

# Fathers' Rights Groups

## Demographic Correlates and Impact on Custody Policy

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This article combines information from fathers' rights Web sites with demographic, historical, and other information to provide an empirically based analysis of fathers' rights advocacy in the United States. Content analysis discerns three factors that are central to the groups' rhetoric: representing domestic violence allegations as false, promoting presumptive joint custody and decreasing child support, and portraying women as perpetrators of domestic abuse. Fathers' rights organizations and themes are examined in relation to state-level demographics and custody policy. The implications of fathers' rights activism for battered women and their children are explored.

**Keywords:** *backlash; custody policy; domestic violence; fathers' rights*

Fathers' rights groups (FRGs) currently enjoy unprecedented visibility in the United States and other areas such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The Internet has played a key role in the multiplication of FRGs by facilitating group formation, allowing for communication between groups and providing publicity for their causes. Hundreds of fathers' rights Web sites are now available on the Internet, and these provide a wealth of information about their interests and activities. This article examines fathers' rights Web sites in the context of state demographics and custody policy to provide an empirically based analysis of fathers' rights advocacy in the United States. Although commonalities exist between FRGs in the United States and other countries, and the timeline for the growth of the

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movement is somewhat similar, the specific political, economic, and legal context in the United States merits an empirically grounded analysis of its own (Collier & Sheldon, 2006b; Jaffe & Crooks, 2004).

The scholarly literature on the fathers' rights movement in the United States is concentrated on the relationship between fathers' rights advocacy and family law reform, with a particular focus on the implications of gender neutrality, formal equality language, and violence against women (Armstrong, 1983; Collier & Sheldon, 2006a; Fineman, 1991, 1995; Shanley, 1995; Varcoe & Irwin, 2004). The available scholarship includes excellent work outlining the rhetorical strategies, influence, and makeup of FRGs as well as contradictions between their discourse and activities (Alexander, 1997; Bertoia, 1996; Bertoia & Drakich, 1993; Bourque, 1995; Boyd, 2004, 2006; Chesler, 1994; Collier & Sheldon, 2006a; Drakich, 1989; Fineman, 1995; Kaye & Tolmie, 1998).

Because research on the subject of FRGs is only in the beginning phases, many people know little about them. The lack of generalized awareness of FRGs, changes in custody policy, and their harmful implications are particularly significant in fields that deal with violence and abuse. Survivors, service providers, and attorneys are already feeling the adverse impact of fathers' rights activism (*Booth v. Hvass*, 2002; Jaffe & Crooks, 2004; Kaufman & Davis, 2006; Morrill, Dai, Dunn, Sung, & Smith, 2006; Rosen & O'Sullivan, 2005; Waits, 2003). Advocates for child victims of incest were aware of the impact of the fathers' rights movement since the mid-1980s following high-profile cases in which fathers accused of incest were awarded custody of the children who had accused them of the abuse (Rosen & Etlin, 1996). However, it was not until the 1990s that battered women's organizations became aware of mounting problems, with batterers receiving custody of their children (Varcoe & Irwin, 2004). FRGs have attempted multiple lawsuits attacking battered women's shelters and other domestic violence service providers (*Blumhorst v. Jewish Family Services of Los Angeles*, 2003; *Booth v. Hvass*, 2002). Despite their failure, these suits cost time and money to agencies that already have too little of both to meet demand for services (California Women's Law Center, 2003).

In addition to lawsuits, FRGs have received millions of dollars in federal funds to run supervised visitation and transfer centers that are used when a safety risk related to contact between a parent and a child has been established. FRGs lobby against efforts to ensure that supervised visitation and transfer centers cooperate with domestic violence service providers to secure women's safety (Children's Rights Council, 2000-2001). They also oppose policies that require the consideration of a history of domestic violence at custody determination (Children's Rights Council, 2000). One advocacy group, the National Alliance for Family Court Justice (NAFCJ), claims that FRGs have been using federal grant money to fund members' custody litigation. NAFCJ reports that FRGs have also established partnerships with federal officials in the Department of Health and Human Services and collaborated with

prominent nongovernmental organizations such as the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (Richards, 2006).

## **Social, Political, and Economic Contexts of Fathers' Rights Activism**

The emergence of specialized groups lobbying to promote the interests of fathers is fairly recent, although child custody has always been an important concern for family law (Delorey, 1989; Fineman, 1991, 1995). FRGs claim that their activism parallels feminism and other liberatory social movements such as the civil rights and gay rights movements. FRGs argue that these social and political movements have gone too far, however, and that they must now work to reverse changes they perceive as harmful to men. FRGs have consciously appropriated rhetoric from feminism and other social justice movements (Boyd, 2004; Crowley, 2006), similar to other backlash efforts (Chesncy-Lind, 2006; DeKeseredy, 1999; Ferber, 2000).

Despite the rhetorical focus on feminism, changes in American demographics, family law, economic policy, technology, and cultural politics have all contributed to the formation of contemporary fathers' rights discourse (Collier & Sheldon, 2006a; Varcoe & Irwin, 2005 [AQ: 2]). Alberto Godenzi (1999) argues that many men resist feminism because it poses a threat to their established identities and behavior: "Given that most people live in genderized societies, every man reacts to challenges of the existing order of the sexes" (p. 385). FRGs use a combination of techniques in their reaction against what they perceive to be women's increasing power, ranging from passive resistance to aggressive attacks. But FRGs' resistance to feminism is effective only because it draws on powerful discourses about women, violence, and families that are already in circulation (Boyd, 2004; Delorey, 1989; Fineman, 1987).

### **Backlash**

The broader cultural reaction against feminism and other progressive social movements provides an important backdrop for the recent growth of FRGs. Scholars have written extensively about the phenomenon that Susan Faludi (1991) labeled "backlash." Faludi argues that backlash is triggered by real or perceived gains of women that have historically been interpreted by men "as spelling their own masculine doom" (p. xix). Other scholars have noted similar patterns in reaction to antiracist movements (Ferber, 2000; Smedley & Smedley, 2005) and efforts to address homophobia and heterosexism (Herman, 1996).

Michael Kimmel (1987) has argued that "definitions of masculinity are historically reactive to changing definitions of femininity" (p. 123). In this context, it is not surprising that feminism has been met with forms of resistance that seek to naturalize and re-center hegemonic masculinity. Even though many men may not feel

personally powerful, they are likely to feel threatened by challenges to existing norms for masculinity, femininity, and patriarchy (Ferber, 2000). When threatened by real or imagined losses of power, resources, and authority, some men have sought out peer subcultures that shore up their opposition to women's empowerment (DeKeseredy, Schwartz, Fagen, & Hall, 2006). Abby Ferber (2000) studied similarities between mythopoetic men's groups and White supremacist groups and found that both "movements are primarily concerned with rearticulating white male identity and privilege. Both movements appeal to similar constituencies of white males who feel vulnerable, victimized, and uncertain about the meaning of masculinity in contemporary society" (p. 37). These characteristics also apply to FRGs, which likewise use essentialized notions about masculinity as the basis for their moral claims.

The real causes of men's perceived loss of power undoubtedly include economic changes that result in greater competition for resources, such as the outsourcing of jobs overseas. Although these changes do not comprise discrimination, research on loss of privilege indicates that it may be experienced that way (Ferber, 2000). FRGs appear to mobilize against feminism when they experience a loss of control that interrupts the way they have always done things. One fathers' rights advocate writes, "Like many men, I observed feminism with some bemusement, not being too worried about its effects on my life. . . . Until I got divorced" ("Men Are Screwed," 2006). FRGs complain bitterly that women now enjoy legal rights that are actually enforced by the State, regardless of men's preferences: "One thing divorce teaches a man is that women have real legal power, power backed up by the power of the state itself. A divorced woman's problems are the state's problems; a divorced man's problems are his problems" ("Men Are Screwed," 2006). Comments such as these point to some (White) men's expectation of institutional support for their own interests. However, a combination of factors has increased the possibility that individual White men's interests may be subverted by the State as it pursues its own goals. In the case of child support, for example, states prioritize collection over men's interests in controlling access to their children or depriving their ex-wives of resources following divorce (Boyd, 2004).

### **Family Demographics**

Increasing rates of cohabitation, increased rates of divorce, decreasing rates of marriage, later marriage, and decreasing remarriage by women have all had a significant impact on family demographics in the United States (Collier & Sheldon, 2006a; Fields, 2004). These shifts have contributed to higher numbers of children born to unmarried mothers and single mothers than in the past (Fields, 2003, 2004). In combination with changes to government welfare programs, these demographic changes have led to a surge in demand for child support (Logan County Child Support Enforcement Agency, 2006a, 2006b; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1995). Increasingly, state and federal agencies are involved in

efforts to collect court-ordered support (Fields, 2003, 2004; Logan County Child Support Enforcement Agency, 2006a, 2006b).

## **Economic Context**

Efforts by states and the federal government to collect child support have contributed greatly to interest in FRGs. Without provisions such as the withholding of tax refunds, wage garnishment, passport denial, and mandatory registration of new hires with state child support collection agencies, fathers who did not want to pay support in the past often did not have to, even when court orders requiring support were in place (Office of Child Support Enforcement, 2005). Even with aggressive enforcement efforts in place and backed up with federal funds and incentives, only half of custodial parents are awarded support. Half of those receive the full amount of support due them (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1995). State agencies seem clear about the need to provide incentives for the payment of child support. For example, the mission statement of the Logan County Child Support Enforcement Agency (2006b) says that it is "dedicated to providing services that will enable parents to 'willingly' support their children."

Federal Web sites focused on child support tout the allegedly unique and superior value of fathering as opposed to mothering, but policies for child support collection make clear the primary economic interest of the federal government (Casper, 1997; Office of Child Support Enforcement, 2005). The states are getting the message loud and clear. One local child support enforcement agency Web site explains its federal mandate this way: "In 1982, the federal government realized that by expanding IVD [involuntary child support collection] services to any parent needing their services they could greatly reduce Welfare Costs" (Logan County Child Support Enforcement Agency, 2006a).

The existing research suggests that FRGs tend to be largely composed of White middle-class men rather than low-income or minority fathers (Crowley, 2006). Owing to standardized state formulas for calculating support, very-low-income fathers are less likely to be ordered to pay support or face collection efforts. The concentration of fathers' rights activism in a particular socioeconomic demographic group may indicate the importance of financial motives on the part of the men.

## **Changing Demands of Fathers**

Although there has been a lot of recent attention to fathers' roles in child rearing, with government reports proclaiming that fathers' interaction with children is essential for their well-being, women still provide the majority of childcare in couple and single-parent households, regardless of their employment status and that of their partners (Casper, 1997). A U.S. Census Bureau report titled "My Daddy Takes Care

of Me! Fathers as Care Providers” (Casper, 1997) highlights fathers’ caregiving during mothers’ working hours, even though it has *decreased* in recent years and remains well below women’s provision of care. Despite the congratulatory language in the report, it makes clear that economic necessity rather than changing gender norms accounts for men’s caregiving. More households need two parents’ incomes to survive, and many of the men have time to care for the children because they are unemployed (Casper, 1997). The Census Bureau has never published a report extolling the virtues of mothers’ care of children. However, childcare patterns in intact couples with children are also relevant to custody arrangements in the event of separation. Indeed, mothers’ disproportionate provision of care was one of the foundations of custody arrangements that used the “best interests of the child” and “tender years” doctrines that preceded rhetoric about fathers’ rights and access.

Although a handful of sympathetic scholars have expressed hope that the increased activity of FRGs might stem from an evolving masculine identity and changing norms for fatherhood, FRGs’ complete lack of attention to parenting prior to separation should perhaps attenuate their optimism (Collier & Sheldon, 2006b). FRG members’ support for fathers who are violent to mothers, children, or judges are reasons to view fathers’ rights claims about their interest in healthy parenting with caution. Many Americans have an interest in evolving gender roles in the family, but FRGs would not appear to be a viable location for this work.

Fathers’ rights advocates claim that feminists are desperate to divorce so that they can lead luxurious man-free lives, financed by child support (“Outcast Superstar,” 2007). However, feminists have led the way in advocating men’s increased participation in child care since the 1970s. Their arguments were not based on essentialist notions of father-necessity. Instead, various approaches emphasized the desirability of structural changes that would make it easier for both parents to work and care for children; the desirability of more fluid gender norms for women, men, and children; and the benefits that nontraditional (nurturing) male role models could provide in the face of negative media images of masculinity (Chodorow, 1971, 1978; Duindam & Spruijt, 2002; Gardiner, 1998; Miedzian, 1991; Silverstein, 1996; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999; Vachon & Vachon, 2006).

### **Popular Embrace of Formal Equality Arguments**

Legal research on fathers’ rights activism has commented repeatedly on the dangers of the application of formal equality standards in an unequal economic and social context (Fineman, 1987). Widespread acceptance of formal equality arguments have played a role in eroding the gains made by multiple social liberation movements. For example, court rulings undermining affirmative action indicate a trend toward the implementation of formal equality standards despite persistent inequalities (Ferber, 2000). As a result, efforts to secure the rights of minorities have

been termed “special interests.” FRGs have attempted to capitalize on the effectiveness of formal equality discourse in their lawsuits and other forms of activism.

Lawsuits attacking domestic violence legislation and services have relied on formal equality, attempting to use constitutional equal protection arguments, as in *Booth v. Hvass* (2002), or state civil rights codes to attack funding for services to battered women and their children, as in *Blumhorst v. Jewish Family Services of Los Angeles* (2005). Although these suits have been unsuccessful, this has been due to lack of standing or specific state prohibitions against attacking services for protected groups. The merits of the cases have not been argued in court.

## Theoretical Framework

The authors draw on patriarchal peer support theory (DeKeseredy et al., 2006) to understand why FRGs emerged and how they function. Patriarchal peer support refers to “the multidimensional attachments men form to male peers” who abuse or assault female intimate partners or who “provide resources that perpetuate and legitimate such assaults” (DeKeseredy et al., 2006, p. 231). Key to patriarchal peer support is the recognition that woman abuse supportive subcultures, which is not completely at odds with the dominant culture. Instead, peer group members draw from readily available scripts that excuse and promote violence against women indirectly as well as directly (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). Patriarchal peer support for violence against women may sometimes take the form of overt exhortations to violence, especially among like-minded peers or among men who have abusive behavior in common. However, it is also likely to appear as more subtle support for the conditions that engender and enable violence against women, articulated by those who use violence as well as those who do not. Examples of this include things such as defining one’s violent behavior as less than violent or nonviolent, minimizing the seriousness of violence against women, or denying that violence took place.

By associating with an FRG, men can form alliances with other men who share their interests, securing support for their beliefs and behavior in a cultural context where men are supposed to pay child support, and where perpetrators of violence against women are supposed to be held accountable. The groups provide a vocabulary and resources with which to resist these developments in ways that are socially acceptable by linking their interests to culturally desirable and symbolic institutions such as the heterosexual and patriarchal nuclear family.

Group influence can be significant, whether it is online or face-to-face. For example, peer support for discriminatory beliefs and violent behavior has been documented in research on White supremacist groups that function largely online (Duffy, 2003; Ferber, 2000). Online organizing allows groups and individuals from disparate locations to come together virtually to create online communities. Like FRGs, White

supremacist groups refer to culturally valued concepts and language to promote their cause, rhetorically tying their marginal agenda to more moderate mainstream assumptions and beliefs.

In the online context, FRGs provide a virtual location for like-minded men to reinforce their existing beliefs, expand their vocabularies, and share tactics that can be used to advance their political and personal interests. In the United States, violence against women is nominally condemned yet decisive action to penalize abusers, or even unequivocally support battered mothers' rights to protection from them, are often less than forthcoming. Alongside competing discourses that warn about the dangers of divorce and the decline of the patriarchal family, concerns about the protection of battered women frequently come second. FRGs emphasize the dangers associated with the putative decline of patriarchy in their efforts to reinforce the marginalization of battered women's needs, effectively changing the subject from protecting battered women and their children to protecting the patriarchal family.

## **Goals and Hypotheses**

The purpose of the current study was to examine prevalence of FRGs in the community, to quantify and analyze themes displayed on their Web sites, to examine demographic characteristics of communities manifesting significant FRG Web site activity, and to determine whether there is a relationship between the material found on FRG Web sites and state legislation promoting joint custody.

First, we hypothesized that insofar as the fathers' rights movement seeks to safeguard principles of familial patriarchy and to reinforce male privilege at a time when these are threatened by family dissolution, FRGs would be associated with a higher percentage of young adult males in the community, higher levels of divorce, higher male income, and White ethnicity. Second, we hypothesized that higher levels of FRG Web site activity would be associated with custody policies more favorable to fathers, one indication that the dominant culture is responsive to scripts that engender violence against women (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997).

## **Method**

### **Development of the Database**

As the Internet is one of the primary tools used by FRGs to disseminate information, the topics and substance of the fathers' rights arguments presented were gathered through a review of more than 300 FRG Web sites from September 2003 to March 2005. Online search engines (Google.com and Yahoo.com) were queried, using the search terms "fathers' rights," "dad's rights," "divorced fathers," and "father custody."

Web sites returned through those searches were entered into the database. Each Web site was examined for links to other fathers' rights Web sites, and those Web sites were searched for links to additional fathers' rights Web sites until all sites were exhausted. Because there is some overlap among men's movement organizations, some Web sites that are not solely focused on fathers' rights are included in the database.

### **Definition of Fathers' Rights Groups**

The content of each Web site was reviewed to note the predominant themes for classification purposes. Groups were categorized as FRGs if they mostly posted about the gender bias against fathers in family courts, including areas such as child custody and visitation, child support, divorce, and domestic violence. Groups were considered to be men's rights organizations if they mostly posted about bias against men in society, including opposition to the all-male military draft, supporting choice for men regarding reproduction, and granting men the same equality in the home "that women are granted in the workplace."

These groups are not mutually exclusive, so category blends were created. The fathers' rights and men's rights classification consisted of groups that primarily discussed (three or more postings) issues relating to fathers' rights, but also secondarily discussed (less than three postings) issues relating to men's rights. Conversely, the men's rights and fathers' rights classification consisted of groups that primarily discussed issues relating to men's rights and secondarily discussed issues relating to fathers' rights. The responsible fatherhood movement classification consisted of groups (many government-sponsored) that offered programs and advice solely on successful fatherhood skills, refraining from any discussion of family court or gender bias. The religious Christian men's movement classification consisted of Web site postings of religious encouragement, mention of religious writings and deities, and retreats, separate from discussing the family court system or gender bias. Mythopoetic men's groups consisted of those groups that encouraged men to better understand themselves through retreats, drumming, chanting, and poetry, excluding discussion of gender bias and the court system. Finally, feminist men's groups consist of those groups that post about gender bias against women. These groups promote women's rights and advocate the expansion of nontraditional gender roles.

### **Content Analysis**

The content of the Web sites was coded, and the presence or absence of the following major themes was noted: (a) divorce; (b) child support issues; (c) support for "children's rights"; (d) promotion of a presumption of joint custody or "shared parenting"; (e) other child custody issues; (f) minimizing the occurrence of domestic violence or claiming that domestic violence is exaggerated; (g) claims

that women are more violent than, or just as violent as, men; (h) claims that allegations of domestic violence are false and used manipulatively to gain advantage in divorce proceedings; (i) other domestic violence theme; (j) claims that false allegations of child abuse are used manipulatively to gain advantage in a divorce; (k) discussion of parental alienation or parental alienation syndrome; (l) claims that mothers are the primary perpetrators of child abuse; (m) other child abuse theme; and (n) paternity issues. Variables were coded dichotomously as 1 = *present* and 0 = *absent*.

### Scale Development

The codes were analyzed to determine whether Web site themes were grouped together in any meaningful way using exploratory factor analysis. A three-factor solution for the 14 themes suggested the following categories: (a) false allegations of domestic abuse in divorce, (b) child custody and child support themes, and (c) women as perpetrators of domestic abuse. However, only one theme, false allegations of abuse, produced a scale with a minimally acceptable alpha coefficient (.71). The items in this scale comprised (a) discussion of divorce, (b) claims that false allegations of child abuse are used manipulatively to gain advantage in a divorce, (c) claims that allegations of domestic violence are false and used manipulatively to gain advantage in divorce proceedings, and (d) discussion of parental alienation or parental alienation syndrome.

In addition to the false allegations scale, a variable was created based on the total number of themes discussed on the Web site. These variables were aggregated for all fathers' rights Web sites at the state level. Finally, the total number of fathers' rights Web sites and the total number of *active* fathers' rights Web sites were calculated for each state per million of the state population.

### Demographic Variables

Demographic variables taken from Census 2000 were aggregated at the state level. All variables were defined as percentages of the total state population with the exception of median income. The following variables were included in the analysis:

1. Marital status: We proposed that fathers' rights Web sites would be positively related to the percentage of divorced men in the population and less likely to be related to the percentage of never married men in the population. The marital status variables thus included the percentage of divorced men, divorced women, single men, and single women in the population (in all cases, aged 15 years and older.)
2. Age by gender: We examined the percentage of males in the population in the following age categories: 18 to 24, 25 to 34, 35 to 44, 45 to 54, 55 to 64.
3. Race: We hypothesized that inasmuch as the fathers' rights movement is an attempt to reinforce the principles of White male privilege, fathers' rights themes would be

associated with a higher percentage of Whites in the population. We therefore included the percentage of Whites and Blacks in the population.

4. **Income:** One of the major goals of the fathers' rights movement is the preservation of income for men postdivorce. Because the higher the man's income, the more he is likely to be assessed for child support, we hypothesized that wealthier men would be more motivated to support the goals of the fathers' rights movement. Thus, we included median income for men, median income for women, and the difference between men's and women's median income.

## **Custody Policy**

Because FRG activity is linked to their perception of custody policy, we used the Children's Rights Council's (CRC, 2005) classification of custody policy in our analysis. The CRC Web site assigns states to one of six ranked categories based on the CRC's assessment of the strength of their statutory language or case law related to the enforcement of joint custody. States in the highest ranked category have enacted statutes referring to "substantially equal shared physical custody" or similar language. States in the lowest ranked category have enacted no statutes with language referring to "shared parenting." In the present study, we adopted the CRC classification system ranging from 1 to 6. Although there is some face validity to this rating system, it may not be an accurate reflection of the actual statutory language so much as a perception of the states' friendliness to the fathers' rights agenda. Lack of clarity in many of these statutes could result in their being easily misinterpreted by judges, mediators, and other court personnel, in some cases possibly deliberately misinterpreted or misconstrued. Thus, the CRC classification is probably based on a combination of the actual statutes and a perception of the extent to which their implementation favors fathers in the final outcomes.

## **Results**

A total of 458 Web sites were identified in the search. These were classified as follows: (a) FRGs ( $n = 275$ ), (b) men's rights groups ( $n = 14$ ), (c) fathers' rights and men's rights groups ( $n = 11$ ), (d) men's rights and FRGs ( $n = 38$ ), (e) responsible fatherhood groups ( $n = 55$ ), (f) religious Christian men's movement groups ( $n = 2$ ), (g) mythopoeic men's groups ( $n = 19$ ), (h) feminist men's groups ( $n = 4$ ), and (i) other types of men's groups ( $n = 40$ ). In the present study, the first four categories were combined and referred to collectively as FRGs, comprising a total of 338 Web sites. However, during the course of the study, 105 FRG Web sites became inactive, although some of these had already been content analyzed before they were deactivated. Content analyses were thus conducted on 285 Web sites, including the 236 that remained active throughout the study period and 49 that were deactivated during the study year but had

**Table 1**  
**Fathers' Rights Theme Frequencies**

Theme	All Content-Analyzed Sites ( <i>n</i> = 285)		Active Sites Only ( <i>n</i> = 236)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Any child custody theme	243	85	206	87
Promotes children's rights	86	30	69	29
Promotes shared parenting or joint custody	190	67	162	69
Other custody theme	55	19	46	19
Discusses child support	231	81	193	82
Discusses divorce	158	55	138	58
Any child abuse theme	123	43	108	46
Claims mothers are primary child abusers	27	9	25	11
Claims mothers make false allegations of child abuse	91	32	82	35
Other child abuse theme	6	2	3	1
Parent alienation syndrome discussed	65	23	57	24
Any IPV theme	147	52	126	53
Claims men are the primary victims of IPV	86	30	76	32
Claims wives make false allegations of DV	68	24	63	27
Domestic violence is minimized	22	8	20	8
Other DV theme	12	4	9	4
Discusses paternity	64	22	54	23

Note: IPV = intimate partner violence; DV = domestic violence.

been analyzed prior to that. Frequencies of fathers' rights themes for all content-analyzed (CA) Web sites and for active Web sites are presented in Table 1. The most frequently discussed issue was child custody, which appeared on 85% of CA Web sites. This was followed by child support issues, which appeared on 81% of CA Web sites. Within the category of child custody, the most common theme was the promotion of joint custody or shared parenting, which was mentioned on 69% of CA Web sites.

### State-Level Analyses

Four categories of dependent variables were identified in the state-level analyses: (a) custody policy, (b) proportion of FRGs per million of the state population and proportion of *active* FRGs per million of the state population, (c) the mean number of fathers' rights themes for CA Web sites and for *active* Web sites, and (d) the mean score for the false allegations scale for CA and for *active* Web sites. Washington, D.C., was omitted from correlations because of demographic peculiarities. District of Columbia has the highest percentage of singles in the United States (about 20%) and also the highest proportion of fathers' rights Web sites per million. This gave the appearance of a positive correlation between fathers' rights Web sites and singles ( $r = .63$ ).

**Table 2**  
**State-Level Correlations Between Fathers' Rights**  
**Variables, Custody Policy and Demographic Variables ( $n = 50$ )**

Demographic Variables	Custody Policy	Fathers' Rights Themes		False Allegations		Fathers' Rights Sites per Million	
		Content-Analyzed Sites	Active Sites	Content-Analyzed Sites	Active Sites	Content-Analyzed Sites	Active Sites
Men's median income	-.11	.36*	.34*	.20	.17	.26	.19
Women's median income	-.07	.31*	.29*	.13	.10	.13	.13
Gender disparity in income	-.11	.25	.24	.22	.18	.34*	.18
% Single men	-.32*	.03	.03	-.05	-.02	.05	.07
% Single women	-.31*	.17	.16	.15	.19	0	.06
% Divorced men	.30*	-.29*	-.28*	-.22	-.22	.08	.14
% Divorced women	.33*	-.14	-.14	-.07	-.06	.04	.11
% Men 18-24	-.11	-.09	-.06	-.07	-.19	-.16	-.21
% Men 25-34	-.02	.31*	.32*	.19	.19	-.03	-.02
% Men 35-44	.05	.15	.12	-.01	.06	.18	.17
% Men 45-54	-.01	-.16	-.17	-.18	-.12	.15	.23
% Men 55-64	.09	-.27	-.28*	-.16	-.05	-.04	.14
% White	.10	-.18	-.19	-.11	-.18	.13	0
% Black	-.08	.23	.24	.37**	.40**	-.19	-.03

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

With District of Columbia removed from the database, there was almost zero correlation between these variables. District of Columbia is also home to many national organizations because, as the nation's capital, it is the location for policy and lobbying efforts, so organizations located there do not represent their local populations in the same way as organizations based in a home state (see Table 2 [AQ: 3]).

1. Custody policy: There were no significant relationships between any of the fathers' rights variables and policy favoring joint custody at the  $p < .05$  level, although a higher number of fathers' rights themes was associated with policy favoring joint custody ( $r = .26, p = .07$ ). Policy favoring joint custody was significantly associated with a lower percentage of single men ( $r = -.32, p < .05$ ) and single women ( $r = -.31, p < .05$ ) in the state population. It was also significantly associated with a higher percentage of divorced men ( $r = .30, p < .05$ ) and divorced women ( $r = .33, p < .05$ ) in the state population.
2. Proportion of FRGs per million: This was correlated with the difference between men's and women's median income ( $r = .337, p < .05$ ), reflecting the income disparity between men and women, where women earn significantly less than men.

3. Number of fathers' rights themes on content-analyzed Web sites: This was related to higher median income for both women ( $r = .306, p < .05$ ) and men ( $r = .356, p = .01$ ); to a higher proportion of men aged 24 to 35 in the population ( $r = .32, p < .05$ ); and to a lower percentage of divorced men in the population ( $r = -.286, p < .05$ ). The same variables were correlated with the number of fathers' rights themes for active Web sites only.
4. False allegations of domestic abuse scale: This was correlated with a higher percentage of Blacks in the state population ( $r = .372, p < .01$ ).

### Multivariate Analyses

Although the correlation between custody policy and number of fathers' rights themes did not reach statistical significance in the zero-order correlations, we hypothesized that this may be because the percentage of divorced men in the population and the mean number of fathers' rights themes on all Web sites were both related to custody policy but in opposite directions. In other words, custody policy might be significantly related to fathers' rights themes if we controlled for the proportion of divorced men in the population. This was confirmed by a multiple regression analysis with both percentage of divorced men and fathers' rights themes as independent variables. Custody policy was significantly related to both variables at the  $p < .01$  level ( $R^2 = .19, F = 6.75, p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

### Demographic Correlates of Fathers' Rights Themes and Custody Policy

*Marital status.* It did not come as a surprise that a higher number of fathers' rights themes and a higher proportion of divorced people in the population were found to be associated with policies favoring joint custody. However, the association between a *higher* number of fathers' rights themes and a *lower* proportion of divorced people in the population was the opposite of what we predicted. Why would fathers' rights themes be *negatively* correlated with divorce when they are aimed at enhancing the rights of divorced fathers?

First, it is important to note that fathers' rights rhetoric appears to be related to policy favoring joint custody *independently* of the divorce status of the population. Second, legislation addressing divorced parents' access to their children appears to be consistent with the needs of populations that include large proportions of divorced individuals. Fathers' rights activism in these areas would be superfluous because they already have policies favoring joint custody. Rather, FRGs target areas where policies favoring joint custody are weakest—namely, where there are fewer divorced individuals in the population.

*Income.* Although the correlation between median income and fathers' rights themes was predicted, there could be more than one explanation for this finding. For example, in wealthier communities, FRGs may be able to afford more elaborate Web sites with more content. However, this cannot explain the correlation between FRGs per million and the disparity between men's and women's income. Income disparity between men and women is also correlated with higher income for men—that is, the more money men make, the greater the income disparity between them and women. In the case of divorce, these men would be assessed for a larger amount of child support and possibly even alimony. It is therefore in their interests to form and fund FRGs that would lobby for lower child support payments. Presumptive joint custody arrangements are one of the ways to achieve this.

*Race.* The correlation between the false allegations scale and a higher percentage of Black women and men in the population was the opposite of what we expected. However, this result does not necessarily reflect the race of those claiming to be victims of false allegations. It is possible that White males may feel their privileged status to be more precarious in an environment where there is a sizable Black minority. In such situations, White males may adopt the language of victimization traditionally associated with victimized minorities to consolidate and protect their privilege (Ferber, 2000). This interpretation, however, should be viewed with caution, because the aggregation of racial demographics by state may obscure local patterns. More research is needed to investigate the significance of this correlation.

## Conclusion

This article combines information from FRG Web sites with demographic, historical, and contextual information to provide an empirically based analysis of fathers' rights lobbying in the United States. Although our findings represent a preliminary investigation of FRGs, their implications for battered mothers and their children are important. Many antiviolence advocates report that battered women are increasingly being forced into ongoing contact with their abusers after separation on the basis of the arguments promoted by FRGs, although these groups are not the original or sole sources of these arguments. Our findings provide some insight about why such problems may be on the rise.

Our quantitative content analysis of FRG Web sites discerned three factors that were central to the groups' rhetoric: representing domestic violence allegations as false, promoting presumptive joint custody and decreasing child support, and portraying women as perpetrators of domestic abuse. These factors are all directly related to some of the most serious problems battered mothers report, including not having their reports of violence taken seriously in court at divorce, being pushed into unsafe custody arrangements by the courts, and seeing retaliatory abuse claims filed

by their abusers. In addition, the quantification of these factors provides empirical evidence about the nature of FRGs and a very different account of their priorities than that found in their mission statements.

Because ours is the first effort in the United States to undertake a quantitative analysis of FRG lobbying on family law policy, it is necessarily exploratory and raises as many new questions as it answers. Our investigation of FRG themes in relation to state-level demographics and custody policy identified correlations that require additional empirical research to be fully understood.

Limitations of the study include the reliance on state-level demographic information and reliance on FRG Web sites for information about FRG activity and interests. Demographic information aggregated at the state level obscures significant disparities from county to county that have been found to be significant in other studies of woman abuse. Like any other text, Web sites provide only a partial picture of FRGs based on the discourses they produce. Many FRGs also share the same small membership across multiple groups, resulting in a Web presence that distorts their numbers and the nature of their membership. Additional quantitative and qualitative research is needed to document FRG organization and activities as well as their rhetoric.

Our findings suggest additional support for patriarchal peer support theory by documenting the correlation between abuse supportive attitudes and beliefs promoted by FRGs and structural realities that present barriers to women seeking to leave abusers. The correlation between a higher proportion of FRGs in the population and lower income for women relative to men suggests that it may be patriarchal privilege, rather than financial hardship, that is at issue when men are required to pay child support without maintaining control over their former spouse and the couple's children. Additional empirical research is needed to shed light on the micro-level dynamics at work in the payment and nonpayment of support.

Future research is also needed to empirically document the nature of FRGs and the relationship between their online and other activities in the United States. Research is needed to investigate FRGs' impact and how they interact with other individuals and organizations to affect policy. Research is also needed that documents the funding relationships between FRGs and state and federal agencies, especially those that are simultaneously tasked with protecting battered women and their children. Research is needed to investigate the possible correlation between fathers' rights activism and challenges to White supremacy. Further research is also needed to determine the outcomes of child custody cases where there is a history of violence and abuse to investigate children's perspectives on contact with abusive fathers following divorce and to document the outcomes for children who disclose violence by their fathers. Our investigation provides a starting point for these studies by empirically documenting the top priorities of FRGs and their correlations with state-level demographics. We hope that other scholars will join us in researching the impact of FRGs on battered mothers and their children based on this new information.

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