

The Impact of Fatherhood on Child Poverty

The Washington Interagency Fatherhood Council

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What do fathers have to do with childhood poverty?

A life in poverty for a child can have lasting and detrimental impact, and such toxic stress presents a serious threat to brain development and healthy system function.¹ Children who experience life below the poverty line are at increased risk for negative outcomes in their physical and mental health, social emotional development, learning success, and future employment, and they are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems into adolescence.^{2,3} This is true across all demographics and disproportionately impacts Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous children.¹ The absence of a father or father figure exacerbates these outcomes,³ and living with a single parent, whether it is with Mom or Dad, is one of the greatest risk factors for living in poverty—nearly five times the rate for those living in families with married parents.³ For children without a father in the home, they are 47 percent more likely to live in poverty.³

An engaged father lessens the impact of poverty and toxic stress in a child.

The evidence base on the impact of fatherhood on child and family poverty is limited and emerging; however, we do know the positive impact involved fathers have on their children's social-emotional and behavioral development.² Notably, for some children living in poverty whose fathers are more engaged with them, social and behavioral problems are less pronounced.² Thus, a father's involvement amidst poverty can moderate the negative impact of poverty on a child.²

What is the Washington story?

In Washington, the child poverty rate is decreasing and sits slightly below the national average.⁴ Still, 29 percent of Washington's children live in single-parent households, which hasn't changed over the past decade.⁴ Despite this, we know fathers want to be involved. Paternity establishment was 97.9 percent in 2019 and has consistently increased over the past decade.⁵ Dads are participating in the efforts necessary to support their children, even in non-marital arrangements. Feedback from Washington fathers tells us the support systems for fathers are lacking. In light of the essential role fathers play in their children's development and the powerful impact fathers can have on poverty reduction, we must consider how fathers are supported and encouraged in their role not only as a source of income and economic stability for their children but also as a fundamental factor in reducing the impact of toxic stress and scaffolding the framework for families and children to be well.

Where do we go from here?

◀Promote fatherhood inclusion

Policy and programmatic action will require strategic assessment of how services can be tailored and sustained for the multitude of family needs and can better align with and reinforce the needs, interests, and strengths of fathers.^{3,6}

◀Reduce toxic stress and promote equity

Policies and systems must strengthen safety-net programs, identify and remove barriers to resources for fathers and parents, promote equity, and prioritize systemic racism elimination and violence prevention.¹

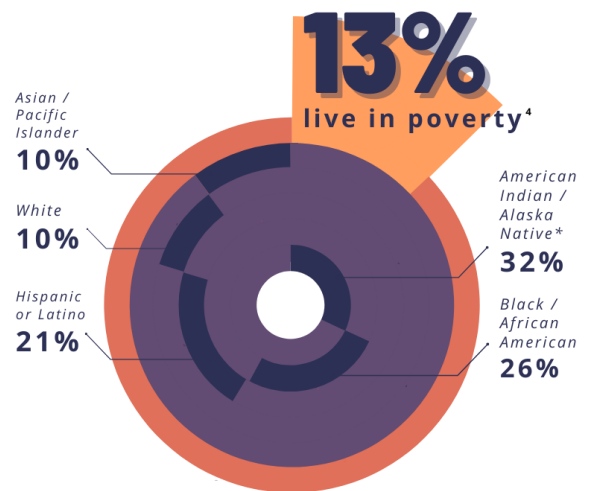
◀Foster positive co-parenting relationships

Consider how policies, programs, and services can foster positive co-parenting and reduce the stress associated with single-parent households. Adapt to the shifting socio-cultural dynamics of families; embolden efforts to strengthen families.⁶

◀Invest in fatherhood research

Research that incorporates a fatherhood-focus is limited. Invest in stronger data that articulates the role that fathers play in their children's lives and the expressed needs of fathers through their own voices.⁶

Children in Washington State...



1 in 5 children live without a father in the home in WA⁵



References

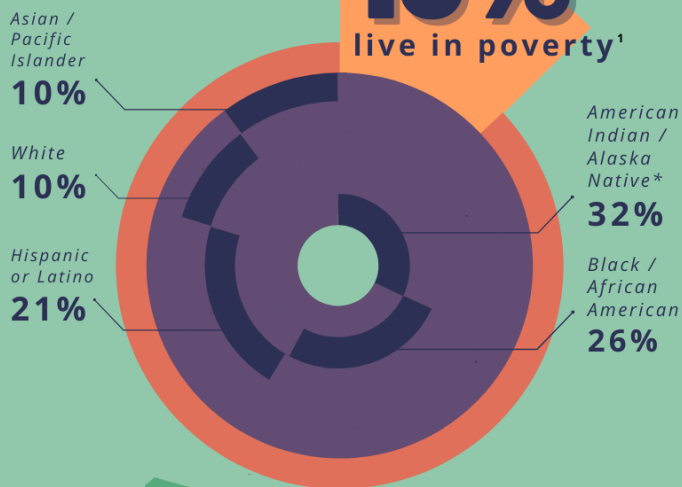
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*Estimate from 2013 is most recent accurate data point. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2020). Kids Count in Washington [database]. Retrieved from <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/4748-children-in-poverty-by-race-and-ethnicity-state-level?loc=49&loct=2#detailed/2/any/false/1376,1201,1074,880,815/4684,172,133,12,4100,826,1673,13/11103,11104>

Infographic: Fatherhood and Child Poverty

Children in Washington State...

13%
live in poverty¹



1 in 5 children
live without a father
in the home in WA²

47%
more likely to
live in poverty³

Positive father
engagement can
reduce the
impact of poverty
in children and
improve health
and life outcomes³

*Estimate from 2013 is most recent accurate data point.
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