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Dad's role touches economy

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The role dads play in the economy goes beyond the ties and after shave kids will be giving them Sunday -- a father's involvement in the family can impact the state's future economy.

According to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), there are 67.8 million fathers in the nation, some 25.8 million of them are part of married-couple families that include children younger than 18. Of all the fathers in the United States, 1.7 million are single fathers.

Custodial fathers, those that have primary custody of their children, received \$2.8 billion in child support from the mothers of those children in 2007, according to the Census Bureau. Non-custodial fathers paid \$18.6 billion to custodial mothers, that same year, according to statistics.

Today, fathers are facing tough times, as the hardest-hit sectors in the economy have been male-dominated industries such as construction, manufacturing and finance. Of the 86,171 people filing for unemployment claims in Connecticut during the first quarter of this year, 51,167, or 59 percent were men, according to the state [Labor Department](#). That's left a lot of households' scrambling for money, and for those households where dad doesn't live with them but is paying child support, a job loss can worsen a tough social situation.

At the Tuesday night meeting of Father's for Life in Bridgeport, at least six of the fathers in the room had lost jobs or couldn't find work. Father's for Life is a program started by Career Resources, a nonprofit organization specializing in job training that aims to help non-custodial fathers and parents reconnect with their kids.

As program instructor [Malik Williams](#) explained, the focus of the program is give these men the tools they need to be present in their kids' lives. He said many fathers struggle with guilt when they don't have the money to pay child support, but dropping out of a child's life is not the solution.

He said the point is to do what you can and understand the mother's frustrations as well. He said although there is still a tendency to treat fathers who are unable to pay full child support as "deadbeat dads," there is a growing realization that labeling men down on their luck as such and tossing them in jail isn't going to help families.

Melissa Farley, executive director of external affairs for the state [Judicial Branch](#), said it's fair to say Connecticut has moved away from branding fathers as "deadbeat dads" and is more interested in working with fathers to get them into jobs and paying child support. That's why judicial magistrates recommend some parents who are facing contempt charges for non-payment attend programs such as Fathers for Life.

Williams said one of the goals of the program is to get men to recognize that, "Mom needs help.

And the societal impact is more than economic, he said. Drop-out rates at schools are high and "juvenile detention centers are overflowing. Many of these children are fatherless."

During the meeting, Williams and the men discussed breaking patterns of behavior and how if a father doesn't demonstrate that he's responsible and law abiding, the children are more likely to go down the wrong path.

Anibal Torres, a [Fairfield University](#) assistant professor of marriage and family therapy, said absentee fathers are not a new phenomenon in the United States, but it has gotten worse over the decades and could be a huge problem if not addressed.

"If you see the family histories of these fathers, their fathers were not involved," he said. "So family patterns have a way to perpetuate themselves."

He said it doesn't mean people without fathers are doomed to repeat the same mistakes, but it generally holds they are more likely to. If a mother is strong enough, she can provide a good example to her kids, but then what if she too had an absentee dad?

Torres said the issue becomes larger as the generations continue. One bad dad can lead to a future bad dad and mom, who then could set the example of more parents.

"The more involved and engaged fathers are decrease the costs of the state if they take care of the children," he said. Those kids will be less likely to rely on state programs or break the law, which also raises tax burdens.

Torres, like Williams, said he believes a reformed, mature dad still can repair his relationship with his family.

"If they take responsibility for their actions and show their children a different model of how to live in the world," he said, then the kids will be alright. And, so will dad.

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