

# POLICY BRIEF

## *Stresses on Idaho Families: Nurturing Father Involvement*



Stresses on Idaho families, as summarized in this and other Idaho KIDS COUNT reports, can have diverse consequences for children, including jeopardizing healthy relationships with fathers. Recently, the 2004 Northwest Job Gap Study found that 78% of job openings in Idaho failed to provide a living wage for a small family (one adult and two children). Further, there were 10 job seekers for each job opening that could provide this wage level. Similarly, the *Idaho Statesman* recently reported that Idaho's workers are increasingly relying on food banks and charities.

This report focuses on implications for father involvement. The relation between economic stresses and father involvement is not simple. Increased father involvement is often viewed as a solution to the economic stresses faced by families. Indeed, increases in fathers' involvement in child care have been observed primarily for low-income families in which fathers and mothers have different work schedules. With high costs of center child care, father involvement has increasingly become a matter of economic necessity (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999). For single-mother families, father involvement can mean important financial contributions to families (child support payments).

### **ECONOMIC STRESSES AS BARRIERS TO FATHER INVOLVEMENT**

Beyond economic contributions to the family, high-quality father involvement benefits both children and parents. How do we increase levels of this high-quality father involvement? Answering this question depends on understanding the barriers to healthy interactions between fathers and children. This report on *Stresses on Idaho Families* focuses on economic stress as one important barrier.

Most research documenting the benefits of father involvement for children has been conducted with middle-class families (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999). Other research suggests that family economic security may be necessary to support the kind of high-quality father involvement that benefits children.

***“Conflicts between parents can be especially damaging to children. Parental alienation syndrome reflects a compelling example of how extreme parental conflict can lead to the rejection of parents (usually fathers) from their children’s lives following divorce. In these cases, an alienating parent appears to be responsible for children’s hatred and rejection of the other parent.”***

*(Dunne & Hedrick, 1994)*

Idaho KIDS COUNT

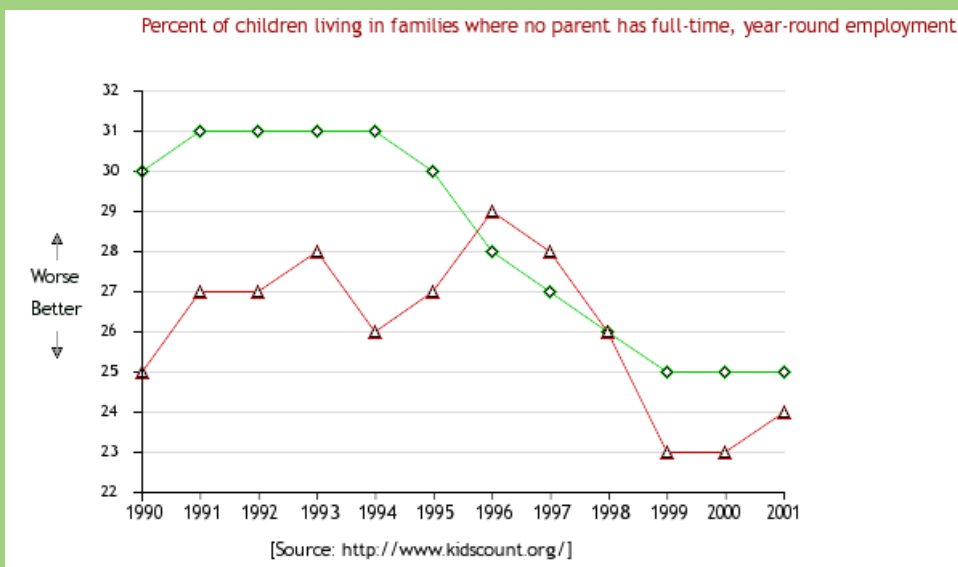


Linda Jensen, State Director 1607 W. Jefferson Street Boise, Idaho 83702  
phone: 208-388-1014 fax: 208-331-0267 e-mail: ljensen@mtstatesgroup.org

In a study of fathers of 5-year-olds, researchers found that fathers with more job satisfaction spent more time playing and had higher quality interactions with their children (Grossman, Pollack, & Golding, 1988). Both poor working conditions and family economic hardship predict poor parenting among fathers of adolescents (Whitbeck et al., 1997). Other research confirms that poor fathers are less involved with their adolescent children than nonpoor fathers; the greater the persistence of poverty, the less father involvement (Harris & Marmer, 1996).

## ECONOMIC STRESSES AND RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS

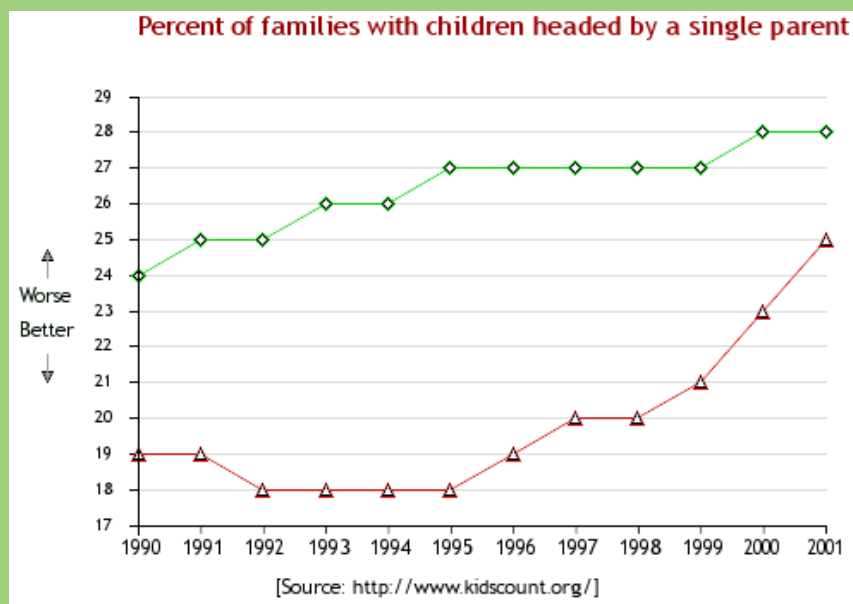
**How and why** do economic stresses influence father involvement? One answer is that family poverty strains relationships within families. Obviously, when conflict between parents leads to divorce, fathers' involvement with their children usually declines dramatically. An earlier Idaho KIDS COUNT report addressed associations between economic insecurity and single parenthood. Trends are strikingly similar; as economic insecurity for families in Idaho approaches national averages, so does the rate of single parenthood:



Percentages reflect the proportion of children living in families where no parent (the only parent in single-parent families, either parent in married-couple families) worked at least 35 hours per week for at least 50 weeks in the previous year.

The graph shows 3-year averages, adding stability to the data estimates. For example, the figure for Idaho for 2001 (24%) is the average for 2000, 2001, and 2002.

Red lines = Idaho averages      Green lines = national averages



In general, there are two major ways in which relationship problems resulting from economic stresses can influence a fathers' involvement with their children. First, as discussed earlier, economic stresses increase the likelihood of conflict between intimate partners. Researchers examining father involvement have discovered that fathers in positive marriages also have more positive attitudes about their children; poor mother-father relationships are recognized as strong barriers to fathers' involvement with children (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999). Further, in the context of parental conflict, it is not surprising that economic stresses contribute to the increased likelihood of separation or divorce (Sherman, 1997); nonresident parents typically have limited involvement with their children.

Second, economic stresses on families erode the quality of parent-child relationships in a diversity of ways. For example, family poverty is associated with harsh and punitive approaches to parenting known to be associated with negative child outcomes (Hashima & Amato, 1994). Hence, when fathers increase their hourly involvement in child care to address economic concerns, the quality of the father-child relationship may be jeopardized by economic stresses.

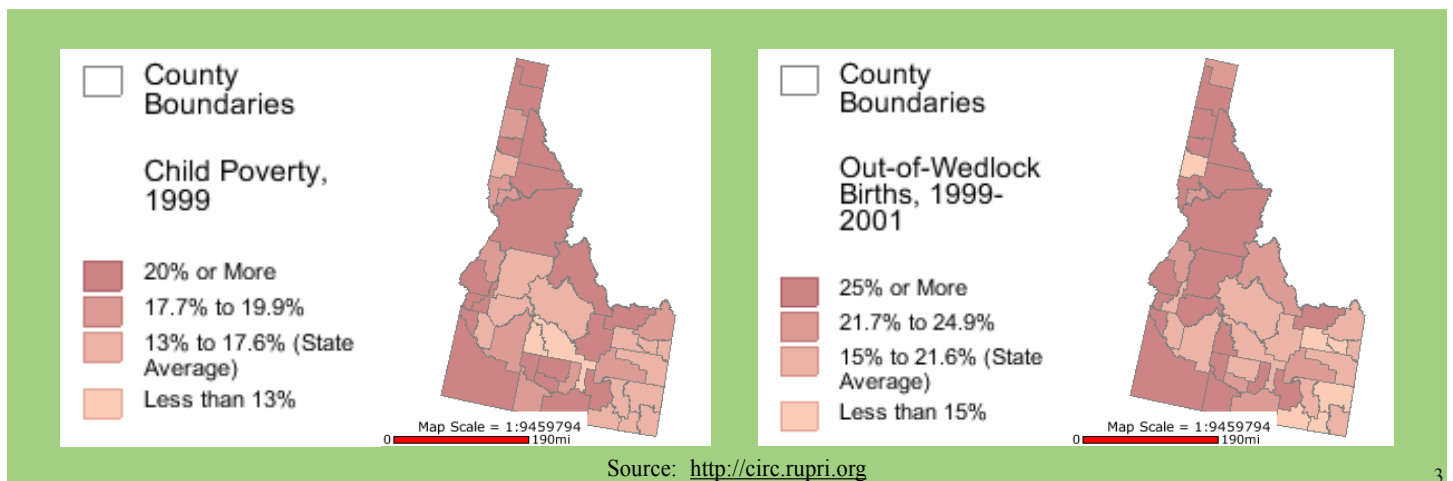
### POVERTY AND VIOLENCE: FURTHER BARRIERS TO HEALTHY FATHER INVOLVEMENT

Unfortunately, family poverty and violence are intimately connected. For example, family poverty often results from domestic violence. One group of researchers reported that 38% of a sample of women who had experienced domestic violence—and separated from their abusing partner—became homeless (Baker, Cook, & Norris, 2003). Other researchers have reported that experiences of physical aggression from male partners decrease the odds of maintaining employment (at least 30 hours per week for 6 months) by about one third (Browne, Salomon, & Bassuk, 1999). Following structured interviews with poor and homeless mothers in Boise, the present author found that 88% of mothers reported being the victim of violence; 63% reported having been the victim of 20 or more specific acts of violence (Anooshian, in press). In view of close associations between poverty and violence, father involvement may **not** include high-quality, healthy interactions when family poverty is involved.

### ECONOMIC STRESSORS AND FATHER INVOLVEMENT: A DIVERSITY OF PATHS OF INFLUENCE

In addition to effects on relationships and connections with violence, economic stresses can negatively influence father involvement in yet other ways. For example, both teenage parenting and out-of-wedlock births, strong predictors of father absence, appear to be related to poverty. Coley and Chase-Lansdale (1998) concluded that childhood poverty—in reinforcing limited life options and future possibilities—increases the likelihood that female adolescents will become mothers.

Father involvement is obviously limited in cases of out-of-wedlock births. For Idaho, the following charts of county-by-county rates for child poverty (left) and out-of-wedlock births (right) show striking similarity:



Yet other threats to father involvement posed by family poverty include the following:

- Fathers in poor and low-income families often work long hours, limiting the time available for involvement with children.
- There are costs associated with special activities that could involve fathers and children (e.g., a trip to the zoo); poor neighborhoods provide fewer opportunities for local outings than do more affluent neighborhoods (e.g., parks, libraries).
- Some of the negative influences of poverty include factors that influence the likelihood of a difficult temperament and/or behavior problems for children (e.g., poor prenatal health, exposure to violence, low-quality child care). Difficult temperaments and behavior problems, in turn, appear to strain parent-child relationships.

*“Research indicates that men who have greater income, education, self-esteem, and parenting knowledge and egalitarian sex-role attitudes tend to be more involved with their children.”*  
(Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999)

## **NURTURING FATHER INVOLVEMENT: FATHERS AS NURTURERS AS WELL AS PROVIDERS**

Traditional gender roles reflect the roles of women as nurturers of children and men as economic providers for the family. As women have increasingly entered the workforce, they have taken on the double roles of nurturers and providers. If high-quality father involvement is beneficial to children—as researchers are concluding—the obvious implication is that children would benefit if fathers’ roles also expanded to include nurturing and providing. Despite the obvious need for caution (e.g., in cases of domestic violence), there are numerous benefits to nurturing the roles of fathers as nurturers of children (see Crawford & Unger, 2004):

- Children benefit from healthy, high-quality interactions with their fathers.
- Couples report higher marital satisfaction when fathers are involved in parenting. Mothers report less stress. Fathers report higher self-esteem.
- When women are nurturers and men are providers, women and children become too economically dependent on men (as evidenced by high rates of poverty among single-parent families).
- When divorce occurs, nonresident fathers who spend more time with children are more likely to provide monetary support to mothers (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999).
- Social values that reinforce the nurturing roles of fathers are important in reducing levels of family violence.
- As fathers’ roles in parenting expand, public policies will increasingly support families (as family policy changes become as relevant for men as for women; Silverstein, 1996).

*“There is more to being a father than providing a paycheck. Good fathers are those who are responsive and emotionally available to their children ... As long as a good father is defined simply as a good provider, men will have more privilege both at home and in public life and will continue to be deprived of intimacy and emotional connection with their families.”* (Crawford & Unger, 2004)

*“Today many fathers are more involved in their children’s lives than their own fathers were, while others are increasingly distancing themselves from their children. Some children experience warm relationships with their fathers; others experience inconsistent, unstable support; others will be adversely affected by destructive fathering behavior; still others will lose their fathers early in their development.” (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999)*

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ■ **Caution about Marriage Promotion:**

A research-based approach to father involvement, as reflected in this policy brief, reinforces the need for caution regarding any policy explicitly designed to promote marriage. Obviously, maintaining marriage is not a good solution for families that have experienced domestic violence. In general, research indicates that the type and quality of parenting children experience is more important in determining child outcomes than family type (e.g., one versus two parents). For example, for fathers with high levels of antisocial behavior, **greater** father involvement is associated with **negative** outcomes for children (more conduct problems; see Jaffee, Moffitt, Caspi, & Taylor, 2003).

### ■ **Nurturing Father Involvement – Reducing Economic Stresses:**

This policy brief has focused on the variety of ways in which economic stresses on families create barriers to high-quality interactions between fathers and their children. There are a variety of policy changes that could reduce those economic stresses including, for example, **increasing the minimum wage** and **implementing earned income tax credits**. Programs that **help parents with the costs of child care and health insurance** represent other viable approaches to reducing economic stresses.

### ■ **Nurturing Father Involvement—Family Support and Education:**

There are also a variety of family policies that can support the nurturing roles of both fathers and mothers, including, for example, expanded **parental leave policies** that encourage both fathers and mothers to spend quality time with infants and/or sick children. Based on research reviewed in this policy brief, programs and policies that promote the nurturing role of fathers (e.g., **parenting education for fathers**) should yield significant benefits for children and families. Fathers with more parenting knowledge and egalitarian views on gender roles appear to be more involved with their children as well (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999).

## RESOURCES

- Anooshian, L. J. (in press). Violence and aggression in the lives of homeless children. *Journal of Family Violence*.
- Baker, C. K., Cook, S. L., & Norris, F. H. (2003). Domestic violence and housing problems. *Violence Against Women, 9*, 754-783.
- Browne, A., Salomon, A., & Bassuk, S. S. (1999). The impact of recent partner violence on poor women's capacity to maintain work. *Violence Against Women, 5*, 393-426.
- Coley, R. L., & Chase-Lansdale, P. L. (1998). Adolescent pregnancy and parenthood: Recent evidence and future directions. *American Psychologist, 53*, 152-166.
- Crawford, M., & Unger, R. (2004). *Women and gender*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Dunne, J., & Hefrick, M. (1994). The parental alienation syndrome: An analysis of sixteen selected cases. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 21*, 21-38.
- Fick, B. (2004). Idaho families struggle despite economic recovery. *Idaho Statesman* (11-13-04).
- Grossman, F. K., Pollack, W. S., & Golding, E. (1988). Fathers and children: Predicting the quality and quantity of fathering. *Developmental Psychology, 24*, 82-91.
- Harris, K. M., & Marmer, J. K. (1996). Poverty, paternal involvement, and adolescent well-being. *Journal of Family Issues, 17*, 614-640.
- Hashima, P. Y., & Amato, P. R. (1994). Poverty, social support, and parental behavior. *Child Development, 65*, 384-403.
- Jaffee, S. R., Moffitt, T. E., Avshalom, C., & Taylor, A. (2003). Life with (or without) father: The benefits of living with two biological parents depend on the father's antisocial behavior. *Child Development, 74*, 109-126.
- Northwest Federation of Community Organizations and Paul Sommers (2004). *Searching for work that pays: 2004 Northwest Job Gap Study*.
- Sherman, A. (1997). *Poverty matters: The cost of child poverty in America*. Washington D.C.: Children's Defense Fund.
- Silverstein, L. B. (1996). Fathering is a feminist issue. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 20*, 3-37.
- Tamis-LeMonda, & Cabrera, N. (1999). Perspectives on father involvement: Research and policy. *Social Policy Report: Society for Research in Child Development, XIII* (2), 1-25.
- Whitbeck, L. B., Simons, R. L., Conger, R. D., Wickrama, K. A. S., Ackley, K. A., & Elder, G. H. (1997). The effects of parents' working conditions and family economic hardship on parenting behaviors and children's self-efficacy. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 60*, 291-303.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda J. Anooshian received her Ph.D. degree in 1974 from the University of California at Riverside. She has been conducting research and teaching at the university level on different aspects of child development for over 25 years. During this time, she has published over 30 articles in professional journals. In addition to studying memory and cognition during childhood, Dr. Anooshian's research and scholarship has focused on the pervasive negative outcomes observed for poor and homeless children.

