



# Module 1

**GOOD DADS GREAT COMMUNITIES**

Assessing Father Focus in Your Community





## Introduction

What makes a community a great place to live? Most people would agree it almost always involves safety, good schools, and a strong economy. Communities with these assets are the kinds of places folks want to live, work, and raise a family. Take away any one of these assets and you've got problems.

### HIGH CRIME RATE?

Who wants to live in a place where their personal safety or possessions are frequently threatened?

### POOR SCHOOLS?

It's hard to attract families and talented workers without good public schools. This means less opportunity for advancement. Sadly, communities with a failing economy are the kind people move from rather than to.

### WEAK ECONOMY?

Without a robust economy, there are fewer tax dollars to support public schools, public safety, good jobs, and other amenities common to places where people want to live.



Many people do not realize that these factors, all of which are critical to a great community, are also related to father engagement and father absence. Communities with a higher percentage of absent fathers also happen to struggle with poverty and violence. They are often characterized by poor schools and flagging economic conditions. Social service problems (e.g. crime, child abuse and neglect, addiction, and mental health concerns) abound.

Since the War on Poverty began in 1964, numerous efforts have been made to reduce these social concerns by providing access to healthcare, nutritional assistance, and educational support. While these programs (e.g. Food Stamps) have had a positive impact, poverty and its associated consequences are far from eliminated. In fact, many would suggest that poverty continues to be a primary cause of many issues like child abuse and neglect, crime, and addiction.

In Good Dads Great Communities, we suggest that without a focus on father engagement, Americans are destined to have continued problems with poor schools, unsafe neighborhoods, and weak economies. That is, if we continue to do what we've been doing, then we'll get what we've already got. If we want things to change, we must do something new...something different.

Good Dads Great Communities is a new and different approach. The program helps gather people in a community or organization to focus on fatherhood engagement for the explicit purpose of building great communities by encouraging good dads. In the Great Communities program, you'll learn to assess the current presence and extent of father-focused activities in your organization or community. You'll explore the possibility of beginning a fatherhood initiative in light of your identity and context. You'll consider the most feasible place for you to implement a successful launch. You'll take into account promising practices to serve at-risk fathers and families. Finally, you'll be introduced to strategies and tools to help you fund a fatherhood mission and vision to fit your setting or circumstances.



**What services or support exist for fathers in your community or organization?**

### **Men care about family relationships.**

In early 2007 I oversaw a marketing campaign associated with a federal grant focused on providing healthy marriage and relationship education to people in southwest Missouri. Our marketing partner suggested we focus our "message" on reaching women 18 to 35-years-old because "women were more likely to be interested in relationships than men." They put together a campaign to run on local radio stations, and we waited for the results to roll in. We were sorely disappointed when a month of radio spots yielded only a handful of women contacting us about the services we offered. We could see that what we were doing clearly was not working. That's when we decided to target men specifically and re-designed all our media to appeal intentionally to men. Soon our phones rang so often we struggled to answer all the calls, and we knew we were on to something. Men really did care about family and relationships—they just had to be approached in a different way.

**What evidence do you see in your community or organization that men care about family relationships?**

What are your thoughts about the idea of men and commitment?



In what ways have you seen men be committed to their children? Their families?



## Men value kids and commitment.

Although many question the capacity of men to make a firm commitment to their children and relationships, Dr. Scott Stanley, a research professor and co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver, challenges this assumption. He asserts that men have an equal capacity to commit, but they are less likely to do so until they know they have a certain future with someone, i.e. that the relationship will “go the distance” with them.

If we begin our interactions and work with fathers, especially at-risk fathers, with the belief that commitment is important to them, including commitment to their children, then we might start with an alternative approach. We might ask different questions. We might avoid calling them “deadbeat dads,” and consider the possibility that “deadbolt dad” is more accurate. That is, they have been “dead-bolted” out of their children’s lives.

What most people don’t know, or fail to recognize, are the nearly insurmountable obstacles many fathers face in having actual in-person contact with their children. Most people assume that if a dad pays child support, he will be able to see his child. The truth is, in most states, a man can faithfully pay child support and still have no contact with his child. If he has few resources, he may not have the money necessary to pursue legal action that would allow him to address the limiting behavior from the mother of his children.

There are so many systems in place and obstacles to overcome that the future is uncertain. It’s easy for fathers to assume they are unnecessary to their children. Many dads believe they are certain to fail, causing them to give up because they assume their children will be better off without them. Of course, in many, many cases, nothing could be further from the truth.

## Reaching men requires a different approach.

At Good Dads we have found that, in general, men prefer to be equipped with information, tools, and strategies, not “helped, aided and supported.” We’re not saying this is true in every situation, but we have noticed that recognizing





men's strengths is preferable to seeing them as pitiful creatures who need to be helped. In other words, assuming that men are interested in and capable of being good fathers must be foundational to a father-focused initiative's mission and values. Understanding the challenges men face in providing for their families while receiving services is also paramount.

Consider, for example, that most services related to childcare and parenting are focused on women speaking to women. When a child enters school, there are likely very few if any men in the building. Even at medical appointments, mothers are considered to be the primary caregiver for a child. There are exceptions, of course, but if we really want things to change for fathers, we need to rethink the ways we unintentionally exclude dads and search for strategies to intentionally include them.

**What strategies or tactics might you use to reach men in particular?**

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How or where might fathers in your community welcome information, tools and strategies?

## Father Absence in Mid-America

When we consider the problem of father absence, it's easy to think about many urban areas of the United States today, particularly among certain racial and ethnic groups. According to the 2023 census data and the National Fatherhood Institute, 47.5% of Black children, 28.8% of Hispanic children, and 19.6% of white children live in mother only homes and have limited contact with their fathers. In fact, most of the efforts of the federal government focused on responsible fatherhood have been directed at poor communities in predominantly urban settings with racial minority families, but we've observed these same concerns in predominantly rural and predominantly white mid-America.

Good Dads has no argument with the allocation of federal and state resources to the communities where they are most needed. In fact, this would seem a reasonable and prudent use of our tax dollars. The difficulty we see lies with the fact that we, too, see problems with father absence in rural populations, such as that of southwest Missouri. We know that many other small and medium-sized communities in surrounding states are experiencing similar concerns.

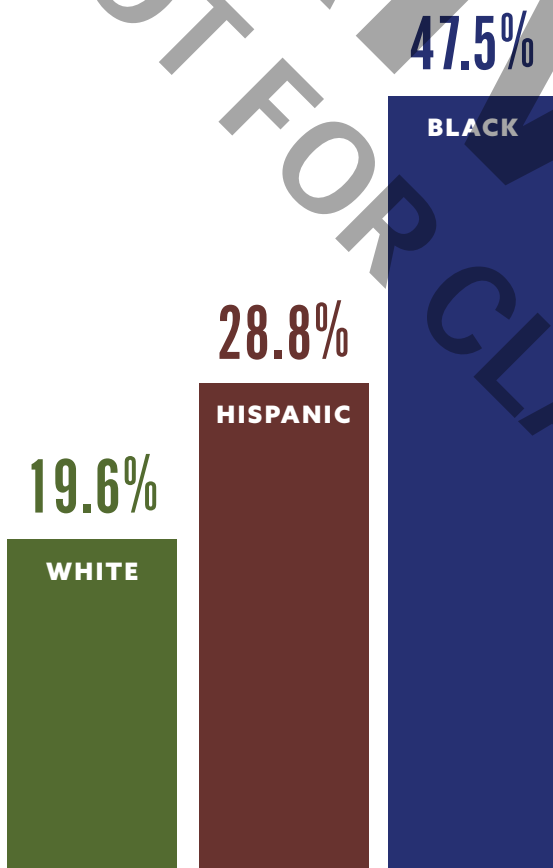
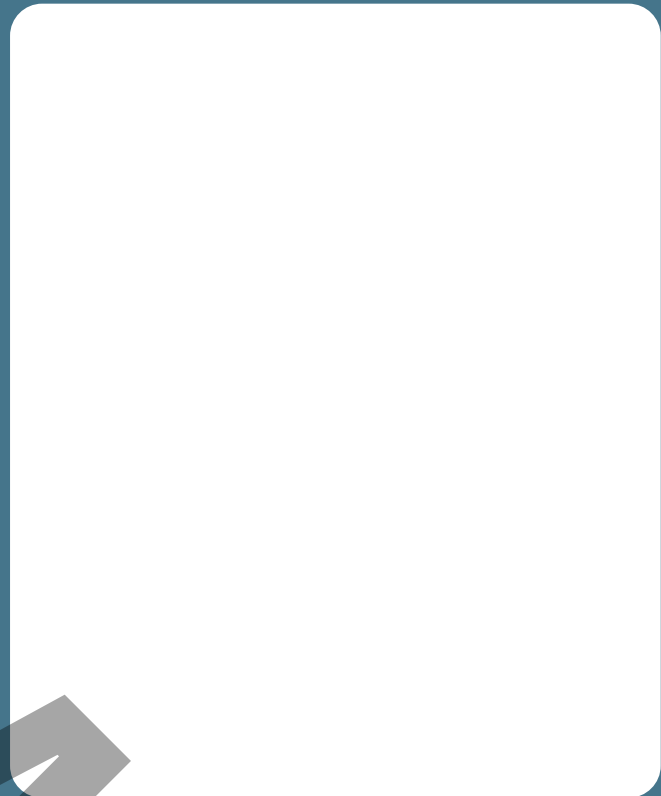
As a city of nearly 160,000 and a metro area approaching 250,000, Springfield, MO, Good Dads' headquarters, is not considered rural, but our location nearly 200 miles from the nearest urban area (St. Louis or Kansas City) isolates us from issues associated with many metropolitan areas in the U.S. At the same time, it isn't exactly as though we were problem-free.

As you will see in the modules that follow, our community does struggle with poverty—both in Springfield and in the surrounding region. Many counties in southwest Missouri lack resources typically found in larger cities: There are fewer treatment programs for addiction. Many counties lack access to adequate health care and drug rehabilitation programs of any kind. The scarcity of reliable transportation, often a problem in rural communities, exacerbates these concerns. Finally, a less dense population means fewer funds from state or federal sources are available to address problem areas.



By 2014, it became evident to us that if something was to be done to address father absence and the problems related to this situation, we needed to figure out how to solve the problem ourselves. Good Dads Great Communities began as an effort to create a model with the potential to help any size community or municipality address the needs of fathers, regardless of them receiving federal funding. In the modules that follow, we will take you on a journey to learn what we've learned along the way and hopefully avoid some of the pitfalls we experienced. You'll also be able to see the outcome of those efforts. Our desire is for you to have a healthy focus on fathers in your community that is a good fit for you and those you serve.

## Who are the role models for dads in your community?



Percentage of Children in United States Experiencing Father Absence



## BEFORE BEGINNING MODULE 2

Conduct research  
on the following subjects:

- ❑ Demographic information related to father absence, child abuse, and poverty in your community.
- ❑ Existing father-focused areas in your community, if any, and their leadership teams.
- ❑ Officials, elected/appointed/other who manage child support (Family Support Division) and Probation and Parole.
- ❑ Existing legislation in your state relating to paternity, custody, child support, etc.



"Helping Kids and Communities One Dad at a Time"

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205 West Walnut Street, Suite 10  
Springfield, MO 65806  
417.501.8867  
[www.goddads.com](http://www.goddads.com)

