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Father absence "decimates" black community in U.S.



By Joyce Kelly

CHICAGO (Reuters) - For Chris Gardner, who was played by Will Smith in the movie "The Pursuit of Happyness," fatherhood is the greatest job in the world.

"There's no pay. There are no benefits. You don't get time off. You don't get a break," he said. "But once in a while you get to see your child shine and you say to yourself, 'That's my boy. That's my girl.'"

It is also a job that Gardner and others believe is increasingly in trouble in the United States, even as the country gives its annual Fathers Day salute on June 17.

More than 19 million children -- about one in four -- were living in households where no father, biological or other, was present, according to a Census Bureau report in 2005.

The statistics also show that this burden falls more heavily on black children. Some 56 percent of black children lived in single-parent families in 2004, with most of those families headed by mothers. That figure compared with 22 percent of white children and 31 percent of Hispanic children.

"Father absence in the African American communities, across America, has hit those communities with the force of 100 hurricane Katrinas," said Phillip Jackson, executive director of the Chicago-based Black Star Project, which helps children in mainly minority schools.

"It is literally decimating our communities and we have no adequate response to it."

Among those who grew up without a father is Gardner, the subject of the movie "The Pursuit of Happyness." The movie tells how he struggles with homelessness and raising a child while trying to pursue a new career as a stockbroker in training.

Gardner is now the millionaire head of investment firm Gardner Rich & Co. and a motivational speaker.

For groups like the Black Star Project, the focus is on education, sponsoring activities such as getting fathers to walk to school with their children on the first day of classes each year.

Last year an estimated 300,000 men in 127 cities participated that first day of school effort called the "Million Father March" and this year the group hopes to see nearly half a million men in 200 communities.

"The children start thinking, 'Wow, my father is here. This thing called education, this must really be important because my father took the time off to come up here'," Jackson said.

Jackson said it has taken decades for fathering to decline to its current state, and restoring it would be a long process.

"We're not going to wake up tomorrow or next year and say 'Voila! We're back to where we were,'" he said.

In 2006, the National Fatherhood Initiative in Gaithersburg, Maryland commissioned the University of Texas at Austin to conduct a survey of 701 fathers called "Pop's Culture: A National Survey of Dads' Attitudes on Fathering."

It found that 91 percent of those questioned agreed there is a father-absence crisis in America. They listed work demands as the No. 1 barrier to being a good father. Other major impediments included the media and popular culture followed by financial problems.

Fathers who were not married to the mother of their children cited a lack of cooperation from mothers as the chief obstacle to being a good father, followed by work responsibilities, financial problems and treatment of fathers by the courts.

Roland Warren, president of the National Fatherhood Initiative, said that children in fatherless households are more susceptible to life's challenges.

"They are two to three times more likely to use drugs, become teen parents, be connected with the criminal justice system, to fail in school or to live in poverty," he said.

Gardner credits his uncles with being positive male figures in his life.

"I had a very abusive stepfather. I made a decision at 5 years-old that when I became a man and had children no one would ever talk to my children, treat or terrorize them as I was," he said in an interview.