

Obama's next project should be fatherhood: Column

New research illuminates the struggles of fatherless boys and the urgent role Obama could play.



(Photo: Pool photo by Dennis Brack)

“By almost every measure, the group that is facing some of the most severe challenges in the 21st century in this country are boys and young men of color,” President Obama [said](#) in 2014 when he launched My Brother’s Keeper, an initiative to help black and Latino boys. The president went on to note that compared with young white men, young minority males are less likely to graduate from high school, less likely to be gainfully employed and more likely to be poor.

A new round of social science confirms the president’s observations and indicates they apply not just to young men of color but also to young men from lower-income homes generally. Indeed, what is striking about today’s trends is that poor boys, as well as Latino and African-American boys, are often doing worse than their female peers when it comes to a range of outcomes in young adulthood, from educational attainment to incarceration to employment as young adults. For instance, today, [less than 40%](#) of Latino and black college graduates are male.

In trying to account for the falling fortunes of young men from disadvantaged backgrounds, scholars, policymakers and journalists have tended to focus on factors such as poverty and racial and income segregation. These structural factors matter, to be sure, but so too does an oft-neglected factor — missing fathers. A series of new studies confirms a time-tested truth: Dads matter, and their absence from the home is a major reason why poor and minority males are floundering.

Princeton sociologist Sara McLanahan and her colleagues recently [concluded](#) after reviewing more than 40 academic studies that father absence is a particularly potent predictor of dropping out of high school and behavioral problems.

And new research on education from MIT economist David Autor and his colleagues shows that minority and poor boys without fathers are falling behind in school at a [faster rate](#) than their female peers. In studying more than 1 million children in Florida, Autor and his colleagues found that the “brother-sister gap in suspensions is far smaller in families where children are born to married parents.” They also discovered the gender gap in high school graduation is bigger for children from fatherless homes. Thus, growing gender educational inequality in lower-income communities appears to be tied to the rise of fatherlessness in these very same communities.

This pattern of disadvantage for young males extends into young adulthood. New work by Stanford economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues shows that young men from poor homes are less likely to be employed than their female peers. That’s striking because, in general, young men are employed at higher rates than young women. But this pattern did not hold for one group of men raised in poor homes: Young men in married families were more likely to be employed than men or women from single-parent homes.

How can we explain the positive impact of present fathers on boys from poor and minority homes? “Boys particularly seem to benefit more from being in a married household or committed household — with the time, attention and income that brings,” Autor said. The lack of a male role model in impoverished, fatherless households led by single mothers seems to be having a disparate effect. “It’s quite possible that daughters are drawing the lesson that I’m going to be the sole provider and the head of the family. ... Sons could be drawing the lesson that the men I see around me are not working or committed fathers.”

Thus in many low-income communities, we face a vicious cycle of absent father households creating large disadvantages for the sons of those fathers, reinforcing the gender gap in educational attainment and labor market advancement. Autor is not the only one who has noticed this. So, too, has President Obama: “We know that boys who grow up without a father are more likely to be poor, more likely to underperform in school.”

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We should not be content with a world where a high degree of educational and economic inequality is locked in by fatherlessness. We should regard it as unacceptable that so many boys from poor and minority communities are growing up without dads. That’s why

we should keep looking for new ways to revive the beleaguered fortunes of marriage and the ideal of committed fatherhood among poor and working-class Americans. One way is by communicating loudly and clearly that dads matter. No one will be better positioned, or have more credibility, than Barack Obama as he opens a new chapter in his life next year.

As we approach Father's Day, we encourage him to make strengthening fatherhood one of his top post-presidential priorities.

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