

Ten Key Findings from Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives



February 2008

Karin Martinson and Demetra Nightingale

The role of noncustodial fathers in the lives of low-income families has received increased attention in the past decade. As welfare reform has placed time limits on cash benefits, policymakers and program administrators have become interested in increasing financial support from noncustodial parents as a way to reduce poverty among low-income children. Although child support enforcement efforts have increased dramatically in recent years, there is evidence that many low-income fathers cannot afford to meet their child support obligations without impoverishing themselves or their families. Instead, many fathers accumulate child support debts that may lead them to evade the child support system and see less of their children.

To address these complex issues, states and localities have put programs in place that focus on developing services and options to help low-income fathers find more stable and better-paying jobs, pay child support consistently, and become more involved parents. In part because of the availability of new funding sources and a growing interest in family-focused programs, this area is experiencing dramatic growth, with hundreds of “fatherhood” programs developing across the country.

Under the expanded purposes of Title IVA, authorized in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-193,

also known as PRWORA), states have been able to use some of their Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to provide services to nonresident fathers, including employment-related services. PRWORA also authorized grants to states to assist noncustodial parents with access and visitation issues, and it required states, as part of their Child Support Enforcement Program, to have procedures requiring fathers who are not paying child support to participate in work activities, which may include employment and training programs. The Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) of 2005 (P.L. 109-171), which contains a reauthorization of the TANF program, also authorized funding to states and public and nonprofit entities for responsible fatherhood programs.

These recent policies encourage the development of more programs for low-income fathers. This brief focuses on several important early fatherhood initiatives that were developed and implemented during the 1990s and early 2000s that provide valuable lessons to policymakers and program staff now in this field. Formal evaluations of these earlier fatherhood efforts have been completed, some quite recently, making this an opportune time to step back and assess what has been learned and how to build on the early programs’ successes and challenges.

Responsible Fatherhood Demonstration Projects

Young Unwed Fathers Project. Operating in six sites from 1991 to 1993, this project targeted young fathers under the age of 25. The project provided education and training services to improve the earning capacity of young noncustodial fathers, “fatherhood development activities” to encourage parental values and behavior, assistance with establishing paternity and paying formal child support, and ongoing case management services. The programs worked with fathers for up to 18 months so services could continue after job placement. The programs primarily served fathers who participated voluntarily. This demonstration was funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and a number of foundations.

Parents’ Fair Share (PFS). Launched in 1994 in seven sites, PFS was a national demonstration program targeted at underemployed or unemployed noncustodial fathers who owed child support and had children receiving welfare. The programs provided a range of services including peer support groups, employment and training services, mediation, enhanced child support enforcement, and reduced child support obligations during program participation. In most cases, the men were referred to PFS during court hearings or appointments scheduled by child support agencies. For those referred, participation was mandatory until they found a job and started paying child support. The PFS demonstration was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Labor, and a number of foundations.

Welfare-to-Work Grants (WtW) Program. In 1997, Congress established the Welfare-to-Work Grants Program, a five-year initiative (1998–2003) operated by the U.S. Department of Labor that funded programs providing employment-related services to the hardest-to-employ TANF recipients and noncustodial fathers of children who were on welfare. For noncustodial parents, WtW grant programs emphasized employment services, but some also focused on increasing child support payments and improving relationships between parents and their children. The target population varied across local programs. Some programs served those the courts had ordered to participate, some served those who volunteered to participate, and some served both groups. Some programs focused specifically on fathers on parole or probation who had children on welfare and limited employment options.

Responsible Fatherhood Programs (RFP). Funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the RFPs operated in eight sites from 1998 to 2000. These programs aimed to increase employment and income, encourage more involved and better parenting, and motivate child support compliance. The programs targeted unemployed and underemployed noncustodial fathers and provided a range of services, including employment services, assistance with child support issues, and parenting instruction. The state-initiated responsible fatherhood programs varied significantly in service delivery systems, mix and content of services, and target population. The target population included both those whom the courts had ordered to participate and those who volunteered to participate.

Partners for Fragile Families (PFF). Implemented in 13 sites over a three-year period beginning in 2000, the PFF projects sought to help government agencies (especially child support enforcement [CSE] agencies) and community organizations provide more flexible and responsive programs to better support the needs of children living in fragile families. The key elements of the PFF projects included promoting the voluntary establishment of paternity, connecting young fathers with the child support system and encouraging payment of child support, improving parenting and relationship skills of young fathers, helping young fathers secure and retain employment, and providing other services to strengthen father involvement when parents do not live together. PFF targeted young fathers (under age 25) who had not yet established paternity and did not yet have extensive involvement with the CSE system, and the fathers volunteered to participate. The underlying theory was to target new fathers when they had little or no previous involvement with this system and when they still might have a positive relationship with the mother of their children and the children themselves. PFF was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Ford Foundation, and a number of other foundations.

Toward this end, this brief discusses key findings from five major demonstration programs that focused on improving employment and earnings, child support payments, and parental involvement among low-income noncustodial fathers. Listed in order of implementation, these include the Young Unwed Fathers Project, Parents' Fair Share (PFS), programs for nonresident fathers operated under the Welfare-to-Work (WtW) Grants Program, the Office of Child Support Enforcement's Responsible Fatherhood Programs (RFP), and the Partners for Fragile Families (PFF). (See box for program descriptions.)

These initiatives targeted poor fathers, most of whom had limited education and skills, unstable employment histories, and children that were in the custody of their mother or another relative (but typically in a low-income household). The programs were unique in that they focused on how fathers could contribute to their children's well-being—both financially and emotionally. Before these efforts, fathers received minimal attention in the national dialogue about single-parent families, except as the focus of child support enforcement.

While child support enforcement efforts have increased collections for many mothers, largely from fathers who have stable jobs and can afford to pay, they have not worked well for poor fathers and mothers. Poor fathers often face child support orders that are set at levels they cannot pay; their orders are rarely modified during periods of unemployment, and they can accrue unrealistic levels of debt. This may motivate fathers to lose contact

with their families and evade the child support system.

Designed to address these shortcomings, the projects reviewed in this brief were among the first multisite initiatives focused on improving the economic status of low-income nonresident fathers as well as the financial and emotional support provided to their children. Launched in the early 1990s through 2000, the projects typically involved partnerships of child support agencies and providers a range of services to address the needs of the fathers, that could include employment, training, and parenting services, case management, and services to increase fathers' access to their children.

These early initiatives also shared a commitment to research, with each including a comprehensive program evaluation. Only one (PFS) used a random assignment research design, while the others used nonexperimental techniques to examine economic and child support outcomes for at least some participants. All included a process study that examined program implementation and operations lessons, and several also included an ethnographic component providing in-depth information on the experiences and views of a small number of fathers.

Because many current fatherhood programs have goals similar to these past initiatives and involve many of the same organizational partners as these demonstration efforts, program administrators and policymakers can also learn from the programs' strengths and weaknesses. Toward this end, this brief outlines ten key findings that emerged from these past responsible father initiatives. While each

project had its own circumstances and lessons (and the evaluations did not cover the same topics consistently), this brief draws out common themes across the projects. As shown in table 1, each finding was experienced by at least two projects, with many experienced by all.

Low-Income Fathers and Mothers Face Similar and Significant Barriers

While program administrators of these early fatherhood initiatives expected the population of nonresident parents to be disadvantaged, the extent and severity of barriers was generally greater than anticipated. Program administrators of the responsible fatherhood initiatives uniformly found that poorly educated minorities with limited job opportunities make up a disproportionate share of low-income, nonresident fathers. Although most low-income noncustodial fathers have some work experience, many of them work intermittently at low wages and have low education and skill levels that limit their job prospects.

Overall, nonresident fathers and custodial mothers look very similar in terms of race, low-education levels, and work history.¹ In a national representative survey of poor noncustodial fathers who do not pay child support, over 40 percent had high school diplomas and only 30 percent had worked in the past three years. These rates were nearly identical to those of poor custodial mothers. Like their female counterparts, noncustodial fathers had many other employment barriers, includ-

TABLE 1. *Key Findings from Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives, by Project*

Key finding	Young Unwed Fathers	PFS	WtW	RFP	PFF
Low-income fathers and mother face similar and significant barriers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Recruitment and enrollment are key challenges	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Being a good father is important to nonresident fathers	✓	✓	N/A	✓	✓
Programs had difficulty establishing employment services that improved how nonresident fathers fared in the labor market	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Child support-related services are a critical program component	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Child support orders are often set at levels above what nonresident fathers can reasonably be expected to pay	N/A	✓	N/A	✓	✓
Child support enforcement agencies need to collaborate with fatherhood programs and respond to the circumstances of low-income fathers	✓	✓	N/A	✓	✓
Co-parenting issues need to be addressed	N/A	✓	N/A	✓	✓
Lack of long-term sustainability inhibits the development of program capacity and innovation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Systemic change is difficult	N/A	✓	N/A	✓	✓

N/A This issue was not addressed in the evaluation.

ing health issues, substance abuse, housing instability, lack of transportation, and mental health problems.

In addition, unlike custodial mothers, many fathers had been arrested before enrolling in these programs, which created significant challenges for them in the labor market. For example, two-thirds of fathers in the PFS evaluation had been arrested before program entry; in the RFP programs, 40 percent had a felony conviction. While the other studies did not specifically collect data on participants' criminal history, program administrators

consistently reported criminal records as a key concern and challenge.

Recruitment and Enrollment Are Key Challenges

Recruitment is a critical challenge and a major part of programs serving nonresident fathers. Although the overall population of low-income nonresident fathers is quite large (estimated at 7.2 million),² past fatherhood initiatives uniformly had great difficulty meeting enrollment goals. Factors that hindered enrollment included

- narrow eligibility criteria set for programs, such as age, characteristics of children (i.e., receiving cash assistance), and degree of involvement with the child support agency (paternity established, order in place);
- fathers' lack of trust in the organization or agency operating the program;
- fathers' fear of involvement with the child support enforcement agency;
- mismatch between program services and men's perceived needs;

- difficulty acquiring referrals from other agencies; and
- poorly designed recruitment procedures.

Although most fatherhood programs were designed to be relatively small, many were smaller than originally envisioned as a result of these challenges. Across the projects, the continuous recruitment and enrollment struggle typically required more resources than anticipated and drew staff attention away from other important operational issues.

Overall, programs were most successful in achieving and maintaining their enrollment levels when they had relatively broad eligibility criteria, used multiple outreach and recruitment approaches, and had developed trust or had a history of working within the community and developed referral arrangements with other agencies serving nonresident parents. For example, some programs in the RFP, WtW, and Young Unwed Fathers Project that were able to establish a steady source of referrals from another agency (such as the child support agency, criminal courts, or a prisoner reentry program) had fewer difficulties with enrollment than those that relied more heavily on general recruiting in the community and word of mouth. Programs with narrow or specific eligibility criteria, such as PFF and the WtW grants program, often eventually broadened their enrollment criteria to increase the number of participants.

Both mandatory and voluntary programs encountered recruitment and enrollment problems. PFS used a mandatory approach, where indi-

viduals were referred to the programs usually by the courts, child support system, or probation offices and faced consequences such as incarceration or higher child support orders if they did not participate on an ongoing basis. PFF used a voluntary approach—individuals participated solely at their own discretion—while the OCSE demonstrations, WtW, and the Unwed Fathers Project used both.

Based on the experiences of these early programs, a combination of positive inducements and pressures may prove more successful than either a completely voluntary or harshly punitive program in recruiting and enrolling participants. Particularly in the RFP demonstrations and WtW grants program, program operators found using both positive incentives (such as employment services, flexible child support arrangements,³ child-related services, and transportation assistance) with negative incentives (such as the threat of incarceration and inflexible child support payment schedules) improved recruitment and participation levels.

Being a Good Father Is Important to Nonresident Fathers

Program activities focused on improving fathers' relationships with their children were highly valued by participants and served as an important incentive to encourage participation. Several evaluations (including those for PFS, PFF, RFP, and Young Unwed Fathers Project) reported that many fathers expressed a desire to be more involved in their children's lives and appreciated the services that

addressed parenting and child-related issues. Peer support sessions or other support groups that provided information on their rights and obligations as nonresident fathers, encouraged positive parenting behavior, and allowed sharing of concerns and points of confusion consistently received high marks from participants, as noted in the PFS, PFF, and Young Unwed Fathers evaluations. Some programs included workshops focused specifically on parenting issues and sponsored father-child events, at least in part because of participant interest in these issues.

Experiences in the RFP demonstrations, PFF, and PFS initiatives indicated that participants also valued services and information related to custody and visitation. Some fathers were unhappy with the amount of access they had to their children and turned toward program staff to formally or informally help them negotiate visitation agreements. Although not common, some programs (particularly in the PFF and RFP demonstrations) found it valuable to provide legal representation or financial assistance with legal costs to address custody and visitation as well as other issues.

Programs Had Difficulty Establishing Employment Services That Improved How Nonresident Fathers Fared in the Labor Market

Many low-income nonresident fathers continued to experience poor economic outcomes even after involvement in fatherhood programs. Based on some ethnographic studies and focus groups, many

fathers indicated that their desire for a job was one factor that attracted them to the project. Staff in all the projects reported that many nonresident fathers viewed employment as critical for improving their lives and were highly interested in the employment services offered by the fatherhood programs.

Despite these services, obtaining and maintaining stable employment remained challenging for many fathers served by the programs. The projects that tracked employment outcomes for program participants—specifically the RFP demonstrations, PFS, and PFF—found that earnings remained very low over time. For example, PFS (the only study to use an experimental research design) increased earnings modestly but only for the men with the least education and employment history. The other studies, which did not include a control group, found participants increased their earnings after enrollment, but their incomes remained relatively low; quarterly earnings reflected an annualized income of less than \$15,000 (some programs had much lower earnings).

Several factors may have contributed to this lack of employment progress. First, the programs in these early efforts focused on job search and soft skills, such as appropriate workplace behavior, not skill development and training. Given program participants' low education and skill levels, it is not surprising that they generally found work in low-paying jobs even though some employment services were provided. Similar to the situation with other low-income workers, the poor quality of these jobs may be one reason the men do not stay in them for long and may

contribute to their overall employment instability.⁴ Job retention and wage progression may be stronger if individuals are placed in higher-quality jobs, but in many cases this would require skill development through education and vocational training.

Second, it was difficult to get the fathers to participate in training program, even when available. Some programs, notably PFS, PFF, Young Unwed Fathers Project, and WtW, provided some skills training, but relatively few fathers received these services. PFS and the Young Unwed Fathers Project found it difficult to have their participants accepted into available on-the-job training slots because providers did not want to serve a group this disadvantaged. Providers were sometimes reluctant to work with the fatherhood programs because participants' poor performance could negatively affect outcomes on their performance measures and their relationships with employers.

Additionally, many programs, including PFF and the WtW Grants Program, found that the pressures fathers and staff experienced in helping individuals find employment immediately minimized fathers' interest in longer-term training options. There was also tension between the need to work and pay child support immediately and the need to get a better job so payment of child support could be sustained over the long term. To address these issues, policymakers must also pay attention to developing strong skill-building and training programs geared toward the needs of this population rather than job search-focused activities. Strategies should

be considered that allow individuals to combine work and training, ideally with paid release time for training or a stipend for those who participate in training before securing employment.

A third factor that affected employment outcomes was that programs did not address many fathers' multiple barriers to employment. Most fathers had low education or lack of work experience, but many also had criminal histories and health and substance abuse issues. The fatherhood programs varied significantly in their ability to meet these needs—either through services provided directly or through referrals to other organizations. They also differed in their experience in working with disadvantaged and high-need populations; some programs were built on long-standing fatherhood initiatives, and other were developed from scratch. Evaluations of several demonstrations (PFS, PFF, WtW, Young Unwed Fathers Project) found that involving organizations and staff with experience working with disadvantaged men, particularly in addressing the needs of ex-offenders or those with substance abuse problems, were critical to establishing effective program services.

Child Support–Related Services Are a Critical Program Component

The fatherhood evaluations that measured child support outcomes generally found that they increased payment of child support even in the absence of employment gains. As measured using an experimental design, PFS increased child support

payments by fathers at the time of enrollment through revealing unreported income and increased payment rates among those who participated in the program. Although comparable results are not available for PFF and RFP (due to the lack of a control group), these studies also found a notable increase in the proportion of fathers who established child support orders. The RFP evaluation reported an increase in the proportion of fathers making any child support payments, owing to an increased use of wage withholding.

These findings are particularly noteworthy given that all the projects reviewed here found that many nonresident fathers had a minimal understanding of the child support enforcement system when they enrolled in fatherhood programs. The information they did have generally gave them very negative perceptions of this system, particularly if they had significant debt accumulated. Many fathers perceived the child support system as biased toward the mother.

Fatherhood programs can serve as an important resource or ally for the father in understanding his rights and responsibilities. They can encourage formal participation in this system (because informal payments are not recognized) and help fathers understand that paying child support is part of being a good father. This includes getting started on the “right foot” in meeting their child support obligations before significant debts have accumulated or, if debts already exist, to help manage them so additional debt does not accrue. Initiatives such as the WtW Grants Program that focus primarily on employment may have little effect on improving financial and emotional

support for children unless they include activities that educate fathers on their rights and responsibilities regarding child support and visitation and encourage father involvement through payment of support and spending time with their children.

While many early fatherhood programs were unable to establish more flexible child support arrangements for low-income parents such as those with modified payment orders or debt compromise, the ones that did so (i.e., some programs in PFF, WTW, and Young Unwed Fathers) attributed the accomplishment to their strong partnership with the child support agency. Child support agencies may be unlikely to initiate these changes on their own, particularly because clients, the child support advocacy community, state officials, and the public may perceive such changes as reducing support for children or reimbursement to the state. In partnership with a fatherhood program, child support officials seem amenable to considering alternative arrangements.

Child Support Orders Are Often Set at Levels Above What Nonresident Fathers Can Reasonably Be Expected to Pay

The evaluations of the programs that examined child support outcomes (PFF, PFS, and RFP) revealed that in many cases the child support orders were set at higher levels than the nonresident fathers could be expected to pay. For example, in the PFS evaluation, over 60 percent of men had orders that amounted to more than half their monthly earnings. The reasons for the high

orders varied, but many resulted from changes in the economic circumstances of the father, such as loss of a job or incarceration, or because the father failed to participate in the order-setting process. The combination of low wages and high child support orders makes the full payment of child support unrealistic for many fathers if they are to meet their own basic living needs. It also contributes to fathers’ negative perceptions of the CSE system.

Regardless of the reason for the orders being set beyond the capacity of the fathers to meet their obligation, the presence of an unmanageable order often led to debt accumulation. The PFS study, which had as a primary component establishing more flexible child support orders for program participants, found that orders were reduced after enrollment for about half the men. However, many other early fatherhood programs were unable to establish more flexible child support arrangements for low-income parents; the PFF and RFP evaluations show order levels did not change over the course of the study. Overall, establishing the appropriate child support payment level for low-income fathers is difficult and needs continuing attention from fatherhood programs, child support program managers, and state officials.

Child Support Enforcement Agencies Need to Collaborate with Fatherhood Programs and Respond to the Circumstances of Low-Income Fathers

The early fatherhood initiatives varied in terms of whether they

required a partnership with child support agencies. The RFP demonstrations, PFF, and PFS required varying types of partnerships. The WtW Grants Program gave sites discretion in this area but focused more strongly on providing employment services; child support became involved through standard child support mechanisms when the fathers found a job. The earliest initiative, the Young Unwed Fathers Project, sought to engage fathers in the child support system before enrollment but did not require any program partnership. Even when fatherhood demonstration projects required partnerships with child support enforcement agencies, individual programs developed stronger institutional partnerships with the child support agency than others, particularly in the PFF and RFP demonstrations and the Young Unwed Fathers Project.

The experiences within and across these early demonstration projects show that the involvement of the child support enforcement agency as an institutional partner with fatherhood programs can produce important advantages. Although the nature of this institutional partnership varied, all evaluations of the early demonstration projects stressed the importance of involving the support agency as a key partner. While a drawback of involving the child support enforcement agency is that fathers may be more reluctant to participate (which was the case for some projects), the demonstration projects consistently found that the benefits of involving the child support agency outweighed this issue in several ways:

- Child support system involvement can help improve the knowledge base for both program staff and participants on how this system works and fathers' rights and responsibilities within this system. Given that fathers will be facing the child support agency regardless of program involvement, this is an opportunity to have the system work better for them.
- Child support agencies were sometimes an important source of referrals in some programs and helped alleviate recruitment difficulties.
- The active involvement of the child support enforcement agency is needed to establish realistic child support order amounts and develop strategies to address fathers with significant accumulated debt.

Not only do collaborative relationships need to be established, they also need to be maintained. Staff turnover can be high in community-based programs like fatherhood programs. Child support enforcement agencies also can have periods of rapid or unexpected change, especially during state or county budget shortfalls. When staff changes, relationships need to be rebuilt to ensure that the collaborations continue to be effective.

Co-Parenting Issues Need to Be Addressed

These fatherhood initiatives generally did not include a focus on marriage. While the PFF program sought to recruit young men who had not yet been involved with the child support system, recruitment

was father-based, rather than couple-based. Anecdotal reports from the PFF sites, as well as information from the other studies, indicates that the relationships between the fathers and mothers were already troubled by the time fathers enrolled in the program, with the break-up of the relationship sometimes the motivating event for program enrollment. Other programs, such as PFS and some RFP fatherhood demonstrations, recruited participants from the child support system. For the most part, these fathers and mothers were divorced, separated, or otherwise no longer in a romantic relationship. As such, marriage education and couple relationship strengthening did not appear appropriate in the context of these programs.

Many unwed fathers in these programs, as documented in the PFF, PFS, RFP, and the Young Unwed Father Project evaluations, expressed consistent frustration with the nature of their relationship with their child's mother and often experienced significant conflict and tensions. When services involving the custodial parent were offered (such as mediation services), the services were typically not used by many parents. As noted in the PFF and PFS evaluations, greater efforts and incentives are needed to address co-parenting—even, or especially, when romantic relationships no longer exist. Encouraging the participation of custodial parents in these programs might provide opportunities to reduce conflict, address mothers' concerns, and ensure the fathers' efforts to become more involved parents proceed on track.

Adding to the complexity of addressing parents' relationship and co-parenting issues, the father or mother or both may sometimes have additional children from relationships with other partners, as reported in the PFF evaluation. This multiple-partner fertility can create additional strain on efforts to work through co-parenting issues with any particular child in the household.

Lack of Long-Term Sustainability Inhibits the Development of Program Capacity and Innovation

Although sustainability was not specifically addressed in many of the early fatherhood program evaluations, the experience of these initiatives shows that time and attention are required to develop and maintain the level of funding necessary to sustain programs over time. Many early fatherhood initiatives were funded by special (and often temporary) funding sources; when the funding ran out, the programs often could not continue. As a result, many services that were developed and institutional connections that were made were lost when the program ended. With some exceptions, few programs that operated under these early initiatives still exist today, in large part because funding could not be sustained.

When fatherhood programs were able to secure long-term funding, they did so through accessing sources not specific to fatherhood, such as workforce development, social services, or public health systems. Having multiple funding sources can broaden scope and create flexibility to serve specific pop-

ulations of interest. But, multiple funding sources can also create barriers to recruitment, enrollment, and hiring and require multiple reporting and record-keeping systems.

Although up to \$50 million is being provided for responsible fatherhood programs annually by HHS under the authority of the Deficit Reduction Act, these funds are not long-term operational funds. The authority is for research, demonstrations, and technical assistance, and the funding authority expires after five years. The organizations awarded these grants in the first year will be funded for five years, assuming satisfactory performance.

Given the history of sustainability problems for these efforts, responsible fatherhood programs need to look for long-term funding options and opportunities, and the ability to leverage and combine resources from other systems. States and communities that have or are planning to undertake a fatherhood initiative should consider building long-term funding coalitions as an essential part of their projects' structure.

Systemic Change Is Difficult

Many of the fatherhood projects were relatively small-scale, local efforts. Their development and implementation did not require or result in wide-scale change by entire systems or organizations. If lasting systemic change is a goal, different types of efforts may need to be made in how public agencies, particularly child support and employment agencies and community organizations, work with low-income fathers.

For example, while a local child support agency might have been willing to implement alternative arrangements, such as an arrears reduction program or a temporary suspension of child support, these local program accommodations generally did not result in changes that were implemented statewide. Other fatherhood programs in a state, or even in the same community, had to develop their own protocols and ways to approach deviations from existing statewide rules and procedures or develop new approaches to common problems.

These demonstrations were important for moving policy and program development for low-income nonresident fathers forward because results were discussed at conferences and shared within the policy and advocacy communities. Systemic change, however, often requires procedural, regulatory, or legislative efforts that are most efficiently and effectively made at the state level.

Conclusion

Helping low-income men develop their earnings capacity and become responsible fathers is an important social policy goal, since the potential benefits—including greater productivity for the men, more stability for their children, and improved economic outcomes for both children and their parents—will benefit society as a whole. The mixed results of programs to date indicate that improving the lives of low-income men and their families is not an easy undertaking. While many low-income nonresident fathers have a strong interest in building relation-

ships with and supporting their children, a comprehensive range of services is needed to address their varied needs.

These program experiences also strongly suggest that this is a significant endeavor, requiring time to develop and establish the projects and to maintain a strong commitment by multiple organizations and partners at the community level. In most states and localities, the relationships between child support, employment programs, and community-based fatherhood programs need to be strengthened to turn fathers' interest in becoming more emotionally and financially involved in the lives of their children into a reality.

Additional models and strategies to improve the employability and viability of paying child support for nonresident fathers need to be tried and tested. More work needs to be done on developing employment programs that actually increase income and earnings, and in strengthening the ties between fatherhood programs and employment programs. Without intensive skill-building strategies that are accessible to this population, these fathers are unlikely to experience the type of earnings gains necessary to support their children and themselves.

With the proper design and incentives, fatherhood programs appear to help fathers understand the importance of paying formal child support. The regularity and amount of child support paid increases even without measurable increases in employment and earnings. In addition, strong anecdotal evidence indicates that these fathers (and mothers) need a lot more help

with their co-parenting relationships than fathering programs currently provide. Ways of reaching out to the resident parent and of working with both parents on custody, visitation, and co-parenting issues are still underdeveloped and underfunded.

Greater involvement by child support agencies is also part of the solution. Promising child support reforms that can ease the disproportionate burden on low-income fathers need to be implemented, including less reliance on default policies; guidelines that allow for lower orders for low-income earners; streamlined procedures for downward and upward modification of orders; more systematic ways of reducing or suspending orders when fathers are unemployed or underemployed, in substance abuse treatment or have other health limitations, or are incarcerated; and more methods, like debt compromise and reduction in interest rates and penalties, for reducing large arrears balances that many low-income fathers have accrued and that often interfere with their ability to pay current support.

Research has shown that fathers, whether rich or poor, are important to their children. Even with uncertain funding options, fatherhood programs are likely to continue, and their numbers are likely to grow. These early fatherhood initiatives provide valuable lessons for developing the next generation of policies and services that will improve the lives of low-income men and their families.

Notes

1. See Sorensen and Zibman (2000).
2. See Sorensen and Zibman (2000).

3. In this brief, the term "flexible child support arrangements" is used to reference various enforcement strategies used by child support programs to help low-income obligors manage their child support debt. These strategies include debt compromise; waiving or reduction of interest, fees, and penalties; temporary suspension of payment; downward modification of orders; and negotiated payment plans.
4. Poor-quality jobs not only have low pay, but also offer limited benefits, job security, and access to training and job advancement opportunities.

Bibliography

- Sorensen, Elaine, and Chava Zibman. 2000. *A Look at Poor Dads Who Don't Pay Child Support*. Washington DC: The Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=310334>.
- Office of Child Support Enforcement Responsible Fatherhood Programs*
- Pearson, Jessica, Nancy Theonnes, David Price, and Jane Venohr. 2000. *OCSE Responsible Fatherhood Programs: Early Implementation Lessons*. Denver, CO: Center for Policy Research and Policy Studies, Inc. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/rpt/process.htm>.
- Pearson, Jessica, Nancy Theonnes, Lanae Davis, Jane Venohr, David Price, and Tracy Griffith. 2003. *OCSE Responsible Fatherhood Programs: Client Characteristics and Program Outcomes*. Denver, CO: Center for Policy Research and Policy Studies, Inc. <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/Stability/RespFaPgmsClientChar.pdf>.
- Parents' Fair Share Demonstration*
- Bloom, Dan. 1993. *Child Support Enforcement: A Case Study*. New York: MDRC.
- Bloom, Dan, and Kay Sherwood. 1994. *Matching Opportunities to Obligations: Lessons for Child Support Reform from the Parents' Fair Share Pilot Phase*. New York: MDRC. <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/pfs94/>.
- Doolittle, Fred, and Suzanne Lynn. 1998. *Working with Low-Income Cases: Lessons for the Child Support Enforcement System from*

Parents' Fair Share. New York: MDRC. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/isp/pfs/lowinc/toc.htm>.

Doolittle, Fred, Virginia Knox, Cynthia Miller, and Sharon Rowser. 1998. *Building Opportunities, Enforcing Obligations: Implementation and Interim Impacts of Parents' Fair Share*. New York: MDRC. <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/146/full.pdf>.

Furstenberg, Frank Jr., Kay Sherwood, and Mercer Sullivan. 1992. *Caring and Paying: What Fathers and Mothers Say about Child Support*. New York: MDRC. <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/pfs92/index.htm>.

Johnson, Earl, and Fred Doolittle. 1996. *Low-Income Parents and the Parents' Fair Share Demonstration: An Early Qualitative Look at Low-Income Noncustodial Parents (NCPs) and How One Policy Initiative Has Attempted to Improve Their Ability to Pay Child Support*. New York: MDRC.

Johnson, Earl, Ann Levine, and Fred Doolittle. 1999. *Fathers' Fair Share: Helping Poor Men Manage Child Support and Fatherhood*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/eric_docs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/16/05/00.pdf.

Knox, Virginia, and Cindy Redcross. 2000. *Parenting and Providing: The Impact of Parents' Fair Share on Paternal Involvement*. New York: MDRC. <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/38/full.pdf>.

Martinez, John, and Cynthia Miller. 2000. *Working and Earning: The Impact of Parents' Fair Share on Low-Income Fathers' Employment*. New York: MDRC. <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/39/full.pdf>.

Miller, Cynthia, and Virginia Knox. 2001. *The Challenge of Helping Low-Income Fathers Support Their Children: Final*

Lessons from Parents' Fair Share. New York: MDRC. <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/104/full.pdf>.

Partners for Fragile Families Demonstration

Martinson, Karin, Demetra Nightingale, Pamela Holcomb, John Trutko, and Burt Barnow. 2007. *Partners for Fragile Families Demonstration Projects: Employment and Child Support Outcomes and Trends*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/07/PFF/outcomes/index.htm>.

Martinson, Karin, John Trutko, Demetra Nightingale, Pamela Holcomb, and Burt Barnow. 2007. *The Implementation of the Partners for Fragile Families Demonstration Projects*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/07/PFF/imp/index.htm>.

Young, Alford, and Pamela Holcomb. 2007. *Voices of Young Fathers: The Partners for Fragile Families Evaluation*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/07/PFF/voices/>.

Welfare-to-Works Grants Program

Fraker, Thomas M., Dan M. Levy, Erma Perez-Johnson, Demetra S. Nightingale, Robert B. Olson, and Rita S. Stapulonis. 2004. *The National Evaluation of the Welfare-to-Works Program: Final Report*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/wtw-grants-eval98/final04/report.pdf>.

Martinson, Karin, John Trutko, and Debra Strong. 2000. *Serving Non-custodial Parents: A Descriptive Study of Welfare-to-Work Programs*. Washington DC: The Urban Institute. <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/ncp-wtw-d00/index.htm>.

Perez-Johnson, Irma, Jacqueline, Kauff, and Alan Hershey. 2003. *Giving Non-Custodial Parents Options: Employment and Child*

Support Outcomes from the SHARE Program. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/wtw-grants-eval98/share03/report.pdf>.

Young Unwed Fathers Project

Achatz, Mary, and Crystal A. MacAllum. 1994. *Young Unwed Fathers: Report from the Field*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.

Watson, Bernandine H. 1992. *Young Unwed Fathers Pilot Project: Initial Implementation Report*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.

About the Authors

Karin Martinson is a senior research associate in the Urban Institute's Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population. Her research interests include welfare reform, employment and training programs, service delivery systems, and work supports. She has worked on numerous program evaluations in these areas, with a focus on implementation studies of programs and services for low-income families.

Demetra Nightingale is a principal research scientist at Johns Hopkins University. An expert in social policy, she has focused for more than 30 years on issues related to employment, welfare, poverty, and the alleviation of poverty. She has written many reports, books, and articles.



THE URBAN INSTITUTE

2100 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20037

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 8098
Easton, MD

Address Service Requested

For more information,
call Public Affairs:
202-261-5709
or visit our web site,
<http://www.urban.org>.
To order additional copies
of this publication, call
202-261-5687
or visit our online bookstore,
<http://www.uipress.org>.

THE URBAN INSTITUTE

2100 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20037

Copyright © 2008

Phone: 202-833-7200

Fax: 202-467-5775

E-mail: pubs@ui.urban.org

This brief was completed by the Urban Institute under contract to the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as part of the Partners for Fragile Families evaluation, under contract number 100-01-0027. The authors gratefully acknowledge the guidance and comments provided by their project officer, Jennifer Burnszynski. Helpful comments were also provided by Linda Mellgren of ASPE and by Margot Bean, Eileen Brooks, and Myles Schlank of the Office of Child Support Enforcement in the Administration for Children and Families/HHS. The authors also benefited from comments by Burt Barnow and John Trutko and editing by Fiona Blackshaw.