



# PUBLIC JUSTICE *REVIEW*

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## FAMILIES VALUED

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### 4. Fatherhood in a Changing Economy

#### An Interview with Robert Francis

**Robert Francis** is a doctoral student in Sociology at Johns Hopkins University and an affiliate at Hopkins's Poverty and Inequality Research Lab. He previously served as Director of Advocacy and Public Policy for Lutheran Services in America. His current primary research involves an examination of work and non-work among prime-age, working-class men in rural America.

#### **What were the models of family and fatherhood you grew up with?**

One of my parents' favorite movies was *Father Goose*, a 1964 comedy starring Cary Grant and Leslie Caron. Grant plays Walter, a former soldier-turned-nomad who is waiting out action in World War II's Pacific Theater by hopping his skiff from island to island. Caron plays Catherine, a private school teacher whose entire class find themselves stranded on Walter's island. In predictable fashion, Catherine and her class of girls wreck Walter's manly solitude. When the two main characters, after antagonizing each other for most of the movie, decide to get married, they radio the nearest ship to request a priest for the ceremony. The naval commander, who happens to know Walter, is aghast and exclaims: "Goody Two-Shoes and the Filthy Beast?!"

My parents both loved that scene because they identified with the odd-couple dynamic and class differences depicted in the movie. My father, who passed away in 2007, was a high school-educated Vietnam veteran who labored most of his life in poorly paid manual jobs. He never had the stability or wages of union work. Manual labor, which can be glorified in some circles, can also be hard on one's body and poorly paid. He spent the final years of his life on disability, ironically dying months before he would have qualified for Medicare. He was a man of his time—not necessarily strict—but he had a hard time showing his emotions to those closest to him, although he could also chat up a total stranger for hours.

My mother was a standout student in her small rural high school and earned a bachelor's in elementary education from a nearby state teacher's college. She didn't marry until her mid-thirties, which was much rarer back then. When I was born, she retired from teaching to stay home and raise us kids. In this way, my parents conformed to what sociologists call the male breadwinner model of family, even though my mom had the BA and the better earning power. Looking back, especially as a sociologist, I've been considering how their beliefs about normative family structure and gender roles interplayed with the changing economic and social realities just emerging back then.

Perhaps one way my dad made sense of his labor market difficulties was to urge me to make a living with my mind, and not with my hands, as he had to. In a way, I represent the promise of what sociologists call intergenerational mobility, standing on the shoulders of my parents' hard work and aspirations. Unfortunately, this story is starting to work in reverse for many in my generation and younger, as we see an increasingly polarized labor market between good and bad jobs and more social and economic distance between those getting ahead and those falling behind.

### **What is the focus of your current work, and how is it related to themes of fatherhood?**

My current research takes me to predominantly white, working-class places to interview men about their lives. I am particularly interested in the declining labor force participation among this group. While my focus now is not necessarily on fatherhood, many of these men are fathers.

Men want to be good dads. In fact, I think there is a rehabilitation of fatherhood underway in sociology, and hopefully in society. For decades, groups from the feminist movement to the Religious Right found a convenient target in so-called "deadbeat dads"; in the 1970s, there was this idea of men leaving their families destitute to live the high life, and more recently, the focus has been on men who father out-of-wedlock children but supposedly don't want to take responsibility for those kids. The image of the "deadbeat" has been largely based on anecdote, and new work is starting to overturn this mythology.

Kathryn Edin and Timothy Nelson, who recently wrote *Doing the Best I Can* about fatherhood in the inner city, have found, among other things, that men are excited to become fathers and they do their best, especially in the child's early years, to be there. Yet the deck is really stacked against many of these men. As David Brooks of the *New York Times* puts it, "these men have a lot of negativity in their lives." As a sociologist, I think it is more than just negativity; it's a perfect storm of punitive and selectively enforced drug policy, maladaptive social policy, a changing labor market, and a changed social contract. And it is also about intergenerational "negativity." Some of the men I have been talking to come from challenging circumstances such as poverty, drug-addicted parents, and so on.

This is not to absolve men of responsibility for their actions, but good research shows that men, even those who are not living in the home, are more involved with their kids than is often understood. We need increased awareness that many men who might seem absent are, in fact, quite involved with

their children, and many who do not contribute formal child support are giving to their kids in other ways, often through in-kind gifts. In some cases, men are being fathers to the kids under their roof, who may or may not be their own biologically; meanwhile, their biological kids have a “Dad” in the form of the current partner of the mom.

### **Does the changing structure and availability of work affect how fathers interact with their families?**

I am just in the beginning stages of answering this using my data, but I think both factors have an impact. We certainly know already that for decades, the American economy has been offering fewer full-time, well-paying jobs to men with less than a college degree. The challenge facing working-class men is particularly acute in rural places, where economies are smaller and there are simply fewer employers to begin with. Yet I find that men are willing to go to great lengths to support their families, including moving away or taking jobs that require extensive travel, like long-haul trucking. But unfortunately, some of these same jobs are hard on their families because they take the men away, leaving a lot for the moms to handle.

### **How has fatherhood changed?**

For this topic, I’d recommend the work of Andrew Cherlin, who wrote *Labor’s Love Lost* about the demise of the working-class family. He looks at the US family over time, finding that the male breadwinner model, which rose in the mid-century and is probably the formative family model for so many of us and our parents, is actually the historical anomaly. In earlier times, women very much contributed to a household’s livelihood through domestic work broadly understood: managing livestock, hosting paying boarders, and so on. Gender norms were traditional, but economic roles were not, at least as understood today.

In some ways, we might be returning to this “all-hands-on-deck” approach. In affluent contexts, like mine, both parents working might reflect two professionals wanting to work, earning good salaries, and sharing household duties out of a commitment to egalitarianism. In cases like those of the men I study, it is perhaps born more out of economic necessity: all adults need to work to weave together income from multiple low-wage jobs, and childcare is juggled between parents but also often among family, friends, and even exes who still have or want custody of their kids.

### **How do you think about fatherhood?**

I think about fatherhood on a few levels. Of course, there’s the day-to-day experience of being a dad to my three-year old son. I also think a bit like an economist—about fathering in the sense that every day is an opportunity to add to the storehouse of good memories and try to minimize the bad ones. Especially at my son’s age, I know he won’t remember most of what we do with him, but I also know that these early years are so vital for his development. With every book read, game played, park

visited, snuggle offered, and tear wiped, it's a special moment now but also an investment, so to speak, into forming who he will become.

I also think about things sociologically. We know that kids born into advantaged situations tend to do fine in the aggregate. I am the first to acknowledge that my son has many advantages: two loving parents with a loving, stable marriage; enough material resources that his basic needs are met, including access to healthy food and health care; and many extras like preschool, paid childcare, enrichment activities, and so on. And because we live in an affluent area with a robust tax base and commitment to public goods, we have access to excellent parks, libraries, and eventually, schools. As a dad, I'm glad that we can afford the things my wife and I think are best for him.

### **How can we strive for a society in which no one has to transcend the enormous barriers of intergenerational poverty and trauma?**

This is obviously the million-dollar question. I have been thinking a lot about what some call the geography of opportunity. For example, a new book, *Dream Hoarders* by Richard Reeves at The Brookings Institution, finds that households with income in the top 20 percent can essentially buy good outcomes for their kids by buying homes in the places with good schools and affording other enrichments available in such places. But this group—albeit unknowingly—hoards this advantage for themselves by not supporting the types of social policies that would make those same opportunities available to the bottom 80 percent.

This connects to a lot of other recent work by Raj Chetty and others on the factors that facilitate or impede social mobility in particular places. When considering outcomes for children, we often focus on family-level variables, which are certainly important. Yet this can obscure the powerful role of place, whether it's an inner-city neighborhood or coal country. And then there's the flip of those places, where wealth and advantage are concentrated but are hard for most to access because housing in those places is out-of-reach.

Finally, I think how we deliver support matters perhaps as much as what support we offer, which takes a page from one of my mentors, Kathy Edin, and her colleague, Luke Shaefer. For example, a group of scholars who recently studied the Earned Income Tax Credit found that it is much more socially incorporating and dignifying for its recipients than something like cash welfare, even though both programs are essentially cash transfers from rich to poor.

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