

**Fatherlessness in
Hispanic Households in
the United States**



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**In honor of my own late father
Gerardo Rojas**

The National Crisis of Fatherlessness

Fatherlessness is one of the most pressing social issues in the United States today. Brewer (2023) reports that 18.3 million children live without a father in the home, which is about one in four children nationwide. The effects are wide-ranging: children from fatherless homes are more likely to struggle in school, face behavioral problems, and even end up incarcerated. In fact, 71 percent of high school dropouts come from fatherless homes, and 70 percent of youth in state facilities were raised without fathers.

When looking at Latino families specifically, the numbers are even more

have lower levels. This diversity means that Latino families face very different opportunities depending on background.

Karberg et al. (2017) found that nearly two thirds of Latino fathers are low income, and close to half have not completed high school. This lack of education limits economic mobility and affects how fathers can engage with their children's schooling. Parents with higher education are better able to navigate schools and advocate for their children. Without that, Latino fathers face barriers that make involvement harder. Poverty and education are not just statistics; they are forces that shape how fathers can or cannot be present.

Cultural Forces:

Familismo and Machismo

Culture plays a huge role in Latino fatherhood. Ingoldsby (1991) explains two competing forces: familism and machismo. Familism emphasizes loyalty, sacrifice, and collective well-being. It can strengthen father involvement by embedding men in networks of responsibility. Machismo, on the other hand, emphasizes dominance, aggression, and sexual conquest. It often undermines fatherhood by normalizing absenteeism and emotional distance.

Martinez (2020) shows how immigrant fathers often carry wounds from their own childhoods. Many grew up with absent or inattentive fathers,

alarming. Martinez (2020) notes that roughly one in three Latino children grow up fatherless compared to one in five white children. This shows that Latino communities are disproportionately affected by father absence. It is not just about missing a parent, but about the ripple effects that shape education, mental health, and opportunities. From this perspective, fatherlessness is not only a family issue but a structural crisis that impacts entire communities

Poverty, Education and Opportunity.

Father absence is closely tied to poverty. Brewer (2023) points out that fatherless families are four times more likely to live

in poverty. Martinez (2020) adds that immigrant Latino fathers often work exhausting jobs that leave them drained of energy and time to parent. Employment pressures force many fathers to see themselves only as financial providers, which limits their emotional involvement with children.

Education plays a major role here. Ryberg and Guzman (2023) show that Latino parents' educational attainment is highly diverse. About half of Latino children have a parent with at least some college experience, but one in five have parents who did not finish high school. Heritage matters too: Cuban and South American parents tend to have higher education levels, while Mexican and Central American parents often

which connects directly to Ingoldsby's idea that machismo is passed down through father-son relationships. Fathers who were raised with authoritarian or distant parenting often repeat those patterns. This creates cycles of trauma where absence becomes normalized. At the same time, familism offers resilience. Latino fathers who embrace familism often remain deeply committed to their families despite poverty or legal status. Familism can counteract machismo by emphasizing care and responsibility. The tension between these two cultural forces is central to understanding Latino fatherhood. It is not just about individual choices but about cultural scripts that shape how men see themselves as fathers

Strengths and Challenges of Latino Fathers

Karberg et al. (2017) provide a national portrait that complicates stereotypes. Most Latino fathers live with their children and partners. About 73 percent live with all their children, and 82 percent are married or cohabiting. This shows that many Latino fathers are present and committed. They are not absent by choice, but often constrained by structural barriers.

At the same time, challenges remain. Nearly two thirds of Latino fathers are low income, and close to half have not completed high school. Immigrant fathers are less likely to be teen fathers or have children with multiple partners,

but they face greater poverty and lower education. U.S.-born Latino fathers are more likely to have children with multiple partners and to have been teen fathers, but they generally have higher education levels. These findings show both resilience and vulnerability. Latino fathers are often present and working hard, but poverty and education limit their ability to thrive. The portrait is complex: fathers are not simply absent or present, but navigating a mix of strengths and challenges.

Cycles of Trauma and Healing

Martinez (2020) describes the “father wound,” the generational pain of absent fathers that repeats across families. Fathers who grew up without paternal involvement often struggle to be present for their own children. This connects to Ingoldsby’s (1991) idea that machismo grows out of feelings of inferiority, passed from father to son. Brewer (2023) shows how fatherlessness leads to poor outcomes for children, which can perpetuate cycles of poverty and incarceration.

very little at a corner store tucked away in a poor part of Houston. The store had few patrons, and although she no longer works there, her current job is only slightly better. Growing up, I think I was somewhat oblivious to how hard we had it. My mom and aunt somehow made life seem less difficult than it really was. At the same time, I knew on some level that my life was different. I grew up without a father and never shared that experience with anyone at school. I was too young to have meaningful memories to grieve, but as I have gotten older, I grieve everything I could have had.

Fatherlessness, however, is not a curse. You are not doomed to a life of misery without a father present. I created a similar zine for my senior year AP English Language class, but that one was purely reflective and not research-based. Even then, I realized how strange it is to talk about fatherlessness. Few people are comfortable with the topic.

Some cannot imagine life without a dad. Others do not want to picture their own father gone because they have a good relationship. And others have their own painful experiences that are too uncomfortable to share.

I wish this world, particularly the United States, was more open to discussing fatherlessness and other difficult topics. The U.S. model of the nuclear family is often presented as the ideal, but I think it can be dangerous. The individualism and “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” ideology that dominates American culture conflicts with how humans should interact with each other. Families and communities thrive when people support one another, not when they are forced to struggle alone. My own life is proof that extended family and collective care can make survival possible.

Healing requires breaking these cycles. Familism offers one path by emphasizing collective responsibility and care. Education offers another by opening opportunities for fathers to engage more fully. Latino fathers show resilience in the face of these challenges, but breaking the cycle requires structural change as well as cultural transformation.

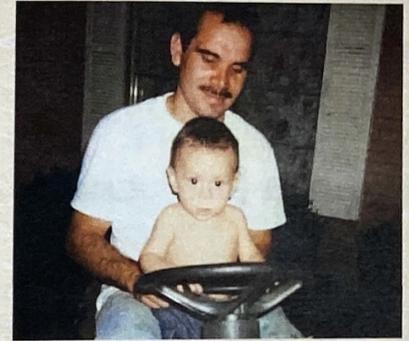
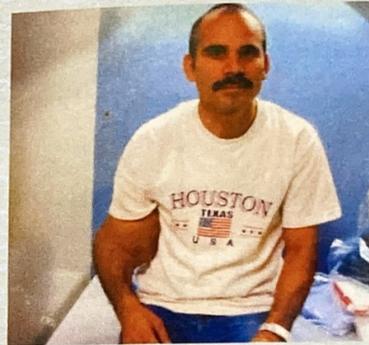
Author's Note

As you can imagine, this topic is deeply personal to me. My own father passed away when I was only four years old, leaving my four siblings, mother, and myself with little to maintain ourselves. Fortunately, one aunt on my dad's side was always present and helped us through some of our hardest moments. When my mother spent days in the hospital visiting my dad, my aunt would cook for us and care for us. When my mother was between jobs, my aunt would step in and help as much as she could. Despite the odds, my family and I are doing well now, and the hole left behind by my father's death feels smaller with time.

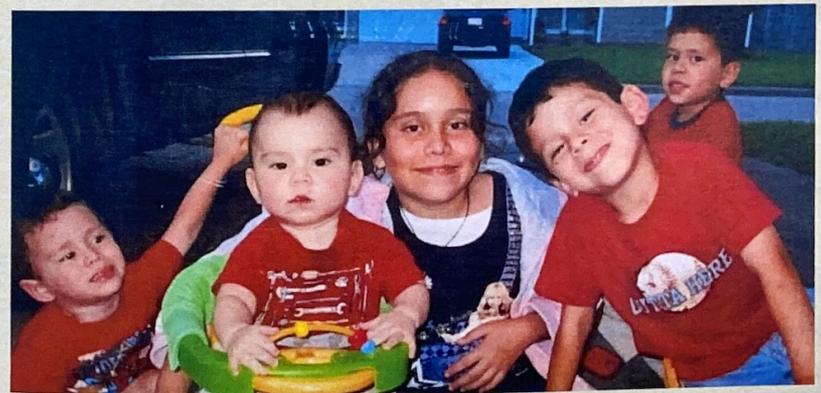
My aunt had her own children to care for, but she never ignored us. She probably spent more time than she should have balancing her own responsibilities with the care she gave my siblings and me. When my dad passed away, my mom picked up a job that paid

Family Matters

These are three of the already fleeting photos I have from a time in my life I cannot remember



On the left is my dad in one of his doctor appointments. His arm swollen from the tumor that took his life. On the right is my dad and me on a lawn mower, the only image I could find with just my dad and me in it.



My siblings and me before my father died. From left to right is me, my youngest brother, my sister, my oldest brother, and my second oldest brother

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