

# Organizational Responses to the Fatherhood Crisis: The Case of Fathers' Rights Groups in the United States

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**SUMMARY.** The emergence of fathers' rights groups, predominantly composed of men who have been personally affected by child support and custody laws, have been understudied up until this point. This article, based on 158 in-depth interviews, identifies individual motivations of members who join these groups, as well as their impressions on overcoming obstacles to further growth. Contrary to popular perception, the desire to change public policy is only one of the many reasons these men choose to join; equally, if not more important, are their needs for legal and emotional assistance. While acknowledging barriers to attracting new members, most are optimistic that their network of grassroots groups will soon become a strong, national social movement working on

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behalf of fatherhood issues. The article concludes with several recommendations for policymakers to consider these groups' claims. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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In recent years, policymakers have grown increasingly concerned about fatherless families in the United States. The statistics related to children living with only one parent suggest the need for such urgency. From 1970-2000, the percentage of children living with a sole parent grew from 12% to 28%.<sup>1</sup> More often than not, this sole parent is the mother. Divorce, separation, and never-married parents are the central drivers behind this trend which leave increasing numbers of children with only one primary caregiver in their critical developing years (McLanahan, 1998). Although there are differences across racial, ethnic, and class lines, most fathers are simply parenting less than mothers, if they are parenting at all (Dowd, 2000).

The consequences of growing up in single-parent families are now well known. Researchers have demonstrated that children from these non-traditional families are more likely to engage in criminal activity than their counterparts in two-parent families (Conamor & Phillips, 2002; Popenoe, 1996). They are also more likely to drop out of high school, lag academically if they stay in school, experience a teenage pregnancy, and undergo long periods of unemployment (Krein & Beller, 1988; Painter & Levine, 2004; Kiernan, 1992). Children living in single-parent families are also exposed to higher risks for sexual abuse by non-relatives (Lauritsen, 2003). Still other scholars have pointed to the reduction in income and quality adult interaction as the most central deleterious outcomes associated with growing up in a single-parent home (McLanahan, 1985; Simons, 1996).

While most observers agree that fatherlessness is a problem, there is much less consensus on what needs to be done to turn this negative trend around. As a result, a variety of organizations have sprung up to address what they view as the key "causal factors" behind the fatherlessness phenomenon. Most of these organizations are "top-down" in nature; that is, they are composed of a core set of paid or

unpaid professionals that attempt to shape the fatherhood debate. Membership is either not possible for the mass public, or is defined simply through a financial contribution. Some, however, are “bottom-up” organizations; that is, they are composed of actual members who physically meet and work together on a more grassroots level to address some particular aspect of fatherlessness.

One of the most understudied of these “bottom-up” groups are fathers’ rights organizations located across the United States (Messner, 1997). These are grassroots organizations made up of mostly men who are predominantly interested in how the child support and child custody systems, including visitation enforcement, affect fathers. Their existence is not without controversy. Women’s groups, for example, have responded to them with alarm, arguing that fathers’ groups aim to restructure both child support and custody policy in ways that disadvantage mothers (Crowley, 2003). More specifically, they maintain that the sole purpose of fathers’ rights groups is to overturn all of the economic and social progress that they have earned over the past several decades, especially when it comes to women’s roles as mothers. Beyond these broad characterizations and accusations, however, little is known about these groups’ actual membership composition and goals. What do the men who join hope to achieve from these groups? Are they really interested in a fundamental shift in public policy with respect to their responsibilities when their families break down as some women’s groups argue, or do other factors motivate their participation? What about the future? Are they confident in their ability to bring more men into their ranks?

This article aims to answer exactly these questions by first beginning with an overview of recent organizational responses to the fatherhood crisis. Second, in order to present the concerns of fathers’ rights groups more specifically, I describe my research methodology which involves 158 in-depth interviews with leaders and members located across the United States. Third, I present the results from this membership study, and fourth, I conclude with several recommendations for policymakers as they consider these groups’ primary concerns.

### ***RECENT ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSES TO THE FATHERHOOD CRISIS***

A variety of organizations now operate within the current political landscape to address the epidemic of fatherlessness across the United

States. While they each argue that fatherlessness is a problem which needs to be remedied, they disagree as to its causes. Generally speaking, these groups can be categorized according to the one particular cure for the fatherhood crisis they promote: pro-marriage, economic empowerment, spiritual leadership, or fathers' rights.

### ***Pro-Marriage Groups***

Individuals involved in pro-marriage groups begin with the premise that the modern American family has recently undergone a massive, negative transformation (Gavanas, 2004; Popenoe, 1996; Blankenhorn, 1995). Over the past several decades, these groups claim, feminists and other liberals have advocated new family forms that wrongly assert a moral equivalence between two-parent and female-headed households. In this new social order espoused by these "progressives," men and women have interchangeable roles in the family. Pro-marriage groups disagree. In stark contrast to these interchangeability claims, pro-marriage adherents argue that men and women perform worthy, necessary, and unique tasks within the American family (Coltrane, 2001). These differences are both natural and valuable; other family types are simply inferior. Pro-marriage groups, therefore, seek to restore monogamous, lifelong marriage as the central institution that forms the foundation of all societies. Only with this restoration, they maintain, will fathers be able to reclaim a sense of their own importance in their children's lives.

The National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI), founded in 1994 by Dr. Wade Horn and Don Eberly, is, perhaps, the most influential of the pro-marriage groups operating in the United States today. It promotes media campaigns on the significance of marriage and family, and also produces educational programs for targeted groups of families who might be experiencing higher levels of stress than usual, such as those with fathers in the military or in jail. Another influential group is the Institute for American Values, formed in 1987 by David Blankenhorn. This organization generates research on the topic of fatherlessness in the United States, and has published numerous books and reports on the importance of marriage in American culture. Other pro-marriage groups include the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization (IRFFR), begun by Charles Ballard in 1982, and the National Center for Fathering (NCF), started by Ken Canfield in 1990. IRFFR has engaged in innovative policymaking by actively sending married couples to live in low income communities as role models. NCF provides tips on how men can be better fathers and offers training

seminars on the topic of strong father and mother partnerships in raising children. Public affiliation in each of these organizations is simply by donation; only NFI calls its donors “members,” and even here, membership is defined chiefly by financial contributions.

### ***Economic Empowerment Groups***

In contrast to pro-marriage groups which view traditional partnerships between men and women as central in revitalizing fatherhood, economic empowerment organizations look to jobs, particularly for low income, African-American men, as the panacea for fatherlessness (Mincy & Pouncy, 1997, 1999; Gavanas, 2004; Doolittle & Lynn, 1998; Doolittle et al., 1998). These groups focus on deficits in the educational and labor markets as the primary causes of problems for these men in the “relationship market.” In this view, the severe lack of employment for a substantial percentage of the male population creates a situation in which family responsibilities become almost impossible to assume and then manage (Wilson, 1996). As a result, men may father children, but then fail to adequately raise them (Sorenson & Zibman, 2001). These organizations thus look to economic opportunity as the principle way to advance men’s interest in creating strong bonds with their children. Marriage to their children’s mother might be one option for these men in establishing more robust family ties, but it clearly is not the most significant pathway to becoming strong fathers.

Economic empowerment groups, also known as fragile family organizations, take on a variety of forms all across the United States. The National Partnership for Community Leadership (NPCL), for example, began in 1996 as a vehicle to distribute grants to community-based organizations to run a variety of programs for low-income fathers. One of its most important projects is the Partnership for Fragile Families initiative which encourages parents to establish legal paternity, remain involved with their children after birth, and find gainful, long-lasting employment. NPCL often collaborates with the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families (NPNFF), founded in 1995. This group provides conferences, training, and technical support for those interested in improving the lives of fathers in fragile families. In the same vein, the Center for Family Policy and Practice (CFPP), established in 1995, advocates for families in economically tenuous circumstances, including situations where fathers have had their parental rights terminated. This group also offers legal assistance and workshops on the topics of custody and child support enforcement, with a specific focus on

those fathers who are currently incarcerated. The public cannot join NPCL at all and can only affiliate with CFPP by donation. Membership in NPNFF is defined chiefly by financial contribution, but is aimed at academics and practitioners working in the field rather than the general public.

### ***Spiritual Leadership Groups***

Like pro-marriage and economic empowerment organizations, groups that emphasize spiritual leadership remain highly concerned with the loss of familial leadership power among contemporary men. However, instead of pointing to the demise of marriage or declining employment opportunities as the causes of this deficiency, spiritually based groups place the blame for these changes on the increasing secularization of contemporary society—through such factors as movies, television, and popular music—that move men and women away from their true, God-given family roles. According to these groups, men and women are biologically different, leading them to occupy unique roles in the social structure. In this view, men are the natural heads of households, with women assuming secondary positions of support.

Unfortunately, according to these groups, the turbulent social activism of the 1960s, which included the women's movement, toppled this order in the name of "progress." In order for societies to function most healthfully, then, men must take back these leadership roles in their families. More directly, spiritually oriented groups aim to change men's hearts into stronger, authority-motivated forces over their families and advance the idea that all men should live their lives in accordance with certain religious principles. In doing such, proponents hope to bring American society back into a purer, God-centered form of social order.

One of the most influential groups with this philosophy is the Christian Promise Keepers (Coltrane, 2001). From its beginnings in 1990 with only 72 followers, leader Bill McCartney built a transformative movement of men across the United States that seeks to put Jesus Christ first in all of his followers' lives. By 1995, the organization was able to fill several football stadiums across a multitude of American cities with devoted adherents (Quicke & Robinson, 2000; Messner, 1997). By 2003, the Promise Keepers continued to show strength by holding 18 arena conferences that attracted more than 170,000 men who responded to the charismatic character of these meetings (Johnson, 2000). While Christian belief systems tend to dominate these spiritually oriented organizations, other belief systems are represented as well. For example,

the Million Man March took place in 1995 under the guidance of Minister Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam. Although the March had many goals, a chief tenet of those who attended was to restore male responsibility in their key roles as husbands and fathers (Baker-Fletcher, 1998; Gabbidon, 2000). Public “membership” in groups like these is usually through the attendance of large-scale rallies or conferences at which there might be a price for admission.

### *Fathers’ Rights Groups*

Finally, others see the problem of fatherlessness through the lens of individual rights (Williams & Williams, 1995; Coltrane & Hickman, 1992; Fineman, 1991). Fathers’ rights groups, located throughout the country, take on a variety of forms, including national offices with state-level chapters, freestanding national or state units, or state-level groups with local chapters. In stark contrast to many of the groups described above, public membership is available; it is also usually through yearly paid dues instead of sporadic monetary contributions. More importantly, these groups actually meet *in-person on a regular basis*. Like their counterparts in other countries, the majority of fathers’ rights groups in the United States claim that men are victims of discrimination in the area of family law, especially with respect to child support and custody issues (Bertoia & Drakich, 1993). Sympathizers argue that current family law is corrupt; only when fathers achieve “equal rights” with mothers will their significant value to families be properly acknowledged and restored (Baskerville, 2002). However, beyond these broad claims, little else is known about the motivations of the men who join these groups and their perceptions of what is holding them back from constituting a larger social movement. It is to these questions that this analysis now turns.

## **METHODOLOGY**

My primary methodological aim in this project was to conduct one-hour telephone interviews with both leaders and rank-and-file members of fathers’ rights groups across the United States. Similar to the work of Arendell (1995) and Waller (2002), this intensive interview strategy represented the best way to capture the complexity of these men’s lives and how their organizational affiliation fits into their every day existence. Because no centralized list of “fathers’ rights” groups ex-

ists, I first searched the Internet and non-profit directories for possible groups. This was difficult in that organizations that are involved in these issues describe themselves in many ways. Some prefer the term “fathers’ rights” group. Others identify themselves as “children’s rights” groups and adamantly deny that they are interested in “fathers’ rights.” Still others qualify themselves as “family rights” groups. Further complicating matters is the fact that many of these groups are highly ephemeral in nature. Intra-group in-fighting is common, leading to the rapid birth and demise of these types of organizations over short periods of time. It is therefore nearly impossible to compile a comprehensive list of such groups that remains consistently stable. As a first step, then, I attempted to identify at least 3-4 viable groups per state.

In deciding which of these groups to include in this analysis, I examined their array of activities, mission statements, and goals. If child support and child custody issues were primary, then they were in the pool of potentially sampled groups. They also had to meet two other criteria. First, all selected groups had to be active within their particular jurisdiction on family issues; that is, they could not simply be post office boxes without members. More specifically, all groups had to meet a certain threshold of regularly scheduled activities, including monthly or quarterly in-person meetings. Second, I also chose groups to provide the research project with maximum geographic and thus membership diversity. In the end, I had a potential sampling pool of 50 groups.

Next, I attempted to make contact with each group’s leader. Four leaders declined participation on behalf of their group and two leaders declined because their groups were no longer active. Fourteen group leaders did not respond to my request for information, and four group leaders’ contact information was no longer in service at the time of my request for access. This left me with a final sample of 26 groups,<sup>2</sup> including seven from the northeast, eight from the mid-west, nine from the south, and two from the west.

Once the group’s leader agreed to be interviewed, I requested permission to publicize my study to group members. This is the typical “snowball sampling” technique, a procedure that is necessary when group members are difficult to reach. While most leaders were helpful and forthcoming during the interview process, a small minority was not willing to provide additional assistance in reaching members. These diverse reactions translated into varied levels of success in recruiting potential members to the study. The maximum number of interviews I obtained from one group was 20, while the minimum was only one. In the end, I secured a total of 158 interviews and conducted them during the



summer of 2003. I asked all of my respondents questions on six topics, of which the second is the focus of this article: (1) Demographics, (2) Group Patterns of Recruitment and Goals, (3) Relationships with Past Partners, (4) Relationships with Their Children, (5) Political Behavior, and (6) Challenges Related to Leadership (asked of leaders only).

As the final part of this first methodological strategy, the taped interviews were transcribed. I then analyzed the written transcriptions of this work using grounded theory methods with the help of the qualitative software analysis program, Atlas.ti. By using this method, I was able to draw upon the words of each of my respondents to create categories of meaning across the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These categories were constantly compared, developed, and refined in order to produce the theoretical understandings of membership behavior presented here. It is also important to note that throughout this article, I illustrate my most important arguments with quotes taken from my research participants. All quotes that are used here are verbatim, and all names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of my respondents.<sup>3</sup>

### ***FATHERS' RIGHTS MEMBERS: WHO THEY ARE***

Fathers' rights groups in the United States are not monolithic by any means; rather, they attract a wide variety of individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Out of the 158 individuals sampled for this study, 85% were male and 15% were female. Women involved in the groups tended to be second wives and mothers of men with outstanding custody and child support decisions. In this article, however, I focus only on male membership patterns since they constitute the core group of activists. Overall, the majority of members in the groups were in their thirties and forties, while the mean age of the sample was 46, the range of ages represented was between 23 to 76.<sup>4</sup>

There is one important difference between the fathers' rights members that I interviewed and fathers that have been the focus of other studies related to child support and custody issues; this difference relates to socio-demographic advantage. The majority of research in this area has focused on profiling low-income fathers who tend to come from minority backgrounds, possess low levels of education, and are either underemployed or are unemployed (Sorensen & Zibman, 2001). In contrast, my fathers' rights sample was 87% white, while only 8% were Black, 2% were Hispanic, and 1% were Asian. Less than 1% character-

ized themselves as being of multiple races or an unspecified race, and 1% of all respondents refused to disclose their race.

In addition, while my respondents were not asked directly about their incomes, they did report their level of educational achievement as well as their occupation. Overall, the sample was highly educated. Those who had a high school diploma or a GED composed 9% of the sample, while those who had an associate's degree, some college credits, or some other type of post-high school vocational training made up 31% of all respondents in the study. In addition, 30% of the respondents held a bachelor's degree or a bachelor's degree plus some other graduate training, while the remaining 30% held doctorates, master's degrees, or professional degrees (law, medical, or dental degrees). Corresponding to these high levels of educational achievement, fully 78% of all respondents occupied traditionally white-collar jobs, while only 13% occupied blue-collar jobs. About 6% were retired, and the remainder were either unemployed, students, or volunteers.

In terms of their living situations at the time of the interviews, about 51% of the respondents were divorced or separated, 41% were married, and the remaining 8% were either single or widowed. Over the course of their lives, however, a full 79% had experienced a divorce. Most were divorced once or twice; the maximum number of divorces received by one respondent was six. These divorces took place as recently as 2003 and as early as 1973. There was also wide variation in the number of children reported by these respondents. The average number of biological children in this study was two, although one respondent reported having 12 children. Interestingly, some members of fathers' rights groups were simply activists; they did not have any children of their own.

Members came together in these groups mostly through monthly meetings that lasted from 1-2 hours in length in an individual member's or leader's home, or they were conducted in spaces that were donated either by a local church, library, or business organization. Sometimes the group gathered in a local cafe or restaurant. The content of meetings varied from group to group, but most included the leader following a simple agenda covering a variety of issues currently facing individual members or the organization as a whole. The key questions thus remain: What motivates individuals to join these groups? What do they hope to achieve through their organizational affiliations?

### ***Personal Case Management***

By far, the most common answer to the question of why individuals joined their local fathers' rights groups was not the desire to transform public policy, but rather the need for help with their own personal child support and custody issues. In fact, 49% of all respondents in the sample declared that personal case management was a central reason for joining.<sup>5</sup> Most fathers' groups studied here spent a significant amount of time during each meeting providing individual consultations to members. Usually any member who was having a personal family problem—most often related to child support and custody—had an opportunity to speak at the meeting. As these organizations are not licensed to practice law, leaders were careful to insist that they were only offering general information and not legal advice. In addition to the leaders offering options regarding legal tactics, other group members often provided their opinion as to the most effective strategies for handling a particular type of problem, especially if they experienced a similar challenge in their own lives. Sometimes local attorneys also attended these meetings with the dual aim of both offering information about the court system, as well as recruiting new clients for their legal practices.

Members turned to the group after feeling a sense of shock when they initially faced the court system. They did not know what to expect, and the group offered help in understanding the processes under which they would now need to operate in order to secure the most favorable child support and custody decisions. In short, the group gave them the resources that they needed to move forward with their cases.

What I found through the court system was (that) they ignore the parental input and desires of fathers. My kids' mom asked for the divorce, I didn't want it; there was no infidelity, she up and said one day she wanted a divorce. It shocked me. I was the one who bathed the kids every night, I put them to bed, (and) I read them stories. I was always the first one up and fed them breakfast. I was a very involved father, very involved parent. . . . I immediately filed (I learned pretty quick what joint custody or shared custody was) for shared custody, but they gave me some temporary custody because the mother for the first couple of weeks wouldn't let me see the kids. It was every other weekend, Wednesday nights for 2-1/2 hours, which is what I have now. It took a year to get the trial and the trial was a joke, it was like 15 minutes. . . . The more I went to the court, the more I saw (that) they were missing reality and

there was nowhere to help that, there was nothing. Then I contacted (my local fathers' group) and thought long and I thought if there is nothing around there, I am going to start something. So I did and the more I got involved, the more it helped me. –Tito

Other fathers at first tried to get information themselves about the court system through a local library or through other online reference tools. However, they frequently found themselves so overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of complex family laws that they turned to the group for aid in sorting through it all.

I was doing so many things on my own like joining a law library at the city-county building, researching (and) reading hundreds of cases of law and trying to do my own work. I said, there has to be a better way, maybe to get to the point a lot quicker instead of my working in circles and, you know, feeling so alone and depressed, down and out about it. I (was) talking to a friend of mine who went through a divorce and actually knew (the local fathers' group leader) who started the local chapter of (a national fathers' group) and he said, give him a call. . . . When I finally hooked up with him, it was like a light bulb lit for both of us. He is like, boy, you've already done a lot of things that we would have already recommended and you are already up to speed with most of the things I need to explain to you, but I can help you, (if you) join. That's what happened. –Reed

Still others turned to the group when their financial resources no longer permitted them to continue paying attorneys to fight on their behalf. For these fathers, the group provided them with the information that they needed to continue pressing their claims for more favorable child support and custody arrangements without the assistance of a lawyer.

(I joined) because after 6 1/2 years, now it's 7 1/2 years, of not seeing my children and litigating against a brick wall, I've gone through 5 lawyers and over \$20,000 at that point, now it's over \$25,000 . . . I wasn't getting anywhere and I wanted to first see if there was some more information that I could find out, even though my case is out of state. –Tristan

In each of the examples cited above, fathers found elements of their personal child support and child custody cases to be too overwhelming to

experience alone. They therefore turned to their local fathers' rights group to provide them with the nuts and bolts of case management.

### ***Emotional Support***

Approximately one in five (17%) of respondents in this study declared that emotional support was a motivating factor behind their joining their local fathers' group. Numerous respondents reported feeling isolated in the period immediately following their family's breakdown. To these respondents, women have an advantage over men in that they have strong networks of friendship upon which to rely during stressful periods of their lives. Men tend to lack these networks, and thus the group became the only place where they could encounter solace during a difficult time.

When I was going through my divorce and the issues that were raised and what we perceived as the unfairness (of the situation), I felt I was alone. . . . I discovered when (the group) contacted me that I wasn't (alone) and there were many, many, many men in (a) similar situation. All of us (were) out in the wilderness with no place to go, and this (group) was a place that brought us all together where we could share feelings and emotions and come up with strategies on how to proceed with our cases. –Juan

Others looked to the group for emotional benefits after they settled their divorce cases, when they were seeking a new beginning for their lives.

I was looking for, at that point, more just social support, social connections. As far as my situation was concerned it was pretty much a done deal, there was not a whole lot I could do about it. I wasn't in a great deal of economic or emotional pain at that point . . . I was more in the process of putting my own life together and so for me it was just very therapeutic to take my anger about the situation and use it in a very constructive manner by being part of an organized group. –Ryan

Fathers, then, used the groups as places where they could share their experiences with others, and, as such, draw upon the emotional sustenance offered by men in similar circumstances. Once they became more stable emotionally themselves, they could then return the favor by offering their assistance to all newcomers to the group.

### ***Changing Public Policy***

Interestingly, only one in five respondents (17%) stated that a desire to affect federal and state level public policy was central in their decision to join fathers' rights groups. At the federal level, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 continued the several decade-long trend of strengthening child support enforcement efforts in the United States against non-paying parents. More specifically, among many measures, PRWORA introduced a directory of new hires in order to track down delinquents, improved interstate collection mechanisms, and mandated the creation of strong procedures to revoke drivers' and professional licenses when parents fall behind in their payments. States followed suit with hard-line enforcement policies of their own, such as tough, new arrearage penalties, including jail time. Also at the state level, most fathers continued to face judges that used the "best interest of the child" standard for making custody determinations. Although on its face gender-neutral, this best interest standard still resulted in mothers receiving custody in the overwhelming majority of cases.

Fathers who sought to change laws such as these quickly discovered the power of numbers in affecting the political process. More specifically, they learned that when acting in isolation, most policymakers would not listen or respond to their calls for change. However, when they aggregated their claims and interests, policymakers were much more likely to at least provide them with a hearing.

(I joined) because I have been very frustrated with the public policies towards noncustodial parents in our state . . . I had spent, oh, since my divorce, I have spent five to six years writing letters and talking to state senators and doing many things by myself, and I eventually realized that as a single voice, I wasn't getting very far. So I felt it was best to lend my voice to an organization. –Lawrence

Still others cited the need to change public policy in order to create a better world for their children in the areas of child support and custody.

I've always been active. I did not like being told how much time I could spend with my kids. If I wanted more time, it was (only) at the grace of the other parent. If I didn't do something (like join the group), what is going to change for my son and daughter? –Gerard

Others echoed this view of wanting to improve the future for others, but expressed a desire to do so not just for their offspring, but for fathers everywhere.

Every holiday, especially after separating from the kids, it (is not only) hell on the father but everyone around you. It affects you at work and every aspect of your life and who is around (you). It is so wrong. I am a strong Catholic. My faith has grown over the last years and this is so wrong that if I can help other men from going through this, I'm going to. –Pablo

Interestingly, even though their reason for affiliating was not dominant, those who joined with the aim of changing policy tended to express a stronger desire than other respondents to continue their activities with the group for an indefinite time into the future. Only when they reached their goal of “true equality” in terms of family policy would they end their struggle for fathers’ rights.

### ***BARRIERS TO ENCOURAGING OTHER MEN TO JOIN***

While many men have been motivated to join fathers’ groups, most members acknowledge that there is a vast, untapped constituency that shares their plight. These untapped potential participants are mostly men, who, for a variety of reasons, have not yet been mobilized to fight on behalf of fathers’ rights. Their explanations for others “not joining” are important in that they indicate the capacity of these groups to grow in the future. Interestingly, while 23 respondents discussed this theme in their interviews, no one dominant explanation emerged for the lack of mobilization; approximately 20% of this group mentioned each of the following barriers to participation: new life priorities, a lack of group exposure, men’s ineffective “natural” organizing skills, and a general dearth of personal resources.

#### ***New Life Priorities***

One reason cited by fathers’ rights group members as to why more men do not join their organizations is the existence of new priorities in their lives. The family separation process takes an extreme toll on these men, and most want to look forward, not backward.

I think people are basically selfish—maybe that’s not the best word—self-interested which is a little less harsh and judgmental. But if you, through the horrors of divorce, take the emotional and financial beating you are going to take, whoever you are, man or woman, mother or father, grandparent or whatever, you take all the beatings and you (want to just) pack up all that emotional baggage and tuck it away in the back of your head and get on with your life.  
—Gerald

Moreover, if a man has started to put his family’s break-up behind him, he may also have a new love interest who does not necessarily want him to become involved in a group that deals with “problems from the past.”

(Sometimes you feel), yeah, things are bad but I am just tired of this crap, tired of divorce and probably also if you get remarried or have a significant other in your life, there is always, “Hey don’t worry about that—you are with me now and . . .” So, if you are in another relationship, that has issues, too. (Your new love interest might say) “Why are you taking time off to go do that, but you don’t take time off to do this with me?” You end up in the same trap as you were before, you don’t want to go there. So that whole thing is difficult; (it is difficult) to find another significant other who is also compassionate around that topic. —Elliot

According to these members, then, most men want to go on with their lives after a painful family separation. The existence of new life priorities simply adds increased momentum to the often powerful drive to move forward emotionally without looking back.

### ***Lack of Exposure***

Other members and leaders argued that the lack of participation on behalf of many men was simply due to a paucity of information on the availability of local groups. In other words, a sizeable percentage of men simply do not know that fathers’ rights groups are active and fighting on behalf of the issues that impact them directly.

I think it’s a non-exposure (issue), not knowing (that) the groups exist. Even today, (our group has) made a lot of strides in the last year. (But) basically, (I) at 42 didn’t know (the group) existed. And I’m very political. I work with U.S. Congressmen, and state



legislators, and I didn't know it existed. People are just finding out about it. –Jules

Another respondent echoed similar sentiments about the need to distribute information about the group more effectively.

(Most men) don't know there is help out there. I didn't know about it until just a few years ago. I guess I'd like to see (publicity about the group) more. I don't know how we can promote it more, but there are a lot of guys out there that don't know (about) it. . . . You talk to more guys (and) they have the same kind of problems (that) I do. –Tomas

Inherent in many of these perspectives was a twofold sense of responsibility. Men had to do more to learn about resources in their geographical areas, as their quotes demonstrate. However, many respondents also argued that fathers' rights groups needed to do a better job of getting their message out as well.

### *Men Are Not “Natural Organizers”*

One of the most interesting explanations as to why more men are not joining fathers' rights groups had to do with members' perspectives on the differing propensity of men versus women to organize. For these respondents, men are not “natural-born” organizers in the same way that women are. This puts them at a relative disadvantage when it comes to advocacy work in the political arena. Part of what inhibits men from political action is also gender-based socialization when it comes to showing emotions. According to several respondents, joining a group signals weakness, something most men want to avoid.

Men have a stigma of being male, being dominant, and our society teaches us to be tough and to tough it out. This is something (that) you have to go through. . . . When I played football and got hurt, you showed your toughness by not admitting to the pain. You got through it as best you can, but I think men, especially nowadays, need to talk about it. –Lukas

Beyond the notion that actively seeking out a group indicates male weakness, other respondents indicated that certain men do not become involved in fathers' rights groups because they believe that help should

come to them rather than the other way around. To current members, this common attitude again works to the detriment of men in comparison to women as organizers.

If you look at most men, so many men are so stubborn. . . . Like my dad when my mother passed away a couple of years ago. Hospice sent stuff to my dad saying (that) there were support groups to go to. Of course, my dad is saying, I am not going to those support groups, blah, blah, blah. I just think some men have that attitude that they want the help, but they don't want to have to go get it. They think it should come to them, kind of. . . . Some men are that way that they just don't want it. They want to put that big tough side on. They walk around saying, I can handle it, I don't need anybody's help. That's why (fewer) men join these groups. I think that is why the women's movement was so great because women can bond like that, but I think men have trouble doing that. –Harry

Still other respondents argued that men do not join these groups because there is a deep shame associated with bringing issues related to the loss of one's children to the public's attention.

I think I said it at the beginning . . . people say men don't join groups . . . I'm sorry, (but) I go to football games on weekends and there are a lot of men. Men will go join billiard clubs, they join bowling leagues. . . . It's about if you join these (fathers' rights) groups, you are held up to social stigma that is really difficult. You stand up and identify yourself as someone who has lost your children and in this society, God knows what runs through the people's minds as for the reasons why. –Burt

Continuing this theme, other fathers pointed to men's inability to see the larger picture of fathers' rights as a cause, and instead focused solely on their own cases. This "inward-looking" tendency of many fathers, then, as compared with the "outward-looking" tendency of most women, has prevented these groups from enlarging their scope of membership.

### ***Lack of Resources***

Finally, for other respondents, the critical issue impeding more men from joining fathers' rights groups is a lack of resources. In order to participate actively in a group, fathers have to make certain financial sacri-

fices. Not only are there transportation costs, but there are also opportunity costs associated with attending these meetings.

I think (that there are) two reasons (as to why more people do not join fathers' groups): (1) The same reason I am not super active—I don't have the time, I have to work a lot of times during the meetings. (2) It costs money to be able to have that free time and do things with these people—it costs you money. . . . I attended a little rally protest march at the State House here last winter and we had people coming from (all over the state). . . . That cost them money to drive from (all over the state) to spend the day down here, feed themselves, the kids, and then drive back. That is a cost. —Sean

Fathers' rights groups, for the most part, are cash-poor. They tend to rely on volunteers to conduct the majority of their business, and members are expected to incur most of the direct and indirect costs of participating. For many, even a minor contribution to the cause in the form of meeting attendance may simply be prohibitive.

Despite all of the above-mentioned barriers to growth, most respondents remained cautiously optimistic that they could be eventually overcome. Indeed, numerous members described these barriers as simply temporary roadblocks to their success and offered concrete ways to meet these challenges. More specifically, these respondents maintained that in order to jump-start the membership rolls, the chief objectives for these groups should be to provide quality information about the judicial system, offer emotional support for members, and make incremental, father-friendly changes in public policy so that ultimate success—true equality with mothers—becomes a more tangible and attainable goal. Success in these areas, in their view, would breed further success in terms of membership growth.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In recent years, policymakers have paid increased attention to certain aspects of the fatherlessness debate—that is, those issues that tend to impact low-income fathers. After President Clinton called father-absence “the single biggest social policy problem” in our society in 1995, President George W. Bush committed his Administration to restoring the prestige of fathers in American families. For example, the Bush Administration recently encouraged the states to introduce increased flexibil-

ity within their Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) programs in order to promote father-friendly families. By 2002, states like Mississippi, North Dakota, and Oklahoma responded by disregarding the income of a new spouse in calculating welfare benefits during a post-wedding period of between three and six months. Bush also supported new economic empowerment and faith-based initiatives of up to \$64 million for fiscal year 2002 and up to \$315 million in five future years, lending political weight to organizations that attempt to attack these specific root causes of fatherlessness.

But these initiatives do nothing for the more socioeconomically and demographically advantaged yet nonetheless disaffected fathers who tend to join fathers' rights groups, the organizations that were studied here. These fathers have different concerns. First, they lack information about child support and child custody policies. And when they seek out this information, many feel that both sets of policies are unfair to men. Second, they experience this perceived injustice in emotional isolation, finding it challenging to connect with others who will understand their plight. Third, they clearly want to affect public policy in the area of family law, but are only beginning to identify the organizational hurdles that they must first clear in advocating for change. In sum, the common theme that unites all three of these concerns is the sense of being voiceless during a period of major upheaval in their lives. Their organizational affiliation is one way to speak out to others regarding the complex and turbulent issues that they are experiencing on a daily basis, and they hope that others will soon overcome any negative attitudes that they have regarding participation.

What types of policies, if any, should be designed in response to these concerns? As a starting point, new efforts should be made to not only provide information to these fathers regarding their rights and responsibilities with respect to child support and custody, but also to fully demonstrate how these laws were formulated with each person's well-being in mind. For example, all parents might be required to complete a workshop or view a special video on the legal process concerning child support and custody prior to their entry into the court system. Furthermore, existing and/or new father-oriented programs should also promote the idea that seeking out others in a time of need does not demonstrate weakness, as many men presume, and that organizational participation can be a healthy outlet for sharing and expression. Finally, policymakers should be open to hearing about the ways in which these groups—if they continue to mobilize—might alter the current direction of family policy. Only through the first step of listening will public officials then be able to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of these groups' claims.

## NOTES

1. Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years Old, 1960-Present, U.S. Census Bureau, Table CH-1. Accessed from <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/tabCH-1.pdf> on 11/8/04.

2. These 26 groups constitute the total of each respondent's primary affiliation. Some were members of multiple groups at one point in time—belonging to other groups in my study or, in most cases, groups that I did not have permission to study. Counting these second and third affiliations would bring the groups studied total to 34.

3. Sometimes I inserted words for grammatical clarity or to protect the identity/personal characteristic of a person/organization; these word insertions are always noted by parentheses. Punctuation marks were often added to clarify the meaning of the quote.

4. One individual chose not to report his age.

5. Note that respondents frequently offered more than one answer to this question, and this overlap is reflected in the percentages reported here.

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