

RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS IN THE PARENTS AND CHILDREN TOGETHER (PACT) EVALUATION

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Policy interest and support for increasing the positive involvement of fathers in their children's lives has increased substantially in recent years, with a dedicated federal funding stream for responsible fatherhood programs. These programs aim to improve fathers' parenting, economic stability, and relationship skills, factors that are known to be associated with fathers' socioemotional and financial support of their children. We focus on the efforts of four fatherhood programs participating in a large-scale evaluation sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. We conclude that fathers in these programs, the majority of whom have nonresidential children, are strongly motivated to be more involved with and support their children despite numerous barriers, including difficult co-parenting relationships and problems with access to their children. Findings show that large numbers of fathers voluntarily enroll and participate in fatherhood program services in an effort to improve their situations. Future reports will describe the effects of these services on the well-being of the fathers and their families.

Key Points for the Family Court Community:

- The federal government is devoting considerable resources to programs to help fathers become more involved with and supportive of their children.
- Many participating fathers lack formal visitation or parenting-time agreements because they were not married to the mothers of their children and no longer live with them.
- Research to learn how these programs work is growing; this article describes preliminary findings from an evaluation of four federal responsible fatherhood programs.

Keywords: *Co-Parenting; Fatherhood; Federal Evaluation; Nonresidential Parents; Parenting-Time Agreements; Unmarried Parents; and Visitation*

INTRODUCTION

The past several decades have seen sweeping changes in American families, changes that have left many children without the support or involvement of their fathers. Currently, a smaller percentage of Americans are married than at any time in history, and rates of nonmarital childbearing are high (Martinez et al., 2012). Although the majority of unmarried couples having a child expect to stay together, most become estranged within a few years of their child's birth (Carlson & McLanahan, 2010). Nearly one of every three children in the United States—more than 20 million children—now live in a home without their biological father (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

Family research confirms that fathers matter; father absence and lack of paternal involvement have negative consequences for children and families (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007; Carlson, 2006; Hofferth, 2006; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). The involvement and support of not just mothers but also fathers affect lifelong outcomes for children such as educational attainment, employment, and childbearing (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Wolfinger, 2003; Wu & Martinson, 1993). Resident and nonresident fathers alike have an important role in shaping children's outcomes (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013; Carlson & Magnuson, 2011; McWayne, Downer, Campos, & Harris, 2013). Among nonresident fathers, involvement and positive father-child relationships are associated with fewer child and adolescent behavior problems (Carlson & Magnuson, 2011; King & Sobolewski, 2006; McWayne et

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al., 2013). The quality of father–child interaction is of particular importance for child well-being (Marsiglio et al., 2000; Stewart, 2003), and involvement in specific child-related activities is associated with positive social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment in children (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013).

In addition to providing socioemotional support, fathers also contribute financial resources, which are essential to stable family functioning and healthy child development. Many children born to unmarried parents are at high risk of growing up in poverty, and the limited economic resources in single-parent families are contributors to poor child outcomes (Magnuson & Votruba-Drzal, 2009; Reardon, 2011). Financial support by nonresidential fathers is an important resource for children and has historically been the key focus of child support enforcement policy. Yet many nonresidential fathers have low levels of education, unstable employment, and other barriers to economic security, reducing their ability to fulfill their child support obligations.

The quality of the relationship between parents who share a child is known to be significantly associated with father involvement (Coley & Hernandez, 2006; Osborne & Ankrum, in press). Interparental conflict, in particular, is linked to lower engagement of fathers with their children, whether the father is residential or nonresidential (Coley & Hernandez, 2006). Moreover, recent research suggests that the involvement of nonresidential fathers is linked with positive child outcomes only when the quality of the co-parenting relationship is strong (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). In the context of multiple partner fertility, where parents have children by more than one partner, maintaining positive relationships between fathers and mothers may be particularly difficult.

Emerging research suggests that despite their economic and social challenges, many nonresidential fathers yearn to be more involved in their children's lives (Holcomb et al., 2014; Edin & Nelson, 2013). Thousands of fathers are voluntarily enrolling in services, many sponsored by the federal government's Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) programs, that aim to help fathers learn parenting skills, become more economically stable, and improve their relationship skills. Research suggests that when they are equipped with relevant skills and capacities, fathers can contribute financially and become positive influences on their children (Howard, Burke Lefever, Borkowski, & Whitman, 2006; Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999). This promise, particularly in light of the dramatic changes in family structure and their attendant causes and consequences, has motivated policy research on fatherhood over the past two decades, including the examination and testing of a range of programmatic interventions.

RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD PROGRAMMING AND RESEARCH

Research and evaluation on responsible fatherhood programming began during the 1990s, expanding in the past decade with growing government support and attention. In 2005, federal legislation for the first time dedicated a funding stream for responsible fatherhood (RF) programs. As part of the HMRF program under the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, \$50 million in annual funding was designated for fatherhood programs, which funded 103 organizations to operate or support RF programs. The Claims Resolution Act of 2010 reauthorized the HMRF initiative and increased the funding for fatherhood programs to \$75 million annually. Sixty organizations were awarded three-year fatherhood grants in 2011, which were recently extended for a fourth year of funding through 2015. Under the HMRF, RF program grantees are required to offer a comprehensive set of services in three core areas: parenting behavior, relationship skills, and economic stability.

Other related government efforts seek to increase child support payments by noncustodial parents by providing employment-focused programs. In May 2014, there were 77 such work-oriented programs for noncustodial parents across the country, many of which were led by child support agencies. Because the cost of employment-focused activities has not been allowable under federal child support rules, these programs have often drawn on other sources of funding. The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement has recently proposed new rules that under certain circumstances would allow job services as a reimbursable cost (Federal Register, 2014).

The responsible fatherhood movement continues to grow, with additional government and privately sponsored efforts under way. For example, the White House recently announced My Brother's Keeper, an initiative to empower boys and young men of color. Nonprofit coalitions that support fatherhood programming, including the National Partnership for Community Leadership and the National Fatherhood Initiative, are being joined by new coalitions, such as the National Fatherhood Leaders Group and the Practitioners Leadership Institute.

As a result, hundreds of fatherhood programs have now been implemented, representing a wide range of philosophies, approaches, structures, and formats, but research and evaluation of these programs are still in the early stages. The field lacks a body of rigorous research evidence and evidence-based program models. Although an evaluation of an early program, Parents' Fair Share, used a rigorous experimental design to estimate impacts among fathers mandated by the child support enforcement system to attend (Miller & Knox, 2001), few have used high-quality research methods since. The Strengthening Families Evidence Review, conducted by Mathematica, confirmed that few evaluations of programs for low-income fathers have employed rigorous research methods (Avellar et al., 2011). Of the more than 150 studies examined by the review, only 7 received a rating of "high" for the quality of the methods and procedures used to determine program effectiveness. Thus, the need for additional rigorous research on responsible fatherhood programming is great. As one step toward filling this gap, the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services contracted with Mathematica Policy Research to conduct the Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation.

THE PACT EVALUATION

PACT is an ongoing large-scale rigorous evaluation of the operations and effectiveness of a subset of the 2011 cohort of HMRF programs. This multicomponent evaluation includes (1) comprehensive documentation and analysis of the design and operations of four RF programs (*Implementation Analysis*), (2) a detailed description of the views and experiences of participating fathers (*In-Depth Interviews*), and (3) an assessment of program effectiveness (*Program Impacts*).

IMPLEMENTATION ANALYSIS

The implementation study relies on multiple data sources to document how selected programs are designed and implemented, their content and service delivery structure, characteristics of enrolled fathers, and rates of fathers' participation. Information is drawn from a baseline survey of fathers at enrollment, on-site interviews with program staff at all levels, a Web-based survey of program staff, and data from the management information systems used by programs to track enrollment and attendance.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH FATHERS

The in-depth interviews with fathers are intended to inform policy and program design in two key ways. First, they will provide a detailed picture of how low-income fathers view and experience their roles as parents, providers, and partners, and second, they will help us understand how their experiences in the RF programs fit into the broader context of their lives. The interviews, which last about two hours and are conducted individually and in-person, explore fathers' views and experiences through open-ended questions covering a range of topics. Topics include, for example, their childhood and early family relationships, views on fathering and fatherhood, relationships with their children's mothers, experiences in the labor market, and perceptions of the fatherhood program. For this component of the evaluation, a random sample stratified by high and moderate levels of program participation was drawn from the larger sample of fathers across all four programs. A total of 87

fathers participated in the first wave of in-depth interviews in the fall of 2013. To assess change over time and to address additional topics, the same 87 fathers will be asked to participate in further in-depth interviews annually over the next two years.

PROGRAM IMPACTS

The PACT evaluation is also collecting data using a rigorous experimental research design to determine whether the programs improve outcomes for the fathers who enroll. Fathers interested in the program who consent to the study are randomly assigned to either a group that can receive services from the program, or to a control group, who can seek similar services in the community but not from the federally-funded RF program. Data are collected at baseline and approximately 12 months after enrollment. Because random assignment ensures that the two groups are similar on average at the outset, any differences in 12-month outcomes between the groups can be interpreted as a result of the program.

RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS IN PACT

As of October 31, 2014, more than 5,000 fathers had enrolled in the four RF programs under study: the Center for Fathering at Urban Ventures in Minneapolis, Minnesota; the Family Formation Program at Fathers' Support Center in St. Louis, Missouri; the FATHER Project at Goodwill/Easter Seals of Minnesota in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota; and the Successful STEPS Program at Connections to Success, in Kansas City, Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri. In accordance with funding requirements, these programs offer fathers services through group workshops and individual-level meetings in three core areas: (1) parenting/fatherhood development, (2) services to promote employment or economic stability, and (3) relationship skills education.

PARENTING/FATHERHOOD DEVELOPMENT

The programs' parenting components are designed to help men embrace their roles as fathers and equip them with skills needed for effective parenting. Drawing on published curricula, the programs offer content through group-based workshops. Trained group facilitators lead the fathers in discussions of what it means to be a father, including the qualities, roles, and responsibilities of a father, and help them explore how this aligns with their personal conceptions of manhood. Fathers are taught parenting skills such as how to discipline children using positive methods, how to be nurturing and supportive of their children, and how to reconnect with children from whom they have been separated. Some programs also provide information on the needs of children and stages of child development to help fathers recognize and understand age-appropriate behavior.

SERVICES TO PROMOTE EMPLOYMENT/ECONOMIC STABILITY

The programs involved in the PACT evaluation use employment readiness workshops and individual meetings with trained employment specialists or job specialists to help fathers prepare for, find, and maintain employment. In most cases, the initial step is for fathers to work with staff to identify job skills and interests; typically by completing a workforce assessment. Employment readiness workshops then focus fathers on appropriate workplace attitudes and behavior, such as how to have a positive attitude, respond appropriately to criticism from a superior, and be on time for work. Fathers may also learn how to create a resume, interview for a job, and develop a job-seeking strategy. Once a father has demonstrated signs of employment readiness, the programs may assign him a job developer, whose role is to help the father identify and apply for jobs. Job developers may provide referrals for training opportunities, identify jobs openings that are appropriate for fathers and their

backgrounds, arrange transportation to job interviews, or ensure that fathers have appropriate work clothing. One program also requires fathers without substantial work experience to complete a job practicum, much like an unpaid internship, to develop marketable skills; job developers monitor fathers' performance in these practica.

EDUCATION IN SKILLS TO PROMOTE HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

The third goal of all RF programs in PACT is to help fathers develop skills for identifying, developing, and maintaining a healthy relationship with a nonresidential co-parent or with a current romantic partner or spouse. All of the programs offer content through a facilitator-led group workshop, following an established curriculum. Typical topics include recognizing the characteristics of a healthy relationship, improving communication and managing conflicts, anger management, and understanding the effects of family structure and co-parenting on children. Domestic violence is also commonly discussed: content is often provided by staff from local domestic violence organizations that partner with the RF programs. Three of the four programs encourage current or past partners to join the relationship workshops, either by attending with the father or participating in a separate workshop for female partners.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Recognizing the multiple life challenges and difficult backgrounds that many of the low-income fathers bring when enrolling, all four RF programs participating in PACT also offer content in personal development. Although not required by the grant funding, the focus on personal development is driven by programs' desires to provide a transformative experience and orient fathers to a positive future. They aim to instill a sense of hope, personal responsibility, and accountability by helping fathers reflect on past behaviors, identify goals and values, learn how to cope with stress, and ultimately develop self-confidence and a positive outlook. Program staff typically emphasize these concepts during parenting and job readiness workshops and through individual-level interactions with social workers, case managers, and/or employment specialists.

To help guide each father's individual development, three of the four programs help fathers develop a foundational plan that articulates the father's goals and objectives for improving his life in multiple domains, including personal and professional goals. These life plans, or fatherhood plans, as they are variously called, identify action steps toward achieving specified goals in such areas as education, employment, housing, physical and mental health, child support and legal issues, transportation, family, and social support. Program staff monitor and encourage each father's progress in achieving the goals set out in his plan.

ASSISTANCE WITH CHILD SUPPORT AND RELATED LEGAL ISSUES

Issues related to child support and related legal issues are a major source of concern for most enrolled fathers. Each program partners with one or more local child support enforcement agencies to help address these issues. Representatives from the child support agency provide information to fathers about how to navigate the system, typically during group workshop sessions. The partnerships also pave the way for advocacy by program staff on behalf of some participating fathers. Such advocacy can sometimes lead to intervention by the child support agency in certain cases, such as reinstatement of a father's driver's license which was suspended due to child support payment issues.

Two programs' partnerships with their child support agencies go further. At one program, child support enforcement staff and fatherhood program staff are co-located, enabling staff from both agencies to participate in case reviews and providing program participants with greater access to child support staff. The other program offers a substantial benefit for fathers who participate. In a unique arrangement, the program has an agreement with the child support agency that allows fathers to receive forgiveness of up to \$1,625 of their state-owed child support arrearages based on the number of hours they attend the fatherhood program.¹

To further assist fathers with paternity, child support, custody, and parenting time agreements, some of the programs offer legal services. These legal services are typically in high demand, and the amount of support programs can provide is extremely limited. Although not covered under the federal HMRF grant, fathers at one program can receive free advice from an in-house legal clinic, and for a fee, legal representation. At another program, fathers can receive pro bono legal advice through partnership with a local legal aid society. Although slots are limited, the agency can sometimes represent fathers.

One of the programs has taken a serious step to provide reliable information to fathers about the importance of, and steps to, establishing parenting time agreements. During a 2-day orientation to the fatherhood program, staff from the local legal aid society spend an afternoon presenting information on the benefits of parenting time agreements and how fathers can petition the court to legally establish such an agreement. Fathers' rights and responsibilities are discussed, and fathers receive a booklet with forms and additional information.

SUPPLEMENTAL SERVICES

To reinforce or extend core program content, all RF programs offer optional, or supplemental services. These commonly include resource rooms with internet access for conducting job searches or educational activities, job clubs or peer discussion groups, tutoring, job fairs, subsidized employment or unpaid internships, and supervised activities with children. Other services provided by some of the programs include couples workshops, transportation assistance, and access to vocational training. Some programs offer supplementary services supported by non-OFA funding, such as family therapy and health care.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FATHERS ENROLLING IN THE PACT RF PROGRAMS

Data from the baseline survey completed by all 4,734 fathers that enrolled in the four programs by August 22, 2014 suggest the vast majority of fathers sign up because they want to be more engaged with their children, despite numerous life challenges and often troubled co-parenting relationships.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN

The fatherhood programs participating in the PACT evaluation attract men who are, on average, in their mid-thirties and have multiple children. Almost half of the fathers (47%) have children by more than one partner, and although relatively few (22%) live with at least one of their children at baseline, the great majority (78%) have nonresidential children. Although four out of five fathers, including residential fathers, reported spending time with at least one of their children in the month prior to completing the baseline survey, most wanted to be more involved and supportive parents, especially for their nonresidential children. In the baseline survey, the majority of fathers (60%) reported that their primary reason for joining the program was to improve their relationship with their children (the second most common reason was to get help with employment). In-depth interviews with a subset of fathers further revealed that many are striving to turn a new page in their lives; a central part of that effort is gaining greater access to their children so they can better connect or re-connect with them socially and emotionally.

CO-PARENTING RELATIONSHIPS

Only one-third of fathers were romantically involved with the mother of one of their biological/adopted children when they enrolled in PACT, and fathers reported that co-parenting their children with women to whom they were no longer romantically linked was challenging. Nearly two-thirds of

fathers indicated that at least one of their children's mothers created a barrier to spending time with their children. Nevertheless, many fathers felt they had a good co-parenting relationship with at least one of the mothers of their children. Almost half (47%) strongly agreed that they and at least one mother of their children were a good parenting team. Many (40%) also strongly agreed that at least one of their children's mothers supported them in how they wanted to raise their children.

LIFE CHALLENGES

The great majority of fathers in these four programs are men of color—African American (81%) or Hispanic (5%). Most have very difficult backgrounds and face a broad array of socioeconomic challenges, with low educational attainment, employment, and earnings. In the month prior to enrollment, 50% lacked jobs, and of those who were employed, 27% earned less than \$500. Twenty-three percent of fathers lacked a high school diploma or GED. Fifty-eight percent of the men had a legal child support order. Almost three-quarters of fathers had been convicted of a crime. More than one-third were on parole, and on average, the fathers had spent 1.7 years in a correctional institution. More than half of the fathers were living in unstable housing upon enrollment, including a shelter or halfway house, residential treatment center, or staying temporarily with a friend or relative.

PARTICIPATION IN THE PACT RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS

The four RF programs in PACT vary widely in the amount of programming they offer. The most intensive program offers 240 hours of structured programming during a daily 6-week integrated-content workshop, while the least intensive program offers 24 hours of structured programming through a series of 1- to 2-hour weekly workshops. All programs augment the group workshops with individual-level meetings that focus on case management and/or employment.

PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

Using administrative data gathered from each program involved in PACT, we analyzed fathers' participation in the programming offered. Averaged across the programs, 80% of fathers assigned to the intervention group attended at least one program activity during the first four months after enrollment. Initial participation ranged from 71 to 91% of fathers across the four programs. More than two-thirds attended at least one workshop session focused on parenting, healthy relationships, or economic stability, and the same proportion had at least one individual-level meeting during their first four months.

RETENTION

Parenting and employment workshops were most consistently attended, though retention varied across programs. Participation in at least half of the parenting workshop sessions ranged from 21 to 59% across programs and participation in at least half of the employment workshops ranged from 7 to 63%. Relationship workshops that were offered separately from other workshops had the lowest retention rates—just 2 to 15% participated in at least half of the relationship group sessions.

DOSAGE

Averaged across all programs, fathers attended 46 hours of programming during their first 4 months. This average obscures substantial program variation, however. Total hours of participation in all program activities ranged from about 11 to 90 hours across the four programs. Most programming occurred through workshop attendance; fathers participated in individual meetings with staff for about

3 hours, on average. Among fathers who participated in at least one activity, dosage was higher. This subset of fathers averaged 58 total hours of programming, with 53 hours in core workshops and 4 hours in individual meetings.

LISTENING TO NONRESIDENTIAL FATHERS IN PACT

To gain a more nuanced understanding of the lives of low-income nonresidential fathers than could be obtained through surveys, we conducted in-depth interviews with a subset of enrolled fathers. During these interviews, we asked fathers to tell us the story of their lives—what it was like for them growing up, the role of their own father in their family, their experiences with the labor market, and their relationships with their children’s mothers and with their children.

DIFFICULT EARLY LIFE EXPERIENCES

Fathers typically told of childhoods filled with neglect, poverty, and a range of other traumatic experiences. In nearly half of the interviews, fathers’ stories about their early lives included exposure to substance abuse and domestic violence by parental figures. Most men did not have a positive father role model, describing their own fathers as having been in and out of prison, involved with drugs or alcohol, or simply absent from their lives altogether. Even as adults often well into their thirties, these men acutely felt the absence or negative influence of their own fathers. When describing growing up, one father recounted:

I feel in general man, what a boy needs his dad for [is to] teach him how to do man things, even shave, little stuff like that. He wasn’t there to do none of that stuff. The two things he taught me how to do was shoot a gun and drive a vehicle, that’s it. That’s the only thing I can really think back to what my dad taught me. He didn’t teach me no morals. He wasn’t there to teach me how to treat a woman. I learned everything from the streets.

EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGES

Growing up in these difficult circumstances, many fathers reported turning to drugs or criminal activity as young adults, often resulting in incarceration. Along with low levels of education and job preparation, these experiences inhibited men’s abilities to obtain and maintain employment as adults. Employers are often reluctant to hire individuals with a felony conviction and many fathers cited their criminal record as their primary barrier to gainful employment in the formal economy. As one father explained:

I was struggling hard to find a job . . . I got turned down by multiple McDonalds . . . So, I go into a dollar store one day, they so under-staffed they got boxes on the floor. . .and I got years of stock clerk experience and you don’t hire me? Just because I got a felony? And the pay was \$6 an hour. I’m like, that really opened my eyes. I was like, “This felony thing is real.”

Employed fathers frequently cited frustration with low-wage work which often involves unstable work schedules. They felt this contributed to difficulty spending time with their children because of the need to coordinate schedules with their nonresidential children’s mothers.

. . . they’ll send you out to work but you might not be at that place the next day. You might not have any work the next day . . . It can change any time. I may work two days, and not the rest of the week.

FATHERHOOD AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Many of the fathers expressed deep feelings of regret for past behavior, and a desire to amend their mistakes and to give their child a better life. At some point in their lives, they began to see their own

fatherhood as an opportunity for redemption, for finally doing the right thing by becoming responsible men and fathers, and in doing so, giving back to society. As one father put it:

I'm going to be there for my son. Show him the stuff that he needs to know about . . . Show him the ropes and the routines . . . I'm not going to let him get into that street life like I did. You're going to go to school, you're going to do good, you ain't going to go to jail like I did . . . Man, I hope he becomes a better man than I was . . . Don't take the route I went. There's a better route I want him to go. The right road, not the wrong road, not the street road.

When reflecting on the meaning and experience of being a father, virtually all of the fathers we interviewed expressed that fatherhood made them realize they had to live for someone other than themselves and this served as a catalyst to make positive changes in their life.

I would have still been on the streets man, for real . . . My son changed my life around . . . Oh, it's no more playing no more. It's no more faking. I can't go to jail . . . I gotta be there, man . . .

ACCESS TO CHILDREN: A KEY BARRIER TO FATHER INVOLVEMENT

The fathers who have voluntarily stepped forward to participate in fatherhood programs are generally demonstrating a willingness to change and become better men and fathers for their children. While programs can provide these fathers assistance and support in learning how best to support and be positive influences in their children's lives, and may help them become more stably employed, the fathers continue to face significant challenges in gaining access to their children. These children's parents are often in acrimonious high-conflict relationships, or may be entirely estranged from one another. Because most were never married, they typically do not have a formal child custody or visitation agreement.

Maternal gatekeeping was a consistent theme that arose in discussions with low-income nonresidential fathers. While gatekeeping may in some cases be justified, such as in cases of domestic abuse or lack of a suitable venue for fathers and children to visit, it often may simply be a result of unresolved issues between the parents. This was particularly the case when fathers had moved on to another relationship. As one father relayed,

She uses my son and won't let me come down there to see him and stuff like that. . . . Every time we try to make plans there's always another excuse. It's always this and that. She uses my son and she just creates a situation where, she's very vindictive. I think she's very bitter.

Other fathers expressed their frustration that their children's mothers were unwilling to share information and decisions about their child with them, and effectively prevented them from fulfilling the father role.

She leaves me out in the dark about literally everything—doctors and all, medical and dental. She doesn't tell me anything . . . She makes it really hard to be a dad. She strips me from being a father and being the actual really great dad that I want to be and give him the world. Someday he'll realize that I was here for him the whole time.

It is important to acknowledge that we do not know the other side of these fathers' stories. Still, they suggest that some nonresidential fathers actively seeking to improve their parenting skills may nevertheless struggle to see their children because of unresolved issues with the children's mothers.

DISCUSSION

Although the PACT impact study findings are not yet available, some of the early results from the evaluation's implementation study and in-depth interviews with fathers are consistent with and

expand upon findings from earlier studies of fatherhood programs. Fathers—even those with multiple life challenges—are interested in engaging in activities that will improve their relationship with their children, although their ability to do so is often dependent on their relationship with the child's mother. As was found in the evaluations of Partners for Fragile Families, Parents' Fair Share, and the Young Unwed Fathers Project (Martinson & Nightingale, 2008), fathers in PACT are often challenged by conflicted relationships with their nonresidential child's mother. Similar to the fathers in these earlier fatherhood programs, PACT participants also desire and value services and information related to custody and visitation, in the hope that such services will increase their legal access to their children.

Most of the programs in PACT encourage fathers' current and/or past partners to participate in the relationship skills component either with the father, or in a separate "mothers' group." These workshops are potential opportunities for helping mothers as well as fathers learn conflict management and communication skills, which they can then use to resolve co-parenting and visitation issues. However, these workshops have not been well attended. Some fathers have had limited involvement with the mother of their child for a long period of time, while others are in contact but are experiencing high levels of conflict. It may be very difficult to engage parents in these situations. Earlier programs such as Parents' Fair Share offered conflict mediation services, which similarly were not used by many parents.

A strategy employed by one program in PACT is to encourage and provide resources to fathers to help them establish a formal visitation, or parenting-time agreement. Because most low-income nonresidential fathers were never married to the mothers of the children, they often lack a formal visitation agreement, with the result that spending time with their children is at the sole discretion of the residential parent. Programs may be able to secure or develop a standard set of forms that fathers can use to petition the court for such an agreement, and engage low-cost or free community legal services to provide instruction to fathers in how to navigate the process.

A key area in which PACT findings are not consistent with prior studies is program recruitment and enrollment. The four programs in PACT have so far enrolled more than 5,000 fathers over a two-year period, and relative to the experiences of prior evaluations (Martinson & Nightingale, 2008), they have not struggled with identifying and engaging fathers in their voluntary services. This result may be, at least in part, because the host organizations operating each program are mature, well-trusted community-based organizations that have established one or more steady sources of referrals. Partnerships between fatherhood programs and local child support agencies that agree to provide special assistance may also encourage enrollment. In PACT, one agency offers arrearage reduction for hours spent attending the fatherhood program, while another provides co-location of child support workers to help with modifications or other issues onsite at the program.

Perhaps surprisingly, participation in the voluntary RF programs in PACT is higher than in earlier evaluations of fatherhood programs such as Parents' Fair Share, which mandated attendance through the court system. In Parents' Fair Share, 70% of fathers attended an activity for at least one day over an 18 month period, while 80% of fathers in PACT attended an activity within the first four months. About the same proportion of fathers in both evaluations (64–66%) participated at least once in a group workshop with peers (Doolittle, Knox, Miller, & Rowser, 1998). Retention and overall dosage varies substantially across PACT programs, but little prior research provides benchmarks against which these results can be compared.

The experiences of programs and fathers participating in the PACT evaluation may not fully generalize to all responsible fatherhood programs. The PACT results are based on only four, albeit large-scale, programs, all located in the mid-west and serving primarily African American men in urban areas. In addition, the findings reported in this article are preliminary and based on only a partial sample of the more than 5,000 fathers enrolled so far.

As the PACT evaluation continues to progress, more findings will unfold to inform future program design and implementation and increase our understanding of program effectiveness. In the meantime, it seems clear that there is a substantial demand among low-income nonresidential fathers to be more involved and supportive parents, despite numerous obstacles. Policies and programs that seek to

capitalize on these fathers' innate motivations and desire to improve their lives and the lives of their children—and research that seeks to understand how social programs can aid fathers in meeting their goals—are likely to be a wise investment.

NOTE

1. At the two Minnesota programs, fathers can also have arrearages reduced but this benefit is available to anyone in Hennepin County, not just fatherhood program participants.

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