



(Bettman/Corbis) The homeless and out-of-work of the Depression in line for shelter in New York.

## Missing men

**America's fight against poverty has a growing hole. Some say it's time to pay attention to the people falling through it: men.**

By Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow | August 10, 2008

IN KEEPING WITH the work ethic of their Puritan forebears, Americans have always preferred to direct their generosity to the "deserving" poor: the have-nots who, through no fault of their own, are unable to support themselves. Since the New Deal, the first large-scale federal initiative to aid the needy, the US government has focused its antipoverty efforts on the vulnerable, such as the disabled, the elderly, widows, and children. In the 1930s, President Roosevelt launched programs to support these groups and to assist the unemployed during economic downturns - all populations affected by circumstances beyond their control.

The next major wave of antipoverty legislation, President Johnson's War on Poverty in the

1960s, offered cushions and a hand up to the "forgotten fifth" of society. Many of these programs - Medicare, Head Start, expanded welfare rolls - were conceived with the same constituencies in mind.

The icon of the "undeserving poor," by contrast, has always been the able-bodied man. Although some programs in the New Deal and the War on Poverty provided them with jobs and training, social welfare policy has otherwise largely ignored men. One practical reason is that as a rule, aid to children - the paragons of vulnerability - has been channeled through mothers. Equally potent, though, is the longstanding cultural belief that men, barring economic disasters, should be able to take care of themselves. Today, especially, low-income men have an image problem. Many are convicts and "deadbeat dads," widely seen as deserving blame, not bailouts.

But according to a new wave of thinking, the next front in the fight against poverty should consist of policies aimed at these very individuals. Experts say that poor men, caught in profound economic and social changes, now number among society's most vulnerable members. The economy has shifted its weight to the service sector, shedding the manufacturing jobs that once offered low-skilled men the promise of good wages to support their families. Alarming percentages of poor men - disproportionately African-Americans - pass through the criminal justice system, further undercutting their employability. And child support laws have driven them deep into debt.

"In a lot of different ways, I think there's been an awakening perception," says Harry Holzer, a professor of public policy at Georgetown and coauthor of the book "Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men." "The men have to be in the equation."

In recent books, papers, and conferences, specialists from across the political spectrum are urging a comprehensive array of new antipoverty policies targeted at men. The proposals include wage subsidies, forgiveness of child support debt, reentry programs for ex-offenders, and even a scheme that would force men to work under threat of prison.

No antipoverty plan will ultimately succeed, these thinkers say, without bold steps to end male indigence - and its pernicious ripple effects. Low-income men are more likely to turn to crime than their female counterparts. While having a poor parent of either gender is hard on children, having an uninvolved, and often incarcerated, parent is worse. These men find themselves mired in seemingly intractable difficulties, and their offspring - frequently deprived of one parent's worth of emotional and financial support - start life that much closer to the same traps.

This new thinking is gaining traction throughout the country. Several bills in Congress, including one cosponsored by Senator Barack Obama, would provide a wage subsidy for men, among other measures. Some states, including Massachusetts, are reexamining their child support policies, seeking compromises with fathers who are unable to pay their debt. The University of Wisconsin's Institute for Research on Poverty has a program called Families Forward that experiments with ways to reduce child support debt. A number of cities, including Newark and New York, have begun aggressive efforts to reintegrate ex-offenders into society. And New York State has instituted a wage subsidy for fathers who keep up with their child support orders. (The laws are not technically gender-specific, but "ex-offenders" and "noncustodial parents" are

overwhelmingly male.)

In certain quarters, these ideas have generated controversy. Conservative critics oppose the expenditures, while others, especially feminists, fear that limited antipoverty funding could be diverted from poor women, who are by and large still struggling to raise the kids. From this perspective, the question is, why should men who have shirked their obligations be rewarded with assistance?

"If men were taking responsibility for their children, they would be receiving benefits," says Kim Gandy, president of the National Organization for Women.

These objections underscore one of the central challenges of any strategy designed to benefit poor men. Although policy analysts describe them as among the most vulnerable citizens in contemporary America, they are commonly viewed as more menacing than helpless. Many of them have broken laws and are severely alienated from mainstream society. The new proposals raise the question: How can you justify devoting scarce resources to helping people who most Americans see as culpable for many of their own - and society's - problems?

...

After World War II, the US economy flourished, and earnings rose across the economic spectrum. By 1973, the real earnings of blue-collar workers were more than 60 percent higher than in 1947. "The whole country was on an up escalator," says Gordon Berlin, president of MDRC, a policy research organization based in New York.

After 1973, however, this escalator came to a "grinding halt," says Berlin. Well-paying manufacturing jobs began to vanish. Immigration of low-skilled workers created competition for the low-paying jobs that remained. The inflation-adjusted value of the minimum wage fell, as the importance of higher education rose.

Between 1975 and 2002, the real earnings of men with a college degree or more shot up by 62 percent, according to research by Sheldon Danziger, a professor of public policy at the University of Michigan. But over the same period, the earnings of males with only a high school diploma declined by 13 percent. For high school dropouts, they dropped 23 percent. Many men who would have been able to support families a few decades ago are in a very different position today.

The opportunities and incentive to enter the labor market have dwindled, especially for black men. In 2005, about 28 percent of working-age black men reported no employment. This level of joblessness means the inability to help support families, or reliance on illicit sources of income such as the drug trade - in either case, ravaging the fabric of poverty-stricken communities.

But along with economic shifts, analysts say that social policy has also left poor men behind. Reforms in the 1990s ushered millions of women off the welfare rolls and into the labor force. In addition to the "sticks" of welfare reform, there were less widely discussed "carrots," notably a greatly expanded earned income tax credit (EITC) for custodial parents (read: mothers). Families

with two or more children can now receive a maximum credit of \$4,400, while those with one child qualify for up to \$2,662. For single adults with no dependents, however, the maximum is only \$399. While there is a clear logic to these disparities - caring for dependents requires money - the reality is that many low-skill jobs don't pay a living wage, especially considering the child support obligations of many low-income men.

What's more, in some cases the current policies actually penalize marriage. If a mother is single, she will be eligible for an array of benefits that will disappear or diminish once she files jointly with a husband.

"It doesn't take a genius to figure out that if we don't get married, we'll get a bigger check," says Steven Raphael, a professor of public policy at UC Berkeley.

Some thinkers advocate a wage subsidy that would "make work pay" equally for everyone. Gordon Berlin, in a recent paper, argued for a substantially increased EITC that would be available to single workers, whether or not they had children. In order to reduce the marriage penalty, he advocates exempting the supplement from joint income tax filing requirements. In Berlin's view, the calculus is simple: "If work paid enough, you'd get a lot more work."

In Berlin's view, this subsidy could also make the men more marriageable. Poor women say they are more inclined to marry potential contributors to household finances, and studies have shown that male earnings correlate with marriage rates.

Another piece of the male poverty puzzle, thinkers say, is the evolution of the child support system. Aggressive efforts to track down "deadbeat dads," forcing them to pay up with automatic deductions from their paychecks, have become an unavoidable fact of life for many men over the last several decades.

The reforms have helped plenty of struggling mothers and children who would have otherwise had no recourse. But critics say that the majority of poor fathers today can't pay, and that the erosion of their paychecks translates into a further disincentive to take legal work.

"They are being saddled with growing debt that drives them underground to somewhere no one wants them," says Ronald Mincy, a professor of social policy at Columbia and editor of the 2006 anthology "Black Males Left Behind."

Meanwhile, high rates of incarceration exacerbate the child support debt trap. About 70 percent of inmates are noncustodial parents, according to a common estimate. "If they're in prison, the child support clock keeps ticking," notes Holzer. And after their release, they stumble on multiple barriers to employment: the stigma of a criminal record, time away from the labor market, and in some states, laws banning ex-offenders from working in certain settings, such as hospitals and nursing homes.

A number of analysts endorse compromise arrangements with poor fathers. This could mean forgiving child support arrears, in part or in full, for men who keep up with current payments. Or it could involve recognition of the hurdles to paying while incarcerated. Over the past five years

or so, almost half of the states, including Massachusetts, have begun to work out various agreements with fathers. The idea is that these policies will be fairer to men with low earning capacity and begin to lure them back into the labor force.

...

The discussion of helping poor men has also turned to the "culture of poverty" - a touchy subject because it is often associated with race. After the 1960s, there was widespread discontent with the growth of the welfare rolls. Conservatives, especially, charged that instead of curing poverty, welfare discouraged work and perpetuated a dependent underclass. These criticisms culminated in the 1990s bipartisan effort to "end welfare as we know it," in the words of President Clinton.

Under welfare reform, millions of women left the rolls and entered the workforce. Although it by no means eradicated female poverty, most observers agree that it successfully promoted a culture of work. In a partial inversion of the traditional gender roles, poor women are the ones bringing home the bacon, albeit in meager strips. A widespread hope today is that public policy can induce similar changes in male work patterns.

At the same time, a consensus has emerged that breadwinning isn't the only crucial role for fathers to play. Research has shown that children from two-parent households are less likely to smoke, repeat grades, and engage in violent behavior, among other worrisome tendencies. While causation is hard to prove, many experts agree that involved fathers exert a positive influence - and that active fatherhood can transfigure the men themselves, giving them purpose and the motivation to become responsible earners, citizens, and family members.

"Social welfare policy should be changed so that the man is recognized as an asset," says Joseph Jones, an ex-offender and founder of the Center for Urban Families in Baltimore. "That would change some of the dynamic in our communities that is so dysfunctional."

Lawrence Mead, a professor of politics at NYU who shares these concerns, has taken a different tack from most of his colleagues, putting forward a controversial proposal to mandate work. He argues that due to social disorder in their communities, low-income men, especially black men, have lost internal discipline, and that government must therefore impose it on them. Under his plan, men on parole or in child support debt would be required to work. Their efforts to find work and their employment would be closely supervised by case managers. If they failed to land private jobs, they would be assigned to government-funded "work crews." Those who still failed to work, with no valid excuse, would be imprisoned. (Men may already be sent to jail for nonpayment of child support.)

"The idea is to make it real that this obligation matters," says Mead.

Most other analysts favor less, not more, reliance on incarceration. Criminal records and time in prison, after all, contribute to men's initial employment challenges. But Mead believes that sticks - in combination with incentives such as wage subsidies - will be needed to shake men out of ingrained habits.

Divergent strategies notwithstanding, the members of this growing movement believe that more effective policy can nudge poor men into jobs and mainstream society. They hope this will foster more stable families, and ultimately greater support and opportunities for a new generation of children, who have always been at the forefront of the nation's antipoverty agenda.

"It's the same kid you're looking out for," says Mindy Tarlow, executive director of the Center for Employment Opportunities, a New York-based nonprofit. "People are starting to say, 'Hey wait a minute, that kid has a father.' "

*Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow is a contributing writer for Ideas. She can be reached at [rebecca.tuhusdubrow@gmail.com](mailto:rebecca.tuhusdubrow@gmail.com). ■*

© [Copyright](#) 2008 The New York Times Company