HOW LOW-INCOME FATHERS IN RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS PERCEIVE AND PROVIDE FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR THEIR CHILDREN: **SUMMARY BRIEF**

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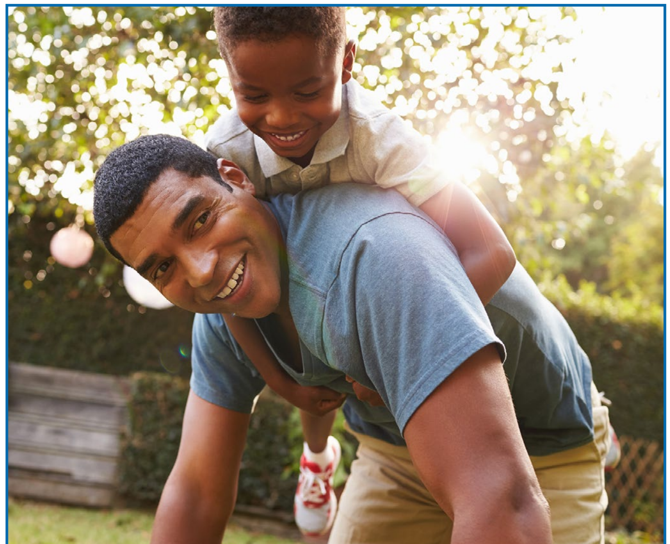
Quinn Moore, Rebekah Selekman, Ankita Patnaik, Heather Zaveri

Financial support from noncustodial fathers, often provided through formal child support payments, can make up a substantial part of the income of single-parent families and reduce child poverty.[1,2] Child support has been linked to positive outcomes for children such as increased education and lower risk of maltreatment.[3,4] Further, formal and informal financial support (see Box 1) has been linked to noncustodial fathers being more involved with their children.[5]

Recognizing the importance of fathers' support for and engagement with their children, Congress has authorized funding for grants for Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs since 2005. The Office of Family Assistance (OFA), part of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, awards and oversees these grants. OFA funded, and the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in ACF oversaw, the Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation, a multi-component evaluation of four federally funded RF programs that received grants in 2011 (see Box 2). From December 2012 to March 2015, 5,522 low-income fathers who applied for one of the RF programs in PACT were randomly assigned to a program group that was offered RF services or to a control group that was not.

This brief describes how low-income fathers participating in the RF programs in PACT perceive and provide financial support for their children. It integrates quantitative and qualitative analyses to address the following questions:

- What amount and types of support do fathers participating in RF programs provide to their children? What are their attitudes toward providing this support?
- What are the impacts of the PACT RF programs for different groups of fathers on outcomes relevant to fathers' financial support for their children, such as the amount of support provided and knowledge of the child support system?



Box 1. Common types of financial support

- **Formal support:** Cash support provided by way of the child support system
- **Informal support:** Cash support provided directly to the custodial parent
- **Noncash support:** The financial value of goods and services purchased in the interest of children

Findings from these analyses can help inform efforts by RF programs to improve the well-being of children through increased financial support and involvement from fathers.

Box 2. RF Programs in PACT

- Successful STEPS, at Connections to Success (Kansas City, Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri)
- Family Formation Program, at Fathers' Support Center St. Louis (St. Louis, Missouri)
- FATHER Project, at Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota (Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota)
- Center for Fathering, at Urban Ventures (Minneapolis, Minnesota)

HOW RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS IN THE PACT EVALUATION WORKED WITH THE CHILD SUPPORT PROGRAM

The core service of the RF programs in PACT was group-based workshops, covering topics such as the meaning of fatherhood, child development, co-parenting, and finding and retaining employment.[6] Grantees also offered individualized support related to economic stability, such as helping fathers identify job skills and interests, develop résumés, and apply for jobs.

At three grantees—Fathers' Support Center, Connections to Success, and the FATHER Project at Goodwill-Easter Seals—child support staff spoke to fathers during the core workshops about how to navigate the child support system. In addition, each program developed partnerships with local child support agencies, but the extent of agency involvement varied:

- The grantee with the most comprehensive approach, the FATHER Project at Goodwill-Easter Seals, co-located staff from child support agencies at the RF program to help fathers navigate the child support system and participate in the case review meetings.
- Staff from Fathers' Support Center advocated for their participants with the child support system. Child support staff spoke to fathers about the child support program as part of the center's regular services.

Box 3. Fathers enrolled in PACT

The typical father enrolled in PACT was a disadvantaged Black man in his thirties. Fathers in the study reported low earnings; average earnings in the month before fathers entered the study was $374. Fathers in the study had two or three children, on average, and the typical father had seen most of his children in person in the month before the study. About 75 percent provided some financial support for their children at the time of study enrollment (with the average amount being $185 monthly per child), usually in the form of noncash support.

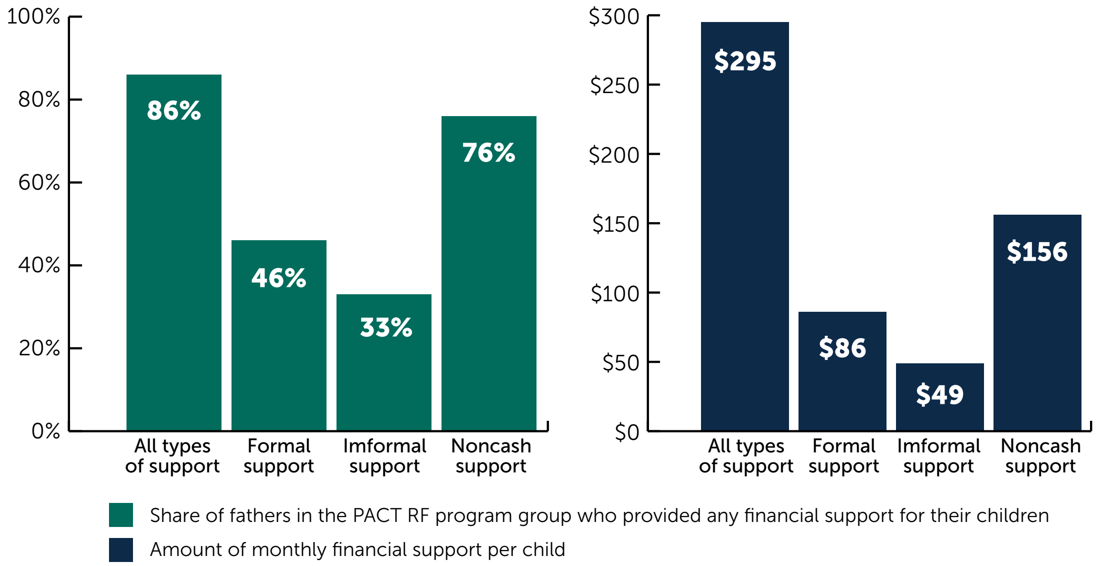
- Connections to Success operated in two states. In one state, the program developed a relationship with the child support agency wherein the agency would decrease a father's state-owed child support arrears based on his hours of program participation.
- The grantee with the least comprehensive approach, Urban Ventures, had little direct involvement from local child support staff but advocated for fathers with child support issues by reaching out to child support staff as needed.

WHAT SUPPORT DID FATHERS IN PACT RF PROGRAMS PROVIDE?

Most fathers in PACT provided some financial support for their children in the year after study enrollment, and those with greater ability to pay were more likely to do so

About 85 percent of fathers provided financial support to their children during the year after study enrollment—on average, $295 monthly in financial support per child (Figure 1). Noncash support was the most common type of financial support, but providing more than one type of support was common. The fathers who were more likely to provide financial support were those who, at the time of study enrollment, had stronger histories of employment and providing support, were more involved with their children, and were in romantic relationships with the mothers of their children.

Figure 1. Share of fathers in the PACT RF program group who provided any financial support for their children during the one-year follow-up period and amount of monthly financial support per child



Source: PACT follow-up survey, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research; administrative data, the National Directory of New Hires.

Fathers' reasons for providing different types of financial support are complex

The qualitative data suggest that a complicated set of factors influence fathers' decisions about how they support their children, including their access to the children, co-parenting relationships, formal child support obligations, and ability to provide support given their income. A few fathers recognized the benefits to their children of automatic wage withholding for child support payments. However, many fathers felt that the amounts of child support orders left very little for them to support themselves, that the system could be punitive, and that complying with orders did not help them secure access to their children.

Many PACT RF fathers described a preference to provide noncash supports over cash supports, informal or otherwise. They felt confident this support would help meet their children's needs and could create opportunities to positively interact with their children. Some fathers also expressed a preference for providing informal over formal support, due to concerns that their child would not receive support fast enough or that the custodial parent would not use the payments to directly benefit the child. Many fathers described that being in the formal child support system meant that their obligations not only caused them economic hardship but also limited their ability to provide their children additional informal and noncash support.

Fathers reported feeling divided between the desire to financially support their children and their frustrations with the child support system

Many fathers described experiencing extreme financial hardship due to obligations they faced in the formal child support system, which contributed to their preference for providing informal support. Fathers were acutely aware of the compounding and complicating effects, particularly for financial well-being, that resulted from falling behind on their child support obligations. For example, some fathers described that paying child support depends on being employed, but when they fall behind on their child support obligations, some of the enforcement mechanisms, such as driver's license suspension, made it difficult to find work.

A related topic during the interviews with fathers was the linkage between support for and access to their children and relationships with the mothers of their children. Some fathers expressed frustration when they were paying and providing support and mothers were keeping their children from them. However, barriers to legal assistance made it more difficult for fathers to exercise their right to see their children. Some fathers reported contentious relationships with the mothers, which they felt translated into restrictions on access to their children.

As a result of the above factors, many fathers' perspectives of the formal child support system were divided between understanding their responsibility to financially support the children and frustration with the child support system. During interviews, some fathers described wishing PACT programs had done more to help them gain legal access to their children and help with modifying child support orders. Although the RF programs were designed to inform fathers about the child support system, few offered follow-up services that helped fathers address the challenges they encountered with access and visitation and the child support program. Some fathers reported receiving referrals to legal assistance programs or help preparing court documents, while others reported that the program gave them information about the child support system and court procedures but did not provide any services.

HOW DID PROGRAM IMPACTS VARY ACROSS DIFFERENT GROUPS OF FATHERS AND PROGRAMS?

Impacts of PACT RF programs varied depending on whether fathers had a child support order at the time of study enrollment

The evaluation team examined the PACT RF programs' impacts on outcomes relevant to financial support separately for fathers who did and did not have at least one child support order in place at the time of study enrollment (Figure 2; see Box 4 for a summary of impact findings for all fathers). PACT RF programs improved father involvement for those who had a child support order in place but had no effect on father involvement for those who did not. Further, although the PACT RF programs did not increase financial support for children overall, they increased informal support among fathers who did not have a child support order at the time of study enrollment by about $29 per child. The PACT RF programs also improved fathers' knowledge of the child support system for fathers with and without a child support order at the time of study enrollment but did not affect fathers' perceptions of the fairness of the child support system, on average.

Box 4. Summary of impact findings from the PACT evaluation related to child support for all fathers

The evaluation team tested the effects of the PACT RF programs by comparing the outcomes of fathers who were randomly assigned to the program group and control group. Three key findings emerged about the programs' impacts on outcomes related to child support:

- Positive impacts on several outcomes related to father involvement, such as engagement in age-appropriate activities with their children.
- No impact on the overall amount of financial support for children but a small positive impact on informal child support.
- Positive impacts on outcomes related to knowledge of the child support system but no effect on whether fathers felt the system was fair.

Impacts of PACT RF programs varied with their approach to child support

To explore whether variation in the partnerships that RF programs established with child support agencies translated to differences in impacts on outcomes related to child support, we examined impacts separately by program. We found positive impacts for some outcomes related to father involvement for Urban Ventures and Fathers' Support Center but not Connections to Success or the FATHER Project at Goodwill-Easter Seals grantees. None of the programs increased the overall sum of the three types of financial support for children, although the FATHER Project at Goodwill-Easter Seals increased informal support.

The FATHER Project at Goodwill-Easter Seals and Fathers' Support Center improved fathers' knowledge of child support whereas Urban Ventures and Connections to Success did not. That positive impacts on child support knowledge emerged for two grantees, including the one with the most comprehensive approach to child support, suggests that RF programs that coordinate with the local child support agency and provide child support–related services can improve fathers' knowledge of child support. That impacts did not emerge for the grantee with the least intensive approach suggests that a comprehensive approach to child support education is more likely to improve fathers' child support knowledge.

Figure 2. Impacts of PACT RF programs on outcomes related to child support for key subgroups

Whether father had a child support order at time of enrollment			Outcome	PACT RF Programs				
Yes	No	Difference across subgroups		Connections to Success	Fathers' Support Center	FATHER Project at Goodwill–Easter Seals	Urban Ventures	Difference across subgroups
			Father's involvement					
●	○	■	In-person contact with children	○	○	○	○	□
○	○	□	Any contact with children	○	○	○	○	□
●	○	■	Frequency of in-person contact with focal child	○	○	○	●	□
●	○	■	Had contact with focal child at least a few times a week	○	○	○	●	□
●	○	■	Age-appropriate activities with focal child	○	●	○	●	□
			Father's financial support for children					
○	●	□	Average monthly financial support	○	○	○	○	□
○	○	□	Average monthly formal child support per child	○	○	○	○	□
○	●	■	Average monthly informal child support per child	○	○	●	○	□
○	○	□	Average monthly noncash support per child	○	○	○	○	□
			Knowledge and attitudes toward the child support system					
●	○	□	Knowledge of the child support system	○	●	●	○	■
●	●	■	Knows how to request change in child support order	○	●	●	○	□
●	○	□	Knows a contact person at the child support agency	○	○	●	○	□
○	○	□	Disagrees that child support system is unfair to dads	○	○	○	○	□
●	●	□	Agrees that he has a better understanding of child support system	○	●	●	○	■

○ Subgroup impact is not statistically different from zero at the .10 significance level.
● Subgroup impact is statistically different from zero at the .10 significance level.
□ The subgroup impacts are not statistically different from each other at the .10 significance level.
■ The subgroup impacts are statistically different from each other at the .10 significance level.

Source: PACT 12-month follow-up surveys, conducted by Mathematica

CONCLUSION

Findings presented in this brief underscore the complexity of efforts to increase fathers' financial support for their children. Fathers interested in RF programs report wanting to provide support for their children, and quantitative findings indicate that those with greater ability to pay were more likely to do so. However, the types of support fathers provide are varied, as are the motivations for providing different types of support.

Results from the PACT evaluation suggest that to increase fathers' financial support for their children, RF programs need to improve a range of outcomes, such as fathers' economic stability, involvement with children, or attitudes toward parenting and child support. The PACT RF programs were able to improve some of these outcomes for some fathers. Among fathers with a child support order at the time of study enrollment, PACT RF programs increased involvement with children and knowledge of the child support system, but they did not increase the amount of support provided. A missing link for generating impacts on support might be improvements in earnings and economic stability, particularly given the positive relationship found in this study between ability to pay and likelihood of providing support. Another important factor might be increased access to children. Fathers identified the strong linkage between access and support, but the PACT RF programs were not able to offer services that directly addressed child access. With these factors in mind, RF programs might consider intensifying efforts that would lead to improvements in economic stability and child access.

LINKS TO RELATED READING FROM THE PACT EVALUATION

Impact findings for the RF programs in PACT: Main report

Impact findings for the RF programs in PACT: Summary brief

Report integrating findings on fathers' experiences and design and implementation of RF programs

Qualitative findings on fathers' experiences with the child support system

Qualitative findings on fathers' perceptions of their roles as parents, partners, and providers

Report describing the design and implementation of RF programs in PACT

ENDNOTES

[1] ACF. "The Child Support Program is A Good Investment." December 2016.

[2] Sorensen, E. "Child Support Plays an Increasingly Important Role for Poor Custodial Families." Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2010.

[3] Cancian, M., Yang, M., & Slack, K. "The Effect of Additional Child Support Income on the Risk of Child Maltreatment." *Social Service Review,* vol. 87, no. 3, 2013, pp. 417-437.

[4] Knox, V. "The Effects of Child Support Payments on Developmental Outcomes for Elementary School-Age Children." *The Journal of Human Resources,* vol. 31, no. 4, 1996, pp. 816-840.

[5] Nepomnyaschy, L. "Child support and father-child contact: Testing reciprocal pathways." *Demography,* vol. 44, no. 1, 2007, pp. 93-112.

[6] Zaveri, Heather, Scott Baumgartner, Robin Dion, and Liz Clary. "Parents and Children Together: Design and Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs." OPRE Report Number 2015-76. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015.

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