

Dead-Broke Dads

Commentary

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Recent reports from Washington that child support collections have increased by 20 percent in the past three years spell good news for some children. But many children are still being left behind. In 1997, 9 million children lived apart from their fathers and received no financial support from them.

The sad fact is that children living with single mothers are no more likely to receive child support today than they were two decades ago. The figure was around 31 percent then, and it is around 31 percent today. Even more troubling, children faring least well are those in the fastest growing group of single-parent families—children living in households headed by never-married mothers.

The dramatic increase in the numbers of families now headed by never-married mothers is skewing what otherwise might have been a brighter picture. Nearly half of all single mothers today have never been married, compared with 18 percent in the mid-1970s. While these families have seen their child support rate more than quadruple since 1976, their starting point was so low that only 18 percent receive it today. In sharp contrast, rates of child support for children living with previously married mothers increased from 36 percent to 42 percent over those same years.

Continued improvements in the collection rate are vital. Yet getting child support to more of the children who need it the most means going beyond simply improving collection. Making full amends is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. So what more and different needs to be done?

Step one: Distinguish between "deadbeat" and "dead-broke" fathers. Roughly half of noncustodial fathers who do not pay child support are "deadbeat"—they earn enough to provide child support but don't. For these dads, enforcement tools, such as wage withholding, make sense. The other half—the "dead-broke"—have limited abilities to pay child support. Most are young, poorly educated and earn less than it takes for one person to scale the poverty wall. Their annual personal income averaged only \$8,956 (in 1998 dollars).

Step two: Establish paternity. This has been easier to do since 1993, when Congress began requiring states to set procedures for men willing to acknowledge fatherhood voluntarily. But establishing paternity is not enough, because many of the fathers who never married their children's mothers are no better off financially than their children.

Step three: For the children's sake, recognize that what these fathers need is basically what poor mothers need: job-related and parenting skills and help moving up the job ladder to wages that will allow them to help support their children. Yet few of these fathers receive any sort of public assistance and even fewer receive means-tested employment-related services.

The prospects for the increasing number of children living with mothers who can't give them the basics simply won't brighten until the other parent's economic prospects also improve. When these fathers earn enough to sustain support, then increasing child support collections will truly signal good news.

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