

# Vast majority of impoverished fathers involved with their children

October 3 2016, by Bert Gambini

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Credit: University at Buffalo

Many policymakers and elected officials, including President Barack Obama, have publicly criticized impoverished and African-American fathers for not being involved in the lives of their children. But a new study published in the journal *Families in Society* suggests the criticism is largely unfounded and that even in cases of incarceration, most low-income fathers are connected to their children.

"Regardless of what these [fathers](#) were facing, they tried to stay involved with their children," says Robert Keefe, PhD, an associate professor in

the University at Buffalo School of Social Work and the paper's lead author.

In his first inaugural address, President Obama said, "Too many fathers also are missing from too many lives and too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men."

"This is upsetting to hear - especially when it comes from the top, as in the case of President Obama," says Keefe. "Our research suggests that fathers are rolling up their sleeves and getting involved with their children."

Results from data collected between 1996 and 2011 indicate that 94 percent of mothers interviewed say their children's fathers were somewhat involved or highly involved with their families.

The public criticism derives from a narrow definition of "involvement."

How we look at father involvement in this country is all financial, according to Keefe, who says "all kinds of factors are considered when talking about what makes a good mother, but with fathers, economic support is the major criterion."

Keefe also points to disproportionate rates of incarceration for African-Americans, which compound the flawed perception of low involvement. Those fathers who are in jail remain involved as much as possible through visitation and phone calls - both of which mean additional financial strain for families already struggling with finances.

"Many low-income fathers who are not incarcerated also face challenges to remaining involved in their children's lives" said Keefe. "Working three or four jobs, being called away for military duty or volunteering at jobs in hopes the job will turn into a full-time paying job are all ways

fathers try to provide for their children, but also pose limitations on the amount of time they can spend with their children."

"It's not fair to limit defining fatherhood involvement to economics when many of these dads are trying to be good fathers," says Keefe. "Since all of the fathers in the study were low income, their economic contributions might not be that great and because of that they're automatically thought of as any number of things we've heard, from deadbeat dads to just being uninvolved."

Yet Keefe's conversations with the mothers and fathers reveal concrete examples of involvement.

Those conversations took place between 1996 and 2011 in Syracuse, New York. Over the course of five different studies looking at the mother-child relationship, Keefe and his colleagues also interviewed fathers, all of whom had been incarcerated or were presently on parole or probation. Both the mothers and the fathers talked independently of each other about how the dads stayed involved with their children.

"It could be something as simple as writing letters to keep in contact so at the time of discharge the fathers feel like there is an established relationship," says Keefe. "So despite the incarceration, the fathers keep moving the relationship with their [children](#) forward."

There are services set up to make this process even easier, but Keefe says there are shortcomings.

"In some jails and prisons there are re-entry services, but there is a stigma associated with incarceration. Policy can change, but attitudes don't always change accordingly," says Keefe. "So we're finding that fathers who are incarcerated, upon release, who are actively trying to get work, who are actively trying to be economically supportive, are still

facing barriers."

The result is that some of the policies aren't as helpful as we would hope them to be, he says.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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