

# New Report: Foster Care System Disregards Fathers

By Jeffery M. Leving and Glenn Sacks

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When a mother and father are divorced or separated, and a child welfare agency removes the children from the mother's home for abuse or neglect, an offer of placement to the father, barring unfitness, should be automatic. Yet according to a new report by the Urban Institute, few fathers are able to reunite with their children, who are instead pushed into the foster care system.

The new report, *What About the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify, Locate, and Involve Nonresident Fathers*, examines the foster care systems of Massachusetts and three other states. The report contains a shocking finding: when fathers inform child welfare officials that they would like their children to live with them, the agencies seek to place the children with their fathers in only 8% of cases.

All fit parents have a fundamental right to raise their own children without state interference. Moreover, fathers can offer their children a sense of permanence, security and emotional support that a foster family (or a succession of foster care placements) cannot provide.

Fathers are also a much better source of long-term resources and sponsorship. Many foster children are pushed out of their homes and into a tenuous existence when they turn 18 and the foster parents no longer receive state subsidies.

Research shows that fathers matter. The rates of the four major youth pathologies--juvenile crime, teen pregnancy, teen drug abuse, and school dropouts--are tightly correlated with fatherlessness. For example, one long-term study of teen pregnancy published in *Child Development* found that a father's impact is so large that income, race, the mother's characteristics and a host of other normally powerful factors all mattered little. What mattered was dad.

It is true that the fathers of children seized by child welfare agencies tend to be younger, less stable and less fit than the average father. They are more likely to have drug or alcohol problems, and more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system. Yet behind child welfare agencies' disregard for fathers lie two largely unfounded beliefs--that fathers are often a safety risk to their children, and that most dads have little interest in their children.

Our societal image of family violence centers on abusive men. However, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' new report *Child Maltreatment 2004*, when one parent is acting without the involvement of the other parent, mothers are almost three times as likely to kill their children as fathers are, and are more than twice as likely to abuse them.

Many absent fathers are not a part of their children's lives because mothers have driven them out by denying visitation, moving far away or employing spurious abuse charges. Some fathers only find out that their children have been put in foster care when they are hit for child support to repay the state's costs. Many had no way of knowing that their children were in peril. Others were brushed aside by authorities when they asserted that their children were being abused.

For example, in one highly-publicized case, seven year-old Kaili Warrington-Sims was starved down to 29 pounds and imprisoned in a bedroom by her mother and her mother's live-in boyfriend before being rescued by her father, Daniel Sims. The couple had spirited the girl around New York state and then to Florida to deny Sims access. Sims struggled through a maze of bureaucratic indifference and hostility to get to his daughter. He arrived just in time--the girl would have only lived a few more weeks in her condition.

*What About the Dads?* makes it clear that many child welfare workers treat fathers as an afterthought. The report found that even when a caseworker had been in contact with a child's father, the caseworker was still five times less likely to know basic information about the father than about the mother. And 20% of the fathers whose identity and location were known by the child welfare agencies from the opening of the case were never even contacted

These policies are seriously misguided. When a mother is deemed unfit to care for her children, dad shouldn't be just one option out of many. He should be first in line.

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