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By Juan Williams

The Tragedy of America's Disappearing Fathers

Walter Dean Myers, a best-selling author of books for teenagers, sometimes visits juvenile detention centers in his home state of New Jersey to hold writing workshops and listen for stories about the lives of young Americans.

One day, in a juvenile facility near his home in Jersey City, a 15-year-old black boy pulled him aside for a whispered question: Why did he write in "Somewhere in the Darkness" about a boy not meeting his father because the father was in jail? Mr. Myers, a 70-year-old black man, did not answer. He waited. And sure enough, the boy, eyes down, mumbled that he had yet to meet his own father, who was in jail.

As we celebrate Father's Day tomorrow, we should reflect upon a sad fact: It is now common to meet young people in our big city schools, foster care homes and juvenile centers who do not know their dads. Most of those children have come face-to-face with their father at some point; but most have little regular contact with the man, or have any faith that he loves or cares about them.

When fatherless young people are encouraged to write about their lives, they tell heartbreaking stories about feeling like "throwaway people." In the privacy of the written page, their hard, emotional shells crack open to reveal the uncertainty that comes from not knowing if their father has any interest in them. The stories are like letters to unknown dads—some filled with imaginary scenes about what it might be like to have a dad who comes home and puts his arm around you or plays with you.

They feel like they've been thrown away, Mr. Myers says, because "they don't have a father to push them, discipline them, and they give up trying to succeed... they don't see themselves as wanted." A regular theme of their stories is that they feel safer in a foster care home or juvenile detention center than on the outside, because they have no father to hold together the family. There is no one at home.

The extent of the problem is clear. The nation's out-of-wedlock birth rate is 38%. Among white children, 28% are now born to a single mother; among Hispanic children it is 50% and reaches a chilling, disorienting peak of 71% for black children. According to the Na-

tional Center for Health Statistics, nearly a quarter of America's white children (22%) do not have any male in their homes; nearly a third (31%) of Hispanic children and over half of black children (56%) are fatherless.

This represents a dramatic shift in American life. In the early 1960s, only 2.3% of white children and 24% of black children were born to a single mom. Having a dad, in short, is now a privilege, a ticket to middle class status on par with getting into a good college.

Male role models shouldn't be a luxury item.

The odds increase for a child's success with the psychological and financial stability rooted in having two parents. Having two parents means there is a greater likelihood that someone will read to a child as a preschooler, support him through school, and prevent him from dropping out, as well as teaching him how to compete, win and

lose and get up to try again, in academics, athletics and the arts. Maybe most important of all is that having a dad at home is almost a certain ticket out of poverty; because about 40% of single-mother families are in poverty.

"If you are concerned about reducing child poverty then you have to focus on missing fathers," says Roland Warren, president of the National Fatherhood Initiative, based in Gaithersburg, Md. This organization works to encourage more men to be involved fathers.

The odds are higher that a child without a dad will have more contact with the drug culture, the police and jail. Even in kindergarten, children living with single parents are more likely to trail children with two parents when it comes to health, cognitive skills and their emotional maturity. They are in the back of the bus before the bus—their life—even gets going.

A study of black families 10 years ago, when the out-of-wedlock birth rate was not as high as today, found that single moms reported only 20% of the "baby's daddy" spent time with

the child or took a "lot" of interest in the baby. That is quite a contrast to the married black mothers who told researchers that 88% of married black men, or men living with the mother, regularly spent time with the child and took responsibility for the child's well-being.

In his fictional books, Walter Dean Myers has found that the key to reaching young readers is to connect with their "internal life of insecurities and doubts." These doubts and insecurities involve answers to painful questions such as, "do you feel loved, do you ever feel lonely?" These are feelings that are hard to share with a teacher, a coach or even a friend.

More so today than in the past, reaching the heart of insecurity among young people means writing about the hurt of life without a dad. It also means writing about being young and black or brown in the midst of the flood of negative images in rap videos without a positive male role model. These young people see so many others just like them standing on street corners, unconnected to family life

and failing at school and work and threatening violence—and in so many cases just like them, without an adult male to guide them.

When these children see Barack Obama, Colin Powell or Condoleezza Rice, they tell Walter Dean Myers that those black people must be "special; they are not like me, they don't have the background that I have."

In his own life, Mr. Myers often looked down on the man in his house: his stepfather, who worked as a janitor and was illiterate. He felt this man had little to teach him.

Then his own son complained one day that he, Myers, "sounded just like granddad" when he told the boy to pick up after himself, to work harder and show respect to people.

"I didn't know it at the time," says Mr. Myers of his stepfather, "but just having him around meant I was picking up his discipline, his pride, his work ethic..." He adds: "Until I heard it from my son I never understood it."

Mr. Williams is a political analyst for National Public Radio and Fox News.