Fathering Change: Strengthening the role of black fathers

Many black fathers from troubled homes want a bigger role in their kids' lives

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Photographer Zun Lee is documenting the efforts of black fathers to reclaim their roles as parents with an intimate, moving photo essay called Father Figure: Exploring Alternate Notions of Black Fatherhood. (Courtesy Zun Lee)

This week's CBC Metro Morning radio series “Fathering Change: Strengthening the Role of Black Fathers” explores fatherhood issues in troubled homes and neighbourhoods (listen to the series now).

Steve Thomas got out of prison on a Friday afternoon. By Monday morning, he was at the Children's Aid Society offices in Toronto trying to get his baby daughter back.

While he was serving a seven-month sentence, she was taken from her mother and placed in foster care.

Thomas (his name has been changed in this story to protect the identity of his child) is one of many black fathers from troubled homes who want a bigger role in their children's lives. It's part of what's sometimes called a “fatherhood movement” playing out in cities with large black communities from Kingston, Jamaica, to New York City, to Toronto.

But it's often easier said than done.

In Thomas's case, his unexpected appearance at Children's Aid caused a commotion.

"Staff members came running down the stairs," he recalls, "to get a glimpse of him. One of them was calling urgently, "The father's here, the father's here!"

His daughter's child protection team hadn't factored an absent black father into their plans. The baby's mother had stopped showing up for her scheduled access visits, the foster parents wanted to adopt and the legal hearing was only two months away.

- Video: Metro Morning's Matt Galloway hosts a panel on black fatherhood issues

His first supervised visit with his daughter was a challenge. The baby wouldn't stop crying, but as Thomas held her he repeated, "I'm Daddy, Daddy loves you," until the sobs began to subside.

A social worker came into the room and told Thomas, "You're a natural!" She also said he had little time left to make his case as a father.

Over the next two months his race against time — enrolling in parenting classes, finding an
apartment, proving to the child protection team that his daughter would be better off with him than with her foster family — would lead to an on-again, off-again custody arrangement.

Today he has weekly scheduled visits with his daughter, hoping to soon have her back for good.

“It would be easier to give up,” Thomas says.

**Common struggle**

Thomas hasn’t given up. But some black men in troubled neighbourhoods, facing similar pressures, withdraw from their role as fathers.

For a 2013 study called Gathering Our Voices, black fathers in Toronto talked about their experiences at 11 community forums in priority neighbourhoods, places designated by the City of Toronto as facing numerous social and economic inequities.

Researchers noted the "paucity of information" about black family structure and residential patterns.

“The system tries to disenfranchise the father. We’re just a sperm donor. But we have the same emotion as a woman has, we just don’t show it.”

- Steve Thomas

The most recent figures come from Statistics Canada, which reports that in 2000, 40 per cent of children in African-Canadian homes were in single-parent households, almost always headed by the mother. The numbers were even higher in Toronto’s Jamaican-Canadian community, where two out of three children were growing up in single-parent homes.

Those numbers contrast sharply with more recent numbers on Canadian families overall, of which Statistics Canada says lone-parent families represented only 16.3 per cent in 2011.

A Toronto Star investigation published in December 2014 also found an unusually large number of black children in foster and group homes. It said 41 per cent of the children and youth in the care of the Children’s Aid Society of Toronto are black, while just 8.2 per cent of Toronto’s population under the age of 18 is black.

One of the prominent themes emerging from the Gathering Our Voices forums was the lack of black fathering role models in many priority neighbourhoods.

Photographer Zun Lee says images of black fathers with their children are underrepresented in most of mainstream media coverage, fostering negative stereotypes. (Courtesy Zun Lee)

The report added that, “the most frequently discussed barriers to being a good father included family court, employment challenges, educational attainment and interactions with their child’s school.”

Census Canada’s National Household Survey (2011) says that in Ontario, the unemployment rate of 13 per cent for black adults was almost twice the provincial average. It was even higher - 25 per cent - for black youth, comparable only to Aboriginal youth.”
Institutions such as the family courts and the child protection system routinely leave the father out of the planning process. In *Gathering Our Voices*, researchers said fathers who were involved with the Ontario Family Court system, "overwhelmingly suggested that the system was designed on an antiquated philosophy that favours mothers over fathers."

They also felt the, "system was biased and participated in precluding them from being with their children."

- **Listen to the Metro Morning series: Fathering Change: Strengthening the Role of Black Fathers**

Fathers elsewhere, no matter what their skin colour, echo those experiences. In the report *Manufacturing Ghost Fathers*, researcher Leslie Brown reviewed 116 randomly selected files from a child protection agency in a mid-sized Canadian city. This study explored what it called "the invisibility of fathers in the child welfare system in Canada." It found that almost 50 per cent of fathers are considered irrelevant to mothers and children.

"They were nowhere to be found in the files," says Brown. "They exist in the lives of these children, but child welfare doesn't see them."

That bias against fathers is intensified by higher than average incarceration rates. In 2012 Canada's Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI) identified black inmates as one of the fastest-growing groups in federal corrections, increasing by 75 per cent over the past 10 years. Its report pointed out that while black people make up about 2.5 per cent of Canada's population, they represented just over 9 per cent of the federal inmate population.

"When we talk about black fathers we assume that black men don't care, not understanding that hundreds of years of slavery have created the disjointed family."

- *Knia Singh*

The impact of incarceration extends to the relationships between black mothers and fathers in ways that go beyond the physical separation, according to Knia Singh. A law student at Osgoode Law School and a member of Toronto's African-Canadian Coalition of Community Organizations, he is a father who won sole custody of his own daughter, now in her 20s.

Singh says many African-Canadian fathers referred to him by community workers have told him about former partners using criminal records against them in court. And he adds that many young black men don't even know they have a legal right to joint custody.

"And especially as black men, if they've had any experience with the justice system, they avoid it at all costs."

- **Watch: Metro Morning's Matt Galloway hosts a panel discussion on black fatherhood issues**

For many black leaders, some of the roots of father-absence lie in the trauma that years of slavery inflicted on black families.

"You can't talk about absent fathers without talking about the history of slavery," says Ojo Ojo, a senior program analyst with the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies. Ojo is responsible for driving an anti-racism and anti-oppression agenda within the child protection system.

"I've heard women talk about dating black men," says Ojo. "Oh, don't date that black guy, you know they don't get married — I've overheard that. Well, that goes back to slavery, and a pattern of detachment for 500 years."

Singh agrees that slavery is part of the key to understanding modern father-absence.

"We have to understand why these things are happening, and that's why I bring up slavery. When we talk about black fathers we assume that black men don't care - not understanding that hundreds of years of slavery have created the disjointed family."

**Real change**

Many believe a fresh perspective is needed to help reconnect fathers and children in troubled homes.

To this end, photographer Zun Lee has launched his own counter-narrative, through an intimate photo essay called *Father Figure: Exploring Alternate Notions of Black Fatherhood*. 
Lee's photo essay of black fathers and their children is a tribute to the black men and boys who befriended him years earlier. He says black fatherhood can't be reduced to the stereotype of the disengaged father. The black men who stepped up repeatedly proved for Lee that the reality was much more complicated.

Audio: Zun Lee's story

"That's why I knew the stereotype was really just a stereotype," says Lee. "Because I had experienced the opposite. Here I was, a child that wasn't even theirs and they took it upon themselves to be there for me in ways my own parents weren't."

Like Lee, Thomas is also revisiting his childhood memories in an effort to understand his own experience of a father who left him when he was six.

Thomas used to think his father had abandoned him. Today, as a dad himself, he wonders whether his father was any different than him, and whether he too could end up turning his back on his role as a father because of the financial, cultural and social odds stacked against many black men.

"The system tries to disenfranchise the father," Thomas says. "We're just a sperm donor. But we have the same emotion as a woman has, we just don't show it."

Thomas still feels that his role as a father is fragile, barely rooted as far as the family court or Ontario's child protection system are concerned. But he's one of a growing number who long to give their children a different experience than what their own fathers offered them.

Mary Wiens' series "Fathering Change: Strengthening the Role of Black Fathers" originally aired on CBC Radio's Metro Morning. Listen to the series:

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