
OVERVIEW

To test assumptions often made about the absence of black fathers.

DESIGN

Fifty-three black, latency-age boys from a large, predominantly black church and two federally supported housing projects were randomly selected for this study. The boys were between seven and twelve years of age; all had a father who was absent from home. The boys and their mothers were interviewed separately in Knoxville, Tennessee.

BACKGROUND ASSUMPTIONS

Chestang has pointed out that society tends to judge black families by a romantic ideal for American families: "Viewed from the perspective of the white, larger society, the poor black family is, in the main, in a state of disorganization. But viewed from this same perspective this would be true of the majority of other families in our society."

Hopkins addresses racist assumptions about black fathers: "It is generally taken for granted that a white man loves his family, but this is rarely the case in relation to a black man...When a black father is absent for whatever reasons, all kinds of negative things are assumed about him."

FINDINGS

Several findings emerged through the study:

- All boys in the study had access to some black male.
- Thirty-seven percent of boys said they would go to their father for help with a problem only a man could help with while only five percent of the mothers thought their son would seek a father’s help.
- Thirty-three percent of the mothers identified an uncle as influencing their son the most; only eleven percent of the boys indicated they would go to their uncle for help.
- Most boys indicated they would turn to a male relative for help; six percent picked their mother’s boyfriend; twenty percent said they
would seek help from a male in the neighborhood or community.

CONCLUSIONS

• An absent father may still be keenly interested in and involved in the life of his family and play an important function, especially in the life of his son.
• Mothers and sons should be supported in their "efforts to find alternative male role models." Efforts should also be made to reverse the welfare penalty against a father’s presence.
• Finally, male school teachers and recreation leaders should be hired to act as male role models whenever possible.

IMPLICATIONS

Youth workers can learn from the conclusions in this study and provide additional male role models for boys whose fathers are absent. Influential voices are also needed to speak against the forces pulling families apart.

Dean Borgman CYS