

## **A POLITICAL HISTORY OF AMERICAN FAMILY POLICY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD**

Theda Skocpol, author of *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, is the nation's leading social policy historian. She taught us to think of American social policy history as a complex jigsaw puzzle. Her 'jigsaw' perspective is an excellent way for understanding the origins of the social welfare system and why the rise of responsible fatherhood programs is so important for the system going forward.

As she explains it the United States pioneered the idea of generous social spending for its elderly, disabled, or dependent citizens. At the end of the American Civil War the federal government provided generous pensions and benefits for Union Civil War veterans and their families. In their zeal to repair the harms produced by the Civil War System's corrupt spending and inequalities, the new people, the reformers, and progressives, brought to power by the Progressive party system thwarted the possibility of an American-style universal social safety net for decades. Skocpol tells us that the Progressives ended "the hopes of some Americans that veterans' benefits could be expanded into pensions for all of the needy elderly and social insurance for workingmen and their families.... Such hopes went against the logic of political reform in the Progressive Era. Generous social spending faded along with the Civil War generation."

For our purposes it is enough to know that Progressives birthed a 'maternal' welfare system that limited state and federal benefits to widow and orphans. And this is the 'maternal' welfare system that would become the key mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century social program, Aid to Dependent Children, later, Aid to Families and Dependent Children.

Jocelyn Crowley, who trained under Theda Skocpol, authored the book, *The Politics of Child Support*, and offered the insight that the American maternal social welfare is indeed a jigsaw puzzle, except it has a very large missing piece. For well over a

century an American policy meant for the families of dead Civil War fathers became a policy for families with a missing father who is very much alive and able-bodied. *Note that this is the same missing father's problem we just discussed in the previous chapter.* From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the current century's first few decades, four policy regimes have tried their hand at solving the maternal system's missing puzzle piece, what to do about absent fathers. (1) From the early 1900's through the late 1960s *social workers* expanded the system, professionalized it, and they also professionalized themselves and grew to become a dominant policy force. (2) In the 1970s *a conservative political/policy coalition* installed the nation's child support enforcement system as a response to the maternal system's cost, its governance, and its theory of a father's role. (3) From the 1980's through the early 1990s, *a political arm of the women's movement* re-established the maternal system with the goal of preventing a mother's entry into the welfare system itself by making the enforcement system work better for non-welfare families. And (4) from the late 1990s to the present, *a fatherhood movement* responded to the child support system's expanded obligations and sanctions with demands for benefits and support for the father's family role before and after his relationship with the mother ends. Chances are, if you are reading this book it is because it is now your turn to address the American social welfare system's fatherhood problem through your participation in a responsible fatherhood group.

### **A Maternal Family Policy System**

At its beginnings, the maternal system featured private charity workers who worked with poor mothers, bringing them food, clothing, and shelter. They were also a moral police force given to monitoring how their charges brought up their children and conducted themselves privately. Bad mothers were cut off. Black mothers received little support and children born of out-wedlock were locked out. If the father could be found, the charity workers often tried to rehabilitate him and reunite him with his family. That was Plan A. A bad father could be turned over to law enforcement. A bad father was the able-bodied man who 'abandoned' his family, left them with no support

and resisted efforts to rehabilitate himself and reattach himself to his family. Plan B was punishment for not supporting for his children. This was the heyday of the Charity Organization Movement and their moral mission to correct what they saw as the failings of the poor.

From 1900's through the 1960s, social workers and their profession had control of maternal social policy. They overturned the policy logic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the striking policy idea that fatherless families did not need to be reunited with the father. Rather than rehabilitating fathers, the modern social worker was able to see that in some cases family unification was harmful because of physical, emotional or substance abuse. They professionalized their field with standards of training and 11 separate nationwide organizations that took on such jobs as standardizing accreditation, certifying standards and practices and, most importantly, policy lobbying. Their crowning achievement was the 1962 amendment to the social security act that mandated state governments to offer prescribed services and funds. Their list of accomplishments included a broad array of new services and enabling legislation: the Economic Opportunity Act and its provisions for the job corps, neighborhood youth corps, the community action program, maximum feasible participation of local citizens and the expansion of child support.

When a friend asked the late Sara McLanahan, author of *Children of the Great Recession* (2016) *Fathers Under Fire* and one the nation's leading authority on family formation, why fathers continue to be left out of the social welfare system, she explained it this way. After the 1950's the American family operated like an efficient, international trading system. A marriage between a very capable man and very capable woman produced a household offering its children a world-class private tutor (the mother) and a world-class piggy bank (the father). For most men, such a system was an all or nothing proposition. It was an "all" for most men who married and a nothing for the rest.

### **The Conservative Shift;**

In the 1970s a conservative coalition arose that was strong enough to counter the family policies installed by social workers. They took aim at the low-income non-custodial fathers who had a “propensity to recklessly have children.” These were the fathers missing from dependent welfare households. Conservatives installed the child support enforcement system to recover the costs of an expanded welfare system. The 1975 Child Support Enforcement Act created a federal-state partnership that used its power to punitively pursue the population least able to afford the welfare bill. They believed that the policy would “end permissiveness” as well as end the reign of social workers. This shifted attention from the financial burdens of single mothers and their rehabilitation and employment to the problem of finding fathers whose children were on welfare. To do so, they installed a system that automated the mechanisms for addressing child support. This reduced the position of social workers because the new system required minimal implementation.

### **Women Leaders**

Until the 1980s women had been subjects of American social welfare policy, but they had never been the policy’s authors. In that decade, for the first time something akin to a women’s vote emerged, made manifest by a sizeable gender gap in national and higher-level state elections. For the first time enough women ran for office and enough women supported women politicians that a family policy authored by women was possible. In addition, national politicians from both parties sought the ‘women’s vote’ by committing to a family policy based on what women wanted. And women (at least middle-income women) wanted help avoiding entry into welfare, not more help exiting welfare, should that have already happened. They wanted help getting child support from recalcitrant divorced and separated fathers. They didn’t use the term ‘deadbeat dads,’ but Ronald Reagan and other conservative politicians appropriated the term and its implied support for a womanist agenda. In his description of parents in a

1983 statement at the Signing of the National Child Support, Ronald Reagan appealed to Congress to pass legislation that would force “parents who are deadbeats to pay up and deliver on their responsibilities.”

Brittany Pearl Battle (author of *“They’re Stealing My Opportunity to be a Father”*: *The Child Support System and State Intervention in the Family*) notes that this focus on the shortcomings of “deadbeat dads” corresponded with a major move to strengthen child support policy by the federal government from 1981 through 1999. In that period Congress passed more than fifteen new laws associated with child support. Although some of the legislation around child support policies was embedded within welfare policy, there were a number of significant standalone pieces of legislation specific to child support. All of it put the child support enforcement system at the beck and call of the maternal family policy system.

Of particular importance are the 1984 Child Support Enforcement Amendments and the Family Support Act of 1988. The former mandated the implementation of an income-withholding system in each state in order to collect outstanding child support payments from delinquent obligors. This amendment sought to increase the relatively low percentage of support being collected by moving from a system of payment that was essentially voluntary to one that was automatic.

The Family Support Act of 1988 expanded this system requiring states to implement wage garnishment in all child support cases involving recipients of public assistance. Two other pieces of legislation, the Child Support Recovery Act of 1992, and the Deadbeat Parents Punishment Act of 1998, are also particularly important in understanding the evolution of the child support system, especially in the increasingly punitive approach to enforcement. The 1992 Act represented the first time that federal criminal justice sanctions were attached to non-payment of child support obligations. The Deadbeat Parents Punishment Act strengthened the earlier act, extending the

criminal penalties for non-payment to any circumstances in which a non-custodial parent sought to evade an order for support by leaving the state or country.

### **Father figures in policy**

Unhappy with their treatment and their label 'deadbeat dads,' groups representing fathers formed in the early 1990s and to their punitive treatment. David Blankenhorn, a founder and leader of an early father rights' organization, the Institute for American Values, put it this way.

We respond to the Deadbeat Dad by denying and pretending. If only we could get through with these guys, that would fix what is broken. Get them to pay. That would help the children. That would relieve the taxpayer. Here, finally, is a family policy we can all agree on." He called the strategy a fantasy, adding, "It is based not on evidence but on wishful thinking." He said that the payments did not replace a father's 'economic provision and 'they do not replace a father.'

Others in the push back against the deadbeat dad label were less thoughtful. In 1984 Ken Pangborn of Men International told a Senate Committee that women 'trapped' men into becoming fathers, so Congress should give men a bill of rights that would protect them from predatory women and child support awards should be skeptical of claims as a consequence.

Even as the agenda of the women's agenda reached the full extent of its reach with the 1995 PRWORA welfare reform, a serious father agenda took shape in 1995 with a Memo from President Clinton instructing agencies to strengthen the role of fathers. Its guiding principles (issued in a 1995 DHHS memo) were a roadmap to what was to come.

The five guiding beliefs were: fathers are important, parents are partners, the roles that fathers play are diverse, culturally different and community normed, men should receive the education and support necessary to prepare them for the responsibility of fatherhood, and government should encourage and promote father involvement through programs and workforce policies.

A father's behavior to his child, family and community was thought to be as 'valuable' as his child support contributions.

Several studies came out of the 1982 Amendment to the Social Security Act that funded demonstrations that informed pro-father policies including a program in Wisconsin called Child First and the multi-site The Parent's Fair Share demonstration.

The biggest deal was Parent's Fair Share in 1992. It offered noncustodial fathers job training, peer-to-peer meetings, contact with local child support personnel, mediation services and part-time work. It connected enrollees with local businesses and job clubs that helped fathers polish their resumes and interview well. MDRC said the father's employment prospects did not improve. There were differences in implementation over timing of job placements. MDRC concluded that it might work better if tensions over short- and long-term job strategies were resolved. Also solving arrears problem was a big deal as well.

The significant one was Child First because it allowed fathers to trade their participation in training for child support considerations. This was an idea offered to divorced dads in some states, here it was offered to never-married, non-custodial fathers.

These demonstrations and ideas birthed two strands in the fatherhood response. One cleaned up the impulse of angry dads who wanted their place in a broken family restored. That policy response led to the Healthy Marriage demonstration, or the effort to prevent divorce and encouragement of cohabiting and never-married households to marry. The evaluations suggested (*characterized the Mathematica evaluations here*). These results point to a forecast from Professor McLanahan that fatherhood outcomes are determined before couples become parents. Couples that marry have selected that option because of their many advantages and keeping the marriage going, or even ending their marriages, leaves them with resources unimaginable to many less well-off parents. So, a program that works for parents with those advantages is fine, so long as it is understood as a useful resource for such families.

The second strand continued the work pointed in communities that called upon fathers to become local leaders in their communities, but more importantly in their own families. From the first model or two, formal programs began under umbrella organizations like NPCL that encouraged never-married, non-custodial, low-income fathers need to assume larger leadership roles in their own families by becoming better educated, getting on better job trajectories, becoming more involved with their child(ren), and becoming stronger assets to their communities. This strand was enriched with support from the Ford Foundation (and many others as well) that funded demonstrations and research to design interventions based on responsible fatherhood programs to help fill the policy space created by the missing fathers of maternal social policy. The responsible fatherhood programs at the heart of this book are at the center of the current policy response to the missing piece of the policy puzzle.

Fatherhood programs fit into this jigsaw puzzle as one response or consequence to a 'maternal' social system. One is to 'restore' marriage in center of family unit and make the locus of activity, and the other suggests, "Men need to assume larger leadership roles in families." This in addition to spiritual groups religious belief systems



and fathers' rights groups that want to reform child custody and child support laws. Providing the services and so forth to address the implied and mandated role for fathers involved with a maternal social welfare is what responsible fatherhood groups that are interested in augmented leadership role.

Fatherhood movements are broad-based forms of collective action that focus on more clearly defining the role of male parents in modern families. Fatherhood movements are composed of two types of organizations: those that concentrate on advocacy and policy research and those that are membership based with actual fathers as participants. Each movement, however, has different belief systems and goals. Pro-marriage groups place marriage at the center of any properly functioning family unit, whereas responsible fatherhood groups argue that men need to assume larger leadership roles in their families. Other fatherhood movements include spiritual groups that are based in strong religious belief systems and fathers' rights groups, which advocate on behalf of reforming child custody and child support laws. Across all of these movements, fathers in the twenty-first century are transforming themselves and the meaning of parenthood.