action initiative sponsored by the Greater Washington Research Center. The mission of the committee is to help existing mainstream and neighborhood institutions improve their ability to reduce the number of people who are living in or at risk for long-term poverty, and to create economic opportunity. The strategic focus of the committee is to help the community increase the earnings of working-age adults and to improve the educational attainment of children, youths, and adults.

Contact:
Joy Williams
Greater Washington Research Center
(202) 466-6680

Community Redemption Initiative

The Community Redemption Initiative will begin this winter in the Anacostia region to serve ex-offenders leaving the criminal justice system. The goal of this project is to preserve the family through connecting the father with his family while providing support services in such areas as employment and public health.

Contact:
Brenda Lee Richardson
Anacostia/Congress Heights Partnership
(202) 889-2102

Family Preservation and Support Services Program (FPSSP)

The Family Preservation and Support Services Program attempts to provide capacity building to the District by assessing resources, identifying gaps in services, and supporting families. Projects include the Healthy Families and Thriving Communities ad-hoc steering committee, family preservation services, and family support services that seek to strengthen and support families through community-based, preventive activities.

Contact:

Pamela Johnson or Maria Elena Orrego
(202) 727-5930

Families Together

Families Together, a program offered by the Family Services Administration / Child and Family Services Division, is designed to preserve the family through short-term, home-based services. Activities are directed to those who face the removal of a child due to physical abuse or neglect. Families Together serves families who are in crisis periods and are deemed to have a significant opportunity for change.

Contact:

Michael Bullock
(202) 727-1835

Child Welfare

Consortium for Child Welfare

The consortium is composed of 12 major non-profit family-serving agencies for the Washington, DC, area and provides a variety of services through the collaborative efforts of the member agencies. Its main purpose remains "to develop, strengthen, and improve services to children and their families in the D.C. child welfare system."

Contact:

Tom Donaldson
(202) 723-3211

National Black Child Development Institute

The National Black Child Development Institute works to improve the quality of life for African American children and youth. The institute provides and supports program workshops and resources in child care, health care, education, and welfare for African American children, their families, and their communities.

Contact:

Erica Tollett
(202) 387-1281

Research Centers

Center for Law and Social Policy

The Center for Law and Social Policy works to establish effective linkages between U.S. welfare and education systems to address the problems of America's poor families. The center provides information and technical assistance to state and federal officials, school personnel, and legal and policy advocates to achieve compliance with the Family Support Act of 1988.

Contact:
Mark Greenberg
(202) 328-5140

The Urban Institute

The Urban Institute investigates the social and economic problems confronting the nation, including studies on the AFDC system, as well as government policies and public and private programs designed to alleviate them. The institute's objectives are to sharpen thinking about society's problems and efforts to solve them, improve government decisions and their implementation, and increase citizens' awareness about important public choices.

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For additional information about the D.C. Family Policy Seminar, or to order copies of the following briefing reports, please contact Amy Scott at (202) 687-8477, ext. 3:

"Preventing Family Violence," September 1994
"Preventing Adolescent Violence," May 1994
"Preventing Teen Pregnancies," December 1993