Foreword

"In every child who is born," wrote James Agee, "the potentiality of the human race is born again; and in him," as indeed in "each of us, our terrific responsibility towards human life." The abandonment of that responsibility, as represented in a parent's obligation to give his or her child financial support, is what this book is all about. The failure of absent parents, mainly fathers, to pay child support is a national scandal, one that has huge consequences for taxpayers, governments, mothers, and most important, children.

Child support has officially been on the national agenda since 1975 when the "IV-D" program got started and state governments began to work with a new federal office of child support enforcement to establish and collect child support awards in a coordinated manner.

But it was not until the decade of the 1980s that child support truly became a subject of national debate. Census Bureau figures released at the beginning of the decade demonstrated how few children were receiving the support they deserved. Then the neglected children and their hard-pressed mothers put a tragic human face on the cold, hard facts. Grass-roots organizations formed and began to lobby for change, putting pressure on the media to pay attention and on public officials to take action.

That was the genesis of my own involvement in the issue. Despite my exposure to child support problems as an attorney in private practice and as state senate majority leader in Connecticut during the 1970s, it was not until 1981 when I began my campaign for state attorney general that I became aware of just how many mothers and their children were denied their rightful child support payments and how costly it was for the government to support the children of poor families whose fathers had deserted them. I owe my own education to a group of mothers in Connecticut who formed PECOS (Parents for Enforcement of Court Ordered Support) and who helped me work

toward the enactment of tougher child support laws in our state during the 1980s.

I have carried that interest to the United States Senate, where I have been pleased to find a growing acceptance of the need for innovative child support collection laws at the federal level and for the stronger enforcement of these laws. The mass media have responded similarly to the pleas of mothers and their children. The result has been a series of hearings and seminars around the country and a wave of stories in popular magazines, newspapers, and television shows about “deadbeat dads” and the kids they’ve left behind.

A societal consensus has been building for forceful new laws, geared toward improving the identification of absent parents, getting them into court to establish child support obligations, developing effective methods of collection, and punishing those who fail to abide by their child support orders. But what has been the result of the state and federal governments’ broader and stronger involvement in child support collection? Are mothers and their children better off because the legal system has begun to care about them? Are taxpayers getting their money’s worth from the new investment in child support programs? In short, is the child support system working?

That is the focus of this book. The years of research by Andrea Beller and John Graham into the bottom line of child support—from the establishment of paternity to the awarding of child support to its collection—have yielded a bumper crop of facts that go a long way toward puncturing myths, settling debates, highlighting successes and failures, and furthering our search for better ways to make the system work. I have rarely seen so thorough and so well-documented an analysis of a public-policy problem.

As a result of the authors’ thoughtful perspective, this is a book devoid of “conventional wisdom,” of politically correct preaching, of pop psychology. It does not stretch or avoid the truth of this terribly complicated social problem. Beller and Graham do not shrink from the difficult task of separating fact from speculation and backing up each fact with a wealth of supporting evidence. Most important—and most refreshing to someone accustomed to political discourse—the authors are not afraid to admit when the answer to certain aspects of the child support problem is not clear. They do not abuse the data to make a point.

That gives added weight to the conclusions reached and recommendations made in *Small Change* and makes the book all the more

important for those of us intent on finding ways to make the system work better. For example, the authors show that child support awards, despite more than ten years of legislative and judicial activism, remain low and have actually declined when compared to the father's ability to pay. They also demonstrate that child support awards are generally too low to match the actual costs of raising children in today's world, which means that without changes in the system there is little hope that child support can help families rise out of poverty and off the welfare system.

Such findings are a call to arms for those who want to make government and our laws work better. Lucky for us, Andrea Beller and John Graham supply the arms we will need to do just that. They make a compelling case for the enactment of a national system of guidelines for child support awards, educating judges and lawyers about the need to require awards from *all* fathers, no matter how little money they make, adding criminal penalties for nonsupport to federal child support statutes, and focusing more attention on the special problems of never-married and African-American mothers, many of whom obtain little or no support from the fathers of their children.

Beller and Graham also give evidence of the value of such child support enforcement tools as liens against property, automatic wage withholding, and criminal penalties, suggesting that states and the federal government would do well to ensure their widespread use.

At the heart of *Small Change* is the belief, informed by a thorough analysis of the evidence, that America and America's families function best when children receive love, attention, and support from their mothers *and* their fathers. In an ideal world, all children will have two parents present for their upbringing. But in our imperfect world, we know that this will too often not be the case.

Yet there should never be an excuse for fathers to neglect their obligation to their children. A denial of child support is a denial of love, and that puts tremendous economic and psychological burdens on millions of America's children. To stand up for effective child support awards and collection is to stand up for the family and for the belief that our kids need a mother and a father, even if both cannot be in the same home.

Just as the failure of fathers to pay child support on a massive scale has contributed to a host of social problems in our country today, the more effective collection of child support by government will help us to address the related crises of education, poverty, disease, illiter-

acy, crime, and other obstacles faced by children as they grow up without adequate support in our troubled world.

The problem of child support crosses all ideological barriers and gives us an important opportunity to unite in a bipartisan manner to enact and promote practical solutions that work. Whatever our personal agendas, I believe we can all agree that it is our “terrific responsibility” as a nation to act when America’s children need support.

Small Change establishes that need, proves that it is unmet, and points the way toward big changes in the way we deal with fathers who refuse to pay what their children so genuinely deserve. The potential of the human race, of our nation, is born again in our children, as James Agee said. Meeting the basic economic needs of our children helps us ensure that such tremendous potential is fulfilled.

Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman