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THE BUFFALO NEWS

Growing up in a world without fathers

By Mark Sommer / NEWS STAFF REPORTER

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Many poverty-stricken households are run by single mothers. x Where are the fathers? That's a question many ask, from mothers and children to social workers and academics.

"Where are the fathers? I wish I knew the answer," said Pedro Velez- Lopez, a youth court advocate with Hispanics United. He handled 94 cases this year through Oct. 1; all 94 involved single-mother families.

"That void – the absence of fathers – is truly detrimental," said Ron Stewart, a Buffalo State College sociology professor who specializes in the African-American family, and black males in particular.

While single-parent homes are more prevalent among low-income families, they're most pronounced among African-Americans. Some 65 percent of black households were led by a single parent as of December 2006, according to the U.S. Census Supplemental Survey and American Community Survey.

Stewart said the absence of fathers is a major factor in sons turning to a tough street culture in search of acceptance and identity, and in daughters seeking surrogate fathers in gang members and drug dealers, and getting pregnant without being in a committed relationship. But he worries all black males are being unfairly painted by the same brush.

"We do have young black males attending college and living up to expectations of society. Not all black men are gangbangers and drug dealers and criminals," Stewart said.

A legacy of poverty

Some observers, like the late New York Sen. Daniel Moynihan, have blamed the large number of single-parent households on a "culture of poverty" that is passed on generationally.

A vertical sidebar of coupon categories from CoolSavings. Each category is represented by a colorful icon and text:

- Free Samples**: Icon of a gift box with 'FREE' written on it.
- Grocery Coupons**: Icon of a shopping basket filled with groceries.
- Baby Coupons**: Icon of a baby bottle.
- Pet Coupons**: Icon of a blue dog's head.
- Travel Coupons**: Icon of a blue suitcase.
- Beauty Coupons**: Icon of a purple perfume bottle.
- Free Stuff**: Icon of a yellow starburst with 'FREE' written on it.
- View All**: Icon of a person wearing sunglasses.

The bottom of the sidebar features the **CoolSavings** logo.

“There is one unmistakable lesson in American history,” Moynihan wrote in 1965. “A community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future – that community asks for and gets chaos.”

But Wendell Wild, a social worker for the Buffalo Public Schools, counters that. “The ‘culture of poverty’ has a premise that somehow the poor are different, like there is something wrong with them. They are poor, they don’t have enough support and their lives are difficult and chaotic because of it.

“But they are trying no more or less than the rest of us, and they are no more or less responsible than the rest of us.”

Wild said he sees “a ton of disorganization” in children’s lives during home visits. Blaming the individual, he said, ignores the loss of good-paying jobs, inferior education, lack of job training, affordable child care and health insurance, substandard housing and predatory landlords, and lack of investment in poor and often segregated neighborhoods.

“The problem of poverty has been individualized and psychologized, when it’s a structural economic problem that requires structural economic solutions,” Wild said.

West Side resident David Rodriguez, who helps support two children but does not live with them, understands that desperation.

“Sometimes poverty makes you do some strange things. I have found myself dumpster-diving for food,” said Rodriguez, a driver for La Nova pizzeria. He worries that if something happens to his car, he could become unemployed again.

“Poverty drives some people into crime. And I don’t say it’s a good thing, but people have to take care of their child no matter what.”

Money flows up

Aaron Bartley, director of PUSH Buffalo, a grass-roots group working to rebuild the West Side, calls the ‘culture of poverty’ a “distraction from the culture of greed,” as wealth in the U.S. becomes increasingly concentrated at the top.

“I know it may sound crazy to someone in Amherst,” he said, “but the only way these young men can reach [society’s expectations] – unless they are exceptionally gifted or exceptional in some way – is to seek it through primarily illicit opportunities.”

One of PUSH Buffalo’s goals is to extend the mayor’s summer jobs program for youth year-round. A larger vision is a citywide public works program that could employ people to rebuild struggling neighborhoods.

“We wouldn’t catch all of the people caught up in [drugs and other illicit activities], but you’d see most turning to the culture of work almost overnight,” Bartley predicted.

Henry Louis Taylor, a University at Buffalo planning expert, says the alienation, sense of hopelessness, anger and the economic conditions that help drive this despair, have gotten worse.

“The marriageable pool of black and Latino men who have the jobs and income that would allow them to take care of a family is small. We don’t have programs set up to support them,” Taylor said.

He sees the same problems encircling another generation of children.

“We saw these problems emerging 17 years ago. It’s just become deeper and more complicated with the passage of time. We didn’t solve those problems, or really try.

“It takes a village,” Taylor added, “but we don’t have a village.”

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