

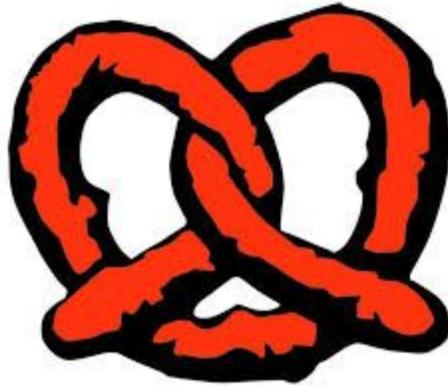
The Black Plague: Absentee Fathers of the African-American Community

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Abstract

There is a stereotype in today's society that many African American children do not have fathers, and unfortunately this stereotype has some truth to it. The percentage of absent black fathers is far larger than the percentage of absent white fathers and this is in part linked to the age at which African Americans are having children, the family dynamics in which black males are growing up in, and the poverty level at which a majority of African Americans fall. The research compiled in this paper explains the different ways in which the high percentage of father absence affects the black community financially, emotionally, and behaviorally. These findings can be used when analyzing the relationship amongst African American families and the behavioral pattern that can be seen in fatherless African American children.

LIT REVIEW/INTRO:

For one African-American boy in a rural, midwestern city the only things that his father ever gave him was a gap and lower self-worth compared to his peers with a dynamic family. While being only one boy, there are countless children just like him. At forty-seven percent, nearly half of African American children live with only their mother and research has shown that 40.5 percent of families with single mothers live below the poverty line. This information was found by a doctor of psychology at Pennsylvania State University and will be helpful to my own research because it is proof for the basis of my research that there are more absent black fathers than there are white fathers and that the absence of these fathers brings financial hardship to the

family¹. The high percentage of African American children with single mothers begs the question of how does their father's absence affect them and their family and why are there so many "deadbeat dads" in the black community to begin with?

The surplus of absent black fathers has been a cycle in our community, but abandonment is not written into a black man's genetic code, so the finger of blame can be pointed at the environment in which many black families grow up. A person learns from what they see, so when a young black child only sees hard working single mothers and space where a father should be, it is easy to follow in those footsteps. As research has found, one thing capable of predicting a father's involvement with his children is his own relationship with his parents². While fathers may leave their children partly because they view it as a norm that does not explain why they feel the need to cut out. Research suggests that the very same thing causing some fathers to want better for their children is the same reason other fathers leave theirs-- poverty. Research has found that "many low-income urban fathers already desire to be responsible fathers but see themselves as limited by material and structural challenges" this will be an important aspect of my own research because it shows that there is more to the situation than black fathers simply not wanting to be part of their children's lives³. The evidence suggests that if a family is living in poverty then the father is more likely to leave, and because almost half of black families live in

¹ Damaske, Sarah. Bratter, Jennifer L. French, Adrienne. (2016). Single Mother Families and Employment, Race, and Poverty in Changing Economic Times. *US National Library of Medicine*. 62(120). Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5300078/>

² (Smith, Tyler. Et al. (2014). Parenting Needs of Urban, African-American Fathers. *American Journal of Men's Health*, 9(4). Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1557988314545380>)

³ (Threlfall, Jennifer. Seay, Kristen. Kohl, Patricia. (2014). The parenting role of African American fathers in the context of urban poverty. *US National Library of Medicine*, 19(1) Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3728162/>)

poverty compared to white families one can easily see the connection between this information and the somewhat truthful stereotype of the black, deadbeat dad.

History has proven that those who are raised in traditional stable households are often at a psychological and mental advantage compared to those who do not, and broken African-American families are a perfect example of the nasty effects of unstable families. The psychological effect of a father's chosen absence is harmful to the children, the mother, and even the father himself. Single-moms have shown to be more prone to depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts due directly to being the sole financial provider for their children and feeling not up to the task. Children with an absent father have shown to be at increased risk of behavioral problems, decreased academic achievement, and a higher involvement with substance abuse. For the fathers, their lack of involvement only hurts them in the long-run. Fathers who are a part of their child's life have shown to have better nutrition, less alcohol consumption, decreased risk-taking behaviors, and noticeably higher personal care.

A father's role is often viewed as one of provider and protector and as stated by one African American man in a study done by the American Journal of Men's Health⁴ "that can be a lot to take on". The feeling of having too great of a responsibility may contribute to the high rate of father absence in the black community. Black fathers who are involved in their child's life have shown to feel the need to provide for their children financially, emotionally, physically, and psychologically, which for some black men, may seem like an impossible fete.

⁴ Smith.

The high amount of absent black fathers may also do with the age at which their child is born. African Americans, compared to other races, are the youngest to start a family, and, as we know, it is hard for a child to raise a child.

Going back to the progression of absent fathers in the black community being cyclical, if the role of being a father is viewed as an unimportant one then some fathers may not feel the need to fulfill it. The majority of the attention is focused on the mother when discussions arise on raising a child, they have to nurture them and care for them physically and emotionally when traditionally a father's most important role is to care for his child financially. Today, many women are perfectly capable of providing for their children financially and in this sense making the father's role obsolete, which could easily contribute to a father's absence. If a father feels that he is unable to provide for his child financially he might leave as well, feeling that he has nothing to offer it. African Americans have been found to be the prominent race in impoverished areas. Unemployment is high and the poverty line is low, so many African American men either do not have a job or do not make enough at their job to get by.

This research project is going to delve into the financial and psychological effects on families with absent fathers through qualitative data. I will research fathers who are in their child's life and fathers who are not, children who have a dad and those who do not, and single mothers and co-parenting mothers. I will compare the financial and developmental wellbeing of all groups. I predict that Freeport's black community shows a higher level of absent fathers compared to other races and that fathers who are absent have a history of abandonment in their past.

METHODS:

There is a stereotype in America that many if not most black fathers are absent from their child's or children's life. After pouring through research that has already been conducted I concluded that statistically there are more absent African American fathers than there are of other races, which led me to conduct research on if that same data is conclusive to the population of Freeport and if so what the effects of that are on the black community. To answer this question I developed a survey and asked 100 people about their relationship with their father, their performance in school, their family's financial situation, and that person's self-worth to see if there is a relationship between these things and their father's involvement in their life. Because this question is aimed at African Americans, race played a significant role in who I surveyed, but, interestingly enough, there was substantially more Caucasians who were willing to be surveyed than there were African Americans, with sixty Caucasians compared to the twenty-four African Americans. To build on the data I received from the survey I also interviewed fatherless people in the community and asked them about how their father's absence has affected their lives. I left my question purposefully vague as to not lead the interviewee in any direction and get their most honest answer as to how they were affected by their father's absence. I also spoke to a father whose own father was not in his life and asked him what fatherhood is to him as a way to see how he views his own role as a father despite not having a dad himself.

Results/Data

Of those surveyed, twenty-three percent (23%) were African American or had one parent who was African American, sixty percent (60%) were Caucasian, two percent (2%) were Asian,

nine percent (9%) were Hispanic, three percent (3%) were Middle Eastern, one percent (1%) were Native Hawaiian, and two percent (2%) were other. Seventy percent (70%) of African Americans answered that their father is not in their life, and thirteen percent (13%) of Caucasians answered the same (See charts one and two). Seventy-four percent (74%) of African Americans said that they struggle financially and sixty-three percent (63%) of Caucasians also said that they struggled financially.

Seventy percent (70%) of people who answered that their father is not in their life struggle financially. Eighty-two percent (82%) of people whose father is only partially in their life answered that they struggle financially. Fifty-three percent (53%) of those whose father is in their life answered that they struggle financially (See chart three).

Seventy percent (70%) of African Americans ranked their self-worth above a five (5) on a scale from one (1) to ten (10). Seventy-three percent (73%) of Caucasians ranked their self-worth above a five (5) on the same scale.

Of those who answered that they receive grades of C's and below in school fifty-eight percent (58%) do not have their father present in their lives and forty-two percent (42%) of those who answered that they receive grades of C's and below in school do have their father present in their life (See chart 3).

Twenty-two percent (22%) of African Americans answered that they receive grades of C's and below in school. Eight percent (8%) of Caucasians answered that they receive grades of C's and below in school.

Thirty-five percent (35%) of African Americans answered that their grandfather was not in their father's life. Thirty-five percent (35%) answered that they did not know if their

grandfather was in their father's life. Thirty percent (30%) answered that their grandfather was in their father's life.

Twenty-two percent (22%) of Caucasians answered that their grandfather was not or was only partially in their father's life. Sixty-seven percent (67%) said that their grandfather was in their father's life. Fifteen percent (15%) answered that they did not know if their grandfather was in their father's life. Eighty-eight percent of participants who answered that they do not know if their grandfather was in their dad's life do not have their dad wholly in their life. Fifty-percent of participants who answered that their grandfather was not in their father's life said that their father was not in their life. Eighty-six percent of people who answered that their grandfather was in their father's lives have their own dad in their life.

Fifty-two percent (52%) of African American parents had their first child as a teenager. Twenty-two percent (22%) of Caucasians had their first child as a teenager. Seventeen percent (17%) of African Americans had their first child at age sixteen or below. Three percent (3%) of Caucasians had their first child at age sixteen or below. Of those whose fathers are not entirely in their life forty-one percent (41%) of their parents had their first child as a teenager. Of those whose fathers are in their lives twenty-six percent (26%) of their parents had their first child as a teenager.

Seventy percent (70%) of people whose fathers are not in their life answered that on a scale from one to ten their father's absence has affected them a five (moderately) or above. Forty-four percent (44%) of people whose father is not in their life or has only partially been answered that they have gotten into a physical fight at school. Twenty-nine percent (29%) of people whose father is in their life answered that they have gotten into a physical fight at school.

Fifty-two percent (52%) of African Americans answered that they have gotten into a physical fight at school. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of Caucasians answered that they have gotten into a physical fight at school.

When asked how close they are with their mother on a scale of one (not close at all) to five (very close) sixty-five percent (65%) of those who do not have their father in their life answered four or five, and seventy-four percent (74%) of those who do have their father in their life answered a four or five.

Seventy-percent (70%) of African Americans when asked how close they are to their mother on a scale from one (not close at all) to five (very close) answered a four or five. Seventy-percent (70%) of Caucasians answered the same on the same scale. Twenty-two percent (22%) of African Americans when asked how close they are to their father on a scale from one (not close at all) to five (very close) answered a four or five, and fifty-three percent (53%) answered with a four or five on the same scale.

I interviewed twenty-two people whose father was or is not in their life and asked them “how has your father’s absence affected you/your family?” One-hundred percent (100%) of these people expressed some degree of negativity towards their father or the situation that their father’s absence brought to them/their family.

African Americans with a father vs. without a father

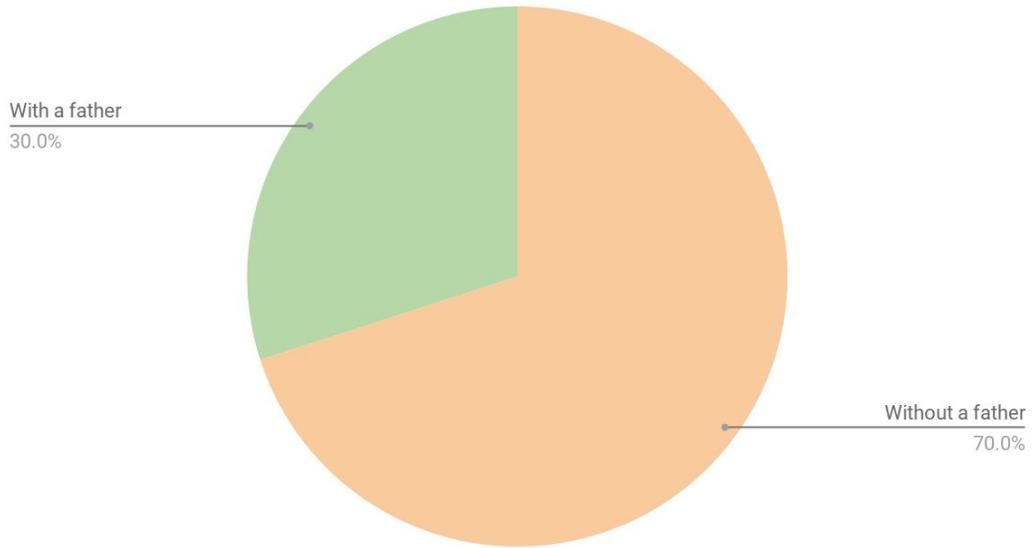


chart. 1

Caucasians with a father vs. without a father

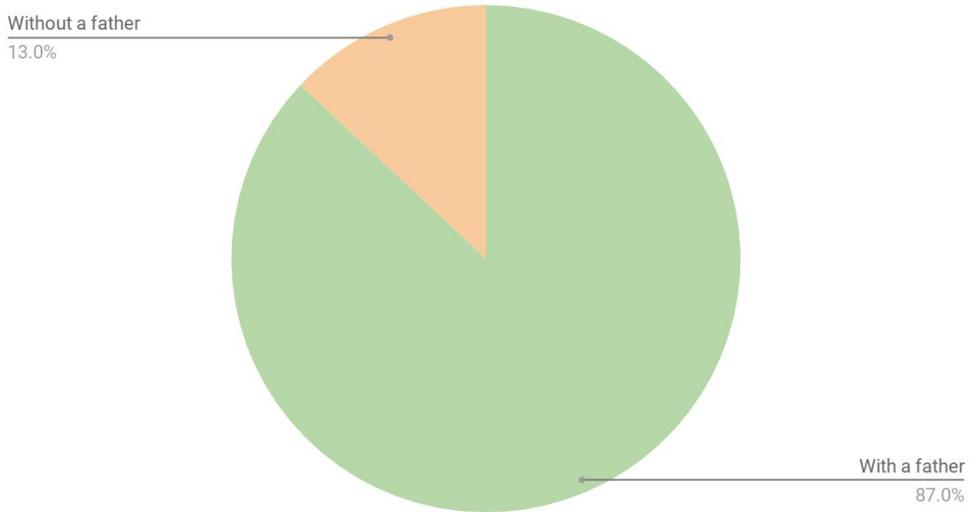


Chart. 2

Struggling in school related to fathers involvement in life

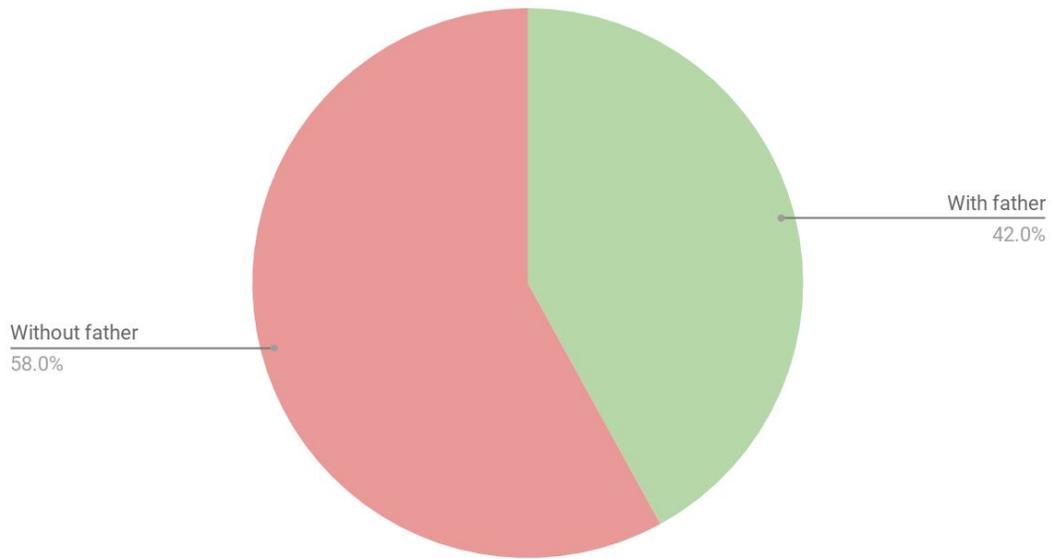


Chart. 3

Teen parents

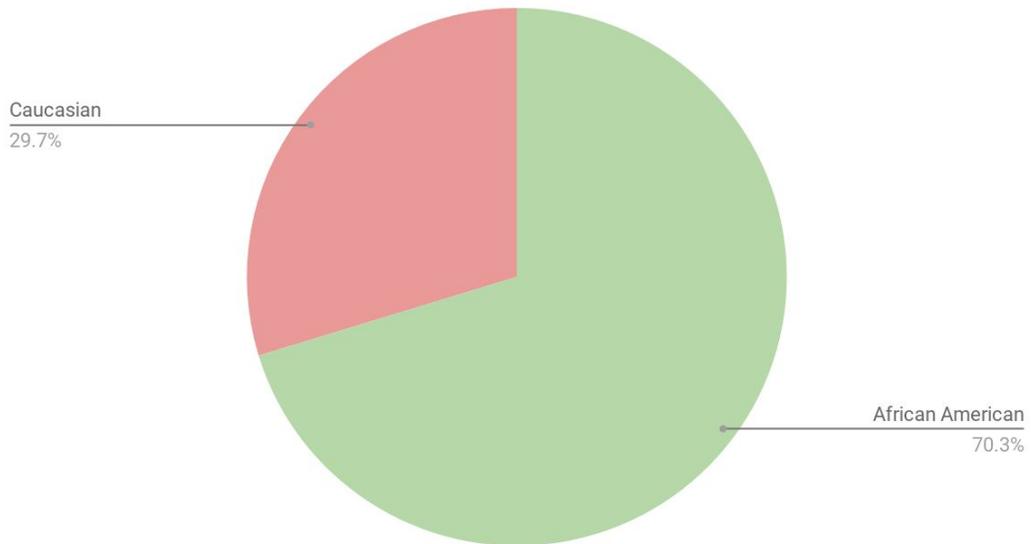


Chart. 4

Discussion:

Using a survey conducted with 100 Freeport residents ranging from the age of fourteen to thirty-eight I was able to conclude that yes among races African American fathers are statistically more absent from their children's lives and this affects the African American community in various ways. Among the people surveyed, seventy percent (70%) of African Americans said that their father is not wholly present in their lives compared to the thirteen percent (13%) of Caucasians who said the same. The data also shows that there is little correlation between one's self-worth and fatherhood involvement, as of the people surveyed eleven of them who ranked their self-worth as a five or below on a scale of one to ten had their father in their life, compared to the four people who ranked their self-worth as a five or below on the same scale and did have their father in their life, but the three people who marked their self-worth as a three or below all said that they had no involvement with their father. This illustrates that while a father's involvement is capable of affecting a person's self-worth it is not the deciding factor in how one views themselves.

On a financial aspect, the data shows that eighty-seven percent (87%) of those surveyed who do not have their father in their life struggle financially, and sixty percent (60%) of those surveyed who do have their father in their life also struggle financially. Seventy-four percent (74%) of African Americans surveyed struggled financially and sixty-three percent (63%) of Caucasians struggled financially. This means that more African-American families struggle financially than Caucasians. This can also be linked to the city in which the survey was conducted. In 2016 a survey was done which showed that 22.3% of Freeport residents live in

poverty (Freeport, Illinois. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.city-data.com/city/Freeport-Illinois.html>). Moreover, a majority of those who took the survey were Freeport High School students which is a Title one school.

Of those whose father is in their life, fifty-three percent (53%) of them struggle financially compared to the seventy percent (70%) of fatherless people who answered the same and the eighty-two percent (82%) of those whose father is only partially in their life which is a clear indication that a father's absence has a strong impact on his family's financial wellbeing. When comparing performance in school between people who have their father in their lives and people who do not one can conclude that there is a correlation between a father's involvement and their children's performance. Ten percent (10%) more Freeport High School students who do not have their father in their life answered that they receive grades of Cs and below in school than students who do have their father in their life and answered the same. Furthermore, Fourteen percent (14%) more African Americans answered that they receive grades of Cs and below in school than Caucasians who said the same. This data shows that fatherhood involvement does influence a child's performance in school and the cause of a higher percentage of African American students who do poorly in school compared to their white peers can at least partially be put on the level of father involvement in their family. Fifteen percent (15%) more students who do not have their father wholly in their life have gotten into a physical fight at school than students who do have their father in their life. Moreover, of those who say that they have gotten into a physical fight in school, there was twenty-four percent (24%) more African Americans than Caucasians.

Starting this research, I began under the assumption that the reason for a higher level of black father's being uninvolved with their child(ren) was linked to the age at which African Americans were having children. The data supports this idea. The research has shown that a larger percentage of African Americans have their first child as a teenager than Caucasians do, and an even larger percentage of African Americans had their first child at age sixteen or younger than Caucasians. Furthermore, a much larger percentage of men whose father was in their own life commit to fatherhood than those who did not grow up with a father which supports the idea that father absence is a cycle.

The data shows that whether a father is in their child's life or not does not dictate how close they are to their mother. Those who do not have their father in their life and those who do both answered that they are very close to their mother. African Americans and Caucasians are equally close to their mother, but on average Caucasians are much more close to their fathers than African Americans are.

Conclusion/Limitations:

I was unable to use a true random sampling, therefore I used a convenient sampling. I combined biracial students who have one African-American parent and another parent of a different race and African American students into a single group. I had far more Caucasian volunteer to answer my survey than I had African Americans. I could only find one full-time dad who did have a dad himself to interview so the results from my questioning can obviously not be applied to other fathers, I decided to still include the information though to make clear that just because a boy may not have a father growing up does not mean that he can not one day be a

good father himself. More discussion with fatherless African Americans would be helpful to this research. These findings can be applied when studying the family dynamics among African Americans and Caucasians and how those dynamics affect the population.

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