

Ohio Pizza Box/'Deadbeat Dad' Campaign Unfairly Stigmatizes Fathers

By Jeffery M. Leving and Glenn Sacks

Three roofers, two construction workers, a musician and four men with no known occupations just became very famous. They are the Ohio “deadbeat dads” targeted in the Butler County Child Support Enforcement Agency’s highly-publicized new campaign which puts mug shots of the County’s “Most Wanted Deadbeat Parents” on pizza boxes. Agency Executive Director Cynthia Brown and campaign supporter Kay Cullen of the National Child Support Enforcement Association would have us believe that the men targeted are high-flying deadbeats who are selfishly stiffing their children. Research contradicts this.

That Butler County was unable to come up with even one alleged “deadbeat” who has an education or a middle-class job might give public officials less zealous than Brown and Cullen some pause. Butler County’s child support debtors are in no way atypical. Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement data shows that two-thirds of those behind on child support nationwide earn poverty level wages; less than four percent of the national child support debt is owed by those earning \$40,000 or more a year. According to the largest federally-funded study of divorced dads ever conducted, unemployment, not willful neglect, is the largest cause of failure to pay child support.

The “Most Wanted Deadbeat Parents” lists put out by many states and counties illustrate this problem. Far from being lists of well-heeled businessmen, lawyers, and accountants, the vast majority of the men on these lists do low wage and often seasonal work, and owe large sums of money which they could never hope to pay off. Even a person with a college degree is a rare find on these lists.

Over the past 18 months, “deadbeat parents” have been the targets of highly-

publicized law enforcement and/or public relations actions in Texas, Virginia, Kentucky, and Arizona. Texas' Attorney General Greg Abbott said those on his list of Top 10 evaders were "singled out" because they "have the ability" to pay but "refuse to do so." Yet his list consists largely of unskilled laborers, not one of whom appears to have an education. The big wage earner in the group is a plumber. One wonders what the financial condition of those who weren't "singled out" for their ability to pay is.

Virginia's "Most Wanted" list was topped by a laborer, a carnival hired hand, and a construction worker, who collectively somehow owed over a quarter million dollars in child support. Kentucky's list sported only one obligor with an education, and the most common designation for occupation was "laborer." Near the top of Arizona's list was a maintenance man who owed \$90,223 and, best of all, a roofer who owed \$240,581.

How did men of such humble means end up owing so much money? The arrearages are likely created in large part because the child support system is often mulishly impervious to the economic realities working people face, such as layoffs, wage cuts, unemployment, and work-related injuries. According to the Urban Institute, less than one in 20 non-custodial parents who suffers a substantial drop in income is able to get courts to reduce his or her child support payments.

Worse, by federal law child support orders cannot be retroactively modified, no matter how mistaken, misguided or ridiculous. Nor does the interest charged on their debt--at unusually high rates in many states--stop accruing. Moreover, child support enforcement agencies are notorious for creating erroneous arrearages through bureaucratic bungling, and are very slow to fix them.

Cullen asserts that there is \$106 billion in cumulative past-due child support since child support enforcement agencies were formed in the mid-1970s. Yet this figure is largely meaningless because most of these arrearages are

artificially-inflated paper debt, and do not represent what child obligors should actually have been expected to pay.

While there are some fathers who don't live up to their financial obligations to their children, the larger problem lies not with non-custodial fathers (or mothers), but instead with the child support system. Humiliating and arresting low-income parents is neither fair nor useful. What's needed instead is an overhaul of the system, so that noncustodial parents who earn low wages aren't turned into criminals because they've failed to pay obligations which are beyond their reach.

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